

Інформація

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Harry Potter The New Lord Black

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92 Chapters

1.0M Views

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Synopsis

Aries Sirius Black, once known as Harry Potter, endured a miserable childhood under the Dursleys until the day the Blacks found him.

Rescued and educated, Harry learns the intricacies of the wizarding world and the manipulations of Dumbledore. How will Aries Sirius Black navigate the challenges of the wizarding world?

Will he rise as a hero, or will he choose to become the next Dark Lord—an outcome eagerly anticipated by the Blacks?

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General Audiences

Chapter 1: Pureblood Pride at

Privet Drive

Marius Black pulled his Aston Martin to an easy stop directly in front of number four, Privet Drive. He let out a deep sigh.

'For heaven's sake, Marius,' his wife chided him. 'If you didn't want to come this evening, why on earth did you accept the Muggles' invitation?'

'Bentley says that Dursley has talent,' Marius replied. 'He thinks we should give the account to Grunnings.'

Clytemnestra Black sniffed haughtily. Marius chuckled. Squibs they both might be—a disgrace to their families—but his wife had never lost her pureblood pride.

'I hardly see why we should trouble ourselves to meet with him,' she said. 'Why didn't you send Bentley?'

Marius sighed again. His wife refused to understand how these things worked.

'The Dursleys invited us, my dear,' he replied evenly. 'Would you have me insult the Muggle?'

His wife grinned maliciously. 'Do you really want to know what I should prefer to do to the audacious Muggle? Really, for some middling Muggle scum to presume to invite Marius Black to dinner...it boggles the mind.'

That was enough. Marius turned on his wife with a ferocious gleam in his eye.

'Fine,' he spat. 'Why don't we pay a visit to Malfoy Manor, then? I'm sure Abraxas will be simply delighted to see his dear Squib sister.'

Clytemnestra turned pale, but she said nothing more as she gathered her mink about her and exited the car. Marius' heart sank. He cared for his wife deeply, and it hurt him to cause her pain, but every now and then she needed to be reminded exactly what they were. She tended to forget why it was that they had to put up with all these miserable Muggles in the first place.

Marius got out of the car and offered his arm to his wife. She refused to take it, but marched ahead to the Dursleys' door. He followed her and rapped smartly on the door three times with his silver-topped cane.

Dursley opened the door.

'Good evening, Mr and Mrs Black!' he exclaimed. 'What an honour for us to have you in our humble home. Allow me to present my lovely wife, Petunia, and our son, Dudley.'

Marius forced himself to smile as he raised the horsey-faced woman's over-large hand to his lips and ruffled the hair of her whale of a son.

'Charmed,' Marius said drily. 'You have a fine family, Mr Dursley.'

Clytemnestra cleared her throat loudly beside him. Marius ignored her.

'May I take your coats, Mr and Mrs Black?' the fat boy asked. Marius could hear the boredom in his tone, and wondered how much the brat was being paid to act appropriately this evening. He removed his overcoat and hat and placed them in the boy's outstretched arms.

'Thank you, my lad,' he said, then turned and glared at his wife until she removed her mink and dropped it over the boy as carelessly as if he were a house-elf.

'Won't you step into the parlour, Mrs Black?' the woman asked

Clytemnestra, who was visibly suppressing a great many snide remarks.

'Thank you, Mrs Dursley,' she drawled.

'Oh, please, call me Petunia,' the woman replied.

Marius stifled a chuckle. Clytemnestra looked at the woman as though she were a bit of manure that had appeared on the tip of her shoe.

'I prefer Mrs Dursley,' she said coldly.

Dursley laughed nervously at that and began to wave them all into the parlour.

'What would you care to drink?' he asked.

Before they could leave the hallway, Marius heard a loud sneeze. He turned around. It seemed to him that it was coming from the cupboard under the stairs. Then he heard a small voice berating himself in a harsh whisper. If Marius hadn't been so surprised, he would have laughed. It

sounded just like a house elf. But how could there possibly be a house elf in this Muggle home? He decided to investigate.

'If you'll excuse me, Mr and Mrs Dursley,' he said, stepping briefly into the parlour. 'I was wondering where I might freshen up.'

'Oh!' Mr Dursley exclaimed, as though stunned that such an important man as Mr Black might need to relieve himself occasionally. 'In the hallway, right across from the cupboard under the stairs.'

'Excellent,' Marius replied with a wry smile. 'I shall return presently.'

The haughty Squib then slid quietly over to the cupboard and knocked on the door. No one responded.

'It's no use hiding, you know,' he whispered. 'I heard you.'

He heard a quiet gasp.

'What is your name?' Marius pressed.

'Harry,' a small voice murmured.

Marius' face went white. That was a boy locked in the cupboard. What did the Muggle oaf think he was playing at?

'Are you Dursley's boy?' he demanded.

'No, sir,' the timid voice whispered. 'I'm Harry Potter. Please don't tell Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia you heard me. I'll get in really bad trouble.'

Marius' eyes went wide. Harry Potter? The Harry Potter? He stood up in a fury.

'DURSLEY!' he roared. 'GET YOUR WORTHLESS HIDE IN HERE!'

The large man came blustering in. His face was purple. Clearly Marius had crossed some sort of line.

'What's the meaning of this?' Dursley demanded. 'You can't just stride into my home, insult me, and order me about.'

'You have a boy locked in that cupboard,' Marius said simply. 'He says his

name is Harry Potter.'

Clytemnestra let out a small gasp.

'It's our nephew,' Dursley said smoothly. 'He's very disturbed. Dangerous, really.'

'And that's why you keep him locked up in a cupboard?' Marius asked incredulously. 'Let him out. I wish to speak with him.'

Dursley began to bluster again. 'What right do you have...?'

'Let him out,' Marius repeated calmly. 'Or I shall be certain to bring this matter up at our dinner with the Prime Minister next Thursday.'

Chapter 2: Rescued from the

Cupboard

Dursley shut up quickly. He took out his key ring and fiddled around with the keys until he found the one that unlocked the cupboard. He swung open the door, but the boy did not come out. Marius knelt down in the opening and looked at the boy closely. His eyes narrowed. There was no doubt that this was his great-nephew. He looked exactly like Dorea's son.

If anyone could see that, it was Marius. After all, his sisters were the only members of the family besides Uncle Phineas who had bothered to keep up with him after his involuntary exile. Marius' eyes shot up to the boy's forehead. There it was, as plain as day—the infamous scar. Marius stood up and glared at Dursley.

'You filthy Muggle!' he snarled. 'You dare to keep Harry Potter locked up in a cupboard?'

'He's a freak,' Dursley mumbled. 'He's dangerous.'

'Is it really him?' Clytemnestra asked her husband quietly. Marius nodded at his wife, who then proceeded to slap Dursley across his bloated face.

'That boy is no freak,' she scolded. 'He may well be the greatest wizard

the world has ever known!

Mrs Dursley gasped. 'You're part of their lot, aren't you?'

Marius turned his angry glare on the hideous woman. 'I'll not put up with this nonsense for another moment. From this point forward, Mr Potter will come live with me.'

'Now hold on,' Dursley began to protest, but shut up when Clytemnestra slapped him again.

Marius knelt down again in the doorway of the cupboard.

'Harry,' he said gently, holding out his hand. 'Would you like to leave this horrid place? You can come live with me, you know. I'm your dad's uncle.' He chuckled softly. 'You look just like him.'

Harry hesitated for a moment, but then he took the elderly man's hand and came out of the cupboard.

'Oh, that poor boy,' Clytemnestra moaned, and rushed over to his side. She pulled Harry into an affectionate, but respectably distant embrace.

'He doesn't even have proper clothes, Marius.'

'We'll fix that,' Marius said firmly. 'Take Harry out to the car, my dear.' Clytemnestra took Harry's hand and led him outside. Dursley made no protest.

'I have a deal to make with you, Muggle,' Marius spat. 'You tell no one about what happened here tonight, and I'll not report you to the authorities for child abuse.' He paused and considered, then smiled nastily. 'Or turn you all into frog spawn.'

Mrs Dursley fainted at that. Marius took the opportunity to collect their coats and slip out the door, a wide smile on his handsome face. After all, the Dursleys didn't know he was a Squib.

That evening was the best Harry had ever experienced. First off, his dream had come true. He really did have a rich uncle, and that uncle at

long last had come to rescue him from the Dursleys. Then he got to ride in a magnificent car next to his new Aunt Clytemnestra, who doted on him while Uncle Marius explained a bit about how they were related to Harry. They drove to a magnificent country estate.

When they got there, Harry's new aunt ushered him into the house, where a maid named Dawson had given him a wonderfully hot bubble bath before dressing him in silk pyjamas that almost fit. They were a bit threadbare, but they were far better than anything Harry had ever worn before.

'These belonged to Master Castor,' Dawson explained as she helped Harry get dressed. Harry didn't know who that was, but he was grateful that Master Castor had been a bit closer to his size than Dudley. Then Dawson took Harry down to the kitchen, where the cook served him an enormous supper together with Uncle Marius and Aunt Clytemnestra. Not only did they let him eat as much as he wanted, they even gave him ice cream afterwards.

But the best part came when Aunt Clytemnestra led Harry up to an enormous bedroom filled with beautiful antique furniture.

'This is your bedroom, Harry,' Aunt Clytemnestra said.

Harry's eyes went wide. There must be some mistake. All this couldn't be for him. But Harry made no objection as his new aunt led him over to the gigantic four-poster feather bed with loads of fluffy pillows and actually tucked him in and patted him gingerly on the head.

'Good night, Harry,' his aunt said.

'Good night, Aunt,' Harry whispered back, and Aunt Clytemnestra left the room and turned out the lights.

It took Harry a very long time to fall asleep. That was partly because he wasn't used to being so warm, comfortable, and well-fed. But mostly it

was because he was absolutely certain that he was dreaming, and he never wanted it to end.

Chapter 3: Family Heirlooms

The next day after lunch, Uncle Marius and Aunt Clytemnestra put Harry into their car and drove to London. Along the way, Uncle Marius explained to Harry about magic, how he was a wizard and came from a long line of noble wizards, and how an evil wizard had murdered Harry's parents when he was a baby, failing to kill Harry in the process. Harry listened to his uncle's explanation with rapt attention.

The Dursleys had told him that his parents had died in a car crash because his father was drunk. As would any sensible person, and particularly any six-year-old boy, Harry found the tale of his parents' heroic death at the hands of a Dark Lord far more satisfying. The news that Harry himself was a hero, however, and now revered by many throughout the wizarding world, was...disconcerting.

'But if I'm really so famous, how come no one noticed how I was being treated by the Durs-, er, the filthy Muggles?' Harry asked. Aunt Clytemnestra had explained to Harry that Muggles, people like the Dursleys who hated magic, were brutish swine who forced witches and wizards to live in hiding. That certainly accorded with Harry's own experiences.

Uncle Marius frowned. 'I have no doubt that Albus Dumbledore, a very powerful wizard, has been keeping careful watch over you. I don't know why he has allowed this nonsense to go on, but I am certain he has some political motivation.'

Harry wasn't sure that he liked Albus Dumbledore that much, not if he was the sort of person who would leave him with the Muggles for so long. Then a horrible thought stuck him.

'If he's been checking on me, he's bound to know you've taken me.' Harry began to panic. 'He'll send me back.'

Aunt Clytemnestra calmed him by patting his shoulder. 'Don't worry, Harry. If he already knew what we had done, he would have acted last night, or this morning. We are taking steps to cover our tracks, so that he'll never be able to find you. Your uncle paid another visit to the brutes this morning, and poured a bit of Forgetfulness Draught into their tea. They won't be able to tell Dumbledore anything.'

'Your aunt and I are Squibs,' Uncle Marius explained. 'We come from magical families, but we can't use magic, otherwise we should simply perform a memory charm. Nonetheless, we do have connexions with the magical world. There are potions we can use to change your appearance, and we'll change your name too, so that no one will know who you are.'

'Once we've taken care of that, we shall raise you in the wizarding world, as ought to be done,' Aunt Clytemnestra said fondly. 'We shall find you a magical tutor, and train you in all the details of wizarding life.' She began to stare wistfully out the window, and daubed her eyes with her handkerchief.

Harry nodded. He believed them, but shifted closer to his aunt anyway.

He did not want to lose his new-found family.

When they arrived at number seventeen, Windermere Court, Harry's aunt raised the collar of his coat and pulled down his hat before letting him leave the car. She held his hand as they walked up the many steps to the entrance. The door had twenty-seven different locks, all of which unlocked simultaneously when Uncle Marius placed his hand on the doorknob. Aunt Clytemnestra bustled Harry inside and shut the door.

Harry had never seen such a house. It was as elegantly appointed as Uncle Marius's country home had been, though the wall hangings and

furniture were rather faded. But the entire house seemed so alive. The many portraits that lined the walls moved and talked, and countless magical artefacts filled the rooms, occasionally making odd noises or puffing coloured smoke into the air. But the strangest thing at all about the house was its caretaker.

A little bald creature appeared in front of them out of thin air, dressed only in a tea towel. She bowed low.

'Mopsy is delighted to see her Master and Mistress Black,' she said. 'Will Master and Mistress be staying long?'

'Yes, we intend to,' said Uncle Marius. 'Kindly run along and fix up the master bedroom and the largest of the ordinary bedrooms.'

Mopsy bowed and vanished.

'That was a house elf,' Aunt Clytemnestra explained to Harry. 'They find their greatest joy in serving wizards and taking care of their needs.'

Mopsy has served your uncle's family for over a hundred years.'

Harry gaped. He had lived for only six years, and remembered fewer. The thought of a hundred years was nearly overwhelming. Uncle Marius chuckled at his expression.

'This house belonged to my Uncle Phineas,' he explained. 'Uncle Phineas was the one who saw to my education after I was disowned...er, after I discovered that I was unable to do magic. He never married, and had no children, so he left the house to me when he died.'

'It's wicked,' Harry said with a grin. Uncle Marius tousled his hair.

'I'm glad you like it.'

Aunt Clytemnestra removed her coat and went to the larder to begin taking inventory, but Uncle Marius led Harry to a storage room that was crammed with portraits and furniture.

'When your parents went into hiding,' he explained, 'they did not have

room for all of your grandparents' belongings, so they placed some of them here. There's someone I want you to meet before we do anything else.'

Chapter 4: A Desperate Plan

He brought Harry in front of a large portrait of a young couple. It looked like it was their wedding day. The man wore very stiff black robes, and the woman wore a white dress and carried a bouquet of flowers. The man looked very much like Harry, sharing his messy black hair and glasses. The woman had red hair and Harry's green eyes.

'Are these my parents?' Harry asked in awe.

'This is their wedding portrait,' Uncle Marius said. He addressed the portrait. 'James, Lily, I want you to meet your son, Harry James Potter.'

'Harry? You're so big!' James exclaimed. 'How old are you now? Four?'

'I'm six!' Harry said proudly.

'Six already? Practically a man,' his father beamed. 'And quite a good-looking one too.'

Harry smiled.

'How are you, Harry? Have you been well taken care of?' his mother asked, concern shining in her brilliant eyes.

Harry hesitated, and Uncle Marius spoke up for him. 'That's what we're here to talk about,' he said. 'Up until now, Harry has been living with some unpleasant Muggles known as the Dursleys.'

'Petunia?' Lily turned white. 'What did she do?'

'They kept him locked in a cupboard and generally mistreated him,' Uncle Marius said coldly. 'I discovered him quite by accident, and took him away.'

'Thanks, Uncle Mar,' James said, breathing a sigh of relief. 'We owe you one.' He looked at Uncle Marius questioningly. 'Why didn't Sirius take

Harry in? He's his godfather.'

Uncle Marius took a deep breath. 'Sirius is in Azkaban.'

'WHAT?' Harry's parents shouted in unison. 'Why?' his mother added.

'For betraying you to the Dark Lord, and for the murder of Peter Pettigrew,' Uncle Marius explained.

Harry was horrified at that news, and so was shocked when his father burst out laughing.

'Sirius, betray us to Voldemort?' he snorted. Uncle Marius winced. 'That's ridiculous. Sirius is the last person on earth who would betray us.'

Uncle Marius sighed. 'I agree with you, but the evidence seems to point in the other direction.'

James shook his head. 'There must be some other explanation. Imperius, perhaps?'

'Perhaps,' Uncle Marius said, 'but that is not actually the most pressing issue at the moment. Our concern is for Harry. If anyone learns that we removed him from the Muggles, he will be sent back to them, and Clytemnestra and I shall likely join Sirius in prison.'

'Why don't you disguise Harry?' Lily suggested.

'That is my intention, but I want you two and Harry to give your imprimatur. I intend to tell the world that Harry is the only son of Sirius Black and Regina Malfoy, Clytemnestra's niece. We shall say he was born when Regina was in hiding in France. Regina died in a tragic accident a month ago, and Sirius is in Azkaban, so neither can object.'

'How are you going to explain that they didn't tell anyone about Harry?'

James asked.

'We'll say that Sirius and Regina married secretly because of the political differences between Sirius and her brother Lucius. Regina actually did spend the past several years in France precisely because she disagreed

with her brother's positions, so that, at least, is credible. Regina also stayed in close contact with Clytemnestra, so it will be simple enough for us to say that she entrusted us with the boy in her will.'

'You'll have to forge a lot of documents,' James pointed out.

Uncle Marius nodded. 'Already in process.'

'What about Harry's appearance?' Lily asked. 'He looks just like James.'

'You'll have to change his name, too, and not just for show,' James added.

'You can call always him something different, but unless you do something official, the Hogwarts letter will still come addressed to Harry Potter. Dumbledore will figure it out.' He paused. 'There's also paternity tests, and so on.'

Uncle Marius hesitated, and looked back and forth between the portrait and Harry. 'This is why I wanted your blessing, James and Lily. There is a potion I can have brewed—I have an excellent potioneer who asks no questions—which will change Harry's name and appearance effortlessly. Paternity spells and lineage tests will all agree with the new identity.' He swallowed hard. 'But the potion is highly illegal, and may not be reversible.'

James and Lily frowned and looked at each other before speaking in unison. 'Do it,' they said.

Uncle Marius looked surprised. 'Are you certain?'

Lily nodded. 'We want Harry to grow up in a family that loves him, and to be safe.' She smiled. 'We'll always be Harry's parents, no matter what he looks like.'

'Sirius would want this too.' James grinned mischievously. 'Since he got himself tossed in Azkaban it's the least he can do.'

Uncle Marius turned to Harry. 'What do you think?'

Harry gritted his teeth and nodded. 'I won't go back to the Muggles,' he

mumbled.

'I do have one request,' James piped up. 'Let us pick his new name.'

Chapter 5: Transition Under the

Moonlight

Neither Uncle Marius nor Harry had any objections to that, so James and Lily set to work instantly, borrowing an Astronomy book from Phineas Black's portrait in the library.

On a late night six days later, Harry sat in an upstairs room, nodding off in a plush armchair whilst he waited for Uncle Marius to return. Aunt Clytemnestra was at the country manor, organising the final details of their move to London. Mopsy the house elf had finished organising the house at number seventeen, Windermere Court, and Harry had spent most of the week conversing with his parents' portrait.

Two days before, Aunt Clytemnestra had brought over a portrait of Regina Malfoy and explained the situation to it. The portrait had been shocked at the circumstances under which Harry had grown up, and readily agreed to assist in any way it could., though she laughed at the idea that she would have a child with Sirius Black, a man she had got on quite well with, but never viewed romantically, much to the chagrin of Sirius's mother.

James and Lily's portrait had helped Regina to make an Unbreakable Vow not to tell anyone the truth about Harry's identity. (Uncle Marius explained that if a human tried to break an Unbreakable Vow he would die, but a portrait would simply be reduced to a blank canvas.) Regina told Harry all sorts of stories and other things he should know about her, and Harry practiced calling her 'Mum,' and his real parents 'Uncle James' and 'Aunt Lily,' since it had been agreed that they would be listed as his godparents.

As for Sirius Black, who was to be Harry's dad, it seemed that in the wizarding world portraits only began to talk once the people depicted had died, so Harry had no opportunity to speak with him. James's portrait, however, was more than happy to tell Harry stories about Sirius, and Uncle Marius managed to obtain a number of photographs, from which a handsome man with long, black hair waved happily. Harry made a point always to refer to Sirius as 'Dad.' It wouldn't do for him to forget. They were playing a very dangerous game.

When the door flew open and Uncle Marius finally walked in, a large flask in his hand, Harry thought he looked utterly exhausted.

'Do you want to wait and do this tomorrow?' Harry asked in concern.

Uncle Marius shook his head wearily. 'You have to drink the potion at the stroke of midnight,' he explained. He hung a solid silver cauldron over the fire in the fireplace and poured in the potion, which began to bubble and pop almost instantaneously. He added a bit of Harry's hair, as well as some of Regina's, which Aunt Clytemnestra had kept in an envelope, and some of Sirius's baby teeth, which Uncle Marius had narrowly managed to steal from the currently empty Black home at number twelve, Grimmauld Place.

He had only succeeded because Mopsy had distracted the Grimmauld Place house elf whilst the Squib slipped in under an invisibility cloak.

Uncle Marius stirred the potion three times, then whipped out a piece of parchment and handed Harry a strange-looking quill.

'Write, "My name is Aries Sirius Black,"' he commanded. James and Lily had selected that name the day before.

Harry began to write and winced as he felt a pain in his hand. He continued regardless. Uncle Marius had warned him about the blood quill. When he had put the full stop, Uncle Marius took the parchment

and dropped it into the potion.

The parchment dissolved instantly, and the potion changed to a light gold colour. Uncle Marius poured it into a silver goblet and they waited five minutes. At 11:59 he handed Harry the goblet, and as soon as the clock began to chime Harry drank it in one long draught, finishing the whole thing just as the clock struck twelve.

Nothing happened.

'Is something wrong, Uncle Marius?' Harry asked anxiously. 'I'm not changing.'

Uncle Marius laughed. 'It will take some time for the potion to spread through your system. Now run off to bed. I daresay you'll notice some changes in the morning.'

Harry was very tired, and so did not protest as Mopsy led him to his bedroom and tucked him in to his warm feather bed, skipping the now-usual bedtime story. Harry fell asleep in seconds and had a wonderful dream in which he played all night with a large, black dog.

Chapter 6: Taller and Brighter

I have some awesome news to share with you!

I am excited to announce a mass release of 5 chapters just for you. Your support means the world to me, and I can't wait to embark on this literary journey with you.

Also I'm excited to formally announce the launch of this book on my P*atreon.

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Thank you once again for all the support, and I hope you enjoy the new content.

...

When Harry awoke the next morning the sun was already high in the sky. He crawled out of bed and stumbled over to the dresser, where he poured some water from the pitcher into the porcelain basin and washed his face. He automatically reached out for his glasses, but was startled to realise that he had no need of them. He could see perfectly clearly.

The potion must have taken effect, he thought eagerly. He looked into the mirror and let out a small shout.

A different reflection stared back at him. For a moment Harry thought it was identical to the pictures he had seen of Sirius as a boy: he had the same aristocratic features and the same easy-to-manage hair. Then he noticed subtle differences. His eyes were bright blue, like Regina's. He thought he had her ears as well. His scar was gone. Harry was surprised to find he missed it.

Harry looked down and realised that he had filled out overnight. His shoulders were broader and there were a few inches of ankle showing beneath his pyjamas. He grinned. He hadn't realised the potion would make him taller.

'Blimey,' he whispered, and almost didn't recognise his own voice. It sounded just slightly different, perhaps a bit richer. He wondered if that came from Regina. He had learnt that she had a lovely singing voice.

Harry put on some ill-fitting robes and went downstairs to the dining room, where Mopsy was already setting the table for lunch. Mopsy had been instructed on what she should expect, so she gasped only once when she saw her young master's new appearance, and then bowed low.

'Good morning, Master Aries,' she greeted him. 'Mopsy trusts Master slept well.'

Harry nodded and grinned. 'I had a big night.'

Mopsy smiled. 'Mopsy can see that. Master Aries is looking very fine.'

Harry laughed. 'Thanks, Mopsy.'

Once the table was set and Harry had sat down, Uncle Marius walked into the room. He laughed aloud when he saw Harry.

'You're certainly looking well this morning,' he said exuberantly. 'It looks as though everything has gone according to plan.'

'It looks that way,' Harry agreed.

'The real test is tomorrow when we head to the Ministry to file all your paperwork,' his uncle said, sitting down at the head of the table.

Harry shifted nervously. 'Do you think that's a good idea? What if they figure it out?'

'We have to do it,' his uncle explained. 'Otherwise you'll never truly belong in the wizarding world. We didn't bring you here just to hide you away like an escaped convict. We intend to give you a proper upbringing.'

Harry squirmed. 'Couldn't we hide in the Muggle world? Dumbledore would never think to look for us there.'

Uncle Marius frowned. 'You are a wizard, my boy, and you ought to be raised as such. I'd have given my right arm for even a pinch of magical talent. I'll be damned if I let you walk away from your gift.'

'And if they figure it out?'

'They won't,' Uncle Marius assured him, and definitively changed the subject. 'You'll have to show your new appearance to your mother and godparents after we eat. They'll be delighted.'

The next morning Aunt Clytemnestra returned, having finished arranging

all the final details at their Muggle residence. She seemed happy enough when she came in the door, but gasped and burst into tears when she saw Harry's new appearance. Uncle Marius rushed to her side to comfort her, whispering in her ear. Harry felt awkward. After several tense minutes Aunt Clytemnestra calmed herself down. She walked over to Harry and laid her hand on his cheek.

'You look very well, Harry,' she said quietly. 'Or should I say Aries?'

'I'm sorry I made you cry,' Harry said timidly. 'What did I do wrong?'

His aunt smiled at him softly. 'You didn't do anything at all.' She paused.

'It's only that, when I saw you, it struck me how much you looked like someone I once knew, someone I loved very much.' She gave Harry a small hug. 'Don't worry. I shan't lose control again.'

That afternoon the three of them travelled to the Ministry of Magic, armed with a formidable collection of forged documents Uncle Marius had managed to procure. It took them a while to get through the lengthy queue, and there was an embarrassing moment when Uncle Marius had to explain exactly why he and Aunt Clytemnestra had no wands to be inspected, but eventually they got through and managed to find themselves sitting in front of an ugly witch with a bored expression on her face and a nasty attitude.

'What do you want?' she demanded.

'I am Marius Black,' the elderly Squib introduced himself. 'This is my wife Clytemnestra. We have recently taken custody of our great-nephew, Aries Black, and we should like to make sure that he is registered properly as our ward.'

'Why isn't he registered already?' the bureaucrat asked, annoyed that this fellow was wasting her time.

'My great-nephew was born in France,' Uncle Marius began to explain.

'Oho,' the ugly witch exclaimed. 'So he's not a British subject. You'll have to take him to Naturalisation.'

'But Aries is a British subject,' Aunt Clytemnestra insisted. 'His parents were both British.'

The witch grumbled and took the documents Uncle Marius offered her, flipping through them without really reading them.

Chapter 7: A Black Family

Reunion

'Everything seems to be in order,' she mumbled. She stopped suddenly, her eyes narrowing. 'Wait, it says here that the boy's father is Sirius Black. The Sirius Black?'

'The one and only,' Uncle Marius said drily.

'I don't know about that,' the witch said hastily. 'A criminal, really. Most irregular.'

Just then a tall witch with iron-grey hair stepped into the office.

'Mrs Edgecombe, I hate to bother you again, but there seems to have been another problem with my application,' she said, completely ignoring the fact that there were others in the room. 'I simply must have my documents ready before I leave for Transylvania Wednesday next.' She stopped, suddenly noticing the presence of others in the room. 'Oh, I see you have another appointment at the moment.' Her eyes widened when she realised who it was. 'Great Merlin! It's you.'

Marius smiled up at his sister. 'Hello, Cassie.'

'Whatever are you doing here?' Cassiopeia Black demanded shrilly. 'I thought you spent most of your time in the Muggle world these days.'

'I did,' Uncle Marius acknowledged. 'Things change.' He indicated Harry.

Cassiopeia turned her sharp glare on the boy.

'Who is this?' the witch asked. 'You surely haven't spawned again, not at

your age, and not after the embarrassment of the last attempt.' She smirked. 'Unless he managed to reproduce.'

Aunt Clytemnestra turned pink, but Uncle Marius only scowled.

'This is Aries,' he said coldly. 'He has recently come from France to live with us, after the tragic passing of his mother.'

Cassiopeia raised an eyebrow, intrigued. 'Who was she?'

'My niece Regina,' Aunt Clytemnestra said evenly.

'Oh. And who's the father?' Cassiopeia asked.

'Sirius Black, apparently,' muttered Mrs Edgecombe, still sitting behind her desk.

'Sirius had a son?' Cassiopeia's voice was almost hungry. 'With a Malfoy? A pureblood?' She cackled. 'This is marvellous! How could you keep this news from us, Marius Alphard Black? The Black male line continues—and it's unquestionably pure! Oh, such a pity dear Walburga didn't live to see it. Pollux will be absolutely beside himself. Not to mention Arcturus.' She stopped as suddenly as she started. Her expression grew suspicious as she stared Uncle Marius in the eye. 'How can we be certain that the boy is who you say he is?'

'We have documents, Cassie,' Uncle Marius said, but Cassiopeia cut him off.

'You've lived amongst the Muggle swine for too long, Marius. What care I for your documents?'

'He looks just like Sirius,' Aunt Clytemnestra pointed out. 'Is not that sufficient proof?'

'Sufficient for you, perhaps,' Cassiopeia snarled. 'Hardly for me.' She drew her wand without warning and pointed it directly at Harry's forehead.

'Ostende paternitatem.'

'Really, Miss Black. Dark magic in the heart of the Ministry!' Mrs

Edgecombe protested feebly.

The smoky image of Sirius Black suddenly appeared above Harry's head.

Cassiopeia did not hesitate, but fired a different spell.

'Ostende maternitatem.'

The image dissipated, transforming into the delicate features of Regina Malfoy.

'Sanguinis status.'

Regina's image vanished, but the smoke remained, turning bright gold in colour.

'Ostende potestam.'

Harry's entire body glowed with a faint golden aura before fading.

Cassiopeia smiled smugly before turning her attention back on Mrs Edgecombe.

'Don't just sit there gawking at your betters,' she scolded. 'Complete the boy's paperwork at once. Do you have any idea who this is?' She paused and turned to Harry, speaking to him for the first time. Harry was shocked at how gentle her voice became when she addressed him. 'Hello, dear. I'm your Auntie Cassiopeia,' she said sweetly. 'What was your name again?'

'Aries Sirius Black,' Harry said hoarsely.

Cassiopeia smiled softly. 'Such a lovely name for such a darling boy.' She twirled back toward the unfortunate Mrs Edgecombe and snarled. 'This is Aries Sirius Black. His great-grandfather is Arcturus Black, Order of Merlin, First Class. His other great-grandfather is Pollux Black, sometime Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot.'

Harry could have sworn he heard Mrs Edgecombe mumble something about the dangers of inbreeding, but no one else seemed to, so he could not be certain.

'He is directly descended from Sirius Phineas Black, Minister for Magic on four separate occasions,' Cassiopeia continued. 'Not to mention the great Phineas Nigellus, the finest Headmaster Hogwarts has ever known. Surely you can manage to put in an extra bit of effort for someone of Aries' stature.'

'Whatever you say, Miss Black,' Mrs Edgecombe muttered, and began scribbling furiously on a piece of parchment. She handed it to Harry, along with the other documents Uncle Marius had provided.

'Welcome to the United Kingdom, Mstr Black,' she said.

Chapter 8: A Suspicion in the

Darkness

That afternoon Albus Dumbledore stepped through the fireplace of his office at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry and Flooed to the house of a Squib named Arabella Figg. Mrs Figg lived very near Privet Drive, and she had contacted Dumbledore that morning to inform him that she had not seen Harry in over a week.

'It's not altogether unheard of, Professor,' she explained once the aged wizard stepped out of the grate. 'Sometimes the boy will get in trouble and not come out for a fortnight. But this is different. The entire family disappeared for a weekend, and they didn't ask me to watch Harry.'

Dumbledore raised an eyebrow. 'This is unusual?' he asked.

'Yes, Professor,' Mrs Figg assured him. 'Mrs Dursley is worried he'll burn the house down if they leave him alone.'

'I see.' Dumbledore frowned. 'Well, I suppose I shall have to check on the boy and make sure he is well.' His eye twinkled. 'In any event, perhaps a visit from me is just the reminder they require to inspire them to treat Harry better.'

He turned on the spot and vanished, reappearing on the Dursleys'

doorstep. He knocked on the door gently. Petunia Dursley opened it.

'What do you want?' she scowled. She looked him up and down in disgust. 'You're one of them.' It was a statement, not a question.

Dumbledore inclined his head.

'I am Albus Dumbledore,' he said gently. 'We have corresponded, of course.'

Petunia turned a bit pale.

'Do you mind if I come in?' Dumbledore asked.

Petunia looked as though she minded very much, but stood aside nonetheless. Dumbledore stepped through the doorway into the immaculately clean home.

'You have a very nice home, Petunia,' he said. 'Very clean.'

Petunia nodded brusquely.

Dumbledore sighed. 'Petunia, I am here to enquire after Harry's welfare.'

'Whose?' Petunia asked blankly.

Dumbledore was startled, for the first time that day feeling genuine alarm.

'Harry Potter,' he said slowly. 'Your nephew? Lily's son?'

'Lily had a son?' Petunia seemed surprised. 'How? I thought your letter said that she died.'

Dumbledore looked Petunia directly in the eye and gently probed her thoughts. Harry was completely absent from her memories, yes, but there were traces—the unusual gaps that so often attended altered memories.

In this case, he saw many such inconsistencies: Petunia walking to Mrs Figg alone, speaking with her briefly, and then returning alone, all for no apparent reason; a table set for four, even though only three were eating; Petunia opening the front door on November 1 to find an empty basket along with a letter from Dumbledore.

The Headmaster frowned. He rather thought a wizard would have done a cleaner job, and, in any event, there were none of the usual signs of a Memory Charm. The only clue Dumbledore could gather from Petunia's memories was a very fancy dinner she had prepared a week before, with a great deal of hustle and bustle, for which no guests at all had arrived. The next day, Petunia had cleaned out the cupboard under the stairs, which looked as though it had been used as a bedroom for a small boy. Dumbledore pulled out of Petunia's mind. Something had happened a week ago—someone had taken Harry. The questions, however, were too many in number for him to answer: Who? How? Whither? Wherefore? Ignoring Petunia's confused expression, Dumbledore scanned the house for any traces of amulets, Dark artefacts or potions.

In another home, Dumbledore might have detected residue of Forgetfulness Draught in the teapot, and used that evidence to trace the potion to its brewer, and, perhaps, its purchaser. Petunia Dursley, however, was far too efficient a housewife to permit the remnants of any magical potion to remain in her home, and Dumbledore found nothing.

'It appears I was mistaken, Petunia,' he said softly, bowing slightly towards her as he opened the front door. 'I apologise for the intrusion.' He left Privet Drive and returned to Mrs Figg, to whom he offered only the briefest of explanations before returning to Hogwarts. Once back at the school, he sat in his chair and reflected on the enigmatic situation. Someone had taken Harry from Privet Drive a week before. That much was certain. Dumbledore suspected that someone to be the person who had modified the Dursleys' memories, though that was only a conjecture, if a reasonable one.

Whoever had modified their memories was not a very talented wizard, since he had left circumstantial evidence of Harry's existence. Moreover,

he seemed not to have used a Memory Charm. Dumbledore suspected a potion, most likely a Forgetfulness Draught, though Petunia Dursley had undoubtedly destroyed the evidence too soon. Unfortunately, without knowing the means by which the perpetrator had removed Petunia's memories, Dumbledore had no way of recovering them.

When it came to questions of motive, Dumbledore was completely baffled. The protection afforded by Lily's sacrifice ought to have protected Harry from kidnapping. Had the boy left willingly?

Dumbledore had reluctantly to admit the possibility.

The evidence of the cupboard under the stairs suggested that the Dursleys had not treated Harry as well as one might have hoped, and the boy might easily have run off with any kind stranger who offered him a happier situation. The Headmaster frowned. He had not anticipated the possibility that the Dursleys would treat Harry so poorly, and, in retrospect, that had been foolish.

What of suspects? Death Eaters would certainly be delighted to get their hands on Harry, but Lily's protection would prevent them from setting foot in the house. That left only relatives and friends as likely candidates. Lily's only living relatives were the Dursleys. James's parents were both dead, and his father had no siblings. Dumbledore shuddered involuntarily when he considered James's mother's relatives.

The thought of Pollux or Cassiopeia Black getting anywhere near Harry Potter... But both Black siblings were quite skilled enough to cast a proper Memory Charm, and Dumbledore suspected that either would rather die than defile themselves by setting foot in a Muggle residence. For that matter, he could think of no possible way they could have learnt that Harry was staying with the Dursleys. Dumbledore had the strangest feeling that he was forgetting someone, but he was certain that Pollux,

Cassiopeia and Dorea were all the Black siblings. Dumbledore remembered every student he had ever taught. That left friends, or rather, James's one remaining friend: Remus Lupin. Dumbledore would have thought Lupin capable of a decent Memory Charm, but perhaps the werewolf had never had the need to perform one before, and had preferred to use a potion. He also would have known about Lily's relatives, and might have thought to check up on Harry, despite Dumbledore's strict instructions to stay far away from Privet Drive. Dumbledore sighed. For the moment, Remus Lupin was the most likely suspect. He took out a quill and a piece of parchment and began to compose a letter to Mr Lupin.

Chapter 9: The Anxious Werewolf

Remus Lupin sat in the Three Broomsticks and sipped butterbeer as he waited for Dumbledore to arrive. The Headmaster's vague message had said nothing about why he wished to meet, only that it was imperative for them to do so. The urgency of his tone made Remus anxious.

At length he saw the familiar profile come through the door. Remus checked his watch; Dumbledore was right on time. The elderly wizard looked over the entire room briefly before settling his eyes on Remus. Something about his gaze made the werewolf uncomfortable. The customary twinkle was absent.

Dumbledore strode over to Remus's table. Remus rose to greet the Headmaster.

'Good evening, Professor,' he said politely, shaking Dumbledore's hand.

'Good evening, Remus,' Dumbledore replied. 'Do you mind if I join you?'

'Of course not, Professor. Please sit down.'

Madam Rosmerta made her way over to their table, and the Headmaster ordered a tankard of her finest mead before sitting down. Once the mead

had arrived, Dumbledore thanked her, and then, once she had left, looked sharply into Remus's eyes.

'Tell me, Remus,' he said quietly. 'Had you anything to do with the disappearance of Harry Potter?'

Remus was startled. 'Harry? Harry's disappeared? What happened?'

Dumbledore looked into Remus's eyes for what seemed an eternity, but finally he seemed convinced that Remus's surprise was genuine, as he sat back in his chair and sighed.

'Yes, I am afraid Harry has been taken from his relatives' home in Surrey,' he replied sadly. 'I have been unable to determine who is responsible.'

Remus couldn't believe it. James's son—kidnapped! The werewolf was devastated. He had obeyed Dumbledore's wishes and avoided Harry these five years, but it had pained him to do it, and Remus continued to care deeply for his friend's son.

'I could never hurt Harry,' he whispered. 'I would do anything to help him.'

Dumbledore nodded gravely. 'I know. In fact, that is why I suspected you in the first place. I feared that you might have removed Harry from his relatives' care out of a misguided wish to help him.'

Remus's eyes narrowed. 'Didn't they treat him well?'

Dumbledore shook his head wearily, looking for all the world like Atlas beneath his eternal burden. 'I am afraid that they treated him very poorly indeed. I suspect that Harry may have left voluntarily with his kidnappers. It is the only way I believe they could have penetrated the defences that surround the Dursley residence.'

'Do you have any leads?'

'None.' Dumbledore's voice sounded more uncertain than Remus had ever heard it. 'The Dursleys' memories have been altered.' He laughed

mirthlessly. 'They do not even remember that Harry ever existed.'

'What can I do to help?' Remus asked, his expression resolute.

'There is something,' Dumbledore said slowly. 'It is conceivable that one of the neighbours might have heard or seen something that could give us a clue. You could return to Privet Drive and make discreet enquiries.'

Remus nodded. 'I'll do it. Anything to help.'

'Excellent.' Dumbledore drained his mead and stood up to leave. 'Let me know if you learn anything of value. I have some other avenues to explore as well.' He looked resolute. 'We shall get to the bottom of this, Remus.'

Remus hesitated. 'Professor, what is to become of Harry when we find him?' He steadfastly refused to say 'if.' 'We can't send him back to his relatives, not if they really are mistreating him.'

Dumbledore looked at Remus severely. 'It is imperative that Harry return to the Dursleys' care. The fate of the entire world may well depend upon it.'

Meanwhile, at number seventeen, Windermere Court, life soon settled into a happy, if unvarying, rhythm. Aunt Clytemnestra set herself to redecorating Harry's bedroom, even allowing him to help pick the colours and the style of the furniture.

The day after their visit to the Ministry, she had taken him to Twilfit and Tatting's, where she had purchased Harry more new robes (and underclothes) than he had imagined any one boy could possibly wear.

The hand-me-downs he had been wearing were banished to storage, and Regina's portrait said with approval that Harry finally looked the part of her son.

Uncle Marius had officially retired from all his positions in the Muggle world, and now devoted himself full-time to Harry's upbringing. He took

the bedroom next to Harry's and dedicated it as a playroom, and then took Harry to Diagon Alley in order to select toys with which to fill it. Uncle Marius was very difficult to shop with, as he tended to purchase anything if Harry so much as indicated a slight liking for it, and so Harry had to learn very quickly how to control his reactions. He did not wish to abuse his uncle's kindness.

Life at Windermere Court, in deference to the age-old traditions of the wizarding aristocracy, followed an unvarying schedule. Harry awoke at six o'clock every day, washed and dressed before taking breakfast downstairs with his aunt and uncle. After breakfast, he began his lessons promptly in the library at half-past-seven. Harry already knew how to read and write, so Aunt Clytemnestra taught him wizarding etiquette, French, Latin and arithmetic.

Uncle Marius taught him history and genealogy and drilled Harry on his handwriting. (Uncle Marius wrote with a particularly beautiful script.) After lessons, he was permitted to fly his toy broomstick in the garden briefly before returning at eleven for his piano lesson, given by Aunt Clytemnestra, who had in fact once been a well-known concert pianist.

Chapter 10: The Mysterious

Guests

The portraits were eager to involve themselves in Harry's education. After lunch, Harry was free to play until dinnertime, and James took this time firmly in hand, chasing Harry through the house, playing hide-and-seek, showing him how to use the various toys in the playroom and teaching him the fine art of playing pranks.

After dinner and his bath, Harry was supposed to read before bed, and Lily had him read her a wide range of stories, drawn from both wizarding and Muggle literature. Harry did not understand why she so enjoyed

listening to his reading - he tended to pause a lot, and trip over unfamiliar words - but Lily said his voice was like music to her ears. As for Regina, she followed Harry throughout the day - except during playtime, when James had forbidden it - and made sure he was carrying himself with proper deportment. After a couple of weeks of her unceasing commands to 'Stand up straight!' or 'Stop dawdling!' Harry found that it was actually becoming second nature to him. The first day he survived without a single correction from his supposed mother was a proud day at Windermere Court.

After reading-time had finished, Aunt Clytemnestra tucked Harry into bed and kissed him goodnight, and then turned the lights out as Regina sang him a soft lullaby. Harry always drifted off to sleep before the first chorus and slept soundly through the night, dreaming of dogs and stags and flying motorcycles.

Remus spent the next fortnight going back and forth between his parents' old house and Privet Drive, asking questions of the neighbours and taking extensive notes. Surprisingly enough, his first luck was with the Dursleys' son, Dudley. The chubby boy's parents might not have remembered Harry, but Dudley was all too eager to tell Remus about 'the freak,' at least with the proper encouragement.

'Do you remember who kidnapped Harry?' Remus asked in a friendly voice, handing the boy another chocolate bar.

'No one kidnapped him,' Dudley said, rolling his eyes. 'The man found out the freak lived in the cupboard under the stairs, and started yelling at my dad. Dad explained how Harry had to stay in the cupboard, because he's ad...ab...abnormal, and the woman slapped him.'

Remus was disturbed to find himself rooting for the kidnappers. 'What happened then?'

'The man bent down and talked to the freak.' Dudley started speaking in a babyish voice. 'He was all sweet and everything to ickle Harrykins.'

Dudley grimaced. 'It was disgusting. He asked if Harry wanted to come live with him. Harry said 'yes,' and they left.'

'Do you remember anything else?' Remus asked.

'Oh yeah, the old man said that if we said anything he'd come back and turn us all into frog spawn.' Dudley turned white suddenly. He seemed to have previously forgotten that part. He shut up completely. No amount of chocolate could persuade him to share anything else with Remus.

The lady at number five was delighted to tell Remus all sorts of horrible things about the Dursleys, but she had not noticed Harry was missing, nor did she know anything about the strange couple that had visited the Dursleys around the time he vanished.

The gentleman at number six did not interfere in other people's affairs, thank you very much, though he had noticed that someone in a very expensive car had paid a couple of visits to the people at number four not long before.

The lady at number three was even more eager to help.

'Oh, Petunia was always complaining about that boy,' she said. 'He was a lot of trouble, you know, and he was just dumped on them after Petunia's brother-in-law got drunk and killed himself and his wife in that horrible car crash.'

Remus was beginning to hate the Dursleys with a passion. He forced himself to remain calm. 'Do you happen to know anything about some dinner guests the Dursleys had over a couple of weeks ago? I believe they were driving a very nice car.'

'Oh, them,' Number Three said importantly. 'Petunia was going on about them for weeks. He was some very important executive. I think it had

something to do with getting a contract for Vernon's firm. Anyway, when the night rolled around, I had to have a little peek, of course.'

'Naturally,' Remus said with a small smile.

'They drove up in a car that must have cost more than I paid for this whole blooming house,' Number Three continued. 'It was an older couple, very well preserved though. She was wearing jewellery you couldn't imagine. And her mink!' She paused. 'Funny thing was, they didn't stay long. I went to get my Bill—he loves fancy cars, he does—but by the time I dragged him away from the telly the car was gone.'

'Do you happen to remember the name of the couple, by any chance?'

'You're right I do,' Number Three replied. 'Petunia was going on about it for weeks, wasn't she? Now let's see. I don't think she ever said their Christian names, but the surname...Brown, I think...Brown...or Green, maybe. Or Grey.'

'Thank you for your time,' Remus said politely, and left. He had reached the end of the garden when Number Three came out and called after him to stop.

'Black!' she said triumphantly. 'That was their name. Mr and Mrs Black, it was.'

Remus's blood ran cold.

A week before Christmas, three owls arrived at Windermere Court for 'Mstr Aries Black,' 'Mstr A. S. Black,' and 'Mstr Aries Sirius Black, Future Heir of the Noble and Most Ancient, etc..' They carried three letters on fine parchment that had been addressed in three different, but all very elegant hands. Harry nervously opened the first envelope and read the letter aloud.

Dear Aries, it began.

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Chapter 11: Christmas Invitations

Folks, I've got some thrilling news! My latest book, "Naruto: The Son of Acnologia," is now live.

As a special treat for this joyous occasion, I've released this bonus chapter.

Check it out right now.

....

I was as delighted to learn of your existence as I was saddened to learn of the tragic passing of your mother, my beautiful daughter Regina. I should be very pleased if you would join me for Christmas at Malfoy Manor.

This year, I shall be hosting the entire Malfoy and Black families, so you will have the opportunity to meet the rest of your relatives. As your grandfather and closest living relative who is at liberty to provide for you, I wish to discuss certain aspects of your upbringing and guardianship.

If they must come, my sister and her husband are invited as well.

With much tender affection, I remain

Your loving Grandfather,

Abraxas Malfoy

Aunt Clytemnestra became very excited and wanted Harry to write back at once, but Uncle Marius insisted that Harry open the remaining letters first. The second letter read as follows:

Dear Aries,

It was with profound pleasure that I learnt from my sister Cassiopeia

about you, though I am very sorry to hear of your poor mother's death. I am sure that it is difficult for you, being taken from your mother at such a young age and forced to live with Squib relatives, who, though I am certain they are doing their absolute best to provide for you, cannot possibly afford you the proper wizarding upbringing to which I have no doubt you have been accustomed.

Therefore, your great-grandmother Irma and I have decided to move back to England, where we will take up our abode in your grandmother's old house at number twelve, Grimmauld Place in London. You will come live with us, and we shall give you every attention, as befits a young wizard of your station.

This Christmas, the entire family will be gathering at Malfoy Manor, and I sincerely hope you will be able to join us. Please inform my brother and his wife they are to come as well. On Boxing Day, I intend to give you a tour of your new home.

Your great-grandmother sends her fondest regards.

Affectionately yours,

P. C. Black

The last letter was written in a very ornamental hand, and Harry needed occasional help from Uncle Marius to decipher it. It also bore a heavy wax seal, imprinted with a family crest.

To Mstr Aries Sirius Black, eldest son of Mr Sirius Orion Black, Heir to the Noble and Most Ancient, etc., salutations and greetings!

As Head of the Noble and Most Ancient, etc., it is both my very great privilege and sacred responsibility to welcome you into our venerable and illustrious family, and also to express my sincere condolences at the tragic passing of your dear mother, Mrs Sirius Orion Black. It is at such difficult times especially that we recall the importance of family, and of

maintaining a connexion with our past.

As your great-grandfather and the Head of our family, I feel that it is very important for me to see that you are properly cared for, all the more so since I know that one day you will assume the heavy burden that I have borne for over three decades: Headship of our Noble and Most Ancient House.

It is for this reason that I have decided that you are to come live with me and my wife at our home in southern France. I understand that you resided with your late mother in France, so this familiar setting should no doubt prove most comfortable for you.

I intend to spend Christmas at Malfoy Manor along with the remainder of our family, though I do so only out of a desire to see you, my distinguished offspring. I therefore adjure you to come to Malfoy Manor this Christmas, so that I am not forced to make such an arduous journey for naught.

Cordially yours,

Arcturus Sirius Black, Order of Merlin, First Class

Head of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black

PS - The Squibs may come too.

Harry reacted to the letters with distress. 'I don't want to go live in any of those places,' he said to Uncle Marius, trying hard to hold back his tears.

'I want to stay here with you and Aunt Clytemnestra, and the portraits.'

Uncle Marius smiled and patted the boy on the shoulder. 'Don't worry, my boy,' he reassured Harry. 'The first rule of living in the Black family is to master the family politics. Arcturus and Pollux hate each other; they'll each do anything to get you on their side and keep you out of the other's hands.'

'As for Abraxas,' Aunt Clytemnestra explained, 'he has his own agenda.'

You may not be in line to inherit his family wealth, but he would certainly like for you to think of yourself as a Malfoy rather than a Black.' Uncle Marius chuckled. 'If we play this right, we can play them off one another, you won't have to leave here at all, and you'll suddenly find yourself with all sorts of family members who will be constantly showering you with affection.'

Harry thought that sounded complicated, but he trusted Uncle Marius, and obediently sat down to write replies to his three forebears. His aunt and uncle and all the portraits joined in helping Harry to compose his reply.

Eventually they settled on having him express gratitude for his relatives' kindness, as well as great eagerness to meet them all at Christmas. Uncle Marius made him copy each letter out three times before finally giving his approval to the penmanship, then finally tied the letters to the legs of the owls and sent them back to their owners.

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Chapter 12: Black Family

Connections

When he got home, Remus took out a quill and began to compose a letter to Dumbledore. The Headmaster would undoubtedly want to know what Remus had learnt on Privet Drive. After a couple of lines, however, Remus stopped and put down the quill.

The Dursley boy had claimed that Harry had gone with his captors

willingly, and Dumbledore had indicated the same. The one thing that had been abundantly clear from Remus's interviews was that the Muggles had been awful to the boy. Perhaps it was better for Harry wherever he was...

Remus shook his head. Be that as it may, he could not stop looking until he knew for sure that Harry was safe. As for the identity of the kidnappers, it was true that Remus had strongly negative associations with that particular surname, but Blacks weren't that uncommon. It didn't have to be one of Sirius's unsavoury relations; it could have been someone else, even a Muggle.

Not many pureblooded wizards drove cars, after all. There was the fact of the modified memories to consider, but perhaps the Muggles had been working with a wizard? Remus groaned in frustration. He couldn't be sure of anything at the moment, except that Harry Potter was missing and that he loathed Harry Potter's Muggle relatives.

Relatives.

Suddenly something clicked in Remus's mind. Dumbledore had thought that Remus might have kidnapped Harry out of a desire to help him, because Remus had been James's friend. Who else might be willing to do the same thing? James's relatives, of course.

There were no other Potters around that Remus knew of, but James's mum's maiden name had been Dorea Black. She hadn't been close to all of her relatives, as Remus recalled from a few rants he had overheard at James's place, but she had a couple of siblings to whom she was close.

When James and Lily got married Sirius had made some comment about how there were more Blacks at James's wedding than there would be at his.

Remus jumped up from the sofa and retrieved his box of Potter

photographs from their place on the highest shelf in the storeroom. He brought them back to living room, blew the dust off the cover and opened the box. Just seeing the happy faces smiling up at him brought tears to his eyes.

He took out James and Lily's wedding album and started flipping through it, grumbling at the insolence of Sirius Black, who shamelessly jumped right into the middle of the action in photograph after photograph.

In one photograph stood James, waving, standing alongside a very dignified older gentleman with closely cropped black hair, greying at the temples. The older man slightly resembled Sirius, which caught Remus's attention. He resembled James's mother even more strongly. Remus flipped through a few more, stopping when he saw one with James and Sirius both standing with their arms around the same man.

A few photographs later Remus found one with the man and his wife, a very imposing lady who was indeed wearing some rather impressive jewels. They stood alongside a car, and Remus thought it looked expensive enough, though admittedly he knew very little about such things.

Remus stared at the photographs for over an hour. It felt as though the answers were hovering at the fringes of his mind, just beyond his grasp. He went through the facts again and again. The kidnappers had blended in very well in the Muggle world, which one wouldn't expect of a wizard from an old pureblood family. They drove a car, which was also rare, though not unheard of.

Remus looked back at the photographs and noticed one that seemed particularly strange. James and Sirius were in the middle of a hex war, and the distinguished gentleman had unfortunately found himself caught between them. That, in itself, was nothing unusual for James and Sirius.

But something about the man's reaction seemed off. He was shifting back and forth, trying to dodge out of the way, and shielding his face with his arms.

'Why didn't he draw his wand?' Remus wondered aloud. Drawing one's wand was the automatic response of a wizard to almost any situation.

Why hadn't the gentleman taken any steps to defend himself?

Remus thought long and hard about the wizard's curious behaviour, but couldn't make any sense of it. The answer finally came to him just before he drifted off to sleep that night. Remus kicked himself for not remembering it sooner. The man wasn't a wizard at all. James's uncle was a Squib.

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Chapter 13: The Relatives

In the days leading up to Christmas, Harry drilled from dawn to dusk, going over all the etiquette and genealogy he had learnt, as well as practicing his French intensively in case he was called upon to give a demonstration. Other lessons were suspended, as was playtime, and the portraits all joined Uncle Marius and Aunt Clytemnestra in helping Harry to prepare.

The day before Christmas Eve, Uncle Marius sat with Harry in the parlour, going over the names of the family members he would encounter the next day. Uncle Marius held up a photograph showing a very grave wizard and a plump, smiling witch.

'Who is this?' he asked.

'My great-grandfather, Arcturus Sirius Black, Order of Merlin, First Class, Head of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black,' Harry recited dully for the fortieth time. 'He has been living in France for twenty-three years, ever since he left England in a huff after his candidate to become Minister for Magic was passed over.'

'He opposed the Dark Lord because he believed that any pureblood wizard who was worth his salt would take pride in his family name and not conceal it with a silly pseudonym. He suspected He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named of illegitimacy.'

'Correct,' Uncle Marius said proudly.

'Uncle Marius, what's illegitimacy?' Harry asked.

'It's when your parents aren't married,' Uncle Marius explained, turning a bit red.

'Oh. The witch is my great-grandmother, Melania Macmillan Black,' Harry continued. 'She's the sanest person in the family. She'll be wanting me to go to France so she can feed me lots of rich baked goods and keep me away from Aunt Cassiopeia.'

Uncle Marius nodded and held up another photo, which displayed an old wizard with a maniacal gleam in his eye standing as far apart as he could manage from a squint-eyed witch.

Harry closed his eyes and took a deep breath. 'That's my other great-grandfather, Pollux Cygnus Black. He was Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot for six months before Dumbledore took over, and refuses to allow anyone to forget it.'

He moved to Transylvania ten years ago in order to take advantage of their lack of pesky restrictions on Muggle hunting. He was a big supporter of the Dark Lord Grindelwald, and was too disillusioned after

his defeat to back He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. The witch is my great-grandmother, Irma Crabbe Black. She and Pollux try to talk to each other as little as possible.'

Uncle Marius flipped to the next photograph.

'My father's great-aunt, Cassiopeia Virgo Black. She's on the Hogwarts Board of Governors, never married. She's very skilled at the Dark Arts.'

'And who is this?' his uncle asked, holding up a photograph of a stern-looking wizard with blond hair.

'My mother's father, Abraxas Hippocrates Malfoy. Major financial backer of the Dark Lord, never openly supported him. He'll want to keep me away from Arcturus, and to make sure I receive a healthy grounding in the Dark Arts, in order to counterbalance the puritanical nonsense I'll be getting at Hogwarts.' He paused. 'What's puritanical, again?'

'Excessively concerned with doing the right thing,' Uncle Marius explained.

'But shouldn't you always try to do the right thing?' Harry asked.

Uncle Marius smiled. 'You know that and I know that. But Abraxas feels there are some more important things, such as acquiring power and wealth.'

'But what's the point of having all that power and gold unless it's to use it to help you do the right thing?'

'Precisely, Aries.' His uncle chuckled and held up the last photograph, showing four people with blond hair.

'That's my Uncle Lucius and Aunt Narcissa. He was a Death Eater, but got out of Azkaban by claiming to have been under the Imperius Curse. Aunt Narcissa is very active in charitable work. She sits on the board of St Mungo's and chairs the Christmas Robes Drive for Needy Witches and Wizards every year.'

The boy is their son, my cousin Draco. The older witch is Aunt Narcissa's mother, Druella Rosier Black. She's a widow and lives at Malfoy Manor with her daughter. She was accused of playing a part in a recent famine that struck the Home Counties, but nothing was ever proved.'

'In other words, Harry,' James's portrait observed, 'they're all nutters.

There's a reason Sirius ran away from home at sixteen.'

Harry nodded. 'I'm beginning to see that. And it's Aries, Uncle James.'

'You don't have to worry about figuring out how to please them, though,'

James went on, ignoring him. 'They're a nasty bunch. If it looks like you're slipping, just be evil. They'll fawn all over you. OW!' At that point, Lily had just swatted the back of James's head.

'Great advice you're giving him,' Lily scolded. "'Just be evil." Some role model you are.'

'Actually, Lily,' Regina said, chiming in. 'As much as I hate to admit it, your husband is right.'

James grinned. 'I knew you'd see the light eventually.'

Regina rolled her eyes. 'Even a broken clock is right twice a day. In any event, everyone will be looking to see how Aries lives up to their expectations. If he can satisfy them that he's on the right track, they'll give him anything he wants.'

Lily groaned. 'In other words, we're teaching Aries how to acquire minions and manipulate people.'

Uncle Marius smiled mischievously. 'Precisely.'

Lily turned to Harry sadly, her eyes pleading. 'Fine. Just promise me you'll remember that this is all just acting. Don't actually become evil.'

Harry rolled his eyes. 'I won't, Aunt Lily.'

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Chapter 14: The Malfoy Power

Play

The next morning Harry dressed in his best robes and accompanied his aunt and uncle through the fireplace to Malfoy Manor. Abraxas, Druella, Lucius, Narcissa and Draco were waiting to greet them.

'Welcome to Malfoy Manor, my boy,' Abraxas said jovially. 'Happy Christmas.' Harry clicked his heels together and made a short bow.

'Happy Christmas, Grandfather,' he said. 'It is an honour finally to meet you. Thank you for inviting me to spend Christmas here in your beautiful home.'

Harry greeted Druella in much the same way, but also kissed her hand and claimed to have initially mistaken her for Narcissa's sister, rather than her mother. Druella cracked a half-smile in response. Uncle Lucius was standoffish, only nodding briefly to acknowledge Harry's greeting, whilst Aunt Narcissa was gracious enough, but kept giving Harry suspicious looks. Finally Abraxas introduced Draco.

'This, Aries, is your cousin,' he said to Harry. 'I know Draco has been looking forward very much to having a friend his own age to play with.'

The cold glare Draco gave Harry made him suspect that the other boy was not quite so eager as his grandfather believed. Abraxas, however, did not appear to notice anything amiss, and promptly packed both boys off to the playroom. Harry left his aunt and uncle reluctantly. He had not failed to notice that no one had spoken any words of greeting to them.

Draco took Harry up a flight of stairs to his playroom, a large room with

windows overlooking the beautiful grounds and shelves lined with all manner of toys. Once they were inside, Draco shut the door.

'This is my playroom,' he announced in no uncertain terms. 'And these are my toys. This is my house, and those were my mother and father.' He sniffed. 'I do not intend to share them.'

Harry was confused for a moment, then he understood. James, having also been a spoilt only child, had warned him of this possibility. Draco was scared that Harry was moving into his territory. Harry thought it best to clear that up right away. He stood up very straight.

'Well, my playroom is bigger,' he retorted. 'It overlooks my garden at my house where I fly every day on my broomstick. I have lots of my own toys, and if there's anything else I want my uncle will buy it for me.'

'The Squib?' Draco scoffed.

Harry glared at his cousin. 'They're my Squibs, and I do not intend to share them, either.'

Draco stifled a small chuckle. 'Well, so long as we're clear on that, then.'

'Right,' Harry said, tongue firmly in cheek. 'I won't steal your parents if you promise not to steal my Squibs.'

Draco couldn't hold it in any longer. He laughed aloud and offered Harry his hand. Harry shook it and grinned.

'I'm glad that's settled,' Draco said brightly. 'Do you want to see my train?'

Shortly before dinnertime, Pollux, Irma and Cassiopeia arrived through the Floo, followed presently by Arcturus and Melania. They all fawned over Harry to various degrees, but Arcturus and Pollux were by far the worst. They hovered over him like vultures over carrion.

'What a handsome young lad,' Arcturus said, tousling Harry's hair. 'He reminds me very strongly of Orion at this age.' He gave Harry a fond look. 'Orion was your grandfather, and as fine a wizard as any. If you

take after him, you'll do well.'

Pollux crouched down next to the boy and grabbed him by the shoulders.

'You know, my boy, you don't look like the sort to waste all day sipping tea in the library.' He smiled hungrily. 'I can see the fire in your eyes.

You've inherited your grandmother's spiritedness.' He chuckled in admiration. 'Walburga was a fine witch. It's only natural you'd take after her. Your father's the same way.'

Arcturus murmured darkly about excess of spirit leading one straight to Azkaban. Abraxas shoved his way into the conversation.

'I have to say, I think Aries takes after Regina more than anyone else,' he said loudly to no one in particular. 'And how could it be otherwise, when he spent the first six years of his life with her?'

Harry caught Draco's eye through the midst of the swarming relatives.

His cousin was scowling at him resentfully. Harry made a face and shrugged apologetically. Draco smirked back, relaxing just a bit.

'Come over here with me, Aries,' Arcturus commanded, pulling his great-grandson away from the others. 'You're looking a bit pale. All these people must be overwhelming you. It's a sign of good breeding not to be able to abide the masses.'

He led Harry into the parlour, Pollux and Abraxas following close behind.

Melania watched the unfolding madness with a sigh.

'I do hope they don't tear the boy to pieces,' she observed to Irma.

Irma nodded. 'I wonder who will come out on top.'

'That should be obvious, Irma.' Cassiopeia smiled wickedly over Melania's shoulder. 'Whoever's the most ruthless.'

That evening Marius and Clytemnestra lay awake in bed long after everyone else had gone to sleep.

'Things seem to be going as well as could be expected,' Marius said

cheerfully. 'Aries has them eating out of his hand.'

Clytemnestra sniffed. 'I wish someone would actually speak to us occasionally. I haven't had more than two words from Abraxas since we arrived.'

Marius shrugged. 'Considering that until recently he pretended you didn't exist, I should think this was a major improvement.'

'I know,' Clytemnestra said in a small voice. 'It's only that I've dreamt for years of my homecoming to Malfoy Manor, and I'd rather hoped things would be different.'

Marius placed his hand gently over his wife. 'Give them time, my dear. Perhaps, eventually...'

'There is no time, Marius,' she snapped. 'We're not young anymore, and even now, the only reason they tolerate our presence is because of Aries. The moment one of those three manages to take the boy under his wing, you know we'll be out in the cold.'

Marius smiled. 'As for that, my dear, I don't think you need to worry. Everything is going just as I planned. I intend to present my compromise tomorrow after dinner.'

His wife frowned. 'Don't you think Aries needs someone stronger than us to watch out for his interests?' She paused. 'James is so adamant that Sirius is innocent, do you think perhaps we could get him out of prison, somehow?'

'How exactly would you do that?' Marius snorted. 'We have no evidence, and right now the only people who believe in Sirius's innocence and care enough to do anything about it are a portrait of his dead best friend, a couple of Squibs and the boy who's posing as his son.'

Clytemnestra winced. 'I suppose I see your point.'

'Aries actually asked whether perhaps one of his influential grandfathers

might be able to do something,' Marius said with a smile. 'He doesn't like the idea that someone is languishing in Azkaban unjustly.' He sighed and shook his head. 'But we don't even know for sure that Sirius is innocent, and I would rather keep ourselves as far away from any sort of investigation as possible. You know very well what might happen if anyone discovers who Aries is.'

'We go to Azkaban,' his wife whispered.

Marius nodded grimly. 'And Aries goes back to that awful cupboard.'

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Chapter 15: A Grateful House Elf

Harry woke up on Christmas morning to the unpleasant sensation of Draco dumping a goblet of cold water on his head. He sat up straight in his bed and sputtered. Draco was laughing uproariously.

'What was that for?' Harry demanded.

'It's Christmas Day,' Draco replied eagerly, all but jumping up and down in place. 'The presents are downstairs, and Grandfather says we can't start opening them until you come down.'

Harry blinked. 'Everyone else is up?' He looked at the clock over his mantel. 'It's five in the morning.'

Draco smirked. 'I have my ways.'

'I hope you didn't go pouring water on my great-grandfathers' heads,'

Harry muttered, crawling out of bed.

'Don't be stupid,' Draco retorted. 'I just ordered the house elf to make

loud noises outside all their bedrooms.'

Harry frowned at his cousin. 'That's not very fair. You'll only get the elf in trouble.'

Draco shrugged. 'It's just an elf. Anyway, Grandfather won't get anyone in trouble on Christmas Day. Father says he's...incidental that way.'

Harry chuckled. 'I think you mean sentimental.' He was very proud of himself, having just learnt that word a week before. Harry liked learning new words.

'That's what I said,' Draco said, and tugged Harry's arm impatiently.

'Come on.'

Harry yanked his arm back. 'Not until I dry my face. I'm not going downstairs dripping like a wet dog.'

'DOBBY!' Draco yelled. The house elf appeared and bowed low. 'Bring Master Aries a towel,' he commanded. The elf vanished and returned a moment later with a freshly ironed hand towel. Harry took it.

'Thank you,' he said. The elf's eyes went wide, but he said nothing as he bowed. Harry dried his face thoroughly and handed the towel back to the elf. 'Happy Christmas, Dobby.'

Dobby looked as though he were about to be hit by a train. 'Happy Christmas, Master Aries,' he stammered. 'Dobby is delighted to serve such a noble and gracious young wizard.' He disappeared with a pop.

Now that Harry was dry, he had no more reason to hold Draco back, and he allowed his cousin to lead him by the arm through the winding corridors of the massive old house. Harry couldn't help but be amused at Draco's excitement.

Christmas was fun and all, but Harry had never got much, just a few broken toys of Dudley's. He anticipated getting better presents this year, of course, but didn't quite see the point of dragging everyone out of bed

before the sun was up.

Then he walked into the parlour. He gaped in awe at the sight that awaited him. An enormous tree reached from floor to ceiling, adorned with real fairies and dozens of magical decorations, all moving and chirping and emitting multi-coloured lights.

The adults sat in a semi-circle around the room, each with a pile of presents resting beside them. Harry thought the piles were quite generous, but they paled in comparison with the two mountains of presents waiting in front of the tree for him and Draco.

Abraxas chuckled. 'Happy Christmas, boys.'

'Happy Christmas, Grandfather,' Harry and Draco said in unison, and then grinned at each other before diving in.

All the presents were very expensive, and there were loads of them.

Arcturus and Melania had given Harry an antique wizarding chess set - 'It belonged to my grandfather, Phineas Nigellus Black,' Arcturus said - a set of new dress robes and a box of Melania's homemade fudge, which was easily the most delicious thing Harry had ever tasted.

Pollux and Irma had given him a number of antique magical toys of a sort that were no longer produced. There was a set of toy armour that made one mostly invisible, along with a toy sword that could inflict no injuries, but created true-to-life illusions for up to an hour, and a teddy bear that sang lullabies, played games and bandaged scraped knees, alongside many other toys. Cassiopeia gave Harry a collection of magical children's books with moving pictures and realistic sound effects.

Uncle Marius and Aunt Clytemnestra gave Harry a train set that moved on its own and emitted puffs of coloured smoke. Druella, Lucius, Narcissa and Draco gave Harry a hamper of sweets of every sort imaginable. The presents brought tears to Harry's eyes. He stood up and went to each

relative, thanking them profusely for their gifts. Pollux ruffled his hair affectionately. Arcturus patted his shoulder roughly. Irma and Melania each gave him a kiss.

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Chapter 16: Christmas Magic

It was only when he stopped in front of Abraxas that Harry realised he had not received a gift from his grandfather. He didn't miss a beat.

'Thank you, sir, for inviting me to spend Christmas in your house,' he said sincerely.

Abraxas roared with laughter. 'You're welcome, my boy, but I haven't given you and Draco my presents yet.'

When Draco heard that, he jumped up and stood next to Harry. Abraxas raised his wand and Summoned two long boxes, which flew through the open doors of the parlour into the boys' hands. Harry and Draco ripped the paper of the boxes eagerly and gasped in unison.

'Broomsticks!' the boys both exclaimed.

'Comet Two Sixties,' Abraxas said with a smug grin. 'They have training charms on them to keep you from falling off or losing control, but you'll have good speed and a full range of motion.' He paused. 'After breakfast, we can go out into the garden and I'll show you how to fly them. Then perhaps Lucius and I can get our brooms and we'll have a game of two-on-two Quidditch.'

Lucius grumbled a bit in protest, but shut up when his father gave him a

withering glare. Harry and Draco, however, could hardly wait. They practically inhaled their bacon and eggs, and then ran back to their rooms to put on their heavy winter cloaks. They came back down and waited by the door as Abraxas and Lucius fetched their brooms.

Harry had enjoyed flying on his toy broomstick before now, but the real thing was incomparable, and Harry took to it like a fish to water. Within minutes of first straddling his new broomstick Harry was swooping through the air, all worries forgotten as he whooped in delight.

Draco had a bit of difficulty at first, but Abraxas was a surprisingly patient instructor, and after half-an-hour he thought they were ready for a simple game of Quidditch. Abraxas and Harry teamed up against Lucius and Draco and played with only the Quaffle, all players doubling as Chaser and Keeper, with the first team to reach a hundred points winning.

Abraxas was a stunning player, and Harry, it turned out, was not so bad himself. They devastated Lucius and Draco in the first game, before switching sides. The second game was adults versus children, and the adults won, though Harry and Draco held their own.

Harry wouldn't have minded a third game, but Draco was sore from having lost twice, Lucius hadn't wanted to play in the first place, and Abraxas was starting to feel his age. They headed back inside in good spirits. Lucius even tousled Harry's and Draco's hair as he went upstairs to dress for dinner.

'Grandfather was Slytherin Quidditch Captain at Hogwarts for five years,'

Draco explained as the two boys went to their rooms. 'He could have played for England if he wanted, but that was beneath him, of course.'

Harry went to his room and changed into the brand-new dress robes he had received from Arcturus and Melania that morning. They were a light-

blue colour that matched his new eyes. Harry still couldn't get used to looking in the mirror and seeing someone else's eyes staring back, though he enjoyed not having to mess about with glasses.

There was a knock on his door.

'Come in,' Harry said. It was Uncle Marius.

'How are you holding up, Aries?' he asked.

'All right,' Harry said. 'Yesterday was a bit mad, but today's been fun.' He grinned. 'The broomstick is brilliant.'

Uncle Marius smiled. 'James will be excited to see it. You'll have to tell him how well you flew. He'll be quite proud.'

Harry's expression turned serious. 'Will I be able to go home?'

His uncle hesitated. 'I think we've a good chance of working it out,' he said. 'Abraxas may have won a battle this morning with his Christmas gift to you, but he's managed to bring Pollux and Arcturus together, which, to my knowledge, no one else has ever done before. I think they've agreed to do whatever's necessary to make sure you grow up in a Black home.

Abraxas won't see what hit him.'

'We have a Black home,' Harry pointed out.

'Exactly.' Uncle Marius chuckled. 'That's why I said we have a good chance of succeeding. You're doing a fine job, Aries. Keep it up, and we can go home tomorrow.'

Harry had grown accustomed to good cooking since he left the Dursleys, but Christmas dinner at Malfoy Manor outshone anything he had ever imagined. A hundred different dishes covered the table: goose and pheasant, lamb and suckling pig, simple boiled potatoes and elegant soufflés, vegetables prepared in a dozen different mouth-watering ways. Harry couldn't pick favourites out of all the splendid dishes, so he piled his plate high with a bit of everything.

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Chapter 17: Serpent's Whisper

All through dinner the adults bickered with each other over everything from politics to the best recipe for Christmas pudding, their voices growing louder and their arguments more vehement as the fine wine flowed. One particularly nasty spat erupted just before dessert.

'I was stunned, simply stunned the other night at the Ministry ball,' Druella drawled. 'Hortensia Selwyn was wearing robes that were really the most horrid shade of purple—and with a green hat, too! She's so plump, she was strutting about the ball looking for all the world like an overgrown aubergine.'

Cassiopeia raised an eyebrow. 'I was at the ball myself, dear, and I didn't see anything wrong with Hortensia's taste.' She raised her goblet to her lips and sipped. 'After all, she wasn't the one wearing a fuchsia gown.'

Druella narrowed her eyes. 'It was a delicate shade of rose, Cassiopeia, as you well know.'

Cassiopeia smirked. 'If that was a delicate shade, I should shudder to imagine what an intense shade might look like. You stood out more than that Umbridge woman.'

Druella drew her wand and shot a Stinging Hex at Cassiopeia, which the latter witch easily deflected. Cassiopeia cackled and twirled her own wand.

'Serpensortia!' she intoned, and a vicious-looking cobra flew out the end

of her wand and landed on the table directly in front of Druella, who panicked. She jumped back from the table, knocking over her chair. The snake ignored her and turned towards Draco, who was sitting right next to his grandmother.

Harry was sitting across from Draco, and saw the look of terror that appeared on his cousin's face. The cobra raised its head and spread its hood. Without hesitation, Harry grabbed the snake by the tail and yanked it away from Draco. It began to hiss angrily and turned to strike Harry.

'Foolish boy,' it hissed. 'Now you will die instead of the other.'

For some odd reason, it did not immediately surprise Harry that he was able to understand the snake. Perhaps it had something to do with the sheer number of amazing things that had happened in his life over the previous few weeks. In any event, Harry did not stop to wonder, but reacted immediately.

'Leave me alone,' he hissed back.

The snake froze and stared at Harry warily. 'You speak the noble language of the serpents,' he observed.

Harry shrugged, realising for the first time the strange ability he had discovered. 'I suppose so.'

The snake inclined its head. 'Forgive me, my lord, for preparing to strike you. I did not know who you were.'

'Fine, but promise not to attack anyone else.'

'My lord is merciful,' the cobra replied. 'I shall obey your commands with gratitude.'

Harry let go of the snake's tail, and the cobra slithered over to his elbow and curled up.

'I am hungry, my lord,' it said. 'I should be honoured if you would be so kind as to provide me with nourishment.'

Harry took a juicy slice of turkey, set it on his bread plate, and placed it on the floor beside his chair.

'Thank you, my lord,' the snake said, and then slithered down the table leg to the floor, where it eagerly commenced devouring the turkey. Harry smiled at the snake despite himself, and then looked back up at the table. Everyone was staring at him, speechless.

'Did I do something wrong?' he asked nervously.

Pollux laughed in glee and wiped a tear from his eye. 'Wrong? You're a Parselmouth, Aries. Nothing could make me more delighted.'

Arcturus sniffed. 'I'm hardly surprised,' he said smugly, though his broad, almost child-like grin made Harry rather doubt his truthfulness. 'You do spring from two pureblood lines more exalted than any in Britain.'

'That was wicked, Aries!' Draco exclaimed. 'It was just like in the stories, like Slytherin himself, or...' He trailed off.

'The Dark Lord,' Lucius finished, an impenetrable expression on his face.

Abraxas chuckled. 'Indeed, indeed. How long have you known that you spoke Parseltongue, my boy?'

'Is Parseltongue snake language?' Harry asked. His grandfather nodded. 'I only just found out, sir.'

Cassiopeia was incredulous. 'Just now, when you were talking to the snake? Why did you grab its tail then, if you didn't know you could control it?'

Harry shrugged. 'It was going to attack Draco.'

Narcissa gave him a small smile. 'That was very brave, Aries.'

'Ordinarily I would say foolhardy,' Abraxas observed, 'but I suppose you know what you're up to around snakes far better than I.' He sat back in his chair. 'Great Merlin, a Parselmouth in the family.' He laughed aloud.

'What a Christmas present! I say we celebrate.' He called out to the house

elf. 'Dobby, bring in the dessert.'

Late that night, Arcturus, Pollux and Abraxas sat up in Abraxas's study, smoking their pipes and nursing glasses of firewhisky.

'I think Aries should come stay with me,' Abraxas said. 'We have plenty of room for a young boy to romp about, and it would benefit both him and Draco to grow up together.'

Arcturus chuckled darkly. 'If you think I shall permit the future head of my House to grow up in Malfoy Manor, you are gravely mistaken.'

'Shut up, the both of you,' Pollux snapped. 'This isn't about our petty interests any more. None of us can afford to let the others control the boy, especially not now that we've learnt the truth about his power and heritage.'

Abraxas chuckled. 'A Parselmouth! There's no doubt Aries will grow up to be a very powerful wizard one day.'

'He could well be the next Dark Lord,' Pollux said, his voice trembling from a combination of pride and terror. 'The true Heir of Slytherin.'

'He could call himself the Black Lord,' Arcturus said dreamily. 'For a thousand generations wizards would tremble at the sound of our family name.'

'If you don't intend him to grow up with any one of us, what do you suggest, Pollux?' Abraxas asked, and took a long draw on his pipe.

'A compromise, of course,' Pollux said. 'The boy will continue to live with the Squibs. He's used to them, and that way he is equally bound to both our families. Cassie will go live with them. She can begin to tutor the boy.'

'I want Draco to join Aries for these tutoring sessions,' Abraxas insisted.

'Fair enough,' Pollux conceded. 'Irma and I shall go ahead with our plans to move into number twelve, Grimmauld Place, and the boys can spend

plenty of time there, as well as here at Malfoy Manor.'

'Aries must spend summers with me and Melania in France,' Arcturus added.

'That's fine,' Abraxas said. 'We might even send Draco along for part of the summer. France will do the boys some good.'

'It's settled, then.' Pollux said, and the others both nodded. Abraxas filled up their glasses with a flick of his wand and the three wizards joined in a toast.

'To Aries Sirius Black, the true Heir of Slytherin.'

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Chapter 18: Dark Legacy

After breakfast on Boxing Day, Pollux took Harry and Draco to number twelve, Grimmauld Place, leaving Abraxas and Arcturus to discuss their plans with the Squibs. They emerged from the grate to find a dusty old townhouse, similar in many respects to the one on Windermere Court, but far dirtier, and with somewhat of a darker feel to it.

Malfoy Manor had its fair share of Dark objects on display - skulls, shrunken heads, phials of blood and so on - but this house seemed to revel in its Dark heritage. The staircase was lined with the heads of dead house elves and a troll leg had been turned into an umbrella stand near the door. The portraits looked at Harry and Draco suspiciously, and many of them wore sinister expressions. The cobwebs and thick layer of dust only served to enhance the house's spookiness.

Draco nudged Harry nervously. 'Do you think it's haunted?' he whispered.

Harry shrugged. 'Even if it is, we've got Great-Granddad with us.'

Meanwhile Pollux was scowling in utter disgust.

'What has that blasted elf been up to since Walburga died?' he murmured angrily. 'KREACHER!'

The house elf appeared instantly, and bowed low when he saw Pollux, his eyes wide.

'Master Pollux has come to visit Mistress's house,' he croaked. 'Kreacher is honoured to serve his Master.'

'Kreacher, Mistress Irma and I are moving here after the New Year,'

Pollux said sternly. 'We had hoped to find the house fit to live in. How could you disgrace your Mistress in this way? What would she have said to find her home in such a state?'

Kreacher grabbed a poker and started hitting himself vigorously, but Pollux stopped him.

'You'll have plenty of time to punish yourself once the house is clean,' he said sharply. 'I want this place immaculate by the New Year. Every surface should shine.'

Kreacher bowed. 'Kreacher will do as Master has ordered. Kreacher lives to serve the House of Black.'

Pollux pulled Harry and Draco over. 'Kreacher, these are my great-grandsons: Aries Black and Draco Malfoy. They will be coming to visit often, and I expect you to obey them fully. Do you understand?'

'Yes, Master,' Kreacher murmured.

'Aries is Master Sirius's son,' Pollux went on. 'He will be your Master after I am gone, and I expect you to show him full respect and obedience.'

Kreacher's eyes narrowed. 'Master Sirius was an ungrateful blood traitor who ran away from home and broke his mother's heart. Mistress swore

he was no son of hers.'

Pollux looked horrified and, without thinking, placed his hands over Harry's ears, which was completely ineffective, since Harry could hear everything anyway, even if it was a bit muffled.

'I forbid you ever again to speak ill of Master Sirius, or to repeat anything bad that anyone else has said,' the old wizard said imperiously. 'From now on I command you to think, feel and act as though you had a deep and profound love for Master Sirius, and to regard him as a great, kind and beneficent master. Now get to your work.'

Harry thought for a moment that Kreacher looked very unhappy, but the elf only bowed deeply.

'Of course, Master,' Kreacher said, and disappeared.

Pollux turned to his great-grandsons. 'Wait for me in the parlour,' he said.

'I need to have a word with Aries' grandmother's portrait.'

Harry and Draco went back into the parlour, but did not sit down, neither one fancying the idea of wallowing in the dust. They wandered around a bit, looking at the various objects on display. Draco stopped in front of a large tapestry that spread across an entire wall.

'Look over here, Aries,' he exclaimed. 'It's the Black family tree.'

Harry wandered over slowly to see what had his cousin so excited, and he had to admit that the tapestry was fascinating, showing every member of the Black family for centuries.

'There's Mum,' Draco said, pointing to one of the names. 'And there I am.'

'There's Great-Granddad, and Aunt Cassiopeia,' Harry pointed out. His heart leapt when he saw Dorea Black married to Charlus Potter, with one son, James Potter, but of course, he said nothing. It wouldn't do to raise suspicions, even with Draco. 'Uncle Marius isn't on here.'

'Oh? Let me see.' Draco looked over where Harry was pointing. 'There's a

funny black mark right there. Maybe that's where he ought to be. Do you think the tapestry is damaged?'

'Maybe,' Harry mused. 'There's another black mark like that over here where my dad should be.'

'There's a lot of them on here,' Draco said. 'See? Here's another one right by my mum.'

'Found something interesting, boys?' Pollux asked, walking back into the room.

'We found the Black family tree,' Draco said. 'But it's damaged.'

'Really?' Pollux came over to inspect it. 'I wonder how that happened.' He scanned over the tapestry. 'I don't see any damage.'

'Right here, Great-Granddad,' Harry pointed out. 'This funny black mark where my dad should be. And another one over here, where Uncle Marius should be.'

Harry thought Pollux looked a bit pale. The old man laughed weakly.

'Fancy that,' he said, his voice shaking. 'The tapestry does seem to be damaged. Oh, well, it's easy enough to fix.' He raised his wand and muttered a spell. The black marks vanished, being replaced in each case by names.

'My mum has a sister!' Draco exclaimed. Sure enough, the black mark by Narcissa's name had vanished, being replaced by the name Andromeda Black. A double line of gold thread connected her to Ted Tonks. Beneath their two names appeared yet another: Nymphadora Tonks.

'Look, Draco,' Harry said. 'We have another cousin! She's several years older than us.'

Draco frowned. 'How come I never heard about her before?' he asked Pollux.

His great-grandfather hesitated. 'Andromeda doesn't get on with the rest

of the family,' he said carefully. 'She went against her parents' wishes and married a Mudblood.'

Draco gasped. 'Why would she ever do something like that?'

'People do many silly things when they're young,' Pollux replied.

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Chapter 19: Forbidden Lessons

'Is that why her name was covered with a black mark?' Harry asked quietly. 'It was damaged on purpose, wasn't it.' Pollux's wince was all the confirmation Harry needed. 'I suppose Dad's name was missing because he ran away from home, and Uncle Marius was missing because he's a Squib.'

'It's just a silly old tapestry,' Pollux said hastily. 'It doesn't mean anything.'

'So can Aries and I meet our cousin Nymphadora?' Draco asked.

Pollux nearly refused outright, but as he looked down at the two earnest faces of his great-grandsons, he hesitated.

'I'll see what I can do,' he promised. 'Come on, Aries, let's go meet your grandmother.'

Both boys followed Pollux out of the room, none of them noticing the two extra names that had appeared on the tapestry next to Sirius's: Regina Malfoy and Aries Black.

Later that afternoon, Harry returned to Windermere Court with Uncle Marius and Aunt Clytemnestra. He eagerly recounted all the news of the holiday to the portraits, who laughed and gasped in all the right places.

'A Parselmouth?' Lily was stunned. 'Where did that come from?'

James grinned. 'Maybe you're not as Muggleborn as we thought. Maybe you're the Heiress of Slytherin.'

'But I'm not a Parselmouth,' Lily protested.

'Maybe you are, and just never had the opportunity to find out,' Regina observed.

Uncle Marius cleared his throat. Everyone stopped talking and turned their attention to him.

'Whilst all this is most diverting, I am afraid we have some rather pressing matters that demand our attention,' he said. 'Aries, right after you left for Grimmauld Place, Arcturus and Abraxas informed me that they and Pollux have agreed to allow you to remain here with us.'

'That's great!' Harry exclaimed, and James cheered.

'There are, however, a few conditions,' Marius said. 'You will live here Monday through Friday. You will spend Saturdays at Grimmauld Place and Sundays at Malfoy Manor. Over the summer, you will go to visit Arcturus and Melania in France.'

'That doesn't sound so bad,' Harry said.

'There's more,' Aunt Clytemnestra said. 'Cassiopeia will be coming to live with us.'

Harry's jaw fell open. 'Cassiopeia? Why?'

'She'll be tutoring you,' Uncle Marius explained. 'Draco will be coming over for lessons as well.'

Harry wasn't sure what to think of that. Cassiopeia had been perfectly nice to him, after all, but he had seen her be utterly nasty to other people. He didn't think he would much enjoy having her living with him.

On the other hand, taking lessons with Draco could be a lot of fun.

'We'll have to be very careful,' he said. 'No one can slip up at all.'

'Certainly not,' Uncle Marius agreed. 'It would take only one mistake to destroy all that we have accomplished.'

Harry's face fell. 'I hope she doesn't ruin everything.'

'Cheer up, Aries,' James said with a mischievous grin. 'We can make things very exciting for Aunt Cassie.'

As things turned out, Cassiopeia was not nearly as awful as Harry had feared. She continued to treat Harry well, and managed even to treat Uncle Marius and Aunt Clytemnestra somewhat civilly. She spent much of her time alone in her rooms, engrossed in her own studies. As for her lessons, Harry and Draco both found them quite fascinating.

'Most pureblood families nowadays,' she lectured them their first day of tutoring, shortly after the New Year, 'leave intensive instruction in magic until Hogwarts, and so handicap their offspring. They claim that studying too much magic too soon can overwhelm children.' She spat in disgust.

'I do not hold with such new-fangled nonsense. I shall be teaching you the way I was taught as a girl: two years of serious theory followed by two years with practice wands. We shall purchase your real wands a year before you go to Hogwarts, giving you a solid foundation from which to excel.'

'If that's the way they used to do things, why did they change?' Harry asked.

Cassiopeia snarled. 'Dumbledore, that Muggle-loving old fool, persuaded the Wizengamot to pass a number of ridiculous statutes restricting what could be taught to children of various ages.' She sniggered. 'He claims, of course, that it's for their own protection, but everyone knows it's an underhanded attempt to put Mudbloods on the same footing as decent wizards.'

'So what we're doing is illegal?' Draco looked positively thrilled.

'Technically,' Cassiopeia admitted. 'But so is special magic. Laws and regulations are for lesser mortals, not for such as we, the noble descendants of great and powerful wizards. One must learn to manipulate such petty regulations to one's advantage, but one can never allow them to prevent one from doing whatever is necessary to achieve one's ends.'

Cassiopeia instructed them thoroughly in the basics of Astronomy, Herbology and potion-making, as well as the theoretical foundations of Transfiguration and Charms. Fridays were devoted to what she called 'special magic,' in other words, the Dark Arts. Draco and Harry were both quite bright, and made steady progress, much to Cassiopeia's satisfaction. After lessons Draco often stayed over for much of the afternoon, and the two cousins spent many exhilarating days flying their broomsticks in the garden, playing pranks on the Squibs (who didn't really mind) and Cassiopeia (who minded a great deal) as well as exploring the three large magical homes they had at their disposal. As time passed, Harry grew more and more accustomed to his new life, and the Dursleys slowly became little more than a faintly-remembered nightmare.

It took Remus several months of digging in the wizarding Hall of Records, but he finally discovered that Marius and Clytemnestra Black, pureblood Squibs, had been appointed as guardians to one Aries Sirius Black, a pureblood, six years old, the only son of Sirius Orion Black and Regina Cassandra Malfoy.

Remus shook his head at the obvious deception. He might not have known Sirius as well as he thought he did, but he would certainly have known if his supposed friend had secretly been married. Moreover, Aries' birth date was given as August 1, 1980, only a day after Harry's birthday, and Remus happened to know exactly where Sirius had been that day—with Remus at James and Lily's, setting up Harry's nursery.

Remus snorted. Sirius would never have allowed his wife to give birth alone in another country without his being there to help. He had even tried to stay whilst Lily was giving birth, to provide moral support to James, but Lily had lost her temper and ordered him and James both out. Remus jotted down the address on a spare bit of parchment.

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Chapter 20: Plan Delta

The next day Remus placed a few basic appearance charms on himself before paying a visit to number seventeen, Windermere Court. He walked up the front steps and rang the doorbell. A house elf opened the door and showed him into the parlour, offering him a seat. A few moments later the elf brought him some tea.

'Master Black will be down to see you presently, sir,' she said before leaving the room.

A sudden shriek filled the house. Remus jumped up.

'YOU UNGRATEFUL, MISERABLE BRATS!' a woman's voice roared. 'IF I EVER GET MY HANDS ON YOU, I SWEAR TO MERLIN I'LL CRUCIATE YOU SCOUNDRELS TO WITHIN AN INCH OF YOUR LIVES!'

Remus was filled with sudden pity for Harry. How could he ever have thought Harry might be better off in such a horrible place? He should have told Dumbledore immediately.

How poor Harry must be suffering, he thought guiltily.

Then he heard the giggling in the next room. Drawing on his long-disused

Marauding skills, Remus crept over to the door and peeked in. Two sniggering boys stood on either side of the other door, which led into the hallway. Remus was confused. If he had been threatened with torture by a Dark witch, laughter would not have been his first response, yet the boys showed no sign of fright.

'Do you think she's opened the wardrobe yet?' asked the smaller, blond boy, whom Remus did not find familiar.

The other boy checked the clock on the mantelpiece and shook his head.

'Just a minute,' he said.

The taller boy, with his flowing dark locks and dashing features, reminded Remus very strongly of Sirius, and Remus suspected that this might be Harry under some sort of disguise. As he stood there, watching the boys wait, Remus suddenly realised what was going on, and grinned, despite himself. He had walked into the middle of a prank.

A sudden explosion rocked the entire house, and the witch's yelling resumed.

'Now she's opened the wardrobe,' the dark-haired boy smirked, and both boys laughed. The scene brought a tear to Remus's eye. They were acting so very like James and Sirius had, all those years before. Remus half-expected James to walk around the corner and congratulate the boys on their success.

'Well done, lads,' the familiar voice said, chuckling from a corner of the room Remus could not see. 'You should have seen the look on her face.'

Remus turned pale. It couldn't be.

'Thanks, Uncle James,' the dark-haired boy replied.

Remus heard light footsteps, followed by a slightly out-of-breath voice that sounded as though it belonged to an elderly man.

'She's coming down the back stairs,' the voice panted.

'How angry is she, Great-Great-Granddad?' asked the blond boy, but he didn't seem at all worried. 'Is it as bad as when we turned her cat pink?'

'Worse,' Great-Great-Granddad replied.

'As bad as when we blew up the fifth floor?' the dark-haired boy asked.

'Even worse.'

The boys shared a smirk. 'Grimmauld Place?' the dark-haired boy asked, and the blond boy nodded.

'Run along,' James's voice said. 'Go with Plan Delta. I'll cover for you.'

The boys nodded and dashed off, only moments before a furious looking harpy emerged into the dining room.

'Good morning, Aunt Cassie,' James said brightly. 'Did you sleep well?'

'Where are they?' Aunt Cassie growled.

'Where are who?' James asked politely.

'The scoundrels.'

'Oh, if you mean Aries and Draco, I'm afraid they've been gone all morning,' James replied. 'They went over to Grimmauld Place early to use the library.'

'I'm going to kill them,' Aunt Cassie said. 'I'm going to kill them both slowly and painfully.'

'Compose yourself, Cassie,' said Great-Great-Granddad. 'Why don't you take a nice hot bath?'

Aunt Cassie gave a fair imitation of a basilisk stare before sweeping off in a huff. She turned back briefly before exiting the room.

'Don't think I don't know who is the inspiration for all this nonsense, James Cygnus Potter,' she said acidly. 'If it were up to me I would reduce you to a pile of ashes.'

'Oh, but think of how poor Aries would react,' James said, and Remus could hear the wry grin in his voice. 'He might send Kaa after you again.'

Aunt Cassie gritted her teeth and stormed out, muttering darkly under her breath. Remus could only pick out a few bits: 'dratted snake,' 'undignified,' 'Dark Lords' and 'juvenile pranks.' Once she left, James let out a burst of hearty laughter that brought Remus's thoughts right back to Gryffindor Tower.

'Thanks for keeping watch, Granddad,' James said.

'Not at all, my boy, not at all,' Great-Great-Granddad replied. 'I was quite a prankster myself in my youth.'

'Really?' James sounded surprised.

'Where do you think you and Sirius got it from?' The voice yawned. 'Well, I'm going to go take a nap.'

'See you, Granddad.'

Remus couldn't resist. He slipped a bit further into the room, hoping to catch a glimpse of James. He found himself looking directly into the eyes of a very realistic portrait of his dead friend, who was sitting on a table and munching an apple. His hazel eyes flickered in recognition when he saw Remus.

'Moony? What are you doing in that ridiculous get-up?'

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Chapter 21: Enemy in the House

Cassiopeia Black swept up the back staircase in a huff, muttering curses under her breath as she took each step. The old witch had actually been rather fond of her nephew James when he was alive, at least after her

own fashion, but she had very little tolerance for his portrait, which, she felt, preserved and exacerbated his more unsavoury Potter qualities, whilst minimising the part of him that had been purely Dorea.

She also disapproved of the hold the portrait seemed to have over Aries, and, increasingly, Draco. James Potter would have proved a fine godfather, she had no doubt, but he was dead, and it in no way behoved the future Heads of the House of Black and Malfoy to spend their days listening to stories about James and Sirius's little gang and plotting all manner of pranks.

If Aries and Draco had not both proved such apt pupils and proper little gentlemen when the situation demanded it, Cassiopeia would have smashed the portrait in a heartbeat. As it was, she was forced to admit that the boys generally behaved properly during their lessons and at public or adult occasions, more so even than most boys of their age and class, and so she resisted her violent urges. But she kept a close eye on her nephew's portrait.

Once she returned to her suite, Cassiopeia cleaned up the debris of the boys' offensive prank with a flick of her wand and a slight smile. Even she had to admire the boys' cunning, though she would never have admitted it to anyone, not in a million lifetimes. She returned to her mirror and resumed placing her long hair into its customary bun.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw a shape in her Foe-Glass and started. Her eyes narrowed. An enemy was close and in this very house—one who meant harm to her family and her plans. Cassiopeia Disillusioned herself and slipped silently back down the staircase as quickly as she could.

The Squibs would never hold up against an enemy wizard for even a second. Cassiopeia was only grateful that Aries and Draco had gone to

Grimmauld Place. She silently commanded her wards not to allow them to return, nor to allow any witch or wizard to enter or leave the house until the danger had passed.

She reached the bottom of the steps and entered the dining room. Marius stood there alongside a young man with awful orange hair and shockingly shabby robes. His wand was out. Marius was ashen.

'You don't understand, Moony,' James's portrait pleaded. 'It's not what it looks like.'

'Your son has been kidnapped by your uncle, is being raised as the son of the traitor who murdered you, and is happily playing pranks on a mad old harpy who merrily threatens six-year-old children with the Cruciatus Curse,' the young man retorted. 'What am I missing?'

Cassiopeia raised her wand and silently Stunned the raving fool. Mad old harpy, indeed, she thought. She removed her Disillusionment and smirked at the horrified looks on the faces of her brother and nephew.

'Apparently, the fool has missed quite a bit,' she drawled.

She ignored Marius's muttering and James's shouting as she levitated the young man's immobile form up the stairs to her rooms, carefully keeping his head from knocking against the stairs. When she reached her boudoir she laid the wizard on a small divan before shutting and locking all her doors. She absolutely loathed unexpected disturbances.

She Conjured heavy iron shackles and bound the wizard's feet to the floor and arms to the ceiling.

'Ennervate,' she muttered, and the wizard returned to consciousness.

'You,' he grumbled when he saw her.

'I,' Cassiopeia replied brightly. 'The mad old harpy. Crucio!'

The wizard cried out in agony as her curse rippled through his body. She held her wand in place for a full minute before she stopped.

'Now,' Cassiopeia continued imperiously, 'tell me your name and why you have come to my home.'

'My name is Remus Lupin,' the wizard said defiantly. 'As for why I have come here, that is my affair.'

Cassiopeia shook her head. 'That's the wrong answer, I'm afraid, Mr Lupin.' She sighed. 'Fortunately for you, I'm going over to my cousin's for lunch in just a little over an hour, and have no time to linger whilst we wait for you to come to your senses.' She Summoned a phial from her cabinet. 'Veritaserum ought to loosen your tongue.' She forced the potion down Lupin's throat, and in a moment the familiar dazed look appeared in his eyes. She began the interrogation.

'What is your full name?'

'Remus John Lupin.'

'Why have you come to my home?'

'I came searching for Harry Potter,' Lupin replied.

Cassiopeia scowled. 'And what, pray tell, made you believe that you would find the Boy Who Lived in this house?'

'Harry Potter was kidnapped from his Muggle relatives' home several months ago,' Lupin began. 'Albus Dumbledore asked me to help locate him. The memories of Harry's guardians had been modified, but I interviewed several others, including Harry's cousin. From them I learned the circumstances of Harry's departure, as well as the description and surname of the kidnappers and their preference for Muggle transportation.' Lupin paused.

'The Muggles mistreated Harry terribly, locking him in a cupboard under the stairs and calling him a worthless freak. I came to believe that perhaps the kidnapper was motivated by good intentions. I remembered that James's uncle was a Black and a Squib, and decided to investigate in

the archives. It took a long time, but I discovered that around the time Harry vanished, Marius Black had taken in a boy of the same age, claiming him to be the son of Sirius Black.'

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Chapter 22: The Next Dark Lord

'And what makes you believe that Aries is not the son of Sirius Black?'

Cassiopeia asked.

'I was very close to Sirius. We, James and Peter were together almost constantly. There is no way Sirius could have secretly married without our knowing about it. Furthermore, August 1, 1980 was listed as the date of the boy's birth, but I was in close quarters with Sirius that entire week, and would have known if he had gone to France to see his son.'

'Mightn't he have delayed the journey in order to avoid detection?'

Remus shook his head. 'Sirius could never have stood it. He would have wanted to be there right away. Moreover, he never showed any romantic interest in Regina Malfoy. At one point after Hogwarts, he actually encouraged me to ask her out.'

Cassiopeia frowned. That level of deception did seem uncharacteristic of her bombastic great-nephew. Under other circumstances she might have dismissed Lupin's theories as evidence of a diseased mind, but she had seen Marius and James's expressions. They had seemed only frustrated at Lupin, but positively terrified at the sight of Cassiopeia. In her view, this lent some legitimacy to Lupin's claims. But there were other questions.

'What you are saying cannot be accurate,' she mused. 'I performed a series of powerful tests on the boy, which he passed. There's no way...' A thin smile spread across her face as she realised what had occurred. 'I ought to give my little brother more credit. He must have commissioned the Sanguinis Impostor potion. It's the only explanation.' Her smile grew broader and crueller. 'Yes, everything makes sense now.'

This explained the incredible closeness between Aries and James's portrait, as well as the boy's eagerness to please, which, welcome as it was, did not ordinarily result from growing up as the only child in a wealthy, pureblood home. But if Aries was not Sirius's son at all, but rather James's, raised for the first part of his life by filthy Muggles, things were different.

Cassiopeia thought this development might also explain Aries' unique talents. He was a Parselmouth, a rare gift that had never before appeared in either of the Black or Malfoy lines, distinguished as they both were.

The Potters, too, as far as Cassiopeia knew, had no Parselmouth ancestors. But James's wife's ancestry was unknown. It was assumed she was a Mudblood, but it was quite possible she came from a Squib line.

More likely, given her substantial skills, she was a pureblood orphan who had somehow wound up in a Muggle orphanage and been adopted. The actual facts were of no consequence. All that mattered was that Lily Evans had obviously been a descendant of Salazar Slytherin. Cassiopeia thought that perhaps she ought to treat Lily's portrait with more respect.

This, of course, explained the Dark Lord's attempt on Harry Potter's life.

He-Who-Must-Not-Be Named had clearly learnt of Harry's exalted lineage and discovered his power. Not able to abide such a threat, he decided to murder the boy and finish off the opposition. This made perfect sense to Cassiopeia. It was the sort of thing she would have done had she been in

the Dark Lord's position.

But Harry Potter had not only survived, but defeated the Dark Lord in the process. Cassiopeia cackled. It was brilliant! The boy was clearly a Dark wizard of prodigious talent. Marius had learnt of the circumstances the boy endured and decided to claim him for the House of Black. Cassiopeia approved wholeheartedly, since it meant that the greatest Dark Lord of all time was hers to mould and shape. She smiled proudly. Marius's plan had been worthy of Slytherin himself.

There were gaps, it was true, but now that Cassiopeia knew what they were, she could mend them. She turned her wand back on Lupin.

'Obliviate,' she whispered. 'Imperio.'

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When Remus Lupin left Windermere Court that day, he said nothing to anyone. As soon as left the street he forgot where he was and why he had come there. He went home via a circuitous route and directly composed the following letter to Albus Dumbledore.

Dear Professor Dumbledore, he wrote.

I regret to inform you that my investigation has proved only partially successful. The Dursleys' neighbours on Privet Drive were able to identify Harry's kidnapper only as a blonde woman with an American accent. I have done my best to investigate further, but have been stymied at every turn. I think it most likely that the woman and Harry have left the country.

I am sorry that I can be of no further help in this matter.

Sincerely yours,

Remus J. Lupin

After sending the letter, Remus put his Potter photos back in storage. As he caught a glimpse of Sirius's happy face, he sighed, and thought of all

the innocent lives the traitor had ruined: James, Lily and Harry, of course, but also lovely Regina and poor Aries, who would never know his father. Remus thought momentarily of writing a letter to Regina and Aries in France, but soon reconsidered. There was no need to stir up painful memories.

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Chapter 23: Unaware of Danger

Cassiopeia walked briskly through the charming streets of Windermere Court, a small wizarding community hidden from the eyes of Muggles.

The quaint houses were adorned with magical wards and concealed from the prying gaze of the non-magical world. As she approached her home, she felt a sense of accomplishment. Her brother, Mar, had achieved something noteworthy, and it was time to acknowledge his success.

The entrance to Windermere Court was marked by an ornate gate, protected by enchantments to keep unwanted visitors away. Cassiopeia skillfully disarmed the wards, allowing her easy access to the cozy house where her brother awaited. The door creaked open, and she found Mar sitting in the living room, still in a state of disbelief.

Cassiopeia's eyes softened as she patted her brother's cheek affectionately. "Well done, Mar," she said with genuine pride. "I'm so proud of you." Mar, overwhelmed by the moment, could only manage a dumbfounded stare. He hadn't expected such heartfelt words from his usually composed sister.

Leaving her brother to bask in his achievement, Cassiopeia decided to pay a visit to Callidora Longbottom. The Longbottoms were an esteemed wizarding family, and Cassiopeia had developed a close friendship with Callidora over the years. As she walked along the cobblestone streets, she couldn't help but whistle a merry tune. The success of her brother's endeavors had lifted her spirits, and the magical atmosphere of Windermere Court added an extra bounce to her step.

Upon reaching Callidora's residence, Cassiopeia knocked on the door with a rhythm matching her cheerful whistle. The door swung open, revealing Callidora with a warm smile.

"Cassiopeia, dear! So good to see you," Callidora greeted, ushering her inside.

Cassiopeia, ever apologetic, explained, "I'm terribly sorry I'm seven minutes late for lunch. There was something I needed to take care of at home."

Callidora waved off the apology, understanding the unpredictable nature of magical matters. "No worries, my dear. Sit, sit. Lunch is ready, and we have much to catch up on."

Over a delightful spread of magical dishes, Cassiopeia shared the news of her brother's accomplishment, recounting the proud moment when she congratulated him. Callidora listened with genuine interest, appreciating the bond that Cassiopeia and Mar shared.

As they finished their meal, Cassiopeia couldn't resist the temptation to indulge in dessert. "Callidora, have you tried the new Honeydukes chocolate truffles? They're absolutely divine."

The conversation shifted to lighter topics as they discussed the latest offerings from Honeydukes and shared anecdotes from their respective magical endeavors. Cassiopeia cherished these moments of camaraderie,

finding solace in the company of a dear friend.

However, duty called, and Cassiopeia excused herself, promising to meet Callidora again soon. As she stepped out into the magical sunlight, she couldn't help but contemplate the broader wizarding world and the challenges it faced.

Deciding to make a detour on her way back to Windermere Court, Cassiopeia found herself in Surrey, where she knew Muggles needed a bit of magical intervention. The Dursley boy, known for his unpleasant demeanor, was the first on her list. With a flick of her wand, she cast the Obliviate charm, erasing any memory of magical occurrences from the young Muggle's mind.

Cassiopeia, though efficient in her magical endeavors, couldn't escape the constraints of time. She arrived at Callidora's a bit later than planned, prompting another round of apologies. Callidora, being the understanding friend she was, chuckled and assured Cassiopeia that all was forgiven.

As the two friends spent the afternoon discussing magical happenings and sharing laughter, Cassiopeia couldn't shake off the feeling of contentment. She had not only secured her brother's success but also contributed to maintaining the delicate balance between the magical and non-magical worlds.

The day drew to a close, and Cassiopeia returned to Windermere Court, where the enchanting glow of the street lamps welcomed her home. The sense of accomplishment lingered as she settled into the coziness of her house, reflecting on the events of the day.

With a contented sigh, Cassiopeia knew that her actions had ripple effects, ensuring the safety of her great-nephew and subtly countering the influence of Albus Dumbledore. As she drifted into a peaceful night's

sleep, she couldn't help but feel grateful for the magical tapestry that intertwined her life with those she cared about.

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Harry and Draco returned from Grimmauld Place that afternoon, clutching heavy volumes of Dark and advanced magic to show their aunt as proof of their alibi. The boys couldn't really understand anything they read in those books, and their aunt knew it, but it pleased her to see them take an interest in 'special magic,' and the boys found the books most helpful at avoiding punishment.

Neither Marius nor James said anything to the boys about the strange events of the morning, and they went about their routine as though nothing had occurred. They flew their broomsticks in the garden until dinnertime, and then played Exploding Snap in the parlour until quite late, when Marius finally sent Draco home and Harry to bed. Harry never learnt how close he had been to having his secret revealed, and though he was pleased at the additional kindnesses Cassiopeia began to show him, he suspected nothing out of the ordinary.

....

At Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, Albus Dumbledore sighed in sad frustration. His troubles had begun with the letter from Remus Lupin. None of Dumbledore's other channels had yielded any fruit, and the Headmaster had counted a very great deal on the werewolf to locate the boy.

If Harry had been taken out of the country, Dumbledore thought it highly unlikely that they could ever find him, not without involving the authorities, and Dumbledore thought it best not to instigate a panic by informing the world that the Boy Who Lived had been kidnapped. Instead, Dumbledore decided to investigate the Hogwarts list to see if

Harry Potter's name was still written there. it was the one way he knew of to make certain the boy was still alive. He unfurled the parchment with every expectation of finding consolation, but met only disappointment. Harry's name was gone. The Boy Who Lived had died, that was the only explanation.

Dumbledore returned to his office and composed letters to the Ministry, the Wizengamot and the Daily Prophet, informing them that Harry Potter had died that same day, from a tragic bout of dragon pox. It seemed that his battle with Voldemort had drained the poor boy's magical reserves so greatly that he was unable to fight off a simple infection.

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When Cassiopeia read the news the next day, she cackled with glee. Marius and Clytemnestra felt a profound sense of relief. Two people, however, were confused and distressed by Dumbledore's lie. One was a certain werewolf in his late twenties, who was furious that Dumbledore would abandon the search for James's son so easily, and kept resolving to renew the search himself, only to be dissuaded each time by a strange compulsion to organise his bookshelves.

The other was the Boy Who Still Lived himself, who felt that this new revelation only confirmed all the horrendous stories he had heard about Dumbledore from his family, and resolved never to trust anything the old man might say.

Meanwhile, in Azkaban prison, a certain godfather overheard the tragic news from a human guard, and spent the next three years howling in bitter sorrow.

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Chapter 24: Family Ties

Three years later, Harry had grown into a strong, healthy and very bright boy. As his summer began, he revelled in his freedom from lessons and made preparations to visit his great-grandparents in the south of France, as he did every year. This year his cousin Draco would accompany him for the entire summer, which made both boys ecstatic.

Harry and Draco were the best of friends, as close as brothers, and though they technically lived in different homes, they still managed to spend almost every day together. Of course, like all brothers, they had occasional disagreements, but they were really very fond of one another, and usually resolved such disputes quickly.

On the morning they were to leave for France, Harry was supervising as Mopsy the house elf packed his trunk. Draco waltzed into the bedroom just as Harry had finished his final inspection.

'Bonjour, Aries,' he greeted Aries cheerfully. 'Comment ça va?' The boys often spoke French together, especially in front of the house elves.

'Bien, Draco, et toi?' Harry replied.

'Bien. Tu es prêt?'

Harry nodded. 'Bien sûr, mais tu es venu ici très tôt. Le Portoloin ne partira pas avant midi.'

Draco shrugged. 'Je le sais, mais je n'ai pas envie de rester avec mes parents pendant toute la matinée.'

Harry could understand that. He wouldn't have wanted to spend all that time alone with Uncle Lucius and Aunt Narcissa either. He closed and locked his trunk. Mopsy took the trunk downstairs.

'Care for a game of Exploding Snap?' Harry asked.

Draco agreed, and the two cousins settled on the floor and began to play.

'It's brilliant that your parents agreed for you to come to France for the whole summer,' Harry said as he dealt. 'Last year you could only come for a month.'

Draco smiled. 'You know my parents. They're just happy not to have to deal with me.' He picked up his hand.

'They do care about you, you know,' Harry assured him.

'Of course,' Draco laughed bitterly. 'I'm their heir. Everyone cares about the heir.'

Harry rolled his eyes. 'I have no idea how that works,' he retorted sarcastically.

Draco chuckled. 'You have the Squibs though. They don't seem to care about the whole inheritance thing. I think they'd dote on you even if you were just a Muddblood foundling they discovered on their doorstep.'

'They just might,' Harry agreed with a grin. 'The Squibs have big hearts.'

'Well, they don't have magic,' Draco said. 'I suppose they need something to take up the extra space.'

After three games, of which Harry won one and Draco two, the boys went downstairs. Uncle Marius and Aunt Clytemnestra were waiting in the parlour.

'So, boys, are you excited?' Uncle Marius asked them with a fond smile.

'Two months of sunshine, no lessons and an enormous country estate practically to yourselves.'

'Not to mention Granny 's cooking,' Draco added wryly. Technically, Melania Black was only distantly related to Draco, but she insisted that both boys call her 'Granny,' and treated them both the same. (Aunt Cassie said it was her Hufflepuff roots.) Unlike most other wealthy pureblood

witches, who left the cooking to the house elves, Melania carefully supervised her kitchen, and only used her elf for the menial tasks, freeing her to devote her energy to perfecting her artistry.

'Though, strictly speaking, we're not completely free from lessons,' Harry pointed out. 'Granny always works with us on our potion-brewing.'

Draco laughed. 'Those lessons are fun, though, not like with Aunt Cassie.' Ordinarily he would not have been so blatant about his dislike of his great-aunt, but today the old witch had gone over to Grimmauld Place to work on a project with her brother Pollux.

Uncle Marius checked his watch. 'The Portkey leaves in ten minutes.

Better get ready.'

The boys gathered all their belongings and stood close together. Aunt Clytemnestra straightened out their robes and gave each boy a small hug before Uncle Marius ruffled their hair and handed them an empty bottle of firewhisky.

'Bon voyage,' he said, and the boys felt the familiar tug of the Portkey pulling them to France. They landed in a pile in the entrance hall of Arcturus Black's chateau. Melania Black was standing there to greet them, a soft smile on her face.

'Welcome, my dears,' she said, and embraced them both warmly. 'It's so very nice to have you back here.'

'It's good to be here, Granny,' Harry said, hugging her back. 'Where's Great-Grandfather?'

Melania frowned, and Harry thought she looked a bit more tired than she had the last time he had seen her.

'He's not doing very well,' she explained. 'He's lying down and resting at the moment. You'll see him later.' She summoned Roquefort, the house elf, and ordered him to take the boys' belongings to their rooms before

she led Harry and Draco into the kitchen and sat them down at the table. 'You must be hungry,' she said. 'Why don't you tell me your news whilst I fix you up a little something?'

The boys chatted eagerly with the old witch as she slipped on her apron, drew her wand, and set to work. She was clearly ready for them. With a flick of her wand, she sent over a plate of thinly-sliced sausages, a loaf of freshly baked bread and a dish of tapenade. The boys' goblets filled with pumpkin juice.

A bit later came the pâté, followed by duck with mushroom sauce. Then came the salad and a plate of goat cheese, and just when the boys thought they could not manage another bite, a tray of chocolate éclairs appeared: Granny's speciality. When the boys finally got up from the table, they decided to take a nap before heading outside to play one-on-one Quidditch. The summer was off to an excellent start.

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Chapter 25: Inheritance and

Influence

Back in England, Pollux Black and his sister Cassiopeia were poring over ancient Latin codices and assorted scrolls. Two and a half years before, after Pollux had been boasting to Aries about his vast store of legal expertise, the boy had asked his great-grandfather whether there was anything that could be done to free his father from Azkaban. Ever since then, despite the onset of his illness, Pollux had set himself the goal of

clearing the name of Sirius Black.

This task had taken on greater urgency due to the old man's advancing decrepitude. Pollux knew that he had little time left to live, and his cousin Arcturus had also been rather ill of late.

There were no other Black wizards left to help guide Aries, and Pollux had no wish to see his heir pass entirely under the influence of the damnable Abraxas Malfoy, who, most unfortunately, seemed to remain in excellent health.

It had taken every ounce of influence he had left at the Ministry, but Pollux had learnt the appalling details of Sirius's incarceration. It horrified the old man that a Black could be so easily deprived of the customary rights belonging to wizards of their class and social standing, and he had managed to frighten Abraxas and Arcturus into using their influence and wealth to help remedy the situation. They had said nothing to Aries, however, not willing to raise false hopes in the poor boy.

Now, after a series of newspaper articles about Black contributions to wizarding history, a number of generous donations to the Ministry and the opening of the new Orion and Walburga Black Memorial Wing at St Mungo's, everything was finally ready.

Pollux and Cassiopeia were preparing the final details of their case. They would go before the Wizengamot the next day, and Pollux had every confidence he would be able to secure his grandson's release. He was, after all, P. C. Black, Chief Warlock Emeritus.

.....

Albus Dumbledore sat wearily in his chair the next morning, not eager for the day's work to begin. The Wizengamot confronted many unpleasant issues at the best of times, and today's docket promised to be especially painful. The very first case was a petition brought by Pollux

Black.

Pollux had always been a rather unsavoury character, manipulative and vindictive. He had many enemies and few friends. But he was richer than Croesus, and his legal knowledge was unsurpassed. Dumbledore did not know what precisely the crotchety wizard had in mind, but he knew that whatever it was promised to make his life exceedingly difficult.

All the Blacks seemed to have that talent, and Dumbledore had recently been surprised (and, secretly, a bit disappointed) to learn that Sirius, whom he had happily believed to be the end of the miserable line, had managed to reproduce, with a Malfoy no less, and that the son, Aries, would be attending Hogwarts in a little over a year. Dumbledore naturally intended to do his best not to prejudge the unfortunate boy, but his origins were hardly auspicious.

He reluctantly called the Wizengamot to order, and two of his least favourite people in the world appeared in front of him: Pollux Black and his spinster sister Cassiopeia, who had wreaked havoc on the Hogwarts Board of Governors since before Dumbledore had become Headmaster. Cassiopeia stood straight and proud, but Pollux sat hunched over in an ornately-carved walking chair.

'Professor Dumbledore,' Pollux announced, his voice shaking. 'Honoured members of the Wizengamot. I come before you this morning with a most serious grievance concerning a gross miscarriage of justice that has been perpetrated by the Ministry of Magic against my grandson, Sirius Orion Black.'

Dumbledore turned pale. What did the old man have up his sleeve?

'I have learnt that my grandson, the heir to the Headship of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black, was thrown into Azkaban nine years ago without even the benefit of a trial,' Pollux continued. There were

several gasps, and several more angry murmurs. Pollux flicked his wand and sent a scroll to the evidence desk.

'This scroll contains a copy of the order to imprison Sirius immediately, without a trial. It bears the signatures of Millicent Bagnold, then-Minister for Magic, and Bartemius Crouch, then-Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement.'

A similar scroll appeared before each member of the Wizengamot. They unravelled the scrolls and looked them over carefully. The angry murmurs increased.

'As the honourable members can all plainly see, the offences cited in justification of my grandson's imprisonment are two,' Pollux went on.

'Sirius is firstly accused of having betrayed the Potters to Him-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, and secondly of murdering Peter Pettigrew and a number of Muggles. These crimes are certainly heinous, but we must not allow their seriousness to obscure our sense of justice. Every witch and wizard has an absolute right to a full trial.'

Dumbledore frowned. He did not like where this was headed.

'The injustice in the present case is greatly exacerbated by the frivolous nature of the evidence on which the decision was based,' Pollux said. 'It is claimed that Sirius Black was the Potters' Secret Keeper, and therefore the only one who could have betrayed them to the Dark Lord. Yet we have no solid evidence to confirm this.'

'Actually, Pollux, there is no doubt that Sirius was the Potters' Secret Keeper,' Dumbledore said. 'I gave evidence on this myself.'

Pollux smiled condescendingly. 'Quite right, Headmaster,' he said, emphasising his obstinate refusal to refer to Dumbledore as Chief Warlock, and sent another scroll to the evidence desk. 'You have before you the official testimony of Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore. As

you see, the professor is quite adamant that James Potter told him that he intended to make Sirius his Secret Keeper.'

'Are you insinuating that the Chief Warlock told a lie?' an angry witch demanded.

'Not at all,' Pollux said calmly. 'However, his so-called evidence is inadmissible. Professor Dumbledore said that James Potter said that he was planning to make Sirius his Secret Keeper. This is only hearsay.

The Headmaster has no direct knowledge that Sirius was ever in fact the Secret Keeper, nor even that the Fidelius Charm was actually performed.

I would remind the Wizengamot that under the rules of procedure laid down by Merlin himself, hearsay may not be used to convict a wizard of a crime.'

'What about Peter Pettigrew's evidence?' another wizard asked.

'Ah, yes, Peter Pettigrew's evidence.' Pollux smiled. 'Alas, here too we are dealing with hearsay. An Auror reported that a Muggle claimed that Pettigrew accused Sirius of having betrayed James and Lily. One might as well throw a child into Azkaban because another wizard heard a house-elf claim to have heard the child threaten to kill another child after losing a game of Quidditch.'

More murmuring erupted. Dumbledore knew he was losing control of the situation.

'There is also the murder of Peter Pettigrew to consider,' he pointed out.

Pollux laughed. 'And what evidence is there to prove that? An Auror reported that a Muggle claimed to have seen the two wizards arguing, followed by an explosion. The Evidence Statute of 1236 clearly states that Muggle evidence is not to be relied upon in such cases, and rightly so, inasmuch as the unreliability of Muggles in any such situation is obvious to all right-thinking people.'

'Sirius was found at the scene of the crime afterwards,' Amelia Bones reminded the old man. 'He laughed madly at the murder.'

Pollux narrowed his eyes. 'Precisely, Madam Bones. He laughed madly, a response that I believe indicates only that Sirius was driven momentarily insane by the sudden tragic loss of three of his closest friends. What further evidence is there? Was *Priori Incantatem* performed on his wand? Was he interrogated under *Veritaserum*? If so, there is no evidence in the record of anything of the sort having been done.'

Dumbledore sighed. 'Are you asking for Sirius to be given a trial?'

'At this late date?' Pollux snarled. 'Don't be preposterous. Sirius has sat in prison for nine horrible years, without ever receiving a trial. All the evidence provided is flimsy at best, nonsensical at worst. The only witnesses to the supposed crimes are dead or long Obliviated. On the basis of the Criminal Trials Act of 1739 I demand that Sirius Black be released immediately, the case dismissed and his record cleared.'

'Now you're the one who's being preposterous,' Dumbledore replied.

'Hardly, Headmaster,' Pollux drawled. 'The Criminal Trials Act clearly specifies that no pureblood witch or wizard is to be held without trial for longer than thirty days. In the event that such a violation does occur, the accused is to be released at once and cleared of all charges.'

Dumbledore sighed. This was shaping up to be a very unpleasant day indeed.

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Chapter 26: From Azkaban to

France

The dog that was Sirius Black sat on his haunches, howling at the window of his cell, just as he did every day. His canine thoughts raced incessantly.

Harry was dead. James was dead. Lily was dead. Sirius was stuck in this miserable hellhole. Peter had betrayed them all.

Harry was dead. James was dead. Lily was dead. Sirius was stuck in this miserable hellhole. Peter had betrayed them all.

Harry was dead. James was dead. Lily...

The dark cloud of the Dementors lifted a bit, and the dog stopped howling. He heard footsteps outside the door of his cell and transformed.

The door swung open, revealing an Auror.

'Come with me, Mr Black,' the Auror commanded. Sirius followed him meekly through the winding corridors of the prison, until they finally came out in a brightly lit waiting room, where another Auror was standing alongside an elderly witch Sirius had not seen in many years.

'Aunt Cassie?' he said in confusion. 'What are you doing here?'

The witch said nothing, but the second Auror stepped forward and unrolled a scroll.

'Sirius Orion Black,' he read. 'At ten-thirty this morning the Wizengamot voted on procedural grounds to clear you of all charges and order your immediate release from Azkaban. All your rights are hereby restored.'

'The Ministry of Magic will deposit fifty thousand Galleons in your Gringotts vault, with their apologies, on the condition that you sign a waiver promising never to bring a lawsuit against the Ministry or any past or present Ministry officials over this matter. Do you agree to the waiver?'

Sirius was stunned. He thought he must be dreaming.

'Do you agree to the waiver?' the Auror repeated. Sirius nodded dumbly, and signed the parchment the Auror held out to him. His hand shook terribly. 'On behalf of the Ministry of Magic,' the Auror continued, 'allow me to express our sincerest apologies for the mistakes made in your arrest and incarceration, and to wish you all the best in your future endeavours.'

'Congratulations, Sirius,' Aunt Cassie said, and motioned for Sirius to go with her.

They stepped into another room with a single large fireplace and Flooed directly to the Ministry. At the other end a couple of Aurors asked for their papers. Aunt Cassie handed over a roll of parchment, and the Aurors let them leave.

Aunt Cassie led Sirius to a discreet fireplace that was used only for the departure of released convicts, and they Flooed to a familiar flat. It was the flat Sirius had inherited from Uncle Alphard and shared with James after they finished Hogwarts.

'Welcome home, Sirius,' Aunt Cassie said, and Sirius broke down in tears. The old witch showed him little sympathy. 'For Merlin's sake, calm yourself, Sirius.' He continued to weep. Cassiopeia rolled her eyes. 'There is no time for this, Sirius. You have your godson to think of, after all.'

'Harry's dead,' Sirius said bitterly.

'No, he isn't,' Aunt Cassie replied crisply.

Sirius stopped crying and looked at her hopefully. 'He isn't? Where is he? What happened?'

Aunt Cassie closed her eyes and took a deep breath. 'Harry Potter is well for the time being. If you value his life, you must listen carefully to me and do exactly as I say.'

Sirius looked his great-aunt firmly in the eyes. 'I'm listening.'

.....

A month later, in the south of France, the Black household was making preparations for Harry's upcoming birthday. The entire extended Black and Malfoy families were coming, as had become their tradition over the years. For Harry and Draco, this year's celebration was particularly significant, as Aunt Cassie had agreed to take them both back to England on August 2, in order to buy their wands.

For several days leading up to the celebration, the house was in an uproar. Granny spent all her time in the kitchen with Roquefort, her skilled house elf, making preparations for an enormous feast. Mopsy came over from England to decorate the chateau, filling every room with fresh flowers and streamers.

The guests came over a few at a time. Uncle Marius and Aunt Clytemnestra came first, followed the next day by the Malfoys. Pollux and Irma came the day before Harry's birthday, along with a teenage witch with pink hair.

'Dora!' Harry exclaimed. 'It's been ages.' Pollux had fulfilled his promise to take Harry and Draco to meet their cousin Nymphadora Tonks a couple of years before, but they hadn't seen each other very often since then. Family tensions still ran high. 'I thought your mum and dad didn't want you to come.'

Dora shrugged. 'They didn't. But I'm seventeen now, so I can do what I like.'

'We're glad to have you, dear,' Melania said.

On August 1, Harry's birthday dinner began promptly at noon, with mountains of food and plenty of laughter. Halfway through there was a flash, and Aunt Cassie appeared, clutching a hairbrush together with a

tall man with shoulder-length black hair.

'Happy birthday, Aries,' Aunt Cassie said. 'I apologise for our tardiness.'

She gestured towards the stranger. 'I've brought someone you should meet.'

Harry looked at the man for what seemed an eternity before he recognised him. The man's robes were elegant, and his hair and beard were neatly trimmed and well kept. But he was very thin, and his grey eyes bore a sunken, haunted look.

He looked different, but Harry had seen him in plenty of pictures and heard countless stories about him. It was his godfather and supposed father: Sirius Black. Harry began to panic. Everything was going to be ruined. He looked at Uncle Marius anxiously, but the Squib smiled at Harry reassuringly, and nodded slightly. Harry swallowed hard.

'I know you,' he said quietly. 'You're my dad. You're Sirius Black.' Draco and Dora gasped, but none of the adults seemed surprised.

Harry waited for the confused look, the loud denial, the angry rejection, but they never came. Sirius only smiled a bit nervously and nodded.

'That's right, Aries,' he said sheepishly. 'And I'd know you anywhere, even if I haven't seen you since you were a baby.' He looked at Harry meaningfully. 'You look just like your dad. Except for the eyes. You have your mother's eyes.' He winked at Harry imperceptibly, and in that instant the boy understood. Somehow Sirius knew everything that had happened, but he still wanted Harry.

Harry suddenly felt an inexpressible warmth wash over him. Sirius was free, he knew who Harry really was, and he still wanted him. Sirius held his arms wide and gave Harry a tentative look, as though frightened that Harry might not want him in return. The tears burst forth unbidden as Harry ran to Sirius and hugged him tightly, never wanting to let go,

savouring his (god)father's affectionate embrace.

'Happy birthday, son,' Sirius whispered into his ear, and roughly kissed the top of Harry's head.

'Thanks, Dad,' Harry murmured through his tears.

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Chapter 27: Sirius Joins the

Slytherin Cause

Harry pulled Sirius over to the table and they sat down. Arcturus rose from his seat and raised a glass.

'Allow me to propose a toast,' he said in his high, reedy voice, 'to my grandson, Sirius Orion Black, heir to our Noble and Most Ancient House, and to his fine son, Aries Sirius Black, who has turned into such a magnificent young gentleman, a tribute to his breeding and upbringing.

Sirius and Aries!'

'Sirius and Aries,' the family mumbled. Arcturus sat back down.

'Merlin, Sirius, it's good to have you back,' Melania gushed, piling food high on his plate with her wand. 'You're awfully thin. It's not healthy. Not to worry, though. We shall have you fixed up in no time.'

Cassiopeia coughed pointedly.

'Thank you, Granny,' Sirius said. 'Actually, Aunt Cassie has already done a good bit of fixing me up and bringing me up to date. I don't know how I could have managed without her.'

'Oh, it's nothing at all,' Cassiopeia said, blushing faintly.

'Oh no, Aunt Cassie, I'm very grateful to you,' Sirius said. 'I'm especially thankful for the excellent tutoring you've been giving Aries. I do hope you'll continue.'

Cassiopeia beamed at him. 'Well, if you insist, dear, I suppose I can. We must provide only the best for darling Aries.'

'Yes, I see no reason why anything should change, simply because Sirius is free,' Pollux opined. 'You and the Squibs have been doing a fine job of raising Aries, and I'm sure Sirius will be only too happy to maintain the status quo.'

Irma rolled her eyes. Marius and Clytemnestra just sighed.

'Well, I for one am glad that little Aries has a father,' Abraxas said. 'You're a fine boy, Sirius. Allow me to express my joy at having you as my son-in-law, and to welcome you to the Malfoy family. Our home is your home.'

Lucius muttered darkly under his breath.

'Thank you, Mr Malfoy,' Sirius said.

Abraxas chuckled. 'Please, call me "Dad."'

Lucius continued his angry muttering. Harry glanced over at Draco and rolled his eyes. Draco chuckled, but not before Harry had seen a look of longing in his cousin's eyes as he stared at the way Sirius had his arm around Harry's shoulders.

'By the way, Aries,' Cassiopeia piped up. 'Don't forget that your father and I shall take you and Draco to Diagon Alley tomorrow in order to purchase your wands. That will give you a good month of practice before you return to England.'

Pollux harrumphed. 'I don't see the need for these preposterous restrictions on underage magic. The French take a much more sensible line on this, I think.'

'Well, our children manage to do magic at home without being detected,' Irma replied acidly. 'I don't think their having to abstain in public is such an insuperable hardship.'

'Not all families allow their children to use magic at home, Irma,' Melania pointed out. 'I was never allowed to practice during the holidays.'

'Yes, dear,' Irma replied in a saccharine voice. 'But you come from a family of Hufflepuffs.'

'Don't let your great-grandmother prejudice you, boys,' Melania said to Aries and Draco. 'Hufflepuff is a fine House.'

'I'm with you, Granny,' Dora said proudly.

'Draco, if you're Sorted into Hufflepuff, I swear I'll disown you,' Lucius said evenly.

'Don't be ridiculous, Lucius,' Abraxas said. 'Draco will go wherever Aries goes, and where else could our little Parselmouth go but Slytherin?'

Lucius resumed his muttering.

'I don't know, Dad,' Sirius said with a mischievous smile. 'Aries could take after his father and wind up in Gryffindor.'

Everyone fell silent and scowled at Sirius. Harry jumped in to his father's defence.

'That's brilliant, Dad!' he said. He gave Draco a pointed look, and his cousin jumped in.

'That's right, Uncle Sirius,' Draco said. 'It would be wicked for me and Aries to wind up in Gryffindor! Who knew you were so devious?'

'What are you babbling on about, Draco?' Lucius demanded.

'Think about it, Uncle Lucius,' Harry said. 'If I'm to fulfil my true destiny, it's essential to keep meddling old fools like Albus Dumbledore from suspecting what I'm up to.'

'He'll watch us like a hawk if we're in Slytherin, given our family

backgrounds,' Draco said.

'The prejudiced old codger,' Pollux muttered emphatically.

'But in Gryffindor, we could do as we please, without fear of retribution,'

Draco continued.

'We can build up our power bases without opposition,' Harry added.

'And when the time is right, we strike,' Sirius said brightly, to everyone's shock and delight. 'The Muggle-loving fools won't know what hit them.'

Harry and Draco looked up at him in a mixture of surprise and admiration. No adult had ever caught onto them so quickly before, still less joined in.

Cassiopeia cackled. 'A fine plan. Worthy of Slytherin's true Heir.'

Abraxas chuckled thoughtfully. 'You make good points, boys. If anything, I think this proves the two of you think like Slytherins. But, if you can pull it off, your plot has my blessing.'

'No one would expect the next Dark Lord to come from Hufflepuff, either,' Melania said, sulking, but no one paid her any mind, except for poor Dora, who was beginning to understand just why her parents wanted her to keep her distance from the House of Black.

After dinner, Sirius, Harry, Draco and Abraxas went outside for a game of two-on-two Quidditch. Harry and Sirius teamed up against Draco and Abraxas, and the teams were fairly evenly matched. Sirius and Harry won the first match, and then Sirius suggested they switch. Draco seemed surprised.

'I thought you'd want to spend time with Aries,' he sputtered.

'I do,' Sirius said. 'But I'd also like to get to know my favourite nephew.'

Draco raised an eyebrow. 'Uncle Sirius, I'm your only nephew.'

Sirius grinned. 'Precisely.'

Abraxas and Harry won the second match handily, and Draco looked a

bit frustrated, but Sirius ruffled his hair and promised him that they'd play again the next day after they got back from Diagon Alley.

'And tomorrow, we'll win,' Sirius assured his nephew.

'In your dreams,' Abraxas retorted. Harry and Draco both laughed.

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Chapter 28: Magical Bonds

Late that night, after everyone had gone to bed, Sirius slipped into Harry's room and sat on the edge of his bed.

'Aries, are you awake?' he asked.

Harry yawned. 'I am now,' he mumbled.

'We can talk tomorrow, if you'd rather,' Sirius offered.

Harry shook his head. 'No, I'm up.' He sat up in his bed. 'Thanks for looking out for Draco earlier today,' he said. 'I think he's feeling left out.' Sirius chuckled. 'I noticed. I saw the way he was watching us at dinner. It reminded me actually of how envious I used to feel of James and his family. Mr Potter did his best to make me feel at home, and I suppose the least I can do is try to do the same thing for Draco.' He paused. 'Harry, we need to talk about something.'

Harry's face fell. He knew it was too good to be true. 'Don't worry. I know you're not my real father.' He looked up at Sirius earnestly. 'I really appreciate your playing along. I don't want to go back to the Muggles.'

'That's not what I meant, Harry,' Sirius said. 'In the first place, I want to make sure I know the whole story. Aunt Cassie explained most of it, but I

don't know how much you've told her.'

Harry's eyes went wide. 'Aunt Cassie knows? We haven't told her anything. How did she find out?'

'She didn't tell me.'

'Why does she play along then?'

Sirius smirked. 'Let's just say that the fact that you vanquished Voldemort as a baby feeds her fantasies about your Dark power.'

'You said his name!' Harry exclaimed. 'No one ever says his name.'

Sirius just shrugged. 'Let's start from the beginning, shall we?'

Harry explained how life had been at the Dursleys before the Squibs rescued him, and how they had disguised Harry using a potion. He talked about the past few years and how he appreciated his quirky family. He talked about Draco and the pranks they played. Sirius laughed at that.

'It sounds like me and your dad,' he said. 'We did that sort of thing all the time.'

'I know, Dad,' Harry said. 'Uncle James told me. Where do you think we got the idea?'

Sirius frowned. 'I want you to remember that James Potter is your real dad. You can even just call me Sirius when we're alone.'

Harry nodded. 'I understand. You'll probably want children of your own some day. Real children.'

Sirius looked at Harry strangely, and then laughed out loud.

'That's not what I meant, Harry,' he said fondly. 'Your dad was the best friend I ever had, and a wonderful man. It would feel like betraying him if I let you forget that you're really a Potter. I could never forgive myself.'

He put his hand on Harry's shoulder. 'As for you, though, I've loved you since before you were born, and I'm honoured to have the opportunity to care for you.'

'Really?' Harry asked in a small voice.

'Absolutely,' Sirius replied. He chuckled. 'In some ways, I feel guilty. You look like me. You use my name. It's like I've stolen you.'

Harry looked surprised. 'I never thought of it that way. I've just always wanted a real dad. The portraits are great and all, but...' He trailed off.

'They get old after a while,' Sirius finished for him. 'They never change or grow.'

'Exactly. Once I accidentally went two whole days without talking to them, and they didn't even notice.'

'Of course they didn't,' Sirius said. 'They're designed that way.'

Harry shrugged. 'I think that's when I realised for the first time that they weren't real people, that my real dad was dead.'

'Well, I don't know how good I'll be at filling his shoes,' Sirius said hesitantly. 'He was a special man. But I'll do my best.'

Harry chewed his lower lip. 'Do you mind if I call you Dad, even when we're in private?'

Sirius looked surprised. 'Not at all. I thought you wouldn't want to. I'm just some stranger who's barged into your life, after all.'

Harry laughed. 'Hardly. I've been looking at your pictures and hearing stories about you since I was six. I used to dream that you'd come live with us, and that we'd finally be a real family.' He paused. 'Sometimes I had nightmares, though, that you wouldn't want me.'

Sirius hugged Harry tightly. 'Never think that, Harry. Never think that.'

Harry chuckled. 'It's just a stupid dream, right? I used to have lots of dreams about an enormous black dog too. They say that's the Grim, and to dream of it is bad luck, but nothing bad ever happened.'

Sirius smiled. 'Actually, Harry, in your case, I think the Grim is good luck.'

'Why's that?'

'Can you keep a secret?' Sirius asked.

Harry rolled his eyes. 'Think about who you're talking to.'

Sirius laughed. 'Good point.' He transformed, then and there. Harry let out a small yelp, but then began to run his fingers through the dog's magnificent fur. He sniggered.

'Aunt Cassie's going to have kittens,' he said with a grin. 'She hates dogs.'

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Chapter 29: Wand Selection

The next day after breakfast Harry, Draco, Sirius and Cassiopeia took a Portkey to Windermere Court, and then Flooed to Diagon Alley. The passers-by whispered as they walked along the street towards Ollivander's.

Several people shot Sirius nasty looks, and one witch actually came up to him and started yelling before Cassiopeia blasted her out of the way with a flick of her wand. The sudden protests were deafening.

'Self-defence,' Cassiopeia snarled at the angry crowd. 'Next time I shan't be so gentle.' The crowd reluctantly backed away.

The quartet arrived at Ollivander's without further incident, and the elderly wandmaker greeted them profusely.

'Ah, Miss Black, it is a delight to see you,' he said, bowing. 'Walnut, 12 inches, dragon heartstring, as I recall. Quite rigid.' He turned to Sirius.

'Mr Black, what a surprise. I suppose you'll be wanting a new wand?'

Sirius nodded, and Ollivander began searching through boxes. It took a few tries, but they settled on a mahogany wand with a dragon heartstring core, fourteen inches.

'Is there anything else I can do for you?' he asked politely.

'Yes, in fact,' said Sirius. 'We're also here to buy wands for my son and nephew.'

Ollivander furrowed his brow. 'Are the boys eleven yet, Mr Black?'

'Not yet,' Sirius said calmly.

'This is a most unusual request,' Ollivander began, but stopped at Cassiopeia's death glare. 'One I am sure we can accommodate.'

He looked for Draco's wand first, and it didn't take long before the blond boy was matched up with a ten-inch hawthorn wand with a unicorn hair core. Then Ollivander began to look for Harry's wand.

It took a very long time, and they went through half the wands in the store, with the old wandmaker growing ever more excited as they failed to make a match. Finally, he handed Harry an eleven-inch holly wand with a phoenix feather core.

'Try this,' he said eagerly.

Harry took the wand, and instantly knew this was the right choice.

Sparks flew and Ollivander applauded.

'Very interesting, Mr Black,' he said thoughtfully. 'Very interesting, indeed.'

'What's interesting?' Cassiopeia demanded.

'You, see, madam,' Ollivander explained, 'the phoenix whose feather is in this wand gave one other feather, just one. That wand went on to do many great things.' He looked Harry in the eyes, and Harry felt a chill run up his spine. 'How intriguing, that you should wind up with this particular wand, especially given the identity of its brother's owner.'

'Who owned the other wand?' Cassiopeia snapped.

Ollivander's gaze did not waver from Harry as he replied.

'He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named.'

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Sirius and Draco ended up playing one-on-one Quidditch that afternoon, as everyone else was fawning over Harry and his new wand. Cassiopeia retold the story over and over again, and even Lucius didn't seem able to pull himself away.

Abraxas, Pollux and Arcturus were ecstatic. When Sirius and Draco had finished playing and began to head back in, the fuss had yet to subside.

'Poor Aries,' Sirius said to Draco as they watched Harry through the window. 'He looks miserable in there.'

'I don't know why,' Draco replied. 'He should be used to all the attention by now.'

'I think he'd rather be out here playing Quidditch with us.'

Draco rolled his eyes. 'Of course he would. That's what's so frustrating.'

Sirius looked at Draco curiously. 'What do you mean?'

The blond boy laughed mirthlessly. 'Aries has had the whole family fawning over him ever since he came to England. Any normal boy would get a big head about it, and you could hate him with a clear conscience. But Aries is different. They treat him like he's Salazar reborn, but he treats me like we're the same. He thinks the fact that everyone expects him to be the next Dark Lord is some enormous joke.'

Sirius raised an eyebrow. 'What do you think?'

Draco sighed. 'I think it's terrifying,' he replied seriously. 'We read about Grindelwald, and Aunt Cassie starts crowing about how Aries will kill twice as many Mudbloods as he did. Aries runs into a garden snake at Grimmauld Place, and Great-Granddad makes him give a Parseltongue

demonstration for an hour.

He throws a Quaffle inside and breaks one of Mum's vases, and all he has to do is ask Granddad about some obscure point in Magick Moste Evile, and he's out of trouble.'

'You're jealous,' Sirius observed.

Draco scoffed. 'Not about that rubbish!'

'What about, then?'

'I'm jealous about the Squibs,' Draco said after a pause. 'They really care about Aries, and they don't care whether he grows up to be the true Heir of Slytherin or a Curse Breaker for Gringotts. The only person I have who treats me that way is Aries.' He glared at Sirius. 'That's why I expect you not to let him down, Uncle Sirius. Aries needs more people who love him for who he is, not what he is, or what he might be.'

Sirius grinned and gestured at his nephew. 'It looks like he already has someone like that.'

Draco shrugged. 'Someone has to keep an eye on the fellow. They'll eat him alive.' He paused. 'I worry about him, though.'

'What about?'

'Mostly that they'll all turn out to be right,' Draco said. 'I don't want Aries to be the next Dark Lord.'

'Why's that?' Sirius asked.

'It's not that I'm a Muggle-lover or anything,' Draco said hastily. 'I'm all for the purity of the Wizarding race, same as anyone.' He chewed his lower lip. 'But when I hear them describe the things they hope he'll do...'

He sighed. 'Aries is special.

I don't want him to turn into some kind of monster.' He set his jaw firmly.

'And I promised myself on his eighth birthday that I would stay beside him and not let that happen.'

'We're on the same page, then,' Sirius said with a chuckle. 'Are you willing to take on a partner in crime?'

Draco smirked. 'Why not? I am tired of working alone.'

Sirius laughed and tousled his nephew's hair. 'You're a good lad, Draco.'

The blond boy grinned. 'You're not bad yourself, Uncle Sirius.'

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Chapter 30: The Secret of

Enhanced Spellcasting

The family returned to England on August 3, leaving Harry, Draco and Sirius to enjoy the rest of their summer in peace. They played a lot of Quidditch and explored the woods around the chateau, but mostly Sirius helped the boys as they practiced spells.

Harry and Draco already knew dozens of incantations, and they had been memorising wand movements ever since Cassiopeia had given them practice wands, but it proved to be rather a difficult task for the boys to combine the external technique with their magic. On the day they were working on the Levitation Charm, the weather was sweltering, and they hadn't had any luck. Harry was getting rather annoyed.

'Come on, Aries,' Sirius urged. 'You have to envision the feather flying.

Picture your magic reaching out through the wand and lifting it up into the air.'

'Wingardium leviosa,' Harry intoned for the fifth time, and this time, finally, his feather soared gracefully into the air.

Draco clapped. 'You did it! Now it's my turn.' He hopped off the fence on which he was sitting and ran over. Harry levitated the feather back to its spot on a large rock. Draco drew his wand and slashed it at the feather.

'Wingardium leviosa,' he said, and the feather moved slightly.

'Focus, Draco,' Sirius said. 'Your wand isn't a battle-axe. Try to ease up just a bit.'

Draco tried again, and this time sent the feather soaring.

'Well done,' Sirius said, clapping Draco on the back. 'And only on your second try.'

'Good job, Draco,' Harry mumbled, but his heart wasn't in it. He wasn't used to being beaten by Draco in lessons, and didn't think he liked it.

'I want to try again,' Draco said, but Sirius stopped him.

'Wait, it's Aries' turn.'

'No, it's all right,' Harry said glumly. 'I'm done for now. You go ahead.'

Sirius frowned, but went back to helping Draco. Harry felt something roar in anger deep inside him. Sirius was supposed to be his dad, wasn't he? And Harry was always the best in lessons. Draco provided stiff competition, of course, but this time he had got the spell in half the time it had taken Harry.

You're being stupid, he told himself. Draco was only a bit ahead of you, and he had the chance to watch Dad working with you.

But Dad's working with him now.

Harry thought back to his first conversation with Draco, in which he had promised not to steal Draco's parents if Draco wouldn't steal the Squibs.

They had kept that bargain, but they had never discussed what to do if

Sirius came back into the picture.

You wanted Dad to give Draco some attention, remember?

Shut up.

Harry wandered off into the woods. He snorted. Dad and Draco probably wouldn't even notice. He followed a little stream as it wound its way through the trees, kicking clods of mud into the clear water as he walked.

There was a sudden, angry hiss.

'You're disturbing my nest, human,' he heard, and turned around to see an enormous adder.

'Leave me alone,' Harry commanded, and the snake pulled back.

'I have heard of you, my lord,' it hissed back. 'You are the great wizard who speaks the noble tongue.'

'How great a wizard can I be, if it takes me five tries to get the Levitation Charm?' He sat down by the side of the stream. 'Draco got it in two.'

The snake laughed. 'There is more than one kind of magic, is there not? Can this Draco speak with serpents?'

'No.'

'Then there is at least one way in which you are his superior.'

'I don't want to be his superior,' Harry said, but the hissing rang false even to his own ears.

'If that's true, then why does it bother you that the other boy outperforms you? Does he always do so?'

Harry shook his head. 'No. If anything it's usually the other way around.'

'Does the other boy storm off when you surpass him?'

Harry laughed despite himself. 'Sometimes, but not often.'

'Is this Draco your bitter enemy?'

'Not at all. He's my cousin, practically my brother.'

The snake slithered closer to Harry. 'Forgive me, my lord. I am afraid I do not see the cause of your frustration.'

Harry paused. 'I guess I'm used to being the centre of everyone's attention,' he said, but that did not feel right either.

'Is everyone paying Draco a great deal of attention?'

Harry sighed. 'No. It's just my dad.'

The snake hissed triumphantly. 'Now I understand. You are possessive of your parent. You wish to keep him entirely for yourself.'

'I wanted Dad to spend some time with Draco,' Harry said in feeble protest, though he knew the snake was right. 'He's my best friend, and his own dad doesn't pay him very much attention, except when he gets in trouble.'

'Do you believe that your parent has come to care for your friend more than he does for you?'

Harry thought about that. 'No.'

'Do you wish for your parent to care for your friend less than he does?'

Harry shook his head and laughed. 'I'm being stupid, aren't I?'

'I cannot judge that, my lord,' the snake replied. 'I do not understand the complexities of human interpersonal relationships.' It paused. 'However, if you value Draco highly...'

'I do,' Harry said earnestly.

'And if you wish your parent also to value Draco...'

'I do.'

'Then it would seem you have received exactly what you wished for.'

'In other words, I'm being stupid,' Harry replied, picking himself off the grass. 'Thanks for listening.'

'Any time, noble sorcerer,' the snake hissed back. He flickered his tongue a few times. 'May I make a small request, my lord?'

'Go ahead.'

'Could you show me some magic?'

Harry laughed and pointed his wand at a twig on the grass. 'Wingardium leviosa,' he hissed, and was stunned when the twig flew thirty feet in the

air.

The snake was impressed. 'My lord is a very powerful wizard. Where did you learn the classical tongue of the Serpent Lords?'

Harry stared at the snake blankly. 'What do you mean?'

'You delivered your incantation in the ancient tongue.'

'I said the spell in Parseltongue?' Harry was surprised. He had not meant to do so.

'Indeed, my lord,' the snake said.

'I wonder if that's why the spell was more powerful,' Harry mused. He tried another spell with which he had yet to have much success.

'Aguamenti,' he hissed, and a torrent of water burst forth from the tip of his wand.

'Impressive,' said the snake.

'This is brilliant!' Harry exclaimed, all his anger and frustration forgotten.

'I've got to show Dad and Draco.' He bade the adder farewell and ran off to join the others.

'There you are, Aries,' Draco said when Harry came back. The blond boy was standing alone by the fence where they had been practicing. 'We were wondering where you ran off to. Uncle Sirius went to go look for you.' He beamed. 'I managed the Aguamenti Charm, and Alohomora too.'

'Well done,' Harry said, with a good deal more enthusiasm than he had when Draco had mastered the Levitation Charm. 'I did Aguamenti too.

Look at this.' He raised his wand and let out a strangled hiss. A torrent of water once again burst from the tip of his wand.

'Wicked!' Draco's eyes were wide with excitement. 'Did you say the spell in Parseltongue?'

Harry nodded eagerly. 'I didn't even know I could.'

Sirius came jogging down from the house. When he saw Harry he

breathed a deep sigh of relief.

'There you are, Aries,' he panted. 'I was worried about you.'

'Sorry, Dad,' Harry replied, feeling foolish about his bout of jealousy. 'I just needed a bit of a walk, that's all.'

'Look what he can do, Uncle Sirius,' Draco said eagerly. 'Show him, Aries.'

Harry levelled his wand towards the feather with which they had been practicing and hissed. The feather burst into flames.

Sirius applauded. 'That was fantastic! I never knew you could do spells in Parseltongue.'

'I didn't either, Dad. I was talking to a snake in the woods and it asked to see some magic. I suppose I forgot to switch to human speech before I said the spell, and the twig shot thirty feet into the air!'

'Do you think Parseltongue makes your spells more powerful?' Draco asked.

'I don't know,' Harry said. 'It looks like it.'

Sirius stroked his beard thoughtfully. 'We'll have to look into it. It could be that the Parseltongue just helps you to focus better. That's why we use Latin for spells, after all. Perhaps Aunt Cassie will have an idea.'

Draco and Harry groaned in unison.

'She's going to go on about this until Christmas,' Harry grumbled.

Draco nodded. 'And once she gets going, everyone else will join in. We'll never hear the end of it.'

Sirius chuckled. 'Or we can keep it a secret.'

Both boys nodded enthusiastically.

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Chapter 31: Muggle Mayhem

One morning after breakfast, a week before they returned to England, Sirius came into the playroom and announced that the boys would have a different sort of lesson that day.

'What are we going to do, Dad?' Harry asked.

Sirius grinned. 'We're going to leave the chateau and travel undercover in the Muggle world.'

'What is there to do in the Muggle world?' Draco scoffed.

'We are going to study the finer aspects of Muggle culture,' Sirius replied smugly.

'What?' Harry and Draco exclaimed in unison. Sirius only chuckled in response.

'Muggles don't have culture,' Draco protested. 'They're just dumb animals.'

'Not to mention violent and unpredictable,' Harry added. 'Why should we want to learn about them?'

'The official reason that you will provide Lucius and Aunt Cassie if ever they find out,' Sirius said pompously, 'is that wizards - even Dark wizards - often have the need to travel undetected amongst Muggles. We cannot keep to ourselves all the time.

Most wizards, however, are so incompetent at dealing with Muggles that you can detect them a mile away. Unless you learn how to dress like a Muggle properly, how to act like a Muggle and how to interact with them, it may well thwart your pernicious plots for global domination.'

'We have wands, Uncle Sirius,' Draco said, holding his own up in demonstration. 'Muggles don't. We don't need to slink amongst them in disguise.'

Sirius clicked his tongue disapprovingly. 'Tut, tut, Draco. That was very Gryffindorish thinking. Good Slytherins ought always to be prepared to move about in stealth in order to achieve their insidious ends.'

Harry rolled his eyes. 'That's the official reason, you said. What's the real reason?'

Sirius's eyes twinkled mischievously. 'Because it's fun.'

Harry sighed. 'We're not going to get out of this, are we, Dad?'

His father let out a bark-like laugh. 'Not a chance.' He flicked his wand and Summoned a large bag. 'To start with, we need to fix your clothes.'

He reached into the bag and handed each boy a pair of jeans, a T-shirt, a leather jacket, socks and a pair of trainers.

Harry groaned. He hadn't worn Muggle clothes since the Squibs had rescued him from the Dursleys.

Draco was indignant. 'You want us to wear trousers in public? That's barbaric!'

'Just put them on,' Sirius ordered.

'You aren't wearing them,' Harry observed.

Sirius smirked. 'Nice try. I'm already dressed under my robes.'

The boys pulled off their robes and dressed in the Muggle clothes. Harry had no difficulties, but Draco initially tried to put the jeans on backwards. When they had finished, Sirius inspected them.

'Not bad,' he said approvingly.

'Where do we put our wands?' Draco asked.

Sirius raised an eyebrow. 'Do you really think you'll need them? The French may not care so much about underage magic, but they certainly do uphold the International Statute of Secrecy.'

'But what if we're attacked?' Harry offered hopefully.

'You'll have me with you the whole time, and I will be carrying my

wand,' Sirius replied.

'That's not fair,' Draco moaned.

'Draco!' Sirius snapped. 'What's the number one rule of living with Sirius?'

Draco pouted. 'No whinging,' he mumbled.

'Right,' Sirius said sternly. 'And don't either of you forget it.'

He swept off his robes in a flourish, revealing his outfit of jeans, leather jacket, boots and a faded T-shirt adorned with a phoenix. His wand was tucked into the waistband of his jeans. He led Harry and Draco down the back stairs and through the garden to a secluded place where he had parked a shiny red sports car.

'Dad, I thought you were training us how to blend in amongst the Muggles,' Harry pointed out.

'No, I said that's what you should tell Lucius and Aunt Cassie we've been up to—if they find out, which I hope they won't,' Sirius corrected. 'The real reason we're going on this outing is to have fun.' He smiled knowingly. 'I assure you, the Diablo is fun.'

The boys climbed into the passenger seat, which Sirius had magically expanded to accommodate them both, and Sirius himself slid behind the steering wheel. He handed Harry and Draco each a pair of sunglasses before slipping on his own, rolling down the windows, starting the engine and peeling out of the Black estate onto the main road.

He drove them at breathtaking speed to the nearby Zoo de la Barben, where they spent the rest of the day casually strolling from one exotic animal to another, most of which they had never seen before. Harry, of course, showed a particular affinity for the snakes, but he and Draco both enjoyed the wildcats and the bears, whilst Sirius professed a fondness for the hippopotamuses.

'So, do you boys still think that Muggles have nothing worthwhile?' Sirius

asked them over lunch as they munched on sandwiches and crisps.

'I have to admit,' Harry said tentatively, 'the Diablo was fun.'

Draco nodded in agreement. 'Nothing on flying, of course, but not bad at all.'

'And this place is fantastic,' Harry went on. 'I had no idea. Dudley got to go to the zoo sometimes, but I never went.'

Sirius stomped on Harry's foot under the table, and Harry went pale. He had been feeling so relaxed, for a moment he had forgotten that Draco wasn't supposed to know about the Dursleys.

'Who's Dudley?' Draco asked.

'Oh, no one,' Harry said quickly. 'Just a boy I knew when I lived with my mum.'

'Doesn't sound French,' Draco observed.

'He was British too,' Harry invented. 'That's why Mum and I knew his family.'

Fortunately, that seemed to be a sufficient explanation for Draco, and Sirius steered the discussion in another direction. After lunch they resumed strolling through the zoo until late afternoon, when they headed back to the car park and climbed into the Diablo.

'That was brilliant, Uncle Sirius,' Draco said as he fastened his seatbelt.

'Yeah, thanks a bunch, Dad,' Harry jumped in.

Sirius chuckled. 'Oh, we're not done yet, boys. We have more Muggle culture to explore.'

He turned on the car and they zoomed off towards Marseilles, the radio pumping out Muggle music at full blast. When they reached the town, Sirius parked the car and they walked the rest of the way to an excellent restaurant where they had three different sorts of pizza.

'This is amazing, Dad,' Harry gushed over his first slice.

Draco's face bore an expression of perfect bliss. 'I've never had anything like it in my life.'

After dinner Sirius took the boys to a cinema, where they watched an American film that seemed mainly to consist of a series of very impressive explosions. The Muggles who took their tickets protested that the boys were too young to see the film, but Sirius discreetly Confunded them. Harry and Draco were both captivated.

'Muggles are rather violent, aren't they, Uncle Sirius?' Draco whispered half-way through the film.

Sirius shrugged. 'Of course they are, but what else do you expect? They don't have magic, so they have to resort to brute force.'

Draco nodded, and fell silent.

After the film, Sirius drove the boys back to the chateau. They fell asleep in the car, and he had to levitate them into bed. He himself fell asleep as soon as his head hit the pillow, a satisfied grin on his face.

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Chapter 32: Embracing Death

Sirius and the boys prepared to return to England at the end of August with a heavy heart. Neither Harry nor Draco could remember ever having had such a marvellous summer, and Sirius had begun to settle comfortably into his new role as Harry's father. None of them looked forward to rejoining the perpetual intrigue that was daily life in the Houses of Black and Malfoy.

Nonetheless, when the first of September came around, all three gathered in the entrance hall with their trunks, bade Arcturus and Melania farewell and Portkeyed back to Windermere Court. Marius, Clytemnestra and Cassiopeia greeted them.

'Welcome home, boys,' Cassiopeia said. 'I am looking forward to our first lessons of the year on Monday. I trust I shall find that you have been diligent in your wandwork over the past month.'

'Yes, Aunt Cassie,' Harry and Draco replied in unison. They had both become quite competent at a number of basic spells, though Harry was still far stronger when he cast in Parseltongue. He was sorely tempted to use only Parseltongue, because it was so much easier, but since Harry hoped to keep his newfound talent from Aunt Cassie's notice, he forced himself to learn the normal way.

'Your mother told me that she wanted you to come home right away, Draco,' Clytemnestra said. 'You may use the fireplace in the parlour. We shall send Mopsy over with your things presently.'

'Thank you, Aunt Clytemnestra,' Draco said, and waved to Harry and Sirius. 'See you tomorrow, Aries, Uncle Sirius.'

'Bye, Draco,' Harry said. Sirius patted the blond boy on the shoulder, and Draco ran off to the parlour.

'As for you two,' Marius said, 'Pollux has been asking for you. The Healers say he's taken a serious turn for the worse. It won't be long now until the end.'

Harry and Sirius changed into their best robes and Flooed over to Grimmauld Place. Kreacher escorted them up to the master bedroom, where Pollux lay motionless in the centre of the large four-poster bed. Irma sat quietly by his side, looking as though she had not slept in days. 'Hello, Sirius dear,' Irma said. 'Hello, Aries. It was good of you to come.'

She glanced at her husband's gently sleeping form. 'He was asking for you earlier today, but he drifts in and out. I don't know when he will wake up again.'

'That's all right, Grandmamma,' Sirius replied, his face unusually solemn.

'We'll wait here for awhile. Why don't you rest a bit?'

Irma nodded and rose from her chair. 'Kreacher, prepare the bed in Mistress Ursula's old room. I shall sleep there for the time being. Prepare Master Sirius's old room for him, and Master Regulus's for Aries.'

'Yes, Mistress,' the house elf croaked, and scampered off to do her bidding.

Irma placed her icy hand on Harry's cheek. 'He'll be so pleased to know you're here, Aries,' she said. 'Your great-grandfather may have a strange way of showing it, but he cares for you very much.'

Harry nodded, trying not to cry. He didn't know how to respond. It was strange for a boy whose parents had been murdered when he was one, but Harry had never really experienced death, not that remembered.

Irma dabbed at her eyes with her handkerchief. 'I was twelve when Pollux and I married,' she said. 'He was thirteen. It's strange. I've spent the better part of six decades devoutly wishing for the bastard to leave me alone. Now, when it seems the old fool's finally preparing to do just that, I find I want nothing more than for him to stay.' She burst into tears. 'Oh Poll!' she cried. 'Whatever shall I do without you?'

Sirius pulled his grandmother into his arms and let her cry on his shoulder. 'It'll be all right, Grandmamma,' he whispered soothingly. 'Aries and I will take care of you. Everything will be fine.'

Irma only cried harder into Sirius's best dress robes. Harry stood there and fidgeted nervously.

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That evening after Harry went to bed in Regulus's old room and Irma returned to her husband's side, Sirius changed into Muggle clothes, slipped out of the house and Apparated to an old Muggle pub he and James had often frequented. It had been a very difficult day. Sirius and Harry had taken it in shifts to sit beside Pollux, but the old man woke infrequently.

When he did, he tended to rant about Dumbledore or wax eloquent about the beauties of Grindelwald's ideology. The family had known the end was coming, but they hadn't expected it to come so soon. If anything, Sirius would have guessed that Arcturus would go first. Towards the end of their visit, he had kept calling Harry 'Sirius' and Sirius 'Orion.' He was calling Draco 'Regulus,' which made no sense at all, but the blond boy had borne it in good spirits.

Sirius walked into the crowded pub and ordered a pie and a pint, sitting at the table in the corner where the Marauders had always used to sit. They had all come here the night James's mum died, and James and Sirius had come here when they had heard about Regulus's death. As he sat in the familiar spot and sipped the familiar brew, Sirius found that he could almost imagine his friends around him.

James would have sat across from him, of course, going on about how beautiful Lily was and how lucky he was to finally get her, or repeating incessantly the latest story about Harry's new word. Remus would have sat to Sirius's left, quietly nursing his ale and smiling softly at the appropriate moments. He could keep quiet most of the night, but when he did speak, his words were golden. Peter would have sat to Sirius's right, hanging onto James's every word as he always did. Sirius raised his ale to his invisible comrades.

'Here's to you, mates,' he whispered.

'Well, well, well,' a familiar voice said behind him. 'If it isn't Sirius Black.'

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Chapter 33: A Fractured Past

Sirius turned around to see Remus Lupin staring at him coldly. He had been dreading this confrontation ever since he was set free. His old friend looked terrible—far too thin, and with a lot of grey hairs he was too young to have.

'Moony,' Sirius said, his voice choking up. 'It's good to see you.'

Remus's eyes narrowed. 'Don't call me that, Black. Your grandfather may have been able to trick the Wizengamot into letting you go, but we both know what you are.'

'I assure you, Remus, you cannot hate me for what happened more than I hate myself,' Sirius replied soberly.

Remus laughed bitterly. 'Really? So did Azkaban make you feel sorry you handed James and Lily over to Voldemort, and little Harry too? Or are you sorry because you got your master killed?'

'Don't you think I'd give anything for it to have been me who died instead of James?' Sirius shouted. Some of the Muggles turned to look at them, but most minded their own business. That had been one of the reasons the Marauders had always liked this pub in the first place. 'And what makes it worse, Moony, is that I know it's all my fault, and I couldn't do anything about it.'

Remus gave Sirius a funny look. 'I could almost believe you're sincere.'

His expression turned hard. 'But you always were a good actor.'

Sirius chuckled. 'Not to you and James. You could always tell when I was lying.'

'Apparently not the one time it mattered.'

'I wasn't lying, Moony,' Sirius said in a hoarse whisper. 'Please, you're the one friend I have left. Let me explain.'

Remus thought a moment. 'I'll give you one chance.'

'Thank you,' Sirius said, sighing with relief.

'I'm not doing it for you,' Remus snapped. 'If you ask me it's more than you deserve. But James would have heard you out, even after everything.'

'I'm living at my parents' old house. I assume you remember where it is?'

Sirius nodded.

'Meet me there tomorrow at noon.' Remus said.

Sirius winced. 'I'm sorry, Moony. I can't. I have to go to Sunday dinner at Malfoy Manor.'

'Of course,' Remus scoffed. 'I can't keep you from your dinner date with the Death Eaters.'

'How about later on?' Sirius asked. 'Maybe four o'clock in the afternoon?'

Remus nodded reluctantly. 'Four o'clock sharp.'

'I'll be there,' Sirius promised. Remus just shook his head and walked away.

After Sirius had polished off his pie and drained his ale, he went to Windermere Court to pick up his pyjamas before going back to Grimmauld Place. Harry had been perfectly content to wear some of Sirius's old things for the night, but Sirius had outgrown all his own castoffs, and absolutely refused to wear any of his father's old pyjamas. He stepped into the house to find Marius nursing his firewhisky in the parlour.

'Are you heading back to Grimmauld Place this evening?' he asked.

Sirius nodded. 'I just came by to pick up some pyjamas.'

'How is Pollux?'

Sirius shrugged. 'Not well. He's woken up a couple of times today, but he's never been lucid. Grandmamma said he was asking for Aries this morning.'

'It's good of you to do this,' Marius said. 'I know you and Pollux were never close.'

'He got me out prison, though.' Sirius smiled. 'I suppose I owe him. In any event, I'm mostly doing it for Grandmamma. I didn't expect her to take this so hard.'

Marius smirked. 'Curious, isn't it, how often the ones we hate are the ones we care for most deeply.'

'And vice versa,' Sirius agreed, and told his uncle about his run-in with Remus at the pub.

'Remus Lupin?' Marius furrowed his brow. 'That reminds me. You know he came by here a few years ago?'

'Remus did?' Sirius was surprised. 'Why?'

'He was looking for Harry Potter, as I recall, on Dumbledore's behalf.'

'Harry?' Sirius frowned. 'Did he figure out the truth?'

Marius nodded. 'Just about all of it.'

'Why didn't he go to Dumbledore?'

'Cassie intervened.'

Sirius's eyes went wide. 'What did she do?'

'I don't know,' Marius replied. 'She took him up to her quarters. When he returned he left without another word. She told me that she'd taken care of everything.'

'A Memory Charm?' Sirius suggested.

Marius nodded. 'I think that's most likely. Cassie's always been rather gifted in that area.'

Sirius thanked his uncle for the information before grabbing his pyjamas and Flooing over to Grimmauld Place. On his way up to his old bedroom he stopped by the library and retrieved a thick volume on Memory Charms.

Once upstairs he plopped on his bed and flipped through the book, looking for ways to restore a modified or erased memory. There did not seem to be a lot of options, but there was one spell that looked promising, and Sirius did not think it looked particularly difficult.

He set the book on his bedside table, dimmed the lights and drifted off to sleep. Perhaps there was a way he could regain Remus's trust after all.

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Chapter 34: The Reluctant

Observer

That night at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, Dumbledore retired to his private quarters after the Sorting Feast with a steaming cup of hot cocoa and his favourite Fifi LaFolle novel, Persephone's Passion.

He changed into his flowery nightshirt and fuzzy purple slippers before curling up in his favourite armchair beside the fireplace and opening the well-worn novel to where he had left off.

He slipped back into the story effortlessly, as he always did. He had just reached the part where the grief-stricken young heroine was preparing to

hurl herself off a weather-beaten cliff when a loud tapping on the window interrupted his reverie. He looked up, startled. An owl stood on the ledge outside in the dark.

Dumbledore opened the window with a flick of his wand, and the owl flew in and landed on the back of his armchair. A letter hung suspended from its left leg. Dumbledore took the letter and opened it.

Dear Headmaster Dumbledore, it began.

As you may recall, you requested to be notified when the second wand made from your phoenix's feathers was sold. You undoubtedly remember that the first such wand was sold to one Tom Riddle, many years ago.

The second wand was sold just under a month ago to Aries Black, the son of the recently released convict, Sirius Black.

Young Mstr Black is only ten years old, and I hesitated to make the sale because of the legal restrictions, but Cassiopeia Black was with him, and she insisted that I sell the wand immediately. Having dealt with Miss Black in the past, I am sure you will sympathise with my acquiescence.

I hope you find this information of use, though I should greatly appreciate it if you would be so kind as not to reveal that I passed this information on to you. Such a revelation would be bad for business, as well as likely arousing the ire of the formidable Miss Black.

I remain, etc.

Artemius Ollivander

Dumbledore sighed and set the letter down on the side table. This bore immediate investigation. It appeared that he would have to wait until another time before returning to dear Persephone's adventures. He sent a Patronus to Severus, summoning the Potions master to his office, and pulled on decent robes before heading down the steps.

Severus Snape walked into the Headmaster's office moments later.

'What is it, Headmaster?' he asked brusquely. 'I was preparing to retire.'

'Thank you for coming so promptly, Severus,' Dumbledore said. 'I assure you that I should not have asked you to come were it not a matter of great importance. Would you care for a sherbet lemon?'

'No, thank you,' Severus replied.

'As you wish.' Dumbledore paused. 'Severus, what do you know of Aries Black?'

'The convict's brat?' Severus spat. 'Next to nothing. I have never met him.'

'I should have thought that perhaps you had heard something through your other contacts.'

'I'm a half-blood, Dumbledore. I hardly move in the same social circles as the Blacks and Malfoys,' Severus replied coolly.

'But what of your other contacts with Lucius?'

Severus harrumphed. 'Most men do not discuss their sister's children with their business associates.' He sighed and dipped his head. 'Lucius Malfoy, however, is not most men. He has been known to speak of the boy on occasion.'

Dumbledore leaned forward. 'And?'

'Apparently the boy is very like his father, in looks as well as behaviour. He is spoilt and arrogant, and loves to engage in outrageous pranks. His chief partner in crime seems to be Lucius's son Draco.'

'And his family encourage this sort of activity?' Dumbledore asked, raising an eyebrow.

'His family seem to be under the mistaken impression that Aries is a wizard of considerable talent, and so give him a great deal of leeway.'

Lucius says the boy is nothing out of the ordinary, though he admits that perhaps the boy has a particular gift for the Dark Arts.' Severus laughed humourlessly. 'Old Malfoy, however, is quite smitten with the boy.'

Apparently he has invited Black to call him "Dad."

'Sirius is Abraxas's son-in-law,' Dumbledore observed. 'Is that so unusual?'

Severus smirked. 'Abraxas insists that Lucius address him as "Father."'

Dumbledore looked surprised. 'I see.'

'My impression is that Lucius resents the boy's influence in the family quite strongly, but is powerless to oppose his father.'

'I seem to recall Abraxas being a wizard one would be foolish to cross,'

Dumbledore said with a smile.

Severus nodded. 'I have met old Malfoy only on a couple of occasions, but he struck me as possessing power and cunning, along with a ruthless ability to get things done.'

'It seems to me unlikely that Abraxas would be won over so easily by the boy without any cause,' Dumbledore mused. 'Has Lucius provided any indication of the reasons behind his father's opinion?'

Severus shook his head. 'No, only an old man's sentimentality. However, he has made it clear that the brat has captured the hearts of the old Blacks as well.'

'Arcturus and Pollux?'

Severus nodded.

Dumbledore frowned. 'There must be something he's not telling you.'

Neither Arcturus nor Pollux has ever been accused of simple sentimentality.' He leaned forward. 'I want you to keep your ears and eyes open. Inform me of anything you may learn about the boy.'

'Why this sudden interest in Aries Black?' Severus asked.

'I learned today that Aries purchased a wand from Ollivander's a month ago.'

'Your point? It is not all that uncommon for the old pureblood families to ignore the restrictions in that area, and the Ministry has never cared.'

Dumbledore took a deep breath. 'The wand Aries purchased is the brother of Lord Voldemort's.'

'You think this significant?'

'I do not know,' Dumbledore admitted. 'But you said the boy has an aptitude for the Dark Arts, and the family think that he has great potential. Knowing the Black and Malfoy families as we do, it is not difficult to guess what that means.'

Severus shook his head. 'What you ask is not as straightforward as it may seem. What I have just told you I have gleaned from casual conversations over three years. Even Lucius Malfoy has better things to do than complain about his nephew.'

'You will likely be the boy's future Head of House. Mightn't you arrange a meeting with the boy before he comes to school?'

'You're daft,' Severus retorted. 'Do you have any idea what Sirius Black will do to me the moment he hears I'm interested in the boy?'

'Good point,' Dumbledore admitted.

'Perhaps the werewolf would have more luck?' Severus suggested.

Dumbledore sighed. 'Sadly, Mr Lupin has been less helpful since the tragic death of Harry Potter.'

'I sometimes wonder why I still help you after that little fiasco,' Severus mused.

'Because you continue to keep the big picture in mind,' Dumbledore said.

'You realise how important our work is.'

'I do,' Severus admitted, and let out a breath. 'I shall keep an eye out for any news of Aries Black. I do not expect to learn much.'

'Any information you provide might prove vital, Severus,' Dumbledore said. 'In any event, we shall monitor the boy very carefully once he arrives at Hogwarts. It may be, with a little encouragement, that we can

turn him away from his family's path.'

'We shall see, Headmaster.'

Severus left Dumbledore's office, and the aged wizard once again ascended the stairway to his private quarters, regretfully postponing Persephone's Passion for another night.

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Chapter 35: Generational Clash

Sirius and Harry Flooed over to Malfoy Manor the next day promptly at eleven-thirty. Pollux had woken up and spoken to them briefly that morning, though he had called Sirius 'Alphard' and Harry 'Sirius.' Sirius wondered briefly whether it was right for them to leave, with the situation so critical, but Irma urged them to do so.

'If there are any changes, I shall send Kreacher to fetch you at once,' she assured them.

Abraxas greeted his son-in-law and grandson warmly as they arrived.

'Welcome home, Aries,' he said. 'I've heard from Draco about your wonderful time in France. I daresay he was sorry to come back to England!' He clapped Sirius on the back. 'As for you, my boy, we never got to our little rematch. We shall have to play a bit of Quidditch after dinner, I think.'

Sirius bowed slightly. 'As you wish, Dad.'

'It was good of Regina to go off and marry a boy who knows his way around a broomstick,' Abraxas went on. 'I could never get Lucius really

interested in the game. He would enjoy a match now and then, but he never even tried out for the team at Hogwarts. He was always messing about with politics. Even when he was a child it was like pulling teeth to tear him away from The Daily Prophet.'

'I, on the other hand, have never shown the slightest inclination for politics,' Sirius replied. 'My own father had a difficult time getting me out of the garden.'

'That's the way a boy should be. There's plenty of time for politics later. Did you play for your House team?'

Sirius nodded. 'I did, sir. I was a Beater.'

'Yes, I can see that,' Abraxas replied, looking at him appraisingly. 'You're awfully thin now, but I suspect before you had just the right build for it.'

'My best friend, Aries' godfather, played Chaser,' Sirius said. 'James Potter. He was the real Quidditch star.'

Harry looked up at Sirius and grinned. Sirius winked at him.

'Yes, I remember,' Abraxas said. 'I used to attend school games from time to time when I sat on the Board of Governors. He was quite good. I heard he turned down the Wimbourne Wasps. A rather undignified profession, of course, but a pity all the same. He displayed real talent.'

'Aries!' Draco exclaimed, and walked quickly into the room. 'I didn't know you were here.'

'We only just got here,' Harry replied.

'Mum told me what happened,' Draco said. 'How's Great-Granddad?'

Harry shook his head. 'Not good.'

'We're staying at Grimmauld Place for the time being,' Sirius explained to Abraxas. 'Grandmamma needs our help. She's taking it rather hard.'

Abraxas nodded. 'It's no easy thing, losing a spouse,' he said. 'I remember when Iphigenia died. Nasty bout of spattergroit. Regina was just out of

Hogwarts.' His face fell. 'Little could any of us have guessed that Regina would die of the same thing only eight years later.' He patted Harry on the shoulder. 'Your mother was a fine woman, Aries.'

'I know, sir,' Harry replied. 'Thank you.'

'And it can't be easy for you, either,' the old man said to Sirius, 'being stuck in Azkaban all those years and getting out only to learn that your wife was dead.'

'There's been a lot of adjustment,' Sirius said truthfully. 'Aunt Cassie helped a lot at first, and Aries and Draco have made all the difference in the world these past few weeks.'

Abraxas smiled fondly at his grandchildren. 'They're fine boys, both of them. It's hard to believe they'll be off to Hogwarts in only a year.'

Sirius smirked. 'I hope Hogwarts survives the encounter.'

His father-in-law laughed heartily. 'Now, don't tell me you didn't engage in a bit of mischief yourself at school.'

'If he were to tell you such a thing, it would be a monstrous lie,' Lucius said smoothly as he strode into the room. 'As I recall, I had to deduct countless points from him and Potter. Based on what Severus has told me, his behaviour only grew worse after I left.'

'Oh, so you're still in touch with Snape?' Sirius said brightly. 'Figures. How is old Snively?'

'Severus Snape is currently Potions master and Head of Slytherin at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry,' Lucius said drily. 'I should say he's done rather well for himself.'

'Snape? Severus Snape?' Abraxas scratched his head. 'The name sounds vaguely familiar, but I can't quite place it.'

'Nasty fellow,' Sirius said, scrunching up his nose. 'Mortal fear of soap.' Harry and Draco sniggered. Lucius scowled at them.

'Severus Snape is an excellent potioneer and your future Head of House,' he said to the boys. 'You would do well to show him some respect.'

'Come now, Lucius, they've never met the man,' Abraxas scolded his son. 'How can they show him respect when all they know of him is that he has poor hygiene?' He frowned. 'Who was his father? Surely I knew him.'

'I doubt it,' Sirius said with a mischievous grin. 'I believe he was a Muggle.'

'WHAT?' Abraxas shouted. 'A Muggle? You mean this Snape fellow is a Mudblood?'

'Half-blood, Father,' Lucius said evenly. 'He's a half-blood.'

'As I recall,' Sirius said with his tongue firmly in cheek, 'Cissy once commented that Severus Snape gave the phrase "filthy half-blood" a whole new meaning.'

Draco and Harry doubled over in laughter, Abraxas joined in, and even Lucius struggled to suppress a smile.

When Abraxas had calmed down, he shook his head sadly. 'Since when can a half-blood be Head of Slytherin House? In my day, we had a few half-blood students, but still...Head? It boggles the mind. When my father was at school there was not a single student in Slytherin who could not document pure blood for at least three generations.'

'Is Minerva McGonagall still Head of Gryffindor?' Sirius asked Lucius.

'I believe so,' the blond man replied.

'I always liked her,' Sirius said nostalgically. 'Tough as nails, to be sure, but a fine woman and a skilled witch.'

'I remember Minerva,' Abraxas said. 'We went to school together. I even escorted her to Hogsmeade a few times. I quite agree with your assessment, Sirius, a fine woman from a decent family, though a bit puritanical for my tastes. A Scot, you know. It's the Presbyterian strain.'

A little bell rang, and they moved into the dining room. After a delicious dinner, Abraxas, Sirius, Harry and Draco went out into the garden for their game of Quidditch, which Sirius and Draco won by a single goal. Abraxas and Harry were good sports, however, and willingly agreed to fetch the drinks for the others: butterbeer for the boys, firewhisky for the men. They sat in the garden and sipped from their bottles, enjoying the soft breeze. It was truly a perfect day.

At three-thirty Sirius took his leave.

'Thank you for a wonderful time, Dad,' he told Abraxas. 'I trust it's all right if I leave Aries here until this evening?'

'Why don't you let the boy stay the night?' his father-in-law suggested.

'We'll send Dobby over to Windermere Court for his things. He and Draco can come over to Grimmauld Place tomorrow after their lessons. Draco ought to pay his respects to his great-grandfather.'

Sirius checked with Harry to make sure that arrangement was fine with him, and then thanked Abraxas for his generosity. He said good-bye to the three wizards and Flooed back to Grimmauld Place to check on Pollux. There was no change, so Sirius told Irma where he would be before changing into Muggle clothes and Apparating to Remus's parents' old home. The Squibs and Cassiopeia were visiting Grimmauld Place that evening, so she wouldn't be alone.

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Chapter 36: Forgotten Bonds

The house was on the moors, not in good condition at all, but it was shelter, and Sirius understood what a precious commodity that could be. He walked up to the front door and knocked in the elaborate pattern they had always used on the door of their dormitory. Remus opened the door and let him in. The inside was a good bit shabbier than Sirius remembered, but everything was clean. Remus's trousers and jumper were visibly patched and mended, but they looked like they still kept the cold out.

'You came,' Remus observed, motioning for Sirius to sit down. 'Would you care for some tea?'

'Yes, thank you,' Sirius said, finding a place on the sofa. Remus poured their tea and pointedly sat in a chair on the other side of the table, as far away as possible from where Sirius was sitting. Sirius took a sip of tea.

'How have you been?'

'This isn't a social call,' Remus replied sharply. 'I have invited you here to explain to me the circumstances you so greatly regret which persuaded you to betray your best friend and his family to the Dark wizard who wanted to kill them. So what's the excuse? Imperius?'

Sirius chewed his lower lip. 'I didn't do it.'

Remus raised an eyebrow. 'That's it? You came all this way just to tell me...'

'Shut up, Moony,' Sirius cut him off. 'Let me explain. I was never James and Lily's Secret Keeper.'

'Dumbledore said...,' Remus began, but stopped when Sirius held up a hand.

'Dumbledore didn't know,' Sirius said simply. 'I was originally going to be the Secret Keeper, but I thought that would be too obvious. Surely Voldemort would figure out it was me, and focus all his efforts on making

me crack.' Sirius shivered. 'I didn't trust myself not to tell under torture, or perhaps Veritaserum. I suggested that we switch. I would be the decoy, and draw off all Voldemort's attention, but Wormtail would be the real Secret Keeper. We would place him in hiding, and everything would be fine.'

Remus frowned. 'I have to admit. It does sound like the sort of plan you'd come up with. But if that's the case, why didn't you tell me?'

Sirius's face fell. 'I thought you were the traitor. Peter kept pointing out all the times you were missing, all sorts of suspicious little details. Of course, it turned out he was the traitor. I discovered he was missing that night and realised the truth. I arrived at Godric's Hollow too late. It was like a nightmare, Moony. I found James and Lily's bodies. Harry, though, was still alive. Hagrid had him. He said Dumbledore was going to send Harry to live with his aunt and uncle. I argued with him, but he wouldn't listen. So, being me, I did something foolish. I ran after Wormtail.'

'And that's when you killed him?' Remus's voice was hard.

'I didn't kill him,' Sirius said, shaking his head. 'He shouted that I was the traitor, for the Muggles to hear, and then he cut off his own finger and blew up the street. He transformed and vanished, leaving me to take the blame.' He sighed. 'I would have explained all this at the trial, only...'

'You never got a trial,' Remus finished in a low voice.

Sirius jumped up and grabbed Remus by the shoulders. 'Moony, I would never betray Prongs. If I could, I would gladly die in order to bring him back. Surely you must believe that.'

Remus forced Sirius's hands off of him. 'I did believe that. Then it turned out I was wrong. James and Lily believed it too, and it killed them. Harry had to go live with those horrible Muggles, and then he was kidnapped, and no one knows what happened to him. He may well be dead!'

Sirius sat back down. 'He's not dead,' he whispered.

'What?' Remus responded sharply. 'What have you done with him? Where is he?'

'You already know, Moony,' Sirius said. 'Or rather, you did.'

'What do you mean?'

'I'm afraid you're the victim of a Memory Charm cast by my Aunt Cassiopeia,' Sirius replied. 'I only found out about it myself after our meeting yesterday. I did some research. I think I can fix the damage, if you'll let me.'

'You want me to let you point a wand at my head?' Remus scoffed. 'Are you mad?'

'Probably,' Sirius shrugged. 'I'd hoped you'd believe me.' He chuckled. 'I don't suppose you have any spare Veritaserum?'

Remus gave a small smile. 'Unfortunately not.'

'Then we're stuck,' Sirius said. 'Unless...' He trailed off.

'What do you have in mind?' Remus asked.

'I think I know someone whom you might find a bit more convincing,' Sirius said. 'He's also been around for much more of Harry's childhood than I have. But if you want to talk with him, we have to go to the house where I'm staying. Will you come?'

Remus took a deep breath and rose to his feet. 'Let's go.'

'You'll really do it?' Sirius was impressed.

'All my friends are dead or as good as,' Remus said bitterly. 'Harry's gone. I don't have any reasons to live anymore. If you're telling the truth, I could have a friend again, and Harry would be back. That's two reasons. The way I see it, I have nothing to lose, and everything to gain.'

The two wizards Apparated to Windermere Court, and Sirius let them inside. The house, of course, was empty, and Sirius led Remus directly

upstairs to Harry's bedroom. Remus stared at the impressive furniture and large wardrobe.

'Whose room is this?' he asked.

'This is Harry's room,' Sirius replied.

'Why did you bring me here?'

The answer came from a large portrait on the wall.

'Moony!' James exclaimed. 'You came back. It's been awhile.'

Remus turned pale. 'Prongs?'

'The one and only,' James said cheerfully. 'How have you been? You look rather peaky.'

Remus brushed the question aside. 'So Harry's been here all this time?'

'Of course,' James replied. 'Ever since he left the Muggles.'

'I wish I were alive so I could strangle Vernon and Petunia,' Lily said, stepping into the portrait. 'Hello, Remus.'

'Lily,' Remus choked.

'James told me you came by earlier,' she said. 'Why haven't you been back sooner?'

Remus looked at Sirius with confusion in his face.

'I told you, Moony,' Sirius explained. 'Aunt Cassie put you under a Memory Charm.'

Remus furrowed his brow. 'Tell me, Prongs. What happened? How did Harry come here?'

James and Lily related the entire story, with a bit of help from Regina's portrait, who had just come in from a party on the third floor.

'Aries is Harry?' Remus shook his head. 'That can't be! I remember Sirius going to France for the birth. Merlin, Prongs, I was there for the christening! You were godfather.'

James smiled. 'As Padfoot said, Moony, you were put under a Memory

Charm.'

Silence hung in the air as Remus processed everything he had learnt.

Finally he looked up at James and Lily's portrait.

'Tell me, Prongs,' he said hesitantly. 'Is Harry happy with Sirius? Is Sirius treating him well?'

'Well, I haven't seen Harry much since he met Padfoot,' James replied honestly. 'They've been in France for the past month, and apparently they had no need to take us with them.'

'We were outside most of the time, Prongs,' Sirius said. 'You would have missed all the fun anyway, and most of the portraits in the chateau only speak French.'

James wrinkled his nose. 'Good point. Where was I?'

'I was asking whether Harry was happy with Sirius,' Remus reminded him, amused at the familiar banter between James and Sirius.

'Right. As I said, I haven't seen much of Harry since he met Padfoot, and when I saw him yesterday morning he seemed positively despondent.'

Remus frowned. 'Why was that?'

James smiled. 'He said it was because he had enjoyed his month with Sirius so much that he didn't want it to end.'

Remus sighed in relief. 'Well, it sounds as though Harry's happy with him, then.'

'What can I say?' Sirius shrugged. 'I'm the world's greatest godfather.'

'How can I possibly trust you, Sirius?' Remus said quietly. 'After everything that's happened...if you only had some proof.'

'But we can't prove anything unless we find Wormtail,' Sirius protested.

'And for all we know he was hiding at Hogwarts and McGonagall got peckish.'

'Come on, Moony,' James urged. 'Don't be such an arse.'

'Shut up, Prongs,' Sirius snapped. 'You're not helping.'

'Do you think you can just give him your puppy-dog eyes and he'll believe you?' James shot back. 'He's being stupid. If I am the one you supposedly betrayed and yet I trust you to raise my son - my son, Padfoot - then who is he to keep holding a grudge?'

Remus laughed. For a second, he could imagine that nothing had ever happened, that they were all back in Gryffindor Tower. He took a deep breath and turned to Sirius. 'Go ahead.'

'Pardon?' Sirius gave his friend a quizzical look.

'Undo the Memory Charm. Quickly, before I change my mind. I want to remember what I figured out.'

Sirius gave him a broad grin. 'So you believe me after all?'

Remus sighed and nodded slightly. 'I believe you, Padfoot. I don't know why exactly, and I'm not sure what it means yet, but, God help me, I believe you.'

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Chapter 37: Legacy of a Pureblood

Patriarch

On Wednesday, September 5, the following article appeared in The Daily Prophet:

P. C. BLACK DEAD AT 78

A scion of one of our oldest and most outrageously provocative pureblood families, Pollux Cygnus Black was in many ways a relic of a

happily bygone era, writes Rita Skeeter, Special Correspondent. The nephew of the infamously tempestuous Sirius Black, Minister for Magic from 1918-1924, 1926-1928, 1930-1934 and 1936-1939, P.C. Black followed proudly in his uncle's footsteps. He caused quite a stir when he left school to marry Irma Crabbe at thirteen (the bride was but twelve), which turned into a full-blown scandal when his daughter Walburga was born only six months later.

P.C. Black completed his education at home under private tutelage, and would eventually acquire a well-earned reputation as a scholar of wizarding jurisprudence. His magisterial work, *The Role of the Seven Statutes of Hegesippus in the Formation of the Hermetical Code of 764*, sold some three hundred copies, and is still regarded as the definitive work on the subject.

Upon the death of his father in 1943, P.C. Black took up his father's seat on the Wizengamot and entered into public service. Meanwhile, according to many reputable sources both in Britain and on the Continent, he began funnelling large sums from his newly-acquired fortune to the support of the Dark wizard Grindelwald, for which he was personally awarded the Order of Purity, First Class by Grindelwald himself.

After Grindelwald's defeat, Mr Black dedicated himself to defending the prerogatives of the old pureblood families on the home front. He authored a number of important statutes, including the 1959 Law on Inheritance and the 1966 Law for the Regulation of Domestic Labour, and was the Chairman of the Standing Committee for the Revision of the International Statute of Secrecy from 1957 to 1969.

In 1967 he served for six months as Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot.

Mr Black seems to have regarded this achievement as the high watermark

of his career, though his colleagues recollect that he was a brutal tyrant in the position, leading to his ouster that same year by current Chief Warlock Albus Dumbledore. In 1968 he famously instigated the Pureblood Riots in response to the Squib Rights Act, leading to the forced resignation of the Minister for Magic. From 1973 to 1975 he headed the British delegation to the International Confederation of Wizards.

In 1976 he retired from public life and moved to Transylvania in order to devote more time to his various recreational activities, citing the heavy burden of British restrictions on Muggle hunting. In 1986 he returned to England in order to spend more time with his great-grandson, Aries Black, whose mother had died earlier that year.

He achieved his final legal triumph only a couple of months ago, when he successfully coerced the Wizengamot into releasing his grandson, Sirius Black, from Azkaban prison on a technicality. Sirius Black is, of course, best known for betraying James, Lily and Harry Potter to the Dark wizard You-Know-Who, and for the murder of the late Peter Pettigrew and a dozen Muggles, proving once again that the apple does not roll far from the tree.

P.C. Black is survived by Irma Crabbe Black, his wife of sixty-five years, his sister Cassiopeia, his brother Marius, his grandson Sirius, his granddaughters Bellatrix Lestrange, Andromeda Tonks and Narcissa Malfoy, his great-grandsons Aries Black and Draco Malfoy and his great-granddaughter Nymphadora Tonks. He is predeceased by his sister Dorea Potter, his daughter Walburga Black, his sons Alphard and Cygnus and his grandson Regulus.

Due to his status as a former Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot, Mr Black's body will lie in state at the Ministry on Thursday, September 6 and Friday, September 7. Funeral services will be held in London at the

parish church of St Wulfstan-within-the-Walls on Saturday, September 8 at 11 o'clock in the morning.

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The week Pollux died flew by in a dizzying blur for Harry. Monday started ordinarily enough. He and Draco went to their lessons with Aunt Cassie at Windermere Court before heading over to Grimmauld Place, where they found Sirius and Narcissa already waiting for them. Pollux was actually fairly lucid when they arrived, and conversed happily with his great-grandsons about Quidditch for half-an-hour before he slipped back into unconsciousness. The boys sat there with their great-grandmother for another forty-three minutes before Pollux died.

It was sudden. He was breathing fairly normally up until the last minute, then there was a strange gasping sound. Moments later, Pollux gave up the ghost. For one horrible minute it felt as though the world had ended, and then all hell broke loose. Irma was reduced to hysterics and had to be escorted by Narcissa to her boudoir in order to recover. Sirius took charge, summoned Kreacher and began issuing orders. The coroner arrived after an hour, and it seemed to Harry and Draco as though his arrival inaugurated an unending stream of visitors and paperwork. The boys wanted to help, but had no idea what was going on or what to do. Eventually Sirius kindly but firmly asked them to stay out of the way, and the boys obliged him.

That evening Clytemnestra took them to Windermere Court, where she kept both boys for the rest of the week, since Sirius was preoccupied with all the details of managing the funeral and Irma refused to allow Narcissa to leave her side. She baked them pies and read them books aloud, anything to keep the boys distracted. There were no lessons. Except for Clytemnestra, all the adults seemed constantly preoccupied with funeral

preparations and legal details, letters and wills. No one expressly forbade the boys to play, but at the same time neither boy felt much like doing anything in particular. They spent most of the week reading, playing music together (Harry on the piano and Draco on the violin), practising spells or playing chess.

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Chapter 38: Funeral Formalities

On Friday evening the boys dressed in very hot dress robes made of black velvet in order to accompany the family to the closing of the casket at the Ministry. There were a number of boring speeches, of course. The Minister for Magic spoke at length about Pollux's many contributions to the wizarding world, followed by a load of wheezing waffle from Albus Dumbledore, whom Harry saw for the very first time.

He had heard from his great-grandfather on many occasions about the long-standing enmity between the two wizards, but Dumbledore seemed perfectly happy to stand there and repeat half-hearted platitudes as though he had actually cared about Harry's Great-Granddad. It made Harry sick, and he had to step out in the middle of Dumbledore's speech. He couldn't explain exactly what it was about Dumbledore's behaviour that made him so angry, especially when he knew that the Minister's speech was equally insincere. All Harry knew was that Dumbledore was standing up there and lying to the world again, just as he had when he had told everyone that Harry was dead.

Eventually Harry composed himself and returned to the hall, where Sirius was thanking everyone on behalf of the family, since Arcturus was too ill to attend. Having mostly seen Sirius's playful, fun-loving side, Harry was surprised to see how easily Sirius had stepped into the role for which he had been raised. To his credit, Sirius did not repeat a single platitude and did not rehearse any of Pollux's notable achievements. Nor did he lie. Instead, Sirius spoke about Pollux's care for his family and the great affection he had shown his two great-grandsons, as well as briefly acknowledging his own personal debt to his grandfather. It was honest and quite dignified, and Harry was very proud of his dad.

After the short service, Harry and Draco had to wait around with the rest of the family and accept condolences. Clytemnestra had carefully prepared them for this arduous task, but both boys found it wearying. They had just sat down for a moment on a small sofa in the reception area when the Minister for Magic came over to greet them. Harry and Draco jumped to attention.

'Hello, boys,' the Minister said. 'Please allow me to express my deepest condolences on the death of your great-grandfather. Mr Black was a fine man.'

'Thank you, Minister,' the boys mumbled.

'Now, what are your names, again?' the Minister asked in a kindly voice.

'I'm Aries Black,' Harry said. 'My father is Sirius Black and my mother was the former Regina Malfoy.'

'I'm Draco Malfoy,' Draco piped up. 'My father is Lucius Malfoy and my mother is the former Narcissa Black.'

'Ah, yes, I can see the family resemblance,' the Minister said. 'You look very like your respective fathers.'

'Thank you, Minister.'

Albus Dumbledore passed by, and the Minister caught his attention.

'Over here, Dumbledore,' he said. 'I want you to meet Black's great-grandchildren. These are Aries Black and Draco Malfoy.'

'How do you do?' the old man said, looking at both boys over his spectacles. 'Please accept my sincerest condolences on the loss of your great-grandfather.'

'Thank you, sir,' Draco said, but Harry glared at the old man silently. This was the man who had sent Sirius to prison and tried to keep him there.

This was the man who had sent Harry to live with the Dursleys and told the whole world Harry was dead when he had finally been rescued.

This was the man whom his great-grandfather had hated until his dying day, but who had still had the arrogant presumption to stand up in front of all those people and pretend that everything was right between them.

'Pollux and I knew each other for many years,' Dumbledore said.

'We've heard,' Harry replied in a cold voice. Draco gave him a funny look.

The Minister chuckled nervously. 'So, when will you boys be starting Hogwarts?'

'Next year, Minister,' Draco replied. Harry continued to glare at the aged Headmaster.

'Ah,' Dumbledore said. 'Then we shall all be seeing each other again very soon.'

'If we must,' Harry said brusquely. Dumbledore gave him an appraising look before taking his leave of the boys. The Minister followed shortly thereafter. Once they had gone, Draco dragged Harry out into the corridor.

'What was that about?' he demanded.

'I don't know what you mean,' Harry replied innocently.

'Don't lie to me, Aries,' Draco snapped. 'I know you too well. What were

you playing at with Dumbledore?'

'I can't stand him,' Harry muttered. 'He ruins everything. He ruined Dad's life. He ruined Great-Granddad's life. And he dares to come up to us as though everything's just fine and act like he's Great-Granddad's old friend.'

'It's a funeral. What's he supposed to do? Tell everyone how much he hated Great-Granddad?'

'He doesn't have to lie,' Harry protested. 'Dad didn't say a single untrue thing. I'd rather Dumbledore had stayed home than come here and subjected us to all that rubbish.'

'I understand, Aries,' Draco said. 'Really, I do. I don't like the old Muggle-lover either. But we have to show him some respect. We're going to Hogwarts next year.'

'Maybe we could persuade my dad and your mum to go along with Uncle Lucius's idea of shipping us off to Durmstrang,' Harry suggested hopefully.

Draco rolled his eyes. 'Like that's ever going to happen. Face it, Aries. We're going to spend the next seven years at Dumbledore's school.'

Harry swore violently in Parseltongue. Draco took two steps backward.

'Don't use magic here,' he said hastily. 'We're in the Ministry, for Merlin's sake.'

Harry smirked. 'I wasn't using magic.'

'What were you saying?' Draco demanded.

'I'd tell you, but I'm afraid your mum would Scourgify your ears.'

Draco turned slightly pink. 'Oh, right.' He paused. 'At least try to be civil to Dumbledore, for both our sakes.'

'I was perfectly civil,' Harry said primly. 'I held my tongue and didn't breathe a word of what I really think about him.'

'You didn't have to say anything,' Draco muttered. 'I think your glare alone lowered the temperature in the room by ten degrees.'

'Fahrenheit or centigrade?'

'Shut up, Aries.' The blond boy looked his cousin directly in the eyes. 'Is it safe for us to go back in, or do I need to tell Aunt Clytemnestra I have a stomach-ache and get her to take us home?'

Harry sighed. 'I'll behave.'

'You'd better, because if you make a scene at Great-Granddad's funeral I'm the one who's going to catch it. You could get away with murder.'

Harry thought of his great-grandmother, still barely holding herself together, and of Sirius, who had put so much work into organising all of this. He hadn't thought about it, but he really could have turned it all into a horrid mess. His face fell.

'I'm sorry, Draco,' he said. 'I didn't mean to make a scene.'

His cousin smiled and put a hand on his shoulder. 'You can't help it, Aries. It's your Gryffindor side. It makes you do stupid things.'

Harry raised an eyebrow. 'Are you accusing Slytherin's True Heir of Gryffindorish qualities?'

'You're no more the Heir of Slytherin than I am Morgan Le Fay,' Draco scoffed.

Harry let out a long, guttural hiss. Draco rolled his eyes.

'Come on, you idiot,' he said. 'Back inside.'

Harry bowed elegantly. 'After you, Madam Le Fay.' Draco swatted the back of his head, and they walked through the double doors into the large hall.

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Chapter 39: Unspoken Emotions

The next morning was grey and dreary, and a light drizzle fell from the sky. Harry stood beside Sirius in the churchyard. The rest of the family huddled around the open grave, wrapped tightly in thick cloaks and carrying large umbrellas. Pollux's coffin was lowered into the ground, and the vicar droned on.

'...we therefore commit his body to the ground; earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust; in sure and certain hope...'

Hope? Harry thought bitterly. What hope? Great-Granddad's dead. He's gone, and he's not coming back.

Harry had never thought about death much. He knew James, Lily and Regina were dead, but he had only ever known any of them through their portraits, and somehow it had never really clicked that dead people had once been alive, had once been real, flesh-and-blood people with families and friends and hopes and dreams.

The thought of Pollux as a portrait, stuck forever in two dimensions, repulsed him. Never before had a portrait seemed so fake, like the barest reflection of someone who had been real, someone who had been lost forever.

The mourners all filed by, dropping handfuls of dirt on top of the coffin.

'Good-bye, Great-Granddad,' Harry whispered as he dropped his own clod of soil. It made a loud noise against the coffin. He clutched tightly onto Sirius's hand as they left the churchyard and walked slowly back to Grimmauld Place.

Draco and Abraxas came up behind them and walked silently on Harry's

other side. The Muggles zoomed by in their cars, horns blaring and radios blasting, an unwelcome intrusion on the family grief. At least the weather seemed to sympathise. Even the sky was weeping today.

They reached the townhouse and went inside. Kreacher had prepared mountains of food, ready for any visitors who might come by to pay their respects to the family. Harry didn't feel up to accepting condolences today.

'Dad?' he breathed hoarsely. Sirius looked down at him with compassion in his grey eyes.

'What is it, son?'

'I'm really tired. Can I go home?' Harry asked.

'Let me take Aries and Draco home with me, Sirius,' Abraxas suggested.

'You'll be busy all day anyway, and the boys need a chance to rest.'

Sirius nodded. 'Thanks, Dad.' He patted Harry on the shoulder. 'I'll be by to pick you up this evening.'

Harry nodded and followed his grandfather and cousin to the fireplace.

....

Late that night, exhausted and bleary-eyed, Sirius Flooed to Malfoy Manor. He found Harry lying on the sofa, curled up in a small ball next to Abraxas, who was sitting with his legs crossed and flipping through the latest issue of Transfiguration Today. Abraxas looked up as Sirius entered the room.

'Is everyone gone?' he asked.

Sirius nodded. 'Finally. Grandmamma's gone to bed and Kreacher's handling the cleanup. How's Aries?'

'The poor boy's taking Pollux's death rather hard,' Abraxas said. 'Much harder than Draco is.'

'Well, Aries had to deal with his mum's death very young,' Sirius said

thoughtfully. 'I suspect it bothers him more deeply to lose those he loves.'

Abraxas smiled down at his grandson's sleeping form. 'He didn't want to leave my side until you came to collect him. He insisted he'd stay up.'

Sirius chuckled. 'Ten-year-old boys do have a tendency to overestimate their own abilities in that regard. Thank you for humouring him.'

'Grandfathers live to spoil their grandsons,' Abraxas replied. He paused.

'Would you forgive an old man for dispensing a bit of fatherly advice?'

'Absolutely,' Sirius said with a smile. 'I need all the help I can get.'

'You've stepped admirably into your role as future Head of the House of Black this week,' his father-in-law said. 'Everything has gone splendidly. Pollux would have been proud, and I'm sure Arcturus will be too, once he hears about it.'

'But?'

Abraxas took a deep breath. 'You've rather left Aries to the sidelines. He and Draco have been by themselves all week.'

'Aunt Clytemnestra was taking care of them,' Sirius pointed out.

'Indeed she was, and no doubt doing an admirable job,' Abraxas said quickly. 'I understand the necessity for it under these circumstances, and the boys do as well. But you're going to have greater and greater responsibilities as time goes on, Sirius, more and more excuses to pull you away from your son.'

They will all seem incredibly important at the time. Don't let abandoning your son in order to fulfil other duties become automatic, as it has with Lucius and Narcissa.'

'I care about Aries more than anything else in the world,' Sirius protested.

'Lucius and Narcissa care for Draco,' Abraxas replied. 'Perhaps more than he'll ever know. That's precisely the problem.' He sighed. 'Trust me on this, Sirius. I have done many grand and important things in my lifetime,

and now, in my old age, I find that I would trade them all to have spent more time with my son.' He smiled wistfully. 'Aries is going to Hogwarts next year. You've already missed out on nine years of his life. If you're not careful you'll wake up one day and find out that you've lined up everything perfectly for an heir you don't even really know.'

Sirius nodded. 'Thanks, Dad. I'll bear that in mind.'

'Don't get me wrong, Sirius. I think you're a wonderful father. Aries adores you.' He paused. 'Only I want things to stay that way.'

'I respect that. Thank you.' Sirius looked down at Harry. 'Now, if I'm going to be a wonderful father tonight, I should get Aries to bed.'

'Don't wake him,' Abraxas said. 'I had Dobby prepare Aries' usual room for you. You can stay here tonight.'

Abraxas summoned the house elf, and Sirius followed him up the ornate staircase to the guest room, levitating Harry all the way. He laid Harry gently in the large bed and crawled into the smaller second bed Dobby had set up. He had just laid his head on the pillow when Harry stirred.

'Dad?' Harry mumbled. 'Is that you?'

'It's me,' Sirius whispered back.

'I thought you weren't going to come.'

'I promised,' Sirius reminded him.

Harry lay there quietly for a minute, and Sirius thought he had fallen back asleep.

'You're going to die one day, aren't you, Dad?' he said eventually. 'Just like my parents.'

Sirius felt his eyes grow moist. 'Yes, Harry,' he said hoarsely. 'I am.'

Everyone dies, you know. But I shan't die for a very long time yet.'

'You don't know that for sure,' Harry said with resignation. 'My parents were young when they died.'

Sirius sighed. 'But that was during a war. Voldemort's gone now.'

'There could be another war,' Harry pointed out. 'He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named was hardly the first Dark Lord, and he probably won't be the last. Or you could die in an accident. What if you crash the Diablo? What if there's a fire?'

Sirius dragged himself out of his bed and crawled next to Harry. He put an arm around the boy's shoulders.

'I suppose you're right,' Sirius said. 'You never know. I could die tomorrow.'

'So could I, for that matter,' Harry replied. Sirius shuddered, not allowing himself even to consider the possibility. 'Or Draco. Or Granddad. Or the Squibs.'

'Everyone dies eventually,' Sirius said. 'All you can do is live each moment for all it's worth.' He paused. 'And you know, I don't think the ones we love ever really leave us.'

'So you think there's a chance people really do live on after they die?'

Sirius smiled at his godson, his son. 'We live in an amazing world, Harry. Who knows what wonders await us beyond the grave?'

Harry hugged Sirius tightly. 'I don't want to lose you.'

Tears began streaming down Sirius's face. 'I don't want to lose you either, Harry.'

Father and son held each other close, neither wanting to let go, and slowly drifted off to sleep.

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Chapter 40: Aunt Cassie's

Challenge

The Monday after the funeral, Druella Black left Malfoy Manor and moved permanently into Grimmauld Place in order to help her mother-in-law, much to the relief of Sirius, who was more than happy finally to move back to Windermere Court. Harry was simply glad to have things return more or less to their proper order.

On the Wednesday after the funeral, Harry and Draco resumed their lessons. Cassiopeia launched the boys on an intensive preparatory program, including the full range of subjects they would be studying in their first year at Hogwarts.

'By the time you start school, I expect you to have your first-year course books memorised,' she informed them in a tone that brooked no opposition. 'You are scions of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black. It simply will not do for either of you to be shown up by wizards of lesser lineage.'

Both boys steadily improved with their wandwork, though Draco continued to have a slight edge over Harry when casting normally. Harry found this very frustrating, especially since every spell he practised would come easily if only he used Parseltongue.

At first he was tempted to spend all his time outside of lessons practising with Parseltongue, since it was so much easier, but it only succeeded in making it even harder for him to perform spells normally in class. Since Harry still did not wish to alert Cassiopeia to his newfound talent, he decided to bring up his problem with Sirius.

'That's very strange,' Sirius said, stroking his beard thoughtfully. 'I don't see why using Parseltongue for spells should have a deleterious effect on

your other magic.'

'Maybe I should just use Parseltongue all the time, and not worry about the other,' Harry suggested.

Sirius raised an eyebrow. 'And when other people find out?'

'Let them deal with it,' Harry replied casually.

Sirius shook his head. 'I don't like it. I think you should avoid using Parseltongue for the time being. Build up your strength with your normal magic first.'

'But shouldn't I practise the Parseltongue too?' Harry protested.

'It seems to come to you naturally enough without practice,' Sirius pointed out. 'What are the most advanced spells you can do with Parseltongue?'

'I've got through all the third-year spells without a problem.'

'What can you do normally?'

Harry's shoulders fell. 'I'm struggling to keep up with Draco.'

'Focus on your normal work,' Sirius said, ruffling his son's hair. 'Once you catch up a bit, then maybe you can bring out the Parseltongue again.'

Harry did not like depriving himself of his unique ability, but Sirius's advice made good sense, and Harry went along with it. In time, he caught up with Draco, though his performance, much to Cassiopeia's frustration, never surpassed what one would expect from a young wizard of average abilities. The only exception seemed to be during their weekly sessions of special magic, where Harry did seem to have a special gift.

This mollified Cassiopeia somewhat, though it also confused her.

'Magnificent, Aries,' she said one Friday, after Harry had managed the Blood-boiling Curse on his first try. 'Why is it that you manage these spells with such ease, but never display anything other than determined mediocrity in your other work?'

'I don't know, Aunt Cassie,' Harry said quietly. Draco gave him a worried look, but said nothing.

...

Whilst the boys endured their lessons with Cassiopeia every morning, Sirius took advantage of the opportunity to visit Remus. The werewolf was unemployed at the time, and so he was more than happy to spend his mornings talking with his old friend over a couple of bottles of butterbeer.

'How are you holding up, Padfoot?' Remus asked him one day.

Sirius shrugged. 'Well enough. I'm mostly exhausted.'

Remus nodded. 'I'm not surprised, what with all the work you've been doing.' He smiled wryly. 'Who would have guessed when you were sixteen that you'd happily step into the role of Black paterfamilias?'

Sirius grinned. 'Not yet, Moony. Grandfather's still breathing, last time I checked.'

'Acting paterfamilias, then.' Remus furrowed his brow. 'How's that bit going? It can't be pleasant for you, being stuck back with your family.'

'Well, staying with the family was one of Aunt Cassie's conditions for letting me take charge of Harry,' Sirius explained. 'I knew what I was in for. But it's actually not nearly as bad as I thought it would be. I think we've all of us mellowed a bit.' He chuckled. 'Though you might want to ask me again in a few months. I haven't been back in England that long.'

'It probably helps that some of your more unpleasant relations are gone,' Remus pointed out.

'That's true enough. I'd probably go barmy if I had to live with my mum again, or if I had to play nice with Bella. I nearly went mad just staying at Grimmauld Place with Grandmamma.' He paused reflectively. 'There's one other thing.'

'What's that?'

'Before, when I ran away, I didn't have anything in common with my family,' Sirius said. 'Now we all have one thing in common.'

Remus understood. 'Harry.'

'Exactly. I didn't think it possible, but they mostly seem genuinely to care for Harry.' Sirius chuckled. 'Even Aunt Cassie, in her own perverse way.'

Remus grimaced. 'I don't think she's capable of caring for anyone.'

'You're just upset because you were on the receiving end of her interrogation techniques.'

'She used the Cruciatus Curse on me!' Remus exclaimed.

Sirius shrugged. 'To be fair, Moony, at the time she thought you and Dumbledore were plotting to steal Harry and send him back to live with those filthy Muggles.'

'You've been spending too much time with your family, Padfoot,' Remus observed. 'You're picking up their expressions.'

'Can you think of a more apt description of the Dursleys?' Sirius demanded. 'You know as well as anyone how terribly they treated Harry.'

Remus conceded the point. Sirius changed the subject.

'I wish you'd let me give you some gold,' Sirius said with a pout. 'This place could use some repairs, and with Granddad gone I am now fabulously wealthy.'

'As it just so happens, Padfoot,' Remus replied, 'I've inherited something of a fortune myself.'

That caught Sirius off guard. 'Really?'

'Apparently James and Lily wanted me to inherit all their gold if anything happened to Harry.'

Sirius nodded. 'That makes sense. So why haven't you done anything with it?'

'It doesn't really belong to me,' Remus said. 'It belongs to Harry.'

Sirius snorted. 'Harry has more than enough gold coming to him as it is.'

'You might have other children, you know.'

Sirius smiled wistfully. 'Unfortunately, Moony, as embarrassing as it is for me for an old ladies' man like me to admit it, Azkaban has made that rather...unlikely.'

Remus turned crimson. 'I see.'

'Even if I did, Harry's going to be quite comfortable off,' Sirius pointed out. 'He's only getting everything from Uncle Alphard, Granddad and Grandfather through me, of course, but Aunt Cassie has no children, so she's decided to leave everything directly to Harry.'

Uncle Marius has told me he's planning on doing the same thing-his only son died years ago. At this rate, Harry is on track to become one of the wealthiest wizards in Great Britain. So you can use Harry's gold guilt-free.'

'It's not right,' Remus said quietly. 'That gold should go to Harry, not to me. I've managed until now, and I suspect I'll keep on managing perfectly well.'

Sirius sighed. 'If you say so, Moony.' He paused. 'There's something else we need to talk about, by the way.'

'What's that?'

'I'm concerned about Dumbledore,' Sirius replied. 'I was watching him at the Ministry, and he seemed to be looking at Harry far more often than I should like.'

'Do you think he suspects the truth?' Remus asked.

'I hope not.'

'Why don't we just tell him?' Remus suggested. 'We can tell him what happened with you and Peter, and show him how happy Harry is. Maybe

he'd go along with everything.'

Sirius snorted. 'I'm sorry, Moony, but I lost all faith in Dumbledore's wisdom when I learned how hard he fought to keep me in Azkaban.'

'To be fair, he thought you were guilty.'

'He could have spoken with me first,' Sirius growled. 'From what Lucius has told me, Dumbledore's given Snivelly far more of a chance than he ever gave me. Besides, look at what he did to Harry!'

Remus sighed. 'I can't say I'm all that happy with Dumbledore, either, at the moment.' He paused. 'So why do you think he was watching Harry?'

'The truth of the matter is that I have no clue what he's up to, and I don't like it,' Sirius replied. 'I want to do something to remedy that.'

'What do you have in mind?'

Sirius gave Remus a mischievous grin. 'Ever fancy becoming a secret agent, Moony?'

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Chapter 41: Unexpected Training

One afternoon, a few weeks after the funeral, Sirius escorted Harry and Draco to Malfoy Manor after lessons, where they found Narcissa and Clytemnestra waiting for them in the ballroom.

'What's this about, Mum?' Draco asked.

'Now that you boys are ten years old, you will be permitted to attend the Ministry Christmas Ball this year,' Narcissa explained. 'There will be many lovely girls your own age present, and I expect both of you to

acquit yourselves as befits young wizards of your station.'

Harry and Draco looked at each other in panic. Harry opened his mouth to protest, but Sirius cut him off with a smile.

'When Cissy says "permitted",' he clarified, 'naturally she means "required".'

'But we don't know how to dance!' Harry protested.

'That is why you and Draco will be taking dancing lessons every day until the ball,' Narcissa replied. 'We shall begin with the waltz.'

'Cissy and I shall demonstrate first, so you'll have an idea of how it's supposed to look,' Sirius added.

He flicked his wand and music began to play. He bowed to Narcissa and she made a curtsy in return. Then they began to dance. Harry had never seen anything quite like it. His dad and aunt twirled effortlessly around the dance floor, spinning and dipping gracefully. They moved together in perfect balance, not one foot out of place.

It was mesmerising. Harry was certain he would never be able to do anything like that, and, judging from the gobsmacked expression on his cousin's face, Draco felt exactly the same way. The music ended and Sirius and Narcissa stopped. Harry, Draco and Clytemnestra all applauded.

'Of course, we don't expect you to be able to do that just yet,' Sirius said.

'Cissy and I have been dancing together since we were children.'

He paired Harry with Narcissa and Draco with Clytemnestra, and then began giving the boys pointers. He drilled them relentlessly, and by the end of the lesson the boys were exhausted.

'I can't believe you let Aunt Narcissa talk you into this,' Harry complained to Sirius when they got home. 'It's torture.'

Sirius smirked. 'Actually, it was my idea.'

'Yours?' Harry was indignant.

'But of course,' his dad replied. 'I was shocked when I learned that you and Draco hadn't started dancing lessons before now. I began when I was five.'

Harry pouted. 'I don't see why we have to do them at all.'

'Watch the whinging,' Sirius warned. 'Besides, how do you ever expect to win all the girls if you can't even dance? Trust me, one day you'll thank me for making you do this.'

Harry only scowled darkly. 'My feet hurt.'

Sirius laughed. 'You enjoy playing the piano, don't you?'

'It's all right,' Harry replied. Sirius gave him a doubtful look. The boy groaned. 'Fine. I enjoy it very much.'

'Did you like practising at first?'

Harry knew where Sirius was going with this, but he knew better than to argue. 'No.'

'Were you angry at Marius and Clytemnestra for making you take the lessons?'

'Not really,' Harry said cheekily. 'I was still so grateful to them for rescuing me from the Muggles that I willingly submitted to all kinds of torture.'

Sirius rolled his eyes. 'And now that you're an exasperating, over-indulged prat, would you acquiesce so easily?'

Harry smirked. 'Probably not.'

'Are you nonetheless happy, or even - dare I say it? - grateful, that you were forced to take those awful piano lessons?'

'Yes,' Harry admitted. 'I see your point.' He grinned. 'But I'm still allowed to dislike the dancing lessons in the meantime, aren't I?'

Sirius tousled the boy's hair. 'So long as you remember to watch the

whinging.'

...

In early November, Lucius and Narcissa went to Spain for a week, and Draco came to stay at Windermere Court whilst they were gone. One evening when the boys were playing chess in the parlour, Sirius burst inside and shut the door. He was wearing his Muggle outfit and a shifty expression on his face.

'Quick!' he urged, thrusting a bag full of Muggle clothes into the boys' hands. 'Everyone's upstairs. It's now or never.'

The boys grinned at each other and promptly changed into the jeans, T-shirts and jackets. Sirius opened the door of the parlour. No one was there but the house elf, who was whistling merrily as she dusted.

'Mopsy!' Sirius hissed. 'Is the coast clear?'

'Yes, Master Sirius,' Mopsy replied in a whisper. 'Master's in his study, Mistress is in her boudoir and Miss Cassie is in her rooms.'

Sirius nodded. 'I'm going out with the boys. What will you tell anyone if they ask where we are?'

'Mopsy is saying that Master Sirius is taking Master Aries and Master Draco on an educational outing,' the house elf recited proudly.

Sirius smiled at her fondly. 'You're a good elf, Mopsy.'

'Thank you, Master Sirius,' Mopsy said, bowing deeply. Sirius opened the door of the parlour wide, and the boys came out into the entrance hall.

They froze when they heard familiar footsteps on the stairs.

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Chapter 42: Magical Night Out

'You'd best be leaving now, Master Sirius,' Mopsy said quickly. 'Don't worry. Mopsy is holding Miss Cassie off.' The elf darted up the stairs and Sirius led the boys out of the house. Parked in front of number seventeen, Windermere Court was a sleek black coupe.

'Where's the Diablo?' Draco asked.

'In France, of course,' Sirius replied. 'You didn't honestly expect me to drag that thing all the way back here, did you? This is a V8 Vantage.

Don't worry, it's fun too.' He opened the door and practically shoved the boys into the back seat before himself sliding into the front passenger seat. A wizard Harry and Draco did not know sat behind the steering wheel.

'Boys, I'd like you to meet Remus Lupin,' Sirius said as the car pulled into the traffic. 'He's an old friend of mine and James's from school.'

'Remus Lupin?' Harry repeated. The name sounded familiar. Then it clicked. 'You must be Moony!'

'That's right,' Remus said. 'And you must be Aries and Draco. I've heard a lot about you two.'

Draco sniggered. 'Not nearly so much as we've heard about you. James Potter's portrait used to tell us stories about you and Uncle Sirius all the time.'

'Is it true that you Spellotaped Filch's cat to the chandelier in the Slytherin common room during third year?' Harry asked eagerly.

Remus chuckled. 'I'm afraid so.'

'What about the Giant Squid incident in sixth year?' Draco asked.

Remus winced. 'I may need to have a talk with James about which stories he tells you.'

'Actually, Dad told us that one,' Harry said wryly. Remus grimaced and Sirius let out a loud bark-like laugh.

'Of course he did,' Remus said. 'You'd better watch it, Padfoot, if you're not careful with your stories, these two scoundrels may wind up burning down the castle before they finish their first year.'

'There's always Durmstrang,' Harry said casually. Draco punched his shoulder.

'Shut up about that, Aries,' he growled. 'They're not sending us to Durmstrang.'

Harry grinned. 'Beauxbâtons, alors. Nous déjà parlons français.'

'Aries,' Sirius said sharply. 'Nous l'avons discuté mille fois. La décision est faite. Quel est le quatrième règle pour la vie avec Sirius?'

Harry sighed. 'Sirius locutus est, causa finita est.'

'Ne l'oublie jamais, mon grand.'

Draco decided it was time to change the subject. 'So, Mr Lupin, where are we going?'

'I'm not sure, exactly,' Remus replied. 'I'm just following Sirius's directions.'

'You'll see when we get there,' Sirius said. 'I promise, you won't be disappointed.'

Ten minutes later they pulled into a car park and climbed out. Sirius led the four wizards to a small Turkish restaurant.

'This place has the best kebabs west of Istanbul,' he proclaimed eagerly.

'Kebabs?' Harry asked. 'What are they?'

'Meat on a stick,' Remus explained.

'Moony!' Sirius scolded. 'Kebabs are one of the most sublime achievements of the human race.'

'Better than pizza?' Draco was in awe.

Sirius paused reflectively. 'That's a difficult question. I don't know whether there truly is anything better than pizza. But kebabs are certainly on the same level.'

The boys' eyes went wide. Remus's eyes rolled.

They stepped into the restaurant and found themselves at the end of a long line.

'How long are we going to have to wait?' Remus complained.

'Watch the whinging!' Harry and Draco responded in unison. Remus chuckled.

'I'd forgot all about the rules! I see you've got them trained, Padfoot,' he said fondly, but Sirius was not paying them any attention. Instead he was waving at a man who was standing near the kitchen. The man jumped when he saw Sirius and hurried up to the front.

'Good evening, Mr Black,' the man said eagerly. 'It is very good to see you again. How have you been?'

'Very well, thank you, Mehmet,' Sirius replied. 'Allow me to introduce my son Aries, my nephew Draco and my good friend Mr Lupin.'

'A pleasure to meet you all,' Mehmet said graciously.

'Mehmet Tosun is the owner of this restaurant,' Sirius explained to Remus and the boys. He turned back to Mehmet. 'I was telling them you have the best kebabs west of Istanbul. It seems a lot of other people had the same idea.' He gave the owner a winning smile. 'Is it a long wait?'

'For you, Mr Black, there is no wait,' Mehmet replied, and motioned for them to follow him.

'Hold on!' protested a very large Muggle with a bushy moustache who was standing alongside a thin woman with a very long neck. It took a moment, but Harry paled as he recognised Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia. He heard Remus gasp.

'May I help you, sir?' Mehmet asked Uncle Vernon politely.

'My wife and I have been waiting here for twenty minutes,' Uncle Vernon said. 'If anyone should get to go in it's us.'

'Mr Black has a reservation,' Mehmet explained.

'We called earlier, and you said you didn't accept reservations!' Aunt Petunia complained shrilly.

'It is a standing reservation, madam.' Mehmet turned his back on the Dursleys and ushered the four wizards to a somewhat private table near the back. Remus whispered something in Sirius's ear. The Animagus's eyes shone with a feral glint.

'If you'll excuse me for a moment,' he said to his companions once they were seated. 'I need to use the loo.'

He walked just out of their sight, and a few moments later Harry heard a familiar shriek.

'Who let that monstrous thing in here?' Aunt Petunia shouted. 'Do something, Vernon!'

Harry jumped up and headed back towards the front in order to see what was going on. He was just in time to see an enormous and very familiar black dog relieve himself into Aunt Petunia's new handbag before Mehmet came out with a broom and chased the dog away. Harry sauntered back to the table with a wide grin on his face.

'What happened?' Draco asked.

'Some stray dog wandered in off the street and pissed all over that annoying Muggle woman's handbag,' Harry explained, laughing. Remus winced and put his head in his hands.

Sirius reappeared after a couple of minutes.

'Feeling better?' Harry asked with a smirk.

'Much,' Sirius replied brightly. He sat down at the table and took charge

of ordering their food. He started them off with cigar-shaped cheese pies and an assortment of tasty dips. Sirius rattled off their exotic names with ease, but Harry couldn't keep them straight. Then they had a salad before moving onto the meat. Sirius ordered several different kinds of kebabs: lamb kebabs, chicken kebabs, salmon kebabs, kebabs which were made from a mixture of ground beef and lamb. Harry and Draco devoured the delicious new food with abandon.

'You were right, Uncle Sirius!' Draco exclaimed. 'Kebabs are definitely on the same order as pizza!'

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Chapter 43: Secrets and Shadows

Remus Lupin fought desperately to keep his anxiety hidden as he stepped into Dumbledore's office. Sirius had eventually persuaded him that this was the right course of action for them to take, with a bit of help from James's portrait, but Sirius and James had always possessed an uncanny ability to convince Remus to do things that deep down he felt to be wrong. Filch's cat in third year was only one example.

'Good afternoon, Remus,' Dumbledore greeted him, a twinkle in his eye.

'What a delightful surprise! Please sit down.' He gestured towards a dish of sweets. 'Would you care for a sherbet lemon?'

'No, thank you, Professor,' Remus replied as he took a seat.

'It is very good to see you, Remus. It has been far too long.'

'About that, Professor, I wanted to apologise,' Remus said. 'It wasn't fair

of me to blame you for what happened to Harry.'

'I assure you, my boy, you cannot possibly blame me for that tragic incident as much as I blame myself,' Dumbledore said soberly. 'It was my duty to protect Harry, and I failed to do so. I can only hope that my inadequacy in this regard does not have dire consequences for the future.'

Remus chewed his lower lip. 'I wanted to talk with you about that as well. I've decided that, no matter what mistakes might have been made, it's still my duty to help fight in whatever way I can.'

Dumbledore beamed. 'I'm very glad to hear it. As a matter of fact, there is one immediate task for which I believe you to be most eminently suited.'

He paused. 'I understand that it may prove emotionally difficult for you, and I want you to feel free to decline, or to desist at any time.'

'Thank you, Professor. What would you have me do?'

'As you know, Sirius Black has been freed from Azkaban on technical grounds,' Dumbledore explained. 'Looking back, I suppose we ought to have given him a trial, but it would hardly change the verdict. James himself told me they intended to use Sirius as the Secret Keeper, and, really, who else would they have picked?' Remus wanted to speak up and defend his friend, but Sirius had strictly forbidden him to do so. He forced himself to nod in agreement. 'I do not feel comfortable having such a dangerous wizard at large,' Dumbledore continued. 'For all we know, he's currently searching for Lord Voldemort in an attempt to bring him back.'

Or playing Quidditch with Harry Potter in the rear garden of one of his family's many houses, Remus thought. Aloud he said, 'It would make sense to have someone in a position to monitor his activities.'

'Precisely,' Dumbledore said. 'And who better than an old friend?'

'Me, Professor?' Remus feigned surprise. 'I couldn't possibly do such a

thing! He betrayed James and Lily, and Harry too. We are hardly on good terms with one another.'

'Nonetheless, I hope you will muster the courage once again to befriend Sirius Black,' Dumbledore replied. 'Watch his movements. See who his friends are. It may be that we shall gather some clue as to the nature of his schemes.'

Remus lowered his head. 'If there's no one else, I suppose I could. For James and Lily's sake.'

'And Harry's,' Dumbledore reminded him.

'And Harry's,' Remus agreed. He let out a deep breath. 'I'll do it.'

'Thank you, Remus,' Dumbledore said with a beneficent smile. 'I know you will do a fine job.'

Remus rose to his feet, eager to get out of the office, which felt increasingly cramped. 'I suppose that will be all, Professor?'

Dumbledore raised a finger. 'Actually, there is another matter we ought to discuss.'

Remus sat back down. 'Yes?'

'I am very curious to learn more about Aries Black. I have heard rumours from certain sources that the boy may be extraordinarily gifted, and may have an unfortunate predilection for the Dark Arts. I am sure, given his lineage, this does not surprise you.'

Remus shook his head. 'He's half Black and half Malfoy. I can hardly think of a more unfortunate combination.'

'Precisely,' Dumbledore agreed. 'Find out what you can about the boy.'

Anything we learn now may prove to be of vital importance in the coming years.'

'I'll do my best,' Remus said, nodding his head.

'That's all any of us can do,' Dumbledore replied. 'I have one more thing

to discuss with you.' He opened a drawer in his desk and removed a shimmering silver cloak. Remus gasped.

'James's Invisibility Cloak? I thought it was lost.'

'James lent it to me shortly before he died,' Dumbledore explained. 'I have learnt that the Potters made you their heir, in the event that anything happened to Harry?'

Remus nodded. 'That's right.'

Dumbledore handed the Cloak over to Remus. 'I should very much like to keep it for myself. It is a fascinating artefact. However, I believe it is right for you to have it.' He smiled. 'Besides, it may prove useful if ever you feel the need to...explore the Black family home.'

'Thank you, Professor,' Remus said sincerely. 'I shall make good use of it.'

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Chapter 44: Marius's Wisdom

On the evening of the Ministry ball in December, Clytemnestra took a very long time getting Harry ready. She dressed him in a fine set of antique dress robes that Pollux had worn for his wedding: blue velvet embroidered with gold thread and adorned with diamonds and sapphires along the collar and cuffs.

'Aunt Clytemnestra, do I have to wear these robes?' Harry complained.

'They must weigh at least a ton.'

His aunt knelt down and hemmed up the edges at the back. 'What is it your father says? Oh yes. "Watch the whinging." Wonderful phrase. Lift

up your arms.'

Harry complied. 'I have other dress robes. Ones that weigh a good bit less.'

The Squib stood up and placed her hands on her hips. 'I thought that you might want to honour your great-grandfather by wearing something that belonged to him. If you'd rather not, I'm sure we can scrounge up something else. Of course, that would require much more work on my part, and you'd probably end up late to the Ministry...'

Harry's eyes fell. 'I'm sorry, Aunt Clytemnestra. I'll stop complaining.'

'There's a good lad.' She put the finishing touches on his robes and then stood back to admire her handiwork. She nodded approvingly. 'You'll do, I think. Run off and show your uncle. He's in his study.'

Harry made his way to Uncle Marius's study. The elderly man was sitting in a comfortable armchair with a book of Tennyson in his hand and his favourite pipe clenched between his teeth. Harry knocked on the door, and Uncle Marius looked up.

'Upon my word!' he exclaimed when he saw Harry. 'Who is this good-looking fellow?'

'Aunt Clytemnestra said you'd want to see,' Harry explained.

'And she was quite right,' the Squib replied. 'Turn around.'

Harry spun around and Uncle Marius nodded approvingly. 'You look every inch the heir of the House of Black tonight, my boy. I'm sure you and your father will have a marvellous time.'

'Aren't you and Aunt Clytemnestra coming?' Harry asked.

'I think it's best if we don't,' Uncle Marius said tactfully. 'Our families have been very kind to us over the past few years, what with letting us back into the family and all. It wouldn't do for us to make things unduly difficult for them.'

'Because you're Squibs,' Harry said dully. 'That's not fair.'

'Whoever said life was fair, old man? We play the hand we've been dealt.

That's all any of us can do.'

'I wish things were different.'

'Be careful what you wish for,' his uncle said sternly. 'Think about it. If your aunt and I were perfectly accepted in the wizarding world, we should never have gone to the Dursleys that night, and you would be locked in a cupboard under the stairs right now instead of preparing to attend a ball at the Ministry.'

Harry grinned. 'You have a talent for putting things in perspective, Uncle Marius.'

'Years of Muggle school food will do that for you,' Uncle Marius said.

'Now run along and have a good time. Don't worry about me and your aunt. We're invited to Buckingham Palace tomorrow.'

Harry left his uncle's study and went downstairs to the parlour, where Aunt Cassiopeia was waiting, dressed in a very austere set of plain black dress robes, her hair, as always, pulled back in a tight bun. Harry thought she looked more as though she were going to a funeral than a ball, though, knowing his aunt, he rather suspected she might feel more cheerful and relaxed at a funeral, especially if it was in honour of one of the many people she loathed. The stern witch scrutinised Harry's appearance as he came in.

'The Squib knows her business, I'll give her that,' was her only remark.

They waited there in silence for five minutes before she began tapping her foot impatiently.

'Where is that father of yours?' she snapped, as though Harry were at fault. 'If he makes us late I swear to Merlin I'll Cruciate him to within an inch of his life.'

Harry made a mental note that threatening someone with the Cruciatus Curse became remarkably ineffective after the hundredth time one did it without following through.

'Haven't you ever heard of fashionably late, Aunt Cassie?' Sirius said, sweeping in majestically through the parlour doors. He was wearing a very grand set of dress robes, cloth of gold trimmed in red velvet and adorned with large rubies.

Aunt Cassie sniffed. 'You look like a walking advertisement for the Gryffindor Quidditch team.'

'However did you guess?' Sirius replied, his eyes wide. 'It took me ages to get it right.'

The old witch rolled her eyes. 'You just might have me fooled,' she replied. 'But I know for a fact that those robes were a gift to Pollux from the Moroccan Minister for Magic.'

Her nephew grinned. 'You caught me. Shall we depart?'

The two wizards and the witch gathered at the fireplace and Flooed to the Ministry.

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Chapter 45: Pureblood Elegance

Daphne Greengrass stood with her friend Pansy Parkinson, watching the various boys as they entered the Ministry's Grand Ballroom.

'That's Vincent Crabbe,' Pansy said, referring to one very large boy.

'Decent family, of course, but he's a bit dim-witted.'

Daphne sighed. 'Can't there be at least one pureblood wizard left in Britain who doesn't look inbred?'

Pansy giggled. 'That's not a very nice thing to say.'

'Sorry. Two, then.'

Pansy giggled some more.

Just then a family of three walked into the room, all blond. Pansy sighed.

'Oh, there you go, Daphne. Isn't he a dream?' she gushed.

Daphne glanced at the boy, who had pointed, aristocratic features. 'He's not bad,' she admitted.

'That's Draco Malfoy. I met him two years ago over the summer while he was vacationing with his parents in Spain. My father says his father has a lot of influence with the Minister.' She dragged Daphne by the hand. 'Let's go meet him.'

Daphne followed her friend helplessly. They trotted over towards Draco, who had taken up a position near the punch once his parents had split up to make their respective rounds.

'Good evening, Draco,' Pansy cooed. 'It's so good to see you again.'

Draco looked at her blankly for a second before his eyes lit up in recognition. 'Oh, hello, Pansy.'

'Daphne, allow me to present Draco Malfoy,' Pansy said. 'Draco, this is Daphne Greengrass.'

'Pleased to meet you,' Daphne said.

'The pleasure is all mine,' Draco replied. His eyes darted about the room as though he were looking for someone. 'Have you seen my cousin, Aries Black?'

'Ooh, isn't that Sirius Black's son?' Pansy exclaimed. 'Is he really coming tonight?'

'He's supposed to be,' Draco answered, still looking around. 'Uncle Sirius

said they were both coming.'

Daphne shivered involuntarily at the casual way Draco referred to the infamous wizard.

'What's he like, Draco?' Pansy asked eagerly. 'They say he was one of You-Know-Who's most dangerous followers.'

Draco smirked. 'Uncle Sirius is cool. He's loads of fun to be around, but you don't want to get on his bad side.' He looked over towards the door and smiled. 'In fact, there he is right now, as inconspicuous as ever.'

Both girls turned around to look. A very stern-looking witch in plain black robes had just walked in, and behind her strolled two wizards in opulent robes who could not possibly be mistaken for anything but father and son. The elder had long black hair and a closely trimmed beard.

Daphne suspected he had once been very good-looking, but now he was too thin and his eyes carried a haunted, dangerous look. She didn't much fancy the idea of spending time in close quarters with a wizard who looked like that, no matter how 'cool' Draco said he was.

'Look at those robes!' Pansy breathed. 'They must have cost thousands of Galleons. And the boy's robes too! What I wouldn't give to have robes like that.'

But Daphne wasn't thinking about the boy's clothing. Her eyes were fixed on the younger Black's face. Aries Black wore his insolent good looks like he wore his princely robes, with a casual nonchalance that suggested he thought them nothing more than his due. His bright blue eyes twinkled with mischief, and the boy bore himself like his father, with the confidence born from knowing that the whole world was one's to command.

'He's gorgeous,' she found herself saying. She blushed slightly once she realised she had spoken aloud.

'Who, Uncle Sirius?' Draco said incredulously.

'No, silly,' Pansy told him in a dreamy voice. 'Your cousin.'

Draco snorted. 'Aries?'

'Oh, Merlin!' Pansy shrieked. 'He's coming this way.'

It was true. Aries Black had left his father's side and was wandering over towards Draco.

'Good evening, Draco,' he drawled with a very pronounced upper-crust accent. Daphne wondered whether he had taken lessons to sound like that. He turned towards the girls and smiled. 'I don't believe I've had the pleasure of meeting these lovely ladies.'

'Daphne, Pansy, this is my cousin, Aries Black,' Draco said. 'Aries, these are Daphne Greengrass and Pansy Parkinson.'

Aries bowed slightly. 'I am honoured to make your acquaintance.'

'Likewise,' Daphne murmured. The orchestra transitioned into a waltz.

Draco and Aries looked at each other. They seemed to be communicating silently, their eyes shifting back and forth. Eventually Aries nodded his head in acquiescence. He stepped closer towards Daphne and offered her his hand.

'May I have this dance, Miss Greengrass?' he asked.

Daphne nodded and placed her hand in his. They went out onto the dance floor and Aries launched into the waltz. He had nowhere near the ability of his father, who was currently twirling elegantly about the ballroom with a dark-haired witch Daphne didn't know, but Aries managed well enough, and Daphne found herself quite enjoying the opportunity to dance with him.

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Chapter 46: Dancing in the

Shadows

'So, Miss Greengrass, I take it you are starting Hogwarts next year?' Aries asked her.

'That's right,' she replied. 'I'm very much looking forward to it.'

'What House do you think you'll be in?' he asked.

'Slytherin, most likely,' Daphne answered. 'All my family have been in Slytherin.'

'So have mine,' Aries replied. 'Except for my dad. He was in Gryffindor.'

She raised an eyebrow. 'Really?'

'You find that surprising?'

'A bit,' Daphne admitted.

Aries chuckled. 'Dad is a very bold character. He doesn't much like to slink around in the shadows, though he can if he needs to.'

'That doesn't sound much like the Sirius Black everyone talks about.' The girl blushed. 'I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said that.'

'Why not? It's true, isn't it?' Aries smirked. 'Tell me. Who is this Sirius Black that everyone talks about?'

Daphne paused. 'They say he was one of You-Know-Who's greatest followers. They say he deceived all his friends for years and betrayed them.'

Aries snorted. 'That just goes to show how much "everyone" knows my dad. Bunch of idiots.'

'My father says that Professor Dumbledore...'

'Please don't mention that Muggle-loving old fool around me, Miss

Greengrass,' Aries said coldly, for the first time making Daphne feel a bit uncomfortable.

'I'm sorry,' the girl replied, and they danced without speaking for a few moments. Daphne took a deep breath. 'Tell me, Mr Black. Who is the real Sirius Black that no one actually knows?'

Aries smiled. 'My dad is the best father in the world. Nothing frightens him, and he's loyal to his friends no matter what. He has a great sense of humour and loves to take me and Draco on adventures. You don't want to cross him, but he's not really strict either. You just have to follow the rules.'

'Does he have many rules?'

Aries shook his head. 'Only five.'

'So few?' Daphne was surprised. Her family had many more rules than that. 'What are they?'

'The first one comes up most often: "No whinging." Dad can't stand to listen to people complaining, especially when their voice goes all high-pitched and nasal.'

Daphne laughed. 'I shouldn't have thought that would be the most important.'

'They're ranked in the order he came up with them at school,' Aries explained. 'The second one is: "If the sun isn't up yet, neither is Sirius." Never forget that one, or the consequences are likely to be dire. Draco ran into trouble over that one during the summer. He's an early riser.'

'What's the next one?' the girl asked with a grin.

"'Never lie to Sirius.'" That's probably the most important one. If you steal something of his and lose it, it's better just to tell him. He'll figure it out anyway, and then there will be hell to pay.'

Daphne blushed. 'Doesn't he mind it if you swear?'

Aries stared at her blankly. 'Pardon?'

'You just said an impolite word,' she pointed out.

'Sorry,' Aries mumbled, looking a bit embarrassed. 'Aunt Narcissa doesn't like it either. I should have been more careful in front of a girl.'

'I don't mind,' Daphne said quickly. 'It's just that my parents are very strict about things like that, and I was surprised Mr Black didn't seem to care.'

'Dad?' Aries laughed. 'No, not at all. He's actually a bad influence on me in that regard.'

Daphne joined in his laughter. For some reason she found the thought of swearing as one of Sirius Black's chief vices to be quite amusing. 'So what's the fourth rule?' she asked.

'Sirius locutus est, causa finita est.'

The girl rolled her eyes. 'Sirius has spoken, the case is closed?'

'Dad says it's the rule that covers all the others,' Aries said. 'He hates it if you keep arguing with him once he's made up his mind.'

Daphne frowned. 'I thought you said he came up with these rules at school.'

'He did.'

'Didn't his friends object to that one?'

Aries snorted. 'Of course they did. My dad's best friend, my godfather James Potter, had his own set of rules, and one of them was the exact same, only with "Jacobus" instead of "Sirius". Even now, Dad's always bickering with James's portrait over which one of them gets the last word.'

'What's the fifth rule?' Daphne asked.

'Probieren geht über Studieren,' Aries replied with a smile.

'I beg your pardon?'

Aries chuckled. 'It's German. It means trying is better than studying. Dad says that's his philosophy of life.'

Daphne shook her head. 'Well, it certainly seems that the Sirius Black you know doesn't have much in common with the one everyone else talks about.'

The music drew to a close and they stopped. Aries escorted her back to her table.

'It's been a pleasure dancing with you, Miss Greengrass,' he said with a bow. 'I hope to have the honour again sometime.'

Daphne sat at the table and watched as the fascinating boy went over to talk with the witch his father had been dancing with. Pansy returned from where she had been dancing with Draco and sat beside her.

'Tell me,' she said eagerly. 'What was he like?'

'Interesting,' Daphne replied with a smile. 'And he doesn't look inbred, either.'

'Of course.' Pansy giggled. 'My mother says it's just like with horses. It all depends on the quality of what one's breeding.'

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Chapter 47: Godric Hollow

Christmas that year was Sirius's first since he had been freed from Azkaban, and he did everything in his power to make it memorable. He personally oversaw the decorations at Windermere Court and Grimmauld Place, holding nothing back in his desire to create a festive atmosphere.

The sound of Christmas carols filled both houses from morning until nightfall, coming from every possible source: enchanted instruments, portraits, suits of armour, busts, statues, even the house elves. Sirius himself could often be heard to join in with his clear baritone, which rather surprised Harry, who had not realised how well his dad could sing. On Christmas Eve, Sirius took Harry by Side-Along Apparition to Remus's house on the moors, where they exchanged a few small gifts and ate a light supper whilst Sirius and Remus recounted stories of Christmases past. After supper Remus took down a box of photographs from a cupboard and pulled out a small album. The cover was inscribed in a neat, female hand: Harry's First Christmas.

Harry stared at the album wide-eyed. 'Is that what I think it is?'

Remus nodded. 'After your parents died, I went through their house and removed most of the personal items.' He chewed his lower lip nervously, as though worried that Harry might think he had been stealing. 'I didn't want souvenir-hunters taking them.'

'You did the right thing, Moony,' Sirius said, placing a hand on his friend's shoulder.

'I'm saving them for you to have when you're older,' Remus went on. 'I'd give them to you now, but Padfoot said he thought that might arouse suspicion.'

Harry nodded. 'He's right. Best for you to keep them for now.' He gave a small smile. 'But I should like very much to see them.'

They sat down on the sofa - Harry in the middle, Remus and Sirius on either side - and began flipping through the Christmas album. From every page, Lily and Harry laughed whilst all four Marauders performed their wild antics. James and Lily, of course, looked just as they did in their portrait, but it struck Harry how different Sirius and Remus were. Remus

looked much younger in the pictures, with no grey hairs and fewer scars. Sirius looked much better-fed and still possessed every bit of his dashing good looks. Harry looked up from the photographs to see the men as they now appeared. Remus was gaunt and tired, looking older than his thirty years, but occasionally his eyes would brighten up at some memory or picture, and at such moments he could seem years younger. Sirius had filled out a good bit since the summer, and was no longer as gaunt as he had been when Harry first met him, but he was still too thin, and his eyes continually bore that desperate, haunted look. Here too, however, a glint of mischief or delight would occasionally appear, and then Harry would be vividly reminded of the devil-may-care young man in the photographs.

The real shock for Harry, however, was seeing himself in the photos. Even as a baby, Harry had looked remarkably like James, except for his eyes, which were all Lily. Harry had been Aries for so long he had almost forgotten what he had looked like before he had been rescued by the Squibs, what he would still look like if only James and Lily hadn't died, or even if Dumbledore had sent Harry to live with Sirius instead of the Muggles. On the one hand, the sheer joy on baby Harry's face in the photographs could easily have belonged to him at any age: when he rode a broomstick for the first time, when he met Sirius, whenever he and Draco played a successful prank. But Harry found he could not look at the tiny boy with messy hair without thinking of the nights he had spent locked in the Dursleys' cupboard without any dinner, praying that someone would come to free him. It was odd, to say the least.

Harry turned the page of the album and was startled to see a large black dog, a stag and a rat chasing each other around the Christmas tree, whilst Lily shook her head in mock disapproval and baby Harry clapped in

excitement. Eventually the dog pounced on the stag, and they both crashed into the Christmas tree, sending it toppling to the floor.

'Dad, I knew you were an Animagus,' he said, 'but I didn't realise the others were too.'

Sirius raised his eyebrows. 'Didn't Prongs ever tell you and Draco?'

Harry shook his head.

'That makes sense,' Remus observed. 'If he told one secret, he might need to tell the other.'

'Good old Prongs,' Sirius said with an affectionate smile. 'Even from beyond the grave he manages to keep his promises.'

Something clicked in Harry's mind, and he squealed with delight. 'I get it!' he exclaimed. 'You're Padfoot because you turn into a big black dog, like the Grim, so the others' nicknames must be connected with their Animagus forms too.' He pointed at the stag. 'That's James, isn't it? Prongs.'

Sirius nodded. 'Well done, Harry.'

Harry thought for a second and then pointed at the rat, whose long, naked tail was clearly in evidence. 'Wormtail. That's Peter Pettigrew.'

Sirius and Remus both growled at that, but Sirius nodded.

'That only leaves Moony.' Harry turned to Remus. 'What's your Animagus form, Uncle Remus?'

Remus looked a bit peaky. 'I don't have one.'

'Moony can't turn into an Animagus,' Sirius explained.

Harry frowned pensively as he turned the page, only to be greeted by a picture of baby Harry surrounded by four stuffed animals: a dog, a rat, a stag...and a wolf.

Harry traced his finger over the wolf's distinctive snout. Moony.

No wonder he couldn't become an Animagus.

Harry gulped hard and looked up at Remus questioningly. Remus nodded slowly. Harry looked back at the picture.

'How long?' he asked quietly.

'Since I was a child,' Remus replied calmly.

'Have you ever...bitten anyone?' Harry asked.

Remus shook his head. 'Never.'

Sirius put his arm around Harry's shoulder. 'We found out when we were in school. You see, once a month Moony has to be locked up so he doesn't hurt anyone. That's why we all became Animagi—to keep him company.'

Harry nodded. 'Because animals are unaffected by the werewolf's bite.' He let out a deep breath.

'Are you all right, Harry?' Remus asked nervously.

Harry nodded. 'It just takes some getting used to. My dad's best friend is a Dark creature.' He flashed Remus a wry grin. 'I can't complain though, can I? I mean, I'm a Parselmouth. I'm supposedly a Dark wizard, right?'

He shrugged. 'You're still you. You just have...a problem.'

Remus chuckled. 'That's exactly what James used to call it—my furry little problem.'

Harry snorted. That did sound like the kind of thing James would say.

'You do understand that you can't tell anyone about any of this,' Sirius warned Harry, who rolled his eyes.

'Yes, of course,' he replied. 'What's one more secret when one already has so many?'

Sirius ruffled Harry's hair. 'There's a good lad.' He stood up from the sofa and stretched. 'Now, I believe we have an outing to be getting on with.'

'An outing?' Harry was incredulous. 'It's nearly eleven on Christmas Eve!

We have to go over to Malfoy Manor early tomorrow.'

Sirius smiled. 'Yes, but this is a very special outing. I'm afraid we can't do

it at any other time.'

He took off his robes, revealing a Muggle suit underneath, and held out clothes for Harry and Remus to change into. Once they were dressed, they all put on heavy coats and Apparated to the centre of what appeared to be a rather small village.

'Where are we?' Harry asked.

'Godric's Hollow,' Sirius replied. 'Welcome home, Harry Potter.'

A tiny stone church stood in the centre of the plaza. It looked very old and weather-worn. The sound of familiar Christmas carols came from inside.

'That's the church where you were christened,' Sirius explained. 'Shall we go in?'

They slipped into the very back of the crowded church and readily joined in a slightly off-key but very spirited rendition of 'Hark the Herald Angels Sing'.

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Chapter 48: Heartfelt Homage

In the chaos of everyone filing out of the church, Remus and Harry got separated from Sirius.

'How are we ever going to find him in this madness?' Harry asked Remus.

'I have a fair idea where he is,' Remus replied. 'You see, Harry, this is a special church for a number of reasons. Not only were you christened here, but...' He drifted off, but Harry could see where he was leading

them. The churchyard.

'James and Lily are buried here, aren't they?' he whispered. Remus nodded and opened the gate so they could go in.

Sirius was standing over a grave near the back wall, his hands folded in front of him.

'I'm so sorry, mate,' he was saying quietly as Harry and Remus came up behind him. 'You deserved better. You both did. And Harry deserved to grow up with you, instead of the Raving and Most Mental Madhouse.

He's a really good kid. You'd be proud of him.'

Remus stood back to give Sirius some privacy, but Harry leaned closer so he could hear better. The werewolf didn't stop him.

'He's going off to Hogwarts next year, you know,' Sirius sniffed. 'I'm not really ready for him to go yet. It feels like I haven't had enough time with him. He'll do great, though. He's clever and funny. He'll take Hogwarts by storm. He has a good friend to share it with, Draco Malfoy.' He snorted. 'I know, I can't believe it either, but Draco's a good kid too. They rather remind me of us at their age.' He paused. 'I wish I could know what you think of how I'm doing. I know I can never fill your shoes, but I'm trying to be a decent dad.'

Harry came up and put his arms around Sirius's waist. 'You're the best.'

Sirius looked down at him in surprise. 'How long have you been there?' he asked.

'Long enough,' Harry replied, and looked down at the stone marker. It was inscribed with the names and dates of James and Lily Potter. 'Is this your first time coming here?'

Sirius shook his head and smiled. 'No, actually I'm afraid I come here rather often. I like to keep Prongs updated on how you're doing.'

'You could always talk to his portrait,' Harry reminded him.

'Oh, I do that too,' Sirius replied. 'This seems more real, somehow.'

They stood there awhile, staring down at the grave in silence. Before they left, Sirius conjured a bouquet of flowers and let Harry lay them at the gravestone. As they walked away, Harry noticed a smaller marker next to James and Lily's. It read: Harry James Potter, 1980-1986. The Boy Who Lived.

'What is that?' Harry snarled.

'Oh, that.' Sirius rolled his eyes. 'I assume Dumbledore had it placed here after your unfortunate demise.'

Harry, however, was in no mood to joke around. 'Is the grave empty, or do you think the old man found some other child to put in my place?'

'Harry!' Sirius scolded. 'I'm hardly Dumbledore's biggest fan, but it's just ridiculous to suggest he'd do anything so nasty. I'm sure the grave is empty.'

'Good,' Harry said coldly. 'Because then no one will mind if I do this.'

Harry drew his wand and hissed a curse in Parseltongue. The offensive gravestone was blasted to smithereens.

Remus came running over in shock. 'What happened?'

'Harry doesn't care for his gravestone,' Sirius explained.

'I see,' Remus replied. 'Won't the Ministry detect his underage magic?'

'They can't detect who did it, Moony, only that it was done,' Sirius replied carelessly. 'And Godric's Hollow has always had a significant wizarding population.'

'You do realise that blasting away Harry Potter's gravestone will attract attention?' Remus pointed out.

'I don't care,' Harry said through gritted teeth.

Remus started to argue, but Sirius shut him up.

'I think the boy has the right to decide whether he wants a gravestone or

not,' he said wryly before turning to Harry. 'Is there anything else you'd like to blow up, or can we go home now?'

Harry chuckled. 'I think I'm done.'

As the three wizards left the graveyard, Harry felt oddly light and full of holiday cheer. He started singing 'I Saw Three Ships Come Sailing In' at the top of his lungs, and Sirius immediately joined in. Remus gave them an exasperated look, but eventually relented, and lent his voice to the mix.

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Chapter 49: Wizards and

Whispers

Albus Dumbledore opened his newspaper on Boxing Day to find a most distressing headline.

HARRY POTTER'S GRAVE VANDALISED!

In a shocking act of Christmas hooliganism, Harry Potter's tombstone in Godric's Hollow was destroyed in the early morning hours of Christmas Day, writes Rita Skeeter, Special Correspondent. It is unknown who committed this terrible crime, or with what motive, but highly placed sources within the Ministry of Magic indicated that it may be the work of remaining followers of the Dark wizard He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named.

'I don't think there's any doubt, really, that Death Eaters were behind it,' one source stated, having agreed to an interview only on condition of anonymity. 'Who else would have anything against Harry Potter?'

By a happy coincidence, four underage wizards were in the near vicinity of the cemetery at the time of the incident, and Ministry wizards were able to use the Trace to ascertain that the Blasting Curse was used at 1:03 am, December 25, in the cemetery of the parish church of St Godric of Finchale. It is considered very likely that this was the curse used to reduce Harry Potter's gravestone to rubble. Ministry officials have refused to release the names of the four underage wizards, though our sources have assured us that none of the children is considered a suspect at this time.

'The Trace can tell us what magic was done around an underage wizard, when and where,' one Ministry official clarified. 'It cannot, unfortunately, tell us who was responsible for a particular spell.'

When asked whether it was suspicious that four underage wizards were out and about in the early hours of Christmas Day, Ministry officials claimed that a Christmas service had concluded shortly before the incident, and that the children had apparently been present at the service.

'We will find the perpetrator of this heinous crime and bring him to justice,' said Dolores Umbridge, Senior Undersecretary to the Minister for Magic. 'The Boy who Lived is a symbol of hope to the wizarding population of Britain, and we will not allow malcontents to stir up trouble in this peaceful society that we have rebuilt from the ashes of the war.'

Dumbledore put down the paper and took out a quill. He wanted very much to ascertain the identities of these four underage wizards, suspecting that they might hold the key to finding the vandal. Ministry policy might prohibit the release of that information to the general public, but Dumbledore was hardly the general public. Who in the

Ministry would object to such a reasonable request from the Chief

Warlock of the Wizengamot?

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Dumbledore sat in his office quietly, sipping a cup of hot tea as he waited for Remus Lupin to arrive. He had sent for the werewolf immediately upon learning that one of the unnamed underage wizards who had been detected within the vicinity of the incident was none other than Aries Black, the son of the one person in England whom Dumbledore thought to have more cause than any other to try to take vengeance on poor Harry Potter, even after the boy's death.

Remus knocked on the door.

'Come in,' Dumbledore called out, and the young wizard entered the office. 'Ah, hello, Remus. Please have a seat.' Remus sat down across the desk from Dumbledore, and the Headmaster offered him a sweet, which the werewolf declined.

'You had a good Christmas, I trust?' Dumbledore asked.

'Very nice, Professor, thank you,' Remus replied. 'How was yours?'

'Quite pleasant, thank you.'

'How can I be of service, Professor?' Remus asked politely.

'I have learnt from my sources at the Ministry that Aries Black was one of the four underage wizards who was present at the scene of the recent destruction of Harry Potter's tombstone,' Dumbledore said.

Remus frowned. 'Professor, we both know that Harry Potter's body does not rest alongside his parents.'

Dumbledore opened his hands slightly, conceding the point. 'Be that as it may, Remus, the marker is nonetheless a potent symbol for wizards and witches throughout Britain. Its destruction can have only one purpose: to strike terror into the hearts of innocent people.' He paused. 'I was

wondering if you knew anything about it.'

Remus shook his head. 'I've already spoken with the Ministry about it.

Aries came to Godric's Hollow that evening with me. Sirius had a...romantic encounter scheduled for that evening, and I didn't want the boy to be alone.'

Dumbledore raised his eyebrows. 'A romantic encounter on Christmas Eve?'

'You know Sirius,' Remus shrugged. 'I wanted to take Aries to a Christmas Eve service, expose him to a little bit of a wider world than what he's grown up with amongst the Blacks.'

'A laudable purpose,' Dumbledore said. 'Why did you take him to Godric's Hollow?'

'I have good memories associated with that church,' Remus explained.

'Because of the Potters.'

Dumbledore nodded. 'Did you see anything of interest at the time of the incident?'

Remus shook his head. 'As soon as I heard the explosion, I took Aries back home by Side-Along Apparition. I didn't want to take any chances with his safety.'

'Very sensible of you.' Dumbledore stroked his beard thoughtfully. 'Sirius Black is one of very few people who would have the motive to destroy Harry's tombstone. Is it possible that he came separately to Godric's Hollow whilst you thought he was out?'

'I'm afraid that's impossible, Professor,' Remus said. 'Sirius was with his female companion at the time of the explosion.'

'How can you be sure?' Dumbledore asked.

Remus blushed. 'When I brought Aries home, the young lady in question was still present.'

'I see.' The aged Headmaster sighed. 'In that case, it appears that we must search elsewhere for the culprit.' He paused. 'Remus, what do you think of Aries Black?'

'I find him to be a delightful child,' Remus replied. 'Rather rambunctious, perhaps, and overly fond of mischief, but basically decent. He's very close to his cousin, Draco Malfoy, and they seem utterly devoted to each other.' He paused sadly. 'They actually remind me a bit of James and Sirius.'

'Any sign of an unhealthy propensity towards the Dark Arts?'

Remus shook his head. 'Aries is somewhat familiar with them, of course, as are most young wizards of his family background, but I have seen no evidence of a particular inclination towards Dark magic.'

Dumbledore nodded. 'Thank you, Remus. We shall speak again soon.'

Remus rose from his chair. 'I look forward to it, Professor.'

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Chapter 50: Passing of Arcturus

Black

1991 brought fresh sorrow to the Black family, as Arcturus Black's drawn-out illness finally concluded with his death on Easter Monday. His funeral was a quiet, private affair, very unlike the grand state occasion Pollux's had been. The family went down to France on Tuesday; the funeral was scheduled for Thursday.

Much to Harry's confusion, Arcturus's death did not seem to hit him with the same force as Pollux's had. Part of it, no doubt, stemmed from the

fact that Arcturus had been ill for quite some time, and the death was not at all unexpected.

Furthermore, though Harry had many fond memories of his time at the chateau, he had never spent much time with his Great-Grandfather, who had always preferred to maintain a cordial aloofness, which, though it might at times rise to the level of authentic affection, never reached that peak of true grandfatherly love which had characterised the relations between Harry and Pollux.

Above all else, however, it was the irrepressibility of Melania Black that carried the entire family through the funeral. She bore her husband's passing with her quiet good humour and indefatigable diligence, singlehandedly taking charge of all preparations for Arcturus's burial.

'We had a long and happy marriage, boys,' she told Harry and Draco as they helped her chop potatoes for the funeral meal. Ordinarily Granny would have handed such a menial task over to Roquefort, but in this instance she felt that a bit of manual labour was just what the boys needed to keep themselves occupied whilst the adults concerned themselves with other matters. 'This year would have been our seventy-first anniversary. I only hope the two of you are as fortunate in your spouses as I have been.'

'Won't you miss him, Granny?' Harry asked.

'Of course I will,' she replied, giving Harry an affectionate smile as she checked on the beef bourguignon. 'For a little while, at least.'

'Then what will happen?' Draco asked, confused. 'Why won't you miss him anymore?'

'Because I shall go to rejoin him,' Granny answered calmly, 'and we shall never be apart again.'

Arcturus was buried in the little family cemetery on the grounds of the

chateau. The service was quiet and dignified, and the weather was lovely.

Granny herself had chosen the inscription for the tombstone:

In the sight of the unwise he seemeth to die:

His departure is taken for misery,

His going from us to be utter destruction:

But he is in peace.

After the burial, the family walked together up the long path to the chateau where Granny presided serenely over a magnificent banquet, surpassing even her usual standard.

'Mother, I do wish you would come back to England and live with me and Nate,' said Sirius's Aunt Lucretia, Granny's daughter.

'You have quite enough to be getting on with, dear,' Granny answered her, sweetly but firmly. 'There's no need to add a troublesome old woman to the mix. I am quite happy here.'

'I don't feel comfortable leaving you here all by yourself, Granny,' Sirius said from the other end. With Arcturus's passing, he was now head of the family, and Harry noticed a subtle shift in how the others related to him.

'I appreciate your concern, dear, but it's really quite unnecessary,' Granny replied. 'I have Roquefort to take care of me. I have some friends in town, and you and the boys will come here over the summer. What more do I need?'

'Actually, Mrs Black,' Lucius said. 'Since Draco is heading to school in September, we had thought to keep him at home this summer.'

Harry and Draco gave each other a forlorn look when they heard that, and Granny noticed.

'Call me Granny, dear. Everyone does,' she told Lucius. 'As for your dilemma, I have a simple enough solution for that. You can all come here for the summer. There's plenty of room in this draughty old house for

everyone.'

Lucius looked ready to refuse, but Abraxas spoke up first, glaring sideways at his son as he did so. 'What a charming idea, madam! We should all be delighted to spend our summer in your elegant home, enjoying your exquisite cuisine.'

'It's settled then,' Sirius said with a barely suppressed grin. 'We're all coming here for the summer.'

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Chapter 51: Lucius's Priorities

'I thought it was a very kind gesture from Granny,' Narcissa said. She was lying in bed, but Lucius was pacing angrily about the guestroom. 'Besides, it made the boys happy. Didn't you see the look on poor Draco's face when he heard what you said?'

'I did, Narcissa,' Lucius replied. 'Nonetheless, I think it would be very good for Draco to spend some time apart from Aries. He needs to make other friends. I introduced him to the Crabbe and Goyle boys at the Ministry Christmas ball, and he hardly said a word to them.'

Narcissa wrinkled her nose. 'If those boys are anything like their fathers, I should be very surprised if Draco had much in common with them.'

Lucius stopped pacing and sat on the bed. 'They are useful, Narcissa.'

'They are idiots, Lucius.'

'Friends are one thing, allies are another,' Lucius said.

Narcissa smiled and ran her hand along her husband's cheek. 'You've

made my point beautifully, dear. Draco and Aries are friends—no, more than that. They are family. There will be plenty of time for them both to acquire useful but stupid allies later.' Lucius opened his mouth to protest, but Narcissa laid her finger gently across his lips. 'If Draco showed any evidence of lacking ordinary social skills, I should agree with you,' she said. 'But he handled himself very nicely at the ball, and seemed to charm quite a number of proper young ladies.'

'It's not right for a boy to spend so much time away from his family,' Lucius said feebly. 'Lately Sirius Black has seen more of my son than I have.'

Narcissa frowned at him. 'Sirius is my cousin and your brother-in-law. He's hardly outside our family.'

'Sirius Black is a blood traitor,' Lucius replied.

'Don't you dare say such a thing, Lucius Abraxas Malfoy!' Narcissa scolded.

'Have you forgotten the torment he put his parents through?' Lucius asked. 'He ran away from home and joined the Order of the Phoenix, for Merlin's sake!'

'In the end, however, his breeding came to the surface,' Narcissa pointed out. 'He married your sister, a respectable pureblood witch, and fathered a Parselmouth who has a demonstrable talent for the Dark Arts. Sirius may deny it, but it is generally accepted that he entered the Dark Lord's service.'

'I do not recall ever hearing of him amongst the Death Eaters,' Lucius said petulantly.

'Do you honestly believe that the Dark Lord entrusted all his secrets to you?' Narcissa replied mockingly. 'Besides, Sirius spent nine years in Azkaban for the Dark Lord, which is more than you can claim to have

done.'

'Would you rather I had gone to prison, my dear, together with Bella and Rudy?'

'No,' Narcissa said primly. 'I much prefer to have my husband with me. But I find it a bit amusing for you to accuse Sirius of being a blood traitor, when he has suffered more prejudice and maltreatment from the Mudbloods and Muggle-lovers than any of us.'

'What of his behaviour since his release? He's always whisking the boys off to Merlin-knows-where on some mad adventure. He's loud and obnoxious, and all too proud of his Gryffindor background.'

Narcissa smiled. 'Sirius is larger than life, I'll certainly give you that. He's always been that way.' She laughed. 'But that hardly makes him a blood traitor. He hasn't objected to the boys' weekly lessons with Aunt Cassie in special magic, his dislike for Dumbledore is clear and I haven't heard either of the boys spout any Muggle-loving nonsense.'

Lucius frowned. 'It seems he has even you under his spell.'

His wife rolled her eyes. 'I don't think any malicious enchantments are to blame, Lucius. Sirius is a decent wizard. He cares deeply about both Aries and Draco, and they naturally return his affection. If you would like to receive your own share, you might consider spending less time holed up in your study or visiting with the Minister, and a bit more time playing Quidditch with the boys on the grounds.'

Lucius raised an eyebrow. 'I am an important wizard with important work. Sirius Black may not have anything better to do than play Quidditch all day, but I certainly do.'

His wife sighed. 'Of course, dear.'

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Chapter 52: The Letter

That June, right after Draco's birthday, the entire family relocated to the chateau. It was a bit more crowded than the boys were accustomed to see it during their summer holiday, but the house was very large, and there was more than enough room for all.

Granny seemed utterly delighted to have so many guests to care for, and the entire house was filled with a spirit of good cheer and family fun. The fact that most of the family considered it good fun to discuss the best way to poison one's enemies or smuggle potion-quality human blood past the Ministry was entirely beside the point.

About a week before Harry's eleventh birthday, he was awoken by an owl tapping on his window. A letter dangled from its leg. Harry opened the window and retrieved the letter. It bore the Hogwarts crest and was addressed in green ink:

Mr A. Black

The Largest Bedroom

The East Wing

Chateau Noir

Provence, France

Harry threw on his bathrobe and slippers and ran down the corridor to Sirius's room, the letter clutched in his hand.

'Dad!' he shouted, jumping on Sirius's bed. 'It came!'

'Second rule,' Sirius growled.

'The sun's up,' Harry answered back. 'You're fair game.'

Sirius groaned and sat up in bed. 'What came?' he asked.

'My Hogwarts letter!' Harry said eagerly.

His dad yawned and stretched. 'Let's see it.'

Harry barely managed to open the envelope before the door to Sirius's room burst open and Draco came running in.

'You weren't in your room,' he told Harry. 'I thought I'd find you here.'

'Good morning, Draco,' Sirius said wryly.

'Good morning, Uncle Sirius,' Draco replied quickly before turning back to Harry. 'So you got yours too?'

Harry nodded and held up his envelope.

'For Merlin's sake, just read them already,' Sirius said.

The boys yanked their letters out and began to read them aloud at the same time.

'Dear Mr Black,' Harry began.

'Dear Mr Malfoy,' Draco corrected.

'We are pleased to inform you that you have a place at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry!' both boys shouted in unison.

'You sound so excited.' Sirius smiled fondly. 'Were you worried you wouldn't get in?'

'No, but it's still a bit thrilling to see it written down,' Draco replied.

'There's a long list of supplies,' Harry observed.

Draco nodded. 'We'll have to go to Diagon Alley.'

Sirius chuckled. 'Somehow I don't think that will be a problem. May I see your letters?'

Both boys thrust their letters into his hands. Sirius looked them over.

'I think I'll get you both your animals,' he said thoughtfully. 'Do you want an owl, a cat or a toad?'

'An owl,' both boys said together.

'Well, if I buy you owls, I'll expect lots of letters from both of you,' Sirius teased. A mischievous gleam appeared in his eye. 'Now go show your letters to Aunt Cassie.'

A week before they were set to leave for Hogwarts, the family bade farewell to Granny and came home to England. Sirius took the boys to Diagon Alley to purchase their school supplies and bought them two magnificent eagle owls. Harry named his owl 'Pollux', so Draco decided to name his 'Castor'.

The night before Harry went off to school, Sirius came into his bedroom and sat on the edge of the bed.

'Are you nervous?' he asked.

'A bit,' Harry admitted. 'But mostly I'm excited.'

Sirius grinned. 'You'll have a great time. With you and Draco there together I have no doubt it will be like the Marauders reborn. Just try not to burn down the castle your first year.'

'I have that planned for third year,' Harry replied cheekily.

Sirius chuckled. 'By the way, I've placed a couple of special items in your trunk. One of them is a mirror. I have its twin. If you want to talk to me, just say my name. It's a bit easier than waiting on owl post.'

'That's wicked!' Harry exclaimed.

'James and I used them when we were in separate detentions,' Sirius explained.

'Thanks, Dad,' Harry said.

'The other surprise is even better,' Sirius went on. 'It's very special, so I've buried it under your clothes. You have to promise to take good care of it, not to lose it and never to let anyone but Draco know you have it.'

'What is it?' Harry asked curiously.

'An Invisibility Cloak,' Sirius told him.

Harry's eyes went wide. 'Brilliant!'

'It belonged to James,' Sirius said. 'It was the key to much of our success. Use it well, but make sure you keep it secret. Dumbledore gave it to Moony, and we don't want the old man to figure out that he passed it on to you.'

Harry nodded. 'No need to make him suspicious.'

'There's one more thing,' Sirius said. 'We lost it, but if you can find it, it will make your time at Hogwarts ever so much more fun. It's called the Marauder's Map.'

'A map?'

'It's a special map of Hogwarts that shows the layout of the whole school,' Sirius explained. 'Moreover, it shows the identity and current location of everyone in the castle. It cannot be fooled or tricked. It was confiscated by Filch in our last year. It's probably still in his office.'

'What does it look like?' Harry asked.

'Just a spare bit of old parchment. Tap it with your wand and say the words, "I solemnly swear I'm up to no good." Then the map will appear. When you're done, tap your wand and say, "Mischief managed." It's very important not to forget that bit, otherwise anyone who finds it will be able to use it.'

Harry smiled at his dad. 'Do you have any other tips?'

'Just keep yourself busy,' Sirius replied, ruffling Harry's hair. 'Try new spells and experiment a bit. Remember, you'll learn more magic by doing it than by reading about it in books.' He roughly kissed the top of boy's head. 'Now get to sleep. You want to be well rested for tomorrow.'

'Good night, Dad,' Harry said.

'Good night, Harry.'

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Chapter 53: Gathering

On September 1, the house at number seventeen, Windermere Court bustled as it never had before. The old townhouse was conveniently situated within a short walking distance from King's Cross, so it was agreed that the family would assemble there that morning before walking to the station. Abraxas, Lucius, Narcissa and Draco Flooed over from Malfoy Manor, all dressed impeccably in the very elegant Muggle clothes Clytemnestra had purchased for the occasion, whilst Dobby Apparated over with Draco's trunk and owl.

Sirius shook Abraxas's and Lucius's hands, kissed his cousin on the cheek and tousled Draco's hair.

'Are you excited?' Sirius asked the blond boy, who seemed to be restraining himself from bouncing up and down only with the greatest of difficulty.

Draco nodded vigorously. 'I can hardly wait. Where's Aries?'

'He's upstairs supervising whilst Mopsy refolds his robes for the third time,' Sirius replied. 'He'll be down in a moment.'

Abraxas chuckled. 'Draco had his trunk ready two days ago.'

'Not to mention he felt the need to wake us up at four in the morning,'

Lucius growled.

Draco grinned. 'What can I say? I'm looking forward to school.'

Irma and Druella Apparated over from number twelve, Grimmauld Place a few moments later. They both wore old dresses that had no doubt been

highly fashionable in elite circles at the turn of the century, but which now would seem hardly less exotic than robes to Muggle eyes.

'Good morning, Grandmamma,' Sirius said, kissing the old lady's hand.

'Aunt Druella.'

'Good morning, Sirius,' Irma replied. 'Are we ready to depart?'

'We shall be in just a moment,' Sirius said. 'Aries hasn't finished packing yet.'

'He'd better hurry up,' Irma grumbled. 'You know how I abhor being made to wait, Sirius.'

'The heir of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black will not be rushed in his own home, Irma,' Cassiopeia proclaimed in her stentorian tones, gliding into the drawing room in her customary black robes and witch's hat. 'Particularly not for those of lesser lineages.'

'He's my great-grandson, Cassiopeia,' Irma replied coldly. 'Surely my blood is as good as his.'

Cassiopeia smiled. 'One can dilute good wine with a bit of cheap wine and not gravely affect its quality, but that does not make the cheap wine any less inferior to the good.'

'The Crabbe family, at least, has never produced any Squibs,' Irma retorted.

'How could you tell if they had?' Cassiopeia replied with a sneer.

Fortunately, Marius and Clytemnestra picked that moment to enter the drawing room, and a hex war between the two old witches was narrowly averted. A moment later, Harry slid down the banister.

'Aries!' Cassiopeia snapped. 'You're the heir to the House of Black. You shouldn't slide down the banister. It's undignified.'

Harry shrugged. 'Dad does it all the time.'

'That's different, son,' Sirius said with a broad grin. 'I'm the Head of the

House of Black.'

Harry rolled his eyes. 'Good morning, everyone,' he greeted his relatives.

Mopsy Apparated into the room, carrying all his things.

'You're all packed, I see,' Abraxas said.

'Finally,' Harry replied. 'I told Mopsy it was fine after the second time, but she wanted everything to be organised perfectly.'

The diligent house elf stacked the trunks alongside Draco's, together with a large wicker basket.

'What's that, Mopsy?' Sirius asked the elf.

'It's just a snack, Master Sirius,' she explained. 'A bit of something to tide over the young masters on the train. A nice steak-and-kidney pie, several kinds of sandwiches, sausage rolls, grapes, apples and a Black Forest gateau, not to mention a few other titbits, and the butterbeer, of course.'

Harry grinned at Draco. 'Isn't she wonderful?' he said.

'Take the young masters' things to the station in about fifteen minutes, Mopsy,' Sirius commanded. 'Platform Nine and Three-Quarters. We shall meet you there.'

The house-elf bowed low, and the family set out on their journey.

'I don't understand why we can't go in carriages,' Druella complained.

'Walking all this way gives me blisters.'

'Then why didn't you stay home?' Cassiopeia shot back.

'We could have taken cars,' Sirius suggested cheekily.

'I shouldn't be caught dead in one of those horrid Muggle death traps,' Irma snapped.

'Do you really know how to drive, Sirius?' Abraxas asked curiously.

'Absolutely, Dad,' his son-in-law replied, walking along the pavement with his arm around Harry's shoulders. 'If you like, I can show you sometime.'

'It's wicked, Granddad!' Draco exclaimed. 'You'll have to get Sirius to show you the Diablo.'

'And when were you going to tell me that you were taking my son driving in a Muggle vehicle?' Lucius asked sternly.

'If it makes you feel better, Lucius,' Sirius replied, 'I've never driven any vehicle without a bit of magical enhancement.'

'You don't have to explain yourself to Lucius, Sirius,' Narcissa said. 'He's just envious.'

'I haven't been to King's Cross in years,' Irma said loudly, attracting the attention of passers-by. 'September 1 is the beginning of the hunting season in Transylvania, you know. Pollux always brought home a good-sized buck on that day. It's a shame he was never able to take you boys on an expedition before he died. It's good clean fun.'

'You know, Mother dear,' said Druella, 'I read in the Prophet that the Transylvanian Assembly of Warlocks has bowed to international pressure and banned Muggle hunting.'

Cassiopeia sniffed. 'It seems one cannot even rely on the Transylvanians to keep up the old ways.'

'What is this world coming to?' Irma moaned. 'I'm so glad Poll didn't live to see that.'

'I remember when the Transylvanians banned Mudblood hunting,'

Abraxas said. 'It sent all the old families into an uproar. My father always said that Mudbloods were more interesting prey than Muggles, since they have teeth and claws.'

'On that happy note,' Sirius interrupted. 'What do you think of the Wimbourne Wasps this year, Dad?'

Abraxas launched into a lengthy and excruciatingly detailed discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of each of the Wasps' players. Harry and

Draco were relieved at the opportunity to be able to join in the conversation. It was always so boring when the adults reminisced about their glory days.

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Chapter 54: Encounter on the

Train

After a quarter of an hour they arrived at the station and made their way to the platform. They had attracted stares amongst the Muggles - even Muggle clothes can be conspicuous, especially when they are hand-tailored and worth thousands of pounds - but once they reached the platform the whispering started up in earnest.

'Look over there! That's Sirius Black,' said one dumpy witch, pointing Sirius out to her neighbour.

'I heard he was high up with You-Know-Who!' opined one portly wizard.

'He's one of the richest wizards in Britain, you know. His grandfather bribed the Ministry to get him out of Azkaban,' said a stern-looking woman with a vulture on her hat.

It did not take long at all before Harry drew their attention as well.

'Do you reckon that's his son?' asked a rather plain witch with two boys.

'Watch out for that boy, Seamus. The apple doesn't roll far from the tree,' an Irishwoman admonished her son.

'You see those boys? They're cousins. Each half-Black and half-Malfoy. It couldn't be much worse if they were spawned by You-Know-Who

himself,' said a pompous boy with red hair.

Cassiopeia's response was not calculated to reassure anyone of her family's basic sanity. She drew her wand and sent up angry sparks.

'I am Cassiopeia Virgo Black, authoress of Ten Thousand Ways to Torture One's Enemies Legally,' she shouted at the top of her considerable lungs. 'If anyone dares make another foul comment about any of my nephews, I shall give a public demonstration here and now, beginning with chapter twenty-seven: Kneecapping Curses.'

Her threat, if impolitic, was nonetheless effective. The crowd fell quiet, though they continued to stare at the Blacks and Malfoys. Sirius quietly herded the boys past the gawkers to the spot where Mopsy was waiting with their trunks, and they began the long process of making their good-byes. Narcissa was wiping her eyes with her lace handkerchief.

'Just remember,' Sirius told Harry and Draco. 'You're in school to have fun. Enjoy yourselves. You'll learn more that way anyway.'

'And if anyone gives you trouble,' Narcissa added, 'just remember that either of you could buy or sell their entire families twenty times over.'

Hugs were shared, tears were shed—even Sirius sniffled a bit—and the boys boarded the train and made their way to an empty compartment in the back. They had just stowed their trunks when Draco realised that he had forgotten his owl on the platform. The blond boy rushed off and left Harry alone in the compartment.

Suddenly a tall boy Harry didn't know appeared in the doorway. He had flaming red hair and freckles, and a smudge of dirt on his long nose.

Harry sighed. Just what I need, he thought. One of the Weasley litter.

'May I help you?' he asked the boy haughtily.

The Weasley shrugged nervously, and Harry felt momentarily sorry for him.

'I was wondering if I could join you,' the boy muttered. 'Everywhere else is full.'

'Get out of the way,' a familiar voice snarled. 'That's my compartment you're blocking.'

The Weasley boy turned crimson and moved to the side as Draco barged in. His owl cage hit the red-haired boy in the face, pushing him into the wall. The blond boy sauntered into the compartment and sat down.

'That was close,' he said cheerfully, completely ignoring the boy he had just slammed. 'I can't imagine what I should do if I left Castor behind.'

'Who the hell do you think you are, ramming into me like that?' the Weasley boy growled at Draco.

'I'm Draco Malfoy,' the blond boy replied, as though that explained everything.

The Weasley sniggered. 'That figures. I've heard of your family.' He turned to Harry. 'His father was a big supporter of You-Know-Who. You might want to watch out for this one. He seems like a chip off the old block.' He extended his hand. 'I'm Ron Weasley.'

Harry took the Weasley's hand and shook it firmly. 'I'm very pleased to meet you,' he said, smiling broadly. 'I'm Draco's cousin, Aries Black.'

Ron jerked his hand back as though Harry had bitten it. His eyes were very wide.

'Y-your dad's Sirius Black,' he stammered.

'That's right,' Harry said proudly.

'He murdered thirteen people with a single curse!' Ron exclaimed.

Harry only smiled beatifically. 'He's taught me everything I know.'

Ron turned pale. 'Well, I see this compartment's full. I'll find somewhere else to sit, I think.'

Draco laughed uproariously as Ron scarpered off.

'That was brilliant, Aries,' he said.

'What an idiot,' Harry grumbled.

'What did you expect?' Draco retorted. 'He's a Weasley.'

'But they're all idiots!' Harry shot back. 'Didn't you hear the people whispering on the platform?'

Draco shrugged. 'They're just envious of us, that's all.'

'Perhaps it would have been better for Aunt Cassie to tutor us all through school,' Harry moaned.

Draco raised an eyebrow. 'Watch the whinging. Besides, do you really want to miss out on the opportunity to play pranks on an entire school?'

'That reminds me!' Harry exclaimed, promptly cheered by the thought of the fun they could have. 'Dad told me about something he and his friends made: It's a map of Hogwarts, only it also shows everyone in it.'

'That would be wicked,' Draco said. 'We could move about the corridors at all hours without ever getting caught.'

'The only problem is that Filch confiscated it,' Harry said. 'Dad suspects it's probably still in his office.'

'What does it look like?'

'Just a bit of old parchment,' Harry explained. 'But you activate it by saying, 'I solemnly swear I'm up to no good.'

'Music to my ears, Fred,' an unfamiliar voice said. Harry and Draco turned their heads to see two identical boys standing in the compartment door. They had the same flaming red hair as Ron Weasley.

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Chapter 55: Twins' Intrigue

'I totally agree with you, George,' replied the other twin, whom Harry supposed to be Fred. 'We came by to see a couple of dangerous Death Eaters in training...'

'And we found a couple of men after our own hearts,' George finished. The twins stepped into the compartment and closed the door tightly.

'We couldn't help overhearing your conversation,' Fred said.

'It sounded as though you two weren't above indulging in a bit of mischief,' George added.

'If we were,' Draco drawled, 'why should we share our plans with you?' Fred smirked. 'Maybe because we are the dominant mischief-makers at Hogwarts...'

'And we'd be happy to assist you with our years of accumulated wisdom,' George concluded.

'Thanks,' Harry said. 'We already know quite a bit.'

Fred sat down next to him. 'Yes, we heard that.'

'Tell us. How do you know about the Marauder's Map?' George asked, sitting down next to Draco.

Harry laughed. 'My dad and his friends made it.'

The twins could barely contain their glee. 'Your dad? Sirius Black?'

'That's right,' Harry replied lazily.

'Which one was he?' Fred asked.

Harry frowned. 'What do you mean?'

'Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot or Prongs?' George pressed.

'Oh, that's easy,' Draco said. 'Uncle Sirius is Padfoot. Aries' godfather was Prongs, and we spend a good bit of time with Moony, too.'

'What about Wormtail?' Fred asked.

Harry growled. 'He's been permanently expelled from the Marauders.' He paused. 'How do you know about the Map?'

'We...discovered it,' George said.

'Nicked it from Filch during first year,' Fred said.

'It's helped us so much,' his twin added.

Harry furrowed his brow. 'Now we have a problem, though.'

'What's that?' the twins asked in unison.

Draco frowned. 'How are we going to use the map if you have it? I don't suppose you'd give it to us?'

'No,' Fred admitted.

'We might sell it,' George said cheekily.

'How much?' Harry asked.

'A hundred Galleons,' Fred said with a smirk, which quickly dissolved when Harry opened his trunk and pulled out a large sack of coins.

'It's a bit steep,' Harry said, 'but Granny gave me some pocket money over the summer. I can use that.'

'We were only kidding, mate,' George said in astonishment.

'But we'll take it,' Fred said quickly. George nodded.

Harry carefully counted out one hundred gold coins. 'Here's the gold,' he said. 'Now where's the map?'

Fred whipped the piece of parchment out from within his robes and handed it over. Harry took it and touched it with the tip of his wand.

'I solemnly swear I'm up to no good,' he intoned, and the map appeared.

Harry spread it out and looked over it. Currently it was almost empty, of course, since the students were all on the train, but he could spot the teachers.

'Look, Draco,' he said, pointing out a dot in the dungeons. 'There's Snivellus!'

'Snivellus?' the twins asked in unison.

'It's what my dad and his friends called Severus Snape,' Harry explained.

The twins laughed.

'We'll have to remember that one,' Fred said.

George nodded. 'You two are all right for first years.'

Harry pushed the pile of Galleons towards Fred. 'Here you go,' he said.

'It's been a pleasure doing business with you.'

Fred grinned. 'We may have to do business again sometime.'

'We'll be keeping an eye on you two, Messrs Black and Malfoy.' George

stood up, and he and his brother left the compartment. Draco moved over

to the seat next to Harry and they both studied the Map.

'For one thing, Aries,' Draco observed, 'we shan't get lost.'

'There are secret passageways, too,' Harry said, indicating several tunnels that led out of the castle. He smirked. 'I think I may like Hogwarts after all.'

'The twins seem all right,' Draco said. 'I almost forgot they were Weasleys.'

'Their grandmother's Cedrella Black,' Harry reminded his cousin. 'Blood will out.'

Draco nodded, then grinned. 'They claim to be the dominant mischief-makers at the school. Do you think we'll be able to top them?'

'Absolutely,' Harry replied, and told Draco about the Invisibility Cloak.

When they reached the school, Harry and Draco thought at first that they would ride up to the castle with the rest of the students in the carriages pulled by what looked like black winged horses, but instead a very large man called the first-years over to a group of boats.

'That must be Hagrid,' Draco whispered, recalling some of the Marauders' stories. Harry nodded. They climbed into an empty boat, only to be

followed by a rather chubby boy clutching a toad and a girl with very bushy hair.

'I do hope we're Sorted soon,' the girl was babbling. 'I can't wait to find out what House I'll be in. Gryffindor sounds like it's by far the best, though I suppose Ravenclaw wouldn't be too bad.'

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Chapter 56: Unwelcome

Interruptions

'I just hope I'm not in Hufflepuff,' the chubby boy said morosely. 'My Gran says that Hufflepuff is for misfits.'

'Well, there has to be some place for the simple people to go, you know, people who aren't brave or clever or ambitious,' the girl said. She was beginning to get on Harry's nerves, and he didn't even know her name yet.

'There's nothing wrong with Hufflepuffs,' he snapped. 'My Granny was a Hufflepuff, and she's one of the best people in the whole world.'

'She really is,' Draco agreed. 'She's kind to everyone, generous, always cheerful. Great cook, too. Our cousin Dora was a Hufflepuff as well, and she's pretty cool.'

'So if you do wind up in Hufflepuff,' Harry told the chubby boy adamantly, 'wear it with pride, and don't let anyone tell you otherwise.'

He glared at the bushy-haired girl.

'Like I said,' she said in an exasperated tone, 'it's good for there to be a

House where all the simple people can go.'

Harry raised an eyebrow. 'As opposed to all the prissy swots with their heads up their arses?'

The girl huffed, but fell silent.

'I'm Neville Longbottom,' said the chubby boy. 'This is Hermione Granger.'

The girl harrumphed loudly.

'Longbottom?' Draco mused. 'Any relation to Harfang Longbottom?'

'He was my great-grandfather,' Neville replied.

'So you're a cousin too!' Harry exclaimed. 'I'm Aries Black, and this is my cousin Draco Malfoy.'

'Aries B-black?' Neville stammered. 'Aren't you Sirius Black's son?'

'That's right, and proud of it,' Harry said defiantly.

'I read about him,' Hermione Granger said. 'I heard he was a major follower of You-Know-Who, but got out of prison on a technicality.'

'If she doesn't shut up, I swear to Merlin I'm going to Cruciate her to within an inch of her life,' Harry growled to Draco.

'Can you really do the Cruciatus Curse?' the girl went on. 'I thought it was illegal. I read all about it in The Rise and Fall of the Dark Arts.'

Harry's hand crept towards his wand, and Draco decided to intervene.

'So, Granger, eh? Any relation to the Dagworth-Grangers?'

'I'm Muggleborn,' Hermione said brightly. Harry and Draco both groaned.

'Figures,' Harry mumbled.

'What's that supposed to mean?' the girl demanded.

'It means you really oughtn't to barge into someone else's world and start spouting off on things you don't understand,' Draco said in a superior tone. 'Books are one thing, real life is something else.'

'Probieren geht über Studieren,' Harry added.

'Precisely,' Draco agreed.

'What does that mean?' Hermione asked.

'Go look it up in your books,' Draco said dismissively.

'Or, better yet, go home and leave us alone,' Harry muttered.

They crossed the rest of the lake in a chilly silence.

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Hogwarts Castle was simply incredible. Harry and Draco found themselves staring at the Gothic stonework, portraits, suits of armour and tapestries as much as anyone. Truth be told, they felt a bit foolish, gawking at ghosts like any Muggleborn. But even though the two boys had been raised in the wizarding world, Hogwarts seemed to be constantly bursting with surprises, to a level that simply was not the case at Windermere Court or Malfoy Manor.

Professor McGonagall guided the first-years into the toasty warmth of the Great Hall.

'Look at that, Aries,' Draco said in awe, pointing out the enchanted ceiling. 'I wonder how they managed that.'

'It's a very powerful Proscenium Charm,' Hermione Granger said from over his shoulder. 'I read about it in Hogwarts, A History.'

Harry and Draco shared a dark look, but managed to refrain from making a scene in the Great Hall. McGonagall brought out a very battered old hat and set it on a stool. The hat promptly launched into song.

'That's a clever trick,' Harry whispered to Draco. 'The Vitalitas Charm, do you think?'

Draco nodded. 'That, or maybe a really advanced Ventriloquus.'

'Hush,' Granger hissed. 'We're not supposed to be talking.'

The boys turned around and gave her a vicious glare. She seemed unperturbed.

At length the Sorting Hat finished its song and Professor McGonagall began to call out the names of the new students. Harry was glad that his name came early in the alphabet. Right after 'Abbott, Hannah' was Sorted into Hufflepuff, McGonagall called out, 'Black, Aries.'

Dark muttering erupted as Harry sauntered forward casually, but he was expecting it by now. It was really more annoying than anything else, and Harry decided the best course of action was to ignore it. He strolled over to the stool and plopped the Hat over his head.

'Oh, very interesting,' the Hat muttered. 'Aries Black, is it? Or is it Harry Potter?'

Harry panicked. You can't tell anyone! It's a secret. They'll send me back to live with the filthy Muggles.

'Don't worry, Mr Potter,' the Hat replied smugly. 'Your secret's safe with me. I am unable to reveal anything I learn from a student's head. My task is simply to Sort you.'

Harry breathed a sigh of relief.

'Now, where shall I put you? You're quite bright, but for you learning is simply a means to an end. You take little delight in knowledge for its own sake. I think we can safely rule out Ravenclaw.'

No surprise there, Harry chuckled.

'Don't sell yourself short, Mr Potter,' the Hat admonished. 'You would do well just about anywhere.'

Of course I would, Harry replied cheekily. I'm Aries Sirius Black.

'And with that, I think we've ruled out Hufflepuff,' the Hat sighed.

'They're salt-of-the-earth sort of people, humble and hardworking.'

And very dull.

The Hat laughed. 'You didn't seem to feel that way on the boat.'

Oh, there's nothing wrong with being dull. Sometimes you want nothing

more than a bit of dullness. It's comforting, like hot buttered toast. But I think I'd like a bit of glamour, myself.

'You've thought this out,' the Hat said, impressed.

Well, my dad has. We've talked about it a bit.

'I see. That leaves Gryffindor and Slytherin. You could be great, you know. It's all right here in your head. Slytherin would certainly help you on the path to greatness.'

Hmm, Harry thought. I don't really know if I want to be great. I know Aunt Cassie's expecting me to be the next Dark Lord and all, but, honestly, I'm great enough as it is. I've got a family that cares about me, enough gold to last me several lifetimes and my dad's good looks. What more does one need?

'Interesting, Mr Potter,' the Hat replied. 'If you don't want greatness, what do you want?'

Harry grinned. I just want to have a good time.

The Hat chuckled. 'In that case, Mr Potter, I think I know just the House for you.' The Hat shouted out for all the Hall to hear: 'GRYFFINDOR!'

There was a stunned silence, and then scattered applause broke out.

Harry took off the Hat and handed it to McGonagall with a flourish before strolling over to the Gryffindor table and taking a seat. The Weasleys twins were heartily applauding him and moved over so he could sit next to them.

'Well done,' said Fred.

'We can't say we're surprised,' George added.

'At least this way we'll have an opportunity to work more closely together,' suggested Fred.

Harry smirked. 'We'll have to see about that.'

The Sorting continued. Harry groaned when Hermione Granger was

Sorted into Gryffindor, but the Muggleborn girl looked very pleased.

Neville Longbottom was Sorted into Hufflepuff after all, and Harry pointedly gave him a standing ovation. Neville flashed Harry a grin as he made his way to his table, walking with a bit more confidence than he had before. Shortly afterwards came Draco's turn to be Sorted. The Hat seemed to take a very long time. Harry began to worry, and, from the look on his cousin's face, he thought Draco was worried too. That couldn't be good.

Harry couldn't risk being separated from his cousin. He raised his wand very discreetly and aimed it at the Hat, being careful not to hit Draco.

'Imperio,' he whispered in Parseltongue.

Almost immediately, the Hat shouted 'GRYFFINDOR!' in a good strong voice.

There was silence at first, just as when Harry had been Sorted, but Harry stood up on his bench and starting clapping and whooping at the top of his lungs. Fred and George soon joined in, followed by most of the other Gryffindors, along with Neville at the Hufflepuff table. Daphne Greengrass at the Slytherin table started applauding, as well as Pansy Parkinson, who was still waiting in line to be Sorted. In due time, the Hall was roaring in applause for Draco Malfoy, who grinned as he swept off the Hat and gave a little bow before running off to the Gryffindor table.

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Chapter 57: A Shocking Discovery

Later that evening, in their dormitory, Draco and Harry were changing into their pyjamas when suddenly Draco jumped up in shock.

'A rat!' he said with disgust. 'There's a filthy rat on my bed!'

Aries looked over at Draco's bed. Sure enough, a very fat rat lazed there as though he owned it.

'Don't worry, Draco,' he said. 'I'll take care of it.' He levelled his wand directly at the vermin. 'Extermino,' he said. The rat shrieked and then expired.

'NO!' Ron shouted. 'You killed my rat!'

'You mean you're the one who put the vermin on my bed?' Draco glared at the red-haired boy. 'It's bad enough having to share a room, but under no circumstances will I permit you to tamper with my bed.'

'It's his pet, you idiot!' Seamus shot back. 'Your fool of a cousin just killed his pet.'

'Oh,' Harry said casually. 'Sorry.'

'You murderer!' Ron roared. 'Scabbers has been in my family for ten years!'

'Don't be stupid,' Draco retorted. 'Rats don't live that long.'

'He has too!' Ron insisted. 'My mum said he wandered into our garden just a couple of days after You-Know-Who vanished. The poor thing was all bloody, too. My brother nursed him back to health, and now he's dead.'

Ten years? Harry thought. A couple of days after the Dark Lord vanished? A rat? Could it possibly be? He looked at the rat suspiciously. It was hard to tell, but he supposed it did look a bit like the pictures he had seen of Peter Pettigrew in his Animagus form. There was only one way to know for sure.

'You know, Ron, I really am sorry,' Harry said, putting a bit more effort into this apology than he had into the first. 'I didn't know he was your pet. Here, let me offer you some compensation for your loss.' He opened his trunk and got out his gold.

'You disgust me,' Ron spat. 'You think that just because you're rich you can come in here and murder decent people's pets, and that your gold will make it all better. Well, it won't!'

'I'll give you ten Galleons,' Harry offered.

'Weren't you listening to him?' Seamus said. 'Ron doesn't want your bloody Galleons!'

Harry noticed how Ron looked longingly at the gold in his hand.

'Fifteen, then,' Harry said. 'I really am sorry, Ron. Won't you please let me show it?'

'All right,' Ron said grouchily. 'But you have to clean up the mess you made. His guts are all over Malfoy's bed.'

'No problem,' Harry said, and handed over the gold. He Conjured a small box and levitated the rat's corpse inside. He closed the box and placed it in his trunk.

'Don't forget to clean off my bed,' Draco said.

'Right.' Harry cupped his hands to his mouth. 'I need the on-duty Gryffindor Tower elf,' he called out. 'There's a mess in the first-year boys' dormitory.'

A house-elf appeared instantly. He bowed low to Harry.

'How may I serve young master?' he asked.

'Master Draco's bed is soiled,' Harry said crisply. 'Please change it.'

'Yes, Master,' the elf replied eagerly, and promptly removed Draco's bedclothes and replaced them with clean ones.

'Thank you,' Harry said graciously, and the elf bowed before disappearing

with a pop.

'That was cheating,' Ron growled. 'I didn't think about getting a house elf to do it.'

Draco laughed. 'Well, surely you didn't expect Aries to clean it himself!'

Harry joined in his cousin's laughter, but Ron and Seamus only glared at them sullenly. Draco's features twisted into a mask of horror. 'You did, didn't you?'

Ron shrugged. 'That was always the rule in our house. If you make a mess, you have to clean it up.'

'Same with us,' said Seamus. Both boys looked at Dean Thomas expectantly, who held up his hands and shook his head.

'Keep me out of this one,' he said. 'My mum and stepdad are Muggles. We had the same rule, but I don't know how things work here.'

Harry nodded in approval. 'It takes a good fellow to recognise that he doesn't know something. Keep up that attitude, and you'll do just fine in our world.'

'Better than these cretins, anyway,' Draco said, gesturing toward Ron and Seamus. 'If your mum made you clean up your own messes, what work was there for the house elf to do?'

'We don't have a house elf,' Ron mumbled.

'Neither do we,' Seamus said proudly. 'We do our own chores, divided up fairly between everyone. Me mam says that only stuck-up toffs keep house-elves.'

Harry shrugged. 'Maybe, but at least we never had to do chores.'

'You really didn't have to do anything like that?' Dean asked curiously.

'Well, there was that one time Granny asked us to help her cut vegetables at the chateau,' Harry said fairly.

'But that was because she said it would help us take our minds off the

funeral,' Draco pointed out. 'Otherwise she would have had Roquefort do it.'

Ron and Seamus snorted in disgust and pulled their bed curtains tight.

'So, I bet you're glad to be out of the Muggle world,' Harry said to Dean.

'How did your family take it when they found out you were a wizard?'

Dean shrugged. 'All right, I suppose. It was a bit of a surprise for them.'

He smiled. 'My stepdad thought it was pretty cool, though.'

'He didn't think you were a...freak?' Harry probed tentatively.

Dean shook his head. 'Of course not.'

'Well, that's all right, then,' Harry replied uncertainly.

'I shouldn't want to live in the Muggle world,' Draco yawned as he

climbed into his clean bed. 'I mean, there are some good parts, like pizza

and kebabs and sports cars. But I think it would get very tiresome to have

to put up with all those explosions and gunfights every day.'

Dean stifled what might have been a chuckle. And with that, the boys

dimmed their lights and went to sleep.

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Chapter 58: Disappointing Classes

The next morning Draco woke Harry very early, before the sun was up.

'Have you forgotten the second rule?' Harry asked groggily.

'We're not at home and you're not Sirius,' Draco retorted. 'Come on, I

want to explore a bit with the Map before breakfast.'

Harry dragged himself out of bed and splashed some water on his face.

He walked over to his trunk and let out a low hiss. The trunk popped open and Harry retrieved his clothes, the Cloak and the Map.

'A Parseltongue password?' Draco observed once they had left the room.

'Nice.'

'I didn't want Weasley nicking my things in the middle of the night,'

Harry replied.

'I had the same thought,' Draco admitted. 'But I just used a simple Blood Charm.'

'No need to make things complex when simple will do the trick,' Harry agreed. Before they left the Common Room, he slipped the Cloak over himself and Draco. The Cloak easily covered them both, and they found they could manoeuvre about the castle quite comfortably. Draco held the Cloak up a bit and Harry opened the Map. Most everyone was still asleep, of course, so the boys devoted their attention to learning their way about the castle.

Even with the Map, it wasn't simple. Doors didn't always lead where they should, and staircases had a tendency to move about. If it weren't for the advantage afforded by the Marauder's Map, Draco and Harry felt certain that they would get lost quite easily.

On their way back to Gryffindor Tower, Harry and Draco charmed the suits of armour to swear at passers-by. It was a simple prank, the first one James's portrait had ever taught them, but it felt wrong to let the opportunity pass completely, and the boys had nothing else prepared.

They thought it would at least get the new term off to a decent start.

Harry ran upstairs to return the Cloak and Map to his trunk, and collected the rat's corpse. He dashed off a short note to Sirius before making his way up to the Owlery, where he sent Pollux off with the package before heading down to the Great Hall to join Draco for

breakfast. Dean Thomas was also at the table.

'What took you so long?' Draco demanded as he piled his plate with sausages.

'I had to send a note to Dad,' Harry explained, and eagerly helped himself to breakfast.

'Everyone was whispering about your dad on the train,' Dean said between mouthfuls of porridge. 'He sounds like a pretty interesting bloke. What's he like?'

'My dad is the coolest wizard in the world,' Harry replied with a smile.

'He's good at everything and loads of fun.'

'The best part is, Uncle Sirius really listens to you,' Draco added. 'You know how parents are sometimes distracted by other things, and just want to get you out of their hair?' Dean nodded. 'Uncle Sirius is never like that,' Draco finished.

Dean chuckled. 'He sounds brilliant. I'd like to meet him.'

'Maybe you'll get a chance sometime,' Harry replied.

The food at Hogwarts wasn't quite up to Mopsy's standard, let alone Granny's, but it was decent enough, and Harry and Draco each polished off a couple of plates worth before heading to their first class.

The boys found their classes disappointing, to say the least. It turned out that Aunt Cassie's standards were rather higher than those of their professors, and both boys were head and shoulders above their

classmates. In Astronomy the boys already knew the major constellations and stars, and tended to draw funny looks whenever they exclaimed

'There's Great-Granddad!' or 'There you are!'. Herbology was

straightforward enough, though neither Harry nor Draco had any

particular zeal for the subject. Harry was pleased, however, when Neville Longbottom decided to sit with them. He seemed to be quite the leader in

Hufflepuff, and also had a flair for the subject.

History of Magic was taught by a ghost, and neither Harry nor Draco had any idea how the other students were supposed to learn anything with the mindless way Professor Binns droned on. Aunt Cassie's lessons had been far more interesting, with lots of little anecdotes about Emeric the Evil's third wife or Uric the Oddball's illegitimate offspring.

'How do you reckon the others keep them all straight without the stories?' Draco asked Harry after their first class. Harry could only shrug. Charms was fun, as both boys could handle most everything in the first-year curriculum, but it didn't prove much of a challenge. Harry and Draco had hoped that perhaps Transfiguration would be more interesting, especially since McGonagall reminded them a bit of Aunt Cassie, but instead they found that they were just changing matches into needles. Naturally, both boys managed on their first try, earning them each a few points for Gryffindor, but the class was not very exciting.

Defence against the Dark Arts was most disappointing of all. They were to study nothing that Aunt Cassie had not covered in their very first year of lessons. Professor Quirrell seemed to be utterly incompetent, constantly afraid of his own shadow.

Harry and Draco scoffed at the idea that this buffoon could teach them anything that would be of use against the Dark Arts. To make matters worse, all through the lesson Harry found himself suffering from a severe headache, which was odd, because Harry had never had many headaches before.

'Maybe it's the garlic,' Draco said as they left the classroom.

Harry shook his head. 'I like the smell of garlic. It reminds me of the chateau.'

'Maybe you should go see Madam Pomfrey,' Draco suggested. He had

gone to the hospital wing himself on their first day with a cut, and had become quite fond of the school nurse.

Harry shook his head. 'I'll just wait and see if it passes.'

Fortunately, the headache seemed to pass quickly as soon as they had got away from the classroom, and Harry nearly forgot all about it.

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Chapter 59: Pranks and Paranoia

Since Harry and Draco were so far ahead in all of their classes, they soon discovered that they had an inordinate amount of time at their disposal.

Much of that time they dedicated to planning and exercising pranks, of course, but they made sure to spend some time in the library each day, locating new spells and potions, which they would practise in abandoned classrooms. They avoided Gryffindor Tower as much as possible, because Ron and Seamus tended to make trouble.

It was worse for Harry, because he could hardly go anywhere in the school without having people hiss insults at him. 'Death Eater spawn!' and 'Murderer's brat!' were two of the most popular. Thursday afternoon, after Harry's bag had been ripped by a Severing Charm on his way back from class, he hissed a vehement oath in Parseltongue out of sheer fury.

Fortunately, the other students seemed to think he was just making incoherent sounds, and ignored him. Draco, however, was quite concerned.

'You really want to watch yourself, Aries,' he told his cousin as they got

ready for bed that evening in their empty dormitory. (One side effect of Draco's propensity to wake them up before dawn was that they both tended to go to bed well before their Housemates.) 'If someone finds out about your gift, it will only make things worse for you.'

'It's hard to imagine that things could be any worse,' Harry spat. 'Maybe if they were afraid of me, they'd at least leave me alone.'

Draco rolled his eyes and banished his pillow towards Harry. Harry flicked his wand and blocked Draco's pillow with his own.

'You shouldn't have done that,' he told his cousin. 'This means war, Malfoy!'

'Die, Black!' Draco roared in response, and the two boys launched into a fully fledged hex war. After ten minutes, Harry was purple with green hair and yellow polka dots, whilst Draco had elephant ears, a poodle tail on his backside and a pair of wildebeest horns growing out of his head.

'I'll kill you for that, Malfoy!' Harry shouted playfully, and fired a squirt of lurid red paint at the blond boy's chest. Draco stared at his 'wound' in feigned shock and fell to the floor.

'You've won this time, Black,' he gasped. 'But Lord Draco the Malevolent shall return!'

At this point, Ron Weasley walked in, just in time to hear Harry's response.

'I think not, Malfoy,' he crowed triumphantly. 'Lord Aries the Black will drink your pure blood from your still throbbing veins!'

Ron screamed and ran downstairs, shouting for all Gryffindor Tower to hear that Aries Black had murdered Draco Malfoy in their dormitory.

Needless to say, Professor McGonagall was not amused when she arrived five minutes later to find Harry and Draco, both very much alive, rolling on the floor laughing.

'What is the meaning of this outrage?' she demanded. 'Do you think it amusing to frighten one of your Housemates half to death?'

'Yes, Professor,' Draco said honestly, still laughing.

'In any event, miss,' Harry broke in, giving his cousin a glare, 'we didn't mean to frighten Weasley. We were engaged in a private activity.'

Weasley came in and jumped to conclusions. He should have ascertained the truth of the matter first.'

McGonagall frowned. 'In that case, Mr Black, you and Mr Malfoy should have run after Mr Weasley and corrected his misapprehension, rather than sitting here laughing like a bunch of hyenas whilst the rest of your House was in an uproar. That will be two points each from Gryffindor. I do not expect to hear any more of this sort of nonsense in the future. Do you understand?'

'Yes, Professor,' Harry and Draco responded glumly. Weasley stood behind McGonagall, any embarrassment he felt at his mistake thoroughly recompensed by the sight of the two boys being scolded.

'Move along to your beds,' McGonagall commanded the large crowd that had gathered on the stairs, and left the room. Draco climbed into his bed and drew the curtains.

'Good night, Draco,' Harry said.

'Sleep tight, Aries,' Draco replied, and within minutes Harry heard the steady breathing that meant his cousin was asleep.

Harry, however, was not ready to go to sleep. He retrieved the mirror Sirius had given him from his trunk before getting into bed. He cast a Silencing Charm on the bed curtains, so as not to bother anyone else.

'Sirius Black,' he said, and within seconds his dad's face appeared in the mirror.

'Hello, son,' he said cheerfully. 'I got your gift. You're absolutely right. I

showed him to Moony, and he agrees too. Well done! I think there's a certain poetic justice in your being the one to do the rat in, though I shan't deny that I'm more than a bit envious of you.' He stopped at the expression on Harry's face. 'What's wrong?'

'I hate school,' Harry complained, and for once his dad didn't tell him off for whinging.

'Why? What's the problem?' Sirius asked, concern on his features.

'The lessons are a total waste of time,' Harry began, and the complaints began pouring out of their own volition. 'Half the teachers don't even know what they're on about, and the other students can hardly tell a wand from a broomstick. Everyone in my House hates me, and people are always mumbling behind my back. Today, someone used the Severing Charm to cut open my book bag in the corridor.'

'Is it because of me?' Sirius asked quietly.

Harry didn't want to hurt his dad's feelings, but he knew better than to lie to Sirius. He nodded.

Sirius closed his eyes. 'I'm sorry, Harry.'

'It's not your fault,' Harry mumbled.

'Yes, it is,' Sirius sighed. 'In every possible way. All I can tell you is to hold on, Harry. Things will get better.'

'And if they don't?'

Sirius shrugged. 'Then we'll pull you out and send you to Beauxbatons. Or Moony and I can teach you at home. Just give Hogwarts a year. If you don't want to go back after the summer, we'll work something out.'

'Thanks, Dad,' Harry replied, nearly tearing up from gratitude.

Sirius smiled wickedly. 'Now tell me all about how you killed the rat. I want to hear every gory detail.'

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Chapter 60: Midnight Mischief

On Friday morning, Harry and Draco each received a large basket of assorted baked goods, which made them simultaneously the most popular and the most hated boys at the Gryffindor table, as half the students whispered about how spoilt they were and the other half asked them if they could spare an éclair.

Later that morning, they had Double Potions with the Slytherins, which meant they got to see the infamous Professor Snape for the first time.

When Harry caught sight of his greasy hair, he smirked.

'Your mum was right,' he whispered to Draco. His cousin chuckled.

Snape began class with calling the roll. When he reached the name 'Aries Black', he muttered, 'Oh, yes. The convict's son.' Harry heard sniggering from all over the room. Most of the Slytherins laughed because Snape was mocking a Gryffindor, whilst Ron and Seamus did so because they didn't like Harry. Harry closed his eyes and mentally counted slowly to one thousand in Latin. He was interrupted just after 'quingenti sexaginta duo' when Snape asked him a sudden question.

'Black! What do you get if you add powdered root of asphodel to an infusion of wormwood?'

The Granger girl's hand shot automatically into the air. Draco rolled his eyes.

'The first stage of the Draught of Living Death, Professor,' Harry answered automatically.

Snape looked startled, but pressed on. 'Where would you look to find a bezoar?' Granger's hand shot up again.

'The stomach of a goat, sir,' Harry replied.

'What's the difference between monkshood and wolfsbane?' Granger's hand was still up.

Harry yawned. 'Nothing, sir. They're just two different names for aconite.' Draco sniggered, but Snape's eyes narrowed dangerously.

'Very well, Mr Black,' he said silkily, 'since you seem to consider yourself such a Potions expert, perhaps you could tell me the principal ingredients for the Regeneration Potion.'

Granger slowly lowered her hand. Harry paused. Aunt Cassie had never taught them that potion. Harry suspected it was a very advanced potion, which Snape was using in an attempt to humiliate him in front of the entire class. Harry refused to let that happen. He thought very hard, consciously reaching for the part of his mind he used to speak Parseltongue.

How do I make Regeneration Potion? he thought with a mental hiss.

There was a sudden stabbing pain in his forehead, but the answer came to him.

'Bone of the father,' he whispered in an oddly high voice, 'unknowingly given. Flesh of the servant, willingly sacrificed. Blood of the enemy...'

'That's quite enough, Mr Black,' Snape interrupted. His skin was deathly white. 'Ten points from Gryffindor for knowing such Dark magic.'

'That's not fair!' Draco protested. 'You shouldn't have asked the question if you didn't want it answered!'

'That's another ten points, Mr Malfoy,' Snape said silkily. 'If I hear another word out of either of you, it will be detention for you both.'

The cousins kept quiet for the remainder of the lesson, but they glared

unblinkingly at Snape with such hatred that even the normally unflappable Potions master felt somewhat uneasy. When he found scorpions in his bed that night, he had no doubt who was to blame.

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The next morning, Draco woke Harry up early as usual, even though it was Saturday. Harry did not feel at all like getting up yet. He had dreamt very strange dreams all night long, and felt as though he had hardly slept a wink. To top it all off, this morning he had a splitting headache.

'Go away, Draco,' he moaned.

'We're supposed to explore the third-floor corridor today,' Draco reminded him. Harry put his pillow over his head. 'Don't you remember?' Draco pressed. 'At the opening feast, Dumbledore said it was out of limits to everyone who did not wish to die a most painful death. Come on!'

Harry sighed. That had sounded too interesting to ignore. He reluctantly got out of bed, and a few minutes later he and Draco were heading out the door of Gryffindor Tower. They hid under the Cloak and made their way towards the third floor. Draco kept watch over the Map. They passed by a few other early risers on the way, but mostly the coast was clear.

Once they reached the third floor, however, they found two teachers blocking their path: Snape and McGonagall. The boys froze.

'The last of the protections is in place,' Snape said quietly. 'The Stone should be secure, though I do question the wisdom of hiding such a powerful magical object in a school. I fully expect the Weasley twins to find their way in here before the year is out.'

McGonagall nodded. 'James Potter and Sirius Black would have broken into the corridor within a week.' She sighed. 'Nonetheless, I am sure Albus and Flamel have their reasons.'

The two teachers walked off in the opposite direction from Harry and

Draco. The cousins shared a significant look.

'Do you think she meant Nicolas Flamel, the famous alchemist?' Draco asked.

Harry nodded. 'Who else could it be? And they mentioned a Stone.' He could barely contain his excitement. 'Draco, do you really think there's a Philosopher's Stone hidden here at Hogwarts?'

'It seems a likely explanation,' Draco agreed.

'Do you realise what this means?' Harry's expression was ecstatic. 'If we had the Philosopher's Stone, we could brew the Elixir of Life. No one we care about would ever have to die again!'

Draco furrowed his brow. 'Do you really think that's a good idea, Aries? Granny said that your great-grandfather was ready to go.'

'Maybe, but Great-Granddad wasn't,' Harry shot back. 'Besides, at least this way we have a choice. Come on, Draco. This would be the caper of a century.'

Draco let out a deep breath, then smiled. 'I have to admit, it would be pretty cool for us to steal the Philosopher's Stone. Not to use it, mind you. Just to say we'd done it.'

'It's settled then?' Harry asked.

Draco nodded. 'Before the end of the year we'll steal the Philosopher's Stone.'

Harry gave his trademark smirk, and mischief shone in his blue eyes.

'In that case,' he said, 'we had best see what we're up against.'

The boys crept over to the door that led to the third-floor corridor. It was locked, of course, but a simple Alohomora let them in. On the other side they encountered an enormous dog with three monstrous heads. They crept a bit further in, counting on the Cloak to hide them from the beast, but the Cloak could not hide their scent, and the giant dog went mad, all

three heads gnashing their very large teeth in the boys' direction. The boys dashed out the door as quickly as they could, but not before Draco noticed that the dog was standing on a trapdoor.

'All right, so we have some research to do first,' Harry panted once they were safely in the corridor.

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Chapter 61: The Quidditch

Revelation

As it happened, as intriguing as the prospect of researching three-headed dogs was, Harry and Draco soon found themselves distracted by other things. An announcement appeared on the Gryffindor notice board on Sunday, indicating that flying lessons were to be held for first years during the second week, as well as Quidditch tryouts for the older students.

'Flying lessons should be a laugh,' Draco said. 'We've both been flying since we were six.'

Harry snorted. 'I have no intention of going to their damn flying lessons,' he said. 'I'm trying out for Quidditch. It says here that they're looking especially for Chasers and a Seeker.'

'Fancy trying out for Quidditch, Aries?' Fred Weasley said behind them.

'Hate to break it to you, mate, but first years aren't allowed on the team,'

George added.

Harry laughed. 'They haven't seen me fly yet.'

Fred and George gave him a sceptical look, but Harry's brazen confidence did not waver in the slightest. George turned to Draco.

'Is he really that good?' he asked.

Draco smirked. 'It depends on the position. He's a mediocre Keeper and, his parentage aside, only a so-so Beater. But he's a good Chaser, and Granddad says that Aries is one of the best Seekers he's ever seen.'

Fred and George flashed an eager grin at one another.

'Aries, why don't you come out to the Quidditch pitch with us this afternoon?' Fred said. 'We'll try you out.'

'If you're as good as you say, we'll put in a word for you with Wood,'

George added.

'He's team captain,' Fred clarified. 'We've been on the team since last year.'

'What about you, Draco?' George asked. 'Are you as good as Aries is?'

Draco sighed. 'No,' he replied honestly. 'I think I'm pretty good for a first year, but Aries really is ready to play now, especially if you need a Seeker.'

That afternoon, Harry accompanied the Weasley twins to the Quidditch pitch. Draco tagged along just to watch. George loaned Harry his Cleansweep Five and Fred released a Snitch that they had got a hold of somewhere. Within seconds Harry was off, swooping and dipping through the air as easily as if he had been born on a broomstick. It felt good to be back in the air.

He circled the pitch a couple of times, and then caught sight of the Snitch hovering behind Fred Weasley's ear. He dove right towards the twin and pulled up at the last second, handily catching the Snitch without even grazing Fred. Harry landed, and the twins looked like Christmas had come early.

'Wood is definitely going to want to see this,' George said, and ran off to find the Gryffindor Quidditch captain. He returned a few minutes later with a burly fifth-year, who looked more than a bit put out at having been dragged all this way to see some first-year 'play around on a broomstick.' His expression shifted to one of ineffable delight, however, when he saw Harry fly.

'I'll speak with McGonagall immediately!' he exclaimed. 'I'm sure she'll let us bend the rule about first-years having brooms.' He rubbed his hands in glee. 'We might just win the Quidditch Cup this year. Do you have a broomstick already?'

'A Comet Two-Sixty,' Harry replied.

'Not bad,' Wood nodded. 'Write home as soon as you can and get them to send it to you. I'll be sure to have your permission from McGonagall before it gets here.'

'Do you really think she'll give in?' Harry asked. His impression of the elderly witch had been that she was a stickler for the rules.

Wood chuckled. 'She'll give in all right. McGonagall's a bit of a Quidditch fanatic. She'll do nearly anything to help us win.'

Sure enough, Harry received a note from McGonagall during supper, excusing him from flying lessons as well as authorising him to join the Gryffindor Quidditch team as Seeker and to obtain a broomstick from home. Harry ran up to the dormitory as soon as he was done eating and contacted Sirius using the mirror.

'What's new, Aries?' Sirius asked.

Harry grinned. 'You'll never believe it, Dad. I've been made Gryffindor Seeker.'

Sirius's eyes went as wide as saucers. 'During your first year? That's incredible. It must be some sort of record.'

'Youngest House player in a century,' Harry replied. He heard a delighted shout from the other side of the mirror.

'Give me that, my boy,' Abraxas's voice said roughly, and soon his face replaced Sirius's in the mirror. 'Did I hear right, Aries? Youngest House player in a century?'

'That's right, Granddad. Gryffindor Seeker in my first year.'

'At least share, Dad,' Sirius protested off the side of the mirror, and soon his face joined his father-in-law's.

'Anyway, I've been told to ask you to send my broom from home,' Harry continued.

'I don't think so, Aries,' Sirius said wryly. 'An occasion like this definitely merits a new broom.'

'A Nimbus 2000, I should think,' Abraxas mused. 'It's the fastest thing on the market right now.'

'Actually, as Head of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black,' Sirius continued in an artificial drawl, 'I think that buying just one new broom is a bit beneath our dignity. What brooms do the other team members have?'

'I'm not sure,' Harry replied. 'The Beaters are on Cleansweep Fives.'

'Great Merlin!' Abraxas shouted in horror. 'We shall have to remedy that, and quickly.'

Harry laughed. 'You do remember we're talking about the Gryffindor team, right, Granddad?'

Abraxas wrinkled his nose. 'I've conveniently forgotten that little detail, Aries. For now, I shall only remember that we're talking about my grandsons' House team.'

Sirius clapped his father-in-law heartily on the back. 'I knew you'd come around eventually, Dad.'

'Don't push your luck, Sirius,' Abraxas warned, but he was smiling.

'Find out the names of all the team members and let me know as soon as you can,' Sirius said.

'Why?' Harry asked.

'I want to give the brooms to the players personally, not the school,' Sirius explained.

Abraxas raised an eyebrow. 'Rather generous of you, isn't it?'

Sirius shrugged. 'If we give them to the school, there's a chance Dumbledore will redistribute them amongst the other teams in the interest of fair play. This way we can make sure that only the people we want to have them will have them.'

'Very Slytherin thinking, my boy,' Abraxas replied with an approving nod.

'I always knew you were one of us.'

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Chapter 62: Unexpected

Deliveries

On Sunday evening, Lucius Malfoy was sitting in his study, going through his correspondence and sipping a glass of sherry. His father was at Windermere Court with Sirius Black, the son he never had, poring over broom reviews in Quintessential Quidditch. Narcissa, meanwhile, was at Grimmauld Place visiting with her mother and grandmother. Lucius had the house to himself, and to be perfectly honest, he rather appreciated the quiet.

The study door opened and Dobby stepped in.

'Professor Severus Snape, Master Lucius,' he announced, and the hook-nosed Potions master entered the room, raindrops scattering from his woollen cloak.

'Good evening, Severus,' Lucius said graciously, and indicated a comfortable armchair to his right. 'Please have a seat. Would you care for a glass of sherry?'

'Thank you, Lucius,' Snape said, and sat down. Lucius poured his guest a glass and handed it over.

'To what do I owe this unexpected pleasure?' the blond wizard asked.

Snape's nostrils flared. 'I trust you have heard of the little incident we had in Potions on Friday?'

Lucius looked at his guest curiously. It was most unlike Severus to come all the way from Scotland just to discuss a matter of school discipline. He nodded.

'I have heard something,' he said. 'I heard that Aries answered one of your questions correctly and you removed points for his knowing Dark magic.'

Snape narrowed his eyes. 'It is necessary for us to maintain appearances. I cannot be seen to encourage any student in the study of the Dark Arts. If Dumbledore...'

Lucius held up his hand. 'I understand, Severus. Though my father might ask why, if you were so keen to maintain appearances, you asked such a question in the first place.'

'Black answered all my questions correctly,' Snape replied evenly. 'It is not healthy for boys never to get answers wrong. They become big-headed. I simply selected the most difficult potion I knew. I did not expect the brat to know the answer.'

Lucius chuckled. 'You cannot fool me, Severus. I know your real motivations. You have my blessing to bait Aries Black as much as you wish. Merlin knows he needs to be cut down to size.' He frowned. 'I do wish, however, that you had not deemed it necessary to drag Draco into the whole affair.'

'Draco challenged my authority in my own classroom,' Snape said. 'I doubt very much that you would tolerate such insubordination here, and I will not tolerate at school.'

'You must do as you think best of course,' Lucius said nonchalantly, but the look in his eyes was lethal. 'It would, however, be prudent for you to remember that, despite the unfortunate mishap with his Sorting, Draco is still my son.'

'I shan't forget it, Lucius.'

'See that you don't.' The elder wizard took a sip of sherry. 'Now, Severus, is this really the reason you have come all this way to see me?'

Snape shook his head. 'I wanted to know how it was that Aries Black knew the ingredients of the Regeneration Potion.'

Lucius frowned. 'Was that the potion you asked him about? I'm afraid I've never heard of it.'

'My point exactly,' Snape replied. 'Very few people have. It is devilishly difficult to get right, and it is amongst the Darkest magic that I have ever encountered. Could Cassiopeia Black have taught it to the boys?'

'No,' Lucius said. 'I have kept a close eye on their curriculum, and she has taught them nothing I do not know myself.'

'How then would Aries have encountered it? Might Sirius Black...?'

'Sirius Black is an arrogant playboy,' Lucius replied. 'He has no room for anything in his head but jokes and Quidditch. In that respect he makes rather an excellent playmate for my father.' He paused. 'Aries has

demonstrated a curious affinity for the Dark Arts. I have often heard Cassiopeia wax lyrical about his strange capacity to master any Dark spell almost effortlessly. I suspect that the boy must have read about the potion in some book.'

'It is curious that the boy would display such a particular aptitude at such an early age,' Snape observed.

Lucius smiled. 'I shouldn't fret so much about the boy's advanced knowledge if I were you, Severus. Aries has much more interesting secrets.'

The Potions master raised an eyebrow. 'What sort of secrets?'

'Tut, tut, Severus,' Lucius scolded mockingly before taking another sip of sherry. 'I may not care for the boy, but he's still family. I shan't reveal everything to you. Let's just say that Aries possesses some unique and extraordinary gifts. I fully expect that his future will prove most...diverting.'

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Towards the end of the following week, seven long, thin packages were delivered to the members of the Gryffindor Quidditch team. Oliver Wood nearly fainted when he saw the note on his.

Dear Mr Wood,

Best of luck on winning the Quidditch Cup this year! We hope this might help a bit. It's your very own brand-new Nimbus 2000. Use it well!

Cordially yours,

Sirius Black, Gryffindor Beater, 1973-1978

Abraxas Malfoy, Slytherin Chaser, 1937-1943, Team Captain, 1938-1943

Every member of the team received the same broom and basically the same note, except for Harry. His note read as follows:

Dear Aries,

Granddad used his connexions at the Nimbus Racing Broom Company to get you a fully working prototype of the Nimbus 2001, which won't be entering the market until next year. We have both tested it - for safety reasons, naturally - and we are pleased to report that it flies beautifully and is a good bit better than the 2000 model. If there are any problems, let us know and we can replace it immediately.

Affectionately yours,

Dad and Granddad

After Potions, Harry and Draco ran up as quickly as they could to their dormitory in order to examine the new broom.

'It's beautiful, Aries,' Draco exclaimed, lightly caressing the wood with his fingers.

'You're not allowed to have a broomstick, Black,' Ron scoffed. 'You'll get in trouble.'

'I've got special permission from McGonagall, Weasley,' Harry replied evenly.

Ron snorted. 'Figures. That what you Death Eaters do, isn't it? Your dad bought his way out of Azkaban, and now he's bought you a broomstick, even though it's against the rules.'

Fred and George walked in, carrying their own new broomsticks over their shoulders.

'Lay off it, Ronniekins,' Fred said. 'Aries is cool.'

'Be sure to thank your dad and granddad from us,' George added.

Harry smiled. 'I'll pass it on.'

'Wood told us to let you know he's scheduled practice for this evening, so we can all get used to our new brooms,' Fred said.

'I'll be there,' Harry replied with a nod.

'You're on the Quidditch team, too?' Ron moaned. 'In your first year? I

hate you.'

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Chapter 63: Research and Pranks

Whilst his cousin was occupied at Quidditch practice, Draco decided to go to the library in order to begin researching three-headed dogs, and pored through several musty old tomes in the hope of finding some clue. Some three-headed dogs were described as having a mane of serpents, and Draco wondered briefly whether his cousin's Parseltongue ability might help them to get past the dog, but he couldn't remember having seen any serpents on this dog, nor had he heard any hissing.

Hercules, for his part, had supposedly got past a three-headed dog by wearing a magical lion skin that protected him from the dog's bite whilst he wrestled it into submission, but the boys hadn't any magical lion skins, and Draco thought that, even if they had, they would hardly be able to wrestle the monster.

Granger, the Muggle girl, was also in the library, studying—she didn't seem to have made any friends at school, and spent most of her time amongst the books. She looked miserable, but Draco had a hard time feeling sorry for her. If the Muggle wanted friends, she should try not to be such an insufferable know-it-all.

Draco's eyes were beginning to blur from fatigue, and he was nearly ready to call it a night. However, he forced himself to try one more book, and opened a thick leather-bound volume. He found what he was looking

for on the first page.

'Eureka!' he exclaimed loudly, earning him a disapproving stare from Madam Pince and a curious look from Granger. The blond boy was astounded that he had not thought of it before. It seemed so obvious now. He re-shelved the books with a flick of his wand and ran back to Gryffindor Tower.

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Harry whistled as he walked back up to the castle from Quidditch practice. For the first time since he had come to Hogwarts, he felt as though he belonged. Wood and the rest of the team had been ecstatic about his family's donation, and everyone had been thrilled to see how well Harry could fly. He made his way up to his dormitory and found Draco in bed, already wearing his pyjamas.

'How was practice?' he asked.

Harry changed out of his Quidditch robes. 'It was wicked! You should have come.'

Draco shook his head. 'No thanks. I love Quidditch as much as anyone, but coming to practice is a bit much if I'm not even on the team.'

Harry pulled on his pyjamas and sat down on his own bed. He frowned.

'Do you mind that I made the team?'

'Why should I mind?'

'Well, you're a good Quidditch player too,' Harry said. 'It's not fair that you should have to take flying lessons with everyone else. And it would be nice if you could play.'

Draco rolled his eyes. 'Believe it or not, Aries, there is more to life than Quidditch. Like stealing the Philosopher's Stone.'

Ron walked into the dormitory and the boys switched to French.

'Qu'est-ce que tu as découvert? [What have you found out?]' Harry asked.

Ron muttered darkly as he searched for his jumper.

'Tu te souviens d'Orphée? [Do you remember about Orpheus?]

'Bien sûr [Of course],' Harry replied.

'Pourquoi Cerbère l'a laissé entrer l'Enfer? [Why did Cerberus let him into Hell?]' Draco replied smugly. Ron grabbed his jumper and left the dormitory, growling about 'ruddy foreigners'.

Harry grinned widely. 'You mean we have to sing to it?'

His cousin nodded.

'But that's so simple!' Harry exclaimed. 'I should have thought of it myself.'

'You were too busy thinking about broomsticks and Quidditch glory,'

Draco retorted. 'Someone had to keep the important things in mind.'

Harry laughed. 'Whatever should I do without you, Draco?'

'I shudder to think,' the blond boy replied primly as he crawled into bed.

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Harry wanted to go back to the third-floor corridor the very next morning in order to test their discovery, but Draco put his foot down.

'If a hell-hound is the first obstacle, the others are bound to be worse,' he pointed out reasonably.

'All the more reason for us to check them out,' Harry argued. 'We can find out what each obstacle is and then come back and research them.'

Draco shook his head. 'And what will you do when we run into an obstacle that kills us before we can get out of there?'

Harry pouted. 'So you're giving up then?'

His cousin took grave offence at that. 'What do you take me for, Aries? I just want to make sure we have a few more tricks up our sleeves before we go barging in where angels fear to tread.'

Harry reluctantly conceded that Draco had a point with that, and agreed

to wait awhile. Their school work was still very straightforward, so they used their extra time to research spells that might help them get through whatever obstacles were guarding the Philosopher's Stone. Between that and homework - and Quidditch practice for Harry - they kept pretty busy over the next few weeks, though they still managed to find time for a few pranks here and there.

They still did not get on particularly well with Ron Weasley and Seamus Finnegan, but the influence of the Weasley twins and the rest of the Quidditch team meant that the other Gryffindors began to be much friendlier with both boys. After a few well-aimed hexes in the corridors, Harry and Draco established something of a reputation amongst the other Houses as well, and soon even the Slytherins did their best to avoid them. As for the professors, most were delighted with their high level of achievement. Severus Snape was the sole exception. He never hid his obvious dislike for Harry, and generally did his best to ignore him, except to glare at him darkly from time to time. If he wanted to tell Harry something in class, he almost always addressed Draco, which amused both boys greatly.

With the end of October came Halloween, and the grand Halloween feast. Halloween celebrations in the Black family home had been muted, to say the least. Marius and Clytemnestra had thought it indecent to celebrate the anniversary of the Potters' deaths with Harry, and had always found some pretext to avoid it. Sirius had done nothing to alter that tradition, choosing instead to spend the entire day locked in his bedroom with a few bottles of firewhisky the year before. As for the Malfoys, they too avoided Halloween celebrations, if for rather a different reason: for them, the holiday marked the defeat of the Dark Lord.

The school, however, was very much in a mood to celebrate, and Harry

and Draco found themselves caught up in the general excitement. The food was excellent, as always. Harry particularly enjoyed the roast beef, whilst Draco savoured the stuffed turkey. They sat with Dean Thomas, Lee Jordan and the Weasley twins, much as they always did, and plotted their first joint prank, to take place immediately before the Christmas holidays.

About half an hour into the feast, Quirrell burst in, causing a bit of an uproar.

'There's a troll,' he stammered. 'In the dungeons.' Having delivered his message, he promptly fainted.

The Hall exploded with terror, and Dumbledore struggled to calm the students down. Harry and Draco, however, grinned at each other in mutual understanding. They thought having a troll loose in the castle was simply wicked. The prefects gathered the students to send them back to their dormitories. The cousins, however, held back with one accord, and slipped into a side corridor. They couldn't let an opportunity like this pass them by.

'How do you suppose we kill a mountain troll?' Draco asked Harry as they ran past a series of locked doors.

'Blasting Curse?' Harry suggested.

Draco shook his head. 'Their skin is awfully tough. How about the Disintegration Hex?'

'That won't work either,' Harry replied with a frown. 'It only works on inanimate objects.' He paused. 'I think the Blood-Boiling Curse is the best option.'

Draco nodded. 'We haven't learnt the Killing Curse yet.'

They turned a corner and found themselves directly in the path of a monstrous troll. It roared when it saw them, troll spit flinging

everywhere, and raised its club.

Draco aimed his wand. 'Sanguifervereo!' he shouted. His curse hit its target, but seemed only to succeed in making the troll angrier. Harry lifted his own wand.

'SANGUIFERVEO!' he cried. This time the troll stopped momentarily and hissed in pain, but after less than a minute he raised his club again to attack Draco. Harry drew up all his strength and focus, and cast the spell again, this time hissing it in Parseltongue.

The troll roared in agony and fell to its massive knees, shaking the whole corridor. Harry kept his wand trained on the monster as red vapour continued to rise from all its pores. After thirty seconds, the vapour ceased, and the troll collapsed to the floor.

At just that moment, Professor Snape came round the corner at the far side of the corridor, accompanied by Professor McGonagall and Professor Quirrell.

'Malfoy!' he called out angrily. 'What are you two doing out here? You're supposed to be in your dormitory.'

Harry smiled widely. 'We went looking for the troll, sir,' he replied.

'You foolish children!' McGonagall snapped. 'Have you any idea of the danger you were in?'

Draco gestured at the troll's corpse. 'I think we managed all right.'

The teachers stopped and looked at the troll's body. Quirrell looked as though he was going to be sick, but Snape walked right over to the troll and cast a number of diagnostic spells.

'It's dead,' he said in surprise.

'Dead?' McGonagall was stunned. She turned to the boys. 'How did you two manage to kill a twelve-foot mountain troll?'

Harry shrugged. 'The Blood-Boiling Curse, Professor.'

Snape's eyes darted to the black-haired boy in shock. 'The Blood-Boiling Curse is very Dark magic, Black.'

'Is it, sir?' Harry replied innocently. 'It seemed quite effective.'

McGonagall looked flustered for a moment, but quickly recovered her composure.

'Not many first-years could handle a mountain troll on their own,' she said. 'I still say you should have done as you were told, but I am awarding five points each to Gryffindor. Now run off to your Common Room. Students will be finishing the feast in their Houses.'

Harry and Draco nodded and ran back to Gryffindor Tower as fast as they could, Snape watching them suspiciously as they left. No one noticed a red-eyed Hermione Granger hiding behind a suit of armour, a suspicious frown on her face.

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Chapter 64: Encounter with Snape

Early November brought the first Quidditch match of the year. It was Gryffindor vs. Slytherin, and the entire school was bursting with excitement. On the morning of the match, Harry ate a hearty breakfast before walking over to the Quidditch pitch. He changed into his robes and grabbed his broom, and then joined the others for Wood's pep talk before heading out.

Harry relished the feel of the wind in his long hair as he soared into the air. His eyes quickly darted towards the stands, where he saw Draco

watching eagerly. Harry's heart leapt when he saw who was sitting beside his cousin: a tall, good-looking man in Gryffindor Quidditch robes and a distinguished older man in a set of very old Slytherin Quidditch robes. It was Sirius and Abraxas. Harry laughed aloud, and did a couple of flips on his broomstick.

The game began. The Gryffindor team was really quite good, and the Slytherin team wasn't bad either, though it seemed to be built largely on the basis of brute strength rather than fine skill. Harry soared high above the crowd and watched for the Snitch. He saw it about half-an-hour into the game and dove for it at maximum speed. Higgs, the Slytherin Seeker, realised too late what had happened, and tried to race for it, but Harry was too fast. His hand clasped tightly around the Snitch, and Gryffindor won the game - 220-60.

The spectators erupted in applause and Harry flew high above the crowd, holding the Snitch triumphantly above his head. Sirius, Abraxas and Draco were on their feet, clapping and roaring at the top of their lungs. 'ARIES BLACK! ARIES BLACK!' they chanted, and soon the rest of the Gryffindors joined in, followed by the Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs. The Slytherins, of course, looked sour at having been defeated, but they had noticed Sirius's presence, and seemed afraid to express their displeasure too severely in the presence of the man whom everyone knew to have been the Dark Lord's number-one henchman.

Harry landed, and was immediately surrounded by the rest of the team. 'That was brilliant, Aries!' Wood crowed. 'Keep this up, and the Quidditch Cup is ours for certain.'

Fred and George clapped him on the back. 'We knew you had it in you,' George said.

'Best discovery we ever made,' Fred added.

Angelina smiled. 'The new brooms don't hurt, either. Thank your dad and granddad for us.'

'Thank them yourself.' Harry grinned. 'Here they come.'

The team turned around. Draco was leading the way onto the Quidditch pitch, followed closely by Sirius and Abraxas.

'Well done, my lads!' Abraxas shouted. 'And lasses,' he added a bit sheepishly, when he saw the girls' glare. 'I think the Quidditch Cup has our name on it this year.'

'Our name?' Sirius smirked. 'What colour are your robes again?'

Abraxas rolled his eyes and waved his wand. His old Quidditch robes changed to red and gold.

Sirius nodded in approval. 'That's much better.'

'Thank you so much for our brooms, Mr Black and Mr Malfoy,' Wood said.

'Don't mention it, my boy,' Abraxas said. 'Just a small token of our esteem.'

Sirius's eyes gleamed. 'We consider them an investment, and we expect to reap abundant dividends.'

Draco laughed at Wood's confused expression. 'He means he expects seven Quidditch Cups in a row from Gryffindor.'

Abraxas tousled Draco's hair. 'You'll want to keep an eye on this one, Mr Wood,' he said. 'Draco is an excellent Keeper. You might want to groom him as your successor.'

'Not to mention he's a good backup player for just about any position,'

Sirius added. 'Just in case someone falls ill.'

'Except Beater,' Harry interjected. 'He's pants at that.'

'True,' Sirius admitted, patting Harry's shoulder fondly. 'But so are you.'

Harry grinned. 'I never pretended otherwise.'

Abraxas put his strong arms around both of his grandsons. 'By the way,' he said, 'I should like to extend an invitation for all of you to attend a Gryffindor team party at Malfoy Manor over the Christmas holiday. I shall owl you with the details.'

'I'll bring the firewhisky,' Sirius said with a mischievous twinkle in his eye.

A silky voice broke into the conversation. 'How very like you, Black, to enable illegal behaviour amongst the younger generation.'

Sirius did not even turn to look at Snape. 'Oh, Snivellus,' he said carelessly.

'Snivellus?' Abraxas repeated, and then turned to look at the Potions master. 'Oh yes, the half-blood.' He wrinkled his nose. 'Indeed, Sirius, I believe Narcissa was quite right.'

Harry and Draco sniggered.

'Is there a reason, Mr Snape, that you have intruded into our private conversation?' Abraxas demanded.

'I only wished to congratulate the Gryffindor team on their victory,' Snape replied icily.

'What do you think of my grandsons?' Abraxas went on. 'Surely you have been impressed by their considerable talent?'

'The boys are competent potion-brewers, Mr Malfoy,' Snape said dully.

'Indeed they are, Mr Snape, amongst other things.' Abraxas looked Snape directly into his black eyes. 'In fact, you might find some of their other talents most intriguing. Aries and Draco are very gifted wizards.' He leaned forwards. 'As am I, Mr Snape, and, to be sure, as is my distinguished son-in-law. You would do well to remember that.'

Snape frowned. 'Thank you for the warning, Mr Malfoy.'

'That wasn't a warning, Snivellus,' Sirius interjected. 'That was a threat.'

Snape glared at both men before nodding curtly and walking away.

'My, what an unpleasant fellow,' Abraxas murmured. 'It's a pity you children have to study Potions with him. It's a wonder anyone can learn anything with him looming about. In my day, and in Sirius's as well, we had Professor Slughorn. A marvellous potioneer, and a good friend of mine. It's a shame he retired.'

'Anyway, you lot have a victory party to attend,' Sirius said. 'Don't let us hold you up. Well done, and we hope to see you all at the Christmas party.'

Sirius and Abraxas bade them all farewell, and the team trudged back up to the castle for the victory party.

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Chapter 65: Midnight Meeting

Ron Weasley and Seamus Finnegan slipped out of the Common Room after curfew and followed the directions on the note they had been given.

After ten minutes they arrived at a remote, no-longer-used classroom.

Hermione Granger was waiting for them.

'What's this about, Granger?' Seamus yawned. 'I want to get some shut-eye.'

'Which is more important, Finnegan?' she scolded the boy. 'Getting some sleep or stopping Aries Black?'

Ron's ears perked up. 'What do you mean about stopping Black? What's he up to?'

Hermione groaned. 'Isn't it obvious? The son of the second-most-feared wizard in all Britain comes to Hogwarts and is Sorted into Gryffindor. He uses his family money to buy himself friends, and he's even earning House points for practising Dark magic.'

Ron frowned. 'I don't follow you.'

Hermione took a deep breath before continuing. 'I think Aries Black is trying to infiltrate Gryffindor. I think he wants to be the next You-Know-Who.'

'The next You-Know-Who?' Ron scoffed. 'Are you mad?'

Hermione ignored him. 'I've been spending a lot of time with Hagrid, and he let slip that Dumbledore is hiding something in the school, something very powerful. I don't know what it is, but I bet Black is trying to steal it, in order to help him rise to power.'

Seamus paused, then nodded. 'That does make some sense. Black and Malfoy are always sneaking around. The other day, I woke up to find them coming into the dormitory at six in the morning.'

'They keep a lot of secrets too,' Ron conceded. 'Whenever I walk in on them they switch to some other language, like they don't want me to know what they're on about.'

Hermione sat pensively. 'We should start following Black and Malfoy around. That needn't be too difficult, as we all have the same class schedule.'

'I don't know about that,' Ron said reluctantly. 'They get up awfully early.'

Hermione glared at him. 'Then you'll just have to get up earlier.'

'Don't you think you're taking this a bit far?' Seamus asked.

'Don't you two get it?' Hermione snapped. 'Haven't you heard what it was like when You-Know-Who was around? Black wants to bring back those times.'

'We're just kids,' Ron protested.

'And imagine how things might have been different if a bunch of students had taken things into their own hands when You-Know-Who was in school,' Hermione pressed.

Both boys nodded reluctantly.

'What did you have in mind exactly?' Ron asked.

'First of all, I think we need to figure out what Dumbledore is guarding,' Hermione said. 'I bet it has something to do with the third-floor corridor.'

'The one that's forbidden?' Seamus asked.

Hermione nodded grimly. 'I think we need to find out what's behind that door.'

....

A couple of weeks before the end of term, McGonagall collected the names of students who would be staying at Hogwarts over the Christmas holidays. Harry and Draco both scoffed at the idea that anyone would want to do such a silly thing, and were surprised when they saw Fred and George queuing up to put their names down.

'Aren't you going home for Christmas?' Draco asked.

Fred shook his head. 'Our mum and dad are going to see our brother Charlie in Romania.'

'Well, you can't very well stay here!' Harry protested. 'All alone in this draughty castle on Christmas? You're coming home with us.'

George raised his eyebrows. 'You can't be serious?'

'Why not?' Draco said. 'I'm sure either his dad or my granddad will be happy to have you over. We'll have loads of fun.'

Fred and George gave each other a look. They sighed simultaneously.

'We'd really like to,' Fred began.

'We definitely appreciate it,' George added.

'But we can't just leave...' Fred continued, but was suddenly interrupted when Ron barged between them.

'You're holding up the queue, you idiots,' he growled at his brothers before going over and adding his name to McGonagall's list.

Fred and George shared another look and then turned with one accord to Harry and Draco.

'On second thought,' George said. 'We'd be absolutely delighted to join you for Christmas.'

Harry and Draco both grinned at that.

'Excellent,' Harry said. 'I'll let Dad know.'

....

Two days before the start of the Christmas holidays, the twins, the cousins, Lee and Dean launched their enormous prank. It began with lunch in the Great Hall, as each person who entered without saying the appropriate password had their hair turned either red or green. It was specifically designed so that Ravenclaws and Slytherins got red hair, whilst Gryffindors and Hufflepuffs got green hair, which had taken quite a bit of clever spellwork.

The tables, meanwhile, had been charmed to break out into loud, off-key Christmas carols each time someone said the word 'Christmas'. They had enchanted the Christmas trees to applaud whenever anyone mentioned Professor McGonagall, or else to boo and heckle whenever someone mentioned Professor Snape.

That alone would have merited recognition as the prank of the decade, and certainly produced a fair amount of merry uproar amongst the student body, along with a good bit of annoyance amongst the teachers. Lee and Dean were both more than satisfied with the accomplishment, and determined to sit back and enjoy the fruits of their labours. But the

twins and the cousins were equally determined not to be outclassed by each other, and kept pushing the boundaries of what was possible.

All day Sunday, fireworks exploded in the corridors, gargoyles sang and students' hair kept changing colour. Harry and Draco enchanted the suits of armour to insult the students in English, the teachers in Latin and the Headmaster in classical Arabic, whilst Fred and George adorned every portrait in the school with artfully arranged and festively coloured toilet paper.

The crowning achievement came late Sunday night, when Harry and Draco managed to Stupefy Mrs Norris, sneak into the Slytherin Common Room with the Invisibility Cloak and Spellotape the wicked old cat to the chandelier. When they reported their success to the twins on the train the next day, the Weasley boys reluctantly acknowledged that they had finally met their match.

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Chapter 66: Aries Black Under

Scrutiny

After the students had left for the Christmas holidays, the staff had their usual end-of-term meeting to discuss the students' progress. Dumbledore sat at the head of a long oak table, a long roll of parchment in his hands. He rapped the table to get the teachers' attention. They quieted down at once.

'We shall begin with our first years,' Dumbledore announced, and there

was a ruffling of parchment as the teachers turned to the proper place in their notes. 'What is your assessment of Hannah Abbott?'

By tradition, the student's Head of House was always permitted to speak first.

'I find her a marvellous girl,' Sprout replied. 'She's very diligent and conscientious, and I've had no complaints about her behaviour. As for her Herbology work, it's been solidly Acceptable.'

All of the other teachers agreed that Miss Abbott was a solid student, if uninspired, and Dumbledore moved on to the next student on the list.

'Ah, yes,' he said. 'What do you think of Aries Black?'

'He's a spirited boy, with a great deal of both natural talent and previous preparation,' McGonagall answered. 'He has overcome significant prejudice to become rather popular in Gryffindor House, and he has become a valued, dedicated member of his Quidditch team.' Her lips twisted in a slightly amused expression. 'He is certainly rambunctious, and rather reminds me of his father at that age. I have received occasional complaints about his propensity to mischief, but so far there has been no evidence that his jokes have crossed the line into especial malice or cruelty. He seems to get on well with the Weasley twins.'

'As for his academic performance,' the witch continued, 'his work in Transfiguration has been exceptional, and I do not think that this is entirely the result of his advanced preparation. his native talent in this area is remarkable, which is unsurprising, given his father's own considerable gifts. Fortunately, the younger Black seems to have taken the initiative in keeping himself challenged. So long as his class work remains at its current standard, I have dispensed him from the ordinary homework, and instead permitted him to pursue his own projects under my supervision. The advanced work he has turned in has all been of

superior calibre.'

'Thank you, Minerva,' Dumbledore said, and turned to the Charms master. 'What do you think, Filius?'

Professor Flitwick practically jumped with delight. 'I am very fond of the boy. He displays a gift for Charms I haven't seen since Lily Evans. Like Minerva, I have seen fit to encourage him in the pursuit of his own studies, and have been equally pleased with the results.'

'The boy is a solid student and shows clear mastery of the material,' Sprout said fairly, though it was clear from her expression that she had no particular love for the boy. 'However, he lacks motivation. I've noticed that when he already knows something he tends to act out, and I have sometimes needed to stop him from distracting other, weaker students. I have taken to partnering him with Neville Longbottom. Longbottom shows exceptional gifts in Herbology, and tends to move very quickly. This seems to be enough to keep Black interested.'

Dumbledore nodded thoughtfully. 'What do you think, Quirinus?'

'B-black s-seems to be a very g-gifted student,' Quirrell replied. 'He d-doesn't pay very much attention in class, but consistently p-performs very well on examinations.' He paused. 'He was able s-singlehandedly to k-kill a mountain t-troll on Halloween. I think that s-says much about his ability to d-defend himself.'

'I have some thoughts about that incident,' Snape said slowly. 'Black used a very powerful Dark curse to bring down that troll, and I have seen on a few other occasions how easily Dark magic seems to come to him.'

'That's hardly a surprise,' McGonagall observed, 'given his upbringing.'

'There is, I think, more to it than that,' Snape continued. 'His partner-in-crime Mr Malfoy has the same upbringing, but displays nothing of the prodigious talent Black does for the Dark Arts, though they are of

comparable ability in every other way. This, when combined with Black's unfortunate disregard for the rules, gives me great cause for concern.'

'You make a valid point, Severus,' Dumbledore said. 'However, as we have seen, the boy does have other, more positive qualities. We ought to find ways to encourage those tendencies, whilst simultaneously inhibiting the growth of his more negative character traits. What do you think of his academic work?'

Snape snorted. 'Aside from his malignant attitude, I have no complaints. He is a competent potion-brewer.'

As Professor Sinistra had no particular comments, except to observe that the boy's work was consistently at an Outstanding level, and Professor Binns had stopped attending staff meetings some seventeen years before his death, Dumbledore decided to move on.

'Very well,' he said to his teachers. 'Tell me, what do you think of Susan Bones?'

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Chapter 67: Christmas at

Windermere Court

As the Hogwarts Express drew slowly into King's Cross Station, the cousins and the twins gathered their belongings and bade farewell to Lee Jordan and Dean Thomas.

'You're going to love Dad,' Harry gushed to the twins as they exited the train. 'He really is brilliant. He...' He paused in confusion when they

stepped out onto the platform. 'He isn't here.'

Sirius Black was, in fact, conspicuously absent. In his stead stood Cassiopeia in her severest robes, looking sternly in their direction.

'Don't dawdle, boys,' she snapped. 'We don't want to wait around this Muggle sty a moment longer than we have to.' She looked at the boys' trunks and owls. 'Are these all your things?'

'Yes, Aunt Cassie,' Harry replied.

His great-aunt waved her wand and their trunks vanished.

'They will be waiting for you all at home,' she explained, taking a couple of steps closer to the boys. Fred and George Weasley instinctively took a step back. Cassiopeia glared at them. 'Aren't you going to introduce your friends, Aries?'

'Sorry, Aunt Cassie,' Harry replied hastily. 'These are Fred and George Weasley. They're Cedrella's grandsons.' He turned to the twins. 'This is my great-aunt, Cassiopeia Black.'

'It's a pleasure to meet you, Miss Black,' Fred said nervously.

'A real honour,' George added.

'I know,' Cassiopeia replied in a bored tone. 'I wish I could say the same.'

She sighed. 'In any event, my nephews are fond of you, and you have been invited to join the family for Christmas. As much as I might wish it otherwise, the decision in no way rests with me. I wish, however, to impress upon you the utmost importance of your maintaining proper decorum in our house. I don't doubt that, raised as you have been, you have become accustomed to a somewhat looser standard of behaviour.

That will not do with us. You will behave yourselves as proper gentlemen at all times, or you will find the consequences to be most severe. Do I make myself perfectly clear?'

Fred and George nodded in unison.

'Do you have voices?' Cassiopeia demanded.

'Yes, Miss Black,' George stammered.

'Then I suggest you use them. Once again, do I make myself clear?'

'Yes, Miss Black,' both boys replied simultaneously.

Cassiopeia gave them a faint smile. 'Excellent. As long as you behave yourselves appropriately, I expect we shall get on quite nicely.'

She led them off the platform and out of the station, and the boys followed her in silence. Fred and George gave Harry and Draco rather resentful looks, but the younger boys could only shrug apologetically.

'Where's Dad?' Harry asked Cassiopeia as they walked back to Windermere Court.

'Your father is very sorry that he is unable to collect,' she said. 'He injured his leg rather seriously over the weekend, and he is still unable to move about.'

'Is he all right?' Draco asked in concern.

Cassiopeia frowned. 'I have no doubt he will survive. Tell me, boys, how have you fared in school?'

'The classes are really boring,' Harry answered.

'They're nowhere near the level of yours, Aunt Cassie,' Draco added.

Cassiopeia sniffed. 'Undoubtedly. It is a very rare thing for children to be instructed by a witch of my proficiency. You should both count yourselves lucky to have been afforded such a privilege.' Her tone was stern, but the boys thought she looked rather pleased.

When they finally arrived at the house a quarter of an hour later, Sirius met them at the door, seated in Pollux's ornate old walking chair.

'Aries! Draco!' he exclaimed, and gave both boys a hug without standing.

He smiled at Cassiopeia. 'Thank you for picking them up, Aunt Cassie.'

The old witch sniffed. 'It was dreadfully inconvenient, of course, but the

boys managed to refrain from causing too much trouble.'

Harry grinned at her. 'You know you love us, Aunt Cassie.'

She pursed her lips, but gave him a rather affectionate look. 'Well, at least I am generally satisfied with your conduct, which is more than I can say for some people.' She turned her glare on Sirius. 'What were you doing to get yourself so damaged? Sliding down banisters again, no doubt.'

Sirius shrugged. 'It was the full moon, Aunt Cassie,' he said nonchalantly.

'I was wrestling with a werewolf.' Aunt Cassie shook her head and walked upstairs, muttering beneath her breath about insolent, overgrown adolescents, but Sirius gave Harry a playful wink, and the boy realised that his dad had been doing exactly what he had said.

'And these upstanding young gentlemen must be Fred and George Weasley, about whom I've heard so much,' Sirius said, offering the twins his hand. They accepted it somewhat nervously, still clearly shaken by their encounter with Cassiopeia. 'I'm Sirius Black, Aries' dad,' he went on.

'I remember seeing you at the Quidditch match. You're both excellent Beaters.'

'Thank you, Mr Black,' Fred said.

Sirius grimaced. 'Lose the "mister" bit,' he said. 'It makes me feel old. I'm only just barely on the far side of thirty, which is still quite young, really. Call me Sirius.'

'Certainly, Sirius,' George said politely, holding his hands folded politely in front of him, as though he were reciting a bit of poetry.

Sirius rolled his eyes. 'Are you really going to be minding your P's and Q's all through Christmas?' He turned to Harry. 'Let me guess. Aunt Cassie gave her introductory speech?'

Harry nodded.

'I thought so,' Sirius replied with a sigh. 'Well, whatever the old crone said to you, I want you to do the exact opposite. This is your holiday, and I want you to enjoy every bit of it.' He raised his voice pointedly. 'And if Aunt Cassie complains, she'll find out just how dangerous a wizard Sirius Black can be!'

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Chapter 68: The Twins'

Adventures

The boys heard a faint huff from upstairs. Sirius laughed heartily with Harry and Draco, and the Weasley twins hesitantly joined in.

'That's more like it,' Sirius said with an approving grin. 'I hear that you boys think yourselves quite the mischief-makers. I look forward to seeing a bit of that over the holiday.' He looked over his shoulder to where Mopsy was dusting a portrait of old Sir Sagittarius. 'Mopsy, kindly escort Messrs Fred and George Weasley to their rooms. They will be our guests here for the next two weeks, and you are to see that all their needs are fulfilled.'

'Yes, Master,' Mopsy replied, and led Fred and George upstairs.

'As for you, Draco,' Sirius continued, 'your mum is eager for you to come home as soon as possible. We'll see you at Grimmauld Place tomorrow, and then we'll all come over to Malfoy Manor on Christmas Day.'

Draco nodded. 'Thanks, Uncle Sirius. See you, Aries.'

The blond boy headed for the drawing room, and moments later vanished

through the fireplace.

'It's good to have you home, Harry,' Sirius said once Draco had gone. 'I've missed you. It's just not the same with only Aunt Cassie and the Squibs to keep me company.'

Harry smirked. 'It seems like you and Uncle Remus have been keeping yourselves busy. What happened to that leg?'

'Werewolves have extraordinarily powerful jaws,' Sirius replied with a wince. 'Let me give you a bit of fatherly advice: No matter how good an idea it seems at the time, never try to sneak up and surprise a werewolf, even if you're a giant black dog and the said werewolf's best friend. You might just end up with a shattered leg for your trouble.'

Harry raised his eyebrows. 'A shattered leg?'

'It hurt like hell to have it mended, let me tell you,' Sirius replied. 'I should be all right by Christmas, though, and your granddad and I'll still have plenty of time to trounce you at Quidditch.'

'Dream on, old man,' Harry retorted.

Just then, the Weasley twins came sliding down the banister, one after another.

'I'm glad to see you boys are feeling more at home,' Sirius said wryly.

'Well, we heard it mentioned and decided we couldn't resist,' Fred replied.

'Are your rooms satisfactory?' Sirius asked.

George snorted. 'Does the sun let off a bit of light? I've never seen anything so grand in my entire life.'

'You should see Dad's suite,' Harry told him. 'It's like a whole flat all to itself.'

Sirius shrugged. 'Being me has its privileges. Who's up for a game of Exploding Snap?'

Fred and George grinned at each other. Maybe this hadn't been such a bad idea after all.

.....

The twins, as it turned out, had a marvellous Christmas. Abraxas Malfoy welcomed them heartily to Malfoy Manor, and they received gifts from Sirius and Abraxas in addition to the ones from their family and friends. Sirius gave George a brand-new professional-quality Beater's bat, but he gave Fred an old, worn-looking one.

'That's my lucky bat,' Sirius explained in response to Fred's curious expression. 'We won every game I played with it.'

Fred looked stunned. 'Blimey! Thanks, Sirius.'

'It's yours on the condition that you pass it on to your successor as Gryffindor Beater,' Sirius said solemnly. 'I want its magic to continue on to the next generation. I'd give it to Harry or Draco, but they're rubbish Beaters. I think it would take more than a lucky bat to win any game with them Beating.'

Harry and Draco simultaneously hit Sirius with a Tickling Hex, and soon the tall man was rolling on the floor, laughing.

'How can you do that outside of school?' George demanded. 'Won't you two get in trouble with the Ministry?'

'Don't be ridiculous,' Cassiopeia sniffed. 'The Trace can only detect where magic was done, not who did it.'

'In a magical home, there's no way the Ministry can figure out that an underage wizard has done magic,' Narcissa explained.

The twins looked as though that were the best present they could possibly have received. They pulled out their wands, and soon the Manor's drawing room erupted in a hex war. Lucius and the ladies excused themselves, but Abraxas and Sirius joined in eagerly. Sirius in

particular took full advantage of his new freedom from the walking chair to dodge and twirl, and by dinnertime, he was the undisputed champion.

'Dad always wins hex wars,' Harry explained to the twins on their way to the dining room.

'It's because I am such a great and fearsome wizard,' Sirius boasted, his festive dress robes swishing as he swept past them.

Harry grinned mischievously and tried out a nonverbal spell James had taught him. Soon Sirius was dangling in the air from his foot, his long hair dragging on the floor. The twins and Draco burst out laughing.

'What were you saying, Dad?' Harry taunted.

Sirius didn't blink. He flicked his wand and Transfigured Harry into a large gourd. Harry's spell broke, and Sirius barely managed to Conjure a large pile of fluffy pillows before he landed on the floor. The twins and Draco applauded. Sirius jumped to his feet and gave a little bow before Vanishing the pillows and picking up the Harry-gourd.

'I like you much better this way,' he said with a grin. 'I think I shall leave you like this until after dinner. On the other hand...'

Sirius dropped the gourd. The twins cried out in shock, but Sirius only flicked his wand, and Harry returned to normal before he could splatter all over the floor. Instead he ended up with only a sore bottom. Sirius reached down his hand and helped Harry up.

He chuckled. 'You were saying?'

Harry only rolled his eyes. 'Just you wait, Dad. I'll get you one day.'

Sirius tousled Harry's hair. 'I'm sure you will. But until that day comes, I'm going to savour every moment.'

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Chapter 69: Dealing with the

Fallout

On Boxing Day, the twins, Harry and Draco went with Sirius to Remus's house on the moors, where they spent the day eating leftovers and being regaled by stories of the Marauders' glory days at Hogwarts. Fred and George listened to their idols with rapt attention, and Harry could see their minds working as they drew inspiration from the Marauders to improve their own mischief-making.

On December 27, the Gryffindor Quidditch team assembled at Malfoy Manor for their party. There were mountains of top-notch food and plenty of butterbeer. Sirius, true to his word, brought a bit of firewhisky, though he carefully monitored consumption. There was music and a number of games, and everyone had a marvellous time. Harry, Sirius and the twins did not return to Windermere Court until well after midnight, and so they were quite surprised to find Marius waiting up for them, alongside a witch and wizard with very red hair and stern expressions on their faces.

'FRED AND GEORGE WEASLEY!' the witch roared as soon as they stepped through the Floo. 'HOW DARE YOU? WHEN I GOT PERCY'S LETTER...'

'Oh, so it was Percy, was it?' Fred said.

'Figures,' George added. 'Perfect prefect Percy.'

Sirius stepped forward. 'You must be Mr and Mrs Weasley,' he said in a friendly tone. 'I'm Sirius Black. Has there been some sort of misunderstanding?'

'I know perfectly well who you are,' Mrs Weasley snapped. 'And what!

And if you think I'll let you patch over this with your gold the way you've done everything else, you've got another think coming.'

'Molly, calm down,' Mr Weasley urged quietly. He turned to Sirius. 'You see, Mr Black, we were under the impression that the boys were staying at school for Christmas. When we received a letter from our son informing us that they had gone home to stay with a family we did not know...well, being a parent yourself, I am sure you can understand our concern.'

Sirius gave the twins a wry look. 'You didn't tell your parents you were coming?'

George shrugged. 'Must've slipped our minds.'

Sirius sighed and turned back to the Weasleys. 'I'm very sorry, Mr and Mrs Weasley. When I told my son that he could invite the twins to come here for the holidays, I assumed they had permission. I should have thought you would be happy for them to spend Christmas with friends, rather than alone at Hogwarts.'

'I don't know what Dark schemes you have up your sleeve, Black,' Mrs Weasley hissed, 'but I'll thank you to stay far away from our family. I don't want you turning their heads, poisoning them with your wicked notions.'

'Don't blame my dad!' Harry yelled, jumping to Sirius's defence. 'It's not his fault.'

Sirius put a strong hand on Harry's shoulder. 'Thank you, son, but I'll take care of this,' he said in a low, even voice, a tone that Harry had learnt not to question. He obediently quieted down.

'There's no need for all this bickering,' Marius said with a yawn. 'It's very late. Why don't I have our house-elf prepare a room for you, Mr and Mrs Weasley, and we can all talk this over in the morning?'

'Thank you, Mr Black,' Mrs Weasley replied curtly, 'but we shan't be staying more than a minute.' She turned on the twins. 'Fred! George! Collect your things. We're going home.'

'What?' the twins protested. 'That's not fair!'

Mrs Weasley, however, would not change her mind. The boys trudged sullenly up the stairs to pack. They returned a few minutes later with their trunks and broomsticks.

'Where did you get those new brooms, boys?' Mr Weasley asked curiously.

'A couple of alumni gave new brooms to the Gryffindor team members,' Fred said quickly.

'It was really very generous of them,' George added.

'I see,' Mrs Weasley said quietly. 'Well, you won't be seeing those brooms again until you go back to school.' The furious woman marched her sons right out the front door, leaving an embarrassed Mr Weasley to bid the Blacks good-night. Once all the Weasleys had left, Sirius let out a long breath.

'Thanks for dealing with them, Uncle Marius,' he said. 'I'm sorry we kept you up.'

'Not at all, my boy,' Marius replied sleepily. 'I could have sent them over to Malfoy Manor, of course, when they showed up at eight o'clock, but I hated to interrupt the party. I told them I didn't know where you all had gone.'

Sirius chuckled and clapped the Squib on his shoulder. 'So you sat with them for over four hours? You're a good man, Uncle Marius.' He looked down at Harry and patted him on the shoulder. 'I'm sorry your friends had to leave.'

The boy shrugged sadly. 'They should have known better than to try to

trick their mother. She clearly isn't the sort to take this kind of thing lying down.' He sighed. 'Draco will be disappointed. We were all going to play Quidditch tomorrow.'

Sirius grinned. 'Well, Granddad and I shall just have to take the opportunity to crush the both of you, shan't we? I can't wait to show you my new broom.'

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Chapter 70: Back to Hogwarts

On one chilly afternoon towards the end of the Christmas holidays, Harry was reading in the library of number twelve, Grimmauld Place - by far the best stocked of all the family libraries - when Draco burst in excitedly, clutching an old book in his arms.

'Uncle Sirius said I'd find you here,' he said cheerily. 'I've found the answer.'

'To what?' Harry asked, barely looking up from his copy of Moste Potente Potions.

Draco rolled his eyes. 'To how we're going to steal the Philosopher's Stone without dying in the process.'

Harry looked up at that. 'What's your idea?' he asked.

'Password-activated Portkeys,' Draco said smugly. 'We prepare them to take us to a safe location when activated, and that way, if we come up against something we can't handle, we just say the password.'

'Brilliant,' Harry said with an approving smile. 'Have you learnt how to

make a Portkey?'

'It's a simple incantation,' Draco said, showing him the book he carried, 'but difficult to manage. I thought we could practise together.'

Harry nodded. 'We want to make sure we know what we're doing before we put our lives on the line.'

The boys spent the rest of their holiday making Portkeys. The first few didn't work at all. Harry wanted to try doing it with Parseltongue, but Sirius had told him only to use it in the most desperate of situations, as it seemed to interfere with his regular magic. Even without his special gift, however, Harry was the first to make a successful Portkey, one that took the boys from the library to his bedroom. They experimented with greater and greater distances, and by the time the holiday was over, they felt fairly confident.

Come January 5, Sirius drove the boys to the station in the V8 Vantage. Once he parked the car, he helped them load their things onto carts in the Muggle way.

'I know it's easier to have Mopsy bring them,' he said, 'but it's good for you to know how to do without, in case you ever need to.'

He escorted them through the crowds and led them onto the platform. He gave both boys a hug before they boarded the train.

'Have fun,' he said. 'It's not that long till Easter, and Granddad and I'll come up for the Quidditch games.'

The boys said their goodbyes and boarded the Hogwarts Express in good spirits. Once on the train, however, the boys suffered a serious blow. Fred and George came by their compartment, their faces long.

'Bad news,' Fred said glumly. 'Our mum went ballistic after we got home.'

'I thought she went ballistic way before then,' Harry said.

George shook his head. 'That was nothing. She's forbidden us to spend

any more time with the two of you, outside of the Quidditch team.'

Draco gawked at them incredulously. 'You must be joking.'

Fred sighed. 'I wish we were, mate.'

'Well, you can't be planning on listening to her,' Harry said.

'We thought of just ignoring her and doing what we want anyway, like we usually do,' George said.

'But then she told us that she's asked Ron and Percy to spy on us and let her know if we do spend any time with you,' Fred finished.

'That's not fair!' Draco protested.

'No, it isn't,' George agreed. 'But Mum thinks you two are a bad influence.'

Fred laughed bitterly. 'It must be the first time she's ever thought anyone could be a bad influence on us.'

'Don't worry, though,' George said. 'we're hoping it will only be for this term. Over the summer, I'm sure we'll be able to talk Dad into getting her to change her mind.'

'And we're still your friends,' Fred added. 'We're here for you if you need us, Ron and Percy be damned.'

'Thanks,' Harry said with a small grin.

'We had a really good Christmas with your families,' George said. 'Be sure to thank them for us.'

'And tell them how sorry we are about what happened,' Fred added.

'We'll do that,' Draco promised, and the twins left to go sit with Lee Jordan and Dean Thomas.

'Damn that Weasley woman,' Harry growled after the twins had gone.

'Why do adults have to meddle in everything?'

'It could be worse, Aries.' Draco smirked. 'My father doesn't like you or Uncle Sirius either, but he hasn't forbidden me to spend time with you.'

Harry laughed. 'I should like to see him try. Just imagine what Granddad would say.'

'Forget Granddad,' Draco retorted. 'Imagine what I'd say.'

Just then the door of their compartment opened. Pansy Parkinson and Daphne Greengrass stood in the open doorway. Harry and Draco jumped to their feet.

'Happy New Year, ladies,' Harry said, assuming the suave tone Sirius had taught him in preparation for the previous year's Christmas Ball. 'What a delightful surprise.'

'Happy New Year, boys,' Pansy replied. 'May we join you?'

Draco motioned towards the seat to his left. 'Please.'

Pansy sat next to Draco and Daphne sat next to Harry. Harry opened up Mopsy's basket and offered them both some éclairs, which the girl took with eager gratitude.

'We didn't see much of you last term,' Daphne said.

'It was our loss, I assure you,' Harry replied.

'You're not avoiding us because we're Slytherins?' Pansy teased.

'If we did that we should have to avoid our families as well,' Draco pointed out.

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Chapter 71: Chess and Trolls

'It is a bit frustrating, how difficult they make it for us to interact with people outside our own Houses,' Daphne commented. 'There are a

number of people in other Houses that I think I should get on with much better than some of the people in my own.'

Harry groaned. 'Tell me about it. I'd much rather you were in our House instead of that Muggleborn swot Granger.'

'For that matter, I shouldn't object to trading Weasley and Finnegan for Nott and Zabini, either,' Draco added.

'You lot can keep Crabbe and Goyle, though,' Harry said with a winning grin.

'I can't stand that Granger girl,' Pansy said. 'She's so ugly too! With that bushy hair and those buckteeth. It's not far that she should be at the top of every class.'

Draco raised an eyebrow. 'She may be the top girl in every class, Pansy, but I hardly think she's the top student.'

Pansy giggled. 'You and Aries stand so far above the rest of us, I didn't even think of counting you.'

'You're right about one thing, though,' Harry said. 'Granger is an all-around pest.'

Daphne frowned. 'I actually feel rather sorry for her,' she said quietly. 'I know she can be a bit off-putting, but she seems terribly lonely. Just imagine what it must be like to go to a school where you don't know anyone or anything.'

'Dean Thomas seems to be adjusting just fine,' Draco pointed out. 'He knows what he doesn't know and is happy to learn. Granger, though...'

'Is different,' Daphne cut in. 'She's trying to prove to everyone that she really belongs here.'

'She doesn't, though,' Pansy said biting. 'She's a Mudblood.'

Harry sat still for a moment, his brow furrowed in deep concentration.

'My godmother was a Muggleborn,' he said quietly. 'Lily Potter. But

everyone says she was a brilliant witch.'

Draco nodded thoughtfully. 'Her portrait's really nice. She doesn't act at all like Granger.'

Pansy backtracked as quickly as she could. 'I didn't mean to say anything against your godmother, Aries.'

'Of course not,' Harry said dully. He paused before turning to Daphne.

'You may have a point. Maybe Granger would be more tolerable if she had someone to be nice to her, to explain how things work.'

Daphne shrugged. 'It's always worth a try. If she turns out to be as awful as she seems at first glance, no one's going to force you to spend time with her.'

Harry nodded, and there was an awkward silence.

'By the way, Draco,' Pansy broke in with a giggle. 'Guess where I spent the holidays!'

.....

Without the Weasley twins to distract them, and armed with their new escape plan, the boys wasted no time in executing their grand heist. Late on the second night of term, Harry and Draco slipped out of their dormitory under the Cloak and made their way to the third-floor corridor. Each boy wore a Portkey around his neck that would activate only when its owner uttered a specific password.

When they reached the locked door, Harry whispered, 'Alohomora,' and the cousins crept inside. Just as before, the giant dog detected their scent and moved towards them, but this time Harry and Draco immediately began to sing, Draco taking the melody line and Harry the harmony.

'Lullaby, and good-night,' they sang, 'in roses bedight. Creep into thy bed, there slumber thy head.'

The dog instantly relaxed, its three heads each sporting a goofy, doggy

grin. It lay down on the stone floor and drifted off to sleep. The boys continued to sing as they made their way to the trapdoor and jumped in. Harry was careful to close the trapdoor behind him as he jumped, lest anyone else come in and discover what had happened. Even through the trapdoor, Harry could hear the sudden snarling as the dog woke up. The landing was surprisingly soft. Harry felt relieved...until the floor began to twist around his legs.

'What is this?' he demanded.

'I'm not sure,' Draco replied anxiously.

Harry lit his wand. 'Great Merlin!' he exclaimed. 'It's Devil's Snare!'

'It likes the wet and the dark,' Draco said quickly. 'We should light a fire.'

Harry nodded, and muttered the incantation. Flames burst forth from the tip of his wand, and the Snare let the boys go.

'That was close,' Draco muttered.

'I wonder what other nasty surprises Dumbledore has in store for us,'

Harry mused.

They made their way along the damp stone corridor, and soon entered a brightly lit chamber. There was a door on the far side of the room, but it was locked, and refused to open to spells. Up above them, it looked as though a thousand birds were fluttering about. Harry looked more carefully, and then it dawned on him.

'They're keys!' he exclaimed. 'Winged keys.'

'Which one do you think opens the door?' Draco asked. 'They all look the same.'

Harry smiled. 'They are all the same, except for that silver one. It matches the lock on the door.' He spotted a broomstick out of the corner of his eye. 'I'll have to catch it.'

'We don't have time for Quidditch heroics,' Draco said, rolling his eyes at

the eager expression on Harry's face. He lifted his wand and pointed it towards the iron key. 'Accio Silver Key!' he intoned, and the key flew into his hand. He opened the door easily and let the key fly back to its brothers. Harry and Draco walked through the door and found themselves facing a giant chessboard.

'Do you think we have to play?' Harry asked.

'No, Aries, I think the giant chessmen are just here for decoration,' Draco snapped.

Harry gave his cousin a funny look. 'You seem unusually tense.'

'Sorry,' Draco said sheepishly. 'It just all makes me a bit nervous. I mean, none of the obstacles so far have been exactly what you'd call difficult.

There must be something worse up ahead.'

Harry groaned. 'That's a cheerful thought.'

'As for the chessboard,' Draco mused, 'I suppose we need to take the place of the pieces. I'll be the king, you can be the queen.'

'Thanks, mate,' Harry said sarcastically.

They took their spots. Before play began, Harry leaned over to Draco and whispered in his ear. 'Go for scholar's mate.'

Draco nodded, and they began to play. It was the oldest trick in the book, but it worked. Four moves later, it was checkmate, and Harry and Draco happily passed through to the other side. They found themselves facing a very angry mountain troll.

'This should be easy,' Harry said with a grin, and brandished his wand.

'Don't kill this one,' Draco suggested. 'If we leave the protections in place it will take longer for them to figure out we've taken the Stone.'

'Good point,' Harry agreed, and pointed his wand at the troll's head.

'Imperio!' he whispered, and the troll docilely allowed them to pass.

'You're awfully good at that,' Draco observed with a frown as they walked

on ahead. 'How many times have you used it before?'

'Only once,' Harry replied with a grin. 'I Imperiused the Sorting Hat to put you in Gryffindor.'

'WHAT?' Draco exclaimed. 'What did you do that for?'

Harry shrugged. 'It was taking too long. I didn't want to be separated from you.'

'You're one scary wizard, Aries.' Draco shook his head in bewilderment.

'Not that I mind. I didn't like the other option the Hat was giving me.'

'What was it?' Harry asked.

'Not telling,' Draco said primly. 'That's the price you pay for your impatience.'

'If I hadn't done it, you mightn't have wound up in Gryffindor,' Harry said defensively.

Draco snorted. 'Think about we're up to at the moment, Aries. We're stealing the Philosopher's Stone, just for the hell of it. If that isn't a Gryffindorish thing to do, I don't know what is.'

Harry smirked and the cousins moved on to the next obstacle.

Flames suddenly burst up both in front and behind, trapping them in a stone room with a table, on which lay a row of potions and a riddle written on parchment.

'This is tricky,' Draco muttered after he read the instructions, and began trying to figure out the puzzle. 'Some of the phials are poison, some are nettle wine, whilst one will take us forward, and one back. Let's see...'

'We don't have time for this rubbish,' Harry said. He levelled his wand at the row of potions. 'Toxicum revelio,' he muttered, and small black clouds appeared over the phials that contained poison. 'Vinum revelio.' A purple haze appeared over the phials that contained nettle wine. 'Does that help?' he asked wryly.

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Chapter 72: Unveiling Secrets

Draco grinned. 'A bit.' He glanced over the riddle again, and took a phial.

'This is it. This will take us forward.' He took a sip and then handed it to

Harry, who drank from the phial and then replaced it, being careful to

cast a Refilling Charm before stepping through the flames into the next

room. Draco joined him a moment later. The room was empty except for

a large, antique mirror. Harry wandered over and stood in front of the

mirror. He gasped at what he saw. It was himself, only as he had been

before he became Aries Black, with James's messy hair and Lily's green

eyes. Behind him stood James and Lily, as well as Sirius and Remus.

Draco stood beside him, and the rest of the family were there too: Pollux,

Arcturus, Melania, Irma, Cassiopeia, Abraxas, the Squibs...all of them. In

his hands Harry held a large crystal flask of Elixir of Life, and everyone

around him looked both energetic and youthful.

'What do we do now, Aries?' Draco asked impatiently. 'I just want to find the Stone and go.'

'Look in the mirror,' Harry said eagerly, shoving his cousin in front of the large mirror. 'What do you see?'

Draco stared briefly, and then gasped. 'The Stone! It's in my pocket.' He

reached into the pocket of his robes and pulled out a blood-red stone.

'You did it!' Harry exclaimed in shock.

'We did it,' Draco corrected with a smile.

'May I see it?' Harry asked, reaching out for the Stone.

'Once we get out of here,' Draco said, and muttered his password.

Nothing happened. He tried again, with no results. And again. Draco's triumphant look changed to one of panic. 'The Portkey doesn't work.

There must be anti-Portkey wards in place!'

'Let's try mine,' Harry said, and grabbed his cousin's arm before letting out a long, guttural hiss. It didn't work.

'We'll have to try to make our way back through the obstacles,' Draco said.

'How are we supposed to do that?' Harry snapped. 'The effects of that potion have undoubtedly worn off by now, and there's no other way to get through the flames.'

'What do we do?' Draco asked.

'We'll have to break through the anti-Portkey wards,' Harry said.

'How the hell are you going to do that?' his cousin demanded.

'Don't know,' Harry replied honestly. He closed his eyes, raised his wand and began to hiss. Draco felt himself growing more and more nervous as his cousin went through incantation after incantation. Finally, Harry's eyes snapped open and he grabbed Draco's arm. 'Now, Draco!' he shouted, and the blond boy uttered the password. Moments later, the two boys found themselves in the Gryffindor Common Room.

'How did you manage that?' Draco panted.

Harry smirked. 'I'm the Heir of Slytherin, the next Dark Lord. I have all sorts of phenomenal powers.'

His cousin rolled his eyes, and the two boys went up to bed. Neither noticed a certain Muggleborn witch hiding behind a large armchair.

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Early the next morning, Hermione dragged Ron and Seamus back to their

favourite abandoned classroom.

'What is it this time?' Seamus yawned. 'You could have let us have a bit of a lie-in. Even the Crafty Cousins aren't up yet.'

'And I know why,' Hermione said smugly. 'They were up late last night.'

They Apparated into the Common Room, even though no one can Apparate or Disapparate inside of Hogwarts.'

Ron scoffed at that. 'There's no way they could have Apparated, Hermione. They're only eleven.'

The bushy-haired girl glared at him. 'I know what I saw, Ron. Besides, I heard what Malfoy said after they Apparated. He asked Black how he did it.'

'And what did Black say?' Seamus asked.

Hermione took a deep breath. 'He said that it was one of the many special powers he has because he's the Heir of Slytherin and the next Dark Lord.'

Both boys' eyes went wide in shock.

'He actually admitted it?' Ron exclaimed.

Hermione nodded soberly. 'Right there in the Common Room.'

'Did he know you were there?' Seamus asked. 'Mightn't he have been pulling your leg?'

'He didn't know I was there,' Hermione said. 'I was behind an armchair picking up a book I'd forgotten when they Apparated in.'

Ron collapsed in a rickety wooden chair that barely looked as if it could hold his weight.

'Blimey,' he exclaimed. 'I knew they were trouble, but I never thought they'd admit it so freely.' He shook his head. 'They've been weaselling their way into our family too. Fred and George went over to the Blacks for Christmas. Mum was livid when she found out.'

'We've got to do something,' Seamus said. 'Maybe we could tell a teacher?'

Ron sat up straight. 'That's an idea. We could tell McGonagall.'

Hermione shook her head pensively. 'I like Professor McGonagall, but I'm not sure we can trust her. I went to complain to her after I saw her award Black House points for the Dark magic he used on the troll, and she told me to mind my own business.'

'If Black really is the next Dark Lord, we should go straight to the Headmaster,' Seamus opined.

Ron scoffed. 'When? It's not like we have any lessons with him.'

'I think we should go to Professor Quirrell,' Hermione said at last. 'He is the Defence against the Dark Arts master.'

'Do you think he could handle a Dark Lord?' Seamus asked. 'He seems a bit on the twitchy side.'

Hermione sighed, conceding the point. 'I still think we should tell him. If he can't handle Black himself, at least he can take the matter to Dumbledore. The Headmaster would be more likely to listen to a teacher than a bunch of first-years.'

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Chapter 73: Chaos in Gryffindor

Tower

Hermione, being the dutiful girl she was, wasted no time in going directly to Professor Quirrell's office that same afternoon and knocking

on his heavy oak door.

'Excuse me, sir,' she said nervously once he had let her inside. 'I have something I need to discuss with you.'

'W-what is it, M-m-miss Granger?' he asked kindly.

'It's about Aries Black,' she said. 'I think he's up to something.'

'W-what m-makes you s-say that?'

Hermione chewed her lower lip. 'I overheard him and Malfoy talking the other night. They Apparated into Gryffindor Tower.'

'No one can Ap-p-parate inside Hogwarts, M-miss Granger,' Quirrell corrected her. 'L-least of all t-two f-first-years.'

'I know, sir, but I saw them appear out of nowhere,' Hermione insisted.

'Th-that is strange. Have y-you any idea how they m-managed it?' the Defence master asked.

Hermione nodded. 'Yes, sir. They were talking, and Black commented that he had all sorts of powers because he was the Heir of Slytherin and the next Dark Lord.'

Quirrell's expression, which had been one of that sort of polite boredom with which an elderly relative might listen to a small child's fantastic story, abruptly shifted to one of intense interest.

'What else did he say?' he asked eagerly.

'Nothing, sir,' Hermione said. 'But I think he might be after the thing that's hidden in the third-floor corridor.'

Quirrell smiled indulgently, but his eyes flickered with concern. 'What makes you think that there is anything hidden in the corridor?'

The Muggleborn girl raised an eyebrow. 'It's not that hard to figure out, Professor. I don't know what it is exactly, but I don't want Black to steal it.'

'You're a very bright girl, Miss Granger,' he said. 'Ten points to

Gryffindor. I shall investigate this matter thoroughly. If you hear anything else suspicious, please inform me.'

'Of course, sir,' Hermione said, and left the room. She was so pleased at being taken seriously that she completely failed to notice that, for the last part of their conversation, Quirrell had forgotten to stutter.

...

After Harry and Draco had captured the Stone, neither boy gave it much more thought. The heist had been the main thing for both cousins, and though Harry had thought a good deal about what the Stone could do in the future, he had no pressing need to explore its powers as of yet. Draco handed it over to Harry without complaint, and Harry only stroked it fondly for a few minutes before merrily stuffing it in a sock and hiding it at the bottom of his trunk. Between their lessons and other activities, they almost forgot about the Stone altogether.

One day, on his way up from Potions, Harry accidentally bumped into Hermione Granger, knocking her books out of her arms and scattering them all over the stone floor.

'I'm so sorry, Granger,' Harry said, and Summoned all her books into a neat stack before handing them back to her.

'Thanks,' the Muggleborn girl mumbled.

Harry decided to take advantage of the opportunity to put into practice some of the things Daphne had suggested.

'By the way, Granger,' he said, 'we seem to have got off on the wrong foot. I'm sorry about that. I know it must be difficult for you coming into a new world where you don't understand how everything works. I should have offered to help you out.'

Granger looked at him suspiciously. 'What are you playing at, Black?'

'Nothing,' Harry said innocently. 'I just realised we'd got off to a bad start

and thought I'd try to make amends.'

Granger narrowed her eyes. 'Are you trying to set me up for some prank, or is this something even worse?'

'What do you take me for, Granger?' Harry asked in confusion.

'I know what you and Malfoy are planning, and I don't intend to let you get away with it,' the bushy-haired girl replied defiantly. Harry threw up his hands and backed away.

'Fine,' he said. 'Have it your way. I shan't bother you again.'

He headed for the stairwell and left the suspicious girl behind him.

.....

The week after they had stolen the Stone, Harry was making his getaway from a revenge prank he had played on Percy Weasley when he ran directly into Professor Quirrell.

'Excuse me, sir,' he said. 'I'm sorry. I didn't see you.'

'That's q-quite all right, M-mister B-black,' Quirrell said. He pulled Harry aside into an empty classroom. 'I have heard th-that you and your c-cousin have a b-bit of interest in the Ph-philosopher's Stone.'

Harry was surprised, but did not allow it to show on his face.

'I don't know what you mean, Professor,' he said. 'I've read about it, of course, but so far as I know, very few have ever successfully made it. The only existing Stone, I think, belongs to Nicolas Flamel.'

Quirrell narrowed his eyes, and Harry suddenly felt a stabbing pain in his forehead. Then came a sudden hissing noise, but Quirrell's lips did not move. It sounded as though the noise were coming from the back of the professor's head.

'We have heard other things too,' the strange voice hissed in Parseltongue. 'We have heard that you claim to be the Heir of Slytherin. How can that be, when the true Heir is none other than Lord Voldemort?'

Part of Harry wanted very much to answer, but something told him that would be foolish. He kept quiet.

'Can he even understand me?' the voice droned on. 'What sort of Heir is he to Salazar Slytherin if he cannot speak the ancient language of the serpents?'

'If I may ask, sir,' Harry addressed Quirrell, ignoring the strange voice, 'where did you hear that I was interested in the Philosopher's Stone?'

'Miss Granger told me,' Quirrell said. 'She said you were planning to steal it.'

How could she have known? Harry wondered. He thought quickly, and then spoke. 'Granger must have misunderstood, sir,' he said. 'She was in the library when I was talking with my cousin Draco about the forbidden corridor on the third floor. We were wondering whether it might have something to do with the Chamber of Secrets Slytherin supposedly left behind, the one only his true Heir can open. I said that I'd like to sneak inside.' He furrowed his brow. 'But that wouldn't have anything to do with the Philosopher's Stone, would it, sir? So far as I know, I've never even brought that up.' He forcibly brightened his expression. 'Might there be a Philosopher's Stone inside Slytherin's Chamber, sir?'

Quirrell chuckled. 'Wh-what a f-fanciful idea, Mr Black. That w-will be all.'

Harry turned around to leave.

'Wait,' the strange voice hissed, and Harry stopped dead in his tracks before he could realise just what a terrible mistake that was.

'You do speak the language of the serpents, don't you?' the voice continued to hiss. 'Turn around when your betters are speaking to you, boy.'

Harry laughed, but he did turn around to face Quirrell. 'You are hardly

my better,' he hissed. 'I am Slytherin's True Heir, descended in faithful descent from two pureblood lines that stretch back to the days of Merlin. Who are you?'

Quirrell turned around slowly and removed his turban, revealing a hideous face on the back of his head. The face's eyes glowed red, and it had no nose, only snake-like slits.

'I am Lord Voldemort,' the voice hissed. 'And I am the True Heir of Slytherin.'

Harry wrinkled his nose. He thought the face was the most disgusting thing he ever saw. He snorted.

'If you are really Slytherin's Heir, then why do you use a pseudonym?' he asked. 'If you were a decent pureblood you wouldn't feel compelled to go by that ridiculous name. "Lord Slytherin" would sound much more impressive.' He smirked. 'As would "Lord Black".' He paused. 'My great-grandfather always suspected you were some witch's bastard. Who was your dad, some filthy Muggle?'

Voldemort roared in rage, and Harry knew he had guessed exactly right. 'You're a half-blood, aren't you?' he taunted. 'What irony! He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, a half-blood!'

'KILL HIM!' Voldemort roared in English, and Quirrell turned around, his wand drawn. Harry raised his own wand, and they began to duel. Harry used all the Dark curses he knew, and some which he thought he didn't, but Quirrell was an accomplished duellist. With Voldemort helping his opponent, even Harry's Parseltongue abilities didn't seem to give him an edge. With mounting terror, Harry realised that there was no way he could win. He was duelling to kill, and even so he could only barely manage to hold off Quirrell's attacks.

In one horrible instant, Quirrell's Cutting Curse got through, and Harry

collapsed to the floor, bleeding profusely. Lord Voldemort cackled.

'You were lying about your ability to speak Parseltongue,' he said in a high voice. 'Were you lying about the Stone too? Are you looking for a way to break through Dumbledore's defences? Tell me what you know!'

Harry lay on the stone floor, his heart thumping violently within his chest, and something cold and hard pressing into it from the outside. The Portkey, he thought. He was still wearing it. He let out a low, strangled hiss, and vanished, leaving Quirrell and Voldemort behind.

He suddenly appeared on the floor of the Gryffindor Common Room, covered in blood. Harry could dimly hear the shrieks and cries of his Housemates through a thick haze.

'Great Merlin!' Fred shouted. 'Aries!' The twins ran to Harry's side.

'Who did this?' George demanded.

'Quirrell,' Harry whispered. 'He's been possessed by the Dark Lord.' Then he passed out.

Dean Thomas ran off to get Madam Pomfrey, whilst Lee Jordan went to fetch Professor McGonagall. Fred and George sat by Harry, and not even Percy dared say anything to them about it. In all the hustle and bustle, no one noticed Hermione Granger slip up the stairs to her dormitory, a horrified expression on her face, and copious tears streaming down her cheeks.

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Chapter 74: The Missing Stone

Sirius Black stormed through the doors of Hogwarts, his gold-and-scarlet robes billowing behind him. Abraxas Malfoy followed after his son-in-law, along with Cassiopeia Black. After them came Irma, Druella and Narcissa, as well as Melania, who had come all the way from France. The Squibs brought up the rear. Furious rage burned in the eyes of each and every one of them.

Students made way for the angry crowd as it surged up the stairs. Any who dawdled were soon helped on their way by a few Stinging Hexes from Cassiopeia's wand. The family headed directly for the hospital wing, where Draco met them outside the closed doors.

'How is he?' Sirius demanded.

Draco shook his head. 'Not well. It was very Dark magic. Madam Pomfrey says he's lost a lot of blood, and she can't get the wounds to seal properly. She's giving him loads of Blood-Replenishing Potions, but if she can't get the wounds sealed, they won't do him any good. She's kicked everyone out of the infirmary whilst she's working.'

'Who was he duelling?' Abraxas asked. 'I should have thought our Aries would have been more than a match for any student.'

'Did they come after him from behind?' Cassiopeia asked. 'I suspect it was some dishonourable Mudblood. Attacked him whilst his back was turned.'

Draco chewed his lower lip. 'Aries said it was Professor Quirrell.'

'AN EFFING TEACHER?' Sirius roared, causing his grandmothers to blush, though they agreed fully with the sentiment.

Draco nodded. 'Aries said he was being possessed by the Dark Lord.'

'Where is Quirrell now?' Sirius demanded.

'I am afraid, Sirius, that Professor Quirrell seems to have disappeared,'

Dumbledore said, coming up the stairs from behind them.

'What sort of damn fool school are you running, Dumbledore?' Marius

demanded. 'Hiring Dark-Lord-possessed wizards as teachers? That's just not cricket.'

Dumbledore looked at Marius strangely. 'I don't believe we've met,' he said politely.

'I'm Marius Black,' the other man responded. 'Sirius's great-uncle.'

'I could have sworn that I had taught all the Blacks, Mr Black,' the elderly Headmaster said. 'But I have no memory of you.'

'My brother's a Squib,' Cassiopeia said brusquely. 'And I daresay he'd do far better running this school than you have, Professor. I fully intend to bring this matter up at the next meeting of the Board of Governors. Dark-Lord-possessed Defence masters!' She sniffed. 'What's next? Hell-hounds as guard dogs?'

'I assure you all that I was not aware of Quirrell's condition,' Dumbledore tried to reassure them.

'Then you're as incompetent as my husband always thought,' Irma retorted.

'I do find it odd that you do not routinely check for possession as part of the screening process,' Melania observed. 'I am quite certain they do at Beauxbatons.'

Narcissa sighed. 'I suppose we shall have to send the boys there or Durmstrang. I don't like the idea of them being so far away.'

Melania patted her on the shoulder. 'There, there, dear. You can all move down to the chateau. We've plenty of room.'

'My grandsons are not leaving Hogwarts, dear lady,' Abraxas insisted.

'This old Muggle-loving fool will leave first.'

All this time, Sirius's stare was drilling holes into Dumbledore's forehead.

'I want to see my son,' he said quietly, and all his relatives fell completely silent and joined him in glaring at Dumbledore.

'Alas, Sirius, Madam Pomfrey has made it quite clear that she is to remain undisturbed whilst she is working,' the Headmaster replied.

Before Sirius could respond with the string of profanities that sat on the tip of his tongue, the doors of the infirmary opened and the matron stepped out. All eyes turned to her, and Dumbledore slipped away quietly.

'How is he?' Sirius demanded.

Madam Pomfrey's face was long. 'I've finally managed to stop the bleeding, but this was no ordinary Cutting Curse. He's still unconscious, and I don't know whether the Blood-Replenishing Potions will take effect in time to prevent serious damage.' She paused. 'I don't want him to be disturbed, but if you promise to be very quiet, you can see him in small groups. No more than three at a time.'

Without blinking an eye, Sirius, Abraxas and Cassiopeia passed through the infirmary doors.

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That evening, Dumbledore sat up late in his study, pondering the many unusual occurrences of the day. Most serious, of course, was Aries Black's revelation that Quirrell was being possessed by Lord Voldemort.

Naturally, the word of a single student was insufficient to convict the Defence master of anything, but the sudden disappearance of Quirrell led Dumbledore to suspect that young Mr Black was telling the truth. How the boy had managed to survive such an encounter as long as he had was utterly beyond the aged Headmaster. He was undoubtedly as gifted a wizard as Dumbledore's intelligence had suggested. The professor sincerely hoped that Aries would yet survive, though Poppy did not give him very good odds. The family had wanted him moved to St Mungo's but the Healers there had agreed with Poppy's assessment that they could

do little more to help the boy than she could, and said that to move him at this juncture would be unnecessarily risky.

Another enigma was Sirius Black. Lupin had led Dumbledore to believe that the playboy wizard was an unfit parent, the sort of neglectful father who thinks nothing of abandoning his son for some loose woman on Christmas Eve. But Sirius had not left Aries' side even once since he arrived, and he had adamantly refused to vacate the premises overnight. Poppy reported that the whole family seemed genuinely to care for the boy, but she said one needed only to watch Sirius's bedside vigil to see that Aries was the centre of his father's universe.

Then there was the confusing matter of this new brother to Cassiopeia Black. A Squib, she had said, but Dumbledore knew as well as anyone how routinely Squibs were disowned and disavowed in the Black family. What could he have done in order to secure reacceptance into the family?

These musings were abruptly cut off by a sudden owl outside the Headmaster's window. Dumbledore let the bird into his office and removed the parchment scroll that dangled from its leg. He unrolled it and blanched at its contents.

Dear Chief Warlock Dumbledore, it read.

As per your request, we have been keeping an Auror posted near the Devon residence of Nicolas and Perenelle Flamel. We regret to inform you that the Flamel residence was attacked early this afternoon by an unknown Dark wizard. Our Auror, John Dawlish, was killed shortly after calling for backup, as were both Mr and Mrs Flamel. Their house was thoroughly ransacked. We have no leads, as of yet, on the identity of the assailant. Our office will of course keep you posted on any further developments.

Sincerely yours,

Rufus Scrimgeour

Head of the Auror Office

Dumbledore put down the parchment and sighed. He feared that he knew all too well who was responsible for his friends' deaths. He only wondered why Quirrell, who knew that the Stone was hidden at Hogwarts, would have gone after the Flamels. Unless... Dumbledore rose suddenly from his desk and headed for the third-floor corridor.

Dumbledore cursed himself for not thinking to check on the Stone's safety immediately after Quirrell's disappearance. It should have been his first thought. True, he felt certain that the protections he had placed in the innermost chamber would be sufficient to keep any would-be thieves from stealing the Stone, but one ought never to underestimate Lord Voldemort.

He opened the door to find his worst fears confirmed. Quirrell had indeed gone after the Stone before he left. Speed rather than stealth appeared to have been his primary concern. In the first chamber Dumbledore found bits of hell-hound all over the walls. The Devil's Snare had been scorched away by Fiendfyre, the magical door had simply been blasted off its hinges, McGonagall's chessmen had been reduced to rubble and the troll was slain. Dumbledore passed through the flames into the final room and approached the mirror, willing himself to retrieve the Stone. Nothing happened. The elderly wizard closed his eyes in frustration. The Stone was gone.

.....

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Chapter 75: Looming Shadows

Over a fortnight passed and Harry still had yet to regain consciousness.

Madam Pomfrey told Sirius that his condition was relatively stable, which gave her some cause for hope, but the situation was still quite grim. It seemed that in addition to the Cutting Curse, there was another, very Dark curse in the boy's bloodstream, and no one knew quite what it was or how to remove it. Sirius had allowed Dumbledore and even Snape to take a look at it, to no avail. The poor boy continued to lie suffering in the infirmary. The family wanted to take Harry home to recover, but both Madam Pomfrey and the visiting Healers from St Mungo's advised against it, arguing that Harry needed constant supervision from trained medical professionals. The fact that those same medical professionals hadn't the foggiest idea of how to help him didn't seem to matter.

Sirius himself had not left Harry's side the entire time, except for a few minutes each day when Aunt Clytemnestra would bring him a change of clothes and spot him so he could wash. The other family members came by to visit about once a day, as did Remus. Draco came by whenever he wasn't in class, and he and his uncle spent many long hours talking. Most of the time, however, Sirius and Harry were all alone in the infirmary, and they had many intimate, if rather one-sided, conversations.

One morning Clytemnestra came through the doors of the hospital wing, carrying a large wicker basket in her hands. Sirius refused to leave Harry's side in order to eat, and Mopsy had been sending regular provisions via his mistress. Even so, Sirius ate very little. He hadn't much of an appetite seeing his (god)son in such a terrible condition. It worried Clytemnestra. Her great-nephew had put on a good bit of weight since he had been freed from Azkaban, but he was still quite thin, and couldn't

afford simply to go without eating.

'Good morning, Sirius,' Clytemnestra said briskly. 'Any change?'

Her great-nephew looked up at her hopefully. 'I was talking with him about Quidditch last night, and I think he might have groaned a bit.'

The Squib gave Sirius an affectionate smile and handed over the basket.

'Here's some more food, as well as freshly laundered robes. You go and wash. I'll sit awhile with our Aries.'

Sirius leaned over Harry's prone body and grasped his hand. 'Don't worry, son,' he whispered. 'I'll be just a minute, and Aunt Clytemnestra will be here the whole time.' He gently squeezed Harry's hand before letting go and setting off to the bathroom. When he came back a quarter of an hour later, his hair still dripping, he found Clytemnestra singing softly to

Harry:

'Arthur my king lay dying,

His golden crown was broken.

Came three witches on eagle's wings

To carry him home to Avalon.'

Sirius chuckled softly. The old tune was one of his favourites. He joined in for the chorus.

'Avalon, Avalon, where Merlin's magic burns bright!

There yet reigns our good king: Arthur, the truest knight!'

Clytemnestra looked up at him in surprise. 'That was awfully quick,' she observed.

Sirius shrugged. 'I can't stay away too long.' He grinned. 'I love that song.'

His great-aunt smiled back at him. 'It was always one of Aries' favourites.

I used to sing it to him most every night when he was younger.'

'I had a teddy bear that used to sing lullabies to me as I fell asleep,' Sirius reminisced. 'I always asked for that one first.' He grimaced. 'Until I turned

eight and my father decided I was too old for teddy bears.' He paused reflectively. After a few moments, he launched into the next verse in his clear baritone.

'Stay safe, sweet child, in thine angel's care

As gently thy life moves on,

Till that day when through the air

He shall bring thee to Avalon.'

Sirius broke down in tears. Clytemnestra rose from her chair to comfort him.

'I can't lose him, Aunt Clytemnestra,' the wizard sobbed.

His great-aunt patted him lightly on the shoulder. 'Believe me, dear, I understand. I too care for the boy just as if he were my own.'

Sirius took a deep breath. 'I love the kid more than life itself, but it's not just that. I promised James I'd take care of Harry. I owe it to him.'

'Sirius!' Clytemnestra hissed. 'Be careful. Someone might be listening.'

Her great-nephew rolled his eyes. 'We're all alone, Aunt Clytemnestra.'

'One never knows who may be watching,' the Squib admonished.

Sirius conceded the point. 'In any event, Aries is my life now. If anything happens to him...'

'Don't even think about it, Sirius Orion Black!' Clytemnestra snapped.

'Aries will recover, and he'll be just fine. You'll see.'

'I hope you're right,' Sirius said glumly.

His great-aunt patted him on the shoulder and handed him a sandwich from the basket. Sirius tried to refuse, but she insisted, and watched him eat the whole thing.

'You have to take care of yourself, Sirius,' she chided him. 'It won't do for you to get sick as well. Who will care for Aries if something happens to you?'

Sirius sighed. 'I suppose you're right.'

'Of course I am,' his aunt replied. 'Now have another sandwich.'

Unbeknownst to either wizard or Squib, a certain Disillusioned Headmaster had been listening carefully to their every word, and at that moment slipped silently out of the infirmary through a side door. He returned to his office, his face twisted in profound thought as he attempted to divine the consequences of this momentous revelation.

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Chapter 76: A Dangerous Plan

Draco sat in the Common Room late at night working on his Potions homework. With his cousin's incapacitation, he had been made substitute Seeker, and he had just returned from Quidditch practice. Wood was working them like mad, and the professors had not let up at all, despite the news that one of their number had been possessed by the Dark Lord all year.

The worst part was that Draco knew he had something that could cure Aries completely, but it was locked away in Aries' trunk, sealed under a Parseltongue password. Draco had tried all the opening charms he could find, and had even tried cutting into the trunk, but there was no way through. Aries' protections were simply too powerful. Draco thought that perhaps one of the adults would be able to break into the trunk despite the password, but that would mean revealing the boys' secret, and Draco knew that Aries wouldn't want that, not if there was any other possible

alternative.

Hermione Granger came up to Draco and coughed slightly. 'Er, Malfoy?'

'What do you want, Granger?' the blond boy asked with a sigh.

'I know why Quirrell attacked Black,' she said quietly.

Draco dropped his quill in surprise. 'What?' he exclaimed. 'Why's that, Granger?'

'Several weeks ago I saw you two Apparate into Gryffindor Tower,' she explained. 'I heard Black say that he was the Heir of Slytherin and the next Dark Lord.'

Draco rolled his eyes. 'Aries was only joking. You can't take things like that seriously.'

'I understand that now,' Granger went on, chewing her lower lip anxiously. 'But I was worried at the time.' She paused and took a deep breath. 'So I went to Quirrell to ask him for help. I didn't know he was being possessed by You-Know-Who.'

It was as though the dragon for which he had been named had been suddenly born deep within Draco's bowels. Flaming fury rose up within him at the impertinent stupidity of this foolish know-it-all girl. It was with great difficulty that Draco restrained himself from cursing her then and there.

'You meddling Mudblood!' Draco shouted. 'Do you realise what you've done? My cousin could die because of you.'

Tears came to Granger's eyes, which only made Draco angrier. How dare she cry when he was angry with her? It was so very like a girl.

'I didn't mean to,' she whispered. 'I thought that you two were up to some evil plot, and I wanted Quirrell to stop you. I didn't think he'd try to kill Black.'

'You'd better hope he survives, Granger,' Draco said in a very cold voice,

one that nearly sent shivers up his own spine. 'Because if he doesn't, I swear to Merlin I'll kill you myself.'

Granger began to respond, but stopped herself. Instead, she nodded meekly and went upstairs to her dormitory. Draco frowned and returned to his Potions homework, ignoring the stares of his Housemates.

...

Meanwhile, back at Windermere Court, Cassiopeia was relaxing in the drawing room, brushing up on her Sanskrit, when her younger brother came in.

'Cassie,' he said in a grave voice. 'I need to talk with you.'

'What is it now, Marius?' Cassiopeia snapped, not even looking up from her book.

'It's about Aries,' her brother replied. 'I've found a way to save him.'

The old witch sighed and put down her book before turning to give the Squib a pitying glare through her spectacles.

'I know you want to help,' she said, 'but what can you possibly do? You're only a Squib.'

Marius frowned. 'I may not be able to do magic, Cassiopeia Virgo Black, but I remain perfectly capable of reading.' He held up the thick volume in his hands. His sister looked at the book curiously. She recognised the texture of the parchment—the book had been written on human skin.

'A bit of light reading, Marius?' she observed wryly.

Her brother grunted and plopped the massive book on the table beside her chair. He flipped it open to a spell that had been written in silver ink, or perhaps it was unicorn blood. Cassiopeia sighed and looked at the spell her brother wanted to show her. After all, it couldn't hurt to humour him. However, as the old witch scanned the manuscript her expression morphed into one of stunned disbelief.

'Great Merlin!' she exclaimed. 'Curse Transfer? Do you even realise what a difficult piece of magic this is?'

'Surely nothing you can't handle, Cassie dear.'

'We'd be breaking half the statutes on the books, you know,' his sister continued.

'Since when has that ever stopped you?' the Squib retorted.

Cassiopeia frowned. 'This is different. It's a truly nasty spell. I've only done anything like this a few times in my life. Besides, to whom would we transfer the curse? It would have to be someone we hated, since they would certainly perish in the process.'

Her brother only stood there quietly, and Cassiopeia slowly realised with mounting horror what her brother had in mind. She leapt to her feet.

'Absolutely not, Marius!' she shouted. 'I utterly forbid it.'

'I'm only a Squib,' he replied casually. 'It would be no great loss.' He gave his sister a small smile. 'I came to you because I thought you of all people might go along with it. It's the only way to save our nephew.'

Cassiopeia collapsed back into her chair. Her face had grown quite pale, and Marius thought that he had never seen her appear so vulnerable.

'First I lost Dorea,' she whispered. 'Then Pollux.' She grabbed onto her brother's hand. 'I won't lose you too, Mar.'

The Squib knelt next to her chair. 'Cassie, I'm going to die one day anyway. I've lived a very full life. Would you rather cancer took me, or a heart attack?' He laughed. 'This way I could die from a curse, like a true Black.'

Cassiopeia sniffed, and Marius handed her his handkerchief.

'Let's remember for just a moment who the boy actually is, Cassie,' he continued. 'He's Harry Potter, James's son and Dorea's last surviving descendant.'

'I'm being sentimental,' Cassiopeia said, wiping away the tears from her eyes. 'Of course you're right, Mar. You've always been very sensible. For dear Dorea's sake, we have to do whatever it takes to save our Aries.' She stroked her brother's cheek. 'You're such a brave boy,' she said fondly. 'You always were. Going off on your own into the Muggle world at the age of eleven, admonishing little Dorea not to cry. You two were always so close.'

'And I'll be with her again soon,' Marius said, standing up. He offered a hand to his sister. 'Shall we get on with it?'

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Chapter 77: Farewell Plans

That afternoon, before he left for Hogwarts, Marius stopped by his wife's boudoir. Clytemnestra was doing needlepoint.

'I'm going over to see Aries,' he announced. 'I thought I'd say goodbye.'

His wife of fifty years looked up and gave him a smile. 'Give my love to him and Sirius,' she said. 'What time shall I expect you to return?'

Marius's face fell. 'I may be awhile.'

Clytemnestra glared at her husband. 'What are you up to, Marius?'

'Nothing you need to worry about, dear,' he replied, placing a gentle kiss on her forehead.

His wife sighed. 'I never could stay angry with you,' she said, giving Marius a wry smile.

'Hold that thought,' her husband replied, and gave her one more kiss. 'I'll

see you later, Clytemnestra.'

His wife returned to her needlepoint. 'Goodbye, Marius.'

.....

At four o'clock in the afternoon, Marius Black walked into the infirmary to find Sirius and Draco both sitting next to Harry.

'Good afternoon, boys,' he said in a hearty voice that he did not feel. 'I ran into Professor McGonagall on the way here. She asked me to send you both over to her office to speak with her.'

'I can't leave Aries, Uncle Mar,' Sirius protested.

Marius rolled his eyes. 'I shall be here the whole time, Sirius, and she made it sound quite important.'

It took a great deal of persuading, but eventually the Squib managed to get his nephews out of the infirmary.

'Quick,' he hissed as soon as they were gone. 'We haven't much time.'

His sister lifted her Disillusionment Charm and appeared in the room. 'Lie down on the bed next to Aries,' she commanded.

Marius squeezed Harry's hand briefly before complying with Cassiopeia's orders.

'Goodbye, Cassie,' he said quietly. 'Tell Clytemnestra I'm sorry that I had to do this.'

'Goodbye, Mar,' his sister replied. 'Give my love to Pollux and Dorea.' She raised her wand and intoned the incantation: 'Transfero maledictionem.'

The Squib let out a gasp of pain before slipping into unconsciousness.

Cassiopeia did not waste a second. She Disillusioned herself again and then clutched the emergency Portkey in the pocket of her robes, which instantly carried her back to her apartments at Windermere Court.

Moments after the witch vanished Sirius came barging through the infirmary doors, accompanied by Professor McGonagall and Draco.

Madam Pomfrey stopped them.

'What is the meaning of this?' she scolded them. 'I won't have my patients' rest disturbed.'

'Hold on, Poppy,' McGonagall said. 'This may be very important.'

Sirius all but ran over to Harry's bed, and gasped when he saw his Squib uncle lying unconscious in the next bed. He was very pale, and perspired profusely.

Pomfrey cast some diagnostic spells. 'He's suffering from the same curse as Aries Black!'

'The curse is contagious?' McGonagall asked, her first concern, as always, being the students' welfare.

'Wait!' Draco exclaimed. 'Aries looks better.'

It was true. Colour had returned to Aries' cheeks, his face had relaxed and he looked much more peaceful. Pomfrey cast a diagnostic spell on him, and frowned.

'I find no trace of the curse,' she said. 'It will take him some time to recuperate fully, of course, but the curse itself appears to have been purged.'

'Perhaps it leapt from Aries to Mr Black,' McGonagall suggested.

Sirius said nothing, but he had turned very white. He thought he knew exactly what had happened, but he wouldn't say anything, not in front of McGonagall and Pomfrey.

...

When Clytemnestra learnt what had happened, she understood immediately what her husband had done, and gave her sister-in-law a good slap before Flooing to Hogwarts. It was a mark of Cassiopeia's own sense of guilt that she bore the blow without retaliation. As soon as the Squib reached the infirmary she ran to her husband's side and clutched

his hand.

'You noble fool,' she said in a soft voice. 'Why didn't you tell me what you had in mind? Did you think I'd stop you? I'd have tried, of course, but you could always persuade me to agree to anything.' She began to cry.

'That way, at least, we could have had a proper goodbye.'

She sat there holding her husband's clammy hand until late that night.

Sirius sat beside her with his hand on her shoulder. He didn't know whether it was a side effect of the transferral spell, or whether it perhaps had something to do with the fact that Marius was a rather elderly Squib, but the curse seemed to attack his body far more aggressively than it had Harry's. Marius died that very night, in the hospital wing of a school he had never been permitted to attend.

He was buried a couple of days later, in a plot not far from Pollux's.

Sirius insisted that he be buried in the wizarding section of the churchyard with the rest of the family, not in the Squib section.

Cassiopeia provided the epitaph:

Marius Alphard Black

June 27, 1917 - February 1, 1992

Here lies a true Black.

.....

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Chapter 78: Dark Sacrifice

Harry woke up in the middle of the night to find himself lying in one of the beds of the Hogwarts infirmary. Sirius was propped up in a chair by

the side of the bed, snoring loudly. He looked awful, as though he had hardly slept in days. Harry felt a twinge of guilt that he had made his dad worry so. He blinked his eyes several times to clear his vision and tried to sit up in bed, only to be hit by a sudden burst of pain.

'Ouch,' he moaned, and collapsed on his pillow, deciding not to try that again.

Sirius stirred at the sound. His eyes opened slightly, but as soon as he saw Harry he became fully alert.

'Har-ries!' he exclaimed, barely catching himself before he blurted out Harry's birth name. The tongue-lashing he had got from Clytemnestra after the previous incident had made the wizard resolve to be much more cautious, even at two o'clock in the morning. 'You're awake. How do you feel?'

'Horrible,' Harry croaked. 'Like a herd of hippogriffs spent the night in my skull.' He managed a half-smirk. 'But I'll bet I don't feel half as bad as you look.'

Sirius shook his head. 'You cheeky prat. Can't you be awake for an entire minute without mouthing off?'

'Not really,' Harry replied, and then broke into a coughing fit. 'I think I get it from my dad.'

'You may be right about that,' Sirius admitted.

'How long have I been asleep?' Harry asked. Judging from how exhausted Sirius looked, he would have guessed that it had to have been three or four days. Quirrell's curse must have been quite nasty.

'Just over three weeks,' Sirius said.

Harry's eyes went wide. 'Three weeks?'

His dad nodded. 'We were worried you mightn't wake up at all. You were totally unresponsive for the longest time. Nothing Madam Pomfrey tried

seemed to work.'

'How did she eventually make her breakthrough?' Harry asked. He had always been interested in how Healers managed to find cures for unknown curses.

Sirius shifted nervously. 'She didn't, son. Actually, Aunt Cassiopeia and Uncle Marius figured it out.'

'Uncle Marius?' Harry looked confused. 'But he can't do magic.'

'You're wrong, Aries,' Sirius said quietly. 'He did the only magic that could cure you.'

Harry gave Sirius a hard stare. He could tell his dad was hiding something from him. 'What happened, Dad?'

Sirius took a deep breath. 'Uncle Marius found a Dark spell that could transfer a curse from one person to another. He had Aunt Cassiopeia transfer your curse to him.'

Harry sat up straight, ignoring the pain. 'Uncle Marius took my curse?'

That was terrible news. Harry couldn't bear the thought of his great-uncle suffering. 'Where is he? I have to get to my trunk. I can fix it.'

Sirius shook his head sadly and placed his hand on Harry, stopping him from getting out of bed. 'No, Aries, you can't.'

'You don't understand,' Harry protested, fighting against his dad's arm. 'I can! I...'

Sirius pulled Harry into a tight embrace, and the boy stopped struggling and fell silent. 'No magic can bring back the dead, son.'

'NO!' Harry cried out. 'He can't be dead. Where is he? I've got to see him.'

'He's gone, Aries,' Sirius whispered. Harry pressed his face into his dad's robes and cried.

...

Early the next morning Draco burst through the doors of the infirmary to

find his uncle and cousin sitting up and talking soberly.

'Aries!' Draco exclaimed. 'Thank God you're all right. I've been worried sick.'

'Good morning, Draco,' Harry said quietly.

'I suppose you've been told about Uncle Marius,' Draco said. Harry nodded curtly. 'I'm sorry. I know you really cared about him.'

'Not nearly so much as he cared about me,' Harry replied, his face a stony mask. He paused. 'Dad, could you give me and Draco a moment to talk?'

'No problem, Aries,' Sirius said, and rose to his feet. 'I'll just go find Professor McGonagall and gather your things from your dormitory.'

After Sirius left, Harry turned to his cousin.

'Why didn't you use it, Draco?' he demanded in a harsh whisper. 'There was no need for Uncle Marius to die.'

'It was locked in your trunk, Aries,' his cousin replied defensively. 'I did my best to get it out, but there was no way to do it. I thought about telling Sirius, but you didn't want any of the adults to know.'

'You could have told him after you found out what Uncle Marius had done,' Harry pointed out.

Draco shook his head. 'McGonagall and Pomfrey were around when we found Uncle Marius. They sent me back to my dormitory, and he died later that night.'

'I would rather the teachers found out what we did than have Uncle Marius die,' Harry said quietly.

'I know, Aries,' Draco said kindly, 'but I wouldn't.'

Harry turned on his cousin furiously. 'What did you just say?'

'Do you realise what would happen if people found out what we did?'

Draco demanded. 'You could go to Azkaban. Azkaban, Aries! I would rather let the world burn, myself with it, than see you get into that sort of

trouble. What would you do if our positions were reversed?'

Harry thought about it long and hard, but eventually he sighed. 'I don't know, Draco,' he said quietly. 'But I do see your point. I shouldn't want for you to get into trouble either.' His eyes gleamed with furious determination. 'But I promise you this, Draco. We're never going to be in this position again.'

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Chapter 79: The Philosopher's

Stone

Madam Pomfrey examined Harry thoroughly that afternoon, and announced that he was in a well enough state to travel home.

'But I need your guarantees that he will have regular visits from a qualified Healer for the foreseeable future,' she insisted.

Sirius nodded.

'He is also to be on bed-rest for at least the next month,' the matron continued.

'A month?' Harry protested feebly, but fell silent at Sirius's glare. He accompanied his dad through the Floo back to Windermere Court.

Clytemnestra and Cassiopeia were waiting for them in the drawing room.

'I'm so glad to see you awake, dear,' Clytemnestra said. Harry stepped towards his aunt, his head bowed and his expression contrite.

'I'm so sorry, Aunt Clytemnestra,' he said. 'It's all my fault.'

The Squib pulled her nephew into one of her affectionate but

appropriately dignified embraces. 'No, dear, it isn't. Your uncle loved you and wanted to make sure you were all right. Any one of us would have done the same.'

Harry knew that was true, and hated himself for it. Too many people had died for him already. He made a vow to himself there in the drawing room that never again would anyone have to die to save him. Instead it would be his duty to protect those he loved.

Harry spent the next several weeks in his bed, but he was far from idle. The portraits were always around, of course, and he had regular visits from his family. Abraxas came by a couple of times a week and Cassiopeia gave him private lessons every morning. Clytemnestra took tea with him in the afternoons, and Sirius spent most of his time with Harry: talking, playing chess or cards, or going through business matters with his son.

Marius had made Harry his sole heir, on the condition that Clytemnestra be maintained at her accustomed standard of living until her death. That meant that Harry was now the owner of number seventeen, Windermere Court, as well as numerous other properties, various Muggle stocks and bonds and a fortune in liquid assets, squirreled away in both Muggle and magical banks. Sirius, as Harry's guardian, was responsible for managing his son's portfolio until he attained his majority, but he wanted to make sure that Harry understood everything that was going on with his considerable fortune.

At another time, Harry might have complained about how busy everyone was keeping him, but under the circumstances he was quite grateful. The less time he had to lie alone in his bed and think, the better. Every time he closed his eyes, he saw his great-uncle's face. Marius had been the very first one to show Harry what it meant to have a family, and now he

had given his life to save Harry, just as Harry's parents had all those years before.

The worst of it was that Harry knew deeply that he had only himself to blame. Cassiopeia had explained once that Voldemort had come to kill Harry as a baby because he couldn't bear the thought of a rival to his power, and now Voldemort had tried to kill him again, for much the same reason. If Harry had only been cleverer, if he could have ignored Voldemort's tricks, Uncle Marius would still be alive. For that matter, if Harry hadn't been so stupid and short-sighted as to stick the Stone somewhere where Draco couldn't get to it, everything would have been all right.

No one else blamed Harry for what happened, and that only made the boy feel even more guilty. He felt as though he didn't deserve his family's love after the pain he had caused, but they kept on giving it to him anyway, even - or rather especially - Clytemnestra, who seemed to go out of her way to make sure that Harry understood that she did not love him one whit less because of Marius's death. If anything, she loved Harry more because her husband had given his life to save him. But all her kindness and well-meaning affection only made Harry feel as though she were rubbing salt in his wounds.

Soon after his return home, Harry crept out of bed and retrieved the Philosopher's Stone from his trunk, hiding it under his pillow. He had ordered Mopsy to bring him every book from the library that dealt with it, but he found surprisingly little.

Very few had ever successfully made one, and it seemed that much of its true nature remained a mystery. Everyone knew that it could be used to make the Elixir of Life, of course, as well as turn base metals into gold, but there were theories that the Stone's powers went much further.

The Philosopher's Stone was the most perfect element, and it possessed the property of communicating its perfection to whatever it encountered. It was believed to teach its owner, conveying the heights of alchemical knowledge and wisdom to those who contemplated it, but most theorists believed that the Stone, being the purest of substances, would only convey its knowledge to those who proved themselves worthy of it. Anyone could use it to produce gold or Elixir of Life, if they knew how, but true mastery of the Stone required nobility of heart and purity of intention.

Harry began to spend some time every night holding the Stone and gazing into its many-faceted depths. At first he could only bear to look at it for a few moments, but he felt as though at those moments he stood face-to-face with reality itself, and each time he approached the Stone he learnt something new. At the same time, however, the contemplation of the Philosopher's Stone was very painful.

Harry began to see his own faults more clearly, his arrogance and recklessness. It exacerbated his feelings of guilt for what had happened. That was a large part of why he could not bear to hold the Stone for more than a short time, though he noticed that as time went on he was able to endure it for longer and longer periods.

One interesting thing that Harry discovered in his study of the Philosopher's Stone was that, had Voldemort managed to steal the Stone, it was very unlikely that the Dark Lord would have been able to use it without help. Exposure to the Stone seemed to act on the wounds of one's soul much as antiseptic on a physical wound. The worse one was infected the worse it hurt.

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Chapter 80: Dumbledore's

Ultimatum

Remus found Sirius out on the terrace, leaning against the balustrade with a glass of firewhisky in one hand and a cigarette in the other.

'I thought you didn't smoke anymore after Azkaban,' Remus commented.

Sirius exhaled a thick cloud of smoke. 'I didn't. Tobacco's hard to come by in a wizarding prison. But with everything that's going on with Harry, I decided it was time to start up again.'

The werewolf coughed a bit. 'Never could see what you and James saw in it, myself.'

Sirius shrugged. 'It's relaxing.' He grinned wryly. 'And our mums hated it.'

'James always got on well with his mum,' Remus protested. His friend chuckled.

'That's the understatement of the century. Prongs adored his mum. That doesn't mean he didn't like to tweak her nose now and again,' he said, and then let out a long sigh. 'I'm so worried about Harry, Moony. I really hope he pulls through all right.'

'He will,' Remus assured him. 'If he could survive the Killing Curse he can survive this.'

Sirius shook his head. 'It's not his survival I'm worried about, at least not anymore. The Healer says he should be able to get out of bed in the next week or so.'

'What is it, then?'

'He's so damn gloomy all the time,' Sirius said. 'We'll be playing or

talking, but his heart just isn't in it.'

'He misses your Uncle Marius,' Remus said.

'It's worse than that. I think he blames himself for what happened.'

'That's not right,' Remus said. 'He's only a boy.'

Sirius snorted. 'Try telling him that.' He took another drag on his cigarette. 'Draco will be coming home for his Easter holidays soon. I think I shall ask Narcissa if he can stay here. He might be able to cheer Harry up. Then in the autumn we'll see about sending them both to Beauxbatons.'

Remus coughed slightly. 'Actually that's the reason I came over,' he said.

'Dumbledore asked me to meet with him yesterday. He knows.'

Sirius cursed colourfully. 'How much?'

'Just about everything,' Remus said. 'He said he's been piecing together clues for some time, but something you let slip when Harry was unconscious confirmed it.'

'Damn him!' Sirius exclaimed. 'He would be watching.'

'You should have realised that,' Remus said. 'I think Dumbledore knows just about everything that goes on in Hogwarts.'

'He never figured out we were Animagi,' Sirius shot back. 'Besides, I was sleep-deprived and under a great deal of stress at the time.'

'No one's blaming you, Padfoot,' Moony said. 'What's done is done.'

Sirius growled, and put out his cigarette with a vengeance. 'What does he plan to do with this information?'

'The good news is that he doesn't want to take Harry away,' Remus said.

'What he saw of you in the infirmary was enough to convince him that you have only Harry's best interests at heart, and he said something about Marius's sacrifice protecting Harry so long as he lives with members of the Black family. He also doesn't plan on revealing Harry's

true identity to the world. He thinks it's safer if everyone believes him to be dead.'

'That's a relief,' Sirius replied. 'What's the bad news?'

'He asks that you cease your attempts to have him sacked by the Board of Governors, as well as your pending suit in the Wizengamot.'

Sirius frowned. 'He really deserves to suffer for what he did, but I suppose that's a fair trade. It won't matter to the boys anyway. They'll be at Beauxbatons.'

'He also insists that you allow Harry to return to Hogwarts in the autumn so that he can be trained to resist Voldemort,' Remus continued. 'If you do not comply, he says he will bring charges against Clytemnestra for kidnapping and against Cassiopeia for Dark magic and the murder of Marius Black.'

Sirius hurled his empty glass against the stone wall, shattering it into a thousand pieces. 'That manipulative bastard!' he shouted. 'I'll destroy him!'

'How can you take down Albus Dumbledore?'

'I'm not sure yet,' Sirius admitted, 'but I'm sure the family will have some ideas. That man will rue the day he ever made enemies of the House of Black.'

Remus would never say it for fear of incurring his old friend's wrath, but at that moment Sirius's expression rather strongly resembled his mother's.

The furious wizard marched into the drawing room, and Remus quietly followed. He owed a very great debt to Dumbledore, but he had decided to cast his lot with Sirius and Harry, come hell or high water. If war was at hand, the werewolf knew where his loyalties lay.

'Aunt Cassie, Aunt Clytemnestra,' Sirius said as he entered the drawing room, where the witch sat perusing a well-worn copy of *Magick Moste*

Evile whilst the Squib played the piano. 'Professor Dumbledore has learnt our little secret and decided to blackmail us.'

There was a sudden dissonant chord. 'The impudent half-blood!'

Clytemnestra exclaimed. 'How dare he?'

'I intend to teach the old fool a lesson,' Sirius went on. 'I trust you'll have something that can help us, Aunt Cassie?'

The old witch smiled. 'I thought you'd never ask.' She raised her wand.

'Accio Little Black Book!' she intoned. Moments later, an enormous tome bound in black leather soared through the door. Remus could have sworn that it was at least a yard tall and two feet wide. It hovered in front of Cassiopeia as she unlatched it and began to flip through pages and pages of tiny print in quadruple columns.

'Aunt Cassie has been collecting dirt on every witch and wizard in Britain for decades,' Sirius explained to Remus.

'That explains why the book is so large,' his friend replied.

'Don't be stupid,' Cassiopeia snapped. 'This is only the index.' She turned several pages. 'D...D...D...Dumbledore, Albus Percival Wulfric Brian. Let's see.' She paused. 'Father was a known Muggle-hater, sent to Azkaban for an attack on Muggle children.'

'You're kidding!' Remus exclaimed, but Cassiopeia ignored him.

'Squib sister, died under mysterious circumstances. That might do, but I seem to recall there was something a bit better.' She turned the page and cackled in triumph. 'Ah yes,' she said, a cruel smile spreading across her face. 'Here we go. It seems that at some point I managed to obtain several love letters written by the Headmaster as a youth, as well as some rather embarrassing journal entries and poems from the same period.'

'How did you do that?' Remus sputtered.

'Never underestimate Cassiopeia Black,' Sirius said wryly. 'So who was

the lucky girl?'

Cassiopeia laughed. 'Gellert Grindelwald.'

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Chapter 81: Family Triumph

On a misty Monday morning in late March, Albus Dumbledore was whistling merrily as he descended down the stone staircase that led from his quarters into his office, holding a steaming cup of freshly-brewed tea in his hand. He made his way over to his large desk and turned over a few papers.

He let out a quiet sigh. Alas, paperwork continued to be the bane of his otherwise happy existence. Dumbledore set his cup down and took a seat in his chair. He was surprised to notice a large envelope lying in the centre of his desk, underneath a few other papers. He had not seen it the night before. He took out his favourite letter-opener and slit open the envelope. Inside, he found a single large piece of parchment. It was completely blank.

Dumbledore unfolded the parchment and stared at it intensely. He had far too much experience with magic to think that it was simply a spare bit of parchment. After a few seconds, words began to appear. They were written in a vaguely familiar hand.

Messrs Moony, Padfoot and Prongs

wish to dedicate

this production of their new comedy

'Turnabout is Fair Play'

to their esteemed Professor,

Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore.

Enjoy!

Dumbledore frowned at the parchment, and then there was a sudden, blinding flash of light. When Dumbledore recovered his eyesight, his entire office was plastered with photographs of himself with Gellert Grindelwald, and the harsh music of Schwartz's 'March of the Warlocks' filled the air. Over the loud music, Dumbledore could make out disturbingly familiar voices reading words that he wished desperately he could forget.

'Dear Gellert,' recited Remus Lupin's voice. 'I was thinking about your idea of internment camps for Muggles, and I think you are quite right. Such camps will prove necessary on an interim basis, until we can cement the absolute dominance of wizards...'

Dumbledore went white. How could they possibly have found out about his youthful indiscretions?

'Oh Gellert!' Sirius Black read. 'I am so glad that we have met. I have never before found another wizard of such brilliance and ambition. I think we were fated to be together...'

As if this were not quite enough, there then followed a voice that Dumbledore had never imagined he would hear again in this lifetime.

'I find I am always thinking of him,' James Potter read from a journal that Dumbledore had believed to be lost. James - or rather, Dumbledore supposed, his portrait - used every ounce of that unique talent he had always possessed to make even the most serious matters sound utterly ridiculous. 'From cockcrow to sunset, and all through...'

'Finite Incantatem!' Dumbledore intoned, and everything stopped. The

pictures vanished, the music ceased. The words on the parchment changed, and Dumbledore looked down to read them.

Dear Professor Dumbledore, the letter now read.

You should be aware that what you have just witnessed is only a tiny foretaste of what we are capable of doing. We don't care about the impact of our actions on your schemes or on any hypothetical future confrontation with Voldemort. For us, the only Greater Good is that of our family.

Our representative will be arriving shortly in order to discuss the terms of your surrender. Remember, you started this one.

Sincerely yours,

The Noble and Most Ancient House of Black (and Associates)

There was a knock on the door.

'Come in,' Dumbledore said, and in walked Cassiopeia Black, escorted by Professor McGonagall.

'Miss Black would like to speak with you, Headmaster,' said McGonagall.

Her tone was annoyed. She had never got on with Cassiopeia Black.

'Thank you, Minerva,' Dumbledore replied. 'You may leave.'

The Transfiguration mistress shut the door quietly, and the Headmaster turned his attention to Cassiopeia.

'Good morning, Miss Black,' he said. 'I trust you are the representative I've been told to expect.'

Cassiopeia smirked triumphantly, and Dumbledore resigned himself to a very painful series of negotiations.

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One bright morning, about a week later, Sirius swept into the dining room of number seventeen, Windermere Court. He ruffled Harry's hair and pecked Clytemnestra's and Cassiopeia's cheeks before sitting down at

the head of the table. Mopsy brought him a steaming plate of eggs and sausages with a cup of tea, and the wizard dived in eagerly, humming to himself all the while. Harry, Cassiopeia and Clytemnestra all gave one another curious glances, and Harry smiled, a rare occurrence since Marius's death.

'You seem to be in a good mood, Dad,' he said.

'I am in an excellent mood,' Sirius replied. 'And why shouldn't I be? I live in a beautiful home with my strapping young son and my two lovely aunts,' - Harry and Clytemnestra blushed, but Cassiopeia only narrowed her eyes suspiciously - 'not to mention a very capable and hard-working house-elf.'

'Oh, Master Sirius is being too generous to his Mopsy,' the elf replied modestly.

'Furthermore,' Sirius went on, 'this morning I have received fresh proof that nothing is impossible if only one has enough nerve.' He flicked his wand, and three copies of The Daily Prophet appeared in front of his family members.

Cassiopeia nodded her approval as she glanced at the large headline. 'I was wondering when this would come out.'

'I arranged it for today,' Sirius said. 'The anniversary of his duel with Grindelwald. It seemed appropriate.'

The others carefully read the stunning article that dominated the front page:

ALBUS DUMBLEDORE RETIRES; NEW HOGWARTS STAFF APPOINTED

In an unexpected announcement, Albus Dumbledore, the widely revered vanquisher of the Dark wizard Grindelwald, has indicated that he plans to retire from his position as Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry at the end of the current school year, writes

Aloysius Prewett, Special Correspondent.

When asked to provide a reason for his surprising decision, Professor Dumbledore said simply that he has grown weary of the many administrative burdens attached to his position, and wishes to devote his remaining years to a quiet life of research. He will be succeeded by Professor Minerva McGonagall, long-time Deputy Headmistress, Transfiguration mistress and Head of Gryffindor House.

Whilst continuing to hold his important positions in the Wizengamot and the International Confederation of Wizards, Professor Dumbledore will also be moving to Devon and beginning the monumental task of organising the books and papers of his late friend, noted alchemist Nicolas Flamel. In addition, at the suggestion of school governor Cassiopeia Black, the Board of Governors have unanimously awarded Professor Dumbledore the title of Headmaster Emeritus, with the privilege of an ex officio seat on the Board of Governors and the right to nominate faculty candidates for the consideration of the Headmistress. Professor Dumbledore proceeded to make full use of this privilege in order to nominate two new faculty members, both of whom were promptly confirmed by Headmistress McGonagall. The first of these new teachers is Mr Remus Lupin, who will be taking up the now-vacant post of Transfiguration master. An old Gryffindor, he will also take over the new Headmistress's former position as Head of that House. The second new faculty member is Mr Abraxas Malfoy, distinguished wizard and famous duelling champion, who has generously agreed to serve as Visiting Lecturer in Defence Against the Dark Arts during the upcoming school year.

'How did this happen?' Harry asked, just a hint of curiosity in his voice. He didn't sound quite as excited as his dad would have hoped, but Harry

rarely got excited about anything these days.

Sirius grinned widely. 'Let's just say, it doesn't pay to muck about with the Blacks.'

The boy's eyes went wide. 'You did this?'

'Well, to be perfectly fair,' Sirius said, 'it was more of a family effort. We couldn't have managed anything without Aunt Cassie's Little Black Book.'

Harry raised an eyebrow. 'What's that?'

'Don't worry,' Aunt Cassie said. 'I'll show you when you're older. Besides, your father is being far too modest. He's the one who raised this whole affair from a rather boring case of blackmail to a true work of art. I still can't figure out how you Charmed that parchment to have so many simultaneous effects.'

Sirius laughed. 'Come now, Aunt Cassie. You know that a Marauder never reveals his secrets.'

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Chapter 82: The Enchanted Diary

'I must say, Sirius, I was impressed that you were able to pull it off,'

Narcissa said as she handed her cousin a cup of tea. It was a pleasant afternoon in early April, and the two were sitting on the terrace of Malfoy Manor. 'Aunt Walburga wouldn't have believed it. She never thought you'd amount to anything more than a mischievous prankster.'

Sirius took a sip of his tea, then grinned. 'Well, in a way, this was all simply a very elaborate prank,' he said. 'Dumbledore never saw it

coming.'

'Lucius was furious,' Narcissa said with a small laugh. 'He's been trying unsuccessfully to unseat Dumbledore for years, and now you and Aunt Cassie manage it on a whim.'

Sirius's expression suddenly turned very grave. 'It wasn't a whim, Cissy. We had a very good reason to do what we did.'

Narcissa nodded. 'How is Aries doing?'

'Much better, thank you,' Sirius replied. 'He's able to sit up for most of the day now, and the Healer's encouraging him to take short walks in the garden every morning and afternoon.' He smiled faintly. 'I'm hoping he'll be up to riding a broomstick again by summer.'

'How about you?' she pressed. 'How are you handling all this?'

'Not very well,' Sirius admitted. 'Aries may be improving physically, but I'm worried about his emotional state. He's depressed all the time. He's perfectly polite, but he never seems actually interested in anything.' He sighed. 'I'll ask him if he wants to play chess or cards, and he'll say, "All right, Dad, whatever you like." But if I don't initiate it, he'll sit alone all day gazing at the wall.'

'Do you think there's anything we can do to help?' Narcissa asked.

Sirius took a deep breath. 'Actually, I've been meaning to ask you about that. I was wondering whether Draco might be able to spend the Easter holidays with us. I know Aries has missed him, and I thought that perhaps if they got to spend some time together it might help Aries to get back to normal.'

'Lucius won't like it,' Narcissa said with a frown. 'He's been positively delighted that Draco's spent this term away from Aries. He's always felt that the boys spend rather too much time together.'

Sirius snorted in anger. 'What do you think, Cissy?'

'I've always regretted that Lucius didn't want us to have any more children, and I'm very pleased that Draco has Aries. They're all but brothers.' Narcissa sat up straight and gave Sirius a resolute nod. 'Have no fear, Sirius. One way or another, I'll get Lucius to agree. If I have to, I'll go to my father-in-law.'

'I could have done that,' Sirius said cheekily. 'Dad would never refuse me anything.'

Narcissa laughed. 'You're right about that. I've no idea how you managed to persuade him to take up the post of Defence master.'

'Well, technically, he's not a fully-fledged teacher,' Sirius pointed out.

'He's a visiting lecturer, not an employee of the school, and he was adamant that he not be paid a salary.'

'Still, I never thought I'd live to see the day when Abraxas Malfoy would consent to instruct schoolchildren.'

Sirius shrugged. 'He likes me, I suppose,' he said. 'Besides, he'd do anything for Aries.'

Narcissa sighed. 'Yet another reason for Lucius to dislike the both of you.'

'No offence, Cissy,' Sirius said, 'but the feeling is mutual.'

'None taken,' Narcissa assured him. 'One cannot survive for long in the House of Black if one expects all one's family members actually to get along with one another. I think it would drive one slowly mad.'

Her cousin smirked. 'So that's the reason, is it? Poor Mum, if I'd only known.'

Narcissa rolled her eyes and took another sip of tea.

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To his wife's surprise and delight - and, ultimately, her everlasting regret - Lucius proved remarkably agreeable to the suggestion that Draco spend the Easter holiday with Aries. Not only did he express concern for his

nephew's well-being, but he even volunteered to collect Draco at the train station, something which had never happened before. Therefore, when Draco disembarked from the Hogwarts Express, he was simply overjoyed to find his father waiting for him.

'Dad!' he exclaimed, and gave his father a hug. Lucius hugged him back stiffly. 'What are you doing here?' the blond boy asked excitedly. 'You've never come to pick me up before.'

'I've missed you, Draco,' Lucius said as they left the platform. 'We never got much of an opportunity to speak after the unfortunate incident with the Squib.'

'I've missed you too, Dad,' Draco replied. 'I'm glad to see you.'

Lucius smiled at those words. He relished his son's affection.

'How was school?' he asked.

Draco shrugged. 'It's all right, though I have to say it's been a bit boring without Aries.' He looked at his father hesitantly. 'You wouldn't happen to have heard anything about how he's doing, would you?'

Lucius frowned unconsciously at his son's concern for the Black brat.

Nonetheless, making use of Draco's weakness was a necessary part of the plan.

'Alas, he seems to have fallen into a bit of depression,' Lucius said. 'Your Uncle Sirius says that he doesn't show much interest in anything. That's why your mother and I thought it might be a good idea for you to spend your holiday at Windermere Court.'

'Really?' Draco seemed surprised. 'Do you really want me to spend the whole holiday with Aries and Uncle Sirius?'

Lucius raised an eyebrow. 'Don't you think it a good idea?'

Draco paused reflectively. 'I do. I've spoken with Aries quite a bit using the mirror that Uncle Sirius gave him, and he has seemed different.' He

looked at his father quizzically. 'I'm just a bit surprised that you would approve. You've never liked Aries.'

'Draco, your cousin is your closest friend,' Lucius replied, with all the affection he could muster. 'What matters to him matters to you, and therefore I care what happens to him.' He withdrew a parcel from his coat. 'In fact, I've even thought of something that might be able to jolt Aries out of his foul mood.'

'What's that?' his son asked eagerly, and for the first time, Lucius felt the tiniest twinge of guilt at what he was planning to do. He squashed it as one might a pesky mosquito, reminding himself that it was really for Draco's sake that all this was necessary.

'At certain times in my life, I've found that writing one's thoughts in a diary can be very therapeutic,' Lucius said. 'It gives one the opportunity to work through one's emotions.'

Draco nodded reflectively. 'I suppose that's true. I don't know whether it's the sort of thing Aries would go for, though.'

Lucius smiled at his son. 'I have procured a very special enchanted diary for you to give to Aries,' he said. 'This diary is capable of responding to whatever one writes in it, thus enabling one to pour out one's most secret thoughts and fears without ever worrying that anyone else will know, but at the same time to reap all the benefits of an actual conversation.'

Draco was impressed. 'That might actually help, Dad,' he said. 'Thanks.'

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Chapter 83: Lucius's Dark Task

'There's one very important thing you must promise me before I give you the diary, however.'

'What is it, Dad?'

'This diary is not exactly legal,' Lucius told him in a low voice. 'The fewer people who know about it the better. Don't tell your Uncle Sirius or your Aunt Cassiopeia. For that matter, I shouldn't even tell Aries who gave it to you. I trust them all, of course, but...'

'Even the walls have ears,' Draco finished, and nodded. 'Good point, Dad. I really appreciate what you're doing for Aries.'

'For you, Draco,' Lucius said, placing his hand on his son's shoulder. 'I'm doing everything for you.'

After dinner that evening, Draco and Narcissa Flooed over to Windermere Court. Abraxas's gout was acting up, so he retired early, commanding Dobby to draw him a hot bath. No one was around to notice as Lucius slipped out of Malfoy Manor and Apparated to a distant shack built on the very edge of a high cliff, on a rocky island somewhere in the North Sea. The weather was stormy, and Lucius pulled his woollen cloak tight to keep out the icy rain. He knocked on the door three times, and it creaked open. Lucius hurried inside.

The inside of the shack was mostly dry, but that was about all one could say for it. The thin walls did virtually nothing to keep out the biting wind, and the tiny fire flickering in the grate provided only a modicum of warmth. In an old armchair beside the fire sat Quirinus Quirrell, his eyes closed. Quirrell was seldom awake these days, but the same was not true of his master.

Lucius knelt on the dirty floor. 'I have come, my lord,' he said.

'Welcome, Lucius,' the Dark Lord greeted him, his high, cold voice

seeming to come from the back of Quirrell's head. 'I hope you like my humble abode.'

'I do wish, my lord, that you would allow me to secure you more...appropriate accommodations,' Lucius pleaded. He was tired of having to come out to this miserable hellhole.

'As I have told you, Lucius,' the Dark Lord hissed, 'this island has certain useful magical properties. In the absence of unicorn blood, it is the best I can do to maintain my strength.' He paused. 'What of your mission? Have you completed it?'

'It is done, my lord,' Lucius said quietly. 'My son will pass your diary to the Black brat as you commanded.'

Even in his weakened state, the Dark Lord's voice could still send chills up Lucius's spine. 'Are you certain the boy will not fail to do as you have instructed?'

'I am, my lord,' Lucius replied.

'Well done, Lucius,' the Dark Lord said. 'That impudent whelp thinks he can usurp my rightful title without repercussions. We shall show him how wrong he is. We shall show him what it truly means to be the Heir of Slytherin.'

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It took very little time for Draco to realise that it was a good thing he had agreed to spend the Easter holiday with his cousin. Aries was doing much better physically, but he seemed to move about the house listlessly, never taking much interest in anything. He did anything Draco suggested, but he never suggested any games or activities of his own. He congratulated Draco on taking his place as Seeker, but he made virtually no response when Draco emphasised that it was only temporary, and they everyone would be glad to have Aries back in the autumn.

Late one evening during the first week of the Easter holiday, Aries and Draco were playing a game of Exploding Snap on Aries' bed when Mopsy suddenly Apparated into the room. She bowed low to her young master.

'The room Master is requesting is ready,' she informed him.

'Finally!' Aries exclaimed, showing a hint of enthusiasm for the first time in ages. As far as Draco knew, it was the first time since Marius's death.

'What is it, Aries?' he asked eagerly. He felt that anything that could distract his cousin from his ongoing feelings of guilt and grief had to be a good thing.

Aries rose to his feet. He was still rather wobbly after his prolonged recuperation, but at least he was no longer confined to his bed. He stuck an arm under his pillow and removed the Philosopher's Stone before turning to Draco and grinning widely.

'How about I show you?' he said, and Draco nodded. 'Mopsy, take us over to the laboratory,' Aries commanded. The house elf grabbed each boy by the hand, and the three of them vanished.

They reappeared in a dimly-lit room Draco had never seen before. Three long workbenches stood in the centre of the room, and the stone walls were lined with shelves containing thick volumes in dead languages, a bewildering variety of rare and expensive potion ingredients, and numerous cauldrons of various shapes and sizes.

'Where are we?' Draco asked.

'This is old Uncle Phineas's private laboratory,' Aries explained. 'He was quite the potions expert, apparently, and conducted numerous experiments right here in the house. It's enchanted so that only the owner of the house, or those he admits, can find it or enter it. I don't know whether Uncle Marius even knew about it, but Mopsy certainly did.

When I asked her whether there were any place in the house where I

could work on some experiments in absolute privacy, she told me about the room. It was in a terrible state, but she's been cleaning it up for me.' He turned to the house elf. 'Thank you, Mopsy. You may go. We'll call you when we need you to take us back to our bedrooms. If anyone looks for us, tell them we're sleeping.'

'Yes, Master,' Mopsy replied, and Disapparated with a loud pop.

Draco looked around the laboratory in astonishment. 'Aries, this place is brilliant! I bet even old Snape would kill to have a laboratory like this.'

His cousin snorted. 'I bet Snivellus would kill for a lot less.'

'True,' Draco agreed. 'So what experiments did you have in mind?'

An unearthly light shone in Aries' eyes. 'We're going to brew the Elixir of Life,' he said solemnly.

Draco frowned. 'Who's ill?'

'No one yet,' the boy replied. 'But I don't want us ever to be caught unawares again. We're going to brew a large batch of the Elixir, and we'll each keep a flask on our person at all times. We'll store the rest here in the laboratory, and I'll command Mopsy to be on alert to bring us a flask if she ever hears of any family member who is suffering from a potentially-mortal illness. If we're unavailable, she'll bring it to Dad, and on down the line.'

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Chapter 84: The Cost of the Elixir

'It looks like you've thought it all out,' Draco said, impressed at the

amount of work Aries had put into this, even whilst bedridden. 'Have you told Uncle Sirius about the Stone?'

Aries shook his head. 'It's far too dangerous. If anyone ever learns that the Stone is here, they'll undoubtedly try to steal it. That was Dumbledore's mistake. If he wanted to hide the Stone successfully, he shouldn't have told anyone where it was.'

'Good point. So we're the only ones who know?'

'Us and Mopsy,' Aries said. 'But Mopsy is under strict orders never to mention the Stone to anyone, under any circumstances. Since I'm her owner now, she has to obey me even over Dad and the rest of the family.'

Draco pouted. 'That's convenient. You're so lucky. I wish I had an elf of my own like that.'

Aries frowned at his cousin. 'Think about what you just said, Draco.'

The blond boy looked confused for a moment, and then turned deathly pale as he realised the only circumstances which could enable one to inherit full ownership of a house elf.

'I'm so sorry, Aries,' he stammered. 'I didn't mean it that way. I wasn't thinking.'

'That's all right,' Aries responded quietly. 'I understand. Just try to think before you speak next time. That's one of the first things the Stone taught me. Words are very powerful. We ought never to use them flippantly.'

'Sorry,' Draco repeated. He paused. 'So how do we make the Elixir? What book did you find the directions in?'

'There is no book,' Aries replied. 'We shall have to consult the Stone itself.'

'You make it sound like it's alive,' Draco said uncomfortably.

Aries furrowed his brow pensively in response to that. 'The Stone isn't alive, or at least I don't think so,' he said after a moment's reflection. 'It's

more as though it's made out of life, or rather, the Stone and life are made out of the same thing.'

Draco stared at his cousin blankly. 'I don't follow you.'

Harry chuckled. 'I suppose it is difficult to grasp. After we brew the Elixir, I'll let you look into the Stone, and you can see for yourself what I'm talking about.' He sat down on a stool behind one of the workbenches and held the Stone several inches directly in front of his face.

Draco watched curiously as his cousin began to stare into the Stone. After a few moments, Aries began to wince. A few minutes later, he began to groan in pain. Nonetheless he continued to stare into the Stone, seemingly mesmerised by its hidden mysteries. His eyes narrowed in concentration, and the Stone began to glow. Suddenly Aries cried out and dropped the Stone onto the workbench.

'Are you all right, Aries?' Draco asked, putting his hand on his cousin's shoulder.

'I'm fine, Draco,' Aries said weakly. 'It just takes a lot out of me, is all.' He grimaced and forced himself to sit up straight. He rubbed his temples for a moment before glancing at Draco. 'Fetch a solid gold cauldron, please,' he said. When Draco made no move to comply, Aries turned to look directly into his cousin's eyes.

Draco gasped. Aries' eyes were brighter than ever, and they seemed no longer to be blue, but rather green. Moreover, they bore a sad, world-weary look, as though they had seen far too much of the world's sorrows ever again to be light-hearted and carefree.

'Draco,' Aries said slowly, 'I'll be all right. But we need to begin brewing the Elixir. Please fetch a solid gold cauldron.'

Draco nodded and walked over to the shelf on which the cauldrons were stacked.

'Er, Aries?' he said once he got there. 'They're all pewter.'

Aries sighed. 'That's not a problem, Draco,' he said. 'Just bring a medium-sized cauldron over here.'

Draco selected one of the cauldrons and set it on the workbench in front of his cousin. Aries picked up the Stone and closed his eyes. He carefully touched it to the edge of the cauldron, and in an instant the pewter was transformed into pure gold.

'Great Merlin!' Draco exclaimed. Aries ignored him.

'Fill the cauldron two-thirds full of pure water,' he said hoarsely. He still sounded utterly exhausted.

'Where shall I get the water?' Draco asked, looking around the room.

There didn't seem to be a tap.

Aries gave his cousin a wry smile. 'May I suggest the Aguamenti Charm?'

'Oh, right,' Draco said, his cheeks turning pink with embarrassment, and began filling the cauldron from his wand. 'Um, Aries? Not that I mind, but why didn't you just cast the charm yourself?'

'I'm far too tired to do any magic at the moment, Draco,' Aries replied, holding his head in his left hand. 'It always takes me at least a few hours to recuperate after gazing into the Stone.'

'You're too tired to do any magic?' Draco asked in concern. 'That can't be good. What if you use Parseltongue?'

Aries shook his head. 'I find that Parseltongue doesn't come to me as easily as it once did,' he replied. 'Ever since I began using the Stone, the Parseltongue seems to slip farther and farther away.' He glanced down at the cauldron. 'Stop,' he said, and Draco complied. Aries took a deep breath. 'Now levitate the cauldron onto a tripod and light a blue fire underneath it.'

It was well after midnight when Draco finally finished pouring the wine-

red Elixir into small diamond flasks - Aries had insisted that only diamond flasks were good enough to contain the Elixir of Life.

'How much gold did these flasks cost?' Draco asked in awe.

Harry smiled at his cousin. 'A single diamond flask costs upwards of twenty thousand Galleons.'

Draco dropped the flask he was holding, and it dented the stone floor.

'Where did you get the gold?' he demanded.

Harry shrugged. 'I had Mopsy use all the allowance I'd saved up to buy scrap metal. With the Philosopher's Stone to turn it into gold, that was just enough to pay for one diamond flask.'

'But there must be a hundred flasks here,' Draco protested.

'Fortunately, diamond flasks are eminently well-suited to the Duplication Charm,' Aries replied. He looked as though he were trying not to laugh.

For the umpteenth time that night, Draco's cheeks burned with embarrassment, and he quietly resumed his work. Once he was done filling the flasks, he placed all but two of them on an empty shelf. Of the other two, one he gave to his cousin, and one he slipped into the pocket of his own robes. Aries summoned Mopsy, and the elf Apparated them each to their own rooms.

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Chapter 85: Aries's Struggle

The feather bed was warm and comfortable, and Draco was exhausted, but he found that couldn't sleep at all. He tossed and turned, but all he

could think of was Aries' exhausted face, and the cry of pain he had let out after several minutes of holding the Stone.

After breakfast the next morning, he took Aries into the drawing room alone and confronted him.

'I've been thinking about last night,' he began. 'I don't like the effect the Stone has on you.'

'What do you mean?' Aries asked coolly.

'You said it makes you feel tired, and I saw how much pain it caused you,' Draco said firmly. 'It makes you too weak to use magic, and it even makes it harder for you to use Parseltongue. It can't be good for you.'

'You don't understand, Draco,' Aries said wearily. 'When I look into the Stone, everything becomes clear. It's like seeing the daylight for the first time. How can I possibly give that up?'

Draco chewed his lower lip. 'I've heard how withdrawn you've been these several weeks,' he said. 'I've seen it myself.'

'I'm still dealing with Uncle Marius's death,' his cousin retorted defensively.

'I know,' Draco said. 'But I think it's more than that. You brighten up whenever you're talking about the Stone. For just a moment last night, I caught a glimpse of the cousin I know so well. But you don't care about anything else. That can't be healthy.' He paused. 'There's more,' he whispered. 'What colour are your eyes?'

'Blue,' Aries replied automatically. 'You know that.'

'They are now,' Draco agreed. 'And they are most of the time. But last night, after you gazed into the Stone, they turned bright green.'

Aries went pale. 'R-really?' he stammered in a high, nervous voice. 'That's odd.' He sat down in a high-backed armchair, looking utterly terrified.

'What's going on, Draco?'

'I don't know, Aries,' Draco said. 'The Stone is a very powerful magical object, and you are only eleven. Maybe you should leave it alone for a few years. We've made enough Elixir to take care of any emergencies.'

'I don't want to give up the Stone,' Aries replied. 'It's the most amazing thing I've ever seen.'

'I'm not asking you to give it up,' Draco said, placing a hand on his cousin's shoulder. 'Just take some time away from it. It will still be there when you're a bit older.'

Aries sighed. 'Maybe you're right,' he said. 'It does make me feel awfully tired.'

'I'm sure that when you're older you'll be able to deal with it better,' Draco said kindly.

Aries took a deep breath. 'All right, then. I'll have Mopsy put it into the laboratory for the time being. I'll tell her not to fetch it for anyone except us.'

The boy was as good as his word, but the results were not pleasant for anyone. He went from only caring about the Stone to not caring about anything, and he spent the remainder of the holiday in a terrible mood.

Draco tried to interest Aries with tales of what was going on at Hogwarts and how the Quidditch team were doing, but Aries grew sullen, and paid him little mind.

To make matters worse, he was sleeping poorly, so he became irritable and snappish, not only with Draco, but also with the other members of the family, and even with Mopsy, whom he had always adored. Everyone noticed, but no one except Draco knew the cause. Aries would glare at Draco accusingly whenever anyone mentioned the disturbing change in his behaviour, but Draco was adamant that his cousin keep his word.

Aries' reaction to separation from the Stone only served to confirm

Draco's opinion that the Stone was dangerous, and that Aries ought never to have been exposed to it at so young an age. Draco was beginning to wish devoutly that they had never stolen the dratted thing.

On the last day before he returned to Hogwarts, Draco gave Aries the diary.

'I think this might help you to feel better,' he said. 'It will give you the chance to vent as much as you like, and the diary's even enchanted to respond to you, so you'll feel like you're talking to a real person.'

Aries smirked. 'Only without making life miserable for everyone around me.'

'That's the general idea,' Draco replied with a grin.

'I'm sorry, Draco,' his cousin said glumly. 'I've been a terrible host.' Draco rolled his eyes. 'You nearly died a couple of months ago, Aries. I think I can overlook it. Just try to get better, all right?'

Aries smiled at him. 'I'll do my best.'

'And promise me you'll try the diary,' Draco went on. 'I really think it might help.'

'I promise,' Aries replied. 'Thanks for the get-well present.'

Draco laughed. 'Don't mention it.'

The next day, after Narcissa came by to collect Draco, Harry went upstairs to his bedroom and took out the diary. Having spent the better part of the last two months handling the most powerful magical object believed to exist, Harry knew instantly that what he held in his hands was no ordinary enchanted journal. It was a powerful magical object in its own right, and somehow, Harry got the sense that it contained something even more precious than the Philosopher's Stone.

He ran his fingers along the spine, and felt a sharp pain in his forehead. The pain was excruciating, but Harry found it relatively easy to ignore,

because he simultaneously felt a strange sense of exultation. The part of his mind that he used to speak Parseltongue, which had been strangely quiet over the past several weeks, had suddenly reasserted itself with a vengeance, and Harry felt alive and strong again. In some ways, this new feeling was similar to that of contemplating the Stone: Harry experienced an exhilarating clarity and sense of purpose. He smiled as it washed over him.

He found that he had missed it desperately.

At the same time, Harry could sense that there were major differences between the diary and the Stone. Gazing upon the Stone had always been accompanied by a sense of quiet sorrow, like the song of a phoenix in all the old stories, and Harry had always felt strangely small afterwards, as a small child might feel all alone in the middle of an enormous desert, with the infinite blackness of the starry firmament stretching overhead.

This new feeling was far more...pleasant. As he held the diary, Harry felt large and powerful, as though all the stars in the sky were nothing compared to him and his destiny. And whereas the Stone had all too often made Harry feel like a dirty little boy sticking his nose where it didn't belong, the diary felt as though it belonged with him. There was a kinship between them; they were alike in some fundamental way that Harry did not yet understand, but which he fully intended to explore.

He opened the diary and took out his quill.

This diary, and all its secrets, he wrote in his neat, elegant hand, are now the property of Aries Sirius Black, the true Heir of Slytherin.

His words vanished, and new words appeared in a different hand.

Hello, Aries Sirius Black. I am Tom Marvolo Riddle.

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Chapter 86: Summer Duels

Part 2

'I'll get you, Black!' Draco Malfoy shouted, firing a Stinging Hex at his cousin from atop his broomstick. It was the last week of summer, and the two boys had gone with Sirius to stay with Melania Black at the family chateau in the south of France. 'You ought to know better than to cross Lord Draco the Malevolent.'

Harry dodged the hex with ease, and fired off his own curse in response, a nasty little spell he had invented only a week before with a bit of help from his magical diary and the wizard whose memories it contained: Tom Riddle.

'Magnadoleo,' he whispered, and Draco cried out in pain, nearly falling from his broomstick.

'NO UNFORGIVABLES!' he shouted over his shoulder. 'That's always been the rule.'

'I didn't use an Unforgivable,' Harry replied smoothly, the edges of his lips twitching a bit.

Draco flew around and hovered directly in front of his cousin. His expression was livid.

'Yes, you did,' he growled. 'That was the Cruciatus, Aries. It hurts!'

'It wasn't the Cruciatus,' Harry insisted. 'It's a new spell I invented.' He smirked. 'Though I suppose it might have been inspired by the same principle.'

'You're not playing fair,' Draco snapped.

Harry yawned. 'All's fair in love and war. Besides, how is it any different from a Stinging Hex?'

'It hurts a hell of a lot worse!'

'That's a difference of degree, not kind,' Harry pointed out.

Draco sighed. He knew when he was beaten. 'Fine,' he said petulantly.

'But the gloves are coming off now.'

Harry let out a robust laugh. 'Good. I want you to try your best, cousin.

We'll see who's been stuck at Hogwarts and who's been home taking lessons with Aunt Cassie.'

Draco flew off, grumbling, and Harry gave chase. He was amused at his cousin's reaction to the curse. He and Riddle had specifically designed it to give pain without inflicting any damage or leaving any traces. Riddle thought that it might prove a useful way of controlling one's minions.

Harry didn't give much thought to minions at this point in his life, though he was always interested in gaining the edge in a friendly duel.

Draco swerved around and fired off a series of curses. Harry blocked most of them, but one got through, slashing a gash in his left arm.

'Damn you, Malfoy,' Harry swore, and fired off a Bone-Breaking Curse in response.

Draco executed a perfect flip, barely moving himself out of the way of Harry's curse. Unfortunately for him, he moved the tail of his broom directly into Harry's line of fire.

'Reducto!' Harry shouted, and the back of his cousin's broom exploded.

Draco hurtled towards the ground, and Harry dived to intercept him. He manoeuvred his broom into Draco's path, and his cousin landed roughly in Harry's waiting arms.

'I win, I think,' Harry said with a grin.

'Sod off, Aries,' Draco said bitterly. 'That was my new broom.'

Harry shrugged. 'I'm sure Granddad will buy you a new one.'

'He won't be happy about it.'

'Tell him we were duelling and I destroyed it,' Harry said nonchalantly. 'It will suddenly become a remarkable display of my prodigious talent.'

Draco scowled at his cousin, mostly because he knew Harry was exactly right.

Harry and Draco glided gently to the ground, where Sirius was waiting for them with a frown on his handsome features.

'You're bleeding, Aries,' he observed. 'And what happened to your broom, Draco?'

'Aries blasted it into oblivion,' Draco growled, hopping off his cousin's broomstick.

Sirius rolled his eyes. 'You two have been playing rough this summer,' he observed. 'You never used to cast anything so dangerous.'

'We're growing up, Dad,' Harry said. 'We've got to keep ourselves challenged.'

'Well, I suppose I can't argue with that,' his dad replied. 'Though I wish you'd be more careful with each other. If I didn't know better, I'd get the idea that you didn't much like each other.'

Harry laughed, but Draco scowled at him. Sirius sighed and waved his wand, instantly healing Harry's cut.

'Unfortunately, your broomstick won't be so easy to fix,' he said to Draco.

'Aries will buy you a new one out of his allowance.'

Harry groaned, but knew better than to complain. He supposed it was fair. He had purposely destroyed his cousin's broomstick. Draco, for his part, brightened up considerably after Sirius's announcement and shook hands with his cousin.

'Congratulations, Aries,' he said. 'That was an excellent duel.'

'Thank you, Draco,' Harry responded graciously. 'You put up quite a fight.'

Once it was clear that everyone was once again on amicable terms, Sirius Summoned two broomsticks from the chateau, handing one to Draco and mounting the other.

'So, who's up for a race?' he asked as he floated into the sky. 'Brooms only. No wands allowed.'

Harry and Draco exchanged grins and followed Sirius into the air.

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Chapter 87: Asserting Authority

On September 1, Sirius and Narcissa took Harry and Draco to King's Cross in order to catch the Hogwarts Express. Sirius gave his son a long hug before taking him aside for a private chat.

'I'm glad to see you're doing better after what happened with Uncle Marius,' he said quietly. 'But are you sure you're ready to go back to school?'

'I'll be fine,' the boy replied casually. 'Life goes on, right? Besides, you've stationed Granddad and Uncle Moony there to spy on me, so I shan't be able to go around provoking duels with Dark Lords in disguise.'

Sirius laughed. 'Well, try not to give either one of them too hard a time, all right?'

'I'll do my best,' Harry replied with a smirk.

His dad ruffled his hair. 'I know,' he said. 'That's what worries me.'

Harry gave a hug to his aunt and then he and his cousin boarded the train, making their way through the crowded corridor to their favourite compartment. Four sixth-year Hufflepuffs were already sitting there.

Harry opened the door and leaned casually against the frame.

'Get out,' he commanded, in the same tone Pollux had always used with recalcitrant house elves. 'This is our compartment.'

'Says who?' demanded a burly boy with brown hair.

'Me, of course,' Harry retorted.

'And who are you?' asked a blonde girl.

Harry stared at her incredulously. 'Who am I?' he snorted. 'I am Aries Sirius Black, only son to Sirius Black by his late wife Regina Malfoy, heir to the fortune of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black. Who are you?'

'Come on, Aries,' Draco muttered. 'We can find somewhere else to sit.'

'No, Draco,' Harry insisted. 'We will not be pushed around by a bunch of Hufflepuff peasants. This is our compartment.'

'We were here first,' said the burly boy.

Harry rolled his eyes. 'Like I care. You have thirty seconds to vacate the compartment before I curse you all into oblivion.'

'There's four of us, and only two of you,' pointed out the blonde girl.

'Not to mention we're sixth-years,' added the redhead sitting next to her.

'Fine,' Harry said. 'Have it your way.' He brandished his wand and Transfigured the burly boy into a baboon. Another flick, and the blonde girl was a parakeet. Harry smiled at the remaining Hufflepuffs.

'Shall I continue?' he asked courteously.

Moments later, the compartment was empty, and Harry and Draco moved in to take possession.

'One must always be firm with the rabble, Draco,' Harry said as he

stowed his trunk. 'If one gives them an inch, they'll always take a mile.

Riddle says that the secret to obtaining and maintaining power is to make it absolutely clear from the beginning just who's master.'

'Who's Riddle?' Draco asked curiously as he took out a couple of Chocolate Frogs from his trunk. He tossed one to Harry, who caught it easily.

'Oh, just someone who wrote a book I've been reading,' Harry replied, and bit off the head of his frog.

A few minutes later, Daphne Greengrass and Pansy Parkinson appeared at the door. Draco jumped to his feet, but Harry lounged back casually in his chair.

'Hello, boys,' Pansy said. 'Did you two have a good summer?'

'Yes, thank you,' Draco replied, but Harry laughed.

'How could it possibly have been enjoyable without the benefit of female companionship?' he said. 'Come sit by me, Daphne, and tell us all about what you've been up to.'

Daphne looked at Harry strangely, but did as he told her. She sat at the edge of the seat next to his, being careful to maintain very good posture.

Pansy giggled and sat down next to Draco.

'My family and I spent the summer in Majorca,' Daphne began. 'My sister Astoria and I had a grand time. We've never been to Majorca before. The weather was simply marvellous. What did you do?'

'Oh, Draco and I always spend the summer with my great-grandmother at our chateau in France,' Harry replied.

'You have a chateau in France?' Pansy exclaimed. 'That must be wonderful.'

Harry shrugged. 'It's nice enough. The food is always fantastic. Granny has very exacting standards.'

'What did you do there?' Daphne asked.

'We played Quidditch,' Draco replied. 'Then we had several hex wars.

Aries smashed my new broom to bits, and his dad made him buy me another one.'

Harry turned and gave his cousin a glare. 'Well, if you hadn't been so stupid as to fly your broom right into my line of fire, I'd never have got a clean shot.'

'What's this I hear, George?' Fred Weasley's voice came from the corridor.

He stuck his head of flaming red hair through the door, and his twin brother joined him after a second.

'It's sounds as though there's a bit of dissension within the Dynamic Duo,' George said, a grin on his face.

'It's good news for us,' Fred went on. 'We may finally be able to reclaim our rightful dominance.'

Harry and Draco laughed.

'Dream on, Weasleys,' Harry said. 'You can either join us, or be crushed.'

'We favour the take-no-prisoners approach to warfare,' Draco warned drily.

George smirked. 'So we've heard. We saw what you did to poor Gregory Zeller.'

'What did he ever do to you?' Fred asked. 'A baboon? Really?'

Harry chuckled. 'He was sitting in my seat.'

The twins looked both impressed and a bit wary.

'Remind us never to get on your bad side,' George said.

'Won't you introduce us to your friends, Draco?' Pansy asked pointedly.

'Oh, I'm sorry, Pansy,' Draco said. 'These are Fred and George Weasley.

Fred and George, these are our friends Pansy Parkinson and her cousin Daphne Greengrass.'

'Nice to meet you,' Fred said.

'You're in Slytherin, aren't you?' George asked.

'Yes,' Daphne replied coolly. 'Does that bother you?'

The twins shrugged.

'Not really,' Fred said.

'Any friend of Aries and Draco is a friend of ours,' George added.

Just then, Ron Weasley passed by the compartment.

'Just wait till Mum finds out what you said,' he said huffily to his brothers. 'She told you this summer not to have anything more to do with them.'

'Bugger off, Ron,' Fred snapped.

'And you better not say anything to Mum, or Aries might Transfigure you into a baboon,' George threatened.

Harry laughed. 'Don't insult me, George. For Ronniekins, I should think I could come up with something much more...creative.'

The twins smirked and glared at their younger brother.

'You'd better watch out, Ron,' Fred said. 'Aries is one scary bloke.'

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Chapter 88: Guidance and

Governance

That evening after the Sorting Feast, Remus stopped Harry just before he left the Great Hall.

'Move along, Draco,' he said to the blond boy. 'I just have a small matter

to discuss with Aries.'

Draco nodded and joined the mass of students heading up to Gryffindor Tower. Remus led Harry to his office.

'Congratulations on the new job, Uncle Moony,' Harry said once they were inside and he was comfortably seated in an overstuffed armchair.

'Thank you, Aries,' Remus said, pouring them each a cup of tea. 'Of course, you and I both know that my task here is about loads more than just teaching Transfiguration. I'm mostly here to help keep an eye on you.'

'I know,' Harry replied with a long sigh, and took a sip of his tea.

Remus raised an eyebrow. 'Of course, your dad and I do know what it's like to be twelve, and I have received explicit instructions from certain individuals not to do anything that might keep "boys from being boys."'

Harry chuckled. 'That's a relief. I was beginning to worry how I'd manage any mischief with a former Marauder as my Head of House.'

'Do make an effort to keep things beneath my notice,' Remus warned. 'If you're too blatant, I'm afraid I'll have to take action.'

'I do like a bit of a challenge,' Harry said cockily.

The edges of Remus's mouth twitched slightly. 'Is that why I heard this evening that you took on four sixth-years on the Hogwarts Express?'

'They were sitting in our compartment,' Harry said defensively. 'And I gave them plenty of warning. You can ask Draco.'

'Still, I'm afraid I have to take five points from Gryffindor for your actions,' Remus said. His tone was stern, but his eyes twinkled.

'Transfiguring older students so you can steal their seats is not appropriate behaviour.'

'Yes, sir,' Harry said evenly.

'It was, however, very impressive work,' the new Transfiguration master

continued. 'I've never seen anything like it from a second-year. I'll give you five points for the baboon, and ten for the parakeet. Human-to-monkey's not so difficult, but human-to-bird is truly brilliant.'

Harry smiled. 'Thanks, Uncle Moony.'

'Now run along up to your dormitory,' Remus said. 'And don't hesitate to come to me if you run into any trouble this year.'

'I shan't,' Harry promised. 'Good night.'

'Good night, Aries.'

.....

Late that night, after everyone else was asleep, Harry sat up behind his bed curtains, writing in his diary. He found Tom Riddle to be an utterly fascinating individual. He knew better than to trust him, of course - what fool would trust some random book that could speak for itself? - but he felt that he could make use of him to learn the secrets that the diary clearly possessed.

So, Black, are you going to seek out the Chamber of Secrets this year, as I suggested? Riddle wrote.

Harry groaned. How you do go on about that, Riddle! he wrote back. One would almost think you had some sort of vested interest in my visiting the Chamber.

You are the Heir of Slytherin, Riddle replied, and Harry could almost hear the mocking tone. Or at least that's what you claim.

Shut up, Riddle. I may be the Heir of Slytherin, but I have no desire to set his monster loose on all the Muggleborns. They're not all as bad as all that.

They're filthy blights on the wizarding world, that's what they are! Riddle wrote back angrily. They don't deserve to live.

Harry chuckled. Strange to hear stuff like that coming from you, Riddle,

he wrote. Especially since I've never heard of any pureblood family with your surname. Was your dad a Muggleborn?

There was a long pause before Riddle finally wrote back.

You don't know anything about my father.

Harry laughed aloud. He was, wasn't he? What is it with all these half-bloods becoming blood supremacists? It's like you all think you have something to prove. There's you, of course, and Snape - he was a Death Eater - and then there's Voldemort himself.

There was another long pause.

Voldemort? Who's that, Black?

A half-blood bastard with an over-inflated ego, Harry wrote back. He thought he was the Heir of Slytherin and set himself up as a Dark Lord awhile back. Pretty impressive too, I must say. He nearly killed me last time we fought. Of course, the first time we fought I nearly killed him, so I suppose that makes us even.

If you're really so powerful, why don't you become a Dark Lord yourself? Riddle asked.

All my family want me to, Harry wrote. Except for my dad and cousin. I think they'd rather I didn't go mad and start murdering Muggles for fun. I've always thought it sounded like too much work with not enough reward. Why make all those enemies and have to live in hidden fortresses and such when one can just get along with people and play Quidditch and spend lots of gold?

Harry sensed a flash of amusement from the diary, and his forehead began to ache. He ignored the discomfort. His head had been hurting off and on ever since he had first encountered the diary. He supposed it was because it was such a powerful magical object. The Philosopher's Stone had caused him pain too, though in rather a different way.

Maybe you don't want to be a Dark Lord because you've never realised what it would really be like, Riddle wrote. Haven't you ever imagined having the entire world tremble at the sound of your name? Just think of it, Black, you could fix everything. You could put an end to people like that annoying Ron Weasley and his friend Finnegan, and those idiot Hufflepuffs. You could teach all us uppity half-bloods our proper place. Everyone would know who you are.

Aunt Clytemnestra always says that if someone doesn't know who a Black is, that someone isn't worth knowing, Harry shot back. Anyway, I'm tired. I'm going to bed now.

Good night, Black.

Good night, Riddle.

Harry slipped the diary beneath his pillow and went to sleep. That night, as on most nights since he had begun to write in the diary, he had a very strange dream.

He was sitting on a throne-like chair in the centre of a dark room. A group of wizards in robes and masks knelt before him and kissed the edge of his robes.

'Well?' Harry demanded in a cold, cruel voice that sounded vaguely familiar. 'What news from our operation in Sussex?'

'Success, my lord,' said the leader of the masked wizards. He sounded very much like Uncle Lucius. Harry supposed that it might be Draco as an adult. 'Caractacus Weasley will no longer be a thorn in your side.'

Harry felt a thrill of delight. 'Well done,' he said. 'You will be rewarded for your faithful service to your master. What of the attack in York? Nott?'

Another of the wizards bowed his head and stepped backwards.

'M-my lord,' he stammered. 'Dumbledore arrived at the last minute. He

was too much for us. We had to leave.'

Harry narrowed his eyes at the unfortunate wizard in front of him. 'Did you at least manage to assassinate Crouch at his speech? That was the whole point of the endeavour, after all.'

Nott hung his head. 'No, my lord. I beg your forgiveness.'

'That's all the more unfortunate for you, Nott,' Harry drawled. 'You should know by now that I do not forgive. Crucio!'

Nott collapsed to the floor in agony, and Harry let out a long, exhilarated cackle.

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Chapter 89: The Unforgivable

Innovation

'You are entitled to your opinion, Mr Black,' he said. 'However, as I said to Miss Granger, you are not an expert, and I don't really care what you think. Ten points from Gryffindor.'

That settled, he went on with his lecture. Harry was far too clever, however, to consider the matter closed, and was completely unsurprised when his grandfather asked him to stay after class.

'I will not tolerate disrespect from you, Aries,' Abraxas said sternly.

'I meant none, Granddad,' Harry replied earnestly.

'Then what is your basis for disagreeing with those who know better than you? Why do you think it possible to improve on the Unforgivables?'

'I've done it,' Harry said simply.

Abraxas's eyes nearly burst out of their sockets. 'What do you mean, you've improved on the Unforgivables?'

'I've done some work on the Cruciatus Curse,' Harry explained. 'It tends to cause secondary damage in the victim, as well as leaving numerous traces that make it easy to detect. I created a different pain-inducing curse over the summer, based on the same basic principles as the Cruciatus. I haven't tested it at full strength yet, but the preliminary trials have been most promising.'

His grandfather stared at him curiously. 'Write up your research,' he told Harry. 'I should very much like to see what you've done. If you're right, that would utterly revolutionise one of our foundational presuppositions.'

'Yes, sir,' Harry said, and turned to leave. He stopped at the door and turned back. 'By the way, Granddad, have you ever heard of someone named Tom Riddle?'

Abraxas went deathly pale. 'Where did you learn that name?' he demanded.

'I read it somewhere,' Harry replied truthfully. 'Who is it?'

'No one you need concern yourself with, my boy,' Abraxas replied abruptly. 'Just a boy who was a couple of years behind me at school.'

That piqued Harry's interest. He had no idea why his grandfather was being so evasive.

'Thanks, Granddad,' he said, and made his way to lunch, privately resolving to find out exactly who this Tom Riddle fellow was, and why his grandfather was so hesitant to talk about him.

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A few weeks into term, Abraxas and Remus met up with Sirius and Cassiopeia at the Three Broomsticks in order to discuss Harry's progress. Sirius ordered firewhisky for all the men, and gillywater for Cassiopeia.

'Very well, gentlemen,' he began after casting a muffling charm around their table. 'How's Aries doing?'

'He's back on the Quidditch team,' Remus said. 'Wood's thrilled about that. He got into a bit of trouble with some sixth-years on the Hogwarts Express, but he proved more than up to the challenge.'

'What did he do?' Sirius asked.

'He Transfigured a boy into a baboon and a girl into a parakeet because he wanted their compartment,' Remus said, shaking his head. 'I was probably too soft on him, but it reminded me very much of the sort of thing you or James might have done.'

Sirius chuckled. 'What else?'

'Snape blames Aries for Dumbledore's departure, and has been taking it out on him pretty strongly,' Remus said.

'Slimy git,' Sirius muttered.

'He also has dropped some fairly large hints that he suspects Aries of being deeply involved in the Dark Arts,' the werewolf went on.

Cassiopeia sniffed. 'As though that were a bad thing.'

'Filthy half-blood,' Abraxas snorted. 'It's a disgrace that he's Head of Slytherin House.'

'That aside,' Sirius interrupted, 'have you any more news about Aries?'

Remus shook his head. 'He gets along with some of his classmates, but not with others. He plays pranks in his spare time. He doesn't study much but seems to do well in all his classes. He's a Marauder, Padfoot.'

'I'm afraid I must disagree with you somewhat, Professor Lupin,' Abraxas said. 'Aries may be a "Marauder", as you put it, but there are other things going on. I think he's playing his cards very close to his chest.'

'What else would you expect from the heir of the House of Black?'

Cassiopeia asked wryly. 'He's been specially bred for slyness.'

'You're right, of course,' Abraxas replied, taking a long sip of firewhisky.

'But I am nonetheless intrigued by his behaviour. The other day he informed me that he has invented a refined and improved version of the Cruciatus Curse.'

Cassiopeia cackled with glee, but Remus and Sirius spewed their firewhisky all over the table.

'I hardly object to that line of research, of course,' Abraxas went on. 'I asked him to write a paper describing his findings, and they appear to be sound. I should like your opinion, Cassiopeia.'

'Naturally,' the witch replied.

'You may approve, Dad,' Sirius said, 'but I don't much like the idea that my son has been secretly developing improved Unforgivables under my nose.' He sighed. 'I suppose he has been acting strangely of late, a bit colder, but I attributed that to Uncle Marius's death.'

'Don't worry, Sirius,' Cassiopeia said, patting his arm. 'We all have to go through this phase before we become adepts of special magic. There's nothing to be concerned about.'

'Actually, dear lady, there is,' Abraxas continued with a frown. 'At the same meeting in which Aries informed me of his new discovery, he asked me whether I knew anything about Tom Riddle.'

Remus and Sirius stared at Abraxas blankly, but Cassiopeia only narrowed her grey eyes.

'That is disturbing,' she said.

'Who's Tom Riddle?' Sirius asked.

'Tom Riddle is the birth name of the Dark Lord,' Abraxas explained. 'It is known only to a very select group of his closest followers. I, myself, had to pay a very high price before I learnt that the Dark Lord was in fact my old school fellow.'

'Did you tell Aries this?' Remus asked.

'I did not,' Abraxas replied. 'I see no reason to toss around such dangerous knowledge. My concern is simply as to why Aries was asking about it in the first place.'

'Did he give no explanation?' Cassiopeia asked.

'None,' Abraxas sniffed. 'He claimed that he had read it somewhere.'

Sirius stroked his beard pensively. 'He was nearly killed by Voldemort several months ago. Maybe he's trying to learn more about him.'

'I don't think that's it,' Abraxas said, shaking his head. 'The way he asked made me think that he hadn't any idea who it really was that he was asking about.'

'Keep your eyes and ears open,' Sirius said. 'Maybe we can find out some hint of what he's up to.'

'Aren't you going to ask him about it?' Remus asked.

'I trust my son, Moony,' Sirius said. 'He'll come to me if he needs to. I don't want to be overprotective.'

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Chapter 90: A Dangerous

Revelation

That evening, Sirius, Cassiopeia and Clytemnestra sat quietly in the drawing room of Windermere Court. Clytemnestra was playing some Beethoven quietly on the piano, whilst Sirius read a mystery novel and Cassiopeia looked over Harry's essay.

'This is really very impressive work, Sirius,' she commented. 'I've never seen anything so advanced from a twelve-year-old. I don't know whether his new curse is capable of the same power as the Cruciatus, but it's certainly an intriguing idea.'

'What have I done wrong?' Sirius moaned. 'He's the perfect Black.'

'Watch the whinging, Sirius,' Clytemnestra said from the piano. 'Besides, there's nothing wrong with being the perfect Black.'

'James and Lily would kill me, you know,' Sirius said. 'I've raised their son to be the sort of boy who works on improving the Unforgivables for fun.'

'I doubt you had very much to do with that, dear,' Cassiopeia said. 'Don't forget, you've only been out of prison for a couple of years. I've been tutoring him for much longer than that.'

Sirius rolled his eyes. 'I can't believe I went along with it.'

'It's not as though you had much choice,' Cassiopeia snapped. 'You had either to go along with my plan or allow Dumbledore to send potentially the most powerful wizard in centuries to live with those wretched Muggles.'

'Good point,' Sirius conceded. 'I just wish it hadn't come to this.'

'You worry too much, Sirius,' Clytemnestra said. 'There's nothing wrong with a good theoretical grasp of special magic. Even dear Marius liked to dabble in the theory.'

'Precisely, Clytemnestra,' Cassiopeia replied. 'Why, I...' She trailed off and held her hand to her head. 'My head,' she moaned. 'It hurts.' After a moment, she collapsed in her chair. Sirius and Clytemnestra jumped up and ran to her side. She was very pale and clammy. Sirius checked her pulse.

'It's very weak,' he said. 'We need to get her to St Mungo's now. MOPSY!'

The house elf appeared in the drawing room and bowed. 'Yes, Master Sirius?'

'Pop over to St Mungo's and get a Healer at once,' Sirius commanded.

'Miss Cassie is very ill.'

Mopsy paused. 'Is Miss Cassie being in mortal danger, Master Sirius?'

'Possibly!' Sirius snapped. 'So hurry!'

'Just a moment, Master,' Mopsy said, and vanished. She reappeared a moment later with a brilliant flask of wine-red liquid. She handed it to Sirius. 'Master Aries commanded Mopsy to fetch this if ever any of the family were being in mortal danger, Master Sirius,' she said timidly.

'Master Aries is saying it will be curing any illness.'

Sirius had only a split second to decide. Cassiopeia seemed to be fading fast. He swore and popped the top off the flask, then raised it to Cassiopeia's lips and poured the whole thing down her throat. Within seconds, colour returned to her cheeks and she began to stir.

'What happened?' she asked, smacking her lips.

'I'm not sure,' Sirius said quietly, staring at the empty flask. 'Where did you get this, Mopsy?'

'Mopsy is fetching the Elixir from Master Aries' secret laboratory,' the house elf said dutifully.

'Did Master Aries make this?' Cassiopeia asked. Her voice was quite strong, and Sirius thought she seemed a bit younger than she had before. She had fewer wrinkles, and her hair was slightly darker.

'Yes, Miss Cassie,' Mopsy said.

'How?' Sirius demanded.

'Mopsy isn't supposed to be telling anyone, Master Sirius,' the elf replied.

'Master Aries has explicitly forbidden Mopsy from telling.'

'Well, I order you to tell me,' Sirius said.

Mopsy shook her head. 'Mopsy is belonging to Master Aries,' she said.

'Mopsy is having to obey him first of all.'

'You blasted elf!' Sirius growled, but Clytemnestra placed her hand gently on his arm.

'Just a moment, Sirius,' she said, before rising from her chair and going over to where Mopsy stood. Clytemnestra crouched down beside her.

'You're a very good elf, Mopsy, to keep your master's secrets so well,' she said. 'And Master Aries must be a very powerful wizard, to be able to brew such a medicine. Did Master Aries tell you the name of the medicine he brewed?'

'Yes, Mistress,' Mopsy said.

'Did your Master forbid you to tell us the name of the medicine?'

'No, Mistress.'

'What is it?' Clytemnestra asked with a smile.

'Master Aries is calling it the Elixir of Life,' the elf replied dutifully.

'Thank you, Mopsy,' her mistress said. 'You're a good elf. You may go.'

Mopsy bowed and vanished.

'That explains it, Sirius,' Cassiopeia said, her eyes gleaming. The wizard frowned in response.

Clytemnestra shook her head. 'I can't believe it. Aries brewed the Elixir of Life? But where would he get a Philosopher's Stone?'

Sirius began to pace back and forth across the room. 'Fact: for all his talent, Harry is not talented enough to create a Stone on his own.'

'Are you sure of that?' Clytemnestra asked.

'Yes,' Cassiopeia snapped. 'To create a Philosopher's Stone requires decades of perseverance. There simply hasn't been enough time.'

'Furthermore, the practice of "special magic" is generally considered to be incompatible with the creation of the Stone,' Sirius pointed out.

'You seem to know an awful lot about the Stone, Sirius,' Clytemnestra observed.

Her nephew chuckled. 'After my parents disowned me, I briefly contemplated making a Philosopher's Stone to resolve my money troubles. I gave it up when I realised how much work was involved, but not before I'd done a good bit of research on the subject.'

'Fact,' Cassiopeia said. 'The only known Stone was in the position of Nicolas Flamel.'

'Fact: the Flamels were both murdered by an unknown Dark wizard shortly after Harry's confrontation with Voldemort,' Sirius added.

'There's no way Aries could have obtained the Stone after they were murdered,' Clytemnestra said. 'He was in hospital for weeks, and then here for weeks after that.'

'Which means that he had to have obtained the Stone before his confrontation with Voldemort.' Sirius lit up a cigarette. For once, the ladies didn't complain about him smoking in the house.

'But if the Dark Lord was the one who killed the Flamels, as seems likely,' Cassiopeia mused, 'then he too must have had an interest in the Philosopher's Stone.'

'Of course,' Sirius said. 'If Voldemort's a disembodied spirit, he would do anything to obtain the Elixir of Life.'

'But if he wanted the Elixir of Life, why didn't he go to the Flamels directly?' Clytemnestra asked. 'Why waste his time at Hogwarts?'

'Voldemort wanted the Stone,' Sirius thought aloud. 'He was at Hogwarts. Harry somehow got the Stone. He was at Hogwarts. There's only one possible conclusion.'

Cassiopeia nodded. 'The Stone too was at Hogwarts. Dumbledore and Flamel were friends. Flamel must have suspected that someone would try

to steal the Stone and given it to Dumbledore for protection.'

'Harry figured it out somehow,' Sirius added. 'I'll bet he had Draco's help.

They stole the Stone.' He snorted. 'Probably thought of it as a brilliant prank.'

'But somehow the Dark Lord found out,' Cassiopeia said.

'And that's why he attacked Aries,' Clytemnestra finished.

Sirius sighed and sat down hard on the sofa. 'I may have to confront him about this after all.'

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Chapter 91: Secrets and

Confessions

'Fred! Keep your eyes on the Bludgers!' Wood shouted. 'That one nearly hit Alicia!'

Harry rolled his eyes. The Gryffindor Quidditch team were practising in a very heavy downpour. It was no wonder the Bludger had nearly hit Alicia —it was nearly impossible to see even to the edge of one's own broomstick. As for finding the Snitch, Harry might as well have been searching for a flea on a hippogriff.

They sat out in the rain for another half-hour before Wood finally conceded that it was time to them to go in. The team let out a collective sigh of relief at the announcement, and gathered up all the balls. Just as they landed, however, Katie Bell let out a screech.

'It's a Grim!' she shouted, pointing towards an enormous black dog who

sat in the stands, completely drenched by the falling rain. Harry laughed.

'That's no Grim,' he said. 'That's my pet dog.'

'What's your dog doing at school, Aries?' George Weasley asked.

'My dad must have brought him,' Harry replied, setting off towards the stands. 'I'll go see if he's around.'

'Shall we wait for you?' Fred asked.

'Nah,' Harry replied. 'You go back up to the castle. I'll see you all later.'

The rest of the team made the long trek back indoors, whilst Harry climbed up the steps to where Sirius was sitting. He was wearing a wide, doggy grin, and his tail was wagging vigorously.

'What are you doing out here in the rain?' Harry asked, scratching his dad behind the ears.

Sirius let out a loud bark and leapt to his feet. He motioned for Harry to follow him with a jerk of his head. Harry sighed and set off after his father. Sirius led Harry to the Whomping Willow, where he crept on his stomach to the trunk and pressed a small knob. The Willow ceased its whomping, and Sirius led his son into a tunnel.

'Where are we going, Dad?' Harry asked.

The dog barked once, but did not stop. Eventually they came to the end of the tunnel and passed through a trapdoor into an abandoned house.

Sirius shook himself dry and transformed back into a human.

'Welcome to the Shrieking Shack,' he said. 'I thought we could talk here for a bit. It brings back a lot of happy memories.'

'If you fancied a chat, why didn't you just collect me in the Great Hall like a normal parent?' Harry asked cheekily.

'Because I'm not a normal, boring parent,' Sirius replied, sitting himself down on a dusty sofa. 'And this seemed like much more fun.'

Harry smiled and sat down next to his dad. 'All right, then. What did you

want to talk about?'

'First, I wanted to let you know that Aunt Cassie came down suddenly with a severe case of Cranial Cramps,' Sirius began.

Harry's eyes widened in concern. 'Cranial Cramps? But those can be serious! Is she all right?'

'She nearly died,' Sirius said soberly. 'But she's perfectly well now, thanks to Mopsy and the Elixir of Life she brought.'

'That's good,' Harry said with relief, and then realised what exactly Sirius had said. 'Oh. So that's why you want to talk.'

'Partly,' Sirius replied. 'Harry, when were you going to tell me that you'd stolen a Philosopher's Stone?'

'How do you know I stole it?' Harry shot back defensively. 'I might have made it. Why do you always jump to the worst conclusions?'

Sirius only sighed and looked at the boy sadly. 'What's the third rule, Harry?'

Harry looked down at his toes. 'I'm sorry, Dad.' He took a deep breath.

'Yes, I took the Philosopher's Stone.'

'Why?' Sirius asked. 'Did you and Draco think it would be a fun prank?'

'That's why Draco went along with it,' Harry replied. 'But it was my idea. I wanted the Stone so that no one else in our family would ever have to die.'

Sirius raised his eyebrows. He honestly had not expected that answer.

'But Uncle Marius hadn't died yet when you took the Stone,' he pointed out.

'No, but both Great-Granddad and Great-Grandfather had died within a year of each other,' Harry replied. 'I didn't want to lose anyone else.'

'Why didn't you tell me, Harry?' Sirius asked. 'I thought we trusted each other.'

'I suppose that part of me was scared that you'd make me give it back,'

Harry said quietly.

'If the Flamels were still alive, you'd be right,' Sirius said. 'But they're gone, and I refuse to hand the Stone over to Dumbledore. He's dangerous enough without it.'

'I also didn't want too many people to know the secret,' Harry said. 'I thought that if too many people knew about the Stone it would attract attention.'

Sirius laughed. 'And so you ended up telling too few,' he said. 'If you had told me in the beginning, we could have kept it between you, me and Draco.'

'Don't forget Mopsy,' Harry added.

'And Mopsy,' Sirius corrected. 'But I had to figure it out on my own, and now Aunt Cassie and Aunt Clytemnestra know too.'

Harry winced. 'You're right. I should have told you sooner. If I had, maybe you could even have managed to use the Stone to save Uncle Marius.'

Sirius put a hand on Harry's shoulder. 'I wasn't going to bring that up, but you're right, of course.'

'I fouled up,' Harry said dully.

'Indeed,' his dad replied. 'It happens to the best of us. But what lesson have you learnt from this misadventure?'

'Don't keep secrets from you,' Harry mumbled. 'You'll figure it out anyway.'

'Exactly,' Sirius replied. 'I thought you had learnt that lesson when you crashed my broomstick.'

'It looked all right after that Reparo,' Harry protested.

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Chapter 92: A Shocking

Revelation

Sirius snorted. 'But it flew worse than a dying hen.' He paused. 'Now, are there any other secrets you wanted to tell me?'

Harry thought for a second. He didn't particularly want to tell his dad about the diary. He rather thought that Sirius wouldn't approve of it, and he didn't want to give it up. He didn't think that Sirius could have figured it out, but, then again, Harry hadn't thought Sirius would ever have been able to find out about the Philosopher's Stone. And there was something about the way Sirius was asking. He had his lower lip curled the way he always did when he was asking a question to which there he was expecting a very particular answer. Harry took a deep breath.

'Yes,' he said. 'At Easter, Draco gave me a diary. He thought I was becoming obsessed with the Stone, and he thought it might help me to deal with my feelings over Uncle Marius's death. It's really a wicked diary. It writes back, you see.'

'It writes back?' Sirius asked. 'Jokes and whatnot?'

Harry shook his head. 'No, it's like a real person. Riddle and I have actual discussions. He's helped me with my research, and he's given me loads of brilliant ideas.'

Sirius looked as though he had seen a ghost. 'Was this Riddle the one who helped you improve the Cruciatus Curse?' he asked coldly.

Harry nodded eagerly. 'Granddad says my work is revolutionary. He

thinks...'

'Do you know who Tom Riddle is, Harry?' Sirius asked evenly.

'No,' Harry said, shaking his head. 'Granddad does, though, but he won't tell me. He must be a very powerful wizard, though. I thought that perhaps if I could find him, we might be able to work together.'

Sirius grabbed Harry by the shoulders roughly. 'Are you out of your bloody mind?' he shouted.

'D-dad, what's going on?' Harry stammered. 'You're frightening me.'

'Well, you're sure as hell frightening the shit out of me!' Sirius shot back.

'You know who Riddle is, don't you?' Harry said in a small voice.

Sirius scowled. 'Tom Riddle is the scum who murdered your parents, and damn near murdered you.'

'You mean the Dark Lord?' Harry whispered, all blood draining from his face. 'I've been plotting and joking and doing research with the Dark Lord?'

'I can't believe you'd do something so stupid,' Sirius went on, rising from the sofa and beginning to pace. 'Who knows what kinds of Dark magic Voldemort put into that bloody thing? You could have been killed, or even possessed!'

'I'm sorry, Dad,' Harry said. He had never seen Sirius so angry. 'I fouled up.'

'You're damn right you fouled up!' Sirius retorted. He picked up a rickety old chair and smashed it against the wall. 'I should have seen this coming. You've been different all summer. I just thought it had something to do with Uncle Marius's death, but no, you were having a grand old time refining Unforgivables with the bastard who killed him!'

Tears began to stream down Harry's face. 'I'm sorry, Dad,' he sobbed. 'I didn't know.'

'And what was Draco thinking, giving you a cursed object like that?'

Sirius went on obliviously. 'Where would he even find something that belonged to Voldemort?' The realisation struck him like a bolt of lightning, and he fell silent. Sirius set his jaw and narrowed his eyes dangerously. 'Harry,' he said quietly. 'Take me to your dormitory. I want the diary.'

Harry sniffed and nodded. He led Sirius back through the tunnel up to the castle. They dripped water and mud all over Filch's clean floor, but the old Squib didn't dare to say anything once he caught the feral glint in Sirius's eye. They went up to Gryffindor Tower, and Harry ran up to fetch the diary. Draco was in the Common Room talking with the Weasley twins. He started when he saw his uncle, and frowned at the upset look he had seen on Harry's face.

'What's wrong, Uncle Sirius?' the blond boy asked hesitantly. 'Is everything all right?'

Sirius took a deep breath and closed his eyes. 'Yes or no, Draco. Did your father tell you to give that diary to Aries?'

Draco paused. His father hadn't wanted anyone to know, but he couldn't lie to Uncle Sirius, not when he asked a direct question.

He nodded. 'Yes, Uncle Sirius.'

Sirius made no response, but stood there clenching and unclenching his fists. Harry came down a moment later with the diary. Sirius snatched it from his hands and stuffed it in his pocket.

'You two stay here,' he commanded. 'I have business to attend to.'

He turned around on his heel and stormed out of the Common Room.

Draco looked at Harry curiously.

'What's going on, Aries?' he asked in confusion. 'Is Uncle Sirius upset because the diary isn't technically legal?'

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