

Laocoon's Children: The Fugitive from Azkaban

Chapter 1

Summary: Laocoon's Children is an alternate-universe fic based on the events of an earlier fanfic, Stealing Harry. In Stealing Harry, Lucius Malfoy reached Peter Pettigrew before Sirius could, and as a result Sirius was never imprisoned in Azkaban. When Harry Potter was eight years old, Sirius abducted him from the Dursleys and set about raising him with Remus Lupin's help, resulting in a blossoming romance between the two men. Peter Pettigrew, seeing his chance, attempted to murder Harry after performing a spell which equipped Peter with immense magical powers. Harry was taken away to Betwys Beddau, a small Welsh village, to live in safety until he could attend Hogwarts. Remus and Sirius went with him.

Laocoon's Children takes up the story two years later, and runs parallel to JK Rowling's books. In Harry's first year at Hogwarts, "The Philosopher's Stone", he was put in Slytherin where he made fast friends with Gryffindor Neville Longbottom, Ravenclaw Padma Patil, and Hufflepuff Draco Malfoy, forming an odd inter-house gang of friends who delighted in exploring Hogwarts, playing pranks, and getting into trouble. He was saved from near death at the hands of Pettigrew and Quirrell by his mentor Severus Snape, but Peter escaped and has not been heard from since.

In "Secret Tongues", Harry's gang of friends reunited for their second year at Hogwarts, where they faced a basilisk, a homicidal diary bent on destroying Padma's sanity, and Draco's own mother's unprovable betrayal. Nymphadora Tonks, fresh from a debilitating injury as an Auror, took on the role of Dark Arts professor, and began a stormy relationship with Severus Snape. At the end of the school year, Lucius Malfoy escaped Azkaban prison and Draco was sent to stay with Harry in Betwys Beddau over the summer, for his own safety.

In "The Fugitive From Azkaban", year three of Harry's AU adventures, Harry and his friends must face many new problems: protecting Draco from his father, dealing with their new Dark Arts professor's quirks, helping Padma with her heavy school load, and standing firm against the aura of fear that is pervading the wizarding world.

ITEMS OF NOTE

(Clipping: Betwys Beddau Weekly Crier, August 1, 1993)

Youth Cricket: Scythes beat Stones in improbable Upset.

The Betwys Beddau Scythes and Betwys Beddau Stones met on the field of play Saturday last for a much-anticipated rematch after last year's rout of the Scythes. The South of Riverbend Scythes and North of Riverbend Stones have been playing the annual Youth Cricket tournament these past forty years as this reporter well knows, but rarely has the game been so widely anticipated.

The reason for this year's upset as all agree is a slight, spindly lad new to Betwys Beddau and the noble game of cricket: thirteen-year-old Daniel Malfoy, nephew of local tour guide Sirius Black. Young Daniel has taken up cricket with a fierce determination only matched by his companion Harry Potter's well-known passion for football. With little knowledge of the game Daniel has managed to become quite the batsman and while his fielding may still need a bit of work, one might feel that for the game he plays the boy may be forgiven a few trifling inconsistencies.

The Scythes were not favoured to defeat the Stones, captained by the Indomitable Jerry Agnew (whose father Mr. Alex Agnew is well-known to these pages for his yearly Holiday Amusements) but all proved not as it seemed on Saturday's sunny morning....

MINISTRY AWARDS ORDER OF MERLIN TO HOGWARTS PROFESSOR

(Photo Clipping: Daily Prophet, July 3, 1993)

MINISTER FUDGE presents the Order of Merlin (2nd class) to Nymphadora Tonks, former Hogwarts Professor, for bravery beyond the call of duty in slaying a Basilisk recently discovered at Hogwarts School. Ms. Tonks has declined to have a Bertie Botts Chocolate Frog Card made in her likeness but agreed to accept the award "under much pressure from the public and the Hogwarts Board of Governors". Left to Right: Minister Cornelius Fudge; Nymphadora Tonks; parents Andromeda and Ted Tonks, owners of Tonks & Tonks in Diagon Alley; Severus Snaqe, fellow professor at Hogwarts School; Albus Dumbledore, Headmaster of Hogwarts School.

Scrawled at the edge of the clipping: It's Snape, you damn fools.

LUCIUS MALFOY STILL AT LARGE

(Clipping: Daily Prophet, August 9, 1993)

The Ministry of Magic reports today that Friday's attempts to secure Lucius Malfoy, the first-ever successful escapee from Azkaban Prison, were unsuccessful. Auror Kingsley Shacklebolt spoke with the press to assure them that every possible method of capturing Malfoy, a known murderer and supporter of You Know Who, was being employed. He went on to state, however, that Malfoy is "a cagey bloke without any conscience, and it's

much harder to catch a nutter than your average sane person, you know".

Public opinion regarding Malfoy's daring escape suggests that many people believe him to have drowned in the Black Sea off the coast of Scotland....

There were a lot of things that the village of Betwys Beddau, as a collective, knew about the Black-Potter family. Or, at any rate, thought they knew.

For example, they knew that Mr. Black was independently wealthy and probably Old Money, because young Harry went to a prestigious, exclusive private school in Scotland during the year while Mr. Black kept a flat in London. Some people, on the other hand, theorised that Mr. Black was some kind of fugitive criminal or member of organized crime, because it was clear that he valued his privacy very highly. At any rate, he had enough money to support Harry without having any real kind of job. Tour guide for the local stone circle, Rhos Y Beddau, didn't count since half the time he'd do it for free.

He had enough money to support his cousin, too, although Mr. Lupin was a proud sort of man who always found some job or other to do while they were there for the summer. Some of the younger and the more astute villagers smiled indulgently on the pair's facade of "cousinly" affection, but Mr. Black was so charming and Mr. Lupin so unfailingly polite and kind that even those who disapproved of "that kind of thing" simply ignored the signs.

The villagers knew too that Mr. Black loved children, he must love children, because not only had he taken in his poor orphaned godson (and quite right) but also a sickly nephew who was down in the country "for his health" the summer that young Harry turned thirteen.

In Betwys Beddau, Harry and the other boys made him feel at home by initiating "Daniel" into the complex, Eleusian mystery of childhood cricket. They also played football among the old standing stones in the village parks and went prospecting for interesting rocks in the river at the bottom of the garden. They walked into town with Padfoot nearly every day to fetch Remus from his job and rarely a day went by that some kind person didn't stop to say hello and offer to buy them an ice lolly or a soft drink from the grocer, because you couldn't find a more charming pair of boys than Harry and Daniel. Padfoot magnanimously condescended to help them finish whatever they couldn't eat.

Mr. Lupin, while somewhat less outgoing than Mr. Black, was more sociable in the general sense. He worked in town, after all, and so saw the villagers more regularly. They knew that he too was fond of children and particularly fond of his big black Newf, Padfoot, the most intelligent dog that the villagers had ever encountered. Mr. Lupin was of a weak constitution himself, but when well he was a hard worker.

What the villagers didn't know about the peculiar family, of course, would have filled a book. But they were unaware of their own ignorance, and thus treated them as no more than a curiosity. Mr. Black's marriage prospects, Mr. Lupin's scholarly turn of mind, Harry Potter's frank and friendly outlook, Daniel Malfoy's shyness and surprising skill with a cricket bat -- these were as far as gossip went.

Had the villagers known that their little town harboured and sheltered a werewolf, a shapeshifter, and two adolescent wizards, Merlin knew what they would have thought.

It was early August, only a few days after Harry's birthday party, and the sun was out in full force in the little Welsh town. In a grassy lot near the main road, most of the Betwys Beddau under-sixteen set were rehearsing a pageant of the town's history, with Harry and Daniel (who would be gone by the time it was performed) as spectators, assistant directors, and general errand-boys. Padfoot lounged under a nearby tree, sleepily watching the proceedings and waiting patiently for Master to emerge from Meredith's Cafe nearby. Very few people were out on the road, except for one elderly man with a prodigious beard, carrying a walking stick in one hand and wearing an enormous, broad-brimmed straw hat.

Inside Meredith's Cafe it was bustling, as was usual at that time of day. The town was not so big nor so busy that a late-afternoon break couldn't be observed, and everyone left their offices and shops at two o'clock to go to one of the three cafes in town and get a scone or a muffin and a cup of tea. Remus called this the "Tea-esta" after which Padfoot had soundly bitten his ankle.

The bookstore hadn't needed Remus this year, they regretted to tell him in June, so he'd found employment at Meredith's instead. He was good at waiting tables, because he was polite, and he excelled at making drinks -- hot drinks, cold drinks, blended drinks, and the occasional alcoholic drink if he were slipped a few extra coins and nobody was paying very close attention. After all, he said to Sirius, he'd had seven years of Potions classes.

So while Lynn was on table duty and Marcus worked the cash register, Remus handled drinks. An order would be placed, Marcus would put their name and drink preference on the cup, Remus would prepare the drink and sing out the name after the patron had paid.

"Abby, your tea's ready," he called, passing the cup across to a young woman who grinned flirtatiously at him and took a seat nearby. "Nicholas? Where's Nicholas?"

"Over here!" said a man about his own age, gratefully accepting an iced coffee. Remus checked the next cup, scooped some vanilla ice cream into the blender, added a cup of lemonade from the refrigerator, tossed in a dash of sugar syrup, and whizzed the whole thing up, pouring the results into the original cup and capping it before bothering to look at the patron's name. He opened his mouth to call it, but the name came out remarkably quietly.

"Albus?" he asked, startled. He lifted his eyes over the edge of the counter and blinked a few times.

"Hello, Remus," Albus Dumbledore said with a smile. "Is that my lemonade cream?"

Remus dropped the drink, caught it before it fell far, and passed it across with a shaking hand.

"What are you doing here?" he asked. Dumbledore sipped the milkshake and smiled appreciatively.

"Taking tea. There is nothing to concern yourself over; this is a social call to ask a favour, nothing more."

Remus wiped his hands on the towel hanging from his belt and licked his lips nervously.

"I believe I shall take my lemonade cream and go watch the play rehearsal that appears to be occurring across the street," Dumbledore continued serenely. "When you are at liberty, please feel free to join me."

Remus passed the next twenty minutes in a state of vaguely fretful confusion, until at last the tea-rush died down and he could take his break. He found Dumbledore sitting placidly on a low tree branch that he was certain had never been there before, under the same tree that Padfoot had been using for shade. Padfoot, muzzle buried in the paper cup, lifted his head and panted at him.

"It is so soothing to see children at play," Dumbledore observed, indicating the pageant rehearsal with a nod of his head. Onstage, someone was being stabbed to death. "So long as one does not harbour any illusions about the content of a child's mind."

"They're good boys and girls," Remus said uncertainly.

"No doubt. Won't you sit down?"

Remus sat next to Dumbledore, leaning forward and resting his elbows on his knees.

"*Something* must have happened for you to come here," he said. "Is it Lucius?"

"Mr. Malfoy has not yet been found. I suspect, as I am sure you do, that he is being concealed and protected by Peter Pettigrew."

Remus nodded. "What about the Tonkses? They're all right?"

"Indeed. Nymphadora thrives, and they send their love. Severus expressed no desire at all to be remembered to you, but he has asked me to ensure that Harry and -- "

" -- Daniel."

" -- Daniel are well looked-after. Which reminds me, I have their Hogwarts letters," Dumbledore said, passing two thick envelopes to Remus, who tucked them absently in his back pocket. "So you see I am not here as the bearer of bad news. It was you in particular I came to see."

"Me?" Remus asked. "Why on earth?"

"I come with the full weight of the Hogwarts Board of Governors and School Trustees to offer you the position of Professor of Dark Arts at Hogwarts for the coming year," Dumbledore said.

Remus fell backwards off the tree branch. Padfoot leapt up at once and ran to him, but Remus was already struggling up onto his elbows.

"You're mad!" he said to Dumbledore, forgetting for a moment that he was speaking to his former Headmaster. "You can't give me a job!"

"That remains to be seen. I am empowered to offer it," Dumbledore replied calmly. Remus stood up and rubbed the back of his head. Dumbledore looked up at him mildly.

"We both know it's cursed, Headmaster," he said. Padfoot stepped across his feet and glared menacingly at Dumbledore.

"Be that as it may, you will do well to remember that werewolves are immune to many common curses and hexes," Dumbledore replied. "The pay is excellent, of course, and -- "

"Two of our Dark Arts professors were *eaten* by things when we were at school!"

"Remus," Dumbledore said warningly, glancing at Harry and Draco. Remus followed his gaze, sighed, and settled down on the low tree branch once more. Padfoot placed himself ostentatiously between them.

"You can't honestly think I'd be any good at the job even if I were mad enough to take it," he said in a softer voice, one hand placed warningly on Padfoot's neck.

"I know you have spent many years studying ways of combating the Dark Arts while you were searching for Peter," Dumbledore said. "You seem to have an uncanny method of discerning when trouble is looming on the horizon, and moreover, you are a figure of authority in young...Daniel's eyes."

"What has he to -- oh. Oh, I see," Remus said grimly. "Lucius."

"We have no reason to believe he has forgotten his only son and heir. You have the ability to protect him, Remus."

"You're playing dirty, Headmaster," Remus said. "Does the school board know what I am?"

"Do they need to?"

That elicited a small smile from Remus. "No, I suppose not. It'll be hard to avoid telling the staff..."

"No; they would have to be informed. Poppy knows already, of course."

"And Snape."

"He has kept your secret this long. Besides, I have presented you to him as a...challenge."

Padfoot whined. Remus looked perplexed.

"A challenge?"

"Indeed." Dumbledore offered him a newspaper clipping from yet another pocket. Remus stared down at it for so long that Padfoot began to gnaw on his shirtsleeve.

"It was perfected in July," Dumbledore offered. "I know you'd been following the journal articles for years, but they've kept it all very secret. Fortunately, Severus was one of the members of the extended research team."

"He can brew this?"

"He believes so. He's been allowed to brew a test batch for the experimental subjects. They are still alive. He would be capable of providing you with the potion each month, in return for research assistance. There is still some pain, I understand, but the human mind is retained much more fully -- "

"Human," Remus whispered, not looking at anyone now. "I could remember the moon. I'd be safe to be around."

"Alas, the potion does not travel well. Your presence at Hogwarts is required," Dumbledore said. Remus was silent. "I have faith in your abilities, Remus; you might try it yourself some time. Come to Hogwarts. Try the potion, try teaching, and protect your son's best friend."

Remus looked at him sharply. Dumbledore smiled winningly. Padfoot, finally driven to it, ran behind the tree and emerged as Sirius, shaking his shaggy hair out of his eyes.

"You're not bribing him with some potion," he said, pointing a finger at Dumbledore accusingly. "If Snivellus can make it, I can make it, and you know I'm well-connected enough to get a copy of the procedure."

Dumbledore gazed mildly at Sirius' finger.

"Do you wish Draco dead?" he asked quietly.

"Since when was it Moony's job to protect him? Get Snivellus to do it, he was Lucius Malfoy's bumboy at schoo -- "

Sirius found himself suddenly unable to speak. He clutched his throat, swallowed, and glared at Dumbledore.

"As I was saying," Dumbledore continued, "The responsibility for the protection of our children does not fall only on the shoulders of those intimately connected with them. As Mr. Black may be intrigued to know, I myself educated *him* over the strong objections I held to his family's personal beliefs."

Remus hid a smile.

"The decision is ultimately yours to make," Dumbledore said to Remus, emphasizing *yours* slightly. "But there is also the fact to be considered that Lucius Malfoy may not only be after his own son. He may be after Harry Potter as well."

Sirius paled, glancing at Harry, who had yet to notice the antics of his elders.

"Revenge," Remus murmured. "Yes. And if Peter had a hand in it..."

Dumbledore was very eloquently silent.

"May I have a day or two?" he asked. Sirius was still rubbing his throat, trying to throw off the hex, but without his wand he wasn't getting very far.

"Of course. I'll send someone for your answer in three days. Give my regards to the boys; tell them I could not stay to say hello."

He rose and smiled at Sirius, who coughed and growled. Remus put out a hand to stop him, however, as Dumbledore made his way back to the road and continued walking towards the path to Rhos-y-Beddau, the ancient stone circle (now submerged in peat) at the edge of town.

"*Bastard* ," Sirius said feelingly.

"He has the best interests of the children at heart," Remus replied.

"He wants us to think that," Sirius retorted. "Moony, you know that job is cursed."

Remus sighed. "Yes, and he rightly pointed out that some curses...don't work on me."

"But this one might! I don't want you eaten!" Sirius dropped onto the branch next to Remus. "Besides, that would mean we wouldn't be able to stay in London this year, and you know you'd miss Diagon."

"There'd be Hogsmeade. You could take a cottage there. I'd have floo access, there's no reason I couldn't come home every night. And at lunches," Remus suggested with a grin. Having two thirteen-year-olds living in the River House, which was small and not terribly thick-walled, made for a rather stifled sex life. Sirius' frustration with it was beginning to show.

"You're managing me."

"Am not!" Remus answered, looking hurt. "I'm rationally -- oh bugger, my break's up," he said suddenly. "Listen, I'll see you at the River House, I'm off at four. *Don't* tell the boys anything and don't try to argue this out with me in front of them."

"It's going to affect them, you know! It's not exactly easy when your..." Sirius fumbled for the word to express what Remus was to Harry. "Well, it's not easy knowing the person who's grading your papers, is all!"

"Severus does it. I've got to go , we'll ask Harry about it after you and I are sorted," Remus said, running back across the grass.

"WHAT ABOUT THE MOONS?" Sirius yelled after him, and several people coming out of the cafe stopped to stare.

"Argument about astrology," Remus said to them as he brushed past. Sirius, sulking by the tree, ignored the funny looks they gave him.

Harry had once told Draco that Remus didn't need any money, since he and Sirius had loads in Gringott's, but that Remus liked to work because he felt useful and anyway it was good to keep his hand in. Draco had replied that he thought he understood that, and it was likely he understood it even better than Harry or Sirius. Remus felt an instinctive affinity for the shy child, as well -- he remembered what it was like to be the quiet one.

Remus liked to work. He'd been raised to it and the few years spent trying to hold a steady job before Sirius took him on at Sandust Books was the most depressing time in his life, bar none. Even now, with the Black wealth and his own meagre savings supporting them comfortably, he liked to keep busy. Sirius did too, even though he didn't admit it; he'd spent half the summer bent over a drawing board, designing new toys for Madame Schaeffer's Scholars' Emporium. Harry, who was a rather better artist than Sirius, occasionally assisted.

And a long time ago, Remus had rather liked the idea of teaching at Hogwarts. It was a *long* time ago, when he was fourteen or fifteen and thought Minerva McGonagall was the most wonderful teacher in the world (well, he still thought that) and before he'd fully realised just how limiting his lycanthropy would be as an adult. At fifteen he could almost bounce back in a day. Now -- well, now he was in his thirties, and the Change slowed him down a bit more.

But still. Teaching, and teaching something he was good at...

Well, Sirius might be louder and less tactful and a good deal more obstinate about small things, but for sheer bullheaded stubbornness where it really mattered, you couldn't beat Remus Lupin.

Two days after Dumbledore made his offer, while Harry and Draco were puttering around making themselves breakfast in the kitchen, Remus rolled over onto his back and stretched his arms behind his head, shoulder-joints cracking in a satisfying way. Sirius grunted and turned on his side, stealing the blankets.

"Sirius, I'm going to take the Hogwarts job," Remus said. "We're not going to argue about it any more. As long as Harry is all right with having me as a teacher, I can't miss this opportunity."

Sirius opened his eyes wide enough to see the set of Remus' jaw.

"Well, if you'd sounded that decisive when Dumbledore was here," he yawned, "I wouldn't have bothered fighting with you."

Remus began to laugh. "What?"

"Moony, if you had any sense at all, you'd know that as long as you *tell* me something instead of *ask* it, I'm going to cave every time."

"*Really* ," Remus said, turning his head. "That could make life interesting."

"Life isn't interesting now?"

Remus grinned. Sirius knew that particular grin, and would have taken full advantage of the impending excitement it had to offer, but there was a pounding on the door.

"EGGS AND BACON IN FIVE MINUTES!" Harry called through the door.

"When did we tell him he could start frying bacon on his own?" Remus asked, sighing.

"I think it was part of our plan to give him more responsibility," Sirius said. "Which was your idea, by the way."

"Bugger. Well, there'll be bacon, anyway," he said, rolling over to straddle Sirius' hips and kissing him on the forehead. "Thank you, Sirius. This means something to me."

"Yes, well, you're in charge of finding me someplace to stay in Hogsmeade," Sirius grumbled. "And nothing stone or drafty, either, it's cold as blue fuck in Scotland."

"Duly noted." Remus slid easily off the bed and reached for his housecoat. "Come on, Harry'll sulk if the bacon's cold by the time we get out there."

Draco was devouring an enormous egg and bacon sandwich when Remus appeared in the kitchen, blinking at the bright sunlight streaming through the windows.

"Morning," Remus said. Harry passed him a warm plate of eggs, bacon, and several slices of fried bread. He reflected that early mornings weren't quite so bad when the reward was fried things.

"Sirius coming?" Draco asked.

"Mmhm. Listen, I need to have a word with you two," Remus said, sitting down and cutting his bread into soldiers.

"If it's about the river, we didn't do it," Harry said promptly.

"And if we did you couldn't prove it," Draco added. Remus rubbed his eyes.

"We'll come back to that, because I know you're not really stupid enough to disclaim knowledge of something ahead of time, but for now, no. It's about Hogwarts."

Harry tilted his head as he slid the rest of the bacon, along with quite a bit of grease, onto Sirius' plate.

"The Headmaster has offered me a job at the school," Remus continued. "Teaching Defence Against the Dark Arts."

"Wicked!" Draco said. "Does that mean we'd have to call you Professor Lupin?"

"Yes, and that's what we need to talk about," Remus said, as Sirius walked in and took the plate Harry offered him. "I've decided to take the job, but I want to make sure it's all right with you two. It's not easy having a parent at school -- "

"Yeah, Dora graded Neville really hard, 'cause he's her brother," Harry said.

"Well, yes. And other students might think badly of you. And, if I had to give you a detention, I would," Remus continued.

"Here, Moony, I have a thought," Sirius said suddenly, as he entered the kitchen. "Do you suppose you could talk Filch into letting you into his files and steal back some of the stuff he took off us -- "

"-- twenty years ago? *No*," Remus said firmly. "Besides, he's probably thrown it all out, and stop distracting me."

"Yes, Professor," Sirius muttered.

"So I want your thoughts and your approval before I tell him yes," Remus finished, looking from Harry to Draco and back. "It'll affect you as much as it does me. I'll be living at school with you, and Sirius will be nearby as well."

Harry glanced at Draco. "I think it's brilliant," he said with a shrug.

"I'm with Harry," Draco agreed.

Remus hesitated for a fraction of a second before nodding. "Settled, then," he said.

"Is Sirius coming up to live at Hogwarts too, then?" Harry asked. Sirius glanced at Remus.

"Er...probably not at Hogwarts," Remus said.

"Well..." Sirius pursed his lips. Remus gave him a questioning look. "Padfoot could. Professors are allowed a Familiar, aren't they?"

Remus burst out laughing. "You're proposing to spend an entire year as a dog?"

"Not the whole year. Just the bits of it where I follow you to class, bite anyone who's misbehaving, and snag sweets from all the students."

"You'd do that anyway."

"My point exactly."

Remus rolled his eyes. "We've nearly a month to decide all that. I think it's far more sensible of you to take a cottage in town and we'll have it hooked up to the floo in whatever rooms they give me. And you two had better keep quiet about it," he said, pointing with his fork at the boys.

"We're thirteen, Remus," Harry said scornfully. "We're almost grown!"

Sirius tried not to laugh under his breath.

"Good, then I will trust you," Remus said agreeably. "And for the next month you may refer to me as Professor."

Sirius snorted into his fried eggs, but when he looked up, Remus was regarding him with quite an interesting look on his face.

"You too, Sirius Black," he said with a grin.

Sirius decided this Hogwarts business might be entertaining after all.

Laocoon's Children: The Fugitive from Azkaban

Chapter 2

Please Note: Laocoon's Children is a parallel of the Harry Potter books, and therefore passages from the books themselves are occasionally useful. In this chapter, portions of the Knight Bus and Firebolt scenes are taken directly or rephrased from The Prisoner of Azkaban.

The messenger that Dumbledore sent to speak to Remus wasn't Snape, as he and Sirius had assumed it would be; it was a tabby-cat with squarish marks around her eyes. She was waiting for them when they returned from a lunchtime outing, calmly washing one paw and sitting on their welcome mat.

"Deputy Headmistress, this is a pleasure," Remus said, opening the door and allowing her to lead the way inside. "I assume the Headmaster has sent you?"

Sirius shut the door after the boys and the cat stretched and transformed, ending up as a tidy-looking witch with square spectacles on.

"He has," she said with a small smile. "Hello Mr. Lupin, Mr. Black. Harry, Draco."

"Professor," Harry and Draco mumbled by way of greeting.

"Won't you have some tea?" Remus said.

"I'm afraid I can't linger; I'm needed at Hogwarts again by two," she said.

"Of course. Please tell the Headmaster that I've decided to accept his offer," Remus replied. "Contingent on one or two points, but I'm sure those will be no bother."

McGonagall smiled more broadly than Harry and Draco thought possible. "Wonderful, Remus. I'm certain you'll be an excellent professor."

She reached into her sleeve and took out a wooden scroll-case, sealed at both ends with wax bearing the Hogwarts imprint. "This should contain all the necessary information. Albus would prefer you sent him your lesson plans via Muggle post -- there's an address in with your papers -- and ride up to Hogwarts with the children on September First."

"That's easily enough done, but..." Remus glanced at Sirius. McGonagall waited. "Well, Sirius had thought about moving up to Hogsmeade. It'll make it a bit rough on him if he can't get there until the term starts."

"Your duties will, of course, require you to room at the castle," McGonagall said significantly.

"Yes, I know, but Sirius would like to be near his godson and his cousin's son, considering everything," Remus answered easily.

"Mr. Black may take a room at the Three Broomsticks until he finds suitable lodging; surely that will be acceptable," she said. Remus sighed.

"I suppose it will have to be. Are we permitted to come to London a few days early, to see Andromeda and buy the boys their school things?"

"I don't believe the Headmaster will object."

"That's fine. Tell the Headmaster I'll take the Knight Bus to London with Harry and Draco, and we'll catch the Hogwarts Express as usual," he said.

"Of course. Good afternoon, *Professor* Lupin, Mr. Black. Boys," she added. Harry and Draco grinned impudently at her as she passed.

"She doesn't like me," Sirius said, watching the tabby cat wander up the lane to Cwundu Road.

"I think she doesn't like *us*," Remus answered.

"She loved you at -- "

"That's not what I meant."

"Oh. *Oh*, do you really think?" Sirius said, turning to look at Remus, who shrugged.

"It may be she simply disapproves of Professors bringing along an entourage," he answered. He looked at Harry and Draco, who were sharing some kind of private joke. "Well, lads, that's done then. Which reminds me, we'll need to speak with Narcissa, or at least have Andromeda speak with her, when we get back; Draco's got to get his Hogsmeade permit slip signed."

"I'll talk to Andromeda about it. I think she likes needling Narcissa once in a while," Sirius said, touseling Draco's hair. Draco beamed up at him, and Remus smiled; he'd suspected years ago that Draco had a deep hero-worship for Sirius, and the summer had only confirmed it. Early on,

when he'd just arrived, Draco had clung to Padfoot constantly and followed Sirius around like a pale-haired shadow.

"And I had better start working on a lesson plan," he announced. "I wonder if I still have my old Dark Arts notes..."

"You don't need notes, Moony! You're a walking encyclopaedia!" Sirius grinned.

"Yes, but it'd be nice to remember what was taught at which level," Remus said. "Though it was patchy at best, wasn't it?"

Sirius frowned. "Yeah. The curse."

"Is it real, then? The curse?" Draco asked. Sirius gave him and Harry a gentle shove into the kitchen and followed then in. He sat at the kitchen counter while Remus went to the icebox for some milk.

"Nobody knows if the curse is real or if it's just a self-fulfilling prophecy," he said. "Some teachers while we were there just flat out ran away after a year, as far as we could tell. And you know, Dark Arts is nothing to muck about with."

"Oh god," Harry said. "It's the Talk."

"Talk to your kids about the Dark Arts!" Draco mimicked a popular wizarding wireless advert. "They'll listen!"

"Quiet, you two," Remus warned.

"As I was saying," Sirius continued, "We had -- was it eight or nine, Moony?"

"Eight and a substitute," Remus replied. "Dumbledore certainly treats it as if it were real, you know."

"Dumbledore treats *Father Christmas* as if he were real. We had a couple of professors with nervous breakdowns; one of them was eaten by a rogue hippogriff and another by a dragon just after her first year ended. One or two were yearly substitutes who weren't planning on staying any longer, like Dora."

"Professor Dora," Harry corrected primly. "You will be careful, won't you Remus?"

"Wouldn't want you getting eaten," Sirius added. Remus smiled.

"I survived seven years there as a boy," he said. "I know Hogwarts better than anyone, except maybe Sirius and the Headmaster. I'm not worried."

"You don't know this," Sirius said to Draco, "But before Harry came to live with us, Remus traveled the world in search of adventure. He's been all over. He'll be fine."

Remus smiled tolerantly.

"Were you really an adventurer?" Draco asked.

"I wouldn't call it that. I did a lot of research, and I did travel, but I never went looking for adventure. It'll be interesting to try teaching what I've picked up to others," he mused. "I wonder...I think my notes are out in those cartons in the garden shed, the ones that we never unpacked. You boys want to go exploring?"

"Yeah!" Harry said.

"Did you really keep all your old school notes?" Sirius asked curiously, as Remus led the boys down the hall to the back door of the River House. There was a little shed to the left of the path that led down to the river, tightly sealed and dusty-windowed.

"Of course. Didn't you?" Remus asked.

"Never took notes, did I? Besides, anything I had left over from Hogwarts was in a box in Sandust," Sirius said glumly. Remus gave him a sympathetic look. Five years later, the burning of Sirius' bookshop was still a painful topic.

He unlocked the door and threw it wide, revealing a messy interior with a few cardboard cartons, one or two empty milk crates, and a very dusty potting table on one side. Fungus was growing out of the table. Draco and Harry stayed on the threshold, peering around the doorway and inside. Remus lifted one of the boxes onto the table, avoiding the mushrooms, and opened it.

"Moody put some never-damp charms on everything, but they might be wearing off..." Remus peered into the box, wrinkling his nose. "Sirius..."

"Mmh?" Sirius asked, spit-shining one of the windows so that more light could come through.

"Is this yours?" Remus inquired, lifting a pair of boxer shorts from the carton. Harry and Draco began to laugh.

"I've been looking for those for years!" Sirius crowed.

"This is all clothing...Sirius, Merlin, no wonder you had to buy all those shirts when we moved here. Half your clothes are in this box," Remus said, shoving it over to him. Sirius took out a couple of t-shirts emblazoned with band names from times long past. He threw them at Harry and Draco, who struggled into them, still laughing.

"Split Enz," Draco said, looking down. "Is that a place?"

"It's a band. Old girlfriend gave me that," Sirius said. "Never listened to them myself."

"Look, I got Pan Demonium!" Harry held out his shirt for Draco to admire. "Remus has a phonograph of them somewhere."

"The sins of my youth revisited," Remus murmured. "I fancied the lead singer."

"What, the one that transfigured horns for himself whenever he performed?" Sirius asked, helping Remus shift another, heavier carton.

"Listen, I didn't say it was a tasteful decision. Phew, this is it!" Remus exclaimed, as a cloud of dust rose up from the inside of the carton. Thick, tightly bound rolls of parchment were stacked on top of a pile of black fabric that itself lay atop a dozen old schoolbooks. Each scroll was bound with twine and labeled -- *First Year Potions. Sixth Year Arithmancy. Third Year Defence.*

Remus sifted through the scrolls, taking out nine all told, and then lifted the fabric out from under the rest. He shook it, then held it up in front of himself. "Well?"

"Is that your Hogwarts robe?" Harry asked.

"Sixth and Seventh year. It's the one I wore when I passed out of school," Remus said proudly. There was the Gryffindor insignia on the chest; a Prefect's badge was still pinned to the collar, and one of the sleeves was wrapped in gold braid.

"Prefect and high academic honours," Remus said. "Not bad for a scholarship boy, eh? Sirius had high honours too, but James -- "

He hesitated suddenly, glancing at Harry.

"James had high honours *and* his Head Boy braid, and it snagged on a banister and Lily had to fix it with a transfigured hairpin..." Sirius said nostalgically. "And at the party after he took all his braid off and tied it up in her hair."

Draco looked sidelong at Harry, who was listening hungrily.

"Well. That's the notes I need, at any rate. You, troublemaker, take this back up to the house and figure out if you still want any of it," Remus said, putting the carton of clothes in Sirius' hands. He gathered the scrolls up in his own long, capable fingers and gestured them all out.

"Sirius, can I have this one?" Harry asked, pointing to his shirt as they made their way back to the house. Remus paused to lock the door, listening to them talk.

"I don't need it. Draco, do you want Split Enz?"

"Nah. Have you got any Deaf Wizard?"

"I think so -- how do you know about them? They're not for your tender ears, that's for sure."

"Neville nicked some from Dora ages ago. Them and The Merlingers."

Remus smiled. Harry and Draco were flapping around in shirts a few too sizes too big -- well, Sirius was a broad-chested man -- and Sirius was trying to sort out when kids who used to listen to Faerie Tails discovered hard wizarding rock. And there he stood with a handful of memories from school, the first step in returning to Hogwarts, which he loved. Oh, he had loved Hogwarts.

Even with Lucius Malfoy on the loose, this was going to be a good year. He could feel it.

Professor Flitwick, Professor McGonagall, and the Headmaster were terrifying enough when seated together, although a little bit of Padma's mind was giggling uncontrollably at the tableau they made, like a rising bar-graph. A larger part of her mind was, however, consumed with curiosity about the tall, dark-skinned man sitting next to the Headmaster.

The rest of her was nothing more than a bundle of anxious nerves. They were all sitting on the other side of the desk from her.

"Mrs. Patil, Miss Patil," the dark-skinned man said, standing as she and her mother entered. "Please, sit down. My name is Kingsley Shacklebolt; I'll be conducting your interview today."

"Thank you," Padma said politely, sitting on the edge of her chair. She glanced at Flitwick, her Head of House, who gave her a cheerful wink.

"We're very grateful for this opportunity," her mother added, placing a hand on her shoulder. "Padma's well aware of what a privilege this is."

"A privilege and a large responsibility," McGonagall said severely.

"She has read the official caveats, Minerva," Dumbledore said, "and no doubt understands them much better than I do."

"Mrs. Patil," Auror Shacklebolt said, "I've received your letter of petition, as well as letters of recommendation from the Deputy Headmistress, Headmaster, and Miss Patil's Head of House. I was a Ravenclaw myself, you know," he said to Padma, who smiled at him. "I'm inclined to approve your petition, but we're all aware of what happened last May. I'm concerned about Padma's ability to handle the stress of an increased workload and, of course, we're always required to ensure that this isn't because of...parental pressure," he said delicately. "I'd just like to ask you a few questions, Padma. There are no right or wrong answers -- you'll just have to trust that I will make the right decision. Do you understand?"

Padma nodded and took a deep breath. Her mother squeezed her shoulder reassuringly.

"All right then. Let's begin..."

"Harry -- Draco -- it's nearly time."

Harry rolled over and glanced at the yellow-lit doorway where Sirius was standing. "Muh?"

"Come on lads, up you go."

Draco had spent his summer sleeping in a bed that had been crammed against the wall of Harry's room opposite Harry's bed. Now he rolled over and sat up, automatically avoiding banging his elbow on the wall or his hand on the bedside table the boys shared. Sirius flicked the lights on and both boys winced.

"Sorry," Sirius said, as Harry sat up and reached for his shirt, shedding his pyjama shirt and tossing it into the open trunk at the foot of his bed. "Get dressed -- Remus has gone to fetch the taxi."

Betwys Beddau only had one taxi-cab, and its driver was a retired military man named Carl. He had agreed to drive them to the outskirts of Llangynog, the closest large city, where they would catch the Knight Bus to London and put up with Andi and Ted for a few days. Hedwig had arrived in mid-August with a letter from Andromeda, saying she was expecting them, and took one back from Sirius thanking her and giving her the day they'd be there.

Harry and Draco stumbled out into the chilly Welsh air, lugging their trunks, and reached the main road just as the taxi arrived. Sirius stood and talked to Carl amiably, blocking his view of the fact that there was no house anywhere nearby, while Remus helped the boys put their trunks into the boot. His and Sirius' belongings, as much as they would need for the year, had been shrunk into a third trunk which was settled between the boys and Sirius in the back seat.

"Back to school, eh?" Carl asked them, as Remus climbed into the front.

"Yes, sir," Draco replied.

"Best years of your life. Vocational academy, isn't it?" Carl asked Remus.

"Er, it's certainly a training ground," Remus replied.

"But not one of them poxy, pansy places like Eton?"

"It's up Edinburgh way," Remus said. "Harry does sport, don't you Harry?"

Harry snickered.

"Reckon young Daniel will too, won't you, after this summer?" Carl inquired. "Never seen a better natural batsman in m'life."

"I...I might," Draco stammered.

"Sure, you should try for the house team," Sirius said. "Harry'll have a word with your Captain, won't he?"

Harry shrugged and grinned. "I don't mind trouncing Daniel."

They talked of schools, mainly of Carl's memories of his own academy, until they reached a hotel just outside Llangynog.

"Bus for us from here -- ta, Carl," Remus said as he paid him. They waited until he had disappeared, then looked carefully up and down the street.

"What is the Knight Bus, anyway?" Harry asked, as Sirius took his wand out of his pocket and casually pointed it outwards at the road.

"Wizarding transport -- I prefer trains, but this is a less noticeable way to get to London," Remus answered. Just then there was a loud bang and a

screech of brakes. Draco stumbled backwards from the kerb.

Before them stood a violently purple triple-decker bus carrying the legend "THE KNIGHT BUS" in gold lettering on the windshield and the side. A conductor in a purple uniform leapt out of the bus and began speaking loudly, reading from a little card held none too subtly in his palm.

"Welcome to the Knight Bus, auxiliary transport for witches and wizards. Just stick out your wand hand, step on board, and we can take you anywhere you want to go. My name is Stan Shunpike, and I am your conductor this morning -- "

"Right, right," Sirius said impatiently. "Fares gone up this year?"

The rather spotty young man turned the card over. "Eleven sickles for a single fare, orange juice and croissant for fifteen, newspaper eight knuts extra."

"Four breakfast fares and a newspaper, please."

The conductor rang up four tickets. "Three galleons, nine sickles, sixteen knuts."

Sirius paid and Remus shepherded the boys aboard, then reached around for the trunks.

"I'll do that, sir!" Stan-the-conductor said, hurrying forward. Remus watched in amusement as the young man struggled to get all three trunks aboard. He tipped Stan a galleon while Sirius wasn't looking.

"What's the ride like to London this time of day?" Sirius asked the driver.

"Oh," the man said in a scratchy voice, "Got a couple'a pickups to do first. Ever'on's goin'ta Lonnon this time'a year, aren' they?"

"Might as well settle in," Remus said, leading them to one of the many small round tables lining each side of the bus. Sirius sat down with a pleased sigh and picked up the croissant that appeared at his place. Harry and Draco eagerly sat nearby and tore into the chocolate croissants at theirs.

"Sports page?" Sirius asked, offering it to Remus.

"Good god, the Cannons won? Is the world ending?" Remus said, studying the headlines.

"Nice to have Magical news again," Sirius said. He glanced down at the front page, then quickly folded it over and smoothed down the crease.

"My dad's on the front page, huh," Draco asked. Sirius looked at him, then at Remus, pleadingly. Remus chewed on his lower lip.

"Draco," he said slowly, "You're probably going to have to get used to a certain amount of your...family business being aired publicly, until all this is over."

"I'd like to see it," Draco said, in a remarkably authoritative voice. Remus blinked at him. Sirius shrugged and passed him the folded front page. Draco unfolded it and smoothed it out on the table. Harry leaned over his shoulder.

MALFOY STILL AT LARGE, the headline read.

"The Ministry of Magic confirmed today that Lucius Malfoy, one of the most infamous inmates of Azkaban prison, is still eluding capture," Draco read aloud. "*We are doing all we can to recapture Malfoy*, said the Minister for Magic this morning, *and we beg the magical community to remain calm*. Meanwhile, witches and wizards live in fear of a massacre like that of twelve years ago -- "

"Surely they're aware that wasn't Malfoy alone," Remus said, brows knitting.

"Peter's old news," Sirius grunted. "Enough. You'll hear enough about Lucius Malfoy at school, I'm sure, some children being the pissant little scrubs they are."

"Not from Slytherin he won't," Harry said angrily.

"It's all right," Draco said, folding the paper in half. "Besides, I'm only half-Malfoy, right?" he asked, glancing up at Sirius, who grinned.

"So it seems. Hey -- Harry, look at this!"

Harry looked at the paper, which Draco had turned over to the below-the-fold headline. "*Ministry of Magic employee scoops grand prize* -- that's Mr. and Mrs. Weasley!"

"Arthur Weasley, head of the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office at the Ministry of Magic, has won the annual Daily Prophet Grand Prize Galleon Draw. Oh, well done Arthur," Remus said, reading with his head tilted to adjust for the awkward angle. "We'll have to try and catch the Weasleys in Diagon and congratulate them."

"Molly can't possibly still be angry about the Anglia," Sirius agreed.

They spent the rest of the ride to Diagon, amidst the bumpings and bangings of the Knight Bus, reading the paper from cover to cover and making plans for the rest of the trip: school book shopping, a trip to Mardjinn Alley, dinner out with Neville and the Tonkses. Sirius was going to go up to Hogsmeade ahead of everyone and start looking for a flat.

"Are you and Sirius really going to live in different places all year?" Harry asked Remus, bending his head low over the table and speaking quietly. Remus followed his gaze to where Sirius was standing at the front of the bus with Draco, watching the scenery speed past. "I mean, that can't be much fun for you, can it?"

"It won't be so bad; there'll be a direct floo portal, and professors can come and go into Hogsmeade as they please," Remus answered. "You live away from us all year and it doesn't change anything."

"Yeah, but that's -- different."

Remus nodded. "That's true too. On the other hand...Hogwarts is a place with its own laws and its own reasonings. You'd understand this better than anyone. When you become a teacher you make certain commitments, certain sacrifices, because you're invested with an awful lot of power. I...didn't always do as I should have, when I was a Prefect."

"I don't believe that!" Harry laughed.

"We all grew up a lot during the war, Harry. And when we took you from the Dursleys, we had to grow up even more, Sirius and I. At school we were terrors, really."

Remus was staring past Harry now, and Harry had the distinct sensation that where he was looking was not a place, but a time.

"I owe Hogwarts," he said quietly. "More than anyone knows, including Sirius."

Harry was about to ask him to expand on this when the Bus made an enormous bang and wheezed to a stop in front of the Leaky Cauldron.

"Here we are," Remus said with a sudden grin. "Come on, we'll leave our stuff at Andi's and go run amok in Diagon, sound all right?"

Andromeda was thrilled to see them, and just as thrilled to see them leave again; she was in the middle of fitting first-year robes to half a dozen new Hogwarts students and begged Remus to take a restless, rambunctious Neville away with him.

"We'll buy you dinner tonight," Remus said, kissing her on the cheek and following Harry and the other two boys out the door. Sirius was already outside, romping around the boys as Padfoot and playing Knock-Over, a spirited if simple game in which the object was to push someone into sprawling on their arse. It had gotten a lot harder in the past year of course, as the boys had shot up in height, but Sirius did love a challenge.

"How've you been, Neville?" Remus asked, as they dawdled their way down Diagon towards Gringott's, where they could change their Muggle cash for Wizarding and make a withdrawal from Draco's trust.

"Brilliant," Neville said. "Harry, I have something to show you. You too, Draco."

He led them down to Quality Quidditch Supplies and elbowed through the crowd with the other two close behind. Padfoot begged for sweets from the children clustered around the display window and Remus leaned forward to try to get a better look.

"It's a new prototype," Neville said. "Professor Snape pointed it out to me."

"When did you see Professor Snape?" Draco asked.

"He's always around, mooching after Dora," Neville said absently. "Look at *this*."

He gestured at the window. Harry actually gasped.

The broomstick in the window looked almost as if it was moving, though it was resting on a sleek silver stand. It had a wild look about it, predatory in fact. Harry found himself staring at it, nose pressed to the glass despite Remus, in the back, scolding him for it.

"Fastest broom in the world," Draco whispered, awed. Harry studied the little placard below the amazing broom intently.

THE FIREBOLT! FASTEST BROOM IN THE WORLD!

THIS STATE-OF-THE-ART RACING BROOM SPORTS A STREAM-LINED, SUPERFINE HANDLE OF ASH, TREATED WITH A DIAMOND-HARD POLISH AND HAND-NUMBERED WITH ITS OWN REGISTRATION NUMBER. EACH INDIVIDUALLY SELECTED BIRCH TWIG IN THE BROOMTAIL HAS BEEN HONED TO AERODYNAMIC PERFECTION, GIVING THE FIREBOLT UNSURPASSABLE BALANCE AND PINPOINT PRECISION. THE FIREBOLT HAS AN ACCELERATION OF 150 MILES AN HOUR IN TEN SECONDS AND INCORPORATES AN UNBREAKABLE BRAKING CHARM.

PRICE ON REQUEST.

"Ash and birch?" Harry asked Neville. "Is that smart, do you think?"

"Blowed if I know, you're the Quidditch man," Neville replied.

"It's definitely new," Draco said.

"Irish International Side's just put in an order for seven of them," said a man from the shop door. "Hullo Nev!"

"Hullo sir!" Neville called. "Look who I brought!"

"Blimey, it's Harry Potter," the man said. "Thinking of buying one, Mr. Potter? I hear you're going to be playing for England in a few years."

Harry grinned at him. "When I'm making pro-Quidditch salary, maybe. Price on request, huh?"

"Ten percent off for the Boy Who Lived," the man said with a wink, and disappeared back inside. Remus finally managed to "excuse-me" his way through and tweaked Harry's ear.

"No noses on glass," he scolded.

"Remus, look at it!" Harry said. Remus gave the broom a professional once-over and nodded.

"It's craftsmanship," he said. "Might want to wait and see how they do in play, though. Besides, you have a perfectly good Nimbus, lad."

Harry grinned and scratched Padfoot's head; the dog had his paws up on the ledge and was covering the glass in snouty nose marks.

"Come on, let's go get your books," Remus continued. Harry saw him exchange a significant look with Padfoot, but assumed it was simply a scold for snouting up the glass.

Laocoon's Children: The Fugitive from Azkaban

Chapter 3

"Spaghetti," Sirius said, offering the menu back to the waitress who was hovering over him. She smiled prettily at him and almost squeaked as she took his menu. He'd forgotten what life in the Wizarding World was like; people stopped and stared and pointed at Sirius Black, heir of the Black family and dapper bachelor about town. The waitress was almost visibly drooling.

"You always get the spaghetti," Andromeda said, grinning at him teasingly. "How boring, Sirius!"

"I like spaghetti," Sirius answered. He glanced at Remus and winked. Remus flushed.

"Shrimp linguini, please," Remus said firmly. The waitress smiled at him too, took his menu, and dashed away to giggle about Sirius with her comrades. Ted refilled their wine and leaned back, holding up his glass.

"To London again," he said, and the other adults toasted. "And to wherever you slink off to during the summers. It's done Draco a world of good."

"I enjoyed myself," Draco said shyly.

"I can tell. You're brown as a nut," Andromeda said. "Nice to see some colour in your skin. Merlin, you boys grow up fast."

"Watch out," Remus said to Ted, grinning at Andromeda. "She'll be looking for boot-faced cats again soon."

"Mum isn't happy unless she's got someone to spoil," Dora agreed. "Ah -- be right back," she added, and everyone followed her gaze.

"Did he have to come?" Sirius asked Ted in a low voice.

"Play nice or kiss your kneecaps goodbye," Ted answered, and raised his hand in greeting to Severus Snape, who had just come into the restaurant. Dora threaded her way through the tables and hugged him hello; to no-one's surprise, his returning hug was fraught with awkwardness. Andromeda gave Sirius a warning look as Harry jumped up and ran across the restaurant to say hello to his professor.

"Good evening," Severus said, taking the empty seat between Andromeda and Dora. "Neville, Draco. Lupin. Black," he added, drawling the last name as disdainfully as possible.

"Don't," Dora said out of the corner of her mouth. The waitress rushed back over and Snape stopped her in her tracks with a glare.

"Penne pasta salad," he said. "Off with you."

"I see your manners are improving," Sirius remarked. Remus' leg twitched slightly and Sirius winced.

"I wish I could say -- "

"Severus, how about some wine?" Ted asked, interrupting him. "We were just saying how big the boys were getting. Doesn't Draco look well?"

"He appears not to be malnourished," Snape allowed. "I suppose it's too much to ask that any of you have retained an ounce of knowledge over the summer?"

"I read the books you sent me," Harry said.

"Repeatedly," Remus added with a tolerant grin. "He's become quite the Graveworthy fan."

"Really! Did you give him *Wizard Bird* ? That was clever of you," Andromeda said. "There's a new one coming out, you know, Harry. And you're a Slytherin, you really should read *Two Kneazles*. "

"Ill-researched," Snape murmured.

"It's all about Salazar Slytherin!"

"That doesn't mean it's objective," Snape answered. "Graveworthy was a Slytherin too."

"Cynic," Dora said affectionately. "You'll be really horrified when you hear about Mum's Grand Plan."

Sirius glanced at Andromeda. "Finally taking over the world, are you?"

"Well, I was thinking of waiting because this is really a dinner to welcome you lads home," she said. "But I'm bursting with the news, so if you don't mind..."

"Go on! We're all fascinated now," Remus said.

"Well, I've been thinking about what to do with the flat on the top floor since you boys are abandoning me for Hogsmeade this year," she said. "And Ted and I talked it over and decided we wanted to do something useful with it. But it's -- well, you know, it's a flat, it's hard to put a flat to good charitable use."

"But," Ted said, "we eventually found a group that'll let us take people in and give them some housing. It's a tax break on the building, too."

"We're registering the flat with the Werewolf Support Network," Andromeda said. "It'll be available for people recovering from new infections, or people who've been put out because of the restrictions on werewolf employment."

Sirius, Harry, Snape, and Dora all instinctively looked at Remus, who had a glass of wine halfway to his mouth. His lips were open slightly. He blinked, looked from Ted to Andromeda, and -- after a very tense moment -- smiled.

"Very appropriate," he said, setting his wine down. His grin widened and he laughed a little, quietly. "Very apt, Andi. Well done."

"You know the kind of attention you'll get for it," Snape said sharply. "You'll lose business."

"We're not planning to broadcast it," Ted said. "Besides, we always have a few job openings now that the shop's really taking off. More work than we can keep up with. We'll be able to pay under the table, help them get on their feet again."

"How does it work?" Remus asked. "I've never even heard of this group."

"It's only about a year old, there's no reason why you should have," Ted said. "When the new restrictions were passed, someone decided to do something about it, I suppose."

"Ah. Yes. Umbridge," Remus murmured.

"Are you sure this is wise?" Snape persisted. "Some of these people -- "

"-- are sitting at this table," Sirius said sharply.

"-- are genuinely dangerous for more reasons than the obvious," Snape retorted.

"Sirius, be quiet," Remus said. Sirius fell quiet, sullenly. "He's right, Andromeda. I think it's great, but he does have a point. People who are down on their luck, who've been rejected by their families -- it isn't pretty. It can be dangerous."

"If nobody ever trusts them, it'll never get any better," Ted replied. "Besides, everyone knows Dora's an Auror, and I'm not sure if you're aware of this, but her mother's pretty fearsome in her own right."

"Look, food!" Dora said with mock-cheer. "Everybody dig in until you've stopped sulking."

"God, you are your mother's child," Ted said, but he smiled as he said it. Across the table, Draco lifted an eyebrow at Harry, who rolled his eyes.

"I'm still interested in how it works," Remus said, once Snape and Sirius' mouths were safely full of food.

"Well, it's fairly simple. Newly registered werewolves are given the Support Network's contact information by Healers at St. Mungo's -- apparently they have to get round the Ministry by privately asking Healers in the intensive wing to hand them out," Ted said. "It's all strictly confidential; any werewolf can contact a vastly underpaid woman who runs the Network. They can give a false name, or no name at all; she meets with them and evaluates what they need. There are apparently a couple of shops that regularly donate food and clothing, mostly seconds and dented cans, that kind of thing. She's in touch with a few Muggle charities too, but she doesn't like to house werewolves with Muggles."

"Industrious woman," Remus remarked.

"I think she lost a son," Andromeda said softly.

"Ah. Yes, there is a certain...parental drive," Remus answered, glancing down at his plate suddenly.

"At any rate, we're on the list now, so she sends them to us and we agree to provide safe housing. In return, our tenants agree to do their best to find work and also to change at the moon in a secure location."

"Such unnecessary charity," Remus murmured. "If it weren't for the new regulations..."

"Things will change," Ted said. "People are still living in fear from when You-Know-Who was in power. This next generation -- the boys here -- they'll change things."

Harry looked at him with such a grave, adult expression on his face that Ted bit his lip.

"Yes," he said. "Count on it."

Harry's going to be Minister for Magic," Draco teased.

"Great way to pick up girls," Remus added, breaking the tension.

"I'm sure that's why Fudge did it," Snape remarked sarcastically.

"Can you imagine him getting any otherwise?" Remus asked. Sirius almost choked trying to keep his laughter down.

Neville wanted Harry and Draco to sleep over that night, and Remus and Sirius were just as happy to have some time alone, so they parted ways after dinner and made for the Leaky Cauldron while the rest of the party wandered slowly back to Tonks&Tonks, a second bottle of wine tucked securely under Severus' arm. Dora held the other one just as securely, since Severus preferred to be seen escorting her rather than childishly holding hands.

Back in Neville's room in the spacious flat above Tonks&Tonks, the boys set about unpacking bedrolls Ted provided and discussing plans for the new school year. Neville joined in Harry's valiant crusade to convince Draco to go out for Beater on the Hufflepuff team.

"You can practice on my Nimbus," Harry offered, as Draco's mother had been horrified, years ago, at the idea of buying her son a broomstick. "You can even play on it when Hufflepuff isn't playing Slytherin."

"I dunno," Draco said. "I was thinking of maybe organising a Cricket eleven. Well, two elevens, really. There've got to be at least that many Muggleborns interested in playing, don't you think?"

"Not with Quidditch around," Harry answered. "Come on, Draco, it's like Cricket in the air! I know you can fly well and you've got wicked aim with a bat."

"Mum'd never allow it."

"Don't bloodywell tell her!" Neville exploded. "You needn't tell your mum everything you do, you know."

"She'd find out anyway," Draco retorted. "They cover the school games in the Prophet."

"Yeah, and your mum *of course* reads the sports page," Harry grinned. "Just try out, will you? I know there's an opening this year."

"If you stop harping on it," Draco said.

"Done deal!" Harry licked his palm in the style of the Betwys Beddau boys and offered it to Draco, who rolled his eyes. Grinning sheepishly, Harry wiped his hand on his trousers instead. Draco cast around for a subject to change to.

"Tell you what, let's get some snacks and barricade ourselves in for the rest of the night," he said. "The grownups are just going to have boring wine and talk about politics."

"Sounds good," Neville said. "There's ice-cream in the kitchen and a box of biscuits and some sandwich stuff. We'll have to sneak the ice-cream out," he added, turning to Harry. Or rather, where Harry had been. Now there was nothing but a pair of sneakers and about two inches of trouser-leg that ended abruptly in nothing.

"Your shoes are showing," Draco sighed. "Here, take it off, you're doing up the wrong buckles."

Harry shed his invisibility cloak and handed it to Draco. Sewn across the back and at the throat were a series of leather straps, designed so that the cloak could be hitched up or lengthened depending on the height of the wearer. Harry had always buckled the lowest strap across his throat, almost doubling the cloak's material around him. Over the summer, however, he'd gained a few inches and now he was on the third buckle. Draco did the other two up across his chest to keep the cloak closed.

"You two go for the sandwich stuff," Harry said. "I'll snag the ice cream."

In the hallway, however, they stopped suddenly at the sound of the voices in the dining room where the Tonkses and Snape had gathered. They weren't the usual cheerful tones of four people enjoying an after-dinner gossip; Ted's voice was low and serious, and so was Dora's when she spoke. Severus sounded oddly defensive.

"...makes no sense not to tell him," Ted said. "He should know, if only so that he doesn't make risky mistakes. He's thirteen, Severus, and old for his age."

"I'm aware of that," Severus said, annoyed. Neville held up a finger to his lips, unnecessarily shushing the other two.

"They'll listen to you, maybe even more than they will to Remus. You've been their teacher for two years. They need to know how important it is not to go running around in the forest or Hogsmeade or wherever they go when they get bored with school," Andromeda said. "I love them but they're such..."

"They're clever, all four of them, too bloody clever by half," Snape said. "That doesn't mean they need to know this."

"He sort of has a point," Dora said. "Tell one, tell all. I don't think they have any secrets between them."

"Harry and Draco make a pretty tempting target together," Andromeda sighed.

"They will be safe at Hogwarts. Why stir up old trouble?" Snape asked. "Lucius hasn't been seen since his escape. He's probably dead."

Draco made a soft little gasp, quickly stifled by Harry's hand.

"He's not dead and we all know it," Andromeda replied. "And he'll come for the boy sooner or later."

"Draco is not your responsibility," Snape said sharply.

"No -- he's yours," she answered, just as sharply. "Doubly so because of your friendship with Lucius. You knew him better than anyone -- Draco should know about his father, what his father's capable of. You're the only one who can tell him that with authority."

There was a long silence. When Snape spoke again, it was in a surprisingly sad voice.

"The boy is ashamed enough of what his father is," he said. "He's happy at school, away from Narcissa, away from that house. I was just as glad to see him away from it this summer. She fills his head with wrong ideas and I can't even credit how he manages to avoid turning into the perfect little copy of her. Let him have one place where he isn't constantly reminded of his father's misdeeds."

"You don't want him to hate you," Dora said.

"I didn't say that."

"He knows you're not like Lucius."

"I am more like Lucius than anyone ought to be."

"All right," Andromeda said suddenly. "It's your decision, Severus, but I hope you know what you're doing. Let's find something more cheerful to talk about."

Neville turned to look at Draco. The other boy was pale white, fists clenched into balls at his sides. His grey eyes were brilliant in his face.

"Take him back," Harry whispered in Neville's ear, startling him. "I'll get the food."

Neville pulled Draco away from the doorway, back into his room, and when Harry returned they were sitting on Neville's bed, Draco with his fists pressed into his lap, too-long silver hair falling across his face.

"Did you know?" Draco asked them both, in a controlled, furious voice. "Did you know he knew my father?"

"Not me," Neville said, glancing at Harry. Harry shook his head.

"No idea. I don't see why they'd be friends," he said. "It's not like Professor Snape is...I don't think he's even pureblood, is he? Why would your dad be friends with him?"

"I'm going to find out," Draco said determinedly. "Once we're back at school."

"Draco, listen, maybe it's better if you don't," Neville said hesitantly. "I mean. Maybe Professor Snape is right. It's done with now -- "

"He's free, and he's going to come for me. It isn't done with at all!" Draco said, and began to cry.

Neville and Harry looked at each other, utterly lost. Boys didn't cry, especially thirteen-year-old boys. True, he was crying in a very manful fashion, snuffling desperately and trying to hide it, choking on his own sobs, but he was still crying.

"Give him a handkerchief, I haven't got one," Harry said to Neville, who produced a grubby kerchief from one pocket.

"I'm not afraid," Draco said, swiping at his face with the cloth.

"Course not."

"I hate him. My father. And I hate my mum too, and it was such a nice summer..."

Harry mutely offered Draco a biscuit from the tin, and Draco nibbled on it, falling silent.

"You've got us," Neville said. "Me and Harry and Padma, I mean. And Professor Snape, and Remus too. And Dora's out chasing him all the time. And we'll get Hogsmeade weekends, that'll be fun, and Harry and I will make you try out for Quidditch if we have to glue you to the broomstick."

The mental image was apparently funny enough to make Draco laugh -- rather snottily, through his tears, but laugh all the same.

"Ghaaaaa," Sirius said, flopping down on the bed in one of the nicer rooms at the Leaky Cauldron. Remus grinned at him and leaned on the bureau, tilting his head from side to side. There was an alarming crack as his bones popped.

"Nice to have an evening to ourselves," he remarked, as Sirius worked his left shoe off using the toe of his right, still lying across the bed.

"You know I love Harry," Sirius said, working at the other shoe, "and I'm in a fair way of being very fond of Draco."

"But it's nice to spend an evening without once feeling the urge to strangle one of them?" Remus asked, smiling. Sirius stretched his arms.

"It's just nice not to have any responsibilities for a bit," he said. He propped himself up on his elbows and grinned at Remus. "Which reminds me, will you open our trunk? I got you a present."

"A present?" Remus asked, sounding perplexed and delighted at the same time. "What on earth for?"

"For getting your professorship," Sirius replied. Remus lifted the lid of the trunk and studied the mess inside skeptically. "Okay, lift up the blue jumper -- no, the knit one -- there -- and then kind of wiggle it out from under my trousers."

Remus grinned at him and grasped something deep in the trunk, tugging it free finally. It was a large, oblong thing, wrapped in brown paper; he tore it off and held his gift up to the dying light coming through the window.

"Sirius, it's marvelous," he said, fingers stroking the leather exterior of the briefcase appreciatively. It was golden-brown and buttery-smooth, the perfect size for carrying student papers and lesson plans. He turned it over to admire the brass latches at the top and burst out laughing.

"Professor R.J. Lupin," he read, tilting the briefcase so that the light picked out the sheen of the gold lettering stamped on the top of the case. He flicked it open deftly, his hands exploring the more durable interior. "Thank you."

"Got to have proper supplies before you go off to school," Sirius replied, grinning. "You like it, really?"

"It's wonderful," Remus said, and Sirius flopped back again on the bed, contented. "You didn't have to, you know."

"Yes, well, I'm Sirius Black, I don't *have* to do anything." He sighed blissfully. "It's a nice feeling."

"Very nice," Remus agreed, but it sounded as though he'd moved; after a second, Sirius nearly jumped out of his skin when he felt a hand clasp his leg gently. He propped himself up on his elbows and saw Remus leaning over his right knee, kneeling on the floor.

"Though it's not *terribly* private here," Remus continued, hooking his thumb in Sirius' sock and pulling it down and off. His hands were warm and sure, and Sirius had the sudden idea that perhaps Remus had been as frustrated all summer as he had. One sometimes couldn't tell, with Remus.

His hands moved to the other foot, holding Sirius' ankle lightly. When he was done removing the sock, he slid his fingers up slightly, just under the cuff of Sirius' trousers.

"There are silencing spells," Sirius said, as Remus' other hand came to rest just above his knee. Remus rested his head against Sirius' thigh.

"I've just cast two," he said. "And nobody's going to come knocking."

Sirius sat up further and ran a hand through Remus' hair, affectionately. "Why, Professor Lupin, what on earth are you implying?"

Remus leaned forward and slid his hands down Sirius' calves, then up over the fabric, past his thighs. His thumb brushed Sirius' groin and he smiled when Sirius moaned softly.

"I think you ought to know," he said, curling his fingers in the waistband of the jeans and tugging them down, "that I appreciate what you're going to have to put up with this year."

Sirius' breath hitched as Remus pulled his clothing down and away. His left hand slid under Sirius' shirt, hiking it up.

"I think you ought to know that living apart will be difficult," Remus continued. He rose up and leaned over Sirius, pushing his shirt further up around his chest. The soft nap of his trousers brushed tantalisingly against Sirius' erection. "I want you to know that we'll find ways around it. I'll find ways around it."

"*We* will," Sirius moaned, head tilting back. He lifted his arms and let Remus tug the shirt up and off.

"So glad to have your cooperation, Mr. Black," Remus murmured in his ear. Sirius shivered. Remus had very few kinks, but they always emerged at the most opportune, entertaining times. He couldn't have known, for example, that he would find lying naked under a fully-clothed Hogwarts professor so very...stimulating. But Remus had known.

"Anything for Professor Lupin," he replied, and Remus laughed and kissed a line down his chest.

"With an attitude like that you'll be head boy before long -- "

Sirius groaned and twined his hands in Remus' shaggy hair. "Awful."

Remus, in reply, hummed deep in his throat and darted his tongue out, licking a line up Sirius' cock.

Sirius decided he could get used to Professor Lupin.

This time he knows it's a dream.

*In the dream (the dream the **dream**) he can feel the hollow coldness inside. He remembers from other dreams the way this felt. In the dream he's lost everything -- not just James and Lily and Peter but Sirius too, irrevocably lost Sirius. The ache is always there, like a hollow space between his spine and his heart, for everything he's lost in the dream. His health, too; he can feel how taut the skin is on his ribs, he can see the way it stretches over his knuckles. Fingers metaphorically scrabbling, broken-nailed, for a handhold in the world.*

*He tries to think about where he really is, which is buried under a rat's nest of blankets and sheets in the Leaky Cauldron with Sirius curled up around him and drooling on his neck, both of them exhausted and slick with sweat from lovemaking. He tries to think about the pasta and wine they had for dinner, still warm in his stomach. He tries to think about the moments he still has, every day, where he looks at Harry or Sirius or the books on the shelves or the nice furniture or the full pantry and feels **safe**.*

But the truth is that in the dream he's a skinny, underfed, ragged-robed man sleeping under a patched cloak in a freezing-cold rail compartment, with a handful of kids who only sat here because it was the last place they could all fit in together. In the dream he hears Harry's voice for the first time, the voice of a stranger with James' familiar timbre nonetheless.

There's Ron Weasley, whose mother had taught Harry before they left for Betwys Beddau, asking who he is, and some girl he doesn't recognise, replying; and there Ron prompts Harry to tell him the story of something, some argument that Ron's parents had. And the girl warning Harry not to go looking for trouble.

"I don't go looking for trouble," says Harry, sounding nettled. "Trouble usually finds me."

Too right, thinks the cold, exhausted man under the cloak.

"How thick would Harry have to be, to go looking for a nutter who wants to kill him?" asks Ron, shakily, and Remus thinks he means Sirius, but that can't be, because Sirius is lying warm in bed with him, not some crazed murderer. Sirius belongs to him, Sirius would never betray him.

Except he has. Sirius abandoned him and went to kill Peter after he killed James and Lily, oh, Sirius.

In the bed in the Leaky Cauldron, Sirius woke suddenly and wasn't sure why, until he heard Remus moan softly. His skin was cold and clammy even under the blankets. His face was twisted up into a pained, wizened expression that made him look far older than he was.

"You killed them," Remus whispered, horrified. Sirius opened his mouth to ask who, but Remus was still asleep, and he moaned again.

"Moony," he said quietly, trying to keep his voice steady. He propped himself up for better leverage and rested a hand on the other man's chest, wondering if he should wake him. "Moony, it's just a nightmare."

But it wasn't nightmares with Moony, not always; sometimes it was presentiments, glimpses of some other world that Remus was convinced existed somewhere, a world where Harry had never come to live with them, where somewhere things had gone horribly wrong.

"Moony, come on," he soothed, sliding his hand up to cup the side of Remus' throat. "I'm right here."

Remus' back arched suddenly, nearly pushing him off the bed. As Sirius scrambled for leverage he screamed "*Expecto patronum!*" and the room was filled with blinding white light. Sirius shut his eyes and buried his face in the blankets as Remus fell limp against the bed again; he sprawled out over the other man and tried to hold him down, but Remus was unresisting now and it wasn't even necessary.

For a few heartbeats, the world was awash in white even behind Sirius' eyes. When he was finally able to open them again, he peered past Remus' prone body to the diminishing source of the light.

"Bloody *fuck* ," he said. An enormous silver-white dog, faintly transparent, was staring at them both over the edge of the bed.

Even as he watched it faded off into little wisps of light and then vanished entirely. He looked down at Remus, who was wide-eyed and staring at where the dog had been.

"My patronus," he said quietly.

"You cast it wandless," Sirius replied, equally subdued.

"I had a bad dream," Remus answered. He rolled towards Sirius, twisting the blanket tight around him and pressing his face into Sirius' chest. Sirius eased himself down slowly, his breathing a little less frantic now.

"Did you see anything I should know?" he asked. Remus shook his head, clinging tightly to him. "Do you want to tell me about it?"

"I love you," Remus replied. "And I don't believe them."

"Them?"

Remus didn't answer.

Laocoon's Children: The Fugitive from Azkaban

Chapter 4

Remus showed no sign he remembered his dream the next morning, and Sirius didn't press him. He wasn't certain he wanted to know. And if Remus dreamed again after their midnight upset, it was either much more quietly or Sirius slept deeper.

There was no shortage of distractions, at any rate: rambling shopping outings with the boys, Remus' meetings with Dora to ascertain where she'd left off teaching and where he ought to start, dinners with the Tonkses, and preliminary preparations for the move to Hogsmeade. Remus had made Sirius swear not to buy any furniture without Remus' presence, and much private teasing about interior decorators had followed. Sirius left for Hogsmeade the night before the Hogwarts Express was scheduled to leave and while Harry sensed that something was askew between his godfather and his professor, he doubted it was very grave. Not considering how unhappy Remus had been to see Sirius leave.

Besides, Harry had more important things to concern himself with -- more important to him, at least. Thirteen is a perilous age and its politics are much more seriously played than those of any government. He wanted to see Padma again and find out how she was getting on. He had to talk to the Hufflepuff captain about Draco's prospects, not to mention re-convincing Draco to go out for the team. And he had to make sure that everyone knew the first person who talked down about the new Defence professor was going to feel the full weight of Slytherin's disapproval. Harry hadn't much authority amongst the sixth and seventh years, but if he could convince them that Remus was a friend of Professor Snape, they'd adopt him readily enough. Most of them already knew Remus from his infrequent appearances in the newspapers, usually in the background of some photograph of Sirius.

Even with all the weight of the new school year on their shoulders and a full moon not far past, they made a merry gang on their way to the train platform. Ted and Andromeda cracked jokes about the weight of Neville's trunk and Harry and Draco plotted mischief just out of Remus' earshot, strutting proudly ahead of the new Defence professor. Remus himself was tall and impressive-looking in his perfectly-pressed brown professor's robes, his new briefcase carried lightly in one hand. True, he also looked pale and a little frightened, but Harry knew he wouldn't show it to the students. Remus had thrown himself in front of a killing curse before; he could handle Hogwarts students just fine.

He kept a lookout for Padma and her family, but even so he missed them and saw Dobby first. The house-elf, dressed in a variety of clothing apparently sewn entirely from socks, shrieked with joy and bolted straight for Draco.

"Master Malfoy!" he shrilled, dancing from foot to foot in front of Draco, who eyed him with amusement and just a hint of annoyance. "Master Malfoy! Look, it is Dobby! Dobby has returned to you, Master Malfoy!"

"I see," Draco said drily. "How was your summer, Dobby?"

"Dobby has looked after Mistress Padma!" Dobby nearly babbled, as Padma leaned around a column and waved at them, laughing.

"Hiya, Padma!" Harry called. Padma's mother Sara leaned around the column also, narrowed her eyes, and rested a hand warningly on Padma's shoulder. Padma scowled.

"Looks like she's still mad at you for getting Padma into trouble," Draco said.

"Mad at me? Like she's not mad at you?"

"Course not," Draco said loftily. "I gave her a house-elf."

"If you'd given *me* Dobby, I'd hold a grudge," Harry answered.

"Come on lads, you might as well load up now," Remus called, standing on the bottom step of a train doorway.

"We'll stay here until the train's away," Andromeda said. "Give us hugs -- mmmh -- and go on. Mind your manners and be nice to the first-years!" she called after them as they ran off.

Harry led the way past Remus up into the train car, searching for an empty compartment. Behind him, he heard Remus welcome the Patil twins aboard and then call out, "Find us somewhere roomy, Harry!"

Harry peered at the glazed, frosted glass of the last compartment left, which appeared to only have one person in it -- but it didn't look like a student.

"This is the last one!" he called back. Remus pushed through the crowd of children and opened the carriage door.

"Excuse me, do you mind if we -- "

He broke off suddenly. Harry peered around his elbow and saw a small, rather stout wizard in pinstripe robes occupying the window side of one of the benches.

"I'm so sorry," Remus said. "This compartment's probably reserved -- "

"Nonsense!" said Cornelius Fudge, the Minister for Magic.

Remus was familiar with the concept of the Minister, and he'd seen photographs of Cornelius Fudge many times, but he'd never expected to come face to face with him. He didn't like Fudge's politics much and had often made fun of him to Sirius over the morning newspaper. Fudge had been in office when Umbridge's werewolf laws went through, and while he hadn't backed them, he hadn't exactly fought them, either.

"Come in, come in," Fudge was continuing. "There's room for four or five, really. Professor Lupin, isn't it?"

Remus cleared his throat and let the others push their way in ahead of him.

"Lupin, Remus Lupin," he said. "We can certainly find another compartment, Minister."

"Not at all, don't be silly. This must be young Harry," Fudge said, all but pulling Harry into the small compartment. Draco and Neville had already squashed each other into the seat opposite, totally ignoring the leader of British Wizardry, and Padma seated herself next to Neville, elbowing him sharply when he and Draco didn't stop wrestling. Parvati had apparently wandered off, probably to find her Gryffindor companions.

"I'm bound for Hogsmeade, and I thought I might take the train up. So much more pleasant than floo travel, and it gives one time to get a bit of quiet work done," Fudge said. Remus gave it two seconds' thought and decided Fudge was, if nothing else, a first-rate liar in person. "You've been appointed Dark Arts professor, haven't you?"

"Defence Against the Dark Arts," Remus said, putting the slightest emphasis on the first two words. "It's quite exciting, really," he added, somewhat uncomfortably. "Draco, Neville, settle down or you'll be the first students ever to get a detention before the school year actually starts."

"Boys will be boys, eh?" Fudge asked. Harry perched on the bench next to Padma, which left Remus to share the other bench with Fudge.

"Only when absolutely necessary," Remus replied absently. "I hope your business in Hogsmeade isn't unpleasant."

"Not in the least, though I shall probably have a few rather tiresome meetings. I don't suppose you're staying in town?"

"No, up at the school. I do know people in town, though; Harry's godfather is living in the Three Broomsticks right now while he searches out a flat."

"Ah! I was under the impression he lived in London."

"Well, considering everything, he thought it best to be a bit closer to Harry," Remus said significantly. Fudge nodded and glanced at Draco.

"Of course, you haven't been properly introduced," Remus said. "Harry you've met; this is Draco Malfoy, of Hufflepuff --"

"Ah! I was a Hufflepuff boy myself, you know!"

"Neville Longbottom of Gryffindor, who lives with Draco's aunt Andromeda --"

"How d'you do," Neville said politely.

"And Padma Patil of Ravenclaw. Who'll have your job one day, I imagine," Remus said, grinning at her. She smiled back shyly.

"Quite a jolly band! Are you all looking forward to the new year?" Fudge inquired.

"Yes, Minister," Harry said. "We start new electives this year, and we get Hogsmeade visits."

"Ah yes!" Fudge said. "Lovely little town. Quite historic."

"It's the only Wizarding village left in Great Britain," Padma said.

"Sure, but that's not why I want to go," Neville said. "I want to see Honeyduke's."

Remus glanced at Harry, who looked as entranced as Neville did. Honeyduke's had been around when he was a boy, and always inspired the same reaction in children -- awe and a sort of covetous longing. In another year or two, the only thing that would inspire that kind of look would be girls -- or boys, he supposed, all things being equal.

His gaze fell on Draco, who looked as though he was trying to hide some disappointment or other. Probably that he didn't get to sit next to Padma, Remus thought with a grin.

The door slid open then and Dobby appeared, arms stacked high with sweets and cauldron cakes.

"Dobby has brought snacks like Master Malfoy requested!" he announced, wobbling unsteadily into the compartment just as the train shrieked loudly and jerked into motion.

"By jove, they have relaxed the rules a bit if children are allowed to bring house-elves to school now," Fudge observed.

"What're you going to do with him, Draco?" Harry asked. "He can't live in your trunk all year again."

"Dunno. Maybe he can get a job in the kitchens? He's been socked, he's a free elf. I don't know why he insists on following me around. I only paid you through the end of summer, you know," he said to Dobby.

"He was a very good elf," Padma said. "You shouldn't let him go to just anyone, Draco."

"You know, Sirius might be able to use him," Harry suggested. "He's going to be living alone all year and he's not really that good a cook, and he never does his laundry. He'd pay his wage, too."

Dobby turned enormous, bulbous eyes on Harry. "Master Sirius...Black?" he asked, tone full of awe.

"Um, yeah," Harry said.

"Dobby would be in the employ of Master Sirius Black?"

"He's very nice, really," Harry said. Remus wondered for a moment why Dobby would want so much confirmation, and then it occurred to him that the Blacks had a certain reputation, above and beyond Sirius' fame as a handsome, wealthy bachelor.

Dobby drew himself up to his full height proudly. "Dobby would be proud to serve Master Sirius Black!" he proclaimed.

"I'll write to him when we get to school," Harry assured him.

"Er, but for now...maybe you could...find somewhere quiet and...go there," Draco said. Dobby obediently tucked himself under the bench and wrapped his arms complacently around his legs. He sat so still Remus wondered if he was breathing.

"That reminds me, Harry, I got you a birthday present," Padma said, digging in the bag at her feet. She produced a small, gaily-wrapped package and offered it to him.

"Hey, ta Padma, you didn't have to," Harry said, accepting it with pleasure.

"Well, it was a bit of a production. Mum and dad are *not* best pleased with any of my friends. Except Draco," she added, and Draco shot Harry a smug look. Remus' internal amusement leapt up a few notches. "Eventually I talked Dobby into getting it for me without telling on me to mum and dad."

"A sneakoscope!" Harry said, taking a small, top-shaped object out of the paper-wrapped box. "Cool!"

"Very useful things, when they work," Remus said. Harry stood it up on his palm and spun it experimentally. It kept turning in slow, lazy circles, whistling softly. "It all depends on how sensitive they are."

"How d'you mean?" Neville asked.

"Well, the spinning-top is powered by a certain form of energy put out by a charm that detects ill intentions -- it's the same basic principle as a foeglass, except that in this case the magic is much more active, not quite so passive and dependent upon the person carrying it. D'you know what a foeglass is?" Remus asked, and Neville shook his head.

He launched into an explanation of the theories behind the foeglass charm, more than happy to have an audience to share his information with. It was a good forty minutes before he realised that all four children were listening raptly and a few more had paused in the doorway to listen as well. Fudge was calmly reading some kind of legal brief near the window, and Dobby had crept out to sit on Remus' shoes.

"Er. So that's why a sneakoscope's charm is the most important part," he finished lamely. "And why the really professional ones are highly calibrated by experts."

"Have you ever used one?" Padma asked.

"Well, no," Remus admitted. "Most of the time when I travelled, I traveled light. I mean, you could use a sneakoscope, or you could just always assume that you're in danger, and keep a sharp eye out. An old friend of mine says constant vigilance is the key. And an alert mind, you know, is much easier to carry than a dozen amulets and sneak-detectors and that kind of thing."

"You're a born lecturer," Fudge said, looking at him over the edge of his paperwork. "I can see why Dumbledore hired you."

"Thank you, Minister," Remus replied. "Really, though, it's mostly the students -- they're a very agreeable audience."

At that point Harry and Neville broke out a pack of tarot cards (newly bought for Divinations class) and began some kind of furious card-game that Remus recognised as a distant variant on Egyptian Ratscrew. Padma placidly found a book and buried herself in it while Draco cheered Harry and Neville indiscriminantly, depending on who was winning at any given moment. Remus decided Padma's example was probably a good one, and took a book about Macedonian hexwork out of his briefcase.

The time passed quickly enough that he'd nearly forgotten the presence of the Minister for Magic at his elbow until a quiet snore told him that the Minister had drifted off to sleep. He didn't blame him; it was getting quite dark out.

Draco, who was gazing out the window, glanced over his shoulder at Remus.

"We must be nearly there, don't you think?" he asked. "Hard to tell in the fog."

"The fog's probably a sign," Remus replied. "Yes, I think -- "

He broke off as the train started to slow down.

"Grand! Time to put our robes on," Draco announced. "I'm starving, I can't wait for the feast -- "

"We can't actually be there yet," Remus said, putting out a hand to stop him. Padma and Neville looked at him, confused. Harry was asleep as well, head crooked in the corner of the compartment.

"Then why are we stopping?" Padma asked hesitantly.

Remus shook his head, listening intently. The pistons on the engine began to fall away, but the wind was howling against the glass and rain had begun to pelt down. Something felt wrong, quite wrong, and quite horribly *right*, as well. As though he'd done this before.

Neville opened the door a crack, stepping carefully around Harry, and put his head out.

"Nothing in the -- ow!" he said, as the train stopped entirely with a jerk, throwing him on top of Harry. Harry promptly woke and shoved Neville off him, and Remus caught the boy's wrist in his hand.

"Sit down," he ordered. Neville obeyed, looking startled. Even as he sat, the lights flickered and went out.

"Ow, Neville," Padma said. "Mind your feet."

"Sorry," Neville muttered.

"Have we broken down?" Harry asked sleepily.

"No," Remus said, never more sure of anything in his life.

"Remus, something's moving," Draco said worriedly, pointing to shifting shapes in the fog beyond the train. "Someone's coming aboard."

"Stay where you are," Remus ordered. "Don't move. Stay away from the window," he added. Ice was beginning to form in the corners of the glass. "I'm going to make sure everyone's all right."

He held out his hand and called up a small ball of green flame in his palm, one of his favourite tricks from school and a handy tool at any time. The flickering light illuminated four worried young faces and the still-sleeping form of Cornelius Fudge.

He opened the door with his other hand, wand tucked between two fingers, and stepped catlike into the corridor, nearly tripping over another student.

"Sorry," she gasped. "I was going to ask the driver what was going on -- "

"Get inside a compartment," he ordered.

"Yes, sir," she answered, brushing frizzy hair away from her face. A young man stumbled into them and Remus, with a growing sense of horror, recognised Ron Weasley.

"Both of you. Right now," he said, opening the door of the compartment next to his own and pushing them into it. "Stay there."

That was apparently enough for the rest of the train car; the few heads that had been poking out to see where the light was promptly pulled back. Several doors slammed shut.

He walked warily down the corridor to the front of the car, pushing the door open and stepping out into the fog. Little tendrils swirled and dipped around him, but he couldn't see any more from here than Draco had seen through the window -- just dark shapes moving in the distance. Maybe they were nothing more than birds.

But that was a lie, and Remus knew it. And when he turned around in the doorway there was his proof, because a cloaked figure was standing at the other end of the train car, one grey, slimy hand resting on the door to a compartment.

The door to *his* compartment.

Time stretched out and seemed to fracture into fragments as Remus hurtled headlong back through the carriage, towards the impossibly tall, ghostly figure that was now opening the door and now reaching inside and now making the most horrible *sucking* noise as it inhaled --

"*Expecto Patronum* ," he shouted, skidding to a stop in front of it. A silver dog leapt out of his wand ahead of him, and its huge jaws clamped ethereally around the Dementor's arm, throwing it sideways even as the shiny white teeth passed straight through it. The dog circled again, driving it towards the door, and Remus had the presence of mind to look around for any others that might have crept onto the train. A shadowy figure rushed at him from the direction he'd come, and he very nearly sent a patronus straight through the train's driver.

"What in bloody blue Asgard is going on?" the man asked.

"Dementors. Check the other compartments," Remus ordered, propping the door open with his hip. The man ran onwards and Remus was confronted with a scene out of his worst nightmares.

He dimly registered that the Minister was huddled in a corner, terrified; Padma and Neville were clinging to each other on one of the benches. Draco knelt on the floor and looked up at him with a ghostly-white face framed by silver hair that glowed green in the dwindling light.

Harry lay on the floor, arms and legs sprawled limp, head cradled in Draco's lap, glasses gone.

Remus dropped to his knees next to Draco and took Harry's face in his hands. He was breathing, thank god, and even as Remus checked his eyes they were fluttering open.

Remus helped him sit up and lit the tip of his wand so that he could hold both of Harry's shoulders.

"What happened?" Harry asked. Remus fought the urge to pull the boy against him and cry; Harry was thirteen, too old to be cried over -- and Remus was supposed to be a teacher. Teachers didn't cry in front of their students. He fumbled in his pocket for a bar of chocolate.

"Eat this," he said, tearing it open and offering it to Harry with only slightly shaking hands. He broke off a piece for Draco, and gave the rest of the bar to Padma, who bewilderedly shared it with Neville and the Minister. "It'll help. Do you feel cold?"

Harry nodded, nibbling on the chocolate with wide eyes.

"What was that thing?" Draco asked.

"A Dementor," Remus said grimly. "One of the Dementors of Azkaban."

Surprisingly, the squeak of fear that followed the announcement came not from the children or Dobby -- still trembling under the bench -- but from Fudge.

"I was told they'd be guarding Hogwarts, but nobody mentioned they might search the train," Remus continued, still holding tightly to Harry's shoulder. "Is everyone all right?"

"The chocolate helps," Padma said in a small voice.

"Good. Minister..." Remus turned to him. "Do you know the patronus spell?"

Fudge shook his head, chocolate clenched in one hand.

"Bloody hell..." Remus rubbed his face. "All right. Eat the chocolate. If another one comes, everyone scream as loud as you can, right? I've got to make sure none of them got up to any more mischief in the other cars."

"Remus -- " Harry grabbed his wrist as he rose. He stopped, ready to stay at a word from Harry. The boy looked up at him, pleadingly, and then let go of his hand.

"You have to see if everyone is okay," he muttered.

"I can stay -- "

"We're all right," Neville said. "If another one comes, we'll scream."

"Right," Remus said. He gave Harry one last, measured look, and then went out. He had hundreds of children now, not just one, after all.

"I'm not paid enough for this," he muttered, passing out into the fog and hurrying quickly into the next car down, where someone somewhere was crying.

When Remus was gone, Draco got his hands under Harry's arms and helped him up onto the bench. Padma wrapped her arms unabashedly around Harry's neck; on the other side, Neville studied him with solemn eyes.

"What happened?" Neville asked. Draco seated himself next to Fudge, on the very edge of the bench and ready to leap up at any second.

"It just felt -- cold," Harry said. "So cold. And -- miserable."

"Like you'd never be happy again," Draco put in. Harry nodded. "We all felt that, didn't we?"

"I heard screaming," Neville said.

"Me too," Harry whispered. "And then I couldn't move, and everything went sort of...white around the edges..."

"You fell over," Draco said. "On me, mostly."

"Sorry."

"S'okay," Draco said. "And then...this big white thing came out of nowhere and knocked the Dementor over, and Remus came back." He glanced at Fudge, who was still holding the chocolate, watching them. "It isn't poisoned, you know," he said. "You should eat it."

This seemed to snap the man out of his stupor, and he looked down at the chocolate, then out at the window.

"Ah -- yes, this is a rather unexpected turn of events," he announced distractedly. "I'm afraid I can't be delayed -- very important business meeting in Hogsmeade -- you'll forgive me if I Apparate..."

They didn't have time to complain even if they'd been capable of it; with a loud bang and a puff of sulfur-scented air, the Minister for Magic disappeared.

"Coward," Padma said contemptuously.

"Too true," Draco agreed feelingly. "I was working up to ask him something important, too."

Padma slowly released Harry and sat back, finishing the slightly melted chocolate and licking her fingers.

"What were you going to ask him?" Neville asked. Padma shook her head at him. "It'll take our minds off -- that thing."

Draco looked morose. "Mum wouldn't sign my Hogsmeade form. I thought -- " he raised his voice over their stunned objections. "I thought the Minister might. I mean, he's the *Minister for Magic*, that's as good as a parent, isn't it?"

"Why won't your mum sign it?" Neville demanded.

"Says she thinks Hogsmeade'll distract me from my studies."

"She's bonkers!"

"Yeah, but she's probably right, this time," Draco sighed. "It *is* distracting and I can always use more time to study, you know how I am."

"Then we won't go either, will we?" Neville said, appealing to the other two. Harry and Padma exchanged a hesitant look. "Oi! TRAITORS!"

"No, it's just -- "

"It's okay," Draco said. "Really. Anyway, someone's got to go and bring back sweets and all. Really, it'll be fine."

They all jumped as the compartment door slid back again, but it was only Remus. He hesitated on the threshold.

"Where's the Minister gone?" he asked.

"He Apparated," Neville volunteered.

"Apparated? To the school? Good of him to -- "

"No," Harry said. "He Apparated to Hogsmeade."

"Whatever for?"

"Didn't want to be late to his meeting, he said," Padma put in.

Remus frowned, sitting down just as the train jerked to life and the lights flickered back on. He closed his hand, dousing the green flames.

"He left you here in the dark? Well, it's only what he's been doing to the country," Remus mused. "All right, everyone feeling better now?"

"Yes," they chorused.

"Good. We're only ten minutes from Hogwarts at top speed, and I've sent an owl ahead. You," he said to Harry, "are going straight up to the infirmary."

"Aw, Remus, I'm fine -- "

"Be told, Harry," Remus said, in a severe voice that none of them but Harry had ever heard before. Remus didn't often step into Sirius' shoes, but when he did, he meant business.

"We'll come too," Neville said, glancing at Draco, who was still a little pale.

"That's just as well," Remus said. "You'd best get your robes out. I'm going to have to leave you -- I'll be wanted in the Great Hall."

"We'll miss the sorting," Harry said, but the protest had gone out of his voice.

"Boring, anyway," Padma said, studiously yawning. The train began to grind slowly to a halt, just as the sign for Hogsmeade Station passed their window.

They clattered out into the crowd of nervous students, all of whom were much quieter and more well-behaved than average. The younger ones were huddled in a group around Hagrid, the groundskeeper, who looked even larger when surrounded by eleven-year-olds. The older children were filing into large carriages that waited on the road which wound from the train station up the hill to Hogwarts.

Padma stopped so suddenly that Harry nearly plowed into her.

"What's up?" Neville inquired, brushing past. "I'll save us a carriage!"

"All right, Padma?" Harry asked. He watched Remus climb into the frontmost carriage, and saw a brief flash of silver hair -- Dumbledore was sitting inside. Dobby, on orders from Draco, tottered after Remus officiously.

"I've never seen a Thestral before," Padma said, pointing to one of the spiked, horselike creatures that drew the carriages.

"How come she gets to see one and I don't?" Draco demanded. "I'm the only one now! AND the only one who's actually seen a real live dead person lying in a coffin."

"Come on, Draco," Neville said, rolling his eyes. He hauled open the door to one of the carriages and all but thrust Draco inside.

"It isn't fair!" Draco protested.

"It's not like we picked it, you know," Harry said.

The bickering over the Thestrals continued until they reached the school. Harry almost made it into the Great Hall, but he couldn't quite duck away from Madam Pomfrey fast enough. She led them through the echoing hallways to the hospital wing, clucking over Harry like a hen with only one chick.

"Mr. Lupin wrote that you had a bad fall, is that so?" she asked, as she opened the door.

"He fell on *me*," Draco said, still aggrieved, then blanched when she turned and began fussing about him, too. Neville and Padma sat on a nearby bed and shared a chocolate frog as amused spectators.

"Dementors in the trains, I'm sure I don't know what the Ministry is thinking," she said, investigating Harry's eyes thoroughly and then pressing some strange metal device to Draco's chest, over his robes. "Well, you both look all right and there's no concussion. Let's just get you a nice restorative potion and send you down to the feast, shall we?"

"I don't need one, really," Harry protested, but she'd already vanished into the other room.

"Hey, before she comes back," Padma said. "I didn't get to show you until now. Look what I've got!"

She tugged at a thin gold chain around her neck, pulling it out from under her shirt. Dangling from the end was a tiny glass-and-gold hourglass, held in place by two or three rings of flat gold with odd inscriptions on them.

"It's...pretty?" Neville said.

"Is that what I think it is?" Draco demanded, scooting forward for a closer look. His face ended up about half a foot from her shirt, which was gaping open to allow the necklace out, and she gave him a gentle shove to bring his chin level with hers.

"Better," she said, and he blushed. "And yes. It's a time-turner."

"Really?" Neville asked. "I've never seen one."

"What's a time-turner?" Harry said.

"I got it from the Ministry so I could take more classes, catch up a bit on what I missed last year, that kind of thing," Padma said. "It's very top-secret. They only gave out two this year, I guess a Gryffindor got the other one. That's what I heard when I was getting mine, anyway. I had to sign all sorts of papers not to tell anyone about it."

All three boys looked at her.

"Well, none of them were hexed, and anyway you lot won't tell," Padma said. "Plus I had to promise not to misuse it."

"what's it do?" Harry asked, but Padma quickly shoved the necklace back under her shirt and sat up straight. A second later Madam Pomfrey came bustling back into the room.

"Drink up," she said, pouring out four helpings of an awful-looking green potion. "Then you may go down to the feast."

Harry and Draco immediately leapt into a competition to see who could finish theirs first, while Neville held his nose and tried to down it in a single gulp. Padma glanced around, made sure Pomfrey wasn't watching, and then poured hers out the window. From below came the stuttery complaint of a bird nesting in the shrubbery.

"Now, off you go," Pomfrey said, herding them out the door. "And enjoy the feast!" she called after them, as they raced each other to the Great Hall.

Laocoon's Children: The Fugitive from Azkaban

Chapter 5

Author's Notes: At one point in this chapter I have used dialogue verbatim from *The Prisoner of Azkaban* . This is intentional, as Laocoon's Children does run parallel to the books. In this instance, the text of Dumbledore's speech is taken directly, with only minor alterations, from canon.

In addition, JKR's system of class scheduling for Hogwarts is absolutely untenable. So I have arbitrarily redesigned it. Cope. :D

"Balls, we *have* missed the Sorting *and* all the seats are taken," Harry said, when they arrived in the Great Hall. The last of the first-years was just making his way to the Slytherin table.

"Bad luck," Draco sighed, sitting down at the end of the Hufflepuff table, next to the first-years. Padma found a couple of Ravenclaw girls who had saved her a seat, and Neville squeezed himself in on the other side of the first-years, next to Seamus Finnegan.

Harry, undeterred and unashamed, walked down to where Marcus Flint and most of the other Quidditch players were sitting with the sixth-years, elbowing his way in.

"Oi!" said an annoyed sixth. "Find your own seat!"

"Shove off," Flint told him. "Potter's with us."

"Ta," Harry said. "What're you doing back here?"

Flint sneered. "Fumbled my NEWTs. Got to take the year again. Anyone going to say anything about it? Thought not."

"Shh," said Towler, a fifth-year who played Beater for the team. "Dumbly's talking."

"...nother year at Hogwarts!" Dumbledore was saying, standing at the lectern in front of the high table. "I have a few things to say to you all, and as one of them is very serious, I think it best to get it out of the way before you become befuddled by our excellent feast."

The Slytherin Quidditch team, en masse, groaned. Dumbledore frowned slightly; behind him, Snape smiled.

"As many of you are aware -- particularly after their search of the Hogwarts Express -- our school is presently playing host to some of the Dementors of Azkaban Prison, who are here on Ministry of Magic business."

Harry turned to glance at Draco and saw a Ravenclaw lean across the space between tables to give him a shove. A few other Hufflepuffs closed ranks around the blond boy.

"They are stationed at every entrance to the grounds," Dumbledore continued, "and while they are with us, I must make it plain that nobody is to leave school without permission. Dementors are not to be fooled by tricks or disguises -- or even Invisibility Cloaks," he added blandly. Harry grinned at him. "It is not in the nature of a Dementor to understand pleading or excuses. I therefore warn each and every one of you to give them no reason to harm you. Dementors are capable of seriously injuring even the innocent when their tempers are aroused. Fortunately, they have been banned from entering school property, but I cannot speak to your safety from them -- or other dangers -- outside of the grounds."

Behind Dumbledore, Remus sat next to Snape with his hands folded on the table, looking pale and grave. Dumbledore turned to look at him. Harry wondered how much Remus' owl had said about what the Dementors had done on the train.

"On a happier note," Dumbledore continued, "I am pleased to welcome two new teachers to our ranks this year. First, Professor Remus Lupin, who has kindly consented to fill the post of Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher."

Remus stood and gave a hasty bow to a scattering of applause, mainly from the Weasleys and Harry's band of friends. Several Gryffindor girls were giggling with their heads together, Ginny at their centre. Most of the Slytherins in the immediate area were murmuring discontentedly: "Snape missed it again!" "He'll never get the job." "Dumbledore doesn't like him."

"In addition," Dumbledore said, spreading his hands to quiet the crowd a little, "Professor Kettleburn, our Care of Magical Creatures teacher, has chosen to retire in order to enjoy more time with his remaining limbs. I am delighted to say that, after some discussion with the Board of Governors, his place will be filled by our own Rubeus Hagrid, who has agreed to take this teaching job in addition to his gamekeeping duties."

Hagrid, the enormous gamekeeper, stood with an abrupt jerk and gave a clumsy imitation of Remus' bow. Remus clapped him on the shoulder when he sat down again, then winced and shook out his hand to banish the sting.

"Now, with introductions out of the way, let me wish you a bright new year of studies," Dumbledore said. "And let the feast begin!"

Immediately the tables filled with food -- giant tureens of mashed potatoes, sides of beef and roasted chickens, overflowing bowls of bread, pitchers of pumpkin juice and cool iced water. Harry heaped his plate high, being in competition with boys and girls whose arms were much longer

than his, and settled down to enjoy the meal, keeping one eye on Remus at the high table. He seemed to be doing all right, making conversation with Hagrid, and Harry felt a surge of pride for his adoptive father.

"So," Flint said, talking around a mouthful of turkey, "We're down seriously this year. We've got me for Keeper, Pipsqueak's bound to be out of practice in Seeking so you'd better find some time to make it up -- "

"I'll be fine," Harry replied, annoyed.

"Sure you will, tiny," Towler put in.

"Pucey's our only Chaser left, and Towler's a hell of a Beater but not good enough for two."

"Care to wager on that?" Towler asked, buttering his bread.

"Not the cup I'm not, but we'll have a contest sometime," Flint answered. "Tryouts are next Sunday."

"It's already Tuesday. That hardly gives people a week and a half to sign up!" Harry said, thinking of Draco.

"Long enough. No slackers on this team, right?" said Flint, which made Harry stifle a grin. Marcus Flint was the laziest Quidditch player he'd ever met. "We'll be looking for two new Chasers and a Beater. Anyone got recommendations?"

"Blaise Zabini flies all right, but I've no clue how he plays," Harry said. "I imagine Colin Creevey'll try for something or other."

"Cricket? He's smaller than you are! If he tried to bat a Bludger he'd fall off his broomstick," Towler said with a laugh.

"Sharp though," Harry answered. "And he's a quick little bug. Are all the teams doing tryouts?"

Flint nodded. "Sure, we're doing a big mass thing, I arranged it with the other captains. Way more embarrassing that way," he added with a chuckle. "Oliver Wood likes Neville Longbottom for Beater, you know."

"Good, 'cause he's pants at it and that'll make it easier on us," Harry replied. "Speaking of flying, have you seen the Firebolt yet?"

The conversation rapidly changed to the merits of the Firebolt, the history of the company, the personal preferences of the players, and several jokes about who liked what kind of wood. Harry listened, actually getting many of the jokes for the first time. He even joined in on the chorus when the Slytherins and Hufflepuffs both broke into a rude song about the Holyhead Harpies and their lovely soft bristles.

Betwys Beddau had been fun, and London had been interesting, but Hogwarts really was the best.

It took Remus until after dinner was over to corner Snape. McGonagall had passed word down the High Table that there was to be a gathering for punch and light dessert in the professors' common room after dinner; Remus finally found Snape folded into a chair by the empty fireplace with a cup of punch in his hands.

"May I sit with you?" he asked politely, indicating the other chair. Snape gestured to it dismissively. "I was wondering if I might have a word before classes begin tomorrow."

"Oh?" Snape asked, disinterestedly.

"Listen, I know we haven't always been on the best of terms and you and Sirius are -- well, I won't try to come up with a word for that -- but I think we've managed to reach a sort of detente in the last few years, don't you?" Remus asked.

"A detente?" Snape said scornfully, raising an eyebrow.

"A truce? I don't approve of the way Sirius treated you at school, I never did..."

"Nor, if I recall correctly, did you -- "

"-- do much to stop it, I know," Remus interrupted. "And I'm sorry for that. Honestly, though, we're both adults; we're going to see a fair bit of each other what with the -- potion and both of us living in the castle and all. I'd like to put that behind us, if you will," he continued. "I think we have a lot in common, Severus. I want to make a clean start with you."

He offered his hand. Snape looked down at it, then back up at him. "Nymphadora didn't put you up to this, by any chance, did she?"

Remus looked perplexed. "Do you think I'm not capable of wanting to make amends myself?"

"It has more to do with her annoying habit of wanting me to get on with everyone," Snape said, then sighed and shook his hand lifelessly. "A fresh start, as you say -- but don't expect we shall be great friends or that I'm going to help you with your lesson plans or any of that."

"Wouldn't dream of it," Remus said drily. "That's very decent of you, Severus."

"Yes, well, don't let word get out," Snape replied.

"That you're a decent human being? My lips are sealed. If you'll excuse me..."

"Ah yes. Mingling," Snape said, his lip curling in distaste. Remus picked up his cup and wandered back over to the cauldron of punch, where Madam Hooch and the Headmaster were discussing the events on the Hogwarts Express.

"Our hero of the hour!" Hooch said, smiling at him. "We were just saying how wonderfully pithy your owl was."

"Mr. Lupin has rarely been at a loss for words in his life," Dumbledore added.

"Dementors aboard train; students endangered. All well, proceeding to Hogwarts. Medical attn. for Potter. Signed RJL," Hooch repeated dramatically.

"Yes, well. Therein lies a mystery, you know," Remus said. "Has the Headmaster informed you that Cornelius Fudge was on the train?"

"Was he?" McGonagall asked. "Why would the Minister for Magic want to take the Hogwarts Express?"

"I've no idea," Remus said. "He said it was because he found the train less stressful than flooing straight to Hogsmeade, which is obviously a line, but I can't think of any other explanation. After the Dementors came on board he Apparated away pretty quickly."

"Perhaps he was coming up early for the Azkaban inspection," Flitwick said, picking up a discarded Daily Prophet and folding it so that the headline on the back was visible. "He's supposed to be having a look at the new safety features on the prison."

"Can't imagine that'll be much fun, if he's so skittish around Dementors," Remus said.

"I'm skittish around Dementors. Horrible creatures," said Madam Pince.

"Well, good thing we have a big strapping Defence professor to keep them at bay, eh?" Professor Sinistra said, winking at Remus. "I'm off, children; Mercury's leaving retrograde tonight and I always like to watch that. See you all at lunch."

"I think I will slip away too, actually," Remus said, finishing his punch. "Bit of a long day for me. Besides, I'd better go make sure Dobby hasn't utterly destroyed my belongings -- I left him unpacking my rooms, but he can get a bit overenthusiastic."

"Sleep well, Professor," McGonagall said, putting a slight emphasis on his title.

"Thank you, Deputy Headmistress, I plan to," he answered with a grin, leaving the common room and pausing in the hallway to get his bearings briefly. Then, with the confidence born of seven years' sneaking around the castle, he made his way to the rooms he'd been assigned, near the entrance to Gryffindor's dormitory tower.

He found Dobby in the hallway outside his room, unloading an enormous chair from the old dumbwaiter.

"Evening, Mr. Howson," he said, nodding to the ghost of the old porter, who was directing Dobby bossily. "How are you?"

"Little Lupin!" Howson crowed, tipping his hat. "Fine, sir, and yourself?"

"Getting along. Good to see you're still about the place. Dobby, what *are* you doing?"

"He's bringing you some proper furniture," boomed a voice from the doorway to his quarters, and Sirius' head poked around the doorway. "Come on then, I didn't sneak all the way here from the Shrieking Shack just to get caught and tugged around by my earlobe by McGonagall."

Remus grinned and took the chair from Dobby, carrying it effortlessly into his rooms.

"Right, elf," Sirius said, "Get ye to the kitchens for a day or two. I'll call when I need you."

Dobby bowed so low his nose banged on the hallway's stone floor before he vanished. Remus shut the door after him and allowed Sirius to kiss him hello before inspecting his rooms.

"Bit poky," Sirius said professionally, looking around. "But then you did always like poky."

"I don't expect to spend much time here -- did you have Dobby refurnish it? My books aren't even unpacked!"

"I just had him take the broken stuff away. And the ugly stuff," Sirius added.

"Sirius, your definition of ugly..."

"Well, I was tired of looking for flats in Hogsmeade. I still haven't found a proper one. There's a nice house out near the fens, though. It's rather big,

actually, but -- "

"How big is big?" Remus inquired, amused.

"Three bedrooms, plus a library and a study plus all the usual rooms. But it's a good investment! I can fix it up and then rent it out when or if we move back to London. And it's got lovely big gardens..."

"One wonders how anyone ever mistook you for straight," Remus said, reaching for a box of books on the floor. "First you redecorate my rooms, now you're going on about lovely gardens. Oof!"

His muscles protested and he nearly dropped the box; Sirius caught one edge and helped him move it onto the table.

"Raw animal magnetism," Sirius answered.

"And your horrible taste in art. Listen, I need to talk to you about Harry."

"No you don't," Sirius said, wrapping one arm around his waist. "We can talk about Harry tomorrow."

"Sirius..." Remus pushed him off, gently. "You know Dumbledore said there were Dementors guarding the grounds?"

"Sure, that's why I went underground when I came in. Did you know the east tunnel collapsed? Looks like it's been years -- "

"They searched the train. One of them attacked Harry."

Sirius froze. "What?"

"He's all right, just a little bruised up. But he passed out, and I thought -- "

"Is he in the hospital wing?"

"No -- Sirius -- " Remus grabbed his arm as he made for the door. "He's fine. Well, probably not completely fine, but he'll be much less fine if you go bursting into his common room..."

"Has the nurse seen to him?"

"Yes, all right? I made sure she checked him out. When I left the Great Hall he was having a grand time and eating ice cream."

"You didn't tell me sooner?" Sirius demanded.

"He's all right, Sirius! I only thought you ought to know, and I didn't want you to panic, which you're clearly going to do anyway..." he tugged Sirius back from the door and gave him a gentle push onto a sofa near the big windows.

"You're sure he's all right?"

Remus crossed his arms. "Do you think I'd have left him alone if I thought otherwise? The boy has to preserve some kind of respect with his friends, though. I promise, Sirius."

"Okay," Sirius said, looking calmer. "Thank you for telling me."

"You're welcome," Remus said, properly interpreting *Thank you for telling me as I'm sorry I am insane*. "Listen, why don't you Padfoot up tomorrow morning and you can come to breakfast with me and see for yourself."

"Do you have him for class tomorrow?"

"N...o," Remus said, checking his schedule. "No third-year classes at all tomorrow, I won't have Harry in a class until Monday. But if you want to come along, we can have dinner in Hogsmeade after my last class. And this weekend you can show me this house you like so well."

Sirius looked placated, though still a little worried.

"And you can stay here tonight if you like," Remus added, tempting him. "Bet you always wanted to have a passionate affair with a Hogwarts Professor."

Sirius smiled at that and jerked his head at the box of books on the table. "Want help unpacking?"

"All right, gentlemen," Padma said, sitting at the Hufflepuff table the next morning. Harry, a very sleepy-looking Neville, and Draco were all eagerly eating breakfast while Denbigh, head of the kitchen elves, waited on the early-rising foursome. "You know what time it is."

Draco put his fork down and groaned. "Index cards?"

"Index cards!" Padma said with relish, taking a handful of white cards out of her book bag. "Who's got what when and with whom?"

"Who wants to know?" Harry asked, but he took a card anyway and began writing down his schedule. "You lot all have Arithmancy tomorrow afternoon, don't you?"

"No, I've got Runes," Padma said. "Well, both. You know, it's sort of silly really, I'm not even going to be using the time-turner all that much."

"Not for classes," Harry agreed.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Padma, you have a device which allows you to travel in *time*. Do you have any conception of how much mischief we can get up to this year with a time traveling accomplice? It boggles the mind!"

"It boggles your little mind, I'm sure," she replied with a sniff and a teasing grin. "Honestly, I can't use it much, I think they monitor it or something."

"Padmaaaaaa..."

"Maybe a little," she allowed. "But not much!"

"All right, all right."

"How'd they even let you have one?" Draco asked, writing industriously and with many ink-blottings. "I mean -- after last year..."

Harry saw Neville kick him under the table. Draco winced. Padma's lips were pressed into a thin line.

"I have to catch up," she said determinedly.

"Yeah, but I mean, not about classes, but -- ow! Neville! *Ow! Harry!*"

"Don't mind him," Neville said. "You're fine, aren't you?"

"Sure," Padma agreed. "Done with your schedule?"

"It's a thing of beauty," Neville said, propping it next to his plate. "We have Dark Arts together, don't we Harry?"

"I think so," Harry said. "Yep. Dark Arts and Divination. You should have taken Divs, Draco."

"No thanks. Besides, it means I have Friday afternoon off," Draco answered. "Listen, people are showing up; you guys had better go before the Prefects get stropky."

"Sure thing," Harry said, sliding off the bench and crossing the aisle to the Slytherin table. Neville climbed up over the table with simian agility and settled into a seat at Gryffindor just as Percy Weasley, the most officious Prefect in the school, appeared in the doorway. This year, in addition to his Prefect's insignia, he had a Head Boy badge pinned to his collar.

The hall filled up quickly as Harry finished his breakfast and double-checked his schedule. Cricket Creevey brought up his brother Dennis to be introduced; Dennis had gone into Gryffindor and was a little anxious about fraternising with Slytherins. Harry privately decided Creeveys were genetically disposed to making things difficult for themselves.

A shriek of glee near the doorway made him look up, then stand up to try and see over everyone else, who were also standing up. He could see Remus' head bobbing towards the High Table, but surely Remus wasn't causing the commotion --

All became clear as Remus mounted the steps to the High Table's dais, followed by an enormous black dog who came easily up to his hip. Padfoot, tongue lolling, tail-wagging, saw him to his chair and then leapt down, avoiding the many hands outstretched to pat him and making a beeline for the Slytherin table.

"Hello, dog," Harry said with a laugh, allowing Padfoot to lap his cheek affectionately.

"He isn't yours, is he Harry?" someone asked.

"Nah, he belongs to R -- Professor Lupin," Harry answered, as Padfoot leaned past him to steal a helping of bacon from the table. He rubbed Padfoot's jowls affectionately. The enormous dog finished the bacon in record time, then sniffed Harry all over, wagged his tail, and trotted away again, pausing briefly to nudge Draco with his nose. Draco grinned at Harry, but Harry noticed that Dumbledore and Snape were both looking distinctly unamused.

Harry's first class was History of Magic, which was boring on several levels; Binns was of the old school (the very old school; he was a ghost) and didn't believe in making learning interesting. Perhaps he really believed history was interesting on its own merits, but his lectures, if possible, made it drier than it had been to start with. There was also the fact that Harry had read several wizarding history books, so some of it wasn't even new information. He spent most of the class doodling an intricate design in the corner of his desk and wondering what Remus was up to.

Remus was not having quite as placid a morning as Harry; after leaving the Great Hall slightly ahead of the crowd, in order to have a few minutes with his classroom before the students began to arrive, he had bid Sirius goodbye, calmly walked to the faculty washroom next to the Defence classroom, and been violently ill from nerves. Twice.

By the time he washed his face and drank enough water from his cupped hands to kill the acid in his throat, he was nearly late. He arrived to find a half dozen seventh-year students already unpacking their quills and books in the expectation of a full morning of teaching. God, seventh years. Too young to have stopped testing boundaries, too old to punish easily, and far too cocky to reason with. He remembered seventh year all too well.

There were two mixed-house classes for seventh years; not enough of any given House wanted to take Dark Arts for him to make a full classroom from them. He had one this morning, for the whole morning, which was clearly some kind of sadism.

Well, at least he had a place to begin.

"Good morning," he said. "My name is Professor Lupin, as you know, and I will be in charge of your education this year. I understand your course of study may have been a little...irregular."

There was a smattering of laughter from the back of the room. Remus smiled.

"So I'm going to make sure that you get those gaps filled in, as well as preparing you for your NEWTs. You are all planning on taking a NEWTs in Defence? How many of you plan to go out for the MLE?"

Most of the hands went up. Remus nodded.

"Very well then. Quills away and books closed, please; pack up your bags, as we will not be returning to the classroom today."

The students all looked at each other, startled.

"Well, come on then, you haven't got all day," Remus continued.

"We normally have a test on the first day," a shy-looking Ravenclaw said, blushing immediately when he made eye-contact.

"What makes you think you won't?" he said, and walked out of the classroom. Behind him there were hurried rustling noises as they tried to strap up their bags and catch up. When the first few appeared at his elbow, he began asking questions.

"What are three ways of disposing of an Ashwinder egg?" he asked. "Come on, it's all right. I'm not talking to myself, you know."

"Uh, freezing, burying in sand, and, uh..." a tall Hufflepuff fumbled on the third.

"A containment charm," another supplied.

"Very good. Who can name the four categories of Dark potions?"

"Acquisitive, Manipulative -- "

" -- Unforgivable, and Invasive."

"Hey, I was going to say those!" complained the boy who'd started the list.

"No interrupting, you're all big kids, you know better," Remus said, pushing open the side-door that let out onto the Hogwarts grounds. A group of startled-looking first years were learning to fly broomsticks off to the right. He led them down and across the steep slope, towards a clearing near the lake. As long as he kept them off their footing, they couldn't kick back...

"Where are we going?" someone asked.

"I like the fresh air," Remus replied. "Here we are. All right," he said, stopping on level ground and turning to face the breathless Sevenths. "I know Professor Tonks drilled you in duelling last year -- how many of you are in the Duelling Club?"

Every hand went up.

Remus grinned. This might be fun after all...

Following his Charms class, Harry had a free afternoon and he knew everyone else did too; he lay in wait outside McGonagall's classroom for

Draco to come out. When the rest of the Hufflepuffs passed by, Harry poked his head in and found Draco still sitting at his desk, working. McGonagall was nowhere to be seen.

"Hey!" Harry called. "C'mon!"

"Can't," Draco replied, half-turning.

"Sure you can, it's our first day," Harry said, walking down the centre aisle. "You can't have that much homework already. We're all going to go to the Defence classroom and play pranks on Remus' students so they learn proper respect for their professor. It'll be fun!"

"Nah," Draco said. "You go on. I've got remedials."

"*What*?" Harry asked. "Remedials? First day back? McGonagall isn't merciful, is she?"

"Well, I sort of signed up for it," Draco said reluctantly. "I mean, I was middle of the class last year because of Transfiguration, I want to be top of class this year. It's important now, you know."

"So I'll help you, why do you want to spend more time in a classroom?"

"McGonagall says she thinks she knows how to help. It's fine, Harry, go on. See you at dinner, okay?"

"You're welcome to stay, Mr. Potter," said McGonagall's voice behind him. Harry stiffened. It was instinctive -- he swore he'd seen Sirius do it once or twice. "You could use a few extra hours on your diction."

"Ah -- no thanks -- Professor," Harry said, turning around and backing away slowly. "I'll just -- go -- to -- my...common room."

He fled with a backwards glance at Draco, who didn't look as miserable as Harry would have been in his shoes.

Padma and Neville should have been coming out of the free-study class in the library, but when Harry arrived only Neville was there.

"Where's Draco?" Neville asked.

"Where's Padma?" Harry asked.

"Is it just us? Padma's doing extra tutoring to get up to speed on what she missed. She says it'll only be a month."

"Draco's doing remedials in Transfigs."

"*Again*? It must be some kind of genetic disorder."

"I dunno what it is, but he seems to like it. Come on. We can still spy."

Harry and Neville crept towards the Dark Arts classroom by slinking along the walls and, once, taking refuge in an empty room on the first floor.

"You stand guard," Harry whispered. "Then I'll stand guard and you can have a turn."

"Should've brought your invisibility cloak," Neville sighed.

"Takes all the fun out of it," Harry said. "It's fine in a -- you know, a greater cause, but when it's sneaking for the sake of sneaking, invisibility's boring."

The classroom door was open just slightly, and Harry knelt down and pushed it a little until he could see inside, his head just past the doorjamb. Remus was pacing back and forth at the front of the class.

"So, the theory behind this is -- yes -- "

"Brocklehurst, sir. The theory of equative properties states that the force of magic in a given object is reduced in efficiency by the same amount as a Muggle object in high magical fields."

Remus had moved out of sight now, though it sounded like he was walking past the windows. Harry narrowed his eyes at Elaine Brocklehurst. He had yet to forgive her for helping to dye Neville green in their first year. Perhaps a croak-throat hex...

"And what are the implications of this, Mr. Diggory?"

"Magic meant to interact on a normal basis with Muggles must be slightly stronger than magical items meant to remain in a magical environment, Professor."

"Yes, we all know that," Remus said, sounding much closer now. Harry had just about fixed his wand on Brocklehurst's neck. "What I mean to ask is, with an eye to theoretical experimentation, what can we learn from bringing Muggle objects into a magical field?"

There was a sudden thump. Harry had a brief vision of Remus' newly-shined shoes before all he saw was stars. He tumbled backwards into Neville, who fell over also. The door had slammed shut, directly on his nose.

He sat up slowly, rubbing the tip of his nose where the wood had knocked him backwards. Behind him, Neville pushed himself upright.

"He slammed the door on me!" Harry said, outraged. "My nose is bleeding!"

"He's not half mean as a professor," Neville observed, laughing. "He's got your number right enough, Harry. Serves us right for spying."

Harry, pride and nose both still smarting, stood up and gave Neville a hand up too. "Come on, let's go steal some snacks from the kitchen and plot our revenge."

"He *is* a professor, Harry," Neville said, slightly apprehensive. "And you did deserve it, you know."

"Maybe," Harry allowed. "But he shouldn't get away with it."

Neville rolled his eyes and tickled the pear at the entrance to the Hogwarts kitchens. "Yes, how dare a professor escape punishment for putting you in your place, Harry Potter."

Laocoon's Children: The Fugitive from Azkaban

Chapter 6

A/N: At one point in this chapter I have used dialogue or description verbatim from *The Prisoner of Azkaban* . This is intentional, as Laocoon's Children does run parallel to the books. In this instance, Hagrid's brief lecture on the Hippogriff is taken from canon.

Thursdays, Harry supposed, were going to be outdoors sort of days.

He had Herbology in the morning, a double-class with Ravenclaw, and then in the afternoon he and Draco both had Care of Magical Creatures with Hagrid. He knew the gigantic gamekeeper well enough to know that Care of Magical Creatures was bound to be...interesting. No one, so far, had been able to get their Monster Book of Monsters open, and most of them had been forced to lock it in a box or tie it shut with various shoelaces and belts. Draco had tied his up with string, which it had then gnawed through and gone on to eat two pairs of socks before he'd been able to get it under control again. All through breakfast that morning he kept glancing apprehensively at his bag, which was moving as the Monster Book inside rattled around restlessly. Neville was gloating just a little that he'd decided not to take the class.

"I'd kill anything I was supposed to care for, anyway," he said. "Dunno how Trevor's survived this long. He's a very hardy toad."

Herbology wasn't really an outdoors class, but it felt like it; all that time in the humid, stuffy greenhouses meant that Harry and Padma showed up to the Great Hall damp and tired -- and not all that interested in lunch after a morning of squeezing various pods and studying diverse saps.

"Ready to go, then?" Draco said, shouldering his bag as lunch ended. "Maybe Hagrid'll let us leave our books with him."

"Doubt it," Harry replied. "See you in Ancient Runes, Padma!"

It was nice to get out of the castle after lunch and stroll down through the grounds to Hagrid's hut near the forest. It was a clear day, slightly windy, and the grass was still wet underfoot, dampening their shoes and the edges of their robes. Hagrid was outside, a cluster of students already gathered around him. Harry heard Theo's voice drift back on the wind.

"...open them!" the Slytherin was saying, sounding injured.

"Yeh haf ta stroke their spines!" Hagrid replied. "Din' anyone get theirs open?"

Harry reached into his bag and stroked the spine on his Monster Book of Monsters, unbuckling the binding around it as he did so.

"I did," he said with a smirk, taking the book out of his bag. It fell open in his hand, making little purring noises.

"Me too," Draco chimed in, fumbling a little with his. Theo looked murderous.

"See? Gen'le as can be," Hagrid said, taking Harry's book in his huge hands and showing it to Theo. It growled a little and made a half-hearted snap at the boy's face. "All right, yehs, put 'em away for now an' follow me!"

"Show-off," Theo muttered as he passed Harry, who smiled serenely and fell into step behind the other Slytherins, just ahead of the Hufflepuffs. To his surprise, Padma appeared at his elbow.

"Did I miss anything?" she asked breathlessly.

"I thought you had Charms!" Draco said, surprised. "Don't Ravenclaws and Gryffindors get Magical Creatures on Fridays?"

"Sure, but Friday I'm in Divs with you," Padma said. She hooked her thumb under the little golden chain around her neck, and Draco's eyes widened. "I'd rather have a busy Thursday and be able to sleep a bit on Friday, so I got permission to take class on Thursdays."

"We *have* to talk about that -- "

"Don't say it!" Padma said, clapping her hand over Harry's mouth. Then she blushed and pulled back. "We're not *supposed* to talk about it, remember?"

Harry didn't reply; they'd reached a small paddock at the very edge of the forest, beyond which a clearing cut a swath through the trees. Grazing in the clearing was a herd of what looked like horses, but horses with massively misshapen heads and shoulders. One of them had been cut out of the herd and was serenely strolling around the paddock itself, stopping occasionally to inspect a post or a bit of interesting wildlife.

Up close, Harry could see that it wasn't a horse at all; what he'd taken for deformed shoulders were furled wings. Instead of a normal horse's neck and head, the creature had an elongated neck covered in soft downy feathers, and the head of some kind of bird of prey -- a hawk, maybe an eagle. Its beak looked razor-sharp, and followed the colouration of the rest of the animal: deep steel grey with white dapples. As they approached, it turned its head sharply to reveal one large, brilliant orange eye.

"Look at its hooves," Draco whispered. Harry looked down. Each hoof was cloven, with a talon above it, and all three looked dangerous enough to kill.

There was also a thick leather collar around its neck, attached to a chain which was hooked on a simple locking ring screwed into one of the posts. Hagrid unhooked the chain and held it in his massive hands, standing on the other side of the fence from the students, who were all leaning on the wooden crossbeams, looking at the animal curiously. It looked back.

"This," Hagrid said proudly, "Is Buckbeak. He's a Hippogriff."

"Oh, wow!" Padma whispered, looking entranced. Harry glanced at her, then turned to Draco; he was watching her too.

"Now, firs' thing yeh gotta know about' hippogriffs is, they're proud," Hagrid continued. "Yeh always wait fer the hippogriff ter make the firs' move. Yeh walk toward him, and yeh bow, an' yeh wait. If he bows back, yeh're allowed ter touch him. If he doesn' bow, then get away from him sharpish, 'cause those talons hurt."

In demonstration, Hagrid reached into his pocket and took out a sizeable dead rat. Amid cries of "oh, *gross!*" he threw it into the air and the hippogriff leapt upwards with a flutter of its wings, neatly catching the rat between talon and hoof. It ripped it in half with its other talon and commenced eating it happily.

"So," Hagrid said, turning back to them and rubbing his hands. "Who's first then?"

Everyone looked apprehensive. Harry saw Theo smirking back at him out of the corner of his eye, and was about to volunteer when Padma stepped up onto the lowest bar of the paddock fence.

"I'll go," she said. Draco tugged on her sleeve, but Padma gently shook him off and climbed over the fence.

"Padmer! Good on yeh," Hagrid said proudly, as the rest of the class muttered about what a Ravenclaw was doing in a Slytherin-Hufflepuff class. "Now. Stand there, and remember not to blink too much. Hippogriffs don't trust yeh if yeh blink too much..."

Harry saw Padma immediately blink, then wince. Buckbeak stood very still, studying her with his keen orange eyes.

"I can't look," Draco said, both hands covering his face. "She's going to die."

"She's not going to die, nobody dies at Hogwarts anymore," Harry said, but he knew how unconvincing he sounded.

"There yeh are now. Now bow," Hagrid said, one hand on Padma's back. She bowed deeply, her braid falling over one shoulder, and stopped herself from flicking it back when she stood up. Buckbeak sidled back a step.

"Easy now, easy..."

Padma took a step forward, boldly, and bowed again. This time, Buckbeak screeched a little, but after a moment, when Padma didn't move, he bowed back.

"Righ', now yeh can touch 'im," Hagrid gave Padma a slight push forward, and she slowly stretched out her hand to touch his beak.

"It's warm," she said, startled. Buckbeak closed his eyes as she stroked the fluffy feathers just below where his beak ended.

"Yeh like a ride?" Hagrid said. Padma nodded, entranced. "Righ' then..."

He gestured to Buckbeak and the hippogriff knelt on his front legs, extending both wings. Hagrid gave her a slight boost as she put her foot on the top of Buckbeak's wing and hoisted herself lightly onto his back.

"Where do I hold on?" she asked, and Hagrid grinned.

"Anywhere yeh can!" he said, giving Buckbeak a slap on the rump. Most of the students shrieked as his wings suddenly beat the air and the hippogriff leapt into a running start. Padma looked like she was grinning, but it was hard to tell; her hands were both gripping the long, durable-looking feathers on the back of Buckbeak's neck. Just before reaching the end of the paddock, Buckbeak gave a second mighty leap and pumped his wings furiously, while Padma whooped and clung tight. Harry watched in awe as the hippogriff got fully airborne and pulled into a hairpin curve around the paddock. The other hippogriffs in the clearing looked up and screamed encouragement.

It didn't look like a comfortable ride; Harry watched Padma's braid bounce up and down as she was rocked by the beating of the wings just behind her hips. He couldn't see her face, but her shouts didn't sound like they were in fear.

Buckbeak circled the paddock and dove suddenly, pulling his legs up as he skimmed the clearing ground. Just before he would have collided with the fence, he swung upwards slightly, then crashed down into the paddock with all four feet going.

When he finally stopped, Padma half-slid from his back and staggered towards Hagrid. Her usually tidy hair was windblown and wispy, but she looked ecstatic.

"She didn't die!" Draco said, in a tone of utter disbelief. Harry laughed.

"That was brilliant!" she called, running back to the fence. "I nearly fell off like a dozen times!"

"A'Wrigh', everyone around to the clearing," Hagrid said, gesturing them towards the other hippogriffs. The rest of the class, reassured by Padma's success, began slowly approaching the animals, bowing so often that Harry, who could see the whole clearing, nearly laughed. He grabbed Draco and pointed to an enormous black hippogriff that nobody else had approached yet.

"Let's take that one," he said. "Hey Pansy!"

Pansy Parkinson looked around.

"You partner with Padma!"

Pansy looked put out -- she'd been gesturing at Millicent Bulstrode to be her partner -- but still obeyed, walking over to where Padma was once more bowing to Buckbeak.

Harry approached the enormous black hippogriff, trying not to blink, and bowed slowly. Next to him, Draco followed suit. Its bright green eyes flicked back and forth between them, and then it bowed low. Harry put out a hesitant hand and stroked its beak. Draco touched the feathers below its eye.

"They're not so scary up close," Harry said calmly.

"Speak for yourself," Draco replied. As if to prove his point, the hippogriff jerked backwards with a start.

"That one's a bit testy," Hagrid said. "Come over an' try Buckbeak, Padma's gentled him a treat."

Harry and Draco joined Padma and Pansy, who were looking uneasily at each other over Buckbeak's shoulders as they scratched his wingjoints. Harry hung back while Draco bowed, received his bow in turn, and was allowed to come closer.

"That was some good flying," he said. Buckbeak's eyes rolled and he pulled away, nearly knocking Pansy over. Draco froze, startled. Padma stepped backwards while Pansy ran for the comfort of the paddock fence.

"Bow again," Hagrid said, looking worried. Draco bowed. Buckbeak whistled, then bowed.

"There's a good -- hoo!" Draco leapt deftly backwards as Buckbeak turned and snapped.

"One more try," Hagrid said encouragingly. Draco put out his hand and Buckbeak allowed him to smooth over some ruffled feathers on his neck. For a few seconds, all was well.

"That's better," Draco said. At the sound of his voice, Buckbeak lashed out again with his hooves, and this time Draco couldn't pull away in time. He went over backwards, knocked down by a blow from a wing, and cried out when Buckbeak's talon ripped into his arm. The other hippogriffs crowed, and most of the students ran for the relative shelter of the paddock.

Hagrid darted forward with surprising speed for a man his size and pulled Draco away from the flailing Buckbeak, who looked like he'd enjoy trampling Draco underfoot. Draco himself was curled into a ball around his arm and had to be dragged a little before Hagrid could pick him up. Hagrid turned, Draco held upright in one arm, and smacked Buckbeak in the beak. Surprisingly, the hippogriff merely snorted and trotted off.

"Class dismissed," Hagrid roared. Everyone fled except Harry and Padma, who waited for Hagrid to get clear of all the hippogriffs before running forward.

"Ow ow ow ow ow," Draco was whimpering, trying to walk as he was half-carried, half-dragged to the fence. Hagrid leaned him up against a post. Both teacher and student were white-faced, Hagrid with worry, Draco with pain.

"We got ter get yeh to the hospital wing," Hagrid said. "Can yeh walk?"

"No -- if we go they'll tell mum," Draco gasped.

"Draco! Now is not the time to worry about your bloody mother!" Padma shouted. A couple of the hippogriffs screamed agreement.

"No no no..." Draco gulped a deep breath. Padma rolled her eyes, took out her wand, and tapped it against his forehead with a muttered "Ibuprofi!"

He sagged backwards.

"Thanks," he said, breathing a little easier.

"No problem."

"If they tell mum, she's on the Board of Governors," he continued, still breathless. "She'll get Hagrid in trouble. Plus she'll have Mr. Macnair come

after Buckbeak. My fault, my fault..."

"It wasn't, I saw," Harry said. "He attacked you for no reason."

"Nah, I scared him," Draco answered. "Just, okay -- you know any healing charms?"

"We're taking you to the hospital wing," Padma insisted. "We'll -- we'll say you fell down some stairs."

"And gashed his arm open?" Harry asked.

"Have you got a better idea? No? Then hop to, Potter," Padma snapped. Harry, startled, helped Draco to stand upright and peeled back his shredded shirt-sleeve. Blood dripped down Draco's fingers. "Hagrid, carry him!"

"She's a sharp 'un," Hagrid said to Harry, as Draco protested that he could walk. All four of them made their way slowly back to Hogwarts, where Madam Pomfrey was standing on the steps, shading her eyes.

"What happened here?" she said. The rest of the class was gathered around her. "Merlin, did one of those hippogriffs maul the boy?"

"I saw it!" Pansy said shrilly. "It knocked me over too!"

"It did not, Parkinson," Harry said. "Draco fell," he added to Madam Pomfrey. "And -- and cut his arm on a sharp root."

"All right, everyone run along," the mediwitch said, shooing the rest of the class off. "Potter, Patil, you'd better come with me..."

"All my fault," Draco repeated. "I fell. I slipped."

Then his eyes rolled up in his head and he passed out, landing squarely in Padma's arms.

"Wow, where's Creevey and his camera when you want him?" Harry asked, as Padma staggered under his weight.

"Well," said Pomona Sprout lightly, "never let it be said that Hufflepuffs aren't determined, at any rate."

Draco, sitting on a bed in the hospital wing, set his jaw and rubbed his arm, which had been wrapped in white bandage. "I fell," he repeated.

"Of course you did, dear," she replied. "After the hippogriff cut your arm open almost to the bone. I would too."

"Sharp root," Draco muttered.

"It was," Harry and Padma chorused supportively. Madam Pomfrey looked disapproving.

"Ah, Headmaster," Professor Sprout said, as Dumbledore appeared in the doorway. "We were hoping you could have a talk with young Malfoy here."

"Of course," Dumbledore replied, smiling at Draco. "Humbug?"

Draco took the small peppermint sweet, putting it in the pocket of his ripped school robe.

"Now then. We're having lovely weather for this time of year, don't you think?" Dumbledore continued. Draco blinked. "I hear Puddlemere United played last Sunday; aren't they your team?"

Draco stared at him. "Um, yes...sir..."

"Mine too. I hear their Seeker rides a Nimbus two thousand and one; a very good broomstick -- "

"Headmaster," Professor Sprout said, sternly.

"Hmm?" Dumbledore turned to look at her.

"A talk about his injury," she prompted. He gave her a small smile.

"Of course. How silly of me. How did you hurt your arm? I hope it isn't serious."

"Nosir," Draco said. "I fell, sir. Tripped and cut it open on a sharp root."

Dumbledore glanced at Pomfrey. "Seems rather open and shut, to me."

"There are several students who claim he was attacked by a hippogriff," she said.

"Ah. These students here?" Dumbledore said, pointing to Harry and Padma. "You disagree with Mr. Malfoy's tale of these events?"

"No, sir," Harry said. "We saw him fall."

"Very sharp root," Padma added.

"Ah. Well, it would seem to be the word of he who was injured against the word of several...invisible students?"

Pomfrey threw up her hands and rubbed her forehead. Professor Sprout sighed.

"Hm, yes, mass invisibility, that will have to be seen to," Dumbledore said, winking at Harry and Padma. "For now, however, I suggest Mr. Malfoy be sent to his dormitory for some well-earned rest, and Harry and Padma continue on to class. Ancient Runes, isn't it? Very stimulating for the mind."

"But Headmaster..."

"Well, I *have* enjoyed our chat," Dumbledore interrupted, "but I'm afraid I must be going. Do come say hello any time," he added to Draco, who was smiling. "Good day, Madam Pomfrey, Professor Sprout."

As he left he presented each of them with a humbug. The two women sighed, and Madam Pomfrey shrugged.

"The Headmaster knows best; off you go, then, Draco. Harry, Padma, I'll give you slips for class."

"That was the best thing *ever!*" Draco whispered to Padma and Harry, as they left the hospital wing.

"I don't know," Padma said dubiously.

"It was your idea!"

"No, that was just keeping stuff from your mum, I think it's good practice for you. I mean, Dumbledore covering for Hagrid that way. What if he really is dangerous, as a teacher?"

"Well, then he's learned his lesson," Draco said. "Bet you we're stuck with really *boring* animals all year."

"Hey, where're you going?" Harry said, as Padma turned off towards the staircase. "Ancient Runes is this way!"

"I know! I'll see you there," she said, disappearing up the staircase. "Draco, I'll take notes for you!"

When Harry arrived at class, after walking Draco to the Hufflepuff common room, he found Padma already seated with an empty desk next to her and a pile of Arithmancy homework at her elbow.

"Got here early, saved you a seat," she said with a grin.

Harry met Draco in the corridor outside the Great Hall the next morning, falling easily back into the habit of early breakfasts. Padma and Neville showed up before long, Neville with his tie askew and hair still a mess from sleep.

"Don't look at me," Harry said, as Neville tried to flatten it down. "My hair's *always* a mess."

"Yeah, but it's a nice mess," Padma said. "I mean, it looks sort of good that way."

"Oh, sod it," Neville sighed, taking out his wand and pointing it at his head.

"Don't -- " Draco and Harry chorused, but Neville had already spoken the charm.

To be fair, his hair did now lie in a flat and orderly manner. The fact that it was also bright purple was lost on Neville, who couldn't see it. Padma rolled her eyes.

"*Capellum fuco*," she said. Neville's hair changed mostly back to brown. He mumbled a thank-you around the hot pastry the house-elves had delivered to the end of the Hufflepuff table where they sat. Hedwig, Remus and Sirius' snowy white owl, fluttered in through one window and looked around in perplexity when she found the high table empty.

"Poor Hedwig. It'll be good when Sirius has a real address again," Harry said as she spotted him and soared across the Great Hall, dropping off a Daily Prophet. "She isn't sure whether to bring things here or to Remus' rooms or to the Three Broomsticks."

Hedwig stole a sausage and flapped away while Harry unrolled the paper.

"Looks like Fudge finally made it to Azkaban," he said, studying the photograph of the Minister on the front page. Fudge looked pale even in monochrome, and didn't move except to shake his head from side to side at the camera.

"Says he's staying in Hogsmeade for another few days until the Aurors set up an office there. What do they want to do that for?" Draco asked.

"High time if you ask me. Hogsmeade hasn't got any security at all, and someone's got to keep an eye on the Dementors besides," Padma said. "Maybe Professor Tonks'll get reassigned here!"

"Doubt it," Neville said, looking glum. "She's a hero. She got reassigned to diplomatic last week. She's off running round the continent."

"Bet Professor Snape hates that," Harry said with a grin. Neville grinned back.

"Well, she does get whole weeks off at a time, 'cause they never know how long she'll be on."

"Guess you'll know when she's home," Padma snickered. "Professor Snape'll actually give nine of ten on a paper."

"Not mine!" Draco laughed.

"Uh oh -- Prefects on the way," Neville said, shoving his toast in his mouth and preparing to dash for Gryffindor. It was a standing joke that Percy Weasley hadn't yet removed whatever was stuck up his arse, and hated to see Neville fraternising in other houses.

"Nah, it's just Eddie Carmichael," Padma said, craning her neck. "He's in the year above me. He's a twit," she added. "And his girlfriend Marietta. Ugh, don't make eye contact."

Eddie Carmichael was a plain, studious-looking boy who was followed by a handful of girls in Ravenclaw blue. Harry guessed that the curly-haired girl at his elbow was probably Marietta.

"Hey," he called, spoiling Padma's plans to studiously avoid him. "Hey, Malfoy!"

Draco, looking resigned, raised his head.

"Yes, Carmichael?" he asked.

"I hear you passed out in class yesterday," Carmichael said. Marietta giggled. "Swooning over hippogriffs, eh? About your calibre, I suppose."

"What's that?" came a new voice from the other side of the room. A couple of sixth-years with Gryffindor ties had filed in. "Who passed out?" one asked mockingly.

"Draco Malfoy!" Carmichael called.

"What, the little spawn of Lucius Malfoy?"

"Oh, that's it," Neville said, standing up. All the Ravenclaws made fearful, sarcastic noises, but the Gryffindors hesitated. Two years before, a couple of students had paid dearly for turning Neville green. "Don't think I can't knock you down, Carmichael!"

"Getting your boyfriend to defend you, Malfoy? I hear your dad does the same thing," Carmichael taunted. Neville would have vaulted the table and gone for him, but Padma caught him by the shirttails and gestured to the doorway. Professor Snape had just swept through.

"But they're getting away with it!" Neville fumed.

"No they're not," Harry said calmly. "Come on, we'd better go."

Neville pointedly sat as far from the others as possible at the Gryffindor table, though he glared daggers at them all throughout breakfast. Padma did likewise at her own table, muttering audibly under her breath about Marietta. Harry dawdled at Slytherin until Towler and Pucey arrived.

"Hey Towler," he said, pretending to eat a muffin in front of him.

"Yah, pipsqueak?" Towler asked, spinning a sickle idly on the table.

"You know Edgecomb and Carmichael?"

"Not well. Why?"

"You know anything about Edgecomb she doesn't want public?"

"She'd hardly confide in *him* ," Pucey said. "What gives, Potter? Got a crush?"

"Just playing a little game," Harry said.

"I hear she's a gossip," Pucey volunteered. "And she talks down other girls in her House."

All three boys shook their head, tsking. There was often no love lost amongst Slytherins and they'd stab other houses in the back soon enough, but you stabbed your family, at least, in the front.

"Well, that ought to do it. Who are the fourths in Ravenclaw?"

"Oh well, there's Edgecomb of course, Cho Chang -- god, you know Chang?" Towler asked Pucey. "Ravenclaw Seeker, nice hair?"

"Nicer legs," Pucey observed with a leer.

"Edgecomb, Chang, Gill..." Towler scrunched up his face in concentration. "Dunno the rest."

"That's enough, I think. Hey, you played cricket before Hogwarts, didn't you?"

"Sure. I'd play it here if they had it."

"Will you have a word with Malfoy? He wants to go out for beater and he's a keen batsman."

"Right-o," Towler said agreeably. "Only don't tell Flint, he'd call it traitorism."

"Sure," Harry said. "Now, watch this."

The hall was crowded now, and nobody else noticed as he made his way to where Carmichael and Edgecomb were sitting with the rest of the Ravenclaw fourths. Carmichael was doing an exaggerated imitation of someone having a fainting spell, which drew a lot of laughs. Harry stopped, facing them across the table, and leaned forward between two other students.

"Can I have a word before class, Edgecombe?" he asked. Carmichael howled with laughter.

"Are you going to beat us up too, Potter?" he asked.

"I don't think this is any of your business," Harry replied.

"Ooooooh. Wee Potter's got his knickers in a knot."

"What do you want?" Marietta asked suspiciously.

"In private," Harry said gravely.

"Pull the other one," she said. She smiled, but it was an uncertain smile.

"I really think you should," Harry insisted.

"Go on, Potter," Carmichael said, making a shooing motion. Harry ignored it, staring at Marietta.

"Yes," she agreed. "Go on, Potter."

Harry straightened and shrugged. "All right. It's your funeral, not mine."

Then, very deliberately, he grinned at Cho Chang. "See you on the practice field, huh, Chang?"

She smiled back, looking confused but pleased. Marietta's eyes darted from her to Harry. Satisfied, Harry turned, winked at his teammates, and left the Great Hall. Even if she didn't come running after him, the uncertainty on her face was enough for now --

"Harry! Harry Potter!"

Harry stopped on the threshold of the front entrance, smiled to himself, and turned around. Marietta *had* come after him, just as he'd hoped. He wondered if Towler and Pucey were as amused by the bluff as he was.

"Go on, Edgecombe," he said, imitating Carmichael's shooing motion. She stopped, looking stricken.

"All right, what is it you wanted to say?" she demanded. He waited as she drew closer.

"Oh, that." Harry shrugged. "Nothing much. But I know what you said about Cho Chang."

She froze. Harry wondered if he'd hit more pay dirt than he knew.

"What -- what about her?" she stammered.

"We both know that, Marietta," he said, leering a little.

"What are you going to do about it?"

"Well, that depends on you, doesn't it?" he asked, giving her his best Snape smile. "It's not really any of my business, I'm just a third-year Slytherin. But, after all, *I* don't gossip about my own House."

"Harry, come on now, we were only teasing Malfoy a little."

"And if you tease him a little again, I'll talk a little to Cho Chang. She'll get the words right from my mouth. Just like I got them from Towler," he added, in a moment of inspiration.

"*Towler* knows?" she practically howled.

"Oh, he'll keep quiet if I ask him," Harry said. "Cho never has to know, really. But if you tease Malfoy again -- or if any other Ravenclaw teases Malfoy again -- "

"I can't police the whole House!"

"Find a way," Harry said ruthlessly. "Because otherwise Cho and I could get to be really good friends, y'know?"

He left her in the hallway and had almost made it all the way to his morning Potions class before he burst out laughing.

Laocoon's Children: The Fugitive from Azkaban

Chapter 7

A/N: At one point in this chapter I have used dialogue or description verbatim from The Prisoner of Azkaban. This is intentional, as Laocoon's Children does run parallel to the books. In this instance, Trelawney's speech and portions of Lupin's lesson are taken directly from canon.

Harry didn't get a chance to tell Draco about his brilliant politics until lunch; he had double-potions with Padma while Neville and Draco had double-Defence. He was eager, and a little scared, to hear their reactions to being taught by Remus. He'd heard nothing but cheerful gossip about Defence class so far, but he didn't care if the *school* liked Remus as much as he cared that his friends did. And that they wouldn't give *him* the cold shoulder if Remus was hard on them in class.

It turned out he needn't have worried. On their way to lunch, Padma and Draco gleefully dissected the morning's lesson on hinkypunks. Harry could hardly distract them long enough to tell the story of Marietta's blackmail.

"But you've no idea what she said about Cho Chang," Padma pointed out.

"Who cares? She doesn't know that," Harry replied.

"You didn't have to, you know," Draco said, slightly sullen. "I mean, I can take a bit of teasing."

"It wasn't just teasing," Padma retorted. "It was cruel and unnecessary. You can't help who you're related to."

"No," said Draco quietly. "S'pose not."

"But it *is* brilliant, isn't it?" Harry bragged, swaggering into the Great Hall. Snake, sensing food nearby, poked his head out from under Harry's collar.

"Do you really think it'll keep all the Ravenclaws in line?" Neville asked.

"Enough of them," Harry said, heading for Slytherin's table. "See you in Divination!"

"Not me, I've got the afternoon free," Draco grinned at Harry. "Have fun studying your balls!"

Draco's jest, weak as it was, was still the funniest thing about Divination class, as Harry soon found out. For one thing, it was in one of the highest levels of the castle: an entryway on the seventh floor led to a spiral staircase that seemed to go up forever, getting closer and tighter as it went. At the top landing there was nothing more than a trapdoor in the ceiling with a brass plaque on it reading "Sibyll Trelawney, Divination Teacher".

"Bugger this," Harry said to Padma. "How do we get up there? Levitation?"

As if in answer to his question, the trapdoor opened and a silvery ladder descended through it, sparkling in the dim light on the landing.

"Great," Padma said. "Remind me not to wear a skirt on Fridays."

Climbing up the ladder was like portkeying to an entirely different world, one made up mainly of chintz and china. There were a few narrow windows, but most of the light came from a handful of red-swathed wall lamps, giving the entire room a dark, crimson hue. It was packed with small tables, surrounded by armchairs and footstools, some of them looking rather greasy and well-used. It wasn't even cold outside, but a fire was burning at one end of the room next to a larger table that Harry could only assume was the professor's desk. The copper kettle over the fire gave off a smell of stale tea. The walls were lined with shelves, covered with dusty curios and teacups. It reminded Harry a little of one of the Betwys Beddau tea-shops, the one all the older people frequented, and a little of an engraving of Hell he'd seen in one of Remus' books.

He flinched back suddenly; what he'd taken for another heap of curios had begun to move, and turned out to be his professor. She was a thin, bespectacled woman in a gauzy shawl with tiny bells and bangles hanging from it; more hung from thick ropes of beads around her neck and bracelets on her wrists.

"Good afternoon," she said in a soft, misty sort of voice. "I am Professor Trelawney. Do be seated, won't you?"

Harry picked out a table near the back of the classroom, and Neville and Padma followed him there.

"Ah, my dears," the Professor said, gliding towards them. "I am afraid it is an ill omen to have three at a table -- you will sit here, my dear," she said to Neville, gently guiding him to where Ron Weasley was seated, "and you here," she said, returning for Padma, who sullenly followed her to where another Ravenclaw was seated. Harry sulkily kicked out a chair for Theo. Crabbe and Goyle took the table next to them and immediately began scratching swearwords into its surface.

"You may not have seen me before," Trelawney said, taking up a position at the head of the classroom. Harry noticed resentfully that at least two other tables had three occupants. "I find that descending too often into the hustle and bustle of the main school clouds my Inner Eye. So you have

chosen to study Divination, the most difficult of all magical arts. I must warn you at the outset that if you do not have the Sight, there is very little I will be able to teach you."

She paused as she passed Neville and Ron's table. "You, my boy," she said to Neville. "Is your grandmother well?"

"My grandmother's dead," Neville replied with a remarkably straight face.

"I knew as much. My condolences," she said, passing onwards. Some of the other Gryffindors looked impressed. Harry wondered if "courageous" was the Sorting Hat's euphemism for "slightly dim".

"We will begin with tea-leaves, then progress to the Tarot. If we finish fire omens, we shall move on in second term to the most sublime of all divinatory devices, the crystal ball. Unfortunately, classes will be disrupted in February by a nasty bout of flu. I myself will lose my voice. And around Easter, one of our number will leave us forever. By the way," she said to Parvati Patil, "beware a red-haired man."

Parvati and Padma both glanced at Ron, the only red-head in the room. Ron looked terrified.

"Now, collect a tea-cup from the shelf, come fill it with tea, and then return to your tables and drink until only dregs remain," she said. She touched Neville's shoulder. "After you've broken the first cup, *do* choose one of the blue-coloured ones? I'm rather partial to pink. Now," she added, moving on, "Swill the dregs of the tea around the cup three times with your left hand and turn it upside down on its saucer. After the last of the tea has drained away, give your cup to your partner to read, using pages five and six of *Unfogging the Future*."

"Break a cup!" Neville said hotly to Harry as they stood in line to collect their teacups. "I've managed to feed myself for many years without breaking any cutlery at all, thanks!"

"She's just picking on you," Harry replied as Neville reached up to defiantly take one of the pink-patterned cups. "She -- watch out!"

The cup, which was coated with dust, slipped through Neville's fingers and crashed to the floor. Neville looked horrified.

"Blue-pattern, dear, please," Trelawney called. About half the class laughed, but everyone looked vaguely sympathetic. Neville gathered the shattered pink teacup onto a spare saucer and sheepishly collected his blue-patterned one.

Harry and Theo poured their tea and returned to their table; as one, they opened the window behind them and dumped out most of their tea. Around the room, the rest of the class was drinking and grimacing. Harry stealthily pulled the window shut and sipped the last of the liquid. Theo was a little too enthusiastic, and choked momentarily.

"Swirl!" Harry whispered to him. "Swirl for your life, she's coming!"

Theo hit himself in the chest with his right hand while he swirled with his left and upended the teacup onto the saucer. Harry followed suit and waited for Trelawney to arrive.

"Have you examined your dregs already?" she asked, beaming on them. "You must be very fond of the tea!"

"Absolutely," Theo croaked. Harry turned over his teacup and traded it with Theo, opening his copy of *Unfogging the Future* (half-price used in Mardjinn Alley, with interesting but mostly irrelevant margin notes and some very naughty annotations to the chapter on Crystal Ball Gazing).

"Um, it looks kind of like a..." Harry studied the list of images in *Unfogging the Future* madly. It looked like a lump of tea-leaves to him. "A volcano!" he said triumphantly. "Which is an...impending disaster. Well, that sort of makes sense," he said to Theo. Trelawney bent over his shoulder and studied it.

"Excellent, Mr. Potter," she said approvingly. "And yours?" she said to Theo, who was still clearing his throat.

"Right! Right. Uh, it looks like a flower and...a...tree," Theo said. "Sort of like a park...park's not listed...uh..."

Trelawney gave a little shriek and snatched it out of his hands.

"Can you not see it!" she cried, holding it under Theo's nose.

"A spider?" Theo said hopefully.

"My dear boy, I am so sorry to tell you this -- it is a Grim!" Trelawney declared. Harry stared at her, baffled.

"A Grim?" he asked.

"An omen of impending disaster!"

"Sort of like a volcano?" Harry ventured.

"Much worse, my boy! See the horns of a bull, here, and the shape of the Grim's head, the head of a black, red-eyed dog -- to see the Grim is to know that death is upon you!" she announced loudly. "And the horns of the bull, a troubled friendship -- someone close to you is near death!"

"Been there," Padma sighed, looking bored.

"Nah," Harry said, tipping the cup so that he could look into it. "That's not a dog, is it? Looks more like a kangaroo to me."

"What, like this?" Neville said, holding up his teacup. Trelawney shrieked louder.

"The Grim!" she declared. "But not meant for you! Tell me, are any of your friends ill, my dears?" she asked, looking back and forth between them. Harry looked at Padma, who smiled wickedly.

"Professor," she called, holding out her cup. Another very doglike figure had taken shape in her tea-leaves. "What do you think of this?"

Trelawney gave Padma an infinitely sad look. "One you love is near death," she said.

"Must be Draco," Neville said cheerfully.

"Who?" Trelawney asked, delicately.

"Draco Malfoy," Harry said. "He's our mate. A Hufflepuff -- "

"But you probably don't know him. I expect newspapers cloud the inner eye," Padma said.

"My dear, I am not certain you are taking this matter with the gravity it requires!" Trelawney said, scandalised.

"Oh, no, Professor!" Padma gave her a wide-eyed look. "I swear I'm giving it all the respect it deserves!"

Neville tried not to giggle. It came out sounding like someone was choking a frog.

"Clearly," Trelawney said with a significant frown, "Mr. Malfoy should heed the portents!"

"Meaning he should sign up for class," Harry whispered to Theo.

"Alas, we can but hope he will come to his senses in time," she continued, shaking her head. "In the meantime, we must press on..."

Most of the class actually seemed pretty awed by Trelawney's predictions and vague histrionics about Draco, but Neville and Padma were less than impressed.

"Honestly. It's all power of suggestion," Padma said as they walked back down the narrow spiral staircase. "And anyone who really isn't naturally gifted isn't going to get very far anyway."

"Dunno," Harry said. "It did sort of look like you both had dogs in your cups. She seemed awfully convinced..."

"Of course it looked like we had dogs in our cups," Neville scoffed.

"Why would you say that?" Harry asked curiously.

"You didn't see?" Padma asked, putting on her best innocent face. "We rearranged our tea-leaves when she wasn't looking."

Saturday morning dawned bright and beautiful. Remus knew, because he was awakened at dawn by a large black dog slobbering all over his face.

"Ugh! Sirius!" he groaned, shoving Padfoot's muzzle away. Sirius transformed on the bed and pinned him down, grinning. Remus saw he was fully dressed.

"Up up up!" Sirius said.

"Merlin, what time is it?" Remus asked.

"Six ay-emme. I want you to see the house. Come on, come on," Sirius said, wrestling him out of bed. Remus staggered towards his closet and began dressing sleepily.

"It still exists after ten in the morning, right?" he asked, pulling his trousers on.

"Yes, cranky," Sirius answered.

"Then why six -- "

"Because you can't really appreciate it unless you see it in the mornings. Come on, I've found a floo point nearby..."

Sirius' floo point turned out to be a little cafe on the edge of Hogsmeade, and Remus sipped tea as they walked, the end of his sleeve wrapped around the paper cup.

"Now, it's a bit far from the village centre but it's got a great big garden for moons," Sirius said excitedly. "And it's big enough for you and me on week-ends -- "

"When I don't have class duties -- "

"Right, right. And big enough for Harry too during the holiday. It's got washing charms in place on the sink and a chill-charmed cupboard, bootscrubbing spells in the front hall -- I checked the heating hexes myself, they're in good order."

"Rent or purchase?" Remus asked, blowing on his tea.

"Well...purchase," Sirius said. "But I can rent it out in summers and Harry's going to need a house of his own one day after Hogwarts, you know."

"Can you afford it?"

"We, Moony, we . That's why I want you to look at it, it'll be yours too, you know," Sirius said. "And yes. We definitely can."

"There must be something wrong with it," Remus said with a grin. Sirius led him around a high hedge and down a small path.

"Erm," he said. "Well, it...does need a new coat of paint and some work here and there..."

He opened a gate and guided Remus through it, almost dancing with eagerness. Remus grinned at him and turned to regard the house.

"Oh god," he said, startled out of any tactful reaction.

The house rose before them on the crest of a little hill, and he would have to admit that the view out the windows on the west side would be stunning -- sunlight touched the grass and stones of Creadonagh valley below the Forbidden Forest, turning it bright gold. But the house itself...

"It's so...orange," he said.

"Yeah, but paint is cheap enough," Sirius said, resting his hands on Remus' shoulders.

"But -- so -- orange, Sirius," Remus repeated. The house, a two-story affair with a handful of odd gables and turrets, might have looked normal enough in other circumstances, but the sheer orangeness of it -- two toned orange, orange with *brighter orange trim* -- overwhelmed. It was like a giant orange wart in the middle of a lovely green field. "I mean..."

"Come look inside," Sirius urged. "And don't mind the wallpaper, I'm going to pull that down too."

"Is it orange?" Remus asked, still stunned witless.

"It's blue!" Sirius said cheerfully.

"What did you do this morning, Professor Lupin?" Remus asked himself, while Sirius opened the door and led him inside. "Oh, not much, Headmaster. Got some tea in Hogsmeade. Went blind and insane. Bought an orange house. An orange house, Professor Lupin? Yes, Headmaster, with lovely blue wallpaper..."

Very few things could kill Harry's appetite. Quidditch matches, of course. Nerves in general. Rarely had excitement done it, but on Monday morning he found himself totally uninterested by the delicacies Denbigh tried to tempt him with. Today he was going to have his first Defence class with Remus, and he was looking forward to it with a mixture of anticipation and anxiety. He'd studied with Remus before, of course, since Remus had tutored him in "extracurriculars" when he was a student at the little village school in Betwys Beddau. He'd come to Hogwarts with a reasonable comprehension of Arithmancy and Latin because of Remus, and he'd spent many hours practicing wandwork with sticks in the back garden of the River House. He'd never really considered that to be "class", though. That was just Remus, showing him how to do things.

Neville and Harry left breakfast early and were almost the first to arrive -- Hermione Granger was already seated at her desk with her books out, doodling idly with her quill on a scrap of parchment.

"Morning, Hermione," Neville said, taking a seat next to her. Harry sat on Neville's other side, unpacking his own book. No way was *Hermione Granger* going to show him up in Remus' class.

"Hi, Neville -- hi Harry," she added, blushing a little.

"Hermione," Harry said, setting out his inkpot. "Looking forward to class?"

"Oh yes. I've heard Professor Lupin knows all kinds of interesting things about the Dark Arts," she said, as other students began to arrive. There

was still no sign of Remus, however. "He's going to take over the Dueling Club, too."

"Brilliant," Neville said. "Professor Lupin's great."

"Do you know him?"

"Yeah..." Neville faltered and glanced at Harry. "He's friends with my parents."

Other students began to pour into the classroom and Parvati Patil sat down on Hermione's other side at that moment to engage in what was apparently a hot bit of gossip. Hermione's attention swerved away from them as Parvati whispered in her ear. Harry glanced at the doorway just in time to see Remus enter, carrying the briefcase Sirius had bought for him and wearing his freshly-ironed teaching robes.

"Good morning," he said, putting his briefcase down on the desk. "Please put your books and inkpots away. Today's lesson will be a practical."

There were a few muffled groans as people re-packed their bags. Harry hurriedly shoved his book back and tossed his quill into the bag's pocket.

"I'm Professor Lupin, and I think..." he looked narrowly out at the double class, "I know quite a few of you already. You're Mr. Crabbe, aren't you?" he said to Crabbe, who nodded sullenly. "Yes, you're very like your father. And that must be Parvati -- almost called you Padma -- and there's Neville of course...hallo Ron! I had your sister in class on Thursday...and you must be Hermione Granger," he said to Hermione, smiling. "I've been warned about you."

Hermione turned so pale that Remus hastened to add, "Only good things! Professor McGonagall has nothing but good to say of you, Miss Granger."

Hermione heaved a sigh of relief as Remus continued to name off the third-years, stopping occasionally to be introduced when he couldn't place a student. Finally he came back around to Harry.

"And you're Harry Potter," he said, winking at Harry. "I think we've met once or twice, haven't we?"

"Yes, sir. I believe you know my godfather," Harry replied.

"Just so. Well, I've managed most of your names, and those I've only just learned I'm sure I'll remember with a little occasional assistance. I've rather a treat for you today. I had intended to show you a working demonstration of how Hinkeypunks trap their victims, but over the weekend a much more interesting creature was brought to my attention. Follow me, please. Leave your bags; bring your wands."

He led them out of the classroom and along the empty corridor in the opposite direction from the Great Hall. Harry wasn't sure where they were going, and he nearly ran into Neville when the whole class had to stop suddenly.

Craning his neck, he could see Remus standing at the front of the crowd. Peeves the poltergeist was in front of him, busily stuffing a keyhole with chewing gum.

"Peeves," Remus said in a reserved tone of voice. The poltergeist looked up, then flipped over midair to float upside-down, facing Remus.

"Ooooho! It's the new professorling!" Peeves squealed.

"I'd take that gum out of the keyhole if I were you," Remus said, his tone still conversational. "Mr. Filch won't be able to get to his brooms."

Peeves stuck his tongue out and burst into song. "Loony, loopy Lupin! Looney, loopy Lupin!"

A few of the Slytherins giggled. Harry glared at Theo until he smacked Millicent and Goyle in the backs of their heads to stop them. Remus didn't seem affected in the least; he merely raised his wand and said "*Waddiwasi!*" in a commanding tone. The gum shot out of the keyhole as if it had been fired from a gun, ricocheted off the ceiling, and landed right in Peeves' left nostril. The poltergeist shrieked a startled curse and zoomed off down the hallway.

"Cool!" Dean Thomas exclaimed.

"Effective," Remus answered absently, leading them onwards. He stopped at a door marked "Faculty Common Room" and opened it, gesturing them inside.

The faculty common room, which Harry had never been in before, was a long room paneled in wood and furnished with old, mismatched chairs. A wall of windows looked out onto the grounds, and the fireplace at one end was empty, awaiting autumn's more bitter chill.

At the opposite end of the room from the fireplace, near to the door, was an old upright wardrobe which Harry guessed was meant to hold spare robes and cloaks for the professors. Remus crossed to it and the rest of the class followed, fanning out in a circle -- a circle that got a lot wider as the wardrobe gave an alarming wobble, banging against the wall and tilting forward on two legs for a moment.

"Nothing to worry about," Remus said calmly. "It's only a boggart."

Harry, as well as most of the rest of the class, felt that this was definitely something to worry about. Grimmauld Place used to have boggarts

infesting the spare rooms, and he remembered hearing horror stories from Ted about getting rid of them.

"Who knows what a Boggart is?" Remus asked. Harry raised his hand quickly, barely beating Hermione's, but Remus eventually called on Seamus Finnegan.

"I -- it's a shape-shifter, isn't it?" he said uncertainly. "It takes the shape of whatever's most frightening."

"Very good, Mr. Finnegan. Boggarts nest in dark, enclosed spaces -- under beds, in unreachable cupboards, under the sheets on furniture in unused rooms. I once encountered one that had hidden itself inside a grandfather clock," he added. "This one is relatively new; I suppose it moved in over the summer. I managed to save it from the tender ministrations of Professors Snape and McGonagall -- " here everyone laughed, " -- by offering to use it as a lesson for my third years. Now, this Boggart, sitting in the darkness next to the Headmaster's second-favourite cloak, doesn't have a form yet. He doesn't know what frightens us -- yet. When we let him out, then he'll immediately try to become whatever each of us fears most. This means that we have an advantage over the boggart, doesn't it? Anyone care to guess what it is?"

Hermione's hand beat Harry's into the air this time, but Remus smiled at him. "Potter?"

"Uh," Harry said, thrown off by hearing Remus use his last name. "There are a lot of us, so it won't know what shape it should be?"

"Exactly. It's best to tackle Boggarts with company, and not just because you should always try to deal with the Dark Arts with a companion who can watch your back. Now, when Boggarts are faced with a pair of people, they have a decision to make -- what should they become? Headless corpse? Flesh-eating slug?"

The class made appropriately mock-terrified noises.

"I once saw a boggart make that very mistake -- tried to frighten two people at once and turned himself into half a slug. Not remotely frightening, of course," Remus said. "Now, how do we defeat a Boggart? All right, Hermione, your turn," he said.

"Laughter," she said promptly.

"That's right. You need to force it to assume a shape you find amusing. And the spell we use to accomplish this is, repeat after me, *Riddikulus*."

"*Riddikulus*," the class repeated.

"*Riddikulus*."

"*Riddikulus*," Harry chorused, along with everyone else.

"So, who wants to volunteer? Neville, a bit of Gryffindor courage?"

Neville grinned and stepped forward.

"Now, what do you find most frightening?" Remus asked.

"Professor Snape," he said, and the entire class laughed. Remus grinned.

"Come on, Longbottom! Professor Snape's scary all right, but there must be something worse."

Neville appeared to give it some thought.

"I don't reckon I like Dementors very well," he said, and the class was instantly quiet. Remus nodded.

"That's uncommonly wise of you," he said. "Very well then, let's see. Ted Tonks is quite the cook; you know that red apron he owns?"

Neville nodded, perplexed.

"And do you remember the time Andromeda played a trick on him and he came running out of the kitchen chasing her with a saucepan full of onions?"

Neville laughed. "Sure!"

"Right. Now, when the Dementor comes out of that wardrobe, I want you to picture it in a red apron, with a saucepan of onions in one hand, all right?"

Neville nodded and took his wand out of his pocket. "I'm ready," he said.

"Very well. On three -- one, two, three!"

Remus aimed his wand at the wardrobe and it burst open. Black smoke spiralled out, resolving itself into a Dementor with frightening speed. Neville turned pale and Harry felt sick, but just when he thought he might bolt, Remus shouted.

"Now, Neville!"

Neville lifted his wand automatically and shouted "Riddikulus!"

The Dementor jerked backwards as if a string had pulled it, and a red apron materialised over its cloak. One slimy hand suddenly grasped a large saucepan, and the other held a spatula. It looked down at the spatula in confusion. The apron read "REAL MEN SAUTEE". Neville and Harry both burst into immediate laughter, followed closely by the rest of the class.

"Excellent! Form up, let's give everyone a try -- you next, Crabbe!"

The Dementor swooped down on Crabbe, turning into a giant spiked ball as the rest of the students fell into line behind him.

"Riddikulus!" Crabbe shouted, and little streamers burst out of the tips of the spikes to the sound of kazoos going off. Parvati was next, her mummy unraveling and tripping on his own bandages, and after her came Ron. The Boggart burst out into a gigantic spider, but Ron was prepared and almost before it was fully formed, it had rollerskates strapped to its feet.

Harry, at the end of the line, watched as each student took their turn, marveling a little at the variety of fears, both concrete and absurd, that were passing before his eyes. Finally, he was next; he lifted his wand, but before he could, Remus stepped forward so quickly he almost collided with the giant jack-in-the-box that was about to have its lid slammed down on top of it by Goyle. It stretched and compressed and shifted into what Harry knew to be a moon, though from where he stood it looked more like a pale yellow balloon.

"Riddikulus!" Remus said almost lazily, and the moon deflated, buzzing all over the room before zipping back into the wardrobe. Remus locked the door and stepped back quickly as the wardrobe nearly toppled on top of him.

"Well!" he said, slightly breathlessly. "I think that's enough for one day. I'll have my fourths finish it off. Let's see; five points to everyone who tackled the boggart; ten to Hermione, Harry, and Seamus for answering my questions, and fifteen for Neville for going first."

Harry stared at Remus as the rest of the class filed out, heading back to the Defence classroom for their bags. Remus checked that the lock was secure, slipped his wand up his sleeve, and turned.

"Did you need something, Harry?" he asked mildly.

Harry was furious, suddenly; he'd known he wouldn't get special treatment from Remus, but he didn't think Remus would coddle him. He never had before.

"No," he snapped. He turned on his heel, almost running out of the room.

Laocoon's Children: The Fugitive from Azkaban

Chapter 8

A/N: I am a BAD PERSON. I didn't even run this past my betas before posting. SORRY BETAS!

If Harry was struggling with unfairness in Defence class, Draco wasn't doing much better in his morning Potions class with Padma.

"These are," Snape said, looming over him, "without a doubt the most pathetically ill-shredded daisy roots I have ever had the misfortune of witnessing, Malfoy."

Draco's cheeks burned and he pulled the roots towards him, trying to imitate Padma's delicately-diced roots on the cutting mat next to him. Snape continued to stand there, intimidating him.

"I find it difficult to believe that even you can fail to adequately brew a Shrinking Solution, but you may yet prove it possible," Snape said as Draco wretchedly continued to cut up his roots. "Patil!"

"Yes, sir?" Padma asked.

"At the end of the lesson, you will sample Malfoy's Shrinking Solution."

"Me, sir?" Padma asked, looking horrifiedly at Draco, who seemed equally horrified.

"Yes, you! Are all Ravenclaws deaf?" Snape demanded, stalking back to the front of the classroom. On his way, he swept the pulpy remains of a shrivelfig from Morag MacDougal's table into his hand.

"This," he said acidly, "is not a skinned shrivelfig. It is a former shrivelfig, now made useless by Ms. MacDougal's clumsiness."

"At least it's not just you," Padma whispered to Draco.

"No, just mostly," Draco whispered back. "Help me! I don't want to poison you!"

"I don't want to be poisoned! Here, swap me roots," Padma said, trading with him and quickly helping him to dump her perfectly sliced roots into his cauldron. She efficiently re-cut his roots and threw them into her own cauldron, then turned to skinning her shrivelfig. Draco had already added his and was stirring it, a worried expression on his face.

"Is it supposed to be pink?" he asked.

"I don't know! I need a rat spleen," Padma said. She leaned forward and tapped Justin Finch-Fletchley on the shoulder. "Justin, got a spare spleen?"

"Take two, they're small!" he said, offering her two small, pinkish objects on the tip of his knife. She plucked one off, grimacing, and added it to her potion. It glowed neon green and she breathed a sigh of relief.

By the end of class, however, Draco's potion was still bright pink, no matter how much work he put into making it turn green, up to and including adding an enormous helping of parsley. The pink absorbed it all.

"Shall we, then?" Snape asked, ladling out a cupful of the horrible liquid. He offered it to Padma, who took it with a grimace. "If even Patil cannot teach you how to make a proper potion, Malfoy..."

But he stopped then, because Padma had already tipped her head back and downed the whole cupful in two long gulps. She set the cup down on the table and glared up at Snape defiantly.

Then, miraculously, she began to shrink. When she nearly slipped off the stool, Snape relented and offered her a small flask from his pocket. A sip restored her to normal size, and she held it out to return it to him, smirking.

"The next time," Snape growled, "it had better be the proper colour, Malfoy."

"Yes, sir," Draco said gratefully, bolting from the room. And, as it turned out, right into Neville.

"Wotcha!" Neville said. "Come on, let's get lunch and bugger off. Harry wants to sit outside."

"Fine by me," Padma said, sticking her tongue out. "That tasted foul, Draco."

"What did?" Neville inquired, leading them towards the Great Hall.

"Snape made me drink Draco's Shrinking Solution to make Draco feel bad about bollocksing it up," Padma said.

"LEECH JUICE!" Draco shouted, stopping suddenly. "That's what I forgot!"

Neville slapped his forehead. Padma shook her head despairingly.

They shoved sandwiches and a few pieces of fruit into their pockets and went in search of Harry, who was sitting on the steps of a side entrance that looked out over the Quidditch pitch.

"He's in a foul mood," Neville said as they approached. "We got to hex a boggart today – "

"Really?" Padma asked excitedly.

"Yeah, and Remus didn't let him have a go. Harry thinks Remus was coddling him."

"He was," Harry said resentfully, as the rest of them joined him on the steps. "It isn't fair, him treating me like I'm not big enough to face a Boggart on my own."

"You didn't do very well with that Dementor on the train," Neville pointed out. The other three glared at him. "Well, it's true. And you know Remus, he's practically your *dad*, Harry. Ted'd be really uncomfortable seeing me mucking about with boggarts."

"It still isn't fair," Harry sulked.

"Well, don't dwell on it," Padma advised. "What've you got this afternoon, Charms?"

"Yeah," Harry said. "Hey, Draco, are you going to have extra Transfiguration again? Or can you break away long enough to bat some Bludgers around?"

"Today?" Draco asked, alarmed.

"When better? Tryouts are on Sunday," Harry said. "Towler said he'd give you some tips, too."

"It'll have to be after dinner," Draco replied.

"That's fine, Towler has class all afternoon anyway. I'll get the key to the ball trunk from Flint," Harry said, looking marginally happier now that they were talking about Quidditch. "We can play until it gets dark. It's dead easy, you'll get the hang of it in no time."

"Need to borrow a broomstick," Draco said.

"There's plenty in the shed, you can use one of the spares. If you get on the team you can give Sirius some money and he'll buy you one," Harry said. Draco gave him an uncertain look, but he didn't really object. He was good at hitting a ball with a stick, after all, and that ought to be useful somehow. Draco had the uneasy sense that he was not always as useful as he might be – oh, not with Harry and his friends, but in a general way. He had the dim idea that as a pureblood he was supposed to be safeguarding the heritage and defending the culture and all that. He just hadn't the faintest clue how.

"Moony? Moony, are you there?"

Sirius emerged from the Floo in Remus' rooms, dusting ash from his sleeves and waving a rolled up parchment scroll importantly. Remus ought to be in his rooms by now; dinner was long since over and he didn't have tutoring on Mondays. At first he didn't see him and wondered if some faculty business had distracted him, but then he saw the tall, slouching figure leaning against the frame of one of the wide windows that looked out on the Quidditch pitch.

"Come here," Remus said quietly, and Sirius obeyed, giving him a curious look. Remus pointed at a couple of kids throwing around Quidditch balls on the pitch and offered Sirius a pair of omnioculars. He took them and twisted the little brass rings until the kids came into sharper focus – not just any kids, but Harry and another Slytherin boy, Padma, Neville, Draco and one or two others in Hufflepuff yellow. All of them but Neville and one of the Hufflepuffs were on broomsticks, dodging and darting around the pitch. For a moment, Sirius felt a desperate squeeze of nostalgia on his heart. James had flown like that.

"How long have they been at it?" he asked, forgetting the scroll he'd hastily shoved in his pocket.

"About half an hour. As far as I can tell, Harry's giving a lesson."

"Really?" Sirius asked, focusing on Harry. It didn't look like he was snitch-chasing, that much was true. "Well, I expect nothing less."

Remus laughed. "I suppose so. See, he's got Neville and that other boy, Eric something, fielding Bludgers on the ground. Padma's throwing the Quaffle around with the other Hufflepuff and Harry and the Slytherin – Towler, he's a Slytherin Beater, I'm told – are showing Draco how to bat Bludgers."

"What does Harry know about batting Bludgers?"

"Not much, but he's practically an encyclopedia of flight dodges," Remus said. "Look at them go. Absolutely unafraid of death or dismemberment. When was the last time you saw professional Quidditch players play like that?"

"Never have done," Sirius replied, handing the omnioculars back to Remus. "They're a bit raw for the big leagues, Moony."

"Yes – but they're fearless. Reminds me of you and James," Remus said, peering through the omnioculars.

"Well, come on then, let's go say hullo," Sirius said. "Oh! Wait a second."

He dug the scroll out of his pocket and unrolled it. "Sign here," he said, pointing to a blank at the bottom. "It's the deed to the house."

Remus skimmed the document. "I suppose you had Llewellyn Payne draw up the contract?" he asked.

"Old bird made it as airtight as possible," Sirius said, summoning a quill. Remus took it and signed, neatly, adding the date. "Splendid. I've moved in already. I'm going to paint it tomorrow."

"No idle hands for you, hm?" Remus asked. Sirius put the scroll on the mantel above the fireplace. "Where are we going, again?"

"Down to the pitch! Come on, I'll go as Padfoot, there'll be no harm done," Sirius said, shoving Remus towards the door.

In less than ten minutes, they arrived on the field, a big black dog chasing low-flying broomsticks and a brown-haired professor who hung back from the crowd, watching with detached interest – except when Harry cut things a little too fine. Then his fingers tightened into worried fists before forcibly relaxing again.

By the time Harry landed, Padma and Neville were lounging on the grass with Padfoot and the sun was well low on the horizon.

"Good flying," Remus offered as Harry trudged past him towards the storage shed.

"I'm still mad at you," Harry said over his shoulder, stomping off. Remus blinked and glanced at Padfoot, who blinked back and jerked his head in Harry's direction. Remus took the hint and followed Harry into the little shed they kept their broomsticks and equipment in.

"Care to explain why?" he asked, leaning against the doorway. The others brushed past him and went to put their broomsticks away; Harry dawdled and double-checked the lock on the game-ball trunk until they'd gone again.

"Man to man?" Harry asked. Remus fought down a smile.

"Sure. No Professor Lupin here, just Remus and Harry," he replied. "What'd I do?"

"You're a rotten Professor," Harry accused.

"You didn't enjoy the lesson today? Harry – "

"You didn't let me, did you? Cut me off before I could even get a crack at the Boggart," Harry exploded. "I didn't expect to be treated specially, but you're not my dad in class, you know. How am I supposed to learn anything if you don't let me try stuff?"

"Is that what this is about? You think I...spoiled you?" Remus asked, perplexed.

"Yeah! I wanted to try that spell!"

"Harry – " Remus rubbed his eyes. "Does that sound like me?"

"No! And that's why I think you're a rotten – "

"A rotten professor, right. Come on, Harry, it was one class and that's not why I did it."

"Then why?" Harry demanded. "Everyone'll say you're treating me special."

"Okay, okay." Remus made a calming gesture with his hands, palms down. "Right. Harry, I have no doubt that you can handle a Boggart and I'd be happy to have you give Riddikulus a try in private, okay? But you – have a lot in your past. I was concerned that your boggart would cause a panic."

At least Harry was quiet now, listening intently. Remus took a breath and continued.

"I don't pretend I know your mind as well as you do, you're growing up. I know that," he said. "But I've raised you with Sirius for the last five years. I know a little bit about what you think and feel. I assumed – maybe I'm wrong – that your Boggart would be Peter Pettigrew. Or, god forbid, Lord

Voldemort. I couldn't risk the rest of the class panicking because of it, Harry. I should have warned you sooner, but it didn't occur to me until class had begun."

He saw Harry staring at him and crossed his arms, almost defensively. "I wasn't trying to spoil you, Harry. I was worried about how little you're spoiled, really."

"That's still a rotten reason," Harry said sullenly.

"Am I wrong?" Remus asked mildly.

"No – yes – well, I'll never know, will I?" Harry asked. "Nobody ran away when Neville had the Dementor."

"That's true, but most of them still don't recognise Dementors."

Harry glared at him. Remus sighed.

"I'm sorry, Harry. Do you *want* a private conference with a boggart?"

"S the principle of the thing," Harry muttered. Remus waited, uncertain what to do next. Finally, Harry scowled and licked his hand, offering it to Remus. "Truce."

"Truce," Remus replied, gravely licking his palm and shaking Harry's hand. "Promise not to do it again."

"Better not," Harry said.

"We are a spitfire, aren't we? Are you always this catty with your professors?" Remus asked, wiping his hand on his sleeve as they left the shed.

"Only the ones that underestimate me."

"Low blow! I thought we called truce!"

Padfoot bounded across the grass and knocked Harry over before he could reply, but Harry's smile came pretty easily, so he resolved not to worry overmuch.

Something told him this was just the precursor to Harry's teenage years; from here out it would only get harder.

The day of Quidditch tryouts dawned early for Harry's foursome, with Draco up at dawn from nerves. It didn't go smoothly, either.

Sunday breakfast was a generally informal affair, carried out more or less all morning as late-sleepers wandered in and a few seventh-years had a snack before going to bed. Fewer people bothered about table rules, so as long as Percy and the Slytherin prefects weren't around – or weren't paying attention – Harry and Neville went mainly unmolested while breakfasting at the Hufflepuff table.

"Listen, can't we just – go do one last practice or something?" Draco said, fidgeting on the bench.

"Eat your toast," Padma commanded.

"The captains are probably already out there," Harry said. "It's a bit hopeless to practice now."

"But my forehand – "

"It's fine," Neville said. "Um. When you hit the ball, anyway."

"Thanks," Draco muttered. "But I can still back out, right? I mean, I don't put my name on any list until I get there, so if I wanted to..."

"Don't you want to play Quidditch?" Harry asked.

"Well..." Draco frowned. "I should, right?"

"Should?" Padma asked.

"Team glory and all that. And it'd be nice....Harry has friends in all the other classes because he plays. And I like hitting Bludgers, it's just...everyone'll be watching," he said, squirming in pre-emptive embarrassment.

"Short memories," Harry replied. "Do you remember all the stupid moves I made last year?"

"No," Draco said sullenly.

"But you remember that one brilliant dive, don't you?"

"Sure, I suppose..."

"There you are then. It'll be good for you. Show the school you're just as good as anyone. Because you are, really."

Draco was about to reply when one of the other Hufflepuffs at the table (most Hufflepuffs ate breakfast in a timely manner, regardless of the day) leaned across and offered him the Daily Prophet.

"Better read it," he said gruffly, without a hint of the malice that a Slytherin might have used. Draco picked it up even as Padma said, "See? Everyone's watching you anyway..."

Draco's fingers tightened on the newspaper. He laid it flat on the table so that the others could see.

MUGGLE REPORTS LUCIUS MALFOY NEAR HOGSMEADE

WP - A Muggle woman has reported seeing Lucius Malfoy yesterday evening near the magically shrouded village of Hogsmeade in Scotland. Unaware that the Azkaban fugitive is a wizard, she contacted a Muggle "hot line" which has been set up on the chance Muggles might encounter Malfoy.

The Muggle claims to have seen a 'filthy blond man in a bathrobe hiding in the trees' outside Iobair, a Muggle village located on the far side of the Forbidden Forest from Hogsmeade.

The Ministry of Magic was notified and has responded, although there is currently no evidence of Malfoy's supposed presence in or near the Forbidden Forest. Aurors say it is likely the woman heard a news report about the dangerous Dark wizard and imagined seeing him.

"The Forest is patrolled not only by Dementors by several creatures potentially even more dangerous to wizards," reports Kingsley Shacklebolt, who is spearheading the effort to locate Malfoy. "There is no need for alarm."

The Forbidden Forest encompasses much of the land south of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, dividing it from Hogsmeade. It also serves to protect Hogsmeade from Muggle settlements such as Iobair, which have cropped up to the east in the last three hundred years.

"I know Mr. Shacklebolt!" Padma exclaimed. "He gave the examination for my...well, you know. And he's really good, Draco, I'm sure if he says it, it must be true."

"Or he's trying not to cause a parental panic," Harry whispered to Neville.

Draco looked doubtful, but he hadn't heard the whisper -- and, in the grand thirteen-year-old scheme of things, the immediate trauma of Quidditch tryouts far overshadowed the vague, distant trauma of his father being mentioned in the newspaper.

"What time are tryouts again?" he asked, glancing at Harry.

"Nine o'clock. Come on, we might as well go," Harry said with a sigh.

Down on the field, the Captains were just setting out the practice pads and broomsticks for the hopeful applicants. Towler and Pucey were sitting in the stands, yawning and looking annoyed at having to be out of bed before noon.

Harry left Draco and the others sitting on a sideline bench and went to say hello to Marcus Flint, who was having a heated debate with the other Captains.

"Listen, we have the most players to recruit for, we should go first," Flint was saying as Harry approached.

"That's crap, you should go last so we can get ours out of the way," Oliver Wood replied. "Wotcha, Pipsqueak."

"Hi Oliver," Harry said.

"Good you're here, Potter, go keep Towler and Pucey awake," Marcus said. "Listen, I didn't come down here at eight oh-bloody-early-clock to wait around all day while you poufs piffle with your broomsticks."

"There's no need for that kind of language," said the Ravenclaw Captain, Ellen Dawlish.

"We could draw lots," suggested Cedric Diggory. "Luck of the draw."

"Why don't you double up?" Harry asked. All four of them turned to him, surprised.

"It speaks!" Ellen said, grinning. "What d'you mean, double-up, Pipsqueak?"

"Well, we've got to get the most players," Harry said. "You're only looking for a Chaser, and Hufflepuff needs new Beaters, right? And Oliver only

wants a Seeker."

"One new Beater, one Chaser," Cedric corrected. "What's your point?"

"We'll form up teams and do a few mock matches. Slytherin versus all comers. That way we get a chance to go through all our prospectives, and –"

"– and show off," Oliver said.

"It's tryouts, who cares?" Harry asked. "And you lot get as much time as you need to pit your people against the current Cup champions."

He glanced at Marcus, hoping he wasn't overstepping his bounds, but the older boy seemed to at least be considering the idea.

"Well, it seems sensible enough to me," Dawlish said. Oliver nodded agreement. "Ced?"

"Fine by me," Cedric said. "Let's make the roll lists."

Harry caught Cedric's sleeve as the others wandered away. "Diggory, I need to talk with you."

Cedric smiled easily at him. "About your pal Malfoy, right? I'm not going to make him my new Beater just because he's your friend, Pipsqueak."

Harry had the sinking sensation he was never going to outlive the nickname they'd given him in first year. "I don't want you to pick him if he's not best. I just thought you should know if I were you, I'd take him. He's a good flyer. Watch his dodges."

"Okay, Potter. But I want you up in the stands, not helping him from the pitch."

"Sure," Harry said, retiring in triumph. He jogged over to the equipment shed and unlocked his broomstick from its stand, carrying it out to the pitch.

"Here," he said to Draco. "It's faster than the practice brooms. Couple of other students have their own broomsticks, you might as well use mine."

Draco looked at it as if it might bite him. "What if I crash it?"

Harry shrugged. "Then I'll get Sirius to buy me a Firebolt. TAKE IT, Malfoy, and stop cringing."

Fire flashed in Draco's eyes for just a second, but a second was all Harry was asking for. He grasped the Nimbus and reached for the pile of greaves nearby. Harry nodded curtly and gestured for Neville and Padma to come with him to the stands.

"Harry!" Towler waved him over, rolling his eyes at Pucey when Neville and Padma came too. "Come help us make fun of the losers."

"Little Cricket's going out for Chaser, isn't 'ee a snookum?" Pucey said, pointing to where Colin Creevey was putting on a pair of gloves much too huge for him.

"He'll never make it," Harry said. "He's too small, even for a Seeker. 'Nother few years, maybe."

"Malfoy all ready to knock them around?"

"I hope," Harry said truthfully.

"No more training with him once we start practice, mind," Towler said. "Can't go giving away all our secrets. Flint hasn't even mentioned a new playbook yet."

"There's still time," Harry said. "Ah, looks like it's starting..."

Other students were arriving in the stands as the prospective players kicked off from the ground, some with a bit more difficulty than others. Draco seemed startled at the speed with which the Nimbus rose, but he covered it well, tossing the bat from hand to hand while he waited for the signal to start.

"Oh god, he's going to drop the bat," Neville said.

"He's a sure hand," said a new voice, and they all twisted around to see Remus and Sirius standing in the row behind them, hands in their pockets, looking for all the world like well-grown seventh years.

"Sirius!" Harry said, startled. Sirius winked at him. "What're you doing here?"

"Came through the Floo. Seems a shame to spend the year in Hogsmeade and not see any Quidditch, and I thought Malfoy might like a friendly face," he said, sitting down. He offered his hand to the other Slytherin players, which probably took all the tact he had. "Sirius Black," he said.

"Adrian Pucey," Pucey replied, shaking his hand and looking faintly awed. "That's Towler."

"Martin Towler, sir," Towler said, equally wide-eyed. "I play your position."

"So I hear," Sirius said. Remus had wandered over to a knot of Gryffindors across the aisle and was pointing out one of the Gryffindor hopefuls. "Didn't think anyone would even remember I played at school."

"You nearly killed Hammerhead Gens in the seventy-five House Cup!" Towler exclaimed. Sirius looked rueful. "Knocked the snitch right out of his fingers, they had to have Kennilworthy Whisp himself mediate the call!"

"Who won?" Harry asked.

"Don't you even know?" Towler asked, surprised.

"I live with him," Harry said with a grin. "He's the guy who leaves his laundry on the sofa, not the Quidditch idol."

"Gryffindor won, but nobody was really satisfied," Sirius said. "I mean, we felt like it wasn't a fair win if people disagreed, and Ravenclaw felt like it wasn't a fair win at all anyway."

"So what'd you do?" Padma asked.

"Snuck out of dormitory after hours with pretty nearly the whole student body and had a second game," Sirius said, savouring the memory. "Dumbledore had to punish us – everyone involved, Detention was so big they had to hold it in the Great Hall – but he let us finish the match first. Gryffindor won fair the second time and we shook hands over it with Ravenclaw."

"Hey, there he goes!" Neville said, pointing to the pitch. Draco was dodging in and out of a complicated play, riding wing on a Ravenclaw would-be Chaser who was being dogged by a Bludger. He leaned forward, took both hands off the broomstick, swung forehand and smacked it straight into a knot of Seekers following the Snitch. Harry and Sirius cheered loudly.

"How's he doing?" Remus asked, strolling back over to sit with Sirius behind the others.

"Brilliantly, really," Sirius said. "What were you up to?"

"Making illegal bets with students over who's going to be Gryffindor Seeker," Remus replied easily. "My money's on Ginevra Weasley, personally."

"Little Ginny? The girl who used to pour paint in Harry's hair?" Sirius asked. "Is that her out there?"

"Yep. She's only a second-year, but she's clever and she hasn't any bad habits yet. Weasleys are practically born on broomsticks anyway, you remember Charlie Weasley. Wood's a fool if he doesn't pick her."

"Betting with students," Harry asked. "Bad form."

"Well, if I win they have to write me a paper each on magical ethics, and if they win I've got to deliver a lecture on sex magic for any interested fourth-years and above," Remus said complacently. "Either way, they learn something."

"Sex magic?" asked Towler and Pucey in unison. Sirius sniggered. "Will that be allowed?" Pucey continued.

"Oh, I imagine I'll have to get parental permit slips from anyone who wants to attend, but I don't see why it shouldn't be. If you're allowed to dissect birds in Divination and rats in Potions, I don't think sex ought to be off limits. Besides, I'm sure Ginny will get the spot."

"Oof, there goes Cedric," Harry said, pointing to where the Hufflepuff Captain had grabbed his own broom and taken off to break up a nasty scrum between a couple of Chasers.

"He's rather good looking, isn't he?" Padma asked, leaning on the railing.

"Too old for you," Harry replied. "And too tall to be a really great Seeker anyway."

"There's more to people than Quidditch positions, Harry," Padma said.

"News to me," Sirius teased.

Just then, Draco darted between two other Hufflepuffs, who were both angling for a Bludger that was coming in a high, easy arc towards one goal. He cut close past Cedric and looked like he was going to collide with Ginny for a split second.

They heard him shout "Keep going!" at Ginny, who leaned forward on her broomstick and stretched out her left hand. Draco passed just above and to her left, pulled the Nimbus into a flat 180 spin, and brought his bat up just as the Bludger the others had already hit would have collided with her.

The impact of the spin, combined with the speed of the ball, knocked him backwards and he flailed, hooking his knee and one hand around the end of the Nimbus. Cedric blew a whistle loud and everyone stopped; even the Bludgers dropped flat to the ground.

In the silence, Ginny shouted "I got it!", holding up the Snitch triumphantly. Draco was still grappling with his broomstick. Cedric rose fast, grasping

the collar of the other boy's robes and pulling him up onto the hovering Nimbus again. He patted Draco on the back, said something the spectators in the stands couldn't hear, and descended slowly to speak with Oliver Wood. When he'd touched down, he blew the whistle again and the Bludgers immediately rose, play resuming as before.

"Damn," Harry said, as Draco drifted out of play and slowly over to the stands. "He must have kicked him off."

"Stupid," Sirius said. "That was a bloody good play. He knew where the Bludger was going to be before it was even there."

Draco was almost level with the stands now, his face blank, hands white-knuckle gripping his broomstick.

"What'd he say?" Harry asked hesitantly. Draco gave him an empty look.

"He said I'm in," he told them, as if he himself didn't believe it. "He said, *good play. You're in.* "

Sure enough, the rest of the Hufflepuff Beater hopefuls were dropping to the grass as Cedric called them down one by one. Harry and Padma helped Draco off his broomstick and over the edge of the stands, Harry pulling the Nimbus after him. Sirius slapped him on the back in congratulations.

"Now you get to do that," Harry said, pointing at the still-scrimmaging players, "Every week!"

"Well, hopefully not the falling-off-your-broomstick part," Neville added.

"Brilliant, Draco!" Padma said. Even Towler nodded professionally to Draco as one Beater to another.

It took Draco five or six minutes to come down from the adrenaline rush, but when he did, a huge grin split his face.

"I'm *in!*" he said triumphantly.

Laocoon's Children: The Fugitive from Azkaban

Chapter 9

At one point in this chapter I have used dialogue or description verbatim from canon. This is intentional, as Laocoon's Children does run parallel to the books. In this instance, a portion of the Dark Arts class is lifted with minor alterations from canon.

Also, In the interests of DRAMAH, I have moved the full moon slightly, from September 30th to October 2nd. I can do that, 'cause I'm the Author. :D

After the excitement of the Quidditch tryouts ended, school seemed to pick up in earnest, though it was an unseasonably hot September and most of the students would rather have been outside. They dreamed of cramming in a few last hours of freedom before the autumn rains began to set in, but the professors kept a tight rein.

Remus' classes continued to be the highlight of the week, and not just for the third-years; everyone seemed to be enjoying them, almost looking forward to them. They didn't face down the Boggart again (he'd been permanently destroyed by some of Remus' fifth-years) but they quickly moved on to Red Caps and Kappas, nasty creatures both and only dispatched through defensive spells. Remus promised he'd stop infringing on Care of Magical Creatures soon enough, but nobody minded; after the hippogriff attacked Draco, Hagrid had reduced the third-years to flobberworms, immensely boring creatures he was growing for Professor Snape's potions storeroom.

Severus found himself nearly as restless as his students, though much better at hiding it, of course. He would not have admitted for the world that he actually missed Dora but he did confess to McGonagall, with some perplexity, that for the first time he was finding the silence of his rooms oppressive in the evenings.

"Perhaps you're feeling pent up down in the Dungeons," she replied knowingly. "It is a rather monastic life for a young man like yourself. Where is Nymphadora these days, anyway?"

He was so aggrieved by her absence it didn't occur to him until later to question the propriety of the inquiry. "On the continent. She sends postcards," he added, annoyed.

"Oh yes! Dumbledore got one of her postcards to you by mistake, didn't he? The one with the -- "

"I'm surprised she isn't cited for sending obscenity through the mail!" Severus interrupted.

"I didn't think she'd written anything so terribly naughty on it -- "

"It was the front to which I was referring," Snape said sullenly.

"Dumbledore seemed very amused by it. I shouldn't worry if I were you. She's bound to be home soon," McGonagall said, patting his arm. "You can shout at her then."

They had been discussing it over tea after a Friday-evening staff meeting, and perhaps McGonagall had a little of the Sight herself -- or perhaps she was merely well-informed. The next morning, Severus woke up to a thump and a curse in his rooms. Instinct overriding common sense, he had thrown off the sheets and taken his wand from the nightstand before he even saw who it was.

"Is that a wand in your hand or are you just happy to see me?" Dora Tonks asked. She was covered in ash from head to foot and rubbing her elbow, which was turning red and starting to swell.

"What on earth?" he asked, not sure even what to demand first.

"You never changed the passcode on your floo," she said, gently pushing his wand-hand away and planting a sooty kiss on his nose. He narrowed his eyes at her.

"I didn't expect seven a.m. visits from the filthiest Auror of my acquaintance," he said, running a thumb down her forehead and showing her the black dust on it. "Have you been playing in the chimney?"

"I got lost," she complained. "I tripped getting in and my elbow bumped something and I ended up in some pub in Cockerham."

"Cockerham? Where in Hades is that?"

"Well you might ask!" she said. "It's a good thing I still had my robes on!"

He lifted an eyebrow. "Is there a reason, Auror Tonks, that you would not have your robes on while flooing into the private rooms of a Professor at Hogwarts School?"

She grinned and shrugged. One shoulder of her uniform robes slid down her arm, revealing what was definitely not standard-Auror-issue

underwear.

"You did miss me, didn't you?" she asked, kissing him. He brought one hand up to grasp the back of her neck, and touched the other -- still holding his wand -- to her bare arm.

"*Scourgify*," he said against her mouth, and she shrieked as the cleaning spell cascaded over her, raising goosebumps on her skin.

"You," she said damply, through a burst of soap suds, "know how to kill a mood, Severus Snape!"

"I'll ring for breakfast," he said calmly, kneeling on the hearth. "Denbigh! Large breakfast for two, heating charms!"

"I don't want breakfast!"

"You will," he said, and then added over his shoulder, "Especially as I doubt we'll be leaving the room all day."

She stopped halfway through rubbing her hair dry on her now-clean Auror's robe. "Oh?" she asked delicately. He accepted the breakfast tray from the fireplace, set it on the table near the hearth, and crossed to stand in front of her.

"Well," he said, kissing her, "once I'm finished *properly* saying hello, there's the matter of the postcards to clear up."

The same Saturday morning that Dora Tonks was thoroughly enjoying her homecoming, Remus Lupin was still ranting about the events of the night before.

"Moony, you're going to give yourself some kind of health problem," Sirius said, really and truly worried. He wasn't sure he had ever seen Remus sustain any kind of anger for any length of time, let alone nearly twelve hours.

"Well, then they'd have to call in my substitute even earlier!" Remus said, pacing angrily back and forth. He'd come home (such as it was at the moment) and paced all evening; he'd gone to bed and slept restlessly. Then he'd gotten up, made a terrible breakfast, and begun pacing again.

"I mean, how could he?" he exploded, stopping and turning to Sirius, spreading his arms wide. "Dumbledore, of all people. I told him I was handling it, I told him I'd leave notes..."

"Dumbledore does things his own way, always has," Sirius replied. He was still sore from all the fiddly little painting he'd had to do where charms wouldn't work, and tired from the interior work, pulling down the blue wallpaper and preparing the walls for painting. Plus there was unpacking to do and their bed still lacked a frame. He wondered if he could channel some of Remus' anger into helping him assemble some of the new furniture that had been delivered. "What did he say, exactly?"

"I said to him, Headmaster, I'm preparing my notes for the first full moon, I expect I'll be out Monday the fourth and back on Tuesday," Remus recited. "All I wanted to know was who was going to cover for me or if I needed to ask around and find someone myself."

"And he said?"

"He said there's no need, he was arranging a guest lecturer to handle my classes on Monday and Tuesday if necessary, and he'd have others throughout the year."

"Which is thoughtful of him," Sirius pointed out.

"Thoughtful! Sirius, he called the most viciously bigoted, small-minded -- "

"Did he actually call the Ministry and ask for someone? I thought you said -- "

"*Will you please be on my side for a minute!*" Remus shouted. Dobby, who had been trying to quietly and unobtrusively clear up the breakfast dishes, squeaked and disappeared under the sink. Sirius stared at Remus for a second, stunned, and then grinned. Remus let his shoulders slump and leaned on the kitchen counter.

"Sorry," he muttered.

"Don't be! This is all very healthy for you. I've been telling you all these years not to repress!" Sirius said, still grinning. "My fault, Moony. Yes, it's very wrong that your students are going to be placed at the mercy of a Ministry stooge, but I'm sure it's some kind of political move to get the Ministry off his back so that he can call interesting people the rest of the year."

"I think it's a conspiracy to make me come in and teach class. I mean -- I could, you know. I've been up and around the day after a good change before. I could teach class."

"Moony," Sirius said, standing up and walking to where he was leaning against the counter. He wrapped his arms around Remus' waist and kissed the back of his neck. "Go talk to Dumbledore. Shouting at me is fun, but isn't going to get you anywhere. Go shout at him for a bit. He'll be delighted, I promise."

"I can't shout at him, he's the Headmaster."

"And you're not a fifth-year anymore. Tell him you want to choose the guest lecturers for the rest of the year. I'll come and lecture if you like."

"On what?" Remus asked, distracted.

"I'm a Black, we practically invented the Dark Arts. Get Andi to come talk, she can tell about cleaning out Grimmauld Place."

Remus sighed. "I should just let him do it. He probably won't pick an entire year's worth of idiots."

"Remus."

"What?" Remus groaned. "Fine, fine. I'll talk to him on Monday."

"Why not now? He's probably at breakfast."

"Sirius -- "

"No better time to make anyone agree to anything than at a meal. Catch him with his mouth full, then he can't say no."

Remus looked at him suspiciously. "Is that why Harry always asks my permission for something while I'm eating?"

Sirius looked entirely too innocent to actually *be* innocent. Remus rubbed his forehead, then went to the front door and pulled on his shoes.

"Do I look all right?" he asked.

"You look fine for a Saturday morning. Go," Sirius replied. "And if Severus Snape is there, tread on his toes for me."

"You have to stop being mean to him, he's making this new potion for me and we're very grateful," Remus said, taking down a pinch of floo powder and lighting the pile of dry kindling in the fireplace with a flick of his wand.

"Good luck," Sirius said. Remus threw the powder into the floo, climbed in, and announced "*My rooms!*"

Sirius, grateful for a few minutes' silence, fished Dobby out from under the sink and sent him to Hogsmeade for some decent sausages, then settled down with tea and a book in the only fully assembled chair in the bare, box-filled living room.

When Dobby returned after ten minutes, he was still engrossed in his book and ate while reading. After twenty minutes he was mildly concerned; at thirty minutes downright alarmed. He was about to floo into Hogwarts himself and demand to know what they'd done with Moony when Remus reappeared in a cloud of ash.

"How did it go?" Sirius asked, trying to sound calm.

"He made me have a bowl of oatmeal with those little sugar dinosaur eggs in it," Remus said, throwing himself down into a chair. He looked a little more relaxed, at any rate. "He said if I wrote up a proposal for the rest of the year he'd have the board of governors sign off on it, as long as the speakers had reasonable merit. He did say you weren't allowed to lecture on pranks."

"He knows me too well," Sirius said gravely. "But that's good news, right?"

"Yeah, I suppose. I mean, yes it is. But, you know..." Remus leaned back in his chair and stared at the ceiling. "Basically, he made me eat a proper breakfast and gave me homework. I'm never actually going to be a grownup, apparently."

Sirius laughed and set his book down, resting his arms on the table.

"So," he said, "let's plot who you want to ask to lecture."

Remus' suspicions were confirmed the day he started the Wolfsbane Potion.

"Is all this really necessary?" he asked, shivering shirtlessly in the Hogwarts hospital wing. Madam Pomfrey was making a detailed examination of his scars while he listed off everything he'd eaten in the past two days.

"That depends," Snape remarked, a charmed quill hovering over a piece of parchment floating in midair. "Do you wish to receive the Wolfsbane potion or not?"

Dora's presence in Scotland -- he'd seen her around Hogsmeade -- seemed to have done little for Snape's disposition, though apparently he was grading his students slightly easier.

"Yes," Remus answered.

"Then you will please inform me what you had for dinner this evening."

"A rare steak and some of those marinated carrots. A couple of dinner rolls, a small bowl of sherbert, and two glasses of wine," Remus recited, vaguely annoyed.

"Does that constitute an increase in appetite from your usual?" Snape inquired.

"Yes."

"Is this habitual?"

Remus rolled his eyes. "Yes. About a week before the moon I tend to start eating more, particularly rare meat."

"Your weight is listed as...eighty-one point six kilograms. Is that normal?"

"Within reason, yes."

"Mmh." The quill scratched on the parchment. "There are dietary restrictions accompanying the potion."

"Permanent?" Remus asked, looking vaguely worried.

"No. After your evening meal you are not to consume refined sugar, acidic fruit juice, or more than two glasses of water. Once you have consumed the potion, you may sip water; do not consume any food for at least thirty minutes."

Remus saluted. Snape looked at him sourly.

"The measurement is precise, so please drink it all," he said, walking around the bed to where a set of brass scales, a goblet, and a small cauldron stood. He placed the cauldron on the scales, adjusted the weights in the other cup, and began to ladle a smoking liquid into it. The scales clanked slightly; he picked up the goblet and offered it to Remus.

"Severus, I know this is troublesome and I just wanted to say again that I'm -- oh *god* ," Remus said, nearly spitting his first sip back into the cup. "Is it *supposed* to taste like second-hand bile?"

Snape looked at him impassively. "Bile *is* one of the ingredients," he said, deadpan.

"Wonderful," Remus said, throwing his head back and downing it in two large gulps. He covered his mouth, winced, and set the goblet down carefully. It was still smoking.

"Sugar makes it useless," Snape continued, picking it up.

"I do appreciate it, you know," Remus said, turning around as Snape crossed back to the cauldron again. "Bile-flavour and everything. If it works, it'll be..." he trailed off haplessly. It was difficult to explain, especially to someone as controlled as Severus Snape, how horrifying the loss of control, the loss of *memory* always was.

"I shall expect a full report on its effect as soon as possible after sunrise on the third of October," Snape said.

"I'm generally asleep after a full moon sunrise, but I'll do my best," Remus replied. "Thank you, Severus."

Snape did not say "You're welcome," but he didn't scowl as Remus dressed and departed, which he supposed was a step in the right direction.

The morning of October fourth dawned remarkably rainy, and Harry wondered whether Remus and Sirius had even been able to venture outside for the full moon. They did all right indoors so long as Padfoot was around, that much he knew, but the new potion Professor Snape was brewing for Remus was an unknown quantity. He hoped they were both okay, and tried to reassure himself that he'd have heard if they weren't.

Remus hadn't told the class he was going to be gone that day, probably because he thought there was an even chance he might still make it in. Harry didn't see him at breakfast, however, and knew with a sinking heart that they were going to have a substitute.

He'd asked Remus what they were going to be doing in class if Remus wasn't there, but Remus had smiled frustratingly and replied, "If you really don't want to be treated any differently, Harry, I can't tell you. I wish I could, believe me -- I wish I could *warn* you. But if nothing else...it'll be a good test of your critical thinking skills."

And with that enigmatic remark, he'd gone off to Hogsmeade for the weekend.

"Who do you think it'll be?" Neville asked, as they made their way down the corridor towards Defence class. "You never know, it might be Dora!"

"I don't think Remus would be as upset about it as he was if it were Dora," Harry answered. "Whoever it is, he doesn't like them much."

"Cornelius Fudge!" Neville laughed.

"If he's teaching our Defence class I'll laugh in his face," Harry replied. Parvati Patil and Hermione Granger caught up with them at that point.

"Did you hear?" Hermione said to Neville.

"Hear what?" Neville asked.

"Someone from the Ministry's teaching Professor Lupin's class today! He's sick," she added.

"Never," Harry drawled.

"I hope it isn't serious," Parvati said.

"Parvati thinks Professor Lupin is dreamy," Neville told Harry. Parvati hit him in the shoulder. "Ow!"

"All the Gryffindor girls do," she said. "Even Hermione."

"I do not!" Hermione said, but she blushed.

They slowed as they approached the Defence classroom, Harry putting a finger to his lips and poking his head around the doorway cautiously. At first he didn't see anyone; then some of the shadows in one corner resolved themselves into a stout, wobbly sort of shape.

A soft, fluttery, high-pitched voice spoke. "Come in, young man, do come in."

Harry glanced at the others, shrugged, and strode into the classroom, sitting in the back -- far from his usual spot -- and slinging his bag over the back of his chair. Hermione and Parvati, curiosity overcoming them, sat down in front. Neville sat across the aisle from Harry, close enough to pass notes without being close enough that the teacher would immediately separate them.

His eyes adjusting to the unusually dim light, Harry was finally able to make out a figure and a face for their new substitute. After a moment's consideration he decided that "toad" was probably a good description, though that might be an insult to nice toads everywhere.

She was a short, stout woman with a broad and flabby face, no neck to speak of and a wide, almost slack-jawed mouth. Her large, close-set eyes bulged slightly under hair that was pulled tightly back into curls on the top of her head, tied with a black velvet bow. She wore a fluffy pink cardigan as well, and a ruffled pink skirt that would have looked more appropriate on someone around nine years old.

Other students began to arrive, and she greeted the more hesitant ones in the same oddly girlish tone. Surprisingly, the last person to arrive, in a knot of Gryffindors, was Albus Dumbledore.

"Good morning, ladies and gentlemen," he said, striding up to the front. His clear, confident voice was a relief after ten minutes of the woman's cooing. "Unfortunately, Professor Lupin is ill and cannot be with us today. However, in his place I have arranged for a very...unique substitute. Ms. Dolores Umbridge -- "

"Hem, hem," said the woman behind him. He turned to her, curiously.

"I am Dolores Jane Umbridge," she said, stepping forward, "Senior Undersecretary to the Minister for Magic, Cornelius Fudge."

"Just so," Dumbledore said drily. "And she has come here today to speak to you about the dangers of magical beasts, which I understand Professor Lupin is currently reviewing with you. I hope you will all give her the respect and attention she deserves, and show her the true spirit of inquiry for which Hogwarts School is so well-known."

With that cryptic statement and a very slight smile on his face, he turned and glided serenely away. The entire class of Slytherin and Gryffindor third-years stared with unabashed amazement at the only human being they'd ever seen interrupt Albus Dumbledore on a technicality.

"Well," she said. "This is nice. Good morning!"

A few people mumbled some form of greeting in reply; most were too amazed to speak.

"Tut! That won't do, now, will it? I should like you, please, to reply 'Good morning, Miss Umbridge'. One more time. Good *morning!*"

"Good morning, Miss Umbridge," the class echoed back at her.

"There, now, that wasn't too difficult, was it? Wands away please," she added, and Harry rolled his eyes at Neville, tucking his wand up his sleeve and taking out his inkpot.

"Now, I understand from an examination of Professor Lupin's notes that he has been educating you on the dangers of magical creatures, although

his curriculum is, I may say, not in keeping with current Ministry policies on the subject..."

Harry bridled at the silent criticism of Remus. Hermione Granger's hand shot up.

"Questions at the end," Umbridge said dismissively.

"It's about Ministry policy," Hermione said.

"Stand when you address me, if you please."

Hermione obediently stood up. "With all due respect, Madam Umbridge -- "

"Miss Umbridge. And you are...?"

Harry grinned. Score one for Granger and Gryffindor.

"Hermione Granger, Miss Umbridge. The Ministry doesn't set Hogwarts policy, Headmaster Dumbledore does."

"For now," Umbridge said coolly. "Be seated, Miss Granger."

"Ms. Granger," Hermione corrected, seating herself primly. Umbridge decided to ignore it, taking out her wand and pointing it at a piece of chalk, which leapt into the air.

"I am sure Professor Lupin's approach to 'education' is thoroughly unique," she continued disapprovingly. "But I am here to present the Ministry's views on the topics of..."

The chalk began to write on the board, outlining a short list:

1. *Classification of dangerous creatures*
2. *Identification of dangerous creatures*
3. *Various situations in which defensive magic may safely be used*
4. *Proper authorities to notify*

It was an extremely tedious lecture, complete with fuzzy black-and-white slides whose occupants themselves looked bored, barely moving in their frames. A couple of Slytherins tried to even the score by raising their hands at various points, but Umbridge pointedly ignored them. First they learned about the X-classification system, which Remus had gone over on the first day of class just to make sure they were aware of it: how various animals were rated as threats, from a single X to five for the most dangerous creatures like dragons and acromantulae. Then they were shown lots of pictures of low-risk animals and the various people who had discovered, and sometimes been killed, by them.

Harry didn't really pay much attention until she reached the end of her second point. Then he sat up so suddenly that he woke Neville, who was dozing across from him.

"The werewolf is considered a five-X rated beast," she was saying, indicating a slide of a man in mid-transformation. Harry recognised it; he'd seen it in a book years before. "There are two methods of detecting a werewolf, one for when it is in what is known as Mortal form, and one for when it is in wolf form. The five methods of detecting it in wolf form are -- "

Harry's hand shot up.

"Yes, Mr...?"

"Potter, ma'am," Harry said, standing. He fought down a laugh; he was tempted to ask her to call him Miss Potter. "The five methods of differentiating a werewolf from an ordinary wolf are in the shape of the snout, elongated in a werewolf, the colour of the pupils, deep yellow, a significant tuft on the tip of the tail, the enlarged size of the paws, and the length of the incisors."

She gave a pleased sort of whistling sigh.

"Very good, Mr. Potter! What a star pupil you are. And can you tell me the methods of differentiating a werewolf in mortal form?"

"You mean human form?" Harry asked.

"When they appear to be human," she replied.

"Doesn't matter," Harry said. "Werewolves aren't dangerous as humans."

Umbridge shook her head, giggling. "Mr. Potter, such naivete! Why -- "

"I suppose you could count not being able to get a job as a way of differentiation," Harry added. She froze. The entire class seemed to grow tense. "And having to undergo painful physical examinations on Ministry orders. But then you know that, Madam Umbridge. You wrote the law."

"Miss Umbridge," she said sharply. Most of the Slytherins snickered. "Sit down, Mr. Potter."

"I have a question, Miss Umbridge," Harry said.

"Questions at the end," she replied. A sickly-sweet tone had invaded her voice; she was going to win, because she was the teacher, and she knew it.

Well, not if Harry could help it.

"It is impossible to differentiate a werewolf from an ordinary human being in Mortal form," Harry said loudly.

"That is untrue, Mr. Potter," she cried triumphantly. "Werewolves in mortal form can be differentiated by the shape of the pupil, the positioning of the eyebrows -- "

"Madam Umbridge, may I ask what source you're using?" Parvati said, standing up. Harry, who was still standing, grinned at her.

"Questions at the end," Umbridge repeated, turning to the blackboard. "The Ministry's approved source on werewolf physiology is Hoff's treatise of 1637 -- "

"Not Sanzecki?" Harry asked, honestly startled this time. "He's much more recent and his book has actual statistics in it, I've seen them."

"Anyone not in their seats when I turn around will be given an immediate detention," Umbridge said. Parvati gave Harry a "what can I do?" shrug and dropped back into her seat. Harry sat down on the very edge of his, thrusting his legs out into the aisle. When she turned around, she smiled sweetly at Harry, who had crossed his arms defiantly over his chest. The score was still technically two to one for Gryffindor.

Theo Nott raised his hand and spoke without standing. "Who's this Sanzecki bloke anyway?"

Umbridge deliberately turned away from Theo and began speaking again. Theo shrugged and put his hand down. "Is he trustworthy?" he asked over Umbridge's pre-prepared speech. She kept talking.

Pansy Parkinson looked positively wicked as she stood up. "Madam Umbridge, I'd like to hear more about why the Ministry's approved source is Hoff's Treatise of whenever..."

"Madam Umbridge said sixteen thirty seven," Hermione replied, also standing. Both girls sat down, grinning. Umbridge was still speaking, but nobody was paying the slightest bit of attention now. Every few sentences, someone would call out a question and a short contest would ensue to see who could keep the questions going until they ran out. By the time class ended, they'd managed to drown her out for nearly forty minutes. Harry was in pain from keeping the laughter inside, because everyone in that classroom knew that as soon as someone laughed, the fun would actually end.

Once in the corridor, however, with the Defence classroom's door shut with a slam behind them, Harry doubled over in the hallway and laughed until he wept.

"Harry Potter, valiant leader of the student insurrection of '93," Neville said, slapping him on the back. "That was brilliant, Harry."

"Thanks," Harry gasped. "Oh god, let's go eat lunch. Remus is going to be absolutely furious if he hears, but it was worth it."

Laocoon's Children: The Fugitive from Azkaban

Chapter 10

October 4, 1993
Hogsmeade

Dear Andromeda,

Well, here I am, writing to you -- partly because I want to hear from you, partly for lack of better occupation, I'm afraid. I'm on bed-rest today after the moon, though I don't mind it so much. Teaching is terrifically exhausting and it's almost nice to have an excuse to skive off a day, especially a Monday.

I'm writing from the bedroom overlooking Creadonagh Valley in the house Sirius has purchased, on the outskirts of Hogsmeade. We haven't named it yet. At the start of the school year I thought the Oh Merlin It's So Bloody Orange House would be a good name; Sirius has since repainted it a nice shade of green with white trim and it's almost painfully domestic. Painfully Domestic House, however, doesn't precisely have the right ring to it either.

I was glad to hear that the Werewolf Support Network hasn't caused you any problems so far. It sounds as though you have good, hardworking people staying with you and I'm sure they're grateful for the assistance. I wouldn't worry too much about the younger girl -- pride is hard to overcome, and so is natural shyness. She'll warm up to you if you give her time, I've no doubt. Perhaps Nymphadora might take her to lunch, it's hard to make friends in a strange new city. The important thing is that she's working and earning some money and self-respect. It's a good thing you're doing, despite Severus' reservations.

In fact, speaking of Severus, I've just finished up my first account ever of a full moon spent as a wolf, for his research. It took quite a while to get it all down, though Sirius helped a bit and I wanted to record it anyway. I've spent so many years wondering what it was like, so many years having to go on faith and assurances by Sirius and the others that I hadn't hurt anyone -- hadn't hurt one of them, which was always my biggest fear. Now...

Well, I've never done hard drugs, but I imagine the experience is similar, and similarly hard to describe. I've always remembered the pain; this time I remembered so much more -- the aftershock of pain, you know -- like how a scratch can hurt more an hour afterwards than it did at the time. Even so, it's a background echo in the end. Everything becomes so much more vivid, so much more sensory. Every nerve seems to stand up and scream its presence. You take for granted that cats and dogs and wolves have whiskers, but you never really think about what it must feel like, until you feel it. It's absolutely amazing, Andromeda. All these years I've thought I'd trade in my lycanthropy in a flash for a chance at a normal life, and I still would -- trade it, that is -- but...

I'd hesitate now. I'd pause just for a moment and ask myself if it was worth it. It would be worth it, to live like normal people do, but I'm glad to have at least experienced the wolf on my terms, not on his.

Which leads me to the other thing I thought I ought to tell you. Scent is ridiculously vivid, in the wolf, and the smell of humans and magic are both very distinct. Once we'd decided I was more or less safe, we got out of the house and I must admit I lost myself in the Forbidden Forest for a while, on the Hogsmeade side where the Dementors aren't permitted to go. It was just so amazing, the richness of -- of *existence*, Andi.

But while we were out there I picked up a scent that I didn't recognise, or rather I recognised it and couldn't place it. I spent all morning wrestling with what it might be, but I think I've finally figured it out. It smells like Peter Pettigrew. Like he was in the Forest, all over it in fact.

I can't be certain, really, it could be my mind playing tricks on me and the Aurors in the paper have said over and over again that Lucius Malfoy can't be anywhere near Hogsmeade. I don't even know that Lucius and Peter are together, though I strongly suspect it. All the same I've written to Nymphadora about it. I can't come out and say it publicly, people will ask how I knew and that's something I have to protect as much for Harry and Sirius as for myself, but Nymphadora can tip off others on the sly, and I thought you ought to know. Draco's your nephew and Narcissa your sister, which makes you a target -- and I'm certain that where Peter goes, Lucius follows. By now it might even be the other way around. Sirius and I are protecting Draco, and so is Severus in his own way, but you and Ted need to be careful too. Please look after yourself down there in London.

Remus.

Remus did return to class on Tuesday, against the combined advice of Madam Pomfrey and Sirius. He walked steadily enough and his voice was clear, but his robes hung somewhat loosely on his shoulders and there were dark shadows under his eyes. The Change took more of a toll on a thirtysomething than it had on a teenager, but the potion and Padfoot's presence together had ensured that he came through unscathed, for once. Besides, he'd had two days of bed rest on Snape's orders, plus another embarrassingly thorough examination.

He arrived early to put his classroom in order and look over his notes; apparently that Umbridge woman hadn't left any record of what she'd gone over with Monday's classes, which was shabby of her but probably pretty in-character. His classes went mainly without a hitch until the last hour of the school day, which he had free on Tuesdays. As the students were filing out, Dumbledore looked in -- and some of the students smirked when they saw him, never a good sign.

"Remus, I was wondering if I might discuss a small...disciplinary measure with you," Dumbledore remarked, serenely seating himself in one of the front row desks. Remus took the desk across from him, relieved to be able to sit down.

"Of course -- why me, though?"

"It concerns yesterday's Defence classes," Dumbledore replied, taking a roll of parchment out of an inner pocket of his voluminous robes. "Apparently your afternoon classes were quite docile and pleasant, according to the account I received from Miss Umbridge. Your morning double-class, on the other hand..."

Remus put a hand to his forehead. "My third years," he said. "Harry did something horrifying, didn't he."

"It would certainly seem so, according to this letter of complaint. To judge by Miss Umbridge's vitriol, he only barely stopped short at physical assault. I shall spare you her details, but it appears that Mr. Potter insulted her, encouraged a mass insubordination, argued with her, called her a liar, and demonstrated a complete lack of respect for the institution of Hogwarts, the Ministry and, so it would seem, all of Wizarding Britain. She recommends his expulsion from school. She recommends mass punishment for the rest of the class as well, for disrespectful and insubordinate behaviour hardly befitting children half their age."

Remus stared at him, stunned. "What on earth did they do, tie her up and play may-pole with her?"

"I imagine she's too short," Dumbledore said calmly. Remus tried not to smile. "As I understand it, the debate began over a portion of her lecture regarding werewolves."

Remus was instantly sober. "Werewolves, sir?"

"Mr. Potter has strong views on the treatment of werewolves. So does Dolores Umbridge, as you know."

"I see. What are we to do?"

Dumbledore studied him. "As their teacher, it is primarily up to you. Of course we cannot allow mass disrespect for a guest at the school go unpunished, but I've found corporal punishment very ineffective on disobedient children, on the whole, as I'm sure you'll recall."

"But we have to show we did something," Remus replied.

"Just so."

Harry knew that he was in deep trouble when Dumbledore stood up for evening announcements at Tuesday dinner and requested all Gryffindor and Slytherin third-years to report for a special meeting in the Defence Against the Dark Arts classroom following the meal.

A chorus of knowing "ooooh"s rippled through the hall and Harry looked up to find Remus gazing directly at him; Umbridge must have called a conference or left a note or something. Harry was pretty confident he wouldn't be expelled, but he had no expectations after that -- and while he was fine being angry with Remus, he didn't like Remus being angry with him.

"It'll probably just be detention for a month or something," Neville said bracingly as they walked towards class, extra food wrapped in napkins in their pockets in case it was a long detention.

"That's your idea of whistling in the dark? Detention for a month? I have Quidditch, you know. Merlin, what if I'm thrown off the team?"

"Remus wouldn't do that, he knows you love Quidditch."

"That's exactly why he would do it if he had to punish me badly enough," Harry said.

"When was the last time Remus punished you?"

Harry had to really think about that one. Punishments in the Black-Lupin-Potter house were rare occasions and usually resulted more from getting caught than from whatever he'd done in the first place.

He hadn't actually formulated an answer before they reached the classroom and sat down. Dumbledore was seated off to one side; Remus was leaning against his desk, arms braced on the edge, head bowed in what was probably exhaustion. Harry felt a twinge of guilt over his behaviour for the first time. He hadn't intended it to put any kind of stress on Remus.

"I'm sure you all know why you're here," Remus said, when everyone had arrived. "You're not stupid enough to think that Umbridge wouldn't inform me of what you did during yesterday's class."

Hermione's hand immediately went up. Remus looked at her, and she slowly put it down again.

"I have been given a detailed account of yesterday's class by Ms. Umbridge," Remus continued.

"Miss Umbridge," someone whispered. A good portion of the class laughed. Remus frowned.

"Ms. Umbridge was a guest of the school, and reports to the Minister for Magic himself," he said. "You don't have to like her, but you were required to listen to her and wisdom should have dictated that you give someone in her position a good account of Hogwarts school. A good account of me, if it comes to that, as your teacher and the person responsible for your discipline."

"But she was lying," Harry said, before he could help himself. The rest of the class nodded in assent. "And worse, she was boring."

"Do you think Hogwarts School's primary goal is to entertain you?" Remus inquired.

"Well, you always manage it when you teach, so I should think it would be in the bylaws somewhere," Harry retorted. Others began to speak until Remus held up his hands; everyone fell silent immediately.

"I will grant that Ms. Umbridge's account is likely biased, as I have had some experience with the woman myself," he said. Harry glanced at Dumbledore, who wore a faint smile on his face that told him nothing of the Headmaster's thoughts. "I would like to hear your side, but not from everyone at once."

He consulted a scroll on the desk behind him.

"She names Harry Potter, Parvati Patil, and Hermione Granger by name," he said. "You three, stand if you please. Can you tell me why you are mentioned above and beyond?"

"We're the only ones whose names she learned," Parvati said.

"Oh, I reckon it was because I called her a liar and refuted her evidence," Harry said.

"On the subject of...werewolves, I see," Remus said, consulting the scroll again. "What did you say to her, Mr. Potter?"

Harry swallowed. "I volunteered to give the five ways a werewolf is differentiated from an ordinary wolf. Then she asked me how you tell a werewolf from a human being and I told her you couldn't, and that it didn't matter because werewolves aren't dangerous except at the full moon."

Remus nodded. Harry hesitated, then continued. "She said I was wrong."

"Harry felt he had a moral imperative," Hermione put in.

"A moral imperative?" Remus asked, with a trace of amusement.

"Werewolves are people too, sir," Hermione said. "Nobody goes around teaching us racism. Why should *she* get away with it?"

"The Ministry-approved source on werewolves is some musty old book from sixteen something that's not even accurate," Harry added. "I asked her why the Ministry didn't use Sanzecki's work, it's barely fifty years old and it involved actual research. I really did want to know, too. Then Theo -- " Harry gestured to him, and Theo glared as if he'd spilled some big secret, " -- wanted to know who Sanzecki was, but she ignored him. So we started asking questions, but she kept ignoring them. So we had to work out the answers, too. That's all. It's not like anyone threw spitwads or anything."

Remus hesitated. "That's all you did? Ask questions?"

"Well, we had to talk over her 'cause she wouldn't stop talking, but yeah, basically."

Remus turned to Dumbledore. "Headmaster, I really can't countenance much punishment for students asking questions. They were only doing what I've taught them to do."

"Indeed, what I advised them to do on introducing Miss Umbridge," Dumbledore said. "Tonight's detention, and a short essay on some subject of your choosing, perhaps?"

"My thoughts precisely," Remus replied. "You can sit down, Harry, Parvati, Hermione. Now, let's talk a little bit about common sense in Defence, as long as I have you all captive as an audience for the next few hours. Defence isn't simply a matter of spells, it's a matter of how to think, and how to look at things. You treated Ms. Umbridge as an enemy, but what did you learn from her first? What does this tell you about the Ministry? About its policies? How does this apply to other dangerous situations you may one day find yourself in?"

At some point, while Remus was writing ideas down on the chalkboard and the students were calling out observations and remarks -- in a respectful if disorganised fashion -- Dumbledore disappeared from class. By the time they ran out of ideas it was nearly time for lights-out. Harry, Theo, and Pansy strolled back to the Dungeons proud of their accomplishment and just a little excited about having gotten away with it so handily.

"See, when they're good teachers, it's not *about* us versus them," Theo declared to Harry. "Professor Lupin never makes you think he's the enemy."

Harry, privately, thought this was a good thing. If nothing else, the evening's detention had shown just how good thirteen-year-olds were at finding their enemy's weaknesses and preying on them mercilessly.

Himself included.

Between classes and Quidditch practice, October seemed to rush past. Harry spent his free afternoons practicing Quidditch plays, usually with Neville's help since Padma and Draco were still occupied with studying on those days. Neville wasn't very athletic, but he and Harry designed a small machine that would shoot golf balls into the air at varying degrees of altitude for Harry to chase down. Sirius gave his approval and helped with the charms when they got stuck, suggesting that they patent it and sell it to Madam Schaeffer's Educational Toy Shop or Quality Quidditch Supplies once they worked the kinks out.

Draco was practicing too, in his spare time and with his team in the evenings, though he took a fair amount of continual ribbing for nearly falling off Harry's broom in tryouts. He hadn't yet bought his own broomstick -- his allowance from Narcissa was generous, but it would take a month or so to save up for it. Any of his friends would have loaned him some money, and Sirius would happily have bought it for him as a gift, but Draco seemed to *want* to train on a substandard broom. He said it would make him a better flyer when he finally did get his Nimbus.

Harry barely had time to be concerned about Draco's progress anyway, since he and the rest of the returning team had two new Chasers and a new Beater to train. Harry supposed he ought to be happy for Crabbe that he got the Beater position, since Crabbe was in his year, but Crabbe was also exceptionally dim and didn't catch on very quickly to the flexible nature of the Slytherin playbook. Harry, Towler, and Pucey could make mid-air alterations in plays when necessary, but Crabbe sometimes still ended up in positions that made it clear he was working off laboriously-memorised plays and not real-time observation. Colin, as expected, had not even come close to qualifying for Chaser, but the two fifth-year girls that were tapped as Chasers were decent enough. Besides, this year Harry could occasionally suggest new plays without having to go through Snape; he'd been on the team two years and was at the very least senior to the new players.

The weather grew cold and wet as Hallowe'en approached, which wasn't great for Quidditch practice but did help ease the heat a little bit in the stifling Divination class. Harry had started to dread Divs as much as he suspected Remus had when he was at Hogwarts. Sirius was right; it was easy, and Trelawney wasn't exactly great at discerning fake star charts from the real thing. But it was also hot and boring, and Harry began to wish he'd taken Arithmancy like Remus said, or even only taken two new classes like Draco and had a free afternoon a few times a week. He *was* rather fond of his tarot cards, but only because they were useful for playing poker with when Trelawney wasn't looking.

Before he knew it, Hallowe'en was almost on them and notices had been posted on all the common-room boards that the first Hogsmeade weekend would be the last weekend in October.

"Nice of them," Neville said. "We can buy lots of sweets for Hallowe'en and such, and I bet the whole town will be done up for the holiday."

Draco picked at his breakfast, looking morose. Padma sighed unhappily.

"I'm sure you'll be able to go next time," she said. "Can't you ask Dumbledore or someone to sign it?"

"Did already," Draco muttered. "A professor can't sign for you because then Hogwarts is still responsible if you get hurt or die or whatever. It's fine, I reckon it's not as good as Diagon Alley anyway and I've been there often enough."

"Sure," Harry said. He'd been to Hogsmeade a handful of times and knew that he was lying through his teeth, but it would make Draco feel better, anyway. "I mean, the sweet shop's pretty good and Zonko's has some great pranks, but other than that it's mostly just the Shrieking Shack, and that's not exactly scary most of the time."

Padma rolled her eyes at Harry and he frowned, perplexed, before dismissing it.

The first Hogsmeade Saturday dawned clear but cold, with a sharp cutting wind that promised snow before too much longer. It was also the full moon, and Harry wondered who they'd have as substitute on Monday again as he and the65t7rfdtg others walked to the entrance hall.

"We'll bring you a load of sweets back from Honeyduke's," Neville promised Draco, who seemed to have made his peace with not going and was walking along with a blank look on his face, hands in his pockets.

"And Sirius is taking us to lunch, so we can see how Dobby is," Harry added.

"I hope you have a good time," Draco said, sounding mildly unconvincing. "Don't worry about me, I'll be fine."

Filch, the caretaker, was standing at the front doors, checking names against a long list clenched in one grubby hand. Draco left them there and retreated before either Filch or one of the other students could make a remark; there had already been a few about ickle wee Malfoy, whose mad mummy wouldn't let him go to Hogsmeade.

Draco watched the others walk away, down the path to Hogsmeade, from behind a pillar just inside the grand oak doors of the Hogwarts front facade. When he couldn't see them any longer, he turned to -- go back to the Hufflepuff dormitory, he guessed, or maybe up to the library.

He started back with a shriek when he saw someone else in the hallway, watching silently, but Remus grabbed him before he could stumble and knock his head into the column behind him.

"Hallo," Remus said, grinning at him. "It's only me, don't worry."

Draco smiled, relieved. "Hi, Professor Lupin."

"Like you, I'm good at lurking in corridors," Remus said, but there was no accusation in his voice. "Everyone gone down to Hogsmeade?"

"Yeah," Draco said. "Thought I might go to the library for a bit. Aren't you going too?"

Remus frowned. "Well, I'm supposed to, but Severus said no strenuous labour, and chaperoning several hundred students in Hogsmeade doesn't exactly qualify as restful. The new potion trial, you know," he added, gently guiding Draco away from the front door and down the hallway. "I don't suppose you'd keep me company? It's very boring, being stuck in the castle."

"Tell me about it," Draco answered glumly. "Reckon you're going to lunch though, aren't you? Harry said Sirius is taking everyone..."

"Not even lunch," Remus replied, sounding more cheerful than Draco would have in a similar situation. "Until we know the effects of the potion in full, I've got to do as the good Professor orders -- even grownups are prisoners of one thing or another," he added, his hand still on Draco's shoulder. "You're welcome to come have a cup of tea with me, if you like. It's not Hogsmeade, but..."

"Sure," Draco said eagerly. It beat hanging about with the second and first years in Hufflepuff, at any rate, or sitting alone in the library.

"I missed out on a number of Hogsmeade weekends when I was at school, for one reason or another," Remus continued as they walked. "My parents, you know, were quite as bad as yours. I had to fight with them for weeks to get my permit form signed."

"I don't think fighting with mum -- "

"Oh, I agree. And it wasn't really fighting -- Lupins don't fight -- but it was quite a chilly summer in our household. At any rate, bed rest is no kind of fun when all your friends are down at Honeyduke's nicking chocolates. Nor, I imagine, is tea with your professor," he said thoughtfully. "You know, there's no injunction against a calm stroll. Would you rather explore Hogwarts a bit? I could show you some new places, I reckon."

"Reckon I could show you a few," Draco replied, grinning.

"Oh, you think so?" Remus challenged.

"As long as you don't rat about them to Dumbledore."

Remus laughed. "You aren't wandering round the roof or leaping down stairwells, are you?"

"No."

"Then I think your secret is probably safe with me."

Draco stopped him in front of a staircase. "Do you know about the music room?" he asked.

"Music room?" Remus said, raising both eyebrows.

"Wait for it," Draco told him, climbing through the portrait-hole into the music room they'd uncovered last year. "Padma found this place and somehow weasled the passwords..."

"Brilliant," Remus breathed, sounding very like a student as he stepped into the music room. "This place never showed up on -- "

"On what?" Draco asked, his voice muted by the room's acoustics.

"Nothing," Remus said absently, strolling over to the window that looked down on the Hogwarts grounds.

"Now listen," Draco declared, going to stand in the centre of the room, on the sunburst that was laid into the floor. He opened his mouth to sing one of the naughty limericks they'd written last year, then changed his mind and recited, instead.

*Derwent College, Oxford, '36
My father's laughter still in echoed halls
The disapproving click of heels on stone
And time, as ever, subjugating all.
Two hours each week I had, in colonnades
Arched slyly over walkways few will see.
My father's world is books and wooden chairs
A lifetime spent in peaceful academe.
But passion spirals down another path
In dreams of books and chairs of different kind
And fame unwanted crowned my sandy head*

*The colonnades unfaded from my mind.
Sometimes it longs for rich obscurity
(My father walks with Tolkien and Belloc)
But dreams of quiet contemplation yet
Must wait for one more poem, one more book.
Such silence as my father's study saves
Awaits, as my inheritance, the grave.*

As he spoke, the words appeared on the chalkboard that took up one wall of the room. When he was finished he glanced at Remus, but his professor was leaning against the window, listening raptly.

"That's impressive, from memory," he said.

"It rhymes," Draco said. "Makes it easier."

"Undoubtedly. Did Harry give you Graveworthy's book? I didn't think he had the collected poems."

"No -- he hasn't. I've been nicking the novels off him, though. One of my tutors gave me his poetry book," Draco admitted. "He said it was one of the Great Works. Mum's never read it or she'd probably make me throw it out."

"Do you know what it means?"

Draco scowled. "I'm not stupid."

"I didn't say you were, Draco."

"Graveworthy's dad was a professor at Derwent, it's obvious enough. He wishes he was too, but he decided to write instead and now even if he was going to go and teach he'd never get any peace because he's famous," Draco said.

Remus smiled, as if he knew something Draco didn't. "Very good. You've given me an idea, actually. I'll work on it later; come on, let's go have that tea. I'm exhausted from the stairs."

He rested his hand on Draco's shoulder again after they climbed out of the portrait-hole, but Draco could feel the weight behind it now, and walked slow so that Remus wouldn't have to hurry to keep up.

Harry, Padma, and Neville returned from Hogwarts windblown and happy, well-fed from a ridiculously large lunch with Sirius and bearing sacks of sweets and jokes. They congregated with Draco after dinner in the library, unceremoniously kicking a handful of first-years out of the study alcove that Madam Pince couldn't see from her desk.

"Hogsmeade's really historic," Padma said, paging through a book she'd bought on the town's history. "The Three Broomsticks was the headquarters for a Goblin rebellion in the seventeenth century, and most of the houses are incredibly old. I don't see why more people don't want to properly study it, it's got to be so interesting living in the last wizarding village in Great Britain."

"Brought this for you," Harry added, upending a small paper bag onto the table. Dozens of sweets tumbled out -- chocolates wrapped in waxed paper, a box of Fizzing Whizbees, Pepper Imps and Green Dragon Toffee (one of Draco's favourites) and a small cheap balsa case filled with exploding bonbons packed in dried coconut shavings.

"We looked at broomsticks too," Neville said. "Soon as you want, Sirius can go down to Dervish and Banges, they have a Quidditch department and they sell Nimbus two-thousand-ones. Really top-level."

"You have to come see the post office at some point," Padma added. "Hundreds of owls all sorted by speed and size -- and the smell!"

"Thanks, I'll pass on that," Draco said, smiling.

"You're in a good mood," Neville observed.

"I had a nice day," Draco replied.

Laocoon's Children: The Fugitive from Azkaban

Chapter 11

"Sirius? Sirius, are you there?"

Sirius, yawning sleepily, rolled over in the bed and muttered into his pillow. "Nonnow, s'jussa full moon..."

"Sirius, *please* ..."

Sirius opened one eye at the frantic tone, then sat up in bed quickly. Andromeda's head was floating in the fireplace in their bedroom, looking worried and strained. He glanced at Remus, who was sleeping fitfully next to him, and rolled out of bed. He pulled some trousers on over his underthings and knelt on the hearth, throwing a pinch of floo powder in.

"What is it, Andi?" he asked, muzzily. "Better be good, I'm knackered – last night was the moon, you know – "

"Yes, I know," she said worriedly. "It's – it's our tenants."

Sirius tensed. "Your Werewolf Network Thingy people? Did one of them get loose?"

"No – " Andromeda bit her lip. "It's Anne, our young girl, she's hurt herself and she won't let anyone near her – she scratches and bites. We let her use the basement because she doesn't like to go too far from the house."

"How bad?" Sirius asked, glancing over his shoulder. Remus was stirring, sitting up stiffly.

"I can't tell, we can't get close. I thought – I know it's hard after the moon, but Remus..."

"What is it?" Remus asked hoarsely, resting his cheek on his knees and turning his head to watch Andi with remarkably alert eyes.

"None of your concern," Sirius said, turning back to Andromeda. "He's in no condition to do anything."

"Sirius, I'm all right – what's going on?" Remus slid out of bed, half-falling to the floor, and edged across to the hearth. "Andromeda, did something happen with one of your Support Network people?"

"Anne's hurt herself and she won't let us near her," Andromeda said. Sirius reached behind him for a dressing-gown slung carelessly on a chair and draped it across Remus, preserving his dignity. "I'm really worried, Remus, I didn't know who else to call – St. Mungo's will have to report her – "

"What about the others?" Remus asked.

"They Change somewhere else, they're never home for at least a day after -- "

"Okay, I'll come through," Remus said. Sirius grabbed his shoulder, but he shook his head. "I'll dress and be there soon."

"What should I do, though?" Andromeda asked.

"Have Ted fix some food. Sausages," Remus suggested. His joints crackled as he leaned back and stood up, staggering to the dresser and determinedly taking out a shirt.

"You'll do yourself a harm," Sirius said, hovering anxiously.

"I'm all right, I had the potion," Remus replied.

"You're not all right – "

"Then come with me, but don't stand there like an arsehole," Remus snarled. Sirius' jaw dropped. "Well, unless you're going to tie me up, I'm going to help that girl, Sirius. What would you do if it were me?"

Sirius sighed. Remus gripped his shoulder for balance as he stepped into some trousers. As soon as they were done up, Sirius pushed him gently onto the bed and took a pair of socks from his drawer.

"Stay there," he said, putting them on Remus' feet, following with his shoes. "We'll go through together. I'll talk, you stay quiet."

Remus nodded and stepped into the greenish flame, wrapping one arm around Sirius' shoulders when Sirius joined him, holding tight.

"Twelve Grimmauld Place!" Sirius said loudly and clearly, and soon they were stepping into the warm, sun-filled living room of Ted and Andromeda's upper-floor apartment.

Remus, thank you," Andi said, helping them both out of the fireplace. "She's in the basement, she won't come out."

"All right," Remus said. "Sirius, the stairs..."

"You're an idiot," Sirius said, but he helped ease Remus from step to step, down into the back-room of Tonks & Tonks and around the staircase, through the door to the basement.

"Stay here," Remus said. "Nothing happens if she bites *me*. "

"Except you hurt and bleed and – "

"Sirius!"

Sirius sat down on the top step. "I'm not leaving."

"Fine, but keep quiet, all right?" Remus leaned heavily on the banister and limped slowly down into the basement. From the darkness came the sound of harsh, heavy breathing.

"Anne?" Remus called. "Anne, my name is Remus, Andromeda called me. Is it okay if I light the room a little?"

No reply. Remus muttered a charm and green flame leapt up from one shaking hand, turning the murky blackness a flickering green. There was a curled shape in one corner, shaking.

"Hi, Anne," Remus said.

"Hi," said a young female voice, rich with pain.

"I'm a werewolf, like you. Andi thought I might be able to have a look at your wounds, okay?" Remus took two steps forward.

"Don't touch me," she said. "You're filthy."

Remus smiled a little. "Well, I haven't had time to wash – "

"*Filth* ," she shrieked. He paused.

"Anne, I just want to make sure you're not hurt too badly, okay?"

"*Your kind made me like this!*"

Sirius growled low in his throat. Remus shot a look back at him that Sirius had never seen before and never wanted to see again, a look of pure annoyance tinged with disdain.

"Come on, Anne, I know what it's like. Just let me have a look at your cuts," Remus said, but he didn't move forward. "Someone's got to, sooner or later."

"I'm fine."

"You're not fine, we both know that. Andromeda's worried about you."

Silence. Remus took another few steps forward and crouched, level with her and perhaps four feet away.

"Who told you we were filth?" he asked, softly.

"*Everyone* ," she answered. "I had a normal life before you – you freaks!"

"You haven't been a werewolf long, have you?" he asked. "What happened, Anne?"

She pulled in on herself and Sirius saw blood trickle down her cheek.

"What happened?" Remus asked.

"How do I know it wasn't *you*?" she asked.

"Because I don't bite people. I make sure I'm safe, just like you," he said. "Come on, Anne, I just want to look at your cuts, can you show them to me so that Andromeda won't worry?"

The girl lifted her face, streaked with blood and tears. There was a huge jagged slice down one cheek, but it didn't look deep. She was cradling her left arm in her lap.

"Is your arm hurt?" he asked.

"No," she said rebelliously. Remus held out a hand and, when she didn't flinch, he touched her left shoulder. Slowly he moved his hand down her arm. When he reached her elbow, she grunted.

"It's just sprained," he said with a smile. "Can you show me where else it hurts?"

Sirius hadn't realised until then that she was naked, wrapped in a dirty plaid blanket; Remus looked so clinical that it hadn't occurred to him the girl wasn't wearing much of anything. Then she reached down with her right hand and hiked up a corner of the blanket, displaying her upper thigh. Remus looked down and sucked air in through his teeth.

It wasn't possible for a wolf to bite itself where the bitemark was, high on her thigh, nearly crossing her hip. Besides, it was half-healed, more scar than wound at this point, though Sirius could see her pulse throb darkly where a blood vessel passed too near the surface of her skin. Remus spread his fingers and touched thumb and pinky to the wound; the deep canines were as wide across as his hand, and there was one sharp zig-zag where the wolf's tooth had broken or been pulled crooked at some point.

"Two, three months?" he guessed, looking at her.

"It hurts," she said, her voice a thin, keening whine.

"I know. I know," he said softly, spreading his hands. She looked at him warily, but when he didn't move she scooted forward, letting him pull her and the blanket into his arms.

"Sirius," he said unsteadily, and Sirius bounded down the stairs to help them both up, Andromeda on his heels. Anne gave a little shriek and darted from Remus to Andromeda as if his embrace had burned her. Remus looked at her sadly.

"Take her upstairs," he said to Andromeda, who tightened the blanket around her and obeyed. Once they were nearly to the top, Remus leaned on Sirius and let himself be half-carried upstairs as well. Anne and Andromeda were ascending to the flat, but Remus moved towards one of the stockbenches on the ground floor, sitting on it heavily.

"Well, that was exciting, you *idiot*," Sirius said. "You could have really hurt yourself, and all she has is a sprain."

"It's not the sprain, Sirius," Remus sighed, rubbing his left thigh distractedly. "She's one of those, you know. Raised thinking werewolves were filth, beneath human notice. It's not easy for her."

"That excuses it, does it?"

"She was assaulted, it's not as though this just happened spontaneously," Remus replied.

"I won't have you running all over England soothing weepy teenagers," Sirius warned.

"I seem to recall you doing quite a bit of running all over England for me," Remus retorted. "Just shut up for a minute, would you? I need to think."

"About what? How you're going to singlehandedly -- "

"She's my family, Sirius."

Sirius stopped dead, eyes widening. "*What?* "

"Not like that," Remus said, sighing. "Not blood. Just..."

He fumbled with the flies of his trousers, standing to pull them down. Sirius had seen the scar thousands of times, both when they were students and after, as a lover. He'd never paid much attention to it; it was just there, like an oversized birthmark – on the outside of Remus' left thigh, high on the leg, nearly crossing his hip. Remus spread his hand wide and pressed his fingers against it. The canines were exactly the width of his hand, from tip of thumb to tip of pinky. Just above his index finger was a sharp zig-zag where the wolf's tooth had broken or been pulled crooked at some point.

"Whoever did it to her, did it to me," Remus said. "Which means he's still alive. Which means whoever Walden Macnair shot, it wasn't the one who did this to me."

Sirius stared at the scar, at the way Remus' fingers curled against his skin.

"Even if she weren't, she's a child and she's hurt. If your compassion is big enough for me, it's big enough for her, too," Remus continued. "I can't do much, hardly anything – this I could do. You have to let me do it."

Sirius took Remus' fingers away from the scar with one hand and hitched his trousers up with the other, re-dressing him carefully.

"Promise me," he said, staring in Remus' dark brown eyes. "Promise me you will never go help someone else before you have help yourself, all right? If you go, I go too. *Promise*, Moony."

Remus nodded. "All right. I promise."

Andromeda came back down the stairs then, carrying a plate of sausages in one hand and two mugs of tea in the other. Remus fell on the sausages as though he'd never seen food before, picking them up with his fingers and then sucking on the fingers when they burned. Sirius blew on his tea to cool it.

"I can't tell you how grateful we are," Andromeda said, hugging Sirius one-armed around his neck and bending to kiss Remus on the crown of his head. "I was so worried. We love Anne, she's a good girl at heart."

"Better you than me," Remus said around a mouthful of sausage.

"She's just...a little confused still," Andromeda replied. "Ted's fixing her up a sling and working on her face. I just seem to pace and fret."

"You're very good at both," Sirius grinned.

"You're not too big to take a pummelling," she warned. Remus, having finished off two sausages in record time, sucked on the tip of his finger thoughtfully.

"Andromeda, do you know where Nymphadora is, these days? I need to subvert her for personal ends," he said.

"You're more likely to see her than I am, seems she spends every spare holiday she gets up at Hogwarts with Severus," Andi replied. "I'll write to her if you like. Is anything wrong?"

"Too much to list off, I'm afraid," Remus said quietly.

Harry didn't expect to see Remus for the Hallowe'en feast, given that the night before had been the full moon. He had made plans to go exploring after the feast; not outside the castle, since they weren't fools, but there were plenty of interesting places to go inside the castle. He and the others had considered a seance, or perhaps merely scaring the bejesus out of some seventh-years. Sporting with the sevenths was one of Harry's favourite pastimes, and he almost never got to do it.

Neville was fond of a lie-in and didn't wake up until noon on Sundays, generally. He probably wouldn't be really human until the feast, so Harry and Draco had spent the afternoon in the library discussing Quidditch in hushed tones until Padma joined them with her loads and loads of homework to do.

"Tonight's the night," Harry told her as she worked. "We're going to misuse your Time-Turner tonight. We've just got to, Padma, it's too great not to."

"Have you got a plan?" Padma asked suspiciously.

"Will you be happier if I do or if I don't?" Harry replied.

"If we're going to abuse a sacred trust we're going to do it properly and with malice aforethought," she said. "So you'd better have a plan, Harry Potter."

"Well, I have a few," Harry admitted. "I was thinking, let's charm our faces glowy-red and jump out at people."

"That's your plan?"

"It has the brilliance of simplicity," Draco said weakly.

"That's not a plan, that's just mean-spirited aerobics," Padma said acidly. "A plan involves split-second timing and possibly the use of pulleys and levers."

"Oh, I'll give you pulleys and levers – " Harry began hotly, but Draco kicked his shin under the table.

"Pince!" he hissed, and Harry subsided.

"What can you actually do with a time-turner, prankwise?" Draco asked. "I mean, we just assumed it would be the best thing ever, but do we have any actual ideas?"

"Well, you could pick someone and start showing up everywhere they did, all the time," Harry said. "Or keep putting something in their bag after they've taken it out. It must be brilliant for escaping if you're being chased."

"You're thinking about it backwards," Padma said. "It's not something that stops time. It just lets you jump back an hour or two. It'll help with escaping, maybe, but I honestly don't see what else you could possibly plan to do with it."

"Here's a thought," Draco said. "If we can figure out something, then we'll see it happen, won't we? And then we can figure out what we arranged after we see it happen, and go do it."

"I think that's a paradox," Padma said. "Anyway, it's nearly time to go down to the feast. Pack up your paradoxes and come along."

"Are you hauling all those down to the feast too?" Draco asked as she stuffed books into her bag. "At least let me take a few. And Harry," he added hastily. Padma gave him a lifted eyebrow, but offered each boy two large books.

They ran into Neville on the stairs, apparently coming up to find them.

"I've been down to the feast already, thought you'd be there," he explained, returning down the stairs with them. "It's pretty brilliant this year. There's a great big marzipan skeleton on each table –" he stopped in laughter as Draco's eyes lit up. "The House-elves like you, Draco."

"This isn't news," Padma said as they reached the side-entry doors to the Great Hall, pushing them open. Inside, candlelight from a thousand illuminated jack-o-lanterns flickered over the four House tables and the High Table where the professors sat. All the House banners had been blacked out except for a glowing white insignia, and –

Things on the tables were *moving*.

"Look at this!" Harry said, picking up one of the small white objects that was leaping around the table. It turned out to be a snapping pair of fake vampire teeth. He shoved them in his mouth and grinned at the others, fangs gleaming. "Tafes like bebbbermin!"

"Dora!" Neville shouted, pushing past Harry. He ran to the High Table, where Professor Snape was standing by his chair, talking to Dora Tonks. "Hi! What're you doing here?" Neville blurted.

"Hiya, kid!" Tonks answered, bending over the table to tousle Neville's hair. The others joined him in a little knot at the table. "How are you? I'm here for the feast, with Severus."

"Oh," Neville said, glancing with wide eyes at Snape, who glowered. "Sorry, Professor! I mean! Not sorry – I – you're...you'd better look after her properly!" he said, face turning red, and bolted away again.

Harry walked past Snape calmly and winked. "You had better, you know," he said conversationally.

"How're you, Harry?" Tonks asked.

"Pretty well. You?"

"Thriving. Is your godfather around?"

Harry shrugged. "Probably down in Hogsmeade."

"Oh! At the Three Broomsticks, probably, they're having a big party. We're going after," she said, then glanced at Snape apologetically.

"Have a good time," Harry said, wandering on. "Say hi if you see him!"

"Will do – Remus! Hallo, you look like death warmed over!"

Harry turned so fast he nearly knocked Padma over; he stood aside to let her and Draco push through the crowds to their tables, craning his neck to try and see Remus.

When he finally managed to work his way back to where Tonks was sitting, he saw her shaking Remus' hand. Remus looked awful, eyes deep-sunk in his face and skin a pale, almost yellowish colour. He was leaning heavily on the back of Snape's chair.

" – glad you're here, I need to ask you some questions," he was saying. He didn't even look happy, but rather grim, as though he'd had bad news. Harry wondered if he and Sirius were in a fight. They almost never were, but lately he'd been too wrapped up in his own affairs to notice much.

"Any time – oh, do you really have to sit at the other end? Professor Sinistra, you wouldn't mind changing, would you?"

Sinistra, who had experienced Dora's accident-prone table manners before, smiled knowingly and ambled down the table to Remus' seat on the end.

"Hi Professor Lupin!" Harry called up. Remus turned down to face him, the unhappy look replaced with a smile.

"Hallo Potter," he said. "Happy Hallowe'en to you!"

"Happy Hallowe'en! How are you?"

Remus glanced down at his hands, where the skin was taut over the knuckles. "Better than I look, Harry," he said in an undertone. "Don't fret about me."

"Never do," Harry answered cheerfully, which only he and Sirius knew was a lie. All the times Harry had read to Remus after Changes, down in Betwys Beddau, had been as much for their sanity as for Remus' own comfort. "Seeya later!"

Remus waved him on and seated himself next to Tonks. As Harry went, he heard him say something to Tonks about research, which must mean he was okay; Remus was always okay when he was researching.

"I need your help with some off-the-boards research," Remus said quietly, mindful that other members of the faculty were still passing behind him and students were passing in front, stopping to say hello to their former Professor Tonks.

"Sure, anything I can do," she replied, popping a grape from a nearby platter into her mouth. "Work's taking me away a lot, though. What do you need?"

"Don't make promises you can't keep just yet," Remus said. "I need you to look into some MLE files for me."

She frowned. "What do you want with Magical Law Enforcement?"

"Dark Creatures affairs are all kept in the MLE archives, aren't they? I know formal reports are filed, at least usually."

Tonks was all attention now. "Is this to do with what Mum's up to with the Support Network?"

"Indirectly. I think an error may have been made in one of the files. One of the people staying with your mother has a bite pattern that's too similar to mine," here his voice dropped to almost nothing, "to be a coincidence. For the last twenty-five years we've believed that Walden MacNair – "

"That asshole!"

"Yes – that he shot the wolf who bit me," Remus continued. He nodded to Dumbledore as the Headmaster passed to the front to signal the start of the feast. "We know he shot a werewolf, but if this girl was bitten two months ago by the same person who bit me – "

Tonks turned to him, horrified. "He shot an innocent person?"

"We don't *know*that, but I think it might be likely."

"He's got to be brought up on charges!"

"Tonks, you can't. We'd have to testify and the whole thing would come out – I'd lose my job, she'd lose any chance she had at a normal life. Imagine what Harry would go through on my account."

"But Remus – "

"That's not why I asked you this," Remus said, helping himself to potatoes with a hand that barely trembled. "I need to know everything you can find about who bit this girl Anne, and where it happened, and whether there were any witnesses."

She gave him a long look under the fringe of her pink hair, then nodded. "I'll do what I can. You may have to settle for copies. I – "

At that point Severus touched her wrist and pointed upwards, and Remus followed their gaze. The candle-filled pumpkins that had been illuminating the Great Hall were fading into nothing, and the hall itself was falling very dark indeed.

Several of the Hogwarts ghosts suddenly appeared, drifting up through the floor with shrieks and yells. They crowded together at the top of the vaulted ceiling and suddenly arrowed away in all directions. Behind them, wherever they flew, the ceiling burst into points of starlight until the entire room was filled with them.

Remus glanced down and smiled at the furry black head resting on his leg. Sirius had insisted that he could only attend if Padfoot came with him, and Remus was disinclined to argue. The heavy weight on his thigh was comforting, as was the pure adulation in Padfoot's eyes.

He rubbed behind his ears and glanced back up at the brightly-lit ceiling, thinking of other times he had spent with Sirius looking up at the stars.

The feast generally lasted quite a while, and often the Professors went down to the Three Broomsticks after to attend the party there, drawing straws to see who would stay behind to keep watch over the school. Remus and Snape had both been exempted from the lottery, because Remus was hardly in a condition to prowl the halls and Severus – well, young love does have its way. Young was relative, in this case, but he was still the youngest of the professors save Remus, which conferred special indulgences at times.

Remus had wished Snape and Dora a happy Hallowe'en and left the feast early, escorted back to his rooms by his enormous Padfoot. When they were well away from the feast and unlikely to encounter anyone but Peeves, Sirius changed back and wrapped his arm around Remus' waist, tacitly offering support.

"You were very well-behaved tonight," Remus said, smiling despite the pallor of his skin and the slight rattle in his throat. "Good dog."

Sirius smiled and kept walking. "Come on, you sound like you need some sleep. You could have sent me to find Dora, you know."

"I wanted to go to the feast," Remus said. "I loved Hallowe'en at Hogwarts. Remember the costume parties Gryffindor threw?"

"Course I do. Seventh year we all went as Greek Gods."

Remus laughed. "That's right. You went with James as Castor and Pollux."

"And you were Haephaestus, and P – " Sirius stopped himself. "And Lily," he said, "went as Athena."

"That's right."

"And then James was annoyed because Andrew Bones was only a sixth-year and he showed up as Apollo, but you wouldn't let us prank him at all."

Remus coughed lightly. Sirius turned his head, then stopped in the hallway about ten feet from the door to Remus' rooms.

"Moony," he said, narrowing his eyes.

"Yes?" Remus asked innocently, digging in his pocket for the charmed key to open his door.

"Did Andrew Bones know about the Greek Gods ahead of time?"

Remus gave him a small smile. "Whatever do you mean, Padfoot?"

"I mean," Sirius turned slightly, pressing him into the stone wall, "Were you and Andrew Bones shagging behind our backs?"

"You're very direct," Remus replied, kissing him. "Don't tell me you're going to be jealous of wee Andy Bones, Sirius. He may have looked nice in a chiton, but he's married now, and was never a patch on you anyway."

"You and *AndrewBones*? "

Remus nuzzled his ear. "I may have been pining for you, Sirius, but a boy has needs, you know."

"Pining?" Sirius asked, sounding pleased. "Really?"

"Pining," Remus confirmed. "Wasting away."

"Now you're just making fun."

"Step into my parlor and see how earnest I am," Remus replied, pushing Sirius gently down the hall, walking behind him. He was reaching around him to unlock the door, his other hand firmly secured on Sirius' belt, when Sirius grabbed his wrist suddenly.

"Don't," he said.

"Sirius, I'm not going to have sex with you in the hallway," Remus replied, moving forward again, but Sirius held his wrist too tightly.

"*Don't touch the door, Moony*," he said. The tone of his voice finally penetrated Remus' brain, and he raised his head to see why Sirius was suddenly afraid.

Criscrossing the solid oak door were a series of deep gouges, stained here and there with what looked suspiciously like blood. As though someone had taken a bloody knife and attacked the door in rage.

He watched, the world slowing down to half its normal speed, as Sirius reached out and plucked something small and white out of one of the grooves. He held it flat in his palm, staring at it. Remus stared over his shoulder.

"It's a fingernail," Sirius said. With mounting horror, Remus realised that whoever had done this hadn't bothered with a knife. He'd simply scratched furiously at the door until his nails broke and his fingers bled.

"Peter," Remus said. Sirius shook his head.

"Peter's not this mad," he answered. "This was Lucius Malfoy."

Time actually stopped for a second, Remus was sure. Then Sirius took a deep breath that sounded like a rumble of thunder, and things clicked back into place.

"We've got to warn everyone," he said. "If Peter and Malfoy are in the castle, they'll come for Harry – fuck, they'll come after *Draco*."

"Go," Remus said. "I can't run, I'll slow you down."

"Yeah, I'm leaving you here for Lucius Malfoy to find," Sirius retorted. "Come on, we'll go as fast as we can."

His breath was hitching by the time they reached the Great Hall again, but they'd made good enough time – nobody had begun to leave, and Dumbledore was still at the head table.

"Stay here – or come in as Padfoot," Remus gasped, leaning against the outer wall. Sirius changed without question and loped inside, making a beeline for Draco. The commotion of a large black dog bolting through the Great Hall did not go unnoticed, and Harry was at Padfoot's side almost as soon as he arrived. Remus leaned in the doorway.

"Close the doors," he shouted to Dumbledore. "Don't let anyone leave. There's an intruder in the castle."

The uproar was immediate, but even over the shouts of confusion Remus heard Sinistra's sudden cry.

"Headmaster," she called, pointing at the windows on the far side of the hall.

Outside it was dark, of course, that was expected; but now the glittering lights of the Hall threw shadows on the darkness, picking out the fall of a cowl or the reflection off slimy grey skin. The Dementors were flocking at every window, gazing in. Everyone fell silent.

Remus hoped he imagined the feeling of a low hum, just below human hearing, coming from the massed Dementors.

Laocoon's Children: The Fugitive from Azkaban

Chapter 12

PG-13 for a bit of aggressive snoggery in a hallway.

Nymphadora Tonks had really been looking forward to Hallowe'en.

She was going to go to the feast at Hogwarts and sit next to her insanely smart boyfriend and say hi to all her students, and then after that she and said insanely smart boyfriend were going to go down to the Hallowe'en party at the Three Broomsticks. She'd always wanted to go to the party as a student and of course none of the tricks any student tried ever got them in, but that night she had planned on going. And after the party she was going to walk back to Hogwarts under the starlight and spend the night doing things with Severus that made her shiver happily just thinking about them. One of her friends at work had made fun of her for dating her former professor, but Dora couldn't care less. And the way Severus looked at her sometimes told her that he didn't care either, no matter what he said.

Instead of all that, however, she was sitting on the steps to the Hogwarts cellar, offering a handkerchief to a house elf with an eerily-crooked nose that was crusted all over in dried blood.

"Dobby innoo nuffin!" Dobby said, grasping his nose with the handkerchief and carefully bending it back into place.

"We know you didn't do anything, Dobby," the Headmaster said patiently. "We want to know what you saw."

"A MIG MOOT!" Dobby shrieked. Dora looked at Severus, sitting next to her on the stairs.

"A big boot," he muttered in translation. She nodded.

After Remus had burst into the Great Hall with orders not to let anyone leave, there had been a hurried conference amongst the professors before several ghosts were dispatched to check the professors' quarters and House common rooms. After half an hour most of them returned. The Fat Friar, however, was gone for forty minutes, then an hour.

When he finally returned, he reported that the painting covering the entry to the Hufflepuff common room had been ripped to shreds, and there was an unconscious house-elf nearby, just outside the kitchen entryway. Dobby, down from Hogsmeade to help with the feast, had apparently happened upon whoever was trying to get in and been booted in the face for his troubles. The painting's occupants, three medieval men who normally sat around a kitchen table playing cards, were nowhere to be found.

"We must search the castle," Dumbledore said, sitting on the step next to Tonks. He looked worried for the first time she could remember, and Severus looked positively gaunt in his concern. "Nymphadora, I am certain you understand why this is not a matter for the Aurors."

"They'll let the Dementors in," she said in a small voice.

"Yes. If, however, you would remain -- "

"Course I will," she said immediately.

"Stout woman. Dobby, you will return to the kitchen and have the elves see to your nose."

Dobby nodded groggily.

"Tell Denbigh to close down all kitchen entrances and send up hot cocoa and biscuits to the students. They will remain in the Great Hall tonight. No elf is to leave the kitchen without my express permission."

Dobby straightened and saluted with the bloody handkerchief before bolting off down the corridor.

"Come; there is much to do," Dumbledore said, rising and begining the ascent to the ground floor of the castle.

"The elf does have a history of troublemaking," Severus muttered as they climbed.

"With motivation, perhaps, but there is no reason this time -- no, I trust his testimony," Dumbledore replied. "Severus, you will search the Dungeons. If this is Lucius Malfoy's work, he may go to ground there. Nymphadora, take Argus Filch and make sure the other dormitories and tower entrances are sealed tightly. The rest of the professors will search the main halls. Give the passcodes only to the Heads of House."

"Yes, sir," Dora murmured. She glanced regretfully at Severus; no party tonight, no private affection (the only kind he showed) after. Dumbledore could not have separated them more completely if he'd sent her to Siberia.

But his hand did find hers, and he squeezed it tightly in the dim stairwell before letting go again.

"I will mind the children," Dumbledore continued. "Hagrid gets on well with the paintings; he'll try and see where our valiant cardplayers have gone, and make sure the others understand what is at stake. Canvas can be mended. Go now."

Severus veered off towards the dungeons and Dora began climbing the stairs, knowing full well that Argus Filch would be in his odious little office. Privately, she cursed Lucius Malfoy to hell and back.

In the Great Hall, the students sat quietly at their tables, watching the High Table warily. McGonagall had briskly taken charge and made the students squeeze down to one end, away from the windows where the Dementors leered in. She had then covered each window with black drapery to block the horrible sight, but nothing could quite block out the knowledge that they were there.

Remus was sitting at one end of the table, drinking a glass of brandy that Professor Sprout had fetched for him. There was more colour in his cheeks, but he looked very ill to Harry. Padfoot had not left Draco's side, and was being petted reassuringly by some of the other Hufflepuff third-years. Draco had his fingers twined in the thick coarse fur of Padfoot's neck and looked about as healthy as Remus did. The ghosts -- almost all of them, now -- were drifting around near the ceiling, speaking in low voices.

Harry glanced at Neville, who mouthed "Lucius" at him. Harry gave a slight nod. Padma was sitting very close, just across the aisle from Harry at the Ravenclaw table, and he leaned back to whisper "Lucius" in her ear.

"I think so," she replied in a hushed tone. "But how?"

"Dunno. Neville can hear them talking, maybe he knows."

He leaned forward again, suddenly, because Dumbledore had appeared in the doorway. The Headmaster crossed the room and stepped up onto the platform where the Head Table sat. He held up his hands for attention, rather unnecessarily; the room was stone-quiet.

"It appears as though there has been an intruder in the castle," he said, looking grave. "We do not know who or how yet, but the Hufflepuff dormitory painting has been slashed severely, and Professor Lupin's quarters were attacked. I am placing the prefects in charge of their Houses; the professors will need to search the castle. This naturally means that you must remain here, where you may be accounted for at any time. Stand, please."

As one, the students stood. Dumbledore waved his wand and the tables rose into the air, stacking themselves neatly against one wall. The benches followed. Another flick of his wand and the room filled with squashy purple sleeping bags.

"I have given orders for cocoa and biscuits to be served," Dumbledore said, just as small trays appeared next to each sleeping bag. "Very good. I will remain here with the prefects, so I would appreciate an absence of...monkey-business."

He turned to speak to the professors, and the students slowly began to unzip their sleeping bags and crawl inside. Harry elbowed Cricket Creevey, who'd been sitting next to him at dinner.

"Do us a favour, Cricket," he said. "Swap out with Longbottom, would you? You've pals in Gryffindor, shouldn't be any trial for you."

"Sure, Harry," Cricket said, looking as though he'd like to be closer to the High Table anyway. Behind him, Harry heard Padma striking a similar deal with one of the Ravenclaw boys, who sidled across the rows of bags and jerked his head at Draco. Draco bent down and spoke briefly in Padfoot's ear, then trotted across the Great Hall while the professors were still conferring amongst themselves. Padfoot slunk behind him, low to the ground, almost comically.

"Any news?" Harry asked Neville, scooting his sleeping bag closer to Draco and Padma's.

"Couldn't hear very well. Professor Lupin thinks it's Lucius Malfoy. Doesn't see who else it could be 'cept Peter Pettigrew."

Padfoot nosed Harry's hand, and Harry absently scratched behind his ears. The big dog wove himself around and between the four children, eyes watchful.

"No pranks for us tonight," Padma said, and Harry remembered she wasn't aware that Padfoot could understand more than he let on.

"You'd better go to Professor Lupin," he said to the dog, who snuffed reluctantly. "He's going to need you. We'll look after ourselves."

The dog gave a heaving sigh, but licked Draco's hand and crept back the way he'd come. Harry sat on his sleeping bag, and the others followed suit.

"Do you think he's in the castle?" Draco asked miserably. Padma patted his leg.

"The professors must think so," Neville said. "Lucky we were all here when it happened, you know. If we *had* gone pranking tonight he might've got us."

"Wonder how long it'll take word to get out," Draco said. "You know they'll be horrible about it. Everyone, I mean. He must've -- he must've been

coming for me, mustn't he? Why else would he try for my common room?"

Harry, not knowing what to say and not quite able to look Draco in the eye, found himself watching the rest of the Great Hall instead. Other students were doing as they had done, brokering small swaps so they could be near their friends. He noticed suddenly that they were nearly encircled by the Slytherin Quidditch team; Towler gave him a small smile and a thumbs-up sign. Hufflepuff's team was slowly drifting over too, and Oliver Wood didn't bother to be secretive; he strode right up to them and hooked his thumbs in his belt.

"All right then, Malfoy?" he asked. Harry glanced over his shoulder. The rest of the team had formed a tight knot around Ron and Ginny Weasley, probably the Twins' doing.

"All right, Wood," Draco replied. Harry had a sudden sense of smallness; next to Oliver, the four of them looked very slight and fragile indeed.

"You, out," Wood said to a nearby Slytherin, and the girl hastily retreated to an empty sleeping bag on the Ravenclaw side. Oliver settled in next to Marcus Flint and silently dared the other Captain to say anything.

"He's a nutter, and he's your dad," Oliver said. His voice was calm and even. "But mostly he's a nutter. You're not. So. Up the school and down with nutters, eh?"

"Ta," Draco replied meekly. Harry gave Oliver a grateful look. Just beyond him, Cedric Diggory was bedding down next to Cho Chang.

"So," Oliver continued, now addressing himself with admirable civility to Flint, "Ja hear about the Cannons? Their Seeker lost an eye last match."

"Perfectly justifiable foul, he was blocking the Chasers," Flint answered. "Besides, he's getting fitted for a magical replacement."

"You can't play Quidditch with a magical eye, it isn't sporting," Oliver retorted. Their bickering was oddly soothing, and Harry turned back to Draco.

"If he's in the castle, Padfoot'll find him," he said. "You can't hide smell."

"Sure," Draco said. "Listen, I'm going to sleep, kay?"

"Okay," Harry replied. Neville followed Draco's lead, and soon most of the students were, if not sleeping, at least pretending to while they talked amongst themselves.

"I think you'd better go change," Remus said to Padfoot, when the dog returned to him. "Look, there's tons of big strapping students around Draco, he'll be all right. I want to talk to you."

Padfoot rolled his doggy eyes but crept off the dais, slipping out a side door. He returned a few minutes later, walking up to Dumbledore and greeting him loudly.

"You sent for me, Headmaster?" he said, in a voice that at least the Gryffindors would hear. Dumbledore played along immediately, to Remus' pleasure.

"Mr. Black, thank you for coming. You're well-versed in the school's layout -- I was wondering if you'd lend a hand. Professor Lupin, if you please?"

Remus rose and joined the pair, the three of them now the only adults left in the Hall.

"You two are more familiar with the ways and means of getting in and out of this building than any of the students, and I daresay most of the professors," Dumbledore said in a low voice. "If you have any information, now would be a good time to share it."

"There are six secret passages in and out -- Filch didn't know about any of them when we were here, but that might've changed," Sirius said promptly.

"Seven, weren't there?" Remus asked, frowning.

"No, I'm sure it was six -- " Sirius ticked them off on his fingers. "The one behind the mirror on the fourth floor, the one under the Whomping Willow - _"

"The first caved in, ten years ago," Dumbledore said. "I doubt even Lucius Malfoy could pass the Willow unharmed, but I will see to that myself tomorrow morning."

"Right. Then there's the dumbwaiter -- that won't help, it's only within the school -- and the secret door in the library." Sirius glanced at Dumbledore.

"The library door was sealed the same year you left Hogwarts, I believe," Dumbledore said smoothly.

"That makes four. There's an old servant's entrance behind your chair -- "

" -- removed during the kitchen renovation last year -- "

"And the first-floor boys' toilet. That was the one that led to the sweetshop, wasn't it? That was our favourite."

"The door is still there, but the big oak's roots have completely blocked the tunnel. Oak is surprisingly impervious to most blasting charms," Dumbledore finished.

"That makes six. Were there any others?" Sirius asked Remus. Remus shook his head tiredly.

"I don't think so. I don't remember. I wish we had the map," he said, then realised what he'd let slip.

"The map?" Dumbledore asked, and finally they saw a dangerous look in his eye.

"We used to have a map," Sirius said briefly. "We don't anymore. We gave it to Cara Kung when we graduated."

"A few years later she told me it was confiscated by Filch. He said he was going to burn it," Remus added. "It would have shown every possible way to get into the castle, and everyone within it on any floor."

"I see," Dumbledore said. "It's quite a shame you're much too old to be given detention. Peter Pettigrew knew of these passages?"

"He did, but if they're all sealed anyway..." Remus felt deep shame wash over him. Dumbledore was a good man and hardly deserved the sort of constant betrayal they'd committed at school. Sirius was studying his shoes.

"Sirius," Dumbledore said. "You will investigate both the damaged door and the torn painting, and track any scents you find to their source. Report to me when you are finished."

"Yes, Headmaster," Sirius said.

"Professor Lupin will remain here and supervise the search. Don't trifle with me, Sirius; he's much too ill to run about the castle with you. Go."

Sirius left, looking as guilty and ashamed as Remus felt.

"Headmaster -- "

"You were young, Remus, and I make great allowances for youth, but surely even you could have seen what a dangerous weapon the map could have been. You knew what was occurring outside of the school."

"I..." Remus spread his hands. "I'm sorry, sir."

"Yes, well. The blame is shouldered equally by a dead man, a madman, and your partner in crime. There's nothing to be done now and, as you say, the map has been destroyed." Dumbledore sighed. "We won't speak of it again. Are you well enough to remain here? Please don't lie to me."

"I am. There's nowhere I'd rather be," Remus answered quickly.

"Good. I don't expect that Lucius Malfoy lingered overlong, but one can't be too careful. This search will take time, and there are places I must search personally. Take reports, make sure nothing is overlooked, and in the meantime try to keep the students from killing one another."

Remus watched him leave the Great Hall, feeling very tired by the events of the past hour. He fought down the urge to burst into grateful tears.

Harry was nearly unconscious, in the dreaming twilight that was more hallucination than sleep, when he heard rustling and soft movement across stone. He incorporated it into the passing dream, hearing it as Snape walking swiftly across the cobbles of Knockturn, robes blowing in the wind. He was eight again, nearly nine, and it was Severus Snape who had rescued him from the shop in Knockturn and carried him back to the arms of Sirius when he was lost.

Do you know what they do to children who are disobedient to their parents, in Knockturn Alley? Snape asked, not towering over him as he had when it happened, but whispering in his ear. *They eat them. Or turn them into mice.*

Even as he dreamed it, however, he was aware of other things -- the overheated curl of Draco's back against his own, the soft wheezing of Neville's snores nearby, and of something crawling up his arm.

He started awake, sure that when he struggled out of the dream it would all blow away, but instead he felt the horrible crunch-hard sensation of insectoid legs on his arm, and looked up into eyeless sockets in a red, oozing face.

He screamed, which was all he could think of to do, even as he felt Draco jerk next to him and heard his accompanying cry. The horrible eyeless face jerked forward and Harry scrambled back, tumbling against Neville's stomach.

"OOGA BOOGA!" the face yelled, just as he heard Remus call "Lumos!"

The room flooded with light. Blinded, Harry shouted again in fear and kicked.

The owner of the horrible face grunted whoofingly and keeled over to one side. Harry stared, certain that one kick from a thirteen-year-old boy couldn't possibly have done that much damage to Voldemort himself, when he suddenly realised that the red, melting face had vanished and in its place was Fred Weasley's freckled snub nose and mocking mouth.

Another shape -- George -- tossed himself to one side, away from Draco, and skidded across the floor.

"What'd you do that for?" George demanded of Harry. Harry, furiously, kicked George too and thrust himself to his feet, meaning to leap on the pair and beat them senseless, fifth-years or not.

Remus, seemingly from nowhere, caught Harry by the collar and jerked him backwards, pushing past him. Other students were sitting up and shouting about the racket; Draco was pale and trembling, still only half-out of his sleeping bag. Remus hauled Fred and George upright effortlessly, both boys doubled over from Harry's kicks. Fred clutched his stomach, George his left shoulder.

Harry looked up at Remus, who was white with rage. He didn't speak, didn't seem to be capable of talking, just clenched Fred and George's arms in his hands until Fred cried out.

"Professor, you're hurting us!" he said. Remus shook him silent.

"Good," he replied, in a low and dangerous voice. "Remember it."

He released them both, and Fred rubbed his arm regretfully.

"I should lock you out of the castle," Remus continued. There was a tremble in it that had nothing to do with grief or weakness. "I should shove you into the arms of a Dementor and see how you enjoy it."

"We were only having a little -- "

"Fun?" Remus asked, and Severus Snape could not have poured more scorn into a single word. "You think it's fun to torment other children, do you?"

Oliver Wood loomed up on Harry's other side. Slowly, the Slytherin Beaters got to their feet.

"You enjoy making light of a murderer in the castle?" Remus demanded. "You find disturbing the sleep of others entertaining, Fred Weasley?"

Fred looked down at his feet.

"Do you, Fred? George?" Remus inquired.

"Nosir," they replied.

"What happened, Harry?" Oliver asked softly. Harry opened his mouth and found his throat was too dry for speech.

"Draco, are you all right?" Remus asked, without looking away from the shamed, penitent twins.

"I'm fine," Draco whispered. Padma, who had missed the action, was sitting up in her sleeping bag, arms draped protectively around his neck from behind, chin resting on his shoulder.

Remus lifted his head and raised his voice. "Does anyone else think it would be funny to play pranks tonight? Does anyone else think now is an appropriate time to cause confusion and distress?"

There was a chorus of frightened replies, scored for a few hundred anxious voices to the tune of "No, Professor".

"He kicked me!" George burst out, unable to take the shame any longer. "He knew it was me and he still kicked me!"

"You'll have worse before much longer," Remus answered coldly. "From your Head of House, to start, and I imagine from your Captain as well."

The twins looked apprehensively, pleadingly, at Oliver Wood. Oliver put one large hand on Harry's shoulder. Remus crossed his arms.

"High Table, both of you," he said. Fred and George glanced at each other, then made their slow way across the field of sleeping bags towards the front of the Great Hall. Remus looked at Oliver.

"I can take care of things here," Oliver said. "Right, Harry?"

Harry opened his mouth again and found speech this time. "Just startled," he managed. "We're all right."

Remus nodded curtly.

"Back to sleep, everyone," he called, dousing the lights once more. He charmed a small handful of green flame and Harry watched it dip and bob as Remus followed the twins back to the high table. He sank slowly back down on his sleeping bag.

"We'll kill them," Neville whispered in his ear. Oliver dropped among them, crossing his legs. Harry glanced at Marcus Flint and saw that his own Captain had slept through the entire thing.

"What the bloody hell happened?" Oliver asked in a soft voice.

"Fred and George," Padma sighed.

"I gathered that much."

"They made themselves up to look like -- like monsters," Harry said. "With no eyes and all."

Oliver ran a hand over his face. "And woke you up?"

Draco swallowed. "Guess so," he murmured.

"They're off the team," Oliver told Harry. "There's pranking and that's all well and good, but not tonight. They're off."

"You can't do that," Harry said, though he was startled to hear himself say it. "You're playing us in a week. You won't have time to train new Beaters."

Oliver gave him an odd look. "You're worried about that?"

"Well, they didn't do anything unsportsmanlike," Harry continued, though it felt as if someone else was saying the words. He felt detached from it all, as though "Harry" had fled to somewhere in the back of his brain. Oliver was staring openly at him now. "You can't punish the whole team because Fred and George are arseholes."

"Hear hear," Neville said. "McGonagall's bound to do something really awful to them, Oliver."

"I think they should be expelled," Padma said vehemently. Draco made a little choking noise as her arms tightened painfully around his neck. "Sorry," she added, releasing him.

"Sokay," he gurgled.

"We'll talk about it in the morning, anyhow," Oliver decided. "Think you lot can sleep?"

Harry and Draco nodded, though Harry privately thought neither of them actually would. Oliver waited until all four of them were once again lying silently in their sleeping bags before he crouch-walked back to his own and crawled inside.

Harry lay awake a long time, straining to hear what Remus was saying to the twins, but they were much too far away and the sudden shock had made him strangely tired. His last vision before he slipped back into sleep was of Draco's eyelids drooping slowly over his pale grey eyes.

Remus knew he was shaking visibly and he knew he was frightening the twins; he knew that even Molly, who was fairhandedly stern with all her children, and especially Fred and George, would be angry with his treatment of her sons.

"Professor McGonagall will be notified as soon as she is available, though I don't see why you want to waste her time punishing you when a dangerous man could be loose in this castle," he said to the two silent, now-sullen boys. "I will personally notify your parents of what you have done. I won't bother asking what you were thinking, because I'm certain you weren't. You do realise that you may have been mistaken for the man who attacked the castle this evening? That I might have killed you because I thought you were someone else, attacking a student?"

The twins were saved from answering by Sirius, who put his head in the door that Remus was standing in front of.

"I'm bollocks-freezing and the professors are all wandering the halls, running into each other and throwing hexes without thinking," he said. "I've done all I can -- hallo boys," he said, coming around Remus to tousel their hair. "What're you doing up? Volunteering to help? Because if you go out there you're liable to be knocked on your arses -- "

He turned at that point and Remus knew he must look actually terrifying, because even Sirius started.

"What's happened?" he asked.

"You two, sit there," Remus said, pointing to two chairs at the opposite end of the high table. "If you so much as move, you'll be sweeping halls with Filch until you graduate."

The boys obeyed silently and stiffly. Fred rubbed his ribs as they went. Remus took Sirius by the arm and pulled him back out the door, into the dim hallway.

"Did they -- " Sirius managed, before Remus slammed him up against the wall so hard he grunted. Remus pushed up against him and kissed him roughly. He knew he was shaking, knew Sirius could feel him shaking, but all that adrenaline had to go somewhere and Sirius was closest. He had felt a strong and terrible urge to hurt the twins, something that he recognised from full moons as the wolf's urge to eviscerate anything that came near his pack. Even now, with Sirius' fingers in his hair and willing body arching against him, he could feel the low instinctual push to kill.

Sirius moaned. "Moony -- "

Remus bit his earlobe.

"If I didn't have to see to the children in there," he heard his own voice rasp, low and aggressive, "I'd take you right here."

He stepped back, really more like pushed himself back, and Sirius stared at him with dark, confused eyes.

"Get McGonagall," Remus said, breathing deeply. "Tell her Fred and George Weasley assaulted two students and I'm locking them in her office for the night. You'll need to take them there. I have to stay with the students."

Sirius, still leaning against the stone, nodded slowly. He moved forward, kissed Remus a second time, and loped down the corridor, heading for the main stairs.

Remus wiped his mouth, faintly appalled at himself, and walked back into the Great Hall. The rustle of whispers that had risen in his absence abruptly ceased.