

Amicus Draconis: 1st Cycle - Cycle of the Badger

by Yamato

In the Trio's seventh year, the wizarding world has lost its second war against the Dark Lord. The Death Eaters conquered Hogwarts, defeated the Order of the Phoenix and overthrew the Ministry of Magic. Forming a new government with Voldemort as the supreme ruler, they take control of Wizarding Europe, spreading terror and destruction everywhere. Harry and his friends are forced into hiding, but far from giving up hope they form their own secret rebellion trying to save as many people as possible. In four cycles, Amicus Draconis tells the story of a world shattered and rebuilt throughout three wizarding wars, of two masterminds moving people like figures on a chessboard, and a boy torn between his destiny and his one true love.

00. The Trailer

Chapter 1 of 12

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Author's Note: "Greetings to all ye witches and wizards and welcome to the English version of *Amicus Draconis*, one of the old classics in German HP fanfiction. I sincerely hope you'll enjoy this story, and I'm looking forward to receiving your feedback. Also, I'd like to thank my betas, Notsosaintly, Ellie & Arsinyk, for their magnificent work.

So, what can you expect from a trailer in terms of fanfiction? Is it the same thing as a prologue? Let's find out! Close your eyes for a moment and imagine you're not in front of your computer and I'm not talking to you from out of the screen, but we're both sitting inside an old-fashioned movie theatre. Low lights, dark tapestries (a little moth-eaten perhaps), squeaky seats covered in musty fabric, and velvet curtains concealing the screen in front of us. Traditionally, the interior of such theatres is red, but since this is the *Cycle of the Badger* it might be more appropriate to decorate in Hufflepuff colours, don't you think?"

Yamato takes a deep breath to continue his little speech as two shadowy figures rush in. He falls silent and puts a finger to his lips.

"In a hole in the ground, there lived a hobbit."

"Space...the final frontier."

"It was the dawn of the third age of mankind."

"In a galaxy far, far away..."

"Something has survived."

"Right, as long as we skip the BMW adverts."

"Dude, what are you doing?"

"Uhm ... a trailer?"

"Nicking movie tags won't get us a trailer, idiot."

"Oh, let's skip the trailer. Let Sirius do it. Let him smile and take off his shirt and say 'It's magic.' Then he's James Marsters and we're the geek trio, and everyone will be happy!"

"There's only two of us, mate, and we don't even know if Sirius will survive the war... just look!"

The velvet curtains are sliding apart, and an image appears before us on the SCREEN. It is night-time. Sirius Black is standing in the middle of a graveyard, and we see his wand falling to the ground in slow motion. Suddenly, tight ropes wrap around his entire body, and a group of mysterious people clad in long scarlet robes emerges from the darkness, surrounding him. Their faces cannot be seen under their hoods, but we hear one of them speak: "This is an important day to all faithful followers of the Dark Lord!"

"Turn it off, turn it off, you freak! We haven't started yet! You're spoiling it for our viewers!"

"I will make a speech."

"Thou shalt hold thy tongue!"

"Lemme do the **Disclaimer**, OK... Puhleez!"

"This is a Harry Potter fanfiction, and it's - sort of - anime-styled, so don't get all culture shocked on us. Friendly yellow letters: "DON'T PANIC**All characters, including us, belong to JKR, Bloomsbury and Warner Brothers. And all the quotes from books, movies or TV shows we use belong to their respective authors. This is not for money; it's just for fun, so don't sue.**"

"My turn."

"This story is basically plot-driven, but we'll have some slash and some het romances in it as well, some characters will be killed off (hopefully not us), and we have some spoilers on sale for PS, CoS, PoA and GoF. Not for OotP, obviously, since this was written in 2001. Well, that pretty much sums it up. Cycle of the Badger is the first of four cycles, and it has 13 episodes, which will be divided into 26-39 chapters in most archives. This is not a chapter; it's what you would normally call a prologue."

"And now for something completely different. Can we please start the trailer?"

"OK, what do we need?"

"Well, what do you need to do a trailer? War, love, death, action, kissing couples and maybe a shrubbery!"

"Nii, nii, nii, here it goes..."

*

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Amicus Draconis

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First Cycle: Cycle of the Badger

The Trailer

*

CEDRIC

(Voice Over)

"Seventeen years ago..."

A black SCREEN. Slowly, clouds of red mist begin to appear.

CEDRIC

(VO)

"...darkness ruled our world."

Inside the mist, the Dark Mark starts to form - a skull, its mouth penetrated by a snake.

CEDRIC

(VO)

"Seventeen years ago..."

A dark liquid starts running down the SCREEN, forming a shimmering pool in the middle. Around the pool, the red mist becomes even thicker, manifesting itself in a metallic gleaming bowl, which holds the liquid.

CEDRIC

(VO)

"...we believed the darkness to be destroyed..."

Three slender women's hands appear, touching the liquid with their fingertips. At first, we only see tiny ripples, then bigger and bigger circles gliding out in all directions. And suddenly, an image forms inside the bowl.

CEDRIC

(VO)

"...for all eternity..."

The image shows Lord Voldemort advancing towards a small, dark-haired baby boy, wrapped in a blanket. Next to the baby, we see a flow of red hair, belonging to another person lying on the floor, but she's outside the SCREEN, so we don't see her. Then, a sudden flash of green light bursts over the SCREEN, accompanied by a loud bang that makes us jump in our seats (yes, guys, where's the THX robot?), and the black-robed figure of the Dark Lord dissolves in the green. The CAMERA is back on the baby; his forehead bears a lightning-shaped scar now. Also, the metallic bowl framing the picture has disappeared, and now the images are spread over the entire SCREEN.

HYSTERICAL WOMAN

(OS)

"This is not possible! How can our master be defeated by a mere child?"

CEDRIC

(VO)

"How could we have been so foolish...?"

IMAGES FLASH BY, changing rapidly. We see riders, clad in dark billowing robes, riding the skies on shadowy steeds we see different-coloured flashes of light emerging from various wands we see Diagon Alley in flames we see people locked in a small dark room and again and again we hear terrified screams.

DRACO

(with a sly grin on his face)

"So, you're blaming me for what? Ridding the world of some stinking Muggles?"

NEW SCENE: Voldemort's hand with its long, claw-like fingers slowing curling up into a fist.

VOLDEMORT

(triumphantly)

"The nightfall of the old world is the dawn of a glorious new age, my dear friends!"

NEW SCENE: Walden Macnair and Marcus Flint walking. In the back, we see some of the shadowy horses from the previous scene. Macnair is wearing red robes and Flint black ones.

MACNAIR

(politely puzzled)

"So, there's still Mudbloods left in London?"

NEW SCENE: Peter Pettigrew's head materializing inside a fire.

PETTIGREW

(hissing)

"Our master wants you to conduct a search of Diagon Alley."

NEW SCENE: Lucius Malfoy is sitting in an armchair, probably in one of his many rooms in Malfoy Manor. His facial expression is that of a sleepy cat, having just dined on an innocent little mouse.

MALFOY

(very self-complacent)

"I'm sorry, old friend, but the project Ragnarök must remain in secrecy at this point."

NEW SCENE: An old man with snow-white hair and features hard as stone he's a character we haven't seen so far sits in a chair made of stone. And it's not a drawing room he's in, but a dungeon. On his lap sits a red-haired girl about six. He's supporting her with one arm while holding a large doll in the other one. To his sides, two older girls are standing; they're maybe around twelve years old. One is red-haired as well; the other one's blonde. The girls' eyes shoot daggers at each other.

OLD MAN

(imitating a doll's voice)

"Why don't you want to tell us where your hideout is? Don't you see how sad you make the poor little dolls?"

The CAMERA moves to the other side of the dungeon; there we see Dumbledore, who is chained to the wall with iron shackles. His head has fallen forward, and a mass of dirty white hair is hiding his face.

DUMBLEDORE

(although he's in bad shape, his voice is remarkably calm)

"My life does not matter. There will always be more who can tell right from wrong, and they will never stop fighting your tyranny..."

NEW SCENE: A bunch of young witches and wizards racing in the air on broomsticks. If we look closely, we can see Harry, Ron, Hermione and many other familiar faces, such as Ernie Macmillan, Hannah Abbot, Lavender Brown and Dean Thomas. There might be all the students of Harry's year there, except for the Slytherins.

RON

(trying to sound heroic)

"You can tell your Dark Lord that we will never surrender. As long as one last breath is flowing through our veins, Harry Potter and the brave rebels of Gryffindor ... and well, I suppose Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw, too, will fight for the freedom of all witches and wizards!"

MORE IMAGES FLASH BY: Harry and his friends race through the air suddenly they're flying underwater and then they return to the air. They're fighting wizards in long red robes. A wand suddenly turns into a small rubber piglet.

NEW SCENE: Hermione is talking to a dark-haired eight-year-old girl sitting behind her on her broomstick. A four-year-old boy with dark blonde hair is sitting in front of them.

HERMIONE

(thoughtfully)

"Well, actually we're just a bunch of children who want to see their parents again. But I'm afraid you're right: it means saving the world. As long as Voldemort rules, nothing will ever be the same again."

NEW SCENE: A group of children is sitting on tatami mats, drinking tea from bowls. They're inside a house made of wood and thin paper walls. Harry and Hermione stand before them, along with some fellow Gryffindors.

HARRY

(determined)

"If we want to see our families again, if we want to have our lives back, we must fight for them. As long as Voldemort rules over the realm of magic, heritage is all that matters in a witch or wizard, and there's no such thing as character. Values such as love, friendship and compassion are stepped on and trod into the ground."

NEW SCENE: In the Forest, a dark moonless night. Two figures are facing each other, their hands entwined.

SIRIUS

(tenderly)

"You know what we vowed to do. We have to fulfil our mission even if something happens to one of us. You know I have to go now!"

NEW SCENE: Hermione's face in CLOSE-UP

HERMIONE

(nervous)

"So, am I right? Are you in love with Harry?"

NEW SCENE: Harry and Ginny are sitting on a rock in the middle of a waterfall. Harry has put an arm around her, but they're both looking in different directions.

HARRY

(softly)

"I'm sorry."

GINNY

(sadly)

"There is someone, isn't there? I mean ... in your life."

HARRY

(sadly)

"Yes."

NEW SCENE: Ron's face in CLOSE-UP

RON

(puzzled)

"But you're the one who's in love with Harry!"

NEW SCENE: Cho, wearing a seductive, purple, kimono-like dress is standing in a dark room at the window when suddenly a hand grabs her arm. Before her, we see a dark-haired young man bearing an unmistakable resemblance to Walden Macnair.

YOUNG MAN

(desperate and aggressive)

"Come back to me, Cho! I can't live without you!"

CHO

(angry)

"It's over! Just leave me alone!"

NEW SCENE: Hermione's face in CLOSE-UP.

HERMIONE

(utterly confused)

"But, if you're not in love with Harry, and I'm not in love with Harry, why in the world are we fighting for him?"

NEW SCENE: Night over London. Marcus Flint and Draco Malfoy are sitting on a roof overlooking the city.

MARCUS

(to himself)

"Power ... it's always about power! And what's all this power good for, if you can't be with the one you love?"

DRACO

(to himself as well)

"It's simply a question of how much power you have to gain."

FLURRY OF IMAGES: A car driving through the rain, when suddenly a red-haired teen-aged girl appears on the road a cell phone, where a text message suddenly appears, as if written by a ghost Narcissa Malfoy and an unknown red-haired woman, their eyes shooting daggers at each other (much like the little girls in the previous scene) Draco and Cho standing on the balcony of Malfoy Manor, both wearing formal clothing in fact, Cho is wearing the purple dress from the previous scene.

DRACO

(very cynically)

"Tell me, how often a year do you usually think of Cedric Diggory?"

CHO

(if she's cynical, she's sure hiding it well)

"About as often as you think of Pansy Parkinson."

NEW SCENE: Harry, Ron and Snape are in Dumbledore's former office, which seems to be Snape's now. Harry is facing Snape with fury in his eyes, pointing his wand at him.

HARRY

(yelling)

"I'm going to kill this traitor, even if it's the last thing I do."

SNAPE

(staying completely calm)

"I know you don't understand, Potter. You never will, and that is exactly the reason why you should leave this war to the people who do. With your ways, we can't ever win."

NEW SCENE: Ginny and Colin Creevey at the waterfall (the one from the previous scene).

COLIN

(trying to sound heroic to impress Ginny, but fails completely)

"I know I can be brave if I just get a chance to. But we won't get far with our old methods. Saving a few Muggles it's not enough. We have to be more active; we must fight and not hide in here!"

NEW SCENE: Hermione and Hagrid in Hagrid's hut. (Doesn't seem to be the one we know from the books, although it looks similar.) Fang's lying on a fur by the chimney and Crookshanks swaggers past him.

HAGRID

(noisily setting his mug back on the table)

"Ay, if yeh ask me, yeh shouldn't be roaming about, getting yerselves into trouble. Should stay put like Dumbledore would want yer to!"

NEW SCENE: Harry and his former fellow students gathered round a huge table (again, it's Gryffindor, Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw).

RON

(addressing the others, sounding slightly annoyed)

"We're down here, like the badger in his hole, and we can't do anything. Outside, the world's falling apart and we don't even notice. We have to..."

Suddenly, without any warning, the image is ripped apart like old paper, and a rotting Dementor's hand tries to grab us, as if it were reaching right out of the SCREEN.

A girl's desperate scream....

PANSY

(OS)

(her voice trembling with sobs)

"Please ... please don't! Not the Dement...

UNKNOWN MALE VOICE

(OS)

(coldly)

"Bear witness what happens to those who dare to oppose the Dark Lord!"

The hand curls into a fist, and again, red smoke fills the SCREEN. Slowly, the smoke forms letters....

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Amicus Draconis - 1st Cycle - Cycle of the Badger

Episode 1 coming soon to your favourite radio station.

Original Airdate: December 2001

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VOLDEMORT

(VO)

"This is only the beginning!"

....

"Hey, Fred?"

"Yeah, George?"

"I wonder, I wonder, do you know what I wonder?"

"Aren't we the best, or what?"

"What?"

"Awesome."

"Splendid."

"Simply magnifique!"

"God shave our radio station."

giggle

over and out

Author's Note: So, are you curious about the new adventures of Harry and his friends? Do you want to know about their ongoing battle against the Dark Lord? Do you want to play fly on the wall when the Death Eaters plot their schemes?

Then go ahead and click on the first chapter. A magical world awaits you....

01. Children of Magic - Part A

Chapter 2 of 12

In the Trio's seventh year, the wizarding world has lost its second war against the Dark Lord. The Death Eaters conquered Hogwarts, defeated the Order of the Phoenix and overthrew the Ministry of Magic. Forming a new government with Voldemort as the supreme ruler, they take control of Wizarding Europe, spreading terror and destruction everywhere. Harry and his friends are forced into hiding, but far from giving up hope they form their own secret rebellion trying to save as many people as possible. In four cycles, Amicus Draconis tells the story of a world shattered and rebuilt throughout three wizarding wars, of two masterminds moving people like figures on a chessboard, and a boy torn between his destiny and his one true love.

Disclaimer: The characters don't belong to me, but to mighty JK Rowling (Yama bows deeply). I'm not making any money of this story, so please don't lock me up in Azkaban. Yama doesn't get along with Dementors. Also, none of the Book/Movie/TV show quotes Fred and George use are mine. They all belong to their respective authors. The opening song for episodes 1-13 is Sonnet No 92 by William Shakespeare and the ending song for episodes 1-11 is Iron Fist by Motörhead.

Authors Note: As of now, I'm taking over again. *glances around apprehensively for any signs of Fred and George* I hope you're enjoying AD so far and didn't get all culture-shocked by the trailer. Don't worry if you did; all of the scenes and quotes in the trailer will appear in the story later on, all their secrets will be revealed and everything will make much more sense anyway once you've read it in context.

Amicus Draconis is an epic consisting of four novel-length fics named after the Hogwarts crest animals. I wrote the first one *Cycle of the Badger*, between 2001 and 2004, and I'm currently working on the second one, *Cycle of the Snake*. Please note that the English version is at times a bit different from the original, especially the Fred/George parts. They were particularly hard to translate. And without the help of my great betas Arsinyk, Ellie, Ann, and Notsosaintly I wouldn't have been able to do this anyway.

*

*But do thy worst to steal thyself away,
For term of life thou art assured mine;
And life no longer than thy love will stay,
For it depends upon that love of thine.
Then need I not to fear the worst of wrongs,
When in the least of them my life hath end.
I see a better state to me belongs
Than that which on thy humour doth depend:
Thou canst not vex me with inconstant mind,
Since that my life on thy revolt doth lie.
O what a happy title do I find,
Happy to have thy love, happy to die!
But what's so blessed-fair that fears no blot?
Thou mayst be false, and yet I know it not*

*

*

Amicus Draconis

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First Cycle: Cycle of the Badger

Episode 1: Children of Magic - Part A

London, September 1998

Night had fallen over London, but the huge city was far from going to sleep. Honking cars blocked the streets alongside heavily drunk soccer fans, while bright coloured lights flashed lazily over the asphalt, and the ever-present smell of beer, petrol, and fish made the air hard to breathe.

It was unnaturally cold for an evening in late summer. Even peoples' faces seemed strangely frozen, their joy and laughter shrill and hysterical. But if you asked one of them how this sudden winter had entered his heart, he probably would not have known an answer.

Yet, a few nervous glances turned skywards, a few people wondering why the ever-present, thick, foggy clouds covering the city seemed so very dark and gloomy tonight, almost menacing. Faster than ever, their pointed shadows were gliding across the roofs and walls, and from time to time, a red glowing star would appear in between, like the sparkling eye of some large demonic animal.

Every sensible person would dispose of thoughts like that at once. Monsters in the mist, ghosts, witchcraft, black magic, creatures of the night. Something for lunatics and little children.

Something for nightmares...

Nightmares. The monstrous horses of the worlds below. Darker than darkness itself, their grisly bodies seemed to contain naught but smoke and mist, impossible to touch, impossible to feel, their shapes blurring before the human eye. As if they could gallop right through a human body, ripping out his soul. Hell's fire burnt fiercely in their eyes, flames of death emerging from their sniffing nostrils.

The ghostly creatures riding their backs concealed themselves under long, flowing, black robes, large hoods covering their faces. To anyone watching them, it would be impossible to see if they were human, or demon.

The Ghost Riders of Voldemort rode the skies again.

Tonight there were only five of them over London, but other groups might be roaming elsewhere to fulfil their quests of evil. Their steeds raced the sky as common horses raced the land, and they could cross incredible distances in a single night.

To the human eye, the horse and her rider were visible only as a misty cloud, making them the perfect tool to carry out the Dark Lord's commands. Yet, they had to return before daybreak, since their gruesome steeds could not bear to see the light of the sun.

The Ghost Riders of Voldemort rode the skies again, and only a selected few had the ability to see them for what they truly were. These few crouched into the corners of their rooms, climbed into their closets, or hid under the blankets of their beds, trembling with fear.

Hoping they would pass....

Just this once....

Maybe they won't see me if I close my eyes....

For these few were children, children born with the ability to use magic.

"Did you have another one of these nightmares, honey?"

"That was no nightmare, Mommy. The scary ghosts on black horses were outside my window again!"

"Don't talk like that; there's no such thing as ghosts! Go back to sleep, honey. You don't want to be late for school tomorrow."

Would any sensible person believe them?

The five riders changed their formation, assuming the shape of a triangle in the night sky. All of a sudden, their leader lost speed, holding out a copper amulet in the shape of a rooster. Dangling from his outstretched arm, the amulet spun fast around on its chain.

The hand holding the amulet looked quite human. The long slender fingers curled tightly around the chain, the knuckles turning even whiter than the pale skin.

Slower and slower the rooster spun, until he froze in mid-air, his beak pointing directly at the window before them. Careful not to move his hand, the leader turned to his companions, eyes of cold grey glittering triumphantly beneath his hood.

The Ghost Riders had found what they were looking for. The Dark Lord would be pleased with them.

* * *

The Seer's gaze remained fixed on the crystal ball, although the light inside had vanished quite a while ago.

"Well?" demanded the voice. "What did you find out?"

"Auspicious signs, my Lord." She lowered her eyes, hiding them beneath her long lashes. "Your power is bound to spread out over the world, mighty and unstoppable. There is only one small obstacle between you and your absolute triumph."

"I am listening."

"A wizard who could possibly achieve the power to defeat you."

"You dare to claim that another wizard could be more powerful than me? Do not taunt me, foolish woman." The voice became dangerously soft. "I have killed for far less insulting remarks."

Her face remained calm as ever; it did not betray whether his words had frightened her. "Forgive me my forthrightness, my Lord, but do you not have enough sycophants agreeing to anything you say? Lying to your face in fear of their pitiful lives? What I offer you is nothing but the truth. My life belongs to you, and it is your decision how it may serve you best."

The voiced laughed. "How clever you are, Narcissa. If you were a man, I would take you into the Dark Council without a second thought. However, as things are, you must leave politics to your husband and take care of your children at home."

The voice paused, possibly waiting for the Seer to argue, but she did not take up the challenge and remained silent.

"Very well. As soon as you find out more about the hideout of Har ... You-Know-Who," he corrected himself with a soft chuckle, "... I want to be informed at once. You know how to contact me."

The voice faded away. But an evil aura remained between the walls of her room, and it would not wither.

* * *

After her parents had told her off for the third time, Ophelia Flowerfield had given up and returned to her room. She grabbed an armful of stuffed animals, placed them on her bed, and hid them carefully under the covers, so anyone who looked would think that somebody was lying in there.

Then she crawled inside the closet.

And waited.

For a while, she wondered whether it would be safer to leave her room and hide somewhere else in the apartment. Or maybe she could sneak out and run away....

But she decided against it. If she ran about like a scared rabbit, they would probably see her.

They could see in the dark.

Maybe, they could see through walls.

She lay down flat on her belly, bending her head and trying to get a glimpse through the gap between the closet door and the carpet. There was only a little bit of light, probably from the other apartment building right across. Maybe some of the windows were still lit.

Her own room was dark. She could only see a bit of carpet and the foot of her desk. And a pencil lying on the carpet, next to the desk.

Why hadn't her mother noticed? She always made such a fuss about tidying up the room.

Flopp!

She pressed her hands to her mouth, and just in time managed to keep herself from screaming. Luckily, it was only one of her school notebooks; it had slipped from the upper shelves and fallen to the floor.

Flowerfield, Ophelia. 2nd grade. Mathema....

She couldn't read the writing anymore because the trickle of light through the gap had vanished.

Gone. The writing desk was gone... the carpet was gone... the room was gone.

Only the pencil was still there. She heard a loud crunch when it broke.

"Watch it, Goyle," said a drawling boy's voice with slightly mocking undertones. "We're not here to wreck the house, although that might be amusing. We're here for the child."

"Where's the little brat?" a second, somewhat croaky voice snarled. It also seemed to belong to a boy or a young man. From their sounds, the intruders seemed to be searching her room now. She could hear her covers being pulled off the bed.

"She's in here!"

The closet door was opening slowly with a creaking sound.

Ophelia held her breath.

There were three black-robed figures in her room, one standing close to the closet, another one next to the bed, and a third one by the window.

But not one of them had touched the closet door. It had opened all by itself.

Like magic.

Ophelia crawled back into the furthest corner of the closet. She tried to scream, but the dark creature in front of her, steadily approaching, beat her to it. A movement with the strange wooden stick he held in his hand, a word she didn't understand, a sudden harsh wind that seemed to circle her head, and she couldn't get a sound out anymore, not even a whimper.

"This is the safe way to silence annoying little children..."

The wind had blown her attacker's hood back, and she could see she was indeed facing a human, a pale boy with pointed, almost elf-like features, who couldn't be any older than twenty. His silvery blond hair was combed back from his forehead, and his glittering grey eyes were staring at her coldly. His nose was wrinkled in a sneer, as if he was seeing something particularly disgusting.

The corners of his thin mouth curled up in a cruel smile. "There are other ways, of course: far less pleasant ones. You don't want to find out, do you?"

He stretched out his hands as if he was going to reach for her, but then changed his mind, calling for his companions: "Crabbe! Goyle! Tie the Mudblood up and take her out to the others!"

Then he turned on his heel, swaggering towards the window.

One of the other two was approaching her now, some sort of vine shooting out of the wooden stick he carried. The vine wrapped itself tightly around the little girl's body, except for the end; he kept it in his hand and pulled her out of the closet and towards the window as if she were a dog on a leash.

Five black, horse-like creatures were floating in front of her window. On two of them sat more robed figures. But that wasn't the worst.

Children were dangling in the air beneath the horses. Like her, they had been tied up with those strange vines, and the vines were bound to the saddles of the horses.

What did these people want with the children? Why had they taken them away?

The door to her room opened. "Ophelia, if you can't sleep, we could..."

"Avada Kedavra!"

A green ray of light shot out of the pale boy's stick, and for one endless, terrible moment her whole room was bathed in a blazing green light. A hissing sound rung in her ears as if a horrible snake, invisible to her eyes, had appeared out of nowhere to throw itself at her mother.

In the very next moment, her mother dropped to the floor, lying motionless by the doorframe.

The girl screamed, but no sound came out of her throat. She struggled at her bindings, but it was no use; her captor was at least three times as strong as her.

Calm and completely unmoved, the pale boy was leaning against the window frame, as if he could care less. He smirked coolly, blowing the smoke from the end of his wooden stick.

With a nod, he signaled his companions to leave. "Come on, don't waste my time."

The night air was cold, much colder than Ophelia had expected, but it seemed some of the cold emanated from those creepy horses. Soon they were high above the city, and she closed her eyes, so she wouldn't have to look down. Her head was filled with questions, questions that didn't have answers.

Voldemort's Ghost Riders crossed the night sky, dragging the captured children along like a gruesome mobile.

* * *

"Say, Captain, how many troops are we still waiting for?"

Marcus Flint, captain of the Ghost Riders, raised his tremendously confused eyes from the Muggle map he was currently holding. He just couldn't read the damn thing. Who had ever heard of a map with no water in the rivers and the mountains as flat as the rest of the bloody thing! Not even the different layers of smog were visible on there, and Muggle cities were always covered in layers of smog. Even Marcus Flint knew that, and Marcus Flint could look back on six generations of pure-blooded witches and wizards and had never ever taken the subject of Muggle Studies while he was at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

Hogwarts ... Yes, there had been a time before the Dark Lord had taken his destined place as supreme ruler over the realm of magic. Back then, Marcus had been captain of the Slytherin Quidditch Team, and they had won one game after another... Oh, those were the days, my friend! He had hoped to be taken on by a professional Quidditch team after graduation, maybe even the national one. However, the Fates had had something different in mind for him.

Not that there was any reason to complain. He had gotten far in these three years since he had left school, extremely far considering that his family had never been an active part of the Death Eaters, and even now, they didn't rank high among the followers of the Dark Lord. However, joining the Ghost Riders was the best option an ambitious young man could have in order to prove himself to his master.

He took a look around. Since they didn't have anything to do right now, most of the guys were relaxing in the grass, gambling with magical cards or dice. Pretty much all of them were between the ages of seventeen and twenty-five; many of them had gone to school with him. Girls were a big exception to the Ghost Riders, and none of them had yet reached a position of command.

"We're almost complete," Marcus addressed Terence Higgs, who had spoken to him. "As soon as Draco's group gets back from London, we'll have everyone."

"I was just wondering..." Terence leaned a bit closer to be able to lower his voice. "You see, Grand Dragon Macnair is getting impatient."

"Grand Dragon Macnair will have to sit it out." Marcus frowned slightly; he didn't think much of the members of the Dark Council. In his opinion, they were a bunch of arrogant bastards. To speak that thought aloud, however, would be signing your own death verdict, and Marcus knew when to keep quiet.

Terence obviously didn't because he added with a glance to the map: "Looks like Malfoy could use one of those, couldn't he? You think the idiot got lost on his horsie?"

Under different circumstances, Marcus would have laughed at the joke, but not with Macnair approaching behind his back. Talking bad about the son of a council member in presence of other council members was one of the *Don'ts* as well; you could never know who was in allegiance with whom and what consequences it could have. Politics were complicated. And, if you didn't understand any of them, like Terence Higgs for example, you wouldn't get very far.

"The last group's in London, Flint?" Showing his usual patronizing smile, Macnair's face didn't betray whether he had heard the last remark. "So there's still Mudbloods left

in London?"

"You heard me correctly, sir," Marcus nodded. "It's difficult to find them all; we have to search each section separately. As you know, the Flame Quill has never been found."

"We will find it." Macnair's voice sounded very confident. "It's just a question of time until Dumbledore will crack and tell us where it is. Then, you can simply go down the list and get them all."

"Yes, that would save us a lot of time." Marcus' eyes were searching the skies, but there was no sign of the latecomers so far. "Say, sir, do you require our assistance in guarding the children? There's still enough time till daybreak; I could leave you a few of my people...."

"No assistance needed, Flint. My own people are well up to the job. Call it an early night!" Macnair chuckled. "Won't your girlfriend be happy that you've got some spare time for her?"

Marcus swallowed hard and averted his eyes. What did Macnair know?

"Well, a kid your age's got to have a girlfriend, don't he?" Macnair added jovially as he sensed Marcus' confusion and a tiny trace of fear. "Don't worry about it, son. What's all the hard work for if you don't get to have a little fun afterwards?"

In an almost fatherly gesture, he placed a hand on Marcus' shoulder. "Well, as long as you know your limits and keep your private life to yourself, there won't be any trouble. I'll make sure of it, eh?" He gave Marcus a wink.

With a sigh, the young man nodded. In the realm of magic, it was hard to keep a secret. Well, things could have been a lot worse.

"You know, sir, my worries about guarding the children..." he said, hastily changing the subject. "I ... uhm ... permission to speak freely, sir?"

"Permission granted, Captain Flint." A tiny smile lifted the corners of Macnair's mouth. The boys were exactly as he wanted them: loyal, submissive, and a little too eager to prove themselves.

They didn't have any political influence at all; they were no more than a tool carrying out the Council's orders. However, they thought quite a lot of themselves.

Marcus' eyes darted left and right to make sure they weren't overheard. "I happened to come across a rumour. Only a vague one, of course, but it always pays to be careful."

"I'm listening."

"The Mudblood children we took last week; it's said, they have been freed. Freed by You-Know-Who!"

Macnair laughed heartily. "Oh come on, Marcus. You don't believe that rubbish, eh? Freed by You-Know-Who? A splendid joke indeed! You-Know-Who is busy hiding deep down some rabbit hole. Attack us? Never! He wouldn't even dare if his kiddy league was twenty times as powerful."

"If you say so, sir." Actually, Marcus knew pretty well that these rumours couldn't be so far-fetched. After all, Draco Malfoy had told them to Vincent Crabbe and Gregory Goyle yesterday. Draco probably knew them from his father. In the realm of magic, not even a tiny mouse could stick his nose out of a hole without Grand Dragon Lucius Malfoy, Member of the Dark Council and Lord Voldemort's right-hand- man, hearing about it.

But, who was Marcus Flint to argue with a member of said Council?

"Look, sir!" Marcus pointed upwards. "The last group's returning. And they brought us some more children!"

* * *

Ophelia couldn't remember ever being so cold in her entire life. Her whole body felt numb, as if it were made of clay. When she finally felt solid ground beneath her feet, she wasn't able to stand up straight.

The other children weren't in any better shape; some of them even had lost consciousness. Others glanced around, their eyes filled with fear. None of them were able to speak; these dark riders had charmed away their voices.

A hand reached for the vine that bound her, pulling her to her feet. "Bring all the children over here!" a voice yelled.

The riders had gone now, but there was new group of these dreadful people, and their robes were not black, but dark red. Almost like blood. They were pushing the children along like a herd of sheep, dragging the unconscious ones.

The ground below them became sandy, and they walked downhill for a long time. Around them were strange rocks of red sandstone. Ophelia didn't think that they were still in London.

At the entrance of a huge cave, the group finally came to a halt. Some of the children were so exhausted, they fell to the ground right where they stood. Others hurried to the stone wall next to the cave entrance where a trickle of water was running down the rock, drinking the water thirstily. Their captors didn't stop them.

A man stepped up in front of them, a large fat man with a huge beer belly, a puffed-up face, and a shiny red nose. If Ophelia had been older, she would probably have realized that he was someone who fancied more than a drink or two.

"Listen up," the man barked. "I'm Steve Pinch, and you will remember the name! You will call me sir! And do you know who you are?"

Silence. After all, the children couldn't answer him.

"I'll tell you what you are! Scum! Mudbloods! You're nothing more than the dirt under my feet, and dirt should be cleaned away! So give me one good reason why I shouldn't just squash you like the bugs you are!"

No answer. With a malicious smile, he looked at the children, taking in their fear, which he seemed to enjoy.

"However." His voice calmed down a bit. "If you should prove to be useful bugs, the Imperial Wizard, our all-powerful master, supreme ruler over the magical world, may possess the grace to spare your wretched lives. Now, we will bring you down the mines to dig for fairy gold. You're small enough to crawl through the tunnels..." He raised his forefinger. "And about one-third of you might even grow big enough to get another, less troublesome job."

He spat on the ground. "But you gotta earn it first, scum!" .

Steve Pinch continued to talk about the Dark Lord, the worthlessness of Mudbloods and the glorious age they lived in, but Ophelia was far too tired to pay attention. During his long speech, even more of those red-robed people marched out of the caves, joining the other guards around them. Pinch ignored them and talked on. Olivia stared at all the red, desperately trying to stay on her feet. If she broke down now, they would probably...

One-third, Pinch had said. One-third. What happened to the other two?

The robed figure next to her looked so strange. She was smiling beneath her hood, a true smile, not one of those evil grins. As if she were truly a person, a human being and not a guard who was supposed to take her down into the mines.

But that couldn't be! Surely, her mind was playing a trick on her!

This person had such warm brown eyes. No doubt, it was a woman. A girl, maybe. But how was that possible? None of their captors were girls....

Pinch had finally finished his speech, and with a movement of his fat wobbly chin, he pointed towards the cave entrance. The guards pulled the children up again.

A little girl was crying....

Ophelia heard her sob....

A little girl was crying, really crying with her voice and all. Her voice was back.

All their voices were back.

In the very next moment, all the children started to shout and scream. Ophelia heard herself yell, as if her voice belonged to a stranger. She didn't realize yet, that it was her own voice making that noise, that she could control it. Had the spell truly been broken? But how? And by whom?

One grip into his blood red robes, and Steve Pinch held one of the wooden sticks in his hand. Ophelia had realized by now that those sticks were likely to be wands, even if they didn't look like the black and white wands wizards used on TV.

Steve Pinch drew in a deep breath and raised his hand, holding the wand: "*Silen...*!"

But someone else was much faster than him. "*Expelliarmus!*" yelled another robed figure; all Ophelia could see beneath his hood was a pair of sparkling green eyes behind silvery glasses, which flashed the light. Whatever spell Pinch had wanted to use, he could not finish it. His wand was blasted away, and all he could do was stand and stare unbelievably at his empty hand.

As if the green-eyed boy had issued an order, all the others pulled out their wands as well, and for a moment, loud shouts and bright flashes of light made it impossible for her to see and to hear. The next thing she saw was Steve Pinch falling flat on his beer belly while thick ropes wrapped around him. The vines binding the children, however, withered and broke away.

It all happened so fast that Ophelia could hardly understand what was going on. Red robes fighting other red robes. More sparks, flashes, wands and people zooming through the air. Something exploded loudly....

And the girl with the warm brown eyes reached for her, pulling her onto a...

Broomstick???

"Hold on!" she yelled loudly, trying to make herself heard over all the noise. "Hold on tight, now. We're going up!"

The broom shot straight up, circling the cave entrance once and whooshing back down a moment later, so that the girl could grab another child, a very small boy, and put him on the broom in front of her. Then, they finally dashed off into the night air. More brooms rose around them; it was an entire squadron.

A red-haired boy floated directly over fat Steve Pinch, poking him with his wand. Trembling, the two children sitting on the broom behind him clung to him and to each other, while he had started to make a speech. "You can tell your Dark Lord that we will never surrender. As long as one last breath is flowing through our veins, Harry Potter and the brave rebels of Gryffindor...and, well, I suppose Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw, too, will fight for the freedom of all witches and wizards!"

"Ron, you idiot, will you stop it!" the girl shouted angrily. "Come on, we have to go!"

"As long as one last breath is flowing through our veins...." giggled another girl, and a third one added, "Ron for president!"

The boy's face turned as red as his hair, and without another word, he raced past the girls.

* * *

Amicus Draconis - 1st Cycle: Cycle of the Badger - Episode 1: Children of Magic

"I wonder, I wonder, do you know what I wonder?"

"No idea."

"What's this?"

"Hello, dumb brother? This is the eye catch!"

"Right. We survived the alpha part of the first episode. And Sirius did, too."

"Good for him, considering he's not even in this chapter. So stay tuned for the beta part!"

"Beta sounds good. Reminds me of something we have to do."

"Ladihoh! Praise our wonderful beta readers bravely plunging their way through the dark and gruesome swamps of Yamato's writing."

"Praised be the betas, praise them, praise to them! May the light forever shine on Saint Ellie, Adorable Ann, Angelic Arsinyk and not so saintly, yet saintly Notsosaintly!"

"Stay tuned. Coming up next on AD: New Hogwarts, a secret hideout and lots and lots of questions."

Amicus Draconis - 1.Zyklus: Zyklus des Dachses - Folge 1: Die Kinder der Zauberkraft

* * *

Author's Note: Here's an overview of *Cycle of the Badger* for you:

00. The Trailer

01. **Children of Magic** (Kinder der Zauberkraft)

02. **Encounter at Hogwarts** (Begegnung in Hogwarts)

- 03. **The Underwater Quidditch Game** (Quidditch unter Wasser)
- 04. **Offers and Offerings** (Angebote und Opfergaben)
- 05. **Owl SMS** (Eulen SMS)
- 06. **Blood Oracle I** (Orakel des Blutes I)
- 07. **Blood Oracle II - Priori Incantatem** (Orakel des Blutes II Priori Incantatem)
- 08. **As Far as Dreams Can Carry** (Soweit die Träume tragen)
- 09. **Love is a Song that Never Ends** (Liebe ist mehr als nur ein Wort)
- 10. **Phoenix Fire** (Phoenixfeuer)
- 11. **Once Upon a December** (Es war einmal im Dezember)
- 12. **Erinnye** (Erinnye)
- 13. **Upon the 13th Hour** (Bis zur dreizehnten Stunde)

01. Children of Magic - Part B

Chapter 3 of 12

Ophelia believes herself an ordinary little girl until one night, strange, black-robed people kill her mother and take her away from her home. Who is this mysterious Dark Lord they serve, and why does he order them to kidnap little children? Rescued by Harry Potter and the rebels of New Hogwarts, she finds herself caught in the middle of a war she doesn't understand. What is "New Hogwarts" anyway and what are they fighting for?

Author's Notes: So, some of you already wonder/predict/assume to know what pairings this story has *smirks*. It's always fun to read such predictions, and it's even more fun to see people fall for my red herrings. Well, since the first cycle is mostly plot-driven, it could be called a genfic anyway, but romances, while not the main focus of the story, will occur. I should warn you that AD has het, slash, and femmeslash couples, so don't read on if you have a major problem with any of them.

Oh, and one little request to German readers, who decided to read the English version. Please don't use any spoilers in your reviews. I know it's hard, you're watching the English-speaking readers struggle with all these red herrings, and you're bursting to say, what's really going on. Please don't. People like to figure out stuff for themselves and it wouldn't be fair to take that away from them.

Amicus Draconis - 1st Cycle: Cycle of the Badger - Episode 1: Children of Magic

"I wonder, I wonder, do you know what I wonder?"

"No idea."

"What's this?"

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Amicus Draconis - 1.Zyklus: Zyklus des Dachses - Folge 1: Die Kinder der Zauberkraft

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Amicus Draconis

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First Cycle: Cycle of the Badger

Episode 1: Children of Magic - Part B

*

Like a startled flock of birds, the broomsticks raced up and away. To Ophelia it felt as if they were going in circles; they changed direction every so often. Again and again, the boys and girls doubled back to make sure they weren't being followed.

"We can't let them find our hideout," explained the bushy-haired girl, as she turned round to Ophelia. Then, she addressed the little boy in front. "Don't get scared now; I need to make sure they didn't jinx the broom. I'll need my wand to do that, so I'll have to let go of you with one arm. Are you holding on tight?"

The boy nodded.

"All right."

She flicked her wand, but nothing happened. "We're OK," she reassured the children. "They didn't have enough time anyway. Also, they aren't the brightest!

"By the way, my name's Hermione Granger," she introduced herself.

Ophelia and the little boy gave their names as well. He was Thomas Krueger from Greenwich, and he was four years old. "Are you taking us home?" he asked with a shaky voice.

Hermione sighed deeply. "I'm sorry, Thomas, I can't. They would simply kidnap you again, and all would have been for nothing."

"What do these people want with us? Why can't they just leave us alone?"

"That's a very long story," Hermione answered. "And it will sound like a fairy tale, but every word of it is true. I suppose I best start at the very beginning...."

"Is that a school uniform you're wearing?" Thomas interrupted. "What kind of school do you go to?"

Ophelia took a look around and saw that all of their rescuers were wearing school uniforms: white shirts, striped ties, V-shaped jumpers in grey, with trousers for the boys and skirts of the same colour for the girls. Only one thing was different from a regular uniform; there were no blazers. Instead, they wore long black robes lined with different colours. Stitched on the left side of their chest was a symbol, obviously the school's crest.

The crest on Hermione's robe was a mighty golden lion on red background. She also wore a golden badge that spelled "Head Girl." So, she was the head girl of her school, but what kind of school might that be?

"Actually, I'm not attending any school right now," explained Hermione. "If things had gone normally, I would have graduated this summer. But something came up, or I should say someone: Voldemort!" She spoke the name with a shudder of both fear and contempt.

"Is he the one they call the Imperial Wizard or the Dark Lord?" Ophelia wanted to know. "They said he is the supreme ruler of all witches and wizards."

"This wizard is pure evil. He has seized power over our world, spreading terror everywhere. He destroyed our government, our laws and our society! He is...." She broke off. "Oh dear, I'm starting to sound like Ron...."

"You're fighting against this Voldemort guy, aren't you?" Thomas asked with an excited sparkle in his eyes. "You are brave heroes saving the world! Just like on TV!"

"Oh, well..." Since Hermione took her time to answer, things were probably a little more complicated than that. "Actually, we're just a bunch of children who want to see their parents again. But I'm afraid you're right: it means saving the world. As long as Voldemort rules, nothing will ever be the same again."

"But there's one thing I still don't understand," Ophelia wondered. "What's all of this got to do with us?"

"You two and all the others are children with the ability to use magic. Although your parents are Muggles that means entirely non-magical people you, Ophelia, are a little witch and you, Thomas, are a little wizard. And the Dark Lord fears you. He wants to have power over all witches and wizards so that no one can prove a danger to him."

"Even the children?" Ophelia asked, catching her breath as she took this in.

"Especially the children," Hermione answered her. "You see, it was a child who defeated Voldemort a long time ago ... seventeen years ago, to be exact. And this child was much younger than you or Thomas. He was only a baby at the time."

She smiled mischievously. "You'll get to meet him soon enough. Harry Potter is our leader."

* * *

Above a great lake, its borders lost in the nocturnal darkness, the brooms finally came to a halt.

"You'll get food and rest very soon," Hermione assured the children. "We're almost there: only one tiny obstacle is still in our way." She pointed to the black, glittering surface of the water. "Our hideout is down at the bottom of this lake."

A pudgy girl with a friendly, round face and two blond plaits flowing over her shoulders flew from one person to the other, handing out something. Ophelia saw that her school uniform was different from Hermione's; it was lined in yellow instead of red, and the school crest on her robe showed a badger instead of a lion. As she came closer, Ophelia could also see what she held in her hand; it was some strange, green plant with slimy, tentacle-like leaves.

It smelt like seaweed, and the blond girl didn't seem to like the taste either. "We really should think of something to make it taste better," she suggested to Hermione.

"No, Hannah, we really shouldn't. We can't afford to waste any of it," Hermione protested brusquely. "You need to chew the Gillyweed very carefully," she explained to Thomas and Ophelia. "It'll make you grow gills to breathe under water. Don't be scared. It won't hurt at all, and they'll be gone again soon."

And so, it happened that only a few minutes later, Ophelia felt a strange tickling on both sides of her neck, and when she touched it, there were strange slits behind her ears. "Hold on tight, you two," Hermione warned. "And don't be scared of the water; you can breathe it just like air!"

Down and down the broomsticks raced, finally breaking through the surface of the water. Ophelia shuddered as she felt her clothes getting soaked in the cold water; she closed her eyes tightly and held her breath. Hopefully, this would be over soon. She didn't dare to breathe underwater; it was much too scary. This just couldn't work.

However, she wouldn't be able to hold her breath for a long time.

She heard a bubbling sound when Thomas started to cough desperately, and a moment later, she couldn't hear anything anymore for she was coughing and bubbling herself. As wonderful fresh oxygen filled her body, she felt her panic disappear and the cold along with it.

Carefully, she opened her eyes. Like a swarm of fishes, the broomsticks were gliding between rocks, sea plants and coral reefs.

Darker and darker it became around her, until soon, there was no more starlight glinting through the surface of the black water. But the tips of the many wands shone like candles, a shimmering ribbon leading downwards into nothingness.

It couldn't take them *that* much longer to reach the bottom of the lake....

Shadows were gliding around them, giant fish the size of humans. But what if they really were humans? Glowing eyes. Glistening scales. A flow of dark green hair almost

brushing her face. Or had it been seaweed, and she was just imagining things?

Ophelia tightened her grip on the broomstick and the soft fabric of Hermione's robes, yet she resisted the temptation to close her eyes. This new world was much too fascinating to shut it out. Although she was hurt and tired, for the very first time she felt she was a small part of a big adventure. And who could know how it would end?

When they finally came to a halt, everything was dark around them, so dark that they were probably inside an underwater cave. One of the boys was hovering just above the ground; Ophelia could make out his dark silhouette reflecting against the soft light of his wand. But all she could see was a robe with a head on top and on top of the head, a mass of ruffled black hair. There was so much hair surrounding that head, it would have been enough for another three heads.

With the tip of his wand, the boy touched the ground below him. Probably he was using some kind of incantation as well, but being underwater, she couldn't understand any of it. All she could hear was a bubbling sound.

The sands parted, revealing a trap door in the ground. A tiny trap door, no bigger than a cat flap, but Ophelia didn't have much time to wonder how they were going to get through. Everything started to grow around her, but maybe it was because she was shrinking. So did the broom, Thomas and Hermione.

The broomsticks formed a line, speeding through the trap door. Hermione's broom was last to disappear in the strange darkness before them. As soon as they had flown through, Hermione turned the broom around, reached for a tiny golden key inside her robes and stuck it into a keyhole on the inside of the door. The door vanished again...no, wait, it was transforming. It was transforming into a cloud.

A cloud?

They were underwater no longer. Instead, they were hovering in a picture-perfect blue sky above a group of houses, which were made of wood and pastel-coloured paper. Huddled closely together, the buildings were surrounded by a beautiful garden: delicate stone pathways winding around blooming shrubs and unknown miniature trees proudly raising their branches into the air. Tiny streams and trickles of water made their way between flowers and strangely shaped rocks, all leading to a large pond covered in water lilies.

There seemed to be a plank leading from the shore to the middle of the pond, but when they flew closer, she saw that it was actually a set of wooden squares with different heights. To get across them, you had to jump from one to the other, and that was exactly what a group of playing children were doing down there. More children and teenagers could be seen everywhere in the garden, walking, playing, socializing or testing magic spells with their wands. When they saw the newcomers up in the air, they started to smile and wave at them, shouting out greetings.

"This is sooo beautiful..." Ophelia sighed, gazing in awe at her surroundings. Little Thomas almost forgot to shut his mouth.

Hermione smiled at the children, pride shining on her face. "Welcome to New Hogwarts."

* * *

When Ophelia opened her eyes, she didn't have any idea where she was or how she'd got there. She wasn't lying in her bed at home, but on a soft tatami mat inside a strange room that she couldn't remember ever having seen before.

Around her, there were more of the mats serving as bedsteads for the other children. Most of her roommates, including little Thomas, were still sleeping soundly, but some lay awake, staring glassy-eyed at the ceiling. Others had sat up, drinking something hot and steamy from the big round tea bowls they were holding in their hands.

Slowly and gradually, Ophelia started to remember the strange dream she had had last night. Scary people in red and black robes, wands, flying broomsticks ... Harry Potter....

"Are you feeling all right?" asked an unknown voice.

She turned around to see two young girls walking from bed to bed, handing out tea bowls to the children. The tea bowls were floating in front of the girls like a flock of birds. The strange thing about those girls was that they looked both exactly the same: long dark braided hair, olive-brown skin, oval faces. Only their school uniforms differed; one wore the same as Hermione, and the other one was clad in blue-lined robes, which showed the crest of a bronze eagle.

"My name's Parvati Patil and that's my twin sister Padma. She's a Ravenclaw; I'm a Gryffindor," one of the girls explained. Obviously, she had noticed Ophelia taking a good look at the different school uniforms.

Gryffindor? Ravenclaw? She was still wondering about those strange words when Parvati continued: "We're just making sure you lot are OK."

"Are you doctors?" Ophelia wanted to know.

The girls smiled nervously. "Well, not really, but we're trying to specialise in healing spells," Padma explained. "We don't have any teachers right now, but we're trying our best..."

"But don't worry, we've never bewitched anyone to grow a third kidney," Parvati joked as she seemed to sense Ophelia's uneasiness.

"So, when we're all well again, can we go home?" the small boy on the mat next to Ophelia's asked eagerly.

The sisters exchanged a silent glance, neither of them wanting to speak the answer aloud.

* * *

A few hours later, all the children were awake. They had had something to eat and to drink; it seemed that all the food consisted of plants and animals from the outside lake. Their injuries had been taken care of; wounds and strained muscles had been treated with spells and healing potions. Also, they had received school uniforms, even the ones who were too young for school.

"You don't have to wear them if you don't like them," Parvati assured them. "If you prefer your normal clothes, that's totally OK. We wear these uniforms because for us, they represent a strong bond with our old school. However, since you have never been to that school, it's probably not important for you. If circumstances were normal, you would also attend a school for witches and wizards... but everything is sort of complicated right now...."

"What do the animals on the robes mean?" Ophelia wanted to know. She had noticed that the children's uniforms did not have the different colours and there were no animal crests on the robes.

"Hogwarts was divided into four different houses," Padma explained. "This was because the school was founded by four different witches and wizards. The animals are the crests of the different houses." She pointed to her robe. "The eagle is Ravenclaw's symbol, the lion represents Gryffindor, and Hufflepuff has the badger. The different houses also represent certain virtues that were important to the respective founders, but if I try to explain that, it gets a little complicated...."

"At Hogwarts," Parvati added, "we had the Sorting Hat, a magic hat that sorted the children into the right houses. Here, we have to find a different solution. After a while, when we all know each other better, we can decide together who fits best in which house."

"What if we don't want to be in any house!" a small boy with cropped hair yelled. "I don't care about all this rubbish; I just want to go home!"

Again, the sisters exchanged a nervous glance. "Like Parvati said, you don't have to wear a school uniform," Padma tried to calm him, her voice shaking a little. "You don't have to take part in the lessons or the activities. No one is forced to do anything around here. However, you can't go back to your home. You don't want your family to get

hurt, do you?"

The little boy averted his face and clenched his hand to a fist, biting down on it.

A little girl waved her hand, as if she were in school. "Please, Ms. Parvati, I have a question!"

"Yes, of course."

"You said there were four houses in your school. But here, you've only got three. What happened to the fourth one?"

Again, the nervous glance from one sister to the other. By now, Ophelia had figured out that there were things these people did not want to talk about. "Well, you must know ... the whole Slytherin thing is sort of complicated...."

"No, it's not!"

Hermione Granger had entered the room, followed by a group of fellow Gryffindors. "The house of Slytherin chose to be on Voldemort's side without question. Many of the students' parents had been his followers since the first time he came into power."

"It's not like the Slytherins ever had a choice. Not like we did."

At first, Ophelia hadn't noticed the dark-haired boy with the green eyes, but now she recognized him; he was the one who had attacked Steve Pinch, and he had also opened the door to the secret hideout. When Hermione heard him speak, she opened her mouth to argue with him, and all at once, the others gave loud sighs, rolling their eyes at the two of them. It seemed they already knew this argument too well, and the red-haired boy, the one the girls had called 'Ron,' gave a loud howl of protest:

"Hermione! Harry! Can't you just shut up, and give it a rest for once? I can't stand this any *longer!*"

"OK, Ron, just take it easy." While Hermione covered her ears, protecting them from Ron's shouting, Harry grinned apologetically. "We'll just save the fighting for later when you give us another one of your presidential speeches."

He turned to the children, and his face was serious again. Ophelia had to admit that there was something about him, something she could not explain. She saw him joke with his friends, and yet, it seemed that this happiness reached only a part of him. Even when his face smiled, his eyes didn't. A deep sadness lay hidden in those eyes, a dark sorrow she couldn't even begin to understand.

"Actually, I came here to tell you a couple of things. I'm not that good at speeches, but these things just need to be said."

As he walked through the room, his gaze travelling from one child to the next, Ophelia couldn't explain how, but she had the feeling that he wasn't looking at their faces, but directly into their hearts.

And it was to their hearts that he directed his words. "No one gave you a choice whether you wanted to be witches and wizards. You were simply grabbed and ripped out of your normal life, and nothing makes sense anymore. And you keep thinking: 'This isn't fair! This isn't fair at all!'"

Harry Potter paused in his steps, now standing directly in front of the small boy with the cropped hair. "And you're totally right about that. This is the most unfair thing that could happen to any one of us."

The little boy took his hand out of his mouth and raised his head to look at Harry.

"This you can believe: we understand how you feel. Not because we're especially smart or clever people, but because we feel the exact same things in the exact same way. What has happened to you has happened to us as well. And all we want is to go home and be with our families again."

He gave a nod to his friends. "Hermione hasn't seen her parents since last Christmas, and she doesn't dare visit them because she fears to attract the attention of Voldemort's troops. Ron's parents are wizards in another resistance movement, just like his five older brothers, and he has not heard from any of them since Voldemort came to power. He doesn't know if they're hurt or taken captive or even worse. And every one, each and every one of us, misses our families and friends. Just like you, we were grabbed and ripped out of our lives, and nothing makes sense anymore. And sometimes, all we want to do is to hide in some dark corner and cry. And yes, sometimes that's exactly what we do.

"But if we want to see our families again, if we want to have our lives back, we must fight for them. As long as Voldemort rules over the Magical World, heritage is all that matters in a witch or wizard, and there's no such thing as character. Values such as love, friendship and compassion are stepped on and trod into the ground.

"Wisdom: the wisdom to understand about right and wrong, to make the right choice even in difficult times that wisdom is represented by the eagle of Ravenclaw.

"Bravery: the bravery to stand up for what is right, no matter how harsh the sacrifices are that bravery is represented by the lion of Gryffindor.

"Loyalty: the loyalty to always stand with your friends and to never ever turn your back on them that loyalty is represented by the badger of Hufflepuff.

"We believe in these virtues, and that is the reason we wear them on our robes: So we can always see them right in front of our eyes, especially in those moments when we want to hide in dark corners and cry. We may be desperate at times, but we are never without hope. We know that the day will come when we can be home again."

Harry Potter smiled, and this time, his eyes smiled with his face. "Home with the ones we love."

Tsuzuku (... to be continued)

*

Dark night, nothing to see

Invisible hand in front of me

Scared to death there's someone near

Scared to move but you can't stay here

You know me, evil eye

You know me, prepare to die

You know me, the snakebite kiss

Devil's grip, the Iron Fist

*

extra Extra EXTRA!!!

"Look, we're on!"

"Look, that's us!"

"Hmh. *clears throat* Welcome, gentle viewers, welcome to Fred and George's radio show. I am Fred and he is George!"

"No, you're totally wrong! You are Fred and I am George. Don't mix it all up again!"

"Whatever. OK, how about we start today's broadcast by answering some of our fan mail. We are very popular, you know, so we get lots and lots of fan mail. If you'd like to send us anything that's not fan mail, like a howler for example, you should send it to Yamato and not to us. He's the bad guy. He kills people off and ships them into strange pairings that would never ever happen in the books."

"So let's have a look at our first letter then. It's by notsosaintly from The City of Petulant Poetesses."

"Poetessessesses...."

"Notsosaintly loves our comical banter. I daresay, dear brother, we have a fan." *blows kiss*

"That is, if Yamato doesn't scare her away with his geekiness. *insert maniacal crackling laughter here* So, this one here is from black colour vision, a native of Bring-on-the-Evil-Secrets-of-German-Fanfiction-City. She likes evil characters that are brought to life."

"Oh, but we can be evil, too." *hopeful glance*

"Yes, we'll be evil for you. We even hit southern_witch_69 from Evanescence City with a tickling charm. That's why she's giggling so much. See? Very evil."

"So, in a joint effort to show you how evil, nasty and mean we can be, we're gonna tell you lot something about Episode Two. Just like Episode One, it will have an A-part, and a B-part. And since we're not only awfully evil, but also awfully smart, we already know what will happen in those ... uhm ... parts."

"In Episode Two, brave, brave Sir Harry and his merry men must hasten to the rescue of poor unfortunate Muggles, which are oh wait, of course I mean **who** are being held in good old 'Old Hogwarts,' so the students can use them for practising curses. Boy, school has really changed since our days, hasn't it? And later, in the B-part of the episode, our heroes will encounter an old acquaintance, one they are not pleased to meet. But we won't tell you who it is because evil is as evil does."

"So, stay tuned for..."

*

Amicus Draconis - 1st Cycle: Cycle of the Badger Episode 2: Encounter at Hogwarts

Coming soon to a Fanfiction Archive near you

*

"Say, Fred?"

"Yeah, George?"

"Are we done yet?"

"Yes. I mean, no. We forgot the tag line!"

"But we don't have any tag line!"

"Then we shall make one! How about: 'I send you the waves of love!'"

"That's the Wedding Peach tag line, dumb brother! Why don't you try: 'The gate of adventures has opened!'"

"That's Digimon 02, you freak! Oh well, let's just settle for: 'The moonlight carries the message of love!'"

"No, you moron, that's Sailor Moon. We will never get a decent tag line by taking other shows' taglines. I don't want our absolute destiny to be the apocalypse. *sings* Zettai Unmei Mokushiroku!"

"We need something cool...."

"Something wicked...."

"Something Hogwarts...."

"Might as well stick with the classic!"

"OK. *whisper* On three...."

"One, two, two and a half..."

"Two and three quarters...."

"Draco Dormiens Nunquam Titillandus!"

"Say, Fred?"

"Yeah, George?"

"Are we done yet?"

"Yeah, we'll shut up now!"

02. Encounter at Hogwarts - Part A

Chapter 4 of 12

"Coming up next on AD: Episode 2: Encounter at Hogwarts!"

"That's right, Fred. In Episode 2 brave, brave Sir Harry and his merry men must hasten to the rescue of poor unfortunate Muggles, which are – oh wait, of course I mean: who are – being held in good old 'Old Hogwarts', so the students can use them for practising curses. Boy, school has really changed since our days, hasn't it? And later, in the B-part of the episode, our heroes will encounter an old acquaintance. One they are not pleased to meet, but we won't tell you who it is."

"No, we won't, George. Because he has a long nose. Or maybe because we're mean!"

Disclaimer: The characters don't belong to me, but to mighty JK Rowling (Yama bows deeply). I'm not making any money of this story, so please don't lock me up in Azkaban. Yama doesn't get along with Dementors. Also, none of the Book/Movie/TV show quotes Fred and George use are mine. They all belong to their respective authors. The opening song for episodes 1-13 is Sonnet No 92 by William Shakespeare and the ending song for episodes 1-11 is Iron Fist by Motörhead

Author's Notes: The second episode will focus a little more on the trio and tell us a few things about the life they're leading now in New Hogwarts. Also, we get a first glance at some of the big mysteries of the story as well as at upcoming romances concerning our three heroes. Don't forget to watch out for red herrings, though. AD's just full of those. Like G'kar once said to Catherine Sakai: "Nobody on this station is exactly what they appear to be." Same goes for this fic *g*

Cookies and chocolate beans to all the readers and reviewers of AD, and of course to my wonderful beta ladies Notsosaintly, Ellie and Arsinyk, who weed out all my dumb grammar and punctuation mistakes.

"During our last episode, brave Sir Harry and his merry men...."

"And women..."

"Well, Loretta, we could always state that you have the right to have babies, even if you can't get any. So anyway, they had to rescue innocent children from the Evil Blood Legion and...."

"No, I'll let Lee have the babies, as soon as I can find a fanfic author crazy enough to write us a nice preg fic. And shut up about the Blood Legion. Our audience doesn't know that they're called the Blood Legion yet. They only know about the Ghost Riders."

*"OK, here we go again. During our last episode, brave Sir Harry and his merry men and women had to rescue innocent children from ... from weird guys in weird red robes. The Dark Lord *Presses a button and furiously keeps punching till a loud 'boo' is set off. * had sent his Ghost Riders to kidnap all Muggle-born children with magical abilities in order to keep them under control."*

"Apart from that, some evil chic with some nice crystal ball has warned him to beware of He Who Must Not Be Named. However, Him ... uh ... He Who Must Not Be Named has found a nice little hideout in a magical room just below the Hogwarts Lake. From down there, he and his friends start their brave rescue missions to free innocent damsels in distress from He Who Was Formerly Known As He Who Must Not Be Named."

"And that's about it for Episode One. Wait, no; ugly Marcus Flint got himself a girlfriend."

"He did? Wicked!"

*

But do thy worst to steal thyself away,

For term of life thou art assured mine;

And life no longer than thy love will stay,

For it depends upon that love of thine.

Then need I not to fear the worst of wrongs,

When in the least of them my life hath end.

I see a better state to me belongs

Than that which on thy humour doth depend:

Thou canst not vex me with inconstant mind,

Since that my life on thy revolt doth lie.

O what a happy title do I find,

Happy to have thy love, happy to die!

But what's so blessed-fair that fears no blot?

Thou mayst be false, and yet I know it not

*

*

Amicus Draconis

*

First Cycle: Cycle of the Badger

Episode 2: Encounter at Hogwarts - Part A

Hogwarts 9/9/1998

Dear Mother,

The sweets you sent last week are all finished. Could you please send new sweets? The food is terrible as always. Gabrielle says that in Beauxbatons, the students can choose between twenty different dishes for each meal. Why didn't you let me go to Beauxbatons? We can afford the fee, can't we? And Gabrielle says that my French is très bon.

I do all my assignments and get good marks, and my teachers say I'll do just fine in the exams. I'm also the best flyer in my year, and I wish it wasn't so hard for girls to get onto the Quidditch Team. If I were a boy, I'd most certainly be on it.

Can I have a new broom for my good marks? I don't like the colour of my old one anymore. Nosia Babble says it clashes horribly with my complexion. And besides, this broom makes my legs look fat when I sit on it, or so Nosia Babble says.

I absolutely hate our new uniforms. They're even uglier than the old ones. Everybody says the snakes on our crests look more like slugs.

I'm looking forward to the Yule Ball. I can actually go because some fourth year invited me. The guy's a real moron, and he's real ugly, too, but I said yes because I wouldn't be able to go otherwise. I'm the only second year who got invited anyway and Nosia Babble's soooo jealous. She wanted to not be my friend anymore, but I hexed her with an acne hex, and I flushed her toad down the toilet. She's very sorry now and apologized to me. But I think I'll wait a couple of days before accepting it.

The fifth years can't really look forward to the ball; they've got to study for their OWLs. They just got a bunch of Muggles to practise their curses on them. The Muggles are kept on the third floor, but they already make the whole school stink. It's so disgusting!

Oh, I almost forgot, I need a new owl right away. My old one had a ... well, a sort of accident.

I really didn't want it to happen, and I'm real sorry about it, but I was so angry when Nosia Babble said all the mean things about my legs.

Can I please get an eagle owl now? Pretty, pretty please?

Love,

Lucilla

P.S. Please don't send the sweets with the stupid school owls, they're real slow.

* * *

In the so-called Peach Blossom Room, Hermione Granger sat, or rather knelt on one of the sitting cushions, frowning at her owl-shaped watch. For the second time already, the tiny bird had hooted to remind her that it was time for the weekly meeting of the Elders' Council. However, ten long minutes had passed now and still no one had bothered to show up yet. Except for her.

The Elders' Council was the not entirely serious term for all those witches and wizards who had reached the age of maturity. Most of them were in Hermione's year, but some of the former sixth years had turned seventeen as well. Harry Potter and those of his classmates whose birthdays fell in the first half of the year had already turned eighteen.

After five more minutes, at a quarter past four, the paper door slid open just far enough for Seamus Finnigan to stick his head into the room. "Nobody here yet?"

"See anyone?" Hermione's voice sounded slightly cynical. "It seems that our dear classmates don't give much thought to our current problems."

"Problems?" A grin started to spread over Seamus' face. "What problems? We don't have any problems, do we? Except for Voldemort wanting to kill us all, but that's his problem, not ours."

"Very funny," Hermione snapped back. She was definitely in a bad mood now. "We've got all sorts of problems. For example, how are we going to design lessons for so many children of different age groups? And we don't have nearly enough books, wands or brooms for everybody! And how are we going to plan our next rescue mission? Will we take the younger teenagers along, like two certain overly zealous individuals called the Creevey Brothers obviously want?"

"Well, couldn't we at least take sixteen and seventeen year olds?" Seamus suggested, desperately trying to prove that he had given the matter some thought. "I mean, it's dangerous for all of us anyway, no matter how old we are."

Hermione started to argue back; she already had a long explanation planned about why it would be much more dangerous for anyone younger than herself, but before she even opened her mouth, the paper of the sliding door was torn apart with a loud bang. Startled, Seamus jumped into the room, knocking over one of the small delicate tables on the floor between the tatami mats. Wood splintered; the table lost one of its legs.

"Oops!" With a guilty expression, Neville Longbottom looked from the broken door to the broken table and finally to Seamus lying on the floor. "I'm really not good with these Chinese doors...."

Hermione sighed and decided not to bother explaining, for the umpteenth time, that the design of their houses was Japanese and not Chinese. Those boys wouldn't be able to remember it anyway.

"Rumour has it, it's possible to open a sliding door by hand, Neville," Seamus moaned, clutching his aching shin.

With a flick of her wand, Hermione repaired the ripped apart door as well as the splintered table. Seamus grinned, pointing hopefully to his leg, but all he got was an angry scowl.

She took a couple of deep breaths as if she was trying to meditate, and when she faced her fellow rebels again, her voice had calmed down. "Would you please sit down now, so that we can commence the meeting?"

"Well, if that's what you call sitting." Dean Thomas, who was following Neville into the room, gave the sitting cushions an apprehensive glance. "I'd prefer a nice chair anytime."

"Me, too." Seamus agreed. "I'm kinda fed up with our Asia Weeks."

"Guys just don't understand about true beauty." Smiling blissfully, Lavender Brown glanced about the room, taking in its exotic atmosphere. "This is so very romantic!"

Dean, Seamus and Neville grinned at each other, rolling their eyes.

Behind the Gryffindors, Hannah Abbot, Ernie Macmillan and the other Hufflepuffs entered the room. The Ravensclaws still were nowhere to be seen.

"Oh, Parvati and Padma would like to be excused," Lavender said. "They're pretty busy right now. The children we rescued two weeks ago had their first flying lesson today, and some got thrown off their brooms - nothing major though...."

"I know." Hermione sighed. "We checked on them earlier. Getting used to our kind of life is not easy for those poor youngsters."

"No one can get used to people as weird as us. It defies nature!" Ron Weasley, slightly breathless from running, slid the door aside. "Ravensclaws are coming - oh, there they are."

It seemed the meeting could finally begin, even if it was half an hour later than originally planned.

"We were talking about the Shape just now," Dean explained to the newcomers. "Personally I'd like to change it. Hallowe'en's coming up in less than two months - what do you people think of a Haunted Castle?"

"Are you out of your mind?" shouted Lavender, completely taken aback. "Don't you think of the poor children at all? Didn't they get scared enough already?"

"Some of them do want something more exciting as well," Dean remarked. "And besides, you're only using them as pretence to keep this Chinese stuff. So don't pretend it's them you're worried about!"

"Did anyone ever tell you how rude you are?" Lavender snarled at him, and a moment later, a heated discussion had broken out. Parvati might not have been there to agree with her best friend, but some of the Ravenclaw girls definitely shared their opinions, while the Gryffindor boys complained loudly about kitschy feminine ideas and offered to dye the girls' hair pink. The Hufflepuffs tried to soothe the argument by suggesting odd compromises, such as: "How about a Chinese haunted castle?"

Right in the middle of the debate, Ron suddenly wanted to know. "Where's Harry? Why isn't he here?"

Hermione jumped up, startled. Harry! How on earth could she have forgotten about him? She, who never ever forgot things! The poor fellow must have been waiting in the entrance for half an hour now; he had asked her to let him in shortly before the meeting. 'Go on like that, and you'll be needing Neville's Remembrall soon,' she told herself angrily.

"I'll go look for him," Ron offered. "Maybe he's brooding over new plans and forgot all about the meeting."

"Don't worry, Ron, I'll take care of it. Ernie and Hannah, will you please take over the meeting?" Hermione didn't want the others to know that Harry had left the hideout. It would raise too many questions and might make the others jealous. After all, they hated being locked up, and everybody longed to get out on the surface.

However, trips to the surface endangered the safety of their hiding place, so they never left the lake, unless they really had to. Flying rescue missions and collecting new Gillyweed were some of the few reasons to go up.

Without doubt, Harry, too, had his reasons for being on the surface....

Hermione had just left the room when Dean nudged Seamus with his elbow. "Know what I think? Harry and Hermione just want some time on their own."

"Right you are!" Grinning, Seamus took a quick glance at Ron's blushing face. "Our two turtledoves! Don't you think it's 'so very romantic', Lavender?"

"Oh, shut up!" Ron snarled, clenching his fists. He turned away from the others, trying not to show his embarrassment. However, they noticed anyway...

"Chill out, mate." Dean gave him a roguish smile, trying to ease the tension. "Just fooling around. We know Harry needs Hermione to get back in. We're not supposed to figure out he's been visiting Hagrid again."

"There's really no need for all this secrecy," complained Hannah. "It's not like we have a problem with him visiting Hagrid's. I mean, that's where he gets all the information from, isn't it?"

"Did something come up?" Harry wanted to know as Hermione retrieved her golden key from the cloud in the artificial sky, sliding it back into her pocket. "Or did you just forget about me?" he asked teasingly.

He had been able to pass the entrance door at the bottom of the lake, but had been cast out again; you needed two people to open the hideout. This was an extra safety measure to protect them from the dangers outside. Only the two seventh year Prefects of each house were able to open the entrance; Harry and Hermione for Gryffindor, Ernie and Hannah for Hufflepuff, and Terry and Lisa for Ravenclaw. There were only three golden keys and it was the girls' duty to keep them.

So, of course, they would never leave the lake with all six Prefects at the same time. If something happened to them, the others would not be able to leave the hideout, not unless the one who had created it returned to them. And that was very unlikely given the circumstances.

"Well, I almost did. I'm sorry." Slightly embarrassed, she averted her eyes. "Please don't be angry with me, there's just a lot going on right now. And it's difficult to keep up."

"You're taking too much responsibility. You work yourself too hard." He placed a comforting hand on her shoulder as they flew back down to the ground. "Why don't you let the others do some of the work once in a while?"

"You're right," she agreed. "It's just so difficult. You see, I'm getting the feeling that if I don't do it myself, it's not going to get done at all. The others are never serious about things. I mean, everything's falling apart and they just keep making their dumb jokes!" Her voice broke, but she swallowed the tears. Now was not the time to cry. She just couldn't afford to let herself go.

"Hermione, can't you see why they're doing it? They're trying to keep their joy in life. It's hard enough with their families gone, but if they worried and worried all the time, they'd go crazy. And make all the others crazy as well. We need to keep our heads clear."

He jumped off his broom; they had reached the ground. "And we also have the responsibility for the younger students. We should at least try to make some kind of a normal life possible for them."

"I know we're doing our best!" She clenched her fists and her broom fell to the floor. "But to me it always feels like it's not enough! It's simply not enough!"

"Same here." He picked up her broom and gave it back to her. "But we need to do, and we will do, everything that's within our power. I'm not kidding myself. I know, right now, we and our rescue missions are nothing more than an annoying fly buzzing around Voldemort's ugly nose, but we won't give up. We will never give up."

"OK." She took a deep breath. "So how's Hagrid?" she asked, trying to change the subject. "And do you at least have some good news for us?"

She looked at him, new hope dawning on her face, but as their eyes met, it was destroyed instantly.

"Hagrid's good." He sighed. "Unfortunately, the news I've got isn't."

* * *

"Those bloody bastards!" Dean had leapt to his feet. "We're not going to let that happen!"

"Harry, you don't know by any chance, who these people are?" Susan Bones wanted to know. "I mean could someone we know be among them?"

"I'm sorry, all I know is what I already told you. The Muggles were kidnapped and they're now being held at Hogwarts for the students to practise curses on them. I don't think they were chosen especially for this; they probably just took the first couple of people they could get their hands on."

"Curses? I thought only the members of the Dark Council were allowed to use the Curses." Ernie sounded confused. "Didn't Harry mention something like that not too long ago?"

"Not those curses," Harry corrected him. "I'm pretty sure they wouldn't teach the Unforgivables at Hogwarts. Nevertheless, there are enough other curses that can prove very dangerous to people."

"Hmm...." Hannah's face became very thoughtful. "It'll be difficult to break into Hogwarts. The castle is probably one of the safest places in the entire Magical World."

"It used to be, with Dumbledore around," Mandy Brocklehurst corrected her. "But everything's changed now. I wonder who they've chosen as new headmaster..."

"Snape," Harry answered without hesitation and his eyes narrowed with hatred. It took him a moment to realize that he was getting bewildered stares. "How come you know that?" Seamus asked, confused.

"Well ... uhm ... 'know' would be exaggerating ... I simply assumed it's him," Harry stammered. Ron noticed Hermione giving Harry a warning glance and shaking her head ever so slightly. "Maybe ... maybe Hagrid mentioned something about it."

The others didn't pursue the matter; they were too busy making and dropping new plans. "So we all want to save those Muggles?" Seamus asked. "I don't think we need a vote on that, but if anybody's against it, he should speak up now. No? Good, didn't expect it anyway...."

Ron gave Harry a soft nudge. Since the others were here, he didn't dare to talk openly about the Invisibility Cloak and the Marauder's Map, but he was sure Harry understood what he was aiming at. They had used the Cloak the first time they had rescued children, but hadn't told the others about it. The Map had not been useful so far, since it only showed the Hogwarts grounds. And they had never entered the school again after their escape that night....

"There's no reason to keep it a secret any longer," Harry began. "I've got a map of Hogwarts, which also shows the secret entrances and passageways. With that map, it should be possible to sneak into the castle without getting noticed, and it would probably cause a lot less racket than flying over the walls with our broomsticks."

"It was only a suggestion," Justin Finch-Fletchley grumbled defensively. "And besides, we could still do it to draw their attention. One group sneaks in, and the other group makes a lot of noise for distraction."

"Why would we want to draw their attention in the first place?" Terry Boot wanted to know. "If we keep a low-pro they won't even notice we're there. After all, they don't expect someone to come and get the Muggles, do they?"

Again, Ron noticed Hermione scowling at Harry, but she didn't say anything and he didn't want to ask about it in front of the others. So he decided to direct his attention back to the plan instead.

"Only a few of us should go into the castle," he suggested. "With a small number of people, we're less likely to attract any attention. We'll take the Muggles out one by one through one of the secret passages. All the others wait at the exit. We'll fly the Muggles off on our brooms right into the next Muggle settlement. They'll find their way home from there, I guess."

"For one thing, we don't know how heavily the Muggles are guarded, and second, I just can't see them mounting a broom voluntarily. Sounds like a plan where too many things can go wrong to me."

"Point one, I don't think they're heavily guarded; they're not important prisoners after all," Ron rushed to answer Terry's comment. "Okay, point two's a difficult catch, I agree with you. However, you forgot all about point three, Terry. We can't take the Muggles into our hideout with us. We have to take them someplace - Muggle - and we have to use a Memory Charm to make them forget all about the last few days."

"I think it'll work!"

Heads turned towards Hermione. The old fire had returned to her eyes; they were planning now; they were doing something useful, something she was good at. "Harry and Ron could be the ones to sneak in - maybe there's a passage that leads them directly to the third floor. Two people won't be detected easily, and one can always check on the map while the other keeps an eye on the Muggle in case he or she panics."

"The rest of us will wait at the entrance with our brooms, and we'll use another two people to fly every Muggle off: one to keep an eye on the Muggle and one to keep an eye on the surroundings. Doing a Memory Charm on all the Muggles shouldn't be a problem either."

"Not if it's a basic Memory Charm," Lavender added, "but if we just wipe out, let's say, the last three days of their memory without replacing them somehow, they'll know that those days are missing. They'll know something has happened to them."

"We can't help that," Hermione sighed. "Specific Memory Charms are too difficult for us; we could end up damaging somebody's mind. They'll wonder about those missing days, but they won't be able to guess the truth."

"I don't think I can do a Memory Charm at all," Embarrassed, Neville averted his eyes. "And I don't want to risk anything."

"You don't have to; you'll take the lookout part of your group. We'll have to be extremely careful."

"We always have to be careful, don't we?" Seamus smiled sadly. "Anyway, your plan's pretty brilliant, Hermione. I think it's going to work out."

"My plan?" Utterly bewildered, Hermione looked at him. "It was Ron's idea, remember? I simply fine-tuned it, that's all."

* * *

It was two o'clock in the morning when the tiny owl on Hermione's watch hooted for her to get up. Still sleepy, she crawled out of bed, digging for her school uniform. She was just getting dressed when someone on the outside rattled the sliding door.

"Just a moment," she called. Her fingers were still busy with the buttons of her shirt when the door slid open and Ron came rushing into the room. Lavender, who was trying to shake Parvati awake, gave a shocked squeal and jumped back into her bed, hiding under the covers.

"Get out, Ron," Hermione shouted, pointing towards the door. "Can't you see we're not dressed?"

"Hermione, I need to talk to you!" He sounded angry as well. "What was that supposed to be this afternoon? I want to know!"

"Not when I'm not dressed," she snapped back, throwing a slipper in his direction. "Get out, and wait outside till I'm done!"

"Hurry up, then!" Grinding his teeth, he turned around and left.

"What's that guy's problem?" Lavender rolled her eyes and Parvati agreed with her. "He can be a real prat sometimes."

"Sometimes? What do you mean 'sometimes'?" Shaking her head, Hermione finished buttoning up her shirt.

* * *

"So, what's with all the fuss?"

Ron and Hermione stood on one of the wooden platforms leading out to the middle of the pond. They could see the others gathering at the shore, right in front of the wooden houses.

"Why did you tell them it was my plan, even though everyone knew it was yours?" Ron wanted to know. "Do you think I need your support because I'm too stupid to make plans on my own? Thank you very much, Miss Know-it-all. Thanks to your most charitable help, everyone else will now consider me a prat, too."

"And so you come storming into our bedroom at two in the morning? Cut the rubbish, Ron. Of course it was your plan. I was only working out the details." Hermione was struggling with her rising temper; she couldn't stand being called a know-it-all, and least of all by Ron. Did he expect her to pretend she was stupid just to please him? "And since when did you get so defensive about everything?" she continued. "No one thinks you're a prat, unless you act like one. And for storming into our bedroom like that, I expect an apology!"

"I apologize," Ron muttered. "So, which one of us is acting defensive now?"

"That's an entirely different matter."

"And why do you want me to go into the castle with Harry?" He grabbed a rock, throwing it out into the lake. "After all, it's you and him playing inseparable all the time."

"Now what's that supposed to mean?" Fuming, she spun on her heel, her long hair flying around her face and shoulders. "Just in case, you hadn't noticed, Harry told the others about the Map, but not about the Cloak. So that leaves how many people to go into the castle with him? I trust you know the basic rules of arithmetic."

"Stop going off topic!" Ron clenched his fists.

"Well, of course, I could go in with him as well. I just didn't want him to go alone, because it's too dangerous. There could be problems with the Muggles, or something else could happen, which they didn't expect ... there could be all sorts of trouble. And if you don't have a problem with your memory, you'll remember that no more than three people can fit under the cloak. So we can't all go." She was shouting now. "It doesn't matter in the least, who's going to accompany Harry! I just don't understand why you have to make such a fuss about it!"

"You don't understand anything, Hermione. That's exactly the problem!"

He stormed back to the shore, his steps thundering loud and hollow on the wooden floor as he jumped from square to square. She followed him with her eyes, not sure she was feeling angry or disappointed, probably both at the same time. Why did Ron have to make everything so difficult?

"He is a prat after all," she whispered softly to herself. "He's such a stupid, stubborn prat."

* * *

"So you think it's safe to take this passageway?" In the soft light of their wands, Ron pointed to the Marauder's Map. "Doesn't Filch know about that one?"

'But Filch isn't caretaker of Hogwarts anymore,' Harry was careful not to speak that thought aloud; his little slip with Snape this afternoon had been bad enough. Instead he rather pointed out to Ron that all of the other passageways either didn't end on the third floor or started out at a place that were too dangerous. They didn't dare to sneak through half of Hogsmeade or take the Muggles through the Forbidden Forest. Nor was it a good idea to try the patience of the Whomping Willow, and underwater travel would prove a little stressful for a Muggle.

So that left the one passageway they were in, and it suited their needs perfectly. The exit was behind a waterfall, which broke from below the stone fundament of Hogwarts, falling down into the lake. The sound of the water drowned out most of the noise, and if they kept their brooms close to the surface of the lake when they flew away, they wouldn't be spotted from the castle. Soon the mountains would hide them from view completely.

Now all they needed to hope for was that the ending of the passageway was safely hidden as well. But even if it wasn't, they had the Invisibility Cloak to hide them.

With extreme caution, they advanced through the stone corridor. The ground and walls were moist and extremely slippery; the water was pretty close after all. Also, the corridor was steep, rising sharply into the castle. So it was a good thing their trainers' soles weren't smooth.

They hadn't talked much, directing their attention to their surroundings instead. By now they had figured out that the sound of the waterfall had its downside as well. In here, the water thundered incredibly loud in their ears, echoing from the walls around. They wouldn't even be able to hear Hagrid stomping before them, and this would make them easy prey for anyone else walking this way. That thought made Harry a little twitchy, and he wouldn't have been surprised if Ron felt the same way.

The passageway ended in small room with a trapdoor in the ceiling above them. It was too high up to be reached by hand, but they didn't dare use a spell - what if it was detected? A levitation spell on a human being was quite powerful, and the security around here was probably very tight now.

They couldn't even say if it would have worked anyway. They already knew that you could not use Levitation Spells to get over the castle walls from the outside.

"Let me stand on your shoulders," Harry suggested to Ron. "I should be able to reach it then."

"No problem," Ron assured him, but he did sway a little under Harry's weight. He grabbed his friend's ankles to give him a little more support, and Harry was struck by the thought that they probably looked like two clowns in a circus, trying to perform ridiculous acrobatics. Not that they should worry about something like that....

The trapdoor was locked, of course; he should have thought of that. Could he risk a simple Alohomora? As he worried and reached for his wand at the same time, bending his body in odd gymnastics, while desperately trying to keep his balance, his robes swished over Ron's face and neck, tickling him. The other boy squirmed, letting go of Harry's ankles.

Thud!

"Oops!"

"Ouch!"

"Looks like we're not as young and flexible as we used to be!" Moaning and grumbling, Ron tried to disentangle all the arms and legs that were his from the ones that were not. "Our old bones are no longer in a condition for gymnastics."

"We really need to play Quidditch to stay in shape." Harry gave a sigh, his voice getting dreamy. "Imagine, half a year ago, I was still thinking of going pro...."

"Oh, stop it!" Ron interrupted him. "Let's not think about stuff like that right now, okay? It's no good."

"No, it's not. However, we will play Quidditch again, even if it must be down in the lake!" Harry's face was screwed up in determination.

He leapt to his feet and this time stuck his wand between his teeth before climbing onto his friend's shoulders again. An Alohomora was enough to open the door's lock. Harry listened for a moment, before pulling himself up with his arms and pushing the door open with his head. Then he heaved himself into the room above.

"Harry!" Ron whispered from below. "What's going on? Where are you?"

He had to be inside a huge hallway; it was too gloomy around him to make out the walls. All he could see were a couple of dusty pillars fading into the darkness and the twisted, cobweb-covered stone figures decorating them looked horribly familiar. Hastily, he pulled the Map from his pocket, and it confirmed his uneasy feeling. This was the forbidden third floor corridor, the one they had fled through seven years ago, while trying to escape Filch. The room where they had met Fluffy had to be right behind him.

Right behind him there was something else as well. A tiny dot on the map, racing towards him with incredible speed.

"Wheeee!" squealed Peeves, zooming through the wall right into the hallway.

* * *

Amicus Draconis - 1st Cycle: Cycle of the Badger - Part 2: Encounter at Hogwarts

"I wonder, I wonder, do you know what I wonder?"

"No idea."

"If I can get the new slim fast broom, because it doesn't make my legs look fat!"

"I want a new wand to match my complexion!"

"I want sweets that make you lose weight!"

"I want Muggles, which I can flush down the toilet!"

"I want lots of Bludgers I can hit at Nosia Babble when she doesn't do as I say!"

"And an owl to match my eye colour would be nice as well!"

"Cause I'm a Malfoy girl, in a Malfoy Wo-hur-hur-Id."

"I'm made of plastic, it's so fantastic!"

"I'm a spoiled blonde brat; I'll run to Mum and Dad."

"Do what I wa-hant, or I'll throw tantrums!"

"Hey, Fred, you dumb prat!"

"What do you want, annoying know-it-all! Stop hurting my feelings!"

"No, you stop hurting my feelings, you insensitive klutz!"

"So, if you wanted to go to the Christmas ball, which you can't, of course, who'd you rather take? The blonde brat, or Moaning Myrtle?"

"Can't I just take the Whomping Willow? Pretty, pretty please?"

"No, I was gonna take the Whomping Willow. You get the giant squid!"

"Gee, thanks a lot, bro!"

Amicus Draconis - 1. Zyklus: Zyklus des Dachses - Teil 2: Begegnung in Hogwarts

* * *

Author Notes: Ever read a Harry Potter Anime?

Let me pay a little compliment to all of you writers out there. When I started reading English-language HP fanfiction a short while ago, I found hundreds and hundreds of amazing stories, and I still discover new ones every day. Coming to the International HP fandom was like entering a whole new world of magic, taking me to places I've never even dreamt about. And I'm really, really glad to be here to enjoy all of this.

HP Fanfiction, and fanfiction in general, sure is a lot older in the English speaking fandoms. On different message boards I've read many interesting things about it. Fanfiction started out and also boomed with American TV shows and movies like Star Trek, X-Files and Star Wars. In Germany there are a few writers who started out with these fandoms as well, but the big boom came in the late 90s and the new millennium with Japanese animation series like Sailormoon, Pokémon, Digimon and Shin Seiki Evangelion. From what I heard, these fandoms are also pretty popular in English-language fandoms, but they don't represent its beginning; they could rather be called ... hm ... 'The Next Generation?' *ggg*

This means, of course, that German fanfiction in general has been highly influenced by Anime and Manga. People will talk about 'Yaoi' and 'Shounen Ai' rather than 'Slash', even when it's Frodo and Sam, they're pairing up. Also, people will often structure longer fics with story arcs like a TV show, rather than a novel.

Now don't get me wrong, I'm only talking about general tendencies. There's lots of Germans, who write LotR and BtVS and are not interested in Anime/Manga at all (In my opinion, BtVS was heavily influenced by Sailormoon as well, but that's an entirely different story. If you're interested, just ask me about it.)

Anyway, a huge number of German HP writers come from Anime/Manga fandoms. www.Animexx.de the biggest German Anime and Manga community also hosts one of the biggest HP FF archives. That's where I come from, and that's where Amicus Draconis started out in 2001 – a Harry Potter fanfiction with Anime elements.

I'll get back to you and tell you more :-)

02. Encounter at Hogwarts - Part B

Chapter 5 of 12

"He could feel his temper rising as he desperately forced himself to keep a clear head. Voldemort and his followers had such a simple view of the world, such clear categories about who deserved to live and who didn't. The method behind the madness made it all the more cruel. This was not about children learning curses; this was about children being desensitized at a young age, being taught to hurt and kill without mercy."

Author's Notes: Another happy 'Thank you' note for my betas, Notsosaintly, Ellie and Arsinyk, and off we go to Hogwarts. Explore the secrets of the castle, and cower before Caps Lock!Harry. *g* Strictly speaking, I'm not allowed to use him, since he's very OotP, but well, couldn't resist the temptation, I guess.

I hope Snape is IC: he's probably the most difficult HP character to write (or to translate *g*), and I still don't understand when and why he uses long forms in his speech and when he doesn't. To me it seems he used short forms all right during the first four books and only started this whole "I talk like Data" business in OotP.

Oh, and by the end of this episode, you can do some more guessing about pairings. Enjoy. ^^

Amicus Draconis - 1st Cycle: Cycle of the Badger - Part 2: Encounter at Hogwarts

"I wonder, I wonder, do you know what I wonder?"

"No idea."

"If I can get the new slim fast broom because it doesn't make my legs look fat!"

"I want a new wand to match my complexion!"

"I want sweets that make you lose weight!"

"I want Muggles, which I can flush down the toilet!"

"I want lots of Bludgers I can hit at Nosia Babble when she doesn't do as I say!"

"And an owl to match my eye colour would be nice as well!"

"Cause I'm a Malfoy girl, in a Malfoy Wo-hur-hur-Id."

"I'm made of plastic, it's so fantastic!"

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"Do what I wa-hant, or I'll throw tantrums!"

"Hey, Fred, you dumb prat!"

"What do you want, annoying know-it-all! Stop hurting my feelings!"

"No, you stop hurting my feelings, you insensitive klutz!"

"So, if you wanted to go to the Christmas ball, which you can't, of course, who'd you rather take? The blonde brat or Moaning Myrtle?"

"Can't I just take the Whomping Willow? Pretty, pretty please?"

"No, I was gonna take the Whomping Willow. You get the giant squid!"

"Gee, thanks a lot, bro!"

Amicus Draconis - 1. Zyklus: Zyklus des Dachses - Teil 2: Begegnung in Hogwarts

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Amicus Draconis

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First Cycle: Cycle of the Badger*

Episode 2: Encounter at Hogwarts - Part B

*

Harry dove to the floor, reaching out as he fell. "Invisibi..." was the only sound that made it out of his mouth, but luckily, Ron had a fast reaction with things like that. Almost at once, the Cloak came soaring up the hole, spreading itself over him.

"Boo hoo hoo," Peeves sang. "Shoe hoo hoo! Rukkidigoo, there's blood in the shoe!"

Something cold touched Harry's leg, but he didn't dare to move. Peeves' voice was really close to his ear now. "Boo hoo hoo, what's with the shoe?"

His shoe. Could Peeves see one of his trainers? What if he hadn't completely covered his feet? He hadn't had much time... Well, it was too late to act now. If the shoe were to disappear right in front of Peeves' eyes, it was bound to arouse the poltergeist's suspicion, and he might raise the alarm.

He could only hope Peeves wouldn't get any stupid ideas....

Again Harry felt the strange cold, an unpleasant tingling shiver in his leg. What was Peeves doing? Was he floating through him right now? Could he feel that there was someone lying on the floor? Someone alive....

Oh, even if the poltergeist couldn't feel him, he was bound to hear his heartbeat. It thumped incredibly loudly in Harry's ears.

He could barely stop himself from screaming in surprise and pain when he suddenly felt a strong pull at his leg. The poltergeist was trying to move his shoe. He had never understood how ghosts could flow through solid objects on the one hand, and touch them on the other. This could get real ugly now. He hoped that Peeves hadn't figured out that there was a foot inside the shoe on the floor yet.

Harry pressed his leg closer to the floor, trying not to make any sounds. He didn't even dare to breathe. Tiny droplets of sweat were running down his forehead into his brows.

"Sweat!" Peeves gave an excited squeal, finally letting go of Harry's trainer. "Smells like sweat. Smelly, smelly sweat!"

He giggled madly, zooming up into the air. "Oh, you poor dears!" he croaked, his voice full of malice. "Poor dears, they will come for you! They will come and get you! Can't run! Can't hide! They will come for you tonight! Wheeeee!"

His squealing and sniggering faded away into the darkness. A hasty glance on the Map told Harry that he had dropped down a couple of floors and was now roaming about the Entrance Hall.

"Blimey, that was close!" Harry gave a sigh of relief. He took a couple of seconds to catch his breath, while Ron called softly from the corridor: "You all right, mate? What's going on?"

"I'm fine. Peeves found my shoe, but he's gone now."

"Yes, I noticed. Good thing he was busy with your shoe. Imagine he'd found the hole in the floor instead!"

Well, Ron could talk easily; he hadn't been the one getting pulled at. Harry sat up, stretching his aching legs. "Anyway, now we know that the Muggles really are in here. I think it was them he was talking about."

He bent over the trapdoor. "OK, let's see ... Our arms are too short for me to pull you up. Maybe we should try another spell? Or we could go back and get a broom instead."

"Spell's too risky." Ron shook his head. "This is Hogwarts after all, remember? And getting a broom would take too much time. It's four o'clock already, and I suppose in about two hours people start waking up. In my opinion we should have gone earlier, but everybody said it was too risky. And Hermione...."

"What about Hermione?"

"Nothing." Ron frowned. "I'll tell you what; I'd better stay here and help the Muggles get down the trapdoor. You'll be quicker on your own. Just don't forget to close the trapdoor before you leave, or someone might notice me down here."

"All right." Harry wasn't too happy with the idea, but he couldn't think of any alternatives right now. He closed the trapdoor and made sure that he was completely covered by the Cloak before he snuck away.

Finding the Muggles' prison didn't prove too difficult; he could see their names on the Map. They weren't spelled properly, a cluster of letters changing around, but this was probably due to the fact that Muggles did not have the same magical aura as wizards did, which confused the Map. However, such a large number of people were bound to be noticed even by a magical artefact not created for Muggles.

There were no guards at the room, which didn't come as a surprise. The Muggles weren't important prisoners after all, and no one was likely to be worried about rescue missions. Who would bother with Muggles anyway? Even the resistance had better things to do.

Now the important question was how could he open that door. Another Alohomora was risky, but it seemed he had no choice. Hopefully, the door wasn't protected by an alarm system.

He wished he still had Sirius' knife as he edged closer, checking the Map again and finally approaching the door. There was a small window with bars in it, but the room behind was too dark to make out anything.

The only thing he noticed as he peered through the window was the smell. It seemed the prisoners were kept under pretty bad conditions in there. They probably didn't have any way to clean themselves or use the bathroom.

He could feel his temper rising as he desperately forced himself to keep a clear head. Voldemort and his followers had such a simple view of the world, such clear categories about who deserved to live and who didn't. The method behind the madness made it all the more cruel. This was not about children learning curses; this was about children being desensitized at a young age, being taught to hurt and kill without mercy. Did Voldemort hate Muggles so much because he had been treated badly by them as a child? Or was it because the pure-blooded Slytherins had taunted him during his time in Hogwarts? How on earth could anybody become such a psychotic madman?

Once again Harry wondered how much the Death Eaters knew of their Dark Lord's past.

There was no reaction when he checked the door with his wand. It seemed as if there weren't any special protection spells on it, so a simple Alohomora should do the trick.

What would he find inside? Were the people injured? Would they panic when they saw him, believing him to be one of their captors? Believing he would hurt them?

He stayed hidden under the cloak as he snuck in. The light of his wand did not reach very far in, but he would be able to cast a quick glance around the room before he spoke to the people inside.

There seemed to be about twenty of them. Women, men and children of all ages were lying fast asleep on the stone floor. Their bruises and scratches and tattered clothes showed that the bastards who had captured them had taken anybody they could get their hands on and had done so none too gently. At least there didn't seem to be any severe injuries.

One man was awake, guarding the door. Harry wasn't surprised that the Muggles tried to remain vigilant; they must have known they were in great danger.

The man drew back inside the room as the door opened, his huge, fearful eyes staring out into the corridor. Worried that he might wake the others and start a panic, Harry quickly stepped behind him, placing a hand upon his mouth. "Don't scream. We're here to get you all out. Just stay calm, and you'll be home in no time at all."

The man was startled, but he didn't make a sound. Since he didn't panic or try to fight Harry off, Harry cautiously let go of him and slipped out of the cloak to reveal himself.

The others, too, had noticed there was something strange going on. Slowly, they got up, stumbling backwards into the farthest corners of the room. With their uncontrolled movements, their shaking bodies and their wide opened eyes, they reminded Harry of the creatures from the horror movies, Dudley used to watch with his friends. He felt a strange fear, but managed to shake it off. They were the ones who were afraid. They were the ones that had been hurt.

"Listen to me," Harry tried again, this time directing his attention to the whole group. "You have nothing to fear. My friends and I have come to your rescue. Please, believe me. We're here to take you home."

He took a deep breath, but before he could utter another word, he felt a cold hand pressing against his throat, and the tip of a wand poking his back.

"Don't even try, Potter," said a voice he had not heard for a while, except in his nightmares. "They don't understand a word you're saying."

* * *

In the office that had once belonged to Dumbledore, Headmaster Snape scowled at his prisoners. The Marauder's Map, the Invisibility Cloak and Harry's and Ron's wands all lay before him on the desk, while the two boys sat in front of it, tightly bound to their chairs.

The hateful sparks gleaming in Harry's eyes only seemed to amuse Snape. His lip curled slightly as he held his former student's glare.

Ron couldn't remember ever having seen Harry so full of hatred. True, his own recollections of the Potions master were anything but pleasant, but Harry gave the impression of holding Snape personally responsible for every crime Voldemort and his followers had ever committed.

"You haven't changed one bit, Potter," Snape spat coldly. "The same arrogant fool as ever. Dumbledore and the entire Order put their lives at risk to protect you, but no the Great Harry Potter has to act the hero and jeopardize everything we worked for."

He banged his fist on the table, causing the wands to roll about. "And why's that? Because the Great Harry Potter rejoices in the delusion that he can make the world a better place by saving a few Muggles!"

"Don't you dare speak Dumbledore's name, you bloody traitor!" Harry snarled between clenched teeth. "He trusted you. He trusted you, even though you were a Death Eater. And you betrayed him and everything he stands for."

"Is that so?" Snape raised an eyebrow, giving Harry a scornful look. "Do not speak of things you cannot understand, Potter. You are completely unaware of the havoc you and your ill-fated choices wreaked upon our world. Without your meddling interference, none of this would ever..."

"We understand what it's like out there," Ron hastily interrupted the Potions master. "Muggles are being tortured, terror's spread everywhere, and anyone speaking out against Voldemort is murdered before they even get to finish the sentence."

"Not murdered, Ron." Harry's voice sounded bitter and tired. "They lose their souls to the Dementors. Isn't that right, *Headmaster* Snape?"

"It seems that for once, you've done your homework." Snape's black eyes were inscrutable, yet there was a slight change in the tone of his voice. "I don't know how you came by this information, but for once, listen to reason and not to your raging hormones. You cannot change the world. You cannot set things right again. You and your little friends and all of your pathetic rescue missions won't change a thing about the Dark Lord's reign of terror."

He slowly rose from his armchair. "So, stay out of this, children. Stay in your hiding place, like Headmaster Dumbledore has ordered you to, and wait until all of this is over. Maybe there is a way to defeat the Dark Lord, but you certainly aren't the ones to find it. Leave that to the people who see the big picture."

"Is this a trick?" Ron's eyes narrowed in apprehension. "You pretend to be on our side to get information from us?"

Snape chuckled. "If it was information I wanted, Weasley, I would have plenty of other options at my disposal, believe me. You know nothing of importance to me."

"Where is Dumbledore?" Harry wanted to know. "And what about Ron's parents? Are they still alive?"

"Dumbledore is a prisoner of the Dark Lord," Snape replied, "but I do not have information on his whereabouts or his condition. Too many things went wrong when the Dark Lord took over Hogwarts. He does not trust me with important knowledge at the moment. He thinks me a fool, not a traitor, but I am under close surveillance and cannot risk exposing myself. However, the last time I heard from Weasley's parents, they were still at liberty."

"I don't believe you!" Ron had started shouting now. "I don't believe a word you're saying! It's all a trick!"

"I don't care what you believe, Weasley." Snape gave his wand a casual wave, and the rope that bound the two boys to their chairs, broke and fell to the floor. "I don't care in the least."

His sleeve swished over the desk, shoving the wands, the Cloak and the Map to the floor. "Take your stuff, take your beloved Muggles and get out of here. And then stay at your hiding place until all of this is over. Dumbledore should not have made it possible for you to leave it in the first place."

"Our hideout!" Ron scrambled to retrieve his wand. "That's why you're doing this, right? You're letting us go so you can have us followed and find our hideout. Then you can capture us all at once."

"You are raving, Weasley. Your hideout is inside a magical room below the Hogwarts Lake. I am one of the three wizards who created it. Professors Dumbledore, McGonagall and I wanted to construct a safe house to make sure the students of Hogwarts would not fall into the Dark Lord's hands. We certainly believed we would win the war and you would only need to spend a few weeks there. However, considering our current situation, you will need to exercise some patience, difficult as this may be."

He knew....

This was not an act....

Ron felt a shiver going down his spine. Snape knew about the hideout. Professor Snape, Potions master and Death Eater, was not a turncoat after all; he had remained loyal to Dumbledore. He was still a member of the Order of the Phoenix. They had a spy within the ranks of the enemy.

He drew in a sharp breath and thought how to argue his case. This was their chance to convince a member of the Order to work with them. Young they might be, but this hadn't prevented them from taking an active part in the resistance. They could do so much more. They could make a difference....

He turned to Harry for support. Surely his best friend was considering the very same thought right now.

Harry had grabbed onto the desk for support; his entire body trembling as if he had just received a Shaking Hex. "You knew," he stammered. "You knew all along about our hideout ... Oh, my God, how could you not save them? How could you...."

"YOU EVIL BASTARD!" Harry screamed, reaching for his wand. "IT'S YOUR FAULT WHAT HAPPENED TO THE SLYTHERINS! ENTIRELY YOUR FAULT! YOU...."

"Harry, cut the rubbish!" Ron grabbed his friend's arm, trying to wrestle the wand from him. Angry orange sparks flickered, and the hex, which was aimed at Snape, whizzed past the Potions master into a shelf next to the desk. "Harry, chill out, OK? Just calm down for a minute."

"CALM DOWN?" Harry shouted, staring at Ron disbelievingly. "I'LL KILL THE SLIMY GIT, EVEN IF IT'S THE LAST THING I DO!"

He shoved Ron aside, aiming his wand at Snape. For a while he stood motionless, staring at his former teacher, his eyes gleaming and his features twisted with hatred. Snape locked eyes with him, but he didn't show any fear, nor did he make any attempt to reach his wand or move out of the way.

Finally, Harry lowered his wand. "Why?" he asked in an empty voice. "How could you?"

"I know you don't understand, Potter," Snape replied softly. "You simply can't, and that is exactly the reason why you must keep out of this war. With your methods it cannot be won. Your friend Weasley is a decent chess player; he might possibly understand about hard choices. Sometimes one must sacrifice a less important figure to protect a crucial one. That is a lesson you have yet to learn."

"No, that I will *never* learn," Harry whispered. "Not ever."

* * *

It had taken them some effort to calm the Muggles so they could get them out through the tunnel and onto their brooms. Snape had been right; they really hadn't been able to understand Harry's words because a spell had kept them from using and understanding language so they could not plot their escape. By the time dawn crept up over the horizon, the last ones were safely on their way to the next Muggle settlement.

Bright daylight spilled over the lake as the young witches and wizards returned to their hideout, entering the lake somewhere between the hills so that they wouldn't be spotted from the castle. Although they were awfully tired, they couldn't keep themselves from chattering about what had happened. Harry, however, left it to Ron to tell the others about their encounter with Snape and withdrew from his fellow students. Hermione, noticing at once that there was something wrong, kept him company at first. After a short while, she returned to Ron, who was now sitting on one of the wooden platforms in the very middle of the pond, gazing into the waters.

"He wants to be on his own right now," Hermione said, as she sat down next to Ron. "He seems really downcast; I think he's crying, and doesn't want anybody to see."

"Well, I reckon if he's back to brooding mode, there's not much we can do about it." Ron sighed. "He'll come round when he feels like talking again."

"Ron, what happened?" The helplessness in her voice made him feel vulnerable too. "What did Snape do to upset Harry like that? Is this about the Slytherins? But Snape couldn't possibly have brought them into the hideout with us. Too many of them were on Voldemort's side. They would have betrayed the hideout, and we all would have been taken prisoner."

"Maybe." Ron's gaze followed a white koi who was lazily flipping her fins in the water. "Maybe not. Since Snape didn't take the risk, we'll never know. Maybe he was worried about exposing himself as a spy. Or maybe he thought it better to sacrifice the few for the sake of the many...."

"No, I don't think anyone's been sacrificed," Hermione assured him. "The Slytherins are in less danger than us, don't you think? Being pureblood and all...."

She didn't sound very convinced of her words, and Ron remembered what Snape had said about the chess figures. It seemed to fit.

"I think it's odd that Harry never talked to you about it," he finally said, turning towards her. "You're something like his soul mate, aren't you? He tells you pretty much anything, doesn't he?"

There was a tiny trace of jealousy in his voice. Or did she just imagine it?

"I'm his best friend, just like you are," she hurried to reply. "He'd rather talk about some things with you and about others with me. And sometimes I think neither one of us can really understand him."

She fell silent, unsure if she wanted to continue, but then decided she might as well. Going round in circles didn't help anything; they had to talk about things before they became too difficult.

"I know you're going to disagree with me," she began, "and I'm pretty certain we'll fight again if I say this." She drew in a deep breath and continued: "Ron, I know, you're jealous about me and Harry."

"And how ... I mean, what gives you the idea?"

If she had looked at him now, she would have noticed him blush. But she was staring at the water, just as he was, as if they were avoiding each other's eyes on purpose.

"Well, it's pretty obvious, don't you think? Anytime I'm with Harry and you're not, you make a fuss about it. The others noticed it, too, obviously since they already started teasing you because of it...."

They both remained silent for a while, watching the koi in the water. Probably fish lived a far happier life than humans or at least a less complex one. Provided they were real fish, of course, and not fake ones like these. Like everything else around them, they were only a Transfiguration of the Magic Room.

Hermione had expected Ron to get angry with her, had expected him to shout and to deny he had any feelings for Harry. Maybe even to walk away and refuse to speak to her. But of all the things she'd expected him to do, sitting quietly next to her and hearing her out was not one of them.

"Last night you said I wouldn't understand, Ron, but you're wrong. I know how you feel, I really do. Back at school, when we were younger, everything was much more ... simple. It was just the three of us. Sticking together, having adventures, sharing secrets. Things are different now. Harry and I are responsible for all these people, and I won't deny that this responsibility along with our duties has created a certain bond between us. And, as you surely know, there's more: experiences we made, secrets we shared "

She broke off; he already knew what she was talking about, and she didn't feel much like going into details. "However, this doesn't mean that you're less important to Harry, and that he would trust you any less. You're his best friend, and he needs you. Maybe more than he needs me. There are lots of things boys would rather share with other boys than with girls."

Impulsively, she put her arm around him. "Ron, I don't want you to feel left out, and I don't want you to think I would ever want to be the cause of a rift between you and Harry. That's why I suggested you should go into the castle with him. I wanted you two to work together. Maybe I was overcompensating, but I never had any intention of making you look stupid or hurting your feelings. Believe me, it's all a big misunderstanding."

'You bet it is,' Ron thought, his head still spinning from her complicated view on emotional matters. Why did girls have to make everything so difficult? "It's all right," he hurried to answer, smiling at her. "I did act like a prat and I'm sorry. Let's just forget about it, OK?"

"Did you think I was trying to patronize you? Was that the reason why you got so angry at me?"

"Yeah ... well, maybe ... but it's all right now," he assured her. "Really."

"And the plan was from both us, but the others didn't appreciate your work; they thought it was all my doing, and I thought that was so unfair."

Ron rolled his eyes. "Hermione, it's all right. How often do I have to say it?"

"I don't want Harry and me to get all the credit all the time; after all, you work as hard and as much as we do."

"Hermione, it's OK!"

"All right, all right, there's no reason to take that tone with me. Just because you're too much a prat to understand that I'm trying to show consideration for your feelings...."

"I understand about feelings. I'm a very sensitive person!"

"Right you are," she mocked him, playfully nudging him with her elbow. As an answer he slapped his hand on the water, splashing some in her face.

Squealing and laughing, they chased each other back to the paper houses. Now it was time to rest a little, to get ready for the next adventure.

For the future would hold quite a few surprises for them in store, that much was certain.

Tsuzuku (...to be continued)

*

Dark night, nothing to see,

Invisible hand in front of me.

Scared to death there's someone near,

Scared to move but you can't stay here.

You know me, evil eye!

You know me, prepare to die!

You know me, the snakebite kiss!

Devil's grip, the Iron Fist!

*

extra Extra EXTRA!

"Welcome, welcome, viewers, listeners, readers. Welcome to Fred and George's radio show. Today we shall explore the mysteries of cliché hunting in the fanfic world. It is a noble sport among young witches and wizards such as yourselves."

"But first, we'll take a look at the letterbox. ladyinthecloak thinks AD different from anything she read so far? That's a huge compliment for such an old story to still be original. So good to hear that not everything has turned cliché during the last three years. Why, thank you, my lady. *curtsey* And on we go to some nice notes from notsosaintly, who likes reading this fic, Sternschen, who already read this fic and wants to read it again in English don't you go shouting out spoilers, young lady, and MaUrAuDeRmAn, who would enjoy reading this fic much more, if it didn't have weird things like trailers and movie stuff, and well us, I suppose. Can I go sulk now?"

"Oh, shut up, you whiny whimp! OK now, ready for game? On one line we've got: Private Maladict! Cheers for PM! And on the other line we got Sponge ... uh ... Snooty Bob. Big hand for Bob!"

"Aaaaand action! PM races through the trailer and into the first episode. Looking good there ... looking good and yes! She's got one. Ophelia can see Draco very vividly in the darkness; Yamato could have mentioned a Lumos spell there.

"No wait that's not a cliché, that's more of a flint. Still, we award PM a bean for finding it. Here you go."

"And on she zooms and spots our littlest brother doing something stupid. Would that be Idiot!Ron? Well, poor Yama never heard of a cliché called Idiot!Ron. He definitely should read more bad fanfiction.

"Yep, he still thinks Harry's the one to do stupid stuff. Anyhow, take another bean."

"Oh, how come PM missed out on Sexy!Evil!Draco? Elf-like features, glittering grey eyes ... cliché if I ever saw one. All right, all right, back in 2001 it wasn't one yet, but it most certainly is now."

"PM strikes again, oh and it's an Americanism this time. 'Ron for President.' How come Ellie didn't spot that one?"

"Well, probably because it's actually more of a Europeanism. Europeans sometimes tend to make fun of the very soppy and kitschy speeches American presidents give, and that's reflected here. Sorry, can't award you a bean for that one. But you get one for spotting the KKK reference, even though you think it's cheesy, and you get a bonus bean for mentioning Lord of the Flies. It's great book, although it doesn't compare too well to the situation of Harry and the others."

"So, PM's got a total of four beans. Can you beat that, Bob? Bob's going for influences rather than clichés. Good choice, mate. There should be lots of them to find, since Yama spends half his time reading and watching TV. Ooooh bean for Tolkien. More bean for KKK. Bonus bean for Stephen King. Aaaaand ... well no more bean, but you could still even up the score by reviewing another chapter."

"Oh my, aren't we pushy tonight. So, if you lot ever get tired of hunting for flints, clichés, or possible influences, you might try ships next. Or clues. That'd be like figuring out what will happen next, who's going to do what, and what's going on in this fic anyway."

"Which brings us right to Episode 3. Go ahead, bro!"

"Episode 3 is still a fairly light one ... hm ... romance, maybe? There's no rescue mission this time, so a certain brother of ours comes up with the idea of arranging a Quidditch game for New Hogwarts. Besides romance, there's some Gillyweed, some music and lots of jealousy. We get to meet Chieftain Murcus, and some more characters we haven't seen before. Also, this episode's main character is a Ravenclaw girl named Lisa."

"We'd give you lot a short trailer, but then you'd start complaining again about how weird this fic is."

"Oh, what does it take to make you stop sulking? I'll hex you if you don't shut up!"

"Like to see you try, Fred. Stay tuned for: "

*

Amicus Draconis - 1st Cycle: Cycle of the Badger Episode 3: The Underwater Quidditch Game

Original Airdate: February 2002

Coming soon to a Fanfiction Archive near you.

*

Draco Dormiens nunquam titillandus.

Author's Note: Okay, back to AD and Anime. A few helpful notes if you're still confused, or if you want to know more about the structure of this fic.

- **Story Arcs:** Like most Anime (and some complex American TV shows as well) AD has three story arcs: a small one for each episode, a big one for each season (cycle) and an epic one for the entire story. This often confuses readers tremendously because it's so untypical for fanfiction. There's a lot of jumping around between characters, places, different points of view. And most of the time you don't know what's important for later episodes, and what's not. The big picture forms piece by piece, and sometimes when you reread the early episodes, you might think: "Hey, how come, I didn't spot that? It's so obvious."

- **Genre:** AD has elements of action/adventure, mystery, slash, romance, drama, songfic, angst, dark story and humor/parody. One scene might be silly, and in the next one your laughter dies in your throat. It can be quite an emotional rollercoaster ride, especially in the later episodes when you've become attached to the characters.

- **Background Story:** The three years between the end of GoF and the beginning of AD aren't blank space. A lot has happened in those years, and while the complete story is yet to be revealed in Cycle of the Snake, we already get glimpses of it in the first cycle. Also, there'll be lots of flashbacks in later episodes. It's very typical for Anime to start in the middle of the story, revealing not only the future, but also the past. But since Star Wars and Buffy do the same thing in the Western world, it shouldn't be too difficult to understand.

I didn't scare you off, yet? Wow, you got some nerves there. So I'll see you in the next chapter, where I'll tell you something about the Fred/George interludes.

Feedback is very much appreciated :-)

... but you'll risk finding yourself in Fred and George's radio show. *eg*

03. The Underwater Quidditch Game - Part A

Chapter 6 of 12

In Episode 3 (AD, not Star Wars *g*) New Hogwarts plans a very unusual Quidditch match. Featuring lots of Merpeople, a disgruntled Chieftain Murcus, an impatient Voldemort, a secret ring, a Ravenclaw with boy troubles, and Harry speaking in poems.

Disclaimer: The characters don't belong to me, but to mighty JK Rowling (Yama bows deeply). I'm not making any money off this story, so please don't lock me up in Azkaban. Yama doesn't get along with Dementors. Also, none of the Book/Movie/TV show quotes Fred and George use are mine. They all belong to their respective authors. The opening song for episodes 1-13 is Sonnet No 92 by William Shakespeare, and the ending song for episodes 1-11 is Iron Fist by Motörhead.

Author's Notes: Sorry, it took me a while to update but translating all the lyrics was murderous. I spent hours in our college library with rhyming dictionaries, thesauri, and Longman Language Activators keeping me company. I'm telling you, I'm so NOT looking forward to translating the musical episode. Luckily we still have some time left until that, so let's plunge right into the love troubles of Lisa Turpin, Ravenclaw.

However, I should advise you before you get all tangled up in the Lisa storyline to read through the first two scenes carefully. As you can probably guess, they will be a little more important for the story arc than painting rosettes and romance on broomsticks.

Marguerite, who also goes by the nickname of Marie, is my own character. Though, technically, after OotP she exists in canon in a way. Won't say no more, until we get to the three sisters episode *g*.

Thanks to my betas, Notsosaintly, Ellie and Arsinyk and thanks to everyone who wrote me a review. *hands out more cookies*

*

"Last episode, Harry and Ron snuck into Hogwarts to free a group of Muggles. Of course, they couldn't have done so without the map we gave them."

"Which makes us the heroes of last episode...."

"Naturally. Still, Little Bro and Golden Boy got themselves caught by Snape, who turned out to be a surprisingly good guy, considering what an evil git he is. It seems he's no Death Eater after all, but a spy for the Order."

"Which didn't stop Harry from capslocking...."

"Elementary, my dear Weasley. Bad yelling with the Man of Noses. Bad things happening in the past."

"Bad secrets for our poor audience, still recovering from this weird trailer thing."

"Yes, there seems to be a whole lot of mystery. What about the Slytherins? What about Harry messing with things that are too big for him? And finally, is our poor Trio stumbling headfirst into a tangled-up love triangle?"

*"We won't tell...." *smirks**

*

But do thy worst to steal thyself away,

For term of life thou art assured mine;

And life no longer than thy love will stay,

For it depends upon that love of thine.

Then need I not to fear the worst of wrongs,

When in the least of them my life hath end.

I see a better state to me belongs

Than that which on thy humour doth depend:

Thou canst not vex me with inconstant mind,

Since that my life on thy revolt doth lie.

O what a happy title do I find,

Happy to have thy love, happy to die!

But what's so blessed-fair that fears no blot?

Thou mayst be false, and yet I know it not.

*

*

Amicus Draconis

*

First Cycle: Cycle of the Badger

Episode 3: The Underwater Quidditch Game - Part A

*

"What do you mean by 'nothing came up yet'? Are you trying to imply that your master's concerns are no longer yours?"

There was only a slight trace of annoyance tingeing the sound of the voice, but it was enough to make the Seer's hands tremble and to bring tiny droplets of sweat to her forehead. "I've tried everything, my Lord, all the powers and resources at my disposal. The Crystal Ball, the Cards, not even the Lights revealed the secret to me. The hiding place of He Who Must Not Be Named seems to be protected by an ancient and powerful magic, which my humble skills are not able to penetrate. I cannot find the smallest hint of information on his whereabouts."

"So it is not lack of effort that prevents you from achieving your task. Incompetence, perhaps?" The annoyance had changed to something else now, mocking contempt and possibly a slight complacency at her moistening eyes and quivering lower lip. "Rumour gives the women of your family a reputation as powerful Seers, but one never should place too much faith in rumours, don't you think, my dear Marguerite?"

"Forgive me, my Lord." She had begun to cry in earnest now, lowering her eyelashes, as if her master stood before her personally. "I'll try harder. I'll do anything, I swear! On my life, which belongs to..."

"Quiet, girl." It was hard to determine whether the soft sound of these words was soothing or dangerous. "I don't have time for your silly whimpering. Go back to work."

"As you wish, Master. It's just my father will visit us today, and he should not know.... "

"You will not be disturbed in your work. I made sure of that. Your father will inform your husband shortly that he has postponed his visit until tomorrow because of his work in Azkaban. In fact, our friend Dumbledore could be telling him right now where he hid the one we are so desperately trying to find."

The voice chuckled softly, fading away into the stillness of her room. Just like last time. And the ones before.

She was alone again, but she knew the time would come when her Lord would no longer be content with excuses. She needed results. Results she could not give. Not with the methods she was using now.

But what else was there to use?

Should she turn to Father for help? No, that wouldn't do her any good. Men knew nothing about Seeing anyway. He only would frown upon her and chide her for not fulfilling her duties to Master and Family. And if he kept his temper, there would a long sermon. 'Obedience is a woman's first virtue, ma poupée.' She did not have time for that now. And she didn't deserve it, either.

After all she had not been the one to betray the family.

* * *

"Ay, if yeh ask me, Dumbledore's right." The dishes chinked softly on the huge wooden table as Hagrid set down an enormous mug of steaming tea. "Yeh shouldn't be roaming about, gettin' yerselves into trouble. Should stay put like Dumbledore would want yer to!"

"Snape said that, not Dumbledore," Hermione corrected him. "And to be honest, we don't know if we can trust Snape. Even Harry and Ron can't agree about it, which is so strange. They usually agree about not trusting Snape."

"I've told yeh a hundred times that Snape...." Hagrid began, but broke off with a sigh. "Where's Harry anyway? Still waitin' fer letters?" He stomped to the window of his forest hut and flung it open. "Come in, Harry! Tea's ready!"

"Shh, not so loud." Alarmed, she put a finger to her mouth and continued softly, "Besides, you're in more danger than us, Hagrid. Voldemort's people surely know that you're our friend. It was never a secret after all."

"I told yeh, they were there, the bunch o' them. Right after yeh had left Hogwarts. Treated me with some Veritaserum an' asked a lotta questions about yer hideout. Couldn't answer any of them, so they had ter let me go fer now. Have ter get clearance from the giants ter take me into custody, but they don't help without return service. Guess, I wasn't worth the trouble. And now - livin' in the forest, they can't find me no more. Tough luck on them."

Again, he leaned out of the window frame. "Harry, tea's getting cold!" He obviously wasn't comfortable with Harry being outside for so long, although the forest was supposed to be safe.

"All they need is some sort of treaty with the Centaurs and perhaps with some of the other Magical Creatures and Peoples living in here," Hermione considered, gazing thoughtfully into her own mug. "I don't think they'd need them all on their side, only the most powerful ones. Then they could just overrun the others and take control of the Forbidden Forest as well."

"Tha's right, m' lass," Hagrid smirked, "but the Centaurs'll never support old Tom. And it would be rather foolish o' him ter attack a neutral people and bring 'em t' our side. Harry, get in here, already!"

He waved his arm, still holding Harry's tea mug, spilling some of the hot liquid on the floor. Almost at once, Fang came running, wagging his tail and lapping up the tea from the floor while Crookshanks watched with a look of disgust on his grouchy face. If he were human, he might have made a comment about doggyish ingestion, but as things were, he had to content himself with a genteel meowing.

"I'm here." Creaking, the heavy door was pushed open, and a windswept Harry slid through the gap, the Invisibility Cloak over his arm. "No owl," he said dejectedly, turning to Hermione.

"I've noticed," she said coldly and her expression hardened. "Looks like someone's been too busy for little love-letters."

Harry ignored her snappy comment, turning to Hagrid instead. "Thanks for the tea, but we really have to be off. We shouldn't let the others find out again that we've left the hideout."

Hastily, he took a sip, leaning forward to put the half empty mug back on the table. As he did so, a necklace slid from his collar, a black ring on a silver chain. The ring was shaped into a dog-like head with dark rubies as its eyes.

"Do you have to wear that thing all the time?" Hermione hissed with a careful glance to Hagrid, who was in the back of the cabin, throwing more wood into the fire. "What if the others see it?"

"Stop worrying, Hermione. It's just a piece of jewellery. No one would notice." Harry tucked the ring safely under his shirt and went to say goodbye to Hagrid. Hermione scarcely had enough time to pet her cat before Harry was back, spreading the Cloak over them both. Crookshanks meowed again, this time quite piteous, as he watched her disappear.

"Next time, take Ron with yeh," Hagrid called after them, as they squeezed through the door. "There's enough room fer three under tha'."

* * *

Returning to the hideout, Harry and Hermione found everyone in the Elders' Council alert and excited. At first they suspected the worst, but they quickly realised that the others were once again dwelling on a heated discussion about their favourite subject: Magical Shapes. Ron hastily informed them that they had almost agreed on a new Shape for Hallowe'en when someone came forward with the suggestion of creating a Quidditch field. Ron did not tell them who this certain someone was, but Hermione suspected him at once, and as usual, she was right.

"We do know that a Quidditch field is not provided in the original Shapes." Absorbed in thought, Hannah Abbott toyed with one of her plaids. "All Shapes contain buildings suitable for living, rooms to sleep and spend time in, and usually some sort of garden or landscape around them. It's only logical; the Shapes are meant for long-time usage after all. Where are we supposed to sleep on a Quidditch field?"

"We'll probably need to improvise a bit," Dean Thomas suggested. "But first what news of the outside world, Harry? Did Hagrid find out something new for us?"

Everyone fell silent; this was the first time someone had directly confronted Harry with his not-so-secret visits. All eyes were on him to see how he would react.

He simply shook his head. "There's been no news, which means no new rescue missions to go on."

Disappointed faces surrounded him; most students would have fancied a new and exciting adventure. "Oh well, mate...." Ron sighed before his expression suddenly brightened up. "So, let's talk Quidditch, then."

Harry looked at him curiously; it seemed that his best friend had cooked up some sort of plan or was brooding over an idea. "The solution is quite simple." Ron grinned. "You said it yourself, Harry. We will play Quidditch again, even if it has to be underwater."

The young witches and wizards threw each other looks, puzzlement and confusion in their eyes. Had Ron really said, 'Quidditch underwater'? How on earth was that supposed to work?

"This whole Quidditch thing's another one of your silly jokes, isn't it, Ron?" For Padma Patil, the matter seemed closed.

"No, it's not ... this is good." Seamus Finnigan was just beginning to consider the possibilities. "There'd be enough room in the lake, and we couldn't be seen or heard from the outside...."

"We'd need lots and lots of Gillyweed, though," Mandy Brocklehurst added, "but we should get more of it anyway. It's not a bad thing to build up our supplies."

"But how will the balls work under water? Well, I guess we could use magic to get them to move differently, but..."

"And what's the deal with that, Lisa? This isn't the World Cup. It's just for fun!"

"Well, if you say so," Lisa Turpin snapped back at Mandy. The two Ravenclaw girls exchanged an angry glare, but didn't pursue the matter. For the rest of the discussion they chose to ignore each other.

"You are barking mad, all of you." Hannah shook her head disbelievingly. "Ernie, say something!" She nudged her boyfriend for support.

"I'm sorry to say this, my dear, but..." Ernie eyed her carefully, moving out of her reach, as she frowned at him. "I don't think it's such a bad idea after all. We have to provide some sort of entertainment for the younger students, don't we? After all, being stuck in here is even harder on them than it is on us. We are responsible for their well-being."

"Well, perhaps...." Hannah seemed to be won over by this argument.

"Do you think the Merpeople will agree?" Neville Longbottom asked cautiously.

"We'll have to ask Chieftain Murcus for permission first," Hermione stated. "The day after tomorrow is Wednesday, the day of our weekly audience with her. She'll probably think it's a pretty strange idea, but we might be able to convince her. We wouldn't be doing anything to endanger the Tritons after all."

"Considering that our presence here endangers them anyway," Harry added softly. "We know what would happen to them if Voldemort's followers found us here."

A shudder ran through the crowd, and everyone fell silent for a moment.

Harry rose. "All right, let's take the vote. All in favour of the match raise your hands."

With only a few exceptions, the hands went up in the air. Hermione noticed a small grin spreading on Ron's face.

"It's settled, then."

* * *

For the next few days, the entire hideout was buzzing with excitement. Although the Prefects hadn't had a chance to talk to Chieftain Murcus yet, most students seemed to be certain that the match would take place.

Never before had anyone seen so many brooms buzzing about in the air, and never before did Padma and Parvati Patil have to deal with so many broom crashes at once. The small airspace above the little Japanese houses proved entirely unsuitable for Quidditch training. Since the illusion of blue sky was so perfect, the ambitious New Hogwarts students kept smashing headfirst into the walls and the ceiling.

Down on the ground, things weren't exactly quiet either. Each of the three Houses was in a constant debate about the team line-up, and that didn't always run smoothly. With the Hufflepuffs, Justin Finch-Fletchley made quite a fuss because he wanted to be on the team, but wasn't a very good flyer. With the Gryffindors, the trouble was once again with the Creevy brothers.

Anyway, the Lions forgot all about their quarrels when Harry announced he would not take the Seeker position on the team. His Housemates, outraged at first, soon admitted grudgingly that he was doing the right thing. Harry's flying skills were easily good enough to enter a professional team; it wouldn't be fair to use them against the other students. So fifteen-year-old Natalie McDonald took the position of Seeker, and Harry was named referee by an absolute majority of all years and Houses.

The students who did not have the ambition to enter their House team wanted to contribute to the match as well. Under Hermione's patronage they had converted the Orange Blossom Room into a workshop for painting and handicrafts. She herself was experimenting with certain charms to make all the flags, banners, and rosettes the others were creating fit for underwater usage.

"If you want to colour the lion, use the gold first, and then the red for background," Dean explained to little Ophelia Flowerfield, showing her a sketch on a huge transparent. Since Dean was very gifted with drawing, he was one of the sketchers, passing his works on for colouring.

"I'm not stupid. I know what the Gryffindor Lion looks like," Ophelia replied indignantly, pointing to her robes. She and most of the other rescued children had decided on a House by now. Thomas Krueger, who had come to regard Ophelia as a big sister, had decided on Gryffindor as well; it seemed that most of them had chosen the House of their respective saviour. Since it was going to be their first time ever to watch Quidditch, the children were especially excited about the game.

Across the room, Lisa, who was very good at drawings as well, sat at another table, busy with a tiny eagle on a Ravenclaw rosette. Since she did not stop to talk or to play with the children, her work progressed considerably faster. The others didn't worry about her silence; most of them knew Lisa to be a very quiet person, keeping to herself most of the time. Also, she did not get along well with small children.

Only once did she look up from her drawing to secure a strand of hair, which had freed itself from her tight French chignon. Lisa's dark brown hair was very sleek, constantly sliding out of her hairdos. Nevertheless, she liked to put it up so it wouldn't annoy her, and cutting it short wasn't really an option. There was no way she would ever look as scrubby as Mandy thanks, but no thanks!

Why did she think such mean things about Mandy all of the sudden? The other girl had never done anything to her. That wasn't a fair thing to do, was it?

But who would worry about fair when Mandy was making passes at Terry? She was interested in him, this much was for sure. And maybe he even liked her back. It had not escaped Lisa's attention that he had been talking about her a lot, lately. Mostly to Lisa herself; after all, they had been friends since their first year at Hogwarts, and he usually confided in her.

After they had both become Ravenclaw Prefects, their friendship had become even closer. Nonetheless, it had never developed into something else, and it wasn't until after Terry had started pursuing that gormless Mandy girl that Lisa realized that was exactly what she had wished for.

And still wished for....

The door slid open without a sound, and Seamus Finnigan tiptoed into the room. Since Dean sat with his back to the door, he did not notice his boyfriend sneaking up on him. Grinning, Seamus put a finger to his lips to signal Lisa and the others to be quiet. Lisa rolled her eyes; it was so obvious he was up for some stupid and childish prank, and in the very next moment, he grabbed the cushion Dean was sitting on and pulled it away from him.

Everybody laughed when Dean fell over, suddenly finding himself down on the floor. He reacted at once, reaching for Seamus and grabbing him into a headlock. His boyfriend struggled to escape, and Ophelia hastily put the colours away so they wouldn't get knocked over.

Lisa stood up, striding out of the room. She really wasn't in the mood for couply goofiness right now. Of course she knew that Dean and Seamus were only joking around a little displaying intimate signs of affection in public was not customary for Hogwarts students and for her bad mood this was definitely enough. She wanted to get some fresh air.

The Fates were not on her side today. Right outside the room in the dark corridor, she ran into Ernie and Hannah. Now these two had really believed themselves unobserved, and so they stood very close, gazing lovingly into each other's eyes. Lisa rushed past them, not minding their startled looks. Finally, she was out in the open.

And that was when she hit bottom. On one of the wooden planks, right in the middle of the water-lilied pond, sat none other than Terry and Mandy, absorbed in blissful conversation. Apart from socializing, they were pushing tiny miniature brooms around in the air. Were they talking strategy for the Quidditch game?

The looks they gave each other said something else....

She turned without a word, hastening back into the building. Not to the workshop room, however. She was heading for the Ravenclaw girls' dormitories to finally find some solitude.

And should any love couple use that particular room for some secret snogging session, then God have mercy on them.

* * *

Wednesday afternoon had finally arrived and Lisa met with Terry, Hannah, Ernie, Hermione and Harry in front of the houses at the pond. The weekly meeting with Chieftain Murcus was the only occasion (apart from the Shape Changing, of course) when all six of the seventh-year Prefects left the hideout together. Since the Prefects had no wish to endanger themselves or the others, they would remain below the surface of the lake at all times.

The Tritons that was the original name of the Merpeople lived inside an underwater city, consisting of the huge coral reef where Chieftain Murcus and her court dwelled, and many surrounding houses and gardens. Not even Neville or Hermione could have explained how this particular coral was able to survive in the icy lake water; their best guesses were that it somehow had to be a Magical Creature itself.

The reef was busy as a beehive, a continual coming and going through its many exits and entrances. Everybody seemed to want to be anywhere but where they were, but this was probably due to the Tritons' restless nature. They never remained stationary for long periods of time; even conversations were held while swimming. From one room into the next, inside, outside it was all the same to them. For human visitors, who were used to quietly sitting and socializing in chairs, it was pretty hard to get used to.

The Tritons didn't even own such things; the concept of chairs was completely unknown to them. Why would anyone want to bend their middle and hover over a piece of

wood anyway?

Anyway, as time passed, the young witches and wizards had become accustomed to many elements of the strange and exciting culture around them. The process was mutual, of course; the visitors would prove to be an intriguing and ever mysterious research object to the natives. The Tritons were especially fascinated and awed by magic in its every form. During their last visit, the six young witches and wizards had encountered a passing elementary school class, entertaining the Merchildren with multi-coloured sparks from their wands. Another time, they had tried to magically spice the Merfood, but that one had been a total disaster.

When the humans entered the audience hall riding their strange wooden sticks and flipping their fake Gillyweed fins, there was no sign of Chieftain Murcus. Maybe all the waiting had tired her out, and she had decided to engage herself otherwise. Or maybe there was work to be done, and she had forgotten all about the time. Time wasn't really an issue underwater, and for people like Lisa Turpin, who favoured punctuality over everything else, this attitude was particularly hard to grasp.

Inside the audience hall, a large group of Mermen and women was busy swimming around and across a large table, talking in merry musical voices and filling their stomachs with a delicious meal. Like on any audience day, the table was buckling under the weight of all the fish, sea fruit and water plants the Tritons had to offer. One thing the New Hogwarts students had noticed early on was how generous their hosts were when it came to food. They were the ones who provided their meals ever since the young witches and wizards had taken refuge down in the lake.

What was not customary among them was to wait for their guests to arrive and start the meal. They didn't seem to have fixed meal times anyway; they had something whenever they were hungry and then simply swam on. Most adults took care of their own food anyway; food on tables was something for celebrations and other special occasions, such as visits from strange tailless creatures with or without weird wooden sticks.

The Tritons waved at their visitors, eagerly pointing to the food on the table. They looked rather threatening with their wild green manes of hair, their glistening fish tails and those huge spears they waved about. And it would be foolish to underestimate them; they were a martial folk and could prove a great danger to a potential enemy.

Lisa had been cautious at first, not knowing how she should deal with these people, but very soon she had come to like the visits with them. She had even managed to learn a few of those musical tunes they used to communicate with each other. Only very few of them spoke English, and if they did, it was rather broken.

After the visitors had put the brooms away and tried some of the different foods, Hannah swam up to a stone shelf located near the ceiling. Since you could effortlessly move in all three dimensions by flipping your fins; the furniture did not have to be set on the floor like in human housings. Hannah took a couple of small blackboards with coral quills from the shelf and handed them out to the other teenagers. Those were used for communication, because English was barely understandable underwater and their knowledge of Mermish was still quite limited.

Harry was the only exception; he could even hold small conversations in Mermish. Either he had a natural linguistic talent, or the rumours were true that Dumbledore had made him learn the basics of several Magical Creatures' languages. Maybe both, but how could the boy have known that he would need those languages later on? To Lisa it all seemed pretty strange, but then, he was Harry Potter.

Right now he was talking to a young girl with very long teal blue hair. He even seemed to be flirting, because the girl blushed and giggled in a chime-like sound. She wondered about that for quite a while. Harry did not seem the type to make girls laugh. Of course she respected him greatly as a leader, but whenever she compared him to Terry, it seemed to her that Terry was a lot more fun to be around; he was cheerful, easy-going and liked to live on the bright side of life. Harry, on the other hand, seemed so removed from everyday teenage life, his head filled with countless thoughts and his soul hiding mysteries an ordinary person like her couldn't even begin to comprehend.

But maybe a person had to become like that if so much bad stuff had happened to them in early childhood. And if that hadn't been enough, he always had so much responsibility to deal with. That didn't leave much time for a normal life indeed.

Suddenly, she had to think of Cho and that thought flashed through her mind like a painful stab. Cho had been such a cheerful girl: pretty, vivacious, always the centre of attention. Then that thing with her boyfriend Cedric happened, and it broke her; it completely broke her. She had been expelled from Hogwarts, or had run away. No one knew for sure. None of the other Ravenclaws knew what had become of her either, not even her former friends like Lisa. Rumour had it, she had taken her own life, but Lisa refused to believe it.

Lisa hadn't understood much of Harry's conversation with the Triton girl, but she was certain that Chieftain Murcus' name had come up. The girl swam out through one of the windows and returned a short while later with the chieftain of the tribe.

Murcus looked, if possible, even wilder than the rest of her people. Her green hair, striped with coral red strands, was kept out of her face by fishbones. Her green garment, clashing horribly with her hair, seemed to be made from seaweed. Torn and tattered, it floated around her torso, held by a chain of shark's teeth at her waist. Her breasts and belly-button were decorated with all sorts of brightly coloured fishbone piercings, as were her nose, lips, and eyebrows. In her hand, instead of the spear she usually carried, she held a leash with a Grindylow pulling at its end. She had probably been taking one of her pets for a walk when the blue-haired girl found her.

She hissed at the Grindylow, which was trying to jump onto the table, wrapping the leash several times around her hand to shorten it.

"Oh, don't you dare, beware of my glare

This day's bad hair and my nerves lie bare.

So be a good hound, stay down on the ground,

And you'll like the sound of what I found."

She threw him a large chunk of calamari, which he grabbed eagerly, bubbling and smacking his lips as he ate. Then she turned to her human guests. Lisa scraped her Mermish together to at least say an adequate hello: "We bring you greetings to our happy meetings."

"I'm greeting you back; now cut me some slack

Before I crack from stress attack.

I want to smack and whack a pack

Of stupid pricks; they make me sick.

I took a quick pick of these tricks

To block one's mind to things unkind.

A humble peace is hard to find.

Oh, don't you dare mock, my human flock,

Now mind the clock and please unlock:

Why shock my block with your loud knock?"

"Uhm...." The boys and girls exchanged rather helpless looks, while desperately racking their brains for the best way to express their request. The fact that Chieftain Murcus obviously wasn't in the best of moods certainly didn't help in achieving their goal. For the first time, Lisa had the uneasy feeling that it hadn't been such a great idea to get everyone so excited about the match before asking permission. Maybe they shouldn't have rushed things so much.

As could be expected, all glances turned to Harry. He gave a long bubbling sigh and went to it:

"You saved us from a dreadful fate,

By giving us new homes.

We live in safety, unafraid

Beneath the water foams.

A tricky question we pursued

Till now to no avail:

How to express our gratitude

When words entirely fail.

We thought some more and found a way

To fill your hearts with glee.

A gift the kindness to repay,

A special one, you'll see.

It can be seen, it can be heard,

Be felt, but not be touched.

It brings excitement beyond words;

Hands will be grasped and clutched.

And arms will wave and voices yell

In merriment and cheer.

These times are dark, but they will fail

To break what we hold dear.

I see the mystery in your eyes;

No key yet to unlock it.

The answer to this riddle lies

Well hidden in my pocket.

Harry stuck his hand inside the pockets of his robes, pulling something out. At first Lisa could not see what it was, but then she noticed the flick of gold glimmering between his fingers. Murcus seemed to have understood as well for a wide smile slowly spread over her excited face.

Slowly Harry opened his fist. In the palm of his hand sparkled a golden Snitch.

* * *

"Get out the Pearlchampagne, people," Terry shouted, while the Prefects smiled knowingly at all the anxious faces awaiting them. "Yesss!" He pumped his arm and leapt from his broom, practically into arms of the person standing next to him, giving them smooches all over their cheek. This unexpected behaviour startled Justin Finch-Fletchley a little, but nonetheless he didn't waste any time to worry about it, joining the cheering instead.

Lisa had never seen the hideout in such a state; everybody was jumping up and down, squealing and waving their arms. If Terry had brought the message of the enemy's downfall, the mood couldn't have been more ecstatic.

"The Merpeople can't wait to see us play," Terry continued. "Chieftain Murcus is overjoyed. Harry was the one doing the negotiation; he sold it to them really well. Made it sound as if we're organising the match as a gift for the Merpeople. She said we don't have to repay them in any way, but Harry said it's not posing any trouble for us; it'll be fun. And he's right, too. Isn't he?" He winked at Harry, who gave him a reluctant grin.

"Wicked, mate!" Harry's best friend Ron Weasley made his way through the crowd, grabbing the Head Boy into a bear hug. "Where did you get this idea from? They can't refuse now, and we're even doing them a favour."

Harry grinned mischievously, patting Ron on the back. "I suppose my Slytherin side must have kicked in."

"Don't say things like that." Harry's other best friend, Hermione Granger, scowled at him. "You didn't take advantage of them, did you? You made everybody happy."

"Hermione, please, not now." Harry let go of Ron to face her. "You know what I meant; it's not about taking advantage of other people. It's more like taking advantage of circumstances. That's still Slytherin mentality."

"Harry, I'm not trying to argue with you," Hermione protested. "If you stopped arguing with me, we would be just fine. In fact, we'd be even more fine if you simply stopped mentioning the S-word in my presence. Are you trying to provoke me?"

"You two do realise that you're ruining the best moment of my life," Ron complained. "Stop arguing, both of you. There's a match to be organized. Three matches, actually."

He rummaged around in his pockets until he found what he was looking for. "The team line-up for the Lions is all set; we can go public now. What about you lot?"

"All finished." Susan Bones passed him another piece of parchment with the completed line-up for Hufflepuff.

"Eagles are ready to soar." Beaming, Terry handed Weasley the list for Ravenclaw.

How was this possible? How could their team line-up be finished already? Lisa couldn't remember a single discussion about it; at least none she had taken part in. Had the others made the decisions without her? She was a Prefect, for Merlin's sake!

Ron tipped his wand to his throat to magically enhance his voice with the Sonorus Charm and turned to his fellow rebels. "OK, people, word has it, there'll be a Quidditch tournament this Saturday!"

There was another round of loud cheers, and Ron seemed to rather enjoy the attention as he continued his speech. "Chieftain Murcus and the Tritons gave us permission today, so let's get right to it. Our tournament will consist of three games so that all our teams have a chance face each other. Winner is the team that scores the most wins, or in case of a draw, the most points. I'll read out the team line-ups, and then we'll figure out what else is there to organize. As you know, Hermione's responsible for decorations, and Ernie's in charge of finding the right spot for the field and putting up the loops. He could probably use some help. Right, Ernie?"

Lisa wasn't listening anymore; she was far too preoccupied with her own thoughts. How could Terry have treated her that way? He had simply ignored her. The others had made the team line-up without her, hadn't even asked her opinion. She was a Prefect, for Merlin's sake!

"Hey, Dennis, that's going to be a real catfight," a young Gryffindor sniggered. "All three Seekers are girls, did you see? Laura Madley for Hufflepuff, Mandy Brocklehurst for Ravenclaw, and we've got Natalie."

Mandy Brocklehurst? So that was the reason why he hadn't told her! Of course he had wanted to keep it a secret from her that his beloved Mandy would take the position of Seeker. He was bound to know that she wouldn't agree. So he made sure that all Quidditch talk happened in her absence. What a disgusting little plot!

Just a minute ago she had been so certain that she was dealing with a simple misunderstanding, but now it was crystal clear to her it was something else.

Lisa clenched her fists tightly. She would never ever let that little brat Mandy steal Terry away from her. Maybe Mandy had been the one behind the whole intrigue; yes that had to be it, but she would never fall for such a cheap scheme.

Mandy would regret this. She would make sure of it.

* * *

Amicus Draconis - 1st Cycle: Cycle of the Badger - Part 3: The Underwater Quidditch Game

"I wonder, I wonder, do you know what I wonder?"

"What?"

"Say what?"

"Five, six, seven, eight!"

Ka boom boom jonk! Ka boom boom jonk!

Hekki hekki hekki hekki! Hekki hekki hekki hekki!

Bong badabong! Bong badabong!

Yoh yoh yoh yoh! Yoh yoh yoh yoh!

"There was a young Weasley named Fred

Who kept chocolate frogs in his bed.

One day they got pulped

And poor mother gulped,

Grasping her nose as she fled."

Ka boom boom jonk! Ka boom boom jonk!

Taterang bang bang! Taterang bang bang!

Kch ptping bing! Kch ptping bing!

AwEEEEEEEEEEEEEE! AwEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!

"There was a young Weasley named George

Who fake chocolate froggies did forge.

Tasting like dung,

They jumped on his tongue

Until they got stuck in his gorge."

Ka boom boom jonk! Ka boom boom jonk!

Yoh yoh yoh yoh! Yoh yoh yoh yoh!

Dsh dsh honk dsh dsh honk honk! Dsh dsh honk dsh dsh honk honk!

Bong badabong bang! Bong badabong bang!

"There once was a fic named AD.

T'was odd beyond any degree.

It mixed George and Fred,

And any who read

Right into its weird potpourri."

Ka boom boom jonk! Ka boom boom jonk!

Klonk!

Pling!

"Hey, you prat, now you broke it!"

Amicus Draconis - 1. Zyklus: Zyklus des Dachses - Part 3: Quidditch unter Wasser

* * *

Author's notes: Okay, where to start with Fred and George?

I've already mentioned that I was always very tempted to include non-novel elements into my story, such as Anime, musical, song lyrics, script format, and stage play or movie elements in general. I also love to play with the barriers between story reality and reader reality.

So anyway, the Fred & George interludes are some of these weird elements confusing my poor readers. That means you. *hands out a round of pity* Actually, the roots of these little intermissions go way back to ancient Greek Theater, where people had a thing called *The Choir*. This choir was a group of actors who commented the play in between the scenes. You could say they created a bridge between the characters of the play and the audience. They gave their opinion on what happened to the characters, so most of the time they predicted that terrible, terrible things would come to pass and everybody would fall to their doom. That's why these plays were called tragedies. *eg*

The main inspiration for the Fred & George eye catches came from an Anime called *Shoujo Kakumei Utena* (Revolutionary Girl Utena). That show designed a parody on the Greek Choir, namely two (actually three) mysterious beings named *Shadow Girls*. These girls would always appear in the middle of each episode, making fun of the story and characters and often dropping mysterious hints on what was really going on and what would happen next. No one was able to figure out whether they were aliens, higher beings, spirits of dead people, ordinary school girls or maybe two girls watching the Anime and making fun of it.

Or maybe, all they are is a nasty joke from the director to confuse the audience. In Anime, anything's possible. ^^

Whenever the Shadow Girls appeared, they would do so with the line: *Kashira, kashira, gozonji kashira*, which roughly translates as: *Did you hear the latest rumor?* or literally *I wonder, I wonder, do you know what I wonder?*

So Fred and George happen to be my Shadow Boys now. In the original version of AD they're even weirder, talking in only small letters and without proper punctuation. But both my beta readers suggested I better use normal grammar in the English version, or people will think I'm making mistakes. So for once I decided to be a good Yamato, and cut back on the weirdness. I have to admit, it doesn't happen often.

Hope to see you all for the B-part of the episode, where Lisa's plan will be revealed. In the Post Fic Author's Note I'll be giving you some background information on the AD version of the Potterverse.

Yamato

03. The Underwater Quidditch Game - Part B

Chapter 7 of 12

As Lisa's plan unravels, Mandy suddenly finds herself in severe danger. Will Lisa try and save her, or simply leave her to her fate?

Disclaimer: None of the Book/Movie/TV show quotes Fred and George use are mine. They all belong to their respective authors. The opening song is Sonnet No 92 by William Shakespeare and the ending song is Iron Fist by Motörhead.

Author's Notes: More cookies for my wonderful betas Notsosaintly, Ellie and Arsinyk, my creative artist Ebilein and all of my readers and reviewers. :) And some extra chocolate frogs for my new beta, Mind_over_Matter.

Amicus Draconis - 1st Cycle: Cycle of the Badger - Part 3: The Underwater Quidditch Game

"I wonder, I wonder, do you know what I wonder?"

"What?"

"Say what?"

"Five, six, seven, eight!"

Ka boom boom jonk! Ka boom boom jonk!

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Dsh dsh honk dsh dsh honk honk! Dsh dsh honk dsh dsh honk honk!

Bong badabong bang! Bong badabong bang!

"There once was a fic named AD.

'Twas odd beyond any degree.

It mixed George and Fred,

And any who read

Right into its weird potpourri."

Ka boom boom jonk! Ka boom boom jonk!

Klonk!

Pling!

"Hey, you prat, now you broke it!"

Amicus Draconis - 1. Zyklus: Zyklus des Dachs - Part 3: Quidditch unter Wasser

Gradually, the evening merged into night, and at some point or other, the students either became bored with working or left for bed. Around midnight, Lisa and Hermione were the only ones left in the Orange Blossom Room; Lisa was drawing, and Hermione was using different charms on the artworks to make them water resistant or let their colours flash in different lights. Since Lisa had worked all day long, Ravenclaw now ranked highest in terms of the quantity of flags, banners, pennants, and rosettes they now possessed.

"Something bothering you, Lisa?" Hermione suddenly broke the silence, concern showing on her face as she tried to give the other girl an encouraging smile.

That question confused Lisa. "Why would you think something like that?" she replied a little defensively. "I'm fine."

Hermione was still smiling at her. "I always plunge into work like that when I don't feel well. It keeps me from brooding."

"There's too much to brood about right now," Lisa sighed, "but it wouldn't get us anywhere, so..."

They fell silent, refocusing their concentration onto their work again. For a long while, the rustle of paper and the scratch of quill remained the only sounds in the room. Neither one of the young women was particularly keen on discussing their current situation.

Lisa was surprised that Hermione had noticed anything was wrong. They got along well enough, preferring to spend their time with a good book instead of gossiping away about boys and make-up. Nevertheless, they hadn't become close friends; at least not close enough to share their secrets. So she hesitated at first. Should she tell Hermione about what happened with Terry?

No, better not. She didn't feel comfortable talking about such things anyway.

"Imagine," she began cautiously, despite herself, "imagine there's a boy you've known for a long time. A close friend, perhaps; maybe even your best one. You've known each other since childhood and you always felt comfortable around him, even when you two were fighting. And then, suddenly, everything changes. You develop feelings for him, strange feelings that haven't been there before ... What do you do?"

'How childish am I?' she wondered as she told Hermione this. 'I sound like a silly little school girl with her first crush.'

But then, this was her first crush. Or her first time in love. Or whatever....

"Talk to him, of course," Hermione replied without hesitation. "That way you can find out whether he fancies you, too, or whether the whole thing is pointless." A frown crossed her forehead as she continued. "Or, if you knew that the whole thing was pointless from the beginning, don't talk to him and drop the matter. Rejection is painful enough but losing a friend is a risk I wouldn't be willing to take."

With her last words she had lowered her wand, gazing absentmindedly at the Gryffindor rosette lying on the table. "No, you should talk to him," she concluded, defiantly raising her head to give Lisa a weak smile. "If you don't, you'll have to deal with these repressed feelings all the time, and things will only end up getting more complicated."

"Thanks." Lisa closed the colour jars and started to clean her quills and brushes. "I think I'll go to bed now ... it's getting really late."

It was only when she was lying awake in her dormitory that she realized she had possibly been a little rude towards Hermione. The Head Girl had listened to her whining and had actually given her some honest advice, and she had simply rushed out on her...

It seemed that Hermione was rather familiar with the situation herself. But why? Did it have anything to do with Harry? He was Hermione's best friend after all; maybe she had finally developed some more-than-friendly feelings for him. After all, the endless rumours about them never seemed to die down. Maybe there was some grain of truth to them....

Not that this was any of her concern. Her sole concern was Mandy, the girl whom Terry admired for being such a skilled flier and Quidditch player.

Lisa smiled. It was not a good kind of smile. Would Terry still admire Mandy if she made a fool of herself at the Quidditch game?

"Hey, Harry, wait up!"

Harry Potter paused in his steps to let Terry catch up with him. "Ron just told me you and Hermione are going to fly out later to get some more Gillyweed for the game, is that right?" he asked the Head Boy all in one breath.

Harry nodded. "It's about time we did. The game's tomorrow after all."

"Mind if Mandy and I tag along?"

"Not at all. We planned on taking some more people anyway. The swamps aren't exactly the safest of places; it would be too risky if just the two of us went. What about Lisa? Is she coming too?"

"No, but you and Hermione can open the hideout, so we don't need her," Terry explained, hopelessly failing at trying to sound casual. "And Ernie and Hannah are staying here, so we've got two Prefects in the hideout. They finished putting up the loops, and they won't put up decorations 'til tomorrow morning so the stuff doesn't get soaked over night." He broke off as he realized he was babbling. Hopefully Harry hadn't noticed.

It appeared that he had, and now he looked slightly apprehensive. "It sounds like you've got it all planned out. Terry, what's going on?"

Terry took a look around to make sure no one was listening before he turned back to the other boy. He needed Harry's support in this and he knew he would have to spill the beans to get it. "Listen, mate, all I want is a chance to talk to Mandy on her own. That's why I want to take her along and that's why I didn't tell Lisa. You see, in here it's really difficult. There's people everywhere and no privacy, and I don't want everyone to know that I'm going to ask her out. But once we're outside, digging for Gillyweed in the mud...not that that sounds very romantic...I'm sure, there's a chance that you and Hermione could choose a different spot to ... err ... dig in the mud."

"Well..." Harry was still frowning; he didn't seem entirely convinced. "OK, but you need to stay within sight. Like I said, the swamps are a dangerous place. They're the home of the Water Widows, and we don't know what else lurks down in the mud. The one we'll be digging in."

"Don't worry, we'll be careful," Terry promised. "I know it's Mandy's first time out there, but I've collected Gillyweed before. I know the dangers."

He gave Harry a wink. "Just because I'm a hormone driven teenage boy who's madly in love doesn't automatically mean I'm going to risk all our lives over a bit of romance."

"No, of course not," Harry said stiffly. His eyes narrowed for a moment, but when they focused on Terry again, they retained a perfectly neutral expression. "I suppose you'd better go get your broom, then."

The evenings were still sunny, but October had brought with it chilly winds and a wave of cold. The four teenagers flew in silence as they crossed the lake, enjoying the sun and the fresh air...a rare, precious taste of freedom. Usually when they got outside, they were either rescuing somebody or fleeing from somebody else.

They enjoyed the ride, but afraid of feeling overconfident, they kept a close eye on their surroundings. Moving in silence, they avoided loud noises or reckless flight manoeuvres to make sure they didn't draw unnecessary attention to themselves. The Forbidden Forest had eyes and ears and they were well aware of it.

Where the shallows of the lake seemed to lead directly into the woods, the swamps began; only the tree roots stretching out into the lake held the muddy ground together. Tiny rills were drawing like cobwebs through the moist earth, collecting the water in dirty pools. It was not safe to walk on foot here, because you never knew where the ground would still support your weight and where it would give way to the horrors beneath. Hungry creatures and poisonous plants were lurking, waiting for unsuspecting victims they could pull into the depths of the earth to devour them. To be safe, the students rarely left their brooms while cutting Gillyweed, and they made sure that someone always kept watch.

"Harry, over here!" Terry saw Hermione approach a small pond where tentacle-like branches protruded from the greenish surface of the water. With one last glance back, Harry followed her.

Terry gave him a roguish wink to show him that everything was all right and turned to Mandy. "We'll look over here, OK? You coming?"

"We'll have to be careful though. Didn't you see the cobwebs?" As she followed Terry, Mandy pulled a small bag out of the pockets of her robes. With the help of some lavender powder, it was possible to make the huge webs of the Water Widows more visible so you wouldn't accidentally brush against the sticky threads. As long as their webs weren't touched, the giant spiders would not attack; it was not in their nature.

When all the cobwebs around them glistened in pale purple, Terry pulled a knife from his pocket and started cutting off the slimy sprouts of the plant. "This would be so much easier with a Summoning Charm," he sighed.

Mandy shrugged her shoulders. "I suppose so, but we'd rip the roots out, too. We would've used it all up in a few short weeks, and since Gillyweed isn't even natural to this climate, it's not like we could get more of it anywhere else. So..."

Dispirited, she lowered her eyes. "And who knows how long we'll have to stay underwater...."

If Terry had looked at her, he'd probably have realized that this would have been a perfect moment for a comforting move, perhaps a smile or even an arm around the girl's shoulders. He was busy, however, peeking past her to make sure that Harry and Hermione were out of hearing range. "Uhm ... Mandy, listen, I..."

"What is it?" She steered her broom sideways to dodge a long black tentacle suddenly lashing out from between the greenish-grey weeds. Since the sun hadn't sunk yet, the Devil's Snare pulled back immediately; it could not bear sunlight. Mandy gave a breath of relief and turned back to Terry.

"Mandy ... uhm ... I ... I wanted to ask you something."

"Fire away." She smiled, trying to appear more confident than she actually was.

"I ... uhm ... don't object to you, you know?"

Mandy's cheeks flushed scarlet as she mumbled something too softly for Terry to make out. Terry's face reddened as well, and he dropped his glance, staring at the bundle of Gillyweed he was holding in his hands. 'Words,' Terry thought with some annoyance, 'have an irritating habit of vanishing right when you need them most; after all the cheeky comments that bubbled up at the most inopportune times, surely it wouldn't be too much to ask that they be present the one time I truly need them. But apparently, it is.'

"I like you, too, you know." Mandy's heroic attempt to rescue him from his speechlessness went unnoticed.

"I ... uhm" Terry mumbled.

"Watch out!" Terry hadn't paid attention and was hovering close to the spider's web, his arm almost touching one of the glistening threads. Unfortunately Mandy's shriek caused him to jump and accidentally brush against it. He struggled to get free again, but his arm was stuck.

"Hurry, the spider's coming!" Mandy leaned forward and reached for Terry, trying to pull him away by the speed of her broom. Only her broom didn't want to pick up speed. Instead it made a sudden, unexpected leap. She managed to grab hold of it, but didn't release Terry soon enough; he was pulled off his broom and fell headfirst into the Water Widow's web.

"Terry!" Mandy yelled. She wanted to reach for her wand, but her broom bucked violently like a horse in panic, and she had to cling to it with both of her hands. She had no clue what was wrong with the bloody thing: it wouldn't obey any commands; it skipped and bounced and spun as if it was trying to throw her off on purpose. For one moment, she wondered whether she should just jump off, but there were spiders' webs beneath her, and if she got caught in there as well, Harry and Hermione would have to rescue them both.

The mud smacked and gargled as the giant Water Widow worked her way out of it, her huge black mouth pincers clicking threateningly. Terry screamed and tried to wrestle his arms free from the sticky threads, but they were as tough as they were elastic.

Just like monstrous rubber bands....

From the corner of her eye, Mandy saw Harry and Hermione speeding through the air; luckily, both of them were keeping their cool. Their wands were already out, and they attacked the spider together, trying to keep her away from Terry

"Watch out," Terry shouted from below. "There's a Devil's... "

A giant black tentacle darted upwards from the mud, wrapping itself around Harry's arm. The fading daylight was no longer strong enough to keep the dangerous plant at bay.

Mandy did not see what happened next. Her broom shot straight down, and the only thing her eyes could make out was the dark ground lined with purplish threads. Coming closer and closer....

The world went flashy and sticky and black.

"Say, Padma, have you seen Hermione by any chance?" In the Orange Blossom Room, Lisa was sitting with a group of other girls, stowing away her quills and brushes. "I just wanted to let her know that I'm finished with tomorrow's decorations."

Padma shook her head. "No idea where she could be. Did you check the Gryffindor Common Room?"

Officially, there still was a Common Room for each House, but no one kept to their own any more; too many friendships and relationships had been formed between members of different Houses. Since they all had to trust each other in their current situation, they had done away with the passwords as well.

"All set for tomorrow?" The sliding door opened just far enough to let a red-haired head poke in. Ron took his duties as Quidditch organizer very seriously; he was constantly dashing around and checking in with everyone involved in the preparations. So far, he had successfully made sure that everything was running smoothly.

Lisa and Padma nodded at his question and Lisa added: "You haven't, by any chance, seen Hermione?"

"I couldn't have," Ron explained. "She's left for the Gillyweed swamps with Harry, Terry and Mandy. I would've gone along as well, if I didn't have so many important..."

"Mandy, too?" Lisa interrupted him, hand flying involuntarily to her mouth in horror. "Ron, please, where are Ernie and Hannah?"

Ron only shrugged, but a few girls giggled, among them Hannah's friend Susan. "You can't talk to them right now," she said blushing. "They ... uhm ... retired for a little while."

Lisa practically stormed from the room. Ernie and Hannah would either be in the seventh year boys' or girls' dormitory, so she raced down the corridor with the Hufflepuff dormitories. Reaching the girls' one first, she scraped at the door, almost ripping the paper. As she shouted Hannah's name, a muffled voice replied, and a few moments later the Hufflepuff girl appeared in the doorway, her blond hair tousled over the morning robes she had hastily thrown over. "What happened, Lisa?" she asked, concerned.

"I don't have time to explain right now," Lisa shouted desperately. "Please, you have to open the hideout at once. Mandy's out there collecting Gillyweed, and her broom's not working right ... Please, you have to hurry!"

"We'll be out in just a moment." Luckily, Hannah didn't waste any precious time with questions. She and Ernie threw on some clothes while Lisa Summoned their brooms, and only a few minutes later, all three of them flew upwards to the cloud holding the entrance of their hideout.

"You have to take someone with you," Ernie demanded. "We can't leave, you know that, but you shouldn't be out there alone...."

"Please, we don't have time!" Lisa urged. It would take precious minutes to fly back down and find someone of age, minutes which...for all she knew...Mandy did not have. It was a risk she just couldn't take.

"We'll send a couple of people after you," Hannah suggested, reaching for her golden key. "The Gillyweed swamps, right?"

Lisa nodded and spun her broom around, ready to race.

Damn, how could she have let this happen? If something happened to Mandy out there, it was her fault and her fault alone.

It was only when she realized she couldn't breathe that she realized she hadn't had any Gillyweed herself. In all this haste she had completely forgotten about it. For one brief second she considered a Bubble Head Charm, but she didn't know whether it would work underwater, and if she muttered an incantation she wouldn't have any breath left. If she tried and failed, she would drown for sure.

Instead, she made desperate attempts to race even faster, the force of the water pounding against her body, almost ripping her off her broom. Locking her fingers around the handle, she clung onto it; she needed to reach the surface before she fainted, or it would be all over. Damn, why couldn't this stupid thing go faster! Just a little bit!

Her lungs felt like fire; she started coughing and choking and grasping for air. Somehow the water around her seemed brighter; was she finally getting close to the surface, or was she losing consciousness? Why couldn't this stupid broom...

The world around her seemed to fade just as her broom finally broke through the surface of the lake, wonderful fresh air filling her lungs. Her hands, however, finally slipped off the handle and she was thrown back into the lake. Her empty broom rose in the air a bit before it fell back down in the water, luckily not too far away from her. Trying to stay on the surface, she realized how icy the water was and how heavily her wet clothes pulled her down. She would catch a cold for sure.

But this was all her fault....

Nevertheless, she managed to reach her broom, the wind pulling her wet clothes as she started racing through the air. Her body stiffened with all the cold, but she didn't even notice. 'Please, please, Mandy, be all right,' she prayed silently.

What if Mandy wasn't? What if something had happened to her?

What if she came too late?

The sounds of battle greeted her as she reached the swamps. From afar she could hear voices shouting incantations, the sizzling and rustling of spells and the thunder of an explosion.

Voices, yes.

But not Mandy's....

Below her, Terry hung inside the giant cobweb of a Water Widow. Hermione attacked the spider with Stunning Spells, which couldn't penetrate the creature's thick body armour, but kept her distracted, buying Harry enough time to cut Terry free. Some ripped plant parts lay on the ground below them; it looked as if there had been additional trouble with a Devil's Snare.

Anyway, they would be OK. Terry was almost free from the sticky threads.

But where was Mandy?

Lisa's eyes darted left and right; there was no sign of the other Ravenclaw girl. A second spider sat in her web, but she was too far away to pose any immediate danger.

No, wait! The spider was chewing on something. Her giant pincers were moving.

There was a loud crunching sound....

Please, no! Oh, please, that couldn't happen!

Lisa raced downwards, stopping dead just over the giant animal and kicking at its head hard. The Widow straightened, looking up at the disturbance. Pincers reached for Lisa, but she had been expecting that, so she had no trouble sidelying them.

As she looked downwards she could make out what the spider was doing; broken pieces of broomstick tumbled from her mouth tools as they opened and closed lazily. The spider took no notice of them. Hard substances like wood weren't edible to her; she needed something softer. So she turned away to focus her attention on something else.

Lisa had not been able to see Mandy at first, because the other girl had lain beneath the Widow's hind body, hidden by the creature's massive form. Only as the spider moved, the Ravenclaw could spot her classmate's lifeless form.

There was a trickle of blood on her cropped hair and some more on one of the tree roots supporting the web. If she had hit her head on that root, it meant that she was only unconscious, didn't it? She would be all right.

Please, she had to be all right!

Lisa drew her wand, but her hands, stiff with all the cold, couldn't hold onto it. It slipped through her fingers, dropping down into the sticky substance of the web. The spider didn't mind the tiny piece of wood; she was busy with something else. As she loomed over her prey, she used her front legs to turn the girl on her back.

Lisa didn't waste any time. She shot downwards, attacking the creature with her bare hands. It could only be seconds until Harry and the others were here to help her; all she had to do was keep the spider away from Mandy just a little longer.

She kicked at the spider again, aiming for the eyes. They had to be more sensitive than the heavily armoured head, she thought, but her blows didn't even seem to make the spider angry. In a placid, almost lazy move the creature reared up, using one of her pincers to shove her attacker off her broom.

The threads were incredibly sticky. Fortunately, Lisa had kept her calm as she tumbled down into the web, using only one hand to break the fall and keeping the other safely away from it. Her wand had to be close by, and if she had a free hand, she could try to reach for it. Her eyes darted about, feverishly searching for her only weapon. She breathed in deeply as she spotted it only an arm's length away from her, dangling from one of the threads.

She stretched out her arm, trying to reach it. Hopefully, her stiff fingers wouldn't desert her now; she had to grab the damn thing. She had to, or everything would be over. After what seemed like hours, she thought she could feel the hard wood at her fingertips, but she couldn't tell for sure; her hands were too numb.

In the next moment she was thrown roughly onto her back, giant spider's legs pressing her arms and legs to the sticky threads to make sure she couldn't struggle. The creature's weight pinned her down into the web as she desperately threw her head back and forth, the only part of her body she was still able to move.

That was until her chignon loosened and her long dark mane got caught as well.

The glistening green eyes of the creature stared at her coldly as the pincers moved aside to make room for the long, pointy suction tube spiders used for ingestion. Lisa squeezed her eyes shut so she didn't have to see it moving towards her.

Goosebumps raced along her arms and legs and her heartbeat pounded like a drum in her chest as she still saw the image in her mind's eye; the venomously pointed spike moving inexorably towards her belly. Automatically, her body tried to shrink back into the web, but her mind knew it was no use.

She felt a searing pain as the razor-sharp tip pierced her abdomen, and then she knew no more.

There was nothing but darkness around her, a complete utter darkness. Only once the features of Padma...or was it Parvati? ...emerged out of the blackness, only to fade back into it a moment later. Or was it hours? She couldn't tell.

She wasn't in pain any more, but she felt sleepy, so very sleepy. The darkness gave way to something else now; she was travelling through a world of strange forms and bizarre sounds.

Tattered images floated past her: the lake, the swamps, those horrible glistening green eyes....

And then the images faded away so that only the green eyes remained.

Yet they were no longer the eyes of a monster, but the friendly eyes of a human gazing down at her.

"Am I dead?" Her voice sounded a bit hoarse, but it was still her voice. Her hands gingerly palmed her stomach, feeling a bandage around it.

"No, not at all," said Harry Potter, smiling. "Thanks to our twins and their impressive healing skills, you're almost completely healed again. You'll be back on your feet soon.

"It was close, however," he added. "If we had come only a few seconds later, your chances would've been less than zero."

"It's so quiet ... where are all the others? Mandy?"

"That's because it's Saturday and everyone else is out in the lake watching the game. Mandy...well, as far as I know, she just snatched the Snitch from the Badgers and chances are good she'll do the same to us. Only Padma and Parvati took turns in checking on you."

"But you ... why are you here?" Utterly bewildered, she stared at him.

"Ron took over my post as referee. I wanted to be with you when you woke up."

"But why ... I mean, Quidditch is so important for you...."

Harry shook his head. "We don't live in a time for games anymore. Of course, sometimes we have to push it all away and just be happy, and that's why we decided not to blow the game off after your accident. Too many people worked too hard for it, and they deserve a little joy with all the terrible things they have to cope with.

"But it's still only a game, and it's not important. What you did was important. You saved Mandy's life by risking your own; that was a very brave thing to do."

"No, it wasn't." Hot tears spilled from her eyes as she continued. "It's all my fault! I jinxed Mandy's broom. I wanted her to screw up during the game so that the others would laugh at her and Terry would stop following her around."

She could feel her voice break into sobs, but the words just kept bubbling out. "I never imagined Mandy would fly her broom outside the hideout before the game. I thought she'd only fly it at the game and under water she wouldn't get hurt, even if she fell down. I never meant for her to get hurt. I never meant ... Oh, Harry, I've been so stupid! So childish. So...."

"I'm sorry, but I have to agree with you." He Summoned a handkerchief for her to dry her tears and blow her nose. "Under normal circumstances this would have been a school prank, and if we were back in Hogwarts, you would've lost some House points, got a couple of detentions and justice would have been served."

He gazed at her intently, until she lowered her eyes. "You know as well as I do that circumstances aren't normal anymore. You endangered others and you endangered yourself as well...and for what? We can't afford childish pranks like this, Lisa, not when we all need to rely on each other. We can't put our own petty interests before the safety of our classmates and certainly not before the crucial goal we are trying to achieve."

"Forgive me," Lisa sobbed desperately. She turned her head away; she still wasn't able to meet his eyes. "I'm so, so sorry! I can never make up for this!"

"You already did." With a gentle gesture he lifted up her chin so he could look at her face. "Don't try to bury yourself in feelings of guilt now. Talk to Mandy; this is between the two of you. If you want to ask someone's forgiveness, it should be her and not me. Only when things are OK between you and her can we consider this unfortunate matter closed."

"Do you really mean that?" Lisa asked hopefully. "Don't you ... don't you want to punish me or anything?"

Harry shook his head. "This is not about crime and punishment, and I certainly have no right to pass judgment on you. I'm not Dumbledore or some old wise wizard who knows about life. I only know that you took full responsibility for what you did and that you tried everything to repair the damage you caused, even by risking your own life. What more could be expected of you? None of us is perfect; we all make mistakes. So isn't the most important thing how we deal with our mistakes afterwards?"

She could only nod; she was far too moved by his words to find words of her own now. Besides, talking was wearisome, and she felt tired and exhausted from all the crying and brooding. Her health wasn't fully restored yet.

"The others will be here soon," Harry considered. "Maybe a little rest would do you some good, Lisa, especially before the talk with Mandy. I don't suppose it's going to be easy for you."

He stood up, gently smoothing her covers. Not that they really needed smoothing; it was simply a caring gesture.

"It shouldn't be that way," he said softly. "I know it shouldn't. We should be worrying about lessons and grades and love and Quidditch. All the matters important to children and teenagers...."

"There's something else, Harry," she mumbled, growing sleepier with each passing minute. "I want to resign as a Ravenclaw Prefect."

"If that's your decision, we'll accept it. Maybe, since we don't have proper teachers to appoint Prefects, the Ravenclaws could choose a new one by vote."

"OK. And Harry?"

"Yes?"

"I ... I do think that you're wise. Very wise."

"Please don't say things like that." He turned around in the door frame, and as he shook his head, she could see a deep sadness darkening his green eyes. "I've done things far worse and by far more foolish than jinxing a rival's broom."

Then he closed the sliding door and she was on her own.

She wondered what he had meant with his last sentence; he didn't seem the type for foolish things at all. But she was far too tired for mysteries now. She snuggled comfortably into her covers and soon sank into a deep dreamless sleep.

Tsuzuku (...to be continued)

*

Dark night, nothing to see,

Invisible hand in front of me.

Scared to death there's someone near,

Scared to move but you can't stay here.

You know me, evil eye!

You know me, prepare to die!

You know me, the snakebite kiss!

Devil's grip, the Iron Fist!

*

extra Extra EXTRA!!!!

*"Aaaah, my dark past is coming back to me. It's all my fault. *sob* I'm going to brood now."*

"Wouldn't we like to know what poor Harry-chan did?"

"That's very simple. He had sex, lost his soul and then he killed people."

"No way. He had sex, then he turned into Potterfly and tried to merge with his lover in a beaming box."

"Yes way. He had sex, got brainwashed by an evil alien queen, and then he threw black roses all over the place and broke his lover's new pink moon wand."

"If you know the right answer, call Fred & George's studio and win a rose-shaped music box with a prince and princess in it. A green one, because all the other colours are taken."

"Of course we have to charge you 5000 Galleons for each call, but we aren't telling you that. Americans may pay in 100 dollar bills."

"Or come by and drop us a postcard. Don't be shy! Enter the shadow realm behind the mirrors to listen to our pointless ramblings."

"Or turn back and get out of here as fast as possible. Go, go! Now's your final chance!"

"What my gentle brother is trying to convey with his cautious words of warning: The worst is yet come!"

"Didn't like spiders? Well, try rats next chapter. Didn't like jealous girls bitching at each other? Well, how about some partying Death Eater boys spreading testosterone poisonings with their raging hormones. Didn't like Quidditch games? Watch what happens when the Blood Legion ravages Diagon Alley and the Ghost Riders aren't allowed to play."

"Yep, they're all back next chapter. Mackie Macnair and Toto-chan and the Malfoy ferret."

"Secret Conspiracies. Tempting offers. Mysterious assignments. Smiling schemers. Whispered promises. The forces of darkness return in: "

*

Amicus Draconis: 1st Cycle - Cycle of the Badger - Episode 4: Offers and Offerings

Original Airdate: March 2002

Coming soon to a fanfic archive near you....

*

Draco Dormiens nunquam titillandus

*

Author notes: When we write HP fiction, there are some topics to deal with. Jo gave us a detailed and enchanting world, but she also leaves a lot to our imagination. So we have to plan what our interpretation of the HP universe is going to be like.

In this note I'd like to address the topics of "Books vs. Movies", "Wizard Clothing" and "Same Sex Relationships" and how I decided to deal with them in my HP universe.

Books vs. Movies: The books are my first source of canon, but since Jo supervises the movies herself, I'm okay with them as well. I stick to book reality in terms of dialogues, plot and characters, and all the important issues. When it comes to the question of design, however, I often prefer the movie version, and sometimes I like to create my own, which differs from both the books and the movies.

Here's what I mean by design. An example would be the different clothing the characters wear in the movies, or the different design of the Chamber of Secrets and so on. In a movie you just need some eye candy. Since AD is based on Japanese Anime, the experts on bright colours and flashy images, it needs eye candy, too. So I gave New Hogwarts a shape changing hideout and I let the Ghost Riders thunder through the skies on demonic horses.

Wizard Clothing: What do wizards wear beneath their robes? When James turns Severus upside down, we get a good look at his underwear. But when Draco storms out of Madam Malkin's shop after chucking the green robes away, he's fully clothed. And why does an old-fashioned, pureblood wizard like Sirius' father wear trousers? Aren't those too Muggle for him?

I don't write too much about clothing, because I would bore the reader to death if I was constantly dressing and undressing characters. In general I stick a little more with the movie design, which means you wear your trousers, shirts or dresses beneath a set of robes or a wizarding cloak. In year X your fashion magazine might promote cloaks and open robes and it's okay to show your trousers. In year Y you absolutely have to wear closed robes, because trousers are bad Muggle things. Since fashion bounces back and forth in all Muggle societies, why shouldn't it do so in the wizarding world as well?

As for trousers, skirts, etc, I imagine pureblood wizards to be a little bit archaic. Long dresses for the women, perhaps medieval, Renaissance or Victorian styled, and the matching masculine counterparts for their husbands. Clothes like jeans, mini-skirts and tee shirts would rather be worn by young people, or people with Muggle ancestry.

Same Sex Relationships: Jo doesn't give wizards the same problems as Muggles; she always transforms them into wizarding equivalents. While Fascism in the Muggle world is based on skin colour, religion, or nationality, wizards base it on ancestry. It's no big deal whether your skin's black or white, but it matters greatly whether your father was an accountant or an employee at the Ministry of Magic.

So I've tried a similar approach for relationship issues. In my wizarding world no one cares whether you love a man or a woman, because there are other things to worry about. Can a wizard legally marry a giant? Will the daughter of a wizard and a Mermaid be accepted at Hogwarts? Does the son of a witch and a Centaur get a fair trial, or will he find himself before the Magical Creature's Department?

So, same-sex relationships are an every-day thing in AD. Most characters don't define themselves as straight or gay anyways; they fall in love with someone as a person.

04. Offers and Offerings - Part A

Chapter 8 of 12

The Death Eaters have new plans ? will Harry and his friends be in time to save innocent lives? Pettigrew sends the Blood Legion to Diagon Alley, where Macnair makes Draco an offer he can't refuse.

Author's Notes: The fourth episode is in many ways a turning point for the story. It shows a little more what this epic is about and where it's going. In the last chapters our main focus was New Hogwarts; we learned about the new life that the Trio and their friends are leading. Now we'll turn our attention back to the Death Eaters and find out what life is like on the other side.

I want to thank my beta readers Notsosaintly, Ellie, Animagus, Mind_over_Matter, and everyone who reviewed so far. And the extra cookie goes to kannnichtfranzösisch, who had some excellent suggestions for the translation of the Leaky Cauldron scene.

Oh, and everyone, please don't forget that AD is an old fic. So if you're bursting to tell me that a certain girl has a Chinese background instead of a Japanese one and that Draco's birthday is in June instead of November, please remember that back in 2002 none of this information was available yet.

* * *

"In the last episode, brave Sir Harry and his merry men..."

"And women..."

"Shut up, Loretta. During our last episode, brave Sir Harry and his merry men visited Merchifteeness Murcus and her Merpeople, had some tea with Hagrid and fought some giant spiders. Also, while the residents of New Hogwarts while away their time with Quidditch games and dubious love schemes, Harry is..."

"...desperately brooding about his dark past and trying to do penance for his sins?"

"More like: Desperately waiting for a letter from said past and trying to sin some more. The ring, Harry!"

"Oh, yes, Harry. The Ring of Power. One ring to rule them all..."

"Quick, quick! Throw it into Mount Doom! Hurry Harry, before the Dark Side corrupts you!"

"Ring! Ring!" "Hoarse voice" "Sseven daysss, Harry!"

"Baka! Hari-chan no uchi ni terebi ga arimasen."

"What?"

"Hari-chan no uchi ni terebi ga arimasen!"

"What?"

*"Shoot the glass, I mean, Harry doesn't own a TV, you stupid" *Glares**

"Oh. I guess that makes him safe from evil little Japanese girls then."

*"Right... I know someone who isn't." *Smirks**

*

*

But do thy worst to steal thyself away,

For term of life thou art assured mine;

And life no longer than thy love will stay,

For it depends upon that love of thine.

Then need I not to fear the worst of wrongs,

When in the least of them my life hath end.

I see a better state to me belongs

Than that which on thy humour doth depend:

Thou canst not vex me with inconstant mind,

Since that my life on thy revolt doth lie.

O what a happy title do I find,

Happy to have thy love, happy to die!

But what's so blessed-fair that fears no blot?

Thou mayst be false, and yet I know it not.

*

*

Amicus Draconis

*

First Cycle: Cycle of the Badger

Episode 4: Offers and Offerings Part A

*

It was the soft crackle in the fireplace that awoke him. When he had gone to sleep a few hours earlier, all Tod had seen in the grate was the faint glow emanating from dying embers. Now, however, a vivid blaze flared up from the ashes; dazzling, burning, spluttering flames blinding his eyes and ringing painfully in his ears. Their colours flashed from orange to bright red to a bluish purple, leaving no doubt that this was no natural fire, but a magical phenomena.

He barely had time to rub sleep out of his eyes when something took shape within the flames. Bright sparks became watery blue eyes, flickering patterns formed facial features, and thick smoke curled into a wreath of matted grey hair framing a bald patch on the now fully shaped head floating inside the fire.

"Your humble servant, sir." Tod sat up in his bed to give his visitor a courteous bow. It was nothing out of the ordinary to receive important messages this late at night, but until now, Lord Pettigrew had never spoken to him personally. Usually, Tod received all his orders from his father, who was also his direct superior.

There was a situation; he was sure of it. Action had to be taken immediately.

Pettigrew avoided looking him in the eye. Not that this surprised him; there had been rumours about the creepy and crawly demeanour of the fourth Grand Dragon. Responsible for intelligence, Pettigrew conducted a group of spies who passed him information the Dark Lord might find useful. Other than that, Tod had no idea how this man had come to achieve such a high position within the Master's ranks. He was certainly the only member of the Dark Council who did not come from a wealthy and influential family.

"Diagon Alley," a voice pronounced from the sizzling flames. "Our master wants you to conduct a search of Diagon Alley. You are to leave at once. Your father will give you..."

Pettigrew broke off and his watery eyes darted across the room when they spotted a second figure moving on the bed. "Nani da, Toto-chan?" sing-songed a sleepy female voice and a thick cloud of bluish black hair spilled out from under the silken covers.

"It's all right, my little butterfly." Tenderly, Tod's hands caressed the dark flood, stroking it back until a delicate face with almond-shaped eyes appeared underneath it. "Go back to sleep. I'll be back before you wake up tomorrow. Promise."

"Hai, Toto-chan."

She gave a deep content purr, stretching and rolling playfully like a kitten. In a hurried movement, Tod spread the covers back over her; he hadn't failed to notice a hungry look enter the watery eyes drawing relentlessly towards the tender white body of the girl. She, however, didn't seem to have noticed; with another soft sigh she snuggled back into the covers and was asleep a moment later.

"Your father will give... will give you further information," Pettigrew stuttered, withdrawing his tongue back into his mouth.

The fire blazed up one last time before it disappeared along with the Grand Dragon's head, leaving nothing behind but ash and dark embers.

* * *

Like souls forlorn, the first keys of a gloomy melody swirled through the hazy air inside the Leaky Cauldron, reverberating off the walls and drifting upwards, reaching towards an imaginary paradise. The space was saturated with the sound of music, with the smell of alcohol and with the dreams of a young generation bound to change the world. Preferably tonight.

They were in charge and they knew it: sinister and dangerous, frightening and formidable, fierce and unstoppable. They would prevail. They were always on call, impatient to bring the Dark Lord's cruelty and terror to the furthest reaches of his kingdom.

Ghost Riders in the sky! Foaming beer bottles clanged together, joining in another toast to victory.

However, since one had called for their services tonight, some five dozen Ghost Riders had to make do with embellishing the stories of past deeds, and washing away their boredom with some more alcohol. At least conversation was a challenge they had to yell to be heard over the music.

"Where the hell is Flint, anyway?" Gregory Goyle demanded as he returned from the bar, where Draco Malfoy had sent him to procure more drinks. "You'd think as he's our bloody captain, he'd bother to show up once in a while." He banged the four beer bottles down on the table with one oversized fist.

"What?" bellowed Vincent Crabbe over Millicent Bulstrode's head. Millicent scowled at him, grabbing him by the ears and shoving his face away so that he'd stop spitting on her.

"I said, *Flint!*" Greg bellowed back. He brought his hand up as if to shield his eyes from the sun, and mimed looking left and right melodramatically, with obvious irritation.

"Oh, OK." Vince had apparently understood Greg's attempt at sign language and returned it in kind. He smacked a fist repeatedly into his other palm, intending to convey that Flint was probably with his girlfriend, engaged in far more entertaining activities than hanging out with his buddies. The others at the table leered and grinned; some knowing smirks were exchanged and the bottles rose again.

Terrence Higgs, who sat at another table across the room, joined in with his own lecherous smirk. He seemed to have grasped the concept of the discussion, probably largely due to Vince and Greg's impressive acting performances. Terrence swaggered over to them brazenly, swung one of the empty chairs around, and slung a leg over it.

The others renewed their smirks, for his attempt at a pretentious swagger needed some work. As did his maneuver with the chair.

Terrence narrowed his eyes and looked around, as if to make sure no one would overhear the breathtaking news he was about to share with them. "I've heard some things," he boasted. "Nothing concrete, of course, but people are talking about Flint's taste in women."

Millicent, Vince and Greg stared at him open-mouthed. To Terence this might have come across as a gesture of awe at his stunning revelation, but it was, in fact, confusion as they'd only managed to pick up about half of his words and had no idea what he'd been trying to imply. Shrugging their shoulders, they turned to Draco, looking for clues as to how they should react.

Their group leader had been sprawled nonchalantly in his chair, sipping his beer and following the conversation with amusement and a significant amount of boredom. Abruptly, he leaned forward, glaring at Terrence through icy gray eyes. "You should show some respect when you speak about our captain, Higgs."

He hadn't spoken very loudly, but the other boy didn't seem to have any difficulty understanding.

"All right, all right." There was a slight uneasiness in Terence's voice as he shrugged his shoulders, trying to downplay the situation. It was pretty obvious that this wasn't so much about defending the captain, but about marking borders of territory. Everyone knew how ugly Draco Malfoy could get if someone tried to butt in on his little group. Terence's eyes darted about the table, and the sceptical, almost hostile faces told him that he had outworn his welcome. It was time to go back to his own friends and have a nice little chat about elitist bastards and their simpleminded followers.

None of The Malfoy Court paid him any attention though; they were too busy having a laugh at Vince's clumsy attempts to heave a beer bottle open with his wand.

"Give it here, you moron!" Millicent tried to snatch the bottle from his hands, but, at the very same moment, the cap slid off, allowing the frothy beer to foam freely over her hands. This was an even better cause for amusement, and everybody grinned and leered after her as she stomped off to the bathroom scowling, burly arms stretched out, determined to keep her sticky hands away from her clothing.

Other eyes followed her as well. These, however, were not filled with amusement but with suspicion and hostility; to many of the guys, the presence of a girl in their midst posed some sort of threat to their masculinity. Now that she hung out with Malfoy, they had given up on their attempts to bully her, but it still didn't feel right having her here. This job was made for tough men and not for women and wimps.

Ghost Riders in the sky! Devil's hounds! True warriors of darkness!

Just to make sure, another round of beer bottles joined in another toast.

The final chord of the previous song has not yet faded away when a new tune kicks in, much harder and faster than the last one: a deep, droning bass, causing bottles and glasses to hum and jingle. As heavy guitar riffs join with the gruff rhythm, sudden realisation flares in five dozen pairs of eyes; all voices give way to a deafening elation, effortlessly drowning out the music. From trembling throats, the boys are shouting and screaming their enthusiasm; this is their song, the symbol for all they aspire to, ambition of their hopes, field of their dreams. Their song, their hymn, their credo.

Dark night nothing to see

Invisible hand in front of me

Scared to death, there's someone near

Scared to death, but you can't stay here

The cheers fade away as more and more voices join the chorus, singing and shouting out the lyrics. Like the fiery outburst of a volcano, sound and rhythm heat up the blood, changing it to a stream of lava flowing through blistering veins. Some uneasy feet start stamping the floor, some anxious heads start to bang back and forth with hair flying in all directions. A fiery fascination flares up, blazing and burning, sweeping the room like a raging bushfire.

You know me, evil eye

You know me, prepare to die

You know me, the Snakebite Kiss

Devil's Grip, the Iron Fist

They are in charge and they know it: sinister and dangerous, frightening and formidable, fierce and unstoppable. They come like phantoms of the night, ghostly demons on hellish horses. Invisible and untouchable, they know no danger, no fear and no qualms, and none can hinder them or stand in their path. They are nightmares turned to flesh, masters of life and death, and the tool of their own master: his number one elite force. They are always on call, impatient to bring the Dark Lord's cruelty and terror to the furthest reaches of his kingdom.

Flying horse don't make a sound

Flying hooves don't touch the ground

Walk in circle, lose your track

Can't go on, but you can't go back

Draco is the first who can't remain in his seat any longer; he jumps up, pushing his chair aside. Vince and Greg follow suit only moments later and so does the rest of the group. It takes no more than a simple incantation to sweep chairs and tables into the corner of the room and free a space in its middle. As soon as the others realize what Draco is doing, they all leap towards the newly created dance floor, never heeding small obstacles such as falling beer bottles and flying furniture. Draco secures his wand in the inside pocket of his cloak, hurls the cloak into a corner and dashes headfirst into the savage horde.

You know me, evil eye

You know me, prepare to die

You know me, you can't resist

Devil's Grip, the Iron Fist

Some of them are thrown to the floor as their bodies collide, but hands pull them up before anyone can become the victim of trampling boots. While Vince stomps elephant-like through the masses, sending people to the ground left and right and shouting out lyrics to no one in particular, Greg and Millicent have grabbed each others' shoulders, swinging one another around. Shirts and cloaks go flying into corners, empty beer bottles are kicked out of the way, and the wild cluster of arms and legs and bodies and

banging heads steamrollers from one direction into the other. Gasping breaths and boiling blood flares passion into blazing ecstasy as the music streams into the deepest pits of their quivering souls, filling them with beat and rhythm and drone and mighty guitar riffs until, filled to burst, it all floods over, pouring out into fiery dance. A cycle to last until the end of all times ... or at least until the end of this song.

Moon eclipse and you know, why

Ghost rider in the sky

Beast of evil, devil's hound

Tooth and claw, they pull you down

With the grace of a feline, Draco leaps onto the counter, muscles tensing and flexing in his sleek, supple body while he bangs his head back and forth, the lights catching in his silvery hair as it whips the humid air. Like a silken curtain it spills over his face, sticking to his sweaty skin but never concealing the frozen fire of his eyes; icy flames blazing like the first sunbeam on a greying dawn. Tiny beads of sweat glint on his throat, gleaming on his moon-pale skin as they roll down his bare chest past the ripples of his stomach and finally disappear below the black leather breeches clinging to his slender hips like a second skin.

You know me, evil eye

You know me, prepare to die

You know me, the Snakebite Kiss

Devil's Grip, the Iron Fist

He raises his arm, forming his hand into a fist save for two fingers; his forefinger and pinkie piercing the air like two pointed fangs the sign of the serpent. The answer is a billowing sea of arms over the crowd; the snake is the symbol that unites them all, standing for the new glorious times awaiting them and all wizards of pure blood.

Dark images shine on their forearms, black skulls sprouting serpents; they all wear their tattoos in honour of the Dark Mark that none of them has yet received. But they all hope to be among the chosen ones, somehow, somewhere ... someday in their glorious future....

As the guitars burst into their final crescendo, as the droning sound of the basses finally started to fade, Draco let himself fall forward into the mass of arms catching him and passing him until there was room enough for him to stand. When he felt solid ground under his feet again, he leaned heavily on Greg until he was able to stand straight again. The other boys were in no better condition; they held onto each other as they attempted to catch their breaths, gasping heavily with exhaustion. Vince didn't care about anything anymore; he lay spread-eagle on the ground, ignoring Millicent's desperate attempts to pull him up.

"Hey, Draco." There was a clear warning in Greg's voice, and when he gave a small nod towards the door, they could all feel the cool breeze suddenly penetrating the room. Draco turned around, sweeping his sweaty hair out of his eyes as he did so and found himself face to face with a young man he was quite familiar with.

Some twenty scarlet robes stood in the entrance of the Leaky Cauldron, a few of them still out on the street. They seemed to have been watching the Ghost Riders for a while; smirking at them as if amused by their childish behaviour. Which they probably were.

"The Blood Legion," Terence gasped. "What are *they* doing here?" It was one of those unwritten laws that the Leaky Cauldron belonged to the Ghost Riders at night; the Blood Legion had their own locations for fun and recreation. They weren't particularly welcome here, and they knew it.

The young man standing before Draco was Tod Macnair, eldest son of Grand Dragon Walden Macnair, the head of the Blood Legion. Since Lord Macnair and Lord Malfoy were old friends, Draco had met him before on several occasions. Tod was four years his senior, and like most members of the Blood Legion, he had gone to school at Durmstrang.

Like his father, Tod was tall and dark-haired, but lacking the moustache. He was of heavy build, which could have been called stocky had he been any shorter. Due to his prominent chin and his distinctive facial features, women usually considered him handsome, especially when he smiled. But now he couldn't have been any further from smiling; his face wore a deep frown and his dark eyes mirrored the contemptuous scowl that was shown in Draco's pale ones.

Draco peeked past him, eyes eagerly searching for his wand, but it lay somewhere in a corner with his shirt and cloak. Not that it would've done much good anyways; in a fight the Ghost Riders wouldn't stand much of a chance. They might be stronger in numbers, but the others had a far better education concerning the Dark Arts. Draco himself might have mastered the Unforgivable curses, maybe even Crabbe and Goyle, whose fathers were Great Titans on the council, but other than that, things didn't look too good for the Ghost Riders.

And who could say what other skills the Red Robes had accomplished? According to rumour, you had to pass difficult tests to be accepted in their midst, whereas the Ghost Riders took pretty much anyone, no questions asked.

But the times when Draco's face had betrayed any of his thoughts were long gone, and so he stood silently and unmoved, eyes locked with his opponent's. The organisation Tod belonged to was without doubt the more powerful one, but in terms of rank both young men were the same first-born sons of Grand Dragons of the Dark Council and as long as Tod didn't give a cogent reason for this intrusion, Draco would not step aside.

And as long as he didn't, neither would anyone else.

Like two silent walls, Red and Black stood opposing each other; every single person in the room felt the tension rising between them. Was it only because of the open door that the air had suddenly turned frigid?

"I beg your pardon, my lads!" A cheerful voice broke the silence, tainted with a hint of fake surprise. "What's with all the long faces? We're all on the same side here."

The Red Robes stepped aside, making way for their leader. Walden Macnair was in no hurry; he took his time striding through the newly-created passageway with all the dignity appropriate to his position. It was only when he stood before the Ghost Riders that he brushed off his hood, addressed Draco with a casual greeting and then turned his attention to the crowd. "We never had the slightest intention to gatecrash your little ... hmm ... party. We are only passing through to Diagon Alley, where we have some business to attend."

"Why weren't we informed of this, sir?" Draco asked, trying to keep suspicion out of his voice.

A jovial smile spread over Macnair's face. "Probably because our master believes the Blood Legion capable of conducting a search without any outside help. Still, should we require assistance, we know where to find you. So better stay ready, just in case."

Draco stepped aside and so did the rest of Ghost Riders. Lead by Tod, the Red Robes marched out through the back entrance, and a moment later they could all hear the scraping of the stones opening the way to Diagon Alley.

But Macnair didn't accompany his people; he turned back to Draco instead. "Is there a place we can talk? I have an offer to make which you might be interested in hearing."

"I'll be back in a moment, sir." Draco gathered all his missing clothes and disappeared off to the bathroom. It took quite a while until he returned fully clothed and with his hair in place; Macnair was starting to get impatient. With a nod of his head he pointed towards the street outside, and Draco followed him. "Sir? Are you sure this place is

safe to talk? We might be overheard."

"Well, let's not worry about every little sewer rat crawling about." Macnair laughed at his own joke, which was doubtlessly directed at another council member, but Draco didn't join in or ask any questions about it. Instead, he looked expectantly at the Grand Dragon.

"Well, Draco, my lad..." Macnair switched back to his paternal manner, "... your father keeps me well informed about your career, but it's been a while since I've taken a good look at you. You're all grown-up now; you must be, what ... eighteen?"

"Nineteen in November."

"Time sure does fly these days," Macnair gave a melodramatic sigh. "Right, you finished school this summer. Did you join the Ghost Riders right afterwards?"

Draco nodded. Even if he knew where this conversation was leading to, his face didn't betray anything.

"And you enjoy your job, don't you? According to your father, your skills concerning the Dark Arts are quite extraordinary. And, rumour has it, you have no qualms about putting them to practical use."

Macnair grinned, but Draco didn't look remotely abashed. He hadn't really expected his little escapades to stay secret; too often had he broken the rules and cast the killing curse, usage of which was limited to members of the Council and certain privileged Special Forces; the Ghost Riders not being one of them. But since he had never used the spell on a fellow witch or wizard, no one had ever bothered to trouble him about it.

"I beg your pardon, sir." Draco smirked back at Macnair. "So you're blaming me for what? Ridding the world of some stinking Muggles?"

"According to my source of information, it was more than just a few." Macnair broke into good-natured laughter, giving Draco an appreciative slap on the shoulder. "Don't worry, laddie, you young people just need to have some fun, eh?"

"Well," his laughter faded and his voice became serious in a matter of seconds, "that's not what we came here to talk about. Draco, did you ever wonder if your extraordinary skills might be put to better use elsewhere?"

"Sir?"

"I mean, just look at those Ghost Riders. Errand boys, nothing more. A pathetic bunch of wannabes trying to have some fun. They may be all right for no names like that Flint guy, but for you? Your father and grandfather sit by the Dark Lord's side; you have a reputation to live up to. Think of your future, your career."

He broke off, waiting for some sort of reaction from Draco that did not come. The boy simply looked at him with cold, expressionless eyes, and if Macnair hadn't known better, he could've sworn he saw a sneer wrinkling his nose.

However, one did not sneer at a Grand Dragon of the Dark Council, so he was sure he had imagined it. "Forget about the Ghost Riders, Draco. Come join us."

"Well, sir, that offer is really ... tempting," Draco said slowly. "However, it's too big a decision to make rashly; I'll need time to consider. I should talk to my father about it first."

"Of course," Macnair agreed. "As for your father, I have to admit that I already mentioned the idea to him and he seems quite in favour of it. Your career certainly means a lot to him. I shouldn't be surprised; what father wouldn't want the best for his only son?"

His last words sounded particularly smug. After all, the Macnairs had three more sons besides Tod; while the Malfoys' only other child was a daughter. "Don't take too much time for your considerations," Macnair added. "After all, how difficult can it be to find out where your true career chances lie?"

"If you really are in need of a quick answer, sir, I shouldn't make you wait." Draco shrugged his shoulders, making a half-hearted attempt at a saddened face. "I'm very sorry, but I have to decline your generous offer. I sincerely hope my decision doesn't cause you any trouble."

"Well if that's the only answer you can give..." The jovial, almost patronizing look on Macnair's face gave way to an angry frown. "I bid you goodnight, my lad, and I hope for your sake that you won't regret your decision."

"The same to you, sir," Draco answered, "and good luck for your search."

* * *

"...and when the Snitch hid behind those strange weeds, I reckoned we'd never see it again ... anyways Natalie would've got it for sure, if that stupid Grindylow hadn't ... hey, Mi!"

"My name is Hermione and I'm not a possessive pronoun." Without sparing him so much as a glance, Hermione swept past Ron and the group of devoted listeners surrounding him. She appreciated his good work as Quidditch match referee and Quidditch match organiser and such, oh yes, she really did, and he had done a great job and everything, but now it was simply enough! He had spent the better part of the after-match-celebration hopping from one group to the next, entertaining each with boastful stories and colourful anecdotes. And those fools even fell for them, especially the girls. They were staring at him all open-mouthed and glassy-eyed as if they didn't have anything better to do than listen to that little show-off.

"Hermione, wait, where are you going?" he called after her. "It's too early for bed yet. I mean it's only..." a rustle of fabric behind her indicated the desperate search for a clock or watch, "... wicked, one thirty. Can it really be that late?"

"Yes, it can, Ron." She didn't turn around. "And I'm very tired, so please excuse me."

"Wait for me, mates, I'll be back in a moment!" Ron abandoned his audience to chase after Hermione, not hearing Lavender's stifled yawn and Seamus' sleepy: "How 'bout we call it a day?" He looked frantically in the direction of the Gryffindor dormitories, but, to his surprise, Hermione made no attempt to enter any of the little wooden and paper houses. Instead she turned to the pond.

Passing white and purple water lilies, she traversed the wooden plates leading into the middle of the glistening waters. Finally, she sat down, drawing her knees to her chest and staring silently into the darkness around her.

"Why such a temper all of a sudden?" he called, hurrying up to her. "They all admired your decorations for the match, didn't they? The Tritons even wanted to keep most of them. Or are you disappointed that we didn't win?"

"Rubbish." Even in the darkness he could see the familiar frown on her face. "The Ravenclaws really deserve their victory, and I'm perfectly happy for them."

"That's it, isn't it?" Not heeding her answer, Ron dropped down next to her on the wooden plate and claimed: "You're upset because we lost the match. Even if it wasn't the bad S-word who defeated us."

"Why can't you just stop being such a bother?" She jumped up, glaring at him, and then gave a skip onto the next plate to sit down further away from him.

"Maybe because I like to bother you. You see, if we can't talk to each other properly, we could at least argue and bicker and snarl at each other again. You know, I really don't mind you only talking to Harry and not talking to me anymore, I'm used to it by now, and I don't even feel ignored. But now that you've started bickering with him instead of me, I'm afraid he's intruding in my territory."

Utterly bewildered, she turned to look at him, but his face didn't betray whether he was serious or making fun of her. "What are you going on about, Ron? I thought we discussed this. I know that Harry and I spend more time together because of our responsibilities, but it's not like I'm trying to get between the two of you. We're still best friends, all three of us, and there's no reason for you to feel left out. Your jealousy is getting ridiculous, you know."

"And when will you ever learn that not all the world revolves around Harry?" he muttered.

"Just drop it, won't you?" There was fatigue and weariness in her voice as she rested her head on her knees, closing her eyes for a moment. "Maybe you have enough energy left for arguing, bickering and snarling as you put it so nicely, but I really don't, and I don't see why we should make things more difficult than they already are by fighting amongst ourselves."

"I didn't come here to fight. You're getting it all wrong, I only wanted ... well, I..."

"So what did you want?"

"Talk to you, I guess. Just talk to you."

There was an uncomfortable silence for a moment, and when she turned to face him, it was with an irritated scowl in her eyes. "You had all night to talk to me, Ron, or you would've had, if you hadn't been so busy showing off. And now when I'm tired and want to go to sleep, you want to talk. Excellent timing, really."

"It wasn't my fault." Ron shrugged. "There was just so much going on earlier ... the party ... all those people who wanted to talk about the match..."

"So you're telling me you needed an entire four hours to tell them how great you are at Quidditch? Now I can certainly see why we don't talk with each other anymore. I still don't understand why you're trying to blame it on me, though, but that must be a kind of logic I'm not familiar with." She rose from her seated position and turned towards the buildings. "Good night, Ron."

There was a certain finality in her voice as she spun around and swept away. He knew it would be no use going after her, although part of him longed to do just that. "Night, Hermione," he muttered between clenched teeth, but he didn't think she had heard him. He scowled after her until she had disappeared in one of the houses, wondering how a person with so much brains could be so unreasonable.

He didn't feel like sleeping, so he sat back down, watching the lights go out and listening to the voices fading away. She was unreasonable, wasn't she? And why was she withdrawing from him and spending so much time with Harry instead? What were they not telling him? Was he no longer good enough to share their secrets?

He didn't know how long he had been sitting there lost in his thoughts when he suddenly noticed a movement at the edge of the pond. A tiny red light glowed in the darkness only to disappear moments later, but still he could see two shadowy figures hurrying along the shore. The light was gone before he had time to recognize them, but they were carrying brooms, and another second later he heard a soft rustle in the air above him.

They were leaving the hideout.

So they had to be two seventh year Prefects, but who could it be and why?

Would Ernie and Hannah abuse their privileges for a little lover's stroll in the moonlight? Surely not. Or was it the Ravenclaws? No, it couldn't be them, at least not Lisa; she was in the hospital wing. An attack by one of those Water Widows ... what if Ernie and Hannah wanted to take down the Quidditch loops or something? But why not wait until tomorrow? Why sneak out in the middle of the night?

Harry and Hermione! Was that the reason why she had wanted to get away from him so quick? No, that wasn't possible; she wouldn't draw on a dirty trick like that. Using fatigue as pretence so she could sneak out with Harry? That was definitely not her.

But she had kept secrets from him before, hadn't she?

Secrets, yes, but she would never lie to him. Those were Ernie and Hannah after all. Or maybe Ernie had an affair with Terry from Ravenclaw, and didn't want Hannah to know, or Harry had an affair with Hannah, or maybe...

There had to be an explanation. There just had to be.

* * *

"You really are certain, aren't you?" Eyeing Harry dubiously, Hermione got off her broom. "I sure hope you didn't wake me up for nothing. I'm very tired, and besides, it's not safe to be out here all the time, you know that."

"Yes, I'm certain." Harry fetched his ring from under his shirt, shielding the light with his hands as he showed it to her. The two gemstones inside the ring glowed in a deep red colour, bringing a bizarre, almost demonic life to the dog-shaped head, almost as if it was looking at the two of them. "This has to mean something; the eyes have never shone like that. I thought it likely that an urgent message is waiting for me, and no I can't hide beneath that or the owl will not find me." He caught her hand as she raised the Invisibility cloak to drape it over him.

Their eyes searched the sky, but there was no movement between the clouds and stars. "Should we ask Hagrid if he saw something?" she wondered, looking at the black shape of the former gamekeeper's hut barely visible between the trees.

"No, there's no reason to wake him. You know that the owl only comes to me."

"If it comes at all," she muttered, not even trying to hide the suspicion in her voice. Who could say what other powers that ring might have? What if it was a trap?

Silence fell like a shadow, like the soundless shadow hovering around Harry's dark hair; two large feathery wings spreading over his shoulders like angel's wings as it came to land; soft feathers brushing against his cheek like a caress. He closed his eyes for a moment, and as he opened them again, his face was void of all emotion. Yet his hands shook slightly as they took the letter clasped in the owl's beak.

"Is someone in trouble?" Hermione wanted to know, dreading the answer.

"I'm afraid so. We should get back to the hideout and form a rescue mission."

* * *

"Lavender, Parvati, Eloise, Tara!" Hermione raced from one bed to the other trying to shake her roommates awake. "Wake up, there's an emergency!"

As the five Gryffindor girls rushed outside, clasping their brooms, they faced a crowd of anxious, hastily-clad young witches and wizards; some faces stifling yawns, others small and pale and worried. No one had got more than a few hours of sleep after the match, and no one understood yet why they had been so roughly woken.

Harry waited until everyone was within hearing distance and started to explain. "The Blood Legion has been asked to conduct a search of Diagon Alley. We don't know who or what it is they're searching for, but we should try to find out more. If someone's in danger, we could help them."

"Uhm ... sorry, but how do we get past the Leaky Cauldron?" Parvati wanted to know. "Didn't you say the Ghost Riders are in there?"

"I did, but it's possible to reach Diagon Alley via air, and it's quicker at that. It's going to be a hard ride though; we'll need to get there as fast as possible. Everyone who

doesn't think him or herself capable of this should better stay. I know you're all tired, so..." A defiant silence answered him, and not one of them stepped back, so he continued: "They aren't expecting us, so that gives us the benefit of surprise, but you all know that we can't face the Blood Legion in an open fight. We stay out of harm's way unless there are people to be rescued. Then we'll take them and be off."

"We know, Harry, we know." Seamus reached for his wand to make sure it was stowed safely inside his pockets. "It's our usual hit and run strategy."

"That's exactly what I was going to say." Harry mounted his broom. "Let's go."

* * *

Amicus Draconis - 1st Cycle: Cycle of the Badger - Part 4: Offers and Offerings

"I wonder, I wonder, do you know what I wonder?"

"I wonder if I could throw my rubber duck at the other children when Auntie Voldie's not looking."

"Yeah, let's all go throw our toys at each other, that would be heaps of fun. We have so many toys at the Kindergarten and we all watched Home Alone, although it's a Muggle movie and Auntie Voldie has forbidden us to watch Muggle movies, but we don't care as long as they have naked people in them."

"Yesterday, Lord Luscious got framed for watching Notting Hill."

*"Eurgh ... bad image ... very bad image." *throws rubber duck**

"How dare you cast this rubber duck at me, scoundrel! I am Grand Chicken McDonald, Lord of the Burger Legion and I can make you gain weight!"

"Hold your tongue, mingling mongrel. I am Grand Lick Luscious, also known as Mighty Malfoy Mouse, and I do not gain weight, because I'm incredibly sexy. And keep your hands off my son, pervert or I'll go tell on you."

*"Ha!" *scamper scamper* "Can't tell, can't tell!" *sticks out tongue* "Auntie Voldie knows everything you ever did. Naah-nah-nah-naah-naah! I'm Grand Greasy Ripper Rattyglue and I'm telling on you all!"*

"I fart in your general direction, you silly English kaniggets! Your father was a shrubbery and your mother was a pokémon. Cower, mes poupettes, for I am Grand Lay Strange, Master of Disneyland ... uhm ... actually I meant Azkaban, but they both look like Neuschwanstein anyways. I'm Auntie Voldie's favourite, favourite baby in all of Kindergarten."

"No that's me, and I broke your favourite favourite baby doll. Oopsie!"

"I ate your burger!"

"I'm in on playing Hide-and-Seek and you're not!"

"I stole all your little horsies."

"Yeah, that's because you're blackmailing Captain Flintstone with his girlfriend. Grab, Growl, go get my pimpcane. And hit him. Hard."

*"Eurgh ... bad image ... very bad image." *throws another rubber duck**

"Shush ... we have to be good boys now. Here comes Auntie Voldie."

"Shshshshsh...."

"Uhm, Fred?"

"Yeah, George?"

"There're no naked people in Home Alone."

"Thank goodness."

Amicus Draconis - 1. Zyklus: Zyklus des Dachses - Teil 4: Angebote und Opfergaben

* * *

Author's Note: This note is about Voldemort's Dark Council.

The Council consists of thirteen members: Voldemort himself and his twelve most loyal Death Eaters. As some of my American readers were quick to notice, the names of their council ranks derive from the Ku Klux Klan. Voldemort calls himself 'Imperial Wizard', the four higher-ranked members of the Council go by the name of 'Grand Dragon', and the eight lower-ranked ones are called 'Great Titan'.

In case you're wondering where I got the idea from, I think there are some parallels between the Death Eaters and KKK in the HP books. When I read GoF, a scene I could picture very clearly in my mind was the attack of the Death Eaters at the campsite. Jo described them as hooded and masked, spreading terror and setting everything on fire. Reading that passage made me think of KKK immediately. I believe that Jo made a few subtle connections between "Wizarding Fascism" and "Muggle Fascism" to show that they're not all that different.

As for the council members, I don't want to give you any spoilers, so I'll only mention the ones we already know from the story. Walden Macnair is a Grand Dragon, as is Peter Pettigrew and Lucius Malfoy, who will make his first appearance in one of the next chapters. The fourth Grand Dragon will remain in the background for a while, but those of you who read the trailer already got a glimpse of him. You could say that he is half canon character and half self-created, because he makes his first appearance in GoF. Since he isn't given a background yet, I created one for him (which is certainly not the one that Jo would later give him in OotP).

The only Great Titans we know so far are Crabbe and Goyle senior, but there'll be more coming up in later chapters. Also, as we found out in Episode Two, Severus Snape is not a member of the Council, but he's trying to get in. In later chapters we'll see whether he's successful in his task.

04. Offers and Offerings - Part B

Chapter 9 of 12

Diagon Alley in Flames ? but what are the Death Eaters searching for? Will Harry and his friends be in time to save Madam Malkin and Mr Ollivander? What are Harry and Hermione hiding from Ron? Who betrayed the Death Eaters? Is someone playing both sides against the middle? Who is meant to receive the mysterious new wand Ollivander is working on? And what does Tod Macnair's beautiful girlfriend have to do with all of this?

Author's Note: In the first part of this chapter we met some new characters: Walden Macnair's son Tod, his mysterious girlfriend and Peter Pettigrew. Now, in the second part, we'll wrap up the Diagon Alley storyline and plunge headfirst into some more mysteries for future chapters. I'm always amazed how accurate some of my reviewers' guesses are, but I'm just as glad that so many of you fall for my red herrings. *smirks evilly*

Many hugs and cookies to Lici, my Brit-picker for this chapter, my artist Eblein and my beta Notsosaintly. I also want to appreciate some web pages that I use in the translation of this fic. www.leo.org has been a great help and so has www.thesaurus.com. And nothing could've been done without the good old Oxford English Dictionary, on- or offline.

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Amicus Draconis - 1st Cycle: Cycle of the Badger - Part 4: Offers and Offerings

"I wonder, I wonder, do you know what I wonder?"

"I wonder if I could throw my rubber duck at the other children when Auntie Voldie's not looking."

"Yeah, let's all go throw our toys at each other, that would be heaps of fun. We have so many toys at the Kindergarten, and we all watched Home Alone, although it's a Muggle movie and Auntie Voldie has forbidden us to watch Muggle movies, but we don't care as long as they have naked people in them."

"Yesterday, Lord Luscious got framed for watching Notting Hill."

*"Eurgh ... bad image ... very bad image." *throws rubber duck**

"How dare you cast this rubber duck at me, scoundrel! I am Grand Chicken McDonald, Lord of the Burger Legion, and I can make you gain weight!"

"Hold your tongue, mingling mongrel. I am Grand Lick Luscious, also known as Mighty Malfoy Mouse, and I do not gain weight, because I'm incredibly sexy. And keep your hands off my son, pervert, or I'll go tell on you."

*"Ha!" *scamper scamper* "Can't tell, can't tell!" *sticks out tongue* "Auntie Voldie knows everything you ever did. Naah-nah-nah-naah-naah! I'm Grand Greasy Ripper Rattyglue, and I'm telling on you all!"*

"I fart in your general direction, you silly English kaniggets! Your father was a shrubbery and your mother was a pokémon. Cower, mes poupettes, for I am Grand Lay Strange, Master of Disneyland ... uhm ... actually I meant Azkaban, but they both look like Neuschwanstein anyways. I'm Auntie Voldie's favourite, favourite baby in all of Kindergarten."

"No, that's me, and I broke your favourite favourite baby doll. Oopsie!"

"I ate your burger!"

"I'm in on playing Hide-and-Seek and you're not!"

"I stole all your little horsies."

"Yeah, that's because you're blackmailing Captain Flintstone with his girlfriend. Grab and Growl, go get my pimpcane. And hit him. Hard."

*"Eurgh ... bad image ... very bad image." *throws another rubber duck**

"Shush ... we have to be good boys now. Here comes Auntie Voldie."

"Shshshshsh...."

"Uhm, Fred?"

"Yeah, George?"

"There're no naked people in Home Alone."

"Thank goodness."

Amicus Draconis - 1. Zyklus: Zyklus des Dachses - Teil 4: Angebote und Opfergaben

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Flames ate their way through the buildings, accompanied by clouds of smoke and the sickening stench of objects sweltering in the heat. Their angry crackle blended into a cacophony of terror: the steady pound of booted footsteps, the brisk bark of orders and the desperate shouts of voices in anguish. Wands flared and doors were blasted apart as the soldiers of the Dark Lord forced their entry into various shops and apartments, driven by their relentless determination to fulfill their master's commands. Pandemonium reigned in Diagon Alley, and it was a near miracle that no one had been seriously injured yet.

Not that the Blood Legion had found anything of importance so far. A few banned books were carelessly thrown into the fire, but none of them seemed to link to resistance groups, let alone the Order of the Phoenix itself. Insignificant romance novels or mystery stories, harmless except for the fact that they had been written by Muggle authors. The proprietors were fined a considerable amount of money, and their names were registered, but the offence was trivial; there were more pressing matters to worry about. Would their search be in vain? Had Lord Pettigrew made a mistake and there was nothing to be found?

Walden Macnair wouldn't have dared to speak any of these thoughts out loud.

Supported by two of his men, he was standing guard for Gringotts. They had to make sure that none of the fires would reach the British Wizarding Bank, or else there would be trouble. Goblins were worthless creatures, certainly, but they controlled the money. Wizarding governments, whether they be old or new, had to abide by the unwritten laws of economy. Trouble with the bank was the last thing they needed now; the damage to the stores was bad enough.

Macnair frowned; the Dark Lord wouldn't be pleased with all the havoc they had wreaked. Intimidation was one thing, destroying premises was another. But what was he to do? Once rage and murderous frenzy had taken over their minds and repressed all reason, even an elite Special Force was hard to control.

"Father, I believe we're onto something!"

Macnair didn't fail to notice the pride in his son's voice as Tod stepped up the now ashen-grey marble stairs to the bank. "This individual," with a brusque wave of his wand, the younger Macnair flung an elderly man to the ground, "attempted to conceal something from our Forces."

Tod handed a small wooden box to his father. "It doesn't seem to be jinxed," he explained, "but we haven't tried to open it yet."

On first glance the box looked like an ordinary wand case, but one could never be too careful. Macnair ran his own wand over it repeatedly, watching out for hostile spells. When nothing happened, he clicked the case open and found himself looking at a brand-new wand.

He took it out to have a closer look and handed the empty case back to his son. "Tod, as soon as we finish this search, you will Apparate back to headquarters and have this thing taken apart. Double bottoms, secret drawers, built-in mechanisms, magical or non-magical; I want to know about it. Take a couple of people if you need any help. I expect your report at dawn. As for this wand, I'm sure Mr Ollivander will be kind enough to reveal to us what its secret is."

"My most humble and sincere apologies, Grand Dragon Macnair." Wincing, the old man got to his feet. "This wand was a very special order, and I'm not permitted to speak about it, not even to you."

"My, my, aren't we cheeky tonight?" Macnair assumed an air of cheerfulness so that none of the men would notice how taken aback he was at these words. Was there any truth to the old man's claim? Or was it a bold attempt to bluff his way out, fuelled by the courage of desperation? Was this wand the very object they had been sent out to find?

"Who gave the order to have this made?" Without warning his voice hardened, and he pointed his wand at Ollivander's throat. "I will not ask again, old man!"

He was bluffing, at least partly; he couldn't kill Britain's finest wand maker without consulting his superiors first. But his sudden change of manner seemed to have done the trick; Ollivander gaped at him in fear, and his voice trembled as he replied: "He ... it was a man, but I didn't see his face, sir. Nor do I know his name. My most humble apolo...."

"Maybe you forgot his name and it will come back to you once you are properly reminded," Macnair interrupted coldly. "Crucio!"

Ollivander toppled over and fell to Macnair's feet, writhing with pain. He wasn't screaming yet; it was more effective to begin the curse with a subtle pain that you could intensify at will. In Ollivander's case such measures weren't necessary; he gasped for air and blurted out almost at once: "Pettigrew! He was working for Lord Pettigrew ... the ring ... showed me the..."

His voice broke. Macnair, who had discontinued the curse as soon as Ollivander had started talking, waited patiently until the old man had caught his breath. "What kind of ring did the man show to you?" he wanted to know.

"A crest ring, sir. He showed me a silver crest ring with the symbol of a rat as proof that he was working for Grand Dragon Pettigrew. I remember it quite clearly; the rat had small yellow jewels for its eyes. And he could activate the ring and make them glow in the dark. He gave me orders to have this wand made and forbade me to speak about it. That is the truth, Grand Dragon, I swear!"

He sounded sincere, so Macnair took a moment to think the situation over. The rat was indeed Pettigrew's symbol, but that fact wasn't widely known yet. Since Pettigrew wasn't a member of one of the old wizarding families, he had only recently received his crest ring from the Dark Lord. How would Ollivander know about it if he didn't speak the truth?

Macnair glanced down at his own crest ring, wondering how he should handle the situation from here on. He was treading on thin ice; he was still the most junior of the four Grand Dragons, and interfering with Pettigrew's plans could get him into serious trouble. On the other hand, why would Pettigrew interfere with his own plans and send the Blood Legion to Diagon Alley while Ollivander was still working on that special order of his? It just didn't fit together.

What if it was no more than a cover story? If Ollivander secretly worked for the Order of the Phoenix and he let him go now, severe wasn't a proper word to describe the trouble he would be in.

No, he should definitely investigate the situation further. For the safety of the Dark Lord's Empire. Well, probably more to satisfy his own bloody curiosity than anything else, but he liked to be informed about the happenings around him. "What did you use to create this wand?" he barked. "Which magical artefact?"

"Dragon heartstring, sir. Dragon heartstring from a Chinese Fireball. I once sold another wand with heartstring from the same dragon ... let me think ... I can't remember the name, but I'll look it up for you if that is your wish, sir."

"Yes, that is my wish," barked Macnair, not utterly convinced by Ollivander's words. Didn't the wand maker claim to remember every wand he ever sold? "And I also wish to know when your mysterious visitor will return to pick up the wand."

"He won't, sir. He paid in advance and left me an owl. I'm supposed to send the wand to a certain Skuld. I have no idea who that person is, but the owl will find him, I suppose."

Macnair snorted in disbelief. This story was becoming weirder by the minute. A mysterious order, a strange twin wand, an unknown man named Skuld what was all of this about? A new scheme the Order of the Phoenix had cooked up?

The only thing that didn't fit was the ring. Ollivander had described Pettigrew's crest ring down to the very last detail; how would he know it so well if he hadn't actually seen it? Or had he been fooled as well? Was the ring a hoax?

"Father?" Jason and Michael, two of his younger sons, approached him, leading a second prisoner between them. The elderly woman's hands were tied behind her back; both boys eyed her apprehensively as if she was a particularly vicious creature. "We found a dangerous pamphlet in that woman's chimney," Jason stated.

"I had no idea it was there," the woman tried to defend herself. "Someone must have thrown or Flooded it into my chimney while I was asleep..."

"Of course they did." Macnair had better things to do than listen to pathetic excuses. "Michael, you will stay here, guard the prisoners and keep an eye on the bank. Jason, you will take this wand case to headquarters and then report back here. Tod, you're with me. We still haven't uncovered what our Master sent us here to find."

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"Madam Malkin and Mr Ollivander? They're arresting Malkin and Ollivander? What in the world could *they* have done to deserve this?"

"They don't need a reason, do they?" Harry's eyes narrowed as he peered through the shimmering fabric of the Invisibility Cloak. The street looked dark and deserted now,

save for a small fire in one of the houses. Yet, the deep red cloak of the young man guarding the two prisoners was clearly visible in the dim light.

"There's only a single guard." He held out his arm to stop Ron so they wouldn't come within hearing range of the small group. "This doesn't look like efficient security measures to me."

"Maybe they got a bit reckless," Ron wondered. "Or they are busy with something else and don't expect too much trouble from the two old fogies."

"Well, they certainly looked busy a few minutes ago," Harry mumbled. It hadn't been easy to stay hidden and witness the destruction when everything inside him screamed to rush out and fight these criminals. But what choice did they have? They wouldn't save anyone's life by reckless and foolhardy actions, only lose their own. And he could not account for leading his friends to certain death....

"Harry, we can take him." Something must have shown in his face, for Ron seemed to know exactly what he was thinking about. "He's only one man and there are two of us. And we're under the cloak, so he won't see us coming. We'll take him by surprise."

"Too dangerous." Harry shook his head. "We would..."

"Harry, how can you just stand there and watch this?" Ron broke him off in mid-sentence. "These people out there, they are people we know. We've talked to them; we've been to their shops. We can't just leave them to their fate!"

How could his best friend believe such a thing of him? Harry was about to give a hurt and bitter answer when a soft squeaking sound interrupted Ron's passionate appeal and broke the sudden tension rising between them. Harry turned his head, almost bumped his chin against Ron's shoulder and saw him clutching his hands into fists and into the yellow rubber duck he was holding. In a hasty movement Ron dropped the rubber duck into his pocket where it turned back into a wand.

Harry suppressed a smile. Did Ron keep one of Fred and George's fake wands as a lucky charm?

"I have no intention of leaving them to their fate," he assured his friend, "but we need a plan first. Even if we defeat one Death Eater, how will we escape from the others? We can't fit four people under the cloak."

"We need our broomsticks first, so we can take Ollivander and Malkin to safety," Ron agreed, his other hand now holding a pink piggybank. Obviously two lucky charms were luckier than one. "Two people to a broom works out all right if both don't try to fly it. But maybe we should get some help from our friends. One person could attack the Death Eater from under the cloak, and two others could fly in and rescue the prisoners."

"Yes, that sounds like a much better plan to me."

* * *

Guarding two old fogies was not much fun. Michael Macnair was still at odds with his cruel fate of forced boredom when *âPetrificus Totalus!*" out of nowhere almost took him by surprise. As the full Body-Bind was only a minor hex, he was able to deflect it, but then an *"Expelliarmus!"* swooped down on him from the skies above and almost made him lose his wand.

During the quarter of a second it took him to hold onto this precious possession, the *"Petrificus Totalus!"* hit him again. As he toppled down, stiff as a board, he was forced to watch helplessly as two boys on broomsticks grabbed his precious prisoners, cut them loose and pulled them onto said broomsticks.

When, another quarter of a second later, two more Death Eaters came to his aid, there was no sign of boys or prisoners. Let alone broomsticks.

* * *

"And that'll be fifty points to New Hogwarts," Stephen Cornfoot cheered as the group landed on a distant field to catch breaths and check brooms. "We sure showed them!"

"What if they are still trying to follow us?" Madam Malkin did not share her rescuers' enthusiasm.

"They can't follow us over long distances; they don't use brooms," Harry tried to reassure her. "Through Levitation you couldn't possibly catch up with the height or speed of a broomstick, and Apparation is pretty much useless if you don't know where to go beforehand."

"What they could do is try to bewitch a broom or put a tag on one of us to see where we're going," Ron added. He was going to say more, but fell silent as Harry gave him a sharp look. It wasn't exactly safe to talk to strangers about the precautions they took against being followed.

"It seems you know a lot about our enemies," Mr. Ollivander said admiringly, even with a tone of awe in his voice. "We're very fortunate to have been saved by the Order of the Phoenix."

"No, we're not from...." Neville started, but was silenced by Hermione stepping on his toes. "Why, they're on our side, aren't they?" he shouted, protesting against such rough treatment.

"Of course they are, but with each word we say, we bring them into more danger," Hermione answered. "Madam Malkin, Mr Ollivander, do you have any contact with one of the resistance groups, or do you know any other safe place where we could take you? After tonight, Voldemort's people will be searching for you."

"Yes, there's a friend's place where I could hide." Apparently lost in her thoughts, Madam Malkin raised her head to look at the young woman again. "I wouldn't want to endanger her, but it seems that I've got no choice."

She swallowed hard. "Fighting groups, secret resistance ... I'm not familiar with people like that. I'm merely a simple tailor and certainly not the right person to fight evil dictators and dark lords. I'm sorry, children."

"Everybody has to decide for themselves...." Harry broke off when he noticed an unfamiliar coolness creeping into his voice; it hadn't been his intention to chide the elderly witch. Nevertheless, if everybody thought as she did, there wouldn't be any resistance at all.

"You shouldn't try to contact your family," he added in a softer tone. "They might use your loved ones to get to you. It's the way Death Eaters work."

"I appreciate your advice." Madam Malkin gave a nod of thanks to Harry. "I only hope they don't take the shop away from my daughter. The poor girl ... how would she support her children?"

"Mr. Potter, I would like to accompany you and your friends," Ollivander proposed. "In such dark times every stout soul must take up the fight against evil. Therefore, I offer my services to the Order of the Phoenix. I might not be very skilled in battle, but I do know a thing or two about wands."

The young witches and wizards looked at each other, unsure what to make of this offer. "Well, we could use some help," Eloise Midgeon considered.

"An adult would only push us around," Dean protested. "So far we've got by without them."

"How about we put it to a vote?" suggested Tara Moon.

Harry, who had remained silent so far, shook his head. "I'm sorry, Mr Ollivander. Your intentions are honourable, I'm sure, but we can't risk taking strangers into our hideout. Too many lives would be at stake, and we have to put the safety of the children first."

"Hey, Harry, I'm sure that your intentions are honourable, too, but it wouldn't hurt to talk things over once in a while before making decisions," Seamus complained, and Stephen added: "What about the children we rescued? They were strangers as well."

"Seamus, we do talk things over." At once, Hermione rushed to Harry's defence. "But we can't stand here and hold long debates; it's too dangerous."

Harry opened his mouth to say something, but Ernie Macmillan beat him to it. "Dumbledore always trusted Harry's judgment, and so should we."

"Thanks, Ernie. Stephen, you're right about the children, but in their case we had no choice. They were children and they had no place to go. And besides, they are from Muggle families with no connection to the wizarding world. Do you think it likely that any of them would be working for Voldemort?"

"And now you have a choice?" Ollivander asked with increasing desperation. "I don't have any place to go either. Would you really leave me to those cutthroats? Do you want this on your conscience?"

"You won't be left behind, Mr Ollivander," Madam Malkin promised, and her voice sounded much more firm than before. "You can accompany me. We're not in an easy situation, the two of us, but I'm sure we can figure something out."

"Thank you, Madam." Ollivander seemed none too pleased, but he made no more efforts to persuade Harry and his friends.

"You can share my broom," Stephen offered. "Just tell us where you want go, and we'll take you there." He looked positively delighted at the prospect of another adventure.

"I'll take Madam Malkin, if it's all right." Ron suggested. "How about we split up? Harry and Hermione come with us while Ernie and Hannah take the rest back home?"

"Sounds good to me," Harry agreed. The third pair of Prefects, Terry Boot and the newly elected Padma Patil, had stayed home to watch over the younger children and the third golden key.

"But shouldn't someone go back to Diagon Alley?" Hannah wanted to know. "What if the Death Eaters try to take more prisoners?"

"No, Harry, we can't risk it," Hermione protested, before he had a chance to answer. "The Blood Legion knows about us now. They're prepared for more attacks, maybe even lying in wait for us. You would lead our people to their deaths. Didn't you just say we have to put the safety of the children first?"

Harry sighed, then gave a tiny nod and turned away from her, facing the two adults. "Before we leave, you should take these. As a precaution...."

With a few steps he walked over to Ron, pulling two wands from the pockets of his friend's robes. He handed the wands to Ollivander and Madam Malkin.

It happened so fast that no one was able to react in time. Ollivander grabbed Stephen, who was standing closest to him, pressing his wand to boy's throat. "Everybody stay calm," he said coldly, "or your friend here will pay the price."

They stared at him, shocked, dumbfounded, unable to believe their eyes. "We saved you!" Hannah was close to tears. "How can you do this?"

"I never asked to be saved, you silly children." His voice no longer sounded cold, but hard and angry. "They took me prisoner, yes, but it was no more than a misunderstanding. I was working on a crucial task, which would've made my fortune, if you fools hadn't meddled with things you don't understand. You ruined everything, do you hear? Everything!"

"Why am I not surprised? You should never trust a man who admires Voldemort."

Harry would never forget the day he had walked into Ollivander's shop to buy his first wand. And he would never forget the words the old man had softly whispered into his ear: "I think we must expect great things from you, Mr Potter ... After all, He Who Must Not Be Named did great things terrible, yes, but great."

Back then, he hadn't understood. All he had felt was a cold shiver down his spine.

Ollivander trembled at the Dark Lord's name, but he stood his ground. "What a clever boy you are, Mr Potter. Word has it you are also brave, courageous and true. So, be a good little hero now and trade places with your friend here. Harry Potter happens to be a far more valuable hostage than some nameless Ravenclaw."

Still holding Stephen at wandpoint, he took a few menacing steps towards Harry. "You're the one they're all trying to find, didn't you know? For some curious reason you're more important to them than McGonagall, the Weasley family and this Black fellow all put together. Turning you over will grant me entry to their inner circle. Perhaps even a seat in the Dark Council...."

"Ambitious plans," Harry replied coldly. "Take it from a good little hero; a pink piggybank may not be the proper tool to achieve them."

Ollivander stared. Instead of the wand he had been holding, a small rubber piggybank wriggled in his hands.

Harry didn't waste any time. He rushed forward, pulling Stephen away from his confused attacker. The others reacted only a few moments later, seizing their wands and pointing them at Ollivander, who automatically took a step backwards.

He raised his hands, smiling anxiously at the field of wands before him. "My dear friends, you didn't really believe that I..."

"Don't play Pettigrew with us," Harry interrupted Ollivander's would-be defence. His face was calm and impassive; only a fiery spark in his serpentine eyes showed his anger. "And now, be kind enough to leave, before I change my mind."

"You want to let him go?" Ron asked, bewilderment in his voice. "After all he did to us?"

"Do you honestly think we have the time and the means to trouble ourselves with people like him? We don't have room for prisoners, and if we wanted to kill every pathetic Voldemort supporter that crawls in our way, we'd better become Death Eaters ourselves. They're the experts on murder after all."

Harry turned to face his best friend. "No, Ron, I'd rather we left that particular way of solving conflicts to our enemies."

"Speaking of Death Eaters," Stephen cut in. "I may be wrong, but weren't some Red Robes looking for this bloke here?"

"Right." A smirk crossing his mock-concerned face, Seamus Finnigan winked at Ollivander. "Maybe he should start to run and hide or whatever it is people do in such situations."

"Who knows, he might even challenge Harry's position as 'the one they're all trying to find'," Eloise added, playfully raising her wand a little higher.

"Scampering like a rat, that one. Disgusting, don't you think?" Lavender coughed as if she could barely restrain herself from getting sick.

And Ron couldn't refrain from sending a little hex after the fleeing Ollivander. Just a little one. When a rat's tail suddenly appeared from below the wizard's robes, everybody broke into liberating laughter.

"You can tell your Dark Lord that we will never surrender. As long as one last breath is flowing through our veins, Harry Potter and the brave rebels of Gryffindor, Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff... oh, do I have to say it all over again?"

* * *

Ernie and Hannah were given the task of taking Madam Malkin to her friend's house while the others returned to the hideout under the lake with Harry and Hermione. As soon as the young witches and wizards had landed, Harry pulled the Head Girl aside. "Wait for me here, we need to go back up. I'll go fetch Ron; I don't want him to think we're keeping secrets from him again. We're going to need his help with this."

Hermione swallowed hard. Did Harry want to talk to Ron about the letters and the ring? Well, he would eventually have to, but why now?

"Harry, wait!" she called, hurrying after him. "I don't think this is such a good idea." More softly, she added: "I know you hate keeping secrets from your best friend, and you have my full support if you really want to come clean on ... uhm ... you-know-what, but believe me, this is not a good time. We know Ron will take it hard anyway, but right now, he might have even more reason to, because of his feelings...."

"No, Hermione, it's not about that." Harry turned to face her and a frown crossed his face. "I wanted to ask you two a favour, that's all. Take the Map and my Invisibility Cloak and sneak into Hogwarts. I will wait for you at Hagrid's place."

"You want us to give Snape a message?" Hermione gave a sigh of relief; she knew at once where this was headed. "You want to make sure the Order is warned about Ollivander. I think it's a good idea, but Snape won't be pleased at all. He'd rather we didn't interfere with Order business."

"We're not. We'll only pass him a note about what happened with Ollivander, that's all. It's his choice what to make of it."

Hermione agreed with him, but she was certain that Snape would have a different view on the matter. What if he alerted the rest of the Order, and what if they tried to put a stop to the rescue missions of New Hogwarts? And besides, sneaking into the castle was a great risk. It would be safer to send an owl ... but no, it wouldn't be. Since the change of power, all owls were required to bear a Dark Mark on their wing, and sending Snape an owl without such a mark would put him at great risk. It could blow his cover as a spy for the Order.

And the only owl within their reach that bore a Dark Mark was the one they couldn't possibly send. What if Snape recognized it? What if the Order found out where Harry got his information from? They would put a stop to it for sure. And who could blame them?

She followed Harry with her eyes, watching his unruly head of hair disappear within the crowd. Oh, how much he had changed. The Harry of old would have run into danger himself; he would never have delegated an important task to others. But this new Harry understood about the principles of leadership. He still hated most of them, but he understood.

"Hermione? Hey, Hermione, is it true, what they're saying? Did Harry really use a fake wand to expose that evil git, Ollivander? Isn't he an incredible wizard? And so clever!"

A group of younger Gryffindors had approached her, Colin and Dennis Creevey among them. They didn't even wait for her to answer their questions, but rambled on and on about Harry's alleged skills and abilities: "It's his scar, isn't it? It burns when evil people come near him. So he knows exactly who's trustworthy and who's not. Our Harry isn't fooled by false smiles and sweet lies."

'If things only were that simple,' Hermione thought to herself.

* * *

"Enter."

"It's me, Father." Tod stepped into Walden Macnair's office. "I'm here to turn in the report on the wand case. We tried every possible spell on it, but we didn't find anything. I'm sorry, but it seems to be just an ordinary box after all."

"Well, I can't honestly say that I'm surprised."

Tod shuffled his feet uncomfortably as if he was expecting a scolding; then he took a deep breath of relief as Macnair continued: "I have spoken with Lord Pettigrew, and as it turns out, Ollivander was telling the truth all along. He was supposed to create this wand according to the instructions and send it to that Skuld person afterwards. Pettigrew believed the wand already gone when he sent us to Diagon Alley tonight and was surprised, if not to say worried, that it fell into our hands. Now we're supposed to keep it safe until we receive a special owl and then send it off immediately."

"But he didn't tell you who that Skuld is and what he's supposed to do with that wand?" Tod asked curiously.

Macnair shrugged. "No, unfortunately not. I managed to throw a few well-placed questions into our conversation, but Pettigrew doesn't seem to know much about the matter himself. His only concern was whether the wand had been damaged, and he was relieved when I told him that it's in fine condition. If you ask me, he was merely following orders."

"Orders by whom?" Tod wondered. "There aren't too many people who can give orders to a Grand Dragon of the Dark Council."

"Right you are, son." Macnair flicked his wand to open the bottom drawer of his desk, stowing away the report without sparing the thick bundle of papers so much as a glance. "And that's exactly the reason why I won't pursue this any further. I'll do what I'm told, and so will you. We have more pressing matters at hand than meddling with things that aren't our concern. The Blood Legion is in enough trouble as it is."

"Trouble?" Tod's mouth fell open. "Why, what did we do wrong?"

"Think, boy. That attack last night; it was already the third one in a row. Pot You-Know-Who is targeting us. Twice now, he and the Order of the Phoenix freed the Mudblood children we captured, and last night they liberated our prisoners from the raid. Do you honestly think that all of this is just coincidence?"

Tod gaped at him, then shook his head in disbelief. "Father, I don't understand why everyone is so worried about that little boy and his miserable lot of would-be rebels. It's not like they're doing any real damage, is it? A Muggle here, a Mudblood there, I mean, what's with all the hassle?"

"The Dark Lord considers him dangerous, and you would do well not to doubt our master's judgment," Macnair scolded. "It's possible that these skirmishes are nothing but a distraction from our enemies' true plans. But that isn't what this is about!"

Without warning he slammed his hand down on the table. "Three attacks and all three of them against the Blood Legion! Do you still not understand why this worries me?"

Tod's eyes were completely blank. "No, Father, I'm sorry."

"Do me a favour, lad, and use your brains for once! Can't you see what happened last night? We conducted the Diagon Alley raid only a short while after we had got the order, but we found absolutely nothing. Instead we were attacked. And those children last month? It wasn't that big a secret that we were taking them, but it's not like we put an ad in the paper either. They *knew* where we were taking those children. And they *knew* about the raid. Do you honestly think that all of it was coincidence? Bad luck?"

"You think..." Slowly, comprehension was beginning to dawn on Tod's face. "You think someone told them? Someone from the Blood Legion. But ... but," he sputtered, "that would be treachery!"

Macnair gave a deep sigh. "Yes, son, that's exactly what I'm talking about."

Tod gaped at him. The very idea that someone among their own people could be a traitor seemed too much to grasp for his son. But after tonight, there could be no other explanation. Someone was passing information to their enemies, and that someone couldn't be an outsider. He knew too much about their plans.

"Do you have any idea who...?" Tod wasn't able to finish his sentence. "Or any proof?" he added after a moment's silence.

"None so far." Macnair lowered his glance, examining his own fingers lying on the table. "And that's what worries me most. A traitor among one's own causes damage enough, but if we can't catch him before others come to the same conclusion, the Blood Legion will be in trouble. We might lose our reputation. If things go bad for us, we might even lose our status as the Master's elite force."

"No, Father, what are you saying?" Tod protested. "We can't lose our status. He needs us. We're far too important for him. I mean, we are his number one. He couldn't just dump us and pick someone else."

"And why couldn't he, Tod? His only true elite force are the Dementors, all human organisations and institutions are exchangeable. We are no more than pawns to his game. He could overthrow his own order if he wanted to and create a new one. It's his game, Tod, and his order. He made it; he can destroy it. The only reason why our world is the way we know is because that's the way that suits him best. He could change it. Any time, any way...."

Macnair broke off. Tod didn't look like he understood any of those things. Probably this was his own fault, not the boy's. He had raised his sons to obey, not to understand.

* * *

"I kept my promise, didn't I, little butterfly? I said I'd be back before you wake up!"

"Hai, Toto-chan."

Tsuzuku...

*

Dark night, nothing to see,

Invisible hand in front of me.

Scared to death there's someone near,

Scared to move but you can't stay here.

You know me, evil eye!

You know me, prepare to die!

You know me, the snakebite kiss!

Devil's grip, the Iron Fist!

*

extra Extra EXTRA!!!!

"Dear readers, viewers, listeners, spectators, audience, we're muchly disappointed in you. Draco Malfoy, headbanging half-naked on a table..."

"Wearing leather pants..."

*"Wearing leather trousers *glares at George* and none of you cries wolf anymore. Where has all the howling and whining about clichés and fanon assumptions gone? We're actually getting owls about such primitive and boring things as: *fanfare* Plot!"*

"Unbelievable!"

"Storyline!"

"You can't be serious!"

"Character development!"

"The world is a madhouse!"

"Yes, yes, we figured that one out three episodes ago. So, our most sincere (and that's no irony:-)) thanks go to shocolate, loonyluna256, Dragenphly, katherine_15, madam_lash, sikodelika, PerdoAnima, vanilla_taste, jamc91, ali, yuuh and all the other charming witches and wizards who sent owls to our studio.

"Look here! Imperfection Is A Bliss from barking-up-the-right-tree-land muses that a big secret is revealed each cycle and that all those secrets lead up to bigger secrets."

"One secret per cyle? It's more like one per episode, muharharharharhar! You'll see!"

Episode Number Five will reveal a secret we've been wondering about since Episode One. A sweet and innocent fair maiden, whose name is not Mary Sue and who has no special powers, is attacked by evil wizards. But what do these strange people waving sticks in her face want with a young shopgirl anyway? Kill her, kidnap her, save her, use her?

A member of the Ghost Rider must face a tough choice. A member of the Blood Legion has already chosen. And someone much more powerful than both of them holds all the threads in his hand. And the scissors which cut them."

"But what happens when someone else takes those scissors away from him and uses them for his own purpose?"

"So, will Hermione, Lavender and Parvati be able to save the day, or are they too busy bickering at each other?"

*

Amicus Draconis - 1st Cycle: Cycle of the Badger - Part 5: Owl SMS

Coming soon to your Favourite Radio Station

*

Draco Dormiens Nunquam Titillandus

* * *

Author's Note: This one's about the Special Forces. But why Special Forces? Wouldn't the Death Eaters be far more powerful if they all fought together in one big group instead of quarrelling with each other in several smaller groups?

Basically, it's the "Divide and Conquer" pattern. Voldemort doesn't have a powerful outside opponent anymore, and his people need something to do. Also, it would be too dangerous for him if all the power was in one place. What if they teamed up against him?

Six different Special Forces will be mentioned in AD (not counting Dementors, Giants etc.) but only two of them play an important role in Cycle of the Badger. The Blood Legion is a well-trained elite force; they are allowed to use special magic such as Apparition or the Unforgivables (you can imagine that in a dictatorship the more powerful magic is limited; it wouldn't be exactly safe for Voldemort to let people Apparate around the country).

At the beginning of the story, the Ghost Riders are little more than 'errand boys', as Macnair puts it so nicely. The plot bunny for them hopped into my mind while my brothers and I were dancing to Iron Fist at a Motörhead concert. The musical scene in the Leaky cauldron was the very first thing I ever wrote for the Ghost Riders; even before I made them a part of my Harry Potter fic.

Also, you might have noticed that the Ghost Riders are a bit of a parody on the Nāzgul from LotR, while the plot bunny for the Blood Legion derived from the Sardukar from Dune.

As some of my German readers were quick to spot, the whole Blood Legion vs. Ghost Riders power struggle bears a certain resemblance to the situation in the Third Reich. Hitler had two Special Forces (SS and SA) that absolutely loathed each other. In the beginning, the SA was the elite force while the SS was basically for anybody who wanted to join, but over time the power between the two shifted.

Which brings us back to the whole "Wizardsing Fascism" and "Muggle Fascism" topic. I believe there are also similarities between the HP Pureblood Philosophy and some of the ideas the Nazis used, so I decided on a few parallels between Hitler's and Voldemort's reign of terror. But if you take a look at history, you'll see that many dictatorships follow similar patterns anyway.

05. Owl SMS – Part A

Chapter 10 of 12

Hermione Granger, 18, witch, Headgirl. Bridget Hanson, 19, muggle, shopgirl. What do these two young women have in common? Not much, but while they struggle with everyday things like mutinous students, nagging customers, gossip and boy troubles they get caught up in something much bigger; a mysterious scheme plotted by a top-ranking death eater. Click. The trap closes.

Disclaimer Addition: None of the Book/Movie/TV show quotes Fred and George use are mine. They all belong to their respective authors. The opening song for Episodes 1-13 is Sonnet No 92 by William Shakespeare and the ending song for Episodes 1-11 +13 is Iron Fist by Motörhead. The ending song for Episode 12 is Sleeping Sun by Nightwish.

Author's Notes: Perhaps some of you have been wondering about the two additional Gryffindors in the story, Eloise Midgeon and Tara Moon. Have you heard about the *Two Unidentified Gryffindor Girls Theory*? Jeralyn from *Harry Potter for Grown-ups* came up with it as she was rereading the scene with Lupin and the Boggart in PoA. While the students tackle the Boggart, it turns into eight different things; eight shapes for eight students minus Harry and Hermione who do not have a go at it. Neville defeats Snape, Parvati gets the mummy, Seamus the banshee, Dean the hand and Ron the spider, which leaves a rat, a rattlesnake and an eyeball for three more students.

We can assume that Lavender is one of those students, which still leaves two unidentified Gryffindors. Since we definitely know that there are only five boys, the missing students have to be girls. Quod erat demonstrandum. *ggg*

Have fun with this chapter and worship Notsosaintly, my brilliant beta, and my wonderful Brit-pickers, Ellie and Lici :-)

* * *

"Previously on Amicus Draconis:"

"Previously on Amicus Draconis, Harry and his friends were trying to save dear old Ollivander; only dear old Ollivander didn't want to be saved and therefore stole Ron's pink piggybank. Harry receives letters that make him stand all poetic in the darkness, Skuld receives a wand, Draco receives an offer, and Lord Grand Greasy Ripper Rattyglue is ogling Lord Grand Chicken McDonald, Lord of the Burger Legion's son's girlfriend who does not crawl out of TVs, although she seems to be Japanese."

*"And there's a traitor. Mean evil nasty little traitor stole our precious." *pouts**

"Fred?"

"Yeah, George?"

"Who the heck is Skuld?"

"No idea. We should go ask Urd."

"Next episode?"

"Next episode."

"Is that a thunderstorm coming up?"

*

*

But do thy worst to steal thyself away,
For term of life thou art assured mine;
And life no longer than thy love will stay,
For it depends upon that love of thine.
Then need I not to fear the worst of wrongs,
When in the least of them my life hath end.
I see a better state to me belongs
Than that which on thy humour doth depend:
Thou canst not vex me with inconstant mind,
Since that my life on thy revolt doth lie.
O what a happy title do I find,
Happy to have thy love, happy to die!
But what's so blessed-fair that fears no blot?
Thou mayst be false, and yet I know it not.

*

*

Amicus Draconis

First Cycle: Cycle of the Badger

Episode 5: Owl SMS Part A

6:45 a.m.

"No way, George, this is definitely not a thunderstorm. It's a cloud, it's a dragon, it's a frigging spaceship with aliens from Mars, but it's not a thunderstorm. We had plenty of those already, and now it's time for the weather to clear up. How are the owls supposed to fly with all the wind and rain? You tell me!"

"Sorry, Fred, looks like those poor owls have to exercise some patience if they don't want to bump headfirst into the butterflies. This is London and not Florida. It's the middle of October, and all incumbent weather-frogs predict rain for today. Get out your warm cloaks and coats, people, and tuck your ears in!"

"And all the beautiful ladies among you should get out your stockings, so you can still wear your short skirts. Hosting radio shows is a very demanding job, so we need inspiration from our angelic muses when we're finally able to scrape together some time to look out the gloomy windows of our dull studio."

"So, and just to make sure that you lot get some inspiration too, we'll play you some music. Here's Robbie Williams' newest single..."

With an automatic, almost robotic movement, Bridget Hanson reached for her radio alarm and successfully turned the accursed thing off right before the song started. Bridget hated early shift, especially after a weekend like she just had. Not even a wake-up call from her two favourite radio hosts could help that. She should never have let Jenny persuade her to change shifts today. Why did she always have to grow soft when her flatmate pressed the "best friend" button?

She stretched herself and rolled over to the other end of the bed to finally get her feet on the floor. The floor was cold and her slippers nowhere to be seen. But what did she expect from a day like this? At least, in spite of any weather-frogs, it wasn't raining. An apprehensive glance out her bedroom window assured her that this day was cloudy, but not wet. Not as yet.

Still rubbing sleep from her eyes, she padded into the bathroom. She would take an umbrella anyway, just in case. The weather could never be trusted, and she didn't want to give it a chance to ruin her hair. It was hard enough to shape those bristle strands into curls. What wouldn't she give for natural curls? Well, maybe not her soul, but a great many other things.

For the umpteenth time in her nineteen-year-old life, she scowled at her reflection in the mirror. The ordinary young woman scowling back at her didn't look much different from many other London girls. Hazel eyes, snub nose, freckles, blonde hair with just a tinge of red. She wasn't special in any way. A slender figure, but a bit too boyish for her taste....

Enough for today, Bridget! No more childish whimsies about your looks.

Well, if she absolutely had to spoil this bright new morning with worry, she could at least worry about the important things in life. Job issues, perhaps. Or rent. Or world peace.

At least, she didn't have to worry about weight. Jenny always whined that she gained an entire pound by doing no more than throwing a greedy look at a muffin, but Jenny didn't have any right to complain about anything. She earned an entire twenty pounds more per month, and Bridget hadn't even asked her to pay a higher amount of rent for that ramshackle hut of a flat. And she even could have had a sleep-in today; she didn't have to be at the store until noon.

Where was that stupid yellow blouse? She had put it *somewhere* last night, she was sure of it.

Racing back to her room, she began a frantic search for the missing object. The cupboard? Somewhere in that mess of clothes hanging over the chair? Somewhere in that other mess of clothes by the drawer? *Why, Bridget? Why do you not manage to keep your room nice and orderly? Is life really so short that you're worried about wasting your time with cleaning up?*

Finally, the first good luck of the day. She had no idea what folly had driven her to throw the blouse on the window sill, but there it was, looking innocent as if butter wouldn't melt in its mouth. If blouses had mouths, of course.

She had just finished getting dressed when something outside the window attracted her attention. It was a huge bird passing by her window, and it looked like...

An owl? No, that couldn't be. What was an owl doing during the day in the middle of a city? No, wait a moment, wasn't there something with owls? She had heard

something about owls somewhere; she was sure of it.

But she had no idea when and how it could have happened....

She was still absorbed in thoughts about owls when a sudden purple flash flickered through the room, followed by a soft beep. She didn't worry too much about the beep it was only the message signal of her mobile phone but that light had been a bit strange. Maybe there was something wrong with the batteries? She should let Jack from the electronics department have a look at it ... So what did the message say anyway?

HELLO HONEY BUNNY YOU SAID YOU HAVE EARLY SHIFT TODAY SO HOW ABOUT I PICK YOU UP AT THE STORE LATER AND WE'LL DO SOMETHING TOGETHER MISS YOU LOVE M

* * *

"Class, repeat after me: *Wingardium Leviosa!*"

"Wingardium Leviosa!"

"No, no, no! It's Le-vi-O-sa, not Leviosar!"

Pacing the classroom like an angry Kneazle, Hermione crossed her arms over her chest. The stern frown on her face turned to an irritated scowl as if she was trying to ensure her authority by glaring. Her class consisted of six- to ten-year-old children, who, until a few weeks ago, hadn't been able to tell a wand from a cooking spoon. In ordinary times, British wizarding children didn't get to study magic until they had reached the age of eleven, but these times were anything but ordinary, and the witches and wizards of New Hogwarts had decided to do away with some of the old traditions.

Yet, instructing children in the proper use of magic turned out to be a more challenging and ambitious task than any of them had bargained for. "Didn't I explain to you about the importance of proper pronunciation?" Hermione wondered for the umpteenth time this week. "If you change the words around or put the emphasis on the wrong syllable, you lose your control over the magic. You have no idea what the spell will do eventually, and the consequences can be severe. By the way, the same goes for..." she stepped closer to one of the tables and snatched a fidgety little boy's wand from his hands "the improper handling of wands."

She set the wand firmly on the table. The little boy, whose swordplay with his neighbour had been so mercilessly interrupted, tried to force his face into an unconvincing expression of guilt. However, as soon as Hermione had turned away from them, the two boys started to giggle and make faces behind her back.

She tried not to notice and continued with her instructions instead. Once this lesson was over, every one of those children was supposed to be able to float their quills without making them explode.

"Don't you think you might be just a bit harsh on those poor little mites?" a nagging voice wanted to know as an exhausted yet determined Hermione strode from the classroom at the end of the lesson. "Yes, I know, discipline is important, but they are so young and so alone and they can't be home with their mothers. Don't you pity them at all?"

Hermione rolled her eyes; this was so typical of Lavender Brown. The girl had made a habit of appearing behind closed doors, but of course it was always 'by coincidence'. "And don't *you* realize, Lavender, that too much pitying and pampering will eventually turn those poor mites into spoiled brats? We're responsible for them now. And we're all that stands between them and the war. I know it's a harsh life, but they need to grow up fast, and they need to be able to defend themselves. Their lives may depend on it."

Hermione turned and marched along the corridor, her steps so forceful that Lavender had to skip to keep pace with her. "Defend themselves?" she asked in a high-pitched voice. "You can't mean that, Hermione. You can't mean to teach them combat spells."

She looked into Hermione's eyes, searching desperately for some sign that this was all a joke. Yes, that girl had made a habit of knowing everything and knowing everything better. She was also known for her overblown sense of duty, order and discipline, her exaggerated drive for perfection and, last but not least, that frosty air of arrogance that seemed to follow her around wherever she went. Yes, that was her majesty the ice queen Hermione Granger, and she had always been that way, except for that brief time during fourth year when she had loosened up a little. But that time was long gone, especially now when her royal highness wanted to turn their secret hideout into a military training camp for children.

"For your information, this is not about combat spells. It's about discipline and respect." Hermione didn't know any of the thoughts Lavender was pondering behind that pretty, vacant face of hers, not that she cared about any of them anyway. "If the children don't respect us and listen to what we say, neither will they do so in case of emergency."

It was probably something about boys and clothes and make-up. What else would a girl like Lavender think about?

"What do you mean by 'in case of emergency'?" Lavender tried to sound cheerful, but she couldn't stop her voice from shaking, and she didn't know whether it was because of anger or fear. It was one thing to let Hermione's endless sermons wash over her, but she really shouldn't let little Miss Know-it-all get to her like that, especially when there was no reason to worry. "The last time I looked, we didn't take the children on any of our missions," she stated. "They stay here, in our hideout. And our hideout is a safe place. It can't be found. Dumbledore said so." She glared at Hermione with her jaw set, as if she dared the other girl to contradict her and question Dumbledore's wisdom.

I bet the Death Eaters are already working on a way to find us Hermione thought, but decided to keep these thoughts to herself. She had discussed them with Harry often enough; it was no use discussing them with someone like Lavender Brown. "I know we can trust in Dumbledore," she replied, "I just want the children to be safe, that's all." Not waiting for an answer, she pushed open the door to her next classroom and vanished behind it.

That's so typical of her. Lavender scowled at the closed door, but then she shrugged and continued on her way. After all, she too, had classes to teach.

* * *

"How may I help you?"

"I just want a look around."

Same questions, same answers. Over and over again. All day long.

Perfume wasn't something people bought because they needed it. They needed soaps and toothpaste and shampoo, but who could really say they needed perfume? The entire perfume business was a game with angst, desire and hidden dreams coming to life on soppy advertisement posters and in unrealistic screen scenarios, most of them involving good-looking, half-naked models prancing around, while the wind simulator blow-dried their hair.

How ridiculous...

Well, it could be funny sometimes, Bridget considered, as she unpacked boxes and arranged their contents on the shelves. Old women in particular were very fond of perfume for young girls. And guys with faces that made you want to drop dead on first sight believed themselves irresistible Casanovas, once they had doused themselves in pheromones.

Too bad, they weren't dogs. Or insects. Then it might actually work.

Why, oh why, couldn't she work in one of the fashion departments? Then she could at least give some good styling advice to people. The right clothes could work miracles even on the drop-dead-faces.

On the other hand, no. Too many potbellies trying to force themselves into tight jeans and mini-skirts.

"Hi, honey, how are you?" Jenny popped up behind her, not even bothering to wait for her reply. "Say, would you mind staying a little bit longer, just an hour or so? It would be so sweet of you. You see, I almost forgot my appointment at the hairdresser's today."

"No chance, sweetie." Bridget smirked at her. "Maybe you should have thought of it a bit earlier, perhaps..." she drew out the sentence on purpose, "...before you changed shift with me?"

"How can you be so mean?" Jenny whined, looking as hurt as if she had taken a blow to her face. "What could be important enough to desert your best friend for? Ah, don't tell me. It's that silly boyfriend of yours again. Come on, you hung out with him all weekend!"

"Oh, well, I think I could hang out with him for much longer than that? The rest of my days, perhaps?" Blushing, Bridget averted her face to suppress a giggle. "I know what you're going to say now."

"I'm going to say you're acting like a teenager in love." Jenny rolled her eyes, but that gesture didn't conceal the trace of envy in her voice.

Bridget gave her a sweet smile. "That would be because *iam* a teenager in love, my dear best friend."

"Are any of you planning to help me anytime soon," an old woman's voice croaked.

"Of course, my dear." Bridget turned towards the customer, the innocent smile never leaving her face. It was probably best to lead her to the young girls' perfumes immediately.

* * *

"So, how's our chief mediwitch doing today? Busy, I hear?"

"Oh, shut up, Lav! Don't let Padma hear you talk like that; she's jealous enough as it is."

"Oh, don't mind her." Lavender winked at Parvati, who had just entered the girls' dormitory, before she turned back to the contents of her schoolbag. It was almost lunch-time, so she should probably head down to their makeshift library and put back the books she didn't need this afternoon. Books were a scarce commodity in their hideout, so you couldn't just leave them lying around.

"Could you leave the *Sporeone*?" Eloise Midgeon reached for the Herbology encyclopaedia. "I need to look up something."

"But you don't teach Herbology, do you?" Tara Moon wondered, her face emerging from behind her planetary charts. She was in the middle of preparing her next Astronomy lesson, which was bound to take place after lunch.

"Well, I don't, but ... well, it's rather embarrassing..."

All three girls listened up, looking at her with eager faces. These little anecdotes of embarrassment were their third favourite form of entertainment, following right after gossip and rumours.

Eloise lowered her eyes and voice. It was an unsuccessful attempt to conceal how much she enjoyed being at the centre of the attention for once, but it had to do. "One of the little girls asked me about the usage of powdered Ginkgo, and I didn't have any idea what she was talking about. I don't remember Professor Sprout saying anything about Ginkgo in class.

"Ohhh." Her audience made shocked faces.

"Wait, it gets even worse. The girl said I shouldn't worry about it; she was going to ask Neville because he's the expert after all. Can you imagine what it felt like? I was standing there like some silly cow that doesn't have a clue, and Neville Longbottom is supposed to be an expert."

"Ohhh!"

"Well, he does know a lot more about Herbology than you do, that's for certain."

Four heads spun round. Hermione stood in the doorway. She didn't give the other girls so much as a second glance; simply put her schoolbag next to her sleeping mat and disappeared through the door again.

"And that's supposed to tell us ... what?" Tara shrugged her shoulders.

"That's so typical," Eloise muttered. "That girl needs her head checked."

"Maybe this is supposed to be a brilliant plan, and we're just too dumb to appreciate it," Tara remarked dryly. "After all, she's the Head Girl, and we're only the common folk."

"Anyhow, she should work on that attitude of hers." Parvati lowered her voice and glanced towards the door, just in case Hermione changed her mind and came back to the dormitory. "It's not that I don't like her, and I really don't mean to talk behind her back, but she's just not like us. She always keeps her distance, and she can be a real snob sometimes."

"She's been like this since first year," Lavender agreed. "She was never interested in our friendship."

"Maybe she would've been a bit nicer if you hadn't made fun of her teeth all the time. And her hair."

"And you shouldn't have drawn those dog pictures on her History of Magic notes!"

"I only did that because she told everyone that I used a self-correcting quill when we wrote that test in third year. Besides it was during the month when we decided not to talk to her, so she should have been glad for a bit of attention."

Lavender didn't answer. As Eloise and Tara launched a passionate debate over the question whether Parvati had really used a self-correcting quill, she let her thoughts travel back to their time at Hogwarts. Had they really been unfair to Hermione? But wasn't it her own fault if she didn't try to fit in? All those taunts about her hair and her teeth hadn't come out of nowhere; Hermione could've been a real beauty if she'd made a bit of an effort with her looks. Different clothes, flashy make-up, perhaps a potion to get her hair straight.

Everything could've been so much easier if she were only a bit more, well, perhaps *normal* was the appropriate word. No wonder that none of the boys had ever taken an interest in her.

Wait, that wasn't entirely true. Back in fourth year, there had been a time when she had loosened up a little; she had even taken a bit of an interest in things like clothes,

music and make-up. Yes, you wouldn't have believed it, back then she had even understood the meaning of the term giggle, and it wasn't because she had read the word in the dictionary.

Back then, Viktor Krum had been in love with her. The star of the Bulgarian National Quidditch Team had fallen for a little wallflower. How had the story ended? Hermione had never spoken about it.

That was another one of those things. Normal girls talked about their love life.

* * *

"Did Flint take another day off? Again? He was away all weekend!"

"You can shut your big mouth right now, Higgs. Captain Flint will arrive right on schedule for second shift."

Adrian Pucey, commander of the Ghost Riders and Marcus Flint's official second-in-command, sat at a table in the Leaky Cauldron trying to work out a patrol schedule for next week. He looked very busy doing so, and he looked especially busy when Terence Higgs turned up to get on his nerves.

Unfortunately Terence didn't take the hint and continued to flood him with information he wasn't particularly keen on. "Hey, SIC, did you hear the news about Malfoy?"

Adrian gave a sigh. "Who did he kill this time?"

"No, it's not about his illegal curses. That fool got the chance of his life, and he just threw it away, just like that. I heard him do it with my own ears. Well, Zabini heard it with his ears, and he told me about it." Terence held his breath to prepare for the death stroke. "Macnair was going to admit Malfoy into the Blood Legion."

"So?" His effort was wasted, because Adrian wasn't impressed in the least. "Don't tell me that this was Malfoy's own achievement. Macnair's friends with his father, so it was bound to happen."

"Still, we're talking about the Blood legion here. The elite force of our Master."

"Who says that? Macnair? He should better watch his mouth," Adrian snarled, his temper rising. He felt angry enough to curse Terence, especially as the boy continued to blabber on: "How could anyone turn down such an opportunity? Does he have flobberworms for brains, or what?"

Adrian jumped up, his legs hitting the table. The scroll with the patrol schedule rolled to the floor, but he didn't bother to pick it up as he leaned forward, glaring at the younger man. "The Blood Legion are nothing but a lot of arrogant slime-buckets, and no Ghost Rider who has the tiniest bit of pride wants to be involved with them any more than necessary. You better not forget that, Higgs!"

Terence shrunk back as Adrian drew his wand, but he only used it to pick up the scroll and pin the finished schedule to the wall. "And besides, if you're so keen on talk and rumour mongering, I can tell *you* a little something a little owl told me. The Blood Legion are being infiltrated as we speak. They have a spy in their midst, a spy who passes information to the Order of the Phoenix. Or why do you think it's always the Blood Legion who gets attacked? None of the other forces have had any trouble so far. We haven't either."

"Well, it's not like we do anything important, is it?" Terence muttered, but he kept his voice down so as not to infuriate his boss any further.

Adrian didn't bother to reply. He stormed out of the Cauldron to get some fresh air before the official shift would start and bring with it more trouble.

* * *

As the artificial sun was setting in the hideout under the lake, a pair of ruby eyes started to glow, casting an eerie light upon a black ring adorned with a dog-shaped head.

Its owner looked up in concern, tucking the ring safely beneath his shirt. "We need to go up to the surface, Hermione. There's a letter waiting for me."

* * *

The cool, fresh air outside the Cauldron felt like the breath of life, and yet it would take some time until his anger had subsided. No, he didn't want to hear about the Blood Legion. No, he didn't want to think about a part of his life that was long over and couldn't be brought back. Leave the past behind. Let bygones be bygones. Turn your thoughts to the future.

Oh, what a feather in his cap. Adrian Pucey, proud member of the Blood Legion. One of the few Hogwarts students to qualify for the Dark Lord's elite soldiers, and, no, he didn't have a family friend to smooth the way for him. His success came from hard work, devoted study and the determination to be successful.

He was going to do it. He was going to show them.

Of course, he knew that dark and difficult times lay ahead of him. The former Dumstrang students would not readily accept a Hogwarts alumnus into their midst. Their education concerning the Dark Arts had been far more superior to his; they considered him an obstacle, a pebble in their shoe. He would have to bear their enmity, just like Bulstrode had to deal with all the hostilities from the Ghost Riders.

But he was certain his luck would change. Bulstrode was left alone after she became part of Malfoy's gang. He, too, had thought that he would eventually be accepted into a group. Someday.

Day after day he tried. He practised his spells, followed his orders, never complained to his superiors, and never ever told on a mate, no matter what they had done to him. He usually knew who was behind a prank, or worse, an attack, but he wanted to prove his loyalty. And if the prank was against someone else, he was glad to join in and take an active part in it. After all, he had to use every method available to prove to them that he was a useful member of their group and a cruel, merciless servant of the Dark Lord.

And then, one day he was put to the ultimate test. A hot day it had been, a June day, a Hogsmeade day. One last visit to the village before the students had to sit their exams. But when those exams came, one girl would be missing among their number. And some other seats would remain empty as well.

It was a day he wouldn't forget for as long as he lived...

Something startled him from his thoughts, and it happened so quickly that he didn't even have time to realize what had interrupted him. A sound? A shadow? The presence of another person? He spun around, drawing his wand, but the entire street was deserted. Straining his eyes, he tried to make out something in the darkness, but his efforts were in vain. There was nothing.

The nothing turned out to be the tip of a wand poking into his back.

"Please don't do anything rash, Mr Pucey," said a cold, drawling voice. "I came here tonight with a lucrative offer, and believe me, we both would feel very sorry if I had to ruin my plans and your bright future simply because you forced me to kill you."

How could this be possible? The wall with the entry to Diagon Alley was only a couple of steps behind him. Had someone Apparated between him and the wall?

He took a deep breath, trying to stall for time. "Let me hear your offer."

"All I ask of you is a very small favour. Should you be willing to accept it and settle the affair without any complications, I might be able to provide you with a new career. A more promising career than chasing Muggles over rooftops."

"Sounds interesting. What do I have to do?"

"Remove an obstacle out of my way. A Muggle."

Adrian drew in a sharp breath. He wasn't surprised that his job description included someone snuffing it, but why would anyone need to be rid of a Muggle? Muggles were like rats; they swarmed all over the place, and you killed them for sport. And yet his client wanted him to target a certain individual of the species. How did you single out a rat from other rats?

No, he wasn't the type to ask questions. Whatever that mystery bloke's problem was, it was none of his business. The only thing to worry about was the pay.

"Fine, I'll do your Muggle. But first let me hear about that career offer of yours."

"We will clarify the details after your job is done. You needn't worry; I have no intention of deceiving you. The Blood Legion was foolish enough not to recognize your potential," the voice gave a soft chuckle as Adrian flinched at the name, "but I do, and I'm always in need of competent people. Give me your hand, Mr Pucey."

Giving his hand would mean letting go of his wand, but it didn't look like he had much of a choice. Since the stranger's wand was still pressed firmly into his back, he didn't dare to turn around, so he quietly switched his own wand to the left hand and stretched his arm backwards, expecting the worst.

Something was put in the palm of his hand. His fingers curled around it, felt the cold metal, felt the shape adorning this most remarkable piece of jewellery. He had known it for a ring the moment he touched it, a crest ring to be exact, but what surprised him was the crest animal. After the brief talk with his client, or should he rather say future employer, he had presumed the animal to be a rat. He did not know which one of the Lord's council members carried the rat as his symbol, but he knew that people were recruited in the name of the rat, people to gather information, or to do certain kinds of jobs. But it was all very fishy, and no one knew too much about it.

Anyhow, the animal on the ring was not a rat at all. It was a cat's head he felt, a cat's head with a pointed snout, long whiskers and small tufts of hair on the tips of his ears.

There could be no doubt that the crest animal was a lynx. And there was only one family in all of wizarding Europe who bore that crest.

"You would be a fine asset to my own security force, Mr Pucey. Assuming you complete your job, of course. Contact me as soon as you have good news for me."

"I won't disappoint you, Grand Dragon. You were right in delegating this task to me."

The ring was taken from his palm, and only a short moment later, Adrian found himself to be alone again. Adrian Pucey, proud member of the Venom Fangs. Well, they weren't exactly the Blood Legion, but it was a lot better to work for a private security force than for a bunch of losers like the Ghost Riders. And besides, as long as the Blood Legion had so much trouble with this traitor thing, he wasn't particularly keen on rejoining them anyway. He would have to wait until they got that bastard.

A leading member of the Dark Lord's council considered him a competent person. Adrian felt his ego swell with pride. It seemed that the tides were finally turning in his favour and that all his hard work had been good for something after all.

Well ... just how was he going to get that Muggle?

As he turned around, he faced nothing but the magic wall leading to Diagon Alley, but something had changed about that wall. Fiery red letters were written upon it, clearly visible in the darkness.

"Bridget Hanson," he started to read. "Moonstone Alley No.42, Apartment 63..."

* * *

"How did it get so late again?"

A second glance on her watch assured Bridget that it really was two o'clock in the morning. Of course, her boyfriend had offered to take her home at this time of night, but she had decided to decline his generous offer. You could guess what it would lead to, and she desperately needed some sleep. Her apartment was just down the road, and she was a big girl, capable of walking a few steps on her own.

Besides, who could do her any harm when the street was empty anyway? All sounds of living beings came from further away, voices behind windows, car engines, music...

Steps...

Steps. Someone was walking. But where? The street was completely deserted, and if someone walked along any of the other streets, they would be too far away to hear. Someone was walking right here, and why couldn't she see them?

No, there wasn't anyone walking. *Don't be silly, Bridget. You're imagining things. It's only the echo of your own steps playing a trick on you.*

She reached into her handbag, grabbing her keys just to be safe. Keys between her fingers, just as Jenny had showed her. It wasn't much, but it could be a helpful weapon against an attacker. But it was still more helpful not get yourself into any dangerous situations. So, she should get home quickly.

Stop your panicking, Bridget. Panic is bad. Very bad.

All the strange newspaper reports she had read came to her mind, and they came all at once. People disappearing without a trace. Others reporting strange lights in the sky, flashes, green skulls, ghosts, phantoms, angels, UFOs. One man claimed to have seen zombies, decayed bodies scampering around with spread arms and glassy eyes. Another talked about dead people suddenly coming back to life. There had been something about a woman in the mortuary, she was sure of it. The woman had been presumed dead by a doctor and put into one of those cubicles, but a few hours later, she had suddenly climbed out of it and demanded to go home.

What a ridiculous bunch of rubbish! Some people really didn't have a life.

Panic is bad, Bridget.

She pressed a hand to her chest, feeling her heart pound beneath it. Soon she would be home, and a warm bed and a cup of hot chocolate would make her forget all those silly thoughts. When she turned around the corner to Moonstone Alley and got the first glimpse of the house where her flat was located, she finally felt a trace of relief. Now all she had to do was climb the stairs and then...

Someone was following her. She couldn't see anything, didn't hear a sound, but something was there, watching her every movement. It was an inexplicable fear coursing through her veins, slowing her down, clamping her, harsh and cruel like a vice. As she tried to break free from its merciless grip, she felt like a hunted animal, unable to make out the predator in the bushes, but knowing it was there. It was there, and it never took its eyes off her.

She accelerated her steps, rushing towards the stairs which led up the side of the large house. Her own flat was on the top floor, and her steps sounded so strange on the metal stairs, so dull, so empty. She was running now, jumping from step to step, the sound of her footsteps merging with all the noises coming from behind the doors and windows. Human voices, a TV, a door banged shut; did people ever go to sleep behind these thin walls?

Somewhere, a baby started to cry...

She raced over the balcony past all the identical-looking doors, stumbling over some toy, almost bumping into the baby pram the Andrews always left outside. She raced on, jumping a flowerpot and accidentally scaring a cat that hissed at her and went on its way. She didn't stop until she had reached her door, turned her key, pushed it open and shut, with herself on the other side.

Utterly exhausted, she leaned against the wall, trying to catch her breath. Her breathing slowed and so did her heartbeat as she pressed a hand to her chest once more. The horrible fear that had gripped her just a moment ago finally subsided and seemed so ridiculous now that she was safely in her own home.

She really shouldn't have read all those silly articles. And what was worse, she shouldn't have believed a word of them *Stop being so naïve, Bridget!*

Well, not that any of it mattered now. She dropped her handbag on the small table by the wardrobe and switched on the light.

And suppressed a scream.

Jenny lay on the floor, limp, unmoving; her glassy eyes staring into nothingness. No blood, no sign of violence, only her flatmate and best friend with an expression on her face as if she had seen something horrifying during those last seconds of her life.

And then that life had ended.

* * *

Something inside her mind urged her to run to Jenny and shake her awake, although another part of her had already registered the unspeakable truth. It couldn't be. It wasn't possible. People didn't just fall down and ... die.

Her second thought was the telephone. She needed to call an ambulance. What if it was all a mistake and they could still save Jenny? She was no doctor, so how could she know if...

The police! She had to call the police.

Her fingers were trembling as she dialled the number; her hands were shaking, and the phone slipped from her grasp, falling to the floor with a loud bang. The display went dark.

No, no, no, no! She picked it up and shook it. She took out the batteries and put them back in. She swore at it. She pleaded with it.

Nothing happened.

Of course they had a landline phone as well; in fact it was only a few meters away from her. She could easily reach it. All she had to do was...

... step over Jenny.

She made one careful step and felt her legs give way beneath her. That thing on the floor couldn't be Jenny. Not with that mask-like face. Not with those eyes.

What if Jenny was a zombie like the ones in the paper? What if she jumped up any moment and tried to grab her?

Shut up, Bridget! Shut the hell up! How dare you think such mean and nasty thoughts about your Jenny? Your best friend is dead. She's dead! Gone forever.

Her eyes were staring at the dead girl; she couldn't move, couldn't speak, couldn't reach for the phone. Something horrible had happened here, something beyond words and reason and sense, something that human logic could find no explanation for. She didn't understand how, but suddenly she realized that not even the police would be able to do anything. They would be as helpless as she was.

Jenny did not move; she did not jump up and didn't make a sound. But something else did. It ripped through the silence, scaring the living daylight out of her, and this time she did scream, although it wasn't much more than a yelp. The vice-like fear had come back with full force, and it had taken her breath away.

Why she had to go, I don't know, she wouldn't say...

It was her mobile ringing.

I said something wrong, now I long for...

Oh my God!

... yesterday...

"Bridget? Bridget, are you there? Come on, talk to me, honey-bunny. I just want to know if you got home safely. Is everything all right?"

"No, it's not all right, it's not!" Sobbing, she sank to the floor, her hand clutching the phone like a drowning man would cling to a life-buoy. When tears broke from her eyes, hot and wet like blood, she finally felt words break from her mouth, crushing the trance that held her in its grasp. "Jenny ... an accident ... it's horrible ... I'm so scared. I'm so scared!"

"What happened? Bridget, for Merlin's sake, tell me. What's going on? Tell me!"

"I don't know," she sobbed. "I really don't. Jenny ... she's on the floor. They killed her. Her eyes, her eyes ... like she has seen a ghost."

His next words were beyond all comprehension; something she had never heard before, something that didn't even sound like words. She could not associate any meaning with them; they were nothing more than an inscrutable horror, a haunting, a child's nightmare. As if they named and summoned something from outside the boundaries of reality.

"Avada Kedavra...."

"What ... what are you talking about?"

"Bridget, you need to listen to me now. That accident that happened to your friend wasn't an accident at all, and you're in great danger. I know it sounds strange, but you need to trust me on this and do as I say. You can't stay there. Come to Kensington Gardens, and we'll meet up by the statue of Peter Pan. I'll explain everything then. You need to hurry!"

"I'll come." Still shaking, Bridget pulled herself up from the floor.

"I love you, honey-bunny. Everything will be all right, I promise."

"I love you, too, Marcus," she whispered as his voice faded. She lowered her eyes, staring at the dark silent phone display.

Before she could do anything else, a hand was placed on her mouth from behind.

* * *

Amicus Draconis - 1st Cycle: Cycle of the Badger - Part 5: Owl SMS

"I wonder, I wonder, do you know what I wonder?"

"You wonder how the game works, right? It's real easy; all you have to do is copy the movements. Ready?"

"Actually, I was wondering if the weather..."

"Here it goes."

"But..."

"Up! Down! Up! Down! Choo! Choo! Choo! Up! Down! Up! Down! Choo! Choo! Choo!"

"What?"

"Right! Hey! Left! Hey! Choo! Choo! Choo! Come on, hurry up already. You'll never get any points until you copy the movements, and you'll never get a boyfriend either."

"This game is stupid."

"You need the right-right-right clothes. Or you'll be left-left-left out! You need fancy make-up-up-up! Always bow down-down-down to your superior! And never smo-choo-choo-choo any Muggles! Or you'll be hey-hey-hey-hated."

"You don't know who're talking too, scum! I'm Captain Headgirl Know-it-all, mighty and invincible. I'm way-hey-hey-hey better than you are, and I'm way-hey-hey-hey too smart for these games. And I don't need a boyfriend either."

"But everyone needs a boyfriend. This is a fanfiction. Everyone needs boyfriends in a fanfiction."

"Well, I don't. I happen to have a wonderful girlfriend. And you better shut up-up-up before the mods start complaining about all your netspeak and your one word sentences."

"Spoilsport. I H8 U4 this."

*"H8 U2 " *sticks tongue out."*

"O RLY?"

"YA RLY!"

"OMG STHU b4 we get b& plz."

Amicus Draconis - 1. Zyklus: Zyklus des Dachses - Teil 5: Eulen SMS

* * *

Author's Note: Sorry about that mean cliff-hanger :-(

I was always very curious about the relationship between Hermione and her fellow Gryffindor ladies. From the little we get to see through Harry's eyes, it's obvious that Lavender and Parvati have trouble getting along with Hermione. In GoF when Harry asks Lavender if she can think of a Yule Ball partner for Ron, she wonders: "What about Hermione Granger?" The way she speaks about Hermione, mentioning her last name shows that even after four years in the same dormitory, the girls still aren't especially close. Lavender and Parvati are best friends, and Hermione is the one left out.

I wanted to explore that conflict a bit further and look at it from different sides. Fanfiction is often quick to point a finger at Lavender and Parvati, holding them responsible for everything. It's true; the two seem flippant and superficial, while Hermione is more earnest and doesn't waste so much time on trivial things. But she can also be stubborn, bossy and arrogant, so the situation is a bit more complicated than simply choosing a culprit and bashing them. As a fanfiction author I feel that I should treat such conflicts with care. That's why I hope the quick POV changes between Hermione and Lavender during the corridor scene make sense to you. It's not my intention to bash the characters; I'm only trying to express the way they think and feel about each other.

I already explained to you about the *Two Unidentified Gryffindor Girls Theory* before this chapter. The theory might be a bit outdated, because we never hear about those girls in books five and six. Anyhow, I liked it very much when I read about it, so I decided to follow it and include two more female Gryffindors in Harry's year. Eloise Midgeon (also spelled Midgen) is mentioned in the books once or twice, and the name Moon is called at the Sorting ceremony in PS, hence Tara Moon. The two characters are another best-friends pair like Lavender and Parvati, and they will play a small part in future chapters.

Talking about future chapters; in the B-part of episode five we'll find out who the mysterious Death Eater is and why he wants to kill Bridget. In the Post Fic Author's Note I'll talk about the crest rings, another mystery that's not solved yet.

Yamato

05. Owl SMS – Part B

Chapter 11 of 12

Bridget, a young Muggle, lost her best friend to a Death Eater attack that was originally intended for her. Now she's thrown headfirst into the wizarding world, having to deal with strange witches waving wands about, nightmares (literal ones), more Death Eaters attacking her and a boyfriend who isn't who he pretends to be. Will he do his best to save

her, or is he the one who wanted her dead in the first place? And if not, who was behind the attack and for what reason? Is there anybody she can trust at all?

Disclaimer Addition: None of the Book/Movie/TV show quotes Fred and George use are mine. They all belong to their respective authors. The opening song for Episodes 1-13 is Sonnet No 92 by William Shakespeare and the ending song for Episodes 1-11 +13 is Iron Fist by Motörhead. The ending song for Episode 12 is Sleeping Sun by Nightwish.

Author's Notes: Welcome to more mysteries, evil schemes, and power play among the Death Eaters. As always, cookies to my amazing artist Ebilein, my breathtaking beta Notsosaintly, and my brilliant Brit-pickers, Ellie and Lici :-)

* * *

Amicus Draconis - 1st Cycle: Cycle of the Badger - Part 5: Owl SMS

"I wonder, I wonder, do you know what I wonder?"

"You wonder how the game works, right? It's real easy; all you have to do is copy the movements. Ready?"

"Actually, I was wondering if the weather..."

"Here it goes."

"But..."

"Up! Down! Up! Down! Choo! Choo! Choo! Up! Down! Up! Down! Choo! Choo! Choo!"

"What?"

"Right! Hey! Left! Hey! Choo! Choo! Choo! Come on, hurry up already. You'll never get any points until you copy the movements, and you'll never get a boyfriend either."

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*"H8 U2." *sticks tongue out**

"O RLY?"

"YA RLY!"

"OMG STHU b4 we get b& plz."

Amicus Draconis - 1. Zyklus: Zyklus des Dachses - Teil 5: Eulen SMS

* * *

"Hey, SIC, take over for me. Something came up ... uh ... special assignment. Can't say more; it's ... uh ... confidential."

Marcus tried his usual dirty grin on Adrian Pucey, only to realize upon seeing the other boy's facial expression that he had failed dismally. Pucey's eyes were narrowed in suspicion, his lips drawn back in a sneer.

"Got a problem?" On the second attempt to appear blasé and nonchalant, he didn't fare much better. Now Pucey stared at him as if he had grown an extra head.

"No, of course, not, *captain*." Marcus gave an internal sigh of relief as Adrian finally abandoned his confused expression and broke into a grin. "See you ... uh ... later. And hurry up, I don't like working overtime."

Was Pucey simply trying to make fun of the situation, or was he really suspecting something? Even if he did, he'd better keep quiet. You didn't ask your superior about his private life.

Marcus made himself a mental note to enforce the discipline of the Ghost Riders. All of the other troops worked much more efficiently and didn't have an authority problem. They didn't question orders or talk back to their superiors. It looked like he really needed to do something about the morale of his people, and he would start with it as soon as he got back.

Hell, he would've started right now if he hadn't been in such a hurry. But Pucey and his big lip would have to wait. For the moment, he had more pressing matters to deal with.

Avada Kedavra. The killing curse. Someone had used the killing curse on Bridget's friend. But who? And why? Had the killer been some random wizard who wanted to have a bit of fun, or was there more behind it? Some sort of plot perhaps?

No, that couldn't be. After all, no one knew about Bridget and him. Was he getting paranoid? Still, even if the killer was just a bloke having fun, he was possibly still around looking for more of it. And another helpless young Muggle girl was fun on a silver plate.

He had to find Bridget as quickly as possible and bring her to a safe place. But where should he take her? Who could he turn to?

Certainly not his people. Should they ever find out the truth about him and Bridget, the consequences would be severe to say the least. The Ghost Riders would lose all respect for him, and eventually he would have to step down from his post. The mere thought of this scenario made him shudder. In their book, nothing could be as

unforgivable as close contact with a Muggle.

But didn't he think the same way about Muggles? Didn't he find them disgusting?

They certainly were. This thing with Bridget, well, it was different. A special case. She was a Muggle, yes, but she was ... Bridget.

Brooding over all these strange and complicated thoughts made his head spin, so he decided to rather stop. Right now he needed to keep a clear head so he could save Bridget. He also needed someone to help him save her, and he finally knew who. After all, there was one person who knew about him and Bridget, and that person had assured him his help not too long ago.

"Well, as long as you know your limits and keep your private life to yourself, there won't be any trouble. I'll make sure of it, eh?"

* * *

"Don't be scared of us. We're not going to hurt you. We're here to help."

Hermione knew that her words wouldn't do much to comfort Bridget. How could mere words help a girl who had lost a friend in such a terrible way? And how could they make her understand what had happened? Could you explain something as complex as the wizarding world in a few simple sentences?

She felt incredibly sorry for this young woman who had been so mercilessly pulled into a war she couldn't understand, let alone fight. In this moment she wished more than anything that there could be a way to heal Bridget's pain and let her go back to her old life. Yet, neither pity nor ignorance would save this girl from the threat looming over her like the sword of Damocles. They needed to tell her the truth, and they needed to find out in what way she was linked to the Death Eaters. Preferably fast.

"Listen, I'm going to let go of you now. Please don't scream or panic or try to attack us. We're not your enemies. We're three girls your age, so please turn around and let me explain what's going on. Nothing bad will happen."

Bridget spun around, and for one endlessly long moment Hermione did fear that the other girl would start to scream and charge at her, but she only stood there silently, her eyes wide open with fear. Hermione did not speak and neither did Lavender or Parvati.

"What do you all want from me?" Bridget finally asked, taking back a step.

"We're going to explain everything, but first we need to sit down somewhere. What we have to tell you will sound very strange, almost like a fairy tale from a storybook. Nevertheless, every word of it is true."

Hermione took a deep breath, realizing how pathetic her words sounded. This was going to be a long night.

* * *

"Don't worry, lad, we'll see what we can do about your little problem, eh?" Macnair's voice sounded cheerful and reassuring; he had lost nothing of his usual jovial demeanour. "You worry too much anyways. The incident with that Muggle was unfortunate, yes, but it can't have been more than an accident. No one would dare to lay a hand on your girlfriend. After all, she's under the protection of one of the most powerful men in the country."

"Listen, son, I'll get back to you as soon as I've dealt with some of my other responsibilities. Don't worry, everything will be fine."

Macnair's voice faded away and so did the green fire inside the Ignisian Cup. Only a few puffs of smoke remained, stinging uncomfortably in Marcus' throat. He turned his face away and used a Freezing charm to cool down the hot metal of the enchanted bowl.

Should he simply wait for Macnair to contact him again? Too bad Ignisian Cups didn't allow travel; otherwise he would have Flooed right into Macnair's office to talk to him in person. But even if it had been possible, he couldn't leave the park. He had to wait for Bridget.

On such a gloomy night, even Peter Pan didn't look like a cheerful little boy anymore. His crooked smile, clearly visible in the darkness, felt like the devious smirk of a sly little demon not to be trusted. Marcus felt a sudden urge to blast the statue away, but he resisted it, knowing that a rash action like that would only get him into more trouble. What if Bridget saw him doing magic?

Well, what *if* Bridget saw him doing magic? They were the ones in charge now, not the Muggles.

What was taking her so long? Why wasn't she coming? She didn't live far from Kensington Gardens, so why wasn't she here by now? Had something else happened? Was she in danger?

He couldn't stand the uncertainty any longer. A Flaming Charm and a handful of Floo Powder brought the green fire back to the Ignisian Cup.

* * *

"This is weird, so weird. All of it."

"Believe me, I know how strange this must sound to you, Bridget. I felt very much the same way when I first heard about magic. It's hard to imagine that there is a second world out there, so different from the one you know."

All four young women sat in Bridget's kitchen, drinking hot tea laced with rum and planning their next step. A careful examination of the entire flat had shown them that there were no traps, assassins or any other dangers lurking nearby. They were safe, at least for the moment.

Hermione had used a spell to levitate Jenny into her room and put her on her bed. There was nothing else they could do for the poor girl. She made a mental note to call the police later on, but the Muggle police wouldn't even be able to understand that there was a crime involved. Victims of the killing curse never showed any signs of external violence.

Once in a while, Bridget would glance nervously at the second door of the kitchen, which led to Jenny's room, as if she hoped or feared her friend would come out any moment. Other than that, she seemed to struggle very hard to follow the explanations of the three young witches.

"This Voldemort person," she wanted to know, "the one who's supposed to be responsible for all this trouble who is he?"

"Unfortunately, we don't know much about him." Hermione stirred her tea, but did not bother to touch it. "Since he came to power with his little dictatorship, he calls himself Imperial Wizard officially, but most of his followers refer to him as the Dark Lord or the Master. Twelve members of his inner circle, the so-called Death Eaters, form the Dark Council, his farce of a government. Four of them..."

"Thanks," Bridget interrupted firmly, "but I still don't understand what all of this has to do with me. I'm not a witch; I can't make things float like you can, and until tonight I didn't even know that any of it existed. Why do they want to attack me?"

"They don't need a reason." Lavender, who had just raised her own cup to drink, put it back on the table, untouched. "They hate Muggles, non-magic people, and they kill and torture them for entertainment."

Bridget gave her a bewildered look. "Are you trying to say it's a form of discrimination? Like some whites discriminate against blacks or others have a problem with

foreigners? They actually think that people only count as real people if they can do magic?"

"Well, discrimination works the same way everywhere." Parvati pushed her cup away with a look of disgust on her face. "In the wizarding world, people think I'm oh-so special because I'm pureblood. And in the Muggle world, I hear things about Indians being lazy and stealing hard-working people's jobs."

"Then you shouldn't ever listen to my dad because he does say rubbish like that." Bridget stirred her untouched tea with a spoon, staring into the dark liquid. "Maybe he would think twice about it if he knew that others despise him for not being able to pull a rabbit out of his hat. Presumed he had such thing as a brain."

"I agree with all of you that discrimination is a horrible thing, but I don't think it's the reason Bridget was attacked," Hermione interrupted in a brave attempt to steer the conversation back to its original topic. "We received your name as that of a potential victim, so whoever attacked you wanted to target you specifically, and they must have had a specific reason for doing so. If we could only find that reason, it would bring us a lot closer to the people who are behind this."

"What do you mean 'received my name'?" Bridget asked in confusion.

"Well, let's put it this way. We have friends and they have friends who have spies among the enemy," Hermione explained. "They give us information about people in danger, and then it's our job to save those people."

"Or, at least, we made it our job," Parvati added. "We can't just watch all this injustice and do nothing, so we took our chance to do some good in this world."

"And those spies," Bridget wondered, "they didn't tell you what was going on? Just my name and that I'm about to be attacked?"

"It's not that simple. Hag ... ouch!" Lavender broke off in mid-sentence as Hermione kicked her under the table. "Our ... er ... informant gets only bits and pieces of information."

The four girls flinched when an unexpected noise blared from the hallway, but it was only the tune of 'Yesterday'. "Don't worry, it's my mobile," Bridget explained hurriedly. "A phone, a telephone. We ... uhm ... non-wizard people use it for communication."

"I know what a mobile is." Hermione raised her eyebrows.

"Excuse me." Bridget slipped off her chair and rushed out into the hallway.

"Was that really necessary?" Lavender grabbed hold of her foot with a pained expression as if Hermione had broken it instead of giving it a small kick.

"Yes, it was." Hermione rose from her chair as well and walked to the door so as not to let Bridget out of her sight. "You were about to reveal Hagrid's name. No one's supposed to know there's a connection between him and us. Can't you imagine the danger he would be in if the Death Eaters ever found out?"

"But you're the one who's been spilling secret information for the last half-hour or so." Lavender gave Hermione an angry scowl. "We're not supposed to talk to Muggles about our world."

"Yes, but in this case things are different. We need to know what's going on, and Bridget needs to know as well. Her life is at stake."

"We *know*, Hermione," Parvati interrupted. "But we could've just grabbed the girl and taken her to a safe place. Remember the Muggles we saved from Hogwarts? We didn't give them any long-winded explanations. Our job is to protect this girl, so maybe now's not the right time for detective games."

"But how are we supposed to protect her if we don't know who was behind the attack and why? There's something wrong here. I just can't seem to grasp what it is...."

Hermione paced the kitchen, glancing briefly into the hallway where Bridget was still talking on the phone. "Maybe, from now on, we should follow a different policy concerning Muggles. I know we're not supposed to talk to them about our world, but the government who created this rule is dead and gone. Our situation is completely different now."

"Back then, they weren't in any danger from wizards. They are now. They have a right to know who's threatening them. Voldemort is the enemy of wizards and Muggles alike."

Lavender and Parvati exchanged nervous looks; this was one of those well-known situations when Hermione Granger thought herself smarter than the rest of the world. Since there was nothing they could reply, except for, 'We always did it that way, why should we change it now?' they decided to remain silent and let Hermione talk herself out of it.

"All right, I'll talk to you in a minute."

Bridget came back into the kitchen, still holding her mobile. "It was my boyfriend. I couldn't really explain things on the phone, so I told him to come over. He'll be here in a minute." She said those words very defiantly as if she was waiting for someone to contradict her.

"Great." Lavender gave a sigh. "Let's explain everything once again to another Muggle."

"Bridget, what's going on?" There was a note of suspicion in Hermione's voice when she addressed the other girl. "What are you not telling us?"

"What do you mean by that?" Bridget narrowed her eyes, scowling at Hermione.

"I'm Muggle-born, so I know what a phone is. And I know how it works. And this phone doesn't work at all because it's turned off. It was turned off when you came back into this room pretending to talk to your boyfriend."

"I was talking to him!" Bridget raised her voice, almost shouting now. "Yes, I know the phone's broken. I don't know why he could still reach me. There's probably some technical explanation for this."

"Explanation, yes, technical, no." Hermione snatched the phone from Bridget's hand, running her wand over it. "The explanation is quite simple: that phone is bewitched."

None of the other girls was able to say a word. A bewitched mobile phone? Who would ever have heard of such a thing?

"Bridget, who else had any access to this phone?"

"Jenny, perhaps, but I'm sure she's ... was no witch. And maybe my boyfriend, but he wouldn't have done anything with it. He doesn't understand technical stuff very well, and that's what makes him so special. All the other blokes are constantly going on about their mobiles and computers and that new music player that just came out, MP3 or whatever it's called, but he's different. He's..."

Hermione gasped, a terrible suspicion flashing through her mind. "Bridget, what's your boyfriend's name?"

Before Bridget could answer her, someone rang the doorbell.

Everyone jumped in their chairs. "I'll accompany Bridget to the door," said Hermione, who was already standing. "You two give us cover."

Lavender and Parvati stayed back in the hallway, their drawn wands directed at the entrance while Hermione carefully approached the door, followed by a trembling Bridget. "Hello," Bridget asked nervously. "Who's there?"

"It's me," a voice called from outside, a voice Hermione was certain she had heard before. "Bridget, open the door, quick!"

"Marcus!" Bridget gave a sigh of relief and was about to release the door chain when Hermione shook her head, pointing backwards. Bridget scowled at her, but nonetheless she took cover behind the wardrobe cabinet as instructed.

As the door opened, three wands were directed at it.

"Hello, Flint," Hermione said coolly. "It's been a while."

* * *

"How many times do I have to say it, I'm not responsible for the attack! Why would I want to attack my own girlfriend?"

"Let's see, maybe because you've grown tired of her. She's no longer fun."

"And she endangers your career. What if your little Death Eater friends found out about her? Maybe they already did."

"Does someone like you really need a reason to kill a Muggle?"

After having disarmed Marcus, they all had returned to the kitchen to question him. The three young witches kept an Argus-eyed watch on him, their wands at the ready, while Bridget sat next to her boyfriend, scared and confused. Her Marcus was supposed to be a wizard? And an evil one at that, a supporter of the inhuman regime she had learned about during this last hour. Could this even be possible?

No, it couldn't be. It had to be a mistake. The Marcus she knew couldn't hurt a fly.

She was on the brink of tears again, but this time she held them back, trying desperately to keep her temper. By no means would she let those strange girls with their weird stories about witches palter with her love for her boyfriend. And neither would she let them hurt said boyfriend.

"Don't worry, we have no intention of hurting him." Hermione hadn't missed Bridget's hostile expression and the suspicion in her eyes. "Well, at least not as long as he behaves himself," she added in a harder tone. After all, she didn't want Flint to become too sure of himself and start getting ideas.

"He didn't do anything," Bridget sobbed. "This is a mistake, a terrible mistake!"

"Well, if it's the murder you're talking about, I believe you," Hermione interrupted. "It's pretty unlikely that Flint is behind it. It seems that the killer mistook your friend Jenny for you, and I should think that Flint knows what his so-called girlfriend looks like. Besides if I remember right, you and he were together when the murder happened."

She leaned over the table, gazing suspiciously into Bridget's eyes. "Would you have covered for him if he hadn't been with you during that time? Would you?"

Bridget didn't answer. She averted her face and finally burst into tears, unable to bite them back any longer. As Marcus moved, the three witches startled and raised their wands higher, but all he did was put an arm around Bridget, pulling her close. He was crying as well, even if he did his best not to show it.

Hermione wasn't impressed in the least. "So, you're not responsible for this murder, but this doesn't change anything about the things you've done, the crimes you've committed! How many Muggles did you torture and kill, how many of them? You didn't get into such an important position by big talk alone, did you? Did you?"

"I'm not important," Marcus sobbed, not daring to meet Hermione's eyes. "They're the big guys. I only follow my orders."

"Oh, how convenient," Hermione said coldly. She turned to Lavender and Parvati, who had begun whispering. "What's wrong?"

The two exchanged a couple of nervous looks until Lavender finally broke the silence: "Hermione, could we have a quick word with you?"

"Yes, of course."

"No, not in here, in private." Lavender beckoned to the door leading into the hallway.

Hermione shook her head. "We can't all leave the room together. At least one of us must stay behind to keep an eye on Flint."

"I'll do that," Parvati promised. "You two go on ahead. Lavender will explain everything."

"Why me?" Lavender mildly protested. "You're much better at explaining things. Oh, well, if I must...." She gave a sigh, rising from her chair.

"What's going on?" Hermione asked as soon as Lavender had closed the wooden-framed kitchen door behind them. "Any new ideas about the murder?"

"Well, we..." The slightly ironical tone in which Hermione had asked that last question clearly indicated that she did not believe Lavender and Parvati capable of coming up with anything important. Lavender swallowed hard and finally tried a more direct approach: "Don't you feel sorry for them at all?"

"What do you mean, 'feel sorry for them'?" Hermione had no idea where this conversation was going, but it was so like Lavender to pull her out from an important interrogation to talk about *feelings*. She hoped they would be able to deal with this quickly and get back to business. Now that Bridget's connection to the Death Eaters was revealed, it was clear that she was in far more danger than they had first assumed.

"I mean that they're in trouble and we should help them. Isn't that our job at New Hogwarts?" Lavender asked defiantly.

"Well, obviously. That's what we're trying to do, isn't it? Or did you and Parvati have something else in mind?"

"Well, we thought ... Couldn't we take Bridget and Flint with us? Inside our hideout they both would be safe."

"I can't believe that you actually want to show our hideout to a Death Eater," Hermione hissed, trying to keep her voice down. "Lavender, have you gone completely mad?"

"No, wait, you're the one who doesn't understand. Just look at them. I mean, just look at them..." Lavender broke off, gazing through the milky glass of the kitchen door where two blurred shapes held each other in a comforting embrace. "What a heartbreaking scene," Hermione remarked dryly, her tone like ice.

Lavender couldn't believe her ears. "How ... how can you be so callous?" she stammered. "Don't you have any heart at all?"

"Oh, no, I'm completely heartless when it comes to people who try to play the tear-jerker card on me. 'I'm not important. I just follow my orders.' What's next, bad childhood and abusive father? If that bloke is looking for someone to pat his shoulder and tell him that everything will be fine, he definitely knocked on the wrong door. I'm not stupid enough to fall for it!"

'Not anymore,' she added silently to herself.

"Of course, I forgot that little Miss Perfect can see through such evil manipulations," Lavender snapped back. She had started shouting now, shocked by the force of her emotions breaking through. "Damn, Hermione, you're so egoistic and self-righteous, with your holier-than-thou attitude, I can't bear it any longer! You hypocrite! We should help those people, and all you do is just stand there and sneer at their suffering. How can you do this? How can you be like that? God, Hermione, I don't understand you, I really don't!"

It seemed to Hermione that the unsaid words of many many years had waited for this particular moment to burst through the surface of the shallow and tentative relationship she had built with Lavender during their time at Hogwarts. Why couldn't they have had this conversation a long time ago? Why now, in the midst of all this trouble? They could never work this out between a kitchen door, a rescue mission, a scared Muggle girl and her crying Death Eater boyfriend...

Lavender's words had struck a chord with her, hurting her in a way she hadn't thought possible. She felt like yelling and screaming and shouting at the other girl, but she forced herself to remain calm. "I'm not a hypocrite," she insisted. "I may seem a bit harsh sometimes because I tend to base my decisions on thought rather than feeling, and that's definitely not the way you do it. Still, this doesn't mean that I would simply deny my help and walk away while others are suffering."

"Then ... then let's help those two," Lavender pleaded.

"Lavender, that boy lied to his girlfriend ever since he met her. He told her stories about love and romance, while in truth he supports a system that despises and kills people like her. What kind of love is that supposed to be? And now that she found him out, did you hear him telling her the truth? Did he even apologize? No, nothing. All he does is cry, play the innocent victim and wait for us to step in like superheroes and make his problems go away." Hermione shot Flint an angry glance.

"Yes, but I'm sure he's sorry for what he's done. Did you ever see Flint cry before?"

"No, and I agree with you that these are honest tears and not simply a show put on to manipulate us. Maybe he's not a bad person, maybe he truly has feelings for Bridget, but it's not enough. I want to hear him say that he's sorry, that he's ready to change, and I want to hear these words from his own mouth. He has to stop being such a coward, for Merlin's sake! No, for Bridget's sake ... oh, whatever." Hermione took a deep breath.

"You expect him to take a stand against Vol ... against Voldemort, don't you? But it's not as easy as it sounds..."

"Nobody said it was going to be easy, but yes, that's what I expect. And Bridget can expect no less from a man who wants to be her partner in life. He has to take responsibility for the crimes he committed, and he has to try to make up for them. He has to be completely honest with her from now on. No more lies, no more blaming others, no more licking Voldemort's boots. We'll be here to catch him, but he's the one who has to make the jump."

"I'm beginning to see your point, Hermione, but I still think that he'll need our help to make that decision. You know, Flint may have been Quidditch captain, but he was never a high-flyer, so he probably needs a bit of a push in the right direction. Why don't we go back inside and you talk to him like you've just talked to me? Explain to him what he needs to do, and I'm sure he'll gladly turn his back on the Death Eaters."

Lavender's voice sounded hopeful, but Hermione did not share her positive view of things. "I'll give it my best try, but I don't think he's strong enough. However, I do hope for Bridget's sake that he'll prove me wrong."

"You know, Hermione, you sometimes have a very negative attitude. I mean, how can you be so sure of this?"

"I can't, but I..." Hermione paused, and Lavender could almost feel her inner struggle as she continued. "It is ... let's just say it's not the first talk of this kind. Some time ago, before Voldemort took power, there was a situation similar to this one. A boy and a girl fell in love, but she was considered beneath him and he wasn't especially good at handling pressure."

She sighed, switching back to her matter-of-fact voice. "Well, to cut a long story short, the whole thing didn't work out."

"That boy's name," Lavender asked cautiously, "was Viktor Krum, wasn't it?"

Hermione opened her mouth, but before she was able to speak, the silence was broken by the ear-splitting crash of a door being blasted out of its frame. On pure instinct, with absolutely no clue what was going on, both girls dropped to the floor, grasping for their wands. Their quick reaction had most likely saved their lives because the very next moment it was raining spells over their heads. One of them flashed by so close, that Hermione could swear it had singed her hair, but there was no way she would raise her head to check. "*Protego!*" she yelled, managing to create a shield over them that warded off the next couple of blows.

"*Expelliarmus!*" Parvati had pushed open the door, returning the attack and buying them a few seconds time to scramble back into the kitchen. "Two, Blood Legion," she gasped, pulling Bridget to the floor. Marcus had already taken cover behind the table.

"Move the furniture and get out of the kitchen!" Hermione ordered. If their attackers truly were from the Blood Legion and if they had seen the interior of the kitchen, no one was safe in here anymore. She urged Bridget and Marcus through the second door into Jenny's room and helped Lavender move the table while Parvati knocked over all the chairs. A couple of seconds later, they too had withdrawn into the next room.

Hermione's assumption had been correct. Just as the young witches rushed towards the window, they could hear the loud cracks of Apparition behind them, followed by angry curses and the splintering of wood. It seemed that at least one of the Death Eaters had found himself in an unpleasant encounter with the rearranged kitchen furniture. Nevertheless, such small troubles wouldn't keep their enemies for long. They had to hurry.

She blasted the window apart, not bothering to open it the conventional way. They had to get away as fast as possible; they wouldn't stand a chance in an open fight with the Blood Legion, and much less so if they had to protect Flint and Bridget as well. As she Accioed their brooms, she remembered with a cold shock that they had left Marcus's wand in the kitchen. How was he supposed to defend himself?

As it seemed, Marcus had other plans. He rushed back to the door, shoving it open with one hand and grabbed Bridget's arm with the other, pulling her with him into the kitchen. "We're here!" he shouted. "I'm Flint, the captain of the Ghost Riders!"

"Lord Macnair sent us," one of the Red Robes answered, nursing a bleeding leg, while his companion lay sprawled on the ground, foraging for his wand. "He informed us that you require assistance."

"I do." Marcus closed the door and held out a hand to pull the other young man up, letting go of Bridget's arm. "We're under attack from the Order of the Phoenix."

* * *

At first, Bridget had been taken completely by surprise, making no attempt to resist her boyfriend's manhandling. Facing these two strangers in her kitchen, however, planted the first doubts about his honesty. "Marcus, who are these people? What's all this supposed to mean?"

"Don't worry, they'll protect us..." Marcus was still digging for words when one of the Red Robes cut him short. "Leave that dumb Muggle now, get your wand and help us!"

"Certainly." Marcus ran to the counter, searching for his wand. Bridget was in no immediate danger now; he would explain everything later when this situation was sorted out. Now they had to get those Order girls and arrest them ... He was sure they put his wand somewhere here ... Ah, there it was.

"You bloody liar!" Bridget yelled at him. "You deceived me all along!"

She turned on her heel and stormed out into the hallway. The Red Robes didn't pay her any attention; a Muggle was completely irrelevant when they had to deal with the alleged Order of the Phoenix. They took position and blasted away the door...

Marcus felt cold sweat trickle down his back. If he abandoned the battle now to go after Bridget, it would be treachery. No one could get him out after that, not even Macnair. Everything would be over...

They would take him to Azkaban. Or worse.

But he couldn't just stand there and let her go. Couldn't lose her. He needed his Bridget.

No, he wouldn't lose her. On the contrary, if he helped to arrest known enemies of the Dark Lord, it would be a great achievement, and he would never need to worry about his private life again.

No, he didn't turn his back on her. The decision to stay would help her as much as it helped him. It was the right choice, wasn't it?

Wasn't it?

The door was blasted apart in a blaze of light. As they looked into the next room, all they could see was a dead girl lying on her bed and three very much alive girls flying out the window on their broomsticks. The spells they sent past them hit nothing but air.

"Call your Nightmare, Flint," one of the Red Robes ordered. "Bring them back, dead or alive."

* * *

"Fly around the house," Hermione shouted against the wind. "We'll grab Bridget and be off; she can't be far yet! If I heard right and she ran out the front door, she must be somewhere on the stairs by now."

"There's no need to save Flint," Lavender muttered. She and Parvati followed closely when suddenly a blurry shape chased past them, almost knocking them off their brooms. Hermione gasped, clawing her fingernails into the sleek wood, and turned her head. At this speed, the thing was impossible to make out, but it was huge and black and shadowy, and definitely not the kind of creature you wanted to meet in the middle of the night. A screech, a terrible hissing sound, and within the blink of an eye it was gone.

Only these eyes didn't look as if they needed to blink. They were like glowing embers in the dark.

* * *

Marcus stumbled over the remains of what had been once an entry door and ran out on the balcony. He reached for the small bone whistle he carried around his neck and gave it a mighty blow. The sound was too high for human ears, but his Nightmare would hear it wherever she was and come to him immediately.

Down the stairs he saw a small slender figure scurry away. *Damn, Bridget, where do you think you're going? I've got everything under control; I'll get us both out of here in a couple of seconds.*

The very next moment his steed came galloping through the skies, her fiery eyes locked on him. Marcus climbed the balustrade to jump into the saddle. He wasn't going to lose any more time.

However, the demonic horse didn't stop to let him mount. She was already carrying a rider. And both rider and steed raced past him to swoop down on Bridget.

* * *

The last thing, Hermione, Lavender and Parvati saw of Bridget as they turned around the corner, was a large shadow and a flowing black robe, snatching her away. Flint was standing on the balustrade of the balcony screaming her name into the darkness.

"Hermione, we need to follow!" Lavender shouted.

It was pointless, completely pointless. Following a Nightmare on a broomstick was like chasing Buckbeak on a tricycle. Flint was the only one who could get her back now.

'But will he even try?' Hermione thought, looking down at the desperate young man. 'Or will he be a good little Death Eater and go for us instead?'

* * *

Marcus looked up and saw Granger and the other two girls on their broomsticks at the very same moment his own Nightmare finally descended from the cloudy night sky. There they were, his enemies from the Order of the Phoenix, ready for battle. But there were still three of them and only one of him. And what about Bridget? That other bloke, that Ghost Rider, had kidnapped her; there was no time for fights with the Order lot right now. He couldn't just leave her to her fate.

But what would the Blood Legion say if they saw him walk away from a fight to chase after a worthless Muggle? It would be treason.

Yes, but they couldn't see it, could they? They were still inside the flat, probably contacting Lord Macnair for new orders. They couldn't see what was happening on the other side of the house, nor did they have any idea that Bridget was in danger. He could fly off and rescue her and later pretend to them that he had been chasing the enemy. They would never know the truth, and he wouldn't need to take any risks.

What would he have done if there had been a risk? Saved Bridget, or followed his orders?

It was a good thing that he didn't have to worry about such stupid questions. When this was over, everything would be different. He would be different. He would stand up to Macnair and demand better protection for Bridget. Perhaps a Fidelius charm on her flat or a secret place to hide her. Also, although this wasn't official, there were ways to mark Muggles so that other wizards could see they belonged to someone and know they weren't allowed to harm them. There were rumours that the members of the Dark Council sometimes used Muggles for their purposes and they needed to make sure that no Muggle-basher accidentally interfered with their business. So why shouldn't he be allowed his own Muggle? It wasn't a big thing to ask, no more than a little favour.

And Macnair owed him. Macnair owed him big time. After all, Macnair's silence about the whole Bridget affair hadn't come cheap.

First, there was information. Anytime, a member of the Dark Council sent the Ghost Riders on an errand, Macnair wanted to know all about it. Marcus doubted that any of the things they did were important, but still, the knowledge gave Macnair a certain insight into the plans and schemes of the other council members. It could prove valuable intelligence in his struggle for power.

Second, there was loyalty. Officially, Marcus owed the same obedience and loyalty to all council members, but it was always Macnair's business that came first. Sometimes it seemed that Macnair commanded not only the Blood Legion but the Ghost Riders as well. Not that Marcus cared; having a powerful protector usually paid off. Macnair had kept his word, hadn't he? He had sent men to help him.

Marcus forced his thoughts back to his present situation. He had to get Bridget back, and everything else could wait.

* * *

I won't fail this time!

Adrian Pucey's second plan was simple, direct, and fail-safe. He would rise high up into the sky and then push the Muggle off his horse.

He had followed Flint back to the flat and taken position on the roof, soon realizing that his curse had hit the wrong girl and that the right one was still inside. Now all he had to do was wait for an opportunity to strike. Whatever Flint, the Blood Legion and the Order of the Phoenix were doing there was none of his concern. He wasn't going to get involved in anything, least of all in any battles. He was going to do his job and collect his reward. Nothing more, nothing less.

His job was done. With a satisfied grin, he let go of the screaming girl and watched her tumble through the clouds. As she disappeared into the foggy night air, he leaned back with the satisfaction of a job well done.

"Why, what's going on with you, Pucey?" a drawling voice asked with mild curiosity, and a second rider emerged from below, pulling the still screaming Muggle girl nonchalantly behind him. "Muggle-bashing, all on your own? How bored can you be?"

"Get lost, Malfoy!" Adrian snarled. "This is my Muggle, so if you want to play, go get your own."

"Now she's mine." Draco smirked mischievously. "If you want her back, come and get her!"

Playfully, he circled Adrian and closed in on him only to make his steed leap away the very next moment. He probably did think that Adrian wanted to kill some time with Muggle-bashing; it was a popular sport among the Ghost Riders. Still, you could never know with Malfoy. Maybe he knew about the job and was trying to butt in. Jealousy, perhaps?

It was strange anyway; why hadn't Malfoy received the job instead of him?

Now what should he do about the whole situation? Tell Malfoy the truth? No, that would be a foolish thing to do. Pull rank on him and order him to surrender the Muggle? No, that would only raise his suspicions. It was best to play along for now. There would be plenty opportunities to kill the girl later. These little games usually proved fatal for Muggles.

And Malfoy enjoyed killing very much. Wouldn't it be a twist of fate if Malfoy did the job for him, and he, Adrian, received the reward?

He loosened the reigns and galloped through the skies towards Draco, pretending to aim for a head-on collision. Instead of showing fear, his opponent only laughed at him, holding up the girl as if he were a matador and she the red cloth. "Toro, Toro!" he shouted. As Adrian approached, Draco put spurs to his horse and pulled the reigns at the same time, which caused her to rear up, her sharp hooves only inches away from Adrian's head. Adrian steered his Nightmare a bit lower to avoid getting hit.

He stopped a moment later, spun around on the spot, frantically looking for Malfoy, but he was nowhere to be seen. It was as if he had vanished into thin air. Only seconds later Adrian heard a yell and felt something touch his head.

He looked up and startled in his seat. It was a hand, the girl's hand to be exact. Malfoy and his steed were hovering above Adrian, and Draco held the once again screaming Muggle girl by her ankles, letting her dangle above Adrian's head. With an angry snarl Adrian tried to grab her, but Malfoy had already pulled her back up on his horse.

Adrian's patience was wearing thin. He would finish the girl, and there was no need to physically touch her for this. What did he have a wand for? All he required was an opportunity to cast a killing curse on her without hitting Malfoy. It was a bit risky, yes, performing an illegal curse in front of a witness, but then, who was Malfoy to tell on him? That bloke had AKed more Muggles than he had fingers on his hands and toes on his feet.

For the moment, casting a spell was too difficult because the girl was in the saddle with Draco and they moved very fast. He had to change that, perhaps trip him up a bit, make him lose his cool. Why shouldn't Malfoy be the one to get angry? After all, it was the Blood Legion who taught its members about psychological warfare, and Adrian had just the thing to strike Draco where it hurt.

"So, you're worried about losing another girl to me, aren't you?" He circled Draco with a half-hearted attempt to reach for the Muggle. "Losing the first one must have been tough. I remember it well, it was a June weekend in Hogsmeade, and a hot day it was. I believe it was right before your year's NEWT exams...."

He watched Draco's face intently as he spoke, but couldn't see any reaction on it. The smirk was still in place, although it seemed a bit frozen. "Pucey, you dunderhead, what are you talking about? When my NEWTs came up, I was a good boy for once and spent my weekends studying. I never went to Hogsmeade that June; ergo, I don't have the faintest idea what you're trying to imply."

"I know you weren't there." Adrian made no attempt to hide the malice in his voice. "You weren't there when she needed you the most. Say, did I ever tell you that it was your name she screamed when the Dementors ripped out her soul? But you weren't there to hear her cries, and you couldn't do a thing to save her."

"It's good that I don't have a saving people thing, then." His opponent's voice still didn't betray any emotion, and Adrian couldn't see his face anymore because Draco kept moving. Draco's Nightmare made a huge leap over Adrian's, and he had to turn around to continue the conversation. "How does it feel, Draco?"

"How does what feel? I still have no idea what you're talking about. If you want me to get angry at you or have a crying fit, it would really help if you gave me some clues. That girl's name, perhaps?"

"Wait a minute!" Adrian pretended to be thinking hard, although he had no idea about the name. He only wanted to give Malfoy the impression that he wasn't paying attention to him at the moment. Perhaps it would lure him into a false sense of security and make him stop all that jumping around.

"Don't worry about it. Do you think I keep a list of names from all the people I knocked off?" Draco was closing in on him, the Muggle girl, still before him in the saddle, a perfect target. Not close enough to grab her, but close enough for a spell.

It was time. This might be his one chance, and he wouldn't miss it.

"Some people simply aren't worth being remembered. *Accio badge!*"

Adrian felt his rank insignia being pulled off his cloak and suppressed the urge to forget all about the Muggle and curse Malfoy instead. Yes, he would make him pay. Malfoy would pay dearly for his insolence, but the job came first, and this was his chance to strike. "*Avada* "

A glint of triumph in Draco's cold eyes warned him that something was wrong, very wrong.

He would never know what it was...

"*Petrificus Totalus!*"

It wasn't Draco who had cast the full Body-Bind on Adrian Pucey. It was a third rider who had suddenly appeared behind Adrian. Marcus Flint had never been a fast thinker, but seeing a wand pointed at his girlfriend and hearing the first few syllables of a killing curse was enough to make him react.

Unable to stay in the saddle, reins slipping from his stiff fingers, Adrian fell over. He tumbled through the clouds and vanished into the foggy night air.

A moment later, an ear-splitting bang could be heard, much like the sound of bursting stone.

* * *

He was in trouble. Oh, Merlin, he was in such trouble. He had killed, he had murdered one of his comrades, and he had done so for no apparent reason. A Muggle girl wasn't a reason. This was treachery. They would kill him or worse. He had to run, run fast, run far and never come back. No, he couldn't run; Malfoy still had Bridget.

Bridget ... I have to save Bridget...

Oh, Merlin, what should he do? Fight Malfoy? No, he couldn't kill him as well. That would make everything much worse. Try and bribe him into letting her go? But what did

he have to offer? He wasn't rich or powerful like the Malfoys. He was just a normal guy.

Oh, Merlin, what should he do? He was in so much trouble.

"I owe you my life, Marcus. That was bloody close!"

What if he just stunned Malfoy and grabbed Bridget before....

"What?"

"My life. You saved my life, Marcus. That nutter was about to kill me, and you arrived just in time to save me. One second later and I would've been the one lying down there. I'm still recovering from the shock." Draco ran a hand through his windswept hair as if he was trying to put it back into place.

Then he lowered his glance to check his fingernails.

That changed everything. All the images of danger, fighting and running away in Marcus' head burst like soap bubbles. He didn't care whether Malfoy truly believed that his life had been saved or whether he was simply putting up an act. All that mattered was that Malfoy wasn't going to turn him in. He was safe. Pucey had tried to murder Draco, and he, Flint, had killed Pucey in self-defence. It was a perfect official version of Pucey's death, and there was a witness to confirm it. And if they were going to investigate the last spell of Pucey's wand was an attempted killing curse. It all fell into place. Nicely.

"Marcus, you're a bastard!" That was Bridget's voice, grief-stricken and hoarse with sobs. In his relief Marcus had forgotten all about her.

"You know the Muggle?" Draco raised his eyebrows in mild surprise. "Could it be that the curse was meant for her? I remember Pucey saying something about giving you some wand, so maybe he wanted to kill her to take revenge on you. Anyway, he was a difficult person, more trouble than he was worth. No wonder they kicked him out of the Blood Legion."

Draco steered his Nightmare beside Flint's and lifted a sobbing Bridget over. "Here we go. If I had known that she's yours, I would have been more careful with her, but she's not damaged. I suppose we'd better not mention her when we report Pucey's death. It would only make the whole thing seem fishy. We'll just stick by the old version that he tried to kill me and you accidentally killed him in self-defence. Oh, and Pucey dropped this."

He held out his hand and showed Flint a small silver badge. Marcus knew it well; it was the rank insignia Pucey had worn on his cloak.

Marcus nodded slowly; he had been expecting something like this. Help was never for free, and he had already been wondering about the cost of Malfoy's. Well, he needed a new second-in-command anyway, and Draco was the obvious choice.

"Draco Malfoy." Marcus took the badge from Draco's hand and, with a flick of his wand, stuck it to his newly appointed officer's cloak. "I hereby promote you to commander of the Ghost Riders. May you prove yourself worthy for the honour bestowed upon you."

* * *

"Did we fail Bridget, Lavender? What if the Death Eaters killed her just because we were too stupid to help her?"

"We did everything we could, Parvati. We tried so hard to save her." Lavender's voice sounded small and choky. "I don't think they got her. I wish we knew, though. Not knowing, that's the hardest part of it."

"Coming home from a mission used to feel so good, like we made a difference and all. But I don't have that feeling now."

"We won't be successful all the time, you know that, Parvati. We won't be able to save everyone. Remember what Harry said? We're not heroes, we're just ... people."

After a desperate and completely fruitless search for Bridget, the three Gryffindor girls had flown back to their hideout to inform the others about the battle and what they felt was a failed mission. Lavender and Parvati had finally returned to the girls' dormitory to catch some sleep while Hermione was still with Harry, talking strategy and forging new plans.

Lavender was so exhausted that her eyes hurt and she could barely walk a straight line. She dropped down on her tatami mat and waited for sleep, but sleep wouldn't come. As she listened into the silent darkness, she could hear Parvati rolling around as restlessly as she was. Finally, despite Tara's and Eloise's protests, they had lit some wands and candles and started talking. About Bridget. About Marcus. About failed missions, failed battles and failed love.

"I think Hermione was right about us being too naïve." Lost in her thoughts, Lavender gazed at a tiny spark emanating from the tip of her wand and slowly floating upwards. "If Marcus had truly loved Bridget he would've stopped supporting the Death Eaters."

"Hermione's always right," Tara mumbled into her pillow. "And that's exactly what makes her such an insufferable know-it-all."

Normally, Lavender would have gladly latched onto the change of subject and joined in in another light-hearted Hermione slugging-session, but somehow it felt childish to do so. She couldn't go back to every-day school-girl life as if nothing had happened tonight. Why did Bridget's fate have such an impact on her? Was it because she was a young woman her own age? Or was it because in those few fleeting hours they had had a much closer look at Bridget's life than the lives of all the other Muggles they saved before?

Or was it because, for once, the story didn't have a happy ending with the damsel-in-distress happily snogging her prince and the heroes riding off into the blazing sunset?

We're not heroes. We're just ordinary people.

The spark had reached the ceiling now and slowly died down.

"We should talk to her once she's back."

"Talk to who?"

"Hermione?"

"Why?"

"Is there a problem?"

Lavender got up, looking at all the confused faces around her. "Yes. Of course, there's a problem. There's been a problem for about seven years now, and that problem is that we don't talk to each other. Hermione does things her way and we do them our way. We don't want her in our lives and she doesn't let us in hers. We've been living in totally different worlds all these years, not even bothering to take a peek over the walls.

"Yes, but we've learned not to constantly fight with her anymore, haven't we?" Eloise pointed out, and Parvati added, "She isn't going to change, no matter what we say or do."

"No, I don't want to change her, that's not what I meant. I just want to understand her. I want to know how she's ticking, get all those unsaid things out in the open. Do you know what I mean? I mean, look at us! Talking about injustice and discrimination all day long, and in the night we fly out fighting for a better world and all that. But if

someone's just a little bit different, we can't cope with it, and instead of talking things over, we slag her off. You see, we pretend to be heroes, but we can't even deal with our own differences. How pathetic is that?"

And besides, I'm dying to hear that Viktor Krum story, Lavender added silently to herself.

"Wow, what a speech, Lavender." Parvati giggled. "Harry couldn't have put this better himself."

* * *

"Bloody women!"

Marcus hurled his empty beer bottle away and watched it shatter to pieces on the road. The two young men sat on the roof of the Leaky Cauldron while down below them some metal band bawled about death and destruction. The Cauldron itself was almost empty; second shift was over, and the first sliver of dawn was beginning to creep over the ghastly silhouettes of houses in the east.

The birds had already started their morning noise, but you couldn't really count their whistling and screeching as singing.

"It's over, she told me. Dumped me, just like that. Never wants to see me again." Marcus was struggling with his tears and the stubborn cap of the next beer bottle. "I promised her I would take care of her. No wizard would ever lay a hand on her again; I would've made sure of that. I'm not just anybody, you know?"

Although his head was already floating on clouds of alcohol, the memory of his last conversation with Bridget was cold and clear, cutting like ice through his dizzy mind. Nothing had gone as expected. He had saved her life. He had risked his neck for her. And was she at least a tiny bit grateful for all that? No, not at all!

"You're asking too much of me," she had said. "You want me to forgive you your lies? I could do that. You want me to forgive you the crimes you committed against other people like me? Maybe even that. But to think you could just go on as if nothing happened, that's definitely the pits!"

"Well, what did you expect?" he had shouted back at her. "It's not me, it's just the world we're living in. I can't do anything about it. Do you want me to throw away my life and die for you? For a bunch of crazy ideas that don't work in this world anyway? Do you want us to be fugitives when we could live safely and happily? You have no idea what you're getting yourself into! They'd kill us both!"

"I can tell you what I expect from the man I want to share my life with." Her voice was firm and clear despite the tears still running down her cheeks. "I expect that he doesn't support a system which considers people like me less than dirt. How can you say you love me and kill others like me?"

He couldn't answer her question, and there was no point in even trying. What answer could there be to a question as old as humanity itself, and who was he to find it?

Instead he begged her not to leave him. Promised that nothing would happen to her ever again. A powerful protector would guarantee her safety.

Not that he truly believed in his own words; after all, Macnair hadn't been able to help him. But it didn't matter; he would've said anything just to make her stay.

She didn't. "Just be careful that your powerful protector doesn't backstab you one day. Or perhaps your new second-in-command when he doesn't want to be second anymore. That's how things work in your world, isn't it? Well, I'm not going to be a part of it. Adieu, Marcus!"

And then she had turned around and walked away. "I could kill you," he had yelled after her. "I could kill you right now and no one would stop me!" But she hadn't stopped walking, and she hadn't turned around either.

And he certainly hadn't done anything to her.

He lost patience with the cap, smashed the bottle's neck instead and wanted to gulp down the beer. Draco took the broken bottle away from him before he could cut himself and gave him another one, already open. It was good that they had taken the entire crate, Marcus considered as he took a deep swallow.

He was too much engulfed in his own worries to notice that Draco, too, was lost in thought. These thoughts, however, had little to do with his captain's present situation and love life. They dwelled on a dinner at Malfoy Manor, which had taken place a few nights ago. The Malfoys had been visited by their old friends, the Macnairs. Father and Walden Macnair had exchanged Death Eater stories from the good old times while Alice Macnair complained to Mother about her eldest son's girlfriend: "I don't trust that little jezebel with her slit eyes and her fake smile. Mark my words, Narcissa, she is going to break my poor Tod's heart."

Draco couldn't fail to notice that politics weren't an issue during the dinner conversation. It seemed that both his parents and the Macnairs carefully avoided the subject. He was curious to find out whether his father and Macnair had certain disagreements, but his curiosity wasn't satisfied until the Macnairs had left and his parents had returned to the drawing room, believing themselves alone.

"What an ungrateful little snout your so-called friend has turned into!" Narcissa could barely hide her contempt. "Has he already forgotten that it was your influence that brought him to power? Where would he be today if you hadn't pointed him out to our master?"

"Don't be too harsh on him, Narcissa," Lucius answered with a benevolent smile. "He's going through hard times at the moment. Things are not going too well with the Blood Legion. All these rebel attacks - dreadful, dreadful."

"Did you know that he's found a new way to snoop around the rest of the Council? Alice let slip something earlier; after all these years the woman still hasn't learned how to keep a secret." Narcissa sneered, an expression all Malfoys could do in their sleep.

"Yes, dear, I'm aware of it." Father leaned back comfortably in his armchair. Like the lynx, the crest animal of his family, he could be an image of utter relaxation on the outside and yet never slack in his vigilance. "I already managed to find out about his new source of information. He's blackmailing Flint, the captain of the Ghost Riders."

"Blackmailing Flint?" Narcissa raised her eyebrows. "Shouldn't you do something about it, then? Walden already has the Blood Legion under his thumb; he doesn't need the Ghost Riders as well."

"No need to worry," Lucius replied calmly. "The necessary counter measures are already in preparation."

Narcissa stood by the window, looking out into the rambling park of the manor. "Who would've thought," she said, more to herself than to anybody else, "that Marcus Flint of all people has a skeleton in the closet?"

"Well, she's not a skeleton yet," Lucius' fingers stroked the stem of his wine glass, "but she will be. She will be."

Father's counter measures had worked perfectly well, except for one slight change of plan. However, the only one who had any reason to complain lay scattered all over London. *Bad luck, Adrian. Rest in pieces.*

Pansy, wherever you are, I hope you were watching.

Draco raised his bottle. "To power! A much more consistent force than love and much more reliable, too."

Marcus shook his head in disbelief. "Power ... it's always about power! And what's all this power good for if you can't be with the one you love?"

"You're drunk, Marcus. That question is pathetic and unworthy of a Slytherin."

Shrugging, Marcus turned his eyes back to the road, staring without focus. Preoccupied with his own thoughts, he missed the glint of triumph in Draco's eyes and the way his fingers stroked the new badge at his shoulder.

"It's simply a question of how much power you have to gain."

Tsuzuku... (to be continued)

*

Dark night, nothing to see,

Invisible hand in front of me.

Scared to death there's someone near,

Scared to move but you can't stay here.

You know me, evil eye!

You know me, prepare to die!

You know me, the snakebite kiss!

Devil's grip, the Iron Fist!

*

extra Extra EXTRA!!!!

"Ah, Fred, there's romance in the air."

"No, there's not."

"Yes, there is. Just look at all these letters: People keep firing questions about possible Harry/Ginny, Harry/Ron, Harry/Draco, Harry/Cho, Harry/Lisa, Harry/Hermione, and Harry/Millicent Bulstrode pairings."

"Except for *ali* from my-son-is-obsessed-with-pokémon country. *ali* thinks that Harry has other things on his mind than romance. He is trying so hard to be a leader (Harry, not *ali*) and he is busy being ambiguous with Snape."

"No, *he's* not."

"Spoilsport!"

"Kaelin-Hikaru from I-use-a lot-of-...s country is worried about horrible fandom names. Oh, we do so love horrible fandom names. Sevvie and Hermy and Drakey-Poo..."

"Freddy, Georgie, Nevvy, Marcy Flinty, Ollie Woody, Auntie Voldie ..."

"Uh Fred?"

"Yeah, George?"

"We do use Auntie Voldie."

"Oh, uhm ... how about we forget everything I just said and tell our dear audience something about Episode Six! It's a double episode, so brace yourselves."

It's October and Hallowe'en is coming up. Auntie Voldie has very special plans for this night, and all of these plans have to do with finding Golden Boy's hideout. Three witches will gather at midnight in the moor for a secret ritual that, if successful, breeches even Dumby's most powerful protection magic. So, will Urdy, Skuldy, and Verdandy triumph or can Harrie, Hermy, Ronnie and Nevvy save the day?

"Uhm, Fred?"

"Yeah, George?"

"That's about enough silly nicknames for one summary."

"So, stay tuned for:"

*

Amicus Draconis - 1st Cycle: Cycle of the Badger - Episode 6: Blood Oracle - Part I

Amicus Draconis - 1st Cycle: Cycle of the Badger - Episode 7: Blood Oracle - Part II Priori Incantatem

*

Draco Dormiens Nunquam Titillandus

* * *

Author's Note: About the Crest Rings

Looking back on this chapter, I couldn't resist the temptation to add a few sentences here and there, for example at the Lucius/Narcissa scene. It's such a classic image to picture Lucius loling in an armchair (with style, of course), playing with a wineglass and plotting someone's death. It's almost as decadent as Draco dancing half-naked on the bar. *smirks*

I'm curious; did any of you guess that Lucius was the one pulling the threads behind the assassination attempt? Some of my German readers recognized him right away when he still played mystery man. In case you're wondering, yes, we'll get to see more of him in future chapters. As for Bridget, you might have guessed that she's a one-chapter protagonist, like Ophelia or Lisa Turpin. She might make another appearance later in the story, but the focus lies on other characters.

Anyhow, I wanted to talk a bit about the crest rings. As you already know, each member of the Dark Council carries a ring with a certain crest animal. In Episode 5 Adrian recognizes Lucius because of his ring while in Episode 4 Pettigrew uses his to give Ollivander the order to have a mysterious wand made (and we will find out about this wand, don't worry :-)).

Usually, the eldest son and heir has another ring just like it, so in most cases there are two or three rings to each family. These rings are usually made of silver, with different gems as the animal's eyes. The rings do have magical powers, but before you ask, no, Voldemort is not using them to control his subjects and neither is he the keeper of The One Ring. *g*

My first idea was to use the twelve animals of the Chinese zodiac as crest animals, but I finally decided against it. It wouldn't make any sense for all the British wizarding families to choose their crest animals according to a certain system. And besides, the members of the Dark Council will change during the course of the story.

So I tried to fit the animals to the characters rather than basing them on a system. Pettigrew got the rat, that one was obvious. The Malfoys got the lynx because he's a symbol for beauty, solitude and above all for cleverness and slyness. In German we have the idiom "to lynx something from someone" (jemandem etwas abluchsen), which means that you trick another person into giving something to you. Remember that story from the Bible about Jacob persuading his brother Esau to sell him his firstborn's right for a bowl of lentil seeds? That's exactly what lynxing means. And from what we know about Lucius, he does seem the type to manipulate every situation to his advantage.

As for the other crest animals, I can't tell you anything about them now because we haven't encountered them in the story yet. Some are mentioned only in passing, but others will play a vital role to the plot, so I don't want to give anything away.

Yamato

06. Blood Oracle: Part I – Part A

Chapter 12 of 12

The next few chapters will take us on a journey into the past: All their lives, the three daughters of the LeStrange family have been dedicated followers of their master, the Dark Lord. The day he falls from power, however, only two remain faithful while the third chooses her own destiny. However, this is not her story. This is the story of one who never wavered in her faith, ready to face Azkaban, ready to risk her life, and ready to take part in the torture of an innocent little child.

Disclaimer Addition: None of the Book/Movie/TV show quotes Fred and George use are mine. They all belong to their respective authors. The opening song for Episodes 1-13 is Sonnet No 92 by William Shakespeare and the ending song for Episodes 1-11 +13 is Iron Fist by Motörhead. The ending song for Episode 12 is Sleeping Sun by Nightwish.

Summary: The next few chapters will take us on a journey into the past: All their lives, the three daughters of the LeStrange family have been dedicated followers of their master, the Dark Lord. The day he falls from power, however, only two remain faithful while the third chooses her own destiny. However, this is not her story. This is the story of one who never wavered in her faith, ready to face Azkaban, ready to risk her life, and ready to take part in the torture of an innocent little child.

Author's Notes: In this chapter we'll get some answers at last. Who is this mysterious person named Skuld? What happened to the secret wand Ollivander created? Will the Seers finally discover Harry Potter's hideout? And how does a certain Hallowe'en night fit into all of this? Be prepared for a few flashbacks, a bit of family history, and many unsolved mysteries arising from the past.

Cheers for Ebilein, the amazing artist, Notsosaintly, the breathtaking beta, and Lici, the brilliant Brit-picker :-)

"Previously on AD:"

"Previously on AD, we saw nasty, evil, vicious, malicious Lord Luscious..."

"The one who likes watching Notting Hill."

*"That's him? *imitates Draco voice* Do you think I keep a list of names from all the people I knocked off?"*

"Dream on, Fred!"

Previously on AD, we saw nasty, evil, vicious, malicious Lord Luscious wearing leather trousers ... uhm, I meant we saw him plotting a nasty evil scheme to kill Marcus Flint's Muggle girlfriend. Didn't work out, however because ferret-boy saved the girlfriend to impress her boyfriend and get himself a promotion.

"Poor heartbroken Captain Flintstone needs a drink."

"Poor defeated Macnair can blackmail him no more."

"I suppose that calls for a party at the Malfoys."

"Yep. There will be party at the Malfoys, but not in this episode, so... shush!"

*
*

But do thy worst to steal thyself away,

For term of life thou art assured mine;

And life no longer than thy love will stay,

For it depends upon that love of thine.
Then need I not to fear the worst of wrongs,
When in the least of them my life hath end.
I see a better state to me belongs
Than that which on thy humour doth depend:
Thou canst not vex me with inconstant mind,
Since that my life on thy revolt doth lie.
O what a happy title do I find,
Happy to have thy love, happy to die!
But what's so blessed-fair that fears no blot?
Thou mayst be false, and yet I know it not.

*
*

Amicus Draconis

First Cycle: Cycle of the Badger

Part 6: Blood Oracle: Part I

October 31, 1981

(Hallowe'en, 17 years ago)

John Doe realized that he must have taken a wrong turn.

This bumpy field road couldn't possibly lead to London. It was probably best to turn around, drive back to the last crossroads and choose another way.

Any other way.

The rain came down in sheets. The night crept up the hills. The storm howled like a mad wolf, smashing buckets of water against the windscreen of John Doe's silver Bentley.

It seemed that all the forces of nature had joined up against the human intruder. Or was this the doing of evil Hallowe'en spirits emerging from the bumpy field road's potholes?

Not that John Doe truly believed in Hallowe'en spirits hiding in potholes of bumpy field roads. Instead he opened the glove compartment, foraging for a suitable map. He didn't believe maps to be helpful in his current situation, but at least the foraging gave him something to do other than stare at the rain.

The next moment he had something else to stare at, for in the middle of the road stood a girl.

She couldn't be much older than fourteen. A long black cloak flowed around her delicate body, merging into the night surrounding her. Her face, pale as death, was pure white against the darkness, but the long hair that framed it, wet strands sticking to her ashen cheeks, had the colour of deep titian red. And her eyes...

Her eyes were flashing a dark demonic violet, as if she had emerged from hell itself. John Doe would never again forget these eyes, not for the rest of his life.

Although, considering that his life would end only a few moments later, that wasn't much to say.

* * *

October 29, 1998

(Present Time)

"Power of darkness, power of night,

Drown hope in despair, extinguish the light,

Alter this brilliance to feeble gloom,

Cast thy foe to eternal doom!"

The Seer made another frantic attempt to cast her dark shadows over the brilliant white light emanating from her crystal ball. This light was a spell, a mighty protection spell shielding a hidden place from her powers. A secret hideout, a hole, where fiends of the master were crawling around like vermin. Again and again had she tried to find this hideout, but her desperate struggle had not brought her any closer to her goal. The magic of her enemies was simply too powerful and could not be breached by her own.

Exhausted, she sunk her head in her hands, black-painted fingernails combing through shiny titian-red hair. During day-time she preferred to wear it up, but in a ritual she did not wish to disturb the free circling of energy with bounds and knots. So, she let her hair loose and her delicate black silk dress flow down as well, even undid the laces of her stiletto heels. She dropped the shoes to the ground, pulling her bare feet up on the oriental-styled divan she was lolling on, and turned her attention back to her crystal ball.

She had seen many things during these last few weeks, but only few of importance. The master's enemies were gaining power? You need not be a Seer to realize that. He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named would be a key figure in the play? That had been known since before his birth.

Her husband cheated on her? Well, she smelled his bad conscience every single moment he was around.

A miniature stag sprang from the bright light into her dark room. At once, darkness formed into a dragon breathing fireballs on the stag. Annoyed, she wiped her sleeve through the air, destroying the animals before any of the fireballs could set fire on her precious curtains. She had seen fighting animals before she could walk or talk, again

and again and again. Stag versus Dragon. Snake versus Lion. Lynx versus Jackal. Jackal versus Phoenix.

It had started to bore her long ago.

The remaining bits of light arranged themselves into a wolf, a dog, a rat and yet another stag. All four of them seemed to skip merrily around imaginary trees. Nice. Who needed to worry about things that might have happened twenty years ago? She worried about the present.

And the future...

The stag drowned in an imaginary lake while the other animals scampered away and finally dissolved. What should she tell her master tonight? Zoo stories? He would not be pleased with her.

« Maman! Une lettre est arrivée! »

Cécile, her six-year-old daughter, stuck her head in the door. She was red-haired like her mother with the same violet eyes and the same milky complexion. Her face, however, was less delicate if not to say clunky; she had inherited her father's big bones. Also, her hair was never as sleek and shiny as it was supposed to be. It had an unbecoming brownish tinge.

The wrapped object the little girl was excitedly waving into her mother's face, turned out to be a small parcel rather than a letter. « Je crois que c'est pour toi, mais je n'en suis pas sûre! »

Well, taking a closer look at Cécile, she was ugly to say the least. She bore too much resemblance to that wimp of a father. And besides, what business did she have stomping into the room like that? No manners at all.

"We knock before we enter a room, child," Marguerite chided her daughter in English. "If I lock my door, it means that I want to go undisturbed, not that you are allowed to Charm it open!"

And besides, why did the second child have to be yet another worthless daughter? When would she finally give birth to the long-awaited family heir?

She turned her attention back to the girl, her voice heightening to a hysterical wail. "Next time I'll put a hex on my door to scratch this impudent grin of that repulsive face of yours!"

Breathing in deeply, she stretched out her hand. "Hand me that letter, Cécile. What do you mean by 'I'm not sure'? Is it not my name written on there?"

She took the little parcel from her daughter's hand, searching for an address or a sender, but it seemed to be completely blank. Little Cécile took back a step, as her mother's hands suddenly started to shake uncontrollably.

The parcel slipped from her hands, dropping to the floor, or rather the expensive carpet embroidered with the Lestranger family crest. A black jackal in honour of a long-forgotten god...

"Maman? Are you ill? What's going on?"

Isn't it heart-warming, how my little girl worries about me? She's probably the only person in this whole wide world who truly cares about my well-being. I must not be so strict with her.

« Rien ! » She shook her head, drawing her shoulders together as if some chilly breeze had made her shudder with cold. "There's nothing going on, chérie, I'm fine." With a sugary-sweet smile she sank to her knees to be on face-level with her daughter, carefully spreading her dress around her on the carpet so it would not crease. "Why don't you go play some more, ma petite?" Tenderly she caressed the girl's cheek with one hand, while squeezing her shoulder with the other as if she feared Cécile would try to break free from her signs of affection.

"What's it say on there?" Cécile finally freed herself from her mother's grasp, reaching for the parcel again, but Marguerite slapped the girl's fingers, her beautiful face twisted with rage. "Get out, you little brat, and stop trying my patience!"

Without paying any attention to her mother's outburst, Cécile scampered out of the room. She had found and read the small inscription on Maman's letter, but couldn't make any use of it. *To Skuld*. Who was Skuld anyway? She had never heard that name before. Maybe the letter wasn't even for Maman?

She stopped worrying and went back to dressing and undressing the new doll Grandfather had given her for her birthday.

* * *

October 31, 1981

"Oh, you should have seen this; it was wonderful, just like in one of their books. A dark road, a man who lost his way, a beautiful demonic woman emerging from the shadows a true classic." The girl's voice was alight with enthusiasm as she spoke on. "I even used a raining spell to give everything the right..."

"Do you have it, Skuld?" a second voice, the one of a young woman interrupted her.

"I do, Verdandi, there's no need to take that tone with me," the girl answered breathlessly, rolling her eyes at the brusque interruption of her story. "And it's still warm. You should better appreciate my hard work, dear sister. Without me, it wouldn't even be possible to conduct this ritual."

"A lady doesn't brag, chérie." Verdandi gave her sister a stern look, tossing back her long blond hair. "And if Papa knew about you reading Muggle writings, he wouldn't be pleased either."

"Oh, I don't think Papa would object to my books. After all, they're about Muggles getting abducted by witches, Muggles getting their blood sucked by vampires, and Muggles getting devoured by demons while making out with other Muggles in Muggle carriages. On the contrary, I believe that these books are the perfect preparation for life as a dark witch or wizard."

Skuld held a small urn out to her sister. "Here it is. Warm and fresh, and from the first Muggle I ever hunted down in my young life. This marks my initiation as a dark witch, doesn't it?" She spread out her arms and spun around. "I've lost my innocence."

Her voice sounded a bit too matter-of-fact for the dramatic scene she was trying to act.

"You never were innocent to begin with, little sister," a third voice cut in from the darkness. "Not in this family anyway."

Further apart from the two, a third woman stood bent over a fire. Flames flickered; their tireless dance cast an eerie light over the nocturnal marshes, bringing shadows to life. A black cauldron was floating in the air, emitting green vile-smelling odours, and it was that cauldron the woman's attention was focused on. She seemed to be the eldest of the three sisters, her eyes of dark violet scanning her surroundings with a predatory scowl. Her hair, falling to her waist like that of her sisters, was black as raven's feathers.

"I knew you would take her side against me," Skuld grumbled. "You always take her side, don't you, Urd? Hey, Urd!"

"Silence." Verdandi put a finger to her lips. "Don't disturb her now."

The eldest sister appeared to have fallen into a trance. Her eyes were half-hidden under long eyelashes and heavy lids, her nose was greedily breathing in the green fumes, while her lips constantly mumbled strange syllables in a hissing, unknown language. Skuld took a few steps closer trying to eavesdrop, but as she seemed to realize she couldn't understand a word of it, she turned away with drooping shoulders. "A lady doesn't slouch," Verdandi reminded her sternly.

Urd's eyes suddenly flared open as if awoken from a nightmare. Utterly disregarding the heat as well as the cauldron's massive weight, she embraced it with both of her arms, tipping it over and pouring the stinking broth into the fire. The potion turned to steam emanating a snakelike hiss as it froze the flames into solid pillars. "It's time," Urd whispered, "come my sisters, let us see what the future holds."

Three pairs of violet eyes stared into the motionless flames. Urd gave a nod and Verdandi poured some of the liquid from the urn into them. A dark, coppery-smelling liquid it was; there could be no doubt that this was the blood Skuld had taken from the Muggle.

As soon as the blood touched the rigid flames they started moving again, evaporating into stringy mists, weaving themselves into a metallic gleaming bowl. The blood was caught in it, forming a shimmering pool in its middle.

All three witches bent over it, yet there was nothing to be seen save for their own eager faces.

And the night sky above.

Urd touched the liquid with her fingertips. "Time is Past. Threads of Fate unweave and grant your humble servant Urd the power to See."

"Time is Present." The second sister's fingers joined with the first. "Threads of Fate unweave and grant your humble servant Verdandi the power to See."

"Does that hurt?" the girl asked, glancing apprehensively at the smoking hands in the bowl. Noticing Urd's withering glare, she immediately fell silent and placed her hand into the liquid as well. "Time is Future. Threads of Fate unweave and grant your humble servant Skuld the power to See."

The three witch sisters pulled back their hands. "Did we make a mistake?" Verdandi wanted to know, a frown crossing her forehead.

"Choose your questions," Urd whispered. "And choose them wisely for this urn of blood will not last forever. Neither will our powers."

"What does my future husband look like?" Skuld exclaimed before anyone could stop her. "Well," she shrugged, half-heartedly trying to defend herself from the angry scowls of the other two, "you are already married, so you needn't worry about it."

The mirror of blood trembled, forming a round, brown-haired head bent over a plate of soup. As the image grew clearer, it showed a young wizard approximately in his early twenties. He was wearing expensive, richly embroidered and utterly tasteless robes. The man's face was still not visible behind his soup bowl, but the hand holding the spoon was adorned with a crest ring. A bird, a swallow to be exact.

Skuld stretched out her hand and touched the image, apparently under the delusion that she could make the wizard move his head, so she could finally see his face. But all she achieved with her touch was the disappearance of the picture. What was worse, the mirror seemed to crack and dissolve, and only a bit more blood from the urn could restore it to its original smoothness.

Skuld gave a sigh. "Well, at least he's rich and from a decent family. Personally, I wouldn't have chosen an Avery for my husband, but I'm sure it will all fall into place."

She was going to say more, but Urd hissed at her to be quiet, and as Urd snarled and Skuld pouted, the middle sister, Verdandi leaned forward mouthing an unheard question into the bowl. The others fell silent immediately, their eyes sparkling with anger now. What did Verdandi have to hide?

A new image formed inside the mirror. It was a mighty throne of black marble, a throne which seemed to be made entirely of snakes. Two for the armrests, four for the feet, and an entire colony for the back, sleek glistening bodies woven together like the threads of an especially gruesome carpet. A hooded wizard resided upon it, a wizard with long black robes flowing down from his shadowy figure, but apart from these robes they couldn't see much of him because a second person stood on the steps before the throne.

This one they could see more clearly. It appeared to be a boy or young man, slight of build, his head covered in a mop of unruly black hair. He stood almost with his back to them, only a sliver of his face visible as he faced the figure sitting on the snake throne. His clothes were the robes of a wizard, but his shoes clearly revealed a connection to Muggles. One of his hands was stretched out towards the throne, but he wore no crest ring that gave away his family name.

The boy took a step towards the throne, but this was the moment Verdandi struck the mirror with her palm, destroying the image. It appeared to the others that she had seen enough.

"You cowardly little runt!" Urd snarled. "I won't let you dream of my master's defeat. Mark my words, sister and mark them well: Only one man will rule on the Throne of Snakes and he will rule for all eternity!"

Her voice rose to a hysterical, almost banshee-like wail. "Our Dark Lord Voldemort is the mightiest wizard of all ages. He commands over life and death, over light and darkness, over times and tides. None shall ever put an end to his reign, none ever defeat him. Not this old Muggle-loving fool with his pathetic Order of the Phoenix, not those spineless puppets at the Ministry. And least of all," she had to gasp for air now, "this strange, frog-eyed boy!"

Frog-eyed boy? The younger sisters exchanged bewildered looks. They had only seen the back of the boy's head, so what could Urd possibly know about his eyes? Did she know more about this boy?

"He's the one," she whispered, more to herself than to anyone else. "There can be no other explanation. Yet, tell me, sisters, how is this little child supposed to stand against our master? A child who will never grow up to be a man? Tell me, how is this possible?"

"Look!" Skuld shouted. "The mirror it thinks the question was meant for it!"

This time, the mirror showed the boy's face, and his eyes truly were green, bright and sparkling as emeralds. The eyes did not change much, but the face around them did. It became smaller and younger, until it was the face of a toddler sitting on his mother's arm. Urd had been right once again, this boy was still a child.

"Lily Evans!" Verdandi gasped as she recognized the woman holding him. "Lily Evans, that annoying Head Girl we had in Hogwarts. Oh, how I hated her..."

"He's the son of Lily Evans and James Potter," Urd said coldly. "Or I probably should say *was* their son because he's already dead. One of our trusted companions has given us information about the Potters' hideout. You two certainly couldn't know about these things because you are not among the master's chosen."

"It is happening as we speak." Skuld clutched her hands in excitement. "Look, the Dark Lord is entering a house. This must be the house of the Potters."

Verdandi poured more blood into the mirror, so the image would not fade and three eager heads bent over it to see the latest triumph of their master.

The witch sisters watched without a word as the Dark Lord faced the little family. They watched as the first killing curse struck the father, they watched the mother run upstairs holding the baby. They watched as the Dark Lord ordered her to step aside, but she shook her head, crying, refusing to yield her son. A second killing curse burst through the room, a third one and then a fourth one...

And then....

One long moment there was silence. Faces frozen in horror. Three figures stood motionless as if some ancient magic had turned them into pillars of salt.

Then the urn fell from Verdandi's hands and shattered. The blood seeped away, returning to the earth.

The image broke apart. As did the bowl of flames.

Two voices screamed in unison, and a third one remained silent. The mightiest wizard of all ages, defeated by a mere child. This wasn't... this couldn't be possible.

Should everything they had ever believed in end tonight?

* * *

October 29, 1998

Memories flashed through her mind as Marguerite Avery-Lestrangle stared at the wand lying before her on the delicate glass table. No, there could be no doubt about it.

Pine. Twelve inches. Dragon heartstring. The heart of a Chinese Fireball.

It was the very wand that had ended her sister's life....

Her pointed fingernails scratched over the table as she grasped the paper with trembling hands, gazing at the two words written on it *To Skuld*. No letter, no explanation. Just these two words and a case with a wand.

Skuld. There were only two more people who knew that name and one of them was dead killed by this wand. And the other was a traitor who should better stay out of her way.

Urd, Verdandi, and Skuld, the three Norns. Klotho, Lachesis, and Atropos, the three Moirae. Goddesses of fate, powerful beings, who ruled over life and death with the blink of an eye and the cut of a scissor. Indifferent, cruel and eternal, their power exceeded even the power of the mightiest god, regardless if this god was called Odin, Zeus, or Jupiter. All gods had to yield to their judgement.

No, it wasn't a coincidence that they had chosen these for their secret names.

Margaret, Catherine, and Elizabeth. Even Catholicism still held some traces of the three, although this patriarchal religion had removed them from their divine status and turned them into lowly saints. Without being able to strip them of their true powers, of course. Didn't she herself and her sisters live in a world ruled by men? Weren't they forbidden to sit at their master's table in the Dark Council? Hadn't Papa repeated over and over again that they were no more than insignificant girls?

But all that changed when they were together in secrecy, uniting their powers.

Unfortunately it hadn't happened very often. Most of the time, she and her sisters had hated each others guts, and their interests had been too far apart to unite them into a common goal. Usually it was two sisters uniting against the third, but which two, and which third heavily depended on their moods. There were only a few times when they had truly worked together.

That Hallowe'en night in the marshes had been one of them...

A smile crossed her face. If someone had been watching her in this very moment, they would have thought that she felt an innocent, almost childlike joy. However if that someone had been a person who knew her, they maybe could have suspected that she rejoiced in the memory of her first murder.

That fateful night, they had tried to use their visionary powers to unveil the hidden mysteries of the future. Of course, they had done so countless times with vague images flickering around in crystal balls, tea leaves, entrails, and flight of birds.

But this ritual was different.

And to unleash its powers, you needed a Hallowe'en night.

A Hallowe'en night, like the one after tomorrow...

"Marie, ma chérie! I'm sorry for coming home so late again, but there was an emergency meeting of the Council. You can imagine that we're all worried about all that trouble with... the Order of the Phoenix, and You-Know-Who and all that. Well, as you can imagine..."

"I certainly can, darling," she chirped, kissing his cheek. The sympathetic wife was an easy role to play, and didn't take much effort. "I know how hard you work for us. So, did you come up with a brilliant solution?"

"I... well, uhm..."

Couldn't the fool at least try to find a better excuse? She could smell the other woman's perfume all over him. A flowery fragrance of lilac with just a whiff of sage.

It was how she had always imagined the scent of a butterfly.

* * *

October 31, 1981

"Silence!" Urd was the first of the sisters to regain her control. "Stop behaving like a lot of cackling chickens. We know that it will happen tonight, but we don't know when. Perhaps there's still time to ensure that this horrible vision will never come to pass. We need to ask Papa for advice!"

The others nodded in agreement. Papa would know what to do. Papa was the most powerful dark wizard, well, the second most powerful right after the master, and apart from that, his most trusted advisor. He was much more experienced than all these youngsters the master had acquired of late. There could be no doubt that he would pull a solution from the field of his magical experience as easy as a Muggle charlatan might pull a rabbit from his hat.

As always, Papa would set things right.

Urd reached into her pocket and was about to forage for something, when she stopped mid-movement, and withdrew her hand, casting an icy glance at Verdandi. "Looking for this?" her blond sister asked, holding out a black ring with a jackal's head. Urd snatched it from her without a word and threw it into the flames while adding a powdery substance with her other hand. It would probably have been quicker to Apparate to Papa than to call for him, but even now in these desperate times none of them dared to disturb their father. They did not want to imagine what his reaction would be.

"What are you doing out there in the woods, mes poupettes? Did you ask your husbands' permission for this? And you, Marie, why are you not in your room at this hour of night?"

A man's head had appeared in the flames, a head covered in dark hair with a greyish tinge, and a face with stern features. They did not yet emit the harshness that seventeen years in Azkaban would bestow on them, but seemed frozen nonetheless, save for small signs of irritation along the corners of the mouth. A pair of violet eyes coolly observed the three daughters.

"Papa, I..." squeaked Skuld, who was once again Marguerite, Marie for short. No longer a powerful goddess of fate, but a scared little girl whose voice had failed her.

"Papa, please." As always, it was Urd who managed to scrape together some courage. « Ecoutez, je vous en prie, il faut raconter toute l'histoire! Nous avons des problèmes! »

"What problems are you talking about, girl?" the head in the fire snapped, but he fell silent as Urd described the vision from the mirror of blood. He didn't interrupt her a single time as he listened to her words, but a shade of sorrow appeared in his eyes. It would go unnoticed by anyone but his three daughters who were experts in reading his emotions.

"So you have seen this boy standing in front of the master's snake throne?" the father finally asked as Urd, finished with her recollection of the first vision, went on to the second one. "This means that the outcome of the last battle is still unclear. Our master may have been defeated once, but he shall return ever more powerful." A fierce look had taken possession of his eyes.

"Yes, we saw the boy, but we couldn't see whether it was our master sitting upon the throne." Urd lowered her eyes. "There was someone on the throne, but... did you two see it?" The other two sisters quietly shook her heads.

"You speak the truth, Marie, but you ... you cowardly little runt ... you dare to lie to my face. I always know when my puppets lie. I know that all women are false and I know that I am cursed with three daughters and no heir. I would punish you right here, right now for your insolence, but first I have to deal with matters far more important than you three. You will wait here and not move a finger until my return, vous avez compris?"

The witch sisters nodded, a strange mixture of fear and relief visible upon their pale faces as their father's head disappeared in the flames.

"He has gone to warn the master, hasn't he?" Skuld had finally regained the use of her voice. "Oh, how I hope that he'll arrive in time. That little brat just can't defeat the Dark Lord, he can't...." She turned around. "Where has Verdandi gone?"

"Disappeared," Urd hissed. "Did you honestly believe she would wait quietly until Papa comes back to punish her? At her husband's place she's out of Papa's reach. We all know that. My own wouldn't lift a finger to protect me, so I might as well stay and get it over with."

"At least you married someone loyal to our family." Skuld tried to steer the conversation away from the dangerous turn it was obviously taking. "She on the other hand married a coward and a traitor."

"She married whomever the master chose for her, just as I did and just as you will," Urd snarled. "You have no right to question his decisions."

"No, I would never," Skuld hastened to assure her. "I'm simply worried what she might do, that's all. Did you know that she used a potion on you to ensure that you would not bear a son? Why do you think she has one while you don't have any children at all? Everything is her fault!"

"Oh, is it?" Urd asked dangerously soft, grabbing a strand of her sister's hair. "Who's the potion brewer in our family?"

"It wasn't my fault!" Skuld tried to break free of her sister's grip. "She... she put the Imperius Curse on me."

"Oh no, she didn't, you lying snake! You helped her because you thought that in the end you would be the one giving this family a male heir."

"Let go of me and shut your dirty mouth!"

"You filthy piece of scum!"

"Ugly hag!"

"Mudblood!"

Once again, the short moment when the three witch sisters had united their powers, was over.

* * *

October 29, 1998

The phrase 'When can we go back in?' was spelt in huge spidery letters on the blackboard which Justin Finch-Fletchley raised high above his head for what seemed to be the third time during the last forty minutes.

Like the two other times before, Hermione answered him with a shake of her head, her characteristic frown, and the sentence: 'As soon as the hideout is finished.' on top of her own blackboard. You could hardly believe that a member of the elder's council, who was supposed to set an example for the younger students, could be so impatient while said younger students patiently waited during the transformation. Such difficult magic couldn't be accomplished within the blink of an eye, even if it was created by Dumbledore himself. The transformation usually took a little less than an hour, and since it would be dangerous to stay inside a shape-changing hideout, the young witches and wizards had to spend that time underwater.

After long and elaborate discussions, the students had finally agreed on a Shape for Hallowe'en. They had chosen a marshy countryside with brick cottages and the lonely hulk of a castle on the horizon. It would also have been possible to have the hideout create a castle for them to live in, but that option had been dismissed at once. The memories of Hogwarts were simply too painful.

As for the current Shape, the young witches and wizards had decided to keep it for about a month and then choose something more Christmas-like for December. New discussions had spawned already; some of the students wanted to celebrate a classic white Christmas, while others wanted to forget all about winter enjoying the warmth of a sunny beach. Another idea that had, for no apparent reason, reached great popularity among them was a that of a colourful jungle with tigers, elephants, and other animals to keep as exotic pets.

Still, they had another month to discuss these topics. Right now, Hallowe'en was approaching.

A few merpeople swam past them, giving courteous nods or even waving at the group. The Quidditch match had strengthened the tentative friendly bonds between the Hogwarts students and the inhabitants of the lake. Some of the witches and wizards had started to pay neighbourly visits apart from the Wednesday audiences at Chieftain Murcus' palace. Strangely enough, Neville was often among them, although he wasn't especially known for diplomatic skills and everybody had believed him to be afraid of the merpeople. But this had obviously changed during the last months because as they passed he spun around in the water and swam right towards them.

"Hey!" Seamus nudged Dean, trying to convey a message through excited gestures and loud blubbing in the water. Since Dean's only response was a point-blank stare, Seamus relieved a protesting Justin Finch-Fletchley of his blackboard, decorating it with new words. Next to them, Ron almost twisted his neck to be able to read them, too.

"Heartbreaker Neville," the words spelled. With a wink and a nod of his head, Seamus gestured towards Neville, who was in a lively conversation with a young girl he obviously seemed to know pretty well. He excitedly waved his arms and scribbled words on his own blackboard.

The three boys burst into laughter. Neville, who had his back turned to them, didn't notice any of it and carried on with the conversation.

"Go, get her, tiger!" Ron waved his own blackboard over his head, jumping up and down like a drunken cheerleader. Neville didn't notice it either, but the girl did. She obviously had no idea what the words on the board were supposed to mean, so she turned to Neville to question him. His face turned such a bright red that it was even visible in the dim underwater light. He shook his head, scowling at the other boys, who had now started whistling and scribbling 'Booh' all over their blackboards.

Ron's eyes searched for Harry and Hermione in the crowd. He felt a sudden inexplicable sting of jealousy as he saw Harry give a nod to Hermione to signal that the hour was over and that they could return to the hideout. It was such a small gesture, yet it showed how his two best friends could understand each other without words. It was almost like they were able to read each other's mind.

As the others saw Harry and Hermione approach the entrance, they grabbed their brooms and followed, forming a big cluster around them. Everybody wanted to be the first to see the new Shape. They barely left enough room for Harry to Charm away the sand and for Hermione to open the door with her golden key.

Harry and Hermione on the contrary seemed to have their eyes on the students. They wanted to make sure everyone got in safely.

"Woops, sorry, mate." Ron had accidentally shoved Harry aside as he was trying to fight his way through between Dean and Seamus. He automatically reached for Harry's shoulder as the surge of the water threatened to drift him aside, but what he suddenly felt between his fingers was a small chain.

"Woops, sorry again." He let go at once. Oh right, it was the ring, Harry was wearing around his neck. A strange piece of jewellery, but he had never bothered to ask about it. Oh, well, it looked like a dog, didn't it? There wasn't really any reason to wonder about dogs when your godfather could turn into one.

Neville swam past Ron, clutching his broom to his side. He was one of the last students, and Ron was pretty certain that it had something to do with saying goodbye to that girl. Did he have a crush on her? But she was a mermaid, that kind of thing couldn't work, could it? And he had never had a girlfriend before; he just wasn't the type the girls liked.

'Well, neither am I,' Ron thought to himself. He was about to turn back to the entrance when he suddenly saw Neville freeze as if struck by a stunning spell. Had he screamed? Under water it was impossible to make out; there was too much noise and blubbing around.

But Neville's eyes! There was a look of pure horror in these eyes as he stared at Harry. No, at Harry's ring. It was only for an instant, then everything seemed back to normal again, and Neville smiled.

It was a twisted smile, and Neville's eyes seemed to have lost all focus. Ron knew that expression, he had seen it before.

He had seen it four years ago as Neville watched the fake Mad-Eye Moody torture a spider with the Cruciatus Curse.

* * *

Amicus Draconis- 1st Cycle: Cycle of the Badger - Part 6: Blood Oracle - Part I

"I wonder, I wonder, do you know what I wonder?"

"No, what do you wonder?"

"I wonder about the best way to become a black wizard!"

"Well, first of all, it's not 'black wizard' it's 'DARK wizard'. Even the forces of evil have to submit to the great laws of political correctness. Second, to become one you have to follow a carefully structured plan of DARK wizardness, which includes clothing, make-up, speech, and style."

"Which means I have to wear only black, sorry, DARK clothes?"

"Exactly, dear brother. You wear DARK clothes you can shop for them at the Gothic market in Camden Town, you hang out in cemeteries a lot and brew DARK potions in the middle of the night, you wear white make-up, and kajal around your eyes, and most important of all, you need to learn French."

"French?"

"Oui, mon cher frère. DARK wizards always speak French for it is a DARK language. Please translate for me: « Je t'aime. »"

"I aim at you."

« Je te donne un bonbon et un baiser ! »

"I give you a good beating."

« Je t'embrasse .»

"I embarrass you. No, wait that can't be right!"

"Yes, you do. Let's try German next."

Amicus Draconis- 1. Zyklus: Zyklus des Dachses - Teil 6: Ritual des Blutes - Teil I

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Author's Note: Sorry for not updating for so long :(

My next couple of notes are going to be about the Lestranges because that family plays a major role in the next chapters. From that first moment the strange heavy-lidded woman and her two men appeared in the court scene in GoF, we fanfic authors have been speculating about her. We didn't learn her first name until OotP, so in post-GoF fanfics, she is given lots of creative first names, for example, Lydia, Morgana, or Icicle. Many people speculated about her role as well; the only thing we learned at that time was that tiny bit about Neville's past, which makes an interesting fanfic-plot as well. I suppose that is one of the major reasons why we like the HP books so much because they give us so many bits and pieces of plot to work with.

Well, first of all, I imagined the Lestranges to be an old, rich, pureblood family. I gave them a French background, but the family patriarch, Istave LeStrange already grew up in England. He married Angelika Grindelwald, who in my first draft was Grindelwald's daughter, but since I never mentioned that fact anywhere in the fic, it wasn't too late to change her to Grindelwald's niece. Due to, well... let's just call them recent events. *smirk*

As for their three daughters, I'll talk more about them in my next note, so as not to give away any spoilers. The idea to have three mysterious sisters in my story basically derived from watching Gargoyles and reading the Avalon series. Little did I know that Rowling had planned three sisters as well, so I had one of those happy "I predicted the books!" moments when OotP came out. (My other moment was, when Fred and George suddenly had their own resistance radio show in DH, and even mentioned a secret hideout below the Hogwarts lake. *raises eyebrows*)

Oh, and we have one more crest ring for our collection. The jackal is the symbol of Anubis, the Egyptian god of death, and the Lestranges claim that their family roots go back all the way to Ancient Egypt.