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**Breath of the Nundu**

by corvusdraconis, Dragon_and_the_Rose

Summary

[HG/SS] AU/Crackfic: One morning, Severus Snape wakes up with a furry visitor snuggled under the quilt with him. As he pulls back the quilt, two glowing eyes lock with his, and everything is turned on its ear. As the rest of his visitor crawls out from under the covers, he realises he has a problem. There is a Nundu cub in his bed, and for some reason, she's bound to him.

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Beta Love: The Dragon and the Rose and Dutchgirl01, who keep me insane, er, I mean sane. Wait… Hrm.

Breath of the Nundu

Chapter One

I'm Not Sure What Happened, But I Swear I Wasn't Drunk

Quiet is essential to my process. Perhaps it entered your mind unconsciously. Were your dreams filled with two flounders slapping together? A ketchup bottle being squeezed repeatedly as a nearby walrus issues a death-rattle?

-Sherlock, Elementary

Hermione sniffled to herself as she sat alone in the dark. She wasn't even sure where she was. One good look at the troll had sent her tearing through the halls, fleeing for her life.

She was convinced the magical world hated her. No one liked her. They talked about her behind her back— hell, they even talked around her and in front of her. The redhead, in particular, had a major grudge against her. She saw how he glared at her like she was a freak who didn't belong here. His black-haired best mate, while he was a little more polite about it, seemed to agree with him, shaking his head every time she raised her hand to answer something. How was she supposed to prove she was able to learn how to be a part of the magical world if she didn't answer the questions?

It wasn't like she could go back to being a Muggle after finding out she was a witch and that magic truly existed. She could never not love magic, but the people— why did the people have to be so cruel?

To be fair, she admitted, not everyone was out to get her. Her transfiguration professor and head of house seemed stern but quite kind. Her charms professor seemed to think she had great talent. Her potions professor, however, seemed to be taking something out on her, and she had no idea why. Madam Hooch seemed to think it was odd that she didn't like flying. Most students, she had said, look forward to flying out of all of their classes. Still, even Madam Hooch was kind to her, offering to give her a little one-on-one attention after the classes were done for the day. She liked her professors, well, most of them. It was just her supposed peers who were making her life miserable.

As for going home, she didn't want to do that either. One, leaving the magical world behind would make her old life feel even more bleak. Two, her home life wasn't as cheery as she liked people thinking it was. Her parents put on a cheerful face to the outside and professional world, but the truth was her parents were more than happy to send her away to school— any school. Boarding school, magical or otherwise was just a bonus. Did her parents love her? Hermione really wasn't sure. Most of the time, Hermione felt like a fashion accessory, to be shown off and bragged about in public, but when it came to home life? Not so much. It was part of why Hermione was so deeply into reading and studying. Burying herself in her work was something she had ample practice with.

She had thought that coming to Hogwarts would have opened a new door into making new friends and possibly finding a reason or a joie de vivre, but so far, all she had were housemates who scorned her and laughed at her, and non-housemates that pretty much did the exact same thing. The only
people she seemed to get along with were her professors, and that just ostracised her all the more with her supposed peers. She had never felt so very alone in her entire life.

_I'll be your friend._

Hermione looked up. "Who's there?" She sniffled, wiping her face with her robes.

_I am everywhere. I am here._

Hermione blinked. It was dark in the room she was in, and she really hadn't been paying that much attention to her surroundings when she was running for her life. The troll had followed her for most of the way, and then a door had suddenly appeared just when she needed it. Thankfully, the troll had not discovered the same door. "Who are you?" Hermione asked, her curiosity rising.

A soft glow filled the room, and Hermione was drawn to it. It was a small room, but it was shaped like a circle. In the cardinal directions there was a statue. There was a lion, a snake, a badger, and an eagle. At the center of the room, however, was a very large cat. A leopard, perhaps?

_I am the stone beneath you. I am the magic around you. Do you not feel my breath as you walk through my corridors?_

Hermione wished for _Hogwarts : A History_ at that moment. Surely it would tell her what this place was.

Chuckling filled her mind. _I am the history. I am the future. Even now, I am the present. The book writes itself at my accord._

Hermione approached the center of the room. "You are Hogwarts?"

_I am magic made from child._ The voice was warm and gentle. Hermione couldn't help but feel safe. _We can help each other, if you wish it._

"I'm no one special," Hermione replied bitterly. "Just ask anyone."

_Special is not always measured in popular opinion. Nor is it always measured in the love one receives from those one wishes it from._ Hermione gasped as a figure stepped out from the eagle statue. It was a tall, pale-faced woman with dark red lips and raven-black hair. On her head was a delicate diadem with a sapphire as deep as the midnight sky.

"Are you Rowena Ravenclaw?" Hermione boggled.

"All that was magic in her, perhaps," the figure said with a strong Scottish accent. "An echo of a time long past, but a testament that little changes."

"You sound just like I imagined her," Hermione confessed.

Rowena smiled slightly, her form shimmering into that of a tall man with long auburn hair and a bushy beard, laughing green eyes and a sword slung over his shoulder. Then he was a balding older wizard with a pointed salt and pepper beard. He stroked his beard thoughtfully and fingered an ornate silver locket around his neck. Then, the form shimmered again, and it settled on a plump middle-aged woman with warm blue eyes and red hair that glowed a deep orange in the sun, even though there was no sun in the room. Her hair was short, but wavy and arranged in an intricate braid around her head. Her eyebrows were delicate lines that arched over her eyes like a smile.

"Ah, this is probably best," the witch said with a smile. "Come, child, let me wipe those tears away."
She took a homespun ivory handkerchief from her earthen-coloured robes and blotted Hermione's tear-streaked face. "I wish I could offer you a drink from my favourite cup, but I fear it has been lost to one whose heart was never full and whose mind is ever full."

Hermione frowned, not understanding.

The elder witch tutted. "There now, fear not. In magic there can be many great things. Good or bad. Light or Darkness, but these are only words. Magic is magic, and magic is forever. Here in these walls, all the more so. We have watched you, my dear. From the moment you came within our halls. We have heard your tears."

"You heard me?" Hermione squeaked, suddenly abashed.

The older witch smiled. "We hear everything in this walls, my dear. I'm sure there are some who would be very frightened by that, if only they knew."

"Why me?" Hermione asked.

The older witch sighed, sitting down on the nearby chair that simply appeared. She patted the seat beside her. Hermione sat down, tentative but curious.

"Do you wonder sometimes, how some things simply appear when you need it?" She asked.

Hermione nodded. "I lost my toothbrush. I looked everywhere, and then it just showed up in my water cup."

The blue-eyed witch smiled. "Help comes to those who need it here, my child, but sometimes, we fail those we wish we could have helped. Then, like the casting of a die, we cannot go back and make it right. But, with a little help, perhaps we can make things better. For you. For those who live here. For those who seek shelter in these hallowed halls."

"What can I call you?" Hermione asked.

"Do you remember what you felt as you crossed the lake the first time? The elder witch asked. "That feeling as you saw the lights and the fires as the moon rose over the parapets?"

Hermione nodded.

"Think of that, for it is I," the woman said with a gentle smile. For a moment, she flipped into the three other faces, which Hermione was beginning to realise were the four faces of the founders of Hogwarts.

The elder witch, who Hermione realised was Helga Hufflepuff, was kind, warm and genuine. "There is a deep emptiness inside you, child, but there truly does not have to be. What you need cannot be found where you have been looking, but it can be with a little faith and perseverance."

Helga stood and walked up to the sculpture in the middle of the room. Glowing emerald eyes lit up with her touch. "We need someone," she said softly. "Someone like you. Someone who still hasn't lost their faith in magic, even when they have lost faith in many other things and people. There are a great many wrongs to be righted here inside these walls, but only someone like you could help us."

"What could I do?" Hermione asked, puzzled. "I can't even seem to make friends properly."

Helga took Hermione's much smaller hand in hers. "We would be your friend, child—the song that sings to you as you fall asleep and the very air that sustains. You are not alone here, if you have the
ears to hear and the heart to feel."

Hermione set her jaw and squared her shoulders. "How can I help you?"

Helga smiled. "Did you know, the Nundu is a very noble magical beast? They were once considered the kings and queens of all Africa, more so than the most magnificent of lions. It was said to be highly intelligent and a most impeccable judge of character, far greater even than the finest purebred kneazle. But there was only one problem. The Nundu absorbs the ambient energy around it, and the emotion it feels is channeled through its breath. Somewhere along the line, the Nundu was captured and abused, and its emotion grew to be focused on hatred. That hatred was passed on from one to the next, from sire and dam to cub, until almost all Nundu that have ever been seen breathe out their distrust and hatred into a miasma of lethal disease, killing all those around it lest they themselves be killed in turn."

Hermione frowned, her hands touching the marble sculpture with interest. "That is so unfair."

"The Nundu, much like you, young one," Helga sighed, "is often sadly misjudged. Did you know that Godric and Salazar wanted to make the crest of Gryffindor House a Nundu, but the children were so afraid of the very thought of such a beast that they chose the lion instead? They tried for an actual gryphon as well, but that wasn't well received either. The tales of gryphons eating wizards who didn't live up to their standards was found to be somewhat unsettling." Helga winked at Hermione.

Hermione grinned, suddenly feeling much more at ease.

Helga stroked the sculpture of the Nundu with a smile. "This school needs a protector, Hermione. More so now than ever before. We need someone who can hear our call, set about our tasks, and protect all those who live within the walls. More so, to protect those who have never stopped serving those who come here to learn and grow. We have chosen you, Hermione. You are fit for this task, but it will be your choice alone to make... if you choose to have faith in us."

Hermione stared into the glowing emerald eyes of the statue and then back up at Helga. "I want to help. I want— to believe in magic."

Helga looked upon her kindly. "Perhaps, in time, you can come to trust in magic as well, but, can you trust in us? Help us, and we shall help you find the peace in your heart you have always longed for— long before now."

"What do you need me to do?" Hermione asked.

Helga smiled. "Be our eyes and ears. Be our guardian in spirit and body. There are tasks you will know to do, and only you will hear of them. How you perform them is entirely up to you. In exchange, we shall teach you, as you sleep, the skills that will allow you to make your way in the world at such a time when your tasks are completed and you feel safe enough to show everyone who you really are. All that you have learned. All that we shall give you. This will all be yours to keep. A thank you, as you will, for your service. And, should you decide to remain our champion, then we will discuss other— job perks."

"But how? I'm just a first year," Hermione reasoned.

"Every wizard or witch, great or small, started as a person much like you, Hermione," Helga said with a softened expression.

Helga's form changed into that of the elder wizard with the pointed salt-and-pepper coloured beard
and dark grey eyes. "It is simply what you do with what you have learned that makes one the truly
great person or the one doomed to remain ordinary."

"Will you help us, child?" The man asked sombrely. "Help restore honour to the houses of our
names. Restore balance to Hogwarts as it was in the beginning."

Salazar's form changed into the younger, bright-eyed Godric Gryffindor. "Remind those who live
within this walls that chivalry is not only for the brave." His form changed back into Helga's.

"Hard work is not only for those who live under the banner of the badger," Helga added. She
changed into the pale-faced, raven-haired woman.

Knowledge is a thing to be shared often, To fail in this," Rowena guided, "is to fail the future."

Rowena's form returned to the warm-eyed Helga Hufflepuff. "Will you help us, Hermione? Help us
bring peace to Hogwarts."

Salazar Slytherin extended a large hand to Hermione. "My house would have you believe me to be a
bigot—a man whose hatred for the Muggle-born outweighed all else. The truth is that once we were
all Muggle-born. Most of us came from magic that sprung from the mundane, save those like Merlin
whose conception was, even in lighter tales, nothing short of supernatural, but even he was
supposedly born from a mortal woman."

Hermione tentatively took the elder wizard's hand, nervous in the face of the man who, as he said,
had a reputation for being unsavory to those such as herself.

He placed a warm hand on hers. The truth is, I instilled the hat to pick out those people who were
born to lead, born to cunning, drive, and wiles, but in so doing, I had inadvertently reinforced the
misconception that such things came from the purity of one's blood. Those who were most apt to
lead or mislead were also born of families who would see themselves raised above others for no
other reason than blood rather than hard work and deeds. They would see themselves like the divine
rulers of old, whose main trait was being connected to the divine seed of a rampant and virile god
with a lack of self control."

Salazar sighed, patting her hand gently. "It was my fault, you see. I trained him, my apprentice, and
he did learn all the things I did teach but one: that magic was born in the blood, but that blood could
spring from a vacuum in a seemingly fathomless sea. He took my partial lessons, and did what any
Slytherin is well-known for: he outmaneuvered me. He shamed me, making me look an addled fool,
then he took my place at Hogwarts. Then, he did modify the Sorting Hat to favour those with
supposedly pure blood over potential and talent right under my old friends' noses. I don't blame them,
you see. I taught him— everything."

Salazar took in a deep breath and looked into Hermione's eyes. "I will promise you, Hermione. If
you take up this cup and drink, I swear to you that I and my oldest friends, we shall teach you
ourselves what it is to be a witch so that you may one day teach others the way it was meant to be."

Rowena was looking at Hermione very seriously. "At first, you will not remember much of yourself,
and this will be done deliberately. You must make your allies with a purity of purpose unmarred by
any previous judgements."

Godric took Rowena's place. "You must be anchored to what made you human lest you lose
yourself along the way, and thus, when you find those that you judge most needful of your care,
comfort and help, you will become bound to them—they as your anchor and you as their comfort.
Then, and only when the bond is true, we will come to you in your dreams and begin our lessons."
Helga took Godric's place. "And only when that bond has been tested and found true will you begin to remember yourself and hear our voices again while you are awake. When you are ready, we will ask you to attend to the tasks that require your special talents. You may find, however, that some of the tasks happen without your even knowing it. Some wrongs can be righted simply by being there before the event happens or even as it happens."

"How will this be possible?" Hermione asked, looking perplexed as though the task would be impossible.

"You will become our Nundu, Hermione, our champion," It was Godric that was smiling at her now. "You will grow up in the halls that you will guard and protect. You will learn its secrets and its people, and perhaps even the secrets of its people. And, in the end, I pray, you will defend us of your own will, not by oath or duty bound."

Hermione swallowed. "Will it hurt?"

Helga's warm eyes smiled. "I cannot promise you that life will not hurt, dear child. Life is life. The physical change shall never hurt you, and your presence will ease the pain of those who are in most need of it. It is our penance, you see, for failing those we should have helped long ago but could not. Through you, if you are willing, we shall bring balance to the school again."

Then, Helga was not alone. The four Founders of Hogwarts stood before Hermione, looking at her with varying states of emotion. They surrounded her, but not so unkindly.

"It is your choice, child," Helga said. "You may take as long as you wish to decide. When you do we shall know, and no matter the choice, we shall watch over you."

Hermione bit her lip. "Could I think about it?"

Helga smiled. "Of course, child.

"Remember," Rowena said. "Not all is what it seems in Hogwarts."

"Not all cruelty is without reason," Salazar added, "but some cruelty is, sadly, for its own sake."

"True wisdom is to know the difference," Rowena agreed.

"Bravery is to stand up for injustice, especially when your peers believe otherwise," Godric said with a nod.

The large statue of the Nundu burst into magical particles and reformed into Helga's hand. It was a locket with a great cat trapped in amber. Around it a hundred some glyphs were etched. A dark blue sapphire was suspended in the amber, the beast's paw upon it like a ball under its foot. Surrounding the cat was the eagle, the badger, the serpent, and the lion. She placed the locket around Hermione's neck. "When you are ready, we will know. Whatever you decide, Hermione. We will never fail to watch over you."

Hermione nodded, sniffling a little.

Helga pressed her lips to Hermione's right cheek. Rowena placed hers to Hermione's left. Godric pressed his lips to her temple. Salazar drew her head to his and gently pressed his lips to her forehead.

"Walk in safety, my child."
"Hermione! Where have you been?"

Hermione bolted upright in the Common Room sofa chair. Her eyes were wide and her hand went to her throat. She froze as her hand alighted on the warm thrum of magic contained in the locket.

"Oi, Hermione," Ron fussed. "Where were you? You had Harry here worried sick about you. There's a bloody troll loose in the school."

"Maybe he was just sick, mate," someone snickered somewhere in the Common Room. "Sick of listening to her prattle on." More snickering came from around the room, causing Hermione to flush hotly with embarrassment.

Ron shook his head.

"Hey, you seen my copy of *Hogwarts: A History*?" Neville asked from the side. He was digging frantically through his stack of books. "I have to write that essay for Snape, or he'll give me another detention on top of the one I already got for blowing up that cauldron."

"The one I accidentally poured the flaming potion on?" Seamus asked sheepishly.

Neville glared darkly at the other boy.

Ron scoffed. "You don't need a book, mate. Hermione is here." He shoved her forward with his hand. "Just ask her. I'm sure she'll just spout it out like the good little bookworm she is."

"Don't be such a git, Ronald," another voice chided.

Hermione looked up hopefully towards her unknowing saviour.

Percy Weasley looked at his brother with disgust. He looked Hermione over. "You okay? We were worried, yeah?"

Hermione nodded, silent.

"Next time, stay with us, okay? They are still dealing with a troll downstairs. You could have been hurt."

Hermione nodded again, chastened.

Percy's gaze softened. "Why were you not with us in the Great Hall, anyway? It was— what is that?"

Hermione's eyes widened.

Percy's fingers touched the pendant around Hermione's neck. His eyes narrowed as he pulled her to the side.

"Where did you get that?"

Hermione cast her eyes down. "I— it was given to me."

"Given? By whom?" Percy asked suspiciously. "I've seen that pendant before. It's trapped behind crystal in the Hall of the Founders. First years don't have access to it. How did you get it?"

"She probably stole it off one of the upperclassman," someone snorted, eavesdropping. "They are always making replicas in Transfiguration class."
"I di— " Hermione stammered. "I didn't steal anything!"

"Given then, stolen. Whatever," the blond Gryffindor said, waving his hand as he went back to his book. "Girls."

"McGonagall will sort this out," Percy said, jutting his chin. "Come along, Hermione." He shoved her in front of him and out of the portal to McGonagall's office. "Stealing is a serious offence, Hermione. We don't tolerate it here at Hogwarts."

Hermione fumed silently, having seen first hand what the twins did all the time "in good fun."

"McGonagall is off helping the other staff," Percy said. "I have to get back to the dorms. You will stay here and wait for her. I'm sending her an owl to let her know the situation."

"I didn't steal anything!" Hermione blurted, scandalized.

"If that is true," Percy said, eying the locket with clear suspicion, "then I will apologise to you later. I will not have someone under my watch accused of stealing and end up being accused myself of not properly following up on it as a prefect."

He gestured to a seat opposite McGonagall's office desk.

Hermione sat down in it, her jaw grimly set.

A group of Slytherin walked by, escorted back to their Common Room by a prefect. They cat-called at her. "In trouble already, Granger? Figures. She doesn't know any better, being an uncivilised Muggle and all."

The group laughed, hustling down the hallway.

Percy snorted. "Stay here, Hermione," he ordered, closing the door firmly behind him.

Suddenly, the door opened again. "Oh, and give me the necklace. I'll give it to McGonagall. If what you are saying is true, then she'll give it back to you."

Hermione's eyes grew very wide. She shook her head back and forth wildly in negative.

"Hermione," Percy cautioned.

"It was a gift!" Hermione protested. "It's all I have."

Percy sighed. "If it really was, then you'll get it back," he admonished. He reached to take the locket from her.

The locket flashed with magic, a tendril like the limb of an octopus lashed out and slapped Percy's hand.

Percy had his wand out as he pointed it at the locket. "Where did you get that? Did my brothers put you up to this?"

"What?" Hermione gasped, horrified. "No!"

"If you are going to get along here, Hermione Granger," Percy warned. "You would be best served to stay well away from the likes of my twin brothers. For that matter, it would be best if you stayed away from my family altogether. Ronald is an utter failure. He can't even take care of Scabbers without losing him. Fred and George will end up getting you expelled, and if you think you're going
to get in with the famous Harry Potter, then you'll have to get in line with the entirety of bloody Gryffindor."

Percy gave her a disgusted look. "Don't leave this room, Granger." He slammed the door behind him, leaving Hermione alone as the tears streamed down her face.

She clasped the locket in her hand tightly, feeling it instantly warm in her hand. "I'll do it," she whispered. "I accept your offer."

Hermione padded down the shadows of the hallway corridors, her paws making absolutely no sound as she walked along. She had been worried about something, but she now couldn't remember what that was. In fact, her heart was far lighter than it had ever been. It seemed as though a heavy weight had been taken off of her shoulders. As she walked down the corridors, she felt the magic in the walls and felt even better. It was like a hug coming from everywhere at once, and she liked it.

She batted at a moth and chased it down the hall. It flew up towards the portraits, and she leapt up to bat at it, her paws whapping up against the portrait.

"Hey!" the portrait said. "Watch it there, kitty."

Hermione laid back her ears. She hadn't been expecting that.

The moth fluttered down the hall, and she chased after it. If there had been any awkwardness in her change in body, she was easily shaking it off, and her thoughts were lighter than they had ever been in her life. She couldn't even remember what she was thinking about before. It seemed so distant and out of mind. It felt good to be alive, and everything was— MOTH!

Hermione leapt up into the air and snapped her mouth around the moth with a clack of her teeth. The offending insect was gone in an instant, but the moment it hit her stomach, she realised she was hungry. Positively starving. She bounced down the hallway, keeping to the shadows and following the school's natural leylines. They tickled her smoothly furred skin as she walked, and she liked how it made her feel. She mrrowled to herself, the golden locket around her neck rang like the sound of a Tibetan temple bell, its sound ringing in the air with a grounding thrum.

Exploring was fun! This was so much better than— well, she really couldn't remember, but she was definitely having fun now!

A rustle of feet caught her attention, and Hermione dove behind a nearby pillar, lowering her belly to the ground. Her tail lowered, and her ears flattened tightly against her head.

A thin, twitchy little man with a turban on his head shuffled by, and Hermione flattened against the ground. Her tail lowered, and her ears flattened tightly against her head.

A thin, twitchy little man with a turban on his head shuffled by, and Hermione flattened against the ground. He smelled like some sort of spice and— rot? Why would he smell like rot? Hermione growled softly, and pressed her body to the floor until she practically blended into the stone. Something told her to stay low and remain unseen, and she listened to the little inside voice.

"Yes, yes, my Lord," he whispered. "Wouldn't it be better if we told him? He is your servant af—"

"No!" A sibilant voice hissed angrily. "No one shall see me until I am ready to be seen."

"Yes, master, of course," the twitchy man groveled, seemingly to himself.

Hermione bared her teeth, irritated, the fur on the back of her neck rising stiffly. Then the man hurriedly disappeared down the corridor.
She waited until the man turned the corner and slunk down the hall, ears flicking from side to side as she listened to the goings on of Hogwarts on multiple levels. She heard a muffled groan coming from somewhere above, and then she came upon the moving staircases.

Hermione narrowed her eyes. Something about the moving staircases was bad, but she couldn't remember what that was. Still, the sound of distress was unmistakeable. She had to investigate.

Clinging to the side of the moving staircase to move her way up unseen, Hermione found herself on the third floor. She sneezed at the dust, but something more interesting caught her attention. It was a light, herbal smell mixed with blood, and something that smelled like— wet dog?

Something in the back of her head told her something was behind the far door, and the soft groan confirmed that. Hermione hunkered down as the door opened and slammed. A tall, dark-robed figure limped by her, pausing only long enough to insure the door was well and truly closed. He hissed to himself as he walked, favouring one leg. She could smell the blood.

"Have to make sure it's well guarded, Severus," the man muttered. "Hagrid has something that can help us, he says. Giant bloody arse three-headed dog. How is that even a good idea? Albus is going to get someone killed. He's going to get me killed."

The man limped away, and Hermione felt a tug of sympathy.

Curious, she investigated the closed door.

She sniffed the edges, wrinkling her nose as the musty scent of canine wafted out from the edges. She eyed the handle of the door and grabbed it with her paws, but it didn't open. Suddenly, a large slam came from the other side accompanied by furious barking and low growling.

Hermione moved backwards, making a tiny nervous sound. She wasn't exactly small, but whatever was on the other side of the door sounded very, very large.

Curiosity brimming, she eyed the handle of the door again. She flexed her claws, one by one, extending six exceedingly sharp, dagger-like claws.

Six?

Didn't she have five— no, six seemed right. Hermione shook her head. Of course she had six claws on each paw. What self-respecting example of her species wouldn't have six? Hermione scratched her chin with her rear foot. Her thoughts felt strange. Maybe she needed a nap— and a zebra to gnaw on. That would be spectacular. She could settle for nice water buffalo, or a roc egg— better, a whole roc! She wouldn't have to eat again for days.

Hermione shook her head and yawned, stomach rumbling insistently. Something told her that there was something she had to take care of before she could go on grand adventures. The man who had limped past her seemed interesting. He smelled interesting, at least. He also seemed in dire need of a friend, and Hermione was all about making friends. At least, she thought she was. Wasn't she? Oh well, she was now!

Hermione froze as a large, hairy, shambling man walked by, whistling to himself, dragging a leg of something that smelled… absolutely delicious. She licked her chops, drooling and her stomach growling insistently.

The man opened the door, dragging the leg of something behind him. Hermione tore after it, sliding behind the man without him seeing her and then diving into the adjoining room. The room was terribly dark, but as her eyes adjusted, it became wonderfully clear.
The hulking man didn't even see her. He dragged the haunch in, and a giant three-headed dog whined and growled to get either at the man or at the food. Either seemed likely.

"There now, ya big lug," the man said, patting the beast with his hands. "Food for all three mouths. "You keep guarding this here door, and the Headmaster says he'll let ya stay even though those mean folks at the Ministry say you're untrainable and misbehaved. Psh. Don't let them tell you that you're dysfunctional, eh? No, sir. Alright, time for me to go. They need help moving that big troll out of the lavatory. Apparently he was showing off to the female troll he thought he saw. Not too bright, those."

The man patted the dog a few times and then shuffled out, tripping slightly as he left, so the rug moved under him. He brushed himself off and left. Hermione's ears swiveled and she heard the door's muggled bump against the rug instead of the door latch.

Well, at least she had a way out!

Hermione's stomach growled.

The three-headed canine lifted his head and began to bark furiously. He launched on the thick chain he was on, so much so that the stone that was anchoring the heavy wrought iron ring was starting to pull out from the grout work. The dog was so determined to get at her, that he seemed forget that breathing was rather a necessity, and he suffocated himself on the chain just enough to collapse on the floor.

Hermione flicked her tail with disdain. Not the sharpest tool in the shed, that one. She padded over and tore into the haunch of meat, savouring it with delighted mrowls. She dragged the meat over into the corner with her, pulling it under herself in fine feline tradition. Ideally, she would like to pull it up somewhere and hang it from a tree. Vaguely, she remembered a rather nice-looking tree outside on the grounds.

Hermione shook her head and ate ravenously. The meat was glorious, if just a little too fresh to be completely tender. A nice hang for a few days would make it tender and render the taste even richer. Mmmm… meat. She licked her mouth and fastidiously groomed the blood off her paws.

The three-headed dog was starting to rouse again. And now he was pissed that she had his food. He lunged to the end of the chain, the stone starting to give. Foam was flicking everywhere in thick globs.

Hermione flattened her ears to her skull and arched her back, reaching out her large paws to swat the huge dog in the face. Her sharp claws smacked the canine squarely on the nose.

The first head yelped and whined, head sagging.

The second head, spurred on from the attack on his brother head, lunged at her again.

Hermione swatted him straight across the face, her claws and her hissing growl warning him away.

The second head helped and sagged, ears drooping.

The middle head, which seemed to be the wisest of the three, whined softly and lowered his head down in submission. His tail wagged at her as he whined and licked his chops.

Oh, well, if that's all you want.

Hermione dragged the haunch into range and sat down next to it.
All three heads looked at her warily, eyeing her sharp claws.

Hermione yawned and scratched her jowls with her rear foot, causing the locket around her neck to tinkle musically.

The dog’s tail thumped wildly against the ground at the sound, and he pulled the food over to him, all three heads digging in as though it were his last meal on earth.

Unlike Hermione, he made short work of the entire haunch, seemingly uncaring that the food would taste better if left to hang around for a day or two. Then, when he had crunched open the bones and gnawed out the tasty and rich marrow, he focused his three heads on her once more.

**SLURP!**

**Slurp. SLURP!**

Triple tongues hailed her from every side, tipping her over. Hermione mrowled, unhappy with being rather wetter than she preferred. She batted at the dog’s muzzles, keeping her claws in, but the dog seemed to realise the warning and whined, setting his heads down to look at her. Hermione rubbed up against him, partly to rid herself of the canine drool and partly to express forgiveness for his transgressions.

His tail beat the ground in rapid smacks, vibrating the ground. Hermione rubbed her cheek against each muzzle, smearing her scent over him, letting every other feline like herself know that this drooling canine was hers. She had no idea what that meant, really, at least for the future, but it was all about labeling your stuff. This guy was her stuff. Well, he was now.

The dog wagged his tail and whined, seemingly happy with being assimilated into her territory.

Hermione gave each muzzle a raspy lick and padded back out the door, slipping between the space the rug had left to allow her escape. The dog whined, straining against the chain to follow her, but not in the barking maniacally I-really-want-to-chew-on-you kind of way. Hermione mrowled apologetically and the dog whined and set his head down, tail still wagging.

She pushed the carpet out of the way and used her front paws to push the door closed. She had a feeling that if a student happened to come by, the last thing they would want to do was find what was on the other side of that door. Making a mental note to come back when she had some sort of food in tow, she trotted down the empty hallway, following the pleasant scent of herbs and toffee.

Toffee?

Hermione followed the scent from shadow to shadow. Thankfully, no turban-wearing half-rot smelling man showed up to offend her nose, and she was glad of it.

As timing would have it, just as she found the source of the toffee-herbal scent, she found him leaning heavily on the wall as he traced some sort of intricate pattern on the nearby tapestry. The wall next to it moved aside, exposing a portal into a private quarters. He was limping even more heavily this time, and weariness practically radiated off of him, so much so that he didn't notice the distinctly feline shadow slip between his robes and the door and into the room beyond.

She watched him most of the night from under his very thick bed curtains. He seemed so terribly exhausted, weary, and alone, and her heart ached for him as he muttered to himself. He seemed to be speaking to someone as though he were not alone, and part of Hermione seemed to feel like she knew that feeling well enough.
He went about his evening rituals with a strange fervor. Even with the pain, everything was done just so. He winced, rubbing his leg as he graded parchments until every last one was finished, and then he pushed the heaping pile aside with a sigh.

At one point, an old man's head came through the floo and started to converse with him.

"I'm sorry, Severus," the man in the floo said. "This cannot wait. I need you to fetch it for me tonight."

"Yes, Headmaster," Severus said wearily, standing, wincing as he tried not to stand on his badly swollen ankle.

Hermione waited under the bed until after he left, busying herself by sniffing around the room and inspecting his things. She really liked the smell of his robes, and she flopped over them, rubbing herself on them as she cheek marked those too, as hers.

Hours passed, and when the sound at the door came again, she dove back under the bed once more.

Severus dragged himself in, somehow managing to look even wearier than before. He groaned, flopping on the bed, barely even coherent enough to do much more than take off his dragonhide boots and lay his head on the pillow before his soft snores began filling the room.

Hermione crawled out from under the bed, mrowling sadly. She leapt up onto the bed and took the duvet in her teeth and pulled it over him. Something told her that this man needed companionship in a bad way. Thankfully, she was well equipped to be there for him in that capacity.

She snuffled his wounded ankle and licked it assiduously, cleaning the blood off it. Then, she snuggled up under his arm, pressing up against his chest while under the duvet.

Severus' arm wrapped around her, pulling her close, perhaps the hunger for some sort of companionship asserting itself on an instinctive level.

But as his warmth and scent wrapped itself around her and she shared her own with him, she purred happily, closing her eyes as the first sleep after her change dragged her off into oblivion.

She had found her person. That was reason enough to have a celebratory sleep. Maybe he would have meat for her in the morning.

Purr.

"Severus?" Minerva called his name, but it sounded like she was somehow speaking underwater.

"Erghfff," Severus groaned. "Why is it, Minerva, that you feel you must inflict yourself upon my person in my own chambers? I already regret giving you access to my wards."

"Severus, you didn't show up for your first class," Minerva huffed. "That is considered reason enough for a wellness check."

"W— what?" Severus grunted, pulling the duvet and quilt back.

"Severus, have you been drinking?"

"Of course not, Minerva," Severus sighed, sitting up. "You know about my father."

"Well, it's not at all like you to miss class, Severus," Minerva chided. "Are you feeling poorly?"
"No more so than usual," he sighed, rubbing his eyes. "What time is it?"

"Half past noon, dear," the Animagus tutted.

"Half past— I never sleep past eight at the most!"

Minerva raised a curious brow.

Severus flipped the duvet and quilt over and yawned widely.

"Oh, my word," Minerva gasped, utterly entranced. "Severus, wherever did you find her?"

"What?"

Severus looked down.

Minerva reached down, extending her fingers. "Oh, what a beautiful little girl you are," she cooed.

A large bundle of fur uncurled and stretched, from the tip of her nose to the end of her tail. Big, glowing orange-green eyes stared up at them both. The distinctively spotted cub let out a soft, squeaky yawn as her paws wrapped gently around Minerva's fingers. She licked Minerva's hands with her rough tongue.

Severus stared blankly down at his bed. "What? Minerva, I swear, I've never seen this kitten—cub—animal before in my life!"

"Just look at her paws," Minerva fussed. "She's going to grow up to be a monster. She looks like a leopard cub, but she's considerably larger. Oh! And those beautiful eyes!" She picked up the cub in her arms and the furry creature purred loudly, placing her paw gently against Minerva's face.

Snape stared, looking as though he were trying to retrace his steps very, very carefully. "Minerva, I don't think that is a leopard."

Minerva gave him a look that roughly translated to "Well, I don't really care what she is, Severus. She's adorable."

One sharp eyebrow rose into his hair automatically, but the pseudo-leopard cub shot her tongue out and licked his face while on her back in Minerva's arms.

Snape's expression softened. "I have no idea how she got here." He started to walk away, and the little beast made a sad little whuff, resting her head on her paws and gazing up at him with her soul in her big, orange-green eyes.

Both Minerva and Severus felt a sudden shock, as though a very large bear rug had zapped them at once with a powerful jolt of static electricity. Then a strange, wondrous, spreading warmth filled them at once and they collapsed together.

The wayward pseudo-leopard cub then yawned, kneaded their robes, and curled up between them, purring loudly.

Lucius Malfoy stepped through the floo with a yawn. His wife's latest socialite soiree ran until the wee hours of the morning and involved far too many people that he really didn't care for. It was enough to make him swear off humanity as a whole, but thanks to his current "status" he had an image to uphold. There was also the fact that there was stirrings the Dark Lord was going to rise again, and if that was true, he would have to find his way into the good graces of his "fellow" Death
Eaters again, lest his young son grow up without a parent— or any parents.

Severus was the only person who truly understood. Even as a half-blood wizard, he was far more intelligent than even the more talented sort they had at Hogwarts. He knew things, saw things, and then, like most Slytherins, took note of the information on the off chance it might prove useful at a later date. Strangely though, he and Severus had become friends, which wasn't something Lucius every admitted to lightly, if he even admitted to it at all. He could lie, of course. That was hardly a new thing for him, but it wasn't a lie when it came to Severus.

It had been because of that friendship that Severus had been Marked. At the time, both of them had their reasons. Severus because he had nothing left to lose, and Lucius because he thought he had everything to lose. Both of them had been wrong in it, but it wasn't like you got branded by the Dark Lord and then said "Mm, no. Sorry. This really isn't for me."

It was the Mark that insured that.

If Lucius ever failed in his tasks to the Dark Lord, if he did indeed return, he had no doubt that his family would pay the price for that.

Lucius looked around. Severus was normally one to have tea ready for his arrival, or a good brandy. While Severus himself rarely if ever drank thanks to his paranoia that whatever vice created his father would transfer to him, he did have very good taste in liquor.

Scratching sounds came from the adjoining chamber, and Lucius was curious. Severus didn't have a familiar or any sort of fascination with animals. He'd turned down Lucius' offer of a peafowl or two, a good dog (stating he wanted nothing that reminded him of Black), or even an cat. Truly, Lucius thought, Severus needed something to take care of. He needed something to distract him from his tendency to brood over things so hard that his gaze would melt iron. Every time he had asked Severus to babysit Draco, his boy would scraily proper. It made him wonder what was exchanged. It wasn't that he ever believed Severus to raise a hand or wand to a child, no. It was a just the man seemed to find the very idea of children as distasteful as an allergic reaction to air.

Curiosity demanding a high toll, Lucius investigated the next room.

He arrived into an unmitigated disaster zone. Chairs were tipped over, curtains were shredded, the rug was slung over to the fireplace and half of it was burned. A feather pillow was torn to shreds, and there were about a thousand little feathers scattered all over the floor. Oddly enough, the fragile teaset on the nearby table was untouched, and the handmade quilt that Lucius' grandmother had made Severus was unmolested.

It was probably a good thing. Lucius' grandmother had made it specially for Severus after the younger Snape had stayed hunkered under one of her quilts all weekend while visiting the Malfoys during Christmas holidays. Knowing his gran… she's rise up from her grave to sort that out offence. She's always been one to take care of "her people," and Lucius had the sinking suspicion that the reason he'd made so many bad choices was because she hadn't been there to hex the sense back into him. Merlin knew, it didn't get bad decision making from his mother's side of the family. His mother had tried to guide him right, but his father had unfortunately been the voice of "reason."

Every was entitled to a few mistakes in life, right?

*Flomp.*

Chewing noises came from below him.
There was a leopard kit—cub chewing on his Italian dragonhide boots?

_Nice, Severus. You can't be seen with a normal cat, so you get yourself an exotic?_

Orange-green eyes stared up at him with a distinctive glow.

_Wait. This wasn't a leopard cub at all!_

Lucius froze. He thought about his wand and then twitched. It took one hundred skilled wizards to take out the animal he was thinking this one was. Okay, so this one was a fairly small one, but did that really matter?

The cub _mrrrowled_ and stood on its hind legs and placed oversized paws directly over his family assets.

Lucius flinched. Forget the sodding Dark Lord. This was far, far worse.

Sure, they hadn't managed to have any children since Draco, but there was always at least the slimmest possibility that they might, by some miracle have another child, and well, he didn't want to lose his ability to father one due to a very happy cub of a magical feline species.

A double groan caught Lucius' attention. Severus and McGonagall scraped themselves off the ground with a few scratches to the head and bleary-eyed looks.

"What happened?" the Scottish witch asked.


"She's not my," Severus yawned, "frisky animal."

"I never imagined Professor McGonagall to be the exotic animal collector, Severus," Lucius replied.

"Oh, she's not mine," Minerva said.

At the sound of Minerva's voice, the cub perked, pushed off Lucius, and bounded over to the elder Animagus with a series of happy _mrrrowls_.

Lucius gave Minerva a look.

"Minerva is not lying," Severus said, waving Lucius off with a gesture the blond wizard was prone to using often. "She just showed up today."

Lucius twitched the cover of his mouth. "You do _realise_ that is a Nundu cub, Severus. Those aren't exactly your run of the mill anything."

Severus frowned. "What?"

Lucius let out his breath. "That," he said, pointing to the pseudo leopard cub that was stretching her claws out on the nearby chair, "is a Nundu cub."

Watching the cub lick Minerva under the chin while listening to her purr, Severus raised a dubious eyebrow.

"Check the paws," Lucius said, splaying his hands like claws. "If there are six digits, she's a Nundu, or a mutant leopard. If it is the latter, I will apologise and pretend this never happened." Lucius paused. "There is the saying 'green spot in the ear, disease to fear'. We learned it as children, well, at
least Malfoys do. Not that most people would ever get close enough to even a potential Nundu to find out for sure."

The cub was happily wriggling in Minerva's arms and didn't seem to want to settle for inspection.

Severus placed a pale hand on back of her neck and gently pinched the fold of loose skin there. The cub stilled instantly, going immediately limp in instinctive response to being transported in her "mum's" mouth. Severus gently pulled her head back and inspected her ears. Then, he pressed into the pads of the cub's oversized paws and pressed into them, splaying out all six clawed digits.

"Green spots in the ears," he confirmed. "Six digits per paw." He released the nape of her neck, and the cub squirmed and licked Severus under the jaw and placed her carefully sheathed paws against his face in a playful bat.

"She hardly seems to be the murderous representative of her species," Minerva noted bemusedly. "Even her breath smells… like elderberries. We've both been in the room with her all morning. We're obviously not diseased or dying."

Lucius tentatively put out his hand to the cub, and she lick, lick, licked his fingers with her rough tongue. "Yes, I would tend to agree, but the species identification is true. It must be."

Lucius frowned suddenly. "How do you know it's a she?"

Minerva and Severus both looked away to stare at the destruction of the room instead of Lucius' face. Lucius stared not so very politely.

"She doesn't have those parts, Lucius," Severus muttered.

"What?"

Severus gave him a very pointed look.

Comprehension hit Lucius like a thunderclap, and his face abruptly flushed. "Oh."

"Honestly, Lucius," Severus scoffed. "You can figure out she's a bloody Nundu, but you can't figure out she's a female?"

Lucius sighed. "I'm a wizard, not a magizoologist, Severus. There are limits to the things I remember from childhood."

The cub reached out and batted at Lucius' walking cane. Despite himself, his expression softened.

"Adorable," Minerva said.

Lucius twitched. "Yes," he said almost painfully, as if the admission might cause him to die horribly of some sudden onset of dragon pox.

Lucius opened his arms out in invitation, and the cub immediately perked up, clambering over to him. Unfortunately, her rear claws got stuck in Severus' robes, and she began to panic. She yowled, paws and legs flailing. There was a sharp odour of pickled herring as she squirmed about.

Severus hissed as her claws dug into the flesh of his arm even through his thick robes. Blood trickled down his arm as Severus' face twisted in pain.

"Severus!" Minerva gasped, moving to help him. Blood was trickling down his arm in rivulets of
crimson. She held his arm as she summoned bandages with her wand.

Severus struggled against her touch. "I'll deal with it!"

"Severus! You're bleeding! Let me help you," Minerva ordered.

Severus gave her a panicked look as she sat him down in the nearby chair. He watched her pull up his sleeve, exposing his faded but still present Dark Mark.

"Ach," she tutted. "You're going to scar. These are deep gouges." She ignored his protests as she chanted over his arm, guiding her wand over the wounds.

"I feel you staring at me, Severus," Minerva sighed. "I haven't been patching together cubs for decades without gaining considerable skill from watching Poppy."

Severus flinched and tried not to yank his arm back.

The cub, seemingly mollified, crawled into his lap with a rumble in her throat. She nudged away Minerva's hands to lick Severus' bleeding arm, her rough tongue gently rasping against his skin as she made seemingly apologetic noises.

Minerva hoisted the cub out of the way. "You're not helping, love," she tutted. "Let us help him now."

The cub mrowled unhappily, headbutting into Minerva's arm and grappling her robes with her paws.

Severus and Lucius, however, let out a low mutual gasp. Severus' arm was healing before their eyes, but that was not the only thing. The sickly looking, dormant and greyed mark on his arm—the badge and mark of a Death Eater—was bleeding out as though it were his blood. The wounds from the cubs' claws were knitting together rapidly. His skin, pale as it always had been, righted itself into perfectly pristine order—unmarked and unmarred in any way.

Severus and Lucius exchanged disbelieving glances.

The cub wriggled free from Minerva's arm and pounced on Severus' lap, headbutting into his chin with an audible thunk, her purrs radiating with her affectionate attentiveness.

Severus's hand soothed the area between her ears, his fingers ever so gently rubbing the soft fur of her ears.

The cub rolled over onto her back, exposing her furry belly, her paws up in the air. The scent of freshly baked bread filled the room.


The cub flattened her ears and bounded off Severus' lap and dove under the somewhat tattered remains of Severus' bedsheets. Severus cast a quick spell on Lucius, turning him into a gaudy corner lamp, making an apologetic face as he threw his nightshirt over it.

The headmaster's head popped out of the green flames. "Ah, there you are, the both of you. I've been looking around the entire school for you. I had to pull the emergency floo ward nullifications just to get through all your bloody wards, Severus. Are you both down with dragon pox? Do I need to call Poppy?"
"No, Albus," Minerva said. "I was just checking on Severus. He seems to have come down with a little something from Mr Longbottom's latest potion explosion."

"Oh dear," Albus said, stroking his beard. "You do look a little peaked, my boy. "Minerva, I hope you aren't coming down with it too. You look a little pale too, my dear."

Minerva waved him off. "No, Albus. I'll be fine. It just took me a while to get through the horrible wards, is all."

"Ah, well, I think I may need a nap myself. Maybe after I get some of those wonderful currant pasties," Albus answered. "Sorry about your wards, Severus. I'll... well, I have no idea how to put all of those back in place. You give paranoia whole new meaning."

Severus glared at the older wizard.

"Now, now, you know it isn't natural for both of you to be missing in action at the same time," Albus placated. "I was worried. You do understand that, I hope. Seems like the entire school just slept in today. I've never seen anything like it."

Severus muttered something that may or may not have been in Aramaic.

"Do I need to find a substitute for tomorrow, or are you on the mend, Severus?" Albus asked.

"I should be fine, Headmaster," Severus answered, sniffing somewhat loudly.

"Ah, good, well," Albus replied. "Feel better soon, then." The headmaster's head disappeared and the flames died down.

Severus gestured towards the floo and closed the panels to prevent any further intrusions of the prying-meddlersome-wizard kind.

The cub poked her head out from under the bed and, sensing no further danger, padded out from under her hiding place. The air smelled oddly of sulfur as she glared at the closed floo, perhaps sensing that no one had appreciated the intrusion.

Severus waved his wand, and Lucius stood where the lamp had been. The blond wizard raised an eyebrow as he removed Severus' nightshirt off his head.


Lucius sighed. "It was understandable. I appreciate your keeping my occasional visits secret from the meddling old man." He rubbed his nose. "What is that odour?"

"Brimstone," Severus answered.

The cub perked her ears and placed both paws on Severus' chest and looked up at him adoringly, her bright orange-green eyes stared into his.

"That was not supposed to be your name," Severus told the cub rather sternly.

The cub mrowed at him, placing her large paw against the side of his nose.

"It seems she has chosen it herself," Lucius commented, brushing lint off of his person.

Severus cocked his head to the side to regard the furry interloper that had just woven herself into his life. "What am I going to do with a Nundu?" Severus grunted.
Minerva, who had shifted into her smaller silver tabby form, was exchanging sniffs and headbutts with the newly dubbed Brimstone. The cub seemed perfectly happy to imitate the smaller cat and mirror her actions.

Lucius’ hand went to his arm as he rubbed it habitually. "I could think of a few places with which to start," he answered sombrely.

"There you go, Master Snape," the overly cheerful older witch said as she put the magical identity tags on a fine leather collar. "Here, now, young miss. Please let me put this on you."

Brimstone mrowled, putting her paw against the woman's face as she licked her upside the face.

The woman chuckled, clipping the collar around her neck. "This will keep you nice and legal, young lady."

"Mrrrowl!"

The woman smiled, tapping the collar tag that clearly said "Brimstone" on one side and "Masters Snape and McGonagall — Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry" on the back. "After extensive testing, I can confirm a few things. One, she is, indeed, a Nundu. One hundred percent. Two, her breath is not the instantly fatal disease riddled type, which I can only presume the old legends saying that Nundu breath is directly correlated to emotion. As she is clearly very happy and quite taken with you and apparently all others she meets, her breath seems to be neutralised. I would, however, recommend that you never leave her in any situation where she might learn to hate someone."

Severus and Lucius exchanged glances as Minerva scratched her head.

"We work at a school with rampaging hormonal teenagers," Severus noted.

The cheery witch swallowed hard and smiled disarmingly as if to say "Well, can't win them all."

"Thanks to Mr Malfoy paying to have the familiar confirmation and aptitude test," the witch said, signing the parchments and stamping them. "Brimstone is protected under the law as your bonded familiar. This gives you certain rights. You may, of course, take her anywhere you are in magical establishments. If you take her to Muggle areas, however, there will be a charm on the collar that will shrink her down and cloak her visually to resemble a bengal housecat, to avoid considerable— panic."

Lucius raised a brow. "She is a Nundu. Panic will be the first thing on most people's minds."

The witch smiled. She scratched Brimstone behind the ears, earning her a happy purr. "I am not one of those magizoologists who allow fear to cloud my judgement of a species as rare as the Nundu. Much like gryphons, there are always things the history books do not tell us. Such as sins of the human race against another powerful magical species."

Brimstone whapped her tail against the witch's arm and mrowled.

The magizoologist witch tapped her quill against the nameplate on her desk that somehow managed to cram so many titles on it that her name was crowded to the side. "I'm not sure how much experience either of you have with true familiar bonds?"

Snape and McGonagall shook their head. "I fear we know very little, Master Greenbrier."
"Rosemary, please," she laughed. "I do not stand on formality here. Now, what you may notice in the days to come, as the bond solidifies, is that you will start to see things that she sees or hear things that she wants you to hear. What she shares with you will depend on how much she thinks you will need the information. You will, in time, be able to tell her, but it will take time, practice, and a little trial and error. While we have many people with familiars, very few have the actual full bond. That you do is really quite special. She will cross land or sea to get to you if she thinks you are in trouble, but if she is in trouble, so, too, will you, so be careful where you choose to send her."

"Because of her special dietary concerns, you will be given a house-elf that is authorised to apparate to the game preserves. Brimstone's tags have permits to allow her to hunt in familiar hunting area. The tags will allow her in automatically and prevent her entry from areas that house restricted preserves. This will keep her from accidentally eating an endangered species if you haven't had time to brief her on it."

Lucius stifled a laugh. "Can you imagine, Severus? Having your giant overgrown cat taking out a bald eagle or a wild water buffalo across the pond?"

Severus sputtered slightly at the mental image.

Minerva looked strangely amused.

"Well everything looks set here," Rosemary said. "I am glad you decided not to wait to have her registered. It will save a lot of unnecessary note, if you will be traveling to places such as past the first floor of the Ministry, St Mungo's, major events such as say—the World Quidditch Cup, where large crowds gather and might tend to panic, owling ahead is required due to her special circumstances. This is only due to her species' rather fearsome reputation. As for traveling in public, the common thing to do is to place your hand on her shoulder when she becomes big enough that this is possible, as you walk. This signals to others that she is with you and she is fully under control, to avoid inciting panic and causing unfortunate misunderstandings. Seeing as she is an endangered species, we have a very keen interest in keeping her healthy. I would appreciate it greatly if you would allow me to check on her from time to time and make sure she is continuing to do well. I will owl ahead of time, of course."

"That is not a problem," Severus immediately agreed.

Minerva nodded in the affirmative.

"If anyone should attempt to harm her, however, do not hesitate to inform either the Aurors or myself. You may also inform the Endangered Magical Species Consortium as well. She is protected, under law, and that offers both her and yourselves certain rights as her caretakers," Rosemary concluded. "Any questions at any time, do owl me. I will be happy to help."

"Thank you for seeing us on such short notice, Master Greenbriar," Lucius said with a nod.

"You are most welcome," Rosemary said with a smile. "To see a real, live Nundu—one so healthy and not trying to kill us all, is a true pleasure."

They all shook hands and excused themselves.

Brimstone, who was sprawled blissfully in the middle of Rosemary's desk seemed sad that she was losing another talented ear scratcher.

Rosemary smiled. "I will see you again, my soon to be very large friend."

Brimstone gave her a rough slurp with her tongue and jumped down from her desk, following
Severus and Minerva out as she wedged between them and headbutted their hands for scritches.

The magizoologist chuckled. "Hogwarts is in for quite an adventure," she said to herself, stamping the paperwork and filing it away. "I hope they're prepared for it."

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**Nundu? Who do? You do?**

*If any of you happened to be lucky enough to be at the Familiar Registration Department at the Ministry yesterday, you may have been seeing spots. Literally.*

Deputy Headmistress Minerva McGonagall and noted Potions Master and Professor Snape from Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry were seen bringing in a large leopard cub into the Familiar Registration Department yesterday. There was only one minor difficulty: it wasn't actually a leopard at all.

'Green spots and breath of sickness', the old nursery rhyme strikes fear into the hearts of many witches and wizards the world over. Stories of a hundred skilled wizards being needed just to stun one doesn't help the species reputation, but Master Rosemary Greenbriar said in an interview, "I've never met such an endearing young cub. She will be quite a tribute to her species, for sure. I have no doubt that with proper care and handling, she will be perfectly well-mannered. That is not to say she won't be dangerous. A Nundu is a Nundu after all, but a Nundu's lethality is based entirely on negative emotion and intent. I'll tell you plainly: the only thing that is going to get her to breathe disease on you is if you try to hurt her, her bondmates, or threaten her home. Like all familiars, they are much smarter than the average animal of their type, and they can learn very quickly."

"No, Professor Snape has not been breeding Nundus at Hogwarts," Headmaster Dumbledore scoffed at this reporter's question. "Believe me, I would have been aware if that was the case. How she arrived here is anyone's guess. It's quite possible someone was trying to transport her via the floo network and mispronounced something."

With a sharp rise in illegal exotic magical animal smuggling, the Nundu is at the very top of the endangered and protected animals list and special permits are required to even enter their habitats let alone own one, but special exceptions have been made in this case due to the confirmed familiar bond. Thanks to extensive testing at the Ministry, it has been confirmed that she is fully bonded to her people, and that is very good news for the safety of those attending and working at Hogwarts.

"Nundus are extremely protective of their homes and their people," Magizoologist Harcon Weiss told us. "What they consider their homes, however, spans an entire territory and all that is within it. As long as her people introduce her properly and socialise her, she will protect everyone within Hogwarts without hesitation."

Nundus were once highly sought after as treasure room guardians, and it was due to this that the grudge between Nundus and humans eventually came to pass. Unlike gryphons, who often mauled and flew away, Nundus transformed into a peaceful yet protective species into one that breathed disease and killed entire villages. Rumour has it that a Dark Wizard tampered with the species, but modern research seems to indicate that the Nundu's ability to breathe disease depends entirely on emotion.

Many magizoologists are lining up and sending owls to have the opportunity to meet Wizarding Britain's rising Nundu star, but at the time of this interview, the only thing the Nundu, named Brimstone, seems to want to do is chew on this reporter's boots!

All I can tell you, dear readers, is that she has the most glorious eyes, and the last time she breathed
on me, she smelled of elderberries. So far, I haven't died.

A word of caution to our readers: Nundu, phoenixes, gryphons, and the like are considered critically endangered and protected animals. Having one without the familiar bond or a permit is illegal. Harming one is doubly so. For those of you who feel like running out to try and find any of the above in the hopes of developing a familiar bond with them, don't.

"True familiar bonds are exceedingly rare," Master Fabien Rochelle stated. "You are far more likely to get attacked by one of these rare animals than getting one to bond with you. It's simply not worth the risk. You are far better off wandering through Eyelops or the Magical Menagerie and finding a bond with one of the many fine animals there. Those animals have been raised around people and are much safer options for anyone looking for a possible familiar."

Those of you who may be interested in working with the endangered animal program are encouraged to contact Master Harmony Blackbird by owl. She has a volunteer network spanning the globe.

"We're always looking for volunteers," Blackbird said. "Help us out, and who knows? Sometimes, one of the animals will choose you, not the other way around."

Blackbird, who has been one of the world's first witches to develop a confirmed familiar bond with an East Asian Bluebottle Kirin, is one of the world's most famous and talented magizoologists. Back in the seventies, she made history by publishing her articles about gryphon intelligence and family structure.

For those of you wishing to catch a glimpse of the beautiful and infamous Brimstone, we are saddened to inform you that her main place of residence is at Hogwarts, and now, thanks to the approval of the Board of Governors, both she and her bondmates have been given permanent quarters there. Hogwarts is a private magical boarding school that is closed to the public. The Headmaster, Albus Dumbledore, asks that you please avoid causing unnecessary distractions for the students and staff when sending any correspondence in regards to non-official Hogwarts matters.

[Photo of Brimstone tracking a moth with her eyes, paw outstretched]

We have, thanks to the kindness of the Deputy Headmistress Minerva McGonagall and Potion Master Severus Snape, been permitted to take a few photographs for your enjoyment.

An owl dropped the Prophet into Severus' bowl of oatmeal with a flop, causing the potion master to curl his lip in disdain. To top it off, the hare-brained owl perched between Brimstone's ears and hooted tiredly.

The Nundu moved her eyes to peer at the owl curiously, having thankfully come preprogrammed with the knowledge that owls were not chew toys.

"At least it wasn't Errol this time," Minerva tutted, passing the crumpets.

Severus gave her a look that translated as, "You just had to bring a Weasley anything into this, didn't you?"

Minerva chuckled to herself.

Severus noted that the Headmaster was raking him over with his eyes. Severus stared back at him only to get that annoying twinkling eye regard.
Minerva looked up, and Albus turned away as he always did, looking the typically dotty old man. Severus, however, knew better.

Albus had not been happy at all to learn that Severus' Mark had mysteriously disappeared. Severus, of course, had been well nigh ecstatic, as much as one such as he ever appeared ecstatic. The Mark had been his most brazen act of shame in his life. Every bad thing he had ever done had been reflected by the irrefutable evidence of his worst mistake, the hated Dark Mark. Severus' usefulness to the old man, however, had largely depended on his ability to use the dark wizard as a spy and errand boy. Now that he no longer had the Mark, if the Dark Lord should rise again, Severus would be utterly useless in that regard. It wasn't as if Albus could order him to go get himself Marked again.

Severus narrowed his eyes. Or, maybe he would, for his much-vaunted greater good. This time, however, Severus had serious protection: Brimstone. The chances that any Death Eater would dare to come within a Quidditch Pitch of him, knowing full well that Brimstone would likely be nearby was slim to was also the supposition that if she had taken away his Dark Mark that she'd just do it again, thus foiling Albus' plans.

How did Severus know?

Severus smiled knowingly to himself.

He wasn't the only one running around with a newly-pristine arm as of late.

After Nundu-sitting for Severus for a night, Lucius Malfoy had also gained the blessing of the rambunctious cub. She had, much as they expected, not known her own strength, and she had inevitably clawed the blond wizard's robes to shreds. Then, mollified by her actions, she sidled up to Lucius and licked his arm clean. Pristine clean. Dark Mark free, even.

Not even a single day after Lucius had gone home, a pair of owls had arrived bearing a large basket containing an assortment of exotic jerked treats for Brimstone and a batch of Severus' favourite double-chocolate fudge brownies that were his secret indulgence. Narcissa Malfoy was nothing if not thorough and prompt in sending thanks when thanks were due.

As Brimstone gnawed happily on what may or may not have been the remains of a Chianina cow's femur, Severus savoured his brownies. Albus, however, kept glaring daggers at him.

Then, in a perfectly unnerving Slytherin move, Severus arched a brow and gave him a tight smile, staring the Headmaster directly in the face.

Albus turned away, seemingly engaged in an intense conversation with Sybil Trelawney. *No, that wasn't an obvious move at all, Albus.*

A strange phenomena seemed to be going on around Brimstone. There were the fearful ones, of course, but there were some curious types who were willing to not only brave the fearsome Nundu, but they were willing to approach him just to get a better look at her. He wondered how long that might go on, especially when she started to grow into her paws and ended up larger than a Pleistocene tiger.

Severus looked over at the Slytherin table. Draco was looking particularly happy today. It probably had a lot to do with his father's recently obtained "freedom." There were many things Lucius could not do while still under the Mark, and one of them was treating his son the way he truly wished. In just a few interactions, Draco had turned over an entirely new leaf of confidence without the demeaning arrogance he normally overcompensated with.
Lucius had dumped a load of old "questionable" artifacts off at Borgin & Burkes in Knockturn Alley, having no more need to hold on to them. The shop owner, of course, was more than happy to take them off his hands. One thing, however, Lucius did not give up. Instead, he had met with Severus and showed him the one thing that boded ill for their future: the diary of Tom Riddle.

It was blank.

Both Lucius and Severus knew that blank very rarely meant empty. Spells, however, revealed nothing. No, they would have to put their Slytherin heads together and figure it out in due time, but not today and probably not tomorrow. For now, they would take comfort in the smaller victory of losing their Marks together and the blessing of a Nundu who had appeared out of nowhere.

As he caught Minerva's eye, he thought about the fact that she had reacted to the recent sight of Severus' Dark Mark with clear sadness. That had surprised him.

"I'm sorry I wasn't more available to you back then, Severus," she had said as she touched the pristine skin where his Mark one lay. "I wish I had known. I took the Headmaster at his word, and only now am I starting to see how very wrong he was."

Severus, full of emotion from seeing his Mark disappear before his very eyes, placed a warm hand over hers. "You are my friend now, Minerva. That is more than enough for me."

Severus suspected there was some unspoken history between Minerva and Albus. The thing was, he was almost positive that even Minerva didn't know what that history was. If that happened to be true, that meant that somewhere along the way, Minerva had been "relieved" of her memory of the events in question. There was an exceedingly short list of people skilled enough to do that, especially to a witch as powerful as Minerva, and not get caught.

That realization made him much more sympathetic to Minerva's past with regard to himself. There was a pretty good chance that had Minerva known anything about the favoured Marauders and their disreputable activities, she may well have walked into the Headmaster's office with an earful primed and ready to be unleashed, only to walk out wondering why she was mindlessly walking the halls at two a.m. for no reason she could discern. And whatever happened to that wizard named— Ra, Re, Robert— Robert Fiarbain. What did Minerva call him? Rabbie? Why couldn't he remember clearly? There was something— damnation.

Severus looked down at Brimstone, thinking the name Robert Fiarbain very, very clearly into her head. I need you to remember this name for me. It's important. He prayed she could.

Brimstone looked up at him with her orange-green eyes and lay her head on his leg.

Robert "Rabbie" Fiarbairn.

Severus narrowed his eyes. In fact, that was starting to make more and more sense.

No, perhaps whatever fate that had brought Brimstone into both of their lives was truly benevolent. Now, at least, they could face the future together, and with Lucius no longer tied to the Dark Lord, he could keep his family safe while he could assist Severus in the tasks to come.

Severus shook his head, confused. Daydreaming again, he admonished himself. He stared down at his half-eaten oatmeal. The house-elf, Tinky, had ported in to drop off a large and meaty bone of some— thing. Severus nodded in thanks to the new elf and hoisted the meat down to Brimstone, who tackled it with happy exuberance and crunching noises.

Severus finished off his meal and nodded to Minerva that he was going off to prepare for class. He
drifted by the Slytherin tables, looking to see if anything was out of place, but thankfully found nothing, save for Draco smashing a serving bowl of oatmeal down over Goyle's head and calling him a stupid git. That was perfectly normal. Severus wasn't concerned at all.

Brimstone padded silently beside him, nudging his hand with her whiskers and mrrrowling, chattering her teeth in excitement to be on her way. As his hand idly stroked between Brimstone's ears, she moved her head and gently licked his fingers with her raspy tongue.

He was never so glad that she was there with him.

Warmth trickled through the bond and he smiled fondly at her. They made their way down to his office, pausing only once to take points from a Ravenclaw and Gryffindor snogging shamelessly behind one of the curtains. Curtains? Really? Did they not realise that body shapes show quite well through curtains?

As he sat down behind his desk to draw up his lesson plans, Brimstone dropped the bone she had been carrying in her mouth the entire way. She added it to her "trophy" pile at the back of his office with a strange look of pride.

As he dipped his quill into his ink well, Brimstone placed her head on the edge of his desk and stared at him intensely.

Robert "Rabbie" Fairbairn.

Severus dropped his quill and stared.

Brimstone stared back at him, her long tail looped over her back and her ears perked attentively forward.

"What did you say?" Severus questioned her carefully.

He waited.

Nothing.

You're an idiot, Severus chastised himself, and you definitely need to get more sleep.

He picked up his quill and began to write again.

Robert "Rabbie" Fairbairn.

Severus' eyes grew very wide and he stared into her familiar orange-green glowing eyes. He grabbed a piece of parchment and wrote the name down on it, then, deciding that wasn't enough, wrote it again, tore the parchment in half, and stashed one of them in one of his well-loved books.

Why did that name seem so familiar?

"You wouldn't happen to know who that might be, would you?" He asked the Nundu.

Brimstone just blinked at him, cocking her head curiously.

Severus pinched the bridge of his nose. Now he was talking to a Nundu and expecting a clear answer. Did that make him insane?

Severus stood and put on his traveling cloak. He would have to send an owl to Lucius. Maybe it was one of his old contacts that he had just forgotten about in passing.
You don't forget a face or a name, Severus Snape, and you know it.

Severus hurried out the door, hastily Occluding his mind as he went. There had been a time when he thought after the Dark Lord's death that he wouldn't have to worry so much about such things, but apparently he was going to have to be even more careful in the place he called home.

"Come along," he said softly, holding open the door.

Brimstone hopped up and trotted out the door, her tail curled over her back like a flag.

He was suddenly all the more glad that Brimstone was always near him. His paranoia told him that if she hadn't been there, someone might just happen to coincidentally run into him on his way to the owlry. That same paranoia told him that he'd end up back in his chambers again without remembering how he there.

Isn't that a little too paranoid, even for you, Severus? He admonished himself.

Severus narrowed his eyes. You're not paranoid if people really are out to get you. Filling his mind up with horrifying images of Rubeus Hagrid naked and dancing the can-can, with his hairy legs up high in the air and his bits bouncing wildly with every kick. With those particularly disgusting thoughts in mind, he immediately made a bee-line for the owlry. If anyone tried to read his surface thoughts on his way there, he hoped they choked on the mental images.

Merlin knows, he wanted to.

Severus and Minerva noted a distinctive lack of antagonistic behaviour in their classes with Brimstone around. The Nundu, which did nothing but gnaw on the femur of her latest meal, seemed to have a tranquilising effect on the house hostilities. While neither of them were stupid enough to think the classes were cured, they did agree that it was nice not to have to stop and take points for a hundred thousand small infractions every day. And, now that Snape was free of the yoke of the Dark Lord, points were being taken off of every house for their acts of stupidity, Slytherin included.

He had the suspicion that Ronald Weasley was not convinced that Brimstone was a real Nundu. Most of his conversations in class when he thought Snape wasn’t listening involved telling Harry Potter and his gaggle of Gryffindor all about how a real Nundu would have killed everyone. Brimstone was supposedly just some transfigured housecat.

Brimstone, however, seemed to sense that Ron was talking about her, so every time she paced down the aisle with him, she would smack him upside the face with her tail and radiate the smell of burning sulfur mixed with pickled herring.

Ron would turn a horrible shade of green and proceed to hurl into his cauldron, which would, of course, cause it to explode. That usually blew up in his face, and his lab partner’s as well. Said lab partner would then get very, very angry and try to murder him while the rest of the class watched, jeered, and expressed their sincere approval.

Severus would have to assign detentions if blows actually connected, take points when altercations became more than verbal insults, and then pass Brimstone pieces of dried game meats from under the desk. Class had become so much more amusing. Teaching was actually starting to become—tolerable. Thanks to a Nundu, a supposed murderer of thousands, both Severus and Minerva were starting to gain a little more joy in teaching. Minerva was never the bitter teacher that Severus had been, but even she seemed much lighter of heart. That, he admitted, was a wonderful thing to behold. Minerva seemed to lose years off of her apparent age. The lines around her eyes seemed to disappear. She smiled more, and they were not the tight, stern smiles she usually gave.

"I keep feeling like I’m forgetting someone, Severus," Minerva confessed over their afternoon tea by the Dark Forest. Brimstone was being attended by a party of no less than fifteen centaur foals, who
did everything from decorate her in flowers and vines to paint her up with muddy war-paint. The foals, who had managed to bring down their first full-grown stag with Brimstone's help, had become the pride of the centaur herd. Morale was way up, and the level of tolerance between the centaurs and Hogwarts seemed much improved.

Magorian, who had rarely shown himself before, often came to greet Severus and Minerva as they entered the forest. It seemed that he approved of the Nundu's protective territorial assimilation of the forest.

"She protects the forest, thus she protects us and our foals," the elder centaur said. "There can be no greater alliance to our people."

Brimstone, who managed to scent mark every single centaur in the herd, seemed happy to oblige. She even gained jerked treats and shared catches from their hauls, and for a hungry Nundu, that was total bliss!

Her memory for scents of "her" centaurs was proven when a neighbouring herd tried to lure off a few of the foals while they were out gathering. When a strange centaur arrived to lead the foals back to the “new” encampment, which was a common practice amongst the nomadic forest dwellers, Brimstone poked her head out from the pile of napping foals and let out a low, rumbling growl. The foals had immediately scrambled behind her, and Brimstone left the retreating interloper with a parting gift of a Nundu-sized, six-clawed swath of claws across his ample backside, marking him forevermore a stealer of foals. None, perhaps not even his own herd, would ever accept him again.

It was common to adopt lost foals from other herds. That was accepted. Stealing, however, was a crime that earned the ultimate disgrace. Wherever that particular centaur went, he would wear the badge of Nundu claws, and every centaur knew that Nundu only protected their territories.

Severus thought it was ironic that the centaur knew more about Nundu than most people. The foals didn't fear a Nundu in the slightest, and Brimstone seemed instinctively protective of them. She also kept tabs on the thestral herd and seemed to do headcounts on the hippogriffs as well. In many ways, she seemed to do much as the professors did with the students, only she was always watching. Even when dosing, her ears would flick at an out of place sound, save when she was well and truly asleep. Only then did Severus and Minerva have their turn to ensure her safety.

The foals were making forays out of the forest, as long as Brimstone was there, and sometimes Magorian would send Firenze to watch over them as well. Firenze seemed relieved that the relations between the centaur and Hogwarts was softening. To trust one's next generation in the lands of Hogwarts was a big step, and Firenze was quite happy to see it.

"How do you mean?" Severus replied to Minerva's earlier commentary.

"I wake up thinking there is a student I've forgotten, but when I try to think on it, it slips away, almost like a dream," Minerva confessed.

Severus frowned. "Is the student always the same?"

Minerva shook her head. "I think so, but—"

"It's like a dream."

"Yes."

Severus sighed. "Others have said the same, that the feel like a student is missing, but then the feeling leaves them."
"I may be old, Severus, but I remember my students. I would remember if one was missing. I've checked the logs, my records. Nothing. The only thing is—" she trailed off.

"Yes?" Severus asked.

"That Percy Weasley," Minerva sighed. "He sent me an owl the other night saying he caught a troublemaker stealing something from the Founder's Hall. I checked. Nothing is missing, and when I talked to Percy, he had no idea what I was talking about. He didn't even remember sending the owl."

"It is a Weasley, Minerva," Severus quipped.

Minerva huffed. "Yes, but—a missing student, Severus? Even Percy Weasley isn't the type to make up problems like that."

"Your sodding owl ate my rat!" Ronald Weasley's voice screeched loudly.

"Hedwig did no such thing, Ron!" Potter yelled back at him.

"I saw it! The blood! The fur!" Ron yelled, red-faced.

"You saw blood and fur, but it wasn't Hedwig, Ron," Harry yelled back.

Severus raised a brow. "Sometimes, I feel like it should be someone else. That Weasley had someone else he was always blaming for everything."

Minerva nodded. "But there is no one."

Brimstone popped her head out of the bush and mrrowled, headbutting against them both and then slapping them upside the face with her tail before flopping between them.

"Hello, dearie," Minerva cooed, petting the Nundu affectionately.

Thoughts of the missing student disappeared as both Severus and Minerva scratched and rubbed Brimstone between her ears and on her belly.

Brimstone purred happily.

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"Stand like this, Hermione," Rowena guided. "Concentrate not on the spell and how to say it but the result. The result is more important. Intent is more important. Structure is in the intent. Words are only a crutch."

Hermione stood, mirroring Rowena's posture and the way she held her wand. "But—"

"For an intellectual, Rowena," Salazar sighed. "Your teaching methods lack reason. She is but a learner. One must give reason to the learning lest they question too much and miss the lesson entirely."

Salazar moved Hermione into place. "Think, child. Why would we have Latin spells?"

Hermione frowned. "Latin is not magical."

"No," Salazar agreed. "Why then, would Latin be used?"

"Latin is," Hermione concentrated. "A root language."
"Yes," the elder wizard instructed. "A unifying language brings order unto chaos in the minds of the learner. It was a choice made long ago and it remains, but Rowena is correct. The student must have structure. The student must learn the order. Only then can one colour outside the lines. For now, you need the Latin to remember the purpose, but later, the purpose is all you will need— the intent. Do you understand?"

Hermione nodded.

"Now, Rowena is correct. Words are a crutch," Salazar explained. "But, you must remember the words so when you eventually teach, so you do not end up like Rowena who cannot remember what it is like to not cast wordless, silent magic."

Rowena huffed, crossing her arms.

Salazar arched a brow at her.

"Advanced skills must build upon the beginner," Salazar guided. "Clear your mind. Still it. Open it up to possibilities. This is what we shall do, so when the time comes, your mind will be open to the infinite, and then all doors will open to you. Magic will simple be an extension of self."

"Now, it is time for you to learn from that braggart who thinks a sword can still solve anything magic can't," Salazar sighed. "Go to him, for now. Spells will wait until you come back to us again."

Hermione nodded hopefully and rushed down the corridors towards where Godric was waiting.

"It has been a long time since I have seen you so happy in teaching, old friend," Rowena commented as Salazar fingered the silver locket around his neck.

"It has been a long time since someone has been open to my teachings given my horrid reputation. Even the Slytherins of Hogwarts seem hesitant to learn the true message," the elder wizard muttered.

Rowena tapped her fingers to her chin. "She will learn, Salazar. Even now, she is opening to the true Magic. I am hard on her because she is able. Her potential is vast."

Helga walked in. "Do not forget that drove your daughter from you, dear friend," she stated sadly. Remember that Hermione is but a child. Yes, eventually, she will be very powerful. She will be strong, but for now, she needs all the support we can give. We must be the ground she stands on. Then, and only then, can we ask of her to perform miracles. When the time is right, you will be able to ask of her to jump. With the proper faith, she will not only jump. She will fly."

Rowena exchanged looks with Helga and then nodded grimly.

"We have waited this long to find her, my friends," Salazar said. "We must not fail her now."

There was a squeal of surprize as Godric chased Hermione in the air, broom-to-broom, zooming across the sky of Hogwarts' virtual dreamscape.

Salazar pinched the bridge of his nose. "Gryffindors."

The three friends chuckled as they watched Godric teaching Hermione of the pleasures of magical learning via broom.

Hermione opened her eyes to find a very tasty-looking leg of venison had arrived, and it had her name all over it. She poked her head out from under the covers, nose twitching, but Severus' arm
was around her midsection and he pulled her close.

Purr.

Breakfast or cuddles. The choices were murder.

Hermione loved the heat from under the covers, and being saturated with the scent of herbs and toffee was made her happy. When it was McGonagall's turn to share custody, she came back smelling of peppermint and "bonnie heather." She didn't really mind that either. Both of her people were more than fine by her.

Hermione gave Severus' cheek an apologetic slurp before wriggling out from under the covers to tackle her growling stomach. The house-elf was always good about arriving with tasty food just about when she started to feel hungry. She was quite pleased with that.

Upon closer inspection, she realised she had a giant haunch of something that might have been elk. Closer sniffs confirmed the suspicion, and she gave it a cursory lick to make sure.

Yup. Elk. Mmm. Elk.

Hermione looped her tail over her back and pulled her lips back from her teeth in a grimace, scenting the air. Just right too. Tinky, at least the thought it was Tinky, was a dutiful house-elf. She had learned to hang the meat just long enough to be tender and fragrant, and Hermione appreciated that all the more.

This morning, however, she remembered she had a breakfast date, so she wrapped her jaws around the haunch and dragged it under her. Her eyes picked up the faint waver where the leys were meeting. Magic swirled on the far wall, gathering to her needs. She hoisted the haunch with her and jumped through the once-solid wall and appeared near her three-headed canine friend.

The canine startled as she suddenly appeared, giving a sharp triple-bark, and then belatedly realising who it was, he whined and tail-wagged happily. Hermione dragged the haunch over and lay on part of it, cornering off part of it for herself, but allowing the hungry dog to tear off pieces of the rest from three angles. He had learned better than to steal from under her, and when excitement became too much, she reminded him with a swift clawless cuff to the faces.

The giant-like man that came into fuss over the canine called him "Fluffy." Hermione found the name somewhat inappropriate. The canine was distinctly not fluffy. Her tail had more fluff than the dog did. Slobbermouths seemed highly accurate but not very dignified. She pondered a bit after the meat was eaten. She took herself off the bone to allow the dog to crack it open and go for the marrow.

Hermione thought.

Cerberus was the dog of the underworld. Hogwarts was hardly the underworld. She couldn't very well call him Mr Three Heads or Dog. Three was just boring, but maybe three in a different language would work better. Trois? Nah. San? No, he was Greek. Naming the poor guy in Japanese was silly. Τρία?

How did she remember Greek?

Hermione shrugged. Τρία sounded good. Tree-ah. Dogs liked trees, right? Little play on words? She looped her tail across her back in amusement. She liked wordplay.

Τρία, she thought at him, concentrating.
The three-headed dog perked from all three heads and woofed.

*You are Τρία,* she projected, focusing.

Ex-Fluffy barked happily, wagging his tail. Well, Τρία was way better than Fluffy. Calling him Pomegranate would be better than Fluffy.

*Mission accomplished,* Hermione thought to herself. *Excellent.*

Hermione yawned and rolled over onto her side. A sunbeam would be perfect right about now. This room was far too dark for her tastes.

There was a rustling on the other side of the door, and Hermione narrowed her eyes.

Τρία let out a low growl, and he stood in front of her, slavering as all three heads focused on the solitary door. The door opened a fraction as someone pushed in a large haunch of meat, rolled it in, and then closed the door.

Τρία let out a furious chain of snarling for a while and then cast his gaze down to the offered up meat.

Hermione sniffed the air. There was a spicey scent to the meat. Spicey and— rot.

She bounded in front of the meat and growled, warning Τρία away from it.

Τρία looked dubious and whined his commentary.

*Smells wrong,* she concentrated. *Smell it.*

The three-headed canine cocked his heads and sniffed, one head after another. Comprehension clicked and the dog snarled lowly. He kicked the meat over to the side and flopped down, ignoring it.

Hermione rubbed up against his jaws in approval, gaining herself a few happy licks and some nuzzles.

At least Τρία was easy to train. Maybe there was hope for a canine compatriot in Hogwarts protecting. It would nice to be able to patrol around with a friend. Perpetually drooling three-headed friends were okay too.

Maybe Severus and Minerva would like to meet her new and much more civilised friend. Hermione liked that idea. Still, he was guarding something, so taking the poor guy away from his assigned duty was probably a bad idea, at least for now, but, maybe afterwards they could have some fun.

At least she didn't have to call him Fluffy. *Ugh.*

A mental image of an older wizard with salt and pepper hair and discerning dark eyes came to mind. He was holding his face in his palm and shaking his head in clear disgust.

Yeah, she could *definitely* relate.

Salazar!

Hermione looped her tail thoughtfully. That was his name. She liked remembering names. Maybe she would remember more later.
Something tickled in the back of her mind—a vague lesson from a woman with long black hair, a thick Scottish accent, and a velvet dress.

She eyed the pile of rancid, spiked meat with a glare. Begone!

_Fwoop._ The meat disappeared.

Hermione looped her tail even more tightly with happiness. Excellent! She filed that away in her mind for the future.

Rubbing up against Τρία, she slathered her scent all over him and whapped her tail against his faces.

_I'll be back later_, she promised. _Remember to carefully sniff your food before eating._

Τρία wagged his tail and barked an affirmative in triplicate.

Hermione concentrated on having an exit, and again, Hogwarts seemed to respond, making the wall shimmer for her. She gathered herself and leapt, disappearing through the wall in a blink.

Ron glared across the classroom, watching Snape's overgrown leopard as she lazed about in front of the class. She lay with her head over her paws and her tail flicking back and forth.

"I know it's a fake," Ron told Harry. "It's got to be."

"What are you going on about, mate?" Harry scolded, visibly annoyed.

"A Nundu?" Ron scoffed. "Can't be real. A Nundu is like the size of a horse, yeah? It has toxic breath."

Harry raised an eyebrow. "Emotion-based breath weapon, mate."

"Says the papers!" Ron huffed.

Ron froze as he saw a very familiar brown rat making its way across the Potions classroom.

"Scabbers!" Ron cried. He got up to pursue, just as Brimstone snapped her jaws together with a loud clack and swallowed.

Ron screamed hysterically, "You murdered my rat!"

"_Ron!_" Harry hissed in warning.

Ron had his wand out and pointed at the lazy Nundu, who barely lifted her head from her paws.

"You cough up Scabbers right now!"

A strong, cold hand snatched Ron up by the collar. "Mr Weasley," Severus growled venomously. "Is there something you would like to _share_ with the rest of the class about why you feel the need to assault my familiar and a protected, endangered species with magic?"

Ron sputtered. "Your bloody great cat ate my rat!"

Snape's eyes flicked down to his familiar. "Why did you bring a rat to Hogwarts, much less your Potions class, Mr Weasley? Do you feel as though owls, cats, and toads are somehow deficient?"

"He's my familiar!" Ron blurted.
"That must make for some rather interesting dreams, Weasley," Snape said, his face set like stone. His eyes flicked downward as he dropped Ron on his feet. "You are aware, of course, of basic biology, hm? Some animals gorge themselves at one feeding and bring them back to their cubs, pups, or whatnot?"

Ron went red-faced. "I know she ate Scabbers! She's a murderer!"

"Do you know why rats are not on the approved list of familiars, despite their natural tendency to be quite overly-clever survivalists?" Snape asked.

Ron just glared darkly at Snape.

Severus leveled his gaze to meet Ron's. "They are notorious carriers of fleas and disease. I'm sure you've heard of the Black Plague, Weasley."

Ron stuck up his chin stubbornly. "Scabbers is not diseased."

Severus narrowed his eyes. "Maybe, maybe not. I'm sure you've kept him in a cage all this time, haven't you? Away from any other wild rats? You surely kept him safe in your dormitory and prevented him from wandering through the school and perhaps finding himself in the refuse bins?"

Ron turned red and said nothing.

"Since you seem so utterly convinced that my familiar is at fault," Snape's voice oozed venom. "I will make you a deal. I will have her prove that she did not eat your rat, and if she has not, you, Mr Weasley, will be cleaning my floor without magic and using a toothbrush tonight in detention with ten points from Gryffindor for your sheer audacity. If you are correct, however, I will apologise."

"I know she did," Ron fumed angrily. "You can't just conjure up some carcass of another rat to prove me wrong."

Severus rolled his eyes. "Brimstone. Be a good girl and share your lunch with Mr Weasley."

The Nundu stood up slowly, stretching from nose to tailtip. She rubbed herself affectionately against Snape's thigh and bonked her velvety head against his hand. Then, she gurgled, making a wet, schlucking sound, and promptly emptied the contents of her stomach on Ron's shoes.

Chunks of half-digested elk, coarse fur, and what looked disturbingly like half of an acromantula spiderling landed on Ron's feet.

Snape stared at the unappetizing-looking pile of half-digested food and his sensitive nose twitched in protest. "Alas, no rat."

Ron let out a shriek as the legs of the half-acromantula twitched spasmodically as though it was still alive. Ron hastily scrambled out of the room, still screaming.

The distinct sound of violent retching echoed in Ron's wake.

"Fifteen points from Gryffindor for contaminating the public hallways, Weasley!" Snape yelled down the hallway. "I will see you in detention tonight. Bring a toothbrush."

Snape waved his wand, vanishing the foul remains of Ronald's own lunch from the public corridor. Snape pinched his nose and vanished the odiferous pile of half-digested remains from Brimstone's hearty meal. Then, suddenly, he tilted his head, getting an idea. "Today, I think, we shall go outside and learn about collecting the potion ingredients for the purification potion, which, I might add, also
works as a highly effective air freshener. Gather your things and put them away. Meet me on the
green on the east side of the castle in ten minutes. Get. Moving."

Students immediately went scrambling in all directions.

Brimstone licked Snape's fingers apologetically.

Severus shook his head. "I'd avoid eating rats for a time," he cautioned. "If Weasley does have a
familiar rat out there, it will need to be found quickly."

The Nundu mrowled softly in agreement and leaned companionably against his leg.

"Though, if you should find his rat, perhaps you should bring it to Minerva," Severus said with a
sniff. "She knows how to properly deal with— rodents."

Brimstone gazed up at him fondly.

Severus scratched between her ears and smiled.

"These are ley-lines, child," Salazar said, his hand caressing the bright white bolts of energy flowing
through the heart of Hogwarts. "Every place has them."

"But the ones here are special," Hermione noted.

Salazar smiled. "Indeed, they are. It is why we chose this place of all places to form the school."

"They feel powerful," Hermione said, closing her eyes.

"They are," he confirmed. Unlike the energy of the human source, which is finite, leys are magic
unlimited, but they are not something that can be completely controlled. They can be coaxed, and
they can help. They can also harm when those not attuned to them attempt to manipulate them. In my
time, we had Ley-Masters, who specialised in the moving and altering of Leys. What was magical
out it was that they did not alter them unnaturally. That was their great talent. When we created
Hogwarts, we anchored the school to the Leys. It has been there so long, that there is— a living
quality to the school."

Hermione touched the walls of the school. "That explains the breaths— if you sit still on a quiet
night, you can actually hear it breathe."

Salazar smiled. "Yes. Now, what you must know is that some spells can be carried throughout the
leys, but in this you must be very careful. A spell tapped into a ley can spread throughout the entire
network. This is why life tends to punish those who attempt to harness a ley for their own purpose."

"People try to use the Leys to cast unlimited magic?"

"Try, child," he answered. "They try."

Hermione pondered the latest lesson and nodded.

"Now, so magic, such as wards, and protective spells are powered by ley magic. Also, the spell we
used to conceal your true identity to those that knew you are also tied to the ley lines. This keeps
those that did know you from thinking of you and thus compromising your safety," Salazar
explained.

Hermione reached out, her fingers gently drawing across the ley line.
"You are a creature of the leys, Hermione," Salazar said, "and the leys will protect you wherever there is magic. Do you remember how it feels to walk the hallways of Hogwarts? Or perhaps in special spots in the Dark Forest?"

Hermione nodded. "I see the shimmer. It feels like— like a tingle."

Slytherin smiled.

"Will— will people ever remember me again?" Hermione asked.

"When you are fully prepared to protect yourself," Salazar said, nodding. "And when your heart truly wishes to be remembered. You will always be a child of the leys, Hermione. It was there you were reborn as you are. It will forever sing in your blood."

Hermione bit her lip. "Salazar?"

"Hrm?"

"I won't ever forget you, will I?" Hermione asked, worry in her eyes.

Salazar put his hand to her head. "No, my child. You of all people, will remember us the best."

Hermione seemed to chew on that and, in a moment of genuine emotion, threw her arms around the grumpy looking wizard and held him tight. "I'm glad."

Salazar's face softened as his hand drew her head to his chest, tucking her under his chin. His hand soothed her curly hair gently. "We will always be in your heart, Hermione. That I can promise you."

Hermione sniffled and held him tight.

Later, as Godric walked in and saw Hermione clinging to Salazar like a burr, the younger man gave him a genuine warm smile.

"Not so grumpy after all, hrn?" Godric ribbed.

"Shut it," Salazar sniffed.

Godric placed a hand on Hermione's head as she slept in Salazar's arms. "She'll make us proud one day," he said softly.

Salazar shook his head. "No. She already is."

Godric smiled. "It's good to see you smile again, old friend."

Salazar cracked a smile and nodded.

Meanwhile, from the shadowed archway, Helga Hufflepuff tilted back her head and smiled.

"She's dreaming," Minerva said, sipping her tea.

Severus looked over to where the Nundu sprawled on his bed twitched in her sleep, paws moving slightly.

"I wonder what a Nundu dreams of," Severus wondered aloud.

Minerva shook her head. "As long as they are happy," she said with a smile. "She deserves that, at
least."

Severus nodded. "I must patrol. If you would—"

"I'll watch over her," Minerva replied.

Severus smiled slightly and nodded his head respectfully, standing, and then exiting out the portal.

Minerva pulled out the next batch of scrolls to grade and made herself busy.

"Thanks, Professor Snape," Hagrid drawled as he dragged a sled piled high full of fruit and vegetables back to his hut. "I just can't seem to keep the rodents out of me provisions anymore. It wouldn't be so bad, but Fang is utter rubbish as a rat catcher. He just sits there and practically has tea with them and all."

Severus raised a brow. Brimstone was bounding excitedly around his legs and tearing off into the bushes and running back. Fang ran up to greet them, and the two faced each other, bodies stiff, and noses working furiously.

"Fang! You be good now," Hagrid yelled.

Suddenly the two leapt at each other, yowling and barking and carrying on, making quite a ruckus as they ran through the garden. Then, just after everything looked like it was about to descend into all-out war, they flopped down on each other, panting heavily.

"Oh, well, okay then," Hagrid said, scratching his head bemusedly. "That's the most I've seen old Fang run around in weeks. You know, Nundu— no one knows how long they really live."

Severus sighed. "Are you trying to tell me to prepare for her impending death?"

"What? No!" Hagrid stammered. "I was just—" he sighed. "What I'm trying to say is that she seems to be good for you."

Severus stared at him.

Hagrid scratched his head. "Ah, er, I mean. Things seem kinda better for you since she arrived."

"Hn," Severus replied. "I guess, I'm happy for you, eh?" Hagrid said as he dropped the rope to his wagon and sighed. "The rodents are in the hut, I think. At night they raid the crops. Took a big bite out of the ol' pumpkin and stole all the seeds out of it."

"You've tried the standard methods?" Severus asked.

"Tried the traps," Hagrid sighed. "Tried having some of the detentions Accio rodents, but they ended up buried in everything from pocket gophers to squirrels, and a few bats."

Severus frowned, his expression seemingly going through a hundred and one ways to say "imbecile." "I'll see what we can do," Severus said after a while, making eye contact with Brimstone.

The Nundu rose from her position on top of Fang and trotted into the half-giant's hut. Severus waved his wand, casting a series of spells on Hagrid's hut, sealing it off save for one exit. Then, he drew some runes over Hagrid's front porch.
"I hope you have a suitable reinforced humane shock-cage, Hagrid," Severus said calmly. "Also, I hope you weren't too attached to your furniture."

"Wha—"

*Crash!*

Sounds of wanton destruction came from within. A massive cloud of dust billowed out as the sounds of tearing, ripping, and growling echoed from within. Sparrows frantically flew out of the open door along with a swarm of assorted insects.

Severus curled his lip. "Hagrid, do you live in this—hut?"

"Well, of course I live dere, Professor," Hagrid answered with a laugh.

Severus frowned and tried again. "*How* do you live in this…"

"Aw, I know it ain't much, Professor, but to me, it's home," Hagrid answered happily. "Out here, with nature. Much better than in there, trapped between stone walls, y'know."

Severus' eyebrow twitched.

Just then, a veritable horde of terrified, squealing rodents went scurrying out the door along with another huge cloud of dust. Just as they hit the threshold, however, they froze and fell over, instantly zapped into stasis. Snape guided them into a reinforced, unbreakable cage with his wand, shaking his head at Hagrid as he reached down and proceeded to do the same without magic.

Snape rolled his eyes. "Allow me to do it, Hagrid. Some of them might be carriers of something potentially contagious."

"What? Oh, of course, Professor. I dinna think of that."

A ground-shaking snarl came from within the hut, and another wave of terror-stricken rodents of various sizes scrambled out the door, only to be zapped by the trap just like all the others.

The fray continued on for almost an hour, with Severus constructing a new cage to house the sheer quantity of rodents they were capturing. Even Hagrid seemed rather surprised by the number of rodents that had been making their home in his hut.

"That might explain where all the food went, yeh," Hagrid mumbled. "Here I thought it was the dozy dog eating me out of hut and home."

Snape made a face and created yet another rodent cage, reinforcing it with an unbreakable charm.

Just as the next wave of rodents came out, Severus noticed something about one rat in particular. It was crawling over the bodies of its fellows and making a break for the pumpkin patch. Then, a blur of Nundu feline fury leapt out of the door and tore off after it, claws scraping against the ground for traction as she moved with increasing speed.

The rodent, however, perhaps enhanced by fear, was scurrying faster, almost as if being pushed by an unseen force. Brimstone roared, her jaws clacking on the rat's rear leg. The rat twisted in mid-air, squeaking in terror, biting Brimstone on the face as his claws tried to rip gouges into the Nundu's eyes.

Suddenly, there was a blistering wave of heat emitting from the Nundu's body, and both Hagrid and
Severus froze as they realised what emotion was radiating off of her body: hatred.

With a venomous snarl, she roared, and a cloud of noxious green vapour enveloped the rat.

The rat immediately fell to the ground, twitching, convulsing, and squeaking pathetically. Strange boils filled with greenish pus formed all over its body. The rat squeaked lowly, and it somehow sounded less like a squeak and more like a moan. The rat's body was expanding, growing, and puffing up ominously, looking like it was about to explode. Fur was falling off, limbs were cracking, growing, expanding, and all the while the rat was screaming like— *a man?*

"Brimstone," Severus called, his eyes black with Occlumency. He stood straighter. His face was pale and stiff like stone. He showed no emotion at all— nothing to reveal what he was truly feeling.

The Nundu suddenly jerked her head up, her wild, hate-filled eyes focused on Severus and she calmed. Her ears flattened, and her jaw slackened. She mrowled and padded up to him, tail down and a sad purr in her throat. She headbutted against him again and again, rubbing her face affectionately against his caressing hands.

Severus knelt down, wrapping his arms snugly around her, and she bathed his face with her raspy tongue, flopping on her back to expose her belly, her sheathed paws tenderly batting at his face.

"It's okay," he whispered. "Peace now."

"Um, Professor?" Hagrid interrupted.

"What is it, Hagrid?"

"I think you need to come take a look at this."

Severus looked the Nundu in the eyes, lowering his Occlumency shields as a flood of the concerned Nundu's thoughts barraged him with her need for his mental touch.

"Shh, now," Severus soothed, gently petting her ears. "I'm here now. It's okay."

"Professor?"

"**WHAT,** Hagrid?"

There was a horrible, choking cough, and Severus jerked his head up. There, where there had once been a rat, was the lesion-covered sorry excuse for a man with tattered clothes and misshapen hands. His hair was half-missing, and his teeth were grown out like—a rodent's. And the unmistakable grey outline of the Dark Mark was etched clearly into his left forearm.

Severus' eyes grew dark as he pulled out his wand. "*Stupefy. Incarcerous. Petrificus Totalis.*"

Hagrid's eyes were wide as he stared down at the rat-man's misshapen body. "Who is—"

Severus' eyes were filled with a simmering hatred. "Peter Pettigrew," he growled venomously. "How nice of you to join us."

Brimstone looked up at Severus and then at the man. She growled, her hackles starting to rise up again. Heat radiated off of her body.

Severus, quickly realising his mistake, quelled his emotion, focusing on his bond with the Nundu in favour of his hatred of the man in front of him. Slowly, her eyes lost their hate again, and she mrowled at him, gazing up at him with clear adoration.
Gently, Severus pulled her close, wrapping his arms around her. He pressed his face into her warm fur and held her.

"You are far more important than indulging my hate," he whispered into her ear.

Brimstone made a soft teeth-chattering sound, head-bonking into his chin and rubbing her muzzle against his face.

Severus leveled his eyes to Brimstone. "I need you to go to Minerva. It's very important. Stay with her until I come for you."

The Nundu perked up instantly at Minerva's name.

"Go on, go to her now," Severus encouraged.

Brimstone mrowled, rubbing up against him one more time and then smacked him upside the face with her tail before dashing up the path towards Hogwarts and Minerva.

When the Nundu's body disappeared into the castle, Severus turned back to face the incapacitated Peter Pettigrew. His dark eyes bled into a deeper, darker black. "Well, Pettigrew. Welcome back from the dead."

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**Decades-Old Murder Shocker — Innocent Sirius Black Released from Azkaban**

Nearly ten years after the supposed murder of a group of Muggles and Peter Pettigrew, Sirius Black has been released after being found innocent of the heinous crime. New evidence was revealed by none other than one of the supposed victims: Peter Pettigrew.

Pettigrew, who was assumed to be murdered by Black, something which Black has consistently denied, has been discovered to be masquerading as a brown rat, the familiar of a first-year student, at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. After being questioned both without and under the influence of Veritaserum, Pettigrew revealed that he framed Black for the murders he himself committed back then, when he assumed the form of a common rat. From there, he managed to get himself adopted by a well-meaning magical family as their pet, and has been living, until recently, as the presumably long-lived familiar of the Weasley children.

Black, who has been released with the Ministry's sincere apologies, has been given full treatment at St Mungo's in the aftermath of his incarceration. Mind-healers and Trauma-healer specialists will be working with him to erase the mental horrors left due to the years he spent incarcerated in Azkaban and exposed to the facility's infamous Dementors. His family estate and bank vaults have been unfrozen, and his name cleared. The healers are hopeful that he will recover with a few months of intense therapy and medical treatment.

"It's the very least we can do for him," Healer Brockovich stated. "The poor man was innocent all this time. We owe it to him and the memories of those who died."

The Minister For Magic refused to comment or give an interview, but the official word from the Ministry is that they have sent their sincerest apologies to Mr Black and will be settling his closed accounts and any liens that may have been accrued during his incarceration.

And who does Mr Black have to thank for his freedom? It is none other than Potion Master Severus Snape and his familiar, Brimstone, who rooted out the illegal Animagus hiding within the school grounds. While neither Master Snape or Deputy Headmistress McGonagall were available for an interview, many accolades and congratulatory owls have been arriving at Hogwarts following the
"Well, I suppose that means we really need to watch our emotions carefully around the little lass," Minerva said, sipping her tea.

"Indeed," Severus agreed, setting down the latest Prophet.

Brimstone was sprawled at their feet, flat on her back, with all four paws up in the air, snoring softly.

"It's a miracle Pettigrew managed to survive the disease, as I understand it," Minerva commented.

"True," Severus replied. "Poppy said that the only thing that saved his life was that I got him to her in time. She poured about fifteen different potions down him and chanted something the entire time. She said it was a very close thing."

"To think, he's been alive all this time," Minerva boggled.

"I'm more concerned that he's been living under the Weasley home for the last decade and no one even suspected that he was anything other than an unusually long-lived rat," Severus commented.

"Molly was absolutely horrified," Minerva confirmed. "I visited the Burrow the other day. She put comprehensive rodent wards up on the house, Arthur's shed, the greenhouse, and all of their surrounding property. She even put wards up against Animagi, but she realised that was a bit of overkill when it almost killed me when I Apparated in."

Severus stared at Minerva.

Minerva waved him off. "I'm fine, Severus. I understand her paranoia after being violated like that. I hear she adopted three cats. One, this half-kneazle that no one wanted from the store went to Ronald Weasley, to, how did she put it 'protect him from filthy imposters'. The cat apparently hates him, at least from what I've heard from the prefects and the other students in Gryffindor."

Severus shook his head. "After all of that, I am surprised she got the boy a half-Kneazle. I would think she would swear off magically-inclined anythings."

"Kneazles are supposedly great judges of character," Minerva speculated.

Twin eyebrows rose up past Severus' hairline. "Doesn't say much for the youngest Weasel boy, Minerva, does it?"

Minerva coughed, half-choking on her tea. "Severus."

He stared at her with meaning.

Minerva rolled her eyes. "Fine, fine. He's a right little horror in anyone's book. After that entire thing… running and vomiting all through the corridors as he screamed about spiders— well. At least that debacle is over with."

"Did he name his cat, or are we to be inflicted with Spot, Cat, or Bloody Hell for names," Severus asked dryly.
Minerva snorted. "The shopkeeper called him Crookshanks. I don't think they bothered to rename the poor dear."

"Fascinating name," Severus commented.

"Better than Bob, Spot, or Mr Fluffikins," Minerva pointed out.

Severus closed his mouth and shook his head in total bewilderment.

A blur of orange fur caught their attention.

A proud-looking orange cat with a fluffy tail, a pseudo-leonine mane, and a somewhat scrunched-up face padded in from seemingly nowhere. The cat padded in silently, rubbed up against the nearby table leg, and then trotted right up to Brimstone. He head-bonked her, causing her to startle, and the two felines stared at each other silently for several moments. Then, the orange cat purred and rubbed up against her. Brimstone's eyes were drifting closed again, and the audacious cat flopped down next to her and closed his eyes.

Severus and Minerva exchanged glances.

Brimstone's paw wrapped around the little cat and drew it close as their twin purrs filled the room.

"So, Ron," Cormac MacLaggen snickered. "Slept with any Death Eaters lately?"

"Shut it, Cormac," Ron hissed, angrily rustling the paper he was reading.

"What the hell happened to you, mate?" Harry asked, looking him up and down. "You look like you lost a battle with a blender."

"A what?" Ron asked, confused.

Harry scratched his head. "It looks like you had a pretty serious row with a box of scissors, mate."

"It's that bloody orange beast mum gave me," Ron groused unhappily. "The half-kneazle cat from hell. She's convinced that all her kids have to have a good cat if they don't have an owl."

"Crookshanks did that to you?"

Ron harrumphed. "Yeah. He finally had it out with me and left. Hopefully, he went off somewhere to die."

"That's not very nice, Ron," Harry frowned, feeding Hedwig an owlnut.

"It's a bloody menace, it is," Ron groused.

There was a low rumbling growl from the entrance portal as Brimstone shouldered her way through the door. Her shoulders were getting broader in a very short time thanks to regular feedings and attentive caretakers. Brimstone showing up in the Gryffindor Common Room, however, could mean only one thing.

The Nundu cub yawned and padded in, on a mission. She padded up the stairwell on silent feet, her tail draped over her back in a neutral position, and a scroll case gripped in her jaws. In a few minutes, a sleepy first year was being guided out, her hand wrapped around the Nundu's tail as she sleepily followed behind in her pajamas.
The Nundu padded straight out of the Common Room, paying no attention to anyone as she focused on her mission. Within a few seconds, they disappeared out the exit portal, and the portrait door swung shut.

"How does an overgrown cat get in here without a password?" Ron muttered.

"Same way your Crooks does, Ron," Seamus said, flipping the page of his paper.

"Crookshanks isn't even right in the head," Ron sighed.

"I don't think that has anything to do with how portraits let them in and out, Ron," Neville said fairly as he closed his book with a snap.

Ron just shrugged. He reached for the tin of biscuits he was hoarding and opened it. Suddenly, he screeched in horror as the biscuits sprouted multiple legs and started skittering out of the tin in a mass migration. Ron leaped up with a cry and promptly disappeared up the stairs of the dormitory, and the loud slam of a door was heard shortly after.

Harry, Seamus, and Neville stared at Fred and George.

The twins slid their eyes over to the side. "Why all the accusatory looks, mates?"

Harry just shook his head. His hand reached out and swatted at the biscuit, making the legs fall off. He popped it into his mouth and chewed. "At least you didn't ruin your mum's biscuits."

Fred and George exchanged disappointed glances and then they shrugged.

"At least we got our baby brother, Fred," George said with a shrug.

"Just wait until he tries to wash his face," Fred said with a wink.

"I don't even want to know," Percy muttered as he walked by on his way out.

"Spoilsport," the twins sighed.

The common room was blissfully quiet for a grand total of five minutes before the piercing shriek of one Ronald B. Weasley came from upstairs as a small parade of soap bubble spiders skittered down the steps and off across the common room floor.

The twins grinned, high-fiving each other in congratulatory enthusiasm.

A/N: Vengeance is a dish best served in spiders.
Brimstone's Web

Chapter by corvus draconis

A/N: Ron may or may not deserve everything he gets in this chapter. You can decide. heh. heh. heh.

Beta Love: The Dragon and the Rose, Dutchgirl01

Breath of the Nundu

Chapter 3

Brimstone's Web

In ancient times, cats were worshipped as gods. They have not forgotten this. - Terry Pratchett

Hermione yawned sleepily as the first year grasped her tail nervously. Strangely enough, the stress was not about being near a Nundu. Hermione couldn't recall who this particular girl was, save for knowing that she had remembered her at one point, as she had rode on the train with her.

The young girl was isolated and sitting in Minerva's office, and Hermione vaguely remembered something about having to wait in the intimidating Deputy Headmistress' office, very scared and alone. Thankfully, however, the girl wasn't alone.

Minerva had sent her out to find the girl using a scroll she had turned in for grading. Scenting her out had been easy, even with the inundation of strange and interesting smells in the Gryffindor dorms. The little girl smelled of leather and broom polish, which Hermione recalled fondly from her time with Godric. She must like flying quite a bit.

Hermione head-bonked the girl, and she lit up like a Christmas tree, petting the Nundu all over with her small hands, all awkwardness forgotten. Hermione flopped down on the floor of the office, sprawling, and the girl cuddled up next to her, yawning sleepily. Hermione smacked the girl a few times with her tail playfully, and pinned her down with one large paw, licking her head "fur" into a mess that resembled a hedgehog. The little girl giggled and hugged her tighter, but Hermione didn't mind. She rubbed her cheeks against the girl, marking her as hers, just in case anyone was wondering. At least if Τρία ran into her, he would recognise the girl as part of Hermione's growing list of "things that are mine."

"Ah, Miss Brown," Minerva said warmly. "I'm sorry for calling you in so early, but your parents wished to pull you out this weekend to visit your grandmother. She's at St Mungo's with some sort of heart condition. She's stable, don't you worry, but they wanted you there because you are so close, yes? I believe it is your grandmother's birthday tomorrow?"

Lavender Brown nodded up and down, her face lighting up at the thought of getting to see her grandmother soon.

Minerva smiled. "Go ahead and return to the dorms and pack up anything you want to take with you. When you're ready you can come back here. Your mother will be flooing in to fetch you."

Lavender nodded excitedly. She started to head out the door, but looked back at the Nundu with a hopeful expression.
Hermione yawned and stood, shaking off the sleepiness as she trotted over and slammed her head into the girl's thigh, rubbing up against her.

Lavender giggled and wrapped her arm around the sleepy Nundu and walked with her back to the dormitories.

Minerva watched the pair go. "Well, at least some of the students don't immediately think they are going to die of some dreadful Nundu-afflicted disease," she chuckled.

Severus appeared in front of her office door. He grunted, refusing to use the Queen's English. He thrust out a mug of something that may or may not have been coffee or turpentine.

"Bless you, Severus," Minerva thanked him, quaffing the drink down in a few gulps.

Severus' eyebrows lost themselves in his hair.

Minerva shivered, still very sleepy.

Flitwick wandered by, sipping his own hot drink. "Morning," the little half-goblin greeted sleepily.

Severus grunted, and Minerva said something that resembled good morning mixed with an impressive yawn.

There was a faint jingling noise as Brimstone bounced back towards them. She was carrying a large stuffed plushie spider with remarkably realistic moving legs. She set it down and it immediately started to scurry away. She tore after it, battling it down the hallway in her enthusiasm.

"I'm glad to see that someone enjoys her mornings," Severus sniffed, staring at his empty coffee mug.

"You keep that bloody thing away from me!" the high-pitched voice of Ronald Weasley screeched from somewhere down the hall.

"Hn," Severus said. "Gryffindor house is awake."

"For now, at least," Flitwick quipped, sipping his mug.

A very happy Nundu barreled by them all, chasing the animated plushie spider.

Flitwick smiled. "Breakfast?"

"What has you staring so intensely into the scrying pool, child?" Rowena asked, sitting down beside Hermione as she stared into the swirling waters.

Hermione tilted her head. "Time seems so strange here. Sometimes I feel as though more time has passed here in but only a heartbeat of the waking world. Sometimes, I feel like time had gone backwards."

Rowena touched the pool with her hand, and the water formed an image of one Hermione Granger huddled in the dark, ostracised and alone. "For you, dear child, time has given you a reprieve of sorts, pulling you from what you once were on the path you are now on."

Hermione frowned and looked up at her mentor. "I do not understand."

"We all have our destinies, Hermione," Rowena said, her eyes flickering with some unknown
emotion. "Some of them are set from the moment we are born unto life. Some become our own due to things beyond our control."

Hermione shuffled up closer and lay her head against Rowena's shoulder. The elder witch put her arm around her gently.

"Your vision will improve with time, Hermione," Rowena assured her. "I was not born seeing both forwards and backwards with equal skill. Though time here passes differently, there is no rush here, unlike in the waking world. You will have all the time you need to know us and to find yourself both inside and in your magic. When the time comes for you to choose before you, I hope you can forgive us for being protective of you."

Hermione shuffled her feet. "I feel safe now. There are no more stares. I do not feel I must constantly prove that I have the right to be here."

Rowena frowned. "You were born and reborn unto magic, Hermione. No matter what the fearful and insecure might think, that is your birthright. Your focus should never be proving to others how great you may be but to prove to yourself that you are capable of of the vast. Prove it to yourself, and everything else will seem so much less trying." The ancient witch smiled. "How about we do something fun today, Hermione?"

Hermione perked.

"Making tea without using a wand," Rowena said. "Proper tea."

"Is this your way of saying I'm rubbish at making tea?" Hermione asked.

Rowena touched the tip of her nose. "Hundreds of years of practice, my dear child. When I am finished, no one will ever hold a candle to your skill."

Hermione beamed excitedly. "I'm ready!"

Rowena smiled. "Excellent. Our first lesson will be, how to properly warm a kettle."

"Might as well teach her which one is the salad fork as well, Rowena," Helga chuckled from the doorway.

Rowena scoffed. "Bring on the forks, Helga," she laughed merrily. "We'll make it a proper lesson in etiquette and manners."

"You're not going to make her walk a straight line with a book on her head, are you, Helga?" Godric yawned sleepily from his favorite arm chair. "I'd much rather teach her how to sharpen a proper sword." He yelped as a candlestick bonked him soundly on the head. "Hey!"

Salazar flipped a page from his grimoire, saying nothing, just smirking.

Hermione giggled and ran off to fetch the tea kettle.

Something very odd was going on, and Professor Quirrell was getting extremely frustrated. Everything he did to try and get past that obnoxious, horrible, slobbering, three-headed menace simply wasn't working. He spiked the meat. Nothing. He tried to stun the dog with spells. Utterly ineffectual. He tried to get the oaf Hagrid to spill his secrets about the canine, but the half-giant was being forced to do maintenance on his ridiculous hovel to make it liveable in a way that didn't scream vermin hostel. He hadn't been seen in Hogsmeade, much less the tavern, in weeks.
No, instead of drowning his sorrows in drink at the tavern, Hagrid was cleaning up his hut and making it—liveable. And thanks to the sheer amount of rodents Snape had pulled out of the place, Dumbledore gave the bumbling oaf a house-elf to help keep the place clean. That was the elf's sole job. So now, Hagrid was actually happier, and that meant he wasn't out spilling Hogwarts secrets at the Hog's Head. Now that the season was getting much colder, the half-giant was busying himself with the job of winter-proofing his residence and decorating for the winter holidays, so not only was he not showing up at the Hog's Head, he was happy, had a nice place to live, and had absolutely no complaints.

To make things worse, he couldn't get Snape to help him with anything. His master seemed to think it was because he didn't have a real body to hold him in check, and Quirrell's attempts to remind Snape about his bond to the Dark Lord was falling on deaf ears. To top it off, Snape was seemingly even more resistant to hints about loyalty. Mind you, the annoying man was harder to read than a rock. His facial expressions ranged from cold disdain to total indifference to complete and utter dispassion, meaning that getting a response from him was not unlike trying to draw blood out of stone.

Quirrell didn't like to think about it often, lest the Dark Lord learn about it, but Snape seemed strikingly more resistant to emotional or ordinary manipulation of any kind. It wasn't what he expected from a man who was supposedly very easy to manipulate via hatred and loathing. It also didn't help that every time he tried to get a bead on the odious man, Snape would stare back at him, unflinching.

A soft tinkling sound signalled the arrival of Quirrell's other little problem: Snape's supposed familiar.

The annoying spotted fuzzball, supposedly a Nundu, but he couldn't properly tell due to not being able to get close enough to her, was unnervingly capable of disarming hostility everywhere she went. The Slytherins, for example, had dressed her up in a deep green velvet collar with a stunning silver bell set with a huge emerald and designed to resemble a spider. Every time she pounced or bounced somewhere, it would tinkle softly like some peaceful windchime. All of his well-groomed Pureblood hostility went right down the drain. Even pug-faced little Pansy Parkinson would rather rub the Nundu's fuzzy tummy instead of getting seriously offended by—well, anything!

Blaise Zabini would lay under a tree in the courtyard with Theodore Nott, and she, the annoyingly friendly creature, would flop over their legs and track the butterflies. They, showing no sign whatsoever of responding to the baits of Gryffindor house, would take her little plush spider and send it scurrying off so she could chase after it. The game would continue long into the evening, and she would dutifully escort them back to their Common Room whenever the curfew bell would chime.

How was he supposed to insure the rise of his Lord into a suitably hateful environment when there was a distinct lack of hatred?

To top it off, whenever Gryffindor got uppity and tried to antagonise Slytherin, the annoying feline would start nipping butts. Literally. None of the students wanted that particular badge of shame on their posteriors, as every professor in Hogwarts knew exactly what it meant. It just wasn't worth it to be caught being out of line, and with her around, if you were out of line, she always knew about it.

*Kill the beast*, his Lord hissed in his brain. *Bring him back into my fold. Blame it on one of the Gryffindor brats.*

"My Lord, what if the legends are true? What if it is a true Nundu?"
It is a beast, Quirrel. A beast is just a beast. It bleeds. It will die.

Quirrel frowned. "Yes, of course, my Lord."

"Quirinus," Professor Sprout greeted. "Talking to yourself again?"

Quirrel chuckled nervously, playing up his discomfort. "Hehe, of course, Pomona. "Who better to understand that everything is out to kill me?"

Sprout looked at the DADA professor with real pity in her eyes. "It's not all woe and dread with murderous intent, Quirinus."

Quirrel made a face. "Isn't it?"

Pomona shook her head sadly, going back to chatting with Madam Hooch.

Quirrel quietly simmered to himself. First, he needed a suitable scapegoat.

Surely there would be someone suitable in the herd of ignorant sheep.

Severus dozed slightly as he enjoyed the soak in his enormous sunken private bath. It was one of the few times he felt he could completely relax, and even Albus would leave him be when he was bathing. Part of that, he reasoned, was that there was not a floo in the bathroom. Thank Merlin for small favors.

He yawned as his eyes started to become heavy. Thanks to a glaring lack of a Dark Mark, he was starting to relax a little and feel that his long atonement was finally coming to an end. Also, being bound to a magical beast that was prone to homicide just because he was feeling hateful that morning rather put things into perspective. As much as he found many people to be utterly distasteful, having people die because of his lack of control was leaking over to Brimstone was not an idea he particularly favoured.

There was a muffled squeaking sound, and Severus lifted his head to see a large leopard head peak over the side of the tub, with a large, dust-coated plush spider in her mouth. She looked at him hopefully, dropping the filthy and well-loved stuffed arachnid into his bath water.

Severus sighed, plucking the dirty toy from the soapy water. He lifted up his soap bar and set to work the hard way, cleaning the toy from leg to leg until the dirt rinsed away. Each time he drew the soap across it, the spider squeaked, and Brimstone got more and more excited. Her tail twitched happily and her ears perked forward.

Finally, she could take it no longer.

SPLOOSH!

Brimstone swam towards him and watched closely as he washed her favourite toy for her. Severus patted her gently, snickering as she made happy little chirping sounds and chattered her teeth in eager anticipation. Severus finished cleaning the colorful stuffed arachnid with a slight roll of his eyes, but she looked at him with such adoration in her orange-green eyes that he couldn't even pretend to be frustrated with her. He shook the water out of the toy, setting it under the blast of very warm air that was channeled into the bathroom through a series of heated pipes.

Brimstone looked after her spider plush with sadness, eager to have it again, but Severus promptly seized the opportunity to do give his familiar a wash while she was so conveniently in the tub with
him. Taking the bar of fragrant herbal soap in one hand and soothing her with the other, he massaged the soap into her fur, until she was nearly white with foamy lather. She mrowled at him, batting and grasping at his hands with her sheathed paws.

It was all a game to her.

He had her floating her on her back and worked on her belly, and she squirmed playfully, whipping at his face with her soapy paws until his face was covered in a sudsy beard of bubbles.

"Fft," he muttered, giving her a mane of soapy lather.

Nundus, apparently, unlike their smaller feline counterparts, seemed perfectly happy to soak in water. While he didn't expect a Nundu to be exactly like the oversized leopard it resembled, he did find it fascinating to learn just how very different they really were. She sniffled his face, breathing puffs of her elderberry-scented breath at him. He sniffled, trying not to sneeze. She paddled up closer to him, wrapping her forelegs over his shoulders and headbutting his chin with a deep resounding purr.

She lay her head across his check and peered up at his face, wearing her foamy mane of soap suds without protest. Severus shook his head and smiled at her, unable to ignore the feeling of warmth that came over him when he looked at her.

Yawning fitfully, he rinsed off, stepping out of the warm water with some reluctance. If he didn't worry about drowning, he would quite easily fall asleep to the lull of the warm steam and fragrant herbal oils. Severus toweled himself off, wrapping the fluffy towel around his waist as he lured his wet familiar out of the tub with her favourite spider. She gladly leapt out in hot pursuit, barely holding still long enough for him to towel her off and examine her, making sure everything was in order.

As he had her calm and clean, he took the time to look her over more carefully, spreading out her paws to examine them, brush her coat, and inspect her teeth. She yawned into his face, exposing her sharp canines, and a second pair of backward pointing fangs that seemed to hide behind her normal canines.

"Those would make escape quite a challenge, hrm?" He noted, scratching her behind the ears.

She mrowled, play-chomping his face with her exposed canines. She was always extremely careful, so he never worried about her hurting him. It surprised him just how much he trusted her to know her own strength. She never used her claws when batting at his face, and she never scuffed him with her teeth. Her claws, which had originally looked black to him, were actually a very dark green with a shimmering oil-like patina.

Her tongue, of course, was like being roughed up by, and subsequently smoothed down, by both coarse and fine sandpaper. In the mornings, she would take to "helping" him groom his hair, pinning his head down with her giant paws and licking his hair this way and that until it looked like he'd had a row with an angry hedgehog.

Brimstone seemed to think he looked better that way, and Minerva, well, Minerva seemed to be glad they were getting on well, unique hair care techniques aside. It would always be Minerva's turn on opposing days, but the cat Animagus cheated by transforming into her feline aspect. Minerva's hair very rarely looked anything less than perfect in the morning.

Severus admitted to a slight case of jealousy over that.

Brimstone yawned and stretched, her many claws stretching out and scraping against his poor abused
carpet. Every morning the house-elf would come in and mend it, the chair legs, the curtains, and his bedpost, all of which had suffered her rough attentions. She never did it maliciously, and as far as he could tell it was terribly instinctual, so it was pointless to get angry with her over it.

Lucius and he were working on making her a Nundu-friendly scratching post slash lounging tree covered with a few different fabrics ranging from plush velvet to bedpost smooth wood, but they were still working on the auto-repair charms that would make it so the house-elves didn't have to check on it all the time.

So far, all they had managed to finish was the frame of the tree itself, but that wasn't to say Brimstone wasn't already loving it up. She would bound up the side and lounge from the branches often, sometimes using the height to look down on him and pounce on him or, in some cases, drop her spider down on top of him.

Severus sighed as he realised that tonight was the night he had to check on the three-headed monstrosity on the third floor trapdoor chamber. Albus wanted to make sure his little trinket was well-guarded, especially after Gringott's itself had been robbed, but he wasn't sure if Hogwarts was the appropriate place to hide anything that might attract thieves (or worse) to Hogwarts. The school was full of children, after all. Severus was not exactly fond of hundreds of rampaging hormonal imbeciles, but he didn't exactly want them to become triple-headed canine chow either.

Sometimes Minerva and he had wonderful conversations about child endangerment in a school that was supposedly the "safest place around."

Brimstone mrrowled at him, placing her paws very near his unmentionables to remind him that he still had her favourite spider. He held it out to her, gazing at her silently. And she sat down and stared up at him hopefully. He waited, then when seeing she wasn't budging, he gave it to her. Allowing her to wrap her mouth around the stuffed arachnid and carry it with her.

Listening to the squeaking noises of the plush, he re-dressed, praying to dear Merlin he wouldn't get mauled by the enormous dog again. Why Albus refused to at least let Hagrid introduce him to the dog properly so it didn't attack HIM on sight would have been nice, considering he was the one who Dumbledore always sent to check up on the dog at night. Professor Sprout's responsibility was to add the devil's snare, and once that was done, her part was finished. Minerva and Severus, however, took turns making sure the dog was okay, something which both of them found somewhat irritating considering it was Hagrid's dog.

The mountain troll was simple enough to deal with. They were as dumb as they were disgusting on a good day, so Dumbledore simply sent down food every so often to keep the oaf from dying of starvation or self-cannibalism. Severus was never quite sure what a troll was likely to do other than smell like decomposing flesh and exhibit exceedingly poor manners.

Patrol went smoothly, which was a minor miracle in itself, but thanks to Brimstone, it was becoming more and more tolerable. Brimstone was a keen sniffer of troublemakers and curfew breakers, and sometimes Mrs Norris would tag long to seemingly just keep the larger feline company.

However, when it was time to walk into the third floor trapdoor chamber, no one was more surprised than he as to see "Fluffy" playbow to the young Nundu and bark in triplicate, tail wagging. Brimstone walked up as though there was nothing out of place, and head-bonked against each dog head. When Fluffy focused on Severus, he growled softly, but then leaned closer, sniffing him so closely that Severus' robes rustled.

Fluffy gave a deep woof and wagged his tail.
Now this was unexpected.

"Τρία."

Severus tilted his head. Tree-ah. Where had that come from?

"Τρία." The thought came again.

"Τρία," Severus repeated out loud.

Fluffy sat down and barked, tail wagging.

"Is that your real name?" Severus asked the dog. "Τρία?"

The cerberus panted happily, tail thumping enthusiastically.

"Well then, Τρία it is then," Severus decided out loud.

Τρία woofed in triplicate and whined as he scratched his ears with his rear foot. The cerberus whined and supplicated the Nundu for play. Brimstone zipped between his legs and batted at his knees. All three heads swiveled to catch the pesky Nundu, and he managed to wrap his mouth around the overgrown magical cat.

At first Snape began to panic, until the Nundu batted Τρία on the muzzle with her front paw, and the dog released her. Then, she pounced on the dog's middle head, grasping at the nape of his neck, growling and making a fuss. The dog tried to dislodge her, but she hung on tight. Then, heads number one and three snapped at her, and she moved just in time for him to nip himself.

The middle head yipped and whined, and the rest of the dog lay down.

Brimstone fearlessly padded up and head-bonked him, rubbing up against him as if to say "good game, thanks for playing."

Τρία wagged his tail in reply.

"Brimstone," Severus said softly.

The Nundu padded up to him and mrowled, headbutting his hand for scratches.

"What have you been up to, young lady?" He asked suspiciously.

Brimstone wore her best magical feline halo.

"Hn," he noted. "I don't believe that at all."

Τρία woofed in triplicate, tail wagging.

Severus scritchted the Nundu, shaking his head. "Well, thank you for sparing my ankle from being mauled.

Brimstone mrowled happily, taking his arm in her mouth and worrying on it harmlessly.

Τρία seemed to take this as a cue, and he flopped down next to Snape and snuffled him, sniffing him over while butting him with his heads until he tipped over. Snape let out a cry of indignation as the three headed canine lay his heads over him and let out a happy woof. One pale hand gently patted the side of the dog's three heads, and the dog let him up, panting happily as his tongues lollled.
Part of Severus wondered if this was going to effect ex-Fluffy's ability to guard the chamber, but a sound outside the door caused the three-headed monster to growl menacingly. He strained on his chain and snarled, showing all his teeth, maneuvering himself in front of Snape and Brimstone as he eyed the door suspiciously.

Well, *that* answered that question!

After a few minutes, Τρία settled, laying down. He whined softly, scratching around his neck, yipping as his claws hit a sensitive spot.

Brimstone was up in an instant, leaping onto the Cerberus' back and sniffing about. She grasped the collar in her teeth and tugged, mrowling in displeasure.

Severus, who had never once been close or comfortable enough to inspect the dog before, realised the collar was on too tight or Τρία had grown some. Either way, the collar was fusing to his three necks, making for a painful situation. Snape had never been allowed a dog. The one time he had found a puppy and brought it home, he found it the next day with its head bashed in, half-buried in the backyard. It didn't take a genius to figure out what had happened there. It had traumatised him enough to never do it again, which is probably what his father wanted. Still, perhaps now that the dog wasn't trying to devour him, he could do something.

"Here now, easy," Severus placated, "let me help you."

Τρία looked at him with all three heads, whining.

Carefully, he took his wand and whispered a numbing spell. Then, very gently, he pulled the collar free from the half-fused flesh with a wince of disgust. Brimstone was licking the wound repeatedly.

Severus pulled out a jar of ointment he had created to heal his scars from the ever-so-compassionate Dark Lord. He fingered it over the band of raw flesh and watched the flesh knit together into angry pink and then a more healthy pink. He removed the collars from each head, treating the neck wounds with equal care, and Τρία looked at him with unconcealed gratitude.

Brimstone was glaring at the collars with unconcealed hatred, perhaps not for the collar itself, but that they had not been humane to her three-headed friend.

Snape held the collars and frowned. He had to put them back on, but, perhaps he could make it less horrible for the canine. He tore off some fabric from his robes and used his wand to transfigure it into a soft lamb's wool. Using a permanent sticking charm he lined the harsh metal collar with it, taking the time to expand the size of the collar with a self-sizing spell like they made for belts for humans. He greased the latch and hinges, and added a few rings to the anchoring chain so the dog could move around without choking himself. Carefully, he put the collar back on, putting his fingers under the collar to check if three fingers could comfortably get under the band.

Τρία took a few steps forward, eyes widening as he discovered he wasn't restrained anymore from lying comfortably in the middle of the room. He touched the collars with his rear foot, but after confirming they weren't hurting him, he rolled over on the floor and gave himself a good roll, thrusting his paws into the air as he groaned in pleasure.

Brimstone gave a feline chirp of approval, and Severus put a hand between her ears and smiled.

Inspired by the much happier canine guardian of the room, Severus felt it was probably worth his while to make it more comfortable for the dog as well. He gathered the straw together and transfigured the overgrown Grecian dog an equally oversized canine bed. Τρία pounced on it almost
immediately, giving a soft growl of approval as he lay down on it. He made a giant stone bowl and filled it with cold water, smiling a little as the dog fought itself for water rights until each head quenched its thirst. He vanished the piles of canine waste, opening the tower windows to give the dog some fresh air, and scourgified the entire floor with a combination of spells and conjured pine-scented cleanser.

By the time he was done, everyone seemed happier—Trix most of all. The happy canine woofed and tail wagged, laying down on his new bed with blissful happiness. Wondering if he was going to regret it, he crafted a large stuffed three-headed duck toy and tossed it to the dog, and Trix fell upon it like a labrador on the hunt. Each head chewed on the stuffed toy, causing it to squeak and quack softly but not too annoyingly.

Snape watched as Brimstone came up to inspect the three-headed duck. The large dog whined but immediately dropped his prize, seemingly knowing he would have claws to his face if he was a bad Nundu-friend. Brimstone cheek-rubbed against it and then padded off, seemingly giving the dog her approval. Trix happily went back to chewing on his prize, tail wagging furiously.

Severus stared at Brimstone. She looked up at him, her pointy canines exposed in a half smile of feline mischief.

"Made any more otherworldly friends, young lady?" He asked. "Taming basilisks while the school sleeps, perhaps?"

Brimstone looked at him excitedly as though that was now her next goal.

Severus facepalmed and sighed. "Well time to check the other safeguards. He hoisted open the large wooden trapdoor and stared into the darkness below. "Now, you're going to have to trust me," Snape said to the Nundu, a frown furrowing with his eyebrows. "It's important."

Brimstone looked at him with curiosity.

"Come on then," he called, opening his arms to her. "Hold close to me."

Brimstone placed her paws on his shoulders and hopped into his arms, wrapping her forelegs around his neck and digging her claws into his thick robes just enough not to fall. She meowed nervously, but Severus put a hand on her neck and it calmed her. "Into the dark now, love," he said. "You'll be fine."

Severus took in a deep breath and jumped down the hatch.

Brimstone was freaking out, Severus knew, if the claws digging into his back was any indicator. She was meowing unhappily, tensing up.

"Shh, love, relax," he soothed. "Relax."

She chattered nervously, clinging to him.

"Relax, now," he said, sharing his calm. He rubbed her neck with his fingers, grasping the soft fold of skin there. She stared at him with glowing orange-green eyes in the dark. He stared back into them. "Trust me."

Brimstone mewed, and went limp against him.

The strangle vines surrounded them both and then guided them downwards to the corridor below.
Brimstone landed on her feet, but Severus landed squarely on his arse. He winced and sighed. The Nundu purred, purred, and purred some more, rubbing up against him and bonking his chin.

"That's a good girl," Severus said, patting her on the head. "You did very well."

The Nundu mrowled, whapping him upside the face with her tail. He stood, brushing himself off.

"Let's check out the obstacles and then we can get our well-deserved sleep," Snape suggested.

The sloping passageway was damp and slightly slick to walk upon. Snape struggled to stay upright, but Brimstone trotted down it with leaps and bounds. Her collar radiated a warm light, illuminating the passages for him, which made it slightly easier to navigate. The corridor led into a brightly illuminated chamber with an impossibly high ceiling that seemed to go on forever.

Brimstone stared at all the fluttering keys of all shapes and sizes— Flitwick's work. The door was safely sealed with no signs of tampering, which was a relief. Still, he should check further in. Brimstone was leaping up in the air and batting at random keys, amusing herself. Keys were fluttering out of the way in due haste, trying to avoid the Nundu's attentions. Brimstone, however, was not to be deterred. She bounced off the side walls and leapt, going after a few of the higher flying keys.

SNAP!

Clatter. Tink. Tink. Tink.

A shiny silver key with cobalt blue wings fluttered brokenly on the ground thanks to the Nundu's enthusiastic attentions.

Of all the— well, he wasn't going to tell Flitwick that sheer dumb luck and a Nundu damaged his key test. He picked up the key in his hand and used it to open the door, and then carefully mended it, adding a bit of speed and proclivity to fly higher than the typical inquisitive Nundu. He pet the soft cobalt wings and let the key go, watching it flutter up higher towards the ceiling.

Brimstone chattered her teeth, sad to see her prey leaving.

"Don't tell Flitwick," Severus told the cat.

Brimstone mrowled a reply, tail lashing.

They moved into the next chamber, and the chess pieces were undamaged with no rubble to indicate a previous attempt. Brimstone stared at the large chess pieces, staring at them as though they would come to life, and perhaps she wouldn't have been so wrong.

Snape traced a very intricate pattern on a pillar hidden in plain sight with other pillars and then placed his palm against a nearby statue's outstretched hand.

The door to the next challenge opened, bypassing the chess chest.

"Your nose is not going to be happy, love," Severus warned the Nundu. A wave of trollish stench came from the next chamber. The Nundu's face wrinkled in distaste and she gave him a thoroughly put-out look.

Snape gave her an apologetic look in return as he hurried through, catching the troll to the head with a stunning spell. The troll wasn't the real trial, he knew. It was the odour. He held his breath, grabbed Brimstone, and rushed for the hidden door—a door hidden with a hundred similar doors. Had he not...
known which one it was, he would have succumbed to the vapours in seconds.

He pushed off into the next corridor, catching his breath as the stench from the previous room made him want to gag. Brim looked at him accusingly as though he were trying to murder her.

The sixth chamber Snape knew very well, as it was his trial to construct. He pulled a bottle from his robes, sniffed it, and drank a swig of it. "Fire protection potion," he told the Nundu. He poured a little into his hand. "Drink up."

Brim sniffed his hand, her whiskers tickling his palm. She lapped the potion off his hands, her rough tongue practically removing his skin. She looked at him, face wrinkling.

"Tastes like bile, but it's better than becoming a spontaneously combustible cat, yes?" He asked the feline.

Brim mrowled and seemed to shrug.

They passed across the threshold of black flames, walking down the black-fire-lined corridor into the next room.

Brim batted at the flames with her paws, seemingly enjoying not being burned by them. The flames flickered up and away and then came back, seemingly annoyed with being swatted at.

The final chamber was surrounded in normal orange fire. Inside it was a gigantic pile of stones—all identical copies of the real philosopher's stone. The stones filled the entire chamber, surrounding the real thing with countless counterfeits.

"Albus has been… busy," Severus quipped.

Brimstone was batting at a few of them with her paws, flopping on her back and tossing a few in the air to smack them with her paws. Stones went flying off into the room.

"Brim," Severus sighed, leaning down to pet her. "You're such a pest."

She stared at him and mrowled happily, pegging him on the chin with her rough tongue.

Severus did a quick scan of the hoard of stones, confirming that each one had the exact same magical signature. Which was the real one, only Dumbledore himself knew, and that was fine for Severus. He really didn't want the responsibility of knowing such a thing.

"Time to port back up," Severus said, inviting the Nundu into his arms.

Brim hopped into his arms without hesitation this time, having learned that Severus hadn't let her down yet.

He hugged the cat to him, pressing his nose into her warm fur as his hand pressed against an innocuous looking brick on the wall while stepping on a very similarly dull looking stone on the floor.

_Fwoop!_

"Ah, Severus," Albus greeted from his desk. The old wizard was sitting in his nightclothes feeding fruit to his phoenix. "Does the stone chamber remain undisturbed?"

Severus set Brimstone down and brushed off his robes. "Everything is still in place, Albus," Severus reported.
Brimstone stared at the elegant bird on the perch. Fawkes perked, staring down at the Nundu with considerable interest.

Fawkes warbled.

Brimstone mrowled. She stood up on her hind legs and reached up to pat the bird with her unclawed paw.

"Brim," Severus warned.

The phoenix rustled his tail, and Brimstone nipped at it, ending up with mouth full of feathers. The bird seemed to chuckle, pecking at Brimstone's whiskers. The phoenix led the feline on a merry chase, knocking down a hundred things from Dumbledore's desk including a bowl of lemon sherbert drops. Fawkes landed on his globe, and Brim landed on it, causing it to spin. Fawkes flew to the coatrack, and Brim tipped it over. The phoenix let out a laughing chirp, landing on Albus.

Dumbledore's eyes grew wide as about a hundred kilos of highly enthusiastic magical feline pounced him, sending him toppling backwards onto the nearby sofa. Fawkes warbled like a kookaburra, and flew off into Dumbledore's private chambers.

There was the sound of chasing, toppling, and crashing mixed with chirps, warbles, meows, and growls.

A few minutes later, Brim came back in with a long tail feather held victoriously in her mouth, and Fawkes landed on his perch, a long Nundu whisker clasped tightly in his beak.

Brim flopped down at Severus' feet, grooming herself, and Fawkes placed his prized whisker into a crack in his perch before landing on top of Brimstone's back and settling in to preen her ears.

Dumbledore's stroked his beard thoughtfully. "Well, then, Severus," the old man said with a sniff. "Seeing as my domicile has been properly trashed this evening, perhaps you would like to adopt a phoenix for the remainder of the evening?"

Fawkes turned to stare at Severus and warbled.

Brimstone chirped approval, her tail waving lazily.

Severus gave the headmaster a long-suffering look. "Of course, headmaster. Whatever you think is best."

"He lent you Fawkes?" Minerva laughed, almost choking on her tea.

Severus rolled his eyes. "He said to, how did he put it, 'get them make peace with one another to make certain my office and quarters are safe once more'."

Fawkes was nestled between the Nundu's paws as she slept by the hearth. Her paws were twitching in sleep.

"They look perfectly at peace with each other as it is," Minerva noted.

"Who knows what is going on in that old man's head," Severus sighed. "Brim seems to make friends wherever she goes, provided they don't happen to be rodents."

"I'm still not convinced it was the rodents as much as the hidden Animagus," Minerva speculated. If Nundus are anything like Kneazles, she probably sensed something was off about that particular rat.
She's gone after hundreds of vermin since then without having a hate outbreak."

Severus ran his fingers along his chin thoughtfully. "True."

Minerva yawned. "It's hard to even imagine her being hateful, had you not told me what happened. She is always so well-behaved when she's here with us.

"With us, Minerva," Severus clarified. "If not for us teaching her who is friend or foe, she could have had someone like Quirrell teaching her right and wrong.

Minerva frowned. "There is something very wrong about that man."

Snape shook his head. "I do not know what it is. He seems rather flighty for a grown man, perhaps more so than any man should ever be. He strikes me as a very shady individual that appears to be hiding behind the bumbling facade."

"Severus?" Minerva started, looking up at him.

"Hn?"

"If Brimstone hadn't appeared, would you still—?"

Severus sighed. "I'd be putting forth a very different image, Minerva," he said quietly. "I fear I would be even more difficult to get along with, not that most of those here are aware that I've changed in the slightest. The mere possibility that the Dark Lord could return combined with the Mark is enough to make you consider your life to not be your own. There is never enough penance. Never enough atonement as long as it exists. You are always damned. You either revel in your damnation as many of that time were wont to do, or you live with the fact that there are many more unspeakable things you will have to do before the end— of either yourself or the world you love."

Minerva nodded grimly. She seemed thoughtful. "I have the strangest feeling that had Brim not relieved you of your Mark, Albus would never have told me of your duties to him. I am not quite sure how that makes me feel."

"Used?" Severus inquired.

Minerva's jaw tightened. "Yes."

Severus sipped his tea. "I am sadly entirely too used to feeling as such."

Minerva's expression darkened. "You shouldn't."

Snape took in a deep breath and sighed. "There was a time when I believed that no amount of atonement would ever make my sins seem less than they were."

"And now?" Minerva asked with concern.

Severus looked over to where the Nundu was curled up by the fire with her newly gained phoenix friend and a strangely familiar fluffy orange ball of half-kneazle. "I'm starting to think there might actually be hope for me," he confessed. "Or that perhaps I might become the next Dr Doolittle."

Minerva grinned at him. "You know, there is something that might be able to bring you closer to our four-footed friend."

Curiosity, the bane of all Slytherin, reared its head.
Minerva held out something for him.

Severus held it between his fingers, staring at it. "Trying to poison me with mandrake, Minerva?"

Minerva arched a brow. "Hardly. One leaf is not going to kill you, dear. However, one leaf could give you a very good opportunity to bond a little better to our four-footed feline mischief maker."

Severus eyed the mandrake leaf with interest.

"One month in the mouth," Minerva said. "Hardest part really, not swallowing it. I recommend a sticking charm. Once you get your vision of what you are, you can stop carrying it around in your mouth. The rest is about making the shift, which will be extremely easy since you already know how to meditate and clear your mind of distracting thoughts. And since you happen to know an Animagus, well, I can guide you through the fast track to success."

Severus perked, clearly interested.

Minerva smiled.

Excellent.

"You've got to do something, Percy," Ron whined yet again. "Everywhere I look there are bloody spiders! They are showing up in places spiders shouldn't ever be!"

Percy sighed, taking off his glasses and rubbing at the bridge of his nose. "You want me to discourage our twin brothers from doing what they've been doing ever since you were old enough to get suckered into their shenanigans?"

Ron turned bright red around the ears. "Come on, Percy. You're a prefect. Isn't it your job to get rid of contraband? They transfigured a spider plant into a realistic-looking stuffed Acromantula just to torment me!"

Percy rolled his eyes.

"You know they did it!" Ron bemoaned. "Just… make that huge monstrosity go away."

Percy gave his brother an annoyed glance. "You realised that even if I do turn it back into a spider plant, they'll just transfigure it back again."

"You're a prefect, Percy," Ron justified. "So you can confiscate it or destroy it as you see fit, right?"

"And what justification would I have for confiscating a houseplant?" Percy grunted.

"Peace of mind and people won't have to wake up hearing me scream at night!" Ron hissed.

Percy waved his hand. "Fine, I'll do it," Percy said, "but only because I'm tired of waking up to your shrill girly screams."

Ron reddened, but said nothing.

"I'm going on patrol," Percy said, standing up. "Try not to fall into a nest of bird-eating spiders or anything while I'm gone."

Ron paled.
Percy shook his head and exited the Gryffindor common room, muttering to himself about idiots, brothers, and high maintenance people.

Hermione was a Nundu on a mission.

Her favorite spider toy was on the loose, and she was going to to get it!

She tore down the hallway as the animated toy skittered speedily down the corridor. She pounced on it, gleefully reveling in the wriggling of its animated legs. She let it go and then chased after it again, blissfully happy and enjoying the chase and the prowl.

Severus and Minerva were at a evening faculty meeting, and Dumbledore seemed frustrated with her "conversations" with Fawkes, which, she might add, had a mutual excitement factor for both parties. So, Albus did what any frustrated headmaster with a curious Nundu chasing his phoenix around the office would do: he distracted her with her favourite arachnid toy and sent it scurrying down the stairs and down the corridors, far away from his office.

The Head Boy and Girl found her while they patrolled the hallways, chuckling as she leapt over them to pounce her toy spider. They picked it up and dusted it off. The Nundu mrowled, chattering her teeth, eager to be on the hunt again, but she paused a moment to assert her possession of the pair of students by rubbing against them mercilessly, smearing her scent over them. What sort of disreputable territory holder would she be if she didn't make sure to mark everything and everyone in her domain? Sheesh.

While some of the students kept a very wary distance between themselves and the prowling Nundu due to her notorious species, the Head Boy and Girl seemed to find her perfectly well-mannered and even entertaining. They would often hoard away treats from dinner for her, and slip her meat pies and leftovers from the roasts. Once they had shrunken down an entire turkey and then enlarged it for her. Hermione had appreciated that and the twelve pounds of tasty stuffing baked on the inside. She hadn't wanted to move for a week after that meal. She had even had enough to share with Τρία and still had enough to hoard away for later. Ah, but where would a Nundu have to stash her hoard of leftovers where no one else would steal them?

Up a tree of course!

Not just any tree, though.

The Head pair gave her a very large roast leg of something that smelled wonderful, curious to see where the Nundu would take the leftovers of her prize. Hermione, of course, didn't really mind them watching. She wasn't worried about them stealing the food back as much as some other random Nundu that might come by and attempt to steal her stuff. That wouldn't do at all.

Well, it could happen!

Hermione grasped the haunch in her mouth by the leg, and dragged it under her, carrying it leopard-style to her most favoured stashing place. The Head pair followed curiously, gently placing her animated spider on the windowsill planter to await her return.

The path across the green was very foggy thanks to the abrupt change in weather. A brisk, almost frigid wind was coming down from the mountains making the warmer season seem suddenly far too cold. As the trek across the grounds led her to a very familiar tree, she mrowled, waving her long tail.

The Head pair became rather nervous as the large Whomping Willow leaned over, its large limbs coming down at high speed to pulverize the interloper with all due haste. But, just as the bulbous
limbs looked ready smash the Nundu into nothing more than a pile of fresh meat, Hermione jumped onto the limbs and hopped from nodule to nodule. The willow tree swung this way and that, as if attempting to dislodge her, but she clung and jumped, clung and jumped again making happy meows and chirps.

She slid down the branches, clung to others, and hopped onto the passing limbs as they swung around her. Eventually, however, she grew tired, and one limb was too fast for the young Nundu, and it clocked her in the torso, knocking the wind out of her, and she fell to the ground with a thump.

The limbs then froze, the sound of their creaking like the unoiled hinges of a haunted house. The willow extended its limbs and sent tendrils around her body, lifting her up and pulling her up into the tree's core, surrounding her in a cocoon of entwined limbs and leaves. A few minutes passed, and the Head pair looked ready to bolt back up the path back to Hogwarts, but Hermione let out a soft chirp and yawn, shaking her head as if to clear it. The ornery willow seemed to caress her with its limbs as she came to, mrowling in slight dizziness.

Shakily she stood, cheek-rubbing against the willow's embrace. She woozily leapt down to the ground and grabbed her haunch of meat. The Head pair watched in amazement as the tree lowered its limbs and surrounded her, hoisting her and her prize into the top of the tree.

Hermione tucked the food into a crevice in the willow's many, many forks. Chirping in feline satisfaction, she bounded back down the willow's long limbs and leapt down to the ground again, rubbing up against the Head Boy and Girl with her tail waving high and proud. She grabbed their sleeves in her mouth and tugged on them, leading them back to Hogwarts. When they seemed to lack inspiration, she snatched their wands in her mouth and tore off up the path, her tail streaming behind her.

"Hey!" They yelled, taking off after the furry feline thief.

Meanwhile, the Whomping Willow shook itself, covering the many stashed foods in the Nundu larder with a fine coat of insulating and concealing leaves.

Fred and George lured their favourite playmate to them as they counter-patrolled the halls looking for mischief. They were the only ones that they knew of that Brim didn't immediately report to Snape or McGonagall when she caught them roaming about after curfew, and they rewarded her by giving her both lessons in mischief as well as fun new toys to play with.

This time, however, they kept her in the common room to avoid getting caught by Filch, who seemed to really have it out for them.

"I'm telling you, mate," Harry said as he and Ron came in the entrance portal after curfew. "There is a giant dog up on the third floor."

"You're mental, Harry," Ron replied. "Hogwarts already has a giant cat. We don't need a bloody giant dog too."

"What are you two up to?" George asked suspiciously. The one half of the mischief-making duo was all too attuned to troublemaking.

Harry's eyes widened as he suddenly realised they weren't alone. "Nothing," he said quickly.

Fred, who missed very little, shook his head. "Have you forgotten who you're talking to, Harry?" He scoffed. "We're more likely to believe you were off making a late-night pasty raid in the kitchens then out doing "nothing".
George, who had his head in Brim's mouth in a strange adaptation of a head in the lion's mouth trick, caused Ron's eyes to bug out of his head.

"What the hell are you doing?!" Ron squeaked.

Fred whapped his brother upside the head. "Don't interrupt. It took us a month to get it right so she didn't drool on him while we did it."

George pulled his head out of Brim's mouth and placed a fish-shaped biscuit on her nose. "Steady."

Brim's eyes focused, cross-eyed, at the treat.

"Steady now," Fred encouraged.

"Ok go!" They said together.

**SNAP!**

The fish biscuit disappeared in a flash of pearlescent fangs.

"Wicked!" The twins praised, loving on the Nundu.

Brim pounced George, sending him down on his back and proceeded to lay on his chest. She slurped the side of his face, giving him a long-lined welt where her sandpaper tongue tried to remove the first few layers of epidermis off his skin.

"Ack! Mercy!" George cried, wrestling with the playful Nundu. They tumbled across the common room floor.

"She's growing, eh?" Fred noted, whipping out a measuring tape. "Come 'ere, Brim," he called.

The ornery magical feline seemed disinclined to release George from her death grip on his trouser belt as she was dragging him across the floor by his arse. Finally she dropped him with a thud and padded over.

"Mrrowl?"

Fred measured her height at the shoulder, her girth, tail, and even the size of her paws. "You're a right jaguar now, Brim," Fred laughed. "If it weren't for all that kitten fuzz, you'd look like a full grown beast."

"Wonder how much bigger she'll get?" George asked, scratching his posterior with a slight wince.

"Fully-grown Nundus are the size of a horse," Ron sputtered. "There's that skeleton in the Ministry's museum."

"Eldon's Bane," Fred sighed. "Supposedly the Nundu Eldon Elsrickle kept to watch his treasure. He was apparently not all that great as a Nundu caretaker. The Nundu ate him."

George glared at his baby brother. "How is it that you actually remember about that when you can barely remember which end of a broomstick to mount?"

Ron flushed. "Dad used to take me to the museum when mum had to take Ginny to the— well, you know. Girl healer."

All the males in the room looked uncomfortable and didn't ask for more details.
"Actually," George speculated. "If the skeleton was as big as a horse, that means the actual beast was probably—"

The twins exchanged glances. "Wicked."

"Think we can train her to sit on Percy?" George asked, wiggling his brows.

"Why wait?" Fred answered his brother. "She's a fast learner!"

Brimstone chirped curiously.

The twins grinned at her.

"Wait a minute," George said. "Eldon Elsrickle used to stun his Nundu every day to keep it from attacking him. Everyone knows that a full-grown Nundu takes one hundred skilled wizards to even have a fighting chance at stunning one."

"What are you yammering on about now?" Ron complained.

Fred seemed to catch the epiphany. "Ahhh, so Eldon's Bane wasn't a full-grown Nundu. We're going to have to make much a larger spider, eh?"

Ron's eyes got huge and he made a terrified squeaking noise.

Brim turned her head to stare fixedly at him.

,Thud.

Ronald Weasley fainted dead away.

Brimstone chirped, following Percy around, staring at the wriggling plush spider that was in his hand.

"Ugh, filthy," the boy said, curling his lips in disgust.

"Give it back to her, Percy, you sorry git," Fred said. "She just wants her toy back."

"You made this out of the missing spiderwort plant in Greenhouse Three," Percy accused.

"Actually, I transfigured a lake rock," George replied.

"You've been torturing our brother with this!" Percy said, waving the stuffed toy.

Brim tried to leap up to snatch it, mrowling in distress.

"Come on, Percy," a rusty-haired wizard sitting at the chess table sighed. "Don't get us in trouble with McGonagall."

"We'll be in trouble when Professor Sprout finds out you stole her spiderwort plant!" Percy hissed.

"It's a lake rock, Percy," Fred replied.

"Give it back to her, Percy," Harry said, snatching at the toy to give it back to the distressed Nundu cub.

The air was starting to smell of pickled herring and burning sulfur.
The spider plush went tumbling through the air, and Brimstone leapt up into the air to receive it with an excited meowing chirp.

Percy made a grab for it. "No! I'm confiscating it!" His hand batted at the plush spider in his haste to grab it, but instead he knocked the stuffed toy into the burning hearth.

The wriggling virtual arachnid made a high-pitched screeching sound as it charred and shriveled, before bursting into flames. Its legs writhed and twitched as it made heart-wrenching sounds of misery.

Brimstone suddenly came unglued, yowling and running to the fire, looking as though she were going to fling herself in after it.

"Brim, no!" Fred and George tackled her, capturing the squirming and distressed Nundu cub as she cried and writhed, and tried to get to her toy.

The Gryffindor wizard by the chessboard ran over and cast Aguamenti over the fire, causing a fizzle and hiss as the water hit the hot coals and the burning toy.

"Aaron?" Harry asked.

The older wizard shook his head, using his wand to levitate the remains of the charred arachnid to the stone floor.

Brimstone broke free from Fred and George, making sounds of utter distress. She nudged the charred spider with her nose, tentatively touching it with her paw. One of the arachnid's legs cracked and fell off, falling to ash. The young Nundu visibly wilted, her tail dropping and ears flattening tightly against her head. She gently shoveled the wet, charred carcass between her jaws and slunk out the main entrance portal, disappearing into the dark of the hallway. Then, as if to accentuate the situation, the portal door slammed into their faces, preventing any of them from following her.

Multiple eyes glared at Percy.

"You're a gormless git, Percy," Fred and George chimed together, shaking their heads as they stormed up the stairs to their dorms.

"It's hardly my fault!" Percy yelled at their backs.

"Sure," Fred snorted. "I'll be sure to tell mom you broke an animal's heart because you were just pandering our gutless brother's constant whining instead."

Percy flushed angrily as Ron reddened angrily, but no one was left in the common room to hear their sputtered excuses.

The moment Brimstone returned to him, Severus knew there was something very wrong. His normally pleasant familiar slunk into the room and hid under the table, laying her head over his feet with a sad whuff of a sigh.

She seemed to be waiting for him to finish up with his duties for the Headmaster, but unlike all the times before, she showed no signs of being interested in chatting up Fawkes, investigating his desk, or wrestling with the old man's coat rack. In fact, when the old man tried to offer her a biscuit, which she normally accepted as long as Severus or Minerva were there too, she didn't even move from under the table.
"Something might be wrong with her, Severus," Albus muttered. "Not that I don't mind my office not being trashed, but there is something to be said about noticing particular patterns of behaviour."

Severus stared down at the Nundu, whose ears flicked but she showed no other signs of moving. He gently leaned down to touch her ears, and she barely moved.

"Brim," he said her name softly.

The Nundu lifted her head and placed it in his lap. She gently placed the charred remains of her favourite toy on top of his legs. Her eyes swiveled up to look at him, sad and lifeless.

"Aw, Brim, what happened?" Severus fussled, picking up the lump of char and half ash. "Did you chase it into the fire?"

Suddenly, Snape frowned. A vivid mental image formed in his mind. His scowl spread across his face.

"What happened, Severus?" Flitwick asked, shuffling closer concernedly.

"Someone threw her favourite toy into the fireplace," Severus answered, scowling.

The half-goblin looked horrified. "Oh, no, we can't have that," Flitwick tutted. "The meeting is over, Headmaster. Do you mind if we tend to this?"

Dumbledore waved them off. "I am quite finished, Filius. You are all welcome to attend to your business."

"Come along," Filius said with a nod. "Bring the remains to my office. I think we can reassemble her favourite toy and give it a few special upgrades to insure it doesn't spontaneously combust again."

Flitwick led the way to his office with Severus following behind as he cradled the remains of Brim's arachnid toy. Brimstone, however, padded behind them in a sad state, her tail drooping and ears flattened as she walked.

Fawkes pegged Albus on the eyebrow.

"Ow, what was that for, Fawkes?" Albus muttered.

The phoenix let out a sigh, staring out the open door to his office.

"I'm not sure what you expect me to do, old friend," Dumbledore sighed. "I've never been good with cats."

Albus blinked, looking around his office. "Where did that owl that was waiting for me go?"

Fawkes stared at him quizzically.

Albus rubbed his temples. "Nevermind. I must be thinking too hard."

Fawkes warbled Londonderry Aire and stared out the window, offering no other commentary.

"I think she's depressed," Poppy Pomfrey mused as she comfortingly rubbed the woebegone Nundu under the chin. "I know you think it was just a toy, but you said neither of you made it originally right? It was a gift from a student?"
Minerva nodded. "She just appeared one morning with it."

Poppy smiled sadly and rubbed the Nundu tenderly. "She's a very smart lady under that fur, I think. You have to think that it's very possible she valued it as a gift from a friend and became attached to it."

"Ah hah!" Flitwick yelled excitedly from the table where he and Severus worked steadily at arachnid reconstructive surgery.

Poppy sat next to Minerva and helped her rub the clearly distressed Nundu down to help distract her from her depression. The medi-witch pulled out a tube of something and twisted off the end. A very fishy smell suddenly began to permeate the room.

Brim perked up instantly.

Poppy smiled warmly and leaned in. "Open wide now, young lady."

Brim exposed her and tongue, deciding to trust her.

Poppy smeared some of the fishy paste on her tongue.

Brim made an odd face, but then her eyes lit up with pure pleasure as she lick, lick, licked, her tongue working and jaws moving up and down to help her get every last bit of the tasty stuff where it belonged.

"Phew," Minerva exclaimed, wrinkling her nose. "That is strong stuff, indeed. I feel like even my inner cat wouldn't be able to resist that stuff."

Poppy laughed. "I use it to reward her for letting me examine her every week. It has a little bit of catnip in it too."

"Well, that will certainly be good for morale," Minerva chuckled as she watched Brim bat at her own face and roll on the floor like she was completely stoned out of her feline mind. "I hope the smell doesn't last too long. Severus has to sleep with her tonight."

Poppy slid her eyes to the side. "I might have to give her a breath mint."

Minerva covered her face with her hand and chuckled.

Brim was bat, bat, batting at Poppy's shoelaces.

"It's going to be interesting when she's full-grown," Poppy said. "I may have to start getting dragonhide shoes custom made in the future."

Minerva chuckled. "When she's fully-grown, we'll all be able to ride on her back. Wouldn't that be an interesting experience, Poppy?"

The mediwitch smiled at the thought.

"Hn," Severus commented. "Could we borrow that tube of paste, please?"

"Of course?" Poppy answered, looking a bit baffled.

Severus' face twisted into a serene, dangerous sort of smile. "Thank you, Poppy."

"Do I even—?" Poppy began.
Minerva shook her head. "Let the boys have their fun avenging the honour of Our Lady of the Silent Paws."

Poppy calmly sipped her coffee with a small smile playing about her lips.

"Did you manage to finish your experiments with Nundu saliva, Poppy?" Minerva asked.

Poppy nodded. "Severus and I both worked on it. It has germicidal properties as well as healing factors, but, it seems to lose potency shortly after leaving the Nundu’s mouth."

"Oh?"

Poppy chuckled. "Not that you were planning on harvesting drool for extra money, Minerva?"

The Animagus laughed. "No, Poppy, dear. Not even close. I did think it might be useful for cuts and abrasions around Hogwarts though. Pity."

Poppy smiled. "Easy solve for that, love. Just have Brim give them a good slurp."

Minerva chortled into her hand. "I've even lost that little scar on my forehead from when my father accidentally dropped his pipes on me as a wee lass."

Poppy smiled. "Amazing. I hadn't even thought of scars."

Minerva pointed to the Nundu's lolling tongue. "Helps when one lick of that sandpaper tongue of hers both removes a few layers even as it starts healing. I'm sure that somewhere there is a young witches group that would pay serious galleons for an exfoliation treatment, if they knew."

Poppy snickered. "Tested that idea on someone, Minerva?" She asked, recognising the Animagus' mischief-making face.

Minerva slid her eyes to the side. "I may or may not have turned Brim loose on top of Narcissa Malfoy."

Poppy's blue eyes practically bugged out of her head.

"She swears she feels ten years younger," Minerva laughed. "She won't tell anyone, though. She's a Slytherin, and she doesn't want anyone to discover her beauty secrets."

Pomfrey snickered. "Who knew?"

Minerva tapped her temples with a wide grin.

"I'm surprised Rolanda hasn't tried to rent her out for Quidditch games," Poppy said honestly. "Actually, it might be a good idea to have her around for such things."

Minerva seemed to think on that. "I might have to bring it up to her. Merlin knows how many scrapes and abrasions they get just standing there waiting for the game to start, not to mention what happens after the game starts."

Pomfrey shook her head. "I'd appreciate a few less occupied beds, to be honest, at least on Quidditch days."

"Well, ladies, I think we've done it!" Filius cheered as he hopped down from the counter-side chair.

Severus had a bundle in his hands, and Brim perked up the moment he turned around.
"Mrowl!" She chattered at him, leaping to her feet.

Severus stood over her, holding the bundle and looking down at her rather sternly.

Brim sat down and stared up at him hopefully. They stared at each other silently for a good minute.

Severus broke the staredown by putting her re-tooled and improved arachnid plushie down on the floor.

The stuffed spider's legs moved slightly, its multiple shiny crystalline eyes looking around curiously.

"Mrrrowl!" Brim exclaimed, snuffling her spider toy excitedly.

The spider tore off in a random direction and out the door into the hall, quickly disappearing from sight. One very exuberant and happy Nundu immediately went tearing after it, her small silver bell jingling merrily when her claws scraped the stone floor as she scrambled after it.

Poppy saluted Severus and Filius with her favorite Oriental poppy-patterned teacup. "You have ended the great Nundu depression. I salute you both."

Severus crossed his arms, shaking his head. Filius laughed and poured himself a cup of tea.

A skittering plush arachnid darted past the open door to Filius' classroom. Seconds later, an oversized Nundu cub went tearing after it. The arachnid was making soft squeaking noises as the cub made chittering, happy mrrowls.

"Everything seems perfectly normal to me," Filius said, sipping his tea.

The group of professors sat together in the comfortable transfigured sofa chairs and chuckled.

_Sometime past the witching hour…_

"*Harry!*"

Harry Potter opened his eyes blearily, rubbing at them with his fists as he sat up in his bed. He moved the curtains aside and patted at the nearby table to find his glasses in the dark. "Whaa—?"

"Harry!" A voice whimpered, thin with terror. "Help me!"

Harry fumbled around for his wand to light his bedside candle. "Ron?" He shuffled over to the bed. "What is it?"

Whimpering came from above him.

_Above_ him?

Harry held his candle up and peered into the gloom sleepily.

Ron was clinging to the top of his bedpost like a climate-displaced koala.

"Ron, what are you doing way up there?"

"They're after me, Harry!" Ron wheezed.

"Who is after you?"
"ALL OF THEM!" Ron hissed.

"What in Merlin's name are you talking about, Ron?" Harry shook his head and started to make his way back to his nice, warm bed.

"Don't leave me here with all of them!" Ron whinged.

"All of what, Ron?"

"The spiders! They're all over my bed!"

Harry pulled back the bed curtains.

A hundred pairs of shiny crystalline eyes stared back at him as an equal number of realistic plush spiders gathered on Ron's bed.

Harry closed the curtain. "You must be hallucinating, mate," he said calmly, going back to his bed and crawling back into it.

"Harry!" Ron cried pitifully.

"Besides, Ron. If there were actual, real spiders, wouldn't they just crawl right up the post and get you?" Harry yawned, covering up his head with a large, fluffy, sound-dampening pillow.

Harry put in the special noise-eliminating earplugs Fred and George had given him for just such emergencies and settled back in for a good sleep. One tag-along plush spider crawled up his duvet and tapped Harry on the face. The black-haired wizard yawned, grabbed the plush, and snuggled into it, blissfully oblivious.

The sounds of Ron's frantic screaming went strangely unnoticed as every bedside table had a box of Weasleys Wizards Wheezes Mail-Order Scream-Dampening Earplugs.

Realistic plush spiders 100. Ron Weasley 1.

Meanwhile, down in the dungeons, Severus Snape was having the best sleep of his life with a Nundu cub providing gratuitous warmth under his Slytherin green velvet duvet. His arm wrapped around the peacefully purring cub and drew her closer, and Brimstone yawned contentedly— about fifteen plushie spiders standing guard over the duvet and the original one tucked safely under her chin.

Crookshanks cuddled up next to her, grasping his own smaller stuffed spider in his paws.

Far across Hogwarts, in the chambers of Argus Filch, Mrs Norris and Argus slept away obliviously, a small plush spider resting between Mrs Norris' paws.

High up in the headmaster's office, Fawkes snoozed away on his swinging perch with his very own little plush spider clinging to the brass rings that held the perch together.

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_Hogwarts Professors Invent Popular Wizarding Cat Toy_

_Proceeds Donated to Wizarding Feline Shelter in London_

_Have a cat? Planning to get one?_

_You might want to stop at The Magical Menagerie where the newest sensation to sweep cat-lovers_
everywhere has taken Diagon Alley by storm.

Professors Filius Flitwick and Severus Snape have come up with the ultimate cat toy: the fully-animated and indestructible plush spider. It comes in various designs from the highly realistic to bright pink and even rainbow colours, but one thing remains the same in all models: cats absolutely love them!

Seeking a way to entertain Hogwarts' beloved pet Nundu cub, the famous Brimstone, these two professors have created a perfect balance of entertainment and guardianship. Not only will the spiders recognise friend and foe, but they are fire-proof, waterproof, and uncrushable. In fact, there is a special upgraded model that replicates itself when under attack by non-family members and normal felines, making them a highly amusing way to stop thieves from getting away with your treasured belongings.

Each stuffed spider is fully-animated and charmed to stick close to their feline friend, or, if you prefer, to stay within a certain defined area. Guardian models will happily guard your stuff and entertain your feline friend without ever tiring or wearing out.

Sales of this new cat toy are exceedingly high, and all proceeds are split between the African Whomping Willow Nundu Preserve and London's Wizarding Feline Shelter.

"There are a lot of potential familiars out there in need of a good and loving home," Filius Flitwick said in our interview. "Keeping them happy while they patiently wait for their forever home and life partner is a very important thing."

Those wishing to purchase one of these toys can find them for sale at The Magical Menagerie and the London Wizarding Feline Shelter. The African Whomping Willow-Nundu Preserve is also offering them via Owl Post for those who wish to order them from the comfort of their own home.

A special edition model, nicknamed the R.W., is crafted to resemble the Himalayan Jumping Spider and is made for those extremely hyper and highly-active felines which require extra exercise to maintain optimum health. What does R.W. stand for, you ask? Really Wicked! And I can tell you, my dear readers, as a wizard with a very active Abyssinian that I swear was crossed with hyperactive toddler on a perpetual sugar buzz, these toys are a blessing from Merlin. Get your cat a few today!

"Just because you're paranoid doesn't mean they aren't after you."

— Joseph Heller


Sorry if you really love Ronald. *eyedarts* Nope. So not sorry!
Silvanus Kettleburn yawned sleepily as he sipped his morning coffee. Birds were gathering on the green, attracted to his scarecrow in a manner that seemed to indicate it was failing utterly at its intended job. It started with one magpie, graduated to a spattering of jackdaws, and then ended with about a hundred hungry blue tits.

"Well at least the garden will be free of insects and spiders," Kettleburn mused, stroking his beard with the one hand he still had all of his fingers on. "Not that we've had a problem with spiders recently."

"Mrowl."

"Ah, there you are, Aberdeen," Kettleburn chuckled. "Come to check up on me?"

The tortoiseshell cat hopped up onto his lap and curled up there, plunking down her virtual spider. It seemed that every single cat in Hogwarts had one now, and the even greater irony was that the virtual spiders were far more welcome than their real-life counterparts. Not all of them, however, were the work of Professors Flitwick and Snape. No, it seemed there were those who had chosen to help them proliferate the current virtual arachnid craze: the infamous Weasley twins. Merlin, even the Christmas trees had festive arachnids charmed to appear like eight-legged snowflakes dangling from each bow.

All of the feline familiars were totally ecstatic. There was even some evidence that the owls were also enjoying the pleasures of pursuing the plush arachnids, seeming to be quite aware of the difference between the real and the virtual and were thoroughly enjoying the fun catch and release game.

"Mrrrr!" Aberdeen meowed at him, sticking her sharp claws into the front of his shirt.

"Hey!" He fussed. "What are you on about, lass?"

She dropped a soaking wet stuffed spider into his lap.
"Oh, is that it?" He laughed with a smile that spilled over into his eyes. He gently dried the stuffed toy off with his wand and sent it off, watching his happy familiar chase after it with gusto.

Kettleburn's cottage was just inside the boundaries of the Dark Forest. It was built out of stone and natural earth, much like the nomadic style of the centaur mixed with the traditional stonemasonry of old. He was one of the few people the centaurs welcomed into the forest, as they knew of his affinity for the magical beasts, and he treated them all with respect, something many seemed to forget when they were dealing with the centaur. He tended a forest garden of various kinds of herbs, as well as edible ground and tree fungi that he shared with the local herd, and they, in turn, brought him other foods in exchange. He was one of the few that knew about centaur holistic healing thanks to many years of working with them, and he made sure there were always plenty of the plants they desired if one of them happened to get hurt. Thanks to his magic, his garden flourished and bloomed all year round, even in the dead of winter, which was a great windfall for the centaur in times of need.

Sometimes, the foals would visit, bringing him baskets of smoked fish or venison in exchange for some of his plants, and he had a very open take-as-you-need policy for them. Few knew it, but it was because of his hard work that Dumbledore's peace treaty with them went through officially. Now, however, thanks a certain Nundu, centaur relations were even better than ever, and that made Kettleburn happier. If he did retire, which he hoped would be fairly soon, then he wanted things to be in a good state for both the centaurs and Hogwarts. Now all he had to do was find someone to be his inheritor of the cottage that would take care of it. So far, he was starting to whittle down Pomona into accepting his invitation if they could figure out a way to link her chambers at Hogwarts to the cottage due to her house duties with the Hufflepuffs. Short of her, however, he was struggling to find an alternative. Hagrid was far too large for the place, and his large feet had already accidently smashed over a decade's worth of delicate lichens and healing plants purely due to their being too difficult to easily see.

Dumbledore had hinted that perhaps Kettleburn would like to retire to his cottage there, since he was so at home there as well as providing a great service between Hogwarts and centaur, but official approval for that arrangement from the Board of Governors had never come through. Silvanus had to admit the place had grown on him, and it would be nice to be able to remain close to what he had been his life for so many years without having to deal with foolhardy students trying to wrestle bugbears and then running to him when that didn't quite work out the way they had imagined it.

He had a few missing digits and had almost lost half his leg if not for a quick intervention by Poppy Pomfrey. He had learned the fine line between foolhardy and cautious regard with the wild and the magical versus somewhat domesticated and magical. A thestral, despite what many people believed, was not a bloodthirsty man-eating creature. Now, an acromantula, on the other hand, no matter how well it "talked to you" was far more likely to eat you afterwards once they got bigger than whoever had been talking to it. That was simply their nature. You could not tame them out of that.

"Prrrrt!" A loud purring meow came from nearby, and Kettleburn watched Snape's and McGonagall's familiar perform her daily morning headbonk, tussle, pounce, and cheek-rubbing with Auberdeen. The Nundu had become an accustomed sight around the school, and while many students gave her a wide berth because of her species, he had to admit far more was going right since her unexpected arrival than wrong. Albus' office seemed to be the only casualty of her being around, and part of that was because his phoenix found a kindred spirit to play with. Who knew such an unlikely pair could be so friendly? It wasn't exactly common knowledge, even to someone like Silvanus.

Kettleburn pulled out a smoked salmon from his stash and held it out, and Brimstone came trotting up to him immediately. She rubbed up against his hips and his elbows, play-gnawed on his wrists, and proceeded to give him a good dose of elderberry-breath.
"Aren't you getting big, lass?" He said with a smile, ruffling her fur.

"Mrowl!" She answered, her long tail whacking him gently on the side.

"Here you go, the morning peace offering," he laughed, handing her the smoked fish.

Brim settled down beside him to eat it after giving it a good sniff over. He was one of the few she took food from without being overly suspicious, and he was glad of the honour. She took food from the foals all the time, and she could smell them all over the food more often than not. So, as an extension of learned trust, she trusted him too. He was not so foolish as to think that he would ever be able to make her do anything she didn't want to do, but she never showed a lick of bad behaviour short of her instinctive need to shred things, mark everything, and chase various small critters, both alive and simulated.

Snape and McGonagall had walked her around the school on a number of occasions and taught her who was who, where the boundaries of Hogwarts were, and by gesture, who she could trust by who they could trust. The centaur did much the same thing, taking her on patrols with their warriors, so she knew every scrap of land in her "territory." Hogwarts, if it hadn't already been strong enough in defence, had a very strong defender growing up inside its walls and surrounding lands. The fact that McGonagall and Snape both permitted her to roam her territory without their presence was indicative of a deep trust in her, and if her herding the first years away from the forest and checking in on the thestral herd and driving away any large predators from the herd was any sort of litmus test, then things were going very well on all fronts.

"Time to take some mushrooms to the centaurs," Silvanus said. "Did you wish to accompany me?"

"Mrowl!" Came her enthusiastic reply. She had made short work of the entire smoked fish, leaving only the spine and a few of the larger bones. Everything else was well and truly devoured. She picked up the remaining bones and trotted over to the compost heap he had made and neatly buried it. She looked back at him, tail swishing in anticipation.

Silvanus smiled and picked up the large basket of fungi and herbs. "Let's go then!"

It was starting to snow as they walked the well-worn trail through the woods. The trails led off to the thestral herds and the hippogriff paddocks, depending on which direction one chose to go, but the trail he wanted was the less traveled and less obvious path to the heart of the centaur's lands.

Brimstone looked fascinated. As each large flake fell, she would rush to bat at it, but then it would smack into her paw and promptly melt, startling her. She went after the fluffy flakes again and again, and Kettleburn realised the Nundu cub had never before experienced snow.

Amused, he walked along, knowing that she would stay near him. As fascinated as she was about everything, she also tended to watch her human companions for cues about how to respond to her environment. When he got a little too far away from her, she would bound back to him, head-bonking her skull into his hip, side, or the back of his knee, depending on how enthusiastic she was feeling at the moment.

"Hello, friend Silvanus," a melodic baritone voice greeted from the shadows. A large group of shadows moved, finally allowing themselves to be seen, and the centaur came out to greet him.

"Magorian, Bane, Firenze," Silvanus greeted with a smile. "Ah, Coltsfoot, Bramble, Firetender, good to see you all."

The centaurs bowed their heads, putting their bows across their backs. "Indeed. Sorry for the
weapons, my friend. We have been on high alert since we found a unicorn dead in the forest. Its mate was also injured, but we were making our way to you in the hopes you could help with her. She is laden with foal, and we may lose both if nothing is done."

Brimstone's nose was working furiously, sniffing out the story from their scents. Magorian patted her down and ruffled her fur, greeting her by kneeling down so she could headrub him properly. She greeted each of the other centaurs in turn, sniffing and rubbing herself against their legs.

"I think she knows half the story already from our scents," Firenze commented, soothing the anxious feline's distressed vocalisations.

"The death of a unicorn is always a bad omen," Bane said, his dark eyes full of concern. "A unicorn herd in our forest has been a true blessing for so long, and never have we seen the violent death of one."

"Violent?" Silvanus asked worriedly, handing the full basket over to Firetender. The centaur took the basket gratefully and cantered off to deliver it to the main herd.

Magorian nodded. "The stallion was not just killed defending his mate. He was maimed and blooded."

"Blooded?" Silvanus gasped. "You are certain?"

Magorian nodded grimly. "There is very little blood on the ground around him, my friend. It is as if… it was taken away."

Kettleburn shivered. "To drink of a unicorn's blood is unthinkable. Unforgivable. To do harm to one is—"

The centaur nodded in sober agreement.

"Let us waste no time," Silvanus said.

The centaur seemed to discuss something without words. Magorian jutted his head, and Coltsfoot grunted. The painted centaur went down on his forelegs. "Get upon my back, friend Silvanus. We can carry you there faster."

Kettleburn's eye went very, very wide. The amount of respect in the offer had not been lost on him. To ride upon a centaur's back was a very rare gift. He nodded, swallowing hard as he took up the space behind the centaur's withers. Coltsfoot stood, and within seconds they were off, with Brimstone following behind with her great bounds of feline speed.

Thankfully, Kettleburn was no stranger to mounted movement, and he did not embarrass himself by falling off Coltsfoot as they zoomed between the trees as breakneck speeds.

By the time they arrived at the site where the unicorn mare lay on the ground, her sides heaving with exertion, things were looking very grim indeed for the unicorn mare.

Silvanus leapt to the ground, bowing in respect to Coltsfoot before pulling several small jars and bottles from various pockets in his robes. He approached the mare cautiously, knowing that pain and trauma from the attack probably hampered her ability to tell friend from foe. Forest unicorns were not ones to attack humans without a really good reason, defending their foals being the understandable exception. Coastal unicorns, however, were often vicious creatures that would run anything and anyone through that tried to encroach upon their territory. There were some people who speculated that Kelpies were the result of a crossbreeding experiment gone wrong, created by taking coastal
unicorns and breeding them with regular horses to create a terrifying, carnivorous, human-hating beast that looked exactly like an ordinary horse. If you were foolish enough to mount it, however, it would run you straight into the deep water in an attempt to drown you.

If that was true, Silvanus would have loved to go back in time to give the idiot who did it a piece of his wand and perhaps a swift kick to the face. As Silvanus was hardly a violent person, usually, that hidden desire said much about his opinion of unauthorised and unethical cross-species breeding of animals, especially when magical animals were involved. Silvanus was adamant that if it didn't happen in nature then it wasn't meant to happen, and "in nature" did not include "with a little help."

When the unicorn mare accepted his presence, he set to work, quickly taking out his tinctures and salves to help with her wounds. He poured a few tinctures over the wounds and frowned. Instead of healing, the wounds simply fizzled. The unicorn groaned, straining, making sounds of pain and distress.

"Easy now, my lady," Kettleburn whispered.

"Something is wrong," he noted. "There is Dark magic in these wounds. These are not normal."

Brimstone was introducing herself nose-to-nose, snuffling the unicorn's velvet nose as she lowered herself to the ground to greet her. The unicorn seemed okay with the young Nundu cub, seemingly more apt to trust a new Nundu than a human. Brim was licking the unicorn's face with her raspy tongue in an almost reassuring manner.

The gentle licking seemed to relax the unicorn more, and Silvanus used that to try a different tincture, attempting to dispel the Dark magic from the mare's wounds. Dark magic made wounds very difficult to treat. They were like salting the wound the moment it was made and then shoving heavily contaminated trash into it for extra nastiness. Dark magic liked to cling to wounds, interfering with any healing potion or spell so much that even when they closed, the body scarred in a way that could never be fully healed. Werewolf bites were one of the testaments to that particular phenomena.

The unicorn was a pure creature of Light, and they could normally heal themselves very quickly, provided the wound was not laced with Dark magic. Someone had deliberately wounded her and her mate, fully intending for them to bleed out. It was almost too much horror to wrap his mind around.

Magorian dropped a bundle of moss and healing mud in a large bowl beside him. The centaur way was to clean the wounds and then pack it with the mineral-rich healing mud that they cooked over a fire mixed with various herbs. It looked horrible, smelled wonderful, and healed like nothing short of a miracle. Humans shied away from that sort of healing due to the notion that all mud was dirty and "bad." Silvanus, however, had seen it in action time and time again. First, however, he had to clean the wound, and the Dark magic was still resisting him.

The mare was starting to become cold to the touch. The centaurs immediately gathered around and lay down beside her and Brimstone, offering their combined warmth and comfort to allow Kettleburn to do his work. Time was ticking away, and Silvanus was growing increasingly worried. Poppy was not one for countering Dark magic on wounds. Her skills were in the curing of illnesses and the healing of damaged bones and the typical fare of magical children finding new ways to try and kill themselves and each other doing ordinary things. Every day things, thank Merlin, was not being attacked by cursed objects laden with Dark magic.

Brim, picking up his growing distress, head-nudged his hands, wedging herself under them to inspect the large gash on the mare's side. The unicorn's blood had an almost unearthly silvery sheen. The silver was almost a dull iron colour, and that concerned him. That was not the picture of unicorn health, but then again, a healthy unicorn did not normally bleed. The only reason he knew of that
could cause healthy unicorn blood to look like that was when he would patch up some of the stallions after they went through the yearly spring "rut" trying to prove to their chosen mares that they "still had the stuff" that made them a superb genetic contributor. Unicorns were creatures of Light, but they still had primal biological urges. That was something very few people knew. They never killed each other. The same could not always be said about other animals throughout the world.

Brim, convinced that the mare needed some extra-special TLC, set to work grooming the wound with broad strokes of her raspy tongue. Silvanus watched as dark rivulets of "something" trickled out of the wound, hissing as it turned into a foul-smelling steamy vapour and disappeared into thin air. Silvanus, quickly seeing Brim's gentle tending for the priceless gift that it was, carefully guided the cub's attentions to each of the other wounds as he packed the wound with the healing mud and moss, making the proper compress and bandage to encourage the unicorn to heal herself.

By the time Brim was finished, Kettleburn had covered all the gashes, and the centaur had brought the unicorn fresh water to drink. The mare's colour was already returning, her breathing was no longer laboured, and she nickered softly in thanks. The mare nipped the Nundu on the head, using her flexible velvet lips to work the feline's ears and the fur around her head and neck into a mane-like formation. The Nundu calmly tolerated the mare's attentions, seemingly taking it for the thanks it was.

"We will watch over her until she can get on her feet again, Silvanus," Magorian said with approval.

Silvanus smiled. "I am glad that she will be able to recover."

Firenze whickered. "Our feline friend is quite the blessing in her own right," the palomino centaur said with a nod. "I am starting to suspect that she is our local guardian spirit."

"Spirits live without food," Magorian said. "I, however, will be sure to bring extra fish and jerked meat in thanks for her help."

Brim was laying on her side, her paw outstretched to softly lay on the unicorn's muzzle.

Magorian whickered. "When the mare is strong enough to move, we will try to encourage her to shelter near your cottage, where you built the lean-tos for us when we visited. Hopefully another stallion will brave the forest to find her. If not, we will keep watch over her so she doesn't have to foal alone."

"I will prepare the shelter to accommodate her and her young," Silvanus agreed. "I am glad that unicorns don't seem to care whose foal they are protecting. It will give her a good chance of raising a healthy one even though his sire is dead."

Bane snorted. "We have buried the stallion to keep any scavengers from finding him."

Kettleburn sighed. "I am saddened that such a thing had to be done at all."

"You and the centaur both," Magorian said, pawing the ground with one of his front hooves in agreement.

"With it being early winter, I will keep the shelter warm for her. Without her mate to share body heat, it will help her to remain comfortable when you are not there to provide your warmth."

"A good idea, Silvanus," Bane said. "I think you should know, my friend. We have spotted a forest
troll lumbering closer to Hogwarts from the western part of the forest. It is not a local one and has been getting in fights with the local fauna. We withdrew our patrols there to avoid conflict as this is not a season we prefer to move our shelters."

"I will inform the Headmaster," Kettleburn said. "Thank you for telling me."

The gathered centaur inclined their heads. "It is to both of our advantages to see the troll removed," Bane said after a time. "It is odd to see one at all, but especially in winter. They are not known for their ability to preplan for cold and tend to freeze to death in this climate."

Silvanus stroked his beard. "Very curious indeed."

There was a soft mrowl of protest as the unicorn mare lay her head over the Nundu cub and pinned her down. Brim's legs pumped as she squirmed, but then she settled, seemingly knowing she was defeated.

Kettleburn smiled. "I will let you know what I find out, my friends."

The centaur nodded affirmative as the professor transfigured a warm blanket and cast it over the resting unicorn mare, happy that there had only been one casualty in the forest that morning.

When Brim returned from her morning patrol with Kettleburn, both Minerva and Severus got a mind full of excited memories of unicorns, centaurs, and a strange scent that was more a lack of scent. The excited Nundu was only too happy to share in great detail, demonstrating her excitement by fluffing her tail to the point where it looked like she was a snow leopard, and by dropping a very cold snowball she had been carrying around into Severus' lap with a very wet spat. The Potion's master looked at his mischievous familiar with an arched eyebrow, but she stared back at him with such a content expression that all he could do was ruffle her ears, thank her for the exceedingly cold and wet gift, and then made it disappear in much the same way any owner might dispose of their loving pet's gift of a dead and smelly rodent on their front step.

Brim tried to do her best impression of an innocent tabby cat, and crawl into Severus' lap, but ended up sharing his and Minerva's lap together due to her rapidly growing size. While she wasn't totally overbearing like a St Bernard attempting to sit in a toddler's lap, she did set her rather large head on the edge of the table to better observe the goings-on at the High Table.

Flitwick and Sprout, who seemed to realised the feline craved a higher sort of position to keep her eye on things, had crafted her a living cat-perch with a heated rock nestled between the branches of an overgrown Pachira tree they had been keeping near the High table as a decoration. Brim took to it eagerly, much to Snape and McGonagall's relief to get circulation back in their legs. The house elf arrived with a large haunch of something, and the happy Nundu took to eating her breakfast while Kettleburn told his story of the strangeness of what was going on in the Dark Forest.

"A unicorn murdered?" Rolanda said with horror.

"And another almost killed?" Septima Vector gasped. "That's not a good omen at all."

"Death! We're all going to die!" Trelawney predicted. "Horribly in a dark cloud of—"

"Yes, yes, Sybill, that will do," Minerva admonished the Divination instructor with a brief roll of her eyes.

Concerned expressions went up and down the High Table at the news. Unicorns and forest trolls
were not the expected news of the day, and both things seemed out of place.

"Even more reason to keep the children well away from the Dark Forest," Bathsheda Babbling said, sipping her hot coffee a bit gingerly. "While I realise we restrict them in respect to our centaur friends, surely they would appreciate now having to keep their eyes open on wandering students as well as the recuperating unicorn."

Aurora Sinistra nodded to the Ancient Runes professor. "I tend to agree. If there is anything we need them to be in the forest for, we can escort them as usual. I would feel better if we had someone check out the forest troll coming our way, especially after the incident earlier this year during Halloween."

Minerva pinched her nose. "Whenever I think about that night, I keep thinking I've forgotten something important. A student or something—"

"You too, Minerva?" Flitwick sighed.

"I— I really would like to forget about that day," Quirrel stammered.

"Not exactly your bravest moment, Quirinus," Pomona agreed, patting him on the shoulder.

Quirrel muttered a series of indistinguishable things under his breath as people shook their heads at him.

Brim lifted her head from her haunch of meat, eyes narrowing and whiskers twitching. Both Severus and Minerva turned to look at her strangely. The feline growled lowly, ears flattened tightly against her skull.

Minerva touched her ear and scratched it, causing the Nundu cub to play bite and wrestle with her arm, distracting her from her growling fit. Still, Severus looked down the table suspiciously, his mind working as to what connection the cat had made at that very moment. He turned to the cat, and very subtly made it look like he was loving on her, pressing his head to her head and rubbing her chin.

"What is it?" He whispered to her.

Brim licked under his chin, but her thoughts came in a stream. Quirrel's half-rotting scent, the utter lack of scent on the unicorn's wounds, and the strange lack of scent on Quirrel right at that moment — a void in the table's mixed scents.

Flitwick smelled like tallow candles and juniper berries. The Headmaster smelled of lemon sherbet candies and a hint of Fawkes' cinnamon ash. Minerva always smelled of heather and mint. Pomona smelled of plants and living earth. Madam Pomfrey smelled of linen and medicine, while Rolanda smelled of broom polish and open air. Quirrel, however, had always until that moment, smelled faintly of rotting things no matter what other scent he may have doused himself in.

Severus rubbed her chin, wrinkling his nose as she basted him with her raspy tongue and both removed and healed the skin on his chin. He was getting used to the rough sensations of Nundu affection, and Merlin knew it was causing both him and Minerva to appear years younger than their actual ages, but it was still more than a little discombobulating.

*Everything* had a scent. Severus was no stranger to that, especially with him being a Potions master. Lack of scent was— quite suspicious. Which suggested that the lack of scent on a unicorn's murdered body hardly a coincidence. Severus did not believe in such things. He had not been a two-sided, two-mastered, Death-Eater spy to subscribe to the lackadaisical "things just happen as they happen" philosophy.
"I swear you look a year younger every time she does that," Trelawney fawned over him, making him abruptly stiffen with disgust. In all the years he had been teaching, Trelawney hadn't given up on trying to inject herself into his life, much like the man who hated cats always ending up with the attention of the entire cat shelter. Oh, how he loathed Divination practitioners— fake ones even more so.

Suddenly, Severus bolted up, as Brim turned her head and breathed on Trelawney— the scent of burning rubber and hákarl assaulting his nose. Trelawney promptly passed out into the nearby dish of bread-and-butter pudding, face first.

"Oh, dear!" Hagrid boomed. He quickly picked Sybill up by the collar of her robes and lifted her out of the pudding.

Pudding covered her entire face, glasses and all, making her look very— well she had never looked even remotely attractive to begin with.

It wasn't that Severus was particularly concerned with someone's physical appearance. He, himself, had a nose that could cut glass and teeth that had come out of the gate looking like he'd smoked two packs a day for the last forty years (and seeing that he was in his thirties made that comparison all the more horrible, he supposed), so it wasn't exactly her being unattractive as much as she was all around unattractive, from her death-obsession, to her overbearing personality to her bug-like face and her tasteless baggy robes. Having bits of pudding dripping off of herself merely made her even more disgusting. The irony of someone like himself considering her to be quite unattractive was hardly lost on him.

Brim mrrowled, snuffling his face happily, projecting her love and pride.

"Good kitty," Severus whispered, scratching her velvety ears. A part of him was concerned that his emotion might have been the lethal sort for one Nundu to channel, but thankfully (or unfortunately), Trelawney came to, sputtering pudding and proclaiming that everyone was going to die horrible to blackness incarnate.

"She seems just fine," Poppy said, after waving her wand over the disheveled witch.

"Normal for her, at least," Minerva quipped.

The air was filled with the scent of coconut and verbena as Brim pawed her shoulder and placed her head on it from her cat-stand.

"Yes, yes, I see you, you shameless attention craver," Minerva chuckled, rubbing the Nundu's ears.

Brim purr-chirped and placed her large paw aside Minerva's face.

"I'll take Professor Trelawney up to her quarters," Hagrid said. "Get 'er cleaned up nice."

*Change her clothes into something that wasn't found at charity shop or a vintage shop straight out of Piccadilly— some fifty years previous,* Severus thought to himself.

As Hagrid led Trelawney down the aisle and out of Great Hall, a flurry of plush spiders scrambled up her ragtag robes. Brim perked up immediately and leapt off of her cat-tree, bounding down the aisle with increasing speed. She latched onto Trelawney's robes, batting at the plush spiders with gleeful abandon. The Divination professor screeched doom and destruction while flinging remnants of pudding in all directions. Students immediately scrambled to get out of the way of her frantic flailing.
The attack on Trelawney ended when a few Gryffindor children called for Brim, and the Nundu cub trotted over, her mouth full of stuffed arachnids. They patted the bench to get her to jump up, and she did, dropping her bounty of squirming legs onto the table.

They scattered in random directions until the sound of Ronald Weasley screeching caused them all to freeze in place. Then, rather like a Muggle horror movie, they all skittered towards him en masse.

Ron fled screaming out of the Great Hall, and Fred and George turned to each other with matching devilish grins and traded high-fives, listening as their younger brother's screams faded off into the distance.

"Looks like someone may have been making a few improvements to your original model," Minerva said, nudging Severus with her elbow. Flitwick was chuckling.

"Those two are a menace," Severus commented.

Brim was bat, bat, batting at something the twins had dangling from a fishing pole. She was leaping up high to go after it. Severus narrowed his eyes suspiciously. Shortly after they flung the line out, sending the dangling toy shooting across the room, and the Nundu cub went flying off after it, leaping high in the air in an arch only to land on the Slytherin table and slide across it. Children went scattering in all directions as Brim popped up over the end of the table, a plush bird grasped her jaws.

Draco grabbed it from her brazenly, charming it Slytherin green before releasing it to fly back across the table. Brim leapt up high, snatched it out of the air, and then landed on all four feet. She trotted back up the High Table, emitting the pleasing scent of coconut and verbena.

*Splat.*

A damp bird landed squarely in the aged headmaster's lap.

"Mrrrowl!"

Brim gently set her head on his lap and looked up at him pleadingly.

The headmaster plucked the bird up with a slightly disgusted expression, looking around to find a place to put it. In his focus to get rid of the bird, he forgot the first rule of acquiring Nundu toys: don't ever hold them for long.

**POUNCE!**

Over one hundred kilos of exuberant Nundu cub jumped up onto Albus and sent him toppling over in his chair.

Minerva and Severus averted their eyes and quickly darted up the aisles.

A Nundu head popped up over the table as she suddenly noticed her people were not with her. She gave a loud call of distress and bounded out after them. By the time Albus scraped himself off the ground and regained some semblance of dignity, the two professors and their familiar had long since fled the scene.

Albus righted his chair with a sigh, only to find himself being stared at by the entire student body.

Albus winced, plucking a wet stuffed bird from the neck of his robes. "I'm never going to live that down, am I?"
The other professors at the Head Table had enough sense to collectively avert their eyes and refuse to answer him.

Lucius stared down at the Nundu cub gnawing on his dragonhide boots. "Hello, little menace to all things leather," he greeted her.

"Mrrowl!" Brim replied excitedly, trying to climb up his leg.

Lucius' eyes grew wide as her large paws and equally long claws came very close to his vulnerable privates. He dodged, kneeling down so she could headbonk him properly without attempting to climb him like a tree.

She wrapped her paws around his head and pulled it down, giving him a swift lick across the face.

Lucius winced as her sandpaper tongue relieved him of a few layers of epidermis. He tapped the nodule to the climbing tree nearby, and Brim leapt up into it, scratching the branches with her claws and making deep gouges. Thanks to the enchantment, the wood swiftly healed, and left it pristine for her attentions at a future point. As Lucius walked into the next room, she followed by using the room's surrounding "tree branches" to look down at him.

"Lucius," Severus' voice greeted from the opposite door. "Miss the dungeons so much that you just felt you had to visit?"

Lucius snorted. "These dungeon quarters feels like a warm tropical paradise."

Severus poured him some tea, gesturing for Lucius to sit. "Lately, our Spotted Lady of the Large and Silent Paws seems to enjoy it."

Lucius arched a brow. "Very touching, my friend. Since when have you cared what others desired?"

Severus gave him a pointed look. "Perhaps when she cared about what I desired."

Lucius put his hand to his chest. "My heart. It bleeds."

Severus rolled his eyes. "What news have you, old friend?"

Lucius sipped his tea gingerly. "I think it best if we wait for Minerva to join us for this particular debriefing."

Severus arched a brow. "Well, she has the night patrol this evening, so, you may have to suffer my sofabe and a very cuddly Nundu."

Lucius tilted his head. "Doesn't she usually sleep with you or Minerva?"

"Guests are always more exciting than family," Severus replied with a smirk.

Lucius snorted. "Well, at least we aren't stuck in a cave like cowering vermin hiding from Aurors."

Severus grunted. "Had you instructed me to do that on the night of my initiation, Lucius, I would have told you exactly where to go when you asked me to take that Mark."

Lucius gave him a sad smile. "It did not take long after for even I to realise the gravity of my mistake. I do truly regret bringing you into it, but, seeing as to where it has brought us, a part of me does not regret what came of it."
Severus rubbed his nose. "Others were not quite so fortunate. If there are even others who sincerely regret becoming the Dark Lord's pawn who are not so deeply buried in the Dark Lord lies that they go the way of dear Bellatrix."

Lucius stared at the Christmas tree in the corner. "You have a tree, Severus?" His disbelief seemed to rain down from above like a load of lead bricks.

Severus snorted. "Brim loves it. All the snowflake spiders hang on it like ornaments. She just picks one for the day and replaces it when one gets too soggy."

Lucius scoffed. "I prefer my peafowl, I think. They do not demand a tree for the holidays."

"Psh," Severus retorted. "You know as well as I that Brim has ensorcelled your Slytherin heart and wrapped you around her feline soul like a fine, blond ribbon."

Lucius waved him off like one would shoo away a fly. He did not, however, attempt to deny his friend's accusation.

"I have told Minerva to come on in when she's ready," Severus said. "Winter holidays makes it rather quiet around here. She may come in the morning to let us sleep, but either way, I should tuck you in before you turn into a pumpkin."

Lucius gave him a long-suffering look.

"It is not my fault that your parents drilled into me on countless occasions that their son would surely expire at the Witching Hour if he wasn't properly home and tucked into bed."

Lucius rolled his eyes. "I swear my father just wanted to make sure he knew where I was so I didn't have the opportunity to bed any Muggles, and mum wanted me close to make sure father didn't beat me. Oddly enough, he was always on his best behaviour whenever you were there."

Severus nodded in solemn understanding. "At least you had that, Lucius. I think my father had no kind word left in him by the time I was born. He certainly made no attempt to prove otherwise."

"Your father was a truly horrible, pathetic little man," Lucius agreed. "He— he was the reason I truly believed you were better off with us as a Death Eater than—" he trailed off.

Severus shook his head, holding up his hand. "We all had our reasons for believing the lies, Lucius. We were all desperate for something to save us from our pain. Some, like Bellatrix, fell so completely under the delusion that sanity was lost forever. The love of your wife and son is what saved you, Lucius. The death of my old friend was mine."

"What a sorry pair we are," Lucius snorted.

Severus' hair fell about his face, framing it. "At least things are getting better now, hrm?"

"True," Lucius agreed.

Severus waved his wand, extended the nearby couch and summoning a folded pile of nightclothes, bath towels, sheets, and a duvet.

As if on cue, Brim flomped down on all four feet onto the bed from above, smelling of fresh-baked almond biscuits.

Lucius rubbed his nose. "Almond biscuits?"
Severus shrugged. "It's bed time. She gets in a strange mood for bed."

Lucius used his wand to make up the bed as a large fluffy feather pillow slammed into the side of his face.

"Really, Severus?" he muttered.

"It wasn't me," Severus voice came from the other room, muffled by the brushing of his teeth.

Lucius looked down to see Brim staring at him from the bed. She sprawled herself over the head of his bed. "Leave some room for me, menace," he protested.

The Nundu cub yawned toothily, stretched out her body, and rolled over to give him more room.

"Hopefully Narcissa doesn't think I'm cheating on her with a Nundu," Lucius sighed.

Brim gave him a decidedly odd look.

Lucius waved his wand to expand the sofabed out a little more to accommodate both cub and wizard. He placed his wand by the table, changed into his nightclothes, and slid between the silken sheets. Not even a minute later, a warm, furry interloper wiggled between the sheets and snuggled up to him, radiating a pleasant warmth and the scent of almond biscuits.

He had to admit that this was far better than sleeping in the typical guest bed or in a cave or squatter house somewhere hoping the Aurors didn't find you. How had he ever thought that was a sign of being on the right side of anything?

Youth.

It didn't take long with the cub's radiant warmth to fall into a blissful sleep.

Lucius woke groggily, feeling the same sort of lethargic bliss that always happened when you had to be up for something in the early morning and your bed was perfectly warm and comfortable. His eyes twitched.

A low rumbling purr vibrated against his chest.

Blissful comfort.

Lucius wrapped his arms around his living pillow, refusing to let go of the comfortable warmth.

The comfortable warmth seemed to approve with a hearty purr.

"Lucius," Severus' bemused voice sounded off from far away.

"Mff," Lucius grunted. "No."

A sandpaper tongue slid across his face, and he didn't even care. It actually felt pretty good at this point, and maybe he'd look younger than his wife if he let the Nundu rearrange his face.

A gentle shake. "Lucius, Minerva is here."

"She can't have her back," Lucius muttered, hugging the Nundu tighter.

Severus' chuckled. "No use, Minerva. He's buried in deep like a tick, and he's claiming ownership of
our familiar."

Minerva's chuckle came shortly after. "I can always teach our lovely feline how to do the morning kidney and bladder dance. I think that is a skill all cats are experts at."

There was a soft thud on the end of the duvet as a silver tabby kneaded the fabric. Then, when that didn't work, she stood very deftly, right over Lucius' kidneys with her front paws and positioned her rear paws on his bladder.

Time passed.

Lucius burst out of the blankets, quickly heading towards the bathroom, cursing.

Severus snickered as his baffled familiar looked around, wondering where her Lucius went. Minerva head-bonked the Nundu cub, and Brim took Minerva in her mouth, moved her, and then groomed her dutifully.

Lucius returned after a while, mumbling about Animagi, bladders, and horrible feline tendencies.

Minerva transformed back into a human and laughed into the back of her hand. She stroked Brim's furry head and ears idly.

"I was having the best sleep of my life ever since Draco was born, Minerva," Lucius protested. "Surely you could have given me a few extra minutes to enjoy how wonderful it was?"

"You asked me to wake you when I came back," Minerva laughed. "I let you sleep in until morning."

Lucius blinked. "Oh, it's morning."

Severus thrust a mug of coffee into the blond wizard's hands. "Drink, before your brain melts."

Lucius did as he was told, and took the silently offered stack of biscuits to go with it.

Minerva had ordered breakfast in, and the house-elf that brought in Brim's haunch of the day happily brought in generous portions pf fruit, wentelteefjes, some sort of chocolate fruit bread that smelled like heaven in bread form, cheese and bread, eggs, tall glasses of milk, a few glasses of freshly squeezed orange juice, and a few small jars of chocolade hagelslag.

"Minerva, have you been craving a visit to the Netherlands?" Severus asked as he smeared the chocolate spread on his toast.

"Are you complaining, laddie?" Minerva pestered, her Scottish lilt showing.

Severus shook his head as he sliced the cheese and arranged it on his bread. "Nee hoor, mevrouw. Absoluut niet."

Minerva smiled at him as she drank her orange juice.

"How is that even remotely fair?" Lucius complained. "When did you learn Dutch, Severus?"

"You never did?" Severus asked innocently.

Lucius scowled at him. "Soms haat ik je echt.," Lucius grunted. "I really do."

"Hate is such a strong word, Lucius," Severus laughed. "Besides, you paid enough attention to know
how to tell me you hated me."

Lucius mumbled, "Met een passie."

"Mrrwol!" Brim commented, chomping on Lucius' wrist.

"Ow! Fine, furry demon! I ask forgiveness for my rudeness," he growled.

Brim looked to Severus. Severus looked back at Lucius. "You are forgiven."

Brim released Lucius' wrist and licked it apologetically.

Lucius let out a long-suffering sigh. He paused, narrowing his eyes. "Wait, what other languages have you taught the beast?"

"Well she knows Gaelic from Minerva, Latin from simple exposure, English obviously," Severus speculated, "and whatever spattering of other languages I decide to teach her."

"Like bloody Dutch?" Lucius accused.


"I'll stick with Dutch," Lucius decided, shaking his head. "At least I remember some of it from when we were teenagers and you used me as the test victim for your incessant language learning."

Severus gave him a triumphant look that seemed to translate into "Score!"

Lucius realised with some resignation that the conversation had distracted him from breakfast, and Brim had relieved him of his half of his blackcurrant jam-covered toast. The Nundu was licking her lips in satisfaction, having greatly enjoyed the extra helping of jam.

"Aren't you a carnivore?" Lucius pointed out to the furry toast thief.

"Mrrrrrrt!" she replied, snuffling his milk glass.

"Careful, that's not good for felines," Lucius snatched his milk away. "I did pay some attention in Care of Magical Creatures."

Brim looked as though she were pouting.

"Tch," Minerva commented, waving her hand with a piece of her egg-saturated toast.

Brim happily relieved her of her burden of excess food.

"You have half a steak on your own plate, and she hasn't tried to steal it!" Lucius protested.

Severus gave a gallant shrug.

When a certain phoenix showed up to clean up the extra fruit, Lucius threw in the towel and just fed
the bird his grapes. "When did you gain a phoenix, Severus?"

"He's a rental," Severus said, deadpan.

Lucius blinked and seemed to decide it wasn't worth asking more about.

Once everyone was properly fed and caffeinated, Lucius summoned the parchments he had brought with him.

"This Robert "Rabbie" Fairbairn," Lucius began, "was a very hard one to research. It was almost as if someone wanted him to disappear."

Severus looked at him blankly, an expression that Minerva mirrored.

Lucius closed his eyes and counted to ten. "Okay, on my honour, Severus, you asked me to look up this name. You swore it was something important, but you also told me that you weren't going to remember it the next day, and apparently you were right."

Severus frowned. "I believe you," he said slowly. "But why would I focus on a name neither of us know?"

Brim stuck her head up on the table, resting the edge of her jaw on it as she looked at the parchment.

Lucius gently ruffled her ears, causing her to purr rather loudly. "Robert Fairbairn died over a decade ago," he went on. "According to the records at least, he was last known to be alive around 1978. Yet, strangely, he may have been alive longer than that, but everything starts to get hazy around '78."

Lucius rubbed his chin, where a hint of stubble was growing in where Brim hadn't licked him upon waking. "He was a world traveler—a wizard who went from place to place teaching about and researching exotic and endangered magical creatures. He was quite well-known for it too, from what I researched. Strangely, around 1978, he disappeared. Equally strange, no one ever reported the man missing."

"Seems very odd for someone that well-known in any community," Severus commented thoughtfully.

Lucius nodded. "I did some extensive digging to find this information, and I think I know why it was so deeply buried."

Minerva and Severus frowned together.

Lucius pulled out an old clipping from The Daily Prophet.

Masters Robert Fairbairn and Minerva McGonagall Celebrate the News of Their Upcoming Child

Renowned Magizoologist, Master Robert Fairbairn, announced his plan to travel with his wife, Hogwarts transfiguration professor, Minerva McGonagall, to some of the world's most sacred sites to study the rarest endangered magical beasts known to the Wizarding World.

Fairbairn, an expert in magical beasts who has been touted to rival that of the famed Newt Scamander, has focused his life on the magical beasts that have long been considered to be sacred by hundreds of cultures around the world. When asked about what he plans to do on his travels, Fairbairn stated that hoped to bring his child into a world where she could feed a phoenix, grow up
with kirins, and see a thestral without ever having seen death.

"Don't you think a child growing up around such powerful magical beasts could be dangerous?" we asked Master Fairbairn.

"Sacred beasts were considered sacred for a reason," he stated. "Most of them are creatures of Light or extremely benevolent. It was the reason they were often captured and abused. Unlike the Nundu, many of the creatures never fought back, and they began to disappear. I hope, between myself and my lovely wife, we will find a way to reconnect with the sacred and restore trust in the old species. Their magic has always been a part of our world. If we lose that, we lose something beyond price that we can never get back. Did you know that basilisks were once worshipped on Easter Island for being the guardians between the worlds? It was said that when one looked into the eyes of the basilisk, one saw the entirety of Creation. Mere mortal creatures could never stand this sight, and they would turn to stone. The basilisk would then shade its eyes to protect mankind from the knowledge it was not yet able to understand. Then, one powerful and arrogant wizard decided that he would use that to his advantage, and he used them to kill his enemies and guard his hoards. Tall tales, exaggeration, and fear came in its wake. The noble basilisk became a fearsome villain fit only for death, and any who dared to think otherwise were branded as Dark wizards. It was a self-fulfilling prophecy, you see. We began to believe the animal itself was evil, and those that may have retained benevolence died with those that were truly malevolent. People who spoke the tongue of serpents were ostracised and shunned, considered to be the spawn of evil. The few left that could understand them died off with them, branded as freaks and evil-doers. This is why I wish to raise my family to see and know the truth."

"And what of your plans to marry, Master Fairbairn? You've already postponed your official wedding three times already? Don't you worry that someone might take that as a sign of ill portent?"

"Hah! No. Minerva and I are very much in love. We have a child on the way. Marriage is just a formality. Believe me, both of our families are just as excited as we are. Minerva wants to make sure she has her replacement well-trained to take over before she leaves Hogwarts, that is all. It's all perfectly understandable. Noble even."

"Have you set a formal date?"

"We hope to have our wedding in September," Fairbairn said with a smile. "That gives my Minerva plenty of time to complete the end of term with Hogwarts and also give us a little time to get things in order. You wouldn't believe how hard it is to authorise the use of flying horses for a wedding."

"Ha! Well, we look forward to receiving one of those invitations, Master Fairbairn."

"As soon as we figure out how not to tax the poor owls at the Owl Post, they'll be going out!"

"Oh! And when is your wife-to-be due, if I may ask?"

"Should be late September or October if all goes well," Fairbairn said with a beaming grin. "I am betting she will be a Samhain baby with glorious bushy hair just like her mam. Ach! 'Tis a pity you never see it anymore since she ties it back in that silly bun."

"Are you sure it will be a daughter, Master Fairbairn?"

"First-borns of the Fairbairns are always female," Fairbairn replied. "She'll be named Bonnie Skye, partially after ma' grandmother."

We here at the Daily Prophet wish you and your soon-to-be family the best, Master Fairbairn. I am
Minerva stared at the article, her fingers tracing the photograph of Robert Fairbairn and a younger version of herself. Fairbairn had his hand on Minerva's swollen stomach. "I had my replacement—it was you, Severus. It was going to be you."

Severus stared at the picture, his eyes swimming with information just out of reach. "I don't remember—"

Suddenly, Brim grasped his hand in her mouth, pawing at him and Minerva both. Their eyes went unfocused and then seemed to do entirely the opposite.

"I remember!" they said at once.

Lucius narrowed his eyes. "Pardon me, my friends. Allow me to test something."

He lured the Nundu cub to him with scritches and pets.

Brim mrrowled and lay in his lap, exposing her belly for him to rub.

Severus and Minerva looked confused. "What were we talking about?"

Lucius extracted the cub to their laps, draping her across them both and placing their hands on her.

Severus and Minerva shook their heads simultaneously, eyes refocusing.

"Okay, humour me," Lucius said. "Keep your hands on the Nundu and read that article again."

"Article?" Minerva questioned.

Severus looked down at the *Prophet* article as though seeing it for the first time. "What is this, Lucius?"

Lucius stared at them both. "Enlightenment. I also have an idea, if Brimstone will allow it."

Brim looked at him curiously, smashing her paw against Lucius' nose.

"Severus, you may not remember this, but you were *always* even better in Transfiguration than Potions," Lucius said.

"That's ridiculous," Severus scoffed. "I've always been strong in Potions."

"Yes," Lucius answered. "You are, but you were considerably stronger in Transfiguration."

"What?" Severus frowned.

Lucius drummed his finger against the desk. "You turned me into a lamp, Severus. Without even thinking about it, you turned me into a lamp. That is highly complex human Transfiguration, and you did it easily. You didn't give me a potion to make me invisible or disillusion me, no. You turned me into something else. You've built this entire jungle-tree house for Brim with me with Transfigured materials. Severus, you've always been strong in Transfiguration, yet somehow, you forget that almost as soon as you do something with it. Somehow, Minerva forgets it too."

"How could we forget something together and not you, Lucius?" Minerva asked.
"I am not sure… but I think it is connected," Lucius speculated. "Brim, will you help me?"

The Nundu cub mrowled softly, licking his face.

"Ack! Not that kind of help, love," Lucius said, gently shoving her off his face. Lucius held her paw in his hand and pressed on the pads. Long claws extended like stiletto daggers, their dark green iridescence shimmering with magic and unknown emotion-based toxins.

Gently, he moved his hands over her paws, soothing her as she squirmed a little. "Shh, love. Just a little more."

Brim mrowled and lay her head on his lap, looking up at him.

"Felines have a sort of claw shed," Lucius said. "I remember when I was a child, my grandmother's Kneazle would use my trousers as a scratching post, and these claw sheaths would get stuck on them. The casings would be left behind, leaving a more developed, sharpened tip underneath."

Lucius pinched the tip of one claw and twisted.

Pop.

The worn outer-casing of the claw popped off, exposing a well-formed and ready to go new claw underneath. He repeated the gesture six times, one for each claw.

"Mrowl?" Brim complained looking up at him.

Lucius placed his head to hers and scratched her chin. "Thank you, my Lady."

"Mrowl!" she replied, all forgiven. She scratched her chin with her rear leg, and Lucius snatched the caps that were flying off in random directions. The Nundu cub looked at him strangely.

Lucius drew out his wand, passing them over the claw-caps and cleaning them up from the various places she had walked recently. Thanks to their inherent magic, they were not overly dirty, but he polished them up anyway for the purpose he was envisioning. He pulled out coins from his breast pocket, snatching up the galleons there. Muttering a soft apology to the goblins, he tapped his wand to it and drew it off, pulling a strand of golden metal out into a fine chain.

He flicked his wand, draping the strand in his opposite hand like he was crafting pasta, and used his wand to weave the strands together over and over until they formed a very fine, silken chain that was almost invisible and impossibly strong. He carefully drilled a hole in each claw-cap and wove the fine gold chain around it, stringing it like a necklace.

"I'm not sure if this will work, but I'm hoping it does," Lucius said. "If it does, we'll have a way to protect those closest to us. Somehow, Brim is immune to some sort of mass spell that affected you both and anyone that publically knew you. For all I know there is a spell on me too, but for now, at least, I remember and you do not. When you are in contact with Brim, your memory returns. Here. Put these on. If it works, charm them with a permanent sticking charm or find a way to embed it into your sternum. I don't know. I think it's important."

Severus, looking baffled, but also knowing that Lucius was not one to freak out over something lightly, put on the necklace. Minerva, too, did the same, and Lucius lured the cub over to him and sat with her together.

"Now, read the article again," Lucius directed.
Minerva and Severus exchanged glances and did what they were told.

"Mrowl?" Brim commented, tagging Lucius on the chin with her rough tongue.

"Don't you have anything better to do, miscreant?" Lucius glowered at the cub.

Brim ran over to the chair, picked up her plush spider, and bounded back, shoving the wriggling legs into his face with a happy and hopeful expression.

Lucius sighed heavily, took the toy and sent it scurrying off into the next room. Brim went tearing off after it with a gleeful mrowl.

Twenty-one claw talismans lay on the desk with three of them around each of their necks, slightly improved by tinkering from Minerva and Severus to improve on Lucius' work. Each one had a sort of do-not-notice-me charm in place that worked if it was being worn by the person whose name was carved into the claw. Minerva had capped each claw with a focus stone, allowing it to glow when it was working against something. Severus had dipped them all in strengthening potion bath, which allowed the claws to resist being crushed, burned, or otherwise destroyed from anything short of Fiendfyre.

"Each of us will take seven," Lucius said at last. "If you feel you need to give one to someone, carve their name into the claw and give it to them. I will give one to Narcissa and Draco to start. Narcissa may know more than she thinks. I seem to recall she was helping you with wedding plans. Odd that I never remembered this before. Perhaps, I was more affected by this spell than I originally believed."

Severus stroked Brim on the head. "How is it that she manages to convey protection against it?"

Lucius shook his head. "Perhaps, it is something in how she can be anywhere in Hogwarts she wishes. She senses the leys. I've watched her around them. There is no doubt that she sees them."

Minerva rubbed her temples. "I was going to be married. I— I was going to have a baby. I made Severus my apprentice. He was going to be my replacement here at Hogwarts. I don't remember everything, but, I remember being so very happy for you, Severus. You'd made up with Lily. You and her family were witnesses to Rabbie's and my impromptu hand-fasting. The wedding was to be for the official folk. My daughter— she was to be named Bonnie Skye." Minerva let out a choked sob. "How could I forget any of this?"

Severus looked sombre. "Lily forgave me?"

Minerva grasped his hand. "She did, lad. Her father married us the Muggle way. You and she were there as witnesses. No one else knew. It was going to be all made official after I left Hogwarts."

Severus looked pained. "How could I ever forget that?"

Brim placed her head in his lap, and he stroked her ears automatically, his eyes growing hazy with memories.

"Sev, hold these will you?"

"What am I going to do with a bouquet, Lily?" he complained. "I feel my male affinity points leaking out between my ears as I stand here."

Lily swatted him on the shoulder. "Be serious, Severus," she admonished. "They're beautiful, aren't
they? I picked them out especially for Minerva."

Severus huffed. "Have Potter be the flower-bearer, then. Merlin knows he has no shame."

Lily put her hands on her hips. "Can't you find a way to put all that behind you, Sev? He groveled on his knees begging you to forgive him in his wedding tux, refusing to marry me until I knew the truth and you came to see us married. Surely that means something, even to you."

Severus sighed. "It does, but I spent most of my childhood hating him, Lily. It will take time to see him as anything but what I have since I was eleven."

Lily pressed her lips to his nose and looked him in the eyes. "Sev, I said horrible things too, and you know I didn't meant them, right? Rabbie and Minerva—they are the ones that helped me see how hypocritical I was. If it weren't for them, I'd still— Severus, I really want you to know that I never meant to—"

Severus looked away. "I know."

"I'm married, but I'm still your friend, Severus," Lily sighed. "We have to make our lives better and that means learning how to forgive and move on. Merlin knows if I can forgive that scruffy toerag for being a horrible excuse for a person, it was only right that I also came to realise that what you said wasn't because you actually believed it. Somehow, you forgave me, Sev. Now, your Master is getting married! You're a Transfiguration Master and will be teaching something that doesn't involve turning your hair into lanky mop remnants—"

Severus huffed at her.

Lily giggled. "Come on, Sev. You're happier than you've ever been. Admit it. I just wish you'd show me your Animagus form. James said you wrestled him to the ground and sat on him. Are you a bear? That could explain why Sirius is so grumpy."

Severus just glowered at her.

Lily laughed, tapping his nose with her finger. "Figures the one time you find something to help you bond with James, it is the one thing you won't share with me."

Severus turned his face away, flushing. "It's embarrassing, you wouldn't understand."

"Fine, fine," Lily sighed. "One day, I'm going to have Minerva teach me, and I'll get together with Mary and Alice and we'll fly circles around you."

"Not if you end up being a pond flower," Severus mumbled under his breath.

Lily swatted him again. "Severus!" She snatched the flowers away from him.

The sly smile told her that she'd walked right into his trap.

"Ohh! Slytherin!" she scoffed.

Severus gave her a genuine smile.

Lily sighed. "You're forgiven." She looked behind her. "Daddy is all excited to marry a real wizard and witch. Petunia keeps threatening that God will strike us dead for doing it. God doesn't love freaks, she keeps yelling."

Severus rolled his eyes. "Hasn't changed since she got the letter from Dumbledore."
Lily sighed wistfully. "Sev, why won't you tell me what your animal form is?"

Severus sighed. "It's embarrassing."

"I won't laugh!"

"You will too," Severus said. "Or you'll try to hug me. Both are not acceptable."

Lily put her hands on her hips.

Severus rolled his eyes. "Fine," he said, pulling out a box and putting it in her hands. "Consider it a late wedding gift for surviving Hogwarts."

Lily tore it open quickly and stared.

A long curving, shiny claw sheath lay in the box with a tuft of stag fur stuck on the tip.

"Sev, what is this?" Lily boggled.

Severus shrugged, walking towards where Minerva and Rabbie were waiting to get married. "A testament to a truce," he said, deadpan, disappearing in a billowing swirl of black cloth.

Severus trembled as he looked from Minerva to Lucius. "I remember."

He looked down at Brim, his eyes filled with emotion. "I remember the wedding at the Evans' garden. I—"

Suddenly, there was a dark, spotted prehistoric cat in his place. His coat was a dark brown so deep that it looked like the mottled forest floor. Light inverse rosette spots marked his hide like dappled sunlight through the forest canopy. His black eye swallowed the entire surface of his eyes. Long, curved incisors arched down from his upper jaw.

Brim tensed, her fur raising up on end like a cat on the end of a Halloween broomstick. Her whiskers worked nervously. Her tail was poofed into a featherduster.

The dark smilodon sniffed her gently, whiskers moving against hers.

Suddenly, his scent clicked with the young Nundu cub, and she let out a happy mrowl and pounced on his withers and clamped onto his neck. She sprung off him, making chittering noises, rubbed up against him, and bounded away. She snatched up her favourite spider, and put it down next to him.

Severus eyed the spider.

The spider eyed him back, and it took off out the chamber door.

Brim and Severus went tearing off after it.

Lucius stared off into the next room where the sounds of cats, spiders, and cats chasing spiders were heard. "I guess the rest of this meeting will wait."

Minerva's haunted look changed into mischief as she changed forms, falling to the ground as a silver tabby. She bounded off into the next room to join the "fun."

Lucius pinched the bridge of his nose. "I refuse to become an Animagus. With my luck I would end up something unseemly."
There was a crash of something hitting the floor in the next room.

Lucius lifted one brow. "Or a rodent surrounded in predators."

"Ah, here you go, Master Snape," the cheery-looking younger witch said. "I dug up the old records. It was a total mess down there. So many cabinets, cabinets in cabinets. You'd think someone didn't want me to find your records, hah!"

"Thank you, Miss—?"

"Pennyroyal," she said with a nod. She opened up the large book and tapped the entry. There you are. Fully registered Animagus— smilodon, black with blond spots, black eyes, pink foot pads, and a—"

She looked at him. "Erm, could you uh—"

Severus gave her a long-suffering look. He transformed as Pennyroyal inspected his rump.

"Ah yes. Heart-shaped blond spotted ring on left flank," she said, confirming.

Severus wasn't really listening, as he currently had a Nundu cub glued to his ears. She was trying really hard to wrestle him down onto the ground, and he was much too large for her shenanigans. He plunked his enormous front paw on her, pinning her down.

Brim mrowled unhappily, disappointed and squirming.

"Ah, here you go, Master Snape," Pennyroyal said, offering up the enchanted collar. When you're in human form it will look like a choker of carved bone and wooden beads to resemble Muggle prayer beads. When you are in your Animagus form, it will look like a thin leather collar with a Registry tag. Either way, you are covered again. The new collars are much more flexible and enchanted so they match what you are wearing. Unlike the old ones, they cannot be lost and each of them comes with a glamour so you appear more normalised in public Muggle areas. We learned our lesson when poor Master Robinson was tranquilised and send to a Muggle Panda breeding facility. Took us months to find him, and he'd fathered about fifteen new generations. Thankfully, all normal great pandas, but we don't want a repeat of that."

Brim had wriggled free in order to pounce Severus again, chomping and batting as his tail and sinking her claws into his thick rump. Severus transformed, catching the happy cub in his arms and sighing as she licked the side of his face with gusto.

"When did you say it was originally registered," Severus asked. "I fear I have forgotten."

Pennyroyal chuckled. "Nineteen seventy eight according to the records. Studied under Master McGonagall and witnessed by Master Meredith Wilkinson."

"Thank you, Miss Pennyroyal," Severus favored her with a small smile. "You have been most helpful."

Pennyroyal was being enchanted by Brim, who was play batting at her face with her paw pads, carefully keeping her claws sheathed. "It was no problem at all, Master Snape. I'm glad to be of assistance."

Severus nodded and walked out of the Registry office, Brim playing trip up the Severus with her front paws. He tutted at her, picking her up with the scruff and holding her over his shoulders. She
purred happily, having found that it was her favourite place to be in order to get a bird's eye view of everyone around him. Severus grunted, as even as a cub, she was getting bigger and much harder to hoist.

He led her down the sidewalks of London, happy when he found the park at last. He looked around and let her off her lead, knowing that she would be fine off of it.

Brim chased after a squirrel, but after a few bounds, she stopped, trotting back to him and rubbing up against his legs for reassurance. He rubbed her shoulders and smiled at her, letting her know it was okay to relax a little. Brim placed her paws on his knees and gave him the knowing look. It was the look that said "Come play with me!" and "Be a solar-powered feline with me!"

Severus looked around, and there was no one around. He knew there wouldn't be. Brimstone was anything but unobservant, and she had picked up in very little time at all, exactly when it was okay to be a smilodon and when she had to have a two-legged Severus. Now, if only his students could be quite so observant and cease blowing themselves up.

Severus transformed and fell on all fours. She pounced him almost immediately, giving a happy mrowl. She darted away, as kittens were wont to do, and she batted his tail and darted away a little further. He tore after her, causing the cub to streak across the park green, dodging trees. If any Muggles did see them, they would be taken for two wild-looking housecats, but they would have their tags and their collars, so they were unlikely to attract any unwanted attention. Mind you, if a dog went after them, they might find themselves in a world of hurt—the canine anyway.

Wandering cats, however, were rarely even noticed by most folk. A stray dog would be more memorable than a cat. A cat was independent and usually out of the way. There were exceptions, but thankfully that wasn't all the time.

After a long romp and chase across the green, Brim finally started to get tired, her seemingly endless reserve of cub energy finally hit a wall. She flopped near him, snuggling up to him with a content sigh. Her plush spider appeared, crawling out from his hiding place on her collar and enlarging himself.

Someone had been "helping" her keep her spider close other than he and Flitwick. Severus suspected the twins, and he had to admit that the twins seemed far more happy to play with Brimstone and care for her than prank him, which was fine in his book.

Murdering your students was always so unseemly and required lengthy paperwork.

His eyes and ears flicked as he scanned the area for any incoming danger, but he found none. Taking that a sign that he, too, could relax, he did so, sprawling out in the sun.

Severus yawned with a big show of his elongated canines. Brimstone snuffled his chin and licked under his jowls in supplications, and he pinned her with one paw to groom her properly. She settled almost immediately, responding to his ministrations with a loud purr.

Having rediscovered his Animagus form gave him a bit of peace he didn't realise he was missing. Realising that he and Lily had actually made up before her death was even more powerful. Being on speaking terms with James Potter? That was probably the most mind-boggling memory to have back. Part of his mind was screaming, clawing, and denying everything, but if he was to believe that Lily and he had made up, then he had to take the improbable rest along with it.

Severus smiled as the sensation of one very playful Nundu cub batting at his tail resumed again. His elongated canines seemed to grow even longer as his lips drew back from his teeth. He was certain it
was quite an unnerving sight. Many would have considered a smile on the face of Severus Snape to be a portent of the upcoming apocalypse. The smile on an extinct prehistoric mammal? Yes, well, maybe it was good they were alone in the park with a strong glamour charm protecting them.

His thoughts drifted to one James Potter as Brimstone occupied herself by gnawing on his neck scruff and failing to pull him down like her imagined prey animal. Whatever she was imagining was apparently quite epic, but unfortunately her dreams of conquering were falling short of the main problem of her existence: being small.

Well, small for a Nundu or a smilodon.

He never thought he'd be happy to be a smilodon.

Okay, well. He never thought he'd be a smilodon, either.

"I'm sorry, Severus."

Severus' ears flicked, hearing the phantom apology from one James Potter.

Closing his eyes, he let his thoughts drift for a moment. That was one memory he truly wanted to savour after having relived the moment of bliss when he and Lily and forgiven each other. After remembering the feel of suffused joy at the thought that Minerva was getting married and he was there as a trusted witness. He knew he wouldn't be alone in these rediscovered memories. Perhaps, after he and Minerva both had time to come to terms with it, they would have another meeting with Lucius to discuss where to go from that point on.

Potter snorted in rage as he charged forward, his antlers down and ready to turn Severus into a pincushion. Their discussion hadn't ended well. Technically, they were still having that same discussion that Lily had begged them both to have. It was the kind of discussion that was long overdue, but, like the completely mature adults that they were, they were trying to murder each other with their Animagus forms due to the emotional surge triggering their transformation.

Two sets of large, pointy antlers set on the surging hooves of an angry stag was not the way Severus wanted to leave his life behind. Alas, he wasn't really thinking that clearly. Neither of them were.

It was as if they had filled their bodies with multiple years of contained malice and thoughts of retribution that were all trying to escape through a very small orifice. Neither he nor Potter were doing much thinking with their higher brain functions.

Potter had claw marks that raked down his flanks. Severus had a bloodied rear leg where Potter had nicked him with his antlers before trying to trample him to death. Both of them were limping. Yet, still, they were trying to go at it like a pair of Siamese fighting fish defending their small corner of the universe—both thinking they were the king of their respective ponds.

They were both full of it.

Any time now, Lily was going to come charging down over that hill and murder them for attempting to murder each other. The irony would be utterly poignant. She might even say a few words over their graves in-between curses.

The level of violence and sheer physical exertion was finally wearing them both down, little by little. Each of them were panting heavily, on the edge of collapse, yet each time they would come back up, they would proceed to try and impale or claw the other to death. Oh, the sounds they made! Someone, somewhere, was probably convinced that a rabid pack of wild animals were killing
children in the Evans' backyard garden.

Had Severus been thinking clearly at all, he might have said a thankful prayer that the Evans' backyard emptied out into a large, unfenced, woodland area. Perhaps, it was better than being back at Hogwarts. There, Hagrid would try to wade in and separate them, and somehow students would get involved, and someone would get hurt, and all kind of pain, woe, and drama would ensue.

Merlin, his lungs hurt. His body ached. His head was spinning.

Potter didn't look much better, though. He was foaming at the mouth, making whistling sounds with his mouth wide open in a panting gape as his sides heaved.

For once, Severus could relate.

And, despite it all, Severus realised that despite it all, they were fairly evenly matched in rage and self-righteousness. Both believed the other to be guilty beyond a doubt of something truly heinous. What that was was probably very different for both men, but each of them was utterly convinced it was true.

Severus realised in that moment of physical exhaustion that they were both bloody idiots.

Potter was panting heavily and collapsed in a heap of completely exhausted stag. Severus had only seconds to realise he was literally the last one standing before he slumped to the ground too, head unceremoniously slammed into the grass as he impaled the ground with his oversized fangs.

Smilodons were definitely not designed for worn out face-plants after battle.

His eyes drifted to where Potter was stuck against a tree, the vines having tangled in his impressive, yet completely impractical antlers. Stags were not really well-designed for whatever it was they had been doing either.

What were they doing anyway?

*Being bloody imbeciles,* came the prompt answer in his head, rational thought having returned like a roommate that left with the telly and the valuable breakables after he started throwing things.

Simultaneously, Severus and James transformed back into their human selves, sprawling flat on their backs as they stared blankly up at the blinding sun.

Sure, they tormented you ceaselessly, but you *always* did your damnedest to get them back, didn't you, Severus? You *never* turned the other cheek. You goaded them on just as much as they did to you. It was a never-ending cycle that went on so long you couldn't even remember what started the argument. You were like two feuding families who slaughtered each other into near-extinction because someone's great, great, great grandmother's brother's cousin-twice-removed kicked someone's favourite pet Kneazle.

*Do you even remember what the original offence was?*

*You were bloody eleven, idiot. Does it even bloody matter?*

Severus groaned, and Potter seemed to share the same mental epiphany.

"I'm sorry, Severus," Potter said, half-wheezing. "I don't even remember why we are always fighting. I can't even remember what idiotic thing started it. I've been a lousy, sorry-arsed, git while blaming you for everything from why it always seems to rain on Saturdays to when Lily tells me off
for being a sorry excuse for a human being. I'm sorry. I realise now— what we've wasted so much
time and energy hating each other for something that's probably really, really stupid. I'm getting
married next month. Lily wants you to come, and you know— I do too. You're important to her,
Severus, and maybe I should have realised that long ago without being a jealous, sorry-arsed git
every time she smiled at you."

Severus was silent, fearful that his voice would crack horribly or sound terribly similar to a child's
voice on helium. Taking in a deep breath, he breathed out slowly. "I'm sorry, too, except for that time
you pushed Lily down in the hallway and dropped her books in the mud. I am not sorry for gluing
your shoes to the floor that day and making your act like human fly-paper."

Silence.

Then, like a crack of thunder, James busted out laughing, and laughing, and laughing some more. He
laughed so hard, he gripped his sides, wincing when he realised that at least one of his ribs was very
likely broken. Still, he laughed.

Severus made a harsh wheezing sound, and he realised he, too, was laughing. All the venom and the
bitterness leaked away as they lay spread eagle on their backs, laughing like a pair of hyenas.

"Oh, gods— Merlin," James panted, gripping his side in pain. He pulled a claw sheath out of his side
with a sharp yank. Blood and fur from his stag-self clung to the end. "Truce, Severus? I'm getting too
old for this shite."

Severus turned his head to stare at James, his dark eyes meeting Potter's with a sort of fierce desire to
see the truth.

"Truce, Potter," Severus answered him after a while, "though I would appreciate it if you kept your
canine friend on a leash so we don't end up murdering each other quite messily."

James snorted and laughed, wincing again. "Ow, dammit," he groaned. "Don't worry about Padfoot
and Wormtail. I'll set them straight enough. Remus has been begging me since that horrid night at the
shack to kindly pull my head out of my arse, so he'll probably want to buy you a pint."

Severus suddenly narrowed his eyes. "Prongs. Padfoot. Wormtail— Moony. All of you Animagi,
then?"

"Been keeping Remus company since we first made the change," James admitted. "My name
because I got my head stuck on the headboard of my bed one night after a bad dream. Sirius got
Padfoot because he woke up with paws instead of feet. He had to wear slippers to class until they
changed back. Wormtail, well, that's self-explanatory, aye?"

Severus snorted. "He really is a rodent."

"He grows on you after a while," James said a bit sheepishly.

"Like foot fungus," Severus sighed. "Same odour."

James snorted. "He's a bit special. He does love to root around in the waste bins. Lily yelled at him
and told him he has to actually take a shower and dress like a human being for our wedding. She
doesn't even know he's a— rat. She just knows he stinks to high heaven every time he "goes out on
the town". She has this Muggle lemon and pine cleanser she keeps under her sink at home. She
threatened to bathe him with it in concentrated form if he ever came over smelling like a disgusting
rubbish pile again."
"Dettol," Severus said after thinking for a moment.

James blinked. "Hrm?"

"The cleanser's name," Severus sighed. "An antiseptic and disinfectant cleaner. My mum used to mop the floors and clean the bathroom with it."

James chuckled, tried to sit up, groaned, and sagged back to the ground. "I think I'll stay right here for now."

Severus' eyebrows rose up into his hair, and he winced slightly as his leg ached painfully where James' had done his level best to seek his femoral artery.

"Same," he grunted.

"So, Coal," James said after a minute. "Going to come to the wedding then? Can I tell Lily that we both promise we won't kill each other?"

"Coal?" Severus asked, curious.

"You look the colour, Severus," James laughed. "Unless you prefer Fangface or Tooth Fairy?"

"Coal is fine," Severus blurted quickly.

James chuckled painfully, instantly regretting it. "Well?"

Severus sighed, aching miserably as he tried to move. "Tell her we both promise to do our very best not to murder each other in cold blood right front of her entire family and umpteen wedding guests."

James wore a lopsided grin.

"But if Black points anything at me, I reserve the right to bite off his wand hand," Severus warned him.

"Severus, after all this," James laughed, "I'll personally help you take him apart."

Severus and James returned to gazing up at the bright blue and sunny sky.

There was peace, at long last.

"Did I mention Lily wants us to wear sky blue at the head table?" James quipped.

"I will happily sit at the back," Severus growled.

For the first time, James put a hand on Severus' shoulder. "I'll tell her we'll make an exception for you. We wouldn't want the friends and family to die of a heart attack seeing you in any colour but black."

"Do shut it, Potter," Severus grunted.

Potter's hand remained on his shoulder, and for the first time, Severus had no desire to move away.

A/N: Makes you wonder what could have happened that drove Severus to take the Mark after all that, hrm? Curiouser and curioser...
Breath of the Nundu

Chapter 5

Catspaws

After scolding one's cat one looks into its face and is seized by the ugly suspicion that it understood every word. And has filed it for reference.

- Charlotte Grey

Lucius had a problem.

It was a feline problem.

He twitched his fingers. Well, at least he could still breathe. That was one mark on the plus side.

One Nundu cub was curled up on his chest. A silver tabby was curled up on his neck. A large prehistoric beast with fangs long enough to cave his skull in was currently cutting off the circulation in his legs.

Oh, and Draco was smashed in the middle, blissfully happy that all his dreams of being able to die happily squished between multiple warm feline bodies and a pile of soft plush spiders were almost coming to fruition.

How was this bed even holding them all?

Draco had spent the night too, partially because Severus had been utterly unwilling to extract the peacefully sleeping boy from Brimstone's neck. He'd found out that it was rapidly becoming feasible for one to ride around on the growling Nundu cub, and the cub seemed all too happy to oblige.

Yet, part of him was perfectly, blissfully content to be where he was. He looked over to the sofa and blinked. Apparently his wife was having a glorious night too, as she was covered in plush spiders. Never let it be said his wife had arachnophobia.

Well then. Weren't they all just a big happy feline-arachnid-loving family. Maybe they should simply change their house to Skitterin. They could make their mascot Lady Pounce-a-lot.

Okay, coffee was required before his brain deteriorated in the way of Bellatrix Lestrange.

Lots of coffee— preferably the kind from the bottom of the French press that had been sitting there on the counter concentrating itself into near-sentience.

Pity the press was on the other side of the room. Bother.
After the long night of literally mapping out every memory into a large parchment scroll that took up almost the entire floor, their small group of no-longer-memory-challenged people had figured out the extent of how bad something had gone terribly wrong.

Fact: Robert "Rabbie" Fairbairn had been missing since 1978 and was quite possibly dead.

Fact: Minerva had been pregnant with a child at one point, and the child, too, was missing in action.

Supposition: Child, Bonnie Skye, could be with her missing father. Damn, he hoped that didn't mean the grave.

Fact: Severus was a Transfiguration Master on top of all the other stuff he was bloody brilliant at. He was also a giant sabre-toothed cat. No more drunken arguments with Severus. Check.

Fact: Somehow, all of them forgot about Rabbie Fairbairn, forgot that they had all been witness to a wedding, and even more disturbingly—they had all forgotten that Severus, Lily, and James Bloody Potter had made up. Narcissa confirmed that she distinctly remembered attending a perfectly marvelous bachelorette party with all of the above women twice. Once for Lily. Once for Minerva.

Also Fact: Minerva was supposed to be Draco's godmother. Severus his godfather. Well, one of those things came to pass, but somehow Minerva was left right out of that. In fact, somehow, they had even forgotten they were quite CLOSE to Minerva. How was that even possible?

Disturbing fact: somehow, despite it all, Severus and Lucius had been convinced like Lily had never forgiven him and Lucius had inducted him into the Death Eater Club to "protect him." Shortly after, Lily and James Potter died to the Dark Lord. Why would people who had finally made up and found peace do something like that? Why ruin such painstaking work? That was very un-Slytherin. Hell, that was very un-Gryffindor too.

Supposition: Somewhere in there Wormtail aka Peter Pettigrew had become a Death Eater—something none of them could seem to remember. As former Death Eaters, it was natural to think they would know something like that, yet none of them did. Narcissa, who may not have been marked, was, at the very least, nothing less than highly observant. She never recalled the rat being at any of the many social functions they attended. Narcissa never forgot a social function any more than she forgot what colour shoe to wear with her gown. It wasn't done.

Fact: Minerva and Rabbie had asked Lucius and Narcissa to be godparents to their daughter, Bonnie Skye. The paperwork had been drawn out, signed, and dated. They even found the paperwork at the Ministry. Severus himself had witnessed it. They both remember having a very amusing conversation that any godchild of the Malfoys would spontaneously grow blond hair and gain silver eyes out of principle. Lucius distinctly remembered ribbing Minerva that her child would be Slytherin... so help him. Yet, there was no trace of Bonnie Skye. There was no evidence of her to be found anywhere, save the pre-signed documents themselves, that Bonnie Skye had even been born—pre-signed documents and a tiny enchanted pendant that they had all come together to make for her. They had found it sealed in a cat figurine in Minerva's quarters.

_Bonnie Skye Fairbairn_

_May you be as cunning as the serpent,_

_Brave as the lion,_

_And wise enough to know when saving your own life saves others._

Disturbing thought: How many people had the tremendous power required to cast a spell that would
wipe all memory of an entire person away?

Answer: Oh, I could think of maybe two, at the very least. Three if you counted Gellert Grindelwald. The Dark Lord Voldemort and Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore.

Now, Voldemort was many things, but he didn't ever hide what he wanted. If their Dark Lord had wanted to wipe someone off the face of Creation, he would have had him murdered. He would have had them murdered in front of witnesses. Well, that didn't happen, so, that left Dumbledore and Grindelwald.

Grindelwald was incarcerated in Nurmengard since long before 1978, so that left Albus Dumbledore.

Lucius narrowed his eyes. What business of the headmaster of Hogwarts involved one magizoologist, his wife, and soon-to-be-born daughter? What purpose would breaking up a hard-won peace have served? What greater good would have—

It made no sense whatsoever.

And there was no way. NO way that he and Narcissa would willingly go along with forgetting a godchild— a female godchild that Narcissa would have pampered and spoilt until the girl knew everything about fashion in the Wizarding world, every single social circle, every last lineage forwards and backwards. No, there was no way Narcissa would have given up on a chance for a female child to help raise. Never. It wasn't even to say she didn't love Draco because she did, but much like Draco and Lucius were expected to be similar, so, too, would Narcissa enjoy having someone who could understand.

Unbeknownst to most people, Lucius knew that Narcissa had always stayed in contact with her sister, Andromeda. She had helped pay for Nymphadora's education and supplies when Edward Tonks had fallen on a bad run of luck with his job. The catch had been no one could know but Andromeda, and once Nymphadora was old enough to recognise Narcissa and talk about it, the visual visits had stopped. It had broken his wife's heart.

They had not been able to conceive another child, let alone a girl, and Lucius truly felt terrible about that. That was the awful hidden truth about being Pureblood. The more "pure" you were, the less fertile you were. You could practically smell how "pure" a family was by how difficult it was for them to have children.

Strangely, Orion and Walburga Black had two sons and that set Lucius' mind a churning. How pure was the Black family, really? Cygnus and Ursula had Bellatrix, Andromeda and his own Cissy—and they didn't seem to have trouble with having children at all. Then again, maybe the price they paid for their unusual fecundity was in genetic insanity. Lucius considered himself quite fortunate to have Narcissa. She was stable, emotionally constant, and loving on their son. If he had been married like Rodolphus to Bellatrix, Lucius confessed that he might have just "gotten lost" in the Bermuda Triangle looking for long-lost magical creatures himself.

Lucius' eyes widened. What about the bloody Weasleys? Were they truly Pure-bloods or did they have a really strong (and apparently hidden) infusion of Muggle blood hidden somewhere in their family line? What possible curse on their bloodline would have come of generations of inbreeding?

There were quite a few wizards that had hypothesized that keeping the lines "pure" had done nothing but curse the magical bloodlines. Muggle blood, they supposed, much like breeding two lines of specific dogs, strengthened the genetics. One only really had to look at the British Royal Family to see where hemophilia and other genetic diseases had put their stamp on an even more miniscule line.
of genes.

It was terribly obvious—if you actually opened your eyes to look.

If Purebloods continued to breed solely with Purebloods, eventually whatever curses each family had would combine, weakening the lines even more until they literally bred themselves into extinction. If he and Narcissa forced Draco to marry Pure-blood witches only, they could be denying themselves any future grandchildren, given just how very difficult it was for them to even have Draco. That was a very sobering thought. Horrifying even.

Narcissa would probably crawl headfirst into a bottle of Ogden's and never come out if she knew she was responsible for never having grandbabies. It was one thing if your child were to come out as preferring the same sex, but being the reason why your child couldn't have children of his or her own? Could anything be more damning to a mother who wants to see the next generation of her family growing up before her eyes?

Never before had Lucius been so very thankful to have that dreadful Mark off of his arm—that stain of perpetual damnation. For all Lucius cared, that Pureblood insanity could bury itself with his father. Now that he was no longer "obligated," Narcissa had been relieved of her responsibility as a "Pure-blood favouring wife" and replaced it with the more motherly "love who you love, my son" philosophy. Draco was too young to really take that seriously, but at least he wasn't going around thumbing his nose at anyone without a proper pedigree.

In fact, there had been some movement in the darker circles that there were some Death Eaters that wanted out desperately. There was a chance the Dark Lord's power base might literally walk out on him, provided what had happened to Severus and Lucius could be repeated. Now, that was a thing to ponder. The Nundu had to have a trust and affection for the person, and neither Severus, Minerva, or Lucius was going to just invite over random Death Eaters over to tea and tattoo removal if it might endanger Brimstone.

Yet, if there was even a chance that it could free people from the Mark—misguided people like himself that saw the truth of how stupid they were being—the Slytherin thing to do would be to find a nicely neutral place to do so. Severus would have to be there for a well-timed Obliviate just in case things went pear-shaped. The Dark Lord did not need to know just how powerful the Nundu cub was. It was far better that he thought of her as merely a mindless beast.

Rumour had it, and there were some memories Lucius had that confirmed it, that Rabastan had been discontent for years. His brother, Rodolphus, had been as well. It had started when Bellatrix had practically stripped in front of the Dark Lord and shamelessly expressed her carnal desires for him despite being married. Yet, that same woman showed no interest at all in consummating her marriage with her true husband. That was the greatest insult to the lines of the Lestrange right there. The Lestranges were dying off due to marital apathy and literal lack of trying.

Yet, if anything had woken up the male Lestrange brothers, it had been mad Bellatrix. Only, they could do nothing as long as they were both Marked and sharing the hospitality of Azkaban for their purported "roles" in torturing Alice and Frank Longbottom.

Torture was Bellatrix's great passion and specialty of choice. Rabastan and Rodolphus, on the other hand, were always about much more subtle methods of getting what they wanted. True snakes to the last, they were all about survival and taking out the enemy without drawing attention to themselves, so when Lucius heard they were found guilty of torturing the Longbottoms, he knew something had been amiss.

Bellatrix. She had always been the common factor.
If he could get them away from Bellatrix, perhaps there could be something to be said about duress, just as he had been experiencing in regards to his service.

Perhaps, Fudge could be persuaded that a second trial be put in motion due to the highly-embarrassing Ministry debacle that was Sirius Black's unwarranted incarceration. It was well-known that Death Eaters weren't exactly given fair trials once the Aurors saw the Mark on someone's forearm. What if Severus and Lucius were there at the trial with Brim watching? Would the Nundu be the kind of foolproof test the Wizengamot had never had before? What if they started off with "common" prisoners first as a judge of character and just happened to work their way up to the incarcerated Death Eaters?

Who could they convince to be their champion?

Who would believe evidence over rumour?

Brim was up, stretching. She smacked her tail into his face and turned to lick his face in her standard morning greeting.

Lucius sputtered and muttered under his breath.

A sly smile spread across his face. He knew exactly who to ask.

Now, he just had to pry himself out of the bed.

Still one problem remained: there was an extremely heavy overgrown smilodon currently pinning down his legs.

He grabbed for his wand on the nearby table and pointed it over to where his wife was sleeping away under a blanket of plush spiders. He levitated one over to the sleeping smilodon and placed it directly on his head, right between the ears. Then, he grinned evilly and moved his wand, making the spider's legs start to wiggle.

Brim perked instantly, instinctively drawn to the movement. She crouched, her butt high in the air as her tail floofed with excitement.

Wiggle.

Wiggle.

Twitch.

POUNCE!

Lucius sat up as the two overgrown cats immediately went flying off into the next room, yowling and making hay at each other.

Victory!

Kingsley Shacklebolt rubbed his closely-shaved head as he looked into the holding cell. Twenty people were lined up in blindfolds. Five of them were Aurors who were there undercover. The rest were a mixture of Ministry volunteers and actual prisoners.

They had been through this before, having tried to test "Dark magic-sensitive canines" hoping to use them in the same way Muggles trained dogs to sniff for drugs. Every time before it didn't work.
Getting volunteers was ridiculously easy. It gave people an excuse to get out from behind the desk and do something that required absolutely no effort on their part.

Everyone knew it never worked.

This time, Kingsley knew, things would be much different. He had faith in it. As a child, he had grown up with stories of the Nundu—the real Nundu—and now, right before him, was the real thing.

A giant paw whumped against his face and he laughed, looking the young Nundu over. She breathed her elderberry breath over him, her fur smelling of oranges and freshly mown hay. Snape had told him that she expressed her moods with scents, but the biggest concern was not to get "hateful" around her. She picked up on feelings of hate like nobody's business and channeled it by breathing out disease. That part of the legends was absolutely true.

She seemed perfectly well-mannered and quite happy to meet him. She rubbed her chin along his legs, knees, backs of the knees, and even rubbed herself across his rump.

"She really likes you, Kings," Auror Redford laughed. The man had an impressive collection of brown and gold fur all over his robes, a testament to his own newly-approved status.

Kingsley shook his head and chuckled deeply. "A real Nundu. Simply amazing," he whispered. "What my father wouldn't have given to have seen her."

"Well, shall we start? I'm curious as hell, Kings," Redford laughed. "She already seems much better than the dogs."

Kingsley looked over to Severus, who nodded his approval. All the volunteers and prisoners were in suspended animation, magically protected by a physical barrier, but all of them were positioned for individual inspection. Severus had volunteered to be present in case anything odd happened, but Kingsley had a kind of strong faith. Everything his father had taught him said Nundu could weigh a person's soul.

They had carefully worked with her for over an hour, using hand signals and vocal cues to send her off to hunt, access, seek, return, and various other signals to keep things running smoothly. They wanted to insure it wasn't Severus telling her what to do in case the test was questioned later.

But, much to Kingsley's relief, once Severus gave her the nod to work with him, she affixed herself to him as tightly as a trained hound, looking up at him with her orange-green eyes for any sign of what he wanted her to do next.

Kings flattened his hand, and she lay down, her rear wiggling a little with excitement.

He smiled, flicking his finger out to the first person.

Brim jumped up and padded straight to them. She paced around them, head up as she sniffed. She seemed really interested in her robes, and Kings realised that it was covered in white hair from her office persian. Brim seemed really fascinated by the smell, but then sat down next to her.

Kingsley summoned her to him, giving her a small dried fish as a reward. She made it disappear quickly and licked her chops. He sent her out again to the man he knew was one of his Aurors. The man had been on the force for as long Kingsley had been alive.

Brim bounced over to him, nose working furiously, her tail floofed with excitement. She placed her paws on him and sniffed his face, sneezing as something seemed to irritate her nose. She stuck her
face into one of the man's pockets and came out with a pillbox of some sort. She sniffed it, dropping it to the ground and sat once more.

Redford chuckled. "You going to explain why his pillbox is covered in Nundu drool?"

Kings snorted. "No, and you won't either."

Kings gestured, and back she came again, gently taking the fish treat from his fingers. He scratched her ears affectionately and sent her out again. The next man to step forward was an Auror too. He stood in the military at ease position that screamed "I've been professionally trained for something." At least that's what it screamed to Kingsley.

Brim was halfway to the man, when she abruptly stopped in her tracks. Her lips pulled back from her teeth, and she growled lowly.

Redford and Kingsley exchanged puzzled glances. Number three was an Auror. This wasn't good at all.

The Nundu cub, which had been, until that point at least, casual and laidback, was showing her teeth, and her tail was poofed out like a bottle brush. The man, who was blindfolded and charmed not to hear anything, had no clue as to what was going on around him. He sighed heavily as if he was the most bored person in the room.

Brim leapt, her claws extended, knocking the man to the ground. She snarled as she landed, her teeth poised to sink into the man's neck.

Kingsley snapped his hand, making a whistle as he snapped his fingers loudly. "Return!"

Brim immediately froze in mid-leap, falling to land on her feet and staring at the number three man with thinly-veiled animosity. She looked from Kings to the man and back with something that seemed like indecision.

"Come on now," Kings said, holding out his hand.

Brim started his way and then paused. Her eyes narrowed, and she leapt again, this time affixing her teeth to the robes of the Auror, tearing and slashing at his left sleeve.

Kingsley shot an urgent look towards the one-way mirror to where he knew Snape was, and the darkly-clad wizard came in immediately. "Brim."

The Nundu cub froze and lowered herself to the ground, keeping her belly to the ground. Her ears flattened and she crawled over to him, admonished. She climbed up into his lap, mrowling quietly and apologetically.

"What was that about, Kings?" Redford gasped, running up to the man she had so viciously attacked.

"Check his arm to make sure she didn't get through the barriers, my friend."

Redford nodded, carefully inspected the man's torn robes and suddenly let out a startled cry. "Merlin!"

Kings frowned. "What?"

A very pale Redford looked up at Kingsley, lifting the tattered cloth from the man's arm.
There, faded into a pale and scar-like blemish, was the Dark Mark.

Kingsley stared at the Mark, his jaw practically hitting the floor. He turned to look at Severus, who was busy placating the anxious Nundu cub. He whistled a signal, instantly getting the cub's attention. She perked, looking a little unsure. He made the gesture to return, and she looked to Severus for instruction.

The dark-haired wizard nodded, and she promptly returned to Kingsley's side. He gave her the signals for "Okay!" and "Lay down." She did so, and he gave her the obligatory treat. "Good girl," he signalled. "Job's done. Ready?"

The Nundu cub perked.

"Take number three to the holding cell, Redford," Kingsley ordered after a moment. "There will be questions."

Redford, pale as the snowflakes falling outside, nodded grimly. "Sure, Kings."

The rest of the tested people tested out as was expected. The four other Aurors were all approved of. Nine other office workers were rustled out of the group, and out of the prisoners, she disapproved of all but one. Only the hidden Marked Auror had seemed to evoke a violent reaction. The rest of the prisoners were simply guilty of non-violent petty crimes that ranged from breaking the Statute of Secrecy to using magic to commit theft. Brim simply growled at them and sat down, staring at them instead of at Kingsley. Each of those were removed and sent back to the low-level offender wing of Azkaban.

That left just one person remaining to be sniffed out.

Brim was staring at the middle-aged man. Her tail was lashing from side to side. She made a grimace with her teeth bared and lips pulled back from her teeth. Then, she circled around them a few times. Then, she sat down, facing the man and gave a cheetah-like bark.

Kingsley blinked.

He approached, putting his hand on her head. "Are you sure?"

Brim gently took Kingsley's hand into her mouth.

"Okay, I believe you," Kings placated. He gave her the "okay" signal and passed her another treat. She chewed on it and licked his fingertips as he inspected the man.

He signalled to the people on the other side of the glass. A few brown-clad Aurors came in. "Place this one in an isolated holding area. Have him watched constantly for signs of polyjuice withdrawal."

"You got it, Kings," the two Aurors said, taking the man out of the barriers but keeping them blindfolded and unable to see or hear what was going around.

As Kingsley walked out of the room with a very smug-looking Nundu at his heels, he looked around in the waiting and observation room. Highly-regarded officials were chattering idly amongst themselves. Aurors were looking around with disbelief as they spoke to each other. Lucius Malfoy and Severus were talking together in the waiting room, quietly staying out of the way of the Aurors and officials that had observed the entire unintentional show.

As Brim came padding in, several curious and nervous eyes met Kingsley's, perhaps wondering if the Nundu was trained to do what she did, and if only the people they wanted had been singled out,
but Brim happily met all of them. She introduced everyone to her favourite plush spider, and even more happily thrust it into their hands, begging for them to play with her. Soon, the gathered crowd lost all their nervousness regarding the proverbial witch hunt, and were laughing and playing with her, sporting silly grins on their faces.

Brim, true to her nature, adored all of the attention, but Kingsley could tell she was never truly relaxed around those she wasn’t specifically told were okay. She would look over to Severus for cues as to the nature of the situation, and she would then act accordingly.

None of the gathered, however, failed the unofficial inspection, and unknown to the Nundu, perhaps, she had just passed her second test at determining who was trustworthy amongst the officials as well as the prisoners she had just inspected. Kingsley made note of it all in his head, filing it away for future reference.

"Kingsley," Fudge greeted him as he stepped out from the cluster of officials. All of their faces were strangely grim. "I think that perhaps it would be wise, after you have so clearly demonstrated that there are indeed security risks among us here at the Ministry of Magic, for you to," Fudge exchanged looks with the other officials as he spoke, "take your Nundu friend on a little tour, if you catch my meaning. Master Snape and Lord Malfoy, of course, would be welcome to join you to put any visitors and such at ease. You could take a small contingent of Aurors along with you once you are finished here."

"We feel," the taller, lanky looking official that Kingsley realised was the director of the Department of Mysteries said, "that we may have, if you will pardon the expression, snakes hidden in the grass. Given precisely how sensitive much of our work here is, all of us here agree that we cannot afford to sit on our laurels with such a definitive way to check for Dark Magic at hand. Perhaps, if you would not mind, you could have her do a blind test of boxes to prove that she knows the difference between the Dark and the ordinary?"

Kingsley exchanged glances with Severus and Lucius. They nodded affirmative. "Of course, Minister. Perhaps, we could resume in the storage facility? Where we have the confiscated magical artifacts located? All of them have been studied and categorised in detail, so there would be very little for her to confirm."

"That, I think, would be an excellent idea," the other official nearby agreed with a brisk nod.

"Well, then, shall we?" Kingsley asked. "Are you ready, Brim?"

Brimstone mrowled and seemed to indicate that if more fish treats and ear rubs were involved, she was ready to go anywhere.

The first task was to gather trustworthy Aurors, and after finding one that determined to be definitely not trustworthy, that was indeed the most pressing order of business. Fortunately for Kingsley, who was starting to think that maybe he wasn’t such a great judge of character after all, Brim approved of everyone she met in the Auror’s Office.

"You know, Kings," Redford said as he stood with him. Brim was busily inspecting all the seated and working Aurors as well as those that came in from their assignments. "Dabney Funk was here for decades. We had no reason to even suspect he was Marked. He donated money to the bloody Muggle Arts and Entertainment funds, orphanages, and volunteered at soup kitchens. There was no way we could have missed anything. His record appeared to be spotless."

"I wonder," Kingsley said, tapping his chin with his fingers. "Auror Moody once said, back when the trial for Barty Crouch’s son was going on, that he suspected there were far more sleeper agents in
our ranks than anyone knew. It was part of why he was so bloody paranoid. He used to say, there was no legal way he could point his finger at various people. Now, I'm not about to put everyone under Veritaserum like he wanted to do, but we do, now, have a Nundu proving herself even more effective and portable. I think, Rohan, that we need to owl Alastor and have him come out of retirement. Tell him—Tell him that we have a Nundu and he might want to be around for the party. I'll even give him a bigger office and promise him he won't ever have to sit next to Peggy Parklefoot and her singing teacups again if he agrees."

Rohan Redford laughed, slapping Kingsley on the shoulder. "You always did speak Alastor's language."

Kingsley smiled. "I think," he said with amusement as he watched Brim introduce her toy spider to everyone, including the very arachnophobic janitor, that he'll be here the moment the ink dries on the parchment. He never could resist watching people squirm."

"Want me to send him a Patronus, Kings?" Rohan asked.

Kings smiled. "Yes. That would be perfect. Tell him he can collect the official oaths that we were supposed to swear upon employment. Somehow, we stopped doing it, and I think whoever put that in motion may still be here."

Rohan arched an eyebrow. He pulled out his wand and sighed. "I do solemnly swear that I will remain loyal to the British Ministry of Magic and that I fully support its aim of providing support and protection for all of its citizens regardless of race, religion, gender, age, sexual orientation, or blood status. So mote it be." His wand flashed as his magic registered the oath.

Kings shook his head, pulled out his wand, and repeated it. His wand flashing brightly as his magic sealed his oath.

Rohan smiled. "I'll poke the Alastor. I wouldn't want him to think we like him out there enjoying his fishing on the lake as he riles up the locals to make them think he's just a garden-variety crochety old coot."

Kings laughed. "He is a crochety coot, for sure, old friend. He's just not quite as old as he would like people to think."

As predicted, Alastor Moody came striding into the Auror Office even before they had managed to pry the poor spider-fearing janitor off the ceiling. Brim seemed sad that she didn't want to play, and it took a gaggle of younger Aurors to lure her off the poor lady before she had a coronary—or broke all the windows with her terrified screeching.

"I have to retire before you decide to give me a decent office, Kingsley?" Alastor grunted, wiping his craggy face with his sleeve.

Kings laughed. "Well, we did have to have a few people retire before their old offices opened up."

Alastor pshed. "You could have moved out the old coot in 352. Merlin knows all the berk did was snore like a troll all day."

Kings coughed to stifle the laugh that threatened to erupt.

Alastor stiffened, his body growing rigid with anger. "Snape," he growled, storming off before Kingsley could even attempt to stop him.
"Alas— bloody hell!"

"You!" Alastor snarled. "Why are you here?"

The pale-faced Potions Master raised his eyebrows. "I was invited here, Mr Moody. Something you would have known, if you had waited to storm over here accusing me of whatever it was you are planning on accusing me of."

"Why would they invite the likes of you here?" Moody demanded, refusing to back down.

"I would imagine," Severus answered dryly, "that I had something of use to them."

"Nothing you bring to the table would be useful," Moody growled, pressing his fingers into Snape's bony sternum.

WHUMP!

Moody was knocked over and flat on his back by over a hundred kilos of furious Nundu cub. She pinned him down with her big front paws, her claws digging into the scarred leather of his coat. Her lips were pulled back from her teeth in a snarl, exposing glistening white fangs.

Moody's eyes widened as stunned realisation settled in.

She stared at him with fierce, orange-green eyes, and all the hate inside him drained away in favour of absolute shock and awe.

The moment his hatred faded away, her demeanor shifted. She stared down at him, but the almost relentless fury seemed to fade ever so slightly.

"Brim," Severus called, "let him up."

The Nundu cub relaxed almost immediately. She let out a soft mrowling chirp and bounced off of Alastor's gonads to hop up and place her paws on Severus' knee. "Mrrwl!"

Moody's eyes crossed in pain as the Nundu left him. She head-bonked into Snape and Lucius, chattering her teeth as she looked up at them. He stared blearily at Snape as he watched him touch her head and soothe her. The cub purred happily, clawlessly batting at his robes and offering him a squirming oversized plush arachnid.

Severus took the toy and sent it scurrying off, and the cub went tearing across the Aurors' office after it.

Moody slowly peeled himself up off the floor with a pained grunt.

"You have a Nundu?" Moody grunted in disbelief. "How is that even possible?"

"She found me," Severus informed him, his face set like stone, "at Hogwarts."

"She— found you?"

"Quite literally."

Moody adjusted his collar, wincing as various pained parts of himself reminded him to never, ever do whatever he did again.

"She's bound to a Marked Death Eater," Moody confirmed angrily.
"Mr Moody," Lucius said, stepping in. "Perhaps if we were to prove that neither of us is a Death Eater, it will bring this unpleasant confrontation to an end."

"Oh, I'm sure your glamours are just fine," Alastor hissed. He tapped his magical eye. "But they won't save you. I know what you are."

"You know what we were when we were very young, misguided fools," Lucius pointed out. "The difference is, we chose a club that did not like to give up its inductees and let them live. Do you think every person who has ever joined an organisation has never changed their mind? Do you believe that no one is capable of change?"

Moody narrowed his eyes. "Death Eaters can't change. Once tainted, they wear that mark of shame forever. Some spots don't come off."

"Mrrrow!" Brim returned, the wriggling spider in her mouth.

"Oh! Sorry! Sorry! I uh— oh dear!" a flustered-looking young man with a glass terrarium came bursting through the crowd. "Have you see my— oh goodness. Samantha!"

The man skidded to the Nundu's side. "Could I— uh— could I have that spider, please, madam? She's important to my research! She got out and— oh dear!"

Severus rolled his eyes. He knelt beside Brim and pointed to the terrarium. "Leave it," he said softly. "Give the poor man back his spider. You have plenty more at home."

The Nundu cub seemed to sulk, and she gently placed the wriggling arachnid back into the terrarium. The spider quickly scurried under a rock in the terrarium as the man slammed the lid down on the top. "Thank Merlin," he said. "She's a rare bird-eating spider from the south," he gushed. Her venom is crucial for making anti-venom for Runespoor bites. We don't know why it works, but it is the only thing that does. All the Aurors have to carry a vial of it."

Severus raised an eyebrow as he distracted Brim with a plush spider instead of the real and wriggling one. "Perhaps, you should keep a better eye on your arachnids, Mr—?"

"Mathers, sir," he stammered.

"Mr Mathers," Severus answered.

Mathers nodded and smiled apologetically. "Thank you. Thank you!" he said as he hugged the terrarium and scampered away into the crowd.

"You may have done the man a great service," Lucius commented.

"Oh? How so?" Severus asked.

"The spider may never roam out of the terrarium again lest she be eaten by a giant feline with a distinct fondness for arachnids."

Severus snorted. Then, as he remembered what they had been conversing before the strange interruption, he unfastened the buttons on his sleeve. He went all the way up his arm with painstaking movements, then he started again with the white inner shirt. Finally, he rolled up his sleeve, exposing his pale, pristine forearm.

Lucius, too, rolled up his sleeve, exposing his own unmarked forearm.
Moody's magical eye flicked back and forth wildly, and Moody stared at the arms and at their faces in disbelief. "How—"

Severus and Lucius sighed together.

"True remorse and redemption, Mr Moody— the magic of legends."

Moody stared at their flawless, unmarked arms again. "I suppose if I am to believe in a Nundu, then I must also believe that other legendary things are possible. Perhaps, even a change in what was seemingly impossible."

Moody proceeded to eat multiple hearty slices of humble pie when Brim tackled the magical artifact storage room. She sat down in front of every single dark object they had labeled, giving her definitive chirp of disapproval as she glared at the object in question. Boxes didn't matter. Being encased in a magical-dampening field didn't even slow her down, and it seemed like that the more ordinary and innocuous it seemed, the easier she found it. Cursed dice, masks, quills, necklaces— all of them couldn't escape her senses.

Then, to top it all off, she made friends with the local ley line and instantly vanished from sight. Frantic Patroni and owls came from the upper floors of the Ministry reporting that "a giant spotted cat came through the ventilation pipe and is digging through our storage closet!"

The officials, Moody, Kingsley, Severus, Lucius, and the small contingent of pre-approved Aurors all went scrambling through the halls of the Ministry to get to where the cub had obviously found a shortcut path of high-efficiency.

They found Brimstone lording over a large box, her head laying against the cardboard as she waited patiently for the rest of her "team" to show up. She looked up as they arrived, panting from their run through the Ministry halls.

"Mrrrowl!" she greeted, her tail lashing back and forth.

"What do you have there, girlie?" Moody asked, using his wand to carefully open the box. Other boxes had been pushed to the side by the investigative Nundu, but this one alone had her hovering over it. He opened the lid, nudging the Nundu to the side with a healthy dose of caution, but Brim seemed to realise he wasn't going to start attacking her people anymore.

He looked inside and frowned. "What?"

Kingsley looked inside too. "Quills?"

"Those are the blood quills we confiscated from a Dark wizard's residence about a year ago," Auror Whitehorse told them. "I remember them. I logged them in. They were supposed to be down in the storage room with all the other stuff we collected."

Kingsley narrowed his eyes. "I want this box traced immediately. I want the logs scoured. I want to know who authorised moving them. If no one did, I want to know who moved them anyway. Now."

The Aurors shook their heads and sprang into motion, casting their traces over the box and the quills inside.


"Hn?"
"How well can she track?" Alastor asked.

"Minerva uses student parchment to have her fetch people anywhere in the school," Severus replied.

"Well, then, lass," Moody said. "Why don't you show us who moved this box, hrm?"

Kingsley gave her a hand signal, and she perked immediately. She sniffed the box— and vanished.

A very perturbed-looking Nundu was staring fixedly at one door in particular in the Minister for Magic's main office. Word had come quickly, but Snape had already been on the move, having sensed her presence through their bond now that he was prepared for her to do her disappearing trick. He had thought she was limited to Hogwarts, but that had apparently been wrong. If there was a ley line to be found, she was apparently able to use it just as she did "at home."

Energy was still crackling off the Nundu's spotted hide, and it crackled between her whiskers.

"Mrowl!" she said, gouging deep furrows into the office door with her dark green claws.

A small crowd was gathering around, muttering to each other and pointing. Brimstone, however, ignored them all. What she wanted was inside the door, and there was no one outside it that concerned her.

Cross-eyed pastel kittens on fancy plates decorated the outside frame of the door, and they mewled and hissed at the large Nundu cub. Brimstone, however, was not impressed, and she yawned, showing all of her pearly white fangs in response.

The kittens promptly dove out of the plates into some off-frame haven, leaving Brim well alone.

Kingsley arrived with the rest of the group, and quickly gave the Nundu the "all done" signal, releasing her from her guard duty. Brim seemed skeptical, but she trotted back to Severus' side as he and Lucius stood back and out of the way.

It wasn't hard to figure out which door to knock on, after all. Only one had deep furrows from Nundu claws raked across it.

Moody gave Kingsley a strange look, and the Head Auror nodded. They pulled out their wands and began complex scans. They were joined by the other Aurors. Suddenly, the traces burst into a deep red, making the door glow as though possessed.

Moody clicked his tongue and jutted his chin at the nearest Auror, and the younger Auror seemed to pick up on the message he was giving. He and the other Aurors chained their wands together and pointed at the door, sending out a pulse of bright warmth.

There was a strange hissing sound, as though air were being let out of a balloon, and then Moody cast something with his wand. The door ceased to glow. He used his wand to open the door, and it creaked open with an almost comical drawn-out haunted house screech.

"What are you doing!" a high-pitched screech came from around the corner. A short and stout toad-faced woman carrying a clipboard and wearing the most obnoxiously pink, fluffy, and sparkly cardigan was storming towards them. "This is my office! You are not permitted inside without my permission!"

"I gave them permission," Minister Fudge coolly informed her, stepping out of the small cluster of officials.
"M— Minister! Why have you let these horrible people destroy my door? If you informed me you were coming, I could have been here to greet you properly!" the woman sputtered.

"Dolores," Fudge placated. "I fear we haven't been doing some of the things we should have been to improve the conditions around the Ministry."

"Oh! I've been trying to tell you, Cornelius," she replied in a gush. "We need to be far more strict with them!"

"Yes, yes," Cornelius said with a nod. "Well, let's start off by showing everyone that we are not immune to the rules, shall we?"

"Whatever do you mean?"

Cornelius pulled out his wand. "I do solemnly swear that I will remain loyal to the British Ministry of Magic and that I fully support its aim of providing support and protection for all of its citizens regardless of race, religion, gender, age, sexual orientation, or blood status. So mote it be." His wand flashed with his magic, sealing in his oath.

"Wh-what— but we already took our oaths, Cornelius!" she blurted.

"Come now, Dolores," the Minister tutted. "All the more reason to show we aren't afraid to reaffirm ourselves. Especially here in front of the masses who look to us for guidance."

The toad-like woman stared out into the office hatefully. Fury and hate seethed off her body as she glared over every person in the room.

One of the Aurors was working his way around her office, waving his wand in intricate circles to trace and search for Dark magic. Dolores snapped her head around and she immediately lost any semblance of control.

"Get out of my office!" she shrieked in fury, storming towards the man with her wand raised threateningly.

A blur of gold and black streaked in front of her as a disturbed Nundu cub placed herself between the young Auror and Dolores. Her fur was spiked high and her tail was like a bottle brush. Foam flecked around her jaws as she exposed her teeth.

WHUMP!

Dolores was down for the count, pinned to the floor by the angry Nundu. She stood on her, her paws resting on Dolores' person in a very particular position. She moved over Dolores with precise, exacting movements. She placed her large paws just under the toad-like woman's ribs, and then she took her rear legs and very deliberately put both of her back paws right over the woman's bladder.

The woman squirmed and turned very red in the face, but her eyes were wide with fear. She had a huge animal pinning her down, cub or no, and said animal was very precisely squeezing the extremely unhappy nephrons of her kidneys and compressing her bladder at exactly the same time.

The stench of urine filled the air as Dolores Umbridge's bladder did the only thing it could do under the circumstances: evacuate.

"Get this filthy beast off of me!" she screeched hatefully. Somehow, she had kept her wand, and she stabbed it into the feline's ribs. "Stupefy!"
The panic-driven magic slammed into Brimstone and seemed to travel straight up her spine and to her whiskers. Energy arched off her whiskers as she narrowed her eyes and let out a low, menacing growl. Deep green fumes leaked out from her mouth as the Nundu absorbed the woman's hate and breathed it back out into her face as virulent disease.

Gasps filled the office as people hurriedly covered their mouth and nose, looking as though they were going to fling themselves out of the office window to escape.

Moody and Kingsley had Bubble-head charms over their heads, and they cast them on the office personnel as they panicked, forgetting they were witches and wizards with wands, all caught up in the sheer panic of the moment.

"Brimstone," Severus said, his voice deadly calm and his face as impervious as stone.

Brim jerked her head up.

"Come."

"Mrrrowl!" she answered, leaping off Dolores's abdomen to bounce back to Severus. She purred and rubbed against him and Lucius, pawing, and head-butting them in favour of their approval over dealing with Dolores' hate.

Severus kneeled and embraced her, pressing his face into her fur. "That's a good girl," he praised.

Brim beamed proudly, expressing herself with the inviting scent of freshly-baked bread.

"Snape, do you have a Disease Cure potion in those pockets of yours?" Moody barked as he bound Dolores to a stretcher. Her face was breaking out in a particularly vile-smelling pustulent bruise-purple pox, and she was turning a rather unhealthy shade of green.

Severus pulled out a small black vial from his robes and handed it to him. "Cures everything up to and including Dragon Pox," he said.

"Better than nothing," Moody said. "Thank you." He unstoppered it and forced it to Umbridge's lips.

Her colour began to shift back to normal, but the ghastly purple pox on her face remained. "Get her to Mungo's. Apparate her straight to the isolation ward admissions area."

"Yes, sir!" the two nearby Aurors replied, picking up the stretcher and disappearing with a crack.

"Thank Merlin!" a small woman near the coping quills desk cried.

The entire office seemed to echo that opinion as it burst into applause and cheers.

Fear forgotten, Brimstone was surrounded by happy office staff that took turns rubbing her stomach and giving her all the love and praise a Nundu could ever wish for.

One day later, a giant, fresh ocean tuna was delivered to Severus' quarters with a tag on the tail:

Our deepest appreciation and eternal gratitude

For our beloved feline heroine.

Thank you,

Office of the Minister for Magic
P.S. We put a preservation charm on it in consideration of the tuna's size.

That night, Brim, Crooks, Severus and Minerva munched away happily on the tail end of the tuna as Lucius, Narcissa, and Draco dined on the best tuna steaks they had ever eaten. Somewhere on the third floor, tucked away in a hidden room, the world's happiest three-headed dog muched away happily on his share of the spoils. On the other side of the castle Argus and Mrs Norris dined on their first fresh tuna steaks together, and each professor at Hogwarts had a visit from Tinky, the house-elf, who brought them all a large celebratory tuna steak, a glass of wine from the Malfoy's coveted wine cellar, and fresh winter-greens from Sprout's winter garden greenhouse. Each tray had a small card written with Minerva's elegant hand and Severus' spidery scrawl.

Happy Christmas, Hogwarts.

(Nundu pawprint smeared across the card)

Some time later, as the witching hour chimed, Crookshanks curled up right next to Ronald Weasley's face and breathed his tuna breath directly up into his nostrils.

Unexpected Raid at the Ministry of Magic Exposes Secret Death Eaters

Panic descended upon the Ministry of Magic today as an unexpected raid brought to light several Death Eaters hidden amongst our faithful Ministry workers.

Retired Auror Alastor Moody has returned to the Auror Office, swearing in his magical oath to protect and serve along with thousands of other employees at the Ministry who had not previously done so due to an unfortunate lapse in departmental policy. The first order of business for newly-returned Auror Moody was to clean house.

And boy, was it ever cleaned out.

Starting with the discovery of a Death Eater, Reinhold Davies, in the ranks of the Aurors, he moved on to charge Undersecretary Dolores Umbridge with nine counts of harboring Dark magic artifacts and warding her office with Dark magic, plus multiple additional counts of bribery, blackmail, and intimidation.

But it didn't end there.

No, shortly after Dolores Umbridge was taken to St. Mungo's with a rather nasty case of Amazonian Whistling Tuber Pox, the likes of which Mungo's hasn't seen in decades, the Aurors, led by Aurors Shacklebolt and Moody, rounded up Augustus Rookwood, Walden Macnair, Mortimer Mullen, Dagwood Oxnard, Stuart Sneddon, Rupert Knowles, Laird Blackburn, Jasper Woodcock, Balthazar Binns, Creighton Nutter, Willard Wiggins, Dabney Funk, Fergus Lackey, Putnam Penwick, and Eliza Montague. All of them bore the faded yet distinctive Dark Mark that set them apart as followers of He-Who-Shall-Not-Be-Named.

Each person has been given access to legal counsel for their upcoming trial before the Wizengamot. Alastor Moody, who had been trying to find proof of their guilt for years, said that he finally feels like the Ministry is set to do what it was intended to do: protect every magical citizen in Britain.

While some of the people who were caught are claiming that they were forcibly marked and acting under the Imperius curse, the Wizengamot has announced it will give everyone a fair trial, no matter how long it might takes, but they will also authorise the use of three drops of Veritaserum. However, if the accused prefers, they may submit to a thorough examination by the Master Legilimens team.
Submitted memories will be viewed by pensieve, and many believe that this has been the most care that has gone into doing everything by the book before sending the accused to Azkaban. It seems the Department of Law Enforcement has cleaned up its act since the release of the unjustly imprisoned Sirius Black.

Moody, however, reported to us, "the evidence against every one we captured today is very strong and damning. I have faith that we will bring the correct people to justice. Mistakes have been made in the past, but we will do our absolute best to not repeat them."

"This, child, is the Hall of the Founders," Helga said as they found themselves back in a very familiar chamber. "While it exists here, it also exists in the waking world."

"Long ago, students and professors that came after us would come here to share wisdom. They could hear Hogwarts and her needs as well ask us for guidance through their own lives," Salazar noted, his hand running across the nearby serpent statue.

Hermione stared at the statues with more wonder. "Why is it that only I can hear you?"

Rowena stared into the scrying pool. "Because you were born here, Hermione. Born and reborn. Hogwarts has imprinted your very being with its own magic. You cannot help but hear it, see it, and hear and see us. We are a part of Hogwarts now, just as you are. One day, perhaps, someone will see you here as well."

Hermione seemed to think hard on something. "Rowena?"

"Yes, child?"

"When you say born and reborn," she started to say. "You mean that literally, don't you?"

Rowena's expression softened. "Yes, child, I do."

Hermione mind was churning. "But, if I was born here, then I wasn't really born to two Muggle dentists, was I?"

Godric lifted her up and twirled her, causing her to giggle. "What does your heart tell you, love?"

Hermione touched his beard and smiled. "This is my home."

"And do you feel loved here?" Helga asked.

Hermione nodded enthusiastically. "Very much so."

"The rest will come in time, dear one," Salazar said. "You need not rush what happens here. Here you have all the time in the world."

"Minerva is very sad," Hermione said. "Can she come here and sort things through too?"

"Alas, no, child," Rowena answered. "We, here, all share one thing in common. We all gave ourselves over to Hogwart's care. Hogwarts preserves us within its walls and magic— long after our bodies were dust. You were special. You heard Hogwarts even before you knew us. Even when all other things made your doubt, a part of you has always been connected here. Most that dwell here cling to life or pass into the beyond. Some becomes ghosts because they cannot let go. To be here in this place, one must let themselves go to Hogwarts and trust it will take care of them. That is a big step for most, Hermione. It requires too much faith in the unknowable."
Hermione pondered again. "But, if they talked to you like I did, then they would know you exist. If they know you exist they would have to believe, wouldn't they?"

Godric smiled, shaking his head. "Logic is not always the end point of belief, Hermione. Logic can only take you so far. Sometimes, you have to have faith that there is more out there than you can understand."

"There are a lot of things I still don't understand, Godric," Hermione said, sulking a bit.

"Hah!" he replied, ruffling her head. "You already know more than most. It is important for you to keep an open mind and an open heart, or you shut yourself away from life's greater secrets and lessons."

"And do you remember the most important one, my child?" Salazar asked.

Hermione frowned, realising she wasn't sure.

"You always keep learning," he replied. "Even here, we continue to evolve. Never forget, everyone has the ability to learn and everyone has a story to tell."

Hermione combed Godric's beard with her hands, fussing. "I think Minerva and Severus would like to talk to you too. You said long ago, people used to. Could they now?"

Helga smiled. "If they really wanted to, they could come to this place and ask their questions. We cannot always answer, but sometimes, if their mind is quiet or their need great enough, yes, they can hear us for a time."

Hermione seemed happy with that answer and hugged Godric before sliding down his chest and landing on the floor. She tilted her head as she traced the runes over one of the statues with her fingers. "In the stories you tell me, the Fae all have a true name— it's the name they weave all their magic in which is why if someone finds it out they can control it, right?"

Rowena nodded. "Many of the Fae operate this way, yes."

Hermione twirled her curls with one finger. "What if I never knew what my real name was. If my magic was my name, and I used the wrong name, what would that do?"

"Human names are not the same, dear one," Rowena explained. "A fairy is born with their name sung to them in magic. It is tied to their very soul at birth. If it was not so, the fae would die and fade away. They cannot help but be tied to their name. Most sentient creatures do not tie themselves to one name. Think of all the names we call each other. Think of all the titles we much know, the nicknames, the endearments. Are any of them less to us than another?"

Hermione pondered Rowena's question, her eyebrows furrowing. She shook her head in negative.

"The truly powerful are not beholden to any one name," Salazar said.

"So, if I was meant to have one name, but I was given another name and never knew it," Hermione supposed. "I could have both names?"

"As many names as there are stars, Hermione," Rowena answered her with a smile. "What name calls you now, my dear?"

Hermione smiled impishly. "I think I like Brim."
Salazar snorted and picked her up. "I think I shall call you Imp because that is what you are."

Hermione giggled and played with his locket. Her face grew oddly serious. "But maybe— maybe one day I wouldn't mind being called Bonnie Skye."

Helga looked at her kindly. "The day you do will a very important day," she said warmly, "both for you and the ones that will call you it."

"Salazar?"

"Hn?"

"Why do some people make me so angry?" Hermione asked. "Why are they so hateful?"

Salazar pondered. "Hate is a strong emotion, anchored as much in love and passion rather than being the opposite. What is the opposite of love, child?"

Hermione bit her lip and looked up at the ceiling. "Not hating."

Salazar gave her a look.

Hermione huffed and looked skyward. "If hate is an emotion, then not hating would be not feeling, so the opposite of hate is not feeling at all." Her mind was searching for the right word. "Impassivity!"

Everyone in the room but Hermione turned to Rowena and glared at her. Rowena's eyes grew wide. "What? She remembers vocabulary and it's my fault?"

"Who else would fill her mind with words like impassivity, Rowena?" Godric scolded. "Insouciance!" Hermione cheered.

Salazar gave Rowena a fatalistic eyebrow lift. "We rest our case."

Rowena pinched her nose. "Come, child, let us leave these fonts of discouragement and pessimism for places more jubilant and ebullient."

"Okay!" Hermione agreed, taking her arm with enthusiasm.

The pair disappeared down the corridor.

Godric shook his head. "That's it. I'm taking her out flying and teaching her everything about Quidditch."

"Gods no," Salazar moaned.

"What?" Godric huffed.

"I have a better idea," Helga said.

The two wizards turned to stare at her.

"Let's teach her how to unwrap turbans using unconventional tools," Helga suggested.

Both Salazar and Godric shared the same unnervingly smug smile.
It was on.

A/N: Gee… wherever will Brim find a turban to practice on...
Curiouser and Curiouser

Chapter by corvusdraconis

A/N: Something wicked this way comes. Karma is a very strange thing. When it comes to bite you squarely on the arse, it's not always going to come with a cute plush spider envoy. Just saying.

Now, perhaps some of you might have something you need explained further or something you might want to see in the upcoming chapters. Now would be the time to send in any particular requests. I cannot promise that everyone's idea(s) will be incorporated, but hey— you might just see something in an upcoming chapter that seems awfully familiar!

Beta Love: The Dragon and the Rose (praise her for losing sleep for me and tolerating my increasingly delirious typing as the hour gets later and later), Dutchgirl01 (I'm not exactly sure when this gal sleeps.)

____________________________

Breath of the Nundu

Chapter 6

Curiouser and Curiouser

Curiosity killed the cat but satisfaction brought it back. - Eugene O'Neill

Hermione poked her head up over the garden wall, eyeing the dark splotch that was Severus sunning himself in the sun. There was a strange irony that she could appreciate, having heard the rumours and nonsense spread about her chosen human anchor. Most of those people would probably die of disbelief if they knew that Severus enjoyed sunning himself like a proper feline rather than hanging upside down like a certain flying mammal.

She hunkered down on the grass, her tail low, her ears pointed forward.

Pad.

Pad.

Pad.

She crept along the ground.

Severus' taunting tail was flipping back and forth on the ground, begging to be pounced on. How could she deny it when it begged so nicely?

POUNCE!

She landed on the dense, brindled tail, and Severus mrowled at her, flicking his tail back and forth to get her to re-pounce, readjust, and pounce again. She pounced on his back, trying to wrestle him to the ground or even move him, but he was massive, and she— well, she had a lot of growing to do still. She tugged on his ears, batted his muzzle, and then flopped on her back to bat at his chin.

Severus pinned her down with one paw and groomed her over, and she stilled, purring happily.
Oddly enough, she felt far more connected to him now that they shared this sort of feline intimacy, and she reveled in the closeness of their bond together. Minerva and she had always been close as well, due to her tabby presence, and it was like they all spoke the same language.

That was all before she had realised that Minerva even more special to her than she had ever suspected.

As a Nundu, Hermione's personality was far more strongly that of her Nundu self than Hermione the young apprentice of the Founders, not that she was ever not herself. Brimstone and Hermione were, much as Rowena had said, reflected two parts of an ever growing whole. Brim was more strongly ruled by feeling and senses, while Hermione was ruled much by her unquenchable desire to learn and the drive to know as much as possible. It wasn't too difficult to see how the two things combined and met in the middle. Nundus were notoriously curious creatures too. They just liked to stick their paws and whiskers into places head-on.

Severus, conveniently being the only animal around that was big enough to cart Hermione around by her scruff, stood up and took her with him, dangling her from his mouth like a mother cat carrying her kitten. She hung limply as he did so, instinctively driven to trust him to carry her wherever he wished to take her. She wasn't exactly tiny, but apparently she was perfectly sized to be his "cub," and she found a certain pleasing warmth in that.

The full contact cub-raising satisfied Hermione's primal need to have a place to fit in, and now, more than ever, she felt as though she could trust Severus to be there for her. That revelation alone did something wonderful for her heart, and she expressed it by indulging in surging bouts of playfulness and jubilant frolicking.

Flitwick, being the sly sort, which was something most people didn't realise Ravenclaws were actually capable of, put a very interesting charm on Minerva's Animagus "collar." Now, whenever Brim needed a little mothering, she would grow to an astounding size to match and do much as Severus did, pin her down, groom her, make sure all her parts were functioning, and then set her free to explore.

Hermione adored the one-on-one attention on the more primal level of understanding. Minerva, even before learning of their hidden past, was her mum by choice. Severus, on the other hand, she was never quite sure what he was. He was trusted without reproach, and that was really all that mattered. She knew, in her heart, that he was her person, her anchor, and her guidepost for life. Through him, she learned who she could trust, who she had to tolerate, and who she really wanted to bite on the arse but couldn't due to reasons she never quite understood.

Kingsley, for example, was a trusted figure. Severus trusted him to look out for her, and so she trusted Kingsley. He did give the most amazing ear-rubs too, which helped his case in all the places that mattered.

Mr Moody, which is what she heard Lucius and Severus call him more often than not, was an odd duck to place. She was to behave around him, and she wasn't allowed to chew on him. Yet, even so, there was this berth of something that kept Severus from having the kind of complete faith in him like he demonstrated with Lucius, Minerva, or Kingsley.

After their first "meeting," Hermione had been mentally confused as to how to file him away. He was violent and hateful, but then he had put a rein on it and the animosity between he and Severus and Lucius had faded. Perhaps that was the lesson to be learned. Salazar had always taught her that appearance was not always truth, but that truth lay beneath, often covered by other truths as much as things that were not so truthful. Maybe there was a lesson in there somewhere— this Moody's being able to change being something she should file away for future contemplation. Most important to her
was that he was no longer hateful to her people, and even more importantly, her people weren't hateful to him.

Hate was something powerful to her, but it was primordial as much as it was unpredictable. It was always Severus' voice that kept her in check when hate was around her. His mental warmth, the coolness of his resolve and tranquility of mind, even when everything around her was in flames, kept her from descending into ruthless instinct and murderous intent.

There was a certain irony in that, she knew. She was all too familiar with some of the things people said when they thought no one was listening. Most people wouldn't think Severus had warmth of any kind. Most of his Potions students were a prime example of that.

Hermione realised Severus had stopped walking. She dangled from his mouth.

"Mrowl?" she questioned.

He released her, and she looked around with confusion. She started off in one direction, but his paw moved in front of her, blocking her progress.

Hermione sat down.

Severus was staring down toward Hogwarts' main gate.

The lumbering half-giant was escorting someone to Hogwarts. It was tall man, at least as humans went, scruffy-looking unshaven face, scruffy-looking black hair— Well, he was pretty much a scruffy-looking specimen of human male. That was all Hermione could tell from a distance. Severus, however, seemed very interested in the visitor, if interest could be layered in— a near-overpowering feeling of utter loathing?

Hermione pondered whether it was either standard practice to loathe unshaven and unkempt humans in general, or if this particular human was a special case. It was so hard to tell, sometimes.

As they watched the pair walk into the large main doors of the castle, it was only when the door closed that Severus finally relaxed. Hermione head-butted into his chin, causing him to shake off his strange mood and start grooming her.

Hermione purred happily in approval. She preferred him to pay attention to her than whatever that last mood was. Even so, curiosity was churning in the back of her head.

Curiosity, the bane of all felines and Slytherin, was increasingly hard to ignore.

"He's my godson!"

"He doesn't even know you exist, Sirius," Dumbledore replied, turning as he paced his office.

"And you didn't even try to defend me, did you, Albus?" Sirius hissed. "I rotted in that bloody cell with Dementors as my jailors for an entire decade, and you didn't even try. James and Lily made me Harry's godfather. I should have been there to take care of him instead of those pathetic excuses for human beings!"

"Had you taken me into your confidence and simply let me know that you were planning to go after Peter that night, perhaps I would have been less broadsided by arriving to find you surrounded by thirteen dead Muggles and only a single digit belonging to your supposedly dead friend. The friend that you had referred to, not long before, when you were heard screaming, 'I'm going to murder that
dirty, stinking rat!'" Dumbledore reminded him.

Sirius clenched his fists. "We were a part of the Order! You should have trusted me!"

"I fear such trust in you was quite hard to come by after you tried to murder someone here at Hogwarts," Albus sighed. "I stood up for you then, Sirius. I turned a blind eye to your— childish pranks. And, much like the boy who cried wolf, by the time you were found surrounded so many innocent dead, I fear I had far less faith in your stories."

"It was the truth!" Sirius growled.

"Yes," Albus replied. "A truth you refused to take Veritaserum for because it was brewed by Severus Snape, isn't that right?"

"You could have gotten it from ANYONE else but him!" Sirius seethed.

"Even though it would have proven your innocence without a single doubt? You could then have taken Harry and been there to raise him. Instead, you refused it, despite my begging you to take it," Albus narrowed his eyes as he spoke in low, dangerous tones. "You forced my hand, Sirius. Lily's protection relies on blood family being there to renew the protection. I made the choice to save him."

"In an abusive home!" Sirius seethed. "A home that made the beatings in my own seem better. At least broken bones can be easily healed. What if it's broken him? You might as well have put him in the cell next to mine and had the Dementors suck all of his happiness away."

"Sirius, I pulled every string I had to get them to agree to question you under Veritaserum," Albus said somberly. "You— you had every chance to prove your innocence."

"So Snape could poison me?" Sirius growled. "That bloody snake—"

"That 'snake' saved your life," Albus said coolly. "He is the sole reason you are here right now, talking to me as a free man."

"What?" Sirius sputtered.

"His familiar found Wormtail, Sirius," Albus reminded him. "I realise that you were hardly in your right mind at your first actual trial, but you cannot tell me you didn't read the countless series of Prophet articles that covered all the details of Peter's capture and your subsequent release."

"You know damned well that I don't read the Prophet's spew after all of their articles praising the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black," Sirius scoffed at the aged wizard before him.

"Perhaps, you should have in this case," Albus replied wearily. "It was Severus' familiar who found Peter. It was Severus himself who captured and contained him and then brought him straight to the Aurors instead of simply making him disappear and leaving you to rot in Azkaban, Sirius. He saved you, and maybe you need to do some thinking on that before you presume to judge me for my actions with regard to ensuring Harry's safety from Tom. I did what I had to for the greater good."

"Voldemort killed James and Lily and then himself," Sirius ground out. "The greater good is that he died along with them and my traitorous Death Eating brother with him."

There was a knock at the door.

"Come in," Albus said, gesturing for Sirius to be silent.
"Headmaster," Minerva said from the doorway, her arm around a certain messy, black-haired boy with round glasses. "You requested Mr Potter's presence?"

"Yes, Minerva," Albus answered. "Please, do come in, Mr Potter."

The black-haired boy seemed quite disinclined to come in, but a large furry head head-bumped his hand and his hand clenched around the Nundu's neck scruff. He wrapped his hand around the collar for reassurance, seemingly having developed a tight reliance on the calming feline presence in a very short amount of time.

"Am I in trouble, sir?" he asked quietly.

"No, my dear boy, whyever would you think that?" Albus asked, gesturing him in.

The young wizard looked around the rather intimidating office. His hand rubbed the cub's fur somewhat more frantically.

Minerva walked into the room, and the young wizard was rooted to the spot. Brim used her head to firmly nudge into his legs and push him along, and the boy awkwardly entered as though he were passing through a barrier of very thick taffy.

"Harry." The voice was strangled and harsh.

Harry spun, looking at the disheveled older wizard with wide eyes.

"Mr Potter," Dumbledore said quietly. "There is something important we need to discuss. Some of it may be difficult for you to hear."

"You're taking me out of school," Harry blurted. "You're sending me back to my Aunt?" His arm went around the Nundu cub tightly, and she looked to Minerva in confusion. The elder witch nodded to her silently, and the cub calmed, allowing his stranglehold on her neck.

"No, Mr Potter, that's not it at all."

"I knew your father, Harry," the Sirius blurted. "We were best mates, he and I."

Harry narrowed his eyes at the older wizard.

Sirius face softened dramatically. "You look so much like your father at your age, but— your eyes are so much your mother's."

Harry's face twitched, his hands loosening slightly in the death grip he had around the cub's neck.

Brim relaxed a little, relieved that her duty to do as Minerva had asked became a bit less uncomfortable.

"Not to be rude, sir," Harry said after a long moment, "but I don't know you."

"I—" Sirius started, taking a moment to glare at Albus. "Your father made me your godfather, Harry, a long time ago."

Harry's face went from curiosity to suspicion again. "Then why haven't I heard from you before?"

Dumbledore cleared his throat. "I regret to say that Sirius was detained in Azkaban due to a very unfortunate misunderstanding involving events that happened shortly after your parent's deaths."
Harry's eyes widened. "You're Sirius Black?"

Sirius nodded. "I am, Harry. I fear I have just been released from St Mungo's. There was some discussion that there may have been considerable mental trauma after my incarceration, thanks to the Dementors."

Harry squeezed Brim again, and she wiggled her head into his lap and let him cling to her more naturally instead of trying to throttle her. He seemed to relax with her nearby, and continued to pet her in an automatic soothing motion.

"The paper said you were framed by your best mate, Peter Pettigrew," Harry recalled.

"He betrayed us all, Harry," Sirius said, his face darkening. "He was our Secret Keeper." The elder wizard stared at Dumbledore accusingly. "I mistakenly believed that I was not the best person to keep your parents' location safe. It was a very dark time, Harry. We all put our faith in the wrong people. When I discovered that your parents were dead, I knew it had to be Peter. I knew it in my bones, and I went after him. But, none of us ever knew the real Peter. He was waiting for me, and he killed several random Muggles to frame me for both their deaths and his own supposed death. I went to Azkaban, and—"

"Pettigrew went to the Weasleys," Harry finished.

Sirius nodded. "I'm sorry, Harry. I wasn't able to be there for you, but I'd like to be there for you starting now. I have a proper home again. I would like to get to know you properly, and, if you would like to, give you the home I should have given you before I was imprisoned."

"Sirius, we've already discussed why Harry cannot le—" Albus began.

"Damn your rubbish about protective wards enforced by his proximity to his mother's blood kin!" Sirius hissed. "We ARE blood-kin, or did you forget how the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black has been bloody well mated to just about every single Pure-blood family line on this side of the pond? That includes great, great, great, second-cousin thrice removed Erasmus Potter."

Albus, for once caught completely wrongfooted, stared at the younger man in uncomfortable silence.

"I think," Minerva piped up, "that Mr Potter and Mr Black should get to know each other. Now, since tomorrow is the start of our winter break, there will be far less people about here at Hogwarts. It would be a nice, neutral place for them to do so in relative privacy. I could arrange to have a guest room made up for him. Should anything happen, Mr Potter would have plenty access to his professors and the other staff, though, I would recommend the two of you keeping your meetings, for now, in public places."

Albus fidgeted. "I suppose it would not hurt, if Mr Potter is agreeable—?"

Harry looked to Minerva. "Could— could Brim maybe stay with me?"

McGonagall's eyes softened as she saw a how attached he had become to Brim in the short time it had been since she had fetched him to Dumbledore's office. "It is alright with me, lad, but she must be accompanied by either myself or Severus even if she is with you. We wouldn't want her to run off into the woods chasing a spider and leave you alone, aye?"

Harry nodded. "Okay."

"You've gotta be kidding me? Snivellus?" Sirius clenched his fists and glared at Minerva.
Suddenly, the relaxed Nundu cub's demeanor changed almost completely. She stood up stiffly, her fur spiked up as if by electricity. Her lips pulled back from her teeth in a snarl. She nudged Harry behind her with her shoulder, keeping him close but closer to Minerva.

"Mr Black, control your hate!" Minerva ordered.

"I'll hate that greasy git if he so much as lays one hand on Harry!" Sirius seethed, taking a step forward.

That action, however, made Harry cringe away from him, and the moment he did so, Brim growled lowly, pressing against him and bracing herself against the floor, her long green-black claws digging into the headmaster's rug.

The flames in the floo came to life. "Headmaster— I need—"

"Yes, Severus, do it," Albus snapped, waving his hand to the hearth to quickly lift the wards.

The tall Potions Master stepped through the green flames, barely ducking enough so as not to slam his head on the stone mantle as he did so.

"Brim, come," he said, his voice low and calm.

The Nundu cub perked immediately, her ears going flat and then forward as her fur lost some of its spikiness. She looked as though she wanted to come, but she looked back at Harry seemingly with indecision. Then, as if deciding that Severus always knew best, but Harry was apparently worse off as a cub than she was, she wedged her head against Harry's back and pushed him along towards Severus. Then, when she decided that Harry was "safely" behind the Potion's master, she mrowled and put her front paws on Severus' waist and rubbed herself affectionately all over him.

"That's my good girl," Snape rumbled, petting her head. "Mr Potter is fine."

Brim mrrrlled and chattered her teeth, aiming to please, and please she did. Snape put his arms around her and shared his inner calm with her. "There now, love. See? Mr Potter is okay. No one is being hurt."

Harry, who had switched from cowering behind Snape to clinging nervously to the Potions Master's leg, reached out and affixed himself to Brim's long tail. "I'm okay," he said softly.

Brim, who looked to Minerva for a visual clue, then to Snape for an emotional cue, then to Harry for a physical clue, pounced on the boy and lay over him, setting her head down on his chest.

Harry squeaked, startled, but wrapped his arms around her furry chest and pet her all over.

The headmaster let out a sigh of considerable relief.

"Sirius, while I do realise it has been some time since you have seen the outside world," Albus said. "I must stress the fact that you cannot bring your unreasoning hate into Hogwarts. And, before you tell me it is justified, let me reiterate that I don't particularly care if it is or not. That creature over there is a Nundu, and I hope you can put two and two together and figure out just what that means. Her home is here at Hogwarts. Hogwarts herself has made that abundantly clear."

"Impossible," Sirius boggled. "There is no possible way a real Nundu would ever be with that greasy g—"

"Mr Black," Severus answered coldly, his eyes utterly void of any emotion at all. "What you think of
me, I have known for countless years. I do not care. However, I will give you a vial of my own memories of what happened most recently to your former best mate and co-conspirator of nasty little childhood pranks, and then I will walk away. You may not appreciate learning just exactly how close you were to provoking Brim into breathing foul disease upon your person, and all of your own making. But I, for one, refuse to let someone die due to their own gross stupidity and have an innocent cub blamed for their most painful and gruesome demise."

Brim chirped, pawing at his elbow, obvious concern on her feline face as she tried to access Snape's emotions and the calm of the familiar connection to his mind.

Snape's face softened, and he knelt down again, allowing the cub to wrestle his collar and tug on his cravat. He pressed his head to hers and whispered to her. "There now, I'm here. Be still, little one."

Brim settled on top of Harry, pinning him down. The black-haired wizard squirmed a little, and then seemed to realise the utter futility of such an attempt.

Snape stood again, pressing his ebony wand to his temple and pulling a strand of silvery memories from his mind. He guided it into a vial and stoppered it. With a stoney face, he passed it over to Sirius. "And no, they are not tampered with."

Sirius's jaw tightened, perhaps caught in thinking just what Severus had supposed he was. "There is no way that is a real Nundu."

"Perhaps you would like a closer look," Severus said coolly. "Or, if you truly value your life, you can trust Mr Potter to do the examining, since he seems rather close to her at the moment."

Sirius looked from the "leopard" to Harry. "Harry, could you— check her ears? What colour are they on the inside?"

Harry, who narrowed his eyes at the rather violently-inclined man, pulled Brim's head closer and rubbed her ears, then flipped them to look inside. "There's a green spot, it's almost fluorescent."

"How many digits on her paws?" Sirius asked, narrowing his eyes.

Harry struggled to check, as Brim's big paws were nearly the same size as his head, and when he tried to press on her pads to get her claws out to count them, she proceeded to lick his face.

"Ack!" Harry squirmed, sputtering, trying to fend off the rough and raspy tongue.

"Slurp!"

"Slurp!"

"Ahh!" Harry cried out, giggling hysterically.

She pinned him down like her own cub, and dutifully groomed his hair and face. His hair, which was already a mess to begin with, actually started to look rather attractive.

"Slurp!"

Harry went down for the count, giggling like mad.

Brim rasped her tongue over his skin, leaving his face pink as it healed almost immediately back into the glowing peak of health.

Harry batted at her face, trying to push her away, but she was completely relentless. She had decided
that "her" cub really needed a bath, and bathe him she did. She nailed him upside the face, over the nose, and across the forehead, causing the boy to giggle, squirm, and flail helplessly.

Finally, after many, many good licks, Brim flopped over on her side and purred.

"Ah!" Harry suddenly hissed, touching his forehead.

"Mr Potter, are you okay?" Minerva asked, coming closer. She pulled his mop-like hair away from his face.

Harry winced, looking up at her as a trickle of vile-looking black smoke emerged from the distinctive curse scar on his forehead. There, before their very eyes, the jagged bolt scar turned raw and red, foul blackness trickling out from the wound as blood would from a cut. It seemed to scream as it did so, making an unnatural and frightening hissing sound. Then, as it formed into a serpentine face of a half-man, it vapourised and dissipated.

The skin on his forehead seamlessly knit together, turned bright pink, then a lighter pink, and then faded into smooth, clean, pale and unscarred skin.

The jagged lightning bolt scar that had marked Harry Potter from the day of his parents' murder, was finally gone.

Sirius, who was viewing the current goings on with growing discomfort, stared at the vial of memories in his hand. "I think—" he started to say. "I think I need a pensieve."

Albus, who was staring fixedly at the now unscarred boy's flawless forehead, simply gestured to his wall, causing his pensieve to fly over to his desk at his command.

Harry, who was staring speechlessly at his small reflection in the mirror that Minerva had thoughtfully conjured for him, threw it down with an excited gasp and practically tackled the startled Nundu by latching onto her neck and hugging her fiercely. "You're the best Nundu ever!" he cried, happy tears flowing down his face. "I'll look normal now!"

"Normal for a living mop, perhaps, Mr Potter," Severus quipped, handing the boy a small jar of something.

Harry eyed the jar and read the label. "Bloomsbury's Hair Tonic for Insufferably Untamable Hair?"

Severus' face softened. "You should have seen my hair before I started using it, Potter."

"It was even worse than—" Harry stopped himself, flushing with embarrassment. "I'm sorry, sir. I —"

Snape snorted. "I know very well what people think of my hair, Mr Potter."

For the first time, Harry seemed to realise that some deep bitterness in Snape had been lifted when he looked up at him. The loathing was gone. It was almost as if he was now judging Harry on his own merits (or the lack of) alone. "Thank you, sir."

Snape sniffed and nodded to Minerva. "I will take Our Lady of the Relentless Tongue back to class with me, Minerva. It will likely do her well to be away from Mr Black for a time."

Minerva pet Brim and inspected her carefully, checking all her paws, her mouth, and her ears like a mother checking her newborn progeny for missing fingers and toes. Brim purred, purred, and licked her chin in supplication, her tail swishing lazily with serene calmness.
Minerva pressed her lips to Brim's forehead and nodded. "Off you go then, lassie."

Snape seemed to realised he had something of a cling-on grasping at the belt of his trousers.

"Mr Potter?"

"I— if you don't mind, sir," Harry asked almost shyly, "may I come along too?"

Snape's brows furrowed, but he looked to Brim and then back to Harry. His lip curled slightly, but then he seemed to take in a deep breath. "As you wish. You will still sit to the side in my class, since it is not for your year, and you will not touch anything, lest it blow you or someone else to kingdom come."

Harry nodded, his hand grasping Brim's tail tightly.

"Headmaster," Severus said, bowing his head slightly. "Minerva." Severus squared his jaw. "Mr Black." The Potions master swept gracefully from the room, the cub close at his heels, and Harry trailing behind the Nundu cub with his hand still tightly grasping the cub's long tail.

"I must teach my class as well, Headmaster," Minerva said, bowing briefly as she made to leave.

Soon, only Albus and Sirius remained.

Sirius stared at the vial in his hands. "You wouldn't happen to have some Ogden's by chance, Albus?"

The Headmaster lifted a brow, stroking his long beard. "I may have a bottle stashed away for medicinal purposes."

Sirius stared off blankly into space. "I think this qualifies."

"Hey, Potter," Draco said as he brought over a deck of Exploding Snap cards. "What brings you to Snape's chambers, eh? Last I heard, you wouldn't be caught dead down in the dungeons."

"I could ask you the same," Harry said, looking around a bit nervously.

"He's my godfather," Draco said. "Didn't you know?"

Harry shook his head.

Brim came up to Draco and pounced him, rubbing all over him and sniffing him over to see where he had been.

"Ack! Mercy!" Draco laughed, getting a few licks upside the face for his trouble. He pulled a tin off the shelf and pulled out a smoked fish.

Brim perked, mrrowling with excitement.

"Hey," Draco said, putting the smelly fish into Potter's hand. "Give this to her. She'll love you for it."

Harry blinked and wrinkled his nose at the fish, but he held it out to her.

SNAP!

The Nundu had it in her mouth, and she was climbing up her tree-perch to make it disappear.
Harry's eyes went extra wide.

"So, you here for Christmas holidays?" Draco asked, dealing the cards.

Harry, automatically rubbing his forehead and then pausing when he realised the scar wasn't there, dropped his hand. "Yeah."

"Bad family or just feel more at home here?" Draco asked. Tensions between the houses had almost evaporated thanks to one highly emotion-sensitive Nundu. No one who knew of Brim wanted to be on the receiving end of hate-inspired Nundu disease breath, and all it had taken were the stories of Peter Pettigrew's recent affliction to cement that concern in the brains of all those living at Hogwarts. Draco had long since apologised to Harry for being such a git on the train, and Harry, ironically, was starting to see some very unlikable traits in his red-headed "friend" that weren't all that attractive either.

What that boiled down to was an uneasy but growing friendship between the two boys, at least when no one from their prospective houses were hanging all over them.

"Both?" Harry confessed. "My Aunt and Uncle make me sleep in the cupboard under the stairs."

Draco's eyes widened in shock. "What?"

Harry flushed, embarrassed. "I wanted to stay here for holidays, but the headmaster called me to his office to meet someone: Sirius Black."

Draco frowned. "I don't remember much about him. Growing up I had heard all these stories about my batcrap crazy aunt Bella, and my blood-traitor cousin, Sirius Black, but really, in a Pureblood family, that's just typical bread-and-butter talk. You have to talk about either the weather or blood status or no one seems to know what else to talk about. Focusing on crazy Aunt Bella or blood-traitor cousin Black was like hearing the same story about how Great Uncle Farthoway saved the damsel in distress from everything from a nesting dragon to a rabid dog."

"You really believe that stuff?" Harry asked curiously. "The blood status thing?"

Draco shrugged. "It's hard not to, growing up with it, but Father and mum, they had to keep up appearances until recently. I don't really know what changed, but suddenly I had my father back—the one I remembered from when I was a little kid. Mum doesn't hide her tears while cooking anymore. I swear she baked biscuits, tarts, and cakes all the time just to try and hide the fact that she was always crying over things. But it's so different now. I don't believe it anymore, but there are plenty of those who really do believe that nonsense. Crabbe and Goyle can't even put a proper sentence together between the two of them, but they can sure spew hate like nobody's business. One of these days those two are going to bump into Brim and they're going to die—not that she actually wants them dead, but they're really hateful people."

Harry shuddered. "Ron isn't hateful, at least I don't think. He just—always blames people for everything that goes wrong. He blames his brothers for his being afraid of spiders. He blames me for when I try to do my homework, and he blames his little sister back home for causing his parents to focus on her instead of him. I don't get that last one. I don't want my aunt or uncle to pay me any more attention. I'd seriously prefer if they just ignored me instead."

"So, why would Dumbledore ask you to come see my cousin?"

"He's my godfather."

"He's your what?" Draco stared not so politely.
Harry flushed. "He was so angry too, like—one minute he was telling me about how I reminded him so much of my dad and my mum, but the next he looked like he wanted to kill someone. Thank goodness, Brim stepped in. She seemed to know that I was scared, and she nearly attacked him. But Professor Snape flooed in almost immediately and calmed her right down."

Draco frowned. "He always was good for blind hate, I was told. Blacks are raised to hate, really. My mum had to suffer through her sister being burned off the family tree just because Aunt Andromeda married a Muggle-born wizard. Then again, Sirius's mum burned him off the tree too. She might have regretted that one a bit later, but she was far too proud to go back on it. By then, Regulus, his younger brother, had died mysteriously, and his heartbroken father died shortly after that. She didn't last much longer. Many say it was pure spite that kept her alive."

Harry swallowed hard. "Is he still a Black?"

Draco nodded. "She just burned him off the tree. Orion Black would have had to do the actual disowning, and I think she knew in her heart, or what she had of one, that Orion would never actually disown his flesh and blood just for running away. Pureblood politics and family squabbles are pretty much a way of life. One day we are burned off a tree, the next year they pay galleons to have the family tree repaired. Grudges last forever until they don't, and no one seems to know when it will or won't until it happens."

Harry shook his head in bewilderment. "Sounds a bit confusing, if you ask me."

Draco shrugged. "It's life. I'll tell you, being hateful is hard. It takes a lot out of you to be that hateful all the time. I feel much better now that Father isn't forcing me to keep up appearances anymore."

"You have any enemies?"

Draco made a face. "Who doesn't? Nothing I can't handle, but no one dares to have a go at me here at Hogwarts. Brim sees to that. Everyone walks on eggshells whenever they let loose with a hateful comment, thinking that she'll materialise and breathe on them."

Harry looked up to see Brim gnawing away happily on the only thing left to her: the fish head. He wrinkled his nose.

"She protected me up there," Harry said after a while. "She also did something I never thought could happen."

Curiosity, bane of all Slytherins, promptly reared its head at that. "Oh?" Draco said, leaning in.

Harry lifted his hair to expose his forehead.

"Whoa!" Draco gasped. "It's really gone?" He reached out to poke his forehead gingerly, just to make sure it wasn't a glamour.

Harry made an odd face, but seemed to understand. "All I've ever wanted to be was normal," he confessed. "Unmarked and free to make my own choices. Maybe, now I can."

"That's funny," Draco snorted. "I think everyone wants to be normal in some way, and yet, normal is always something someone else has."

Harry shrugged. "Being normal around the Dursley's is probably not my first goal."

"Your relatives sound like a real piece of work."
Harry tapped his nose. "There really are no words. Hagrid had to come fetch me off some lighthouse on an island somewhere in the middle of nowhere because they didn't want to get any more owl post from Hogwarts so I would never find out I was a wizard."

Draco just stared at him like he was radioactively glowing. "I can't even imagine, sorry."

"Hey, you ever get cold at night?" Draco asked, randomly switching subjects.

"All the time," Harry answered.

"Want to learn the best reason to get along with my godfather?"

Harry's suspicious but curious eyes met Draco's. Snape was just in the next room, and Harry was glad the Potions master was tolerating his need to be near Brim after his unpleasant experience with his newly-rediscovered godfather. He didn't want to do anything that would endanger his visitation rights and get Brim taken away from him.

Draco yawned. "Don't worry, it's nothing horrible." He left his stack of cards and summoned a pillow and a blanket from the nearby shelf. He threw one at Harry along with a duvet. "I'll show you a little trick."

Draco tapped the nearby couch and it turned into a large, king-sized bed. He threw the sheets on, a blanket, the pillow, and a quilt. He stared at Harry for a few seconds before Harry remembered he was holding the duvet.

Harry laid it out neatly on the bed.

"You bring your pajamas?" Draco asked, going behind the nearby screen to change. He came out a few seconds later, having apparently mastered the fine art of the ten-second change.

Harry just shook his head in embarrassment.

"Oh, well— Tinky!"

_Pop._

Tinky arrived, tugging on her ears. "Yes, Master Malfoy? Yous be needing something?"

"Could you bring a set of Potter's nightclothes here?" he asked politely. "Poor guy seems to have forgotten to bring suitable clothes for the occasion."

Tinky beamed. "Of course, Tinky is happy to serve!"

_Pop._ She was gone.

Seconds later, she was back with Harry's entire trunk of clothes. She plunked it down with a somewhat frazzled look on her face. "Trunk would not open for Tinky," she said. "Clothes inside. Promises, but trunk is shut tight."

"Thank you, Tinky," Draco said.

The house-elf disappeared.

Harry frowned, trying to open his trunk. "It's stuck tight!"

Draco and Harry wrestled with it.
"What did you do to it, Potter?"

"I didn't do anything!" Harry complained, utterly flummoxed.

Draco aimed his wand at it. "Alohomora!"

The trunk rattled and shook, but the lid stubbornly refused to come open.

Both boys seemed to realise that something wasn't right.

Brim, curious to learn what all the fuss was about, promptly jumped down and sniffed the trunk thoroughly. "Mrowlll!"

"I think there is some kind of glue all around this trunk lid," Draco commented. "Let me get some solvent from Severus' cabinets."

The blond boy scurried off and climbed a shelf, pulling a vial of dark looking fluid off the high shelf. He returned with it and a handful of cotton balls. "Come on, help me out, eh?"

He poured the solvent on the balls, and they both took to soaking the rim and hinges of the chest with the solvent and cotton balls.

The trunk rattled and shuddered.

"What the hell do you have in this thing, Potter?" Draco demanded.

"Normal clothes!" Harry protested.

"Tasmanian Jumping Cursed Clothes?"

"Normal clothes!"

Draco looked highly suspicious, but they continued to work on the trunk. Finally, Draco pulled out his wand again and pointed to the trunk. "Alohomora!"

**BOOM!**

Snape lifted his head as the sound of a mild but muffled explosion came from the next room. Mentally, he proceeded to tick off the list of things he had in his potions cupboard and which ones of them could possibly be mixed to create an explosion. Nothing came to mind.

He put down his grading quill and stood up, walking towards the adjoining room, wondering if his godson and his cling-on Potter had managed to blow each other up somehow. Lucius would be thrilled.

As he neared the next room, a flood of plush spiders shaped like snowflakes rushed out door, covering his floor with an endless stream of pristine white snowball spiders. Shortly after, Brim merrily bounded out after them, chasing, batting, and snatching up as many as she could, only to realise that many more were still to be had. The wave of spiders were not of the typical make and model of the ones he and Flitwick had crafted for her. No, these were Weasley-designed snowball spiders—the very same sort of plush spiders that adorned just about every Christmas tree in the Great Hall.

He walked over to the next room, wincing as when he stepped on a spider, it made a rather sad and squeaky death-rattle. There were hundreds if not thousands more such spiders streaming out the
door, so he didn't feel too guilty, but a small part of him was punched right in the kidneys upon hearing the sound anyway.

He wasn't sure if he was happy or frustrated when the flattened arachnid suddenly pulled itself up, blew on one of its own legs to re-inflate itself, and scurried off to join the others. Damn if the Weasley twins didn't make remarkably *persistent* little annoyances.

He looked in the next room to find Draco and Potter flat on their backs, practically buried alive in plush spiders. They were thrashing about, laughing hysterically. The spiders were streaming out of an open trunk which was only now starting to taper off into a somewhat smaller stream. Then, as if to add a bit of comfort to the calamity, a stream of helpful spiders delivered Potter his pajamas before scurrying off to join their brethren.

Snape pinched the bridge of his nose.

"Brush your teeth and wash up before bed," Snape snapped, shaking his head as he turned to head back through the doorway.

"Yes, sir," the two boys squeaked out between giggles from under the mass of white plush spiders.

"Good morning, Severus," Minerva greeted, calmly plucking the white plush spider off of her teacup and setting it to the side. "Something you want to confess to this morning, hrm?"

Severus eyed Minerva blearily, sipping his coffee. "I hardly see my quarters being overrun by a multitude of white arachnids as being worth of a morning debriefing, Minerva."

Minerva sipped her tea, arching one brow in thinly-veiled dubious regard. "It seems, Severus, that quite early this morning, my fifth-year prefect and one Ronald Weasley both received packages from each other."

"Goody for them," Severus commented, sounding utterly bored by the information.

"The interesting thing is, each package released a rampaging horde of white plush arachnids that look strikingly similar to the one perched on my teacup this morning," Minerva noted, idly flicking another spider off her teacup.

"I hardly created them, despite what you may think," Severus informed his colleague. "You know perfectly well that I *detest* white. Also, I would have you know that someone seems to have sealed an utterly atrocious amount of said arachnids into Potter's clothes trunk. When Draco had Tinky fetch it last night, it was sealed shut with glue. He and Potter eventually managed to open it, and a flood of biblical proportions then descended upon them."

Minerva's eyebrows rose. "However did you deal with that, Severus?"

Severus sniffed. "I told them to put their heads together and deal with it like a proper Slytherin would."

McGonagall made a face. "Potter is *not* Slytherin."

"Oh, I think he's certainly earned his green and silver stripes, now," Severus said, smirking at Minerva over his coffee cup.

"Severus," Minerva said calmly. "What did you say to them?"
"I simply reminded them about basic tracing spells," Severus said with a tilt of his head. "Say, the last thing the spiders saw before being shoved into a box and glued inside. Purely for educational purposes, you understand."

Minerva sniffed. "Of course, and, what, pray tell, would such spiders have seen? Purely hypothetically, of course."

"Hn," Severus replied. "How about a shrieking red-headed younger Weasley holding down the trunk lid as one Percy Weasley seals the rim shut with Stickey's Super-Sealing Super Glue? Perhaps, said younger Weasley might have been yelling 'Percy, I'll get him a new trunk, just help me seal these bloody things in here!'"

Minerva pointed her wand at the nearby white spider and zapped it with a tracing spell. She pinched the bridge of her nose and sighed. "I swear, there really are times that I wish the Sorting Hat had finally decided to put me in Ravenclaw."

Severus poured her more tea, taking a moment to flick a small white plush spider off the rim. It made a high-pitched noise that sounded suspiciously like "Wheeeeee!" as he did so.

Minerva sighed. "It wouldn't be so bad if I didn't have to owl Molly to inform her that two of her sons are in the hospital wing with a broken ankle, twisted knee, and a shattered elbow from falling off the moving staircase."

"I've seen worse off the moving staircases," Severus quipped.

Minerva sighed. They actually landed okay. The plush spiders managed to break their fall. It was Ronald Weasley freaking out hysterically that caused Percy to be knocked off the edge of the second staircase, and then Ronald got his own leg stuck in the railing. Instead of waiting for help, he kept screaming that the spiders were after him and broke free only to fall and break his ankle on the way down."

Severus seemed to be contemplating which response would be either less harsh or extremely comical. He finally decided on, "I'm sure Poppy is ecstatic."

"Apparently, Weasleys are notoriously allergic to Skele-grow and their bones sometimes completely disappear when the spells for mending are used on them," Minerva noted. "They'll have to ride around in a Muggle wheelchair or remain at home until their bones heal the normal way. Poppy doesn't want to risk vanishing their bones."

Severus looked horrified. "Is someone wheeling them into Hogsmeade to take the train home?"

"Molly is coming to floo them back with her," Minerva said. "Albus is considering crafting them a Portkey just so they can be transported home all at once."

"Happy Christmas, Weasleys all," Severus said, shaking his head. "I suppose the Portkey would be less messy and more efficient."

Minerva nodded.

"Well, today is the feast before the children leave for home for the holidays," Severus sighed. "Are you looking forward to a little peace and tranquility?"

Minerva flicked a spider off her spectacles. It went flying off her with a small squeak and a weeeeeeew!
"I don't think that's even possible for us, Severus. We do live at Hogwarts."

Severus plucked a coffee-covered spider from his coffee-mug. He dried it off by blotting it on the table napkin. Each time he did so, the spider squeaked cutely. The now coffee-coloured arachnid wiggled its legs at him. He set it down on the table, and the now highly-caffeinated spider went zooming off into the next room.

Severus sighed, looking at Minerva. "You are probably right."

"Mrrrowl!" came a familiar feline cry from the other room.

The coffee-coloured spider came zooming back in with a joyous Brim hot on its heels. It zigged and zagged, heading back into the next room. Brim's claws made frantic scratching noises as she went all out to catch it.

CRASH!

Frantic giggles and laughter from two young wizards ensued.

Minerva and Severus clacked their wands together, making the symbols for wand, cloak, and stone.

Severus sighed, moving to go check on the boys.

Minerva celebrated her victory by drinking the last of Severus' coffee and the rest of her tea. It was going to be one of those days.

Brim sat at the front of the Great Hall, her neck covered in Christmas garlands, wreaths, red and green ribbons, and silver bells. She sounded like a reindeer as she walked, which was slightly discombobulating.

The students seemed convinced that she had to be every bit as festive as the occasion. Hermione really didn't care too much as long as the ear and belly rubs continued. As long as Minerva and Severus were nearby, she didn't mind getting them from whoever wished to give them.

"Tch, Brim, come here," Severus called.

Brim perked, bounding towards him with excessive jingling.

Severus rolled his eyes as he relieved her of most of her excess bells and finery. She snuffled him happily, feeling his great affection and concern for her welfare.

He rubbed under her chin, and she closed her eyes, her tongue sneaking out to slide against his face yet again.

"Gah," he said ruffling her fur and pushing her away, but she knew it wasn't because he didn't like her. She looped her tail over her back and lay her head down on his knee.

He handed her a tasty sausage from his plate that looked a little on the rare side, just the way she liked it!

She bit into it, head-bonking into his hand, and then padded off to devour her prize in the corner, lest someone try to steal it from her.

It could happen!
"Severus!" Trelawney fawned over the man, pawing at his robes. "I hear you are staying for the holidays. "What a delightful coincidence, I am too!"

Hermione's ears pinned back to her skull. She looked down at her delicious sausage and then back to where her beloved master was being pawed at by that strange thin woman who smelled of some kind of perfume-and-smoke mixture that made her want to sneeze.

Hermione huffed, wriggling her whiskers in annoyance. She grasped her sausage in her mouth and carried it with her. Then, with the utmost in feline tact, she wedged her head into Trelawney's lap and proceeded to eat her half-raw sausage just as messily and bloodily as possible.

The smell of fermented half-raw meat, spices, and blood made Trelawney's eyes widen, her nostrils flare, and her face to turn a very un-Slytherin sickly shade of green.

"Not over the Christmas table!" Sinistra yelled, hitting Trelawney with a spell that put what looked like a horse feed bag on the end of the Divination professor's face.

"Hospital wing!" Flitwick yelled, hitting her with a levitation charm and crooking a single finger at Trelawney to drag her along with him.

Hermione promptly found herself with an entire plate of heavenly half-raw sausages in front of her. 

Bliss.

She dragged the entire plate over to her corner and proceeded to lord over them like a dragon on its hoard.

A small parliament of owls came down and hooted at her.

Hermione eyed them suspiciously.

The owls looked at her hungrily.

Hermione looked down at her large pile of sausages and mrowled, looking rather conflicted.

Tail twitching, and ears swiveling, Hermione nosed two large sausages off the top, causing them to roll towards the owls. The owls pounced gratefully, tearing into them with enthusiasm and happy hooting.

Hermione munched on her sausages, savouring their juicy, delicious flavour. Well, they really were good sausages. She couldn't really blame the owls for being hopeful. When her stomach was finally full, she realised she still had a pile of sausages and some very hungry-looking owls watching her.

She licked her paws and her jowls, and pushed the plate towards them. The happy owls descended upon the plate with a flurry of wings and beaks. In a matter of minutes, the plate was clean, and a number of content, somewhat rotund-looking owls hooted respectfully, reaching out with their beaks to preen the Nundu's whiskers and ears. Hermione closed her eyes drowsily, barely even noticing that the parliament of owls had comfortably perched along her back.

Professor Quirrell was an odd duck, to say the least, and Harry really wasn't sure what to think of him. After having his first supervised visit with his godfather, it seemed as though the man had some considerable baggage, but Harry had his own, so he didn't really fault him for it so much as he was wary of him. He didn't know Sirius other than from what the man said he knew about his parents, and while he was very hungry to know what his parents were really like, the first impression hadn't
been very good.

Brim's reaction to Sirius had been fine before he had heard the name of his Potions professor, and Harry had found himself doing something he never believed he would ever do: standing by Professor Snape, albeit due to Brim's clear trust in him, choosing to favour him over a man who may or may not have really known his parents. Brim had always been a protector around Hogwarts. Everyone knew it. Everyone also knew she was tightly bound to Professors McGonagall and Snape, and if being bound to them had caused such loyalty and protectiveness on Brim's part, then neither of them could be all bad — even Snape. If anything, Snape had arrived just in time to prevent a murder, and unlike Sirius, who was practically raining hate down on the other man from every direction, Snape remained calm, bringing the young Nundu to check with his voice and his mind.

To Harry, that meant much more. Snape had, regardless of his feelings, controlled them to keep the Nundu from killing a man who completely hated him. It was plainly obvious that the two had a bad history between them, but what was it? Draco seemed to think his godfather was a strict but protective man. He expected you to follow his directions to the letter, but if you did what he demanded, then he would defend you to the last. Harry had to admit that he had hardly been on his best behaviour in Snape's class. Draco had also said that the Black family was notoriously mentally unstable, and to find sanity among any of them was like bobbing for apples. Sometimes you sank your teeth into a great one, and sometimes you found a half-rotted one with a worm inside.

So, the question was: which kind was Sirius Black?

Harry sighed. He supposed he had to at least give the man a chance, and he would. Even so, he wanted Brim to be there. It felt — much safer that way. And after seeing what Snape had done to calm the enraged feline, he was okay with his Potions professor being there too. After a surprisingly great night with Draco in Snape's guest room, even if one did count the explosion of plush arachnids, he was starting to think that maybe some things he had been "taught" about Slytherins and Snape were just as chock full of misconceptions and outright lies as the stories behind his scar. If that were the case, then he owed it to his Potions professor to get to know him better — especially now that Snape seemed less likely to give him detention for just looking at him wrong.

All of the classes were done, and the feasts were on until all the other students left on the train back to their families for the holidays. Harry, though, wasn't so sad anymore. Even now, as word spread that his scar was gone, people were treating him like an entirely new person— a normal person. He wasn't cursed. He wasn't the Boy-Who-Lived-But-Hadn't-a-Clue. He wasn't a freak. He was just a boy trying to learn his place in life, just like everyone else.

Snape was leaving the Great Hall. It was always easy to tell. Those billowing robes were like a flag announcing his comings and goings as clearly as one might wave a red cape in front of a bull. Brimstone jingled along behind him, happily carrying a mouthful of plush arachnids. Harry had to laugh at that. She had her favourites too. There was the original spider that she loved, but she had added a coffee-coloured and scented one to her favourites as well a white one that seemed utterly impervious to dirt, unlike all the others. Fred and George had heard rumours that someone had accidentally loosed a baby Acromantula in Hogwarts, but with the flood of plush spiders, it was really hard to tell. Some of them, Harry knew, were all Fred and George trying to get one over on their baby brother. Some of them were simply toys for the cat familiars around Hogwarts, and some seemed like they got excited and cloned themselves specifically when they heard Ron scream.

As Draco and Harry had found out: plush spiders were warm and comfortable. They made great bedfellows, and they attracted a certain Nundu cub to come and sleep with them. Bonus!

Draco had said the trick only worked when either Severus or Minerva were about. If her two main
people were not around, she would favour no one else with her feline warmth. That gave Harry even more reason to give Snape a chance. Brim obviously loved him to death. If she did, then he really should give the man a chance.

Draco was gesturing at him to come with him just before he followed Snape out of the hall. Harry looked around. No one else seemed to notice Draco's gesture. Harry smiled and politely excused himself, scurrying out to follow.

Harry found Draco following Snape out to the very intimidating and notorious Whomping Willow. Brim was carrying a very large haunch of something in her jaws. Snape and Draco stopped at the boundary that was clearly marked by the drag marks of angry willow branches, but Brim went on.

Harry cried out in alarm as the branches came down to pummel the Nundu cub, but then, just as they reached her, they suddenly stopped.

The cub rubbed her cheek on each branch and pulled the haunch up with her onto one branch, and the willow pulled her up into the high areas. She tucked her haunch away in the tree, climbed over all the limbs as if to check them all over, and then took a ride on one branch that guided her back down to the ground.

The cub landed with a flop and seemed extra excited. There, at her feet, was a miniature whomping willow. Very tiny buds covered the small branches. One day, they would grow large like shillelaghs, but for now, they were tiny, much like the small willow.

She mrowled and rubbed her cheek very gently against the little tree, and the sapling seemed to respond in kind, ever so gently stroking the Nundu's fur as she passed by. Tenderly, Brim placed one of her spiders in the sapling's branches, tucking it away for the tree to guard.

The sapling rustled at her.

Brim gnawed on the tree a bit, and leaves popped out of some of the nodules she chewed on.

The sapling rustled at her again, and Brim mrowled, looping her tail over her back. She rubbed up against the large mother-tree, and clawlessly scratched against the bark, embedding her scent into the tree's side. Brim bounded back towards Severus and Draco, and the Whomping Willow caressed her sides as she left.

She blasted past Severus and Draco and pounced Harry, knocking him back into the snow.

Draco just laughed at him, but Severus shook his head. "Don't let her fool you, Mr Potter," he told the young wizard. "The willow only tolerates her."

"I've never seen the willow like anyone," Harry marveled.

"From what Auror Shacklebolt has said," Severus explained, "the Nundu and the Whomping Willow are natural allies. The Nundu births her cubs in the branches and the willow protects them. The Nundu, however, protects the tree from would-be attackers. One family of trees will bond to one Nundu family for life, thus both the tree and the Nundu survive together."

Harry looked at the willow with amazement. "No one ever talks about the willow, not really. That's the first I've ever heard of it, short of someone saying not to try and climb it."

Severus snorted. "That wouldn't be good for your health, Mr Potter."

Harry grinned sheepishly as the Nundu cub licked off half of his face.
“Careful, if you let her do that, you’ll be deaged, and I’ll have to start calling you Babyface,” Draco said getting the cub's attention.

“Come on, Brim, let's go for a run!” He took off up the hill, and Brim went chasing after him, trying to trip him up with her big paws. Harry tried to chase after, huffing as the pair left him in the dust.

Everyone called her a Nundu, but really I just called her Brim. I didn't think of her a species so much as I thought of her a lady — that is if ladies could turn your emotions into virulent disease. I suppose that it could be possible. Aunt Bella, for example, was a bloody nutcase, but she was also a lady. She was a bloody mental case, but there were times when she could walk the walk of society's elite like nobody's business.

When I thought of Brim though, it was very different. She was a true lady. She was a young lady, but a lady none the same. Even when she brought me one of those wriggling plush spiders and looked at me with that hopeful gleam in her eyes, I would see her as this witch with sparkling eyes and voluminous hair, crazy robes that defied gravity, and this look about her that said everything and yet nothing at the same time — much like my godfather, Severus. It was fitting, really, seeing them together. Severus and his lady.

In my head, I saw them growing older together. It was a strange fancy, perhaps due to my age. Father used to say I had nothing better to do than float around with my head in the clouds, seeing unicorns in the garden and talking to fairies riding astride his white peacocks.

He used to scowl at me as I grew older, telling me I needed to grow up faster and suck it up more. He'd say it in some smoldering, menacing manner, but it all boiled down to, don't ever shame us in public, or very bad things will happen to you.

Then, one day, Brim came into our lives, and then, almost magically, my father became my father again. It was the same father who watched me as I chased the fae around my father's garden. It was the wizard who smiled when I said I saw unicorns munching on mum's prize rosebushes.

Now, I won't say that my father was ever a soft and fuzzy or truly coddling kind of person, nor would I say that even my mother was the pampering type — there were always appearances to be upheld. Yet, with the arrival of Brim, Severus' Lady of the Silent Paws and Relentless Stalker of Arachnids, things seemed to be changing for us, and it was a good kind of change.

Instead of being told to shut up and not touch anything, my father came home to my mother one night, and for the first time in years, he took her into his arms and wept.

My father— wept.

My mum touched my father as though seeing him for the first time. She stroked his arm, and she, too, wept.

I was sent back to Hogwarts that night, but not before something bloody amazing occurred: my parents held me in their arms, crying.

Something truly profound had happened, and I had no idea what it was. I was just a child, but for the first time in years, I felt as though I could be one again. Malfoys, for example, are expected to hold their heads high and lead. This was the Malfoy way of life, or so I'd been told. Malfoys rule, lead, and conquer. Malfoys were always strong. We did not ask for friends; we demanded them.

Severus, my godfather, was always different.
Even when my parents were preoccupied with appearance, Severus would take me on walks through the garden—even when my parents stopped. He would forbid me to climb the rose trellises, and I would do it anyway. He would be waiting for me at the top, congratulate me on my audacity and tenaciousness, then force me to identify every plant I had crushed on my way up with their scientific name. If anything, I learned never to climb anything I didn't know the name of in Latin. I also learned to wear thick trousers lest I fall into something with thorns. What can I say? I was a quick study.

I also learned that saying anything like "my father will hear about this" would end very badly—for me. Severus was one of the few people my parents trusted over me. Severus would always listen to my well-crafted lies until I couldn't remember which ones I had said, and then he would repeat them back to me in the exact order I messed them up. It was he that taught me that lying was a skill to be used for the true enemy but it was a skill to be honed on an ally. Lie to an ally and you lose trust. Lose trust and you lose respect. Lost respect, and, well, it was all over.

Severus never lied to me.

He would tell me there were things he could not tell me, but he would never lie to me. That was the difference between he and my parents. My parents would lie, sometimes for the noblest of reasons, but it was still a lie.

Now, however, due to Our Lady of the Wriggling Arachnid, the lies were going away. Now my questions were either answered or not, but the lies were gone. Why do I blame this on her? I may be eleven, but I can tell when things are getting better. I know because I could always tell when things were getting worse.

Now, it was almost Christmas of my first year at Hogwarts, and I finally felt I could be myself, that is, if I could just figure out what that was.

Some would think I was far too young to be considering that bigger picture, but I was too things. One, I was Slytherin, and two, I was a Malfoy. I was trying to figure out what I was in life at the age of five. By seven I was already being told what I was going to be, like it or not. Now, at the budding age of eleven, I was feeling the weight of freedom, and I had no idea what I was going to do with it.

Brim had my hand in her mouth again, and she making sure I was paying attention. She made a chirping sound that almost sounding like a hiccup, and she smelled of almond scones. Potter caught up to me as we stood on the edge of the Dark Forest. It was scary in there, and I'll be the first to tell you as a child whose scariest situation was being confronted by my father after sneaking out in the garden after curfew, that I was not prepared for roughing it in the slightest.

Severus had, on many occasions, tried to teach me real survival skills, but I had never been interested. I was starting to regret that as I stood at the end of the Dark Forest. We, the students, weren't allowed in the Dark Forest without a professor escorting us or one of the staff. As I looked into the gloom and heard the creak of the trees, I wondered why anyone would want to go into the forest at all, let alone alone.

Brim made excited feline chirping noises, and her tail was getting all floofy with her anticipation. She wanted to go into that intimidating forest, and I didn't want to go in a all! Potter was seemingly feeling much the same as he was not showing any inclination to go forward.

"Admiring the view?" Severus rumbled, causing both myself and Potter to practically slam into each other and hug each other tight. So much for personal space and boundaries. Bloody hell.

Merlin, that man could scare the skin off a snake with his voice alone. Potter obviously wasn't used
to my godfather's way of things, but, hell, I should have been used to it! Nope. I'd blame it on my age, but he was known to do that to my father and mum too. He'd appear like an apparition, say something overwhelmingly snarky, and disappear like a spectre.

Brim mrowled happily, headbutting and carrying on, tugging on his sleeve, and smashing her tail against everyone nearby. If I didn't know better, I'd swear that she was doing it to give Potter and myself time to regather our dignity. The other part of me figured neither of us had any dignity to begin with, at least around my godfather.

At first, I thought that Severus was going to force us into the forest for some task that would lead to a pile of potion ingredients, itchy arms, and a lesson in doing something without the proper equipment. It was winter, so I could only imagine what horrible things he would want us to dig out from under a snow drift.

I was fidgeting nervously when a soft series of whickers came from the forest.

Brim perked and mrowled, looking up to Severus.

"Go greet our friends," Severus said softly, his voice like a whisper on the wind.

Brim bounded into the dark of the forest and a few seconds later, happy laughter and giggles came through. Shadows moved, making me nervous, but then three young centaurs bounded out of the forest, followed by the taller and far more intimidating shape of a full-grown and rather menacing-looking centaur.

Each centaur was wearing extra hide throws over their backs and fur-lined coats for their human torsos thanks to the cold, but they seemed far more comfortable than I was, and I had charmed warming robes on.

A filly was rubbing down Brim briskly with her hands, and the Nundu was cheek-rubbing, headbonking, and otherwise lifting her rear to the back scratches she was getting. The two colts that were with her nickered and invited Brim to come investigate them as well, and Brim was far too polite to deny them.

"Severus," the older centaur said, his voice like rumbling thunder.

"Bane," Severus replied, bowing his head respectfully.

"It is good to see you, friend," Bane said, snorting as he watched the foals chasing Brim around and loving on her. "I have news of the forest troll we have seen in the far woods."

"Oh?" Severus inquired, handing Bane an enlarged basket he had apparently been stashing under his robes somewhere.

"It's missing," Bane said with some concern. "This morning, it seemed to vanish completely. Even its wretched stench has disappeared."

Severus' brows furrowed.

While the adults were busy talking, Potter and I were playing keep away with the centaur foals and Brim. They took great fun in seeing how high she could leap to get her spiders. They also liked to play "Port the Nundu" which was a game of having Brim go completely slack, moving her onto their backs, and then bolting very fast in some random direction and back. Well, it seemed random to me, anyway. Oddly enough, Brim seemed okay with being ported around like a sack of grain, but the ear scratches and belly rubs probably sealed the deal for her.
Port the Nundu did not work quite so well for humans. Brim was just way too big for that, at least for me. Potter looked quite comical trying to lift her up like an oversized housecat. Between us both, we managed to lift up the head end of her, but then she flopped down on top of us, looking quite proud of herself.

The centaur foals were giggling amongst themselves, mostly at us, wondering why we couldn't lift Brim. Perhaps, in their minds, we were all foals, and if they could lift her, why couldn't we? The logic worked if you were a centaur.

Recalling my charms class, I pointed my wand at Brim and hit her with a wingardium leviosa. It took a few tries thanks to putting the stress on the wrong syllable, but eventually Brim was floating off into the distance.

Severus reached out and grasped Brim by the scruff as she was floating by. He didn't even flinch. Nothing fazes my godfather. The world could be exploding, quite literally, and he would be telling me not to panic in that low baritone drone of a voice of his.

Brim made a sad mewling sound, perhaps not entirely happy about floating in mid-air in a manner that wasn't of her own accord. Then again, maybe it was because Severus wasn't letting her float off on to a new adventure. Both were equally likely.

Severus tugged Brim over letting her clamber all over his shoulder and make herself comfortable, and she did so, purring happily. She was getting a lot bigger, but Brim didn't care. She was where she wanted to be, with her person of interest, and everyone that knew anything knew that Brim and Severus were like two peas in a pod.

Somehow, despite the Nundu cub climbing over him and whapping him in the face with her tail, the adults just kept talking like nothing special was going on. How do they do that? It just wasn't right.

"Snivellus!" came an angry voice.

Severus stiffened, and he nodded to Bane. They arm-locked respectfully, and he whinnied to the foals to attend. The sad-looking foals gathered and pet Brim on their way back into the forest. Severus positioned himself in front of Potter and myself, setting Brim back down on the ground to avoid getting claws in his skin from overly-enthusiastic Nundu pouncing.

Brim was looking to Severus for physical and mental cues, and Severus was working very hard to stifle anything that might have been less than calm. I could tell because his index finger was twitching as he ran his hand down his multitude of buttons. That was usually the point at which I decided to shut up and sit down and readjust my focus. Potter seemed to sense the same thing (perhaps there was hope for him after all) and gulped and motioned to me that maybe we should hug the Dark Forest border.

Seeing as the centaurs just came out from there, it seemed far safer than nearer to Uncle Severus and Black. The centaurs hadn't done anything even remotely threatening, so my confidence that the forest was the better option over what was in front of us was pretty high.

Severus gestured to Brim with his hands, using some of the new signals he had learned from Kingsley from the Auror training. It was becoming really useful for physical commands, and while I don't think Severus needed to use them, he was trying to use them more often to make people think she was well-trained. It did seem to make people calmer, so it was a very Slytherin tactic. People who think that an animal is simply very well-trained, probably won't start wondering if that animal can respond to mental cues. Oh, sorry? Did we forget to mention that part?
Brim bounded over to us, and she used her head to nudge us forward into the Dark Forest.

Potter and I exchanged glances, but we put our hands around her collar, allowing her to lead us deeper into the forest. I had no doubt that Brim would never lead us into trouble, and even if trouble came to us, well, she wasn't exactly a hamster.

Brim lead us steadily inward, and I found that I wasn't as afraid as before. Brim was confident and relaxed, and that meant Severus was emotionally stable enough that she felt relaxed too. She led us gradually into a clearing which seemed to be full of a whole lot of nothing, at least until "nothing" tried to munch on my robes!

Brim led us further in until we came to another clearing, but this time, we were met by Bane and the centaur foals. Brim made a happy greeting mrowl and shook off Potter and myself to go and head-bump, leg-rub, and stand on her hind legs to give Bane a friendly lick across the face as he leaned down to ruffle her fur in counter-greeting.

Bane eyed us, seemingly noting that we were not with Severus and then he looked behind us.

"Hogwarts foals, you are without your sire or dam," Bane said. "Do you seek protection amongst us?"

Bane was a very intimidating centaur. He had a scar down one side of his face that sent a jagged line of white fur down his muzzle and eye. He was tall in way that made Severus seem average, and he had this gaze that seemed to weigh your merit for the afterlife. I didn't want to mess with him, offend him, or even look at him funny.

I bowed my head respectfully, nudging Potter to do the same. When in Rome…

"Brim brought us here at Severus' behest," I answered, trying to sound formal and less like a squeaky rodent.

Bane's eyes narrowed as he looked behind us. "Come. Put your hand on my back and follow with us. Do not tarry."

Brim followed with us, seemingly looking to Bane for cues as to what to react to now that Severus was not around. Bane seemed to realised this instinctively, for he guided her with his own non-verbal cues. We arrived in a small clearing that had quite a few lean-to type shelters set up. The foals fanned out and grabbed kettles and dragged them to the fire. They tended the smoking fish and meats on the surrounding spikes, and then brought us a waterskin, gesturing for us to drink.

Potter and I both seemed to think it was the best, coldest, and most pure water we had ever tasted. We both nodded our thanks, and the filly that brought it to us nickered happily. She trotted off to do her own thing. One of the other foals gestured for us to sit on the fur-lined straw they had gathered under one of the lean-tos, and both I and Potter were more than happy to do so. The fire nearby was very warm, and the snow didn't seem so bad under the lean-to.

Brim, who had just finished her rounds of sniffing everyone and everything, flopped down behind us, and her furry warmth immediately made us both drowsy. Bane dropped a hide down over us, and it was soft as silk. Whatever they did to it, it was as soft and smooth as butter and very warm. Forgetting that Severus was out there confronting my pig-headed idiot of a cousin, I was feeling my eyes grow heavy.

"Hey, Malfoy," Potter whispered.

"Eh?" I answered sleepily, using my smooth command of the Queen's English to impress.
"Why does Sirius hate your godfather so much?"

"No idea, Sc—" I stopped. Scarhead wasn't exactly accurate anymore. Smoothhead would make it sound like he was bald. Mophead wasn't very— well, I wouldn't have wanted someone calling me that. "Harry."

"What?"

"No, I was just— I have no idea, Harry." Smooth Draco. Your command of allocution is brilliant.

"It just doesn't make any sense is all," Harry replied. He yawned the last of his sentence. A beat. "Thanks, M— Draco."

"For what?" I slurred.

"Not calling me Scarhead."

"Oh. Er… no problem."

Brim started to purr. We were both out cold in a matter of seconds.

Harry opened his eyes and realised he had been drooling a little on Draco's arm. Embarrassed, he stirred under the warm, insulating hide, but he really didn't have any inclination to move further. Draco was still out like a light, and Harry wasn't quite sure what had woken him up.

"Let me tend your shoulder, my friend," Bane's voice rumbled.

Snape grunted a little as the centaur touched his wounded shoulder. He cleaned it with some soft fiber, water, and foaming root. Then, he gently applied an herbal paste, wrapping that snugly with a strip of hide to keep it in place.

"You were very wise to have Brim bring the foals here, friend," Bane said. "I knew something unpleasant was afoot when you sent our feline sister to us unaccompanied by yourself."

Severus winced and rubbed his arm. "I am glad that it worked. I would not have wanted her around such poisonous hate. She almost killed him earlier due to his blind hatred, he just doesn't realise it."

"How do you not realise that a Nundu is a Nundu?" Bane asked, snorting in disbelief. "Even the youngest of our foals know what a Nundu is. They know what a Nundu can do as well."

Severus shook his head. "I do not know, Bane. I thought the memories would have helped him, but I think, strangely, cursing me blindly without me fighting back actually did help him, as odd as that sounds."

"You let this unstable one curse you?"

"I blocked a few and may have pretended that they hurt," Severus confessed.

Bane whickered in amusement. "You missed a few."

"Had to make it look real," Severus replied with a sniff.

"So, you think this helped?"

Severus nodded slowly. "I believe so. I gave him one of the claws. Well, I affixed one to his back
while he was busy pummeling me. Anyway, there is a chance he may remember our true past, just as I did. If he remembers it, he may realise that someone made it so he had no reason to not flip his gourd against Wormtail or myself. I didn't remember any of it until Brim came to us."

"The claws work for us too, Severus," Bane said. "Magorian wears one, and so does Firenze and myself. We are the only three he says have had more intensive relations with humans. The rest of the herd has remained neutral and hidden. The foals collect as many claw sheaths as Brim wishes to donate. We can make them into pendants and spread them out as we collect them. Eventually all of us will have them, so all of our memories will be protected.

Severus nodded. "Many of them will be going out as Christmas gifts for the professors, at least. Thankfully, our feline claw donor sheds them quite often, or maybe she simply realises that we need them. I would not put such a thing past her."

Bane looked up at the forest canopy. "As much as I hate to disturb the sleeping foals, we must move camp. "Will you be taking your foals back to the school? Is it not one of your human holidays?"

Severus nodded. "Tomorrow many leave on the trains home to spend time with their families. Tonight is the Christmas feast, where most will stuff themselves silly and inundate the halls with Wizard Crackers and tom-foolery."

Bane chuckled. "Well, try not to have too much fun, my friend."

Severus stood as Bane did also. "Thank you for watching over them."

Bane shook his mane. "Our heart-sister protects and guards us. I shall do the same, gladly, for our friends and allies."

Severus looked down at the pile of wizard and one Nundu. He clicked his tongue, and Brim instantly burst out of the pile, ready to go. Harry sat up, completely startled, and Draco just looked like he wanted to go back to sleep.

"Come," Severus stated simply. "It is time for us to return to Hogwarts."

Padfoot paced around Hogwarts, following the path up and down from the Black Lake. Something was going weird in his head. It spun around in growing circles, making it hard to think. At one point, obsessing over getting revenge on Wormtail had been what got him into trouble. Now, like some indigent git with no brain at all, he was ready to beat the shit out of Sn— Severus just because he had caught Wormtail instead of getting to do it himself.

_Catching Wormtail, idiot, was a good thing!_

_So why did you get your pants in a bunch over something that led to your being freed? Weren't you complaining to Albus that no one had tried to set you free? Someone did set you free, and you repay them how? By beating the shit out of them as they don't resist?_

_But Snivellus deserves it!_

_No! No. Sirius shook his head violently. Tell me why. Why does he deserve it?_

_Well, he's— Snivellus!_

_That, Sirius, is a completely bollocks reason! Try again, mate!_
The regular reason isn't good enough?

Maybe the reason was total rubbish from the start.

Padfoot slammed his head against the side of the stone wall, whining. Why couldn't he seem to think straight?

His nostrils flared. He could smell the strange scent of the giant feline. It was a combination of something that was both cat and something un-cat. It mixed up with Snape's and McGonagall's scents. Wherever she went she had both of them on her.

Nundu.

She was a real, honest-to-goodness Nundu.

Yet Snivellus hadn't even tried to use her against him, despite everything. He could have. He could have easily killed him at any time—not by lifting his wand but by letting Sirius' own hate do the dirty work for him.

Even after seeing the memories of what had happened to Peter, he had still rushed up like a bloody idiot and tried to take a piece out of Snape. It was like he hadn't learned anything at all.

I tried to murder you, Severus. I said it was a prank, but we all knew it wasn't. I tried to blame my family's problems on anyone who was Slytherin, but most of all you. You because you had the friendship of the pretty girl. You because you came from nothing. I'm sorry. I am sorry, Severus. James was right. It took your beating the shit out of me before I could find the bollocks to admit it.

Sirius blinked, startled. The memory had returned so terribly clear. He saw himself sitting, his ear and nose bleeding and his shirt ripped and torn. Snape was telling him to not be such a baby as he poured liniment on his wounds and magically healed his cuts. Most of his injuries had been due to his own hands. His own blind hate and stupidity. He had missed hitting Severus entirely, and he had wrathfully slammed himself into trees and rocks like a rampaging elephant in a china shop. Who knew the seemingly gangly and skinny Slytherin had such blindingly quick evasive moves? Truly, he had been hiding that particular skill—or else James himself had taught him.

Sirius shook his head.

No, James had indeed taught him. Severus had known his every last move and dodged them expertly. He had avoided every single move.

Merlin, that alone should have told him that James had truly patched things up with the gi—with Severus.

Sev-er-us. His name—his real name—was Severus. Not that wasn't so hard, was it?

He was a grown man, for crying out loud, he should start to act like one instead of a pretentious eleven-year-old who got arse-hurt over preferring Slytherin over Gryffindor.

Why was he remembering this now? And how the hell had he forgotten it all in the first place?

Severus reached over and fixed his tie as they waited on the wedding dais for Lily to walk down the aisle. "Honestly, Black. Don't you know how to dress yourself properly?"

"At least I dress in more than black, Snape."
"You have first names, idiots. This is a wedding. Both of you could at least try and use the names we were given," James reached over and slapped both of them upside the head. "Try not to bring the wrath of Lily down on all of us."

Severus and Sirius stared upward, for once thinking the same exact humiliated thoughts.

"Severus," Black hissed.

"Sirius," Severus mumbled.

"That's better," James muttered.

The scene shifted to a small living room. Open presents were everywhere.

Lily lifted out a mobile that would usually hang above a crib. "Severus, it's beautiful!" She set it down and glomped the discomfited wizard. "Harry is going to love it!"

"Hey!" Sirius pouted. "My gift was good too. Why didn't I rate a hug?"

James shook his head. "Broom polish, motorcycle parts catalogs, and sports magazines for a baby is not an appropriate gift, Sirius."

Sirius crossed his arms. "I would have liked them at his age."

"You ate paint as a child," Remus reminded him.

Sirius huffed. "So not fair."

James pulled out another box and opened it. "Aw, Remus." He pulled out a large, extra fluffy, plush wolf toy. He squeezed it and it howled. "Moony, he'll love it."

Remus smiled, some of the premature age caused by his lycanthropy seeming to fall away and make him appear younger again.

"Lupin," Severus said, handing him something.

"W-what's this?"

"It's a present for Harry, but it goes to you."

Remus blinked, looking down. He stared down at blood-red ruby marked with runes. It was set in goblin silver on a chain shimmering with magic. The inside of the ruby shimmered, a light, golden fluid seeming to flow within.

"Severus, what is this?"

"Freedom."

Lupin just stared at him.

"He's been holed up in my parents' potion laboratory for the last month, Moony," James said, slapping Severus on the back. "All of us pitched in to get the ingredients. Sirius nicked the ruby from his mother's vault. Don't judge. The ruby was flawless."

Lupin stared a little harder.
Lily took Lupin's shaking hands in hers. "We researched the runes extensively. That and the potion Severus created inside of it. Once you put it on, you'll always keep your mind, Remus. Even when you change. You'll be safe, even around Harry."

Lupin's face wrinkled as tears rolled down his eyes. His mouth worked, but no sound came out. James and Sirius pulled him into a hug. Lily hugged him too. Severus tried to avert his eyes, but Lily pulled him in too.

"Put it on, Moonie," James said. "Join Sirius and Severus as one of Harry's godfathers."

Remus was crying now, his entire body shaking with emotion.

"Now you've done it," Sirius muttered. "You went and broke Moony's waterworks."

"They seem perfectly functional to me," Severus quipped.

Remus held the ruby pendant with awe and reverence then clasped it in his hand so tightly that his knuckles went white. He put it on. There was a flash of magic as the pendant grew brighter and brighter until it emitted a brilliant golden light, and then suddenly it was gone. In its place was a perfect circle tattooed on his chest: inside of the circle was a man and a wolf dancing in perfect harmony, the sun blazing in glory beside the wolf and the full moon beside the man.

Remus was sobbing with joy, his golden eyes filled with his wolf. He clung to his friends, and he grasped Severus' hands. "Thank you."

Severus' gaze softened slightly. Then, a spark of mischief rose as his lips quirked upward. "Don't think it's entirely selfless, Lupin. I just don't want you to try and murder me again."

Remus burst out laughing and embraced Severus in hug. Suddenly, it was a group affair. Lily pulled them all in, Harry too. Sirius busted out first, claiming he couldn't breathe, but Remus was laughing hysterically. James had a grin so wide that it resembled a Cheshire cat's.

James took everyone's hands and put them together. "We're going to win this war, my friends. All of us. Together, we will win this war. We must remember that. No more hiding. No more sitting in the dark waiting for the attack that might come. No more distrusting each other." He paused. "Even no more relying on Wormtail to even show up when we invite him to my son's party."

A few snorts echoed within the room.

"There's something wrong with that man, James," Lily said. "Something is not right. I don't trust him. He comes in smelling of rot."

"It's just the trash he digs through," James said, rubbing his nose.

"No, it's not just that," Lily said, brows furrowing. "I don't want him around our son, James."

James sighed and nodded in assent. "I'll look into it. He has been acting funny lately."


"We'll look into it," James said again, nodding to Sirius and Remus. Then, he turned his eyes to Snape, giving him a significant look.

Severus inclined his head silently but said nothing.
Sirius put his head under his paws. What was going on? Why was he remembering now? How had he forgotten? Something horrible had happened. Something had driven them back to hating Severus again—and trusting that bloody traitor, Wormtail. Somehow Severus ended up getting Marked. Remus went on the run. HE had argued with Remus about him being unsafe to be around. After all they had been through, worked for, and done to make sure Remus would never have to worry about his transformations again, everything had gone pear-shaped.

Why would he have done that if he knew he had the pendant embedded into his magical core? What—how—bloody hell.

How would they have all relapsed back into hating each other?

He knew something had happened.

He, Severus, and Remus. They were supposed to be there for Harry if anything went wrong, but something had. Something had gone horribly, horribly wrong.

Wormtail. They had trusted Wormtail.

Sirius himself had told James—Merlin, no!—HE had told James and Lily to make Wormtail the Secret Keeper. It was on HIM!

No, no, no!

He had been adamant that they not trust Snape. HE had told them that Snape's warning was a lie. He had let his blind hatred of the Slytherin cloud his judgement… damn it all. Damn it!

"They want me to make my decision by next full moon," Severus said, closing his eyes. "I can either join them and hope I can keep my mind safe, or go on the run like an animal."

"No, Severus," Sirius said firmly. "We've come way too far to let any of us down now. We must stay together. We must see this through. Harry's life may depend on it."

"I am thinking of Harry," Severus replied grimly. "You're going to need someone on the inside other than Regulus. Regulus is watched far too closely. Too many Purebloods look to him as an example."

Sirius shook his head. "My brother never should have done that. Never! He did it to save me, but now—now he can't even look at me. It's tearing me apart, Severus. My baby brother is out there dancing with Death Eaters and all I can do is cower in the dark hoping that they don't come for James, Lily, and Harry."

Severus grasped his shoulder. "Pull it together, Black," he said grimly. "They need you to protect them. Do not let your thoughts stray to anything other than this. If I must take a bullet for the cause, then I will take that Mark. I will protect you much as I can from the inside, but you, James, Sirius—Lily, and Remus. All of you must never lose faith that that is exactly what I am doing."

"I don't like it, Severus," Sirius said. "We haven't seen Wormtail in weeks. Last he said, he was going to check out some kind of possible prophecy—a seer who was interviewing with Albus for a position at Hogwarts. I told him there hasn't been a real Seer found in years. He was downright loony, Severus."

Severus narrowed his eyes. "I will check it out. Stay here with Potter. Do. Not. Stray. I will send word as I can." Severus looked at the mobile over the crib and then the sleeping infant within.
"Albus will want you to choose a Secret Keeper. Tell him that you want him to be the Secret Keeper. Albus is the only one beyond reproach right now. Even if you can't quite trust him completely, he has every reason to keep you safe. Potter safe… he and the rest of his glorious Order. If he refuses, then either you or Remus must take the cup, but whatever you do, do not let Pettigrew know."

Sirius nodded.

Severus turned to leave, and Sirius put his hand on his shoulder.

Severus turned back, eyes narrowing at his former enemy.

"Be careful, Severus," he said softly. "I don't want to see you turn up dead."

Something flickered across Snape's face and he nodded. "You be careful as well, Black," he said, sweeping from the room, his dark robes fluttering behind in his wake.

A shadow cast itself upon him, and Padfoot looked up to see the largest bloody cat he'd ever seen staring down at him. The Nundu cub yawned toothily, her whiskers moving as she sniffed him curiously. Then, as if to make her seem like a kitten next to an elephant, a darker and much larger cat with long ivory fangs stood beside her. The cub pounced and growled, trying to pull the bigger cat down, but the darker beast just yawned and calmly tolerated her silliness. The cub seemed to give up after a while, seemingly sad that things were not working out in her favour.

Harry and Draco stood with their hands resting on the two felines. Both of them looked very secure in trusting the cats over him, not that Sirius really blamed either of them given his shameful behaviour over the last few days.

Padfoot whined, lowering his head and tucking his tail submissively between his legs.

The larger feline nudged the smaller cat onward, and they walked together, taking the two young boys with them. Both Harry and Draco held onto their escorts' respective tails, pausing only to look back on Padfoot with a kind of confused curiosity.

The Nundu cub jumped and played and frolicked around the dark smilodon, causing the boys to laugh and chase her around. All of them kept close to the larger cat, who was, in turn, watching them all closely.

Severus.

The smilodon was Severus.

Somehow, he had forgotten that too.

Severus could have, at any time, torn him to shreds, but he didn't. He didn't do that, and he didn't let his Nundu reflect his unreasoning hatred back onto himself in spades.

Sirius was truly a bloody imbecile. He knew perfectly well what a Nundu was. Every Black knew what a Nundu was— what they could DO. What was wrong with him? Why did his memory have more holes than a block of Swiss cheese? Why would he be as frankly suicidal as to try and piss a Nundu off? The unnervingly graphic pensieve memories of what the Nundu cub had done to (a more than deserving) Wormtail still made him rather queasy.

Sirius shuddered for a moment, then closed his eyes. He really needed to talk to Severus— this time with a much clearer head. Hopefully Severus was, well, like the one from his newly-reacquired
memories and not the one who was still holding a schoolboy grudge. Despite his not tearing him to pieces, there was that slim chance. He also had to make up for his disgusting outburst in front of Harry. The boy probably thought he was completely mental. And understandably so. Maybe he wouldn't have been so far off the mark.

It was then, in the middle of his self-loathing pity party that he smelled something horribly rank.

Hell, it smelled like Wormtail went dumpster diving at the butcher shop again. It smelled like rank and decomposing flesh combined. Ugh.

Oddly, there was nothing that seemed to point towards a giant heap of mouldering trash. Hagrid had apparently cleaned up his act, as far as he could tell, though the smiling house-elf on duty was probably the cause of that minor miracle.

The memory of the shocking horde of rodents, birds, insects, and other uninvited houseguests was enough to make Sirius invest in a thorough monthly flea dip purely out of principle. He may have been in Azkaban for ten years, but that didn't mean he didn't feel the need for a regular shower. He shuddered. Maybe he could put large troughs of water in front of his hut for Hagrid to trip over and accidentally get cleaner.

Sirius twitched and stood up. He didn't want to, but he had to investigate the stench. He followed it, trying desperately not to hurl, and found a part of the outside gate that had been smashed in.

Smashed?

You'd have to be bigger than bloody Hagrid himself to smash the large stone gates of Hogwarts. You'd also have to find a way to get past the impressive wards that protected them. What the?

Sirius sniffed at a piece of purple fabric that had been caught on the rock and wrinkled his nose. Well, that was where the rot was coming from. The odor was thick on the fabric. He shifted into his human form and cast a stasis spell on it and tucked it into an old tobacco tin in his robes. He tucked that away and shifted back into his dog form. The rest of the scents were rank, but, oddly, not rotting.

Troll.

Damn, he was rusty.

He ran up the path and across the green, following his nose. It was getting stronger and fresher as well as more disgusting. He followed it, wondering why a troll was even breaking into Hogwarts. Hogwarts was not really a place for forest trolls. Sirius wasn't exactly a Care of Magical Creatures expert, but he did pass his N.E.W.T., so at least he had functional knowledge— when he chose to use it.

Think about that later.

He followed it into the school itself, finding a smashed side grate that had been blocked for as many years as he had gone to Hogwarts, perhaps even long before. All of the Marauders had tried to find places to go in and out of Hogwarts, but this one was notoriously busted— until now.

Reason came before impulse for once, and Sirius stood as a human, sending his Patronus zinging out to the one person he knew wouldn't risk lives over a possible lie: Severus Snape.

Troll loose in Hogwarts. Entered through previously blocked west-side ventilation grate. Found purple cloth at broken gate. Smells of rotting flesh. The children are in grave danger.
Sirius paused and added to it.

*I remember*. Talk later.

He sent the Patronus zinging out towards the Great Hall, praying it wasn't too late to prevent anyone from getting hurt. Or worse.

"Ga— dammit Crook! That sausage was not yours!" Ron bellowed loudly, flinging the smug half-Kneazle onto the floor from the table. Crooks landed with an oof, but he held tightly to his nicked sausage with a feline glare.

"Just give him some of them, idiot," Fred scoffed. "One small half-Kneazle is not going to deprive you of the opportunity to devour more than your fair share of bangers and mash."

"Really, Ronald," George said, pointing his spoon at him. "You should try to make friends with him. He's a wicked mouser, and he easily can get you out of a pinch with Filch."

"How would you know that?" Ron accused, turning bright red.

"He works for food, you twit," George informed him.

"He doesn't need much," Fred replied. "He's a half-Kneazle, not a Nundu. Though, I am tempted to invite Brim over to finish off your bangers and mash."

"Don't you dare!" Ron squeaked, shoveling food in his mouth even faster.

"Hey, Wheels," Cormac said from a bit further down the table. "We rolling you to the station with us tomorrow morning?"

Ron glared at him, not appreciating the snide new nickname. "No. Don't need your help, Cormac."

George rolled his eyes. "What he means is, mum and dad are coming to get him and floo him home because he's currently a gimp, just like Perce over there."

Ron punched George in the side.

George shuffled out of range with a snicker. "Hey, I'm not the one who flung themselves off the moving staircase, baby bro," he sighed, picking up a plush spider to blot away his spilled pumpkin juice. The spider squeaked in protest each time he tapped it against the table. He patted the spider amicably on the head and sent it scurrying off down the table. Surreptitiously, Fred snatched up the pumpkin juice-coloured spider and flung it at Ron while his head was down near his plate, speedily devouring an enormous pile of mashed potatoes. The spider let a tiny "Wheeeeee!" and then clung firmly to Ron's hair.

"Best things we ever made, bro," Fred said, elbowing George with a wide grin.

Crooks was starting to look very interested in Ron's head. The small pumpkin-coloured spider wiggled its legs enticingly.

"Doom! DOOOOM and DEATH upon you all!" Trelawney cried as she entered the Great Hall.

Children looked up, frozen in the midst of pulling their wizarding Christmas crackers and then they went right back to ignoring her typical overdone dramatics.
"Death will come with the putrid stench of rot and bile! Doom! Death!"

"And you say you like Divination, Martha?" someone muttered.

"I like Divination, Peter," a voice snapped, "not that ridiculous fake, Trelawney."

A loud bang came from the High Table, and Dumbledore and Flitwick were covered in soot from head to toe from an exploding wizard cracker. Each professor was covered in sparkling bits of jelly in various festive colours.

McGonagall had Severus holding one end of a cracker and she tugged on the other with a grin on her face.

**Bang!**

A rain of tiny dry leaves were scattered over the table.

Suddenly, Brim was practically climbing on the table, batting at it, rolling, and generally making a quite a fuss. Even Minerva seemed oddly entranced, clearly fighting the urge to rub her own face all over it too.

"Mrrowlllll!" she exclaimed. "Mrrrrowwwwllllll!"

George and Fred laughed together, "Catnip!"

Snape seemed to tolerate this for a few minutes before he snapped his fingers and pointed to the cat-perch nearby. Brim sadly returned to it.

"That's not nice," Fred commented.

George shook his head. "Naw, look!"

Snape gathered up all of the loose catnip, grabbed one of the roaming plush spiders, and stuffed it with the leaves, sewing the spider back up with his wand. He plunked his creation by her, and Brim snatched it up happily, rubbing her head against it over and over and tossing it in the air and catching it. Each time she caught it, the spider would squeak in protest at the vigorous cat-handling.

Finally, she snuggled up with it, and the spider hugged her paws with all of its eight legs.

"Maybe he's not such a bloody git after all," Fred commented.

"He's really not," Harry told him, finishing off own his dinner of roast beef, Yorkshire pudding and glazed carrots. "He's actually very careful with her. Brim really adores Professor Snape."

"You serious, Harry?" asked a clearly gobsmacked Seamus.

Harry nodded. "She looks to him for almost all of her clues about how to behave. Him and Professor McGonagall. The reason she's so easygoing is because of their influence."

"B— but he's Snape," Neville protested.

Harry shook his head. "I don't think he's anywhere near as bad as a lot of people make out," Harry stated, sipping his drink. "People assume, then they act on that assumption, never giving people the chance to prove themselves. I know the feeling."

"H— He's a total bastard," Neville whispered uneasily. "He doesn't let you get away with anything."
Harry's eyes darkened, but then something seemed to fit together in his mind. His recent experiences with Professor Snape had not been the same as what he did during class. Maybe there was a reason for it.

Snape hadn't snapped at him the entire time they were out walking the green, nor while with the centaurs. In fact, he had seemed quite calm, if a bit more focused than the average person. In fact, ever since the arrival of Brim, Snape hadn't seemed as hard on him— not that he didn't snap at him for doing admittedly stupid things in class— but he no longer seemed to judge him preemptively for being an ugly stain befouling the pristine sanctity of his classroom.

His adventures with Brim, however, had been truly calming and peaceful, and he connected his lack of active stupidity around Snape with being able to spend more time with the gregarious large feline. There was certainly no harm in being more attentive, after all. He was also quickly becoming fast friends with Draco— something he was still nervous about letting people know, at least among the other members of Gryffindor house.

Draco obviously trusted Snape with his life. Surely that meant something significant about the older wizard. Brim trusted him implicitly. McGonagall and Snape seemed to be both close and trusting of each other, unlike their houses— yet even that hostility was starting to wane more than a bit, thanks to the very social Brim.

Being hateful around a large magical cat that returned your hate to you in spades, accompanied by a deadly wave of disease was not a good thing for anyone. Really, what were you going to say in your defense? "No, I wasn't being hateful, honest!" or "That giant magical cat just misunderstood me!"? Um, no.

Harry looked up to the Head Table, and Snape lifted his head to look back at him. They held gazes for a long moment, and very slightly, Snape inclined his head. It was barely even noticeable, had he not been looking directly at his professor.

Trelawney was still wailing her way up to the Head Table, and Ron was trying to detach a very excited feline from his head. Crooks was enthusiastically trying to get at the spider in his hair, and Ron was frantically trying to get the cat out of his hair. Everyone else was waiting for Ron to realise that Crooks was just chasing a spider.

"Uh, Ron?" Harry tried.

Ron was randomly flailing about, looking like he was trying to punch his cat or throttle it, whichever way would get it off of him faster. Good thing it wasn't a Nundu. Harry shuddered. That wouldn't end well.

A bright light in the form of a dog went running past toward the Head Table, and it stopped right in front of Professor Snape and Professor McGonagall. Trelawney flung a bowl of jelly squares everywhere, screaming that the Grim had arrived. Death was eminent.

"It's a Patronus," the older students whispered.

"A full-bodied Patronus," another whispered.

A flash of purple moved at high speed from the entryway. "Troll! Troll loose in Hogwarts!"

Ron, who was still desperately trying to rid himself of Crookshanks, rolled backwards to try and lower his head enough to pry the damned cat off. Ron finally pried the orange fuzzball off his head and flung him to the floor, or, at least in the general direction that he thought the floor was.
Unfortunately, poor Crooks landed headfirst in a huge serving bowl filled with mashed potatoes and was not happy about that at all. The spider he was chasing then leapt onto Quirrell's turban to hopefully find a place to hide.

An unhappy Crookshanks was not in any mood to lose anymore, and leapt onto Ron's head again to use his thick skull as a springboard to pounce on Quirrell's turban and get at that bloody spider! Crooks pawed, clawed, and clung to a howling Quirrell's head, and the man spun about in circles, desperately trying to get ahold of the cat to yank him off.

Finally, Crooks sank his teeth into the spider and tried to leap off of the DADA professor, but his claws were caught and tangled up in the purple fabric. He dangled, hissing, spitting, and clawing in anger. Sharp claws scraped a bloody swath across a dizzy Quirrell's face as Crooks, the spider, and an impressive mound of dark purple cloth all fell to the ground.

Screams filled the back of the Great Hall. First years pointed and cried out in sheer terror.

"What the **HELL** is that **thing** on his head!?!"

"He has two faces, mate!"

"Two faces!"

"Merlin, I think I'm gonna be sick!"

"Bloody hell, what **is** that awful smell?"

"Students, all students come towards the Head Table, right now!" Dumbledore's voice boomed out. Professors were running forward, wands out, aimed straight at their strangely afflicted surrounded the DADA professor completely, standing roughly in a wheel formation. Children and teenagers were screaming and fleeing to hide behind the Head Table where most of the elder half of their professors had gathered to help keep the students under control.

"You think this means anything?" Quirrell cried out gleefully as though he was actually relieved to be exposed. "My Lord will **crush** you all!"

"Be quiet, Quirrell!" a sibilant voice hissed menacingly.

But Quirrell seemed to be absolutely incensed and determined to speak freely, almost as if unwrapping his head had released some binding geas on his ability to censor himself.

"My Lord shall rise in his glory. All of you shall serve him or die!" Quirrell said, spinning around like a top. "But first, the boy—"

Quirrell stiffened, jerking. He turned around, walking in a manner that seemed unnervingly like a marionette being controlled by strings.

"You **lied**, Quirrell," the voice from the second face hissed. "The boy is not here! Where **is** he?"

"No...no, my Lord, he must be here. He's in my classes."

"That is not the right boy, you fool! I would **sense** the right boy!"

"M— my Lord."

"Must I do **everything** myself? Give me your body, Quirrell!"
"N—" Quirrell's body jerked spasmodically, his eyes rolling back in his head. He dropped to his knees, screaming and clutching at his face as though it was being slowly and painfully stripped away from his skull.

Suddenly, he stood up straight, and it seemed like the face on the back of his head was being sucked inward only to appear on the other side, taking over Quirrell's face. Flesh and bone seemed to spontaneously reshape itself until the face staring out at the horrified occupants of the Great Hall was one that most had only seen in their very worst nightmares.

He hissed at the surrounding professors and jumped up, taking off in flight.

Dumbledore, however, stood out from the students, summoning a wall of flames and ice. He gestured with his non-wand arm, and powerful wards shimmered into place.

The man who was and yet was not Quirinius Quirrell materialised again. "No! No! I will not be defeated here! I will not! I am Lord Voldemort! I will not die! I will NEVER die!"

Voldemort summoned a huge demon made of living fire that threatened to devour the entire room. It rose up in a massive wave like a whale breaching from the ocean if only the whale was made up of searing flames.

Dumbledore rose slowly, quenching the flames with an impressive swirling mixture of water and magic. The other professors drew up a protective wall of wards, sheltering the terrified students behind them. Minerva and Severus sent Brim out in front, and she stood just outside the barrier, helping channel the magic of her masters through the strong familiar bond.

Brim nipped a few students to get them back behind the barrier, tolerating their death grip on her neck before the professors pulled them off. The Nundu stayed at the front of the room, and the professors linked arms and wands, channeling their magic into Severus and Minerva, and they in turn used Brim to keep the shield up. Magic flowed and waned around her, but it did not burn. Instead, it licked around her like flames around a cauldron, and it bolstered her protective influence. The wards protecting the students flashed as they were reinforced, layer by layer, again and again. Meanwhile, the pendant around the Nundu's neck glowed brightly in green, red, yellow, and blue. Brim's eyes were literally glowing with magic.

What do you do, my child, when the leys are around you?

Let them flow through you, like air through a screen.

And what do you do when someone tries to wrestle them away, child?

Let them, for the leys will always snap back, and when they do, they will remember.

And when the leys call out, demanding the name of the one who guides them?

I am Brimstone of Hogwarts. Hermione. Bonnie Skye. Apprentice and daughter. I was born to the leys unto Hogwarts, and unto them, I shall always return.

Sing to them, child. Sing to them your Names.

Brim roared, a blast of magic blowing outward from her body. She stood strong and steadfast in front, and the leys arched into, jolting through her body like lightning, but Brim did not falter. Instead, her body glowed, serving as the conduit to a will not her own, acting as a channel and an anchor.
Meanwhile, the battle between Dumbledore and Voldemort came together in blast of magic. Green and red beams met each other as wand met with wand. The walls shook around them as magic hit wall, barrier, and shield.

There was a grinding rumble behind the students as a door formed. The ragged form of Sirius Black, flanked by Aurors, poured into the hall. They gestured for the students to exit with them, pointing to the snow-covered banks of the outside. Hagrid's hut blazed in the distance, seeming entirely too cheery for the situation. The students quickly fled through, caught between wanting to watch and wanted to be anywhere but there. Survival, however, was the main goal of the Aurors and the professors. They herded them out, with a contingent of Aurors helping all the students to the safety of the borders where they could then Apparate them to a safer place.

Some of the professors left with them to help watch over the students. Some remained with Severus and Minerva, who were maintaining the bond with their familiar. One by one, Aurors linked up, adding their collective energy to the mix, allowing Severus and Minerva to adjust the shields and wards as the fierce battle raged on.

The battle was pretty much at a stalemate. Fire and water met with hot and cold, light and darkness battled as life and death rose and fell. Finally, it seemed that Dumbledore had enough. Now that the students were gone, he called in the leys, bending them to his will as he caught Voldemort within a blast, pinning him to the floor in a cage of arcing energy.

Voldemort let out a long, agonised scream as he did so.

Albus stood straighter, his wand held tighter, and he arched power through Voldemort, beam after beam, sending searing raw power through the man in a way that ley energy was never intended for. Voldemort's stolen body jerked and twitched with the punishing flow of energy. Albus focused every ley to pour into him, burning away his neural pathways and cauterising the magical core that allowed magic to be channeled and used.

Voldemort dropped his wand, and the magic seared him inside and out, tearing through him until every pathway that he had lay scarred and sealed shut. His limp body dropped to the ground, energy arching off him still as if it was trying to make certain that every last channel he had left was burned away.

Brim turned to her masters, her eyes glowing as brightly as the pendant around her neck.

*Let go, my masters, or you will be burned.*

"Brim?" they said together.

Brim's eyes met theirs, their light softening, but no less bright. *Let go, and let me protect you.*

"Brim, no!"

*Trust me. This was why I was born.*

Severus and Minerva let go of the connection, dropping the link of power they were sending through their familiar. The Aurors fell away with them, falling back to the far wall.

Just as they fell away, feeling empty without the warm surge of power that Brim had been maintaining for them, the leys that had been forced into place by Dumbledore vibrated with tension and then sprang back to where they actually belonged.

*SNAP!*
Cracks like claps of thunder hit one after another.

SNAP!

SNAPSNAPSNAK!P!

Ley line after ley line went back into its original position, but as it did so, it arched back through the one who had demanded that it bend to his will: Dumbledore.

Albus screamed as each ley slapped through him on the way back to where they wanted to be. His wand went flying, clattering away somewhere to land on the floor.

SNAP!

The largest ley line howled and screamed as it went back into place, sounding like the shriek of a banshee. It slowly slithered through Albus' body and then snapped back into place causing a shock wave that caused Hogwarts herself to shake down to her very foundations.

The remaining ley lines shimmered around the room, seemingly lost and frozen in place. They held Albus and Voldemort wrapped together in a powerful embrace, continuing to burn away their energy along with their magic.

Who are you?

Brim walked forward into the center of the hall.

I am Brimstone of Hogwarts.

The arcs of power slithered around her, lifting her up and jolting through her, but the Nundu did not resist, instead, allowing it to flow through her entire body as it would.

Home! Home!

Guide us Home!

The power gathered around the Nundu, looking as though it was going to devour her whole. They wrapped around her from all four directions. The ground below them seemed to shake with vibration. The Nundu hung suspended in the air, her body seeming to stand on her hind legs like she was human. For a moment, four figures materialised around her: Salazar Slytherin, Rowena Ravenclaw, Helga Hufflepuff, and Godric Gryffindor.

"Return," they spoke in unison.

The ley lines zinged back into place with a final, resounding SNAP. Each one resonated with a thrum of a celestial bell.

Brim landed back on the floor on all four feet, and the visions of the Founders of Hogwarts slowly faded away. The Nundu cub shook her head and looked around. Her coat was thicker than before. Her orange-green eyes glowed more deeply, and it seemed as if she had gained significant mass, appearing to be nearly the size of a full-grown male lion than the young leopard as she had been before. Yet, when she saw Severus and Minerva standing there, she bounded towards them with a happy mrrrowling call, chattering her teeth and lashing her tail about with pure excitement. She jumped up onto them with her front paws, rubbing against them ecstatically like she hadn't seen them in years.
"Brim? They asked her, soothing her as they hugged her fiercely.

"Mrowl?" she answered. Nothing more.

The two professors hugged her tight again. They didn't need the Queen's English to show how glad they were to see her, whole and unharmed, and she had never needed it to demonstrate how happy she was to see them, either.

The warding barrier fell, but as it did, the remaining ley energy blasted through the castle, arching outward as it zapped through Minerva, Severus, Brim, and Argus Filch as he carefully peered back into the now-silent room to see if it was safe to return. Minerva and Severus staggered, forced to brace themselves on the Head Table to avoid falling to the floor, a stunned Argus fell flat on his back, and Brim seemed to grow another few inches.

"Mrowl?" Brim commented, shaking herself off thoroughly from head to tail.

Minerva and Severus stood up straighter, confused.

The remaining energy blasted outward, seemingly being sucked back into the ley lines and outward, sending a surge of cold, prickly magic through the Aurors and the Hogwarts students and staff gathered outside as well.

The Aurors were rushing to assist an unconscious Albus and tend to the equally unconscious Dark Lord, the latter having risen and fallen again in a remarkably short period of time.

Crookshanks slowly pulled himself out from under a fallen table with his fur standing up in all directions, looking for all the world like he had been struck by lightning. He meowed unhappily, but he had his pumpkin-coloured spider gripped tightly in his jaws. He set it down and proceeded to groom the little plush toy affectionately, almost as if he realised they had been through quite a lot together. The spider seemed to agree, as it cuddled up and hid in Crooks' thick fur, not wanting to leave him anymore.

The Aurors placed Dumbledore and Voldemort on hastily-conjured stretchers and moved to take them past Hogwarts' wards to Apparate to St Mungo's. The remaining professors cleaned up the Great Hall, setting it back to rights. As they did so, they unstacked the tipped tables, and a tiny troll about the size of a large mouse came running out with an equally tiny roar. He swung his club around, looking ready to take on the world—a few inches at a time.

Brim perked immediately. "Mrowl!"

The troll froze, staring at Brim.

Brim stared right back.

The troll went wildly careening down the hall corridor with an excited Brim tearing off after it.

Minerva and Severus helped a groaning Argus up, and the old caretaker coughed smoke and ash out of his lungs. What little hair he had was standing on end from being zapped by the ley energy. He stared at Minerva and Severus.

"Your hair looks like you stuck your finger in a Muggle electric socket," Argus slurred, swaying a bit as he stared owlishly at Severus.

Severus eyed Argus' thin grey hair. "Yours is not looking much better, Argus."
Minerva's own hair was standing on end, trying to escape her bun like a runaway cephalopod. Severus poked it with one finger, and one tentacle from her hair slapped his finger away. Severus raised a curious eyebrow.

"You may need extra shampoo and conditioner tonight, Minerva," Severus quipped. "Your hair has become nigh-sentient."

Minerva eyed Severus' hair, which resembled that of a character out of a Japanese Anime film. "You might want to sand yours down, laddie."

Severus touched his hair and sighed.

"Minerva," Argus said with a soft hic. "Where's that husband of yours?"

Minerva and Severus turned to stare at Argus in shock.

"You know, sandy hair, spectacles, wrinkles around his eyes when he smiles," Argus described. "Not like old Rabbie not to be underfoot at a time like this."

"You remember Rabbie?" Minerva asked carefully.

"Course I remember Rabbie," Argus said, eying Minerva with a little disbelief. "He's the one who fixed up my Mrs Norris when she picked up that odd strain of feline dragon pox from one of the other cats in the castle."

"Ach," Argus groaned. "Where is that silly girl of mine? Mrs Norris! Come 'ere, girl!"

Suddenly, a long-haired, scruffy-looking, tortoiseshell cat came sailing through the hall, yowling all the way, and landed in Argus' arms with a tiny and rather frightened meow.

Argus blinked. "That ne'er happened before," he said, scratching his head with confusion.

Minerva and Severus immediately had their wands out and did a few cursory spells. "Poppy," Minerva called, waving for her to join them.

"Poppy, love," Minerva cooed. "Do me a favour and do that scan we do before we put the trace on a child, won't you?" Minerva gave her a silent eyebrow and mouthed "Humour me."

Poppy shrugged and waved her wand. "There now, Argus, this won't hurt a— Merlin, Hecate, and Morgana Le Fay!"

Poppy's eyes widened. She stared at Minerva and Severus, who stared right back at her.

"Something wrong, ma'am?" Argus asked a little tentatively.

Minerva put on her best poker face. "No, Argus," she said with a deadpan expression. "Well, ahem. It seems we'll need to arrange a few lessons for you, Argus. Nothing serious."

Argus was petting the poor Mrs Norris, who was still not happy with her impromptu and highly involuntary flight lesson. "Lessons in what, ma'am?"

"Ah—" Minerva started off. "Nothing yet, first we have to make a quick stop at Ollivander's to get you a wand."

Argus scratched his head. "Whatever for? Not like I can do diddly with a wand. Ya know that, ma'am. Much as I might wish otherwise."
Poppy, Severus, and Minerva stared at Argus meaningfully.

Awkward silence.

More awkward silence.

Mrs Norris abruptly sneezed on Argus.

Argus' face began to turn several interesting and unique colours as he started to put two and two together and came up with pi. He stared at Minerva for a minute that seemed more like a fortnight.

**Thud.**

Argus Filch, newly-discovered wizard, passed out cold on the floor.

"That went rather well," Severus quipped.

Brim came bouncing back in, a rather drool-covered and squirming miniature troll dangling helplessly from her mouth. She proudly dropped it on top of Argus' skinny chest with a rather wet-sounding splat.

"Do we save it or let the Nundu keep it?" Minerva asked, eying the unhappy troll with some concern.

Severus just shrugged. "I suppose we can owl a troll preserve— might take them a few days to get out here and pick it up."

Minerva sighed and rubbed the space between her eyes. "I have no idea where to start with everything that has just happened."

Severus put a comforting hand on her shoulder.

"Sir! Sir! You can't just run in—"

"Bollocks, young man!" an angry male voice yelled. "I bloody well live here!"

"I—oh," a rather confused-sounding voice answered. "If you could just tell me your na—"

"Professor Robert Fairbairn at your service," growled the voice. "Now, if you really don't mind, I just woke up with a dreadful hangover in the middle of serving drinks at the Leaky Cauldron and calling myself Tom, so if you're quite finished interrogating me, I'd like to embrace my wife!"

Minerva paled and turned around to see a mature older wizard with sparkling blue eyes and somewhat unkempt sandy-grey hair. His face was clean-shaven, and he wore a pair of round gold-coloured spectacles that half slid down his nose. He was draped in his family colours, and he looked and sounded thoroughly exasperated.

"Rabbi?" Minerva said in a quivery whisper of a voice.

"Minerva, my love," the man breathed in a tone of clear relief. "You would simply not believe the day I've had! Did you know there is this half-giant living in my garden house out on the green? I swear if McAllister and MacDuff are playing a prank on me again, I'm going to make them polish my pipes until they shine like the sun and those young miscreants are both older and greyer than I am!"

Minerva rushed up to him, placing her hands on his shoulders, running her hands across his beloved
"Ach, Minerva, why are you stressin', lass?" he laughed. "You look like you've walked the moors all night with a banshee and a pack of hell-hounds nipping at your heels."

Minerva suddenly burst into tears and hugged Rabbie tight. The startled wizard kissed his crying wife soundly and then looked around him in confusion.

"What's going on— Severus? Son, you look like you're around thirty. Did you have an aging potion blow up in your face? Did that bloody twit Slughorn go and trick you again, laddie?"

Severus opened his mouth to say something and then closed it again.

Poppy's face went from confusion to amazement. "Rabbie? Is that you?"

"Course, it's me, lassie," he laughed merrily. "Why is everyone looking like they've been moonstruck?"

"Professor Fairbairn," Severus said. "If you could help us see to getting the students back to their dorms, perhaps we could arrange for tea to catch up. I can volunteer my own quarters."

"Mrowl!" Brim interjected.

"And I can introduce you to— my new familiar," Severus made up quickly.

"Mrowl!" Brim agreed enthusiastically.

"Oh, my, Severus—" Fairbairn gasped. "Is that—?"

"After we clean up?"

Fairbairn tsked. "Alright, laddie. You drive a hard bargain. Onward, to wayward student herding!"

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**Dark Lord Rises Again!**

*(and Falls Shortly After)*

In what has been touted as the shortest reign of terror in the recorded history of the Wizarding World, You-Know-Who himself was exposed and revealed to be living on the back of Professor Quirinus Quirrell's head during this year's annual Christmas feast that always takes place just prior to Hogwarts students leaving for the winter holidays. The exposure, which lead to an epic battle between YKW and Headmaster Dumbledore that landed both wizards in St Mungo's being treated for ley line exposure-induced magical burns.

Magical parasitism, which has long been hypothetical in most circles, is apparently a rare but very real phenomenon. Mr Quirrell apparently acquired the Dark Lord as a parasite that gradually took over the mild-mannered and rather flighty wizard and turned him into the perfect host for YKW.

When he was exposed, however, YKW took over the body of his host in entirety and began to battle Headmaster Dumbledore. Dumbledore kept the Dark Lord busy as the other staff members managed to successfully evacuate the students to safety elsewhere on the Hogwarts grounds. The students, who have now safely returned to their dorms, seem eager to spend the holidays with their families, and really, who can blame them?

Despite the terrible battle, many of the students that we interviewed seemed quite eager to return,
telling this reporter that they never felt as though they were in any real danger. Brimstone, the school's very protective Nundu familiar, proved herself again to be a staunch defender of the school's students and staff from whatever threats may come to pass.

"She protected us," Ravenclaw's Padma Patil stated. "That's what she does. I'll always feel safe whenever she's around."

"Professors Snape and McGonagall channeled energy into Brim and she held up the wards to keep us all safe! It was bloody brilliant!" Seamus Finnegan of Gryffindor reported.

No one was killed during the attack, and even YKW is reported to have survived the battle between himself and Headmaster Dumbledore. One thing, however, currently remains unexplained. Both wizards have been completely drained of all magic and their magical pathways have been burned away so completely that a team of the finest Healers at St Mungo's believe that they will never fully recover and that both YKW and Dumbledore have effectively been rendered squibs. Even more disturbing is the news that their magic was so completely drained that their very souls will carry the scars for all eternity.

For those of us who believe in reincarnation, this suggests a very grim future for the souls of Albus Dumbledore and YKW, who may be condemned to never knowing the flow of magic through their bodies ever again, no matter how many times they may be reborn. Exactly how all this came to pass has not yet been confirmed, but specialists at Mungo's seem to believe that ley line burns were the likeliest culprit.

"Ley lines are raw magical power," Master Heather Skysong of the Ministry's Department of Mysteries informed us. "They are special because they connect directly to the earth. They run through all corners of the Earth and provide magic to important places of power and have done so since long before we learned to harness magic. People built special places on top of ley lines because of their potent magical power, but they were always careful not to tamper with the magic itself. Ley lines are a form of quasi-sentient magic and do not like to be manipulated by wizards. Doing so requires extensive special training but you must also be someone lucky enough to have been born directly in the junction of the leys. It doesn't happen very often, and people of old did not attempt to do this deliberately because of just how dangerous it could be. Manipulating ley line magic can make for powerful spells that linger for remarkably long periods of time, but as I previously stated, they do not appreciate being told where to go or what to do. The ley masters of old learned how to ask leys respectfully to grant them their favour. It was an art that has almost died out in this modern magical age. Leys that are forced to work have a very strong desire to snap back into place and return "home." That is when foolish people get burned. The power takes the shortest path back to where it needs to be, and it takes all the power in the area along with it. If you happen to be there, it will very likely take your magic with it and burn your channels as it goes, making it impossible for it to ever recover, much less return."

Skysong paints a grim future for the Wizarding icon Albus Dumbledore, but it does brings some hope that the reign of terror by YKW may truly be over for good. If what has been said is true, as a squib he will never be able to plague us again. Even reborn— he will be as the Muggles are.

Only Muggles have the potential to be born magical, and YKW will not be blessed with magic ever again.

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Hogwarts Board of Governors Appoints New Headmistress Minerva McGonagall-Fairbairn to Replace Albus Dumbledore

The Board of Governors for Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry has appointed Minerva
McGonagall-Fairbairn to its Headmistress after Albus Dumbledore's forced retirement due to magic loss due to extensive ley-burns gained during the recent battle between himself and YKW.

Newly-appointed Deputy Heads include Deputy Headmaster Filius Flitwick and Deputy Headmaster Severus Snape. Both wizards will be sharing duties to assist the new Headmistress at Hogwarts.

After the loss of Professor Quirrell left an opening for the Defence Against Dark Magic, Headmistress McGonagall has brought in Professor Remus Lupin to assume the vacant position. The announcement of Professor Silvanus Kettleburn's retirement at the end of this term will see Professor Robert Fairbairn replacing him as Professor of Care of Magical Creatures. The return of the Headmistress' long-time husband from sabbatical has excited many and set raised somewhat of a compelling mystery for others.

Headmistress McGonagall-Fairbairn promises to look over the school's curriculum and overhaul some of the more troubling aspects that have long plagued Hogwarts. Grammar, Maths, and Study Skills will probably make a top priority for first to third years after a disturbing trend involving students with exceedingly poor grasp of basic skills, such as reading, writing and arithmetic. Flying lessons will be moved to second or third year after students have demonstrated respectable competency in basic skills via a test to be administered which will evaluate a student's progress.

"First year students cannot even have their own broom," Madam Hooch said. "It makes more sense to teach flying during a year when a student can bring a broom to school. I am quite happy with these new changes. Exceptions can and will be made for those who have demonstrated stellar accomplishment of their basic skills, and I can always teach extracurricular flying to those students as a reward for being such studious and hard workers."

Earth Magic will replace Divination due to a lack of Seer blood in the majority of the students.

"It makes no sense to teach Divination when Divination requires Seer blood to really be good at it. That is something you simply cannot teach. You have to be born with it. That is hardly fair come grade time. Arithmancy, however, is tried and true discipline with a standard approach and a proven track record," Professor Vector said in her interview.

Extracurricular classes such as Wizarding etiquette, centaur culture, star reading, and basic healing techniques will be offered in conjunction with the local centaur herd. Professor Firenze and Professor Bane will be jointly teaching the centaur-centric courses, and Professor Andromeda Black-Tonks will be teaching the Wizarding etiquette course. All of the above are new courses which will be made available to anyone from second year and up. All extracurricular classes are not required for graduation, however, and should be seen as specialty courses to be used for expanding a student's resume and education. Certificates of accomplishment will be given as well as formal letters of recommendation for those students to wish to get a jump on summer employment and internships.

In a note from our Ministry's Department of Magical Law Enforcement, Head Auror Kingsley Shacklebolt states that student internships will help greatly for getting high scores in the right subjects for those who wish to work towards a future career in the Aurors' Office. Auror Shacklebolt assures us that he will be very happy to work with Hogwarts in designing a curriculum that will ensure that every future Auror candidate gets the required grades on every N.E.W.T. subject required to qualify for the training programme.

A number of local Hogsmeade businesses have also expressed great interest in sponsoring summer student internships, and the local magistrate is planning to get together with Hogwarts leadership to both make it happen and develop a plan to make it all as painless as possible.
"Children are our future," Sylvester Succotash stated. "I know I'm not alone in wanting to encourage the learning of valuable trade skills in our younger generation."
Als de kat van huis is, dansen de muizen op tafel.

(When the cat is away from home, the mice are dancing on the table.)

In het huis Snape is dat niet zo. Iedereen weet dat spinnen geen ratten in hun territorium willen hebben.

(This is not true in the house of Snape. Everyone knows that the spiders don't like to share with rodents.)

Brim set her head on the edge of the table, letting loose her coffee-coloured spider to scitter across the top. The spider dashed across the table, nicked a biscuit from the plate, and promptly brought it back to her. Brim took the spider and the biscuit into her mouth and padded into the next room, leaping into the cat-tree to devour her spoils.

"Brim." Severus' morning growling voice said only one thing.

Brim flattened her ears and made the biscuit disappear quickly.

Severus shuffled into the room with a large yawn, he reached up and scratched the Nundu behind the ears, and she licked his arm in response. "Nicking the biscuits again, love?"

Brim set her head on his arm and looked up at him adoringly.

Snape's expression softened. "Why is it that I can never be angry with you?"

Brim mrowed at him, tail curving around his arm and thwapping him gently.

Brim had grown significantly since the battle in the Great Hall. The newly-rediscovered Rabbie suspected it had to due with her formal link-up with the leys. He suspected it because he had begun to remember the truth: Dumbledore had killed the original guardian of the ley lines— the basilisk Salazar Slytherin had raised as a hatchling and set in the Chamber of Secrets to keep the school's ley lines safe. Rabbie had discovered the truth, stumbling upon it while tracking down rumours of Salazar's sacred beast.

The last thing Rabbie remembered was coming upon the corpse of the great basilisk and having none other than Albus Dumbledore say "I'm sorry, Robert, but you weren't supposed to find out about this. There is far too much at risk."
Next thing he remembered was waking up as "Tom" in Diagon Alley, and that had continued until the most recent release of the spell Albus Dumbledore had somehow cast through the ley lines—cast through them, but apparently had also anchored to him at the same time. Then, somehow, thanks to a strange bit of timing, something had happened that wiped everyone's memory of Rabbie at all, making "Tom" the only person anyone knew— including Rabbie himself, and it had all occurred after "Rabbie's" body had been found floating in the ocean after a freak "broom accident."

It was enough to instill some serious paranoia for one Albus Dumbledore, had he not been already been chock full of that. Ever so slowly, the group of them were starting to put things together in a strange and convoluted timeline of events, but the events were confusing, all the same.

A knock on the door signalled the arrival of his expected guest. Brim perked and bounded off to the door, making a low, bass hrrrrrr rr rrrrr as she bounced that reminded him of the low bellows of adult male lions. Considering she was as large if not even larger than the average lion, that wasn't terribly surprising. The door opened, and there was a loud THUMP shortly after and the sound of dragging.

"Gah!" a male voice said. "Severus!"

"Don't look at me. It isn't my fault that you smell like a wet wolf," Severus quipped, pouring the tea.

"She doesn't drag Lucius around by the ankle!"

"She's known Lucius longer, and Lucius doesn't go around baying at the moon three times a month," Severus said with a sniff.

Remus Lupin stared at Severus with a sigh, his robes all crumpled due to his being dragged about by one ornery Nundu. Brim pinned him down, so all he could do was flail helplessly.

Lick. Lick. Lick.

Remus was then thoroughly bathed, whether he liked it or not.

Remus made soft sounds of protest, but his hands were rubbing her over, and that only encouraged her attentions. He sat up only after she thoroughly resurfaced his face with her attentive licks.

"I supposed I should thank you for the scar removal, my rather large feline friend," Remus chuckled. "Not to mention taking a good few years off this mug of mine for good measure."

Brim mrowled, laying on her side and exposing her belly in clear invitation for reciprocation. Remus happily obliged her request; it was only fair, after all.

"I can't believe I spent the last decade thinking I was a proper wolf in Yellowstone National Park in the States," Remus grumbled.

"You would prefer being the owner and operator of a tavern like Rabbie?" Severus asked. "As I understand it, you were quite lucky you weren't killed by a rival male or shot after wandering off and attempting to nick a cow from a local rancher."

Remus shuddered. "No, since I 'showed up naturally,' hah, they kept me under a really crazy watch. I, uh, woke up in a den with a tracking collar around my neck and three rather baffled-looking pups staring at me."

Severus blinked. "You didn't mention that part."
"I still looked like a wolf, so it took me a while to make it to a place where I could floo. Do you realise how hard it is to find a working public floo in America?"

Severus eyed Remus. "Haven't had the pleasure. You didn't, um, have any pups or anything while you were busy... wofling it out?"

"Gods, no," Remus sighed in relief. "I was just pup-sitting. The alpha was a large white wolf who looked as though he could give Fenrir a run for his wolfiness. I finally found a young witchling working in the office at a local campground, and she read out what I wrote with a stick and called her parents. They got me to the right people who transfigured me back into a wizard. They had to stuff me in the camper and saw off my radio collar to prevent some random ranger from assuming they were attempting to transport a stolen wolf out of the park."

Severus shook his head mock-dolefully. "And this is what you get for not learning how to become an Animagus like the rest of us."

"I was a werewolf, Severus!" Remus complained. "I hardly thought that I'd have to learn that to try and keep myself company!"

Severus raised an eyebrow. "Moronic Gryffindor. Is that the only reason you can think of for wanting or needing to be an Animagus?"

Lupin slumped. "Go ahead. Tell me I was a dunderhead."

"You," Severus stated archly, "were an utter imbecile."

Brim slurped Lupin upside the face, as if to indicate her full agreement.

"What's the last thing you remember— as a human, anyway?" Severus asked curiously. "You never said in the meeting."

Remus just shook his head. "I still don't remember much. I think— and I'm really not perfectly sure — that I smelled something wrong about James and Lily. There was something very odd about their scent and then it all went black."

"Nothing else since that?" Severus asked, frowning.

"No, old friend," Remus replied with a sigh. "Nothing at all."

"It seems so surreal to suddenly remember that you've been a friend," Severus admitted. "I spent the last ten years thinking Lily—"

"Hated you, yeah," Remus sighed. "I can't say spending ten years as a wolf was much better, but at least I didn't have any guilt, self-loathing, and worries on my plate beyond the basics: food, water, shelter, and pack."

Brim was gnawing playfully on Remus' arm, pretending she meant to maul him to death.

"Wherever did you get her, Severus?"

"I woke up with her like I'd been out drinking the night before and couldn't remember bringing home a woman," Severus confessed. "By morning, Minerva and I both got imprinted with a familiar-bond and that was that. Ironically, Lucius is the one who found out first. He dragged our sorry arses to the registry to get her tested so that no one could attempt to contest the bond."
"Smart man, that Malfoy. Slytherin practicality."

Severus nodded. "She's a fully-registered Nundu as well, so she's a bonafide ambassador from Africa and even has dual-citizenship. Kind of like giant pandas and China."

Remus snorted. "Ah, well, they do that with the Cerberi too, so that makes sense, really. They are very important to Greece, China, or whatever."

"Alas, Britain does not have a National Magical Animal," Severus said. "Australia has the bunyip. I'm still not sure whether to be appalled or amused by that."

"Does the United States?"

"They have two, actually: the jackalope and the chupacabra. Each animal had its ardent supporters, they just couldn't pick one amicably and be done with it."

Stony silence perfused the room.

Severus gave him a look. "Believe me, I couldn't make this shite up, Remus."

"Canada?"

"Wendigo," Severus recalled. "Strangely there was some fight, as I recall, between the wendigo and the sasquatch, but they determined the sasquatch had no magical properties, so the title went to the wendigo—well, the wendigo and the thunderbird, which was added recently due to someone successfully proving that it actually existed. South America holds tight to the quetzalcoatl, but there is still some debate on magical creature versus god status, depending on who you talk to."

Remus snorted. "Ten years as a wolf, and I feel like I can't remember diddly about the real world. Speaking of things I know nothing about—do we even have a ley master who can come tell us what in the arguably nine worlds we are really dealing with here?"

Severus pointed to Brim.

"Mrowl?"

"That's it, eh?" Remus replied. "Our expert is a massive disease-breathing feline?"

"You'd prefer a pygmy fairy cat, perhaps?" Severus asked with a smirk.

Remus waved him off with mock disgust. Then his face suddenly became serious. "I feel terrible that Sirius spent the last ten some years in Azkaban. I'm sure his mind isn't anywhere near stable with all of these shocking revelations going on."

"He and Mr Potter are finally okay with being in the same room together as long as Brim is there. That's a considerable bit of progress. I think Brim serves as a powerful visual reminder for him to not fly off the handle," Severus speculated.

"That is good, at least," Remus agreed. He petted Brim's ears affectionately. "I am so very glad you kept our Severus' head on straight, my feline friend. Thanks to you, the rest of us have started to come to our senses as well."

Brim batted at his hands and grasped his head, pulling it down with sheathed claws to mock-gnaw on it. She released him gently and laid her head in his lap.

Remus rubbed her head and smiled. "Part of me wishes she'd been around earlier, but then I
remember that none of us were exactly stellar with our emotions back then. She would have surely murdered us all."

Severus rubbed Brim under the chin, causing her to purr loudly. "I will admit that me having a Nundu back as a teenager would likely not have ended well for anyone."

Remus smiled. "I just wish James and Lily were still alive to appreciate that we have, despite all of this, managed to remain friends, Severus. It would tear them apart to know that we went back to hating each other. I know that Prongs valued our friendship. I valued it. Sirius valued it. Sirius, gods — even Sirius. That morning you and James planted an entire roomful of overgrown honking daffodils around his bed to wake him up after he had been out sowing his oats and drinking like a grindylow the night before. Merlin, that was beautiful. Even Sirius admitted he deserved it. He didn't even remember the witch's name."

Severus twitched uncomfortably.

"Severus— you know who it was?"

Severus turned away, flushing.

"Who was it, Severus?" Remus asked, his wolf ears practically poking out of his hair at full alertness.

Severus tugged on his collar.

"Severus," Remus repeated, his eyes almost begging.

"James and I just might have found out, inadvertently, as he spouted drunken poetry, that he 'loved her shiny blue carapace almost as much as her blond curls and red glasses'."

"No—" Remus gasped. "You have GOT to be kidding me!"

Severus peered out of one eye, keeping the other squinted. "Unfortunately, no."

"I would have planted something far worse than a bunch of honking daffodils— Merlin!" Remus exclaimed. "I think I might have thrown him into a vat of ice water and frostbitten his bits off."

"Potter and I did seriously consider Obliviating each other after that," Severus admitted, "but we agreed we had to remember just in case we needed to remind Sirius of what a 'complete moronic arsehole' he was. What if the bloody bint had ended up pregnant?"

Remus shook his head violently. "I do not even want to contemplate the idea of Rita Skeeter Black, thank you very much. I feel like I need to bleach my brain right now."

"You just had to insist that I tell you," Severus quipped.

"You should have just told me I really didn't want to know!"

"Oh, and that always ends so well, doesn't it, Lupin?" Severus harrumphed, cutting his eyes at the werewolf.

Remus groaned. "You're right. You're ri— Merlin, do you have any firewhisky? I think I need to be drunk right now."

Brim nipped him squarely on the rump just then, giving him a meaningful glare.

"Ow!" Remus exclaimed. He stared down at her with narrowed eyes. "I think someone is far more
"intelligent than most people seem to think."

"Some of us never questioned it," Severus said with a sniff.

"Fine, my Lady," Remus moaned in surrender. "I will not inebriate myself into either Oblivion or the nine punishing layers of the Abyss, even though I most desperately wish to at the moment."

Brim seemed to eye him somewhat suspiciously, but then she plunked down a plush spider in his lap. Remus seemed to realise that his forgiveness came with a price tag, and he tossed the spider across the room.

The spider disappeared off in the distance with a gleeful "wheeeeee!" and Brim shortly thereafter, her paws scraping across the stone as she comically tore after it.

"Not even a month back with us, Lupin, and she already has you perfectly housebroken," Severus quipped with clear amusement.

"Hey!" Remus complained. "I do have positive traits, you know."

"Positively lupine," Severus countered.

Remus slumped. "I love you, mate, but sometimes, I really, really want to punch you."

Severus lifted an elegant black eyebrow.

Remus looked up, a trace of raw vulnerability in his green eyes. "I meant what I said about believing that it would have broken their hearts to know if we went back to hating each other, Severus. It wasn't just Lily and James who truly valued getting to know you." His hand went to his collarbone where the tattoo of a man and wolf remained.

Severus' expression softened somewhat at the other man's words. He said nothing, but he reached out and gently put his hand on the werewolf's shoulder.

Remus smiled at him, nodding, sharing in a moment of warmth and intimacy that few would have believed possible if they weren't privy to the details of their friendship.

"Now that I'm back, I miss them, Severus, ever so much," Remus confessed. "I see Harry eleven years grown, and my heart simply breaks."

"I almost hated him beyond repair, Remus," Severus confessed with a soulful look. "I truly believed there had been no forgiveness for me at all. I saw the hated Potter of my past, but I didn't remember the friendship that came after. Then Brim came, and suddenly I began to remember. If it hadn't been for her, I would have blamed him for all of his father's sins—for those would have been all I could remember."

"I am glad that didn't happen," Remus agreed, "for Harry's sake most of all. It makes my teeth itch knowing he's been forced to live with those bloody Dursleys all this time. That was the one thing even Lily absolutely could not abide. Anyone who knew Petunia at all would know that. Anyone who had known Vernon, doubly so. He was the one 'man' that I think everyone agreed was better off transfigured into the form of a bludger."

"Or a urinal at King's Cross Station," Severus replied, utterly deadpan.

Remus busted out laughing. "Severus, you are a positively dreadful yet brilliant man."
"Kingsley asked for recommendations on what to suggest to the Wizengamot as a fitting punishment for the ex-Dark Lord," Severus noted.

"Oh?" Remus said, raising an eyebrow. "Do tell."

"I recommended a pink, plush hippogriff, charmed to never fade or get soiled, and made completely impervious to spells, fire or any other sort of damage. Then, they could give him to the orphanage so he could be cuddled, drooled on, and otherwise being dressed up in fancy doll clothes and attending tea parties with little children… forever."

Remus' eyes went comically wide and then he burst out laughing, slapping Severus on the back. "Merlin, Severus. I hope they do. I really, really hope they choose what you recommended."

Severus sniffed. "Immortality— just hardly in the way he would have wished."

Remus was having a hard time breathing due to uproarious laughter, and he waved Severus to stop talking lest he pass out in a most undignified manner. When he could properly breathe again, he looked up with tears in his eyes. "You are *such* a devious Slytherin, Severus. I believe that somewhere in the great beyond, Salazar Slytherin is looking down upon you with great favour."

Brim perked and attempted to crawl into Remus' lap, which was made exceedingly comical due to her greatly increased size.

*Thud.*

Remus was on the ground with about two hundred kilos of rapidly-growing Nundu loving all over him.

"Gah!" Remus protested, wriggling, wrestling, and then cuddling with the very playful overgrown feline.

Brim made a soft purring sound, wrapping her forelegs around him like a protected, favoured toy.

Severus eyed the pair with amusement. "Good thing you are a werewolf, Remus. I'm not sure if a fully human wizard would be able to survive all that enthusiastic Nundu love."

"For once, Severus," Remus replied with a whuff of air, "I am glad of it as well. Never thought I would *ever* say that."

Brim proceeded to rearrange his face with her raspy tongue, making Remus look a little pinker, younger, and far less scarred.

Severus' mouth turned upward slightly. Things were definitely looking up.

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**HARRY JAMES POTTER!**

**HOW DARE YOU INSULT MY FAMILY BY CALLING MY SON YOUR FRIEND AND THEN FORCING HIM TO SUFFER DOING YOUR SCHOOLWORK FOR YOU SO OFTEN THAT HE DOES NOT HAVE TIME TO FINISH HIS OWN?! YOU USING YOUR REPUTATION AS THE 'BOY-WHO-LIVED' TO HANG OUT WITH THE LIKES OF THE MALFOY FAMILY JUST TO SERVE YOUR OWN PURPOSES IS UTTERLY DESPICABLE!**

**OH YES, MY RONALD HAS FINALLY TOLD ME THE TRUTH ABOUT YOU, MR**
POTTER! YOU CANNOT HIDE BEHIND YOUR EXALTED STATUS ANY LONGER! I AM GOING TO TAKE THIS SHAMEFUL SITUATION UP WITH THE HEADMISTRESS OF HOGWARTS AND REVEAL YOUR SELFISH MANIPULATION OF MY SON AND THE OTHER GOOD STUDENTS THAT YOU LAUGHINGLY CALL YOUR FRIENDS ONLY TO COMPEL THEM INTO DOING YOUR BIDDING!

I'VE HEARD ALL ABOUT HOW YOU DRAG MY RONALD AROUND THE CASTLE, AT ALL HOURS OF THE NIGHT, WANTING TO PULL PRANKS INSTEAD OF STUDYING IN GRYFFINDOR TOWER AS YOU SHOULD BE! I'VE HEARD ALL ABOUT HOW YOU KEEP HIM UP SO LONG THAT BY THE TIME HE GETS BACK, HE CAN BARELY SLEEP, MUCH LESS EAT, BEFORE HAVING TO DRAG HIMSELF UP OFF TO HIS CLASSES! YOUR BEHAVIOUR IS BEYOND REPREHENSIBLE AS TO BE DOWNRIGHT HEINOUS! HOW DARE YOU DRAG MY CHILDREN THROUGH THE DIRT WHILE YOU GET AWAY WITH MURDER, YOUNG MAN?!

I'VE HEARD ALL ABOUT HOW YOU DRAG MY RONALD AROUND THE CASTLE, AT ALL HOURS OF THE NIGHT, WANTING TO PULL PRANKS INSTEAD OF STUDYING IN GRYFFINDOR TOWER AS YOU SHOULD BE! I'VE HEARD ALL ABOUT HOW YOU KEEP HIM UP SO LONG THAT BY THE TIME HE GETS BACK, HE CAN BARELY SLEEP, MUCH LESS EAT, BEFORE HAVING TO DRAG HIMSELF UP OFF TO HIS CLASSES! YOUR BEHAVIOUR IS BEYOND REPREHENSIBLE AS TO BE DOWNRIGHT HEINOUS! HOW DARE YOU DRAG MY CHILDREN THROUGH THE DIRT WHILE YOU GET AWAY WITH MURDER, YOUNG MAN?!

I'M GOING TO MAKE SURE THAT EVERYONE KNOWS THE BOY-WHO-LIVED IS JUST AN ARROGANT LITTLE SOCIAL-CLIMBING TOE-RAG! TO THINK THAT I ACTUALLY INVITED YOU INTO MY OWN HOME— TREATED YOU LIKE A MEMBER OF MY OWN FAMILY!

YOU ARE NOT WELCOME IN MY HOME EVER AGAIN, HARRY JAMES POTTER, AND I WILL MAKE SURE EVERY MEMBER OF OUR FAMILY TREATS YOU EVERY BIT AS POORLY YOU DESERVE.

DISGUSTEDLY YOURS,

MRS MOLLY PREWETT WEASLEY

SEVERUS TOBIAS SNAPE!

HOW DARE YOU TAKE YOUR INEXPLICABLE HATRED FOR ALL GRYFFINDORS TO SUCH AN UNHEALTHY LEVEL AS TO TORMENT GOOD STUDENTS LIKE MY SON?!

HOW DARE YOU FORCE MY SON TO CLEAN CAULDRONS WITH A TOOTHBRUSH JUST FOR ASKING QUESTIONS DURING YOUR CLASS?! I'VE KNOWN YOU FOR NEARLY 15 YEARS, SEVERUS SNAPE, AND I NEVER THOUGHT YOU WOULD SINK SO LOW AS TO TAKE OUT YOUR PETTY GRUDGES OVER LOSING LILY EVANS POTTER OUT ON INNOCENT CHILDREN LIKE MY YOUNGEST SON! OH, DUMBLEDORE TOLD ME ALL ABOUT YOUR HEARTFELT CONVERSION TO THE LIGHT... I SAW IT EVEN THEN FOR THE BLATANT LIE THAT IT WAS, AND I AM FINALLY CALLING YOU OUT ON IT!

I KNEW THE STORIES ABOUT YOU MAKING UP WITH LILY AND THE OTHERS WERE NOTHING BUT A PACK OF LIES IN A PITIFUL ATTEMPT TO SAVE FACE! ANYONE WHO LOWERS THEMSELVES TO ASSOCIATE WITH THE LIKES OF YOU IS NOTHING BUT THE BLACKEST OF STAINS UPON THE WIZARDING WORLD. HOW DARE YOU RAIN YOUR DARKNESS AND HATRED UPON MY GOOD FAMILY!

I WILL BE REPORTING YOUR ABOMINABLE BEHAVIOUR TO THE HEADMISTRESS AND THE BOARD OF GOVERNORS, YOU MAY CERTAINLY COUNT ON THAT!
DEAR MRS MOLLY PREWETT WEASLEY

After bringing your concerns before the Board of Governors, I am enclosing for you a collection of memories which have been donated by each of your son Ronald's professors at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, under the personal supervision of our good Ministry officials. The entire Board of Governors has reviewed the memories in question and have deemed the memories in question to be unaltered and the information contained within to be entirely true.

The following memories can be taken to the Ministry Department of Wizarding Education and viewed under a Pensieve without charge (due to the circumstances) at the arranged time of 5 July 1991 at 9:30 a.m.. Copies of these memories have been stored at the Ministry Archives under case number 56FA24Y-0000096-WEASLEY and will be made available to you and Mr Weasley as Ronald Bilius Weasley's parents and legal guardians.

Enclosed memories inventory:

**Professor Pomona Sprout:** Ronald Weasley mixes up fertilizers for fanged geraniums causing them to spit out all of their fangs, causing injury to 15 fellow students during his Herbology class. Ronald blamed Neville Longbottom, but Professor Sprout's memories of the incident clearly indicate otherwise.

**Professor Rolanda Hooch:** Ronald Weasley flagrantly disobeys orders to remain on the ground until every student's broom has undergone a mandatory safety check. His malfunctioning broom smashes into a stained glass window and destroys three shelves worth of rare books in the Hogwarts library.

**Professor Filius Flitwick:** Ronald Weasley botches a charm spell, causing Miss Lavender Brown to gain critical mass and rendering her unable to move from the floor until said spell was subsequently removed by Professor Flitwick.
Professor Minerva McGonagall-Fairbairn: Ronald Weasley consistently demonstrates improper allocation and transforms mice into toadstools instead of matchsticks and has been repeatedly caught and reprimanded for copying answers from nearby classmates during tests.

Professor Cuthbert Binns was unable to provide memories due to his status as a ghost, but memories in this case were taken while under interrogation by Ministry Official Rosemary Killswitch-Starkweather.

Professor Quirinus Quirrell has since been replaced, however, memories of gradebooks and performance evaluations as well as copies of official complaints of blatant plagiarism of Percy Weasley's essays were reported before his leaving Hogwarts for the summer. Copies of the essays in question have been enclosed.

Percy Weasley: Memories of having previously written said essays have been included.

Comparison study has been enclosed. Accusation of plagiarism: VERIFIED. Report was not sent out due to extraordinary events involving Headmaster Dumbledore at the time the official letter was to be sent out.

Professor Severus Snape: Memories of Ronald Weasley's performance in his Potions class including every incident requiring detention, docking of house points, and injury of another student due to wanton carelessness. Other memories include insults directed solely at Slytherin students based on their house affiliation, which was consistently noted during many class sessions. One incident involved Ronald Weasley being caught purposefully sabotaging the potion of a fellow student, Theodore Nott, by tossing in a wad of Drooble's Best Blowing gum, causing the cauldron's contents to expand and then explode, which coated most of the classroom in a sticky pink substance that smelled strongly of mouldy cheese. The foul odor caused several of his fellow students to vomit repeatedly and others to flee the classroom for the nearest lavatory. Five of those students had to spend the night in the infirmary vomiting copious amounts of tiny pink bubbles. During further review of the incident in question, it was determined that Ronald Weasley had actually been aiming for the cauldron of fellow student Draco Malfoy but missed.

Said incident cost Hogwarts one full day of cleaning by both magical and manual labour and making it necessary to move subsequent Potions classes to a different location that unfortunately had no laboratory equipment available, temporarily setting back the education of every single Potions student at Hogwarts.

As the parchment explaining this situation was sent out and returned to Hogwarts, signed by yourself, we are currently investigating whether your signature was legitimate, as you have repeatedly denied, in front of several witnesses, any knowledge whatsoever of this particular matter.

Professor Silvanus Kettleburn: Memories of Ronald's performance in class indicated consistently acceptable marks. However, there was one recorded incident of Ronald Weasley kicking a niffler in front of the entire class when it did not do what he demanded of the poor creature.

All of the enclosed memories are verified as unaltered, collected under official Ministry guidelines and have been signed, notarised, duplicated and are currently being kept under file number 56FA24Y-0000096-WEASLEYR in the Ministry Department of Wizarding Education, Office of Records.

As Headmistress of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, Mrs Weasley, I must inform you that your son's poor marks and equally poor behaviour in class were not caused by his rather limited association with Mr Harry Potter. Ministry officials have thoroughly interviewed Mr Potter,
who voluntarily agreed to be questioned under Veritaserum and also examined by Master Glendon Abernathy, Master of Legilimency, under the supervision of his current legal guardian, Lord Sirius Black. On the occasions that Mr Potter was accused of abusing his friendship with Mr. Ronald Weasley, Mr Potter was, in fact, quietly studying with fellow student Mr Draco Malfoy in the school library during said hours. At other times, he was doing his homework in study hall under the supervision of various Hogwarts professors. Mr Potter has also volunteered to help tutor fellow students after hours in the library, which has been verified by Madam Pince, Hogwarts Librarian. In fact, Mr Ronald Weasley was offered tutoring himself by Mr Potter on multiple occasions but he has consistently refused all such offers. Madam Pince has verified this as has Professor Fairbairn-McGonagall.

It has been the decision of the Board of Governors that, in real concern for your child's educational needs, Mr Ronald Weasley must attend the remedial study sessions being offered this summer under the supervision of Ministry official Griselda Marchbanks, to ensure a completely unbiased evaluation of Mr Weasley's classroom skills. Mr Weasley is to report to the Ministry's Office of Wizarding Education, located on the seventh floor, at eight a.m. sharp each day. He will be required to remain there until 6 p.m. daily. Supervised lunches and breaks will be provided at no charge to you. The standard fee for these remedial lessons, due to the seriousness of this case, have been waived. These classes will begin starting Monday of next week and will continue until the first-year aptitude test has been successfully passed.

You are not required to send your child to these sessions, but if you should not, be aware that your son will be required to take a first-year level aptitude test before being permitted to join the second-year classes at Hogwarts. Failure of the aptitude test will require that Mr. Weasley be held back one year at Hogwarts to repeat his coursework, for which the usual fees for a student of said level will need to be provided.

Sincerely,

Headmistress Minerva McGonagall-Fairbairn and Professor of Transfiguration

(Her seal, the cat on the Fairbairn heraldry shield)

Constance Whitechapel-Burns, Head of the Office of Wizarding Education

(Her seal, the quill and the parchment)

[Signatures of the Board of Governors of Hogwarts]

(the seal of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry)

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Trussssst In Me

Chapter by corvusdraconis

A/N: Nooooo… it's my last free weekend. NOOOOOOO!

Beta Love: The Dragon and the Rose, Dutchgirl01, and Flyby Commander Shepherd

Breath of the Nundu

Chapter 8

*Trust in me*
*Just in me*
*Shut your eyes*
*and trust in me*
*You can sleep*
*Safe and sound*
*Knowing I*
*Am around*

*Slip into silent slumber*
*Sail on a silver mist*

*Slowly and surely your senses*
*Will cease to resist*
*Trust in me*
*And just in me*
*Shut your eyes*
*And trust in me...*

*Trust In Me (from the Jungle Book)*

Brim hunkered down beside smilodon-Severus, her tail swishing from side to side in pure excitement. He chewed on the back of her neck to calm her a little, and she purred softly in approval. Even as large as she was growing, Severus was still very much the boss, and she very much looked to him for approval of her current and future acts.

The full moon glared down from above like the eye of some highly attentive god, and Moony padded out from the copse of trees he had been hiding in before his change. The night before they
had let him transform without Harry or Draco being around in case the tattoo hadn't worked or worn off during his ten years roaming around as a wolf in Yellowstone National Park, but Lupin's enchanted tattoo and potion infusion had worked precisely as it was supposed to. Remus remained in full control, and even better, remained entirely non-contagious.

Severus had thoroughly checked Remus over from saliva to his claws and even took a blood sample for examination. It may have not have been a true cure, but it was was a remedy that had, so far, demonstrated the ability to make werewolves well and truly safe around their families and other people. Everything pointed to a permanent resolution to Remus' lycanthropy.

Remus recommended trying to recreate the charmed ruby that they had made for him, but there was some concern that finding a gem just as flawless and of high quality as the one Sirius had originally nicked off his mother would hamper any efforts at mass-producing the cure.

Severus had pondered whether suitable laboratory-created stones could be produced, so Lucius had put out his tendrils in the Muggle holdings he had to see if that was even a possibility. They hadn't seen the results as of yet, but Lucius was working on having his people cut the results into the exact shape and size of the one Sirius had given him the memory of.

All of this, however, was a moot point for the moment. The end result was that Harry and Draco got to spend quality time with Moony without having to be Animagi, and all of the hard work they had put into giving Remus freedom had paid off. It seemed as though, despite the belated use, Remus would be able to remain with Harry and protect him regardless of the day or night.

Harry and Draco gasped in amazed delight, having never seen a fully-transformed werewolf before. They inspected him from head-to-toe, and Moony calmly tolerated it for a while before getting poked and prodded seemed to become a little tedious for him.

Severus and Remus had built a nice campsite out in Bourne Wood, a place known for being seldomly visited due to rumours of it being haunted. As it so happened, Sirius' father, Orion, had purchased it many years before Sirius had even been born, but he had never built anything on it. Sirius had been authorised to make a series of Portkeys, since it was now considered his land, to allow for their cluster of friends to be able to port both to and from key places: Grimmauld Place, Bourne Wood, Spinner's End, Hogwarts, and Minerva's summer house on the shores of Loch Long.

The lot of them had gutted Spinner's End entirely, and Lucius had hired a team of Muggle architects to renovate the old house into something to be proud of. Once the team was finished, they moved Severus' treasured books and other choice items back in. Minerva and Rabbie had taken care of making new furniture to be proud of, Severus, Remus, and Lucius worked on thoroughly warding the house, and Sirius gifted him some furniture from Grimmauld that had been in his family for untold generations. He couldn't stand it due to the highly unpleasant memories of his miserable family life, but he also admitted that wasn't the furniture's fault. It was handsome and perfectly well-made, and came in the standard dark mahogany and ebony— which was admirably suited to Severus' personal tastes.

Harry and Draco, under the tutelage of Minerva, crafted a house-wide cat-network. Small crannies and large were all connected by natural logs and stones. The set in sky-windows to bring in plenty of natural light, and had endless fun luring in Brim to test the sunning spots. Brim seemed to approve, and promptly set about scent marking everything.

It was because of Brim that they found perhaps the greatest secret buried at Spinner's End: Eileen Prince Snape. They found her locked in what appeared to be a permanent stasis spell. Even more disturbing, she had been walled up alive, literally, her body hidden under a section of brick behind the basement stairs.
Tobias, it seemed, had beaten his wife bloody, believed her to be dead, and then disposed of her "corpse" behind the stairs. Eileen had managed to wandlessly cast a stasis spell on herself just before she ran out of oxygen, but it had also rendered her unaware and unable to summon aid.

When Brim had absolutely refused to leave her position under the stairs, Draco and Harry had become suspicious. They had, in-turn, summoned Severus, and the discovery of Eileen had come about shortly after. They had quickly taken her to St Mungo's to undergo treatment.

Once Eileen was released and Severus brought her back "home," the truth had finally come oozing out like purulent discharge from a badly-infected wound. A long time ago, way before Severus had even been born, her sister, Elizabeth, had wanted to be sole heiress of the considerable Prince wealth. Elizabeth had then proceeded to frame Eileen for various misdeeds in the hopes that her parents would eventually disown her. It hadn't worked, so she became even more insidious and creative. After spiking Eileen's tea with a completely tasteless form of Amortentia mixed with a strong fertility potion, she had set her up with a Muggle man named Tobias Snape, whom she had also dosed with the potion. That single night had proven to be enough to get Eileen pregnant, and Tobias had married her due to great pressure from his parents to "suck it up and be a man." Elizabeth then wove a grand story about how her wicked sister had abandoned the family and left them all behind for a filthy Muggle. Her plan had seemed to work out this time.

Tobias had fiercely resented Eileen, blaming her for his lack of freedom, and he had started drinking heavily. Things between them got even worse when Severus had been born, and his drinking had rapidly accelerated. While Eileen dearly loved Severus, she felt she could not leave Tobias due to her family having closed all doors to her as a result of her shameful "transgressions." Tobias was, oddly enough, still paying for the basics for him, despite frequently saying how much he hated them both.

Then, one day, Eileen had found her wand, which had been mysteriously missing ever since her one-night stand with Tobias, which had turned out to be the beginning of a life of endless pain and misery. She had also found the corpse of the Prince family's favourite owl. Poor Ichabod had been killed, a faded letter still strapped his leg, begging their daughter to come home— wherever she was, whatever had happened, they didn't care. They just wanted their beloved daughter back home safe.

Eileen realised what had happened as well as the horrific extent of her sister's greed and depravity, and was set to move out that very night. Unfortunately, Tobias had come home early and caught her packing up her belongings. He had hit her so hard, she hadn't had the time or the ability to call on her wand. She woke up to find herself trapped behind the wall, and she knew she would die there. She used the last dregs of her magic to cast a wandless spell to place herself in stasis, praying that one day, someone would find and rescue her.

The Aurors were called in at once. Alastor Moody performed a series of traces on poor, dead Ichabod, and also found traces of the Dark magic that had killed him. That traced back to none other than Elizabeth Rosalind Prince— who had apparently not been happy to learn that the two Prince elders, her parents, had locked away Eileen's inheritance in Gringotts. They had been convinced their daughter was still alive and had never given up until the day that Elizabeth had murdered them too.

Elizabeth was hauled away by Aurors, literally kicking and screaming, and was, ironically, convicted of the attempted murder of one of the Aurors who had come to secure her. That alone was enough to condemn her to life in Azkaban without even hearing about the rest, though she had been tried and found guilty of that as well. It was a life sentence, but many believed that even that wasn't nearly long enough for her many crimes. The Prophet was alight with news regarding the return of the lost heiress of the Prince family, but when all was said and done, all Eileen really wanted was to live in peace and mourn the loss of the parents she thought had given up on her all those years ago.
Eileen, after having been beaten and abused at Spinner's End for so long, seemed happy to see what Severus and his "new" friends had done to the old place. She was equally glad they had thrown away all of the horrid and tacky items that Tobias had so loved. Even more so, she celebrated the disposal of the hated alcohol cabinet. She sold off the remaining estate of her parents, feeling that she just couldn't live in the house where her parents had been murdered. But, when Severus asked her if she would like to stay at Spinner's End and help make it a place for positive memories, she agreed.

That door to the hurtful past of the house of Snape seemed to have finally closed behind them. Eileen was hoping she would finally have time to bond to her son in a way she had never been able to before, and it seemed that Severus, too, wanted to get to know his mother for the woman she really was.

Draco and Harry took turns practicing transfiguration on some of the remaining bits of tackiness and horror that had belonged to Tobias Snape. They transformed his chipped old coffee mugs with rude sayings on them into a series of charming duck figurines. They turned a boxful of old beer mats and pub glasses into marble and crystal chess pieces and a decorative playing board. They took the entire collection of old beer signs and odd paintings of dogs playing poker to a reputable London resale shop and were shocked to find they were actually worth thousands of pounds. Since Draco and Harry had done the work of collecting and hauling them away, Eileen told them they should split the money and invest in something that mattered: their futures.

With a little advice from Lucius, the two boys put their savings into a series of investments. With a little luck, those investments would ripen by the time they graduated into something far greater. Both Draco and Harry trusted implicitly that Lucius knew his investments, so if he told them it was something they should do, they believed him and took his advice. Their friendship only grew stronger from their many adventures together, and it seemed as though the two would become inseparable—the kind of relationship that would last for a lifetime.

As for Eileen and Severus, the initial awkwardness was broken up by one happy Nundu, who gleefully introduced Eileen to her plush spider collection and headbutted Severus firmly on the arse so he would hug his mother as often as possible. Eileen named Brim's spiders Eek, Coffee, Squeaky, Snowfall, and Whee. It wasn't uncommon for Eileen to wake up with a pile of happy plush spiders gathered next to her, piled there so very carefully by a well-meaning and very affectionate Nundu. The visits to Spinner's End seemed to breathe new life back into both the house and Eileen, and for the first time in decades, she began to dress like a witch again and started working at the Leaky Cauldron. Despite her generous inheritance, she desired a reconnection to the world she had been forced to leave, and Rabbage's kind encouragement had been exactly what she needed. As it turned out, she loved working with people, and the shyness she had always demonstrated around Severus as a child slowly fell away. Brim had donated Squeaky to her to keep her company, and the little plush spider would perch on her shoulder as she worked and fetch her objects such as spoons or tabs as she needed them. Life, it seemed, was much improved for her, and if Brim had anything to say about it, she refused to allow Severus and Eileen to remain awkward with each other, disarming them with her playful antics and genuine adoration of ear and tummy rubs. The covenant was sealed with Crookshanks, who had been determinedly following Brim everywhere. The highly intelligent half-Kneazle decided that Eileen needed his attention and love more, and soon they became inseparable.

Alas, when the Weasleys showed up to have lunch at the Leaky, they recognised Crookshanks and demanded that he be returned. A sad Eileen bade him a tearful goodbye, tucking him in Molly's arms with his favourite pumpkin-coloured spider.

It wasn't a week later that a large basket arrived via owl with Crookshanks inside, accompanied by a note explaining that he had become beyond insufferable after being brought "home" and they simply didn't want to deal with him anymore. Crookshanks was now Eileen's familiar for good. It took a
week to nurse back to health the unfortunate owl that had been stuck with the job of delivering the 
brassed-off feline, as the poor owl had crashed headlong into the picture window upon arriving and 
knocked himself out. Beyond delighted that her furry friend had been returned to her, Eileen walked 
right over to Eyelop's Owl Emporium and bought a young barred owl, enough food to last the young 
owl a year (to insure that the bird grew up without needs), bundled up a grateful Errol in a well-
cushioned basket, and had it all delivered by courier to the Burrow with Eileen's profuse thanks for 
gifting her with Crookshanks. Enclosed with the basket was a generous gift certificate for a 
Hogwarts-approved cat, owl, or toad from the Magical Menagerie.

Fred and George came into the Leaky Cauldron with their father, Arthur, a few weeks later to thank 
Eileen for her kind consideration. Arthur apologised for his wife's rather erratic manners of late and 
speculated that finding out that her youngest son had the sheer audacity to lie to her face about what 
really been going on at Hogwarts had thoroughly rattled the normally warm and kind-hearted 
witch. She was never one, or so he believed, to do anything lightly or half-arsed at all, so she had 
promptly set fire to the bridges before realising that Ronald needed an altogether different sort of 
mothering than the rest of her children. Her usual coddling was clearly not helping Ronald at all, and 
allowing him to go on believing that merely being Sorted into Slytherin house somehow made you 
irredeemably evil was definitely not helping to improve his lacking social skills. Arthur was seriously 
considering sending Ronald off to Durmstrang Institute for the stringent discipline alone, but had 
been informed that the school rarely accepted transfer students.

"Perhaps Ronald should work here for a while, Arthur," Eileen kindly suggested to the clearly 
frustrated father. "Here, you must pay attention to people's wants and take care to treat them well. It 
could be very good for the boy to learn responsibility for his actions in a real-life situation, don't you 
think? Perhaps, with permission from the Ministry, he could even do a sort of work-study program 
between here and Hogwarts. I can schedule him a few hours here each evening. He can floo here 
directly from Hogwarts, and he will still have time to do his homework. During the slower times 
here, he will be able to tend to his studies as well."

"That seems like a brilliant idea, Eileen," Arthur confessed. "Do you think the Headmistress would 
approve of an arrangement like that?"

Eileen shook her head. "Contrary to what some may believe, the Headmistress wants her students to 
succeed. That is why she has put in so many reforms recently, yes? I think she would be quite 
receptive to the idea if you were to bring it up to her over tea and biscuits. I recommend rose biscuits 
or jaffa cakes. One should never forget chocolate when having tea with a lady."

Arthur grinned. "You're a true miracle, Eileen. I'm so glad you finally found your way back to us."

Eileen smiled at him. "Rabbie has really been very kind to allow me to to reacquaint myself with our 
world here at the Leaky. He trusts me to keep things running smoothly, and I find that I truly enjoy 
the work. Getting to know people again. We even get a few Muggle visitors on occasion. I have the 
best job around, Arthur."

Mr Weasley smiled and nodded. "I'm very glad to hear it," he told her.

Draco and Harry had been given special privileges to visit due to their connections to Snape through 
Brim. As Minerva and Severus lived at Hogwarts all year around due to Brim's bond to the school, 
some exceptions were being made due to preexisting social bonds.

The pair had helped Rabbie build a new hut for teaching Care of Magical Creatures since his original 
hut had been commandeered and renovated to suit his much larger size by one Rubeus Hagrid. 
Rabbie confessed that he really didn't want it back after having taken a good look at it, and it gave
him a welcome opportunity to build an even better residence.

Kettleburn, while he had finally, blissfully, retired, was living peacefully in the Dark Forest in his own small cottage, and he came to visit and assist Rabbie quite often. After meeting with the centaurs to request their permission to build, Magorian had been happy to agree. He remembered Rabbie's work well from a time long past, and the rest of the centaurs seemed happy to see him once more as well. More people like Rabbie and Kettleburn were exactly what they wanted, and they gladly gave their permission to begin building.

Work on the hut began in the morning and continued until dusk. Hogwarts elves came popping in regularly with refreshments and meals, and it seemed that everyone was happy to help Rabbie reclaim a bit of what had connected him to Hogwarts to begin with.

Harry and Draco applied levitation spells to move larger stones over to be used, soon becoming quite skilled at it—enough so that they started to have friendly competitions to see who could make the tallest pile of stones without toppling the entire thing. Rabbie outlined precisely where he wanted the desired stones set, Minerva worked on cementing them into place, and Filius designed the windows and shutters as well as the door frames. He crafted a door that would be so heavy that no one could possibly budge it unless they were accepted by the wards. That last was devised to prevent students from attempting to sneak in during the night with the intent of pranking or committing any other sort of adolescent mischief.

Minerva taught the two boys how to craft clay roof tiles by shaping them in soft clay and performing the simple spell to fire them properly. Then she taught them how to apply the desired glaze before firing them again to make them virtually unbreakable. The boys again competed against each other, trying to create the most brilliant roof tile, and by the time Sirius, Severus, and Remus had set all the tiles down, the roof looked like the shining, iridescent scales of a great dragon. Rabbie was more than pleased with the effect.

Remus taught them how to make a roofing beam decorations to perfectly match the dragon scales and then carefully guided them on how to make protective wards to anchor them within. It took only a week for them to make the intricate dragon's head for the beam, but it took them a bit longer to learn the wards due to the sheer complexity of what Remus and Rabbie had designed.

"You must remember," Remus told them, "that each ward must be keyed to a specific person or a chosen group of people. If you forget, you can block out people who you want to visit and cause people to think that you don't want any visitors."

Brim was mrowling unhappily outside the warded wrought-iron gate that guarded the cottage's outer perimeter.

"See?" Remus chided. "You've totally forgotten about our large feline friend over there."

Harry and Draco looked utterly appalled, and they quickly set to work with expressions of serious concentration on their faces.

A blur of heat suddenly blew past them, and Brim bounded in, pouncing the two boys mercilessly into the grass. They squirmed and wriggled, but it was no use. She pinned them, licked them all over, and then very proudly carried them by their collars into the hut.

Remus laughed uproariously, his bellows of pure amusement lasting until the two boys came back out, looking as though they had been dragged through the woods backwards only to collapse in a puddle. Perhaps, anyone speculating such would not have been so far off in their assumption.
"How does she do that?" Draco bemoaned, both hands scrubbing at his pale hair and the impressive monument to cowlicks that it had become.

"We haven't even figured out how to add her!" Harry sulked, his black hair now bearing a remarkable resemblance to the bony casque crowning the head of a cassowary.

"That, children," Remus informed them, "is a lesson on the magic of Hogwarts. Just like the Headmaster or Headmistress can override any ward on the castle and the surrounding grounds; for example, the anti-Apparation jinx, so too can Brim. She is a creature of Hogwarts, much like the house-elves. They defy normal rules because they are a part of the land itself—they are actually bound to it. The house-elves are so by choice, but Brim—I don't think there was ever a time she was not bound to this land."

Harry and Draco exchanged glances and then squeaked as Brim enthusiastically pounced them again.

The centaur foals were coming out of the forest to visit; a dappled palomino mare was escorting them to a meadow dotted with colourful wildflowers behind the work site. The foals cheered as Brim came bounding over to greet them when Harry and Draco's malfunctioning wards refused to allow them entry.

Remus gave them a "Well, now you have to fix that too" sort of look, and the two boys frantically set about fixing their errors while Brim and the foals happily frolicked together. Being left out of the play proved to be quite the inspiration for their efforts. Soon the wards were properly set, checked over by Remus, and then fully incorporated along with the newly-mounted dragon head.

"Sunchaser," Remus said with a bow. "How very good to see you."

"Good morning, Moondance," she replied, using his nickname amongst the centaurs.

"I always did rather prefer that name to Moony," Remus confessed.

Sunchaser smiled, handing him a basket full of green things.

Remus looked inside. "Oh, wonderful. Rabbie will be thrilled."

"We thought he would like seedlings and cuttings for starting up his garden. All of these are centaur-friendly specimens so he needs not worry about accidentally exposing the foals to anything dangerous," she said with a smile. "Not that he ever would, of course, but we saved him the trouble of fetching them."

Remus laughed. "I think Rabbie enjoys romping around in the woods searching for the wild's bounty, aye?"

"He and Kettleburn both," Sunchaser said, her smile widening into a grin, her ears flicking to and fro to keep tabs on her young charges. Her stance was relaxed, though. She knew Brim would never allow them to be harmed on her watch.

"Rabbie is off fetching some new magical shutters that will keep the insects out but let fresh air pass through," Remus told her. "Someone in Diagon Alley is making a killing selling them. They even have door applications too. You just paint the nontoxic shellac on your door and it works like a charm."

"I approve," Sunchaser said. "If only such a thing could be applied to our hides in the summer to rid us of all these horrible flies."
"I think I can help you with that," Remus chuckled. "Let me find that spray bottle Rabbie left for you." Remus disappeared into the hut and came out with a large sprayer. "If you will allow me?"

"Please do," Sunchaser invited, her tail swishing and legs stomping in eagerness to rid herself of the annoying blood-sucking insects.

"Severus is working on a band that you will be able to wear around the base of your tail that will automatically produce the potion's effect, but he is still testing it," Remus explained as he sprayed the citrus-smelling liquid over the mare.

"Glory be to Chiron," Sunchaser gasped, her ears drooping slightly to the side in sheer relief. All the random horseflies and blood-seeking insects pinged off her hide as if they had just flown into a wall at top speed.

She took the diffuser and prompted called out to her foals. They stood twitching with curiosity and excitement. She covered them all from head to hooves, and each of them looked as though they had just been given the best massage of their young lives.

"Thank you, Professor Lupin!" they all chimed, returning to romp with Brim, Harry and Draco.

"Feel free to take the diffuser with you, Sunchaser," Remus said. "Rabbie said to stop in any time to get more. He has a vat of it curing in the back already. You can just dip into it whenever you need a refill."

"His compassion for us is a greatly cherished gift," the centaur mare said with a nod, "truly. I think he and Kettleburn together have given us all a clear reminder on why Magorian was very wise to promote peace between us despite some worry that there would be much disrespect for our ways."

"I don't think either Kettleburn or Rabbie have a disrespectful bone in their bodies," Remus chuckled. "Well, not to the magical creatures and races, at least. They've had a few harsh words to say about some of their fellow humans, though."

Sunchaser nickered her amusement. "We share our forest with creatures both magical and mundane. Our race has always been somewhere in the middle, thanks to our natural duality. It is a great relief that our relationship with Hogwarts remains strong and healthy. Especially now that Mistress Hushpad always keeps us in mind when making decisions for the school. That is something the old Headmaster did not always do."

Remus smiled. There was a squeal as the centaur foals, the boys, and one highly-enthusiastic Brim plunged into the cool depths of Black Lake together. The concerned giant squid seemed to take a swift headcount, making sure that no one might be drowning on his watch.

Sunchaser smiled. "Perhaps, one day, our people will be blessed with such relationships all around the world. Such things are slow to bloom, but as word spreads to the other herds, very few herd-leaders will fail to see the real advantages for our people.

"That I would truly like to see," Remus replied truthfully. "As a werewolf, acceptance is a wonderful yet fragile thing."

Severus appeared as he came walking out of the Dark Forest, his hands full of baskets loaded with various types of fungi and edibles from Kettleburn's gardens — offerings for the centaur and tokens of their friendship. He whistled shortly, and Brim's head immediately popped up from the water.

The two boys were clinging to her back as she paddled around, and the Nundu bounded out of the lake and tore up the bank to meet her master in all due haste. Draco and Harry clung to her like burrs,
frantically trying to hold onto her scruffy almost-mane and barrel-like body. She bounded up the bank in large bounds, coming to a halt by Severus. She mrowled in happiness, rubbing against him as the rattled boys slowly began to get their bearings back.

Draco and Harry stared up at Severus as he shook his head at them.

"Having," Severus started to ask, "fun, gentlemen?" His voice was like velvet and venom chased by thread of pure amusement.

They nodded back to him silently.

"I think they just developed a brand-new new sport, Coal," Remus chuckled.

"Oh?" Severus asked, raising a brow. "What would that be?"

"Nundu riding," Remus laughed. "She can be their war-cat as they defend this territory from the evils of the world."

Severus snorted. "Gryffindor."

Remus clapped Severus on the back. "Someone has to teach them to dream big and take on the world."

"I prefer to teach them to watch their arses and remain alive," Severus noted with a sniff.

"Team sport, old friend," Remus chuckled. "It takes an entire village."

"And a herd," Sunchaser agreed.

"Indeed," Remus chuckled. "It takes us all."

Salazar dropped his book as a pair of slender arms glomped around his shoulders and the very familiar weight of Hermione slammed into him. She deftly caught his book as she snuggled into his neck and shoulder.

"Oof, child, what brings you to assault my weary person so thoroughly?"

Hermione grinned and leaned into him, chuckling warmly. "Is it so bad to have missed you?"

"Every night you see me, child," Salazar groused, "and every night is the equal to months of the time outside. As if looking in a mirror did not clearly demonstrate this already."

"I still feel like it's only been such a little while," Hermione confessed, leaning her head against Salazar's shoulder. "Yet, I have learned so very much."

"You are a true master in a great many things, dearheart," Salazar said with a smile. "This place—the heart of Hogwarts—has allowed you to grow up with us and live a full life, yet out there, it is just beginning. A part of you shall always remain here with us, but for a time the outside world can be yours as well."

Hermione wrapped her arm around his and slumped into his shoulder. "I'm glad you are here with me. Everyone. I feel as though I finally—belong."

Salazar hrmed. He patted her curly hair and grunted softly. "You have always belonged, my child. Only now, your space is carved amongst the magic as ours once was for us."
Hermione smiled at him, her eyes glistening with something of a faraway look.

"There you go with those faraway looks Godric is so fond of," Salazar harrumphed.

"I cannot help it," Hermione answered. "There is so much to both look forward and backwards to."

Salazar chuckled. "It seems that only a short month ago you were but a child who could not see the true message in the scrying pool— driving dear Rowena to her wit's end. Now, just look at you. You see both forwards and backwards. You are flexible— and clever. You unravel and become the mystery. You handle a sword and your pride like Godric, but you shelter and nurture like Helga. You are driven as you are ambitious. You let no one prove your worth for you. You have shed your insecurities and exchanged them for determination and will. You have grown up well, Hermione. You are a truly brilliant and gifted young witch. You are now what we have become: a protector of the land, the magic, as well as the people and creatures that live upon it. Even the very trees know your names, child."

Salazar took her hands and held them gently in his own, after carefully placing something within them. "I would give you one more name, child, if you should choose to honour me with your acceptance."

Hermione stared down into her hands. Cradled in her hands was the most beautiful amber locket. The serpent appeared to writhe within the amber as though the inside was entirely liquid. Runes danced within the cut surface. The outside and rimmed in fine silver and gold, and that too were wreathed in runes. "It's so beautiful." As she placed her finger on the surface, the serpent moved below her finger and then moved up and out over her finger, wrapping around it like a ring and then sank back into the deep amber. "Is that a basilisk?"

Salazar nodded. "The guardian of my family for as long as the name of Slytherin has existed. Long have we heard the language that others fear. In the times of my father's father, the dark was only our fear. The night was only dark, so fear and dark were seen as one and the same. It is said, at some point, a Slytherin ancestor grew tired of fearing the dark, for self-preservation can only take one so far. He set a trap in the writhing dark to capture that which scared him so. In the morning, he did find the basilisk— king of the serpents."

"The basilisk gifted my ancestor with the speech to understand all serpents, to beg him to avert his eyes, lest he kill him with his gaze. He said that while the world feared the dark, he could see it as clearly as though it were the light of day, but the price was that those who looked into eyes of his people— the basilisks— would see all the things hidden for good reason and the terrible weight of that knowledge would turn a man to stone," Salazar continued. "He said that it was a very lonely existence as the kings and queens of all snakes. His people were hated and feared by everyone. If my ancestor would but converse with him and keep him company, he would give his family the tongue of the serpent, that he might always be able to understand the language of the scale and fang."

Salazar snorted softly. "A Slytherin always knows a good deal when they hear one. My ancestor did agree, and so the covenant was made. The basilisk did shield his eyes so my ancestors could be unafraid, and they did keep him company. He, in turn, protected our family. He and for all the generations after."

"When men grew braver, they hunted the basilisk out of unreasoning fear, killing them because of their gaze and misunderstanding their true nature. They wove fearsome tales of Dark wizards hatching chicken eggs with toads, spreading lies that the crow of a rooster at the break of dawn dispelled all evil," Salazar continued. "Most men are as only as good as their stories, their own frequent and biased rewrites of history. The truth would likely be their doom. While this is not always so, it is so often proved to be so."
"What most do not realise is that the pact with the basilisk spans for countless generations," he continued, "and the immunity to its gaze and venom is bestowed to the one who makes a pact with it in truth, solidarity, and friendship. The basilisks even recognised the loved ones of their chosen bond-mate's line, and beauty of the gift was that it protected those loved ones too."

"That was the ultimate gift of the greatest of serpents," Salazar said. "Friendship, love, companionship, understanding, and protection. Alas, it seems that my line has fallen into grave disrepair, the lessons I once thought impossible to forget have indeed been forgotten."

Salazar twitched and he held Hermione's hands again. "This is my family's grimoire. All those of my family once wore one. Share with it stories of your loved ones and it will know them. Whisper into it your spells, and it will remember them. Sing to it your songs, and it will sing them back to you whenever times grow dark. I would claim you as my family, my kin, my heart, and my daughter, my dear Hermione. To you, I would give my legacy that you may show the world what being Slytherin truly is and was."

Hermione clutched the pendant that was so much more than a pendant. Her hands trembled as she put it around her neck and threw her arms around the usually dour-looking wizard, attempting to squeeze the life out of him.

Salazar stroked her hair and smiled. "Is that a yes?"

Hermione nodded, too overcome to speak, and sobbed into his collar, holding him tightly. "Yes. Yes. A hundred times yes."

"One more name to add your growing list," Salazar said with fondness. He pressed his lips to her forehead.

_Upon this day,_

_I swear in blood and magic entwined,_

_You are my daughter,_

_In fate, heart, and soul in kind._

_Forevermore one, we are this day—_  

_Our lives joined this life and next,_

_May our bond be true and enemies vexed._

_This I swear to you this day,_

_I shall always be here to wipe your tears away._

_May our lines be joined forever hence,_

_Made as one in love, not recompense._

_Will you accept my bond, this day?_  

_Will you allow us joined this way?_  

Salazar pressed his lips to her left and right cheek and pressed his forehead to hers. Bright, warm magic swirled around them.
Hermione hugged him tight, her mouth pressed his ear.

*I accept your bond, your love, my father.*

*I know together, our lives will prosper.*

*Together now, forever hence.*

*I accept it all shall it commence.*

*Family comes both in birth and fate,*

*Family I do choose in you, not hate.*

Tendrils of magical energy wove around them, springing from their cores and weaving together. Fine filaments of blood blended together and returned within them both, joined forever in blood and magic.

Salazar wiped away the silvery tears that trickled from Hermione's eyes. "Welcome to the family, Hermione Jean Bonnie Skye Fairbairn Brimstone Slytherin. May all your names sing true to your heart."

Hermione sniffed, snuffling into Salazar's salt and pepper hair as her mind and heart were full of emotion. "There is only one name I need to know for you."

"Oh? Pray tell, my child, what would that be?" Salazar asked.

"Dad," she sniffled, wrapping him tight in her arms.

Salazar pressed his hand to her hair and his eyes closed, one tear trickling down the side of his nose. "It is time for you to remember a task in the waking world, my daughter. It is important."

Brim yawned toothily and flopped down onto the floor. She stretched her body from nose to tail tip, shaking her body from whiskers down to her toes with a collected sound. She padded over to the pile of boy wizards and wedged under the blankets and began to wiggle and lick any and all exposed skin.

"Ah!" the boys burst out from under the shared duvet and made sounds of protest.

Brim waved her tail back and forth lazily, and made motions pretending that she was going to devour each boy starting with their heads.

"Ah, Brim! No! My hair!" Harry protested.

"It already looks like a mop, Harry," Draco noted amusedly, ruffling his hair. "She might even improve it."

Harry gave Draco the look that roughly translated into 'Shut it, you,' and 'Damnit, leave my hair alone!'

Draco clicked his tongue and distracted Brim long enough to get his own dose of tongue bath and tickle-by-whisker torture.

Harry snorted and handed Draco his shirt and trousers. "Do you think they'll let us go to Hogsmeade today? Rabbie said we deserved a little fun after working so hard building his house with everyone."
Draco shrugged as he pulled on his shirt. "He's not one to lie. It's just a matter of who actually has the time to take us. If it was during the school year, we couldn't go then since we're too young."

"Psh," Harry said dismissively. "It's only Hogsmeade, not Knockturn Alley."

Draco snorted. "I don't think anyone is old enough for Knockturn Alley."

Harry shrugged. "I hear Hagrid goes there to buy some slug repellant for his gardens."

Draco raised a brow. "Makes you wonder just what they put in it that has it only being made available in Knockturn Alley, don't you?"

Harry looked thoughtful. "Now that you think of it." He shuddered visibly.

Draco whapped Harry upside the head with his shirt and trousers. "Come on, we might as well feed ourselves and be ready for once. Maybe Brim will let us tag along with her on her morning patrol."

The early-morning feline yawned and walked by them, her tail smacking into their faces as she strolled down the hall. Both boys grabbed on her tail automatically, having already been conditioned to follow her and stay close in a very short amount of time.

Tinky had breakfast set out for them already, so it was only a matter of dishing it up. The boys left behind a few scraps of cloth for the house-elf, knowing that she was working on a quilting project, as a token of their thanks. Draco dumped about fifteen metric spoon-tons of sugar and cinnamon on his oatmeal and stirred it in while Harry added diced cheese and apples and proceeded to devour the pile.

"Merlin, Draco, were you a hummingbird in a previous life?" Harry demanded.

Draco shrugged. "I might have been dreaming about those huge elephant ears from the circus last night."

Harry shook his head, pulling a tangerine from the fruit bowl, quickly peeling and devouring it. Deciding to get a little creative, he cut a few slices of the fragrant loaf of wholemeal bread Tiny had left for them, giving some to Draco, and then proceeded to stack apple slices, cheese, and bacon together. He slapped another piece of bread over it, zapping it with his wand to toast the bread, and proceeded to enthusiastically stuff his face.

Draco looked curious and a little envious. "Where did you learn that?"

"One of the few things Aunt Petunia made that actually tasted good, even though she only let me have bits of leftover bacon and the apples that had gotten bruised," Harry told him. "She learned it off the cooking channel on the telly."

Draco arched a platinum brow in question.

"Moving pictures on a screen. Kind of like the pictures in the Prophet, but in colour and they even talk."

Draco looked extremely curious, now.

Harry finished off his sandwich. "Maybe Professor Snape will let us catch a movie in London sometime. I think you'd like it. There is a discount theatre that plays older movies for less than a pound. We could probably all get in to see the show for a galleon's worth of Wizarding money."
Draco got a rather sly look on his face.

Harry was instantly suspicious. Brim, however, took both boys by the sleeve and herded them out the front door using her head wedged against their back as a plough.

"Brim, where we going?" Draco asked as Harry and he obediently clasped her tail as they walked.

Peeves drifted by, likely on a mission to make someone's life miserable sooner rather than later. He did a strange sort of astral skid as he saw Brim, and slowed down. Slowly, he flew back in the other direction.

"Well, that's the first I've ever seen Peeves think better of something," Harry noted.

Draco pointed to the Nundu. "Who knows, maybe her breath reaches into the astral."

Harry's eyes widened. "Disturbing. Can't even be an angry ghost or poltergeist at Hogwarts."

"I dunno," Draco thought aloud. "I kind of like Peeves behaving."

"The meeting is just ending," Filch's voice said as he walked down the corridor. Headmistress said to keep an eye out for you and let you know.

"Hello, Mr Filch," the boys chimed as Brim pounced the man mercilessly, sending poor Mrs Norris flying into Draco's arms.

"Mrow!" Mrs Norris complained.

Argus lay supine flat on his back as the Nundu worked him over, licking his thin hair into total disarray and shaving off half his face with her raspy tongue. As with most of her grooming "victims" Argus was distinctly looking better for her attentions. Between the gaining the status of being a wizard instead of a Squib and looking a bit younger due to the daily groomings, he was looking far less tired and raggedy.

"How are your studies coming, Mr Filch?" Harry asked politely.

Argus sighed. "I was trying to cast a warming charm, and I ended up turning Mrs Norris into a lynx instead. She laid on me all night until she got bored."

Harry and Draco exchanged sympathetic glances.

"Maybe save the actual wand-work for when you are in class," Harry said. "We all can't be H—" Harry trailed off.

"Can't be who, Harry?" Draco asked.

"I have no idea. For a minute, I thought— but I think I'm confused." Harry scratched his head, baffled.

Brim tugged on his sleeve.

"Looks like it's time for you to go, young sirs," Argus chuckled.

"Take care, Mr Filch," the pair said, waving before getting dragged away by the insistent Nundu.

Harry and Draco arrived at the Headmistress' office in time to have tea and socialise a little with their professors without the kind of stiff formalities they had to observe while others were present. Both
boys had become a bit of an expected duo, and Harry's growing bond with both Severus and Minerva (thanks to his initial need to have Brim around to help him feel safe around Sirius) had matured into a full-blown respect and even affection. Now that it was common knowledge that Harry and Draco shared the same godfather, having them both come around for a visit was not surprising. Harry had gone from being the ostracised child living under the stairs to a polite, if still somewhat shy around those he didn't know, young wizard. Between Draco and himself, he was becoming much more outgoing and secure, and Draco was more focused on his learning instead of appearances. No one seemed to find that to be a bad thing at all—at least amongst the people who truly mattered: his professors and those he had begun to see as his real family.

Suddenly, Brim popped her head up from chewing lovingly on her spiders. All of them crawled up to nest in her scruffy, mane-like neckfur. She made a short chirp-like meow like a mother leopard to her cubs, and bonked Severus on the rump and tugged on Minerva's sleeve.

Harry and Draco knew this herding motion well and instantly perked.

"Where we going, Brim?"

The Nundu purred loudly and chirped.

Draco and Harry crawled onto her back and clung to her neck and sides together. Brim bounded down the staircase, pausing a moment to snuggle up to the guarding gargoyle, and then she took off down the hall, the other professors chasing behind her, whispering in curiosity and excitement.

"Look, she has a new pendant around her neck," Draco said, pointing to the glowing object around Brim's neck.

Severus knelt down as fingered the growing collection gathered around the Nundu's neck: the emblem of the Founders, her registration shield from the Familiar Registration Office, her African endangered species registration tag, an emerald green velvet collar with a pristine silver spider with the added miniature habitat for her growing collection of plush spiders, and the latest startling gold and silver amber pendant with a writhing serpent moving within. "This one is new."

Both the Founder's emblem and the serpent pendant glowed, lighting up the darkened chamber they had found themselves in. Ahead of them was a giant door, wrought in metal. Multiple snake heads were poised as if to strike. Glimmering runes were shining around the curve of the door.


Remus was waving his wand, perhaps to check for any Dark Magic. At that, Brim bit him squarely on the arse.

"Hey!"

Brim glared, shaking her head at him.

"Rumour had it that Tom Riddle found the Chamber once," Remus blurted. "Even if it didn't originally have Dark Magic, it might still have some yet."

Brim seemed to ponder this for a moment and then, gave his offended posterior an apologetic nuzzle. Remus sighed. "I'm really glad I heal fast."

Brim put her paws on the door and chirped. Her pendants glowed, and Harry's eyes suddenly went
very wide.

"I can hear her!" he and Draco exclaimed simultaneously.

"So can I—" Minerva said in wonder. "How very strange." She clasped Rabbie's hand tightly in excitement.

"I can only hear hissing," Remus complained, confused.

"Me too," Rabbie said, "but I do not doubt that Minerva can."

"I can hear her too," Severus said.

*Open for me,*

*Door of old.*

*My father made thee,*

*To hide his gold.*

*Gold not of monetary gain,*

*No, it is gold by another name.*

*Serpents great dwell deep within,*

*I call upon them to let me in.*

*I am the heir you seek to hear.*

*I am the one he cherished dear.*

"I remember that—" Severus said as the door clanked snake after snake into position and then opened. "A half-burnt tome in the Restricted Section was written by Seraphina Slytherin, Salazar's beloved wife. She was burned to death by Muggles. Rumour has it that this was the reason Salazar supposedly turned against Muggles, but the stories were never clear. It was almost as if the history wasn't written by the Founders at all."

"I fear we know very little of the Founders, save the rare few texts that remain to us," Filius said.

"The great fire," Rabbie said with a grim nod.

"Aye," Remus recalled. "A fire as mysterious in how it began as how it miraculously went out."

Their musings ended as Brim confidently trotted off into the darkness, her pendants shining a glowing warm, golden radiance. They followed the Nundu, trusting her instincts.

"Merlin," Pomona gasped, speaking up in her awe when she first laid eyes upon the giant serpent sculptures rising up from the water. Pristine water poured from their open mouths. Pond vegetation grew thanks to hovering lights. Large fish swam in the water, leaping up to snatch the insects that skimed the surface. Dark, phosphorescent vines draped down from the ceiling as a rare species of glowing fungus cast a dim light within the chamber. "I've never seen such a cleverly-constructed ecosystem here at Hogwarts short of in the greenhouses themselves."

"This place is bloody huge," Harry and Draco whispered, clinging to Brim tightly. The Nundu
purred softly to reassure them.

Tiers upon tiers of lush, thriving gardens and subterranean plants filled the chamber. The air was surprisingly fresh and earthy.

A soft warble hung in the air. Fawkes was perched on a nearby glowing root, plucking glowing berries from one of the nearby vines.

"Fawkes?" Minerva gasped. "How on earth did he get there?"

Brim chirped a greeting, and Fawkes promptly flew down to perch on top of her head. Brim pulled him into her paws and snuggled him, rubbing her chin against his feathers and then letting him go. The errant phoenix chirped and made himself at home in Harry's lap, snuggling between the Nundu and the two boys.

They all looked above. Somewhere, far, far above, light trickled in from the outside world, but it was a long, long way away. Anyone who might have fallen from above would most definitely have met a singularly harsh and painful end, had the chamber not been so well-warded, ensuring that it would remain unseen and yet thoroughly protected.

"Maybe it's one way, unless someone knows where the entrance is— something with wings," Remus said, musing aloud.

Severus, who was staring up and around nodded. "Air exchange. Natural caverns were carved out to form this place."

"These plants—" Pomona crooned lovingly. "Some of these exist nowhere else in the world. They died off hundreds of years before. We have similar plants, yes, but these— I recognise them from the old block prints and dried specimens."

She fondly caressed one of the flowers with her hands like one would a lover, and the plant began to sing. Tears poured down her face.

As they explored, something large and dark shot out from one of the shrubs and bolted, a long sinuous tail and overgrown teeth gave hint to what it was.

SNAP!

The beast gave a choking cry followed by a horrifying death rattle as something far larger rose up in front of them.

Close your eyes, a voice commanded. Avert your gaze.

Harry and Draco buried their heads in her fur. The professors all immediately did as the voice commanded.

Brim moved forward confidently.

"Kin? Kin of he who sheltered us?" the serpent hissed, enormous dark coils moving in the hazy darkness.

Brim stood, but she lowered her head respectfully.

"She is," another voice hissed excitedly. "I can smell it on her."

"At last!" the other exclaimed, hissing loudly.
"Say the words," the one said.

"Renew the pledge the other would not," the other hissed. "Renew the bond that he forgot."

"Avenge the one who died," the other hissed, "betrayed by the one who lied."

Brim lifted her head, her eyes closed. She roared loudly, the sound reverberating off the walls and carrying up to the skies above.

I am Brim,

Daughter of him

Who created this place

In all due haste.

He crafted a home,

But not for you alone.

Here lies his gold,

Knowledge untold—

Waiting, waiting

For his true heir.

I swear to you

This day, this night

The ones who came before

Were not the ones you waited for.

They betrayed.

They did not belong.

They merely used you

And forgot the song.

The covenant ancient, I will uphold.

I swear it thus. Let all behold.

Long you have waited

In the most silent dark.

I come with love

Within my heart.
Let us join ourselves again.

Let us be bound, together, friends.

Come out into the light once more,

Let us together, honour restore.

I am Brimstone Slytherin.

I protect Hogwarts and all sheltered within.

Join with me like in days of old.

Let us together the future unfold.

There was a warm blast of magic that blew outward as the two giant serpents coiled around the smaller Nundu. Their coils wrapped snugly around her, the boys, and the phoenix, their fanged mouths opened as they rubbed against the Nundu's sides.

"We mark you with the magic of our teeth," the one hissed.

"Immunity to our gaze and our venom wreath."

"To you, your loved ones, and family now and later."

"We reaffirm the gift to be our translator."

Very slowly, they drew back their heads and struck, sinking their fangs into the Nundu's neck, but she did not struggle or cry out. They curled around her and the boys, setting their heads across her back, tongues flicking as their magic venom spread throughout her body and the magic cemented them.

"Safe to look," the serpents hissed.

"Safe to see," the darker serpent with a single red feather crest on his head hissed.

The boys looked up with fear and wonder, but Brim purred softly to reassure them. Slowly, the professors looked up as well, dwarfed by the giant basilisks.

"The same offer we make to those brought here," the feathered serpent hissed.

"Under the protection of our sister dear," the other hissed.

"Now that you can understand our speech," the dark basilisk hissed. "Make a choice to to join us and peace to reach."

"Take the mark of a Basilisk's favour."

"May our Covenant be strong and never waver."

"Fangs to skin."

"Venom within."

"But you shall not die within its grasp."
"No, we shall both know peace at last."

"Will you bear your neck to us?"

"Where will you put your faith and trust?"

Severus walked up, cautiously extending his hands to caress the serpent's large, wedge-shaped head. The basilisk's tongue extended and lightly flicked across his face. His dark eyes seemed even more black, but he closed his eyes and tilted his head to the side, exposing his throat. "I accept."

The serpent struck quickly, and Severus winced in pain as the fangs sank in, but as the flood of warm magic quickly blew outward, he sank to Brim's side and slumped against her— venom and magic combining to seal the covenant. Brim cuddled him against her, giving his neck a loving lick.

Rabbie and Minerva came up next, the giant serpents lowered their heads to "taste" them with their tongues. They reached up as Severus had, caressing their scales. They clasped each other's hands and closed their eyes. "We accept."

The serpents struck together, and the couple sank down next to Brim, who tenderly tucked them against her too as they were wrapped in the serpent's warm coils.

Rolanda bowed her head. "I cannot accept, though I mean no offense. My place is in the sky."

"Friend you are to our sister near."

"Fear not retribution or wrath, my dear."

"Friends we can have without the bond."

"Friendship with you perhaps has spawned."

Rolanda nodded, pressing her hands to the serpent's muzzle, and then she stepped away, much relieved.

Septima and Aurora also declined the offer, happy to allowed friendship without the far greater commitment and possible familial repercussions.

Filius came up, reaching up to touch the male basilisk's head. "I accept." Soon, he too slept off the effects in the coils, wrapped in both serpent and Nundu.

Remus stepped up, looking high with such awe and wonder in his wide green eyes. He stroked the basilisk's head as one would a cherished hound. "I accept." The basilisk's fangs glinted like the light of the moon just before they sank into his neck.

The two basilisks looked down at Harry and Draco, tongues extending to taste the air.

"Very young you are for life's decisions
We shall not pressure or make divisions.
Our sister protects you with her power,
We shall do the same, you need not cower."

Brim, who was watching everything with a lazy, trusting aura about her, groomed the two boys tenderly. It was obvious that she wasn't worried, and perhaps that had already proven itself in how
the adults had been willing to take the Mark and leave them in Brim's care.

"When you are grown

*Both in body and mind be toned,*

*Come back to us with your choice in heart*

*And we shall give you another start.*

*Or, if you prefer,*

**Speak to your guardians and concur.**

*If the decision you make is to take our Mark,*

*Come back to us with this in your heart.*

*Either way, what choice you make,*

*Until you are grown, no oath shall we make,*

*You shall be free to choose when you are grown,*

*Whether your fate is with us or yours alone."

The female basilisk curled lovingly around her charges, hissing softly. "*Return above with your professor friends. We shall protect these ones until the end.*"

Harry and Draco looked over to Madam Hooch, who extended her hands to them. They slowly crawled out over Brim and the coiled snake to her side.

"Promise they'll be safe?" Harry asked

Brim yawned lazily and gave a soft churr. *They'll be fine. I promise.*

Harry and Draco exchanged glances with each other and looked to Rolanda, who didn't seem to notice there had been a conversation.

Draco seemed to think of something. "Will we be able to understand you outside this chamber?"

Brim's gaze softened. *No. Not without the covenant. Unless you are here, in this place.*

The boys clenched Rolanda's hands tightly, and she interpreted it as the two of them wanting to leave. She guided them out as they made a retreat back the way they came.

Both boys looked back to stare at Brim. They shook loose from Rolanda and ran back, throwing their arms around the Nundu and holding her tight. Rolanda looked somewhat distressed that they choose the giant cat and pair of scary basilisks over her.

"*Do not fear, child of the air*

*They are safe here with the heir,*

*We shall not harm, murder, or reap.*

*We will protect them all as they sleep.*
We swear it on the magic here.

We shall never harm our friends endeared."

The two basilisks hissed together and curled around their treasured new friends.

Rolanda exchanged glances with Aurora and Septima. They bowed respectfully and headed back out of the chamber, trusting in the Nundu that had never led them wrongly before, to not be wrong now.

Severus was the first to "awaken" after being marked by the basilisks, but he was in no mood whatsoever to move. It was way too warm and comfortable where he was. Brim was purring, and he could smell her everywhere. Her large foreleg was wrapped around him, the exact opposite of how it had been when she was so much more portable. Harry and Draco were snuggled up against him and Brim as well.

His hand went to his neck, but it was smooth and unmarked, completely healed. Brim was watching him intently, her head laid across Fawkes' back like her own personal pillow.

Taking the mark of a giant snake and leaving Harry and Draco unguarded probably wasn't the most mature and adult thing to do, but he couldn't help but think that none of them had been in any true danger. Brim had never led them wrong before. Perhaps it was faith— too much faith— or maybe it was simply a show of just how much faith he truly had for Brim. She had always seemed to have equal if not more faith in him than he ever thought he deserved. It was far time he had faith in her too.

Judging by the people around him, he hadn't been alone in this.

His eyes had become focused in the dark without feline vision, and the glow from many plants and magical lights were just enough that it seems almost bright for him. He felt Brim's attentive licking of his neck, and he smiled, wrapping his arm around her neck and leaning into her.

As he stood and climbed over the warm coils of the basilisks, she did too, nudging the two boys beside her to wakefulness. They snuggled tighter to her rather than wake, and Brim gave Severus a long-suffering look.

Severus chuckled lowly, pointing his wand at them to make the levitate and then guiding them to Brim's back, where they instinctively clung to her like young monkeys. Brim snuffled him in thanks and licked his hand with her raspy tongue.

The basilisk with the red feather crest peered at him in the dark, his dark orange-red eyes glowing with a strangely reassuring light, though he had to remind himself that it probably wouldn't be so reassuring if it weren't for the covenant to protect him from fang, gaze, and subsequent petrification.

Again Brim had revealed her voice. Part of it seemed so familiar, yet when he tried to put his finger on it, the thoughts would scatter. She had saved them all from a very stony death, but she had also revealed perhaps the greatest secret Hogwarts held: the Chamber of Secrets.

Daughter of Salazar Slytherin? Had he heard that right?

I am Brimstone Slytherin.

I protect Hogwarts and all sheltered within.
No, he was certain he had heard it right.

Had Salazar Slytherin sent his daughter to them to help protect Hogwarts from the beyond? How was it he couldn't remember Salazar Slytherin having a daughter?

"You could ask her," the crested basilisk hissed softly. "The covenant allows—communication. Speech without sound. Speech with sound. Allows you to speak with us, even if we are here, below."

Severus blinked. "How long have you been down here?"

"Hundreds of moons," the crested basilisk said. "Countless beyond remembering. Salazar raised us here to protect his knowledge and us. He built the great aqueducts and gardens. He gave us fish and animals on which to feed. Gave us each other in which to keep each other company. Rescued us from humans who meant us to be their servants."

Severus frowned. "Why have we never heard of this?"

The female basilisk raised her head, running her grey head against her mate's. "Hissstory is written by the victors. Why else would your house be so shamed when greatness is so close at hand?"

"With all respect," Severus asked, "How are you still alive?"

"We live a very long time," the crested basilisk said, giving a ripple of scale that could have been a shrug, "but Salazar gave us a place to sleep— suspends us— unless the chamber is open. Sleep lasts months, then we wake, patrol our domain, eat, and return to sleep."

"Do you have names that I might call you?" Severus asked.

"I am Dissina," the greyer female said. "She who watches."

"I am Sathras," the crested male added. "He who protects."

Severus held out his hands and gently stroked their heads. "Dissina, Sathras. You honour me with your friendship."

"You honour us with the covenant," the two serpents replied. "Long we have longed for the whispers of warmth and stirrings of the mind again. Long we have waited for those who can speak to us again."

"Without spells," Dissina hissed.

"Without lies," Sathras growled.

"The covenant does not permit one to speak lies," Dissina said. "While we can befriend anyone we wish, it is the covenant that allows trust without lies, but that requires trust."

"Trust in us," Sathras confirmed.

"Trust in the fang and venom," Dissina said with a nod of her serpentine head. "Once we shared minds with Salazar and his friends. She-who-nurtured. She-who-sees-forwards-and-backwards. He-who-stands-bravely. They all protected us, but then, their bodies did still. They did not visit us anymore, and no others braved the covenant to join their minds to ours."

"We are truly blessed," Sathras said. "To have such trust again." He coiled himself lovingly around the still-sleeping professors.
Severus felt the warmth and surge of protectiveness from the two basilisks and nodded.

"Ssseverus," Dissina said. "There is a place in the below which contains Salazar's treasures. Only those Marked by ussss may enter there. It has waited long for one to touch the pages again."

"Even the sssssmooth talking one," Sathras said, "did not know of it. He was far too interested in death and chaos."

Severus turned his head, curious. "Please, lead on."

Severus followed the two basilisks deep into the "mouth" of Salazar's giant sculpture, and he found himself in front of yet another door. The door was, oddly, covered lions and gryphons, looking very much like a very Gryffindor panel.

Severus looked up at the basilisks, wondering what sort of joke they might be playing, but the two serpents radiated amusement.

"Thiss is why the foul pretender could not pass," Sathras hissed.

"He hissed pretty words. Pretty speeches. But he was not of Slytherin's heart. Blood, perhaps, but barely just."

Dissina peered at the wall relief. "Can you see it now? The door waiting for its key?"

Severus stared. The mural was astonishingly complex— overly so, with more detail than a picture. The patterns were so intricate they distracted the eye— perhaps on purpose. Of course. What self-absorbed bigot would ever think that the great font of knowledge would be hiding behind a wall that screamed bravery and Gryffindor?

Severus smiled. Not Tom Riddle. Not, apparently, anyone since the time of Salazar Slytherin— the man so many believed hated far more than cared about was a trick to opening this door— he would expect nothing less, but what was it?

Feeling like a boy with his fingers stuck in the Chinese finger trap, he stared at the relief. That's when he saw it: the gryphon crushing the snake, the gryphon fighting the snake, the gryphon chasing the snake— but there, hidden in the background was the gryphon fighting with the snake. Perhaps, it looked far too much like a serpent trying to strangle it to death to others, but Severus knew from the feeling of the giant coils around him as he slept; it was not the embrace of death but of kinship.

He placed his hand on that area of the wall and felt the thrum.

And he knew, in that moment, what it needed.

Severus extended his hand to the great serpents, and he felt their approval at his figuring out the riddle. He pricked his finger on one of their venom-coated fangs, allowing his blood and the venom to mix— fatal for anyone not bonded to the basilisks in the covenant.

He wiped the blood mixture across the three parts of the mural that depicted violence instead of peace, and the walls slid apart, exposing the hidden lair beyond.

PurrmmBONK.

One nundu and her spider plush rubbed up against his leg. Severus smiled slightly and scratched her ears. "Let's see what Salazar left for us, hrm?"
Brim purred, her crest of the Founders glowing with a brilliant light.

Severus and Brim walked down the new passageway, and it was covered in murals and reliefs of the four founders. Each of them were doing something surprising casual. Rowena was sitting in a window, reading to a small girl with a head of crazy curls. Helga was a tending plants in a vast garden, teaching that same young girl how to trim and prune what looked like a venomous tentacula. Oddly, the tentacula was not attacking, instead unfurling for the trimming as though it was pleased by the treatment. Godric was showing a young girl how to use a sword, the bow, and a shield. Salazar Slytherin was teaching her the language of the serpents, the mysteries of the cauldron, and the intricacy of potions and alchemy.

Severus touched the walls, watching them move like repeated scenes in a moving photograph. The girl was growing up— from young girl to a young woman, and what was even more interesting was that the scenes were becoming strikingly more vivid, as though they were coming clearer and clearer into focus and becoming more and more real.

A radiant, lovely young woman stood surrounded in ley lines at the heart where all of them met. Rowena guided her hands across them, and the unknown woman caressed them as one would a lover, and they caressed her in return. She stood at the core— and he could hear the whispers of the leys as they sang to her and she back to them. Another caught his attention— the woman stood with her hand alighted on the head of a Nundu, around here were smaller panels of girl and cub, young woman and young Nundu, and fully adult witch with the equally full-grown adult Nundu— the pair always side-by-side and never apart.

Severus blinked, and before he had even gotten to the end, retraced his steps. He touched each of the depictions of the little girl and saw how each one suggested some sort of tiny Nundu characteristic about her. Just the slightest suggestions of traits as if detailed by the subtle brush of a gifted artist — a hint of spots on the brow before the hair, the slight pointing of the ears, or delicate fingernails that seemed more like claws.

"Mrrrowl," Brim said, her voice echoing down the corridor.

Severus returned to her side and saw her placing her forepaws on the end panel that guarded the door at the end.

Salazar Slytherin waited, his fingers steepled in front of him as he stared down the corridor.

PurrrrrrrrrrBONK.

Brim fervently rubbed herself against the mural. "Mrrrowl," she said, placing her paws against the image. "Mrrrrlllll."

Severus frowned. He knew there had to be some other sort of test— but what? He stared at the mural, hoping to discover some sort of clue. Salazar Slytherin stared back at him— silent and utterly unhelpful. He leaned on the wall, inspecting it for any telltale clue, but Brim mrowled and begged him for scritches. He automatically reached out to lay his hand on her head and pet her gently.

And then he fell through the wall to the other side, feeling as though he had just passed through the weighing of his heart on the scale of life against the Feather of Ma’at. In that split second it was more than that. Time was elongated. He saw moments of his life stacked on each other— truly terrible moments from his past which he would have gladly left behind him. They surrounded him. They circled him— hungrily— like ravenous sharks smelling blood.

But then, he saw the brilliant light of the Founder's crest around Brim's neck, and she found him.
"Mmmrrrlwl!" She said, plowing her head into his chest. He held her tightly, and he hit the ground in a roll— safe on the other side.

Magelights hung in the air, glowing just enough so he could see his way but not so much to harm the — holy mother of Merlin.

There were books, books, and more books. There were maps, tapestries, and sextants. There were ancient scrolls and tomes— everywhere.

Brim rubbed her face against his, licking his cheek, and then bounded off into the gloom. She leapt up on a shelf that overlooked the library as if she owned the place. Her glowing orange-green eyes glimmered in the dimness.

As he stepped further in, a shimmering wall of energy sprang up to protect the books as the room itself was flooded with ample natural light. He had to quickly shield his eyes in order to see. Intricate murals decorated the ceiling above, but every wall contained a massive bookshelf that stretched the entire length and height of the room — a veritable treasure trove of long-forgotten knowledge.

Severus sank gratefully into a comfortable armchair that had strangely appeared the very instant that he needed it. With his legs shaking, he drew a pristine handkerchief from a hidden pocket in his frock coat, wiping his brow with a trembling hand.

"Mrowl." Brim's tail was swishing lazily from her perch.

"We need to get Minerva in here," Severus said. "And Kingsley… and… gods. We're going to need a lot of help sifting through all of this."

"Perhaps, if you tell us what you are searching for, we can point you to the proper volumes," a soft voice said.

Severus froze as the forms of the four Founders entered the room through the walls, gliding past him with a ripple of strong magic.

Rowena reached out and caressed Brim under the jaw and smiled fondly— her hand having become solid.

"My Ladies," Severus whispered, dropping to one knee and looking down. "My Lords."

"Most polite, this one," Godric said. "So very few are anymore. As time has passed around us, manners seem to have slowly faded before disappearing altogether. Language, too, has evolved or devolved, depending on how one views it."

"Devolved," Rowena agreed, rolling her eyes. "Now, only the spells are in Latin. Jarbled. Truncated. Neutered."

"Please sit, Severus," Salazar said kindly, moving in to caress the Nundu's ears. Brim purred blissfully at his touch. "In this room, we may finally speak properly. It was constructed by all of us, brick by brick. Board by board. Stone by stone. Unlike most other places in Hogwarts, this place remains inviolate, just the same as it was when we first created it."

"Surely, you must have questions," Helga encouraged their guest. "A great many, I would presume."

Severus could barely nod in assent.

"Shall we guess at them, my dear Rowena? Salazar said teasingly. "You do so love your riddles."
Rowena smiled. "True, I do, but alas— I think our rather astonished friend is probably less apt for riddles and needs a bit of time to collect himself."

Helga shook her head. "Honestly, you two. You forget he's probably famished and greatly in need of a good, strong cup of tea."

"Mrrrr! Mrrrowl!" Brim was instantly off her perch and snuffling around. She placed her paws on one of the shelves and batted at it. A secret door popped open, exposing an antique bone china tea set and an equally antique tea canister. Both showed signs of being well-used, but they were in absolutely pristine condition.

"Ah, yes, thank you, my child." Rowena waved her wand and the tea set came floating in to land on the nearby table. Water filled the kettle and was soon steaming hot after a mere second or two in the enchanted kettle. She waved her hand and a sachet of tea wrapped in a bit of linen and tied with a fine thread landed in the kettle. The kettle filled with fragrant, golden tea, the very scent setting Severus' tastebuds to watering.

"Ah, my daughter, do get the poor man the milk and sugar," Salazar chuckled. "Otherwise we might have to wait for him to finish climbing the walls."

Rowena huffed. "My tea is not *that* strong."

"Strong enough that Godric uses it to clean his swords as often as drinking it."

Rowena rolled her eyes. "It is perfectly lovely tea, I will have you know."

Salazar smiled. "I do not claim otherwise."

Brim mrowled and Tinky appeared in a shower of magic.

"Tinky is here! I has milk and sugar for master."

Severus stared at the house-elf.

Tinky placed the tray down, smiled, and popped away.

"Now he looks even more befuddled," Salazar commented.

Helga sighed. "Do drink up, dear," she said. "You will feel much better."

Severus added sugar and milk to his tea and drank it, saying nothing, but the moment it touched his tongue, his eyes widened.

"Rowena's secret tea recipe," Salazar sighed. "You'll have to butter up my daughter to get it, I'm afraid."

"Rowena won't even tell us," Godric pouted.

"Psh," Rowena said.

"How are you even here?" Severus whispered.

The Founders all turned to stare at him.

"We have always been here, child," Helga replied gently. "Unfortunately, there were those that would prefer no one remembered this, lest they seem less than what they were."
"We had designed it so that when our objects were placed in the Founder's Hall, the students and teachers alike could come and ask us questions," Rowena said. "They could touch our objects to gain wisdom or courage. But our plans failed from almost the beginning. My daughter, Helena, stole my diadem and fled with it. I sent the Baron to Albania to find her, but I soon found that he was the wrong choice for that mission."

"Their ghosts haunt this school still—forever apart as they were in life," Godric said.

"The diadem was lost," Rowena said. "Never returning to the place that was made for it."

"My sword ended up traveling from hand to hand, disappearing and reappearing as needed thanks to being taken from its resting place," Godric said.

"My locket was stolen from its place by my…successor," Salazar said, eyes narrowing.

"My cup was taken and used by the elves for many years— and then it was eventually stolen from them," Helga said.

"All of our objects have been taken from their rightful places," Rowena said. "My daughter took my diadem out of spite or perhaps she wished to become greater than I, to surpass her mother's shadow. I do not know. Her ghost—ironically, cannot see or hear me."

"The Founders remain with Hogwarts," Rowena continued. "We are bound to the very land. We protect it, or rather, we were supposed to—"

"Many of those who came after us worked hard to erase our true goal, our combined work," Godric said.

"They tainted our stories and distorted our true selves," Salazar added darkly. "Turned us into a collection of tragedies, stories, and legends."

"They erased the truth and rewrote it," Rowena said coldly. "They corrupted Hogwarts, turning a school of thought and learning into something else entirely."

"Each Headmaster of this school has passed down a book detailing the original instructions and duties as written by us," Rowena said.

"Instructions on how to properly maintain the wards and the magic of this school to allow it to protect the school and grounds, along with its people and creatures," Helga said.

"But, along the way, the ley-masters were pushed out," Salazar said. "The instructions were twisted and changed to each new headmaster."

"And we were all but forgotten," Godric said. "Pushed aside for a new, shinier or more convenient truth."

"All of this, however, is moot, young Severus," Salazar stated. "You are here because my daughter trusts you, and as such, we are also trusting you."

"Tom Riddle took our objects and corrupted them by crafting them into vessels for his soul," Rowena said.

"Each murder gave him power to split himself and store it away for later," said Godric.

"But what he did not know," Salazar added grimly. "Was the price. Immortality always comes with a
"Each time he did it," Helga sighed, "he broke himself— not just the soul but from his magic itself. Each time he uses what he has made, he comes back less a man and less magical as well. Perhaps he thinks it is a merely a wand. Perhaps he thinks he is simply weak from the strain, but it is not that."

"Look ye upon the face of the man turned into Riddle's body— the man with a man's face on the back of his head," Rowena said. "Think how much worse that could be the next time around. Will he— even look human anymore?"

"Eventually, he would become so deformed and twisted, that no magic would come to him and no shape would be familiar," Salazar said. "But many would die before this came to pass. It cannot be allowed. Destroy the corruption and you destroy his vessels— his Horcruxes. Purity them, and they will weaken him."

"Find our treasured objects," Rowena said.

"Bring them back home," said Helga.

"Destroy the corruption within them," said Godric.

"Do this and the reign of the one you loathe shall not rise again," Salazar said. "Do this, and Hogwarts will rise again as it was meant to be."

"You make it sound so very easy," Severus sighed. "How could I possibly destroy such a thing?"

Helga chuckled. "Look at your arm, dear boy," she said warmly. "The answer is staring you right in the face."

Severus turned to stare at Brim who was looking at him with a curious tilt of her head.

"Mmowrl?"

"Brim," Severus whispered.

Salazar slammed a tome down in front of Severus. "Knowledge is power." He nodded to the Nundu. "She will always know where our objects are, just as she will always know where you are, Severus. Use that and what you gain from this," he said, pointing at the book with one, slim finger, "to put an end to the darkness and corruption."

"The future can be changed," Rowena said. "You have already proven that, whether you realise it or not. Help our child with her task, and it will not only be you that benefits from the success."

Rowena stared at Severus and then at Brim. Brim bounded up to Rowena and mrowled, batting at her. Rowena soothed her ears and smiled at her.

"Fail in this, and we all fall." Rowena's expression was grim.

"You need not perform this task alone," Godric said.

"Just because you are a Slytherin does not mean you cannot rely on someone else to guard your back," Salazar said. "Prove to others that we are so much more than a collection of erroneous labels placed on us by those who know nothing of our kind."

"Bring our voices back to Hogwarts," Rowena said.
"Help our child to set things right again," Godric said.

"Make Hogwarts whole again," Helga said.

"No pressure at all, that," Severus said grimly, drinking the last of the tea.

"Prrrrrooorwr!" Brim said, bonking her head into his hand.

Severus placed his hand on Brim's head. "Daughter, hrn?"

"Miirowl."

"Well, I suppose it's time we got started."

Brim pounced on him with glee, and everything went black.

Severus opened his eyes and found Minerva staring down at him with obvious concern. He unfurled himself from the coils of the great basilisks and slowly sat up, running his hands through his long, black hair. Harry and Draco were playing on Brim nearby— she had seemingly grown even larger than he remembered her being.

"Severus? Are you okay?" Minerva asked.

**THUMP!**

A large tome materialised out of thin air and landed neatly in Severus' arms.

Severus' black eyes sparkled. "Better than okay, Minerva. We have a bit of reading to do."
Embrace of Hogwarts

Chapter by corvusdraconis

**A/N:** Classes in session. Why can't I be a bloody genius like Hermione? *whine*

**Beta Love:** The Dragon and the Rose, Dutchgirl01, and Flyby Commander Shepard

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Breath of the Nundu

Chapter 9

Embrace of Hogwarts

"*I have studied many philosophers and many cats. The wisdom of cats is infinitely superior.*"

- Hippolyte Taine

"Minerva, had the book not fallen into my arms, I would swear I was having some sort of basilisk venom-induced hallucination."

The tabby Animagus lifted a brow eerily similar to a certain potion's master. She poked the book with a pointed fingernail. "Well, it's real?"

Severus rolled his eyes. "Obviously."

Brim popped her head over the table and lay her chin on the surface. "Mrrrrrt!" She loosed a spider to do recon on the tome in question.

"Well, what is it?" a female voice asked.


"I know that, Severus."

"Then why did you ask?"

"I didn't."

Severus stared at Minerva who stared back.

"Oh, it's that tome," the feminine voice said. "Come back then."

The little spider came back to Brim, and she snapped it up with her teeth and carried it off.

"Mrrrowl!" Brim loosed the spider on the floor and tore after the coffee-coloured and perpetually highly caffeinated spider.

"Eeewwwwaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!" exclaimed the coffee spider, skittering away at high speed.

Severus pinched his nose. "That venom is still working through me, I think. I'm having auditory hallucinations."
Minerva shook her head. "Erm, you heard that too?"

They exchanged glances.

"Mrrrrowl!" Brim bounded after her hyper over-caffeinated spider.

Severus and Minerva shrugged.

"Comeherecomeherecomehere!"

The spider squeaked and skittered just out of reach. "Catchmecatchmecatchmecan't!"

"Goingtcatchyoucatchyoucatchyou!"

Brim pounced, snapping her jaws around the wriggling spider, and the spider squeaked.

"Caught me. Caught me. Awww!"


"Caught me. Yours. Caught me. Weee!"

"Severus?"

"Yes, Minerva?"

"I have some fifty-year-old scotch. I think we could use a wee dram. Perhaps a bit more than that," Minerva sighed.

Severus followed behind the elder Animagus, not deigning to argue.

Brim popped her head up over the table, loosed her spider battalion, and waited for them to push the tome to her. She clamped her jaws around the book, waiting for her spiders to crawl back into their habitat, and trotted off, carrying the tome with her.

"Ahhhhh!"

Harry and Draco clung to the back of Brim as she tore across the green, down the beach, and back up the shore.

"That way, Brim!" Draco yelled, tugging on her ear to get her attention.

Brim tore off on a slant.

"Ahhh! Wrong way!"

Brim was bounding along the treeline at top speed, and the boys clung tightly to her back, trying not to get knocked off of her by random stray branches. One boy would tug on one ear while the other tugged on the other, giving the Nundu conflicting directions. She pinned her ears back and made for the lake, going faster and faster.

The two madly clung to her neck scruff, trying to coordinate their efforts, and finally when they managed to yank on her collar at the same time, she screeched to a halt at the end of the dock, sending them toppling off into the Black Lake with a large splash.

Brim laid down on the end of the dock, her tail flicking with clear amusement as she watched the
boys sputter and cling to the dock supports. They crawled up on the dock and tried to push and pull the Nundu into the water, but she refused to budge. They pulled her tail, yanked on her paws, and even tried to wrestle her, but she just rolled over on her side and huffed, using her paws to pin them both down with a thump.

"Can't move!" Draco wheezed.

"Me either!"

They vainly attempted to move her heavy paws, but it was like trying to move a filled iron cauldron from the picnic events. It never budged, and the Nundu was definitely not budging either.

"Hn," a baritone voice rumbled.

Remus turned his head upside down to peer at them. "Having problems, gentlemen?"

Draco and Harry grunted together.

"She won't budge!" Harry complained.

"Perhaps she's tired," Severus drawled, "seeing as you had her running all over the grounds like a racing hippogriff."

"She's not even breathing hard!" Draco whinged.

"Perhaps you are both out of shape," Severus said with a sniff.

The two children groaned, and Brim seemed more than content to keep them pinned down. Suddenly, her ears swiveled and she growled lowly. Both Severus and Lupin turned immediately, and Brim stood up, allowing the boys to move but not much. She made a point of keeping them behind her, blocking their way forward with her bulk.

A long spattering trail of fire crabs were skittering across the green, some of them engaged in a life and death struggle with something far, far worse: manticore.

"Manticore?" Remus whispered in shocked horror. "What in Merlin's name—"

"Remus, if you would, please?" Severus said, his brows furrowing.

"Of course," Remus replied, pulling the two boys with him. "Come along with me, you two. We need to get you inside to safety." Remus waved his wand, sending a Patronus zinging ahead of him as he held the hands of both boys, running with them to Hogwarts and away from the rampaging manticore and fire crabs.

One of the manticore spied the movement and snarled, moving quickly to intercept Remus and the boys, its tail primed to drive deep into Remus and inject the lethal venom.

Brim roared ferociously, leaping to land squarely on top of the manticore just as Severus' stunning spell slammed into it, and she clamped her jaws onto its stinger, ripping it off with a sharp jerk of her muzzle. Her back legs pulled back and raked down the manticore's tail as she mauled it, ripping and tearing mercilessly at it as she went.

They went tumbling down the hill, and stopped as the ground went oddly smooth.

*WHOMP!*
The hardened nodules from the Whomping Willow smacked into the manticore's head, knocking it into the air, even as it grasped Brim and wrapped its branches around her, pulling her clear and allowing her to set her paws on the ground.

The manticore eventually landed, but was not doing well. Discoloured blood dripped from where Brim had torn off its stinger and nearly dislocated its tail. Long, ragged swathes where her sharp claws had raked through its hide marked where she had demonstrated her clear displeasure, and the manticore's head was half caved-in where the willow had effectively demonstrated its own brand of violent hospitality. Unfortunately, the manticore wasn't showing any signs of better behaviour even with his head bashed in, and it was snarling and attempting to pursue its original victim, despite its horrific injuries.

Brim leapt upon it again, this time taking a slash to her flank and a cuff about the head, but she shook it off and sank her teeth into the back of the manticore's neck and used her weight to drag it down. A wet, tearing snap sounded as she broke the creature's neck, but she did not let go until it stopped twitching completely. She dragged the body over to the whomping willows and let the older tree teach its sapling how to beat on a non-moving target as she ran off to find Severus.

She spotted him madly casting spells to keep the crabs from escaping, but also keep the manticores at bay—away from the fallen body of a familiar half-giant. More interested in protecting her master than the fallen, Brim tackled the largest manticore that was trying very hard to impale Severus with its venomous tail. She buried her teeth into the tail and ripped, crunching down as hard as she could. The manticore roared, thrashing, smashing Brim to the ground once, twice, three times, but she held on stubbornly, raking her claws down the tail, slashing it to ribbons. The creature snarled at her, a strange hissing voice coming from its throat.

"Kill you!"

Brim violently ripped the stinger off the end of the tail, but the manticore thrashed the remains of his tail and sent her careening into the nearby forest, smashing into the trunks.

A low triple-bay echoed across the green as a giant three-headed dog burst from the front doors of Hogwarts, tearing across the grass, spurred on by the sounds of battle. Τρία slammed into the wounded Manticore and clamped into it in three places, shaking his head violently until the beast went limp. But Τρία was not done. He tore into the manticore and ripped it in opposing directions—one for each head. He dropped the carcass as bloody foam and drool dripped from his multiple heads. He glared at the remaining manticores that were making eyes at Severus, and he plowed into them, sending them flying in all directions like a set of bowling pins. He snatched one out of the air and tore into him, shaking the manticore so violently that its tail stung the manticore itself instead of Τρία.

The other manticore, the last one left, hatefully focused on Severus, going for the one that seemed "least dangerous" of the bunch. But if it thought there was going to be less of a fight, it was quickly proved to be dead wrong.

Severus' Sectumsempra slammed into it before it finished pulling itself off the ground, and it was bleeding everywhere from multiple slashes. As the creature staggered, Brim pounced on it from the dark of the forest, landing on the manticore's back and sinking her teeth into its neck. She raked her claws down the already bleeding wounds, tearing them even wider.

Severus, in the meantime, was levitating Hagrid's body, trying to get the half-giant away from the battlefield. Yet, even as he did so, a brindled manticore, which had managed to go unseen due to its mottled brown and almost green fur, chose its target and silently ran forward, its tail primed to bury
itself in Severus' preoccupied backside.

Brim, torn between the still squirming body she was dealing with, and Tpio's occupation with tearing and ripping another manticore to bits left Severus unguarded. Brim gave a low, desperate howl of anguish and warning.

Severus turned, wand at the ready, but the tail was already reaching out to strike— it was already too late.

**HissssssssssssssssssSSSSS!**

Two adult basilisks rose out of the tall grass, eyes glowing with nothing less than murder, freezing the manticore dead in mid-air just before they simultaneously struck, sinking their fangs deep into the manticore's body. Had the gaze not killed it, it was surely dead now.

The manticore's mate leapt from the high grass, and a wand pointed out from between Dissina's coils, causing the grass to rise up to strangle the final manticore to death. Dissina's coils loosened as Pomona Sprout stood up from the safety of the basilisk's coils and brushed herself off. She placed her hand on Dissina and the other on Sathras and sighed.

"*Must* you engage in epic life-or-death battles while I was having such a wonderful time cataloging all the plants down in the chamber?" she bemoaned.

Severus plucked a stray twig out of her hair. "Yes."

The two basilisk hissed laughter as they helped themselves to a few large helpings of manticore that had been considerately torn to pieces during the battle.

Minerva and Rabbie were running out to join them, having stayed with Remus to ensure that the children had remained inside and safe from the fray. About fifty fire crabs scrambled about in make-shift cages that Severus had conjured around them to keep them from escaping into the forest or, gods forbid, finding themselves a place to breed. As it was, a few of the creatures were oblivious to their surroundings and were attempting to get it on inside the cages, and Minerva zapped the lot of them into paralysis.

Harry and Draco turned red, unable to help staring at the frozen spectacle.

"What is going on here?" Minerva said, panting.

"I'll get Rubeus to Poppy," Rabbie offered, gesturing to Remus, who had just manage to catch up to assist him back towards Hogwarts. Remus gave a tired sigh, but complied.

"We were down by the lake, Minerva, when Brim alerted us to the danger," Severus said, sitting on a nearby log to catch his breath and regain his composure. "Remus made sure the children made it back to Hogwarts, but there were manticores and firecrabs loose all over the green. I know nothing more than that, save that Hagrid was already down, face first in the mud, with multiple manticores stinging him."

"That makes no sense," Minerva said, clearly baffled. "I had Hagrid check the shipment that had come in for Albus. I had presumed it was just some new supplies meant for restocking, as we usually have during the summer months."

"Unless Albus was restocking on how to terrify and murder our students, why in the world would he have manticores and fire crabs shipped into Hogwarts?" Pomona asked, brushing off her robes.
"I'd love to ask him, if he wasn't already currently tied up, answering for unauthorised ley-magic and misuse of Hogwarts magic in front of the Wizengamot as we speak," Severus said from flat on his back. One happy Nundu was laying on him, grooming him thoroughly and purring happily as she made sure he was "okay."

"Not much they can do for the man anymore, magic-wise," Pomona pointed out. "From what they have already said, even Tom Riddle won't be using magic in any incarnation after being burned so thoroughly by the ley lines."

"Pomona, dear," Minerva tutted. "Here I was thinking you would never wake up from the basilisk venom. You had us all worried."

"Psh, there were loads of new plants to catalog, Minerva!" Pomona huffed. "Very important work!"

Minerva sighed. "Good to see that your priorities haven't been lost in the face of giant venomous serpents."

Dissina and Sathras hissed in amusement, their bellies quite full after an impromptu meal of freshly-killed manticore.

"Not to make you feel as though you are not most welcome, my friends," Severus said, "but how did you know there that was trouble afoot?"

"His daughter shares with us all threats that make their way here," Dissina replied.

"She, like us, is bound to the task of Hogwarts' ongoing protection." Sathras said with a sibilant hiss.

"His daughter? Whose?" Pomona asked, pulling her head up from the leaf she was studying.

"He who created our safe domain," Sathras hissed.

"He is our father. He is the protector. He kept us warm while still in the shell and provided food whenever we were hungry," Dissina said.

"Salazar Slytherin," Severus said quietly.

"Wait, you said daughter," Minerva said.

"Yesss," the basilisks hissed.

"What daughter?" Minerva said. "Salazar Slytherin only had sons— traced down to the Gaunts. The last one was Marvolo, and Tom killed him while he was still a student here."

The basilisks cocked their heads to peer at the humans with the equivalent of serpentine amusement. "We do not speak of the rewritten history," Sathras hissed.

"We speak of the true heir," Dissina said with a nod.

"Who?" Minerva repeated, frustrated.

The basilisks looked down at Brim, who looked up from her position sprawled on top of Severus' chest.

"Mrrwl?"

A coffee-coloured spider crawled out to perch itself between Brim's ears. "Busted," it squeaked
The humans all stared at the rather wide-eyed Nundu.

"Oh, fine, stare at the big kitty. Just ignore the talking spider," The coffee-coloured spider complained from between between Brim's ears.

Poke.

*Squeak.*

Poke. Poke.

*Squeak!*

The coffee-coloured spider on the table was looking pretty disgruntled for a plushie, wriggling its legs as it tried to avoid being prodded by multiple fingers.

"Maybe it's possessed?"

"We made the thing, Filius," Severus growled. "Don't you think we'd have noticed something like that?"

Severus sat to the side, drinking his tea and rubbing Brim between the ears, shaking his head as the others poked the poor, unhappy spider plushie. Brim was looking distressed that her favourite coffee-coloured friend was being abused.

"Care to tell me the real story, hrn?" Severus said quietly, rubbing Brim gently under the chin as the others prodded the unlucky plush spider.

Brim put her head on his chest and stared deep into his eyes. "Hard."

Severus rubbed her ears. "Try me."

Brim licked his arm and she gently worried on his wrist, playing. "Can't always remember everything."

Severus, who had already been bitten by and indoctrinated into a secret society of basilisks, fought off rampaging manticores in the course of a few days, and discovered his familiar could speak the Queen's English was surprisingly patient about waiting further for the unknown.

Brim rubbed her jaw against his hand. "Afraid."

"Of what?" he asked, having a hard time believing that his fearless Nundu familiar who threw herself at rampaging manticores was afraid of anything.

"That you'll be mad," Brim replied looking at him with soulful orange-green eyes.

"I cannot promise not to be upset, as I have no idea what you are going to say, but I can promise to think carefully on what you do say before getting upset."

Brim perked her ears as the coffee-coloured spider squeaked out, "Help, help, stop it, abuse, help!" She leapt onto the counter where they had held her spider hostage, snapping it up between her teeth, and jumped down to lay her head in Severus' lap again, releasing her rescued spider to return to her collar habitat.

"Phew," the spider said, happily skittering back inside her collar.
Severus glared and Remus and Filius and waved them away. "Go and interrogate someone else's innocent plush toy," Severus growled.

"Surely you can understand us wanting to know how and why a plush spider started talking like the heir of Slytherin," Remus complained.

"No, I don't," Severus hissed. "I would never mistake an animated spider which is acting like a sarcastic familiar to my familiar as the heir of Slytherin."

"You said you didn't enchant it like that!"

"I didn't."

"Yet it's talking!"

"You're talking."

"That's different!"

"A month ago you were a random wolf in a dirt cave surrounded by wolf pups. You weren't talking then either."

"Damnit, that's not the same, man!"

Draco and Harry, who had been looking back and forth during the entire discussion and drama, exchanged amused glances. "You could always just ask her. She's right there."

Remus stared at the two boys.

"We can't understand her because my godfather and Draco's father doesn't want to risk us getting bit and bound to a pair of basilisks, but we did— down there in the chamber. I don't understand why you guys are poking a plush toy over it."

"She obviously understood English from day one," Draco muttered. "She's always known when we are talking about her or someone she knows. We just can't hear her, yeah? But we want to. And you are standing there with the gift of being able to understand her, and you won't even listen!"

Both boys scowled darkly, crossing their arms across their narrow chests.

"Tongue-lashed by a pair of twelve-year-olds," Severus said with a sigh.

"It's not the same, Severus," Remus protested. "You've been bound to Brim from day one. She's your familiar. Of course you understand her."

"I guarantee you she was not speaking in the Queen's English the first morning she showed up in my bed!"

"I—" Remus started and slumped, sighing. "Can we just start over, Severus? I just realised I'm trying to cover for being an oblivious idiot."

Severus raised a brow. "It will have to wait for later when Minerva can pry herself away from attempting to figure out why Albus would approve a shipment of dangerous magical beasts to Hogwarts and then we can go over the tome together. Doing anything now would be pointless if we just had to repeat the process all over again."
"Remembering is hard," Brim admitted as she walked side-by-side with her smilodon companion. "Instincts stronger. Protection stronger."

"Yet, I can speak with you now, even like this," Severus said, savouring the new sensation.

"Those not with the basilisks will only hear hissing," Brim said. "This is their gift— what my father wished you to have."

"Your father?"

Brim sat, her tail twitching. "I am their child. You call them the Founders. Rowena showed me the memories. Once, I was born, but too soon to survive without aid." She looked out across the lake. "Too much stress, and I came early. Hogwarts claimed me to save my life. Its heart energy now flows through me. There was a price— I would, as I grew older, be drawn to return to this place. I cannot stay away for long."

Brim groomed herself, drawing her paw across her ears. "An old man took me after I was saved. He cast me out. He gave me to other parents to raise as their own. But he had to erase that event, so he went to the ley lines and cast a spell— a spell to carry from line-to-line and all those who were exposed. He erased me from their memory. At least, she who I was. But, like most children of magic, I returned here. But I was not human. I had never been fully human since the day Hogwarts saved my life. When first I returned, I did not fit in here. I heard things, saw things that others didn't. I was not pure enough to be a proper magical child, yet I was not Muggle enough to be a truly mundane child."

Brim sighed, her spotted coat rising and falling heavily with her breathing. "I fled, deep into the bowels of Hogwarts, and it welcomed me home. My destiny, should I accept the fate that was chosen for me on the day I was born, was to take up the cup at long lost. I would relinquish my dream of being wholly human to become that which I was meant to be. At night, when I dreamed, I would live for years at a time. I would train under the first ones— the Founders— my surrogate family. They would teach me to be what I was meant to be, and during the day, I would be bound to my anchors: they who would remind me what was was to be human. You and Minerva— helped to temper my emotions, guided my ideas of friend and foe, and allowed me to grow up in a different way, no less poignant than a normal child's life. The Founders taught me skills, spells, and ancient weaves in the tapestry of magic. You and Minerva taught me about love and trust, placing reliance on another, and faith. But, until recently, the two worlds were set apart. They did not touch but rarely. But when you accepted the covenant, everything changed. It bound you to Hogwarts and its guardians. It bound you and allowed you to hear us. I broke down the barrier that had kept two parts of me separate and content to be so, but I am not a human who had forgotten how to be so. I ceased to be truly human on the day I was born."

"Albus," Severus growled darkly, his lips pulling back from his oversized teeth.

Brim's tail twitched. "Do you think less of me now?"

Severus blinked. "Whyever would I?"

"For being something you did not think I could be."

Severus frowned. "You have always been what I believed you were."

Brim cocked her head. "What?"

"Special," he replied. "You have always been more."
"Now you are too," Brim said with a mental smile. Those who undergo the change— give up a little of what makes them human to be a part of Hogwarts. Does this… trouble you?"

Severus sniffed, rubbing his whiskers thoughtfully. "I have been considered inhuman for many years, I fear. Finally being so is almost a relief."

Brim nuzzled his muzzle and pawed his ears affectionately.

"Besides," Severus said after a moment. "Being closer to you hardly seems like a bad trade."

Brim gave him a toothy grin as she set loose her coffee-coloured highly over-caffeinated spider, and it tore off across the green squeaking "Weeeeeeeeeeexxxttttteeeeee!

Brim and Severus tore after it full tilt, bounding through the grass to catch their swift and agile eight-legged prey.

"Okay," Severus said as they streaked through the grass. "I understand why I can hear you, but why can we understand the spider as well?"

Brim beamed happily. "Rowena didn't want me to lose another friend to the fire, so she… pushed along your repair spells with a little extra magic."

"Oh, good," he said with considerable relief. "I was worried that anything you touched might start to become sentient and I would find my cauldrons crawling across the floor come morning."

"Weeeeeeeeee!" squeaked the spider as it zigged and zagged out of the way.

The two huge felines bounded through the brush after the one coffee-coloured plush spider, putting all rational conversation to the side for a nice, therapeutic chase.

The house-elves had set up a nice set of banquet tables and refreshments down in the Chamber of Secrets for those privy to the basilisks' secret to meet and go over the tome that had been quite literally dropped upon them. While not all of them had accepted the covenant, at least in the chamber, all who came there were perfectly safe— and much to Remus' dismay— the two boys were proven correct in their evaluation of Brim.

Lucius and Draco were curled up within the coils of Dissina, who had wrapped herself around them protectively as her venom worked through their systems. Lucius had decided, after a long conversation with Severus and Mineva, that there were many advantages to being acceptable by the basilisks. They had obviously not croaked in some painful, envenomated manner, so Lucius agreed — provided that Draco wasn't alone during the experience.

Harry was giving Sirius death glares every few seconds. Sirius adamantly refused to allow such a "risky" decision so early in Harry's life. Harry, of course, was quite bitter, throwing back in Sirius' face that "Of course, Sirius would want to put his foot down and be a good guardian now." It was a low blow, and everyone knew it, but it was filled with a partial truth that made it hurt more. Harry was used to being denied everything he had ever wanted— but what the covenant offered him was something he longed for above anything else: a place where he could finally belong. It was something he had gotten a taste of and desperately didn't want to lose. Sirius was equally desperate to give Harry that sense of "normality" that Harry had supposedly wanted all his life. Somewhere in between, their communication was getting crossed. But what it really boiled down to was that he trusted Brim more than he had ever trusted Sirius, and he wanted to be with her more than anything. Sirius, regardless of whether it was his fault or not, had failed to be there when Harry had needed him the most, and his attempts to compensate for it was only driving the wedge between them.
Brim flopped herself down next to Harry, who was tucked away in the back of the chamber behind one of the snake sculptures, just as far away from his godfather as he could get.

She rubbed her chin against his face and took off a few layers of skin with her tongue, causing him to sputter and giggle a little.

"Don't be too angry," she whispered. "If I had a cub, I would want him to be safe too."

"I am safe," Harry said, crossing his arms defensively. "With you."

Brim licked his ears and pinned him down with her paws, causing him to squirm in response. "You have placed entirely too much faith in one Nundu."

Harry shook his head. "You've never let me down, Brim. Ever."

Brim lay her head on his chest, pinning him down with her sheer mass. "I could one day. Not because I mean to. Never intentionally. But I could make a mistake, you know."

Harry hugged her head and buried his face into her fur. "You don't make mistakes."

"I just eat the evidence," Brim replied cheerfully, her tail looping over her back.

Harry laughed but frowned soon after. "I want to live with you and Professor Snape. He's strict, but fair. He always has a reason for the things he does. Even when I don't know the reason, I know that he's looking out for me. And Draco too."

Brim flicked her ears. "You used to hate him."

Harry sighed. "Yeah. You taught me to trust him."

Brim whuffed. "I cannot judge your godfather. He is closed off completely. His mind trusts nothing, least of all me."

"And I'm supposed to trust him? Just because my dead parents thought he was an okay bloke?"

Harry turned his head, suddenly angry.

Brim thumped her tail solidly into Harry's side in reproach. "You lost your parents before you even knew them, Harry. He lost his best friends, every one of them, and then lived with it for as long as you've been alive. Then, one day, he finds out he lost them for entirely different reasons than he once believed. You lost an ideal. He lost reality twice over."

Harry frowned, automatically hand-grooming Brim's ears and neck. "You are real," Harry said. "I don't ever want to lose you."

"I will be here," Brim replied. "Always."

"But I won't be able to understand you unless I'm here in this room," Harry insisted. "Draco will understand you, but I won't. I won't, because he doesn't bloody trust anyone anymore and he's taking it out on me! On you!"

"Give him some time, Harry," Brim advised. "I'll be here, just waiting to fill your mind with plenty of thoughts about chasing spiders and eating splendid fish and antelope and nice, bloody haunches of elk."
"Ew," Harry shoved Brim away, making a disgusted face.

"See?" Brim pointed out. "You're disgusted with me already." Her tail looped in amusement.

"I'm not disgusted with you! I'm disgusted that you eat things without cooking it!" Harry protested.

"What? I'm a carnivore," Brim replied easily. "It's perfectly natural."

Harry stuck his tongue out at her.

At that, Brim promptly pounced Harry, nailing him with her raspy tongue until every inch of his face was scrubbed pink.

"Ack! No! They'll never let me go to Hogsmeade because I'll be eleven forever!"

Brim grabbed him by the scruff of his robes and carried him off like an errant cub, jumping up to land on top of the sculpture of Salazar's head. She plunked him down and surrounded him with her front legs, purring madly. Harry wrapped his arms around her neck and buried his face in her warm fur.

"I love you, Brim." Harry said.

Brim answered with with a deep, resonating purr as she grasped him with her paws and playfully mauled him "to death." "I love you too, Harry. We do not need a magical bond for that to be true."

Down below, a lone black dog stared up at the pair nestled together on top of Salazar's sculpted head. He sighed and stood, padding back towards the group of adults that were dickering over the ancient tome— instructions on restoring Hogwarts to the way it should've been all along.

"Brim, can you tell us which of these objects are here?" Minerva asked. "The writing is— it keeps moving around. Inverting itself."

"Mnmrowl?" Brim stuck her head over the table and peered at the book. She plunked down her plush spider collection, setting the swarm loose over the book. "There were seven Horcruxes. Not all were made from objects originally created by the Founders. Others were made by him— the one you call by no name and a name."

"Tom Riddle."

Brim nodded. She groomed herself, shifting between comfortable speech and instinct quickly and without warning. "The last Horcrux was Harry— created when his mother was murdered. It was not intentional. The others were all objects this Tom hated as much as he loved them. Just as he both hated and loved himself."

"Back when my father was shamed by the lies of others, a man known only as the Wizard Gaunt stole a precious stone from my father's vault and crafted it into a focus of power and placed it into a ring. He wove a tale of abject misery, casting all things Slytherin into a pit of shame, but he did this far too well for his own good. For Gaunt, too, had the speech of serpents. He had learned it from his master, Salazar. But unlike him, he had stolen it through darker magic than most would ever dare. Gaunt eventually fell from power, but he had his ring— the last piece of a failed legacy. That ring passed down the Gaunt line to one known as Marvolo."

"That was Tom Riddle's grandfather."
Brim nodded.

"People do not realise that Hogwarts is privy to all secrets— and Tom of all people refused to believe that magic truly existed in Hogwarts as a sentient, living thing. Many secrets he told to Hogwarts—Hogwarts remembered them all and shared them with the Founders. Many of which are written here in this tome."

Brim snuffled the tome, nudging a spider off a diagram. It squeaked and climbed up her muzzle and sat between her ears. "The next was a locket, thought to be the famed locket of Salazar Slytherin: his legacy, but it is not. It looks much as the one around my neck, but it holds nothing more than a memory of the shred of a shattered soul that was once housed within."

Brim stared into the pages, carefully placing her paw on it. "The leys destroyed Tom Riddle and his soul pieces. He will never rise again, but this task my father, my family would wish of you, will restore power where it was meant to be: to Hogwarts. Year after year, century after century, many Headmasters of Hogwarts passed down a secret that all who followed were made privy to: how to maintain the wards that were kept by the leys— and how as long as the leys remained untampered with, Hogwarts would retain the ability to take care of itself."

"Something has been preventing Hogwarts from defending itself?" Minerva asked worriedly.

Brim nodded. "Each headmaster since has either spent their life trying to fix the mistakes of the past or they attempt to tamper with what should never be. Some did this for the right reasons. Some did it only for power, but what all of them succeeding in doing was to prevent the power from returning to Hogwarts, preventing it from protecting its people, creatures, and itself."

"What are the other objects?" Filius asked, tapping on a diagram with his hand.

"Helga's golden cup, a locket of gold and crystal, shaped to hold a jeweled serpent, the ring which we discussed, a jewelled diadem that once was worn by Rowena Ravenclaw herself—"

"One Horcrux that was not connected to the Founders in any way was the diary of Tom Riddle. One object Hogwarts requires that was not tampered with so much as it keeps getting lost is the fabled sword of Godric Gryffindor."

"I know where the diary is," Lucius said rather groggily as he pushed himself up from the coils of Dissina. "It's in my family vault. I also know where the cup is. It's in my dear niece Bella's vault."

Lucius looked around somewhat blearily, but the colour in his face was returning and he seemed more resolved and healthy. "I feel like I've just had a night drinking Ogden's until dawn."

Dissina and Sathras hissed their laughter, projecting amusement and approval.

Pomona stared at one of the illustrations, placing an index finger on it. "I know of this place. It's a rumour, mostly, but it was said a family lived in the forest in unspeakable poverty. They— hissed at one another instead of speaking, or so the story goes."

"Parseltongues," Kingsley sighed. "I've heard all the stories too. A Ministry official by the name of Ogden once went to question someone named Morfin Gaunt about using magic in front of Muggle villagers." Kingsley paused as Dissina was looking him over thoroughly, her tongue flicking out to "inspect" him more closely. His eyes went wide.

"You don't believe speaking to snakes is a curse or a sign of Dark magic," she hissed softly.

Kingsley gently placed his hand on her head, feeling her smooth scales. "No. There are many people in Africa that still believe that any magic is "sorcery" and they do not believe it can be a positive
thing. My family was driven out, long ago, for being—"

"Different?" Sathras asked.

Kingsley nodded. "The climate there has changed since then, but many old superstitions remain. A
talking Nundu would probably cause a widespread panic."

Brim snorted, shaking her head. "Why be afraid of simple communication?"

"People have always feared that which they do not understand," Remus said thoughtfully. "Whether
that is the remains of the people who stared into the dark and feared it was staring back at them or
because they believed the dark did harbour things much more frightening than they could possibly
imagine, I don't really know."

"Fear or envy," Kingsley agreed. "Quite possibly a mixture of both."

"You do not," Dissina hissed, her tongue flicking out to gently tickle his nose.

"No, my lady," Kingsley replied softly. "I do not."

Sathras lay his head on Kingsley's shoulder. "I like this one. I wish to keep him."

Dissina hissed. "I saw him first."

Kingsley flushed.

"Unused to being fought over?" Brim asked with clear amusement, playfully tickling Kingsley with
her whiskers.

"I am honoured," Kingsley smiled, "to even be considered for such a fine gift."

Brim tugged him by the sleeve. "Come, lay next to me, so you do not fall on your face. I would not
wish you to damage yourself."

"I would gladly suffer a broken nose to feel such peace outside of this chamber."

Brim sprawled out on the loamy earth, nestled between the glowing foliage.

"Between a giant and still growing Nundu and a pair of giant reptiles, I'm not sure just why I feel so
comfortable," Kingsley confessed.

Brim flicked her tail. "I'm adorable."

"There is that," Kingsley laughed. He looked over to the table where Minerva, Rabbie, Severus,
Filius, Pomona, Remus, and Lucius were going over the tome more thoroughly now that they knew
what objects they needed to focus on.

"Don't worry about them," Brim said confidently. "They'll bicker and fuss and Severus will smack
them upside the head, Rabbie will offer everyone those coffee sweets he loves so much, and then
they will end up fighting some hellish tentacle beast that springs out of page four hundred and sixty
two and laugh about it afterwards, feeling better about everything."

"There is a hellish tentacle beast trapped inside that tome?" Kingsley asked, his dark eyes going
impossibly wide.

Brim wore her very best halo.
"Brim?"

"I may have accidentally used my father's tome to thoroughly smack… something into submission."

"You—"

"I was thirteen, to be fair," Brim pointed out. "It startled me."

"I… greatly look forward to hearing about your childhood, Brim— the one with them," he said, referring to the Founders.

Brim favoured him with a very feline smile as she playfully wrestled him down. "You and Severus both, I think." She grew thoughtful. "You know this will change you— bind you— to Hogwarts. You will always hear her call, but she— she will always hear you too."

"I have a feeling she's been listening to me since I was first here as a student, Brim," Kingsley said. "I just hope she hasn't told you any stories of MY childhood here."

Brim suddenly looked over to stare at an English bluebell plant rather intently.

"Merlin— I'm almost afraid to ask— but whatever did she tell you?"

"It was a noble sort of story," Brim replied, "even if started with skinny dipping in the lake and playing hide and seek with the giant squid and your pretty lady friend."

Kingsley flushed, his normally dark skin turning a rather interesting shade of pink. "Oh gods…"

"Your choice in 'friends,' however, was somewhat dubious," Brim ribbed. "Seeing as they stole your lady's clothes instead of yours."

Kingsley hung his head and rubbed his temples, wondering if one could actually die from embarrassment.

"And then there was the time you fell asleep in Professor Binns' history class and started talking in your sleep…"

Kingsley groaned aloud. "A little help here, Dissina?"

Hissing serpentine laughter was his only answer.

Sathras flicked his tongue out. "But I'm rather enjoying story time."

Kingsley buried his reddened face in Brim's side as the Nundu looped her tail in amusement, clearly quite pleased with herself.

"Never fear," Dissina hissed merrily. "We have plenty of embarrassing sssstories to sssssshare!"

Kingsley lifted his head, curious now.

"Your friend over there, the one with the wavy black hair," Dissina hissed, her fangs glinting. "He had a crush on a female and had only just become an Animagus."

"At first, he had never had problems— his crushes gladly met him in dark broom closets and empty classrooms to indulge in each other's mutual caress."

Sirius, who had a pair of black dog ears sticking straight up from his head, was frantically trying to
distract Harry so he didn't hear the story. Harry, however, was like a shark smelling blood in the water when it came to stories about Sirius, and he was very, very interested.

"But, as a canine, he found himself experiencing some rather sensuous dreams," Sathras hissed merrily. "His dorm mates would awaken to find him humping the bed posts, whimpering and whining, a tail sticking straight out of his pants as he rather futilely attempted to mate with his own bed."

"Pads!" Remus hissed. "Why didn't I know about this?"

"It was a full moon! You were in the shack that night!"

"And you let everyone know about all of my embarrassing moments yet somehow neglected to share that you were just as bad as the rest of us?!"

"I didn't do it on purpose!"

"James didn't purposely get his antlers wrapped up by the devil's snare in Greenhouse Three either, but you never let him live it down!"

Harry used that moment to slip in close between the two basilisks, hoping to hear more about Sirius' most memorable youthful indiscretions.

"No!" Sirius tried to leap over the brush and go after Harry. "He doesn't need to hear this!"

"Oh, I think he needs to hear that his godfather is a fallible mortal just like the rest of us," Remus growled.

"Moony, this is not the time or place to make a point!"

"No, apparently that was up in our dorm room!"

"Wait—wait!" Remus yelled gleefully. "Does this mean that story about Marlene McKinnon hexing your broom with a banner that showed you humping the Gryffindor goalpost was actually true?"

"Wha— damnit Moony! Not here!"

"No wonder the girl dumped your sorry arse!"

"Harry, please, cover your ears!"

"No way!" Harry yelled back, grinning madly from ear-to-ear. "Not when things are getting wickedly interesting around here!"

Sirius practically prostrated himself before Dissina and Sathras. "I give you permission for both of us! Please! Please— make it stop!"

Dissina hissed, swaying her head. "We do not wish to accept such an agreement under duress, human."

"It's not under duress! I swear it's not! I know it will do him good. I was just— afraid. Terrified of losing my only remaining link to my best mate— afraid that he'd always trust Sniv… I mean, Severus more than me. I didn't agree because I wanted to— I wanted to hold on the one thing I remember from before my head was all messed up. I lost my faith, but he hasn't. I know that now."
"You—you mean it?" Harry whispered, a tentative hope lighting up his face as he ran up to Sirius.

"Is this what you really want, Harry?" Sirius asked quietly. "Things can never be normal again, not after this."

Harry snorted, sounding eerily like a certain tall, black-haired potions master. "Since when has anything in my life ever been normal?"

Sirius took his hands and clasped them. "If it is what you really want, Harry, then I will support your decision."

"I want this, Sirius," Harry stated firmly. "More than anything. I really do."

Sirius clasped his hand tightly and nodded. "Then, I will support you."

"You need not feel alone," Sathras hissed. "One day, you may make the decision yourself, when your heart has finally finished grieving and healing."

Sirius nodded with no small amount of relief. "Thank you."

Dissina had curled herself almost lovingly around Brim and Kingsley. "Trusssst in me."

Harry touched Sathras' muzzle gently and allowed the male basilisk to herd him over towards Kingsley and Brim.

Dissina struck Kingsley in a flash, her fangs sinking into his neck and shoulder in a lightning strike, but she guided him to Brim's side as the venom spread through his system, binding to his magic as he sank into the greater embrace of Hogwarts. Her coils tightened around them as she hissed a soft serpentine lullaby.

"Are you sure, Harry?" Sathras said. "Do not feel you must rush to join us. We will still be here when you are older."

Harry touched Sathras on the nose. "I'm sure. I'll be close to you, but I'll be closer to Brim. Closer to Professor Snape, and Professor McGonagall. I'll be closer to here. To my home."

"Come lay beside me, Harry," Brim purred. Harry nestled next to her and Kingsley, making himself comfortable and petting her ears tenderly. "When I wake up, we'll be family for real, right Brim?"

"Yes, Harry," she replied warmly. "But we already were family before this."

Harry hugged her tight. "But, they won't ever be able to take me away. I won't have to sleep in a cupboard anymore."

Brim bristled, but then she knocked him over with her paw and pulled him closer to her. "No, never again."

Harry closed his eyes, and Sathras struck in a flash and added his coils to Dissina's. Harry didn't even flinch. His arms wrapped around Brim's neck and he snuggled in close, let out a soft sigh of contentment and drifted off to sleep.

Severus sat down next to Brim and caressed her ears, pressing his face into her warm fur. "Aren't we becoming a rather expansive family, hrm?"
Brim lay on her side, setting her head in his lap as she purred in contentment, wrapping her foreleg around Kingsley and Harry as they sank deep into the covenant and the embrace of Hogwarts.

**A/N:** School is back in session and classes are going to kick my arse! *whimper* Updates are going to be somewhat erratic or sporadic from this point on. I ended this positively so no one can beat me up for leaving you with a cliffhanger! BE HAPPY! ARGH!
A/N: Sorry, really short compared to my normal fare. Classes are really kicking my booty.

Beta Love: The Dragon and the Rose, Dutchgirl01, and Flyby Commander Shepard

Breath of the Nundu

Chapter 10

"Of all God's creatures, there is only one that cannot be made slave of the lash. That one is the cat. If man could be crossed with the cat it would improve the man, but it would deteriorate the cat." - Mark Twain

Severus opened one eye to realise he was being happily glomped.

While he was curled up next to Brim and he was in his Animagus form, Minerva had curled up between his legs like a tabby cat pillow and Draco and Harry were "nesting" between them with a virtual horde of plush spiders piled all over them.

At least the others weren't eerily sentient like a certain coffee-coloured spider. That would've proved infinitely more unnerving.

Coffee, the most aptly-named spider, yawned squeakily and crawled out from under Brim's head, leading his elite platoon of spiders out from Brim's collar.

"Come on. Come on," the spider squeaked.

"Hurry! Hurry up!" the pristine white spider encouraged, moving the others along.

"Coming! Coming!" another answered.

Severus' whiskers twitched. Yes… definitely unnerving.

"Spell's broken, let's get it before it moves again," one spider said to the other.

"Moving, always moving. Moving, moving," the other spider complained.

"Come on, hurry up," Coffee chided. "We have to get it."

"Small enough, small enough!" one of the others replied.

"Silk now. Silk now!" another spider cheered. "Go, go!"

Curiosity piqued, Severus decided that following the spider was probably better than sitting there wondering what they were up to. Unlike many of the students in Hogwarts, the plush spiders seemed to have some sort of awareness that kept them both out of danger and in the thick of things at the same time. The students tended to stumble blindly into the thick of danger instead. The difference might be subtle, but at least the plush spiders were flameproof, squish resistant, and apparently downright cheeky in an unexpectedly endearing sort of way.
At least Draco and Harry had both become more— aware.

It wasn't that he expected a twelve-year-old to always be completely sensical or well-behaved, but Draco and Harry had become a team and their own support system. More importantly, they seemed more apt to listen to instructions and pay attention to what was going on around them. They called it play, and maybe most people would see nothing more than that. Severus knew that Brim was slowly incorporating important life skills into their play: hunting, stalking, wrestling, and even defending against swarming masses of plush spiders.

It was all in good fun to them, but Severus and Lucius had learned such things in far less amusing, let alone "fun" ways. Then again, had Severus had a friend like Brim back in his childhood, people like his father may not have survived— let alone the teenaged Marauders. Seeing that they had eventually become friends, he had to think that at least they had managed to defy the odds. He and his father— not so much.

"Hurry!" a spider said. "Hurry, hurry!"

"Drops! Have the drops?"

"Yes, drops. Drops!"

A large speckled spider hurriedly skittered up, carrying a dish of lemon sherbets. Each plush spider grabbed one of the tart candies from the dish and then they scattered around.

Severus tried to decide which spider to follow. A tiny spider plush, one that seemed to have gotten the short end of the stick on size, struggled to carry its lemon sherbert, teetered, and plunked down face first, sending its hard-earned prize rolling away. It made a squeak of distress, and hurried after the candy, struggling to carry it like the others.

Thunk.

Squeak.

The little spider peered sorrowfully at the lemon sherbert, looking positively forlorn. Feeling a strange tugging in that place he thought to have been abused to death long ago or at least had become numb, Severus transformed and pulled out his wand.

"Come here," he said, extending his hand.

The little spider, who was unlike her brethren, was a rather pearlescent grey, crawled into his hand, emitting the sort of aura that indicated she expected to be punished for her dismal failure.

Strange that he distinctly knew it was a "she." Then again, there were a lot of odd firsts happening in the span of the last year that had anyone told him it would happen a year previous, he'd given them rather explicit instructions on where to go and where to shove it.

He pulled out his wand and pointed it at her. "Engorgio," he said softly.

The little spider squeaked in surprise as she rapidly grew larger— not so much as to be cumbersome, but enough that she could carry her cargo without tripping over herself. He sat her down, and she seemed slightly disorientated for a moment. Then she spied her escaped lemon sherbert and picked it up, moving away on her mission, but then seemed to realise what had happened. She squeaked in joy and skittered up to his hand and hugged it to her with all of her legs. Then, she skittered off to who-knows-where, carrying her lemon sherbert victoriously and joining her fellow arachnids.
Then there was the matter of figuring out what the spiders were doing carrying around a dish of those particular candies in the first place, though Severus did have his suspicions. Suspicions involving a certain lemon sherbet-addicted old bastard.

It didn't take much to make the connection. Dumbledore had been practically addicted to them… or at least he had made it seem like he was. Both possibilities pointed towards something a bit more sinister than one dotty old man.

"Come on!" the not quite so little spider said, waving a leg. "Hurry!"

Severus blinked.

No, the spider was definitely waving at him.

"Hurry!" she said, skittering off with her lemon sherbert sweet.

Well, he thought. When in Rome…

Severus padded off to follow the spider, letting his feline feet carry him on auto-pilot. There were spiders skittering in all directions, but he tried to keep his eyes on the one spider in particular. It proved much easier said than done. Thanks to the "infestation" of helpful plush spiders, there were spiders of every possible size, colour, and variation. One grey spider in the bunch was strangely hard to find amongst the rainbow.

"It's here!" a chorus of tiny voices announced.

"Hurry, hurry!" the others cried, and spiders were rushing in a wave toward a crack in the wall.

Severus skidded to a halt, accidentally stepping on one of the spiders and its lemony cargo. The sweet went tumbling down the hall, and the spider he had stepped on made a coughing wheeze that sent pangs of guilt down his spine. The fact that it did made him realise how far he had come—from detached, emotionally repressed bastard to where accidentally stepping on a plush spider on a mission caused him a painful pang of guilt-ridden emotion.

He carefully lifted his paw and scraped the white and purple polka-dotted spider off of himself, and winced as he found it staring up at him with its tiny black, gemlike eyes.

"Sorry," he apologised, strangely comfortable with his newfound ability to speak in Parseltongue as a large prehistoric feline.

The spider wriggled helplessly, making sad sounds. The other spiders gathered around, set down their lemon sherberts and, each taking up a leg and blowing together, reinflating the unfortunate paw-victim. It popped back into shape with an almost comical pop, and went scurrying after its lost sherbert.

The spiders all stuffed the candies into a crack in the wall—one Severus certainly didn't recall ever being there before—and he could almost swear that the crack was crunching on the lemony, just when he thought he'd seen it all, a door formed in the wall and the spiders flooded over it after the door opened, shooting out jets of webbing from their spinnerets and wrapping the door in spider silk.

Huh. Plush spiders could spin webs too. Who knew?

If what Brim had told him was true, Rowena herself had "helped" the evolution of the plush arachnids so they could be companions for Brim. He had to admit, whatever she had done was definitely a force to be reckoned with.
All the plush spiders gathered into a giant pile and seemed to be gathering their thoughts with regard to their next plan of action. Coffee was bouncing on top of pile, seemingly consumed in spiderish thoughts. The spiders gathered up and sprung in all directions, shooting out silk and crafting a remarkable large web.

_Twwaannnnnng!_

Something landed in the web.

The grey spider that Severus had helped earlier crawled up the web and pounced on something that had managed to snag itself in the threads. She wrapped it in spidersilk over and over again until its vibrations against the web finally ceased. Another spider used its mandibles to snip the silk and cause the cocooned object to fall, and the pile of plush spiders fell on it with excited squeaks.

"Got it?"

"Got it!"

"Yay, gots it!"

"Hurray!"

"Ganbate!"

"Klaar is kees!"

The pile of spiders stared at a golden blond spider who had apparently absorbed Dutch somewhere along the way. The blond spider squeaked innocently, waving its legs. It pointed one leg at the black spider that had spewed a chain of rapid-fire Japanese as if to say, "I'm not the only one!"

The plush spiders tugged the captured object and rolled it over to Severus and stared up at him with a multitude of gemlike eyes.

Severus stared at the webbed object, torn between curiosity and the sudden desire to do something profound for his seemingly enthralled audience. He picked the silk-wrapped object up in his mouth, but as he did so, all the plush spiders crawled up to cling to his back, using him as a transport vehicle back to Brim.

Glad there was no Mr Creevey lurking about to take a slew of embarrassing photographs, Severus padded back towards his chambers, carrying the mystery object and an umpteen amount of plush hitchhikers with him.

There was very little that seemed overly strange to him anymore when every day was bizarre.

"Morgen!"

"Morgen!"

"Goede morgen!"

"おはよう!"

"Bonjour!"

"Καλημέρα!"
The spiders froze as they stared at the marbled white spider that had said good morning in Greek. So far, they had been learning and exchanging good mornings in various languages, and it had left no doubt at all that Rowena Ravenclaw had blessed them with her magic. Who else would enchant plush spiders to know different languages and have insatiably curiosity?

"Доброе утро!" another spider greeted.

"Bore da!"

More staring amongst the spiders ensued. They all stared, repeated the words until they got it right, and then said the words again until all of them could say it.

"Merlin's beard, Severus, did you teach them all of this?" Lucius groaned as a plush spider greeted him in Dutch.

"Don't look at me," Severus said, holding up his hand in denial. "They accomplished this all on their own."

"So, what is this… thing?" Lucius asked, staring at the object that looked suspiciously like a giant tin of lemon sherbets.

"Portkey most likely," Severus replied. "The bigger question is where does it go? The plush arachnids seemed to think it was very important, however they don't seem to think it's dangerous— correction. They do not seem to think it's dangerous as it is now. I have no doubt that is dangerous in some way."

"There would have been a time, old friend, that I would question your choice not to question the judgement calls of small, virtual arachnids," Lucius said with an eyebrow lift. "However, seeing as our circumstances are infinitely stranger as of late, I will concede your point."

Dissina laid her head on Lucius' shoulder, her tongue flicking.

"Circumstances like having a pair of basilisks visiting randomly yet it not being necessary to close your eyes and flee while screaming at the top of your lungs?" Severus asked with an arched brow.

"Much like that, yes," Lucius replied rather dryly.

Sathras hissed with laughter. "It is so good to be out of the chamber again. It has been quite a long time since we could slither out of the walls without fear of being seen."

"Do you know what it is, Sathras?" Lucius asked.

The serpent shook his head. "I fear we do not. We tend to sleep deeply until someone enters the chamber—the last one to attempt parlay was your Tom Riddle. He whispered away our firstborn who desperately craved to see the outside world. He stole him away, attracted to his vibrant red plume, thinking perhaps him more mature than the others rather than it simply being the mark of a male basilisk. And then, our most brave and foolish child did brave the world with his charismatic new ally, but it did last for only a few hours until the cock crowed with the dawn and slew him."

Dissina let out a serpentine sigh. "The smart generally survive," she said. "But no basilisk so young could ever hope to survive the cock's crow. One must be many decades old to hear one far away and many, many more to survive one up close. Even at our age, the sound is… excruciatingly painful for us."
"You'll be happy to know that thanks to Mr Marchbanks' detestable botch of a vitamin potion meant to fortify Hagrid's chickens, they and all their progeny have been rendered permanently mute."

Lucius raised an eyebrow. "Truly?"

Severus shook his head. "I never thought I'd be glad for his mistakes. He managed, to my everlasting relief, to spectacularly fail his potions O.W.L., so I will not be seeing him again in my classes ever again."

"Prrrrt!" Brim stuck her head over the side of the table and loosed her recon spiders to check out what they were looking at.

"I swear to the gods she uses those spiders to give her tactile reconnaissance," Lucius muttered.

"She does, actually," Severus said. "Every one of them reports to her in some manner. Somehow she keeps it straight."

"It must be," Lucius said slowly, "quite busy inside that head."

Severus rubbed Brim behind the ears. "You have **no** idea. At least I get to share the mind-stream with Minerva. It helps temper it. At least somewhat."

"So, it's true then?" Lucius asked. "She lapses in and out of instinct?"

"It's hard to explain, but yes," Severus replied. "Right now, she is most definitely running on instinct and Nundu guile. It took a lot of energy for her to remain fully cognizant during our meeting down in the chamber."

Lucius eyed the Nundu, who purred back at him. "I'm not sure if I'm being played."

"She is playing with you, Lucius," Severus snorted. "Just not in the way your paranoid mind is thinking."

"*What?*"

"You're stepping on her spider."

"What? Oh. Sorry," Lucius apologized lifting his boot to unpin a multiple-coloured spider covered in polka dots that he had unintentionally squished.

The spider made a sad sound as the Nundu picked it up and carried it in her mouth, far away from the evil spider-squishing man with the harsh dragon-hide boots.

"Why do I feel guilty?"

"Because you stepped on her spider."

"But why do I feel so damnably guilty about it?" Lucius asked, clearly at a loss.

Severus shrugged. "I could try and explain, but I fear most of it would come out sounding like I'd just gargled with the same mouth rot as dotty old Trelawney."

Lucius shuddered at the thought. "Please, no," he said after a moment, holding up his hand.

"How are you feeling?" Severus asked, giving Lucius a concerned look.
Lucius shook his head. "Good. Better than good. I'm okay with it, Severus. You needn't hover."

"I don't worry about the children as much," Severus confessed. "They are still quite young and adaptable. Far more than we are."

Lucius clasped Severus' shoulder in a rare moment of unguarded friendship between the two Slytherins. "I am fine, my friend. I feel as though a weight of a hundred lifetimes is finally lifted and gone."

The two serpents hissed in approval. "Hogwarts grows stronger again with the covenant established between us. Perhaps this strange object lies somewhere outside of the natural flow of magic. It jumps from place to place, requiring an entire legion of spiders to lure and net it. Even Hogwarts herself seemed unable to help us."

"Albus," Severus said. "He was always good for turning the most simple of things into a royal pain in my arse."

"We should wait for the others before doing anything," Lucius said. "As strange as it is for me to feel a part of an actual team——"

Severus nodded. "Come, let's ward this thing up and wait for Minerva and Kingsley. Remus will want in too, lest he gets jealous and starts peeing on the furniture."

Lucius stared at Severus wide-eyed.

"What?" Severus asked. "He's a werewolf."

"This coming from a giant, overgrown cat?"

"A giant overgrown cat that will use you as a scratching post if you don't help me ward this thing."

Lucius smiled. "Come on, let's get this done."

"Hey," Draco said, nudging Harry with his foot. "Let's do something."

"Like?" Harry said groggily.

"You still feeling the venom?" Draco asked, shaking his head.

"You had a head start," Harry muttered.

Draco shrugged. "Father woke up and walked directly for the shower."

"Sounds like something your father would do," Harry chuckled.

Draco rolled his eyes. "You need a shower bad, Potter."

"Oh, and you don't?"

"I showered when I first woke up this morning, I'll have you know," Draco fussed.

Harry threw a cushion at him, flopping down on the empty settee with a groan. "My head still feels fuzzy."

Draco gestured to the outside beyond the window. "Father says they are still working on restoring
the wards that mysteriously stopped working when Headmaster Dumbledore had his— unfortunate accident. My head feels really strange too. Almost as if I can feel the wards trying to come back up."

Harry nodded. "Do you think the others would notice, or is it just because of the covenant?"

"Highly-skilled people would notice, I think," Draco guessed. "Maybe they would have to be specifically looking for a problem, though. Most people don't realise wards are there. I mean—"

Draco made a face as he tried to put what he was thinking into words. "I think that many people that grow up around something forget it's there, you know? Like the house-elves at Hogwarts. You don't ever see them, but they are there. The food gets set out and cleared away with no effort on your part. The dormitories are cleaned, but no one really thinks about it. Look at Brim? At first, yeah, everyone was watching her— really scared of her even. But now? She comes and goes almost like a ghost, yet she always seems to be exactly where she's needed at exactly the right time. And I bet we're both a little spoiled, yeah? We both expect her to be there if we're in trouble, but we don't ever stop to think, 'Oh hey, I wonder what Brim is doing right now'."

"I think I get it," Harry said thoughtfully. "It's kind of like electricity in the Muggle world. "It powers your lights and electronic devices— things that do things that we use magic for. Take it away, and people practically fall over themselves. No one even thinks about it until it's gone."

Draco nodded in agreement. "I could be wrong, but that's my take at least. Who knows what kinds of things we'll learn in a few years, yeah? Hey, you talk to your— cousin, was it? At all?"

Harry shook his head. "My uncle hated me. My aunt— I don't know if she hated me or was taking something out on me. Dudley. I don't even know how to describe Dudley. He had two rooms. I got the cupboard under the stairs."

Draco's eyes widened and his face darkened. "I can't imagine treating blood family like that. Don't look at me like that. Blood as in related. Most magical families are the same. It doesn't really matter if you have a line traced back to Merlin or not. No one wants to lose their magic or their family."

Harry scratched his head. "Yeah, I get it. Ron used to always say 'I don't have to look up my family tree because I know I'm the sap' and I never quite got it. His family is all magical too, ya know? He never seemed to realise that I grew up Muggle."

Draco frowned. "I think father is relieved he can be my father now. You have no idea how very strange it is to have a real dad again. He isn't just smacking my hand and telling me not to touch things. He's showing me things and telling me why things are they way they are."

"Can I tell you something?"

"Aren't you already?"

Harry made a face.

Draco waved in a go forth gesture. "Go on, then."

"Professor Snape has been more like a real dad to me than my uncle ever was, not that it took all that much, but he's also better than my own godfather." Harry looked around, almost as if he was afraid that admitting such a thing would cause lightning to strike him dead.

"Naw, I get it," Draco said. "There's a reason I call Severus my Uncle. He and dad are close, but it was always more than that. Severus used to teach me things— mainly to keep me from blowing myself up 'In the most embarrassing manner possible'."
Harry snorted. "Sounds about right. Professor Snape isn't trying to be my new best friend, but he isn't trying to be my enemy either. He sets rules, makes it clear that he expects them to be followed, and he follows through by letting me know in no uncertain terms when I do something stupid, and he makes sure that I know better next time. When I finally realised that— I really started to see him differently. I watched how he treated Brim, and that's when I realised I had it all wrong. She absolutely adores him, and— I really trust her judgment."

Draco smiled. "No one can resist Brim's charms. Not even my father. If you watch, he'll sneak her tidbits under the table."

Harry laughed. "I believe it. She makes a patrol of the table, hitting up everyone for tasty treats."

"No one denies the Nundu," Draco laughed. "Have you seen how many spiders she can pack into that collar of hers?"

Harry shook his head.

"I swear she packs a Quidditch stadium full in that collar. She's like the queen Nundu, and the spiders are her minions."

Harry smiled. "That may be more true than you think."

Draco cocked his head. "Did you hear that?"

Harry stilled. "It's a," he said, trailing off. "Song?"

Draco nodded.

"House elves?"

"No idea. If they sing anything like Dobby, that is \textit{not} a house-elf singing," Draco said.

Harry looked ready to go. "Come on, let's go find out what it is."

Draco looked nervous, but conflicted. "We shouldn't leave without Brim or without father or someone knowing where we are."

A small, plush arachnid was sitting on Harry's sleeve, tugging on it, shaking its head back and forth for him not to go. Harry tried to brush the spider off, but it immediately crawled back, tugging on his sleeve in tiny, futile movements.

\textit{Shake!}

"Harry!" Draco yelled.

Harry blinked, the glassy look on his face leaving. "Whaa?"

"I said, I think we need to stay here. At least here we're under Severus' wards."

Harry made a face but nodded. "Did you— hear the music?"

Draco shook his head. "Yeah, and that's what worries me."

"Harry! Thank Merlin, a familiar face!"
"Ron! I didn't expect to see you here," Harry greeted. "How's your summer going?"

"Terrible, Harry," Ron groaned. "I'm stuck in school all of summer. Mum is all mad because dad won the Daily Prophet Grand Prize Galleon Draw. Everyone is going to Egypt to visit Bill. He's out there curse breaking, yeah? I only get to see a little and mum has to floo me here for classes. Bloody useless, if you ask me."

"Summer classes?" Harry asked with a frown.

"Yeah, that entire misunderstanding with mum."

"You mean that 'misunderstanding' that had your mum sending Harry a howler in front of the whole school telling him all about how he corrupted you and made you do all of his work so you couldn't do your own lessons?" Draco said, coming back with two large ice creams. He handed Harry one and sat down beside him.

"Malfoy!" Ron hissed furiously.

"Thanks for reminding me what my family name is," Draco said. "I might've forgotten." He licked his ice cream and attempted to chase the runaway cherry bits that were trying to escape by burrowing deeper into the cone.

Harry ended up with ice cream on his nose as he attempted to snap up the cherry pieces by taking a large bite out of it.

"Nice one, Harry," Draco snorted.

"Shut it, you," Harry snapped, but his expression was amused.

"Father says the Wizengamot is going to go all day. They even brought Brim up and had someone put her memories into a Pensieve over what happened to the Headmaster." Draco shook his head. "Poor Brim. She didn't like that much—the first woman who tried to was a bit hateful."

"I wouldn't want to put my memories out there for everyone to see," Harry said. "It was one thing when the Ministry wanted one event from me, but Brim—she sees everything, everywhere—senses, feels, smells."

"Yeah, one of the Wizengamot members got ill with the sensory overload," Draco said. "That's why father had time to come out and give us a couple galleons for ice cream."

"Good on him," Harry approved with a smile.

"What the hell are you doing here, Malfoy?" Ron demanded, crossing his arms angrily.

"Keeping this bloke company," Draco answered, poking Harry with his pinky, "before my mum comes to take us to Diagon Alley to get fitted for robes."

"Like you need any more robes, Malfoy."

Draco sighed. "Look, this may be a foreign concept to you, Weasel, but we Malfoys grow just like everybody else. And fang and claw-proof Acromantula silk doesn't grow on trees. It has to be specially tailored. Besides, the new Nimbus racing broom is on display, and if we're lucky, mum will let us put our names down on the list for it."

"You're not even on a Quidditch team," Ronald bit out, scowling.
"Well, unlike Potter here, who practically flew into McGonagall's office to make a lasting impression, I plan on trying out for Seeker this year," Draco said, giving a loud sniff.

Harry rolled his eyes. "You stole Neville's Remember-All."

"Borrowed."

"Without intending to give it back."

"He was welcome to come and get it. You did." Draco snorted.

Harry and Draco scoffed and ate their ice cream in silence for a while and then started chortling together.

Ron gestured to Harry to come talk to him, and Harry stood up and walked over to him.

"What's up, Ron?"

"That's bloody Malfoy!"

"Yes?"

"He's Slytherin!"

"Okay."

"You can't trust him!"

"Not to take the last biscuit, I know," he said, giving a lifted eyebrow to Draco, who was busily eavesdropping while licking his ice cream cone. Draco stuck his tongue out at him and continued to devour his cone.

"His father is a Death Eater!"

"Acquitted, actually," Lucius' voice purred.

Ron's eyes grew wide as he spun around and saw both Lucius and Severus standing together with Narcissa Malfoy. Brim squeezed between them after rubbing all over Narcissa, and pounce the two boys, bowling over Harry into Draco and then licking their faces clean of ice-cream.

"ACK! NO!" they laughed hysterically as she dutifully 'helped' them clean up.

Just then, Ron spotted his father strolling up to greet them. "Ah, thank you for arranging a Portkey, Lucius. I appreciate it."

Lucius gave a gallant shrug. "Better a Portkey than having Aurors come and fetch you each time," he replied. "I did arrange for you and the family to transferred to the resort that Narcissa and I usually go to when we take Draco. We weren't using it this year. I hope your wife sees this as a equitable trade for having you come testify today?"

Arthur waved his hand. "Bill owled. Molly hasn't left the spa since coming back to drop of Ron. Oh, Ron, shouldn't you be back in class? We're not due to pick you up until six."

"We have a break, dad," Ron said, crossing his arms truculently.

"Oh! Well, I'll walk with you, son. You can tell me all about if you passed the accelerated test.
Maybe you can join us sooner before the holiday is over. Lucius, thanks again.

Lucius waved his hand dismissively. "Enjoy your holiday, Arthur. And do try to lose that horrible statue of the mating camels somewhere. Narcissa and I would be most grateful."

"You had some pretty odd wedding gifts, Lucius."

"You have no idea."

Lucius herded Ron, who looked very red in the face, to Arthur's side with a simple look. Ron stormed off with his father, shooting Harry a look sour enough to curdle milk.

"Issues?" Lucius asked Harry with a lifted brow.

Harry sighed. "I never really know with Ron. A quote from him may show up in the paper tomorrow claiming that I embarrassed him in public."

Severus muttered something distinctly unfriendly under his breath. He walked over to Harry and sighed. "This meeting is going longer than expected. However, I do not think you will object to Brim tagging along with you to Diagon Alley with Narcissa?"

Harry and Draco both nodded excitedly.

"Hn," he replied. "If only you were that excited when doing your classwork."

Narcissa put a hand on Severus' shoulder. "Come on, Severus. Let the children be children today."

Severus rolled his eyes, but he handed Harry a pouch of coins. He leveled a gaze at the boy. "Do not spend it all on sweets and dragonet-roasted chestnuts. I expect all your books and tailoring fees to be covered before you splurge."

"Yes, sir," Harry promised.

Severus turned to Brim, and she mrowled, head-bonking her skull into his hand.

"Have," Severus said awkwardly. "... fun."

Harry glomped Severus around the waist enthusiastically. "Thank you!"

Draco dragged Harry down the hall while Narcissa ran to catch up.

Severus looked at Brim. "Try not to let them die or something that will require an obscene amount of paperwork."

Brim licked his hand and purred. Then, she rammed her head into Lucius, barely missing his assets and bounded off after the boys and Narcissa. The boys gave a happy yell as they mounted on the Nundu's back and let her plow through the crowds for them.

"My entire life just passed before my eyes," Lucius wheezed.

"Welcome to life with a Nundu," Severus chuckled. "Better than the Wizengamot."

"True, but at least the Wizengamot isn't trying to crush my privates."

Severus smiled. "Yet."
Meanwhile, the glowering face of Ronald Weasley scowled at the scene with clear malice before his father dragged him back to his classes.

"Well, what do you think?" Harry said, posing in his robes.

Brimstone yawned toothily, her tongue lolling as she looked him over. A few curious spiders came out of her collar habitat to look him over, going in and out of pockets and his collar, inspecting him.

"Looks good."

"Good!"

"Whee!" they said as they sprung off him to return to Brim. The seamstress eyed the spiders warily, unsure what to think and ironically more concerned about the arachnids than the very large Nundu.

Narcissa, who was watching from not so far away, pet Brim between the ears, earning her happy purrs and a few age-defying licks to her hands. The elder witch seemed happy to dote on the Nundu like a surrogate daughter, having taken her to a shop to be groomed and pampered as a person would at a spa. Draco and Harry had enjoyed the hot springs the most, soaking in the heated water and then diving into the colder pool to shock their systems. Their attempts to avoid the Nundu, however, didn't work.

Nundus loved water, unlike most other felines.

As it was, Brim was purring happily, her coat all shiny and brushed, and she had small serpent-shaped clips in her longer mane-scruff. No one mistook her for a Nundu on the loose, at least, not that anyone who knew anything about her wasn't well aware of just who she was and exactly who she belonged to.

Brim laid her head across Narcissa's lap, purring contentedly, her ears flicking back and forth lazily.

Few people came up to visit the family as they shopped, partly due to the Nundu presence. Three people in particular did their best to avoid them as much as possible after finding out their very presence caused the Nundu to start breathing disease their direction: Crabbe, Goyle, and Parkinson. Theodore Nott and Blaise Zabini didn't seem to mind or care, and Brim eagerly pounced and mock-mauled them in greeting.

"Oi! Watch the teeth!" Blaise yelped, not really complaining.

Brim mrowled and attempted to stuff her head into his pocket like a kitten, only she was hardly a kitten anymore and only her nose fit inside— barely.

Blaise sighed, pulling out a small handful of what might have been a meat jerky of some sort and relinquished it. Brim gobbled it up, giving him a series of unrelenting thankful licks.

"Argh!" Blaise moaned, pushing her away, getting more licks on his hands. "Nundu slobber!"

Theodore snickered.

"Wait— YOU put that in my pocket, Nott!"

"Did not," Theo said while fighting a smile.

Brim attempted to stuff her head into Blaise's other pocket and came out with a giant gummy fish.
She shook it victoriously and bounced back over to Narcissa and laid her head in her lap as she ate it… quite noisily.

"That one was mine," Theo said with a mischievous wink.

"Bastard," Blaise sneered at him, but there was clear amusement in his dark eyes.

"Ready for our second year?" Theo asked Draco, handing him a package of chocoballs.

Draco opened the package of sweets and shared it with Harry. "Thanks. Yeah, I think so. You?"

"Can't say I'm all that excited to see who our new DADA professor will be after what happened last year," Theo said. "You hear about my father?"

Draco shook his head negative.

"His ruddy father got himself arrested by the Aurors for trying to dig up something in Little Hangleton. The old Muggle groundskeeper called the police, and then Aurors showed up after them with an Obliviation team," Blaise said. " Makes me glad my mother ate my bastard father."

"Damn, Blaise, you're sodding heartless," Theo sighed. "Did she really eat him?"

Blaise shrugged. "All I know is my mum's husbands don't ever last long, and you have to wonder where all the bodies go, yeah? When I was seven I didn't really question it, but now… I am really starting to wonder why I've gone through seven stepfathers in the twelve years I've been alive."

Draco stared impolitely. "Nasty, Blaise."

"Oi, Potter. You finally one of us now?" Blaise asked curiously. "About time if you ask me."

Theo rolled his eyes and thumped Harry on the shoulders. "Old Snape seems to tolerate your arse, so we figure you can't be awful." He grinned at Harry.

"Thanks, I think," Harry said as the seamstress took the last measurement and pointed to the dressing room. Harry shuffled off to change back into his everyday clothes.

"Glad he turned out alright," Theo sighed. "He was hanging out with Weaselbee, and that never bodes well for anyone."

Blaise shrugged. "I always thought Charlie and Bill were okay blokes," he said. "But things kinda went downhill after that. Then they had a daughter. Merlin only knows how that will end."

"Have you heard Molly Weasley's howlers? That is how it will end," Theo shuddered.

"You know, Blaise," Draco said thoughtfully. "If you're really worried that your mum is a sodding cannibal, you might want to have Brim come over and—I dunno. Check the place out? I'm sure my Uncle wouldn't mind loaning us Brim if she didn't mind going, that is. You'd have to ask her."

"You want me to ask… a sodding cat?"

"Nundu."

"Sodding Nundu cat?"

Draco facepalmed. "She's way smarter than you think, Blaise. Trust me, just ask her. But only if you really want to know, otherwise don't. Your call, mate."
“Mrowl?” Nundu whiskers were shoved right into Blaise's face.

"Argh!" he said as she pounced him, sitting on his chest— heavily.

"She really likes you, mate," Draco grinned.

Harry came back to see a rather flattened Zabini squirming underneath a Nundu. His eyes begged the question that his voice did not.

"Fine!" Blaise groaned. "If you would not mind, Madam Nundu, I would really appreciate it if you could confirm whether my mother is eating my stepfathers or otherwise disposing of their remains."

"What? " Harry blurted.

Brim gave Blaise a swift slurp to the face, giving him baby-smooth skin on one side.

"Wonderful, now I'm never going to grow a beard on that side," Blaise muttered. "I'll invite you all over for tea and crumpets or something," he said. "Mum loves to meet my friends for some reason. She may change her mind when she sees Brim though."

"Is she a hateful person?" Draco asked.

"Not to your face," Theo said slowly, "but you get this feeling like everything is hidden under her smile, if you catch my meaning."

"Uncle Severus will have to come then," Draco said. "He's the only one who can keep her in check around that kind of negative emotion."

Theo suddenly paled. "That's right, Pansy didn't do so hot. Hell, Crabbe and Goyle— have you even seen them around Diagon this year?"

Blaise shook his head. "No. Rumour has it they both tried to transfer to Durmstrang— and insulted someone on their first day there. It did not end well for them."

"Damn, who?"

"Someone named Viktor Krum," Blaise answered. "And Krum wasn't the one who actually took offense. It was the High Master."

The boys shuddered. They had all heard rumours of what life was like at Durmstrang, and that particular rumour only made the already bad reputation even worse.

Draco nodded. "Krum is a pretty good guy from what I've heard. Level-headed, tough, determined and damned smart. He just attracts followers who are both very loyal and protective of him."

The boys nodded together.

"Hey, I hear someone named Lupin is our new DADA instructor this year," Theo said. "True?"

"Yeah, McGonagall hired him in as her first act as the new Headmistress. I heard rumours that Dumbledore had been thinking of hiring that puffed-up ponce, Gilderoy Lockhart."

"Lockhart?! Have you seen that man? He checks his teeth in a mirror more often than a climbing socialite."

"Father says he's a total moron." Draco shook his head in disapproval.
"I heard them talking. Professor McGonagall is having problems cleaning up after Dumbledore’s tattered bond to Hogwarts. All former headmasters have them, but he didn't actually retire or die so —"

"Squibbed, can you believe it? I can't even imagine." Theo boggled. "Anyway, this Professor Lupin bloke sounds good to me. We might actually have a decent DADA teacher this year."

"Beats the hell out of Quirrell," Blaise agreed.

"Even Dobby beats the hell out of Quirrell," Draco mused.

"That brain-damaged elf?"

Draco gave Theo a look. "He fell into a vat of butterbeer as an elfling. He really can't help himself, Theo."

"More like Ogden's," Blaise snorted. "He hasn't been right for a long time. Remember that time he tried to serve cold drinks and he boiled our drinks and served the soup ice-cold instead."

Draco's eyebrow twitched. "Yes."

Brim was pretending to gnaw on Blaise's head, and she had sent her plush spiders out to search his pockets for other hidden goodies.

"AGH! Theo, I'm going to murder you!"

"It wasn't me this time, mate! All I planted was the giant gummy fish. That really was brilliant by the way. I flavoured it with real tuna."

Blaise glared at his friend as he was slurped over and attacked by spiders of all shapes and sizes.

The spiders retreated after a while, carrying their loot like a line of army ants back into Brim's collar. Blaise sighed. "Will we see you on the train then, Draco? How about you, Potter?"

Harry had a look of pure panic on his face.

Draco pat Harry on the shoulder. "Don't worry. We'll protect you from your barry Gryffindor house-mates."

Harry slumped. "That's exactly what I'm afraid of."

"We'll just sic Brim on anyone who looks at you sideways, yeah?"

"Nundu on a train? She'd take up one whole compartment all by herself," Harry chuckled.

"That, and I don't think Severus would want Brim riding on a train full of students without him, and he sure as Hades isn't going to be on the train with us," Draco laughed.

"Was worth a thought," Blaise chuckled.

The seamstress let out a loud squeal, and the boys turned to find out what was wrong. The witch had her hands clasped together as she stared at all of her needles. A tiny, bright green plush spider had threaded each needle and organized them by size and function on a giant apple-shaped pincushion.

"You little darling!" she cooed, hugging the little needle-threading interloper.
The tiny spider squeaked with pleasure and stared adoringly up at the seamstress.

Brim poked her head over and stared up at the spider, and the spider shuffled reproachfully towards her, almost as if she expected to be chastised for her impertinence.

Brim gave the spider a fond slurp and nosed it closer to the seamstress.

The little spider squeaked happily, hugging Brim's whiskers before crawling up into the seamstress's waiting hands.

"Oh! Are you sure?" the seamstress gasped.

Brim nodded her head in the affirmative. "Mrowl!"

The seamstress stared down at the spider in her hands and smiled.

Brim purred. Match made!

The seamstress gently caressed Brim's ears, and she purred even louder.

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**Murder Most Foul at Zabini Manor**

In a world where magic seals a marriage bond for life, there is only one way to escape: death. Normally, this would be a tragedy, but what if unspeakable tragedy was actually an act of murder?

Now, some people wanted this covered up, but I, Rita Skeeter, mean to bring you the cold hard truth of the matter. I will bring you the story of what the Ministry has tried to cover up!

What happened, you might ask. What could they possibly be trying to hide from the good wizarding public? Murder. Murder most foul, indeed.

Mrs Zephyr Worley-Greystoke-Chadwick-Dane-Bumble-Rochester-Zabini, has a long list of late husbands. All of them left her "mountains of gold" when they died. Her beauty, said to rival that of the ancient Cleopatra, which I must say is a baseless story as the woman in question is terribly plain, has supposedly charmed many an unwary wizard into her deadly embrace— yet she only had one child, a son named Blaise.

But is this a mother simply trying to provide for her beloved child? Or is she a lethal black widow, whose only concern is adding to the already impressive pile of galleons in her Gringott's vault… at any cost?

Unlike our hard-working magical folk out there, Mrs Zabini seems to enjoy living in the lap of luxury. And what more would a person who used to luxury and multiple husbands want? Eternal youth— the siren call of many a woman since ancient times. How, you ask?

Dangerous unproven methods implemented by none other than the banshee Headmistress of Hogwarts, Minerva McGonagall and her pet potions master: the notorious Severus Snape. Regardless of what you might've been told. I know the TRUTH. Severus Snape is dosing an ordinary leopard with engorgement potions and unnaturally tampering with the creature— mutating it into his beast of burden. Then, he is having it deliver potions to "special clients" via saliva, making it look like the animal is somehow responsible for bringing about a miraculously youthful transformation. He does it under the direct sanction of Headmistress McGonagall— to make an truly obscene amount of galleons by preying on gullible witches and wizards who will do anything, pay anything in a desperate attempt to turn back the hands of time.
I think the Wizarding world needs to know the truth of the matter! Demand to know why this horrible man can get away with hiding away potions that can turn back the hands of Time. Surely, this is far more important than catering to the wants of one ordinary witch who wants to seduce more unlucky men to her fateful beside. If anything, she was married out of pity only to be left money to take care of her child. At least the boy has some natural good looks about him.

Alastor Moody scowled at the edition of the *Daily Prophet* that had arrived before the ink had even dried on the paperwork for the Zabini fiasco.

"I want to know where our leak is, and I want to know NOW!" he snarled, sending multiple Aurors flying in all directions in a hurry to do something— anything— to get out of the range of Moody's wrath.

Moody threw his copy of the *Prophet* across the room, and Brim padded up to it and squatted over it, promptly relieving herself on the paper. The sound of Rita Skeeter's poisonous narration burbled and drowned as the ink washed off the parchment, leaving it strangely pristine and smelling of wildflowers.

"I'm sorry, Severus," Alastor grunted. "I have no idea how anyone could've even known we were there. I had hand-picked our team the moment Kingsley asked me."

Severus shook his head. "I am used to being called many things, Alastor. Minerva, however, does not need the extra stress when she is trying to clean up Albus' messes."

Moody rubbed his temples. "We've had a leak in our department for years. It's always that bloody Skeeter menace. It's always our most highly sensitive cases. Nothing from the DoM, thankfully, but only just. I don't know how that muckraking bint gets her information."

"What does the DoM have that you do not? Security-wise?"

"Other than a rampaging horde of Unspeakables and over a hundred nasty wards to walk through before you can get in the main door to their working area?"

Severus smirked. "Yes, that."

"Mrowl!" Brim said, gnawing on Moody's sleeve, and when he didn't respond, she proceeded to crawl into his lap like an overgrown housecat.

"Aghhh!" Moody complained, his face full of long Nundu whiskers. Her rough tongue lathed off the top layer of his unshaven stubble on half his face, exposing pink skin underneath.

Moody sighed, touching his face with half-resigned disgust. "Nundu slobber." He patted his face a few times. "Wait, what?"

Severus raised an eyebrow.

"Mirror!" Moody bellowed, and some random young Auror practically flew the mirror to his hand with a startled yip.

Moody stared into it. "The blazes?"

"Hn?" Severus commented.

"The scars are gone."
"She likes you."

"No, the scars— they are gone!"

"As I said, Alastor. She. Likes. You."

Brim purred, pouncing Moody backwards and giving attention to the other side of his face. Alastor's mirror went flying, which Severus caught in a strangely adept movement.

"Someone is getting all the love," Auror Savage commented as he passed by. "Oi, boss! I think I have a lead on who has been stealing our information."

"What, Savage!" Alastor groused, trying to push the Nundu off himself, but she laid on top of him, her tail swishing in clear amusement. All three hundred or more kilos of her were effectively pinning him down.

"When you are done wrestling with Her Raspiness, I think we know who the leak is."

"Spit it out, Savage!"

"Rita Skeeter."

"I know she's getting the information, Savage. I want to know who is getting the information!"

"Rita Skeeter."

Alastor shoved Brim's face to the side, exposing his pink, baby-face skin. "What?!"

"I think she's an Animagus, sir."

"She's not on the list!"

"I know, sir, but—"

Brim pounced Savage, sending him flying backwards, however he seemed to handle it better than Alastor, and he wrestled with her and rubbed her ears and got her to lay on her back for a belly rub.

Alastor glowered at Savage's skill as he stood up. "Now how did you find all this out?"

Savage handed him a piece of dried and preserved mud. "Beetle tracks, sir. I had them identified by Master Grover. He's an expert on bugs. He says it's a species of beetle—a *Cetoniinae* something—but they don't live here. They're native to Africa."

"And why were you tracking down bug prints?"

Savage squared his shoulders. "I saw them on Proudfoot's collar after we came back from the Zabini estate. You know Proudfoot and his always perfectly immaculate collars. One speck of dirt and it instantly looks out of place. I recognised them and then realised why. I've seen them before—over our filing cabinets, in the dust, and other places."

Alastor narrowed his eyes. "Give me your memories of it so I can look it over. I have a feeling this is going to require a lot of coffee."

Savage, was quite busy being mock-savaged by a certain Nundu, grunted a response as about a hundred plush spiders joined the fray and helped bury him alive.
"Hey!" Moody barked. "Bury him later. Let him give me his research first!"

"Awwww!"

"Awww!"

"No fun."

"No fun, no!"

"Got the vial?"

"Helping! Got it!"

Moody stared as a wave of spiders carried a vial over to Savage and let him fill it with his memories. Then, the corked the top and carried it up Moody's leg and plunked the vial into his hand.

Moody twitched and glowered at Severus.

Severus lifted an eyebrow. "Don't look at me. It is hardly my doing."

"Grumpy!"

"Grumpy pants!"

"Smile more."

"Yes!"

"Needs to smile more."

The spiders leapt off his hand and landed back on Savage and Brim. "Wheeee!"

Moody sighed. "You're right. Nothing that sodding cheerful could ever be your fault."

Severus pulled his outer robe around himself and crossed his arms, shaking his head. "Careful, Alastor. People will start thinking we actually get along."

Moody just snorted as he grasped the vial of memories. "Snape."

"Hn?"

"How good is our Furry Queen of the Arachnids at tracking possible Animagi?"

Severus' lip twitched ever so slightly. "Just give her something with a scent or magical signature, and she'll do her best to please."

Alastor shrugged. "I'm not an Animagus. How much scent or energy does she need to start?"

Severus frowned. "Enough to be unique to Ms Skeeter, otherwise Brim may not know what scent she's supposed to track over any others that may be present."

Moody narrowed his eyes. He dug through his bottom desk drawer and pulled out an unopened parcel that smelled suspiciously of some kind of exotic eau de parfum.

"What is that?"
Brim put her paws over her nose and let loose several sneezes, then she attempted to bury her face in Savage's arm pit. A plethora of spiders gathered around her head as if they were trying to filter her air or else suffocate her to death. Severus had the feeling that either was preferable to the overwhelming combined stench of what smelled like an ungodly mix of spice and rotting flowers.

Savage was giggling hysterically, obviously quite ticklish.

"Really, Savage? What are you man, twelve?"

Savage wasn't answering Moody, far too involved in laughing himself silly.

Moody snorted. "This parcel arrived shortly after Skeeter's trashy book He's So Moody was released. It didn't take much to realise that she'd sent me a personalised copy just to make absolutely sure I got one.

"Did she— actually dip it in parfum?" Severus asked, wrinkling his nose in distaste.

"I always kept it in a scent-locked drawer. Believe me, it was for everyone's betterment that I did." Moody sighed. "Now I have to go watch these memories to ensure we have enough evidence to authorise a tracking spell. Hopefully— that will be enough for Our Lady of Unspeakably Savage Torture?"

Severus curled his lip in disgust. "If she doesn't die of asphyxiation from the horrible stench."

"Do try to unbury Savage while I'm gone, if you please? I might actually need him."

Severus rolled his eyes. "As you wish."

Moody trudged off with the vial on a quest for a pensieve.

Severus stared down at Savage, whose only feature that was barely recognisable— was his hand. His fingertips were twitching spasmodically under a pile of plush spiders.

"This is what you get for being friendly with a Nundu," Severus said with a sigh.

"Oi! Potter!" Draco hissed, slipping into Parseltongue with ease. The two were practicing often, and becoming adept at it. Dissina watched over the two boys from her curled position, blending into the floor with startling accuracy. The two boys weren't worried. The basilisks, much like Brim, were a safe presence to them both.

"Huh?"

"You have a bug on your books, mate." Draco pointed.

"A— bug?"

"You know… blue, has antennae, multiple legs, and probably rolls dung balls."

"Those are dung beetles," Harry scoffed. "Not all beetles roll dung."

"This one might. It's certainly big enough." Draco frowned.

"It's a big one," Harry hissed softly. "Let's catch it and maybe Professor Snape can tell us what it is."

"My uncle really isn't that into bugs," Draco replied, curling his lip, "but I guess it's better than us just
guessing. His identification book is on the top shelf, and we both know how that would end for us if we should get caught climbing his bookshelves."

Harry shuddered. "No thanks. The only one who can get away with sprawling on his bookshelves is Brim."

"And Professor McGonagall."

"Well, they're both cats."

"Miaow."

The boys turned to see Crookshanks staring at them. His distinctive low meow sounded more like the drop of a brick.

"Okay, well, he's a cat too," Harry pointed out.

Draco just rolled his eyes.

"I don't even know how he gets here," Harry confessed. "He's Ron's familiar."

Draco frowned. "I don't think so. They don't really act like it."

Harry gave a sort of gallant shrug. "Mrs Weasley bought him, and she gave him to Ron."


"Well, if he isn't Ron's familiar, whose is he?"

Draco made a face. "He sleeps with Brim and Severus, so—"

"Can a familiar even have a familiar of their own?"

"Can we really judge Brim by normal rules and expectations?"

"True," Harry said with a sigh. Harry looked at Draco with a strange expression, the corners of his mouth tugging in odd directions.

"What?" Draco asked.

"I think about what could have happened a lot, and I realise that I could've ended up back with Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia. This life, as odd as it is, is a pretty good life. It's definitely a better one. Even if thinking about it really makes my head hurt. I think about how bad it could be." Harry scratched his head and shrugged.

Draco shook his head and made a face. "Don't dwell on it, mate. I mean, we could have been enemies forever if Brim hadn't, you know, kind of forced us to deal."

Harry grinned. "You were such an arse."

Draco ffffted. "You chose Weasel for a best friend."

"He was my only friend at the time!"

"Yeah, and what do you think about that friend now?" Draco tapped his nose.
"I'm thinking he has no right to tell me my choice in friends sucks when he lied to his own mum about me being the reason for his grades being total rubbish," Harry grunted. "He was always picking on that bushy-haired witch too."

"Who?"

Harry blinked. "I have no idea."

They stared at each other and shrugged.

"That was really weird, yeah?"

"Yeah." Harry perked. "Hey, Professor Snape gave us that habitat bottle to stash our fireflies in. Maybe we can catch it in that?"

"Good idea," Draco agreed. "Where did you put it?"

"Um…"

Draco rolled his eyes.

"Ah! Too late! It's already on the move!" Harry leapt over his bookbag and launched himself at the scurrying beetle. Draco moved in to help, and the both of them crashed into each other, hands stretched out in hopes of covering the frantically moving insect.

The beetle was buzzing as its wing coverlets opened, and it suddenly seemed to remember it could fly. It took off into the air, barely escaping the grabbing hands of two young wizards.

Harry grabbed for the nearby chair where a plush spider was resting. It squeaked with alarm as he snatched it up and he wrapped a bit of the silk around his hand and flung the arachnid up towards the beetle like a yo-yo toy.

"Eeeeee!!!" the spider exclaimed.

The spider landed on the beetle in full collision and grasped the beetle, but Harry's miscalculation caused him to yank the spider away from its prize. The silk strand snapped with a TING! and the plush spider and beetle went flying in opposite directions.

Harry cursed loudly.

Draco scrambled, the both of them even more determined to capture the elusive insect. They tore after the bug, now less interested in capturing it alive as much as capturing it at all, and the insect seemed to instinctively sense this change, buzzing away even more speedily, but it was obviously disoriented—there were wisps of spider silk still clinging to its antennae.

Harry slammed his hands down over it, but it crawled up between the cracks in his fingers. Draco slammed his over Harry's, and the beetle squeezed back out again. They alternated over and over trying to get the bug under wraps, but it became more and more desperate, even drawing blood by clamping on Draco's fingers.

Crying out, Draco slammed his fist down on the beetle, but it dodged, but it seemed to realise it had done something even worse: caused the boy to seek its destruction. It buzzed and flew away into the adjoining room, and Draco snarled, about to run after it but Harry stopped him, grabbing him by the shoulder.
"Draco!"

"WHAT?!"

"The wards!"

The glaze of temporary insanity faded from Draco's face. "Sorry, I lost it there for a while."

Suddenly, the beetle was surrounded in a bright, glowing green light as a spell snapped into place.

"What's going on?"

"Tracking spell," Draco answered, his grey eyes going very wide. "Saw one on a guy at the Auror's office once. He tried to shake it off, and it did really bad things to him."

"Really bad as in what?"

"Really bad as in I'm pretty sure he couldn't take a piss standing up after that."

Harry did a minor equipment check before sighing with relief.

Both boys froze when a horrific, blood-curdling scream came from the next room.

"That was not a beetle!" Harry hissed with fright.

Immediately, Dissina's coils were wrapped around the two boys as she placed herself in a protective position.

"Get down in my coilssss," she hissed.

Harry and Draco immediately did as they were told, not needing to be told twice.

Dissina wrapped around them gently, and pressed her head over them like the lid on an urn. Her tongue flicked in and out. The boys peeked over her coils, but stayed glued to her, taking comfort in her size and warmth.

Zap!

KER-zap!

CRACK!

Energy crackled and arced from the next room as a woman with curly blonde hair was lifted high into the air, her body jerking violently as it struck the protective wards that had been set to guard the priceless curios within. The woman screamed, her eyes wide with shock and filling the lenses of her bright red-framed glasses.

"That's not just the wards!" Draco hissed frantically. "The tracer is reacting to them too!"

The woman had her wand out and she was madly casting a barrage of spells. Myriad spells were zinging off every surface, destroying vases, sculptures, picture frames, furniture, and curtains. Portraits shrieked in terror and painted figures dove out of their frames in search of safety. They hastily grabbed their painted valuables and fled for their oil-based lives.

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With each spell cast, the arcs of energy grew stronger as the wards resonated ever more strongly, pulsing outward like the thrumming beat of a giant heart. The trace was trying to anchor the woman
to the area, but the area was warded and most emphatically didn't want her around. Both magicks were powerful, and both were trying to rip the woman in opposing directions. She shifted back and forth between beetle and woman, shrieking and clicking and screaming again. The changes came faster and faster, blurring between woman and insect, until it was hard to see where one ended and the other began.

_Crack!_

_CRACK!_

Multiple Aurors Apparated in along with Snape, fanning out as Moody burst through the lines.

"Snape, can you bring down the wards?" he snapped. "Rochford, disable that trace-restrainer at once."

"Sir!" one of the Auror's said waving his wand.

Snape put his hand on Brim's head as he focused his will through her as his familiar. He drew complex arcs with his wand until the wild arcs of energy started to calm, but the moment both his wards and Rochford's tracing spell started to wane, the witch trapped inside quickly transformed with the obvious intent to flee, slamming herself into the object that bore a striking resemblance to giant tin of lemon sherbert that was sitting on a satin pillow. Her arms jerked, and her body was beginning to transform— but not quite in the way she wanted. One leg was perfectly human, but the other was the leg of a giant beetle. Her compound eyes were an enormous version of those belonging to her beetle form but they were planted on her shrieking, terrified human face. Aurors tried to stun her, but she, the table, and the tin went flying into the crowd.

"Don't let it touch you!" Severus yelled.

"Cover my eyes! My eyes!" Dissina hissed.

Harry and Draco draped over the basilisk's eyes to protect whoever might accidentally find themselves faced with the basilisk's murderous gaze.

_Tink._

_Tink-tink._

_Clank._

The tin bounced along the floor.

Spiders came flowing out of Brim's collar habitat, beelining to restrain it before someone touched it, but the tin came to a stop as it touched one of the Auror's boots.

A blinding flash of light combined with the distinctive tug on the naval signalled the activation of a Portkey.

"Protective positions, everyone!" Moody yelled, and everyone scrambled to grab ahold of each other so no one arrived "somewhere" alone and without backup, but they needn't have worried. The Portkey created a strange spherical bubble of energy that encompassed the entire room and everyone inside.

_Fwoooooooop!_
They were gone.

_Splloosh!_

"Eugh, really?"

Someone was burbling, while others were thrashing about in water.

"Light, people! Someone, anyone with a wand and moving arms. _LIGHT_!"

"Lumos!"

A brilliant ball of light lit up what seemed to be a giant cavern surrounded by a darker than dark lake. They, however, had landed in what seemed to be a pool surrounded in stalagmites. Above them stalactites hung, dripping a constant stream of water below.

"Where the sodding hell are we?" Moody barked.

"Everyone, please close your eyes for a moment please," Severus requested. He tore a bit off his robe and transfigured it and wrapped it around Dissina's head, covering her eyes to protect the innocent—and her from them.

"Okay, it's safe now."

"The _hell_, Snape?" Moody raged. "The report said they always stayed at Hogwarts!"

"She _WAS_ at Hogwarts until that Portkey activated," Severus answered, glowering.

"Please don't hurt her!" Draco and Harry yelled, hugging Dissina tightly.

Moody growled. "I'm not going to hurt her, bloody hell. Just make sure she doesn't hurt any of us!"

"She would never!" the boys chimed together.

More lights went zinging out around them, lighting up a chamber of statues.

At least they _seemed_ like statues.

The room was a cavern, infiltrated with cave formations. Dampness was everywhere, yet save for the flow of salt-laden sea air coming from somewhere in the vicinity, there was an odd stillness to the air. Moody stared at the nearby "statue" and waved his wand.

"These aren't statues. These are stasis spells. Bloody hell, these are _people!_" he yelled. "Severus, can we do something to insure the children remain safe? If things should go pear-shaped here, I want them safe."

"I could Apparate them back with Dissina—to the borders of Hogwarts or perhaps the Auror's Office would be better," Severus said thoughtfully. "Minerva only opened the window for us to Apparate there for a few minutes. I wouldn't be able to take them directly."

"I would prefer them out of this place, provided you can Apparate back here. In or out." Moody glowered. "Whatever, wherever this place is."

"There is a switch here."
"Whatever you do, be careful not to touch it. Merlin knows where it would take us or what it might do!"

"I will protect them," Dissina hissed. "Here or Hogwarts makes no difference." She curled her coils around the boys, gently herding them together.

"You can't without your eyes," Severus responded, unconvinced.

Dissina hissed softly. "I do not need eyes to find my prey." Her tongue flicked out lazily as she showed off the pits on each side of her serpentine muzzle.

"Dissina will protect them," Severus translated. "Even without her sight she is quite formidable."

Moody grunted and nodded in assent. "Fine. Never thought I'd be trusting a basilisk."

"To be fair," Savage said, his hand gently resting on Dissina's head as he let her "taste" him with her tongue. "I'm starting to think a lot of creatures and things have a 'bad reputation' that was simply passed down without question." His eyes sort of glazed over as he ran his hand along her smooth scales, a sort of pleased expression crossing his face.

"Hey, bond with the basilisk on your own time, Savage," Moody snapped. "Let's get the where are we and what the hell is this place out of the way."

Savage snorted. "Yes, boss." He let his hand drop from Dissina's head, but she bumped her head under his arm affectionately.

Severus gasped in shock, taking a few steps forward. His face twisted in a grimace of pain, but he reached out to one of the statues and then let his hand drop. "Regulus."

The statue was frozen in mid-scream, his hands balled into tight fists that covered his face as though fending off an attack.

Severus fell to his knees. "Lily."

He crumpled to Lily's feet— her "statue" was frozen in obvious terror as a grim-faced James stood guarding her with his wand out. Both were frozen as if taken in mid-combat. Brim came up, meowing softly and rubbing against him, giving off a worried scent of fresh-baked sourdough bread.

Severus hugged her tightly, and she didn't protest, allowing him to use her as a source of strength and comfort without question.

"These are the McKinnons," Proudfoot said wonderingly. "I recognise them from— they haven't aged a day."

"Alice," an older Auror whispered, "and Frank. They're supposed to be at St Mungo's. What are they doing here? Why are any of these people— here?"

Moody suddenly seemed to realise something. "No, it can't be," he ground out slowly.

"What is it, boss?"

"All of these people here are Order members. The Order of the Phoenix— Dumbledore's agents against Voldemort."

"Your debriefing said the organisation was set up to fight against Voldemort ever since the first war," Savage said. "Are you sure all of these people are from the Order?"
"Positive," Moody said.

"Not to be a downer on this, boss, but they all look like they were caught in mid-combat— like they were betrayed."

"This seems to be the key," Auror Hastings said, pointing to a glowing blue crystal on a pedestal. "This powers whatever is keeping them statues." The glow of his tracer spell lit it up like a miniature sun.

"No telling what will happen if you stop the flow of power," Proudfoot said.

"We can't just leave these people like this," Hastings said, gesturing.

"Mum?" Harry had managed to crawl over Dissina's coils and make his way to the statue in front of Severus. He reached out and touched her hand— a child reaching for his mother's hand— and made contact.

**Foom!**

A weight in the room seemed to somehow lessen.

**Crack.**

**Crackle.**

**Split.**

**FWOOOOOOOOOM!**

The crystal on the pedestal suddenly burst into millions of shards as a powerful wave of magical energy blasted outward.

"**You'll never use my son!**" Lily screamed.

"**I'll never let you touch my son!**" James yelled.

"**We'll never betray where they really are, Albus!**" Alice and Frank yelled together.

"**I'll tell them all! I'll tell the whole Order what you've done, Dumbledore!**" Marlene McKinnon screamed.

"**You'll never find it,**" Regulus hissed in a low, menacing tone of voice. "**You're just as twisted and vile as the Dark Lord ever was!**"

At that, Harry hastily scrambled back into Dissina's coils, utterly terrified. Severus looked up into Lily's blazing green eyes.

"Lily?"

Her eyes quickly became less wild— less furious.

"Coal?" James whispered. "Merlin, what happened do you? Did Albus manage to get you too? Hit you with an aging spell?"

"Sev?" Lily cried, crushing Severus to her with a fierce hug. "Albus tried to take our Harry! You have to stop him! He wants Harry for some kind of mad destiny! He wants to serve him up like a
spring lamb for slaughter! Please, Sev. We have to stop him!"

"Mrowl?" Brim sidled up, sniffing the Potters rather curiously.

Coffee sat perched between her ears. "This is complicated," he squeaked.

"SPIDER!" Lily shrieked, pointing her wand at the innocent arachnid and sending a blast of magic at Coffee.

Coffee frantically skittered and dodged, diving back into Brim's magical collar. "Oh yeah, just ignore the giant oversized Nundu, but kill the plush spider. Yeah, thanks for that."

Severus put his hand over Lily's and dropped her wand arm. His face twisted with myriad conflicting thoughts and feelings.

Brim, silent and stoic, now had a black patch of scorched fur on her head where Lily's blast had tried to take out poor Coffee. She gave Lily a scornful, Professor Snape death glare and huffed with obvious exasperation.

Severus pulled Lily and James together into a hug and let out a sob of pure relief, his body slumping with emotion.

"Sev, please, we have to save Harry!" Lily cried. "Worry about us later!"

"Mum?" Harry said, cautiously peeking out over Dissina's huge coils.

Like in a horror-film, James and Lily simultaneously turned their heads in slow motion to stare at the boy-wizard snugly tucked into the coils of a gargantuan blindfolded basilisk.

And then both of them passed out cold on the cavern floor as all the blood drained from their faces.

Thud.

Brim peered at them both, her whiskers twitching. She looked at Severus for direction as to what the "proper" reaction was supposed to be in this particular situation.

Just as the other freed people began to fall to their knees in exhaustion from their multi-year ordeal, Frank caught Alice as she staggered— one foot lightly touching the surface of the black water surrounding the cavern.

A ripple shot across the unnaturally still water as Frank pulled Alice away from the edge of the water, and a feeling of dread spread through all those gathered. A dull, moaning roar of moving water rushed around them as a multitude of gnarled, rotted hands, arms, and bodies pulled themselves out of the lake. Eyes hollow and black, skin stretched across bones, and tatters of hair clung to skeletal emaciated frames that had once been human: Inferi.

"Hrrrrrrogggggghh!" the Inferi cried, coming in a massive wave toward the shore.

"Fuck me," an Auror in the back cursed.

"Protect these people!" Moody barked sharply. "Side-along them back to the Auror's Office. Move!"

Aurors scrambled to obey, but as they made the motions to do so, they found they were unable to Disapparate to safety.

Dissina immediately snapped into the fray, flinging many bodies away, but what was coming their
way was far more than a few. The entire lake was alive with the crawling undead. Inferi spanned as far as the eye could see. Each Inferius was on a mission to drag anyone or anything into the water to their doom. White, clouded eyes peered out from darkened sockets— not a single spark of life held within.

Aurors herded the victims into a circle and made a ring around them, attempting to keep the Inferi at bay. The victims were disoriented and frightened, believing themselves to be still caught up in the moment of their ultimate betrayal. Severus cast a few spells, but the Inferi did not bleed. Realising his error, he staggered back, barely avoiding being snatched.

Brim roared ferociously, bounding over him and bowled herself into the midst of the Inferi, clawing, slashing, tearing bodies to pieces, but even as large as she was, the Inferi were far greater in number, and their strength was unnatural and terrifying.

Harry and Draco hid themselves within Dissina's huge coils, knowing better than to stray far from her, and she also moved to encircle some of the victims, keeping them in her coils. While the Inferi moved over her, they could not drag her, and they could not wound her through her magically imbued scales.

"Brim!" Severus cried, but Brim was surrounded by a wave of Inferi, falling under their combined, massive wave. The lights around them were flickering wildly, some unknown magic attempting to douse them, and the darker it became, the stronger the Inferi became. A dark, oppressive, unnatural cold came down upon them from all around, causing their breath to make clouds.

"A wand! Someone give me a bloody wand!" Regulus yelled, struggling to fight by Severus' side, back-to-back

A strange, magic-draining, dampening field seemed to be coming down upon them all, making their casting far less effective— and without their magic they were only a few against a great many. They were weaker and infinitely more breakable.

They could bleed.

They needed to breathe.

The Inferi could wait just as long as it took for each of their victims to suffocate and die.

Severus cried out in anguish as Brim's body was dragged into the dark water, kicking, clawing, and tearing as she went— but for every one she took out, a hundred were waiting to drag her under. She disappeared under the surface of the water in a mass of churning Inferi bodies.

"Someone break that damned hex that is keeping us from Apparating!" Moody ordered as he managed to drive some back with a spout of flame. His magic, too, was refusing to respond.

"The magic is tied to the ley, sir!" Hastings yelled. "I can't touch it without it arcing into me."

The line was failing, defenses were rapidly dwindling, and the Inferi seemed even more endless. The Inferi seemed to realise that the time was right to surge forward, and they did, blackening the light with the masses of their bodies.

"It's been an honour, sir," Savage and Proudfoot said together.

"Don't give up!" Moody yelled, but the Inferi had already descended upon them, dragging them into the water.
"No!" Hastings screamed, trying to cast something, but the dampening field seemed to draw their magic away and feed it back into the ley itself.

Severus threw himself over Lily and James' bodies as he desperately tried to maintain a shield and a small ring of fire— all he could maintain in the oppressive zone.

Suddenly, flames burst out from the water, lighting up the entire lake. A burning phoenix rose up from the water like pegasus reborn, spinning as he carried the figure of a woman in his talons. Fire blazed off his body surrounding her. Wild, writhing tendrils of hair surrounded the woman's radiant face, and she clapped her hands together, sending out a blazing path of fire through the masses of Inferi. Soundlessly, she flung out her arms and guided the flames, and her eyes filled with golden fire, brightly shining with a strange orange and green halo. The ley line shimmered into sight, its magic eagerly responding hers as it surrounded her, arcing into her chest and suspending her over the lake like the hovering of Icarus.

"Haaassss!" she hissed, raw energy blasting from her eyes and hands, and she made an amazingly quick series of complex gestures and symbols in energy with her fingers— both wandless and utterly silent. Fawkes spread his wings while perched on her shoulders and he let out a cry of pure avian rage.

Fire lit up the cavern, boiling forth from the woman like a runaway potion. It cascaded over the Inferi, and they screamed as their bodies were consumed— utterly and completely. The water around churned, all the bodies within instantly vapourising. The water itself turned a bright, vivid aquamarine, rushing outward as cracks blew out the cavern sides, exposing the entire cavern to the pure light of the sun. Ocean water from outside rushed in to reclaim what had always been its own. The sun baked down on the Inferi even as the flames claimed them.

The woman's glowing eyes turned to the fighting figures below her, and she stretched her arms out as her fingers made more gestures. Glowing runes spread across her skin in bright, golden light. She drew her arms together, her hands pointed up and her elbows down— bringing them together like the closing of a door.

"Haaasssssssssssssss!!" she growled as a bubble of energy formed around her, growing, growing, and growing even more. She flung it towards them as a blinding light caused them all to cower in fear, and then everything went white as a sharp tug on their navels yanked them away from the carnage.

The sea rose up and swirled in the place the people had once been, covering the once-chamber and reclaiming it for Poseidon's own.

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**A/N: NOT A CLIFFHANGER, DAMNIT! (Also, homework aka careplans await… grrr)**
In the Between

Chapter by corvusdraconis

A/N: The last chapter was not supposed to be a cliffhanger. It really wasn't. So, as an apology, here is the next chapter without a cliffhanger. No seriously. I swear it isn't.

Beta Love: The Dragon and the Rose, Dutchgirl01, and Flyby Commander Shepard

Breath of the Nundu

Chapter 11

In the Between

With the qualities of cleanliness, affection, patience, dignity, and courage that cats have, how many of us, I ask you, would be capable of becoming cats? - Fernand Mery

Moody opened one eye and found himself not dead. Thankfully, he'd managed to dodge becoming undead, but he felt as though he should have been dead, which left him contemplating the rather delicate, glowing flower that was dangling in front of him.

A small vibrant purple spider crawled across the leaf and stared at him with its large, multiple eyes. "Hallo daar!"

Moody blinked at the plush Arachnid.

The spider used a strand of silk to alight on Moody's nose. "Je snurkt een beetje."

Moody took one finger and poked the purple plush spider.

"Eeee!" the spider said, scurrying off into the foliage.

"You could have just said hello," Severus said with a sniff. "Instead of poking her."

"How do you even know it's a her?" Moody asked, rolling his eyes.

"She sounds female," Severus replied, raising a brow.

"You do realise how strange it is to be parlaying with an stuffed spider, right?"

Severus shrugged. "I've learned that many things in my life are too hard to explain. Such as that spider telling you that your snore a little."

"What?"

"She wasn't lying," Severus mused. "You do snore."

Moody facepalmed and rubbed the bridge of his nose.

"Where are we?"

"Not feeling very secretive with a bunch of un-statufied people laying around us like some sort of fall frolic gone sideways." Moody confessed.

A large ruby-coloured spider rushed by. "Catchmecatchmecatchme!"

An even larger Nundu happily barrelled by in hot pursuit. "Gointocatchyoucatchyoucatchyoucatchyou!"

Moody watched the chase a moment before it suddenly hit him. "Didn't she get dragged under the water?"

"Yes," Snape replied, "but then, so did they, for a time." He pointed over to where Proudfoot was passed out cold in a pile of leaves, and Savage was draped over Dissina's coils, snoring like he was sawing logs—a fine line of drool escaping the corner of his mouth.

Moody rubbed his temples. "I feel like I've missed something really important."

"Oh, I suppose it will come to you, when you see what is lying over there," Severus said with a sniff. He twirled his hand and did a mock bow.

Alastor narrowed his eyes and turned around slowly, perhaps afraid that odd had graduated with top honours to become something infinitely worse.

"Merlin's bloody aftershave," Alastor cursed. "What the fuck is that?"

Severus raised a brow at the Auror's coarse language. "She's had a very bad day."

Rita Skeeter hung suspended in a giant web of spider silk—at least, what was still recognisable as her. Her arms had become beetle legs. Her compound eyes were bulging and inhuman plastered on a human face. Her curly blonde hair made a mockery of her half-insect form, giving her a human look from one side only to expose her very inhuman looks when she turned her head.

"I think I need a—"

Severus held out a tin cup filled with some sort of strange steaming beverage.

"Thanks," Moody said, quaffing it without even asking what it was. His face scrunched up, but he cricked his neck and handed back the empty mug. "What am I going to put on the report for this?"

"Before or after you describe a lake full of undead swarming you and the victims of over a decade of war?"

Moody took in a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Life was much simpler when the enemy had a brand on their arm and it meant they were the enemy."

Severus eyed Moody with a shake of his head.

Moody slumped in a rare moment of resignation. "I know I misjudged you before, Severus, but sometimes I really miss feeling completely sure of who was on which side."

Skeeter struggled against the web, but it held tight, and she glowered at them both with tangible hatred, though whether it was because she had been caught or that she simply felt that way towards everyone remained to be seen.

Brim stiffened nearby, her fur spiking and standing on end, tendrils of greenish diseased vapour already seeping from her mouth.
"Brim," Severus called, extending his hand.

Brim looked up, her orange-green eyes shifting as her mind snapped back into total awareness. "Mrowl!" She immediately bounded up to him and rubbed against his hand, smelling like blueberry muffins still warm from the oven. Severus knelt, pressing his head into her fur, and she purr-bonked into his cheek and rubbed her whiskers against his face.

"Hey, you," Severus said softly, rubbing her chin. "Don't waste your breath on that one."

Brim purred as if to say "As long as you keep rubbing, I'll be as happy as you want me to be."

"She really is quite an efficient hate detector," Moody said admiringly. "Even seeing it firsthand, it was easy enough to dismiss as mere circumstance."

Severus shrugged. "It helps me to be more aware of my own emotions, most assuredly."

"What are we going to do with her?" Moody said. "She'd rate a lengthy stay Azkaban for being an illegal Animagus if they prove she's used that form to the detriment of others."

"That shouldn't take very long, now that you know how she spied on everyone, including the DMLE."

Moody nodded. "But— do you treat that or imprison it?"

Severus stared at the hateful Skeeter witch… thing. "I do not envy the Wizengamot the responsibility of trying her."

"The Wizengamot is going to think we're under a perpetual full moon." Moody rubbed his nose. "Then there are all these lot." He gestured to the blissfully unconscious former prisoners strewn haphazardly about the chamber. Oddly, all of them were curled up on plush beds of moss and looking quite comfortable.

Severus stared at two of the victims in particular. "It's going to be quite an adjustment for many."

"How do we get them out of here?" Alastor asked.

"There is a passage just outside the main chamber," Snape replied.

"Maybe it would be better if they are moved so they can wake up at Mungo's instead of this place," Moody speculated. "Preferably somewhere without a giant pair of basilisks looming over them. No offense to these two, but they are a bit intimidating."

"Oh, I think they're quite aware of that," Severus mused. "I took Draco and Harry up to Minerva already. She and Lucius are getting them calmed down. Harry is absolutely frantic that he'll have to move again, and he really doesn't want to."

"Boy finally figured out where he wanted to be, and then life throws him a rogue bludger with his formerly-dead parents. That's gotta be tough on the kid," Moody grunted.

"I would imagine it will be difficult for them too, once they wake up again."

"Why is Savage sprawled over the she-basilisk like he's just had the wildest bachelor party ever?" Moody asked, narrowing his eyes.

"The covenant," Severus replied.
"You say that like I should know what that means."

Brim mrowled and headbutted Moody.

"It's a bond between Hogwarts and her protectors— her champions," Severus replied. "It allows those who take it to understand all those who have undertaken it— specifically, those who trust the basilisks here. And, as an added bonus, you get to understand her a little better too."

"Mrowl!" Brim replied, gnawing on Moody's ankle playfully.

Moody's expression softened. "I'm not one to place my faith in a building."

Severus ran his fingers under his chin thoughtfully. "I did not place my faith in a building, Alastor. My faith is in her. She has never led me astray, and I can do no less for her."

Severus rubbed Brim's ears. "She trusts Hogwarts completely, and I trust her judgement."

"I lost that kind of faith when my Maggie died," Moody said in a quiet voice. "Never found it again."

"I—" Severus began. "My condolences."

Moody shook his head. "She trusted everyone. We used to joke that she'd invite the robber in and offer them tea and a biscuit. Make sure they were well-fed before leaving them to steal the silverware. Irony was, it was her best friend from school who killed her. Childhood friends. Argument over something stupid. Petty. It wasn't a criminal or a Death Eater or some closet Dark wizard or witch. It was just a typical, angry, run of the mill idiot."

Severus gazed on the struggling beetle-woman and sighed. "I can attest that some of the worst examples of humanity come with seemingly humble places far more so than tyrants born into power. My father was one such garden-variety bastard. And we have other far more recent examples of those who betrayed us on multiple levels."

Moody stalked over to where Savage and Proudfoot were passed out, looking like they'd been to a grand party the night before. "Oi, Savage. Proudfoot. Time to help me get these people to Mungo's."

He nudged Proudfoot awake with his foot and then did the same to Savage.

Proudfoot woke up immediately, snapping to full attentiveness with a speed most would envy. Savage, however, cuddled up to Moody's leg and grunted, "Just a few more minutes, mum."

Proudfoot burst out into raucous laughter, which woke up a few of the other Aurors. All of them homed in on the sight of Savage snuggling with Moody's leg and they instantly joined in the hilarity.

"Gah, where is my camera?" Hastings hooted, shaking with mirth.

"Hey, don't look at me. Gadgets always break when I'm around," another Auror chuckled, waving his hands wildly.

"Yeah he didn't get the nickname 'Breaker' for nothing," another Auror laughed.

"I think Savage earned himself a new one, yeah?" Proudfoot crowed joyfully. "Cuddles."

They all laughed amongst themselves.

"Thissss one needssss more time to adjust," Dissina hissed, her tongue flicking in and out. "Perhaps, you might pick him up later."
Moody rolled his eyes and then stopped in surprise. "Wait, how can I hear you?"

"Here in the chamber, you are perfectly safe," the serpent replied calmly. "The daughter of Salazar Slytherin renewed the magic that keeps us well-protected in this place."

Moody blinked. "Now, I'm even more confused than before."

The female basilisk curled her coils around Savage and cradled him gently within. "Never fear. He will return to you unharmed."

"I'm more worried he's going to sprout scales and slither around the office," Moody muttered.

Dissina hissed serpentine laughter.

"Okay, chuckleheads, help me get all these unconscious sods out of here. Remember, they are victims, so we don't want waking up in an underground chamber with two giant snakes and a giant disease-breathing feline to be their first memory after being nearly killed by Inferi! Levitate them out past the anti-Apparation jinx and take 'em directly to the Auror wing at Mungo's. Move it!"

"Yes, sir!" the Aurors said, scrambling.

"What do we do about that, sir?" one of the younger Aurors, said, pointing to what had been or maybe still was Rita Skeeter.

Rita clacked her mandible and hissed malevolently. "Spinny spin raisins meet the clouded kill!" she spat. "Green quill, bright quill, sing, sing, swish!"

Moody and Snape exchanged glances. "Collins, go inform the Animagus Registry folks that we have an unregistered... accident. Have them bring in someone to evaluate her. Mungo's is going to need an actual Animagus healer to examine Skeeter and see if anything can be done for her."

"My father Barnabas, twiddle-dee dum!" Skeeter warbled madly. "Hate you. Hate you all! Insufferable bastards! Oh, the farmer's life for meeee!"

Moody puckered his mouth and wrinkled his nose in distaste. "Well, I don't really have high hopes for that."

"Dooooowhap! Dooo-waaaap-wap!"

Collins scurried off, waving a full-bodied Patronus as he ran for it.

"And here I thought Bellatrix bloody Lestrange was the ultimate example of batshit crazy." Moody scratched his head and sighed in exasperation. "Help me get this one to Mungo's, Snape? I'd appreciate it."

"Mrrrrt!" Brim said, and a flood of plush spiders spread over Rita and wrapped her up securely in a cocoon of strong spider silk. Then they all skittered back into her collar and she stared at them innocently, wearing her best feline halo.

The Rita-burrito promptly fell flat on her "face" on the floor.

"Zing zing zinga-lee oh la lee!" Rita cried. "Ho ho ho! Who wouldn't know?"

"Well at least she'll be easier to move without someone seeing her beetle legs. The eyes are going to be pretty hard to miss as it is."
Severus plucked a large pink blossom from the underground garden and stuck it to Rita's face, covering it completely.

Moody blinked. "That works. Alright, let's go!"

Brim grabbed Rita-burrito by the silk cocoon and dragged her like a prey animal out of the chamber and up the stairs. With every bounce of Rita's body on the stairs, they heard, "Umf! Umf! Zing alley oh!"

"I'm going to need some serious alcohol therapy after this," Moody confessed.

"I have more of my personal home-brew upstairs."

"That, Snape, is called a proper place to start."

"Minerva has quite a stash of two hundred year old scotch too," Severus noted.

"And that, Severus, is called a fine place to end." Moody cracked his neck and gestured with his hand. "Let's go, before Gilderoy Lockhart pops out of a cake and drops trou, eh?"

"As long as we don't catch him snogging Trelawney, we'll be fine."

Alastor made a face. "I could have gone my entire life without that vile mental image, Snape."

Severus' corners of his mouth quirked upward in clear amusement. "You're welcome."

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**Missing Reporter Found — Sort Of**

*By Merry-Anne Jigglejinx*

*The Daily Prophet's most high-profile reporter, Rita Skeeter, was spotted in St Mungo's by one of our staffers, but what he described is almost too strange to be believed.*

*Skeeter, who had suddenly gone missing while investigating her latest lead a week ago, subsequently failed to check in or send a progress report. While Ms Skeeter has no living relatives, her Prophet family noticed her absence almost immediately. Unfortunately, Rita's notoriously secretive habits made her very hard to contact she she had not checked in. Word was sent to the Aurors, and foul play was suspected, but it seemed that Skeeter had somehow disappeared into thin air.*

*That is, she had until she showed up at St Mungo's and was spotted being transferred from the Spell Damage Ward to the Janus Thickey Ward—in the high security wing.*

*While the reasons for Ms Skeeter's admission to Mungo's has inspired much wild speculation, eyewitnesses have told us that she seems to have had an unfortunate accident with some sort of transformative magic. Whether it was truly transfiguration-related or the result of some other type of spell gone wrong, it has definitely gone... very wrong.*

*(Photo of beetle-woman struggling in heavy restraints with Rita's distinctive blonde curls and lower face)*

*Rumours say that she was on hot on the trail of a Dark wizard who was allegedly running highly-dangerous experiments involving extremely Dark magic, but no one seems to know the truth. Stories are many and varied, and get ever wilder with each retelling. Some say she was caught in a trap in Egypt while following Gringott's curse-breakers. Whatever the story, however, Ms Skeeter seems to...*
have completely taken leave of her senses and babbles a stream of indecipherable nonsense whenever she’s awake.

Have information on what really happened to our illustrious Ms Skeeter? Please contact us at the Daily Prophet and help us get to the bottom of this mysterious tragedy!

Curious Gawkers Flood St Mungo's Hospital

By Xenophilius Lovegood

Curiosity killed the cat, as they say, but this time curiosity is making it impossible to get anything done at St Mungo's! Healers are complaining that the halls are filled with gawkers, hoping to catch a glimpse of Rita the "Beetle-witch."

The crowded halls are gumming up the routines, blocking patients from getting the care they need, and even causing brawls in the halls where people are getting angry with hospital staff for “cutting” in line.

Aurors have since moved Ms Skeeter to an undisclosed location to protect both Ms Skeeter from the public and the public from the extremely violent and unpredictable Ms Skeeter.

Ms Skeeter's name showed up on the court docket for the Wizengamot earlier this week, but the session was listed as being closed to the public. What was discussed and if Ms Skeeter was even able to attend in her current condition remains a mystery.

While the Prophet seems to lament their most beloved reporter's latest predicament, many seem to think that Ms Skeeter's fate is due to nothing more than karma catching up to her at last.

One thing is for sure, however: the piles of mail flying in from all over has run the gamut from standard fan mail, to get well letters, and other mail essentially bearing the sentiment of 'good riddance to bad rubbish'.

It seems that Ms Skeeter's illness has exposed a rather wide range of reaction among Prophet readers, from worshipful to frankly adversarial. Well, 'to each their own', the Muggles say. Here at the Quibbler, well, we can't really argue with that.

I don't know about you lot, but I'm far more interested in learning what the fate of Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore will be after his trial for ley line tampering concludes. Rumour has it that he is guilty of a great deal more than that, but if the Wizengamot knows anything, they haven't said as much... yet.

Son and Daughter-in-Law Aren't Son and Daughter-in-Law!

Augusta Longbottom was dragged away by Aurors after socking the head Healer in the face and trying to brawl with the Auror security at St Mungo's last weekend. She claims, even after calming down, that the man and woman she's been lovingly tending for the last 11 years were not, in fact, her true son and daughter-in-law.

Yet, the witch has dutifully watched over the couple in question for well over a decade now.

Even stranger, perhaps, was when she pulled out a photo of her son and daughter-in-law. I must say, the resemblance was quite uncanny. Some might say that a mother should be able to recognise her own flesh and blood, and a respectable number of healers have sworn up and down that they
have been treating Frank and Alice Longbottom, yet when they checked in on the patients in
question, something had most definitely changed about them.

The bigger question of who these two people are and what happened to the real Frank and Alice
Longbottom.

"Aliens," was Healer Bostwick's rather sarcastic commentary.

Aliens or otherwise, what possible benefit could there be in having two people pose as the Auror
couple that was tortured by Bellatrix Lestrange and the two Lestrange brothers? The motive for this
decession is still a mystery, one that, we have been assured, magical law enforcement will continue
to investigate until answers are found.

Why they are only now being recognised as not being Frank and Alice Longbottom is even more
baffling.

Healer Pennywise, who has been studying the effects of long-term spells on the victims at St
Mungo's, believes that whoever or whatever caused it must have been using ley magic.

"It's the only thing that could last that long and affect so many people at once. It's one thing to cast a
long-lasting spell on one person. Everyone? No one noticed that Frank and Alice weren't, in fact, Frank and Alice Longbottom? It's the only thing that could possibly cause it," Pennywise stated.

Now that that has been cleared up, who cast the original spell on the faux Longbottoms? And to
what purpose? We at the Quibbler will not stop until we learn the answers to these questions that we
may share them with our faithful readership.

"There is no way in Hades I am allowing my son to hang around a sodding Malfoy!" James raged,
his face growing red with escalating anger.

"I told you this was a bad idea!" Remus said, grabbing James firmly and yanking him back.

Harry, who had been waiting to see his parents with a bit of nervous unease, hastily retreated to cling
to Severus, diving under the drape of his long robes.

Brim, who had been contentedly chewing on one of her plush spiders, making it squeak, released it
and growled lowly. The spider scurried back into her collar as she stood, homing in on the ambient
negative emotions around her.

"I told you not to bring her!" Remus yelled, trying to get James under control.

"Mr Potter would not agree to come unless SHE came too," Severus replied.

Remus gave him a frustrated look. "His parents have the right to see their own son!"

"Then perhaps they should stand on the other side of a thick glass wall!" Severus hissed.

James froze in the midst of his struggle, staring at Severus with conflicting emotions crossing his
face. "It's different, Severus! His father is a bloody Death Eater!"

Severus narrowed his eyes. "I was a Death Eater."

"That's different! You did it to keep us all safe!"

"And Lucius did it to keep his family safe when he realised the enormity of his error. Will you take it
out on his son who has been a far better friend to your son than any of his Gryffindor housemates? Will you blame Lucius for making a bad judgment and trying to keep his family alive? Are you entirely blameless? Are ANY of us?"

James looked somewhat conflicted.

"Mr Potter's best Gryffindor friend crowed to his mother telling her that it was your son who made a habit of exhausting him, keeping him out all night instead of doing his assignments. He accused Mr Potter of making him do so much work for him that he neglected his own studies. It took an accounting of memories from every teacher in Hogwarts to clear it all up. Do you think that is better for your son? Does that sound like a good role model to you?" Severus seethed, yet he kept his actual emotions tightly reined. He gently rubbed Brim's ears to keep her calm—and perhaps himself as well.

Remus put a comforting hand on James' shoulder. "Pettigrew betrayed us, and he wasn't even a Slytherin. We all knew that. Lily sensed it well before the rest of us. He was one of us, mate, and yet he still betrayed us. We finally realised our terrible error with Severus back then, so don't you think Lucius might appreciate the same kind of consideration? By the way, that's a Nundu over there, James, not just some overgrown leopard. Do you think she'd be content to lay there letting Draco and Lucius rub her belly if their hearts and minds were full of hate? She almost ripped your face off for being hateful just now."

"I—" James started and stopped. "But Nundus breathe out disease!"

"When they are exposed to hatred, mate," Remus said. "And you need to thank your lucky stars that she didn't do to you what she did to Wormtail out there on the green. I heard the stories. And then I saw the memories. Trust me, mate, you don't want to go there."

James abruptly wilted in the nearby seat. "Just a week ago, Harry was only a little baby. He was just a year old. Death Eaters were our enemies, and Malfoy sat at the head of their table. I can't just forget that!"

"No one is asking you to forget that, Potter," Severus said with a sigh. "But continuing to think that Lucius was and still is incapable of change is more than a bit hypocritical."

"I just want my son back," James said, his expression haunted.

Harry, who seemed to realise that what his father really wanted was not necessarily him as he was now, mounted up on Brim's back and clung to her tightly, sending her pelting out of the room and down the hall, the Nundu leaping out of the castle doors and onto the green beyond.

Severus closed his eyes, seeming to count to ten as Remus rubbed the area between his eyes rather frantically.

A cluster of plush spiders returned to where Brim had been only seconds before, carrying small biscuits and other tasty treats. They milled about in confusion, squeaking in obvious distress. Then, following some unseen signal, they all high-tailed it out of the room in the same direction the Nundu and Harry had fled.

Remus sighed. "I just hope you didn't make Harry cry, mate. You'll have an entire horde of plush spiders trying to crawl down your throat and suffocate you to death while you sleep."

James sank to the ground and stared at his feet. "Why do I always end up with my foot in my mouth?"
Severus sighed. "You're a sodding stag, Potter. You're always charging in antlers first and wondering why you're waist deep in mud with your antlers stuck in a tree."

"I can always count on you to say it how it is, Severus," James said.

Snape curled his lip. "You're welcome."

As Harry went blasting across the Hogwarts green, clinging to Brim's back, a certain blond wizard threw himself at the charging Nundu and pulled himself up behind Harry.

"I'm not stopping!" Harry yelled.

"I'm not expecting you too!" Draco yelled back.

Brim continued to plow ahead, charging through the tall grass and shrubs.

"How the hell did you know I was coming?" Harry said.

"Psh, idiot," Draco scoffed. "She told me she was coming. She even slowed down so I could jump on."

Harry slumped a little, even as he was clinging to Brim's back. "I can't even have a crisis on my own anymore."

"You prefer to go pout by your lonesome?" Draco asked. "I can go push you into the giant squid and laugh at you to make it seem more first year."

Harry mumbled something into Brim's fur.

"You going direct this runaway hippogriff stampede, or are we going to just let her scrape us off on a random tree limb?" Draco asked.

"I wasn't thinking that far ahead!"

"Gryffindors."

"Psht!"

Brim screeched to a halt on the edge of the pier of the Black Lake and sent her two passengers careening into the water with a splash. She lay down on the edge, stretching out in the sun, and groomed her paws and ears.

The boys sputtered and laughed, pushing water at each other and attracting the giant squid to come and play. It lifted them high in the air and let them slide down the tentacles into the water again. The boys chased each other in the water until they were exhausted, pulled themselves up onto the dock and flopped against Brim's side, their breaths coming fast and furious before they finally calmed down enough to cuddle up next to her and doze in the sun.

"Feel better?" Brim asked, tail twitching in amusement.

"Mmrph," the boys answered together.

"Good," the Nundu replied, laying her head down on the dock and purring.

"Brim, how is it you always know what to do?" Harry asked.
"I don't," the Nundu said, yawning, "but I can guess what you need."

"What do I need?"

"A good dunk in the lake, obviously," she said, her tail looping.

Harry snorted.

Draco nudged the giant cat. "Brim, was that you that rose up in the lake. Did you save us?"

Brim was silent for a while. "I think so. Does that bother you?"

The boys shook their head together. "You were wicked!"

"Will you be able to do that again?"

"I'm not sure." Brim looked over the lake and scratched her ear with her hind leg. "That was something that had to happen, or people would have died."

"Does Severus know?" Draco asked.

"Of course, he does," Brim replied. "I hide nothing. I just can't always— remember everything."

"What about Professor McGonagall?" Harry asked.

"She's harder to convince," Brim mused, "but Severus is working on her. She loves me, and she wishes to protect me. But I protect her and Hogwarts. You see?"

The boys shook their heads.

"It's like dad wanting to treat me like I'm still a baby, but I'm not," Harry griped. "I'm not grown up, but I'm not a baby anymore."

Brim paw curled around Harry and wrestled him down. "You're small enough to be a baby something. Dragon, maybe? Or a Roc, perhaps?"

Harry snorted and tried to tickle the Nundu, but she purred even louder.

"It's hard for them, yes?" Brim asked. "Hard for you, thinking them dead. Hard for them thinking you kidnapped and then realising they missed eleven years of your life in what must've seemed like an hour. That must be difficult to grasp. To them, they lost their child. To you, you have parents who are still heartsick over a younger you."

Harry rolled his head on her fur. "You have deeper thoughts than most people, Brim."

Brim sneezed, and the small grey spider between her ears responded, "Gesundheit!"

Brim shook her head, dislodging the arachnid and groomed her over, causing the plush to squeak repeatedly.

"Even plush spiders have deeper thoughts than most people, just saying," Draco muttered.

The two boys snickered together as Brim's tail whapped into them over and over.

"You two look like you're having fun," a feminine voice interrupted.

The boys startled and stared, instinctively using Brim as their safety net.
The woman spread her hands out in a peaceful gesture, and Harry's eyes narrowed. She gave her son a somewhat uneasy smile. "I know you don't really know me anymore, Harry, so if you want to call me Lily until we get to know each other again, I'll understand."

Harry and Draco exchanged wary glances, but then Harry nodded slowly.

"I hear you two have become really close," Lily said, sitting on the side of the dock. "Sev's been taking good care of you?"

The boys looked back at each other.

"Professor Snape doesn't like people calling him by disrespectful names," Harry said.

Lily gave them a sad expression. "I've known Sev a long time. We grew up together.

Brim's lips pulled back from her teeth, but she turned her head away, seemingly finding something more interesting towards the lake.

Lily tried to change the subject. "I saw you two riding across the green. It looked like you were having fun."

The boys relaxed a little. "Brim takes care of us."

"I've never seen a cat big enough to ride," Lily confessed.

Harry shrugged. "She started out small. She was only the size of a Siberian tiger cub."

Lily blinked. "That's not exactly a small animal either."

"Not big enough to ride," Harry reasoned.

"I suppose that's all that mattered, aye?" Lily chuckled.

"Well, yeah," Harry agreed.

"You trust her?" Lily asked.

Harry frowned. "Of course. She protects us."

"So, she's your pet cat?"

Harry and Draco busted up laughing and then sobered as they realised Lily didn't know anything about Nundus.

"She's not ours," Draco said.

"She belongs to Professors Snape and McGonagall," Harry continued, grinning.

Lily's feet froze in the water. "She's Sev's?"

Brim's giant paws grabbed the boys' heads and she playfully pretended to gnaw on their heads, causing Lily to gape in astonishment.

"Well, yeah," Harry answered. "If it wasn't for Professor Snape, she would've probably killed both Wormtail and Sirius. She doesn't do well around hateful emotions."

"Really, any negative emotion," Draco added. The boys nodded to each other.
"She's the reason I learned to trust Draco," Harry said. "She's why I trust Professor Snape too."

"Weren't you with Sirius or Remus?"

Harry and Draco mumble-hissed to each other.

"The first time I met Sirius, he tried to attack Professor Snape. Brim almost tore him to pieces, but Severus stopped her," Harry said. "That was last year."

Lily frowned. "How can this be? Remus and Sirius were your godfathers. So you stayed with Sev, then? You grew up with him?"

Harry shook his head sadly. "I had to stay with my Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia. They were the only blood family I had left."

"What?"

"I stayed with them until last year," Harry said. "They really didn't like me much. I had the room under the stairs. A cupboard. I didn't meet Professor Snape until I came to school, and I didn't much like him at first either."

Lily tilted her head down and smiled. "That's Sev in a nutshell."

"Did you really know him growing up?" Draco asked, suspicious.

"Do we seem like an unlikely match?" Lily asked, amused.

The dubious expressions seemed to answer her far better than words.

Lily exhaled and nodded. "I understand. I am only a stranger to you. Even what I remember may not count for much considering all the years I've been… away. At least you were with my sister, right? She treated you okay? I would have preferred if you'd been raised with someone with some knowledge of mag—" She stopped, seeing the stricken expression on Harry's face.

"No, please tell me she didn't take out her stupid grudge out on you?" Lily demanded, her knuckles turning white.

The air seemed to instantly thicken, and Brim growled lowly, standing stiffly. Greenish vapour began to leak out from her mouth. Her eyes were focused steadily on Lily, glowing with an eerie orange and green fire.

"No, Brim, no!" Draco and Harry cried, trying to calm her, but Brim pulled her lips back from her enlarged canines in an instinctive reflection of Lily's hatred. She used her hindquarters to push Draco and Harry behind her and block them from the source of the hatred.

"Think of something beautiful!" Draco yelled.

"Think of happiness and beauty. Think of flying on a broom. Something happy!" Harry cried.

Crack!

"Brim."

The Nundu's eyes widened and she looked up, the haze of hate swiftly fading from her eyes and body. "Mroowl!"
"Come."

Brim promptly bounded over to the black-clad figure, rubbing up against him and purring madly.

"That's my lady," Severus crooned. "Peace now. I'm sure that Lily didn't not mean it."

The boys ran up immediately, not fearing Brim in the slightest, clearly more worried that she might be in trouble.

"It's not her fault!" Harry blurted.

"No, Lily heard about Harry's aunt, and she got pretty upset!" Draco added.

Severus' eyebrows furrowed, and he sighed deeply. "I believe you. Brim?"

"Mrrowl!"

"Please take these two back to my chambers. Lucius will be waiting there with Narcissa."

"Mum and dad?" Draco asked, excited.

Severus nodded.

"Mrrrrl!" Brim complained, clearly wanting to stay there with him.

Severus knelt, pressing his head gently to hers. "Trust me now. No harm will come to me. I promise."

Brim made a cub-like noise, chattering her teeth and licking his face.

Severus tolerated it for a while before pushing her away. "Enough, I'm going to look like a first year."

"Mrowl!" Brim gave off a scent resembling fresh melons and garden cucumbers, freshly sliced.

She knelt down so the boys could get on her back, and then bounded down the green in a hurry—straight back to Hogwarts.

Severus stood and straightened his robes. "There are some memories you need to see before you again try to approach a fully grown Nundu who is extremely protective of her people." He extended a pale hand to Lily. "She may be my familiar, but she is the guardian of this school, her faculty and her students. Come. Lucius will keep them entertained while you and Potter view the memories. Then, we teach you how to control your emotions."

"What do you mean control my emotions?! My baby boy was stolen from me, forced into living with my horrible sister, and I find out he's been living under the stairs? In a cupboard?! You have no right to judge my emotions, Sev! Not all of us can be cold and unfeeling at the drop of hat like—"

Severus dropped his hand, his eyes turning an even deeper black than before as all of his casual shielding was replaced with an implacable iron control.

"You will follow me now, Mrs Potter," Severus said from between gritted teeth. You and your husband will spend your evening with Minerva and Kingsley because it is obvious I am not the person you need to have around when you find out the truth."

"Sev— I'm sorry!"
But Severus had already started striding up the hill, turning his back firmly towards Lily with a silent sweep of his billowing black robes.

"I want to tell him I'm sorry!" Lily cried, wringing her hands.

"You have already done so and quite loudly, Mrs Potter," Minerva said. "He has heard you, and forcing it upon him again will not change the current situation."

"I didn't mean—"

"I'm sure you didn't."

"But he—"

Minerva sighed. "We here at Hogwarts like to attribute certain dominant traits to our individual houses. We are quick to put people into a particular category and then blame them for what comes of it. Back when you were but a young student here, Gryffindor was known for being brash, impulsive, and often quite foolhardy— brazenly stumbling forward where other wiser souls feared to tread. Yet many chose to see only the positive traits in Gryffindor, while the house of Salazar Slytherin was seen only in negative. Yet, we are all fallible human beings, Mrs Potter. We must take responsibility for ourselves and our actions, lest we find ourselves guilty of the very same things that tore this school apart for many years, something the great Founders never intended to happen."

Minerva straightened her shoulders. "You'll find a Pensieve and the pertinent memories in that room, Mrs Potter. You and Mr Potter can watch them for a time. Hogwarts was kind enough to make this room so you can see for yourselves how they interact naturally. Then, since you have seen the memories of what happened to Mr Pettigrew and what very nearly happened to Mr Black and yourselves—you may come to understand what binds them together does not involve any form of duress. Mr Black made a decision, as was his right as Harry's guardian, to give your son a kind of healing he knew your son needed. While you may argue that no child could ever make a decision of that magnitude by himself, I encourage you to sit here and really see what's going on in there. Perhaps then you will see why controlling your violent and strong emotions must be done— no matter how justified you may believe you are."

Minerva swept from the room, her emerald green velvet robes rustling as she left, leaving Mr and Mrs Potter to sit down in the comfy seats and watch the young man that their baby boy had become.

"Eeeeee!" a fuzzy red spider exclaimed as Harry tickled it with his fingers.

"Feeling better, Mr Potter?" Severus asked, sitting a tray down with tea and biscuits.

The boys reached for the biscuits and then stopped, staring at Severus carefully.

He nodded after a moment. "You may devour them at your leisure."

The boys grinned and pounced on the tea and biscuits, giving one to the fuzzy red spider, who, in turn, scurried off to deliver it to Brim.

Brim, who was laying on a large branch overlooking the room, happily munched on the offered biscuit and then groomed the little red spider until it was dizzy. It squealed before scurrying into her collar and disappearing.

The boys laughed as Lucius moved a chess piece and won the game, causing Severus to roll his eyes
and wave him off.

"You're letting him win," Narcissa accused, nibbling on a rose biscuit.

Severus arched a brow. "Contrary to popular belief, I do not always win at chess."

Narcissa just shrugged. "As you say, Harry, dear, what is troubling you?"

Harry bit his lip a little. "Lily— my mum," he began awkwardly, "she said that you and her grew up together, Professor Snape. Is that true?"

Severus took in a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Yes, it is. She lived but a few houses down from me as a child. I knew her before Hogwarts."

Harry drank his tea thoughtfully. "Professor, did she really call you 'Sev'?"

Severus frowned, brows furrowing. "Unfortunately."

Draco threw his hands up. "Told you he'd hate it. You hate nicknames, Uncle."

Snape snorted. "Apparently my students understand this better than certain others."

"Professor," Harry said. "Is Brim really dangerous?"

Snape lifted a brow. "Of course she is. Anything that can move silently and grow to that size is potentially dangerous. She is a predator. She could wipe out a village of hateful people. That doesn't mean she is going to hurt you or anyone in Hogwarts, but there is a reason she is usually always with myself or Minerva. I know I can trust her with you two because of the Covenant— but that is hardly a normal situation."

"We tried to stop her," Harry said. "We tried to get Lily to think of something positive."

"Sadly, Mr Potter," Snape said. "Unless you are practiced in controlling your emotions, doing it on the fly is not an easy thing."

"We do it around Brim all the time," Draco protested.

"True, but you have had an entire year of dealing with Brim's ways," Lucius pointed out. "You've learned to practice this already. You just don't think about doing it anymore."

"Oh," the boys said together.

"Most of Hogwarts has learned this now, and next term we will have a new gaggle of first years who will have to learn this lesson, but they will learn it. Brim is always with myself or Minerva when out in public, and that is important in case she runs into someone who cannot control their emotions."

"Professor?"

"Hn?"

"Is she nice? Lily— my mum, I mean."

"Infinitely more so than I, if you are to believe common talk," Snape answered, a tug about his lips. Harry sighed.
"I don't trust her. I don't trust my dad either. They both look at me like I should be someone else. Sirius always looked at me like I was supposed to be my father. My parents look at me like I should still be their baby son," Harry said, frowning.

"I am sure that they mean well; however, I will not patronise you by telling you false stories to imply that your parents are perfect people. They are not. No one is. We have all done things we have come to regret and wish we could take back. Some of us, however, were eventually given the chance to redeem ourselves."

At that moment, a playful overgrown Nundu pounced Severus, dragged him to "her" bed of plush spiders and curled up with him in the nest of squeaking arachnids.

"I believe this is our cue for bed," Lucius said, lifting an amused blond eyebrow. He turned to face his wife, who was already buried under a warm plush blanket of friendly arachnids. Lucius sighed. "Why am I always the last to bed?"

A helpful zebra-striped spider held out his toothbrush even as a blue-furred one held out a tube of toothpaste.

"Thank you," Lucius said, plucking the tools out from the spiders and trudged off to the sink to scour his teeth the old-fashioned way.

When Lucius returned to curl up next to his wife, the boys were settled in separate beds the room had helpfully provided, an assortment of tasteful false walls providing each sleeper a bit of privacy from the others.

Then, as the candles dimmed, both Harry and Draco sneaked out from under the covers and burrowed into the pile of plush arachnids that covered up the Potions master— happily falling into a blissful, trusting sleep curled up against Brim's warm side.

As they slept, a few spiders crawled over to the dimming candles and carefully snuffed them out, sending the room into a complete, peaceful darkness.

"Goodnight!"

"Goede nacht!"

"おやすみ!"

"спокойной ночи!"

"Buenas noches!"

"Guten Nacht!"

"КАЛНУХТА."

"Bonum nocte!"

"спокойной ночи!"

"Bonne nuit!"

The room fell silent save for the sounds of deep content breathing and the thrum of a warm purr.
Severus awoke to find himself sitting in a large window archway overlooking the greens of Hogwarts, only the landscape was slightly hazy as if seeing it through a sort of tinted glass.

"Ah, Helga, you won my services pruning your plants again," a voice said. "I was betting he sleep through the entire night and miss us completely."

"Godric, put a sword in your hand and you are brilliant, but you are a horrible judge of people."

"Psh," Godric said, waving his hand. "You just enjoy having me prune your plants.

"My plants enjoy you having you there to prune them, dear," Helga said with a smile. "I have nothing to do with it."

"Do not be so hard on the man," a woman with dark tresses and equally dark eyes chuckled, walking in with the rustle of velvet robes. "He always loses—especially to Salazar."

Godric huffed. "Rowena, give the man a sword and I will mince him for pie."

"You would try, Godric," a taller and thinner man with salt and pepper hair answered, stroking his beard. "First rule of sword combat with wizards. Don't be in sword combat with wizards."

Godric rolled his eyes. "Your daughter is perfectly well versed in swordplay, and she is also perfectly well versed in magic."

"My daughter is an anomaly," Salazar grunted, "which is why she is so beloved."

"Pah!" Godric said, waving his hands. "You are all out for my services for free. I should have adopted her so you would have been envious of the name of Gryffindor for all time."

Salazar dismissed him with a hand wave. "You are just jealous, Godric. I got to her first."

Godric snorted, crossing his arms across his chest.

Helga shook her head. "Now, now, we have a visitor. Severus, glad you could join us."

Severus just stared silently.

"He thinks he's dreaming, Helga."

"He IS dreaming," Rowena said. "That doesn't mean it isn't happening."

"Always the cryptic soothsayer, Rowena," Godric mumbled. "Give him a sword, and I will insure Salazar's daughter's honour remains intact."

"Godric, I swear you are a heathen with a wand," Salazar ribbed. "The man is intelligent, not a barbarian. At least allow him to use some of that grey matter before you throw swords at him."

"Tut," Helga said, passing Severus a cup of tea. "Let the man at least digest that he's here before deciding what to throw at him, hrm? If anything he needs more meat on his bones. Poor dear."

"Helga, you are always such a mother," Salazar said, rolling his eyes.

"Oh, you have nothing on me, Salazar Slytherin!" Helga said, waving her finger at him. "We all know where your real love lies."
"Well, it definitely wasn't my sons by birth," Salazar growled. "You don't see them here protecting Hogwarts and the legacy she is."

Rowena sighed. "None of our children by birth did, Salazar. I'm most painfully aware of that."

Salazar's expression softened. "And yet her spirit lingers, trapped here with her unrequited lovers—naught but shades. I am sorry, Rowena, you know this."

Rowena shrugged and nodded. "She chose her fate when she stole my diadem. But it was not my hand that brought her death."

"I found it!" a female voice said excitedly. A woman dressed in emerald velvet robes with silver embellishments practically floated in. She threw her arms around Salazar unabashedly, kissing his cheek.

"Agh, daughter, what brings you so happily to accost my person?" Salazar muttered.

"The ring Tom Riddle wore— I found the photos scattered about Hogwarts," she replied arranging the photos around the table. "See how he always has this ring up until here," she said, pointing to clippings of the murder of Tom Riddle, senior.

Rowena looked over the photos and clippings. "Hogwarts never ceases to amaze me with what she can do to help us— even when we set about her construction, I do not think any of us truly knew what a wonder we had created."

Godric tapped the photo in the clipping. "He stopped wearing the ring— a ring he never failed to have on him every day previously."

"It is not one of our objects, but we should have you apprehend and disable it just the same," Helga said.

"Look at this," Salazar said, pointing to the symbol on the stone. "The Peverell coat of arms."

"That is the stone of Cadmus," the younger woman said.

"Hermione, you remembered the old stories," Salazar crooned.

"She should," Godric laughed. "You put her to bed with such stories for years."

"Bah, I also put her to bed reading the alchemical formulae for the creation of goblin silver and the cure for lycanthropy," Salazar muttered. "It made no difference as long as I read her something."

"Still here, father. Right in front of you!" the young woman pouted.

Salazar ruffled her head of hair and pulled her to his chest, rubbing her back. "Yes, and so you are, Hermione."

"Hermione," Severus whispered, the strange name rolling off his tongue.

The younger witch looked up with surprise, having been so preoccupied with the find to notice the newcomer. "Oh! Severus." She stared at him rather intensely, flushing deeply.

Severus realised as he looked around for the first time, that this place was Hogwarts— not the Hogwarts he knew so well, but perhaps the innermost soul of it. It was Hogwarts as she was truly was at her heart.
"Look at her, eh?" Godric said, ribbing Salazar with his elbow. "You'd think she'd never seen a nice, eligible young man before."

"She hasn't!" Salazar snapped, whapping the back of Godric's head with the flat of his hand. "It's not as if you count. You're a few thousand years her senior, even here, not that I'd let her marry you."

Godric gasped and grabbed at his chest as if he had been stabbed in the heart.

"She may have stopped aging at the practical age of a typical married, childbearing witch of our time, but she's still a child compared to you."

"Considering most people of our time rarely lived more than half a century if they weren't magical—and even then they liked to skewer each other with swords," Helga noted.

All eyes turned to Godric.

"I'll have you know I wasn't skewering anyone on my sword who didn't truly deserve it," he pouted. "And I taught Hermione the same."

The other founders rolled their eyes at him simultaneously.

"You were the woman who rose from the lake," Severus whispered. "But that was Brim."

Rowena, who seemed more aware of their guest despite the conversation put a hand on Hermione's shoulder. "Daughter of ours, I think it's time you showed our guest the Hall of the Founders, hrm?"

"Of course, Rowena," the younger witch said with a smile. "Would you like to follow me, Severus?"

Severus said nothing, but he slowly got up off the window sill and followed the younger witch.

The Founders said nothing, but Godric made a big show of sharpening his sword while Salazar dipped his dagger into a crystal jar of poison as Severus passed them by.

Rowena and Helga shook her heads. "They jest about it, but when it comes to fathers and their daughters, both of those wizards are the same," Rowena chuckled.

"Of course they are, Rowena, dear," Helga tutted. "They were once young men once."

"How they ever survived to become older men is beyond me," Rowena muttered.

Helga chuckled. "Come, old friend, let us get some tea and discuss what is to come."

"This hall looks different than the one I remember," Severus said, his fingers tracing the plaque under Salazar's statue.

"Here, the Founder's Instruments never left," Hermione said with a sad expression. "This is the hall as it should be, not how it is in the waking world."

"Waking world?"

Hermione smiled. "This is Hogwarts—the heart of Hogwarts—as it should be. Yet, because the instruments were not returned as they were meant to be, here and the waking world are not connected. It is why Hogwarts is crippled from doing all of what it wishes to and why none can hear the Founders unless they have undergone the Covenant."
"Yet, Minerva and the others haven't ever mentioned seeing this— being here." Severus said somewhat dubiously.

"Here in this place, things happen as they need to happen. Time flows slowly and more quickly depending on the need. The Founders have been here since the very beginning. Those who undergo the Covenant have the option of returning here, just as they did. But they will not know of this place until it is time for them to know this. The Founder's families chose not to return here. They chose to pass on to the next life—at least most of them did. Rowena's daughter, well, you know the story, yes?"

"Helena— the Grey Lady," Severus mused. "Why haven't there been others before… you? Why do I not know of you in the waking world?"

"You do know of me," Hermione responded with a soft smile. "Just not as clearly as you might here."

"Vague," Severus noted.

"Consider my parents," Hermione said with a smile.

"Point."

"Wisdom trickles down from this place to the waking world. Some call it inspiration. Others call it dreams. But, if you are ready, this room can tell you what you need to know, or rather— what you think you need to know."

"You really were raised by Rowena Ravenclaw," Severus muttered.

"A child can only absorb what they are taught by presence or absence," Hermione chuckled. "I was lucky—I had four parents."

"I feel like I am forgetting something important— something I should know," Severus puzzled.

"It will come to you in time," Hermione said with a warm smile.

"It is… difficult."

"I think you'll find that I quite understand," she replied.

Severus looked at her silently. "I believe you." He came to a series of statues in the middle of the room, surrounded by the sculptures of the original founders. Around the center were a series of panels, like frescos, detailing particular moments in someone's life.

There was a tiny baby, abandoned and alone, without a blanket or a kindly touch— cast aside like so much refuse on a cold, stone floor— skin blue and unhealthy. The baby was obviously born too early— the body wrinkly like someone much older and no fat to fill out the fragile limbs. In the next panel, the leys were cradling the baby gently, fusing themselves with her body and bonding to her— colour and health were signs the baby was growing stronger even as the Founders surrounded her. The umbilical hung grossly to the side, evidence that she had been heedlessly cast aside very soon after her birth.

The Founders gathered around with Rowena holding the baby aloft into the very center of of the joined ley lines. The energy arced and poured into the baby's body, but she was looking ever healthier for it. The next panel showed the baby being held by the Founders, but the ley was serving as her umbilical— providing life where her unknown mother could not. The leys were her womb
and her lifeline. The Founders were her caretakers.

The next panel showed her sleeping peacefully in a bassinet in the Founder's Hall with a pair of hands reaching down to take her. Albus Dumbledore yanked the sleeping infant out of the cradle, snapping the lines of magic that connected her to her artificial magical womb. The baby was clearly crying—screaming her little lungs out. The wizard carried her away, out of the hall, out of Hogwarts, and the Founders looked on in horror. Rowena was weeping. Helga was wringing her hands. Godric looked ready to drive a sword through someone or something, while Salazar wore an expression of pure, undeniable rage.

The next panel showed her laid at the steps of a Muggle hospital—abandoned and alone. Tiny tendrils of magic attempted to reconnect to her, calming her, but just as she was reassured, more hands picked her up and carried her into hospital—deeper into the Muggle world.

The next panel showed a bushy-haired young girl sitting nervously on a stool as the Sorting Hat came down on her head—Gryffindor.

The next showed her crying as others pointed and laughed—whispering and whispering behind her back and to her face. A redhead elbowed a young wizard with a mop of black hair. They laughed together as she walked past them, fighting back tears.

The next panel showed her alone in the very same Hall of the Founders she had begun in—the shades of the Founders surrounded her much as she had been at the very beginning. The girl looked up, tears streaming down her eyes as the Founders gave her a pendant: the crest of the Founders.

The next showed the girl sitting in Minerva's old office—Percy Weasley slamming the door on her as he told her stay put. The young witch clutched the pendant and dropped to her knees. The ley energy rejoined with her, arcing into her body and rising her up in the air, suspending her like a kite in high wind.

Zap.

ZAP!

ZAAAAAP!

The energy gathered in her core, rejoining her with the energy she had once left behind not by her choice. Yet Severus knew at that moment she had chosen to return. She chose this fate—even as it was unknown. The energy blew outward from her in a nova of power as the pendant around her neck glowed impossibly bright. She fell to the ground and landed on four feet: as a Nundu cub.

The moving fresco panels showed the dual life: as familiar to two professors of Hogwarts and child of the Founders. By day, bound to a physical world tinted by the view of a young Nundu cub. By night, as the Nundu cub slept, the child grew up—learning all that there was to learn from the Founders themselves.

And the last panel was of Salazar Slytherin invoking the ancient magicks to made the babe now grown his true daughter in every way that mattered. She was an apprentice no more. She stood with the Founders that had raised her: master of the leys that gave her life.

Severus placed his fingers on the plaque that marked the fiery woman with the blazing hair, side-by-side with the huge Nundu. He wiped the haze from the metal embossing.

Hermione Jean Bonnie Skye Brimstone Slytherin
"Ah, Severus. It's quite a lovely evening, yes?" Albus said pleasantly.

"It is a night like any other, Headmaster," Severus said, narrowing his eyes suspiciously.

"Yes, yes, of course it is. Do you have anything to report?" Albus asked, sitting back in his chair.

"No, Headmaster, there is nothing, save for the fact that Minerva has seemingly taken an abrupt leave of absence without prior notice tonight, as I have been doing her rounds."

"Oh, I wouldn't be too hard on her, Severus. "She's had a rather painful family issue come up."

"I did not think Minerva had any living family," Severus said with a sneer.

"I fear she does not, at least not anymore, Severus. I would ask you not question her about it. She is understandably quite shaken at the moment. I have done what I can to ensure things move along normally so as to not remind her of their absence."

Severus curled his lip. "As you wish, Headmaster."

"Thank you, my boy," Albus said with a rather satisfied smile. "I knew I could count on you, my boy."

"He knew—he was the reason," Severus hissed. "All along." Snape stared into Hermione's solemn eyes and saw the same flicker of orange and green that was pure Nundu. "You were born here—deep in the bowels of Hogwarts, and then he tore you away from this place. Why? What 'greater good' could that possibly serve? WHAT in Merlin's name could possibly justify ripping an infant from its womb?"

"Stress was what birthed me early," Hermione said gently. "My premature birth was not caused by magic or a curse. But my frail body was not yet ready to face the world. The Founders could not bear to see an infant die here in the halls they created. So my Rowena-mother did call the leys and entreat them to save me. And they did—for a price. I would never again be solely a child of man. There was a part of me that was never born—an emptiness I had no time to fill. Magic of the ancient leys filled that hole and made my heart beat. Helped my lungs to heave—and allowed my fragile body to live. I was irrevocably bound to Hogwarts even as I took my very first breaths. She kept me alive. The Founders gave me succor, cradling me as the energy and magic remade my womb—but then he found me. He discovered me and immediately ripped me away from this place, that I would not inconvenience my mother further."

Hermione looked to the statue of the Nundu. "He thought I would be cast out to the Muggle world and be forgotten. Safe from all things Wizarding—but I was not born of Muggles. I was born of Hogwarts. And when I walked across the threshold of Hogwarts, Hogwarts remembered me. And when the emptiness in my heart did not ease with human company, they found me and again offered
me the Convenant that had begun on the night I was born. I had a choice: to become the being I was *meant* to be— or suffer alone in a world that no longer welcomed me— I was too Muggle to be a witch, yet too magical to ever return to a Muggle world."

"You were much more than merely magical."

Hermione smiled. "I did not know that. The Founders welcomed me into their embrace. I was their apprentice. And when I came of age, my father pounced upon me to ensure his name remained with me. It is here I grew up. And in the waking world, it was with you that I learned who to trust and who to protect. You and Minerva tempered my Nundu heart and taught me what it was to be human."

"Are you human or Nundu?" Severus asked.

"Yes," Hermione answered with a smile. "I am both."

"Are you really my—"

"I am your familiar, Severus. You and Minerva are my anchors to humanity and compassion. You may find that ironic, but it is true. Does this displease you? Do I displease you?" Hermione's face was sad, the lines of her face furrowed in concern.

"You never displease me, Brim," Severus said firmly. "With you, I *feel* again."

Hermione's eyes sparkled. "I am glad, Severus. I know that your trust is a fragile thing, and I would probably not survive your rejection. I am your familiar as much as I am the guardian of Hogwarts."

"Somehow I don't think anyone in the history of Hogwarts ever had a familiar that could rise up from a burning lake as a human and obliterate an entire raging horde of Inferi."

Hermione smiled. "You always wished to excel and become known for greatness and impossible feats."

Severus snorted.

"So, now that you know, I would ask you a question, one that you can say no to if you so choose. I wish you to know there will be no hard feelings, whatever you decide. I will remain at your side in the waking world, gnawing upon your enemies regardless."

Severus frowned but nodded slowly.

"You have two options— you may go to sleep and wake in the waking world, knowing what you know now," Hermione said with a sad expression. "Or, you may stay here for a time and we can get to know each other better."

"How long does one night in the waking world last here?" Severus asked carefully.

"Time flows differently here. We are outside of time. If time is the river, we are on the shore, watching it flow by," Hermione replied. "I cannot tell you exactly how much time may pass. Perhaps a few days— perhaps a year. All I can say for sure is that in the span of a year in the waking world, I grew up, and the apprentice became a master. That is, if you believe becoming a master in anything is actually possible. My father would willingly debate you on that, perhaps."

Severus turned to the many panels detailing the life of Hermione Jean Bonnie Skye Brimstone Slytherin. "I would… gladly get to know you better."
Hermione gave him a genuine smile that lit up her entire face.

"You owe me one day's worth of venomous tentacula pruning, Godric!" Helga's triumphant voice chimed cheerfully from somewhere.

"Bloody hell, witch," Godric yelled back. "Why do you always win?!"

Severus yawned and felt his whiskers wriggle. A rather lovely sensation was spreading down his body as an attentive Nundu was grooming his ears. Yet, he was still in this dreamlike world "beyond" — the true core of Hogwarts— sharing space with the Founders and the Founder's daughter.

How many days— weeks perhaps— had passed, Severus wasn't sure. Time had, as Brim had warned him, set itself apart from the sense he knew of it. This new Brimstone— Hermione— was all Brim, yet so much more. With all of her cognitive ability intact, she was like talking to a fellow master. She was a peer, a colleague, and a true friend. She had been worried that he would view her secret— who she really was— as a betrayal, but Severus had viewed the circumstances of her creation as the ultimate betrayal, not her actions and what the Founders (and Hogwarts) had to do to preserve her life. It was because of Brim, after all, that he felt able to forgive in the first place, and he liked that feeling. He could, almost, forgive Lily her accusation of being a cold and heartless monster.

He was still working on that one.

If anything, Severus found himself angry on her behalf, but Brim (and he never truly stopped thinking of her as anything but Brim despite her myriad of names that rivaled Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore) always took everything like water off a duck's back. As long as he was there, she said, she could let things go.

Perhaps, they were not so different in that. He found he could be much more forgiving as long as Brim was with him. Minerva probably felt much the same, but he wondered if Minerva was ready for the ultimate reveal. Her missing daughter had been prematurely born, rescued by Hogwarts, torn from Hogwarts's embrace, tossed into the Muggle world like refuse, adopted by Muggles, and then cast into the Magical world with the same "whatever" regard she had been cast into the Muggle world to begin with. Then, Minerva had obviously been Obliviated— and not only that everyone had been Obliviated of Rabbie Fairbairn's existence to being with.

Ley magic.

For anyone other than Rowena Ravenclaw and now Hermione Brimstone Slytherin— it was like playing with Fiendfyre. While there may be other ley-attuned masters out there, they were probably few and far between. As he understood it— the leys had to bond with you from birth as they had with the infant Bonnie Skye. Rowena, too, had been born prematurely in a time when premature birth was death— only the leys had saved her too. How the leys made the choice to save or not was a mystery, and not even Rowena seemed to know.

Severus wondered what sort of magical creature Rowena really was, but neither she or anyone else was telling. Bother his insatiable curiosity.

Brim— Hermione— was a Nundu. Her acceptance of the Covenant had rebirthed her. That would never change, however, Brim was also a Nundu with an Animagus form: a human form. While Bonnie Skye may have ceased to be what she would have been born to be, she had become something more. She was born of Hogwarts in Hogwarts. She was Brim. She was Hermione. And
somewhere inside of her, she was also Bonnie Skye— the orphan not by her mother's choice.

Brim said she held no ill of Minerva. She loved her. There was a reason both Severus and Minerva shared the bond with her. In her own way, Brim had been eager to help the two of them as she had needed to be anchored to someone. Instinctively, she had chosen them: one disgruntled wizard with a tortured past and a witch with a tortured past she couldn't remember.

And if what he understood of the true nature of the Covenant was true, one day in the future, he would have the option of remaining here with Hogwarts as the Founders had— watching over her as he had in life. Only, unlike ghosts who had some unfinished business that haunted them as they haunted Hogwarts— those that passed on while under the Covenant had the choice to stay and continue their work. Perhaps, that was the ultimate reward: choice.

Coffee, the loyal and ever-present plush spider, skittered into sight, carrying biscuits. He deposited one in front of Severus and then crawled over to pry open Brim's maw and stuff one in. He squeaked lovingly, caressing her teeth, and zipped into her magical collar habitat. Even here— in the world beyond—Brim had her spider entourage.

Severus wondered what someone like Ronald Weasley would think if he knew that intelligent multi-lingual spiders could exist in the in-between world beyond. He smiled. Maybe someone should let him know.

"What are you thinking about, Severus?"

"Plush spiders in the ethereal realm and Ronald Weasley."

"Thinking of torturing your students, Severus? That's not very nice."

"Endlessly amusing, though."

"That too."

Brim sprawled in the sun, soaking it in.

"It will be hard to go back to teaching dunderheads after being so at peace here," Severus mused.

"I will be there to nip their rumps," Brim said, her tail looping in amusement.

"You enjoy herding students," he accused.

"Perhaps," she replied.

"Careful, your halo is crooked," Severus commented.

Brim gave him a feline grin, using her huge paws to wrestle his head and mock-maul his face.

Severus pounced on her, and they tumbled in the grass, chasing each other across the green through the high grass. The chase was always cathartic, his troubles and more human thoughts being pushed aside in favour of something more primal and immediate.

She led him on a merry chase, even diverting to the lake. A part of him wondered if such things reflected in the waking world, and it some person who happened to be near the lake at that given moment felt the splashes of water from the movement of "spirits."

A ripple in the water was barely a warning as a huge basilisk head rose out of the bubbling lake, and a mouth full of dagger teeth snapped just behind his rump.
Severus jumped almost twelve feet into the air with a startled rrrwor and landed on the bank. Meanwhile, Brim mrowled as the giant basilisk held her in a cage of teeth. She stuck her paws out from between the teeth, batting out them.

"No fair, father!"

"Be more aware, daughter!" Salazar hissed merrily.

Brim mrowled and complained as Salazar slithered onto the shore and deposited his soaking wet daughter on top of Severus with thud.

The basilisk curled his giant coils around them both and basked in the sun. Severus, however, was still breathing a little heavy, a patch of small silver hairs having appeared just over his left ear.

Salazar chuckled. "Startle reflex working, hrm, Severus?"

Severus tried to glower, but all he managed to do was wheeze. "A basilisk. That explains much."

"Did you think I created the chamber of secrets to house a basilisk strictly by asking them what they needed?" Salazar mused.

"It seemed logical, as you were a Parselmouth," Severus replied.

"Hrm, perhaps," Salazar said. "But, I did have insider information."

Severus sulked as only a feline could. "So it seems."

"Don't be cross, Severus," Brim chuckled. "My father first surprised me with his basilisk form when I was studying on the dock. He rose out of the water like a leviathan and dragged me under, forcing me to remember my bubble-head charm silent and wandlessly or drown."

Severus stared at Salazar accusingly.

"What? She remembered!"

Severus glared.

"You have no faith, Severus. I had all sorts of faith in my daughter's ability to think on the fly." Salazar radiated pride.

"By drowning her?!"

"She didn't drown."

Severus' eyebrow twitched.

"Surely in the years you have been here, you know that I do not test what I do not know the outcome will be," Salazar said.

Severus blinked. "Years?" His smilodon shape fell away as he shifted into his human form.

"Perhaps you needed this more than you realised, hrm?" Salazar hissed in amusement.

"That does explain—" Severus stopped, his head turning away as his hair covered his face defensively.
"Dearest my daughter," Salazar hissed. "Could you go help Rowena and Helga with their latest project before they blow up my lab?"

"Of course, father," she replied. "If you'll excuse me?" Brim nuzzled Severus and gave him a headbonk and then gave her father's serpentine muzzle a slurp and bounded up towards Hogwarts.

As she disappeared, Salazar leveled his eerie orange eyes at Severus. "Something to confess, hrm?"

Severus, hiding ineffectually behind his curtain of hair, flinched and flushed.

Salazar changed back into his human form, a tug of pure amusement on his lips. "I fear I have had many more years of experience reading people, Severus. No amount of hair or avoidance is going to help you."

"I happen to be quite adept at hair avoidance, thank you very much," Severus muttered.

"Perhaps in the waking world, this does you a great service," Salazar mused.

"I care for her," Severus blurted, cracking under Salazar's intense scrutiny.

"That wasn't so hard, was it?" the elder wizard said.

"You have no idea how intimidating you are," Severus hissed.

"Oh, I think I do," Salazar said with a sparkle in his eyes.

"You are infuriatingly observant."

"I'm the ultimate Slytherin."

"You ARE Salazar Slytherin."

"Mmmhmm."

Severus slumped. "It's too soon to feel this strongly."

"It's been years, Severus. Here, in this place. How soon is too soon?" Salazar rubbed his beard.

"She's my familiar. I have no right to bind her with another type of chain!" Severus said, clenching his fists.

Salazar sat down beside him. "She choose you, Severus. If she chooses you again, how is that slavery? That is what you are worried about, yes? That she had no choice but to care? That she never had a choice? You're wrong. She has always had a choice. Even when the leys saved her, she chose to live. She chose Hogwarts. She chose the Covenant. She chose to be my daughter. She always had the option to step away, to die as she was originally intended, or to live in spite of it all. That was her choice— her will."

"That's Brim."

"Mmmhm."

Salazar stroked his beard for a while. "If it makes you feel better, I could terrorize you and threaten to break your bones and string you up by your thumbs should you ever harm my daughter in any way."

Severus paled. "Please, no. I'm terrorized enough as it is. I can only imagine what medieval tortures
mixed with modern day horrors you could come up with. I'm terrified as it is— just facing her."

"Come now, she's a Nundu not an executioner," Salazar chuckled. "Though, I suspect that Godric may have been teaching her some rather interesting axe moves the other day, just in case she ever found it necessary to behead someone."

Severus swallowed hard.

Salazar smiled. "You're a fine young man, Severus. You're even in the same century, age-wise. You can sit and discuss the finer points of alchemy and potions until the sun comes up, sleep in a furry pile of feline abandon together, and you both crave fish and chase spiders. You know enough to control your emotions when it really matters, and yet you are perfectly fallible like any human being in a time of crisis. You know it. You know you are not perfect. You are not some arrogant imbecile who parades in and tries to convince everyone that you are the king of the world and the center of the universe. You know right from wrong because you've been on both sides, not because you were raised to be better or because you are on some holy mission."

"Do you think that Godric and I do not get into— as they say— epic rows? Do you think we always agree? Not on your life, young man. Even here, in this place, we have threatened to bring the walls of Hogwarts down to the point where Rowena had to wade in and start silencing us with hexes. Helga even subdued us with devil's snare once or twice. Believe me when I say, we are not perfect people, not even in this place. We did our very best to raise our child, and I think she has grown up the better for it— knowing that we are fallible but also able to reason. These are the things she knows. This is why she adores you. She knows you are capable of error. She knows you are not perfect, but you will never lie to her. When you make a mistake, you explain it. This is what life is about, yes? Making mistakes on a path to greater perfection, but knowing that absolute perfection is not a realistic goal?"

"There are better people and I—"

"Where?" Salazar laughed. "You have raised a Nundu from her cubhood and helped her grow into a creature who knows right from wrong and ally from foe in a year's time as the waking world sees it. Yes, we were training her here, but you were not some idle thing wallowing in stagnation while this occurred. You kept her from tearing your childhood enemy to shreds even as you wished him dead. You kept her from killing a man who once tried to kill you— not knowing at the time that you had made up, anymore than he did. You walked away from the hurt of your rescued childhood friend. You did not scathe or lay her low. You did not hit her where it would hurt most. You did not embarrass her in front of her son."

"These are not the actions of immaturity, Severus. You may lack in age compared to me, but you are no idiot. You are not a fool. The days when vengeance and slights given and taken are behind you. The days of serving two masters are also behind you. Now, your only duty is to protect Hogwarts, and that task you chose on your own, Severus. Your choice. Your desire. Whatever inadequacy you think you have— believe me you are by far better than most out there. Can you imagine, by chance, had my daughter found Mr Potter or Mr Weasley first. Perhaps bonded to an emotionally damaged young boy before she knew what stable was? Bonded to a selfish young whelp whose ideas of good and bad were based on whether they wore green and silver?"

Severus paled significantly.

"Indeed, think on that next time you think yourself a lesser wizard," Salazar said with a dry laugh.

"Think too, what would have happened had Albus Dumbledore found her first," Salazar said. "What would a man like him have done to a young, malleable Nundu cub who strived to please in all
ways?"

Severus twitched uncomfortably at that.

Salazar shook his head. "Severus, I have watched you grow up. I have watched her grow up. You have made bad decisions that made me want to reach through the aether and slap you upside the head, but you were never the only one making horrible life choices. That is why my daughter is working hard to bring our objects home. That, and destroying the Horcruxes—even as useless as they are right now—will remove a great evil from the world. You have grown up, Severus. You have grown into yourself. And if anyone can give my daughter the balance she needs in both this world and the waking, it is you. Are you not here? Now? No one else has managed it so far, yet here you are. You are the first in centuries to have been found worthy of such an honour."

Severus was silent.

"You have my permission," Salazar said with a chuckle. "Take whatever time you need to muster that courage you have buried deep within your soul, and tell her how you feel. Bond or no, words are—poignant, even when the silence of deed is genuine. She may know you love her, even now, but until you say it. Until you make it real—she will doubt she means enough for you to say the words."

Severus paled as the blood drained from his face. "She is my world—even before this. Even before I knew."


"Wake up, Severus," Salazar repeated. "Tell her how you feel. Make it real."

Severus felt the world fading away as the darkness swallowed him. The last thing he saw was Salazar's subtle smile as he stroked his beard and faded away.

Severus opened his eyes to see Harry and Draco sitting at a small table that had materialised out of nowhere overnight. They were sipping tea and having a quiet conversation—a far cry from the first year of death glares and poisoned daggers from the eyes. Lucius and Narcissa were plucking ornery plush spiders out of the breakfast cereal and trying to save the bacon from a few of them. A few had escaped her scrutiny, and they carried the bacon back towards him and Brim with a sort of eight-legged victory march that only a plush spider was capable of.

Only a single night had passed—a mere handful of hours. Yet, he felt as though he had lived an entire lifetime studying with the Founders and learning about Brim—the witch as well as the Nundu—there in the aether of the world beyond. Perhaps he had. He felt a sudden pang in his chest as he thought of not being able to see Brim's warm smile as she laughed at one of Godric's awful jokes. Her bell-like laughter and the gentle touch of her hand on his as she passed him his tea—memories far too sharp and vivid to ever be imagined—swam in his mind.

He remembered it all.

Her eyes—the perfect feline green and orange combined that was all Brim. Hermione Jean Bonnie Skye Brimstone Slytherin. And unlike Albus, she had earned every one of her names through blood and hardship.

"Mrowl," Brim said, rolling onto her back and exposing her vulnerable belly trustingly. Her sleepy gaze met his, and Severus felt a pang of sadness that the full, powerful, glorious Brim was sleeping somewhere inside of his beloved familiar.
He touched her cheek, feeling the soft, velvet fur and the slight stab of her long whiskers.

"I love you," he whispered, a single tear escaping his eye and trailing down his face. "Hermione Jean Bonnie Skye Brimstone Slytherin."

_Fwoop._

Brim's human hand suddenly touched his face, startling him. He stared at her in stunned disbelief as she caressed his skin, savouring as he leaned into her touch. "I love you too, Severus," she whispered.

"_Yay, he said it!_"

"_Yay!_"

"_Double yay!_"

"_Triple yay!_"

Spiders cheered and waved their legs all around the room.

"_Finally,_" said a rather glum-looking, black spider.

"_Hooray!_"

"_I have bacon!_"

"_Even better, yay!_"

"_Kiss her!_ one of the spider whispered._"

"_Come on!_"

"_Kiss her!_"

Severus flushed crimson.

Brim had a rather amused expression on her face. Subtlety was not a particularly strong plush spider trait.

Severus turned a few different shades of embarrassed before Brim placed her hands on his face and pulled it down, bringing his mouth to hers as a flare of heated magic blew outward, arching between them and resonating between the ley lines. The magic built into a bright ball of concentrated energy and blasted its way outward in a tangible, heated wind.

As Severus pulled away, if only to breathe, his lungs working hard to return oxygen to his starved cells, the plush spiders were cheering around them, waving their legs and clapping.

"_Ooh lah lah!_"

"_Hooray!_"

"_Bond is sealed!_"

"_Sealed!_"

"_Yay!_"
"Congratulations!"

"Ahem."

All the plush spiders went silent, freezing in place as Severus and Brim froze too.

"Far be it for me to not express my approval that you finally found yourself a witch, Severus," Lucius said dryly, "but could you at least introduce us before sealing a magical bond with her in front of the children?"

Harry and Draco looked out from behind Lucius' legs, green and grey eyes very wide.

"Bugger me," Severus muttered, flushing deeply.

"She's the woman from the lake," Harry whispered in amazement.

"She saved us all from the Inferi," Draco said, tugging on his father's trousers.

"I am Lucius," Lucius said with a courtly bow. "This is my lady wife, Narcissa— and you are?"

Brim stood a little shakily on two legs and braced herself on Severus' arm. Her startling greenish orange eyes shone as she watched everyone in the room. Her mahogany curls framed her face. Hints of leopard-like spots ghosted across her scalp and merging down her face. Her fingers were slightly pointed, curving into pseudo-claws. "I am Hermione Jean Bonnie Skye Brimstone Slytherin," she said, dropping slightly in a small curtsy. "At your service, Lucius Malfoy of the House of Malfoy."

Lucius paled significantly, propping himself on the nearby table. "Bugger me!"

Narcissa sat down heavily in a nearby chair.

Harry and Draco, however, rushed right up and eagerly hugged the witch's waist. "Brim!"

The witch smiled gently as she drew the two boys into a hug. "Hello, my children," she whispered softly.

"You're so cool!" they exclaimed as the adults in the room took a moment to collect their thoughts, sanity, and what was left of their reality.

"This room has been locked up for a great many years, Severus," Minerva protested. "I can't even remember why."

"Do you even remember what it is?"

Minerva paused. "The Hall of the Founders."

"Strike you a little odd that the Hall of the Founders would be locked up?"

"That is a bit odd, Minerva," Rabbie said. "It was never locked up as I recall.

Minerva shook her head. "I… don't remember. Why don't I remember?"

The locking mechanism on the Hall opened with a sharp clang, and the doors opened, exposing the hall within. "Mrowl!" Brim said, promptly bounding into the room, her tail waving merrily in invitation.
Minerva and Rabbie walked in first, followed by Severus and a virtual army of colourful plush spiders.

"Ooo! Open now!"

"Both sides!"

"Both places!"

"Yay!"

"Is there a reason you wanted me to be here, Severus?" Regulus asked, rubbing his ear, not that I am not grateful for you saving me from a most stimulating evening of guilt-ridden apologies from my older brother."

"Actually, yes," Severus said, nodding as Kingsley and Moody came in behind him. "Something rather important is going to happen tonight, and I believe Alastor and Kingsley should be here as well.

"Not that I don't like a little nostalgia, Severus, but it's been ages since I was at Hogwarts," Kingsley said with a smile. "I don't think Alastor even remembers his school days."

"Shut it, Kingsley."

Kingsley grinned widely.

The hall opened up into a larger room, and the tall statues of the four Founders stood in the cardinal directions. Each seeming to loom over the room.

"Minerva, do you have the Sword of Gryffindor?"

"Aye, Severus. It took some finding amongst all of Albus' things, but then it just showed up when I was about ready to torch the room."

Snape raised one brow.

"It's been a very long summer holiday, Severus."

Snape swallowed hard, tugging on his collar. And it's going to get even better.

"Regulus, the reason I needed you here is that you have the real Horcrux, and before you give me that look that says 'how do you know', just take a deep breath, hrm?"

Regulus' jaw dropped.

"I'm guessing you've tried every spell you know while attempting to destroy it too."

"Everything short of bloody Fiendfyre—I never could control it."

"Probably good that you didn't," Snape said with a sigh. "Fiendfyre would have destroyed it."

"But that's what I WANT, Severus," Regulus insisted.

"Yes, but that is not what we need."

"What?" Regulus stared at him.
"Look around you. Each Founder has a statue, but something is missing from each one. Each one has something missing—something that should have been there centuries upon centuries ago."

Snape gestured to Godric Gryffindor's statue. "He's missing something in his hands. He pointed to the statue's outstretched hands, palms up, as if to hold something."

"Minerva, if you would humour me?"

Minerva pulled out the sword of Godric Gryffindor and gently placed it in the statue's outstretched arms. A blaze of golden light shimmered off the sword and it sang as she put it in its place. The bright light thrummed as magic returned to that section of the room. Godric's statue seemed almost alive.

"Ahhh, at last," a male voice said with considerable relief.

Godric's shade stepped out of his statue and smiled. "Thank you, my lady, for returning what was mine. You are one step closer to restoring Hogwarts as it should have been—this room as it should have been. This is the Founder's Hall, but it never truly was because it was never allowed to be. Our objects were stolen from us as the tombs were robbed in Egypt. We were unable to communicate with those in Hogwarts—at least not in the way we had intended."

Godric's shade smiled as he saw the look of wide-eyed wonder on just about everyone's faces. He focused on Brim. "Hello, child," he greeted, reaching out to touch her ears and rub them. "You've been very busy."

"Mrrowl," she answered sadly.

"I've missed you too, love," he said with a smile. "Someone has to offer me a proper challenge with a sword."

"Mrrowl!" she replied.

Godric's face suddenly became serious. "Each of us has an object. Rowena's diadem, Helga's cup, and Salazar's locket grimoire remains."

"I have the locket," Regulus said, his eyes never leaving the phantom Godric.

"Wonderful, give it to Salazar's daughter."

"What?"

Godric chuckled. "The Nundu. Give it to her."

Regulus, who had obviously tried everything in his book to destroy the locket, was finding it a little hard to comprehend what a giant cat was going to do any better, but he handed the locket to Brim.

Brim took the locket in her mouth and began to foam at the mouth.

Her lips pulled back from her teeth as her saliva foamed out like shaving cream from a canister. Black ooze dripped from her mouth as a low, agonising scream seemed to emanate from everywhere. A vision of a man clutching his head in agony filled every mind. Tom Riddle, squibbed but apparently still bound to the Horcrux, screamed.

***Clank.***

The drool-covered locket landed on the floor as the black vapour slowly dissipated. The aura of
malevolence disappeared along with it. The locket grimoire shimmered with light, giving off a pleasant warmth and a soft glow.

Brim, however, seemed to find the experience utterly distasteful, and she frantically rubbed her head on the floor, trying to evict the foul stench from her mouth.

Severus knelt and held her still, pointing his wand into her mouth and using Aguamenti to rinse out her mouth for her. She stuck out her tongue and smacked her lips experimentally.

Coffee crawled down her muzzle and deposited a mint into her open maw, and the Nundu licked it over, making faces as she tried to shove the mint into every space of her mouth to cover all the places the Horcrux had foamed on.

"I am sorry, child," Godric apologised. "That did not look even remotely pleasant."

Brim glowered at the phantom of Godric, wearing her best Professor Snape disgusted expression.

Severus picked up the somewhat drooly locket and whispered to it, and it opened with a soft click. He placed the chain around Salazar's neck and placed the locket itself into his outstretched hand.

Again, the golden burst of light novaed outward, filling the room with warmth, and when the light faded, the phantom of Salazar Slytherin stepped out of his statue, brushing his robes as though he had just walked through a raging sandstorm. "Ahhhh, at last. I was thinking you would be forced to listen to this man babble about honour and chivalry until the sun itself fell out of the sky."

"Mrrrwoowwwl!" Brim said, leaping up like a caracal to greet Salazar.

"Ah, my daughter," Salazar crooned. "It is good to see you too."

Salazar gestured to the other statues. "Each of us has lost an item. Some to simple ignorance and others by outright betrayal. Reunite our objects to our statues, and the wisdom of the past will be here for the present. Fail in this, and Hogwarts will remain a shadow of what she should be. Knowledge was meant to flow freely here at Hogwarts. Help was to come those that needed it."

Salazar soothed the Nundu between the ears with an affectionate pat. "Until all of the objects have been returned, our visit must be brief. I beseech you to find the diadem and the cup. Return them here that our experience may reach a new generation."

"You are Salazar?" Regulus said with wonder.

"And that is Godric," Salazar replied. "The four of us created Hogwarts as friends, which is something history likes you to forget, I believe."

Regulus let out his breath slowly and nodded.

"We have very little time, my friends," Godric said.

"But we have just enough time to tell you a story," Salazar continued.

"It is a story with a tragic beginning," Godric said. "A story of survival."

"It is a story of compassion and learning, forgiveness, and cunning," Salazar said.

"It is a story of love lost and found against the odds," Godric said.

"Long ago, when the skies were as stormy as Scotland's heart, a babe was born here in Hogwarts—
"The babe, stressed by birth before its time— the mother stressed beyond stress, beyond the breaking point for so many reasons. The babe was born into Hogwarts, torn from the hands of the mediwitch, and cast aside that spells might be cast to purge the memory of the trauma."

"Hogwarts sensed the child, born within, and moved to save her. The leys became the lifeline. Hogwarts became the womb. And the child was found by the Founders— spirits to some, but tangible to her— she who was born half-grown, half-formed."

"Magic filled in the empty spaces. Magic fed her life— forming her tiny heart and lungs anew, feeding her life."

"For days, weeks perhaps, she was suspended in the leys, cradled and nurtured. She was sung to sleep by the voices of the Founders and the song of the leys themselves. Hogwarts moved her cradle as she was given life."

Godric continued for Salazar. "Just as she was to be reborn again, a man came, having tracked her down from her birthing at last. He ripped her from her magical womb and carried her away to the land of Muggles, depositing her on the steps of one of their hospitals and leaving her there. And he would have not seen her again, nor would any, had her magic not risen up, and she returned to Hogwarts in her eleventh year as a student."

Salazar frowned. "But she was not accepted by her peers. While most of her professors adored her and her magic— her drive— her peers did not. Her peers called her outcast, ridiculing her, accusing her of crimes she was not guilty of, and in her grief and despair, she fled from them and found this Hall. She found this place and found her way in— for no door in Hogwarts remains locked to her. She was born in these halls. They knew her."

Godric sighed. "We offered her what Hogwarts offered her: a chance to be what she was meant to be— a guardian, a friend, a child born of Hogwarts, raised by Hogwarts. But she needed time to decide, and so she left, taking with her the blessing of our well wishes, whatever she should decide. And not long after she returned to her peers, they accused her of stealing the mark of our favour— the crest of the Founders. And as she cried, locked inside the office of house's matron, she accepted the Covenant. She then became what she was meant to be."

"To temper the young one's training," Salazar continued. "By day, she was as a child is, curious and learning always. By night, however, she lived an entire life. Nights became months. Months became years. She was our grandest apprentice, but by the end, she was my daughter. I gave her the grimoire of my family and bound her to my bloodline— by her choice."

"He was faster than the rest of us," Godric said with a sniff. "I was betting on Rowena."

"Bah, you fail at betting, Godric, and you know it," Salazar growled.

"Don't I know it," Godric agreed.

"But now that her training is done," Salazar continued, "the memories of her true self have returned to her. And as they return to her, so too, does the world remember who she was."

"She will never be a child again," Godric said. "She was never meant to live, thanks to the hand of wizard that stressed her mother to the point of premature birth. Hogwarts saved her. The leys claimed her, and we, the Founders, taught her everything we knew."

"But she remembers who she was. She remembers who she could have been, but she also knows..."
what and who is now," Salazar said. "Daughter."

"Child of the Founders."

"Child of Hogwarts."

"Nundu."

"Hermione Jean."

"Bonnie Skye."

"Brimstone Slytherin."

The apparitions of the Founders faded, and in their place was a statue in the middle of the room. A beautiful woman with a long mane of curls stood with her hand outstretched. Beside her was the great and massive Nundu. Coffee skittered up the statue and sat in the middle of her outstretched hand—perfectly sized. A collar that looked very much like a choker, hung around her neck. A virtual army of plush spiders swirled around her feet. A shining plaque glimmered at the base of the marble:

**Hermione Jean Bonnie Skye Brimstone Slytherin**

*Born of Hogwarts*

*Familiar to her chosen*

*Guardian of Hogwarts*

*Keeper of the Covenant*

Minerva let out a low wail, turning around to where Brim was. The Nundu's form shimmered as she stood upright, reforming into the woman with mahogany curls and eerie feline, green-orange eyes.

"A daughter—" Minerva whispered. She stumbled over towards Brim and reached out to touch her cheek and touch her hair. "I had a daughter."

"Hello," Brim said softly.

Minerva crushed the young woman to her with a sob. "My Bonnie Skye. My precious baby. You're alive. Dear Merlin, you're alive!" Tears ran down Minerva's face as she buried her face into Hermione's profusion of curls.

"Daughter?" Rabbie whispered. "I have a daughter?" He looked around. "I have a **DAUGHTER!**" he exclaimed, clasping both Kingsley and Alastor on the back.

Minerva turned to Kingsley and Alastor, her face a mask of fury. "Tell me you will make him pay."

Kingsley and Alastor exchanged glances. "Who, Headmistress? The Founders did not say who."


"Minerva," Alastor said carefully, "you said you didn't remember anything that happened back when Rabbie disappeared."

"I remember **now,**" she said coldly. "Get me a Pensieve, and I will show you all."
The Sentencing of Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore

Unless you've been living under a rock the last summer, you've probably been waiting to hear the news about the trial and sentencing of ex-Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore.

The Wizengamot finished their summer-long deliberations over his lifetime of sins that many believed were only the mad ravings of the sensationalist writer, Rita Skeeter. After Pensieve after Penseive of memories were presented both by fresh memory pull and preserved memories, testimonies, journal evidence, and even a memory dive into the mind of his former familiar, his phoenix, Fawkes, the list of crimes kept adding up. After Dumbledore refused to answer questions, Veritaserum was administered under healer-observation and with multiple witnesses provided via sister-Ministries of neighbouring Wizarding countries, to insure all was done impartially.

The list of crimes, which has steadily grown ever since his incarceration at St Mungo's following the battle which sapped the magic from both himself and the notorious Tom Riddle, aka the self-styled Dark Lord Voldemort, has cast an entirely different light on the Leader of the Light many fancied him to be:

Unauthorized Obliviation of a number of individuals through the use of ley line magic spanning over 10 years

Use of ley line magic without attunement, endangering the lives of students, staff, and the surrounding area of Hogwarts and Britain

Forced incarceration of: Regulus Black, the McKinnon family, James and Lily Potter, and Frank and Alice Longbottom

The "disposal" of the prematurely-born daughter of Robert and Minerva Fairbairn and the subsequent unauthorised transfer of a magical baby to Muggle hospital

Cursing Aberforth Dumbledore with an unhealthy obsession with goats

Mr Dumbledore has been sentenced to spend the remainder of his life incarcerated in the Bermuda Triangle Maximum Security Wizarding Penitentiary. Both he, and Mr Thomas Riddle, Jr will be serving concurrent sentences for their crimes against both the Wizarding and Muggle worlds.

The Bermuda Triangle facility has historically been used to house only the world's most dangerous witches and wizards, magical individuals who have been convicted of crimes so heinous and unspeakable that the usual visitation and possibility of parole or forgiveness is impossible. So intense is the security of this place of incarceration, that the wards and securities have been known to crash Muggle planes and ships throughout recorded history. It is said that even the Dementors refuse to go there, and there are far worse both in the waters in and around this legendary place.

How long Mr Dumbledore and Mr Riddle can survive there is anyone's guess. Having lost their magic entirely, they have already started to show signs of debilitating physical and mental aging equivalent to the number of years they have lived so far. When the pair will be transferred is unknown, in the meantime, the pair will remain under heavy guard by the Ministry to protect the prisoners against retaliatory retribution.

From the looks on the faces of the members of the Wizengamot as they exited the sentencing trial, many seem to believe that dying of old age is too good for the two wizards. Rumours hint that their "special" accommodations while waiting to be transferred to the Bermuda Triangle may include
warding that will immediately transfigure each wizard into an indestructible, inanimate, and self-aware plush toy that will be given to the wizarding children’s orphanage—should either of the men even try to escape. Whether this rumour is founded on truth, however, remains to be seen.

A child cried as the storm raged on outside, rain pelting the windows with merciless natural rage. Most of the children were asleep, but this child was new to the facility—a victim of some remaining Death Eaters who were trying desperately to cling to a way of life that was shattering around them due to their "lord’s" fall.

Matron Fairfax was thankful that Tom Riddle was finally captured and dealt with—even though it meant he and his "host" were being sentenced together. Her friends at Mungo's had said that the Dark lord had fully taken over his host body, and that brought her some comfort that he would not return and cause more orphans under his banner of hate.

Hate had started in a orphanage much like this one, only this was a Wizarding orphanage. Until recently, hate was what ultimately brought the majority of the victims to this place. Now, for the first time, the death tolls were slowly diminishing and children like this young toddler were becoming less frequent.

Matron Fairfax soothed the child with her voice, attempting to rock him as he bawled, but the child refused to settle. She dodged a fist to the face, a kick to the kidneys, and a scream aimed at her nearby ear canal. The storm was terribly frightening to him, and it was obvious to her that he was wanting something that was missing—whether it was his parents or something else, she had no idea.

The owl flew in on the wings of the storm, dripping storm water as it dropped a parcel in her lap and immediately flew back off, not even waiting for the customary treat. The poor thing looked thoroughly bedraggled and sopping—not at all happy to be wet, and judging by the bird's wobbly flying, wetness wasn't helping in the slightest.

Matron Fairfax tried to both rock the distressed child and open the parcel at the same time, and sighed in relief as it opened with a slight tug.

The matron gasped as two perfectly pristine plush toys fell out: a bright purple octopus with cute, fat tentacles and an equally bright pink hippogriff with a floppy green bow around its neck and tassled silver bells on its tail.

The child in her arms quieted almost immediately—reaching his hands out to open and close his fingers in an obvious "gimme" gesture. Fairfax guided the stuffed hippogriff to the boy, and he immediately shoved its head into his mouth and chewed on its eyes, drooling on it profusely with a happy gurgle.

Fairfax smiled and lay the child down into the bed, pulling the blanket up to cover him again. The storm raged on, but the child didn't seem to care anymore. His mouth was clamped on the hippogriff's head as his arms were wrapped around the octopus with a tight grip. Within a few minutes, he was fast asleep.

Matron Fairfax picked up the wet parcel paper and examined it for an address, but found nothing but her name on the front.

Odd, but anonymous donations were fairly common. She was hardly going to complain. Thanks to the kindness of the anonymous sender, one little orphan was sleeping quite soundly indeed tonight.

Tomorrow, when the storm was over, the boy would face all new problems, but he would have two
small plush friends to help him through those challenges every step of the way.

Fairfax kissed the sleeping boy's forehead and exited the room with a pleased smile on her face.

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**A/N:** That's what you get for trying to escape punishment! MOAR punishment!

It's going to be a busy week for me, as usual, so next update will be "as it happens, whenever that may be." Praise the Dragon and the Rose for braving sleepies to finish this last part of the chapter.

PRAISE HER!
**Merits of Moderation**

Chapter by corvus draconis

A/N: Don't drink and cast spells… this chapter is a fine lesson on the merits of abstinence. Friends don't let friends become the next Sybill Trelawney.

**Beta Love:** The Dragon and the Rose, Dutchgirl01, and Flyby Commander Shepard

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**Breath of the Nundu**

**Chapter 12**

**The Merits of Moderation**

*To err is human, to purr is feline.* - Robert Byrne

"This place is a dump."

"Thank you, Black, for stating the bleeding obvious."

"Are you sure the Riddles lived in this place? It's more likely they died here instead."

"You're one to talk, Padfoot," Remus mumbled. "You let your own family home go to shite."

"I wish Prongs was here to offer some sort of humour," Sirius said with a sigh.

"Well, therapy is more important, yes?" Remus speculated.

"Probably," Sirius agreed. "It's bad enough that Mini-Prongs doesn't want to be near his parents because they keep treating him like the result of some sort of freak potions accident that aged his body but not his mind. I can't imagine taking that well if that was me."

"At least Frank and Alice are doing pretty well with young Neville," Remus said. "If anyone needed calm and stability from parents risen from the supposedly dead, it's that young man. The McKinnons were all taken at the same time, so they don't have half as much to deal with short of a little time and a bit of culture shock every time they try to tell us what day it is."

"Mainly because it got that old vulture off his back, always telling him how he'll never measure up to his parents," Sirius muttered. "I know that feeling."

Remus shook his head. "There's a big difference there, mate. Your mother and father were a piece of work in a really bad way. At least Frank and Alice were good people fighting for a future I could stand behind."

Sirius sighed. "I dunno, Moony. I used to think that about my brother and it turns out he wasn't the evil Dark wizard I thought he was either. He was just saving my arse from my own family by taking up the cup that I wouldn't. He was much like Severus, and that bloody bastard fried all of our brains making us think the absolute worst of each other."

Remus touched his hand gently, leveling a stern but warm gaze. "He's not in any shape to hurt you or anyone else anymore, Pads. That has to mean *something.*"
Sirius broke into a grin. "Albus the octopus and Tom the hippogriff? I couldn't have dreamed a better punishment for two megalomaniacs like them. Are you sure that none of the horrible personalities locked within those two toys can seep out to corrupt some innocent tyke?"

Remus shook his head. "Nope, they have no magical connection anymore. The leys saw to that, permanently. From what the healers were saying, the two were barely able to construct a sentence between them due to the age catching up to them. Muggle senility and dementia with scant periods of lucidity."

"I'd imagine those scant periods would be absolute torture."

"I bet they are," Remus said, a dangerous glint in his eyes. "Even if by some random act they were to fall upon a wand, absolutely nothing would change. No magic. No connection. Though, when they have finished serving their respective sentences, the magic may allow them to 'die' naturally— fade into the aether or whatever rot happens when you die. Who knows though? From what I understand, the spell slammed down on them almost too easily, as if the hand of something far greater than us took great pleasure in ensuring their eternal punishment."

Sirius shrugged. "I'm just glad that they will never come back to haunt us again five, ten, thirty years from now. I'm almost relieved— at least as a stuffed toy they can't get into much trouble— um, let me correct that statement. At least they aren't a stuffed spider from Hogwarts."

Remus snorted laughter. "I don't know. Brim would keep them in line and chew on them regularly."

"No way!" a tiny spider voice chimed in.

"Never!"

"Nooit!"

"Ewww, we don't want him with us."

"They'd give her indigestion!"

Coffee and his merry band of arachnids were bouncing up and down on top Brim's head, looking very excited. Coffee, Eek, Snowfall, and Whee had been joined by *Rood*, *Somber*, and *Tally-ho*. There was also one that Draco had dubbed "Squish" for always ending up on the bottom of someone's boot by accident, "Charlotte" the pale grey spider that had a habit of writing obscure words in webs, "Koekie" the sandy-coloured biscuit-thieving arachnid with a cause, and a senile-seeming white and gold spider that had somehow been dubbed "Fizban the Fabulous." No one seemed to know where *that* had come from.

Asking seemed like a moot cause. As far as most were concerned, they were simply glad the names the spiders ended up with were seemingly less strange than the ones the house-elves gave themselves. While Remus did his best to attempt to remember all the names, Sirius had given up and started calling them "you," "that one," "this one," and "those over there." Severus called them something different every time, save for the originals whose names he remembered, resorting to simple physical descriptors when names utterly failed him.

"Eee!" Eek said, waving his legs as he perched on Severus' shoulder.

"This place is awful," Whee added, shining black eyes looking around.

Severus tilted his head. "As much as adore the decor, your multi-legged agents of mayhem wouldn't happen to know how to chase up this ring so we don't end up cursed to death."
"Sure."

"Sure!"

"Sure thing!"

"Ab-so-lutely!"

A stream of multi-coloured spiders swarmed out of Brim's collar and blanketed over the area.

"Did you just— deploy an entire swarm of plush spiders to find a Dark object?" Sirius boggled.

"Got a better idea, Black? Unless you plan to sniff everything on the grounds and hope to run across something a bit spotty?"

Sirius shook his head. "No, I don't have a better idea. I just— you have to realise how odd it seems that you have a magical familiar that is also a witch who has an entourage of plush minions."

"Jealous, Black?"

Sirius looked sideways. "Maybe."

"Don't forget that my familiar has a familiar of her own."

"A big honking flaming familiar that used to belong to Dumbledore!" Remus said, throwing up his hands.

"I thought she had that ginger cat— Crookfanks?"

"Shanks, mate, Crookshanks."

"Crookshanks chose my mother," Severus said with an arched brow. "He sensed that she needed him."

Sirius groaned. "I need a sodding scorecard to keep this shite straight."

Brim wrapped her jaws around Sirius's head, using her paws to drag him down to the ground. The dog Animagus yelped and transformed, dashing across the decrepit estate grounds to escape the seemingly teething Nundu.

Remus eyed Severus. Sometimes I wonder, Severus, if she does that all on her own or your influence causes her to pick on him."

"Me?" Severus asked. "Whatever do you mean?"

Remus mumbled. "I'm onto you, mate."

"Hn," Severus replied, content to wait for the return of the plush spiders over excessive and unnecessary wand waving.

**Crack.**

**Crack.**

Moody and Kingsley arrived with a handful of Aurors to assist the search.
"Start without us?" Savage asked.

"The spiders went all in," Remus said cheerily. "Sirius is currently running for his life from a bored Nundu."

Savage looked envious. "I want to be chased by a bored Nundu."

Moody smacked Savage upside the head. "You have enough on your plate, Savage."

Savage sighed, disappointed.

"Hey, Cuddles, don't look now, but—"

**WHUMP!**

A giant Nundu slammed into Savage as she attempted lick off his face.

The other Aurors snickered together as Savage was groomed over. Sirius slinked back in his human form, looking as though he had been dragged through the brush by his ankles.

"*Found something!*" Eek said, skittering in with Snowball, Koekie, and Fizban.

"*Yes! Found something!*" Snowball said, grooming the cobwebs off herself.

"*Whee!*" said Whee.

"*Follow us!*" said Koekie.

Brim ceased to lick Savage, trotting off to follow the clutter of plush spiders, her tail looped with amusement.

"I thought you said she was a woman now, Snape," one of the Aurors said.

"I," Snape said lowly, "said no such thing."

Moody snorted at the Auror in question. "You need to stop reading my reports over my shoulder and think you know things, Reginold," he said, pointing a finger at him.

The other Aurors chimed, "*Ooooollllllllll!*" as they snickered at Auror Adcock with amusement having been caught spying over Moody's shoulder."

Reginold flushed, caught red-handed. He made a sudden yelp, leaping into the air as Brim had doubled back and taken a bite of this rump, driving him forward in front of her with a low growl. As the man went stumbling forward, Brim picked up a red and white spider and chewed on her, making her squeak. A fresh scent of peppermint wafted off the spider's body and filled Brim's mouth with foamy bubbles, making her look a little rabid.

Remus nudged Severus. "That your doing?" he asked.

"I assure you, if she decided to bite someone on the arse today, it was not my doing," Severus answered.

"No, the peppermint foaming dental spider," Remus said suspiciously.

"Who am I to question evolution?" Severus replied.
Remus gave Snape a look that told him he didn't believe his innocence.

"You can chew on me too, if you want. I don't mind," the red and white spider chimed from Remus' shoulder, having appeared out of nowhere.

"No, no, I'm good," Remus said, waving his hands.

"You sure? I'm tasty!" she squeaked, tiny topaz eyes whirling.

"Not that I don't believe you, love, but I don't chew on other Nundus' spiders."

"She doesn't mind," the peppermint spider said. "Suit yourself!" She leapt off Remus' shoulder with a strand of silk and used the wind to carry her off.

Remus slumped. "I've been chastened by a plush spider."

"There are probably worse things," Sirius said, catching up to them.

"I feel guilty for NOT chewing on her," Remus confessed.

"Plush spider guilt. Worst kind," Sirius said with a grin.

Remus glared at his friend with an expression that basically said Just you wait, Sirius Black. I have no idea what I'm going to do to you, but it will be great, and you will suffer.

Moody had already caught up with Snape, and they pair were walking side by side as they followed Brim who was following the spiders. Oddly, they were going outside the estate instead of deeper in, finding themselves in a shabby looking area that had seen better days. Only some miracle of luck kept the small house standing—the tree limbs and roots serving as a proper support as the original ones had already long rotted.

Spider silk covered the surface of it, and the clutter of plush spiders—lead by none other than Coffee—were frantically "sewing" the shack together to keep it from falling down around them.

"It's here!" Coffee squeaked, pointing his front legs below.

Brim slurped the spider in thanks and poked her head in, sniffing. All of the spiders trailed in from around the webbed shack, crawling into her collar and disappearing having completed their task.

Savage came up next to Brim and started casting curse detection spells to make sure nothing was going to rise up out of the ground or cast them into a hidden vat of flesh-eating acid. Brim sniffed carefully, her tail puffed out until it resembled a bottle brush.

"Down in the hole," Coffee said, sitting on her head. He tapped his legs over her eye to get her attention.

Brim looked into the hole, her altered vision instantly seeing past the webbing to a gold box nestled deep within. It had obviously been hidden better once upon a time, but the rotting floorboards had given way into a rather large nest of some sort. Piles of small bones, shiny objects, pebbles, candlesticks, and the gold box were all piled together in a heap.

Brim's ears flicked as she listened to what was happening outside. Moody was barking orders to everyone to do a certain task, layering their duties so they could clear the area. She looked into the hole again, wary. Her whiskers flicked in and she used them to feel out the hole.

Severus and Savage wove their spells together to systematically go over the shack's inner room—it's
one room. But the inside of the shack seemed strangely Dark magic free. It was odd considering that the box down in the hole seemed to ooze it.

"Here, let me," Savage said, moving against Brim and pointing his wand into the hole. "Wingardium Leviosa."

The gold box floated up into the room, and Brim rapidly backpedaled to avoid it touching her, giving it a harsh glare of feline disapproval. Dangling from the box was what looked like a scarlet lace brassiere wrapped around a bear trap.

Severus moved out of the way as Savage guided the box out through the door, gently letting it come to rest on the makeshift mission table they had set up in the middle of the clearing. Savage stepped back, giving a silent gesture with his hands to let the others know not to touch it— at least not until they had torn it to pieces to search for booby traps. He eyed the scarlet lace brassiere and the bear trap with morbid curiosity. Others did too, him being not the only one wondering what was going on in that shack throughout history.

"Hunting shack, perhaps?" Auror Findlay suggested.

"Hunting what? The elusive wild breast?" Harbinger replied with a smirk.

A deer startled in the nearby woods at a sudden hum of magical energy. People began to hit the dirt almost immediately, no one sure who had triggered something.

A bright green beam shot out of somewhere, ricocheting off every place it touched inside the shack. Brim launched herself into the air and pounced on Savage and Snape, using her body to shield them from whatever it was that was being flung in their direction. Shortly after the green beam nailed her square in the back.

The green aura expanded, and the shack itself trembled and groaned, trying to collapse, but the multitudes of silk strands kept it in place, and only a large cloud of dirt, dust, and filth tumbled out of every orifice of the shack.

Voices coughed all around as the debris cleared. The shack had crumpled in on itself, but it hadn't collapsed— not for lack of trying.

"Hecate's handgrenades," Savage wheezed. "Severus, you are one heavy-arsed bastard."

The dust finally cleared around the shack enough to expose Savage who was pinned by Severus who was pinned by a rather annoyed-looking gargantuan Clydesdale-sized Nundu.

"I am just as pinned as you, Savage," Severus muttered.

Brim pried herself off the ground, her body and legs having straddled and protected her people as best she could. She was, however, much larger than she should have been— turning what had been large enough for Draco and Harry to ride into something the full-grown Aurors could definitely ride.

Brim extracted herself from the remains of the door, her sheer bulk having completely demolished that side of the shack.

"A beam of death comes out and hits her and it just makes her even bigger?" Sirius muttered, helping the Auror he was standing by up to his feet.

Brim mrowled, sitting down as a clay roof tile fell and bonked her on the head. She stared upward at the offending roof, radiating pure annoyance. Coffee, still clinging to between her ears, used his legs
to brush the dust off her fur, sending tiny bits of dirt and stone flying everywhere. Brim nudged Snape with her head, giving him a concerned headbonk.

"I'm fine," Severus said, rubbing her gently. "Thank you."

"Everyone here alive and un-maimed?" Moody inquired.

Grunts and waves came from all over.

"If someone was dead… how would you even know?" Remus asked under his breath.

"I'd know," Moody snapped, causing the werewolf to startle.

Moody stormed up to the gold box and cast a few spells on it, making absolutely sure there wasn't anything hidden under something hidden that might be hidden under something else.

"Damn, boss, how many layers of spells are you casting on that thing?"

"As many as needed!" Moody muttered.

The gathered Aurors exchanged glances.

Moody waved his hands. "Findlay, open the box. I'll maintain a protective bubble just in case something flies out."

"Sure thing, boss."

Findlay pointed his wand at the box and started a spell, slowly opening the lid. Moody kept a spell centered around the box. The box opened with a snap as a pile of old tobacco shreds fell out and scattered.

Findlay peered into the box. "Boss, I think you found the Dark snuff box."

"Can it, Findlay, look closer."

Sure enough, nestled in the tobacco, was a tarnished silver ring with a black stone set in it. The ring was not shiny, as one would have expected of a well-made piece of jewelry, but it had an unmistakable Dark thrum of power to it.

The other Aurors gathered around as Sirius and Remus helped mark a map of what areas were safe and confirmed.

"You two going to join Auror training, Remus?" Auror Harbinger said as he scribbled on the map.

"Sirius had wanted to be an Auror for forever since we were teens," Remus chuckled. "But I'm not sure I'm the right personality for it."

"Why's that, Remus?" Harbinger asked.

"My propensity to chase my tail by moonlight?" Remus mused.

Harbinger snorted. "That entire anti-werewolf movement that Madam Umbridge tried to put through indirectly resulted in her very public shaming thanks to your Nundu friend over there. If you wanted to be, Remus, we'd support you. You've already proven yourself more than helpful against Dark magic."
Remus looked haunted. "Do you really think I'd have a shot?"

Harbinger raised a brow and shook his head. "I wouldn't say anything if I thought you didn't have a decent chance, mate."

Remus smiled, obviously moved by the change in the kind of opportunities he had been allowed as a "cursed" being.

"Alright, my very large feline friend," Moody said. "I believe you know what we need here."

Brim lay her head on top of Moody's and let out a long sigh.

"Please open up, Madam Nundu," Moody said guiding the ring to her.

Brim mumble-growled and closed her mouth around the offensive object. Her mouth began to foam as viscous black ooze burbled out of the ring. Her lips pulled back from her teeth, but she held still, allowing the foul foam to spew forth from her mouth. She gave off a scent of pickled herring and rotting flesh, causing some of those around to make hurking sounds and search desperately for a good place to empty their stomachs. There was an eerie screaming that came from inside Brim's jaws as smoke billowed out between her teeth. It formed into a distorted screaming face and rushed towards Remus and Harbinger. Both of them immediately conjured a shield and a Patronus, driving back the rolling cloud of Darkness that was threatening to consume them.

As the cloud met the barrier, it screamed again, denied a place to retreat. Sirius hit it with another spell driving it the other direction, and Severus immediately hit the cloud with another spell. "Confringes immortalitum," Severus hissed.

The swirling cloud of anger and corruptive Darkness screamed at the black-haired wizard, its visage looking more serpentine than human, but unlike the natural look of one species or another, the cloud-face looked more like a snake made out of wet sand contorted by heat into the drippings of a candle. The face lunged at Severus, but Brim shoved her head against his free hand, lending him strength as his familiar.

The cloud roared and dissipated, and Brim spat out the offending item in her mouth. The taint was gone.

Severus slumped and Brim crouched, catching him across her broad back, purring softly. Moody had the ring scooped up into a special box lined with complex runes. The box sealed immediately, the seam of the box disappearing.

"Object secured, everyone back up to the Disapparate zone," Moody ordered.

"Yes, sir!" the Aurors said, scrambling to obey.

"You all right, Severus?" Moody asked, concerned.

"I'll be fine," Severus said, draping himself wearily over the larger Nundu. "That spell is a bit draining."

"More than a little by the look of it," Moody commented rather drily.

Peppermint the minty-fresh spider stuffed a galleon-sized breath mint into Brim's maw, and the grateful Nundu rolled the mint around her mouth, trying to get it in all the nooks and crannies to eradicate the utterly repugnant taste of Riddle's taint.
After Brim was satisfied that her mouth was well and truly purged of foulness, she snapped up Peppermint and mouthed her, making her squeak. Her mouth foamed out peppermint-scented bubbles and then she released the dizzy spider to crawl back into her collar habitat.

"Job's done!" Peppermint squeaked, diving back into the collar.

Severus pulled himself up over Brim's back and she stood up, carrying her tired master off toward the Disapparition point. Moody followed closely, making sure the black-haired wizard didn't slide off into the dirt.

By the time Brim had slowly made her way to the safe zone, Severus was almost asleep, and Moody had his arm out to help keep Severus from toppling off in his direction. Alastor put one hand on Severus and his other on the Nundu.

"Ready?"

Severus grunted tiredly.

_Crack._

They were gone.

Nagini slithered across the slippery tiles of the drainage sluice. She was cold, wet, and terribly hungry. Her last proper meal had been days upon days ago— no, months. Her only large meal, that is. Rats and other small and insignificant morsels had been her only food sources ever since the man who was the host of her master had left.

Left her on her own.

Left her to survive on mere scraps. Meager pickings.

At least when the man who held her master was around she was fed. Juicy, tasty morsels— sometimes they were even alive when she ate them. It was always so much better when they were alive.

She slithered deeper into the tunnels. There were many of them, and they were her only refuge now that the school— the very school itself— seemed to want to deny her passage. Deny her food. Deny her pleasure of any kind.

Back in the forests of Albania, she had always been fed well, and her master had often used her body to hunt and feed, forging a bond between them. But then, one day a flighty fellow had come to Albania to study the annoying turtles with wings. Her master and friend had possessed the man— and all the intimate times with her master had gone with it. He was trapped— trapped in a body he despised. Yet, he would caress her head and speak to her in that strange new body. He smuggled her out of Albania and brought her here to hide… but it had been weeks since she had been able to hear her master's call. It had been weeks since he whispered in the language that told her that he was worthy of following. He was a man who understood snakes.

She could hear the children laughing— see their pulses through the wall. Food… so tantalisingly close! She simply could not resist. At least before there had been many people swarming around. It was easy to catch a house-elf or two and then devour the roasted foods they had prepared for the children. No one questioned when a house-elf disappeared, no. The house-elves wanted to remain unseen— so no one missed them when they were gone.
Her master had warned her not to never eat the children or the staff— questions would come of it that would bring danger to her. She had obeyed, if only because he made sure to bring her fresh food from the nearby town: fresh and wriggling, terrified food.

But it had been a few months now. The corridors were scantily occupied. The house-elves remained hidden without people to serve. There was only one option. The warmth beyond the walls.

It called to her.

A part of her tickled the back of her mind, warning her not to put down her guard and telling her there must be some other danger nearby.

Food usually had protection. What if this food also had protection?

What if this food… had spines or magic?

But Nagini wasn't listening. She was hungry. So very, very hungry. All she cared to focus on at the moment was the irresistible lure of food, glorious food.

She surged forth.

Hungry.

So hungry.

"Sathras, do you think Professor McGonagall will still love Brim— even though she never knew she lived?" Harry asked, his face twisting in deep thought.

Sathras hissed softly. "Parents think about their offspring. It is not always healthy, but she has always been a level-headed human. She cares for people. It would be like Dissina and myself realising we had a hatchling— only someone stole it from when it was an egg and threw it under a toad instead of letting nature hatch the little one.

"Besides," Dissina said. "Brim and the headmistress has already had a bond, just not the bond they expected. They did not lose everything completely."

Draco was listening carefully. "I think Professor McGonagall-Fairbairn and Professor Fairbairn care very much for her. They are just sad that they never knew she survived. My father and mother— they were sad when my older sister died after birth. They don't speak of it much if at all, but sometimes I know mother thinks of her. Father too."

"I didn't know, Draco," Harry said. "I'm sorry."

Draco shrugged. "It would be nice to have had a sister when I was younger and father was always away and mother was always having her social parties. To be honest, I never really knew my parents until recently. I thought I did, but the Covenant helps me know father better and mum through him."

Harry nodded. "I don't think Lily would be okay with bonding to something as vast as Hogwarts— not if meant getting bitten by a large basilisk. She doesn't like snakes."

Sathras chuckled and tickled Harry with his tongue. "And you, boy? Do you like snakessss?"

Harry giggled and hugged Sathras on the head. "Of course."

"I just hope Brim isn't getting smothered by her parents, yeah? She'll be okay because Severus is
there, but she's always been a free spirit. She goes where nature tells her to— where Hogwarts tells her to,” Draco said.

Dissina hissed softly. "Children often see things more clearly than adults and not realise it. She will be fine. I think she would rather be here."

Harry and Draco grinned.

"It's going to be hard when school starts up again— not being here all the time— together."

The two basilisks chuckled. "Your friends will return and there will be much happiness. You will see. You can still be friends. There is nothing stopping you. Perhaps, you will have to be on better behaviour so Severus and Brim allow you to do your homework with us, hrm?"

The two boys flushed guiltily.

Sathras hissed laughter. "Children are the same. Our children always getting into trouble when young. Sticking their tongues into places we tell them not to. Getting their tails caught."

"Just remember," Dissina said. "Our oldest died because he couldn't take our word for it that life on the outside was dangerous. Sometimes the elders do know best, and you must trust us— even if you do not agree always. Adults are here to keep you safe. Even from yourselves."

Harry and Draco nodded.

"Sometimes safe is boring," Harry confessed.

"Safe is alive," Sathras said. "Save the life-endangering decisions for when you must make them and your arsenal of magic and knowledge can keep you safe. Okay? Hrmssmmmm?" The serpent nudged the boys with his serpentine snout.

"Okay," the boys chimed.

"I'm going to miss you being up here in the school when the others get back," Harry said.

Dissina and Sathras curled their tails around the boys. "We will always be close. Do not fear."

The boys smiled and nodded.

A rustling came from within the walls, and the two basilisks rose up together, alert.

Dissina curled her coils around the boys, setting her head on top. "Stay down," she hissed. "Do not move."

The boys yeeped and ducked underneath, following her orders immediately.

Sathras hissed malevolently. "Go away!"

"Hungry. HUNGRY! Soooooo hungry!" a voice hissed insistently, oblivious to Sathras' warning.

The wall that each basilisk was facing burst open like the side of an overripe melon, bits of stone and mortar flying in every direction. A gargantuan snake that made one think that a python, anaconda, and a cobra had a threesome and she was the unholy result. Nagini thrust herself out of the rubble-strewn opening, her fanged mouth open wide and she let out a hungry, angry hiss.

"Fooooooooooood!!" Nagini screamed, her mouth open wide as all of her backward
pointing fangs stretched forward to sink into whatever got in her way.

The boys screamed from within protective coils as Nagini's struck against Dissina's scales, but the female basilisk coiled even more snugly around the boys, utterly refusing to move, even to strike in return to defend herself. The fangs of the other serpent glanced across her armour-like scales, ripping a few free as she did so.

"Dissina!" the boys cried.

"Stay below!" she hissed.

Nagini coiled to strike again, but Sathras struck first, his orange eyes blazing with rage. Nagini, however, didn't even seem to be aware of him— far too focused on the food she so desperately wanted.

Nagini hissed malevolently as Sathras' massive fangs buried deep into her side, and she instinctively thrashed, the two serpents writhing and convulsing against each other, slamming into anything and everything around them.

"Kill! Kill! Kill!" Nagini screamed, fighting hard to strike back at the other serpent.

The two serpents went tumbling down the hillside, the coils of each snake loosening more and more by the constant bludgeoning. Sathras was trying desperately to hold on, striking at Nagini once, twice, and again. His hisses of rage echoing off Hogwarts' side as the pair rolled towards the lake. Sathras slammed into a protruding rock where a tree was bent strangely outward like a hook— a favourite place students used to sit and overlook the lake— getting himself hung like a serpent coat on a hook. He shook his head, stunned, as Nagini's tumbled further down toward the lake.

The serpent shook her head dazedly, the combination of her tumbling descent and multiple doses of the extremely irate Sathras's basilisk venom were already starting to render her disoriented, not to mention increasingly grumpy as well. The snake took to the water, immediately disappearing beneath the surface in order to escape more rapidly.

Sathras hissed furiously as he made his way to the shore, the water unfortunately disorienting his sense of smell as well as his heat-sensing pits. The black lake, however, had not earned its name by being crystal clear. Its black surface was like a mirror, hiding all that lay below.

Suddenly, the water rippled violently, churning froth and waves as tentacles burst forth from the Black Lake. The giant squid had discovered the scaly interloper and was not pleased at all to find her lurking in his territory. He stretched her out, bent her around, slammed her hard against the shore, crushed her body with his powerful tentacles, and stretched her out, jerking her head and tail in opposing directions until a distinctive crack signalled the end.

Nagini's body went limp, and the squid dragged her back under the water.

As the water went placid once more, multiple cracks of incoming Apparition resounded throughout the school grounds. All of the professors and agents who had accepted the Covenant suddenly appeared on the shore, wands raised. Savage appeared shortly after, side-alonging a handful of other Aurors as Brim appeared out of nowhere, having seemingly fallen out of the sky.

All of them tensed as the surface of the lake burbled and churned, and the squid ejected the body of Nagini to the shore, having manipulated the snake's corpse into a stunningly elaborate gift bow design.
Brim snuffled the corpse of the reptilian interloper, her lips pulling back from her teeth.

Savage gestured to his companions. "Confirm death please."

Two Aurors worked together, waving their wands without actually touching the corpse, not wanting to get too close if "death" was merely a ruse.

"It's dead, Savage," they said after a while. "Thank Merlin."

"Glad to hear it," Savage said. He nodded to the professors. "I heard the call. I brought along those who are already aware of the... changes going on at Hogwarts."

Minerva raised her hand. "No need to explain, Auror Savage. We all heard the call. What happened?"

Harry and Draco ran down from the hill, each strangely shirtless, until the adults realised they had used their shirts to cover up Sathras and Dissina's eyes. "She attacked us," Draco said.

"Came right out through one of the lower walls of Hogwarts," Harry said.

"Dissina protected us in her coils," Draco added.

"She?" One of the Aurors asked.

"She was hungry— that's all she said. She wanted to eat us." Harry and Draco shuddered and exchanged glances. "Is she really dead?"

"Dead as dead is and never coming back," Filius assured them, having run a large number of scans on the corpse himself. Then, as if to prove his words, the serpentine fancy bow relaxed into two pieces of the same very dead snake.

"Well, that convinces me," Minerva said thoughtfully.

"Enough for our dinner," Sathras hissed. "You prefer the head or the tail half, my love?"

"I will take the head," Dissina hissed back. "I have some anger issues I need to resolve with the fanged end."

"By all means, my love," Sathras hissed amusedly.

The female basilisk struck like lightning, eerily homing in on the head end of the dead snake even without her eyes. She sank her fangs in, burrowing them deep into her eye sockets and shook it violently, slamming her half of the spoils into the ground many times. She then dragged the corpse through the water, flipped it up into the air, and snapped her mouth closed around the Nagini's head and made her disappear from sight— deep into her giant basilisk-sized gullet.

The tail end of Nagini disappeared into Sathras and his hissed contentedly.

"Well, now I'm sure she's not coming back, lads," Rabbie said to the children, who ran up to hug him. "There now. I say we have a nice dinner together. You too, Savage. Aurors welcome. Let's give the house-elves some excitement, aye?"

Minerva grinned and Brim promptly pounced the boys, throwing them onto her back and tearing off up the hill, the boys hastily clinging to her as they rode Nundu-back.

Minerva and Rabbie exchanged an amused smile.
"Perhaps, my love," Rabbie said, pressing a kiss to her cheek. "There is still a little cub left in our Bonnie Skye that we may enjoy yet."

Minerva grinned and smiled at him widely. "Oh, Rabbie. You always know just what to say."

Rabbie winked, and they turned to begin the trek back up to Hogwarts.

"Oh, and what is this, my friends?" Minerva asked, as the elves deposited a tightly-wrapped bundle on the Head Table. It had been expanded to seat the Auror guests as well as Draco, Harry, and their respective parents. While James and Lily were giving Lucius and Narcissa the evil eye, Lucius and Narcissa was avidly asking Harry and Draco how their exciting day had gone.

"Father, why weren't you here?" Draco asked. "Everyone else came!"

"I fear we had something rather important to attend to, my son," Lucius informed his son.

Draco and Harry exchanged glances and peered up at Lucius.

Lucius peered at Narcissa who stared back at him with love in her eyes.

"You're going to have a sister," Narcissa said with a warm smile.

Draco's eyes bugged out of his head. "A si— really?"

"Whaaaaaa— congratulations, Mrs Malfoy!" Harry beamed.

Brim popped her head up over the table, a swiped haunch of a roast in her mouth. "Mrrl?"

"The Kneazle is well and truly out of the sack," Lucius said. "Might as well make the official announcement, or there will be no living with Brim's accusatory stares."

Brim gave Lucius an accusatory stare.


"My friends, my darling wife wishes to make an announcement while amongst our proven friends. Please, if I may have a moment?"

All eyes turned to Lucius who gestured to his wife.

"I went to a healer this afternoon with complaints of ill health," Narcissa announced. "I'm pleased to announce I am not sick. I am expecting. Our baby will be a girl."

Gasps of pleasure and surprise went up and down the table along with many congratulations.

"Mmrrrrrr!" Brim said, dropping a plush spider on the table next to Narcissa.

The soft emerald green spider with silver eyes sent up her legs. "Congratulations!"

"Congratulations!" a grey one cheered.

"Yes, congratulations!" Peppermint cheered, dropping a pair of pink baby booties woven of spider silk. "We made them!"

"All of us!"
"Yes, all of us!"

Narcissa's eyes grew wide as tears fell, she scooped up the spiders in her hand and snuggled them all until they squeaked. She stared at the spiders a moment. "Wait, if you made these— how long have you known?"

The spiders scurried back inside Brim's collar, disappearing from sight.

Narcissa tried to glare at Brim, but the Nundu's giant head had somehow, someway, disappeared along with the rest of her. How something that large had managed it, Narcissa had no idea. She grasped the tiny pair of silken booties and sniffled, leaning on her husband with a smile on her face.

Minerva tugged on the ribbons of the parcel the house-elves had left, trusting that they wouldn't bring something directly harmful to a room full of people. As the box fell open, a shining goblin silver circlet with a glistening oval blue sapphire set between the silvery span of an eagle's spread wings glittered on a bed of royal blue velvet. A dome of elfin magic protected the diadem from being touched.

Minerva let out a shocked gasp, and she wasn't the only one.

"The lost diadem!" Filius gasped. "It truly exists!"

"Minerva, however did you find it?"

"I did not," Minerva said with a scoff. "Our house-elves found it for us. The eyes and ears of Hogwarts brought the diadem back to us."

"Amazing!" Lily gasped. "I thought it was just a rumour meant to keep us searching for treasure in Hogwarts."

The two boys huddled by Severus, who gently guided them behind him. "Brim," he said softly. "I believe your expertise is needed here."

"You mean her slobber!" Coffee squeaked, waving his front legs.

"Yeah, her extra-special slobber!"

"Slobber of DEATH!"

"Slobber of purity, psh!"

"Death sounds more dramatic."

"You're dramatic."

"Well, yeah!"

"Come on, Peppermint. Get ready!"

"Yeah, she's going to need you. Look at the size of that thing!"

"Maybe we should all dip ourselves in mouthwash. You know the extra minty Muggle kind."

"It tickles!"

Brim, looking rather disgruntled, opened her mouth and snapped up the diadem, running to the
center of the room where no one was in order to "deal" with the problem.

Noxious smoke and trailing black gunk streamed from her mouth, and the diadem shook and clanked against the Nundu's teeth. Her backward pointing inner teeth, however, were waiting, and she shook it as a dog would shake a favourite toy. It was no game, however.

The vapour tried to shoot up her nose and in her throat— doing its absolute best to choke her one way or another. Those surrounded her, however, were not idle. Severus had prepared them all with the spell he had learned while spending time with the Founders.

"Confringes immortalitum!" they all said together, pointing their wands at the swirling cloud of noxious evil vapour.

An inhuman face rose out of the cloud and screamed, but the spells hitting it showed no mercy. It broke into countless fractures, shafts of bright light bursting from the dark cloud.

"AHHHHHHHHRRRRR!" the cloud raged as it suddenly shattered like glass, quickly dissipating as the vapour faded into nothingness.

The room lightened, and a fresh breeze blew in from the hall. The sound of wind chimes tinkled from somewhere unknown. A few hundred owls clung to the rafters, staring down below with startled looks on their disc faces.

Brim shook her head and mrowled unhappily, sitting down. She staggered a little and sprawled down on the floor with a thump. "Mrowwwl," she complained.

"Brim!" Draco and Harry cried together, running up to hug her neck.

Brim pawed them both and pulled them under her paws, shoving her head into them and purring loudly.

"She's ok!" Coffee squeaked.

"Just tired!"

"So tired!"

"I'm tired too!"

"You're always tired."

The spiders continued to bicker between themselves but groomed the Nundu dutifully before dashing back into her collar.

Peppermint crawled out of Brim's mouth, full of white suds and peppermint flavour. "Job's done!" she squeaked, scurrying into the collar.

"Bonnie?" Minerva whispered, reaching out to Brim, worry written in every wrinkle on her face.

Brim stood up on her hind legs and shifted, transforming into the mahogany-haired witch with striking orange-green eyes. "Mam?"

"Oh, my precious lass," Minerva cried, pulling her daughter tightly against her."Do we have time to have a normal dinner together now that this— thing— is back to being what it should be?"

The bushy-haired witch smiled warmly. "I could eat an entire elk all by myself, mam."
Rabbie clutched his wife and daughter together in a bear hug. "Then you shall have it! Come, everyone. Let us put the diadem back in the Founder's Hall and proceed to have a feast worthy of the Christmas holiday."

Harry and Draco hugged Brim's waist tightly, refusing to let go of her even as she was being hugged herself.

The young witch looked up to Severus and smiled. Severus's lips curved up slightly in response, and he nodded back.

"You seem to be enjoying yourself, Harry," Lily said, walking with her son as she and James spent some time with their son together after their ordeal.

"Are you okay?" Harry asked, concerned.

Lily and James exchanged glances, and Lily swallowed hard. "We've been through a lot Harry, and I do not think we will be truly ready to face this future and what our lives should have been." Her hand went to her abdomen, and she gave Harry a desperate look. "I'm pregnant, Harry. I became pregnant again when you were still a baby. When Dumbledore tried to convince us to sacrifice you for his plan— James and I fought tooth and claw to keep you safe, but still it wasn't enough. Then, one day, we woke up, thinking you had died and found you a teenager— already half-grown. And we hadn't been there for any of it."

"We're not blind, son," James said with a tight smile. "We both know you don't feel you can trust us because we weren't there for you when we should have been. I'm not going to make any excuses for that. You know why we weren't, but that doesn't solve anything or make it any easier."

"Sev was always supposed to be one of your godfathers in case anything ever happened to us, Harry," Lily said. "And we've spoken with him and with— I'm not sure which name to call her— Brim."

"They've agreed that if you want them to, Harry," James explained, "they will become your guardians in every sense of the word. People who you've already learned to trust. And maybe, as we heal and you heal, in time we can find a way to reconnect again."

"We don't want you to feel pressured to change again after you just found something good in your life. I cannot apologise enough for my sister. I would not have wished her on you. Not ever. Yet somehow— all our plans to ensure your safety failed us. Failed you."

Lily and James exchanged glances. "We want to be your parents. We are your parents. That will never change. But, what you need right now is someone you can trust to be there for you, someone who has been there for you, and has no problem telling you all about it when you do something wrong."

Lily smiled. "When I look at you, Harry, all I see is my little baby boy. I want to cradle you, and comfort you— but I wouldn't be able to be as firm as I would need to be with you. I couldn't bear to think of you hating me for something, even for a little bit as I tried to adjust to parenting a teenager."

"My son," James said. "We both love you, and we want you to know that we are proud of who you are now, but still, we do not know each other. So, if you want, Severus and Brim will be the ones taking care of you, Harry. And hopefully, as things slowly get better, we can try and be a family again, even if it's as an extended family."

Harry pressed his lips firmly together and nodded. "Thank you both for considering my feelings in
your decision. I know, in my heart, that it wasn't your choice to leave me alone. I really do know
that, but I don't know you as my mum and dad anymore. For the first time in my life, I actually feel
safe. I feel safe with Professor Snape. I feel safe with Brim. I don't ever want to leave them now that
I know how that feels."

Lily sighed and smiled gently. "We understand, Harry. We only want the best for you."

Lily and James drew Harry into a hug. It was awkward, but it was genuine, and Harry gave them a
true smile.

"We love you, Harry," James and Lily said. "Never forget that."

"It's like Christmas!" Harry exclaimed, nudging Draco in the ribs.

"Hah! We don't even have to share with other students," Draco said with a grin. "Crabbe and Goyle
aren't here to steal all the food."

Harry arched a brow, having learned by careful observation and imitation of both Snape and Brim.

Draco shook his head. "If Weasley wasn't so against everything Slytherin, he, Crabbe, and Goyle
would be like Nifflers in Gringotts together." Draco sighed, running his hand through his hair. "They
were idiots, but I don't think they deserved what they got up at Durmstrang. Then again, had they
stayed here, they'd have surely been mauled by Brim."

"Were they really that hateful?" Harry asked, passing down the sauteed new potatoes, lemon-mint
couscous, and orange-scented carrot bowl one-by-one. He let Lucius carve the roast lamb with a
rather intimidating-looking sharp knife, while Rabbie served out the roast duck and its accompanying
balsamic vinegar and honey glaze.

Both boys eyed the food with wide eyes and flared nostrils, more than happy to help make it
disappear.

Every so often a plush spider would wander by, carrying a piece of stolen asparagus salad or an even
more interesting cup of summer pudding with a tantalising rum-whipped cream that taunted each boy
to try and make a grab for it. Attempting to snatch the goodies, however, caused the spiders to skitter
away, squeaking their determination to bring it back to their mistress Nundu.

Human form or not, Brim's dutiful spiders squeaked victory as they brought her food, reveling in her
touch as she stroked their fluffy bodies. They squeaked happily and scurried back into her collar until
the next raid on tasty food came around.

"That's so not fair. We need to have our own plush spiders to bring us tasty food," Draco pouted as
the pudding moved out of reach— yet again.

"I think, if you eat the rest of your food," Severus rumbled, "you'll be able to acquire some dessert
unharassed."

Both boys scrambled to eat faster, one rumble of Snape's voice having startled them into instant
compliance.

Liquid warmth came in the form of a chuckle as Brim laughed, her voice a seeming hug as much as
it was a sound. Somewhere down the table, Rabbie was telling a story about once trying to teach
someone how not to approach a hippogriff, and it had gone from basic instruction to a rescue mission
— not because the boy needed rescuing, but the poor hippogriff. The boy hadn't wanted to get off
and had flown off with him somewhere in the direction of the Netherlands. Both boy and hippogriff had come back speaking, or in the hippogriff's case, understanding Dutch. The hippogriff had a sort of identity crisis having met a lot of bovine friends, and came back mooing like a cow, much to Rabbie's consternation, as he had worried that the rest of the hippogriffs would follow suit and end up confusing everyone. To make matters even stranger, the hippogriff in question had turned his beak up to ferrets and gone for pannenkoeken—requiring the house-elves to cook up the sweet and savory pancakes to order. The local ferret population, however, seemed greatly relieved.

"Rabbie, my dear, however did you live with such a high-maintenance creature?" Rolanda laughed.

"I learned how to make stunning pannenkoeken, Rolanda," Rabbie said with a wink. "Minerva loves them too."

"So, Ms Brim," Flitwick said over the bowl of chilled asparagus salad. "I hear we get to call you professor officially here in a week?"

The curly-haired witch smiled. "If you will have me."

"Have you? Hah!" Flitwick gasped. "Surely, you jest. Who are we to turn down a witch trained by and adopted by the Founders themselves?"

"Perhaps someone who thinks I have to take my N.E.W.T.s?" Hermione answered coyly. Multiple professors rolled their eyes in response. "Throw whoever doubts you into the lake of Inferi and see how well they fare."

Hermione grinned, her orange-green eyes sparkling.

"I'm sure Minerva is glad you'll be there to teach Transfiguration," Rolanda said. "She's been at her wits end since Albus flew the coop."

"High-level wandless magic will be very interesting indeed," Pomona said. "If we had a galleon for every student who ended up hurt because they didn't have a wand in their hand—"

"Wandless magic is incredibly complex, Pomona," Severus said. "Which is why she will be teaching it to proven N.E.W.T. level students that have at least three classes at Outstanding and the rest at Exceeds Expectations at the very least."

"True, Severus," Flitwick said with a nod. "No use teaching students who can't do the basics how to screw themselves up royally trying to do the harder stuff."

Hermione chuckled. "I won't discuss what age Rowena had me casting heating charms and pigeon removal spells wandlessly."

"Let's not forget the incident of bubble-charm under duress of an attacking basilisk that you didn't realise was your own father," Severus quipped.

Hermione held up her hands, waving them. "He never tested anything when he did not know what the outcome would be."

Rabbie looked torn between awe and murder. "He did what?"

Hermione sighed. "Salazar tested my ability to cast the bubblehead charm wandlessly and soundlessly by dragging me to the bottom of the Black Lake after snatching me off the pier while I was studying."
Rabbie looked like he was about to come unglued.

"I'd been studying the charm religiously for weeks," Hermione laughed. I had succeeded in the 'classroom' many times. What he tested was that I would remember it when I needed to, and I did."

"And if you didn't?!"

Hermione tilted her head to the side. "Have you so little faith in me?"

"Sorry, I'm still— a little baffled that my baby girl was adopted by Salazar Slytherin himself. While I and Minerva were missing your birthdays, you were being trained by the heart and soul of Hogwarts. I think it's wonderful, lassie. I do. But—"

"You miss what could have been."

"Aye," Rabbie answered.

"I don't plan on dying quite yet," Hermione said with a smile. "You still have plenty of time to realise just how cheeky I can be."

Rabbie spluttered.

"Come, friends, let us return to enjoying our meal," Minerva said, raising her cup as she saluted everyone. "I think we deserve a little bit of calm before other duties consume us all. Rabbie, my dear, there will be plenty of time to come."

Rabbie gave his wife a warm smile and nodded.

Harry hustled his way back to meet up with the others. It was the last trip to Honeydukes before school started up again, and he wouldn't be able to come back on weekends until his third year. He didn't understand why only third years and above could go to Hogsmeade, at least during the school year, when everyone had to pass through Hogsmeade in order to get to Hogwarts to begin with.

Then again, he had to get on the train to "get to Hogwarts" when he hadn't even left Hogwarts to begin with. Draco had told him that Theo and Blaise were looking forward to the news. That would be an interesting train ride up— especially if he was sitting with "evil Slytherin."

"Get out of the way!" a voice yelled as the sound of a kick connecting reached Harry.

Harry spied a house-elf, dressed in the typical horrid rags of a small pillowcase or tea towel, staggering about.

"Get off the road," someone else said, using their leg to push the elf a way.

Multiple legs connected with the elf, and it seemed like no one gave a thought to watching where they were walking.

Harry rushed up using his larger mass to make it more obvious that he was there. "Are you okay?" Harry asked the elf, putting his hand on the elf's shoulder.

Oversized eyes stared up at him, giving him the appearance of someone about to cry. The house-elf tugged on his ears, stroking them as stared. "Harry Potter," the elf breathed.

Harry smiled, but then the elf's hand closed around his wrist like a vise.
"Harry Potter must not go to Hogwarts!"

Crack.

They disappeared.

"What the hell?!” Harry exclaimed as he wrenched his arm away from the house-elf. *Brim. BRIM! I really need you right now.*

"Harry Potter must not go to Hogwarts!" the house-elf cried, wringing his hands in distress. "It's too dangerous for Harry Potter!"

"Dangerous?" Harry cried. "It's dangerous here! When I'm not near Hogwarts!"

*I come!*

"Must keep Harry Potter safe!" the house-elf insisted.

"This is not safe!" Harry retorted. "You have no idea what you've done. You need to take me back!"

"Can't take you back. Nope. Can't," the house-elf said. "Won't!"

"If you want to keep me safe—" Harry reasoned, "then you took me in the wrong direction!"

"No, not safe at Hogwarts, no!"

"Who are you?"

"Dobby has no name, he does," the house-elf said. "No name. Nothing. Dobby nothing. But Dobby save Harry Potter. Save Harry Potter from danger!"

Harry stared at the elf, feeling that the elf had a few kidneys short of a pie.

"Harry Potter cannot go back to Hogwarts. Harry Potter will *die,*" Dobby chanted. "Can't let you go,"

Harry brought his knees up to his body as he sat in the dark room.

The air started to crackle, and Harry pulled himself further away from Dobby, knowing exactly who and what was coming.

The leys were materialising, and the air was thick with energy and ozone. The smell of electricity was tangible as a loud roar sounded off as Brim leapt out of an arch of raw ley energy. Her lips pulled back from her teeth as her huge paws thumped on the floor. One look at Harry's situation was all it took. She snarled, leaping towards Dobby with her mouth open wide to snap him up.

**SNAP!**

Her jaws just missed the house-elf, as he attempted to Disapparate, but the nearby ley zapped him, keeping him anchored. He cried out and tumbled arse over teakettle.

Brim snarled viciously, her claws brandished threateningly as her paw lifted up to swipe at the elf, and she snagged the elf's only covering and slashed it to ribbons.

Strangely, the elf positioned himself directly in front of Harry. "You shall not harm Harry Potter!"
the elf yelled, sending a blast of magic that hit Brim right in the face. Brim's facial muscles went slack for a moment, and she shook her head. Her green and orange eyes glowered at the house-elf as her ears pinned flat against her head. Her lips pulled back from her teeth as her second row of backwards pointing fangs unfolded from the top of her mouth. Electricity snapped between her teeth and moved across her body in a sizzling wave, all the way down to the tip of her tail.

Suddenly, Harry ran forward, wrapping his arms around the irritated elf-icidal Nundu. "Brim, I'm ok! I'm ok!"

A low growl was his only response.

**Crack!**

**Crack!**

Multiple Apparates sounded off as Severus, Lucius, and Auror Savage came in one after the other.

"Brim," Severus called out, extending his arm.

Both Brim and Harry hurriedly rushed toward him. Harry promptly glued himself to Severus' waist as Brim toppled them both down for a head-rub.

"Dobby," Lucius said rather venomously. "Fancy meeting you here."

"M-mm—master!" Dobby cried, tugging his ears frantically.

"You will go with Auror Savage and you will answer every question he gives you truthfully," Lucius glowered. "Right. Now."

Dobby made a whining, tortured sound in the back of his throat.

"Dobby doesn't want to!"

"You will do as I command!" Lucius snapped.

Dobby threw himself at Lucius feet, kissing his boots. "Masta puleeeze gives Dobby clothes. Dobby wishes to be free to protect Harry Potter!"

A low, menacing growl came from Brim's direction, and Severus allowed her to fuss over Harry to make sure he was okay to temper her anger.

"In case you haven't noticed, Dobby, no Malfoy gives clothes to their elves due to the curse put on our family by the Medraut family back in the day—all for the argument over a milk goat that ate some supposed magical beans. Any elf released from our service instantly dies a horrible, agonising death," Lucius informed him with a scowl. "And Harry Potter has plenty of people protecting him. One of which currently wants to tear you to pieces."

"No, Harry Potter must be saved!"

"I am safe, you blathering mooncalf!" Harry hissed, resorting to Parseltongue as he climbed on Brim's back and hugged her neck.

"Dobby, I want you to go report to Auror Savage right now," Lucius said in a low, angry voice. "NOW!"

"Yes, master," Dobby whimpered and whined. "After you gives Dobby clothes?"
"NOW BY HADES!" Lucius roared.

Dobby disappeared with a frightened pop.

Lucius groaned, pinching his nose as he slumped against the nearby wooden support.

"I don't remember him being *that* addle-brained, Lucius," Severus commented with a raised brow.

"He wasn't ever like this," Lucius sighed. "Then, one day, all he could talk about was being a free elf and having clothes and repeatedly trying to bargain with me to give him clothes. He knows— well, he knew that all the Malfoy elves are cursed. The moment anyone gives them clothes, they are cursed to die within a few years as bloodily and horribly as possible. Some sick joke or argument going back untold centuries. I'm not about to become the one Malfoy who tested if the curse is still in place by killing off my house-elves! Even if they are as bloody annoying as that one."

Severus rubbed Brim's ears, calming her down into a low, rumbling purr. "Well, he almost managed to become Brim's first sentient victim… though the sentient part may be debateable."

Lucius sighed. "Maybe Auror Savage can get something out of him that we haven't."

Severus leveled a gaze on Harry. "Are you undamaged? Do you require Madam Pomfrey to poke you with her wand and make you drink vile and disgusting potions?"

Harry paled. "I'm fine, sir!"

Severus narrowed his eyes.

"I'm really, *really* fine, sir!" Harry insisted.

"Tell you what, Mr Potter," Severus said. "Convince HER, and I will believe you."

Brim pressed her muzzle into Harry's face, whiskers twitching.

Harry's eyes grew wide. "I'm really fine, Brim!" he squeaked.

The plush spiders poked him with their legs.

"I dunno!"

"He looks suspicious!"

"Very suspicious!"

"He could be hiding something!"

"I'm fine!" Harry protested.

Brim flicked an ear and a swarm of plush spiders tackled Harry, sending him into a helpless giggling fit.

Lucius and Severus stared down at him.

"Seems okay to me, Severus," Lucius remarked.

"Hn," Severus replied.

"Mrowl!"
"That too," Severus agreed.

"Well, I'm not an expert on house-elf minds," Savage said after a while, "but I recognise the mental scarring of Dark magic exposure well enough."

"What caused it?" Moody asked.

"Torture, most likely," Savage said, handing the crystal over to Proudfoot, who also ran it over the house-elf.

"I'm no healer, boss," Proudfoot said, "but I can tell you that the last things this unfortunate little sod thought of was being free and saving Harry Potter. That's all he had in his mind— and that is what he remembered even if he couldn't remember anything else."

"Is there any help to be had for him?" Lucius asked. "An annoying creature he may be, but— at least now we know why."

"Can he be helped?" Savage thought for a minute, frowning. "Hard to say. I mean, there are techniques designed to help humans but I'm not sure they would work as well for a house-elf."

Moody shook his head. "He'll be like the Longbottoms— well, whoever those people were before they were tortured so extensively."

"Most likely, yes," Savage said grimly. "We did get two things out of him. Three actually."

Moody glowered. "Don't keep us waiting, Savage."

"He keeps repeating 'bad diary', and 'cup in strange vault' and then Harry Potter this and Harry Potter that and 'must save Harry Potter' over and over again," Savage said. "I'm willing to bet that the 'strange' vault is actually the Lestrange vault, and that cup is the one we want to find."

"We could have Brim track the cup at Gringott's," Savage suggested. "It would be easy enough to get a warrant to confiscate a dangerous Dark object and a stolen one at that. There is only one cup of Helga Hufflepuff and it belongs to Hogwarts."

"Diary?" Proudfoot asked.

"I think I know exactly what diary Dobby is talking about," Lucius said. "It was a seemingly empty book given to me by the Dark Lord once upon a time. I had no idea it was blank until Dobby found it one day and in pure curiosity— he opened it. He was never quite the same after that. Talking to himself. Arguing with himself— the other elves complained about him so I had the diary moved to my vaults at Gringott's where it should still be. That, I can easily give you permission to search for and find— and with my blessing, you're quite welcome to take it."

Moody grunted. "I'd love to take care of all this before Hogwarts starts back up again, but is it actually feasible?"

Brim popped up from the ground and set her large head on the table, causing it to creak. She loosed a clutter of plush spiders to crawl over Moody's paperwork, righting and organising all of his desktop.

"I have plush spiders," she said, flicking her ears.

Moody blinked. "What did she say? All I heard was a bunch of purring and meows."

Savage put a hand on Alastor's shoulder. "Don't worry, boss. Plush spider brigade to the rescue."
We'll be in and out of Gringott's in three shakes of a Nundu's tail."

Alastor sighed. "I never thought I'd say this, but I'm going to have go get myself bit by a basilisk."

Brim meowed sweetly, setting her head on Alastor's shoulder and slurping his face, healing the scars on the right side of his face.

"Bah!" Alastor groused.

"Mrowl!"

Moody slumped. "AFTER we get the last of the Horcruxes destroyed and the cup returned to where it belongs!"

All the plush spiders scurried back to Brim.

"Hurry up!"

"Yeah hurry!"

"Hurry up, you heard him!"

"Job to do!"

"Let's go!"

"Go go go!"

Brim gave Alastor a rather smug look.

Moody stared the Nundu down.

It ended when Brim's tongue pegged him squarely on the nose.

"No fair," Savage pouted. "She always gets the last word."

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**Dark Objects Found in Gringott's Vaults**

**Goblins to Partner with DMLE to Keep Dangerous Objects Out**

*Over the last weekend, if you happened to stop into Gringott's that is, you might have noticed that Gringott's had a special visitor sniffing around the vaults.*

*Brimstone, Nundu familiar to Severus Snape, demonstrated her skill in guiding a large clutter of plush spiders in and out of vaults without disturbing anything on the quest for Dark objects.*

*As you may have guessed, it is illegal to store harmful Dark objects in your Gringott's vault, lest any bank official be accidentally harmed while maintaining the vaults. It is also illegal to have Dark objects of any kind harboured at Gringott's.*

*In an unprecedented show of teamwork between goblins and humans, many vaults at the bank were searched and relieved of their Dark objects, with a careful record of such objects being tallied by both Goblin and the DMLE agents. Happily, very few objects were found within the main vaults; however, the same could not be said about the Lestrange family vault, which harboured well over a thousand cursed, Dark, or otherwise malicious objects.*
Lord Sirius Black consented to have his own family vaults searched and any questionable objects removed, stating, "Merlin only knows what dangerous shite my family has been hoarding in that vault since long before I was born. I can only be glad I can finally walk in there and not worry about being vapourised the moment I touch something."

Other families, who agreed to have their vaults searched and Dark objects removed in an agreement not to prosecute for voluntary compliance, also had a number of such objects removed. Curse-breakers were on hand throughout the weekend just in case things went pear-shaped, but thankfully the operation went quite smoothly.

Rumour has it that the goblins are sending out hefty fines to those found guilty of harbouring Dark magic in their vaults, customers who did not sign the papers allowing their vault to be inventoried and cleansed. If this has occurred, the families in question are, so far, keeping mum about it.

Morale was very high, and quite a few families were appalled to discover that some of their family heirlooms were, in fact, Dark, cursed, or malicious in nature. Gringott's offered a special curse-breaking package deal for those who allowed the DMLE and Gringotts to search their vaults, allowing for a free upgrade to vaults that are searched regularly by the DMLE for tainted objects. These new vaults have top of the line security and regular inventories that some of the cheaper vaults do not. The deal is said to expire after this week—when the first round of inspections in all the vaults concludes.

"What do you mean our family line was cursed, Bill?" Molly said, wringing her hands fretfully.

"It wasn't just you and dad, mum," Bill said as other curse-breakers made their rounds. "There have been a lot of families found to be affected by cursed objects. Some are even Dark artefacts.

Molly looked around and saw a number of other families speaking with a few DMLE officials.

"Molly, dear, trust me," Arthur said softly. "The amount of Dark everything we pulled out of Gringotts was truly astounding. Almost every family had at least one object in their vaults that was cursed, jinxed, or otherwise a bringer of ill luck."

"I was never allowed in our family vault," Bill said, frowning. "Otherwise, I might have found it long before now. But thankfully it has finally been found and deactivated. That old Prewett heirloom—the horrible porcelain doll with the tacky paint and glitter you said our old great, great aunt Gemma got from somewhere—it was enchanted to bring boundless fertility to the entire line of whoever had it in their possession. Unusual fertility and terrible bad luck."

Molly's eyebrow twitched. "Bill, that wasn't Aunt Gemma's. It couldn't have been. Aunt Gemma's doll was burnt in that fire the twins caused with their first accidental magic when they were two. I found the head buried in the ash."

Bill frowned. "Well, it looks like the absolute spitting image—"

"You're right, Bill, it does," Arthur confirmed. "If I hadn't known it was burnt, I would have thought it was the very same doll."

"Well, regardless of who put it there or why," Bill said. "It's been neutralised and contained just like all the rest of them. The DoM is going to have a field day for the next few months just trying to inventory and categorise everything. Goblins are happy to allow the objects to leave the bank. They
don't want cursed objects there any more than the next person. Especially in the workplace."

"All this time we thought we were just unable to use any contraceptive potions," Molly sighed. "We never intended to have so many children, not that you all haven't been a blessing, but we didn't plan on having seven, one right after the other."

Bill shook his head. "I totally understand, mum. I'll be glad that when I do find someone to marry, it won't curse us with bad luck and way too many children besides."

Molly nudged Arthur with mischief in her eyes. "Maybe we can stop sleeping in separate beds now, my love."

Arthur smiled broadly. "Wouldn't that be something."

Bill immediately averted his eyes. "So not listening. Tra-la-la," he sang, walking off.

Arthur winked and planted a kiss on his wife's mouth.

Multiple groans of "eww" "ugh" and "Guhhhh, parents!" came from all around.

Arthur's eyes sparkled. "I think I'll go sign the paperwork to get our family one of those nice, new vaults they have on offer."

Molly watched fondly as her husband practically skipped away.

"*If he wasn't already incarcerated, I'd kill him!*" Aberforth roared from a far table where a clutter of spiders skittered frantically out of the way to avoid his fist as he slammed it down hard on the table. One poor, bright pink polka-dotted spider squeaked in distress as his fist connected, squishing her flat against the table.

The other spiders immediately gathered around, trying to offer their moral support.

Brim plucked the unfortunate spider up in her mouth and carried it off as the spiders scrambled to cling to her as she passed on her way back to another vault. A grim-looking goblin stood beside her as they walked together.

"Aberforth, you *do* realize you're surrounded by Aurors, right?" Proudfoot quipped.

"He cursed our mother's favourite goat lawn ornament to make me— make me— *FUCK!*

Aberforth cursed.

Proudfoot put a comforting hand on Aberforth's shoulder. "At least we found it, Abe."

"You have *no* idea what I wanted to—"

Proudfoot winced. "Was at the trial, man. I know."

Aberforth flushed darkly. "*BLOODY HELL!* Everyone thinks I'm a sodding perverted goat fucker because of my own fucking brother!"

Proudfoot tried to gesture for him to tone it down a few notches. "Aberforth, there are some people here, hard as you may find it to believe, who weren't aware of that until you just told them."

Aberforth gaped, his grizzled jaw working silently before he turned red and swept from the room, his body seemingly smoking in the midst of his magical rage.
"That went well," Savage said, patting Proudfoot on the shoulder.

"Glad that evil old man isn't around anymore," Proudfoot confessed rather grimly. People would be forming huge mobs to get their own pound of wrinkled flesh."

The sound of children giggling broke up the serious mood as Brim sprawled out in the middle of one of Gringott's interior courtyards. She lay half-submerged in the fountain as human and goblin children crawled all over her and splashed water everywhere— their parents too occupied with far more serious matters.

Her jobs having been completed, Brim was now happily relaxing in the cool water, allowing the children to crawl, climb, and otherwise use her as an enormous piece of furry furniture. Both goblin and human children, and it didn't seem to matter in the slightest which, all played together without any of the awkwardness their adult counterparts displayed. Even more surprisingly, Severus lay right beside her, grooming her ears, also very much enjoying the time off. Harry and Draco were teaching a couple of the goblin children how to make paper boats to sail in the fountain, and others were gathering around to watch as well. A young goblin girl was teaching the human children how to build a castle out of the coins in the fountain, without touching any of the coins with her hands. Meanwhile, every child seemed to have a plush spider companion, either in their hands or on their shoulder or head, squeaking amusing commentary and gleefully entertaining the masses.

Despite the drama of the Dark magic hunt, the climate at Gringott's seemed to be improving. No one seemed to upset about that in the slightest, even if they were upset about finding cursed items in their family vaults.

As Severus lay his head over Brim's and let out a toothy yawn, the children flopped on them, continuing to have the time of their young lives.

"Yay!"

"Fun!"

"Wet!"

"Wet and fun!"

"Quite!"

"Can we take them home with us?"

"Ooo, can we?"

"No," Severus grunted, licking his paw and running it over his ears.

"Awwww," the spiders chorused sadly.

Suddenly, Coffee flung himself off the top of the fountain. "Wheeeeee!" He landed with a small sploosh in the water, and the conversation was soon forgotten as all of the spiders now wanted in on the fun.

"Welcome to Hogwarts," Hermione said with a slight smile, remembering exactly what her mam had said during her "first" year. "The start-of-term banquet will begin shortly, but before you take your seats in the Great Hall, you will be sorted into your Houses." (HPatSS 114)
Hermione arched a brow as one of the first year students attempted to chase their kitten through the crowd. Said kitten affixed itself to Hermione's dragon-hide boots and mewled up at her adoringly. She scooped it up, waiting for the child to realise his familiar had been found, but the boy continued to search. Hermione placed the kitten on her shoulder and continued. "The Sorting ceremony is very important here in Hogwarts because during your stay here, your House will be your surrogate family here at Hogwarts. Your classes will be with the rest of your House. You will sleep in your House dormitory, and you will often spend free time in your House's common room."

"There are four Houses at Hogwarts. Each corresponding to the four founders of Hogwarts: Godric Gryffindor—"

There was a small whoosh as the phantom of Godric materialised and bowed with a flourish.

"Helga Hufflepuff."

Helga stepped out of the wall and smiled warmly.

"Rowena Ravenclaw."

Rowena took her place beside Helga, resting a friendly hand on her shoulder.

"And Salazar Slytherin."

Godric gave Salazar a congenial thump on the back and grinned, causing the elder wizard to sigh, rolling his eyes. Yet, even so, a small smile played about his mouth.

"Each house has its own noble history, and each has embraced many outstanding witches and wizards. Everyone here has their own strengths and weaknesses. No one is perfect, but if you work together and support each other, your triumphs will earn your House points even if you are working with another House. Rule-breaking, however, will cause you to lose House points. At the end of the year, the House with the most points is awarded the House cup—and all shall know how hard you have worked together. It is my hope that each of you shall be a credit to whichever House is yours."

Hermione took in a deep breath. "The Sorting Ceremony will take place beyond these doors in just a few minutes—up there in the front of everyone, but do not be afraid. These are the people who shall be your peers. You need not fear them. Remember, the Founders of Hogwarts were and are the best of friends. That doesn't mean they cannot disagree. You will not always agree with those around you. Try to keep an open mind, place yourself in another's boots, and keep the rows to a minimum. Under no circumstances are you to draw your wand on another student save on the dueling platform or in class when you are specifically requested to do so. Students who fail to regard this rule risk multiple detentions or, if it has a happened before, being expelled."

"Please wait here with the Founders. If you have any questions before you go in, this is the time to ask," Hermione said, "and Mr Harcourt, I have your kitten up here."

"'W-what?"

"Your kitten," she repeated slowly, "is here." She held out the black and white tuxedo kitten, and he mewed cutely.

"Oh! That's not my kitten," Harcourt said. "My kitten was on the floor. I'm still looking for him."

Hermione's eyebrow twitched. She gently placed the kitten on the ground, cleared her throat, and said, "Mr Harcourt, your kitten is here." She pointed to the floor.
"Oh!" he said, coming up to scoop up the kitten. "Where have you been, Gomez?"

The kitten meowed and jumped out of his arms and trotted over to a giant canine paw—a paw connected to an equally gargantuan three-headed dog. The little kitten purr-bonked into the dog's leg, and Τρία woofed lowly, his tongues lolling lazily as he sniffled the little kitten.

The first years all gasped.

"This, my young friends, is Τρία," Hermione said with a smile, gently caressing the dog's multiple heads. "He is one of your protectors while you are living at Hogwarts. He will not harm you, but you will see him protecting certain restricted areas in Hogwarts."

Hermione smiled. "No matter how safe a place is, there will always be rules and places that are forbidden because they are too dangerous for you to explore. He is here to protect you both from any outside dangers and from the perils of your own insatiable curiosity."

The all children giggled amongst each other, but they approached the three-headed canine with considerably less fearfulness, petting his muzzle and his velvety ears. Τρία sniffed each child over, recording their scent into his memory. He tail-wagged at them in a friendly manner and solicited more enthusiastic pets and belly rubs from the first years.

Hermione shook her head, nodding to the Founders before turning on her heel and disappearing beyond the doors.

"Who was that again?" one student whispered. "I can't remember!"

"Professor Slytherin," another student answered.

"I thought that was McGonagall-Fairbairn?"

"No, that's the Headmistress."

"That was the headmistress?"

The Founders collectively rolled their eyes.

"Why don't we start with a quick lesson on names, first?" Godric said, twirling his hand just so.

"If you think they can handle it," Salazar muttered.

"Hush, Salazar," Rowena admonished. "They are only eleven."

Salazar shook his head and made a gesture with his hand for her to continue. "As you wish."

"Welcome to Hogwarts," Helga said warmly.

"I know you!" one student exclaimed. "You're Helga Huddlepoof!"

Helga closed her eyes, seeming to count to ten very slowly. "Yes, I think a lesson in proper names should be our very first goal."

The doors to the Great Hall opened with an ominous creak as hundreds of other students stared out at the gaggle of extremely nervous first-year students.

"Doom! Doom upon everyone!" Trelawney spewed at the top of her lungs as she staggered into the Great Hall, fashionably late as was her custom.
A little girl with blonde pigtails squeaked in terror and fainted dead away the moment Trelawney fixed her with her bug-eyed glasses.

"You see? DOOM!" Trelawney exclaimed triumphantly.

Трія waded through the crowd of frightened first-years and slurped the girl upside the face, his tail wagging wildly. He sniffed her until she woke and giggled, hugging the closest face. Then the canine stepped over to Trelawney, pointedly aimed his rump at her face, and passed gas, causing Trelawney to stumble backwards, turn a rather unhealthy shade of green, and stagger towards the Head Table— looking disturbingly like she was going to hurl all over herself.

The children, however, giggled hysterically, thinking they were smelling spring flowers and sunshine.

"Welcome!" Minerva greeted from the Head Table. "Returning students, it is very good to see you again. Those of you who are new to us, welcome to Hogwarts. Soon, you will be Sorted into your new Houses— but it will not end there. This is a beginning."

"Joining us this year, thanks to Hogwarts being magically restored to full strength, are the manifested spirits of the four Founders— those who created Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry upon this very ground." Minerva gestured to the spirits' shimmering forms. "Helga Hufflepuff, Rowena Ravenclaw, Salazar Slytherin, and Godric Gryffindor. May they inspire you to great things as they inspired the very first students so long ago."

"I know the Founders! I read all about them in Hogwarts: A History!" a young boy whispered excitedly.

"Really, Cassius?" another boy sighed. "Are you glued to that book, mate?"

"His parents are denteeths or something," a third boy muttered.

"Dentists!" the boy huffed, rolling his eyes. "Not that you would even know one with a bunch of yellow teeth like that!"

The boys shoved each other playfully, pretending to take offence.

"So, you Muggle-born, Cassius?" another boy asked.

"Yeah, Fenton, my parents don't do magic," Cassius replied with a frown.

"His parents are denteeths, remember? It's perfectly obvious," a redhead girl said, rolling her eyes.

"DenTISTS!" Cassius stressed.

"Ahem," Minerva cleared her throat, staring at the chattering first years.

They shrank back, quieting, realising they were being stared at for their distracted rudeness.

"Before we start the sorting, I would like to introduce our professors for this year," Minerva announced. "Teaching Ancient Runes is Bathsheba Babbling. Teaching Arithmancy is Professor Septima Vector. Astronomy is being taught by Professor Aurora Sinistra. Care of Magical Creatures is being taught by Professor Robert Fairbairn. Charms is taught by Professor Filius Flitwick. Defence Against the Dark Arts is being taught by Professor Remus Lupin. Divination is being taught by Professor Sybill Trelawney. Brooms for Beginners is being taught by Madam Rolanda Hooch, who is also our Quidditch coach. Herbology is being taught by Professor Pomona Sprout. History of
Magic is taught by Professor Cuthbert Binns. Muggle Studies is being taught by Professor Charity Burbage. Potions is being taught by Professor Severus Snape. Transfiguration up to the N.E.W.T. level will be taught by Professor Gabriel Cardiff. Transfiguration and Wandless Magic for our advanced N.E.W.T. level students is being taught by Professor Hermione Slytherin."

Minerva nodded to each person as she introduced them. "The professors for our extra-curricular classes are Professor Benjamin Moore, teaching Magical Art, Professor Griphook who teaches Goblin Studies, and Professor Karla Santana, who will be teaching Magical Music. Also, Professors Casper and Morticia Whyte are returning to teach Ghoul Studies due to the increased interest noted from last year. The class has been renamed Undead Studies, and shall include the study of various types of undead, protection against them, and the various associated curses and how to deal with them."

"Joining us for new classes, we have Professor Jane Rochester who will be teaching English, Professor Jeffrey Hawking who will be teaching Maths, and Professor Winifred Winterbourne who will be teaching Wizarding Awareness and Culture. Professor Everett Oliphant will be teaching the Science of Alchemy for those who have attained O level on their O.W.L.s, and Professor Rhys Davies will be working with Madam Pomfrey to teach Healing for those who have attained O level O.W.L.s in both Potions and Herbology. For those of you new students who might wish to become healers one day, I highly recommend that you start doing your very best now in the pertinent prerequisite classes. Finally, Professor Firenze will be teaching Centaur Culture and Star Reading for any student third year and above."

"Our new Deputy Headmaster, elected by our senior faculty, is Professor Severus Snape."

Severus scowled from his place at the table, muttering something under his breath that might've been, "More like drafted!"

"Now, it is time to welcome our newest students with the House Sorting Ceremony. When I call out your name, come up here and sit on the stool," Minerva instructed the first-years.

A black and white tuxedo kitten jumped up on the seat and meowed imperiously, causing many eyes to shift toward the interloping kitten.

"I bet that one will be this year's magical feline hero," Ron muttered from the tables. Fred and George simultaneously smacked their little brother upside the head.

"Maybe it will have a poisonous bite or some magical talent that makes it invaluable," Ron snarked.

"Oh, do shut up, baby bro," Fred hushed with a glare.

"Or else," added George, with a mischievous glint in his eyes.

"That's okay," a tiny voice squeaked. "He just needs a hug!"

"A lot of hugs!"

"We love hugs!"

"Yes! We love to give free hugs!"

A clutter of plush spiders skittered across the table and stared up at Ron, their gem-like eyes shimmering hopefully.

"Totally free hugs!" Eek exclaimed.
"No surcharges, either!" Peppermint agreed.

A sandy-coloured spider skittered up, carrying a chocolate biscuit. "I love hugs! Will give biscuit for hugs!"

"Hugs are fabulous!" a white spider with gold stripes agreed.

"I give kisses too!" Pinky added happily.

Ron’s eyes bugged out of his head. He immediately paled and bolted out of the Great Hall, sending the spiders flying in all directions, and squishing the poor pink polka-dotted spider underfoot.

She gave a sorrowful squeak of distress, causing the other spiders to gather around her sadly.

Meanwhile, other spiders were streaming out from various cracks, all of them chasing after Ron.

"Come back!"

"We just want hugs!"

"We love hugs!"

"We love you!"

Cassius knelt down and carefully scraped up the little pink polka-dotted spider and massaged her back into shape, gently placing his hand over her body as he brought her to his chest and hugged her.

"Awww!"

"He gives hugs!"

"I want a hug!"

"Me too!"

"Hug me next!"

"Please!"

The poor boy suddenly found himself with an armful of happy plush spiders.

"Cassius Granger!"

The boy's eyes widened fearfully, and he swallowed hard.

"You can do it!"

"We believe in you!"

"Bonne chance!"

"Успех!"

Pinky climbed up to Cassius’ shoulder and whispered in his ear, "I'm here for you. Come on, let's go!"

"Veel geluk!"
Cassius Granger squared his shoulders and walked forward, but he petted Pinky the spider to steady himself and gather his courage as he walked to the stool that awaited him, front and center in the room.

"GRYFFINDOR!" the Hat yelled immediately, causing a cheer to go up from the Gryffindor table. The twins clapped him on the back and hugged him, ruffling his hair and complimenting him on befriending the plush spider brigade.

"You made a good choice in friends, mate!" George cheered.

"Totally," Fred added with a wide grin. "You can *always* trust the plush spider brigade."

"That and Brim," George pointed out.

"Who is Brim?" Cassius whispered, trying not to distract from the Sorting Ceremony.

"Professor Snape's familiar," the twins chimed together. "You can't miss her. She's really huge, covered in leopard spots, and is attended by no less than a hundred plush spiders at a time."

"Wha?" Cassius sputtered.

"She also breathes out disease if you are hateful around her, so don't be hateful," Fred said with a wink.

The poor first year sputtered helplessly.

"Hey, hey, finally, little sis is next," George said, the line of first years having finally worked down to the last.

"Ginevra Weasley!"

A red-headed and freckled young witch sat on the stool as Professor Snape dropped the Sorting Hat on her like the hat was akin to a wet nappy, his face an expressionless mask of stone.

Silence.

The Hat shifted almost uneasily on her head.

More silence.

Unlike with the other students, the hat wasn't singing, speaking, not even making the occasional, "hrm" or "hmmmm" noises. It was as utterly silent as a graveyard and just as still.

"Uh-oh!"

"This isn't good!"

""Since when is the Hat ever silent?"

"How would you know?"

"How do you not know?"

The spiders bickered amongst each other as the students from all four House tables stared at the
silent, occasionally fidgety Hat.

Silence.

More silence, save for the mutterings from hungry students impatiently awaiting their dinners.

The professors whispered to each other. Minerva looked like she really needed to use the loo. Some of the professors looked as though they were taking bets. The ghosts hovered amongst the candles, whispering to each other.

Harry was making horrible faces at Draco, Theo, and Blaise, mouthing words silently, almost like he was praying devoutly.

Draco answered back with a wrinkled nose and a shrug, using his hand to pantomime the cutting of his neck.

Even more silence.

Hungry students and faculty as well as staff were starting to contemplate either eating the table or each other, whichever seemed more appetising to them.

"I got it!" the Hat finally exclaimed. "Wait, no… hrm—"

Snape was pinching the bridge of his nose, looking for all the world like he felt a truly epic migraine coming on.

One of the Muggleborn Ravenclaws started to tap the 'Jeopardy' game show theme on the table top with her artfully painted fingernails.

The crowd of plush spiders began to sing together, "Dun da dun dun-da-dun-dee-dun…"

The Weasley twins thumped their heads heavily on the table. "Mum is so going to have a Kneazle. Maybe an entire bloody litter!"

"I thought you Weasleys were traditional Gryffindors?" Seamus said, frowning.

"So did we," Fred sighed.

Charlotte was dangling from between the candlesticks, having woven a large, intricate web that spelled out "Salutations!" just to pass the time.

Tpia shifted uncomfortably and whined softly, looking as though he desperately needed to empty his bladder.

Ginny's face was starting to look like a ripe tomato, she was turning redder and redder by the minute, her embarrassment increasing exponentially as time slowly ticked by.

Ron returned to the Great Hall, his face flushed and his breathing coming in harsh wheezes as he finally lost his tail of hug-seeking spiders in hot pursuit.

"Oh, good! You're back! Can we have hugs now?"

A clutter of plush spiders greeted Ron from the nearby shoulders of hug-friendly students.

Ron whimpered and collapsed on the floor, too exhausted to even run anymore.
"Aw!"
"He's tired!"
"We could make a pillow for him!"
"We could be a pillow for him!"
"It would be kinder if we did."
"He should be comfortable."
"Yes, he should be comfortable!"

The spiders rushed up to nestle under his head.

Ron wailed piteously.

"HUFFLEPUFF!" the Hat bellowed at last.

Ginny stared out at a silent sea of students as a vastly relieved Hat was finally removed from her head.

**Thud.**

The newest Hufflepuff, Ginevra Molly Weasley, had just fainted dead away.

Percy just shook his head. "That's our little Gin-Gin. Always the drama queen, that one."

"She gets it from mum," Fred commented.

"Just wait until mum finds out," George moaned.

"Earplugs?" Fred asked.

"Earplugs," George confirmed, handing out packets of their very best Howler-proof earplugs.

Ginny had woken from her temporary faint and had taken her seat amongst a gaggle of young Hufflepuffs, looking considerably more relieved than disappointed.

"Let the Welcome Feast begin!" Minerva announced at last, clapping her hands.

The hall was immediately filled with enormous trays and bowls of steaming hot foods and the hungry students didn't even bother to pay attention to what any of it was before earnestly proceeding to shovel it all into their mouths, the protracted wait having been far too much for them all.

A small stream of spiders were grabbing various snacks from the table and carrying them off, but the children paid them no mind.

"Come on, baby bro," Fred said with a sigh, attempting to scrape him off the floor. "Might as well eat before the Howlers get here."

"What's wrong with being sorted into Hufflepuff?" Cassius asked in between enthusiastic bites of his honey-glazed chicken wings and chips doused liberally with malt vinegar.

"Nothing," Seamus said.
"It's just that Weasleys don't ever get sorted into Hufflepuff," Percy said.

"So, is she really your sister?" Cassius asked, curious.

The Weasleys all froze in place, forkfuls of food suspended in mid-air. Then they all hurriedly stuffed food into their craws before the conversation continued into forbidden territory that none of them wanted to contemplate, much less figure out an answer.

"So, Cassius," Seamus asked. "What was it like for you, finding out you were magical?"

Cassius, who had been busily stuffing a large Italian sausage pastry into his mouth, swallowed and said, "It was normal, I think. Mum and dad doted on me at least until last year, when they realised something was wrong with me."

"Wrong with you? What do you mean?"

"I used to have these really large front teeth, yeah?" Cassius explained. "One day, I looked in the mirror, and they just shrank in front of my eyes. And when dad demanded to know what had happened to my teeth, a tea kettle flew across the room and… hit him. When I got my Hogwarts letter, my parents couldn't get me out of the house fast enough. Don't get me wrong, they fed me and put clothes on me— but they didn't really want to do things with me anymore."

Seamus' eyes widened. "I accidentally set my mam's curtains on fire. Fortunately, she's magical, so it was no big deal."

"It's funny, though," Cassius said. "Until about a year ago, I used to dream I had a big sister. She'd always protect me. When I did things that were odd, she would protect me, take the blame, tell me I was special. And then I grew up I guess. My parents don't remember me ever having a sister. They said they'd know something like that, but without her, my parents didn't like me as much anymore."

"Maybe you had a guardian spirit," Neville suggested.

"Is there such a thing?" Cassius asked.

"Look around you, mate," Lee said from down the table. "We have guardians, spirits, and guardian spirits."

Cassius beamed brightly. "I'd like to think I had one."

"Hey, what are we?"

"Chopped hippogriff?"

"No one remembers the spiders."

"Why is that?"

A stream of plush spiders slinked away from Cassius, sulking. Pinky made an unhappy squeak as she bounced off his shoulder and landed on the table, following the others.

Cassius snatched them all up in his arms and hugged them tight. "I won't forget!"

Tiny, magical, animated hearts formed over each spider with the hug, and they squeaked happily. They then nicked a biscuit off the pile and scurried off, rapidly heading towards the Head Table.

"See, you've made new friends already," Fred said, elbowing him. "Just— don't go around our little
git brother with your new arachnid allies."

"Yeah," George said, bonking Ron upside the head with the palm of his hand.

Ron was hunkered down, suspiciously watching to make sure all the spiders had left. A lagging spider, trailed behind, and was trying to lug an undercooked sausage with it. Ron yelled flipping a plate, sending the spider and its sausage flying towards the High Table.

*Splat!*

*Squeak!*

The spider and its prize slammed into Severus Snape, who plucked the sausage-carrying arachnid off his robes, setting it down in front of Hermione, giving Ron his most deadly killing curse glare.

"Merlin, why did it have to be him?" Ron moaned.

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**Peep! Peep! Peep!**

"Awwww, Fawkes! You have a chick!"

Fawkes warbled proudly, the little baby phoenix poked its head out from between Fawkes' feathers. He peeped blissfully as Hermione scratched under his chin with her clawed fingers.

"Mystery of the missing phoenix familiar solved?" Severus rumbled, leaning over her shoulder.

The little chick's eyes widened as he stared up at Severus, but then he peeped excitedly and ran up to clamber up Severus' robes and perch on his shoulder.

A mottled-coloured phoenix hen scolded the little chick from the flower box outside the window, and the little chick peeped, duly chastened. He rubbed up against Severus and then flung himself off his shoulder, bouncing unnaturally off the ground like a baby duck, shook himself off, and dashed straight back to mum.

"I'm onto you, Severus," Hermione said with a smile.

"Hn?"

"You're a real softy."

"Hn."

Severus came up behind her and engulfed her like a feeding amoeba. "Are you complaining?"

Hermione purred. "Never."

"Seems like Fawkes wasted no time starting a family as soon as the old man was gone," Severus noted.

Hermione laughed. "I suppose so. No more Dark Lord. No more selfish general for the greater good. I'd say it's a perfect time for adorably fluffy phoenix chicks."

Severus snorted, but he didn't disagree. "Have you decided what name you want everyone to know you by?"
"I'm rather fond of Brim," Hermione said with a smile.

Severus’ expression softened. "No matter the name, I still care for you the same. You know this, yes?"

Hermione tilted her head and smiled. "I know, but I am quite happy to hear you say it." She snuggled into his robes and attempted to fuse herself to his body.

"With all the new professors, I find myself no longer having to patrol the hallways almost every night," Severus said with a sigh.

"Aw," Hermione replied. "I enjoyed our patrols."

Severus snorted. "Of course you did."

"I never minded, as long as I was with you," Hermione said. "You and Minerva always made it all worth it."

Severus placed a palm to her cheek, gently brushing her hair from her face. "You… made life bearable again. Now, you make life worth living."

Hermione smiled warmly. "It gladdens me to hear it."

"Your arachnid is staring at me," Severus said, narrowing his eyes.

"Oh, which one?"

Severus stared at Coffee, who was giving him a good stare with every one of his multiple eyes. "What are you staring at?"

"Just waiting," Coffee squeaked.

"Waiting for what?" Severus asked.

"Waiting to see if you kiss her or if we have to tie you both up in silk," Coffee replied.

"I believe your arachnid is forcing me to kiss you… or else," Severus said dryly.

"Oh?" Hermione said, arching a brow. "Are you objecting? Or perhaps you like being tied up in silk?"

Severus growled, pressing his mouth to hers, causing her to mrowl. He pulled her into him as they kissed heatedly, and he rumbled possessively.

A knock at the door caused him to pull away with a low, menacing snarl. "What?" he snapped.

"Professor Snape, some of the first years are fighting over beds in the dormitories."

Suddenly, Brim was there, pushing her way through the door, plowing over the student at the door as she padded into the Slytherin areas beyond, her tail poofed out like a feather duster. A trail of brassed off spiders followed right behind her.

Severus walked calmly behind, privately betting on if the students would be tied up in silk before or after Brim scared the living daylights of them.

Some things would never change, and he was, privately, okay with that.
As long as the spiders kept wrapping up the troublemakers in silk.

Sybill had a problem.

It was a rather large, furry problem.

Snape's bloody familiar was sprawled between her and the door that always appeared whenever she needed to hide her accumulated sherry bottles.

To top it off, she was utter pants at vanishing spells, so she couldn't just get rid of them that way. Minerva had warned her to stop her drinking at the beginning of term, but Sybill was unable and, in fact, unwilling to stop. It deeply annoyed her that Minerva was getting up in her business when Albus had always left her well alone. He had known that ever since there had been the threat on her life that she'd picked up the habit of drinking to calm her nerves. *HE* had understood.

But no, not Minerva. *Never her.*

Minerva wanted her to define her curriculum so it could be officially registered with the Board of Governors. Minerva wanted her to actually have a written study plan. She wanted her to stick with it and stop spewing about the imminent, gruesome deaths of her students! What was life without the threat of imminent death? *SHE* had to live with the threat of imminent death, so everyone else should bloody well share in that horror with her!

Sybill walked past the waiting furry menace, holding her sack of empty sherry bottles close to her skinny chest. She stormed down the hallway, thinking hard about needing a place to stash her bottles. Always before, a door had appeared, and she didn't need one any more than she did right then.

She paced the far hall, going back and forth in front of the stupid tapestry of some idiot trying to teach trolls to dance the ballet.

She really needed a place to hide her sherry bottles.

Really, *really* bad.

The crackling on the wall caused her to stop. Her vision was horrible, but her hearing was just fine. She rushed over to the door and opened it, slipping in.

It was as dark as Snape's robes in here.

She felt around, privately thinking that she wished Snape was in here. She could finally get him alone. She could finally convince him that he was looking to the wrong person to find understanding.

She felt around, finally finding an open nook on a shelf.

Strange, the shelf seem heated— almost damp.

No matter.

She shoved the sack of sherry bottles into the opening and slipped out the door, feeling victorious.

The light in the room suddenly rose, exposing a glaring Brim with her mouth wide open and filled with a sack of sherry bottles.

Coffee and Eek stood on Brim's head and shook their heads. "*Busted!*" they squeaked joyfully.
"Wha— What do you mean I'm on suspension?"

"Sybill, I specifically warned you what would happen if you continued to drink excessively."

"Well, yes, I have had a few drinks, but it was not excessive!"

_Thunk._

_Roll. Roll. Roll._

A sack of empty sherry bottles slid across the floor.

"I beg to differ."

_"Wha? Those are not mine, Headmistress!"_ Trelawney protested shrilly.

"Oh, but I know they are, Sybill," Minerva said, eyes narrowing, "but seeing as I am fair sort, I will give you two more chances to prove you actively trying to seek help for your problem and keep your job."

"This is my home!" Trelawney screeched. "I've been here for twelve years!"

"Sybill, I am not kicking you out right now," Minerva cautioned. "I am warning you so you can get the help you need. As you said, you've been here for quite a few years. If you want to take some time off, since you haven't used any of your holidays, go to Mungo's and see a healer. I am trying to help you here, Sybill."

"Dumbledore understood me!" Sybill fumed. "I don't need your help."

"Dumbledore had more than a few issues of his own," Minerva said, her eyes narrowing in anger.

"He brought me here to save my life!" Sybill exclaimed. "He knew how vitally important my all-seeing eye is!"

"Yes, I'm quite sure he brought you here for all the best reasons," Minerva answered, fighting the urge to roll her eyes.

"Is there anything else you need, Headmistress?" Sybill hissed.

"Just sign here to say you acknowledge your understanding of what was said here today," Minerva said.

"I don't have a quill," Sybill snipped.

Brim lifted her head to stare at her. Coffee held up a quill in one of his front legs, while Eek held up an inkwell.

Sybill snatched the quill and inkwell, backhanding the plush spiders off of Brim's head.

_"Eeeeeeeeee!"_ Eek cried out.

_"Whhhhhhaaaaaaaaaaa!"_ Coffee exclaimed, tumbling off onto the floor.

Brim narrowed her eyes, her whiskers twitching angrily, a plume of green vapour starting to form around her jaws.
Minerva gently pressed her hand to Brim's head, and the Nundu calmed—if just barely.

Sybill hastily scrawled her signature on the parchment and slammed the quill into poor Eek, who had just pulled himself back onto the desk. He squeaked in distress, legs wriggling.

Sybill, however, had already stormed out of Minerva's office.

Brim mrowled, placing her head on the desk to stare sadly at Eek.

Minerva carefully un-impaled the plush arachnid, waving her wand to repair the hole, clean up the ink stains, and then used her fingers to gently ruffle his fluff back into pristine condition. Eek squeaked happily as she tickled him, and he leg-hugged her fingers before hopping back down to land on Brim's head.

"There you go lass," Minerva said kindly. "Thank you for finding Sybill's contraband."

"Mrrrowl," Brim replied, purring loudly. She slammed her head into Minerva's chest, rumbling.

"Ach, me Bonnie," Minerva cooed, pressing her head to Brim's, smiling as the plush spiders hugged her too. "I love ya, lassie."

Brim purred and purred. "I love you too," she rumbled.

"Aww, lass," Minerva said, tears in her eyes.

"Mam," Brim rumbled, rolling her head back and forth on Minerva.

Minerva wrapped her arms around Brim's neck and buried her face into the Nundu's soft, warm fur.

"Oi," Severus grunted.

"Mrowl," Brim meowed lazily, pulling Severus under her body against her soft belly fur along with Minerva in her tabby form.

"I'm going to need a larger bed," Severus tutted. "What am I going to tell Rabbie? I'm technically sleeping with his daughter and his wife."

Brim huffed, pulling them both closer, legs wrapped snugly around them both.

Suddenly, a sleek black Scottish terrier hopped up onto the bed, burrowed between the legs to find the silver tabby, and whuffed lowly, closing his eyes.

"Rabbie?" Severus said in the closest his voice could come to a squeak, much like it had when his voice started cracking at the age of twelve.

The Scottish terrier yawned. "Go to sleep, future son-in-law," he mumbled, snuggling up to his tabby wife.

Severus' eyebrow twitched as Brim snuggled her parents between her forelegs.

Sighing in resignation, Severus shifted into his smilodon form and made his way into the pile, curled up next to purring Nundu, and closed his eyes, soon finding himself enjoying the best sleep of his life.

Pudgy, a rather plump purple striped spider, snored softly on the nearby pillow, and Brim's paw
collected her and dragged her into the pile, her eight wriggling legs spazzing out as the Nundu caught her by surprise. Brim just purred even louder, lulling everyone into a deep, peaceful sleep.

Meanwhile, somewhere in Gryffindor tower, a small cluster of fluorescent glowing spiders with the distinctive mark of the newly-established Wizards Wheezes Owl-Post Magic Supply Company stared down into the bed of one extremely twitchy Ronald Weasley.

"Harryyyy!" Ronald whinged.

Harry, Seamus, and Neville, however, all slept on peacefully, cuddling their extra large plush spider friends and enjoying the benefits of their new Wizards Wheezes Howler-grade earplugs For A Peaceful Night's Sleep™.

The plush spiders over Ron's bed glowed eerily as they melodiously chimed a strangely soothing and slumber-inducing lullaby.

Ronald Weasley, however, wouldn't be sleeping anytime soon.

Rock-a-bye Ronald,

In the treetop,

When the wind blows,

The spiders will rock.

When the bough breaks,

the spiders will fall

And down upon Ronald,

Spiders and all.

Eek scurried along the wall around the portraits, surveying the hall for trouble. At one point the head boy and girl had given him a lift and the obligatory snuggle before sending him on his way, so he was feeling better after his impaling incident.

That is, he was feeling better until he saw the person who had impaled him shuffling down the hallway carrying a pile of what looked like tasty biscuits. Mmm, biscuits! Maybe Brim would want one. She loved biscuits.

Yet— this was also the witch that had stabbed him through with a writing quill, so Eek was, naturally, suspicious. He scurried along the wall, keeping the witch and her tantalising biscuits in sight.

Eek paused as the witch went down the spiral stairs to the dungeon. Maybe she was taking them to Brim? To apologise? Eek scurried after, keeping all of his multiple eyes peeled. Curiosity was the lifeblood of a plush spider, and he was one of the originals. He had as much as Coffee, Snowfall, and Whee but maybe not as much as Charlotte. She was always rummaging through the library looking for new words to weave into her web. Pinky was more of a legs-on spider, she liked to do things rather than research, which was probably why she always ended up underfoot and, unfortunately, often underboot as well. Koekie was alway raiding the biscuit tins for snacks, Rood
was always pretending to be a red rose in the garden, Somber was usually sulking in a dark corner complaining that his colouring was depressing, and Tally-ho— well Tally-ho was always off on the next adventure. Fizban, on the other hand, had figured out how to do magic, but then he'd forget what he did minutes later, making him the most senile arachnid of the plush spider brigade. In the end they all reported back to Brim, but it was obvious that some of them had "better" adventures than others.

But what was she doing?

Eek kept following, pausing as she did some sort of complex wand waving in front of one of the classrooms before slipping in, unnoticed— well except for Eek. He noticed.

He slipped in between the door crack, flattening himself and reemerging on the other side with a soft pop. He shook himself off and scurried further in.

Furious squeaking came from behind him as Pinky had attempted to follow him, her legs wriggling as she tried to force her way under the crack.

*Pop!*

Pinky flew out from the crack, tumbling into the room and bouncing into a table leg. She shook herself off, squeaking indignantly, and scurried over to him.

Eek sighed. Pinky was never very good at stealth.

"What's she doing?" Pinky asked.

"Dunno. Watching her," Eek replied.

"She has biscuits!" Pinky squeaked happily.

"I know, but—" Eek trailed off. "She's doing something weird to them."

Pinky peered down at the woman. "Isn't she the one that?"

Eek grumbled. "Yes."

Pinky gave the closest to a frown a plush spider was capable of. "I think she's trying to make a potion."

"Not a very nice potion," Eek replied.

"Not a very good attempt, either," Pinky said, tapping her legs on the wall they were clinging on.

The both of them clambered up to the rafters to peer down at Sybill.

"That can't be good," Pinky said, peering at the badly-scrawled recipe she was using. "She's putting in agrimony instead of agar jelly."

"Severus is going to be so mad!" Eek said, shaking his head in dismay.

"We need to follow her— what if she gives it to someone we like?" Eek said.

Pinky frowned again. "That wouldn't be good."

"Hah!" Sybill cried triumphantly. "These will teach that interfering old cat to never again meddle
with Sybill Trelawney!" She sprinkled some sort of potion over the biscuits. They glowed purple for a while and then slowly faded to normal, looking utterly tantalising once more. Then she picked up the plate of doctored shortbread biscuits and carried them out of her rooms.

Eek and Pinky immediately scurried off after her, darting through the door before she closed it, pausing only to recast whatever spells she had undone to get in the door. She hurried up the staircase, her hidden trackers in hot pursuit, their little legs moving fast.

"Where is she going?"

"Looks like the Headmistress' office."

"That's not good at all!"

Suddenly, however, a pair of boys wearing Gryffindor colours came barrelling around the corner, their arms laden with assorted snacks, sweets, and biscuits from the kitchens. They slammed into Trelawney, sending her and her biscuits flying in opposite directions along with their own load of tasty loot from the kitchens.

"What?! Who are you!?” Sybill cried. She stared at them through her large glasses, but failed to take notice of their House colours or anything else.

"We're so sorry, Professor," a dark-haired boy said as the other, a redhead, frantically tried to pick up the fallen sweets.

"What? You're patrolling tonight?" Sybill accused.

"Um, yes, Professor," the first boy said a bit shiftily.

"Harumph, you should watch where you are going!" Sybill snapped as the second thrust the plate of shortbreads back into her hands.

The red-headed boy scooped the rest of the goodies up into his arms and fled down the hall quickly. Meanwhile, the brown-haired boy apologised profusely as he, too, fled down the hall.

Sybill sneered, taking her plate full of biscuits down the hall, not noticing the two plush spiders scurrying off with a nicked biscuit, back towards the private chambers of Severus Snape.

"Danger!"

"Danger!"

"Yes, danger!"

"Don't eat them!"

Severus stared down at the commandeered biscuit. "Worry not, my friends. I am not about to eat it."

The spiders sighed in relief as a curious Brim placed her head on the counter. "Mrowl?" She sniffed the biscuit and growled lowly.

"Well, I already know it's bad, love, but I think you need to intercept the rest of those biscuits before someone gets hurt. Hurry now," Severus encouraged her.

Brim darted away and vanished in a bright flash of ley magic.
"What's going on, Severus?" Minerva said, sitting up and wiping the sleep from her eyes. She sleepily cuddled the Scottish terrier in her arms.

"I'm not sure, Minerva, but I am fairly certain that this biscuit was made for you."

"She said it was for the meddler, the interfering cat!"

"Meddler!" the spiders whispered, lifting their front legs to emphasize.

"Who, my dears?" Minerva asked with a frown.

"Sybill!"

"Trelawney!"

"Bug-eyed witchy witch!"

"Not our eyes."

"Ours are lots better!"

"Yes, better!"

A crackle of energy signalled the arrival of Hermione, her bushy mahogany hair flying wildly in multiple directions like the writhing of serpents. Her orange-green eyes glowed ominously. "These were in your office, mam," she said grimly. Her fingers clasped a handwritten card that stated:

*Sorry for earlier. I really do appreciate your help. - Sybill*

Minerva hugged Rabbie tight. "What is going on here?"

"I do not know, Minerva," Severus said, giving Hermione a concerned look.

Hermione leaned down and scooped up the gathered spiders. "Do you know if any of the biscuits from this batch went missing?"

Eek and Pinky bounced up and down. "Maybe. We just nicked one to bring it back to you. There were two boys who ran into her after nicking a tray of sweets from the kitchens."

Minerva poked Eek. "Who, m'dear?"

Eek squeaked, hugging her finger. "Red-haired hater boy and the boy who blows things up."

"Longbottom?" Severus asked.

"No. Blows things up. With fire. Irish."


Severus rolled his eyes. "Same need for constant damage control as the estimable Mr Longbottom."

"Estimable, Severus? I didn't think you respected Mr Longbottom in the slightest," Minerva ribbed.

"I respect his ability to blow things up and send half my classroom to the infirmary on a regular basis," Severus said.

"Hrm, well, I'll give you that," Minerva admitted.
"This plate of biscuits appears quite normal," Severus said, waving his wand over them. "Now, at least. I have no doubt that minutes ago they were quite tainted."

Hermione narrowed her eyes. "It wore off?"

"Undoubtedly, it was an attempt to cover her tracks or— if you prefer to think her a total cretin— her inability to craft an effective long-term potion." Severus wrinkled his nose.

"I would prefer her fired," Minerva growled, "but I need something that sticks around for the Aurors to gather as evidence of her misdeeds. And as much as we trust your impeccable nose, my daughter, we need something more tangible that is detectable by far less keen Wizengamot senses."

Hermione just sniffed, a gesture that was far too Snape-esque to be denied. A stream of spiders bounced into her choker-collar, disappearing from sight.

"Chances are, with such a fast rate of decay on the potion, those two really dodged a bullet tonight," Minerva said. "I'll speak with my prefects and instruct them to keep an eye on them. Preserve those biscuits for the Aurors, though. Maybe there will be a residual trace enough to taken as evidence of Sybill's treachery. Watch Finnigan and Weasley in the morning in your classes for anything strange. At the first sight of anything even remotely unusual, I want them in the infirmary on the double. In fact, I'll arrange for them to see Poppy in the infirmary, first thing. Unless you think they should be woken up immediately?"

Severus and Hermione exchanged looks. Rabbie woofed with a strangely Scottish lilt.

"Have one of the male prefects check on them. If something was going to happen right away, it will have already happened by now. Have Poppy check them over in the morning." Severus said.

Minerva nodded. "Might as well get it done now. Let's go, Rabbie," she said, trudging off and out the door. "Goodnight, Severus. Goodnight, my wee Bonnie."

"Goodnight, Minerva, Rabbie," Severus replied with a stifled yawn.

"Mrowl," Brim said, having swiftly reassumed her more normal, natural form. She bounded back over to the bed and hopped in, purring invitingly.

"Do you plan to teach as a Nundu?" Severus asked dryly.

"Mrrrwll," Brim replied, giving him a look and a significant whisker twitch.

Spiders streamed out over the bed.

"Bed time!"

"Sleep time!"

"Sleep is good!"

"Come to bed!"

Severus pinched the bridge of his nose and slid back into bed as Brim's leg curled around him and a cluster of accommodating plush spiders scurried under his head to keep him comfortable.

"Buona notte!"

"God natte!"
"Dobranoc!"

Severus snaked his arm around Coffee and pulled him in and was fast asleep to the thrum of Brim's rumbling purr for the second time in one night.

"You really look like shite, mate," Neville told Seamus as they sat down for breakfast.

"Too many sweets with Ron, eh?" Dean said with a cheeky wink.

Ron, who was holding his head on the table, just groaned miserably.

Cassius sat down at the table and a certain friendly pink arachnid hopped off his shoulder, holding his class schedule.

"Forgot this!" she squeaked helpfully.

"Oh!" Cassius said, scooping her up and planting a kiss on her tiny head. "Thank you, Pinky!"

The pink arachnid flushed, her fur turning a darker shade of pink. She scurried down the table in a hurry to make a beeline back to Brim.

"Aren't you the charmer, Cassius?" Fred said, handing down the plate of waffles and maple syrup. "Sleep well?"

"Best sleep ever," Cassius beamed.

"What's your first class?"

"9:45 to 10:45, that's Potions," Cassius said. "History of Magic from 11:00 to noon."

"Good luck staying awake for History of Magic, mate," Dean said, shaking his head. "Binns just drones on and on about the goblin wars and most of us are out cold within 15 minutes."

"Good luck staying alive in Potions," Neville mumbled dispiritedly.

Cassius gulped nervously, using his books as a makeshift shield against his chest, even as he ate.

A swoosh of black fabric went down the middle aisle, followed closely by a rustle of emerald velvet and bushy mahogany curls.

"I'm not sure if agrimony is the answer here, Severus," the witch said. "It has a wonderful peak when used in moderation, but the amount you would need to achieve the desired effect could practically obliterate anyone unlucky enough to drink it, starting with their liver!"

"Temper it with a gram of Erumpent horn, brew over medium heat, and add a anti-clockwise turn with a one-third flourish and you can counter the organ toxicity," Snape replied, his stride not even slowing slightly.

"But wouldn't Moondew do the same if properly applied? You wouldn't even have to heat it. Just add it gradually as it cools with a single drop of Neem oil," the bushy-haired witch suggested.

"That could work, unless the potion had aconite fluid instead of the powder. The Neem oil would react badly to the fluid and possibly need pearl dust or honeywater depending on the balance of
"But it COULD work!" she said.

Snape sighed. "Possibly, but the students here use aconite fluid due to some sort of idiotic regulation that ruined the stores of preserved aconite. In order to teach the potion, we'd have to balance for both, and I don't want to see the classroom blow up due to one student having aconite leaves and one having the fluid. That is a N.E.W.T-level skill, and they can barely tell me what aconite IS, let alone being capable of balancing the relevant alchemical properties."

The other professor pinched the bridge of her nose. "Balancing for alchemical alkalinity should be a basic potions skill!"

"I've been trying to tell them that for years!" Snape growled.

"Merlin, will you listen to that!" Neville groaned.

The two professors had whooshed by, taking their places up at the High Table.

A crash came from Ron's direction as he and Seamus clutched their stomachs and moaned piteously.

"W-what's wrong, mate?" Dean blurted, trying to comfort Seamus. "Didn't you go to the infirmary this morning? Are you having a bad reaction?"

Seamus lifted his head and made a horrible squeaking sound as a pair of round black eyes and whiskers sprouted out of his face, his ears bulged out and rounded, greyish-brown fur spread over his elongating face, and two large front incisors bulged out from his gums. The exact same thing was happening to Ron, and he, too, fell to the floor, writhing and convulsing as some sort of rodent-like transformation was rising within them both.

Children were screaming hysterically, the Head Table was buzzing with professors rushing out to try and figure out what was going on, and one extra-large Nundu leapt over the High Table, landing between the running students. Those who knew her were immediately rushing up to her for protection, favouring Brim over the tables in their fright.

Brim purred and rumbled, moving them with her bulk to huddle behind her, while the other professors were gathering them up and inspecting them all for signs of harm. Startled first years didn't know what to do between the two rodent-boys and the huge Nundu, but the experienced students herded the firsties toward the Nundu, telling them not to be afraid of her, that she would protect them.

Feline familiars all went charging towards the two boys, who were now quickly shrinking down to rodent-size. The two rat-boys screamed in terror, seeming to realise that they were now in serious danger of being eaten, so they went scurrying off as fast as they could, the rat instincts rapidly taking them over and leaving their human brains by the wayside. The stream of very excited feline hunters tore after them eagerly as Brim quickly snuffled over the students around her.

"Brim," Minerva's voice broke through the chaos. "Find those students!"

"Mrowl!" Brim replied before bounding off in hot pursuit. The parliament of owls in the rafters perked as the two exceedingly plump rodents ran by, taking off en masse, all of them highly-motivated in their pursuit of a juicy rat for breakfast.

"Students, if you have owls here at the school, I need you to call them back immediately!" Minerva projected her voice over the still-screaming crowd. "Hurry now! Those of you with cats, same
The children struggled to overcome their terror enough to comply.

"Prefects and Head Students," Minerva yelled. "Please escort your Houses back to their dormitories! Classes will resume when the bell rings and not before. Do not leave until the bells ring. Hurry up! Heads of Houses with me to help search. Professors and all other staff members, please monitor all of our students in case the affliction should spread."

"The house-elves will bring breakfast to you in your dormitories," Minerva continued. "Prefects, I want you to do a headcount when you get back to your dormitories to make certain that all students are accounted for."

Minerva gestured and Severus, Pomona, Filius, and Remus quickly followed behind to assist her in the search.

"Percy," one of the students blurted as he ran up. "We have a problem!"

"We all have a problem, if you haven't already noticed," Percy bit out, his lip curling.

Cassius ran up with a small cage clutched tightly in his hands. It looked like he had crafted it out of sugar quills and twine. Inside, a frantic red-furred rat repeatedly slammed itself against the bars squeaking madly. "I think it's a student!" Cassius said. Pinky bounced up and down on his shoulder, squeaking excitedly.

"Female Weasley!" she squeaked.

"What the—" Percy gasped in shock. "Ginny? What's she doing here when she should be in Hufflepuff?"

Angelina Johnson stepped over from where she had been calming the shaken first years. "I saw her, Percy. She was curled up crying on the couch when I went to bed last night. Your brother Ron and Seamus were trying to comfort her. I didn't say anything because I know how much it meant for her to be in Gryffindor. It was after everyone was in bed. Only reason I noticed is I forgot my potions notebook down here."

Percy stared at the frantic rat. "Ginny?"

The red rat spazzed out and squeaked in terror, trying to gnaw her way out of the bars.

"Someone needs to take her to the Infirmary!" one of the children whispered.

"She doesn't belong here!"

"She might be contagious!"

"What if she bit someone!"

"Be quiet, all of you!" Percy yelled, silencing them. "I need one of the seventh years to take this cage to the infirmary and explain what happened. I have to stay here, so I can't do it."

Silence.

"I'll do it," Oliver Wood said, reaching out an arm to take the cage.
Pinky jumped off Cassius' shoulder and thoroughly wrapped the cage in silk, making extra-sure that it wouldn't break. Ginny-rat chomped on one of Pinky's legs, and she squeaked, scurrying up Cassius' arm and staring down at the rat accusingly.

The boy patted the pink spider gently. "It's okay. She's just really scared."

Pinky, who still seemed somewhat suspicious, huddled a little closer to Cassius' warm neck.

Oliver zapped the cage with a *Wingardium Leviosa* and guided it off with him as he left the dormitories, with Ginny-rat squeaking in terror as she slammed herself into the bars of the cage even more frantically.

Percy rubbed his aching temple with one hand. "Mum is totally going to have a Kneazle when she hears about this one."


"She's a rat," Cassius said, strangely calm compared to the other visibly nervous first years.

"*WHAT?!*

Sybill knew she had to get out of the castle the moment she saw Snape and the other Heads of House returning with two students wrapped snugly in what appeared to be Acromantula webbing and draped over the Nundu's broad back. The huge feline, which seemed perfectly fine with being a beast of burden, carefully walked the students up to the Infirmary along with the entourage of professors who had joined her on the search.

She hurriedly made her way to her rooms, where she shrank and packed all of her things, stuffed it all into a carpet bag with an undetectable extension charm on it, and drank a disillusionment potion she had been hiding just in case of such an emergency. It was time to go. Somehow, her gift to McGonagall had ended up being eaten by at least two students, and Sybill needed to get herself somewhere else, posthaste, before they figured out that she was responsible for what happened.

The ruckus had covered Sybill's escape quite easily, and the potion did the rest. By the time it finally wore off, she was already safely in Hogsmeade, wearing an extensive glamour and checked into a room at the Hog's Head, drunkenly nursing her third bottle of cream sherry as she considered where she should go next.

Now what was she going to do?

Her stash of Felix Felicis had finally run dry—having been filtered into her sherry for the last twelve years. It had gotten her a decent job, protection from harm, and a comfortable home, but now her luck had finally run out. That nosy damned cat had found her sherry bottles. And Albus was no longer there to protect her. If Albus had been there, she'd have been set for *life*!

Her clumsy attempt to get rid of the interfering tabby had ended up with students eating the biscuits instead of her! Of all the stupid, rotten luck!

All she wanted was McGonagall out of the way and that damnable Nundu. If the Nundu ate her master, that would have gotten her taken away from the school and hopefully euthanised. That's all she wanted. Just job security—it was a completely natural, *NORMAL* want! Oh, why had things gone so very, very wrong? Why her?
She guzzled down her fourth bottle of sherry… or was it her fifth? Bah. Who cared? She needed it to think clearly. She needed to be numb. She wanted to think clearly and be numb at the same time. What she really needed was dear Severus on her side— but her every attempt to get him to see her better qualities had resulted in the near-silent flutter of his robes as he left yet again.

Or with her in the infirmary, thanks to that damnable Nundu. She bloody hated cats, they made so much trouble for her!

A spider crawled across the floor, and Sybill's face twisted in a rictus of pure anger.

**SMASH!**

She put an end to the poor, unfortunate arachnid with a satisfied snarl of disgust.

The spider made a sad death-rattle, its legs spasming and finally going still under the blunt, forceful attack of her latest empty sherry bottle.

Another spider appeared, and she smashed another bottle down it.

Again.

Another.

And another one!

**ANOTHER!**

**WHACK! WHACK! WHACK!**

Sybill screamed in a frenzied rage, channeling all of her frustrations and anger into the smashing of every single skittering thing that went across the floor, even throwing one of her bottles at a pair of cooing doves that had the temerity to roost on her window sill.

One dove squawked loudly as the sherry bottle slammed into it, falling to the ground outside.

"**Hey, keep it down up there!"** Thumping on the floor from below alerted her that she was no longer going unnoticed, and Sybill turned bright red in the face, but stopped her reign of terror.

At least all of the little plush agents Minerva McGonagall had spying for her were finally dealt with. She ripped off the legs with her wand to make sure they were well and truly dead, and then she cast the carcasses into the fire.

Stupid spiders.

Stupid cats.

Stupid Hogwarts.

Music came in the open window, the festival of the returning students having been in full swing ever since the weekend. All the businesses were always so damn happy to welcome back all the Hogwarts people. Feh.

She slipped out the open window, tripping over the fallen dove and sherry bottle, and staggered down the back stairs to the street below.

"Aye, yai, yah, yaiiii," she babbled, staggering along with the music.
Someone had charmed the fish in the fountain to glow in rainbow colours. Were they singing?

She put her head in the water.

Nope.

Oh well.

She came back up to sing and dance to the music, downing yet another bottle of sherry.

"Oh, ma'am, are you okay?" a man asked, catching her as she breathed fumes of sickly-sweet alcohol on him.

"Jussst fine, I am," Sybill slurred drunkenly. "You have excellent abs, young man."

The man looked visibly uncomfortable as he helped her up and then rushed away.

"You know what I need?" Sybill asked herself loudly. "I need a nice, big cock!"

The sound of a rooster crowing nearby caught her attention. "Parfffect!" she cried, staggering off towards the sound. "I haven't heard a nice cock crow in well over ten years."

Sybill soon found herself at a wooden gate, and there was a darkened henhouse off in the far corner of the fenced-in area. Inside was—

"Albushhhhh," she slurred. "There you are, my lurrve!" She flung herself bodily over the gate instead of opening it. The music was resuming again, quite loudly, and no one seemed to notice her antics.

She staggered across the small paddock and hugged the bewildered white goat. "Oh, Albushhh, I knew you would come back for me! It was all a filthy lie about you losing your magic!"

"You can save me, right, Albushhh?" Sybill drawled lazily. "You can put everything back the way it'ssssh shupposhed to be!"

The goat stood there, perhaps too shocked to move, as Sybill fawned all over it.

"Yurr jusst sooo sexy, Albushhh," Sybill slurred. "How can any witch reshisht your long white whiskers?"

There was a joyous marriage celebration moving out into the streets of Hogsmeade, with the music and dancing following it. Sybill swayed back and forth to the music, chanting the lyrics drunkenly as she swayed and bobbed along with the thoroughly bemused-looking goat.

"Say that you love me, Albushhhhhh!"

"Maaaaa!"

"You know that I lurrve you!"

"Mmmmmaaahh!"

"You'll protect me forever!"

"Meeaaah?"
Sybill was sweating heavily, and she tore at her shawls and robes as she spun around in the paddock, twirling the poor goat along with her. She danced and danced, swirling the dizzy goat with her as it bleated helplessly in total confusion.

"You're irresistible, Albushhh," she crooned. "Give me a kiss that we will never be parted!"

"Proudfoot, I'm not sure whether I should go in there and preserve the dignity of the woman or the poor goat," Savage said, he face twisted in horror as the rising sun exposed the reason they had been called out to "tend to a disturbance."

"The goat is my bet," Proudfoot said, scratching his head.

A large crowd of gawkers had gathered around the livestock paddock behind the Hog's Head Tavern, despite the normal out of the way location.

"What are we going to tell Alastor?"

"Do we have to?"

Proudfoot just sighed. "If I hadn't seen her swear her love to the goat and summon some sort of drunken old magic, I wouldn't have believed it."

Savage groaned. "I'm so glad I'm very happily, magically bonded and married," Savage said fervently.

"You're also magically bonded to a school, two magical snakes, and a large, overgrown leopard that breathes disease," Proudfoot muttered.

"Jealous, mate?"

"Maybe," Proudfoot replied.

"Don't have to be jealous, mate," Savage said cheerfully. "There's always room for more!"

"Does it mean I have to go around talking to plush spiders?"

"They talk to you regardless of the Covenant," Savage said with a grin.

"My wife already thinks I talk to myself more than her," Proudfoot muttered.

Savage put a companionable hand on his shoulder. "I'm not a marriage counselor, mate, but I think communication is the key to a happy marriage. My wife knows all about what happens to me. Hell, she wants to meet Sathras and Dissina— and especially Brim."

"Everyone wants to meet Brim," Proudfoot noted.

Savage smiled. "She's everyone's favourite Nundu."

"So what do we do about HER?" Proudfoot said, pointing to the naked woman cuddling a goat in a muddy paddock.

"Let the Prophet finish taking pictures," Savage recommended. "I'm pretty sure nothing we say or do could possibly make this worse."

Aberforth wandered out to feed his livestock, setting loose the chickens, which immediately set about
pecking, scratching, and walking all over the witch's passed out body. He just stared at the witch and the goat, pulled out a flask of something, took a drink, and saluted the new couple. "May your marriage be blessed," he said, then promptly downed the rest of the flask. "You'll need it."

Granddaughter of Famed Seer Found Starkers

Married to Goat in Hogsmeade

Sybill Patricia Trelawney, great-great-granddaughter to Cassandra Trelawney, was found in the back paddock of the Hog's Head Tavern—having irrevocably bound herself in marriage to a goat after a drunken night in Hogsmeade.

"Ancient magic is no joke," Ministry official Sigmund Tolliver said as he confirmed the magically-bound marriage of witch and goat. "It says here on the official scroll record: Mr and Mrs Bleatsby and Sybill Goat."

The former Sybill Trelawney, who had been the professor of Divination at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry for the past 12 years, was being sought by Aurors after an incident at the school in which three students were transformed into giant rats after eating biscuits allegedly doctored with a potion by Trelawney. The Headmistress had been searching for Trelawney to question her about the incident in question, but she had strangely disappeared from the school—all of her belongings having been removed from her quarters.

It wasn't until morning, when they found the drunken witch having bound herself in marriage to Mr Dumbledore's billy goat, Bleatsby, that a tense situation became something of a horror story. To top it all off, she traumatised a few families who had been attending Mr and Mrs Franklin and Frances Applethorpe's wedding in Hogsmeade that night, by consummating her magical marriage with a kiss to her furry groom in front of random passer-bys, children, and two Aurors who had been making rounds of Hogsmeade to investigate out what was causing such a fuss.

Even more disturbing is that it seems the drunken witch believed the goat was actually Mr Albus Dumbledore, the previous Headmaster of Hogwarts.

Magic traces and pertinent memories have been submitted as evidence as well as a transcript of Sybill Trelawney's questioning under three drops of Veritaserum in front of the Wizengamot. Mrs Goat's charges have been listed as:

Vengeful magical tampering of food for personal gain.

Magical tampering of food that lead to trauma of multiple minors.

Willful intent to cause the murder of Minerva McGonagall, the current Headmistress of Hogwarts.

Willful intent to manipulate a witch's familiar into consuming her own mistress.

Indecent exposure with specification of public nudity witnessed by minor children.

Brewing and use of a Dark transfiguration potion.

Reckless endangerment of minor children.

Fraudulently professing oneself to be a certified Seer.

Multiple counts of illegal use of Felix Felicis for personal gain.
Multiple counts of killing rare and endangered species: Mourning Tavern Spiders and the Nocturnal Brunswick Night-Pigeon which Aberforth Dumbledore was providing sanctuary and habitat on behalf of the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures

Multiple counts of public intoxication with specification of intoxicated behaviour witnessed by minor children.

The trial is set for next week after all the confiscated items have been thoroughly analysed.

"Rat-ified" Students Finally Return to School

The three victims of Mrs Sybill Trelawney-Goat have been successfully treated at St Mungo's Hospital by a team of healers specialising in human transfiguration mishaps. Thankfully, they report that there will be no long-term side effects, though the healers have stated that the students may occasionally feel an urge to dig through rubbish containers for a few months afterwards and feeling a need to cram themselves into small spaces when stressed or startled.

The treatment was, thanks to their quick apprehension, swift and effective, and it helped that identifiable traces of the potion remained on the remainder of the contaminated biscuits.

Life at Hogwarts appears to be going on without a hitch, and the three victims, whose names are not being withheld to protect the privacy of the minors in question, are doing well and are catching up in their studies for the week they missed due to their unfortunate affliction.

The Headmistress of Hogwarts has cleared with the Board of Governors her choice to remove Divination from the curriculum of Hogwarts. However, more tried and true methods of prognostication, such as the noble skill of Arithmancy, shall remain. Centaur studies including the reading of stars and planets will continue to be taught. The tower, once used exclusively for Divination studies, has been turned into an aviary for the rehabilitation of injured birds as well as a sanctuary for the other feathered friends of Hogwarts—making for much happier birds and happier students who no longer have to make a trek out to a far tower to visit their familiars before their bond with them allows easier forms of wizard-familiar communication.

The Ministry has also confirmed that it will be sending a team to eradicate the Acromantula nests in the Dark Forest as soon as negotiations with the local centaur herd has been brought to a successful conclusion. Magorian, the current herd leader, has expressed the need for a bit of time to move their foals and mares to safer ground before the extermination takes place. The process should take up to a month to complete, but specialists from Borneo in Southeast Asia, the land which Acromantulas are native to, will be coming to Hogwarts Castle to assist with the operation. Also, a culinary group which gained fame for creating the surprisingly tasty Acromantula casserole plans to hold a cookout to provide good food and raise funds for orphans and others who were rendered homeless in the wake of war.

The Rare Silks for Britain group will be arriving to collect and spin all the Acromantula silk to design and create fine-quality silk robes. All proceeds will benefit the new summer education program at Hogwarts, which will house young students who would normally be forced to return home to abusive conditions, allowing them to remain in residence at the castle, attend special summer classes, and take part in work-study options as well as helping to maintain the beautifully-tended school grounds.

The Board of Governors is happy to support such a forward-thinking program that will allow Hogwarts to take care of its more vulnerable students when it is needed most.
But, for now, school's autumn term is just getting started, and the student life at Hogwarts is looking especially bright this year and well into the future.

For those readers who may be interested, the Rare Silks for Britain group will also be spinning a rare skein of Nundu-shed wool mixed with the even rarer Hogwarts Plush Spider silk. I can tell you this— I've felt nothing softer, and it remains perfectly cool in summer and warm when the weather grows chill. And there's a wonderful bonus: it repels rain, sleet, and snow like a dream! Bidding will be by silent auction via owl-post. All proceeds will benefit the Hogwarts Summer Education Program.

A/N: Putting the crack back in crack-fic! You're WELCOME!
A/N: I have spaghetti and sauce. No one has to die.

Beta Love: The Dragon and the Rose, Dutchgirl01 and Flyby Commander Shepard

Breath of the Nundu

Chapter 13

Fear and Loathing

If you are worthy of its affection, a cat will be your friend but never your slave. - Theophile Gautier

"Good Morning!"

"Goede morgen!"

"Oh hai!"

"Hallo!"

"Pancakes!"

"Ja! Pannenkoeken met siroop!"

"Pancakes for everyone!"

"Nalesniki!"

"Ooooo! We like those too!"

"Yes, share!"

Plush spiders swarmed over the breakfast table and distributed pancakes to the Head Table, much to the amusement of all the teachers and staff. Even Argus thanked Peppermint for bringing him the wild berry syrup for his pancakes. Argus rescued a plush spider that had fallen in the butter, using his new magic to clean her off. She puffed out like a Puffskein, but hugged his fingers before leaping off his hand with a "Whee!"

Mrs Norris watched the spidery antics with avid attention, seemingly restraining herself, if only barely, from chasing all of the spiders. Finally, she couldn't take it anymore, and tore off after them, and the spiders all scattered with a chorus of excited squeaks.

"Eeeeeeeeeeeeee!"

"How do you feel about magic, Argus?" Hermione asked, sipping her juice.

Argus flushed. "It's miraculous."

Hermione touched his hand. "I'm glad you think so. Many take for granted what magic gives them."
Argus shook his head. "Never." He looked fondly at the plush spiders. "Things have been more relaxed in the halls now that the students know there is no where safe to hide while making trouble."

Hermione chuckled. "They are extremely useful."

"And cheerful!"

"Yes, cheerful!"

"Cheerfully tell them to go back to their dorms!"

"Or we'll tell Brim!"

"Yes, tell Brim!"

Argus laughed. "That has a lot to do with it too."

"Gives you more time to study, Argus," Hermione said with a smile. "That's not so bad, hrn?"

Argus gave a genuine smile. "Not bad at all. Even Mrs Norris is more calm."

"Well, then," Hermione said. "That makes it all right then."

"Mew!" Mrs Norris said, hopping back into Argus' lap with a small plush spider gripped in her mouth.

"Eeee!" the spider said. "Caught me! Let go! Let go!"

Mrs Norris pinned the arachnid down and licked it over.

"Glad things have calmed down since Professor Trelawney left," Argus confessed. "She always gave me such dirty looks whenever I went by 'her' tower."

Hermione shook her head. "She was quite a piece of work. She believed herself to be special and entitled."

"She always had eyes for Professor Snape," Argus said with a shudder. "One thing I don't understand— if she was always on the luck potion, why did her attempts fail?"

Hermione tilted her head. "Felix Felicis, also known as liquid luck, influences luck in a way that brings good fortune your way. So just imagine what would happen if Severus were to wake up one morning and realise that he had been influenced in any way— by her, of all people."

Argus pondered that for awhile. "That would definitely NOT have ended well."

Hermione smiled. "No, so the potion made it so her attempts failed every single time— to save her life, which was, ironically, very lucky for her."

Argus sighed. "They say the liquid luck poisoned her, little by little. Is that true?"

"It's true, Argus," Hermione said. "It poisons the liver, which is why you should only use it very rarely, if at all— and she always mixed it with alcohol, which prolonged its effects, but multiplied the problems."

Argus rubbed his chin. "She was pretty messed up, she was."
Hermione laughed. "Yes. Very much so."

"Hey!

"Hey!

"Hey!

Three plush spiders bounced up and down near the jelly, led by Pinky.

"May we take biscuits to Cassius?"

"He's locked away."

"Locked away."

"In the dormitory."

"Studddlying."

Hermione eyed the spiders, eyebrow lifting.

"Please?"

"お願いします?"

"S'il vous plaît?"

"Por favor?"

"Пожалуйста?"

Hermione poked Pinky with one talon-like finger. "Will you confer with the house-elves to bring him a proper breakfast to go with said biscuits."

"Ummmm—"

"Rotroh!"

"Say yes!"

"Hnnn," Hermione said, licking her teeth in a predatory manner.

"Eeee!"

"Yes! We'll confer!"

"Conferring!"

"Will do!"

Hermione sniffed and snuffled Pinky and her gang of biscuit-raiding miscreants, hugging them.

"Eee!" they exclaimed, hugging her face.

"See that you do," Hermione said, "and you may."
"Yay!"

"Double yay!"

"Don't forget the pecan tarts!"

"For breakfast?"

"Of course!"

"And bacon!"

"Well, yeah the bacon!"

"Bacon-pecan tarts?"

"I dunno, that sounds strange."

"You're strange!"

"We're all strange!"

The spiders scurried off, carrying biscuits out the Great Hall and down the hallway corridor.

"Looks like someone has made a few friends amongst the plush spiders," Argus drawled.

Hermione smiled. "They are the very best kind of friends."

"Psst!"

Hermione eyed Coffee, who was teasingly waving his legs at her from over by the coffee carafe.

"Chase meee!"

"If you will excuse me, my friend Argus?"

"Of course," Argus said, holding back Mrs Norris.

Coffee immediately went zooming out of the Great Hall, chased by a highly enthusiastic Nundu.

"CatchmecatchmeCATCHME!"

"Going to catch you, catch you, catch you!"

Rolanda leaned over to Argus. ""Wherever did Hermione go, Argus?"

"She uh, had a pressing previous engagement, ma'am."

"Oh, okay. Pass me the waffles, would you please?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Somewhere, out there—"

"Beneath the pale moonlight."

"Someone's thinking of me,
"And loving me tonight—EEE!"

Brim snatched up the singing spiders from the window ledge and carried them off in her mouth.

"Where did they pick up that one?" Severus asked, running his hand along Brim's head and back.

"Phoenixes," Brim mrowled. "They'll sing any song from the past or the future that they like."

"And then teach it to the spiders?"

"And then teach it to the spiders," she confirmed.

Severus rolled his eyes. "Glorious."

"Grumpy," Brim said, laying her head on his knee.

"I'm always grumpy," Severus said, scribbling the last of his grading.

"No, you're just always grumpy whenever you're grading," Brim clarified, purring and rubbing her head lovingly against him.

"Hn," Severus replied, pushing the graded scrolls away just in time for Brim to pounce him, sending him sprawling on his back on the floor rug.

Brim snuffled his face, rubbing her long whiskers against his face.

"Arrr!" Severus said, attempting to wrestle her off, but knowing it was utterly futile all the same.

Suddenly, it was Hermione staring back at him, her long mahogany curls framing her face as she smiled down at him. The plush spiders scrambled over her body, dashing into her collar-choker to return to home base before she went on the move again.

"Hi," she said breathlessly, looking down into his face with nothing short of pure adoration.

Severus swallowed hard, wanting to do and say so many things but feeling completely unable to think coherently.

Coffee, Eek, Pinky and a row of warbling phoenix chicks began to sing.

"Baby I love you."

"Come, come, come into my arms—"

"Let me know the wonder of all of you!"

"Baby, I want you—"

"Now, now, now and hold on fast."

"Could this be the magic at last?"

Hermione's shoulders shook with silent laughter. She touched his cheek gently. "Technically, our magic has told us that we are already married, love."

Severus flushed, turning away, rolling away as he shoved her away. "No!"

Hermione closed her eyes, turning away as a seemingly infinite sadness filled them.
Severus staggered away from her, pulling his robes tightly around himself like a black cocoon. Powerful emotions swam across his face, and then suddenly they were gone. Wiped away as though a mighty hand had swept the scattered pieces from a chessboard. His knuckles were clenched together, his fists going as white as bone. "I can't—*I won't!"

Hermione pursed her lips together firmly, her leopard-like spots seeming to darken along her skin. "I must apologise… for presuming." She half-closed her eyes and resolutely turned away from him. "I have patrol tonight. I will leave you in peace."

In a blur of movement, she was a Nundu, and the ley magic crackled around her and then she was gone—the smell of ozone the only indicator that something had just happened.

A plethora of plush spiders scrambled off the nearby table, running into each other in their haste to chase after their furry mistress.

"Wait for us!"

"No, wait!"

"Come back!"

"Don't leave us!"

Smaller zaps of energy enveloped the anxious spiders, pulling them into a magical vortex and then they disappeared too, leaving Severus alone with only his own thoughts for company.

Severus crumpled against the nearby chair, his face twisted with agony, a low groan of pain escaping his lips.

"Severus, you look like utter shite," Lucius said bluntly, bodily hoisting his friend up into the armchair, and vanishing the near-empty bottle of Ogden's Firewhisky. "What in blazes have you done to yourself?"

Severus, Lucius knew, was not one to drink, much less to excess. One, he had a Nundu as a familiar, and two, he had a Muggle father who had been a violent alcoholic. Lucius glided over to the far cabinet, rustling through the many drawers. He finally found the vial of what he was looking for and then stormed back to Severus. He shook the potion, uncorked the bottle, yanked back Severus’ head by his hair, and threw it back into his throat, stroking his neck to make his swallow, not even caring if it should find its way into his body by going down his windpipe, straight into his lungs.

Severus suddenly coughed, choking, and he hacked helplessly for several moments as his body attempted to assimilate the potion. "Fuck," he said succinctly

"Now I know you must've done something horrible when you start sounding like Sirius bloody Black," Lucius snapped, sitting down in the opposite chair. "Do I need to drag you to the shower like I did when we were in our teens, or should I just blast you right here with an ice-cold Aguamenti until it ceases being amusing?"

Severus gave a low groan and pinched the bridge of his nose. "I didn't have a ring for her."

"So? Lucius said rather unsympathetically. "I've offered to personally craft you one from scratch with my very own hands if need be. Why is this an issue NOW when everyone who knows anything knows that kiss you gave her sealed your magic together just as surely as a sodding Ministry-certified wedding ceremony?"
Severus winced. "She needs to have a proper ring," he stated again. "I need to give her a ring, Lucius."

Lucius stared at his friend as if he'd sprouted a second head.

"To make it real," Severus whispered.

"She already believes it's real, you sodding idiot," Lucius snarled. "Magic never lies about that sort of thing. She of ALL people on this planet respects magic over some stupid band of metal."

"To make it real for ME," Severus stressed, visibly deflated.

"Anubis' pointed ears," Lucius cursed. "Don't make me shake you."

Severus shot Lucius a miserable, tortured look.

"You made her think that you didn't want to be bound to her, didn't you?" Lucius stared into his friend's eyes with nothing short of an accusatory glare.

"I did not mean to," Severus whispered.

"Whatever the hell did she request of you that you couldn't bring yourself to climb down from your high horse to do without a sodding ring when you have been okay with everything up until this point, Severus?"

Severus stared down at his boots.

"Severus."

Severus looked up and sighed. "Make love to her."

"Merlin, Morgana, and Circe, Severus," Lucius snarled at him. "And they accuse purebloods of being hung up on tradition! You had the blessing of Salazar Slytherin himself to bind yourself to his daughter, and you won't show her physical intimacy without a sodding ring?! How much more traditional does it get than the father of the witch giving his blessing and magic itself sealing your bond with a single kiss? Do you want the glowing avatars of the gods to come down and smack you upside the head?"

Severus twitched.

"You realise that now, even if you have a ring forged by Hephaestus himself, that she will most likely tell you precisely where to stick it?"

Severus was silent for a long time. "Yes."

A delicate lacquered box fell into Severus' lap just as a hand smacked him soundly upside the head.

"Idiot." The phantom of Salazar Slytherin sneered and then vanished into the far wall.

Severus tentatively opened the box, fully expecting it to suddenly come to life, transform into a basilisk, and proceed to devour him with great relish.

An exquisite, shimmering ring made of ley energy concentrated into an iridescent gem form and set into goblin silver filigree lay inside, resting upon an Acromantula silk pillow. Energy crackled around the ring, and Severus knew that there would be only one single creature on Earth capable of wearing such a ring and surviving the experience.
The band was "carved" to resemble two large cats rubbing up against each other: a Nundu and a smilodon.

For the next week, Severus felt the painful aftereffects of his shameful social faux pas, and it wasn't even the negativity he felt from Brim that tore at his soul, but the utter lack of anything when once she had been so very easy to read.

All around, it was plain to see that the children still loved her. Minerva and Rabbie were chatting and loving on her with no change. Brim would sprawl out, reveling in the early morning sunbeams on the highest ramparts of Hogwarts, and she would play-chase with the foals of the Centaur herd across the green. Draco and Harry would ride Brim around the castle grounds as a reward for getting their homework done, and sometimes they would drag Cassius along— the newest assimilated member from the House of Godric Gryffindor.

Her spiders attended her all day without fail. She would accompany Argus on his rounds to make sure no one and nothing ever got by him. Remus would test out various spells on her, observing which ones she was immune to, and then he'd have to clean up the mess caused by the wild ricochets off her impervious furry hide. Savage would come in with Proudfoot and report to her, just as they would to Alastor Moody, preparing Proudfoot for the Covenant just as best as they possibly could.

Everything was going along as it normally did, save for one small omission: save for those times when she was expected to attend as his familiar, Brimstone ignored his presence entirely. Even when she looked straight at him, it was as if she wasn't even seeing him; she acted as if he was nothing more than a clear pane of glass. The spiders would scurry around him, giving him a wide berth as they whispered to each other. And Hermione Slytherin wasn't ever seen outside of her classroom. Only Brim remained— a Brim that seemed to see everyone but him.

He knew what he had done.

He had made her believe herself to be undesirable as both a witch and a woman, that she was not someone he could ever imagine being physically intimate with. He could accept her a Nundu, as his familiar— but it was as if the woman had been a phantom from the aether. Magically or no, he had completely repudiated her.

And she was giving him what she truly believed was what he really wanted: a familiar. Nothing more.

That hadn't been his intention at all. Feeling attraction to her had never been a problem— at least, not in the way that she thought. What he had really needed was a visible bond that he could see on her finger. He had wanted, desperately needed, a constant reminder that what they had was real. It was that part of him that had foolishly required proof in the manner of Semele desiring to see the true face of Zeus.

He had wanted absolute, complete, incontrovertible proof.

And he was a dunderhead, a total idiot.

Proof had been right there in front of him the entire time. Proof had sung in their magic— and only now, as she cut herself off from him as HIS request— did he truly feel what he had lost.

"Coming through!"

"Beep beep!"
"Here comes the biscuit train, choo choo!"

A line of cheery, colourful spiders were heading towards Brim's favourite sunning spot on the castle green. They were carrying an endless variety of tasty biscuits back to their much-loved furry mistress.

Suddenly, Severus realised he was being stared at.

Coffee was regarding him steadily with his multiple crystalline eyes, his front legs tapping impatiently on the wall that he was clinging to.

"Angry with you," Coffee informed him.

Severus flinched. "You've a right to be. I'm angry with myself," he admitted quietly.

Coffee continued to tap his legs against the wall and stare at him.

Then Pinky scurried up too, followed by Eek and Snowfall. They all glared at him with their multiple shining eyes.

"What she do wrong now?" Pinky asked, glaring.

"She's giving him space, like HE wanted," Eek said.

"So? She gave him space. What he complaining about now?" Snowfall groused.

Severus slumped. "I never wanted that."

"You pushed her away!" Coffee accused. "We were there!"

"Not for the reasons she thinks!" Severus insisted, feeling utterly foolish for having had to argue with plush spiders to even have a chance at talking to Hermione again.

The spiders whispered to each other. Coffee raised his head. "Why did you, then?"

Severus sighed. Constantly having to explain his reasons both to himself, to Lucius, and now a clutter of angry plush spiders was making him realise exactly how stupid he was being all over again. "I wanted— needed— her to be wearing my ring before… before being intimate with her. I wanted there to be a bond."

Coffee tapped his legs. "You had a bond. Since the beginning."

"A physical one," Severus explained. "A more tangible one."

The spiders whispered back-and-forth to each other, their legs tapping.

"Stupid," Coffee announced.

"Yes, but I still needed it, nonetheless," Severus said sadly, resting his head in his hands.

"You doubt her love for you," Eek accused, pointing a leg at him.

"I doubt anyone who says they can love me," Severus admitted.

The spiders whispered together again, occasionally shooting a look at him and then turning back to confer with the others.
"Still stupid," Coffee decided.

"But I still want it," Severus confessed. "I still need to know what we have, had… is real."

Pinky quickly lowered herself down on a strand of silk and glared directly into Severus' face. "She's been proving to you every single day that what she felt for you was real." Somehow, the little plush arachnid managed to make pink polka-dots look distinctly menacing.

"I cannot explain why it means so much to me," Severus pleaded his case, "but I beg you to let me try and explain it to her."

The cluster of spiders muttered to themselves again, going silent then resuming a few times.

"Okay," Coffee agreed. "But if you hurt her again, we'll wrap you up in silk and anchor you to the bottom of Black Lake."

Severus sighed. "That seems fair."

The spiders whispered to each other again.

Eek spoke up. "She'll come to you when she's ready."

The spiders scurried off, vanishing with an eerie silence.

Severus couldn't help but think that facing down a horde of angry plush spiders was worse than facing the parents of the bride.

One thousand kilograms of fully grown, emotionally blocked-off Nundu was sitting on Severus' chest, and he couldn't help but think, other than his current inability to breathe, that he deserved it.

Always before she'd kept her size "under control" after that spell had dramatically allowed her to become more gargantuan than she would have normally, but not today.

Today, she was laying on top of him, busily chewing on Peppermint the spider, foaming at the mouth, and ignoring him completely, save for not allowing him to breathe.

To be fair, he admitted, somehow he could still breathe— albeit barely. It was if she knew exactly how much pressure she could pin him down with and not asphyxiate him. He blamed it on hours of playing pin the Draco and Harry. Perhaps, he should have been grateful, lest she be out of practice and murder him by accident— or on purpose.

"I'm sorry!" he wheezed.

Brim mauled Peppermint, causing her to squeak and wriggle her legs.

"Come on, Brim!" Peppermint squeaked. "Give him a chance."

Brim turned her head away, clearly not interested.

Snowfall intercepted, allowing Peppermint to escape, but ended up being chewed on in her place.

The spiders scurried around, trying to run distraction and encourage chase, but for once, Brim wasn't particularly interested.

Coffee perched on top her muzzle and massaged the bridge of her nose, but Brim only paused long
enough to give him a slurp, sending him tumbling off into the grass with an "Eeee!

The gold and white spider suddenly floated in on a stunning cloud of magic, zapped Severus, causing the small lacquered box to come flying out of his robe pocket, and tumbled in front of Brim, opening with a clack. Fizban then vanished in a puff of smoke.

Brim slowly turned her head, her whiskers twitched as she eyed the box and its contents.

"You never disgusted me," Severus wheezed. "I wanted you to have a ring before—" he said. "Before I could allow myself to believe that any of it was real."

Brim stared at the ring and then at him, but her pressure on him didn't relent.

"No one has ever said that they loved me, not since I was a child, and even then, my mother never said it when anyone was around, including my father… and my father—" Severus winced. "He showed he "cared" by beating me harder."

"Lily never once said that she cared— it was always a silent thing… accepted as though she never had to say the words," Severus continued. "We'd known each other for so long, it had become something I wasn't supposed to ever question. Now, mother finally says it, almost as if she's trying to make up for lost time."

Severus' face twisted in pain, but it wasn't a physical sort. "I needed you to have a ring. I needed you to know that it was real to me. I needed to know it was real to you. I wanted to see it… every day when I doubted and saw the ring on your finger that what we have… had, was real. Not just some dream I could have made up."

Brim eyed him warily, her tail twitching slightly.

"I cut you off from my emotions because I was scared, Hermione," Severus admitted. "I was scared of what I felt for you. I was scared that it was never going to end and yet that it was going to end. I panicked."

"I wanted you more than I've ever wanted anyone or anything in my life," Severus confessed, "and everything I have ever wanted. Ever thought I needed. Ever been driven to have— has been taken from me."

"I need you," he gasped. "I want you more than anything in this world and the next, and I am terrified that I will do what I just did and hurt you and drive you away."

Severus' face twisted in agony. "I love you, and I don't know how to show such love. I am a fallible man. I have lost my faith, and I don't know what to do to prove what I feel short of dropping every shield I have ever had and letting you see it all."

"And I'll do it," he wheezed. "For you." He held out his hand, his fingers twitching. "For you."

Brim eyed him, the ring, and then him again. Her ears twitched, and her tail was poofed out like a feather duster. Doubt was written on every line of her body. She chewed on Eek nervously, causing him to squeak and wriggle.

Slowly, like the seeping of rain through the tiny cracks in a wall, she stood, allowing Severus to breathe and perhaps regain some of his dignity from being plastered on the ground like a human pancake.

"You are an idiot," Brim informed him, her tail swishing back and forth as she glared at him.
"That and so much more," Severus admitted, rubbing his temples.

Brim paced along the ground, chewing on Eek as she went. The plump plush spider did his best to oblige, squeaking and wriggling his legs with each gnaw. Brim sighed. "It is hard for me to remember that you are not perfect, when so many things you do seem perfect to me."

Brim pressed her nose to his, staring deeply into his eyes. "You hurt me."

"I cannot promise I will never hurt you," Severus said with a sigh, "but I can promise that I will definitely not have meant to. I will try my damnest not to do so again." Severus extended his hand. "The offer still stands. I beg you to take me up on it."

Brim's orange-green eyes flickered as her whiskers twitched. The spiders swarmed over her head.

"Come on."

"Give him a shot."

"You like forgiveness."

"Yes, forgiveness."

"Vergiffenis!"

The spiders stroked her ears, causing her to purr softly.

Slowly, Brim stood, transforming into her, ironically, smaller human form, her mahogany hair flaring about her head like a wreath of fire. She tentatively put her hand in his and met his eyes, allowing his thoughts to swallow her up.

Brim popped her head out of a pile of squeaky, drowsy arachnid plushies and mrowled. She picked up Coffee and Peppermint in her mouth and proceeded to caffeinate and perform dental hygiene in one go. The spiders squeaked and wriggled in half-hearted protest, but didn't attempt to leave.

The spiders yawned and squeaked, crawling back into her collar, exposing a sleeping Severus that had been sharing the bed with her. Brim scratched behind her ear with her rear foot, giving a toothy yawn as she released her plush hostages from their morning maulings.

Coffee and Pinky engaged in some heavy petting on the nearby settee, causing Brim to widen her eyes in feline curiosity. Could plush spiders... breed? Brim averted her eyes. Even a plush spider deserved a little alone time when—well, that was going on.

Not that the spiders gave her and Severus alone time. They just politely pretended to look the other way while singing mood-specific songs to encourage results. Which results they wanted, however, still remained to be seen.

The house-elf had already come and gone, leaving a large bloody haunch of something that smelled absolutely divine. She licked her jowls and pounced, tearing off pieces with enthusiasm.

Nothing like extra protein to make the last week of emotional drama seem like nothing at all.

Purr.

"Oh hai!"
"Oh HAI!"

"Hai dere!"

The spiders were starting to "wake up" from their night's nesting, and they proceeded to greet each other socially on Brim's back.

"Hey, do you know what would be great?"

"More meat?"

"Well, yeah…"

"Steak!"

"Yes!"

"I agree!"

"A nice, rich soup!"

"Barbequed chicken over a bonfire!"

"Better!"

"Let's put it all together!"

"Oooooo, yes!"

"Kids like cookouts too!"

"Hrm that would require lots of steak."

"That's a bad thing?"

"No, just a lot of steak."

"Mmm, steak."

"Hrm, only so many fires we can tend."

"I'll bring the fish!"

The spiders stared at the plush spider that spoke, their multiple legs tapping impatiently.

"I'm a fishing spider, duh!"

A ripple, like a shrug, went through the other spiders like a wave.

"Okay."

"Seems legit."

"Yeah, ok, he's in charge of fish."

"Who gets the drin— EEEEE!"
Brim scooped up a black and white speckled spider and carried him off, making him squeak repeatedly.

The other spiders rustled all together. "I'll get the drinks!" a white and blue paisley-patterned spider offered.

"Fizzy drinks?"

"Caffeinated drinks?"

"Fizzy and caffeinated drinks?"

"Sparkling apple and pear cider!"

"Yessssssssssssssssssss!"

"Ok, everyone, let's make it happen!"

"But, but—" A little blonde spider protested. "It's going to be hard to get that much meat!"

"We know!"

"But—it could get complicated!"

"We know!"

"I might have to get the Malfoys!"

"Mmhm!

"It might involve politics!"

"Yup!"

"I hate politics! You don't understand how much I hate politics!"

"We know! We just don't care!"

The blonde spider slumped dispiritedly, muttering unhappily to herself.

"Okay! Let's go!"

The spiders all scurried away in a tearing hurry.

In bed, Severus Snape woke up, feeling a bit chilly as his blanket of plush warmth suddenly disappeared. He looked around in total confusion. "I really need to stop using sentient blankets."

"Hug!"

"Hug!"

"Me too!"

"Why does Pinky get all the love around here?"

Cassius Granger quickly found himself buried in exuberantly affectionate plush spiders.
"Oi, Granger," Fred said, grabbing him by the collar and dragging him out of the plush arachnid pile. "How are you getting all the love lately?"

"I have no idea," Cassius answered, wriggling. "But it makes me feel better after I found out my parents left for the Doctors Without Borders program, sold the house, and didn't leave me a forwarding address."

Fred and George immediately plunked the younger boy down on the nearby chair. "What?"

Cassius sighed, dragging his toe across the floor. "I told you I used to dream about having a big sister, right? How she protected me by always taking the blame for my accidental magic?"

"Yes, but—"

Cassius shrugged. "Not all parents react that well when they find out their kid is a 'freak' that won't be going to dental school and be normal, just like them."

Fred and George exchanged grim looks. "We're really sorry, mate."

Cassius shrugged as Pinky bumped into his neck and demanded a cuddle, which he promptly obliged.

"Tell them the real reason you're not too sad about it," Pinky squeaked.

Cassius smiled. "I made the summer program. I'll be able to stay at Hogwarts over the summer hols. Learn all kinds of things. Help take care of the place."

"That's great, mate!" Fred and George cheered.

Cassius smiled as Pinky happily bounced up and down on his shoulder.

"They did me a favour, I guess," Cassius admitted. "The summer program is setup for people like me—whose home life isn't as normal or pleasant as we would like."

George plopped next to him. "Our home life isn't normal in any sense of the word. Sure, we're not being abandoned or abused, but I think every family has issues—somewhere."

Fred nudged George. "Don't get us wrong. Our parents do what they can, but we found out over the summer that we kinda had curse on our family."

"A curse?" Cassius asked.

"The curse of extreme fertility," Fred said with a laugh.

"It's a real curse, though— but you'd think my parents would have started suspecting something before they were seven children in."

Cassius' eyes widened comically.

"Weasleys are the definition of plentiful," George chuckled. "But I'm relieved that my chances of having a raging horde of children before I'm twenty-one seem to have been greatly lessened."

Fred smiled. "Damn, and I was so looking forward to you having all the children for me, bro."

George glared menacingly at Fred.
Fred tried to look innocent, but utterly failed his dice roll.

Suddenly, Brim appeared and used her head to push Cassius back towards Hogwarts.

"Mrowl," she insisted, herding him towards the school.

"But my homework is done!"

"Mrowl!"

"I swear, Brim, it's done!"

"You finish that star chart that Professor Sinistra assigned you?"

"Oh, Merlin, I for— AHHHH!"

"Busted," Pinky squeaked.

Brim began to drag Cassius off by his collar like an errant cub.

Fred and George crossed their arms together and grinned. "We so need one of those for Ron."

"You kidding, Fred? She'd murder him!"

"He'd be much better for it."

George tapped his fingers on his arm. "Point."

"Maybe we can introduce her to Percy?"

George's eyes widened and a mischievous grin spread across his face.

"Do I know you, ma'am?" Cassius asked. "I know I don't have you in class yet, Professor, but you seem oddly— familiar."

Hermione turned from writing complex calculations on the blackboard, her dark green velvet robes swirling around her feet in a manner strangely similar to a certain potion master's. "What is troubling you, Mr Granger?"

Cassius sat slumped in a classroom chair, resting his head on his folded hands. "Ever just felt like you somehow know someone? Or that you should? But there doesn't seem to be any specific reason for it?"

"I tend to have a great many reasons for why I feel anything, Mr Granger," Hermione said with a kind smile, "but I understand what you are trying to say."

"People say I'm just making things up because I lost my parents," Cassius explained. "But— I really do feel like I know you from somewhere. Did you ever get your teeth cleaned at a Muggle dentist's office?"

Hermione raised a curious eyebrow. "Perhaps."

"Really? I mean, that would make so much sense!" Cassius exclaimed. "Was it in London?"

Hermione tilted her head, a small smile tugging at her lips. "I suppose it was."
"Oh, man, I feel so much better now. That must be why I think I've seen you before," Cassius said with a smile.

"Well, you let me know if you find some other reason, hrm?" Hermione said with a smile about her lips. "I wouldn't want to encourage your brain to get you distracted from your studies, hrm?"

Cassius grinned. "No, ma'am."

Cassius hopped up, setting about leaving.

"Mr Granger."

Cassius turned around.

"Sometimes we find ourselves parted from those we care for in order to learn new, important lessons in life," Hermione said. "If we are exceptionally lucky, we can one day find them and celebrate our reunion with them."

Cassius pondered that for a moment and then smiled up at her. "Thanks, professor!"

"Hn," Hermione grunted lowly, stifling a smile herself.

Cassius promptly bounced off out of the classroom and away to Gryffindor tower.

Pinky crawled out of her choker-collar and bounced on Hermione's shoulder. "I really like him. Please, can we keep him?"

Hermione scritched the plush spider lovingly. "Perhaps, one day, if he ever truly realises who I am. Until then— let him just be a normal boy with enough hardships to ponder."

Pinky cocked her head thoughtfully. "Okay! But I still think he's cool!"

Hermione smiled. "Nothing wrong with that, little fuzzy one."

Pinky squeaked happily and rubbed into her hand. "You remember him, yes?"

"Of course."

"Why not just tell him?" Pinky asked.

"Some mysteries are best discovered when you are ready to know the answer, my lovely pink friend. He doesn't even know I am his Nundu friend."

"Soon?" Pinky asked.

"Soon," Hermione agreed.

Brim went barrelling across the green, three human burrs stuck to her back. While Harry and Draco knew what to expect at the end of all things and reacted accordingly, the new addition did not. Cassius was promptly sent flying into the lake at high speed, landing with a cannonball sploosh as Harry and Draco did ten point perfect dives.

Cassius sputtered and spat out a stream of water. "Why didn't you warn me?"

"So we could see what we looked like the first time she dumped us," Draco informed him, clearly
amused.

Cassius wrung out the pink spider on his head and replaced her, causing her to squeak. "You two are a menace."

"Then why are you with us, mate?" Harry chuckled.

Cassius slumped. "Because you're still better than most of my age group."

"Aw, they aren't that bad, Cassius," Draco said. "I hear they actually managed to not blow up the potions classroom yesterday."

"Only because I put them in a body bind before they could put sulfur in the cauldron," Cassius muttered.


"No, just partial," Cassius said. "Key areas like the legs and arms. I haven't figured out how to get the whole thing to work."

Draco raised an impressed brow. "Close enough."

"Why are you studying body binds in first year, anyway?" Harry asked.

Cassius sighed. "Because my classmates are imbeciles."

"You sound just like my uncle," Draco chortled.

"Well, unless Professor Snape is your uncle—"

"He is his uncle," Harry told him cheerfully.

Cassius' eyes widened. "Okay then."

"Why, are you trying to emulate my Uncle Severus?" Draco asked.

"No, I just think he's pretty brilliant." Cassius shrugged. "Brim brewed a potion for us to demonstrate. That's pretty cool for a familiar."

Harry snickered. "Don't ever underestimate Brim. She's not your average anything."

Brim chose that moment to pop her head up in the water and gnaw on Harry. He giggled and wrestled himself onto her back as she paddled around.

Cassius eeped as the squid yanked him under the water and then flung him up into the air.

"Aeeeeeiiiiiiiiiiiiii!" Cassius cried, landing with a sploosh again, belly-flop style.

Draco shook his head. "You need to learn how to properly dive, mate."

Cassius spat out a small minnow. "Never learned to swim, really. I can tread water and all. Doggy paddle. That's about it."

"That's going to have to learn if you plan to hang around us much," Harry mused. "Every day ends with a dip in the lake— whether we planned it or not."

"Just plan for it," Draco suggested, waving his hand. "Easier that way."
About twenty plush spiders swam by, doing everything from the backstroke to the side-stroke, causing Draco to grin wildly. "See? Just watch the spiders."

"I've never seen a place with so many spiders, plush or otherwise," Cassius confessed.

"That's because you haven't been around Brim," Harry said. "They just appeared one day. Fred and George made her the first one as a toy, but Percy threw it into the fire. Professor Snape and Professor Flitwick repaired it— more like they remade it with major improvements."

"Then they somehow started to replicate and evolve," Draco added. "We're still not sure if it was Fred and George's doing or a little help from the other side."

"Rowena gave us a lift!" Pinky said, bouncing on Cassius' shoulder.

"A helping leg!"

"Multiple legs!"

"Yes! Rowena gave us to Brim to keep her company."

"Help her out!"

"Be her eyes and ears."

"Many eyes."

"Many ears!"

"Even more legs!"

Eek sat on Brim's head, having done his best fishing spider impression, showing off a good-sized sunfish.

"Lunch!" Draco laughed. "Only one though. Might be a small lunch."

The other spiders surfaced, all wielding fish of their own from sunfish, perch, salmon, and even a rather annoyed pike. Some of them held only seaweed, having failed at their fishing attempts. They clustered around Eek, hoping for pointers. Eek happily obliged, plucking a large striped bass out of the water. The other spiders excited tried to do the same, with random results.

"You guys are awesome," Harry cheered.

The line of sodden spidery minions swam to shore and trailed up back to Hogwarts, carrying "lunch" with them.

"We better help," Draco chuckled. "Uncle doesn't like scaling fish on his own. The spells send scales flying everywhere."

Harry grinned. "Come on, Cassius," he said, beckoning. "We need to dry off so we don't track water everywhere. Argus would hunt us down if we dared to drip all over the place."

"I didn't know you could cook so well, Severus," Lucius remarked with a smirk.

Snape just rolled his eyes.
Lucius tended the cooking fire with his wand, a rather sly expression on his face.

"Hi, Lucius!"

"Oh hai!"

"Hi dere!"

"Whee!"

Spiders swung by on strands of silk on their way to somewhere only they knew.

Lucius shook his head. "I get many more civil and cheerful greetings from plush spiders than most of the stuffed shirts in the Wizengamot."

"Perhaps you should take a few of them along with you to the Wizengamot," Severus said with a smile tugging on his lips.

"The entire Wizengamot would fall over to snuggle small plush arachnids instead of judging the guilty," Lucius mused.

"Or they would judge the guilty while snuggling small plush arachnids."

Lucius chuckled. "Perhaps. It might even improve the results."

Severus shrugged.

"Are we going to have enough fish?" Lucius asked. "Brim is here, after all. She could eat an entire tuna by herself."

Severus arched a brow. "She can certainly restrain herself for the occasion, Lucius."

"As you say," Lucius replied, tilting his head.

"Besides, she is down by the lake with the centaur foals, fishing up more salmon."


"Do not forget the wild boar," Magorian added, walking up to a group of other centaur stallions who were tending a large fire pit, which was emitting the heavenly smell of slow-roasting pork.

"And how could we possibly forget that, my friend?" Severus said with a polite bow.

"Don't forget the steamed fairy pods!" one of the colts said, bringing in a bushel of what looked like multi-coloured pea pods.

"Did you pick them all yourself? Lucius asked.

"All of the foals picked them," Merrylegs said happily. "We had to beat off about a thousand very angry fairies in order to get them."

Magorian laughed. "They don't call them fairy pods for nothing, Merrylegs." The little buggers love them even more than we do."

"Quite the banquet is being formed here," Rabbie said with clear approval. "Minerva made a mixed green salad with her famous citrus vinaigrette. I will admit I am pants at dressings, however, I do
make a mean pan of roasted new potatoes and a blackcurrant crumble."

"As long as there is dessert, the foals will not care," Firenze laughed, nodding as the foals set up a leaf steamer for the fairy pods.

The foals whickered laughter back at him.

"I thought you were down at the lake fishing with Brim?" Severus asked.

Merrylegs stomped his forelegs. "Only half of us. We ran out of fishing poles and drag nets."

"Foals are often assigned tasks in smaller groups. It is not often where we ask them all to do one united thing," Bane said as a little filly darted between his legs with a load of fairy pods and what looked like young gourds.

Harry and Draco were assisting the foals with setting up multiple leaf steamers, laughing as the colts and fillies attempted to cover the boys in leaves. The mares were shaking their heads in amusement. Cassius, however, who had been dragged along due to having spent the night when the boys were done with their homework for the weekend, was staring in awe at the centaurs, almost stiff with shock and awe.

"Cassius, are you going to help or stand there like a praying mantis?" Harry chastened the younger boy.

Cassius shook off the shock enough to stumble over to help.

"He's new," Magorian said. "Did you have a foal while we weren't looking, Severus? Lucius?"

The two wizard snorted together. "Not bloody likely. He's eleven."

"Oh, eleven. Why is it so hard to to tell with human foals?" Magorian shrugged.

Severus gave a small smile. "I tend to group them together as imbeciles."

Lucius nudged Severus. "Come, now. You are getting better from the time when you held Draco out in extended hands like a particularly foul piece of contaminated rubbish."

Severus glared at Lucius.

"He was covered from head-to-toe in tomato sauce."

"So were you."

"Because of him."

"He liked sauce."

"He liked wearing sauce."

"I can still hear you!" Draco yelled from under a blanket of steamer leaves.

Lucius turned. "And?"

"So not fair," Draco pouted.

"Sauce!"
"Sauce!"

"Covered in sauce!"

"Hee hee hee!"

The spiders scurried around, spreading the word of the saucy baby. 

Draco slumped, even under the leaves. "I really hate you, father."

Lucius smiled. "Parents have to have their occasional moments of victory, my son."

Draco muttered darkly as Harry chuckled. They heaved the leaf steamer up over the cauldron of boiling water with the help of their centaur friends.

The house-elves were having the time of their lives setting up the clearing under the trees with tables and centaur-friendly eating stations so everyone would feel welcome. Multiple lines of smoking fish were strung around a smoking fire, while others were being grilled over the fire. The house-elves would pop in and out, helping move the cooked over the warming fire and turning the cooking items. Another quartet of elves were off to the side tending to a whole ox that was being rotated slowly on a spit, rotisserie-style.

The centaur mares snorted and stomped their feet, scattering the elves as they encroached on "their" territory, but there was no true hostility as much as there was a sense of amusement. Some of the younger foals that rarely left their dams' sides were chasing the house-elves around, making a game of it.

Professor Sprout was walking down from Hogwarts with a kettle in her hands. "I brought the hutspot," she announced. "Healthy jingle-potatoes, goat-punching carrots from the greenhouse, and singing onions as well."

"Goat-punching carrots?" the children rushed up to help her with the cauldron. "Ever wonder why I can grow carrots outside of the greenhouse?" Pomona asked. "They defend themselves! Makes it fun around harvest time, though. Have to get them just after a cold spell. Slows 'em down a bit."

Harry, Draco, and Cassius giggled, heaving the cauldron over to the tables.

Rolanda Hooch flew in on a broom, levitating several skewers bearing a multitude of Cornish game hens, already prepped and ready to be roasted over the cooking fires. Flitwick arrived shortly after bearing two enormous trays of delicious-looking caramel apples and some sort of glazed goblin pastries covered in toasted nuts, but he looked as if the trays were somehow tugging him along behind rather than the half-goblin professor actually carrying them to the tables. Professor Sinistra brought along multiple strings of floating sugared almond biscuits shaped into various stars and planets. Remus brought in a gigantic platter of "hot dogs", which were actually steaks shaped like different breeds of dogs that barked at each other from between the buns and chased the condiments around the tray. Professor Babbling brought a heaping tray of decorative shortbread biscuits baked into rune tiles, and Charity Burbage brought a sizable assortment of Muggle snacks, dips, and appetizers which smelled heavenly yet were strangely inactive compared to the more magical foods. Kettleburn shambled in with mood lighting created from Sybill Trelawney's abandoned crystal balls, having transformed them into glowing lamps that phased from one colour to another. Wilhelmina Grubbly-Plank brought in an enormous covered dish which smelled very enticing. When Cassius lifted the lid in curiosity, three or four bulbous fruits floated away, causing the foals to give chase with nets to bring the lighter than air fruits back to the dinner tables. Behind her, she tugged along a larger tray of non-light fare: an enormous four cheese lasagna, a huge bowl of antipasta and several
loaves of fragrant garlic bread.

"Wilhelmina, my dear, you always outdo yourself," Minerva cooed.

Grubbly-Plank smiled and nodded. "I do love to cook, Minerva. You know that."

"Indeed, and I treasure every time you do," Minerva replied with a wide grin.

Narcissa was flitting about arranging the food perfectly so everyone had access to everything, all with the skills of a professional caterer. Her arrival with the "punch fountain" had caused Severus to shake his head in resignation that no matter where the gathering was set, Narcissa would always find a way to provide fizzy and enchanting drinks. And then he saw Narcissa's personal elf toddling dutifully behind her, levitating a triple fountain with dark, milk and white chocolate along with an enormous platter of fresh berries, cut fruits, biscuits, and cake cubes in various flavours.

"Good gracious, just look at all this food," Pomona crowed in amazement, watching as Septima Vector showed up levitating bowls of her famous vegan dishes, a savoury corn salad, bulgur wheat salad, and squash-lentil-sweet potato salad along with garlic-roasted green beans and a several loaves of her homemade vegan banana, zucchini, and pumpkin breads. "What a fine feast!"

Brim suddenly popped her head up in the middle of a pile of leaves and pounced on a few unwary foals, causing them to squeal with excitement and scurry wildly around the clearing.

"Once a Nundu."

"Always a Nundu."

The spiders cheered, waving their legs excitedly.

"Are they here yet?"

"Nope, they're late."

"Tsk, tsk."

"Who?"

"No one!"

Suspicious looks spread amongst the spiders until Eek, Pinky, Snowfall, and Coffee drove the other spiders back into hiding.

Magorian cleared his throat, lifting his arms to get attention. "Friends, herd, and friends of the herd. We welcome you today for a celebration of unity that has transcended the here and the after, the species, and the boundaries that come between one mind and another. Welcome to our celebration of life and friendship—" Magorian smiled slyly. "And a lifetime of friendship between two souls that have been brought together as lifetime companions in the here and the after."

The gathered crowd gasped as Severus stepped out dressed in his very best formals— suspiciously shimmering with a touch of the finest of plush spider silk. The plush spiders gathered together, waving their legs in celebration. As the shock of seeing Severus in anything formal, not to mention completely different from his trademark black wool rippled through the crowd, Brim mrowled and stood on her hind legs and transformed into her human shape, cloaked in an exquisite shimmering silvery silk gown trimmed in emerald embroidery. A circlet made of gold and ebony rimmed her head, framing her hair, which had been tamed into a mane of silken brunette curls, the circlet in the
shape of two great cats woven together in a grand Celtic-esque knot setting it off perfectly.

The half-transparent shapes of the Founders materialised, standing nearby with sly grins on their faces. Salazar and Godric crossed their forearms together, perhaps daring anyone to say anything negative.

"Well this isn't fair," Sirius muttered. "We were supposed to surprise you with the ideal conditions for a wedding."

Crack!

Crack! Crack!

Savage and Proudfoot showed up together as Kingsley arrived with a startled-looking side-along Minister for Magic. Fudge looked around, carrying his official marriage registry book.

"Surprise!" Sirius cheered, looking somewhat sheepish.

"Ah, it seems Mr Magorian has everything in hand. I shall bear official witness for the Ministry on the sanctioning of this marriage and leave the ceremony to you, good sir."

Magorian nodded to the Minister with a tug of a smile on his lips.

Two rather dashing basilisks showed up to encircle the clearing with their massive coils, each wearing delicate silk bands around their eyes to shield the crowd from their gaze. Beside them were a small cluster of hatchlings, each bearing custom woven silk finery to cover their eyes. Tiny silver bells tinkled from their headdresses, giving off a soft relaxing chime. The baby basilisks slithered up to Draco and Harry, curling up in their laps, heads raised to listen to the ceremony.

The other students, having been excused from their classes to attend, whispered excitedly— for once being able to to sit together without the need for house colours or house loyalty. Many of them gasped and looked at the basilisks with fright, but on each side, Savage on one, and Proudfoot on the other, the Aurors had their hands on the sides of each basilisk in the universal sign for "This familiar is under control." Draco and Harry did much the same, and the plush spiders did all the rest, spreading up and down the coils and cheering silently with their forelegs.

The children, having learned that the spiders never lead them astray, and the Aurors hadn't ever let them down— relaxed and returned to paying attention to what was going on ahead of them. Cassius, in particular, looked blissfully happy with a pile of plush spiders taking up posts on his shoulders and lap.

"My dear friends," Magorian began. "Today we are gathered to celebrate a union already blessed by the cosmos herself— the union of two souls brought together in innocence, bound together in friendship and trust, which has evolved into something far greater than simple affection or love. Today, we celebrate amongst our herd and family, friends and officials of the human world, a true joining of trust and camaraderie."

"Perhaps, you might say, this was written long ago, and there are those amongst my people who believe it was written in the stars," Magorian continued. "Some would say, fate was written long before a boy was tormented by his peers and made horrible choices, or a man's manipulation to ensure such things were done. Some would say that fate was written long before a child was ripped from the womb before her time had come, long before the magic of the leys created her anew, and long before she was again ripped from her womb to face a crueler world—"
Magorian smiled. "Long before the girl embraced her destiny and became a Nundu, protector of us all, the hand of the gods worked through the hands of others, bringing these two souls together—undeniably strong. But unlike the bond that remained between long long daughter and her long lost dam, we stand here today to confirm the bond between what we, the centaur, view as the ultimate celebration: the bond between mates, from which new life is formed and carries our immortality as we carry on to the stars."

Magorian took Severus' and Hermione's hands and clasped them together. "Man and woman, smilodon and Nundu, soul and soul, magic and magic. Do you, Severus Tobias Snape, take this soul as your mate, in good times and in famine, in pain and in joy, in life and the world beyond, to travel the world's wonders until the final trek to the last encampment?"

"I do."

"Will you protect your mate, regardless of disagreement, regardless of strength or weakness, and stand by her through the trials of life?"

"I do."

"Do you, Hermione Jean Bonnie Skye Brimstone Slytherin, take this soul as your mate, in good times and in famine, in pain and in joy, in life and the world beyond, to travel the world's wonders until the final trek to the last encampment?"

"I do."

"Will you stand by your mate, allow him to protect you, regardless of strength or weakness, and stand by him through the trials of life as partners and mates?"

"I do."

"Do you, Severus and Hermione, promise to listen to each other even when it hails sideways on one day and is placid the next, remember each other's differences as well as what drew your together as long as you draw breath on Gaia?"

"We do."

Magorian made a gesture and Fawkes and his mate, Aine, came and landed on their wrists, setting themselves to flame. The flames spread to surround the pair. "I most happily proclaim and bless your bond as mates under the sun and moon the eyes of the cosmos."

Fawkes and Aine flew off, leaving two perfect phoenix prints emblazoned on their wrists in shimmering of red and orange flames that burned but did not cause pain.

"You may now share your food," Magorian said with a grin.

Hermione and Severus picked up a perfect red apple together and held it between them, each taking a bite at the same time in a balancing act that threatened to end in mutual embarrassment. Yet, they managed to succeed, and the core of the apple fell to the ground between them. They both dug a hole with their feet, burying the apple's core into the earth—the act ensuring the fruitfulness of the next generation.

Those gathered now stood, cheering and clapping, and many pulled out tiny shrunken presents that had been hidden on their person and used their wands to enlarge them and float them over to the nearby table, burying it in sincere well wishes and a multitude of beribboned gifts.
Rows of tiny, fluffy phoenix chicks perched on Severus' and Hermione's arms, setting themselves to flames just as their parents had, leaving tiny, shimmering, silver prints in their wake. They peeped together victoriously, warbled musically, and hopped down, rushing to chase after their parents.

With a tender smile, Hermione and Severus pressed their lips together in front of everyone, causing a cheer to spread across the gathered folk, save for a few of the children who hid their eyes and went, "Ewwwwww, kissing!"

"So, you've been Brim all along?" Rolanda said with no little awe.

"Yes," Hermione answered, "but I was not really aware of it, not as a person remembers being someone else, not truly. I grew up as a Nundu. I was and still am a Nundu, but in my dreams I was a child being raised by the Founders. They were my parents. Hogwarts was my true home. It was mother and father when I was ripped from my birth mother... too soon."

"Minerva?"

Hermione nodded. "I would've died had Hogwarts not stepped in to save me. I did die, in a way, but then I became Brim— long before I had a name to call my own. Long before I met Minerva and Severus as a child."

"It's so confusing," Pomona said. "You were but a child— and yet now you are not a child."

"Oh, she was a child, Pomona," Helga said, drifting by with an amused expression. "Just like any child. Curious and impertinent, but she was also so very eager to please, learn, and prove herself."

Hermione gave Helga a look. "I wasn't so horrible."

"You drove dear Salazar to aether spirits when you almost fell from the ramparts trying to fetch that run-away handkerchief." Godric chuckled.

"I did it!" Hermione announced, tilting her chin up.

"Like a bloody Gryffindor," Salazar hissed.

Hermione flushed. "Et tu, father?"

Salazar smiled at his daughter. "Someone has to embarrass you in front of your friends and family with infamous stories from your childhood."

Hermione sighed, sulking.

"At least I'm not the only one getting picked on by my father," Draco whispered to Harry.

"Shh!"

"Shhh!"

"Make it worse!"

The spiders scurried around the table and silked a leaf over Draco's mouth.

Harry giggled, averting his eyes and earning a swift slug in the shoulder from Draco.

"No violence!"
"No!"

"It's a wedding!"

"Celebrate!"

"Yes, celebrate!"

"Celebrate the violence!"

A clutter of spiders stared at the violent spider, glaring at him with very Snape-esque expressions.

"Eeee!" the glittered spider exclaimed, running away.

The spiders scurried around some more, chasing after the renegade, driving him into the lake to "play" with the squid.

"Eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!"

The glittered spider cried out in terror as the squid punted him far across the forest canopy.

Cassius cuddled Pinky at the table. "I guess even you little guys have some that simply don't fit in."

Pinky, Coffee, and Eek shook their heads. "He's had his head restuffed a few too many times," Pinky offered sadly.

"He got stuck in one of Ronald Weasley's cast-aside dirty socks when he threw a few hundred everythings at us," Eek added.

"The smell was beyond horrible," Coffee agreed. "It really scrambled his fluffy little brain."

"But… you're made of plush?" Cassius asked, now totally confused.

"This happened before we were gifted with immunity to— random environmental hazards," Eek explained.

"Rowena protected us."

"Evolved us."

"So we could help Brim."

"Always help Brim!"

"We always stay with Brim," Coffee said. "But we can help others too."

"We just can't help Stitches," Eek said sadly. "We tried."

"He's a little… dysfunctional," Pinky sighed.

"Nutters, more like," Coffee muttered.

Cassius cuddled them all, smiling softly, causing them to squeak with obvious happiness.

A trail of happy lintball chicks swarmed the fruit basket, picking up the tastiest looking fruits and quickly making them disappear. They peeped happily and ran further down the table, seeking out more fruity plunder to be had.
Cassius, Harry, and Draco exchanged disbelieving glances, laughing to themselves.

The celebration, laughter, and games went on well into the night, the newlyweds having opted to save the final cutting of the cake for after the festivities had come to a climax. The Hogwarts students enjoyed learning to play with the neighbouring centaur foals, learning how to pop the seeds out of the fairy pods without accidentally pinging them off of random bystanders. They somewhat succeeded. A few choice glares from Severus caused both students and foals to squeal in terror and dive for cover.

Presents piled up to overflowing, causing Remus and Sirius to poke fun at their friends about not having enough room for all of the gifts when it was time to open them. Severus simply rolled his eyes, saying if Hogwarts wanted him to have wedding gifts, She would ensure he had ample space with which to deal with them. They had more than enough room for two gartanguan felines, a Scottish terrier and a tabby cat, after all, not to mention a legion of plush spiders, one Harry Potter, and a chronically visiting Draco Malfoy who might have been separated at birth from the raven-haired boy through some sort of cosmic anomaly. Obviously, if Hogwarts saw fit to provide space for all of that and a side of freshly-made chips, then a few hundred wedding gifts weren't going to pose a problem.

He hoped.

At least there would be plenty of ribbon to play with.

Severus tugged on his collar and went back to listening to Sirius telling some sort of obnoxious story from his youth that caused Regulus to chuck orange-ginger chicken wings at his head in a surprisingly surreptitious manner. Sirius, who was now sporting quite the impressive rack of chicken-wing antlers, tried to save his honour with varying degrees of success. Remus was chuckle-snorting into his robe sleeve, glad that he himself wasn't the target of public embarrassment for once.

"Harry, how are you classes going?" Sirius asked, finally shaking off his unwanted chicken-wing antlers.

"Good," Harry replied. "I really like Potions and Defence."

"Are you chucking potions in Defence?" Sirius asked.

Harry sputtered. "No, sir. Why would I do that?"

"Pity," Sirius said. "James was betting you would because we did."

Harry's eyes widened in shock and he shook his head back and forth frantically. "Brim would drag me off by my ankles and hang me from her cat tree in the rafters."

"There's a cat tree in the rafters?"

"The rafters are her cat tree," Remus corrected the confused-looking dog Animagus, pointedly nudging Sirius and favouring him with a "Do keep up" sort of look.

Sirius sighed. "I'm a canine. I don't look up. I just follow my nose."

"And if you follow your nose up into the rafters?"

"I hope that never happens. I already have more than enough embarrassing things happening in my life," Sirius said.
"You got that right, brother," Regulus mused.

The two brothers glared at each other and then burst out laughing.

"Good to see you both finally laughing together instead of at each other," Remus said.

Sirius sighed. "Just took a greater good megalomaniac to set us straight— me especially. My little bro got frozen as a statue for twelve years. It puts a lot in perspective."

"You spent the same in Azkaban," Regulus remarked. "All of us had our brains scrambled to boot. I don't know about you, but I'm happy to be here right now, celebrating at the wedding of an old friend— even if he gained a few years on me while I was sleeping."

Sirius grinned, clapping his brother on the back. "We're all glad to be here, brother."

Stitches gave a sad squeak, having been trussed up in plush spider silk, all eight legs hopelessly hog-tied, and forced to stare at the bottom of the wedding cake by all of the other spiders.

"Well, except for him," Sirius said. "He looks like he's been having a bad day."

Cassius shuffled up, snagged the previously violent little plush spider, used a pair of silver snips to delicately cut the silk away from his legs, and used his finger to give him a little of the wedding cake he was staring at.

Stitches glomped onto Cassius' fingers with a happy squeak, spouting random ideas about murder, and Cassius shook his head, encouraging the spider to use less homicidal vocabulary.

The little spider spewed something about dissection and fumigation of humanity.

Cassius frowned at the small plush, using his fingers to palpate the spider's head. Stitches squeaked as he did so and made a strange ringing sound as Cassius tugged a splinter out of Stitches' head— some left over debris that he had apparently been forcibly slammed into, head first.

Stitches squeaked dizzily and staggered around a bit, and then all of his moved at once. "Thanks!"

"Yes, much better!"

Cassius rubbed the spider with his finger and smiled down at him. The little arachnid scurried up his arm and hid in Cassius' hair.

"I like you."

Cassius grinned, reaching up his hand to give the little guy a good scritch.

All the other spiders immediately came to look at the tiny sliver Cassius had taken out of Stitches.

"Wha-what's that?"

"Dunno, do you know?"

"I don't know."

"It's pointy."
"Very pointy."

"That was stuck in his head?"

"Ow!"

"No wonder he was wrong upstairs."

"Nobody likes sticks in their head."

"Bubbles has marbles in his head."

"Yeah, well, he was made that way."

"True."

"I'm right here you know!" Stitches complained.

"Oh hi!"

"Hai dere!"

"Hallo!"

Stitches rubbed his head with his front legs, letting out a sigh. "I'm never going to live that down."

Harry and Draco grinned at Cassius and took turns scratching Stitches the no-longer-homicidal-spider. The little glittery spider squeaked happily, completely forgetting whatever grudge it might've harboured a bit earlier.

Sudden shuffling noises caused all the spiders to freeze in place and stare at the newcomers.

"Late."

"Fashionably late."

"Rot-roh."

"Potter."

"The Potters."

"The Potters plus one."

"Well, maybe almost one."

"Half a one?"

"A third of one?"

"Two-thirds maybe?"

"Someone call in Pinky. She does measuring."

"She's busy."

"Yeah, knitting."
At that, Remus and Sirius lifted their heads together. "Oh boy, look who the cat dragged in," Sirius commented. "Did you invite them, Remus? I never got a reply."

"I did."

Sirius eyed Remus speculatively.

"I really didn't think they would be coming." Remus shrugged. "I did tell them it was a potluck, and you know about Lily and cooking."

Sirius blinked.

"Danger!"

"Danger, Will Robinson!"

Spiders scurried around the table, hastily diving for cover.

"Remus! Sirius!" Lily greeted cheerily.

Harry's eyes grew wide, and he used that moment to bury himself in a conveniently located pile of plush spiders.

James dropped off a stack of pizzas and a few boxes of fried chicken from a place with a white chicken logo and a red and white banner that proudly displayed "UK Fried Chicken & Pizza." "Sorry, mates. All we could do for the potluck is spare everyone Lily's cooking."

"JAMES!"

James ducked and grinned, sitting down at the table. "Damn, there are a lot of people here."

Curious arachnids were opening the pizza boxes and peering inside. James leaned on one box, obliviously squishing a blue and a lime green spider in between the cardboard. It squeaked sadly, its legs wriggling helplessly.

Harry quickly snatched the box and set the trapped spiders loose before his mother could see them, swallowing hard when she looked at him intently.

"Harry, how are you?"

"Fine," Harry said, forcing a smile, shoving the spiders off under the table and towards Cassius and Draco, who seemed to realise that hiding the arachnids was the best way to handle the situation. Sadly, said arachnids were insatiably curious and wanted to crawl back out and figure out what was going on.

"Hey!"

"We want to see!"

"What's going on?"

"Eee! That tickles!"

"Harry, your father and I wanted to be the first to tell you," Lily crowed happily as she passed out
the pizzas. "You're going to have a baby sister!"

"We just got the clean bill of health on her right before we came here," James confirmed proudly. "We were so worried that all the time in stasis could've harmed Lily and the baby."

"Isn't this great, honey?" Lily asked, grinning from ear-to-ear.

"Yeah, uh, great," Harry echoed as he uncomfortably tugged at his collar a few times. "That's, uh, really great Lily—" Draco surreptitiously jabbed him in the ribs. "Erm, mum."

"Congratulations, dear," Pomona said politely, passing her a bowl of homegrown, wildcrafted salad and a plate of exquisite chocolate biscuits that had been painstakingly shaped into smilodons and Nundus.

"Aww, look at all the cute little wildcats," Lily cooed.

Pinky popped up from Cassius' shoulder and scurried down to the flame-haired witch, holding a pair of pink silk baby booties. "Congratulations!" she squeaked, holding out her offering proudly. "We made them ourselves!"

Lily screeched loudly in instinctive fright, pulling out her wand, flinging a spell that scorched the table in Pinky's general vicinity. Pinky, the bowl of wildcrafted salad, a bowl of fresh strawberries, a tray of filled champagne glasses and a pepperoni-mushroom-black olive pizza all went flying off the table. The bowl of strawberries landed on Remus' head, the pizza splatted onto Harry's shirt and tie, and the salad dumped over Pomona. Two fat, juicy strawberries pelted James square in the eyes, sending him stumbling backwards to land on his arse. Draco deftly caught the flying baby booties, and Cassius grabbed a terrified, squeaking, slightly-singed and airborne Pinky.

Pinky, now completely traumatised, leapt out of Cassius' hands and streaked a bee-line down the table towards where Hermione and Severus were chatting with the Minister for Magic and Kingsley Shacklebolt. She scrambled up Hermione's gown and dove under Hermione's mane of mahogany curls, instantly disappearing from sight.

"Come back!"

"Come back!"

A trail of spiders followed frantically after her, hurriedly darting up into Hermione's curls and disappearing completely.

Cassius looked a little disappointed, but Stitches snuggled into his neck. "I'm here too! Pinky only needs so many hugs."

The boy smiled and snuggled the now-friendly plush spider against himself.

Remus pulled out his wand and set the table back to rights, cleaning up the spilt items as well as the horrible spattering of salad and strawberries. Sirius and Regulus repaired the scorched table, and Pomona gave a frustrated sigh as she saw the remains of her heirloom crystal bowl and her fine cooking having been obliterated in one event of arachnophobia-induced madness.

Draco slammed the spider-crafted silk booties in front of Lily with a scowl taken right out of father's *Handbook of Utterly Demoralising Expressions to Rebuke Imbeciles Without A Single Word Being Said*, and assisted a very embarrassed Harry with cleaning the melted cheese, pepperoni, and pizza sauce off of himself.
"Good thing Professor Flitwick taught us the clothes cleaning and refreshing charm after Neville tried to use Scourgify on his clothes and ended up coughing bubbles for a week," Draco muttered.

Harry just shook his head grimly, plucking a mushroom slice and a bit of olive off one eyebrow.

"Wha-what are these?" Lily asked, dumbfounded, staring down at the pair of pink booties on the table.

Cassius frowned. "Pinky made you a pair of silk booties for your baby," he informed her. "She was bringing them to you when you tried to hex her off the table."

Lily wrung her hands in distress. "Oh! I'm so sorry— I'm absolutely scared to death of spiders. I always have been. I didn't—"

"Attention, everyone," Lucius' baritone voice rang out through the gathered crowd. "Today I would like to raise a toast to our honoured couple who have defied great adversity and conquered countless boundaries in order to come together as one. In seeing them together today, I realised how far our world has come despite the tremendous odds against us all. They, perhaps, most of all, have challenged our long-held beliefs, borders, culture, and acceptance. It is to them that I raise this heartfelt toast. To friends. To family— and to those who become both."

Fine crystal champagne glasses clinked as silver clattered against them. Cheers and murmurs of appreciation and approval swiftly spread throughout the crowd. The children all applauded and cheered. The centaurs stomped their hooves in a rhythmic thrumming against the earth.

James and Lily beamed brightly.

"Aw, Remus, did you arrange all this for us?"

"You sly, old wolf!" James grinned widely at him.

Remus turned to stare at the couple, total confusion written boldly across his face. "Wha?"

At a round table at the front of the crowd, Severus and Hermione used the same knife to cut their wedding cake in front of everyone. Severus turned, handing out the cake to all the elders first. "In the tradition of our centaur friends, we share cake first with those who came before us, in honour of those that made it possible for us to be here this evening."

Hermione bowed, handing a plate of cake to Eileen, who was beaming at them both proudly. Both she and Severus presented the first slices to all who belonged to the elder generation, thanking them for their attendance. Only after all the cake had been spread to everyone, even the tiniest foals, then the pair shared the same piece of cake in front of everyone.

"Thank you for coming, my friends, my family, and those of you who were forced to come because it was a choice between attending or completing your homework back in your respective dorms," Hermione said with a smile.

The children laughed, cheering in delight.

"Enjoy the food and refreshments, for this celebration is about all of us being joined here today. Thank you for making our day so special." Severus quirked a smile.

People ringed their crystal, giving Severus and Hermione mischievous, knowing looks.

Severus rolled his eyes, but Hermione grinned at him.
He descended his mouth to hers, giving her a tender kiss in front of everyone.

"Yay!"

"Double yay!"

"Google yay!"

"Show off— yay!"

"Congratulations!"

The spiders swarmed on the head table and waved their front legs in a cheer.

Hermione scooped them up and gave them all a kiss, causing the plush spiders to squeak happily and run about in glee.

Minister Fudge stood up and cleared his throat. "I most happily declare my official witness of your most glorious wedding, Mr and Mrs Snape. I thank you most graciously for inviting me today to share in your happiness."

People applauded and went back to socialising and eating as the new Mr and Mrs Snape took to the clearing for their first dance of the evening.

Lily and James exchanged wide-eyed, shocked glances.

"Married?!"

"You're married?!!" Lily shrieked accusingly, staring up into Severus' face with a strangely betrayed look.

"Obviously," he replied, arching a finely raised eyebrow into his hair. Someone had painstakingly woven his hair into braids along the side of his head, weaving the strands along the side in an elegant weave to join in the back, giving him a very refined look. Fine silvery silk ribbon wove through the braids, hinting towards plush spider assistance.

"But— we didn't even get an invitation!"

Severus tilted his head. "No one did. We made it an informal occasion, disguised as a potluck, which I believe both Black and Lupin invited you to, hence your being here. Little did we know, as Hermione and I had planned an informal gathering, that others had brought in the Minister for Magic to make it a formal affair, having intended to ambush us into a "proper" marriage."

Lily stared up at Severus, her doubt written clearly across her face.

Severus folded his arms across himself, tugging his robes across his body.

"But, I don't even know her!" Lily wailed, frowning fiercely.

"You weren't the one who chose to marry her, Lily," Severus replied calmly, cocking his head curiously to the side.

Lily did her level best to stare a hole into him, but Severus, tempered by over a decade of exposure to highly emotional displays of teenaged angst and having achieved an iron control over his own, simply gave her "the look" that usually sent the likes of Neville Longbottom to cowering under his
desk in abject terror.

"It's just not fair, Sev!" Lily protested. "I— we should have at least had a little time to get to know the person you were going to marry. We should have at least known you were even thinking of marriage!"

Severus narrowed his eyes. "Lily, while I understand you are feeling lost and out of sorts since your release from imprisonment, do you really expect me to put my entire life on hold— my happiness— just so you have more time to accept what is going on in my life? Hermione and I have already accepted custody of your son, and it was only proper that we be formally married in order to be his guardians together. We agreed to it together. Did you seriously believe that I would agree to accept the responsibility of such an enormous undertaking with another person without trusting them completely?"

"I trusted you to take care of him!"

"And yet you feel you cannot trust my judgment regarding who I wish to spend the rest of my life with? Or am I only good enough to foster your child but somehow not good enough to choose who I wish to make my own wife?"

"Yes!" Lily blurted hotly. "I mean— dammit, Sev, you know what I mean!"

"I trust Brim!" Harry yelled, standing next to Severus and crossing his arms. "Why can't you?"

"She seems perfectly wonderful but—"

"But what?" Harry demanded, scowling.

"She thinks I'm up to something," Hermione said, smoothly walking over to place a comforting hand on Harry's shoulder.

Harry looked up at her with clear relief in his emerald green eyes.

"Her entire world was ripped away and her baby son was suddenly half-grown in a blink of an eye. The person whom she trusted the most betrayed her and left her and her husband frozen in a cave. Her former peers are now over a decade older than herself, while she remains but a young woman still on but the cusp of her adult life while facing the birth of her second child, who she worries was injured in some way by her time spent in stasis," Hermione's eerie orange-green feline eyes glowed softly.

Lily fidgeted uncomfortably. "They say you grew up in but a year," she said, letting what she left unsaid do all the arguing for her.

"I watched my daughter grow up from but a wee speck of a girl with insatiable curiosity into a master in her own right," Salazar said, drifting by. "A year it may have been in your world, but for us it was a lifetime. Are you not one who managed to avoid aging in a span far greater? Does growing up in the arms of magic seem so very far a stretch?"

"Father," Hermione greeted warmly.

"Congratulations, my child," Salazar said lovingly. "I was hoping I would have to sic Dissina and Sathras upon you in order force you into a wedding dress."

Hermione flushed.
The spectre embraced her, tucking her gently under his chin. "I am proud of you, daughter," he said. "Godric is already betting on child versus cub as your first born."

"Father!" Hermione sputtered.

Salazar smiled slyly. "You know Godric and his bets." He kissed her forehead. "I'm betting on little saber-toothed cubs with over-sized paws getting themselves stuck into everything."

Hermione and Severus flushed together at that.

"I greatly look forward to my grand-cubs," Salazar said with an utterly unrepentant grin. "And I can teach them in this world too."

Hermione and Severus just shook their heads together.

Salazar turned, watching the children climb and slide down the basilisks' backs and tails. The headdresses were jingling like windchimes, keeping their eyes safely covered. "I am glad to see them out in the open again. Accepted by those around them and enjoying the sun."

The baby basilisks, however, were far clingier, not daring to relinquish their snug grips around Draco's and Harry's necks, especially after Lily Potter's spider-induced hexing frenzy.

"Hello there, little ones," Salazar greeted, hissing softly.

"Hi, grandpa!"

"Hello, grandpa Salazar!"

Salazar rubbed them under their chins and kissed their tiny noses. "Be good, children."

"Okay!"

"We will!"

"We're portable!"

Salazar smiled and winked at Hermione and Severus. "You be good too, children."

"Yes, father," Hermione agreed instantly.

"Yes, sir," Severus replied, nodding.

Lily paled. "Salazar? As in Salazar Slytherin?"

Salazar stroked his beard thoughtfully. "Hrm. How common is the Catalan name Salazar?" He gazed skyward, as if searching the clouds for an answer.

"Ah, there you are Salazar," Magorian said from across clearing. "Would you honour our foals with stories of the centaurs of old, when Hogwarts was still being built?"

"Of course, friend Magorian," Salazar said agreeably. "I do like to share my stories."

"Come, brother," Godric bellowed as he cast his arms in the air. "The stories have only begun!"

"Godric, someone has to temper your boastful stories of bravery and justice!" Salazar grumped.
"I live to counter your talk of cunning and ambition," Godric laughed. "Come, come. Rowena and Helga are teaming up on me!"

Salazar simply rolled his eyes. "I'm always saving you from yourself, Godric."

"That's why I adore you, Salazar. Come!"

The elder centaur laughed merrily as Salazar politely excused himself and drifted off to help teach the foals.

"I think I need to sit down," Lily said faintly, rubbing her pregnant belly as she sat down heavily on a nearby chair. "I just… I want things to be like they were before, the way I remember them."

Severus sighed. "Lily. I don't. That time you remember, the things you want to cling to? All of them occurred during the years when some very dark, terrible things were happening. We've come much too far to return to that living nightmare."

Lily frowned, holding her head. "I know. I really do. It's just— everyone, everything is so very different now. Sirius, Remus— and you. You're so much older now. Sirius is so haunted by the time he spent in Azkaban. Remus doesn't look like Remus anymore. You don't look like you, I mean— No one is as they should be! How can I trust anything or anyone but James?!"

Dead silence descended upon the table, and Harry and Draco froze in mid-play with the two baby basilisks and the plush spiders. Harry's face was utterly stricken, the lines of his face moving together in harsh relief.

Severus' lips tugged slightly into an unmistakable scowl.

Draco tugged on Harry's sleeve and they both shuffled over to Lucius and Narcissa, quietly sitting down with them as they introduced the miniature basilisks to the Malfoy matron. Narcissa cooed with delight and hugged both boys— in public, no less— causing both boys to forget the previous awkwardness in favour of the new awkwardness of being hugged in public in front of… multiple witnesses.

Suddenly, Brim appeared, her huge head raising over the shoulders of Lucius and Narcissa.

"Mrowl!" She basilisk-napped the baby reptiles in her mouth and tore off across the green, causing the boys to chase after them, crying out for her to wait up.

"Perhaps," Severus rumbled, "as your apparently untrustworthy friend, I should offer you a bit of advice, Lily. This is the time when your son will be looking very carefully to decide which persons he can trust completely. I have been very careful, and so has Brim. Careful to leave the door open so he can make his own choices and not assume that his current placement with us is a permanent situation. I know you are in a difficult spot to be in right now. But take it from someone who knows, Lily. Slights and grudges start now, and sometimes we never manage rise above them. Perhaps, you should think really hard on what Albus Dumbledore wanted and consider that perhaps what he wanted is precisely what you are doing right now— driving him into the arms of those who no longer look upon him as anything more than a young boy who has had a hard life before it even properly started."

Severus inhaled and held the breath for a long moment, exhaling slowly through his mouth as he attempted to release his tension. "I almost fell right into his plans. I was isolated, bitter, and very much alone. We put an end to that shortly before your wedding, and then, thanks to Albus, we all went right back into the hatred of before. Do you know what broke me out of it the second time?"
Severus turned and jutted his chin in the direction of the frolicking Nundu and the two boys, two baby basilisks, and a raging horde of excited plush spiders. Τρία had joined in, green wreaths with silver bells jingling around his neck and all. "One Nundu cub and her trust in me. And then there was a young boy— the hated son of a wizard I thought my worst enemy— who trusted her. She believed in him, and I believed in her. In turn, I gave him a chance too. Because of her, the spell Albus had cast upon us all finally lifted and we were freed. Rabbie has returned to us because of her. Perhaps, you should think not of how unfair it is that you do not know her and instead focus on how fortunate it is you actually can."

At that, Lily first shook her head violently in denial, then laid it down in her hands and began to cry. "Damn." She sniffed. "Stupid pregnancy hormones." She sniffled and wailed, her hormones surging wildly, triggering a cascade of extreme emotional turmoil.

"Hey, Lils," Sirius greeted, coming out of a small herd of centaur younglings. "Let's get you home, yeah? All this stress isn't good for you or the baby, and your healer already warned you about getting all worked up and not getting enough quality rest."

"I'm sick and tired of resting!" Lily wailed.

"I know you feel like you're being coddled, love, but we care about you too, you know?" Sirius attempted to soothe the agitated witch.

Remus appeared and offered her a hand, but Lily looked even less inclined to accept his assistance.

Suddenly, Molly Weasley moved quickly through the crowd. "Oh, my dear. Why didn't you tell me you were finally out of that dreary old hospital? If you need any help with the upcoming child, Arthur and I are more than willing to assist with the baby and helping you too to adjust to things as they are now."

Lily looked up tearfully, her face so vulnerable and desperate. "Promise?"

Molly took the younger witch's hand very gently. "I promise that you can stay with us just as long as you need, my dear. We all have been suckered by that despicable old man, someone we thought we could trust implicitly. Come home with us for a while, won't you?"

Lily gave her a true smile. "Thanks, Mrs Weasley."

"Molly, dear," Molly said with a smile. "Please just call me Molly. Come, come, let's take you home and get you settled in. We'll just fix up my old sewing room, and you'll be right as rain in no time."

As Molly and Lily walked up the the path towards the front gates of Hogwarts, a clutter of plush spiders finally crept out from their hiding place in a nearby fruit bowl.

"Phew."

"Yes."

"Someone tell Pinky the coast is clear."

"Poor Pinky."

"Hey," Severus interrupted their conversation.

The spiders all stared at him.
"Go make sure none of the children get abducted by Acromantulas, hrm?"

"Ok!"

"Double ok!"

"We can do that!"

"Aye, aye, cap'n!"

"At least Acromantulas don't burst into tears and make everything all awkward!"

"Well, they do eat people… that is awkward!"

"True."

"Let's go!"

"Okay!"

"Eeeeeeeeee!"

Lucius nudged Severus as the stream of plush spiders set off on a mission. "I was actually looking forward to you asking them to wrap her in spider silk and drag her off the grounds."

"Lucius," Severus replied with an arched brow. "We hadn't even had a first date."

Lucius grinned, clapping his friend on the back.

Ronald had just dragged himself off into the dorms after his long shift at the Leaky Cauldron. The hot shower he was currently enjoying had never before felt so good, and he was starting to dredge up a little more respect for all the things his mother had done for him around the house since he was very little. If anything, working at the Leaky in between taking classes had forced him to get his homework done and learn how to deal with people. Many of those said people were in various states of temperamental and rude by the time they arrived at the Leaky. People came the Leaky to unwind, which rarely meant arriving in anything even remotely close to a good mood.

At first, he thought he was hearing something, but the distinctive thrum of loud music was coming from somewhere. He dried himself off with a towel before brushing his teeth and made sure his books were laid out for the next morning, knowing that if he didn't do it the night before, he'd probably forget all about it in the morning.

Eileen had forced him to do his homework in-between serving chores, and there hadn't even been a single night when she let him leave with his homework still unfinished. That had been the agreement made between Headmistress McGonagall-Fairbairn and Eileen Snape.

Snape.

The hated name still made him shudder in revulsion. He wondered how someone who valued life skills and education so much had ended up with a son like Professor Severus Snape.

He heard there was a potluck party being held by Professor Snape and Professor Slytherin— two names he loathed almost equally. He gleefully threw himself into his work rather than attending, telling the others that his job was far more important than some ruddy school picnic. The truth was, he didn't want to be poisoned by anything Snape cooked up. And Professor Slytherin— well, she
was even more likely to poison non-Slytherins. Slytherin was her bloody name, after all.

Suddenly, Ron noticed that the music was starting to get a little louder.

*I've been alive forever*

*And I wrote the very first song*

*I put the words and melodies together…*

Where the heck was it coming from?

Ron looked around. All of his dorm-mates were out cold, snoring away so loudly it sounded like a multitude of voices rather than just one. Maybe one of his brothers had pulled some kind of prank, maybe making the dorm's curtains emit sounds like hundreds of people were snoring at once—he certainly wouldn't put it past his brothers to do something like that.

He dug into his trunk to find his comfiest pair of pyjamas and froze as the music became louder.

*I write the songs of love and special things.*

*I write the songs that make the young girls cry.*

*I write the songs. I write the songs.*

The music screeched to a sudden halt as Ron spotted a fuzzy pink spider and a large, black fuzzy spider with multicoloured stripes, apparently in the middle of enjoying each other's company.

The black spider's multiple eyes shifted to focus on a petrified Ron. "May we help you?"

"EAGGGHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!" Ron screamed, hastily throwing his wet towel over them and slamming the trunk's lid down just as hard as he could. He cursed the lid closed over and over, levitated his trunk, and then flung it out the open window.

Multiple *Lumos* spells activated near-simultaneously as his dorm-mates woke up to his loud screams. They put up a blinding radiance to expose Ron in his starkers, having flung away his towel in the fracas, losing all semblance of dignity.

"Merlin's balls, Weasley!" Dean Thomas sputtered, "Cover yourself!" He chucked double handfuls of plush spiders at Ron in hopes of covering up his pasty white, liberally freckled privates.

"Eeeeeee!"

"Wait whatareyou—EEEEEE!"

"EEEEEE!"

Spider after spider thunked into Ron, sticking to his exposed bits to cover him up.

"Ewww!"

"Brim isn't going to want to hug us anymore!"

"Bath time!"

"Bleach time!"
"Someone give us a Scourgify, please?"

"Someone Obliviate us, please?"

"Halp!"

"S.O.S.!

"Run away!"

A stream of now-traumatised spiders hastily streamed out of the dorms in a desperate search for a bathtub full of soap suds.

Ron fainted dead away, sprawled out naked in the middle of the floor.

"I'm going to go sleep in the common room, mates" Dean groaned, grabbing up his pillow and blanket to take with him.

Neville just slept on, oblivious to the entire situation.

Harry rubbed his tired eyes, seeing that Hedwig had turned herself around on her perch to stare pointedly out the window. "I guess I get to make the floo-call to Professor Lupin." He stared at Ron, who was face first on the floor, trying to drown himself in his own drool.

Meanwhile, down in the courtyard below, Barry Manilow played on.

**A/N:** Chilly days are here again. Zzzzzzzz (hibernating)

**Beta Love:** The Dragon and the Rose, Dutchgirl01 and Flyby Commander Shepard

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**Breath of the Nundu**

Chapter 14

Time Marches On

When you notice a cat in profound meditation,

*The reason, I tell you, is always the same:*

*His mind is engaged in a rapt contemplation*

*Of the thought, of the thought, of the thought of his name…*

*From The Naming of Cats by T.S. Eliot*

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**Inexplicable Madness Strikes Family in Little Whinging**

Over the last several years, a family inside Little Whinging had called local police on multiple occasions to report that they were being stalked by a gathering of freaks and ghosts come to get them from the Great Beyond.

"It's my dead sister and her freak husband!" Petunia Dursley shrieking hysterically while theatrically wringing her hands. "They've come back to torture our innocent family for having moved on without them!"

They're building some monstrous bloody estate up on the hill just to taunt us!" Vernon Dursley bellowed loudly, repeatedly trying to shove his way through a police line armed with a burning torch. "And I won't have it! I'll burn the ruddy thing down! Down to the sodding foundation! And I'll salt the earth too!"

The Dursleys, who were subsequently arrested on charges of trespass and a long list of crimes related to the vandalism of a private property in Surrey, leave behind one school-aged son, Dudley, who has been referred to social services and is currently in the custody of a child protection team pending an evaluation and placement as per the Children and Young People Act. Currently, the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children is also looking into young Dudley's home life, which could result in possible additional charges being made against his parents. The search for any possible relatives in this case has already begun.

Upon a search of the family home, some alarming evidence suggesting the presence of another child turned up in a small cupboard under the stairs—a child that has seemingly vanished, save for a few grammar school records sharing the same address and the vague recollections of a few of the Dursley family's long-time neighbours.
On learning of the arrest of his parents, young Dudley Dursley was understandably shocked and devastated. Local officials have since moved him to a safe facility until the particulars of his parents’ arrest can be sorted.

"You have got to be kidding me," Lily moaned, rubbing her swollen belly. "What do you mean she's already given birth? It's only been maybe four months—and I was pregnant well before she was!"

"It's all about Nundu biology, love," James explained as he brought down an enormous jar of pickles from the shelf.

Lily greedily broke into it and was on her fifth pickle before she said anything again. "I want that kind of fucking biology."

James' eyes widened at his wife's use of profanity. Despite his wife's condition, it seemed that her language had devolved into the rude and even crude the second time around. Either that, or she had somehow picked up Sirius' potty mouth within the last few months. Ironically, Sirius' own language had become far more civil now that he was spending more time around Severus, Remus, and Harry. The same, however, could not be said of his own pregnant wife.

Then again, she'd eaten two jars of pickles, a large tub of cottage cheese, and three handfuls of candied ginger in the last hour, so strange eating habits could perhaps be partially to blame for it.

"I don't think you do, love," James said carefully. "From what Sirius told me, twin Nundu-Smilodon cubs are way more high maintenance than a human baby. Human babies don't try to climb trees and pounce on you from the rafter, much less as newborns."

Lily moaned. "I'd rather have that than the full nine months of THIS," she groaned painfully. "Even if it meant having a set of freakish cubs instead of babies like a bloody normal person."

James frowned, knowing his wife didn't mean it anywhere near as badly as she had phrased it. Nevertheless, he was secretly glad that Severus, Remus and Hermione, or even Minerva or Rabbie weren't there to hear his wife's casual, unthinking remark. Lily hadn't taken the news very well that she was to be forced to care for her sister's young son after both Petunia and her husband had supposedly suffered nervous breakdowns shortly after being taken into police custody. Especially after the pair had threatened the lives of the entire Potter family: Lily, James, and Harry. Thankfully, Lily hadn't asked for extensive details of the incident, knowing that her blood pressure was high enough with her second pregnancy as it was.

James, however, knew the full, unvarnished truth. Good old Petunia had taken the entirety of the funds set they had aside in a Muggle bank account in case something were to happen to them—which had contained more than enough cash money to care for Harry until he was old enough to go to Hogwarts and gain access to the family Gringott's account. She had, instead of using if for Harry's benefit, splurged it all on her son, including pre-paying the tuition fees to give Dudley a very exclusive, very expensive boarding school education all the way through graduation. Mind you, it had not been JUST Petunia misusing the funds; Vernon had had his own fat hands in the pot too.

Now, irony of ironies, Dudley was living with the very "freaks" his parents had taught him to hate with a passion—at least during the summer months and during holidays when he wasn't away at his boarding school. Even more ironically, their own son remained living with Severus and Hermione instead of them—and that arrangement showed no sign of changing anytime soon. It had been strangely easier for them to accept Dudley over Harry. They had never known Dudley—there had been no preconceived images of him and how he related to themselves. There had never been a
parental bond broken against their will—

And, while in their hearts, they knew they cared for Harry—in fact, loved him greatly—it was almost as if that love was for an entirely different person.

A person they had never had the chance to witness growing up.

For all intents and purposes, Harry James Potter was a complete stranger to them.

There was a deep chasm between them that they struggled to cross, yet somehow they could never quite get there. They did have family dinners every week with the Snapes, and they had at least managed to form a somewhat less awkward relationship. It was, unfortunately, not as close as they wanted—much less felt they should have had. It was that feeling of believing that they were deserving of such closeness and the resentment of not having it that had sabotaged their relationship almost before it had even begun.

It was far easier to love Harry as the child of Hermione and Severus Snape than as their own flesh and blood.

James was happy that at least he had the opportunity to get to know his son. He just wished his own heart and mind would cooperate with what he wanted.

There was a knock on the doorframe, and James looked up swiftly.

Molly poked her head in with a smile. "Dinner's ready, my dears."

"I'm starving, Molly," Lily cried with clear relief.

"Oh, I know the feeling, Lily," Molly chuckled. "Seven times over."

Lily frowned. "I can't even imagine going through this five more times."

"I have seven wonderful children. They all have their quirks and individual issues, but when it comes right down to it, we always shared a table." Molly smiled.

"I wish I could feel safe," Lily said with real longing. "I keep thinking—"

Molly took her hand. "Lily, dear. I've been there. I am here. I know what it feels like, but we're here for you. James is here for you. Your friends are there for you too."

"But I don't even know them anymore!"

Molly frowned at that. "Now look here, Lily. I've lived through the last decade with a spell over me, forcing us to forget who our friends and family were. We treated Severus and Lucius like pond scum because Dumbledore made us believe they were evil. He had me and Arthur under some spell that kept us so busy with children that we couldn't see our own hands in front of us. We didn't even remember who our own friends were. You at least remember your friends and they remember you. Right here, right now. Maybe their faces have changed a bit. Maybe they grew up a little more than you expected, but they are still here. They are still alive, and take it from someone who obsesses constantly over her children being hurt and killed—fretting over what could be distracts you from people who are there for you in the now. I worried so much that I neglected my husband. I tried to raise my children in a protective bubble thinking it would keep them safe and help them to become better people. Take it from someone who knows, Lily. Cherish the friends that you have in this life instead of making up reasons to convince yourself that you've somehow lost them."
Molly held Lily's hand. "We're here for you, Lily. Truly we are. Now let's go eat, okay, love?"

"Okay," Lily agreed, pulling herself up, and a sploosh of liquid rushed out from between her legs and trailed down to the floor in a pinkish yellow puddle.

"Oh my god. Oh my god," Lily gasped. "My water just broke."

"What?" James yelped, standing up. He rushed toward her. "We're going to Mungo's right now!" He lunged, grabbed the back of the chair… and vanished with a loud crack.

Lily and Molly stood together staring at one spot with wide eyes just as Arthur came rushing into the room.

"What's going on?"

James had Disapparated to St Mungo's with the kitchen chair instead of his pregnant wife.

James paced a hole in the floor until a pale, white hand slammed into his forehead and forced him to sit his arse in a nearby chair.

"Sit, Potter," Severus growled. "You are making my cubs dizzy."

The two fluffy cubs had been staring at James the entire time, their heads going back and forth in attempt to follow his movements. A few plush spiders teetered on their heads and fell off, holding on only by hastily-spun strands of silk.

"Eeee!"

"Dizzy!"

"Stop moving, ah!"

"Merhghf!"

"See? You're even traumatising the spiders," Severus said with a sniff.

"Lily, don't push! You're not even dilated yet!" Hermione's voice rang from behind the curtain.

"I don't care, I want it out!" Lily cried out. Sounds of some desperate effort could be made out shortly after.

"Mrs Potter!" the healer chided. "If you do not stop pushing before you are ready to deliver, you are going to hurt yourself and get the baby stuck inside yourself!"

"I am ready! My water broke!" Lily yelled.

"She apparently forgot all about how it went when she gave birth to Harry," Severus said with a shake of his head. "She was in labour for just over a day before she finally gave birth."

"I'm pretty sure she forgot that on purpose," James shuddered.

"Mind you, her water hadn't broken until well into that," Severus recalled.

Then came a splash of what sounded like water hitting the floor. "Mrs Potter, please, you need to relax. "You're only in the first phase of labour, and your baby is not properly engaged yet. If you
keep pushing, you risk expelling the umbilical first and pinching off your baby's blood supply and oxygen."

"Whaa?" Lily panted.

"Just relax now, Mrs Potter," the healer chided again. "I'm going to let your husband in to sit with you, and I'll keep checking in on you every half hour or so until it's time."

At that, James went hustling in.

"Slow down, love," James crooned. "No hurries here."

"Says the man who Disapparated with a **CHAIR** instead of his own wife!" Lily yelled angrily.

"Mrowl?" the darker cub commented, shaking his head, seeming to still suffer from a certain amount of lingering dizziness.

"Mrrrrrl," the gold and mahogany spotted cub answered, purring softly.

"Lily could really learn something from your mother, and she was a first time mum too," Severus said with a sigh.

Brim yawned toothily from the large sofa she had taken up with her entire bulk, and the cubs immediately bounced over to nurse, claiming their spaces with eager wriggles and happy purrs.

Severus massaged his wife's velvety ears, pressing his face into her warm fur, and Brim purred even louder. "This is Lily's second child, but you would never know it by the way she's carrying on."

Brim snickered, her whiskers twitching, but she didn't deign to offer further commentary.

Harry and Draco flopped lazily across her back and stared down at the little cubs, and the cubs stopped nursing long enough to bat at their faces and try to wrestle them into a neck-hold. Both boys cuddled the two cubs and ruffled them, grinning widely.

The gold and mahogany cub suckled at Harry's fingers and pawed at his face.

"Hey there, Athena, watch those teeth!"

"Mrowl!"

The pitch black cub with inverted gold spots pounced his twin sister, and they went tumbling around the room, chasing each other around their father's legs.

Severus plucked up the dark cub by the scruff, elevating him to eye level. "Salazar."

"Mroooowl?"

Severus gave him the eye.

The black cub hung his head, suitably chastened, and allowed his father to tuck him comfortably by his mum. Athena, not about to be left behind, scrambled up on the sofa and resumed her own meal with her mummy, making happy little noises of contentment. After their bellies were round and full of milk, they settled down between their mum's legs and were cutely purr-snoring within seconds.

"I think Lily really wishes her child comes out as easily as yours did, love," Remus said as he walked in and gave her and the two cubs their obligatory scritches and ear rubs.
Brim purred happily.

"How is the labour coming along?" Remus asked. "Not quite as anticlimactic as your wife's ten minute deal?"

Severus smiled rather slyly. "She wishes, I'm sure."

"What do you MEAN I'm only in the first bloody phase of labour?!"

A bedpan went zinging over the privacy curtain and smashed into the far wall. The healers, apparently well-used to such maternity ward theatrics, simply dodged and carried on.

Remus' eyes widened. "Oh dear."

"Was that—" Sirius started, tripping over the cast aside bedpan and sliding as he entered the room.

Severus swung out his arm to catch Sirius, and one of the nurses deftly caught the runaway bedpan.

"Thank you," the nurse said, hitting it with a strong Scourgify.

"How far along is she?" Sirius asked as he practically submerged himself in the scrub sink nearby.

"Dilated!"

"Yup!"

"Two centimeters!"

"Latent phase."

The spiders scrambled around, cocking their bodies and heads to better listen in on the goings-on.

"She could be here for quite a while," Severus said.

"This is all your fault, James Charlus Potter!"

"But Lily, don't you remember…"

Crash!

Then there was the unmistakable sound of flesh hitting flesh.

"Ow!" James cried out. "Bloody hell, woman!"

"Get out! Get out! I never want you and your sodding impregnating parts anywhere near me again!"

"Oh dear."

"Transition phase."

"Hates everyone."

"So much for active phase."

"Actively throwing things!"
"Well, that could count."

Spiders were lined up along the privacy curtain, cautiously peeking in.

Suddenly, a water pitcher went zinging at the curtain, sending a number of plush spiders tumbling in all directions.

"Eeeee!

"Mayday!"

"For King and Country!"

"Bonsai!"

"HALP!"

"Arachnid abuse!"

"I can't feel my legs!"

"Well, at least she didn't actually SEE the spiders staring down at her," Remus commented idly. "That would've been far, far worse."

The train of spiders crawled their way up and quickly disappeared into the safety of Brim's collar.

"Scary!"

"Too scary."

"Much safer with Brim."

"Always safer with Brim."

Tiny plush spiders crawled out from the small emerald collars around each cub's neck. They peered around cautiously and then darted back into hiding.

"So, how long do you think this will go on?" Remus asked.

"Was it really like this when I was born?" Harry asked.

"Or me?" Draco added.

"Your birth spoiled her, I believe," Severus said, looking at Harry. "You sort of fell out with a snitch in your mouth."

Harry and Draco exchanged glances.

"As for you, Draco," Severus aid with a sigh. "You came out as any Malfoy. Pale as milk and demanding for your voice to be heard."

Harry laughed, nudging Draco as his friend made a highly-affronted expression.

Lily was making a bunch of groaning sounds, and Brim pulled herself up and shook herself off, her sleepy cubs looking about blearily. Brim purred, rubbing herself up against Severus and then padded in past the privacy curtain to Lily's bedside. The cubs attempted to follow their mum, but Remus and Severus quickly pulled the pair back by the scruff.
"Oh no," Remus scolded them. "That is definitely not a good place for fuzzy baby Snapes."

The cubs wriggled and mrowled sadly.

"When you're older and far less punchable," Sirius said, holding Athena to him. "Then you might be trusted around pregnant Lily. Maybe."

"Doubtful," Severus said. "James might tolerate being punched in the face, but I do not think I would particularly appreciate my cubs being sucker-punched for any reason, labour pain be damned."

Sirius flinched. "Point."

Salazar meowed sadly, but he batted playfully at Remus' hair and used his raspy feline tongue to lick his ear.

"There is no need for you all to stay here in the waiting area," one of the healers told them kindly. "We have a family waiting quarters with refreshments set up for the family and friends of the mothers. It keeps her stress levels down and allows her time to rest until she is ready to start pushing. We will send word the moment it begins."

Severus nodded as a shell-shocked James staggered out from behind the curtain, nursing what was shaping up to be quite an impressive black eye.

"Oh dear," the healer said, waving her wand over his face to fade the bruising. "Take heart, my dear. Last week we even had a labouring mum sock her own poor grandmum. I think aggression must run in the family because baby punched mom on the nose soon after the birth."

"Take a bit of time to unwind, have some tea and biscuits, and get some rest, my friends," the healer continued. "We'll take excellent care of Lily until it's time for her cheering section to begin their duties."

"Thank you, Healer Dunkirk," James sighed gratefully.

The healer smiled at them both. "I will get you a chilled compress for your eye to help with the swelling, and send an elf with some refreshments as well."

"Bless your heavenly heart," James sputtered as Remus used his fingers to pointedly nudge him in the direction the healer was pointing.

"So, Chairs," Sirius rumbled. "This isn't your first baby. Care to tell the rest of the class why you felt you had to side-along with the Weasley's kitchen chair instead of your pregnant wife?"

"Oh, shut it," James moaned.

"Stress-induced amnesia?" Remus asked, cocking a curious brow.

James slammed a pillow over his face and tried in vain to smother himself.

"Might as well rest up some, Potter," Severus advised. "If the first birthing is any indicator of the current situation, you won't be getting much rest after she starts truly giving birth."

"Not to mention once you go home with the newborn baby Potter," Remus added helpfully.

James grunted and rolled over to face the back of the couch, attempting to ignore his friends and get some rest.

The two cubs perked and scrambled up the couch and lay on top of James, purring and radiating a gratuitous amount of soothing body heat.

"I just hope Brim is faring well with Lily," Remus said softly as to not rouse James.

"If anyone can manage Lily in her current state, it is Brim," Severus said. "As long as Lily does not get truly… hateful."

Remus paled. "Lily is not hateful, not usually. You know that. She's just— highly opinionated and doesn't always think before she speaks."

Severus shrugged. "Sadly, she always has to be watched around the cubs. They pick up on all emotions, and unlike Brim— they take her literally."

Remus nodded, placing a hand on Severus' shoulder. "We've all been doing our part to make sure she and James aren't ever left alone with the cubs. For their safety as much as James' and Lily's. I still have hope that they will find that safe place within themselves again. No thanks to Dumbledore."

"You trust us with the cubs," Harry commented. Draco nodded.

"You weren't locked in a cave and trapped in statue form for over ten years," Severus reminded them. "You've proven that you're very emotionally stable despite everything that has happened in your lives."

"And that's really saying something coming from Severus," Remus said.

Severus rolled his eyes and glared at Remus.

Remus just grinned back at him unrepentantly.

"I can't believe that my cousin Dudley is going to be… living with my mum and dad during the holidays," Harry boggled.

"That must be pretty surreal, mate," Draco observed. "From what you told me about him and your aunt and uncle."

Harry frowned but shrugged. "Maybe it will help him see things a little better. I'm going to be perfectly honest here, I'm really glad I'm living with the Snapes right now."

"You're just happy Brim isn't completely nutters," Draco mused slyly.

Harry chuckled, pretended great offence, and got into a half-hearted shoving match with Draco.

There was a soft pop as two of the St Mungo's house-elves arrived, one with a chilled compress for James and the other bearing a generous tray of tea, biscuits, and assorted sandwiches. The tray was settled on a table near them all, then one bowed slightly before quietly popping back out again.

The second elf tried to give the compress to James, but Athena and Salazar growled lowly, baring their teeth at him, causing the house-elf to tremble in fright.

Severus plucked the compress out of the house-elf's arms, pressed it to James' eye, and thanked the frightened elf on James' behalf. He ruffled his cub's fur and soothed them down. "There now," he rumbled. "Chairs doesn't need the Nundu-smilodon guard team duo."
The cubs purred happily, obviously not caring.

"They probably think he does, considering how he got his new nickname, Coal," Remus mused.

Severus shrugged, lifting his hands up like he was holding an invisible tray. He distributed the sandwiches and other refreshments before leaning back in the chair to rest as well.

"Coal, how is it you make parenting look like you're the second time father?" Sirius asked.

Severus opened one weary eye. "Years of experience in keeping you lot from somehow killing each other."

Sirius sighed.

"I've spent over a decade herding other people's children, Black," Severus said after a while. "I've made enough mistakes there and remembering how my father was to know what didn't work. Besides, we all had Rabbie to give us a better example of how to be— I'm just glad we can remember him again and he's still alive to be appreciated and appreciate the fact that we do."

"He's married to a Nudu," Remus pointed out. "That puts emotional control and awareness at a whole new level."

Sirius lifted his brows. "True."

"Coal, did Brim go in to help Lily calm down, or is Lily too scared to be anything but calm because Brim's a Nudu?" Sirius asked.

"Yes," Severus replied with a smirk.

Sirius sighed.

"There she goes, saving Lily from herself and us from her," Remus chuckled.

"I think Brim is gloating about how easy her pregnancy was in comparison," Sirius mused.

"She gave birth in the Whomping Willow," Remus protested. "How is that easy?"

"Easy for her! Not so much us getting a look at them until she was ready to show them off," Sirius said with a snort.

"At least the willow finally accepted Severus," Remus admitted. "I can only imagine having to stun a tree every time you wanted to see your own cubs. Would make for a pretty cranky tree."

"And a cranky Severus," Severus added.

"That too," Sirius said with a grin. "Maybe you just have to be mated to a Nudu to be accepted by a Whomping Willow."

Severus glared at Sirius. "Find your own Nudu outside of my family."

Sirius waved his hands. "Not even thinking that, Coal, I swear!"

Severus muttered something that sounded like a sincere threat on his life.

They all settled into the comfy chairs, letting the boys take the sleeping cots. Within a few minutes they were all blissfully asleep.
"Okay, my dear, push, push, push! You can do it!" the Medi-witch guided the labouring witch. Lily gasped, stopping after a few seconds.

"Deep breath and push," the healer said. "You can do it."

James was holding Lily's hand, and she was squeezing it like a vice. His face turned slightly purple as his wife attempted to grind his bones into dust.

"Okay, rest a little, Lily," the healer said. "This contraction has ended."

"Ended? The baby isn't even out!"

"Maybe on the next contraction, dear," the Medi-witch soothed her. "You have to give the baby time to rest too. Otherwise, you cut off her oxygen too."

Lily paled a little and lay her head back on the pillow, keeping her grip on James' hand.

James was trying to put on a brave face, but his hand was swelling and turning purple. "Lily, let go."

"What do you mean let go? You're supposed to be supporting me!"

"My hand!"

"You have two!"

Brim's mouth went over Lily's wrist, and Lily gasped, loosening her death grip. James pulled his hand back with a groan, and the healers swarmed on him. "Oh dear, Mr Potter, let us treat that before you lose your hand."

"Okay, time to push!" the Mediwitch said again. "Chin to your chest, and keep up your breathing. Push! And hold it. Push, push, push!"

Lily stopped. "I can't. So tired!"

"You can do it. Deep breath in! Now push!"

Lily held on for a few seconds, but stopped, gasping. "I can't do this," she moaned.

"You can. You will. Come on, Lily," the Medi-witch encouraged. Deep breath in, chin to your chest. PUSH!"

"EEEGUUUURHGRRRRRRRAAAAAAAAAHhhhhhhhhhh!" Lily wailed, bearing down with all her might.

"Keep going, keep going, keep going!" the other witch chanted.

"Go, go, go!"

"You can do it!"

"We believe in you!"

"She's almost out!"

"You can do it, Lily!"
"Push!"

"Keep pushing!"

The spiders cheered from beside the bed, braving Lily's wrath to provide some much-needed support.

Without James' hand, Lily reached out for the first thing she could grab, and she snatched a purple plush spider with rainbow gems for eyes. She squeezed the spider tightly, causing it to squeak, its eyes bulging. His legs wriggled in distress.

"Halp!" it cried, wriggling.

"Push, push, push!" the witches chanted. "You can do it! She's almost here, love, keep pushing!"

"Push more, squeeze the poor spider less!" the purple spider gasped.

"Push!"

"Persen!"

"Pousser!"

"Pchnięcie!"

"押す!"

There was a wet schlucking sound as the baby pulled free of the pelvic girdle in a gush of mucous and blood, and the medi-witches caught the baby, quickly clearing out her nostrils and mouth with spells. The baby cried loudly as the witches rubbed her down vigorously, praising the baby for crying even louder.

"That's a good girl!"

"Fine set of lungs!"

"Healthy cry!"

The baby's head was purple and blue, but with each cry it was returning to a more healthy shade of pink. She scrunched up her little face with each cry and balled up her tiny fists. They placed the baby skin-to-skin against Lily's chest, pausing only long enough to place a miniature diaper on the newborn's miniscule rump.

As Lily looked down at her new baby girl, she smiled tiredly. "There's my little Bambi Rose," Lily crooned.

Little Bambi socked her mum in the chin with her fist.

"What? Don't I get a say in this?" James asked.

"No!" Lily hissed. "You didn't have to push her out!" She tried to gesture at him, but ended up sending the purple spider she had been squeezing the life out of careening into James' face. "I've loved the name Bambi since I was kid and discovered my great, great-aunt had a daughter named Bambi, and I swore if I ever had a daughter, that would be her name too!"

*Splat.*
"Hi," the spider squeaked sadly as it smacked up against James' face. "Pardon me," it said apologetically, sliding down James' face with an odd squeegee-like sound.

Brim deftly caught the plush spider in her mouth and transferred the exhausted arachnid to her back. The other spiders clustered around him to offer moral support. Brim snuffled him, nudged him with her nose, and slurped him onto his back and chewed on him a little, causing him to squeak. The spider seemed to recover, refluffing himself back into proper spider shape, and crawled back into her collar habitat.

"Well, that's one spider that won't be coming out to play for a while," Remus chuckled.

James sighed and invited one of the more curious spiders into his hand. He scratched it between the legs and smiled. "I will confess that they do eventually grow on you if you let them."

The little spider in his hand cooed softly and emitted a calming purr.

"We really need to get Moody some of these guys," James commented.

"Moody's already been assimilated," Severus said with a snort. "He has one for each shoulder, and they help him at the office and out in the field."

"Seriously?" Remus asked.

"Indeed."

"Every Auror has an assigned pair to help them with reconnaissance," Severus said, "and keep them company while writing out their reports. Apparently, they make mean cuppas that are to die for, according to Savage."

A strange blissful silence descended on the maternity room as Brim dashed in front of the men-folk and propped her body against the bed to prevent the infant Bambi from falling off the side—her mother having fallen asleep after her exhausting ordeal.

The little baby with a surprising amount of copper-coloured curls took a fist full of Brim's whiskers and yanked on them, hard. Brim grimaced, baring her teeth, and Bambi's eyes widened and she went perfectly still. Brim turned her head and yawned. James shuffled over and cradled the baby, attempting to swaddle her and ending up with one tiny foot and one arm sticking out, both of which she used to kick him in the face and punch his chin.

"Fu—"

Severus slammed a silencing spell on James.

Bambi cooed and wriggled.

"Well, Chairs, your daughter is not a shy violet," Remus said.


James glared at Severus.

"Don't look at me, Chairs, you daughter just ninja kicked you to the jaw and tried to dislocate your nose," Severus said, deadpan.

"I don't even know what a ninja is," James grunted.
"They dress in all black and kick your arse before you even know what happened," Remus said.

James narrowed his eyes. "So, like Severus?"

"Are you actually confessing that I managed to kick your arse?" Severus asked.

James muttered something that ended up coming out, "I love cherry pie."

Remus stared at Severus.

Severus shrugged. "He has a baby. The censorship is for his own good."

"Funny chips with funny fish. Eat the cantaloupe not the dish!"

"Do I even want to know what he really wanted to say?" Remus asked.

"Fahrvergnügen!" James hissed.

"Driving!"

"Pleasure!"

The spiders scurried around, throwing up their legs in a cheer.

"Severus, how do these plush spiders know more about the world than most people?"

"Don't look at me, Black," Severus said with an arched eyebrow. Filius and I simply fixed one to give Brim comfort and protect itself. Mind you, the Weasley Twins added charms to make them replicate randomly when vanished or attacked with curses or hexes, and Rowena did the rest."

"The twins? Really?" Black asked, rubbing his chin.

"They take great pleasure in encouraging Brim to torture their little brother," Severus said.

"And you don't disapprove, do you, Coal?" Sirius muttered.

"The more they torment their little brother, the more paranoid he gets in my class and forgets to cause trouble. It's a winning situation."

Remus clapped Severus on the back. "You were never one to not take advantage of some weakness."

Severus puckered his lips and pointed them to the side. "Perhaps."

Brim yawned as she settled back down on the couch, sprawling on her side as her cubs eagerly joined her for a snack. They purred and wriggled, happily kneading and making happy sounds.

"Hey, where is my daughter?" James asked, his eyes growing wide. The space where baby Bambi had been swaddled was distinctively missing the baby in the swaddle.

As James began to frantically search, Remus nudged Severus in the ribs and they both looked down at Brim's side, where Bambi was doing her best Nundu-Smilodon cub imitation and helping herself to breakfast.

"No loyalty with babies," Remus chuckled.

Brim, peering down at her milk-seeking interloper, seemed to shrug. She groomed all of her "cubs"
and lay back, closing her eyes drowsily.

"I hope drinking Nundu milk isn't going to make Bambi a feral child," Remus mused.

Severus rolled his eyes. "She's not going to be doing it all the time, I would imagine, unless Lily can't figure out how to breastfeed the second time around."

"From what I heard, she was still feeding Harry when she was 'killed' the first time around," Remus said.

Severus slid his eyes to the side. "This conversation isn't awkward at all, Remus."

Remus grinned at Severus. "This coming from a man who is letting some random human child nurse on his wife."

Severus crossed his arms across his chest, pulling his robes in. "Brim is the decision maker about who she lets nurse from her breasts, Remus."

Remus sputtered awkwardly as James finally figured out where his daughter had gone.

"Why can't I have a bloody normal child?" James moaned.

"Feel free to breastfeed your own child, Chairs," Severus quipped.

James dropped his jaw and stared as Remus bust out laughing.

Molly and Arthur shuffled in from the main doors, bringing in blankets and an assortment of nutritious but bland foods for Lily. "I know it doesn't look like much, but I remember being pretty sick to my stomach after a few of my kids being born. I didn't want to bring something in and have her bringing it back up."

Arthur clapped James on the back. "Took us a while to get the basket filled. How's the father?"

James gave Arthur a desperate look.

"Already?" Arthur chuckled.

Molly unfurled a homemade quilt and cast it over Lily as she slept. "Where's the baby dear?"

James pointed to the dozing Nundu, her two hungry cubs, and her human milk-seeking interloper.

Molly and Arthur's jaws practically hit the floor.

Chomp.

"Argh!" Sirius yelled, falling back off the chair and onto the floor.

Two extremely fluffy, leopard-spotted, sabre-toothed kittens pounced on him, pinning him down onto the elegant area rug before the hearth. They bat, bat, batted at his shirt, sinking their sharp baby claws into his clothes and some of his skin, having not yet learned that human skin wasn't pretty much nigh-impenetrable like their mum's and dad's. Each cub had a profusion of tiny spots all over its tawny-coloured body and a seat of miniature sabre-teeth to match.

Sirius quickly made the shift into his canine form and dashed away, escaping, but the cubs chased after him in hot pursuit, their tails fluffed out with excitement.
Thud.
Tumble.
Thunk.

"EAUGH!"

Sirius finally stood up and grabbed both cubs by the scruff of their necks, causing them to go limp in instinctive response to being transported elsewhere. Sirius sighed in pure relief, carrying the obnoxiously curious pair back where they had started: their bedroom.

"Naptime for you two mischief-makers," Sirius grunted, hoisting the two cubs into their specially reinforced cub-cribs.

The two cubs meowed unhappily, batting through the bars at him and giving him sad puppy eyes.

"Nap!"
"Mrowl!"
"I mean it!"


"To bed now!"

Two pairs of wide, adorable eyes peered pleadingly up at him through the crib bars.

"Oh no, you won't get me with those looks, you two!" Sirius stormed out of the bedroom after forcibly turning his head away so as to not be swayed by the big eyes of feline persuasion.

Sad mewling begged him to come back, and Sirius covered his ears and stormed to a seat and sat down, singing loudly about drunken tavern wenches and his love of smelly cheese.

Minerva walked in through the floo and yawned, casting an odd glance at Sirius before walking into the children's room. She rustled around a bit and soon came back out with both cubs, lay down on the settee, and proceeded to have the cubs knead against her and curl up on her chest and belly, closed their eyes, and fall asleep immediately.

"That is so not fair, Minerva," Sirius pouted.

The elder witch gave him a small, tired smile as a clutter of miniature plush spiders rushed over to cover her in the warmest, softest blanket imaginable.

Sirius sighed. "Hopefully James and Remus are getting on well enough with building the new estate. I'd hate to think I was here being used as a chew toy for nothing.

"Bellyacher," Minerva muttered, closing her eyes and snuggling the cubs, who happily obliged her by purring madly and snuggling her back.

"How does Severus manage to get two fuzzy balls of cuteness that are exceptionally well-behaved for everyone but me?" Sirius groaned.

"Perhaps you should be asking what it is about yourself that seems to encourage malcontent
behaviour."

"Minerva, you make me sound like an anarchist," Sirius groaned.

The cubs hissed at Sirius and resumed rubbing up against Minerva.

Sirius slumped. "Will I ever finish paying for my adolescence?"

Brim appeared with a **FWOOSH** of ley-magic, chattering her teeth and chirp-rowling. She was laden with a strange building workbench and pouches with oddball wands with different coloured bands marking them. She shook off the harness with a whuff and then shook herself from nose to tail tip. She padded over to check on her sleepy cubs, slurped Minerva, and then climbed up into the cat-tree. She positioned herself in the highest spot covered by foliage and "vanished."

"I am so telling Lily that you just hoisted your babies off on Minerva!" Sirius moaned.

Severus knocked Sirius over the head with his fist, hard. "You don't know enough about Nundus, idiot," Severus admonished. "Nundu cubs are left in a Whomping Willow tree for days until mum drags back a nice juicy hippo with a side of crocodile. The tree protects the cubs until the mother returns."

"She's nursing them!"

"They are *carnivores,*" Severus reminded him. "They will nurse and yet gnaw on your leg quite happily."

"*Happily!*"

"*Joyously!*"

"*Rawr!*"

"*Om, nom, nom!*"

The plush spiders scurried around and dashed up the cat tree.

Sirius cried out as two ornery and very much awake cubs simultaneously pounced his kidneys and one went for the throat in an attempt to go for a death grip with their baby teeth and tiny jaws. Their army of tiny plush spiders remained with Minerva to keep her warm save for a few that dutifully hogtied Sirius in plush spider silk to reduce his struggling, much to the cubs' clear appreciation.

Severus sat down at the nearby desk and calmly began to grade student essays.

"Some help her—**MFFFF!**"

Severus flicked his eyes over and saw that the plush spiders had dragged a rawhide bone into Sirius' mouth and wrapped it firmly in place with plush spider silk. "What was that, Black?"

"**Mfffmffmfff!**"

Severus just shrugged and went back to grading. "Must be hearing things."

Remus ripped the silk-attached rawhide off of Sirius' face and sat down next to him. "Pads, what the hell?"
Panberry Pancakes!

"Sirius hissed.

Remus arched a brow. "Children present, Pads," he said, his eyes flicking over to where Rabbie was giving the cubs their daily inspection as Brim watched curiously.

Rabbie measured, weighed, and checked their eyes, ears, and mouth. "You're bundles of health, little lad and lassie," he crooned. The cubs wriggled, purred, and proceeded to thump him down on the floor and lick him to death.

"Ach!" Rabbie said, squirming. He hugged them tight and rolled, transformed into a Scottish terrier, and tore off across the room, having the cubs chase and stalk him.

Meanwhile, the drowsy silver tabby on the nearby table yawned and radiated contentment. Brim turned her head and gave Minerva a few slurps, making the tabby look a little disheveled. Minerva battred at the Nundu clawlessly and licked the Nundu on the nose.

"Those aren't children, Remus," Sirius grunted, still wrapped in silk. "They are instigators of my demise!"

"You're complaining that you have tricksters for a niece and nephew?" Remus chuckled. "Oh how the mighty have fallen."

"I did not come out causing trouble from the womb!" Sirius huffed.

"You got your shoulders stuck in mum's pelvic cavity," Regulus said from the kitchen as he flipped eggs and pancakes with Severus. "You technically were trouble before you were even born."

Sirius glared at his brother.

"Pretty sure that's why mum was so hard on you all the time," Regulus said.

"A little help here, Moony, so I can go beat the cotton candy out of my brother," Sirius hissed.

Remus raised a brow. "I think you might be safer as you are considering you're still being censored."

"Grapes, dates, and fur balls!" Sirius yelled.

Remus looked toward Severus who shrugged as if to say "no cursing around my cubs."

Remus attempted to unwrap Sirius. "This stuff is crazy."

"Unraveller is over there, Remus," Severus said, pointing with his cooking spatula. "We save the silk for the fund-raiser weaving projects.

"Wait, are you saying you let Sirius get bundled up like a caterpillar to collect the silk?"

"No, I'm saying why waste good silk by cutting it off," Severus replied.

Remus looked suspicious.

"Aubergine!" Sirius yelled.

Remus sighed and fetched the unraveller potion. "You better behave, Pads, or I'm going to hit you with a stunner to the face.

"Aardbeien, peren en sinaasappels!" Strawberries, pears and oranges
Regulus eyed Severus. "My brother doesn't know Dutch."

"I do," Severus replied, flipping a pancake.

The two cubs screeched to a halt by dad's legs and stared up hopefully.

Severus pointed a spatula at them. "Milk and meat until you figure out how to change into human form."

The cubs mrowled sadly, slinking away.

"Ugh, Severus, that almost killed me, seeing them slink away like that," Regulus groaned.

"Willpower, Regulus," Severus said with a roll of his eyes. "Besides, they've been working with Brim every day to think on their human shapes. Can't start too early with Nundus."

"What age are they going to be when they do?" Remus boggled. "I can't imagine them like Bambi after all they've done already as cubs."

"Salazar guesses they will be human toddlers when they do. Nundus and smilodons grow up fast, but they'll just be starting on a human scale. Once they shift, they'll age like humans. Hermione thinks the only reason they haven't shifted already is because they think being a cub is way too much fun."

Remus poured the potion on Sirius and helped him get out of the plush spider silk cocoon.

"They're going to be worse than the Weasley twins," Sirius mumbled.

"Far better," Severus noted. "They've been watching to see what not to do."

Sirius shuddered at the thought.

"Lily is going to be annoyed that your cubs have the advance track."

Severus shrugged. "First she's sad that she didn't have enough time with Harry, and now she's sad that she has too much time with Bambi. Serves her right for insisting she do everything herself. She's pushed all of us away when we ask to help. She even keeps Chairs from holding her unless she's there to watch."

"Paranoia, friend," Regulus said. "She's… compensating."

"For what? A preemptive kidnapping?"

"She doesn't let me get near her," Harry said with a yawn as he came out of his room.

"Long night, Mini-Prongs?" Remus asked.

"Project is done," Harry said proudly. "Draco and I are going to win the Potions and Herbology Fair projects show."

The two cubs ran full tilt into Harry and pounced him, knocking him down. Harry laughed and hugged, and snuggled the cubs, ruffling them. "Hey little sis and baby bro," he laughed.

The two cubs complained that they were not allowed pancakes in sad meows.

Harry tapped them on the nose. "You know the rule. No human food until you have a human
stomach to go with it."

The cubs meowed sadly and lay their heads on his chest.

"You can do it," Harry said. "I know you can."

The cubs meowed again, tails flipping back and forth.

"Draco is passed out in bed," Harry suggested. "Why don't you go tell him to get his lazy arse up?"

The cubs perked, gained rather crooked halos, and bounded out of the room into the next. There was the sound double pouncing and the landing followed by a yelp from Draco.

"Harry," Remus chuckled.

Harry gave Remus an unsuccessful innocent expression.

Remus gave him a customary "I don't believe you" expression in return.

"How is the project for Lily and James coming along?" Harry asked.

"Almost done," Remus said. "Hard to get Chairs away from Lily to get the plans, but once he gave us the blueprints, we could take care of the rest."

"I can't believe they are moving out into the middle of nowhere."

Remus gave a sad smile. "Lily needs a place to feel safe, Harry. But the good thing is, we built a place for Molly and Arthur too. It's a huge plot of land, and it will give them privacy but the ability to be close. I think Molly needs that comfort too. Lily does, for sure. The Weasleys are the only ones she's learned she can trust again."

"Just not her own son," Harry said sadly. "Week after week we visit and try to connect, and either they treat me like a baby or they treat me like someone else's kid."

Remus clasped Harry on the shoulder. "I know it's been hard on you, Harry. I wish I could say it was temporary."

Both cubs crawled into Harry's lap and purred, causing him to automatically rubs their bellies and ears. Harry smiled down at them. "I'm okay with it now. I have the best little bro and sis ever."

Both cubs purred even louder, clasping his hand with their paws and mock-mauling it.

"Bambi is a bit strange," Harry said. "She always kicks James in the face, and she punches Lily on the nose."

Severus snorted. "Karma. Lily used to say that since you were such a perfect pregnancy and child that all her children would be the same."

Harry snickered.

Draco shuffled out, plopped down by Harry, and mumbled something into his ear.

Harry brightened and stood up suddenly, pulling Draco to his feet.

"Dad, can we have breakfast on the lawn?"
Severus froze, his spatula hung in mid air as the pancake he was flipping seemed to suspend in mid fall. Brim took his wrist in his mouth and stared up at him. He swallowed hard. "I don't see why not."

"Horray!"

"Picnic breakfast!"

"Yay!"

"Double yay!"

"We'll get the hamper!"

A virtual horde of plush spiders scurried over and back with a large picnic hamper.

Severus stiffened as Harry and Draco glomped his waist, snuggling into him. The two cubs, watching, emulated by tackling their dad's lower legs. Then, awkward emotional moment over, the boys grabbed up the hamper and began to fill it with everything they thought was breakfast worthy.

Regulus ribbed Severus, pointing to his pancake so it wouldn't burn.

Severus tugged his collar and resumed pancake flipping duty, but his free hand didn't stop petting Brim for his own emotional comfort.

Brim purred in approval— but as to what she was actually approving of, the pets or the fact Harry had finally called Severus dad in front of others, remained to be seen.

"Salazar, stop looking so smug," Godric bemoaned, waving his hand just so.

The Founders stood around the Whomping Willow, watching the cubs climb the branches and get to know the local tree. The willow, all too happy to pet and cradle the cubs, tolerated the spectres of the Founders far better than the living counterparts.

The cubs were exploring the big willow and the little saplings, taking time to chew on the leafing buds to help the saplings along, rub up and down against them, and play around the base and up in the nooks and crannies of the larger willow.

"I do believe the willow is happier now that it has Nundu babies to take care of," Helga said proudly. "Such a beautiful thing to see."

"Well, Salazar is definitely much happier now with grand-cubs," Godric said, rolling his eyes and narrowly ducking in time to miss the bright green hex zooming towards his face. "I'll be happy when they have a human shape. I'll be able to teach them proper swordsmanship and flying."

Salazar crossed his arms across his himself and glared balefully at his friend. "They aren't even a year old. Do try to be a bit more realistic."

Godric gasped in mock offence. "I'll have you know, my mum put me to bed with my first wooden sword and shield."

"Only because there wasn't room to store it elsewhere," Rowena quipped.

"Rowena!" Godric gasped again. He put his hand to his heart. "Not all of us were put to bed cradled between the stacks of the scrivener's scrolls."
"Pity, perhaps more sense would have leaked over into your sword and shield-bashed dreams."

Godric's lip quivered but his eyes glittered with mischief. "You wound me, my dear."

"I heard you assisted on teaching potions with the older students, Salazar," Rowena commented. "How ever did that go?"

"Nothing exploded," Salazar quipped.

"Always a good start," Rowena agreed.

"My daughter is usually there to bite trouble on the rump before it happens, but I think the students realised just how good they really have it after learning what I had to do back in the day."

"Your old master had you grinding ingredients in a different mortar for each one for each purpose, yes?" Helga asked.

"Yes, and they were all different types of stone depending on the task," Salazar said with a heavy sigh. "Later, when I was my own master, I made one mortar of the finest marble and developed a spell to clean and sanitise it. I only needed one after that."

Helga smiled. "You forget the part where you purposely spread the spell to the community to 'help clean dirty pots and pans' and put a kink in your old master's nose at the same time."

"Me, Helga?" Salazar asked innocently. "Why ever would I be so vindictive?"

Helga huffed. "I think we all know that you take such affronts to efficiency very personally."

Salazar's response was interrupted by a plaintive meow at his feet.

"Yes, little lady Athena?" Salazar asked.

The cub put her paws on his robes and meowed again.

Salazar huffed and picked her up, cradling her on her back and rubbing her belly.

Athena purred, purred, and purred some more, oblivious to the fact that she and her brother were able to interact with the spectres on a physical level.

"You are doomed, brother," Godric said, smiling.

"We're all doomed," Salazar said with a grin, tickling the cub's feet and causing her to fling out her legs, "and loving every minute of it."

PurrrrrBONK.

"Your namesake is jealous, Salazar," Rowena said with a smile.

Salazar huffed and scooped up the second cub, snuggling them both.

Rowena smiled down at the cubs and tickled their fuzzy bellies. "A few hundred years in the making. I think we are finally exactly where we wanted to be— and exactly where Hogwarts wishes us to be."

Helga nodded and then affectionately rubbed noses with little Salazar. "At long last, all is finally as it should be."
The four Founders stared over to where the extended family and gathering of friends were having their picnic breakfast on the green. Brim looked up at them even as she watched over the human children just before her mate used his large paw to wrestle her attention back to sunning like a proper feline.

The two boys, who had started not so long ago as bitter enemies, chased each other across the Black Lake on their brooms, having finished cramming as many pancakes as they could fit in their hungry stomachs.

Plush spiders clung to the ends of the brooms, not wanting to be left behind.

"Eeeeeeeeeeeeee!"

"Wheeeeeeeeee!"

"Harry is going to win!"

"Draco!"

"No way!"

"Yes way!"

"TILT!"

"AIIEEEE!"

Meanwhile Pinky, Eek, Snowfall, and Whee wriggled and squeaked as Brim dutifully chewed on them all, grooming them with her teeth and raspy tongue before flopping against her mate with a content and happy purr.

Whatever the future might hold, they would face it together—a family.

A/N: Phew. Happily ever after, YAY!

Coffee: Yay!

Eek: Double yay!

Snowfall: Eeee!

Pinky: We heart happily ever after!

Whee: Wheee!

(Fizban the Fabulous floats in on a cloud of magic and creates a rainbow across the Black Lake and disappears in a puff of smoke)

Fin.

(Spiders lift their legs up and cheer)

"The end!"

"Thanks for reading!"
"Yes, thanks!"

"Don't mind us!"

"Arrivederci!"

"Aur revoir!"

"Bon voyage!"

"Vale!"

"Довиждане!"

"さようなら!"

"Tot straks!"

(Rood, Somber, Tally-ho, Squish, Charlotte, and Koekie scurry up to peer at the audience, throwing up their legs in a cheer)

"Happy endings are the best!"

"Better endings end with spiders!"

"Yes!"

"As long as they are plush spiders."

"Psh, well, yeah!"

"We're awesome!"

"Bye, now!"

"Buh-bye!"

"Thanks for reading!"

And they all lived plushily ever after.

Squeak!

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