Not Just for Christmas

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Summary

Crookshanks expresses a long-felt need to his human.

Notes

You may know that pretty story that, in honour of the animals' night-watch at the birth of the Christ child in the stable at Bethlehem, all animals are able to speak at midnight on Christmas Eve. (There have been some very good stories written using that, including a Dorothy Sayers Lord Peter story.)

This isn't that story.

It is partially AU, in that none of the trio went home during the Christmas holidays in fifth year, or at Easter. Apart from that, though, I tried to stick to canon.

See the end of the work for more notes.

Christmas Eve at home in her stressful fifth year had been wonderful, though quiet, since the Grangers expected a good many guests on Christmas Day itself. Hermione went to bed before midnight, and was a little annoyed to realise she had been awakened. By something rough rasping her left ear, again and again. It was wet, too. And its fur brushed her cheek.

"Crookshanks!" she protested, rolling her head on the pillow.

"Pay attention," a rusty voice said. "I know you're awake."

Must be a dream. Hermione sighed and burrowed into the pillow. Crookshanks batted her shoulder,
claws out, not his normal good manners at all; she squeaked. He made a threatening sound, so low in pitch she felt it more than heard it.

By the time she acknowledged that she was indeed awake, and that her cat was indeed speaking to her, Crookshanks seemed to be quite irritated.

He muttered, "No wonder we don't make a habit of this!"

He was impatient with her curiosity about his ability to speak, but finally he said, "You sleep too much. If you'd bothered to stay awake on Easter Monday – not Good Friday, or Samhain, what you call Halloween, or Beltane, which is May Day, or Passover, or the nights of Diwali, or Hanukkah, or the first and last nights of Ramadan, you could have talked with me. Kneazles are completely catholic, fair to everyone. Some overdo it, and talk all through Ramadan, or through Easter, even Lent, and the whole of Advent, but most of us are not so indulgent."

"You mean," Hermione said wryly, noticing that he could be talkative indeed if he felt like it, "you can speak any time, if you choose, you just can't be bothered."

Crookshanks ignored that, as he did anything not worthy of his attention.

It made more sense than the pretty story sentimental European Christians had made of it, extending it from magical creatures to all animals, and limiting it to Christmas Eve.

If he chose to speak now, it must be important. Since he was a cat, or partly a cat, it was almost certain that he wanted to talk about something of importance to him.

He had no shyness about coming to the point. He wanted a female companion. She must be part kneazle, and the more kneazle blood she had, the better.

"What will you do with her?"

"Have kittens," Crookshanks answered succinctly, looking at her as if she were crazy.

"And when they're grown?"

Crookshanks looked thoughtful. "More females are always good."

Hermione firmly suppressed all thoughts of incest and said merely, "Inbreeding so closely could be bad for their kittens, did you know?"

He looked alarmed at that, and nudged her hard with his pink nose.

"They might have weak or sick kittens. You don't want that, do you?"

He did not speak, but his look was sufficient. It was a relief to know he did have concern for his potential descendants.

She enquired, "And the young male cats?"

Crookshanks stretched his front legs and his shoulders rippled in a cat shrug. "Turn the toms out to fend for themselves. If they're worthy, they'll thrive."

Hermione paused for a vision of Hogwarts swamped by a tide of part-kneazle kittens, inbreeding like mad. Perhaps Professor McGonagall knew of a contraceptive charm for cats that kneazles could and would use.
Hermione sighed. She had not imagined needing to have The Talk with Crookshanks, of all people.

He distracted her from that thought, saying pointedly, "Mrs Norris is the only cat of personality and intelligence at Hogwarts. She's too old for kittening, and not even part kneazle. She Just Won't Do."

Hermione flinched at the very idea of her cat mating with Filch's horrible creature. Now there was an example of owner and pet becoming all too alike. She wondered, for a moment, if she was as stroppy as Crookshanks. Surely not.

He ignored her query whether she'd be allowed to have two cats at school; he wanted it, how she arranged to get what he wanted was up to her.

She reflected that he was quite capable of doing his own search and bringing his own choice home. Since he wanted her to help him choose she should be thankful, and do so, rather than leave him to the guidance of whatever impulses moved male cats and kneazles at such moments. His queen would be part of her household. Crookshanks might not be thinking of picking a female she liked, of course, but simply that her aid would give him a wider search area.

She warned, "At Christmas many people take home sweet kittens; you might not have much, if any, choice in a pet-shop now, even in the Diagon Alley Magical Menagerie. We may have to try again later."

She also told him how many kittens given at Christmas were abandoned once they became cats, no longer so obligingly playful and pretty, or when the family wanted to go on its summer holiday.

Crookshanks was disgusted. He was also appalled at the very idea of female cats being 'fixed'.

"Spayed?" he asked incredulously. Then, truly appalled, his fur fluffing up, "Gelled?"

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As Hermione had suspected, immediately after Christmas the pet-shop had no kittens, even female ones. They did not turn up any abandoned ones in their determined walks around Hermione's home – it was too early for people to get tired of the pretty Christmas presents yet.

On the way back to school a hurried visit to the shop in Diagon Alley where Crookshanks had allowed her to buy him was similarly fruitless. There were a couple of cats, but they had no kneazle blood at all, Crookshanks indicated. On the train journey he sulked for a while, then settled into her lap and went to sleep, ignoring the antics of Ron's Pigwidgeon, who was fluttering round the compartment behaving like prey.

Hermione thought it a good idea to discuss Crookshanks's ambition with Professor McGonagall before it was achieved. They reached an agreement: Crookshanks could have his mate at school if both of them would participate in Care of Magical Creatures classes when requested, and if they would both actively use the kneazle ability to detect evil, not just use it around Hermione and her friends.

Crookshanks seemed to find this acceptable, though he made a token protest, late that night, about being expected to do anything beyond grace the school with the presence of himself, his mate, and their assuredly handsome and intelligent offspring.

Hermione made a more determined attempt at Easter.
She went home for the short Easter holiday, for once, since Harry had won reluctant permission from Dumbledore to go to the Burrow with Ron. She persuaded her parents to let her go to London a day early, staying overnight at The Leaky Cauldron, feeling very adventurous, and prowling the streets with Crookshanks to an hour her parents would have disapproved of.

The next day the Magical Menagerie again proved to have no suitable young female cats. It had three whom the proprietress swore were part-kneazle, all of them pretty, between three and eight months old. Crookshanks sniffed disdainfully at one, and the other two squalled offensively at him, until he retreated, coat fluffed up, to Hermione's side. The witch looked on with resignation.

"I can see they're going to be as hard to place as that one of yours," she said gloomily.

Reluctantly she added, "I think there's a young female scavenging in Knockturn Alley, but she doesn't look as if she'll last long. And she won't come to hand – several people have tried. She could be a real beauty, cleaned up."

Hermione thought indignantly, "If she were a man I'd call her a sexist pig!" before she reflected that in the Menagerie witch's world view cats, even kneazles, existed to be admired and petted.

Crookshanks herded her out of the door.

Even in daylight Knockturn Alley was emphatically Not Nice. There were some scary looking witches and wizards in the street, some of them reeling but not, she thought, drunk. Something that might have been part-Veela, or not, flashed a smile at her from a tiny alley entranceway; Hermione shuddered and hurried along. She wasn't sure if real vampires had anything to fear from sunlight except sunburn on their pale skin.

They found the cat the witch who ran the Magical Menagerie told them about. She was making futile little darts at something a big rusty black tom had in his front paws and teeth, the struggling prey big enough to make it possible for her to snatch too; but the tom knocked her backwards with an enormous paw.

Crookshanks growled low, and sprang forward. Hermione was dismayed when he not only batted the tom aside – the tom ran off, still clutching his dinner – but seized the pale brown cat by the scruff. She yowled heart-rendingly, and deafeningly. She only stopped when Crookshanks pinned her down with his own large paw and started washing her scientifically.

Definitely female, then; he wouldn't bother with a male kitten. This one might have been an unwanted Christmas gift; she was still not full-grown. Too small to fight on equal terms yet, too inexperienced to scavenge well, perhaps instinctively concerned about having kittens too young. She must be disastrously thin under that fluffy brown coat. Hermione noticed the chocolate brown points on her ears and paws, her muzzle and tail-tip; she had never seen something that looked like both a Siamese and a Persian, but she had seen photographs, and thought them unbelievably pretty. This one was just a little bundle of misery under Hermione's orange cat's paw.

From the sidelines Hermione said cautiously, "We can clean her properly in my room, Crookshanks; you don't need to swallow all the Knockturn Alley dirt on her fur."

He ignored her. Well, perhaps the washing did more than get the dirt off. It did seem to reassure the little female; she had stopped struggling and miaowing, and turned her head obediently to allow Crookshanks to wash under her chin.

Presumably the cats came to an agreement; Crookshanks stopped licking her fur long before she met his normal standards of cleanliness, and let her up. She shook herself, cat-style, a long ripple
going down her spine, and moved closer to him, looking up at Hermione with what was probably distrust.

Hermione went down on her knees on the dirty cobbles, thinking she would have to wash her stockings later. It might help if she did not loom over the little caramel-coloured female. She held out a careful hand where it could be seen, not coming too close, and twitched her fingers. Caramel flinched back against Crookshanks, but when he nudged her she stepped forward and touched her cool little nose to the very tip of one finger. Hermione did not presume, but waited for Caramel to decide this person was safe.

In the end Hermione carried Caramel; the little female was all bones and fur. Later today, Hermione decided, she would take her to a vet to make sure it was only starvation and not disease, and to make sure she was not pregnant.

Crookshanks did not seem to feel the need to speak to Hermione, but she reflected that they were communicating essentials quite well without his doing so. She told him about the vet and he emphatically agreed, rubbing his big head against her calf, purring rustily. Hermione wondered if she would ever find out why Caramel was here and not being petted before some fire on a comfortable cushion, as her beauty deserved. Perhaps she, like the cats in the Menagerie, had a mind of her own.

Back in Hermione's room, after a small meal of chopped lightly cooked chicken livers, to help build up her strength quickly, Caramel reluctantly submitted to being washed with warm water and mild hair shampoo by her new human. Hermione was glad she could use warming charms to dry the kitten, rather than having to do as Muggles sometimes did with young cats in danger of catching cold, use a hair-dryer. That, she thought, would try Caramel's tolerance too far.

Crookshanks conveyed, without speech, that Caramel found her new name acceptable. He had told Hermione earlier, in one of his chattier night talks, that cats were not too concerned about names, so long as they were not undignified. That verged on lèse-majesté. Caramel had no qualms at all about being brushed; she stretched and rolled with the brush movements in a way Crookshanks clearly thought too juvenile.

After Caramel had a sleep, tucked up against Crookshanks on Hermione's bed, Hermione took her to the vet. She was not surprised that Crookshanks insisted on coming, and was glad that there was one in Diagon Alley, accustomed to handling magical animals.

She wondered if he knew about their power of speech, but did not mention it. Crookshanks had been very clear that this was a state secret: not even Harry or Ron was to be told. Even in her talk with Professor McGonagall Hermione had not been supposed to reveal precisely how she had come by her information, though it seemed to her most unlikely that McGonagall, herself a cat animagus, would not know that kneazles could speak if they chose. McGonagall was definitely aware that Crookshanks could communicate with Hermione far better than any ordinary cat.

The vet provided potions, as well as giving Caramel doses of several on the spot. He gave Hermione advice on not letting her become pregnant – here he glanced sideways at the big orange tom sitting watchfully on the far end of the examination table – as soon as it was physically possible. It would be better if Caramel waited until she was at least a year old. Certainly she had to have fully regained her health, and be a proper weight for her age and build. Without a blink, or a similar glance, Hermione agreed she would take care to isolate Caramel when she went into heat.

The vet explained in embarrassing detail how Hermione might know when this happened. Hermione was thankful that humans did not do that. He recommended a couple of books she could buy in Flourish and Blotts; Hermione found that a much more comfortable way of acquiring
necessary information.

He also attended to the formality of getting a licence for Caramel, whom he identified as not just part-kneazle, but almost wholly kneazle, even though she did not look as most kneazles did, having only the faintest shadows of speckles in her pale Siamese-brown fur. That should please Crookshanks, and make the kittens he wanted more acceptable to Hogwarts.

That night at midnight Crookshanks complained of the vet’s interference in his plans, but stopped abruptly; it seemed that Caramel too had decided opinions on the subject.

Hermione thought of the cat tribe that haunted the British Museum. They slunk in the underground passages, hunted rats through the storerooms, were tacitly tolerated, and fed by staff in defiance of orders. They could even be seen occasionally, as Hermione had done on several visits with her parents, frolicking or sleeping in sunlight in isolated courtyards and hidden nooks. She did not want that for Hogwarts. It seemed as if Caramel intended to impose some control on Crookshanks's territorial and dynastic ambitions.

It was not as if a pair of part-kneazles were needed to control vermin at school, or that they could, in a place the size of Hogwarts, even with several generations of descendants to help, if no other means was available. Presumably Hogwarts had magical vermin suppression – though there must be insects, as the spiders thrived. Hermione realised suddenly, from their behaviour in a crisis, that they must be acromantulas rather than spiders. She vividly remembered hearing Ron talk about his disgust and panic during that enforced visit to Aragog in the Forbidden Forest. Aagh!

For that matter, the magical vermin suppression could not be very effective, or was foolishly limited as to size: there was the basilisk! That had moved freely not just in the Chamber of Secrets, but behind the walls of upstairs Hogwarts. It had been inconvenient missing out on all those classes, but not meeting the basilisk – after that one time – was certainly a good point about having been petrified for so long.

Hermione resolved to have a talk with Crookshanks about kneazle ability to identify suspicious persons. Did it require training, or was it wholly innate? Crookshanks was a very reliable detector, as his behaviour with Scabbers the rat had shown. Crookshanks had not just disliked the concealed animagus; he had made a determined effort at every opportunity to dispose of him. Would Caramel be as good? Surely if the ability needed training, that was something Crookshanks could do. He must want that ability in his kittens; why else insist on a queen with kneazle blood.

With the wizarding world more and more on a war footing, as the threat posed by Voldemort became more evident, Hermione thought that a well-developed ability to detect the unreliable should ensure the welcome of a very reasonable number of kittens. Clearly, with Crookshanks and Caramel's kittens, there could be no question of drowning them, or otherwise disposing of them, save by giving them to appreciative and careful homes.

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By the time Hermione went home for summer, taking her two cats in a large carrier basket, where they were quite content to travel when walking would otherwise be required, Caramel had settled in not just with Crookshanks but with Hermione, and even with her closest friends.

By the time they came back for the start of sixth year, Hermione had had her first experience of putting Caramel into purdah. While Caramel understood about not having a litter too early, her instincts still made her yowl after Crookshanks often enough to irritate Hermione as well as her parents. Anyone would think she was a Siamese in more than colouration, she became so talkative. Hermione was relieved when her calling ceased, and glad to allow her out of confinement.
She was hopeful that Caramel might go into heat only once more before autumn, and then perhaps
do as many cats, and kneazles, did, so the vet had advised: not go into heat again until late winter.
One day in mid-October Hermione found, after classes ended, that Caramel was definitely in
season again. She took the female to the isolated quarters that had been set up and petted her before
she left, surprised that Caramel was not complaining this time. Crookshanks chose the midnight of
Halloween to inform her that Caramel was pregnant.

"You're sure?" she asked.

Crookshanks purred in a very positive, not to say smug, manner. Some quick calculation showed
that the kittens would probably be born during the Christmas holidays. Hermione sighed at the
thought of the problems of transporting them back to school at a very young age. However, she
was not prepared to do without her visit home, any more than she was prepared to leave her cats
alone at Hogwarts, especially with Caramel due to have her first litter.

Christmas Eve Mr and Mrs Granger took Hermione with them to an evening in a hotel with
relatives visiting from Canada, so it was quite late when they arrived home. Hermione found
Caramel wandering agitatedly round her bedroom, while a sleepy Crookshanks sat on the end of
the bed, purring soothingly at intervals. Once Hermione was ready for bed Caramel seemed to
settle, lying down at last in the cardboard box lined with old pyjamas which earlier she had seemed
to find acceptable.

At midnight Crookshanks remarked, "You'd better not go to sleep. She's been waiting for you to
come home."

Hermione leaned over the edge of the bed to find Caramel's orange eyes meeting hers. "Would you
like me to sit beside your box, Caramel?" she asked.

Caramel did not talk often, though she had expressed brief opinions at Midsummer and again at
Halloween, but she answered, "Don't go away. My kittens must learn your smell as soon as
possible."

Hermione fetched a book, but she did not read long. Inside the next half-hour Caramel produced
two kittens, one with pale reddish fur, the other cream-coloured. Both had the faintest hint of their
mother's dark tips to ears and paws and tail. Indeed, in the last few months Caramel's own
markings had become more distinctive. She too might have been cream or a pale buff at birth,
Hermione thought.

Caramel seemed to have no doubts or hesitations in dealing with her kittens. She cleaned the first –
Hermione gulped to see her eating first the caul then the afterbirth – and then, soon enough, the
second. After that she lay down and encouraged the kittens to nurse.

Hermione had never seen a newborn kitten before, and found them fascinating: tiny, eyelids closed,
but already able to navigate to their mother's flanks, and with opinions on which of their mother's
teats they wanted to suckle from. Only after Caramel went to sleep, her kittens tucked against her
belly, half concealed by her body and legs, did Hermione lie down again.

She said to Crookshanks, "Congratulations, sir. Very fine kittens."

She had already told Caramel what pretty, healthy kittens they were, hoping the latter was as true
as the former. Caramel had been more offhand about the compliments than Crookshanks was. He
had kept his distance from the kittens, as Hermione did, when they realised Caramel didn't want
either of them coming too close, despite what she had said about the kittens learning to know
Hermione. He moved from the foot of the bed to a place beside Hermione's pillow, from which he
could easily see his queen and their offspring, and curled up, purring low and solidly. Hermione put out the light and went to sleep with one hand on his back, feeling the contented rumble soothe and relax her from the anxieties she had felt all evening.

Hermione locked her bedroom door before their Christmas midday dinner guests arrived. She did not want any of her young cousins disturbing Caramel and her kittens. It might be even worse if Crookshanks became apprehensive.

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The kittens thrived, and became lively; their eyes were open by the time Hermione took her four cats back to school, and their coats grew thicker and darkened a very little. The female's coat seemed to be a redder version of her father's orange, without the tabby markings, while the male was a delicate biscuit, his hair already longer than his sister's, and a suggestion of darker colour on his legs, not just his paws.

Once on the Hogwarts Express, Hermione let the adult cats out of the carry basket. Caramel looked after her kittens in an exemplary manner, but sometimes she liked a break from them. They were safe where they were, she knew, so she curled up on Ginny's lap and went to sleep. Crookshanks himself discouraged visitors curious to look at his kittens. Soon enough the Gryffindors on the train learned they were not welcome in the compartment, though Ginny and Neville sat with the trio as usual, and Luna joined them.

People from other houses did not even get past the door of the compartment before a hissing Crookshanks, back lifted and fur erect to convey his disapproval, saw them off.

Ron remarked, "There's going to be a lot of jealousy, Hermione, you having four cats – yes, I know the kittens can't be left, any more than Caramel can! – and if Crookshanks won't even let people look at them it'll be worse."

Hermione said calmly, "Everyone needs to get used to it – Crookshanks too."

However, the next visitor to the compartment put up Ron's back quite as much as Crookshanks's.

Draco Malfoy arrived, Crabbe and Goyle lumbering behind him as usual, pushing open the door and saying, "I hear you have some pedigree kittens, Granger. Let's have a look."

Harry had to prevent Ron from throwing either punches or hexes, and Hermione said, above Ron's resentfully growled insults and Malfoy's smart-mouthed replies, "You can see them later, Malfoy, when they're older, like everyone else. And not until then. Go away, please, unless you want to upset their mother."

To her amazement he did so, though his parting insult to Ron was so exquisitely apt that even Harry hid a reluctant grin.

When the kittens were four weeks old Hermione brought them, with their mother, down from the sixth year Gryffindor girls' dormitory to the Great Hall, one Saturday after breakfast. A good deal of the morning passed before the students, especially the younger ones and especially the girls, tired of the opportunity to admire the kittens and lament at not being allowed to touch them.

Draco Malfoy came over to the Gryffindor table in mid-morning to ask with astonishing politeness, "May I see your cats, Granger?"

She could hardly say no. Malfoy seemed to admire them sincerely, though he preferred the little male, who certainly looked much more like the conventional idea of a pedigree cat. Hermione
wondered if there was a Kneazle Fanciers Association which kept track of kneazle breeding, and assigned points for adherence to a set standard. There was no way either of her cats would count as pedigreed, if pure breeding were all that counted. Presumably Malfoy would think so; he certainly applied that standard to human wizards and witches.

Hermione did not care. As someone who was Muggle-born she thought she had a better idea than Malfoy of the relative worth of pure blood. It was pleasing that Crookshanks and Caramel's kittens were pretty, and very good that they were definitely healthy (the Diagon Alley vet had confirmed that, watched suspiciously by both parents). It would be best of all if they had a full ration of in-born kneazle skills. Crookshanks seemed to think they did, though he said it was early to tell.

Afterwards Hermione was surprised that neither Crookshanks nor Caramel seemed to find anything objectionable in Malfoy's presence. Perhaps it was because he had been openly interested in and admiring of the kittens. He had been polite to her and Harry – fortunately by then Ron was out on the Quidditch pitch, taking advantage of fair if cold weather to practise.

After that Hermione's cats spent more time in the Gryffindor common room than in the dormitory, and a week later she started taking them down to the Great Hall regularly. It might be the simplest way, Professor McGonagall had suggested, to prevent the growth of inter-house grievances. Soon enough Caramel was willing to allow her kittens to play with the younger students, who obligingly ran about trailing pieces of string or even leftover Christmas tinsel, or rolled balls of knitting wool for them, though sometimes the owners of the wool objected when they found out. Caramel lay about watching complacently, posed with characteristic neatness, looking like a prim little old lady instead of the just-out-of-kittenhood cat she was. Crookshanks was more vigilant, but after a while he too relaxed.

Hermione sat at the Gryffindor table doing her assignments, or reading library books, until the kittens were played out, taking them back upstairs each time after a couple of hours. They dropped off to sleep more than once in that time, of course, but soon roused to play with their human toys again.

With second term well along, and assured the kittens were safe, she concentrated more and more deeply on her studies. This was not their NEWTs year, but it was never too soon to start preparing.

It took her some time, therefore, to realise that Draco Malfoy was one of the most persistent visitors. He did not run about, but sat cross-legged on the floor by the kittens' basket, and when they tired they fell asleep in his lap, if he were there, rather more often than in the basket. When she did realise, she kept silent, and watched him surreptitiously.

He came alone, without his watch-goons, said little, and concentrated on the cats. After a while Hermione saw that they relaxed him.

During his father's imprisonment in Azkaban Draco had been like a wounded wild beast, lashing out, especially at Harry, willing to strike, to bite, to destroy if he could. He was still very tightly wound a lot of the time, though his father's release at Halloween had eased some of his tension. Sitting on the floor of the Hall like a much younger child, delicately caressing a sleeping kitten, murmuring to Caramel, he looked his real age instead of an old man with hands and facial muscles made of wire. His natural athlete's bodily ease came back to him in place of the tormented stiffness that had held him for months.

This seemed to Hermione a good thing. He would never like Harry, nor Harry him, but things were bound to be better between them if Malfoy were not twisted tight all the time by anger and resentment.
Even so she was surprised and dismayed when Malfoy said to her one day, "You'll be finding homes for them when they're eight or ten weeks old, I suppose. If you can bring yourself to consider it, Granger, I'd like the little male cat."

He had made sure they were alone before he asked, presumably more in consideration of his own dignity than her feelings, but he was clearly serious.

She concealed her astonishment quickly; she should be old enough not to gape at Malfoy when he said something shocking. She looked down at the kitten lying contentedly in his hands, half-asleep, purring muzzily.

She thought of saying, "No! I don't want to!"

She thought of saying, "How can I in good conscience give a kneazle to a Malfoy?"

She thought of saying, "Will you look after him properly?"

Stupid questions, childish wishes. He was serious, so should she be. He moved uneasily when she delayed replying, his fingers closing with unconscious tenderness round the little male.

At last she said, "I will ask his parents."

He stared up at her.

She said simply, "They're part kneazle. You do know they're not pure-bred, though, don't you?"

He nodded jerkily. "It doesn’t matter."

"Then they'll know better than I would, if it's right to give him to you." After a moment she added, "I should ask him, too."

She turned in her chair and called Crookshanks and Caramel to her. They came, the little red female trailing after her mother.

It was very easy to explain, and neither adult cat was at all perturbed by her question.

Draco Malfoy gazed wide-eyed as they obviously conferred. Then Crookshanks stepped up to him and nudged his son awake, purring softly at him, then, clearly, talking, as cats did. After a moment the kitten purred with such enthusiasm that his whole body shook in Malfoy's hands.

Crookshanks leapt up into Hermione's lap, trampled it and her draped robes to a suitable form, then curled up, looking up at her sleepy-eyed, making soft contented noises, before his eyes closed completely.

"Well," Hermione said softly, "isn’t that interesting. Kit is happy to go to you, and his parents agree. He's a bit too young yet, but soon. Next week, say. You'll have to think of a name for him. I've just been calling them Kit and Tabitha."

Malfoy smiled. She had never seen him smile like that before; never seen him smile, she thought.

He said softly, 'Thank you, Granger. I'll look after him, you don't need to worry. And I'll think of a name," He smiled a little more broadly. "A suitable name for a Malfoy cat – kneazle. No need to tell my father he's not completely pure blood kneazle."

Hermione said, struck by possible difficulty to come, "You may need to, er, be careful who meets him at Malfoy Manor. His father is very, er, sensitive, and Kit may be too."
No need to say, she hoped, that Crookshanks was confident his son already had a good nose for evildoers. It did mean the kitten would be much safer if he were kept away from Death Eaters and kept from challenging them.

Draco Malfoy evidently understood. "I'll be expected to keep him out of the formal rooms at the Manor, of course," he said calmly. "And he'll come to school with me, as your cats do, he'll be safe here." After a moment he added, "Fairly safe."

For a moment they looked at each other in full acknowledgement that nowhere was absolutely safe, nor would it be, until Voldemort was defeated.

Draco Malfoy leaned over and restored the now sleeping Kit to the basket.

He stood up.

"I may be glad of a kneazle's company," he said matter-of-factly, "and you should keep yours close, too. Thanks again, Granger."

Hermione watched him saunter away, and wondered how long he expected to live, a Death Eater's son, if a kneazle found him acceptable. She should talk to Harry about this. Perhaps something should be done.

When she realised that Valentine's Day was next week, she started to laugh helplessly. She could see now the astonishment, indignation, and fascinated scandal-mongering that her apparent Valentine gift to Draco Malfoy of all people would cause. She had better speak not just to Harry but to Ron before she gave Malfoy the kitten.

* * * *The End* * * *

End Notes

This was written for Christmas 2003 for my then very young niece, who now despises fanfic and writes collaborative Ofic for fun. O tempora, O mores!

The title is taken from the slogan of the Canine Defence League ('a dog is for life, and not just for Christmas').

My beta readers, Proserpina (korestemenos) and ntamara, helpfully identified some things that needed clarifying, as well as making encouraging noises. My thanks to both for a fast but careful job at a busy time of year, so I could put this out for Christmas.

Dedicated to The Cat Protection League of the UK, and to the RSPCA of Australia. And to all our cats, over the years.

[soapbox] Since ordinary cats can't use contraceptive charms, I do subscribe to the spaying and gelding of all female and male kittens, except those meant for breeding, either before sale or before issuance of a licence. Yes, I believe in licences for cats too, and microchipping. And keeping them indoors at night – Australia's native fauna can't compete with or resist the predation of feral cats (or feral dogs, rabbits, donkeys, camels, buffalo…). Feral cats are not pretty after they stop being feral kittens; they are dirty, diseased, and all-too-often starving. [/soapbox}
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