

Catspaws

by Doomspark

Chaos ensues when the Familiars at Hogwarts decide to play matchmaker.

Chapter One

Chapter 1 of 20

Chaos ensues when the Familiars at Hogwarts decide to play matchmaker.

In the wee hours of a chilly September morning, Crookshanks opened one slitted golden eye and looked over at his human pet. As soon as he reassured himself that she was sound asleep, he quietly jumped off the bed and padded out of the room. His feet made no sound but the ticking of his overly long claws on the stones. Halfway down the hall, he stopped and leaned on a particularly unimpressive stone in the left-hand wall. The stone responded by grating softly to one side revealing a small tunnel.

The half-kneazle slithered inside and pushed the stone back in place before picking his way down the tunnel. A few moments later, he emerged from a similarly concealed entrance near the stairs to that led down to the Great Hall. He trotted down the corridors and up and over three staircases, finally ending up in a perfectly obscure room on the third floor.

It was a former classroom, now used by the humans of Hogwarts to store broken or overly shabby furniture. The air was stale with long disuse; even Norris' pet rarely came up here to clean. Crookshanks sneezed at the dust, and his long white whiskers twitched as he noted that he was the first to arrive. He settled himself in relative comfort on a worn chair and waited for the other Familiars. Fawkes had not told any of them what this meeting was about, just that it was extremely important.

They straggled in by ones and twos, settling into whatever place each deemed comfortable. Any human who happened to be watching would be dumbfounded at the sight of some ten cats, two toads, a phoenix, a macaw, a terrier, and a large borzoi sharing the same room without fighting. Fawkes was one of the last to arrive. He chose to perch on a rickety desk in the center of the room. When they were all assembled, he whistled once and the room quieted down.

"Welcome Familiars," the phoenix said as he fluffed out his red feathers. "I'm sure you all want to know what brings us here this evening. Our human pets have suffered greatly from this insanity they refer to as war. Many Familiars have lost their pet humans and been unable to replace them. Some humans have been so damaged that they have been put down. It is a terrible thing! Fortunately, this insanity is over now, and the Great Snake has been vanquished.

"But now we must rebuild. With the deaths of so many humans, our children and their children may never know the joy, the responsibility, of taking care of one. Familiars, the human wizarding population is depleted, and we must do something about it. It is our responsibility."

The phoenix cocked his head to one side and waited for response.

"What are you suggesting, Fawkes?" Trevor asked in a bass croak. "Humans are complicated pets, and don't take kindly to being manipulated." This comment provoked a number of noises of agreement.

"We know our humans better than they know themselves or we should. We must arrange for them to, ah..." he looked slightly embarrassed, "produce offspring."

The lanky borzoi gave a deep-chested laugh. "Easy to say, Fawkes. Quite another thing to do it." He scratched one ear with a long hind leg. "Most of our pets are pretty smart."

"We can do it. We must do it!"

"It would be considerably easier," said the macaw, "if we arranged pairings between our own pets. This would give us influence over both sides of the equation, if you take my meaning." He shook his scarlet and gold feathers and settled down on the shelf he'd chosen as a perch.

"A good point, Topper," Fawkes replied. "An extremely good point. You'll notice that of the sixteen of us here, eight have male pets and eight have female pets."

"Why not get the owls involved in this?" asked a Russian Blue. "That would give us a broader range... a better selection."

"I thought about it, Erasmus. The owls, for all their cleverness, do not have the same bonds with humans that we Familiars do. They are also generally confined to the Owlery, which makes it difficult for them to guide their pets easily. We, on the other claw, have nearly free run of the castle. I chose the sixteen of us because we are best at managing our pets."

"I see the necessity, but how do you suggest we begin?" Crookshanks asked. "You are asking us to meddle with our pets at an extreme level. This could be dangerous."

"We all know each others' human pets by reputation and name. Let us consider for a few moments who would make the best matches, and then list them in turn."

The room fell silent as the Familiars bent their thoughts to what they knew of their pets.

"*Fft!*" The warning came from the Siamese standing lookout. "Gambit, your human's abroad and looking for you!"

The terrier grimaced. "Oh dear. Thankee, Chang. Anyone willing to decoy her off?"

"I'll do it," Crookshanks volunteered. "She likes my pet, and I can slip out again easier than you can." He shook his fur and padded over to the door. "Give me two more minutes before you start talking again."

He skulked down the corridor again, pausing every few seconds to listen. Yes, there she was, right around the corner. He sniffed the air, extending his whiskers to catch every nuance, and then nonchalantly strolled down the hall and around the corner with his tail a flag in the air, making no effort at concealment.

Minerva McGonagall snorted to herself as the big ginger tomcat came walking by. "Where do you think you're going, Crookshanks?"

"*Miaow!*"

She scooped him up. "I'll have to take you back to Miss Granger. I wish I could talk to you in cat form. I'd bet you could tell me where Gambit is." She made her way back toward Gryffindor tower lugging the heavy cat. "It's not fair, you know," she grumbled, "I can understand humans perfectly when I'm a cat, but I can't speak to them. And I can't understand or speak to cats either. Maybe I should have Severus research a potion that would let me talk to other animals. What do you think?"

Crookshanks was horrified at the thought, but years of dealing with humans allowed him to simply look at her with big yellow eyes and yawn. She scratched him behind the ears, making him purr in spite of himself. In a few minutes, she reached the Gryffindor Common Room and opened the portrait.

"Here you go, boy. Now be good and go to bed." She set him down gently. "I think I'll take my own advice. Gambit's been out before and always come back."

The Gryffindor Common Room was slightly more difficult to "escape" from than Hermione's room, but Crookshanks knew how to do it. In less than ten minutes he'd rejoined the other Familiars.

"Ah, Crookshanks, glad you made it back. We've settled a few pairings while you were gone." The phoenix looked very satisfied. "My pet, Albus, will make a splendid match for Gambit's Minerva. Trevor and Cassandra's pets will get along famously as well."

Crookshanks looked over to where the two toads were conversing quietly. "I'd agree with both those matches. Any others?"

"Hephaestus and I agree that our pets will be a good pair," rumbled the borzoi. "They are much of an age, which is important to humans for some reason."

"It's one of their rituals, Swift," answered the grey Persian who was sitting next to him. "They also have a ceremony known as marriage, which is necessary in order for them to reproduce. And they have to like each other to make the ceremony work properly."

Crookshanks considered this. There were exactly two Familiars here tonight with male pets of the same general age as his, besides Trevor. Chang's pet was a nice enough human, but he was not terribly bright. Hermione would never be happy with him. She needed an intellectual equal. Erasmus' pet was a possibility though. He looked around for the Russian Blue to discuss it, and found him deep in conversation with Shadow. The two had obviously agreed to make a match of their pets.

Around him, it seemed that pairs were shaking out. Thunder and Thjalfe had paired off, which was surprising. But if anyone could bring their pets together, the two big toms could manage it. Lucius, Thunder's pet, was new to the faculty this year. He was dreadfully unpopular with most of the other humans, as they thought he had been on the other side during the war. Only recently had it become known that he had been working for Albus Dumbledore for years. Crookshanks wasn't terribly familiar with Thjalfe's pet, as Xiamora Hooch taught flying and coached Quidditch things that Hermione was not interested in.

Even Norris had managed to come to some kind of agreement with Topper, judging from the animated conversation they were having. He snorted softly. That wasn't a match he would've foreseen, but now that he thought about it... very suitable. Both pets were well along in years, though still capable of breeding. Both were hard workers. It just might work out!

Back to his own problem though. Chang and Macavity were also nodding at each other. That left him... nowhere. He was about to ask Fawkes to reconsider asking the owls to join them when an inky black form oozed out of the shadows and sat down next to him.

"You are Crookshanks?"

"Yes, and you are Duster." That was the only unmatched Familiar left.

"Yes. I believe our pets would make a good match, Crookshanks." The black tom's yellow eyes glowed. "My pet is difficult, I admit. But there is no one else I would consider pairing him with. He would be miserable with anyone else."

"Difficult is a good description," Crookshanks returned. "Hermione talks about your pet often and it is seldom complimentary. She refers to him as a greasy git, you know."

"How much of that is her thoughts, and how much is she merely echoing those of the young male she spends her time with? He does not like my pet at all!"

"You have a point, I admit. There is one additional difficulty we will face."

"Ah, yes. This idea that because he is a teacher and she is a student, they cannot have a relationship. Pssh! We'll have to work on that."

"This is her last year as a student. We could use this year to set the groundwork, and then build on it when that is no longer an obstacle."

"So you agree?"

"Yes. As you say, it's the only possible match."

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"This is never going to work if they never spend any time together," Crookshanks grouched, "and classes don't count. She's just another student there!" It was the following morning, and the two Familiars were basking on the sun-warmed roof of the castle.

Duster lazily opened one eye. "True enough. A detention, perhaps?"

Crookshanks considered that suggestion, rolling over to get the sun on his belly. "I could hide her Potions homework. That would certainly get his attention."

"Would he give her a detention for it, though?"

"He just might... if he were in a bad enough temper..."

"At least your pet supervises his own detentions. That's one less obstacle. Now, let's talk to some of the other Familiars tonight. I think we can arrange for Severus to have a truly awful day tomorrow."

"Duster, if Fawkes weren't a phoenix, I think I'd enjoy eating him. He's altogether too much like his pet, with these progress report meetings every night. If he offers me a lemon drop, I may forget myself!"

Duster chuckled. "That could be painful. I expect Fawkes is merely anxious for progress. Of course, he and Gambit have a relatively easy task."

Crookshanks sat up and scratched one ear. "I'd agree there. They just need a little encouragement. Who would you say has the hardest task? My vote is for Thunder and Thjalfe."

"Pssh. Their pets have at least one thing in common they both love to fly and are both good at it. I don't envy Topper and Norris." replied the black cat. "Consider Poppy is obsessively fastidious, whereas Argus is..."

"Severely lacking in hygiene, to put it kindly. I hadn't thought of that. I don't see how Norris puts up with it. Or why she does, for that matter! But at least they're of the same generation."

"I believe you and I are the only ones that face that challenge." He cat-grinned as something caught his attention. "I see Swift is already at work."

"Oh?" Crookshanks looked in the direction Duster was waving a big black paw. The big borzoi was happily digging a hole in Ivy Sprout's brand new flowerbed. "How's that going to bring them together?"

"I've no earthly idea. I expect this is one of Swift's canine-logic ideas. We can ask him tonight."

"Which reminds me one of us needs to sneak into the potions classroom tomorrow night and see what happens at the detention we're arranging."

"I'll do that," Duster said. "I can hide under Sev's desk. It's got some nice shadows to blend with."

"And I'll go to the meeting. We can meet up afterward and compare notes."

"A sound plan." Duster suddenly cocked his head to one side. "I wonder..."

"Hmmm?"

"What you said about Fawkes' and Gambit's pets only needing a little encouragement. I wouldn't put it past that miserable bird to be creating this elaborate plot simply to acquire a mate for his own pet and amuse himself at our expense in the process."

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Duster heard about the results of their plan in great detail while his pet was shedding his dripping robes immediately after the combined Slytherin/Gryffindor seventh year potions class the following day.

"I cannot believe it! I thought even Longbottom knew how to measure ingredients properly by now. Do you know what he did, Duster? He added two tablespoons of ground nightshade, rather than two teaspoons! I should've made him test it on himself!" The robes fell to the floor in a sopping mess, and Severus headed for his private bathroom to bathe.

"That wasn't enough though. Miss Bulstrode surpassed herself today! She somehow managed to brew a Contraceptive, when the assignment was a simple Poison antidote! I had to deduct points from my own House!" He turned on the hot water with an ill-tempered jerk. "I asked her how she managed to make such a mistake and she said she must've misread the assignment."

Duster wondered how on earth Macavity had managed that. He'd have to ask. His pet was continuing on as he climbed into the tub.

"And Mr. Nott..." Sev's voice softened dangerously... "Mr. Nott overheard the exchange between myself and Miss Bulstrode and volunteered his opinion that the Contraceptive potion would be completely wasted on her. I wonder how that boy ever survived seven years in Slytherin House sometimes!" The last sentence was somewhat garbled as he dunked his head under the water to wet his hair.

"Miss Bulstrode, not surprisingly, took umbrage at this comment, and slapped Mr. Nott. The Gryffindors, of course, found it amusing in the extreme." He snagged the shampoo bottle with one long arm and continued. "Mr. Nott attempted to evade her assault, but unfortunately backed into another cauldron and upset it. He must be taking lessons from Longbottom!"

Duster looked quite sympathetic and turned on his rumbling purr.

"Then Mr. Nott managed to upset his own cauldron as well as Miss Bulstrode's. I had to deduct ten points from Slytherin. My own House, Duster! It was quite embarrassing!"

"And then, if you please, while I am collecting homework, that insufferable Miss Granger informs me that she has somehow left her assignment in her room and asks permission to retrieve it. Of course I said no. Do you know what she did?" He turned a face dripping with suds towards his Familiar, "She had the temerity to argue with me!" He rinsed the shampoo from his hair with economical but savage movements. "Of course, I gave her a detention tonight. I believe that four hours as my assistant will go a long way toward insuring that she behaves in my class henceforth."

The potions professor climbed out of the tub and grabbed one of the thick silver towels piled handily nearby. He wrapped it around his waist and went into his bedroom. Duster followed. He couldn't wait to tell Crookshanks about Sev's extremely bad day.

Severus dried himself off and began dressing. "So then, as I'm on my way here to clean up, Professor McGonagall stops me. She has an idea, she says." He snorted. "Do you know what that old biddy wants, Duster? She wants me to create a potion for her that will let her talk to both animals and humans while she's a cat!" He slid clean robes over his head, completely missing Duster's shocked expression. "As if I have time for that, what with supervising detentions and everything else."

He looked up suddenly and bared his teeth in a feral smile. "Oh, she thinks she's so smart, Miss Granger does. I believe I have just the task for her. I'll ~~have~~ research and create this potion for McGonagall!"

Chapter Two

Chapter 2 of 20

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Chapter Two

The meeting was in full swing by the time Crookshanks arrived that evening. Gambit was doing lookout duty, and let him pass without challenge.

"... can't imagine what he was thinking!" Hephaestus growled, "Fawkes, he dug a huge hole in my pet's flower garden, without asking me what I thought about it!"

"I thought it would send your pet in search of my pet, that's all," Swift explained. "How was I supposed to know Ivy was so attached to those flowers? Besides, the ground is very soft there. Just perfect for digging."

Gambit stuck his head in the door, "Oh dear, yes. There's nothing quite like it." He trailed off as Fawkes gave him a glare. "Right, right. Back to my post and all that."

The phoenix whistled once and the room quieted. "Things have been less than successful thus far, obviously." He looked around. "I'd like to hear from each of you what problems you perceive, and your plans to counter those problems. Trevor and Cassandra?"

"Mobility," Trevor supplied.

"What he means is, we toads aren't as mobile as we'd like." Cassandra amplified. "With our pets being in different Houses, it is difficult to arrange 'accidental' meetings."

"That said, Neville is planning to study in the library tomorrow, rather than the Common Room, so Cassandra is going to try to get Hannah there as well." Trevor concluded. "We think that studying together would be a good start."

"Excellent. Swift and Hephaestus?"

Hephaestus gave his partner-in-crime a disgusted look before replying. "We Swift and I need to come up with a plan together rather than acting independently. I don't know his pet that well. Filius spends most of his time up in Ravenclaw Tower when he's not in class." He fluffed out his long grey fur.

"And Ivy spends her time in the greenhouses." Swift added. "The only time they're in the same part of the castle is at meal times."

"Work with that," Norris volunteered from her overstuffed chair. "Filius is ever the gentleman, and this might appeal to Ivy. Get them to start sitting next to each other."

The phoenix nodded. "That's an excellent idea, Norris. How are you and Topper coming along?"

"Badly, in a word. Fawkes, our pets are the same age, but they have nothing absolutely nothing - in common. Argus is rarely in the hospital wing of the castle, unless he's patrolling. He says he can't stand the smell of medicines and sickness."

Topper nodded and clicked his beak in exasperation. "And Poppy thrives on it. She's right. We've no idea where to begin."

"I've got an idea for you!" Swift gave them an evil borzoi grin. "Trip Argus so he takes a header down the stairs and has to stay in the hospital wing for a few days. They'll get to know each other that way."

"I'd rather not resort to that unless we get desperate," Norris replied, grinning in spite of herself. "And I'm not sure it would work even then. We were thinking of making a mess in the hospital wing, and arranging for Argus to have to clean it up."

"A formidable challenge," the phoenix nodded sagely. "But I trust we'll work it out in the end. Thjalfe and Thunder?"

The two tomcats exchanged looks. "Our biggest obstacle," Thunder finally said, "is that Lucius is not well liked."

"You're being overly kind," his partner interjected. "Most of the other humans hate him. They tolerate him only because Albus trusts him. Xia thinks Lucius is a menace still. It will be difficult."

"Play the sympathy card," Shadow suggested from where she was curled up on top of an old bookshelf. "He lost his first mate. Xia might feel sorry for him."

"That might work," Thunder agreed.

"If you can get him on a broom, Xia will notice him." Thjalfe said. "She loves nothing better than flying. She needs a mate who can challenge her in her element. If he can help her coach Quidditch, so much the better!"

"Lucius played Quidditch when he was in school," Thunder mused. "He's got a broom in the back of his closet."

"There, that wasn't so painful was it?" Fawkes asked. "Who's next ah, Crookshanks... where is Duster?"

Crookshanks cat-smiled. "We arranged for Severus to give Hermione a detention this evening, and we deemed it best that one of us keep a watch on them during it." He flattened his whiskers out. "We had some help from Macavity, Chang and Trevor."

"A detention? Do you think that will work?" Erasmus asked. "Justin hates it when he gets a detention. It just doesn't seem like the right setting for..."

"Romance?" Macavity snorted. "Try generating romance in Slytherin House and see what it gets you!" He shook his ratty yellow-brown fur. "Severus is a realist, just like my Millie. You won't convince him to use candles and soft words."

"I'm glad Justin's mate-to-be is in Gryffindor then," returned the Russian Blue. "There is nothing civilized about dungeons!"

"Familiars, please!" Fawkes trilled. "Crookshanks, you were saying?"

"The two problems we know of are the age difference and the fact that she's his student. Both are self-correcting with time. Our plan is to lay the foundation this year by

having them spend time together so they get used to the idea."

"This is Hermione's seventh year, isn't it?" Shadow asked.

"Yes."

"What's she planning to do after she leaves Hogwarts?"

"She was talking about moving to London..." Crookshanks trailed off as Shadow's meaning sunk in. "Blast. That completely slipped my mind. I'll talk to Duster about it, and we'll figure something out."

"Excellent work, Crookshanks," Fawkes said. "Shadow and Erasmus, how are your plans coming along?"

The black and silver tabby tucked her feet under her and spread out her whiskers. "We have the same difficulty as do Trevor and Cassandra our pets are in different Houses. We believe that we can arrange for them to meet in the library accidentally, of course."

"Our goal is to have Justin ask Lavender to the Halloween Ball," added Erasmus. "We have three weeks until the ball, so he should ask her in the next two weeks."

"He'd best not dither," replied his partner. "Lavender is expecting to be deluged with invitations. If nothing else, I'll hide any that come via owl to her room."

"Excellent idea! Perhaps we should all attempt to have our pets go to the Ball together?" This suggestion was met with various expressions of disbelief. Fawkes tilted his head to one side. "No? It was just a thought. Ah, Chang and Macavity, I believe you are the last."

Chang's whiskers twitched slightly. "After aiding Crooks today, it will be interesting to see how our pets deal with each other." He repeated the exchange between Theodore Nott and Millie Bulstrode during their Potions class with some glee. "I believe he does care for her, but has no idea how to show it."

"Millie doesn't care for traditional ideals of romance." Macavity said. "She's not terribly upset. It's the first time any male has paid any sort of attention to her."

"It sounds like your partnership is progressing marvelously," the phoenix nodded approvingly. "We'll meet here tomorrow night, as usual."

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Severus was sitting at his desk, muttering sulphurously at the four neat piles of essays waiting to be marked when Hermione Granger tapped on the door of the Potions Classroom precisely at 7:00. Duster was stretched out on top of the cabinet in the Potions classroom where Severus kept his personal supplies. The cabinet was nearly seven feet high, made of ornately carved black oak. As long as he didn't stand up, he would be hard to spot. He swiveled his ears forward and listened. She wasn't alone; he heard a second set of footsteps.

"Enter!"

She stalked in, eyes flashing although her voice was controlled. "Sir, I'm here for detention." She shut the door with perhaps a trifle more force than necessary and crossed the room to stand in front of Severus' desk.

A flitting shadow had entered behind her. Duster's claws flexed in anger. That Potter human, hiding under his invisibility cloak. He'd shred him if he got in the way.

Severus raised an eyebrow. "You don't believe this is fair, Miss Granger?"

Hermione opened her mouth, and then shut it again. A moment later, she spoke. "Sir, it's your right to give me detention."

"Ah, you begin to learn discretion. I have no doubt that your first thought was something on the order of 'no, it's not fair'."

She paused. "As I said, sir, it's your right."

"Excellent. I see no point in wasting your time or my time having you perform tasks best left to menials. So you will not be scrubbing cauldrons or restocking the supplies cabinet, or anything else of that nature. Instead, you will be researching an entirely new potion."

Her eyes lit up. "What sort of potion, sir?"

"How much do you know about Animagi?"

"They're relatively rare perhaps one percent of the wizarding population is an Animagus. They are supposed to be registered with the Ministry a description of the type of animal and any identifying markings. I personally expect that there are many more unregistered Animagi than the Ministry knows about. As for the transformation itself, it has its basis in Transfiguration of course, but a strong knowledge of Charms is also considered necessary to effect the change. There is also a potion which can unlock the ability, but its effectiveness is doubted." She stopped for a moment, and then went on. "I think that the potion is perhaps only effective on people with the potential to become Animagi."

"What leads you to that conclusion, Miss Granger?"

"According to the article in *Lapis Philosophorum*, the potion was tested on only fifty volunteers. No criteria were applied to selecting the test subjects, and the methodology was disorganized also. When trying to verify the efficacy of a potion, you would need to test hundreds of subjects. Fifty is statistics of small numbers. Sir."

"*Lapis Philosophorum*? Why on earth were you reading that tripe? *The Daily Prophet* is better written and more accurate." He looked up at her. "Sit down, Miss Granger."

She sat. "It's the only periodical about Potions that the library carries. I thought it was badly written, but it was better than nothing."

"You're wrong there, Miss Granger. Misinformation can often be worse than nothing. Try this instead." He opened a drawer in his desk and removed a thick book bound in reddish-brown leather. On the spine, in plain black ink were the words *Double, Double v1-15*.

She took the book and gave one disbelieving glance at the title. "Shakespeare?"

"That is where the name comes from. The original editor, Ewan MacDonnell, was an avid reader of The Bard along with being one of the most innovative Potions Masters the world has ever seen. His son Isaac, who took over two years ago, has maintained all the family traditions."

She wasn't listening. She'd opened the book and was flipping through it. Then she looked up. "This is a compilation, isn't it?"

"Of sorts. That is the first fifteen years in one volume. I think you will find it more useful in your current task than *hapis*."

Hermione started. "I'm sorry, sir. I forgot."

"Obviously. Now as you may have surmised, your task is related to the subject of Animagi. In their animal form, they can understand humans perfectly, but cannot speak to them. Nor can they speak to other animals or transformed Animagi. Research the possibility of creating a potion which will resolve these difficulties."

Her eyes went blank for a second, then took on a far-away look. When they focused again, she seized a quill and blank roll of parchment and began scribbling furiously.

Severus watched her for a moment, nodded to himself, and began marking essays.

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A few minutes later, Severus' head came up sharply. Miss Granger was still bent over her desk, covering parchment with various notations. But there had been another sound behind the scratching of their quills, a sound like cloth on stone. His teeth bared in a feral grin as he idly set down the essay he'd been marking and picked up his wand. If it was one of the few Death Eaters still at large, said Death Eater would be in for a nasty surprise. These last few months of relative peace had allowed him to rest and recuperate. "*Omnia Visio*," he whispered.

His gaze swept the room under the influence of the All-seeing Eye spell. No Death Eaters. Just... his grin grew even more feral... just Mr. Potter, crouched under his invisibility cloak near the supplies cabinet looking a little trapped. As he watched, the boy shifted again and the cloak rubbed against the stone wall. Severus looked at Miss Granger again, wondering if she knew Potter was here. Probably not, he decided.

When Snape stood up and strode over to the supply cabinet as if to retrieve some ingredients, he saw the big black tomcat. "Duster, what are you doing in here?" He picked up the cat off the cabinet and leaned against the door, effectively blocking any chance Potter might have of escaping.

Duster turned on his purr and rubbed his head under Sev's chin. It appeared that the evening was going well in spite of the presence of the other young male. His pet scratched him behind the ears, and Duster's purr intensified, making Hermione look up and stare.

"Have you never seen a cat before, Miss Granger?"

"Yes sir, but I've never seen you with a cat before. He's beautiful."

"He's very stubborn, like some Gryffindors. Very good at being places he's not supposed to be again, like some Gryffindors." He transferred Duster to his left shoulder, the cat riding there with practiced ease. "For example," Severus shot out one long arm and snagged the invisibility cloak off Harry's shoulders.

"Harry! What are you doing here?"

"I, um, I was keeping an eye on you."

"Mr. Potter, you are out past curfew, and you certainly don't belong in my classroom at this hour." He rolled up the cloak and tucked it under one arm. "I suggest you return to your dorm immediately."

Harry glared at the professor. "Give me my cloak again, and I'll leave."

"I think not, Mr. Potter. You may have it back at the end of the year, none the worse for wear."

"It's not yours!"

"I'm confiscating it. Students don't need invisibility cloaks." He shifted again, looking down from his full height. "Ten points from Gryffindor, Mr. Potter. If I have to tell you again to leave, I'll make it fifty."

"Bugger off, Snape. Who cares about House points anyway?"

"Cursing at a teacher. What would your parents say?" Harry glared. Hermione gasped. Snape went on, thoroughly provoked now, "You're a selfish arrogant prat who can't see past the end of his nose, just like James. You are a disgrace to this school, Mr. Potter. You may consider yourself expelled from my classes. Now get out!" The last sentence was almost roared.

Harry left, slamming the door behind him, but not before he heard Snape's final jab. "And fifty points from Gryffindor."

Duster decided he'd better intervene. If the girl said anything to Sev while he was in this temper, he'd take her head off. He turned on his purr again, and sank his claws into Sev's shoulder deeply enough to draw blood.

Severus yelped as Duster clawed him. "Stop that, ingrate!" He extracted the cat's claws from his skin carefully. This took a few moments, and by the time he looked up to meet Miss Granger's eyes, he had regained his self-control.

"Professor..." she began, "I'm sorry Harry followed me here tonight. He's got this idea that I need to be protected. He's lost so many people that he cares about, that he clings to the ones who are left."

The Potions Master started to reply sharply, but thought better of it as Duster's claws pricked him again. Evidently the tom had decided to be sensitive to raised voices tonight. Instead, he sighed wearily. "I believe we are foredoomed to disagree on the subject of Mr. Potter. Now, how is your research coming?"

She squeaked and looked at the time. "Sir, this is far too complex a task to complete in one evening. It will require some weeks of research, and more of experimentation before it could be deemed anything like usable."

"So should I give you detention for the rest of the year?"

Hermione looked up at him horrified, only to see the smile that flitted over his face for a moment. "No sir, I would not enjoy that at all. But..."

"But what?"

"I need to do a research project this year, and couldn't decide between Charms, Transfiguration, or Potions. Researching and creating this potion would involve all three. Could I do this as my research project?"

Severus thought about it. He'd meant to have her do only the tedious initial research, which he would then apply. But if the silly girl wanted to do the whole thing... "Very well, Miss Granger. But these are my terms. First, your friends are not invited to attend." She nodded. "Second, you will conduct no experimentation that I do not approve and supervise. You will have your experiments properly thought out in advance, and you will notify me of any unusual ingredients that you might require." He raised one eyebrow. "Boomslang skin, for example."

She turned red. How had he known she was the one to raid his stores? And was that the hint of amusement in his voice? But he was continuing.

"Thirdly, we will meet every two weeks to discuss your progress. This is, of course, in addition to any time you need in the lab. You will also potentially have to arrange time with Professors McGonagall and Flitwick, if you wish the benefit of their expertise."

She nodded again, glad that he hadn't remarked on her blush.

"Lastly," now a definite smile was hovering in his voice, "you get the pleasure of informing Professor McGonagall that she is going to be our test subject."

Chapter Three

Chapter 3 of 20

Chaos ensues when the Familiars at Hogwarts decide to play matchmaker.

Chapter Three

Hermione got ready for bed that evening after her detention with Professor Snape with a whirling mind. Who better to confide all her troubles to than her cat? So Crookshanks heard about it from her perspective in great detail. "...and then he smiled, Crooks! He smiled, and then ..." she broke off.

Crookshanks' purr faltered momentarily. What on earth had Severus done?

"...he said I have to be the one to tell Professor McGonagall!"

The cat butted her hand and purred louder, radiating sympathy.

"Can't you just see it?" She rose and cleared her throat. "Um, Professor McGonagall, would you mind being our guinea-pig for this Animagus potion?" Hermione sighed and sat down on her bed. "That just doesn't sound right, Crookshanks." She scratched his ears, and he obligingly began purring at her in a rumble that shook the bed. "I can't ask her like that! It would be rude!"

Crookshanks turned his head so she was scratching his chin now.

"Oh you're lots of help." She stood up and cleared her throat again. "Professor McGonagall, Professor Snape and I are researching a potion to allow Animagi to talk, and we need ... that is, I was hoping ..." She threw her hands into the air. "Oh damnitall, Crookshanks! Why did Snape have to do this to me? Why can't he ask her?"

"Miaow!" He rolled onto his back and waved his feet in the air. His pet sat down again and began rubbing his belly softly.

"Perhaps I should ask her as sort of an afterthought to my questions about Transfiguration... No, she hates people dancing around a subject hates it almost as much as Professor Snape does." She shifted to lie on the bed with her feet in the air and propped her chin on her hands. "I wish I was an Animagus. Then I could test the potions on myself." She went still for a moment, then bounced to her feet. "That's it! I have to research the transformation process anyway to understand how to make the potion! If I'm an Animagus, then I'll test my own potions. If not, I can still ask Professor McGonagall!"

Crookshanks sneezed as she picked him up and hugged him exuberantly. "Oh, Crooky! That's the perfect solution!"

~*~

"Perfect solution?" Duster repeated in something between amazement and disgust the following morning. "Severus will kill her!" He saw the look on Crookshanks' face and amended his words. "He'll be rather upset with her. He doesn't believe in experimenting on oneself, and I do think he was hoping to twist Minerva's tail a little."

"And here everything was going so well," Crookshanks mourned. "Even with that Potter human showing up and nearly ruining it." He didn't care for any of the young males who spent so much of their time with his pet, especially not when they might interfere with the Familiars' plan.

"Nothing wrong with that human which couldn't be solved with a tumble down a few flights of stairs." Duster groused in agreement. "What's the plan for today?"

"Since it's Saturday, Hermione's going to be in the library all day doing research for this project of theirs. We don't want to mess that up."

"At least not until they've passed this 'Miss Granger / Professor Snape' stage." Duster agreed.

"We do need to discuss that project of theirs with Fawkes."

"Eventually, yes. Once they get past the initial research stages, I think. It's easier to manipulate experiments than research. Fawkes may have some ideas there."

"Agreed." He rolled to his feet. "Topper mentioned that the Quidditch pitch is being overrun with mice. Shall we see what we can do about that?"

"Race you!"

They streaked away, down the stairs, through the halls, and out into the field surrounding the pitch. Sometimes it was nice just to be a cat, and not worry about manipulating humans. Above them, a single human on broomback dipped and swerved, weaving complex patterns in the air.

~*~

Lucius Malfoy, professor of Defense Against the Dark Arts, was actually enjoying himself for the first time since he'd accepted his current position. It was exhilarating to fly around the pitch, away from the sneers and glares that he dealt with on a regular basis. He had no idea how Severus had stood it for so long. It gave him a new level of respect for his old friend.

He hadn't planned to go flying, but Thunder had accidentally knocked his old Nimbus Zephyr out of his wardrobe that morning. When he'd picked it up, he remembered how it felt the first time he really flew. After breakfast, he'd returned to his rooms to get the broom and then headed off to the pitch. The Zephyr was a good broom fast and agile. He'd kept his in top shape, even though it had been a year or so since he'd flown. Once learned, never forgotten.

Thunder came with him, of course, riding his shoulder. The big brindled Manx loved flying almost as much as he did. Soon after he'd discovered that, Lucius had a heavy rough leather pad built into the left shoulder of his cloak. It afforded Thunder a secure grip through anything but the most acrobatic of maneuvers. He dipped and swerved, weaving figure-eights around the Quidditch goals, almost lost in the feeling of freedom.

He slowed down as he caught sight of another early morning flier, and groaned to himself as he recognized Madame Xiamora Hooch. She had said exactly four words to him at the initial staff meeting where they'd been introduced officially. He'd bowed over her hand quite properly. She'd snatched her hand back as if she'd been burned and hissed "Go to Hell, Malfoy!"

Now, however, she was looking at him with something akin to interest. He brought his broom to a hover within speaking distance and nodded politely.

For her part, Xiamora Hooch was rather surprised to see Lucius Malfoy on a broom. She'd had no idea he could fly, much less that he was so good at it. She watched as he expertly wove his way through the goal posts. Yes, very good at flying. She flew closer, judging his form. A natural Seeker or Keeper, she decided. Too light to be a Beater. He slowed and hovered, just within speaking distance and nodded. Well she could be polite when it suited her, so she nodded back just as politely.

"A nice morning for flying," he offered.

"Very nice, indeed. The Quidditch tryouts are today."

"That should prove entertaining. Gryffindor needs new Chasers, Ravenclaw needs a Beater and a Chaser, Slytherin needs a new Seeker, and Hufflepuff they need an entirely new team."

"Harsh but probably accurate," she acknowledged. "I've scheduled Slytherin first, as Seekers are relatively easy to spot."

"As are Beaters. Chasers are harder to find, because they need speed, agility, and strength."

"And willingness to practice."

"True. If Hufflepuff had the raw talent of any of the other three Houses, they'd win the Cup every year."

She gave him a long appraising look. "You know more about Quidditch than I'd thought."

"I was a Chaser for Slytherin while I was in school. I enjoyed it. I've often thought that Chasers make the best coaches. Theirs is the most strategic position."

"The rules of the game force everyone to concentrate on the Seeker," Xia replied. "However, Chasers see more of the overall strategy." After a moment she added, "I was a Chaser for Hufflepuff."

"Indeed? Tell me..." and they were off in a shared reminiscence of games played in their younger days that only ended when the Slytherins arrived at the Quidditch Pitch. Thunder was very pleased.

~*~

"Hermione?"

Hermione looked up from the stack of books to see Harry standing all scrunched up and shuffling his feet. He looked for all the world like a five year old caught with a hand in the cookie jar. "I'm a little busy here, Harry. What do you want?"

"I'm really sorry about sneaking into the Potions classroom last night. I was just trying to keep an eye on you."

"Really?" she scoffed. "Like anything's going to happen to me during detention."

"That's not what I meant."

"Well what did you mean?" She set down the book she'd been studying and looked at him expectantly.

He shrugged helplessly. "I don't know exactly what I meant. Part of me is scared that Voldemort isn't really dead... that he's going to come back and kill everyone I care about... everyone who's left." Harry dragged the back of his hand across his eyes. "I dream about it sometimes. Ron was my best mate, you know and he died saving me."

"Yes he did." She'd lost count of the number of times she'd had this conversation with him. Hermione privately thought that Harry needed to see a good shrink, but wizards didn't have such things. She couldn't imagine trying to explain Voldemort and Death Eaters and Unforgivable Curses to a Muggle therapist. "Harry, Ron did what he thought was the right thing."

"I've lost so many people I care about... I don't want to lose you!" The intensity in his voice startled her.

"I'm fine, Harry. I'm not going anywhere."

He threw up his hands. "I don't know how to say it right. I don't want to be alone any more..." He studied the floor as if it held the secrets of the universe. "I want to be with you. Always."

Her eyes widened. "Harry... what are you saying?"

"You want it in plain speech? All right. I want to you to marry me. We've been good friends for years... and I can protect you... you're everything to me... you're all I have left."

Hermione stared down at her fingertips, her brain racing as she tried to find the right words. "Harry, sit down. Let's talk about this for a minute." Her voice was soft, as if she were trying to calm a frightened horse.

He pulled out a chair and dropped into it. "What's there to talk about? We're leaving at the end of the year; we can get married right after. Have the ceremony here at Hogwarts in fact, and then go ... home."

"Home? Grimmauld Place? What about jobs? What if you go one place and I go another?"

"You won't need to work. My parents left me plenty of money and I can take care of you properly. I'm going to play professional Quidditch; there are scouts from all over coming to the school games this year. There are at least two new teams forming in the spring, and they'll be looking for good players." He shifted in the chair, leaning on the table as his enthusiasm grew. "Anyway, all you'll have to worry about is taking care of the house and kids."

"Kids?" Her voice rose in shock.

"Well, not right off. Maybe in a year or so. I want to have five or six kids... give them a happy loving home the kind I never had growing up." He tilted his head toward an unhappy-looking Madam Pince. "Come on... let's go up to the Astronomy Tower. It's too nice a day to stay inside."

"Harry, I'm working on a research project."

"It can wait. You don't need that project to finish school anyway. Seventh year projects are optional."

"I know, but if I complete it successfully, I'll be able to get the kind of job I want. I'll get recommendations in three different fields!"

"Job? You won't need a job! Haven't you been listening?"

She shot to her feet scattering books and parchments, earning herself a black glare from Madame Pince. "Harry, I'm not going to be a housewitch like Molly Weasley. I don't want to have children for a long time yet. I'm going to get a good job and make a career for myself. That's what I want to do."

"I never thought you'd be so selfish, Hermione." He sighed. "I thought we were friends."

"I'm being selfish? You're the one who wants me to give up everything I want."

"Not everything. Life's about compromises. You know that." He reached for her hand. "I just want to be happy, and I know I can be happy with you."

"What would you be giving up? Would you do something besides play Quidditch if I asked you to?"

"You wouldn't ask me to do anything that silly."

"It's not silly. You're asking me to give up a career for you. It should work both ways."

"Now you're being unreasonable. I've always planned to play Quidditch; you know that."

"So what makes you think your career is more important than mine?"

"You don't need a career. That's what I'm trying to tell you. I'll take care of you!"

"Harry..." she sat back down again tiredly, "I want more to my life than taking care of a house and children."

Anger flashed across his face and he rose. "Fine! Stay here with your books and your research projects! See if I care! You can take one of those bloody parchments to the Halloween Ball, and marry one of those bloody books! No one else would want you!" He slammed out of the library.

Neither of them noticed the two toads on the windowsill exchange glances and then hop off one heading for Gryffindor tower, the other for the dungeons.

~*~

Argus Filch regarded the mess outside the Infirmary door with no little dismay. "Skunk oil? Who in their right mind would be bringing skunk oil up here?" The distinctive odor of "eau de skunque" clashed with the disinfectants and other medicinal potions. Had he been looking at Mrs. Norris, he might have noticed a peculiarly satisfied smile on her face.

He sighed and brought out his cleaning supplies and pulled on a set of heavy gloves. Skunk oil was pernicious stuff; unless cleaned up quickly, the smell would linger for months happily ignoring any attempts at camouflage. Careful not to get any on his skin and clothes, he began soaking up the oil with a heavy sponge, wringing it out into a bucket. At least a gallon had been spilled, he reckoned.

"Argus! Haven't you got that mess cleaned up yet?" Poppy Pomfrey stood in the doorway of the Infirmary glaring at him.

"Beggin' yer pardon, but this ain't the easiest stuff to clean."

"Well hurry up then. That smell is making my patients nauseous!" She shut the door behind her with a bit more force than was necessary.

"Pssh. What about it making me sick, eh?" he said to the door. "I'm the one crawling around trying to clean it up, but no, you don't see that do you? Too busy waving your wand around and doing things the easy way. Psssh." He trailed off into muttering at the sound of footsteps down the hall.

"Hello Argus!" Ivy Sprout said, wrinkling her nose. "Oh dear skunk oil?"

"Yes'm. Dreadful stuff. Must've been about a gallon."

"Let me help you with that," she picked up a sponge and knelt down next to him. "The sooner we get it cleaned up, the happier she will be." She jerked her head toward the Infirmary.

"Useless stuff. Don't see why anyone would want any of it, much less a gallon," he grumbled.

"Now there you're wrong. It's an excellent fertilizer for many rare plants. I'd like to try to save what we can of it."

"Really? Din't know that Professor. Only thing I ever knew it were good for is makin' those dung-bombs."

She made one final pass across the floor with her sponge. "I think that's got as much of it up as we can get. What's our next step?"

"Lye. It's supposed to lift it out of the wood or whatever it's soaked into." He clamped a lid onto the bucket to prevent accidental spills and picked up a large earthen jug marked with a large red skull and crossbones. "This is poisonous stuff too, but it's the best thing I've found for cleaning up oil or grease." He poured a thin stream of fluid out onto the shining, slippery floor. The moment it hit the oil film, it began bubbling. "Once it stops bubbling, we can soak it up with sponges."

A few minutes later, nothing was left of the skunk oil spill except a large shiny clean spot on the floor. Even the smell had dissipated somewhat.

"That is amazing," Ivy said. "Argus, you're a genius! I had no idea that lye was such a great antidote for skunk oil."

"It weren't nothin'. Cleanin' up after them Weasley twins taught me a few things." He wrung the sponges dry and handed her the sealed bucket. "Got a bit more than half a gallon of this skunk oil here."

"Thanks, Argus." She paused for a moment. "I don't know if I've ever told you this, but I really admire the job you do here. It's a thankless task keeping this place cleaned up, and you do it the hard way."

"Feh, you mean I do it without magic. Like you grow those plants of yours without magic, and they don't think of it as worth anything till they need it."

Norris sat back on her haunches well out of the way and listened in growing amazement. It was obvious that she and Topper needed to have a discussion with Swift and Hephaestus.

~*~

Some time later, Hermione closed the book she'd been reading and thoughtfully contemplated the ceiling. Using Transfiguration to become an Animagus required an extensive knowledge of biology if you wanted to have any sort of control over what you became. You had to direct the change, make sure that organs and nerves and senses changed appropriately. If you didn't, the result was a crash. Even then, if your concentration wavered, the spell would fail usually with messy results. Based on conversations with Harry and other members of the Order, she guessed that James Potter and Sirius Black had been able to control their changes, whereas Peter Pettigrew had left his to chance. Otherwise why anyone would want to become a rat was beyond her!

The potion, on the other hand, "enhanced" the ability and forced the initial transformation into the guise of the animal you concentrated on when you drank it. At least, that was the theory. It was a very personal potion; only the brewer could use the result, as much of the stirring was done literally by hand. It also required three drops of the brewer's blood and six hairs from his or her head. There were one or two ingredients that would be a little difficult to come by, but she hoped to be able to "borrow" them in the course of working on her project. The rest of the ingredients were quite common, and could be found in Diagon Alley. She chewed the end of her quill. If nothing else, she decided, she could get the more common ingredients over Christmas break, and brew the potion during the first weeks of spring term.

As for her research project, she'd concluded that there were essentially two distinct pieces of it. To allow a transformed Animagi to speak to humans was a matter of reshaping tongue and larynx into something that could make the sounds of human speech a very, very specialized application of the Animagus Transfiguration process. To allow them to understand animal forms of communication would require diddling brain functions, and she was more than a little squeamish about that. A charm would be best suited for such an effect. So the Omnicommunica potion (her private name for it) would have to combine the effects of both a transfiguration and a charm.

Satisfied temporarily with the work she'd done, she packed up all her books and left the library. She hadn't let herself think about the spat with Harry; that would wait until

later. Right now, it was time for lunch.

~*~

Severus spent Saturday morning marking the essays he'd assigned throughout the previous week. He was interrupted once when Ted Nott came by to report that the Quidditch trials were over, and the House team was once more complete with third year Randall Marston as the Seeker. By the time he'd finished with the essays, it was time for lunch and he made his way toward the Great Hall with something of an appetite.

There were no fixed seating arrangements at the staff table at Hogwarts. Albus traditionally sat in the center of the long side that allowed him to face the four students' tables. Usually Minerva sat next to him on one side or the other. The remainder of the staff sat wherever they wished. Oftentimes it was a contest to see who could avoid sitting next to Lucius Malfoy. Today however, Xiamora Hooch was sitting next to the DADA professor at one end of the table chatting animatedly. From their gestures, the discussion was evidently about Quidditch. Severus raised an eyebrow and seated himself at the other end of the table where he could keep an eye on the students.

He noted that Mr. Potter was not at lunch. The brat was probably still sulking somewhere. Miss Granger came in with a stack of books much to the derision of her classmates. He could see the disdain on their faces plainly why would anyone want to study on the weekend? She wound up turning her back on them and eating quickly in relative solitude.

Severus left the Great Hall as soon as was decently possible. He knew he was postponing the inevitable; Albus would eventually make him return Potter's cloak. But in the meantime, he would have some fun with it.

Chapter Four

Chapter 4 of 20

Chaos ensues when the Familiars at Hogwarts decide to play matchmaker.

Chapter Four

The view from the topmost parapet of the Astronomy tower was spectacular at night, particularly when the moon was bright. The castle and the grounds far below were washed in silvery light that made everything seem a little surreal and peaceful. The parapet measured only some ten feet across a two-foot-wide path encircling the covered stairway that led down into the tower and school below. No protection from the elements here, so it was unpopular with trusting students in inclement weather.

Duster and Crookshanks made themselves comfortable on the floor and waited for the other familiars to arrive. Fawkes had decided to change their meeting location to prevent their pets from locating them. The tower didn't bother the two tomcats, but Swift shuddered as he looked over the edge. Then he slunk over to the top of the stairs, ears and tail both down.

"I hate heights!" the borzoi growled as he settled down. "Trust a bird to pick a location like this."

Gambit bounded up the topmost stairs just in time to hear the last sentence. "Going to be a mite cramped," he said as he looked around. "Who's watching the door?"

"I am," Erasmus called from the bottom of the stairs. "Shadow is on her way up with our report." He waved a blue-grey paw at Fawkes as the phoenix flew by him and made his way down to the next level where he took up a post at the door.

The other familiars arrived by ones and twos, the toads huffing and complaining loudly about the stairs. Fawkes was compelled to promise that future meetings would not be held in such difficult locations.

"In fact," Trevor croaked hoarsely, "let me and Cass select the meeting spots. We know where we can get to easily."

Cassandra nodded emphatically. "We won't choose somewhere dampish you cats would hate that!"

"Oh very well then," Fawkes said. "Let us know where you decide the next meeting will be. Let's get started, shall we?" He cocked his head to one side. "I'm pleased to report that Albus and Minerva seem to be quite taken with each other. Thunder and Thjalfe?"

"Most excellently!" Thjalfe purred. "Getting Lucius to fly was a marvelous idea! Xia noticed him immediately."

"They were most of the day in conversation," Thunder added, "and are planning to go flying tomorrow something about a one-on-one Quidditch match."

"That sounds most promising!" Fawkes agreed. "Who's next? Norris and Topper?"

The macaw preened his feathers carefully and didn't answer, while Norris scratched an ear indifferently. The phoenix whistled sharply. "Come, come. Surely it can't be that bad."

"Our pets do not like each other, Fawkes! They are just barely civil. This pairing is not going to work out, no matter what we do." Topper's sharp talons grated on the stonework where he perched. "My Poppy is a fastidious creature, and Argus is grimy and unkempt."

"Obsessively fastidious, you mean," Norris interjected. "Not to mention prejudiced against Squibs." She related the incident of the skunk oil. "So it backfired miserably."

"We have the same problem," Swift said while Topper spluttered in outrage, "though it's to a lesser degree."

"Let's trade," Hephaestus suggested. "Pair Ivy with Argus, and Filius with Poppy."

The four Familiars looked at each other and nodded. Fawkes fluffed out his feathers as if nothing had happened. "Trevor and Cassandra?"

"Our pets spent part of the morning studying together in the library. They were quite amiable, and Neville offered to escort Hannah to Hogsmeade. We believe they are well on the way to performing this ritual." The toads exchanged glances, and Cassandra continued. "But while we were in the library, there was an altercation between the Potter human and Crooks' pet."

Crookshanks ears went back. "What kind of altercation?"

Trevor repeated as much of the conversation as he could recall, while Crookshanks' tail lashed furiously and Duster's eyes glittered coldly.

~*~

"We know how much your pet cares about that Potter human." Duster said for the tenth time. "He is trying to make her feel guilty so she will perform the marriage ritual with him." The Familiars' meeting had ended, and the two cats were discussing the latest impediment to their plans.

"True." Crookshanks batted at an inquisitive beetle and sent it tumbling down the staircase. "And if she does, we can forget about ever pairing her with your pet. Humans take the ritual quite seriously."

"Obviously we need to get the Potter human to perform the ritual with another female."

"Duster! Meddling with our own pets is bad enough would you meddle with an unattached human?"

"In a heartbeat!" replied the black tom. "My pet needs a mate, and your pet is the best suited for him."

"But... that violates the Law thou shalt not meddle with unattached pets."

"Law, pshaw! It's custom and morality, not law." He rolled to his feet in one smooth motion. "What Fawkes has asked us to do is no less a violation of custom thou shalt not manipulate thy pet for thy own ends. It is for the greater good, Crookshanks. If we do not do this, wizardkind will die out. What is the difference, in the long run, between making that human fall down the stairs and attaching him to a different female?"

"It's a matter of degree I don't like it."

"Think of it this way. If the Potter human performs the ritual with another witch, we will have another viable breeding pair. I'm sure Fawkes will get Albus to provide suitable Familiars for any children."

"I suppose so not that there are that many unattached Familiars." He broke off and looked at Duster with dismay. "You don't think..."

"Oh yes I do. Five years from now, that overgrown parrot will be tellingus to breed."

~*~

Fun, Severus mused, was an entirely personal thing. For most, it was inane forms of entertainment, or 'practical jokes' the latter being neither practical nor funny in his opinion. It was a bright and cheerful Sunday morning, and he was on his way to London to do some shopping in the more questionable stores of Knockturn Alley. He could've Apparated or taken the Floo network from Hogsmeade, but he was making use of Potter's cloak, and flying.

He'd managed to avoid most of Albus' attempts to corner him thus far, but the politely phrased request for a Sunday evening meeting could not be ignored. He was determined not to think about it. Instead, he reveled in his temporary freedom, pushing his broom to its limits in a quick display of aerial acrobatics that would've astounded most watchers, before settling onto a direct course for London.

As Severus passed over Hogsmeade, he saw an all-too-familiar head on the path below him heading for the village. Miss Granger was evidently taking a break from her research. Some thirty paces behind her, making no attempt to catch up, was Mr. Potter. Now that was curious. He slowed down, noting Potter's efforts to stay out of Miss Granger's direct line of sight. "Curiouser and curiouser," he muttered to himself. He'd mention it to Minerva, although she probably already knew about it. He shook himself and kicked his broom into its best pace, anxious to get his shopping done and return.

~*~

Hermione shut the door to her room and carefully set up the strongest privacy spells she knew. They wouldn't stop a determined teacher, but they'd certainly slow the curious down for a moment. Brewing potions in her own room, while not precisely forbidden, would raise eyebrows. At the moment, she'd rather those eyebrows not be raised. Crookshanks was out somewhere, she noticed. That was all to the good, as stray cat hairs did not mix well with brewing potions. She still had vivid memories of the time she'd put the cat hair in the Polyjuice potion in her second year.

Harry had confronted her in Hogsmeade and demanded that she reconsider his proposal. Her nose wrinkled at the memory. He'd doused himself with some awful cheap cologne that she recognized as a gift from Ron the previous year. She'd put him off again, but it hadn't been pleasant. She shook her head. He'd just have to get over it.

The potions supply shop in Hogsmeade had not only carried everything she needed for the Animagus transformation potion, but had been willing to prepare the ingredients for her (for a price, of course), while she strolled through the rest of the village and bought a few other trifles at other shops. Once the ingredients were prepared, the actual brewing only took an hour. A quick check of the clock told her she would be able to finish it and test it before lunch.

She set up her cauldron and began adding carefully measured ingredients. A gill of fresh water, a level teaspoon of ground comfrey, half a cup of powdered monkshood, and so on. All mixed as required with her own hands rather than the more traditional spoon. The potion was pleasantly warm as it flowed through her fingers. She was pleased to see it begin to swirl on its own as the color brightened. Exactly an hour later, it had whitened to the shade of old ivory. It was ready.

The last step was adding the hair and blood. Hermione considered. She'd been in her room for some time. It might be better to go elsewhere to keep Harry from finding her. She decanted the potion into a vial for safekeeping, and cleaned up all traces of her brewing while she thought about it. Finally, she settled on the Room of Requirement and made her way to the seventh floor.

Without knowing exactly what she needed, she decided to concentrate on a safe place where she wouldn't be disturbed for a while. A long breath later, the room appeared. It had chosen to manifest as a bright and sunny room, devoid of furniture. Well, that was all right. She carefully added her hair and blood and watched the potion bubble as the final ingredients were absorbed. Only then did she realize that she hadn't the least idea what she wanted her Animagus form to be. "Something fitting," she said aloud. "That's what I want. Something fitting." Then she drank.

~*~

Severus touched down back at Hogwarts just after ten a.m. and threw off the Invisibility Cloak with a sigh of relief. The sun was punishing hot today on someone who wore unrelieved black and he'd been roasting under the cloak. He made his way to his quarters, and stripped off his sweat-soaked clothing leaving it for the house elves to deal with. Halfway to his bathroom, he stopped in thought. There were other ways to get clean besides sitting in a tub of water. He snagged a towel, wrapped it around his waist, and opened his back door.

Back door was, perhaps, a misnomer. The door opened onto a somewhat dark passage leading slowly downward. It was damp here, and the walls and floor were furred with moss. It was soft under his bare feet, a springy carpet over the stones. A hasty Lumos kept him from breaking his neck as the passage wormed its way deeper under the castle. There were odd smells in the air here. The stone floor of the passage gave way to uncut rocks that shifted underfoot. He slowed down; a misstep here could result easily in a broken ankle. Soon the passage opened into a vast underground cavern, with an arm of the lake lapping at the rocky beach here.

Snape walked down to the water's edge, dropping the towel behind him. The water here was cold and clean. He waded out, careful to test the depth first. The lakebed here shelved sharply, and the water was quickly over his waist. He took a long breath and lunged into a surface dive, leaving the shore behind him. A moment later he rose for air, then turned on his back and floated, letting the chill of the lake cool him completely.

Well, why not? His research assistant had been rather more accurate than she knew, when she said there were many unregistered Animagi around. He concentrated for a moment and shifted, feeling bone and muscle sliding into new forms, new connections of nerves, veins, and arteries. In a moment, a fifteen-foot sea-serpent hissed his

pleasure and dove for the bottom of the underground lake, silvery scales etched with green knitting through the clear water.

~*~

The potion had no particular taste, and given that it was almost exactly blood heat, was neither warm nor cold as it slid down Hermione's throat. It was, she decided, like tasteless ketchup that had been sitting out on the kitchen counter for much of the day. She concentrated on "something fitting" and let the magic work its will upon her. For a few moments there was nothing, then a tingling along all her nerves. She closed her eyes to focus more tightly, knowing that if she failed here, the results might be spectacularly fatal.

She felt her legs shaking, and her arms suddenly felt too heavy to hold up. She sank to the floor, doing her best to remain focused. It felt odd wrong even to be sitting, and she stretched out on her side. The tingling in her nerves had intensified; now it was almost painful. Spasms tore through her as muscles stretched, moved, and changed, some growing and some shrinking. Bones and tendons writhed into new configurations. It seemed to last for eons, the pain increasing exponentially with every second. Blood roared in her ears and she blacked out.

~*~

Snape the sea-serpent slithered his way back to the shoreline an hour later and transformed back to his human form. He was perfectly capable of making his way back to his rooms as a serpent he'd done it a few times, but the rocks were less than comfortable on his belly. "I really should get around to smoothing out a path," he muttered to himself as he wrapped the towel around his waist.

He was dressing, when Duster came in, gave him a disgusted look, and curled up on the bed. "What's chewing your tail, cat?" Snape looked around the room. Litterbox: clean. Food bowl: half full of the dry food his Familiar preferred. Water bowl: filled. He reached out and rubbed Duster's ears. "I don't speak cat. Maybe that would be another use for that potion if we ever get anywhere with it."

Duster's ill temper had nothing to do with his pet. He and Crookshanks had spent much of the morning in a glorious massacre of various small rodents. Quite refreshing. They'd returned to the castle to be greeted by Swift with the news that the Potter human was following Crookshanks' pet around. "I tried to stop him, but short of biting him..." the borzoi had said.

That Potter human. Duster's eyes glittered like frozen gold. Something had to be done about that kit obviously his dam hadn't trained him properly! He allowed himself to purr and curled around his pet's hand. It was not Sev's fault that Potter was being a problem.

"Have I been ignoring you, Duster?" Severus asked. He picked up the cat and stroked him gently. "I see you've been outside you've got burrs in your fur." A glance at the clock. "After lunch, a good brushing perhaps? I'm meeting Miss Granger in the lab this afternoon, but she will wait." He put his Familiar down and strode off toward the Great Hall, only to stagger as Duster jumped onto his shoulder. "Urff! You aren't a kitten any more, you know." He regained his balance and settled the cat more comfortably. "There. Now may I have my lunch?"

The house elves had, for reasons known only to themselves, decided to prepare a variety of seafood dishes for lunch. Severus grinned inwardly. No wonder Duster had wanted to accompany him! He sat down and shifted Duster to his lap and snagged a dish for his Familiar, which he loaded with tuna, crab, and lobster.

He wasn't the only one of the staff with a Familiar at the table, he noticed. Ivy Sprout's grey Persian was actually standing on the table, sharing a plate with Filch's cat, their owners in a quiet conversation about Herbology. As he started on his own lunch, Xiamora Hooch came in arm-in-arm with Lucius Malfoy, both with their Familiars on their shoulders, and talking non-stop about Quidditch.

Students weren't supposed to bring their Familiars into the Great Hall for meals, and he noticed more than a few wrapping up bits of fish or lobster in napkins and tucking them into pockets. Minerva caught his eye and he shrugged, scratching Duster behind the ears. "We might want to rescind the rule on Familiars at table," he said dryly. "Particularly since we don't obey that restriction ourselves."

"An excellent idea, Severus," Dumbledore agreed. "I'll make the announcement tonight at dinner." He handed Fawkes a piece of tuna. "There you go, friend. Ah, Severus, would you mind terribly if I canceled our meeting tonight? Something's come up."

"Certainly, Albus. We can reschedule at your convenience." He put on his trademark smirk and glanced out at the tables of students, noting that neither Miss Granger nor Mr. Potter were in their customary places. He guessed that she, at least, was on her way back from Hogsmeade knowing she was to meet him in the lab shortly. He turned around to mention the possible trouble between Potter and Miss Granger to Minerva, and caught his fellow Head of House in mid lip-lock with the Headmaster. He immediately returned his attention to his plate, shaking his head to dispel the sight. Something's come up, indeed. I can guess. He shook his head again at the image that thought produced, and swept out of the Great Hall, his black robes swirling behind him.

Back in his rooms, he spent half an hour combing the burrs out of Duster's fur, and treating his Familiar to a non-stop diatribe on the foolishness of romance. "I tell you, Duster, I will never, ever do anything as foolish as get entangled amorously. With anyone. Did you see Albus today? Sweet Merlin! And Minerva who would ever have thought... That's not all it seems to be catching. I suppose it's good that Lucius is finally getting along with someone else on the staff. And did you notice that Argus actually showed up for once?" He rambled on in that vein for a while, and then checked the time.

"Miss Granger will be slightly vexed with me," he chuckled as he put Duster's brush back on his desk. "I was supposed to meet her five minutes ago to begin some practical work on her project." He rose, murmuring a spell to rid his clothing of stray bits of fur. "Perhaps I should have her research some practical uses for cat hair."

He was slightly surprised to see that she was not there waiting for him. Surprise turned to a mixture of anger and disgust as time passed. How dare she impose on his free time, insist on doing a project, and then have the temerity to not show up for an appointment that she, herself, scheduled? He growled something obscene and left the classroom, not forgetting to seal the wards behind him. By the time he'd reached his rooms again, he'd taken fifteen points from a hapless Gryffindor for "loitering", and felt a little better.

~*~

"So where in Merlin's Name, is she?" Duster asked some time later. "Sev was not pleased when she didn't show up."

"I don't know, Duster," Crookshanks replied. "She wasn't there when we came back from the hunt. I know she got back from Hogsmeade, because there's an empty bag from the bookstore lying on her desk. It wasn't there this morning."

"So she's been and gone again. It's not like her to miss an appointment."

"I know. I have to say that I'm a bit worried."

"Let's see if anyone else has seen her," Duster suggested. "And on principle, if you see the Potter human, knock him down the stairs."

"Right." They bolted off in opposite directions.

Half an hour later, they met up again, this time on the roof over the Great Hall. "We know she went to Hogsmeade, and that Potter was following her," Crookshanks said.

"And we know she returned just after 10am and was in her room, because Gambit saw her."

"And that she left again at 11:30, more or less. The Fat Lady told us that."

"She didn't go back to Hogsmeade Swift was there until after lunch, and he didn't see or smell her." Duster growled a bit. "She doesn't have one of those cloaks that I'm

aware of."

"No," Crookshanks said, "which means that she is somewhere in the castle, since Macavity and Chang were sunning themselves on the front gates."

"She's not been in the Great Hall or the kitchen, according to Shadow."

"Nor the Infirmary I checked with Topper."

"She's not in the Badger's Den, or anywhere in Gryffindor tower."

"I'm an idiot!" Crookshanks announced, rolling to his feet.

"What?" Duster rose also.

"Follow me!" He took off in a ginger-colored streak back toward Gryffindor Tower. A few minutes later, they were in the seven-year boys' dorm. It was unoccupied, mostly due to the gorgeous fall weather.

"Would you mind telling me what we're doing?" Duster groused as Crookshanks began sniffing the five beds.

"Looking for Potter's trunk... here it is. Can you open this?"

"What the...?" Duster stared at the lock for a moment, and it obligingly clicked open. "There... now...?"

"Nice trick." Crookshanks burrowed into the trunk and emerged dragging a large piece of parchment. "Help me spread this out, would you?"

"But it's blank." Nevertheless, he unrolled one end of the sheet and stood on it to keep it flat.

Crookshanks slapped the parchment with a heavy paw. "I solemnly swear that I am up to no good."

Duster let out an oath as the Marauder's Map appeared. "Sev would give his left arm for this!"

"Never mind that. Look for a dot labeled Hermione."

It didn't take long. "There!"

"The Room of Requirement!"

Only long discipline forced them to return the map to its place and lock the trunk. Then they dashed off again, this time to the seventh floor. "Damn and blast! It doesn't open for Familiars!"

~*~

Hermione opened her eyes groggily. Her vision was peculiarly distorted; there seemed to be something of a blind spot directly between her eyes. And she had what had to be the grandmother of all headaches. She closed her eyes again, willing the pounding in her temples to stop. It eased slightly, and memory came flooding back.

*Well, the potion didn't kill me, but I'm not going to know if it worked or not until I open my eyes again. Maybe I can tell by feel*She tried to move her hands, to touch her arms and legs, only to find her sense of touch deadened. She could feel the pressure on her arm, but not in her fingers. And it was uncomfortable to try to wrap her arms around herself.

She attempted to get to her feet, only to find herself more comfortable on all fours*So whatever I am, it's probably four-footed.* Sighing, she braced herself and opened her eyes. The headache didn't come back, but her vision was still odd. If she wanted to look directly ahead, she had to turn her head to one side or the other. Taking a long breath, she looked down at her... hooves. Not hands. Hooves. Black hooves, topped by black stockings. She turned her head and looked at the dark brown pelt covering her sides. Something flopped in her eyes, and she shook her head to get rid of it, wishing for a mirror.

The Room of Requirement being what it was, a mirror appeared on the wall behind her. She snorted in dismay at the image it revealed. She'd hoped for something exotic when she saw the hooves a unicorn or a hippogriff perhaps. Instead... a dark brown Shetland pony with black stockings and an impossibly long black forelock looked back at her.

~*~

"Miaow!"

"Duster, I'm trying to read." Severus glared at his Familiar. The tom was being exceptionally annoying. He kept trying to swat the book out of Severus' hands, and had succeeded more than once. Severus sighed and put his book down. "Cat, you're being irritating."

"Miaaaooow!" Duster leaped off Severus' desk and went over to the door.

"We just did this not three minutes ago. I let you out, and you immediately wanted back in again."

"Ffft!" Duster considered smacking his pet with unsheathed claws. Severus was not usually this dense. Instead, he climbed into his pet's lap and curled up, purring like a buzz-saw. Predictably, after a few minutes, Severus began shifting under him.

"Duster, you're a wonderful Familiar, but you're heavy. And hot." Severus gently pushed the cat off to one side. "And you're shedding." He put his book down. "How'm I supposed to get any reading done, eh? I've got to research this potion for Minerva, you know." He rubbed the cat's ears. "Settle down next to me, and let me read in peace."

Duster sneezed at an imaginary dust-mouse, and leaped out of the chair and onto the bookshelves behind it. Once Severus' attention returned to the book, the big tomcat stared at the back of the man's head intently. Sure enough, in a minute or two, Severus began fidgeting again. Once he rubbed the back of his head as if it were bothering him. Finally he put his book down in exasperation. "It really isn't like Miss Granger to break an appointment. Perhaps I should see if Minerva knows where she is." He rose and headed for his fellow Head of House's rooms, never noticing when Duster slipped through the door and followed him.

Minerva wasn't in her rooms, nor was she in her office. Severus was mightily puzzled by this until he remembered the incident over lunch. Groaning, he decided not to drop by Albus' rooms. Instead, he headed over toward the Gryffindor Common Room, hoping to find and interrogate one of the students of that House. He found the portrait easily enough, but the Fat Lady refused to open for him.

"You've no business here, Professor Snape," she said bluntly. "Professor McGonagall hasn't said anything to me about letting you in."

Rather than waste his time arguing with a painting or stoop to the level of hexing said painting, he decided to check the library, reasoning that Miss Granger might have become so engrossed in her research that she'd lost track of time. When he got there, Madame Pince informed him that Miss Granger had not been there all day. Frustrated at having wasted the entire afternoon, Snape swept into the Great Hall for dinner.

~*~

When Miss Granger did not arrive for dinner, Snape's left eyebrow rose fractionally. This was most unlike that particular Gryffindor he'd heard her spouting about "proper nutrition" to her friends far too often. He snorted and returned his attention to his own plate.

"Severus!" Minerva's voice cut into his reverie.

He looked up. "Yes, Minerva?" Her hat was slightly askew, and her hair was coming loose in tendrils. In fact, she gave every indication of having dressed hastily before rushing to the Great Hall.

"I know this research project of Hermione's is quite important to her, but honestly! The child has to eat! You've kept her so busy today that she's missed both lunch and dinner."

He set down his fork deliberately. "Minerva, I have not seen Miss Granger all day. She was supposed to be doing some lab work this afternoon, but evidently this project isn't as important to her as you think. When she didn't put in an appearance by three o' clock, I assumed she had changed her mind, so I returned to my rooms."

The Head of Gryffindor House stared at him. "Then where is she, Severus?"

"I have no idea. I've quite enough to do with keeping track of my own House." Then he relented. "Minerva it is not like Miss Granger to change her mind and not let anyone know. It is possible that something has happened to her."

Their eyes met, and they pushed back their chairs. "I shall have a word with Mr. Potter," Minerva said. "He's her best friend."

Severus grimaced. "I think there's trouble in Paradise, Minerva." He sighed. "I saw them this morning going to Hogsmeade. Mr. Potter was following Miss Granger at some distance, and making sure he stayed out of her sight."

"I'm sure it's just a little misunderstanding, Severus." She rose. "Let us plan to meet in the staff room in half an hour."

"I'll question the rest of the staff while you're speaking with Mr. Potter."

~*~

Hermione spent a few minutes getting used to walking in her new form. It felt a bit odd at first, but she soon grew accustomed to it. Once she'd mastered walking, it was easy to try other things, and she was soon perfectly comfortable trotting around the room. Even jumping over small obstacles was easy. She grinned inwardly her Animagus form was evidently somewhat more athletic than her human form.

A desire to know what time it was caused a clock to appear on the wall, and she realized that she was already late for lunch she'd have to hurry if she wanted to get anything to eat before her scheduled meeting with the Potions Master. With a soft nicker of regret, she closed her eyes and concentrated on regaining her true form.

Only to open her eyes and discover that she was still a Shetland pony.

Don't panic, she told herself, flicking her tail in agitation. You need to concentrate harder. You're distracted by your success. Now, let's try it again. Deep breath. Close eyes. Concentrate... Damn it. What did the recipe say about changing back, exactly? "Once the ability is unlocked, all that is necessary to transform is to have the desire to do so." I want to change back... so why isn't it working?

She couldn't help but remember the incident of the mis-brewed Polyjuice potion in her second year. *But I did it right. I followed all the instructions! I used the right ingredients...* She whinnied in dismay. *Professor Snape is going to be furious with me!*

~*~

"Miss Granger is missing," Minerva informed the assembled faculty and staff of Hogwarts. "She went to Hogsmeade this morning, and hasn't been seen since."

"She hasn't been in the library at all today," Irma Pince volunteered.

"I'll go down to Hogsmeade and see if I can retrace her trail," Filius Flitwick said. He bounced out of his chair and out of the room, his borzoi trailing him.

Albus looked grave. "Hagrid, will you and Firenze see if there are any traces of her in the Forest?" The two nodded and clumped off, the centaur's staccato hoof beats in counterpoint to the half-giant's heavy footsteps.

"I spoke with Mr. Potter, and he said that he did see her in Hogsmeade this morning, but they went their separate ways," Minerva said. "He doesn't know if she came back."

Ivy Sprout rose to her feet. "I'll check the grounds and the greenhouses."

"I'll help yer," said the caretaker, rising also. "Go faster wi' the two of us."

"Thank you, Mr. Filch, Professor Sprout." Under other circumstances, Albus might've been amused by their behavior.

"Is it possible," Lucius Malfoy asked, "that she went somewhere besides Hogsmeade? They are on the Floo network. Also, as a seventh year student, Miss Granger does know how to Apparate."

"Hermione wouldn't do..." Minerva began angrily, only to be cut off by Severus.

"Miss Granger is aware that students are supposed to limit themselves to Hogsmeade only. However, her personal history suggests that she might break those rules if she thought the cause sufficient."

Minerva sputtered angrily for a moment and subsided. "You're right, Severus."

"While we are waiting for Professor Flitwick's return, perhaps we should make inquiries of the ghosts and portraits," Lucius suggested. "It will take some time, but it might give us some idea of when she was where."

"I've an idea," Madame Hooch said slowly. "She's got a Familiar, correct? That big gingery cat?"

"Yes..."

"See if he can find her."

"That's a good idea!" Minerva rose. "I think I saw him in the Common Room. I'll go fetch him." She shot a look at Albus.

"I'll come with you," Severus said. The two Heads of House left, both in the not-quite-a-run stride of an adult in a hurry. Even with his longer legs, Severus was hard-pressed to keep up with Minerva. The Fat Lady opened promptly, not even bothering to favor Severus with a glare.

They burst into the Common Room, startling a few younger students who were lounging idly in front of the fireplace. Minerva bit her lip. "Mr. Wilkins, have you seen Miss

Granger?"

"Not since this morning, Professor." Robbie Wilkins' eyes got huge as he recognized the formidable Potions Master behind his Head of House. "She was going to Hogsmeade."

"What about her cat," Severus snapped. "Have you seen him?"

The second year student gaped and shook his head.

A racket back out in the hallway drew Severus' attention, and he turned around to listen more closely.

"I don't care, Professor Malfoy! You don't get in here unless Professor McGonagall says so." The Fat Lady sounded quite aggrieved.

Severus opened the painting from the inside. "Lucius?"

The DADA teacher was slightly disheveled and breathing hard, as if he'd sprinted from the Great Hall. "Portrait... seventh floor..." he gasped. "Room of Requirement." His message delivered, he sagged for a moment against the wall.

A moment later, Severus and Minerva charged past him, not bothering with decorum. Lucius followed more slowly, catching his breath and returning to his customary elegance.

Severus easily outdistanced everyone on the stairs, taking them two and three at a time. By the time he reached the seventh floor, he had a respectable lead. Drawing his wand, he flung open the door ready for anything. His eyes swept the room and lit on the only occupant a small Shetland pony who gave him a terrified look and backed away.

One did not have to be Merlin to figure out what had happened. His initial worry dissipated, leaving anger in its place. "Miss Granger!" he almost bellowed, "may I ask what you think you're doing?"

Chapter Five

Chapter 5 of 20

Chaos ensues when the Familiars at Hogwarts decide to play matchmaker.

Chapter Five

Hermione whickered nervously as the Potions Master loomed over her. "Miss Granger, transform back immediately!"

She shook her head, causing her forelock to flop in her eyes again.

"Miss Granger..." his voice was a velvet purr now, "if you do not transform back immediately, I will be forced to recommend your expulsion."

She neighed desperately, wishing anyone but Professor Snape had found her. There was a sound of rushing footsteps, and Minerva McGonagall burst into the room. The Transfiguration Professor took in the situation at a glance.

"Congratulations, Miss Granger! We'll have to get you properly registered, but that shouldn't be any problem." She turned to her colleague. "Severus, were you behind this?"

"I assure you, Minerva, that I had no idea that Miss Granger was foolish enough to attempt an initial transformation alone." He glanced at the nervous pony. "I believe she's having some difficulty regaining her natural form."

Hermione nodded energetically and pawed the ground, forelock flying every-which-way.

"Well, we can't have that. Now, Miss Granger, calm down. Transforming is a perfectly natural process. If you're agitated, it makes it much more difficult."

Hermione took a long breath. Everything would be all right now. Professor McGonagall would help her transform, and maybe they could practice it.

"Now close your eyes. Clear your mind of everything. Visualize your true form in your mind that helps initially. Got it?"

The pony nodded, eyes still closed.

"Now concentrate very hard on becoming you again." Minerva studied the pony as dispassionately as possible under the circumstances. There was no sign of the rippling that marked an Animagus transformation. "Severus, what do you think?"

He folded his arms across his chest. "You may be going about this the wrong way. Miss Granger, did you use Transfiguration or a Potion to achieve your current state?"

Hermione snorted, and he amended. "Did you use Transfiguration?"

Now she shook her head.

"That's why she can't change back using Transfiguration techniques. Her form was unlocked with the potion, and it requires a different process to reverse it." He stared down at the Shetland for a moment. "I'm tempted to leave her that way as a reminder of folly." Before Minerva could do more than take a deep breath, he continued, "But I won't. This time."

He turned his attention completely to the pony. "Miss Granger, cease this prancing about immediately. Good. Now, mentally visualize your current form. You do know what you look like, don't you?" At Hermione's nod, he continued. "Every detail is important. Hold that picture of yourself firmly in your mind. Now, this first time, you have to help the process along. Slowly now, begin merging that picture in your mind back into your true form. Start with the hair."

He watched, expecting to see... something. Instead, he continued to see an unchanged pony. Alarm bells began ringing in the back of his head. "Miss Granger, you did brew the potion yourself?"

Hermione nodded desperately. She was long past the stage where she believed teachers were infallible, but surely these two could help her.

"There's naught for it then." His wand moved like lightning, "Conformate Veritas!"

There was a terrible wrenching sensation, as if she was being pulled into a million pieces. It lasted only a moment though, and when it faded she found herself on hands and knees in front of her Head of House and her Potions instructor. "Ow."

~*~

By the time Lucius got to the seventh floor, he could hear Severus' angry voice halfway down the hall, punctuated by McGonagall's less strident tones. Miss Granger had obviously been found. Rather than thrust himself between Scylla and Charybdis, he decided to go flying again. He stopped by his room to change; he was still wearing the formal attire he preferred for dinner.

He had just hung his outer robes up in his wardrobe when someone knocked on his door. He turned, puzzled. No one had ever done that before. "Enter!"

Xiamora Hooch opened the door. "Lucius if you hadn't heard, they've located Miss Granger."

He decided not to mention that he'd been the one interrogating the various portraits. "Thank you. I hope she is... undamaged?"

"I'm not sure, exactly." Xia casually leaned against the doorframe, studying him appraisingly. "But I heard Severus bellowing in that tone that means everything's really fine, and he's just out of temper."

"An apt description, I admit." He flexed his shoulders, letting his fine cambric shirt flow over his muscles. "Since we are evidently no longer needed, shall we go flying?"

"Perhaps you'd like to try another form of exercise?" She stepped inside and closed the door behind her. Under the bed, two cats one brindled, one black and white exchanged satisfied looks.

~*~

"That was one of the most foolish things you could do!" Severus almost shouted. "You obviously made some mistake in the potion, or you would've been able to change back. Didn't you even think?"

"I have to agree that this was not a wise decision, Miss Granger." Minerva said. "While I am pleased that you have successfully transformed, I cannot award you any points due to the circumstances."

Severus snorted. "One more stunt like that, and Gryffindor will be in negative points for the rest of the year." He glared at the subdued student standing before him. "Do you understand exactly how dangerous self-transfiguration is?"

"Yes, sir," she mumbled.

"How, exactly no, never mind that right now." His lips pulled back from his teeth in an extraordinarily evil grin. "Your choice, Miss Granger. Two-hundred points from Gryffindor," he ignored Minerva's gasp of outrage, "or a month of detention with me."

Her head came up sharply. "I'll take the month's detention, sir."

"Very well then. Seven o'clock every evening in the Potions Classroom. Including weekends." He saw a muscle at the back of her jaw twitch, but she simply nodded.

"Yes, sir." Then to Minerva, "I'm sorry to have caused you trouble."

"How very, very Gryffindor," Snape murmured just loud enough for Minerva to hear. He glanced at the clock. "I shall see you, Miss Granger, in exactly twenty-two minutes." He turned and swept out of the room, feeling quite pleased with himself for some odd reason.

Down in the Potions classroom, he propped his chin on his hands and considered the situation more seriously. Miss Granger had to be made to understand that one did not experiment on one's self, unless the situation was completely dire. If she did not learn that lesson, well, the results could be unfortunate. And the pity of it was, she was a strong witch. No female Einstein, but certainly above the norm.

So, what to do? He still hadn't come to a definite decision by the time she knocked gently on the door.

~*~

Ivy and Argus were searching the last of the greenhouses when Albus came by with the news that Miss Granger had been located and was undamaged. He didn't tarry; he had yet to track down Firenze and Hagrid.

"Perfect waste o' time," Argus grumbled as he helped Ivy tidy up the greenhouse that had been pulled to disarray in their searching. "Spent half an hour out here fer nuthin'."

"Hssh," she rejoined, bending to pick up a fallen tray. "Nothing's ever wasted. It's just in how you look at it. For instance," she stacked the tray neatly with the others, "we've had a nice talk while we were searching."

"Well, yeh." The caretaker shuffled his feet some. "Ivy yer awful nice. Yer don't make fun of me fer bein' a Squib."

She brushed her hair out of her eyes, leaving a smear of dust and grime on her forehead. "And you don't make fun of me for spending my time with plants. Let's face it Argus maybe Snape's an exception, but everyone else in this school is convinced that magic only works with wands."

"I was thinkin', would yer like to go down t' Hogsmeade t'night? Have a drink or somethin'?"

"I'd love to, Argus." She put a gentle hand on his arm. "I'd love to. Let me just stop by my rooms and wash up."

"Meet yer at th' front gate in, say, fifteen minutes?"

"Lovely!"

~*~

"Come in, Miss Granger." Severus put on his most forbidding scowl. "Have a seat." He folded his arms across his chest and stared down at her as she sat. She wasn't meeting his eyes; her gaze was locked firmly on the floor, as if the secrets of the universe were written on it.

"Miss Granger, you are not stupid by any definition of the word. You do, however, lack a certain amount of common sense, and your penchant for impulsive action must be checked if you are to continue doing research under my direction."

Hermione's head came up in shock. "... I was expecting..."

"...that I'd cancel your project entirely. I did consider that, but I think you have learned something from your experience. I assume there will be no repetitions of this."

"No, sir."

He relaxed his stance, and let his scowl ease. "Excellent. Let us start by determining what went wrong with your potion."

"I haven't any idea what happened. I did everything according to the book."

Snape sat down at his desk, and flipped through his copy of Double, Double until he came to the section on the Animagus potion. "You did all the stirring and mixing yourself, correct?"

"Yes, sir and it changed color properly as described."

"What about the ingredients? Are you sure you prepared them properly?"

"Yes that is, I made sure they were correctly prepared." She reddened as enlightenment set in a microsecond ahead of her professor's knowing look. "For this potion, the brewer must prepare the ingredients as well, isn't that so?"

"Exactly. And you didn't."

"It doesn't say that in the book," she protested half-heartedly.

"There are many things that aren't in books," Snape returned. "This is what I meant about common sense. In the absence of clear direction, you must always prepare your ingredients yourself." He took a long breath. "Let me make one thing plain, Miss Granger. I will not tolerate another piece of idiocy like the one you performed today. You are old enough to understand the consequences of disobedience. I will have you expelled from Hogwarts if you choose to ignore my instructions." A long pause. "If, however, you successfully create a potion to allow Animagi to communicate, I will write you a recommendation for the apprenticeship of your choice."

~*~

"Where?" Fawkes tilted his head to the left and looked at the toad in astonishment. "You want to hold the meeting where?"

Trevor sighed and repeated himself for the third time. "Moaning Myrtle's bathroom. It's an excellent place for a meeting. No one ever goes there."

"Well," the phoenix looked dubious. "I did say you could decide. I'll let the other Familiars know."

Trevor waved a webbed foot at him, and hopped off, heading for the stairs. Fawkes shook his head. "Somehow," he muttered to himself, "I don't think the cats are going to approve."

A couple of hours later, he was proved right. The toads were comfortably settled beneath a leaky pipe under one of the sinks. Every other Familiar there was wearing expressions of dismay or disgust. Even Topper looked a bit put out. No sooner had the phoenix landed, then he was assailed by increasingly vocal complaints.

"A bathroom, Fawkes! No place to get comfortable!" Swift's lips pulled back from his teeth in what looked like a grin, but wasn't. "This isn't going to do."

"It's wet!"

"And slimy!"

"And it smells bad," Gambit contributed.

"That ghost is watching us," Chang warned.

"I'll deal with the ghost," Duster growled. He sprang into Myrtle's stall and flushed the commode. Myrtle disappeared down the pipe with a horrified wail.

Crookshanks' ears flattened. "You don't really expect to hold a serious discussion in here? Ghost or no, it's wet and it smells of dead things."

"I thought you weren't going to pick any place damp," Shadow rounded on the two toads.

"We're limited in where we can go, you know," Trevor said.

"And it really isn't that bad." Cassandra added.

Topper clacked his beak. "Perhaps the hallway right outside would suffice?"

"Anything's better than this," Erasmus sniffed. He hadn't even entered the room, stopping short in the doorway. Now he moved back into the hall.

"I'll keep watch," Swift volunteered. He sneezed twice, and trotted off down the hall. Just before the first intersection, he sat down beside a suit of armor, looking for all the world like a large black statue.

The other cats also withdrew into the hall, and the toads followed. Once they were all settled, Fawkes whistled once, getting their attention. "I'll make this short. Is anyone having problems with their assignment?"

An echoing silence greeted his question.

"Excellent! Does anyone have any progress to report?"

Thjalfe yawned, showing all his teeth. "I believe that our project is nearly complete, wouldn't you say, Thunder?"

"Definitely. It's just a matter of time till they perform the marriage ritual and produce offspring. They've already mated."

"Oh marvelous," Fawkes said approvingly. "You two are quite ahead of the game."

"Humans and their rituals," Shadow groused. "Why can't they be more like us?"

"It's easy to get humans to mate," Erasmus said. "But they can't produce offspring without the ritual."

~*~

Hermione put her quill down, and flexed her fingers. She'd been furiously writing for the last two hours, making a list of ingredients (and combinations thereof) that could be used to add the desired effects to the Animagus potion. Once the list was completed, she'd have to go over it again and check it very carefully for interaction with the base Animagus potion. Only then would she present her results to Snape.

She looked over at her professor. Snape was brewing something she studied his desk for a moment trying to determine what he was making by examining the ingredients. It wasn't easy; there didn't seem to be any rhyme or reason to how they were laid out in fact, it looked like a scoop of beetle eyes had been casually mixed in

with the shredded mangrove root. And she didn't even recognize a few of the items.

"Cantor's Concealment Potion," he said, startling her.

"I've never heard of that one. And how...?"

"You were staring at my desk so hard that you didn't hear me ask how your research was progressing." He picked up the tray of ingredients and dumped them willy-nilly into his simmering cauldron. "This potion," he almost grinned at her shocked expression, "seems to require lack of precision. I expect your friend Mr. Longbottom would excel at brewing it."

"Lack of precision?" she repeated, ignoring the comment about Neville. "That seems counter-intuitive." A thought popped into her head. "That's how you sneak up on students so effectively!"

"Exactly." He stirred the cauldron a few times and studied the contents. "It's never certain if the brewing will be a success or failure until it's done."

Hermione propped her chin on one hand and drummed her fingers on the desk. "That doesn't make sense though precision allows for duplication. You should be able to record the exact procedure and repeat it."

"Yes, you should. But it doesn't work." He gave the cauldron another poke. "I've tried it a dozen times. It either fails completely, or gives substandard results. And since the cost of the ingredients is somewhat prohibitive, I have learned to be... less than precise... when brewing it. Now, that must simmer for some unspecified length of time. How are you progressing?"

She indicated the list some five feet of parchment covered with notes. "I think that at least half of these will be eliminated in the first cut. The squid ink, for instance, isn't going to do well with the comfrey of the base Animagus potion. Ground hyssop might work, but we'd have to add something else to neutralize the poisons... and so on. May I borrow Double, Double? I'd like to use it to cross-check."

"Certainly." He handed her the book. "Chopped pooka meat would neutralize the hyssop."

"Yes..." she took the book, "but it doesn't react well with human hair or blood." The last sentence was spoken almost absent-mindedly, as she turned the pages to the section on the Animagus Potion, already absorbed. A small paragraph at the bottom of the preceding page caught her eye. Incredulously, she read, "The Animagus potion was developed by Severus Snape while he was still at school."

The book slowly came to rest on the desk and she stared up at her professor. "You developed the Animagus potion! You!"

"So I did. Does that surprise you?"

She stammered. "No, not that I think about it. I just thought it was a much older potion." There was a pause, and her eyes narrowed appraisingly as she studied him. "Are you an Animagus?"

The left corner of his mouth twitched ever so slightly. "What do you think?"

She thought about it. When she'd looked up Rita Skeeter back in her fourth year, she'd skimmed over the other names just out of curiosity. Snape had not been on the list. She would've noticed. So... "I believe you are an unregistered Animagus, though I've no idea what your form is. During the war, I'm sure you found many ways to put it to good use."

"Only rarely, I'm afraid." He sighed. "As you've found out, using my potion means that you have very little control over what you become."

She nodded wryly. "Yes, a Shetland pony wasn't what I had hoped for. May I ask... what your form is?"

In answer, his shape blurred and shifted. She blinked at the green and silver serpent coiled in front of her. The snake's large diamond-shaped head rose level with her own, and an uninking, glistening black eye fixed itself upon her.

Another blur and shift, and Snape stood there in the serpent's stead.

"What kind of serpent is that? I've never seen one like it."

"*Cadborosaurus willsi* a sea-serpent."

"I see what you mean about rarely putting it to good use." She gave him a wry look. "It's highly impractical for a..."

"For a spy." Snape returned to his seat. "And for almost anything else. At least it's amphibious; there are known cases of Animagi suffocating because when they transformed they couldn't breathe. A most unpleasant way to die, I'm told."

She shuddered. "Point taken, sir." Then, "I can see why you didn't register for all those years while you were a spy, but what's stopping you from doing it now?"

An elegant black eyebrow rose. "Think about it, Miss Granger, and tell me tomorrow what you think."

~*~

She returned to Gryffindor Tower with her mind spinning. In the Common Room, pandemonium reigned. Neville and Dennis Creevey were playing chess in the only quiet corner. Apparently everyone else was in the mood for socializing. Someone had been down to the kitchen, because plates of sandwiches covered one of the tables, and several pitchers of pumpkin juice stood on the other table. Even Harry was there, though he wasn't terribly talkative.

Lavender Brown was holding forth on the best way to study for the NEWTs a subject that caught Hermione's ear, and she allowed herself to be drawn into the discussion. Several times, though, she noticed Harry staring at her. There didn't seem to be any malice in it, so she said nothing.

"Mrrrrrow!"

Hermione looked down at her Familiar who was rubbing himself against her legs. It was unusual for the privacy-loving kneazle to come into the Common Room when the Gryffindors were in full cry. She patted her lap in invitation, and the big cat made himself comfortable there. A teasing thread started in her mind, and she noted at some level that virtually all the Familiars associated with various Gryffindors were present. Even Trevor was hopping about next to the chessboard.

It was a late night.

~*~

Hermione was greatly relieved when Harry abruptly quit following her around the next day. In fact, other than classes, he seemed to be avoiding her entirely. She let out a long breath and devoted all her attention to her studies. It didn't surprise her to be summoned to Professor McGonagall's office after Transfiguration was over; an hour later, she was a properly registered Animagus.

"But you will need to practice transforming," her Head of House said. "With someone preferably a teacher present. Unfortunately, I'm somewhat occupied in the evenings. Perhaps Professor Flitwick would be available?"

"Professor Snape could supervise during my detentions," Hermione offered. "We're still in the research stage, and I spend a lot of time waiting while he reviews my work."

"If he's agreeable, then that will be acceptable."

"He seems much more... agreeable... since the war ended."

"Can you blame him, Hermione? He was a double-agent for most of his adult life. The stress he was under was tremendous." The older witch looked down at her hands. "We were all so pressured, so frightened even."

"And we got off so lightly." Hermione finished with a slight wobble in her voice. "Not to belittle those who died but it could've been so much worse."

Minerva blew her nose, and her eyes were suspiciously bright. "Yes. If not for Severus and Lucius to give him his due we would've paid a much higher price. Now get along to detention so Sev... Professor Snape doesn't have an excuse to take points."

~*~

The week passed in a blur of classes and research. Hermione learned to transform at will, though she lacked the speed of her teachers. "It will come," Professor McGonagall told her. "I've had years of practice."

"Impatience breeds errors," Snape said. "Mistakes in self-transfiguration can be fatal." And he'd glared at her in the way that meant he would brook no argument on the subject.

The first time she transformed without the potion, it had been remarkably easy to assume her Animagus form. Changing back had proved quite troublesome, and Snape was compelled to use the *Conformate Veritas* spell again. And again. After two days of this, he had her brew a new batch of the Animagus potion and "re-unlock" her ability. Finally, four days after her first transformation, she was able to change back and forth.

The actual research wasn't going as well as she'd hoped, though Snape said nothing. It was like building a house of cards each ingredient they added had to be checked and double-checked against the current list. Any unfavorable interaction meant starting over. As the list grew, the number of checks grew exponentially. All too often, she'd had to start completely over, as she ran into a proverbial stone wall. She was currently working on her fifth revision, and thought it looked promising.

Despite the lack of forward progress, she was enjoying herself. Snape, when confronted with someone who truly desired to learn, could be a fascinating teacher. The question of why he remained unregistered was an excellent case in point. She'd mulled the subject over, worrying it like a bone, and had been unable to come up with a suitable answer.

"I doubt you'd fail to register out of inertia," she told him, "and it's not because you have issues with the Ministry since Fudge was ousted. So I don't know."

He gave her the look that meant she was overlooking the obvious. "Have you never read the laws about registering, Miss Granger?"

"There's severe penalties for not doing it, of course. That's how I took care of that reporter in fourth year. But surely those wouldn't apply?"

"And why not? I am nobody special, from the Ministry's perspective."

She winced. "So they'd see it as you deliberately failing to register for over two decades."

"Exactly. My covert work for the Order is not a part of public record." His expression dropped into a scowl. "I need not point out that your silence on this point is required."

"Yes, sir."

~*~

Just like the previous Friday, the Gryffindors were whooping it up again when she got back to the Common Room. Even Neville had been dragged into a discussion how to safely cultivate Devil's Snare. She shook her head and turned to go up to her room, only to find her way blocked by Harry.

"Hi."

"Hello Harry. I'm not up to a party tonight."

"I know," he said sympathetically. "You've been in detention all week. What's Snape got you doing? Scrubbing cauldrons? Organizing the supply cabinet?"

"Research, actually," she replied. "It's quite interesting."

His face fell. "I guess you're tired then. But... would you go to the Halloween Ball with me?"

"Accio calendar!" She flipped it open to October. "I can't, Harry. I'm going to be in detention still. Snape gave me a month."

"A month! What did you do?"

Her mouth quirked in a smile. "Snape said I was being very, very Gryffindor." She hadn't told anyone about being an Animagus yet.

"I'll go to Albus! I'm sure he'll get Snape to let you off for one night!" Harry's breathing grew ragged, and his fists clenched. "It's not bloody fair!"

She hated to see him get upset. "Listen, Harry. My detention ends on the second week of November. We'll go to Hogsmeade then."

AUTHOR'S NOTES:

Conformate Veritas mangled Latin for "True Form". Used to force an Animagus to return to human form. Has no effect on non-Animagi.

Chapter Six

Chaos ensues when the Familiars at Hogwarts decide to play matchmaker.

As the Halloween Ball drew near, Hermione couldn't help but wish it were over and done with. It was the only topic of conversation anywhere outside of class and even in some classes. She hated social functions with a passion; they seemed like thinly disguised popularity contests. Only Valentine's Day, with its emphasis on romance, was worse.

Discussions in the Gryffindor Common Room had turned into a not-so-subtle game of who could get the most invitations. Currently Parvati was the front runner, with 42. By Hermione's count, that was every seventh-year male in the school, plus a few more. And Lavender Brown, who till this year had held her own in such contests, was trailing with a mere 13 and was most upset about it.

Hermione didn't worry about it. She wasn't going to go.

~*~

"You want me to what?" Severus almost roared. "Cancel my research project for the night? At this stage? Just to dance attendance on a crowd of rutting teenagers? Albus, get someone else get anyone else."

"Now Severus, you need to get away from your dungeons once in a while," Albus' eyes crinkled happily. "Lemon drop?"

"No. Thank you." Severus shoved away the offered tin. "We are close to a major breakthrough, I believe. Do you want to undo everything we've done so far?"

"I don't believe one night off will harm your research and experimentation that much. One dance with the partner of your choice, and two hours chaperoning to make sure no one attempts to emulate the Weasley brothers."

"Merlin forbid! Fortunately, I believe I have quashed all such adventurous spirits."

"Excellent. I'll see you at the dance tomorrow night then." He bowed Severus out before the younger wizard could voice an objection.

The Potions Master stared at the closed door for a moment before sweeping down the stairs. "How does he do it? How does he talk me into these things?"

~*~

On the evening of October 31st, students and staff made their various ways to the Great Hall which had been transformed for the occasion by carefully placed Charms. The tables had been shoved against the walls, and were covered with food and drink. The raised platform where the staff table normally sat had become a performers' stage for the Weird Sisters.

Hermione opened a book, propped her feet up on the table in the Gryffindor Common Room, and ignored the chaos swirling around her. Dean was pulling at his dress robes, bemoaning the fact that he had grown two inches in the last year. Colin Creevey was everywhere, his camera constantly snapping. Neville came dashing down the stairs, bumped into Dean and bumbled an apology before running down the passage to the Fat Lady.

"Where's he off to?" Dennis asked no one in particular.

"He's taking a Hufflepuff to the dance," Dean replied, giving up on his robes and glaring at the inch of ankle they revealed. "Here, Dennis, you're good at Charms. Can you do something with this?"

There was a tentative knock on the door, and Justin Finch-Fletchley entered, looking rather ill-at-ease. "Sorry for the invasion. I'm taking Lavender to the dance, and thought I should meet her here."

"What's this?" Colin grinned, "Hufflepuffs dating Gryffindors? Sit down, Justin. The girls should be down eventually."

It was only a few minutes before Lavender sailed down the stairs, with Parvati and Ginny right behind her. Two minutes after that, the three couples had left, leaving Hermione in peace and quiet. She closed her book and checked the time half an hour until her evening's detention. Time to get ready. She returned to her room and found a note on her bed.

Miss Granger,

The Headmaster has seen fit to put me on chaperone duty for the evening. Accordingly, your detention for this one night is cancelled. You will not have to make it up. I shall expect you promptly at 7pm tomorrow night.

Professor Snape

"Great," she muttered to herself. "Just great." She scooped up Crookshanks, who'd been winding around her ankles. "I hate last-minute changes of plan, Crooks, I really do. I was really hoping to get the next stage of experimenting done. I think we're close to something." She scratched the cat's ears and chin. "But Professor Snape will not be pleased if I do any work without him there." She set the cat down. "Leave it to the Headmaster to ruin my plans. I don't really want to stay here and run into Harry. I guess I'll stick my nose in at the dance and play wall-flower. He's still brooding about Ron, so he's not likely to show up."

She didn't take too much care with her appearance; a simple charm applied to her robes turned them into something sedate yet dressy. That coupled with a bit of attention to her hair and makeup completed her efforts. After all, if one is going to sit on the sidelines, why bother?

The Halloween Ball was just beginning when she got to the doors of the Great Hall. The Headmaster was making a speech, and she stopped to listen.

"Good evening, students and staff of Hogwarts! I know we're all anxious to begin the celebration, so I shall make only a short speech. It's been only a few short weeks since Voldemort was finally defeated. His followers are in chaos, and most have been apprehended. Let us have a moment of silence to honor those who died working against him." The old wizard bowed his head. Behind him, most of the staff did the same. Only Professor Snape held his head high.

Hermione's eyes filled with tears as she remembered Ron and Seamus. Their combined Expelliarmus! had cost Voldemort his wand and distracted him long enough for Harry to deliver the Killing Curse. But Voldemort's wand exploded when its master died, and the two young men had been caught in the blast.

There were others poor Percy Weasley, now serving a term in Azkaban for aiding and abetting. She was pretty sure he was innocent, and that his imprisonment was more of Cornelius Fudge's political maneuvering.

And Harry who was one step away from madness. His grades were as erratic as his behavior. She hoped he would stabilize before his NEWTs.

Slytherin House had been decimated, with those who supported the Death Eaters comprising the vast bulk of its losses. Of the seventh years, only Millicent Bulstrode and Theodore Nott had survived. Hufflepuff had lost Ernie MacMillan to the lure of the Dark, which had shocked almost everyone. He and Draco Malfoy had fought side by side until an Auror's lucky shot had taken them both out. Only Ravenclaw had escaped unscathed.

"We should never forget what they sacrificed for us," Dumbledore continued. "Yet, we should not dwell on the past. Instead, let us look to a brighter future, where we can

live without fear. Let us celebrate!" He gestured and the band struck up a lively dance tune. Moments later, the floor filled with couples.

And there, Hermione thought, was Harry's problem in a nutshell. He was incapable of moving on. But the Headmaster was right. Dwelling on the past did nothing productive. She slowly entered the room, and moved toward the refreshment tables.

The sight of Professor Malfoy dancing literally cheek to cheek with Madame Hooch was an eye-opener. She still didn't completely trust the elder Malfoy, but she had to admit that he'd never been anything but courteous to her in or out of class since his true loyalties had become known. Even during the last big battle, he'd carefully maintained his charade, except that his "curses" were jets of light that could stun or dazzle, but would not kill.

Curious now, she looked over the other couples. She almost didn't recognize them at first a long lanky man dancing a bit awkwardly with a much shorter plump woman. An older couple, judging from their graying hair. Only when the music ended and they halted nearby did she realize that Mr. Filch had danced a set with Professor Sprout.

Shaking her head, she picked up a glass of pumpkin juice. The musicians struck up a waltz, and she turned her attention back to the dancers. Neville was dancing with Hannah Abbott, though not happily if the look on his face was any sign. As she watched, Neville stepped on Hannah's foot. The blonde Hufflepuff pulled away from him and founced off, leaving him standing in the middle of the floor.

Loud voices beside her distracted her for a moment, and she turned just in time to see Millicent Bulstrode throw her drink in Theodore Nott's face and stalk away. Nott wiped the drink off his face, and looked after his erstwhile date. Then he shrugged and refilled his own glass. Catching Hermione looking his way, he gave her an elaborate shrug before strolling off in the opposite direction.

She picked up her glass, drained it, and filled it again. It was warm in the Great Hall, and she felt stifled. Careful not to get in the way of the dancers, she crossed the room and went out into the garden. It was considerably cooler here. Lavender was sitting on a bench with Justin, and they looked quite comfortable together. Sighing, she went back inside.

Professor Snape was standing stiffly near the windows, looking completely uncomfortable. Well, if she couldn't do her planned experiments tonight, perhaps he would consent to discuss them with her.

"Good evening, Professor."

"Good evening, Miss Granger," he replied. His eyes were not on her, though. They were watching something behind her.

"I was wondering if you would like to discuss the experiments we were going to do tonight, since we can't actually do them."

He was about to reply when a high-pitched voice cut in, "Oh Severus, you simply must dance with me!" Hermione turned around to see Madame Pince in a skin-tight black dress that was most unflattering. Her stringy hair was done up in a sagging beehive, and her makeup showed complete lack of taste.

Gaping, she wondered how Professor Snape would respond.

"Good evening, Irma." His voice was stone cold and rigidly formal. "I already have a partner for this dance. Perhaps you should ask Albus." He turned to Hermione. "Miss Granger?" He held out his hand.

"Thank you, Professor." She allowed him to lead her out onto the floor, and they fell comfortably into the steps of a foxtrot, leaving Madame Pince staring after them in confusion.

~*~

Severus had not intended to change out of his teaching robes for the ball, but when he'd gone back to his room for a moment after dinner, Duster had hacked up a hairball on his lap. Grimacing, he'd opened his wardrobe and found that most of his robes were in the laundry. The only one remaining was the dark green velvet that he only wore on extremely special occasions. He'd worn it the day after expelling Potter from his Potions class.

When he arrived at the transformed Great Hall, he decided to take up a stance near the refreshment tables to prevent any of the more adventurous souls from attempting to liven up the menu with their own additions to the pumpkin juice. This lasted until Albus opened the festivities, and insisted that he come stand with the rest of the staff. As soon as the speech was over, he returned to his chosen position.

Evidently the fact that he was under orders to dance at least once had become general knowledge among his fellows, for Sybil Trelawney followed him around like a harpy, until he'd distracted her with a question about Potter's future. She'd immediately gone off to her tower where her Inner Eye would be less distracted.

He'd seen Irma searching for him, and managed to avoid her twice by stepping behind Hagrid while the half-giant was dancing with Minerva and Xiamora. But the third time, she'd made for him like a shark drawn to blood in the water. He'd been almost resigned to his fate when Miss Granger had asked if he'd like to discuss their work.

In a desperate gamble, he turned to her and offered his hand as if he'd already asked her to dance. Without missing a beat, she'd followed him onto the floor. It was worth dancing with a student to see the look on Irma's face.

He cleared his throat softly to get her attention. She was as good a dancer as he; her attention did not need to be fixed on her feet, and she followed his lead gracefully. "I... appreciate your participation in this charade."

"It's nothing. I like Madame Pince, but her company can be a bit wearing." She gave him a sympathetic smile.

"Be grateful you've never had to dance with her. She has no sense of rhythm." He cast about for a change of subject. "I would've preferred to spend the evening continuing our work."

"Likewise. Bloody rotten of the Headmaster to mess with our plans, wasn't it?"

He quirked an eyebrow. "Quite bloody rotten, and because I agree with you, I shan't take points from Gryffindor for your language." He expertly steered her toward the edge of the dance floor as the music wound down. "Thank you again, Miss Granger. It was most appreciated."

"Thank you, sir. It was quite pleasant." She gave him another smile, and walked toward the refreshment table. He looked after her for a moment, and then headed into the garden to complete his obligatory penance by freely handing out detentions to any students he caught misbehaving there.

Hermione leaned against the table feeling inexplicably pleased with herself. She'd actually enjoyed a dance for the first time in her life. And the sheer pleasure of rescuing Professor Snape and it was a rescue brought a smile to her face.

"G'evening, Granger. Didn't think you Gryffindors would dance with Slytherins." She looked up to see Millicent Bulstrode pouring herself a glass of juice. "Otherwise..."

Hermione studied the big girl for a moment. "Most of us have outgrown that by now, Millicent." She deliberately used her first name. "It never hurts to ask."

The Slytherin returned her look for an equally long moment. "Call me Millie, Hermione." She tilted her head down the table. "Is he spoken for?"

Hermione looked. There was only one Gryffindor in sight. "Neville? He had a tiff with his date, so I think he's available."

An absolutely predatory grin spread over the other girl's face. "Thanks." She strolled off nonchalantly in Neville's direction, carrying two glasses of juice.

Hermione couldn't hear what was said, but Neville suddenly looked much happier. He accepted a glass of juice from Millie, and obviously relaxed. Hermione grinned, mentally wished them luck, and turned back to watch the dancing for a moment.

Her eyebrows rose when she saw Justin Finch-Fetchley dancing with Hannah Abbott. Lavender was nowhere in sight. She shrugged. It really wasn't any of her business. She returned her empty glass to the table and made her way to the exit, meaning to go up to her room and reread her Animagus potion notes.

"Thought you had detention tonight."

She spun around to see Harry standing against the wall with an odd look on his face. "It was cancelled at the last minute."

"Uh huh. And you didn't think of telling me? I saw you dancing with Snape!" His voice was low and venomous. "What've you been researching with him? Comparative anatomy?"

"Harry!"

"You weren't going to tell me, were you?" Her silence hung in the air between them. "What the hell's happened to you, Hermione? You used to be a good friend. Then you take a fancy to Snape of all people!"

"I do not fancy Professor Snape!"

"Bollocks! I saw the way you looked at him. And it's not just that. I don't know you any more! Ever since you started that damned project, you've been different." His voice rose slightly. "I suppose I should be grateful that you picked Snape to screw around with. Better him than Malfoy."

"Oh really, Mr Potter?" Lucius Malfoy's smooth voice fell on them like a cold shower. "I'm sorry you think so little of me. Shall we discuss it with the Headmaster?" He gave Hermione a long look. "Miss Granger, I assume there is no truth to this accusation of Mr Potter's?"

"No, sir!"

"In that case, continue to enjoy your evening. Come along, Mr Potter. I'm sure Professor Dumbledore will be most pleased to have his festivities interrupted." He took Harry by the arm and marched him off in the direction of the Headmaster's office.

Hermione looked after them for a moment. "I don't think this is going to end well," she murmured to herself.

~*~

"Oh what a tangled web we've woven," Crookshanks growled with no little dissatisfaction. "This is what comes of meddling." An emergency meeting had been called as the Halloween Ball wound down, and all the Familiars were gathered in the same classroom where they'd first met.

"Despite all our practice," Duster said just as sourly.

"Now, I'm sure we'll get everything straightened out," Fawkes chirped brightly, looking around at the disgruntled Familiars. "Would one of you Shadow, perhaps please summarize what has happened?"

"I hardly know where to begin, Fawkes," replied the silver tabby. "It seems like all our planning just suddenly came undone."

"Not all," Thunder said smugly. "Lucius is still quite taken with Xia."

"Don't be too sure of that," Macavity snorted. "That Potter human may yet cause trouble there."

"Please!" the phoenix trilled. "Who can summarize effectively?"

"I don't think any one of us knows everything that happened," Swift said. "Better that those who were there tell all they know in turn. With no interruptions." He looked down his long nose at Thunder as he said the last words.

"Swift is right," Topper agreed. "I'll start with what I saw and heard. I was in the garden, because the Great Hall was too warm. Your pet, Shadow, was chatting with Erasmus' pet. The subject turned to a test about lizards that they would be taking next term. Then suddenly they were angry, and he got up and left."

"Lizards," Duster muttered so only Crookshanks could hear him. "Insufferable, overgrown, ignorant parrot!"

"Hssh."

"That clumsy Neville stepped all over Hannah's feet tonight," Cassandra croaked, with a baleful glare at Trevor. "Of course she wants nothing more to do with him."

"Neville isn't clumsy!" the other toad retorted. "He was just nervous. He's high-strung. If your pet is too stupid to realize that, perhaps she shouldn't be part of this plan. It might be hereditary."

"You fish!" Cassandra slapped Trevor hard. "If you think I'm going to countenance a match with your pet after that, think again!"

Fawkes whistled for order as the toads degenerated into fisticuffs. Macavity finally knocked them apart and sat on Trevor while Erasmus did the same to Cassandra. "If you persist in behaving like tadpoles," the phoenix said sternly once the amphibians had been suitably repressed, "you'll be treated as such."

"Interesting," Chang said into the silence.

"What's that," Gambit asked.

"I saw before I came up here Neville was dancing with Millie, and Hannah with Justin."

"What? Impossible! She's a Slytherin!" Trevor's shock overrode his ire at Cassandra.

"And what's wrong with Slytherins?" Macavity almost snarled. "If your pet is happy, isn't that what's important?"

"Chang, where does that leave your pet?" Shadow asked.

"Lavender? After Justin left her, she went to the refreshment table and," he paused for effect, "then she danced with your pet, Mac. In fact, they were still dancing together when I left to come here."

"My pet danced with a Gryffindor?" Macavity spluttered. "Impossible!"

"If your pet is happy, isn't that what's important?" Duster interjected. "Cross-house pairings can be made to work. It just takes a bit of effort."

"Too much effort," Cassandra muttered. "Much better for Hannah to stay with another Hufflepuff."

"We need to decide what to do about the Potter human, Fawkes," Crookshanks said. "He's coming close to ruining things for us, and now potentially for Thunder and Thjalfe. All he has to do is spread rumors about Hermione and Lucius, and there will be trouble."

"I'll scratch his eyes out if he comes near Lucius," Thunder growled.

"It's really too bad he doesn't have a proper Familiar," Fawkes allowed. "Still, I can see that something must be done. I'll see what I can do via Albus."

"If he causes any more trouble," Duster said flatly, "I'm going to knock him down the stairs. If the stairs move out from under him, that's his problem."

~*~

When her month of detention ended two weeks after the Ball, Hermione was more than pleased with the progress she'd made in her potion. She'd decided to tackle the Transfiguration process first, as it would be easiest. Within a week, she thought, she'd be ready to begin actual experiments, though she had yet to discuss the issue of test subjects with Professor Snape.

It didn't take her more than one evening sans detention to realize that she got much more done when she was in the Potions Lab, or the classroom. She'd grown used to Snape's continual presence, to being able to ask him a quiet question about interactions, or preparation. Back in her own room, she felt stifled.

"I'm going for a walk, Crookshanks," she told the big cat who was curled up on her bed. "I'll be back shortly." She went down the stairs and through the Common Room, which was bursting with chattering students, and out into the hall. Harry had left her alone after their last confrontation, even changing his seat at meals to the other end of the Gryffindor table. He seemed to be settling down a bit, and she hoped they could remain friends.

She made her way down the corridors, habit taking her toward the dungeons. When she realized what she was doing, she stopped and bit her lip. "Maybe I'll just go outside for a bit. It's not curfew yet."

The night was crisp and clear, and she breathed deeply, relishing the fresh air. "I've been inside too much," she said to herself as she strolled toward the Quidditch pitch. "Maybe I should take my books outside on the weekends."

Lost in thought, she didn't hear the light footsteps behind her. There was a flash of movement out of the corner of her eye, and as she turned towards it, a hoarse voice shouted, "Stupefy!"

Author's Notes:

Duster and Crookshanks are misquoting this immortal couplet:

Oh what a tangled web we weave

When first we practice to deceive.

-- Sir Walter Scott

The dance scene between Hermione and Severus was inspired in part by "I Don't Dance, but Thank You for Asking" by Melisande88.

Chapter Seven

Chapter 7 of 20

Chaos ensues when the Familiars at Hogwarts decide to play matchmaker.

Hermione woke up with a splitting headache. Groaning, she closed her eyes and pulled her pillow over her head.

Wait. Pillow? Whereami?

She opened her eyes again and sat up, willing her head to stop pounding. She was in an unfamiliar, largish room that contained only the lumpy mattress she was sitting on and the pillow. She reached for her wand, grimacing when her fingers closed on air. As the ache in her head receded, she remembered walking out to the Quidditch pitch... and she shouted Stupefy from behind.

With the memories came a rush of dread, and she wrapped her arms around her knees and shivered. Slowly the adrenaline rush eased, and she calmed down. "So I've been kidnapped," she said to herself, "and now the question is, what can I do about it?"

She rose and made a thorough inspection of the windowless room, starting with the door. It wasn't the normal hinged affair one would expect. Instead, it was a sliding panel set in the middle of one wall that was currently quite firmly fastened. Hermione spent several minutes attempting to force it to move one way or the other, and finally gave up, turning her attention to the mattress and pillow. Both had all identifying marks removed; she could see the places where the tags had been clumsily cut off.

An odd smell tickled her nose, and it took her a moment to recognize the odors of new construction paint, sawdust, cement, and glue. Muggle construction. She was probably in a Muggle house.

For lack of anything better to do, she inventoried her assets. Besides the pillow and mattress, she had her robes and the clothes she was wearing. Nothing else. As no immediate ideas for escape rose to mind, she tugged the heavy mattress into the corner furthest from the door, and sat down on it to wait. And think. Hard.

~*~

When Hermione hadn't returned by eight o' clock, Crookshanks began to fret. His pet's outdoor walks rarely lasted more than fifteen minutes, and she'd been gone well over an hour. "If I'm running a false trail, so be it. This isn't like her!" He rose and padded down to the Common Room. There were half a dozen of the younger Gryffindors there, but not his pet. As he headed for the portrait, it opened, and a disheveled, panting Harry Potter stepped through. Crookshanks twitched his tail and vanished before the boy realized he was there.

He hadn't paid much attention to that human lately, not since Potter had begun behaving himself. But now... the ends of his whiskers twitched as he sensed wrongness. Potter was nervous and sweating, despite the coolness of the evening. He stopped in the corridor and took several deep breaths, obviously attempting to calm himself. Then he straightened his clothing and put on a cheerful grin before stepping into the Common Room. Crookshanks looked after him balefully. "He's been up to something, and I'll bet anything it has to do with my pet." Two minutes later, he was in the dungeons, yowling outside Snape's door.

Duster slipped outside a moment later. "Crooks! What's wrong?"

"Hermione went out for a walk an hour ago and didn't come back. Then that Potter human just came back into the Common Room, reeking of nerves and sweat. He's done something, Duster, I know it!"

"You don't think he's... hurt her, do you?"

"I don't know. We've got to find her."

"Hmm." Duster got a thoughtful look. "We need to arrange a distraction to get everyone out of the Gryffindor tower so we can get that map again."

"A distraction..." Crookshanks' eyes glowed green. "I'll go up there and claw him silly!"

"That would distract Potter, but not everyone else," Duster pointed out. "Perhaps... a fire?"

"Too dangerous. Someone might get hurt."

"Let's just go up there and make anyone there leave."

Crookshanks considered. "One of us should probably stay in the Common Room to keep everyone there."

"I'll do that. You know how best to work that map."

They tore up the stairs and through the halls, a black and ginger streak that terminated abruptly in the Gryffindor Common Room. There were three humans there, two playing chess while the third kibitzed. Duster made himself comfortable under the sofa and began a soft and subtle magic, luring the Gryffindors to the Common Room with thoughts that it would be a nice idea just to socialize.

Crookshanks twitched his tail and vanished, then ducked into the seventh-year boys' room. Only the Potter human was there at the moment. Trusting Duster to keep anyone else from coming up, the half-kneazle flattened his ears and stared very hard at the Boy-Who-Should-Be-Smacked.

It only took a few minutes before Harry put down the parchment he was reading, and left the room, heading down the stairs. Crookshanks dove into his trunk, pawing through clothes and other sundries, and spitting viciously when he couldn't find the map at first. Finally he located it and spread it out on the floor, using one of Neville's shoes to keep it flat. Once it was activated, he scanned it quickly. Then again, more slowly. Finally he hissed in annoyance, rolled it up and returned it to its place. Hermione was not anywhere on the school grounds.

He made his way back down to the Common Room and told Duster what he'd found or hadn't found.

"So," Duster said slowly, "what do you think?"

"I think that the Potter human knows something, but short of ripping his mind open, I don't know how to figure out what it is."

"It's a pity that mind-ripping is strictly forbidden except in the direst situations. Until we can prove that your pet is in deadly peril, we're going to have to find some other way."

"I think we need to call an emergency meeting and get help. This is Friday night. Hermione won't be missed by the other humans until her Monday classes at the earliest, unless we can convince them otherwise."

"In other words, meddle," Duster said with a certain smug satisfaction.

"Let's see if the others have any ideas," Crookshanks temporized. "Meddling still makes me twitchy."

"Very well then. But we'll need to wait for about three hours, until the humans have settled for the night."

"I know, but I don't like it."

"Let's meet at the front gates," Duster suggested.

"Why there?"

"Hermione isn't on the school grounds. That means that she must've left through the gates if she didn't Apparate. It's possible the dogs can track her."

"And if she Apparated? Or was port-keyed?"

"Then we meddle."

"Agreed."

~*~

The Familiars were grim when they arrived at the front gates. Hermione had not returned, and thoughts of foul play were on every mind.

"But you don't know that the Potter human had anything to do with it," Fawkes repeated for the third time. "So we can't assume anything."

"I'm not assuming," Crookshanks almost snarled. "I tell you, he was nervous and sweating and it's not particularly warm outside."

"Perhaps he had just gone flying," Erasmus put in.

"And perhaps he did actually have something to do with it," Duster replied with some heat. "Swift, can you or Gambit get a track on her?"

The terrier nodded and began casting about in an ever-widening spiral, letting the smells of the earth tell their stories to his sensitive nose. For several minutes the other Familiars watched silently. Then Gambit yelped, "Got it!"

Swift was beside him in a bound as the terrier took off in the hunting lope of a dog on the scent. The others followed as fast as they could, Topper and Fawkes carrying the toads. The track led more or less straight to the Quidditch pitch, and then ended. Gambit cast around for several minutes and finally shook his head. "She came here, walking slowly. Then nothing. She Apparated."

"Or was Apparated," Duster reminded them. "Are there any signs of anyone else here at about the same time?"

"Aye, there was someone else all right." He sat back on his haunches and said solemnly, "That Potter human was here too."

"See, I told you!" Crookshanks burst out. "Now I'm going to claw his eyes out, and then rip his mind."

"No!" Fawkes declared. "We know he was here, but we don't know, beyond any doubt, that he did anything to her. They may have gone somewhere together."

The sound of high pitched giggling shrilled behind them, and they whirled to see Moaning Myrtle floating about ten feet in the air. "Poor kitties, lost something?"

"Myrtle, what do you know about this?" Fawkes demanded.

"Why should I tell you? You let them flush me down the commode!"

"We needed privacy!" Macavity said. "We had things to discuss that we didn't want anyone else overhearing."

"That's my bathroom," Myrtle sniffed. "You came into my bathroom for your oh-so-secret meeting, and then you flushed me down the commode. Too bad for you now!"

"Now Myrtle," Fawkes said soothingly, "I'm sure we can work this out. Why don't you tell us what you know, and I'll have Duster apologize."

Myrtle's eyes got bigger behind her glasses. "You're fibbing! You're fibbing! You just want to know what I know, and then you'll go away and I'll never get my apology!"

"She doesn't know anything," Chang stated flatly. "She's just causing trouble!"

"Is that so, Mr Smarty-cat? I know plenty of things! I heard you tonight. You want to know about Harry."

"So?" the Siamese put a world of boredom into his tone. "That doesn't mean you know anything we don't."

"I'll bet you don't know that Harry stuffed a big roll of parchment down one of the commodes."

The cats looked at each other. Finally Duster said, "I'm sorry I flushed you." It was said through gritted teeth.

Myrtle looked dubious. "You don't mean it."

"Come, now, Myrtle. You have your apology. Now tell us what you know about that parchment."

"Which parchment?" She danced around them with some glee. "You didn't even know that he's been doing that for the last two weeks? Silly kitties!" She laughed shrilly. "You think I'm stupid! I'm not going to tell you anything!"

As the cats expostulated with the ghost, Topper scratched an ear thoughtfully. Snagging his claws in Swift's collar, he muttered, "Let's go to the Owlrey. I've got an idea." No one noticed them leave.

Topper flew into one of the many open windows of the Owlrey and looked around. Sure enough, Hedwig was perched in her customary place near the door. The macaw noted that she looked thin and tired; Potter had been using her a lot lately. Well, that fit with what Myrtle said. He landed next to her.

"H'lo, Hedwig."

She looked at him appraisingly with glowing golden eyes. "H'lo, Topper."

"You've been working too hard," he said bluntly. "What's Potter doing? Writing to every member of Parliament?" Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Swift enter the room, locate them, and simply sit down to listen.

She clacked her beak at him. "Letters, letters, and more letters."

"That's hard, yes. Especially in bad weather."

"He hasn't fed or watered me, or given me any special attention in two weeks," she grumbled. "I'm having to eat out of the common feeders." The white owl extended a disgusted wing in the direction of the long troughs that ran along one wall of the room.

"That's not like him at all," Topper observed.

"No, but who's going to pay any heed to me? I'm an owl. It's my job to carry his mail."

"This has only been going on for two weeks, you said? Any idea what happened?"

"No, he won't talk to me any more either. He just suddenly started writing letters to all kinds of Muggles and sending them drafts from Gringotts."

"Muggles?"

"Muggles. Businesses, not people." She yawned. "Sorry, I am a bit tired."

Topper tilted his head to one side. "Are all these letters going to the same place?"

"Little town called Godric's Hollow on the other bloody side of the bloody island. I'd never been there before two weeks ago, and now I know it better than I know Hogwarts."

"One more question and then I'll leave. Did he send any letters today?"

Hedwig looked at him thoughtfully. "No. And frankly, I was glad of it." She yawned again, pointedly.

Topper nodded to the owl politely and flew out into the hallway, Swift following behind him. "Now what?" asked the big dog.

"Now, we go to Godric's Hollow and see what we can find out."

~*~

Hermione was beginning to get tired; once the initial adrenaline rush had faded, the waiting for something to happen was, well, boring. In the unlit windowless room, she had no way to mark the passage of time. Despite the situation, she found herself dozing off, each time waking up with a startled jerk.

Determined to stay awake and alert, she began reciting her lessons to herself. She'd mentally gotten halfway through Friday's Transfiguration class when she heard the sound of footsteps outside the door. She got to her feet, ready for she didn't know what, but determined to attempt to escape.

There was a scrape of metal on metal, and the door panel slid open. In the dark, Hermione didn't recognize the figure that entered. She didn't really care. Instead she launched herself across the room in an all-or-nothing tackle.

Her attack took the figure by surprise, and they crashed to the floor with her on top. Only then did she get a good look at the person. "Harry!"

In her surprise her grip slackened, and he was able to roll away from her and get to his feet. "Thank God you found me! I'm sorry I hit you; I thought you were a kidnapper!"

"It's fine, Hermione." He smiled a bit ruefully and helped her rise. "Everything's going to be all right."

"Come on then! We need to leave before they come back! They took my wand!"

He shook his head. "No, Hermione. We're not leaving. At least, you aren't."

"What?" She would've backed away except for his grip on her hands. "I don't understand!"

"You're obviously under some sort of spell or curse. So I've brought you here, and I'm going to keep you here until you're better again."

"Harry! I'm not cursed, and I'm not under any sort of spell!" Her eyes widened as the sense of what he'd said sunk in. "You're the one who kidnapped me! You!"

"I didn't kidnap you," he protested, tightening his grip on her as she tried to pull away. "I'm taking care of you because no one else will!"

"Let go of me!" She began to struggle in earnest. Unfortunately, Harry was stronger than she was. He pulled her across the room and threw her onto the mattress relatively gently. Before she could recover, he'd hit her with Petrificus Totalus.

"I'm sorry I have to do this, Hermione. But you'll understand when you're better. Really. Then we'll get married and we can put this behind us." He waved his wand again, and a tray appeared. "Here's some breakfast for you. I've got to go back to Hogwarts now, but I'll come back later." As he stepped through the door, he released the hex.

"Harry! I'll piss myself if you don't let me go to the loo at least!"

He didn't open the door again, but there was a clank and a thud, and a chamberpot appeared in a corner.

"Damn you, Harry!" she screamed, "Let me out of here!"

There was no answer but the sound of his footsteps fading.

~*~

An hour of cajoling, threatening, and expostulating later, Myrtle suddenly announced, "I'm tired. I'm leaving." With that, she vanished.

Crookshanks flattened his ears and faced the phoenix. "Fawkes, if you do not produce an intelligent plan of action within 30 seconds, I am going to find Potter and do what I need to do."

"Maybe Fawkes doesn't have an idea," Cassandra said, "but I do."

"What?"

"Trevor and I are small enough to get into the pipes. We can find it."

"We should probably start in her bathroom," Trevor agreed.

Erasmus shuddered. "Crawling around in slimy pipes? Ugh!"

"It's more productive than committing mayhem," Chang said slowly. "Crooks, if you are wrong about Potter, it will cause a lot of problems for all of us."

"Let us return there immediately," Fawkes suggested. "We can wait in the hallway while Trevor and Cassandra see what they can find."

Gambit looked around. "Where did Topper and Swift go?"

"No idea," Macavity said dismissively. "But we've enough on our plate without worrying about them. Come on!"

They dashed back to the school, and up to Myrtle's bathroom, halting once to let the huffing and puffing toads catch up, and once for Duster to distract his pet who was wandering the halls. Fortunately, when they got there, the ghost was nowhere to be seen. The toads hopped in and dove down the commodes, and then there was silence.

~*~

Familiars are possessed of considerably greater speed and endurance than their non-magical brethren. Still it took Topper and Swift several hours to make their way from Hogwarts to the small town of Godric's Hollow. The sun was well up when they halted in the woods nearby.

"So now what?"

"Reconnaissance, of course," Swift answered. "You fly around and see if you find anything. I'll run around and do the same. Meet back here in an hour."

"Hrrm, we'd better go invisible. Don't want the Muggles thinking you're a stray and I'm an escapee from a pet store."

"Right." The borzoi sneezed once and vanished. Topper clacked his beak and did the same. The two Familiars headed toward the houses below, Swift being careful not to bump into the few Muggles who were already out and about.

It didn't take them long to perform a cursory search of the town. It also didn't take either of them terribly long to find the traces of Apparation magic just in front of one house. Swift's lips pulled back from his teeth as the smells of fresh paint and sawdust and cement assailed his nostrils. He padded up to the front door and tried it. Locked. Not to be discouraged, he circled the house, trying every window he could reach, and keeping a wary eye out for any sign of habitation. The house was apparently empty. Finally, a tiny cellar level pane gave way under his shoves. It was far too small for him, but Topper could get in.

The macaw twisted himself under the pane, and secured a grip on the rough concrete walls with his claws. "I'll see if I can get one of the doors open for you," he said. "And make sure there's no humans around." He crab-walked down the wall to the floor and looked around.

He was in a small square room. There were some large white boxy things on the wall he'd descended, and a big white cylinder in the near corner. On the next wall was a stairwell leading up, with empty storage shelves on either side. The macaw nodded to himself in satisfaction and went up to the first floor of the house. It was a matter of moments for him to throw the deadbolt on the back door and let Swift inside.

"I smell Potter," the borzoi said. "I'm a sight-hound, and even I can smell him here."

"Good. Do you smell Crookshanks' pet at all?"

"No, but that doesn't mean anything. Let's look around."

"Did you notice?" Topper asked from the living room.

"What?" Swift was poking around in the kitchen.

"The house. Look at it."

Swift stared at the exterior walls of the house for a long moment. "Anti-Apparation wards, and Unplottable. Potter's doing."

The first floor of the house held no surprises, nor anything of interest. The second floor, though... There were only three rooms there one a perfectly boring bathroom. One of the other rooms was an ordinary bedroom. But in the third room, they were shocked to find one wall absolutely covered with pictures of Hermione.

"The cellar then," Topper said when they finished shaking their heads. They went down the stairs and stopped dead. Directly across from them was a locked sliding panel. "You don't think...?"

Swift loped over and examined the locks. "Deadbolts. Easy to open from this side." He twisted the bolts and then they jointly pulled the panel open.

~*~

Trevor emerged from the commode and flopped down on the moldy tile floor of Myrtle's bathroom, doing an excellent imitation of roadkill. "We found it," he panted. "Cass is trying to dislodge it now; it's wedged in there awfully good."

"What is it?" Duster asked. "Any idea?" He and Crookshanks were actually in the bathroom also. Most of the other Familiars were in the hall outside. Shadow was off looking for Topper and Swift.

"It's a whole mess of parchment all wadded up," Trevor replied. "I'm betting that a lot of the ink has run it's probably soaked through."

"Oh that's easily fixed," Gambit said.

"Once the toads get it out of there, that is," Chang added.

"Hssst!" Erasmus hissed. "Duster, your pet's out again! Just around the corner."

"Damn!" The black tomcat bolted down the hall to intercept Severus before he could see the gathering of Familiars. Just before he reached the intersection he slowed down and assumed a stalking pace as if he were hunting some unfortunate rodent.

"There you are, Duster." Severus picked up his straying cat. "You're out past curfew, Mr.. What do you have to say for yourself?"

"Mrrrrrrrrrrrow!" Duster shoved his head into his pet's neck and began purring.

"Well, if you put it that way..." The Potions Master began retracing his steps towards his quarters. "I'm pleased with the progress Miss Granger is making on that potion. We'll be ready to start the experimenting soon. The first stage, if successful, will let an Animagus speak to humans while transformed. That by itself will be useful." He negotiated a moving staircase and continued, "Once we complete that stage, we will work on modifying it to allow us to speak to and understand other animals as well. That's going to be much harder."

Severus carried his Familiar into his rooms and set him down on the floor. "I wouldn't admit this to anyone else, Duster, but I'm tired." He sat down on the sofa and took off his boots.

"Mrrrrrr?"

"Yes, I know it's late. Minerva traded hall patrol shifts with me. She wanted the early one this week." He moved into his bedroom and began pulling off his clothing, Duster following. "You wouldn't happen to know why nearly everyone at this school has suddenly decided to act like lovestruck adolescents, would you?" Severus had his robe half over his head when he said that, and completely missed Duster's stricken look. "Ah, never mind." He threw himself onto his bed. "Ever since that dance two weeks ago, the place has gone mad. Slytherins dating Gryffindors! The world may come to an end now!"

~*~

Hermione sat in stunned silence for a long time before finally rising and going over to the chamberpot, which relieved the increased nagging of her bladder. She considered throwing the now-full pot at Harry next time she saw him, but decided that would probably escalate into a confrontation she couldn't win.

"If I can actually overpower him and take his wand, I might be able to get out of here," she said to herself. "But I'll have to knock him out with the first shot I get. In the meantime..." She turned her attention to the tray. Scrambled eggs and ham. Wheat toast. Pumpkin juice. Her absolute favorite breakfast. A few careful sniffs failed to detect any tampering, and she decided to go ahead and eat.

While she ate, she let her mind chew on the problem of Harry. She couldn't really stay angry with him. Her long-time friend had obviously gone over the edge, and needed help. When she got out of her current situation, she'd make sure he was sent to St. Mungo's or wherever they treated mental issues in the wizarding world. That brought her back to attempting to escape. Now that she knew who her captor was, she considered the problem from other angles.

"If I pretend to go along with him," she mused, "he might let me out of this room. That would be an improvement. I need more information. I need to know where I am." She drummed her fingers on the tray. "But I can't appear to capitulate too fast, or he'll get suspicious. Maybe I should start by pretending to be asleep the next time he comes in. I don't think he wants to hurt me, so that should be safe." Decision made, she curled up on the mattress and yawned. "Perhaps I really should get some sleep before he comes back."

The scraping of metal on metal roused her some time later; she wasn't sure how long. She feigned sleep and waited to see what he'd do. Unfortunately, she'd turned so she was no longer facing the door. So she listened as hard as she could.

Instead of Harry's footsteps, she heard the sound of claws ticking on the floor, and then a low canine whine followed by a distinctly avian whistle. That was enough to cause her to abandon her plan, and she turned around and sat up. A large dog and a macaw regarded her from about halfway across the floor. It took only a second for her to recognize them as belonging to Professor Flitwick and Madame Pomfrey respectively.

"Well, hello there," she said. "How on earth did you find me, and... never mind that now!" She got to her feet. "Do you have any idea where my wand is?"

The dog a borzoi, she remembered whined and shook his head. Then he ran over to the door and looked back at her.

"Yes, you're right. Let's get out of here!"

She followed the dog out of the room, the macaw choosing to perch on her forearm. When she got into the cellar proper, she looked around half-hoping to find her wand nearby. Wandless magic wasn't her forte, but... "Accio wand!" She wasn't surprised when there was no response. "Wait a sec," she told the Familiars. She turned back to the panel and pulled it closed again, throwing the deadbolts. "That'll keep Harry from noticing anything right off."

Some part of her mind was still wondering how the Familiars had managed to locate her, and why these two in particular. But she was more interested in making good her escape. She followed the borzoi up the stairs and out the back door. Once it closed behind her, she looked at the dog again. "Now what? I can't Apparate without my

wand."

Swift looked up at Topper. This was an unforeseen complication. "We'll have to find some place on the Floo network. It's too far for her to walk."

"Right," agreed the macaw. "Let's get her out of sight in the woods and then I'll see if I can find any wizarding houses nearby."

It was relatively easy to get Hermione to follow them out of the village and into the woods. They settled her in a grove near a stream, and Topper took off flying in a looping spiral.

Hermione was a bit startled when the macaw suddenly flexed his wings without warning and rose into the air. "Where's he off to?" She wasn't really expecting an answer.

"Looking for a Floo connection." The voice was a deep and gravely bass.

Hermione yelped and looked around, but saw no one except Professor Flitwick's Familiar. "Did you say something?"

Swift made no reply. *Stupid, stupid, to have slipped like that! I haven't done that since I was a pup!*

She looked at the dog for a long moment. "I must've imagined it. Dogs can't talk. Not even wizard dogs. Anyway," she sighed, "I need to figure out where I am and then how to get back to Hogwarts. I can't just stay here." She rose and began making her way to the road. The big dog followed her closely, for which she was actually grateful.

It didn't take her long to find a signpost. "Godric's Hollow? Oh, Harry!"

Swift made a mental note that the place must've had some significance for the Potter human.

Hermione considered the situation. It was Saturday, so Harry's schedule would be unpredictable. In that case, it would be unwise to return to the house and search it for her wand. She did not want to run into him again. She also had no money of either wizard or Muggle variety.

Harry had mentioned once that Godric's Hollow was in southern England. She took another look at the sign, hoping for some inspiration. Finally she looked down at the dog. "Got any ideas?"

"Woof!"

The borzoi turned and began walking down the road, away from Godric's Hollow. With nothing better to do, Hermione followed him. At least it was putting some distance between herself and Harry.

~*~

By mid-morning Saturday, Fawkes found himself with a near-rebellion on his talons. Neither Crookshanks nor Duster were in any mood to "let Albus take care of it." Indeed, both tomcats were becoming increasingly bloody-minded, and that blood belonged to Harry Potter.

Also, he had no idea where Topper and Swift had gone. Shadow had been unable to find any trace of them. He wasn't concerned about them as much as the distress it would cause their pets. So far, the two Familiars hadn't been missed.

The phoenix was currently in his pet's office, doing his best to convince Albus to do something. The problem was that Albus' mind was fixed entirely on Gambit's pet to the exclusion of anything else. Fawkes was about to try a more direct approach, when there was a commotion outside and the office door burst open without warning.

Standing in the doorway were Professor Flitwick, Swift, Topper, and Hermione Granger.

Chapter Eight

Chapter 8 of 20

Chaos ensues when the Familiars at Hogwarts decide to play matchmaker.

Albus looked up in surprise at the unannounced invasion. "Ah, Filius, Miss Granger, what can I do for you?"

Filius Flitwick ushered Hermione into a chair and then shut the office door firmly before turning back to the Headmaster. "Albus, I couldn't find Swift this morning so I cast a Locating Charm. It told me he was in southeast England. I Apparated there and found him, along with Miss Granger and Poppy's Familiar. Miss Granger then told me a very disturbing story, and I believe you need to hear it."

Hermione took a long calming breath as the Headmaster turned his attention to her. "Sir, last night I was walking out by the Quidditch pitch and was hit by a Stupefy hex." She went on to detail waking up in the house, the meeting with Harry, and her subsequent escape with the Familiars. "I wasn't sure what to do, so I started following Swift." She rumbled the borzoi's ears. "We walked for a few miles, and then Professor Flitwick appeared."

The Headmaster looked very grave. "I think we must have Harry in and see what he has to say."

"He isn't entirely sane, Professor Dumbledore," Hermione said. "He may try to grab me and leave."

"Very well then. This is what we shall do. Filius, please stay here with Miss Granger while I locate Minerva and have her bring Harry to my office."

"Yes, Headmaster." The diminutive Charms professor had never looked more serious. As Albus left the office, he drew his wand and cast several quick spells. "Wards, Miss Granger," he replied to her inquiring glance. "To absorb the energy from hexes and curses." His tone shifted to lecture mode for a moment. "I dueled often in my youth, and I learned the value of proper preparation."

He was showing her the wand movements for one of the wards when Albus returned. "Minerva will be here shortly. Is there anyone else you would like here?"

Hermione gave that some thought. "Harry will almost certainly accuse Professor Snape of improper behavior," she said slowly. "And possibly Professor Malfoy as well."

"Have either Professor Snape or Professor Malfoy behaved wrongly toward you?" The question came from Professor Flitwick.

"No, sir!" Hermione was definite on the point.

"In that case, we should have them here to address any accusations." The Headmaster rose and went over to his fireplace. "Professor Malfoy's quarters! Ah, Lucius, would you please find Severus and both of you step this way?"

"Certainly, Headmaster." Lucius cut the connection and Albus returned to his desk.

"Miss Granger, perhaps it would be better for you to sit over there, so that Harry doesn't notice your presence immediately." He gestured to the corner behind the door.

Hermione nodded and changed her seat. Swift went over and sat beside her. His head was level with her own, and she got the impression he was making himself look larger than he was.

Filius nodded at the dog. "You've another champion there, Miss Granger. Swift will protect you also if need be." He moved to stand next to her chair on the other side.

A sharp knock on the door heralded the arrival of Professors Snape and Malfoy. Albus offered them lemon drops and asked them to please take seats. A black blur shot through the door and into Snape's lap where it turned into Duster. The tomcat planted his forefeet on Snape's chest and looked into his face for a moment before curling up on the chair beside him.

Hermione bit her tongue to keep from laughing. She'd never seen the Potions Master so discomfited.

Professor Malfoy snickered outright. "I've always wondered what they mean when they do that. Thunder's done it to me a few times."

The door opened again to admit Professor McGonagall. "Albus, I'm sorry for the delay. I've just been informed that Mr. Potter has had an accident. He's fallen down the stairs."

~*~

It's nice to be able to bring Trevor to breakfast now, Neville thought as he entered the Great Hall. His faithful toad had developed a taste for people-food, particularly scrambled eggs. Neville dished up a serving for himself, and another, smaller, serving for Trevor. Seating himself, he looked around. The room was virtually deserted; most of the students were having a lie-in.

"Mind if I sit here?"

Neville looked up at Millie who was carrying a large bag. "You... you want to sit with me? Why?" He gripped his wand, waiting for the other shoe to drop. Even though the fighting was over, he still found it hard to trust Slytherins.

With deliberate casualness, she sat down across from him keeping her hands in sight. "Because there's no one else here, and I hate eating alone. Macavity doesn't count as company."

"I'm finished." He made to get up, ignoring the fact that his plate was still more than half-full. Why is she here? What does she want?

Millie jerked her head at his plate. "On a diet? Listen, Neville I... I don't bite."

"What do you want then?"

"Company for breakfast. Talk, like at the dance. That's all."

He studied her for a moment, with the wary disbelief of a lamb asked to sit down with a lion. "Oh." Then he eased back down into his seat.

She returned his look for an equally long moment. "I can't make you like me, I suppose, but I hope you'll quit thinking that I'm out to get you. I'm not Malfoy, you know."

The contempt in her voice as she uttered the name suddenly made Neville feel better. "I'm not used to..."

"... to Slytherins being civil?"

"Well, yes."

Millie sighed. "I'm all too used to Gryffindors running away like I'm going to sacrifice them to some unknown god."

"Um.. oh."

The Slytherin helped herself to ham and eggs, not forgetting to fill a plate for Macavity as well. "That your toad?"

"Yes. His name's Trevor. He was a present from my Uncle Algie."

"Algernon Bleckwhittle? He and my Dad used to be business partners 'way back when."

"Really? I didn't know that."

"They split up - your uncle blamed my Dad for what happened to his sister."

"But your Dad didn't have anything to do with that!" Neville dropped his fork in surprise. It was the Lestranges who had tortured and killed his parents.

"I know, but you can't prove a negative." She shrugged. "Ancient history. Listen, you said you were good at Herbology, right? Do you know how to grow aconite?"

"I know the theory of course, but haven't ever tried it." Neville thought for a moment. "It likes a warmer climate than we have here."

"Ahh, that might be the issue. My Dad wants to hand over the family business to me after I leave school. It's a herbology supply farm three hundred hectares. I frankly stink in Herbology, so I'm looking for a knowledgeable partner. Interested?" She gave him an expectant smile.

"Your grades aren't that bad," Neville protested. "You seemed to always do fine."

"But you excel at Herbology. You understand it. I know how to memorize what's in the books, but you can make things grow."

"I'd like to give it a try if you're sure," Neville replied slowly. "I don't want to be an Auror."

"I don't blame you at all. Too much work." Millie thought a moment. "Wasn't that your grandmother's idea anyway?"

"Yes. I mean, it just seemed like the right thing to do and all." He trailed off.

"It's not the most important job in the world. Not any more. We our class should be focusing more on rebuilding and getting on with life now that You Know Who is gone."

"That sounds better than worrying about who the next Dark Lord is going to be." Neville shoved his empty plate away. "Want to go out to the greenhouses? We can look at

what Professor Sprout has on hand, and what she'll be likely to need."

"Ah, you're thinking ahead. I like that!" She scooped up Macavity and stuffed him back into the bag. The bag emitted a series of irritated noises, and the gingery tom stuck his head out of the top so he could see. Neville tucked Trevor into a pocket, and they left the Great Hall.

A shout and a scream drew their attention, and they turned around just in time to see Harry Potter tumbling down the marble stairs. He bounced twice and crashed to a stop in a bruised and bloody heap.

Neville went white, and would've fainted except for Millie's grip on his arm. "Go get ... someone!" she commanded. She gave him a gentle shove. "Neville, go!"

He nodded and ran off toward Professor McGonagall's office. Behind him, Millie knelt beside the motionless form. A snapped shoelace on his left foot was a potential clue. Perhaps he'd stepped on it and tripped. She shook her head ruefully and hoped Neville would be able to find one of the teachers quickly. Neither noticed the satisfied smile on Macavity's face as he poked his head out of the bag.

~*~

A harried-looking Madame Pomfrey chased everyone out of the infirmary so she could "work on the poor boy" in peace. Even Albus was banished to the corridor outside, where the fading scent of "eau de skunque" kept them company.

"We shall reconvene when Mr Potter is less indisposed," the Headmaster said after a few minutes. "There's no reason for us all to wait here." He made shooing motions. "Minerva, please escort Miss Granger back to her dorm."

"Wait, Headmaster!" Hermione interrupted. "I don't want to be there. Not alone."

Albus raised his eyebrows. "Mr Potter is incapable of harming you now."

"I know that, sir. It's that I need something to do." She twisted her hands together. "I can't just sit in my room."

"Perhaps Miss Granger would prefer to work on her research project," Flitwick suggested. "That would keep her out of trouble."

Hermione brightened. "Could I, Professor Snape?"

Snape scowled thoughtfully. "I need to speak with Miss Bulstrode and see if she can shed any light on Mr Potter's accident."

"I can do that for you, Severus," Lucius said. "And I can also speak with Mr Longbottom, if Professor McGonagall wishes to remain in the vicinity of the infirmary. Go take your protégée off to your lab and continue your research."

The Potions Master shot him a rather dirty look. "If you insist, Lucius. Miss Granger, I assume you will need to retrieve your books and notes from your room?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then I shall escort you to Gryffindor Tower, and thence to our lab. Please do not dawdle."

Hermione opened her mouth to retort that she never dawdled, and thought better of it. "Yes, sir." She turned on her heel and strode off toward Gryffindor Tower. Snape looked after her for a moment in surprise, and then followed.

"Perhaps I should speak with Mr Longbottom, Lucius," Flitwick said, looking after the departed pair. "He might find me a little less threatening."

"Longbottom must learn to face that which he dreads," the DADA teacher replied. "I shan't bite him. Voldemort may be gone, but there is no guarantee that another would-be-king won't emerge." Filius looked dubious, but made no further objections as Lucius went down the staircase and approached the shaken pair of students.

They must've heard the clicking of his bootheels on the marble staircase, because they looked up as he came near them. Longbottom turned even paler, if that was possible. Lucius sighed mentally and put on his most charming and affable expression. "Mr Longbottom, Miss Bulstrode I realize you've had quite an unpleasant shock, but I need to ask you a few questions. Would you please accompany me?"

Instead of taking them to his office, he led them back into the Great Hall and summoned tea for the three of them. "I find that a cup of tea is often soothing."

Longbottom stared at him, and finally reached for his teacup. "I didn't see much, Professor M-m-malfoy. I heard Harry scream, and I turned around and saw him fall." He swallowed hard. "Then Millie told me to get a teacher, so I ran and found Professor McGonagall." He set the cup down with shaking hands. "She told me to come back here and wait."

"That she did," Lucius said, putting strong approval into his tone. "You did exactly the right thing. Miss Bulstrode, what did you see or hear?"

"The same as Neville, sir. We were on our way outside, so our back was to the staircase. We heard a scream I didn't recognize the voice turned around, and I saw Mr Potter falling down the stairs." She took a sip of tea, the trembling in her hands belying her matter-of-fact tone. "While Neville was looking for Professor McGonagall, I noticed that one of Mr Potter's shoelaces was snapped off, as if he'd stepped on it."

"It wasn't just a scream we heard," Neville said slowly. "There was another shout I don't know who right before Harry screamed."

"That's right!" Millie said. "I heard it, but I didn't recognize the voice either."

"A shout? What did it say?"

"It was more of a noise type of shout a 'hey!' rather than words," Neville answered after a moment's thought.

Lucius rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "I expect that there will be some sort of formal inquiry into this business in the near future. You may discuss it between yourselves, or with any of the staff, but not with anyone else. Is that clear?"

"Certainly, sir."

"Yes, sir."

"Go then," he gave them his most charming smile. "You said you were on your way outdoors. I'm sure you had plans. We shall find you if we need you."

~*~

"How on earth did Harry come to fall down the stairs," Hermione wondered aloud.

"He probably annoyed one of the castle ghosts." Snape replied, without looking up from the cauldron he was stirring. "Forty-nine. Fifty. Good." He moved the cauldron onto the waiting fire and crossed over to the sink to wash the spoon.

"One of the ghosts? Really?" She'd paused in her task of paring the mugwort roots. "It must've been the Baron. I don't think it's possible to annoy the Friar, and I hardly

ever see the Grey Lady. And Nick he wouldn't push anyone from Gryffindor down the stairs, especially not Harry, even if he deserved it."

"The roots aren't going to pare themselves," Snape pointed out as he sat back down at his desk. "What did Mr Potter do to deserve being pushed down the stairs?"

"Besides kidnapping me, you mean?" She reached for another root and began paring it with savage, economical motions. "He took my wand too. And he wasn't going to let me go. He thought it was me who's off my head." She looked up to see her professor regarding her with a thoughtful expression. "Sir?"

"Potter kidnapped you?" Snape's voice wasn't the roar she'd expected. Instead it was soft and venomous, like the hiss of a giant snake. "Is that what that meeting was about?"

"Er, yes, sir." She bent her head over her work so she didn't have to look at him and tried to swallow the lump that had suddenly risen in her throat. She heard him rise, heard his footsteps cross the room to the bench where she was sitting. Then one of his hands closed over hers, taking the paring knife and setting it gently on the table.

"Tell me." His voice was still soft, but the venom was gone.

"I feel stupid," she said slowly. "Like it was my fault. I knew he was angry about my dancing with you at the Halloween Ball, but I thought he'd got over it. I was walking out by the Quidditch Pitch, and he hit me from behind with a Stupefy hex." She shuddered at the memory. "I woke up in a house..." she detailed the encounter with Harry and her subsequent escape. "It just strikes me as too convenient that he fell down the stairs. Does that make sense?"

"Of a sort, yes." He put a hand under her chin and lifted it so she met his eyes. "It is not your fault that Mr Potter has become dangerously obsessed with you. Nor is it your fault that you did not recognize the signs. You have not had training in such matters, true?"

Her doubts fled in the face of his certainty. "True, sir." Then, "what do you think will happen to Harry?"

Snape folded his arms across his chest. "That will depend on you, Miss Granger. Should you press formal charges, Potter will almost certainly be involuntarily committed to St. Mungo's for some time. If you choose not to, then it will be up to the Headmaster."

"I need to press charges," she replied slowly. "If I don't, he'll probably try again."

"Almost certainly," Snape agreed.

"So why do I feel like such a bitch for pressing charges?"

"Because he was your friend for several years, and you think you're betraying him the more so because he cannot defend himself at the moment."

She gaped for a moment, and then her eyes narrowed. "How do you know what I'm thinking? Are you using Legilimency on me?"

He snorted derisively. "Hardly. Use that fine brain of yours for a moment. Spies must be astute students of human nature. That is how we learn to be what we are not."

"I don't believe you...sir."

"Two points... to Gryffindor, Miss Granger. One for having the courage to speak your mind, and one for recognizing what I was doing."

She opened her mouth and shut it again, obviously thinking hard. "You want me to press charges against Harry."

"Yes."

The flat affirmative fell on her ears like stone. "Why?"

"Why do you think?"

Hermione considered this for some time, as she pared the mugwort roots. Finally she looked up again. "It's not just because you don't like him. You wouldn't be that petty. You want him committed because he's dangerous."

"Yes. The Headmaster's only recourse would be to expel him from school. This wouldn't necessarily prevent him from attempting to kidnap you again."

"An experience I'd as soon not repeat," Hermione muttered as she set the last of the pared roots aside and carefully measured a tenth of an ounce of beeswax into a clean bowl. "I can't find it in me to be mad at him any more, but that's not going to stop me from doing the right thing." She added three drops of liquidized rat and set it aside. "That needs to sit for two hours."

"Yes, and you have an errand to do in the meantime."

Her brow furrowed. "I don't recollect any errands."

"Do you wish to attempt to attend a week's worth of classes with no wand? I'm sure Professor Flitwick would find it amusing for you to cast NEWT level Charms without one."

That brought her head up with a jerk. "There aren't any wand shops in Hogsmeade, and I don't have permission to go to Diagon Alley."

He let out a long-suffering sigh. "Must you be so dense? I shall escort you to Ollivander's and back."

"Oh." Hermione rose and went over to the sink to clean the knife. "I'll need to go by Gringott's first."

"Very well." He opened the door for her as they left the lab, an old-fashioned courtesy that pleased her at some level. "We shall Apparate to Diagon Alley, perform our errands, and return to Hogwarts."

"Yes, sir." She grinned inwardly. "No dawdling."

As they reached the front gates, Duster appeared out of nowhere and began winding around their ankles, effectively bringing their progress to a halt. Snape reached down and rubbed his ears, but the cat refused to be placated.

"I think he wants to come with us."

"I think he's trying to cadge a second lunch," Snape returned without rancor. He settled the cat on his shoulder. "I'll feed you when we return, miscreant."

They Apparated into Diagon Alley, near Ollivander's. Hermione took a moment to get her bearings, and headed toward the white marble bank at the end of the street, Snape following her silently. The presence of the Potions Master seemed to have an electrifying effect on the goblins of Gringott's, for they fairly rushed to summon a cart for her.

They rode down to her vault, Hermione too busy concentrating on quieting her stomach to make conversation. When the cart clattered to a stop, she had to take a few deep breaths before she could get out. Snape raised an eyebrow but said nothing. She opened the door and looked inside. The monthly stipend from her parents had added up over the years. She counted out twenty galleons and closed the vault again.

"I hate these carts," she said to Snape as she climbed in again. The cart took off with a jerk, effectively ending the conversation. By the time they reached the main floor again, her head was pounding and she was completely miserable. She leaned against the wall, and closed her eyes.

"Miss Granger?" Snape looked at her closely. A fine sheen of sweat covered her face, and she was much paler than she should be.

She grimaced as she battled against the waves of nausea that were sweeping over her. "Sorry, sir. It's the carts."

"Motion sickness?" He felt some sympathy for her; only as an adult had he outgrown the overwhelming urge to throw up when he rode the Gringotts' carts. "Here, sit down for a moment." He transfigured a chair for her and settled her into it competently. Duster transferred himself to her lap and began purring.

Her stomach calmed after a few minutes, and she took a long breath and looked up. "I'm sorry, Professor. It's never been that bad before."

"Usually motion-sickness goes away with age..." he thought for a moment, "unless... you've never ridden those infernal contraptions soon after Apparating."

She rose, taking Duster in her arms. "You're probably right. I usually take the Floo." Without any warning, the cat twisted in her grasp and lunged away. Hermione flailed wildly for a moment to keep her balance, and stumbled into Snape. Only his quick reflexes kept her on her feet. They both froze at the contact, his hands still on her arms, her hands on his chest.

The Potions Master reacted first, releasing her and taking a step backwards. Hermione dropped her hands and took a long shuddering breath. By mutual accord, they turned and slowly left Gringott's and made their way back to Ollivander's.

The wand-maker's shop hadn't changed at all over the years; even the old dusty chair was still the same. Mr Ollivander, his strange silvery eyes just slightly faded now, expressed his condolences for her loss and was more than happy to sell Hermione a new wand. Finding the right wand was as quick and easy as it had been six years previously.

She flourished the sixteen inch piece of vine-wood, with its dragon heartstring core proudly. "It's marvelous, sir. It feels better than my old one!"

"Interesting," the wand-maker intoned. "I remember every wand I've ever sold, as you know. This one is one and one-half inches longer than your previous wand. Has anything changed in your life recently?"

Snape snorted. "Plenty, Aristabulus. Now, are we quite finished? I have one or two more stops to make."

He sighed as the door closed behind them. "Never let him get started, Miss Granger. He will talk your ear off."

"Where are we going now?"

"Flourish and Blotts. They have finally procured a copy of Phials of Mystery: The Potions of Atlantis for me."

Hermione looked up. "There's only supposed to be half a dozen copies of that in existence! Could I...read it sometime?"

"Indeed you may, Miss Granger. There is an entire section devoted to Animagi."

~*~

It wasn't until after dinner that Madame Pomfrey pronounced Harry fit to be questioned. Hermione retraced her way to the Infirmary with a sinking feeling in her stomach, all her doubts spinning through her mind again. When she reached the Hospital Wing, she saw everyone waiting for her.

"We thought it best to enter en masse," Professor McGonagall said. "That way we can all hear everything." The Transfiguration professor studied her prize student. "Hermione, are you up to this?"

"I need to be, Professor." She erased the quaver in her voice by sheer force of will. "This has to be done." Out of the corner of her left eye, she caught Snape's approving nod. For some reason, that made her feel much more confident. "I'm fine," she repeated.

"Then let us go in to Mr Potter," Albus said.

They entered the Infirmary, the Headmaster leading the way. Harry was propped up in his bed, looking a little miffed. He almost smiled when he saw Dumbledore, but his expression faded to a scowl as he caught sight of Professors Malfoy and Snape.

"Hello, Harry." Dumbledore sat down beside the bed. "You've had quite a day."

"What are they doing here?" Harry lifted a bandaged hand in the direction of the two Slytherins. "I don't want to see them."

"Rest assured, Mr. Potter, that I would rather not look upon you either," Snape almost purred. "I am here solely at the behest of the Headmaster."

"Harry, did you Stupefy Miss Granger last night?"

The young man gave the Headmaster a sidelong glance. "No."

Hermione couldn't stand it any longer, and pushed her way to the bed. "You liar! You did Stupefy me, and you locked me up in a house in Godric's Hollow!"

"Hermione! What... How'd you..." Harry ground to a stop and stared. Surprise flitted over his face for a moment. He turned to the Headmaster. "Headmaster, Hermione is either ill or under some sort of curse. She's been acting very oddly for most of this term."

"I see," Albus said seriously. "Please go on."

"It's Snape's doing ever since he convinced her to do that research project, she's been spending all her time alone with him. She doesn't even need to do that project to finish school! I told her this, but she wouldn't listen to me. She never listens to me any more." Harry's voice became nervous and panicky. "Please, Professor, you've got to believe me. Snape's done something awful to Hermione!"

Only Minerva's firm grip on Snape's wand arm prevented the Potions Master from exploding during this soliloquy. Albus shot them a warning look and turned back to the bed. "Why didn't you tell me this earlier, Harry?"

"I didn't think you'd believe me," he whispered. "You've stuck up for Snape every time I've tried to tell you what a bastard he really is. Him and Malfoy both. It's Malfoy's fault that Ron's dead! He's the one who should've sacrificed himself!" Harry pulled himself together with an effort. "She wasn't going to get better as long as she was around Snape and Malfoy. I had to do something! I had to get her away from here!"

"I see." Behind the Headmaster, Flitwick quietly began casting wards.

"I wasn't going to hurt her. I was just going to keep her safe until I could break the curse. Then we'd get married and put it all behind us." He grinned up at Dumbledore. "Now you can send her to St. Mungo's and she'll get help and once the curse is broken, everything will be all right again."

"Harry, did you cast a Stupefy hex on Miss Granger?"

"Well, yes I needed to take her someplace safe." He looked pleadingly at the Headmaster. "You understand, don't you? I bought my parents' old house in Godric's Hollow and had it all fixed up for her. She told me she didn't want to live at Grimmauld Place, so I thought this would be a nice surprise for her."

"So you Stupefied her and took her to Godric's Hollow. Then what?"

"I put her in a room in the basement and took her wand away from her. Then I came back to Hogwarts. I didn't think anyone would miss her till Monday." The last was said a bit petulantly. "I snapped her wand just in case. The next morning, I brought her a good breakfast, and told her what I was doing and why. She's all I have left; I have to take care of her!"

Albus shook his head sadly. "Harry, Hermione isn't under any sort of curse, and she's not sick."

"She's got to be! She would've agreed to marry me otherwise!" Harry looked around frantically. "Professor McGonagall, you know Hermione! Don't you think she's been acting oddly this term?"

"She's been acting like any other normal Seventh Year student, Mr Potter. She's very focused on her studies, and her schoolwork has always been important to her."

"You're in it too! You all are!" He tried to rise only to be held down by the mediwitch. "Hermione! I'm the only one you can trust! They're going to hurt you! Aaaaugh!" He collapsed as Poppy Pomfrey's quietly spoken Somnulus spell took effect.

"I think we've all heard enough, Albus," Lucius said slowly.

"Yes, I'm afraid we have." The Headmaster turned to Hermione. "What do you want to do about Mr Potter?"

The moment of truth. Hermione took a long breath. "Sir, he kidnapped me and stole my wand. He is obviously in need of help. I will do whatever needs to be done to make sure he gets that help."

"I thought you would do as much. There is an Auror in my office waiting to take your statement. Once that is done, he will take Mr Potter into custody and deliver him to St. Mungo's." He gave her a sad smile. "I have a few things to attend to, and I'm sure everyone else does also. The password is 'chocolate frog'."

She nodded and left the Infirmary, slowly making her way to the Headmaster's office. "I hate it when the Headmaster does that," she muttered to herself. "It's like he's reading my mind."

"As much as I respect Albus, I have to agree with you," said a voice from behind her.

She spun about, her wand out and a hex on her lips, relaxing as she identified Professor Snape. "Sorry, sir."

"I would prefer you to err on the side of caution, Miss Granger."

"I thought that 'Constant Vigilance!' was over now," she replied glumly. "I suppose not."

"Not ever. Not if you wish to live out your allotted span of days." With that cheerful statement, he turned and vanished in the direction of the dungeons.

While Hermione gave her statement to a grizzled Auror in Dumbledore's office, Snape entered his quarters feeling more and more elated. Potter would be out of his hair for some time. In a celebratory mood, he ordered a sumptuous dinner from the kitchen. "Yes, Duster, this has been a good day."

Chapter Nine

Chapter 9 of 20

Chaos ensues when the Familiars at Hogwarts decide to play matchmaker.

Snape's good mood continued for the next two weeks or so, especially as he and Hermione completed the first stage of their project and brewed a vial of a gelatinous yellow mass. If their calculations were correct, it would allow an Animagus to speak with humans while transformed.

"If you won't let me test it, and you won't test it on yourself, how will we ever know if it works?" Hermione asked.

"It will work," Snape replied waspishly. "We have checked and double-checked everything."

"But you can't know it will work." Her eyes fell on the copy of *Double, Double* that was lying on his desk. "How did you test the Animagus potion when you created it?"

"I tested it on myself, Miss Granger, and nearly died as a result of being careless with the ingredients." Snape fixed her with a forbidding scowl. "I have a meeting with the Headmaster this evening. Once you've cleaned up here, you may go." He turned and swept out of the dungeon, his black cloak swirling behind him.

Hermione looked after him, and then back at the potion. With a sigh, she rose and took the cauldron she'd been using over to the sink. "Scrubbing cauldrons I thought I wasn't in detention any more." The stuff they'd created was rather sticky and resisted scrubbing like nothing she'd ever seen before. Half an hour later though, the cauldron was clean and she turned her attention to the other tools they'd used. These were much easier to clean.

Ten minutes after that, Hermione finished wiping down the counter-tops where they'd prepared ingredients. A last look around the classroom confirmed that it was clean. The only thing out of place was the vial sitting on Snape's desk. She picked it up and took it to the supply closet to store it, and then paused.

"It's not going to hurt anything. He won't even know." Firmly ignoring the all-too-clear picture of what Snape would do if he found out, she took the vial back to the sink and scooped out a spoonful and gave it a careful sniff. "Phew! Maybe I should add something to make it smell better." She swallowed the yellowish gelatin quickly. "Yuck!"

Hermione drank a glass of water as a chaser, washed the spoon and put the rest of the potion away in the supply closet. "There. Now..." She thought for a few minutes. "Room of Requirement?" She shuddered at the memories of being trapped in her Animagus form. "No. Somewhere else." Hermione drummed her fingers on Snape's desk. "Damn. I need someone to try to talk to as an Animagus, but I don't want anyone to know about me being one. Professor McGonagall would be sure to say something to Professor Snape." A lightbulb went off over her head. "I know! Professor Malfoy! He can keep a secret."

~*~

Argus Filch made his way through the halls of Hogwarts more nervously than was his custom. Funny how they seemed emptier than usual. His footsteps echoed hollowly, heralding his approach to a door he'd passed a hundred, a thousand times before. He knocked on the door to Ivy Sprout's personal quarters, half-defiantly, half-timidly. It opened quickly.

"Argus? What's the matter?"

"Have yeh seen Mrs. Norris 'round anywhere? I ain't seen her since breakfast." Filch twisted his hat in one hand nervously.

Ivy drew the gaunt caretaker into her sitting room. "Sit." She pushed him into a chair and poured him a cup of the bitter tea they both favored. "I haven't seen much of Hephaestus today either."

"Can yeh find 'em? Like as not, they're together."

That was probably true; Ivy thought it wonderful that their cats got along so well. Hephaestus was quite fussy about allowing other Familiars in "his" quarters, but he had no problem with Filch's scrawny, shabby cat. "I'm no good at Charms, but I've got something that might lure them out of wherever they're hiding." She drained her teacup and set it down, then crossed over to her desk and took out a small sealed canister.

"What's that?"

"Concentrated catnip. If I open it, we'll have every cat in the castle here within ten minutes."

"There's worse fates than that." Argus cracked a half-smile. "I like cats."

"Right then." She opened the canister and took out a small handful of the crushed herb within. As she opened her hand and let the herb spill into the hallway outside her door, a subtle minty aroma rose around them. Argus sniffed appreciatively.

"Smells good, that does. Kinda comfortin'."

"If you make tea with it, it's very good for colds and sore throats." She took a deep sniff herself. "I like it." Then she carefully sealed the tin again.

A moment later, they saw Hooch's black and white cat slink around a corner and come into the hallway. He was followed by the brindled Manx that belonged to Lucius Malfoy. Within five minutes, there were nearly a dozen cats in the doorway, rubbing against the woodwork and their legs, purring madly. But neither scruffy tabby nor grey Persian appeared. The two humans exchanged looks of consternation.

Human footsteps sounded in the hallway, and they saw Minerva coming their direction, sniffing appreciatively. As she neared them, her form rippled and roiled, and she took her feline shape, rubbing against the doorframe like any other cat.

"There's Hephaestus!" Filch said suddenly.

Sure enough, the Persian was strolling all-too-casually down the hall. Ivy scooped him up and regarded him with a serious expression. "Hephaestus, where's Mrs. Norris?"

"Miaow!" The Persian swatted gently at her face with a furry grey paw.

"Now, now. None of that. We're just worried about her."

"Ffft!" The cat ceased his struggles and began purring madly.

"You know where she is, Furball. I know you do."

"Miaow?"

Ivy scratched him under the chin. "Show us where she is, Hephaestus. We won't hurt her." She set him down on the floor, and he strode down the hallway with a businesslike air, ignoring the catnip. Ivy carefully closed her door, and she and Argus started after him, the caretaker seizing a lantern from a bracket as they walked.

The grey cat led them down three hallways, up two flights of stairs, and finally into an unused classroom on the back third-floor corridor. Argus held his lantern high and they looked around.

"Don't see anything."

"Wait, over in that corner!"

There was an old box in the corner that had once held who-knew-what. Ivy's sharp eyes had seen Hephaestus' tail disappearing into it. The two humans approached carefully, ready for anything. They looked into the box and turned to each other with grins.

"Kittens!"

~*~

Contrary to almost everyone's expectations, Lucius hadn't put his office or his living quarters in the dungeons. His office was conveniently down the hall from the DADA classroom on the third floor, and his rooms were just as conveniently located on the second floor hallway, overlooking the lake. They weren't nearly as opulent as Malfoy Manor had been, but then, few things were.

Lucius stepped out onto his balcony, his hands automatically going up to secure his hair to keep it from flying every-which-way. He looked out over the lake, toward the Quidditch pitch. Even in the half-light of the setting sun, he could see the flyers there: Hufflepuff practicing with an intensity he almost envied. They were making a surprising eleventh-hour run for the Quidditch Cup this year, having trounced both Ravenclaw and Gryffindor soundly. Next week they would be playing Slytherin, the last game before the Yule break. He was pretty sure it would be a close game, but his money was still on his old House.

As he watched, the fliers dropped out of the sky. A moment or two later, they reappeared on foot, brooms over their shoulders, headed toward the locker rooms. Xia Hooch trailed behind them, chivvying along the laggards. He'd recognize her anywhere now. She was so different from Narcissa vibrant, earthy, and alive.

Narcissa. His mouth quirked in a snarl of sorts. She had been beautiful, intelligent, cultured and cold as the snow. She'd never refused his advances, but never enjoyed them either. Nor had she made any secret of her dislike for sex. It was "messy". After Draco was born, she'd made it clear that her duty to him was completed. He'd taken to visiting brothels discreetly. It was better than dealing with the look Narcissa would give him if he knocked on her door. Horrid as it was to acknowledge, he was not sorry she was dead.

Now it seemed that the Fates were dealing him a more interesting hand. He'd asked Xia to dine with him tonight after the Hufflepuff practice. He stepped back inside and took a careful look around his rooms, making sure that everything was relatively neat and picked up. At the brisk tattoo on the door, he smiled. Throwing it open, he swept Xia into a hug.

A hug she returned with interest, he noted with some part of his mind. Then they were locked together in what was the most mind-blowingly passionate kiss he'd ever experienced. Even their previous love-making paled beside the here and now.

A gasp brought both teachers back to their senses, and they broke apart to see Hermione Granger standing in the corridor. She was quite, quite red obviously embarrassed to have caught them in such a compromising situation.

"Miss Granger." Lucius was not going to pretend that nothing had happened. Instead he drew Xia closer to him, his arm around her waist. She leaned against him and regarded the blushing student with her glowing hawk-like eyes.

"I, er..." Hermione took a long breath and started over. "I was going to ask you for some help with my research project, sir. I'm sorry I... you're busy." She fled in the face of the obvious sexual connection between the two instructors. Behind her, the adults traded very similar smirks.

She didn't stop running until she reached Gryffindor tower. Bursting through the Common Room, she dashed up to her room and slammed the door, startling half a dozen younger students who were quite unused to seeing the Head Girl in such a state. The racket caused Crookshanks to yowl in fright and fluff his fur up till he looked three times his normal size. He'd been having a pleasant catnip-induced dream.

Once in her room, she collapsed onto her bed and scooped up her Familiar. "Oh Crooks I've never been so embarrassed in my life! Professor Malfoy and Madame Hooch! I walked in on them!" She hugged the cat. "They were kissing and it was more than just a friendly kiss. I never... never thought about teachers acting like that."

Crookshanks purred furiously until his pet's breathing calmed slightly.

"It's weird, Crooks. It reminds me of when I tripped at Gringott's and Professor Snape kept me from falling. It makes me feel ... I don't know. Kind of warm all over." She ruffled his fur and scratched him under the chin for a few minutes. "It's like when I was going out with Seamus, only more so." Her mouth quirked. "Just touching Professor Snape was intense. I wonder what kissing him would be like?" She stopped short. "Did I just say that? Out loud?"

~*~

Snape strode into the Staff Room and took his customary seat at one end of the long table. Minerva looked up when he entered.

"Good evening, Severus."

"Good evening, Minerva." He steepled his hands on the table in front of him. "Might I ask what this meeting is about?"

"Let's wait for the others." She paused for a long moment. "I went to see Harry today."

"Harry? Oh, Mr. Potter."

"He's doing a little better. He's not threatening to kill you any more." Her lips quirked in a half-smile.

"For which grace, many thanks I'm sure," Snape said dryly. "Hello Filius," he added as Professor Flitwick bounced into the room.

"Good evening Severus, Minerva." Filius looked around. "Is the Headmaster joining us this evening?"

"He said this was the business of the Houses, and he thought it best not to be involved." Minerva's clipped tones made it very clear that she disapproved of Albus' absence.

Professor Sprout rushed into the room. "Terribly sorry, Minerva. I've had to do some rearranging of my quarters." She plopped into a chair. "Now, what is this all about?"

The Head of Gryffindor House took a long breath and thought longingly of the catnip outside Professor Sprout's door. "I went to see Mr. Potter today. Although he is improving, he is not likely to be released for some time."

"Poor boy," Filius said. "But what does that have to do with us?"

"Harry's commitment to St. Mungo's leaves Gryffindor without a Seeker. As it's nearly the end of the term, it would place an undue burden on my House to train a new one. I wish to cancel all remaining Gryffindor games for this year."

"Forfeits?" Snape asked, his eyes alight with devilish glee.

"Of course not! The games will simply be cancelled."

"I'd have to vote against that," Filius said slowly. "To be perfectly fair, we would have to throw out all Gryffindor games for the year. That would upset the current House Points totals dramatically."

"I'm not asking for something that extreme."

"No, you're just asking for special treatment for Potter."

"We've all lost players at one time or another, Minerva," Ivy said, "and we've never cancelled games."

"We have only forfeited games when there was clear evidence of cheating," Filius continued. "I dislike the precedent this would set. Besides," his eyes flickered toward Snape for a moment, "Slytherin House has lost much more than Gryffindor. You saw the casualty list, Minerva forty-two deaths."

In the face of this united opposition, Minerva withdrew her request. Grumbling under her breath, she stalked off in the direction of Gryffindor Tower. Snape cocked an eyebrow after her, and headed for the dungeons.

The Potions Master entered his lab and noted that Miss Granger had done her usual thorough job of cleaning up. Pleased, he locked and warded the door and returned to his quarters. Despite the relatively early hour, he decided to turn in. He undressed and climbed into bed. Duster jumped up beside him and began purring loudly. The lullaby of the cat's purr sent him off to dreamland in short order.

It was a bright summer day, and he was standing in a strangely familiar garden. Off in the distance, the lapping of water over stone heralded the presence of a nearby brook. Sunlight poured over him, warming him to his bones. He heard footsteps behind him, and turned to greet his wife.

She came to him and clasped him in a hug, pressing herself against him. He held her close, her long brown curly hair tumbling over his hands. He bent slightly and kissed her, feeling his passion for her grow. With one accord they moved toward the garden bench, their hands roaming freely over each other.

"Hermione..." he groaned with pleasure at her touch. His hands slid up over her breasts, enjoying reveling in the way the nipples hardened. Their clothing was soon discarded, and he caught his breath anew at the sight of her nude form. She was no classic beauty, but she was his heart, his soul, and all he ever could desire.

They joined together on the sun-dappled bench, reaffirming their love and passion for the thousandth time.

Snape woke up with a jolt, the remains of his excitement evident on the sheets beneath him. "Damn and blast it! She's a student! A student!" He banished the bedclothes to the laundry hamper with a muttered Charm, and summoned new ones. "She's just a child!" He settled back in bed. Images of the dream sprang up anew, refusing to be banished. "She's an obnoxious little know-it-all; even if she wasn't a student. It would never work!" He stopped, aghast at the direction his thoughts were taking. "I can't believe I'd even consider courting a Gryffindor!"

Duster curled up next to him again and purred in satisfaction. He was pleased with his pet's response to the dream-sending. Crookshanks would be providing Hermione with a similarly interesting night.

~*~

Talking to Crookshanks had given Hermione an idea. "I'm surprised I didn't think of this earlier," she told the gingery tom. "I can just listen to myself talk! I don't need anyone else." She dumped the cat on the bed and moved to stand next to it. A moment later, she transformed, automatically shaking her head to flick her forelock out of her eyes.

"My name is Hermione Granger." She went through the mental process of vocalizing the words, but the only sounds that emerged were a sort of shuddering nicker. Disappointed, she tried again, with the same results. The potion was a failure. She resumed her natural form with a sigh. "Crookshanks, how am I going to tell Professor Snape?"

She sat down on the bed and picked up her Familiar. "I guess I'll keep my mouth shut until after Yule. Maybe by then I can figure out what to say." A glance at the calendar told her there was only a week left until the Yule break. "And maybe I can also figure out what went wrong." Decision made, she curled up under the blankets. "G'night Crooks."

She was in their bedroom a small comfortably appointed room, decorated in soft shades of blue with ivory accents. The house elves were not allowed in their quarters. Hermione shook out the heavy comforter and was about to pull it smooth when his footsteps sounded in their living room.

"Severus!" She ran to him, wrapping her arms around him in an enthusiastic hug. Perhaps it was silly after years of marriage to greet him like that, but he enjoyed it. In fact, he aided and abetted it. She pulled his head down to hers. "I'm glad you're home."

"Home early," he pointed out, sweeping her off her feet and carrying her back into the bedroom. "We've two hours until dinner. What do you suggest we do to pass the time?"

She mock-growled and bit his neck gently. "I'm sure you can think of something."

Her husband grinned down at her. "I could..." he transferred her to the bed and sat down beside her. "... do this..." One long fingered hand trailed up and down her side, a soft stroking motion that made her want to purr. She pulled him down next to her. His heavy black hair fell over his face, tickling her nose, and she brushed it away.

"Love you, Severus."

"Love you too, Hermione." His lips met hers in a long kiss that kindled their passions.

Hermione sat bolt upright in shock, startling Crookshanks, her heart pounding, and breathing hard. Her hands trembled as she gathered the furry cat onto her lap. "Oh Crookshanks! I've never had such a wonderful dream! Wonderful and terrifying all at the same time!" She rubbed his ears thoughtfully. "Seamus ... I thought he was a wonderful kisser, but he was never like this!"

~*~

Snape entered his 7th year Potions class on Monday with a sense of dread. His dreams hadn't abated one whit. Indeed, they'd increased in detail and intensity every time he closed his eyes over the weekend. Gratifying himself had brought no relief. Never one to lie to himself, he admitted very privately that it would be nice to have a romantic liaison with an intelligent woman. But not a child, and never, ever, a student! Perhaps if she were ten years older...

He did not want to face Hermione. He'd even spent part of Sunday dreaming up reasons to cancel class. But nothing he thought of would've passed muster with the Headmaster. "It's only a week," he muttered to himself as the students filed in. "I survived two decades of Voldemort, I can survive this." Once the students were all seated, he gave them a sweeping glare. "You will not be brewing anything today. Instead, you will write an essay on the uses and properties of pooka blood. I expect at least eighteen inches of parchment on the topic, so you had best not waste any time getting started."

Some students gaped with relief. Others sniggered. Hermio Miss Granger -- stared for a long moment before retrieving her quill and parchment and beginning to write. Once the students were all concentrating on their work, Snape relaxed slightly. He couldn't assign essays all week long; sooner or later, he'd have to interact with her.

Hermione had seriously considered hexing herself sick rather than attend Snape's class. A weekend of arousing dreams about the Potions Master had left her jumpy and irritable. She slipped into the classroom quietly, and took her accustomed seat in the back, not daring to look at Sever... Professor Snape. When he assigned an essay instead of a potion to brew, her mind went blank with relief for nearly ten seconds before she could begin writing.

It wasn't until dinner that she realized that she'd have to face him alone in the lab if she was to continue her research project. The thought made her ill, and she hastily excused herself from the table and made a mad dash for the bathroom. Kneeling next to the commode, she put her head in her hands. "Oh god. Oh god."

Snape hadn't bothered to attend dinner. He brooded in the lab, his chin propped on his hands. What was he going to say in an hour when she arrived to work on her project? He bit his lip and tried to concentrate on the project. Unfortunately, everything led his mind back to Miss Granger. "Hermione," a little voice whispered in the back of his head. He swore violently, and went back to brooding.

Hermione poked her head around the doorjamb and looked into the lab. Snape was seated at his desk, staring off into the distance. Sighing, she entered the room. "I'm here, sir."

His head came up slowly at the distinct lack of enthusiasm in her voice. "Since it is nearly the end of the term, I think it unwise to begin any new line of research this evening. We shall begin again in the spring."

She stared at the floor. "Yes, sir."

That was not the reaction he'd expected. "Miss Granger, are you feeling quite well?"

"I haven't been sleeping well," she mumbled.

"Neither have I." He hadn't meant to say it.

She sat down at her desk, remembering. "It's the dreams. I wake up and it's like I didn't get any sleep at all."

Now he could certainly relate to that. "Have you tried a Dreamless Sleep potion?" I find them useful on occasion." It didn't occur to him to wonder why he hadn't thought of it earlier.

She snorted, surprising him. "I'd have to get them from the infirmary. Madame Pomfrey would want to know why." The memories brought a stain of red to her cheeks.

"Nosy Parker that she is, yes." He wouldn't want to tell the mediwitch about his recent dreams. Snape rose and unlocked his private cabinet, the one that no one else was allowed in. Withdrawing a small green vial, he turned back to her. "Here. Take a spoonful before you go to bed. It should help."

Hermione took the vial as if he were throwing her a lifeline. "Thank you, sir!" She took a long breath and the blush faded. "About the project, sir, I'd like to continue to work on it this week. I'd rather not wait until the spring term."

Snape thought of the row of green vials in the cabinet...enough potion for both of them, enough to last until the Yule break. "I believe that will be satisfactory. Let us begin tomorrow night."

~*~

Hermione and Snape both breathed a sigh of relief as she boarded the Hogwarts Express at the end of the week. The Dreamless Sleep potion had worked well, and they each hoped there would be no further need for it in the spring. Snape watched the train disappear around a bend before returning to the castle. As the train wound through the Forbidden Forest, other eyes, less friendly eyes, watched it as well.

Chapter Ten

Chapter 10 of 20

Chaos ensues when the Familiars at Hogwarts decide to play matchmaker.

Albus called it an air of romance that had permeated Hogwarts for most of the fall term. Snape called it an epidemic of lovesickness. Whatever it was, all the staff had noticed. At their end of term meeting, Argus and Ivy announced their engagement.

"We thought we'd have a quiet wedding at the end of the spring term," Ivy said, "and take a brief trip to the Continent during the summer. We'll be back well before the fall term starts."

"That sounds like fun," Minerva smiled. "You'll have to be sure to bring back some pictures. Albus and I will be pottering around here all summer, making ready for the new students."

The Headmaster nodded. "That's an excellent lead-in to business." He looked around. "Where is Hagrid?"

"He said he had an errand to run, and might be late," Hooch volunteered. "I saw him on my way from the Quidditch Pitch."

"Let's get started then." The Headmaster cleared his throat. "You all know that Durmstrang was destroyed during the war. Beauxbatons cannot accommodate all of the children there. That means we can expect a large influx of students from Europe. I have heard that we will have nearly two hundred new faces in the fall."

"Two hundred?" Lucius repeated. "That's..."

"... over twice the number we're staffed for." Ivy finished.

"Yes we've been giving some consideration to that. It's difficult to find qualified instructors, so we'll be hiring assistants for each major subject to take some of the load."

"If there are any names in particular that you think should be considered, please let us know by, say, the end of January."

"None of the classrooms are big enough for such large classes," Filius mused aloud.

"You wouldn't hire new staff for only a single year, Albus," Severus interjected suddenly. "What haven't you told us yet?"

"In addition to around two hundred first year students, we will be getting a large number of older students as well. Judging from the letters I've received, we can expect approximately thirty new students in each year."

A series of collective jaws dropped around the staff table. Finally Ardis Vector found her voice. "That's almost another House worth of students, Albus!"

"Yes. One of the things Minerva and I will be doing is enlarging the dormitories and the Common Rooms to accommodate them. The older students will be Sorted after the first years at the Welcoming Feast."

The staff room door opened and Hagrid came in. "Sorry I'm late, Professor Dumbledore, sir. Ran into a bit of a set-to." He sat down heavily. "In th' Forest, I was lookin' fer unicorns fancied they'd do for a class, right? An' come to find that there's a band o' Sidhe moved in."

~*~

Although the Headmaster had announced that the Forbidden Forest was strictly off limits to all students, Lucius wasn't sure it would be enough to quash the more adventurous souls. Thus, he rewrote his planned lecture for the first day of the spring term. His first class happened to be the 7th year Gryffindors and Slytherins.

"The Sidhe are an ancient race, hailing from before the days of Merlin. They practice a different type of magic than we do one we know little about. They are a secretive people, and contact with them is rare." He crossed his arms over his chest and swept the classroom with a serious look. "Make no mistake; the Sidhe are the most dangerous thing in the Forbidden Forest. Mr. Nott, would you care to speculate why?"

"Err..." Ted Nott shrugged. "Because we don't know much about them?"

"Ignorance makes them dangerous, yes. But there are other beasts in the forest that we don't know much about." He spun around. "Mr. Longbottom, why are the Sidhe the most dangerous thing in the forest?"

Neville gulped audibly. "B-b-because they can think?"

"Correct! Four points to Gryffindor." Lucius nodded in approval. "Any opponent who can reason is infinitely more dangerous than one who cannot. There are three accounts of contact with the Sidhe in the last two decades. Of these, one was a glimpse from a distance much like that reported by Professor Hagrid. One of the other cases was a short and relatively civil talk. The last the wizard who met up with the Sidhe was murdered by them."

"Murdered?" The gasp came from half a dozen throats at the same time.

"Yes. He had boasted that he was going to force the Sidhe to divulge the secrets of their magic. His body was found at the edge of the Schwartzwald, with a note attached. It contained one word: Justice." Now Lucius leaned on his desk, with his most earnest expression. "Do not think yourselves safe. Do not think you may wander into their encampments with impunity. They are not bound by human morals."

~*~

That night, the Gryffindor Common Room was packed, with the new tenants of the Forbidden Forest being the primary topic of conversation.

"The Sidhe don't stay in one place for very long," Hermione said as she dumped half a dozen books onto a convenient table. "It's thought that they have some permanent settlements somewhere, but the locations are a big secret."

"My Gran used to tell me stories about people being kidnapped and taken off to live with them," Neville contributed. "I thought she was making up something to scare me."

"It's happened a few times," Ginny said from the fireplace. She put down the broom polish she'd been using. "Mum told us that her great grandfather was a prisoner of theirs for nearly fifty years. But she never would tell us any details when we asked. Just that they let him go eventually."

"That seems to be the pattern," Hermione replied. "There're only a few books in the entire library that mention them."

"Other than those in the Restricted Section, of course." Lavender ran her hands through her hair. "Our class today was all about facts, but there are a lot of legends about the Sidhe, and none of them are nice." She made a wry face. "You probably haven't heard most of them, since you weren't raised wizard."

"There're stories among Muggles," Hermione protested.

"Why don't we swap stories around?" Colin suggested. "I bet each of us knows at least one story about the Sidhe that no one else does."

"If we're going to do that," Ginny said, "let's do it right. Dennis, come with me and we'll go raid the kitchen."

"I didn't hear that," Hermione reminded them gently.

"Right!" The two Gryffindors ducked down the tunnel. Behind them, the others settled in for a night of telling "ghost stories".

~*~

"I don't like this at all," Swift said. "The Sidhe are dangerous!" The Familiars were back in the abandoned classroom on the fifth floor for their first meeting of the spring term.

"Definitely!" Chang agreed. "We need to put our plans on hold until they leave."

"Perhaps we can encourage the Sidhe to move on?" Trevor asked.

"How?" Duster flexed his claws. "They have magic we don't understand. They don't use Familiars. They are nothing like our pets!"

"Poppy is quite worried," Topper interjected. "She doesn't believe she will be able to treat the students if they run afoul of the Sidhe."

"We need to be vigilant," Fawkes decided. "Even if our pets are wary of the Sidhe, it will upset them if their friends are less cautious. All of us must watch for wanderers, and alert the adults if necessary."

As the Familiars dispersed, Crookshanks nudged his partner-in-crime. "Duster, did Sev say anything about the status of that research project?"

"Not much. He wants to review it with Hermione this week." The black tom cat-grinned. "How did Hermione sleep over the break?"

Crookshanks returned the grin. "Not well at all as you very well know. Now that they're back together, we can give them more pleasant dreams again."

~*~

Snape's sleep over the Yule holiday had been fitful and restless; he was almost glad when classes started again. The first day had been filled with the first, second, and third year students all of whom had apparently forgotten everything they'd learned in the first part of the term. By dinner-time, he'd assigned a total of thirty-eight feet of essays, and handed out ten detentions to be served with Argus Filch. He was quite pleased when he awoke the following morning feeling rested.

And with an appetite for the first time in days. He was one of the first to enter the Great Hall and take his seat at the staff table. A mug of the strong tea he favored appeared at his elbow as he speared exactly three slices of dark pumpernickel that he then coated with a thick layer of Marmite. Half an hour later, he strolled back to his classroom, fortified to face the 7th year Gryffindors and Slytherins.

The older students, having survived nearly seven years of Snape's uncertain temper, knew better than to come to his class unprepared. Even Longbottom managed to answer the question thrown at him without stammering for five minutes. Pleased in spite of himself, Snape set them to brewing the day's assignment with a minimum of acerbic commentary. Everything was fine.

He ghosted through the classroom, observing his students without interrupting what they were doing. Miss Brown's potion was going to be a remarkable failure if he were any judge. Mr Nott appeared to have actually studied the assignment. And Miss Granger... her potion was up to her usual excellent standards. He paused behind her for a moment. "See me after class to arrange a schedule for your research project, Miss Granger."

"Yes, sir." Her pulse rate doubled at his closeness; he could see the skin of her throat leaping where the big arteries ran close to the surface, but her voice was perfectly steady and she didn't miss a beat in the careful stirring of her cauldron.

Snape hadn't taught teenagers for years without learning what certain physiological reactions meant. He retreated back to his desk to contemplate this new bit of information. Could it be that she was attracted to him? Flattering, if it were true. The dreams he'd had came back to him unbidden. *She's a student*, he told himself severely. *But she won't be after this term. No, but she's still a child! She will be eighteen an adult by all standards. Yes, but she will have her own path to follow; she won't want to be tied down to an old man.*

Everyone in the room looked up at a knock on the door. Snape stalked over and threw it open. A very abashed Harry Potter stood there holding out a roll of parchment. Hermione paled and gripped the edge of her desk. When Harry didn't even look her way, she relaxed slightly.

Snape seized the parchment and skimmed it quickly and then once more slowly, a series of expressions flitting over his face. Finally he stood aside. "Very well, Mr Potter. Come in and take your seat. For this one class session, you may partner Mr Longbottom."

Harry nodded, and slowly walked into the room, continuing to ignore Hermione. He dropped his books next to Neville, and began slicing the toadstools carefully. Neville opened his mouth to say something, then closed it again and continued stirring in silence.

It was the quietest class Snape had ever held. When it was over, the Potions Master gestured for them to bring samples of their work up to his desk for his perusal. As he'd expected, Miss Brown's potion was neither the proper color nor consistency. He assigned her a five-foot essay and happily docked three points from Gryffindor. Miss Bulstrode's potion had turned out exceptionally well, and he gave Slytherin two points. Mr Potter and Mr Longbottom's joint potion was acceptable, and he took it with a sharp nod but said nothing to either young man.

Miss Granger was the last to bring up her potion. It was properly done, just as he'd predicted. He made something of a show of examining it, finally meeting her eyes. "Up

to your usual standards. Well done."

"Thank you, sir."

He steepled his fingers in front of him. "Sit down, please. I have given the matter of your project some thought over the holidays. Professor McGonagall has agreed to test the potion for us. Once we have shown that it works, we will proceed to the next step."

"Erm..." Hermione flushed with the memory of her unauthorized sampling of the potion. "What happens if it doesn't work?"

He raised an eyebrow. "I was under the impression that we had discussed that. There is no reason why it shouldn't work."

"Yes, but... shouldn't we be prepared for all contingencies?"

"Very well. If it does not work, we shall begin again."

"Oh."

"Now, the next step will be modifying it to allow an Animagus to communicate with animals. This will be somewhat more difficult and time-consuming. I recommend that we meet every evening after dinner in the laboratory. We should also have a discussion with Professor Flitwick about integrating the necessary Charms."

"Yes, sir. Starting this evening?"

"Of course. Now off with you; you don't want to be late for your next class."

She went.

~*~

Two days later, Hermione arrived at the laboratory to find Snape deep in discussion with Professor McGonagall. The vial of yellowish gelatin that they'd brewed the previous term sat on Snape's desk in plain view. She flushed and bit her lip. *This isn't going to work, and he's going to be furious.*

"Miss Granger. Good." Snape's voice held an undertone of excitement and anticipation. "We're ready." He scooped out a small spoonful of the gelatin into a saucer and turned to McGonagall. "Professor?"

Minerva shifted into feline form with her usual blinding speed and approached the saucer. Her ears flattened at the smell, but she gobbled it down and sat back glaring at them with an expression of utmost disdain.

"Perhaps something to drink?" Hermione offered. She filled another saucer with water and put it on Snape's desk. The black and white tabby nodded gratefully and took a long drink.

"That's much better, thank you." The voice was unmistakably Minerva's, but with a scratchy undertone.

Hermione stared. "It worked!" *Why didn't it work for me? None of the ingredients become more potent with age. Oh! It has to be consumed in Animagus form!*

"You'll have to do something about the taste and smell if you want to market it successfully," the cat continued. "It tastes slimy and sticky all at the same time, and smells like a sewer." She shuddered delicately. "And the aftertaste!"

"We appreciate your help, Minerva." Snape replied. "Perhaps, when we get the next stage completed, we can revisit the cosmetics of the potion."

The cat shifted back into human form. "Congratulations, Severus. Congratulations, Miss Granger." She ran her tongue over her teeth. "That is one of the foulest potions I've ever tasted. But it definitely works! Please let me know if you need further testing." She swept out in a flurry of green tartan.

Hermione couldn't help grinning. A quick look at the Potions Master showed that he was sporting a definite smile also. "Congratulations, sir. You did it."

"Actually, Miss Granger, the accolades are your due. You did the majority of the research and work. I assume you have given some thought to the next stage?"

"Yes, sir." She took the saucers over to the sink and began cleaning them. "I've been going through the list of Charm enhancing ingredients to determine which one or ones we should work with. My notes are in my bag there."

"And what are the results of your investigations?" Snape asked.

Hermione set the saucers to dry and fished in her bag for her notes. "Sir, there is only one ingredient I can find that meets all our criteria for this potion. Pooka blood."

"That might be problematic." He turned to put the vial of yellow goo back in the cabinet. "Pooka blood is not readily available for research purposes."

"There's another option, sir." She took a deep breath. "Pookas are often found with the Sidhe."

Snape spun around to face her. "Don't even think about it, Miss Granger! The Sidhe are not to be trifled with. Did you pay no attention to Professor Malfoy?"

"But it's not necessarily a given that they're dangerous. From what I've read, they can be bargained with."

"Let me phrase it this way then. The Headmaster has placed the Forbidden Forest off limits to students. If you disobey him, you will leave yourself open to discipline and possible expulsion from Hogwarts."

"But if you came with me, I wouldn't be disobeying." The words were out of her mouth before she thought about it.

Snape sat down heavily. "And just why do you think I would consent to such a foolhardy scheme?"

In for a penny... "Because you want this potion to work just as much as I do, sir."

"Yes, it would please me for you to succeed. But not at the cost of my job and your schooling." He rose. "The Headmaster would not take such a transgression lightly."

"What if I got permission?"

Snape snorted. "You won't, but you are more than welcome to try."

"I'll go see the Headmaster tomorrow, then."

~*~

"Albus!"

"Yes, m'dear?" The Headmaster looked up as the Head of Gryffindor House stormed into his office.

"I have just been informed that you have given Hermione Granger permission to enter the Forbidden Forest!"

"What oh, yes. Is there a problem with that?"

"Albus! She's a child!"

"Miss Granger is an accomplished witch, Minerva. Surely you agree with that. And she won't be going alone. Severus will be going with her."

"Severus? He agreed to this madness?"

"Miss Granger said that he had. You don't think she'd, ah, lie do you?"

"Of course not! Albus, I'm surprised that you'd even suggest such a thing!"

"Well then. What are you worried about? Come now, it's late." He waltzed her out of the office and down the corridors while their Familiars exchanged smirks behind their backs.

~*~

"And how, exactly, did you persuade the Headmaster to sign this?" Snape almost snarled. Almost, because he admitted privately he was impressed with her tenacity.

Hermione gave him a smug grin, an expression she had never dared before. "I asked, sir. I told him you had agreed to escort me, and he signed it."

The Potions Master threw up his hands in exasperation and rose. "Very well. Let us not shilly-shally about. Pookas are most active at night."

"Yes, sir. I'm ready now."

"I, however, require a moment." Snape went to his supply cabinet and withdrew two glass vials. "These will do. Please charm them to be unbreakable, and put whatever other protective spells you think fit." He began rooting around in the bottom of the cabinet.

She took the vials from him and cast the requisite spells. "May I ask what you're looking for, sir?"

Snape stood up, a large white box in one hand. "Pooka bait."

"Pooka bait? I don't recall reading anything about that."

"Nor would you." He tilted the box, showing her the ornate gold lettering.

She stared in disbelief. "Honeydukes chocolate?"

"Of course." He opened the door and gestured for her to precede him. "It's a little-known fact that pookas cannot resist chocolate."

The Forbidden Forest loomed behind Hagrid's hut, more dark and menacing than it appeared by day. Snape strode into it, ignoring the shadows lurking in the underbrush. Hermione followed him, ignoring the shadows somewhat less successfully. Once past the forest's edge, the professor halted.

"We cannot use *Lumos* spells; they are likely to attract the attention of the Sidhe. I do not wish that attention if it is possible to avoid it."

Hermione looked up at the canopy. "We're not going to be able to see in here without some source of light."

"Our eyes will adjust momentarily. Patience is all that is required."

She grumbled quietly but waited. In a minute or two, she found that she was, indeed, able to see well enough to make her way through the forest without tripping over anything. It helped that the path Snape chose resembled a game-trail of some sort. They detoured around a clearing containing a centaur who was busy skygazing, and wound their way deeper and deeper among the trees.

"Do you know where you're going?" she whispered after fifteen minutes of brisk walking.

"Pookas are affiliated with water more often than not. There is a stream nearby, and I believe that will be the best place to begin searching."

Hermione tilted her head to one side listening. "I think I hear the sound of water. Straight ahead."

"Excellent. We are closer than I thought."

Another minute of walking brought them to the bank of a swift running stream. Snape stopped and looked around. "I believe this will do. Are you ready, Miss Granger?"

"Yes, sir." She had no idea what she was to be ready for.

Snape opened the Honeydukes box, set it on the grass and stepped a few feet away. "When a pooka appears, we shall speak with it and offer to trade the chocolate for two vials of blood," he said softly. "Once the transaction is complete, we will return immediately to Hogwarts. If anything goes wrong, Miss Granger, you are to Apparate to the front gates immediately."

A nicker from the water interrupted her reply, and a horse rose from the stream, its nostrils flared and neck arched. A ... purple horse. No, not purple, Hermione realized, as the horse shook the water from its coat. Maroon and deep green and hints of gold meshed together in a regular pattern of squares and bars.

"A plaid pooka?" she whispered to Snape.

"Unusual, certainly," he replied without taking his eyes from the beast. No, not a beast. There was intelligence in the pooka's expression. They sensed that it was waiting for them to speak.

"Starlight ward you," Snape said softly.

"And may the moon guide your sight," it replied. Its voice was a muted trumpet. "Why come ye into these woods, mortals?"

"We crave a bargain." Snape explained the trade he had in mind.

"A princely offer, mortal. Half in advance."

"Agreed." He transferred half the chocolate to the lid of the box, and took it with him, stepping further away from the rest of it. Hermione backed away with him.

The pooka approached the box, snuffing the air and twitching first one ear and then the other at the forest around them. Satisfied, it began eating. In moments, it was

done. "For my part of the bargain, then..."

Snape took out the vials and a small but sharp knife. "I will do this as quickly as I may."

The pooka nodded and extended one foreleg in his direction. "Approach then, mortal."

Hermione gulped. Snape was putting himself in awful jeopardy for the sake of her potion. As he knelt to collect the blood, his back and neck were completely exposed to the pooka's teeth. And he was very close to those sharp hooves. Should it turn vicious, her teacher could be badly hurt. *That story Dean told, about how they drag their victims under water, never to be seen again. Oh why did I do this?*

Only moments later, though, Snape was standing again and putting the filled vials in his pocket. With a swift nod, he set the remainder of their chocolate on the ground in front of the pooka. "Our thanks for your consideration."

"You are well-spoken for a mortal," the pooka replied. "I will remember this. Now I must sleep for a time." It sank into the stream again on the last words.

"We did it!" Hermione said exultantly. "We actually did it!"

Snape looked very satisfied. "We should return to Hogwarts now. We have pushed our luck as it is. Let us not tempt fate any further."

They Disappeared, only to reappear exactly where they'd been standing. Hermione looked around nervously. "I didn't realize you couldn't Apparate out of the Forbidden Forest."

"This is new magic," Snape said. His wand was out, held at the ready. "Come, we will retrace our path. Quickly now!"

They started back toward the school, attempting to mix speed and caution. After a few minutes, Snape halted suddenly. "Something is not right here." He took a few steps to one side, and snorted in disgust. "My navigation spell has been confounded."

"Quite right, mortal." Where the pooka's voice had been a muted trumpet, this voice was a sibilant, venomous hiss. "You trespass on our lands. Do you think to escape our justice?"

They turned slowly. Half a dozen shadowy figures stood there. One stepped forward and bowed mockingly. "A maid and a man we have here. Come out in the forest for privacy perhaps? Foolish to wander so far from where the mortals hold sway."

"We mean no harm," Snape began, only to be cut off by a harsh laugh.

"Your harm is in your very presence. It offends." The Sidhe made a swift gesture, and Snape and Hermione found themselves bound and gagged. "Wait thus while we decide your punishment."

Chapter Eleven

Chapter 11 of 20

Chaos ensues when the Familiars at Hogwarts decide to play matchmaker.

Chapter Eleven

The Sidhe must not use wands, Hermione thought to herself. *They haven't tried to take ours*. She racked her brains for useful non-verbal spells; most of the ones she knew were hexes and minor curses spells that would be most likely to anger their captors. She turned her head and looked over at Snape. He was still lying where he'd fallen when the Sidhe's binding spell had struck.

Concerned, she began wriggling over towards him. His eyes met hers, and he shook his head slightly. She stopped, sighing to herself in frustration. He had to be planning something. As she relaxed, the force binding her arms to her sides loosened. Some quick experimentation taught her that when she tensed up, the force would tighten again.

Hmmm. Wonder if it stretches at all. She relaxed her leg muscles, and then tensed them against the now-loosened bonds. *Yes! There's more slack in them now!* In a few minutes, she'd gained enough slack to raise a hand and scratch her nose, which had been itching furiously for some time. She didn't dare look at Snape; she could feel disapproval radiating from him. A thought struck her. *I wonder what would happen if I shape-changed. I could run and fetch help.*

A moment later, she stood in Shetland form, the bonds gone completely. Elated, she dashed off, hooves churning through the underbrush. She had a vague notion of the correct direction, and headed that way only to find herself running back into the same clearing. She rolled one terrified eye at Snape and kept moving. When she found herself back in the clearing for the third time, she halted, head and ears down.

"Foolish little girl!" One of the Sidhe appeared in front of her. The hood of his cloak was thrown back, and she got her first good look at their captors. Her overwhelming impression was one of ice; his skin was white as snow, and his expression as cold as the pits of Hell. This close, she could see the pointed tips of his ears poking through the silver fall of his hair. Under the finely arched brows, his eyes were the steely blue of the sky before a thunderstorm. She shuddered and dropped her eyes.

"You thought to escape us, didn't you?" The Sidhe reached out a pale hand and tapped her muzzle sharply. "How extraordinarily foolish. You don't care for your human form? We shall fix that!" He gestured swiftly, and she felt a prickle on her skin as some alien magic settled over her. "You with the eyes of a doe, a doe you shall be." She felt her form shifting in response to his words. "And as for your friend," the Sidhe paused a moment, staring at her. Then softly, "No, more than a friend I see. Not yet a lover though. How amusing. Him I shall give both hooves and horn."

Again that quick gesture, and Snape vanished. In his stead was a stag with a fine rack of antlers. Hermione could not help but be reminded of the deer head her father used to have mounted over their fireplace at home. The stag lowered its head and made to charge, only to be brought up short by a jolt of blue-white light.

"Why play with them, Achrion?" Another Sidhe stepped out of the shadows. "They trespass. They should be killed."

"Peace, Erias. They shall be punished in a fitting manner."

The second Sidhe inclined his head slightly. "As you will."

Achrion Hermione assumed that was his name turned to face them now. "You are guilty of trespass in our forest." He softened his voice slightly. "Do you fear me?"

Hermione nodded, backing slowly away from him until she bumped into Snape.

"And you, stag, do you also fear me?"

Snape inclined his head slowly, trying to mask his fear not fear for himself, but fear of what would happen to his student.

"Hear then, your punishment. I shall release your bonds and let you run free. At some point soon after, I will sound my horn. You shall be the prey for our hunt tonight. Elude us till dawn, and you gain your freedom. Fail, and your lives are forfeit."

There was a crack like thunder, and Hermione felt some of their magic lift. She threw a look over her shoulder at Snape before glancing back at the Sidhe. They had brought out bows and were stringing them. The one called Erias looked up and met her eyes, "Run, my pretties! Run!"

She bolted. A crashing behind her indicated that Snape she hoped it was Snape was following. Some part of her noted that she was much faster in this form than as a Shetland. She came to a fallen log and soared over it, barely thinking about what she was doing. After a few moments of headlong flight, she slowed and stopped.

Snape pulled up beside her. "Hogwarts," he said gruffly. "We must try to get back to the school."

"Do you have any idea which way to go?" She was too relieved to hear his voice it still sounded like him to wonder how they were able to talk.

"No." He stamped one cloven hoof. "I think it's this way."

"Wait, Severus! We can't go that way! They'll be expecting it."

He shook his head in bemusement. "What did you just call me?"

Oh no! "I'm sorry sir. It's just ... I'm frightened."

"Understandably." He looked around at the forest. "We should keep moving. Let us head this direction." Snape started off at a comfortable walking pace." She crowded close behind him, taking comfort from his nearness.

A moment later, they heard the horn sound behind them. Snape picked up the pace slightly. "I am attempting to get to the edge of the forest. Once there, we have a better chance of reaching the school."

"Sir, would the centaurs help us?"

"Possibly, but they would be more likely to hunt us as well for food, not malice."

"That's not much comfort."

He whuffed, blowing dust out of his nostrils. "If the Sidhe catch us, you must run on and try to escape. I will hold them off as long as I can."

"With all due respect, sir, that is unacceptable."

Snape halted so fast that she ran into him. "May I remind you, Miss Granger, that you are still my student and as such, I am responsible for you?"

"Yes, but I got you into this." She met his eyes. "Sir, I will not leave you behind."

"For the love of Merlin, Hermione! Put that Gryffindor foolhardiness aside!" He stopped and clamped his lips together, realizing what he had just said. Then, "We've no more time to waste in discussion. Simply obey me in this."

She shook her head. "No, sir. I never abandoned my friends during the war and I'm not going to start now."

"Insufferable Gryffindor," he muttered to himself as he started out again in his chosen direction.

"I heard that!"

~*~

"They what?" Duster yowled. When Severus hadn't returned to his quarters at his accustomed time, the black tomcat had gone looking for him. He'd met Crookshanks looking for HIS pet as well. Then Fawkes had mentioned that Hermione had asked Albus for permission to go into the Forbidden Forest that evening, with Severus as her escort.

The phoenix sniffed. "Albus thought it would be perfectly safe. He said as much to Minerva that Hermione is more than competent, as is Severus."

"Fawkes," Crookshanks began, his claws flexing dangerously, "why did they go into the Forbidden Forest?"

"They were after an ingredient for that research project."

The two cats exchanged looks. "We need to either scuttle that project permanently, or finish it. One of the two."

"Let's discuss it later. Right now we have a more serious problem. Where are our pets?"

"Hopefully they're just lost," Duster said. But he knew better. Severus had spent much time in the forest gathering ingredients. He always used a navigation spell.

"Let's go." They streaked down the stairs, across the corridors, and through a certain hidden entrance that only they knew. At the edge of the forest, Crookshanks paused. "Look at that!" To the enhanced senses of the Familiars, the forest glowed with a soft blue-white light.

Duster reached out a careful paw and tested the edge of the light. "It's magic of some sort."

"The Sidhe. It's not blocking us." Crookshanks left the "yet" unspoken.

Duster sniffed at the glow. "I think it's a ward. They'll know if we cross it."

"I don't care." Crooks slithered into the forest. "There's definite magic here, Duster. I think your pet's navigation spell has been confounded."

"Damn." Duster moved through the glow and joined Crookshanks. "I don't hear or smell them."

"If we split up, we will cover more territory."

"Right. I'll head up the edge and through the centaur glades."

"I'll go up to the river and then swing back through the spider caves. Then we can meet at the river and hunt the other side."

"Let's go then." They took off in different directions.

~*~

It wasn't fun any more. For the last hour, they'd been playing an increasingly desperate game of hide and seek with the Sidhe, each time coming that much closer to being caught. Indeed, one of their arrows had split the air an inch from Severus' shoulder. No banter now; all their breath was reserved for flight.

Snape risked a glance behind them. Hermione no, dammit, Miss Granger was flagging badly. She needed to rest. He halted.

"Why... you... stopping?" she panted.

He shook his head. "You can't run any further right now. Just catch your breath. I think we're well ahead of them."

He was going to say more, but a sharp pain flared in his side extinguishing his words. He looked down to see the shaft of an arrow protruding from his ribs. Even the pain from prolonged bouts of the Cruciatus Curse paled in comparison. Groaning, he sank to the ground. Through the blood roaring in his ears, he heard Hermione scream. Then a wave of blessed darkness rolled over him bringing surcease from pain and consciousness.

Hermione looked around wildly, expecting to be shot herself at any moment. But she couldn't, wouldn't leave Severus for those monsters to torment further. There! One of the Sidhe, she thought it was Erias, stepped out of the underbrush, his bow at his side.

Slowly, mockingly, he raised it, his right hand reaching over his shoulder to pluck an arrow from the quiver on his back. Hermione had just made up her mind to charge, when the call of a hunting horn sounded all around them. As she watched, the Sidhe faded into nothingness while the first rays of dawn brightened the clearing they were in.

A few seconds later, Hermione was annoyed to discover that the Sidhe had lied. Here it was daylight, and she was still trapped in her doe form. Swearing to herself, she looked at her teacher again where he sprawled on the ground. He was still breathing; she could see his ribs rising and falling. But that arrow... it had to come out. Cursing her lack of hands, she knelt next to him and attempted to grip it with her teeth.

"Gently, child. Let us do that."

Hermione yelped and scrambled to her feet. There were three dark-haired women standing nearby. She could've sworn there was no one else around a moment earlier. "Who what are you? How can you understand me?"

"Questions later, child. Do you wish our aid?"

"Oh yes! Can you help him?"

"We can and will." The one who'd spoken knelt down beside Snape's form, and touched the arrow gently. "A barbed head, meant to do as much damage as possible when pulled out."

"They do not reckon on the use of magic," said another. She ran a hand down Snape's side. "No real damage, but he's bleeding inside."

The three joined hands and chanted in a language Hermione didn't know. A gold light enveloped Snape for a moment, and she saw the arrow working its way back out, exactly along the path it had traversed. In a few moments, it dropped to the ground and the light faded.

"Thank you," Hermione said. "I know that doesn't sound like much."

"You know courtesy, child. That speaks well of you and your friend. Come, there is a well nearby. You must be thirsty."

Now that the danger had passed, Hermione had to admit that she was both parched and ravenous. She followed the woman across the clearing, and behind a small lean-to. The promised well was there, and the woman drew her a bucket of clear, cold water. "Drink and rest here, child. Your friend should regain his senses soon."

"How can you understand me?"

"It is our nature, child. We speak the languages of all living things. Now, rest. There will be time for questions later."

Snape slowly became aware of his surroundings again. It wasn't the sharp shift into consciousness that normal waking brought. Instead, it was a gradual drifting, as if the world slowly grew brighter and more solid around him. A most unusual sensation.

Snape's internal clock told him it was well past morning. That meant he at least had survived the Sidhe. His side was sore, but not with the sharp pain of an unhealed gash, more like a pulled muscle. He shied away from speculating on Miss Granger's fate. With a grunt, he opened his eyes and attempted to sit up, only to find that he was still wearing the form of a stag.

He wasn't really shocked, but he was thoroughly annoyed and looked around for a convenient target for his temper. He was in a largish clearing in the middle of a woods. The Forbidden Forest, he assumed. There was a small lean-to on the far side of the clearing, with an equally small garden next to it. As he rose, the door of the lean-to opened and three women came out.

"Who are you?" he asked, knowing they wouldn't understand him in his stag form. To his surprise they approached him. All were about his age if he was any judge, all dark-haired. None of the three were classically beautiful, but all three faces showed character.

The one on the left spoke:

"We are Keepers of the Art,

Freeing lovers bound apart,

Always mending what we may,

Healing, helping, day by day."

Without missing a beat, the one in the middle continued:

"We are Guardians of the Light,

Bastions against the Night,

Bound to war against the Dark,

Bringing Light to Shadow's Mark."

The third picked up the chant:

"We are Wardens of the Green,
Fairest that the world has seen,
Healing ills that Shadows bring,
Healing all who yearn for Spring."

I hate women who speak in riddles! Snape thought to himself. "What do you want of me? And do you know where Miss Granger is?"

The first laughed. "I assure you that we mean you no ill, nor your friend. She is resting."

"You both had a strenuous night," the second chimed in. "and you were quite fortunate to have run in this direction."

"It was more than fortune," the third finished. "The Sidhe drove you this way purposefully."

"But for what purpose? And can you lift this enchantment on me?" Snape was not sure exactly what these women were, but he did not feel particularly threatened by them. "And might I know your names that I might properly thank you for your kindness?"

The three exchanged an unreadable look between themselves. Then the second said, "We have no names as such. However, you may refer to us as Oak, Ash, and Thorn."

"You are Fae," Severus said slowly. His mind dredged up what he knew of these cousins of the Sidhe who lived in Forests and were rarely seen by man. "My gratitude for my life."

Thorn inclined her head in acknowledgement. "Aye, Fae we are. We are charged to keep the green woods here free from evil's taint."

"The Sidhe are not evil," Oak said, forestalling his next comment. "They have their own laws and customs which are different from yours, and they find you as evil as you think them."

A doe came around the corner of the building just then, carefully not treading on the garden. Snape had no trouble recognizing Miss Granger. He took a certain perverse comfort in the fact that she was evidently still trapped in her current form also.

"Thank you for rescuing us," she said to the three Fae. "I when he got shot, I didn't know what to do."

"We dislike seeing blood spilled heedlessly," Ash said. "Too, one of our friends spoke well of you both. We would have interfered, had dawn not come when it did."

"You should not linger overlong in the Forest though. Our protections here are limited, and the Sidhe gain strength with the rising of the moon."

"What about this shape-change they forced on us?" Hermione asked. "Can you lift it?"

"Tis not an ordinary curse," Thorn said. "It may only be broken when its conditions are met."

"What conditions?" Snape barely beat Hermione to the question.

"Some say," Oak put in, "that telling one of how such a spell may be broken interferes with the breaking."

"I'm willing to take the chance," Hermione said quickly. Snape nodded his agreement also.

"As you will." The Fae joined hands and chanted:

"Stag and doe, man and maid,

On them is the magic laid

Until what neither dares to say

Is spoke aloud by light of day."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Hermione asked.

"That is all the aid we may provide," Oak said. "Return to where mortals hold sway before sunset, lest the Sidhe seek you out again." With that, they faded away, leaving behind a sprinkling of laughing sunlight.

"I despise riddles," Snape growled, as well as a stag could growl. He shook himself from head to foot. "We should, however, return to Hogwarts posthaste. This way, I believe."

Hermione fell in behind him again. "That's almost as bad as Trelaw I mean Professor Trelawney's prophecies."

"That's right, you and she had something of a falling out." He exhaled in a long breath. "What do you think they meant by this riddle?"

"I don't know. I mean, I haven't been entirely truthful with you. I... I broke into your supply cabinet in my second year and..."

"...stole the ingredients for Polyjuice. Yes, I know. I had the brewing of all those potions that Madame Pomfrey gave you to undo your ... accident."

"And I set your robes on fire in my first year."

"That was you? I rather thought one of the Weasleys was responsible. Any other confessions?"

"Umm don't you have any to make, sir?"

He shook his head. "Miss Granger, I have nearly forty years of life experience that I have not told you about."

"Doesn't matter," she said boldly. "Whatever it is that we haven't acknowledged has got to be in the last seven years. That puts us on an even footing."

"I gave your house ten points for solving my logic problem during your first year," he muttered.

"Really? Ten points?"

"Really. It took me four months to create that puzzle, and you solved it in less than ten minutes. I was quite impressed." He sighed. "I doubt the Sidhe would hinge our fates on trivia, so I shall up the ante. I gave Cornelius Fudge the evidence he needed to put Percival Weasley in Azkaban."

She would've gaped. "You! What evidence was that?"

"His diary and a Pensieve memory. He wasn't as bad as most of the Death Eaters, but he embezzled a large quantity of gold from the Ministry which found its way into Voldemort's coffers."

"I didn't know. I thought Fudge was keeping him in prison as a bargaining chip with Mr Weasley."

"I daresay many people believe that. However, my confession does not appear to have solved our problem." He stamped one hoof to emphasize his point.

"I guess not." She flipped her tail back and forth, thinking. "I... did something you're not going to like."

"I like the alternatives less," he pointed out.

Hermione took a long breath. "Before Yule I tried our Animagus Potion on myself."

"You WHAT?"

"And it didn't work. It wasn't until Professor McGonagall tried it that I realized that you must consume it in Animagus form."

He would've laughed at the contrition and embarrassment in her voice had the situation been any less serious. Instead he looked down at his hooves and swore silently. "Miss Granger, we are constrained here. I will not take points from Gryffindor for anything you have said. In return, I expect that anything I say will be held in confidence."

"I... I can't think of anything else I haven't told you."

"Hmph." He considered. "There must be something."

"We don't have much in common," she said, thinking aloud. "You're older you have a whole different set of interests. *It's silly to even mention it how could you possibly care for me?*

"Other than academia, I'd have to agree." *And that is exactly why I will not speak of coming to care for you. You would never return my feelings.*

They plodded on through the Forbidden Forest, each lost in their own thoughts. Twice Snape opened his mouth as if to speak. Twice, he shut it again without saying anything. As they neared the school, Hermione finally broke the heavy silence. "I there is one other thing I haven't told you. Or anyone."

Chapter Twelve

Chapter 12 of 20

Chaos ensues when the Familiars at Hogwarts decide to play matchmaker.

Chapter Twelve

Crookshanks and Duster made their weary way back to Hogwarts in the wee hours of the morning. A thorough search of the Forest had failed to turn up any trace of their pets. The Sidhe were obviously not involved in the disappearance; Crookshanks had seen them hot on the trail of a pair of deer. They'd been far too interested in their hunt to spare any attention for two humans. Duster had agreed. Now they were sprawled in the courtyard, two very tired and cranky felines.

"If they are not in the forest, and not in Hogwarts," Crookshanks began.

"They're not dead. We'd know it. Therefore, they must have Apparated somewhere."

"Hogsmeade?"

"Why would they go there?" Duster rolled over onto his back. "They were supposed to be gathering ingredients for their project."

"Perhaps they couldn't find what they needed in the forest?"

"If that's the case, they probably went to Diagon Alley." The gingery tomcat scratched one ear thoughtfully. "Perhaps they decided to stay there for the night."

"That might be. With the dream-sending we've been doing, perhaps they wanted greater privacy than they have here. Fawkes' pet does have a tendency to be quite inquisitive."

"You mean he's nosy. Just like Fawkes." Crookshanks cat-grinned. "You're probably right."

"Ah, there you are!" Chang said, as he minced across the damp grass. "Fawkes wants a quick meeting." The dainty Siamese gave them a long measuring stare. "You look like you've been out in the woods all night."

"That," Duster replied as he dragged himself to his feet, "is because we were."

"Where's the meeting?" Crookshanks asked.

"In the storage room, as usual." The Siamese winked one blue eye at them. "I shall see you there."

The storage room had become the Familiars' regular meeting spot over the past few weeks, and they'd taken steps to make it slightly more comfortable. Now all the chairs were soft and squashy for the cats. There were two heavy block perches for Fawkes and Topper. A large rug on the floor made a nice place for the two dogs, while a long low tray of water provided comfort for the toads.

"...have no idea what to make of it," Thunder was saying as Crookshanks and Duster came into the room. "I thought that it was impossible until the marriage ritual had been performed." His look of bewilderment was almost funny.

"Humans are quite remarkable pets," Fawkes stated. "Every time we think we can predict how they'll react, they do something like this to surprise us."

"Like what?" Duster wanted to know from where he sprawled on one of the chairs. "Apologies; we just arrived."

Thjalfe exchanged frustrated looks with Thunder. "My pet has informed Topper's pet that she will be littering in about eight months. And she has not seen fit to mention this to Thunder's pet."

"That does seem most odd," Fawkes trilled. "Most humans eagerly share such information."

"What's surprising to me," Swift interjected, "is that Thjalfe's pet could produce offspring without the marriage ritual. I think most of us believed that the ritual was necessary."

"And obviously," Trevor croaked, "it isn't."

"Topper, have any other pets said anything to yours?"

The macaw tilted his head to one side and considered. "Not that I know of. Aren't their pets the only ones who've actually mated?"

"That we know about," Crookshanks said. "What if our pets are like us?"

"Like us? How?" Gambit got the words out first in a high-pitched yelp.

The gingery kneazle winced internally at the volume. "What if they don't actually pair for life?"

"But they certainly seem to," Cassandra objected.

"Perhaps we've been interpreting their actions incorrectly," Duster said. "Thunder, your pet is the only one, I believe, who was mated for a long period of time. What do you think?"

"I have been thinking and remembering," the brindled Manx replied. "Lucius was unhappy with his first mate, even though they had one kit together."

"Draco, yes." Fawkes said. "He would have been the perfect mate for Crookshanks' pet."

"Not if I had anything to say about it," Crookshanks muttered to Duster. He left the Familiars' meeting in a good mood that was improved even further by running across a mouse that was just one jump too far from its hole. After fastidiously cleaning his claws, he returned to Hermione's room and curled up on the bed to sleep.

~*~

"And what earth-shattering secret have you been keeping, Miss Granger?" Snape saw they were closing on the edge of the forest, having made excellent time back towards Hogwarts.

She took a long breath. "When I first came to Hogwarts, that first night... I was scared. I didn't know if I would fit in, and I'd met Malfoy Draco on the Hogwarts Express and didn't like him at all."

"None of this is news," he interrupted.

"I know. It's just..." She stammered and finally blurted, "The Sorting Hat wanted to put me in Slytherin."

Severus stopped in his tracks and turned to look at her. "Slytherin? No Muggle-born has been sorted into my House for generations."

"I know. I looked it up in *Hogwarts: A History* later. But Draco had been bragging about how all Malfoys were Slytherin, and I didn't want to be in the same House as him. I told the Hat I'd rather be in Hufflepuff."

"And it put you in Gryffindor. I'd wondered about that. I would have expected Ravenclaw." He shook his antlers in annoyance. "Interesting though this may be, it is obviously not the solution to this curse."

Hermione went on, heedless of the gentle compliment. "I know Slytherin would have been a better fit in many ways. I've had to work twice as hard to be considered half as good as some people, and I think I've proved that I'm their equal."

"Slytherin isn't about hard work."

"Yes, I know. I want..." She stopped suddenly and looked down at her hooves.

"What? What is it you want?"

"I want to be a Potions Master. I want to brew fame and bottle glory! I want to put a stopper in Death itself!" She looked up a little sheepishly. "I've wanted that ever since the first day of Potions class. I tried so hard to impress you, to make you realize I was worth your time!"

"I knew you were a superior student after your first week," Snape said slowly. "I could not tell you that, nor could I do anything but belittle you. It was not fair, but it was necessary."

A compliment! Oh my!"It took me a few years to realize that." *But you agreed to oversee my research project this year, which was a handsome apology and more than makes up for it.*

"You would be the first Potions Master of your generation. A worthy ambition, and not for the faint of heart. You would have to apprentice to a Master for several years, of course. There are two or three in Europe, and perhaps a dozen more throughout the world. You have the tenacity to succeed. I am certain of that."

"I would prefer to apprentice with you. Sir."

Snape's heart rate almost doubled at her words, and it took him a moment to regain control of his voice. "Why would you want that?"

"Because I want to be with you."

Two shocks in as many sentences. "I would like that also," he replied without thinking.

They were both totally unprepared for the rush of magic that swept from nowhere like a pouncing lion. It buffeted and tossed them together like rag dolls, and departed as suddenly as it had come.

Snape staggered to his feet, reaching for his wand. His eyes scanned the forest around them searching for the source of the attack. Hermione, he noticed, had her wand in

hand also, and was doing much the same thing. *In her hand? Wait a minute!*

He looked down at his feet. Feet! Hands. Not hooves. "I think we may relax, Miss Granger," he said slowly. "We seem to have solved the curse."

She lowered her wand and looked at him and then down at herself. "Yes. But... what was the solution?"

"Not here. Not now." Snape looked around and got his bearings. "I do not want to stay in the forest any longer than necessary. This way."

Hermione fell into step beside him, pondering what had been said just before the magic swept over them *I said I wanted to be with him, and he said he would like that. So what does that mean exactly? I hope he doesn't want me just as an apprentice.*

Snape thought it just as well that Hermione he couldn't break himself of thinking of her by her first name was lost in thought for the remainder of the trek to Hogwarts. He had thinking of his own to do. *She wants to study with me, not anyone else. But does she only want me as a Master? Could she want me as a man?*

Once they entered the castle, Snape halted. "I'm sure you must be tired after the events of last night."

Hermione grimaced slightly. "Exhausted would be more accurate. And I've no idea how I'm going to get back into my room without being seen."

"I've a solution for that, at least. Come into the lab for a moment."

He rummaged around in the cabinet and pulled out a vial of scarlet fluid and a spoon. "Cantor's Concealment Potion. My imprecise brewing was rather successful. Once you take one spoonful, you'll have twenty minutes of near invisibility to get into your room."

"That should be more than sufficient." She took the spoon and vial he offered her. "Thank you, sir."

"You're welcome." Severus stored the vials of pooka blood carefully in the cabinet. "Our mission was successful in this regard at least. But I must go make a report to the Headmaster." He made shooing motions with one hand. "Be off now."

~*~

Hermione was pleasantly surprised by the taste of the Concealment potion. It reminded her of caramel-covered apples. It was also quite effective, she noticed, as she saw herself fade to near invisibility.

She put the vial down on Snape's desk, noting that it became visible the minute her hand left it. While he put it away, she washed the spoon and set it out to dry. Then she opened the door and headed for Gryffindor Tower, being careful to avoid those few students who were up early.

The potion didn't make her silent, she discovered. She was able to open the Fat Lady's portrait with no trouble. The Common Room beyond was empty. As quietly as she could, she crept up the stairs and made her way to her room. With a cavernous yawn, she opened the door and let herself inside.

Crookshanks was asleep on her bed, she noticed as she shut the door behind her. She didn't bother moving him; she simply undressed and crawled under the covers, dozing off almost instantaneously. Crookshanks opened one eye and looked at the gently snoring form huddled under the blankets and then cat-smiled as he began dream-sending again.

~*~

The early morning sun was burning the dew off the grass of the Quidditch Pitch when Xiamora Hooch strode out of the locker room with her broom over her shoulder and Thjalfe trailing along in her wake. She always did her best thinking while flying, and she had plenty to think about.

Lucius. Strange how he'd gone from enemy to lover over the course of the year. She hadn't expected it at all. But he'd been civil, then friendly and it was obvious that he was trying to be nice. And he knew a great deal about Quidditch; their conversations were truly enjoyable. It didn't hurt a bit that he was a handsome man, with a well-toned body.

And he was very, very good at adult games. She grimaced. It wasn't his fault that she was in this situation. She'd been enjoying his attentions, and she'd frankly been careless. She didn't want to tell Lucius until she figured out what she wanted.

She kicked off the ground and sent her broom into a long lazy series of loops maneuvers she could accomplish in her sleep. So what did she want? Her years of coaching had taught her that children from happy, stable homes were generally successful, productive adults. She reached up a hand and stroked her Familiar where he was perched on her shoulder.

Back up a minute. Do I really want a child? That's the first question. The answer, she decided a few minutes later, was an unequivocal 'yes'. The wizarding world needed children to replace those who had died during the war. She knew she would be a good parent.

So then. Child yes. But should she tell Lucius? That was a thornier question. She didn't want him feeling trapped into 'doing the right thing'*If I tell him, he'll feel pressured to ask me to marry him. If I don't, he'll feel betrayed when he finds out.* She wasn't going to kid herself that he wouldn't find out.*So I guess I'll tell him and then tell him that I won't marry him.*

It didn't feel right. She sent her broom into spirals and urged it to greater speed, unhappily.*There's got to be a solution for this. If it weren't for the child, I'd...* She paused at the thought, and then a grin broke over her face. *That's the ticket!* Elated, she executed a series of loop-the-loops and intricate spirals, exulting in the speed and control.

~*~

"All these greenhouses," Neville said to Millie, "and they're not using them nearly as efficiently as they could. Look here there's so much wasted space." He pointed to a corner where Professor Sprout kept stacks of storage trays.

"But do we want to encourage efficiency?" she replied, looking around the greenhouse they were in with a slightly jaundiced eye.

"Why not?"

"Think about it. If they don't make best use of what they have, they'll need us even more in the future."

"I guess so... but that just doesn't seem right." He leaned against a work table. "It feels like cheating somehow."

Millie rolled her eyes. "Cheating? Why?"

"I don't know. It... I know Professor Sprout... it..." He ground to a stop. "It isn't right."

"It's business. Just good business. There's nothing wrong with that."

"My great great-uncle Ebenezer used to think that."

"Used to?" Millie was intrigued. "What happened to change his mind?"

"He said his business partner a man named Jacob made a very convincing argument, but I never heard any details." Neville shrugged. "Since then, my family hasn't been that interested in business."

"Whereas my family has built a thriving one from nearly nothing over the past generation." She let out a long breath. "I think we can help each other. My business savvy will keep us well-off, but your conscience will keep us from trampling on others."

Neville looked much happier. "I like that idea." He stuck out a hand. "Shake on it?"

The Slytherin grinned. "I've a better idea. Let's seal the bargain with a kiss."

Neville blushed brightly. "Um, I've... I mean..."

"Shut up and kiss me."

~*~

After a long nap filled with tingly-making dreams, a hot bath, and a good lunch, Hermione felt much better. So much better, in fact, that she decided to corner the Potions Master and discuss the removal of the curse with him. While she agreed that he had been correct in tabling the discussion temporarily, she was determined to have it out with him and the sooner the better.

Unfortunately for her peace of mind, Snape was nowhere to be found. He wasn't in the strongly warded lab, nor the library, nor in the Potions classroom, which was, surprisingly, unlocked. Hermione considered the idea of knocking on the door to his quarters for approximately .01 seconds, and then discarded the notion, albeit reluctantly.

"He'd kill me," she told Crookshanks who had been following her around in her search for the professor. She sat down at her desk and sighed. "He'd bloody well kill me and chop me up for potions ingredients."

"An interesting idea," said a disembodied voice from the front of the classroom. "I could couple it with three feet of parchment on the potions which contain human body parts."

Hermione squeaked in embarrassment. "Oh! You weren't supposed to hear that!"

"Obviously not." Snape faded into view, seated at his desk. "What heinous crime were you planning that I might consider a capital offense?"

"I... I..." She stammered and took a deep breath. "We need to talk about that curse. And why were you invisible?"

"I am attempting to modify the Concealment potion to make it more useful," he replied. "True Invisibility potions are quite costly and difficult to produce, as I'm sure you already know."

"Yes, sir. There are two basic types of Invisibility potions. One requires, um, residue, from a ghost earth from the grave, bones, or similar. The other type requires a large quantity of gold or mercury. Neither is terribly palatable, by all accounts."

"Exactly."

"The Concealment potion is made from relatively common and inexpensive ingredients," Hermione continued. "So if you can modify it, it would be extremely useful." She stopped and regarded him. "You are attempting to distract me, sir. We need to discuss that curse."

"More particularly how it was broken," he corrected. "Yes, I suppose we do."

"I had said that I wanted to be with you, and you said you would like that," she recalled. "We'd been talking about my apprenticeship."

"But were you talking solely of being my apprentice when you said that?" *This is madness, Severus. Madness! She's a student!*

She looked as uncomfortable as he felt. "No... I wasn't just speaking of that," she said slowly, softly. "When you said you would like that did you mean you would like having me as an apprentice?"

"I would enjoy a competent assistant, yes." At the disappointment on her face, he felt constrained to continue, "But that was not all I was referring to."

"What did you mean, then?"

Snape rose in a swift motion, his wand moving in what Hermione recognized as a series of quite powerful wards. When he was done, she was quite sure that no one and nothing could hear anything they said.

"I will only speak of it here and now, behind my wards. Contrary to popular belief, I do enjoy my job and would prefer not to be sacked for inappropriate behavior." He returned to his desk, but perched on the edge of it rather than sitting in his chair. "You are my student, Hermione, for the next several months. Until you have finished your schooling, there can be nothing between us."

"And after that, Severus?" She dared the intimacy of his first name. "You offered me an apprenticeship."

"Yes, and I will not rescind the offer. But I was not speaking of that." He snorted softly. "I am not an easy person to be with by any means. I am stubborn, callous, bad-tempered and sarcastic."

"I know you are. I'm not easy to deal with either." She propped her elbows on her desk and rested her chin on her hands. "I can't count how many times I've heard that in the last few years."

He ran one hand through his hair. "Let us have done with fencing. You attract me as no one else has in a long time." He flushed slightly, unused to making such bald declarations.

Hermione gaped in amazement, her heart pounding. *He does like me, at least a little!* Snape was still speaking, heedless of the color rising in his cheeks.

"I enjoy the time I spend with you. But I cannot, will not, jeopardize my position here or yours."

"Because I'm your student. That's only for a few months longer. What then?" She held her breath, waiting for his reply. *He can't send me away. Not after this!*

"There are no rules against liaisons between members of the staff here, so long as both are of age and unconstrained," Severus admitted. Thoughts of Minerva and Albus crossed his mind for a moment. "We would have to be able to separate out our professional relationship from a more personal one. It would not be easy."

The absurdity of the situation struck him then, and he gave a short barking laugh. "Lord what fools we mortals be!"

She wasn't quite sure what he found amusing, and resolved to ask him about the Shakespeare misquote later.

"Listen to us," he continued, chuckling. "We sound like we are a pair already!"

Now she burst into laughter also. "We do, don't we."

After a few moments, he sobered. "I do not believe we are fated to be together, but I am not averse to exploring a potential friendship." He paused for a second. "After you finish school, of course."

"I think that a thorough exploration would be an excellent idea."

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter 13 of 20

Chaos ensues when the Familiars at Hogwarts decide to play matchmaker.

Chapter Thirteen

The dorm room was lonely, Neville thought morosely. With Seamus and Ron both gone, neither Dean nor Harry spent much time there any more. Dean had sneaked out to be with his current girlfriend, and Harry was down in the Common Room, where he'd been spending most nights since he returned from St. Mungo's. Even Trevor was sound asleep. Ignoring the stiff breeze that blew across the lake, the young wizard threw open the windows and let the night air fill the room. The clean cold wind ruffled his hair and danced through the dorm, leaving dust motes spinning madly in its wake. There was music on the wind. It took Neville a moment to realize it. Horn, harp, and drum spun and flowed around him, almost too faint to hear. As he listened, the music grew louder, winding around his soul and searching out his dreams, the ones he acknowledged and the ones he'd never dared speak aloud.

Something went *snap* inside his mind, and the music swelled within him. It filled him, quenching a thirst he didn't know he had. Hardly realizing what he was doing, he grabbed Harry's Firebolt and climbed out onto the window ledge. "Up!" As soon as the broomstick touched his hand, he straddled it, grabbed the stave in a firm grip, and took off toward the Siren's call coming from the Forbidden Forest.

It was only a few moments before he touched down at the edge of the woods. From here he could hear voices singing as well. Voices of angels, he thought with the part of his mind that wasn't filled with the music. Voices like church bells and songs like those in his dreams. He couldn't understand the words, but he felt the meaning behind them. Leaving the broomstick behind, he picked his way through the forest, ever drawn by what he heard. He splashed across a stream and saw moving lights in a clearing ahead. Cautiously, he peeked around a tree, amazed at the sight before him. Pale and terrible, beautiful as crystalline ice, the Sidhe danced and sang around their fire, while one played an ivory harp and another a silver drum. The brass notes of a horn played by a third gamboled around the dancers.

Neville had never seen anything like them before. They leaped through the figures of their dances with a wild agility that he could only envy. Never missing a note or a step, they sang and danced as the moon rose high and then began to sink again. Only then did he realize he'd been standing there, leaning against the tree, for hours.

As he turned to make his way back to the edge of the forest, a dry branch crackled underfoot. Within moments, the Sidhe had surrounded him and pulled him gently enough into the light of their fire.

"What do you here, mortal?" one asked. He sounded more curious than angry.

"I was listening to your music," Neville replied promptly enough. He couldn't imagine why he wasn't terrified, but he wasn't. "It's beautiful. It's the most beautiful thing I've ever heard."

The Sidhe exchanged startled glances with each other. "Mortals don't usually hear us," said the drummer, peering into his face. "Most odd."

"Should we kill him and be done with it," asked one of the dancers as he shook out the silvery fall of his hair. "Mortals have no business here."

"This one hears us, Erias. We should not kill him out of hand." That was the harpist. He fingered the strings of his instrument, plucking out an arpeggio. "Are you a musician, mortal?"

"Not the way you are. I play a little on the violin." Despite all this talk of killing, he still wasn't terrified. A little nervous, perhaps, but not paralyzed with fear.

The other Sidhe clustered around Neville. "I would expect a musician to hear us," the horn-player mused aloud, "but you say you are not one. It is a puzzle."

The harpist resumed his seat on a fallen log. "There is more of the night left, Achrion. Enough for another song or two." He struck two chords and launched into a slow soft tune. Half a measure later the drummer joined in. Achrion raised an eyebrow, but pulled his horn from his belt and placed it to his lips. The dancers formed up in a circle around the fire, pulling Neville into their midst. All his clumsiness melted away as the music spun and flowed around them.

When the false dawn lit the sky, the Sidhe reluctantly put down their instruments. "We vanish with the day, mortal," Erias told him. "But this night will live in our songs." He slid a ring off his forefinger and wrapped Neville's hand around it. "A token of our regard. Come and dance with us again." The last words were difficult to hear as they melted into the morning mist.

Neville looked at the ring on his palm for a long moment. Wearing it openly would raise questions that he did not want to answer. The thin silver band winked at him in the morning sun. "Confound it," he said aloud as he slipped it over his forefinger just as Erias had worn it.

~*~

"If I didn't know better," Snape grouched to Duster a few days later, "I would think that someone or something is conspiring against us." After the initial success of the first stage of the Animagus Potion, he and Hermione expected a relatively easy time with the second stage. This view turned out to be overly optimistic.

The Potions Master contemplated the latest failed experiment. "This is the third failure, Duster. First that flawed beaker shattered and contaminated the ingredients. Then Peeves somehow got past my wards and wrecked the next attempt. This time..." He glowered at the bright purple potion gently bubbling in the cauldron. "It should be blue, not purple. And it should be much more viscous more like a gel than a liquid."

Hermione entered the lab then, her arms laden with books. "I'm going to cross-check all the ingredients again. May I borrow your copy of *Double, Double?*"

Snape nodded assent. "While you are doing that, I will discuss this with Professors Flitwick and McGonagall. Perhaps we need to modify the Charm portion slightly. Please annotate our notes with the results as well." He swept out of the room in a flurry of black robes.

She set the books down on the table, and looked at the potion. "He's right. It should've been blue or at least bluer. I wonder if some of the ingredients were contaminated." She took out a clean piece of parchment and a quill, and began writing. "Experiment #3: failure. Potion is definitely purple instead of blue, and far too liquid. Will cross-check ingredients for interactions, and discuss modification of the Charm. We should definitely examine this failure to eliminate possible contamination." The notation done, she blew gently on the ink to dry it and set the parchment aside.

Cleaning up the lab was relatively easy. She filled three large vials with the potion, being sure to label them clearly. The rest of the potion went down the sink. Then she scrubbed the cauldron and left it to drain. Chores done, she retrieved *Double, Double* from Snape's desk and sat down to begin the process of rechecking their work.

Once he was sure she was absorbed in her reading, Duster left the lab and went in search of Crookshanks. Their pets were not easily discouraged, and he was running out of ideas. "It's one thing," he grouched to his partner-in-crime, "to let Animagi speak to humans while transformed. But we cannot let them complete this next stage."

"Agreed. Allowing them to understand animals and Familiars by extension would put us at great risk of discovery. What did you do to the potion this time?"

"I adjusted the heat upwards several degrees while they were both out of the room. We can't do anything too obvious, or they'll realize something is not right. Sev is already becoming suspicious."

"Letting Peeves in the lab was brilliant; it's too bad we can't do that again."

"I was hoping he'd get into the supply cabinet and completely destroy some of the more costly ingredients," Duster said. "I suppose that will be my next step."

"How are you going to cover it up?"

"I'm not. I'm going to let one of them 'accidentally' lock me in the cabinet over night."

Crookshanks cat-smiled and scratched one ear with a large orange paw. "It would be best if you arranged to have Severus do that. If he thought Hermione did it, he would get angry with her."

"Excellent thinking. We have two days before they should begin brewing it again. I understand there is an infestation of rats in the kitchen storeroom. Shall we do something about that?"

"Yes!" The two cats streaked down to the storeroom and spent the day decimating the rat colony.

~*~

Argus shuffled into the Great Hall for breakfast with Ivy beside him and Hephaestus trailing them both. As usual, they were the first of the staff to arrive. Taking their customary seats, they ordered breakfast from one of the house-elves, not forgetting to ask for a plate for the fluffy grey Persian. Bumpy, the elf who took care of their quarters, had already provided a breakfast for Mrs. Norris and the kittens.

"We need t' find homes for them kits," Argus said, reaching for the Marmite. "I been thinkin' that Albus might like one."

Ivy considered the question over her poached eggs. "Albus has Fawkes. But there's three or four youngsters in my House who don't have Familiars. I'm sure there's more in the other Houses."

"We'll jus' make sure they know an' like cats," the caretaker replied definitively. "Ain't no good will come of it otherwise."

The staff table slowly filled, each taking their favorite seat. Albus had asked everyone to be present, as he had an announcement to make. Naturally, however, he and Minerva were the last to arrive, which provided the others a rare opportunity to speculate on the nature of the announcement.

"He and Minerva are finally going to get married," predicted Flitwick.

"Nonsense," Irma Pince returned. "The Headmaster is going to announce an increase in the budget for new reference tomes."

"Naw," Argus contributed, "e's going to have us band t'gether and blast them Sidhe outta the Forest."

"I have Seen it with my Inner Eye," Sybil Trelawney proclaimed. "Albus will announce the formation of a fifth House to hold these transfer students we are receiving from Durmstrang. It shall be called 'Dumbledore', of course, and shall have a black and purple phoenix as its symbol." She waved one hand theatrically. "Of course, this House shall be famous for the number of Seers it produces."

Their speculations were cut short by the arrival of the Headmaster and Deputy Headmistress. They strolled in arm-in-arm, paying no mind to the mounting irritation on the part of the rest of the Hogwarts faculty. Fawkes was perched on Dumbledore's head, making it appear that he was wearing a squashy red-feathered cap.

"Finally!" Snape muttered to Flitwick who was sitting beside him. "Now we can find out what this nonsense is all about."

"Good morning!" Albus beamed a smile around the table. "I'm sure you're all wondering why I've asked you to be sure to come to breakfast this morning." He assisted Minerva into her chair with a flourish and took his own seat. "Muffins, please!" A plate of hot blueberry muffins promptly appeared in front of him. He broke one apart and buttered it, his smile growing even wider if that were possible.

"Albus," Xiamora Hooch had had enough. "What is this announcement you wish to make?"

"All in good time, my dear." The Headmaster looked up at the sound of wings. "Ah, there's the post."

"The post be damned," she whispered to Lucius. "The more Albus hedges, the worse it's going to be for us."

The headmaster was oblivious to anything but the various letters falling onto the table like snowflakes. Poppy exchanged an exasperated look with Ardis Vector. Firenze folded his arms over his chest and regarded the ceiling as if it were the most interesting thing he'd ever seen. Finally even Minerva had had enough. "Albus!"

"Yes, Minerva?" He looked up from the letter he was reading.

"We are all here, waiting for you to make your announcements. I'm sure many of us have other things we should be doing."

Bright blue eyes twinkled at her. "Very well, then." He put down the letter he was reading and raised his voice slightly so everyone at the staff table could hear him. "I do have a few announcements to make, and it's much easier if everyone can hear them all at once. First, we will be holding a Saint Valentine's Day dance. I expect everyone to attend." He shot a particular glance at Snape who glared right back at him. "This gives you a fortnight's notice, so you will have plenty of time to clear your calendars. Students will be excused from detentions for this one night. Everyone will be expected to dance at least once, as well as spend three hours on chaperone duty."

"I think that a dance is an excellent idea," Poppy said. "It will give the students a chance for an evening of fun before they begin studying for their OWLs and NEWTs."

"Next," Albus continued, "there has been some discussion about forming a fifth House. After due consideration, Minerva and I have decided that this is not the future we wish for Hogwarts. Therefore, the influx of new students we are to receive will be handled by Sorting them into the four existing Houses."

Sybil looked crushed. Firenze put a gentle hand on her shoulder.

"On that note, I have yet to receive any recommendations for assistants from you. I need those by the end of the day. Otherwise I will have to use my best judgment."

Nothing like a subtle threat to get everyone to fall in line, Snape thought to himself as he speared another slice of pumpernickel. Judging from the sour expressions on his colleagues' faces, they had come to the same conclusion.

"I would like you to consider Susan Bones as an assistant for me," Poppy said into the silence. "I know she is young for the job, but she has the right temperament. She has planned to become a Healer, so a few years as an assistant would be an excellent entry on her C.V."

That started a new train of thought in Snape's mind. Perhaps Miss Granger would be willing to become his assistant as well as Apprentice. True, it would probably extend her Apprenticeship for a year, but it would save him the annoyance of managing more than one person. He would ask her immediately.

"Liam Carpe you remember him from ten years ago, don't you Albus? would be my first choice for an assistant for Charms," Flitwick told the headmaster.

Dumbledore nodded. "Yes, Mr. Carpe was quite inventive as I recall. And Poppy, I believe that Miss Bones would do well as your assistant. The rest of you by the end of the day." He rose, clearing his throat to get the attention of the students. "I am pleased to announce that we will be holding a Saint Valentine's Day dance this year, and all students are eligible to attend. Detentions will be canceled for that one evening. Thank you." He sat down again, oblivious to Argus' muttering.

"One more thing..." Heads shot up all around the staff table. "Minerva and I are getting married."

~*~

With a dance looming in the not-too-distant future, it was no wonder that the students were slightly distracted for most of the day. Minerva McGonagall was not pleased to have to take points from her own House for inattention. Finally, the overly long day wound down with the seventh year Gryffindors. She looked over her oldest students, the ones she considered her best and brightest. Until Poppy had mentioned it, the idea of taking an assistant that young hadn't occurred to her.

She'd been dismayed to discover that most adult witches and wizards particularly those who held anything resembling qualifications were not interested in taking a low-paying job as an assistant professor. In fact, at least two of the eight people she'd contacted had said that the proposed starting salary was far too low. She would have to talk to Albus. But in the meantime...

Minerva turned her attention back to her students. Mr. Potter was making a respectable attempt at recovering his grades. Unless he received another setback, he would do well on his NEWTs. He had his heart set on playing professional Quidditch, and she would do everything she could to help him achieve that goal.

Miss Brown and Mr. Longbottom, seated directly behind Mr. Potter, were simply dismal in Transfiguration. Neither would do as an assistant. Besides, she knew they had other interests. She wouldn't be at all surprised if Sybil offered Miss Brown an assistantship. Poor Mr. Longbottom, though, was just not suited for the academic life.

Mr. Thomas across the aisle was a possibility. He was quite competent, and he freely admitted that he had no idea what he wanted to do once he'd left school.

Her eyes grew suspiciously moist as they tracked over the two empty chairs the ones that were once occupied by Ron Weasley and Seamus Finnegan.

Miss Patil was another possibility. Minerva added her name to her mental list.

That left Miss Granger. She was in her customary spot in the front row. The harsh lines around Minerva's face softened just slightly as she looked at her favorite pupil. She would be an excellent assistant! "Miss Granger, please stay for a moment after class. I've something to discuss with you."

Hermione looked up and nodded, before returning her attention to the essay she was just finishing. As soon as the other students had left the room, Minerva offered her the Assistantship.

"You're young for such a position, I know," the older witch went on, "but it would look well on your C.V."

"Oh, um... I'm extremely flattered, professor..."

"Excellent! I'll tell the Headmaster that it's all settled."

"Wait, professor! I can't... I mean, I've already accepted an Apprenticeship!"

Minerva looked shocked. "An Apprenticeship? With whom? As your Head of House, I would've liked to have been informed."

"I'm sorry, professor. I hadn't told anyone else yet."

"Well then," Minerva was somewhat mollified, "what are you apprenticing in? Charms? Transfiguration?"

"Potions." Hermione took a long breath. "Potions, with Professor Snape."

Minerva sat down slowly. "He is a Master, and you would certainly learn a lot from him, I admit. But would you be happy as an Apprentice? If Sev Professor Snape were to insist on the traditional contract, you would have no time to call your own. Apprenticeships are traditionally unpaid positions as well. An assistantship, on the other hand, would leave you with time to pursue your own studies, as well as provide you a living wage."

Hermione looked stubborn. "I'm aware of that, professor. But an assistantship doesn't provide me with any certifications."

"Well, I shan't try to change your mind, Miss Granger. I do hope it's everything you expect it to be. Get along to your next class, now."

~*~

The soft thud of a closing door nearby brought Crookshanks out of a sound sleep. He jumped off Hermione's bed without waking her, and oozed out into the hallway, carefully remaining in the shadows. A figure scuttled out of the boys' dorm and down the stairs toward the Common Room. Curious and slightly concerned, the gingery kneazle followed.

His senses, sharper than an ordinary cat's, told him that it was the Potter human. Crookshanks bared his fangs in a soundless snarl; that whelp would not upset their plans again. Oddly, though, the human didn't seem inclined to do anything once he got to the Common Room. Instead, he sat down in one of the chairs and gave every appearance of waiting for something.

Crookshanks sensed the ghost before it faded into view. It wasn't Nearly-Headless-Nick, though. This was the ghost of a young man. In fact, it was the ghost of that red-haired human who'd been sniffing after Hermione for a time.

"Hello, Ron," Potter said softly.

"Hello, Harry." The ghost sat down in one of the other chairs. "All right there?"

"All right, I suppose." A pause. "I miss you."

"Well, mate, I wasn't planning on dying. Neither was Seamus. But if we hadn't disarmed Voldemort, things would've been a lot worse." The ghost put on a stern look. "Remember what I told you at St. Mungo's?"

The human nodded. "Yes. It's not Snape's fault that he's still alive when Sirius is dead. And it's not Malfoy's fault that he is alive when you are dead." He dropped his eyes and studied the floor. "It's not easy. I hated them both for so long."

"Right. That's why I came back after you made such a prat of yourself. I told you that you couldn't use Hermione as a lifeline to the past. You have to look to the future."

"I still don't see why I can't marry her though."

The ghost sighed. "Two reasons. One she'd be miserable as a Quidditch widow, following you around to games. She doesn't like the sport. Hell, she doesn't even like to fly. Two you want different things out of life. She wants a career of her own. You want a family. Think it through, Harry. It wouldn't work out." Now he grinned. "You've made a good start by setting aside the hate you were carrying around. Now look at your options. There are other girls here."

"Ginny plays Quidditch," Potter mused half to himself.

"That she does. You've been part of my family for a long time, Harry. Would be nice to make it official." The ghost waved an ethereal hand at the chess table. "While you're mulling over that, shall we play? I'll spot you a castle and still beat you."

As they set up the chess pieces, Crookshanks left the room and went back to Hermione. Nothing like being haunted to turn someone around! I had wondered why Potter started behaving. That was one less worry. Now he could go back to concentrating on his pet.

~*~

By the eve of the Saint Valentine's Day dance, Severus was half-convinced that there were indeed forces working against them. Every time they attempted to brew the potion that would allow an Animagus to communicate with other animals, something went wrong. Miss Granger was taking the lack of success quite personally, although he'd assured her that he would not hold it against her.

They stood together in the lab, regarding their latest attempt their tenth dismal failure. "I checked and double-checked all the ingredients," Hermione said. "And I had them in tamper-proof containers to prevent contamination."

Snape dipped a spoon in the cauldron and gave the oily green liquid a poke. "Green, instead of blue. That indicates an issue with..."

"Improper temperature," she finished. "I know I set the temperature correctly. I checked it. You doublechecked it."

"So you did, and so did I." He ran a hand through his hair in a rare gesture of frustration.

"It's like someone's working against us, making sure something goes wrong with the brewing process," she said. "I guess that sounds silly."

"On the contrary, Miss Granger, I had almost reached that conclusion myself. I refuse to believe in this level of coincidence."

"But why would someone want to prevent this?" She sat down at her desk and propped her chin on her hands. "It's not dangerous. It can't hurt anyone."

"The more interesting question is: who. Consider what we have dealt with. Peeves got into the lab. That means someone knows how to take down my wards without alerting me. Ingredients have gone missing or been contaminated but only those ingredients that we use in this potion. We have had equipment failures the cracked cauldron and flawed beaker. Lastly, at least twice, we have failed to maintain proper temperature. I refuse to believe that we are both so careless."

"So whoever it is knows what ingredients we are using, has access to our lab and our storeroom, and knows something about brewing potions."

"And is quite good at evading detection charms." Snape grimaced. "I added a few extra frills to the wards here last night."

"I don't think a student is responsible," Hermione declared. "I think I could break your wards so could most of the seventh year students but not without alerting you."

"I agree." The Potions Master leaned against his desk. "That leaves the faculty and staff. Albus and Minerva could certainly remove my wards without my knowledge. Filius could probably do the same. Minerva, though, is the only one who knows what we're working on."

"What about the house-elves," she asked, thinking of Kreacher. "I know it sounds silly, but..."

"That is a possibility that is more palatable than the alternative. It is difficult to persuade a house-elf to revolt, but it can be done. There's that free house-elf that Dumbledore hired."

"Dobby? He wouldn't do something like this without a good reason." She tilted her head to one side as a thought struck her. "If Harry were still being a prat, I'd be inclined to suspect him of trying to scuttle our project so I'd lose interest in it. Dobby would help him; he worships him."

"Mr. Potter has been remarkably well-behaved of late, I'll allow." The Potions Master picked up the cauldron and dumped the contents down the sink. "I agree that he is not likely to be behind our trouble here."

"The ingredients were contaminated with cat hair the night Duster was locked in the supply cabinet accidentally," Hermione said thoughtfully, tactfully avoiding mentioning that it was Snape who had locked up the cabinet that night. "Something's been bothering me about that." She went over to the cabinet and opened the doors. "Look at the way the shelves are laid out. I don't see how you could fail to notice him. It's not like he's a kitten."

Snape stroked his chin thoughtfully. "True. That means that someone put him in there after we left."

"Or maybe he put himself there," Hermione said half-jokingly. "Crookshanks likes to get into inconvenient places sometimes." Her grin faded slowly. "Professor, what makes a wizard pet different from a Muggle pet?"

"That is quite the non sequitur, even for you," Snape replied. "I think you might get a better answer asking Hagrid."

She snorted inelegantly. "Hagrid's nice enough, but he's not the best at providing serious in-depth answers. I know wizard owls are a lot smarter than Muggle owls. Are they bred specially? If not, what makes the difference?"

Snape opened his mouth to answer and then closed it again. "I really don't know the answer to that. Why do you ask?"

"It just seems... every time something strange happens, one or more of our Familiars I mean all the Familiars at the school are around."

"An interesting thought," he replied slowly. "I think there might be some merit to it. Now, however, we have the unpleasant duty of attending that dance."

Hermione made a face. "I don't suppose we could 'forget'? No, I guess not." Then she grinned impishly. "Will I need to rescue you from Madame Pince tonight?"

Snape almost smiled. "If Irma attempts to corner me again, I shall certainly ask for your assistance."

Up on the beams of the room, out of sight, a gingery kneazle and a large black tomcat exchanged worried looks.

~*~

"This is going to be a blast!" Dennis Creevey exulted as he entered the Gryffindor Common Room. "It got me out of detention with Filch tonight. And I don't have to make it up! Hullo, Neville! New robes?"

"Err, yes," Neville replied nervously as he sidled toward the portrait. "My Gran got them for me."

"Who are you taking to this dance? Hannah again?"

"Um, no. I'm going with Millie."

"Millie? Don't know her. Oh well. See you there!" He let Neville escape, and waved at the other boys who were piling into the room to wait for their dates.

"Scuse, please!" Colin elbowed his way through the mob, careful not to muss his lime-green dress robes. "Coming through!"

"Where are you off to?" Harry asked, self-consciously pulling his own robes straight.

"Ravenclaw Tower. I'm taking Luna to the dance."

Harry shook his head as Colin departed, his ubiquitous camera in hand. "They're both ditzes. It should be interesting."

"What would?" Ginny wanted to know, as she bounced down the stairs and took his arm. "I'm ready, Harry." She was stunning in deep-blue robes that matched her eyes and set off her hair.

He grinned down at her, feeling good for the first time in far too long. Ron was right; Ginny was a better match for him than Hermione. "Colin and Luna." Then he opened the portrait with a flourish. "Shall we?"

Hermione trailed after the other couples, not caring that she had no escort. No one had even asked her this time, for which she was grateful. The only person she wanted to dance with was Severus.

As they entered the Great Hall, the couples split off in various directions. Harry and Ginny headed for the dance-floor. Dean and Parvati for the refreshments, and so on. Hermione faded back into a relatively quiet corner and scanned the room for Professor Snape.

He wasn't anywhere in sight, but she did see Filch guarding a large basket. Curiously, she moved closer, trying not to be obvious. As the first dance ended, the caretaker adroitly intercepted Ginny. Hermione couldn't quite hear what he said, but the look on her face was one of consternation that quickly changed to amazement followed by pleasure. Harry's expression mirrored hers. The two followed him over to the basket, and Ginny knelt down beside it. By this time, Hermione was close enough to hear.

"Oh they're beautiful, Mr. Filch! Don't you think so, Harry?"

Harry nodded, a grin on his face. "Absolutely."

Ginny rose, a small black and orange kitten in her hands. "Are they old enough to leave their mother? You're sure?"

"Yes'm. They've been eatin' on their own fer a while." Filch extended a long bumpy finger and gently stroked the kitten's head. "Be good to him now. We wouldn't let 'em go to just anyone, y'know."

Hermione watched this little drama in surprised silence. Kittens! She shook her head in bemusement.

"Something funny, Miss Granger?"

She turned around and looked up at Professor Snape, still smiling. "Mr. Filch is apparently offering kittens to students. He just gave one to Ginny."

"He offered me one earlier today, but I already have Duster. I like cats well enough, but would rather not go through the kitten stage again."

"I don't blame you. Crooks was well beyond that when I got him." She looked past his shoulder. "Madame Pince is bearing down on you like a hungry wolf."

"Blast." Snape held out a hand. "They've just started a waltz. Would you do me the honor?"

"Certainly!" They weren't the only student teacher couple on the floor; Ardis Vector was partnering Dean Thomas for this dance. Ginny and Harry swung onto the floor beside them and Hermione tensed in anticipation of an ugly scene. Instead, her old friend nodded civilly and waltzed away.

~*~

Lucius couldn't find it in himself to be too harsh with the students he caught in various stages of dishabille the evening of the Saint Valentine's dance. After all, it was a romantic occasion. He was currently taking advantage of a dark corner to thoroughly investigate Xia's charms. That she was reciprocating enthusiastically only added to his pleasure. In the back of his mind, he contemplated all the possible outcomes of his plan for the later evening. If the worst happened, he did have a fine bottle of wine sitting in his quarters.

"It's too bad we have to chaperon the students," he whispered into her left ear.

She ran a long-fingered hand down the side of his face. "Yes, but it's only for a few hours. We've the rest of the night and there're no classes tomorrow."

"True enough." He cocked his head toward the Hall. "Would m'lady do me the honor of joining me in a dance or two?"

"I'd love to!" They linked arms and went inside. The musicians had just struck up a tango, and very few couples dared the dance floor. Nearly Headless Nick was doing a fine job of it with the Grey Lady, and Albus was leading Minerva through intricate figures that made Lucius suspect the use of magic. Of the students, Ted Nott and Lavender Brown were clearly the best, followed by the Thomas boy and Miss Bones from Hufflepuff. With a smile, Lucius led Xia out onto the floor.

She felt good in his arms. Like she belonged there. They were so attuned to each other that it was almost unclear who was leading whom. He was unaware of the other couples clearing the floor and leaving it to them. There was only her and the music and their passion for each other. As the tango ended, they made their way to the refreshment table where he poured them each a tumbler of pumpkin juice. "Not my beverage of first choice," he said, "but it will do to quench the thirst."

She clinked her glass against his. "To good friends! May we remain ever so."

He obediently drank the toast, though he wondered if that was all she wanted of him. "Xia... I believe we've fulfilled our obligations here. Shall we go someplace quieter?"

"I'd like that." They worked their way around the perimeter of the room and made their escape. The rest of the school was virtually deserted, and they strolled through the halls, arm in arm. "Lucius, I've been thinking about us."

"As have I." That was the perfect opening. "I realize we haven't know each other long, but I enjoy your company greatly." He took a long breath. "I would like to formalize our relationship."

She tilted her head to one side. "Formalize how?" *He can't mean what I think what I hope he means. Can he?*

"I have thought about it for this past week, and I cannot think of anyone else I would like to spend my life with." He turned his hands palm up. "Xia, I want to marry you."

She took his hands in hers. "Oh, Lucius, I was going to ask you!" Before he could do more than smile, she continued, "but I need to tell you something first." Now it was her turn to take a long breath. "I'm pregnant."

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter 14 of 20

Chaos ensues when the Familiars at Hogwarts decide to play matchmaker.

Chapter Fourteen

"I have to say, Albus, that I think Miss Granger may be making a mistake trying to combine an Assistantship and an Apprenticeship. At the very least, it will take her an extra year to complete the latter."

"Two more years," the Headmaster corrected absently, twirling the end of his beard with one hand as he watched the couples on the dance floor.

"Two years!" Minerva almost exploded. "Where did you get that figure?"

"Oh, Severus and Miss Granger came to me to finalize the arrangements it was the evening I made the announcement about the dance. I'm sure I mentioned it..." He trailed off at the growing scowl on his lover's face. "Perhaps I got distracted."

"I'd say so," Minerva agreed without softening her glare. "Two extra years! Severus has nearly doubled the length of time required!"

"Now really, Minerva, Miss Granger did agree to it. You can't fault Severus. Besides, he's agreed that she should draw the standard Assistantship salary for the entire five years."

"Well I should hope so," Minerva replied with some asperity. "What were the other terms of the agreement? As the Deputy Headmistress, I am entitled to know."

She's altogether too clever, Albus thought a trifle ruefully. "Severus insisted on the traditional terms of an Apprenticeship. I know you wanted her for your assistant, but I'm quite sure that Miss Patil will be more than adequate."

Minerva grumbled quietly to herself. Albus was right. As usual.

"Besides," the Headmaster continued, "it isn't as if you'll never see Miss Granger. She'll be here, after all."

"True enough. I'll have to rearrange Gryffindor Tower to accommodate a suite for her. Perhaps we can add a fourth level."

"That won't be necessary. She won't be staying in the tower."

"And why not? She is a Gryffindor, after all!" *The best and brightest my House has produced in a long time,* she added silently.

"As is Miss Patil, yet she is planning to take rooms on the fourth floor corridor."

"Touché. Has Miss Granger indicated what rooms she wishes?"

The Headmaster looked a bit uncomfortable. "Severus insisted that Miss Granger's suite be located in the dungeons where they would be convenient to both the lab and the Potions classroom."

~*~

"You're being quiet tonight," Millie observed as she and Neville made their way out into the garden after sharing the first three dances. In deference to the cold, she cast Warming Charms on their cloaks. "In fact, you've been very quiet for the last few days. What's wrong?" She sat down on one of the benches and looked up at him. "Are you back to that 'can't trust Slytherins' nonsense?"

Neville let out a sigh. "It's not a secret exactly. Just something I don't know if I should talk about it." He sat down next to her on the bench and looked down at his hands. The Sidhe's ring gleamed on his finger. "It there's something I've been invited to do that no one will understand."

"I won't promise that I'll understand, but I will promise to try. And I won't tell anyone else."

Neville reached out and broke a dead stem off one of the rose bushes. "Watch this." He hummed several bars of the Sidhe's music. As he did, the stem turned green and burst into bloom. Ever since the *snap* inside his mind, he'd found his abilities growing in ways he'd never expected. This was one of them.

"That's incredible," Millie gasped. "I knew you were good in Herbology, but I've never heard of anything like that!"

He handed her the roses. "That's only part of it. There's more." A long breath. "I went to a dance the other night."

Her eyes narrowed as she thought aloud. "There wasn't any sort of dance here, and none in Hogsmeade. What sort of dance was it? A Muggle dance."

Despite himself, Neville chuckled. "Muggle? Not hardly!" The chuckle faded. "I saw the Sidhe dancing in the Forbidden Forest." Slowly, he told her about his adventure, and the invitation that came after. "And since then," he concluded, "I haven't felt the same. I feel more alive, somehow." He held up his hand, showing her the ring. "I don't know what they meant by this either."

"Legend says that if the Sidhe grant a token of regard, it's like becoming part of that band," Millie said thoughtfully. "I would bet that the Headmaster could tell you more about them. Or Professor Malfoy! He probably knows a lot that he didn't go over in class! Let's go find him and ask!" She jumped to her feet.

"I think we'd better wait," Neville replied, pointing off in the distance where two figures on broomsticks danced through the air. "I think he's busy right now."

~*~

The two fliers dipped and swerved fifty feet above the ground, cutting figure-eights and intricate spirals in three dimensions. Shoulder to shoulder, almost touching, displaying an exultant jubilation that could be expressed no other way. Above them, the night sky was an infinite velvet canopy of the deepest blue picked out with shining points of silver light.

They landed in the middle of the Quidditch Pitch finally, glee-filled and laughing. Brooms on their shoulders, they trekked back toward the school. It was only natural that Lucius should put an arm around her shoulders. It was only right that she should put her arm around his waist.

"It's been a wonderful evening," Xiamora said.

"And we shall have many more such," he replied, pulling her closer. "I can't imagine what our fellow faculty will say when we announce our engagement."

She nodded. "Won't they be surprised!"

~*~

Three days after the Saint Valentine's dance, Hermione and Snape completed their latest brewing attempt a failure like its predecessors. The Potions Master said nothing as they cleaned up the lab. He simply gestured for her to follow him once the task was done.

Curiously she trailed along in his wake. He seemed more preoccupied than angry. They left the castle and followed the lake shore away from the school. They were well past Hogwarts' wards by her estimation when he finally stopped.

"One moment more, Miss Granger." Snape took out his wand and began setting up a series of privacy and shielding spells. Once she realized what he was doing, she added a low-level camouflage spell to the wards he was raising. He nodded in approval. "That will do."

"Someone would have to know exactly where we are in order to track us," she said. "And the wards at the school could alert someone there to the spell-casting. So this is meant to be a completely private conversation."

"Exactly." He took a small parcel from a pocket and opened it. It was a hand-sized mirror wrapped in silk. "I left this in the lab last night with a *Recollo* spell on it. If someone at Hogwarts is responsible for tampering with our brewing, I prefer to find out without alerting them to the fact."

"I didn't know you could cast that Recording spell on an object," Hermione replied, looking at the mirror intently. "I read that it's primarily used in the making of Pensieves. What is the replay spell... *Audius*? No, that's for hearing."

"*Praefero*." The silvery face of the mirror blackened, and then cleared to show the cauldron standing over the gentle flames. Despite the small size, the image was sharp and clear. Their mirror-selves added the final ingredients, and left the room. For a short time all was quiet, then there was a tiny thump from the mirror and two feline forms, one dark and one gingery, oozed into view and stared at the cauldron.

"The flames," Snape said a moment later. "Look!"

"They're much lower than they should be. The cats must have changed the temperature! Now what is Duster doing?" The cat had stretched to his full length and was shaking a paw over the cauldron.

"Adding something, I'd warrant. Enough to contaminate it, but not enough to be easy to detect, especially after a long simmering."

"Dust," Hermione guessed. "Dust picked up from the floor of the lab would have all sorts of minute magical components in it. That's brilliant! Fiendish, but brilliant! Our potion is sensitive to the purity of its ingredients."

After several more minutes, the cauldron flames returned to their original intensity, and the cats vanished. Snape let out a frustrated breath and returned the mirror to his pocket.

"I am at a loss," he said. "On the one hand, I'm pleased to have the mystery solved and impressed by the tenacity and cleverness of our Familiars. On the other, I am not sure what we can do to prevent future occurrences."

"We didn't have this problem with the first part of my potion. It works perfectly. So they don't object to Animagi talking to people. Just to animals. Why?"

"An excellent question. Perhaps we should ask them. I think it's obvious that they understand what we say. I don't know if they could answer though."

Hermione wrinkled her brow for a moment. "Do you remember when Harry kidnapped me and Professor Flitwick's dog and Madame Pomfrey's parrot helped me escape?"

"Yes, of course." Snape decided not to mention that the 'parrot' was more properly a macaw.

"I might have imagined it but I thought Swift actually spoke to me at one point. In English."

"I think it likely that you did not imagine it. How do you think we should proceed?"

An unholy, wicked grin settled on her face, making her look much more Slytherin than Gryffindor. "Does Veritaserum work on Familiars?"

~*~

The Familiars were in high good humor at their meeting. In fact, they were spending it in idle conversation rather than actively scheming. It was apparent, Fawkes thought to himself, that their plans were maturing quite nicely. His own pet, naturally, had presented no trouble.

He'd been worried about Thunder's pet, but that had proved to be no problem at all. Likewise, Hephaestus and Norris were making arrangements for their pets' marriage ceremony. He ran down his mental checklist, and looked over to the windowsill where Duster and Crookshanks were discussing something.

"And how is your project coming?" he asked.

The two cats exchanged looks, and Crookshanks replied. "We can't really push them into a more intimate relationship until after the school year ends. Since Hermione is working for Severus for the next few years, we have plenty of time for that."

"Of more importance," Duster continued, "is this potion they are working on. They are perilously close to success with it."

Fawkes nodded. "Yes, they cannot be allowed to complete it." He didn't have to explain the wizarding world would be thrown into total chaos if their pets found out exactly how much control and influence their Familiars exerted over their lives. It would not be pretty. In fact, it would be downright ugly.

"We are running out of ideas," Crookshanks said flatly. "They are both stubborn, and working together seems to make them more so."

"We have sabotaged multiple attempts, to no avail. They keep trying."

"In this case," the phoenix said, "have you considered making them forget about it?"

"We've discussed it," Duster replied. "It would be a complex task to do such a thing without leaving any sort of trail. As Albus and Minerva are aware of the project, you and Gambit would have to modify your pets' memories as well."

"And we'd have to make all their notes and all the samples disappear, plus come up with some way to account for all the time they've spent together. Yes, we've thought of it, and we decided it was far too difficult to do without leaving clues behind." Crookshanks scratched an ear. "Our pets would quickly realize that something wasn't right, and would bend their efforts to solving that mystery which would be just as disastrous."

"A pity, that." Fawkes said. "You are right, of course. Well, do what you must; that potion must not be completed." He looked around the room. "Topper! How is your plan coming along with Swift?"

The macaw looked up in surprise. "Slowly, and carefully. We do not wish to push too hard. Poppy is already muttering about Love Charms in the air. She is not truly suspicious yet, though."

"Our intention is to pursue this in greater depth during the summer when they have no students to worry about," the borzoi added. "Filius is busy with his duties as Head of House, especially as the school year winds down."

"Quite sensible," the phoenix agreed. He fluffed out his feathers in satisfaction. "In fact, it seems that the older pets are much more amenable to pairing up than the younger ones. Macavity, have you and Trevor any news to report?"

"There do not appear to be any problems with our pets," answered the gingery tomcat. "Neville was acting oddly for a few days, but that appears to have stopped after the last school dance. Trevor is watching him to be sure that no problems occur."

"Lavender is not ready to settle down," Shadow said, as the phoenix glanced in her direction. "It is not in a butterfly's nature to sit on a single blossom. She enjoys the time she's spent in the company of Chang's pet, but still is interested in other young men."

"That means she's flighty," Duster whispered softly to Crookshanks.

"Tis the nature of the beast," Chang added, ignoring the black tom's muttering. "Our pets are still quite young. Give them time, and they will grow into sense."

"We do not have that luxury!" Fawkes trilled. "A month or two even a year we could wait. But no longer. Humans take so long to mature, that we must not tarry if there are to be pets available for our future generations. You must try harder!" He looked around at the other Familiars. "You must all try harder!"

~*~

"Veritaserum?" Snape considered the suggestion. "Perhaps." He looked at the grin his assistant was wearing. "And it should prove quite enlightening. How would you suggest we induce them to swallow it?"

"It only takes a few drops to take effect. Perhaps we can spike their dinners with it."

"Do we need both? It might be easier to handle one angry cat than two."

"Yes, but they're both involved in scuttling our research. I'd like to pay them both back for it."

"Hmm." Snape's face twisted into an evil grin of his own. "You are on good terms with that house-elf, are you not?"

"Dobby? Yes, and Winky to a lesser extent. They've finally forgiven me for trying to liberate them."

"Excellent. I will provide you the Veritaserum, and you will instruct them to add it to the portions they bring out for our cats' dinner this evening. Be discreet, and be sure that they understand it is only for our cats. It would be disastrous if it got into the wrong food."

"Oh, Severus! That's a terrific idea!" Before she realized quite what she was doing, she threw her arms around the Potions Master and hugged him. For a single awful moment, she thought he would push her away, and then his arms were around her as well, and one of his hands was caressing her hair.

His body was hard and angular, like hugging a statue, except that he was warmer. Not at all like Seamus. She looked up at the man she was with, some part of her mind again making comparisons. Snape was much taller than the Irish boy had been. As their eyes met, she saw something glittering and unreadable in his. Then his lips brushed hers softly and gently.

It only lasted a moment before he stepped away.

"I'm sorry, Severus," she said quietly. "I didn't mean to..."

"I know." He sighed heavily. "It is not entirely your fault. I should not have let you."

"Things will be different after the school year is up." It wasn't a question.

"You are talking about becoming lovers." For some reason he found this unsettling.

"Why not?" That brief kiss had convinced her that this was everything she wanted.

Snape let out a long breath. "Hermione, you are much younger than I. Are you sure that this," he pointed to himself, "is what you want? Wouldn't you be happier with a younger man?"

She snorted. "You told me once that I should never settle for less than the best in what I want. I don't think anyone else could make me feel the way you do. I don't want a younger man. I want you."

~*~

Snape strode into the Great Hall for dinner that evening with Duster riding his shoulder. He hoped Hermione had been able to talk to the house-elf. As he took his accustomed seat, he caught her eye and she nodded just slightly. A moment or two later, his dinner appeared in front of him, with a smaller plate next to it for his cat. Similar arrangements appeared at nearly every place; most witches and wizards had their Familiars with them.

Mr. Potter was one of the few without a Familiar. Miss Weasley, however, was happily sharing her dinner with the kitten that Filch had given her at the dance. All six of the kittens had found new homes, according to the caretaker. Snape was just as glad; he didn't want a second cat.

Not knowing if Duster could truly tell what he was thinking, Snape focused his mind on the minutiae of the day: planning what to put on the NEWTs for the seventh year students. Unlike most of his peers, he rarely chose questions related to what he had specifically covered in class. Instead, he selected questions that would assess how well his students had learned to apply what they had been taught. He had no doubt that Hermio that Miss Granger would do quite well.

Halfway through his dinner, he stole a quick glance at his Familiar. Duster had already finished his meal and was polishing the dish with quick swipes of his long pink tongue. If the house-elf had accomplished his task, the Veritaserum should begin to take effect in the next few minutes. "Come, miscreant," he said as he picked up the

black cat. "I've work to do tonight." He settled Duster on his shoulder and rose, certain that Miss Granger would notice and join them shortly.

He entered the lab and sat down at his desk. Duster curled up in his lap as he began marking the latest batch of essays. It wasn't long before the expected tap on the door came. "Enter!"

Hermione opened the door and came in, carrying her Familiar in an odd plastic box with a grate on the front. "I thought the cat-carrier might be a good idea," she said.

"Yes, I can see that." He swiftly transfigured the inkwell on his desk into an identical carrier. Before Duster realized what was going on, the black tomcat was also securely imprisoned. The two outraged Familiars snarled and spat and finally subsided into a sulky silence.

"Now," Snape said, addressing the two carriers, "we've learned that you two have been sabotaging the potion that we've been working on. We'd like to know why." When there was no answer, he sighed and rephrased. "Why are you sabotaging the potion we've been working on?"

"Because humans should not be able to speak with animals or Familiars," Duster answered. He looked horrified as the words came out in a gravelly baritone.

"Duster!" Crookshanks yelped. "What are you doing?"

"What's the harm?" Hermione asked, looking at her cat. "Why shouldn't we be able to speak to you?"

"You would learn things you are better off not knowing." Now it was Crookshanks' turn to look horrified.

Duster got a calculating look on his face. "You used Veritaserum on us! Don't deny it!"

"I wouldn't dream of denying it," Snape replied. "You have a choice. Either you can explain yourselves completely and to our satisfaction, or we will keep you in these cat-carriers until the potion is completed."

The two cats exchanged a long look through the gratings.

They are serious, Crooks.

I know, but what do we do? The minute either asks a direct question, we are compelled to answer.

Tell them. They are not stupid. They will understand.

And if they don't? The Veritaserum affects all our magic, you know.

Then we make them forget. After it wears off.

Chapter Fifteen

Chapter 15 of 20

Chaos ensues when the Familiars at Hogwarts decide to play matchmaker.

A/N: Catspaws has undergone some major editing as of 2/19/2011. I recommend rereading earlier chapters to avoid confusion.

Chapter Fifteen

By ones and twos, the Familiars made their way to the old storeroom that had hosted their meetings throughout the year. Fawkes had asked that they all attend. For some, this would be their last meeting; their pets had finished school and would not be coming back. Despite the success of some of the pairings, the mood was somber.

"Hannah is completely caught up in the excitement of going home," Cassandra said in answer to the phoenix's query. "Despite all our efforts, she does not believe that Erasmus' pet is at all interested in her."

"That isn't Justin's fault," Erasmus interjected a bit angrily. "He is too much the gentleman to force his attentions on her."

"Then he needs to be less of a gentleman," the toad answered. "Hannah isn't a Legilimens, you know."

"I'll get him to write to her over the summer and invite her for a visit."

"That would be a good start," Fawkes agreed. "Remember, you two must continue to work together. Thus far, only one of our pairs has actually begun to produce offspring." Thunder and Thjalfe tried unsuccessfully not to smirk at his words.

"It's a pity humans only give birth in ones and twos," Macavity mused aloud. "Think how much easier this would be if they had litters of five or six the way we cats do." He scratched an ear. "Millie and Neville have already planned to open a business together. Trevor and I will encourage them to begin producing offspring within the next year."

"Excellent!"

Shadow sighed as the phoenix looked at her. "Lavender is planning to return to the school in the fall as an assistant to Professor Trelawney. We had hoped that she would make a match with Chang's pet, but..."

"Ted is going on a year-long trip to Australia," the Siamese finished. "And if he likes it there, he may not come back."

"We should be able to find someone for Lavender," Fawkes pointed out. "After all, there will be several new students here. As long as they are not her students, there would be no difficulties with school rules." He sighed. "That does leave Chang at rather loose ends, though."

"Just make sure your pet has a miserable time," Topper suggested, clacking his beak thoughtfully. "Misplaced portkeys and faulty Floo connections would be a good start. If you're careful, he might even come back early."

"There is one other bit of news," Hephaestus remarked into the pause that followed the macaw's words. "That Potter human's mate is planning to return here in the fall. While we have no direct access to him, we should try to encourage that relationship as well."

"Is there anything else that needs our attention?" Fawkes asked.

"One item, not directly related to our plans," Duster answered. "We need to get rid of Peeves if we are to make any progress over the summer with our pets. He is a disruptive influence."

"What would you propose? An Exorcism or Banishment would be rather difficult to cover up."

"Get your pet to do it, Fawkes," Crookshanks suggested. "He's got the power. We've been lucky so far that Peeves hasn't figured out what we're doing. But that one ghost does know, and she might tell him."

"If you can get him into a closed space, you could put a Containment on him," Swift pointed out. "That would be easy to cover up."

"I have an idea," Norris said with a wicked feline grin that stretched her whiskers out to their full length. "Introduce Peeves to the Sidhe."

~*~

The summer passed uneventfully enough from the Familiars' point of view. Their pets were busy revamping the castle and its supporting spells to manage the expected additional students in the fall. Topper and Swift were pleased that Filius' mastery of Charms brought him to Poppy's attention when it came to rearranging the newly designed Infirmary. The two were spending much time together discussing it; it was a positive start.

The day before the students were to arrive, the handsomely engraved invitation arrived by owl in the storeroom where Snape and Hermione were gathering supplies for the upcoming classes. "Another wedding?" Snape queried as his assistant cum apprentice skimmed the parchment with a mixture of consternation and amusement.

"The fifth one this year," Hermione confirmed. "So far there's been Albus and Minerva, Harry and Ginny, Argus and Ivy, and Lucius and Xia. I also heard a rumor that Filius and Poppy are engaged, but no one knows for sure."

"Who's the happy couple? Miss Brown and Mr. Nott?"

"Neville and Millie. But it's quite oddly written." She handed him the invitation. "Read it for yourself."

Mr Neville Longbottom

and Miss Millicent Bulstrode

request the honor of your presence

at their life-bonding

to be held at the stone circle

of Hogwarts

on the Eve of Hallows

at 11:30pm.

Come ready to dance and sing!

"A life-bonding? I wouldn't have expected that," he said, raising one eyebrow.

"Is that something special," Hermione asked, once again reminded of the vast gulf between the Muggle world and Wizardkind. "I thought it was just a fancy way of saying 'wedding'."

"It's an ancient rite, one that hails from the days of Merlin, from the most ancient roots of what we call magic. It's much more than a wedding. It's a... joining of souls. It's very rarely done these days, as it's not something that can be undone. Most couples want the option of breaking up, even if they never intend to exercise it." He put the parchment on top of the cabinet and selected two vials from its top shelf.

"I wouldn't want that option," Hermione muttered under her breath as she scooped beetle-legs into a glass jar.

"You might change your mind at some point," he reminded her. "Besides, I hate the idea of being compelled no matter how pleasant."

"I know." They'd been appalled at the extent to which the Familiars had controlled and manipulated them. But Duster had been right; they understood the chaos that would erupt if it were to become common knowledge. A bargain was struck: the cats would no longer manipulate them, and they would keep the secret. They would all work together to scuttle the current project and devise another one that would account for all the time spent. Their project had become the standardization of the brewing of Cantor's Concealment, and their latest round of tests was cooling in their private lab.

And that was all well and good. But despite assurances to the contrary, Snape was convinced that his feelings for Hermione had been engineered by the two cats. Thus he refused to do anything about them. And thus she found herself completely frustrated.

Snape hadn't missed the frustration in her flat tones. He wasn't blind to her disgruntlement. But until he was sure that his feelings were his, and hadn't been imposed on him by their Familiars, he refused to take their relationship beyond its current stage. "She's still young," he told himself. "She'll understand soon enough."

As the two humans left for the classroom to begin their day, the two cats roused themselves from under the cabinets and stretched. "This is getting us nowhere," Crookshanks groused.

Duster swatted at a dust mouse that had attached itself to his ear. "They're attracted to each other. Severus is just being stubborn. It's only been a few weeks since they found us out."

"A few months," the half-kneazle corrected, the tip of his tail lashing. "Fawkes isn't happy about it."

"At least our pets are still together, which is more than can be said for some."

"There is that." The phoenix had not been pleased when he'd learned that Hannah Abbott was engaged to a Muggle, despite everything Cassandra could do to persuade her otherwise. This had left Erasmus' pet at loose ends as well, though the Russian Blue was doing his best to find another appropriate partner.

"What we need is for someone else to tell him that he is not under any sort of compulsion. Someone he respects. But since most wizards have Familiars, he will immediately assume that anyone who tries to convince him has been manipulated and is no longer trustworthy."

"That lets out everyone at Hogwarts," Crookshanks said thoughtfully, looking at the invitation. "What about this upcoming ceremony? Will anyone be there who could possibly convince Severus that his feelings are his own?"

"Trevor or Macavity would probably have an idea of the guest list." Duster sat up and began cleaning his claws. "We've been limiting ourselves to humans in and around Hogwarts. We simply need to expand Severus' horizons."

~*~

"Have you seen Duster?" Snape asked. "I haven't seen him since breakfast." They were in their lab taking advantage of their last free day to do some more work on their project.

"He's probably somewhere with Crooks," Hermione answered a bit absently, her attention fixed on the jarvey shinbones she was carefully grinding into powder. "I haven't seen either of them this afternoon. They'll probably show up for dinner tonight and give us smug expressions when we ask where they've been." She considered the contents of her bowl and began grinding again.

"No doubt they're planning something nefarious," the Potions Master grumbled, reaching for a clean knife. "Where did you put that box of shrivelfigs?"

"It's in the Student Storeroom. Lefthand shelves, on the bottom with the other items that came in this week and haven't been unpacked yet. I was planning to do that this evening. And we still haven't received the ambergris we ordered a month ago from Piggie Potion Supplies. I sent them an owl expressing our joint displeasure."

"Blast. That leaves me at something of a standstill." He rose. "I will go put away supplies then. Do you need me to bring you back anything from the storeroom when I return?"

"Alligator tears. In the blue jar..."

"... fifth shelf, in the back. Yes, I know." Snape went down the corridor to the storeroom. He threw open the door and stopped dead in his tracks. The room looked like a hurricane had hit it. Several hurricanes. Not a single jar or bottle remained upright. Indeed, two of the shelves were tumbled over, their contents pinned beneath them. The floor and lower part of the walls were covered with an unholy mish-mash of common-to-rare potion ingredients and shattered remnants of their containers. "Hermione!"

It was only a moment later that she was beside him, staring at the mess. "What happened?"

"I haven't a clue. I haven't even a clue where to begin on cleaning up."

"At least it's just the student stores. If it was our private stores..." she let the sentence trail off, thinking of the potential for explosive interactions.

He shuddered at the thought. "Heaven forbid!"

She studied the wreckage and drew her wand. A few careful Charms righted the shelves and put them back in their proper places. She heard him muttering spells as well, and millions of tiny shards of glass drifted up off the floor and out into the hallway where they began reassembling themselves into jars, bowls, vials, and other containers. "I can't use *Reparo*," he said, in answer to her questioning look. "I don't want those fragments flying around in here. Too much chance of one of us getting hit."

She cast more Charms to clean the shelves thoroughly, even the ones that hadn't been overturned. "So we've salvaged the jars. What about the contents?"

"I think everything's a loss," he replied, taking a long look at the splattered mess on the floor. "Too much chance of contamination."

Hermione hmm'd in thought. "Between Hogsmeade and Diagon Alley, we should be able to replace most of the common stock enough to get through the next two or three weeks. And by then, we should be able to replace the rest of it. Assuming Piggie Potions Supplies can keep to their delivery schedule." The last sentence was said somewhat waspishly.

Snape began returning the reassembled glassware to the newly cleaned shelves. "Albus isn't going to be happy about the additional expense. Scourgify the floor, would you?"

She cast the spell, pleased to see that the bulk of the mess obediently vanished. Two more repetitions, and the floor was ... nearly pristine. She stared at the shiny stone surface. "Severus, do you see anything odd here?"

He paused in his work and looked where she was pointing. There was a large blurry black and orange stain in the center of the room. "It's obviously the result of the mishap."

She reached for the stain and jerked her hand back as it moved. Intrigued, Snape knelt down to examine it more closely. The stain shifted and separated into two distinct parts, one orange and one black. The black stain oozed across the floor until it was under his knee. The orange stain slid over to Hermione and coiled itself into a figure eight around her feet.

"What in the world?" She took a quick step to the left. The stain followed. Snape rose and strode across the room, unsurprised to see the black stain oozing along after him. A few moments of quick experimenting showed that the stains would follow them anywhere in the storeroom, but wouldn't or couldn't - cross the threshold.

"As curious as this is," Snape said finally, "we've not the time to investigate it. We need to let Albus and Minerva know about the accident and make arrangements for restocking and that will have to be done today with the students arriving tomorrow."

"I'll make a list of what we need to get through the week, while you speak with them." Hermione summoned a quill and parchment. "I'll go to Hogsmeade if you'll go to Diagon Alley."

"Done!"

~*~

By dinnertime, the student stores were more or less replenished. As Hermione had thought, they could at least get through the next ten days without having to resort to assigning essays.

"Not that essays are a bad thing," she finished, "but practice is what they need."

Snape leaned over the table and steepled his fingers. "Practice is well and good for the lower grades, but the NEWT students need to be challenged. They need to learn to think."

Hermione bit her lip in thought. "What about having a class where the students discuss the subject matter? For example, assign them to read up on the uses of beeswax and then talk about it the next class session. We'll learn right away who will do research and who is just memorizing the text."

"That's a thought. And were we to throw out bits of misinformation during the discussion, we'd see if our students are the dunderheads they usually are." He gave her a Slytherin smile. "That could prove quite entertaining."

Chapter Sixteen

Chapter 16 of 20

Chaos ensues when the Familiars at Hogwarts decide to play matchmaker.

Chapter Sixteen

On the last evening before classes were scheduled to begin, the Familiars still at Hogwarts met once again in the dusty storeroom on the third floor. The phoenix perched on his customary table and looked around. "Where are Crookshanks and Duster? I'd rather hoped we could all be here."

"No one has seen them since this morning," Topper answered. "Their pets don't seem to be terribly worried, though they've been distracted." He related the story of the potions-storage mishap to the others.

"All our pets are focusing on the new year, which is as it should be," Norris said. "I will go find Duster and Crooks." She stretched out her foreclaws and arched her back. "Hephaestus will fill me in on everything."

"Very well then." Fawkes nodded. "We will continue on. Familiars, we all know that the reason for these meetings is because the population of our human pets has been declining. We've been trying to arrange matches and persuade them to produce offspring." He paused significantly. "We've only had one real success thus far, although there's been several smaller signs of progress. Obviously we need to implement other strategies."

"It's never a good sign when you rehash the obvious," Swift grumbled.

"It's quite simple. One problem is that humans usually only produce one offspring at a time. Macavity said as much at the start of this past summer. If they had two or three at a time regularly, it would take much less time to rebuild the population." Another significant pause. "Thjalfe's pet will be an excellent test subject. I arranged it this morning."

"You did what?" Thjalfe was horrified and Thunder only a little less so. "Fawkes, you're the one who told us that we needed to be subtle in managing our pets. Now..."

The phoenix shrugged one scarlet wing. "And now we're one small step closer to resolving our problem. Besides, it's not unheard of for humans to have multiple births. Remember those red-haired humans who were here recently?"

"Thjalfe is right," Hephaestus said. The big grey Persian jumped onto the table where Fawkes perched. "Do not do this again." His eyes glittered with green lights, and the end of his tail twitched. "If you dare meddle with Argus or Ivy, I will be very, very displeased."

There was a general rumble of agreement. "Our pets are our own to manage," Topper stated firmly. "Convincing them to find mates is one thing, but you... you have gone too far."

"Most of our pets are fairly intelligent," Gambit pointed out. "Minerva doesn't believe in coincidences and the only question in my mind is how long your pet, Fawkes, will live once she decides that HE's the one responsible."

"Albus does have a bit of a reputation for meddling," Fawkes allowed.

"Like familiar, like human," Thunder muttered so quietly that only Thjalfe could hear him. Then a bit louder, "What's done is done and to undo it would be difficult at best which I'm sure Fawkes was well aware of before he decided to take this action. Fawkes, you will give us your word, sworn on the Egg of Chrysos, that you will not meddle with any pets other than your own. Ever."

It was plain to the phoenix that he would not be able to convince the other Familiars that he'd done the right thing. At least not in the next few minutes. Resolving to speak with them each separately, he reluctantly pronounced the required oath. A little voice in the back of his mind reminded him that oaths made under duress weren't binding.

~*~

While a locked door will keep most ordinary cats out, it requires stronger measures when one's cat is a Familiar. Thus, it was relatively easy for Mrs. Norris to gain access to the room where the student stores for Potions were kept. She stood on the threshold for a moment, her whiskers tingling as they tasted the air, and the traces of lingering magic, mostly Scourgify spells. The corners of her mouth quirked up into a feline smile. Scourgify would remove physical stains well enough, but did nothing to banish any magical traces.

Something was not right here. There was a definite sense of foulness in the room. It was not in or on the walls... rather, it was the floor. Sitting just outside the room, she fixed her attention on the worn grey stones. Hogwart's own magic permeated them, just as it did the entire castle. She discounted that, and concentrated on the splashes of more recent magic. It seemed aimless, purposeless. Almost random.

There! In the far corner of the room was a trace of malevolence. She concentrated all her attention in that spot and the ends of her whiskers quivered as she identified it. Peeves. No doubt about it. "We told Fawkes we needed to do something about him," she muttered to herself. "Now here's one more reason." She stepped into the room, intending to take a closer look at the miasma, but stopped short. There was magic swirling around her, magic light and dark, with a definite presence. Two presences, actually, and both familiar. Not Peeves, for these presences had none of his etherealness.

She bolted for the third-floor storeroom.

~*~

Hermione woke up the following morning with the distinct feeling that something wasn't quite right. She swung her feet over the side of the bed and shoved them into her slippers and staggered over to the sink to splash cold water on her face. Somewhat more awake then, she turned and considered the room, trying to figure out what was making her so uneasy. Perhaps it was just nerves; this was the day that all the new students were due to arrive. No, that wasn't it. Whatever it was, it was more immediate. She looked around the room again. All was neatly ordered, just as she'd set things out the night before. She picked up her hairbrush and stopped. Normally Crookshanks' evening prowlings would knock something away; she couldn't count the number of times she'd had to retrieve her hairbrush from the floor, or find her place in a book that he'd bumped off her desk.

The half-kneazle hadn't shown up for dinner the previous night either. Hermione sat down at her desk, her hairbrush forgotten in her hand, trying to recall when she'd last seen her wayward familiar. She definitely remembered him yesterday morning; he'd insisted on playing pounce with her slippers while she was dressing, and he'd come down with her for breakfast, appropriating two slices of her bacon. But after that... and come to think of it, she hadn't seen Duster since the previous morning either. She attacked her hair with the brush, attempting to tame it into something manageable. If Crooks didn't appear for breakfast, she'd ask Severus about Duster.

Almost as if the thought had summoned him, she heard Snape's voice in the corridor just outside her door. "Hermione?"

She pulled her dressing gown on and tied it. "Come in; it's not warded."

Her jaw almost dropped as he entered. It was one of the few times she'd seen him in any state of dishabille. His shirt was misbuttoned and only half tucked in. "Duster's missing," he announced.

"So's Crooks. I haven't seen either of them since yesterday morning."

"Likewise. And we're not going to have time to look for them with the new students arriving this evening." At her look of non-comprehension, he explained, "There're always a few students who miss the Hogwarts Express either accidentally or purposefully. As they contact the school, we'll have to go fetch them." He grimaced. "I expect, with all the extra students this year, it will be more hectic than usual. From the moment we set foot in the Great Hall for breakfast, we'll be busy. I know we have our lesson plans ready, and I know Albus approved them. But there are a thousand last minute problems that always come up. So the Headmaster decreed that everyone is required to be at all meals on the first day of classes."

"The house elves will be overwhelmed today also," Hermione said, thinking out loud. "But what about the portraits? They might be willing and able to help look for Duster and Crooks."

"That's an excellent idea." Snape considered. "The portraits aren't involved in getting the school ready for a new term. Perhaps you could have a word with the Fat Lady while I speak with Sir Cadogan." He stepped back into the hallway. "We should both probably finish dressing first, however."

~*~

The Great Hall was, indeed, a madhouse. Albus and Minerva were trading barbed insults, gradually increasing in volume and barbedness, as they swept the lower level of the room with a mix of Transfiguration and Charms spells. From what Hermione could understand of their exchange as she walked through the doors, no one had thought about enlarging the House tables to accommodate the new students until that very morning. Minerva apparently felt that Albus should've remembered this not-insignificant little detail, while the Headmaster believed that his Deputy had failed in her responsibilities. And neither of them, apparently, could agree on exactly how to enlarge the tables. As she watched, Minerva expertly Transfigured the Ravenclaw table to run the length of the room while at the same time Albus was Charming the Hufflepuff table into something that would expand itself to accommodate as many diners as necessary. Each saw what the other had done and promptly began arguing vociferously for their way of resolving the problem.

Hermione had just decided that the safest thing to do was to skip breakfast and risk the Headmaster's wrath when Flitwick came in. He took one look and promptly cast a shielding charm over the Head Table. "There," he piped. "Now we can eat in peace." He smiled at Hermione. "They find something to fight about every year. I believe it allows them to what's the Muggle phrase? blow off steam before the students arrive."

He didn't seem terribly worried and neither did the rest of the staff as they trickled in by ones and twos. The older professors, the ones who had been at Hogwarts a long time, simply shook their heads, and Sybil Trelawney muttered about the noise clouding her Inner Eye. The newcomers on staff took their cues from the others. Hermione did notice that everyone gave the little Charms instructor a nod of thanks when they took their seats. She filled her plate and did her best to ignore the spat on the other side of Flitwick's shield.

"You might have warned me," she said to Snape as he sat down.

"There's no fun in that," Xia Malfoy answered from the Potion Master's other side. "It's a rite of passage. If you survive the first day, you'll be fine." She tilted her head toward the sparring professors. "They're getting louder."

Indeed, the argument was apparently escalating, because Minerva had abandoned English and reverted to Gaelic. "Oh Merlin," Ivy Filch said, "the last time she got that angry, we had to rebuild half of Ravenclaw tower!"

"You did?" Hermione couldn't help but ask.

"We did," Snape confirmed as he poured tea. "And it took most of the morning. Although on that occasion, it was a Quidditch game that caused Minerva's fit of ill-temper."

"Ten years ago, the Cardiff Dragons were playing the Chudley Cannons in an exhibition game. In order that neither team had a home-pitch advantage, they played here at Hogwarts." Xia's voice grew dreamy. "It was quite a game!"

"There were more fouls in the first three minutes than I'd ever seen before or since," Lucius put in with an understanding smile for his wife. "But I wasn't aware that game had any particular significance to Minerva."

"Oh she was sweet on one of the Cardiff Beaters, and she wagered a hundred galleons that they would win," Ardis Vector replied with a glint in her eye. "At rather ridiculous odds, as I recall."

"And then the morning of the game, her sweetheart started showing off for some Muggles. Of course, he got arrested, and the Dragons suspended him for two months. So Chudley won, against all odds or expectations."

A rather loud explosion from the other end of the room effectively interrupted the conversation as did the pieces of table that bounced off Flitwick's shield. The little wizard whistled under his breath and drew his wand to cast reinforcing spells.

"Berserkergang!" Sybil's voice was awed rather than frightened. Hermione felt rather than saw the change in the nature of the magics that were flying around the room. Transfigurations and Charms had given way to hexes and curses.

Snape vaulted over the table and offered a hand to Flitwick. Lucius was a half-second behind him. As the three wizards joined hands, the shield firmed and visibly strengthened. Hermione had never seen wizards working magic in groups before, and some part of her brain was busy taking notes. She was just about to go over to them when Ivy caught her arm.

"No, Hermione! You can't help them! You've never worked in a group before!"

"Why aren't you helping then?" she shot back.

"You can't charge blindly into a group. You have to practice with the others. Otherwise your magic won't blend smoothly and you'll do more damage than good. Severus has worked with both Lucius and Filius for years, so he's able to bridge them together."

"We'll have the job of cleaning up after the dust settles," Poppy Pomfrey added. "You'll get plenty of practice in group magic then, if that's what you want. And the gentlemen will be in no shape to go gallivanting all over the country retrieving wayward students, not if I have anything to say about it."

"The berserkergang doesn't last long," Ivy said. "See?" Indeed, the fray gave every appearance of having ended. As the dust clouds settled and Flitwick dropped the shield, Hermione saw the Headmaster and his Deputy walking out together, arm in arm.

"That's the last we'll see of them until lunch," Sybil predicted, looking around at the destruction. "And if there's more to be done then, they'll excuse themselves and have a private luncheon in Albus' office. I'll wager twenty galleons on it."

Chapter Seventeen

Chapter 17 of 20

Chaos ensues when the Familiars at Hogwarts decide to play matchmaker.

Chapter Seventeen

The morning altercation between the Headmaster and his Deputy in the Great Hall, carefully planned by Fawkes and Gambit through some judicious meddling, allowed the other Familiars the chance to inspect the potions storeroom with no fear of being interrupted. They stopped at the threshold for a moment and then entered, all senses at the fullest alert. Norris was right; the room stank of magic well beyond that emanating from the ingredients neatly stored on the shelves.

"It's Peeves," Topper pronounced, clacking his beak angrily. "This is the final straw; we must do something about that poltergeist once and for all. Something permanent, preferably painful."

Norris snorted at the macaw's alliteration, but said nothing.

"Something more than complain about him to Fawkes," Swift agreed, a green light glowing in the back of his eyes. He pawed at the floor, at the frantically swirling orange and black stains. "But we must restore Crooks and Duster first."

"This is not a standard entrapment spell," Thunder said, carefully examining the room. "It's been tainted somehow. Corrupted. I wouldn't know how to undo it."

"There's not just magic here," Thjalfe pointed out, his ears so flattened against his head that they almost disappeared. "Look again; there's blood bound to it."

"Blood magic?" Shadow asked. "The Great Snake used that when she meddled with her pet!"

"If we pull them back through the spell without knowing exactly what was done," Topper said slowly, "we risk damaging them."

"Let's not be polite about it," Thjalfe snarled. "We'll either kill them or render them magically impotent."

The Familiars looked at each other. Neither of those two options was acceptable! Finally the big borzoi broke the silence. "Find Peeves and compel him by force if necessary to divulge what he did and how to undo it. And then banish or exorcise him permanently."

Three hours later they regrouped. A thorough search of the castle had brought them nothing. The poltergeist was nowhere to be found.

~*~

Poppy had exercised her authority as Mediwitch and insisted that Filius, Lucius, and Severus ("The Trifecta," she'd called them) spend the remainder of the morning resting from the strain of keeping the Shield up. Filch had gone with Ivy to inspect the foundations of the castle and make sure the magical temper tantrum had had no ill effects. Madame Pince had been dispatched to travel on the Hogwarts Express to help shepherd the students.

Hermione found herself detailed to work with Sybil Trelawney and Lavender Brown to restore the Great Hall to its accustomed splendor. She bit back a sigh, figuring that she'd be doing all the work while the Seers waved their arms and wailed that such menial chores would occlude their Inner Eyes. To her surprise, Sybil cast a series of Charms that began reassembling the hourglasses in a workmanlike manner. Lavender's quiet but firm Accio's summoned the scattered gems from the furthest corners of the room. Hermione watched in astonishment for a moment and then began levitating the gems back into their proper containers.

Once the hourglasses were properly restored, the Seers moved toward the High Table. Hermione gave herself a little nod, positive now that the other two witches would consider that they had done their share. Instead, they began rehanging the tapestries that had not been protected by Flitwick's shield and repairing what they could. Once she saw what they were doing, Hermione joined them. Twice she opened her mouth to ask what had gotten into them, but fortunately stopped before the words actually came out. There was a glint in her former roommate's eye that told her that her discomfiture was noticed, and that the Seers found it more than a little amusing.

A house-elf popped in with a pot of tea and plate of scones just as this part of the cleanup was finished and the three witches seated themselves at the High Table to take a short break. "We've done remarkably well," Lavender said. "Once we get the portraits dealt with, there's only the tables left."

Sybil nodded, gently swirling the leaves in the bottom of her cup. One corner of her mouth twitched slightly as she contemplated the result. "The future is never certain, my dears. However, one might say that it's extremely probable that we could perhaps think about considering the possibility of completing our task."

Hermione gaped as the Divination Professor's right eyelid dropped in a definite wink. "But... but..."

Now both Seers were laughing outright. Hermione looked back and forth at them, wondering if she'd perhaps somehow been Portkeyed into Wonderland. Lavender gave her teacup a dramatic swirl and set it down gently.

"Theatrics is part of Divination, Hermione," she said. "A good part of why Seers dress and act the way we do is to weed out students who aren't interested in exercising the non-intellectual side of their brain. You can learn the techniques of Divination from a book, but you can't really practice it without faith that it's going to work." She very carefully refrained from pointing out Hermione's rather explosive withdrawal from Divination back in their third year.

"But magic doesn't... isn't supposed to work like that," Hermione protested. "It follows rules. That's why we have textbooks."

"Not everything is in books," Sybil pointed out. "Where would wizards and witches be without imagination, without dreams? There are always new spells being developed, in all fields of magic." She set her own teacup down. "The Unforgivables require strength of will to cast. If you don't want them to work, if you don't have the intent to make them work, they fizzle. Divination is much the same."

"You have to be able to look beyond surface appearances," Lavender added. "The truth of a matter often bears no resemblance to its first view." She rose. "I'll start gathering the damaged portraits and take them down to Mr. Filch's workroom."

"I'll take care of the tables," Hermione said. She wanted a few minutes by herself to mull over what the two Seers had said. It had never occurred to her to even try to take Divination seriously.

"It's not an easy thing to discard the thinking habits of a lifetime," Sybil Trelawney said in a tone completely different from anything Hermione had ever heard from her. "I'll leave you to the tables and see if any of the walls here need repairs." She wafted off in a trail of gauze and cheap perfume. Hermione shook her head to clear it and began working. She rather liked the idea of Charming the tables to expand as needed. A shadow crossed over her head distracting her for a moment, and she looked up to see

Professor Vector and Madame Malfoy flying carefully around the ceiling inspecting it for damage.

"Hello, Hermione."

She jumped at the familiar voice that came from behind her. "Harry! What are you doing here?" Her hand tightened on her wand.

"I asked him to come," Xia called from over their heads. "I'm not going to be up to coaching Quidditch for most of this year. Mr. Potter is going to be my assistant."

Hermione relaxed enough to give Harry a weak smile and lowered her voice. "How are you and Ginny doing?"

"Really well, thanks." He paused a moment. "Look, I'm sorry about ... everything that happened last year. I... I was hoping we could be friends still."

"It's going to take some time, Harry. The apology is appreciated, and it's a good start. But what you did was so... wrong, I can't just forget about it."

"I understand." He looked around the room. "What happened here anyway?"

"Albus and Minerva got into a spat," Hermione replied, giving him a quick precis of the morning's adventures. "We've got almost everything fixed except the tables here."

"I'll go pay my respects to the Headmaster, then, and stay out of your way." He waved and vanished down the hall, leaving Hermione free to return to her work.

~*~

By dinner-time, Hermione had acquired an entirely new level of respect for her coworkers, and a bit of simmering resentment at the extra work Albus and Minerva had caused them all. At an intellectual level, she'd known there had to be a lot of behind-the-scenes preparation for new students, but she hadn't really considered just what that meant. Now she knew firsthand just how much planning and hard work went into it.

There were 123 new first years, of which 48 had originally intended to attend Durmstrang. There were also 58 older students, most of them second and third years. While fewer than originally expected, these increased numbers still meant increased work for the faculty and staff, making sure everyone got to Hogwarts safely and on time.

They'd decided to bring the new older students across the lake with the first-years, in order to facilitate the Sorting. Lucius and Ardis Vector, along with their newly hired assistants, were detailed to help Hagrid chaperone them. Hermione and several of the other teachers shepherded the other students to the carriages. Albus had decided against using the threstrals to pull them, thinking they would be too harsh a reminder of the war. Of the other suggested options, unicorns were too noble, and horses were too ordinary. No centaur would ever consent to being put in harness. So the carriages were drawn by Charms each carriage spelled to follow a specific broom-borne teacher. The pace, while faster than walking, was still slow enough that Hermione's lack of flying skills weren't a problem.

The Sorting, not surprisingly, took longer than usual with all the additional students. What did surprise Hermione initially was the preponderance of Slytherins. It seemed that one in three students were sent to the Serpent's Nest. Then she remembered the heavy losses they'd taken during the war and suddenly everything made sense. The Sorting Hat was bringing Slytherin House up to strength. Snape sat upright in his chair as always, but there was a distinct relaxation in the set of his jaw as the ceremony proceeded.

~*~

The poltergeist curled up in a ball under the stairway leading to Ravenclaw tower, shivering. Perhaps he'd gone too far with the trap spell that had caught the two Familiars. It was a wonderful spell; he'd learned it some years ago from a young wizard. But now the rest of the Familiars were looking for him; it had taken every ounce of cunning he possessed to evade them. And he was sure they'd continue searching. Peeves snorted softly to himself. He could leave Hogwarts it wasn't like it was truly a home. No one wanted him here. All he needed was a building unwarded against his kind, and he could slip in and then... the only way to force him to leave was a Banishment. But that was what those Familiars were planning. He was sure of it.

And Banishment while an inconvenience to a ghost meant a rather permanent form of eradication for a poltergeist.

Chapter Eighteen

Chapter 18 of 20

Chaos ensues when the Familiars at Hogwarts decide to play matchmaker.

Chapter Eighteen

"Peeves!" The Bloody Baron's voice thundered down the stairwell.

Startled, the poltergeist uncurled and came into view. "Sir, yes sir," he stammered. "What can I do for your awfulness?"

The Bloody Baron drew himself up to his full height, an effect that allowed him to tower over the quivering poltergeist. Ghostly silver blood dripped from his robes. "You should know better than to enrage the Familiars."

"But sir!"

"No buts. No excuses. I am tired of having my un-rest disturbed by their ectoplasm dispersion spells."

"Yes, sir, that's quite painful, sir," Peeves babbled, "but sir, they're trying to Banish me!"

"I'm sure you deserve it."

This blunt statement so stunned Peeves that he forgot everything else. Before he could open his mouth to refute it, a net woven of silken threads dropped over him and wound itself around him. Startled, he tried to duck away and only succeeded in tangling himself up even further. "Help!" he screeched.

The Baron shook his head and stepped back a pace. "He's all yours, Thunder," he said over one shoulder.

The big brindled Manx oozed into view and bowed formally to the ghost. "Thank you, my lord." He cat-smiled at the bundle of thrashing poltergeist. "Now, Peeves, we're going to take a little trip."

Peeves spat out an oath in the direction of the Familiar and switched his attention back to the Slytherin ghost. "Baron, please!"

"No, Peeves. You went too far. Now you must reap what you have sown." The Baron faded out, heading for the dungeons.

Thunder stalked off down the corridor, head high, the bundled poltergeist floating in his wake and bouncing every now and then off the floor and off the walls whenever they turned a corner.

"Where ow! are we going?" Peeves asked finally, when it became apparent that shrieks and curses weren't going to get him anywhere. He didn't expect an answer, and didn't get one. Through the halls, across two moving staircases, and finally Thunder came to a halt outside the potion storeroom. Peeves hit the floor with a thud. The other Familiars were there waiting for him there.

"Remove the Trap spell," Norris demanded, her yellow eyes glittering wickedly.

Peeves wriggled into a slightly less uncomfortable position it wasn't possible to actually be comfortable. "I'd love to oblige, but I'm all tied up at the moment. Turn me loose and I'll take care of it."

"You must think we're stupid," Thjalfe said. Then, addressing the others, "I propose we rip his mind, and obtain the knowledge that way."

"And then Banish what's left," Topper agreed. "I'm sure the students will be pleased to have seen the last of him."

"Mind-ripping is terribly painful for the one being ripped. And it does tend to do permanent damage. Soulless husk is the best description I've heard."

"Wait! Wait! You've made your point!" Peeves waved a frantic finger in the direction of the storeroom. "It's not a normal Trap spell. It's tied to blood and I was told only blood can undo it. The more magical the blood, the stronger the spell."

"Go on."

"You outline the area you want to trap with the blood and say the spell over it. So I used the floor of the storeroom. I didn't have a proper wand so I, uh, borrowed one. And then I thought that if outlining the floor worked, that painting the entire floor with it would work even better."

"And where did you get enough magical blood..." Thunder trailed off. "Let me guess. You 'borrowed' that from the instructor's storeroom. What kind of blood was it?"

Peeves grimaced. "I didn't want anyone to notice it was missing, see, so I took a bit from a bunch of different jars and mixed it all together. And why would anyone need goblin blood anyway?"

The Familiars looked at each other in dismay. "Whose wand did you use?" Gambit finally asked.

"I dunno. Dumbledore has a whole box of them in his office. I didn't figure he'd miss one for a night. And I put it back anyway."

"So then what?"

"I got them to chase me that was easy. I floated over the Trap and they landed right in the middle of it and disappeared just like he said would happen. So I dumped the shelves over to make it seem like more of an accident you know, and then..."

"Like who said would happen?"

"The wizard I learned the spell from," Peeves replied promptly.

"And did he say how to undo it?"

"Oh that's child's play! Simple as 1-2-3! You just repaint the area with more of the same magical blood. That's what the next page said." The poltergeist's happy smile faded as he looked at the angry Familiars. "I was reading over his shoulder you surely don't think a wizard would actually talk to me, do you? I've told you everything I know!"

"Just exactly how do you plan to undo this?"

Peeves didn't think it would be a good idea to say that he hadn't planned to undo it. That wasn't his problem. Except that it had just become his problem. "Get me the wand and blood, and I'll, uh, try to undo it. What's the problem?"

"The problem, thickwit, is that you changed the spell! You painted the entire floor instead of just the border, and you used a mix of different kinds of blood as well!"

"You're lucky it didn't blow up in your face using an unregistered wand."

Fawkes whistled and the other Familiars fell silent. "Peeves, can you recreate the mixture of blood?"

Peeves considered. He'd grabbed everything off the shelf labeled "Blood" in Hermione's neat writing, and poured a few drops from each container into the bucket he'd stolen from Argus. When he'd got what he hoped was enough, he'd put them back, although he wasn't sure they ended up exactly where they'd come from. While he was thinking, Gambit trotted down the hall and investigated the instructor's private storeroom.

"Maybe," was the poltergeist's final verdict after going over his actions with the Familiars. "I was in sort of a hurry and I didn't want to get caught. And I had to do something with Filch's bucket too. But why can't you just blast the Trap spell and undo it that way?"

"Think of the trap like a net like the one you're currently tied up in," Swift growled. "If I were to blast the net into smithereens, what do you think would happen to you?"

"I take your point," Peeves conceded. "But it's a net, right." He took his first good look at the storeroom floor. "More like a big ball of yarn, with those two cats wound up in it. So can't you just cut some of the cords so they can get loose?"

"If we knew where to cut, yes."

Peeves opened his mouth but didn't say anything for a moment. Then slowly, "you don't see a big ball of magic cords in there?"

"No, all we see is an empty room."

"Oh, oh! I bet I can get them out! I can show you where to cut! Let me go and I'll do it!"

"Let's just say that we don't trust you not to do a runner," Thunder replied. "But I'll let you have one hand loose. That'll have to do." He stared at Peeves for a moment and the net obliged by unwinding itself from the poltergeist's right hand and arm up to the elbow. Then the whole bundle moved until it was unceremoniously dumped on the floor right at the edge of the storeroom.

Peeves had decided by this point that his only chance of surviving this encounter was to do his best to get the two Familiars out of his modified Trap spell. So with as good a grace as he could manage, he reached out and grabbed the end of the ball of yarn as he thought of it and yanked as hard as he could. Admittedly, given his lack of leverage, this wasn't nearly as hard a pull as he could normally muster.

But the yarn pulled back even harder. And the tendril that he'd grabbed wrapped itself around Peeves' wrist and wouldn't let go. Since the poltergeist had no way to brace himself, he disappeared into the Trap spell with a neat popping noise.

"What in the name of Merlin's little toe was that?" Thjalfe exclaimed, not really expecting an answer.

"And now how do we get Crooks and Duster out?"

That question was answered by a pair of louder pops, and the appearance of two disheveled and exhausted Familiars. Crookshanks staggered to his feet with a wild look in his eyes that gradually faded as he became aware of his surroundings. Duster rose just as unsteadily, his matted fur fluffed up until he looked twice as big. Slowly, the fur relaxed.

"Merlin's teeth!" It was impossible to say which one or how many of the Familiars had spoken. Then Norris' voice. "Crooks? Duster?"

"We're here," Crooks said tiredly. "Don't ask me how, but we're here. It's just a bit disorienting."

"Like being stuffed in a bag, shaken around, and then upended," Duster amplified. "I think I need to find food and my pillow."

"What did you do to release the Trap?" Crookshanks asked as he slowly picked his way toward the Gryffindor Common Room. Gambit, Thjalfe, and Thunder were accompanying him while the others were escorting Duster.

Thunder showed his teeth. "The Baron helped me find Peeves, and I brought him down to the storeroom. And then..." he went on to explain what had happened. "So I think Peeves is now in that trap of his own making."

"And a fitting place," Gambit opined.

~*~

Peeves had thought being hunted by the Familiars through the castle was bad. This was worse. The interior of the trap was a cube about three feet square. The top of the cube was the underside of the storeroom floor. And he was entangled upsidedown in the yarn of the Trap spell and the net that the Familiars had caught him with. And every time he moved, he felt his grip on his not-life slipping just a little as indescribable pains shot through him. He recognized the effects of the Banishment spell he'd had it explained to him in no uncertain terms once.

It was all that wizard's fault, Peeves decided. He had known the poltergeist was there, was reading over his shoulder those so many decades ago. And he must have known that Peeves would be intrigued by a Trap spell. And he absolutely must have known what it would do should Peeves be caught in it, for he was a knowledgeable and powerful wizard! As he faded into nothingness, Banished at last, he cursed the wizard who had shown him the Trap spell with every malediction he could think of. He cursed the name of Tom Riddle.

Chapter Nineteen

Chapter 19 of 20

Chaos ensues when the Familiars at Hogwarts decide to play matchmaker.

"Dammit!" The four two humans, two cats were in the Potions lab where the latest work on their Cantor's Concealment project had just figuratively blown up in their faces. It was the day after Duster and Crookshanks had been released from Peeves' Trap spell. Eight cauldrons of differently colored sludge stood in a neat row where they'd hoped to have at least one semi-success. Snape's verbal explosion expressed all their frustration.

Hermione grumbled and banished the contents of the various cauldrons. "I'm out of ideas."

"Likewise," Severus agreed. "We got the first part standardized easily enough, but once we start adding the beetle eyes, things start going wrong."

She lugged the first cauldron over to the sink. *Scourgify* was fine for cleaning floors and such, but there was nothing like soap and water (with plenty of elbow grease) for scrubbing cauldrons. "I went through the entire barrel of beetle eyes and selected the thirty-eight best for this particular cauldron. I matched them for size and color, even. Didn't make a difference." She paused a moment. "I sorted through eighteen thousand, two hundred, and seventy-three beetle eyes."

"Using your standardized base," Duster interrupted before Hermione could get started on a full-fledged rant, "have you managed to brew this potion successfully at all?"

"Not completely," Severus answered. "The best we've managed was one where I turned translucent like a ghost, and we haven't been able to repeat even that success."

"I've a thought," Crookshanks announced. "One of the problems you're having is lack of time. You're both teaching classes, trying to modify the Potions curriculum, and attending too many ridiculous staff meetings. Why not give this problem to your seventh-year students and let them work on it? You might see some new ideas, and you'll certainly see some lines of experiment that shouldn't be followed at all."

"And you could promise an O for the year to any student who manages to do the trick." Duster added. "That would guarantee a lot of effort."

"You know, Severus," Hermione said slowly, "that's not a bad idea at all. The seventh-year students are the ones who want to really understand Potions." She inverted the now-clean cauldron and set it on the counter to dry. The she *Accio'd* the class schedule from his desk. "There's only thirty across the entire school."

"There would have to be ground rules set, particularly if I am to offer an O as a reward." Snape grumbled as he hefted another cauldron into the sink. "Obviously the basic recipe must be followed. No additional ingredients, for instance."

"Obviously," she replied. "Let's work out the ground rules this week, and you can present the idea to them Monday." She tossed the class schedule aside and began scrubbing another cauldron. "One rule is that they have to clean their own equipment."

"Agreed."

~*~

The influx of transfer students required a major revamp of the class schedules for the entire school. There were nearly forty first-years in each House far too many for a

single instructor to adequately supervise. The second-year class was nearly as large with between thirty and thirty-five students in each House. For these two years, each House was subdivided into two groups, thus reducing the number of students to a manageable level. Double classes were a thing of the past.

Hermione taught all the first and second year classes, having discovered that she was better at instilling basic knowledge into the dunderheads as Severus had put it. She learned that she truly enjoyed teaching, seeing that *Aha* moment when a student's face would light up with understanding.

She taught the first and second years in the mornings while he taught the third, fourth, and fifth year students. Both of them agreed that it wouldn't work well for her to teach the older students, the ones that had been closest to her year group, so Severus taught the sixth and seventh year classes in the afternoons while she made sure the storerooms were stocked, marked essays, and dealt with anything else that needed doing.

Once the Cantor project had been handed over to the seventh-year students, Hermione and Severus found themselves at loose ends in the evenings. This lasted until the third night. He'd been grumbling about the terrible first-year Potions text.

"So why don't you write a new one, a better one?" Hermione asked. It was the same text they'd used in her first year and it truly was terrible.

He opened his mouth to rebut the question only to close it again and actually consider what she'd said. "That would take a great deal of time."

"Are you planning on going anywhere?"

"No."

"Neither am I. You're absolutely right none of the Potions texts have been updated in at least thirty years, so it doesn't take into account any of the advances in the craft. We could do so much better. In fact, we could write a whole new series of textbooks, and do it right!"

"We?"

Now she grinned at him. "Writing a proper textbook is a long-term project you said it yourself. By the time we get done, I'll have my Mastery. A set of Potions texts co-authored by not one, but two Potions Masters is certain to be well-received."

He shook his head at her. "Are you sure you aren't a Slytherin in disguise?"

"What better place for a snake to hide than among the lions?"

And so their evenings were now spent planning and discussing their proposed opus. He had suggested that the introductory chapters explain how to use all the different tools of the potioneer's trade. Hermione took that idea and went one better, suggesting that they include photographs of the tools in use, demonstrating proper technique. He sat back, open-mouthed. Pictures in textbooks were always drawings or paintings. No one had *ever* thought of using photographs. That alone would make their book for it was obviously now a joint work unique.

Colin Creevey spent one evening with them taking some sample pictures. As brash and annoying as the seventh-year Gryffindor could be, he knew his chosen craft and took the time to make sure the end results were exactly what were needed. The proposed frontispiece of the book showed Severus' treasured set of Master's Tools laid out neatly on a worktable.

Severus' next thought was to include photos for each recipe. One showing the ingredients, with notes on how to select the best for that particular potion. One showing the prepared ingredients, and a third showing the completed potion. The other two thought this an excellent idea. "In fact," Colin said, "since I'm setting up my own business after this year, you two can be my first clients. Photographs of the quality you will need are going to take a lot of time to do right, and we'll have more of it during the summer."

"That is an excellent observation, Mr. Creevey," Severus said with a satisfied expression. "And here is your pay for tonight's work." He passed over a sack of galleons.

"We'll talk after your exams," Hermione put in, "and set up a time to do the first set of photographs."

"I wish I'd had a book like this," Colin said as he packed up his camera. "I didn't really understand the difference between chopping and slicing until third-year. And as for telling the difference between mugwort and mangrove roots? I still can't!"

And that had, predictably, catapulted the entire project into something even bigger. Not just a single textbook, but an entire set of textbooks with companion reference volumes covering everything from beginner to NEWT-levels and beyond. Thus *The Consummate Compendium* was born.

~*~

The tail end of September, Lucius was in the middle of showing his first-year Hufflepuffs how to cast a basic shielding spell when the Fat Friar floated in, followed by the Grey Lady. "Pardon us, Professor. Madame Pomfrey requests your presence in the Infirmary. We'll be happy to take your class for you."

"The Infirmary?"

The Friar beamed. "Apparently your children have decided to make an early appearance."

"Children? Early?" He stared at the ghosts, wondering what they were talking about. His class was all present and accounted for. It couldn't be... "Xia?" And then as the Friar nodded happily, "Children? As in more than one?"

"Twins, I believe," The Grey Lady almost had to shout the last word as Lucius bolted out the door as if all the hounds of Hell were after him. Smiling, she turned her attention to the students. "Now, class, I believe we were discussing shielding spells."

It was a long way from the DADA classroom to the Infirmary, but Lucius got there within ten minutes. The castle itself seemed to understand that he was in a hurry, for he didn't have to wait on any of the staircases. At the door, he stopped short, suddenly unsure of what to do. Narcissa had been horrified when he'd barged in on her right after Draco was born. He didn't hear anything, and had no idea if that was bad or good. Mentally girding his loins, he opened the door and strode in.

"Your timing couldn't be better," Madame Pomfrey greeted him. "Come kiss your wife and meet your children."

Two long steps took him behind the privacy screen. Xia looked up at him with a tired but happy grin. "Surprise!"

Relief washed over him and he took Poppy's advice and kissed her gently. Only then did he notice that there were not two, but three bundles in her arms. "Three....?" He touched one of the little heads gently, words failing him. But the goofy grin on his face said everything.

"Two boys and a girl. We have three wonderful, healthy children!"

He picked up the nearest bundle carefully and rocked it in his arms, still grinning. "What shall we name them? We had not really talked about it. It's traditional in my family to name children for assorted ancestors. I'd like to break from that tradition. I'd like to give them names that mean something." He ground to a halt, dimly aware that he was babbling.

"As would I. These are the future. The tradition in my family is that twins or triplets all have names starting with the same letter. That's always seemed a bit pretentious to me."

"Castor, Pollux, and Artemis? Those are names with some weight behind them."

Xia cuffed him gently. "Too predictable. Romulus, Remus, and Regina?"

"Oh please. Let's get away from tradition."

"You started it!"

He laughed. "So I did!"

Some discussion later, it was decided. The newest residents of Hogwarts castle were named Helios, Chrysos, and Aurora Malfoy.

~*~

The third Saturday in October found Severus having dinner with the Malfoys in their quarters, as his apprentice / assistant was dining with Potter and his wife in their quarters. Potter was much more tolerable now that he wasn't a student, but Severus still preferred to minimize their association.

By common accord, conversation was kept light and pleasant through dinner. Only when the dessert a magnificent Schwartzwald cake accompanied by a suitable wine appeared did his hosts exchange what Snape knew to be a significant glance. Lucius took up the gauntlet.

"Severus, you're ignoring the best thing that ever happened to you."

"Hermione," Xia clarified. "She's potty about you. Anyone with half an eye can see that."

"And you've got it just as bad for her, if you'd only recognize it."

Severus looked back and forth between them, somewhat bemused. "Did she put you up to this?" He refused to admit the truth of what they'd said. Even to himself. Especially to himself. He took a long swallow of wine, and helped himself to a large slice of cake, wondering for a moment how Lucius had known it was his favorite.

They laughed. "Not hardly," Xia answered. "I think she'd be embarrassed to be discussing her love-life..."

"Or lack thereof..."

"... with either of us. Fortunately, we're not as shy as she is."

"You love her. She loves you. What in Merlin's name is stopping you from doing something about it? The war's long over, Severus. Voldemort is dead. Look to your future."

"She's a child!" Snape managed. He drained his glass and allowed Lucius to refill it, and then turned his attention to the hitherto neglected cake. Dark chocolate and tart cherry combined on his tongue to explode in a sensory nirvana. If heaven had a taste, this would be it.

"Nonsense," Lucius replied, amused by his friend's enjoyment of the dessert. "She's an adult by both Wizard and Muggle law. She's also much more mature than her age-group. But if you don't find her acceptable, should I try to set her up with Mr. Nott? I believe he's only a month older than she is."

Severus shook his head and sipped at his wine. "It wouldn't work, Lucius. Mr. Nott never bothered to do more than the bare minimum reading for any of his classes as you very well know. She would be bored after half an hour in his company."

"Perhaps we should encourage her to write to that Bulgarian wizard who asked her to the Triwizard Ball," Xia suggested. "They seemed quite compatible."

"The Quidditch player?" Severus snorted. "Impossible! Hermione does not even like to fly." He put his glass down and contemplated his empty dessert dish.

"You've just referred to her by her first name," Lucius grinned. "Would you like another slice of cake?"

"I admit she is a painstaking and competent assistant," Severus said accepting a second, equally large, piece and ignoring Lucius' comment about her first name, "And she's taken the first and second years off my hands, which is certainly a praiseworthy endeavor. If it weren't for her occasional bouts of Gryffindoriness, she would be perfect." He hadn't really meant to put it quite like that, and wondered for a moment if Lucius had spiked the wine.

"So you're pleased with her as an apprentice that means you work well together. You obviously know her fairly well as you have definitely opinions on what sort of man she would or wouldn't get along with. Why shouldn't that man be you?"

"I'm old enough to be her father!" he burst out.

That sent both of them into gales of laughter. "Not just a river in Egypt! Oh Severus," Xia finally managed, "twenty years is nothing between witch and wizard. Even in the Muggle world, it's not unheard of!"

Snape raised his hands in surrender. "You've made your point, both of you. And since you insist on meddling, riddle me this: what in the world should I do?"

"Escort her to Mr. Longbottom's wedding!"

~*~

The days went with surprisingly mild weather that continued as October drew to a close. Severus wondered if Longbottom had paid a weather-worker to predict a good night for an outdoor ceremony. If so, he'd got his money's worth. While cool, the evening of October 31 was calm and dry.

Severus knocked on Hermione's door, slightly nervous. "Ready?"

"Come in. I'll be just a moment."

He almost didn't recognize her. She wore crimson robes embroidered with gold in a Celtic knot pattern. Her flyaway hair had been charmed or otherwise softened into a sleek mane.

"I hope these robes will be acceptable," she said as she cast a spell to remove stray cat hairs. "Millie told me that it's improper to wear black at this sort of ceremony. Most light colors wash me out too much." Then she caught sight of him. "You look fantastic!"

"Miss Bulstrode is quite correct." He'd laid aside his customary black robes for the occasion, and had chosen to wear a medium shade of green embroidered with silver serpents. "Darker colors are more fitting for solemn occasions. And while I can't bring myself to use the word 'fantastic', you are... quite stunning." He held out his arm. "Shall we?"

Chapter Twenty

Chapter 20 of 20

Chaos ensues when the Familiars at Hogwarts decide to play matchmaker.

Chapter Twenty

Hogwarts had changed considerably over the last dozen years, Lucius reflected. He had not expected to be elevated to Headmaster when Albus retired, but apparently everyone else thought he was the best man for the job. Minerva had retired shortly after her wedding, stating that she wished to concentrate on being a parent and Albus had stepped down as Headmaster to teach Transfiguration and take over as Head of Gryffindor.

Flitwick had been promoted to Deputy. Kingsley Shacklebolt – now retired from the Auror Corps – was the new DADA teacher and Ardis Vector had become Head of Slytherin House when Severus (surprising no one) stepped down from that position in order to concentrate on teaching the upper years.

One of the new Headmaster's first actions had been to have Professor Binns sent on to his next great adventure, and hire Percy Weasley to teach History of Magic after his release from Azkaban. He'd argued that the man had paid his debt to society. The ex-convict had been pathetically grateful for the job, and had proved to be a competent instructor.

Two years after Minerva retired, Flitwick and Poppy Pomfrey had announced that they were retiring and getting married. Lucius grumbled, groused, congratulated them, and then promoted Shacklebolt to Deputy. He'd also hired Gawain Robards – another retired Auror – to teach Charms and be Head of Ravenclaw, as he and Kingsley both felt that the Deputy needed to be independent of House affiliation. Susan Bones, now a well-qualified medi-witch, was hired to replace Poppy.

Albus and the Filches had retired the year after that, causing Lucius to wonder aloud if he'd been cursed with replacing senior staff positions every year. Despite the grumbling, he took advantage of the opportunity (as all good Slytherins should do) to rearrange things more to his liking. He hired Astoria Greengrass to act as secretary to himself and his Deputy, and to oversee the Hogwarts house elves who would now do all the cleaning that Argus used to do.

Lucius had then decided that his Deputy should concentrate on helping to run the school, and hired Nymphadora Tonks to teach DADA and be Head of Hufflepuff with Justin Finch-Fletchley as her assistant, and Zachariah Smith became the new Herbology Professor with 7th year Malcolm Bulstrode as his assistant. This left Gryffindor House without a Head until Lucius decided to promote Hermione Granger into that position.

The Hogwarts Express had been retired five years ago after an incident where a Muggle with a video camera happened to film some students going through the barrier at King's Cross. It had taken a month for the Aurors to track down and Oblivate everyone involved.

Now students were told to be at Hogsmeade Station at 4pm on September 1st. Muggleborn students, or those who were unable to get there otherwise were provided with single-use voice-activated portkeys. Others could Apparate or Floo as they chose. At 3:30pm, five or six professors would make their way to Hogsmeade. At 4pm, the threstral-drawn carriages would arrive and start taking students to the castle and the professors would make their way through the town rounding up stragglers.

And while many things had changed, things had been relatively stable in the past few years, Lucius mused as he stood in front of the main gates ready to welcome incoming students, Thunder riding his shoulder. For the first time he could remember, all the classrooms were in use, and the dorms were crowded even with the Expansion Charms. He'd have to form a fifth House over the coming summer – or dismantle the House system entirely. There were almost two-hundred new students coming this term, and nearly three-hundred expected the year after that. No matter what he did about the House system, he definitely needed to hire more staff.

He'd instituted a zero-tolerance policy for ad hominem attacks – physical or verbal. Two suspensions and an expulsion later, the students had got the message loud and clear. It didn't matter what you thought, but while you were at Hogwarts, you didn't say "Mudblood" or "slimy snake".

Lucius smiled as he saw a group of people making their way up the path from the village and recognized the old Headmaster. Albus and Minerva's oldest daughter, Adrienne, was starting at Hogwarts today and her parents had come to see the Sorting. That was another change he'd made: the parents of new students were welcome (and encouraged) to attend the Sorting and first night feast. The school provided port-keys for parents of Muggleborn. The Potters were walking with the Dumbledores; Ron, their oldest, was a second-year Ravenclaw, and Lily, their second oldest, was starting this year. They had two other youngsters as well.

His own children were now third-years. They'd all Sorted into different Houses (Slytherin, Ravenclaw, and Hufflepuff) and were thriving. After consideration and consulting, it was agreed that Deputy Headmaster Shacklebolt would handle any disciplinary issues with the Malfoy children (and there had been a few). This helped obviate any complaints of favoritism.

The first of the carriages pulled up, and the Filch twins disembarked. Rustin and Dustin – or Rusty and Dusty, as they preferred – were second-year Gryffindors with the stated ambition of trying to outdo the infamous Weasley twins in mischief, much to the dismay of their parents. From what Hermione had said in staff meetings last year, they were well on their way to attaining that goal too.

It was a shame, Lucius thought, that the Longbottoms had chosen to home-school their children. He wondered what they would be like – would they have their father's legendary capabilities with plants, or would they be drawn toward charms and transfiguration like their mother? Those two would have been wonderful additions to his staff as well, but they'd graciously declined his repeated offers of employment. They'd chosen, instead, to travel the world with their children in tow – they'd spent a year in Egypt, and two in China, and were currently living in Mexico.

He glanced at his Head of Gryffindor standing next to his Potions Master, with their Familiars riding their shoulders. They'd married quietly a few years ago, after things had settled down a bit. Hermione and her two assistants taught the first through sixth years, and Severus taught the seventh years and spent his remaining time doing research. It was a bit odd how everyone had found someone special just when they needed it. If he didn't know better, he'd suspect that someone had manipulated events.

And then Thunder meowed at him, breaking him out of his musings.