

Stray

by MMADfan

When Madam Hooch's heart goes out to a stray, what will it mean for her — and for Hogwarts?

The story weaves through The Prisoner of Azkaban, The Goblet of Fire, and finally, The Order of the Phoenix.

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Chapter 1 of 11

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PART ONE

Late September 1993

Rolanda's heart went out to the emaciated creature, which disappeared around the corner before she could approach it. She'd seen the almost-skeletal black dog limping about the outskirts of Hogsmeade near the Shrieking Shack the last few times she'd returned to her flat in the village, but this was the first time she'd actually seen it in Hogsmeade itself. The poor thing looked half-starved, and its limp spoke of many miles walked over rough ground. She'd imagined that perhaps a Muggle hillwalker had lost it, and the pathetic hound had wandered the hills surrounding Hogsmeade and Hogwarts searching for its owner, ending up in Hogsmeade, undeterred by the anti-Muggle wards. It had been known to happen, but the dogs usually found their way out of the warded region and, presumably, back into Muggle lands and Muggle hands.

On this occasion, however, Hooch noticed that the giant dog didn't have a collar. Perhaps it had been abandoned, then, and her sympathy for the poor animal increased. It was huge, and scavenging for scraps would hardly be sufficient to feed it for long.

Drawing her wand, Rolanda prepared to follow the stray into the alley. She could at least give the creature one good meal, perhaps dressing its paw pads with ointment and healing them before she set it loose again. Ro loved dogs and had grown up on a farm with two lively terriers who caught the rats in the barn, and a pair of collies who watched over the sheep. She knew, though, that dogs could be dangerous, and this one was a stranger to her, injured and hungry, and she would be prepared to Stun it if she had to rather than risk being bitten.

Hoping not to alarm the creature with a stick in her hand, Rolanda slipped her wand up her sleeve, and she followed after it through the back alleys of Hogsmeade. It seemed to be heading for the Three Broomsticks, probably hoping for some nice scraps from the bins behind the pub. Despite his condition, the huge dog moved quickly, and Rolanda picked up her pace.

She reached the alley behind the Three Broomsticks just as the dog stood on his hind legs, nosing and pawing at a bin lid. It appeared to have been charmed on, though, because it wouldn't budge, frustrating the starving dog. Poor thing!

Despite the fact that, when it stood on its hind legs, the creature was very nearly as tall as she, Rolanda crouched down and pursed her lips, making gentle kissing sounds. She held out her empty left hand, though the tip of her wand was still concealed in her right one, ready to slip out at any moment.

The dog dropped down onto all four paws and turned to see who was there. So intent he had been on finding a meal, he had not noticed a woman following him. His teeth bared, he backed up, growling lightly. Backing up further, he knocked into another bin, which clattered to the ground but didn't spill open.

Still holding out her hand and crouched low, Rolanda edged forward. "It's okay, boy. It's all right, sweet thing. Ro won't hurt you. There now, there now," she said in a soft, soothing voice.

The dog ceased growling, but he backed up as far against the wall as he could, lips curled back, sharp teeth still showing.

"There you are, you beast!" a booming voice said angrily as the back door to the pub burst open. "I've caught you now! Can't be makin' a mess back here this time!"

The black dog cowered and growled as the large wizard raised his wand. "Damned pest!" he said. "I'll show you!"

"Stop it! Stop it!" Rolanda shouted, leaping up.

The man turned his head, seeing her there for the first time. "What're you doin' back here, Hooch?" He gestured toward the dog. "This ain't your dog, is it?"

"He's just hungry, Bruno...leave him be!" Rolanda stepped around between the dog and the wizard.

"He been makin' a mess back here the last three nights running. I told Rosmerta I'd fix whatever was doin' it. Caught a glimpse of him last night, hightailing it around the corner, but I wasn't fast enough. I knew that charming the bins shut tight would work." A nasty grin crossed his face. He looked around Rolanda at the dog. "Can't be messin' around here no more, so git!" He raised his wand and shook it at him. "And next time, I'll use this on you, hear! And you won't like it one bit! Not one bit!"

"Don't you dare, Bruno Packer!" Rolanda said, backing towards the dog, her concern for the animal outweighing her concern about getting bitten by it. She let her wand fall into her hand.

"Mangy beast," Bruno muttered. "You just make sure it don't come 'round here no more if you don't want it hexed." He snarled at the dog, "Skin you alive, I will!"

"If anything happens to this dog, I'll come looking for you!"

"Yeah? You and what army? You just try that, Hooch!" He gave a derisive laugh, but stepped back into the pub and slammed the door shut behind him.

As soon as the door closed, the large dog darted out from behind Rolanda and began a limping run away down the back alley. It was beginning to get dark, and the coal black dog was almost lost in the shadows, but Rolanda chased after it as it hobbled as fast as it could hobble.

"Here now, here's a good doggie! Come now, Ro will get you something nice to eat! You want some supper, boy? There's a good lad!"

The dog slowed, then paused and looked back at Rolanda. His eyes seemed old and world-weary to her, but that was just the shadows in the alley and her own fancy, she thought. He took a few more faltering steps forward, then stopped and looked back again.

Rolanda held out her left hand, palm up and approached him slowly, but the dog's eyes were on the stick in her right hand, and he edged away from her.

"It's all right, poor thing! Ro won't hurt you!" Cooing soft, reassuring words, Rolanda bent and stepped closer. The dog shied away from her touch as she reached out with her left hand. "Shh, shh, shh, sweet lad! Shhh, that's right!" she whispered.

The dog whimpered and cringed, but Rolanda held her hand in front of its nose, then slowly, gently caressed the side of his face. The dog whined softly and leaned into her hand. As Rolanda rubbed its right ear, feeling a thick, old scab behind it and avoiding it, the exhausted animal plopped down at her feet.

Rolanda rubbed his large head, then as the dog closed its eyes and panted, she took a chance and pocketed her wand. Crouching beside him, petting him and running her right hand over his ribs, she let out a slight whimper of her own. The dog was even more emaciated than she'd been able to see.

"Ah, you poor thing! Don't you worry, Ro will give you a good supper. And we'll take care of some of these scratches, too, and clean you up. You'll feel better soon." She stood from her crouch and patted her thigh, taking a step away from the dog. "Come on, come on! Come with Ro and you'll get a nice supper! Come on!" She took a few more steps and winced as the dog struggled to its feet.

She started home slowly, the great black dog hobbling beside her. They turned into a narrow alley that led back to the Hogsmeade high street, and when they reached the road, the dog shrank back into the shadows.

"Come on! Nothing to be afraid of!" Rolanda called softly. She patted her thigh and called the dog again, but she could barely see its dark form cowering against the side of the building. She went back to the dog and tried to encourage it to follow her, crossing the road several times, then going back to it, but it wouldn't budge. It just shivered and whimpered in the shadows.

Finally, not wanting to Stun the creature into compliance, Rolanda reluctantly left the dog in the alley, crossed the high street, walked down to the next road, and turned left. There were very few people who ventured out in the evening now, despite the mild weather, between the presence of Dementors nearby and the MLE patrolling the streets at night. She paused, listening, thinking she'd heard something, perhaps the dog snuffling and shuffling behind her, but then she sighed and continued down Crab Apple Lane to the little cottage whose rear half she rented.

She unlocked the back door with the key in her left hand while she waved her wand with her right, lifting her extra locking charm. One couldn't be too careful these days, after all. With Sirius Black on the loose and Dementors guarding the school, Dumbledore had suggested to her that she might prefer to stay in her rooms at Hogwarts until the insane murderer was captured or Kissed.

Rolanda shuddered, thinking of the Dementors, and how even one floating far above her had been enough to make her feel forlorn and hopeless. Passing those guarding the entrances to the grounds filled her with a dread approaching despair. While she didn't relish the prospect of entering and leaving the gates with those horrible watchers standing guard and patrolling the perimeter of the grounds, she enjoyed being able to lead her own life in Hogsmeade, and until Quidditch season began, her duties at the school were very light. Even once Quidditch season did start in early November, her obligations were not what anyone would call heavy. She would be bored to tears if she had to stay at the school all of the time. She had assured Dumbledore that if the danger increased, or if she felt at all uneasy staying in the village, she would take up full-time residence at the castle, but until then, she'd stay in her flat.

Rolanda stepped into her kitchen and waved her wand, bringing the lamps up to a warm glow, then she hung her cloak on a peg behind the back door. Her teaching robe joined her cloak, and Rolanda began her evening routine. Stir up the fire, put another log on, fill her kettle with water and cast a charm to bring it to a boil, and then look through her cupboards to see what she would have for supper.

That night, she had a couple steaks in her cool cupboard...she'd thought she could share them with the stray dog, since her original plans for them had been scuttled earlier that day, but it was evidently not meant to be for her to have any company at all for dinner that evening. She pulled out the meat, then from the vegetable drawer beneath the cool cupboard, she took out potatoes, carrots, and onions. In her cold cupboard, she had some vanilla ice cream, and that would do well for dessert. If her invitation hadn't been turned down, she would have stopped at Madam Puddifoot's on the way home and picked up a chocolate cake or something...nothing too sweet, or that would have been rejected and the rest of the evening would have been spent engaging in physical pleasures that had nothing to do with food and everything to do with satisfying her date's other appetites.

Rolanda was just setting a knife to cubing the potatoes as a frying pan heated on her cooktop when she heard a high-pitched whine and a scraping at the door. There it was again. Well, her other date would never scrape and whine at her door, so it must be the dog, Rolanda thought with a smirk.

She opened the door, and sure enough, there was the dog shivering on her welcome mat. It sat as prettily as it was able, its brow wrinkled hopefully as it gazed up at her, and raised its right paw.

"Awww, now aren't you a gentleman! Better than the date who turned me down tonight, that's for sure," Rolanda said, taking the large paw in her hand and wincing to feel how torn and shredded the paw pad was. "Come on in. I'm making supper, but I'll give you a little something to get your stomach used to food again."

The dog limped in, looked around, then walked over and lay down in front of the fireplace. He seemed to let out a great sigh, then he rested his head on his paws and closed his eyes. Despite the fire, he still shivered from hunger and exhaustion, and Rolanda lost no time getting him a bowl of food.

She took her pot of leftover breakfast porridge and a bottle of milk from her cool cupboard, and soon had a large bowl of warm, soupy milk and oats ready for the dog. She dropped a knob of butter into it, then put the bowl in front of the dog. The dog raised its head and sniffed.

"This is just for starters," Rolanda said, petting the dog's head as it began to lap at the gruel. "You'll have some nice meat tonight, too. Here now! Eat slowly, slowly!" She stroked the dog's side as it stopped gulping down the food. It seemed almost to understand her. It must have had good owners at one time, poor thing. She wondered if there were any way to find out who had lost it. She might ask Poppy. The school matron might know, since she had Muggle family whom she visited regularly.

Rolanda fixed herself a mug of tea to drink as she finished cooking the potatoes, carrots, and steaks. She normally liked a bit of something green with her meal, too, but as she'd been planning the meal to someone else's taste, she'd decided on potatoes and carrots and didn't have anything else in the house.

By the time Rolanda had finished cooking, the dog had fallen asleep stretched out in front of the kitchen's large open fireplace, and his bowl was licked as clean as it would be after a *Scourgify*. She put her own steak, onions, carrots, and potatoes on her plate, then pulled out a large mixing bowl and put in the other steak, some potatoes, and a few carrots. She waved her wand to mince it and mix it all together. The dog whimpered and shuddered in its sleep, paws twitching.

"Shh, shh," Rolanda whispered, crouching beside the scrawny black dog, the bowl in her hand. "Smell this! A good supper for a good dog." She petted the dog's side, and it stirred, raised its head, and sniffed.

"Steak and potatoes, what any guy would love for dinner, right? Except for mine," she grumbled, standing. "You're better company, anyway. And more well-mannered."

Rolanda sat at the table so she could watch the dog while she ate. She wasn't terribly fond of steak, herself, but was glad for the dog's sake that she'd had the two in the cool cupboard.

"Of course," she continued between bites, "he's not really mine, this guy. That's the whole trouble. I know it, and I should know what to expect, but ... I'm just a sucker, I guess. Not really a romantic, well, that's what I tell myself...and everybody else...but sometimes I still have expectations and I should know better. For him, it's a meal and a fuck, or sometimes, just a fuck, and not even a kiss good-night when he leaves. I know he hardly cares about me ... but I keep thinking he might, anyway, and just not show it. So I keep giving him chances to show that he does care, and every time, I get let down. And it's my own fault."

The dog had finished its supper in record time and now lay on its side, back to the fire, looking up at her, giving every sign of listening to what Rolanda was saying. When she stopped speaking, he gave a high-pitched, whistling whimper, then barked shortly, a startling sound coming from him.

"Well, it *is* my fault," Rolanda said with a laugh. "I just keep thinking that he must trust me more *like* me more, than he does most people, or else why would he keep coming round? And yes, I know the answer to that, too: sex. I suppose I should be happy with that. It's better than the long dry spell I had before him. But now," she said, pushing away her plate, "it's time to get you cleaned up and your paws tended. You are a good listener, though...better than most men!"

After giving the dog a bath in the upstairs bathroom, and getting herself almost as wet as the dog, Rolanda stripped down and pulled her nightgown from its hook on the back of the bathroom door, chattering to the dog as she did.

"You know, I can't just keep calling you 'good dog' and 'sweet lad,'" she said as she looked at herself in the mirror and raked her fingers through her short spiky hair. "I know you're not mine, but I think a temporary name is in order." Her nightgown tossed over one shoulder and her hands on her hips, she turned and looked down at the dog, who was lying on the bathroom rug and looking up at her, panting. He looked much better, and his black coat was glossier now that it was clean, though there were bare patches here and there where he'd lost fur for some reason, whether through malnutrition or accident.

The dog whined, then barked.

"Okay, then, a temporary name for you ... nothing too grand, nothing too embarrassing to call out ..." Rolanda bent and patted the dog's head. She pulled her nightgown on, then said, "Blackie. Simple, straightforward, and very apt, hmm?"

Blackie gave a cheerful-sounding bark.

"Good! We're agreed, then! Now for your paws." Rolanda opened a cabinet and found some ointment she sometimes used on her hands after a long broomstick ride without gloves. "This isn't very potent stuff, but it's what I have. It should be soothing, anyway."

As if anticipating what Rolanda was about to do, Blackie rolled over on his side, showing his tummy and stretching out his legs. Rolanda chuckled and knelt beside him, then smoothed the mild potion into the pads of each paw. Blackie whimpered and yawned, and Rolanda rubbed some of the potion into the heavy scab on the back of his ear. He lay his head against her thigh and sighed.

"You like this, hmm?" She dabbed some of the ointment on a few of his other healing scratches, then put the lid on the tin and stood. "If I see you tomorrow, Blackie, I'll have something a bit better for you. I'll ask my friend Poppy for a good potion for all your little ouchies."

Blackie barked and got to his feet. He barked again, then went to the closed bathroom door and whined.

"You probably need to make a visit outside after your meal."

Rolanda slipped on her slippers and followed the dog down the stairs to the back door. She opened the door and watched as Blackie walked around to some bushes at the side of the house, sniffed around a bit, and then lifted his leg. He looked back at her, gave a quick, rough bark as if thanking her for her hospitality, then loped off.

"Wait! Wait, Blackie! Come back!" Rolanda trotted after the dog, who turned and looked up at her and then walked back, tail wagging.

"You can sleep by the fire tonight, all right? And get a good breakfast in the morning before you have to be on your way," Rolanda said, giving him a pat. "But if you come back tomorrow night, I'll have a better potion for your cuts and scratches, and I'll get you another steak."

With a cheerful yap, Blackie followed Rolanda back to the cottage. As he settled down on the rug in front of the kitchen fireplace to sleep, she put a big bowl of water down

for him.

"Now, I think you're house-trained, but I hope you don't drink too much and have an accident in the night! Sleep well; you're safe here." She rubbed Blackie's head and ears until he was sound asleep, then went upstairs to her own bed.

Author's Note: For those readers who are familiar with some of my other stories, please note that this **is not** a *Resolving a Misunderstanding* / *Death's Dominion* universe fic. It is more consistent with canon than the RaMverse fics.

I don't know whether to call this a short novel or a long novella, but it's somewhere in between the two, lengthwise. For more information, see my mmadfan.com blog.

Late September through October 1993

Chapter 2 of 11

Autumn advances, and the Quidditch season approaches. Rolanda considers Dumbledore's advice to move up to the castle until Sirius Black is caught. She has a date.



Late September through October 1993

Rolanda rose early the next morning and immediately went downstairs to check on her visitor. Blackie was stretched out in front of the kitchen fireplace where she'd left him the night before, but the door into the living room was open, and she could have sworn she'd shut it the previous day and not opened it since. Perhaps it had been slightly ajar, though, and Blackie had got up in the night and explored a bit. She shrugged and filled her kettle with water.

Her movements woke the dog, who leapt up in apparent alarm, but then, looking around himself, he relaxed, recognising that he was safe and in Rolanda's kitchen. He walked over to the back door and whined, so Ro waved her wand and let him out.

"Breakfast in a few minutes, Blackie! Don't wander off if you want to eat!" she called after him as she Levitated the milk bottles and yoghurt crock in through the door and onto the table.

Leaving the door open for the dog, Rolanda fixed her pot of tea, put away the milk and yoghurt, then began frying a half dozen eggs and several slices of thick bacon. As they were sizzling in their pans, she pulled a loaf of dark wholemeal bread from her bread keeper and sliced it up thickly, then used her wand to toast it. She set a butterknife to spreading butter on the toast as she turned back to the hob and transferred the eggs and bacon to a bowl and a plate, giving Blackie four eggs and an equal number of strips of bacon, and herself two eggs and four pieces of bacon. She tore one of the slices of toast into chunks and was just dropping them into the bowl when the large black dog lumbered back into the kitchen.

Blackie sat on the worn brick floor near the door, and Rolanda shook her head at the sight of him. He seemed to look larger that morning, now that he'd had a good meal, a bath, and a restful sleep. Even sitting down, his head came above the doorhandle, and as he panted lightly, his teeth looked enormous. He could be quite a dangerous dog if he attacked, Rolanda thought, and she wondered for a moment about her own safety with this strange animal in her house. Blackie didn't seem anxious or aggressive, though, and once he'd seen she wasn't going to hurt him, he seemed to trust her.

Rolanda flicked her wand to close the door. "Now if I could only teach you to close the door behind you when you come in after your 'visit,' that would be quite handy," she said. "I fixed us breakfast. Eggs, bacon, and toast. Sorry I haven't any dog food...or another steak...but this should get you through the day."

She set the bowl of food down next to the water bowl, which was half-empty, and Blackie came over and lay down next to it, sniffing its contents.

"Well, sorry if it doesn't suit you, but that's all I have," Rolanda said, sitting down with her own breakfast and thinking that a starving dog oughtn't be fussy. She picked up a slice of toast and bit into it. As she did, the dog stood up and began to eat his eggs. Rolanda laughed.

"You do have manners! I'd love to be able to return you to wherever you belong. I'm sure you're missed."

Blackie stopped licking up his eggs and looked up at her for a moment, then he went back to eating.

"Well, I have flying with the first-years today, then I have to pop over to Holyhead and do some coaching. Just their second-string Chasers and Beaters today. Not my favourite training, but I don't get to pick and choose these days." She shrugged. "I was a pretty good Seeker at one time, you know. Would have gone far, too, if ... well, no looking back, no 'what-ifs' for me! Any player can get injured, after all. It's the luck of the draw. And they fined the Kestrel Beater who did it, and sidelined him for the rest of the season, which was more than I'd expected. Anyway, I have to dress and leave soon, but I'll leave you a water bowl out back, and if you're here tonight, you'll have a nice, thick, juicy steak waiting for you." She laughed at herself talking to the dog. "And if you're not, I guess I'll just have to eat steak again sometime this week."

There was a screeching and tapping at the kitchen window just then, and Rolanda swished her wand to open it. A Post Owl flapped in, deposited her post and her *Daily Prophet*...a prepaid subscription, so she wouldn't have to scrounge for coins first thing in the morning...and then it snatched up the slice of bacon that Rolanda had placed in the centre of the table for it.

She picked up the newspaper and unfolded it, shaking her head. "Still haven't caught that madman yet. Killed his own friends, years ago, he did, and has been in Azkaban ever since. Wasn't right in the head when they put him away; he must be even madder now. I knew him in school. He could be a nasty little blighter, but I never would have imagined he'd turn on his own friends, betray them to that wizard-who-must-not-be-named, and then murder another of them outright in cold blood. Killed a bunch of

Muggles, too. But the Blacks weren't ever what you'd call 'normal,' I suppose." She looked over at the dog and smiled. "Good thing I have you here! I think even Sirius Black wouldn't want to tangle with you. You'd protect me, wouldn't you, boy?"

Blackie padded over to her and sat beside her chair, then rested his chin on her thigh. She stroked his head and ears. "Of course, I know I can't keep you, but it's nice to have you around for the time being." She tore off a large corner of her toast and offered it to him. He gulped it down in one bite.

After dressing and grabbing her favourite broomstick from her cupboard, Rolanda roused Blackie. He'd fallen asleep on the *Daily Prophet*, his head on his paws, his drool dampening the "wanted" photo of Sirius Black, making the animated picture seem to melt.

"Come on, Blackie! Time to rise and shine!" She bent and rubbed his head.

The dog lumbered to his feet, and Rolanda picked up the water bowl and refilled it. She placed it just outside the door, then she locked and warded the house behind them.

"I'll be gone all day," she said, turning to the dog, "but you're welcome to stick around if you want. This water's for you, and I'll have a steak for you when I get back tonight if you're here."

Rolanda hesitated before mounting her broom. Despite two good meals, a bath, and a good night's sleep, the dog was in terrible shape. In the morning light, she could easily see the outline of each rib beneath his black coat. She reached out and petted him. "Wish I could stay, but I can't. Don't get into any trouble while I'm gone!"

Blackie barked twice as she mounted her broomstick and floated beside him for a moment. "Be a good boy...and stay away from the pub!" Then she rose above the house and headed toward Hogwarts. She didn't dare fly directly onto the grounds with those Dementors about. But she should be fine as long as she dismounted several yards from the walls and gates.

Thinking of the Dementors made her shudder. Perhaps Dumbledore was right and she should move up to the castle for a while. She'd still have to leave the grounds a few times a week to work with the Harpies, but it might be safer...and she wouldn't have to encounter the Dementors as often. She'd see how things went. Barring some new threat or stricter curfews in Hogsmeade, she'd stay in her flat at least until the start of the Hogwarts Quidditch season.

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Rolanda kept her promise and brought Blackie a steak that night, this time cooking it rare and cutting it into chunks for him, and then sharing her peas and barley. Again, he slept on the kitchen hearth and stayed for breakfast in the morning. Rolanda was happy enough to have the big dog there. He gave her someone to talk to about her day, and when he gave her hand a sloppy kiss as she pet him before taking off that morning, it lifted her spirits and put her in a good mood that lasted all day.

Blackie didn't always appear at the end of the day after that, but when he did, Rolanda would always have something special waiting for him...a lambchop, half a roast chicken, some nice stew beef. Whether he was there for his dinner or not, Rolanda always put a fresh bowl of water in the garden for him before she went to bed and another before she left for the day, and when she would return later, there were often large paw prints around the bowl.

A little more than two weeks after she had first made Blackie's acquaintance, Rolanda thought she saw him in some bushes at the side of the road leading up to the Hogwarts gates, but when she whistled and called to him, he didn't come to her and he vanished like a shadow. Perhaps Blackie was some unearthly creature, not a common dog, Rolanda thought with a smile as she mounted her broomstick, remembering her great-grandmother's stories of barghests and their other-worldly terrors.

Large, black, and bear-like, much like her Blackie, the barghest would prey on the lost and unwary, and its howl would presage death, or even strike a hearer dead with fright. The beast could shrink and grow at will, her granny warned her, and if you caught a glimpse of one, the only way to save yourself would be to look away quickly and to strike a flame, gaze into it, and think of hearth and home, for no barghest could cross a threshold and attack anyone at home or amongst friends. Warm thoughts of home could trick the creature into finding its next victim elsewhere, her granny said. The lone and lonesome had best never venture out after dark, or the barghest would surely get them.

Rolanda chuckled. Blackie was too fond of her hearth to be a very good candidate for a barghest, though it had been a few days since he'd last crossed her threshold. She had considered leaving food out for him, but she didn't want to attract vermin...or her neighbours' cats. Blackie might not be aggressive with her, but she didn't want to chance him with other animals.

On Friday, the last night that Blackie had come around and she had fed him, he had padded up the stairs after her and lain on the hooked rug beside her bed. She woke in the night to the sound of his snuffly snores; finding his presence reassuring, she rolled over and fell back to sleep...though she did dream of the Hogwarts Express chugging its way through town and making a stop in her kitchen, the trolley witch asking whether she had any fizz to spare, as her Fizzing Whizzbees were all flat.

Rolanda was just as glad that Blackie hadn't been by on Saturday night, although she had seen his paw prints outside the back door the next morning, and two large, dirty paw prints on the outer sill of her kitchen window. Poor boy had probably hoped for some late night supper from her, but she'd had a date. Severus had been in an odd mood that evening, though, and more needy than usual, and he would surely have resented any time that she might have spent on the dog, so it was just as well Blackie had not come earlier.

It was a pity Blackie hadn't come back that morning, however, as there had been a lot of leftovers. Although Rolanda tried not to worry about Severus...and he very clearly did not want her to worry about him, though he seemed glad enough of the time they spent together...she had noticed that the Potions master was eating less and losing weight. Never heavy, always spare, now he appeared to be little more than taut muscle stretched over a lanky frame. Severus seemed to be burning with some nervous tension, but he wouldn't share with her whatever it was that was weighing upon him. Rolanda was certain that it was more than just the escape of Sirius Black, for all that Severus seemed still to loathe the man and would stiffen and sneer at the mere mention of the other wizard's name.

That evening, Severus had arrived punctually...five minutes early, in fact...and it was good that she had not yet set the table, for his other carnal appetites had to be sated before they could eat. He had been all raw sex and desperate need, taking her there in the kitchen almost before the door had closed behind him. Rolanda could not even remember whether he had even greeted her before his hungry mouth was at her lips and throat, his body backing hers up against the edge of the table as his hands tore open the bodice of her blouse and then freed her breasts with a burst of sudden magic. His mouth sought her breast as he pushed up her robe and parted the slit in his own robes. His cock thrust into her, and he pulled her away from the table towards himself, lifting her and turning, pressing her hard against the brick facing beside the fireplace. She gripped the collar of his cloak, hanging on, panting, losing herself in his passion as her own passion mounted. Severus's teeth marked her neck and shoulders as he thrust and gasped wordlessly. He came and loosened his hold upon her, letting her slide back down the wall and find her feet.

Moments later, she was perched again upon the edge of the table, and Severus was stripping her completely of her clothes, paying no heed to any torn seams or popped buttons. Rolanda protested only once, but when he looked up at her from where he knelt as he tugged at the skirt of her under-robe, his face pale and his eyes completely black, she saw something bleak and desperate in his expression, and she said no more. She helped him push her robes off, and her stockings followed.

Severus sucked and nipped at the soft skin of her belly, tongue and teeth teasing her, as his fingers, slippery wet, rubbed her clitoris until she was filled with fire and she came, shuddering. Then she was bent over for him as his cock found her entrance again. He pounded into her, bracing against the edge of the table with one hand, his other hand holding one of her wrists pinned to her back as he pressed her down. It wasn't as fast this time, but it was hard and deep. His breath rasped in his throat, and Rolanda thought there were words in his gasps, but she could only make out the one word "no," which made no sense to her.

She came again, exploding, clawing at the table and moaning, and still Severus continued. She knew when his grasp on her wrist tightened and his thrusts became shallower and uneven that he was going to come. This time, he rested in her a few moments, releasing her wrist and stroking his fingers through the sweat on her back, letting his cock soften and slide out before he moved away.

Awkwardly, Rolanda stood, somewhat sore, her breasts bruised from the table and her shoulders scraped from the brick, and Severus turned her around and clutched her to himself. His robes were warm, and they were soft against her skin. Other than opening the slit in the skirt of his robe and at some point losing his heavy woollen cloak, Severus had scarcely disarranged his own clothing.

"You probably want to dress," Severus murmured after a few minutes.

Rolanda nodded against his chest. Though she was a fairly petite witch, she rarely felt short, but naked in Severus's arms, surrounded by his voluminous sleeves, she felt quite small, but oddly safe.

Wordlessly, Severus let her go, then he drew his wand and gathered her clothes for her. She took the floating bundle from him...what had been her favourite winter robes, and which now might be good for little more than rags.

"Come up with me whilst I dress?" she asked.

He shook his head and looked toward the Charmed hob. "I'll rescue your dinner if I can."

"I hadn't started the fish yet," Rolanda began.

"Good thing. Go dress." He urged her toward the stairs, and as she was about to mount them, he drew her back and kissed her. He quirked a crooked smile, then patted her bottom as she turned to go up the stairs.

When she came back down, Severus had managed to rescue most of their dinner, though the runner beans were overcooked to the point of grey-green mush, and he had set the table and poured their wine. The fish and the roast were perfect, however, as were the jacket potatoes, and Rolanda was disappointed when Severus ate little of the meal.

She was pleased, though, when she was able to persuade him to spend the night. Severus hadn't ever stayed before, citing Hogwarts' claim on his time. She thought that his agreement that night had less to do with wanting to stay with her than it did with his reluctance to return to the school and the necessity of passing the Dementors on the way in...and perhaps also some degree of defiance on his part. She didn't understand his relationship with the Headmaster at all; on the one hand, Severus seemed to support him in all things, at least publicly, and on the other, he seemed to resent the man and to chafe at his direction. He also seemed to dislike teaching and to find the students little more than irritants.

After they'd begun seeing each other the previous year, she'd asked Severus why he stayed at Hogwarts if he hated it so. Severus had only given a short, harsh laugh in response, and when she pressed him about it again a few days later, he'd told her there was nowhere else for him to be and that his future depended upon his remaining at the school. Rolanda thought it must have something to do with the circumstances under which he had been released by the Ministry after the war...Dumbledore had vouched for him, she knew. Perhaps he was still on some kind of informal parole and might still be open to prosecution or punishment if he weren't employed by Hogwarts.

Rolanda never asked about his time with the Death Eaters...or even whether he had actually been a Death Eater or just had an unfortunate choice of friends. For her, it was sufficient that Dumbledore had defended Severus and cleared him of guilt, and that when they were in school, Severus sometimes had stood up for Barnabas, her younger brother. Although her family was usually Sorted into Slytherin, she'd been Sorted into Ravenclaw. Barney, however, was in Slytherin, and that had been enough to make him a target of some of the nastier Gryffindors. Her brother was a bright, soft, sweet child, curious about people and friendly by nature, and he was unprepared for some people to dislike him simply because he was Slytherin. Sirius Black had found it funny to pull "practical jokes" on the younger Hooch. Never anything truly harmful, and certainly milder than some of the humiliating stunts the wizard had pulled on Severus, but still they were embarrassing for Barney. Severus hadn't precisely taken her brother under his wing, and he'd likely been motivated more by dislike of Black than any fondness for her brother, but Severus had been protective enough of Barney for Rolanda to remember it still and have some measure of gratitude toward him for it.

She wished that Severus were more open with her. They'd been seeing each other since the previous winter, but she felt they were hardly any closer now than they'd been then. He continued to seek her out, and the sex was often fantastic, so she went along with the relationship, such as it was. It was almost always on his schedule, though, and they never really went anywhere. She'd never even been to his house. Over the summer, he had Apparated to Hogsmeade a few times to see her, but he had never invited her to his home. She'd asked him once, jokingly, if he kept a lunatic wife locked in the attic. He had raised an eyebrow, then after a long, silent, uncomfortable moment, he said, "Worse." She didn't know whether he was joking or not.

Despite the often great sex and those moments afterwards when she felt intensely close to Severus, Rolanda didn't think the relationship would last. She hoped that when it ended, neither of them were hurt by it. Most likely, it would just peter out to nothing; she probably wouldn't even note its demise until well after it occurred.

Rather than flying directly home, Rolanda landed in the small park at the end of the high street and stopped in at the butcher's for a string of sausages for her breakfast the next day. On impulse, she asked the butcher for four pounds of stew beef. If Blackie came around, she'd need something for him. If he didn't, she could cook it up with some potatoes, carrots, and parsnips the way her gram used to...maybe Severus would join her.

When she reached her back garden, Rolanda was surprised to find Blackie was waiting for her, almost invisible in the shadows. She didn't see him until he slunk out, his eyes focussed on the brown-wrapped butcher's packages. He looked beaten, weary, and hungry to her, and Rolanda wondered again how he had come to Hogsmeade and why he remained.

"Now where have you been, my friend?" she greeted him. "I thought perhaps you'd found a better cook than I, but I see that I was wrong." She rubbed his head as he sniffed at the packages of meat and sausages. "Yes, there's something here for you, too. Come on in, and I'll cook it up for you."

Rolanda juggled her packages, her wand, and her key as she unlocked her back door and lifted the locking spell. She left the door open behind her as she came in, dropping her things on the table. She took off her heavy cloak and sent it flying to the hooks beside the door as she began unwrapping the stew beef. She looked up to close the door and was surprised to see that Blackie hadn't followed her into the house.

She crossed over to the open door and looked out into the twilight yard. She could just make out Blackie's hulking shape crouched between two overgrown bushes.

"Come on in, Blackie! I've eaten, but I have some supper for you. Come on, lad!" When the dog didn't make a move to come in, Rolanda shook her head and returned to the kitchen, leaving the door just ajar. It was too cold to leave the door open long, but when Blackie smelled his beef frying up, he might change his mind about staying in the garden.

As usual, Ro lit the fire in the fireplace, then she poured herself a glass of wine as she heated a cast-iron frying pan and dropped a couple knobs of butter in it. Blackie could use the extra fat, she thought. Soon the aroma of frying beef filled the kitchen, and Rolanda turned around as she heard the door creak. She smiled to see the dog standing uncertainly on the threshold.

"Well, come in! Gone a few days, and already unsure of your welcome, are you?" Ro asked, rubbing his head as she closed the door behind the dog, locking it, warding it, and throwing the bolt for good measure. With a murdering madman around, one couldn't be too careful.

Rolanda chatted to the dog as she fixed his meal and sipped her wine. "Hogwarts Quidditch season starts in a few weeks. All the teams are looking remarkably strong this year. It should be an exciting season. The traditional rivalries are still as hot as ever...hotter, I think, between Slytherin and Gryffindor than they've been in a while, and that's saying something, because they've always been intense. But there's some kind of personal animosity between Potter and Malfoy...those are the Gryffindor and Slytherin Seekers...that intensifies even the usual Gryffindor-Slytherin rivalry. Hufflepuff is even looking very good this year. Cedric Diggory, who reminds me of his Uncle Curtis, is their Seeker. Wouldn't have pegged him for a Seeker, myself, more of a Chaser like his uncle, but he's an excellent flyer. And as good looking on a broom as his uncle was in his day...I had a crush on Curtis when I was a third-year and he was a sixth-year. Never let him know it, though, of course. Just mooned about. And when he started playing for the Tutshill Tornadoes, I switched my allegiance...temporarily...from the Harpies, which had been my team since I was quite a little girl.

"If you ask me, a spirited Quidditch season is just what Hogwarts needs this year. With the Dementors guarding the grounds and the staff on edge about Black...and plenty of the students, too...some well-played, competitive games will be a good distraction for everyone.

"McGonagall asked me again about staying up at the castle. Dumbledore seems to think it would be better, but honestly, I can't see Sirius Black bothering about me. If I got

in his way somehow, then he might slaughter me and anyone around me, but how likely is that?"

Blackie whined and gave a sharp, low bark.

"Exactly right! Not very likely. Now that it's getting dark so much earlier, I did promise Minerva that I would stay up at the castle from now on when I would otherwise be returning home after dark. I don't fancy having to pass through the gates in the gloom with Dementors on either side. They might just get a taste for a bit of soul-sucking and not care who it is." Rolanda shuddered. "So I'll be up at the castle on Hallowe'en next week. Not that that means anything to you, but if I'm not here ... well, I'll be back the next day and can feed you then, hmm?"

Blackie sat up and barked, and Ro laughed.

"Here you go, my lad." She filled a plate with well-seared beef and some warmed-up fried potatoes. "It's not steak, but it should still sit nice on your tummy. I have more for your breakfast, as well."

She pulled her chair up next to him and stroked the dog's back as he ate, feeling every vertebra in his spine. "You should really come around more often. You're going to waste away to nothing."

Continuing to lap and chew, Blackie gave a low whine.

"Surely someone must be missing you, looking for you," Rolanda said with a sigh, fondling the dog's great ears as he finished his meal and sank to the floor beside her.

"I've not done anything to try to figure out how to get you back where you belong. I'm not even sure how I'd do that. I *have* been looking in the *Prophet* to see whether anyone's missing a big black dog, but I haven't seen any adverts about lost dogs, except for Madam Marsh's missing Pekinese, and you're definitely not a Peke."

Blackie yapped and licked her hand.

Rolanda picked up the dog's bowl and sent it flying over to the sink. With a wave of her wand, she started the dishes to washing.

"Well, I'll think more about how to find you a home tomorrow."

Blackie gave a low moan, almost a growl, then leaned his head against her leg.

"I can't give you a home, lad. Wish I could. But stay here tonight ... we'll see what the future holds, hmm?"

Hallowe'en, Quidditch, and Dementors

Chapter 3 of 11

Rolanda continues to feed her stray whenever she sees him. Sirius Black attacks Griffindor Tower. The Quidditch season starts.



Hallowe'en, Quidditch, and Dementors

The morning of October thirty-first dawned with crisp frost bright on the grass. Rolanda rubbed the sleep from her eyes and yawned as she stepped back from her bedroom window and hopped over Blackie's large sleeping form on her hooked rug. A light breakfast for her that morning, she thought, and something a bit more substantial for Blackie.

She hadn't seen him in almost a week when he'd shown up on her doorstep the night before, just as she was about to go to bed. He looked worse than he had when she'd last seen him, impossibly thinner, and his paws in almost as bad shape as they'd been when she'd first met him. She fed him what she had in her cupboards...which wasn't much, since she was planning on staying at the castle until Tuesday and she hadn't done any shopping. She'd begun to think that Blackie had found his way back home, wherever that was, but evidently not.

She was just making the dog a bowl of fried eggs, milk, and porridge when she heard his claws clattering against bare wood as he limped heavily down the stairs.

"I don't know how you keep going," Rolanda said as Blackie came into the kitchen. She shook her head. "You're turning into skin and bones. Even worse than another friend of mine. Don't you have any sense in that big head of yours?" she asked, putting down his breakfast bowl. "Surely you must have enough sense of self-preservation to *eat* regularly. You come by here, you know you'll get a meal from me. You shouldn't wander so."

Blackie flopped down next to his bowl. He lapped at his breakfast, then seeming to gather a little strength, he stood up to gobble it down.

Hooch shook her head. "I don't know what to do with you. You know ... today's a Hogsmeade Sunday. I have chaperone duty in the morning, but after lunch, I'm heading up to the castle. If you're here then, I'll take you along with me. I can at least look after you for another day or two. You can stay in my room, eh? I'll sneak you some goodies from the Hallowe'en feast. No one the wiser." She winked at him.

The dog looked up eagerly as if he had understood what she was saying. "Rrrrruff!" His tail thumped the floor happily.

That morning as she patrolled Hogsmeade, looking out for students out-of-bounds or misbehaving, Rolanda thought she saw Blackie a few times, peeking out of alleyways or slipping away around a shadowy corner, almost like a ghost. He was probably both interested in all of the activity in the village that day and a bit frightened by it.

She was glad to get back to her flat for lunch. Her fingers were frozen, and her old Quidditch injuries ached with the damp. The Wizarding Wireless was predicting wind and rain for the first week of November. She'd have to see Poppy about a potion. Quidditch games played in high winds and driving rain were exciting...for anyone who could follow what was going on in such weather...but Rolanda knew from experience that flying in the rain exacerbated her otherwise minor aches. She couldn't let a few old injuries distract her, especially since Slytherin were scheduled to play Gryffindor, and there would surely be a few fouls on both sides.

Blackie showed up just as Hooch was standing at the table, shaping a few burgers for their lunch. She looked up from her work and was startled to see a large, dark shape looming on the other side of her kitchen window. Her breath caught for a moment before she realised it was just the dog standing on his hind legs. For a moment, through the lacy curtains, it had seemed that a shaggy-haired drifter was spying on her, and it was with relief that she saw it had been just a trick of the light.

"Merlin, Blackie!" Rolanda exclaimed as she opened the door to him. "Don't scare me like that! Just scratch at the door when you want to come in. No harm in scratching the paint up, and I won't be having a heart attack thinking there's an axe-murderer lurking about!"

Blackie, seeming to know that he'd upset her, nuzzled her and licked her hands.

"All right, all right!" Rolanda laughed. "I'll have to wash my hands again...I'm sure you could taste the beef on them. We're having burgers for lunch today. They'll be ready in a jiff."

As the two of them ate...Blackie, three large burgers, and Rolanda one more moderate-sized one sandwiched between a couple slices of bread...Rolanda said, "It's a good thing you're here. I'm going up to Hogwarts. We'll walk up together, right? I don't want you going the next few days without a decent meal. I don't know what you find to eat when you don't show up...rats or something equally disgusting, no doubt."

Blackie looked up at her, drooling a bit, a doggie grin on his face, then yapped.

"Thought as much. Well, I'll just do the washing up, then I've got to get a bag with a few things and we can leave."

But when Rolanda closed the door behind them and set down her bag and broomstick to lock and ward the door, Blackie took off, and by the time that Ro had gone around to the front of the house, the dog was nowhere to be seen. Frustrated, she decided to fly back to Hogwarts, low and slow, looking for Blackie as she flew, but she caught not a glimpse of him.

"I guess he's not really very domesticated, after all," she grumbled to herself. "Bloody dog. He'll starve himself." She chastised herself, though, for not having tried harder to find his owners, or for not having tried to find him a new owner, at least.

As usual, Hooch dismounted about twenty yards from the main gates. Dreading passing between the two gruesome sentries, she shivered and picked up her bag. Then she froze, listening. An odd sound ... the hair stood up on the back of her neck. Now a crashing in the bushes...Hooch drew her wand and spun around. But it was just Blackie, panting with exertion as he burst through the weeds at the side of the road.

Rolanda let out a deep breath she hadn't known she'd been holding, lowered her wand, and put her other hand on her chest. "That's the second time you've frightened me today, lad. You'll take years off me if you keep on like this! Come on!"

His chest still heaving as he caught his breath, Blackie walked beside her, close as could be, almost leaning against her. As they approached the gates, Ro called out the password to the sentries, "*Jelly baby!*" They weren't supposed to shout the password, in case Black were lurking about, but almost everyone did anyway, too terrified that they might be mistaken for a fugitive if they waited one moment too long to give the day's password to the Dementors standing guard.

Trembling and cold to her core, Rolanda used her wand to open the gate. She and Blackie passed through together, and once the gate was closed behind them, they both hurried up the drive toward the castle.

"Good thing you're a dog, Blackie. You have no idea how horrible those things are...or maybe you do." She looked down at the dog speculatively. He was shivering, but he was exhausted and undernourished, and the wind was sharp. "Come on, I'll show you my rooms. They're not bad, though I've not got a full suite, since I don't stay at the castle often, but I have a tiny sitting room, a bedroom, and a rather decent bath. And a very big bed." Hooch grinned. Perhaps she might be sharing her bed that night...and not with a dog. Severus was always in a bad mood on Hallowe'en, but she might be able to put him in a better one ...

"I like to enter and leave through the North Tower door," Rolanda said as she rounded the castle, bypassing the great oak front doors. "Closer to my rooms...at least, it feels closer."

She drew a large iron key from her cloak pocket. "Never used to have to lock it during the day," she grumbled to herself. "Hope they catch Black so things go back to normal again. At least it doesn't lock from the inside...rather convenient for going out for an evening spin on the ol' broomstick. Though I doubt I'll be doing that again until they've caught the bleedin' nutter and sent the Dementors back where they belong."

Rolanda led Blackie up a narrow stone staircase that spiralled up the tower. At the second floor, she opened a scarred old door and stepped out into a corridor lit with a few torches.

"And here we are," Rolanda said, stopping at the first door on the right. "*Quodpot.*" At her password, the door clicked, and Ro pushed it open.

She waved her wand as she entered, bringing up the lamps. "Welcome to my home away from home, Blackie." She turned to see Blackie peering around the corner into the room. "It's okay, boy! Come on in!"

Blackie took a few tentative steps into the tiny sitting room, sniffing at the threshold, then darting in and making a snuffling circuit of the room, sniffing everything, including, it seemed, every inch of the little sofa that dominated the centre of the room.

Hooch laughed. "I hope it meets with your approval!" She opened the bedroom door for him, and Blackie repeated his olfactory inspection there and again in the bathroom. When he was finished, he returned to the sitting room and flopped down on the floor in front of the empty fireplace. He was asleep within seconds, it seemed.

Rolanda read as Blackie slept. A little before six o'clock, she closed her book and gently woke the dog, who yipped in surprise when she touched him.

"Time for you to make a visit before I go to the Hallowe'en feast."

Blackie dutifully followed her down the narrow spiral staircase, seeming to have more trouble going down than up, and once, Hooch had to grab at the iron handrail to keep herself from falling when he slipped and collided with her legs.

"Here, you go first, or we'll both take a tumble," she said.

Ro stood in the doorway while Blackie did his business, and she was pleased when he showed no inclination to wander off, but came back in as soon as he was through.

"Now, I'll bring you some treats back with me from the feast," she whispered as they returned to her rooms, "but you'll have to wait until then to eat. I haven't got a kitchen here. I'll leave you a bowl of water, though."

As she closed the door to her suite, she looked back at the sleeping dog with a twinge of guilt, but she reminded herself that she'd be bringing him a good dinner. Besides, she had to eat, too, and possibly arrange with Severus for a late-night visit after the students were squared away.

A few hours later, sated from the feast and with her robe pockets filled with a couple Cornish pasties, slices of roast wrapped in a linen napkin, and several chipolatas similarly wrapped, Rolanda made her way back up to her room.

"Quodpot." The door clicked, and she pushed it open.

Blackie was standing on the sofa shivering. He barked loudly and jumped down, then raced out the door, practically bowling Hooch over. She heard his paws scratching at the door to the stairway.

"All right, all right! I thought with a pee before I left, you'd be fine until now. I suppose I should be grateful you didn't have an accident whilst I was gone."

She opened the door for him, and Blackie immediately flung himself down the stairs, his nails skittering on the age-smoothed stone. Ro followed as quickly as she could, fearing that one or both of them would break their necks at the speed Blackie was moving.

Now he was at the door at the base of the tower, whining and moaning. Ro waved her wand to open the door for him before she even reached the bottom of the stairs. The wind howled through the open door, and she shivered as she stepped through it, expecting to see Blackie with his leg up, peeing against the tower wall, but she didn't. She could just make out his shadowy form as it raced away from the castle, haring off toward the Forbidden Forest.

"Damn!" Rolanda shook her head. "I should have bought him a collar and lead. He'll come into all kinds of trouble in the forest now." A hollow feeling in the pit of her stomach and a lump in her throat, Ro closed the door and headed back upstairs.

She was just putting a freshness charm on the food she'd pilfered when there was a pounding on her door. Leaving the newly wrapped pasties and meat on her small sideboard, Hooch walked over and opened the door. She had expected Snape...though he usually rapped decisively, rather than this incessant, frantic pounding. She was quite surprised, then, to find Vector at her door, white and shaking.

"Come in, Septima! Whatever is the matter! You look like you could use a drink. I have some Old Ogden's..."

"No time for that! We're to search the castle...I half died of fright before I got here, I'll tell you, Ro! We're to go in pairs." Vector shuddered and grasped the doorframe.

"Search? For what?"

"It's Black. Sirius Black. He's been here. In the castle. He tried to break into Gryffindor!"

~*~*~*~

To Hooch's relief, she saw Blackie two mornings later, skirting the edge of the Forbidden Forest, a large cat at his side. He didn't come when she called him, but she returned to her rooms, took the food she'd been saving for him, and went back out, braving the wind. She finally found him behind Hagrid's pumpkin patch, apparently communing with a big ginger tom, the two of them crouching face-to-face, gazing into each others' eyes. Ro snorted a laugh, startling the two. The cat, which had a squashed face and a bottle-brush tail, streaked off, but Blackie just clambered into a sitting position, then held up a paw to her, whining lightly, his head cocked to one side.

"Ah, you sweet-talker, you! I should give you what-for, dashing off like that the other night! You might've met up with a madman...or worse!" She took his paw and shook it. "Brought you a little something to eat," she said, pulling the parchment-wrapped food from her cloak pocket. "I'll be staying at the castle for a while...the Headmaster wants me to oversee some Quidditch practices and help keep an eye on Potter...so I'll try to bring something out to you every day whilst I'm here."

She watched as the gigantic dog made quick work of three Cornish pasties, several slices of cold beef, and a half dozen sausages.

After that, Rolanda made it a habit to carry a few sandwiches in her cloak pockets whenever she went out, but she didn't always see the big dog. On Thursday afternoon, when the rain let up a bit, she found him sniffing around Hagrid's hut again, probably scenting Fang, the gamekeeper's old boarhound.

"Here you are, lad. Chicken sandwiches this time." She rubbed Blackie's head as he ate. "I wish you'd stay where I can find you, Blackie. I worry about you."

He made a soft sound in the back of his throat, then bumped his head against her leg without pausing in his meal.

"The big Quidditch match is in a couple days. Supposed to be Slytherin-Gryffindor, but I guess there's some question of whether Slytherin can play, what with their Seeker having a bad arm." Hooch snorted. "Bad arm, my arse! That little wanker is playing up his injury for all it's worth. Poor Hagrid's beside himself ... but it's not my decision whether Malfoy can play or not. If he can't, then it'll be Gryffindor-Hufflepuff. Still an exciting match, I'd say."

Blackie gave a low bark then loped off towards the forest. Hooch sighed. She supposed he was destined to remain a stray.

Although she had planned to go home to her flat in Hogsmeade on Friday afternoon and return on Saturday for the match, the weather was so bad, Hooch decided to stay at the castle rather than have to travel back and forth in it. She'd get wet enough during the Quidditch match; no sense in getting drenched three times.

When she went out through the North Tower door on her way to the Quidditch stadium on Saturday morning, she was surprised to find Blackie, soaked to the skin, crouched in a slightly protected area near the tower wall. He immediately leapt up and trotted along after her.

"I've got some food for you, Blackie-lad, but I'm on my way to the stadium and I'll feed you there. You can stay in my office during the match. Dry out a bit."

After he ate, though, Blackie insisted on being let out, whining and crying at the door until Hooch gave in and let him out into the storm. She was resigned to his wandering by then. She'd just have to continue to carry sandwiches in her pockets for him. Rolanda grinned to herself. Hopefully, she'd remember to change them out occasionally. Even with a good freshness charm, a sandwich could begin to get a bit rank after a while!

The game was exhilarating, and with the potion that Poppy had given her at breakfast, Rolanda didn't notice any little twinges or aches at all. Potter was quite the flyer, but Diggory had more experience on him. As she flew swiftly up and down the pitch, watching Bludgers, Quaffles, Beaters, and Chasers for fouls and illegal moves, Hooch tried to spot the Snitch herself, but without becoming distracted from the game. The wind and the rain were sufficiently distracting, and she knew that it was quite a job for the young players to stay on their brooms and on course. She smiled as she saw Blackie in the upper stands, watching the game. What a wizard of a dog he was! He even liked Quidditch.

Suddenly, she felt cold, icy cold creeping through her, as though the chill rain had soaked through her skin into her very organs and frozen there. Her whistle fell from her mouth as she looked down to see Dementors massing on the Quidditch pitch below. Dozens. Maybe a hundred. She tried to put her whistle in her mouth and blow to call for time-out, to have the players fly to the stands behind the staff, but she felt as though she was moving in slow motion. And then there was Potter, losing his grip, slipping, falling ... her wand, where was her wand? But Dumbledore was there on the pitch, faster than you could blink an eye, slowing Potter's fall, then, turning, casting a magnificent Patronus; a moment later, several more leapt from his wand simultaneously, all flying toward the Dementors, driving them back, forcing them away. And as Potter landed with a muffled thud, Diggory let out a triumphant cry and held the Snitch aloft. He whirled, stopping when he saw the chaos below him, Dementors fleeing from great silvery birds, Harry on the ground, others rushing toward him.

Rolanda swallowed, then blew her whistle shrilly. "Game to Hufflepuff," she said, her voice cracking, almost inaudible. She cleared her throat. "Game to Hufflepuff!"

Diggory flew towards her, holding out the Snitch. "No, no. Time out, Madam Hooch! Rematch! Rematch!"

"You caught the Snitch, Diggory," Hooch said curtly, "within time."

"But the Dementors...Potter fell...it's not sporting..."

"It's the rules, Mr Diggory." She left him hovering, his hand closed around the Snitch, as his teammates flew toward him.

The Firebolt

Chapter 4 of 11

Rolanda has new tasks assigned her at Hogwarts, including helping Flitwick check a new Firebolt for curses. Her relationship with Severus hits a new low with a bitter argument. She keeps an eye out for Blackie whenever she's out on the grounds.



The Firebolt

After the incident at Hallowe'en, it had seemed hardly any safer at Hogwarts than in Hogsmeade, and then after the Dementors' invasion of the Quidditch pitch the following weekend, Rolanda decided only to stay up at Hogwarts when she had to be there to supervise a practice or teach flying. She'd rather risk running into Black in Hogsmeade than to be any closer to the Dementors than she needed to be. Besides, Black was obviously focussed on Hogwarts...and he'd shown that in addition to being able to break out of Azkaban, the most secure wizarding prison in the world, he was able to break *into* Hogwarts, one of the most secure places anywhere in the wizarding world, guarded by those same dreadful Dementors...and under Albus Dumbledore's nose, too.

She rarely saw Blackie after that, and when she did, it was more likely to be up at the school, where she would feed him a couple of sandwiches before he went off again. Between Halloween and the Christmas holidays, only once did he turn up at her door in Hogsmeade. It was late at night, and Severus had just left in a huff.

They'd had sex, begun dinner, and then rowed. Severus was in a terrible temper, and whatever she said, he took the wrong way. Finally, his meal half eaten, he had grabbed his cloak and Disapparated. Ro sat there, her head in her hands, willing her heart to calm itself, slowing her breathing, swallowing hard against the urge to cry...out of anger, not grief or hurt...when there came a whining and scraping at the door.

It was Blackie, footsore and shivering with cold. Ro hugged the dog, then Summoned a large towel and rubbed him down before giving him the remains of the dinner.

She poured herself a large firewhisky and watched Blackie scarf down his dinner like he hadn't eaten in weeks. He likely hadn't, either. Ro sighed. She couldn't help Severus...the man didn't want to be helped or understood, she decided...and it seemed she couldn't help this dog, either, not without locking him up during the day and taking him out on a leash to do his business. Perhaps she should do just that. But she didn't know how much longer she'd be staying in her flat, and keeping him at Hogwarts seemed impractical...not to mention that the dog had seemed to hate being confined in her rooms there.

There was talk now that the MLE patrolling Hogsmeade would be replaced by Dementors after dark. Rosmerta said that one of her regulars, a Hit Wizard named Murphy, told her that everyone suspected that Sirius Black was getting help from someone.

"Someone has to be hiding him, after all. Only makes sense," Rosmerta said with a nod. "And feeding him. We haven't had break-ins. Nobody's missing any food or clothes. Crime's actually gone down since he broke out, especially in Hogsmeade."

"He'd been spotted in a Muggle village earlier this autumn, though," Rolanda said. "He might be lying low in some Muggle place, stealing from Muggles to live, maybe staying in an abandoned Muggle building. Or even on an old farm, some old shed somewhere. This cold weather, he'd have to stay out of the elements. He might be able to escape the Dementors, but he's still just a wizard. He needs to eat and sleep, and somewhere to do it."

"I don't know about that, but he must have help from somewhere. There's a lot of black hearts still out there, plenty that didn't get caught when You-Know-Who was defeated."

"Anyone who would help Black...they'd have to be evil." It wasn't common knowledge outside of the Hogwarts staff that Black was targeting young Harry Potter, wanting to finish the job his master had left undone, so Rolanda didn't say anything more. But wanting to kill a child ... mad or not, Black was evil, and so was anyone who would help him.

"Maybe they're under the *Imperio*," Rosmerta suggested. "Don't even know what they're doing, or can't help it. It did happen last time, even if a lot of people used it as an excuse to hide their willing complicity."

"Could be." The conversation moved on to the damper that the hunt for Black was putting on businesses in Hogsmeade, and how much worse it would be if Dementors were deployed after dark. People wouldn't come to Hogsmeade to do Christmas shopping and then have dinner at the Three Broomsticks afterwards with a Hit Wizard on every corner and Dementors swarming the streets in the evenings.

If Dementors were going to begin patrolling the Hogsmeade streets at night, Rolanda decided she'd just as soon be safe...or safer...in her rooms in the castle. The mere thought of them passing by her little house gave Ro the willies. At least at Hogwarts, Dumbledore was keeping them out of the castle...and they'd not enter the grounds again, either. She didn't think she'd ever seen the Headmaster as angry as he'd been when the Dementors came into the Quidditch stadium.

In fact, her row with Severus had begun over the Dementors and security at Hogwarts. He thought that the Dementors should have been allowed in to search the castle, which the Headmaster had forbidden, and he was likewise certain that *someone* at the school was helping Black. It was clear to Rolanda that Severus suspected Remus Lupin of helping Black and giving him entrance to the school on Hallowe'en. Rolanda thought that was nonsense and told Snape so. Just because the poor man was a werewolf didn't mean that he was in league with a Dark wizard...even if that wizard had been a childhood friend. After all, Remus had been friends with James and Lily, as well, and it was far more likely that he resented, or even *hated*, Sirius Black for his part in their deaths.

What had really angered Severus, though, was when she had said, "Remus would be less likely than you would be to help Black, when it comes right down to it, Severus. After all, you always hated James Potter in school and you clearly don't like his son, and there was a time when you had a lot of Death Eater friends..."

Severus had said a few choice words, then Disapparated. Ro hadn't meant to sound accusatory, but she was sure that was how it came out. But Severus hated reminders of his past, discussion of his future, and, in fact, most conversation about his current life. Unless the topic was completely impersonal, it seemed that conversation with Severus became more difficult with each passing month, not easier, and she felt that while she should be getting to know him better, they were no closer than they had been. The sex was still undeniably good, though.

She let out a long sigh and got up to pour the remainder of the peas into Blackie's emptied bowl. Her relationship with Snape was on a downward spiral, and she didn't see a Wronski feint at the end of it. Just a big crash.

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"This is a fine broomstick," Flitwick said, caressing the Firebolt's smooth, narrow handle.

"It is." Rolanda's eyes gleamed. "I'll enjoy taking this thing apart and putting it back together again."

"Let's start, though, with some Dark-detecting spells, and also make sure there are no booby traps on it that will go off if we start to dismantle the charms."

"You do that, then. I'll just read over the specs again. I wish they'd sent us a more detailed description, but they kept on about 'proprietary charms' and 'intellectual property.' They would have had conniption fits if they'd known we plan to strip the charms and lay them back on again." Hooch grinned.

"Good you still have friends in the business," Flitwick said. He waved his wand and the broomstick glowed. "Do you ever miss it?"

"I miss the money, and I miss the camaraderie, and sometimes I miss the work, but not often. It was very repetitive. Unless you're in R and D, charming broomsticks can get boring, particularly when they piece out the charms the way they do at Nimbus. I was on tail stability and anti-hover-drift charms till I thought I would scream from boredom. I'd sometimes trade off with someone and get to cast braking charms all day. Fun," she said with a roll of her eyes, remembering her first job after leaving the Harpies.

Flitwick laughed. "But I'm sure you were very good at it. You were always excellent with your charms, very precise."

"Precise, but without any artistry, was how they put it at Nimbus. Which is why I never was moved into R and D," she said with a sigh. "I had a lot of good ideas, too, and it was discouraging to make suggestions and see others get to implement them...and then have to cast whatever they came up with over and over and over again."

"Well, this should prove much more fun for us both!"

"Serious business, too," Hooch said, sobering. She shook her head. "I never liked Black in school, but I never would have taken him for someone who would murder children. If this is from him ..."

"Well, if it is from him, we'll take care of the hexes, make a report to the Ministry, and hope they don't decide to take the broom as evidence. Then we can weave the charms back together and give the broomstick back to young Mr Potter."

"I doubt that Minerva would approve of that," Rolanda said. "I think that if we found one hex on the Firebolt, she'd always fear that there was some other jinx on it that we hadn't discovered and taken care of."

"Then let's hope that it's just a particularly nice Christmas gift from some wealthy patron who simply wishes to remain anonymous and that there are no charms on it that shouldn't be!"

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Sitting on the bench outside Greenhouse Three, glad that the late January sun was shining even if the breeze was bitter cold, Rolanda held out the final roast beef sandwich, which Blackie swallowed down in three gulps.

"Well, the Deputy Headmistress has found something to keep me busy for a while, anyway, as long as I'm here. I've been working with Flitwick to strip down a new Firebolt and test it for hexes. So far, we haven't found anything, but we're going at it systematically, and Flitwick checks in between each charm to see whether there's a booby trap waiting for us."

"Wwrrrrrowf!" Blackie cocked his head.

Rolanda laughed. Sometimes she could swear the dog understood her...and that she understood him, which was even sillier. "Why? Because someone gave Potter a new Firebolt for Christmas and no one has a clue who sent it. McGonagall has even asked around, discreetly, to see whether some wealthy Gryffindor may have sent it anonymously, but no luck. So she and Dumbledore are presuming that Sirius Black sent it to him and that the first time he flies it, it will kill him. We've checked for all the obvious hexes, a Hurling hex, a Plummeting jinx, an Accelerating Anti-Braking hex, and now we're dismantling the charms and checking for more subtle damage."

"Grrrrrowf!" Blackie stood stiffly.

"Nothing at all wrong with the flying, stabilisation, and braking charms. We thought they may have been tampered with, subtly altered, but so far we haven't seen any sign that the Firebolt isn't exactly as it was when it left the factory. And a gorgeous bit of workmanship it is, too. Of course," Hooch said with a wink, "the final test will involve flying her. Both Flitwick and I will have to give her extensive test flights. And if things go as they continue to, I think we'll be able to take that broomstick through her paces and return her to Potter before the next Gryffindor match."

"Owf!" Blackie wagged his tail.

"Indeed!" Ro rubbed his head, then she sighed when the dog turned and trotted off for the Forbidden Forest again. She watched as the chunky ginger cat slipped from the shadows and followed his friend into the wood. One day, she thought, she'd see the dog for the last time, and it would disappear into the forest and never come out again. It would freeze to death or die of hunger. Next time that she had the chance, she'd get him into the castle again, and this time, she'd keep him in her rooms. Time to buy a collar and leash ...

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"I'd like to thank you for all of the help you're giving us with Harry," Dumbledore said. "I'm glad that, thanks to the time you're spending, he can continue with Quidditch."

"I'm happy to help, Professor," Rolanda replied.

"I understand from Minerva that you and Filius are almost done testing Harry's new Firebolt."

"Yes, we are. I don't think there's a thing wrong with it. We want to take a few test flights with it first, just to be sure, but we should be done with it in a day or two."

"Very good! Then Harry will be able to practise with it before the upcoming match with Ravenclaw."

Ro nodded. "And I'll be happy to continue supervising their practices for as long as you wish, though I don't do very much but sit there and watch."

"You're there in case of trouble, though, and that's what's important," Dumbledore replied. "In fact, I want to teach you a spell, just in case we encounter any more problems with the Dementors. I don't believe we will, but best not to take any chances. You know of the Patronus Charm?"

"That was what you cast down on the Quidditch pitch?" she asked, nodding. "I've heard of it, but I had never seen it before. Thankfully, this is the first time in my life I've had any contact with Dementors."

"Indeed. And let us hope you never need to use this charm against them...and that you have no occasion to spend much time in the company of Dementors. However, if you should ever need to fend one off, best to be prepared," Dumbledore said with a smile.

For the next hour, Dumbledore tutored her in the art of casting a Patronus. By the end of it, she was able to cast a silvery streak of something, and Dumbledore was pleased with her progress...though she was annoyed she hadn't mastered it immediately.

"Come by again tomorrow. Four o'clock? We can have tea. I'll have the house-elves send up scones, jam, and clotted cream. That will put us both in quite a fine frame of mind to cast a Patronus!"

Rolanda grinned. She had quite a weakness for clotted cream...though her mother's home-made always tasted best to her.

The next day, following their scones with strawberry jam and clotted cream, Rolanda finally cast a Patronus that had some shape to it. It appeared to be a bird of some sort, which Albus told her was quite fitting for one who was as comfortable in the air as she was. A few more tries, conjuring up the happiest memories she could...being chosen by the Harpies as starting Seeker was a memory that was overlaid with the sadness of having lost her position after her injury, and didn't work well...and the Patronus seemed stronger, a bit more corporeal, but still not as substantial as Dumbledore's phoenix Patronus.

Finally, Ro decided to choose a more recent memory, one that conjured a more immediate sense of happiness. Her relationship with Severus was too complicated to offer a truly happy memory ... Blackie. Blackie snuffling her hand, then licking her face after she'd fed him a turkey sandwich a few days before, his simple gratitude filling her with contentment rather than any ecstatic joy, and yet ... perhaps that was a more satisfying sort of happiness.

She cast. "*Expecto patronum!*" Silver light flashed from her wand, and rather than the foggy, somewhat amorphous Patronuses she had been casting, out flew a bird, a kestrel, flying to the high ceiling of Dumbledore's office, then circling it before returning to her, landing on her arm, and gradually fading. She laughed in delight, and Albus joined her.

"Wonderful! Wonderful, my dear! Congratulations!"

"I want to try it again," Rolanda said, her smile stretching from ear to ear.

"Of course you may!"

Ro cast three more Patronuses, each one satisfyingly corporeal.

"Now tomorrow, we'll practise again," Dumbledore said. "Remus has a lovely Boggart. With any luck, you can get it to appear as a Dementor...just work up a nice fear of them and concentrate on that when it pops out, and whatever your real worst fear may be, it should be supplanted by the more immediate fear of Dementors."

"I don't think that will be difficult. They are dreadful things." Ro shuddered. "It won't take much imagination at all."

"Very good, my dear. Till tomorrow, then!"

Ro's practice with Remus's Boggart went quite well, so well that the third time it popped out, she could barely conjure any fear of Dementors, and instead of a Dementor, it appeared as a huge wall of orange flame. For a moment, she was so startled, she forgot she was dealing with a Boggart. Just as Dumbledore stepped forward, wand raised to assist her, though, she came to herself.

"*Riddikulus!*" The flame shrunk down and became a tiny flame at the tip of a pink candle on a little fairy cake. She laughed and blew it out.

She was prepared to face Dementors if they came onto the Quidditch pitch again.

In Gryffindor

Chapter 5 of 11

Rolanda continues to supervise Harry's Quidditch practice. Severus fumes. Blackie attends another Quidditch match. Sirius Black attacks again.



In Gryffindor

"Why didn't you wake me up?" Hooch demanded, hands on her hips. Ron just shrugged and grinned, giving the Firebolt back to Harry.

"Sorry, Madam Hooch," Harry said quickly.

Ron nodded. "Yeah, sorry, Madam Hooch!"

"You two really ought to take things more seriously. What if Sirius Black showed up?"

"You'd wake up quick enough," Harry reassured her.

"Hmph, you don't know that. A Killing Curse takes only a moment to cast. I could wake up too late, and *you* could wake up dead! Not much point in having a Firebolt when you're dead. Now straight back up to the castle, no arguments. You're out too late as it is."

Harry and Ron apologised again, and Hooch stood at the entrance to the Quidditch stadium, watching them head back to the castle. Ron cast *alumos*, and she saw Blackie's dark shadow fade into the trees and then the ginger cat tear after him when Ron stooped for a stone.

Damned boys! She'd have a talk with Molly Weasley the next time she saw her; she was certain that Ron's mother wouldn't approve of her son throwing stones at cats. Rolanda strode toward the edge of the forest where she'd seen Blackie and the ginger tom vanish, but although she whistled and called for him, Blackie didn't emerge.

The stray looked worse each time she saw him, and Rolanda didn't understand why he didn't seek her out more often for food. Still, he was surviving. If she could coax him back into the castle, she might be able to look after him.

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Immediately after breakfast, several bangers and a few slices of toast in her cloak pockets, Rolanda left the castle to inspect the Quidditch pitch and check on the Bludgers, Quaffles, and Snitch. She had locked them in her office in the stadium, but it was possible that Black could manage to get into it. After all, he'd had no trouble getting into the castle itself at Hallowe'en. It would take only a few minutes for her to check the balls for jinxes.

Flitwick had teased her a bit when he saw her wrapping up toast and sausages to bring with her, but she just said that sometimes she got a bit peckish before a game, and if it was a long one, they might all miss lunch. Severus, on the other side of Flitwick, had raised a lip in a sneer. He was in a vile mood. They'd had another row the night before when she'd slipped down to the dungeons to see him.

First Snape had been angry with her for not waiting until after curfew to visit him...he didn't want his students to see him having a witch visiting late at night...and then when she mentioned what she'd been doing, he went into a rage about the Firebolt, Potter, Dumbledore, and everything else that was wrong at Hogwarts, culminating with a screed against Sirius Black and the incompetence of the Ministry for Magic.

"He should receive the Kiss the moment he's captured," Severus spat at the end of his rant. "They should have done that twelve years ago."

"That's an awful thing to wish on someone!" Hooch replied. "He never even had a trial, did he? And the same thing could have happened to you...just thrown into Azkaban forever with no trial, or administered the Kiss..."

"But that's *not* what happened to Black, is it? 'Forever' didn't last long enough. Now he's here, bent on murder again, and there's Dumbledore and his half-measures! No good will come of this if Black's not caught soon...and Dumbledore prevented from interfering!"

"I didn't come down here to argue with you about this," Rolanda said, now completely out of any mood to spend time with him.

Severus was silent for a moment, then he said, "This isn't the best time."

"I see that. I'll just return to my rooms."

"I'll walk you up," Severus said, Summoning his teaching cloak.

"No need."

"No, but I want to check all of the doors and patrol the corridors, make sure that no one's where they aren't supposed to be *Potter* in particular. He thinks the rules don't apply to him, and he doesn't care that everyone else at Hogwarts is spending all of their time and energy making sure he doesn't get himself killed: he'll do whatever he likes *whenever* he likes."

Rolanda didn't bother to contradict him...nor to feed his fury with her own unhappiness that Weasley and Potter had let her fall asleep in the Quidditch stadium. Besides, he would think she was negligent and likely have a go at her about that.

They walked up to the second floor and down the side corridors leading to her rooms. As they reached them, Severus reached out and touched Rolanda's shoulder; she turned and looked up at him.

"I am sorry, Rolanda."

Ro nodded. "It's been a difficult time."

She waited for him to say something more, to agree with her, to expand on his apology, but he only brushed her cheek lightly with his fingertips, then nodded to her and left in a swirl of black robes.

Even if they were intimate again, Ro felt that on that night, their relationship had come to an end. She closed her door behind her, sat on her couch in her impersonal Hogwarts rooms, and allowed herself to go numb, her mind blank. There was no point in dwelling on what had been, or what she might have imagined could have been ... there had never been any future for them, and she had known that.

She wished that the Dementors weren't patrolling the perimeter of the grounds and the streets of Hogsmeade. She wanted to be home in her own cosy flat, not here. Perhaps she should go down to the staff room and see if anyone was there and might be up for a drink.

In the end, she decided to take a quick flight around the Quidditch pitch on her Nimbus 2000 and see whether she could find Blackie. She didn't find the dog, but the icy night air refreshed her, and when she went back to her rooms, she was able to get ready for bed just as if it were any other night.

Rolanda was settled into bed with a book by her favourite mystery author, solving a murder in a distillery where the plucky heroine was just finding a body floating in a vat of firewhisky, when she heard her door open. She almost jumped out of her skin, but it was only Severus, of course, letting himself in with the password she'd given him.

He filled her bedroom doorway. "You were out."

"Yes. I took a spin around the Quidditch pitch."

"You oughtn't be out after dark."

"I'm not Harry Potter. Or any other student."

Snape seemed to bite his tongue, and he nodded curtly.

"Was there anything else?" Rolanda set her book on her bedside table.

"No. I thought ..." He shook his head. "No."

"Would you like to stay?"

Severus hesitated. "Best not."

"Right. See you tomorrow, then."

And when she saw him that morning at breakfast and she greeted him cheerfully, he simply frowned and grunted something about bad coffee. Flitwick tried to draw him into conversation about the upcoming Quidditch match, but Severus was surly and monosyllabic, and even little Flitwick knew enough not to try to jolly him out of his mood. At one point, Severus even growled something about the inappropriateness of the Head of Ravenclaw speaking with the Quidditch referee about the upcoming match between Ravenclaw and Gryffindor.

Filius looked genuinely surprised. "We wouldn't..."

"He knows that, Professor," Hooch interrupted. "He's just out of sorts this morning."

"I am not *out of sorts*." Severus scowled.

Well, that was that for her trying to make excuses for his bad behaviour, Rolanda thought.

"We even rushed to finish testing Mr Potter's Firebolt so that he could have it in time to practise before the game!" Filius squeaked, still indignant at any implication that he would try to sway Rolanda to do something underhanded to favour Ravenclaw, or that Rolanda would be amenable to such a suggestion.

It was a relief, then, to stuff some food in her pockets and leave the castle. It was a beautiful day, the sky clear, only the gentlest breeze blowing, wonderful weather for flying. Rolanda was further cheered to see Blackie loping across the grounds to meet her.

"Hello, old boy! Breakfast? Here's a few bangers...ah ah! I'll give you the rest in my office. Come along!"

Blackie trotted beside her, occasionally snuffling one of her pockets, but being fairly patient for a hungry dog.

Once in her office, Rolanda emptied her pockets of sausages and toast. As Blackie wolfed down his breakfast, she pulled out the chest with the Quidditch balls in it. The Bludgers, trembling beneath their straps, were the first ones she tested. They were the most likely to be hexed...and in fact, a jinxed Bludger had once gone after Potter. Potter didn't seem to have much luck. Or else he had a great deal of it. It was hard to tell with Potter.

"Just checking that everything's set and no one's tampered with anything. I want this game to go smoothly: no rogue Bludgers, no Dementors, no Sirius Black."

Blackie whined at the door, and Ro let him out. He relieved himself against the low wall on the Slytherin side of the stands, then trotted over to her expectantly, turning, taking a few paces, then coming back.

"No, lad, I'm not going anywhere until after the game. I want to keep an eye on things. You can stay here with me. Come on! Come on!" She slapped her thigh, and to her relief, Blackie came back and settled down on the floor of her office.

"Now to get comfortable for the next couple of hours." She cast a warming charm on the room, took an apple from one pocket and her mystery novel from the other, and settled down to read.

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To Hooch's delight, when the match was over, Blackie was waiting for her in the shadows near her office.

"Did you get to watch the game, lad? Well played, and no shenanigans, thank goodness...except for that last trick at the end by those Slytherins, but I'd say that the joke was on them," Rolanda said with a laugh as she put the case with the balls back in its cupboard. "I don't envy them. They'll be ruing that little 'Dementor' stunt for some time if Minerva has anything to say about it, which she will."

"Rrowf!"

"Now's time to go back up to the castle, take a shower, and get a little something to eat. Or maybe more than a little something, hmm?"

She was pleased when Blackie trotted along beside her, but when she started to head for the Great Doors, he veered off for the North Tower. She decided to ignore him and hope he would follow her up the steps to the main entrance. When he didn't, she turned and headed around to the North Tower herself. Blackie was sitting up tight to the door and waiting for her.

"You are a creature of habit, I suppose," Rolanda said. "I didn't bring the key with me. You wait here if you want to come in this way."

She tried to get him to follow her around to the front doors, but he just settled down with his nose on his paws. Fifteen minutes later, she returned and opened the door from the inside, half-expecting Blackie to be gone, but he was still where she'd left him.

He happily followed her up the spiral staircase to the narrow hallway where her rooms were.

Rolanda gave her password. "*Comet*."

Blackie trotted cheerfully through the door, checked out the rooms briefly, then settled down on the rug beside Rolanda's bed as she undressed for her shower.

"Well, my guy and I had a final blow-up last night. I think it was the final one, anyway. I don't think I can take his moodiness any longer. Or ... or ... just ... just the sense that ... that he really doesn't ... that he doesn't really care about me." For the first time, tears welled up in Rolanda's eyes, and she dashed them away with the backs of her hands.

Blackie whined and leaned heavily against her bare legs, his head pressed against her tummy.

"Aw, thanks, buddy. You're a comfort, you really are," she said as she rubbed the large dog's ears.

When she came out from the bathroom, towelling herself dry, Blackie was stretched out on the bed, fast asleep. She supposed he was clean enough, but she still felt it wasn't quite hygienic to have the huge dog sleeping with his head on her pillows, drooling. Oh, well.

Rolanda dressed quickly, then went over and petted Blackie. "I'm going down to get us some food. I'll be back in a trice." She bent and kissed his large head.

She returned from the kitchens with a tray laden with far more than she could eat, but she knew that Blackie would appreciate a good meal. He woke up long enough to gulp down a bowl of minestrone soup, a plate mounded high with spaghetti and meatballs, and even half of Ro's bowl of vanilla ice cream.

"Now I think that a nap is in order. All that fresh air...and not sleeping well last night...and I could definitely use one."

Rolanda propped a few pillows behind her head and opened a new book. This one was about wizarding explorations of a jungle in the Amazon. Poppy had sworn it was the most interesting book she'd read in a long time and had loaned it to her. She had to at least make an attempt to read it.

Blackie sat next to the bed, his tail thumping, a doggie smile on his face. He lifted a paw and pulled at the quilt at the edge of the bed.

"No, I think you can be quite comfortable on the rug," Hooch said.

The dog sighed and rested his chin on the edge of the bed, looking at her with sad golden eyes. He sighed again.

"Oh, all right, you drama queen! Hop up!" Hooch scooted over to make room for the huge animal. "But I get the pillows!"

"Mmmmmnnnnhh." Blackie's eyes closed, and soon he was snuffling in his sleep.

Rolanda read the first few pages of the book, but her eyes felt heavier and heavier. Finally, she gave up and put the book down on the other side of her, waved her wand to dim the lamps, and then she joined Blackie in dreamland.

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Hooch stood in the narrow doorway and shivered, wrapping her dressing gown more tightly around herself. She didn't know whether Blackie would come back in after doing his business or not; she could be freezing for nothing. But he might return, and Rolanda smiled at the prospect. Perhaps he would stay with her now. She could work it out. Other staff had had pets over the years. Flitwick had had a pair of budgies when she'd been in school. Besides, she wasn't going to be staying at the castle forever. They'd catch Black sooner or later, and life would go back to normal. Then she and Blackie could share her little flat. It would be good to have company.

Rolanda looked down. "Well, what are you doing here? Come to see your friend, have you?" she asked the ginger cat that had suddenly appeared in the doorway beside her.

The cat sat neatly, his front paws between his toes. He looked up at her and blinked.

"I've seen you with him before. A funny pair you two are, too."

The cat squinted at her and cocked his head, then looked out the door at Blackie, who was coming back.

"Ttthhhtthhhtttthhchhrrroagh," the cat said, standing.

Blackie bent and nudged the cat's head with his nose as Rolanda closed the door behind him.

The tom looked back up at Rolanda, blinking slowly, then he looked at Blackie and stood.

Blackie gave a short, sharp bark, then began trotting down the hall away from the door, following the ginger cat.

"Hey there, you two! Stop! Blackie, that's not the way up..." Hooch ran along behind them, cursing her loose slippers. "Stop!" She grabbed Blackie by his neck, wishing she'd put a collar on him.

Blackie shook her off and continued to follow the cat, who was now racing down another side corridor.

"Bloody animals!" Hooch followed them a ways further, but then stopped after they took another turn ahead. *"Damn! Now he'll get lost, Filch will find him and complain, and just ... damn!"*

Rolanda, downcast, made her way back up to her rooms. She couldn't even manage to keep a bloody dog happy enough to want to stay with her.

Rather than stay up and read as she'd planned, Ro poured herself a nightcap, swallowed it down, then, after opening her door one last time and looking down the hall just in case Blackie was coming back, she extinguished all of her lamps and went to bed, trying not to dwell on the state of her life at the moment.

The Whomping Willow had come up to the castle and was whomping her windows, shaking her rooms ... No, no, she'd been dreaming. There was a pounding on her door again, then a shout, and she heard it open. She snatched up her wand from her bedside table.

"What the bloody hell do you think you're doing, Snape, barging in here like this in the middle..." Rolanda stopped short when she saw that Severus wasn't alone. Vector was with him.

"Here," he said with a sneer, turning to Vector, "don't bother to say thanks." He stormed off.

"What is it, Septima?" Rolanda asked, grabbing her dressing gown.

"I ... I asked if someone could come with me this time." The witch was shaking. "The Headmaster sent Snape."

"Not Black again?!"

"Yes," Septima said with a nod. "We're supposed to search. You and I are to meet Madam Pince in the library to search there, and then you're supposed to bring a broom with you and help Hagrid and Dumbledore search the grounds as soon as we're finished in the library." She shuddered. "I don't know what we're supposed to do if we find him. The man is mad!"

Rolanda put on a pair of socks and stout shoes as Vector was talking, then she pulled out a heavy robe and put that on over her dressing gown.

"Where was he this time?" Rolanda Summoned her broomstick and her flying cloak as they stepped out the door.

"In Gryffindor! Right in the boys' dormitory! Tried to kill Harry Potter with a knife, he did, and got Ronald Weasley instead, who alarmed everyone else."

"Ronald? Is he badly hurt?"

Vector shook her head. "I don't think he was hurt at all. Just frightened out of his wits, like anyone would be. Black was scared away when he shouted."

"Not much of a maniacal murderer if the shout of a thirteen-year-old boy scares him off," Hooch said with a frown.

"He's not right in the head, Ro. You can't expect him to act sensibly," Vector replied.

"How on earth did he get *into* Gryffindor? Blast the portrait to smithereens?" Hooch asked.

Vector swallowed and shook her head. "He had the password. All of the passwords for the week. Neville Longbottom lost them; Black either found them or stole them. *He must have been lurking about in the castle all this time, just waiting for his chance!*" she whispered, glancing nervously at the deep shadows behind a suit of armour.

"Great Merlin!"

"Speaking of passwords," Septima said, "why did Snape know yours?"

Hooch shot her a quick glance. "A long story. Now over."

When it was obvious that no other explanation would be forthcoming, Vector just raised her eyebrows and said, "Oh, all right, then."

Rolanda kept an eye out for Blackie as they walked through the castle, and she wished that she had been assigned to search the castle and not the grounds. She doubted that Sirius Black would pay any attention to a dog, but on the other hand, if he felt threatened by him, he could hurt him. Remembering Blackie's large teeth and massive jaws, she thought that Black, even armed with a knife, would have a challenge if he tried to mess with him. She hoped that Blackie and the ginger cat were together in some warm corner of the castle, sleeping peacefully.

About next year ...

Chapter 6 of 11

Staff discuss Sirius Black and what he was like in school. Snape visits Rolanda and vents his concerns. Dumbledore discusses plans for the next year with Rolanda. Ro decides to visit Hagrid to try to console him over the fast-approaching execution of Buckbeak.



About next year ...

Over the next days and weeks, Rolanda looked for Blackie everywhere on the grounds. She continued to carry sandwiches and snacks in her cloak pockets when she went out. There were more than a few times when she thought she could feel someone watching her; the hair at the nape of her neck would prickle and stand up, and when she looked, she believed she glimpsed Blackie's pale golden eyes blink away from her and his large, dark form disappear at the edge of the Forbidden Forest, but she didn't run into him on the grounds at all, and she found herself discarding the sandwiches and getting fresh ones every few days as the charms began to fade on them.

Dropping a smushed corned beef sandwich into a bin outside her office in the Quidditch stadium, Rolanda blinked back unexpected tears. She turned away, set her jaw, and headed back up to the castle. She supposed that the dog had been frightened by the unexpected activity the night of the GryffindorRavenclaw Quidditch match...he may even have had the bad luck to have run across Sirius Black making his escape. She hoped Blackie hadn't been hurt, and that he was finding food somewhere. Perhaps he was spending more time in Hogsmeade again and getting his meals there. He might have found some other soft-hearted witch to feed him and give him a bed by her hearth.

At first she'd been bored with life at the castle, but she'd become closer to a few of the other staff and now often spent part of her evening with one or another of them, or several of them would get together for a drink, perhaps play cards, and talk. Much of the talk was of Sirius Black, of course, and what he'd been like in school and how mad he was now. Flitwick had had to excuse himself from the staff room on one occasion after becoming emotional about it.

"Ensnorcelled, I'm sure," Flitwick had squeaked. "He had his faults, that whole year did in Gryffindor..."

"*Filius*," Minerva began to protest.

"It's true, Minerva...well, except perhaps for Evans," Flitwick said. "Now she was a gem. As bright as any Ravenclaw and as loyal as any Hufflepuff. Brave, too, obviously. To think of her and young James, just starting their family, and then..." Filius sniffed. "And Black betraying them like that. I never understood it. He must have been under some compulsion, one that broke his mind when he realised what he'd done."

"The Blacks were always bad'uns," Pomona said. "Every generation. Just bad blood. However 'pure' they might have thought it, it was purely bad."

"I don't think that's fair, Pomona," Flitwick said indignantly.

"He was one of the worst, and you know it, Filius," Pomona replied. "You just had a soft spot for him because he was brighter than most of them. Which means he should have chosen differently, *could* have chosen differently. He knew what he was doing when he sided with You-Know-Who. He could have used his cleverness for something else, but he went bad like all of them. Rotten to the core, however pretty he looked on the outside."

"I still think he must have been under some spell," Flitwick said. "To have betrayed his friends like that ... James was like a brother to him. He lived with his family after he left home. They were closer than many brothers I've known. How could he have done it? How, if not compelled?"

Minerva shook her head as she adjusted the reed in one of her bagpipe's drones. "Madness, perhaps, is the best answer. I didn't see evil in him..."

"He could be a mean kid, Professor," Rolanda said, thinking of her brother, Barney. "He had a mean streak in him. I didn't think he was evil, but he ... he could find things funny that certainly weren't to the person he did them to. Practical jokes, maybe, but they were cruel."

Minerva dismissed Rolanda's words with a wave of her hand. "High spirits. He and James both had high spirits...which did get them into trouble," she admitted. "And even if he sometimes lacked empathy for the victims of his practical jokes, that's a far cry from arranging the murder of his closest friend and his family. He must have gone insane. Dumbledore said that when he saw him immediately after he killed Pettigrew, all Black did was laugh. Just ... laughed. Not a sensible word from him. It shocked even Albus. That's not the boy I knew." She sighed and returned to winding her bagpipe stocks with hemp.

"And now he's after Potter's son," Pomona said. "He's fixated on the Potters. And Harry is a nice boy, too. To want to murder him, to attack him with *a knife*!" She shuddered.

"I could have Transfigured Longbottom into a toad, I was that angry with him," McGonagall said, her mouth a tight, straight line. "If it hadn't been for his carelessness, Black wouldn't have gained access to the Tower." In her vehemence, Minerva pushed too hard and broke a drone reed. She cursed under her breath as she pulled it out and cast

a spell to repair it. "It'll never be quite right now," she muttered, reinserting it and drawing out more hemp from the basket beside her.

"Poor Harry could have been killed! In his bed! And by his own godfather!" Filius said, his voice trembling. "Murder, bloody murder, right here at Hogwarts. Such a thing, such a thing." He removed his glasses and wiped his eyes with a bright blue handkerchief. His glasses steamed up when he put them back on. "Excuse me. I think I will retire for the night." He sniffled, then slid from his chair and left the room, closing the door behind himself without even a click.

Remus Lupin stood from where he'd been sitting in a dark corner away from the others, reading *Boggarts, Bonnacons, and Banshees*

"I think I'll go up, too," he said softly. He crossed the room and turned to the group, his face troubled. "Whatever made Sirius do what he did, it wasn't *atimperio* or any other compulsion. In his right mind, he would have died before he ... before he led You-Know-Who to James and Lily, and he had a strong will, one of the strongest I've ever known. He must have been mad before he did it, and even more mad after. Certainly he is insane now. But he was a good man before that." Remus swallowed hard. "He was."

The room was quiet for a moment after the door closed behind Remus.

"I'd forgotten he was here," Pomona said.

"I hadn't," Minerva said as she rubbed oil into her chanter, the delicate scent of almonds wafting through the room. "And he is right. Black was strong-willed. He wasn't coerced, seduced, or *Imperio'd* into betraying the Potters. He did it of his own free will and it drove him mad."

~*~*~*~

The spring passed quickly, and soon the students were preparing for their exams, and everyone, students and staff, was looking forward to the summer holidays. There were no further sightings of Sirius Black, and the Dementors remained guarding the gates and the perimeter of the grounds. But neither did Rolanda see her erstwhile canine friend, except for fleeting glimpses of a darker shadow in the shade of the wood, sometimes accompanied by the bow-legged ginger cat. She had since learned the cat was a half-Kneazle belonging to Hermione Granger. Hooch remembered the girl from her first-year flying lessons. Granger was utterly abysmal on a broom; Rolanda was certain that it was only because of the girl's nerves. She'd seen it before. Combine a fear of failure with a fear of flying, and no witch or wizard would ever succeed in becoming a real flyer. At best, they might learn how to let the broom carry them from place to place. Hardly any enjoyment in that.

After several strained weeks, she and Severus had come to a more comfortable place in their relationship. He still occasionally stopped by her rooms in the evening, though he never invited her to his...which in all honesty didn't bother Rolanda as much as it could have, since she found them damp, dreary, and depressing...and although they usually only talked, and he rarely stayed more than a half hour, they did occasionally have sex. It wasn't as passionate as it had been, but it was still satisfying.

Rolanda had no illusion that this meant that the two of them were ever going to have more than what they did. Severus certainly *needed* more, but he would never accept it, and Rolanda wasn't even sure she could give him what he needed.

One evening in early June, long after curfew and after Rolanda was already in her bright blue silk pyjamas, curled up with a nicely spiked cup of hot chocolate and a romance novel that Aurora had loaned her, Severus came by her rooms, looking drawn and exhausted.

"What is it?" Rolanda asked after handing Severus a double-shot of single malt minus the hot cocoa. She wanted to add, *You look dreadful*, but that was unlikely to be met with a warm reception.

Severus took a gulp of his drink. "Dumbledore. Again. Arguing about what should be done with the boy when the school holidays begin. He insists on sending him back to the Dursleys'. The idiot. As if sleeping under their roof would protect him next time the boy's sent out for a loaf of bread." Severus snorted.

"Something will have to be done to protect Potter, though. He's not been completely safe here; I think he'd be in grave danger if he went back to the Muggles."

"That's what I keep telling the daft old coot, but he won't listen to me. And if I'm to believe what McGonagall tells me, the boy's life is no bed of roses when he's with the Muggles, so I hardly think he'd complain if he didn't go back until Black is captured."

"What do you think should be done with him?"

"Kept here. Under our watchful eyes. Dumbledore spends half his time here during the summer holiday as it is; it's not as though it would put him out not to go back to that dump of his in Wales. And McGonagall is here whenever the Headmaster is. Hell, if they wanted, they could just drag him with them, wherever it is they go. But if they want him to live, Potter shouldn't go back to the Muggles. I begin to wonder if *I'm* the only one who cares whether the brat survives his childhood. Wouldn't *that* be ironic," Snape finished with a sneer.

"What does the Headmaster say?"

"*Wait and see, my boy, wait and see*" Snape said, his tone taking a mocking resemblance to the Headmaster's. "And if we wait too long, Potter will be on the Hogwarts Express going back to London, an easy target for Black."

"Dumbledore must have some plans..." Rolanda began.

"He says he's going to call together some old friends. They'll take turns watching the Dursley place. Wants me to 'be available when called,' as if I weren't always at his beck and call as it is. He needn't remind me of it." Severus took a gulp of the whisky.

"Well, then, it doesn't seem he's waiting till the last minute."

"It's insufficient. The minders can't very well stand open guard outside the house day and night, and the Muggles won't have anyone stay, Dumbledore's sure of that. I suggested he have someone in the house itself, and apparently Lily's sister is as stupid and prejudiced as ever. She was a horrid girl. She's not improved with age." Severus lifted his lip in disgust.

"He'll come up with something. He's Dumbledore; he always does, right?"

"Hmph. As long as the boy survives, I don't care how. I don't know why I bother arguing with the old man," Severus said, his voice suddenly weary. "He never listens to me, anyway."

"You look like hell," Rolanda said frankly. "Do you ever sleep?"

"Someone's got to be looking out for Potter," Snape replied. "Black will try again, I'm sure of it. He's tenacious. He hasn't been seen, but he's not been caught, either. He'll be back." He sighed and set down his unfinished drink. "In fact, I have to go now." He glanced at her black mandolin clock. It was a few minutes past midnight. "I have to check all the doors again, then check the seventh-floor corridors."

"Do you really have to?" Rolanda asked, leaning forward and touching Severus's knee. "I'm sure they've already been checked and double-checked. And there are trolls guarding the entrance to Gryffindor now. Black won't get past them."

Severus snorted. "The trolls won't keep him out. But ... if he has any sense remaining, he'll know that attacking them will raise such a noise, he'd never manage it unnoticed."

"So why go? Stay here tonight," she said impulsively. "Get some sleep. How much sleep are you getting?"

"Less than Dumbledore, that's certain," Severus replied grumpily. He paused. "A few hours. An hour or two at night. Another after classes are over, before dinner, sometimes." He shrugged.

"That's not enough! No wonder you look like you do! Another week of this, you'll be dead on your feet. Next thing you know, it will be ~~you~~ you who's gone 'round the bend. Lack of sleep, this obsession with Black, your unhappiness with this place...we'll be carting you off to the Janus Thickey ward to mumble next to Lockhart if you keep going at this rate."

Snap's shoulders slumped. "That's practically the same as what Dumbledore told me when I left him. *Get some sleep, my boy! You're strung tight as a violin. You'll snap, and then where will we be? You can't do anything from St. Mungo's!*"

"Well, the Headmaster was right. You need your sleep. Stay here," Rolanda urged. If she let him leave, even with the promise he'd return to his quarters and sleep, she was sure he would simply patrol the corridors until dawn. "I'd like your company."

Severus snorted a laugh. "You're about the only one who would." His expression softened as he looked at her. "All right," he said with a nod. "I'll stay. I don't know whether ..." He twitched one shoulder and picked up his glass.

"Finish up your drink and come to bed," Rolanda said. "Just sleep, that's what you need tonight. In the morning, we'll see about anything else!" She winked at him and was pleased when she got a crooked grin in return.

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Rolanda woke to the early morning light filtering past the heavy curtains over the bedroom window. Severus was sitting on the edge of the bed, pulling on his short boots.

"Wha' time is it?" she asked, rolling over on her right side to look at him.

"Quarter past five."

"You're leaving already?"

"Mmm."

Rolanda pushed herself up with one hand. "Were you just going to leave?"

"I saw no purpose in waking you."

"No purpose?"

"Nothing would be accomplished other than waking you earlier than you normally rise," Severus replied, standing and settling his boots on his feet.

Rolanda shook her head. Couldn't the man at least *pretend* to want to wish her good-morning? She wasn't the most sentimental of witches, but his attitude rankled, particularly as she was sure that "not waking her so that she could get more sleep" was lower on his list than "not waking her so that he could leave without having to interact with her first thing in the morning."

"Well, go on, then. Make your escape," she said, rolling back over on her other side. "I'll see you in the Great Hall if you're at breakfast."

She hadn't really expected a good-bye kiss, or even a good-bye, but her heart still dropped when he left the bedroom and she heard the sitting room door open and then close behind him.

Despite her disgruntlement, Rolanda drifted back to sleep, waking late. She showered and dressed, and in less than fifteen minutes, she was in her cloak and flying out her bedroom window and around to the front doors...easier and faster than walking through the castle and navigating its many staircases.

Just as she was dismounting, Dumbledore stepped out of the castle.

"Early morning flight, Rolanda?" he asked warmly, a smile crinkling around his bright blue eyes.

She grinned back at him, her mood immediately lifted. "Not really, Professor. Just slept in longer than I'd expected and in a hurry for breakfast."

"Well, I should not wish to keep you from your bacon and eggs, but could I ask you to stop by my office later this morning?"

Rolanda's brows drew together in concern. "Is there something..."

"Nothing urgent, my dear. Just a few things to discuss with you."

"You've confirmed the Triwizard Tournament for next year, then," Rolanda said, her voice low, and her mood shifting downward again.

"That and another matter," Dumbledore replied, "but neither topic is suitable conversation for the school front steps."

She nodded and flashed a slight smile, though it was an effort. "I'll be up as soon as I've eaten."

"Very good, my dear...and do please enjoy your breakfast," Dumbledore added. "It isn't all grim, I assure you!"

The warmth in his voice and the kindly pat on her arm did reassure her, and her face relaxed into a more genuine smile.

"All right. I'll meet you in your office in about a half hour," Rolanda said, her voice rising questioningly.

"That would be perfect." He beamed at her. "Just ride your broom up and I'll let you in the window."

She laughed, and said that in that case, she might be a few minutes earlier. Not many headmasters would invite someone to fly in through their office window! It was one of the things she enjoyed about working at Hogwarts: its quirky Headmaster.

Rolanda did enjoy her breakfast of muesli with fresh berries, though she only had one cup of coffee. She didn't need the jitters just then...the Headmaster might think her nervous, and she never liked to give an impression of weakness of any kind.

Twenty-five minutes later, after a fortifying breakfast and a cheering natter with Flitwick, Rolanda mounted her broomstick again and allowed it to drift up and over to the Headmaster's Tower. It was hardly a flight, just a leisurely ride, and when she reached the Tower, she found that the Headmaster had left a window open for her...she presumed it was for her, since the morning was a nippy one...and she angled her broom toward the window and gently coasted into the office.

"Ah, quite punctual!" Dumbledore said from behind his desk. "I only just arrived, myself. Had a bit of a morning smoke with Hagrid," he added in an exaggerated stage whisper.

"I won't tell a soul," Rolanda replied with a smile and a conspiratorial wink, although wondering whether Dumbledore had actually been having a morning smoke or whether

he had been discussing Hagrid's hippogriff with him. The execution was set for two days hence, and the last time she'd seen Hagrid, he'd made a rather heart-wrenching show of cheerful resignation. He could use a friendly visit from the Headmaster, she was sure.

"Please, allow me to take your cloak," Dumbledore offered, standing and coming around his desk.

After Dumbledore had sent her cloak over to hang on a robe-rack, settled her into one of the comfy armchairs by the fireplace, and ordered a pot of breakfast tea from a mossy-coloured house-elf, Rolanda had almost forgotten why she was there.

"As you guessed, this is, in part, about the Triwizard Tournament. There are still many details to be worked out, but unless something goes very awry in the planning or someone at our Ministry insults someone at one of the other ministries or vice versa, the Triwizard Tournament will be held next year, and it will be held here at Hogwarts, as it is our turn to host, despite the Tournament's long hiatus."

"I see." Rolanda tried to keep her expression from falling or her voice from faltering. "And I presume that this means there will be no Quidditch next year."

"It would be rather impractical," Dumbledore replied, "and the students' attention would be so divided between Quidditch and the Tournament, there would be none left for their studies, as several of the faculty pointed out to me."

"I see. But flying..."

"Naturally, the first-years would still require their autumn-term flying lessons, so your services will be needed for that...if you wish to continue with them. I would understand entirely if you felt it was not worth your time, or if you found some other engagement that prevented you from being able to continue as the flying instructor."

"I will have to think about it," Rolanda said slowly, "see what other options I might have." Maybe the Harpies could use her more hours. The last time that she'd spoken with Gladys Gamp, their current manager, it had sounded as though they were interested in expanding her training duties. Regardless, she would certainly have to find something else to do, not only to remain busy, but to keep paying her rent, not to mention to continue eating regularly. She'd saved some money since moving into the castle, having fewer personal expenses, but it wouldn't carry her through an entire year of partial employment, and although her small Gringotts savings could make up the difference, she was loathe to touch her tiny nest egg.

"Now, I've spoken with the governors...merely to advise them of my decision, not for their approval, as this particular issue falls completely within the headmaster's purview...but because you in good faith signed a renewable contract presuming that it could, indeed, be renewed, and because you have been a long and valued member of the Hogwarts staff, or should I say, the Hogwarts *family*, I am authorising full-pay for the autumn term if you continue to teach flying, and half-pay for the subsequent terms, a retainer of sorts. Naturally, if you choose not to teach flying, you will still receive half-pay for each term, with the understanding that you will return to your normal duties the following year. I know this isn't ideal for you, my dear, but I hope that it gives you a few more options than you might feel you otherwise have."

"Well, I, I ... thank you!" Rolanda was at a loss for words. She had presumed that without a need for her services, she would simply be let go for the year with no pay, at least nothing beyond the small amount that she earned from the flying instruction.

"It was the least I could do. Also, there is the matter of the Quidditch World Cup."

Rolanda blinked at the change in topic. What the World Cup had to do with the Triwizard Tournament, she hadn't the slightest clue. They were both exciting events, but beyond that ...

"I've spoken with a friend of mine at the *Daily Prophet*. He has a few seasoned sport reporters, naturally, and they are all champing at the bit to cover the World Cup, but they also have other duties, and none of them has actually been a professional Quidditch player...except Sally Pendennis, and she's, well, she's becoming ... idiosyncratic."

Looney was a better word for Sally, Hooch thought, calling to mind the seventy-something former Falmouth Falcon, who now wore large hats in the shape of a falcon, complete with Charmed wings, and who carried a grey-and-white striped umbrella with her everywhere, occasionally opening it in restaurants and more than occasionally poking random people with it for no discernable reason. Rolanda merely nodded, however, still not understanding Dumbledore's digression into the World Cup.

"To get to the point," Dumbledore said, "Simon is quite keen to have a Quidditch insider do some special pieces on the players, who they are, their personal backgrounds, their Quidditch careers, their strengths and weaknesses, that sort of thing. He'd like to be able to publish a couple of articles a week between the beginning of July and the Quidditch World Cup at the end of August. I don't know if it's anything you'd be interested in, but I mentioned your name, and Simon said he'd be happy to speak with you about it. The pay would probably be good..."

"I'd love to," Rolanda interjected. "Do you think he really might hire me? I've never written for a newspaper before. I've never written for anything before...except for the Holyhead Harpies news sheet, and that's hardly the same at all."

"I think there's a very good chance of it," Dumbledore said, a broad smile on his face. "I have full confidence in your abilities and conveyed that to Simon. Naturally, you would have to do some travelling, speak with players on both teams, watch their practices...if you're able to charm your way onto their pitches, of course."

"This would be a lot of fun," Rolanda said, thinking about the interviews with the different players, researching their previous games, analysing their strengths and weaknesses. Yes, this could be quite a nice way to spend the summer, and she'd be able to put away a little money.

"Very good! Just send Simon...that's Simon Upbank...an owl, and he'll arrange to meet with you."

"Thank you so much!"

Dumbledore turned a sweet shade of pink as Rolanda leapt up from her chair and wrung his hand in gratitude.

"Think nothing of it, my dear! I'm always pleased when I can help two friends at once. Now, won't you have another cup of tea?" He waved his hand over the little table and cleaned up the tea that had sloshed from Rolanda's cup when she'd jumped up to thank him.

"I don't want to keep you..."

"There is one more small proposal I wanted to discuss with you...nothing financially remunerative, I'm afraid, but you also must absolutely feel free to decline if you don't feel comfortable with it. You are under no obligation whatsoever, and it will have no bearing at all on your career here at Hogwarts, which I hope will continue for many happy years to come."

"Of course," Rolanda said, though she felt this digression was even more confusing than the previous.

"I am recruiting...personally, though prompted by my responsibilities as Headmaster...I am recruiting a number of trustworthy individuals to watch over young Harry this summer. Sirius Black is still at-large, and Harry might be in grave danger from him ... although I am beginning to wonder ..." Dumbledore shook his head and blinked. "At any rate, Mr Potter should be quite safe as long as he is in his house on Privet Drive; however, should he leave there, he might be vulnerable to Black. And even though I do have confidence in Harry's safety while he is indoors, there is always a chance that I may be wrong and that Black could gain entry to the house and attack him there. Highly unlikely, but possible."

"I see," Rolanda said. "Of course you can count on me, Professor. I'll be happy to help."

"It would merely be a matter of unobtrusively watching the house, following Harry whenever he leaves, and, if Sirius Black shows up, preventing him from harming Harry and, if possible, detaining him for Ministry authorities. No one would be on their own, so no worries there. You'd always be partnered with another volunteer."

"One with more experience than I, I hope," Rolanda said. "I'm willing, and I'm no slouch with a wand, but I'm no Auror or expert on the Dark Arts, either."

"And let us hope you will never become an expert in them," Dumbledore said. "Yes, we plan to deploy more experienced watchers with less experienced ones, and when we can, have three watching...although it may not be feasible to schedule so many at once."

"Or practical," Rolanda added, remembering her earlier conversation with Snape on that topic. "Trying to remain unobtrusive will be quite a trick as it is."

Dumbledore smiled. "We do have a few tricks!"

"All right, just let me know what you need. If I'm working for the *Prophet* as well as the Harpies..."

"Of course we will arrange shifts so that they do not interfere with anyone's regular duties," Dumbledore reassured her.

Ten minutes later, after agreeing to a two-year contract instead of her usual one-year contract, Rolanda left the Headmaster's office feeling much more cheerful than she had in a while. Her unhappiness about her relationship with Snape, her worry over poor Blackie's fate, and her concern about what she would do to make ends meet if the Triwizard Tournament took place, all seemed to have evaporated...the final concern disappearing before it ever had time to settle in. Now to write Simon Upbank a letter and send it off by owl before lunch, then she'd have time in the afternoon to go down and commiserate with Hagrid and try to cheer him up a little.

Personally, she liked Buckbeak, and she hated to see any animal destroyed, but she didn't think that Hagrid had ever had a chance of saving the poor beast. She knew Lucius Malfoy, and, vindictive, racist pureblood that he was, he was used to getting his own way for a reason: he usually did, one way or another. It wouldn't have mattered if Buckbeak had been a two-month-old kitten who had clawed his precious offspring, especially if that kitten had belonged to Hagrid; Lucius would have the creature destroyed and take pleasure in doing so...and even greater pleasure in having others carry out his whims. She had spoken to Severus about interceding with Malfoy...after all, he was Draco's Head of House and an old friend of Malfoy's...but Severus had simply snorted and shaken his head. She hadn't actually expected him to act, but she had had to ask.

Author's Note: I'm posting this today in celebration of having survived the last few days...almost literally. Or maybe not "almost."

Anyway, I have several more chapters written, but I will publish the next two, bringing the story up through the end of *The Prisoner of Azkaban*, and then take a bit of a pause and begin posting the chapters in the next section once I've gotten well into the third, and final, section.

Thanks for reading! I hope you're enjoying the story.

Clean away

Chapter 7 of 11

There is more than one miraculous escape from Hogwarts. Rolanda has a shock.



Clean away

Poppy laughed. "Perhaps we should have a new warning issued by the Headmaster at the start of term: Visits to Hagrid's cabin can be hazardous to your health...or to your teeth!"

Rolanda frowned and sat down on the edge of one of the infirmary beds. "I had to at least try to eat one of his rock cakes. He was that gloomy, Poppy. But they must have been a month old, and they're none too easy on your teeth even when they're fresh."

Poppy clucked her tongue, but her eyes sparkled. "All your Quidditch injuries, and you've never lost a tooth or even had a chip, and now three loose teeth from one little tiny biscuit!"

"Just fix them, Pomfrey," Hooch grumbled, though she had to suppress a smile.

The matron smirked and twitched her wand at Rolanda's loose teeth.

"Ouch! That hurt!"

"Does it still?" Poppy asked.

"No, but..."

"Then enter any complaints in the complaint register and be happy your teeth didn't fall out."

"You don't have a complaint register!"

Poppy grinned. "And I was wondering why I'd had no complaints!"

Rolanda rolled her eyes.

"So they're still going to put down the hippogriff as a dangerous beast?" Poppy asked.

Hooch nodded. "Hagrid doesn't really have any hope, although there's one final appeal left."

Poppy shook her head. "I treated Malfoy for that nip...and that's all it was, though it bled a bit...and the boy was hardly in danger of losing his arm. And although perhaps Hagrid might have chosen a better creature to start the third-years off with...one less likely to be offended by congenital rudeness...I doubt that the beast would have done any worse damage even if given the chance. It was a well-deserved slap on the wrist for being impertinent, if you ask me."

"I thought you were opposed to corporal punishment," Hooch said with a smirk.

"I am...by adult humans. But the creature was acting quite naturally. And I've never known a Malfoy I wouldn't have liked to have taken a nip out of...if I were a creature, of course. They're born with a sense of entitlement, and it's nurtured from the moment they take their first breaths. Draco offended the creature, and it disciplined him as it knew best. And perhaps if he'd been disciplined better before he came to Hogwarts, Draco wouldn't have offended the animal and been bitten. So I blame Lucius."

"It's a pity that Hagrid...and Buckbeak...have to pay for it." Rolanda sighed.

Poppy nodded soberly. "It is. I wish there were something someone could do to avert it, but I suppose that everything that could be done has already been done, and there's nothing left. I wrote a letter of support, myself, for the creature's first hearing."

"I asked Snape to intervene with Malfoy, but he ... he couldn't."

"He's always liked Hagrid, too. At least, I think he likes him, more than he does most people. Always hanging about his hut when he was a lad, and he isn't as acerbic with him as he is with most. I am not surprised, I suppose, but I am still disappointed that he didn't try to help him."

"Snape's complicated, and I think there are some Slytherin politics involved that we don't know about."

"Slytherin? Or Death Eater?"

"Those were just rumours. We don't even know for certain that he was a Death Eater, just that his friends were. The Ministry would have put him in Azkaban if there was more to it, wouldn't they? But Dumbledore didn't let them. Besides, that's all behind Severus now," Hooch said firmly.

Poppy shook her head. "Somehow I don't think that's something that can ever be behind someone. Not that I don't believe Dumbledore was right in hiring him, but there are some things in life that once we start them, we can't ever escape them. Being a follower of You-Know-Who being one of them."

"Less said about that, the better," Rolanda replied with a shudder.

"Perhaps. Perhaps."

The two witches were silent for a moment, then Rolanda took a deep breath and let it out as she slid off the edge of the bed she'd been perched on. "Thanks for taking care of my teeth, Poppy."

"It's what I'm here for. By the way, whatever happened with that dog you told me about, the big stray? Did you find its owners?"

Rolanda shook her head, feeling guilty that she'd made no real effort to find Blackie's owners and had, in fact, indulged in the notion that she might keep him herself. Her lack of diligence may have cost the poor dog his life. "No. I haven't seen him in a long time, either."

"He probably found his way home then," Poppy replied. "Dogs are good that way."

Rolanda smiled slightly. "I hope so."

~*~*~*~

"What do you mean, Sirius Black was captured and then escaped again?" Rolanda asked, blinking as she pulled in her chair next to Poppy. She had a hangover, she hadn't had her first cup of coffee yet, and her brain was foggy; she must have misheard the matron.

"Just what I said. Didn't you hear the hullabaloo last night? Bellowing, screams, cursing? I thought Snape alone was roaring loudly enough to wake the dead."

Hooch shook her head. No wonder the Great Hall had been all abuzz when she'd entered. She'd thought it was just Buckbeak's last-minute escape that had everyone gossiping.

"No, I didn't hear a thing. I had a few drinks with Hagrid down in his cabin to help him celebrate Buckbeak's miraculous escape...we started with brandy and then moved on to firewhisky...and I rolled into bed about eleven, I think. I don't even really remember getting back to the castle, frankly. Nothing would have woken me, and nothing did."

"Well, Buckbeak's vanishing act wasn't the only strange thing that happened last night. Apparently, Snape singlehandedly caught Black in the Shrieking Shack with Potter, Ronald Weasley, and the Granger girl, and was going to bring them back to the castle to be Demented...Black, not the students, of course...but Black had Confunded them and they gave Snape some trouble. Lupin was there, too, and I guess he must have been Confunded, as well, because ... well, Snape seemed to think he was in league with Black, though I don't think that was so. Anyway, the three students must have been Confunded, or otherwise very confused, because they hexed Snape. After that, it gets a bit fuzzy on the details, but they were all heading back from the Shack to the grounds when the full moon came out and Lupin changed...and now everyone knows about that, thanks to Snape's announcement to his House this morning. Fortunately for Potter and the others, Snape came to and rescued them from the werewolf. The Dementors had found Black, though, and they were attacking him and Potter...who had run after Black for some reason."

"Perhaps he was still Confunded?" Hooch ventured, taking a sip of her coffee and trying to follow the confusing narrative through her firewhisky-fogged brain.

"I don't know. There's more to this than Snape's been reporting, I'm sure of that."

"So did Snape rescue Potter from the Dementors?" Hooch asked, an icy chill running through her at the thought of young Potter, helpless against the hideous Azkaban guards.

"I'm not clear on what happened. Snape just said the Dementors were all headed back to their positions at the gates when he found Black and Potter lying on the ground near the lake. He brought them all back up to the castle, Black trussed up like a Christmas goose, Weasley, Granger, and Potter floating unconscious next to Black on conjured stretchers, Snape looking triumphant and more pleased than I've seen him in his entire life..."

"So what happened? If Severus had Black trussed up, and he was half-Demented, how did he escape?"

"That is the puzzler. No one knows. Snape is certain that Potter freed him, though that is completely impossible. Potter was in the hospital wing with me and he never left it. In fact, Dumbledore locked us all in. When I heard him leave and close the door, I came out to finish taking care of Potter...everyone was interfering abominably in infirmary business last night, Rolanda, and Snape was the worst, carrying on as he did. I could hardly do my job properly."

"Was Black in the infirmary, too?" Rolanda asked.

"No, no. Dumbledore had him locked in Flitwick's office way up by the West Tower. I had to treat him there, Renervate him for questioning and so on. He was in bad shape. I pitied him ... didn't let it show, though. He did some terrible things. Or they say he did," she added contemplatively. "But I don't see how he could have escaped

unless he grew wings. I honestly can't imagine how he would have escaped without help very well even if his door hadn't been locked. He was emaciated to start with, and then I think that Snape must have hexed him or something, and he'd been very nearly Kissed by a Dementor. He was a pathetic sight, Ro. I thought that at least the last thing he tasted before having his ... before being ... that the last thing he tasted was some Honeyduke's chocolate."

"But he escaped. Somehow." Broomstick perhaps. Could Flitwick have had a broomstick in his office and no one had remembered it? Flitwick wasn't a regular flyer, though, so although Rolanda could most easily envision Black escaping on a broom, she doubted it was one belonging to Flitwick. It wasn't likely that he kept one there.

Poppy nodded. "Snape and Fudge went to see to Black's disposition, and he was just gone. Someone must have helped him escape. It couldn't have been Lupin because he was still ravening about in the Forbidden Forest. I can't think of anyone else it could have been."

"And Potter's fine."

"Fine enough and still in the infirmary." Poppy looked around and lowered her voice. "He had gone on and on about how Black was innocent, that Pettigrew was still alive and had been the one to betray Potter's parents...and that he had been in the Shrieking Shack with them...and the poor boy kept insisting that Black not be given the Kiss. Snape made it clear to the Minister that Potter and the others had been Confunded and had had some fiction planted in their memories by Black. Potter was beside himself. Of course, Snape, being Snape, was simply abrasive and didn't handle the boy with any tact at all. He was downright nasty to Granger, who had the same story ..." Poppy's gaze grew thoughtful.

"Do you think there's anything to it?" Hooch asked, an uneasy feeling in her gut that had nothing to do with her hangover. Had Snape deliberately ignored evidence exonerating Black? His grudge against the Gryffindor ran long and deep, but to have a man Kissed, one who might be innocent, was a terrible thing, a sickening thing.

Poppy shrugged. "Dumbledore seemed to think so. I don't know. I had to hurry down to the infirmary and didn't hear any of his conversation with Black. Potter was certainly convinced, and so was Granger, and she's pretty level-headed. But the fact remains, Sirius Black escaped from a locked room high up in the castle...and Snape has lost his chance at a Merlin. He's livid."

"Why would he not just kill Potter? Black, I mean, not Snape," Hooch asked. "It sounds as though they were together for some time in the Shack, and Potter sounds none the worse for wear. Do you think they were Confunded?"

"They weren't when I examined them, but that doesn't mean that Black didn't Confund them when they were in the Shack. As to why he didn't kill them, or at least Potter, perhaps he had some other nefarious purpose and needed him alive."

"You're right, I slept through some very odd events. And I thought that Buckbeak's escape was miraculous."

"My gran would have said they both had a guardian angel looking after them."

"Presuming they both were innocent."

Poppy took a bite of toast and shrugged one shoulder. "Gran was a very forgiving, soft-hearted soul. I'm not sure she would have cared about that. I am sure she wouldn't have wanted a man to have his soul sucked out of him, though, whatever he may have done."

After breakfast and a trip to the hospital wing, where Poppy gave her a dose of Headache Potion to help her hangover, Rolanda trudged down to the dungeons to look for Severus. He didn't like her visiting him in his rooms...which could be rather insulting when she thought about it too long...but this visit would be under the guise of giving him a friendly ear, and possibly some sympathy, as well, for his lost Order of Merlin. He probably still wouldn't like it, but she wanted to hear his side of things. She was still uncomfortable with the thought that he may have deliberately ignored possible evidence that Black was innocent simply because he hated the man. He disliked Potter, as well, and it would rankle to have to agree with the boy's defence of his enemy.

Rolanda rapped on the heavy wooden door and waited. Severus might be in his office, she realised, but just as she was about to turn and look for him there, the door swung open. Severus was hunched over his tiny desk in the back of the sitting room, looking a bit like a large vulture perched on a rock smaller than itself. He turned to look at her, nodded, and waved his hand to close the door behind her. Rolanda assumed the scowl on his face was a general one, and not aimed particularly at her.

"I heard what happened, at least some of it."

"Hmph. Not the half of it, I'm sure, and as much the fairy tale as the truth, too," Severus replied, his scowl deepening.

"I heard you were quite heroic," Rolanda said softly. "You saved three students last night."

"And captured Black, only to have *someone* pull a nasty trick and help him to escape again." Severus stood and began to pace. "Yanked my Merlin from around my neck before it was even awarded. Let that murdering Gryffindor free on the basis of some nonsense spouted by Potter."

"Poppy said you said something about him being Confunded."

"The boy's *always* Confunded! They found a fine mutual target in me, Potter and Black, cooked up some story about Black's innocence, Pettigrew being alive...and Lupin was there, buying the entire thing, glad to welcome his old friend back. I still think that Lupin was letting Black into the castle, though he claims not. How else could he have entered? Dumbledore, of course, believes Lupin...again. Always the favoured Gryffindors. But he'll be gone before another moon rises," Severus added with a smirk, "now that his secret is out. He's putting his tail between his legs and running away before he's forced to leave."

"I'd heard you told your House that he's a werewolf. We all said we would be discreet about that."

"It just ... slipped out." Snape's lip curled. "Besides, things have changed. Dumbledore assured us all that he would be safe. I would brew his Wolfsbane Potion and Lupin would take it. But Lupin didn't take it yesterday. He broke faith. In light of that, it is only appropriate that the students know how dangerous he is."

"What about Black? Does the Ministry have any idea where he went, how he escaped?"

Snape shook his head. "Must have been by broomstick, though. The only way out of that room was through the window...which was not locked."

"Who would have thought he could escape from a window that high up, though? There'd be no way to climb down...or even up to the roof or over to the Tower. Nothing to hold onto on that stretch of the wall. As you say, he could only escape by broomstick or something similar, unless he grew wings."

Snape snorted. "Grew wings. He may have. Who knows what tricks he has. He was an unregistered Animagus. Apparently turns into a dog, according to Dumbledore. It's how Weasley's leg was broken...and if his repeated attacks on Weasley weren't proof of the man's criminal insanity, I don't know what more Dumbledore would want to see. First attacking him with that knife in his bed, then biting his leg and dragging him into the Whomping Willow. I told Pomfrey she'd better check Weasley for rabies. She just looked at me as if I were mad."

"A dog? Black ... Black turns into a dog?"

"That's what I said. A mangy cur. I think I'd even seen it once or twice near the Forbidden Forest this year. I could have had him then, if Lupin hadn't kept that little factoid secret. Yet Dumbledore still trusts the beast. If we'd all known that Black was an Animagus, he would have been caught and Kissed months ago."

"A dog?"

"Is there something wrong with your hearing?"

"No, it's just ... hard to fathom that Black is an Animagus."

"Apparently he and his little band of mischief-makers all became Animaguses when they were in school, Dumbledore informs me. Lupin knew about it and kept quiet. They say that Gryffindors are brave, but Lupin's one cowardly wolf. Always keeping his mouth shut out of fear." Severus sneered. "Brave, brave Gryffindors. And who saved the Gryffindors from a werewolf and an escaped lunatic last night? A Slytherin. And I get no recognition, just 'soothing words' from the Headmaster. *I won't be soothed that easily!*"

"And, um, you don't think there's any chance that Potter could have been right? That Pettigrew is alive and that he was the one who betrayed the Potters?"

"I don't care," Severus said simply, pausing in his circuit of the room and looking at her levelly. "They were all guilty. But I don't think it was Pettigrew. That little toady...who apparently was also an Animagus and who I'm supposed to believe was Weasley's pet rat all these years...that little toady would have been a miserable Death Eater. The Dark Lord doesn't like snivellers."

"But if he could use him to get at the Potters..."

"So you're against me, too? You believe all that nonsense!"

"I don't know, Severus. I'm just trying to make sense of it. If Black wasn't guilty..."

"HE WAS AND IS GUILTY!" Snape roared.

"All right, all right!" Hooch held up her hands.

"He got entry to the castle twice and attacked Gryffindor Tower on both occasions. He even admitted it!"

"He didn't say how he got in?" Hooch asked faintly.

"Of course not. Probably a tunnel. Or Lupin let him in...or both."

"Still, he didn't kill Potter, in the castle or in the Shrieking Shack last night..."

"Whose side are you on? He attacked Gryffindor Tower! He attacked Weasley and lured Potter to the Shrieking Shack. Granger, too. He BIT Weasley and broke his ankle! He abducted the three and would have killed them all! HE IS MAD!"

"I am sorry you lost your Merlin, Severus," Hooch said softly, backing towards the door. However right or wrong Severus was about Black, she wondered who the madman was...Black or Snape. Or both. "I'm sure that without you, something dreadful would have happened to those students."

"Tell that to Dumbledore when you see him. He's not even punishing them for hexing me...a teacher *their* teacher, and he's just letting it go. I still have cuts and bruises on my head from it!"

"Maybe they'll recapture him."

"Hmph." As if suddenly deflated, Snape sank down into his chair. "And someone else will get my Merlin for it."

"I'm sorry, Severus."

Snape nodded.

"You ought to get some sleep. You look like you were up all night."

"Because I was. Go. Go on. Get out of here. I want to be alone."

Rolanda was already at the door, and she quickly opened it and left, closing it softly behind her. She didn't move, though. She stood there, still, her heart pounding. Black was an Animagus, a "mangy cur," Snape had said. Black turned into a dog. A big *black* dog? Blackie?

The thought turned her stomach, and she wished she hadn't drunk so much the night before. She closed her eyes and breathed slowly, and the nausea eased. Had she been Black's "accomplice"? Had she been letting a murderer, a crazed escapee from Azkaban, into the castle? It couldn't be. Blackie was a gentle dog. He had slept by her bed. He had kept her company. He had ... he had *seen her naked*. It was all Rolanda could do to suppress a groan.

Both times that Gryffindor Tower had been attacked, she'd brought Blackie into the castle, and he'd disappeared after each attack. He hadn't behaved exactly like a normal dog, either. He was practically starving, and yet despite being assured a good meal by visiting her regularly and sticking close to her, Blackie ignored his hunger and preferred slinking about in the Forbidden Forest. And he had come to the Quidditch matches. The matches in which Gryffindor was playing...where he could see Harry.

Rolanda stumbled up to her rooms. She shucked off her shoes as soon as she entered, and went straight to her bed. She would lie down, take a nap, and when she woke up, she would see it was all just foolishness. It was just her hangover. When she could think clearly, she would see that Blackie was just a stray. She hadn't been letting a murderer into the castle. She hadn't been abetting a criminal. She hadn't been sharing her innermost thoughts with Sirius Black.

Sleep didn't come, however, and as she lay there, Rolanda became increasingly certain that she had been duped. Sirius Black had used her. Used her to get into the castle. He'd even got information from her about Potter and about the hunt for himself.

Hoping against hope that she was wrong, Rolanda pushed herself out of bed. She'd go looking for her stray. If she found him, he couldn't be Sirius Black. If she didn't ... well, she'd think about that later.

With the Dementors gone from the school, Rolanda took to the air, cruising over the grounds and the Forbidden Forest, her sharp Seeker's eyes scanning for a hint of black, a flash of movement, but she saw nothing. She took one more pass over the edge of the forest where it met the Hogwarts grounds, but she saw nothing but a couple of students snogging and a few others passing around a smoke. She didn't even care what they were smoking. Her heart was low and her stomach was in knots.

Catching sight of Hagrid near his pumpkin patch, Rolanda drifted toward him and brought herself to touch down beside him. He gave her a big grin.

"Beaky's got clean away. Nobody's seen him anywhere. He's safe fer sure now," Hagrid said.

"And you're still celebrating," Rolanda observed with a grin.

"Aye, haven't stopped," Hagrid said, raising his bottle. "Switched to butterbeer, though. Thought the firewhisky might tetch me head a bit too much afore noon. Yeh like one?"

"Sure." A butterbeer wouldn't hurt after all the strong liquor she'd drunk the night before.

Hagrid reached into the raggedy basket beside him and pulled out another bottle for her. "Beaky's such a clever boy! Stayed wi' me til the last moment, then off he took hisself. Free, free, free." He took another swig from his bottle, and Rolanda wondered if there were something more than just butterbeer in it.

"I hear that it's not just Buckbeak who escaped the Ministry yesterday," Rolanda said, popping open her bottle.

"Yeah, I heard they found Sirius Black, but he got away. Don' know much more than that, though. There was quite the to-do last night after you left. I'd dozed off a bit, but I could hear Perfesser Snape up t' hospital wing shoutin' somethin' awful. Thought he'd gone off 'is nut, I did. I jes' stayed in here and had another nip or two. Heard about it all this mornin' from Perfesser Sprout."

"Professor Snape was upset that Black escaped. He was going to get a Merlin for the capture, and then Black just vanished."

"Strange doin's," Hagrid said, gulping down the last of his butterbeer.

"I'm glad the Dementors are gone now, though."

"Oh aye, me too. They gave me the collywobbles. Hard to go about yer business when yeh think one of 'em might jes' swoop down and suck out yer soul. Had nightmares fer a while that they brought me back t' Azkaban, thinkin' I belonged there. But then after Buckbeak had his troubles, I guess that was on me mind more'n them Dementors draggin' me back t' Azkaban."

"It was good to be able to fly about freely this morning," Rolanda said. "Say, Hagrid, you haven't happened to notice a big dog around anywhere, have you? Shaggy, scrawny thing?"

"Sure. Big black dog. Tried to get it to come share one o' me stoat sandwiches once, but it weren't havin' none of it." Hagrid shrugged. "Use ter see it with Hermione's cat, Crookshanks. Glad t' see Crooks find a frien', as he was havin' a hard time of it up in Gryffindor Tower, what with Ron's pet rat goin' missin' and Ron sayin' that Crooks et it. 'Course Crookshanks hadn't et it. In fact, we found the rat hidin' here jes' yesterday, afore Beaky was supposed t' be ... yeh know."

"Ronald's rat was here yesterday?"

"In me milk jug," Hagrid said with a nod. "Squealed somethin' terrible. It even bit Ron. Wonder if old rats get senile." He shrugged. "Anyway, Ron got his rat an' he could see that Crookshanks hadn't et him."

Ron's rat had been missing and was found only yesterday, and now Potter was saying that the rat was Pettigrew. Rolanda wasn't sure what to make of that, except that it didn't reassure her that Snape was right about Black, rather the contrary. Black. "So have you seen the stray dog recently, Hagrid?"

"Mmmm, few days ago, I think, here in me pumpkin patch, but not since."

"I was worried about it, especially with the summer holidays coming up. I was thinking of trying to bring him to my place, give him a home."

"I'll tell yeh if I see him, Ro."

Confession and Confusion

Chapter 8 of 11

Rolanda fears that she has unwittingly abetted a dangerous criminal.



Confession and Confusion

Returning to her rooms after her visit to Hagrid, Rolanda sat down at the writing desk and pulled out a piece of parchment and a quill.

7 June

Severus,

Now that the Dementors have returned to Azkaban, I'll be returning to my flat in Hogsmeade.

With the summer holidays coming, I doubt we'll see each other again until September. I'll be teaching flying as usual, although there will be no Quidditch next year. I don't think I will be spending very much time at Hogwarts as a result.

I think we would agree that our relationship has not been going anywhere. I feel as though I add nothing to your life and you share little of your life with me. I hope we remain friends, but I don't feel there's any point to continuing with anything other than that, particularly if this summer we do not see each other, which seems your preference.

If you want to talk, come see me down at the flat.

I hope you have a pleasant summer.

~ Rolanda

As she wrote, she considered more conciliatory words, and it even crossed her mind to offer to change things if he wished them to change and if they could see each other regularly during the summer, but she knew that he had no desire to continue to see her over the holiday, and she didn't want to show any vulnerability to him, seeming to beg for their relationship to continue and to grow. The truth was, at that point, she really didn't want more from their relationship and she was ready for it to end. It should have ended months before, and the last few months had just dragged out what was a dead relationship.

Perhaps it was unfeeling or cowardly to owl him a note rather than speak to him in person, but Rolanda had had enough; she also didn't think it would matter one way or the other to Snape. That was one of the problems with their relationship.

She packed up her clothes and anything else she didn't want to leave in her Hogwarts rooms, shrunk her bags, and mounted her broomstick and left through the open window. She waved her wand and closed the window behind her. This was a year she was glad to have over. She hoped she could just forget it.

That night, her first night home in months, she didn't sleep. Even the owl from Simon Upbank inviting her to visit him at the *Daily Prophet* offices the next week hadn't helped cheer her up for long. However much she wished she could forget everything and just think about the future, she couldn't forget that she had aided Sirius Black. Unwittingly, but she had still helped him. She'd fed him, she'd given him shelter, and, worst of all, she'd brought him into the castle. Even though she knew that she had not helped him intentionally, Rolanda still felt guilty. It particularly ate at her that some might come to believe Snape's assertion that Lupin had to have been helping his old friend enter the school. If such a rumour began circulating, Lupin would have an even harder time of it than he already did as a werewolf. The Ministry might even charge him with abetting a criminal.

Dawn had scarcely broken and the dew sparkled frosty on the grass when Rolanda climbed back on her broomstick. She searched Hogsmeade and all the area between the village and Hogwarts, but she saw no sign of the big black dog she'd grown so fond of. Flying in a zig-zag pattern, she scanned the Hogwarts grounds for him, and still no sign. A Bludger in her stomach, she finally set down at the foot of the castle stairs. She knew what she had to do, much as she dreaded it.

Breakfast was just beginning in the Great Hall, and the buzz of excitement of the previous morning had given over to early risers doing last minute swotting before that day's exams. Rolanda was happy to see that the Headmaster was already there...and that Snape wasn't. She couldn't face seeing him until she'd done what she had to do; she simply had no emotional energy to deal with a surly Snape at that moment.

"Good morning, Professor McGonagall, good morning, Headmaster," she said when she reached the staff table.

"Good morning, my dear!"

Minerva gave her a smile and a nod as she reached for a plate of sausages. "Joining us for breakfast?"

"No, thank you. Just a cup of coffee, perhaps," Rolanda amended when her stomach gurgled, reminding her she hadn't had breakfast before beginning her early morning search for Blackie.

"Come, sit here beside me," Dumbledore said, waving a hand and pulling out the chair to his left. "You seem to have something on your mind."

"Yes ..." She couldn't speak to him about it there in the Great Hall, though. "I have moved back to my flat in the village. I thought I should let you know. I also ... I have something I'd like to discuss with you after breakfast, if you have a few minutes."

"Of course. Is it about the *Prophet* job?"

Rolanda shook her head and filled her coffee cup. "No, although I did hear from Mr Upbank yesterday afternoon. I have an appointment with him next week. Or I will have as soon as I owl him back."

"That's excellent news, Rolanda," Minerva said. "Dumbledore mentioned that possibility to me. I hope that it works out. I'd envy you, actually."

"I'm sure you'd enjoy the locker room interviews particularly," Dumbledore teased. "What were you saying the other day about...was it Vulkov? Or Vulchanov?"

"Zograf, as you well know, Dumbledore. He has a finely developed physique, that's all. Well-suited to his position. And he did some splendid flying in the semifinal against Transylvania last week. Scarcely a Quaffle made it past him. Although, of course," she added to Hooch, "I will be supporting Ireland, since Scotland were knocked out by Luxembourg last month in the quarter finals. Luxembourg!" Minerva shook her head in disgust. "But the Irish look sure to beat Luxembourg in the next semifinal match, and then they'll be in the finals against Bulgaria. Fine players, an excellent team the Irish side put together. And all former Hogwarts students!"

Rolanda nodded politely. Any other day, and she'd be eager to discuss the merits of the various players chosen to represent Ireland...or even to speculate about the admittedly quite agreeable physique of the Bulgarian Keeper, Zograf. She was relieved when Dumbledore finished his porridge and set his napkin by his bowl.

"If you're sure you won't be eating breakfast..."

"Quite sure, Headmaster," Rolanda replied, pushing her chair back. The sooner she got this off her chest, the better, even if he rescinded his offer for the coming year. She couldn't bear knowing what she'd done and not telling someone.

Up in the Headmaster's office, filled with its whizzing, whirring, and spinning instruments, Rolanda's dread grew, but she knew she would only feel worse if she didn't tell Dumbledore what she'd done.

"Have a seat," Dumbledore said.

"Thanks." Rolanda took one of the chairs across from the large desk as Dumbledore sat down behind it.

"So is this about next year? Or is something else troubling you?"

She swallowed. "Professor Snape told me that Sirius Black is an Animagus, that he can become a dog."

"He did, did he? I'll have to speak to him about that ... encourage him to forget I ever told him. You'll want to keep that under your hat, Rolanda."

"So it's true; Sirius Black is an Animagus?"

Dumbledore nodded. "Apparently so."

"I..." Rolanda took in a breath. "I have a confession to make, Professor."

Dumbledore raised his eyebrows and nodded encouragingly.

"I don't know how to say this. But I'm afraid someone else might be blamed if I don't, so I'll just say it. I was helping Sirius Black this year. At least, I'm pretty sure I was."

"You were?" The Headmaster looked puzzled. "What do you mean you are 'pretty sure' you were?"

"I found a stray. A stray dog, that is. In the village this autumn. I fed it. And whenever it came around, I'd feed it and let it stay the night in my flat. When I came up to the castle for the Hallowe'en feast, I brought Blackie...that's what I called him, since he was black." Rolanda flushed, remembering when she'd given him that name. She'd given him a bath and was changing into her nightgown, and he'd just lain there and watched her. Panting. "Anyway, I'd been taking care of him. I thought I should bring him with me. He was in the castle when the Fat Lady was attacked. I'd let him in."

"I see. Well, that certainly clears up a little mystery." Dumbledore flashed a wry smile. "Sirius refused to tell me how he'd entered the castle. Now I know why."

"I endangered the students. But I didn't know that Blackie wasn't a dog. Or I thought he was a dog, not an Animagus. I wouldn't have helped him otherwise."

"Of course you wouldn't have, my dear. You thought that Sirius Black was an escaped mass murderer. You thought the dog was a vulnerable stray. You acted on your correct instinct to help the vulnerable stray."

"How can you say that? I'm sorry, I don't mean to be rude, but if I hadn't helped Black, he likely wouldn't have got into the castle."

"Perhaps not, but I doubt that would have changed the outcome significantly. Sirius and Harry met outside the castle. A dog could enter the Hogwarts grounds in many ways; in fact, he probably did come and go from the grounds quite freely. I understand he was often in the company of Miss Granger's cat, a very wise animal. Half Kneazle, I believe."

Rolanda blinked. She didn't understand Dumbledore's attitude at all. "I fed him, too. After I moved into the castle. I carried food around with me in case I saw him. I brought him into the Quidditch stadium on the day that Potter flew his new broomstick in the match against Ravenclaw. Black might have attacked Potter at any time."

"You helped a creature who needed your help, Rolanda. Offering any needy creature food, warmth, and comfort cannot be a bad thing. There was no harm done, and you acted from a generous, sympathetic spirit."

"No harm done ... yes, all right," Rolanda said, still bemused. "If I see him again, though, I will tell you."

"If you wish," Dumbledore said with a nod, "but I believe that Sirius is quite far away now. I doubt you will be seeing him in Hogsmeade any time soon."

"Severus also mentioned ... he was upset, you understand, otherwise he probably wouldn't have, but he mentioned something about Black Confunding Potter and Potter thinking that Black was innocent."

"Yes, I am aware that Severus was unhappy with the turn of events."

"So did Black Confund Potter?"

Dumbledore raised his eyebrows and shook his head. "I was not there, so I could not say what Sirius did or did not do. However, Harry seemed quite lucid and not at all Confunded. I am sure that Severus has some foundation for his belief, but I don't share it."

"Was Black innocent then?"

Dumbledore hesitated slightly, then he smiled. "When you and I spoke last time, you agreed to help stand guard over Harry Potter this summer. That will no longer be necessary."

"So Black ... wasn't after Harry Potter?"

"Harry is not in danger from Sirius Black. That's all I can say at this moment."

"Severus said that Black is guilty."

"He is certainly convinced of it," Dumbledore replied with a nod, standing. "Was there anything else? I don't wish to rush you, but I wanted to look in on the Transfiguration OWLs and see how they're going. Such fun!"

"Of course. I have to write to Simon Upbank and confirm our appointment." Rolanda stood and slipped on her flying cloak.

"Give him my regards when you see him!"

"I will."

"Would you care to leave through my window again?"

Rolanda chuckled. "Thank you, that would be convenient."

"I look forward to reading your articles in the *Prophet* this summer!"

"If I get the job," Rolanda replied as Dumbledore used his wand to open the window for her.

"I have every confidence that you will and that you will make a great success of it."

"I hope so."

Dumbledore grinned. "You could also see about getting Zograf's autograph for Minerva. On one of those posters they have of him. You know the kind, posing with his broomstick, displaying his 'finely developed physique,' as Minerva put it this morning."

"I will do my best!" Rolanda said with a laugh. Minerva would be amused by it, and likely even pleased, even if she pretended to be put out. No question, Rolanda thought: she would definitely get Zograf to sign a poster for Minerva.

Author's Note: This is the last instalment of the *Prisoner of Azkaban* portion of the story. I have a good deal of the *Goblet of Fire* section written, and I will begin posting it when those chapters are complete and I've begun writing the third and final section.

The Post Eagle

Chapter 9 of 11

Beginning of Part Two. Summer 1994. Rolanda arrives home after her trip to Bulgaria and receives some unusual post.
(Part Two takes place during the *Goblet of Fire*.)



PART TWO

The Post Eagle

It had been an exhilarating trip to Bulgaria, and Rolanda was still flying high even as she touched down in her back garden. She was exhausted after the long flight...it had been years since she had flown such a long distance, and she'd flown back after only six days after she'd arrived in the lively wizarding village of Vyeshtitza Dol. The trip had been so exciting and the Bulgarian wizarding community so welcoming, however, that Rolanda still felt energised and doubted that she could sleep despite the long, two-day flight.

Although she had taken three comfortable days to fly to Vyeshtitza Dol, stopping in Cologne and Vienna, Rolanda had only stopped overnight in Brussels on her return trip. Because she had wanted to spend a day in Sofia with a few of the Bulgarian players...including Zograf, the Bulgarian "pin-up" wizard...she decided to sacrifice some sleep on the journey home.

Upbank, her editor, had been tolerant of her decision to fly rather than use Portkeys, as long as she mentioned the flight in her articles and played up the romantic aspects of long-distance broom flights. She didn't know what was particularly romantic about them...knowing good hand-warming charms, supplemental tail-stabilisation charms, and how to find good magical currents and avoid turbulence were interesting and valuable skills, but not particularly romantic. A sore arse and stiff joints after fourteen solid hours on a broomstick, even her Kumo long-distance cruiser, were certainly not romantic, Rolanda thought, stretching. She'd do what she could, though. She'd had a camera with her and shot a few aerial photos he might be able to use.

In the meantime, she'd change out of her flying gear and head up to the castle with her presents for Minerva and the Headmaster. Rolanda was pretty sure that Dumbledore and McGonagall were both there at the moment, freshening wards or some such school business. She giggled softly as she waved her wand and opened the door to her flat. She hoped she didn't come across them as Severus claimed he once had on one balmy summer's day the year after he'd been hired: in the Great Hall as naked as the day they were born, and in the midst of activities the memory of which still had the power to raise goose-flesh on his arms, as he had pointed out to her with an exaggerated grimace and a shudder. Just before ravishing her. So the memory could not have been entirely as unpleasant as he claimed. Hooch smirked. Nonetheless, she thought she would announce her presence loudly when she entered the castle and keep a keen ear out for any activities that the Headmaster and McGonagall would likely wish to remain entirely private.

It was good to be home in her cosy kitchen, she thought as she shrugged off her rucksack, even though she had wished she could stay a few more days in Bulgaria. Waving her wand to send her heavy flying cloak to the hook by the door and her rucksack gliding up to the bedroom, Rolanda headed for the cupboard to pull out her tea tin. A shower, a change of clothes, a cup of tea, and she'd be ready to head up to the castle.

A repeated loud thumping interrupted her before she had even had a chance to heat the water. A large bird of indeterminate species was hurling itself witlessly against her window. Since it seemed bent on continuing until it knocked itself out or broke its neck, Rolanda opened the window. As soon as she did so, she regretted it. The bird was huge, so large, it could not spread its wings to fly through the window, instead hopping in, its wings half-folded. There was a small brownish packet strapped to one of its legs, but Rolanda had no desire to try to untie it. The raptor's talons were large, strong, and quite deadly looking. Only a madman would use such a bird as a substitute Post Owl.

The eagle...for the imperious profile of the black, brown, and white bird could only be that of an eagle...settled down on the back of one of Rolanda's kitchen chairs. Staring at her silently, it shook out its wings and shifted its weight. Rolanda swallowed and slowly lowered her wand. She had no idea what to offer the thing, but it had to be hungry and a long way from home. She hoped there were no cats or dogs out that evening; they might never return home if this bird caught sight of them. She shivered.

The bird seemed to sigh, and began to pick at the strings that held the brown paper packet to its leg. Apparently the cords were charmed, however, and it made no progress. Coming to her senses, Rolanda realised she would not have to take this letter from the bird the way she would from a Post Owl. A flick of her wand released the packet, and the bird flapped its large wings; her great-grandmother's salt and pepper cellars fell from their shelf with a crash.

"Er, I haven't anything to give you," Rolanda said, wondering whether such a wild thing understood any language at all, let alone English. "There's a nice forest close by, though, with interesting animals that, er, you might find edible."

The bird cocked its head, its shoulders twitching and its wing feathers ruffling a bit.

Rolanda poked her wand at the back door, and it swung open wide, though not wide enough for the bird to fly through. Who would be daft enough to send her a letter using such a huge...and potentially dangerous...bird?

"Mind you get away from the village as fast as you can," Rolanda said as the bird made an awkward, hopping exit. "If you try to catch something here, someone might hex you."

As soon as the bird was fully in the back garden, Rolanda shut both the door and the window behind it. Forgetting her tea, she instead reached for the bottle of whisky that sat on her sideboard. She Summoned a glass, poured herself a good amount, then paused and added a bit more. After she had taken a fortifying gulp of the warming liquor, Rolanda pulled the slim brown packet toward her. It was somewhat the worse for its presumably long flight on the leg of the giant eagle, but her name was clearly written on it, "Rolanda X. Hooch, Hogsmeade, Scotland." When she tried to tear into the paper, however, it wouldn't rip. She picked up her wand and tried a slitting charm she sometimes used on envelopes, but that didn't work either.

She picked up the thin packet and turned it over in her hands, seeking a seam, a flap, or a clue to its sender, but found none. She could bring it to Flitwick to open...he was very handy with charms of that sort...but she thought that no one would send her a protected letter that she wouldn't be able to open herself. Perhaps it had a password.

"Harpies," Rolanda tried, but although she could feel the charm react, the packet did not open. "Quidditch. Snitch. Hogwarts." Rolanda tried a half dozen more words to no effect, then she froze. Only a madman would send her such a protected letter using an exotic bird of prey. "Blackie."

The brown paper glowed for a moment, but the packet didn't open and no seam appeared. Rolanda frowned, thought a moment, then nodded. "Stray."

The paper crinkled, and Rolanda could now see a flap where one end was folded over and stuck down with ordinary Muggle Sellotape. She sat sipping her whisky and staring at the crude envelope without touching it. She should bring it to Dumbledore, unread, she thought. Or directly to the Ministry. No, not the Ministry. Their questions weren't likely to be very polite. And if Black weren't guilty ...

She set her empty whisky glass down on the makeshift envelope and headed upstairs for a shower. Her visit to Hogwarts would wait until morning...it was becoming late, anyway...and then she would have decided whether to bring the letter with her and give it to the Headmaster.

After her shower, Rolanda unpacked, quickly tossing most of the items in her laundry basket and setting the gifts for Minerva and Dumbledore on her dressing table. She'd been able to get a very nice poster of Zograf for Minerva, which he had cheerfully signed, and a supelka flute. She'd have preferred to have gotten her one of the fancier flutes, but they were just a bit out of her budget, considering that she wanted to buy presents for others, as well. She had also taken several photographs of some Bulgarian bagpipes, which Rolanda thought Minerva would find interesting, since she had recently inherited her grandfather's Scottish pipes.

For Dumbledore, she had found an interestingly carved tobacco pipe. He smoked rarely, as far as she knew, but he had quite a collection of pipes on the mantel in his sitting room, and he would probably like this one, which had a phoenix carved on the bowl and curving tendrils of smoke twining partway up the long stem. She placed the few other gifts she had got friends and family next to those for McGonagall and Dumbledore. She would have to find time in the next week either to deliver them or to send them off.

Somehow, though, her excitement about giving the gifts and anticipating the recipients' reactions was dampened by the presence of that unread letter on her kitchen table. Resolutely, she finished getting ready for bed, picked up her new history of broomstick sports, and settled down in bed to read. She couldn't keep her mind on the book, though. Her gaze was drawn to the hooked rug next to her bed. Blackie had slept there. And at Hogwarts, he'd actually slept on top of the bed with her. Impudent bastard.

Rolanda overcame her impulse to throw her book across the room...the poor book had done nothing wrong, after all. She doused her lamp, though the late evening sun still bathed the room with a gentle half-light. A flick of her wand, and her heavy curtains closed out the last of the day.

After a half hour of tossing and turning, Rolanda got up and padded to her bathroom. Some potion for her aches would help her sleep, she thought, and she wouldn't be so stiff in the morning. Long-distance flying was most definitely *not* romantic.

Rolanda slept fitfully and woke up to an early dawn feeling more knackered than she had before she'd gone to bed. She pulled on a heavy quilted dressing gown, drew aside the curtains, and opened her bedroom window to the chilly morning air and a symphony of birds greeting the new day. She scrubbed at her eyes with her fists and then stretched and yawned, willing herself to wake up fully. It was pointless to lie in bed, restless and aware of the letter in her kitchen, or, when she did drift off, dreaming of giant black dogs riding huge eagles over vast savannahs.

Rolanda took her time getting dressed, delaying the moment when she would see the letter sitting on her kitchen table, but eventually she could delay no more. The letter was still there under her empty whisky glass; it hadn't evaporated overnight or turned out to be a product of an overactive imagination.

With her coffee made, bacon fried, and her porridge cooking, Rolanda finally sat down at the table. Nibbling a slice of bacon, she considered the letter in front of her.

There was no denying that she wanted to know what Black had to say for himself...and why he felt it appropriate to contact her after having used her so shamelessly...but a part of her wanted to show her complete disinterest in him: she had nothing to do with him, he was not a part of her life. However, Black would never be aware of the snub, and if she were to burn the letter without reading it, she would remain eternally curious about it, which would only irritate her and affect Black in no way whatever. Of course, she could bring it to Dumbledore, read or unread, but perhaps there was something in the letter that she should read before deciding whether to let the Headmaster see it.

She flicked her wand absent-mindedly at her spurtle, setting it to give her porridge a stir every few minutes. With a sigh of resignation...she should have known what she'd do and just done it immediately, saving herself a restless night...Rolanda slashed her wand at the letter, pulling away the crinkled brown paper. The paper inside was hardly of better quality, several soft, mottled, slightly grey sheets that looked like they had been torn from a child's drawing pad. With slight distaste, she picked the letter up and unfolded it. Blue Muggle ink...cheap, too, and blotchy...dated the letter the eighteenth of July, over two weeks before. It was a wonder that it had reached her at all, she thought, remembering its carrier.

18 July 1994

Dear Rolanda,

I suppose that you have deduced by now who your occasional visitor was last autumn and winter, and if not, I hope it's not too much of a surprise to learn that I, Sirius Black, was Blackie. After my second visit to Gryffindor Tower, which was hardly more successful than my first, I became concerned that you would twig to my identity if I hung about any longer, particularly if there were further coincidental and yet unsuccessful 'attacks' on the Tower at the same time as you let your stray into the castle.

But I am beginning in the middle, aren't I? You must understand that I had not initially intended to use your kindhearted generosity as a means to enter the school, or even to continue to take advantage of it after that first night. But hunger for news of Harry, as well as for the meals you gave me, drew me back to you. Then I admit that I conceived a plan to use whatever opportunity you might give me to enter the castle, as long as no one else might see me. Remus would have recognised me immediately, and I also thought it possible that if McGonagall saw me, she would sense that I was an Animagus even if she hadn't a clue as to who I was...particularly if she were in her cat form. If so, the jig would be up, as they say, and I couldn't risk it.

I admit that I had no compunction to use your kindness in this way. I had a goal, and if I achieved that goal, then nothing else mattered to me. I could be struck dead in the next minute and die content that I had achieved my purpose.

Please believe me, though, Rolanda, that even though I was intent on my goal and was consumed with a fervour for revenge, I appreciated your kindness and generosity from the first moment you bent down to touch me and invited me home for a meal, and my appreciation grew even though it couldn't dull my devotion to my mission. I came to value not just your kindness, but you yourself. I'd never known you well in school...different Houses, different years, all that...but from our first meal together, I felt comfortable with you. Despite my mission, which I could scarcely think beyond, and which might easily end in my death, I found myself wishing that I could stay with you and get to know you better, become a real part of your life. Of course, as Blackie, I was limited in how I could interact with you, but there were brief moments when I felt a sudden desire to reveal myself to you, become genuine friends with you. Naturally, my good sense overcame such impulses, and my desire to achieve my goal at all costs crowded out any soft desire for human friendship.

Rolanda stopped reading and tossed the letter down on the table. His "good sense"! She would have hexed him on sight, stray dog or no, if she'd known his true form.

She seethed quietly as she dished up her porridge. His letter gave no useful information, and if it was an apology, it was one of the most piss-poor apologies she'd ever come across. As for explanations, whatever explanation he thought he was giving, he explained nothing but that he was an obsessed nutter, preferring to starve in order to achieve his goal..."revenge," he'd said, but he either believed that the object of his revenge was obvious or irrelevant to her. It wasn't obvious, and it certainly wasn't irrelevant. She'd been aiding him, innocently or not, and she certainly deserved some kind of explanation beyond his obsession. And that bit about "different Houses, different years, all that." Ha! There were far more differences between them in school than those, unless by "all that" he meant that he'd been a conceited, mean-spirited little git who used his looks, charm, and talent to get away with mischief that would have landed any other student in detention for a month of Sundays.

Rolanda methodically stirred her honey into her porridge then added a bit of milk. If she'd hoped that the letter would give some clue about where Sirius Black was holed up, there was none yet.

She ate half her porridge before picking up the letter and turning to the next page. For a long letter, it didn't seem to say much, but on the chance that Black actually made an apology and perhaps even told her where he was, she'd continue reading. Of course, he was probably long gone from wherever he'd been when he'd written the letter, but it would give the authorities a place to begin looking for him...if she decided to hand over the letter. She was still gnawed by doubts. Severus had been adamant that Black was guilty, but Severus wasn't particularly rational or unbiased. Dumbledore hadn't come right out and said that Black was innocent, just that Potter wasn't in any danger from him, and that could simply be because Dumbledore was convinced that Black had given up and had fled somewhere far from the boy.

I would try to explain myself to you, but you have read the papers and heard the stories about me. What can I say that would alter your opinion of Sirius Black? And regardless of what I might say, there is nothing I can use to prove to you the truth of it except this: when I was with you, I may have been in another form, you may have

seen only a dog, but I was myself, as much myself as I could be after everything that happened, anyway. You did know me, Rolanda, and nothing I did when I was with you was false. I think you know that, that you could sense it, and sense my feelings for you and my sincerity. Perhaps that is enough to persuade you that I am not the wizard you read of in the Prophet.

I would never harm you, Rolanda. It is true that I was afraid of discovery if I remained with you, but I also did not want you to become mixed up in this very nasty business. You can rest assured that I did not tell Fudge or Dumbledore, and not even Remus, how I gained entry to the castle...and I'm certain that Dumbledore believes in me and that he knows the truth about what happened on that terrible Hallowe'en all those years ago. Still, I wouldn't risk having you pay in the slightest for your kindness to me, and unless he learns it from you, even Dumbledore will never know how I managed to get into the castle on Hallowe'en and again after the Quidditch match.

Rolanda pushed aside her empty bowl and picked up her coffee cup. There was that, she thought. He hadn't told Dumbledore...the Headmaster had said himself that Black had refused to say how he'd got into the castle. She supposed that meant something; Black had some modicum of decency left in him. But if he thought that it reassured her to know that he was himself when he was with her, even if he was in his Animagus form, it did not. He was no better than a peeping Tom. He hadn't closed his eyes and pretended to sleep when she was changing, or averted his gaze, or got up and turned around. He could have behaved like a normal dog and still behaved like a gentleman. He'd even leaned against her when she was naked, pressing his head against her. At the time, it had been a comfort to her; now it made her feel slightly disgusted. Whatever his feelings for her were, they did not reassure her, and they certainly were not a substitute for an apology, quite the opposite.

She turned to the last page of the letter.

One last thing, a bit of advice, one friend to another: keep clear of Snape. You told me the relationship ended, and I hope it was a final end. He's no good, Rolanda, and no good for you. I could hardly believe it when I first saw him with you. How someone of your calibre, of your worth, with your kind heart, could be involved with that slimy character was incomprehensible to me. I was glad when you saw reason and ended the relationship. I know he hurt you ...

Rolanda quit reading. The bastard, the impertinent bastard. He dared to bring up her relationship with Severus. The things she had said to Blackie were not meant for human ears, and she certainly didn't need Sirius Black telling her anything about Severus, let alone giving her advice about her relationship with him. As if Sirius were one to talk. Whether he was innocent of the murders or not, he'd been a nasty boy before that, quite capable of dirty tricks and mean practical jokes. Her own brother Barney had been the unfortunate victim of more than one of his pranks.

Rolanda shook her head and Summoned the coffee pot from the hob. Black had been egotistical in school, and he was no less egotistical now. He was certainly very cocksure of himself for a man who'd spent the previous decade in Azkaban. Daring to give her advice about Severus! Really!

After a gulp of coffee, Rolanda picked up the grey sheet again.

I know he hurt you, and you deserve better. He could never appreciate what a fine witch you are, or how lucky he was to have had a moment's attention from you at all. You deserve a wizard who values you, not one who just uses you to satisfy his needs like Snape did.

As if Sirius had behaved any better! He certainly had used her, and much more craftily and underhandedly than Severus ever did. Severus never claimed to want more than just sex from their relationship, and she had got something out of it, herself, even if it ended up not being enough. But that was her fault as much as Snape's. She had known better than to become emotionally involved.

I don't know when I will be able to return to Britain. It may be a very long time. But when I do, I hope to make up to you any trouble I caused you. I owe you more than one steak dinner.

Look after yourself, Rolanda, and stay clear of Snape. There are evil times ahead, and I hope you can keep out of them.

I hope that Hermes doesn't become lost and that you receive this letter sooner rather than later. It is always tricky sending post with a wild bird, and this one has never been north of the Niger. My current companion helped me explain to Hermes his task and his destination, and I'm hopeful he will arrive before the end of July. Know that I am safe and that I will always be grateful for the care and affection you gave me. If you want to write me, a hearty Eagle Owl might reach me, but use a private owl, not a Post Owl, for obvious reasons.

Yours faithfully,

Blackie

Black must be somewhere in Africa, or he was when he wrote the letter, anyway. Although the bit about the Niger River might be meant as a red herring, the eagle certainly wasn't a European bird, and Ro could easily believe it was African. She could tell Dumbledore that part. As for the rest ... she really didn't want Dumbledore to know she'd been involved with Severus. It had been important to Severus at the time to keep their relationship discreet, and he had been clear that he hadn't wanted the Headmaster to know any more about his private affairs than he already did. The letter had been pretty uninformative other than the reference to the Niger. There was no reason to give it to Dumbledore; it would only embarrass her.

As for writing to Sirius, he certainly was deluded if he thought that she'd ever want to communicate with him. The back of her hand across his cheek was the only message she wanted to give him.

Rolanda twitched her wand and sent her breakfast dishes over to the sink, then she picked up the letter and its makeshift envelope and set it in the fireplace atop a charred log. It was a chilly morning. A fire would be welcome. A flick of her wand, and the log was ablaze and the grey sheets reduced to ash.

She was through with Sirius Black.

Author's Note: If you're interested in seeing a photograph of the sort of eagle that carried Black's letter, there are some good ones at [arkive.org](http://www.arkive.org/martial-eagle/polemaetus-bellicosus/image-G69354.html#), including my favorite one here:

<http://www.arkive.org/martial-eagle/polemaetus-bellicosus/image-G69354.html#>

For an interesting, brief article about the Martial eagle, take a look at this:

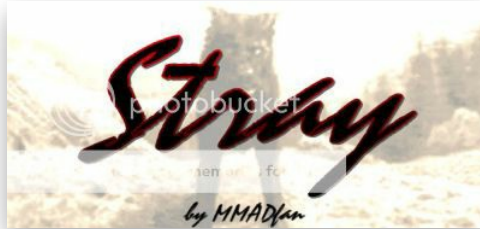
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/science/grrlscientist/2012/jan/02/week>

I wouldn't want one of them arriving in my kitchen!

Unexpected Visitors

Chapter 10 of 11

Ro has two unexpected visitors to her flat.



Unexpected Visitors

Dictaquill, three regular self-inking goose quills, her reporter's notebook, plus a fresh one, pocket camera, Omniculars, money bag *Daily Prophet* badge ... it looked as though she had everything she needed in her bag, but Ro went through it one more time. She'd only been to two Quidditch World Cups, the last back in '86 when Wales beat Andorra in Sweden. That had been a fabulous game. Neither team had been expected even to make the quarter finals, so when the two plucky little teams made it through to the finals, it had really been something to watch no matter who you usually cheered on. When Andorra was ahead by 140 points, 660 to 520, Dafydd Powell caught the Snitch. Ro and her then-new-boyfriend Rees Blevin had consummated their relationship in celebration. He'd been one very happy Welshman, and he'd made her one happy witch.

With a cursory look through her carpet bag checking for her change of robes, toiletries, and her extra flying cloak, she was ready to go. Simon Upbank had procured a very nice three-room tent for her. It rolled up tight and looked like a bit of a pup tent on the outside, but get inside, and it had a nice sitting room with a cooking galley in one corner, a bedroom almost the size of the one in her flat, and even a small bathroom. She would be quite comfortable for the next couple days...or longer, if the match went into extra days.

She felt peculiar leaving her broom behind, but reporters weren't allowed to have them on the grounds, no more than anyone else, other than the players and the stadium staff. Her Portkey...a single also arranged by Upton, the *Prophet's* sport editor...wasn't scheduled for another few hours, and she had more than enough time for a cup of tea and a sandwich before she left.

Rolanda was just sitting down with her pot of tea and her cheese and pickle sandwich when there was a rapping on the door. Most inconvenient, and she wasn't expecting anyone. Best to get rid of them fast and not be put in a position where she'd have to invite whoever it was in for a cup of tea. She pushed back from the table and crossed over and opened the door by hand.

"Severus!"

"You're still here. Good." He pushed in past her. "I need to talk to you."

"I really don't have time."

"You're covering the World Cup."

Ro nodded. "I leave for the grounds soon. I have my own Portkey, but it's on a schedule, and if I don't make it, I'll need to take one of the ones leaving from the park in the village, and you know it'll be a mob scene."

"Don't go."

"What?" Rolanda looked at him in disbelief, but stopped short of laughing, his expression was so serious.

"Don't go. Or if you go, leave as soon as the match is over. Sooner, if it's a long one."

"What are you talking about, Severus?"

He turned from her for a moment, then looked back over at her. "Ro, I know you probably believe I have no feelings for you. I understand that. But I needed to warn you. Do not go to the World Cup."

"You haven't answered my question, Severus. Sit down." She sat back down in front of her untouched sandwich. "You'll need to tell me more than that in order to persuade me to give up my job in the middle...no, at its height."

"I can't. I don't even know very much. Just that I am glad that I'm known for being reclusive and not attending such events."

"That isn't helping. I enjoy Quidditch, and this match is going to be a good one. I've done a lot of work leading up to it, too. I can't just abandon it."

"I've been reading all your articles," Severus said, pulling out a chair and sitting down. From him, that was tantamount to praise.

"As I said, I've been working hard at this, taking it seriously. I'd like Upbank to keep me on after the match is over, even if it's just doing occasional fluff pieces. But he won't do that if I don't show up for the World Cup."

"There will be other reporters there."

"Yes, true, but I'm doing the colour pieces...you know, the behind-the-scenes scoop. I've come to know all of the players on both teams. I'm scheduled to do interviews with some of the players before the game. I'm the only reporter from *any* paper who's going to be allowed to talk to any of them the day of the match, and those articles will be the highlight of the special evening edition put out just before the match. I even have a five-minute slot on the Wizarding Wireless in their special preview programme. I

can't just throw that away for no reason."

Severus Summoned a mug from the cupboard and poured himself a cup of tea. He lifted it, but only looked into the cup and didn't drink. He set it back down.

"I overheard some conversations. I can't say more than that. Even if I knew much more, I couldn't, Ro. But there will be ... there will be some nastiness, some disruption, after the match. Something may even happen before it, but I don't think so. They do want to see the game."

Rolanda went cold. "Who? And why are you telling me? Shouldn't you be telling someone in authority?"

Severus pushed his mug away, and some tea slopped over the rim onto the old oak table. "I shouldn't even be telling you." He stood and bent over her, one fist on the table, his voice low and urgent. "Get out of there as soon after the game as you can. I don't know what will happen, but it won't be pleasant, and I don't want you caught up in it. People could be hurt." He briefly touched her cheek with the tips of his fingers. "I could never be what you need or deserve, and you ..." He shook his head. "You, no matter your effort, you could never be what I need. That doesn't exist. But I still ... Ro, don't go, or if you go, leave right away. If you don't, then ... at least remember my warning, even if you won't heed it. You won't be taken by surprise, anyway."

"If something's going to happen, if some of your ... your old friends are going to be up to some of their old tricks, then someone should be there who knows what's going to happen. You really should tell someone at the Ministry...or tell Dumbledore. He could make sure the right people know."

Leaning on the table, Severus shook his head. "Dumbledore can't do anything about this. If he did ... well, he couldn't, and if he tried to, or if the Ministry tried, suspicions would abound, and suspicion might fall on me."

"Suspensions?" Rolanda asked, confused.

"Most who know what is planned...or even that something is planned...will be there. I am one of only a few who is not attending the match. Besides, the Ministry wouldn't take it seriously." Severus sighed. "And it likely won't amount to much. A little ... hooliganism, but with a very specific flavour to it."

"Death Eater flavour," Ro whispered, a shiver passing over her.

Severus nodded.

"I thought you'd given all that up."

Severus let out an exasperated chuff. "I still know people. And listening to their conversations can be instructive, and useful for the future."

"Well, thanks for the warning, Severus. I really do appreciate it." She reached out and placed her hand over his where it rested on the table.

"I am sorry things ended as they did," Severus said softly.

"Me, too. But we had some good times, didn't we?"

Severus gave a crooked grin. "As you say. The only good times I can remember in ... in a while."

Hooch kissed his cheek. "I'll hold onto that."

"And I ... I will try to hold onto their memory."

~*~*~*~

Sitting at her kitchen table a few mornings later, Hooch fumed as she read the *Prophet*. That Skeeter woman had columns and columns of rubbish, absolute rubbish...she couldn't even get people's names straight, for Merlin's sake!...and all of the other Quidditch news had been pushed aside; only one page in the entire paper was devoted to the match, with a quarter of that page taken up with a photograph of Krum catching the Snitch. Her own articles, which she'd sent off to Upton with an Eagle Owl as soon as she'd left the campgrounds, had been trimmed to a barely recognisable two paragraphs at the bottom of that page. If she hadn't taken Snape's advice, she could have been there and written up something more accurate and detailed about the marauding Death Eaters.

Rolanda tossed the newspaper to the floor. She wished that she had stayed on at the campgrounds after the match, but at the same time, perhaps it was best she hadn't. It sounded as though it had been terrifying, and it was certainly sickening to think of what they had done to those poor Muggles. She was not sorry to have missed that. Muggle-torture, just like before You-Know-Who had vanished after attacking the Potters and scarring young Harry. She could happily go her entire life without witnessing such a thing. She shivered. She hoped those times were not returning. Black had warned her, too. Evil times ahead, he'd said. He had to be wrong.

She looked down at the newspaper strewn on the floor. The photograph of the Dark Mark flickered up at her.

Rolanda got up and threw away her breakfast.

~*~*~*~

A cold but gentle rain pattered on Rolanda's windowpanes. Ro set down her quill, then flicked her wand and sent another split log into her kitchen fireplace. The kitchen was her favourite room on autumn days like this. It reminded her of spending grey, rainy days in her great-grandmother's kitchen when she was a girl. Grammy always had something baking, a steady fire in the kitchen fireplace, and a pot of tea on the table. Even with a fire blazing in the living room fireplace, Rolanda preferred her cosy kitchen.

She wrapped her Ravenclaw-blue shawl around her shoulders and stood. Time for a fresh pot of tea. She froze, her hand still on the cupboard latch. The hair on the back of her neck prickled. She'd heard something, a familiar sound, and there it was again. A scratch, a snuffle, and a whine. Slowly, Rolanda turned back toward the door. It couldn't be him. He wouldn't be such a fool to return here, not when he'd escaped, got clean away.

Ro drew her wand again. She held her breath as she flicked it and lifted the latch on the door. Swallowing, she waved her wand, and the doorknob turned. A slight swish of her wand, and the door opened a crack, letting in a chill breeze. And ... a black snout. She raised her wand to slam the door shut in the dog's face, but she hesitated, and in that moment, the dog nudged the door open and took a step into the kitchen. He was dripping on the flagstone floor.

"Bloody hell," Rolanda said softly. She took a deep breath and let it out, then she waved her wand and closed the door.

The dog stared up at her for a moment, then as Ro's heart beat harder, he changed with a pop, smoothly transforming from dog into human.

"What do you think you're doing here?" Rolanda asked. "Why did you come back?"

"Someone needs my help," Sirius said, pushing his hair back from his forehead and wiping dripping water from his face. "And, since I am here, I wanted to see you." He took a step toward her, and Rolanda raised her wand.

"No closer. Keep your hands where I can see them."

Sirius took a step back and raised his hands briefly before dropping them again. "Look, I just wanted to apologise. I sent you a letter, but I don't know if you got it..."

"Yes, I got it. I burned it."

"I ... did you read it?"

She looked at him a moment. "Yeah, I read it." Sirius was still dripping wet. Ro shook her head and raised her wand. Sirius raised his hands again. "I'm just going to cast a spell to dry you off."

Sirius dropped his hands. "Thanks." He nodded. "That is better. Do you suppose I could sit down?"

"You aren't staying."

"You dried me off to send me back out into the rain?"

"You were getting my floor wet. What do you want, Black? I have half a mind to bind you and Floo the Ministry, or Dumbledore."

"I just wanted to apologise in person. I am sure I put you in an awkward spot. But I still haven't told anyone that you were the one helping me."

"I did. I told Dumbledore."

"So you know that I was innocent," Sirius said.

"I *know* no such thing. Just that the Headmaster doesn't believe you are a danger to Harry."

"I'm not, Ro. Harry's why I'm here. He's my best friend's son, my *godson*. I can try to be there for him as much as I can. He's going to need advice. He's in trouble."

"I saw in the *Prophet* yesterday he's one of the champions in the Tournament," Rolanda said. "An extra." When Poppy had been over for supper the night before, she had told her that there had been quite an outcry about it, but that Harry wasn't going to be excluded from the Tournament based on any irregularity with his entrance. What was done was done, and he would have to compete.

"Exactly. And he never put his name in. Someone put it in for him without his knowledge. Someone who wants him in danger, maybe worse."

"So you came back to hang about and offer Harry advice? Do you have any idea what would happen if you were found with him? Or with me?"

"I have a pretty good idea," Sirius said with a hollow grin. "I spent more than a decade in Azkaban. I haven't forgotten it, or why I was sent there...without a trial."

"Yeah, well, that wasn't right. But you're still in danger here, and probably putting me in danger, too."

"If anyone comes by, I'll transform. You'll just be entertaining a charming stray." Sirius smiled.

Rolanda shook her head. "Neither. Not entertaining, and not charming. You've apologised. You can go now."

Sirius stepped back toward the door. "Listen, I hate to ask, but ... do you have any food? I haven't eaten in, well, in a while."

Rolanda just stared at him.

Sirius took another step back and shrugged. "Right. Bye, then," he said. "*I am* sorry."

"Stay there," Ro said, pocketing her wand. She turned and opened her cupboard, pulling out a half a loaf of bread, then she opened the cool cupboard and dug around, finding a block of cheese, a bunch of carrots, and a jar of jam. She Summoned a small canvas bag from a shelf and put the food in it. She paused, bent again, and pulled out a couple bottles of cider and added them to the bag.

"Here." She put the bag on the table and shoved it toward him.

He picked up the bag and set it at his feet. "Cheers, Rolanda. I appreciate it."

"Don't make a habit of it. You're here by choice...yours, not mine...and you can figure out how to eat." Her eyebrows lowered as she looked at him hard. "I hear the bins behind the Three Broomsticks have good pickings, but watch out for Bruno. He hates stray dogs."

Sirius barked a laugh. "I remember." He nodded at her, and then Blackie was standing in her kitchen again. He gave a quick, sharp yap and picked up the bag with his teeth, his tail wagging.

Rolanda stepped over to the door and put her hand on the knob. "Be careful, Black. Try not to get yourself into trouble." She waved her wand and cast *atempervius* on him. "That will keep you dry for a bit. Now get out of here." She opened the door to a chilly blast of damp November air.

Black disappeared around the corner of the house, and Rolanda closed the door again. "You damned fool, Black," she muttered. "Don't go getting yourself caught."

Two days later, a dark shadow was waiting in the corner of her garden when she returned from Harpies practice. Blackie stood and wagged his tail, tongue hanging out.

"You again. I told you to get lost. You can't be hanging about here." When the dog whined, Rolanda shook her head in exasperation, but otherwise ignored him and started to unlock her door.

Blackie trotted up to her and yipped.

"Shoo, go on!" Rolanda said, opening the door and trying to back in without letting the dog in, too.

Blackie sat, cocked his head, and lifted a paw, whining.

"Oh, for Merlin's sake!" Rolanda chuffed. "Just ... just get in here."

Rolanda took a quick look around before she shut the door behind them. "You just stay there, and stay ...*that way* until I close the curtains." It was unlikely that any of her neighbours could see in through her kitchen windows, but she wasn't going to take any chances. She lit a lamp, then pulled the curtains shut.

Not even bothering to remove her cloak, she turned to the dog, her hands on her hips. "All right, what do you want?"

The dog stretched, and then Sirius was standing in front of her. "I know, I know, I have no right to ask any favours of you. But I'm not asking for me, I'm asking for Harry. I need to talk to him."

"Well, if you think I'm going to get you into the castle again, that's out of the question. Besides, I am only there two mornings a week this term. I can't do it."

"No, that wouldn't be prudent," Sirius said. "But Harry is expecting me in the Gryffindor Floo on the twenty-second. I know I could find one..."

"Then find one, and leave me alone," Rolanda said, taking off her cloak and throwing it on a chair.

"You have an open Floo connection..."

"And if someone sees you in the Floo, someone besides Harry, and the connection is traced from Gryffindor back to me?"

"Sorry. Shouldn't have asked. I just thought..."

"What? That I'm such a soft-hearted fool, I'd let you take advantage of me whenever you raise your paw and give me those soft golden eyes?"

"No, no, not at all. I just thought it would be safer for me. I hadn't considered that it would do more than inconvenience you slightly."

"Why do you have to talk to Harry?" Rolanda demanded.

"He needs my advice. More than I can give him in a letter. Besides ..."

"Yes?"

"I'd just like to see him, and I think it would reassure him to see me."

"You're a scruffy mess," Rolanda grumped. "Hardly reassuring."

Sirius smiled. "But I'm less scruffy than I was, and just as charming."

Rolanda snorted a laugh. "I'll agree with that."

"Listen, Ro, just leave the door unlocked for me and I'll come and go and you'll never know I was here. We're talking at one o'clock in the morning. No one will see me, either here or in the Gryffindor Floo."

"I am not leaving my door unlocked all night. I know not everyone locks their doors in Hogsmeade...even if they should, with you around...but I feel more secure with a locked door when I'm alone here at night."

"All right. I understand."

"But you can come after dark. I'll let you in. I want you gone in the morning, though, before dawn. And this is a one-time event. If you need to talk to him in the future, you'll have to make other arrangements."

Sirius broke out in a broad grin. "Thanks, Rolanda! I won't forget this."

"Just don't tell anyone about it, right?"

"Right."

"And if you don't want to scare the boy, wash your face and comb your hair before you talk to him. Better yet, get it cut."

"Yes, I'll just walk over to Tim Tiddelly's Tonsures on the high street and ask him for a trim," Sirius said sarcastically.

Rolanda pulled out a chair. "Sit."

Sirius sat.

Ro smirked. "Good boy, Blackie! Now, stay!"

Sirius grinned. "Arf!"

Rolanda left the room and returned a few minutes later with a comb, a basin of water, and a pair of scissors.

"Here, comb your hair. Get it damp. Don't worry about the tangles. I'll do Mr Tiddelly's work today. One-day-only special."

Ten minutes later, Sirius was looking in a hand mirror. "Thanks. I almost look..."

"You don't look respectable. You won't as long as you're wearing those bloody awful grey Azkaban rags."

"I was going to say, 'normal.' As for the clothes, they're what I have, and since I spend most of my time in my Padfoot form, I didn't see any reason to try to acquire anything else."

"Hmph. 'Try to acquire,' as in, 'steal,'" Ro said.

"I only take what I absolutely must to live, and believe me, I haven't done that much."

"That's easy to believe, or you wouldn't have let yourself starve last year. You would have been raiding the kitchens of the trusting folk of Hogsmeade while they slept."

"I can't carry a lot, anyway. Besides, with a crazed escapee on the loose, they weren't keeping their doors unlocked last year." He gave her a crooked grin. "I did check a few."

"Listen, you can't stay, but I'm starving...so to speak...and was going to make myself some supper, just a cheese sandwich or two. You can join me, but then you have to leave. And don't come back until the twenty-first, after dark."

"Thanks. And, um, not to be greedy, but do you have any meat I could bring with me?"

"Meat?"

"It's just that last time, you gave me bread, cheese, carrots...no meat. Not that I'm complaining, but, um, I have a companion. He only eats meat."

"You have a companion?" Rolanda asked. That's right: he'd said something about a companion in his letter. "What sort of companion?"

"A carnivorous one."

"You already said that." A carnivorous companion who had helped him to convey to the Martial Eagle where he was to bring the letter ... Her eyes widened. "You have Buckbeak with you."

Sirius barked a laugh. "You're a Ravenclaw for a reason, Ro."

"You saved Buckbeak? But how?"

"Buckbeak saved me," Sirius said. "And now you know something that only Dumbledore and a very, very few others do. I'm trusting you not to say anything to anyone."

"No, of course not." Severus would love to know that bit of information, but Rolanda didn't see how knowing it would help him. She'd keep Sirius's secret, especially since it meant keeping Buckbeak's.

"All right. I'll give you some meat to take with you when you leave. I think I have some mince, and there's some leftover chicken. You can have that."

When Blackie left a half hour later, he was carrying a bag heavy with food, half of it meat.

"Don't be seen, or someone may think you stole that bag," Rolanda cautioned him.

Blackie gave a muffled bark and trotted away, his tail waving.

Dinner Guest

Chapter 11 of 11

Blackie comes by and Sirius stays for dinner.



Dinner Guest

Rolanda had the steaks sizzling and the potatoes roasting when the scratching came at her door. She quickly wiped her hands on a towel, then took her wand from her pocket before walking over and opening the door. Blackie stepped in and shook himself, then raised his snout and sniffed.

"Rrowf!"

"You can transform to eat," Rolanda said. "I'd rather have you appreciate my cooking as a man than a dog. Dumping everything into a bowl for you just isn't the same. Otherwise, stay in your Animagus form."

Blackie went over and lay down on the hearthrug, his tail happily slapping the floor.

"Just another few minutes," Ro said. "Steaks...I presume you like yours rare?"

Blackie yapped in the affirmative.

"Jacket potatoes, carrots, peas, and then pudding. And a bottle of wine. Can't share that with a dog."

Blackie put his muzzle on his paws and watched Rolanda as she moved about the kitchen, setting the table, putting the steaks on a plate, hers a few minutes after his, putting the vegetables in serving bowls, then taking a bottle of red wine from the sideboard and setting it on the table.

"You can open the wine, if you like," Ro said, indicating that he could transform.

There was a slight pop as Sirius stood and straightened. "Don't have a wand."

Roland rolled her eyes. She took a corkscrew from the drawer of the sideboard. "It's charmed. Don't need a wand to open a bottle of wine."

She put the steaks on their plates with their potatoes as Sirius figured out how to use the Charmed corkscrew.

"Merlot," he said, looking at the label as he put the corkscrew and its impaled cork on the table. The corkscrew began to remove itself from the cork.

"I thought it would be okay with steak."

"Never had it," Sirius said. "I don't really know much about wine. I'm sure it will be great."

Of course. Spending almost all of his adulthood in Azkaban wouldn't acquaint Black with varieties of wine, or Charmed corkscrews, or many other things that most adult wizards would take for granted.

"I hope you like it. If you don't, I have some beer in the cupboard."

"I'm looking forward to it."

"Pour us each a glass, then have a seat."

Sirius sat down and surveyed the table. "Thanks, Ro. This is the first meal I've had like this in years. Literally. Sitting at a table, real plates and cutlery. And real food. Thanks."

Rolanda shrugged. "I hope you enjoy it. But ... if anyone comes to the door, I'm going to have to ask you to transform. Get your plate and take it into the sitting room, then transform until whoever it is leaves. I don't think I'll have any visitors, but just in case."

"Of course. I don't want anyone to see me, either." He cut into his rare steak, stabbed a piece with his fork, lifted it to his mouth, and chewed. His eyes closed in appreciation. "Really good, Rolanda. Great."

"Brown sauce?" Rolanda asked, Summoning the bottle from the cupboard.

"No. It's perfect as it is."

Sirius's table manners were a little lacking, but not so much to put her off her food. She gave him a second potato and encouraged him to take more vegetables. She ate only half her own steak, putting the other half aside. He could take it with him, along with the soup bones she'd bought for Buckbeak and some tinned food she'd picked up for him.

"Where are you staying?" she asked.

"Found a nice place for us both up on the mountain, remote," he said in between bites. "No place someone is likely to just happen on." He finished chewing and swallowed. "Nice dry cave. Perfect for Buckbeak. Lots of rats around, too."

Rolanda nodded. She felt a little less guilty about Black being homeless when she remembered Buckbeak. He had to have a place where he could keep him. It wasn't as though she could put a hippogriff in her guest room.

"Listen, a practical matter. While you're here, you might as well use the bathroom. Silly to let you out into the garden to do your business. Just don't transform until you're in the bathroom. If you want a bath, you can take one after I've gone to bed. There's also a razor and soap in there, if you want to shave."

"Thanks," Sirius said with a nod. "I really appreciate what you're doing for me."

"You're here. While I may not want you here, you are here, and I can't see being inhospitable."

"You are a kind woman," Sirius said. Rolanda tried to detect any note of sarcasm in his tone, but found none.

She shrugged. "Well, I fed you when you were Blackie. How can I do less when you're not a dog?"

Black grinned. "You were more hospitable when I was Blackie. You gave me a bath, remember?" He winked at her.

Ro turned red. "Don't remind me," she snapped. No good deed goes unpunished, she thought. Just when she thought they were having a civilised, practical discussion, he had to get crude. "You could have behaved like a gentleman, you know. When I think of all the times..." She broke off, unable to complete the thought, not wanting to remind him of all the times she had unselfconsciously walked around naked in front of him, thinking he was just a big stray dog.

"I *had* been in Azkaban for a very long time, you know," Sirius said, only half-trying to restrain his smirk. "I'd forgotten my manners. And forgotten what a beautiful woman looks like."

Rolanda took a last swallow of her wine. "Dessert's in the cool cupboard. I'm going to go read. Help yourself, then do your Animagus thing." She tossed her napkin on the table and left. She'd deal with the dishes in the morning. Damned impertinent dog. She'd go lose herself in a novel and forget about her "guest."

Twenty minutes later, the living room door creaked open and Sirius's head appeared around the corner. She looked up, then turned back to her book. "You're supposed to be a dog, Black."

"I thought you might want some of this dessert," he said, holding out a plate with a slice of cream-filled cake on it. "I couldn't enjoy it on my own. At least not my second piece. And I made coffee. Or sludge. I wasn't sure how to do it."

Rolanda kept herself from rolling her eyes. She indicated that he should set down her plate and take a seat. She came back a few minutes later with a tray floating in front of her.

"I filtered your sludge. I think it'll be drinkable. If not, we can pretend it's Turkish."

"I'd never made coffee without magic before," Sirius said apologetically. "And you had that apparatus there on the hob, but I couldn't work out its charms."

"It's not charmed," Rolanda said shortly.

"Oh."

Rolanda flicked her wand and Levitated her cake plate in front of her, then she opened her book again and began to read as she picked at the cake with her fork.

"This is great," Sirius said. "Really great. What's it called?"

"Cake," Rolanda said. She relented slightly and added, "It's from Madam Puddifoots. I don't know what she calls it, but it's custard and cream. I hope it's not too rich for you."

"A little. But I'm enjoying it too much to worry about a little overeating."

"Don't transform if you think you're going to be sick," Rolanda said, not wanting dog vomit everywhere.

"Oh, I won't be sick. Some of the things I've been eating lately, well, I won't be sick on this." He grinned at her.

"Mm." She sent her plate over to the table and picked up her coffee cup, then turned her concentration back to her book. She didn't really pay attention when Sirius gathered up the plates and left the room. A few minutes later, though, there was clattering and the sound of running water in the kitchen. Swearing under her breath, she put her book down in her chair and went to see what Black was doing.

The sink was overflowing with soap bubbles and Sirius was dipping their dinner plates in the water.

"I thought I'd clean up for you," he said.

"How much soap did you use?" Rolanda asked, watching as the bubbles travelled over the edge of the sink to the floor, where they began to flow towards her.

"I don't know. Maybe a tablespoon? A bit more?"

"It's a Charmed potion. You only need a tiny drop for an entire sinkful of dishes."

"Ah. Very effective stuff," he said. "Really cleans the plates." He set the plates in the rack and began dunking the serving bowls in the sink.

"Yeah." Rolanda raised the hem of her robe so it wouldn't get wet from the overflowing bubbles. "Listen, why don't you go sit in the living room, relax, and I'll finish up here."

He picked up the dessert plates. "I wanted to help."

"I know. All right, you finish with the dishes, but I've got to do something about these bubbles." They were beginning to run toward the living room now, and the fire was hissing and popping as the soap bubbles flowed over the hearth and into the fireplace.

"I didn't realise the soap was charmed." He looked down at the foam rising around his ankles.

Rolanda just began waving her wand to dry the floor, the hearthrug, and the counters, and then again to reduce the amount of bubbles in the sink. If he'd read the label on the bottle, he would have seen that a tiny drop was all he needed. Men.

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Rolanda lay in bed and listened to the sound of water running into the bathtub. Sirius had finished the dishes, then transformed into his Animagus form and lay down on the hearthrug in the kitchen while she continued to read in the living room. After she had got ready for bed, she came downstairs and gave him a bowl of water, just as she used to, setting it to one side of the fireplace, then she bent and patted his head. She was still irked with him, but he really couldn't help it. And he was a very good dog, even if he was an annoying wizard.

He had waited another fifteen minutes before padding up the stairs. She heard the pop as he transformed back into his human form, then he shut the door to the bathroom. Now he was apparently taking a bath. At least he'd be clean and relatively decent looking when he appeared in the Gryffindor fire.

There was some splashing as Black got into the bath, and Ro was glad that she didn't have charmed bubble bath soap, or they'd have a cascade of them going down the stairs. Ro giggled to herself. Once she'd cleaned up the kitchen and dried everything out, she'd thought it was pretty funny, particularly the memory of Black with suds foaming up around his ankles as he held a cake plate in each hand and looked down at the bubbles in consternation.

A half hour later, Black opened the bathroom door, then she heard the pop of his transformation followed by the patter of his paws on the stairs. He was apparently abiding by her wish that he remain in his Animagus form while he was there. It was safer for him, as well, just in case someone did happen to come by, although she hadn't had a visitor in the middle of the night since she'd lived there. She was simply more comfortable with him in his Animagus form. She liked Blackie. She wasn't so sure about Black.

Despite the fact that she was tired and she was used to having Blackie in the house, Ro found she couldn't sleep, waiting for one o'clock to come. She lay there and waited tensely, reaching for her wand every now and then to cast a *Lumos* and check the time. At five minutes to one, she sat up and turned on her bedside lamp. A few minutes later, she heard movement downstairs, and then the low murmur of voices. Every now and then, she could hear Potter's voice plainly as it rose in distress, though she couldn't make out the words, then she would hear Black's low tones again. Then the voices stopped, and there was a pop as Sirius broke the Floo connection.

Rolanda swung out of bed and pulled on her dressing gown. Downstairs, Black was still crouched on the hearthrug, silhouetted only by the light from the flickering flames in the fireplace. He looked up when she stepped into the kitchen.

"Everything all right?"

Black shook his head. "I don't know. Someone was coming. Harry had to go. We were interrupted just as I was about to tell him how to get past a dragon."

"A *dragon*?" Rolanda gasped.

Sirius nodded. "That's the first challenge. Dragons. Someone showed them to him."

"Good thing, too. Must have been Hagrid. Dragons." Rolanda sat down. "Can't Harry back out? I don't understand, why can't he quit?"

"Magical contract. What comes out of the Goblet of Fire is law, apparently. I don't know what the consequences would be if he did try to drop out." Sirius shook his head. "It may just be bloody tradition. I sometimes think I hate tradition."

"Did it help? Talking to him?"

Sirius nodded. "He seemed relieved to be able to talk to someone about everything, and happy to see me. Thanks for letting me use your Floo. I told Harry I'd broken into a wizarding house, so he doesn't know where I am."

Rolanda nodded. "Well, you get some sleep. Breakfast at seven, then you've got to go."

"Right." He transformed smoothly, and now Blackie's familiar form sat in front of her. He curled up, put his head on his paws, and let out a heavy sigh.

"Good night, Blackie." Rolanda rubbed his head, then went up to her own bed.

The next morning, Rolanda forced herself out of bed and downstairs at quarter to seven. Blackie was still snoring on the rug. The fire had died during the night. Rolanda Levitated a fresh log into the grate, then lit it with her wand. Blackie slept on as she cooked breakfast. Finally, she went over and poked him with her toe.

"Time for breakfast. Rise and shine!"

Blackie stood and shook himself, yawning, then he stretched and transformed. He scratched his chin. "Need to use the loo."

He came back a few minutes later to a plate of sausages, eggs, and toast, as well as coffee that wasn't sludge. "This all looks great. I love breakfast."

"I have a bag of food fixed for you. It's heavy, but I think you can carry it. There are some soup bones in there for Buckbeak."

"Cheers, Ro. I'm sure even Buckbeak gets tired of rats." Sirius dug into his breakfast with vigour.

"So what are you going to do now?" Ro asked, trying not to think about eating rats.

"I'm going to stick around until after this task...not *here*, in your house, but Hogsmeade," he added quickly. "I need to know that Harry makes it through all right. Then I'm going to leave for a while. It's tricky with Buckbeak. I need to be somewhere isolated enough to be able to hide him but close enough to a town to pick up a living, so to speak."

"But you ought to stay away from wizarding areas, Sirius. If you were caught ..."

"I know. But I'll be back. I have to come back. I have a feeling Harry's really going to need my help before this is over. Besides, I need to be able to keep up on the news, know what's going on. That's hard if I'm too far away from a wizarding centre."

"Be careful."

Sirius grinned. "Believing in me now?"

"I just think you got a rough deal, and I don't like Azkaban or Dementors, and I don't think you belong there," Rolanda said evenly. "I'm going to tell Dumbledore I saw you this time, though. I told him I would."

"That's fine."

"I don't believe he'll mind, but he will be surprised, I think," Ro said. "He told me he thought you were far away and it would be a very long time before you returned."

Sirius smirked. "Don't be surprised if he's not surprised, though."

Rolanda's eyebrows rose. "He knows you're here?"

"We've been in touch."

"Oh. I'm still going to tell him. I did say I would. I wouldn't want him to think I was hiding something."

Sirius shrugged. "Whatever you want to do."

"Listen, you better be going. People are going to be out and about. You don't want to draw attention to yourself."

Black stood. "I'll try not to bother you in the future. I appreciate your help today, though."

"As I said, this was a one-time thing. Next time you need to talk to Potter, you'll need to make other arrangements."

"I know."

"And I can't be your caterer," Ro added, somewhat apologetically.

"That's all right. It wouldn't be safe for either of us if I made this a habit." He gave her a crooked smile. "Much as I might like to."

"Right, well, here's the food. Can you carry it?"

Sirius nodded, hefting the bag. "I'll manage it."

"Maybe I could rig a sling or something ..."

"Might have trouble with that when I transform back, though," Sirius said. "This is fine. Thanks again."

"Watch out for yourself, Black. I would hate to hear you'd been recaptured."

"I have too much to do to let that happen," Sirius replied. He placed the bag of food at his feet. "Listen, if you want to write, owls find me. Just don't use a Post Owl. One of the school owls, or a private owl."

"Yes, I can just see me going into the Owl Post Office with a letter addressed to Sirius Black," Ro said with a snort. "I am not dim, you know."

"Of course not. But if you want to write..."

"I don't think so." She wanted to add, *we're not friends*, but that seemed gratuitously unkind. The man had few enough friends, after all. If he wanted to imagine she was his friend, she wouldn't take that away from him. "But if you want to send me a note occasionally to let me know you're all right, I wouldn't mind. Just sign it 'Blackie' or 'Stray.'"

Sirius grinned. "Right! I'll do that. Bye, Ro." He bent and kissed her cheek quickly, then just as quickly, he melted into his Animagus form. He barked sharply once, then picked up the bag in his teeth.

Rolanda watched Blackie disappear in the predawn light, vanishing in the early morning mist even before he rounded the corner of the house, perhaps for the last time. She closed the door. Time for a fresh pot of tea.