Scales of Judgement

by corvusdraconis

Summary

[HG/SS] Back in the time of the Marauders, Sirius Black did something unspeakable when he lured Severus Snape to his death at the Shrieking Shack. Yet, things did not go as planned. Severus Snape disappeared, and Harry Potter and Ronald Weasley never needed Hermione Granger. As inheritors to the Marauder's Legacy, they resolve to make her life hell for fun. M for safety. AU/EWE/NC

Notes

A/N: I have, and shall continue to use "Master" as a uni-sex reference for someone who has obtained a level of experience that they can have an apprentice of their own. This is intentional. I do this instead of using Master/Mistress save for the use of "headmistress" which is a job title. Why? Because in my world (in my head, and the chairs are comfy here) you are either a master or an apprentice—or you are a person who doesn't need/desire to be so and just goes out in the world with the standard education. Come to think of it, look at the Jedi. It was always about masters and apprentices. There was never "Mistress Jedi". (Just a little disclaimer because I still end up with some people sending me reviews trying to correct my use of Master and force me to use "Mistress").

Beta Love: The Dragon and the Rose, Dutchgirl01, and Flyby Commander Shepard

Disclaimer: JKRs stuff is still hers and not mine
Chapter Summary

It all started at the shack...

Scales of Judgement

"What greater thing is there for two human souls, than to feel that they are joined for life-to strengthen each other in all labour, to rest on each other in all sorrow, to minister to each other in all pain, to be one with each other in silent unspeakable memories at the moment of the last parting?"

-George Eliot

"You've been trying to get a bead on the lot of us for a long time, haven't you, Snivellus," Sirius said with a arch lift of his head in that seemed all too like the rest of his wealthy, entitled family.

Severus sneered, but said nothing, keeping his wand hand ready, the fingertips of his hands brushing against the smooth ebony of his wand. "What do you want, Black?"

"Oh, nothing much, just—" Sirius grasped the bars of the grate and shook it loose, allowing Snape to walk out. "Offering you a bit of the truth. You can appreciate the truth, yeah?"

"And I'm supposed to trust your truth?" Snape scoffed. "After all you've done?"

"All we've done, Snivelly," Sirius smirked. "We've both cursed and hexed each other silly since day one. Ever since we first met on the train."

"What are you up to, Black?"

"I'm offering you up a slice of truth on a plate, Snivellus," Black crooned. "A little peek into why we will always protect each other and why the likes of you—couldn't possibly understand."

Snape scowled.

"You want to know where we are always sneaking of to, right? You're convinced we're up to some sort of evil, dastardly plot."

"Trouble making."

"Trouble. Evil. Whatever," Sirius shrugged. "It's all the same to us. You think we're up to something and you want in. Well, what if I could show you exactly why you're barking up the wrong tree, hrhm?"

Snape's black eyes practically burned a hole into Sirius.

"Oh, come on, Snape," Black said with a heavy sigh. "Look I'll let you make your own judgement."
See that tree over there?"

"The Whomping Willow? Who could possibly miss that?" Snape scoffed.

"There's a knob," Sirius said. He pointed his wand at it, turning an area on the bark bright pink. "Turn it and the willow stops trying to pummel you to death."

"I don't plan on going near it," Severus said.

"I think you'll want to tonight," Sirius said.

"Why?"

Black shook his head. "Some things you just have to see to believe, alright?"

"There is a path under the willow," Sirius said. "Your answers are there, I swear it."

"You'll have to forgive a little suspicion as to your intentions, Black," Severus said.

"Just check out the tunnel, Snape," Sirius said. "Or don't. No skin off my back." Black threw up his hands and walked back towards Hogwarts.

Snape looked toward the Whomping Willow and back at the retreating form of Sirius Black. Sighing deeply, he walked toward the notoriously aggressive tree, happy that the moonlight was at least providing enough illumination for him to navigate the path.

"I don't know what you're up to, Black, but this had better not end up with rotten eggs in my hair again," he muttered.

As Severus' eyes froze on the form of Remus Lupin—his face pushing out into a naked muzzle, skin stretching over pointed canines that were suddenly way too big for his mouth even as fur erupted from his abused skin—he realised that the gang of Gryffindor were hiding more than just a secret. They were hiding far, far worse: a werewolf.

Lupin was screaming like he was burning to death, and Severus was pretty sure the agony alone was driving away whatever semblance of humanity the wizard may have had. Of all of his tormentors, Lupin had been most tolerable. It hadn't been because he hadn't taken part in the ridicule and the pranking, but there was something in the look Lupin would sometimes give him when the others went all out to torture their most hated Slytherin target—something that almost seemed like regret. None of the others—Potter, Black, or Pettigrew—had ever displayed anything even close to remorse for their actions. They weren't chums in any sense of the word, but in that moment of primal terror and horrified realisation, he realised that Lupin had been cursed in a way far worse than an abusive, alcoholic father.

Remus Lupin would never be able to escape himself.

And Severus—he would be lucky to get out of this alive.

Suddenly, he wished he'd focused less on retribution and more on discovering his own Animagus form. Professor McGonagall had been generous enough to teach him, and she had shown great faith in him. Severus, however, had only focused on it in-between attempting to find something, anything to pin on Potter, Black, Pettigrew, and...

Lupin.
Lupin the bloody sodding werewolf.

"Fuck," Severus swore, realising he was stuck between a werewolf and the exit. There were no windows. There were no doors save the trapdoor he had used to get into the shack. What kind of house has no windows or normal doors?!

Even in the midst of his half-transformation, tortured with pain, Lupin was both there and not there. Severus could see his horror even as the yellow bled into his irises. Fear. Terror.

The werewolf's muzzle was short and flecked with foam. Slaver dripped from his mouth, mixed with blood. Hunger filled the werewolf's eyes. Hunger not only for meat, no. It was hunger for kinship, pack and freedom.

But a werewolf's craving for such things was perverted into something monstrous. Severus knew that Lupin would do everything he could to insure he wasn't alone the next time he shifted. He would infect any and every human he could.

And someone had put him here—in a house with no windows or doors—only a breath's run away from both Hogwarts and Hogsmeade.

Severus pulled out his wand and tried every spell he knew starting from standard to his customised curses. Ropes went around Lupin, tightening, but he busted out easily, seemingly even more pissed off. He lunged at Severus and snapped, his heated breath brushing against his cheek.

So close.

So dangerously close.

Severus yelled, sticking his wand to the werewolf's head as he used his arms to brace and his feet to kick, scramble, and push the werewolf's mass off him.

Stunning spells only pissed Lupin off.

He used a blast of magic to send the werewolf careening into a wall, but it was in the wrong direction. Again, Lupin was now even more well-positioned to stand between him and the only door to freedom.

The one door that wouldn't even guarantee he could escape.

And even if he did, a werewolf would be free to roam across the Hogsmeade and Hogwarts itself. Even if he was free, how many might fall to Lupin's jaws before dawn?

Any restraint Snape may have felt for the boy werewolf had died with the first vicious snap of those frothy, infectious jaws. Severus kicked the werewolf in the face with his boot and hastily scrambled up the stairs, his hands clawing out on the wooden floor.

Digging.

Digging.

Scraping into the wood with his nails.

Never had his nails been so sharp. Never had his fear been so tangible. Had he been the type to overindulge in fizzy drinks and pumpkin juice, surely his trousers would have been soaked with urine. He ran, crawled, scrambled, and forced his body to move.
He clutched his wand, trying to blast a hole in the wall of the house, but someone had enchanted it. The spell blasted back on him, nearly hitting him directly in the face, but he dodged just in time to send the pissed-off werewolf careening down the stairs.

Escape.

Had to escape.

"Hey Moony," Sirius had said as he taunted the sickly looking wizard with a candy bar. "Howl was your night, hrm?"

"Shut it, Padfoot," Remus had groaned.

"Look, Prongs, Snivellus is watching us."

"He's always watching us, Wormtail."

Moony. Werewolf.


That was how they avoided being harmed by the werewolf. They shifted into their Animagus forms. That had to be how they escaped being infected. Humans could be infected, but animals could not. As long as they were in animal form, they were safe.

"You're such a dog, Padfoot."

Black was a dog Animagus.

Wormtail.

Severus remembered Potter carrying a fat-looking rat with a huge block of cake. Pettigrew was the rat.

Prongs…

"Not my fault you always get your head stuck in the doorway, Prongs," Black had laughed.

"Fuck off, Padfoot."

Antlers. Potter was a sodding deer.

All this time, the reason for how they had always been able to find him. Always had been able to escape being detected. They were always out on the green after hours. They were always just out of reach.

They were Animagi, all.

But unlike Severus, who was training under Professor McGonagall and had his name registered legally as a potential Animagus until he obtained his full shift, the banes of his life had achieved it on their own.

They were illegal.

"I'm sorry you don't have any peers to work with, Mr Snape," McGonagall had said. "Most do not have the strength of will or desire to study for it."
He should have studied **harder**.

He should have focused on that instead of following his hated enemies around, trying to catch them red-handed doing something they could be punished for.

He would never have caught them because they were bloody Animagi.

In his meditations, he could *fly*. He had wings. Huge, leathery wings.

He had been scared, so scared, that his form would be a sodding bat. It was bad enough that people constantly made fun of him because of his black hair and uniform and how it made him look like a vampire bat.

But now he didn't care. Now, he only wanted to escape. Bat, mouse, twittering English Robin—he didn't *care*. He wanted out. He wanted to escape.

Lupin was bounding up the stairs again. Closer, closer.

Snape threw debris down the stairs, hoping to buy himself more time.

Wings. Great, black, leathery wings. He could feel the gnash of razor-sharp teeth. He could feel the pull of muscles he didn't, well, *shouldn't* have.

*Yes!*

*Please, for the love of all magic*, he prayed. *Don't let me die here. Don't force me to live out my life as a werewolf.*

Snape screamed as Lupin leapt, thrusting a dresser between them with sheer terror and adrenaline. The werewolf tore and snapped. The wood cracked and splintered. Snape thrust a candelabra between Lupin's jaws, praying none of those teeth nicked his skin.

Heat. Wings.

His teeth ground together. He tasted blood. His muscles ached as he tried to keep the dresser between them.

"It's not about knowing the spell, Mr Snape," McGonagall had said. "It's about allowing your other self free. Be what you *are*. People think becoming an Animagus is just about acquiring a form and using it, but it's more than that. It's about being your true self. It's about embracing what has always been inside you. That is why you can never be another shape once you make that shift. You're not turning into a random animal, or an animal that is like you. You're turning into the animal that IS you."

Lupin's jaws snapped but a centimeter in front of his face. The armoire was splintering. The candlestick had snapped.

*Fuck.*

*Fuck!*

**FUCK!**

Fear and rage mixed together. Fire churned in his belly.

*I WILL NOT DIE HERE TONIGHT BECAUSE OF YOU!*" Snape screamed furiously.
Magic swirled around his body, churning around his core, and it blasted its way out as molten flames—as hot as lava.

There was a tremendous roaring, screeching, bellowing sound, and Severus realised it was coming from himself. His arm smacked into Lupin, sending him bouncing down the stairs, yelping as he fell.

Rage.

Fire and rage replaced fear.

Severus roared, his shape twisting, churning, and reforming as the shadow of giant, leathery wings burst from his back and utterly obliterated the room he was in, taking out the walls and ceiling. He was rising up, higher and higher.

Thunk.

His head hit the ceiling.

The room was too small. It was crushing all around him. Squeezing him. Pinning him down!

Severus burst free, using all his might to shove away the oppressive force of the walls. Plaster, wood, and stone flew in all directions.

Cold, damp air filled his nostrils, and Severus snorted, sending steam and smoke rising from them. Molten saliva dripped from his super-heated mouth, burning where it landed like lava meeting grass.

One wing unfolded and then the other. A long, whiplike tail with a spike at the end smashed through the sole remaining wall, and swordlike talons pulverised the remains of the floor. The supports groaned with the excess weight, creaking ominously and threatening to crash the remnants of the structure to the ground.

Ba-THOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOm!

Severus' vastly larger mass caused the shack to actually shatter down around him.

Moony tore out of the dust cloud, looking to attack again, but as he clambered over the debris to find his human victim, his jaws wrapped around Severus' obsidian talon-spur.

Hisssssss!

Drip.

Drip.

Drip.

Severus' jaws opened and he belched several gouts of flame in short bursts, but not for long. Soon, he seemed to realise exactly what he was, and his eyes narrowed menacingly as his fanged maw opened wide.

FaaSHOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOm!

Huge gouts of orange, red, and superheated blue and white flame poured out of Severus' elongated, pointed snout.
Moony yiped, tumbling, scrambling, and tearing away as fast as wolfishly possible. The end of his tail was charred and naked, the flesh smoking.

Predator had suddenly become prey.

The werewolf, sensing its life was in grave danger, tore off at top speed in the general direction of Hogwarts.

Glowing, purple eyes radiated hatred as the dragon leapt into the air, unfurling a massive set of wings from his body.

One beat.

Two.

Severus leapt into the air with a cry so low it shook the earth rather than making any audible sound. His muscles flexed. Thickly plated ridges rippled down his back as his rough scales moved over his skin. His tail swished, tail spikes gleaming in the moonlight. As his tail snapped back and forth like a whip, the arrow-like spade on the end seemed to scream through the air with a high-pitched vibration.

Giant horns curved up from his head and to the side, dipping before curling back up, counterbalancing his head as he zoomed after the fleeing werewolf. Lupin ripped swaths across the green in his mad dash across the grounds, seeming to sense his impending death.

Severus roared, but the sound that came out was a low, earthshaking rumble. The lower frequency vibrated across the earth, and even the nearby Black Lake rippled in response. But as Lupin dove into the trees and disappeared into the forest brush, he startled a large deer, driving it out in the clearing.

Severus' eyes glowed brighter as he spotted the bolting deer. In a flash of movement, he banked, breaking off from his pursuit of the gangly werewolf in favour of the plump deer. His talons extended, his digits expanding—

SNAP!

The deer was crushed almost instantly, his sword-like talons slicing through the unfortunate prey in seconds. Without landing, the new dragon banked again, carrying his meal off with him as he glided over the Dark Forest and beyond, leaving behind the human world of torment, ridicule, and pain.

The world that would harbour a werewolf on the school grounds where any hapless student could stumble upon them—no lock on the door save one aptly-named Whomping Willow with a convenient off-switch—that was no world he wished to remain in.

The mountains called to him, and he would carve his own place in them to call his own.

Sirius was having the very best night of his life. He'd arranged for James to be with Lily all night. He'd set up Severus to meet with Moony, which he hoped resulted in teaching the greasy fuck to keep his oversized nose the hell out of their business and fun, Wormtail was off pranking his oh-so-proper Slytherin baby brother, and Marlene McKinnon was gloriously naked underneath him.

Better yet, she had been sneaky all on her own to find him as he was parking himself on the grassy knoll nestled between the rosebushes, waiting to hear the glorious sound of Snivellus' terrified
screams to let him know that it was time to get himself to Hogwarts and connect back with the others to see how their nights went.

Alas, Snape was evidently taking his sweet time getting to Moony, but Sirius wasn't complaining a bit about that. He and McKinnon were gloriously compatible, and their hyperactive libidos were apparently proof of the fact.

The gathering of bushes was perfect to cover their activities—close to Black Lake, but far enough from Hogwarts so the sounds of their lustful pursuits didn't tip anyone off. Better yet, he would be able to hear Snape's screams when they began and even get to play the hero to sweet, little Marlene. Perfect!

He had planned to get a little closer to the Shack and park himself in a tree for a better view, but with Marlene with him, all thoughts remotely resembling rationality had promptly fled off to the lake and drowned themselves in its fact, the only thing Sirius wanted at the moment was to drive himself back into Marlene's inviting, insatiable body. Thankfully, he'd had many experiences with a great many witches, and he knew exactly what places to caress and kiss to get Marlene all hot and bothered all over again. Their little love nest in the bushes was warm and cozy, having been transformed into a roomy, comfortable place to explore each other at their leisure.

Sirius kept his ears perked for any outside noises, but oddly, the night was terribly, eerily quiet. The noises they were making, however, were more than adequate to fill the gap, and Sirius couldn't remember a time when he felt so powerfully driven. So...

They collapsed together again, panting, in boneless bliss.

"Merlin, Black," Marlene gasped. "I never believed the stories about your insatiable appetite."

"Complaining, luv?"

"Mmmm no," Marlene replied with a stifled yawn. "I think I'm quite happy to be here. I never thought sneaking out after curfew would be so—wonderful."

"It's strangely quiet and peaceful," Sirius admitted. "I'll admit, I expected to be plagued by crickets at the very least."

"Guess the silence bubble spell I've been studying really worked," Marlene purred, snuggling into Sirius. "The other girls have been teaching each other so they don't get caught out by Filch."

Sirius froze. "You did what?"

"A silencing charm," Marlene said. "You know, so everyone up there doesn't hear us going at it. We all learned the contraceptive charm from the book that showed up in the girl's dorm too. The upperclassman said they had to go to Madam Pomfrey for a potion, but the charm was so much easier."

Sirius paled.

"This will be BRILLIANT, Prongs!" Sirius had crowed. "We put this dummy book about a contraceptive charm in the Slytherin dorm, and they'll think it's all convenient and wonderful. By the end of the year, half of them will be pregnant and expelled."

"What is it?" Marlene asked, frowning.

"You know how my family is all about old values right? Marry the witch if she's pregnant?"
Marlene shook her head. "I did the charm correctly, Black. I got the tingle down there when I did it and everything."

Sirius was quiet for a while. "So you haven't been taking the potion like the other girls?"

"It was so embarrassing going to Pomfrey about it," Marlene admitted, blushing. "The charm was so much better. The upperclassman still use the potion. Too traditional, but the rest of us just love the charm."

Sirius had stopped petting Marlene's body, his body having suddenly gone unnaturally still. His eyes flew open. "Fuck, I need to warn James!"

"Wha—?" Marlene blurted as Sirius burst up into a sitting position and then pushed his way out of the rosebush as he struggled to put his underpants and trousers back on.

Sirius gave a strangled cry and a yell as a blur of brown fur slammed into him and sharp teeth buried themselves into his arse.

"Sirius, what is going—" Marlene screamed as she realised Sirius had fangs buried into his rump as a huge, disheveled and annoyed-looking werewolf pinned him on the ground. Marlene lunged for her wand, but it was tangled up in her cast-aside clothes.

Moony's lips pulled back from his teeth, and he leapt upon her, his mouth clamping down viciously on her wrist.

Marlene's scream pierced the night air as she went flying out of the rosebush. Moony held fast, ensuring that his special "gift" was properly transferred into her human bloodstream. After shaking her back and forth a few times and taking a few more chomps to make sure she was properly mauled, Moony leapt back on Sirius and sank his fangs into whatever exposed part he could wrap his mouth around—which happened to be almost everything thanks to his current state of undress.

"Moony, no!" Sirius yelled. "Moony!" Black transformed as the pain became too much, shifting into his dog-form, but the transformation broke off Moony's attack only to find another sticking point.

Marlene screamed. "Y-you're a werewolf too!" She had her wand in her bloody hand as she clamped her other hand over her bleeding wrist. Blood was flowing freely, but she used her fear and will to keep her wand steady. She blasted both Sirius and Moony away from her, using every spell she could remember before running for her life, back up the hill towards the theoretical safety of Hogwarts.

Her screams, like the cries of a banshee, caused many lights to appear in the windows of Hogwarts. Sirius limped-ran after her, whining and growling, but Marlene fled from him as though he were the Devil himself.

Sirius, having never told anyone but his best mates about his Animagus form, had no ground to stand on. There was absolutely no reason for Marlene to trust him. There was no reason for her to think anything but what she did—that Sirius was a closet werewolf too.

Sirius, desperate to help Marlene, attempted to shift back and prove he wasn't a werewolf, but the moment he did, he realised his error as Moony snarled and tore into him again, biting, biting, and biting again.

Curious students were poking their heads out of the windows as they pointed and screamed upon
seeing one of their number under attack. Teachers were streaming out of the school. Mage-lights were zooming over the area.

Red and green beams of magic flew in many direction.

Moony yelped as he was knocked away and suspended in the air. He snapped and struggled for all he was worth, but he was unable to get down or move away. His mouth twisted in both impotent rage and total desperation to insure that he had a pack of his own upon the next full moon.

McGonagall threw a handful of pebbles into the air, transfiguring them into a heavy iron cable that wove and twisted around the werewolf. Sprout pulled out a bag from her robes and tugged open the mouth. She threw the contents into the werewolf's face, causing the werewolf to sneeze uncontrollably as hundreds of little pollen sheep baaed and frolicked around his head. Moony slumped with a whine as his body fell to the ground, completely bound. Flitwick mumbled a charm that caused a cage to form around Moony's face—preventing from biting any others to add to the growing pile of victims.

"Merlin's thick and crusty toenails," Minerva blurted. "What the bloody blue blazes is going on here!"

Rolanda Hooch, Madam Pince, and Aurora Sinistra rushed down from the school with Poppy Pomfrey hot on their heels.

"Minerva, Mr Fenwick and Miss Dearborn took Mr Black and Miss McKinnon to the infirmary!" Rolanda said, panting. Her hair was sticking up straight from her head, making her look like a hawk. "They both had several nasty animal bites!"

"Not just any animal, Rolanda," Sinistra said with a shocked gasp. "That's a werewolf!"

"A werewolf? But how?"

Poppy paled. "That's Mr Lupin," she said in a hoarse whisper. "But he—Dumbledore swore that he'd be safe!"

"What?" McGonagall exclaimed.

"There's a house with no windows and doors. I escort Mr Lupin there via the pathway by the Whomping Willow on every full moon. Dumbledore bought the house and arranged it so it would be safe for him. It was supposed to be completely secure! It was supposed to be safe for him and others! He swore it!" Poppy wrung her hands in distress.

"A werewolf?"

"How is this even possible?"

"Dumbledore allowed a werewolf to attend Hogwarts?"

"Minerva, how did you not know?"

Minerva frowned. "Albus always has preferred to keep his secrets close. He never said anything about a werewolf to me. I've brought up a few incidents to him about Mr Lupin and Messrs Black, Potter, and Pettigrew instigating various nasty pranks over the years. He always tells me he'll deal with it himself."

"What do we do with him?" Aurora said. "If he wakes up—"
A little owl hooted as it zoomed quick circles around their heads, looking for a place to land. Minerva extended an arm, and the owl landed on her, presenting her with its leg. She unrolled the scroll and read it quickly. "Have any of you seen Mr Snape? The Head Boy says he's missing. No one in Slytherin knows where he is, and Regulus Black says that's not like him at all. They were supposed to meet to study tonight, and Mr Snape never showed up."

"He wasn't in the library," Madam Pince said, frowning. "He usually is."

"We need to take Mr Lupin outside the gates of Hogwarts," Minerva said, making a decision. "Filius, could you please sent a Patronus to the Aurors and inform them that we need their assistance to transport a werewolf away from Hogwarts?"

"Right away," Filius agreed.

"Rolanda, Pomona," Minerva said. "Could you assist me with levitating Mr Lupin to the gates?"

"I'll check on the children in the infirmary with Poppy," Madam Pince said with a nod.

"Thank you," Minerva sighed. "Let's worry about this first. We will have to bring the Aurors into Hogwarts. Difficult questions will be asked, and Albus will need to hear all of our reports. Let's go!"

"So, Miss McKinnon," Auror Moody said, sitting down in a chair by the bed. "Could you tell me what happened?"

Marlene sniffled. "We—we were out near the lake, you know, kissing."

"Kissing."

Marlene shook her head. Moody's eyes narrowed. "Look, Miss. I didn't fall off the turnip truck this morning. You want me to believe you were out there, just kissing, without any clothes on."

Marlene went deathly pale. Her arm was bound in herbal poultices lined with silver nitrate that had been reinforced with special healing spells. "We were making love, okay?" she said.

Moody sighed. "And then what happened, lass?"

Marlene swallowed. "Everything was fine until Sirius asked if I had used my contraceptive potion. We haven't been because we switched to the charm months ago."

"Contraceptive charm?" Moody questioned gruffly.

"Yes," Marlene said. "You know—to stop from getting preg—"

"I am aware of what contraception is, lass," Moody said. "I'm questioning this charm you speak of."

"It's the newest thing. Easy charm. The movement is a spiral on the abdomen. You even feel it take effect. Most of us switched from potion to the spell when the book came out."

Moody frowned, and Marlene went back on track. "Sirius stood up saying he had to talk to James right away. He didn't even dress all the way. He just stood up and—that's when the werewolf bit
him on the arse. He—he transformed into this giant black beast. I thought... I thought he had become a werewolf! I ran. I ran so fast, but I was bleeding so badly. I must have passed out. Next thing I know, I was waking up here in the infirmary.

"Well, Miss McKinnon," Moody said. "Mr Black was not a werewolf. Unfortunately, you were both bitten by a werewolf tonight. That means you will both be werewolves come next month and that puts you in danger from people and them in danger from you three times a month."

"Wuuuaaaaah?!" Marlene cried.

"Miss McKinnon," Moody attempted to placate the distraught girl. "It is not the end of the world, but there will have to be changes. The Dutch Ministry has created an isolated wilderness community for werewolves. They are far enough away from humans not to infect anyone else, and they have their own community, schools, and laws. It's not the same as being free to roam the world, but you'll be safe there. No one can come and murder you just for being a werewolf, and you won't have to worry about someone coming to harm because of you."

"I'll have to live with a bunch of furry freaks?!" McKinnon cried, wailing hysterically.

"Miss McKinnon!" Moody snapped. "There are thirty days in a month, three of which you will transform into a violent, wolf-like beast that lives to spread the curse. Three days out of thirty. The rest of the time you and everyone like you will be perfectly human. They will look human, have feelings, and act like humans!"

McKinnon whimpered and wailed, preferring to wallow in her incoherent emotional breakdown and anger rather than even considering an attempt at rational thought. "But you want to ship me off into the dark WILDERNESS! Where there is DIRT!"

Moody's eyebrow twitched.

"What do you mean I'm being shipped off to an island in the Netherlands?!" Sirius screamed from somewhere in the hospital wing.

"Mr Black, calm yourself!" Poppy chided. "You are in a hospital suffering from a werewolf bite!"

"Cut my arm off, FUCK!" Sirius screamed.

"You were also bitten on the rear, Mr Black!"

"Then carve a chunk out of my ruddy arse!"

"Alastor," Auror Savage said as he rushed up with Auror Proudfoot. "We have a report about the disappearance of the student, Severus Snape."

"Well, spit it out, man," Alastor growled, impatiently pulling them to the side.

"We found a ruin of a house just outside Hogsmeade, connected by a tunnel here on the Hogwarts' grounds," Savage said.

"Anyway, it's pretty much just rubble now," Proudfoot said, "but we found torn scraps of what appear to be a set of robes, a Slytherin school uniform, and blood. There were claw marks all over the rubble."

"We think the student was most likely lured there—to the house," Savage said, swallowing hard. "We found tracks leading there, but none leading away. If the werewolf didn't kill him, the house
collapse definitely did. It's nothing but rubble, Alastor. We scanned for any signs of life. There was nothing to be found."

"No trail leading away from the scene? No sign of a possible escape?"

"He'd have to have flown away, Moody," Proudfoot said. "Lupine tracks led away and to the lake where the attack happened. We found tracks where Madam Pomfrey said hers would be. We found another set of tracks leading down the tunnel, some old deer tracks, dog prints, and even rat trails, there were two sets of human tracks leading into the passage. One was Mr Lupin, the other must have been Mr Snape. We couldn't find anything leading away."

Moody rubbed his temples. "This is such a sodding mess. A bloody werewolf loose at a school full of children and teachers. Have Bournes and Starkweather finished taking a report from the Headmaster?"

"Yes, boss," the Auror pair answered together.

"Did we get permission to collect memories off of Black and McKinnon?"

"Deputy Headmistress McGonagall said she would do it as soon as the permission slips come back from the families."

"Deputy?"

Moody glowered. "I'm having a hard time wrapping my mind around the fact that Albus purposely harboured a werewolf on school grounds. I find it even harder to believe he didn't put some sort of safeguard on that house! Even if—IF—he did want to provide educational equality and all that rot, why would one of the most powerful wizards in the world not have some sort of heavy-duty safeguard in place—" Moody stopped.

Moody froze in place. "Werewolf. Missing student. Possible murder—Maybe it is time to talk to Pennyworth and Hopkins. They were investigating Mr Snape's belongings and the other students in the dormitory. Savage, Proudfoot, stay here and observe and collect the memory vials from Black and McKinnon."

"Aye, sir," Savage said with a salute, causing Moody to scoff and mutter as he shuffled off.

"Do try not to blow anything up," he growled, storming out of the infirmary.

"You don't understand, Mr Moody," Regulus said. "While there was plenty of bad blood between Severus and Potter, my brother, Pettigrew, and Remus, we are talking one person again four almost every single time. It was actually quite impressive that he managed to get in a few licks of his own."

"What are you saying, Mr Black?"

"I'm saying that while neither party was entirely blameless for holding and acting on a serious grudge," Regulus said grimly, "my brother made it his personal mission in life to make Severus take a fall whenever he could, to humiliate him in front of the entire school, and, in particular, to do whatever he could to part him from his childhood friend, Lily Evans. He hated Severus that much and even I don't know why. I have many memories of such incidents, all of which were duly reported and yet were always ignored."

Alastor rubbed his temples. "And you are not the only one to have witnessed such things?"
"The most recent horror was a book that inexplicably turned up in the girls' dorm detailing a "new and improved" contraceptive spell," Regulus said. "I heard the girls talking about it, and they showed me the book, thinking it was from Madam Pomfrey. It was written in my brother's distinctively atrocious formal script. He cannot write a proper "r" correctly to save his soul."

"What did you do with this book?"

"I had it returned to Gryffindor tower via owl," Regulus said.

A look of dawning horror spread across Moody's face as he realised that Miss McKinnon had specifically mentioned such a "new" spell. "I'm going to need a giant bottle of Ogden's after this."

"We have memories too," one of the younger students said, approaching.

"Me too."

"And me."

A large crowd of Slytherin approached and made themselves known to Moody.

"Take our memories," they said together.

Alastor sighed and squared his shoulders. "You all have owls, yes?"

The students nodded.

"I need you all to write your parents for permission to gather your memories of these events. Do that, and we can start recording your testimonies."

The students moved in a flurry to do as he asked, and Alastor sent a Patronus out to inform his people of what needed to happen.

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**Shocking Revelations of Favouritism at Hogwarts**

**Headmaster Dumbledore Endangers Students By Secretly Harbouring Werewolf!**

**Multiple Pregnancies in Hogwarts Students Thanks to Hoax Contraceptive Charm**

**Bullying Ignored by Headmaster! Called "Harmless Pranks".**

**Student Missing After Werewolf Attack on Hogwarts Grounds, Two Students Infected With Lycanthropy!**

*I have a very special edition of The Daily Prophet for you this day, dear readers, and it is the complete, unvarnished truth!*

*Hogwarts students have been placed in grave danger by the current Headmaster, Professor Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore. He not only chose to secretly harbour a dangerous werewolf on the school grounds without bothering to inform his staff or the Board of Governors, but he has also been found guilty of multiple acts of blatant favouritism that allowed a particular gang of students to constantly avoid being punished for "harmless pranks."

*Offenses that Headmaster Dumbledore has tacitly permitted through ignorance and inaction during his so-called leadership at Hogwarts, despite numerous complaints from staff and students,*
include:

Allowing three unregistered student Animagi to rampage throughout the school, breaking curfew, pulling often-dangerous pranks, and bullying fellow students and yet escaping punishment for a period of at least six years.

Allowing student bullying to continue without punishment when it involved students belonging to a particular house in Hogwarts

Concealing dangerous infective hazards, such as lycanthropy from students and staff.

Allowing the pranking and humiliation of a squib staff member despite multiple complaints.

Blatant manipulation of student rewards, such as house points, to reflect a desired outcome.

Willful ignorance of circumstances that lead to the harm of multiple students and the disappearance of another student

Turning a blind eye to the willful import of extremely dangerous magical creatures by an irresponsible staff member, requiring a specialised team to be sent to exterminate from the forest surrounding Hogwarts a breeding colony of Acromantulas, the result of which has caused the deaths of over a hundred witches and wizards who were apparently "camping" in the forest. The victims sadly perished due to a stampede of angry and apparently very hungry spiders that fled from the nest during the process of said extermination.

Previous knowledge of said "campers", a possible group of anti-government conspiracists, all bearing a strange skull and serpent tattoo on their arms. Rumours say it the mark of a Dark Wizard who calls himself "Lord Voldemort".

Rumours of Dark activities in the vicinity of the school were confirmed by Aurors when a number of the survivors, delirious due to Acromantula envenomation, spewed forth plans of rushing Hogwarts for their Lord "the moment Dumbledore was pulled off this throne."

The investigation into the events in question are currently ongoing.

Headmaster Dumbledore has been removed from his position at Hogwarts pending a trial in front of the Wizengamot. Hundreds of vials of memories from students and staff have been collected with permission from the families of all affected minors.

The most damning of the shocking discoveries made, however, comes with the simultaneous trials of Mr Sirius Black, eldest son of the Ancient and Most Noble House of Black, and his friends James Potter, Peter Pettigrew, Remus Lupin and Lily Evans, all who have been questioned due to suspicions of conspiracy. While it is not known how involved Mr Black's friends were with the prank that led up to the disappearance of Slytherin student Severus Snape, it has been confirmed that they were Black's accomplices in the malicious pranking of several other Hogwarts students.

Mr Black had, on the night of the infamous werewolf attack, lured Mr Snape to a Hogsmeade home being used as a containment for the werewolf during full moons. He then proceeded to wait nearby to better enjoy Mr Snape's screams. Pieced together from memories extracted after the incident and bitter confession after the fact, Mr Black fully intended to "teach him a lesson about being nosy" and claimed that "he got what he deserved." It seems as though his actions on that night, at least, were independent of his other pranking activities.

The charges currently pending against Mr Sirius Black currently include:
A malicious prank that is believed to have caused the grave harm and probable death of a fellow student.

The infection of himself and another Hogwarts student, Miss Marlene McKinnon, with lycanthropy, which required his removal along with McKinnon, and Remus Lupin to a secure werewolf-only community outside of Britain.

Multiple accounts of assault and battery committed by himself and his friends against their fellow students.

The malicious hoax and deliberate spread of an alleged "contraceptive charm" targeted towards one Hogwarts house in particular, which caused a significant number of teenage pregnancies that would have been prevented had the standard contraceptive potions been taken.

And the list goes on.

The full list can be found on Page 6B, under "Sirius Black, Teenaged Troublemaker Under Fire."

Mr Dumbledore and Mr Black will be having separate trials before the Wizengamot on Friday, and the results of which will determine if charges will be brought against his known accomplices, or if the school will be allowed to render punishment now that Mr Dumbledore has been relieved of his post.

In the interim, until the Board of Governors can vote on a replacement, Deputy Headmistress, Professor Minerva McGonagall and Professor Filius Flitwick will be the acting Head and Deputy, respectively and will work together to tackle the multiple issues facing Hogwarts in the aftermath of Mr Dumbledore’s dismissal.

As for the status of the missing student, Severus Snape, an intensive search of the rubble has revealed only blood and tattered clothing. With no sign of possible survival, it can only be presumed that he met his end in the collapsed house, having been crushed and then burned to ash in the resultant fire.

Death Eaters Disappearing Across Europe!

The torn and charred remains of yet another Death Eater was found at the steps of the Ministry of Magic yesterday, bringing the total of slain marked Death Eaters to five-hundred and sixty two.

Years after the beginning of the public rise of Lord Voldemort, he has been sending his tattooed agents to all corners of Wizarding Britain, to terrorise Muggles and magicals alike. Yet, one thorn remains in the side of that rising Dark Lord: his minions keep turning up savaged and burned to death by an unknown assailant or assailants.

Each victim, if you can truly call anyone who is a known Death Eater a "victim", was ripped to pieces and burnt to the bone, with only one part of them still pristine: their left arm, bearing the distinctive skull-and-serpent tattoo.

Since the public posting of rewards for bringing in Death Eaters, dead or alive, requiring only visible proof of the tattooed arm as evidence, whoever it is who has been leaving the bodies at the Ministry has been gathering quite a hefty collection of monetary rewards. No one, however, has ever witnessed the drop offs—only the results.

Ever since the attack on his family by his sister-in-law, Bellatrix Lestrange, and the subsequent transformation of his confirmed Death-Eater father into a dragon due to an exotic strain of dragon
pox which caused the destruction of an entire borough of south London, Lucius Malfoy has contributed a sizable amount of galleons for each confirmed Death Eater brought in to the Ministry—dead or alive.

Dead was apparently the preferred choice of one particular "donor."

After a number of confirmed Death Eaters were killed by Acromantulas in the Dark Forest, autonomy was given to the local centaur herd, granting them unprecedented freedom to guard their lands and govern themselves. The peace treaty between the centaur and the new Headmistress of Hogwarts, Minerva McGonagall has led to the capture of over a hundred Dark wizards and witches and Death Eater initiates. None have breached Hogwarts's gates since the changing of the guard, and many seem to think that the school is more efficient and safe than it ever was under Albus Dumbledore.

Ever since Dumbledore was sentenced to 25 years in Azkaban, the attacks from the Dark Lord Voldemort have been coming fast and furious, but they have also been very public and shocking. The daylight attacks have been countered by the efforts of numerous Auror groups, both British and foreign, and the night's tally seems to be counted in the charred bodies delivered by an anonymous benefactor.

Whatever the case, the war seems to be losing wind, and rumour has it that vials of condemning memories have turned up, gift wrapped, to the DMLE. This has supposedly led to multiple arrests and the destruction of Dark objects all across Britain. Whether this is true or not remains to be seen, but no one seems to be able to deny the fact that Tom Riddle's grip on Wizarding Britain has been in a sharp decline since an anonymous publisher posted a full dossier pinup of his personal history in cities all across Britain—namely the pertinent details of his birth, family, and half-blood status.

The pureblood movement, which was sweeping throughout Britain a few years ago, has been sputtering out significantly since then.

As for Tom Riddle, no one has seen him, and whether that will change or not remains to be seen. If the Aurors have a plan in mind, no one is saying anything, and perhaps that is for the best. We can only wish them the very best of success in their campaign to stop him for good.

The Black Scale Open for Business

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Need to deal with it at once?

The Black Scale is open for business for your everyday or custom potion needs. With an extensive starting catalog as well as a custom potion-crafting service, the Black Scale is ready to assist you with all of your potion needs.

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Lord Voldemort Cornered and Commits Suicide by Auror, Proclaiming He Will Return, Leaves Behind Recipe For His Own Demise

Tom Riddle was a genius. He was also an exceptionally disturbed individual.

The self-styled Dark Lord has committed suicide by Auror, throwing himself into a gathered throng of law enforcement officers as though his own life did not matter to him at all. At the moment he did so, Death Eaters all across this nation fell into convulsions as their Dark Marks spontaneously dissolved off their left arms.

He left behind a very detailed diary explaining his quest for immortality, including the forbidden creation of Horcruxes, which he conveniently provided further details of every location of and what they looked like—almost as if he expected the writing to disappear after his death.

Aurors have found a total of five Horcruxes and disposed of them, and used a trace on them to find any others that might have possibly existed. While the nature of the objects in question has not been disclosed, the DMLE assures the public that every last one was found and has been neutralised.

The end of the Dark Lord Voldemort has, at long last, finally come to pass!

Hermione plopped herself down under a moss-covered tree and let out a long sigh of pure relief.

"Escaping the other foals, foal-sister?" Magorian asked, folding his legs under himself as he plopped down beside her.

Hermione smiled. "Does it show so easily?"

"You are the only foal who can come and go in these woods without incurring the threat of a spear to the throat or an arrow buried in their ribs," he chuckled.

"You can't fool me, Elder Magorian," Hermione said with a small chuckle. "Centaurs do not harm foals."

"Unless they do or intend harm to ours, yes," Magorian said, smiling at the young witch. "But you are a special case, regardless, having risked your life and having taken care of one of ours. Springberry will remember you for along as the stars burn and the planets spin."

"I'll settle for having friends here and now," Hermione said thoughtfully. "Having quiet places to go and good company to share them with."

"So disappointed for one so very young," Bane said as he joined them. "Magorian calls me the storm cloud over our herd. Perhaps you have spent too much time around me."

Hermione smiled. "It's just hard not having friends," she said. "There I mean," she clarified, nodding her head to the school. "I have more friends amongst the teachers than the students. And the friends I do have, no one trusts because they are Slytherin. I have more enemies, it seems, than friends."

Bane snorted, tossing her an apple before biting into one of his own. "I think you just happen to
know who your real friends are, foal-sister. That is something most foals do not know so young. I will confess, I thought all humans were unworthy of any respect or positive regard until you, even when Magorian ordered me to—"

"Stop acting like a colt trying to be a stallion," Magorian said with a smile.

Bane sighed, tail swishing. "Yes."

"Firenze would tell you that it was fated for you to have been there, that day, at just the right time," Magorian said, "but I would like to think that it was your choice that bade you save our filly from danger. Many would not lift a finger to help a centaur, even with the treaty."

Hermione frowned. "That's hardly fair."

"This," Magorian said, as he fingered the chain of tribal markings that mimicked the stripes on an okapi on Hermione's arms, "shows us that your heart is with the herd. Herd magic would not have bound you to us had this not been so."

"Here, I thought it was because Springberry and I bled over each other," Hermione said cheekily.

"Hah," Magorian said. "It takes more than blood, Hermione."

"It takes heart," Bane added firmly.

Hermione traced the distinctive stripes on her arms. "It's funny. I thought when I first came to Hogwarts that I had finally found a place to call home, but I didn't really find that until I gained these."

"You do have your Professor McGonagall, yes? Your Master?" Magorian said.

Hermione smiled. "Yes, I do have her. She encourages me to never give up."

"She is a remarkably wise woman," Bane said. "Even I know that."

"Will you be coming to our autumn harvest?" Magorian asked. "The stallions will be out hunting, of course, but the mares will be cooking and smoking meat and fish with the foals. At night we plan to have quite the celebration."

"I would love to, Magorian," Hermione replied with a smile.

"Good. You may bring your palomino friend, and please send our invitation to your master, yes?"

Hermione nodded. "Of course, I will. Thank you so much for allowing me to invite Draco."

"He is more respectful than most," Magorian reasoned. "I trust he will not forget his manners."

"He's a Malfoy," Hermione said with a smile. "He always remembers his manners. He just doesn't always use them."

Bane barked laughter, clapping Hermione on the shoulder. "I'll make sure to tell the fillies to stomp on his toes if he gets out of line."

Hermione grinned.

"Any luck yet with your Animagus form, Hermione?" Magorian asked. "Any chance you might be a centaur for real?"
Hermione almost choked on her apple. "Not unless you're half-pegasus. I felt wings in my meditation."

Magorian pouted. "Hooves at least? Tell me you had hooves?"

Hermione stared down at her feet. "They felt… odd? My feet, I mean."

Bane nudged Magorian. "Maybe she's a hippogriff."

"Well, at least they are part-equine," Magorian remarked with a grin.

Master McGonagall is sure the change will happen "soon" and "as soon as I get properly inspired."

"Cryptic, that one," Bane said, shaking his head. "Rather like Magorian."

Magorian snorted. "Just don't be a waxwing. We'll never get you out of our fruit trees."

Hermione coughed. "I'll, um, try."

Magorian grinned at her.

"When we were foals, Magorian had us all go out and 'find ourselves'," Bane said. "We weren't allowed to come back until we had a proper epiphany. It was the first time we were allowed away from our dams, and we were cold and hungry and didn't know our arses from a hole in the ground. We couldn't hunt, and didn't know how to fish."

"How did that work out for you?" Hermione asked, practically making equine-esque ears and perking them forward with interest.

"We gathered in a group and huddled together to keep warm. Firenze managed to build a kind of shelter he remembered from watching his dam, and Coltsfoot managed to find some sparking rocks, but he didn't know how to use them. Luckily, I did. Brambles found tinder and kindling, and Arbor made a stone axe head to chop up some logs from the deadwood. We were tired and terribly hungry, but at least we were warm," Bane reminisced. "The next morning, Magorian was there, cooking up a bunch of fish on a spit he had made over our fire, congratulating us on learning the first lesson all young centaur need to know. Well… a few lessons. One, never, ever disrespect your dam. Two, the herd is life, and together you can survive. The third lesson was pay better attention when your elders are teaching you critical skills." Bane smiled.

Hermione laughed. "Good life lessons. But was it just for the colts? Or did the fillies go too?" she asked.

Magorian shook his head. "Fillies are too smart to be lured away from their dams at that age. They stick like burrs to their dams' legs. They absorb everything their dam does for at least a year or two before they allow themselves to wander. Colts are—"

"A little dense," Bane said.

Hermione laughed. "I see."

Magorian tilted his head. "Colts are the next generation of stallions. They are built to be brave and curious, protective and a bit overactive. We guard our herd from any and all threats. We defend against danger. We are the first line of defence. Mares excel in thinking their way out of danger. They avoid conflict, not for lack of bravery, but to protect their foals. When cornered, however, they are incredibly fierce fighters. Make no mistake about that."
Hermione nodded. "Why was Springberry out in the open that day I found her? Away from Highbush?"

"Highbush was ill at the time," Magorian said. "Springberry went out looking for herbs for a poultice, knowing it would help her fever break, but she got lost coming back. I know she put on a brave face for you, Hermione, but she was quite terrified when you found her. I meant it when I said she would remember you forever."

"She can't seem to remember how to get back home, but she will always remember you," Bane chuckled.

Hermione pinched the bridge of her nose. "Well, that's something."

"Well," Bane said, plucking up one of Hermione's schoolbooks. "What are we drilling you over today?"

Hermione grinned. "Chapter forty-two."

Bane flipped through the pages until he got to the right one. "Advanced techniques in holistic potion making?"

Hermione shrugged. "Master McGonagall believed I needed more to expand my mind."

"I should introduce you to a friend of ours," Magorian said, peering at the book. He excels at such things."

Hermione perked. "You know a Potions Master?"

Magorian eyed Hermione. "We are centaurs, but we are not so terribly isolated that we can't have contacts in the outside world."

Hermione flushed. "I'm sorry, it's just—you don't mention anyone outside the herd very often."

"I suppose you're correct," Magorian agreed. "He's a bit of recluse, even by our standards. He likes having plenty of space."

"The entire forest is not enough space?" Hermione questioned.

Magorian shrugged. "We all have our own quibbles. It is a long trip up the mountains to visit, so we usually allow him to come to us."

Hermione shook her head. "I suppose that's fair. Maybe one day, I will get to meet him too."

The elder centaur smiled warmly. "I'm sure you will, Hermione."

"You should just move in with us," Draco said, pushing a rock with his toe as he dangled his legs over the pier. "Gryffindor obviously can't be bothered to protect their own."

"My master is a Gryffindor," Hermione protested. "And at least I'm not living in the Gryffindor dorms anymore." Hermione attempted to skip a rock on the water, and it plopped in without even trying to skip. She sighed and slumped. "I got tired of all the pranks, losing my shoes, and having my toothbrush be used to clean someone's trunk."

Draco put a rock on her hand and guided it up. "Keep your hand flat like this," he said. "Sent it out as if it's going glide across the top."
"Oi, Granger," Theo said, plopping down beside them. "Still trying the skipping stones, eh?"

Hermione groaned. "I just can't do it."

"Bah, it's all in the wrist," Theo said. "It is a bit like whistling through your teeth. Some people just have it easier. Draco is one of those show-offs."

Draco shoved Theo on the shoulder, and they got in a tussle on the dock, both ending up half-covered in seaweed and a gull.

Hermione snort-laughed. "Where is Blaise, Theo? Normally you two are conjoined twins."

"Blaise got in trouble for retaliating against Weasel," Theo said. "Made it look like he was the one torturing Weaselbee. Him and Potter are both having a contest to see how many Slytherin they can get in trouble before the holidays."

Hermione frowned. "Why do those two hate on me so much."

"Don't take it personal, Bieb," Theo said. "They just hate on you because you're a bibliophile, and their grades prove they aren't."

"I swear they follow me around, Theo," Hermione said. "Somehow, they can end up in the oddest places and I never see them come in. It's almost like they know how to Disillusion themselves—but that's such complex magic."

"You know how," Draco scoffed.

"Yeah, but Master McGonagall has been teaching me since I was eleven. I don't think either of them have an Apprenticeship or the inclination to study for that. All they want to do is win at Quidditch."

"And dislocate my arm," Draco said, rubbing his arm at the memory. "Potter ran me into the grandstand last game. Did you see it?"

"No, but we saw the tower collapse," Theo said.

"On top of me," Draco said, rolling his eyes. "I still got the Snitch though, the bastard."

"Language, Malfoy. Your father would give you the look," Theo droned.

"Then don't tell him," Draco hissed.

"One more year to go, Bieb," Theo said, "and you don't have to worry about Pottery and Weaselbee."

Hermione choked at the nicknames. "Pottery now, is it?"

"Every since he ended up with a fanged geranium on his head spitting teeth into his rump," Theo said. "I don't forget things like that."

"Neville was angry. That was his favourite geranium," Hermione recalled. "He had to repot it and tuck its roots, and it was so angry that it bit him on the nose."

"Could have been worse," Draco mused. "He could have been bitten on the—MFFFFFF!

Hermione's scarf throttled Draco to cut off what he was going to say.
"Grrkfk!" Draco wheezed. "Witch abuse!"

Theo rescued Draco by taking him in a headlock, and the two tussled for a bit before bursting into laughter.

Hermione used her foot to kick water on them both.

"Potty and Weaselbee still trying to get you in trouble, Bieb?" Theo asked.

"It never stops, Theo," Hermione confessed. "Been like that since I was eleven and Draco helped me carry my trunk in. Toxic waste. Nothing but rubbish."

Theo's expression darkened. "Don't talk like that. You don't really believe that crap, do you?"

"Part of me doesn't," Hermione sighed. "It's been almost seven years now, right? You'd think being an adult would give me some sort of clarity."

"Clarity doesn't just come with adulthood, Bieb," Theo said. "About all you get out of it is a date for sitting your N.E.W.T.s and in your case, an official job offer since you've already submitted your mastery project. McGonagall doesn't mess around."

"Hah, the moment I turned seventeen, she had a pile of paperwork for me to sign, a skills test appointment at the Ministry, and did some sort of complex wand-waving to remove my trace," Hermione recalled. "Then she had me grade a stack of first year parchments just to see how long it would take for me to want to murder the lot of them."

"That all?" Draco asked.

"We had a party on the ramparts after hours," Hermione grinned. Her smile faded. "After she pulled me out of that giant spider web and the tiger pit."

"We really need to find out how those bastards manage to get around the school unseen," Draco said, eyes narrowing.

"We can't assume it's them, Draco," Theo said.

"I know it's Potty and Weasel," Draco insisted. "Those arrogant berks have been laughing at and mocking her since day one on the train, and they set her bloody hair on fire at the Gryffindor table."

Theo shook his head. "I know, but—"

"No proof," Hermione said, putting her hand on their shoulders and pulling them together. "Don't worry about it. After this year, they go off and be whatever their grades will allow them to be, and they'll be out of our lives for good."

"Blaise would rather arrange to have them dragged down to fifty fathoms by a sea leviathan," Draco mused.

"I'm not sure what jobs they would be good at," Theo mused. "Maybe working for Weasel's twin brothers at the joke shop? Law enforcement isn't exactly going to fly, despite Potter dreaming of turning his pitiful grades into Os."

"If they put half as much energy and work into their studies as they do pranking Hermione and every non-Gryffindor with a pulse, they'd be set for any job out there," Theo mused.
"There's always Quidditch," Draco said. "I dislike them both, you even you have to respect Potter's seeker skills. Weasel, well, he might get a spot on a second-rate team somewhere. If they're desperate enough."

"Probably the Cannons," Theo mumbled.

"In Weasel's dreams," Draco said with a snort.

"We should probably get back for dinner before they send out the search parties," Theo said. "We have that study group for Slughorn's exam. He promises it will be harder than anything we get on the N.E.W.T.s."

"Slughorn?" Hermione said. "Cracking down on you?"

"Must you sound so surprised?" Theo mumbled.

"Who is he trying to impress?" Hermione asked.

"Bieb, why are you so cynical?"

"I prefer to call it pragmatic," Hermione said. "You're the ones who nicknamed me Bieb of all things."

"You spend so much time there," Theo said with a grin.

"So you nickname me 'library' in Dutch?" Hermione said with a scowl.

Theo gave her a thoroughly disarming smile, causing her to roll her eyes and sigh.

Suddenly, the three of them went tumbling off the dock with a large splash as the dock reared up and bucked them off.

Draco, Theo, and Hermione spluttered and swam back to shore. They pulled lake weed off each other. Clouds of steam rose up off of Hermione, making an audible hissing noise.

"Merlin, Granger," Draco said, his eyes going very wide. "You have sodding horns."

Hermione's eyes narrowed, purple flames of magical energy seeping out from her eyelids. Male laughter snickered from the shore, and Hermione's head spun around as she let out a very inhuman growl.

"Bieb, Bieb," Theo said, giving her a hug. "Hey, it's okay. It's just the Wanker Twins. Don't get yourself thrown into Azkaban because of those idiots."

"I want their heads on a PLATE," Hermione hissed venomously.

"They eat nothing but junk," Draco said. "They'd make for terrible nutrition. Come on, let's go tell McGonagall. She can add it to the list of things she'll ream them for when they slip up."

"Almost seven whole years, Draco," Hermione growled, but the glow of her eyes dimmed as her horns faded. "They haven't messed up yet. Somehow, they never get caught in the act"

Theo ribbed Hermione and plucked lake weed out of her hair. "Forget them. Let's have an exciting conversation about how you just grew horns and had glowing eyes."

Hermione huffed, but laughed as Theo favoured her with his full charm and eyebrow wiggle.
"You going to teach us your mad skills after you make a full shift, aren't you, Hermione?" Draco asked, his eyes locking with hers.

Hermione arched a brow. "Something wrong with learning from Headmistress McGonagall?"

"Father said it would be far better if you taught us as your first apprentices to build up your resume," Draco said smoothly.

"Hn," Hermione muttered. "You'll have to pardon my disbelief that either of you wish to pursue a career in transfiguration, Draco, and both of us know you're far more interested in becoming an Auror along with Theo."

"Why do you have to be so practical, hrm?" Draco said. "Maybe we just want to have an official excuse to make sure you don't saunter off and become some famous witch without us."

"Without you, all we have is Blaise," Theo remarked. "Some would argue he's girly enough for anyone, but—"

Draco jabbed his elbow into Theo's ribs.

"I don't think you have to worry about that, guys," Hermione chuckled. "I don't think there is a ditch your friends at graduation clause after passing your N.E.W.T.s."

"I hear you get to sit your N.E.W.T.s early so you can help Headmistress McGonagall oversee the exams," Theo said. "Blech."

Hermione laughed. "If I'm not ready for them by now after all my master has put into my education, I'll never be ready. Besides, I have to to stand in front of the mastery board and be interrogated."

"And turn into some fantastic beast and make them all quiver in their boots!" Draco said, giving her a grin and a nudge.

"I might be something completely unimpressive," Hermione speculated.

"You had steam rolling off you, horns, and glowing eyes. Even small, that's already impressive," Theo mused.

Hermione sighed. "I have no idea what I am going to be."

"A brassed-off, horned owl with real horns," Draco suggested.

Hermione pounced on Draco, and they laughed and tussled as they got the remaining pondweed off themselves. Theo did a warming charm to ward off the shivers.

"Come one, mates, let's get back to Hogwarts before we fall into a sodding tiger pit thanks to the Wanker Twins."

Hermione nodded. "My master wants a report every time something "inexplicable" happens."

"She's a good one, our Headmistress," Theo said approvingly. "It's not her fault there is never any evidence to allow her do anything officially. Let's go. We don't want to be late for cherry strudel night."

The three friends grinned and tore up the hillside, racing back to Hogwarts.
"Congratulations, my lass," Minerva said with a proud smile, pinning a gem and laurel to Hermione's collar. "You've survived the mastery board."

Hermione trembled. "They were so scary!"

Minerva put her arm around her. "They are scary for everyone," she confessed. "When I told them I was going to pursue becoming an Animagus, they gave me all this information on what happens to people that fail. They made me think I was pretty foolish to even consider attempting it."

"You, Master?" Hermione asked, automatically bowing her head in deference to her master and Headmistress. "Hard to believe you'd not stand up to that."

Minerva lifted her chin so Hermione would look at her. "You're your own master now, Hermione. You can look me in the face, and I won't claw your eyes out."

Hermione flushed.

"I'm proud of you, lass," Minerva said. "You've been as excellent as could be expected and more. And I also hope that you'll sign on to become our next Transfiguration teacher here at Hogwarts."

Hermione's cheeks gained some pink.

"You wouldn't be starting officially until next term, just so there is no question of favouritism to your peers of your current class, but until then, you'd be helping me as you always have and getting paid for it."

Hermione perked.

"You'll also have your own private chambers," Minerva tempted Hermione, her invisible cat tail twitching in invitation to pounce.

Hermione, like a good apprentice, conditioned by almost seven years of feline Animagus-tempered behaviour, rose to the bait and pounced Minerva, giving her a hug with an excited giggle.

"That's my girl," Minerva said with a smile, patting her hair. "We can't have you all working at the Ministry. Think of the children."

Hermione bust up, laughing. "Thank you for believing in me, my master."

Minerva smiled. "Minerva, lass. You've earned it, Master Hermione Granger." Minerva passed her a scroll and a writing quill. "Soon to be Professor Granger."

Hermione beamed. "Minerva." She took the quill and scroll and set to work.

"Pull the line over here!" Harry yelled.

"I got it! I got it!" Ron yelled back, tossing a coil of rope towards his best mate.

Harry reinforced the robe with magic and pulled it tight around a nearby boulder. "It's tight. Pull it tight!"

"Tight!" Ron grunted as he anchored the rope around the base of the trees. "Ready!"

"Wait for it!" Harry shouted.
"Buckbaaaawk!" A gargantuan chicken ran right by them, its feathers dyed bright pink and green.

**Thump.**

**Rumble. Rumble.**

**Thump. Thump.**

"Here it comes!" Ron yelled.

The two Gryffindors held the ropes tightly as a giant forest troll ran by, chasing after the brightly-dyed chicken-bait.

"Ugh, the stench!" Ron said, gagging. He lost his grip on the rope as the troll ran into the cord. It tangled around the troll's legs and sent Ron careening into the underbrush.

The troll teetered and fell into the pit Ron and Harry had dug earlier, landing with a low bellow and a pained grunt. Ron fell on top, the wind knocked out of him as the cords tangled around the troll and him.

"Gerroff!" Ron cried.

"Hold still, mate, let me get you out!" Harry shouted, trying to aim his wand at the cords and not Ron's head.

Ron pointed his own wand at the troll's head and blurted out,

"Incarcerous!"

Ropes swirled around the troll and pinned it down, and Ron ran up the troll's back and bounced off his head to get out of the pit, pulling himself out.

"You okay, mate?" Harry asked.

"Yeah, I'm fine," Ron panted. "I'll be happier when I see what it does to that snake-loving brown-noser, yeah?"

"You sure we can get it into position?" Harry asked. "This thing is bloody huge."

"I've been practicing the shrinking charm," Ron said confidently. "We can just stuff him into a box until we need him."

"Couldn't we just transfigure it into a marble or something smaller? Like a rabbit?"

"You actually pay attention in Transfiguration class?" Ron boggled. "McGonagall is a Slytherin sympathiser. Germy Hermy is always shadowing Professor Meow. It's doubly horrible to be in that class."

"Hey, my dad said transfiguration was a good class!"

"Maybe if the teacher wasn't ancient and actually had a sense of humor," Ron wrinkled his nose. "She's such a killjoy." He pointed his wand at the troll and said, "Reducio!"

"I dunno, Ron, I think we lost our window of opportunity," Harry said. "Rumour has it Hermione moved out of Headmistress McGonagall's chambers. That means she passed her N.E.W.T.s and her boards, yeah?"
"So she's passed a few tests," Ron snorted. "She's still one of our year until we graduate from this school."

Harry pointed his wand at the shrunken troll. "Stupefy! Levicorpus!" He levitated the mini-troll into a matchbox and sealed it.

"Okay, let's go fetch the map and cloak," Ron said. "This is going to be brilliant. We already know they're going out to party with those dirty half-breeds, and McGonagall is going to be patrolling the halls until late. That'll be the perfect time."

"Did you hear something?" Draco asked with a frown, heaving the large basket of supplies between them. Hermione counterbalanced it, smiling at him.

"Other than you grunting like carrying this is absolutely killing you?"

"I swear McGonagall filled this basket with stones and charmed it to be resistant to levitation." Draco scowled at her.

Hermione chuckled. "You always bring offerings in without magic or it insults our friends, Draco, you know that."

"Don't have to like it," Draco muttered half under his breath.

"Poor puppy," Hermione teased.

Draco made sad puppy eyes at her and then stuck his tongue out at her.

"Really mature," Hermione laughed. "What are you, ten?"

Draco snickered and grinned unrepentantly at her.

"Hello, foal-sister," Bane greeted as two other stallions stepped forward, allowing their bow arms to relax as they returned their bows to their backs.

"Herd brother," Hermione greeted with a smile. She flared her nostrils, bowed slightly, and stomped her foot in the dirt like the foreleg of one of the centaur.

"Good evening, foal of Hogwarts," the centaurs said together.

A snap of a twig caused all three centaur to cluster around their "foals" and take out their weapons again. Arrows notched and bow strings pulled back, each centaur glowered into the forest shadows, nostrils flaring.

After a few moments, they decided to stand down, but remained watchful and suspicious. "Come, the herd awaits," Bane said. "Magorian looks forward to telling our great stories of the year, and
the youngest foals have decorated the camp with squash lanterns and wish to show them off."

Hermione and Draco grinned together. They hoisted the basket between them made haste beside their centaur escorts as Argoth and Mathus hoisted them up be the arm and carried them, basket and all, between their locked arms. They squealed in excitement as they were carried off.

Bane grinned, but his ears flattened as he heard something rustle in the forest. His eyes narrowed as he looked around once more, nostrils flaring as his lips curled from his teeth. He pulled back one arrow, notching it on his sinew string—and released it.

**THWACK!**

The arrow was embedded into the thick bark of a tree.

Bane approached the arrow, his face twisted with suspicion. He yanked the arrow out of the tree and snorted, rubbing his nose as a disgusting scent tickled his nose and the back of his throat. He replaced his arrow into his quiver, but glared into the forest, staring.

Finally, he snorted, tossing his black mane and flipping his tail as he cantered off to meet up with the others.

After a few minutes of silence, the two pranksters fell to the ground, gasping in relief, the invisibility cloak falling away. Harry's hand went through a spot in the cloak where the arrow had pierced, and he looked horrified that his heirloom had been damaged. Ron was checking his body for damage, despite the arrow having missed him.

"That sodding horse shot my cloak!" Harry exclaimed. "Now I really want to see them scurry."

Ron nodded in agreement. "We owe them now. Come on. Just pinch the cloak shut where the arrow hit. Let's get this party started."

"Springberry—OOF!" Hermione greeted, getting slammed into by a happy filly and squeezed around the waist.

"Hermione! Hermione, look at my lantern!" she cried, thrusting a carved squash lantern into Hermione's arms. The squash was carved to resemble a scary face hidden in the leaves.

"Beautiful!" Hermione praised, causing the filly to beam with pride. She took her wand and cast a spell, causing the lantern to light up with bright shifting colour.

The nearby foals all watched and snatched up their lanterns to show Hermione too, each wanting the privilege of having their own lights inside their lanterns.

"Now you've done it," Magorian chuckled.

Hermione and Draco bowed respectfully, brushing their feet against the ground in greeting. Magorian took each of them by the arm, wrapping his large hands around their arm, just above the wrist, his thumb brushing against their skin just before he released them. The stripes around Hermione's arms glowed softly, singing like soft wind chimes.

"Come, join us for the skinning and smoking of the stag in celebration of the harvest. The mares have been busy preparing the rest of the food, so it's traditional for those of us who are normally spoiled by the mares to take care of the preparation of the stag."
Hermione and Draco nodded in agreement as the centaur led them deeper into camp. The foals, all carrying their glowing squash lanterns, hung them around the camp to light the path and the camp.

Argoth and Mathus passed Hermione and Draco small knives, and both looked to Magorian for permission. The elder centaur nodded, and they set to work, slitting the stag from vent to throat. The teenage foals, caught the guts in baskets and scurried off with them to wash and prepare them for other uses.

"Hey, that's our job!" one of the stallions said, chasing after the teens. The young centaur, far too used to having the honour of cleaning and sorting the organs and other guts, squealed and whickered as they played chase with the elders.

"Teenagers," Firenze said, starting to skin the carcass, now that the guts had been removed.

Hermione and Draco helped pull the skin back from the carcass as the other stallions set to work separating the skin from the flesh. They peeled it away in tact, and two stallions took the hide and worked on fleshing it over a log before spreading it out. Meanwhile, they sawed off the antlers and carried them off to be stored for buttons and knife handles. Flesh was removed from bone, sinew was removed and set aside for bowstrings and sewing, and bone was taken away to be cleaned for future use.

They all took large pieces of meat and began to cut them into strips, all save the tenderloin which was put on a spit and given to one of the elder stallions to tend over the smoking fire. They worked diligently, cutting the meat into thin slices and hanging it over a low smoking fire covered with hardwood chips.

"Smells really good, doesn't it?" Magorian said as he watched Hermione and Draco work over the meat.

"Amazing," Draco agreed enthusiastically.

"Hawthorne makes a venison roast of the likes that brings other herds stampeding the borders," Bane said. "Rumour has it that's how he got his mate, almost causing a herd war."

"I heard that, Bane! It's a lie!" Hawthorne yelled from his post by the roast.

Bane grinned. "Don't believe him."

Hermione and Draco grinned as they arranged the last of the meat on racks set over the smoking fire. Magorian spread hardwood chips over the fire, bringing up the smoke.

The foals were kicking around a ball made of woven vines and rattling gourds, so it jingled as they kicked it around. Hermione and Draco grinned at each other, feeling very lucky to be privy to a sight that most humans were not allowed to see. The ball went careening towards Draco's head, but he ducked in time only to have it smack directly into Magorian's flank. The elder centaur eyed the younglings with a critical eye, causing them to cringe en masse, but then he kicked the ball high over their heads. They tore off after it, giggling and laughing joyfully.

"Foals," Magorian said with a sigh, shaking his head slowly. "I think it's time we fed all the hungry stomachs, hrm?"

"My foals, take food to your elders," Magorian said with a sharp clap of his hands. "It is time to start our celebration!"

The young centaurs immediately swarmed the clearing, taking wooden bowls and plates and filling
them with food before taking them to the gathered elders. Two of the little ones brought Hermione and Draco bowls, even as Hermione and Draco were filling plates for Magorian and Bane.

"Aww," Hermione thanked them. "Thank you so much!"

She and Draco cradled their bowls and sat down around the main camp's bonfire.

"Today is a celebration of friendship and a harvest of plenty," Magorian said as the crowd settled. "We are blessed with health and good company. The stars gimmer and the planets move, and all have aligned to bring us together. Our success has come to us through our joined hard work, whether it be herd or herd-friend that unites us today and tomorrow. May we rejoice tomorrow as we do today—in friends and family."

The centaurs cheered and stomped their legs enthusiastically.

"Eat! Eat! Let us revel until the stars shine down upon us!" Magorian said, and all the gathered raised their goblets in a toast before digging into the food.

"This is wonderful," Draco said, looking as though he was savouring every molecule of the experience one by one.

"It sure looks like you're enjoying it," Hermione ribbed as she ate from her bowl. "You're right though."

"You make an excellent roast, Hawthorne," Draco said, smiling.

"Thank you, herd-friend Draco," Hawthorne said. "I earned my dapples watching my dam cook around the fires when I was but a colt."

"My compliments on your skill," Draco said admiringly.

"Stick around long enough, herd-friend, and you may pick up on some of his tricks," Firenze teased. "He hides them well, however, so you might have to be sneaky about it."

Hawthorne snorted. "Enough. Turn your stories over to someone else!"

The centaurs laughed good-heartedly, resuming eating and enjoying the chilly autumn air. The sun hovered over the horizon for quite some time and then dropped out of the sky as though someone had kicked it out of orbit. The warmth and glow of the fire light the faces around the fire, casting them in harsh relief.

Hermione lifted her head and noticed a dark figure speaking with Magorian. A hamper heavily-laden with herbs and flasks changed hands, and Magorian laid a hand on the man's shoulder.

"Stay for while, old friend," she heard him say. "The foals always so enjoy seeing you."

The figure nodded and the pair clasped arms. He took a place by the fire, and one of the foals ran up and shoved a giant bowl of food into his hands, nickering happily.

"Careful, wing-brother," Bane said, nudging the dark-clad man. "You're charming the fillies young."

The man rolled his eyes. He took small bites of the food, clearly savouring it as much as everyone else.

Magorian walked out by the fire. "Herd brothers and sisters," he said with a smile. "We have come
a long way since the times when fear and misunderstanding tainted our ideas of friendship and
allies and even the meaning of what we called brother and sister."

"One thing we have always valued is the bonds we have between our herd-mates, and even more so
we desire to thrive with each other," Magorian said. "The greatest accomplishment is to see the foal
live long enough to pass their wisdom on to the next, and tonight—tonight we celebrate the coming
of age of our herd-sister, Hermione."

Hermione's eyes grew very, very wide, her fork frozen in mid-lift to her mouth.

Magorian smiled and extended his hand to her. He dipped his fingers into some pigment and drew
it across her face. "Hermione, we recognise you as a foal no more. You are one of us, an adult, and
fit to defend yourself and your family, to walk the forest without escort, and to come and go freely
as the wind does through the trees. You may draw weapons to hunt and to defend, and you are of
the age to court and be courted, if so you would choose."

Hermione blushed furiously as Magorian grinned at her.

Firenze and Bane brought up a bundle and placed it in Magorian's hands, and he unwrapped it.
Pulling out an intricately woven amulet that appeared to have been made of natural vines so that it
looked alive, he carefully placed it around her neck. A piece of shining material, that seemed to be
somehow woven of the stars themselves, glittered as a focal point on the amulet. "We name you
Eltanin amongst your herd, Hermione. You are a foal no longer. We stand beside you as you shall
stand beside us. We name you for the brightest star in the celestial dragon, who flies above us in
the grand hunt."

Magorian dipped his fingers into a shimmering paint that glimmered like a galaxy. "Eltanin, may
your footprints be deep for the young to follow and your allies always be at your back. May your
choice in mate strengthen you and help raise your foals to be strong." He painted a vast starscape
across her forehead and down her hair, giving her the impression of a mane. "You are one of us,
until the stars burn out."

A warm breeze rose up between the herd as the starry pigment came to life, merging with her skin
and body before fading just enough not to be obvious to the untrained eye. The stripes on
Hermione's arms glowed brightly as the herd-magic solidified, and the glow slowly faded. The
centaurs all nickered and snorted in approval.

Hermione bowed respectfully. "I thank you for your trust in me. You have taught me many things,
and I am glad to be a part of the herd."

"Thuban also once stood where you do, Eltanin," Magorian said, "for many of the same reasons.
So, too, did your Headmistress, whom we know as Denebola. We are happy to know such friends,
allies, and family. We are also glad the times when we once thought humans as a blight upon our
forest are in the past. We chose your names from the human stars to bridge the gap between our
worlds."

Hermione smiled as he took her hands, and the gathered cheered.

"Take your place in the world as a foal no more, Eltanin," Magorian said. He gestured to an empty
spot by the fire next to a tall wizard cloaked in robes as dark as the midnight sky. "Sit and join us
this night in peace."

Hermione sat in the space indicated as Magorian folded his legs and sat down beside the other
stallions. The black-clad wizard looked at her through his cage of long, equally black hair.
"Congratulations, Eltanin," he rumbled softly.

"You are Thuban?" Hermione asked.

The wizard nodded silently. "I hear you are a master. Congratulations on that as well. Transfiguration can be a complex subject. An art as much as it is a prized skill that only a few can truly master."

Hermione smiled. "The same could be said about potions."

The wizard arched an enquiring brow.

"You have a scent about you," Hermione said. "Herbs and tinctures, but not entirely limited to healing. You brought a hamper of liniment and salves." She tapped her collar where her pin and laurel was. "You hide yours under your hair and significant collar, but you too are a master—of potions."

The wizard regarded her with an arched brow. "Impressive deduction. Do you foretell the future as well?"

Hermione wrinkled her nose. "I am not a fan of divination."

"At least there is some hope for Hogwarts graduates," he replied.

"I fear I am not the norm," Hermione admitted. "I am an outcast amongst my peers, and Minerva's protection, while it sheltered me from harm, only served to make me more of a pariah."

"Some would say the Headmistress is not a bad trade as an ally, sponsor, or master," Thuban said with a tilt of his head.

"I did not say it was a bad trade," Hermione confessed. "Why have I not seen you before this?"

The wizard pressed his lips together. "I tend to be rather private in my affairs."

"How mysterious," Hermione said. She looked into the fire. "I will not pry then, despite the curiosity that eats away at me."

The dark-haired wizard seemed to have his own curiosity, and he looked Hermione in the eyes, seemingly searching for something there.

Hermione flushed under the scrutiny, unused to being the object of curiosity that didn't involve scorn and ridicule. She was so unsure of how to feel, that when she reached to take a piece of the roast with her fork, it slipped, causing the elusive meat to leap off the bottom of the bowl like a thing possessed.

Thuban's hand moved quickly, snatching the offending food from the air. He held it out to her, a tug of a smile on his lips.

Hermione flushed even darker red, and plucked the meat off his fingers in complete embarrassment. "Sorry," she managed. What the hell is wrong with me? she admonished herself. The brush of his warm fingers caused her to breathe a little heavily, and she shook it off and ate something to cover up her mortification.

The heat from the wizard’s brush of skin lingered both on her fingers and in her mind, and Hermione tried desperately to think of England—anything that wouldn't fan the flames of the
strange fascination. She dug her fingernails into her palm and flashed a consoling smile, hoping the
twitch of her eyebrows and the slight waver in her breaths didn't give her bewilderment away.

"Thuban is a star in the dragon constellation," Hermione sputtered facts in an attempt to shift the
conversation. "The Egyptians used it as their polar northern star."

"Yet, Gamma Draconis—Eltanin—is the brightest star of Draco, outshining even Rabastan," the
dark-haired wizard said.

The mention of Draco caused Hermione to stare at her blond-haired friend over the firelight. Draco
was giving her very curious eyebrows, as if his eyebrows were trying to lift weights in a therapeutic
regimen. He made figures with his hands and eyed Thuban and her, smooshing his hands together
in a very obvious togetherness sort of gesture.

Hermione half-choked on her food and turned away from both Draco and Thuban, utterly
embarrassed.

Bane dropped some pristine apples in Hermione and Thuban's bowls. "See something you like,
hrm, sister?" He nickered in amusement, moving off to distribute more of the apples.

Hermione looked up, seeing Bane whispering something into Thuban's ear. The dark-haired
wizard's pale skin went pink, and he clenched his fist in a very familiar gesture of trying to think of
—anything but what he was thinking about.

"Meddling centaurs," Thuban muttered, grabbing the apple from Hermione's bowl and cutting it
into slices for her with a silver knife he had pulled out of thin air. He cut his too, and ate it, saying
nothing.

"Thank you, Thuban," Hermione said, staring at her apple slice before munching on it.

"Severus," Thuban said quietly, staring into the fire.

Hermione's eyes widened as she mouthed the name a few times. "Severus. Thank you."

Severus looked skyward. "The night is beautiful tonight. Do you fly?"

Hermione shook her head. "I do not—brooms and I do not get on."

Severus looked at her with something akin to sympathy. "I found that flying without a broom is
much more satisfying—under your own power rather than riding a thin stick between your legs
keeping you from an earthly demise."

"Fly? Without a broom?" Hermione asked.

"Consider it?"

"I—" Hermione paused. "Sometimes I dream of it."

The pale wizard regarded her with a tilted head.

"Perhaps, it more than just a dream," Severus said quietly. "They did name you under the dragon
constellation, after all."

"I've never—thought it possible," Hermione admitted, finishing her apple slice.

"Perhaps," Severus offered. "I could teach you."
Hermione's eyes grew wide. "You could—I mean—You'd do that?"

The wizard raised a brow. "I am not completely inept."

"I didn't meant to—" Hermione gasped. "I never—"

Severus made a low, rumbling sound, and Hermione mistook the sound as irritation. He turned his head up, black eyes sparkling in the firelight, and she realised he was laughing. "I take no offence," he said, pulling a parcel out from under his robes and tapping it with his wand. He enlarged it and unwrapped it, exposing a significant pile of fluffy white objects.

He produced a stick, which was quietly whittled down to a sharp point on one end, speared one, and extended it to her. "We seem to have an appropriate fire. I would hope your education was not lacking in the proper use of marshmallows, hrm?"

Hermione grinned broadly as she accepted the stick, and she quietly put it near the embers near the fire. Severus did the same with yet another stick, and their actions caught the eyes of many a curious foal—large and small, and perhaps those who were still harbouring a foal in their heart.

Hermione collected quite a few foals around her, all watching to see what she would do with the marshmallow. When the toasted marshmallow gave off a small puff of smoke, she turned it, repeating the process until all surfaces of the white had turned a golden brown. She then delicately pulled the toasted surface off the marshmallow and ate it, putting the re-exposed white back to the fire.

Severus tutted. "A witch who makes perfectly golden brown toasted marshmallows. Some would call you a myth."

Hermione flushed as she offered the toasted end of her marshmallow to a nearby foal. He plucked the end off with his fingers and popped it into his mouth, eyes growing wide as his excitement manifested as an ecstatic stomping of hooves against the ground.

Wild nickering and excited whispers went through the foals as Severus sniffed and pointed to the basket. "Alas, I have no more sticks. Whatever shall I do?" He tilted his head, giving a nod to Magorian, who was pretending not to be paying attention.

"How sad," Magorian said, shaking his head mournfully. "Wherever shall you find appropriate sticks for such a tasty endeavor? If only we lived in a forest where there were sticks everywhere."

All the foals swarmed over Magorian, hoping to gain permission to hunt for just the right roasting stick.

Magorian kept them writhing and nickering at the end of his bait for a minute or two and then shooed them off to find sticks of their own. The tide of foals rushed out into the woods to find what they needed—but not too far. Foals were always careful to stay within earshot of the camp.

"If only human children chose to stay near their elders and listened as well as they listen to you, Magorian," Thuban said, tilting his head to bow at him.

"It is my ceaseless centaur charm and wealth of experience," the elder centaur said with a wink.

Draco, in the meantime, had found himself a roasting stick, stabbed a marshmallow, and began to roast one, a wide grin on his face.

"I see you are not a stranger to marshmallows," Severus said, eyeing Draco with a curious glance.
"Hermione's mum and dad bring them to every camping trip," the blond said. "We go every summer together to Forest of Dean."

Severus arched a brow.

Draco stared back at him, a flicker of confusion on his face. "Do I know you, sir? You seem somehow—familiar."

"Unless you've had the distasteful experience of running into my drunkard father, which if you had I must apologise for what must have been quite a traumatising experience, I'm not sure where you would have run into me." Thuban took a bite of his marshmallow and returned the white to the fire.

Draco frowned and shrugged. "I just feel as though I have."

"By all means, let me know if you ever figure it out," the black-haired wizard said with clear amusement.

Draco scowled and shook his marshmallow threateningly at him. "Oh, I will."

Suddenly, one of the foals gave a terrified equine squeal, followed by a chorus of screams from the other foals. There was the trampling of many hooves as the foals came stampeding back, quaking in terror.

"Troll!"

"It's a troll!"

"It's got Nelly!"

"Nelly is back there!"

The older centaurs surged forth, escorting the foals to safety as the others grabbed their bows. They thundered out of the clearing. Hermione, Severus, and Draco began to move, but Bane held Draco back. "You come with me, friend-Draco. Until you are free of Hogwarts, we are responsible for your welfare."

"I can fight!" Draco protested.

"I do not doubt this," Bane said. "Please, help us now by guarding the foals."

Draco looked conflicted, but then nodded in reluctant agreement.

Hermione and Severus ran side-by-side, following behind the rush of armed adult centaurs, all of them heading towards the frantic screams of a terrified foal. They screeched to a halt as a giant club swooshed in the air, slamming into one of the elder centaur with a dull crack. Arrows screeched through the air, some bouncing off the troll's supernaturally tough skin, and half of the centaurs broke off to help the elder that had been brutally smacked like a bludger back through the trees.

A black and white pinto foal neighed in terror, the troll's thick hands wrapping around her body like a vise. The foal tried to kick and free herself, kicking her rear legs out to smack the troll in the eye, but it only served to goad the troll into squeezing harder.

Hermione pointed her wand. "Oculatero!" she yelled, sending her blinding hex zinging out to smack he troll in the face.
“Incarcerus!” Severus yelled, sending twirling ropes around the troll’s body.

The troll roared and dropped Nelly. She squealed and struggled to get off the ground, her legs bruised and strained from being badly crushed. Arrows went zinging by their heads as the elder centaurs attempted to perforate the troll, but most of them bounced off its incredibly thick, magically-reinforced hide. He clutched his eyes and blindly stumbled forth, swinging his club wildly, the robes falling to the ground in torn shreds.

The centaurs ran by, using their powerful rear legs to kick at his feet, ankles, and knees—anything to hinder his progress towards the rest of the foals and mares. The stallions yelled, attempting to make themselves a more annoying target over whatever the troll might desire in the other direction. The troll, however, didn't seem to care what direction he ended up going and he swung his club around and sent five centaurs flying into the trees, inadvertently slamming into Severus in mid-cast. There was the crunch and crack of impact as the heavy centaurs landed on the dark-haired wizard.

Hermione dodged a swing and sent a spell careening towards the centaur, "Wingardium Leviosa!" she yelled, moving the centaurs off the wizard as well as away from the swinging club. Severus, however, wasn't moving.

Nelly was whinnying in fear, her legs refusing to obey her, and Hermione hit her with the levitation charm and then send her flying through the forest trees towards the elders with a blast of propelling magic, praying she didn't smack into something hard on the way through.

Hermione panted, trying to catch her breath and decide who to assist first. Her decision, however was made up before she could focus as she heard a group of foals trying to assist Nelly get back to the herd. The mares were yelling. The stallions were scrambling, limping, and sharply barking orders for the young ones to get away—while the herd mentality saved them often, it also made it impossible for them to ignore one of their own in distress. This time, at least, it was getting them in serious trouble.

A groan and cursing from the base of the tree told her that the dark-haired wizard was alive and less of a priority than getting the still screaming foals back to safety, and she rushed forward.

Faster! Faster, Hermione! she urged herself.

Suddenly, Hermione found herself crashing face-first into the dirt. Her wand when spiralling out of control somewhere in the undergrowth.

Raucous male giggles surrounded her, barely audible amidst the cries of the terrified foals and the bellows of the out of control troll.

The image of Crookshanks—lifeless—his paws stuck to the floor with a sticking charm in an obscure part of the school.

Her precious Kneazle friend had starved to death.

She had searched for him for days on end. Called out for him. Tried to lure him with tasty food, but he never came. She’d never had the familiar bond that would’ve allowed her to sense where he was. Never before had she ever regretted being a stupid, ignorant Muggleborn—a witch who didn't realise she had to formally acknowledge a magical bond between herself and her familiar to make it solidify.

She didn't know.
She hadn't known.

They had known.

He had died because of her ignorance and their hatred and spite.

The laughter.

**THAT** laughter.

The two of them snickering in the dark as she wept over her only friend.

Never enough *proof*.

Never any *witnesses*.

It was as if they strutted through the school invisibly and somehow always knew where other people were—or weren’t.

The foals were screaming. The troll was clobbering the elder centaurs, using its nigh-impervious magical hide to its clear advantage.

Hermione tried to get up, but something terribly heavy was pressing down upon her.

She reached out her hand. "*Accio,* my wa—"

Mud was shoved into her mouth, and she sputtered helplessly.

Foals screaming. Stallions—centaurs—her friends.

Her herd.

Her *family*.

Hermione struggled to get up, her arms flailing. She hit something in the empty air, her fist connecting with solid that she couldn’t see. She staggered forward, but the phantom mass was suddenly gone, and she ended up in the mud again. She sputtered mud out of her mouth. "*Accio,* my—"

Moss crammed into her mouth, almost down her throat, and she gagged.

Springberry’s terrified squeal caused her to panic. "*No, no, no, no!*" Hermione cried.

She struggled off the ground and surged forward. Thin ropes wrapped themselves around her body, keeping her from running to help.

"*Eltanin!*" Springberry screamed.

Hermione’s eyes began to glow purple. Flames leaked of her tear ducts. "*Springberry!*"

"You won’t be able to help your half-breed friends," harsh voices hissed into her ear. The ropes tightened, jerking her off the ground, suspending her in mid-air.

The troll had stumbled forward towards Springberry, and Magorian charged up in front to defend her, kicking out his front hooves wildly. The troll swatted at him viciously in response, connecting with the stallion’s upper body. His teeth bared in a victorious snarl as he opened his mouth
impossibly wide, preparing to take off the elder centaur's head.

"NO!" Hermione spat blood and mud out of her mouth. Her teeth were sharp and shiny, oh so white. Too white. Steam came rolling off her body as a set of curved horns grew out from her skull as her face twitched and jerked into a reptilian snout full of dagger-like fangs. Scales erupted from her skin, bony plates erupted along her spine, and her body shook, convulsed, and reformed.

"YOU WILL NOT HARM MY FRIENDS!" Hermione screamed, a roar bellowing out from deep within. Her body grew, grew, and towered, smashing into the trees as her tail whipped around and leveled the ground like the swipe of a mighty axe.

Her head whipped back, her eyes blazing bright purple, and she let loose a torrent of superheated flame straight toward the troll's head.

Magorian kicked the troll squarely in the face, landing on his feet as he used his right flank to push the terrified foals away from the troll. The troll was gripping his head tightly, which was both bashed in and aflame at the same time. Hermione snarled, pushing her way through the trees as a cat would through grass, sending the trees off kilter, careening to the sides at odd angles.

Hermione's maw opened wide, caustic drool dripping from her huge, shiny, white fangs. Raw magical energy gathered in her mouth as flames leaked from the sides of her jaws, and she blasted the troll full on, immolating him with dragon-flame until the stench of charred flesh turned to the scent of ash. Then there was an earth-shaking roar in the air, and it was all Hermione, the sound of her fury mixed in with the sound of flames reaching a temperature that was beyond melting point and more in tune with disintegrate. Her jaws snapped shut over the charred troll with a loud CRACK.

Violently shaking the troll back and forth like a terrier with a rat, she flung the corpse into the air and launched up into the air, her wings spreading over the canopy to block out the moonlight.

She blasted the troll's body once, twice, and yet again with white-hot flames accompanied by earth-shattering roars of draconic rage.

The troll's charred remains fell to the earth once more, careening down a slope at ever-increasing breakneck speed before slamming hard into the earth, breaking into smouldering pieces saturated with the putrid stench of troll, rotting flesh, charred bone, and oily motes of ash that reeked horribly of Eau de Troll.

Hermione landed in the newly-created crater of scorched earth, looking around with a screeching growl of rising panic as her nostrils flared in both disgust and horror, her purple eyes frantically scanning the clearing for any sign of her friends.

Dark flames moved against the glow of the fire as it smoldered, and Hermione stiffened as she evaluated yet another looming threat. But as it moved, giant wings unfolded as a great dragon shape revealed itself. Black scales and intimidating spinal ridges, curving obsidian horns, dagger-like talons, and sword-like teeth combined together into the draconic species Hermione knew as the Hebridean Black.

Caustic drool dripped from his mouth, but just as Hermione braced herself for the fight of her life, the foals ran out from under his wings to hug her legs. The centaurs cheered her name—her centaur name, Eltanin.

She lowered her head instinctively, her nostrils flaring as she snuffed each centaur carefully, recording their individual scents into her memory. The foals, clearly unafraid, hugged her snout,
touched her horns and wings, and nickered affectionately at her. Springberry—her sweet, beloved friend—wrapped her arms around her dagger-filled mouth full of teeth and held her tightly.

"I knew you would save us, Eltanin!" she cried, stroking her scales. "Just as Bane and Firenze predicted. Just as my dreams said you would."

Hermione's glowing purple eyes widened in amazement as all the strength and fury drained out of her, and she slumped down onto the ground. Her dragon-shape fell away and she reverted back into a wobbly-legged, stunned-looking, bushy-haired witch. She staggered forward, then began to fall.

The scoop of a large, leathery wing caught her, and the great Hebridean Black dragon transformed into the form of Thuban of the Dark Forest Herd. Hermione's eyes met his as her fingers touched his face in wonder. "Severus?"

"I'm here," he said softly, his voice like warm velvet. "Rest now."

Hermione slumped against him as exhaustion finally claimed her, and she lay nestled in the black robes of the dark-haired wizard. His expression softened as the young witch snuggled into his embrace, burying her face into his neck.

Thuban's eyes locked on Magorian, who was doing a swift foal count. "You knew," Severus said.

"Of course, old friend," Magorian said with a smile. "But would you have believed me had I told you before this? Us and our 'unreliable divination', hrm?"

Severus scowled, but nodded in reluctant agreement. "I would not have."

The centaurs were all chattering together in excitement

Draco pushed his way through the foals and stared, wide-eyed. "My best mate is a dragon?!" he cried aloud.

Bane snorted as he placed a hand on Draco's shoulder. "Did you really think we named her after the dragon constellation purely out of whimsy?"

Draco's jaw worked up and down silently, making him look like a gaping fish. "I remember you," he said after a while, staring at Thuban. "You always come to visit my father late at night, when he thinks everyone in the house is sleeping. You're Severus. Severus Snape. The wizard who turned in over three hundred Death Eaters and claimed more Dark wizard and witch bounties than anyone alive or dead. You saved my father's life. I heard mum and dad talking about in the early morning one time."

The dark-haired wizard, still with a bundle of bushy-haired witch in his arms, tilted his head to the side. "Tell me, Draco. Why is it that you were awake so late past the witching hour, hrm?"

Draco flushed, caught at being not only a snoop into his father's affairs but also being up long after his bedtime.

"Intruder!"

"Intruders!"

Cries from the foals carried through the crater. The foals were surrounding the smoldering remains of a fallen tree. The colts were brandishing spears, and the fillies all had small skinning knives and hand sickles in their hands. The colts snorted and thrust their spears forward into seemingly
nothingness where an undeniable stench rose up from the log.

As the elder centaurs came closer, the 'emptiness' was slowly filled with the gradual exposure of the forms of two young wizards as they struggled to free themselves from the weighty log. A heavy, oily, intensely putrid stench clung to the cloak as well as the boys fighting to extricate themselves from the tree and the troll remains covering both it and them.

As they struggled, the fabric of the cloak, now tattered, charred, and covered in equally charred and rapidly liquefying troll pieces, slowly became anything but invisible. Yet the wizards beneath it were moving around very carefully as though they still believed that no one could see them.

One of the older colts abruptly thrust his spear up to the redheaded wizard's throat. "Do not move, human," he said coldly, his herd-mates also bringing their weapons to their exposed throats.

The pair froze, suddenly realising that they were exposed for all and sundry to see.

"Potter. Weasley," Draco hissed, his grey eyes narrowed in anger. "They're from Hogwarts!"

"Thunderchase, Bayleaf," Bane snapped. "We do no harm to foals of Hogwarts—regardless of whether or not they deserve it."

"Elder Bane, what are we to do? They positively reek of troll. They trespass in our lands. They may have led the foul creature here in the first place!" The foals all chattered together in their anger and distress.

"I can send a Patronus to Minerva," Severus offered. "She and I go back quite a long time. These are children from Hogwarts. I have a feeling she would take a personal interest in ensuring that Mr Potter and Mr Weasley are appropriately... dealt with."

Severus' face twitched as he realised he still had Hermione wrapped snugly in his arms and a part of him didn't really appreciate the thought of relinquishing her to anyone.

Magorian reached out his arms. "I will keep her safe, Thuban," he said with an understanding nod.

Severus gently transferred Hermione to Magorian and then pulled out his wand. "Expecto Patronum!"

The clearing lit up with a bright blue-white glow as a dragon flew out of the end of Severus' wand, swirled around the clearing, and darted over the trees towards Hogwarts. He stood, transfixed, staring at the tip of his wand.

"What's wrong, Thuban?" Bane asked.

Severus' face twisted in confusion, his brows knitting together and face wrinkling. "My Patronus."

"Pretty impressive, if you ask me," Bane admitted.

"It is supposed to be a doe," Severus said quietly.

Firenze clapped Severus on the shoulder. "Are you so sure that is what it was ever truly 'supposed to be'?"

Severus frowned. "I really hate divination."

Firenze smiled. "I foresee trouble in paradise for two foals of Hogwarts."
Severus glared at the two extremely stanky wizards who reeked of putrid, dead troll. "Nothing a really hot fire can't fix."

Minerva pulled on her travelling robed, getting ready to trek out into the Dark Forest to join with the late-night harvest festival that the centaurs often held until the wee hours. She looked forward to it every year, but she had school concerns to take care of before she could.

Minerva sighed, looking out her window to the green and forest below. The lake glistened with moonlight.

"Always such a sight, even after so many years," she said to herself. She frowned as a brilliant light zoomed across the forest canopy making a beeline toward her. "A Patronus?"

The bright form flew into her open window, blasting through her as it spread its wings and unfurled into a dragon. "Minerva," Severus' rumbling voice emitted from the dragon. "There are two Hogwarts students here in the Dark Forest. There was an incident involving a troll attacking the centaurs. A few have been injured, but no one is in need of Poppy's tender care—yet. You may want to contact the Aurors, Minerva. I have a feeling there is far more to this situation than meets the eye. I must, as you know, step back, but Eltanin—your former Apprentice—will be able to fill you in."

Minerva stared at the fading Patronus. "Whatever happened to the doe?"

Alastor Moody looked decidedly grumpy, Hermione decided as she leaned back against the gathered foals, who were doing their best to help prop her up and give her a safe space to rest during the aftermath. Centaurs were, Hermione knew, extremely resilient creatures, and they dealt with non-fatal stressors with the bounce back of a freshly-minted rubberband. Even Nelly had perked up considerably after wrapping her sore legs with warm compresses. Magorian had another scar to add to his collection, but he remained as good-natured as usual, as long as his herd remained safe.

"Alright, lass," Moody said, sitting down by the fire. One of the little fillies brought him a bowl of food and a drink, having already pegged him as being "one of the elders." "Please tell me what happened to the best of your ability."

Hermione yawned drowsily. "We were enjoying the autumn festival. Draco, myself, and my Master. Minerva had to stay at the school to tie up some loose ends, and she said she'd come down when she was finished for the day. We were all enjoying dinner together, and Magorian had sent the foals out to fetch suitable sticks with which to roast marshmallows. They started to scream just a few minutes later. We ran up to find out what had happened, and came upon a troll attempting to grab some the foals. We all fought it off. Every single one of us did. The foals were still screaming, some were already injured. Magorian defended them, but the troll picked him up, to try and take off his head—"

Hermione closed her eyes, remembering the moment in question. "I just lost it. I saw red. The result being that I made my Animagus transformation for the first time under tremendous stress, and I—burned it to death."

"You burned it… to death?" Alastor asked, visibly astonished.

"Yes."
"What are you, lass, a phoenix?"

Hermione smiled sleepily. "A phoenix would have been far more… portable." She pointed to the ground right next to him.

Alastor looked down to examine the torn up earth. "A badger?"

Hermione laughed. "You might want to put a bit of light on the subject."

Alastor squinted into the dirt and gave up, casting a *Lumos*. The bright end of his wand illuminated the giant swath of dragon tracks on the ground. "Holy Mother of Merlin! You shifted into a *dragon?*

"Alas, I have no idea what I looked like, Auror Moody, but from the herd's description, it seems I am most likely a Hebridean Black dragon." Hermione said. "It was my very first change, so I have yet to be examined by the registry and recorded as to species, form, and colouration."

"Ah, well, I can be a witness and take care of that along with my report, Master Granger, if you so wish," Alastor offered. "Might as well add it to the report and make matters a bit easier. No filing fees if I do it, since it was a clear case of change under duress and extreme stress, as it were."

"I would really appreciate that, Auror Moody," Hermione said gratefully.

"Alastor, please," Moody said.

"Hermione, then."

Moody nodded. "Headmistress McGonagall tells me that Mr Potter and Mr Weasley have a long history with you. Can you explain?"

"I had plenty of reasons to wish to see them pay, Alastor," Hermione admitted, "but I did not. There was never any proof, you see. They were always one step ahead. They always knew when I was alone. They appeared out of nowhere, and left just the same."

"How did you know it was them?"

"Their distinctive laughter," Hermione said. "Sometimes I would smell that—racing broom polish, I think. It was different from the typical stuff you smell on normal brooms. Custom. It was never anything I could prove. This was the first time they actually stuck around."

"Seems like they have a lot more than that sticking to them," Alastor said darkly. "The stench tells me everything that they won't. They aren't talking, but they are of age, so we won't be needing permission from mummy and daddy to interrogate them under Veritaserum in front of the Wizengamot, if it should come to that. It doesn't take much to realise those two were up to no good tonight. We found this interesting bit of parchment on them—but it's blank. Any idea what it is? I tried a reveal on it, and it proceeded to write out a bunch of insults about my hair and my choice of coats."

Hermione raised a slender brow. "May I see it?"

Alastor handed it over. Hermione ran her hands over the parchment. "Magical, definitely, but judging by the use of the parchment—the obvious wear and tear, they carried it everywhere." She ran her wand over it, and writing appeared.

*Mr Padfoot thinks you need to keep your know-it-all-ness out of our bloody business.*
Mr Prongs agrees with Mr Padfoot and thinks you need to trim that overgrown shrub on your head.

Mr Moony would like to suggest that you're barking up the wrong tree.

Mr Wormtail believes you need to keep your front teeth filed down so that you no longer resemble a Scottish hare.

Hermione raised a brow. "Well, that's a first," she commented. "There is probably some sort of trigger phrase required to get it to reveal its true nature. It looks a lot like those passcode parchments Professor Flitwick teaches for enchanting diaries and secret messages."

"Ah, I remember those classes," Alastor snorted. "I wasn't very good at them. I always forgot the password I used."

Hermione smiled, amused, and handed back the folded parchment.

Alastor looked around. "Can you take me to this clearing? Show me your form?"

"I can try," Hermione said with a wry tug of her lips. "Do you plan on scaring me to death to get me to change?"

"I hope that won't be necessary."

"Me too," Hermione agreed. "This way." She stood up rather shakily, and Moody offered his arm to her amongst the concerned whickers from the foals. Hermione hugged them to reassure her young friends.

She walked Alastor through the forest, Bane following not very far behind them, keeping watch over her and Moody as they made their way back to the circle of char.

"Oh, this stench," Alastor groaned. "I should have had Proudfoot do this one instead of me."

Hermione eyed him, but quickly realised he was only joking.

Alastor sent a few spells out from his wand, and lit the area with a multitude of floating mage-lights. "That must be the troll," he said, wrinkling his nose at the still-smoldering remains.

He stared at the multitude of hoofprints, footprints, and shattered debris. "What a ruddy mess. Well, let's get this over with, yeah? Do try not to stomp on me, eh?"

Hermione shook her head in amusement. "I will attempt to."

"Step on me or not?"

"Yes," Hermione replied, mischief clear on her face.

Moody huffed, crossing his arms across his chest.

Hermione took a step into the middle of the clearing, sidestepping various random troll bits. She took in a deep breath, closed her eyes, and made the shift.

More fluid and smooth than her first change, which had been almost painful as her body had been forced into a different shape for the first time—and one significantly larger than the typical animal at that. Her dragon form rose up, towering high over both the forest canopy and a gaping Moody.
Alastor stared up at her in amazement. "You're quite the beauty, lass," he said. You'd send a real Hungarian Horntail crying home to his mam."

Hermione chuckled, flames and smoke trickling out of her mouth.

Moody looked her over under the lights, touching her scales, talons, and wings as well as finding various distinguishing marks on her hide. "I think I've got everything I need, lass. I can always extract a memory for them if they get all snippy with me."

Hermione returned to human form, wobbling slightly, and Moody gave her an arm to lean on. "There now, I got ya," he said. "First changes are draining, from what Minerva tells me. Myself, I never got past the walking around with a mandrake leaf in my mouth for a month. Wasn't really my thing."

Hermione grinned up at him. "It's not for everyone."

"Knowing my luck I'd end up a bloody honey badger or something really useless, like a lady beetle," Moody mused.

Hermione sputtered, flushing pink. "I—honestly can't see you as a ladybird beetle," she confessed. "I have a hard time seeing you as a giant Hebridean Black dragon, Hermione," Alastor said. "Yet, there you were in all your highly intimidating glory."

"I can't even fly on a broom very well," Hermione admitted. "Believe me, no one was more surprised about this than myself."

Moody snorted laughter. "Well, I got enough from you and Proudfoot and Savage are handling the rest with the two students and the Headmistress. If we need you to testify, I will send you an owl, okay?"

Hermione nodded. "Thank you."

Alastor smiled. "Well, I need to go tell Magorian what is going on and take my leave. Mr Malfoy has already given his statement and returned to his dorm, so there is nothing more I need to do here."

"Thank you for being so efficient, Alastor," Hermione thanked him with a smile.

"I wish others were so good about telling us what we need to know without giving us loads of grief," Moody sighed.

"Believe me, Alastor," Hermione said. "I am very much interested in everyone learning the true facts in this case."

Moody gave her an evaluating look. "I believe you do."

"They're children!" Molly wailed, wringing her hands as she paced back and forth in front of the one-way wall of the interrogation room.

"Molly, they are both of age," Arthur pointed out. "It's only because they are still students at Hogwarts that they are allowing us to sit in and watch the proceedings."

Molly shook her head, still highly distressed. "They're good boys, Arthur. They would never do
such things!"

Lily, who was also looking quite distressed herself, stared bleakly into the interrogation room. "They can't be in trouble. Not our Harry. Not Ron."

James had his hand on the one-way glass. "Veritaserum. We'll know soon enough." His face was grim.

"This must all be a big mistake," Lily fretted. "They've always been very curious boys. We all wanted to know what was in the Forbidden Forest. You and the boys were always sneaking out there—"

"I did not tell them about Sirius, Remus and Peter," James insisted. "We burned that bridge back when we found out what Sirius did! This is much more than that, Lils. If it was just about them galavanting around after curfew, they would be at school in detention rather than in a Ministry interrogation room with a healer overseeing the use of Veritaserum!"

All four parents sat down anxiously in the observation area as one of the Aurors guarded the door to ensure nothing unseemly went on during the viewing.

"The interview is beginning. 1100 under caution. This is Auror Stanford. Overseeing for the health of Harry Potter and Ronald Weasley as they are administered three drops of Veritaserum is—"

"Healer Hashito," the man in dark green robes introduced himself.

"Witnesses for the interview are—"

"Auror De Vries," the wizard with dusty brown hair said.

"Auror von Easton," the taller wizard with a dark gold mane of hair contributed.

"The three drops of Veritaserum are now being administered," Stanford stated for the record.

At that, Healer Hashito pulled out a small vial and dropper, tilted back Harry's head, and put the three drops into his mouth. He did the same to Ron, but Ron clenched his jaws shut, pointedly refusing to open his mouth. Hashito narrowed his eyes, firmly tilted Ron's head back, and placed the droplets into his nasal cavity, only releasing him after the drops made their way down his throat—one way or another.

"The requisite three drops have now been administered," Hashimoto said grimly, stepping back.

Stanford sat down at the table. "You are both in Ministry custody at the moment," he said grimly, tapping the dossier in front of him. "Do you know why you are here?"

"You're trying to frame us," Ronald accused. "It's obvious that's what this is all about."

"Care to explain this notion of yours, Mr Weasley?"

"A bloody frame-up," Ronald scoffed. "You're covering up that you've been harbouring a bloody dragon and setting it loose on people."

"Is that what you really think, hrmm?"

"Yeah, that's what I think. Like I said, it's obvious," Ron snapped.

"Tell me, Mr Potter, what brought you out to the Forbidden Forest after curfew, knowing full well
that the forest was off-limits to students?" Stanford asked.

"We just wanted to prank her," Harry snorted. "She's been going off into the forest for years, taunting us with her stupid permissions. We wanted to see what she was on about. She always gets to go in there, taking whoever she likes, but we never do. Why is she so special?"

"Who is this 'her' that you're referring to?"

"Hermione Granger."

"Are you aware of her status at Hogwarts."

"She's a know-it-all suck up bitch who gained the favour of her professors over being a normal student like the rest of us."

"What do you consider to be 'normal', Mr Potter."

"Getting along with her peers. Us!" Harry snapped.

"Tell me Messrs Potter, Weasley, did you at any point extend the hand of friendship?"

Ronald smiled. "Of course we did," he said, looking inordinately pleased with himself.

"Did you mean it?"

Ronald looked as though he was struggling. "No. She's nothing but a bloody freak. We only go to 'er when we need our assignments done. She thinks if she helps us that we'll be her friends."

"Tell me, just what did tonight's 'prank' entail?"

"Just to scare her, yeah?" Ron shrugged. "Show her that she don't know everything."

"She's not as smart as she thinks she is," Harry said insolently. "She was in our class, right? She belonged with us. Not that she ever really belonged," he added scornfully.

"We made her feel special," Ron said with a strange, twisted sort of grin.

Stanford pulled out a photograph. Leaves swirled about a giant hole in the ground, carved into the earth to form a makeshift pit. "Have you ever seen this before?"

"N—you," the boys said together.

"What is it?"

Harry and Ron seemed to struggle, fighting to avoid telling the truth.

"It's the pit we used to catch the troll," Harry finally blurted.

"Why a troll?" Stanford asked.

"Because she's a troll!" Ron bellowed. "She trolls us all the bloody time! Telling on us, trying to get us in trouble! Seemed kinda fittin' yeah? Setting a troll on the troll."

"Trolls are classified as an XXXX beasts," Stanford growled. "What made you think that setting one loose on a gathering wouldn't backfire on you?"

"Troll wouldn't be able to see us," Harry said airily. "My dad's old cloak saw to that."
"What cloak?"

"Invisibility cloak," Harry said, clapping his hands over his mouth belatedly.

"And your father gave it to you?"

"Yes—well, no," Harry blurted out, looking horrified. "We found it in the attic inside a trunk that was buried under a bunch of other assorted crap. It was hidden beneath a sliding panel in the floor. Ron and I found it while we were looking for some old picture albums for mum. Back when we were little kids."

"What was in this trunk?"

"Mementos, mostly," Harry said dismissively.

"Pranks," Ron blurted. "A bunch of really cool journals and all sorts of clever ideas."

"Stories about my dad and his school mates, having fun!" Harry boasted. "He never told us. He never said anything, but we found the journals! We found the cloak and the map! We were going to be the new Marauders!"

"But we're way better than they were!" Ron blurted, clearly proud of himself.

"So you had no permission to take this cloak, those other items?"

"We didn't need anyone's permission. They were in the house. Harry's house. They belonged to him!" Ron snarled.

"We read it in the journals!" Harry said. "All of the pranks. All the fun! All the reasons why people like her don't belong at Hogwarts."

"Why Slytherins deserve to be pranked!" Ron added venomously.

"It's all in there," Harry said. "All of it. They kept this book of all their exploits. Picture books. The journals said it was going to go to their sons to see how to really treat people. It's all in there!"

"What is all in there?"

"The best places to ambush Slytherins," Ron crowed. "How to suspend people in the air by their ankles."

"That spell was brilliant!" Harry added enthusiastically.

"Permanent sticking charms!"

"What were you putting that on?"

"Hermione's annoying cat, Crookshanks."

"Why put a sticking charm on a cat? And where?" Stanford asked.

"To the floor up in the deserted wing that no one goes to anymore," Ron said proudly. "Stupid cat was always following us around, trying to get us in trouble. Worse than Mrs Norris, that one, so we showed it who was boss."

"We showed her!" Harry added, smirking.
"How did you do that?" Stanford asked.

"We stuck that stupid cat to the floor."

"Yeah, if she'd been a real witch, she'd have made the familiar bond and found him right easy."

"Yet you never thought to teach her?"

"Psh, she's just a Muggleborn freak," Ron scoffed.

"She doesn't deserve to be here, period," Harry added spitefully. "We read all about it in the journals. Unless you're like my mum, who earned her place in the magical world."

"Yeah, his dad wouldn't have ever married her if she hadn't earned her right to magic," Ron said approvingly. "My dad says Muggles have metal contraptions that they use to drive around on crowded roads. They can't even use a simple floo. They don't use brooms, they can't Apparate, and they—they're so bloody useless! They don't even play Quidditch!"

Stanford squared his jaw. "So, Muggleborn witches and wizards have to earn their magic, do they?"

"Well, yeah."

"What about half-bloods?"

"Half-bloods are fine," Ron snorted. "They are born half-right, aren't they? They just have to work harder to catch up to the rest of us. Harry's fine, yeah?"

The two wizards nodded to each other.

"This Hermione, she has proven magic," Stanford said. "That makes her a witch."

"Yeah, but she's not," Ron said, curling his lip in disgust. "She doesn't even understand that if you give a house-elf clothes, they'll die without bonding to somebody else. And the Ministry must have given the bint some little trinket that turns her into a dragon. There's no way she could've ever done that on her own."

"No way at all," Harry agreed.

"She doesn't even like Quidditch," Ron snorted. "She's a freak. No real witch wouldn't like Quidditch."

"Are there any other… "pranks" you inflicted on Hermione Granger? Or anyone else?" Stanford asked.

"We totally charmed her clothes to go transparent in the Great Hall. Her and a bunch of the Slytherin girls. And maybe a few others," Harry boasted.

"That was totally brilliant!" Ron exclaimed delightedly. "We also snuck some of Fred and George's experimental products into her food and put polyjuice in her pumpkin juice with a little "gift" we nicked from a Slytherin robe. We thought it would turn her into that pug-faced bitch, Parkinson, but it ended up turning her into a catgirl."

"Me-ow," Harry snickered.

"She looked a lot better as a half-cat," Ron smirked. "At least cats don't have beaver teeth, do
"We framed her for slipping befuddlement draught into the dead ferrets Hagrid feeds to the
hippogriffs," Harry bragged. "He doesn't trust her around any of his animals anymore."

"We tore up some books in the library and made sure that Pince thought Hermione did it, since she
was the last one to use them. The little bint cried when Pince shrieked at her right in front of
everyone. It was beautiful," Ron said dreamily.

Stanford busily wrote things down in a log. "What things did the journals you found teach you?"

"How to get the house-elves to bring you as much food as you want, even in the middle of the
night," Ron continued.

"We figured out how to free a house elf too," Harry said proudly.

"Freed him, and now he will do anything for us," Ron added with a toothy smile.

"What sort of things do you have this elf do for you?"

"Fetch us objects, steal the answer keys to tests, cause convenient distractions, bring us snacks,"
Harry said. "He cleans our stuff all the time, and he does anything, absolutely anything we ask of
him."

This question is for you specifically, Ronald," Stanford said. "What made you think those
journals weren't hidden away because Harry's parents didn't want you to think it was how they
truly believed."

Ron snorted. "Of course it is what they believe," he said. "Otherwise they wouldn't have left me
with Marquilla Burke when I was just a tike. She taught me all about stupid Mudbloods and why
Slytherins can't ever be trusted."

"And you, Harry? Why did you believe it was true? The trunk was hidden away, after all." Stanford
leveled his gaze at Harry.

"My dad's handwriting was all over the journals," Harry said proudly. "He wrote inside that he
wanted his future son to know what a real Gryffindor does to Slytherins, like some berk they made
an example of named Severus Snape."

Stanford stroked his beard thoughtfully. "Tell me, both of you, did you, at any point before
releasing the troll on the centaur encampment, ever realise you were endangering far more than
just Hermione Granger?"

"Oh, we knew," Harry chuckled.

"We just didn't care," Ron finished smugly.

Stanford closed the file and sighed heavily. "Interview suspended for the required break. It is now
1413. Mr Potter and Mr Weasley will be remanded to the Ministry holding cells until the
Veritaserum works its way out of their systems. This interview will resume tomorrow." He waved
his wand and the glowing recording crystal winked out before zooming off and out of the room."

Hermione opened her eyes to find herself in a circular papasan-like bed. The air was cool and
refreshing—the crisp scent of autumn rolled in from nearby.
"You'll be happy to know, Eltanin," a baritone rumble said, "that your tormentors have been convicted of cruelty to animals, causing the death of a family pet, malicious pranking that went far beyond mischief, assault, multiple counts of sexual violence, and multiple counts of 'malicious intent to cause grievous bodily harm'."

Hermione pulled herself up and yawned, blinking as a cup of tea appeared in front of her. "Thank you," she said, taking the cup and a sip without even adding anything to it.

"This is wonderful," she sighed. "Thank you."

"You are," Severus replied, "quite welcome."

"Are we near the forest?" Hermione asked. "It smells like we are."

"Near, or rather in," the dark-haired wizard said with a tug of a smile on his lips. Hermione finished the tea in a gulp. "I like the feel of the place. It feels alive, like the centaur groves."

"I took some lessons from the centaurs in making the place. Near water, plenty of ventilation, but sheltered from rain and weather." Severus bowed his head. "Hidden from the casual eye."

"How long have you," Hermione asked, "been a dragon Animagus?"

"I was seventeen when I made my first change," Severus said quietly. "It, like yours, was a very traumatic experience. The difference is I knew exactly who it was and that they truly did wish me dead. Mine was not a change of rage and retribution. Mine was about survival."

"Trauma is trauma," Hermione mused. "Fighting for your life or for the lives of others. Apparently both are equally capable of bringing about enough stress to trigger the change. I do hope I'm not going to be this wiped out every time I change. Not that this isn't the most comfy bowl I've ever napped in."

A tug of a smile played over Severus' lips. "You may find that sleep comes easier in a bowl-shape. A nest, if you will."

"It makes perfect sense," Hermione said. "Minerva loves to sleep sprawled on her back in the sun. She also adores tummy rubs."

"How positively indecent," Severus quipped amusedly.

Hermione flushed. "As a cat!"

"Hn," he replied, arching a brow. "As you say."

Hermione flushed, huffing. "You're purposely trying to get a rise out of me, aren't you?"

"Did it work?" he replied, lips pressing together in a slight pucker.

Hermione sighed. "Yes."

"You'll be teaching children as a career," Severus mused. "You may have to develop a thicker skin as a matter of principle."

"I suppose I'll have to learn to sprout scales in a figurative sense as well as literal," Hermione mused. She looked around more closely, her eyes scanning the shelves filled with countless jars of
ingredients, from the unusual and exotic to the mundane. "You are the mysterious curator of the Black Scale," she whispered in awe.

"And how would you know of the Black Scale?" Severus asked, setting his cup down before waving his hand to move it to a dish basin where an magical brush washed it before it floated up to a shelf.

Hermione pulled a vial out from her robes. It dangled on a silver chain—fashioned from dark cobalt glass and topped with a small cut crystal stopper. "In my second year, my classmates pranked me. They spiked my drink with polyjuice and turned me into a cat-girl. Professor Slughorn could not cure it, so they sent out to the one person who they knew could make the antidote. They thought I was asleep, but I heard them talking in the infirmary. When the owl came with the vial, I was instructed to take a sip each night until it was gone. I kept the vial after. It was the most beautiful vial I had ever seen, and it had saved me from a fate worse than I had ever imagined."

Hermione closed her eyes for a moment. "Ever since, I've worn the vial around my neck to remind me not to never take the positive things in my life for granted."

Severus stared at her for several moments. "And they say you are not a witch," he said. "Yet you can transform even a perfectly ordinary potion vial into something beautiful."

Hermione flushed. "It was already beautiful."

Severus curled his lip. "Some things are just ordinary. Some things forever remain… ugly and broken."

"Some things hide their beauty on the inside to protect themselves from those who can't understand or appreciate them," Hermione said.

Severus' expression softened. "How very Gryffindor of you." Conflict flickered across his face before he reached out a hand to her and helped her out of her impromptu nest. "Would you like a— tour?" he asked with some awkwardness.

Hermione smiled. "I would love one." She took his hand, the warmth of her skin brushing against the cool of his.

He pulled her up. "I fear this is the only guest room, but it is also a bit of storage for ingredients."

"I love this window," she said, staring a huge stained glass depicting dragons swirling around the sun, blotting the sky with their wings. "It's beautiful."

A business acquaintance of mine works on a dragon preserve in eastern Romania," Severus said. "Usually he needs nutritive potions, scale moisturisers, fire retardant potions, and the like. But during one particularly ill-timed mating season, half his dragons came down with the wizard pox. They all started growing beards of moss, losing their scales, and developing clusters of iridescent boils all over their abdomens. I made some potions and sent them out, and he said it cured most of them before they were too far gone to be saved. He paid me with this glass. He said it was made by one of the traditional craftsmen on the preserve. It depicts a flock of Hebridean Blacks, circling and breathing fire on their eggs to hasten its hatching. Legend says a larger and more ancient pair flies through the cosmos, tending to their eggs. Eggs that, to us, are the suns that bring light and life to countless worlds."

"That's beautiful," Hermione said with wonder, touching the warm, glowing glass orb. "Do you
know much about the Hebridean Blacks?"

"Only what Charlie Weasley blurts out each and every time he visits me," Severus said, amused. "And from what I have come to know from my own personal alien instincts."

"Does he know? That you're a dragon Animagus?" Hermione asked.

"No," Severus sighed. "I believe that he suspects, but I keep refusing to permit him see me in that form."

"Why?" Hermione asked, curious.

Severus shook his head wryly. "Because then I'd never be rid of him. He would be here forever, asking to practically move in and examine me at his leisure."

Hermione's eyes widened. "I suppose that would be rather frustrating, yes."

"He is not a fool," Severus mused. "He had this specially crafted for me, after all. And of all the varied species that he could've chosen, he requested that the craftsman depict the images of Hebridean Blacks. The rarest amongst the rare—said to be even more protective than the Hungarian Horntails."

Hermione smiled. "Is Charlie Weasley by any chance related to—" she trailed off, frowning.

"Yes, unfortunately," Severus answered. "He and his brother William, however, both have good sense and intelligent heads on their shoulders. They have far less of the fiery temper of their mother, Molly, and more of the wisdom and patience of their father, Arthur."

Hermione sighed sadly. "I am glad there is some redemption in the family," she said.

Severus brushed his hair away from his face in a habitual motion. "My knowledge of the Weasley clan has been limited. My exposure to them ended many years ago, save for Charlie and William, the two eldest Weasley children, who have contacted me regularly regarding business for the dragon preserve and the goblins, respectively."

"Are you in hiding?" Hermione asked, curious.

"I value my privacy," Severus explained. "I fear that I had very little of it during a time when I desperately needed it, so I made up for it in my old age."

"Old age?" Hermione scoffed. "Wizards live much longer than non-magicals. And it is said that the Hebridean Black lives much longer than most dragons due to the 'rough Scottish lands that bore them'."

"Someone has clearly done their homework," Snape mused, his black eyes glittering with amusement.

"I did a little light reading on dragons during my fourth year when Hogwarts hosted the Tri-Wizard Tournament," Hermione said. "Ron wouldn't stop blathering on about his brother and the "cool" dragons—he inadvertently told everyone what the challenge was. Not that it made the task any easier, as I understand."

"He comes from a long line of red-headed weasels, each even feistier and more foul-tempered than the others," Severus said with a rather derisive snort. He lead her into a larger chamber, and she followed, eyes growing wide as she took in the vast cavernous space.
"Wow," she breathed.

Vast bubbling hot springs lit with blue-white mage lights sprawled around stalactites and stalagmites. A glowing white mist lazily wound itself around their feet like a cat. The chamber was vast—far, far larger than she had ever expected. "Beautiful," she whispered. "No wonder you choose to stay hidden away from the rest of the world. This is your priceless, natural treasure. Your dragon's hoard."

Severus smiled a little. "It's very peaceful here. I don't want rampaging hordes of wizards and witches coming here to demand various potions and salves. That's why I run a owl-post business. The owls seem to appreciate the relative quiet it too. They have the entire forest to roam and hunt as they wish in-between deliveries."

"Sounds absolutely wonderful," Hermione said somewhat wistfully.

"The main laboratory vents out one of the wall cracks. Perfect for not smothering myself," Severus said. "The living chambers is heated via the hot springs that run beneath it, but the air circulation comes from vents in the stone—natural breaks and gaps. It's really quite perfect." He tilted his head. "And there is a library just past the door," he said thoughtfully.

"Library!" Hermione gasped.

The moment Severus extended his hand in invitation, Hermione disappeared behind the door with a barely concealed squeal of excitement.

"Bartlan's Treatise on Transfiguration and the Soul!" Hermione gasped. "Vapourbend's Of Agrimony and Men!"

Hermione popped her head out from behind the door. "This is amazing!" She held a ball of ginger fur with bat-like ears. "And who is this?"

"Moron," Severus answered, scratching his head.

Hermione frowned. "You named your Kneazle... 'Moron'?"

"He tried to jump into a boiling cauldron while chasing a moth," Severus explained. "He earned his name."

Hermione's eyes widened. She pet the little furball until he rolled over on his back and purred riotously with all four paws in the air. "You're the cutest little Moron I've ever seen," she cooed.

The Kneazle kitten purred even more loudly.

"Did you lock him up in there?" Hermione asked.

"No, he's quite the dodgy little rascal," Snape replied. "He appears and disappears as he chooses. Usually puts his cold paws on your neck the middle of the night."

Hermione giggled. "You're so sweet," she said, touching her nose to the kitten's.

"Mrrrowl!" he agreed, licking her nose.

"Now you've done it," Snape said with a resigned sigh. "He'll be absolutely insufferable now."

"Is he your familiar?" Hermione asked.
"No, he's just quite insistent that this is his home," Severus replied. "Not for long if he keeps trying to boil himself."

Hermione pet the kitten. "We need to teach you cauldron etiquette."

Purr. Purr. Purrr. PURR.

Snape just rolled his eyes.

Moron mewed and jumped out of Hermione's arms, padding off into another room. He mewed and came back to Hermione then walked back to the room.

"Want me to follow you?"

"Mew!"

Severus suddenly barred the way. "That—is my private chambers."

Hermione flushed. "I'm so sorry!"

Moron mewed in protest. Snape shot the kitten a glance of ultimate disapproval.

"Mew!"

"No."

"MEW!"

"NO!"

Hermione slinked past the quarreling Kneazle and its master, choosing to explore the nooks and crannies of the natural cave. She touched the cool surface of the stone, smiling as drops of moisture dampened her fingertips. She continued to walk around the different chambers, finding a few store rooms, a study, multiple cauldrons in mid brew, and a corridor that led outside.

Stepping out into the light, she lifted her hand to shield her eyes. All around her, great trees rose to the heavens—far more ancient than others she had seen. A roar of a waterfall heralded the rush of water from above, and she realised why no one had found this sanctuary. The cave was concealed behind the waterfall—beyond that the trees—and a steep mile-long drop to the rushing water and rocks below. As she stepped out, she looked up, and saw there was equal distance going up. No one was ever going to just casually visit here—unless they knew exactly what they were looking for. Even then, they had best have wings of their own.

"The updrafts are perfect here," Severus' voice. "You can fall into them and rise up without ever having to work at it."

Hermione startled and turned, her feet sliding across the smooth wet rock. Severus' arm reached out and caught her, pulling her closer to the hidden dias. For a moment, Hermione froze, her nose pressed into the soft fabric of his robes, recording the various scents that were layered upon it. The smell of the forest, the water, the stone, earth, herbs, and so much more lured her in like a moth to a beckoning flame. She flushed, and stood away from him in a more proper distance. "Thank you. That was rather clumsy of me," she apologised.

Severus' eyes searched her face, perhaps wondering why her touch had lingered upon him. "It was nothing," he said, absently tugging his cravat. He stared out over the water. "Before you said you
had never been flying. Would you—" he said, pausing awkwardly. "Would you consider taking a
flight with me?"

Hermione froze, her feet seemingly glued to the ground.

Severus closed his eyes in regret. "Please forgive me. I was much too forward."

Hermione's head jerked up and she shook it. "It's not that at all," she said. "I just—have had some
very bad experiences with flight."

"You seemed to have a handle on it the other night," Severus said, his eyes narrowing.

Hermione turned away and grimaced. "That was pure instinct. Whenever I think about it, I
immediately panic. All I have to remember is that flight involves a broom, and brooms and I do not
get along."

Severus held out his hand. "Trust me?"

Hermione stared at it, slowly reaching out to grasp it.

"What if I fall?" Hermione asked shyly, shifting her weight from one foot to the other.

"I will catch you if you do, but I do not believe you will," Severus said. "The instinct—it is
incredibly strong."

"Promise?" she whispered.

"I will be with you," he reassured her. "This I swear."

Hermione placed her hand in his and grasped it tightly.

"Okay."

"How is this fair?" Molly protested. "Arthur?"

"This is far more fair than it could've been, Molls," Arthur said grimly. "They could've been
thrown into Azkaban for life for attempted murder. At least now they will have the chance to finish
their educations while working off their sentence in service."

"They'll be thirty-something before they ever get out of service!"

"This was NOT just a childish prank, Molly," Arthur said firmly. "This wasn't just some silly little
thing that got way out of hand. You heard what they said during interrogation. You know I'm
telling it as it is. It doesn't matter how they found the trunk. It doesn't even matter that they did.
They took it without a shred of remorse. They didn't ask. Some part of them knew it was wrong
because they didn't tell James or Lily or us. They didn't tell anyone, Molly. Anyone but
themselves."

"But if they'd destroyed that trunk—" Molly insisted.

"Molly, do we know every thing stashed away in our attic?" Arthur asked.

"Of course we do! It's our house!"

Arthur gave Molly a rather dubious look.
Molly wrung her hands together inconsolably.

"I know you, my Molly," Arthur said. "I know when it really settles in, you're going to be angry. You're going to want to tear him to bits on your own terms, and it's going to be peppered with your need to blame yourself for not seeing it coming. Well, we can't hold our kid's hands all the time. We couldn't have seen that Burke was a sodding blood supremacist. How could we? She seemed perfect. Everyone else thought she was too. She had even won multiple awards for humanitarianism at the Ministry. How could we have possibly known?"

"We could have asked more questions!"

"She could have lied!"

"I would have known!"

"Like you knew she was a blood supremacist, Molly?"

Molly's face twisted in agony.

"There was no way we could have known, Molls," Arthur said gently, taking her hands in his. "They were perfectly well-behaved children on breaks with us. They were perfectly normal boys."

"But, magical rehab?" Molly groaned. "Ron will be so far away from home. We won't even be able to visit! We won't be able to tell if he's getting better! What if they abuse him? What if they don't treat him right?"

Arthur shook his head. "Come on, Molly. You know they're both going to need extensive mind healing, probably a lot of that Muggle counseling, and then there is that matter of the fact they positively reek of burnt troll and no one can seem to make them to smell any better."

"They take away their wands and make them wear those medieval devices around their necks that sap away their magic—"

"Molly!" Arthur admonished. "It could have been Azkaban! For life! At least there they will have a chance. Provided that they don't still smell so awful in fifteen years. If they do well, they get their wands back, their magic returned, and a little starter money from the work they completed while in service. That's far more than the chances I've seen others get. They took into consideration they were still in school. It could have been worse. Much worse."

"That Bagnold—using magical suppression collars. That is positively barbaric!" Molly cried.

"Consider who it's being used on, Molls," Arthur said. "You want the likes of Bellatrix bloody Lestrange being able to escape if someone should manage to blow a hole into the side of Azkaban? I certainly don't. Now think of what Ron and Harry almost did without being Dark wizards. Unforgivables, Molly."

The pair were interrupted as James and Lily Potter filed out of the interview room looking both grim and ashen-faced.

"I've tried to remove that bloody trunk from the house, Auror Moody," James said. "I can't. I've even tried to burn the ruddy thing. It won't even open for me. It won't open for Lily. Send whoever you want to try and get it out. I even took out Bill Weasley as a loan from the goblins, and he said it's tied into the Potter and Black family lines—the children's lines, specifically. Sirius' insidious little 'heirloom' to ensure the next generation of Marauders' pranksters continued on."
James' jaw tightened and he swallowed hard, feeling the bile rising at the back of his throat. "I left that life behind the moment I realised my best mate distracted me so that my other best mate could murder someone. He lived under my parent's roof for three whole years, trying to escape his murderous family, or so he told me. And now I find out that even now, while he's hundreds of miles away from here, he's successfully managed to corrupt my own son without my knowing. Get that disgusting thing out of my attic, Alastor. Burn it to ash with fucking Fiendfyre if you have to. I want Sirius Black out of my life for good."

The moment Hermione took to the air, Severus felt something incredibly powerful surge through his body from nose to tail tip. The brush of her leathery wings against his as she caught the thermals and was carried up along with him—it all felt so wondrous, if somewhat surreal. To have someone to share the skies with. Gods, how long he had ached for that, for someone special to share the joyous experience with. Even that first night he had escaped Hogwarts, his dragon had called for another of his kind with a deep, instinctive, burning need.

Hermione brushed against him, skin-to-skin and scale-to-scale, a low, almost seductive purr vibrating throughout her entire body as she banked sharply over the forest. The moment her warmth left him, he felt an ache growing deep inside of himself—an almost physical pain. She tentatively began to spin and turn, testing her wings and the extent of her body, surrendering to the skies as he had once done, so very long ago. He remembered all too keenly what it had been like the first time that he had truly realised he could fly.

The wind whistled through the spines on her back with a distinctive high vibration, seemingly in tune with his. Then, suddenly, she flattened them tightly against her back, and she became as silent as an owl that had spotted a tasty-looking prey animal.

So taken by Hermione's presence, he hadn't even detected the two bucks that were fighting, probably over a nearby doe, down below, but she had. Ah, deer in rut season, the preferred prey of a very hungry Hebridean Black dragon.

He banked with her, a shrug of muscles causing his spines to flatten as his skin relaxed to allow the fine hairs along his body to muffle the muscular flaps of his wings. She dropped like a stone from the air, wings pinned back—the instinct and desire for food having claimed her—and he knew there would be no stopping her. That first hunt, the first drive for food—he hadn't realised what he'd done that first night until he had devoured the entire carcass of some poor rancher's cow, a rather wooly sheep, and the unfortunate fox that had been trying to get into the hen house. Ironically, the chickens had survived the encounter.

He'd made sure that the poor rancher had more than enough Muggle money to cover the loss, and he'd even struck a deal with him to provide an annual supply of whole beef, ensuring said rancher never need to struggle to find a good price to sell his cows to. The rancher never knew the real reason Severus had a need for so many cows, perhaps thinking he had a restaurant or other some sort to supply, but he also didn't ask questions of someone who provided him a steady income and more than fair price for his beef.

Thanks to the more than ample reward monies for countless Dark wizards, witches, and Death Eaters as well as a booming mail-order potions business, Severus had also managed to assimilate the surrounding forest of his "territory," turn it into a sanctuary, and deed it over to the Dark Forest centaur herd for "safe keeping."

Magorian and his herd, of course, had been more than delighted, as they not only had a dragon Animagus guarding the stretch of forest, but they also had a connected forest causeway to the neighbouring herd. Decades had passed them by without being able to meet thanks to the land
being infested with humans. With the Dark Forest herd having traditional territory as well as actual property—they were set to be the most well established centaur herd in history.

But all of that was also satisfying Severus' need for a vast forest territory—a safe place for his growing hoard of tomes and artefacts as well as various shiny objects, both potions-related and non. How was he supposed to impress a female, if his territory could not provide food, shelter, and a safe place to raise hatchlings?

*Hatchlings?*

Good one, Severus. Go directly to magical offspring that everyone believes shouldn't be possible. Who was he to complain? He was a bloody dragon Animagus who wasn't "supposed" to be possible either. Shouldn't he at least try and court a witch the normal way before—sod it, what was normal anyway?

But to fly, wing-to-wing, with another like himself—to feel truly a part of something bigger—it was a feeling he never thought he'd ever get to experience. Hebridean Black dragons were rare as it was, even in Scotland where they were native. Some family called the MacFusty clan tended them on the outskirting shores of the moors. They were, as he had found out, extremely aggressive and highly territorial creatures. From what he understood, the MacFustys had quite a job keeping the drakes from killing each other over the right to even attempt to court the jennies, and impressing a jenny dragon was—at least for a Hebridean Black—about so much more than simply being a healthy male specimen.

Hungarian Horntails were all about hoarding food for their young and destroying all vegetation around their lairs so they could see any and all potential threats coming towards their extravagant nests. The Peruvian Vipertooth, on the other hand, would breed anywhere that wasn't underwater. They were small and fast as well as highly venomous, which made for a rather embarrassing history with nineteenth century wizards sending extermination squads after them to prevent the dragon population from growing out of control. Unfortunately, the wizards actions had introduced the infamous Dragon Pox to the world, which gave dragons a rather bad reputation on top of their already bad reputation.

Dragons had one singular dietary pleasure that other creatures tended to shy away from: humans. Whether it was because of the greater size or a taste for the flavour, Severus wasn't certain. From the many Dark wizards he had—ahem—chewed upon, he knew that humans were rather foul dining options unless well-charred before consumption. Still, even then, Severus had found them mostly disgusting when compared to a nice deer or even a domestic cow, and had adjusting his hunting strategy accordingly. Since no one cared how a Dark wizard was "turned in," especially if they had a skull and serpent tattoo, he had become very good as an ambush predator.

Thanks to his "hobby" ridding the world of Dark wizards and witches, he now had a vast, legal territory, a successful business, a wonderful home, and an ever-growing hoard of interesting things. The one thing he didn't have, however, was someone to share it with. And since he wasn't just a run of the mill dragon, he wasn't exactly willing to settle down with just some fine-looking jenny dragon. Sure, it might have satisfied the dragon within him, but what about the part of him that was a very human wizard who loved creating his potions and reading his tomes?

He had the sinking feeling that his list of possible companions in life was rapidly shrinking rather than growing.

Yet, as Hermione dropped down from the sky, silently descending on the two rutting bucks with wings pinned to her sides and talons outstretched. She was silent, deadly, and, dare he think it, absolutely beautiful.
She used her powerful momentum to topple the one stag, sinking her claws in as she dragged it along the ground. Her tail wrapped tightly around the other in passing, crushing it as she drove the spines deep into the stunned stag's body. The awkward weight of the second stag disrupted her sense of balance and she instinctively flung it away before righting herself again. She landed, her talons skidding across the earth.

The second stag, however, went careening toward Severus' head, and he snapped at it, clamping his jaws and snapping its neck as he landed.

Hermione hissed at him, her wings spread to cover her kill as she instinctively protected her food, but her eyes soon began to lose their wildness. Sanity slowly crept back into her demeanor, and Severus frilled out his head crest, lowering his snout as he dropped the other dead stag. He tore open the belly and shoved his snout in, seeking the perfect "gift" for his lovely companion. He tugged on the soft, steaming innards, his teeth wrapping carefully around the delicious liver. He rumbled softly, offering the delicacy to her.

She stared for a while, her spines lowering to flatten against her back as she slowly relaxed. She tugged on the offered organ and relieved him of it, snapping it up with a sharp tug and clack of her teeth. The luminous purple glow of her eyes seemed to grow a bit brighter. Slowly she gnawed at the belly of her own stag and her snout went seeking inside. She tugged out the liver and the heart, and almost shyly offered them up to him.

Severus curled his neck around hers, gently taking the offerings with his mouth and making them disappear. He rubbed his scales across hers, rumbling softly. She froze at first, seemingly unsure, but slowly leaned into his body, crooning in response. Accepting his presence, she began to eat, allowing him to share the spoils and her company.

Human mind unsure, but his dragon mind very pleased, Severus felt the soft lean of the jenny dragon against his body. The instinctive rumble of sound grew in his throat, and he loosed a tongue of flame to gently caress her scales. She purred against him, seeking the touch of his skin and the warmth of his flames.

As they worked on the carcasses, reducing them to bones, and then they blasted the bones with their fire. Crunching the remains, their teeth pulverising the bone to small, charred pieces, they relished the inner marrow, their long tongues running across their glistening teeth. Hermione tentatively licked his snout, cleaning the blood off his face.

Severus rumbled, eyes half-closing as he savoured the feeling. Her attentive licks and nips sent small charges of pure electric ecstasy down his spine. He desired—needed—to reciprocate. His jaws closed around the back of her neck, his tongue flicking across her skin. His teeth pressed into her scales and fine spinal crests, nipping her carefully without letting her go.

Her body trembled underneath his touch, but she did not pull away. A fine trickle of blood seeped where his dagger-like teeth pressed carefully into the soft spaces between her scales and her leathery spikes. He licked her tenderly, the blood disappearing under the attentive strokes of his tongue.

Her neck moved against his, teeth flashing as she nipped the softer skin of of his neck that was covered in spiny frill. The moment her teeth pressed into his skin, he groaned lowly, a rumble like thunder escaping his throat as twin spirals of smoke emerged from his nostrils. She licked at the tiny, almost insignificant wound, but with just that small gesture of tender reciprocation, Severus felt a growing need stirring deep within his body—a hunger he had dodged, had stubbornly denied,
for so many years.

He rumbled, rubbing against her and leapt into the air, giving out a roar of invitation, and she followed. Their wing beats sounded together as they chased each other in the clouds and over the trees, moonlight dancing across their skin. Their wings touched every so often, and they would playfully change roles—one the chased, the other the pursuer. They burst through the clouds then dove towards the earth, entangling themselves with the other before parting and starting to chase again.

Severus let out a barking roar.

*Khehhk. Khekk! KHECK! KHARRRRRRRRR!*

A roar of sound and flame burst from his throat as he proclaimed his prowess and who lorded over this particular patch of forest.

Hermione let an ethereal keen like the sound of a whale's song through the night's sky. She shot off through the sky, and he was with her. He flew faster than he ever had. He spun in the air, stretching his wings to blot out the sky. While larger dragons such as the Ukrainian Ironbelly existed, Severus made up for mass by sheer awe-inspiring presentation. He swooped and brushed Hermione's wings, running his wings over the sensitive membranes of hers. He breathed jets of flame across her scales, driven to show off the extent of his prowess—to prove he would be a good provider and fierce protector of his chosen territory and, if she would be accommodating, his choice in companion.

He curled around her in mid-flight, gently guiding her slowly back toward his lair. Soft nudges of pressure stealthily steered her towards the waterfall hideaway. She yielded to his guidance, banking back to the waterfall, her wings spread in a lazy glide. She sang, her keens like the song of gods or sirens leading him to her and only her. He was enraptured by the sound of her calls. She might as well have been Amortentia incarnate as it wouldn't have made any difference to Severus.

Severus let a low, rumbling croon, sliding across the jenny's back so their wings brushed together. Their wingbeats synchronised as he drew her against him, guiding her under the falls to the hidden cavern beyond—carved out by natural water and his own draconic encouragement. Claws, fire, and dragon-elbow grease had all combined to craft the ultimate home behind the falls. Wizarding magic had done the rest. Human investments and a human business had ensured both his land, privacy and well-being was well provided for. The one thing he could not have crafted with his own hands was a female dragon—a jenny—who would be impressed enough by his prowess and home to settle and share it with him.

A mate.

Hermione landed in the bowl of his meticulously crafted nest, her purple eyes glowing as she sniffed it over. She eyed the smaller, human door with curiosity, catching sight of a ball of orange Kneazle curled up on a nearby chair. The way they had come in—a tunnel leading up high to the falls guaranteed that nothing human was going to come in the way they had flown in—even if they managed to find the way in.

She sniffed the various tomes and shiny artefacts lining the outside of the nest, but she also tested the lining of the nest, tapping the cloth and silks he had gathered to line it. Under it was a plush lining of glowing down he had meticulously gathered from magical firebird nests year after year. She belched a test gout of flame, eyeing the lining critically. The lining did not burn, and she seemed satisfied. Her nostrils flared as she tested each tome for the particular scent she desired: age and preservation, the quality of the parchment, and the vintage of the ink. Her tongue flicked out,
tasting the air.

Severus remained frozen in place, feeling like the Bower bird hoping and praying to whatever gods were listening, that the female would judge him worthy.

Hermione leaned into the nest, pacing around it, shuffling her wings to judge the width. Her tail ran across the woven bowl as her eyes narrowed to judge if the bowl would flex and adapt to movement. New to being a dragon she may have been, but her dragon-self seemed all too in the know of what she wanted.

Severus swallowed hard, his fin-crests rising and falling in both anticipation and fear or ultimate rejection of his decades long construction of the perfect nest. He tensed as the jenny slowly eased herself into nest, whuffing as she relaxed into it. Her eyes closed as she savoured the feel of it. Suddenly, her head came up, and she narrowed her eyes. She sniffed around the cavern, rubbing against the sides of it, searching for something only she knew.

Moron mrowled at her, running around her legs and then bounding up her tail to her back. He headbonked into her neck, chewing on her neck spines. Hermione eyed the Kneazle, eyes narrowing in some sort of disbelief.

"Mrrrwol!" Moron said. "Mrrrt!"

Hermione licked her fangs, seemingly dubious.

Severus felt a twitch growing in his gut as he realised what the jenny was looking for—signs of another jenny. She wanted to know if she was to be a part of a harem of jennys or if Severus was alone. Dragons had a tendency to go either way. Severus, however, was more of a monogamous sort. He didn't want to share. He wanted—

Hermione's nostrils quivered as she pressed the side of her snout against his, and all of Severus' coherent thoughts fled out the high corridor and past the falls. His teeth chattered, a croon gathering in his throat. She slinked by him, moving back to the nest and rolling onto her back, up and back, up and back. She half-closed her eyes, enjoying the feel of the cloth, silk, and down.

Severus tentatively joined her, pressing himself against her as his wing curved around her. He crooned, carefully observing her body language lest he misread her and ruin a good start. She keened and sang, leaning into his warmth, and he snuggled into her, tucking her under his wing as he pressed his snout against hers, their smoking trails of breath mingling together.

Moron purred and snuggled between their heads, radiating pure smug feline satisfaction.

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

A/N:

(Celestial spider shuffled across screen, bumps into screen due to bucket on head)

(Plush spider pops bucket off his head)

"Thanks!"

"I think we ma de a wrong turn."

(Moron pounces and snags spider in mouth, carrying him off.)
"Halp!"

(Celestial spider runs after.)

"Come back! Don't chew on my friend!"
Chapter Summary

Drama, Drama, and HEA!

Chapter Notes

A/N: Onward! The Conclusion

Beta Love: The Dragon and the Rose, Dutchgirl01, and Flyby Commander Shepard

Scales of Judgement

Chapter 2

Hermione woke to a cool breeze coming in from the upper chamber, the scent of clean water tickling her nose. A sinfully soft down duvet had been pulled over her, and a fluffy pillow had been christened by her drool. The nesting bowl was strangely comfortable, but it was incredibly huge, and when she tried to look over the bowl's edge, she realised it was a very long way down. Intricately-carved geometric steps led down from the nesting bowl, and Hermione carefully hoisted herself over the nest and onto the stairs. By the time she had made her way down to the actual cavern floor, she realised she could have just transformed and stepped out of the nest like a proper dragon.

What was a proper dragon anyway?

Hermione swallowed hard, pulling her outer robes tightly around her with some awkwardness. You've just spent the night flying around, hunting deer, and snuggling up to some strange new dragon you didn't even really know. That's not bizarre at all, Hermione.

Hermione's lip twitched. Not at all.

Didn't mum warn you about being careful in new relationships?

What relationships? Hermione growled to herself. It's not like anyone who was ever interested in me was allowed to remain so, thanks to the likes of Potter and Weasley. No, she was all too aware of just how poor her chances were with regard to ever establishing a real relationship. Eventually, every chance she ever had ended immediately when they found out about what a bloody freak she was.

Mudblood bitch.

Didn't even think there might have been more to a familiar bond than just buying the pretty kitty
and taking him home.

You didn't even question there might have been something more to finding a true familiar.

You let Crookshanks **DIE**.

Everything they said was true. You are nothing but a **freak**. You are a busy-body know-it-all bint who knows nothing about how real magic works. If you had, you could have saved Crooks' **life**. You would've known that house-elves **die** without a bond to a magical family instead of trying to shove a bunch of socks and hats at them in some misguided attempt to "free" them.

And once this wizard gets to know the **real** you, he will **run**, not walk, away from you.

Hermione cringed, her fingers touching the flame-scorched cavern walls. "I'm such a bloody **fool**," Hermione whispered, pressing her forehead against the cold stone. "I'm but a few days into my dragon-form, and my stupid heart wants me to go pick out nesting material with him. She hung her head ashamedly.

Hermione squared her shoulders and gathered together all of her Gryffindor courage. She really should should thank him for his gracious hospitality. It was most kind of him to at least not run away screaming on the very night of her first real flight. The least she could do would be to offer him an honourable way out. He was obviously a trusted friend of the centaur, and she would never wish to bring shame upon them in any way, shape, or form.

Her hand drifted to the tome sitting on a stone pedestal, caressing the fine leather binding with her fingertips. He had so many wonderful things. The last thing he'd need in his life would be some dewy-eyed witch pawing wistfully at his collection of priceless artefacts.

She walked into the spanning cavern where the steaming hot spring sent curls of steam drifting upward towards the ceiling. She smiled, touching the bubbling water. "Wouldn't it be nice?" she asked Moron, who was rubbing up against her arm as she sat on the edge of the pools. "If I could find such a place?" She pet the purring Kneazle kit wistfully. "Find someone who doesn't mind that I'm a—lowly ignorant Mudblood. Like that will happen. Ever." Hermione gave Moron an affectionate scritch behind the ears and stood up just as a low baritone voice carried through the cavern.

"They seriously expect me to walk out of hiding like everything is okay? Sure, you won't care, will you, Severus? Help out some selfish little Gryffindor witch who never had a bit of sense to begin with? Help her out, will ya? Show 'er yer a better man. Well we know what she's **really** attracted to, yeah? Money. Power. Influence. Would probably be caressing my bloody artefacts while debating on who she could sell it to for the most profit!"

Hermione cringed as Severus' tirade continued. It didn't take too much to figure out just who he had to be talking about. Hermione had, fact, been "caressing his artefacts" just this morning.

"You can save her. Oh yeah, I can bloody **save** her—" The sound of several long gulps came shortly after and, following that, the crash of glass shattering against the cave wall. "Knowing my luck, saving **her** will end up cursing me. As if I didn't have enough shite to worry about. I gave up on trusting any Gryffindors in my seventh year when it almost got me **killed** by a bloody werewolf. Never again. I don't want **anything** to do with her!"

Hermione closed her eyes in pain, leaning on the nearby stalagmite as she slowly caught her breath. She looked around regretfully one last time as she took in her surroundings. "Guess this is goodbye, Moron," Hermione said, rubbing the Kneazle behind the ears.
The orange fuzzball grabbed her wrist, clinging to her arm like a furry little burr. "Mrowl!"

"I like you too," she said sadly. "But it's quite obvious that I've overstayed my welcome." She pulled out a bit of parchment from her robe along with a travel quill. Magic flared from her hand as she passed her quill over the parchment and neatly wrote her host a note.

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Dear Thuban,

Thank you for graciously assisting me with my first real flight. I appreciate your tolerance of my unfortunate ignorance, and I sincerely apologise if I have given you any reason to regret extending your kind hospitality to me.

If there is everything you might wish from me in the future, you need only ask. I would appreciate any opportunity to express my thanks to you for making sure my first flight wasn't a complete disaster. Please do not hesitate to make any such request of me as I would be pleased to assist you with any of your future endeavors. As mutual allies to the Dark Forest Herd, it would be my honour to provide any small aid you might happen to require.

Most Gratefully Yours,

Hermione Jean Granger

---

Hermione rolled up the scroll, sealing it with a bit of warm red wax from the end of her wand. She took the master's signet ring from her finger and pressed it into the wax. Quietly, she placed the scroll by the small shrine beside the pool, wiping the trail of tears from her wet cheeks. Unheeded, one single droplet fell from her fingertips and dripped into the crystal water of the cavern.

"Goodbye, Moron," she told the Kneazle, kissing him on the forehead.

"Mew!" Moron protested.

"You're better off without me," Hermione said. "The last half-Kneazle I had, I killed with my own ignorance."

"Mew!"

Hermione closed her eyes and fled from the room, her robes whipping wildly behind her. She walked to the edge of the cavern corridor, standing in the blinding whiteness as the sun-filtered water rushed by with a deafening roar. She extended her fingertips into the water for a few moments and stepped off the edge, plummeting downward to the crashing water below.

Dark, sail-like wings spread wide as the dragon jenny flew off over the forest canopy, as silent as an owl in flight.

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Bill wiped his brow as he snugly wrapped a charmed bandage around his fellow curse-breaker's arm. "It's no use. That trunk is locked with a personalised and specific type of blood magic. There is no way to get into it without either being the one it was meant to open for or—putting the right person's blood upon it. You're going to have to wait for Alastor to bring in someone who is much better at reading the intricate flows in Dark blood magic.

"You're supposed to be one of the best curse-breakers in Britain," James yelled. "How can you not—"
Bill held up his hand. "I know you want this out of your home ASAP, Mr Potter, but I'm telling you bad things could happen. Far worse than what already has. Look what spilling the wrong blood did so far, and it was purely accidental!" He jutted his chin at the attic wall that had been entirely blown out, exposing the entire third floor to the outside elements. "I'm telling you that the trunk is keyed to a specific person's blood, probably blood of someone Black knew was going to die to ensure it could never be used to break the spell. This is the kind of thing that used to be put on tombs of the great Pharaohs, to curse a family for generations for tampering with some rich guy's treasures or the body of his wife."

"Why can't you just let Harry and Ron come open it and remove it?" Lily demanded.

"Because they are seventeen," Auror Hatfield said, rubbing his temples. "The magic is keyed to open for the *children* of the Marauders. It's right there in the words etched on the trunk itself."

**Seeker and Chasers**

*Justice sought*

*This trunk shall not open*

*When minor naught. *

*Only the children *

*Shall lead the way *

*And follow in our footsteps *

*That what we do today. *

*Moony howls, *

*And Prongs dashes in. *

*Wormtail nicks *

*And Padfoot seals within. *

*This is our legacy *

*True to form.*

*None but the young *

*Can learn within. *

*Only the blood of the hated *

*Shall quell therein. *

*But he whose blood can defuse this box *

*Shall be dead and gone before this locks.*

Lily brooded. "Why can't you go and drag Black's sorry werewolf arse back here to *fix* this?"
"Oh, trusting him to get rid of a curse on our family after what he did?" James snorted rudely. "Not bloody likely."

"You could force him!"

"How?"

"Spells!"

"None that are legal!" James hissed. "Using spells that were considered off limits is what got us into this sodding mess in the first place. Sirius won't bloody care that I served time for being an illegal Animagus. He'll care that I didn't serve time with HIM, Lily. Like a proper mate."

"He needs to pay for what he did to our son! The Weasley boy! If they hadn't found this bloody thing, none of this would have happened!" Lily screeched.

"Lily, the only reason we even found it in the first place was because Harry and Ron told us it was up here. Even then, it was only because Bill here had tracers on it so we could see it. We couldn't have known!" James growled. "Don't you think I would have tried to take this thing out of here had I known?"

Lily went silent, fuming. Whether she believed her husband or not, however, remained to be seen.

A loud double crack resounded outside the Potter house, and Alastor Moody in his brown Auror robes strode toward the house with a grumpy look on his face. Behind him, however, was a dark-clad wizard with pale, sunless skin and long, lanky hair that framed his rather grim face. Two other Aurors Apparated in shortly after, flanking Alastor and his companion on their walk up.

As Alastor pushed his way into the door, James was suddenly right in the door. He thrust his wand into Severus' neck and snarled viciously. "Snivellus," he hissed. "I should have known you weren't actually dead. You're like a sodding cockroach."

"Potter," Severus growled through gritted teeth.

Alastor yanked James back by the collar. "I asked him here, you doaty dobber. So, unless you want my wand in your neck, Potter, I'd recommend you stand down before I shove yer thick head in the lavvy."

James blinked, flushed, and pulled his wand away from Severus' neck. "You were supposed to be dead," he said coolly.

"Not for a lack of effort on Black's part," Severus replied darkly, walking over the threshold.

James was turning bright red in the face, looking as though he were going to put down his wand and start an old-fashioned fistfight instead.

The two Aurors who had come in with Alastor knelt beside Bill and assisted him with the injured. Meanwhile, Alastor lead Severus up the stairs, paying no attention to anyone else. Severus walked by James and Lily without even turning his head, keeping his hands and jaw tightly clenched.

Silence descended from above, and the house. Then there was a sudden, loud creak and the sound of people moving, and James and Lily immediately rushed up the stairs to find out what was going on.

Severus stood up from the trunk, shaking his head at Alastor. "I cannot remove the trunk without
bleeding upon it," he said grimly. "And that may prove to be rather ill-advised."

"I understand," Alastor said. "I'll talk to Amelia and see if she knows of a way to buffer a protective ward to prevent—"

**SLAP!**

Severus stood, perfectly still, as a trail of crimson blood trailed alongside his nose and down his face.

Lily stood to her full height, her face an ugly mask of absolute fury. "How dare you, Sev. How dare you allow me to think that you were dead all this time?"

Severus squared his jaw, closing his eyes as he wiped the spatter of blood from his face and away from his eyes.

Lily stared at the wide crimson smear on her hand—having inadvertently painted her hand with Severus' lifeblood.

"We were not on speaking terms at the time," Severus enunciated clearly through gritted teeth. "This you made quite abundantly clear."

"I thought you were dead!"

"You didn't attend the funeral," Severus clarified, his eyes narrowed slits of black. Only a small handful of people did—all of whom then learned that I was still alive and agreed to keep my secret."

Lily's face flushed with anger. "You let me think you were dead."

"How long do you imagine I would have lived once people found out that Headmaster Dumbledore turned a blind eye to Potter and his gang of miscreants and permitted them to use me as a guinea pig, Lily?" Severus asked coldly. "How long do you think it would have taken for him to frame me, to make me his Slytherin scapegoat for everything leading up to my almost-death? I fled to the only place I could go—to one of my worthless Slytherin friends: Lucius Malfoy. He smuggled me in to see Alastor and Amelia at the Ministry, and they and Minerva arranged to ensure my safety until the war was over. By the time it had concluded, I found that I liked being the man people believed to be dead. I sent out invitations once a year, every year on the anniversary of my "death". You. Never. Came."

"You were already dead!" Lily hissed furiously. "How was I supposed to know you were only using your supposed memorial day to relay secret messages!"

"Lily, leave the sorry tosser alone," James said, pulling her away.

"Don't you dare tell me what to do, James!"

"Get the hell out of my house," James yelled, staring up at Severus with nothing short of absolute hatred renewed. "You're upsetting my wife and I won't stand for it!" He moved up and gave Severus a hard shove with his shoulder, making it look as though he had just tried to push past him.

Severus glowered at James, took one final look at Lily, and walked back down the stairs.

"Don't you ever bring that ruddy git to my home ever again," James snarled at Moody.
"That 'ruddy git' is the only one who can dispel the curse on that bloody trunk, Potter," Moody growled back, "unless you would like to continue live with it in your home and have your kids live with it along with your unborn grandchildren and all others born of the Potter line!"

"Then why the hell is it still here?!" Lily screeched. "Why doesn't he just blee—" Lily stared down at her hand and grit her teeth. She stormed over to the trunk and slammed her hand down on it, wiping the blood from her earlier attack on Severus' face on the latch of the cursed trunk.

"You fucking Slytherin wanker," Sirius' amplified voice suddenly boomed throughout the attic room. "Think you're sooooo smart, don't you? But you're not. Somehow you thought you'd just waltz right up here and steal all of our secrets, but it's not going to work that way. I made this curse especially for you, Snivellus. Since I know that not even Lils can muster up enough love to even admit she's friends with you anymore. True love is just a big fucking lie. It's all about who you make pregnant, and we know that no witch is going to let your slimy cock anywhere near her. Enjoy the sleep of the dead, Snivellus. I'll leave you just conscious enough to realise that you will never experience true love's kiss. If you're lucky, someone will just kill you while you sleep. Sweet dreams, Snivelly."

The trunk suddenly burst open like a ripe watermelon, spewing random bits of parchment and sending a multitude of assorted objects flying through the room like shrapnel. Panicked yells were coming from the base of the stairs where Bill was kneeling down beside Severus' crumpled form—the latter having tumbled headlong down the steps at the very moment the trunk's curse was engaged.

"Ashford! Mathus! Get Snape to St Mungo's straightaway. Take him directly to the Auror wing! No one but the healers and this team is permitted to see him. GET MOVING!"

"Aye!"

"Yessir!"

**Crack!**

They promptly disappeared with an unconscious Severus in tow.

Moody stalked straight up to Lily and yanked her up off the floor by the scruff of her Muggle cashmere turtleneck. "You had better hope and pray that Severus Snape survives this, Lady Potter, or I will see your pitiful carcass rotting away in Azkaban for murder," he growled directly in her face. "And that's a bloody promise." He released her with a shove, making a disgusted sound, storming down the stairs and out before disappearing with a crack.

Lily sank to the floor in a trembling heap, pulling her knees up to her chin. "Harry's going to be okay, right? Harry is going to be fine. He'll be just fine, right? He'll be safe now."

James stared down the stairs to where Severus had crumpled and collapsed. He stared at the shattered remains of the cursed trunk that his ex-best mate had put there and that had subsequently corrupted his child. He stared at his wife rocking herself as she prayed for her son to be miraculously cured, for him to spontaneously stop being a malicious prankster blood bigot. And for the first time in his entire life, he had no idea how to feel or who to blame for it all other than himself.

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**Drama and Destruction in the House of Potter**
Earlier this week, we informed you that Lady Potter was being tried for knowingly triggering Dark blood magic in an attempt to save her son from his sentence in a rehabilitation-detention centre, but it seems that the House of Potter has not lost their talent for cultivating drama.

Earlier this morning, it was discovered that Harry Potter, only son of Lady Lily Potter (née Evans) and Lord James Potter was recently married to Lady Ginevra Molly Potter (née Weasley) via a magically binding marriage bond consummated in full through a viable pregnancy.

Under normal circumstances, we at the Prophet would like offer our sincere congratulations, but many of us seem to have a problem deciding what is the best course of action to take in this case. With Harry Potter having been sentenced to a 15 year sentence in an intensive mind-healing programme at a Dutch rehabilitation centre, young Ginevra, who has not yet reached the age of majority, the fate of her unborn child seems to be hanging in the balance.

Lady Ginevra Potter seems to have become the latest victim of the notorious false contraceptive charm created by the infamous werewolf, Sirius Black, back when he himself was a student at Hogwarts.

While an uncomfortable topic to be sure, parents are being strongly encouraged to discuss the use of legitimate contraceptives by sexually-active young witches and wizards, lest they end up like the unfortunate Lady Potter—trapped in an inescapable magical marriage bond in which annulment or divorce is impossible. Reliable methods approved by the Ministry are: the contraceptive potion (C-Pep) and abstinence. Lesser known methods, such as Muggle rubbers (also called condoms), have also proven somewhat successful, but require frequent forays to a Muggle chemist shop to purchase the little wonders.

It seems that the new Lady Potter is not alone in her situation, as Mrs Lavender Weasley (née Brown) has also been listed on the list of newly-confirmed magical marriage bonds. Other couples have been registered, but their names have been suppressed due to their currently being underage.

As for Lady Lily Potter and her fate for dabbling in blood magic that, we are reliably informed, caused an unknown party to be seriously injured, we have yet to learn anything further. Rumour seems to suggest that the Wizengamot is waiting to learn the final fate of the unknown party before making their decision with regard to Lady Potter's sentence.

Severus knew, even as he heard Black's voice projecting through the Potter house, that he was fucked. He knew, without even looking, what Lily had done.

His blood unlocked the curse on the trunk. His blood unlocked the curse on him. He could hear them talking about him—hear them speculating who could come rescue him. True Love's Curse was the best way to guarantee something never being cured—even magically married without true love. True love... was a lie.

He once believed in true love, until he had realised that Lily couldn't even forgive him for a slip of the tongue.

What really bothered him? He should have gone after Hermione the moment he read her letter. She had heard him ranting to himself, so unused to company that it didn't even occur to him that she could have heard him. She heard him ranting about Lily—another Gryffindor. She had thought it was herself he was spewing hatred for—his jenny. His wonderfully shy, gentle and affectionate jenny. What had he done?

Instead of answering the call of duty, where he was obviously not welcomed back with open arms.
—even by Lily—he should have chased after his jenny. Hermione.

_Hermione._

Even if he had had a decent chance before at finding a piece of happiness, now what? He had already hurt her, and he wasn't even in a formal relationship yet. What a bloody piece of work he was.

And the truth was, even now in this godforsaken limbo trapped deep within his own body, he desperately missed his jenny—their one and only night together had sealed the fate of his heart. It had patched the emptiness that had hounded him for more than two decades.

Pain filled him as longing mixed with utter despair rushed through him like a rogue wave of agony.

She had _desired_ him, accepted his touch, accepted his nest, and had even deposited a bit of herself in the heart of his lair—the rarest of all gifts—a tear.

Had she any idea what that _meant_ amongst dragons?

Hell, he hadn't even known until the visceral reaction of his dragon to the imprint of the jenny on his lair hit him squarely in the gut. Conscious or not, Hermione had proclaimed her interest to be his jenny. His _mate._

And instead of dropping everything to attend her, to reinforce his desire to be her drake, and be at her side, he had allowed himself to be swayed by old feelings for the one person who couldn't even find it within herself to go to his funeral.

Fool.

That's what you are, Severus. She may have misread your foolish ranting, but you were the one blurring them out for Merlin and everyone to hear. That was all you.

Severus would have pinched the bridge of his nose had he been able to move, but currently that was well beyond his capabilities. True love was his only salvation, and he had done mucked it up before it even had a chance.

Maybe this purgatory was where he truly belonged.

Hermione wasn't in a very good place. Her mind was going in one direction and her heart another. Sometimes they would pass each other in the dead of night and slap each other with a shed glove, challenging each other to a duel of honour. Yet, she was sitting in the waiting area outside the Wizengamot, hoping they would call on her in to give her testimony before her brain gave up the ghost, and her heart just gave up in general.

Her heart wanted to fly back to the forest and find her drake. Her mind told her she was an impossible, stupid dreamer. She'd heard what he thought of Gryffindor witches like her. How much more painfully clear did life have to _be?_

Then why did she feel so miserable and more alone now than she had been in all the years when she'd become used to it? Bother it all.

Suddenly, she noticed that a large, rather odd-looking beetle was skittering across the waiting bench, quickly making its way towards her, but Hermione wasn't in the mood to tolerate such things. She didn't have a convenient wiry horse-tail with which to shoo the bug away, but she _did_
have certain other talents. She snorted lowly, sending a jet of superheated air toward the creature, scalding the air just enough to scramble the creature's senses and send it running directly towards —

Oh dear.

Hermione hoped that lady was okay with insects. The curly-haired older witch eyed the beetle with one raised eyebrow, lifted up her hand, and flicked it off herself with one swift motion. The beetle then went careening towards the other witch on the opposing bench, landing smack in the fiery-looking redheaded witch's face with an unnervingly loud buzz.

The sound of a shrill, ear-piercing scream resolved Hermione's idle curiosity as to what might happen next. The flaming redhead immediately pulled out her wand and conjured a cauldron of boiling, hot soapy water—the kind Hermione knew was standard for washing laundry—and frantically brushed the offending insect into the super-heated lemon-scented soapy water.

The screaming, however, didn't seem to end. Oddly, the redhead's mouth wasn't even open anymore but her bright green eyes were wide with shock as she stared down at the cauldron she had conjured.

Familiar green eyes.

Hermione, forgetting all about the screaming of the moment, pondered just where she had seen them before. Sadly, her thoughts remained stuck on scream, as a sopping wet, severely scalded, red-faced and screaming blonde kicked the cauldron away from herself and loomed.

"Get behind me, Lily," a wizard said, nudging the witch to the back as he confronted the sopping, scalded witch.

"Lord and Lady Potter!" a flustered-looking Ministry official said, running up to them. "What in Merlin's name is going on here?"

Aurors came rushing in from the side corridors.

"That witch!" Lily said, pointing her finger at the blonde. "She was a giant green beetle! She was crawling on my face! I thought she was a regular insect and dealt with it!"

The official looked confused as he began to evaluate the situation. He moved the red-faced blonde's hair to the side and gasped in shock. "Rita Skeeter?"

"Well, well, Rita," a female voice said dryly as she came out of the Wizengamot doors. Amelia Bones stepped out with Alastor Moody and another senior Auror, John Savage. "Normally, I'd say that Wizengamot business always comes first, but in this case, I'm quite happy to make an exception."

"To conclude our proceedings here today, Mr Potter, Mr Weasley. We the Wizengamot now ask you if there were any others who conspired with you or participated in the performance of the malicious pranks that you carried out before the eyewitness memories are submitted for review. We are obliged to warn you that anything you leave out that is subsequently discovered due to witness testimony can and will be held against you, and that your sentence may be increased or changed accordingly."

"Just Ginny," Ron said. "She was our lookout, and she always volunteered to deliver any of our pranks to 'ermynyinny's dorm room whenever we couldn't do it ourselves."
"RONALD BILIUS WEASLEY, HOW COULD YOU?! SHE'S JUST A BABY! AN INNOCENT LITTLE GIRL!" Molly yelled furiously.

"QUIET!" yelled the wizened-looking Chief Warlock. "Mrs Weasley, you have thus far been permitted to sit and watch these proceedings because of your close relation to the accused, but that does not give you leave to disrupt this trial. Any further outbursts on your part and you will be removed from this courtroom, is that clear?"

"Sit down, Molly," Arthur hissed, pulling his wife down into her seat, his face expressing clear disapproval of her behaviour thus far.

"Now, Mr Potter, Mr Weasley, kindly tell us if there were any others who joined you during the commission of your malicious pranks."

"None," Harry said with a disinterested shrug. "Only room enough for Ginny and the two of us under the cloak."

The Head Warlock hastily scribbled down some notes. "You will all now take your seats as we begin the presentation of victim testimony," he said, gesturing them to the designated seating area.

"Since all of the other victims have been interviewed with all pertinent memories submitted, that leaves only one more left to be called until we break for our final deliberations," the Head Warlock said. "Master Granger, would you please step up onto the dais?"

Hermione, who had been sitting quietly beside Alastor Moody and Minerva McGonagall, stood up slowly and walked down the aisle to the witness dias. Her formal black robes hung from her shoulders like draped wings, tiny prisms of light glistening off the surface like the glimmer of scales. She stood up on the top platform, bowing her head respectfully.

"Master Granger, thank you for coming today," the Head Warlock greeted her kindly. "To make this easier for everyone including yourself, I will permit you to cast your memories into the projection Pensieve. After which you may exit the grounds to a less stressful waiting area, if you so wish. As I understand the memories are sensitive."

"Thank you, Head Warlock," Hermione said. "I will do so."

The wizened wizard nodded, writing down on the log in front of him. "Anytime you are ready, Master Granger."

Hermione pulled multiple strands of memories from her head, guiding them like strands of hair into the waiting vials around the giant Pensieve. The older witch sitting by the Pensieve nodded as she carefully labeled each memory. Hermione bowed her head to her as the last memory went in, and then quietly walked out of the meeting chambers.

As she walked by the seating area on her way out, a disgruntled Harry and Ron leaned toward the aisle and hissed furiously at her. "My mum put her best mate from school in the hospital over a grudge," Harry heckled her. "What do you think she'll do to you when she finds out you framed us?"

"Yeah, I heard mum telling dad all about it. Some Slaverous Swape or something. He got his for messing with our stuff." Ron glowered menacingly at her. "Just like you will."

"Slytherin slag."

"You, lean back. Do not talk to the witnesses!"
The two wizards leaned back begrudgingly.

Hermione squared her shoulders and walked by them in a rush, not looking back.

"All memories seen at this proceeding must kept in the utmost confidence. Any conversation or commentary about what you have seen today is strictly forbidden. Those who cannot follow these guidelines will be Obliviated. Those who choose to do so despite these warnings will be dealt with very harshly as per the general protocol of the Wizengamot," the Head Mugwump said. "Now, please continue with the proceedings," he ended, waving toward the Pensieve. It immediately sprang to life and projected the memories to all of the gathered in a blaze of colour and bright rays as the courtroom faded into the memory.

Books flew in all directions as a redhead and his mop-haired companion shoved themselves into her, hard. They didn't even look back until they were almost around the corner. The black-haired boy sneered down at her as though she were a particularly foul bit of trash just before they disappeared.

"Wingardium Levi-OH-sa!" Ron sneered to his friend as they left Transfiguration. "Like we can even tell she's saying anything intelligent through those enormous buck teeth of hers. Psh."

"That's okay, mate," Harry said, clapping his best mate on the back. "I put piss in her pumpkin juice this morning."

Hermione pushed by them, running for the hospital wing to the sound of their raucous laughter.

Hermione cried as her hands were stuck fast to the library table and the books around her seemed to move about on their own. They all dropped on her head, one after one, just before Madam Pince found her and started screaming at Hermione's abuse of her precious books.

"Detention!" she hissed. "I'm reporting your despicable treatment of valuable to books to the Headmaster!"

Cruel male laughter surrounded her, but she couldn't see anyone around.

Hermione stared down in horror at her hand-paws, her body having transformed into that of an anthropomorphic feline immediately after she drank her pumpkin juice—or what she had thought was pumpkin juice. Giggles, snickering and catcalls surrounded her as all the children from Gryffindor laughed at her. They all clapped Harry Potter on the back, who looked incredibly smug, clearly proud of himself.

Hermione dashed out of the Great Hall, crying in hysterical meows.

"Now only her bloody cat will like her," someone laughed. "Oh wait, that is the only thing in the castle that likes her!"

More laughter. More ridicule.

"But, I didn't do it, Professor!"

"Yeah, and I 'suppose all those hippogriffs I asked you ta feed got all befuddled on 'dere own!"
"But—"

"I don't want you 'volunteering' to help me anymore, Miss 'ermione. In fact, I don't want you signing up for my class anymore either!"

Hermione fled the half-giant's hut, crying her eyes out.

"Oh, where did 'ou two come from," Hagrid boomed. "Might as well 'elp me feed the animals some tonic since that 'ermione doped 'em all up."

Hermione stared at Harry and Ron as they helped Hagrid, closed her eyes, and fled back to the castle.

"I can't be your friend, Hermione," Neville said. "The last person who tried got the pox and couldn't sleep for an entire week. I just can't risk it. I'm sorry."

Hermione screamed as magic pinned her down to the floor and her own quill pressed deep into her skin, digging cruelly into her flesh as it carved the words: Mudblood. Useless.

Laughter.

Always the mocking laughter.

Minerva McGonagall burst into the room, drawn to her screaming. "Miss Granger, what is—Merlin!"

The elder witch cradled her to her body as she rushed off, carrying a sobbing Hermione to the infirmary.

"I'm so very sorry, Miss Granger," Professor Slughorn said, putting a hand on her shoulder as she wept over the body of her poor Crookshanks.

The laughter snickered in her ears. Just loud enough to ruin whatever comfort Slughorn may have given.

"Keep your nose out of where it doesn't belong, freak."

"Or you'll end up just like him."

"Stupid bint."

"You didn't even know he was in distress."

"You didn't even know how to sense your own familiar."

"Idiot."

"Some witch you are."

"Don't even know how to seal a familiar bond. "If you had been a real witch—"

"You'd have been able to hear him, crying out for help."
"SHUT UP!" Hermione screamed, clutching her head, slamming her hands over her ears.

"Miss Granger, that's hardly appropriate language!" Slughorn said, appalled.

"Shut up," Hermione wailed, sobbing inconsolably as she rocked the body of her beloved Crookshanks.

Always the laughter.
That awful, bloody laughter.

"You think that just because you moved out of the dorm and have your face shoved up McGonagall's arse that you'll be okay?"

**How** had they found here? She was up high on the ramparts, hidden from everyone. Minerva had given her permission, but no one had seen her! She had been careful!

Ink spilt all over her books and her robes.

One of her books went flying off the ramparts as if it had been kicked violently.

"You'll **never** be safe."

"Not unless you leave Hogwarts."

"Yeah, why don't you just leave Hogwarts."

"No one likes you."

"No one wants to be around you."

She was jerked up into the air by her ankle, her trousers yanked down to expose her knickers. Soap bubbles filled her mouth.

Her wand flew out of her hand, flying over the ramparts and falling far below.

"What was that?"

"Did she say something?"

"Naw, she can't even say anything!"

"We should just leave her here, to consider her options."

Hermione cried, suspended and wandless as the cold chilled her to the bone—until Minerva had finally found her and carried her off to the infirmary once again.

Hermione wept bitterly into the elder witch's robes.

"They are finding her somehow!" Minerva yelled, throwing up her hands. "Every single time, I somehow just miss them! I never see anyone around! How is that even possible?"

Poppy was carefully dabbing healing balm over Hermione's skin, which had been scalded by an exploding potion.
"I've had to give her a room connected to mine just so she can get a decent night's sleep, Poppy," Minerva groaned. "I've taken her on as my apprentice so she doesn't have to be in class with her tormentors! How are they still finding her every single time she's alone?"

Poppy shook her head. "You've been wanting to have her as an apprentice for a while, Minerva—"

"Yes, but I wanted it to be her choice! Not just so she had one place she could feel safe!"

"I did choose it, Master," Hermione whispered. "Not just because of the two of them."

Minerva grasped her hand. "I left you for just five minutes, lass. Just five minutes. How is it that they seem know very the instant I leave?"

Hermione winced as Poppy put more balm on her skin. "They always know where I am. They always know when I'm alone."

Minerva frowned, saying nothing else, but her eyes smoldered with suppressed anger.

All of them were laughing.

The entire Great Hall was laughing.

The moment she walked into the Great Hall, her robes simply… vanished. No, they were still there but they were somehow… invisible. She could still feel them on her body—not that it mattered.

She covered her breasts with her arms, but it was too late—there was no saving even a shred of her dignity.

"Are you okay, Theo?"

"Yeah, I'm fine," the boy said. "I'm just sick and tired of all the dumb things that always seem to happen when no one else is around."

"Are Draco and Blaise—?"

"They're in the infirmary. Madam Pomfrey is pulling all out all the broom splinters. There were a lot of them."

Hermione slumped. "I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault, Hermione," Theo told her quite firmly. "You know it's Potter and Weasel. We all know it. The only difference is, most other people are too busy kissing their asses to care about them hurting other people. Just because Potter is so damn popular because his daddy was an Auror and Voldemort chose to practically throw himself at them—" Theo sighed. "Daddy's a hero so he's the one people want to kiss up to, like some bloody royal."

Hermione slumped, defeated.

"Hey, none of that," Theo said, wrapping his arm around her and pulling her into a hug. "We're not giving up on you. Hell, even Pansy wants a piece of them, and you know Pansy—"

"She hates me," Hermione snorted. "She thinks I'm after Draco. Always has."

"She hates them more," Theo said. "If you can't trust her, trust in her terrible wrath."
"I just wish—"

"One day, we'll figure out how they are tracking us, Bieb," Theo said. And when we do, McGonagall will have all the evidence she needs."

Just then, the dock they were sitting on collapsed, sending the pair falling into the lake.

Laughter.

Always the laughter.

"These memories have been tampered with!"

"They don't even show them!"

"This isn't evidence! It's a ruddy frame job!"

"Lady Potter! Mrs Weasley, we are going to have to ask you to leave this chambers at once!"

"But this isn't fair for our boys!"

"What isn't fair is that you expect the entire Wizengamot to alter their justice because you cannot accept the evidence, ladies," the Head Mugwump said, slamming his gavel down. "You were here when the evidence was taken. You watched the memories being extracted. Now, I must insist that the both of you to leave this room at once. You will be informed of the final judgement by owl."

Aurors moved to escort the two outraged witches from the chambers.

"Now, Mr Potter and Mr Weasley," the Head Mugwump said. "Please give us, the Wizengamot, a simple yes or no. Were you or were you not responsible for the events portrayed in these memories?"

The two wizards exchanged glances. "No."

The entire chambers exploded in noise as Molly and Lily were literally dragged out of the room and chaos reigned until the cacophony was finally cut off by the doors closing firmly behind them.

Potter Family Title Stripped

Fate of Harry Potter and Ronald Weasley Finally Revealed

The fate of former Hogwarts students, Harry James Potter and Ronald Bilius Weasley, has been decided and their final sentence has been handed down after their month-long drama-filled trial concluded yesterday afternoon.

As the fate of the two wizards steadily grew more and more grim, a number of their fellow students gave testimony against them when they learned that they themselves would be held accountable as accomplices unless they could present proof that they were not involved in the Potter and Weasley's reign of terror. While some of these students were exonerated, having been found innocent of complicity, certain others, such as Ginevra Weasley, younger sister of Ronald Weasley, were found guilty of assisting Potter and Weasley in their cruel campaign of malicious pranks against their fellow students. Many of those involved were victims of peer pressure in that they feared for their own personal safety, stating that they had seen what happened to Granger and
didn't want to become the next victim. Others were completely willing accomplices, and their fate will be determined over the coming months through separate trials.

In addition to spending fifteen years at a Dutch rehabilitation facility, being stripped of their wands and forced to wear a magic suppression collar for the duration of their sentence, both wizards are to be stripped of any family titles as being unworthy of such a great privilege. While the Weasleys have long since gone without theirs, the Potters, however, have not.

The victims of Mr Potter and Mr Weasley are also to be paid restitution that is to come out of their current assets, and if no such assets exist, it is to be acquired through garnishment of all future wages until the amount assessed has been paid in full. As of this publication, the number of victims is currently limited to those who were willing to submit testimony and submit their memories of the incidents at trial.

Hermione hated going to the hospital. It was mostly because she felt she was always being sent there for treatment, or else she went to visit Draco, Theo, or Blaise after they had taken a hit for the team, as it were. She always felt as though she were being watched, but that was hardly anything new. Years of being tormented by invisible antagonists had made her feel like she was being followed all of the time.

But, she had been avoiding this situation for a while—coming to this place. Partly for her dislike of hospitals in general and partly because she felt incredibly drawn to it—not to the hospital itself but rather someone within it.

Thuban—Severus—was here somewhere.

But why did she care? He'd made himself quite plain. He'd spouted what he thought of Gryffindor witches. Why did she care at all?

"Hermione?" a gruff voice grunted. "What are you doing here, lass?"

Alastor shuffled up, favouring one side as he walked.

"Alastor! Are you okay?" Hermione asked, rushing up to meet him.

"Ach, don't worry about me, lass," Moody said. "Nothing a hot soak and some rest won't fix. Dark Wizard tried to shoot me in the face, and I fell over some furniture getting out of the way."

Hermione still looked unconvinced. "Are you sure you're okay?"

The cranky old Auror hugged. "I've had far worse from getting in-between two crazy-arsed witches fighting over their kids, Hermione. One of 'em tried to take off me head, and the other went straight for my bollocks. They say mothers are the fiercest of animals, but my mam was hardly one to go between my legs to make her point."

Hermione flushed. "What on earth happened?"

"Ach, walk with me. I'm going up to check on Severus," Alastor said. "He's gotten the short end of the wand more times than anyone I know, and I feel bad because this last time—it was my fault. I asked him as a personal favour to try and remove a curse off the Potters' trunk, and I should have had both Lily and James in irons before I did it. I knew better. I knew the last time they'd seen each other—" Alastor rubbed his temples. "Lily, back when she was Lily Evans, was Severus' neighbour and childhood friend. They were close for years until they came to Hogwarts. Hogwarts—changed them."
"Changed them?" Hermione asked curiously.

"It wasn't intentional," Moody explained. "It's the bloody house system. It's like a caste, you see? You've noticed how the different houses have these rivalries... misconceptions about each other?"

Hermione frowned. "Yes. Gryffindors hate Slytherins, and Slytherins generally aren't too keen on Gryffindors."

"Well, believe it or not it even was worse back then," Moody said grimly. "Being sorted into another house was bad enough, but Severus made Slytherin, and Lily went into Gryffindor. Really, everything went downhill from that moment on. She fell into the mindset that Gryffindors were all noble sorts, and Slytherin were all Dark Wizards, and the truth was—Dark wizards were just as likely in the other houses too. Their friendship soured. He called her a bad name while being suspended by his ankles by the father of the wizard that tormented you. She never forgave him for it. About a year later, they—well, a man named Sirius Black—set him up to be killed by a werewolf just outside of Hogsmeade."

Hermione's agile mind quickly put it all together. "And that is when he shifted for the first time."

"Aye, lass," Moody said. "He did. He leveled the shack and flew off, and the werewolf bit some students before he was stopped. Black was one of them, as it turned out. They were all shipped off to the werewolf colonies, but we put Severus into hiding. Some of us knew he was still alive, and all his assets remained his, but we didn't really make it common knowledge, see. Amelia had reason to believe that Severus was being specifically targeted for recruitment to the Dark Lord that was rising at the time, and, well, none of us wanted that. So we helped him dig himself in underground and basically disappear. He's been protecting that patch of forest for a good decade or more—taking out Dark wizards and straggler followers of the ex-Dark Lord. There were rumours, of course, that the Ministry had a trained dragon on staff—part of why I think Potter and Weasley thought you were our 'trained minion'."

"Needless to say, he had a really bad history with Gryffindor—especially Lily," Moody said. "I had called him in to help because he was one of the best curse-breakers I knew, and Bill Weasley had already tried his best at it and failed. The trunk, however was not just cursed. It was specifically keyed to Severus' blood—as their most hated enemy. The trunk had been made sometime before the incident where Severus shifted. Black had fully intended to have Snape killed to make sure the trunk could never be uncursed or moved."

"But," Hermione broke in. "If his blood was the key, how did he end up here? That makes no sense."

Moody sighed. "Purebloods have old magic. Family magic, or just magic that's been around so long that predates more civilised times. Black used an old blood curse on that trunk. It was meant to kill Snape the moment he tried to break the curse. One way or another, he wanted Snape dead—and if the journals in the trunk are any indicator, at one point, James Potter, Remus Lupin, Peter Pettigrew, and Sirius Black were all in a gang of notorious pranksters. Thing is, they leaned far more towards malicious spite than fun. Not like those two Weasley jokers, the twins."

Hermione nodded in agreement. Fred and George Weasley had tried to comfort her many times, only to end up being busted soon after for being out after curfew or being caught "red-handed" setting up a prank or another. They'd given her a black and white kitten with a strange tuft of red fur on the top of its head, telling her it was to remind her that there were at least a few people who truly cared about her. Then, on the day she came back to Hogwarts after the twins had graduated, her little tuxedo kitten was found dead... it looked like the poor thing had somehow been trampled by hippogriffs. It didn't take long for her to figure out what had really happened.
That laughter.

Always that bloody laughter.

Hermione stared down at the tiles of the hospital floor. "I guess he had as just much reason to dislike Gryffindor as I did, only I was a Gryffindor too."

Alastor stopped walking and put a hand on her shoulder. "Hermione, did something happen? Severus told me before I dragged him to the Potters that it had better be a life and death situation because he'd finally found someone worth fighting for, and I was keeping him from her."

Hermione blinked. "He—said that?"

"I wasn't sure who he was talking about until just now," Alastor said. "It was you, wasn't it?"

Hermione swallowed hard. "Wh—why would you say that?"

"Hermione, I'm an Auror, not an imbecile," Moody grunted. "Severus has few friends. Fewer still that he trusts, yet, he trusted you, Hermione. He showed you his home, his lair. You are the only other Hebridean Black Animagus in all of Britain, with the only others being Master Faraway, who is a Ukrainian Ironbelly the goblins hired to guard their lower vaults, Master Wu who protects the Chinese rare kirin preserve, and Master Cozenbay who rescues ships from the squalls in Greenland." Alastor gave Hermione the arched eyebrow of "Are you getting what I'm putting down."

Alastor sighed and met her eyes. "I may not have scales and a propensity to breath real fire—though some may argue that—but I know something drew you here, Hermione, and it wasn't my rustic charm and dashing battle scars."

Hermione flushed. "You've been talking to Magorian and Bane, haven't you?"

"You're not the only one with virtual hooves, Eltanin," Alastor said with a calm smile. "They call me Rigel. One of the stars of the the hunter. It was either that or McGrumpy-Rump as was suggested by one of the younger foals."

Hermione's eyes grew wide.

Alastor put a hand on her shoulder. "You've had a hard go, Hermione, but so has Severus. If anyone can understand the other it is you and he."

"You are very persuasive, Rigel," Hermione said. "But what makes you think that I can do anything when all the healers of this hospital cannot?"

"They say love has remarkable powers of healing," Moody said with a quirk of his lips. "You're a bright young lass, you'll figure it out."

Hermione flushed brightly. "But I—We've only known each other for—"

"Are you a witch or are you not, Eltanin?" Moody grunted. "For a witch who is also a dragon Animagus, you seem awful disbelieving of the power of magic."

Hermione sighed. "Most days it still seems like a dream. I'm never sure what I will see when I wake up."

Moody frowned. "I can't imagine waking up to a world without magic. I can't even imagine what it
would be like thinking it was all just a dream."

Alastor stopped at the door. "Lass, I know you don't have anywhere near as many reasons to trust as you have not to. That said, I believe that if you go into this room, you could make a big difference in not only your own life—but that someone who has been in dire need of compassion for a very long time. Much like yourself." He squeezed her shoulder reassuringly and then plopped himself down in the nearby chair, pulling his trench coat snugly around himself as he slouched. Even if he looked as though he was simply resting, Hermione knew the man was all ears and keen observance.

Hermione swallowed hard and stepped through the doorway.

She could smell him, her drake, even now as he lay motionless in bed, in his much weaker human shape. She could feel the intense pull to be near him, even as a part of her admonished herself to be careful.

He had rejected her once already.

That was an unfortunate misunderstanding, Alastor had told her so.

He wasn't there!

But he's known him far longer than you. Why would he lie? He's never lied to you before. He's one of the few people you know you can actually trust. He's part of the herd too.

Just like Severus.

Thuban.

You always said you just wanted people to give you a chance. Why deny him his?

Hermione pressed her head against the doorframe and sighed, steeling her will and gathering her courage. She walked toward the bed, pulling her robes tightly around herself like a protective barrier.

He looks so pale, she fretted.

Is he even breathing?

Harry had said something during the last day of the trial. What had it been. It was something about —damn if she couldn't remember. Something his mother had told him.

Hermione braved each step as she made her way to the fallen wizard, her heart thumping in her chest as though she were facing, well, a dragon—a dragon without her wand or the gift of being a dragon Animagus herself. In her mind's eye, she saw the drake tightly coiled around himself. Would he even recognise her? They had had only one night together, after all.

As she stood by his side, her nostrils flared as the distinctive scent of him seemed to become stronger. Tentatively, she lay her head against his cool hand, her fingers brushing against his skin.

She felt a jolt of energy pass between them as a smoky plume of steam and smoke rose from his nostrils, a lick of purple flames leaking out from under his closed eyelids.

"Hermione," his voice whispered into her mind. "You came."
"I was scared to," Hermione said out loud. "I heard you talking—about how you loathed Gryffindors."

Despair flowed throughout his mental presence. "That wasn't about you," he replied. "It was about Lily—the one who also landed me in this place, by the way. Our track record remains unchanged. She needs me, I come running despite all sense, and I end up paying dearly for my stupidity. Somehow, I should have known. I should have—chased after you first."

Hermione felt a surge of emotion rise in her chest. "I thought—I'm sorry."

His sadness curled around her mind. "I have lived alone for far too long, Hermione. I forgot in the heat of the moment, that you were sleeping but a few rooms over… in my nest."

His voice rumbled in her mind, "I should have pursued you first."

Hermione pressed her face to his skin, inhaling the scent of the Hebridean Black under his more human skin. He, much like Minerva, had distinctive dual scents that made her wonder why they didn't just sniff out illegal Animagi—literally. Then again, maybe it was because there was because there was a bond between her and Minerva from the start—as there was to Thuban.

"Severus," his mind voice said. "I was never proud of my name. It, like the world around me, was harsh, critical. But when you say it, I wish to hear it again."

"Severus," Hermione said against his skin. "Again."

"Severus," Hermione repeated, a shudder coming from within.

Magical heat spread between them, and hints of scales appeared over their skin as it did, ghosting the hint of the dragon beneath. Hermione pressed her face to his skin, rubbing against it. A trickle of flames leaked out from between her half-transformed jaws, gliding across his skin.

"Yes!" she heard him whisper. "Again! I can almost move."

"But, you might burn—you're not fully changed!" Hermione protested.

"Touch me," he said. "Touch me and breathe. I can feel it. Please. Trust me."

Hermione looked around. The room was oddly large—almost as if Alastor had arranged for Severus to be in an extremely large room just in case he should transform. Maybe she would fit…

"Please, Hermione," Severus' voice begged.

Hermione closed her eyes. "One thing first," she whispered.

"Anything," he agreed.

"A kiss," she said quietly into his ear, her hair draping over his face like a curtain.

"Woman, I would ravish you here in this hospital bed if I could only move!" Severus hissed into her mind, a moment of raw despair and desire blending together.

Hermione blushed slightly, and slowly pressed her lips to his—a gentle brush of a butterfly's wing upon his mouth. She felt a thrum of his heart beat, beating with hers. She towered over him as a jenny dragon, her front talons holding the small human being in her dagger-like grip.
her voice like the song of an exotic whale.

"Please, Hermione," Severus begged.

Hermione pulled back her head, opened her jaws, and—

"Lady Potter, I highly recommend you not go in there!"

"He's my friend! I have to make sure he's okay!" A feminine scream came from the doorway of the room. "What the—SEV! NO!"

Hermione jerked her head back, flames leaking out from between her jaws.

"Hermione!" Severus' voice begged. "Please!"

Hermione's jaws opened and a blast of fire engulfed the room, changing from the cooler red and orange to the brightest white. Her wings curved around the room like a cocoon, shielding the walls from her fire, but she blasted down upon the body of Severus Snape.

There was a roaring in the room, shaking it from top to bottom as the room was both engulfed in dragon flames and the swift, all-encompassing blackness of wings.

Alastor flipped a page in his manual of *How to Deal with Difficult People Without Throwing Unforgivables*, licking his finger to get the page to turn without coming with twenty or so clingy other pages.

"Well, I warned her," he said with a shrug as the healers rushed up to drag the now-hysterical Lily Potter back to her own private room outside of the Auror's wing. Severus had earned the right to high security protection and privacy in the Aurors' wing, but Lily Potter definitely had *not*. She was the reason Severus was in the hospital in the first place.

Scrimgeour wanted Moody to bait her and see just how far she would go to clear her name—even as far as to factor whatever bribes if they happened. He and his cohorts almost gleefully agreed, as Snape's being incapacitated had made the goblins outraged, the hospital healers flustered, the dragon preserves ready to ride dragons over to smash up Lady Potter's house, the National Hippogriff Racing Society was up in arms that their healing potions and steroid suppressants were running low, and then there were the various wizards in very high places who needed a very particular... something for that very *special* moment.

Alastor knew that Scrimgeour had been trying to find justice in whatever way he could for those like Snape, ever since he'd found out the sheer extent of what had been permitted to go on under Dumbledore's reign. Scrimgeour had sat in on the review of hundreds of his so-called "pranking" cases, each one reaching new heights of shameful humiliation and, in some cases, could've led to serious physical harm... or worse. Moody, Kingsley, and Amelia Bones had sat in many such questionings as well.

Vials of memories remained squirreled away, just waiting for sufficient evidence to back them up—visual confirmations and the like. None were ever found. Only when Harry Potter and Ronald Weasley, the Marauder's Map, and the Invisibility Cloak came to light did the continual lack of evidence start to make sense. Still, it was commonly believed that Sirius Black had gotten his by his own machinations, having been turned into a werewolf and forced to live in a werewolf colony. Peter Pettigrew had served time as an illegal Animagus and then had been discovered to be a branded Death Eater. He was still rotting away in a cell somewhere in the bowels of Azkaban.
James Potter and Lily Evans had managed avoid any such legal entanglements. While Lily hadn't participated in pranksters' reign of terror, she did have a bad habit of showing up in the middle of things. They, too, had gotten married due to being victims of their very own contraception charm hoax—seeing as the elder Potters were not going to allow any Potter-spawn to be born out of wedlock.

Now, of course, Lily was facing charges for reckless use of Dark magic for personal gain. There were also whispers of charges for assault with murderous intent or reckless endangerment or even undue influence in an attempt to keep her son from being incarcerated—much of which Moody had seen so many times before. Parents believed their children to be perfect little angels with bright un tarnished halos, and they continued to believe that up until the point the Pensieve memories came out. Even then, belief was never easy. So, a lot of what Lily Potter did was almost expected and somewhat forgivable up until the point when she recklessly endangered the life of her childhood "friend", rendering him comatose in an attempt to free her son from the influence of a cursed trunk.

It had broken the spell, but it hadn't done diddly to save Harry James Potter and Ronald Weasley, rampaging arsemongers and malicious pranksters extraordinaire.

"Aren't you going to go in there and check to see if they're okay?" Savage asked, sitting down in a nearby chair.

"Nope," Moody said.

The walls rumbled and shook, then a large spaded, scaly tail shoved out of the small door. A slightly smaller tail wove around it and dragged it back in, the delicate spade moving to close the door again.

Savage's eyes grew very wide. "Ooookay then," he said with a low whistle. "I take it things are okay now?"

"Give them a bit," Alastor advised. "He's trying to convince her he's the manliest drake out there. You really don't want to get in the middle of that."

"In… a hospital room?!

Moody peered over his book. "It's much bigger on the inside than it is on the outside."

Savage stared at the ceiling. "Mmm-kay." He paused. "But in a hospital room?!

"Shut your gob and read something," Alastor said, throwing a book at him.

Savage turned the book over and narrowed his eyes to read the cover, which was embossed with the words, "Knowing When to Open Your Mouth and When to Shut It."


One of the healers walked by carrying a gargantuan thermometer. "Temperature time, Mr Snape," she said, utterly nonplussed. There was the sound of rustling, low rumbling, and then a rather loud thump. "Ah, good. Nine hundred and seventy two degrees. Much better. Oops! Kindly watch the tail, please. Colour excellent. Scale shine is reflective with no dullness. Colour of skin between the scales—You're clearly feeling much better, excellent! Now, there will be no relieving yourself in the corners of this room, Mr Snape. Instincts and all, I know, but if I didn't let the wolf and the chimeras do it, I'm not letting you do it either because you know who will be cleaning it up if you do!"
There was the sound of disgruntled rumbling.

"Okay, skin is intact with no dryness or tearing. Stretch out the right wing for me. Now the left please? Any numbness, tingling? Lack of sensation?"

Draconic growling and rumbling answered her.

"Good, good," the healer said. "There now, lass, no need to be jealous. Might as well give you a proper look over too."

Savage kicked Moody on the shins. "That healer is bloody crazy!"

"Healer Skyfall has been patching us up since before I was born, lad," Alastor said. "If anyone can stare down a dragon, tell it to behave itself and have it listen, it's her."

"Ack!" the healer said, and there was a dull thump. "Yes, yes, you're quite welcome. Try not to break that lamp now. It's one of the few I actually like in this old place."

The door opened and Healer Skyfall shuffled out, the oversized thermometer slung casually over her shoulder. "All's clear, Alastor," she said cheerily. "I expect them back in a month for their first prenatal visit." With that she turned the corner and disappeared into another room.

Savage blinked. "Baby dragons?" He abruptly paled and sank into the chair, slid off the edge, and then hit the floor.

Moody shook his head, flipped to the next page of his book, and sighed. "What's your problem, Savage?"

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"I've never been married at a hospital before," Hermione whispered, her arm looped around Severus' waist.

He arched a brow at her. "As opposed to all the other times you've been married?"

Hermione flushed. "I mean—I never thought I'd be walking out of a hospital married!"

"Technically, married people seek services at a hospital and walk out again still married. That doesn't exactly change," Severus replied with a smile tugging at his lips.

Hermione huffed. "You know what I mean!"

Severus hrmed. "Perhaps." He stared down into her face, his pale hand gently brushing the hair away from her ear and face. Hermione flushed pink, but she leaned into his touch. "I feel we skipped over some of the things normal couples consider par for the course. I do, however, know of an excellent place where they offer delicious barbequed beef by the rack that just happens to be by a bookstore for a little after-dinner edu-tainment."

Hermione perked, dragon frills practically poking out of her bushy curls. "Oh?"

"Interested?" Severus asked.

"Do Nifflers like treasure?"

Severus smiled. "We'd have to dress Muggle, I fear, lest we both look like renegade scandalous priests."
Hermione looked down at her black robes. "Point."

"I, for one, would like to have a good soak in the hot springs before we go anywhere, seeing as I've spent the last few weeks confined to a bed with nothing to smell but medicine and myself."

Hermione arched a brow. "They did bathe you, Severus. It's not like they just laid you up and sprayed you with air freshener.'

Severus rolled his eyes. "Still, I would much prefer a bath on my own terms.

"You should just tell her the truth, Snape," a snide voice said. "Though, I'm sure she'll figure out you don't bathe often enough on her own." 

"Potter," Severus said, his posture instantly stiffening. "Don't you somewhere else to be?"

"I'm waiting for my wife," James said, twirling his wand in his fingers.

"The main foyer is the other way," Severus answered coolly.

"She obviously got through to you," James deduced. "Seeing as you are walking out. Why she chooses to waste her time helping the likes of you is utterly beyond me."

"Is that what you think?" Severus replied, arching a brow. "That she helped me?"

"Are you calling my wife a liar?" James asked, puffing up.

"I haven't called Lily anything since that time you and your little friends strung me upside down in front of most of the school and proceeded to strip me down to my starkers," Severus answered. "As you well know."

"And yet, here she came to help you, Snape," James sneered. "Yet you don't have a lick of respect for that do you?"

"I'm not sure what it is that you consider to be "help", Potter," Severus said. "Seeing as this is the private entrance for Auror affairs—"

"Well, you definitely aren't an Auror," James retorted.

"No, but I'm frequently called in as a consultant for the Aurors."

"Right," James muttered. "You're their pet dragon on a leash. Scaring young people half out of their wits when even your face isn't enough to do the job on its own."

"Oh, I'm so sorry, Potter," Severus said icily, "does my registered status give you rather less to hold over my head? Well, other than the countless other imaginary infractions that only someone with your feeble mind could come up with, hrm?"

"You forget, Snape," James said. "I've seen everything you did."

"Imagined, I did." Severus placed himself squarely between James and Hermione. "Tell me, Potter. What were you doing at the time you "saw" everything I supposedly did?"

"Keeping an eye on you," James replied. "Sirius may gone a little overboard, but he knew you were a problem."

"Overboard?" Severus let out a huffing scoff. "He tried to kill me with a bloody werewolf!"
"Yeah, and you believed him. Not very smart of you, was it?"

Severus' face darkened, his hand clenching, but Hermione's hand clutched his fingers tightly, a jolt of warmth passing between them. He let his breath out slowly. "Fine, try justify my almost-murder as you will, Potter, but have you justified yourself to your wife? Have you told her that it was your manipulation that created the fake contraceptive potion that led to the birth of your son?"

"You know perfectly well that she miscarried," James hissed.

Severus paused a moment, seemingly doing the math in his head. "So, little Harry wasn't a bastard child. I'm sure that went over so much better with mummy and daddy. Made the wedding seem— somehow a little more legitimate. Does she know? Does she realise that it was no mere accident that she ended up magically married to you, that it happened solely because she used a contraceptive charm that you and your fellow Animagus delinquents created? A spell your son and his best mate decided to spread around again and—oh, I'm terribly sorry, it seems they are both married to witches they shagged in a random broom closet."

"You ruddy wanker, I'm going to rearrange your ugly face and make it even worse than it already is!" James yelled, enraged.

Suddenly Lily was in front of her husband, her wand to his throat. "What did Sev mean, James?" James stumbled, stammering. "What—what, love? Snape and I were just having a discussion."

"What. Did. He. Mean, James?" Lily insisted, her green eyes narrowed and fixed intently on her husband. "What did he mean that contraceptive charm was created by you?"

"Well, I didn't create it, Lils," James protested.

"But you knew about it, didn't you?"

"Well, I didn't give it to you—"

"But you just let Sirius do it like the twisted little enablers you always were. And I believed your sorrowful bullshite about caring about me and the baby and you wanting to keep my honour intact!"

"Lils, I love you! You know that!"

"Love me enough to lie about it!"

"I never lied to you!"

"You withheld the truth from me. That's even worse."

"Whaa?" James floundered.

"I told them they were mistaken," Lily hissed. "I told them there was no way you would have done such a thing to me! I told them you loved me!"

"I do love you, Lily! And I know you love me!"

"I don't even know you!" Lily hissed. "You really were nothing but a despicable, disgusting toerag, James Potter, and I was just too blind and too desperate not to be seen as a sodding whore to see it!"
"Lily, I love you!" James moved to embrace her, but Lily shoved him away with a look of disgust on her face. "Get away from me!"

"Lily, please!" he protested, trying to hold her again.

"Homo ad pisces," Lily hissed furiously, "in aeternum."

James' yelp was abruptly cut off as he was transformed into a black-capped lionhead goldfish in a flawless crystal bowl. The fish frantically swam in circles around the bowl, rustling up the gravel and plants, his wild splashing working to agitate the water on the surface.

"I have nothing more to say to you, James Potter," Lily said coldly. "Your parents may have paid off your fines for being an illegal Animagus and made that mess just go away, but let's see how well they react to the shame of their son disappearing on his poor, emotionally traumatised wife, leaving only a pet goldfish behind to keep her company."

Lily's face darkened. "I'll raise our son without you and we'll both be much better for it," she said, her hand drifting to rub her abdomen in an unconscious gesture.

The fish in the bowl went spastic, trying to jump out of the crystal container, but a magical barrier prevented him from escaping the tightly warded aquarium. Lily walked stiffly over to Severus and Hermione, and she shoved the bowl into Hermione's hands. "Congratulations on your marriage," she said coolly. "Do with him as you will."

Hermione found herself with an armful of goldfish bowl and wore a rather baffled expression as Lily Disapparated with a loud crack.

Alastor stepped out of the shadows where he had been watching, and Hermione immediately handed the bowl over to the perpetually grumpy-looking Auror. Moody sighed. "I know just the place." He paused. "But—"

The Snapes stared at him.

"If you are up for a little donation to education," Moody said with a glint in his eye. "I might be able to clear a different sort of sentence for our new fishy friend that will benefit our magical youth on a whole new level."

"We were just going to get ready to go out for dinner, Alastor," Hermione purred. "Shall we discuss it this evening, after we've had a little time to wash up?"

"Indeed," Alastor said. "I wouldn't miss it for anything."

"Floo over to my lair, Alastor," Severus said, staring down at the still-spastic fish. "Say around eighteen hundred?"

Moody grunted. "Gives me time to have a chat with Scrimgeour," he said. "Do I need to wear my kilt?"

Severus arched a brow. "I don't see why not. We are celebrating a wedding, after all. I would expect Minerva to turn up in her clan colours. Just don't have a clan war over the dinner table."

Moody snorted. "Only during Quidditch season."

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**Aquatic Pond and Garden Donated to Hogwarts**
Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry has been gifted a spectacular aquatic pond and garden by newlyweds Severus and Hermione Snape, who have not only celebrated their wedding, but also Mr Snape coming out of Ministry witness protection for murderous actions committed against him over a decade ago by the notorious criminal and werewolf, Sirius Black.

Severus Snape, proprietor of the Black Scale, has been faithfully serving the Wizarding community during this entire time, and he is greatly relieved that he may now walk the streets in safety with his new wife. They were bound and married by magic after Mr Snape was stricken with a decades-old curse that had been placed on a trunk that was long hidden inside the Potter family's attic. The dark curse, activated by his blood touching the trunk, placed Mr Snape him in a catatonic state. Thankfully, however, Sirius Black had added what he clearly believed to be the most impossible condition to be fulfilled on the curse: true love.

Well, apparently it isn't so impossible as Mr Black may have believed. May he, wherever he is, chew on that for a while.

The Snapes have quite generously dropped charges on Mrs Lily Potter following the inexplicable disappearance of her husband, James Potter. They said, in an interview, that they believed Mrs Potter had been through quite enough what with having been forced into a magical marriage, finding out her child had been corrupted by a cursed collection of Dark-tainted journals and books as well as being stricken by poor judgement as well as undue influence from a few unnamed parties who are currently still under investigation.

When Lord and Lady Potter were questioned about the activities of their son, both refused to comment, saying they were focusing on helping Mrs Potter with her pregnancy and ensuring that the newest young Potter does not suffer the same fate as his elder brother, the infamous Harry James Potter.

The Aurors, when questioned, stated that they believe that Mr James Potter is serving out his sentence at a private location for a list of crimes that they will not release to the public at this time. Rumour has it that some of these offenses date back to the seventies in connection to Sirius Black, Remus Lupin, Peter Pettigrew, and his own wife, Lily Potter (née Evans).

The climate-charmed aquascape and garden will be in place by the time the children return from Christmas Holidays, and Headmistress McGonagall tells us that when the spring family visits occur—a fairly new occurrence thanks to the ever-innovative Headmistress—they will be welcome to come visit the new garden, feed the goldfish, and enjoy the pleasures of their new temperature-regulated refuge from the unforgiving Scottish weather.

"I knew it!" Charlie exclaimed, whumping Severus upside the snout with his palm. "I KNEW it!"

The massive Hebridean Black yawned toothily, curls of steam rising up from his nostrils as he pointedly ignored the small human wizard.

"Seeeevvverrrussss!" Charlie whined, pouting visibly and audibly.

The black dragon harrumphed, closing his purple eyes, moving Charlie over so the sun could bake down upon him as he sprawled over the top of the waterfall.

"Come on, Severus! You could have told me! You could have—"

Wuu-PHOOOM!
Great wings beat as another black dragon rose up from the falls, bursting through the cascade of water as she soared up and then landed beside Severus. She growled, purple eyes glowing as she spotted the interloper, black lips pulling back from her teeth in instinctive defence of her shared domain.

"Whoa! Whoa, whoa! Severus!" Charlie gasped, looking at the larger Hebridean Black in the hopes for a saving intervention, but Severus' eyes were closed, his head turned away.

The jenny dragon leaked flames out of the corners of her mouth, narrowing her eyes as the red-headed wizard hastily walked backwards away from her, holding out his hands in a peaceful gesture. "Hey, now. Easy, my lady. I'm not a threat." Charlie averted his eyes, staring down, bowing his head. While a normal person would have found it more dangerous to not look at where the dragon was, Charlie knew better. This was her territory, and the last thing he wanted to do was act like he had the right to be there without her express permission.

The jenny pressed her nostrils to his robes, rumbling lowly, her claws scraping against the stone of the falls. Charlie felt a squirming in his inner pocket, and his eyes widened as the jenny jerked back, smoke rising from her nostrils.

"Easy now," Charlie soothed. "I brought a friend," he explained. "He's really weak, and I've been taking care of him. Here, let me show him to you."

Purple eyes bored into him.

Charlie slowly opened his robe and scooped something out of his pocket, whispering, "Engorgio."

"Skrrrrr?" A dragonet the size of somewhat rotund Shetland pony sat on the damp rocks. His scales were dull, and his eyes were dark, barely showing even a hint of purple. His miniature horns were barely grown, and his dorsal spines were limp and his spade-tail was scuffed and half-shed, small tatters of dried skin clinging to it.

"His parents rejected him," Charlie said sadly. "I've tried feeding him, keeping him warm, talking to him—but he's not getting any better. Severus, please! Help me out here!"

The larger black dragon yawned lazily in his direction, the tip of his tail rising and falling with draconic amusement.

"Severus!" Charlie pleaded.

Hermione, however, was taking an avid interest in Charlie's unexpected parcel.

"Skirrrrp?" the dragonet said, eyes growing wide as Hermione nudged him with her nose.

Hermione made a soft, whale-like croon, and Severus was immediately on his feet, moving up next to her, sliding his neck against her neck as his head rubbed against hers. Severus grabbed Charlie with a snap, grasping his robes between his front teeth just before hanging him on a branch of a nearby oak.

"Whoa, hey, Severus? What're you doing?" Charlie was squirming from his dangling position in the tree.

"Skirrrrrr!"

The "little" dragonet stretched out his neck to bump his nose against Hermione and Severus' snouts.
Hermione and Severus pulled their heads back simultaneously, and Charlie squirmed and cried out as their lips pulled back from their teeth, jaws opening wide.

"No! Nononononono!" Charlie cried out. "Don't put him down! Don't put him down!"

Both dragons belched out a huge gout of flame, their fire turning from orange, to blue, and then white as it consumed the dragonet completely.

"I just wanted to give him a chance," Charlie groaned. "He just needed a chance."

"Skiiiurp!"

A shiny black dragonet squeaked and purr-rumbled, weaving around the larger dragon's legs as he romped, nay, frolicked under and around them. Trails of smoke trickled from his nose, his eyes a bright and healthy shade of purple. His scales were shiny and polished like mirrors, no longer dull with fading health. Even his horns were longer, curving back across his head, shiny and flawless.

"Skeeeeee! Rrrrrrr! Skrup!" The dragonet splashed in the water, tiny wings fluttering as he pumped them frantically, but he was still too young and didn't yet have the strength and wingspan he needed to actually fly.

"Oh. thank Merlin," Charlie groaned in sheer relief. "I thought—for a minute I thought—Oh, just get me down from here so I don't feel like such an ruddy idiot."

Severus snatched Charlie up by the robes and dropped him back on the ground, his rumble shaking the ground as he moved by the wizard. The dragonet was batting playfully at Hermione's spade-like tail, acting like a kitten after its mother's tail tip. The dragonet spotted Charlie and promptly rushed him.

"Squeeereerrrrrrrrkk!

**THUMP.**

**Sploosh!**

Dragonet and Charlie were sopping wet, and the dragonet was doing his best to slobber Charlie to death, shoving his snout into all of his ticklish places.

"Arrrr!" Charlie protested, flailing. "You did this on **purpose**, Severus!"

Severus, who was dutifully grooming his mate with loving tongues of flame and his snout, made no effort whatsoever to communicate. Hermione entwined her neck around his, crooning softly, all interest in Charlie put aside, the better to focus on certain more important matters.

Charlie flailed, pinned under about three hundred kilos of young dragonet, huffed, resigned to be pinned, wet, and enthusiastically slobbered on. "This is because I want to examine you isn't it?" he groaned. "I yield! I yield! I **promise** I won't try to take measurements and samples!"

Severus made a soft clicking rumble, and the dragonet perked his head and bounded back to the snuggling dragons. He wriggled his way between their necks and chirred happily.

Charlie sighed as he sat up. "You owe me a new set of robes."

"Did my brother **really**—" Charlie said, slumping. "I'm really sorry, I don't mean to make light of
your situation at all, Hermione. I truly mean that. I just never thought my baby brother could be such a hateful person. We didn't always have everything because of how many of us there were, and Ron often got the hand-me-downs. I know he hated that. He'd ask me when I was still a kid 'why are we so poor if we're pureblood?' as if it mattered what blood status was to having seven mouths to feed, yeah? As for me and Bill too—we didn't really realised how hard dad worked until we had to make our own way. That's normal, right? You don't realise what your parents do for you until you're out trying to make it on your own, and then you realised your mom is an angel, a ruddy miracle and your dad never stopped trying to keep a roof over the head and still had a smile for you at the table."

"It's fine, Charlie," Hermione assured him. "If you can forgive me for having a visceral reaction to your red hair and clear genetic fingerprint." She smiled at him.

Charlie slapped his hands to his face. "The hair and the freckles! Yeah, no one with eyes can miss a Weasley. Even in Romania, people are like 'I know you! You're a Weasley'!" After what you went through, I'm honestly surprised you handled it so well. Dragon instincts are strong, as I've found out the hard way. With that little guy over there," he trailed off, pointing to the sleeping dragonet in the nest. "Well, he had a small chance of survival without parents and a firm family bond. Half the introductions we do end up with a dead baby because the same magical fire that seals the bond can also kill them. But, at least it's a chance. More than they'd ever get otherwise. I will admit to being a little attached to him. Paranoid, even, that you wouldn't accept him. He was such a little fighter. Is still."

The dragonet had flopped on his back, wings sprawled, feet up in the air, and he rolled back in forth in the nest with coos of pure pleasure. He chomped on the leg bone of the last deer his new "parents" had brought him, happily crunching his teeth against the bone as his rough tongue rasped every little bit of remaining flesh of it. He then grabbed the remaining skull of said deer, and proceeded to remove every bit of velvet off the stag's once-growing antlers.

Charlie smiled. "At least he's eating well."

"However did you end up with him?" Hermione asked.

Charlie sighed heavily. "I was called in by the MacFusty clan who watch over the resident dragon population in the Hebrides. They have quite a bit of land to cover, and quite a few mated pairs, but since they are notoriously aggressive, the older pairs tend to drive the young away towards mainland Scotland. This little guy was hatched smack in the middle of a territory fight, so mum and dad didn't realise who he was and ended up punting him from the nest into the ocean below. They found him, barely alive, and patched him up, but he hadn't bonded to another dragon, so his time was limited. They called me in, hoping I could use the supplements you developed to keep him alive, but Hebrideans aren't like most dragons that just need a good meal."

"They need the living fire," Hermione said.

"Yes."

Hermione yawned, leaning into Severus, who had been silent for the entirety of the conversation. He rumbled softly, wrapping his arm around her. "Hi," she said drowsily.

"Hello," Severus replied, his expression softening.

"We should probably meet Alastor for dinner."

"I suppose," Severus said with a heavy sigh. "Whoever will we get to dragon-sit?"
Hermione and Severus turned to Charlie simultaneously.

Charlie looked from one dragon Animagus to the other. "But I draw the line at pre-chewing the raw venison before feeling him."

"You help run a dragon sanctuary in Romania, Charlie," Severus said with a huff. "I'm sure you can handle it."

"Can you at least give the guy a name so I don't have to call him 'Argh'?" Charlie asked.

"I'm rubbish at naming things," Severus said.

"Rowtag," Hermione said, immediately getting steamrolled by a very happy dragonet. She wheezed a little, transformed, and grabbed the dragonet by the nape of the neck and carried him back to the nest. She breathed fire on the pony-sized reptile and tucked him into the nest, transforming back in a smooth transition to take her place next to Severus once more.

"And that means?" Charlie said after an awkward silence.

"Born of fire," Hermione said matter-of-factly. She gave him a look that seemed to ask, "Didn't you know that?"

"You two were truly a match made by the gods," Charlie said with a shake of his head. "I'll take care of Rowtag here. Just... bring me back a steak and chips from Vulcan's will you? If I go visit mum and dad, mum will try to fill me up with turnip mash and sprouts, and while I dearly love my mum and her cooking, I could really use some beef."

Severus tilted his head and sniffed. "We'll see what we can do."

"You can use the guest bed here in the nesting chamber, but don't be surprised if you get a scaly interloper joining you half way through the night."

"But, he's never slept here before. How would you know?" Charlie asked.

Severus smiled. "You smell like dragon," he said with an amused expression.

Charlie shrugged and froze suddenly. "Severus are you saying you knew I worked with dragons from day one?"

Severus said nothing, extending his arm for his wife as they Disapparated with a crack.

"Dragons," Charlie said with a sigh. "Animagus or hatched—they all play with their food and their friends with equal enthusiasm."

"Skiiiiurrr!" Rowtag screech-chirped. He peeked over the edge of the nest and belched flame on Charlie's hair.

"I rest my case." Charlie waited for his hair to go out. "Good thing Severus created that fire-proofing hair tonic and daily moisturiser."

"Alastor, I don't think I've ever seen you dressed so extravagantly," Severus commented with an arched brow.

"Well, it is a celebration of your wedding," the Auror said, rolling his eyes.
"He just didn't want to be seen without his clan colours when I'm here to witness it," Minerva said with a chuckle.

A flash startled them all, and Amelia Bones gave a sly smile. "For posterity," she reasoned as she sat down at the table.

The staff of the Vulcan, perhaps the most famous coastal surf and turf restaurant in Scotland, was bustling with activity. Nothing new for them, perhaps, but Severus seemed caught up in his awkwardness of finally being able to show his face in public and then getting to celebrate his wedding all within a remarkably short period of time.

He'd already had a few business offers from a few patrons and the establishment to sell some of his finest products for the more discriminating wizard and witch, such as his sea-resistant hair tonic, sun protection creams, warming potions for the more frigid Scotland weather, skin moisturisers, and sea-sickness tonics for those who wished to ride the boats out to watch the spectacular sunsets. The proprietor explained that they had thousands of guests in a given week, and the unpredictable Scottish weather did everything from baking them to freezing them. He and his wife, who had built the restaurant up from a small cottage with just a few tables into a robust, extremely popular business, could guarantee that the partnership would greatly benefit them both.

Severus, having always been one to know a good thing when it was practically biting him on the nose, agreed to meet with them in a week to discuss both the partnership and terms. One could never have too many allies or business connections, and he wasn't about to be beaten upside the head by Lucius for letting something so great get away from him.

Lucius and Narcissa had brought a basket of well-aged fine wines from their family cellars. Draco, Theo, and Blaise all arrived with beautifully gift-wrapped parcels of their own, adding them to the sizable stack on a nearby table. Each young wizard brought their dates: Astoria Greengrass, Tracey Davis, and Viola Richmond. Luna Lovegood arrived with her date, who no one could actually see. Luna claimed he was under the influence of Invisilily pollen, so a seat was set beside her for her invisible "date". The Weasley twins, Fred and George, sneaked in carrying a few parcels to add to the pile. They arrived fashionably late, but the two proclaimed that they had to do some "mum-dodging" before they could escape without having to answer any awkward questions.

The Hogwarts' professors filed in after the twins, having had to arrange for someone to hold down the fort while they came to the celebration. Hagrid had agreed to take care of the patrols since he felt he couldn't leave the grounds for too long due to the animals, but he sent a very heavy, overly large, oddly-shaped, almost-wrapped present in his stead, which caused the large parliament of owls that brought it to collapse on the table, their sides heaving as they hooted softly in exhaustion, having clearly over-exerted themselves. Thankfully, the staff of the Vulcan were quickly on top of it, and brought out small bowls of fresh meat and water for the owls. The owls lingered as they rested and regained their energy, hooting sociably over the gathering.

"I'm glad you found each other, Hermione," Luna said as she fed one of the owls. "You'll have far less trouble with Nargles as a dragon. I think they fear the flames."

"Thanks, Luna," Hermione replied with a smile, giving the younger witch a hug.

A snowy owl hooted excitedly, seemingly perching on "nothing" next to Luna. A piece of meat floated up to feed the hungry owl, guided by an invisible force.

"Adrian really gets along well with owls," Luna said. "He also repels Wrackspurts without any sort of charmed object. It's definitely a skill I can approve of."
A slight pink tone hung in the air with a vaguely human face. "Aw, you're making me blush, Luna."

"Adrian?" Draco gasped. "You've been seeing Luna?"

More redness showed where once there was nothing.

"Fascinating!" Luna said. "I had no idea blushing would show under the influence of Invisililies!"

"Pucey, you dog," Blaise laughed, swatting the invisible wizard on the back. "How did you get into the Invisililies?"

Pucey sighed. "Someone was shipping them, and mixed up the labels. I was supposed to get the Lionheart Tango lilies from a Squib breeder. Their pollen is excellent when combined with other lily pollens to make a healing balm for any plant in a greenhouse. Even if it has rot. Anyway, I opened the shipping crate and got sneezed on by some irritated Invisililies. Took me an hour to get them put in quarantine and then warm people not to trip over all the invisible stuff from the box to quarantine."

Theo shook his head. "Damn, Puce. Sounds like you're really enjoying the new healing research though."

"Yeah, it's great," the invisible wizard said. "I just hope this wears off soon."

"So, what are you going to do with the Invisililies?" Draco asked.

"Shipping can deal them," Pucey muttered. "I'm done with them."

"Are you a wizard or are you not, Adrian Pucey?" Hermione huffed as she leaned over his chair, waving her wand. "Pollen collecta," she said, moving her wand in a spiral. She guided the "cloud" of pollen grains into a vial and stoppered it, setting it on the table.

Unfortunately, that restored Adrian to his pre-invisibility state of far-less-than-impeccable personal grooming. His hair was sticking up every which way, pointing up as though he'd fallen into a tub of hair gel and then been sneezed on by a hippogriff. His cardigan was disheveled, and he had pink lipstick on his cheek.

"Oh my—I'll be RIGHT BACK!" Adrian cried, flying up from the table before disappearing with a loud crack.

Everyone looked at Luna.

"He's a very good kisser," Luna said without any embarrassment. "You close your eyes anyway, so there really wasn't much of a difference."

"Thank you for coming to our impromptu celebration," Hermione said, amusement still tugging at her mouth. "I'll be the first to say I wasn't expecting to be married today, but I wouldn't change a thing, save for how it ended up happening."

The gathered guests clapped politely.

"That's okay," Draco said. "If everyone is anything like a Malfoy, they are always prepared for spontaneous social gatherings."

Hermione laughed at her friend. "Nobody is as prepared as a Malfoy, my friend. You certainly
proved *that*.

"Hey! Zabinis are none too shabby at social spontaneity!" Blaise huffed, crossing his arms.

"You didn't get Severus a box of cravats did you?" Theo asked, poking Blaise with a finger.

"Shut up!" Blaise hissed. "They're made of pure Acromantula silk. He'll appreciate it."

The friends shook their heads at him.

"Please," Severus said, gesturing to the food as it came out from the kitchens. "Enjoy this time of both relief and celebration with us. Eat and be thankful with us that life did not end in a hospital—but instead began anew."

The waiter began to carve an enormous prime rib in front of them, placing large slices on the plates along with dollops of horseradish cream. As the waiter portioned out the roast, other staff brought out platters and bowls with Caesar salad, prawns in a garlic-butter sauce, smoked salmon, Yorkshire pudding, roasted potatoes, root vegetable gratin, lemon-thyme couscous, haricot verts with herbed butter, sautéed wild mushrooms with spinach, fragrant yeast rolls, Forfar bridie, kedgeree, and even the not-so-humble haggis made the rounds and were passed from person to person.

"Severus, my friend," Lucius said. "How do you feel about your new lease on public life?"

The black-haired wizard gave an almost gallant shrug. "Happy to be alive, Lucius. Happy to not be alone anymore."

"After the drama at Wizengamot," Lucius said, "I think you both are exceptionally lucky to have survived childhood. We are lucky too—that you did." Lucius grasped his wife's fingers and caressed them automatically. She, in turn, rubbed his left arm—pale and unmarked. They had both known what was at risk very early on, thanks to the fortuitous discovery of Wormtail and his insidious connection to the Dark Lord. Lucius had discovered his father's connection to the Dark Lord as well, and his manipulation of his son. Lucius' support of Severus by posting bounties he could anonymously collect, had slowly but surely ensured his family's safety—and the safety of the Wizarding World, one fanatic Dark wizard and witch at a time.

"What did happen, Lucius?" Madam Hooch asked. "Can you speak of it?"

"All public record now," Lucius replied. "There is some evidence of outside influence on Potter, and Ronald as well as Ginevra Weasley, but it is not the kind of influence many were likely expecting. The—children's sitter appears to have been responsible. Not for all of it, mind you, but enough to encourage them into taking the old journals to heart. I think most of those who read them are contemplating if they might go back in time to readjust the sentences for certain people."

"That bad?" Flitwick asked. "I know the memories we submitted were pretty horrible, but they were only what happened after. We never actually saw the act being perpetrated. Albus was always so adamant that there could be no punishment without clear evidence, and informed us that we were *not* going to be permitted to use Veritaserum on a whim."

Minerva pinched the bridge of her nose. "That, in a nutshell, was the main problem, and in truth, under normal circumstances, we would not wish the DMLE to come tromping into Hogwarts business every time there was a kerfuffle to administer three drops of Veritaserum and determine the particulars. That situation, however, was well beyond complicated. As much as many of us wished to do something, we couldn't go beyond the law and we definitely didn't want to go against
"Well, Albus certainly reaped what he sowed after what happened with Mr Remus Lupin," Pomona said grimly.

"So, fifteen years in rehabilitation?" Rolanda Hooch asked.

Lucius nodded. "Legal in the Wizarding world but still going to school. Grey area. Hopefully, what with getting the help they need, they will come to see the light."

"An improvement to the triple-decker morons that got me almost killed, sans one werewolf who was probably a decent enough person before he tried to murder me," Severus said. "At least it wasn't his fault at the time."

"Well, enough of this rather uncelebratory conversation," Minerva said. "Congratulations to you both!"

"Cheers!"

"Congratulations!"

They took their silverware and clanked them to the crystal lightly.

Severus rolled his eyes good-naturedly, and Hermione flushed slightly. He pressed his lips to hers in a kiss, causing a flare of magic to brush across the table. The gathered clapped politely, grinning and then went back to enjoying the food and company.

A rustling came from one of the unopened presents on the table. A bright gold and black paper crinkled as the ribbon undid itself a pink fuzzball shot out the top and splatted against the table with a squeak. A black and yellow one landed next to it, followed by rainbow-coloured one that cried, "Wheeeee!" just before landing on top. One landed in a coffee mug with a sploosh, and seemed very pleased by the situation. Multiple jeweled eyes looked this way and that as multiple legs unfolded.

"Got the box?"

"Yup!"

"Okay, let's go!"

The four plush spiders scurried up to Severus and Hermione, depositing a redheart wooden box in front of them.

"This is for you!"

"And you!"

"Well, both of you!

"Congragaminations!"

"Congratulations!"

"Congo rats!"

"Rats, is that appropriate at a wedding?"
"I dunno. Not just any old rats! Congo-rats!"

"Okay, if you say so!"

The pink plush spider pushed the box forward as the spastic coffee-saturated spider zoomed figure eights around the water glasses.

Severus and Hermione exchanged baffled glances.

"Well, come on, it won't bite!"

"We won't bite."

"Well, not very hard."

"More like gum your skin, plushily."

Hermione eyed the twins suspiciously.

Fred and George waved their hands. "I swear we didn't do it!"

Moody narrowed his eyes and nudged Amelia with his elbow. "What are you up to?"

Amelia smiled. "Nothing a few plush spiders won't fix."

"Where did you get them?"

"They fell out of an altered time-glass when McHutchins accidentally broke one. They insisted on finding Severus and Hermione." Amelia looked amused. "After they cleaned the entire office area, organised every artefact in alphabetical order and by date, found every lost object in the place, cocooned a run-away Dark Wizard, and spun individual sleeping hammocks for all the Unspeakables."

Moody's eyebrow twitched. "Is that all?"

"They also make extraordinary cuppas."

The plush spiders were staring at Severus and Hermione expectantly.

Severus opened the redheart box, and his eyebrows lifted high into his hair.

Shimmering rings crafted of glistening black dragon-scale glistened on a velvet pillow. The rings looked like tiny black dragons curved around a tiny shimmering hoard of emerald and rubies. The rings glistened and rose from the velvet and glided over to their hands, slipping onto their ring fingers as though they had been there all along.

"Yay, job's done!"

"Happy Wedding!"

"Happy day!"

The spiders merrily waved their legs in a cheer, then scurried up Hermione's arm and disappeared into her profusion of curls. Severus stared and then shrugged. "I've stopped asking questions of how such things can possibly exist when I transformed into dragon after being attacked by a werewolf."
Hermione leaned in and gave her husband a tender kiss, and everything was what it should be.

"You brought me steak," Charlie gushed. "You are my hero and heroine!" He hugged the parcel of food, sniffing the box with his eyes rolling back in his head with pleasure.

Severus unwrapped a large shank of well-aged beef that had plenty of meat clinging to it even after everyone had eaten their share of it, and lured out Rowtag by waving it in the air. The dragonet perked immediately, trying to crawl out of the nest to get to whatever smelled so wonderfully delicious.

Rowtag wrapped his baby teeth around the smaller end and tried to drag it back to the nest, but Hermione firmly nudged him over to the "eating nest" that was distinct from the "sleep nest." Rowtag, having no problem telling who 'mum' was even when she didn't look like a dragon, made happy sounds of meat-loving satisfaction, crunching on the end of the offering with gusto.

Charlie, who was covered in bruises and scratches from draconic roughhousing, didn't even seem to care as he tore into his box of food and almost literally dove into his steak and chips, face-first. Hermione chuckled as she finished moving the pile of presents into place in the lair, carefully keeping the cards with each one. She guided her traveling cloak to the hook on the wall, and flopped into the comfortable couch with a tired sigh.

Severus tossed Charlie a small tin.

"What's this?" Charlie asked, pausing only long enough to swallow before speaking.

"Bruise balm and healing ointment," Severus answered. "For humans abused by dragons rather than the other way around."

Charlie snorted. "Thanks. Rowtag just didn't know his own strength. He was all proper and well-mannered by the time you got back. Not bad for one day's work."

"Thank you for looking after him," Severus said.

"No, thank you both for adopting him," Charlie insisted fervently. "He surely would have died without you two." He paused as he picked at a card that was securely fastened to the tin with twine.

"What's this?"

"Can't read? However did you survive Hogwarts?" Severus quipped.

Charlie rolled his eyes, picked at the little envelope lip, and pulled out an elegantly embossed card.

"Are you serious?"

"Do I look like the type to hand you a prank after all this time?"

Charlie pet the card, looking as though it might vanish from sight if he so much as blinked.

"You're sure?"

"Obviously," Severus droned lowly, rolling his eyes.

Hermione leaned up and kissed him, pulling him down onto the couch with her. He wasn't protesting in the slightest.

"Thank you both so much," Charlie gushed. "My parents haven't ever had such a feast—with beef roasts—for as long as I can remember. We never starved in our house, but we always had to cut
back since there were so many of us to feed. We can finally have a holiday where mum doesn't have to worry about cooking and then cleaning up after."

"Enjoy yourselves," Severus said with a nod. "I mean that sincerely."

Hermione nodded as well. "I am glad to know there are Weasleys who do not share the unfortunate mindset of your youngest brother—and sister."

"Well, Percy is quite the prize git, but we keep hoping he'll pull his head out of his arse and remember we're family," Charlie said. "At least he comes to holidays. There was a time there when he didn't even try to do that. I think maybe he finally realised how much work mum and dad put into making sure we never starved. They really did raise us right—I think that is why they are taking what they did to you so badly, Hermione."

Hermione shook her head. "I used to think 'What horrible parents could have raised someone like Ronald Weasley and Harry Potter?' but—I've realised that we make our own choices despite what our parents teach us and want for us. My parents wanted me to become a dentist or doctor, something in the medical field, just like them. Then I turned eleven and got a letter from Hogwarts. Their dreams sort of took a header off the nearest bridge after that."

Charlie smiled and then frowned a little. "Please, Hermione. I need to know if you hold my family against me in any way. I will do whatever I can to make up for it."

Hermione shook her head. "While I admit the name does cause me to cringe somewhat, even now, I do not hold the sins of one against the entire family unless it has been proven I should through their individual actions. Your twin brothers, Fred and George—they did what they could to mitigate my situation. But they, like the teachers, couldn't move against what they couldn't see—not like that anyway. How do you defend against an artefact? That's what they said it was—at the Wizengamot."

"Invisibility cloaks are pretty rare," Charlie said thoughtfully. "My brothers and I—we'd take the tablecloth and pretend it was a cloak. Mum and dad would pretend they couldn't see us. I never thought we'd ever see a real one."

"They brought in Amelia Bones to analyse the remains—she said that it was unlike all the others she had seen over the years. It was… one of the Hallows."

"An actual Hallow?!" Charlie said, eyes wide with astonishment. "Merlin! No wonder mum is freaking out. There are legends about the Hallows and what Death might do to curse those who would abuse his Hallows—objects that were never meant to stay in mortal hands in the first place."

The floo flamed to life. "Sestra, hope dis is right floo."

"Viktor!" Hermione cried, leaping off the couch. "Come in!"

"Bringing brothers, okay?"

Hermione exchanged glances with Severus. "Sure."

The tall Bulgarian Seeker stepped out of the floo carrying a pile of presents. "Congratulations, Sestra," Vikor said, placing down the packages just in time to scoop Hermione up into a hug and place a kiss on the back of her hand. "Little bird send word of your marriage."

More dark-haired wizards followed in after him, all wearing the Bulgarian Quidditch uniform. "Ah! Congratulations!" they cried, taking turns kissing the back of her hand.
"Now that mean boys no longer shipping us rotten eggs every time we owl you, does that mean we can visit more often?" they asked.

"Tired of pretending to hate you just to stop getting stinky mail," Viktor said. "Also, sorry for not making it to reception. Big game against Japan. Had to tie for hours so no one lose face."

"It's okay, Viktor, we didn't even realise there was going to be a big gathering until it snuck up on us," Hermione said with a smile. "We have plenty of leftovers! Please, help yourselves!"

The Bulgarians looked very happy to take them up on it, and as they all grabbed some food and sat down to socialise, Rowtag realised he had guests that were not being driven out by mum and dad. He crawled out of the nest and snuggled up next to Viktor and his teammates.

"Oh! You! Is darling," Viktor crowed and offered up a piece of steak.

Rowtag tenderly nipped it from his fingers and licked his chops.

Charlie gaped in amazement. "How are you taking this so well?"

"What? Baby dragon? Durmstrang take class on dealing with dragons because in past, some wizard liked to use them to terrify villages," Viktor explained with a sniff.

"Da," one of the others said, handing the dragonet a beef rib. "Babies easy to amuse. Bigger adults require more room and had to be kept outside. Raise them as babies as class project, then we train them to protect school."

"Dhey also help warm the school in vinter," another said with a wink.

"I should have gone to Durmstrang," Charlie bemoaned.

"Vatch dis, brother," the wizard with piercing blue eyes said with a grin. He tickled the horn buds on Rowtag, and the baby dragon wobbled and flopped on his back, purring like a cat. "Get dem every time."

Viktor laughed as they all introduced themselves to Severus, bowing formally in respect to his lair and home. Severus seemed oddly at ease, taking cues from Hermione that these wizards were acceptable company. By the time all of them were properly fed, Hermione and Severus had set up the guest chambers for them off the main bath, directing them to the shower, steam room, and the main baths for soaking until they looked more like raisins than men.

"It's odd hearing so much happiness and life in these caverns," Severus said, pulling Hermione close to him and burying his nose into her fragrant curls. "I am not complaining."

"I'm glad you like them, Severus," Hermione said with a grin. "They've been my penpals since fourth year. Harry and Ron tried their level best to drive them away, but Viktor knew, somehow, that what was going on was the result of someone's ill will. They couldn't do anything, but—it was nice to know someone cared despite it all. There were those like Neville who couldn't afford to be seen with me. His life was already hell with their pranks."

Severus pressed his hand to her cheek and smiled. "I am simply glad you are here, in this place, with me."

Rowtag head-bumped into his side. "Shirrkkkk!"

"And you too, menace," he told Rowtag. "Why don't you go pester Charlie while he's in the
springs?"

"Shreerrk?"

"Go give Charlie a nice hug, won't you love?" Hermione crooned.

The dragonet bounded out of the nesting chamber, and a large sploosh and a yell signalled his victory in finding Charlie in the hot springs.

"I'm going to wash today off of me, "Severus said, leaning down to give his new wife a kiss. "As well as scour the bathroom so it doesn't look like a bachelor has lived here alone for the past umpteen years."

"But, Severus," Hermione protested. "You \textbf{were} a bachelor for the past-\textbf{MPH}!"

He silenced her with a kiss. "Yes, but I really don't want you see what a slob that made me."

"I—fine. We shall agree to disagree," Hermione said with a sigh. "But I will file my official opinion that slob for \textit{you} does not mean what others might think."

Severus looked down his impressive nose at her. "Hnn."

"I'll go clean myself off in the falls," Hermione said. "The waterfall feels wonderful on my skin. I'll just meander off, alone."

She kissed him on the nose and vanished out of the nesting chamber with a woosh, leaving Severus to contemplate the merits of doing what he had promised and saying 'to hell with it' and chasing after her.

Sighing, he reminded himself that there would be many evenings in which to share her company—and it wasn't like they were going to be able to snuggle alone anytime soon. He trudged toward the bath, pulling out his wand to set about scouring his bachelor's bathroom into something suitable for two.

Despite her wanting to feel the water on her back and her wings, Hermione decided to Apparate up to the top of the waterfall and enjoy the moonlight. A part of her was simply content to take in being somewhere peaceful at last, and the rest of her was taking in the feel of her new home—her shared home—with her drake. Unbeknownst to her, she had put in her bid to be his jenny by shedding tears in the center of his domain—and he had been on his way to clear up the misunderstanding shortly before being called to help with the curse of the Potter's trunk.

Perhaps, she thought, had it not happened like that, they would have had a longer courtship and a more subtle consummation. Maybe. Maybe not.

Hermione wasn't sure, but she was sure that when he touched her, she felt as though she had found what home really meant. That was even before—cough—they had made use of Mungo's private facilities to their advantage.

Hermione felt her cheeks flushing at the thought. She wasn't sorry about that as much as—well, she was glad she didn't have to go into details to her mum and dad on how she ended up married overnight.

Merlin, her parents!
Hermione wished, at least at that moment, that she could crawl into a large hole and die of embarrassment. Thankfully, her parents had a pretty solid "whatever, dear" policy with her. They didn't understand or really want to understand her magic. They were just glad she was happy wherever she was. She had put on a brave face for their sake, not wanting to worry them. Bringing a dragonet home for Christmas with a tall, dark, and very intense wizard might be pushing her luck, even if they did love her.

Convincing Rowtag not to eat the neighbour's yippy, annoying ankle-biter dog would've been hard too. She'd been tempted to cast a few spells on the dog to silence him or make him sound like wind chimes, but the fear of the trace had kept her from actually doing it.

That was probably the only reason the little blighter was still alive. Her mum had practically brained the little beast with her gardening trowel when he got loose and tried to take a bite out of her wrist, and her mum was practically patience incarnate.

As her senses calmed, she began to feel the boundary of her drake's territory, a combination of dragon magic and the thrum of their joined heartbeats. It was hard to explain—but she knew that without a doubt, any dragon who came calling would know the moment they crossed into claimed territory. Their life depended on it. Being human didn't seem to matter. They may have started out human, but now human was just a shape. Dragon is what they were, just as Minerva was pure feline.

Minerva had warned Hermione early on that the biggest risk facing those who rushed into the change was accidentally shifting too early, getting stuck, and then being consumed by their beast's instinctive mind. Somewhere out there were a number of animals that had once been human. Rumour had it that the whale the Muggles called "the loneliest whale in the world" was actually once a wizard who had failed to transform back.

Hermione could only shudder at the thought of such a terrible thing. Minerva had been a very kind and patient teacher. She had also been strict and exacting with regard to method and very concerned about maintaining proper safety measures. Her first meditations had always been carefully supervised until Minerva was absolutely certain that she was altering her state of magic and consciousness safely. Sure, her first shift hadn't exactly been planned in advance, much less had occurred in a safe environment, but she'd been mentally and magically prepared for it for months. Slipping into and out of her form once gained, was now as natural as breathing.

She appreciated Minerva even more, now that she had finally shifted successfully. She hadn't realised Animagi could be magical creatures, but Minerva sniffed and dismissed that as pure hogwash. A dragon, a hippogriff—those were natural creatures. It was only the more unusual things such as the Dementor and the Lethifold that seemed to defy the natural order of things. Those were not Animagi forms, and Hermione was quite glad of it.

Hermione shivered.

The thrum of her drake's lifeforce surrounded her, embracing her, soothing her, and she crooned softly. It felt good, this feeling—being a part of something bigger than herself. If she closed her eyes and let herself drift, she could feel his presence below her—even Rowtag's mischief as he stalked the Durmstrang men. It had been so good to see Viktor and the others again. She was glad they were undamaged by the "mischief" caused by Harry and Ron.

Severus.

Hermione hummed to herself. It felt good to have him close—to feel his wings surrounding her as his flames licked her scales. It felt right. She truly felt wanted, needed.
"So this is where Sev has been hiding himself away," a feminine voice broke into her thoughts with a clear note of scorn.

Hermione jolted with surprise. "Mrs Potter?"

"Tsk," Lily said shaking her head. "I'd rather not be associated with that name anymore." She rubbed her swollen belly. "He lied to me. He deserved what he got."

Hermione frowned. "How did you—?"

"You're terribly young," Lily said condescendingly. "Maybe Sev had to settle because he didn't have anything better on offer." She waved the invitation to the party. "Surely you know the traditional invitation trumps all wards? He invited me. I took it as a... sign."

"A— sign?" Hermione said with a frown.

"I've been having dreams, you know," Lily said, nodding sagely at her. "Since I became pregnant again. I didn't understand what they meant until recently. You see, back when we were younger, they wanted me to try and be an Animagus too, so I could be safe around Remus, but before I could finish, Remus was discovered and they were all punished for being illegal Animagi. I never finished the training. I figured, why bother when the reason was gone."

"But why come here? Why now?" Hermione took a step backward, unsure and wary.

Lily rubbed her belly. "I realised what my dreams meant. I realised I was ready to take what I should have back when James had me believing he was the only one loving me."

Hermione crinkled her nose, confused.

"He's always loved me first, you know," Lily said. "We have a history, and you are just some random waif of a girl, a barely grown girl at that, who thinks she can have something greater than she deserves just because she happens to be a winged beast."

Hermione winced, her mind succumbing to the fall from the sense of perfect completion she had thought was truly hers. If Lily had truly known Severus ever since they were— then he was much older than she was. Sure, she had her mastery, but did she really measure up to an experienced witch? Would Severus have even cared a lick about her if it hadn't been for their respective dragon-instincts?

Hermione's inner struggle must have shown plainly on her face, for Lily favoured her with a cruel smile of pure smug satisfaction.

"There, you see, girl? Such obvious doubt. Would there really be any doubt if you truly were meant for him?"

Hermione flinched. His eyes had been so full of sincerity when he looked upon her. He had called to her even when his body had been unmoving. Had it just been the dragon within that allowed such seemingly wondrous things? Was she truly a fool?

If there had been another female dragon around, would she have been just a secondary jenny to an established mated pair?

Pain traveled through her using the currents of doubt to send daggers of misery stabbing into her heart and mind. She placed her hand on her abdomen, remembering the soft brush of his warm wings, his attentive nips and flames upon her scales—but not of those actions had been the love of
a man, only the mating of the dragons, the courtship of mindless beasts.

Surely that tenderness wasn't just instinctual?

"Has he even kissed you?" Lily asked. "Has he made you feel like a woman?"

Hermione flinched. *He did kiss me, at the Vulcan. He did!*

But this was supposed to be their first night together, part of her mind begged her to consider. He married you. He married **YOU**!

Because you were *pregnant*.

*He kissed me before he went off to shower off the day. He was kind. Tender.*

Hermione clutched her head. No, it *couldn't* be true. He was waiting. He was being such a gentleman. The dragons may not have had a choice but he did! Lily hadn't been around in years. Surely if she had been an old flame, there would have been some evidence?

Despair tugged at her.

What if it was true?

"What are you doing here, Lily?" Severus' low voice practically dripped venom and pure, simmering anger. He enveloped Hermione tightly in his arms, pulling her against him as he pressed his face into her wild hair.

Hermione gave a soft cry, clutching tightly to his robes as she loosed a muffled cry of pain and despair.

"I do not recall inviting you to my home, Mrs Potter, nor have I given you permission to torture my wife with your poisonous lies."

"**Lies?**" Lily gasped, looking utterly affronted. "You invited me to your little charade. Did you think I wouldn't notice you *had* to do the honourable thing and marry the witch after you had your way with her in a— hospital, of all things?"

"Are you **mad**?" Severus hissed furiously. "Do you think I would marry anyone if I wasn't a hundred and fifty percent sure I truly wanted her and **only** her?"

"Did you tell her how it used to be all about **us**?"

Severus stiffened, his black eyes growing impossibly darker with fury. "Whatever boyhood loyalty I may once have had for you, Mrs Potter, faded a little bit more every single time you deliberately turned your gaze away as you ignored the sight of Potter and his friends gleefully torturing me. It faded still more every year when the invitation to my "wake" went unacknowledged and unattended. It disappeared entirely when the first thing you did upon seeing me alive was to slap me upside the face and loose a curse upon me, berating me all the while for leaving you ignorant of my survival. Which you **would** have known of had you paid even the slightest bit of attention, Mrs Potter."

Severus leaned down to brush Hermione's hair as he whispered into her ear. "Will you trust me? Hermione. My jenny. My heart."

Hermione looked up into his eyes, trembling. She nodded.
"Forgive me, for not being able to do this where the only one I wish to see is you," he whispered. He placed his hands in her hair, tilted her head to the side, and kissed her neck passionately.

Hermione groaned, trembling, and he held her body snugly against him. He looked down at her, purple flames flickering across his eyes. His mouth covered hers, tongue exploring her lips and beyond. He parted from her mouth, if only to breathe, his hot breath tickling her face.

"I love you," Severus said into her mouth, his nose brushing against hers as his eyes filled with his very soul. "You, and only you. No woman, no dragon for me but you. This I swear."

Lily's magic flared like a hot wind from her body. Rage and hatred merged together, forming into a destructive whirlwind of something unspeakably ugly and terrible. "I've done my research, Sev. Female dragons defeat other, younger females to take what is theirs." She rubbed her abdomen.

"She may have everything to gain, but I have nothing left to lose."

Lily's body lurched over as her magic surged with a bright flash of glittering, rainbow-coloured light. She fell on all fours as her back writhed and twisted, bursting from her robes, exposing pale, pinkish-white skin. Bones shifted, cracked, and popped. Tendons stretched and pulled. Her hands bulged and twisted as scales formed over a soft, new, leathery hide. Veins bulged, showing blue under the almost translucent skin as it stretched over growing, shifting bones. Her arms locked strangely as she cried out, skin spreading between her arm and new, elongating bones. Her fingers were thickening, stretching as her index finger curled into a cruel hook and locked into the spur of a wing. Her fingers crackled and elongated, membrane stretching across and between the bones.

Lily's face twisted in a scream as a bony tail grew from the base of her spine. Muscles stretched over the bone as skin moved to cover the forming tail. Spines grew up from her back, creating a distinctive dorsal ridge. Her eyes bulged, transforming into strange, inhuman ovals with serpentine slits. Her face protruded, teeth growing strangely larger but not sharper. Her nose bulged out, nostrils flaring, as her face twisted into the muzzle of a Ukrainian Ironbelly.

Severus placed himself between Hermione and Lily, drawing his wand as he waited for Lily's body to catch up, making the inevitable growth into the larger, fiercer Ironbelly dragon—the one dragon that could give the Hebridean Black a run for its fierce drive and will with sheer massive size and hunger for violence.

"Hermione, change," Severus hissed. "We have to get her away from our lair. Away from Rowtag and your Bulgarian friends."

Hermione staggered back, allowing the change to consume her, her magic fluidly making her shift swift and flawless. Her great wings spread as she leapt into the air.

Lily snarled in rage, looking as if she was going to leap forward and let her size catch up with her, but Severus was there too—his great black wings pumping tornadoes of wind as his eyes glowed with seething purple fury. Flames leaked from his snout, and he bared his ivory teeth. Caustic saliva dripped from each tooth and fang.

He was ready.

He was willing.

He would fight to the death for his mate, his lair, his territory, and his dragonet—that which had already been born and that which hadn't been born yet.

He jerked back his head as Lily leapt for his face, and he loosed a torrent of bright flame—
The smoke cleared and Hermione landed right beside him, rubbing her muzzle against his, crooning her whale-like song. Severus curved his neck around hers, loosing flame against her scales, rumbling in comfort.

The two Hebridean Blacks stared into the clearing smoke and saw a human-sized Ukrainian Ironbelly miniature—cast in a shade of candy floss pink. Oversized, vivid green eyes stared out—almost human save for the reptilian slits. The dwarf dragon gave off a mighty, yet rather squeaky roar that sounded unnervingly like that of an automobile being crushed in a junkyard compactor being played backwards in a continuously rewinding cassette tape loop.

Hermione made a strange, rather interrogative sound, nudging the mini-dragon with her snout. Severus poked it with his tail.

"Hnnnggggggh?" Severus rumbled.

"HeEEEEEEEEiiiiiiRRR?" Hermione replied.

"Skirp?" The tiny dragon then began to sparkle in the moonlight, as if someone had poured a bucket of children's rainbow glitter all over her scales.

Severus shook his massive head very slowly and plucked the tiny dragon up between his teeth and launched himself into the air, flying in a dive towards the entrance to the air, with Hermione flying close behind.

"Skiiiiiiiiirrrp!" Rowtag pounced on the mini-dragon, happy to have someone to "play" with. The very tiny, very pink, mini-dragon cowered and piddled on the spot, leaving a small pool of pink-tinted fluid underneath herself.

"Even her pee has glitter in it," Hermione boggled.

Severus pinched the bridge of his nose. "This is not how I imagined my honeymoon turning out."

Green flames rose up from the floo, and Alastor Moody and Minerva McGonagall stepped out.

"Ach," Moody grunted. "I expected to find you both in the ecstatic throes of marital consummation."

"Not that I wouldn't like to be engaging in precisely that at present," Severus grumped, crossing his arms across his chest as Hermione blushed brightly.

"Oh my goodness," Minerva gasped. "What in Merlin's name is that?"

"That, my dear friend," Severus said slowly. "Is what used to be Lily Potter."

"What?" Minerva boggled.

Alastor and Minerva had their wands out and were waving them frantically.

"She's an Animagus?” Minerva asked. "When? She never once came to me requesting lessons."

Alastor shook his head. "It's no good. There's no one home in there." He tapped his temple. "The
change consumed her with the— I can't help but feel wrong about calling it a dragon."

Rowtag pounced on Lily again, gnawing on her face and dragging her down to use his back legs to claw her belly as a kitten would play with another kitten— if a kitten had scales and scary claws.

Minerva let out a slow hiss of air. "I… I dunno what t'e call it. I mean her… She looks loch a dragon, aye, but she's pink. Huir uv a pink."

Alastor patted Minerva comfortingly on the back. "Yer brogue comes out when yoo're baffled, love," he said gently.

"Look 'oos talkin', laddie."

They smiled at each other.

"I guess I'll 'av to report it to the Animagus Registry and the DMLE, but she'll haf to go some'ere," Alastor said a bit dubiously.

"Despite our young dragonet's desires," Severus commented. "I would rather not have another dragon— especially one that was formerly Mrs Potter— in my lair. Who knows what horrible things she could teach our little Rowtag?"

Minerva snorted with some amusement. "Surely someone could— Amelia perhaps?"

Alastor snorted. "The last thing the DoM needs is a pink dragon eating up more resources."

Charlie rubbed his hair and stared at the pink miniature dragon. "I'm not even sure what she is. I mean, she sort of looks like a Ukrainian Ironbelly, but she's distinctly pink, which is not natural. She's glittery. That is definitely not right for them, and— she has dull, even fragile teeth. I'm pretty sure she couldn't crack a bone even if she wanted to, and tearing flesh off a carcass—"

Hermione stared. "It's almost as if she willed herself into what you might see in a children's book."

"What?"

"Muggle children's books often depict ferocious things in insufferably cute ways to make them more—" Hermione searched for words.

"Insufferable?" Severus asked.


Charlie boggled. "That explains the huge eyes, useless teeth, and equally useless wings. It's like Rowtag's wings only we know when Rowtag gets bigger, his wings will too."

"So, this is some childhood imprint of a dragon?" Minerva asked.

"I mean, in some ways she's like a real dragon, but it didn't quite, erm—" Hermione just sat down, scratching her head.

"For a moment— Lily was in there," Severus said grimly. "She was positively murderous. She wanted blood. In that moment, I knew she wanted Hermione dead so that she could usurp her position with me, like two warring jennies."

"Twisted."
Severus nodded. "If she had even managed that feat, I would not have accepted her. I do not believe her mind was entirely stable or intact. That she came here to challenge Hermione at all proves that."

"She truly thought your history together as children was stronger than a sudden mating bond with me," Hermione said, shaking her head in disbelief.

"She was a fool," Severus growled. "Had she actually known me at all, she would have realised that I never do anything lightly. My dragon doubly so."

"Well, she did her own self in, laddie," Minerva said with a sigh. "Once an Animagus is lost to the shift, there is simply no getting them back. It's part of why the Animagus Registry was created in the first place. It wasn't solely to police our own, but to make sure all would-be Animagi learned safely."

"Preaching to the choir, Minerva," Severus said with a smile tugging insistently at his lips.

"Well, once your get the official stuff done, I think I can take her back to the sanctuary," Charlie said. "She's a bit high-maintenance due to her inability to feed herself, but the bigger dragons leave plenty of tiny scraps that do absolutely nothing for them. For her, however, well, it would be beneficial." Charlie ruffled his shaggy red hair. "I think she could help bring more visitors to the sanctuary, maybe get us some additional exposure and funding. Most people don't bring their kids with them to a dragon sanctuary, at least not ours. We don't have the smaller dragons. We have Hungarian Horntails. They aren't, quite, um… family-friendly material."

Rowtag crawled over to snuggle Charlie, having given up on engaging the pink dragon in play. He let loose an unsatisfied harrumphing sound.

"Not playing with you, is she, little guy?" Charlie chuckled.

Rowtag huffed, clearly unimpressed.

"I know what can cheer him up," Hermione said. She lifted her hair and pulled out a small fluffy spider, which with a silent spell, became a much larger fluffy spider.

"Oh hi!" the spider squeaked.

"Want to play with Rowtag?"

The spider peered down at the very interested dragonet. "Good thing I'm pretty much indestructible!"

The spider jumped off her hand, gliding down on a string of silk and landed with a squeak.

Rowtag perked.

"Catch meeeeee!" the spider cried, zooming across the room in a blur of multiple skittering legs. Rowtag romped after him excitedly.

Charlie stared at Hermione.

"What?" Hermione said, frowning slightly.

"Where in the world did you—"

"One of my wedding gifts," Hermione told him. A few spiders poked out of her hair and stared at
Charlie, quivering. "It's ok. I'm not letting him steal you."

"Phew!"

"Ok!"

"Thank goodness."

They dove back into her hair.

Charlie mumbled something about needing to go get married himself.

Severus snorted. "I rather doubt if it works that way."

Charlie crossed his arms. "Well, that's hardly fair."

Minerva smiled. "Well, I will take care of the Animagus Registry end, Alastor, if you will take care of the DMLE, yes?"

Alastor sniffed. "Aye, I will. Time for you two to get some rest. Charlie? If you would take care of, er... Mrs Potter?"

Charlie nodded. "Sure thing."

Alastor put a hand on Severus' back and smiled. "We'll take care of things from here, lad. I think you two have been through quite enough. And on your own wedding night at that."

Severus gave Alastor a tired smile. "Thank you."

"See ye in the morning, lass," Minerva said, kissing Hermione fondly on the cheek.

"Thanks, Minerva," Hermione said with a blush.

"Thanks, Minerva," Hermione said with a blush.

The Auror and Headmistress disappeared into the floo, and Charlie stunned Lily, or what was Lily, and prepared her for Apparition. "Goodnight, you two. I will let you know how she's settling in."

As the floo died down, Severus took his wife into his arms and pressed a kiss to her mouth. "Now where we?"

Hermione lured his husband over to the bed as she waved her hand and all the lights went out.

"Oh," Severus said with a rumbling purr. "Yessss..."

"Up, daddy, up!"

Severus stared down at his two-legged spawn with a somewhat tortured look in his eyes. He pulled her up and set her down on top of the pink dragon at the dragon preserve's small petting zoo.

Hermione chuckled as she looped her arm with his.

They watched as their excited daughter squealed and kicked her legs and generally made horrible life choices when it came to anything but animals. Her most favourite colour in the world, at least that week, was pink, so everything she wore had to be very pink. Her hair barrettes, her blouse and trousers, and even her travelling cloak and dragonhide boots were all pink and glitter.

Hermione tried very hard not to hide her visceral desire to hurl upon seeing her daughter looking
like she had climbed straight out of Dolores Umbridge's wardrobe. Severus, on the other hand,
wore his disgust applied directly to his forehead—the wrinkles there furrowed into a marked
crescent of pure disgust.

Kaida, however, was utterly immune to her father's rancor and her mother's disapproval. Every time
she visited her Auntie Minerva and spent far too much time with her Uncle Hagrid, they indulged
her horrible choice in colours no matter how loud and obnoxious they might be. She could pretty
much get away with murder, or so the Hogwarts staff said. She could even dress up Mrs Norris in
rose-coloured ribbons and paint her nails a sparkly shade of pink and get away with it.

It was either an unmistakable sign of the coming apocalypse or that she was just far too plucky for
words.

While she spent her days learning from human or centaur, in the evenings she went to "dragon
school" and learned hunting and play from her parents or her big brother, Rowtag—who never let
her get into trouble on his watch. Eventually, Hermione and Severus would see her off to
Hogwarts, but that day was still several years off. For now, they indulged her curious little mind as
much as they could, and tried not to choke on her budding fashion sense, or, rather, the lack thereof, if
you listened to Severus.

Rowtag, on the other hand, was growing into a fine specimen of a young male dragon, but thanks
to his loving adopted parents, the drive to pick fights and strike out to beat up others to find his
own place in the world just didn't happen. He was perfectly happy to keep right on sharing territory
with his parents, guarding the centaur lands as well as his parents', and curling up with mum and
dad whenever they allowed him—a pile of wings and tails and long, entwined necks.

Hermione and Severus knew that, eventually, Rowtag would feel the pull to find a mate of his
own, but, for the moment, the drive wasn't there. They weren't going to push him. They had learned
long ago that they would treasure what they had for as long as it continued to be there.

From time to time, Charlie would bring them hard luck cases, and they would help raise them.
Rowtag was always the dutiful big brother, and would show them all the ropes: what not to touch,
where the best sleeping spots were, how to get mum and dad to cuddle you under their wings, and
how not to get swatted on the sensitive nose by Moron. It was the important things, after all.

But while the others returned to the sanctuary with Charlie, Rowtag remained unique, perhaps truly
their son in all but blood, or more their son than blood could bring. Hermione and Severus were
happy when he was near, and that was all that Rowtag cared about.

While Kaida wanted to hurry up and get to Hogwarts, their dragon son seemed to take everything
at, well, a dragon's pace. Things would happen as they did, and he didn't have to chasing it to find
trouble. Kaida wanted to find trouble snout or face first, and it was often Rowtag bringing her back
(covered in mud) or depositing her disobedient self in front of a disapproving dragon parent.

As Kaida clung to the saddle of the miniature dragon, however, Hermione leaned into Severus' arm
and sighed happily, content that while she was a handful, Kaida was a healthy young lady. Her
accidental magic did absolutely nothing to dragon scales, much to their relief, and she was
developing like a typical girl her age. Thanks to playtimes with Draco's son, Scorpius, Theo's son,
Edmund, and Blaise's daughter, Bernadette, Kaida was quick on her feet and her mental toes.
Rowtag would often give them glorious rides over the forest canopy, much to their combined
delight, and they would all spend at least a few days a week learning from the centaurs along with
the foals.

Life was, as far as the Snape family was concerned, far better than merely fine.
A strobe light flashed, and Kaida squealed happily, clutching a magical photograph in her hand of her riding the little pink dragon. Hermione and Severus exchanged glancing, knowing their child would want it, take it home, and add it to her ever-growing picture hoard that equalled Rowtag's beloved shiny gemstone collection. You could take the dragon out of the forest, but not out of the heart of the child.

Severus surreptitiously handed the photographer a galleon to pay for the photo, knowing that all the proceeds went to feeding and tending the dragon sanctuary. Charlie had worked very hard to make the place fun for young visitors while also benefitting the larger sanctuary around them.

"Mummy, Daddy!" Kaida said, tugging on their sleeves together. "Can we go see Uncle Charlie and Auntie Ingrid?"

"Eeee!" the plush spiders dove back into Hermione's hair at the mention of Charlie, who, til that very day, still had not given up trying to kidnap one of their number for his own use.

"I suppose so," Severus said, pressing a tender kiss to his wife's temple. "What say you, my beloved jenny wife?"

Hermione smiled up at him, her face beaming brightly. "Anywhere you wish to go, my darling drake," she said warmly.

Severus pressed a kiss to her mouth, chaste and light, his black eyes sparkling with sheer happiness.

With an unspoken signal, they both took to the air, snatching their girl-child up in their claws and tossing her back and forth between them as they flew up to the highest peak where Charlie and his wife awaited them.

"EEEeeeeeeeeeeeee! AGAIN!" Kaida cried out in glee. "YAY!"

And they all lived happily ever after.

(Except for Lily-dragon who couldn't quite convince the larger, sexy full-sized Ukrainian Ironbelly that she was the perfect mate for him and the goldfish at Hogwarts which was convinced that everyone was out to get him)

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**Fin.**

(Plush spiders shuffle onto scene)

"All's well that ends well!"

"Except for the pink one."

"Wait, which pink one?"

"That one." (leg points)

"Ooooooo. Righto!"

"She deserved it."

"Yup!"
"We deserve hugs!"

"Yes!"

"Wait, what happened to her baby?"

"You mean her egg?"

"Yeah that."

"It hatched into a really big pink goldfish."

"..."

"That'll teach you, folks! Friends don't let friends jealously transform into a toy dragon Animagus!"

"Rule for life, that one!"

"Yup!"

"I want apple cider."

"Ooo, great idea."

"Tally-ho!"

"Eeee!"

(Highly caffeinated spider zooms across the scene.)

"Ni-ni!" (waves forelegs cheerfully)

"Thanks for reading!" (spider cheer)

The curtain drops.

(A fuzzy spider with a tiny bucket over its head runs into the curtain with a thump)

The curtain rises a little. "This way, Bucket!"

(The spider disappears beneath it and the curtain falls again.)

**Finis**

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