

ADVENTURES IN FANFICTION

ARSINOE DE BLASSENVILLE'S



VOLUME 2

# HARRY AT HOG- WARTS



A RED HEN PUBLICATION



Red Hen Edition  
Copyright© 2011 by the Author  
2nd Edition Graphics Copyright 2020

ARSINOE DE BLASSENVILLE'S



VOLUME 2

HARRY  
AT  
HOG-  
WARTS





## CHAPTER 1

**WHAT A SUMMER!** Snape

collapsed into his ratty armchair at Spinner's End, glad to have time to himself for once. Harry was as ready as he would ever be to enter Hogwarts. In

their last week of freedom, the two of them had hiked in Cornwall, explored the cairns of the Isles, wandered through Kew Gardens, and dined once more with the Malfoys. Snape had seen *TERMINATOR II* twice, at Harry's demand, wincing at the unbelievable volume of sound and the overwhelming intensity of the images. Muggle special effects had certainly made great strides.

Today they had brewed two potions, the last of a series of six that Snape had thought would give Harry a reasonable background in techniques and ingredients. Since Albus resisted the idea of Harry at Hogwarts before September first, Snape had scrupulously cleaned his own humble home and brewed there. Harry seemed not to notice the shabbiness of Spinner's End, only comment-



ing on the amount of books and how neat it was to have the stairs hidden by a bookcase. They had worked at the battered kitchen table, breaking off for sandwiches they made together. Late in the afternoon, he had taken Harry back to Privet Drive, and had shared the delicious dinner Muffy served. Seeing the boy before him—such a *small* boy—though he had grown nearly two inches since their first meeting—Snape found it a struggle not to smother the child with last-minute advice.

“I’m going to call on you first thing when you’re in Potions, Harry. It’s important that your classmates understand that you’re a serious student, not just a boy basking in his celebrity.”

Harry nodded. “I don’t want people to think that I care about being famous. But I don’t want them to think I’m the sort of know-it-all who thinks he’s better than everybody else, either.”

After a few more anxious admonitions, Snape saw Harry struggling not to roll his eyes. He shut his mouth and turned his attention to his *crème brûlée*. It wasn’t as if he wouldn’t see Harry at Hogwarts, after all.

He would see him tomorrow, in fact: at exactly half-past ten.



Harry’s professors had told him how to walk through the barrier to Platform Nine and Three Quarters. He wheeled his trunk in front of him, preparing to go at the barrier running, and then paused to make his goodbyes.

Aunt Petunia held a dainty lace handkerchief to her eyes. “I can’t believe our Harry is going away. You’ll be nearly grown by the next time we see you!” If her accent had a curiously Scottish flavour, no one who knew her was there to comment.

Uncle Vernon, expensively tailored, beamed at him, teeth gleaming. Harry stared, and then staggered as he was slapped on the back. His hand was grasped for a fiercely emotional—but *manly*—shake. He knew this was really Professor Snape, disguised by something called Polyjuice Potion, but the man looked *exactly* like Uncle Vernon. He heard, unbelieving, as “Uncle Vernon” declared, “You’ll make us proud, my boy.” Harry took a caged and fluttering Hedwig from him, and stepped back.

“Aunt Petunia”—otherwise known as Professor Minerva McGonagall—bent and kissed his cheek. She smelled of heather, not of Aunt Petunia’s usual favorite, *L’Air du Temps*. It was all completely surreal. Harry wondered if his head would explode. He smiled over his shoulder at them, and caught a glimpse of a large family of redheads coming their way, the mother complaining about “muggles.” Knowing that they would be trying to get through, he gave “Aunt Petunia” and “Uncle Vernon” a quick nod, and then started running.

Trundling, really. Holding tight to Hedwig’s cage, he picked up speed, clenched his teeth, waited for the crash, and instantly was in bright light, rolling to a startled stop at the sight of a brilliantly scarlet engine.



"HOGWARTS EXPRESS."

Harry let out the breath he was holding, in a sigh of relief and delight. The engine's smoke drifted in a dense grey haze. A crowd of robed wizards and witches of all ages chattered and jostled, while Hogwarts students clambered aboard, weighted down with bags and trunks and pets. Owls hooted their complaints, and cats screeched in outrage. Harry stood stock still for a moment, enjoying the amazing scene, and then darted out of the way of the red-haired family following him.

"Harry!"

Draco was waving. Behind him, his elegantly-garbed parents granted Harry their rare smiles. He went to meet them, glad he knew someone in this crowd. "Madam Malfoy—Mr Malfoy. A pleasure to see you. You're looking eager this morning, Draco!"

"We were Disillusioned, and we watched you on the platform," Draco grinned. "We had to see your muggle relatives. What happened to the baby whale?"

"He left for school a week ago. They carried on even more for him—though I suppose that's as it should be—he *is* their son and all."

"At least they dressed for the occasion," Lucius remarked, rather coolly. "Not as slovenly and trashy as most of the mob. Off you go then. Let's get your things stowed away. It's a long journey to Hogwarts."

"Not without saying our goodbyes first," teased Madam

Malfoy. To Harry's surprise, she bent and took his face gently in her soft hands. A kiss was pressed on his brow. "You will never again be on the Hogwarts Express for the first time. Make the most of it."

Harry's hand was given a brief, formal shake by Malfoy Senior, who levitated the luggage onto the train, and led them to a compartment. Once the trunks were secured, he gave the boys a brief, considering look, and then a half-smile. "Owl us after the Sorting. I hope—" he broke off, and simply said, "Enjoy Hogwarts. There's no place like it."

He was gone, leaving Harry and Draco the masters of the compartment.

"Don't you have an animal?" Harry asked.

Draco spread out comfortably on the seat opposite. "No." he drawled loftily. "We have Bubo to relay messages already, and if I need to owl home quickly, there's always the owlery. Perhaps another year I might take a cat. I rather fancy an Abyssinian, but I didn't find one that was just right." He glanced into the passageway, and shouted, "There you are! Get in here, you two! You're late!"

Two large boys lumbered into the compartment and plumped down heavily on either side of Draco. "Harry Potter," Draco said, with a gesture to the boy opposite him. "these lads are Gregory Goyle and Vincent Crabbe. We've known each other forever, and they'll be my companions in Slytherin."



Crabbes and Goyles have served the Malfoys for centuries. Greg—Vince—say hello to Harry Potter, The-Boy-Who-Lived.”

The two boys grunted amiably.

Harry gave them the carefully friendly smile he used with strange dogs. “Vince. Greg. Pleased to meet you.”

Goyle turned and remarked to Crabbe, “Thought he’d be taller.”

Draco rolled his eyes. Harry continued to smile. It was rather like the zoo.

Crabbe’s brow furrowed, and then he blurted out, “What was it like, killing the Dark Lord?”

Draco winced. “Smooth, Crabbe. Very smooth. He was all of—what?—one? I daresay he doesn’t remember anything about it. You don’t, do you?” Draco asked, trying to hide how very much he wanted to know.

Harry was not fooled. “I do, actually. Bits, anyway.” Anger flickered at the rapt expressions. “He giggled in this stupid high laugh like a girl. Then it was all very—green.”

Draco’s eyes widened.

“And then,” Harry said coldly, “his laugh cut off with a squawk. And I’m still here to talk about it. I’d rather not have to again. Is that quite all right?”

“Of course,” Draco agreed hurriedly.

A loud whistle, and the train lurched into motion. Harry looked out the window, and saw the Malfoys waving. The boys all waved back, and Draco waved at his parents until

they were out of sight. Harry thought the Malfoys looked a little anxious and strained beneath their bland smiles, but he supposed that was normal for parents. He imagined his own parents standing on the platform, his mother’s red hair catching the breeze. He sighed. Draco looked a little mournful himself. It occurred to Harry that Draco might have reason to be homesick. To be honest, he was little apprehensive about the coming adventure himself. His wonderful little room seemed very precious at the moment. He would have to find the kitchens as soon as possible and see Muffy. He already missed her.

Seeing Draco discreetly wipe his nose, Harry said, “The trip takes hours and hours. Anyone for a game?”

Goyle’s mother had thoughtfully slipped a deck of cards in his pocket, and the four of them were soon playing Exploding Snap, shouting along with every bang. Goyle and Crabbe were not so stolid once their “loyal retainer” façade slipped a bit.

Draco’s spirits picked up a bit with the game. He had talked and talked with Father in the past few days, telling him everything that Harry had said and done when they were together: the tone of his voice, the expression on his face, what Draco deduced were Harry’s plans. Father had told him very seriously that young Potter was destined for great things, and that it was important to maintain their alliance, no matter where the boy was sorted. Whether or not the Dark Lord ever returned, he had been bested by a child, and Malfoys did not



waste their loyalty on losers. Lucius might not be happy with Harry's attitude about blood, but the boy, after all, was young and naïve. And as long as one was flexible enough to accept the occasional outstanding muggleborn—like the boy's mother—it was still possible to keep power in the wizarding world in the proper hands. If the muggleborn was truly outstanding, and was adaptable enough to integrate fully into the wizarding world, it was not necessarily a disaster. Draco must be proud of his heritage, but always keep his options open.

*"It will be awkward if he goes into Gryffindor, I grant you. Nonetheless, don't rise to any baiting from his housemates. Always make yourself the innocent, injured party if anything of the sort happens—and it will. If Potter dislikes bullies as much as it appears, he won't be impressed by that sort of behavior, and he'll hold on to your friendship all the more obstinately. If you don't retaliate, anything they say against Slytherin will seem a lie. And once he thinks they're liars—well—" Lucius smiled slyly, and the smile widened at Draco's answering smirk. "He talks about house unity, you say? Well, that might not be a bad thing, done the right way. If he wants to create a network among the houses, it could be very useful once you are of age. Particularly useful, if he is in another house, and he looks to the Malfoys as his chief allies in Slytherin."*

*"And Professor Snape, too," Draco reminded his father.*

*"Yes—Severus." Lucius was silent a moment. "Severus is*

*fond of Harry—the son he never had—though of course there is still plenty of time—"*

"I daresay you'll be glad to see Snape when we get to Hogwarts," Draco remarked to Harry.

Harry smiled over his cards. "I only hope people don't think I'm some sort of teacher's pet."

Draco shrugged, "Who cares if the morons are jealous? I hope we're in Potions together. We could be partners."

"Sounds good."

Students were passing, sliding the compartment doors open and closed with hisses and crashes. Trunks thumped against their door, making Harry look up. The red-haired boy Harry had seen in Madam Malkin's peered in, shouting out, "Oi! Did you hear that Harry Potter's on this train?"

Harry made a face. "No! You don't say so!"

Draco snorted a laugh. "Sounds like a wild rumour to me."

Crabbe and Goyle exchanged a befuddled glance. "But you said he was Harry Potter!" Crabbe objected, jabbing a thick finger in Harry's direction. Draco and Harry burst out laughing. The red-haired boy peered eagerly at Harry, coming further into the compartment. Harry noticed a dirty smear of black on his nose.

"Are you really Harry Potter?" the boy asked.

Harry nodded.

"Oh—well, I thought it might be one of Fred and George's jokes. And have you really got—you know—" He pointed to



Harry's forehead.

Harry pulled back his hair to show the scar. All the boys in the compartment stared.

Draco attempted to comfort him. "It's not at all disfiguring, Harry, especially since you wear your hair long."

The red-haired boy was still staring. "So that's where You-Know-Who—"

"Yes," Harry said shortly. "So now you know my name, but I don't know yours."

"No need to ask who he is," Draco sneered. "Red hair, freckles, and the manners of a lout. He must be a Weasley. You'll find that some wizarding families are better than others. You don't want to go making friends with the wrong sort."

The other boy's ears had reddened, and he clenched his fists in rage. Harry sighed, and put his hand out.

"I'm Harry Potter. I saw you before at Madam Malkin's. You are...?"

The red-haired boy glared at Draco, and fumbled to shake Harry's hand. "Ron Weasley," he muttered. "Yeah, I remember you. You didn't know anything about Quidditch."

"Well, he does now," Draco shot back, rather nettled. "We were playing Exploding Snap just now when you interrupted, so if you would be so good as to remove yourself..."

Ron scowled and slammed out of the compartment.

"Oh, well done, Draco," Harry complained. "Now I have

someone pissed off at me already."

"A Weasley isn't worth a second thought," Draco declared. "Your turn to deal, I think."

While they were playing, the train had carried them out of London. Now they were speeding past fields full of cows and sheep. They grew tired of Snap, and chatted for awhile. Harry found out that Greg and Vince's fathers both worked for Mr Malfoy at the estate. Vince, like Draco, was an only child, but Greg had a much younger sister, whom he appeared to regard as something of a pet.

Harry had already been told that the Malfoys raised sheep, but he had not seen them close-to, since Draco found sheep smelly and unappealing. From Vince and Greg, however, Harry learned that the Malfoys raised Greater Spellcombe Sheep, a unique wizarding breed, whose wool was used in making high-quality robes.

"All the Hogwarts robes sold by Madam Malkin and Twilfit and Tattings have at least some Greater Spellcombe wool in them," Draco told Harry. "Mine are pure Greater Spellcombe—the most expensive, of course."

Harry smirked at him, and teased, "Of course! Anything of inferior quality might irritate the delicate Malfoy skin!"

"Stop," Draco grimaced, a trifle embarrassed. "Sometimes you sound just like Snape!"

Crabbe and Goyle sniggered, snuffling like boars.



“Well, he does!” Draco snapped.

They looked out the window for some time, calling out when they saw a white horse—considered propitious by wizarding folk—and speculating about Hogwarts. Crabbe and Goyle’s eyes grew heavy, and they dozed off. Draco moved over to Harry’s seat and they admired Harry’s beautiful traveling chess set. Professor Snape had explained the basics of the game to Harry, but they had played only a few times. Draco, Harry found, was quite a good chess player, and generously shared his insights and expertise with his friend.

Around half past twelve there was a great clattering outside the corridor, and a smiling, dimpled woman slid back their door and asked, “Anything off the cart, dears?”

Crabbe and Goyle were instantly awake, alert, and shoving coins at the woman.

Harry was conscious of the picnic hamper in his bookbag, packed full to bursting by Muffy. “I don’t think I really need anything, thank you,” he told the smiling witch. “I brought a lunch with me.”

“Oh, come on, Harry!” Draco demanded, sorting through the treats. “Try the chocolate frogs, at least. And the cauldron cakes are nice. Nothing wrong with a few sweets. Just beware the Bertie Botts.”

Draco’s words roused Harry’s curiosity. He was informed that “Every Flavour” meant exactly that, and that Draco had never felt

the same about them after getting one that—Draco whispered in Harry’s ear—“tasted the way dog droppings smell.”

Harry laughed insanely, nearly sliding out of his seat. Coughing, he submitted to Draco’s urgings and bought a selection of treats, carefully avoiding the dreaded Bertie Botts. He eyed the chocolate frogs doubtfully.

“They’re not really frogs, are they?”

“Of course not. They’ve just a little charm on them to make them jump at first, so hold on. They have cards inside them of famous witches and wizards. I have a complete collection already—over seven hundred.”

Harry laughed. “That’s a lot of chocolate.” He unwrapped the frog and looked at the card. It showed an old man’s face. He wore half-moon glasses and had a long, crooked, nose. His flowing silver hair, beard, and mustache put Harry in mind of Father Christmas. Under the picture was a name he knew.

“So this is Dumbledore!” He turned over the card and read:

Albus Dumbledore  
Currently Headmaster of Hogwarts

There followed a brief description of Dumbledore’s achievements and hobbies. Professor Dumbledore had worked on alchemy with Nicholas Flamel, the man in the biography Harry’s mum had owned. It was in Harry’s trunk, even now, and he had looked through it briefly. It was terribly long,



of course, which was to be expected when a wizard was hundreds of years old.

"I feel like something besides sweets," Harry remarked, getting up. "Greg! Maybe you can help me get my bookbag down. I've got a lunch hamper in it. Maybe you'd all like—"

There was a knock at the door of the compartment, and Harry looked up to see Neville Longbottom. The boy was near tears.

"Hullo, Neville." Harry greeted him. "Draco, Vince, Greg—this is Neville Longbottom. It's his first year at Hogwarts, too."

A duet of grunts, and a bored "Charmed," from Draco.

Neville was too upset to take offense at the lack of welcome. "Sorry," he mumbled. "Hello, Harry. Have you seen a toad at all?"

"A toad?" Draco muttered scornfully.

Neville flinched a little at Draco's tone, and told Harry, "I've lost my toad Trevor! He keeps getting away from me!"

Draco looked at Neville very haughtily. "You actually paid money for a toad?"

"Uncle Algy gave him to me," Neville said defensively, not quite looking at Draco. "I don't think Trevor liked leaving our greenhouses. He was very happy there."

"You have greenhouses?" Harry interrupted, rather interested.

"Of course he does," Draco drawled. "It's the foundation of the Longbottom fortune. There's good money in growing magical plants if you don't mind grubbing in the dirt."

Feeling rather sorry for Neville, Harry paused, not know-

ing quite what to say. Goyle was up, more interested in the contents of Harry's lunch hamper. "Wait!" Harry cried. "I mean—Greg, get my trunk down, if you can. There's a spell to summon a familiar in an old book of my dad's! Let's try it!" With Goyle's muscular assistance, the dragonhide trunk was eased down and Harry quickly opened it, taking no notice of Draco's favourable appraisal of the trunk itself. He dug down and snatched out the copy of *MADCAP MAGIC FOR WACKY WARLOCKS*. "Here it is!"

Thumbing quickly through the dog-eared pages, he found "SO YOU'VE LOST YOUR LAST FRIEND." A notation was scribbled beside it in faded ink: *This works all right*. He read through it quickly, and said, "You'll have to do it, Neville. He's your toad, after all!"

"I don't know—" Neville quavered.

"Do stop dithering, Longbottom, and show us what you can do," Draco said, settling back for the show.

"Here," Harry said, pointing out the incantation. "You just stick your wand out right out, and then say, '*Ecce, Trevor!*' And then swoop your arm back as if gathering him in. And you have to think about how much you want him."

Neville obediently practiced the wand motion—a simple one. He whispered to Harry, "I don't think I can—"

"You *want* Trevor, don't you? Harry whispered back. "Think as hard as you can about that!"

Neville bit his lip and nodded, and then stuck out his arm,



shouting, "Ecce, Trevor!" His arm swooped in a grand gesture.

"Maybe someone should open the door," Draco suggested. "Otherwise, it's likely to splatter all over the—"

Just in time, Harry lunged at the compartment door, sliding it open as a startled toad whizzed through, smacking into Neville's hands. The boy fumbled the catch, and Crabbe and Goyle and Harry amongst them managed to get a grip on Trevor and give him to an ecstatic and incredulous Neville.

"I did it!" he stammered. "I did *magic*!"

"I should certainly hope so," Draco declared, impressed in spite of himself, but unwilling to make a show of it. Such a fuss for a miserable toad! All the same, it was a neat bit of charms work. "Why don't you put him in your pocket, so he doesn't make another mad dash for freedom?"

With more fumbling, that was accomplished, and Trevor was tucked away safely.

"We were just about to have some lunch," Harry told Neville. "Why don't you join us? I've got heaps of food."

"Muggle food?" Draco challenged. "What have you got?"

Harry only gave him an enigmatic smile, and pulled the oversized hamper from the much smaller bookbag with some difficulty. Harry had reread his battered copy of *THE WIND IN THE WILLOWS* only last week. There was a part he loved best, and he had asked Muffy to make up the hamper just so—with a few additions of his own. Crabbe and Goyle were very nearly





drooling at the scents wafting towards them.

"There's cold chicken inside it," Harry replied. He took a breath. "—and—coldtonguecoldhamcoldbeefpickedgherkinssalad—frenchrollscressandwidgespottedmeatgingerbeerlemonade—sodawater—"

The boys were staring at him and his hamper in awe, as the longest word they'd ever heard was put to the proof. Harry just kept on pulling out food.

"—andsausagerollsporkpiesbaconpastiesstrawberriescream—cheese—and some treacle tarts and meringues, if we haven't enough sweets!"

Crabbe and Goyle fell on the food in rapture. Neville smiled in delight, and Draco nodded approvingly, biting into a rich and crumbling pasty. "Not bad, Harry. Not bad at all."

There was no further speech for some time. At length, drowsy and replete, they sprawled in their seats gorged and triumphant, while the countryside through which they passed grew wilder. Now there were woods, twisting rivers, and dark green hills.

The compartment door slid open again. A girl stood framed in it: a girl with lots of bushy brown hair and rather large front teeth. In a bossy voice, she demanded, "Has anyone seen a toad? Neville—oh—there you are. Any luck?"

Neville roused himself to reply proudly, "I found him—with *magic*."

"Oh, are you doing magic?" asked the girl. "I wish I'd seen it!"

"It was a spell in my dad's book," Harry told her, very pleased with his father. "MADCAP MAGIC FOR WACKY WARLOCKS."

"That's not on the Hogwarts list," the girl told him. "Is it any good?"

"Have a look at it if you like," Harry said. "Come in and have some lunch."

She tutted at him, brushing at the seat. "Honestly! Boys! You're all over crumbs!"

"Most excellent crumbs," Draco remarked dreamily.

The girl sat down by Harry and began paging through the book, talking all the time.

"I've tried a few simple spells just for practice and it's all worked for me. Nobody in my family's magic at all. It was ever such a surprise when I got my letter, but I was ever so pleased, of course—"

Draco's eyes widened, and he began inching away, further back into the seat, as far as possible from the strange girl.

Oblivious to his growing horror, the girl prattled on. "I mean, it's the very best school of witchcraft there is, I've heard. I've learned all our course books by heart, of course. I just hope it will be enough—I'm Hermione Granger, by the way, who are you?"

She said all this very fast. Harry gaped at her. He'd had done his share of studying over the past month, but he certainly couldn't claim to have learned all his books *by heart*.

Luckily, Neville's manners saved the moment. "Neville Longbottom," he said softly, with a small nod, in lieu of a bow to a lady.

"Uhh—" Harry managed brilliantly. "This is Greg Goyle—"



and Vince Crabbe—and this—” he said, attempting his suavest ‘*shaken, not stirred*’ voice, “— is Malfoy—Draco Malfoy—” He nodded to her, distracting her from Draco’s expression. “— and I’m Harry Potter.”

“Are you really?” asked Hermione. “I know all about you, of course. I got a few extra books for background reading, and you’re in *Modern Magical History* and *The Rise and Fall of the Dark Arts* and *Great Wizarding Events of the Twentieth Century*. Do you have anything that doesn’t have meat or refined sugar in it?”

Harry served her some strawberries and cream cheese with deliciously crunchy biscuits. Clearing his throat, he said quietly, “You can’t believe everything you read. I read those books, too, and I’m not sure I agree—”

“Have him tell you about the *green light*!” Draco sniped at the girl. “I daresay you don’t know *all* about him.”

“Do you know what house you’d like to be in?” Harry asked desperately, hoping to forestall a fight.

“Oh—Gryffindor, I think,” the girl blundered on. “I’ve been asking around, and I hope I go there. I heard Dumbledore himself was in it, and I think it sounds much the best—”

“Why?” Harry asked.

“Why?”

“Why do you think it sounds the best?”

“Well—Dumbledore is such a great wizard, and if he was in it—”

“You shouldn’t go into a house just because someone else

was in it,” Harry said firmly. “You should go into the house that suits you the best. That’s what my wizarding guardian says, and I agree with him. You have to be true to yourself, or it’s all no good and you’ll never make friends with your housemates. And besides, I don’t know where you read that Dumbledore was in Gryffindor, but—”

“Some red-haired boys on the second car up said that.”

Draco snorted his contempt.

Harry shook his head. “I haven’t read anywhere that Dumbledore was in Gryffindor. I don’t know which house he was in. But it still doesn’t matter. He’s Dumbledore and you’re you.”

“Well—I don’t suppose Ravenclaw would be *too* bad—”

Crabbe sniggered to Goyle, “Not if she’s already memorized all the books!”

Hermione huffed, and took another strawberry.

“Your parents are *muggles*,” Draco said flatly, as if astonished that he could be having such a conversation. “What do muggles *do*?”

She blinked at him uncertainly. “They’re dentists. Both of them. Mum is actually—”

“What in Merlin’s name is a ‘dentist?’”

“Tooth healers,” Harry translated for the purebloods. “They fill cavities in teeth and prevent tooth decay.”

“Cavities?” Neville asked, all at sea.

“Tooth decay?” Draco ventured in helpless revulsion. “Muggles



teeth *rot*? That's the most disgusting thing I ever heard."

Hermione asked eagerly, "Do you mean that witches and wizards never get cavities?"

"What's a cavity?" Crabbe wondered.

Harry explained. "When muggles teeth decay, they get holes in them called cavities, and dentists fill them with metal stuff so the teeth still work."

"That's not entirely—" Hermione contradicted.

"I think I may sick up—" Draco declared, at exactly the same time. "—and it was such a beautiful lunch otherwise."

Hermione could not let go of the subject, however much it disgusted Draco. "Are you saying that witches and wizards teeth are always perfect?"

"Naturally!"

"No," Neville answered. "You might get cursed and have your teeth broken or knocked out or they may go all funny or turn yellow. But they don't—*rot*," he muttered, feeling rather put off himself.

"That's very interesting," Hermione assured them all. Briskly, she rose and said, "Thank you for the snack, Harry. Don't you boys think you should change? I'm going to right away. We should be there soon, I'm sure, and you don't want to be improperly dressed and get into trouble!"

She bustled out officiously, leaving the boys gaping again.

Draco fumed, "So *that's* a muggleborn? Of all the rude,

pushing, presumptuous—"

"Maybe she's nervous," Neville suggested mildly.

Draco dismissed that angrily. "*Nervous*? An arrogant, jumped-up nobody, telling Harry Potter she knows all about him, when she never laid eyes on him before today! Who does she think she is?"

"Hermione Granger?" Goyle guessed.

"Yeah—that's the name, innit?" Crabbe agreed.

"So her parents are *Tooth Healers*, are they?" Draco stormed on, flinging himself into his robes. "Why don't they do something about their daughter's mighty tusks, then?"

Harry had been rather annoyed by Hermione himself, but the word "tusks" made him protest, laughing in spite of himself. "Don't, Draco! That's awful!"

"So is she! No manners at all! '*Who are you?*' What a way to talk! Uncouth little savage!"

From the running and banging in the corridors, it was clear that other people thought their journey was almost over. Harry pulled out his own robes. The ravaged hamper was repacked, and the trunk and bookbag closed up. The boys bumped a bit in the crowded space, and helped each other with stubborn buttons and sleeves gone inside-out. Draco even deigned to give Neville's robe a twitch to straighten it.

"Thanks," Neville murmured.

"Dont mention, it, Longbottom," Draco shrugged. "Quite nice



meeting you—always good to know someone from a *proper* background with *decent* manners.”

A voice echoed through the train: “We will be reaching Hogwarts in five minutes time. Please leave your luggage on the train. It will be taken to the school separately.”

Harry’s stomach lurched with nerves, and Neville, he saw, looked pale. Draco was always pale, anyway, and so there was no reading anything into his complexion at the moment. The five boys joined the crowd thronging the corridor. The train slowed down and finally stopped. Students pushed their way toward the door and out onto a tiny dark platform. Harry shivered in the cold night air. Draco glanced at him, and gave him a tight smile.

Then a lamp came bobbing over the heads of the students, and Harry heard a familiar voice: “Firs’ years! Firs’ years over here! All right there, Harry?”

Hagrid’s big hairy face beamed over the sea of heads.

“Hagrid!” Harry called back, waving.

“C’mon, follow me—any more firs’ years? Mind yer step, now! Firs’ years follow me!”

“Who’s that?” Neville asked anxiously. “He’s huge!”

“Hagrid?” Draco asked at the same time. “Isn’t he some sort of servant?”

“He’s the Keeper of the Keys, and Professor Snape says he knows everything about the forest and its creatures. He’s very nice,” Harry assured his friends in a whisper.

Slipping and stumbling, they followed Hagrid down what seemed to be a steep narrow path. It was so dark on either side of them that Harry thought there must be thick trees there. Nobody spoke much. Neville groped at his pocket anxiously, and then sighed with relief. “Trevor’s all right,” he told Harry.

Hagrid called over his shoulder, “Yeh’ll get yer firs’ sight o’ Hogwarts in a sec. Jus’ round this bend here.”

The narrow path opened suddenly onto the edge of a great black lake. Perched atop a high mountain on the other side, its windows sparkling in the starry sky, was a vast castle with many turrets and towers.

A deep breath, and then a loud, collective “Ooooooh!”

Harry caught Draco’s eye, and then both of them grinned in delight. Neville’s round face was full of wonder. Even Crabbe and Goyle seemed impressed by their first sight of Hogwarts.

“Pretty, innit?” Crabbe muttered.

Before them was a fleet of little boats sitting in the dark water by the shore. Hagrid called, “No more’n four to a boat!”

Draco quickly gave orders to his minions. “Right, then. Vince—Greg—you go with Theo Nott over there and that boy with him. It must be Blaise Zabini, but I haven’t seen him in years. Harry and I will take Longbottom with us, and—”

Hermione Granger pushed past a gaggle of girls and seated herself in their boat. Draco shut his mouth with a snap. Harry hid a smirk with his hand. Neville helped Hermione make



sure that her robe was clear of the water.

"Everyone in?" shouted Hagrid, who had a boat to himself. "Right then—FORWARD!"

And the fleet of little boats moved off all at once, gliding across the lake, which was as smooth as glass. Everyone was silent, staring up at the great castle overhead. It towered over them as they sailed nearer and nearer to the cliff on which it stood.

"Heads down!" yelled Hagrid as the first boats reached the cliff. They all bent their heads, and the little boats carried them through a curtain of ivy that hid a wide opening in the cliff face. They were carried along a dark tunnel, which seemed to be taking them right underneath the castle, until they reached a kind of underground harbour, where they clambered out onto rocks and pebbles.

Harry whispered to Draco, quoting *THE WIND IN THE WILLOWS*, "*There is nothing so much worth doing as simply messing about in boats!*"

Draco did not understand the reference, but agreed, distracted and disarmed by the experience. "Quite fun, really. I've never been in a boat before."

"No more have I. I hope we do that again." Harry wondered if he could persuade Draco and Neville to read *THE WIND IN THE WILLOWS*. He was still unsure if he was Mole and Draco the Water Rat, or if Neville was Mole, Harry was Water Rat himself, and Draco was a bit like Toad. The one thing he was certain of

was that Professor Snape was Mr Badger, Slytherin or not.

Hermione, however, had overheard, and did understand him. "*Simply messing about in boats—or with boats,*" she quoted back. Instantly, Harry felt much more friendly toward her, and gave her a smile as they clambered up a passageway in the rock following after Hagrid's lamp, coming out at last onto smooth, damp grass right in the shadow of the castle.

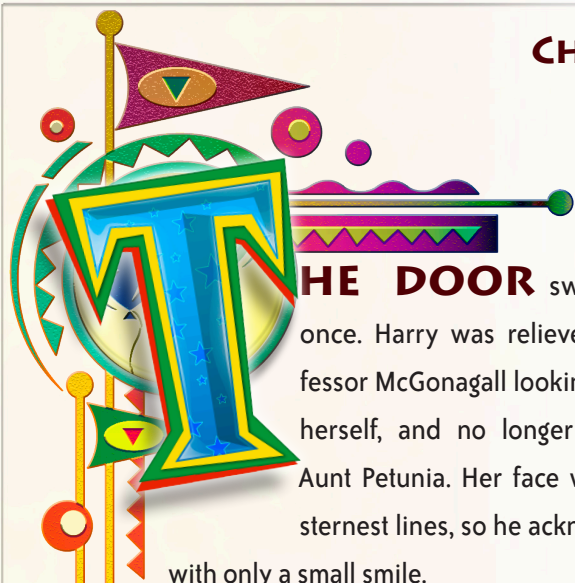
They walked up a flight of stone steps and crowded around the huge oak door. Hagrid called, "Everyone here?" He raised a gigantic fist and knocked three times on the castle door.

"It is like being in a story," Hermione whispered to Harry. "I don't think my parents will quite believe me when I tell them about it."





## CHAPTER 2



**THE DOOR** swung open at once. Harry was relieved to see Professor McGonagall looking entirely like herself, and no longer disguised as Aunt Petunia. Her face was set in the sternest lines, so he acknowledged her with only a small smile.

It had been decided that his relationship with Minerva McGonagall should not be public knowledge. That is, Professor Dumbledore had decided it. Harry supposed it was for the best, since there could be no secret about his situation with Professor Snape. He really didn't want other students to think he considered himself better or more important than anyone else. There was quite enough rubbish going on already about his scar and Voldemort. Or *You-Know-Who*.

That silly name was like nails across a blackboard to Harry. He even preferred the loaded title of Dark Lord. Anything but that stupid name that sounded like a guessing game. Surely

Voldemort had had some sort of real name once, because "Voldemort" sounded pretty made-up to Harry. Of course, a lot of wizarding names sounded peculiar.

"The first years, Professor McGonagall," said Hagrid.

"Thank you, Hagrid. I will take them from here."

The entrance hall was every bit as grand as the outside of the castle had promised. Harry followed McGonagall across the stone floor, and looked about to find himself in the lead. Draco and Neville fell into step on either side of him, and Hermione was hurrying along, not wanting to miss anything. Draco gave her an indignant glare as she pushed ahead of them. Harry smiled and shook his head at Draco. There was a drone of hundreds of voices from a doorway to the right. Harry supposed the rest of the school was already gathered.

Instead of going through the huge doors from where the voices came, Professor McGonagall led them into a small empty chamber off the hall. They crowded together. Hermione was standing just next to the Professor, and Draco caught Harry by the sleeve, determined to stake their own claim to a place near the Deputy Headmistress.

"Welcome to Hogwarts," said Professor McGonagall. She told them they would be joining the rest of the school for the start of term banquet shortly, but that when they entered the Great Hall, they would be sorted into their houses first. Harry had already heard much of this information before: he had



been told about the points system and House Cup. He listened more carefully as Professor McGonagall named the houses, fancying she favored her own house somewhat by naming “Gryffindor” the first of all. And was there a slight drop of her voice as she put “Slytherin” last?

Harry had sensed that Professor McGonagall really, really did not want Harry to be in Slytherin. He was not sure how Professor Snape felt. While the Professor was very proud of his house, Harry had gathered that having his ward in his own house—and a celebrity like Harry at that—might put the Professor in an awkward position. The wizarding world was small and gossipy. And Voldemort had apparently had some relationship to Slytherin House. Who knew what people would make of Harry Potter in Slytherin?

“I shall return when we are ready for you,” said Professor McGonagall. “Please wait quietly.” She left the chamber.

“Oh, Harry!” Hermione asked him, her breathing quick and ragged. “Do you think we’ll have to do a spell to prove ourselves worthy?”

Ron Weasley blurted out, “Some sort of test, I reckon. Fred said it hurts a lot, but I think he was joking. I can’t see that they really make us wrestle a troll.”

Neville went white.

“Oh, for—” Draco snorted. “All you do is put on an old hat. My father told me all about it. The hat looks into your mind and

sees where you should go. And if you don’t like what it says, you tell it where you *want* to go. Of course,” he sneered at Hermione. “That’s only for students from wizarding families. Maybe you—*muggleborn*—really do have to do more. Maybe you have to recite pages and pages from your textbooks out loud by memory—” He smirked. “—But that shouldn’t be a problem for you, since you already learned all the course books *by heart*.”

“He’s just taking the mickey,” Harry assured her hurriedly, wondering how one revived girls if they fainted. “Draco likes to do that. If it’s just a hat, it’ll be a hat for all of us.”

“How do you know?” demanded a tall thin boy. “Who made you Chief Warlock of the first years?” He pushed up to Harry aggressively, looking down his nose.

Harry would have stepped back, but Draco was behind him and hadn’t moved. In a reasonable tone, Harry replied, “Because it only makes sense. Who would send eleven-year-olds to fight trolls? And if we’re just starting school, why would we be expected to know everything already?”

The tall boy sneered. “You seem to think you know it all. Right. You’re Famous Harry Potter. Do you sit in on the Governors’ meetings and tell them what to do?”

Harry turned to Draco. “How did he know I was Harry Potter?” Back in the crowd, Harry saw Ron Weasley’s ears turn pink. “Oh.”

A girl plucked at the pushy boy’s robes. “Zach!” she pleaded. “Stop it!” She said to Harry, rather helplessly, “He gets like this



sometimes. I'm Hannah Abbott. This awful git is Zacharias Smith." Conscientiously, she offered Harry a small, soft hand.

"Hannah." He looked at the boy who had unaccountably taken a dislike to him. He had hoped that the days of attracting hostile notice were gone with the Dursleys. Apparently not. "Yes, I am, in fact, Harry Potter, and no, I don't sit in with the Governors. I guess there's an opening. Why don't you put your name in?"

There were snickers, and an appreciative "Good one, Harry!" from Draco. Zacharias clenched his fists and took a step forward. Harry braced himself, but jumped when several people behind him screamed.

He looked around and gasped. About twenty ghosts had just streamed through the back wall. Pearl-white and slightly transparent, they glided across the room talking to one another and hardly glancing at the first years. They seemed to be arguing. What looked like a fat little monk was saying, "Forgive and forget, I say. We ought to give him a second chance—"

"My dear Friar, haven't we given Peeves all the chances he deserves? He gives us all a bad name, and you know, he's not really even a ghost—I say, what are you all doing here?"

A ghost wearing a ruff and tights had suddenly noticed the first years.

Nobody answered.

"New students?" said the Fat Friar, smiling around at them. "About to be Sorted, I suppose?"

A few people nodded mutely.

"Hope to see you in Hufflepuff!" said the Friar. "My old house, you know."

"Move along now." Harry heard Professor McGonagall's familiar voice. She had returned and was waiting impatiently. "The Sorting Ceremony's about to start. Form a line and follow me." The ghosts floated away through the opposite wall.

Harry turned away, but heard Hermione's warning hiss to Zacharias Smith.

"You're going to get in trouble, fighting with Harry like that!"

"Yes," Hannah seconded. "What's the matter with you? What if you're in the same house?"

"No way am I going to be in the same house as that poser!" growled Smith.

He was shushed as they marched through the door behind Professor McGonagall. Harry forgot the silly dispute as the Great Hall was revealed. Everywhere he looked, there were shining candles and the glint of gold. Most remarkable was the ceiling, velvety black and dotted with stars.

Hermione whispered, "It's bewitched to look like the sky outside. I read about it in *Hogwarts, A History*."

"So did I," Harry murmured back. "But it's one thing to read about it, and another to see it!"

Professor McGonagall placed a four-legged stool in front of the first years. On top of the stool she placed a pointed wiz-



ard's hat. A patched, frayed, and dirty hat, which astonishingly began to sing in a human voice through a rip near the brim.

The Hat introduced itself and described the houses—after a fashion. Harry was hardly going to criticize the Hat's song. It was amazing simply to hear it.

*—“You’re in safe hands (though I have none)  
For I’m a Thinking Cap!”*

The students applauded, and the Hat bowed to each table in turn. A hush settled over the Hall.

Professor McGonagall's voice sounded clear in the vast space. “When I call your name, you will put on the Hat and sit on the stool to be sorted. Immediately, she called, “Abbot, Hannah!”

Hannah stumbled up to the stool and put on the Hat, which was far too large for her and dropped down over her eyes.

Almost immediately, the Hat shouted “HUFFLEPUFF!” Hannah trotted happily to the Hufflepuff table, her yellow pig-tails bobbing.

“Bones, Susan!”

“HUFFLEPUFF!”

“Boot, Terry!”

“RAVENCLAW!”

“Brocklehurst, Mandy!”

“RAVENCLAW!”

“Brown, Lavender!”

“GRYFFINDOR!”

The table on the far left exploded with cheers. Harry noticed that it had a number of redheads sitting there.

“Bulstrode, Millicent!”

—became the first Slytherin. Harry shifted restlessly, knowing he would have some time to wait. He wished he had had time to meet more of his new classmates. Crabbe and Goyle were soon sorted into Slytherin—something that puzzled Harry, since he could hardly describe either of them as “cunning,” and certainly not as “ambitious.” There must be more to the Sorting Hat's criteria.

Sometimes the Hat made up its mind quickly. Sometimes, however, it could take a long time. A sandy-haired boy named Seamus Finnegan sat on the stool for nearly a minute before being sent to Gryffindor.

“Granger, Hermione!”

Hermione ran forward and jammed the Hat on eagerly. There was a brief moment, and the Hat pronounced her a “RAVENCLAW!”

Hermione grimaced oddly, but then gave a brisk nod. Leaving the Hat neatly on the stool, she bustled off to join her house.

“Longbottom, Neville!”

Surprisingly, it didn't take long for the Hat to call, “GRYFFINDOR!” Poor Neville nearly collapsed with relief. He rushed away the Hat still on his head, until Professor McGonagall sent



him back, amidst the gales of laughter. He grinned himself.

"Malfoy, Draco!"

No sooner had the Hat touched his head than it screamed, "SLYTHERIN!" Draco smirked in Harry's direction. Harry gave him a smile and a thumbs-up. *His parents will be so pleased. And it's not like Draco isn't ambitious! He should be all right there. And he'll have Professor Snape to look after him.*

And then, at last—

"Potter, Harry!"

The whispers spread like flames throughout the hall.

"Potter, did she say?"

"The Harry Potter?"

Hundreds of pairs of eyes were fixed on Harry. He was hardly aware of moving, but there he was suddenly: sitting with the Sorting Hat dropped down over his eyes.

"Hmm. Difficult. Very difficult. Plenty of courage, I see. Not a bad mind either. There's talent, oh my goodness, yes—and a nice thirst to prove yourself. Now that's interesting—So where shall I put you?"

Harry gripped the edges of the stool and thought back at the Hat. *Put me where I'll have the most friends. And where I can be a good friend, too.*

In his head, the Hat made a sound very like a laugh. "You've already made a number of friends, my lad. Each one of them is friends with a different Harry Potter. You have a friend in





Slytherin. He was quite insistent that you should join him there. Slytherin would help you on the way to greatness, no doubt about that—it's all there in your head. And Gryffindor! You've a good friend there, too. If you want to be a hero, that's the place for a bit of derring-do and reckless adventure! You even have the beginnings of a good friend in Ravenclaw—a very good friend indeed—and it's not too late to make quite the scholar of you. That would score off those who thought you'd never amount to much!"

*"I don't care about any of that—much", Harry told the Hat firmly. "I don't care about being powerful, or a hero, or beating people over the head with my cleverness. I'll work hard at school, all right—if only to make Professor Snape and Professor McGonagall proud of me. It might be better if I wasn't in either Gryffindor or Slytherin. I don't want to hurt Professor Snape's feelings or Professor McGonagall's, either. And I don't mind work. What I really want, though, are good friends. I want to belong to a jolly lot of good kids where I can be—Harry—just Harry!"*

"Well—if you're sure—better be HUFFLEPUFF!"

A long, breathless pause. A burst of cheers from a table of boys and girls wearing yellow sashes. Loud chatter and speculation at the other tables. Scowls, smiles, and whispers at the Head Table. Harry glimpsed Draco's annoyed, exasperated look and gave him a cheery wave.

Following the lead of Hannah Abbott, he made his way to

the Hufflepuff table.

A handsome, athletic-looking boy cheered, "We got Potter!" The friendly ghost of the friar waved merrily at Harry. Harry grinned at him and at his fellow first years. Hannah patted the seat by her and he took it, feeling very much at home already. Then he looked anxiously up front to see how Professor Snape and Professor McGonagall were taking his Sorting.

Her face seemed pleasant enough. Perhaps the smile was a little forced, but she responded with a polite nod to the delighted remarks of the dumpy, middle-aged witch at the High Table.

Professor Snape was looking straight at him. Harry shrugged and grinned a little helplessly, and spread his hands in a "What-can-I do?" way. Snape pressed his lips together, but did not seem particularly angry. His neighbor, however, was talking to the Professor. Harry recognized the purple-turbaned Professor Quirrell, and felt a chill of apprehension. He watched him a moment, and then flinched when the Defense Professor's eyes met his own.

"Ow!"

"What is it, Harry?" asked a little red-haired girl.

"Just a headache, I guess," he managed.

"You'll feel better after you eat," she told him seriously. "That's what my Auntie always says. I'm Susan Bones, by the way."

He gave her a nod, wondering when he would have a chance to talk to Professor Snape. He hoped he wouldn't have



this kind of pain during every Defense class this year.

Other names were being called. The unpleasant boy—Zacharias Smith—was called forward, and sat nearly as long as Seamus Finnegan had before the hat called out, “GRYFFINDOR!” in a rather snappish way.

Red-haired Ron Weasley was also a Gryffindor, as he had wanted to be. He was greeted rapturously at his house table by a happy group of fellow redheads. Harry smiled and applauded dutifully. The dark-skinned boy, Blaise Zabini, was sorted into Slytherin, and the Sorting was complete.

Harry looked down at his empty gold plate, realizing that he was hungry again. The feast on the train seemed ages ago.

Albus Dumbledore got to his feet, beaming at the students, his arms opened wide.

“Welcome!” he said. “Welcome to a new year at Hogwarts! Before we begin our banquet, I would like to say a few words. And here they are: Nitwit! Blubber! Oddment! Tweak!

“Thank you!”

He sat back down. Everybody clapped and cheered. Harry wondered if he should be laughing or not.

“Is he— a bit mad?” Harry wondered out loud.

The good-looking older boy Harry had noticed before leaned down the table to answer, “Mad? I daresay he is. Best wizard in the world, but a bit mad, too. I’m Cedric Diggory. Do you play quidditch, Harry?”

“I haven’t played much,” Harry confessed. “I’ve only just flown for the first time this summer, but I love it. Do you play?”

Cedric nodded eagerly, “Reserve Seeker last year. Perhaps I’ll start this term. We’ve a pretty good lot of fliers in the House, but we take our turns, here in Hufflepuff.”

Food appeared on the golden plates. Harry was accustomed by now to the wonders of elf cookery, but was still astonished at the variety here: bacon and steak, sausages, pork chops and lamb chops, boiled potatoes and roast potatoes, and for some strange reason, bowls of peppermint humbugs. Harry ignored the humbugs and loaded his plate with a little bit of everything. Alternating bites of juicy steak with everything else in reach, he listened to the conversation around him, trying to get to know these people with whom he would spend the next few years of his life.

A very nice-looking first year boy put out his hand to Harry. “Justin Finch-Fletchley. I was down for Eton, but magic, you know—”

“I do know!” Harry laughed, shaking his hand heartily.

“Ernest MacMillan, Ernie, really,” was a serious-looking but friendly boy, with an oddly formal manner.

The last of the Hufflepuff first years was half-hidden on the other side of Susan. Sally-Anne Perks was a very pretty little girl, shorter even than Harry. Her dark hair was smoothed back in a neat bun on the nape of her neck.

“I haven’t seen you about,” Hannah was saying. “I haven’t



heard of any family named Perks. Are you muggleborn?"

"I'm not sure what you mean," answered the girl in a little silvery voice. "It was always me and Mum, and then when I got my letter, this bloke pops in. My Dad, Mum says. Hasn't seen him since before I was born, but it seems he's a wizard, and when he found out I was a witch, he got all interested in me." She made a face. "I was hoping for the Royal Ballet School, but there wasn't a place open, and my Dad insisted I come here and learn to be a proper witch. At least he's paying for it!"

"Your parents aren't married?" Hannah asked, wide-eyed and quietly shocked.

"You'd rather be a ballerina than a witch?" Justin asked, equally shocked.

"Well," Sally told them, bright and brittle. "I *am* a witch, whether I go to school for it or not, but you have to *learn* to be a ballerina." She added, "And you have to learn it while you're young, too." She looked briefly sad. "This isn't such a bad Plan B, though. This castle is amazing."

"That it is!" Harry agreed. He bit happily into his favorite, treacle tart.

When they were fairly gorged (all but Sally, who ate sparingly and sensibly), Dumbledore rose again, eyes twinkling. The hall fell silent.

"Ahem—just a few more words now that we are all fed and watered. I have a few start-of-term notices to give you.

"First years should note the forest on the grounds is forbidden to all pupils. And a few of our older students would do well to remember that as well.

"I have also been asked by Mr Filch, the caretaker, to remind you all that no magic should be used between classes in the corridors.

"Quidditch trials will be held in the second week of the term. Anyone interested in playing for their house teams should contact Madam Hooch.

"And finally, I must tell you that this year, the third-floor corridor on the right-hand side is out of bounds to everyone who does not wish to die a very painful death."

Harry nearly laughed, and then saw that hardly anyone was taking the Headmaster's words as a joke. Harry stared, wondering what kind of school this was, and decided he would ask Professor Snape about the third-floor corridor as soon as possible.

"He's not serious?" Sally asked Susan in wonder. Susan shook her head and shrugged, her wide grey eyes on Dumbledore.

"He must be," Cedric told them softly. "But usually he gives a reason why we're not to go somewhere."

"And now, before we go to bed, let us sing the school song!" cried Dumbledore. Harry noticed that the other teachers' smiles had become rather fixed.

Dumbledore gave his wand a little flick, and a long golden ribbon flew out of it, which rose high above the tables, and twisted itself, snakelike, into words.



"Everyone pick their favorite tune," said Dumbledore," and off we go!"

Harry didn't actually have a favorite tune, and he mumbled the strange, whimsical words in a monotone. Sally-Anne Perks, he noticed, was scowling and covering her ears.

"Don't you like music?" shouted Hannah, over the din.

"I love *music*!" Sally-Anne screeched back, shaking her head.

At last it was over, except for two Gryffindors who had chosen a funeral march. When they were done, the Headmaster wiped his eyes, and said, "Ah, music! A magic beyond all we do here! And now, bedtime. Off you trot!"

Two older students—prefects—led them away. Harry's legs were like lead, he was so tired and full of food. They seem to wander forever, up and down staircases, through echoing corridors, accompanied by the friendly ghost of the Friar. Finally they reached a large painting of two beautiful blonde women in ancient costume. Harry wondered if they were witches or goddesses—or witches who were worshipped as goddesses. One held a sheaf of wheat, and the other, rather younger one held a basket of flowers. She smiled as the children approached.

"Oh, look, Mamma! New students! We hope you'll be very happy here, little badgers."

The other witch—who certainly did not look old enough to be a mother—smiled herself, and asked, "Password?"

"Floribunda."





The picture swung away from the wall, revealing a round hole in the wall. Harry grinned at a baffled Justin, and clambered through after the prefect.

He found himself in a room at once commodious and cozy. Wall hangings of Hufflepuff yellow and black softened the high stone walls, and comfortable seating was grouped together—some around the huge stone hearth, where a noble fire blazed warmingly—some near a bank of tall, brilliantly-colored windows. Harry suspected the windows would be magnificent in daylight. There were study tables and bookshelves and a little raised platform, mysteriously draped with a velvet curtain the color of ripe wheat. He longed to look and touch, but the prefects were hurrying them on, urging them to come by the great fireplace.

"You lot can sit on the floor here," the tall girl told them. "We're having a Council of the Sett. Firsties and second years sit there so they can see."

The older students were crowding behind them. Some of the girls took seats on the squashy sofas and chairs and ottomans. The tallest boys stood behind, lounging casually. The crowd parted, as the dumpy witch Harry had noticed at the Head Table came bustling in.

"Gather 'round! Gather 'round!" she called, waving at them as if she wanted to hug them all. She came to a halt on the big flagged hearthstones and stood surveying the students of

Hufflepuff House, beaming with affection.

"Well!" she exclaimed. "Here we are, primed for another splendid year! A new lot of badger cubs, and a likely lot they are!"

Harry felt himself flushing under her proud gaze, and glancing about, saw that he was not the only one. It was very nice to feel so welcome.

"I'm your Head of House, Professor Sprout. I teach Herbology at this fine old place, and I hope that every one of you will give your all this year. Each of you is special and gifted in different ways. I don't expect all of you to be brilliant at everything—"

"Some of us are!" called out an older boy with a grin, pointing at the good-looking boy who had spoken with Harry at dinner. *Cedric—Cedric Diggory*, Harry remembered the name. *He seems nice.*

Singled out, Cedric blushed rosily, and shook his head.

Professor Sprout was having none of that. "No false modesty, Cedric! Now you lot listen to me, " she said more seriously, "especially you little cubs there, rolling about on the floor in front of the fire." Hannah and Susan giggled.

"Do you know what a Badger's lair is called? No? It's called a sett. That's the secret name for our digs here at Hogwarts—Common Room and dormitories and all. A badger's sett is his home and his fortress and his comfort. This is your safe place, and I won't have any strutting or bullying or making fellow badgers miserable. It's one for all and all for one here



in Hufflepuff House, as that muggle fellow wrote. Not a bad motto for us. Hogwarts Badgers stick together, because when we do, there's nothing we can't achieve!

"No doubt Professor McGonagall's given you a bit of a talk about House points and House Cups and all that. Cups are all very well, but they're not the most important part of your years at Hogwarts. You're here to become the finest witches and wizards you can be, each of you in your own way. You're here to become part of the community of witches and wizards, and to learn to live and work with all sorts of people. You're here to make friendships that will last the whole of your lives, and possibly even to meet the witch or wizard of your dreams!"

Laughter, and some preening and jostling among the older students.

Professor Sprout waved her hands for silence, and went on. "So while I wouldn't complain if a cup or two came our way, I won't be put out with you if they don't—as long as you've all done your best. If ever any of you need to talk to me, you come on in to my office and have a sit-down with me! We've got some fine prefects in this House, but I'm not one to slough it all on them and sit about taking tea and eating bonbons! You come see me if you've a mind to!

"You've a lot to take in, so I won't heap more on. You'll hear soon enough about our study groups and our talent nights. We badgers take care of our own. Now then, head on down to

your rooms and sleep yourselves out! You'll find your luggage waiting. You'll get your class schedules at breakfast tomorrow. Boys left, girls right. Quick now!"

Prefects led the younger students away. Harry looked behind to see Professor Sprout chatting energetically with a cluster of older students. Hannah, Susan, and Sally disappeared around a corner, with waves and cries of "See you tomorrow!"

The boys followed the prefect down a long hall until they came to a series of round yellow doors. The prefect opened one, and motioned the boys in.

"This is for you firsties." He smiled slightly, and wished them goodnight.

Harry peered in, smiling himself at the cozy room. Their trunks and other gear were piled by the door. Three single tester beds, all draped about with dark yellow bed curtains, filled half of the room. There was a wide window seat, and a reading table with sturdy chairs. By the window was a perch where Hedwig came fluttering, just the boys took possession of the room.

"Hedwig!"

Harry rushed to greet her, hands running lovingly over the sleek white feathers. Justin and Ernie were admiring.

"She's a beauty," Ernie told Harry earnestly. "Snowy owls are particularly intelligent."

"Might I touch her?" Justin asked. "I haven't quite taken in the whole owl thing."



"Go ahead. And yes, Ernie, she's smart, all right."

The boys exclaimed over Hedwig for some time. Ernie had brought his pet kneazle, Widdershins, and that clever creature elicited more exclamations and introductions.

Harry was so tired he could hardly keep his eyes open, but even his trunk was an object of interest to his roommates.

"Look here, Harry," Ernie remarked. "Is that dragonhide?"

"As in actual dragons?" Justin asked.

"Yes," Harry yawned, swaying on his feet. "My dad's old school trunk. Hungarian Horntail. I'm going to bed before I fall over. Do you mind if I take the one nearest the window?"

He tumbled gratefully into the comfortable bed, wriggling down under the covers. Full of rich food and over-excited by events, he slept restlessly, plagued by anxious dreams. He was wearing Professor Quirrell's purple turban, which was telling him he had to be in Slytherin, because it was his destiny. Draco was laughing, telling him, "Come on, Harry! You'll like it! It's all in your head!" Professor Snape loomed over him, tugging angrily at the turban. Harry moaned, nearly waking, and rubbed absently at his scar. Then he rolled over and slept until morning.



## CHAPTER 3

### WHILE THE STUDENTS

were fast asleep and dreaming in their dormitories, the House Heads faced something of a crisis.

The Headmaster, it seemed, was somewhat dissatisfied with the events of the Sorting, and had requested some "trifling alterations" to the schedules of the first years. Working out those alterations had required three hours—and counting, now.

"Never! In all my years..." Minerva's words faded into angry mutters as she tried out the various configurations. "Gryffindor and Slytherin Astronomy? No. That conflicts with the second year Charms class for—"

Snape saw Filius and Pomona giving each other significant looks.

Filius whispered, "Really, Severus! Is all this necessary? First the Headmaster wants the first years in a straightforward Ravenclaw/Hufflepuff, Slytherin/Gryffindor division, and now it's unsatisfactory? All very inconvenient, I must say."

"It's because of young Harry Potter, isn't it?" Pomona asked with smothered excitement. "Such a pleasant boy. I watched him during the feast—and after, and it seems to me he's set-



ting in quite nicely—whether *some* like it or not!” Her eyes shifted to Minerva, who looked up.

“I don’t deny I would have liked to have had Harry in my house, but I wouldn’t have caused all this fash because he wasn’t!” Minerva answered sharply. “The Headmaster says he wants him to know students from other houses: especially those “jolly Gryffindor lads.” She sniffed.

Snape smirked. “Well, he’ll get to know some ‘jolly Slytherins,’ too. There’s nothing else to be done.”

That was only too true. The schedule had been rewritten twice, and was still not exactly what the Headmaster was hoping for. Changing even a single class at this point knocked down other schedules like dominos. They were almost finished now, and Dumbledore would simply have to lump it. After hours of work, Harry would still have only Defense, Astronomy, and History with Gryffindor. And the only way any of this was even possible was by combining all the houses together for History.

“But that’s hardly a problem, since there’s no practical work requiring close supervision,” Pomona comforted them. “It’s not a bad schedule at all, when looked at the right way. All the first-year students will meet in class and get to know one another, and that should only be to the good, shouldn’t it?”

There were reluctant nods. Even Snape was inclined to agree. He hated teaching Slytherins and Gryffindors simultaneously. House rivalry for points exacerbated the traditional

hostility and led to some very dangerous behavior. Minerva had often pointed out to him that those classes seemed to bring out the worst in him. He would rather drink Amorentia than admit it, but it was only too true. It was so much easier teaching Hufflepuff and Ravenclaws. Peer pressure to behave and work hard—and the passionate desire to learn and excel—worked wonders on a classroom. He tried out the new configuration in his mind and felt some hesitant approval. Hufflepuff/Slytherin? Ravenclaw/Gryffindor? The ‘Claws stood for no nonsense if their grades were in danger. The Hufflepuffs and Slytherins had no history of antagonism, though each sneered a bit at the other house. Hard work and ambition might make for a quiet, well-focused class. Draco would be pleased. He had wanted to partner Harry in Potions, and now, it seemed, he might have the opportunity.

“Are you very disappointed, Severus?” Pomona asked. “We all heard that you are young Harry’s wizing proxy.”

Snape shrugged, coming to the decision that perhaps he had not needed that additional source of stress. He was satisfied that Harry was not a Gryffindor.

He replied, “No. After some thought, I believe it is for the best. Harry should be where the Hat placed him. He’s longed for friends, never knowing wizing children before this summer. He needs a friendly, welcoming environment. He *doesn’t* need to be constantly reminded that he’s the Boy-



Who-Lived, and that much is expected of him. Treat him like the others, Pomona. He'll thank you for it."

"Yes," Minerva agreed more wistfully. "The Hat has decided. I'm sure he'll do splendidly in Hufflepuff. He'll make us all proud. But he's a very brave lad all the same," she added, with a touch of asperity.

"And a clever one, or so I'm told," Filius grinned. "He's been doing a bit of extra reading. His mother was such a splendid Charms student."

Snape nodded, sipping his tea.



Harry tried to ignore the whispers that followed him everywhere he went for the next week, once he left the safe confines of Hufflepuff territory. Girls giggled, boys swaggered, and everyone asked to see his scar. Some of the bolder girls even wanted to touch it. Harry backed away from these lunatics, and his fellow firsties closed ranks around him.

Ernie had taken Justin aside, and Susan and Hannah had done likewise with Sally, giving both newcomers to the wizarding world the full story of You-Know-Who and The-Boy-Who Lived. Both were very impressed, but everyone followed the instructions mandated by their Head of House. Harry was not to be stalked or harassed, but treated like any other Badger of the Sett.

It was not so easy, though, once beyond the door of the common room. Fortunately, Hufflepuff House was well organized, with older students mentoring the younger ones, teaching them all the halls, byways, and staircases of Hogwarts. They were warned about Peeves the Poltergeist, and instructed not to irritate the grumpy caretaker, Mr Filch.

"He can get very nasty," Cedric told Harry, as he showed the first years the way to the lecture hall used for the combined History Class.

Professor Snape had forewarned him, but Harry had found it hard to credit that their History Professor was an actual ghost. The class was incredibly boring—even though Harry enjoyed reading the textbook. Professor Binns droned on in a monotone, making even the most dramatic events as dry as dust. Harry consoled himself with seeing all his friends. Draco sat by him and they compared schedules and played Hangman when Binns began reciting the endless genealogy of the extinct goblin clan of Skauraug. It was that or a nap, certainly. Harry was disappointed, having hoped for better.

Much more satisfactory was Charms, taught by Professor Flitwick, a tiny wizard who had to stand on a pile of books to see over his desk. He squeaked with delight when he called out Harry's name on the roll, and toppled out of sight. The class chuckled, and the diminutive teacher chuckled as well. He seemed to know his subject, though, and Harry remembered that his





mother had excelled at Charms. He hoped he would, too.

Astronomy was taught at night on Tuesdays and was a novelty of sorts. Learning the names of stars and how to identify the planets was quite interesting, though Harry found the Gryffindors the roughest of all the other students. Zach Smith made a point of bumping into Harry, just as Harry had managed to find Jupiter with his telescope.

"Sorry, Potter," the boy said loudly, not sounding sorry at all. The boys next to him, Weasley and Finnegan, snickered. Harry tried to ignore them, and had to start all over again. Finding a planet was harder than it seemed. He concentrated on focusing the instrument, and was startled a few moments later when he heard a thud and a crash behind him.

"What's all this?" asked Professor Sinistra sharply, coming over to find Zach measuring his length on the cold floor of the Astronomy Tower.

"I'm not sure, Professor," Justin Finch-Fletchley answered. "We were observing Jupiter, and Smith must have backed up into us. Sorry there, Smith," he said kindly, offering a hand to help him up. Smith glared at the hand and the innocent faces of the Hufflepuffs, and fumbled to pick up his broken telescope.

"Stand back, Smith," said Sinistra. "I'll have it fixed in a flash. It happens all the time. Find a place—over there—and don't fidget while you're working. Use your focuser, and don't step backwards trying to get a clear view. You could trip and fall from the Tower."



Harry was looking forward to seeing Professor McGonagall in Transfiguration. She gave him a faint smile of greeting, but immediately plunged into the subject. He was not surprised at her demeanour—strict and serious. But she was wonderfully clever, and after a brief warning about the dangers of Transfiguration, she impressed the class by turning her desk into a pig and back again. This class, like Charms, included the Ravenclaws. Harry noticed Hermione hanging on the Professor's every word, her hand up and waving at every question. He noticed some of the other Ravenclaw girls looking at each other and rolling their eyes.

Their own assignment was exactly what Professor McGonagall had warned Harry it would be. They were given matches and told to try to turn them into needles. Having watched her at work and heard her explanations for the past month, he was able to grasp a bit of the theory, and succeeded in making his match silvery and pointy. The eye eluded him, but Professor McGonagall seemed pleased, and gave him another little smile.

Hermione seemed to have done as well, and spoke to him after class.

"Hello, Harry! How are your classes? Mine are so fascinating. Have you met Professor Quirrell yet? He told us about he got rid of a zombie for an African prince! That's why he wears that turban, you know: it was a thank-you present. I have Potions next. It's nice talking with you! I'll see you later!"

She was off before he managed a word. Justin and Ernie burst out laughing. Hannah and Susan tutted and shook their heads.

"Poor thing," remarked Hannah. "She hasn't a clue."

"She's all right," Sally spoke up in her little voice. "She doesn't mean any harm."

Harry got the impression that Sally felt a little left out by Susan and Hannah, who had known each other for years and were already close friends. He made a point of sitting with her, since Justin and Ernie seemed to have found common ground in their talks about their complicated, eccentric, well-to-do families. Harry had nothing to contribute to such conversations, but the boys were friendly to him, and had learned quickly not to ask him awkward questions about his own home life.

Susan said, "We know she doesn't, Sally. She's just so—I don't know—so *different*. She says and does such odd things. It's not that she's muggleborn, exactly. Oh, stop, Justin! You don't go gabbling at people like that. It's like she doesn't really know how to behave. Just look at the way she acts in class. She's terribly pushy and overbearing. She tries too hard. Lisa tells me she doesn't quite fit in with them."

Hannah added, "It must be very awkward. Lisa and Mandy and Padma and Morag all know each other so well, and then in comes this complete stranger —"

"—who acts like she knows all about the wizarding world, but doesn't—" agreed Susan.



Hannah nudged her. “—and who sleeps in their dormitory and goes everywhere with them. Of course it’s only reasonable—she *is* their housemate after all—but it makes them uncomfortable. They feel she just isn’t their sort.”

“She probably feels the same way,” Sally muttered.

Susan reached out to touch her shoulder in concern, but Sally scowled and walked a little faster.

“Wait! Sally!” Harry ran after her and gave her a smile. He murmured, “Nobody’s saying that you’re not *our* sort.”

Sally sniffed, and said nothing more. Quietly, they moved on to Herbology, where Professor Sprout was delighted to see them.



After his background reading and his conversations with Professor Snape, the Defense Against the Dark Arts class turned out to be something of a joke. Harry remembered the turban and the reek of garlic and the stammer that made it hard to pay any attention at all to the timid young professor. He was reluctant to look up and meet the teacher’s eyes, remembering the curious pain in his scar that he had experienced in this wizard’s presence. As far as the course material was concerned, however, Harry was relieved to find that Professor Snape had been right: Harry was not miles behind everyone else. In fact, some of the work seemed ridiculously easy compared to the amazing feats he had seen performed by Snape

and McGonagall—even easy compared with the material they had expected him to learn last month. He felt restless and wondered when they would do something—well—*magical*.

Thursday afternoon came, and with it Harry’s first Potions class. He anxiously reread the first three chapters of his textbook the night before, muttering the names and uses of ingredients. He was not alone: Professor Sprout was an ardent believer in collective effort, and Wednesday nights were to be set aside for the first year study group. Attendance was mandatory, and they were joined by Cedric Diggory, who had been assigned to mentor them. He had the highest grades in his year, and mentoring study groups, he told them, was something Professor Sprout looked for in students who aspired someday to be prefects or quidditch team captains.

“Calm down, Harry!” Cedric reassured him with a smile. “You seem to already have the first year material down pretty thoroughly. I don’t think you’ll have anything to worry about tomorrow.”

“Especially since Professor Snape is your guardian!” agreed Ernie.

“He’s my wizarding proxy,” Harry corrected him automatically. “My Aunt Petunia is my guardian.”

“Whatever,” agreed Justin, indulging him. “We’re just saying that you’re obsessing.”

“I don’t want to let him down,” Harry muttered.

Cedric gave him a smile that was light-hearted, but without



mockery. "Somehow I don't expect that to be a problem."



Harry knew that Potions classes were held in the dungeons. He marched in at the head of the Hufflepuff contingent and paused, rather distracted by the shelves of glass jars full of floating animals and random bits. Ernie walked into him and stumbled. There were giggles from the girls as they sorted themselves out and headed to the front of the room, where Harry insisted on sitting. A moment later, the Slytherins were crowding into the room, chattering in excitement.

"Harry!" Draco called, looking very collected and at home. "A decent class at last! Could you believe that buffoon Quirrell?" He raised his brows at the rest of the Hufflepuffs, and nodded to Ernie, Susan, and Hannah.

Harry admitted that he could not quite believe their Defense teacher, and allowed Draco to lead the way to the places immediately in front of the professor's desk.

Draco spoke in a whisper. "Who are the others—that boy and the little girl? Are they—*muggleborn*?"

Harry sighed. "Sally-Anne is a halfblood like me. Justin is from a very wealthy and prominent family."

"Really?" asked Draco, surreptitiously trying to take another look at Justin's clean profile. "I don't recognize the name—Finch—or something? There were some Finches in Upper

Flagley, years ago, but I thought the family was extinct."

"Justin Finch-Fletchley. His father is very high up in the Foreign Office. His mother is Lady Barbara Fitzwilliam, daughter of the Earl of Matlock."

"I knew it," shrugged Draco, losing interest. "*Muggles*."

Harry huffed in exasperation, but had no time to say anything more, for the door slammed open, and Professor Snape was striding swiftly into the room. Briskly, he took the roll, and paused at Harry's name.

"Harry Potter," he said. "Our new *celebrity*."

Draco shot Harry a look from the corner of his eye. On his other side, Susan and Hannah giggled, and behind him, Justin gave him a nudge. Harry knew he was for it.

But not yet. Professor Snape, dark and commanding, wished to give them an introduction to his realm.

"You are here," he declared, "to learn the subtle science and exact art of potion-making. As there is little foolish wand-waving here, many of you will hardly believe this is magic. I don't expect you will really understand the beauty of the softly simmering cauldron with its shimmering fumes, the delicate power of liquids that creep through human veins, bewitching the mind, ensnaring the senses. I can teach you how to bottle fame, brew glory, even stopper death—if you aren't as big a bunch of dunderheads as I usually have to teach."

Harry hoped he would do nothing today that would brand



him forever as a dunderhead. He stole a glance at Draco, who was nearly glowing with excitement, and Draco gave Harry a look in return. This was going to be a great class.

There was a dramatic pause, and then Professor Snape called out, "Potter!"

Harry's head snapped up, his heart pounding.

"What," asked Professor Snape, "would I get if I added powdered root of asphodel to an infusion of wormwood?"

A split-second of terror, and then Harry saw the words on the page in his mind's eye.

"The Draught of the Living Death, Professor: a powerful sleeping potion."

Snape's black eyes raked over the silent students, who waited breathlessly for the verdict.

"Correct. It seems that Mr Potter understands that *fame isn't everything*. Five points to Hufflepuff."

Justin's boot nudged him again, and Harry heard Ernie's sigh of heartfelt relief.

"Malfoy! Where would you look if I told you to find me a bezoar?"

"In the stomach of a goat, sir," answered Draco without hesitation. Harry gave him a faint grin.

"Correct. Five points to Slytherin."

"Well done, Draco!" whispered a Slytherin girl on Draco's other side. Snape ignored her.

"Very well," he said, as if grudgingly measuring out a dram of approval. "Since *some* of you have deigned to open your books, I will permit you to attempt a simple potion this very day. Page five. The Olivine Boil Cure. You will work in pairs."

Harry had already been tacitly claimed by Draco, and the rest of the room seemed to sort itself out quickly—all but Sally-Anne, who looked about, at a loss.

Draco hissed to the pug-faced girl on his other side, "Pansy! Tell Millicent to pair up with the Perks girl. It's all right. She's a halfblood."

Harry overheard, and gritted his teeth. He really needed to have another talk with Draco.

"Sally-Anne is a really nice girl," he hissed in his turn.

Draco clearly did not comprehend. "Oh, good," he answered absently, already weighing some dried nettles. "Rather pretty, too."

They had work to do, and Harry tried to put Draco's irritating prejudices aside for the moment. Fires were lit and ingredients were crushed. Professor Snape prowled the room, uttering the odd scathing comment, and eventually gravitated to Harry and Draco, praising their stewed horned slugs. There was a frantic, hushed scramble behind them when Justin nearly added porcupine quills prematurely, but Ernie's quick warning forestalled a disaster.

At length they were done, and taught how to bottle and label their products. An essay was assigned, and Harry conscien-



tiously added it to his planner. All in all, it had gone quite well—but for Draco's tactless remarks. Harry looked around and saw Sally, pale and serious, finishing up her potion along with a very big Slytherin girl. They were an ill-assorted pair, but they seemed to have worked together well enough. Susan and Hannah were whispering secrets, as always.

Snape dismissed them, and said, "Potter. Remain after class."

Draco gave him a grin and a wave, and was off, chatting with Vince and Greg.

Harry came up to the teacher's desk and waited. Snape looked over his head at the huddle of small Hufflepuffs.

"Why are you lot still here?"

"Please sir, we're waiting for Harry," answered Susan, with clear-eyed innocence.

"Then wait *outside*," Snape growled.

A quick retreat ensued, and the door closed behind them. Snape looked at Harry rather quizzically. "Do they believe you are in need of protection?"

"It's not that, Professor. We go everywhere together. Professor Sprout told us to. It's nice to have friends who stick together. It would be the same no matter who you asked to stay behind."

"Really?"

"Of course!"

"If you say so. You did well today, Harry. It was a remarkably successful first class. I am informed that your work and

demeanour have been quite satisfactory all week."

"I'm doing my best, sir."

"Good. Come to my quarters for tea on Saturday at four. You can tell me your impressions of Hogwarts. The entrance is two corridors further down from this class. Turn left at the painting of the three witches. I'll keep an eye out for you."

"I'll be there, sir!"

"Get along, get along! You have Charms next, I believe. Don't be late. It's very disrespectful!"





## CHAPTER 4

B

Y THE END of the week

Harry had come to the conclusion that Hogwarts could be a very hard place for misfits.

"But I wrote the essay!" Hermione Granger was almost crying. "Truly I did, Professor Flitwick! I worked ever so hard. I don't know where it is!"

At his seat beside Sally in Charms class, Harry studied the Ravenclaw girls. Two of them, Morag McDougal and Mandy Brocklehurst, were smirking. They looked at each other, and seemed hard-pressed not to burst out laughing. Mandy saw Harry glaring, and gave him a quick shrug. He narrowed his eyes until she looked away.

Yesterday, Hermione had come to breakfast without her hat. One of the Hufflepuff prefects told him that it was an old and bad tradition among the Ravenclaw girls to hide the possessions of dorm mates who failed to fit in.

"They say it's good for their education—just another riddle for them to solve—but I call it mean," said the prefect with a sniff. "Ravenclaws can be very cruel."

"Can't you talk to a Ravenclaw prefect?" Harry asked angrily.

"That's not a good idea," she told him. "The Ravenclaw prefects must know all about it. Things would just get worse for her. She'll have to learn to handle it herself, poor thing."

"It might be easier," Harry snapped, "if she had a clue what there was to handle. She doesn't know what's happening. She doesn't know about stupid Ravenclaw traditions. She's muggle-raised, like me. I hate bullies, and that is just cowardly bullying."

Now they were hiding her essays. They were a nasty lot, and probably jealous, too. Hufflepuffs traditionally had classes with Ravenclaws, and knew all their tricks. Hermione was clearly a very bright girl, and the teachers had already noticed her talent. It would probably not sit well with the other Ravenclaws, full of pride in their own intelligence, to see a muggleborn come out of nowhere and top them in class.

"If I were in Ravenclaw," Sally whispered to him, "they'd probably do the same to me."

Harry nodded. It was a nod meaning, "I hear what you're saying," rather than a nod of agreement. He did not think the Ravenclaws would have treated her the same at all. After all, Sally was doing well enough in class, but was not showing up—*every single day*—the rest of the House renowned for intellect. Sally was a very pretty girl and had a nice way about her. Harry had noticed, even in muggle school, that both students and teachers often favored those who were the most physically attractive. It



wasn't fair, and it certainly had nothing to do with one's ability as a student, but there it was. Harry, scrawny, bespectacled, and poorly dressed, had never been a teacher's pet, or even attracted other classmates to the degree they would think him worth braving Dudley and his bullies. It was different for him here at Hogwarts, but it made him a little sad to wonder if that was due to his contact lenses, his fine boots, and his dragon-hide trunk.

Even when Sally did things in the dorm that Hannah and Susan found rather mad—most especially the strange exercises she performed for an hour every morning—they laughed it off and were friendly to her. Hannah and Susan were close friends, but were gradually warming to the new girl. There *were* certainly confusions and misunderstandings. Sally knew nothing about the wizarding world, and Susan and Hannah practically nothing about the muggle one.

Harry faced similar problems in his own dorm, when he and Ernie and Justin talked together. Complicating the matter, he and Justin came from such entirely different *muggle* backgrounds, that they too had little in common. There must be a way to bridge the gap.

It was in the library on Saturday morning that he had his brilliant idea. At least, he was given the credit later on. The idea was actually Hermione Granger's, of course.

The six first-year Hufflepuffs found that they fit nicely at a library table in a corner near the Charms section. Harry dutifully completed his fifteen inches for Herbology, and let his

mind wander. It didn't seem fair. If Professor Snape hadn't given him that book about wizarding customs, he would have bumbled about like an idiot...

"I *am* an idiot!" he announced, apropos of nothing. The table dissolved into muffled laughter.

"You're expecting an argument?" Susan asked archly.

"No! I mean—oh, belt up!" Grinning himself, Harry told them about Professor Burbage's book in an undertone, looking warily toward Madam Pince's desk. "When Professor Snape took me to Diagon Alley for the first time, he gave me some books to help me understand the wizarding world. They really helped. Manners and family histories and all. Draco Malfoy's father keeps proposing that those of us raised muggle should be given a special class, but nothing's come of that."

"We'll teach you manners, Harry," Hannah promised with a giggle. "Trust us!"

Justin fastened on Harry's idea right away. "Could I borrow that book, Harry? Professor McGonagall told my family a few things when she visited, but I can tell there's a lot more to know."

"Me, too, Harry!" Sally whispered. "These two—" she mock-glared at Hannah and Susan "—won't tell me why they think I'm funny."

"It's because you're so cute and adorable," Susan teased her. "What's the name of the book, Harry?"

"SO YOU'VE FOUND OUT MAGIC IS REAL! by Charity Burbage. She teaches Muggle Studies here. It helped me a lot."



“Charity Burbage!” Ernie considered. “My family knows her family—or did. When we had the troubles with You-Know-Who—well, they up and left—left the country entirely and went to New Zealand! There are only a handful of magicals there, and Professor Burbage was the eldest of her brothers and sisters, and the only one who finished Hogwarts before they left. The rest were taught at home and took their N.E.W.T.s through the ICW.”

“What’s the ICW?” Sally wondered.

The wizard-raised at the table stared at her in utter astonishment.

“International Council of Wizards. It’s in the book,” Harry promised her. “Professor Snape says she’s pretty smart, but she’s upset because she has to use this old book for Muggle Studies that was written about a million years ago, and it’s no good at all. A relative of one of the governors wrote it, and she can’t change it. Anyway *her* book is brilliant—”

At the next table, he saw Hermione Granger, trying to overhear without being noticed. He raised his voice slightly, “I don’t mind lending the book, as long as I get it back. Take a look tonight, if you like.”

Hermione slipped from her chair and came over to their table. “I think,” she declared, “that there should be a study group or a club for those of us new to magic. We could share what we’ve learned and help each other.”

“Sounds good to me,” Sally agreed.

Hannah and Susan stared in surprise. Ernie opened his mouth to speak, but then thought again.

Justin nodded. “Sometimes I feel thick as a plank. Everyone assumes I know what they’re talking about, and I don’t. I talked to Terry Boot in Ravenclaw, and he agrees. Did you mention this to him?” he asked Hermione.

She sniffed. “Terry doesn’t talk to *me*.”

“Here, now!” Hannah protested. “What this about a club for muggleborns? Are you saying we aren’t invited?”

“Of course you can be members,” Harry told her hastily. “You can be special guest speakers, and give lessons about the wizarding world.”

“If it’s a real Hogwarts club,” Hermione said, “we’ll need a professor to sponsor us. Professor Snape is your guardian, Harry. Could you ask him?”

Harry grimaced, imagining what the Professor would say if Harry asked him to spend yet more time with a lot of ‘dunderheads and nitwits,’ his usual description of Hogwarts students. But it was such a good idea...

“I’ll ask him,” he promised. “He can find us a place to meet, at least, and we can look at Professor Burbage’s book all together.”

“We can have treats after,” Susan suggested. “Everyone likes treats.”

“Treats?” Ernie considered. “Maybe I should come too. Represent the family and all that. I can tell you my family history. That sort of thing. What sorts of treats, anyway?”





Snape scrubbed at his tired eyes, and slumped back into his worn leather chair. The pitiless book stared up at him, mocking him. Since returning to Hogwarts, he had spent hours in the library, trying to understand the nature of Harry's mysterious scar, and its link to Snape's Dark Mark. The results of his studies were not encouraging.

The Hogwarts library was one of the best in the wizarding world, and yet there were disturbing gaps in its Dark Arts collection. An essential reference book was missing from the library, and had been for many years. The subject was so shocking that he had hesitated to ask Lucius if he owned the book himself. Finally, he had lied, claiming to be studying inferii, and Lucius had lent him the fabulously rare volume, after exacting an Unbreakable Vow to return it within one month.

A *horcrux*? Could that be the answer? The Dark Lord, his soul shredded by countless murders, had cast the Killing Curse at Harry, and somehow a bit of that tattered spirit had become lodged in the intended victim.

His mind probed the horror of it fearfully, timid as a man who fears his leg is broken touches his bruised, swollen flesh. Snape shrank from the idea. The thought of a piece of that vile creature inside Lily's son was more than disturbing: it was repulsive—abominable.

He dared not make notes. He dared not hint at it to anyone. He doubted that Minerva had ever heard of such anathema, and Dumbledore...

Snape was particularly uneasy at the idea of revealing this to Dumbledore. It might certainly cause the Headmaster to see Harry in a new and possibly dubious light. Snape was already concerned about Dumbledore's cavalier attitude toward the boy's physical safety and emotional health. If Harry's innocence seemed tainted by the existence of a shred of Voldemort's foul being within him, Snape could well imagine how much more likely Dumbledore would be to regard Harry as expendable. Snape had been expendable in his day—no, it was foolish to flatter himself. He was still entirely expendable if the game was deemed worth it. He would not allow Dumbledore to treat Harry in a similar way. He must proceed without the Headmaster's help.

But Snape was a grown man and a powerful wizard, and he could not shrink from such a challenge. If he could free Harry from this monstrous curse, it would redeem his lifelong interest in the Dark Arts. It would even seem the design of Fate for his path to cross with Harry's own. Who else had the knowledge to understand Harry's danger, but Snape himself? Who else the cunning, the power, the resources to identify and conquer this threat?

A horcrux. He must not hide from the truth, but face it rationally. It made all sorts of sense. It could explain, above



all, why a ghost of the Dark Mark lingered, why Dumbledore sensed that the Dark Lord, though disembodied, still existed on this mortal plane. It certainly would explain why Harry was a parselmouth. A thread of alien intelligence, lurking unsuspected in the innocent boy...

*It could not have been intentional, surely. Why in the world would a being seeking immortality hide a portion of himself in the fragile shell of a child? Perhaps the Dark Lord brought something with him that night that would have been the real horcrux. Or could it have been an attempt at possession? Why? Could it have been an accident? A bizarre happenstance? Did the Dark Lord cast the Killing Curse at Harry at all? Perhaps his soul was already compromised when he cast the curse at Lily. It was just one Killing Curse too many, and his soul fell to pieces. A stray fragment was blasted into the child—*

Or perhaps the Old Magic Lily had come across had given her certain powers. Not to shield herself, but to protect her child. Perhaps that was why the scar was in the shape of that mysterious rune of power. There were hints in other books. Perhaps somehow Lily had tricked the Dark Lord into an implied contract. Snape accepted that he might never know. Minerva refused to discuss the book they had found at the cottage. She said only that she was sharing the contents with certain friends of hers. Female friends, obviously. Well, good luck to her.

If Lily had cast such a protection, how could a shred of the

Dark Lord enter into the child? He was a very powerful wizard, of course. A shred, then, had survived, but the protection was also powerful, and had largely sealed the intruder off from the boy's consciousness. However, the parseltongue ability had leaked across the divide. What else? And how—oh, how?—to rid Harry of it?

That was the sticking point. There were a number of possibilities. Exorcisms, cleansing rituals, potions—all dangerous in the extreme, especially because of the length of time the soul fragment had dwelt within the host—nearly the boy's entire life. Removing it could do unimaginable harm, especially in these formative years. A failed attempt could drain Harry's magic—even kill him. The fragment of the Dark Lord might fight back and seize control of the boy. Or the soul shard might emerge and immediately attempt to fasten on another host...

He made a mental note: *Must research containment charms/magical traps...*

A knock at the door. A light, quick knock, lower down on the door than any of his prefects.

"Come in, Harry."

The boy looked older already, after only a week at Hogwarts. More assured, more comfortable with himself, at ease in his uniform. Snape put his concerns aside, and set about enjoying the boy's company.

"Hogwarts seems to suit you," Snape remarked.



“Too right it does!” Harry grinned. “I love it here. Even if some of my classes aren’t the best—” He shrugged at Snape’s severe expression. “Professor, I’m not going to pretend that History class is anything but a snore. And Defense is a joke.”

“Defense ought not to be a joke.”

“I agree, sir, but there you are. Professor Quirrell has us reading the first chapter out loud in class. I think I know every word now. Shall I recite it for you?”

“None of your cheek,” Snape grunted. “When you come to tea next week, bring Viridian’s book with you and we’ll work on some hexes. Between us, it’s useless to depend on Defense teachers. A sorry lot they are.”

“Because the position is cursed,” Harry said. The professor had told him about the curse weeks ago. “Why doesn’t Professor Dumbledore break the curse? Why doesn’t anybody?”

“I don’t honestly know how hard the Headmaster has tried. Perhaps he likes the infinite variety of yearly instructors. What I can tell you is that the curse has proved remarkably persistent and elusive. So elusive, indeed, that the fact the position is cursed is not accepted universally, though I agree with the Headmaster in this case. However, in order to lift a curse, one needs to know which curse was used and how it is grounded to the cursed object or individual. In the past, the Governors contracted with Gringotts for some cursebreakers, but that proved unsuccessful and quite disastrous for the individu-

als involved. I think that the Headmaster now simply wants to wait until the Dark Lord is utterly and completely gone.”

Harry scowled. “But lots of curses outlive the caster,” he objected. “Like the curses on all those Egyptian tombs in the PATH OF DARKNESS. The casters have been dead for thousands of years!”

“True. Once again, it depends on the curse used. It is entirely possible that the Dark Lord used a variant that was tied to his life force. He often did so. We can but hope.”

Harry’s expression caused Snape to snort a laugh. They talked of other things: about the pleasures of Hufflepuff house with its study groups and the promise of its Games Nights and Talent Nights; about his housemates and their many virtues; about how Muffy had come to visit in the dorm and had brought a platter of sausage rolls; about Cedric Dig-gory and how he was helping Harry find his way around the castle; about the exciting prospect of the first flying lesson.

“I’ve spoken to the mediwitch about you,” Snape told Harry. “Madam Pomfrey. You’ll like her. She’s quite competent. She wants to have a look at you Monday before class.”

“I’m fine,” Harry complained.

“You’re better, I grant you, but hardly *fine*. You’re only just over a month past the privations of the Dursleys. Monday. Eight o’clock. Be there.”

“OK, OK. I’ll be there.”



There was a brief, comfortable silence. In a moment, Harry spoke again. "Professor—" Harry asked, in that tone Snape already recognized: the tone Harry used when he was attempting to talk Snape into something. Snape raised a brow. Harry grinned self-consciously. "I won't play games. There's something I'd like to ask you. Me and my friends—"

Snape frowned.

"—uh—my friends and I were talking, and some of us need to know more about wizarding things. Could you help us start a club?"

"A—club?" Snape mentally cringed at the thought of supervising a group of horrifyingly enthusiastic children. He cleared his throat. "What sort of—club?"

"A club for kids who are new to magic," Harry explained seriously. "We thought of calling ourselves 'The Outsiders,' or the 'Explorers,' or maybe 'The Newbloods.' We're going to study Professor Burbage's book, and our friends are going to teach us things they know."

Snape's mind raced to a comfortable conclusion. "Perhaps I can help—"

He strode to the fireplace and called out, "Charity Burbage."

A green face appeared in the fire.

"Severus?"

Harry's eyes opened wide. This he hadn't seen before. It was cool, but sort of creepy. The face was distorted, but the voice was certainly a woman's.

"Professor Burbage," Snape asked politely, "do you have a moment to step through to my quarters? I have a student here who might profit from your advice."

"Well—I suppose—" The face appeared confused, and then said, "Just let me—in a minute—"

The face disappeared. Snape told Harry. "I believe she was out rather late last night. Perhaps we awakened her."

Rather scandalised, Harry said, "It's four o'clock in the afternoon!"

"I heard that!" A witch stepped through the fire and emerged into the sitting room, brushing herself off. Harry thought she must be nearly as old as Professor Snape. She had a rather nice face: roundish cheeks and snapping brown eyes. Her dark blonde hair was done up in intertwined braids. Harry thought it looked interesting, and sort of like the styles he had seen in books about ancient witches. She gave Harry a bemused nod. With a touch of irritation she told Snape, "I've been up since ten, for your information. I was engrossed in a book."

"So sorry to impugn your honour. Professor Burbage, allow me to introduce Harry Potter. I am his wizarding proxy, and Mr Potter has some questions that relate to your book."

The witch's eyes brightened. "My book?" She asked Harry, "Did you read it?"

"Yes, Professor. I liked it a lot. I'm happy to meet you."

"Oh—yes—happy to meet you, too." She put out her hand



and shook Harry's vigorously. "So you're Harry Potter!"

"I believe he knows that," Snape grunted. "Would you take some tea with us?" He motioned her to a chair, and Harry to another. "Muffy! Tea for three! Master Harry is with me!"

The little house elf popped in, eyes huge and soulful, carrying a tray. "Master Harry! I has little treacle tarts for you like you likes best! Blackberry scones, too—"

"Hullo, Muffy!" Harry called out. "This is brilliant! And Justin says thank you for the sausage rolls!"

"That's all, Muffy!" Snape interrupted. The elf popped away, and Snape continued. "Professor, Harry here was raised in the muggle world, and I bought your book for him, hoping it would be of use."

"And it was?" the witch asked anxiously. "There's not much interest in the subject."

Harry felt a little sorry for her. "Yes, it was, Professor! All my muggleborn friends want to read it, but since I only have the one copy, we want to study it together. That's why I was asking Professor Snape here if he would sponsor a club for us."

Professor Burbage was more than a little surprised. She glanced at Snape, who shrugged.

"Much more in your line than mine."

Her brows knit in puzzlement. "You want to start a Muggle Studies club?"

"No, professor!" Harry told her earnestly. "We want to start





a Wizard Studies club. There's so much we don't know. Some of the other students—not so much me, but other first years—well—they're having a hard time. If we understood more about the wizarding world, we wouldn't make so many mistakes. And some of my housemates want to join too, even if they're purebloods, and they could share what they know. We can't meet, though, unless a professor agrees to sponsor us. It would be brilliant if *you* did!"

Snape forbore to smile at Harry's artless flattery. It was hardly surprising that Charity's book had sold so poorly. The small number of muggleborn students would not make for much demand, even had they known about it. He studied the witch. She was heaping clotted cream on her scone, visibly pleased and excited. It must be an agreeable surprise to find someone so interested in a field that seemed ridiculously obvious and unnecessary to the majority of purebloods—and even to most halfbloods. He congratulated himself on his cunning. Harry would have his club and Snape would not have to lift a finger.

A half-hour passed with finger sandwiches, scones, tarts, and plans for the new club. Charity said she would speak to the Headmaster directly.

"He'll be thrilled, I'm sure. Children from different backgrounds coming together like this! What a splendid idea!"

Snape cynically wondered if Albus would think it splendid. For all his talk, Snape did not see that Albus had done much

to improve relations among the houses or among students of "different backgrounds." He certainly had not expended much influence to rid Muggle Studies of the albatross of a textbook that Charity constantly complained of. However, he might find it difficult to refuse her proposed club. It would be interesting to see if Harry managed to make a success of it.

Harry wiped his fingers hastily. Professor Burbage wanted to shake hands again, and then she bustled off, looking much happier than she had when she first arrived. He drank his tea, enjoying the lingering taste of the treacle tart on the back of his tongue.

Snape studied him thoughtfully, and then asked, "Are you thinking about asking Draco to join your little group?"

Harry looked up quickly, with a tiny smirk on his face. Snape reminded himself that Harry was not as simple as he sometimes appeared to be.

"Why not?" Harry asked. "I'm sure he could tell us a lot. Draco likes to show off what he knows. He's worse than Ernie that way. I'm going to ask Neville, too. I like him, and he hasn't hit it off all that well with the Gryffindor boys. He knows a lot about magical plants and wizarding remedies. Susan says we should have treats. I think that's a good idea. What do you think?"

"I think tea will prove irresistibly attractive to the masses. If you don't take care, you'll have the entire first year in attendance. Now, tell me more about your Defense class."



## CHAPTER 5

**DRACO GRABBED**

Harry right after breakfast on Sunday, partly wanting to know how Harry liked the “duffers” in Hufflepuff, but mostly, of course, to talk about himself. He gave a nod to the Hufflepuff table as a whole, his eyes sliding away from Justin.

“Let’s go outside,” he said, pulling Harry along. “Mother sent me a box of Chapeaux. She said I ought to share it with you.”

The school seemed thinly populated

that morning as they made their way down the long staircases. Draco described the glory of the Slytherin Common Room in some detail, and told Harry how his arrival had entirely disrupted politics-as-usual within the house.

“The second years are not really from the best families, and there aren’t many third years. I’ll have every opportunity to establish myself in the house over the next few years. Zabini would be my only competition for prefect, but his father is dead, and his mother will likely cause another scandal before then. Professor Snape likes me

anyway, and it’s the Head of House who chooses the prefects. The Headmaster chooses Head Boy, of course, so Father told me not to expect it or worry about it, but it’s important that I be first within my own house, especially now that you’re in Hufflepuff and I have no real competition within Slytherin.”

His father had told him not to repeat the rest of the letter, but Draco was only eleven, after all.

“Father said it was probably for the best that we weren’t in the same house. With your fame, it was likely you would dominate your year in whichever house you were in. With you in Hufflepuff, and me in Slytherin, that’s two houses we can control together. That’s half of our year! Pretty good for first years, I’d say.”

“I really hadn’t thought about controlling anybody. Hufflepuff is nice. We have a third year looking after us, and there are lots of organized activities. We have a Study Night, and later Professor Sprout says we’ll have a Talent Night”

“Yes, yes, all very nice, I daresay. The fact remains that in a few years we can run the school as we like. The Ravenclaws don’t seem to have any leaders, and the Gryffindors are divided.”

“It’s too bad that the other Gryffindors aren’t more friendly with Neville.”

“Longbottom’s all right. Decent manners, if a bit quiet. I sat with him in Herbology and he seems to know what he’s about.”

In fact, Draco had been very impressed by Neville’s knowledge in Herbology, and had immediately grasped that he



would do well in that class with Neville as a partner.

He had more to say about the subject. "Those Gryffindor girls are nothing but pretty fools. Thomas and Finnegan sit together, and Weasley and Smith are thick as thieves." He burst out laughing at his own wit. "Thick as thieves!" he crowed. "At least Weasley will do for the 'thick' bit. What a buffoon."

"He's not that bad. Smith is a prat, though."

They rambled out, and by mutual consent found their way back to the lake. A cool, stiff breeze brushed the water into choppy ripples. Draco opened his bag and revealed a ribbon-tied box. Mystified, Harry wondered what was inside. The word Draco had used meant nothing to him.

The smell of expensive, delicate pastries floated out enticingly. Inside the box, in prim ranks, were conical confections. Draco thrust the box at him.

"Help yourself."

Harry picked one up, and sniffed experimentally. The outside was a coating of smooth, dark chocolate with ribbons of green and pink buttercream. Draco had his and was already taking a bite. Deciding that anything coated in chocolate must be edible, Harry nibbled at the pointed top.

"Umm!"

Just under the chocolate coating was a layer of marzipan, rich and fragrant with almonds. Inside that layer was a filling of raspberry mousse. Harry caught the sweet, creamy filling

on his tongue, and swallowed it reverently.

"What did you call this?"

"It's a Chapeau," Draco informed him. "A Witch's Hat." He stuffed the rest of his own in his mouth. "Mother gets them from Paris. Sublime, aren't they?"

"Ummhmmm," Harry agreed. After a moment, he took a deep satisfied breath, and asked, "Why does it have raspberry filling?"

Draco snickered. "Father says it's the witch's brain—delightful but entirely full of air. Mother thumps him when he says that."

Harry laughed. "They're super. It's nice of your mother to think of me." He tried to think what Professor Burbage's book said about this sort of situation. "I suppose I should owl her a thank you."

"We'll eat a few more, and make it worth your while."

They sprawled out under a beech tree, and finished half the box between them. Draco got up and skipped stones across the lake. Harry leaned back against the tree, feeling blissful. Perhaps this was the time...

"Draco—"

A stone skipped—once—twice—and disappeared under the shining surface of the lake.

"What?"

"You remember how your father wanted a class in wizarding customs?"

"Yes—that idea of his that Dumbledore keeps scotching."

"The other day some of us were talking, and we thought that



if we can't have a class, maybe we could have a club."

Draco scowled, disappointed in his next throw. "What club?"

"Listen! A wizarding world club for all of us raised muggle. We could learn about manners and things like—like Chapeau thingies and manners and all that. Maybe some history too, since Binns is useless."

"Good idea. Teach the mu—muggleborn how to behave. Not that you need that sort of thing, but it would be something for the rest. Dumbledore will never hear of it, I daresay."

"No! We've got a good chance. I asked Professor Snape if he would be in charge, but he called Professor Burbage to do it instead, and she was quite excited about it. She seemed to think it was possible. So how about it?"

"How about what?" Draco threw himself on the grass and took another Chapeau, excavating carefully down to the creamy filling.

"The club! Are you in?"

"Are you serious? I'm no muggle!"

"I know! But Susan and Hannah and Ernie are in—as student assistants. They're going to help teach. I thought of you, since you know quite a lot. You had those etiquette lessons, didn't you? I reckon you must know as much as the Hufflepuffs."

Draco visibly swelled with indignation. "I should say so! Ernie MacMillan teach manners? The MacMillans are grubbing shopkeepers who got lucky! Abbot is a halfblood, you know. The Bones family is all right, I suppose, but—"

"You see? We really need you!" Feeling very cunning, Harry pointed out, "And wouldn't your father be pleased, if you managed to carry out his idea? Susan said there'd be treats, too."

"Oh! Well. Yes. Father would be pleased. I should imagine he would be very—proud," Draco's eyes glowed. "Even half the purebloods these days don't seem to know the old ways. It's a disgrace. We could talk about the real holidays, like Beltane and Samhain, and maybe even teach the old dances."

"Dances?" Harry asked, faintly horrified.

"Wizarding dancing—the real, old dances—are the best! They have special magical meanings, you know—not like muggles jumping up and down like savages. No, really, Harry! It's quite fun, really. And Father says it's good for one's magical core." He leaned back, thinking. "Don't tell anyone I'm involved. If Dumbledore hears that the Malfoys have anything to do with it, he'll never allow it. He hates us. I'll owl Father and tell him, but I'll say that you're the one doing the talking. Once the club is approved and everything is scheduled, Dumbledore won't be able to stop us without looking like a spoilsport."

"That's very Slytherin of you," Harry congratulated him.

Draco was pleased. "Yes, it is, isn't it?"

Harry took another pastry, and amused himself with eating it layer by layer. "Of course, in a club like that, you're going to have to spend time with halfbloods like me and muggleborn kids like Justin, and Hermione Granger."



Seeing Draco's face clouding, he hurried on. "—And you're going to have to be *nice* to them and talk to them. If you don't talk to them, how can they learn? It's not fair to say people are ignorant, without giving them a chance to find out about things they need to know. I expect they'll really look up to people who help them out from the first."

Draco considered this. A little uncertainly, he said, "I'll owl Father. He'd want to know about this." He smirked. "What a prank, teaching the muggleborn proper ways right under Dumbledore's big nose! All right. If Father approves, I'm in. But that doesn't mean I'm going to be that Granger's best friend!"

"I'm not asking you to *marry* her, Draco," Harry said soothingly. "Just share what you know and knock them all on their arses with the grand Malfoy manner. Show the rest how it's done!"

"I could do that," Draco agreed, liking the idea of himself as a respected leader. "Marry *Granger*!" he snorted, licking chocolate from his fingers.



Professor Burbage sent word that the wizarding studies club seemed to be a go. She talked with Professor McGonagall, who was outspoken in her support for the group.

"After all," she said in the staff room. "So many of the wizardborn have had a chance to get to know one another. It seems very sensible to give a chance to the students new to

our world to become acquainted. It was young Harry Potter's idea, you know. It's a very good thing, and it's open to all the first years. The wizardborn will teach the muggleborn about the wizarding world and vice versa. A very sound idea, and certainly one whose time has come."

Dumbledore expressed some reservations about pureblood prejudice, but he found that by and large the staff supported the new club. Quirrell did not express an opinion, and Binns seemed baffled by it all, but otherwise it was well-received.

The Wizarding World Explorers Club was approved, with Professor Charity Burbage as the staff advisor. The students would be informed within the next few days. The club would meet on Sunday afternoons in an unused classroom near the stairs to the Astronomy Tower.

Meanwhile, flying lessons had been announced, and happy, happy Thursday was here at last. Hufflepuff and Gryffindor would be learning together.

Hufflepuff House was astir. In the Sett, older students wished their first-year classmates well. Cedric told Justin, Harry, and Sally they would be fine.

"Madam Hooch knows what she's doing," he assured them. "Listen to her, and don't lose your heads. You three," he said to Ernie, Hannah, and Susan. "Keep an eye on your partners." He turned to the other three first-years, and told Justin to stick with Ernie, Sally with Hannah, and Harry with Susan. "You'll



have someone used to flying with you, that way. And you, Harry," he smiled. "I heard your father was quite the quidditch player in his day. There's a trophy with his name on it, here at the school. I shouldn't wonder if you had a bit of his talent!"

Harry beamed, glad to hear praise of his father, hoping that he really had inherited something besides jewels and a trunk.

The six first-year Badgers hurried down the front steps, heading to the smooth flat lawn on the opposite side of the grounds to the forbidden forest. The Gryffindors were already there, and so were thirteen broomsticks lying in three neat lines on the ground. Harry gave Neville a smile and a wave. Neville returned the wave half-heartedly, looking rather sick. Zach Smith and Ron Weasley were joking about the brooms, roughhousing a bit. Coming closer, Harry could see these brooms were certainly not up to the standards of Malfoy Manor. They were old and the twigs stuck out at odd angles.

Their teacher, Madam Hooch, arrived. She had short, gray hair, and yellow eyes like a hawk. Harry decided that he liked her eyes.

"Well, what are you all waiting for?" she barked. "Everyone stand by a broomstick. Come on, hurry up."

There was some brief shoving, as Zach and Ron claimed the best of the brooms. The rest of them made do with what was left.

Neville stood by Harry, and confided, "I've never been on a broomstick. Gran wouldn't let me near one."

"A lot of people here have never been on one. I've only gone

flying twice, and I don't have a broom of my own. Here—Susan," he asked the red-haired girl. "Would you watch Neville instead of me? I've at least flown, and he hasn't at all."

Susan placed herself between the two boys, looking very business-like. "I'll watch *both* of you. Neville, the most important thing is to stay calm. You are in charge of—" she pointed commandingly—"that broomstick. It is *not* in charge of you!"

At the front of the lines, Madam Hooch called out, "Stick out your right hand over your broom, and say 'Up!'"

Not surprisingly, Harry's broom jumped into his hand at once. A good half of the brooms remained on the ground. One end of Justin's reared up tentatively, and then thumped back. Sally's rose very, very slowly, making the rest of the students giggle. Neville's hadn't moved at all. After a few more attempts, and some outright grabs, each student had a broom—of a sort—while Madam Hooch showed them how to mount without sliding off the end. She marched up and down the line, correcting their grips. There was some grumbling from more experienced flyers, but she insisted everyone do it her way or give up their broom.

"Now, when I blow my whistle," she said, "you kick off from the ground hard. Keep your brooms steady, rise a few feet, and then come straight back down by leaning forward slightly. On my whistle—three—two—"

Neville was so nervous that he nearly pushed off before



the whistle had sounded. Susan's warning hiss stopped him. Unfortunately, it stopped him so effectively that he froze, while the rest of the class rose into the air: some smoothly, like Harry, and some in little jerks and starts, like Justin. Sally soared in a high, graceful arc, uttering a little shriek.

"Get back down here, girl!" Madam Hooch shouted. Sally, alarmed, leaned forward at once, and the broom zoomed toward the ground, Hannah, luckily, darted up beside her, and caught at the broomstick, slowing Sally's descent.

"Lean forward just a *tiny* bit," Hannah called. "Lean like me!"

Sally had no trouble matching Hannah's posture exactly, and the two girls touched ground together. Hannah gave Sally's shoulder a comforting pat.

Madam Hooch shouted out, "The brooms respond to the slightest motion. Small corrections, class! Small corrections!"

Harry glanced and saw that Ernie and Justin were successfully up and down together. Justin was telling Ernie about how it reminded him of his father's Lamborghini.

"I don't know much about Italian brooms," Ernie replied, very interested. They moved away, as Justin explained about muggle sports cars and what fun they were.

Between them, Susan and Harry helped Neville ease up slowly. Susan gave Neville a bright smile and tossed her red hair.

"You see?" she demanded. "It's easy!"

She leaned forward, very slightly, and Neville anxiously





followed suit. Harry joined them, very smoothly, and Madam Hooch saw him and gave him a sharp nod of satisfaction.

"Very nice," she said. "You lot are shaping up a treat."

Next, she wanted them to fly in circles no higher than ten feet above the ground, first clockwise, then counterclockwise. It was something like the first lesson at Malfoy Manor, though not nearly so imaginative and exciting. In between Susan and Hannah, Harry flew decorously, minding his grip and his speed. The Gryffindors were pushing the limits of Madam Hooch's patience, whining that they already knew all this, and why did they have to slow down for the babies?

"Belt up, over there," Madam Hooch boomed. "Straighten your line. You! Finnegan, is it? You're not riding a donkey!"

That made them all laugh—Seamus as loud as the rest. Flying could never be boring, though Harry agreed with the Gryffindors that the more experienced flyers should be trained in a different group.

He was congratulating himself on his own expertise, when his broom began shaking violently.

"Whoa!" he complained, holding tight.

"Don't play the fool, Potter!" Madam Hooch growled.

"I'm not doing this!" Harry objected. "There's something wrong with the broom!"

Madam Hooch soared over to him, muttering, "Ancient rubbish. If the Governors don't cough up new brooms next year,

we might as well give over altogether!"



"Quirinius?" Minerva saw Quirrell looking out the window at the first-years at their flying lesson. She smiled a little to herself at the sight of Harry, speeding along with his classmates. Looking again at Quirrell, she scowled. The man's lips were moving, but no sound was audible. *What is he at?*

"Quirinius!" she called, "Don't you have the third years now?"

Was he casting a spell? The lips stopped their movement, and twisted in what was clearly rage. Quirrell had no choice but turn and speak to her, his expression now the usual one of timorous apprehension.

"Y-y-yes, M-M-Minerv-va. B-b-beautiful d-d-day, isn't it?"

"I daresay," she returned curtly. "Don't be late. It sends entirely the wrong message!"

She swept away, needing to get to her own class.



The broom's flight smoothed out quite suddenly. Harry grimaced apologetically at Madam Hooch.

"It seems fine now."

"Not your fault, Potter. The underthatch is a disgrace. It's a miracle you can steer at all. You'll need to keep on top of things, though, with an unreliable broom like that." She veered off,



frowning at Dean Thomas.

Next, they were to practice their ascents and descents, marking their height with the castle wall. Lavender Brown's angle was too steep, and the girl slid backwards, landing on her bottom with a squeal. Zach and Ron roared with laughter, forgetting to pay attention to what they were doing. Their brooms collided, and both were sent spinning wildly in opposite directions. There was more laughter. Ron's ears were brilliant pink with embarrassment, and he scowled at Harry, not liking to be made fun of.

Harry was too busy helping Neville avoid Zach to pay much attention. His broom began vibrating again, yawing from side to side like an angry snake.

"Harry!" Ernie called out, "Hold fast!"

He broke out of line, followed by Justin. By the time he reached Harry, the vibrating had completely stopped.

"I'm all right," Harry assured them. "Madam Hooch said this broom was rubbish. It's fun all the same."



"In no hurry to get to class, Quirrell, are we?" Snape sneered, suddenly looming out of the shadows. "And last year you were so eager for the Defense position. Your ardour seems—cooled."

Even with the addition of the turban, Snape was far taller than Quirrell, and made the most of his height to intimidate.

"If you can't be bothered to teach, there are those—more experienced, perhaps more *qualified*—who can easily replace you."

"S-s-sorry, S-S-Severus. Just watching the children."

"Watch them in the Defense Classroom, then!"

Snape turned smartly on his heel, and strode away to the dungeons.



Harry laughed off his friends' concerns. Now they were doing serpentine turns, and it was the most fun of all. Everyone seemed more at ease now, and they picked up speed on the curves of the figure eights. Neville still seemed anxious, but was doing well enough. Sally was picking it up quickly, and appeared to be enjoying herself. Justin, too, was having a good time, pestering Madam Hooch with questions that seemed related to horseback riding. He wanted to know what one was supposed to do with one's feet. Should the heels be depressed? What boots ought one to wear? Was there special clothing for flying?

"Didn't matter—dragonhide—yes—" were the answers rapped out rather absently by Madam Hooch, who was too busy watching to listen.

Harry thought that Justin's questions were good ones, and perhaps in one of their club sessions they could learn all about the ins and outs of flying. Madam Hooch might consent to be a guest speaker, if Professor Burbage asked her. Flying and quid-



ditch were very important to the wizarding world.

Out of the blue, his broom bucked, nearly spilling him to the ground. He clenched his teeth and pulled up quickly. Ron Weasley was just passing from the other direction, and there was a cry of alarm. Glancing back, he saw that the red-haired boy's broom was pitching violently. A jerk, and the boy was flung off bodily, clinging only by his hands, as the broom roared toward the ground. Ron screamed, blue eyes distended.

"Arghhh! Help me!"

Harry banked tightly. Pushing his own broom to the highest speed, he shot after Ron, hand out. With a flick, he nosed the broom up as Madam Hooch flew in from the other side. She reached over and caught the broom handle, while Harry tightened his own grip. Together, they slowed and made a soft descent. Ron dropped the last three feet, curling up on his side, breathing heavily. Madam Hooch slipped over her own broom, jumping lightly to the ground.

"Are you all right? Let's see your hands." She called out to Harry, "Good catch, Potter!"

Zach Smith zoomed up beside Harry, glaring. "Think you're smart, Potter! You probably knocked Ron off his broom, and now you act like some sort of *hero*, saving him!"

Harry glared in his turn. "I did *not* knock him off his broom, Smith!"

Justin flew up and circled them both slowly. "Of course you

didn't, Harry. I saw it myself. Weasley lost control and would have crashed if you hadn't caught him. Fair is fair," he told Smith. "I didn't see you helping your friend."

Zach sneered, and zoomed away. Harry rolled his eyes at Justin, who snorted a laugh.

"There's a nasty piece of work."

"All right!" Madam Hooch called, "That's all for today! Get down, you lot! Be here at the same time next Thursday. And if you don't want to spoil your hands," she declared, shooting a dark look at Parvati Patil, "you'll wear flying gloves!"

Ron was still sitting on the ground, looking winded. Harry walked past with Justin, when the red-haired boy called out, "Potter!"

Harry turned, bracing himself for more accusations.

"Thanks," Ron muttered.

Harry gave him a grin and a quick nod.



Quirrell followed Dumbledore to the Headmaster's Office, fuming. The old fool wanted Quirrell's ideas for the new Wizarding World Club, and had been disappointed not to have received them earlier. Clearly, dawdling in a public area was an invitation for prim rebukes from McGonagall, not-so-veiled threats from a jealous, resentful Snape—and tea with the Headmaster. In the future, observing Harry Potter must be



undertaken with more discretion.



While the others trailed away from the flying lesson, Madam Hooch kept Harry back for a word. "Not half bad, Potter," she approved. "You seem to be a natural on a broom."

"Thanks, Madam Hooch!"

Harry was warmed by the kind words. Flying really was the best thing in the world. Draco was absolutely right.

And speaking of Draco—here he was himself, on his way to the Slytherin/Ravenclaw flying lesson. He was flanked by Vincent and Gregory, regaling them with a story about a narrow escape from a muggle helicopter.

Further back, behind the Ravenclaws, was Hermione Granger. Her small face, framed by her bushy brown hair, looked lonely and scared. Harry felt badly for her. It didn't look as if the Ravenclaws were partnered up the way the Hufflepuffs had been. He moved over to speak to Draco.

"Harry!" the blond boy called. "How was it?"

"A lot of fun. The brooms are rubbish, though. Watch out for them." He lowered his voice. "It went as well as it did because the experienced flyers looked after the first-timers—the way you and your father looked after me at Malfoy Manor. It made all the difference today, you know."

Draco smirked with satisfaction.

"—And so," Harry went on, "I'd really appreciate it if you'd look after Hermione. She's going to be in our club—at least if the Headmaster is persuaded it's a good idea. This is a chance to show leadership," he pointed out virtuously. "I would have done it if she'd been in our group, but you're the most experienced after all, and I reckon you'd do the best job anyway."

Draco grimaced, torn between basking in the praise and accepting the care and tutelage of a—of a—of a *muggleborn*.

Harry gazed at him, green eyes a-glow. "Draco," he intoned, very seriously. "WITH GREAT POWER COMES GREAT RESPONSIBILITY."

The words hung in the air. Draco did his best not to show how impressed he was with Harry's remarkable eloquence. The world seemed to shift on its axis...

"Oh, very well," Draco surrendered. "But she had better not talk me to death!"

Sulkily, he muttered a dismissal back at his bodyguards, and sloped off to speak to Hermione. Harry watched, and saw the girl perk up and begin chatting as she trotted after Draco to the waiting brooms. Harry grinned, noticing that Draco was trying to walk a little faster to escape the torrent of questions.





## CHAPTER 6

**T**HERE WAS Dudley Dursley, and then there was Piers Polkiss. Now added to the rogues' gallery was Zach Smith. Harry hadn't known he could dislike a boy nearly as much as he disliked his cousin. Smith seemed offended by Harry Potter's very presence, and just wouldn't let it alone.

The boy's hostility made Charms, Astronomy, and Defense harder than they already were. In Defense, especially, Smith could be trusted to snigger whenever Harry was called on. It was terribly annoying, and the Hufflepuffs had taken to ignoring most the Gryffindors altogether. They sat in a tight little group, with Neville as their only point of contact. Possibly without Smith, the situation would not have been so bad, because now and then Harry could hear Finnegan telling Smith to "belt up," to Thomas' muttered agreement. Once he even heard Weasley saying, "—but he's not so bad!" as he came into the Charms classroom. All the Gryffindor boys stopped talking and the girls giggled, which made Harry think they were speaking of Harry himself. Neville was silent in class, and Harry once again wished the boy had been a Hufflepuff. Hufflepuff House was great.

"Why does Smith dislike me so much?" Harry asked Neville in a whisper, as they left the Defense classroom.

Neville ducked his head, glancing warily ahead at Zach Smith, and whispered back, "The Smiths are a very proud family. Mr Smith — Zach's father — called on Gran once. He was — Gran said herself — 'haughty.' He looked at me like I was a bug. They claim descent from Helga Hufflepuff herself, you know. From what I've heard, Zach thought he was going to be the most important first-year, and he had a rude shock when he saw how people look up to you—and to Draco too, a bit. And then Hermione Granger is such a smart girl. I don't think he thought there was going to be this kind of competition at school. It makes him really — well — I don't know — really put out. He was going on about you in the Gryffindor Common Room all the time, but the older Gryffs are already sick of it. So now it's just in our dorm." Very softly, he added, "I'm pretty sick of it, too."



Before dinner on Saturday, Professor Dumbledore announced the formation of a new club, open to all first-years: The Wizarding World Explorers. They would meet in the unused room across the hall from Muggle Studies. The meeting would begin at three o'clock this very Sunday afternoon, followed by a special tea.

It had taken quite a bit of leaning on the Headmaster to make the club a reality. Dumbledore had been very con-



cerned that the impressionable first years would be indoctrinated in the worst prejudices of the pureblood extremists. That concern was thoroughly—and very innocently—countered by Charity Burbage, who was astonished and a little hurt that their Headmaster would imagine she would permit anything so terrible to happen. She would be there the entire time, she assured the staff, and would observe the students carefully. There would be no bullying and no hateful sneers directed at students because of their families. Really, that was all so foolish, anyway. She wished she could take the children to New Zealand to show them how little other wizarding cultures cared about who one's grandmother was!

Dumbledore found himself with little he could say. All four Heads of Houses very much supported the new club. The staff as a whole favored the idea. If applied to, the Governors almost certainly would come down on the side of the club. In the end, Dumbledore had smiled and acceded, with the condition that the club's existence was provisional only. They would see, this term, whether it was a good thing—or not.

Snape watched the children for their reactions. To his relief, Slytherin House was well prepared for the announcement. Draco looked very superior. He had presented the club as a good thing to his housemates: a chance to set the muggleborn straight about how things were done by witches and wizards. Then, too, they could all learn much that would be useful if

they worked in the Ministry someday as Aurors or Obliviators. And there would be tea. Besides Draco, Crabbe and Goyle were certain to represent the house. There was considerable, whispered debate among the other children, and Snape had noted an increase in owl traffic over the last week, as the new Slytherins wrote home to gauge parental support for such a radical notion as socializing with the lesser orders.

The Ravenclaws, by and large, looked rather uninterested. Snape knew of only two muggleborns there: the insufferable Granger girl and a rather affectless boy named Terence Boot. The two did not sit together or interact, since Boot seemed to get on well enough with the Ravenclaw boys. As to the girl—it seemed to Snape that the other girls treated the news with studied disdain, as if something that would include Granger could not possibly be any concern of theirs.

There was dissension in Gryffindor House. He believed that Harry had recruited the Longbottom boy for his little club, but that young Smith was exerting some pressure on his other roommates to keep their distance. How long that situation would last was debatable. The mention of a “special tea” brought a wistful look to the eyes of Ron Weasley. Thomas and Finnegan were talking to each other quietly, clearly plotting mutiny. If Smith were the leader he obviously fancied himself to be, he would learn that keeping potential followers from something attractive—without making an equally attrac-



tive counteroffer—was not the way to build loyalty. The Dark Lord had been a master—at least in the beginning—of giving his followers what they thought they most wanted.

Hufflepuff House, of course, was the heart of the new club, and all the first years were looking excited and pleased. Snape sought out the dark hair surrounded by red and blonde. Green eyes instinctively glanced his way. Harry smiled at him, very pleased with himself. So he should be.

The only reservations Snape himself had about the club was the second-floor right hand corridor location, considering that the Headmaster had threatened death to anyone who wandered up to the floor directly above.



110

"It's going to be such fun!" Hannah said, going over the list with Susan. "We need more girls, though."

"If they hear enough good things, maybe the Slytherin girls will come another time. Parvati won't come because her sister can't stand Hermione Granger, and Lavender won't come unless Parvati comes."

"That's just silly," Sally sniffed.

"Harry!" Hannah hissed at him. "Tell Draco to make Pansy come! We need more girls!"

"The way I see it," Ernie informed Justin, "it's no great loss if the Ravenclaws think they're too clever to need a club. We'll have

made a real contribution to the school, and that's what counts."

Harry was calculating the club enrollment. There were the six Hufflepuffs. There was Hermione. Justin had spoken to Terry Boot in Herbology and got a promise to show. Neville and Draco Harry had spoken to himself, and they were solid. Draco would bring Crabbe and Goyle—well—because he would. Besides, the two big lads might have interesting things to share about farming and sheep raising the wizarding way. Harry knew he ought not to discount something so important.

That made twelve, which was plenty to have a good time. Justin thought that Seamus Finnegan and Dean Thomas might come. They had never given Harry a particularly hard time, and were welcome enough, if they chose to make an appearance.

Susan was whispering, "Millicent Bulstrode won't come. Her mother was a halfblood, you know, and probably she's afraid that people will think she needs things explained to her. And I don't know about Daphne Greengrass. She and Pansy bickered whenever we went to Madam Hornpipe's for our dancing lessons."

"Why does everybody think we're going to be *dancing*?" Harry growled.



The large and high-ceilinged room set aside for the Wizarding World Explorers was part of the original Hogwarts created by the Founders, and had been many things over the millennium

111



of its existence. In its first incarnation, long before the days of the Hogwarts Express, it had had been a sleeping room for aspiring young witches as they came from all over the British Isles hoping to be found suitable for tuition by one of the Four. In later centuries it had witnessed the teaching of Latin, of Astrology, of Aeromancy, of Divination, of Embroidery (oh, yes, indeed!), and of Music.

For over three hundred years it had been the Transfiguration classroom, but that ended in the seventeenth century when the space was needed for families fleeing the Witch-Hunts. The Transfiguration master had found another, smaller room, and when the refugees went home, or went abroad, or decided to take a cottage in Hogsmeade, the now-empty room became a *salle d'armes*, and the stone walls echoed to the sound of clashing swords.

Around the turn of the 19th century, the stone floor was replaced by one of elaborate wood parquet, suitable for dancing. The room became a small ballroom, as a compliment by a fawning Headmaster to King George III's sixth son, Octavius, whose early accidental magic caused such a to-do in the wizarding world in 1783. Never since the Statute of Secrecy was established had magic been closer to complete exposure. Extreme measures were taken. The boys' parents, King George III and Queen Charlotte, grieved deeply, convinced by the Obliviators that their son had died. The young prince was something of a celebrity during his Hogwarts years, and special, very select

balls were held to introduce him to the children of the wizarding elite. Young Octavius Prince loved the wizarding world so much that he never dreamed of leaving it, and within a generation or two, the family first lost all interest, and then all memory of its royal descent. The dance floor, however, remained.

The room paused for breath in mid-century, as the mores of the Victorian era trickled through the castle stones and the students grew graver. Dust collected on the shining parquet floor. When the occasional ball was held, it was held in the Great Hall. From time to time the high-ceilinged chamber was the scene of duels and trysts, and in 1943 of a private meeting of a charismatic young Slytherin with a number of admirers from his own house—and other houses as well.

On this Sunday afternoon in 1991, it was at its best and brightest, scrubbed clean and polished by the hands of Hogwarts elves. The Hufflepuffs went early, to be certain that everything was in readiness. To their delight, the room was not set up as a classroom. Instead of rows of desks and chairs, there were comfortable sofas and armchairs arranged in a U in front of a handsome fireplace. A great deal of the room was left open, and in the back was a well-appointed long table where the tea would be set out. It was bright with silver candelabra and a gorgeously embroidered table runner. A huge silver epergne in the center held a profusion of late summer flowers.

"This is very nice," Ernie nodded, admiring the three glittering



chandeliers and the mirrored walls. "Quite satisfactory." Justin walked over to admire a huge painting of a wizards' ball in progress.

Sally surprised them with an impromptu little dance: a *ronde de jambe*, a *chassé*, a *pas de chat*, two more *chassés*, and a *grand jeté*.

"That was lovely!" Hannah gasped. The figures in the painting pointed and applauded: a faint clatter of hands and fans and wands tapping approval.

"Nice floor," Sally remarked, as they all stared. She began turning in a series of quick *fouettés*, her working leg snapping in and out as she whirled. She then dropped a most beautiful curtsy to the dancers in the painting. There was another rustle of approval.

"Is that muggle dancing?" Susan asked excitedly. "Can you do that, Harry?"

Harry shook his head, astonished that anyone would think it possible, astonished that *anyone* could do it. He had never seen anyone dance, except briefly on the telly, but he knew from the remarks in primary school that proper blokes were supposed to despise it. It was just as well that he said nothing of the sort, because Justin came from a very cultured home, and knew better.

Justin explained. "That's ballet dancing. It takes a lot of special training. My little sister takes lessons, but she's nowhere as good as Sally. My mother loves ballet. We go to see *The Nutcracker* at Covent Garden every Christmas."

This statement required more explanation, touching on muggle





forms of entertainment, and theatres, and music, and how one could possibly tell a story simply through music and dance. Sally's respect for Justin had obviously just grown exponentially.

It was all news to Harry. The one concert he had attended with Snape was his only experience of live music. That summer night's performance had been grand and beautiful, but it had been something very much outside his normal experience.

Sally told the others how the students at the Royal Ballet School took part in *THE NUTCRACKER*, and that it was the dream of her life to be one of them. This time, her talk about dancing was listened to with a little more interest.

"You should dance for Talent Night," Hannah urged her.

Sally shook her head. "I'd need music, and muggle electronics don't work here at Hogwarts."

Ernie pondered the problem. "There are music boxes, of course. You could learn to charm something to play a tune for you." Seeing that Sally was rather intimidated by the idea, he then said, "Or you could ask one of the students who plays an instrument to play for you. That seventh year prefect, Wintringham, plays the lute very well. I'm sure he'd help you out. Or there's Merton Graves in third year. He plays the cello, and his older sister Ambrosia plays the harp. She's in Ravenclaw, though."

Thus, there was a lively conversation already in progress as the other students arrived. Hermione Granger, unsurprisingly, was first. She came alone, carrying an armload of books. Harry

came over to speak to her, with Sally at his heels.

"Hullo, Hermione!" she called out cheerfully. "I'm so glad you're here! We've been talking about music and dance. Do you play?"

"Play?" Hermione had been prepared for all sorts of topics, but not that particular one. "Play music?"

Sally gave her an encouraging look.

"Uh—well—I play the piano, actually," Hermione admitted. "But I don't know if—"

Her tentative answer was drowned out by the loud voices of a group of boys. Dean Thomas, Seamus Finnegan, and Terry Boot had met on the way and were deep in a debate about the virtues of football versus quidditch. Neville was following behind them, looking nervous. He was holding a glass ball the size of a marble that was glowing red. There were more greetings, and much shaking of hands. Most of the girls broke off to admire the decorations at the serving table.

Harry left Sally to it. She had obviously decided to partner up with Hermione for the duration of the club meeting, and was talking excitedly about music and the Hufflepuff Talent Night coming up next month, and did Ravenclaw do anything like that?

He joined the other boys, and heard the end of a sentence.

"—and Gran knows I forget things. It usually looks like its full of white smoke, but it gets like this if I've forgotten something."

"What did you forget?" Terry asked.

"I don't know!" Neville wailed.



Professor Burbage arrived. She was wearing robes of lavender edged with purple velvet. Harry thought they looked nice with her dark blonde hair. It was done up in even more braids than usual, all intricately woven into a knot at the back of her head. She was wearing earrings of gold set with amethysts. She had nothing with her but a notebook with a pocket for a purple quill. She set that on the seat of a chair a little to the side, and came over to speak to the students.

"Hello, fellow Explorers!" she called out. "I can see you've already found a lot to talk over!" She touched Harry gently on the arm. "I'm just going to sit back here. This is your show, and you don't want a teacher taking over. When all your friends come, I think you should welcome them, and decide together what you'd like to learn about. I have a few ideas, and I'll help you out if you like, but it would be best if the students were in charge." She gave him an encouraging smile, and turned to speak to Susan.

"But—" Harry managed, blushing.

Just then, the Slytherin contingent arrived, Draco swaggered in, flanked by his two taller companions. Harry came over to say hello and give him the thanks Draco was clearly expecting.

"It's going to be great," he told Draco. "Professor Burbage is here, but she wants to leave what we do up to us, for the most part. She wanted me to welcome everyone, if you can believe it. Is anyone else coming?"

Draco scowled. "Those wretched girls! I think they all

wanted to come, but then they went completely mad. Pansy sniped at Millie about her muggle great-parents, and then Millie ran off crying, and Daphne told Pansy she was a beastly bully and had the manners of a troll. Pansy tried to jinx Daphne, and Daphne tried to jinx her back, and they've both somehow got antennae. I should have known it would all end in tears."

Harry laughed. "Susan and Hannah will be disappointed that more girls didn't come. All the more tea for us, I suppose."

Draco smirked, "True." He cast an appraising eye over the students. "A bit thin on the Ravenclaw side. Look here, Harry," he said, dropping his voice confidentially, "We need to gain control of the group from the beginning. Father says you've got to be prepared, or there's chaos and people get ideas and start squabbling. You make your speech, and then the first order of business is to select officers. I've given some thought to that. We'll present them with a slate ready-made." To Harry's amazement, Draco pulled a sheet of parchment from his pocket. "Now, you ought to be president, as it's your idea. That's quite all right with me. However, you should spread the offices amongst the houses. I rather fancy being the vice-president. It sounds well, and there won't be much to do. We'll need a secretary." He glanced up at the attendees, narrowing his eyes. "It might not be a popular choice, but I think Hermione Granger should be secretary. No—hear me out, first." Expecting an argument, he pressed ahead with his reasons.

"Since this club is supposed to educate the muggleborn, we



ought to have a muggleborn officer. Granger is a Ravenclaw and a muggleborn, and so politically it's really a very shrewd choice. I daresay she'll take very complete minutes. The teachers like Granger, I've noticed. They'll think we're being generous. She's not so bad, you know. She was quite touchingly grateful for my assistance at the flying lesson." He looked at Harry, awaiting a response.

Harry opened his mouth, and simply said, "Sounds good to me. But no way am I putting myself forward to be president."

"Of course not," Draco said with long-suffering patience. "I'll do that. Call on me first thing."

"All right, but what about the Gryffindors?"

"Well, we must give them something, I suppose. The club hasn't any funds, luckily. Everyone knows that Gryffindors are pitiful money managers. There's an old office they have in the Wizengamot—Serjeant-at-Arms. Back before there were Aurors all over the place, the Serjeant-at-Arms was responsible for chucking out troublemakers. There are even special hexes used. Now of course, it's just a sinecure for some pathetic old geezer. We could have a Serjeant-at-Arms of our own, though. It sounds just the thing for Gryffindor. What do you say to Longbottom?"

"I think we should ask him first," Harry said firmly. "He might embarrass us by saying no in front of everybody."

"Merlin! You're right!" Draco said, grey eyes wide. "Sound

thinking, Harry. Let's go have a word."

Harry whispered, feeling very cunning, "And if Neville says no, I think Seamus would be a good choice. It would make him and Dean more loyal to the club."

Draco nodded sagely, and the two of them made their way over to Neville, who had taken out his Remembrall again, and was puzzling over it.

"Longbottom!" Draco said, hand on Neville's shoulder. "May we have a word with you?"

The offer was made, and Neville stared at them, clearly astounded.

"You mean," he quavered, "I'd be responsible for keeping order?"

"We're not really expecting any trouble," Harry assured him. "But it's an old tradition, and we thought it would be a good office for a Gryffindor."

Instead of refusing, Neville's eyes shone. "It's like being an Auror!" he said reverently. "I'd be the club's *Auror*!"

"Serjeant-at-Arms," Draco corrected, "but yes, it amounts to the same thing. What do you say?"

"I'd be honoured!" Neville burst out. "I can't wait to tell Gran! If anybody comes trying to make trouble, I'll show them what's what!"

"Er—yes—very nice," Draco muttered, backing away. He pulled Harry along with him. "We'll have to keep an eye on



that one, Harry. Drunk with power in a week, like as not."

"I'd better talk to the other Hufflepuffs," Harry said.

He briefed the members of his own house on Draco's proposal of an office per house. They could see the sense in it, even though he thought Susan was a bit disappointed in not being chosen secretary.

"There are lots of other jobs," Harry pointed out. "Someone will have to be refreshments director—"

Susan became markedly more cheerful. Arranging treats sounded much more amusing than taking minutes.

Harry saw Professor Burbage watching him expectantly, and took a deep breath.

*What do I say? Hello—Good afternoon—Welcome to the—*

Thinking hard, he walked to the mantelpiece and stood in front of it. Draco smiled approvingly. Silhouetted against the fire, Harry looked very authoritative.

"Good afternoon!" Harry called out, getting everyone's attention. "Welcome to the Wizarding World Explorers. I know we'd like to get started. Could you all find a seat?"

The talk died down, and the eleven students sorted themselves out. Harry noticed that they were still somewhat clinging to House loyalties, except for Terry Boot who was sitting with the Gryffindors, and Hermione, who was between Sally and Hannah.

His hands were cold. He discreetly rubbed them on his robes, and tried to think of something clever to say. After a

brief pause, he gave it up and spoke frankly.

"Hogwarts is a pretty amazing place, and it's only one part of the wizarding world. I think by now that a lot of us realise that we don't know everything we need to know in order to get by." He saw Hermione's earnest face, and added, "And some of us don't want to just get by. We want to really understand the magical world. Some of us had never heard of it before this summer, and some of us—" he gave Neville a grin, "have lived in it all our lives. I think we can learn a lot together, and have a lot of fun, too. First of all, I'd like to thank Professor Burbage for agreeing to help us." He gave the witch a nod.

She gave the students a wave. "Don't mind me. I'll help if I can, but I don't want to spoil your good time. There will be no quizzes and no essays assigned!"

Draco cleared his throat. Harry looked his way.

"Draco—you wanted to say something?"

Draco rose gracefully. "I think before we plunge in, we need to be organized. This club needs officers, and for president I would like—"

Sally called out, "I think Harry should be president!"

There were mutters of agreement.

Draco gave her a kind smile. "That is exactly what I was going to propose. Then are we all agreed on Harry as our leader? Any disagreement?"

People looked at each other, but settled back. Draco went



on, "I think we also need a vice-president, a secretary, and a serjeant-at-arms to keep order. Four offices for the four houses."

Primed well ahead of time, Greg bellowed out, "Draco for vice-president!"

"Many thanks, Greg," Draco was trying to imitate his father at his suavest. Treating his own office as a foregone conclusion, he said, "I would like to propose Hermione Granger of Ravenclaw for secretary. I'm sure we can all rely on her to take thorough minutes. And for Serjeant-at-Arms, I would like to propose Neville Longbottom of Gryffindor."

When Harry looked back on it later, he decided it had all been pretty high-handed, but right now nobody was in the mood to raise a fuss. Nor did most of the students present have any desire to hold office. Most of the young minds were on the tea to come.

So the slate of officers was accepted by acclamation, and the meeting moved on to more enjoyable topics. Hermione was thrilled to be entrusted with secretary, and set herself to taking copious notes as all sorts of topics for study were proposed.

"Wait," Harry said, "I have Professor Burbage's book here." He held it up. "*So You Found Out Magic is Real!* is the title. It's helped me a lot. There was a chapter about manners that kept me from making an idiot of myself—"

The muggleborn were surprised to learn that there could be significant differences between muggle and magical man-

ners. Hannah, as a halfblood with a muggleborn parent, had some useful background information here.

"Things are a lot more old-fashioned in the wizarding world. My mum thinks it's because people live so long, and so fashions change more slowly. For one thing, call old wizards 'sir' when you speak to them. I know it's not the done thing anymore in the muggle world, but if you don't use 'sir,' you're going to offend lots of people. And you should use 'ma'am' when speaking to very old witches."

Then they acted out introductions, laughing as Seamus introduced Sally-Anne Perks to his Da, as portrayed by Dean Thomas.

"Oi, Da! This is Sally. Sally, me Da."

Justin laughed too, but protested. "We don't all do that!"

So Justin nicely introduced Susan to his mother, Lady Barbara Finch-Fletchley, as portrayed by Hermione Granger.

"You don't need to curtsy, Susan!"

"Why not?" Susan asked. "I saw Sally curtsy to the painting."

This elicited more discussion. Then Draco introduced Neville to his mother, who looked suspiciously like Susan Bones. The muggleborn and most of the halfbloods were entertained by the formal language and the nicely judged bows. Bowing was discussed: when and how deep. Why "Madam" was to be preferred over or "Mrs," and sometimes over "Miss." Then the subject of table manners was raised, and it was decided that they would postpone that study for teatime.



Everyone had favorite subjects. Draco, of course, wanted to talk about the famous families of the wizarding world. Ernie was promised time to present a talk about the wizarding economy and how businesses were run. Susan was tapped to tell the real story behind *Getting On* at the Ministry, Hannah wanted to teach something about magical cooking and domestic life. Neville was pressed to tell about magical gardening: its pleasures and hazards. It was agreed that they would work out a schedule for the topics. Nearly everyone had a suggestion. They would fill a year of meetings—and more.

Harry said, “Vince and Greg’s fathers work on a magical farm. They can tell us about sheep-raising and farm life. I visited the farm that’s part of Malfoy Manor, and it was really interesting. They have winged horses.”

This stopped the show for some time. Sally, Hermione, Justin, and Terry had not heard before that winged horses existed. Draco swelled with pride, talking about the different breeds and the difficulties of learning to ride them. He promised to bring pictures in future.

Hermione wanted to know more about tutoring and home schooling. Susan was full of stories about the fun they had at Madam Hornpipe’s, learning lots of traditional dances.

“Couldn’t we do that today?” Sally asked. Susan and Hannah grew quite excited at the idea.

“Oh, let’s! We could do the Barley Twist!”

Harry’s heart froze with horror. *Dancing!* “You said we didn’t have enough girls!”

“You don’t dance the Barley Twist with partners, Harry. It’s a ring dance. The girls can form a ring inside with the boys outside. Professor Burbage, do you know the charms for the music?”

Charity Burbage did indeed know how to produce the old tune, and brought the students out into the open dance floor, giving them a little background on the dance. There were two dances, actually, a Sowing Dance and a Reaping Dance. She glossed over the grosser aspects of the origins and symbolism of the Sowing Dance, while giving them enough for context.

“When wizards and witches lived among muggles, they helped their communities with rituals like these. Music and dance are a good way to teach charms to a group that has little magic and no wands. Most of the old dances have been forgotten by muggles, but they are still a living part of our tradition, especially among those with ties to the land.”

Susan volunteered to lead the chant, a string of syllables that conveyed nothing to Harry, but which was supposed to help barley grow tall and eventually make splendid ale. Seamus Finnegan in particular thought this a very noble idea.

The students linked hands and began moving in a circle. Harry immediately crashed into Draco.

“Move to the left,” Draco told him quickly, “Always to the left in this dance, Harry.”



In a flash, Harry could picture a page from THE PATH OF DARKNESS: “—and the priestesses’ chief duty was the appeasement of the Great Powers of the Earth. In their ritual dances, they moved, as one must always move in a rite involving chthonic forces, to the left.”

At once it all made more sense to him. The steps were not that complicated, though he felt an awful bungler. In the girls’ circle, Sally was picking up the dance very quickly, moving neatly and gracefully. The girls were circling much more quickly than the boys, and Susan was calling out the movements.

“Now we stand still. Hermione—back up a step. Now were going to move in and out among the boys. Follow me!”

“Na ei rhystan, rhystan, rhystan,  
Forigh’ plagath Cthallamanthos,  
Dur’nu baglo, Va’su tasno,  
Cthallamanthos ya leibam!”

Harry wanted to ask what the words meant, but there was no chance to ask. It was almost hypnotic, watching the girls weaving in and out under the boys’ upraised arms. For a moment, he thought he could catch the scent of earth and green shoots. There was a part that involved clapping, and another part that called for kicking, which got the boys very tickled and giggly.

“Oi! Watch it, Finnegan!” Terry Boot complained.

“Shut your gob and think of the ale,” Finnegan shot back.

They went through the dances three times before everyone was satisfied that they had been done properly. Faces were flushed and everyone was ready for tea.

And what a tea it was! Susan and Hannah had given a lovingly composed list to the house elves, and everything they had asked for was laid out in grand style. Harry thought that his heroes from THE WIND IN THE WILLOWS would have nodded their own approval. Cucumber sandwiches, with the cucumber cut beautifully thin; potted shrimp sandwiches and egg-and-cress sandwiches and walnut and cream cheese sandwiches; bridge rolls with asparagus tips and tiny shepherd’s pies; plain scones, blackberry scones, and ginger scones because Hannah liked ginger; clotted cream and lemon curd and strawberry jam; marmalade cake and Simnel cake and jam tarts. Harry tried a jam tart and liked it, but the taste was new to him.

“They’re filled with snareberry jam, Harry,” Neville explained.

Hermione listened, trying to continue taking notes while eating.

Neville told them about a plant called Devil’s Snare that could trap people. Witch’s Snare was a cultivar of that dangerous plant, not as dangerous, and with edible fruit. You used light to avoid the branches catching at you, and also to push them back in winter to get at the fruits: pods of multiple berries that were bright blue when harvested, but cooked down to that purplish colour.



"It's good," Harry agreed, brushing away crumbs.

Dean and Seamus walked by, still stuffing themselves with cake. "This was a great idea, Harry!" Dean said. "Thanks for inviting us! I really learned a lot today."

"Me, too," Seamus agreed, "Ron's going to be sorry he missed it. Those daft girls too." They linked arms and did a few steps from the Barley Twist, getting the words all wrong.

"But what do they mean?" Hermione asked Hannah. "What language is that?"

"No idea."

Hermione went off to ask Professor Burbage about it, and Draco swooped in for mutual congratulations.

"What a success! The girls will want to kill themselves when they hear they missed the dancing! We might get Blaise next time. He was a bit under the weather this week. Theo I don't know about. His father doesn't like the idea of mixing even for educational purposes. He's a bit queer, anyway. We'll have to chip away at the Ravenclaws, I suppose, but serves them right for fancying themselves so clever! I'll write Father tonight and tell him all about it! When the rest are gone let's work out the next programme. I still think we should learn about the important families—teach the new lot a bit of respect."

Harry rolled his eyes. "I think the winged horses got you all the respect that even you could possibly want."

Draco glowed. "Yes. They liked that, didn't they?"

By half past four, the meeting was breaking up, and the students drifted away in small groups. Harry promised to meet his housemates for dinner, even though no one imagined they could possibly be hungry. Draco wanted to settle on the schedule while it was fresh in their minds, and Hermione stayed with them to write down every word for posterity. Neville stayed with them because he was the Serjeant-at-Arms, and it was his *duty*. He strolled about the room, hands behind his back, a very serious expression on his face.

Professor Burbage took her leave, too. "I'm so pleased you all had such a good time. A wonderful idea, Harry. Same time next Sunday, I presume." She was off in a whirl of lavender silk and the scent of lime flowers.

Hermione said, "Professor Burbage is awfully nice."

"I'll tell her it was really your idea, Hermione," Harry said, feeling a bit guilty.

"It doesn't matter whose idea it was," Draco declared. "A good idea is a good idea. Well done, Granger. So—next week—"

They talked another half-hour, and settled on wizarding farming, since Draco pointed out there were lots of dances associated with that, and dancing "always brings the girls." Hermione, surprisingly, agreed, and said it was all very interesting. Draco also felt that the Shepherd's Dance would be appropriate, and he would be happy to talk about the importance of Malfoy Manor in producing wool for robes.



“—and Vince and Greg can add their bit about caring for the beasts.”

“Perhaps they could bring a sheep—a little lamb, I mean,” Hermione suggested eagerly.

“Granger,” Draco said with withering scorn. “This is not lambing time—at least in the magical world. Perhaps the muggles arrange things differently.”

“—and that’s exactly what we should be learning,” Harry broke in, to smooth things over. “People don’t know what they don’t know. It would be neat if we could have a real sheep.”

“Sheep stink,” Draco said dismissively. “However, I’m sure one could be sent from home—washed thoroughly.”

“That’s very helpful of you,” Hermione said.

Draco nodded, overflowing with *noblesse oblige*. Harry was tempted to thump him.

Neville strolled back to them, looking rather cheerful. “I think we should always have a special wizarding treat that muggles don’t have,” he suggested. “Like those snareberry tarts.”

“A very sound idea, Longbottom,” Draco approved.

“Yes,” Harry agreed, “I think that’s just the sort of thing that people enjoy learning about. About this dancing business, though—”

They moved toward the hall, still talking. Harry’s mind was half on his Astronomy essay. He stepped past the doorway, following the others.

*Splat!*

Something heavy and wet hit him in the face, and a horrible stench filled the air.

“GOT YOU! HAHAAHAHAHA!”

“It’s Peeves!” Draco shouted. He tried to retreat to the clubroom. *Crash!*

The doors slammed shut behind them, trapping them under a hail of dungbombs. Hermione shrieked, and then gargled with disgust and fright as the mess splattered into her eyes.

“SNOTTY POTTY! SNOTTY POTTY AND HIS SNOTTY POTTY FRIENDS! GOT YOU!” The poltergeist cackled madly, zooming overhead, pelting them with all manner of nastiness.

“I’ll get you, Peeves!” Neville shouted, “You’ll never—aaargh!”

“This way!” Harry said, “The stairs!” He wished furiously he knew someway to stop the wretched creature.

*Professor Snape would know what to do.*

He caught hold of Hermione, who was crying and wiping at her eyes. Half-dragging her, he turned and ran for the nearest staircase. “Come on, Draco!”

Neville was on the other side of Hermione, helping to pull the blinded girl along.

Draco was outraged. “I’ll tell the Baron on you, you—you—”

“Hurry, Draco!” Harry shouted. “Up here!”

The poltergeist cackled again, and sounded oddly as if it had an echo. Harry instantly recognised the hated sound of boys snickers—the kind of laugh he knew from Dudley and



Piers and years of Harry-Hunting. Someone had set Peeves on them. Peeves zoomed down again, and yanked on Draco's robes, pulling the boy down hard onto the slippery floor.

"Ow! Harry! Help!"

Furious, Harry whirled on his tormentors and screamed out the first spell that came to him.

*"Incendio!"*

A roaring jet of flame seared down the hall, catching a surprised and squealing Peeves. There were boys' alarmed shouts, and Harry saw Zach Smith and Ron Weasley dashing away, their faces wild with shock.

Draco looked up, trembling, as the flames died down. Portraits protested in their burning frames. Further down the hall, a suit of armor toppled with a tremendous clatter. Fading squeaks of "Snotty, Rotty, Potty," echoed down the hall.

"Harry!" breathed Neville into the appalled silence. "That was amazing!"

"What this, my sweet?" complained an old man's voice in the distance. "Students dirtying my clean halls?"

"Oh, Harry!" moaned Hermione, at last able to see again, and looking around her in horror, "We're doomed!"

The complaints were coming closer. Harry hissed, "Run!"

He pulled Draco up and waved maniacally at Neville, who caught Hermione by the hand. The four of them ran up the steps and darted down a hall. There was a big door in front

of them. Harry sprinted ahead and flung it open, hustling his friends inside. They shut the door and stood there, panting.

"We're safe for now," Harry said. "Let's wait a bit and sneak down to the Great Hall."

"That's all very well," Hermione snapped. "I hope we can find our way!"

"I'm going to get that Smith," Neville vowed. "Imagine! Setting Peeves on a girl! It's very bad form!"

"Absolutely appalling," Draco agreed, flinching as he wiped filth from his robes. "Harry, you nearly toasted me, you know. This robe will never—" He paused, jaw dropping. Harry stared at him, wondering why Draco's eyes were so wide—so very, very wide—

Hermione gasped, "The third floor corridor! We're not supposed to be—here—"

Draco clutched at Neville's arm. All of them were staring straight into the eyes of a monstrous dog, a gigantic dog with three heads. Three pairs of eyes, three wet noses twitching at the scent of the intruders, three drooling mouths lined with yellowed fangs.

Three throats that growled ominously.

They were too terrified to scream. Quickly, Harry groped for the doorknob, and they all tumbled out of the room. Harry slammed the door shut, and they ran back down the corridor.

"Must—go—down," Harry muttered, not thinking very clearly. They found another staircase and ran down. And





136

down. And down. They did not stop running until they were in familiar territory, not far from the Great Hall.

Hermione clutched her side, gasping.

Draco sputtered indignantly, "What do they think they're doing, keeping a thing like that in a school?"

They were silent, pondering the matter.

Harry thought quickly. He knew something about avoiding trouble. "We can't be seen like this. Let's get to the toilets and get cleaned up before dinner."

Hermione was in a terrible temper, "You don't use your eyes, any of you! Didn't you see what it was standing on?"

Draco caught his breath, and nodded, "A trapdoor. It's guarding something."

"What's at Hogwarts that needs *that* to guard it?" Neville wondered.

"I don't know," Harry muttered. "But we should find out. It's not safe."

"Boys!" Hermione glared at them. "You'd be mad to go back there! We could have been killed—or worse, expelled. Now, if you don't mind, I'm going to wash my h—h—hair!" Her voice broke, and she rushed away.

Draco nodded again, "Sound idea, Granger!" he called after her.

Another furious exclamation, and the door to the girls' toilet slammed shut.

137



## CHAPTER 7

**THREE HEADS?"** Justin scoffed. "Are you having us on, Harry?"

Harry had immediately confided his adventures to his fellow Hufflepuffs in the Common Room Sunday night after dinner, feeling that if there were monsters in Hogwarts, it was something that his friends should know for their own protection.

"I swear, it was gigantic! Draco and Neville and Hermione saw it too!"

"A Cerberus," Ernie frowned. "It must have been."

"Who would keep a Cerberus in a school?" wondered Susan.

"That's pretty much what Draco said," Harry snorted, "but he was a lot more excited at the time."

"Well, Professor Dumbledore must have arranged it," Hannah pointed out. "He must know what he's doing."

"I hope so," said Sally, "but what could be important enough to risk students being hurt?"

"Hermione saw that it was chained over a trapdoor,"

● Harry told them. "I reckon it could be guarding something."

"But what?" Justin asked.

For the moment, no one had a clue. Harry wondered if he should ask Professor Snape. The Professor undoubtedly knew, but asking about a three-headed dog would amount to a confession that Harry had been where he had been specifically instructed not to go. The Professor trusted Harry not to be a troublemaker. Harry decided that the Professor would just worry needlessly if he heard about the accidental journey to the third floor. Better to keep quiet, and protect his guardian's peace of mind. It wouldn't do any harm for Harry to do a bit of research on his own.



Monday morning found them back in classes, but gossip and whispers were the order of the day. Zach Smith and Ron Weasley had been apprehended fleeing the second floor corridor and had lost Gryffindor twenty points each for their shocking destructiveness. An attempt to blame it all on Harry Potter only cost them more.

More painful to Ron than the loss of house points were the acid remarks of Fred and George.

"Not the cleverest of pranks, dear brother," said Fred.

"No wit, no style, no *je-ne-sais-quoi*," said George. "Besides, Potter saved your arse—"

"—during your first flying lesson."

"And worst of all, you were—"



“—caught.”

“That will cost you—hmm—”

“—fifty Twin Points from Ronald Weasley’s—”

“—life-time total.”

Percy, too, shook his head in disappointment. “What were you thinking, Ron? The Wizarding World Explorers is an excellent idea—excellent. Instead of attending and sharing your knowledge of our world, you behave like a hooligan and attack innocent students.”

“Potter nearly roasted me alive!” Ron exploded. “We just threw a few dungbombs. No call to shoot bloody great blasts of fire after us! He’s the one who burned up the corridor!”

Percy only tutted, and the twins exchanged speculative looks.

Ron’s remarks were overheard by older students from several houses, and by the end of the day awe-struck rumour had it that “*Harry Potter can control Fiendfyre!*”

The subject of all this admiration was oblivious to it, however. Harry was still thinking over the pleasures of the club meeting, and the surprising events afterward.

The Hufflepuff first years agreed that the existence of the Cerberus should be kept confidential, just as the four who had stumbled upon it had decided. Here was a real mystery, and blabbing about it could spoil their own attempts at solving it. Besides, Professor Dumbledore had obviously meant for it to be secret.

Draco was the most inclined to tell, longing to owl his father

about the shocking state of Hogwarts security. After an appeal from the others, his owl had been limited to the success of the club meeting, the humble gratitude of his social inferiors, and the smoothness with which the slate of officers had been accepted. The excellent tea and the dancing were given their due. Foolish pranksters had attempted to waylay them and had been soundly defeated. All in all, quite a cheerful message was sent off to Malfoy Manor.

The excellent tea was gloated about to everyone not fortunate enough to have been there. That and the dancing resulted in a great upswell of interest in what had been a somewhat questionable venture.

Contrary to Draco’s predictions, Pansy and Daphne did not kill themselves when they heard they had missed the dancing. However, they were determined never to miss it again.

Terry Boot was talking with uncommon animation to the other two Ravenclaw boys, Anthony Goldstein and Michael Corner, and they were listening with interest.

The Ravenclaw girls, however, were sitting at some distance from Terry, and were whispering among themselves. Hermione was not with them. The four girls seemed angry and pleased all at once, and Harry wondered if they were sorry they hadn’t come to the meeting.

Gryffindor was easier to read, or hear, at least, because the conversations were anything but quiet. Zach was sulking



over his sausages, and Ron was being raked over the coals by his brothers. Dean and Seamus were telling all the older students about the wonderful time they'd had. Neville was being congratulated by Percy Weasley on his new office. Neville seemed very happy, and told Percy he had owled his Gran last night with the news.

Lavender and Parvati were debating attending the next meeting, their voices growing ever more shrill. Lavender was very sorry she had not enjoyed the treats and the dancing and the socialising with all the other firsties at what sounded like a very nice party to her.

"It was silly not to go!" she complained. "What do I care who your sister likes and doesn't like? Everybody had a good time but us!"

Parvati was trying to agree with Lavender on the one hand and explain about not hurting her sister's feelings on the other. She saw other people looking their way and lowered her voice.

The owls arrived, and Harry was astonished to find that Hedwig was bringing him a letter. In his excitement, he dropped it on his plate, getting quite a bit of egg on it. He tore it open, and read the untidy scrawl:

Dear Harry,  
I know you get Wednesday afternoons

off, so would you like to come and have a cup of tea with me around three? I want to hear all about how you're settling in at Hogwarts. Send us an answer back with Hedwig.

Hagrid

Harry scribbled a quick

*Yes, please. Thank you for the invitation.*

on the back of the note and sent Hedwig off again.

"It's from Hagrid," he explained to the others. "Inviting me to tea on Wednesday."

There was a stir of whispers and giggles that made Harry look up. Hermione Granger was coming to breakfast, and looked as if she had been crying. She tried to find a place to sit at the Ravenclaw table, but somehow there was no room. Students moved closer together, grinning, and Mandy Brocklehurst tossed her hair, asking Hermione, "Aren't your feet cold? In the wizarding world we wear shoes."

"Shooooooooosss," Morag drawled out sweetly. "Perhaps muggles haven't invented them yet."

Hermione stared at them, on the verge of tears, "I never did anything to you."



“You exist,” Mandy smirked. The other first year girls giggled. Harry was angry, and glanced up at the Head Table to see if they were aware of what was going on. No. They were talking among themselves, or reading the paper. He wanted to go to Hermione, but was on the wrong side of the table.

Susan Bones, however, was not. She slapped her hand on the table with a crack that made people around her stare. She stormed over to the Ravenclaws and caught Hermione by the arm.

“Come sit with us, Hermione.” She narrowed her eyes and hissed at Mandy, “Shame on you!” She looked at all the girls in turn, and repeated quietly, “*Shame* on you.”

Turning her back on them, she pulled Hermione along to sit with the Hufflepuffs. Hannah moved over, and patted the seat beside her. Ernie and Justin hardly knew what to say, but passed her the toast, as a sign of solidarity.

Sally asked angrily, “Did they take your shoes this time? They call themselves witches, but I think they don’t know how to spell!”

The Hufflepuffs burst out laughing. Hermione sniffled, and then joined in the laughter a little weakly.

“You should talk to Professor Flitwick, Hermione,” Hannah said. “I’m sure he’d make them stop.”

Hermione shivered. “But he wouldn’t be in the dorm with me at night. It might make them worse.”

Harry tore his toast to pieces, feeling horribly guilty. Why had he ever opened his mouth to Hermione about the Houses?

“We’ll make them give your shoes back.” He shot a dark glare at the Ravenclaw girls, which quieted them down for all of five minutes.

Everyone at the Hufflepuff table was particularly nice to Hermione, passing her eggs and marmalade. Cedric asked if Hermione liked bacon or sausage better. Eloise Midgen wondered if Hermione would like some pumpkin juice. There were more angry looks cast at the Ravenclaws, and not all of them by first years.

The Gryffindor/Slytherin antagonism was so bitter that it generally overshadowed all other rivalries at Hogwarts. That did not mean that other rivalries did not exist. Now and then the Ravenclaw/Hufflepuff tensions boiled into real hostility, and this looked to be such a time.

“Anyway,” Hermione said bravely, “I’ve got my essays and my books. I slept with them,” she confessed, and smiled a little as the Hufflepuffs laughed again.

“You can borrow a pair of my shoes, Hermione,” Sally offered.

“They wouldn’t fit,” Susan said sensibly. She told Hermione, “You can borrow mine. Auntie taught me a way to adjust shoes a bit. Sally has such itsy-bitsy baby feet that no way could anyone else wear her shoes.”

“I do *not* have baby feet,” Sally contradicted.

“Tiny, adorable, petite doll feet,” Hannah cooed.

“Oh, stop!” Sally complained, flicking breadcrumbs at her.



"There's no time anyway," Hermione said in despair. "We've got to get to Transfiguration. It wouldn't do to be late to Professor McGonagall's class, on top of everything else!"

"After class, then," Susan soothed. "We'll get through this class and then you can come with us afterwards!"

They bustled to class, and Hermione sat between Harry and Sally.

No sooner had class begun, than Mandy Brocklehurst raised her hand and said primly, "Professor, Hermione Granger isn't wearing shoes!"

Minerva McGonagall stared at the girl unblinkingly. She hated tattle-tales.

"Isn't she, Miss Brocklehurst?" she asked. "I would never have noticed had you not shared that valuable piece of information. Miss Granger," she said, turning to Hermione, "in future, obey the Hogwarts dress code. The stone floors are chilly, and we don't want our students catching their deaths."

"Yes, Professor," Hermione whispered. The smothered sniggers from the Ravenclaw girls caused McGonagall to fix them with an icy look. They subsided, and class was soon underway.

The lesson involved transfiguring a glass marble into a rubber ball. Hermione's single-minded efforts earned her ten points and some warm praise from her teacher. By the end of the class, she seemed more herself. The Hufflepuffs left, taking Hermione with them.

All but Harry, who stood waiting in front of Minerva's desk, his expression very serious.

"Yes, Mr Potter?" she asked, peering at him over her spectacles.

"Professor, I need to talk to you about Hermione."

Minerva looked at him in concern. "Do you happen to know why Miss Granger came to class without her shoes?"

Thinking he was being accused, Harry protested, "It wasn't me, Professor! It's the girls in Ravenclaw. They're taking her things and being rotten to her. Jealous of her, I think. Hermione's really smart and works hard. I know I promised never to teach that runic ward to anyone else, but would you give me permission to teach it to Hermione so she can protect herself?"

"I'd rather you didn't Mr. Potter," she said, with a quick shake of her head. "I expect you to keep your promise. However, don't think I'm being unhelpful. That warding I taught you doesn't work well with personal possessions. I take it you used it on your trunk?"

"Well—yes," he admitted.

"That's quite all right. A trunk would work, but using it on a pair of shoes or a homework assignment might cause other problems. There is an excellent anti-theft jinx that would be just the thing for Miss Granger. I shall have a talk with her Head of House, and see to that he teaches it to her."

"Thanks, Professor, it's really important to me." Harry shuffled and fidgeted, and then confessed, "I feel horrible about



Hermione. The trouble she's having in Ravenclaw is all my fault!"

Minerva was too experienced to laugh at him. "How could the behaviour of her housemates possibly be your fault, Harry?" she asked.

"She wanted to be in Gryffindor and I talked her out of it!" Harry burst out. "I told her on the train about how you had to let the Hat decide and that you needed to go where it wanted to put you. If she'd gone to Gryffindor the way she wanted, she wouldn't be so miserable!"

"You take too much upon yourself!" Minerva told him sternly. "You are in no way responsible for her Sorting, nor for the spiteful conduct of others. You cannot know that she would ever have been sorted into Gryffindor, nor can you know how life would have been for her had she been sorted there. I shall talk to Professor Flitwick about Miss Granger, and she will learn that jinx. Your only task, as I see it, is to be a good friend. I heard that she was chosen secretary of your club. She obviously has *some* good friends, even if they may not be in her own house at the moment."



Hermione Granger sat at meals with the Hufflepuffs all that day. The following morning, however, she came down to breakfast with Lisa Turpin and Padma Patil, and sat between them. The Ravenclaw table was rather subdued in the wake

of an emergency staff meeting that resulted in some quick and decisive action.

Flitwick had been upset and embarrassed, and above all ashamed that this unpleasant Ravenclaw custom still manifested itself when he believed he had stamped it out.

He knew something about being the outsider at Hogwarts, though it was very long ago and only Albus remembered it. The boys and girls who had tormented him and called him stupid, foul names were all long dead. He had compensated by the being the best of them: by using his intellect like a rapier, by proving that physical height was not the measure of magic, by becoming a dueling champion, by becoming a Hogwarts professor. However, it was not easy (and Severus Snape also acknowledged it) for a male Head of House to keep an eye on what went on in the girls dormitories—not without being something of a pervert, at least. Sprout and McGonagall confessed to similar problems with their male students.

"At least it has come to light early in the year, Filius," Dumbledore remarked optimistically. "You can deal with the problem before it festers."

"—and before the Granger girl is badly injured, or simply leaves Hogwarts," Snape observed.

Flitwick knew Snape had suffered some ugly treatment himself at Hogwarts: not just from Potter and Black, but from members of Snape's own house. Snape certainly understood



what it was like to be in constant danger, in a place where one ought to feel protected. Perhaps if Snape had had anywhere else to go he might well have turned his back on the wizarding world himself.

"It would have been a shame," Pomona Sprout declared. "A hard-working, diligent student. I really don't know why those girls are targeting her. She seems perfectly nice to me, if a little—"

"—overzealous?" Snape drawled.

"Harry Potter brought this to my attention, I'm glad to say," Minerva told the staff. "So many boys would have been indifferent or willfully blind. And he did it not to tattle, but to help a friend. He had promised me not to divulge some runic magic I taught him, and came to me to ask permission to teach Miss Granger how to ward her things, rather than break his word. Of course, the jinx is better in this situation."

"H—H—Harry P—P—Potter," stammered Quirrell. "Q—Q—Quite the young l—l—leader. Starts a club for the mu—mu—mu—mu—"

"—muggleborn," Minerva muttered impatiently.

"Th—th—thank you, M—M—Minerva," Quirrell said, his voice rising with the effort of speech. "S—S—S—S—S— Starts a club and rescues a damsel in d—d—distress, practically s—s—s—s—s—simultaneously!"

Sprout eyed Quirrell with a displeased, puzzled look. "Yes, he is a young leader, and I, for one, am very proud of him!"

"—And all of this does nothing to deal with students who do appear to dislike the idea of the Explorers' Club itself. Zacharias Smith and Ronald Weasley," Snape sneered, "will bear watching, in my opinion."

"I don't think Ron Weasley is at all like the Smith boy," Sinistra objected. "He doesn't instigate any of the confrontations. I think he's simply made the wrong friend. Perhaps if he were encouraged to join the club himself—"

Charity Burbage shook her head. "I think it would be a mistake to force any of the students to participate. Let the children continue to have a good time and talk about it. That will do the work better than making it a punishment."

Hooch, sitting in her usual place by the window, surprised them all by speaking up. "Potter saved Weasley from a nasty fall the other day, and Weasley said thanks to Potter. I'd give it time, as Charity says."

It was decided keep a discreet watch on the students who had not participated in the club—especially Smith—but to do nothing more at the present time. The immediate problem in Ravenclaw was considered far more pressing.

That very evening, Flitwick counselled Hermione: he made it plain that her welfare was of importance to her teachers, and he taught her the anti-theft jinx. She learned it quickly, confirming his opinion that she was a remarkably talented young witch.

He also spoke to each of the other Ravenclaw first-year girls



individually, and then had it out with the prefects. He discovered which of the first-year girls had real animus against the muggleborn Miss Granger, and which were simply following along. He wanted to break up that little clique as quickly and decisively as possible, since that was a situation, which given time, could only grow worse.

After these interviews, Flitwick judged that Lisa Turpin had the least personal dislike of Hermione Granger, and that Lisa's friend Padma would support Lisa, rather than attempt to bond with Morag and Mandy. Flitwick was not sure why Mandy Brocklehurst had taken such a fierce dislike to the new student. Very likely, there was no logical cause at all. Sometimes the dynamics of certain groups developed in a negative way, and a small clique was formed that as a group behaved in ways that would be otherwise unthinkable for each of the individuals who were part of it. Four pureblood girls—two close friendships—no place for an outsider. It had gone wrong from the beginning, and he should have been on the watch.

He did not demand that Lisa and Padma pretend that the Granger girl was their best and dearest friend. He did, however, expect the members of his house to behave like gentlewitches and gentlewizards: civil, well-spoken, and above all, *rational*.



"They gave you back your things, then?" Harry asked

Hermione, as soon as they had a moment before History began on Tuesday.

Draco, on his other side, eavesdropped shamelessly. Having their club secretary put upon by her own house would affect the prestige of their club as a whole. And Granger wasn't so bad, after all. She listened to him very respectfully during their flying lessons. Almost as importantly, she was reading ahead in Defense against the Dark Arts, and had caught out that fool Quirrell in repeated mistakes.

It was becoming something of a game for the two of them, seeing who could prove that sorry excuse for a Defense professor wrong the most times in class. Common muggleborns, he had heard, were always weak in Defense, not understanding the importance—the majesty—of the subject. Hermione Granger was taking it very seriously, and learning all she could. Father had told him that it was important to be flexible when one met that rare, exceptional muggleborn like Harry Potter's mother.

Harry thought Hermione seemed in better spirits than usual, as she told him, "Yes—and they apologised. They said it was meant as a joke, but they realised that it hadn't been very clever. I don't know how sincere they were, but Professor Flitwick made it clear that I was to come to him immediately if I ever had any trouble again. He's very nice—and quite brilliant, you know—he thinks our club is a wonderful idea—"

"He's no fool, certainly," Draco broke in. "You know he was



a dueling champion. It's a shame he doesn't teach Defense, in place of that turbaned poser!"

"I'm sure Professor Quirrell is doing his best, Draco," Hermione said primly.

Draco smirked, "I'm sure you're right!"

Harry choked back a laugh.

"Sshhhh!" Sally hushed them. "Professor Binns is here!"

"Oh, spare me," Draco sneered.

Another hour of utter boredom. Harry tried to pay attention, but found himself doodling in his notebook, drawing stick figures of his friends: Hermione with masses of curls, Draco with a pointed nose and superior expression, Neville with a toad, Sally dancing on her toes, Ernie sitting in thought, chin on his fist, Susan with her long plait, Hannah with her pigtails, Justin leaning on a sports car with the word "Lamborghini," on it.

At the end of the class, Hermione said, "I've completed writing up the minutes of the first meeting, and I've learned a replicating charm, so each of the officers will have a copy." She distributed them, to Harry's astonishment, and then she suggested, "Perhaps we should get together before the next meeting, to plan things out."

"I'm free tomorrow afternoon," Draco told them, "and so are you, Harry."

Harry shook his head. "I promised to have tea with Hagrid."

"Tea? With the *groundskeeper*?" Draco grimaced.

"I told you. He's very nice. Professor Snape says he knows all about the forest and its creatures."

"Do you suppose," Hermione asked slowly, "that he might know about three-headed dogs?"

A pause, and Draco said, "Well done, Granger! I daresay that's just up his alley. Harry, I'll go along with you and we'll pump this Hagrid for information!"

Hermione protested, "But I want to go, too! Perhaps we should all go, and we can make some plans for the club on the way there and back."

Neville had listened in, and suggested, "Maybe we could have Hagrid come and talk to our club sometime, and tell everybody what's really in the Forest. I heard he goes there more than anyone."

The idea was approved, and at five minutes to three on Wednesday, the four of them left the castle and made their way across the grounds.

Hagrid lived in a small half-timbered house on the edge of the Forbidden Forest. A crossbow and a pair of galoshes were outside the front door.

"How very—rustic," Draco observed.

Harry elbowed him, and then knocked at the door. Inside there was a frantic scrabbling and several booming barks.

Then Hagrid's voice rang out, saying, "Back, Fang, back!"

Draco's eyes widened, and he moved away from the door.





156

“You don’t suppose—”

“Fang?” Neville faltered.

“It couldn’t be,” Hermione said anxiously. “I mean, the house is just too small!”

The door opened a crack, and Hagrid peered down at them.

“Hang on,” he said. “Back, Fang.”

“Fang?” Neville repeated.

Hagrid let them in, struggling to hold on to the collar of an enormous black boarhound. Draco blew out a relieved breath, and drew himself up. Harry grinned at him.

There was only one room inside. Hams and pheasants were hanging from the ceiling, a copper kettle was boiling on the open fire, and in the corner stood a massive bed with a patchwork quilt over it. Hermione looked around her, fascinated.

“Witches and wizards live in all sorts of extraordinary ways.”

Draco muttered, “The most extraordinary thing is that *I*’m here to have tea!”

“Make yourselves at home,” said Hagrid, letting go of Fang, who bounded straight at an astonished Neville and started licking his ears.

“This is Neville Longbottom,” Harry told Hagrid, who was pouring boiling water into a large teapot and putting rock cakes onto a plate. “And this is Hermione Granger. And this is Draco Malfoy.”

Hagrid glanced uneasily at Draco’s pale, pointed face.

“A Malfoy, eh?” He gave Draco a grudging nod. “Well, if yer

157



a friend o' Harry's, yer welcome here!"

The rock cakes were shapeless lumps with raisins that almost broke their teeth. Harry belatedly remembered that Professor Snape had warned him about them. However, Neville discovered that dunking them in the tea softened them enough to eat. Hermione sniffed, but Draco shrugged and dunked along with the rest of the boys. The cakes were not half bad, after all.

"Professor Snape said you know all about the forest, Hagrid," Harry said, thinking himself very subtle. "I'll bet there aren't many creatures you can't tell us about. We're in a first-year club for learning about the wizarding world, and maybe sometime you could come and tell us all about the creatures in the Forbidden Forest."

"Be glad to, Harry! Can't go wrong with learnin' about animals. Fascinatin' creatures in the Forest— Acromantulae, Unicorns—"

"Any Cerberuses?" Neville blurted out.

"Cerberi," Hermione corrected him. "Cerberi is the correct plural form."

"Cerberuses—Cerberi—Three-headed dogs—whatever—" Draco muttered impatiently.

"Here, now!" Hagrid rumbled. "How do you lot know about Fluffy?"

"Fluffy?" Harry asked incredulously. "Is that his name? We got chased upstairs by Peeves and there was this three-headed dog there. His name is *Fluffy*?"

Draco demanded, "Why is there a three-headed dog at Hogwarts, anyway?"

"He's mine," Hagrid told them, slurping his tea. "Bought him off a Greek chappie I met in the pub las' year. I lent him to Dumbledore to guard the—"

"What?" Harry asked eagerly.

"Now don't ask me anymore," Hagrid said gruffly. "That's top secret, that is."

"It looked like it was guarding a trapdoor," Hermione put in. "We were all wondering—"

Hagrid waved at them, "Drink yer tea, you lot. Now you listen to me. Don't you go meddlin' in things that don' concern yeh. It's dangerous. You forget that dog, an' you forget what it's guardin'. That's between Professor Dumbledore an' Nicholas Flamel, and don' you forget it!"

He got up to refill the pot.

"Oh, I won't," Harry assured him earnestly. "Not for a minute."

Draco muffled a snort. "Good one, Harry," he whispered.

He jerked his head in a minute nod, and Harry saw what Draco meant. There was a piece of paper lying on the table under the tea cozy. It was a cutting from the DAILY PROPHET:

### Gringotts Break-In Latest!

Investigations continue into the break-in at Gringotts on August ninth, widely believed...



"Isn't that the date we met at Diagon Alley, Harry? I heard about the break-in, but I didn't realize that it happened that very day!"

Hermione leaned over to look at the cutting while Hagrid's back was turned.

"*The vault that was searched had in fact been emptied earlier that same day,*" she read.

Harry whispered, "That was the day I met Hagrid, too. He was on his way to Gringotts, on important Hogwarts business, and he was being followed—"

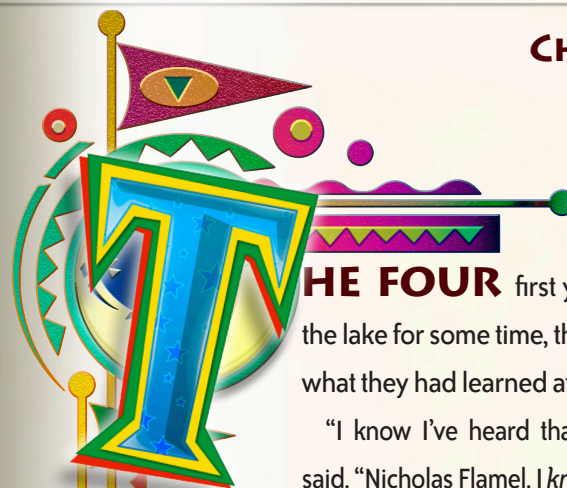
His three companions were waiting breathlessly.

"— by Professor Quirrell."

160



## CHAPTER 8



**THE FOUR** first years sat out by the lake for some time, thinking through what they had learned at Hagrid's.

"I know I've heard that name," Draco said. "Nicholas Flamel. I *know* I've heard it."

Harry said, "I have too. He's a famous alchemist. I have this gigantic book in my trunk all about him. It was my mum's. Professor Snape told me she was really interested in Potions."

"Actually," Hermione pointed out primly, "potions and alchemy aren't at all the same thing. Alchemy is the study of metals—sort of like inorganic chemistry, and—"

"Yes, thank you, Granger, I *have* heard of alchemy," Draco interrupted her. "Anyway, it sounds like Flamel and Dumbledore know each other. Maybe they worked on something together—potions and alchemy do overlap somewhat, even though it's been donkey's years since alchemy was taught at Hogwarts. Father thinks that's a great mistake."

161



"It's probably in your book, Harry," Neville said. "Maybe they did something together in the war against Grindelwald. A secret weapon, maybe."

Harry grimaced. "I don't know, Neville. It's a really long book. Hundreds of pages. It'll take me forever to find out."

"Not if you look in the index," Hermione informed him. "Look in the index for 'Dumbledore.' If you like, I'll do it."

Harry shook his head, feeling a little jealous of sharing something that had belonged to his mother. "It was my mum's book. I really ought to do it myself. I'll check the index. That doesn't sound too bad. Thanks for the idea!"

"Now that that's settled," Hermione said, "I think we should work on a list of possible club programs. It's not too early to decide. People need time to prepare, after all. Do you suppose some parents would be allowed to come and talk about their careers?"

"You might hear things you don't like," Draco snarked. "My father would come if we asked, but his career is being the head of our family. It's not something you can aspire to be—unless you're born to it!"

Hermione huffed, rather offended.

Harry said, "Probably your father would be too busy, I suppose, but it would be interesting to hear what he does all day."

Draco snorted. "Harry, not even my mother knows what Father does all day."



The Headmaster's office was the locus of the extraordinary at Hogwarts. There were collected the rarest of books, the strangest of artifacts, the oldest of relics. Snape had been there many times through the years, but had never been invited to simply browse at his leisure. He knew that things the Headmaster thought too dangerous for public viewing—or even for the Restricted Section—were kept here, away from the eyes of lesser witches and wizards.

Occasionally it annoyed him, especially when he glimpsed that thin green volume that he had reason to believe was a lost work of Pliny the Elder on the uses of silphium. Yes—there it was, not twelve feet away. Dumbledore had not done a jot of scholarly research since becoming Headmaster decades ago. It was insufferable that he was hoarding all these treasures. Not for the first time, Snape wondered if Dumbledore would notice if Snape were to borrow that one slender book—perhaps at the end of the meeting, when he was distracted—

"Ah, Hagrid!" Dumbledore called out, "Join us, if you will. I believe we can begin now."

Looking around the room, Snape realized that this was the same group that the Headmaster had mentioned when he told Snape that he needed some very special magical protections for a certain precious object. Yes: Minerva, Filius, Pomona,



Hagrid, and Quirrell. And himself, of course.

Now that he knew that the object in question was the Philosopher's Stone, he was deeply concerned. Knowing that there was an individual in the room seeking to steal it for the Dark Lord forced him to exert all his occlumency and all his acting skills not to glare at the pasty-faced young man in the purple turban, the one who dared to sit just a little closer to Snape than he ought. Snape longed to push him away, and wondered what would happen if he did.

Quirrell's behavior to Harry in class was deplorable, but Albus would allow no interference. It was all part of the Grand Plan, whatever that was. That the students' education was being sacrificed was of no consequence, it seemed. At least Snape could help Harry catch up on his studies a bit during their Saturday afternoons.

His attention was riveted when the Headmaster produced a curious casket of antique make, inlaid with exotic woods and mother-of-pearl, and set it before him on his desk.

"I thought," said Dumbledore, "that this was the proper moment for you to have a look at the artifact we are all working to protect."

Minerva McGonagall gave the Headmaster a sudden startled look. Uneasily, she glanced at Snape. He felt Minerva's questing gaze, and looked her way, lifting his brows.

Beside him, Quirrell shifted forward eagerly. Snape grimaced at the reek of garlic.





Not even requiring a touch or a word from Dumbledore, the casket slowly opened, and flashes of crimson light flooded the room.

"Oh, my!" breathed Pomona Sprout, utterly enchanted with the beauty of the thing. Flitwick squeaked shrilly and clasped a hand over his mouth in embarrassment. Snape felt his scalp prickle. Only a handful of people could claim to have seen the Philosopher's Stone. That he was now one of them was immensely gratifying.

The Stone itself was irregular in shape, with a glassy, rippling sheen to it, a luminous ruby red—or brighter, really, since most real rubies had something of a pinkish cast. This was a true scarlet, and the vivid, radiant colour reminded Snape of the stained glass he had seen when the Evanses had taken him with them to church one Christmas morning.

This was not glass, however. It sparkled and pulsed with magic. The very air took on a different flavour in the presence of the thing.

They all learned forward, admiring. Some did more than lean. Quirrell's hand stretched out.

"Might I," he murmured, "*touch* it?"

The box slid away toward Dumbledore. The Headmaster smiled.

"I'm afraid not. Dear Nicholas insisted. We are not to touch it—not directly at least."

The box clicked shut and everyone in the room sighed with disappointment.

"We really must get to work," Dumbledore declared. "One

could spend one's life studying such an object, but our task is to defend it. My good old friend finds it such a burden. With his assistance, I came up with a few ideas that I hope you all found of interest. Hagrid here has already done his part—most thoroughly and creditably."

The half-giant beamed and ducked his head, with a muttered, "T'weren't nothin'."

Albus was having none of it. "On the contrary, an excellent effort. We are all in your debt."

Everyone was longing to ask what exactly Hagrid had done, but Dumbledore had decided that each of their tasks must kept secret between himself and the specific member of staff. Snape could think of all sorts of ways of winking the information out of Hagrid, but it would be unkind to take advantage of the fellow's good will towards him.

In private meetings, Albus had given each of them the germ of an idea to base their defense upon. He had consulted with them, approving and refining the concepts until they met his requirements. Snape knit his brows, pondering the meaning behind his own challenge. A logic puzzle? It hardly sounded the sort of thing that would delay the Dark Lord for long. It might amuse him, in fact—it might give him a feeling of superiority if he could overcome the best that Hogwarts' best could devise.

Beside him, he saw a crafty smirk twitch the corners of Quirrell's mouth. What had Dumbledore asked of *him*? What was



the purpose of asking the individual most under suspicion to help protect the Stone? Was Dumbledore merely marking time? Was there something else behind all of this?

After a little more discussion, they were dismissed. To Snape's disgust, Dumbledore bade them a twinkling farewell, standing directly in front of a certain little green book. Snape had no time for it anyway. He must get the Headmaster alone and find out all his could about the current situation.

His opportunity came shortly after lunch the next day. He waited impatiently to be admitted, and found Dumbledore writing letters, the window open to a cool, sweet breeze. Fawkes gave him a friendly chirp.

"My dear boy!" Dumbledore greeted him, "What can I do for you on this splendid afternoon? Have you come to have a bird's eye view of the Hufflepuff quidditch practice?"

Snape had forgotten the Hufflepuffs were holding their practice today, instead of waiting for the weekend. He walked to the window, and saw tiny, faraway figures darting about on broomsticks.

A cluster of students were watching, including all the first-year Hufflepuffs. He saw Harry's dark head in the midst of them. Even at this distance, he could see the boy's attention was entirely focused on the Hufflepuff Seeker, Cedric Diggory. Harry had told him that the Diggory boy had been kind to him. Unsurprising. Cedric Diggory was an outstanding student—popular and athletic—and no slouch on the academic side, either.

Snape grimaced. The Diggory lad was, in fact, very much like James Potter in some ways—or perhaps, more precisely, like James Potter would have described himself. Diggory had none of Potter's arrogance—none of his malicious streak, either. A decent lad, in short: one who did not require the humiliation of others to make himself important.

"Harry is wild for a broom of his own," Snape remarked. "I would give him one at Christmas, but then he would be wanting to bring it to school. Perhaps I shall get one for him as a present at the end of the year, if his marks warrant it."

"Yes—I've heard about Harry's budding talent," Dumbledore answered. "Was there something else on your mind?"

Snape turned, and folded his arms in front of him, scowling. "You know there is. A logic puzzle? What kind of protection is that? Why not a ward net? A lethal potions trap? Why not the Fidelius? I daresay Flamel did not want to put a curse on the Stone itself—"

"Certainly not!"

"But you could create foolproof defenses. A logic puzzle sounds like you're playing games!"

"Perhaps I am," Dumbledore replied, in a tone of calm reason.

"Are you serious about keeping the Stone from Quirrell?"

"The Stone is in no danger from him."

"Does he know that?"

Albus actually laughed. "I certainly hope not!" The laughter



died away and Dumbledore told Snape, "My dear boy, I know how anxious you are. Try to believe me when I tell you the Stone is perfectly safe. These defenses serve a useful purpose—"

"Rubbish! What purpose, other than to delay—" Snape paused. "You *are* playing with the Dark Lord, aren't you? Letting him believe himself cleverer than the rest of us—"

"—always his worst failing. He was so terribly vain—"

"—and keeping his servant here, under your eye—"

"—where I know what he is doing."

"Ah." Snape considered that a moment. "*Keep your friends close and your enemies closer.*"

"Precisely. There are other ways Voldemort could manifest himself—ways that would involve making himself known to his old followers, and building up his support once more—ways that might be more certain than the fabled but elusive Elixir of Life. It seems to me best for Voldemort to hunt after something that he would not wish to share with anyone else. And, as you say, where his activities can be watched."

The formula for the Elixir of Life was fairly well known, and was published in several works. It would not be difficult to brew, save for the initial step, which was the well-known catchphrase for the impossible: *First, create a Philosopher's Stone.*

"Very well," Snape agreed grudgingly. "The plan is to keep Quirrell here as long as possible. But what then? What if he wins through the defenses—he is devising one of them after

all—and gives the stone to Voldemort?"

"He will not pass my last defense," Dumbledore said with confidence. "It is one of my cleverer ideas, and it is certain to baffle him. I believe it *will* baffle him until Voldemort decides he has no further use for poor Quirinius."

"The Dark Lord will kill him," Snape said. "You used to show more mercy to His followers."

"Quirinius is doomed," Dumbledore declared sadly. "I wish it were not so, but there is nothing to be done. He is doomed, but others will survive, and Voldemort will never have the Elixir of Life."

"I don't suppose you would tell me what this infallible defense of yours *is*?"

Dumbledore leaned back and smiled. "I will tell you this: only one who does not want to use the Stone can get at it."



Harry blew out a breath, and looked at the enormous book in despair. There were eight hundred seventy pages of *ALCHEMIST SUPREME: THE LIFE OF NICHOLAS FLAMEL*, by Junia Kleopha Robbins.

Hermione had told him to look in the index, but there was no index. There was a table of contents to the thirty-eight chapters, but the titles were complicated and full of quotations, and gave the untutored Harry no clue as to what they were actually about. The only way he was going to find out



what Albus Dumbledore and Nicholas Flamel might have in common would be to actually read the book, page by page.

But it was a ridiculously long book. It made his wrists hurt to hold it for any length of time. He laid it in front of him on the library table, and prepared to plunge into the first chapter, *A DISTANT MIRROR: PARIS IN THE FOURTEENTH CENTURY*.

"Psst! Harry!"

Happy to be distracted, Harry looked up and saw Draco in the library doorway, trying to get his attention. There was a card in Draco's hand and he was waving it at Harry.

"Oh, go see what he wants, Harry," said Susan. "It's better than being blown through the window by the force of your sighs."

Hannah and Sally giggled, and Harry made a face at them.

Draco was making tremendous gestures, and Harry hurried over, with an apologetic glance at Madam Pince.

"Well, what—"

Draco grabbed him by his robe and dragged him out into the hall. "I know who Nicholas Flamel is. I know what Fluffy's guarding."

"What? How?"

"My Famous Wizard Cards collection. I owled Mother. I told her I needed it."

"There's a Nicholas Flamel card?"

"Of course! Look!"

Harry took the card and studied it. The wizard in the picture did not look anywhere as old as Dumbledore. He had a

clean-shaven, thin, unlined face, with a long nose and piercing blue eyes. Crystal-white hair flowed back from the austere brow and rippled past the man's high, starched collar. He looked back at Harry, and gave him a slight, amused smile.

Nicholas Flamel

Only Known Creator of the Philosopher's Stone

The premier alchemist and noted opera lover Nicholas Flamel possesses the only Philosopher's Stone currently in existence. This stone's astonishing powers include transforming any metal into pure gold. It is also the essential ingredient in the Elixir of Life, which makes the drinker immortal. Grand Master Flamel, who celebrated his six hundred and sixty-fifth birthday last year, enjoys a quiet life in Devon with his wife, Perenelle (six hundred and fifty-eight).

Harry's jaw dropped. "The Philosopher's Stone? That must be it! That's what Hagrid took out of the vault! That's what Quirrell is after!"

"I told you! This is big, Harry! The Philosopher's Stone—well—it's the rarest, most valuable item in the entire world. People would kill for this—and they have. I knew I'd heard the name. That's why I had Mother owl me my entire card collection."

"I saw you getting a big box at breakfast. Why didn't you ask her to find the Flamel card and just send that?"

Draco gave him a shove, "Because, you wanker, she certainly



knows who Nicholas Flamel is, and then she'd want to know what's going on, and then she'd tell Father, and he'd come here, and then we'd have to tell him everything before we're done investigating it ourselves! This is *our* mystery, and were going to solve it. And then everyone will be so incredibly impressed!"

"If you say so. All right, all right! Let's tell the others!"

"But they've got to swear to keep it a secret, Harry! If more people knew the Stone was at Hogwarts—"

"Yeah, I get it. This Nicholas Flamel must be the richest man in the world. He can turn anything into gold. That would come in handy sometimes."

Draco bit his lip. "It's not just the money, Harry. We have plenty of gold. It's immortality, Harry! The Elixir of Life is so powerful that you can live forever, and be young and healthy and strong the whole time! They say that it can even bring people back from the dead—if you don't wait too long to give it to them. It heals all sickness and wounds. Anybody would want the Philosopher's Stone, Harry. But since it also makes you rich, there's nothing you can really offer someone like Flamel to make you a Stone of your own."

He lowered his voice. "I think my grandfather talked to him once—he wanted Flamel to make him one. Offered him the moon, practically, but it was no go. Nobody has any leverage over Flamel, and his place in Devon must be really well protected, because I know a *lot* of people have tried to find it."

"Maybe he asked Dumbledore to keep it here because someone was after it!"

"Maybe." Draco looked doubtful. "But someone's always after it. It's the Philosopher's Stone!" He snickered. "Maybe Quirrell thinks it'll cure his stutter!"

"We've got to tell the others, Draco. They've got to know. It's only fair."

"Not the whole club, I hope," said Draco, looking horrified. "We don't know all that lot very well, and if they talked—"

"I've got to tell the other badgers," Harry insisted. "It would be really wrong if I didn't."

"It could be dangerous for them," Draco warned him. "If Quirrell is after the Stone, he might be capable of anything. I wouldn't tell Crabbe and Goyle. Those two couldn't protect themselves against a grown wizard. And those little girls—"

"Well— Hermione and Neville have got to be told. They know half of it now, anyway. Hermione is smart, and she'll eventually figure it out the rest on her own, I reckon. We can tell our other friends when Quirrell's been sorted out."

"I daresay. Very well, let's meet in the club room right after dinner. I'll tell Granger. You tell Longbottom."

Harry thought Draco had the easier task. The Ravenclaws were largely uninterested in where Hermione Granger went after dinner, other than being rather relieved that she would be elsewhere.



Harry, on the other hand, had to listen to Zach Smith muttering about : “the dumping ground of Hogwarts” and “losers.”

Giving him a quick, hostile look under his brows, Harry said calmly, “Don’t feel so bad about *losing* all those points, Smith. I’m sure that the Explorers’ Club members can make them up for you sometime this year.”

Zach looked like he wanted to make something of it, but the older students nearby gave him no encouragement.

Harry asked Neville, “Could you come to the club room after dinner, Neville? We need to go over the plans for next Sunday.”

Neville nodded, looking very thoughtful.

Dinner was torture for Harry. He hated deceiving his housemates. They were honest kids, who had been open and above-board with him. He felt ashamed of keeping dangerous secrets from them, but told himself it was safest for them. They knew to stay away from the third-floor corridor, at least.

And at the moment they were too interested in hearing about the upcoming Hogsmeade weekend to have time for lesser interests. Cedric was going for the first time, and had promised to bring each of them a souvenir.

Afterwards, Harry had to make up an excuse not to return to the Common Room with them. Ernie was teaching Justin to play wizards’ chess, and Sally was going to meet with some older students to practice for Talent Night in October. Hannah and Susan were devising the tea for the next meeting, and would announce

it when the plans were firmed up.

“We didn’t finish lining up our programs this afternoon. Draco and I got talking with Hagrid and time got away from me. But he promised to come and tell about the Forbidden Forest some time. That should be neat.”

“Give me an exact time when you’ll be back in the Common Room,” Cedric said. “Professor Sprout doesn’t like the first years wandering the halls alone near curfew.”

“I won’t be *wandering*—”

Cedric’s expression told Harry he was perilously close to sounding like a whinger.

Harry surrendered with a rueful smile. “Nine o’clock. Okay?”

“Okay—but if you’re not there, I’ll come after you.”



Neville heard the story from Draco and Harry without interruption. Hermione had remarks enough for two people.

Most of them centered around her main point: they must tell a teacher immediately. The only real question was: who?

This led to some lively debate. Neville had instantly agreed with Hermione. It was ridiculous to imagine that four first years could fight the Defense Against the Dark Arts professor, though Draco was not so sure that he and Harry couldn’t take on “the stuttering idiot.”

Then, too, the students all thought highly of their House



Heads. In the end, they agreed that Professor Snape was indeed the best choice: not only because he was Harry's proxy guardian, but because he himself had witnessed something peculiar between Harry and Professor Quirrell.

"Has he said what might have caused you to faint, Harry?" Hermione asked, fascinated by the subject.

It had taken some time for her to accept that a teacher might be a danger to the students, but Professor Quirrell was such a very bad teacher, Hermione was not sure he deserved any defense. It made sense though, that a teacher planning something so nefarious would undermine his students' education as well.

"I did not *faint*!" Harry protested. "I only—blackened out—just for a little bit."

Hermione pursed her lips, and Draco grinned knowingly at Harry. Neville was still pondering the awfulness of approaching Professor Snape.

"Will we all have to go, Harry?" he quavered. "I don't think he likes me much."

"Oh, Neville, that's not true," Hermione put in. "He's very concerned that you do well. That's why he's paired the two of us up for the rest of term. You're already doing very much better!"

"He looks at me like I'm some sort of—flobberworm," Neville moaned. "I start working on a potion and he raises his eyebrow at me—yes, just like that, Draco!—and my mind goes blank and I make mistakes!"

"I'll talk to him," Harry promised, a little impatiently, wanting to get back to his sensational news. "Do you think we dare wait until Saturday? I have a regular time to see him in the afternoon."

A silence, as the students tried to work out if Quirrell might make for the Stone at any moment. Finally Hermione said judiciously, "I think you *should* talk to him as soon as you can, Harry. You can talk to him without raising any suspicion. We should see him right away. We don't want Professor Quirrell to try to steal the Stone before we can notify the proper authorities!"



Harry stood waiting outside Professor Snape's quarters, thinking about how they would lay out their discovery to him. Harry wasn't sure it was a good idea. Before this summer, he had never had much luck telling adults about his troubles, and no adult had actually done anything that would help him.

But Professor Snape was different, certainly. He had rescued Harry from the Dursleys. Harry had a beautiful room at Privet Drive now thanks to him. Professor Snape had protected him and helped him, and shown him a brilliant new world. But what if the Professor was angry because Harry had gone where he wasn't supposed to be? Professor Snape had told him that whatever was going on with Professor Quirrell was none of his business, but Professor Snape didn't know the whole story!

Before he had a chance to change his mind, the Professor



appeared before them. Harry swallowed nervously under the intense black gaze.

"Mr. Potter—Mr Malfoy. Miss Granger—and Mr Longbottom attempting to skulk behind her. Is there some problem?"

Harry and Draco looked at each other, and Harry shuffled, eyes on the floor. Hermione gave him an impatient little nudge.

"Professor—I know you told me not to worry about things, but we really think you need to know about something—"

Impulsively, Hermione burst out, "Professor—the Philosopher's Stone is here at Hogwarts!"

With this electric pronouncement, the students looked up beseechingly at Snape, who stared back them in shock.

Harry added, "That was what Hagrid took out of the vault that day we were at Diagon Alley. And Professor Quirrell is after it—we think," he faltered, seeing the look on Professor Snape's face.

"One moment," Snape said, and strode away, opening the door to his bedroom and slamming it behind him. He stood there some minutes, not knowing if he would burst out laughing or start tearing his hair. He took a deep breath, drew himself up, and stalked back out to hear what Harry and his companions had got themselves into.



## CHAPTER 9

**AFTER FORCING** himself into a semblance of calm and hearing the children out, Snape sat them down, gave them some of his excellent hot chocolate laced with a Calming Potion, and told them to say nothing to *anyone* of their conversation.

"I need to think about this," he said tersely.

"We need to *do* something!" Harry contradicted, a little wildly. "Professor Quirrell might be getting the Stone right now!"

"Drink your chocolate, Harry," Snape

managed to make himself sound soothing. "I promise to give this my full attention. It would be impossible for Quirrell to get the Stone tonight or anytime soon. It is well-protected with a variety of safeguards, one of which was designed by myself."

"What kinds of safeguards?" Hermione and Draco asked simultaneously. They glared at each other, blushing.

"Ah," smirked Snape. "Great minds think alike, it seems. I am not going to tell you, for obvious reasons. The less you know about them, the safer the Stone is."

He waved his hand, dismissing their indignant protests.





182

183

“Attempt to believe that you know less of magic than I. If Quirrell thought you knew about all the challenges, he might find a way to get the information unbeknownst to you.” With a frown, he said slowly. “For that reason, I suggest that you make it a practice never to look Quirrell in the eye. Not directly.”

“I don’t, anyway,” Harry agreed, enjoying his drink. “Whenever I look him in the eye it makes my scar hurt.”

“Really?” Draco asked. “I didn’t know that. Why do you suppose it does that?”

“Dunno. Have you figured anything out, Professor?”

He was too tired to lie. “Yes,” Snape said. “And I don’t want you to tell anyone else that bit of information, if you please. You lot,” he said, fixing each student in turn with a black and menacing stare, “say *nothing* of it. Not to your housemates. Not,” he said sternly to Draco, “to your parents. Tell no one.” He noticed Neville’s uneasy shuffling, and remarked caustically, “You’re very quiet, Mr Longbottom. Would you care to share your thoughts?”

Neville glanced up at him and shook his head quickly.

“I insist,” Snape said coldly.

“Well—” Neville ventured timidly, “there’s a lot more here than meets the eye. My Gran always says that, but I reckon this time it’s true.”

“Five points to Gryffindor,” Snape drawled. “Don’t look so gob-smacked, Mr Longbottom. I am awarding you these points in order that you remember that you are absolutely right. It is immensely



important that nothing gets out that could be of use to Quirrell.”

Hermione wondered. “Why doesn’t Professor Dumbledore just send him away?”

“Why do you think, Miss Granger?”

Draco squinted shrewdly over his cup. “Dumbledore wants to keep an eye on him. He wants to know what he’s up to.”

“But,” Harry objected, “Professor Dumbledore wouldn’t care what he’s up to if he sent him away so he couldn’t get the Stone.”

“Whatever the reason,” Snape told them, “it is of the greatest importance that you say *nothing* about any of this to *anyone*. Don’t even think about it when Professor Quirrell is near.”

It was on the tip of his tongue to include Dumbledore in his warning, but that might be too alarming to the children. Besides, Dumbledore was unlikely to come in contact with them. He was not exactly a “hands-on” Headmaster, at least in the sense of spending much time with the students, other than at meals. Quirrell was a greater threat, and it was enough that the children be warned against him.

“I think it’s time for all of you to be safely home in your Common Rooms. You look about to fall asleep.” He took the cup that threatened to fall from Neville’s relaxing grip, and said, “Do I have your promise not to divulge these very important secrets?”

They were alert at that, giving him eager assurances. Snape believed Longbottom, and the girl, too, for the most part. He had a feeling that Draco would keep his word unless he felt

his father urgently needed to know something. And Harry—

He sighed, seeing the boy’s thoughtful frown. Harry had so little experience trusting the adults in his life. Snape believed he had made real headway with the boy, but he sensed that if Harry thought for moment that Snape could not adequately protect the Stone or that he, Harry, was imperatively called upon to step in, there would be trouble. Serious trouble. Somehow he must allay Harry’s anxieties, and he would not do it by patting the boy on the head and telling him that all was well. That would make Harry instantly suspicious that his concerns were being dismissed, and then he would cease to confide in Snape and simply go his own way. That could not be permitted to happen.

“I shall hold you all to your word. There is much at stake.” Snape told them gravely. “And now, the hour is late. Talk about this amongst yourselves if you must, but be *discreet*. Do you all understand the word?”

A brief, indignant ruffling, and some rueful smiles. Snape hustled the children away, nodding impatiently at their thanks for the chocolate, giving Harry’s shoulder an attempt at a reassuring squeeze. Slytherin and Hufflepuff were in different parts of the dungeons, but Harry and Draco were soon bound for their dormitories and some needed rest.

Longbottom gallantly declared that he would see Miss Granger safe to Ravenclaw Tower before returning to Gryffindor. Snape grunted ironic approval, and watched them as they



departed down the corridor. The Granger girl waved a farewell.

"Thank you, Professor Snape. Sleep well!"

Snape grunted again in response. He knew that sleep would be impossible for him until he dealt with the crisis at hand. He hurried back to his quarters, deep in thought. As soon as the door closed, Snape stalked over to his fireplace.

"Minerva!"



"Less than *three weeks*, Minerva," Snape hissed, his robe whipping around him as he paced her quarters. "Less than three weeks into term and a quartet of first years has not only deduced the presence of the Philosopher's Stone, but they have divined that Quirrell is a threat to it."

"They came to you?"

"Indeed they did—their innocent little faces full of concern for my adult stupidity. I was informed of the presence of the Stone. I was informed that Professor Quirrell is not what he seems to be. I was further informed that the threat on the third floor corridor is a Cerberus named Fluffy, which is guarding a trapdoor, presumably the door that leads to the Stone. Less than three weeks."

"What did you say to them?" Under her breath, she muttered, "*Fluffy?*"

"I told them part of the truth. What else is to be done? I suppose I could obliviate them—and Dumbledore might prefer that solu-

tion, but that would not prevent them coming to the same conclusion eventually, and I do not wish to oblivate Harry. Obliviations are dangerous, and never work exactly as they are supposed to. I think what we will have to do is accept that these children know something of what is going on, and include them in our plans."

"But the danger, Severus! A Cerberus on the third floor. It's a wonder the Weasley twins haven't already been devoured!"

"They are in danger anyway, because of Dumbledore's mad scheme." He sneered. "Hagrid must have been enchanted to have an excuse to foist such a monster on Hogwarts."

"Sometimes I wonder about him, too." Minerva agreed. "A Cerberus! I think I have something about them here." She studied the contents of her bookshelves, and pulled out a heavy volume. Taking it over to her desk, she paged through it, murmuring, "Calypso—Centaur—Cerberus! There's quite a bit here," she told Snape cheerfully. "They're fond of music. Did you know that?"

Snape refused to admit that he did not. He had actually never seen a Cerberus himself, and was rather curious about it.

"Perhaps it would be just as well if you did not lend that volume to Quirrell."

"I never lend books," she answered absently. "You know that. Not even to Albus. *Epecially* not to Albus."

Snape smirked. One Christmas, after a few drinks, Minerva had told the story of her precious copy of the Ogham Book of Ballymore, its pages stuck together with a vile yellow substance



that Minerva suspected was melted lemon sherbets.

The runic connection struck him. Perhaps this was the right moment to see if he could surprise her. He said, "Speaking of Ancient Runes, Lucius Malfoy is quite impressed that Harry's scar is in the shape of a Rune—Sygel, I think he said. He called Harry a Child of Destiny. Pompous arse. I'm surprised you hadn't noticed it."

Minerva said nothing, but pursed her lips and peered at him inscrutably over the rims of her spectacles.

Snape's voice rose slightly. "Am I to surmise that you *did* notice the significance of Harry's scar, but have chosen not to give me this bit of useful information?"

Minerva shook her head. "It's really not something of which I could speak freely—"

"Oh, sod your super-secret witch lore!"

"Watch your tongue with me, my lad!" Minerva snapped back. "It would have been just as well if no one had spotted that Harry's scar was a rune, but now that you know, you can see that news of it would hardly make Harry's life easier."

"Especially that particular rune, I take it!"

"Yes," she said shortly. "It's a powerful sign, but it's open to all sort of interpretations."

"Well," Snape said dryly, "Lucius Malfoy has interpreted it to mean that Harry Potter is destined to be the Next Big Thing. The Dark Lord is so very out-of-date—so—so—*Eighties*."

Minerva actually cackled. "Well, that's one problem solved.

No wonder Harry spends so much time with Draco Malfoy. I would have thought Draco would put him off, but the boy is behaving better than I expected. Harry's mother's protection seems to have wider implications than I would have dreamed."

"It's not perfect, though," Snape told her.

On impulse, he decided to confide in Minerva. With her knowledge of Old Magic, she might have some helpful insights. "Something was left over that night. I need to tell you something very serious about Harry, and I must have your word that you will not tell Albus. He might take it very badly."

After a moment's thought, Minerva gave her word, waiting in suspense. Snape did not see any reason to dance away from the truth.

"Harry's scar is tainted with Dark Magic. Though that rune of Lucius—and yours—might have sealed it in, it's leaked a bit."

"Dark Magic from the Killing Curse?"

"Possibly. As you can imagine, it's a unique situation. Have you ever heard of a—horcrux?"

Minerva frowned, searching her memory. She shook her head.

Heavily, Snape continued, "It's the foulest of Dark Magic. There is little written about it, but my understanding is that a wizard seeking immortality tears off a shred of his soul during a murder ritual and deposits it in a receptacle of some sort. As long as the soul shard is safe, the wizard cannot be truly killed."

"Oh!" Minerva said, her brow clearing, "Like Koshchei the



Deathless! I remember that old legend. The needle in the egg and the egg in the sparrow—or whatever it was. What has that to do with Harry?”

“I think that the bit of Dark Magic in Harry’s scar is in fact a piece of the Dark Lord’s soul.”

Minerva gasped, her mouth open like a fish.

Then she scowled and answered back with fierce indignation. “I don’t believe it! Harry is nothing like that—that—”

“I didn’t say he was! The shard is sealed away for the most part, but there is evidence that it relates to the Dark Lord.”

“All right.” She poured a whisky for herself and another for Snape and sat down, her jaw set to endure the bad news. “What evidence?”

“Harry is a parselmouth.”

Minerva looked at him in amazement. “And just when were you planning on sharing *that* bit of news? How dare you accuse me of keeping secrets? Have you witnessed this?”

“No. The boy told me himself, quite innocently, when we first met. It was one of the ways he understood that he had magical powers. A story about chatting up a snake at the zoo one day. I simply cautioned him to keep that to himself. I’ve never asked him to show me this ability—” he considered the matter “—though perhaps I should.”

“Perhaps you should!” Minerva rejoined tartly. “I’ll believe it when I see it. What else do you have that isn’t hearsay?”

“Something very serious indeed. All right. When he met Quirrell at the Leaky Cauldron, as I told you, Harry clutched his scar and fainted.”

“But that might mean—”

“—And,” Snape interrupted her, “I did not tell you at the time, but when I touched Harry’s scar, I felt a—tingle—in my Dark Mark.”

There was a long silence, broken only by the crackling of the fire and the sound of glass against wood after Minerva downed her whisky in a single swallow. She poured herself another. Finally, she said, “Do you think he meant to do it?”

“No. I don’t think he meant to give Harry a bit of himself at all. It doesn’t make sense to me. It is possible, however, that he went to the Potters that night with the intention of using their murders to create a horcrux. There—was a prophecy about the Dark Lord, and that he was in danger from a child born in the seventh month.”

He studied Minerva’s startled expression. After a moment it changed to one of sudden illumination. She sighed as if understanding something for the first time.

Grimly, she only said, “Go on.”

“The Dark Lord believed that the child was Harry. Albus obviously believes it, too. It fits, as far as I know, since I only know the first two lines.”

“—which are—?” she inquired with hint of acid.

“*‘The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches...Born to those who have thrice defied him, born*



as the seventh month dies...’”

“What thundering rubbish!” Minerva hissed under her breath. “All this fash for a *prophecy*!”

“But it does fit, I’m afraid. He would have taken real joy in using a child of prophecy as a tool to give himself immortality. He must have brought an object with him to bespell, but we may never know what that was. Apparently, the ritual went wrong—it is obviously a very difficult one—and the Dark Lord was destroyed and the shard he intended for the horcrux went awry and hit the boy. His mother’s protection saved the child from both Killing Curse and largely from the soul shard, locking it away and sealing it with that rune. Nonetheless, a horcrux of a sort was created, and it kept the Dark Lord’s soul from moving on. That’s one scenario I’ve come up with. I’ve also considered that it was completely an accident and that the Dark Lord’s soul was already compromised by his many murders.”

“—And his soul fell to bits, with a portion hitting Harry and the rest slinking off to plot his return,” Minerva finished impatiently. “I don’t find that convincing. It’s too convenient. That horrible creature was all about grand schemes. I can well imagine him dreaming up something so disgusting—making use of a child’s death! But he wasn’t as clever as he fancied himself!” she added tartly. She thought a little longer. “If Albus is right, and he’s trying to find a way back, do you think he knows about Harry—about that bit of soul, I mean?”

Snape shuddered. The thought made him ill. “I really, really, hope not. I see no reason to believe so. If Harry were connected to the Dark Lord’s consciousness, he would have had dreams, visions—perhaps direct contact. He has told me nothing of the sort. His behavior in no way resembles the Dark Lord’s. There is only the tenuous connection between the Dark Lord’s mark and his scar. And his discomfort in the presence of Quirrell—specifically when Quirrell looks in his eyes. Which could mean—”

He stopped. What it truly meant became clear to him at last, inescapably logical. Minerva looked up at him, pale and frightened. He suspected he looked rather frightened himself.

“You don’t think—” Minerva whispered. “He’s *here*? That monster is *here* and he’s teaching the children!”

“You’d think he’d be a better Defense teacher,” Snape muttered bitterly.

“Is that Quirinius at all? Could it be—”

“This is—extraordinary,” Snape said, shaking his head. “I believe it’s a genuine possession. Some of Quirinius is still there, but somehow the Dark Lord has got his claws into him.”

“Could the fact he made this—horcrux—explain it? How a soul can survive and inhabit another’s body?” She thought a little more, and asked, “Can Quirinius be saved?”

“Albus thinks not. I did not understand earlier when we were speaking of Quirrell that Albus has already determined that it is a case of possession. He must believe it to be a volun-



tary one. He spoke of Quirrell as doomed.”

Minerva lurched to her feet, hands twitching, “Looking very sad, and shaking his head more in sorrow than anger, I’ll warrant! Well, I won’t believe it until I see proof of it for myself! How does he *know* it was voluntary? Was he there?” She bustled back and forth, thinking hard. “Look here, Severus: there’s work to be done! We must get that creature out of Quirinius—out of Hogwarts—out of Harry!—out of the world! What is Albus thinking? Has he gone senile? Is he asleep?”

Snape was thinking himself. “He mentioned a plan to contain the Dark Lord. It must have something to do with those defenses we’ve been putting together.”

“Well, you and I are going to have a hard look at those so-called ‘defenses.’ Albus can’t be serious! A chess-game? What use it that?”

“A chess-game?” Snape asked, distracted. “I made a logic puzzle.” Seeing her fuming, he said, “Albus spoke of keeping the Dark Lord’s attention fixed on the Stone rather than going off and rallying his old followers—and perhaps finding other—more *practical*—ways to regain his form.”

Minerva looked at herself in her mirror, her face bleak. She was casting off the most central tenet of her life: her reliance on Albus Dumbledore. “Is the Stone he showed us even real? Is that just a game as well? Is this all smoke and mirrors with nothing solid to depend upon?”

“I don’t know. We’ll find out. I agree that we should have

a look at Albus’ vaunted defenses, starting with Fluffy. We’ll have to be discreet.”

“Of course. And we must keep the children safe, above all. No matter how brilliant Albus fancies his schemes,” she added, utterly disillusioned.

Snape bade her goodnight. Minerva had not moved, but was still studying herself in the mirror, as if looking for answers. Snape knew she needed time to think, and left without another word.

He went immediately to his desk, readied a quill, and began writing a letter. How often had he dreamed of a scholarly correspondence with this great man! He had not, however, imagined writing on such a subject, or with such a grim purpose.

*Worthy Grand Master Flamel,*

*I am the Potions Master of Hogwarts, where the extraordinary item of your devising may be in more danger—and a greater danger to others—than perhaps our Headmaster has led you to believe. Having heard of your love of privacy, I would not force my acquaintance upon you were the situation not of the gravest nature...*





“—and a bar of Honeyduke’s Finest for each of my favourite firsties,” Cedric said, doling out the precious treats at the Hufflepuff table.

“You’re the best, Cedric!” Justin said, busily unwrapping his own keepsake of Hogsmeade village.

A flurry of heartfelt thanks followed, and then ecstatic moans.

“So tell us about Hogsmeade, Cedric,” said Harry. “What’s it like, really?”

Cedric nibbled a licorice whip. “Like any other village, I suppose.” He smiled mischievously. “That is, if it’s an all-magical village.”

“And that means it’s unique,” Sally nodded, breaking off a small piece of her chocolate bar. “What?” she asked Hannah. “I’m going to save the rest for later. *Anyhow*—I want to know about all the shops. I hear there’s a tearoom there, kept by a witch, where students go on dates—”

“Madam Puddifoot’s,” Ernie groaned. “Oh, spare us!”

“I passed by it,” Cedric admitted. “It’s very—pink.”

“So you passed by it—quickly, I hope,” said Justin. “And then you moved on to greener pastures.”

“There’s a splendid quidditch shop, where I found a better pair of gloves. A bookshop, a stationer’s—all the sorts of things a village hard by a school would want to stock. Two pubs. The Three Broomsticks is the one to go to.”

“Is it much like the Leaky Cauldron?” Harry asked. The Leaky Cauldron was the only pub he had ever visited, and

thus the yardstick by which he measured all others.

Cedric frowned. “Nicer, I’d say. Cozier. *Much* cleaner. Madam Rosmerta, who owns the place, is a quite a looker. It’s a place for wizards and witches and nobody else. It feels—I don’t know—*safe*. You know how just about anybody might stroll up to the bar at the Leaky Cauldron—hags, dark wizards—even muggles, now and then”

The six first-year Hufflepuffs nodded gravely, even though this was news to most of them.

“Maybe it’s just London itself,” Cedric mused, half to himself. “There’s an edge about the Leaky Cauldron. It’s a strange place: anything could happen. There’s a bit of danger in the air. It’s not a bit like that at the Three Broomsticks. It’s hard to imagine anything bad happening there. And the butterbeer is first-rate!”

“I heard about the other pub in Hogsmeade,” Susan sniffed. “The Hog’s Head. Auntie says *that* place is dodgy enough!”

“Could be, I reckon. I didn’t stop. Saw the fellow who runs the place, though, and he is a strange sort, if you like.”

“Did you see the Shrieking Shack?” Hannah asked. She told Sally, “It’s supposed to be the most haunted place in Britain. It’s creepy and dilapidated, and I heard that if you get too close, you hear the most horrible screams.”

“It was a right shambles,” Cedric agreed. “I didn’t *hear* any screaming, mind you.”

“I can’t believe we have to wait a whole two years until we



can go to Hogsmeade.” Susan said indignantly. “I think it’s just wicked to tantalise us so!”

“At least we have the Explorers’ meeting to look forward to,” Ernie comforted her. “What’s for tea tomorrow, Susan?”

“I thought we’d have something that went along with the farm theme,” Susan told them, her face brightening. “Pasties and Devonshire splits, Farmhouse Fruitcake, and the little biscuits they make in Tinworth called Goblins’ Gold.”

Ernie was pleased to display his knowledge. For the edification of the muggle-raised, he explained. “Obviously, they’re not really made of gold. They’re very crisp, though, and very cheesy. It’s the cheese that gives them their yellow colour.”

Cedric turned a mock-sowl on Susan. In a high, very Susanish voice, he complained, “I think its just wicked to tantalise a poor, deprived third-year so!”

Susan made a face at him. Hannah said eagerly, “You should come to a meeting and give a presentation. Hagrid’s going to give one, so why shouldn’t you? You could talk about quidditch!”

Cedric thought about it. “I could tell you about the World Cup,” he considered. “The last one was in Spain. Quite a lark, meeting wizards and witches from all over the world. I still have the pictures and some of the things I bought.”

“Sounds like fun,” Justin said, “I went to the Olympics in Korea. It was like the whole world was there.”

Then he had to explain the Olympics to the wizardborn,

who were amazed at the variety of events presented.

“Like a World Cup and a dueling competition and flying races all in one!” Ernie said. “I wouldn’t know what to look at first. Do they have these Olympics often?”

There was more talk. Eventually, Cedric had to go to practice, and once he was out of sight Susan immediately asked Harry, “Have you found out anything more about that *thing*?”

“What thing?” Harry teased.

She poked him. “You know. That *thing* on the third floor!”

Everyone craned in as Harry spoke softly. “I did find out a bit about it. Stay far away from there: it’s dangerous. I had to tell Professor Snape about it. He said it’s a very important secret and that we mustn’t talk to anyone about it, and that we shouldn’t even *think* about it. He’s working on it.”

“Well, then,” Hannah said comfortably, “there you are. Nothing for us to worry about.”

“I suppose so,” Susan worried, “but some people are so nosy and careless. If anyone were to be hurt—”

“Nobody’s going to get hurt as long as they don’t go anywhere near there,” Harry said firmly. “If we see anyone headed there, we should stop them.”

“Unless they’re a professor,” Ernie added practically.

“Right,” Harry agreed. “Unless they’re a professor.” *And then I’ll just watch them*, he decided to himself. *Very carefully.*



## CHAPTER 10

**B**ETWEEN THEM, Snape and McGonagall raised enough questions about the safety of the Stone that Dumbledore suggested that they test the defenses for themselves. They had not told him what the children had discovered, but they said enough that the headmaster understood he could not dismiss their concerns without some concrete reassurances.

"Go this Friday evening, if you like. I'll see that everything is in place."

"Everything *ought* to be in place already," Minerva pointed out.

Dumbledore smiled faintly. "It will all be ready when needed. I think it will set your minds at rest to see how very thoroughly the Stone is defended against those who would steal it for themselves."



"The Cerberus must be just through these doors," Minerva speculated. She felt carefully in her right pocket for a tiny object.

"Just as long as you don't require me to sing," Snape grunted.

"But Severus," Minerva protested, a glint in her eye, "You have

a lovely voice! I shall never forget that Christmas when you and Albus and Elphias Doge regaled us with *The Wintersday Carol*."

"I have not drunk a half a bottle of firewhisky at a sitting since, and thus I'm *not* singing," Snape said grimly. "If that's your plan, you can just—"

"Shhh!" she hushed him.

Though the narrow crack she tossed a little gold box with a whispered charm. The glittering cube spun rapidly, six feet above the stone floor. There was a growl and a tentative snap, and the rattling of chains as the beast crept forward.

With a faint smile, Minerva pointed to a corner, and murmured "*Engorgio! Harmonia mysteria!*"

Snape started as an organ's high, reedy sonority spilled out of the room. The opening figure was repeated, going down, octave by octave, to the lowest vibrating register, and then worked its way up in a massive arpeggio. At the top, ominous minor chords crashed out. The Cerberus flinched, all six eyes bulging. A pause, and then the chords broke into sonic filigree, fluttering and fluting.

Snape peered around the door. A pipe organ had installed itself in a corner of the room. The Cerberus was transfixed by the sounds, standing rigid with fascination. Snape glanced back at Minerva, who was nodding with satisfaction. The organ played on, and gradually the Cerberus subsided into blissful, drooling, snoring sleep.



"The Toccata and Fugue in d minor?" Snape asked. "Isn't that a bit of overkill?"

"If a thing's worth doing—"

"Oh, spare me!"

Snape edged past the massive bulk, nose twitching at the odor of the creature's breath. Minerva appeared quite at her ease, and trotted ahead, raising the trapdoor with a wave of her wand. She looked down, her brow knitting in thought. Snape looked over her shoulder. Darkness yawned below them. There were neither steps nor ladder. There was not even a hint of where the bottom might be. Minerva glanced about and summoned a handful of straw. With a whisper, an ethereal spiral staircase assembled itself.

Snape waved her ahead. "Age before beauty."

She only smiled. "Pearls before swine."

She stepped onto a riser, which circled downwards like a leaf in a whirlpool. Snape was on another riser himself in a moment, his wand out and a bright "Lumos" reflecting on stone. Above them the sounds of the organ echoed more and more faintly. There was a faint "thump," and the staircase was stopped by something soft. Their lighted wands showed clearly what was under their feet.

"Ah, Pomona!" Snape sighed. "Devils Snare."

Instantly he called forth an intense light, and the branches slithered away out of their path.

"Not a very daunting barrier," Minerva sniffed, "Pomona must have been afraid of hurting someone."

"I daresay it would stop a first year," Snape sneered. "Or a *muggle*."

A stone passageway loomed ahead, sloping downwards, and they moved along it, listening for any threats. There was only the trickle of water, a faint thread of organ music, and the distant whisper of a draught in the hall. Not too much farther on, the passage opened into a brilliantly lit room, its ceiling arching high above them.

It was full of small, jewel-bright birds, fluttering and tumbling as they flew about the room. On the opposite side of the chamber was a heavy wooden door with a massive bronze handle and lock.

"Very pretty," Minerva said, with a nod to the birds. "Obviously Filius' work."

"Do you think he was down here?" Snape wondered.

"Well, *I* wasn't," Minerva pointed out. "I merely gave a template—actually a shrunken version of the real barrier. I dare say Filius made something similar, and Albus installed it. Yes, very pretty—"

Snape eyed the birds warily. "They don't *look* dangerous, but perhaps it would be best to be prepared."

He let Minerva move ahead, while he watched the birds, his wand out to defend them both if necessary. On the other side of the room, Minerva attempted to charm the door open, but with no success.



"That's odd." She spoke another command, more sharply this time.

Snape was studying the glittering little birds. His eyes roamed the chamber for anything hazardous and stopped at the sight of "Broomsticks!" he said. "What do you suppose—?"

His eyes followed the birds and then he understood.

"Keys!"

"What?"

"They're not birds, they're keys!"

"Oh! Very clever. Well done, Severus. So they are. We must simply summon the key to this door. *Accio!*"

Nothing happened. Minerva huffed with annoyance. "Bespelled to resist a general summoning. There's nothing for it, then."

She summoned a broomstick instead, and was in the air in a flash.

"Gryffindors," Snape muttered.

He hated using a broomstick. He had never been any good as a boy, and had learned some measure of skill by hard, unrelenting work. It had never been "fun" for him. Nonetheless, everyone else, from the Malfoys to Minerva McGonagall, was mad over broomsticks. Snape launched himself after the Deputy Headmistress with hardly a moment's hesitation.

He hissed as a swarm of the winged menaces buzzed around him. One tangled in his hair. Snape grabbed at it and threw it away, wincing. They wove through a whirl of rainbow feathers.

How was he to know which one they needed?

"There!" shouted Minerva, pointing ahead, "The big one with bright blue feathers! It matches the size of the lock!"

Trying to locate the one out of the many proved difficult. They caught keys with yellow feathers, keys with green feathers, and then, as they grew more crafty, keys with feathers of baby blue and teal and indigo. Snape glimpsed their quarry for a moment, and nearly had it. It got away from them, speeding ahead, vanishing in a cloud of its brethren.

McGonagall soared up, trying to look at the situation from above. Snape doggedly twisted through the mass of them, wishing he had tied his hair back. Minerva gave a shriek of triumph and dove. Feathers spiraled crazily around her, and suddenly she was nearly on Snape. Surprised, he tried to get out of her way, and was startled to feel her hand brush his back.

"Got it!" she cried. "It was sitting bold as you please on the back of your robes!"

The key fluttered defiantly in her grasp. "None of that, now," she chided it.

She landed gracefully, and walked quickly to the door. Snape was behind, wand out. Minerva turned the key in the lock and the door swung open on darkness.

As they stepped through, light flooded the room, and they found themselves on the edge of huge chessboard, on the black side. The chessmen were taller than they. Opposing them, far





206

away across the black-and-white floor, were the white pieces. Snape was impressed at the monumental scale.

"Your work, then?" he asked.

"Yes," she replied, looking about with pleasure. "Very nice, if I say so myself. Bespelled to play a good game, too."

"Shall I take a nap while you play against yourself?"

"What nonsense!" Minerva flicked her wand and murmured a password, and the entire board floated up to the ceiling. "We haven't time for games. Come along, Severus."

He followed along behind her, glancing up warily at the massive stone square over their heads. They reached the far side and Minerva turned and flicked her wand again.

The chessboard descended behind them, very slowly, and crunched into repose, just as it had been a moment before. Not even the knights' swords quivered.

*Quirrell was a fairly good chess player. I have no idea about the Dark Lord,* Snape mused. It was impossible to imagine the Dark Lord playing a game. Snape had never seen him require recreation of any kind—unless one considered torture and murder recreation. There had always been an inhuman quality there—or perhaps it was more accurate to say a *lack* of human qualities. Now that he knew what the Dark Lord was willing to do to himself, it was easy in retrospect to perceive his—incompleteness. He was, quite literally, not all there. It explained so much, and it made Snape feel like a great fool

207



not to have seen it before.

Another passageway. Snape sighed. He pushed the door open for Minerva.

Something was waiting for them on the other side.

*Crash!*

An immense club slammed into the wall, inches from Minerva's head. She ducked out of the way, gasping, her wand tracking the threat. Snape pushed forward, his nostrils full of the reek of troll.

"*Stupefy*," he roared, and heard Minerva's simultaneous hex.

A hideously comical look of astonishment, as the troll's jaw dropped open, it sagged to its knees, and then keeled over onto its face. There was a crunch. Snape's nose twitched in sympathy.

"Quirinius' challenge, I believe," Minerva considered, dusting off her robes. "He's always said he had a way with them."

Snape only snorted. Of all the things on Earth to boast of, "*I have a way with trolls*," had always struck him as rather pathetic. If Quirrell had used it as a pick-up line with witches, he was definitely stupid enough to let himself be possessed by the Dark Lord.

"Another creature that has no business in Hogwarts," Minerva muttered to herself. "This is intolerable!"

Another door was before them, and they opened it slowly, their wands ready for any more unpleasant surprises. Inside the chamber, Snape recognized the challenge at once.

"It's mine," he told Minerva. "Come on."

They stepped over the threshold, and immediately the doorway was filled with purple flames. Minerva started and then looked at the next doorway, where black flames had sprung up, barring the way. Snape was very proud of these flames. The purple had been a secret joke, based on Dumbledore's insufferable finery. The black flames had been difficult to perfect, but they were extremely impressive in this setting. He led Minerva to the table in the center of the room: a table where seven differently-shaped bottles were waiting. He smirked at her.

"Potions!" she muttered, "Why does it have to be Potions?"

She picked up the roll of parchment by the bottles and read the puzzle. "A poet, too! Who would have imagined? Did Albus write this?"

"He did not!" Snape answered, a little hotly. "He absolutely did not! I wrote it all myself, brewed all the potions, charmed the flames. I did it all myself, and no one helped me!"

Minerva studied the puzzle again, and said under breath, "We really, really, do not have time for games!"

"You don't know the answer, do you?" Snape asked smugly.

She narrowed her eyes at him, rather vexed. "In *time*, I've no doubt I could reason it out. I did not require you to play my game. In *courtesy*, I expect not to be obliged to play yours."

"Oh, very well." Still smirking, he passed her the smallest bottle. "A swallow will do."



She swallowed, after a wary glance at him. "Not bad at all."  
"My own creation. Hagrid found that the blackberries were especially good this year." He took a swallow himself. "Quite acceptable, if I say so myself. Two of the other bottles hold some nettle wine—also of my own making. It's not bad either."

The black flames died down with a whisper.

"And now, let's see what Albus has concocted for the grand finale."

It was a high, but not particularly large chamber: windowless, and lit by ever-burning candles in tall candelabra of black wrought iron. There was only one other furnishing in the room: a tall cheval looking-glass propped against the far wall. Very tall indeed, taller than Snape himself, it stood on two clawed feet of bronze ormolu, and the frame was an ornate work of carving and gold leaf, gleaming richly in the mellow light. Around the top of the frame was an inscription, incised in clear but ancient characters: ERISED STRA EHRU OYT UBE CAFRU OYT ON WOHSI.

"Have you seen this before?" Snape asked.

"Never." Minerva moved closer, her lips moving as she sounded out the strange words. "What language is that? None that I know—but perhaps—"

"Yes" Snape agreed "I believe it's—"

He stopped, stunned and transfixed by the reflection. He was not alone—nor was he standing beside Minerva McGonagall.

Lily was holding his hand.

His heart leaped with joy and dread. She was there beside him: alive, beautiful, unchanged by the years. Her bright hair moved with an unseen breeze. Her dimples flashed in a lovely smile. Harry was there too, smiling. And his. It was the same Harry, too. Perhaps the hair was slightly straighter, the nose a thought longer, but it was certainly Harry. It was also undeniably Harry Snape, not Harry Potter.

*How was this possible? Lily is dead.*

Snape moved closer to the mirror, his eyes drinking in the changing visions greedily. He had found the Philosopher's Stone. It was right there, right there in the mirror. It was his for the taking...

*He is brewing the Elixir of Life, there in the dungeons. It is perfectly real: Snape is following the well-known steps, approving of the care he is taking with the stirring and the judicious adding of the phoenix tears at the critical moment. Time-consuming, certainly, but not the most difficult potion he has ever brewed.*

*The next step is more complicated. He is sneaking out of Hogwarts with the potions, saying nothing to anyone. He is apparating to Godric's Hollow, to the cemetery of the kissing gate and the admirable old church, to the stone of white marble, to the grave of James and Lily Potter. He will destroy the last enemy, which is Death.*

*Removing the earth poses no problem for him at all. He has used a digging charm for years, retrieving curious roots, capturing burrowing insects for ingredients. Never on this scale, of*



course, but it is going well: the layer of sod removed neatly and set aside, the pile of earth growing taller. Snape puts more power into the charm and the pile grows faster, the yawning hole before him grows deeper. Such things take time, but he has all the time in the world to rescue Lily.

A smooth surface is emerging. The wood of her coffin, still shining, its varnished wood charmed impervious to the elements. All the earth is whisked away, and the coffin levitated up, up, up into the living world. Snape can see the edge of the other coffin in the grave and sneers. For James Potter, there will be no resurrection.

There are wards and charms to protect the dead. They pose no barrier to Snape, whose intentions are the purest. He clenches his jaw, knowing that the next few moments will be painful—yes—very painful and distressing, but they must be borne, and then the world will be changed.

The coffin lid is removed, and set gently aside. Lily is under the Sun once more.

She is still Lily yet. Her hair is as bright as ever. The dark yellow parchment-like skin has shrunk taut, her lips are black and withered. Her jaw has dropped open, turning her lovely smile into a macabre grin. The eyes are sunken far back into the skull. Preservation charms can only do so much, alas. The stink of decay is faint after eleven years, but it has permeated the inside of the coffin. She is an object of fear and horror, but she is still Lily.

Snape kneels by the side of the coffin, and pours the Elixir over the strong, white teeth, down into her throat, and waits.

The process is slow. Snape waits at the side of the coffin, while the sun moves across the sky. His knees are aching, and he shifts to a more comfortable position. This task will require all his patience.

The skin changes first, almost imperceptibly. Yes, the color is changing. Her hands, too: the claw-like fingers are swelling slightly, as natural fluids fill the tissues. Her eyes—how had he not noticed? — are changing, too, as the lids rise up in their sockets, supported by the resurgent eyes. The lips are plumping and turning rosy, the cheeks filling out, the whole body—Did her finger move?

Snape watches the hands for what might be hours, waiting for another hint of life. He casts a cleaning charm, and then a refreshing charm on Lily's robes. She must not be distressed by the smell of death. Was that a breath he heard? He glances up to see her eyelashes fluttering slightly. Her breast is moving now, a slight rise and fall. It takes time for the Elixir to rebuild and reconstruct, but it is infallible.

It is dawn at last: a ravishing sight. The clouds in the east are radiant peach and apricot, lined with silver and lilac and primrose. The light is soft, tender, even. And Lily opens her eyes.

"Severus?" He smiles down at her, love filling his heart to bursting. She smiles back.

"You've saved me. I thought I was dead. It was all darkness



and confusion. I couldn't find a way out. Where is Harry?"

"Harry is at Hogwarts and safe. We will go there now and see him."

"Oh, yes! Take me to Hogwarts," she whispers. "Take me home."

*Under the glorious colours of the rising sun, he takes her in his arms, and lifts her from the coffin. They embrace. Lily is kissing him: a perfect kiss. The vanquished coffin is vanished, the earth spelled back into the waiting cavity with a word, the sod laid seamlessly down. With another word, Lily's name disappears from the white marble. Lily takes his arm, without a backward glance at the grave, and they whirl away from this place forever.*

*Hogwarts welcomes them. They are at home in the dungeons. They are married in a flash of white and black and joy. They have always been married. Harry visits them in their quarters, as he has since he started regular studies at the school. Life is perfect, and has always been perfect. He will live with Lily for always and always...*

A shoulder jostled against his arm. It was not Lily. Snape frowned, the thread of daily reality disturbed.

*Lily is speaking to him*

Another interruption.

Snape scowled. This was most unwelcome. He turned to rebuke the interloper.

"Professor McGonagall? I did not hear you come in."

Minerva stared at him wildly, blue eyes red-rimmed.

"Severus? What are you doing here?"

Snape looked about him in confusion. They were in a windowless stone chamber, lit by candles, in front of a mirror — where Lily stands waiting.

"Severus?" Minerva gasped. Her hands went to her face, and she glanced fearfully at the mirror. "How long have we been here?"

He swayed, dizzy and disoriented. *No—I've got to get back to Lily—*

A lurch, and he stumbled against Minerva, knocking them both to the stone floor. She cried out in alarm and pain. Snape clutched at his elbow, grunting with the discomfort of tingling nerves.

"Lies," Minerva moaned. "All lies."

*Lies.* Snape gathered the shreds of reality about him, trembling with grief—with devastating loss—boundless sorrow. Lily had died to him once more, and this new passing was fresh and raw. He crawled to the wall and sat with his back to it, feeling as empty as a discarded cauldron.

He dared not look at the mirror, but longed to. Just another glance—the last—

"Severus," Minerva croaked, on her hands and knees. "We've got to get out of here. Don't look! Whatever it's showing you is a lie. It wants us to stay here forever and ever"

*—Always and always.*

He could not hear Mirror-Lily, but saw her mouth the words, smiling.



Minerva caught at his face, and made him look at her. “—until we die.”

Why was Minerva talking? He wanted to see Lily again. He wanted to see himself too: young, happy—almost handsome. That was the true reality—this was some terrible caricature of life.

Minerva’s face was wet with tears. No! She was in front of the mirror.

And then she slapped him. Hard.

“Severus. It’s a lie, whatever you saw. A filthy, mocking lie.”

She hit him again, and he realized that he was weeping, too.

“Now get up. We’re going to turn to the door and we’re going to walk out of here.”

They helped each other struggle up, their limbs stiff from too many hours in front of the mirror. Minerva nearly fell again, and Snape grabbed her arm and helped her out of the room. He thought of Lily, waiting...

He took a deep breath, and forced himself to walk on.

“What did you see, Minerva?” A silence.

“Never ask me.” she hissed. “Never ask me!”

They made their weary way back through the labyrinth without further speech.



Her quarters were closer. Snape felt he could not move another step when they entered. He threw himself into an arm-

chair gratefully, wondering if he would fall asleep right there.

“I’d offer you whisky, but it’s nearly daylight,” Minerva told him. “You will have to make do with tea.”

It was hot and strong and it helped. Snape swallowed it down, surprised at how thirsty he was, not even daring to think about potions. Tea was honest. Tea was safe.

“So now we know,” he said.

“Yes,” she said, after setting down her cup. “We know how Albus plans to trap the monster. I’m not sure it’s a perfect trap, but it nearly got me. If I had been alone—”

He gave a sharp nod. “Luckily we were together. I would have happily spent the rest of my life there.”

“Don’t!” she protested. “Don’t think about it! If it weren’t for He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, I would destroy that cursed thing today. *“I show not your face but your heart’s desire.”* What a monstrous thing to keep here in the school! What if a student were to find it?”

“It might not be so dangerous for a student,” Snape considered. “Presumably, a student would have less to regret, and their heart’s desire, whatever it might be, would be less absorbing.”

“You and I know,” she responded tartly, “that our students don’t have the perfectly blissful lives that Albus imagines them to have.”

He sighed, imagining what Harry might see reflected. He felt a brief, poignant pang of grief for the lost Harry Snape of the mirror. *Oh, my boy, my boy. Quite a wonderful lad.*



"As you say," he agreed, clearing his throat. "It's not the perfect trap. If there were any distractions, or another person in the chamber, he might be drawn away. Besides, if he remained there long enough, Quirrell would die, and presumably the Dark Lord's spirit would be released. Does Albus imagine that it would seek to enter the Mirror?"

"It's—possible." She blew out a breath. "The Stone is clearly in there—somehow. Very clever of Albus."

"I suppose. Is it clever *enough*?"

218



## CHAPTER 11

**D**UMBLEDORE was smug and unsurprised that Snape had been unable to lay hands on the Philosopher's Stone. However, he was both surprised and disappointed that Minerva McGonagall had failed.

She stared back at him unflinchingly. "I think, all things considered, that it is just as well," she remarked. "There is no reason I should actually have possession of the Stone. What is important is to make certain that it is beyond the reach of He-Who-Must-Not-Be Named."

"We are not satisfied that your measures will suffice," said Snape.

"Obviously, we must agree to disagree," Dumbledore replied soothingly.

The two of them left soon after, determined not to share their future plans with the Headmaster.

"Perhaps it's time to confide in Pomona and Filius," said Minerva.

"Possibly. They are no happier about the presence of the Stone than we."

219



"And after being required to create diversions, they might like to assist in creating a real trap."

Snape paused. "However—" He came to a stop, thinking it over. He had not heard from Flamel, and did not want to raise Minerva's hopes unduly by hinting that outside help was on the way. "I think it would be unwise to mention our concerns about Quirrell. Neither of them, however accomplished, is an expert in the Dark Arts."

"All right," Minerva agreed, "but I reserve the right to consult with them if we fail to find the solutions to our current predicament."

It was time for more research. Minerva quietly retreated to her own study and the books she would not and could not share with Snape.

Snape himself was deep in his edgier references: THE BOOK OF RAZIEL THE ANGEL, THE BOOK OF BAPHOMET, THE RED BOOK OF CARFAX ABBEY.

No one source had all the answers, but he was finding ideas here and there. A circle of copper wire and sea salt inlaid into the floor in front of the mirror would assist in keeping anyone looking into the mirror from attempting to move away. A mildly hallucinogenic potion could loosen the bond between a dominant spirit and its victim. That might be of some help in rescuing Quirrell, but would not expunge the shred of the Dark Lord from Harry.

The accidental horcrux in Harry, in fact, appeared to be the knottiest problem before them. Harry's youth posed a special

challenge. An exorcism at this particular age would destroy his magic and could conceivably kill him. As far as Snape could see, they would simply have to wait until Harry was older and stronger, and his magic was more developed and stable.

In the interim, they would attempt to divide Quirinius Quirrell from his fellow traveler. And they would attempt to make certain that the Dark Lord's look into the Mirror of Erised would last a lifetime—and beyond. Snape rubbed the bridge of his nose. The crabbed handwriting of the old volume before him was straining his eyes...

He wanted to study, to read, to research, to do *anything* but think about his experience before the Mirror of Erised. He had always found pleasure dwelling on his memories of Lily, and now he found he did not want to think about Lily at all. His mirror vision had been too disturbing—too ugly—and, of course, too absurd. He knew perfectly well that the Philosopher's Stone could not grant new life to the long-dead. Even the most exaggerated, unreliable sources never claimed that. It was a bizarre fantasy, bordering on necrophilia. The phantom of the Mirror did not behave in any way like the real Lily he had known. It was all a painful jumble, and he *would* read this book and not—"Severus?"

He looked up from the book, expecting Minerva in the fire. It was, instead, Charity Burbage, smiling at him, as she so often did these days.



"Was there something you wanted?" he asked, not entirely politely.

She smiled again, apparently dismissing his tone as normal for him. "May I come through?"

"If you must."

Charity seemed to feel that they had somehow "bonded." Ever since she had come to Hogwarts last year, she had tried to make friends with him. They were, after all, quite close in age. Charity had been a Hufflepuff two years ahead of him, and a prefect—a fair one. He recalled her intervening in a very disagreeable encounter with Potter & Company outside the Charms classroom. She had otherwise not made much of an impression on him during his school years. She was much podgier in his hazy memories, and with as unfortunate a complexion as his own had been in those days.

He doubted he had made much of an impression on her, either. With no classes in common and coming from different houses, there was little reason for them to interact. Her siblings were much younger than he, and he had not known them at all. She had informed him since her return that her brother had been three years behind him, and in Ravenclaw, and her little sister had just completed her first year in Hufflepuff when the whole family decamped to New Zealand immediately after Charity had finished school. There was yet another brother, he understood, who never attended Hogwarts at all.

Only Charity had returned to the mother country, and he suspected she was a little lonely and at loose ends without her family within easy reach.

Hence the attempt at making friends, he supposed. She seemed to have taken his involving her in Harry's club as an invitation to renew her efforts. He wondered if she expected to be offered refreshments. She was certainly dressed very nicely and smelled of high-quality Castile soap and a scent distilled from lime flowers, lemongrass, and—yes—a touch of plumeria. He wondered where she obtained the perfume. Plumeria was notoriously difficult to distill without destroying the delicacy of the fragrance. It was fresh, unfamiliar, and—not unpleasant.

More smiles. He gestured vaguely at a chair, and she seated herself at once, her scent wafting over with her movements.

"I hope Harry has told you how awfully well the club is going!"

"I have received that information from him. And from you, too—every day—in the staff room."

She laughed. "Yes. I have been going on about it, haven't I? I'm so excited about it. Last year was rather difficult, you see, with that ridiculous book and feeling my way. This club though—it's given me such hope and purpose. One of these days, the Governors will allow me to replace the textbook, and I'm preparing for it."

"You've found something better?"

She beamed. "I'm going to write it myself!"



He raised an inquiring brow, and let her prattle happily.

"Those wonderful children have given me no end of good ideas," she told him. "I still have to make certain they can pass their O.W.L.s and their N.E.W.T.s, so I'll have to go over the very wrong-headed and peculiar way the test questions are phrased, but considering how easy the actual material is, I'll have lots of time to teach them real things that young people actually want to know: food and fun and how to get about—and clothes and fashions and holidays. And I can sneak in a bit of politics and science along with it. I'm already sketching out a syllabus."

"In your copious spare time? I salute you."

"Thanks! But you know, my course load is nothing like yours, Severus. I don't know how you manage, really. I only have a section each of third through seventh years, and I've whole half-days to myself. I'm so glad about the club. Last year I hardly felt I was earning my pay!"

"How nice for you. I certainly earn mine."

"Oh—I know!" she sympathised. "It must be such a burden. And your duties as Head of House, too! You'd think that the Headmaster would hire additional staff for the core subjects so that you could concentrate on the gifted students in the later years."

Snape somewhat rearranged his opinion of the woman opposite him. His teaching schedule was extremely demanding—perhaps overly so. It was very perceptive of Charity to notice that. The stress of avoiding accidents, day in, day out,

took its toll. No other teacher at Hogwarts faced the difficulties that Snape himself did. It was part of the reason that his standards for his N.E.W.T. classes were so extremely high. If more students were to be permitted admission to them, he would have to break the sixth and seventh years into two sections each, which his schedule would not permit; or he would have insanely large classes in which he would teach potions of the greatest delicacy—and danger.

"Yes—well, you know Albus," he remarked carelessly. "The eternal optimist. His experience teaching Transfiguration doesn't really give him much understanding of my situation."

"Well, I think it's awful," she replied candidly. "And if anything went wrong, you'd be held responsible. Perhaps if you had an apprentice, he could take over some of the duties and teach the younger students."

"I've considered it, but I would have to train an apprentice, and that would take time as well."

"I hadn't thought of that. And of course, the parents might not like it if their children didn't have the best to start them out right."

Snape was much struck by her insight. She was, he acknowledged, an intelligent woman. Her book on adapting to the wizarding world was very well done. That she found the current text wanting was only proof of her good sense. And she was nice to Harry—very nice, in fact.

"I've made some wine lately—something of a hobby of



mine,” he said, abruptly changing the subject. “Would you care to sample some? Nettle or blackberry.”

“Oh—what fun! Yes, I’d love to. Blackberry, please.”

Snape owned a very nice set of cordial glasses: blue-stemmed, and rimmed and flourished with gold leaf. A tiny emerald was set into the side of each one to ward against poisoning. He was proud of the set, since it was nearly the only heirloom he had left from his mother’s family. His spinster Great-aunt Cornelia Ketteridge had paid the occasional visit—when she could—and would bring money and gifts, which had included this set of glasses. Snape barely remembered her, as she had died when he was five or six, but he cherished his precious copy of Beedle the Bard and his gobstones as relics of her kindness and goodwill. When she died, things at home had rapidly taken a turn for the worse.

He was pleased with Charity—very pleased with her generous and sensible remarks—and opened the cupboard that held these special glasses. The blackberry wine looked good in them, glowing richly purple against the gold designs.

She admired the colour, too, he saw. She sipped her drink carefully—thoughtfully—he was pleased to note. She did not gulp it like a savage swilling beer. She hummed with pleasure.

“This is marvelous.”

He set down with his own glass and broached a subject that had occasionally crossed his mind.

“Your hair.”

She looked up, nonplussed, one hand reaching up anxiously. “My hair? Is something wrong with it?”

“No—I mean—all those braids. They’re very interesting. Do they have some sort of arithmantic significance?”

“Well,” she said, blushing, “actually...”



Harry found that drawing an ellipse was far more difficult than drawing a circle.

In the Explorers’ room, behind a decorative screen, he was doing his best to reproduce a drawing in the manuscript Professor McGonagall had given him to copy last summer. Finn’s Window he had mastered. He had also learned about the other two Wonders of Finn the Enchanter. Professor McGonagall had told him that education was never wasted. His little copy was proving its worth now.

An ellipse was an oval, with two foci instead of one focus. With two pegs, a string, and a piece of chalk, Harry eventually managed to construct a very creditable Finn’s Eye. In the centre of the five concentric ellipses, a triangle held a figure of three connected characters. The Ogham letter that indicated “birch” also was the sign for sight. He added the flourishes, the little rhombus to the left, and then tapped it three times, whispering “*Nusquam occultus est, Finn!*”



He turned slowly, three times widdershins, and then tapped it again, saying the same words.

Three more turns, another incantation, and the spell was done. He held his breath.

A trembling pause, a curious hissing noise, and then a little round hole, where the pupil of the eye would be, drilled its way through the wall. A thin beam of blue light sparked dancing motes of dust and shone a white circle on the screen hiding Harry from the rest of the Explorers' Room. Looking through the hole, he found he could see the entire hall clearly, far better than he could have with a simple peephole drilled into the wall.

Professor McGonagall might approve of his interest in independent study, but he doubted she would approve of his purpose, which was to spy on the staircase leading to the third floor corridor.

Slinking out of the door, he grinned at the sight of the pristine corridor wall. Just as the manuscript promised, the Eye was invisible from the other side.

He couldn't possibly be here all the time—nor had Professor McGonagall given permission to share these family spells with anyone else. He had already done too much that might put his new friends in danger. The greatest problem was to get away by himself. His friends were so very *friendly*, after all. They actually liked spending time with him! The solution had come to him last night.

"Muffy!" he called softly.





The little female elf was before him, pale eyes huge and worshipful.

“What can Muffy do for Little Master Harry?”

“Muffy! I’m Harry—just Harry! Just like before school started!”

The eyes, blinked, once, twice. Harry sighed, knowing that “Just Harry” was a concept that caused Muffy extreme discomfort. What was not beyond her, however, was the favor he next asked.

“Muffy will help Little Master Harry,” the house elf responded eagerly to his request. “Muffy’s friends will help, too.”

“I really appreciate it, Muffy,” Harry replied. “There’s no way I could do this myself. I need to know if Professor Quirrell tries to go up those stairs there. Don’t let anyone see you. You’ll be safe here in the Explorers’ Room. Just step behind this screen and look out the little eye I drew in the wall. No one will notice you that way.”

His conscience pricked him a little, and he added, “But if you see a student going up there, find a way to distract them. Make them turn back. They could get hurt up there.”



More students came to the next Explorers’ meeting. Lavender Brown and Parvati Patil, Pansy Parkinson and Daphne Greengrass. Anthony Goldstein and Michael Corner.

Professor Burbage arrived and greeted Harry, full of good humor, her hair more elaborate than ever. Harry noted that some

of the girls admired her hair, and were copying her today, after a fashion. Susan’s long plait had become very complicated, and Hannah’s pigtails each seemed to be composed of half a dozen smaller braids. He saw several of the girls touching their hair and asking questions, and heard them talking about Arithmancy in whispers. He shook his head, unable to see any connection.

Neville was patrolling the room, and said, “Malfoy’s late. His friends, too.”

“I wonder what—”

Just then, the door swung open, and Draco swaggered in, bearing a shepherd’s crook with all the dignity of an old-fashioned wizard’s staff.

“Witches, wizards, and worthy explorers!” he proclaimed, “I give you—Ovina, the purest ewe of the Greater Spellcombe breed!”

Behind him, on either side of a snow-white sheep of impressive size, were Crabbe and Goyle, grinning proudly. Crabbe had the animal on a lead of pale-blue satin. A pale-blue bow jauntily decorated her tail. The boys guided her up to the front of the room, and all the girls squealed. Ovina blinked, but stood placidly, accepting their admiration as her due.

“—Oh, the darling thing!”

“She’s gorgeous, Draco—”

“What a sweet face—”

“You said sheep smell bad, Malfoy, but she’s perfectly clean—”

The boys were won over when Ovina persistently attem-



pted to chew on the back of Draco's robes. His furtive attempts to shoo her away were somehow missed by Crabbe and Goyle until half the room was roaring with laughter.

"Well—yes—" Draco remarked, glaring, trying to put the best face on it. "She's a Malfoy sheep. She knows quality when she sees it."

"—or tastes it," Pansy teased.

Draco made a face. "Well, come on, then," he said, motioning to her. "Touch her wool. It's nice, really."

Pansy pushed ahead of the rest of the girls, much to the annoyance of some, and stroked the curly wool of the ewe's head. "She's soft."

"Best wool in the world!" Crabbe affirmed stoutly.

Hermione came up on the other side. "I've never touched a sheep. Do they bite?"

"Do they *bite*?" asked Goyle with scorn. A pause. "Well—sometimes—"

Pansy backed away hastily.

Crabbe reassured her, grinning. "Naw—this one never bites. Right lady, she is. Come on."

Hermione came forward, stroked the wool, and then boldly plunged her fingers into it. "She *is* soft."

Harry wanted to try it himself, but held off until the girls had their chance. Neville attempted to herd the girls into a semblance of a queue. Susan and Hannah took their turn, gig-

gling, and then Lavender and Parvati.

"Oooh! She smells like lavender!" Lavender was excited and flattered. She pulled her hands from the wool and said, "And my hands! They're soft, too! Here! Parvati! Feel them!"

All the girls started crowding then. Neville was brushed aside. The rest of the boys rolled their eyes and waited. Professor Burbage came up, wanting to touch the ewe herself, but a little worried.

"Is she—house-trained?" she asked Crabbe in a whisper.

"Don't you worry, Professor," that young lad assured her loudly. "She won't be leaving a present on the floor! My Dad bespelled all the shit out of her when they cleaned her up!"

Some of the girls—and a few boys—dissolved into embarrassed titters at his blunt language. Charity decided not to rebuke him. The word was appropriate—in context—sort of—

"You can do that?" Terry Boot, asked, very interested.

"It's easy," Goyle declared, he wand already out. "*Copro*—"

"Perhaps not now," Charity interposed. She whispered to Goyle. "Someone might use it for a prank, you know."

Crabbe and Goyle gravely assured her that such an idea had never crossed their minds.

All, in all, the well-groomed and lavender-scented Greater Spellcombe ewe was a big hit.

"Lanolin," Hermione said, after some thought. "That's what makes our hands soft. It's the lanolin in her wool."

"What's lanolin?" Hannah asked, puzzled.



"The chemical in sheep's wool that makes it soft. In the muggle world it's used for hand cream and—"

Crabbe and Goyle looked at each other in dawning comprehension.

"Reckon she means woolwax." Crabbe decided, ignoring Hermione's indignant face. "Greater Spellcombe wool is dripping with it. Slimy stuff it is."

"Oh! *Woolwax!*" Pansy said, understanding. "Of course! Everybody knows about *woolwax*. That's the proper name in *our* world," she said, with a disparaging glance at Hermione.

Charity was on the alert, and was not going to allow one of the muggleborn to be made to feel bad. She said, "That's just the sort of thing I hoped you all would learn here! Now—Daphne, is it? Can you name a common potion that uses woolwax?"

"Er—ah—*Sleekeasy?*"

All the girls nodded sagely. Draco and quite a few of the boys nodded as well.

"Very good," encouraged Charity. "Tell everyone what *Sleekeasy* is, please."

"It's a potion for your hair. My mother uses gallons of it. It makes it smooth and shiny."

"It sounds just the thing for Granger," snarked Pansy.

"Excuse us a moment," smiled Charity. She stalked over and took Pansy by the elbow. "Come with me." she said in a tone that brooked no defiance. They walked away, out the door.

They were not gone long.

Draco said to Hermione, "Don't mind Pansy. That's just how she is. If she can get a dig in anywhere, she will."

Charity was quickly back with a chastened Pansy.

"Sorry, Granger. I didn't mean anything by it. I use *Sleekeasy* myself."

Charity decided to fade into the background once more. Harry and the rest of the boys now took the opportunity to admire the sheep themselves. As further entertainment, Crabbe revealed an unexpected talent: he could perform the standard shearing charm with ease and considerable precision. The club members watched, fascinated, while he sheared a neat pattern on Ovina's left flank

"W-W-E!" Harry read. "That's brilliant!"

A round of applause.

Ovina's patience seemed to falter a bit. Crabbe said, "Reckon it's time she was home."

More applause, as the ewe was paraded out the door by Crabbe. Draco told Harry, "Dobby, our house elf, will take her back—"

"Are we *ever* going to dance?" Lavender was loudly wondering. There was a rising tide of interest and conversation.

"*Dancing*," Harry groaned.

"This is fun, Harry!" Neville insisted, pulling him to the centre of the room. "I never got to dance with other kids before. It's much nicer than dancing with Gran and Uncle Algy!"



"There is that," Harry agreed in a mutter, not willing to imagine dancing with either or both of those individuals. It was nearly as unthinkable as dancing with Aunt Petunia—or *Uncle Vernon*.

A laugh burst out of him, but everyone was laughing and talking and nobody noticed. Feeling much better about dancing with fellow students, Harry allowed himself to enjoy the talk that ensued about the Shepherd's Dance: how it was danced for lambing time and shearing time; how the crook was to be decorated with ribbons, and with wool or flowers, depending on the rite; the proper apparel and proper location for the dance to have genuine power.

First Lavender, and then the balance of the girls pleaded with Charity to show everyone what the clothes *looked* like. Charity sighed, and transfigured Lavender's robes into the garb of a Lady of the Meadow: a snowy shift with long bell sleeves, a primrose petticoat, and a sleeveless woolen gown the colour of spring leaves. Her sensible schoolgirl shoes became dark green dancing slippers, and a wreath of wild roses crowned her head.

"All right," Charity said, "And now, which of you lads will be The Guardian of the Flock?"

Draco was ready to put himself forward, but Harry caught him discreetly by the arm. "Just for today, Draco," he whispered, as Charity gestured a beaming, red-faced Crabbe out of the crowd.

"Oh, very well," Draco muttered. "I suppose it means a lot to

him. Mind you, I look better in the clothes than he does!"

Harry had no doubt that Draco would certainly look more glamorous, but Crabbe looked *right* in the tall boots and knee breeches, in the embroidered saffron-coloured shepherd's smock. His wreath was of glossy oak leaves, and they lent the hulking boy a certain nobility. He took up the shepherd's crook and "made a leg" to Lavender in the most old-fashioned wizarding way of bowing. A duplicating charm gave all the boys and girls their own crooks.

"They'll only last an hour," Charity warned them, "and if I see any horseplay with them, that will be the end of the dancing!"


A tune surged through the air, a pulsing rhythm, a hint of melancholy. Crabbe led the boys, and Lavender the girls, and they ceremoniously clashed their crooks together and advanced and retreated, and then formed a long line, bringing the ends of the crooks down with a thump on the beat. A kick to the side, another resounding thump, and Harry was beginning to believe that after all, proper magical dancing was rather fun.

Especially when there was a sumptuous tea to follow.





## CHAPTER 12



**WHEN HE** had been the unhappy and neglected boy in the cupboard of the house in Privet Drive, Harry had experienced how miserably slowly time could pass. At Hogwarts, the experience was quite the opposite.

The weeks seemed to pass in a whirl of activity and excitement: study, lessons, club meetings, the visits with friends from other houses, the visits down to Hagrid's hut, his Saturday afternoons with Professor Snape. There was so much to do and to know. His continuing concern about the Stone, and Muffy's reports of Professor Quirrell's movements were a secret, absorbing adventure. It seemed incredible that Halloween was almost upon them.

He was doing very well in his classes—among the best in his year. Professor Snape seemed pleased with him, though of course, he always had advice about how to do even better. Professor McGonagall gave him her small smile

of satisfaction in the course of nearly every class. Transfiguration, especially, was hard, but he felt like he had grasped the concept. Professor Snape said the world was divided into those who “got it,” and those who never would. Harry's essays were not the best in the class, of course: Hermione's were longer, Draco's more polished, Terry Boot's more philosophical. However, his magical talent made up in practical lessons what he sometimes lacked in pure theory. At least his handwriting was legible, and he knew how to organise his ideas. Without his lessons last summer, and his regular Wednesday study sessions, Harry was certain that his work would have been mediocre at best.

He always thought more clearly after he had a bit of breakfast in him. Hogwarts food was unfailingly, reliably wonderful. He was dawdling over an extra piece of buttered toast one Saturday morning, when Susan's owl swooped in, a large, shapeless paper package in her talons.

“My costume!” Sally cried. “Thanks, Pallas! Thank you, Susan! My dance will be ever so much nicer now!”

“Let's go see it right away!” Hannah said, very excited. In a bustle of crumbs and nearly-spilled pumpkin juice, the three first-year girls vanished from the table. The boys all rolled their eyes in mutual sympathy.

“Witches,” sighed Ernie, with an air of great worldly wisdom.

Harry scowled at his harmless toast. Talent Night was



this next Friday, and Harry wished he had some wonderful accomplishment to exhibit. Sally would uphold the honour of the firsties. She was going to dance something called "THE DYING SWAN," with two upperclassmen playing the music on lute and cello. He looked up the table. Ernie's cousin Primula and her sixth year friends were going to model dress robes they had devised themselves. Cedric and his friend Periander Summers were laughing, and quoting bits of dialogue from a famous French wizarding comedy Periander had translated.

Summers told them, "It's called '*Hélas, j'ai transfiguré mes pieds.*'"

Harry obviously looked very blank. Cedric grinned, and said, "It's about a transfiguration disaster. We call it '*Oh, No! Not the Feet!*'"

The table laughed, Harry along with them. He still wished he had something he could do. He couldn't sing, couldn't play an instrument, couldn't dance (except in the club with everyone else), didn't know any clever French plays.

Justin was thinking along the same lines. "I wish *we* could do something."

Eloise Midgen leaned over the girl next to her, and said, "People do all sorts of things. Lysandra Warbeck is going to show off her embroidery, and Hector and Troilus Doge are going to show the photographs they took of muggles last summer."

"That's—odd," Justin remarked.

"We must be able to do *something!*" Harry growled.

"Well—you're getting to be really good at flying, Harry," Ernie suggested. "Maybe you could bring a broom and zoom across the stage." He laughed when Harry threw his crusts at him.

"Cedric and that lot are doing a bit of a play," Justin considered. "Are there any stories we could act out? I mean—like wizarding stories."

A thoughtful silence.

"I've got my copy of *Beedle the Bard* in my trunk," Harry told them. "We could take a look, anyway."

On the way to their dorm, Ernie suddenly said, "I am *not* going to do *Babbitty Rabbitty and her Cackling Stump!*"

Justin made a face. "Too right," he muttered. "Whatever that is."

Ernie's kneazle Widdershins mewed out a greeting, glad to see them back. Harry dug through his trunk and found the book Professor Snape had given him.

"I read it once, but I don't remember all the stories." He paged through. "*The Fountain of Fair Fortune, The Wizard and the Hopping Pot, Babbitty*—sorry Ernie—*The Tale of the Three Brothers*—"

"That's it!" Ernie declared. "We can do that one! There are three of us!"

"I can't memorise a lot of lines on short notice," Justin warned him.

"We don't have to! We can ask one of the girls to read the story, and we'll act it out—except we need somebody to be



Death and somebody to be the second brother's sweetheart."

But, all in all, it did not seem hopeless. The three of them read though the story (it was very short) and could see how it might be done.

"We need a cloak," Harry pointed out. "And I suppose we could put a sheet over whoever was Death. Maybe somebody could help us with that."

"We can do this," Justin agreed, very pleased. "Might I borrow this book, Harry? I don't know these stories."

"Fine. But be sure to give it back. It was a present from Professor Snape."

They waited for the girls in the Common Room. After some time, Susan and Hannah came down, giggling and chattering.

Susan said, "Sally's doing her exercises. Her costume is gorgeous!" Hannah sighed.

Taking that as his cue, Harry said, "We were working out a plan to do something ourselves for Talent Night. You could join in, if you like."

Instantly he had their complete attention. The boys burst out with their ideas. Both girls knew the story, and thought it was the hand of Fate that there were three Hufflepuff boys in their year.

Ernie said, "One of you can play Death, and one of you can be the dead sweetheart. We'll have to find someone to read the story."

Hannah considered. "Or one of us could play Death *and* the dead sweetheart. Death can wear a mask. The sweetheart just

stands there. And the one who doesn't act can read the story bits."

The girls withdrew to confer and were back in less than two minutes.

"I'd rather read," Susan said. "Hannah thinks it would be fun to play Death. We'll need a cloak and a mask and something for Death to wear that Hannah can cover her robes with. We'll have to write it out too so you can each say something as one of the brothers."

Ernie contributed, "I can ask my cousin Primula to help us make costumes. Somebody in the House might have a mask, or one of the sixth or seventh years could transfigure something."

It took very little time to throw their little skit together. A hooded black cloak and a loose black robe with huge sleeves were not too hard to find. Try as hard as they might, however, they could not find a mask or anyone who knew how to transfigure one. Hannah thought that a white scarf tied tightly over her face would look spooky enough. Cedric told them there was a spell to make a mist that would fill the little stage at the end of the Common Room.

"And we can pop a grey beard on you easy as easy for the last bit, Harry," Cedric told. "People do it as a prank all the time."

Sally came down, and was disappointed to find herself left out of the playlet.

"But you have your own dance, all by yourself!" Susan said. "That's much grander! You'll be the best thing about Talent Night!"



"I want to help, all the same," Sally pouted.

In the end, they decided that Sally could be the one who killed the eldest brother and took his wand. All she had to do was put her arm through the curtain, pretend to cut Ernie's throat, and then grab the wand. On her first try, she grabbed Ernie by the nose instead, amidst endless giggling. Hannah came out as Death, to gloat over the body, and kept breaking up as she attempted to spread out her arms in a menacing, billowing way.

"You look like Professor Snape!" Justin called out.

"Here, now!" Harry protested, grinning himself.

And it was worse when Hannah was pretending to be the dead sweetheart. When Justin called out, "Oh, ring of power, show me my dead sweetheart!" she strode out, pigtails bobbing, stared at Justin, and they both burst out laughing.

"Oh, stop!" Susan said indignantly. "This is serious! Hannah, you're supposed to be dead and suffering!"

"I can't—stop—" Hannah puffed, pink with mirth. "Justin—stop looking at me—"

Annoyed, Susan said, "And how are you going to get back into your Death costume fast enough?"

"Maybe Primula can do a charm," Ernie suggested.

Susan frowned. "Sally, isn't your dance about dying? Why don't you show us your dance and put Hannah in the mood?"

"I don't want to show you until I have my costume on, and I need my music," Sally said, shaking her head.

Not knowing Amelia Bones, Harry had no idea how much Susan resembled her redoubtable aunt at the moment. She immediately tracked down Merton Graves, and dragged him back to the firsties' rehearsal, telling him they had an emergency and needed Sally's music.

"Herman's in Arithmancy just now," he objected.

"You'll be enough," Susan declared. "We really need to see something serious right away. We can draw the curtain so it's just us. Sally, *please*, please fetch your dancing robes and your special shoes. Maybe then everybody won't be so silly. I don't want to look stupid in front of the entire House! What if Professor Dumbledore comes? He does, sometimes, you know!"

So Sally ran up to get the precious package, while Susan and Harry and a still-giggling Hannah acted out the third part of the story. The idea of wearing a long white beard made Harry smirk.

"Don't grin like that, Harry!" Susan ordered. "You're giving up the Cloak of Invisibility to your posterity!"

"His posterior?" Justin gibed.

Susan threw the book down. She shouted, "You're impossible! I don't want to do this if you won't do it right!"

They were attracting a lot of attention. Luckily Sally arrived, and the curtain was drawn to let her change into her costume without being seen. After a few minutes, she told them she was ready, and they clambered through the curtain and sat down cross-legged to watch.



Harry stared at Sally. She was beautiful. She had a wreath of silk flowers on her head, and was wearing a white dress like a princess, with the puffiest skirt in the world. It was not full-length, but just past her knees, and the bottom of the skirt was artfully frayed, making it look even more ethereal. She had strange white slippers tied with satin ribbons.

"Whoa, Sally!" Ernie breathed in admiration.

She looked embarrassed. "It's not the right costume for the Dying Swan," she admitted. "It's just my leotard and my tutu from my last recital. We danced the Panorama from *Sleeping Beauty*. But I know the Dying Swan, and my teacher isn't here to tell me I'm too young to dance it."

"I love it," Hannah said. "I wish I had robes with a skirt like that. Let's see the dance!"

"Merton, you can start now," Sally called through the curtain. She scowled at her fellow first years. "If you laugh, I shall never speak any of you again as long as I live."

The haunting cello melody began, and Sally rose up on her toes and drifted toward them, already quite another being. From the first measures, laughing was the last thing on their minds.

It was not long, and it was not the greatest performance of the dance, but the children did not know that. To Harry, it seemed beyond belief that anyone could do that. Sally must have some sort of special magical ability. The swan struggled against her impending doom, and settled slowly into a pose

on the floor, her arms stretched out in front of her and her head slightly to the side. The last trembling notes died away.

"That was—"

"—Amazing!"

"Thank you, Merton!" Sally called, bounding up from the floor.

Harry just stared. Before he could utter his own compliments, Susan broke in excitedly.

"Sally—I know! Why don't you play the dead sweetheart and do your dance then? It would fit right in! The sweetheart doesn't say anything, and that way as soon as the second brother kills himself, Hannah can come right out as Death and gloat over the both of you!"

"That's perfect!" Hannah said. "I could never play the sweetheart as well as you, Sally! I'll be Death, and you be the sweetheart. Ernie, maybe your cousin Primula could cast a color charm and make Sally grey all over like a ghost!"

"I really like those white robes," Ernie said reluctantly.

"Grey would be better for a ghost," Sally agreed, "as long as it's not permanent." She thought a bit, "It's really more like dancing Giselle, but I don't know any of the variations from that. I'll change what I do with my arms a bit to seem more like a spirit and less like a bird!"

After that excitement, the last details were put in order. Merton and Herman were prevailed upon to play additional music for the skit, mostly the old wizarding ballad "THE THREE



BROTHERS” to help set the mood.

For the death of the first brother, Sally would not want to scramble on the floor in what Ernie and Susan persisted on calling her “dancing robes.” Instead, Harry would provide the mysterious arm of the new Master of the Elder Wand.



Professor Sprout was in and out of the Common Room, and felt that Talent Night was shaping up well. Quite a few of her badgers were performing, and perhaps, given the precedent, even more of them would be encouraged to participate in the next such event in the spring. To her delight, she discovered that all the firsties were performing together in a special presentation of the TALE OF THE THREE BROTHERS.

The dress rehearsal surpassed all her hopes. As she did every year, she sent the non-participants to their dormitories, and summoned each performer or group of performers individually. So much talent! So many gifted children! What good taste Morwenna Robbins and Primula Macmillan had! How well the Llewellyn brothers sang! Who would have thought that the Diggory boy could be so clever and funny?

And all her firsties! They were a prime lot this year. Of course, she said that every year, but this year was special—and not just because of the Potter lad. They were all doing very well—all nice children. They got on well together, and they

had started that splendid club! They would really deserve some special recognition at the end of the year. They bustled in, holding piles of costumes, and Primula Macmillan, Merton Graves, and Herman Wintringham were with them. The two boys brought their instruments.

“Music, too!” Sprout exclaimed. “I know I’ll enjoy this!”

She did, too. And she was very impressed. Yes, they were young and mostly amateurish, but it was really a clever way to tell the story. And the little Perks girl! Sprout had not taken much notice of her, other than to see that she was pretty. A middling student, but quiet and well behaved. To have such an unusual talent! She had really thought for a moment that the children had persuaded a ghost to participate. She noted Primula’s backstage work with the charms. That deserved points, both for the skill shown and the kindness to the young ones. The musicians, too, would be rewarded. Such lovely music. She must tell the Headmaster. He was very fond of music himself. He had almost promised to attend the Hufflepuff Talent Night. This might sway him.



The Headmaster’s throne-like seat was placed front and centre before the small gold-draped stage. In a comfortable chair, Pomona Sprout sat beside him. It had been a struggle, but she had kept the firsties’ little play a secret. The Headmas-



ter would be so surprised and pleased to see these six children from such different backgrounds, working together to tell that fine old tale.

She had not put them first in the program, but halfway through. She would start with some of the solo performances. They performed just in front of the gold curtain, so the skits could be set up behind them. Everyone loved a laugh, so Cedric and Periander's dialogue would be at the end, and any damage to the stage caused by the rough-housing and zany prank jinxing would not spoil things for anyone else.

It was going quite well, other than a third year suddenly being afflicted with stage fright. She was soothed and persuaded to start her flute solo again, and finished with credit. The Headmaster was clearly pleased, twinkling throughout and applauding with enthusiasm. Their own House ghost, Friar Roger, was beaming and clapping, up in his comfortable aerie near the ceiling.

At last it was time for the firsties. Susan Bones, her red hair twisted into an intricate fishtail plait, her robes immaculate, stepped onto the side of the stage, and announced in a clear voice, "The First Years of Hufflepuff House wish to present our rendition of *The Tale of the Three Brothers*, by Beedle the Bard."

The lights in the Common Room dimmed. Beside her, Sprout heard the Headmaster shift in his great chair. Glancing to the side, she saw the twinkle replaced with a look of surprise and deep

thought. He leaned forward, as if not wishing to miss a word. Lute and cello combined played the well-known ballad softly.

"*There were once three brothers,*" read Susan, "*who were traveling along a lonely, winding road at twilight.*"

The assigned prefect spelled the curtain open, and revealed Justin Finch-Fletchley, Ernie Macmillan, and Harry Potter, all in their student robes and Hufflepuff sashes, strolling out of the wings. A thick mist rose, creating a mysterious scene.

"Look! A river!" cried Ernie in a deep, manly voice. There were faint snickers from the audience.

"Indeed!" loudly agreed Justin. "It appears too deep to cross!"

"Whatever shall we do?" wondered Harry. "Wait—I know!—one, two, three—"

The boys shouted as one, pointing their wands.

"*Pontus!*"

In a shower of turquoise sparks, a little footbridge appeared centre stage.

Applause, and some wondering chatter at the success of the firsties' advanced spell. The spell was actually cast by Primula behind the draperies, but that was undetectable to the audience and served its purpose, as first Ernie, then Justin, and finally Harry strutted victoriously over it, each giving the audience a wave or a thumbs-up.

Out of the mist on the other side of the stage, a figure emerged: A hooded black figure, hard to see clearly at first.



The face was—white?

Dumbledore stiffened, uneasily reminded of the War. No—that was not a mask, but a veil or scarf. Still, it had looked for a moment like—

“I—am—DEATH,” pronounced the figure.

Nervous giggles rippled through the audience. Hannah-as-Death spread her cloak out and confided to the audience in a stage whisper, “I shall punish their arrogance, but I shall do it with CUNNING.”

She turned to the three brothers, and in a sickeningly sweet voice she said, “I congratulate you, mighty wizards. Lesser beings drown in that stream, but you have proven yourselves too powerful for me. Name whatever prize your hearts desire.”

Ernie, in the deep voice of the eldest brother, demanded, “Give me the most powerful wand. I want a wand that always wins for its owner—one that is worthy of a wizard who has conquered Death!”

Death produced a stick, and said, “Take this wand of elder wood. Never shall it fail the hand of its Master.”

Justin spoke next. “I want the power to recall others from the Land of the Dead. Give me a mighty charm!”

“Take this stone,” said Death. “It has the power you seek.”

Hannah’s robes billowed as she turned to Harry. “And you, the youngest— what would you have?”

“I—hmmm—” Harry rubbed his chin, pretending to be

thinking. The audience rustled and chuckled. “Wait! I know!” said Harry. “I want something that will hide me from YOU!”

“You ask too much!” Death protested.

“You said I could name my prize!” Harry insisted, folding his arms. “I don’t want you following me around. Give me what I want, or I’ll tell everybody that Death is a BIG FAT LIAR!”

With a huff that sounded just like Hannah Abbot, Death pulled off its black hooded cloak and handed it to Harry, saying, “Very well. This is the Cloak of Invisibility. Don’t lose it! It will hide you from any danger.”

“Cool!” Harry said, admiring it.

Another wave of giggles.

The curtain was shut, and Susan read on:

*“In due course the brothers separated, each for his own destination. The first brother traveled on for a week or more, and reaching a distant village...”*

Ernie swaggered in as Susan read the story of his unflinching success in duels.

“I have a wand that Death gave me,” he announced. “It makes me invincible!” He stretched and yawned and lay down, pretending to sleep.

*“That very night,” read Susan, “another wizard crept upon the oldest brother and as he lay, wine-sodden, upon his bed...”*

An anonymous hand, holding a dagger, emerged from the draperies in the back of the stage, and in a not-very-realistic





254

gesture, appeared to cut the throat of the sleeping brother. Nonetheless, the audience was quiet as Ernie slumped in death. The hand groped about for the wand, and then, seizing it, pulled it back out of sight.

Death emerged from the shadows and spread its arms wide over the scene.

*"And so Death took the first brother for his own."*

The curtain was spelled shut, as Susan continued her reading.

*"Meanwhile, the second brother journeyed to his own home, where he lived alone..."*

The curtain opened on a dense mist. Justin stood at stage left, the stone in his hand. He called out, "O Stone of Power! Return to me my dead sweetheart!"

Sprout noticed that Albus was fidgeting again. What was wrong? Well, the music would settle him down.

Herman and Merton began playing a slow and melancholy tune. Out of the mist appeared an unearthly figure, arms crossed on her breast like a corpse, who seemed to float across the stage. The audience murmured in admiration as Sally, grey as any ghost, performed her dance very creditably. Sprout beamed, trying to catch the Headmaster's eye, but he was totally engrossed, and seemed rather sad. As the music came to an end, Justin pretended to stab himself (with the same fake dagger used before) and Sally sank to the floor beside him. Hannah came out, and spread her huge black sleeves wide once more.

255



“—And so Death took the second brother for his own,” read Susan.

The curtain shut. The students’ murmur grew in volume and there was some tentative applause, here and there, for Sally. It was hushed as Susan began reading again.

*“But though Death searched for the third brother for many years, he was never able to find him...”*

The curtain opened again and revealed Harry Potter, his back to the audience. He turned, and laughter rose, as he was revealed to have a long white beard. With the addition of long white hair and glasses, he looked a little like a small version of Albus Dumbledore himself.

He grinned at the audience and slowly removed his cloak.

“I’ve lived a long, long time, and now I think I’m ready to move on.” He folded the cloak and laid it down on the stage in front of him. “This cloak will be an heirloom in my family, passed down from generation to generation. And now—Oh, Death, I’m WAITING!”

Death emerged from the side of the stage and said, “There you are at last! Well, if you are ready—if you are prepared—”

“I am,” answered Harry firmly. “Let’s go!”

The familiar melody of “THE THREE BROTHERS” was heard again, this time played with triumphant finality. Harry linked arms with Death, and they slowly walked away together, as the mist rose about them.

*“And then he greeted Death as an old friend, and went with him gladly, and, equals, they departed this life. The end.”*

The curtain closed.

A burst of applause and some cheerful catcalls. The curtain opened and all the firsties came out. Hannah was busily untying her white veil and finally yanked it off, revealing her pink and breathless face. The greying charm was removed from Sally, who looked very different in her natural dark hair and white costume. Susan motioned Primula to come out from behind the draperies, and then to the two musicians to come up and bow with them.

“Well, Albus!” Sprout gushed in pleasure. “Wasn’t that delightful? And little Sally-Anne Perks and her muggle dancing! She must have exceptional talent.”

Dumbledore smiled and applauded and expressed his complete agreement with Pomona’s sentiments, concealing how very disturbing—in so many ways—he had found the whole performance. To his relief, the lights in the Common Room had brightened once more. The history of his own wand—the wand in his robes this very minute! Harry Potter with the Cloak of Invisibility! That very cloak was in his office, kept for the boy, and the thought of it caused Dumbledore quite an uncomfortable pang of conscience. He had meant to give it to Harry for Christmas, but with things as they were, perhaps he should advance his schedule...



The Resurrection Stone was the one Hallow he had not succeeded in tracking down. He had longed to find it and in doing so, to find closure for the terrible events of his early life. The charming little dance had somewhat softened his distress. Music was a great healer, truly.

But to see Harry doing an impression of—well—Dumbledore himself—was alarming on a deep level. Especially a Dumbledore going off on the next great adventure so blithely. Death was nothing to fear, of course, but Dumbledore knew he had a great deal to accomplish before he could allow himself to pass on. And so, for that matter, had Harry...



258

## CHAPTER 13



**BUT I WISH** you could have been there,” Harry told Snape over tea. “It was such a lark! I’d always thought I’d like to be in a play, and it went really well...”

“So I was told—repeatedly—by Professor Sprout at breakfast. And she told everyone else, too. Clearly, she thought Hufflepuff Talent Night a notable success.”

“Oh, yeah—yes—Cedric and Perian-der did this play about transfiguring feet, and it was hilarious, with lots of pranks

and charms—and some of the kids played music or sang—and Ernie’s cousin and her friends had a fashion show—and the girls liked that—and the Headmaster was there. It was all pretty cool.

I wish you’d seen it. Sally danced, too. She’s really good and wore a really pretty dress she called a tutu.” Harry sighed with satisfaction at the memory and took another biscuit, munching it dreamily.

Snape gave his charge a tight smile, and indulged his chatter. Slytherin House had no event comparable to Pomona’s Talent Night. Nor did any other house. Filius was

259



very fond of music, but his one attempt many years ago had resulted in a great deal of jealousy, accusations, and bad feeling within Ravenclaw. Now he was talking about trying again. A different group of children...more experienced leadership...the good example of the Hufflepuffs...

Pomona had gone on most especially about all her first-year students cooperating so nicely on their little play. Snape secretly shuddered at what might transpire if he required his own first-years to attempt something similar. Pansy would bully the other girls—he had not missed her mean-spirited remarks at Millicent Bullstrode's expense—and Draco would assume a leading role as his due. Gregory and Vincent might permit that, but Blaise and Theodore would resist, and then there would be resentment and hexes and possibly injuries and tear-stained owls home to indignant parents. Impossible. Completely impossible.

"—and it was really all thanks to you, Professor," Harry was saying. "I beg your pardon?"

"You gave me my copy of *Beedle the Bard*! If we hadn't had that, we wouldn't have found the story that was just right for us!"

"Oh, yes. *The Tale of the Three Brothers*." Snape found it interesting that Harry described performing what was really a rather dark and tragic story as a "lark."

"I wish you could have been there," Harry repeated, now more wistfully.

"Severus?" called a voice from the fire.

"Yes, Professor Burbage?" answered Snape. She had been chatting through the fire and visiting quite a bit lately. It had not proved as irritating as Snape had once thought it might be.

"Oh—is Harry with you? I'm sorry to disturb your special tea-time together, but I wonder if I could have a word with both of you."

"If you like."

Her robes were more violet than lilac today, but she smelled as nice as ever. She gave them both a smile as she stepped through the fire, patting her hair a little self-consciously.

"Would you care for some tea?" Snape asked.

"Oh—well—yes—just a sip. I won't take up too much of your time."

She was handed her cup, fixed to her liking. Snape knew by now that she took milk and one sugar. After the obligatory sip and thanks, she launched into the reason for her visit.

"I had an idea for the next club program, Harry, and I wanted to see what you thought. I know you had asked Cedric Diggory to come and talk about quidditch, but perhaps he wouldn't mind if we put that off for later. Instead, why not have a repeat performance of his play and yours for all the first-years? We could call it an introduction to wizarding literature. I've heard so much about how well you all did. It would be nice if your classmates could see it for themselves—especially now, when it's all fresh in your memories."

Harry was willing enough. He had really enjoyed performing, and had felt let-down and a little disappointed when it was over.



Charity, Snape discovered, had given the idea quite a bit of thought. She had arranged with Pomona to borrow the little Hufflepuff stage and move it to the meeting room. If all the participants could manage to come on Sunday afternoon, there seemed nothing to hinder them.

"And you could come and see, Professor!" Harry said excitedly. "If it would not impose—"

"Not at all!" Charity supported Harry. "I think you ought to see what the students have been doing. In fact, why not let any staff member come who likes? Talk to the others, Harry. I'm sure they won't mind."

Harry knew that all the Hufflepuffs would like to perform for as many people as possible. He was not the only one who had had a good time. He would ask the other officers, but he could not picture them objecting. Of course, they wouldn't want grownups coming to *all* their meetings, but this once it should be all right. He could invite Hagrid and Professor McGonagall, too! Susan and Hannah would enjoy planning special treats for the guests.



Hermione was very interested in the prospect of seeing "wizarding theatre." Neville had never seen any kind of stage performance at all, and considered it a wonderful, unlooked-for treat. Draco did not fail to point out that *he* had seen the complete play "in the original French" in Paris, but conceded that it would be a

very nice thing for those who did not have his advantages.

"But *your* show—" he whispered to Harry—with Sally dancing—"He pulled Harry away from the others, grey eyes wide. "Is it all right—really? I heard that muggle dancing was—you know—sort of *depraved*. Does Sally wear anything? Because if—"

Shocked, Harry gave him a push, and said, "Draco! Of course it's all right! Sally's dance was—beautiful! She wears a really pretty costume and she's not *depraved*! How can you say that?"

A little offended, Draco huffed, "Well, that's what I heard! I heard that there are places where muggle women dance naked!"

Neville and Hermione were listening, of course. Neville's jaw dropped at the horror of it all, but Hermione broke in, scandalised, but eager to give them the best information possible.

"Oh, Draco's right! There are such places, but they aren't nice at all. Decent people don't go there!" she explained, innocent and officious. "Sally's dancing is completely different. Ballet dancing is very refined and respectable. It's Great Art. There are all sorts of muggle dancing, but ballet is the best! I heard that Sally did wonderfully well."

"She did," Harry affirmed, scowling at Draco. "It was—*beautiful*. You'll see. She didn't dance *naked*!" His voice dropped to an embarrassed growl on the last word. "How can you think Sally would do that?"

"Well—how should I know? She's been brought up who knows how—you said yourselves that things are different



in the muggle world! How would I know what they consider all right for a girl to do?" Unwilling to let go of the subject, he asked, "What exactly did she wear?"

Harry was untutored in matters of feminine fashion, but managed to more or less describe the billowing skirt and the wreath of flowers and the satin laced slippers.

"Well—" Draco conceded grudgingly. "That sounds quite acceptable. Odd, but it is a costume after all. And everyone did say it was very good. I didn't mean to say anything against Sally."

"All right, then." They continued their discussion of how Draco would call the meeting to order, since Harry would be busy getting ready behind the scenes. Cedric would come to them to talk about quidditch in the meeting after the following one, which would be the Halloween meeting. They would learn about the customs, treats, and dances of ancient Samhain, and it was sure to be popular.



Quite a few guests did come to the Explorers' meeting. Susan and Hannah looked upon it as a kind of Open House to introduce their club to the staff and distinguished visitors. The little stage was set up just so in the attractive, high-ceilinged chamber. The silver on the table against the far wall gleamed, the chandeliers sparkled. Professor Burbage had found dozens of elegant gilt chairs from somewhere, and they were set up facing the stage.

Among the distinguished visitors was a representative of the Board of Governors. Lucius Malfoy and his wife Narcissa arrived, smartly dressed for an afternoon's entertainment and tea, smiling on all the little first-year students. They saw Snape lurking in the back row and greeted him as an old friend, inevitably spiriting him along with them to the seats in front.

"What a delightful room!" Narcissa said. "I don't believe I've ever been here before."

"Severus!" called Charity Burbage, busily conferring with Susan Bones, "Save me a seat!"

Snape nodded gravely, and the Malfoys exchanged discreet looks and incredulous smiles.

"Ah—Professor Burbage," Lucius remarked. "Draco owed us that she had been generous enough to sponsor the meetings. Have you been seeing a great deal of her?"

Flatly, Snape answered, "She lives here, too. I can hardly avoid her."

"What a good colour for her," Narcissa murmured to Lucius, just loud enough for Snape to hear. "She's much improved from her school days. She's quite grown into her looks. Her hair is very striking, I think. Does she always wear amethysts, Severus?"

"I hadn't noticed," Snape shrugged elaborately. "Amethysts are a good all-purpose charm."

"Mother! Father!" Draco called, coming over to see them. "I'm so glad you could make it! We're going to start soon. With



Harry and Bones busy with the skit, I've had to do everything! I've instructed Granger to include in the minutes the names of everyone who attends. It should be quite an event!"

He strode away to greet Professors Flitwick and McGonagall, and to show them to their seats. Sprout was here too, since the Headmaster had told them he would be in his office if there were any emergency. Draco had no liking for the Headmaster, but it would have been polite had he made the effort to attend. Well, they would do very well without him. All the Heads of House—oh—and there was Hagrid!

Draco told Neville to show the half-giant to the special chair Professor Burbage thought would be comfortable for him. Once Hagrid was settled, Draco checked the time and swept an eye over the gratifyingly full room. They would need to begin in a few minutes, but just as well to let the late-comers come skulking in first. He felt very pleased with himself. Blaise and Theo had come and were sitting with Vince and Greg, with Pansy and Daphne on their other side. Slytherin House was showing proper solidarity today. Whether it would last was anyone's guess.

He gave his best, practiced smile to Lisa Turpin and Padma Patil. The girls joined the Gryffindor Patil and her friend. Brocklehurst and McDougal were still recalcitrant, but it was their loss, after all. Haughty little bints they were, anyhow, with precious little to be haughty about. Granger was worth ten of them put together. There *she* was, busily noting down the names. A

good sort, really. Trying to learn and fit in. He had done wonders with her, just with a bit of advice and encouragement.

Another student made an appearance. "Hullo, Millie!" Draco greeted her, surprised. "I didn't expect you! Glad you're here all the same. The Slytherins sit over there—"

The big girl mumbled, "Hullo, Draco. I'll just sit back here, if it's all the same to you."

"Suit yourself."

It was time. He smoothed his hair and walked forward to give the formal welcome. It was very pleasant to preside today, when his parents could see him, and to be Master of Ceremonies for the programme. Maximum visibility, with a minimum of responsibility. As he was greeting everyone, carefully remarking on the presence of a school Governor, he noticed a flash of red hair sneaking into the room. Not allowing a reflexive sneer to spoil his appearance, he continued with the opening remarks. Not even a Weasley could ruin this for him.

Snape found the little performance was quite pleasant, really. The music was well done, and Harry and his Hufflepuff friends seemed to be having a jolly time. The *pontus* charm was interesting. He had never had occasion to use it, but the colourful sparks were a bonus—at least when being entertained. Charity, next to him, was smiling with pleasure. She smelled very nice. Even Narcissa had admired her robes and hair, and Narcissa was notoriously critical of other witches. It was rather



agreeable to have a friend to sit with today.

*Ah—here comes the famous dance.*

Snape knew nothing of dancing or ballet or anything of the sort. Life in Spinners End was not exactly replete with high culture. He could tell, however, that the little girl was doing well at whatever it was she was supposed to be doing. The music was very nice, and the costume something that he was sure that other little girls would admire. He puzzled over the shoes. Muggles could not be using charms, so the girl must actually be moving on her toes. Surely that could not be good for her feet? Narcissa was whispering something to Lucius, who nodded, his face an unreadable mask of polite attention.

In fact, Narcissa felt rather concerned. A beautiful child—by far the prettiest of the year. Narcissa understood that nearly all of them were in attendance, and she had eyed each of them thoroughly. Some she knew and some she did not. It was clear that the little dancer was the pick of the bunch for looks. Her looks, in fact, were the sort that would only improve with puberty. That could be very inconvenient. She glanced behind to see Draco, and was irritated to see him watching with an enchanted expression. She did not want Draco looking in such a way at the bastard half-blood daughter of that eccentric Unspeakable Croaker and some muggle trollop. At least she was not one of the officers of Draco's little club. Sally-Anne Perks! What a ridiculous name! A graceful, pretty child, certainly. Narcissa wished

futilely, fiercely, for a pretty daughter of her own, whom she could dress in an absurd confection of tulle, whose brow she could wreath in flowers and pearls, who—

She bit her lip, and forced her attention on the play. *Oh, that's over, at last! And now—Harry—how funny—what an amusing, subtle way to mock Dumbledore...*

After his own play was over, Harry found Cedric and Perian-der's performance even better than the last time. Maybe it was the bigger audience, and the louder laughs. Draco had saved him a seat and he edged in between the blond boy and Neville, accepting their whispered compliments with a grin. He was gratified by Draco's added remark that "Sally's dance really was quite charming. She looked very nice, too."

He suspected that the rest of the audience enjoyed Cedric's performance more than THE TALE OF THE THREE BROTHERS. The mock duel was hysterical, and the room rocked with laughter as Periander hopped across the stage on a whale's fluke. *I really do love magic*, he thought, very content.



"The Burbages are an old family," Narcissa considered later that night, as her hair received the requisite brushing. "Quite old. Quite respectable. I think she fancies Severus, dearest."

"I daresay. The pickings are slim at Hogwarts," Lucius pointed out, lounging on the bed. "Should she set her cap at



Flitwick? At Hagrid? At—Dumbledore?”

Narcissa tinkled a chilly little laugh. “Don’t be gruesome, my darling. I take your point that Severus is the only wizard at Hogwarts who would be even possible, but still—I think she does genuinely fancy him. That’s all to the good, of course. It’s a very nice thing for him to have a witch of good breeding hunting him down. Their children would be still be halfbloods, unfortunately, but if she doesn’t mind, so much the worse for her. The only question is if he finds her sufficiently attractive.”

“I think she’s attractive enough—” Lucius observed, wisely adding, “—for Severus. I’ve always thought he fancied red-heads, but perhaps he has branched out lately.”

“High time that he did!” Narcissa said sharply. “A decent pure-blooded witch like Charity Burbage should not have to resemble that muggleborn tart Lily Potter to be considered good-looking.”

“Don’t let Harry hear you calling his mother a tart,” Lucius admonished.

Almost ashamed, Narcissa tossed the hairbrush down, and turned to him frowning. “All right! She wasn’t a tart, but she was something very close to it, as far as I’m concerned!”

“I know you disliked her.”

“I did—and not just for her muggle blood. I disliked her personally. So pleased with herself—so uninterested in our ways. Grabbing all the magic she could—and so quick to parrot Dumbledore, too. Such a—a—Gryffindor!”

Lucius chuckled. “And yet you seem quite fond of Harry.”

“I do quite like Harry. He’s been a nice companion for Draco. They’ve had pleasant times together. Of course, he wasn’t raised by either of his obnoxious parents. A very good thing. And I’m certainly not sorry he’s under Severus’ wing now. I’m not even sorry he’s in Hufflepuff—much. He seems to be enjoying himself, and the children seem nice enough.”

“The little dancing girl is very pretty,” Lucius remarked. “Maybe the current Potter will follow the tradition of marrying the best-looking girl of his year.”

“Oh, I hope not! A half-blood? The mother a muggle? Surely Harry can do better. The Bones girl is going to develop nicely, and she has a great deal of spirit and good sense. Look at how well she played the hostess today, young as she is! A pure-blood, who would produce pureblooded children for the Potter line once more. Much more the thing. Or that Gryffindor Brown girl is pretty enough. She might do. Possibly Daphne Greengrass...I don’t think Harry much likes Pansy Parkinson.”

Lucius laughed heartily. “Draco does though—or at least he can put up with her. I hope she’ll improve with age. Of course, the little Perks girl might prove a distraction. She’s certainly a graceful creature. It was quite interesting to see that sort of dancing.”

“Draco does not need *that* sort of distraction! And neither do we.”

“He’s only eleven, Narcissa! Let him enjoy his schooldays!”





Samhain customs involved more dancing, a bit of candle-magic—something about which Harry had previously known nothing—the significance of pumpkins in wizarding culture, and the magical uses of a bonfire. The bonfire, alas, the Headmaster forbade, for reasons of “safety.” However, the Halloween feast was something to look forward to. The purebloods had been interested and amused to hear about the similarities—and differences—of muggle Halloween lore from their fellow club members.

Lately, Harry had remembered that his parents had been killed on the thirty-first of October. He wondered if that made it wrong for him to celebrate. He remembered very little about that night, and he disliked thinking about it, anyway. On Halloween morning, he talked it over in the dorm with Ernie and Justin.

“I don’t think it’s disrespectful, Harry,” Ernie said, after taking time to consider it thoroughly. “I mean—it’s only the feast. You have to have dinner, anyway!”

“Nobody expects you to starve yourself!” Justin agreed. “That would be stupid. Besides,” he added, remembering a term he had read, “You’re not *celebrating* Halloween. You’re *observing* it. It’s showing respect for wizarding tradition. That’s very important!”

Harry allowed himself to be comforted and convinced.

“Yeah,” he agreed, as the delicious scent of baking pumpkin

wafted through the castle. “tradition is important.”

Charms class that day was great fun. Professor Flitwick decided that they were ready to learn the levitation charm. It was not at all easy, but by the end of class Harry had managed it, and was helping Sally, who was partnered with him. Hermione Granger and her partner Terry Boot had caught on to it almost immediately, and were playing with the feathers, sending them higher and higher.

Some of the Ravenclaw girls sulked, but no one said anything unpleasant to Hermione today—especially not in front of Professor Flitwick. Hermione Granger was regarded somewhat as Flitwick’s “pet,” and no one wanted to rouse the diminutive professor’s ire again. The two other Ravenclaw boys were civil to Hermione now. Two of the girls, Lisa and Padma, were almost polite. The other two simply ignored her. Harry was pleased to notice that Hermione was ignoring them as well, and not seeming unhappy about it.

Even better was Potions, where Harry always felt particularly at ease with the subject matter. He and Draco worked well together, and their potions had been uniformly successful. Their Hand Healer Salve was going smoothly at the moment. Since their seats were so close to Professor Snape, Harry was generally able to tune out the various conversations that were whispered as they brewed.

Not today.



“Ex-cuse me!” drawled Pansy. “Do let someone else have some dried hyssop. I realise that some people need to make a double batch to cover their gigantic man hands, but I would like to finish this assignment sometime this year.”

Harry frowned and looked behind him. Draco whispered, “She’s ragging on Millie again. It’s been going for days now—even before Millie came to the meeting with the plays. And Pansy got an owl from her Mother this morning, and she’s always impossible after getting one of *those*.”

There was a hint of a scuffle behind him and Harry heard Sally hiss, “Stop that! Leave her alone!”

“Sorry, Perks, I didn’t mean to upset your *boyfriend*! Though a halfblood would be just the thing for someone with her background. Or his, I meant to say. Is Bullstrode a nice boyfriend, Perks? You two seem so close—such a lovely couple...”

Her voice had risen just a little too much. Snape looked up from Crabbe and Goyle’s mess of a potion to hear the last few sentences. Instantly he was looming over Pansy Parkinson, staring her down.

“You will not speak for the remainder of the class. You will stay afterward.”

Knowing she had gone too far, Pansy ventured, “I have Herbology next, Professor.”

“No, you don’t.”

He turned his back on her, and continued his restless monitoring of the class. Draco raised his brows at Harry, who

whistled soundlessly. Pansy was for it. Harry would hate for Professor Snape to be angry with him.



The Halloween decorations surpassed anything Harry had yet seen. Thousands of live bats soared through the Great Hall, clinging to the walls, zooming overhead. Pumpkins glowed with the yellow light of the candles within. When the feast suddenly appeared, Harry and his friends grinned at each other in delight.

“Oooh! Brussels sprouts!” Susan called out. “My favourite!”

“Eeeww,” muttered Ernie, whose mother’s sprouts were invariable grey and swimmy, despite all her magic. These, he had to admit, were green and healthy-looking. He still could not be persuaded to taste them, though Harry and Justin were talked into taking a spoonful each.

Harry was on the point of popping one in his mouth, when Professor Quirrell came dashing into the hall, his turban askew and terror on his face. Everyone stared as he ran to the Head Table and gasped, “Troll—in the dungeons—thought you ought to know.”

He sank to the floor in a faint.

Amidst the uproar of questions and screams, Harry and his fellow Hufflepuffs were silent, looking at each other in bewilderment. Harry had warned them that something was wrong with Professor Quirrell, but what were they to make of this?

Purple firecrackers exploded from the end of Professor Dumb-



ledore's wand, and the noise abated. "Prefects—" he commanded, "—lead your Houses back to the dormitories immediately!"

The Hufflepuffs were bewildered. The Slytherins, at their own table, were outraged. Their Houses were in the dungeons.

"But—" Hannah protested helplessly, "—if the troll is in the dungeons, why is the Headmaster sending us there?"

Further up the table, the Hufflepuff prefects were in hot debate. The seventh year male prefect, Bryn Llewellyn, shook his head at the others, saying, "If we stick together, we should be all right. We can deal with the troll if we come across it."

Primula Macmillan hissed furiously, "The Headmaster never thinks of Hufflepuff. Never!"

Llewellyn shrugged in resignation. "We'll keep the kids in the middle. Come on, then." More loudly, he called out, "Follow me! Stick together and stay with us prefects! If we stay together we've nothing to fear!"

Harry glanced up at the Head Table. Professor McGonagall was talking very excitedly to the Headmaster, her face angry and disapproving. Professor Snape—was gone. Harry caught a glimpse of black robes vanishing through a door behind the table. With a jolt of fear, he looked back at Quirrell. The faint had not lasted long. The turbaned professor was already up, slinking away, head down and saying nothing to anyone. He was making for the great doors.

*This is it! Harry thought in panic. He'll go after the Stone*

*while everyone is distracted!*

He squeezed into the line of Hufflepuffs hurrying to the exit. Quirrell was out the door and around a corner. The students, slower and confused, jammed together as all four tables reached the doors at the same time. Prefects called to their charges. Some of the professors were coming to help. Harry took advantage of the pandemonium to slip under Llewellyn's arm, glad for once that he was small. He pushed through the thronging students, trying to get out and see where Quirrell was going.

"Harry, wait!" Draco saw his friend hurrying through the crowd, a set, determined look on his face. At first Draco meant to call Harry over and walk part of the way to the dungeons with him. In an instant, though, he understood the reason for Harry's rush.

*It's Quirrell! It was all a trick!*

"Time to go!" he muttered, shoving Blaise and Daphne out of his way. An argument was breaking out between the Slytherin and Ravenclaw prefects. Draco clung to the walls, and was away before anyone could notice him, hard on Harry's heels. He heard footsteps ahead—light running steps.

In the Great Hall, Minerva McGonagall, thinking at once of Harry, had persuaded the Headmaster that sending half the children in the direction of the troll was not a sound plan.

The Headmaster sent out more sparks, and declared, "On further thought, it would be best if you all remained in the Hall and finished this splendid feast. Return to your seats at



once. Prefects—see that no one leaves until I return. Professors McGonagall, Flitwick, and Sprout, with me. The rest of you, remain with the students.”

With that, he led the Heads of Houses out the little door through which Snape had previously exited. The confusion, already great, was even worse now. Some students had left the Hall and had to be recalled. A milling mass was at the doors, some pushing to get in, and some (who had not heard the Headmaster’s words) still pushing to leave. With considerable effort, the students were herded back to their tables.

Hermione had noticed that Quirrell was no longer on the floor. Where had he gone? It was a disgrace that the Defense Professor had come panicked and fainting into the Great Hall, unable to deal with a troll.

Except—

It took her only a moment to come to the logical conclusion.

*Quirrell did it deliberately—as a diversion!*

She searched the room for Harry—and then for Draco—and then was relieved to see Neville at the Gryffindor table. But where were the other two boys?

“Oh, Harry! You *didn’t!*”



Harry found his observation post deserted. He immediately called for Muffy, and rounded on her.

“Muffy! Where have you *been?*”

“Master Harry! We watches for Professor Purple Hat, just like you tells us. But we only watches when he comes near this room. House elves has their own ways of knowing where professors is.”

Harry thumped the wall in exasperation. “You haven’t seen him?”

“No, Master Harry. He is not been coming this way.”

“All right then. I’m sorry I yelled at you. You go on back now, and I’ll watch here for awhile.”

The house elf appeared about to object, and then winced with pain at the thought of such defiance and popped away.

In a moment, Draco came pounding down the corridor.

“Harry!” he whispered loudly.

“Around here!” Harry whispered back.

Draco hurried into the club room, and in a moment stepped behind the decorative screen.

“There you are! Any sign of Quirrell?”

“Not yet. He might double back, though.”

“What’s this?” Draco asked, his finger tracing the tiny circle of the Eye.

“Finn’s Eye. It’s a thing I learned. You can’t see it from outside, but you can see what’s going on all the way along the corridor.”

Draco tried it, and was impressed. “That’s brilliant! How do you cast it?”

“Well...” Harry knew Professor McGonagall would not like him blabbing about her personal Family Magic. “—It’s com-



plicated. Listen, Draco! I think Quirrell might be going after the Stone tonight, while everyone's distracted. If we see him, we'll need to get word to one of the Professors, but I don't know where Professor Snape went. He ran out the back door as soon as Quirrell came in."

Draco nodded sagely. "He probably went to guard it right away. He said there were protections. If Quirrell comes, we should let him go by. He's bound to run into Professor Snape, and *then* he'll be sorry. When we see him, we should run back to the Hall and find—somebody..."

"Professor McGonagall or Professor Flitwick, I reckon. We could tell the Headmaster, but I've never spoken to him."

Scoffing at the idea, Draco said, "I have. He'd probably ignore us. Flitwick is all right. I suppose McGonagall is, too. She's certainly a competent witch. Even Father thinks so."

"Yes, she is," Harry agreed, peering anxiously through the Eye. "You'd be amazed at the things she knows."



Snape entered Fluffy's lair very warily, looking in to see if the trapdoor had been disturbed. No one appeared to have entered tonight, other than himself.

The Cerberus roused itself and glared at Snape, its chains rattling. Instead of glaring back, Snape whistled a formless, aimless tune to keep the monster pacified. A rumble indi-

cated that Fluffy was not certain that Snape's efforts qualified as music. With a sneer, Snape ducked back out of the chamber, closing the heavy door behind him. He would wait in the shadows of the corridor.

"Everyone's a critic," he snarled.



With growing anxiety, Hermione watched the tables to see if Harry or Draco had returned. The other students had settled back and were digging into the food, talking and speculating all the while.

The other Hufflepuff first-years were gathered at their places, but were not eating very heartily. Hermione saw their heads together, as they held a whispered conference. Cedric Diggory was leaning over, asking them a question, a frown on his handsome face. Susan Bones shook her head, and Cedric's frown deepened.

Hermione glanced at the Slytherin table. Draco had not returned, and there was talk there, too. Why weren't they *doing* anything? What if something happened to Harry and Draco? Would they try to confront Professor Quirrell all on their own? What if they stumbled on the troll? What if they stumbled on the troll and Professor Quirrell at the same time?

It was impossible to remain seated. Hermione jumped up, ignoring the hisses and complaints of the other Ravenclaw girls, and looked for someone to help her. A grown-up. A teacher.

*Oh, thank goodness! Just the person!*





Time passed, and Harry and Draco grew bored. They were hungry, too, having missed the feast entirely.

"I don't think he's coming," Draco declared. "I think he was just having us on. Maybe he wanted to see what Dumbledore would do in an emergency."

Harry was inclined to wait a little longer, but admitted that Draco was probably right. If Quirrell hadn't come by now, he likely wouldn't come at all. Or perhaps—Harry hated the very thought—he had found a different way to the Stone. That was a very distressing idea. He considered another possibility.

"Maybe Professor Snape has already caught him. Maybe he's taken him to the Headmaster's Office and Quirrell's already locked up."

Draco liked that idea. "And everyone's having their dinner now, except us. Come on, Harry, let's go back to the Great Hall. Maybe those gluttons have left something."

The two boys left the room and headed back down the hall. Harry felt a little disappointed. It would have been so glorious to have captured Quirrell in the act. Still, it would be nearly as good if Professor Snape had done it and got all the credit. He wondered if the Professor would get some sort of prize. He was about to ask Draco what sort of awards someone could get for heroic deeds in the wizarding world, when the light

changed down the hall. He glanced up.

"Wait," he said, putting out his hand to clutch at Draco's robes.

A thud. Heavy, shuffling footsteps. The sound of something dragged along a stone floor. A darker shadow amidst all the others. With a trickle of dread, Harry shrank against the wall, pulling Draco with him. Draco nearly objected, when he saw the look on Harry's face.

They had passed a statue of John Dee, Sorcerer Royal, not ten paces back. The two boys slid behind it, trying to be silent and invisible. Harry thought of the Invisibility Cloak of his play and wished with all his might that he had one of his own. Beside him, Draco's breathing was quick and shallow.

A monstrous shape took form as the shuffling grew closer. In the dim light, the creature looked grey all over; and a stench, faint at first, became almost a revolting, corporeal thing. The troll grunted with every breath as it stumped along on legs like tree trunks. Its tiny head perched grotesquely on the huge, misshapen body.

Harry stared at it in horror. It had to be at least twelve feet tall. The scraping sound he had heard was the sound of an enormous wooden club dragging on the stone floor whilst clenched in a mighty fist. Harry wanted to look at Draco, in hopes that the other boy would have a confident expression on his face, but he was afraid to turn his head lest he make a noise and attract the smallest iota of attention.

The troll paused, wagged its long ears, and then continued



down the corridor. Harry's mouth was dry, and he licked his lips. It was moving away—it had its back to them.

And then it paused again. And sniffed. And then sniffed again—long and deep. Another pause.

With a “Whuff!” of indignation, the troll swung its massive bulk to stare in their direction. Its squinting eyes narrowed at the sight of the marble statue, and the club was raised and then was coming down—down—

“Run!” Harry shouted.

“Run!” Draco screamed.

The club crashed down, and the air was full of marble splinters. Draco was hit by a ricochet and stumbled into Harry. The boys fell together, knees and elbows bruising, and the troll paused, studying the small, shrill-voiced creatures scrabbling along the floor.

Deciding that they looked tasty enough, the troll took a heavy step in their direction. Harry scuttled back crab-wise, fumbling for his wand. Draco clutched at his knee, moaning. Watching the troll advancing, one thudding step, then another, Harry tried to think of a spell—any spell—to stop it. His mind had gone blank.

“*Incendio!*” he bellowed. The troll's club blazed up like a torch. Draco rolled over on his back, trying to get up. The boys thought Harry's spell might help, until the troll stared at the burning club, and with an approving grunt, decided that it liked it. It advanced on them again.

“Good one, Harry!” Draco gritted out. “Now he can cook us

before he eats us!” He thrust out his own wand, and gabbled out, “*Tarantallegra!*”

This did slow down the troll, who began a ponderous sort of dance: “Thump-ump! Thump-ump!” Another double step, this time in their direction. “Thump-ump! Thump-ump!”

Harry swore at his robes. He yanked on Draco, trying to help him up. “—If it doesn't stamp us to mince first!”

The troll bared its brown teeth, moving a little faster. In desperation, Harry yelled out the spell he had learned that very day. “*Wingardium Leviosa!*”

The flaming club flew out of the troll's hand and hovered over its head. With a grunt of outrage, the troll reached up to grab at it.

Draco gasped out, “*Wingardium Leviosa,*” and the club edged up, just a little higher.

Distracted, the troll snatched again and again, roaring its fury. The boys worked together to keep the club away from the troll, and the troll attempted a pathetic, thundering attempt at a hop to get at it.

“This is fun!” Harry laughed.

A mistake. Not even a troll likes being teased. It lost interest in the club, and glared its tormentors, head down, ready to charge.

“I think—maybe—” said Harry, grabbing onto Draco, “—that we should—”

“Harry! Draco! Get behind me!”

Charity Burbage rushed past them, gleaming in her feast



robes and jewels. “*Stupefy!*” she shouted at the troll.

A red light shot out of her wand, hitting the troll in the chest. The creature paused, surprised and bewildered, its jaw slack.

“Get back to the Great Hall!” she ordered the boys. “Go!”

“We can’t just leave you here!” Harry protested.

The levitation spell dissipated, and the fiery club crashed to the floor behind the troll in a shower of sparks.

“Go!” she yelled at them in exasperation. The troll was moving again. “*Stupefy,*” she screamed, her voice cracking, putting every ounce of power she had into the hex. She ground her teeth in vexation. She had been told often enough that she was useless at Defense. She had barely scraped an O.W.L. in it.

The troll stopped moving, and stood there, puzzled.

Snape heard the noise as he was coming down the staircase after his fruitless wait for Quirrell. He broke into a run.

*What is going on?*

He was halfway down as he saw a mass of fire fall to the floor of the corridor. In the lurid light he could make out that blasted troll, and just beyond a young woman battling the creature. Harry was behind her, his voice high and childlike, his eyes wide.

It was a shocking, horrifying sight. The woman’s hair glowed red and had fallen in tendrils about her face. One arm was out, sheltering Harry. For a moment, it seemed—

“*Sectumsempra!*” he roared. “*Diffindo! Reducto!*”





## CHAPTER 14

## MY WORD, SEVERUS!"

Dumbledore remonstrated. "Did you absolutely have to *kill* it?"

"Yes, I did," Snape answered curtly.

The troll had toppled over, bloodied and half-dismembered, just as Dumbledore rushed to the rescue. Minerva blew out a breath of relief at the sight of Harry unharmed, but gave the boy a sharp look, all the same. Snape was prepared to do rather more than that. Flitwick was still down the hall, and Pomona behind him, puffing with effort. Albus and Minerva spoke quietly to each other, glancing at the dead troll.

Charity, at least, seemed unharmed. Snape sneaked another look at her. The firelight had dimmed, and she was herself now: dark blonde hair, round cheeks, and wearing a color he had never seen on Lily. The resemblance had been strong, but brief. Charity Burbage was not at all like Lily Evans; though, as Lily might well have done, she was fussing over those two undeserving young dunderheads.

"If your friend Hermione hadn't told me you were missing, who knows what might have happened?"

Harry was embarrassed, and wisely held his peace, but

Draco was full of excuses.

"I think we did rather well, actually. We disarmed the creature, and with a bit of luck we could have outrun it, and anyway nothing happened—"

"Mr Malfoy," Snape said, with terrible calm, "keep digging. The hole you are about to find yourself in will just get deeper."

Draco turned red. He and Harry looked at each other, wondering what to say.

"Professor—," Harry began uncertainly. "We weren't trying to show off. We were worried—about—you know," he muttered in a low voice, looking uneasily at Charity and Minerva, and with even greater unease at the beaming Headmaster. "We just wanted to help."

Snape exploded. "You could have been *killed*, and a bloody stupid way to die it would have been! Your mother gave her *life* for you ten years ago on this *very night*. So good of you to display how cheaply you value it!"

Harry hung his head, but Snape sensed a kind of resistance there, too. It was all he could do not to give the idiot boy a clout over the ear. Charity came to his side and touched his arm. It helped him restrain himself—just barely.

Sprout arrived, and exclaimed in some horror over the bloody remains of the troll. "My goodness! Professor Snape! You certainly don't use half-measures!" She turned to Harry, not unkindly, and said, "I'm very sorry to see you out wander-



ing, Mr Potter! I thought you were a sensible lad. What were you and Mr Malfoy thinking?"

"I was in a hurry to get to the Common Room, Professor, and I got separated from the rest. Draco and I were going to go to the dungeons together, and then we heard the troll and ran this way."

Snape considered the boy's story a fairly good lie. There *had* been confusion. The troll had come this way—perhaps following their scent. Pomona, to her credit, did not appear to believe a word of it.

"Well, whatever you planned, Mr Potter, you were very foolish to run ahead by yourself. You know you're supposed to stick close to your prefects and your friends. I'm sorry, but we'll have to do something to help you remember never to be so careless again."

Snape spoke up, "I was going to give Mr Malfoy detention tomorrow morning with Mr Filch. Perhaps some manual labour might be beneficial for Mr Potter as well. The both of them need to learn *to do as they are told*." He glared at each boy in turn, hoping that his words penetrated those thick skulls.

"Very sound thinking, Professor Snape," Pomona approved. "After all, poor Mr Filch will have to work very hard to clean up this horrid mess. The boys need to understand that actions have consequences!"

Draco and Harry looked at the blood and soot smearing the walls, floor—even the ceiling, and then looked at each

other in dismay. Detention with Filch!

"My concept of punishment, however, does not include starvation," Snape said coldly. "I suggest you return to the Great Hall and see if any dinner is left."

Miserable that Professor Snape was angry with him, Harry wondered if this would be the end of their Saturday afternoon tea-times that he liked so much. He was both relieved and concerned by the Professor's next words:

"And I'll see you tomorrow afternoon, Mr Potter, when we can thrash out this latest misadventure of yours at greater length!"

"Just go, gentlemen," Minerva said, shooing the boys away.

Walking past Professor Flitwick, Harry whispered, "We used the levitation charm on the club, Professor!"

"—and it worked!" Draco added, still impressed with himself.

Flitwick's face was grave, but he gave the boys a nod, and pat on the shoulder to Draco, who was closer. Professor Sprout hustled the boys back to the Great Hall, while the others fell to discussing this extraordinary event.



"Really! Trolls in the corridors! First-years thinking themselves ready to do battle against them!" Sprout muttered as the doors to the Great Hall swung open to admit them. "What is Hogwarts coming to?"

"Detention," groaned Draco to Harry. "I can't believe we're



being punished for saving the whole school! And we'll have to scrub like—like—*muggles*!”

Harry grunted noncommittally, guessing that Draco was unaccustomed to punishments of any kind. Harry was not looking forward to detention either. He was certainly familiar with cleaning up all manner of disgusting things from his days from the Dursleys, but he had hoped those days were behind him. He knew that Professor Snape wanted to protect him, but Harry's motives were good. Other people might not understand, but Professor Snape *knew* the situation with the stone, and should appreciate Harry doing his bit to help. Feeling very misunderstood and put-upon, he slouched into the Great Hall.

The noise rose at the sight of their disheveled state.

“—Did you see the troll?”

“—What happened?”

“—Where are the professors?”

“Harry!” called Cedric. “Are you all right, mate?”

Harry gave the Hufflepuffs a wry grin and a thumbs-up.

Draco was not so modest. His downcast shuffle opened out to a swagger, and he declared, “We saw it. We fought it. We lived to tell the tale.”

More noise and speculation. Harry thought credit should be given where it was due, as he slid into his place at the table.

“We were holding it off when Professor Burbage came to help. And then Professor Snape arrived and he—killed it.”

“Killed it?” gasped Justin, wide-eyed.

“Are you sure?” asked Hannah.

“Pretty sure.”

His plate of food was still warm and looked very inviting. Susan had cut a generous piece of treacle tart for him as well. He dug in, waving at his housemates to wait until he had a few bites in him, before he told them the whole story. At the Slytherin table, Draco was gesticulating vividly, spinning a tale of derring-do. His friends listened in amazement.

Most of those in the Great Hall, however, were in agreement that Harry Potter must be due most of the credit. Awestruck gossip swelled the noise. Covert glances and outright stares of admiration focused on the dark-haired boy obliviously gnawing on a turkey leg.

“—he's so brave,” murmured Lavender Brown.

“—and so modest,” sighed Parvati Patil.

Hermione slipped away from the Ravenclaws and sat down by him briefly.

“Harry! I was so worried! I'm so glad Professor Burbage found you! You could have been killed, you know!”

“Yeah, I suppose. It was pretty big, and it smelled worse than anything you can imagine! Professor Snape took care of it quick smart, though. He was—impressive.” Seeing that Hermione was still angry with him, he soothed her with, “—and Draco and I have detention. Professor Snape was really put out with us.”



"And so he should be!" Hermione affirmed briskly. She got up to go hound Draco as well, but added, "I'm just so glad you weren't hurt!"

The older Hufflepuffs wanted every detail of what Professor Snape had done to defeat the creature. Harry, in between savoury bites, found some pleasure in giving them the blow-by-blow.

"Detention?" asked Susan. "No points lost?"

"They didn't say anything about points," Harry shrugged.

"Well! That's all right then," Susan decided, serving Harry another slice of tart.



294 Rather than leaving the troll for the appalled Filch to manage on his own, the Professors kindly disposed of the remains. Dumbledore was not happy that any creature should lose its life, but could hardly blame Snape for defending students.

"But the fact that a troll was loose in Hogwarts in the first place—" Minerva began hotly.

"—is a matter for discussion tomorrow, I think," said Dumbledore. "For now, let us rejoin our friends and students in the Great Hall."

Filius Flitwick, Minerva noted, was unhappy and unsatisfied at the Headmaster's blithe speech. She must persuade Severus to bring both Filius and Pomona into their private councils. The troll, while dangerous, was not the most danger-

ous thing in Hogwarts at the present time.

Snape stood irresolute, staring at the patterns the blood had spattered onto the wall. If he went back into the Great Hall, the sight of Harry happily eating, smugly sure of his own invincibility, might goad him into saying or doing something that could never be taken back.

Luckily, Charity came to his rescue. "If you don't object, Headmaster, I could do with a bit of quiet." She told them, a bit embarrassed, "I really don't feel like facing any questions at the moment. If you wouldn't mind seeing me to my quarters, Severus, we could have some sandwiches there. What do you say?" she asked Snape.

"What?" he responded, rather rudely, not sure what had been said to him.

"I said," she repeated patiently. "supper in my quarters. What do you say?"

Albus was beaming at him, which made him feel very contrary, but Minerva and Filius were industriously in conversation about the troll, their faces averted. Snape gave the Headmaster his haughtiest sneer, and turned away. "That would be very—agreeable."

Charity led the way down the corridor, and Snape had an uneasy feeling he was being watched. He glanced behind him at his three colleagues, but Minerva had called Albus' attention to the state of the damaged statue, and if they had been staring



at him, they had looked away before he could catch them at it.

“—and some Irish coffee, too,” Charity was saying. “I make a rather good Irish coffee.”

“What? Yes, very nice.” His other colleagues vanished as they turned a corner. He cleared his throat. “I was quite alarmed for you.”

With a weak laugh, she confessed, “I was quite alarmed for myself! I was a perfect fool in Defense. I’m no good at dueling at all.” Her laugh warmed a little, “Had I but *known* the troll was involved, I would have brought reinforcements!”

They were climbing the stairs toward her rooms. More lightly, she said, “The boys did rather well confusing the troll, when all’s said and done. I only slowed it down, but perhaps the boys could have made their escape if they hadn’t been so gallant and protective. Harry refused to run away and leave me! That’s worth something, Severus!”

“Is it worth their hare-brained lives? Young dunderheads. Harry was behaving just like his wretched father James Potter. There’s a man who fancied himself invincible, and you know what came of that!”

He was silent, not trusting the discretion of the portraits they passed until they were safely past the door to Charity’s quarters. Immediately on entering, he burst out: “I daresay it will come as no surprise to you that I hate to see Harry displaying any resemblance to that idiot.”

“I do remember what a tiresome tease James Potter was, but he *was* Harry’s father, Severus. James is bound to make an appearance in Harry now and then.”

“And I intend to see that that happens as rarely as possible. I don’t want Harry getting the idea that rules don’t apply to him.”

He stalked over to her fireplace and brooded there, while Charity summoned an elf and gave it quick instructions. In only a few moments, the elf had returned, and a small table was set for two. A plate of sandwiches, a tureen of steaming soup, and a carafe of wine appeared.

“Come on,” Charity urged him away from the fire. “You’ll feel better after you eat. And so will I.”

He grumbled, more out of habit than for any other reason. He threw himself into the place she indicated, scowling at the table. Partan bree? The creamy crab soup was a favourite of his. Actually he was quite hungry, he found, as he tore into a sandwich. Charity served him a bowl of the soup, and for a time he thought of nothing but the good and comforting food before him.

After he had finished the soup, two sandwiches, and a glass of wine, Charity asked him, “Harry lives with his muggle relatives, doesn’t he? He doesn’t seem spoiled to me, but you would know better than I. Don’t they set proper boundaries for him?”

“They—” He paused and made a decision. “I must have your word that you will divulge nothing of what I am about to tell you.”

“You have it.”



“Harry’s relatives are—a fairly repulsive lot. They hate magic and treated him badly until I intervened last summer. I think,” he said, considering the matter carefully, “that it is not so much a matter of no boundaries being set, as of setting capricious and unreasonable ones. Harry has little experience trusting the adults in his life. If a thing needs doing, his impulse is to do it himself, and not to expect help from anyone. I am working on teaching him to respect his elders, but with staff members like Quirrell—Binns, too, I suppose—it’s an uphill battle.”

“I see.” She sipped her wine and sat thinking. “It would be very important, then, to remain calm, and to always be the adult, whatever he gets up to. If you want him to respect his elders, you have to present him elders worthy of respect. It’s too late, at his age, for him to take it all on faith. Not like Hermione Granger! I should never have known that Harry and Draco were missing had she not come running to tell me. Exactly the opposite situation: she trusts adults more than her peers—or herself, I think.”

Snape grunted assent, enjoying the pudding that appeared for afters. This was all very pleasant, he decided. Charity’s rooms were attractively decorated. He might ask her, in future, about the exotic artifacts spaced among the books on her shelves. Very comfortable—not excessively feminine. Not as spare as Minerva’s quarters, but pleasant in their own way.

After the meal was taken away, she set about brewing

coffee to which she added a generous dollop of Irish whiskey. Snape was pleased that the chair provided him by the fire was proportioned adequately for a man of his height.

“I think you you’ll like it,” she murmured, passing him the heavy stemmed goblet. He took it, and their hands touched briefly.

A shock, of sorts. Snape stiffened, and the liquid sloshed threateningly.

“Sorry,” Charity apologised, settling back opposite him with her own drink.

Snape eyed her warily, feeling uncommonly alert and on edge. The flicker of—*something*—reminded him of the time he had touched that secret book of Minerva’s. Not so unpleasant, of course—but there was *something* there.

Unaccountably nervous, he concentrated on his coffee, and drank it without words. Perhaps it was time to make his farewells. Charity must be tired after such a night...

He set the glass aside, and stood.

“I must go. I have a great deal—”

“Must you? I’m sorry. I’d hoped we could have a nice long chat...”

“Perhaps another night,” he countered, feeling very peculiar. “The hour is late.”

She did not argue with him, but stood herself, stepping in between him and the fire. To his surprise and alarm, she put her hands on his shoulders.

“I haven’t thanked you properly for coming to my rescue,” she



said. "I really was rather frightened, and you were very impressive."

A rustle of silk and a scent of lime flowers. She stood on tiptoe and pressed a kiss lightly on his cheek. Snape stared at her, wondering what had come over her to do something so extraordinary. He had not noticed the colour of her eyes before. They were a light, warm brown, and they were looking very frankly into his. Snape did not need to actively use legilimancy to see what had crossed her mind.

Another kiss, this time on the lips: brief, soft. Another long and meaningful look.

"My hero."

Had the world just changed? Snape considered what to do. He considered what he ought to do, what he wanted to do, and what he ought to want to do. Charity's expression was already changing: uncertain, abashed, preparing to make a joke of it all, thinking of how to give him an escape route and a way for her to save face.

"Hardly," he answered. Deciding that serious thought could go hang, he pulled her to him, and gave her a brief, rough kiss in return. Clearing his throat, he called for his quarters and plunged into the flames without a backward look.

And so missed her little victory dance.



The wizard in the purple turban limped furiously down the

stairs, cursing the monster in the third-floor chamber. All his plans had blown up in his face like a misbrewed potion. All his patient waiting in the stuffy closet while the troll snuffled after those two infernal boys—all the anxious minutes while the old fool and his minions dithered back and forth. It had all been for naught.

No—not entirely. At least he knew the path to his prize was guarded by a Cerberus. He had never come across one before, and had not expected it to be so resistant to magic. He hissed in pain. Blood was running down his leg, pooling in his boot. He needed to get back to his quarters and deal with the wound where no one would see.

A Cerberus! Where had the old fool found one? No need to wonder—it was that oaf Hagrid, no doubt. Ironical that his earlier use of the buffoon had resulted in Hagrid's permanent residence at Hogwarts, and thus his unwitting interference in his own plans. No matter—he would have his revenge on him. On the lot of them.

On the Malfoy boy, certainly. The fanged serpent of his father's family's coat of arms had the right of it. "*Nemo me impune lacessit*," He whispered, lingering over the sibilants. *No one harms me with impunity*. A fitting motto. The boy would pay, as would that slippery devil his father. Nor would he forget the traitor Snape, who now fawned over his greatest enemy, that wretched little brat, Harry Potter. Every one of them would pay.

"Hurry, you fool!" he snarled, hating this damaged vessel, ignoring the protests and excuses from the voice of his ser-



vant—a weak voice, growing ever weaker. No matter. He would have better lodgings before long—and lodgings more permanent than some in the castle would like.



Harry's eyes squeezed open reluctantly to the first light of morning. Professor Snape was angry with him. He had detention this morning with Mr Filch. The world was a dark and terrible place.

Accepting that he had to face the day, he pushed the covers aside. With a whisper, a soft package slid off the foot of the bed to the floor. Harry peered over his blankets, puzzled, and reached out for the parcel. It was very light.

A present? Who would give me a present—especially after last night?

Justin was snoring faintly, and Ernie was completely under the covers—even his head. Harry quietly pulled the wrappings away, and found something fluid and silvery-grey that slithered through his hands almost like water. He unfolded it, and found that it was a piece of cloth—and much larger than he had thought at first. He jumped out of bed, and kept unfolding it, layer after layer of a fabric lighter than any silk he had imagined.

It fastened—it had a clasp. A cloak? He rushed to the little mirror by the door, ready to admire himself.

His body was missing.

Astonished, Harry gaped at the sight. A disembodied head

stared back him, green eyes wide. He pulled the cloak over his head. The cloth was so light that he could see through it fairly easily, but no reflection gazed back.

A piece of parchment lay on the floor. Harry snatched it up, hoping to unravel this mystery. The note said:

*Your father left this in my possession before he died.  
It is time it was returned to you.  
Use it well.*

There was no signature. Harry felt very strange. Who had sent the cloak? Had it really once belonged to his father?

At once all sorts of impossibilities became possible. Harry pulled the cloak around him, thinking of what he might do—all the things he *could* do—things that Professor Snape need never know or worry about.

"Brilliant!" he whispered. "Absolutely brilliant!"





## CHAPTER 15

**THIS IS DISGUSTING."**

said Draco, for perhaps the hundredth time during their Saturday morning detention.

"Draco, it's not so bad," Harry disagreed. "I've seen worse. Come on, we've only got this bit left."

In fact, Harry felt very competent and experienced compared to Draco, who plainly had never cleaned anything in his life. Used to Dudley watching him without lifting a finger himself, Harry was not as put out as he might otherwise have been at Draco's helplessness.

"What do you mean, you've seen worse?" Draco asked suspiciously, slopping water down the walls. He absolutely refused to squeeze the excess water from a sponge, calling it "gross" and "foul." "Do you mean you've done things like this before?"

"Well, Draco..." Harry did not want to reveal unpleasant details of his life with the Dursleys. "Muggles have to do things by hand. It's normal to pitch in with chores like this."

"Are you saying those muggles made you work

for them—like a house elf?" Draco stopped his pretense of cleaning and stared at Harry. "I knew it! They *were* horrible!"

"Don't make me do all this myself," Harry told him, feeling harassed. "We can talk about my family some other time." He was kneeling in soapy water that had soaked through his pants and socks. The soap had a sharp, unfamiliar smell that was rather unpleasant. He threw Draco's neglected sponge at the blond boy. "Get that bit in the corner and I'll finish up here. If Filch gets back and were not done, we'll probably get another detention!"

Draco sulkily returned to diluting the few remaining bloodstains with water until they were invisible. The professors had largely cleaned the corridor the night before. It had only taken Harry a little over an hour and a half to scrub and mop, with Draco's repulsed, unwilling assistance. He could probably have done it more quickly working alone, but he was not going to let Draco behave like Dudley—not entirely.

"There!" The floor was wetter than it should be, but all in all, it was much better than it had been.

Draco was leaning on the wall, loafing again. Harry made him help gather up the supplies.

"Too bad we didn't net Quirrell last night," Draco remarked. "I wonder what happened to him?"

Harry slapped his head. How could he forget?

"Muffy!" he called. Draco looked at him in surprise and then blinked as the house elf appeared.



"What can I do for Little Master Harry?"

"You said you had ways of watching Professor Quirrell. Did you see where he went last night?"

Draco interrupted. "You set the house elves to spy for you? That's brilliant!"

Harry shrugged and turned again to Muffy. "Well?"

The house elf said, "Professor Purple Hat is been hiding from us. He waits until everybody goes away, then he sneaks out and goes upstairs."

"What!"

Slyly, the elf told them, "And just a few minutes later, he comes down again, his leg all bloody. A big something bit Professor Purple Hat and he was not pleased—no—not pleased at all."

Harry grinned at Draco. "Fluffy stopped him! Hurray for Hagrid!" "Absolutely useless, that Quirrell," Draco snorted with contempt. "Couldn't even deal with a Cerberus!"

"Maybe there's something about them. Do you know how to fight one?"

"Well—no—but it can't be that hard. I mean, if Hagrid can get the thing upstairs, it can't be that hard, can it?"

"I'm not sure, Draco. I think Hagrid must be especially talented with animals. Maybe one of the professors helped. Maybe there are special spells and things. We should read up about Cerberi and find out what works."

"Or just ask your friend the groundskeeper. He must know."

"But then he'd want to know why we want to know. We got lucky that one time, but if we ask outright he'll get suspicious. Surely there's something in the library..."



Snape was in a far better mood by tea-time than Harry could have predicted, based on the man's angry words last night. He waved Harry in, looking up from a heavy leather-bound book. Once Harry was perched in his usual chair, he set the book aside and regarded the boy.

"I understand that the corridor is now, if not pristine, at least better than it was last night."

"Yes, sir. Draco and I worked really hard—that is—Draco hadn't used a mop or a sponge before, but he picked up quite a bit about—"

Snape said dryly, "I can well imagine how the work was apportioned between you. Perhaps the experience will help you restrain yourself in future when you feel that irresistible urge to be a hero."

"It wasn't like that!" Harry protested. "We really thought Quirrell was moving on the Stone! And we were right!"

"What do you mean?"

"He did go after it! After the rest of us were out of sight!"

"How do you know?" Snape pressed him.

"Muffy told me."

"Muffy?"



"The house elf," Harry confided, extremely proud of his resourcefulness. "I asked her to watch who went toward those stairs. Muffy said he went up but came down right away, and that it looked like Fluffy had bitten him! So you see," he added virtuously, "we had the right idea."

"Don't talk like that to me," Snape growled. "The troll could have ground you to strawberry jam. The headmaster's orders were contradictory, true: but you knew better. I told you that there are protections around the Stone. You chose not to believe me. Do you think I'm stupid?"

Harry blushed. "Of course, not, Professor!"

"Then don't treat me as if only you have all the answers! This is not your fight, Harry. Let me deal with this my own way. But I can't do it and protect you from your own recklessness at the same time!" The tea arrived, and Muffy ducked her head at Snape's cold stare. "You!" he commanded. "Muffy! In future you will report Professor Quirrell's movements to me!"

"Yes, Master Potions Master!" whimpered Muffy. With a "pop" she vanished.

Snape gave Harry a serious look, while shoving a plate of biscuits at him. Thinking of what Charity had said to him, he tried to soften his voice. "I know, Harry, that you are not accustomed to having other people look after you. I know that you are accustomed to doing everything yourself, but you are a child, and I am your—proxy—guardian. I am dealing with this—" he paused

and went on in a leap of faith"—and Professor McGonagall is also involved. You respect her abilities, do you not?"

"Yes, sir," Harry slouched in his chair and did not look at Snape. "I just wanted to help," he muttered.

Controlling himself, Snape replied, "I know you do. And the best thing you can do to help is continue your studies. Focus on your schoolwork. Learn all you can. Become the wizard you ought to be. This issue with Quirrell is serious, *but it is being handled*. If you need a diversion, spend time with your friends. The first quidditch game of the year is coming up. Or play gobstones—or you could improve your chess game."

"Draco always wins," Harry sulked.

Feeling his blood pressure soar, Snape forced himself to drink his tea. "Then teach the game to a novice," he suggested acidly. "Teach it to Longbottom. There's no better way to learn something well than by teaching it to someone else!"



He simply did not dare tell Professor Snape about the cloak. The Professor was so worried about protecting him that he would certainly take it away and put in Harry's Gringotts vault, along with all those other family heirlooms. Harry was not sure if he could tell anybody about something so precious. Hermione would want to tell a teacher. Draco would want to tell his father. Neville would worry about getting in trouble.



Justin and Ernie—now that was a possibility...

Yes, he might show it to them. They would really enjoy seeing a cloak sort of like the one in the story, even if it didn't look much like the legendary Cloak of Invisibility. The borrowed black cloak they had used for the play had become the image in his own mind of that famous treasure. This was different: almost not like a real cloak at all—more a big piece of cloth that you draped over you like a ghost costume. Still, it worked, and it opened all sorts of possibilities for Harry.

Before he showed it to his friends, he wanted to try it out all by himself. It had been his father's after all, and that made it rather grand. Maybe his dad had had it when he was in school!

Thus, Harry lay quietly in his curtained bed that night, waiting until Justin and Ernie were fast asleep. He had gone to bed before them, fully dressed under his covers, the cloak folded under his pillow, hoping he did not doze off and ruin his own plans.

There—the first faint snore. Harry waited a little longer, pushing the curtains aside, watching for any movements. Slowly he slid out of bed, and pulled out the cloak. Draping it over himself as best he could in the dark, he felt his way to the door, and opened it just enough to squeeze through. The light in the arched corridor showed him that his feet were visible, and Harry adjusted the cloak accordingly.

Satisfied, he tiptoed down the hall to the shallow flight of stairs up to the Common Room.

A number of his fellow badgers were there: a handful of the sixth and seventh years. In the firelight, Herman Wintringham was playing the lute softly for a group of girls who lounged dreamily on cushions. A few couples snogged discreetly in shadowy corners. Harry made his way through the room unobserved, nearly hugging himself with glee. The cloak really worked!

If he were quiet, no one would notice the portrait opening. Everyone was busy, engrossed in music or romance, and Harry cracked it open a little and clambered through, tugging the soft folds of the cloak as it snagged. He shut the opening with care. The two blonde goddesses were curled up, asleep in the flowery meadow. Harry grinned to himself, and set out to explore Hogwarts all by himself. He wanted to find the other Common Rooms, at the very least. The Slytherins must be near Professor Snape, so he set out in that direction first. This would be a night to remember.



Harry was too tired to be at his best that week. The lure of invisibility was just too strong. Every night he wandered through the castle, finding new rooms and new wonders in them. His classwork suffered a little, but no one had complained—yet. The greatest trouble that faced him at the moment was Defense Against the Dark Arts.

Professor Quirrell must know Harry suspected him. That was the only explanation for why he was treating him so badly in



class. The professor was demonstrating jinxes and hexes today as a break from all the reading aloud they had done in the first weeks. It would have been interesting, though Harry had already learned quite a few of the spells from Professor Snape.

Unfortunately, Professor Quirrell was demonstrating the various hexes and jinxes by using Harry as a target.

"P—Potter! Up here!"

Reluctantly, Harry rose to his feet, scowling defiantly.

"No—leave your wand at your desk, Potter! Today you're a mere *m—m—muggle*."

Zach Smith sniggered, elbowing Ron Weasley. Ron answered with a dutiful grin, but felt very uncomfortable. Most of the class watched in uneasy silence. Professor Quirrell was never nice to Harry, but this seemed ominous.

As soon as Harry was standing at the front of the classroom, Professor Quirrell began a very odd speech. Particularly odd, since his customary stammer was absent throughout the whole of it.

"A muggle. You might ask, why a muggle in Defense class? None of your other teachers dare say this, but I tell you that muggles, in certain circumstances, can pose a real and terrible threat. For instance—have any of you ever heard of—Jack the Ripper?"

Justin raised his hand. "Yes, Professor, he killed a lot of women about a hundred years ago."

"Mr Finch-Fletchley. Excellent. Your own muggle background is of some use today."

Justin scowled.

Quirrell continued, "Jack the Ripper is only one example of what the muggles call a serial killer. The phenomenon is not rare in the muggle world. Muggles are prey to numerous mental diseases which can cause them to become savage—violent—malicious—*cruel*."

He would have liked to show them the pictures, but he dared not risk the kind of outcry that would ensue. Instead he described the career of the unknown killer also called Red Jack—how he mutilated his victims—how he sent one woman's kidney to the London muggle aurors—how he blended into the foul muggle world and was never caught.

"And lest you think this a single instance, let me tell you of a Frenchman named Vacher—of the muggle cannibal Fritz Haarman—of H. H. Holmes, 'the Torture Doctor,' a muggle Healer, who built a vast hotel solely for the purpose of torturing and murdering his clientele. And for you young ladies—lest you imagine that muggle females are no threat—let me tell you of the muggle female Belle Gunness, who slaughtered her own children, preyed on lonely men, murdered them for their gold, and then—" he grinned thinly, lips vanishing—"fed them to her pigs. She escaped with her ill-gotten gains, and she too, like Jack the Ripper, was never caught."

A faint, terrified rustle. The children's eyes were glazed in horror.

"Muggles often attack children for deviant, perverted rea-



sons. They kidnap them and subject them to unspeakable suffering before killing them in various ways over long periods of time. Muggle parents fear to leave their children unattended in public, lest they be snatched by such monsters.”

Harry shifted anxiously. He wanted to protest—to say that muggles weren’t *all* like that, but he knew perfectly well that *some* were. What could he say? His own family had locked him in a cupboard. He had not known many nice muggles himself. This was going somewhere, and Harry knew that it would be unpleasant, especially for him.

“It may happen,” Quirrell continued, “that you might find yourself in the muggle world from time to time. If you were to be separated from your friends and family, and a muggle attacked you, what would you do?”

A silence. Then Susan slowly raised her hand.

“Miss Bones?”

“I’d run away, Professor.”

“A reasonable answer. Retreat is often the appropriate response to an attack. But what if the muggle could run faster? What if you were trapped in a narrow alley, or against a wall, with nowhere to run? What would you do—Mr Finnegan?”

Seamus spoke up boldly, “I’d fight him! I’d punch him in the gob!”

“Bravely spoken. But this muggle—” here Professor Quirrell stepped forward and placed an object in Harry’s hands “—has a knife.” He stepped away revealing the long, menacing





weapon in Harry's hand. Harry was too far from a desk to put it down, and he was afraid to throw it away. It looked terribly sharp: double-edged, and serrated where the blade curved into the handle. He held it up to look at it, staring in horrified fascination. The rest of the class gasped at the sight.

"So he has a weapon, Mr Finnegan. You can, as you so quaintly put it, 'punch him in the gob,' but he can stick the knife in you at the same time. Does *anyone* have a better idea?"

"Professor," Ernie said, "We're not allowed to use magic in front of muggles. It's against the law."

"And we're too young," Parvati added. "We'd be punished for using magic away from Hogwarts."

"Mr Macmillan brings up the Statute of Secrecy, a very important law. Yes, we are all bound to protect our world from muggles, *but not at the cost of our lives*. Miss Patil is fearful of transgressing against the regulations that forbid underage magic use. Once again, the law is clear: such use is forbidden, *except* in cases of self-defense. I am shocked that this class has so little instinct for self-preservation. Such a timid lot. Would you really prefer to have your throats cut rather than be scolded by the Ministry?"

The class was silent.

"Miss Brown, since no one has anything to say, I ask you, would you rather have your throat cut than be scolded by the Ministry?"

"No, professor," Lavender whispered.

"I'm very glad to hear it." Quirrell smirked. "There is no reason for any of you to be harmed by a mere muggle. You have wands. You can defend yourselves. The only question in your mind should be: 'which spell should I use?'"

He pointed to Neville. "Mr Longbottom! Any suggestions?"

Neville goggled at him in horror.

"No? Mr Thomas? No? Hmm. Well, perhaps the task of staying alive is just too much for this class. Yes, Miss Bones?"

"The Aurors use stunners to stop dark wizards, sir. Would a stunner work?"

Quirrell smirked. "Can you cast a stunning hex, Miss Bones? An impressive achievement for a first year. Stand up, let's see you. What is the incantation?"

"It's *stupefy*, sir."

"All right, then—there is a muggle coming at you with a knife. Cast your stunner before he stabs you!"

Susan stared at him. "I don't want to stun Harry!"

"Then you're going to die. Stun him!"

Susan pointed her wand at Harry very shakily. "Stupefy!" she called out, sounding very hesitant. A trickle of red light fizzled at the end of her wand. Quirrell uttered a high-pitched laugh.

"Sit down, Miss Bones. You're dead." He smirked at the rest of the class. "Who's next?" He walked over to the Gryffindor boys. "What, given your level of skill, could you actually use against an opponent? You can suggest everything from the



petrification hex to the Killing Curse, but if you are not capable of them, they are useless to you. What will work? Mr Smith—you're a brave Gryffindor. Stand up and defend yourself. What are you going to cast?"

Zach Smith, watching Harry up at the front, had given the matter some thought. "I could use a tripping jinx, professor."

"Can you perform a tripping jinx, Smith?"

"Yes, sir. I think so."

"You had better. Mr Potter— come at Mr Smith with the knife. Don't look so horrified, Potter, just walk towards Mr Smith slowly. Hold the knife up, Potter. Now, Smith! Defend yourself!"

*"Impedimenta!"*

One moment Harry was walking: the next he was tumbling to the floor. The knife flew out of his hand and spun away toward Sally, who shrieked and fell out of her chair. Screams filled the room. The knife clattered against Sally's desk and skittered to a stop. Harry, shocked and shaken, pushed himself up.

"Five points for the spell, Mr Smith, and another five for disarming your opponent. Good work. I think it would behoove you all to learn this jinx. Simple, effective, and with no lasting effects to raise suspicion. The muggle himself will not understand that it was magic: he will believe that he tripped. Mr Weasley, can you perform this spell? It could save your life."

"I'll try, professor."

"Good lad. Potter, up you go." He hauled Harry up, surpris-

ingly strong, and slapped the knife back in Harry's hand, muttering a spell. "Here's your weapon. I think a sticking charm will be much safer for us all—we don't want you inadvertently throwing the knife at another student again!"

"Professor!" Harry objected, trying and failing to drop the knife, "I don't think this is a good—"

"Professor!" Susan protested, "Harry could get hu—"

"Weasley, defend yourself!"

*"Impedimenta!"*

Harry crashed to the floor face first, the knife clenched in his fist. He lay winded, his nose throbbing. He could feel cold steel against his ear, and a thin trickle of something wet.

"Harry!" screamed Hannah.

"Harry!" half the class shouted.

Ron Weasley gaped, and collapsed into his seat, clutching his head in his hands. "I've killed him! What'll Mum say?"

"I'm all right," Harry ground out. "I've cut my ear, but I'm all right." Very carefully, he moved the knife away from his head, still unable to let go of it. Susan and Sally and Hannah, Ernie and Justin, Dean and Seamus—even Lavender and Parvati—crowded to the front of the classroom, and helped pull him to his feet. Dazed, Harry reached up with his left hand to feel his ear. A stinging pain made him pull the hand away, and the children gasped and shrank back to see his fingers covered with blood. More blood trickled into his mouth, and he realised



that his nose was bleeding.

"I'm taking Harry to the hospital wing," Susan declared, angry and frightened.

"I'm all right," Harry insisted, trying to wave them away. There were screams and shouts of "Bloody hell!" as the knife cut a swath through the air.

"Perhaps that *is* enough for today," said Quirrell, looking disappointed. "*Finite.*"

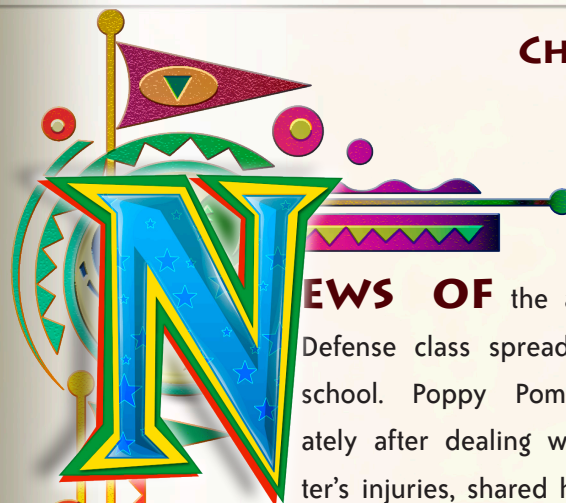
The knife dropped, and embedded itself point first in the floor, just missing the toe of Harry's boot.

Harry glared up at Quirrell, gritting his teeth with the pain. Before he could say anything, Susan was pulling him away, tutting anxiously over his wounds.

As Harry staggered through the door, Quirrell was already telling the students to return to their seats, and was giving Ron Weasley five points for a successful tripping jinx.



## CHAPTER 16



**NEWS OF** the all-too-thrilling Defense class spread through the school. Poppy Pomfrey, immediately after dealing with Harry Potter's injuries, shared her opinion of

a certain teacher's pedagogical style with Albus Dumbledore. At the end of classes for the day, Professor Quirrell was summoned before the Headmaster for a mild reproof.

"S—S—Sorry, Albus!" Quirrell stammered, head bowed in shame. "Th—Th—Things didn't go as I'd planned. I used a d—d—dummy with the next class!"

"Very sensible of you," Dumbledore agreed. "We really can't trust first years with edged weapons, my dear boy. I'm sure you meant well, but do exercise better judgment in future."

Students heard wild rumours about what had happened, and for the most part knew of the affair before most of the staff did. Harry was too embarrassed to complain about his treatment, but others had no such scruples. In Transfigu-



ration class, the Hufflepuffs told McGonagall and the Ravenclaws that Harry had been hurt in Defense and had needed to go to the Hospital Wing. The Gryffindors told the Slytherins during Herbology. By the time the news reached Snape, the story was now that Harry had been put under Imperius and slashed repeatedly with a knife by an enraged Professor Quirrell, and several students had been injured in the struggle.

Snape dashed to the Hospital Wing to find Harry already gone, and Madam Pomfrey already back from the Headmaster's Office. Her rational version of events calmed his fears as to Harry's physical state, but his alarm that Quirrell was bold enough to try to arrange an "accident" in class was not easy to tamp down. He must do something—say something—to Quirrell, without letting his knowledge of the true author of the deeds slip.

It was not until after dinner that the Hufflepuff first years paid a visit to their Head of House. She had heard more about the debacle in the course of dinner, and sent for the students, wanting to hear the whole story from their own lips. Snape wanted to speak to Harry himself, but agreed to wait until Pomona had spoken to her Hufflepuffs as a group. He paced the floors of his quarters, firecalling back and forth with other staff members about their concerns. Minerva was insisting that they must present a united front to Dumbledore and see that Quirrell was dismissed—or somehow reined in.

When at last Harry arrived at his door, the boy was surly

and abashed, hating the fuss that had been made of a minor injury, and hating the prospect of telling the story of his ignominious trouncing in class yet again.

"He knows I'm on to him," Harry told Snape, fidgeting in his chair. "He may not know everything, but he knows that I know he's up to something. Why else would he set me up to get hurt?"

Snape took another anxious look at Harry's ear, now entirely healed. "He's hopelessly incompetent. Students use knives all the time in Potions, but I've never allowed them to play the fool and wave them about. Quirrell is an idiot, but a dangerous idiot. Remember that. I will speak to the Headmaster about this, and make certain that Quirrell leaves you alone hereafter."

"What was really strange—" Harry stopped, unsure if he was being ridiculous.

"Go on."

"Well—it really wasn't a bad class except for nearly hacking my ear off. I mean—he actually taught us something, for a change, and he didn't stutter at all when he was talking."

"Not at all?" Snape asked, carefully expressionless.

"No—not while the lesson was going on. He was like this whole different bloke—really sharp and on top of things. I wouldn't mind having a go at that jinx he taught." Harry cocked his head, considering. "I don't think what happened to me was an accident. Do you reckon the stutter is fake?"

"No," Snape said quietly. "I think Quirrell has a genuine stutter."



"I felt like a right halfwit, falling down in front of the class like that," Harry confided sheepishly.

"You were unarmed," Snape said briskly. "It's no credit to the students who jinxed you that they could trip up a wandless opponent. A pitiful sort of triumph, at best." Getting up, he told Harry. "And now, I will escort you to the Hufflepuff Common Room. I need to speak to the Headmaster about this without delay."



"I have already spoken to Quirinius," Dumbledore reassured his concerned staff members. "There will be no recurrences of today's lapse of judgment."

"I should think not!" Flitwick squeaked indignantly. "Using *Impedimenta* on a child holding a knife! Classes are dangerous enough without deliberately inviting disaster!"

A murmur of agreement supported the Charms professor.

Sprout added, "It's a wonder more students weren't hurt. I don't know what came over Quirinius. I've heard some very queer things about what he said in class, too—all sorts of horrors about muggle murderers catching the children if they weren't careful. Talking about a fellow called Jack the Tripper—"

"I beg your pardon," Charity put in, "I believe that would be Jack the Ripper."

"Ripper—Tripper—all sorts of horrors about mad muggles catching children and killing them, and how the students

should ignore the Statutes for Secrecy and Underage Magic Use if they were in danger—"

"Well—that's perfectly correct, my dear," Dumbledore pointed out mildly. "I questioned Quirinius about his subject matter. While unpleasant in itself, nothing he said was actually untrue."

"Muggle serial killers are a rare phenomenon," Charity spoke up. "I wonder that he didn't have anything to say about attacks by wizards. The children are far more likely to be in danger from our own kind."

"Not anymore," snapped Vector. "The days of You-Know-Who are over. I think we should give poor Quirinius a chance. He's afraid of his own shadow as it is. At least he was trying to teach something *practical*—"

Charity stiffened and turned red, getting ready to fire back. She was perfectly aware of the Arithmancy professor's low opinion of Muggle Studies as a class.

Minerva forestalled a quarrel. "—but he was teaching in a careless, ill-thought-out way. I hope you told him, Headmaster, that it won't be tolerated. Perhaps someone should observe his classes for a probationary period."

There were more murmurs, as this idea was examined and found reasonable. Sprout turned to the silent Snape, who was sitting in his customary place in the corner.

"You're very quiet, Severus. As Harry's guardian, you should give your own opinion."



"My opinion," Snape drawled, "is that Quirinius Quirrell is a bumbling nincompoop. I shall tell him so at the first opportunity. In addition, I'll tell him that if he causes any further harm to Harry Potter, he is unlikely to enjoy the consequences."

Professor Kettleburn gave a rusty laugh. "If the boy doesn't watch himself he'll start losing bits of himself younger than I did! Oh, well—just an ear. An ear isn't much. Don't need them except to hold up glasses and hats."

Snape rolled his eyes. Pomona Sprout refused to take it all as a joke.

"I'm not pleased with the security at the school this year," she said frankly. "First a troll running rampant in the halls, and now this! Something is not right here. How did a troll get in? Is there something wrong with the castle wards?"

The staff members glanced at one another uneasily.

Flitwick cleared his throat. "Albus, I really feel that we need to know if you think the troll was an attempt to harm the Potter boy. Someone so famous is bound to be targeted by the malicious—or by political enemies. Perhaps we need to focus a little more attention on keeping him safe."

Minerva put a quiet hand on Snape's arm, whispering, "We must bring Pomona and Filius into our confidence, Severus. It's time."

"Sunday afternoon," he whispered back. "Albus will be at the Ministry."



Harry was exploring the corridors near the Defense classroom that night. Muffy had told him earlier that Quirrell was in his classroom, and so it seemed safe enough to slink along the wall, covered in his Invisibility Cloak.

Up ahead he heard voices: a man and a woman—and the woman's voice was edgy with anger. As he turned a corner, he saw that it was Professor Burbage, who had plenty to say to Professor Quirrell.

"I don't care if Professor Snape already spoke to you! I want you to know that *I* don't appreciate you poisoning the children's minds in that horrible way! Now they're going to see kidnappers and murders whenever they see muggles, and they'll be paranoid and stupidly fearful, like all too many people I've met since I came back!"

"S—S—Stupidly f-f-fearful?" queried Quirrell, very innocently. "You mean like the w—w—w—witches and w—w—wizards who ran away in the days of the Dark Lord? Oh! I f—f—forgot. Your own f—f—family—"

"Don't you bring my family into this!"

"S—S—So t—t—touchy!" Quirrell smirked briefly. "This is h—h—hardly the p—p—place for debate. If you h—h—have s—s—something to s—say, why don't you c—c—come inside and join me for a d—d—drink?"

"Really!—I—well—I don't know—" she hesitated, confused by the invitation. "After the way you've behaved I really don't think—"



Horried at the idea of Professor Burbage being alone with Quirrell, Harry was about to throw off the cloak and create a diversion, but to his relief, a tall dark figure bore down on the scene, and put an end to Harry's worst fears.

"Quirrell," Snape sneered, "I believe I told you to confine your pitiful attempts at harassment to flobberworms and pixies. It's rather more at your skill level. Professor Burbage, you said I could borrow that book—"

Charity was pleased that Severus took her by the arm and escorted her away. That odour of garlic! Quirrell smelled worse every day, it seemed. Not at all like Severus, whose scent was sharp and herbal and quite intriguing...

The two of them disappeared down the corridor, while Harry remained motionless, watching Professor Quirrell. The turbaned professor was looking at his colleagues with an expression that Harry had not seen before, but which made him very uncomfortable. He was relieved when Quirrell re-entered the Defense Classroom and shut the door behind him noiselessly.

Snape, for his part, urged Charity away from Quirrell as fast as possible. Charity was becoming important to him. He had never before had the opportunity to experience how delightful the company of an attractive and intelligent woman could be. He had been practically cloistered here at Hogwarts for years and years. The witches he knew were older, and most of them had known him when he was a scrawny little boy.

Those who had not were not particularly interested in wizards, anyway. He had begun his teaching career so young that almost every marriageable British witch his junior had been his student—and a great many of them loathed him.

But Charity had not been his teacher, and she had not been his student. They were very close in age, but had been neutral acquaintances at school, barely knowing the other's name. They had few preconceived ideas or prejudices to overcome. She had missed the worst years of the War, and was the saner and more balanced for it. She was not at all like Lily, but at this point in his life, perhaps that was all to the good. Lily had died so very young. He had no idea what she would have been like in her thirties. And it had been bitterly clear to him that she had never fancied him in the way he wanted so desperately.

Charity, however, did, and that was quite—agreeable. They had been very discreet, as the school had always required: so discreet that he believed that no one knew about the pleasant evenings spent in one another's company. He dreaded the day when it all came out. Pomona would gush, Minerva would tell him how *very* pleased she was for them both (in the same tone she praised superior classwork), Flitwick would wink knowingly, Hooch and Vector and Sinistra would gossip and cackle behind his back, and Albus—Albus!—would *twinkle* at him.

"Severus! I can't keep up!" Charity protested at last, stopping to catch her breath.



"Sorry. I just wanted to get you away from Quirrell. I heard him luring you into his quarters."

Her eyes sparkled with amusement. "I don't believe it! Were you jealous—of *Quirinius*?"

"No."

"You mustn't be. I don't even like him. There's something creepy about him—and not just the everlasting smell of garlic. I most certainly was not going to join him for a drink!"

"Good."

They were silent on the way to her quarters. Snape's mind was racing as he planned out what to say. He did not want Charity to confront that creature again, but he did not want to confide the truth to her. She was intelligent and sensitive, but transparent to a legilimens, and he had decided that he did not want to compromise her inherent honesty and candour by urging her to learn to lie and prevaricate and block her thoughts. He had risked enough in his life. He did not want the Dark Lord to make Charity a target.

But he must say *something*.

"Quirrell *is*—creepy," he told her quietly as they stepped into her sitting room. "There is something wrong with him. Albus knows about it, but you must not involve yourself. Stay as far from him as possible."

"But what—" she began, and laughed as he took her in her arms.

"Oh, Severus," she whispered after a moment, "you *do* smell lovely."



The weather had turned colder with the beginning of November. Every morning the ground was covered in frost. Harry found it hard to care. The quidditch season had begun at last, and he would see his first game, even if he froze stiff.

Luckily it was sunny despite the chill. The first game was Gryffindor vs. Slytherin, and it promised to be tremendously exciting. Ernie was impressed by Harry's fine omnioculars, and explained how to use them to watch the game. Justin begged to be allowed to look through them too, and Harry good-naturedly agreed to share them with all his fellow firsties.

They wrapped up warmly and streamed out to the pitch with the rest of the students and staff, finding places with the other Hufflepuffs in a stand draped with yellow and black. Harry waved at Professor Snape, who was wearing a green and silver scarf over his inky black robes. Draco was there, too, his hair bright in the autumn sun. He waved back absently at Harry, while he and his mates talked back and forth excitedly, leaning over to catch the first glimpse of the teams coming out onto the pitch.

Hermione was sitting decorously with Lisa and Padma. *Blimey, she's brought a book!* Harry had heard that was considered bad form in Hufflepuff, but he saw that other Ravenclaws had books, so perhaps things were different there. It might not do when Ravenclaw was playing, though, so maybe he



should put a world in her ear.

Neville and the Gryffindors were bedecked in red and gold, roaring out a chant, waving sparkly banners. A Gryffindor boy that Harry had seen with the Weasley twins was high up in a stand with Professor McGonagall nearby.

"That's Lee Jordan," Cedric told them. "McGonagall's going to try him out as commentator. She taught him the Sonorous charm and all like they use in the professional leagues. Lysandra was disappointed not to be chosen, but there you are."

"I just hope it's not over in five minutes," Ernie said darkly. Harry had read his dad's copy of *QUIDDITCH THROUGH THE AGES*, and so understood that some games ended abruptly when the Seeker caught the Snitch early on. Harry hoped that would not happen today. Cedric was going to explain the finer points of quidditch. He was a Seeker himself, of course, but he had also played Chaser, and knew quite a bit about tactics.

"Now the game you'll see today is probably going to be a rough one. The Gryffindors and Slytherins go all-out against each other. They've both got good Captains, and the teams each have their good points. Gryffindor has a decent trio of Chasers, and an excellent Keeper in Wood. I think their greatest strength is in their Beaters. Those Weasley twins understand each other without having to talk about it. It's like they read each others minds. Very tricky to get past. The Slytherins, now, have more muscle. Flint is a first-class Chaser, very fast

and absolutely fearless. Their Seeker, Higgs, is good, too: better than Spinnet, I expect. She was a reserve Chaser last year, and I don't know if she has quite the—YES!"

Madam Hooch gave a blast on her silver whistle, and the distant figures on brooms rose into the air. Then everything happened very fast. Lee Jordan's voice, which sounded normal but which was loud enough for everyone in the stands to hear, described the action in exciting detail.

"—And the Quaffle is taken immediately by Angelina Johnson of Gryffindor—what an excellent Chaser that girl is—"

Harry didn't know the names of all the players, so the commentary helped him understand who was doing what. It took a little while to become accustomed to the omnioculars, and sometimes the girls' continuing conversation distracted him. He tried to ignore them, watch the action, and listen to Cedric's critique.

"—and look! I told you how the Weasley boys work together. See that? They're playing off each other and blocked Pucey neat as neat. Now look up there—Higgs and Spinnet are looking for the Snitch. It's not a bad idea to position yourself pretty high. The Snitch often appears much higher than the goals. All they can do right now is keep looking for a flash of gold. It's sunny today, so that helps a bit—"

The players zoomed and soared. Harry liked it. He had only seen a few football matches on the telly, and this was much better. Still, he couldn't help but feel that it would be more fun



to play this game than to sit and watch it.

"Now look at that," Cedric went on. "Flint is a terrific Chaser, but he doesn't like to pass the Quaffle. He generally wants to make the goal himself. Beaters catch on to that, and they can focus on him, instead of watching for the other Chasers. He ought to give it to Pucey! *Oh!*"

Jordan's voice boomed out, "—and Johnson is in possession of the Quaffle—she's really flying—Keeper Bletchley dives—misses—GRYFFINDORS SCORE!"

Justin snickered, "Pretty clear which house *he* belongs to!"

They all laughed. The Gryffindors in the stands were jumping up and down and screaming. Boos rose from the Slytherins. Harry glanced around and saw that Hermione had looked up briefly from her book. She blinked, and resumed her reading.

"As I see it, the key to beating the Gryffindors is a good Seeker," Cedric said, more to himself than to the others. "Their Chaser and Beater work is very tight, and it's hard to get the Quaffle past Wood, but none of that matters if—"

He took a quick breath and grinned. Harry looked where Cedric was looking. A brief flash of gold glinted and disappeared.

"Was that the Snitch?" whispered Harry.

Cedric turned to him, surprised and pleased. "That it was, and now there are two of us who saw it before Higgs and Spinnet!" He smiled up at the sky, focusing on the game again.

Harry squinted, trying to spot the Snitch again. He asked

Cedric, "If you see the Snitch when you're watching the game, are you supposed to keep quiet about it?"

"Absolutely." Cedric was very serious. "It's incredibly bad form to give a shout-out if you're in the stands. They can call the game, and then they have to play it all over again; so don't let on except very quietly if you see it. And even if it appears right over your head you mustn't try to catch it." He grinned at Harry, ruffling his messy hair.

"Hey!" Harry protested, batting his hand away.

The game went on, the action swift and unceasing. The Gryffindors were outscoring the Slytherins handily, though they weren't having things entirely their own way. Harry enjoyed the maneuvering and the tricks, but found himself looking for the Snitch. He nudged Cedric.

"There—off to the left."

"I see it—" Cedric nodded. "Higgs is on it!" His voice rose to a shout.

Other spectators had seen the Snitch now, and were standing up and screaming. Alicia Spinnet had seen it too, and was flying up, a streak of crimson to intercept the Slytherin Seeker. Hands were outstretched—they were neck and neck—

Harry was on his feet before he knew it, yelling along with everyone else. He wondered if the two Seekers would collide. Chasers hurtled out the way, forgetting the Quaffle in the excitement of the moment. A Bludger smashed toward the



Seekers, startling Alicia and making her flinch aside. In that moment, Higgs put on a sudden burst of speed—

“—And he’s got it! OH, NO!” screamed Jordan. “Higgs has the Snitch! Slytherin wins!! CAN’T BELIEVE IT! What a bloody—”

The Hufflepuffs laughed as Professor McGonagall took the Sonorous spell off Jordan and hustled him away.

Harry watched in awe as Higgs flew past the stands, the Snitch raised high in victory. The Slytherins had completely lost all pride and propriety and were hugging and screaming and sobbing with joy. The Gryffindors were hugging and screaming and sobbing, too: with disappointment.

“I could fancy some hot chocolate now,” said Susan, rubbing her hands. This seemed a good idea to everyone, and they started clambering down the benches.

“A pretty good game, wasn’t it, Cedric?” Hannah asked.

“Pretty good for the first game of the season,” Cedric judged. “A bit short, but perhaps that’s for the best in this weather. A good catch by Higgs. Spinnet is a faster flyer, but she made a mistake. What was it, Harry?”

“She—” Harry considered what he had seen. “She was watching the Chasers and missed the first glimpse of the Snitch!”

“Too right,” Cedric agreed. “She was a reserve Chaser last year, and a good one. She should be playing Chaser this year, but the Gryffs couldn’t cough up anyone better for Seeker. A Seeker needs to stay focused on the Snitch, and nothing but

the Snitch.” He clapped Harry on the back. “Fancy yourself as Seeker, do you?”

“I wouldn’t mind,” Harry laughed. “Think you’ll let me have a look-in someday?”

“Dunno. Depends on how you shape up.”

They inched forward, moving toward the stairs, when Harry heard distant shouts.

Madam Hooch was yelling, “*Get it! Get it! The bloody thing is loose!*”

A fearful crash, a hail of splinters, and screams as a Bludger exploded through the wall of the wooden stand. It was there and smashing through the other side and gone before Harry quite understood what had happened. He had seen a shadow, and felt a breeze fan his face, and then there was nothing but the panic all around him. Hannah had fallen down, shaking with fright. Sally was crying and pulling at the needle-like splinters sticking in her shoulder. Justin was trying to help her, and failing because his hands were trembling. All around them, the older Hufflepuffs were nursing injuries, and calling out to their friends. A few just stood there, completely bewildered.

Cedric, a streak of red along his cheekbone, pulled Harry around, searching his face. “Are you all right? Susan’s hurt!”

A chunk of shattered wood had hit her in the head, and she was slumped over a bench. Anxious hands reached to help, and Professor Sprout trundled down from a higher bench to





have a look and give reassurances.

"All right now! All right! It's over now, and we'll get you all sorted out!"

Seeing Susan, she said, "Oh dear, we'd better have Madam Pomfrey have a look at this one. You too, Manderly—Perks—Doge—come on behind. Clear the way. Spellman! You and Llewellyn Major have a look at the scratches." She muttered "*Episkey!*" flourishing her wand at Cedric's cheek. She was on her way, levitating Susan, before he could thank her.

Primula had seen Ernie, and shouted at him, "A Bludger got loose before they could lock it away." She leaned over the damaged stand to get a better view. "They've got it now!"

Cedric shook his head, giving Hannah a hand up. "Never a dull moment at Hogwarts—eh, Harry?"



Quirrell and his master observed the pandemonium amongst the Hufflepuffs with smug satisfaction. Let the little cowards squeal! With any luck, there would be a good few students in the Hospital Wing tonight. Quirrell struggled to keep his expression concerned, and carefully did not look at the old fool or the traitor. He knew he had overplayed his hand a bit in that class with Potter, and must lie low until he could go after the Stone in comparative safety.

That said, he could not resist a last slap at them all—if only



for the sake of his own self-respect.

The fools were so easily deceived by poor, bumbling Quirrell. Still, it might be wise not to attract any more of Snape's attention. He was a traitor, certainly, and therefore a fool, but he was not as great a fool as the rest. What needed to be done could wait...yes...Christmas would be the time...the wretched little brats gone...the halls deserted...and just the right Christmas present awaiting him.

First, however, he must find a way to trick that great oaf Hagrid into telling him how to manage a three-headed dog...

340



## CHAPTER 17

**SUSAN HAD** been quite badly hurt after the game, it transpired—so badly hurt that Madam Pomfrey had sent a message to her aunt, Amelia Bones. Susan's friends were only allowed to visit two at a time, and thus it was Harry and Hermione who met the Head of Magical Law Enforcement in the Hospital Wing on Sunday morning.

Madam Bones was too concerned about Susan's condition to do more than speak kindly to them, and express how

glad she was that Susan had such good friends. It was clear from the part of the conversation the two youngsters overheard as they arrived that she understood that accidents happened all too often at quidditch games.

"But it's generally the players who are hurt—not little girls sitting in the stands! And I understand there was a scare about a troll not too long ago?"

At least Susan was awake and able to speak to them, though she was very groggy from the potions. She admired the cards they brought, and they admired the flowers on her bedside table.

341



"I'm going to miss the Explorers today," she told them sadly. "Madam Pomfrey won't let me leave."

"I should say not," said the mediwitch, very sternly. "No dancing for you, my girl. You're going to rest that head of yours. Now off with the two of you," she said, waving Hermione and Harry away. "My patient needs quiet."

They left, saying goodbye to Madam Bones, who was soon back in earnest conversation with Madam Pomfrey.

Harry remarked, "It's rotten luck, her being hurt like that."

Hermione shook her head. "It might not just have been luck. I could see Professor Quirrell during the game. I pretended to be reading—well, I *was* reading during most of the game—but when it was over and we were leaving I could see him quite clearly." She lowered her voice. "He was looking at the Bludger and his lips were moving."

Harry stopped in his tracks. "You think he jinxed it, then?"

Hermione considered, "Well, a lot of people were talking or yelling, but he didn't look frightened or excited. He looked like he was concentrating on something." She added, "I think he's horrible. I've never had a teacher who scared me before. He was just silly until the day he talked about muggles. That day I could see that he was scaring us because he liked it. I hate being in his class, Harry."

"We've got to do something about him," he growled. "I know Professor Snape is working on it, but this can't go on. Yesterday

Susan was hurt. How long before something worse happens? I saw him with Professor Burbage the other night. She told him off right smart about Defense class, and then he tried to get her to go with him to his quarters. She might have done, too, but Professor Snape came along and got her away from there."

"They didn't see you?"

Still uneasy about telling anyone about his precious cloak, he just said, "I'm small enough to hide behind things."

"You should be very careful," Hermione lectured him. "Oh! And by the way, I've been trying to look up our Cerberus in the library, but so far nothing. I'm sure there would be something in the Restricted Section, though!"



On Sunday afternoon, the cat—so to speak—was away, and the Heads of Houses could meet behind Albus Dumbledore's back with some hope of secrecy.

They met in McGonagall's private quarters. In her spartan study there were no tattling portraits, thus allowing them to speak freely about the very unsatisfactory state of affairs at Hogwarts.

"I can't help but feel that that wretched Stone is at the heart of all these troubles," Pomona told them, as she sank into an armchair with a sigh.

Flitwick nodded. "Flamel asking Albus to keep the Stone for him—it all sounds so fantastic!" He narrowed his eyes, adding



shrewdly, "And making such a fuss over a secret. If he really wanted it to be secret, he would have put it in his desk drawer and said nothing to anyone. But to create such a bizarre, over-complicated method of protection! And to tell the students their very first night where *not* to go—he's plotting something, and the Stone is definitely a major piece of the puzzle."

McGonagall served them tea, and they drank in silence, each thinking over what they wanted to say. Pomona spoke up, with her usual forthrightness.

"I hope I'm wrong, but I'm sure that Harry Potter's arrival has something to do with this as well. I don't want to believe that Albus would involve a child in one of his schemes, but—"

Flitwick was watching Snape carefully, and then said, "Severus, you're worried about him, aren't you?"

"Who? Albus? Hardly."

Flitwick's reproachful look forced him to be frank.

"Of course I'm very concerned for Harry's safety," Snape conceded. "A troll suddenly appears, attacking him in a corridor. A bludger conveniently goes rogue and nearly takes his face off. A teacher's poor judgment causes him to be injured. I was uneasy before school started when Albus told us about the Stone. The events of the past few months, though— Yes, I'm very alarmed at this point, and I feel we need to take steps—steps that Albus is disinclined to take."

"He can't *want* the boy to be injured, surely," Pomona mused.

"I would have thought that Harry Potter was the sort of student that Albus would like!"

"He's not a Gryffindor, of course," muttered Flitwick.

Minerva scowled. "I beg your pardon?"

"Oh, come, Minerva!" Flitwick replied impatiently. "Albus is not exactly a hands-on Headmaster, but he's always had something of a soft spot for the Lions. Look at what he's let the Weasley boys get away with over the years. And before that there were Harry's father and his friends. I certainly haven't forgotten *them*!"

"Nor have I," growled Snape. "I have forgiven—for the most part—Albus for his favoritism in those days. However, I have not forgotten it: and because I have not forgotten it I recognise that Albus Dumbledore's judgment is not infallible. Minerva and I have reason to fear that this year he is being unconscionably reckless."

"Minerva, what is this all about?" Pomona pleaded. "Don't you two play games and keep secrets!"

McGonagall set down her cup and blew out a breath. "You're perfectly right to expect honesty from us. We asked you here, in fact, to take you into our confidence about what is going on. I suppose you've noticed that Quirinius Quirrell is acting very oddly?"

Pomona frowned, and Flitwick glanced up sharply.

"Very oddly," he agreed. "Not at all the same person he was before he left."

"As usual, Filius," Minerva declared, "your observations are



spot-on. He is not who he seems to be.”

“Nor who he claims to be,” Snape amended. “Not entirely, at least.”

Sprout and Flitwick listened with horror to the news that the spirit of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named had not departed this plane of existence when his power was broken. The spirit had retreated, true, but had been lying in wait and had lodged itself in Hogwarts’ current Defense Against the Dark Arts Professor.

“I knew that the position was cursed, but usually something happens at the end of the year, not before term has even begun!” Pomona shook her head, and took a chocolate biscuit to steady her nerves.

“The stuttering,” Flitwick considered. “the turban, the smell. We’ve been blind! When did you find this out?”

“I knew that something was seriously wrong with him before school began,” Snape admitted. “When I saw him in Diagon Alley, I hardly recognised him.” Reluctantly, he added, “but that was not the worst of it.”

Slowly he told them the story of Harry’s violent reaction at their meeting, and of the continuing headaches thereafter.

“His scar?” Flitwick was fascinated. “The scar reacts in the presence of—of—”

“Just so.”

“I knew the scar was very remarkable. The shape alone—”

“Oh!” agreed Pomona. “I know what you mean! To see the

mark of the Sun! Such a powerful sign.”

Snape scowled. It seemed that everyone on staff had recognised Harry’s runic scar but him. His own fault for not studying runes. Someday he must remedy that gap in his education.

*If the Dark Lord and Albus Dumbledore ever allow me the time!*

His musings were cut short by Minerva’s quiet voice.

“The scar has other properties as well,” she told them. “More sinister ones. Severus has found evidence that it is key to that spirit remaining among us.”

Snape gave them a brief, bald explanation of a horcrux and its properties. Then he told them the worst of it.

“Minerva and I believe he was planning on creating a horcrux the night he attacked the Potters. Something went wrong and he was disembodied. The soul fragment was blasted into Harry’s scar. Perhaps the boy was injured and the fragment found that a convenient place to lodge. We don’t know. We are sure, however, that the fragment exists, that it ties the Dark Lord to our world, and that it is sealed into Harry’s scar, which reeks of Dark Magic. At the moment I know of no way to destroy the horcrux short of destroying its vessel. Obviously, I have no intention of killing Harry.”

This bombshell, as expected, left their two colleagues speechless for some time. Pomona could only gasp out, “That poor, poor boy!”

Flitwick, however, after a moment’s thought, had a great deal to say.



“But that’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard!” he protested, his voice rising to a squeak. “Deliberately splitting one’s own soul? That’s daft! Yes, yes, Pomona! Don’t look at me like that! Of course it’s evil—that goes without saying. The point is that it’s an idiotic thing to do! It would compromise one’s higher brain functions. It would make one almost totally irrational! You couldn’t be killed entirely, of course, but it would be a sort of half-life, with nearly everything that creates a personality destroyed.”

“A personality like the Dark Lord’s is not much of a loss,” Snape muttered.

Flitwick was silenced—briefly. “It might affect the physical appearance as well,” he pointed out. “He’d have to be absolutely desperate to do such a thing.”

“It’s very odd,” Pomona remarked. “I mean—he was so terribly close to winning. Why *then*?”

“He was obsessed with immortality,” Snape replied. “Perhaps that was to be the capstone of his triumph: victory of his enemies and over death all at once.”

“Unfortunately,” Minerva cut in, steepling her fingers in thought. “It does seem to have worked, after a fashion. He’s back, even if he’s only a spirit preying on another wizard. We would obviously prefer to destroy the spirit without killing Quirinius.”

Flitwick shook his head. “If it was a voluntary possession, his chances of survival are not good.”

“Poor Quirinius!” Pomona mourned. “How horrible! He

was so excited about travelling abroad—always such a fine scholar. What could have tempted him to allow You-Know-Who to possess him?”

“Of course,” Snape said, “the term ‘voluntary possession’ is very much open to interpretation. In some cases, ‘voluntary’ could even mean situations in which subterfuge or compulsion charms were used. The degree of consent can be ambiguous. We can try to pry them apart and see what happens.”

“But we mustn’t tip our hand too soon,” Minerva said. “It is terribly important that we find ways for Albus’ plan to succeed.”

“Do we care if the Stone is destroyed or not?” Flitwick asked. “If we’re trying to preserve that as well as Quirinius’ life, it all becomes very, very complicated.”

Minerva had already made her decision about that. “I think it’s essential that the Stone not fall into the wrong hands. Better it be utterly destroyed than for He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named to have it.”

“I agree,” said Snape. “And for now it appears to be safely ensconced within an enchanted mirror—the Mirror of Erised. Albus says that someone who wants to use the Stone cannot retrieve it. Let us grant, for the moment, that Albus’ charms to that effect are strong enough. It seems that what he is hoping for is that the Dark Lord will be entranced by the visions in the mirror and will be immobilised. Very well. And what then? Does he plan on him staring into the mirror until Quirrell dies of thirst and starvation, returning the Dark Lord to spirit form? What will



become of the spirit? Will it drift away to find yet another host?"

"Severus and I were very nearly trapped by the mirror," Minerva admitted. "Had I been alone, I *would* have been trapped. The mirror's enchantments show you your deepest desires, and they can be—quite absorbing. Luckily, we bumped elbows and distracted one another long enough to come to our senses."

"But—" Pomona's voice trailed off. "—if Albus is banking on the effect of this mirror on a single person—well—perhaps this sounds a bit silly, but you can't actually say that poor Quirinius, as *he is now*, really is just one person. I mean, there are two souls there, and they must communicate, and I for one would certainly find it highly distracting if there were someone else in my mind talking to me!"

"Egad! That's true!" Flitwick jumped down from his chair and began walking back and forth. "There must be a constant inner dialogue going on. The mirror's spell may not work properly at all!"

"I have considered the problem," Snape admitted. "There are ways to enhance the mirror's power—ways to compel the observer to remain indefinitely—even ways to trap a spirit if it releases control of a possessed subject—"

"A circle of salt, and the Baphomet Configuration!" Flitwick exclaimed. "Necromancers have used them to control demons. Something of the sort might well work!"

"It might not be possible to destroy the Dark Lord's spirit," Snape cautioned them. "Without destroying the horcrux itself, it remains

tied to this earthly plane. The most we can do is confine it."

"Well, that sounds good enough to me," Pomona said pragmatically. "Bodies can be confined in Azkaban, and spirits can be bottled up. Remember how Solomon bottled up the djinns! It can certainly be done. Pop him in a crystal and give it to Albus for a paperweight!"

The absurdity of it all wrung a nervous laugh from Flitwick. He was still thinking rapidly, and then ventured, "You saw this mirror yourselves, you say?"

Snape only grimaced. Minerva answered, "Indeed we did, and a dreadful thing it is."

"I'd like very much to have a look at it myself," Flitwick told them. "Did you examine it for the various enchantment patterns?"

"Filius—" Minerva said in exasperation, glancing at Snape, "—it was all we could do to escape the room. I was almost immediately caught up in the visions it showed me. No, neither of us examined it. I would not advise seeking it out—and certainly not alone!"

"My dear Minerva, now that I'm warned about it, I can take proper precautions. The mirror may be meant to do more than you think. There are some looking-glass enchantments—well, there are hundreds of them, actually, but I can think of a few—the Dodgson Projection is one of them—that can actually allow infiltration into the dimensional pockets within mirrors."

"Perhaps Albus used that to hide the Stone," Pomona said,



rather excited. "But could You-Know-Who use something like that to get in there and steal it?"

"Surely Albus has considered that." Flitwick perched himself back in his own small chair and sat thinking. "There are really all sorts of possibilities. I must think about this. And I must see the mirror for myself!"

The idea of facing that object again made Snape feel rather sick, but of course Minerva was a consummate Gryffindor.

"Then we may as well go before dinner. Follow me."



Snape made them wait only a few minutes, while he went through the fire to his own quarters. If so many were to pass through his own challenge, it behooved him to replenish all the potions. He hoped there was some faster way through Filius' keys than by another mad flight on broomsticks.

So it proved. They moved swiftly through the labyrinth this time, knowing what to expect, and each one of them with a short-cut. There was, of course, no troll to deal with, either. Snape's black flames were much admired.

And it was handy to have a Charms Master with them when they reached the mirror. Both Pomona and Flitwick insisted that they must have a look themselves—"just this once"—but neither Snape nor McGonagall had the least desire to see their visions ever again. Flitwick knew a handy masking charm

to protect them, and it was arranged that after five minutes he and Pomona would be pulled away to safety. Afterward, Flitwick was rather shaken and Pomona was sadly wistful.

"It's not so bad," she declared. "Rather interesting, really—but it's all nonsense, of course," she added hurriedly.

Flitwick, careful not to look directly into the mirror again, busied himself with measurements and analysis, jotting notes with his favorite blue quill. "Astounding object, you know," he said under his breath. "Not as old as you might think. Renaissance Revival style, probably from the mid-nineteenth century. I think the original charms are the work of Sheridan Le Fanu—superb work there—with some later accretions—some of them not quite—and *that's* certainly Albus' work—very distinctive. Aha! There's the Stone! Clever fellow!"

Snape left him to it, only keeping an eye on him from time to time to see he did not become ensorcelled by the mirror itself. Pomona and Minerva were quietly discussing ways to help Quirrell.

Minerva turned to Snape. "I believe you said there was a potion that might loosen the connection somewhat."

"It might help," Snape allowed. "I need fresh molyroot, though, and I don't believe there's any prospect of that for some months."

"Not in the greenhouses," Pomona agreed. "It grows wild in Sicily and Malta, of course, but it doesn't react well to apparition or portkey travel. I could go south and pot some up, but I would have to fly back, and that will take a few days. None of us



can get away that long until the Christmas holidays.”

“It would be extremely helpful,” Snape said, feeling relieved at the prospect of things moving along a little faster. “It might be best to start sneaking him the potion during the holidays, anyway, since it will cause some behavioral changes.”

“How to do you plan to slip him the potion?” Minerva asked.

Snape smirked, thinking of Harry’s devoted Muffy. “That, Minerva, is the least of our problems.”



Dumbledore returned to Hogwarts in time for a pleasant dinner in the Great Hall. A few highly placed individuals in the Ministry were concerned about some odd things they had heard from their children. Amelia Bones, especially, back from seeing her injured niece, had needed a great deal of reassurance.

The situation was indeed very unfortunate—no one knew that better than Albus Dumbledore himself— but it would be foolish and counterproductive to create a panic, which would be all too easy to do if he disclosed the terrible secrets known only to himself. Poor Quirinius must be dealt with, and the sooner the better.

His guest was making himself rather more than a nuisance. Tom had been a brilliant student, but in the real world his impatience had proved his undoing. He was too impulsive for long-term strategy, and inevitably used the Bludger bat when the wand would be slower but more effective.

It was evident, even now. Tom could not lie low and fool them all until his prize was safe in his hands. He must make a spectacle of himself—tormenting his host—indiscreetly displaying his superior knowledge—menacing the innocent for no other reason than because he could.

*Once again, his reach will exceed his grasp.*

Dumbledore had often considered how the War could have gone very much the wrong way if Tom had not been so impatient as to do everything at once. If he had focused on gaining power and not been distracted by his quest for immortality—or conversely, if he had achieved immortality and then sought supreme power—well, things might have become very grim indeed. Trying to create a horcrux just as he was on the brink of terrorizing the Ministry into submission—that was a lesson that Dumbledore had taken to heart.

*One must be moderate in all things, and one must accept that one’s power—and one’s life—have limits.*

His own plans seemed to him sound enough. It was a miserable business, risking the boy as he felt he must. Dumbledore could only pin his hopes on dear Lily’s protections. At the very worst, Tom Riddle would be finished for good and all. At the best, Tom Riddle would still be finished, and Harry Potter would survive his first year at Hogwarts.

Such a good, decent boy. Lively and curious, like his father, and having such a jolly time with the Cloak. He would be



out with it tonight, no question. Dumbledore must move the Mirror to a more easily accessible site, and with a little shifting, and a little subtle guidance, Harry would come upon it quite by accident...



After the book in the Restricted Section shrieked out the alarm, Harry made a run for it. He passed Filch in the doorway, slipped under his arm, and streaked off up the corridor.

He hardly knew where he was. It was dark, and it took him a minute to get his bearings. He stepped back beside a suit of armour as he heard approaching voices.

Filch was saying, "You asked me to come directly to you, Professor, if anyone was wandering around at night. Somebody's been in the library—the Restricted Section."

To his horror, it was Professor Snape who replied. "The Restricted Section? Well, they can't be far. We'll catch them."

Harry shuddered at how angry and disappointed the Professor would be if he discovered Harry wandering the castle after curfew. It would mean detention, a stern talking-to, and goodbye to his wonderful cloak. He backed away as quietly as he could. A door stood ajar to his left. It was just wide enough for him to squeeze through without moving it. The two men walked past, and Harry leaned against the wall, listening to their footsteps dying away. Mrs Norris padded back toward

him, stretching her neck to sniff the air, and Harry noiselessly shut the door in her face.

Looking around, he saw he was in an unused classroom. High windows let in the moonlight. He could make out the shape of desks and chairs piled along the walls. Propped up against the far wall, facing him, was something that didn't appear to belong there at all: a magnificent mirror, as tall as the ceiling, with a strange inscription at the top.

Wanting to see himself having no reflection again, he stepped in front of it. With a gasp, he whirled around.

The room was empty. Heart pounding, he turned again to the mirror.

Yes! He was there, smiling, looking very happy and confident, dressed in his good green robes with the real gold buttons. Behind him was Professor Snape, with that quietly pleased look that served him for a smile, one hand resting on Harry's shoulder. On his other side was Professor McGonagall, looking very approving.

His friends lounged on the floor around him, comfortable and carefree: Draco and Hermione were playing chess together; Neville was showing his toad to Ernie and Justin; Cedric leaned over them, a laugh on his handsome face; and there were Susan and Hannah and Sally, all beautifully dressed, holding hands as they danced.

Others were there, too: Professor Burbage in pale lilac, smiling



at him so kindly, her hand on Professor Snape's arm. There was his Head of House, Professor Sprout, beaming at him, and Professor Flitwick clapping his hands. All the Explorers were there, and some of the older Hufflepuffs. The vision stretched out, and there were Draco's parents, dignified and courteous; and Neville's Gran, who was so proud of Neville now. Everyone seemed so happy, and Harry knew it was because they were safe. There! Very far in the background, Professor Quirrell had been caught and was being led away, and nobody Harry cared about would ever be hurt again.

The reflections did not fade, and he looked and looked, half in joy and half in fear. If only everything could always be like this...

A sudden noise brought him up sharp. It was late, and he couldn't stay here any longer. He tore his eyes away from the mirror, whispered, "I'll come back," and hurried from the room.



## CHAPTER 18



**HARRY KNEW** he could not keep such a wonder as that mirror all to himself. All his friends should have a chance to see that vision for themselves!

It would be impossible to bring them all under the cloak, so they would just have to sneak in there quietly. He paid close attention to his way back to the Set. It would be a terrible disappointment if he dragged everyone out, and then couldn't find the mirror again.

Justin and Ernie were fast asleep in their dorm room. Harry folded up his cloak and tucked it away safely in his trunk. He was terribly tired himself, and knew he had lost too much sleep lately. He decided that his explorations would have to be reserved for weekends—and then not so often. He hadn't really found out much more about Quirrell and his movements, and Muffy could be relied on, if the Defense Professor made a move on the Stone. She had been told to report to Professor Snape, but Harry had told her to tell Harry himself as well. He was asleep as soon as his head hit the pillow.

Tired as he was, he awoke early on Monday, eager to tell his dorm mates about his discovery. He was not so eager, of



course, to tell them everything about his late-night wanderings. It had occurred to him that he had been pretty reckless and was likely to get a telling off for it.

"Harry!" said Ernie, rolling out of bed, "You're already dressed!"

"Yeah, I couldn't sleep anymore. Listen, Ernie! I've something to tell you and Justin—all our friends, really. Justin! You've got to hear about this!"

Justin groaned and shied a pillow at him. "Go 'way!"

"Come on! This is really brilliant! I couldn't sleep last night, because I thought I'd left my Transfiguration book in the library. I—well—I went out after curfew to get it, and I found something amazing!"

Ernie frowned. "You shouldn't have gone out after curfew alone, Harry! Professor Sprout doesn't like it! You weren't caught, were you?"

"No! I got away clean—but the good part—Justin, listen to this! I found this old classroom with this enchanted mirror. It was really big and posh, but the really neat thing was that it didn't show just me! All of you were in it!"

Justin was fully awake, curious in spite of himself. "It shows—like—Hogwarts?"

"It showed me, and then all my friends, and my favorite teachers, and it showed—well—the person who's been causing all the trouble getting caught. Maybe the mirror shows the future, and everything's going to be all right!"

"Who was it?" Ernie asked instantly.

"This is a secret, mates, you can't say anything about it, right?"

Slow nods answered him. It was time to tell his friends most of the truth. If they looked it the mirror, they'd probably see it for themselves, anyway.

"Professor Quirrell is up to something. He's after an important magical thing that's kept here at Hogwarts. Professor Snape knows about it, and I reckon he and the Headmaster are working on catching him red-handed. He told me to stay out of it, and not to look Quirrell in the eye, because Quirrell might be able to read minds and see that we suspect him."

"Blimey, Harry!" Ernie breathed. "Do you think Quirrell sent the Bludger our way?"

"Who else?" Harry told them. "I reckon he's behind the troll, too. He wants to distract people and then make for the thing."

"Do you know what it is?"

"I do, but I can't tell. Professor Snape made me promise. It's really important, but he says it's really well guarded. Any day now they'll catch Quirrell in the act and then we'll have a new Defense teacher!"

"The sooner, the better," Justin grunted. "So we're not supposed to look Quirrell in the eye?"

"That's right. We're supposed to stay out of that, but I wanted to show you this mirror, and if you looked in it, you'd see Quirrell getting caught in it, so you'd know anyway. I thought we could go after dinner tonight and you could see."



"You're telling the girls, aren't you?" Ernie asked, brushing his hair.

"They'd kill me if I didn't. In the mirror they're all dressed in white and dancing!"

The boys chuckled.

"Girls." Justin shook his head.

"And since I saw Draco and Hermione and Neville, I thought I'd bring them along, too. There were a lot of other people there, too—like Cedric—"

"That's an good idea!" Ernie nodded vigorously. "If Cedric is along, Professor Sprout won't mind."

"But then I'll have to tell Cedric all about Quirrell, and I'm kind of stretching it as it is, telling you and the girls. It had better just be us first years—Hufflepuff and the club officers. They know a bit about it anyway, since they were with me when I ran into the Cerberus."

At breakfast, Hannah and Sally were told about the adventure, but not about Quirrell. They would see their other friends in class today, and Susan would be joining them as well. When the girls were all together, Harry would warn them about Quirrell.

"We can all meet in the library after dinner," Harry whispered. "The room isn't far from there. We'll meet and I'll lead the way. You won't believe it!"



Feeling like experienced conspirators, the first-years sup-

pressed their laughter, and exchanged quick glances as the time drew near to leave the library.

"Are you sure you feel up to this, Susan?" Hannah asked anxiously.

"Yes, Madam Pomfrey," was the sarcastic answer. "You're not going to leave me behind! I can't wait to see Professor Quirrell get just what he deserves!" She had been very angry when she heard Harry's secret, and had wanted to owl her aunt right away. Harry told her that Professor Snape and the Headmaster were gathering evidence, and they had to wait for clear proof. She was unhappy about it, but understood. She was eager to see the man who had hurt her punished, even if it were only a vision.

They would leave separately, it had been agreed: Harry would come over to Draco and tell him he needed to talk to him and they would meet by the suit of armor down the corridor. As soon as they were out of sight, the Hufflepuff girls would follow them, and then Neville and Hermione, and then the Hufflepuff boys. Nine students made a sizeable group, and Hannah had to keep her hand over her mouth to smother her giggles.

"Shh!" Harry waved for more quiet. "It's just up here!" He found the door closed, which worried him a moment, but it pushed open at a touch. His friends crowded after him into the room, filling it with excited whispers.

"Ow!" Sally complained, as she stumbled over a discarded chair. "It's dark in here!"

Hermione raised her wand for a helpful "Lumos!" Harry



stopped her.

"Wait! Your eyes'll get used to the dark. Look at the window! The moon is up, and you see the mirror best without extra light in the room!"

He had hurried to the mirror himself, and grinned as the wonderful vision was displayed once more: his Hogwarts family all about him. "Look! It's even got your toad in it, Neville!"

"Don't push, Draco!" Hermione scolded. "We'll all have a turn—oh my!"

Harry beamed. "See! You and Draco are playing chess, but I can't tell who's winning."

"Harry!" Hermione was staring at the mirror, entranced. "I'm Head Girl!"

"What?" He looked again, puzzled. "Are you wearing a badge?"

Still gazing raptly, Hermione shook her head. "I'm not playing chess, Harry. I don't know why you think that. I can see myself when I'm seventeen." Her hand reached up to her mouth. "I look different." She smiled uncertainly. "—And I'm Head Girl!"

Draco edged her aside, impatient to see. He saw, and gaped, then nearly burst with delighted importance. "Head Girl!" he scoffed. "I'm Minister of Magic! You're all there, congratulating me. I'm the youngest Minister of Magic ever. Father is so proud!"

An excited chatter broke out.

"Harry!" Sally said excitedly, "do you think this mirror shows the future?"

More excited talk. Draco was still admiring himself, turning his head, smoothing his robes.

"Come on, Draco," Susan scolded, "Let someone else have a look!" Too polite to push ahead, she urged Sally, "Go on!"

Sally pushed a reluctant Draco out of her way and stood in his place. "Oh!" she gasped, her face alight.

"Well?" Hannah asked, "What do you see? Sally!" She nudged the oblivious girl. "Sally!"

"I'm in the Royal Ballet!" Sally breathed. "I'm prima ballerina assoluta! I'm dancing Princess Aurora in *Sleeping Beauty*. I'm more famous than Margot Fonteyn!"

"Who's Margot Fonteyn?" Ernie asked Justin.

"Famous ballerina, I think. Long time ago." Justin was twitching in eagerness, but too polite not to let the girls go first. "Go on, Hannah!"

Hannah had to pull Sally away before she could have a look. Her jaw dropped. She blushed dark red and was silent, gazing at the image.

"What is it, Hannah?" Hermione asked.

Hannah kept staring and blushing. Then she smiled radiantly, still looking.

"That's enough of that!" Susan said, pulling on Hannah's hand. "Tell us what you saw."

Coming to herself, Hannah blushed even redder. "Won't," she muttered.



"What was it?" Hermione asked, concerned.

"I was married," Hannah said, in a single breath.

"What?"

"I was married," she said, almost inaudibly. Plucking up her courage, she added, "and I had lots of children, and I lived happily ever after!"

"Who do you marry?" Susan asked, almost shaking her in her curiosity. "Who?"

"Not telling," Hannah muttered again, still smiling.

"Is it one of them?" Sally waved at the boys in the room, who eyed each other nervously.

Hannah shook her head. "Older."

Hermione blurted out, "Cedric?"

Hannah shook her head. "I'm not telling," she managed. "He's so wonderful!"

Susan was torn between taking her turn and getting the secret from Hannah. She dragged her friend into a corner, and started the interrogation.

"Let them gab," Ernie laughed. "You want to go next, Justin?"

Justin didn't mind, and stood in front of the mirror wanting to see what it would predict for him. After a moment, he grinned. "That's great!"

He turned and told everyone, "My little sister is a witch, and she'll be coming to Hogwarts!"

He was congratulated, and left the mirror for Ernie, who

stepped up smartly and stood a moment, and then sagged in relief.

"She's going to be all right," he breathed. He saw his friends looking, and said, "My grandmother. She's been sick. We've been afraid—well—she's going to be fine."

Hermione, meanwhile, had gone up to the mirror and was studying it. With her eyes adapted to the dark, she could read the letters over the top, and was mouthing out words soundlessly. Suddenly, she looked very grave.

"Your turn, Susan!" Harry said. "Let's see what it predicts for you!"

Hannah gave Susan a push, and the red-haired girl came forward and stood in front of the mirror.

"Wait!" Hermione called out.

She sounded so distraught that the smile died on Harry's lips. "What's wrong?"

"I don't think this mirror predicts the future at all. Look at what it says at the top!"

A pause, while the children walked closer to peer at the curious letters.

"*Erised stra ehru oyt ube cafru oyt on wohsi*," read Draco. He thought a minute, and abruptly deflated. "Oh, bugger!"

"It's backwards, isn't it?" Hannah guessed. "I—show—no—uh, not—yo—ur—facebu—your face—but—your—heart's—oh."

A silence.

"But it *could* happen, couldn't it?" Sally pleaded. "It doesn't promise it, but it doesn't say it *couldn't*—"





368

“Susan, are you all right?” Ernie asked.

In the dim moonlight they could see tears streaming down her face, leaving silvery traces.

“Uncle Edgar? Aunt Felicity?” she whispered.

Hannah was shocked. “That can’t be right! Susan, that can’t be right!”

There were some bewildered looks. They all knew Susan’s aunt and uncle had been killed in the War.

With the sickening feeling that everything had just gone pear-shaped, Harry hurried to her. “Come on, Draco—Neville, let’s get her away.” Draco was willing enough, and helped Harry pull Susan away from the mirror.

“No! They’ve come back!” she shouted, struggling against them, trying to get another glimpse. The vision disappeared and she covered her face with her hands, sobbing. Hannah rushed over to hold her.

“I don’t think we should look at it anymore, Susan! I think it’s a trick. The things we see are just what we want, not what’s really going to happen.”

“It could never happen,” Susan choked out. “They’re dead and I’ll never know them!”

Ernie faltered, “You really saw your aunt and uncle?”

Susan shook her head in disbelief. “And my cousins that I never met! Laurel looked just like me, like Auntie always says. We could have been like sisters! And Colin was an Auror, and

369



the baby who was never born was older than us and a prefect! It's not *fair*—"

Her friends stood around her awkwardly, not sure what to do.

Appalled, Harry tried to stammer out an apology. "I'm really sorry, Susan! I thought it just showed our friends! That's all I saw, I swear!"

His friends were reconsidering their visions in light of this new information. Justin was terribly disappointed, and Ernie worried. Sally was still determined to make the best of it.

"All right. It shows us what we really, really want. It shows us what we'd like to have happen. Some things are just impossible, but some things aren't. Hermione could still be Head Girl, and Draco could still be Minister of Magic. Justin's little sister might still be a witch—"

"—or she might not," muttered Justin.

"Ernie's grandmother might still get better," Sally insisted.

"Maybe," Ernie agreed reluctantly. "Why do they put things like this out where anybody might see them? It's a mean trick, if you ask me. Come on, Sue," he urged Susan, patting her hesitantly. "Let's go. We'll sit in front of the fire and have a snack. What do you say?"

Susan nodded listlessly, and let Hannah and Sally lead her to the door. "My head hurts."

"Oh, dear," Hermione worried. "Maybe you should go back to Madam Pomfrey!"

Susan groaned at the very idea, and Hannah and Sally

promised her in whispers that they would get her straight to the Sett and some cocoa.

"We'll see you all tomorrow," Hannah said with a slight wave, and the three girls hurried away.

Harry blew out a breath. "I feel like an idiot. I can't believe I brought you all here to be tricked by that rotten mirror."

"Not your fault, Harry," Hermione comforted him. "You only saw it briefly in the dark, and of course you were concentrating on what it was showing you. And Sally's right. We *may* get the things we saw, as long as they're possible. I'd like to be Head Girl, but I'll just have to work for it, and not take for granted that I'll get it."

Draco grunted, thinking about what he'd seen.

Justin was still disappointed. "I wish—no, it's not your fault, Harry—but I wish I'd never seen that mirror. It was just smashing when I saw my little sister get into Hogwarts, and I'm going to really, really hate it if she doesn't. I hadn't realised how much I want it. She wants it, too. I wish there was *something* I could do to make it happen, but there isn't."

"I think I'll go sit with the girls a bit, and then turn in," Ernie said. "I hadn't realised how much Grandmother means to me. That's one good thing, anyway. I'll owl her tomorrow. I should have done it weeks ago."

Hermione and Harry watched the two boys leave, feeling very concerned for them both. Draco was still brooding by the window.



"It's very wrong not to take better care of objects like this," Hermione declared. "I can't imagine what the staff are thinking. Oh—where's Neville?"

"Neville!" Harry gasped.

Neville Longbottom was seated on the floor in front of the mirror, a faint smile on his face, simply looking.

Draco roused himself and came over, giving Neville's shoulder a shake. "Oi, Longbottom!" he said. "Don't sit there looking in the mirror! It'll crush your dreams and drive you raving mad and who knows what else. Get up!"

The three of them pulled on the boy until he shook his head and looked about the room. He was reluctant to move, but finally gave Harry a big smile.

"Thanks, Harry! That was great!"

"Neville," Hermione said warningly, "You know it wasn't real. It was just showing you what you wanted to see."

"Yeah, I know. It was great," he repeated. "I never thought I'd see them like that. It meant a lot to me," he said to Harry, and impulsively shook his hand. "You're a real friend!"

Harry smiled weakly. Draco asked, "What did you see?"

"My parents," Neville told them outright. "They were hurt in the War, and they've spent all these years in St. Mungo's. I've never seen them the way they were before—well—the way Gran says they were. Now I have. It was like it was real. They talked to me and everything!"

Draco shrank back, and was silent, looking a little sick. Hermione was full of sympathy for Neville. Harry felt ashamed of himself.

"I didn't see my family in the mirror," he confessed. "You saw your parents, and Susan saw her aunt and uncle and cousins. I feel like I'm not—not a very good son—"

"It's different," Neville said. "You told us you don't remember your parents, but Susan's heard about what a great wizard her uncle was since she was little. Everybody has. And," he gulped, and then told them, "I see my parents all the time at St. Mungo's. I've always wanted them to look at me and talk and be normal—always—ever since I can remember."

"Everybody's different, Harry," Hermione said. "Not seeing the same things doesn't make you a bad person."

"If you say so," Harry grunted, unconvinced. He glanced at the mirror. Last night he had thought it a fairy-tale wonder. He had allowed it to deceive him, and now it appeared to him ominous—even menacing. His own vision—of the villain punished and his friends safe and happy—was only a cruel illusion. Hermione was right. It wouldn't do to take anything for granted. "Let's get out of here. I think we should leave, and not come back."

"I wouldn't mind seeing my parents again," Neville objected, craning his neck for another look.

Hermione put her hand on Neville's arm and urged him away. "Don't look, Neville. Harry's right. We must never come back here. Let's each of us promise never tell anyone else about this room!"



Draco let the others go through ahead of him, and scowled back at the mirror. He shut the door firmly behind them, and the four of them walked down the corridor in heavy silence.

"I wonder—" Draco finally spoke "—if this isn't the latest trick of Quirrell's. It's the sort of thing he would do—making fools of us, raising our hopes, and then pulling the rug out from under us. Maybe it's all of a piece with setting the troll on us."

Harry nodded slowly. Quirrell had not hurt him—not directly—but he had upset his friends and made them feel terrible.

"I reckon you could be right," he said to Draco. "It's *exactly* the sort of thing he would do."



374  
Dumbledore, under a Disillusionment charm in the far corner, watched the children leave, feeling very uncomfortable. He had never dreamed that Harry would bring all his young friends to peer into the Mirror of Erised! Aside from the trouble it took not to be bumped into or stepped upon by the children, he was very sorry that the Bones girl had been hurt and upset. And poor Neville Longbottom! Seeing his parents in the mirror was a mixed blessing indeed.

The one good outcome was that he now knew that Harry was not apt to be ensnared by the mirror himself. Whatever he had seen was so harmless—and so close to his own reality—that he would not need to lose himself in it. That indicated that

Harry was actually a rather happy young man. It was pointless to speculate how this came to be, but so it was. He had meant to meet Harry in private and explain the mirror to him, and that it was important not to live through dreams. That effort now seemed quite unnecessary. Young Hermione Granger was a remarkably observant and clever child, and had comprehended the true nature of the mirror with astonishing speed. He made a mental note to follow the girl's future career.

And Lucius' son surprised him, too. Vain and full of a sense of his own entitlement Draco might be: yet there he was, socialising pleasantly with children from backgrounds that his father would certainly think merited only a sneer. The youngest Minister of Magic! If only Abraxas had had such a benign ambition!

He still believed that Harry's "power to vanquish the Dark Lord" was rooted in love—his mother Lily's great love for him. But Harry too, had a generous and loving nature, which had manifested in his large circle of friends. Bonds of friendship like this, forged so young, might well undermine Tom's hold on the families he had enslaved in the past. Beginning with Draco, Harry was making real progress with the Slytherins. Dumbledore had his own ways of learning who participated in the Explorers' club meetings. He admitted to himself that he had never expected so much good to come from a group ostensibly devoted to learning wizarding traditions.

*Perhaps I have been going about it the wrong way! instead*



*of isolating those I thought carried the infection of hatred and bigotry, perhaps I should have encouraged more communication and friendship.*

It was a bitter pill to swallow, though his own methods were rooted in experience. Horace Slughorn was a great believer in assimilating talented outsiders into the wizarding world, but Horace had failed to keep Tom Riddle from poisoning everything he touched. Tom's fatal charm was his first and greatest weapon, and Dumbledore had felt that the only way to deal with him was to keep him and his as far away from as many of the students as possible. However, this was a new generation—and a new generation called for new ideas. These children might well, in the course of dancing and study and taking tea, succeed in making Lord Voldemort irrelevant, without ever being consciously aware of it.



To their credit, Harry's friends did not react to the disappointments of the mirror's visions with anger and recriminations. Each of them made an effort to be kind: the sort of kindness one shows to a friend who has suffered a loss. Harry was burdened with guilt, and reluctant to show his face at the Hufflepuff table at breakfast, but Susan sat by him and squeezed his hand, to show him there were no hard feelings. It was quietly agreed that Draco probably had the right of it:

this was the doing of Professor Quirrell, who had proved himself a secret enemy. They sat in his class, not looking at him, resenting him with all their hearts.

If the Defense instructor had thought Hufflepuffs worth a moment's consideration, he might have noticed their passive hostility. As it was, confident in his disguise, he was satisfied that they were silent and obedient, and focused instead on his own absorbing desires and goals.

After History the next day, Hermione thought Harry needed some cheering up, and suggested an outing.

"Let's go see Hagrid this afternoon, Harry. Maybe he can recommend some good books about magical creatures!"

Draco, as usual, was eavesdropping. "You just want to see if he'll let anything more slip about that monster of his!"

Hermione did not deny it. "He might," she agreed primly. "But if he *does* know any books about them, I'm going to check them all out so Professor Quirrell can't get his hands on them!" She hissed across her desk, "Neville! We're going to see Hagrid after lunch! Do you want to come along?"

Neville hesitated. He would have really preferred to have another look in the mirror, but Professor Dumbledore had caught him in front of it last night, and told him it was being moved. He sighed. "All right."

They were glad of their warm cloaks as they made the short journey to Hagrid's hut. Fang gave them a slobbery welcome,



and Hagrid soon had them sitting cosily in front of the fire, each with a mug of sugary tea. The hut was a jumble of long, round pieces of wood, wood shavings, and carving tools.

"Gettin' a start on my Chris'mas presents," he told them, a bit bashfully.

"What are you making?" Neville asked. He liked the idea of making things, but was never allowed to, because of the "mess."

"Makin' a flute," Hagrid told them, pleased at their interest. He rummaged through a cupboard and pulled out a larger, finished instrument, a length of smooth and shining wood with carefully carved fingerholes—large enough for Hagrid's huge hands—and with a nice curve to the ends. "Nothin' like a bit o' music on long winter nights." He obliging blew into the fipple and played a few low, pleasant notes, and then a brief scrap of melody. "Old Ogg taught me in his day, when I was his apprentice. Useful too—yeh'd be surprised to know what a bit o' music does for the pumpkins—and most magical animals like it—why, a tune's all yeh need to shut up a Jarvey! There's not many as knows that," he told them with a tremendous wink. "Unicorns fancy music, too, though they go wild for harp, I hear. Never tried it meself. I heard that werewolves will sit down in a circle and listen as long as yeh keep playin', but I never put it to the test—"

"I should say not!" Draco shivered.

"—but it works a bit on just about everythin' alive—more or

less." He showed them his drill and his chisels and the wood he'd gathered and cured. "Pearwood's nice to work with. O' course, some try usin' the same wood as their wand—but not all wood's the same, and yeh need a nice fine grain—"

He talked for some time, enjoying the company and the attention. Even Draco allowed that music was a perfectly acceptable pastime for a wizard—especially since it had proven magical value.

"So you play to the vegetables in the Hogwarts gardens?" he asked, raising a skeptical brow.

"That I do. Yeh need to play over the seeds in the groun' and again at Mid-Summer Eve, and a third time in the full moon afore harvest. Yeh can triple your growth if yeh play jus' right. I play in the orchards, too—but they can be finicky, and they like bein' sung to better."

"That's very interesting," Hermione said earnestly. "Would music help sheep? Draco's family raise sheep, and maybe if Draco played—"

"Granger," Draco said warningly, "I am *not* playing for a flock of sheep!"

Hagrid looked at him pityingly. "Well, that's yer loss an' no mistake. I heard of a tune that can make the ewes bear twins—"

"You see?" Hermione asked Draco triumphantly.

Draco glared at her, and seemed likely to make something of it, but Neville broke in.



"Can you make animals come to you? I mean—magical animals."

"Some. I'm no master at it, mind, but I can draw a kneazle or two, an' bowtruckles, an' there was this acro—"

"What about snakes?" Harry asked.

Hagrid shook his head with a shudder, "Got no use for snakes. Never did. Yeh got to *want* the animal to mind you."

"What about a phoenix?" asked Neville. "The Headmaster has a phoenix, I heard."

Hagrid guffawed. "Me drawing in a phoenix! Not likely! Don' doubt a real firs'-rate player could, o' course..."

The four of them had caught on to the plan and bombarded their host with questions.

"What about a centaur?"

"They like it, but they don' admit to it. Very proud, like, they are."

"What about a doxy?"

"Naw—nasty things."

"What about a—red cap?" asked Draco, hesitating to go in for the kill.

Hagrid nodded sagely. "Yeh can make 'em leave you alone with a bit o' music. I done it meself."

"What about a mooncalf?"

"They get right up and dance!"

Harry took a breath, and asked, his eyes wide and innocent, "What about a Cerberus?"

"Puts 'em straight to sleep, it does—an' here, now—"

"What about a dragon? Hermione asked breathlessly.

Distracted, Hagrid beamed. "Dunno. Like to try it sometime."

Wanting to play his part, Neville wondered, "Wouldn't you need something really loud and big for a dragon—like a trumpet, maybe?"

"Haw!" Much amused, Hagrid shoved aside the clutter, and brought out a plate of rock cakes. "Almos' forgot yer favorites!"





## CHAPTER 19

**P**RECAUTIONS had been taken to make future quidditch matches less hazardous than the first—at least for the spectators. Hufflepuff vs. Ravenclaw lasted over an hour and a half, in a bone-chilling, driving sleet that discouraged the fainthearted. The Ravenclaw team made a rather poor showing, since their best players had finished school the year before and they were in the process of rebuilding their team. The Hufflepuffs scored again and again, until Cedric, soaring up above the clouds, found and captured the Snitch.

The day of the game, Flitwick took Hermione aside.

"It's very important that you make an appearance and show house loyalty, Miss Granger," he told her seriously. "I realise that you have many good friends in Hufflepuff, but as regards quidditch, you must be seen to be Ravenclaw all the way!"

Thus advised, Hermione wrapped up warmly, did not bring a book, and sat through to the finish. She even managed a decent pretense of disappointment

at the outcome, though she was secretly pleased at Cedric's triumph. Harry had lent her his copy of *QUIDDITCH THROUGH THE AGES*, so she was able to make intelligent small talk about the game. She even exerted herself to listen sympathetically to the reserve Seeker, a second-year girl named Chang, who declared that she could out-fly the current Ravenclaw Seeker even on a school broom.

"There's always next year," Hermione pointed out. This attempt at comfort was unsuccessful.

Cho Chang tossed her silky black hair. "I should be flying *this* year!" She walked away to tell the team captain as much.

Hermione wondered why otherwise sensible people cared so much about the game. Not everyone did, of course. She had discovered that a number of the older Ravenclaw girls were quite bright, and some very nice indeed. The two Clearwater sisters, Penelope and Helena, always spoke to her in the Common Room, and would ask her what she was reading. Penelope was a fifth-year and a prefect, and Hermione had discovered that she was approachable and helpful when Hermione had questions. Helena was a third-year, and had a great deal to say about why Arithmancy was the best subject taught at Hogwarts. Helena's good friend, Emily Fawcett, was muggleborn like Hermione, and very interested in all the doings of Hermione's first-year club.

And there were some other pleasant aspects to Ravenclaw



life. The Common Room was very beautiful, and the tradition of answering a riddle, rather than giving a password, was one that Hermione quite liked. She had always enjoyed puzzles and brain-teasers, and in this one regard, Ravenclaw did not disappoint. As long as she spent as little time as possible in the dormitory room with Morag and Mandy, it was not so bad. Only at night, when she crept into her bed, and drew the curtains to shut out the cold looks and barbed words, did she sigh to herself at the thought of spending six more years in a smallish room with the girls who so disliked her.



“To Cedric Diggory! May he always find what he Seeks!”

High revel reigned in the Hufflepuff Common Room. Such a victory in their first match seemed a good omen for the House’s Quidditch Cup prospects.

Harry understood enough about scoring to grasp what Oswald Whitby, the Hufflepuff captain, was saying about the advantages of today’s high score.

“You want to build up that score, whenever you can. The Seeker may win the game, but in the end it all comes down to points, exactly like the House Cup.”

“But if the Snitch is there, you’ve got to take it,” Cedric objected.

Oswald squinted in thought. “Or just make sure the other bloke doesn’t. You may see the Snitch, but if the opposing Seeker hasn’t,

why draw attention? Let the score build up, and *then* go after it.”

From the sound of it, this was a running argument. Cedric disagreed so completely with Oswald’s idea that he made of point of taking Harry aside and explaining why it was “rubbish.”

“You can’t ignore the Snitch. Oswald’s cracked if he thinks you can. He thinks like a Beater, you see. The Bludgers don’t go and disappear when it suits them. If you sit up there on your broom, pretending the Snitch isn’t there, it might well just blink away and pop up right in front of the other Seeker’s face. Oswald’s all right otherwise, but he’s mad if thinks I won’t go after the Snitch whenever I see it!”

Harry nodded gravely, feeling very much a knowledgeable sportsman to be included in the councils of the team. “And you’d look a right fool if everybody in the stands saw the Snitch and they thought you didn’t.”

“There is that,” Cedric laughed.

It was all very comfortable there in the Common Room: a roaring fire, cups of rich cocoa, tins of treats owl-ordered by the seventh years for just such a celebration. Things had been quiet for the past few weeks: no attacks, no unpleasant incidents, and Professor Quirrell back to being a stuttering incompetent. It would be easy to imagine that the danger was past, and that Professor Quirrell had thought better of trying to steal the Philosopher’s Stone. Sometimes Harry found he could forget about it for hours at a time. There were so many



nicer things to fill his time and his thoughts.

Owl-order was a new concept to Harry. So easy—so convenient. He made a point of sharing this information at an Explorers' club meeting, though it appeared that the muggleborns without their own Gringotts vaults could not make full use of the process.

"Well, you *should* have a vault at Gringotts," Draco told Hermione afterward. "Every witch and wizard should have one. How do you propose to do your Christmas shopping?"

"Shopping?" Harry wondered to himself. Everyone was talking about the holidays, talking about where they would go, and what they would do, and what they would get, and what they would give. Harry's only Christmas gifts had been paper bags of Dudley's cast-offs. He had never in his life given anyone else a present. He had never had the means to do so.

*Things are different now, of course.*

What could he possibly give people that they would want? And who should he give presents to? He would really like to give something to Professor Snape—and to Professor McGonagall, too—to show them how much he appreciated all they had done for him. What did kids give grownups? Dudley certainly never gave his parents anything.

It was so embarrassing. He was hesitant to display his ignorance to his fellow first-years. He did not want to ask Professor Snape, for fear of sounding like he was hinting for a present himself. He considered consulting Professor Sprout, but seeing Professor Burbage

standing by herself near the door, he took the plunge and asked her outright what was expected of him by way of presents.

To his relief, she did not laugh at him, or look shocked. Instead, she told him to come by her office on Monday, and they could talk privately about his concerns.



He managed to squeeze some time after lunch the next day to visit the Muggle Studies office.

"Well, Harry," Charity said, after waving him into the chair by her desk. "children aren't generally expected to give presents to adults at your age, other than a token of some sort—a picture, a card, something you've made. Later on, you might give more, but if you're worried about Professor Snape—" she smiled "—and I can see that you are—I'm sure he doesn't expect you to give him anything."

"But I'd like to," Harry insisted. "I just don't know what." At primary school they had often made little presents for Christmas, and after the first painful experience of seeing Aunt Petunia throw his creation into the rubbish bin, he had always disposed of the items before they could be made objects of scorn by the Dursleys. What could he do—what could he make that would be good enough for Professor Snape?

Charity could see how it worried him. "Let me think about it," she said. "Maybe we could do something at the next club



meeting. It wouldn't be expensive, but it would be *something*."

"That would be great!"

"As for your friends... yes, they'll probably give you some small presents, so you might want to give it a bit of thought: a book, some sweets, little magical trifles—that sort of thing. Honeyduke's has a catalogue, and so does Magical Home and Garden—and Gladrags—Flourish & Blotts—Dervish & Bangs—Oh! And Fleurissant de Paris has an owl-order-only warehouse in Diagon Alley. Some of their things are lovely. Why don't you make a list of the friends you might want to give a present to? If you want some help, you can drop by again. You might want to get some extra sweets, in case someone unexpected gives you a present."

Harry looked at her wide-eyed. Christmas shopping seemed a dauntingly complicated business.

But Christmas was coming, whether he was ready or not. One morning, he woke to find Hogwarts covered in several feet of snow. Outside the dormitory and the cosy Common Room, cold draughts whistled down the corridors and rattled the windows in the classrooms. It was so cold in the dungeons during Potions that the students crowded close to their hot cauldrons, trying to keep their fingers warm. Harry made his first owl-order: not a present, but a pair of gloves for himself—fine gloves of supple black leather, lined with soft Spellcombe wool. He put them on and they fit perfectly. Hedwig hooted her approval. Harry took to wearing them between classes, and his hands were grateful for them.

Professor Sprout posted a notice, asking for the names of any students intending to spend Christmas as Hogwarts. Harry stared at it awhile, and then sat down to think it over.

Why go to Privet Drive? His room was pleasant enough, and Muffy would bring anything he liked to eat, but it would be a lonely few weeks, and there would be little to do but study. If Professor Quirrell remained at Hogwarts over the holidays, Harry needed to watch him.

What did Professor Snape do at Christmas? Would he go home to the odd little house at Spinners End? Maybe he would go on holiday somewhere warm and sunny. Feeling he had to know the worst at once, he stayed after Potions class to talk it over.

"An interesting expression," Snape remarked, observing Harry's furrowed brow. "I trust you did not *ingest* any of your Spot-Vanisher,"

"Professor—" Harry blurted out—"do you have plans for Christmas?"

Snape blinked.

*Do I have plans? My boy, if only you knew.*



Snape had simply assumed that Harry knew that he always spent the winter and spring holidays at Hogwarts. He had simply assumed that Harry would wish to stay here as well. And this year he had more than the usual reasons of brewing





projects and general inertia. He and the other Heads of House were deeply involved in tightening the noose around the Dark Lord's incorporeal neck.

Pure sea salt, dissolved and then recrystallized in uniform cubes, glittering and magically charged, had been laid over a copper wire in a mathematically perfect circle incised into the stone of the floor surrounding the Mirror of Erised. The circle was so carefully beglamoured as to be indistinguishable from the stone itself. Inside the circle was the Baphomet Configuration, a stylised rendering of the Horned God. Flitwick had written a Babylonian charm which would confine evil spirits within the circumference of the circle. The tiny cuneiform characters were almost impossible to see, and the characters looked like natural scratches to the casual observer.

Snape was not entirely clear as to what Minerva and Filius had done to the Mirror itself. He had seen them casting spell after spell, layering additional magic in a subtle, unobtrusive way. Minerva had a needle-sharp ritual dagger, which she used to carve some unknown symbols under the Mirror's legend, at the corners of the frame, and in four points of the room that coincided with the cardinal points of the compass. Even if the Dark Lord escaped from Quirrell, he must escape the circle, and even if he managed to escape the circle, he would have little chance of escaping the room. However, it was their plan that he would have not the least desire to do



so, anyway. Albus' trap, as they understood it, was not bad, but they felt their refinements would go far to make it perfect.

He had written again to Nicholas Flamel, warning him that the "the object" was in danger and might well be destroyed. There had been no response. Flamel might not be accepting correspondence from strangers. He might not even be alive, for all Snape knew. Snape had thought of asking Albus about Flamel, but decided against it. He did not want Albus to know what he was doing, since he would certainly interfere.

He still had the Soul Divider's Potion to brew, once Pomona obtained the needed moly plants. She planned to leave as soon the Hogwarts Express pulled out of Hogsmeade Station. She had purchased an International Portkey to Stregavecchia, the charming magical resort near Mount Etna in Sicily. She would pot the plants, and then immediately fly north. Her fellow Heads of House also had their own portkeys, for the journey was too long for anyone to undertake non-stop. Even more daunting, moly would not survive and be usable if it were not transplanted within twenty-four hours. Snape had considered going to Sicily himself and brewing the potion there, but it would keep him away from Hogwarts for an inconveniently long time. Besides, Pomona was now rather excited at the idea of adding such a rare and powerful plant to the Hogwarts greenhouses. Moly was a very ancient ingredient, dating back to the days of the Sorceress Circe: the hero Odysseus had used the flower of the moly plant

to resist the transfiguring effects of Circe's potions.

What Snape intended to brew with this ingredient was based on an antidote to a love potion, and had many of the same side affects of such antidotes: temporary loss of motor skills, impaired judgment, a tendency to babble about whatever crossed one's mind, mild hallucinations. Quirrell's derangement would throw the Dark Lord off-balance and make it difficult for him to maintain firm control of his victim. It was too much to hope that the physical effects would be felt by the Dark Lord himself. The potion's recipe was not described in any great detail—more a mention, in archaic language, of various ingredients, and a vague idea of proportions and timing. At least the finished product's color and consistency seemed clear enough. It might take a few tries to get it right. The work table in his private potions laboratory was piled with notes and books and papers, as he attempted to derive a usable formula from scattered sources.

In short, Snape was going to be very busy throughout the holidays, and he did not want Harry to become aware of the plots going on in the deserted school. Nonetheless, it would be cruel to exile the boy to Privet Drive, to enforced solitude and the gruesome spectacle of Dursley merry-making.

So, after a moment's thought, he was able to answer Harry's question.

"I always spend Christmas here at Hogwarts. Did you wish



to go elsewhere?"

"No! I mean—that would be great—as long as you're going to be here, too. I just hoped—"

"I will certainly be here, Harry. There is always a splendid Christmas feast for those of us in the castle. Generally a few students remain. Perhaps we will have time to visit Hogsmeade."

"I'd like that! It's just that Professor Sprout needs to know if I'm staying over the hols, and I didn't know if you had anything in mind."

There was more in that vein. The boy, inexplicably, wished to spend Christmas with him—with Snape. It was very gratifying to know that he had made such an impression. Unfortunately, though, that he would be so busy. It would not do for the boy to be entirely at loose ends, getting into mischief.

"While I celebrate Christmas at Hogwarts, I am often invited to spend New Year's Eve with the Malfoys. I see no reason you would not come along if they extend the usual invitation."

This, too, seemed acceptable to the boy. That would be at least one day to keep him occupied, but Snape would try to think of something more. Harry went his way, off to tell Professor Sprout about his holiday plans.



"I do feel so sorry," said Zach Smith in Defense class a few days later, "for all those people who have to stay at Hogwarts for Christmas because they're not wanted at home."

Harry knew that the words were directed at him, and ignored them. He was surprised to see Ron Weasley turn bright red, though he thought little of it at the time.

He had told his friends that he was remaining at school as soon as he had notified Professor Sprout. Harry would be quite alone in Hufflepuff, which concerned his Head of House.

"It's fine, Professor," he assured her. "It's not like I'll be alone in the castle. I'll do a bit of reading and studying. I'll see you all at meals, and Professor Snape and I have a few things planned. It'll be great!"

Unknown to him, Pomona Sprout went straight to Snape and asked him what was wrong with the boy's muggle relations.

"Is one of them ill? Are they planning on taking a holiday out of the country? Why not take the lad along with them?"

"Harry is enjoying the magical world, Pomona. He's not ready to leave it behind him—and frankly, his muggle relatives are not quite ready to have a young wizard back amongst them, though I would prefer this was kept confidential. He'll have a far more pleasant Christmas here."

Pomona looked at him so long and earnestly that Snape wondered if she was going to pepper him with questions about Harry's home life. She did not, however. Instead, she gave him a rather sad look, and patted his hand. "I daresay he will. No—you don't have to tell me—I understand a great deal more than you think, now."

Everyone had something to say about the situation. Late



one evening, Charity told Snape that Harry was very worried about getting just the right present for his proxy guardian.

"I asked the students about it, and we're going to make some things at the last meeting before they leave for the holidays. Only trifles, mind you, but Harry is quite excited about giving presents."

"Rubbish! He doesn't need to get me anything!" Snape grunted.

She moved in closer to him on the cushioned settee in front of the fire, running her foot over his ankle. "He feels he needs to. It would make him happy. You must prepare yourself for the unspeakable horror of Christmas presents, Severus. You won't escape them this year."

"I *do* get Christmas presents. Albus always gives me socks. At least Minerva gives me whisky."

"Socks?" Her face fell into mock-despair. "Oh, dear! My plans are in ruins..."

She clearly expected the two of them to exchange presents. He would have to find something for her. Something personal? He would rather stick needles in his eyes than set foot in some god-awful be-ruffled establishment full of witches' furbelows. Owl order was the only option, unless he brewed her something. Hmmm...

And he would have to get Harry something too. Something decent—something sensible—not socks, though...



That last Explorers' meeting before the holidays was great fun. Professor Burbage provided materials for a number of magical craft projects. Some of the students were using beeswax and herbs for candles, and some were modeling it into amulets. Eggshells could be charmed into clever little unbreakable containers that sealed without a mark, or they could be decorated as ornaments and with the proper spell would play a tune. Some of these projects were not unknown to the wizard-born students in the group, but they possessed all the delights of novelty to the others. Professor Burbage walked among them, helping them with the charms.

Harry was enjoying making his two presents. There was a brilliantly scarlet candle for Professor McGonagall, with the runes for peace and friendship inscribed in golden ink. For Professor Snape he used the coloring charm Professor Burbage taught them to give a plain eggshell a finish just like black marble. It, too, was inscribed with a rune—the rune of secrecy. Professor Snape could put things in it he didn't want anyone else to see. Professor Snape was a private person and would like it, Harry was sure.

"What's that mark?" Hermione asked, looking up from her own ornament.

"It's a rune. It's a different way of doing magic. I've got a book about them."

"Oh! Runes!" Hermione leaned over for a better look. "We can



take that class starting in our third year! I'd like very much to know more about them, Harry. You should talk to the club about them."

"I need to know a bit more, first," Harry said dryly. "They're really interesting, though. Professor—"

He broke off. He was not supposed to tell anyone about how Professor McGonagall had helped him. He frowned, and said, "Professor Snape never took Runes himself, but Draco's father knows quite a bit about them."

"Father's quite the scholar," Draco agreed proudly. He had little experience with crafts, since the Malfoys were accustomed to simply buying what they wanted, but this was rather fun, and a chance to prove he'd learned something at school.

"So you're really going to be staying here for Christmas, Harry?" Neville asked.

"Yeah. It's going to be great. Professor Snape thought we might go to Hogsmeade. It'll be weird, though, being the only student here."

"But you won't be," Neville told him, as he worked diligently on the charmed candle he would take home to Gran for Christmas. It was looking quite nice, if he said so himself. "Ron Weasley and his brothers are all staying."

"Weasley!" Draco was disgusted. "That's appalling. Lucky for you they're in a different House!"

"I didn't know anybody else was staying," Harry confessed. The thought of sharing the castle with Ron Weasley was not very pleasant.

"Well," Neville looked around and lowered his voice. "Zach didn't know either, or he wouldn't have made that nasty remark to you in Defense. He really upset Ron, and they're hardly talking to each other now. His parents are going to Romania, you see." Neville explained. "One of their older boys works there. He's a dragon handler, and Ron's awfully proud of him. They couldn't afford to take all the family, so Ron and the twins and Percy are all staying at school over the holidays. Ron's taking it hard."

"That's rough," Harry said.

He did feel a bit sorry for the red-haired boy. Everyone else Harry knew was going home for the holidays. If he had parents, he would certainly want to be with them.

Draco was not very sympathetic. "I don't think people should have so many children they can't afford to take care of them."

"Well, it is a shame, his very first Christmas since he left for school." Hermione said, more kindly. "I can't wait to see my parents and tell them all about Hogwarts. We're going to have such fun! Since we'll be in London anyway, we're going to a panto before we go home."

Explaining what a pantomime was took some time. There were no such holiday entertainments in the wizarding world, and Daphne and Lavender were especially vocal in their regret about that.

Justin had heard from his mother, and they were going to see THE NUTCRACKER as they did every year. Sally was too,



and to Harry's surprise, he learned that she and Justin had arranged with their parents for the families to go to the same *matinée* performance and have dinner together afterward.

"My parents are really looking forward to meeting your mother, Sally. They don't know anyone who has a kid at Hogwarts. I looked around a bit when I got here, but there's nobody whose name I recognised. My mother is surprised that there isn't some group or other for parents with magical children."

"I hope they get on all right. Your mother sounds very grand."

"She's all right," Justin assured her. "And you'll like my sister. They're both mad about ballet, like you. Talk you to death, probably. I hope my dad can make it. He always says he's going to, and then there's some sort of international crisis, and he's off to Kuwait or Beirut or Cairo. I hope he's home for Christmas, at least."

Harry gathered that Susan and Hannah would be spending quite a bit of time together. They had been friends before they came to Hogwarts, of course. Ernie would be seeing them at some evening party or other, and the girls talked about needing new dress robes.

Professor Burbage took pictures of all of them, with her curious magical camera. Some posed alone, and some with groups of friends. Everyone would have a picture to give their family. Harry asked her to take a picture of him by himself, and planned to give that to Professor Snape. He also posed with his Hufflepuff

housemates, and with the officers of the Explorers Club. Draco wanted a picture with Harry for his parents. They all danced the Yule Measure, and drank hot mulled pumpkin juice. It was a wonderful way to get in the holiday spirit. At the end, Professor Burbage took a picture of all the members together.

"This one is *my* present!" she laughed.

Walking back toward the Great Hall, the students found Hagrid in the process of hauling in a huge fir tree.

"Need some help, Hagrid?" Harry called out.

"Naw, thanks. I got it. One more after this one an' I'll be done!"

Inside the Hall, Professor Flitwick was busily decorating ten more enormous Christmas trees, levitating glittering ornaments up into the lofty branches.

"Twelve of them?" gasped Hermione. The rest of the explorers crowded in to admire.

"—Would you look at the Hall!"

"—I've never seen anything like it!"

Harry grinned. He asked the others, "Now aren't you sorry *you're* not going to be here for Christmas?"



There were hugs and farewells as Harry's friends departed for Hogsmeade Station. Harry walked with them to the gates, and felt himself very much the master of the castle. Percy Weasley was bidding goodbye to some Ravenclaw girls, and



he gave Harry a nod.

"All right there, Harry?" Percy had always been perfectly polite to Harry, on the rare occasions they had crossed paths.

"Yeah. I think it'll be great. You?"

"Well, it's too bad our family couldn't be together this year, but there are consolations. I plan to do some serious work in the library. My O.W.L. year, you know. It's very important to do well. Ron's a bit down in the mouth... Look here! Perhaps you two could spend some time together?"

"Well—"

"Do you play chess? Ron's quite a prodigy."

Harry laughed. "Then he'll beat me hollow! But yeah, I play chess. Just not very well."

"Nobody plays chess as well as Ron. Here come the twins. They'll want a snowball fight, I expect. Are you game?"

Up in the quarters of Minerva McGonagall, Sprout had just portkeyed away on her mission. The three remaining Heads of House were silent, thinking of the next few hours' demands. Snape went to the window and looked at the snowy scene. The crowd of noisy brats had departed. Far below, Harry was outside chatting with one of the Weasleys. Snape grimaced. Not the company he would choose for Harry, but the older boy was reasonably well-behaved. He must think of a way for Harry to see something of his friends over the holidays...

"Well, I'd better get some rest if I'm meeting Pomona in Bon-

ifacio in five hours," Flitwick said, determinedly cheerful.

They had agreed that Minerva would take the next leg of the journey, from Lyons to Calais. Then Snape would have the last flight—long, cold, and dark—across the Channel and north to Scotland. He would need some rest, himself.

First he wanted to have another look at his research. Harry could surely be left to his own devices today. There was still the problem of stabilising the potion...

It was a long walk down to the dungeons, but Snape spent it all in thought. He gave the password, stepped through the doorway, and paused.

Something seemed different here. Snape looked about warily. It was impossible that anyone could have gained access to his private laboratory.


The papers on the work table were rearranged. Snape tensed, and then realised that a draught through the connecting door must have disturbed them. If only they were not hopelessly out of order!

His notebook was on top, open to the last entry. Snape looked again, and felt his scalp tingle. There, in another's hand, was a message:

*Agua Vitae as a catalyst. Increase  
citricinnitas by exposure to Sun  
one hour.*



## CHAPTER 20



**AQUA VITAE** as a catalyst.  
*Increase citrinnitas by exposure to Sun  
one hour."*

Snape groped for a chair. The room spun slowly until, after several deep breaths, he mastered his shock.

Gathering his courage, he looked again at the message. That was not Albus' hand. While Albus Dumbledore might well have the ability to slip past Snape's defenses, he had not left the laconic scrap of advice in Snape's notebook.

For a terrified instant, he had thought it might be Quirrell, or his master acting through him. No. He knew Quirrell's handwriting, and he certainly had not written this. And he was rubbish at Potions, anyway.

It took longer to firmly set aside the notion that the Dark Lord was behind it: sending a note to torment and threaten, letting his erstwhile servant know that his secrets were discovered. Snape could not recall ever seeing his handwriting, but he had longer ago assessed the Dark Lord's

potions expertise, and it was impossible that he could have conceived of these elegantly simple solutions to Snape's problems.

He studied the message again, marveling at it. It was inspired. Who could look at notes for what could have been only two hours at most and comprehended Snape's purpose so clearly? And not only that, had improved—possibly perfected—the formula?

The aqua vitae was something that Snape might well have hit on, given time. Using the unique properties of the Sun, however... This was an entire field of research that he had never imagined! He felt a flash of the joy and delight he had known in his school years. He had allowed himself to ossify, down in the dark dungeons, never imagining such a fresh approach. There were so many possibilities...

No one at Hogwarts could have done it. Not even Horace Slughorn at his canniest could have done it.

*"When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth."*

Being a halfblood had its difficulties, but being a halfblood had also allowed him to read Arthur Conan Doyle. Sherlock Holmes had just given him his answer, and Snape's mouth curled in the faintest of smiles.

Had Flamel received his letters? Had they piqued his interest? Was he here, in the castle, intervening to save his master-work? Snape had learned not to hope for much in his life. He knew all too well that no torture was more exquisite than to



hope for help in vain. When he had thrown himself at Dumbledore's feet so many years ago, the old man—almost—promised things that had made Snape nearly drunk with the hope that Lily would be saved from the vengeance of the Dark Lord.

And then she had died. And then she had died.

So he must not expect too much. He must seize what opportunities he could, but not put all his trust in a *deus ex machina*.

Hands still shaking with excitement, he wandered out of the laboratory and summoned tea. He must think this through clearly.

Yes. Very likely it really was Flamel: the brilliance of the solution suggested the greatest of all alchemists. If the source of his own immortality was in danger, perhaps he had arrived to secure it. He might choose simply to remove the Philosopher's Stone from the equation, and depart back to his well-known "retirement."

He was, after all, notoriously apolitical—at least for the past three hundred years. For all Dumbledore's association with him in the Headmaster's youth—the uses of dragon's blood, etc., etc., etc., *ad infinitum*—Flamel had kept an extremely low profile for most of the century. Snape, out of professional interest, knew more about him than the shreds of information doled out in Binns' class. Years ago, he had read the biography of Flamel that Lily had bought at Snape's suggestion. She had always had more spending money than he. She read it, and he read it, and they talked it over privately, puzzling over the wizard's story.

Flamel had been a voice against the seclusion of the wizarding world. His own life had led him to believe that magic was the common heritage of the human race; that there was no great gulf fixed between wizard and muggle, but a sliding scale of magic in which nearly all human beings could find a place. His own genius, of course, caused him to tower over lesser wizards and witches. Small wonder that he saw more similarities than differences between mildly-talented magicals and people who might have only a small ability for divination or arithmancy—or no magic at all.

Magic, Flamel contended, was a gift: only one of many that a human might possess. Musicians did not claim to be superior beings to the tone-deaf: philosophers did not claim that their stronger understanding made them a race apart. Some people were artists, and others were poets. Some were brilliant mathematicians, and some wrote noble histories. Some could use magic.

Flamel saw a greater divide between the gifted—in any realm—and the stupid, the incurious, and the slothful. In various times and places he and his wife Perenelle had been friends with many outstanding individuals who were not magical at all, but worthwhile and interesting people for all that.

After all, no one could honestly hold that wizard and witches were more intelligent than other human beings. Everyone had met wizards who could barely read, and witches who could not reason logically.



But in the mid-seventeenth century, he was a voice from another age crying in the wilderness. The madness of that time was such that the great majority of witches and wizards wanted nothing more than to hide from the terrors and cruelties of the witch hunts. That sugary little fable about Wendelin the Weird taught in Binns' class disguised the real horror of the witch-craze, which shaped an era until it burned itself out in New England and Scotland at last.

Yes, a witch or wizard armed with a wand was fairly safe from the likes of Matthew Hopkins, the Witch-Finder General. Their children, however, were not safe, nor their neighbors, nor people who only looked something like them. It mattered not whether people were actually capable of witchcraft, when the persecutors were also using the term as a code for religious differences, for personal eccentricities, for ethnic hatreds—and certainly, as a tool to lash out against women who dared to be independent.

Wizards had always had a place at the courts of the mighty. Princes, Kings, even the Holy Roman Emperors themselves had their Sorcerers Royal—their pet magicians and potions makers; and even amongst the lower classes the “cunning man” was more respectable than the “wise woman.” Though many men died in the course of the witch hunts, witches were the preferred target, and they had no princely patrons to shield them.

It had been the witches, in the end, who had voted entirely

for seclusion, aghast at the holocaust. In some German towns, every woman and girl had been executed. The witches had carried the day, and the wizarding world had cut itself off from the rest of the humanity and chosen a separate path. It had never looked back.

Flamel had submitted to the will of the majority. What else could he do, short of seizing supreme power and bending everyone to his will? Once the decision was made, he had not subverted or ignored it. On the other hand, he had never concealed his regret for his lost friends and colleagues—or the friends and colleagues who might have been.

*“Just between us, I was told that Flamel thought Albus should have finished his apprenticeship with him, rather than muck-ing about in politics.”*

Where had he heard that? Probably Slughorn, who knew more gossip than Rita Skeeter. Yes—Albus and Flamel had been close when Albus was a young man. Perhaps the scholarly life was not ultimately what Albus wanted, but his early association with Flamel had lent him tremendous prestige, and had launched his rise to fame and power.

Surprisingly, Flamel had not played any role in the war with Grindelwald that Snape knew of, other than as an independent researcher of cures for magical ailments. He had not come forward to fight against the Dark Lord of that time, partly because Snape had the impression that Flamel thought that



for a wizard to describe himself as a Dark Lord was too vain and absurd for words.

His views of the whole Light/Dark Magic question were unclear at best. However, his biographer had quoted him as saying that the use of the terms “Light” and “Dark” as metaphors for kinds of magic were not useful, and actually muddled the issue. His own preference was to distinguish between magic that was benign or neutral and that which he considered “malicious.” And not everything that the British Wizengamot, for example, defined as “Dark” was “malicious” in Flamel’s opinion.

Snape’s own personal Dark Lord, the wizard Albus Dumbledore called Tom Riddle, had not considered Flamel in his own plans at all. Flamel was an outsider: someone who had removed himself from the struggle for power out of weakness, or foolish scruples, or cowardice, or extreme old age. Nor had Flamel come forward to assist his old collaborator, Albus Dumbledore. He had not played a role in public life for so long that no one questioned it at the time—which they *had* done in the days of Grindelwald.

Was that the reason Albus had wheedled the Philosopher’s Stone from Flamel? To give him a stake in the war against the—current—Dark Lord? If Nicholas Flamel was in Hogwarts, improving Snape’s potions, who could say what he had learned about the situation?

“Master Flamel?” Snape called out, not sure what to do.

Should he leave a thank-you in the notebook? Was Flamel still about?

“Master Flamel?”

He was not surprised that there was no answer. Flamel might be at Hogwarts, but he would reveal himself—or not—when and how he chose.



“Where were you last night?” Charity wondered at breakfast. “I called your room, but there was no answer.”

Still rather tired from the previous night’s exertions, Snape did not look up from his plate.

“I was helping Pomona retrieve some new plants for her collection. They had to be flown in from Sicily.”

“That was nice of you. What kind of plants?”

Casually, Snape answered, “Moly. She thought it best to pot up a half dozen, in case some didn’t survive.”

“How interesting! So much lore! So many stories! Has someone been trying to turn people into pigs recently?”

Snape snorted. “Not that I’ve noticed. Though it might be an improvement in some cases, at that.”

She laughed, very chipper and cheerful in the mornings. That, Snape decided, was the worst of her. It would not prevent him from brewing something quite special for her Christmas present: a personalised scent with a base of her favourite



lime flowers. There was an Egyptian vial he owned that would be just the receptacle for it.

"I wondered where Pomona was," Charity said. "She must have had a late night with her new treasures."

McGonagall and Flitwick had come down to breakfast. Flitwick's eyes were shadowed with weariness. Minerva was much the same as ever, and exchanged a quick look of understanding with Snape.

Pomona had rested after her leg of the flight, in order to be sharp when the plants were placed in the greenhouses. She had had quite a bit of work to do with them last night, and was no doubt sleeping in. The moly would need time to adapt, but Snape would be able to take some for his own use within a day or two.

Harry entered the Great Hall, and waved to him. Snape managed to respond in kind without scowling. Not many students had stayed over the holidays this year. A single round table was laid for those who remained. Of the Weasleys, only Percy was there, nose in a book, looking up to nod to Harry. The monsters and the youngest were not yet down, and Snape gave silent thanks for that. No Hufflepuffs, other than Harry—those two Ravenclaw girls were seventh years, and not interested in little boys—none from his own house, since the Headmaster had agreed to let poor Delilah Trewlett spend the holidays with a cousin...

It was the Weasleys or solitude, it seemed. Harry would see

Draco on New Year's Eve, and would doubtless be writing notes to his other friends. Still, it might be possible to arrange a brief visit...

He asked Charity, "Have you locked the club room for the holidays?"

"Yes." She leaned closer, and whispered, "Knowing that the Weasley twins would be here, I didn't want the room spoiled."

"Sound thinking," he agreed, "but it might be available, might it not, if Harry had visitors?"

"Are you thinking of inviting some of his friends for a day?" she whispered back. "Is that allowed?"

Snape narrowed his eyes at the Headmaster's empty chair. "It means bending the rules slightly, since there are provisions for staff who have families. I'm only the proxy guardian, but I would prefer to apologise later rather than to ask permission first and be refused. I was thinking of Boxing Day."

She gave him a conspiratorial smirk. "And if the children stay in the club room, who would be the wiser?"

Quirrell arrived, and took his place on Snape's other side. The pleasant conversation died away.

Snape left soon after, but not before slipping Minerva a message: "*We need to talk. At Three Broomsticks 2 PM.*"



"Oi, Potter!" Ron said, plumping himself down at the table. "Could you pass the bacon this way?"



Harry obliged, still talking with Percy about cheering charms. Percy was writing a lengthy essay about them, and was pleased to share his findings with someone who would listen. Ron filled his plate and ate with gusto.

“—and you can combine them with a number of calming potions for healing. They do that all the time at St. Mungo’s,” Percy finished.

“That must be pretty complicated,” Harry said. “Of course, you’re a good student. Are you thinking about going into Healing?”

Ron laughed. “Not Percy! He fancies being Minister of Magic before he’s thirty!”

Percy was annoyed. “While Healing is a very worthy profession, I *am* more interested in a career in the Ministry, though of course I am not so ridiculous as Ron makes out. Thank you so much, by the way, Ronniekins.”

“Don’t call me that!”

Percy ignored him and addressed Harry. “Our father works in the Ministry, and I’ve always wanted to follow in his footsteps.”

Harry asked, “What does he do?”

“He monitors the misuse of muggle artifacts,” Percy explained, pleased to talk about the Ministry. “It’s quite an important job. You wouldn’t believe how careless—or how unkind—people can be, bewitching muggle things and then unleashing them on the unsuspecting. Not too long ago, Dad had to deal with this cursed teapot—”





Ron was chuckling, shaking his head. Harry glanced at him, and answered, "I can imagine how scared a muggle would be. What do they do, when something like that happens?"

"Confiscate the article, and sometimes call in the Obliviators to remove the muggle's memory of it. Sometimes Dad has to track down who did it, and refer the case for prosecution. He loves his work, though not everyone understands how valuable his contribution is—"

Ron put in, "Percy means it doesn't pay as well as a lot of the Ministry departments. Mum wishes he'd transfer out and get more money."

"Well, I think it sounds pretty important," Harry said, trying to smooth things. "If people don't know much about the muggle world, maybe they don't understand how much trouble those things can cause. It's too bad they don't appreciate it more."

Percy was mollified, and Ron shrugged, reaching for the jam.

"Dad's mad about muggle stuff. He loves hearing about it, and he's got a lot of muggle things about the house—doesn't always know what they *do*, of course—"

"You live with muggles, don't you?" Percy asked Harry.

"Yeah. My aunt and uncle and cousin. Completely muggle."

Harry replied without enthusiasm.

Percy opened his mouth and then shut it, sensing that the muggle relatives were a sore point. Harry, after all, was at Hogwarts and not with his family.

Ron was not so sensitive. "Why didn't you go home for the holidays?" he asked, wolfing his toast. Percy winced.

Harry's temper flared. His first impulse was to tell them the awful truth. "*Because they hate magic, and by extension, me.*"

But Professor Snape was counting on him to keep that quiet. "I'd rather be at Hogwarts. Magic is all pretty new to me. Professor Snape and I have some plans."

Ron shuddered, "Better you than me!"

Percy nudged him, and Ron sputtered, "What?"

"I know what you're thinking," Harry said. "Professor Snape has been really nice to me. I know he's tough in class, but that's because potions are dangerous. He's tough on me, too. Keeps track of my grades, and checks my homework and all, and if it's not good enough, I have to do it again. And no," he said, seeing the look on Ron's face, "he *doesn't* give me the answers. Sometimes he tells me the name of a book I should look at, but I have to do the work myself."

"That's very responsible of him," Percy put in hastily. "He's a very serious person. I always thought so."

Ron rolled his eyes, but said no more on the subject. "So I hear you like chess?"

"I'm just learning. I like it, but I'm not much good at it. Percy says you're brilliant."

Ron shrugged again, but looked very pleased, all the same. "I'm pretty good. Want to play a game or two?"



"Let me get my chessmen. We could play here, I guess."

"Yeah, why not? You want a game, too, Perce?"

"I'm off to the library, I'm afraid. Transfiguration calls."

"See you later, then. I'll meet you here in a tick, Ron," Harry said, and hurried off to the Hufflepuff quarters.

He glanced back at the Head Table. Professor Quirrell looked up at met his eyes briefly. Harry turned his head away instantly and dashed off, with only a fleeting stab of pain to remind him to be more careful.

Quirrell watched the boy go, not surprised at the flash of intense dislike and suspicion he caught. He certainly had given the brat plenty of reason to hate and fear him, and that the boy obviously did rather pleased him. Revolting little do-gooder. Once the Stone was his, he could move on to other projects, and settling The Boy-Who-Lived was certainly at the top of his to-do list.



"But you're *sure* it was Flamel?" Minerva asked again, utterly astonished. The Three Broomsticks was packed with holiday shoppers, and the two Hogwarts professors spoke softly, conscious of the witches and wizards at the neighboring tables.

"I can't imagine who else it might be. No one else has that kind of expertise. I wrote to him—twice. I warned him that the Stone was in danger. I hadn't heard back, but then there was the message in my own notebook in my private laboratory. I

hadn't expected him to come, but it seems he has."

"Do you think Albus knows?"

"If he did, surely he would have—" Snape paused. No, Albus would *never* have told them. "I don't know. It seems incredible that a wizard could simply stroll into Hogwarts, but Flamel is no ordinary wizard, and he taught at Hogwarts in the past. More than once, in fact."

"Not since the eighteenth century, but I take your point. He probably knows the castle quite well, and it has not changed much since his days. I wonder if he's already taken the Stone and left?"

That was certainly a possibility, and the two of them sat glumly over their drinks.

Minerva rallied her spirits first. "Even if he has, what does it matter? Quirrell doesn't know. It would be quite ironic if he spent all this time and effort to thread the maze and come up with nothing. And our trap will probably work just as well. We must tell Pomona and Filius."

"Yes, but we need be extremely careful. Perhaps I'm becoming yet more paranoid, but none of us should discuss this by fire call. And Albus tends to know where people are in the castle. If he notices the four of us together too often, he's likely to become curious."

"True, but this is too important not to share. We'll meet in my quarters this evening. Pomona was completely worn out after her efforts, and I think Filius was too, though he tries not to let on.



He's not young, and flying tires him, but he wanted to do his bit."



Flitwick was so excited at the idea of Flamel coming to their assistance that he nearly fell out of his chair. Pomona Sprout took the news more calmly, but seemed rather reassured. After a brief discussion, they agreed that they needed to know if the Stone was still where they had left it. A brief expedition revealed that it was. This detail puzzled them all.

"It will be nearly impossible to remove anything from the Mirror, if the trap works as it ought," worried Minerva. "Do you suppose that Flamel has another Stone? Or that what we have is only a portion of a larger one?"

Snape was rather vexed that he had no answer for her. The available literature was so sketchy and so enigmatic that there was little he could say. He suspected that others had tried to create Stones, but no one was likely to advertise a failed attempt. Slughorn had pooh-poohed the possibility of making one nowadays, with a great deal of blather about ideal conditions at a specific time in history—so much blather that Snape wondered if Sluggy had had a go at a Stone himself.

He himself had never even considered it. It was not as if his life had been anything that merited immortality. And there were lessons to be learned from Flamel's long life—even from observing a wizard as old as Albus. Times changed. People

had short memories. It must be incredibly difficult to adapt to new ideas and new inventions. Personally, he did not feel that Albus was entirely successful in meeting the challenge of the continual tiny adjustments that long life demanded. Perhaps, however, the Elixir of Life made all the difference. He simply did not know, and he admitted as much to his colleagues.

"But it's very encouraging, all the same," Pomona insisted. "It's obvious that he was in the Mirror Chamber. He didn't even try to hide it. He simply walked in and walked out."

"And presumably had a look at what we've done," Flitwick added eagerly, "though he didn't leave us a note. Too bad, that."

Snape gave a slight shrug. "It might simply mean that he thinks it—adequate."

They left it at that. The next few days passed in something like peace. The Castle was quiet. Quirrell came to meals but otherwise kept to himself. Snape found that two of the moly plants would give him roots enough for his purpose and he set about brewing, very eager to try the solar exposure technique.



"Come in, Harry."

Harry entered Snape's quarters, scowling. "You always know it's me."

Snape smirked at him. The boy took his usual chair, sprawling out comfortably. During the holidays he had taken to



making a daily visit.

*Astonishing what boredom can drive one to*, Snape reflected.

Today Harry had a purpose other than mere chat. "When are we going to Hogsmeade?"

"Tomorrow, perhaps. I'm in the middle of an important potion, and I need to work on it today while the weather is fine."

"Why does the weather matter?"

"Ah—this particular potion calls for an unusual process. I need to expose it to sunlight for an hour."

"Can I help?" Harry sat up, looking rather like an eager puppy.

A moment's silence, while Snape considered the idea. How very appropriate that Harry should take part in brewing a potion that would put paid to his nemesis. Prophecies had an odd way of fulfilling themselves, after all...

"I don't see why not. Wouldn't you rather be playing chess with Youngest Weasley?" He had indeed seen Harry losing spectacularly to the boy in the Great Hall, sometimes after only a half-dozen moves. Ron Weasley had a real talent there. Minerva had noticed it too, and was trying to think a way to channel that kind of clear thinking into some aspect of the boy's academic life.

*Good luck with that.*

Harry told him, "Ron's all right. He's nice enough when you get him away from Smith. He's better at chess than Draco, even. Maybe there should be a chess tournament at school. I think

Ron would like a chance to shine at something. From what he says I guess he feels kind of overshadowed by all his brothers."

"Possible, I suppose. Never having had a brother I wouldn't know."

"Me either, but I remember how I hated it when Dudley got all the attention. Ron gets all these hand-me-downs like I did: even his wand and his pet. It's a rat named Scabbers, and really old and stupid." Harry added, "Anyway, I wouldn't mind helping you with the potion. What's it for, anyway?"

"It may have surprising therapeutic uses. It's something of an experiment, so I'd prefer you not spread the word about."

"If we get it done early, could we go to Hogsmeade after?"

Snape rolled his eyes. "If we must."

"If we go to Hogsmeade, would Professor Burbage want to come too?"

Astonished, Snape wondered for a moment if Harry was crushing on her. "I hadn't mentioned it to her. Why do you ask?"

"I just thought you'd want to. You two are going together, aren't you?"

"What makes you say that?" Snape growled, instantly suspicious.

Harry was surprised at the reaction. "Well—you just are. I mean, you were worried about her when the troll was after us, and you sit with her and talk to her and everything. She has tea with us sometimes, and you don't ask anybody but her. You like her, don't you? She's really nice."

Feeling all his blood rush to his head, Snape managed, "Is



this an item of common student gossip? Have you told anyone else this?"

"No, Professor! I haven't talked about it to anybody. I thought everybody knew you liked her. She sure likes you."

Snape got up and walked across the room, his back to the boy.

"Harry—" he ground out. "I am a very—*private*—person. The thought of my personal life being known and gossiped about by dunderheads is unspeakably repugnant. You must not discuss this with anyone else."

Very chastened, Harry apologised. "I'm sorry, Professor. I didn't mean to—"

Snape turned, fighting down his rage, "I know that you were not speaking out of malice. Yes, Professor Burbage and I are friends. I had not realised that this was apparent to anyone else. We must be more discreet, and to that end, perhaps it is best that we not be seen together in Hogsmeade."

"But it's the holidays!" Harry protested. His eyes, green and innocent, had never looked more like his mother's. "None of the other kids will see. If anybody wonders, you can tell them you both need to protect me because I'm so—" he struggled for a suitable word—"incorrigible!" Yes—that was the word Uncle Vernon had used to describe him to a neighbor once. "—I'm incorrigible, and I take a lot of looking after!"

Snape sighed for the past, and agreed. "Oh, Harry, you are indeed incorrigible, and you do take a lot of looking after."

Would you *like* Professor Burbage to join us?"

"I wouldn't mind," Harry told him. "It would be nice with just you and her and me at a table—just the three of us. She's *nice*," he repeated. "And I don't see why you should mind if the whole world knows you like each other!"

"There are reasons," Snape replied, already inwardly agreeing that Charity's company in Hogsmeade would be very agreeable. "And Hogwarts professors are expected to be discreet about their private lives."

"It's not *private*," Harry said stubbornly. "You're my guardian. Everybody knows that. And extra protection is always a good idea. So maybe we should get to work on your potion and get it done and then we'll have lots of time for Hogsmeade after!"

Snape had long ago learned that work was soothing when he was out of sorts. The potion base was already under way, and there was work for both of them. He motioned to the boy to follow him.

"To the laboratory with you, incorrigible!"

He could not entrust infusing the moly roots to anyone but himself, but the boy was very helpful with the other ingredients, chopping finely and uniformly, just as he had been taught. Harry had a knack with potions, and his good grades were not mere favouritism on Snape's part.

Adding the Aqua Vitae at the proper moment made the boy wrinkle his nose and chuckle.

"I didn't know you were making wine again."



“The heat will burn off the alcohol. It’s merely being used as a catalyst here, to speed up the amalgamation of the ashwinder shells. Yes, the truffles look all right. Add them slowly while I stir widdershins.”

The potion needed some simmering, so he sent Harry off to find his cloak and gloves. It might be sunny, but it was still December, and watching a potion for an hour outside would be chilly work, even with warming charms. He would set up a work table and a flame to keep the potion at the proper temperature, since charming the potion might have an adverse effect. Albus’ office did not overlook the courtyard Snape intended to use, and he hoped that the cold would keep the Headmaster from strolling outside and asking questions.

They must have looked like a parade as they took the work outside, dressed in cloaks and hoods. Snape himself, carrying the potion on the tabletop, flame still burning, felt like some sort of priestly masquerade, with little acolyte Potter trotting along behind him. He hoped no one would see them, and not just because of the need to keep the potion secret.

Once set up though, the work absorbed him. The steam curled up lazily and smelled like excrement seasoned with nutmeg. Theoretically, the odour would fade during this process. Snape certainly hoped so.

The potion bubbled slowly, thinning out over time. Its density was supposed to be indistinguishable from water. The

dirty dishwater colour began changing, ever so slowly.

“Look at that, Harry,” he said, trying to control his own excitement. “Do you see how the potion’s colour is becoming more intense? That golden colour is an indicator of what the alchemists call ‘citrinnitas.’”

Harry grinned. “It looks like pee, Professor.”

“How very mature. Spare me your schoolyard sense of humour. Do you see it?”

“Yes, Professor. I see it. Is it the Sun that’s doing that? Is that why you brought it outside?”

“Exactly. An entirely new technique. There might be a number of other applications. Don’t bump the table. It needs to stand undisturbed the entire time.”

Harry lounged about, messing with lumps of snow, fidgeting back and forth, occasionally gossiping about his new—friend—Snape supposed.

“Ron” had a quidditch pitch at his home, called the Burrow, Snape was told. He was the youngest but one, who was an annoying little sister named Ginny. Ginny would be coming to school next year, and Ginny always got new things because she was a girl.

“I think it might be nice to have a sister. Do you have any sisters, Professor?”

“No,” Snape replied, peering at the potion. “I am an only child, just like you.”

“That’s what I thought.” Harry paused as a new thought



came to him. "Your parents aren't alive, are they?"

"No, Harry, they've been gone a long time." Snape wondered where these questions were leading. It would not do to be distracted at the moment...

"I guessed they were, or you'd be going to see them at Christmas. So you're an orphan, too, like me."

"Many adults are."

"Well—*old* people, of course. You're not old."

"I'm aging rapidly at the moment. Let's talk about it later. Come here and smell this."

"The stink is wearing off. That's good."

"Admirable use of technical terminology. Yes, the stink, as you put it, is wearing off, and that is indeed good." He checked the time. "Not much longer to go."

The colour was a clear, transparent yellow now. It would have to go into something dark, like—hmmm—red wine. If put in just before serving, the wine would not affect the potion, and the colour would be masked. Albus always made such a ritual of having everyone served a goblet of mulled wine at the Christmas feast...



## CHAPTER 21

**WOULD YOU** like another butterbeer, Harry?"

"Er—" Manners contested briefly with greed, and went down in defeat. "Yes, please, Professor Burbage."

It was so good. Harry licked his lips, enjoying the warming sweetness of his drink. This was just about perfect, he decided.

The Three Broomsticks was crowded, noisy and smoky, but Harry loved it. Here was none of the strangeness of the Leaky

● Cauldron: this was a place of cheerful, homely magic. The floor was swept, the woodwork polished. The little table he shared with Professor Snape and Professor Burbage was clean and shining, and it was laden with good things to eat and drink. A Christmas tree glittered near the fireplace.

In fact, he thought Hogsmeade itself was just about perfect, too. The little thatched cottages, roofs laden with snow, were pretty as candybox pictures. There were interesting little shops—or not so little, in the case of Honeyduke's—full of things to look at, and even sometimes to buy.



Of course, his Christmas presents were already bought, wrapped, labeled, and left in the Common Room to be distributed. The elves and owls would take care of them. Still, there was no harm in buying a few of the little bright parcels of sweets to have on hand. And if he didn't need to give them to anyone, he would just have to eat them himself—though it would be a struggle to eat the beautiful little marzipan fruits. Maybe he would just keep them to look at for awhile. Professor Snape had shrunk his packages, and they were even now in his pocket.

Another tankard of hot and foaming butterbeer was set before him.

"Thank you, Madam Rosmerta."

Madam Rosmerta had a very pretty face and the wizards all looked at her a lot, especially when she was walking away. Harry liked her sparkly turquoise high heels himself.

All the wizards except Professor Snape, he noticed. He was frowning into his own drink, not looking at the pretty witch. Professor Burbage had noticed it too, and was smiling a little to herself. Harry was pleased. It was very nice, just the three of them. And Professor Burbage would like the present Professor Snape was making for her with Harry's help.

"So what do you think of Hogsmeade, Harry?" Professor Burbage asked.

"I like it lot," he answered at once. "It's great. Why don't all the wizards and witches live here? I don't know anybody at

school who's from Hogsmeade."

"Really?" Snape looked up, surprised. "Let's see: the Flumes, the McClaggens—the son is a Gryffindor, an Urquhart in Slytherin. Some of the MacNairs, a branch of the Macmillans, but not your classmate's family, I know. Well, Harry, I suppose the reason is that Hogsmeade is a Scottish village."

"But so many people complain about being around muggles. If they just lived in Hogsmeade, they wouldn't see them, and have anything to complain about."

Charity laughed. "Maybe that's the reason!" She took a sip of her own butterbeer, and said more seriously, "There are other wizarding communities Harry. A great many witches and wizards live in the Diagon Alley enclave. Surely you noticed that many of the buildings were more than a single story."

"You mean they live upstairs?"

"Yes, many families live above their shops. A lot of the upstairs space is devoted to flats. I had a flat of my own there for a little while after I finished Hogwarts." She smiled oddly. "Before I went with my family to New Zealand."

Harry thought about that. It would be sort of neat to live right there in Diagon Alley.

"And there are the mixed villages, too," Snape put in, thinking with some distaste of Godric's Hollow. "I'm not sure it's really a good idea, but wizards and witches have lived there so long they don't want to leave, even though they break the



Statute of Secrecy every day.”

“But Hogsmeade is the only all-magical village,” Harry said.

“In *Britain*,” Charity corrected. “It’s certainly not the only wizarding village in the world! Maybe your club needs a little lesson in wizarding world geography. There are three all-magical villages in Ireland alone.”

“Really?” Harry was surprised. “Seamus Finnegan is the only Irish student I know at Hogwarts. I thought there just weren’t many Irish witches and wizards.”

Snape shook his head. “He’s not the only one, but it’s true that not a great many of school age attend Hogwarts. They would have to be living on British soil to receive an invitation, and the current Hogwarts charter does not include any part of Ireland as British soil. There are all sorts of historical reasons for that—and all sorts of anomalies. The Hebrides are Hogwarts territory, of course, and the Orkneys. Fair Isle, too, but only part of the Shetlands—”

“—and the Channel Islands, too,” Charity added, “but not the Isle of Man. And by the way, there are *lots* of Irish witches and wizards.”

“At any rate,” Snape continued, “Hogwarts is very much a British institution, and the Irish have a somewhat different tradition. There are two smallish schools, but more of the children are home-schooled or are fostered out as apprentices.”

“There was a great Irish school founded long before Hogwarts that was destroyed in the twelfth century,” Charity told

him. “Obviously, you never learn these things in Professor Binns’ class, but I studied the period on my own later. The whole relationship with Ireland is very complicated. We’re really only tied to them because of quidditch, and I don’t want to get into the story behind *that* today...”

They returned to their drinks.

“I wish I lived in Hogsmeade,” Harry then remarked. “I like the cottages here. Do the students who live in Hogsmeade go all the way to London and come back on the Hogwarts Express?”

“Yes, they must,” Snape said. “It sounds ridiculous, but the trip is supposed to give the children a transition period between home and school. Urquhart’s whole family floos to London, where they buy his school supplies and make a holiday of it. On September first, they put him on the Express, and then travel home again by floo. He likes it, he says, better than simply being walked up to the castle gates by his parents.”

Harry nodded judiciously. He could see that it would be more fun.

Still, the walk back to the castle was impressive in itself. The Professors insisted on him walking between them when they decided to take the narrow path skirting the Forest. Everything was beautifully white—covered in thick clean snow. The trees drooped over the path, and occasional strange noises broke through the silence. A hawk rose up from the leafless branches, uttering a shrill “Creeeee!”



"Do you see that, Harry?" Snape pointed at a mass of something dark high in a tree.

"Is that a bird's nest?"

"Mistletoe. That's an oak tree. You can tell by the bark. Mistletoe has a number of interesting uses, depending upon how one gathers it. Sometimes one must actually climb the tree and use a silver sickle. Generally, one can simply summon it. *Accio!*" he said, briskly pointed his wand at the treetop. The mass dislodged and came speeding toward them. Snape retrieved a bag from his robes and deftly gathered it in.

"Might I have some?" Harry asked, and was rewarded with a branch of green leaves with white berries.

"Don't eat the berries," Snape grunted.

After a moment, he gave Charity a small spray as well. She smiled, and fixed it to the collar of her robes, by way of decoration.

The castle grew larger as they walked on. Smoke rose from the direction of Hagrid's hut. They passed the gates, and were back into the welcoming precincts of Hogwarts. Harry was surprised to see a small figure waiting for them just inside the door.

"Hullo, Muffy! We've been to Hogsmeade!"

The little elf's eyes were swimming with tears.

"What's wrong?"

"Little Master Harry," the elf choked out, "has given Muffy a Christmas present! I have seen a package from him, with 'Muffy' written on it in his own writing!" With that, she burst into noisy sobs.

"Oh, Harry!" Charity cried, "you didn't give her clothes, did you?"

"No!" Harry protested, "I know not to do that! It's just a bag of chocolates! Muffy's been really nice to me!"

The elf wailed louder. "There has never been a wizard like Little Master Harry!"

The noise was attracting attention. Two identical red heads peeped out from a corridor, exploded into guffaws, and dashed away, echoing "*Little Master Harry!*"

Harry groaned. He would never live it down.

"Stop this at once!" Snape commanded. "Control yourself, elf. A simple thank-you would suffice!"

"But no Master has ever given Muffy a present!"

Charity was torn between compassion and laughter.

Harry tried to explain. "Christmas presents are important! I'm really excited about them. I know people are going to give me things, and I never got a Christmas present before! You *deserve* a present! I know what it's like not to get anything!"

The elf stopped her bawling with a great, wet sniff, and stared at Harry with enormous eyes.

"But Little Master Harry has always had gifts for Christmases! Gifts at his birthdays! Dozens and hundreds of gifts! Muffy has seen them!"



It was a little stone room by the owlery. Snape had never



taken notice of it, but quickly realised that a charm had made certain of that. The battered door opened into the little courtyard. There was a shuttered opening in the wall, which allowed the owls to drop their burdens straight through into the room's interior. The door was not locked. It had never needed to be. Without Muffy as their guide, they would not have known the place existed.

Snape kept Charity and Harry carefully behind him as he opened the door warily. Harry crowded by his elbow trying to see.

There was no window. The pale winter light of late afternoon slanted through the doorway into a room piled with parcels and scattered paper. Someone at one point had tried to keep order, but not lately. At least it was not covered with dust.

"See, Muffy has kept everything clean for Little Master Harry!"

"This is mine?" Harry wondered. He reached for a card on one of the piles.

"Wait!" Snape said, snatching it from his hand. "If this is put away, there must be a reason for it!"

"But it's *mine*!" Harry protested. "Why didn't I get it? I never got anything but sacks of old clothes of Dudley's!"

Charity's mouth dropped open. Snape gave her a quick and guilty "*It was worse than I told you!*" glance.

Harry pushed past him, grabbing at a plushie. "I would have loved getting something like this when I was a kid!"

Snape winced. *When you were a "kid?" Oh, Harry!*





A brightly-coloured little figurine of Merlin was next, with the giver's message still attached. Harry glanced at it. "*From Doris Crockford, with humble gratitude.*" He turned angrily on Snape. "She must think I'm the most stuck-up git in the world, not to thank her!" He set down the figurine carefully, and grabbed at another plushie, this one a very engaging bear. "I would have loved these!" he shouted, and squeezed the bear defiantly.

The bear's belly popped open, disgorging a lump of sickly green matter. Muffy shrieked in alarm. Harry dropped the bear at once, and Charity pulled him away.

"What *is* that?" she asked.

Snape crouched and examined it without touching it. He rose, grimacing. "Dried bobotuber pus. It's not dangerous now, but if you had got this on you when it was sent, Harry, it would have blistered your skin very painfully. Your aunt would not have known what to do." He looked around the room, assessing it. "The Headmaster must have diverted all your owls here, Harry. I grant I can see why he wouldn't want you to get mail from just anyone."

Harry's shoulders sagged. "And Aunt Petunia wouldn't have liked getting owls anyway."

"But this *is* Harry's," Charity considered. "Much of this should be quite all right. It will take time to go through it, mind you, but we should speak to the Headmaster at once. Now that Harry is here at Hogwarts, I see no reason he shouldn't have what he likes out of it."

"—and I should read the letters, too," Harry said. "Maybe some of the strange looks I've got were because I never wrote back."



Harry was sent off to clean himself up and face the music with the Weasleys. His two professors paid a visit to the Headmaster.

"Well, I'm afraid—" Dumbledore looked a trifle embarrassed, but also rather sad. "—that the matter had slipped my mind, I confess, since I made the arrangements so long ago. I had promised Harry's guardians that they would not be bothered by the wizarding world. That was not simply to placate them. I was quite concerned from the first about Harry receiving owls. Before going into hiding, his parents had received some very nasty threats that way, and later on I certainly did not want someone to use owl post to trace Harry's new hiding place. At first, I sorted through the mail myself, and replied to it, but there was such a great deal, and some of it—" He paused. "I was cursed myself," he admitted, "by a very subtle and dangerous message encoded in a Christmas card. There were portkeys, too—and not all of them from mortal enemies, but some from foolish admirers who wanted to be able to say they had met the Boy-Who-Lived. I would have had to hire a full-time clerk to deal with the volume, and the clerk would have needed the skills of a Gringotts curse-breaker. From time to time, I've dug in and organised some it—the letters I have



examined are in a blue box marked "Evening Gloves"—but I admit much remains to be done."

"I would be happy to help," Charity volunteered.

Snape glanced at her in concern. If Dumbledore himself could be cursed by some of those items, there was no way Snape wanted Charity to handle anything in that room without his protection. Grudgingly, he forgave Dumbledore for the ruse. He should have told Snape about the room once Snape's proxy guardianship was approved, but likely he really had forgotten it amongst all the other details. The reason for the room was logical enough.

"I will, of course, supervise the proceedings. My skills in Dark Arts are quite equal to it. Harry, too, might profit from helping. He also," he gave Dumbledore a level look, "might be more understanding of those who kept his only presents from him. I am rather busy at the moment, but perhaps this is something we can work on from time to time."

"A splendid idea!" Dumbledore beamed. "And I will gladly join you when my schedule permits. It will be rather delightful, all of us working together!"

When Snape explained the Headmaster's concerns to Harry after dinner, the boy was not happy, but understood. He was quite pleased at the plan to go through the room's contents. "Most of the stuff will be for little kids, of course," he said, "but it's nice to know that people were thinking of me.

And that cursed stuff—"

"There's probably not that much of it," Snape assured him, "but you understand how careful we must be not to let anything slip through. Some of it is probably worn out, worn off, or otherwise made innocuous," he said, "but we can't make stupid assumptions. I think you'll learn a great deal."

"And Professor Dumbledore is going to help us!" Harry was impressed. "That's nice of him. Could we start soon?"

"We can, on Thursday morning between nine and eleven-thirty. That is the only time we all have free until Christmas."

"What about the day after Christmas?"

"The Headmaster has plans for Boxing Day. However," Snape smirked, "now is as good a time as any to tell you about some arrangements I have been working on for you." He paused, and smirked again. "How would you like for some of your friends to come for the day?"

Harry's face lit like a candle. "Really? That's great!"

"Not all of them, of course. I decided that your fellow club officers would have to do. From what you indicated earlier, your Hufflepuff friends already have plans. Three young visitors should not attract undue notice." Snape warned him, "You must understand, Harry, that I am bending Hogwarts rules a bit, and it is important you not mention this to the Headmaster, or anyone else. Draco's parents, of course, were quite agreeable. Madam Longbottom has also given her per-



mission. In fact, she seemed rather pleased at the idea of her grandson seeing some friends. I spoke to Miss Grangers parents, and we have arranged for her to be apparated from her home and returned by five o'clock in the afternoon."

"We can stay in the clubroom!" Harry burst out in excitement. "We could even have lunch there! Does Professor Burbage know?"

"She does. She will fetch Miss Granger herself."

"This is brilliant!" Harry jumped up and began walking around the room, waving his arms. "We can play games and talk about Christmas and have lunch—and—and—all sorts of stuff! Thanks, Professor!"



442 The Thursday owlery room session was pleasant enough. Chairs and a table were transfigured, and the Headmaster saw to the excellent lighting himself. Harry was on his best behaviour, and even rather repressed in the presence of the great Albus Dumbledore.

Snape took it upon himself to do preliminary examinations of the larger items, hoping that something here might be something to add to Harry's Christmas. Dumbledore examined the cards and letters for danger, and passed them to Snape for a final check, before giving them to Charity to read through with Harry. Charity had parchment and a Quick-Notes quill to keep track of the items.

The only items Harry was allowed to touch unsupervised

were the ones in the "Evening Gloves" box. Those were mostly letters of thanks, or requests for signed photographs. Some of them were quite old.

"How did these people think I could send them a "signed photograph" when I was only five?" he demanded.

Dumbledore chuckled. Charity shook her head.

A torn wrapper had once enclosed a half-kneazle kitten, according to the message. Luckily the creature had long since escaped the parcel and made its way to freedom, much to Harry's relief.

Snape carefully opened a longish package. In it was a small child's broom. It was from the Cleansweep Company.

"A broom!" Harry said excitedly, forgetting his letters. He looked again, and his face fell. "A kiddie broom."

"It's quite safe," Snape pronounced, examining the letter with it. "They wanted a contract with you. Advertise their brooms and get a new one each year."

Harry groaned in despair.

Snape gave a snort. "I hardly think you would have liked being their poster boy. And I think there must be at least three more brooms yet to see."

"Really?" Harry was very pleased. "Maybe I can use one of them. What do you think we should do with the things for little kids? At my old school they had this collection at Christmas. Is there something like that—or like an orphanage where you can send stuff?"

Albus gave him keen, pleased consideration. "That's



extremely thoughtful of you, Harry. No, there are no wizarding orphanages, nor are there organised charities such as there are amongst muggles. Charity is a generally a far more personal matter here in our small world. The wealthy often donate to St. Mungo's Hospital, and there is a childrens' ward."

"That's a good idea," Harry nodded. "I can give the little kids' things to them."

There were many boxes and parcels of sweets. All of them were long past consumption. Two of them had no sender's name, and were poisoned. Harry looked very grave at the news. The gifts were noted down, and the givers' names, and then all of them were disposed of immediately. Clearing them out took some time.

"This is interesting!" Charity said, reading through a two-year-old letter. "Madam Clothilda Fletwock left Harry some money in her will. This letter is from her solicitor."

"Neat!" Harry said, peering around. "How much money?"

"It doesn't say," Charity said, showing him the letter. "Your guardian is supposed to contact him."

"Set that aside, if you please," Snape said, looking up from another annoying plushie. "I will send an owl immediately."

"That was nice of her," Harry said, "but why would she leave me anything? Is she a relative?"

"Not that I know of," Dumbledore smiled. "though we are all related, one way or another. Perhaps she felt personal gratitude. I daresay the will explains it all."

"It was nice of her, anyway," Harry said. He noticed another long parcel in a corner and pointed. "Oh! That looks like it could be a broom, Professor!"

It was.

By lunch time they made only a dent in the room's contents, but Harry already had five proposals of marriage, a dozen plushies, three sets of gobstones, a set of charmed and bejewelled chessmen from the Turkish Ministry of Magic, a broom in good condition (which sadly would have to be stored at his room in Surrey), some childrens' books that needed further scrutiny, and Madam Fletwock's bequest.

"Wow," Harry breathed, adding a toy snitch to the donation pile for St. Mungo's. "Christmas came early this year!"

Snape took a moment to sit down and dash off a note to Madam Fletwock's solicitor. Better late than never, if there was a way to add to Harry's fallen fortunes.





## CHAPTER 22



**HARRY AWAKENED** on Christmas morning to find a pile of presents at the foot of his bed. Grinning, he pushed the covers aside and started tearing through them.

The top parcel was wrapped in thick brown paper, and across it was "To Harry, from Hagrid." Inside was a wooden flute—maybe the very flute Harry had seen him making. Harry blew in it, and the tone sounded a little like an owl to him. He tried out the different notes, first covering all the fingerholes and then lifting a finger at a time. This could be fun. Maybe Hagrid could give him some tips about playing, when Harry dropped by to thank him.

There were so many presents! Glad that he had taken time to find nice things for his friends, Harry bit off the head of one of the chocolate frogs from Ernie, while glancing though a book from Hermione: THE HOBBIT. It looked interesting. There was a book from Professor McGonagall, too, a thin volume called RUNES MADE EASY. He had a monogrammed scarf from Hannah, and a self-folding Map of Magical Britain from Susan. Justin had gone mad over the Honeyduke's catalogue, and Harry's present from him were sweets he had

never heard of before, called sugar quills. Draco had given him something called a Sneakoscope, with a note enclosed, explaining how it worked.

*"I daresay it goes completely wonky in Quirrell's class!"*

Cedric had given him a bag of Bertie Botts. Eating those would be an adventure. Harry opened a lumpy little parcel from Sally. It was a tiny model of Hogwarts. When you tapped the Astronomy Tower, it played THE THREE BROTHERS. He opened Neville's flat present, and found it was a picture of his parents with two other young people. A note from Neville said they were Neville's parents, Alice and Frank. *"They were friends, too."* Harry smiled wistfully, and set the picture aside with a sigh. He would put it in his album.

A thin present was written on in Professor Snape's handwriting.

*"Open this carefully."*

Inside was an ivory-handled potions knife, much finer than the one that had come with his potions kit. It had a leather sheath that could fasten in different ways to one's clothing. Harry drew the knife out cautiously. It was single-edged and wickedly sharp, like all potions knives, and along the top edge from hilt to tip it was inlaid with silver and engraved with protective runes.

"Whoa!" Harry breathed. He sheathed the knife reverently.



The final present at the bottom of the pile was clearly a book, and a large and heavy one at that. Harry pulled away the silk covering, and found a note from Draco's parents, wishing him a happy Christmas. The book was bound in blue leather and stamped with gold.

"Yes!"

It was a book he had longed to read. The autobiography of his great-grandfather, Charlus Potter: *THE SEVEN PILLARS OF MAGIC*.

It was thick and imposing, but it was full of pictures and a map that folded out and showed his ancestor's journeys. This was a treasure. Harry wondered where the Malfoys had found it, because it certainly was not in the Flourish & Blott's catalogue. He would write them a thank-you first of all.

The presents from the room by the owlery were great, but these were even better. These were people who knew *Harry*, and wanted to give *Harry* presents. They weren't just paying tribute to the "Boy-Who-Lived." Still, he looked forward to uncovering more of the owlery room's secrets after Boxing Day.

He was starving. He threw on his clothes and hurried up to the Great Hall. For a change, he was not the first student there. The Weasleys had all arrived, and the twins and Ron were laughing and roughhousing. Every one of them was wearing a thick jumper, and each jumper but Ron's bore the wearer's first initial.

"Good idea," said Harry sliding into his place. "Today I can tell the twins apart."

"So you *think*, Oh Boy-Who-Is-Too-Clever-By-Half," declared a twin in a blue jumper with a large yellow F. "But who's to say we didn't switch 'em?"

Harry laughed. "They look nice and warm. Where did you get them?"

"Mum knits them," Percy told him. His own jumper was golden brown with a red P. "She loves knitting. Makes us all one every year."

"That's really nice of her." He nodded to Ron. "It's a good idea when it's this cold."

Ron stabbed a sausage and grumbled, "I hate maroon."

Harry glanced at him disapprovingly. Some people did not know how lucky they were. Imagine having a kind mother who took the time to knit jumpers for all her children!

"Do you have any plans today, Harry?" Percy asked politely.

"I was going to walk down to the lake after a bit," Harry told him. Professor Snape was not yet at breakfast. He might be sleeping in. Professor McGonagall was sipping her tea, and Harry gave her smile and a nod. She nodded back, looking pleased with him.

"Reckon *you* got a good haul of presents," Ron remarked.

"Sweets and books, mostly," Harry said casually. He saw no reason to tell Ron about his cache of gifts by the owlery. "Susan gave me a map of magical Britain. Where do you live?"

"Ottery-St. Catchpole. Quite a few magical families there:



the Lovegoods, the Diggorys—”

“Really? That’s neat. I’ll bring it with me later and you can show me.”

Ron nodded, and pushed his eggs around his plate. He said, “I could go out with you later. Maybe we could build a snow fort.”

“Sounds like fun,” Harry said. Ron was really making an effort to be friendly, and Harry hoped that after the holidays Ron would persuade Zach Smith not to be such a git.



“Severus, if you don’t wake up, you’ll miss Christmas altogether!”

Snape groaned, and squeezed his eyes open for the second time that morning. Dratted woman. He felt wonderfully relaxed and comfortable, and if she would just stop smiling at him...

He pulled a pillow over his face, and Charity poked him. “You have presents.”

“I already received my present from you.”

“Your *other* present, then. I have some, too. Do sit up, Severus, and let’s open them together.”

He pushed the covers aside, and looked blearily at the parcels she was piling on his legs.

“I daresay it’s socks from Albus again.”

Still, it was quite a novelty to be opening gifts with a companion—even better that the companion was a woman in the same bed. Her bed, of course. Charity preferred her own rooms for their meetings. When his Slytherins were in resi-

dence he had his duties as Head of House, and needed to be where the alarms would awaken him. At least if he had some pitiful first-year at his door, they would hardly be nosing about in his bedroom. The change to Charity’s rooms was novel and pleasant: it really was rather like having a holiday himself.

Charity explained the charm on the little gift from Harry. Snape snorted at it, but was secretly pleased. One never knew such a thing might be useful. And it could be hidden in plain sight, which was sometimes all the better.

And she was enchanted with the scent he had brewed for her. Literally, but that was the charm on the crystal flask. She noticed it and laughed about it, but seemed genuinely pleased with his creation.

“Harry helped with it,” he told her.

“He’s becoming quite the useful little apprentice, isn’t he?”

“I suppose.” Snape frowned, thinking it over. “There’s no need to set his future in stone this soon.”

“Severus, I was just teasing! Oh, look! Albus gave me socks, too! Aren’t they frightful?”

Her own present to him was a beautiful nightshirt, a blend of Spellcombe wool and Leafspinner silk that was exquisitely soft to the touch. With the flaring collar and well-cut sleeves, it was, he supposed, an entirely *romantic* garment.

“It looks like something Lucius Malfoy would wear,” he grunted, and was instantly aware of how graceless that



sounded. Charity was not at all put out.

"No, it looks like something *you'll* wear. It's temperature-  
charmed, too. I thought you'd like that shade of grey."

He cleared his throat. "I do like it. Very much. I'm surprised  
you didn't get me pyjamas."

"Certainly not," she laughed. "Nightshirts are so much more  
*practical*."

He took the hint, and observed, somewhat later, "You know,  
the house-elves piling the gifts there, while we're asleep—"

"—or while we *hope* we were asleep—" she murmured.

"Ugh. It's all rather—"

"—creepy. I agree. We're so dependent on elves, here in  
Britain. It took me sometime to get used to them again."

"None in New Zealand, I've heard."

She blew out a breath. "No, none in New Zealand, not  
even in the Village. I have simply *got* to have some breakfast."  
She pattered off to the bathroom, doing whatever it was she  
did. Snape sifted through his presents, hoping Harry had not  
already sliced a finger off with his new knife. Maybe it was  
reckless of him, but Snape felt it was always useful to have  
an edge—sometimes literally—and the silver on the blade  
might make all the difference someday...

Charity returned, braids neatly arranged on her head, but  
with part of her hair down, which Snape thought quite festive  
and attractive.

"Bathroom's all yours," she announced brightly.

When he returned, she had not yet dressed. She was still in  
her nightdress, sitting on the bed.

"Severus..."

When people used that voice, it boded no good. He eyed  
her warily. "Something on your mind?"

"Maybe this isn't the time, but I've been feeling guilty about this—"

Snape drew himself up stiffly, with what dignity he could  
muster in his current complete undress. "You don't think we  
should see one another any more?" It was no more than he  
should have expected.

She stared at him, aghast. "No! No! God, no! That's not at all  
what I meant! Of course, I want to see you!"

Relaxing somewhat, he asked, "What, then?"

She burst out, "I've never told you about my past!"

He blinked. "You have a past?"

It never occurred to him that such a nice, sweet-tempered  
person might have a past. Of course, she was in her thirties  
and had had a life before she came to Hogwarts, but there  
were *pasts*, and then there were *pasts*. He certainly had one  
himself. She couldn't possibly have one of those.

"Severus, I was married."

"Oh."

Well, that wasn't so bad, surely. Certainly better than "*Severus, I  
am married.*" or "*Severus, I am going to be married—but not to you.*"



It all came tumbling out. There were only a few hundred witches and wizards in New Zealand. Most of those of European descent lived and worked in the muggle world. Charity had gone to muggle university to learn to be a teacher. She had found a job she loved, and had met "Brian."

"Brian McGillicuddy. I was Charity McGillicuddy for three years."

"I salute your taste in returning to 'Burbage.'"

"Yes, well..."

She told him the whole story, while he dressed. Brian was a teacher, too. They met, they got on, they fell in love. Snape tried not to sneer, since it was all too clear where this was going.

"And then he found out you were a witch."

"He was rather excited about it, really. At first," she muttered, turning her head away. "He loved to see me cast charms. He was full of questions. He read all my Hogwarts texts."

Snape stared, rather surprised. "He was all right with it? Not the usual 'Die, spawn of hell' thing?"

"Oh, Severus, don't joke!" she pleaded. "He was all right with it—until—" She paused, and then, looking very miserable, she told him, "He was all right, until he found out that he could never learn to do magic himself."

"Ah." Snape sat down by her, thinking. This was a reaction he had not heard of before.

"He was crushed. Imagine learning that there's a whole magical world out there—but not for you, no matter how clever or

motivated you are. Of course, I know that squibs must suffer, too, but at least—"

"Did he meet your family?"

"Yes—and they got on so well at first. Brian loved the Village and he loved my parents' house. This was all before the truth had quite sunk in, you understand. He wanted to *live* in the Village, and it might have been possible. They were thinking of building a school at the time, and would need teachers there, even with the small number of children. The Village isn't entirely hidden from muggles you see, and the authorities were asking questions. After a while, though, when he understood that he couldn't become a wizard, things changed."

"I daresay." She was leaning on him, and he did the appropriate arm-around-her thing, hoping that she would not get all wet and weepy. He hated that. Fortunately, she merely looked sad. That was not so unpleasant to deal with.

"To make a long and dreary story short, once he realised that he couldn't be a wizard, he was very bitter. And he told me that he didn't want to have children with me. Ever. There was no changing his mind. And it was then that I knew that I wanted a child more than anything in the world."

"Oh?" Snape essayed a brief uneasy glance at the top of her head. *Charity wants children?* He was not entirely sure how he felt about that.

"So we divorced. A legal, muggle divorce—all very tidy,



since we had no children and not much property to speak of. And—this sounds dreadful, I know, but I did it. I obliviated all his memories of my magic.”

“It sounds sensible to me. Why didn’t you have the Ministry do it?”

Instantly she turned on him, thumping him on the chest. “Oh, be serious! There isn’t a Ministry in New Zealand! The Village has a Mayor, and there’s a volunteer Watch, and a two-room liaison office with the Australian Ministry with a single witch who’s out taking tea most of the time! When you’re magical in New Zealand, you deal with things yourself. I miss it sometimes. This whole immense bureaucracy in Britain—it’s so oppressive when you come back to it...”

“Yes, the Ministry is a many-headed monster. No argument there. So you rid yourself of this Brian. Well done, I say.”

“But don’t you see, we were teaching at the same school! And I didn’t do such a brilliant job of obliviation, to tell the truth. He loved to play Dungeons and Dragons—it’s a muggle fantasy game—and he forgot all about that, too. It was just an intolerable situation. At the end of term, I resigned, and I needed a change. So I thought I’d come back to Britain, now that You-Know-Who was gone.”

Snape decided that it was time to treat this all as a happy ending. He gave her a tentative squeeze. “I daresay your family was sorry to lose you.”

“They haven’t lost me! Didn’t you see what my mother sent?

Actually, everyone was very supportive. They wanted me to find a proper wizard and bring him back with me.”

“Is that your sinister scheme for me? To catch me in your toils and drag me Down Under?”

She looked up at him and shook her head, with a small laugh.

“At the moment, my only sinister scheme is to have breakfast. You’re not angry that I kept my marriage a secret?”

“Everyone has secrets. It’s not as if I’ve told you all of mine.”



Professor Snape arrived for breakfast just as Harry was leaving. He ran over, eager to see his guardian.

“Happy Christmas, Professor! Thanks for the knife!”

“Shh! Lower your voice, Harry.”

They were not far from the doors to the Great Hall. Snape watched as Quirrell finished and left by the door behind the Head Table. Harry watched, too, eyes narrowed.

“Yes,” Snape said, taking up the conversation. “You’re very welcome, Harry, but don’t go on too much about that. Others might not approve of my choice. We’ll have a look at the sheath next time we meet. I always keep a potions knife up my sleeve, myself. You’ve seen how I never know when I might need to gather ingredients.”

Harry nodded, looking very wise and serious. Snape did not tell him about the other knife in his boot. Another advantage of being a half-blood. Purebloods never expected a



physical attack. It had saved his life once, and none of his fellow Death-Eaters the wiser.

"And I thank you," Snape said, "for my Mystery Egg. Well done. A clever charm, and it simply looks like an attractive knick-knack."

"Professor Burbage taught us the charms. We had a lot of fun making things. She's a good teacher."

"My ears are burning," said the witch in question, entering the Hall, dressed all in green. "Happy Christmas, Harry."

"You, too, Professor! You smell really nice."

Snape rolled his eyes. Charity only smiled kindly, and said, "Thank you, Harry. Professor Snape said you were a great help. I appreciate your time and effort. Now I really must have something before I fall by the wayside!"

"Harry," Snape cautioned when she was out of earshot, "you really ought not to make such a personal remark to a witch and a Hogwarts Professor, especially about how she smells. In fact, never begin a sentence with 'You smell' unless you're ready to draw your wand."

"But she does smell nice! That perfume is great!"

"Then say something about the scent itself. You have to be tactful with witches. Hot-tempered, some of them."

"But not Professor Burbage. She's really nice. What did she give you?"

"Clothes," Snape answered vaguely.

"That's nice. Ron's mother knitted him a jumper. We're going to build a snow fort, but I thought I'd find Hagrid first. He carved me a flute. I always thought I'd like to play music."

"Hagrid might not thank you for waking him so early in the morning. I believe he was going to enjoy Christmas Eve in Hogsmeade, and might have—been up rather late."

"Oh, all right. I'll see him at the feast tonight, then."

"Sound thinking."

"Oh! And Draco's parents sent me a copy of that book by my great-grandfather! About his adventures," he explained, seeing Snape's blank expression. "THE SEVEN PILLARS OF MAGIC. I expect you'll want to read it when I'm done."

Snape's expression was more grimace than smile. "Do take your time. Don't hurry on my account. I believe I'll join Professor Burbage now. Enjoy your day."



The snow fort developed into quite a noble structure over the course of the morning. Not quite Hogwarts, of course, but once they got Percy interested it grew impressively. They learned to make uniform building blocks of ice, and charms kept the roof up over their heads. Out of the wind, it felt positively cosy inside.

"And there's a window and all!" Ron admired.

The twins were devising steps to take them on top of the



fort, where they could keep watch for enemy wizards. Percy explained the term “crenellation” and those were added. Behind them, they could throw spells and snowballs in safety. A little low wall by the doorway provided extra protection.

“If we cast cooling charms this should last for weeks!” Fred said, looking at their handiwork with satisfaction. “Why didn’t we ever build one of these at Hogwarts before?”

“We must have been mad,” George agreed. “But next year, let’s build it on the rise by the lake. More defensible, I should think.”

“We need more ammunition,” Harry said, busily making snowballs and piling them into neat pyramids. They were really good snowballs, too: the sort you made by packing the snow tightly between your hands and squeezing until they were hard and easy to throw. Not exactly iceballs, of course. Harry remembered the time Dudley had hit him in the face with an iceball and broke his glasses. Somehow the broken frame had cut his face, and drops of red blood fell on the white snow, while Dudley and his friends jeered...

“This is nice,” he remarked to Ron.

“Yeah, best snow fort ever! We make them at home, but it’s sort of flat there and we never took so much trouble before. Yeah, this is nice. I wish we had a door and all and could sleep out here some time.”

“You mean like camping?” Harry had never gone camping himself. He thought it did sound fun.

“Oi! Percy!” Ron shouted. “You reckon you could make a door?”

Percy regarded the structure with a frown. “I’m afraid I can’t. Mind you, I think there might be a way. Or perhaps a tunnel would do. Perhaps there’s something in the library...”

“The Word of Doom!” moaned George. “Thanks ever so for reminding him, Ron.”

“No, really!” Harry said. “I think that’s a great idea. We can have our fort all through the holidays, at least. I think it would be neat to find ways to make it even better. Maybe we can freeze ice to be like glass, even, for the window.” He remembered the heavy blue-and-gold gift from the Malfoys. “I know! I have this book by my great-grandfather about his adventures. I think he went to the South Pole once. Maybe there’s something there.”

“Really?” Percy looked rather swoony. “You have in your possession a copy of THE SEVEN PILLARS OF MAGIC? Really?”

“Uh-oh, the boy’s in love!” Fred threw a handful of snow at Percy. “Pull yourself together!”

Percy huffed, brushing himself off. “That only shows your ignorance. I’ve heard of the book of course, but—”

“Hark! Enemies approaching!” George growled from the battlements. “Get up here! It’s him—”

“—or us,” Fred said, eyes gleaming, as he skidded up the steps. “And somehow I think it’s going to be him. Quick, Potter, the snowballs!”

Slipping and giggling, Harry and Ron made a supply line,



Harry passing to Ron and Ron to Fred. Percy peered around the corner and shrieked faintly.

"Professor Quirrell!"

"Shh! Get down!" Ron whispered, tugging on Percy's cloak. Completely overcome, Percy dove into the fort, hiding his eyes. Harry's jaw dropped. Surely Fred and George would not dare—

"Take that, Dark Wizard!"

"—and that!"

Apparently they would. Harry heard two soft thumps, and a positive *hiss* of fury.

Peering with horrified delight over the little wall, Harry and Ron watched as Professor Quirrell turned to face his attackers. His purple turban was unraveling, sliding off his head. He was trying to draw his wand and hold on to the turban all at once, and he was sliding on the path now—

"For the Burrow!" Fred shouted.

A snowball exploded in Quirrell's face. Harry trembled, bracing for retaliation.

To his surprise, there were only enraged hisses, as Quirrell stumbled, both hands clutching to steady the turban. There was a slow, awful moment when he swayed dangerously, and then his legs flew out from under him and he sat down unceremoniously on the ice.

Ron guffawed. Harry felt a little guilty. He had never liked being tormented, but surely Professor Quirrell could just throw





a snowball back at them or take points or even cast a spell at their precious fort to melt it to a puddle. *If it had been Professor Snape, he thought, we'd all be puddles now.* Instead Quirrell was clinging to that silly turban as if only that mattered.

Percy peeked out, utterly dismayed, and ducked back in again.

Quirrell struggled up, slapping the turban in place, and dashed away down the path to Hogsmeade.

"I see why he wears that turban," George reflected. "Reckon he's completely bald?"

"He wasn't before," Fred considered. "Maybe it happened on his travels. Funny-shaped head he has. I'd wear a turban too."

"Yeah, all bumpy like that. *Ugly*," Ron agreed.

"But why didn't he fight back?" Harry wondered.



The potion was ready—had been ready for two days. Snape turned the vial in his hands, admiring it. Tonight was his best chance to administer it, and to that end, he would need the assistance of—

"—Muffy is here, Master Potions Master!"

"I have an important task for you, Muffy. This needs to go into Professor Quirrell's mulled wine at dinner, and *only* Professors Quirrell's wine. It needs to go in just before it's served to him. The less time the potion spends in the wine, the better."

"Muffy understands," the little elf declared. "Muffy under-

stands more than Master Potions Master thinks."

Elves really did go everywhere...

"Perhaps you do," Snape said. "This potion is not a poison. I am hoping it will help Professor Quirrell. You must not fail."

"It will help Little Master Harry," Muffy replied. "Muffy will not fail. This is easy. Master Potions Master does not understand how easy it is for Muffy."

Everyone took elves for granted. Snape pondered the matter as he entered the Great Hall, dressed in his best robes, the ones with the velvet trim that Charity liked. For today's Christmas dinner, everyone would dine at a single round table that had mysteriously appeared on the dais of the otherwise empty Great Hall. Snape snorted as he strode toward it. There appeared to be *place-cards*...

Dissatisfied with the seating, he attempted to move his card, and found he could not. Oh well, he would like to be placed to keep a better eye on Quirrell, but he could hardly object to having Harry on one side and Charity on the other. Dumbledore was attempting to mix the students with staff. He rounded the table and pitied the Ravenclaw who would have Filch as her dinner companion.

It was the usual Yuletide bacchanal, made more pleasant this year by his companions. Harry babbled happily to Charity about presents, and whispered about tomorrow's anticipated revel with his friends. He then told Snape the story of the Snow



fort and the Trouncing of Quirrell in tones of hushed awe.

Snape discreetly watched Quirrell through the meal. Dumbledore had to know something, because there was a red-faced Percy Weasley sitting right by the Defense Professor, looking like he'd rather be anywhere else. The boy was making earnest, desperate conversation with Vector. Probably the one least at fault, but either of the terrible twins would simply have brazened it out. Percy was apparently capable of remorse.

Harry was more than delighted with their Christmas feast. "I never saw such a dinner, Professor!"

Snape granted that it was very good dinner indeed. Living at Hogwarts made one used to good food, but he could remember pretty thin times in his own boyhood. How much more so must Harry. It would do no harm to indulge the boy by pulling a cracker with him, though the white mice were a bother. Harry put on his admiral's hat, and Charity said she wanted a picture of him like that. Albus was now wearing a flowered bonnet.

*Has the man no pride at all?*

Harry nearly broke his teeth on a silver sickle in his slice of pudding, and then excitedly showed it to Snape. There were more crackers, full of gifts, and Harry had balloons and puzzles and a set of chocolate gobstones, filled with butterbeer.

The mulled wine was served: in great golden goblets for the staff; in small silver cups for the students. Snape could not hear the cheerful noise echoing through the hall. His every

nerve was focused on the goblet at Quirrell's place, the spiced scent rising enticingly. Quirrell was still playing with his pudding. He reached for the goblet. Snape tensed.

Flitwick asked a question of Quirrell, who drew his hand away from the goblet. Snape ground his teeth.

Charity said something to him. Snape could only grunt, not comprehending anything at the moment. Quirrell reached for the goblet again.

He must not—*must not*—catch Quirrell's eye and give the game away. He looked through his eyelashes at the pasty hand on the stem of the goblet. Quirrell was lifting to his mouth—  
—and drinking! Snape felt himself ready to explode, wanting to bellow in triumph, wanting to pound his fist on the table in sheer relief.

He felt a nudge. Harry was asking, "Would it be all right if I went over and said thanks to Hagrid now? I want to thank Professor McGonagall too. I'll be very quiet."

Hagrid was certainly growing very flushed and jolly.

"Yes. I daresay now would be the time."

Harry ran around the table, speaking to his professors, wishing them Happy Christmas, pausing to whisper his thanks to Minerva, and then speaking more openly to Hagrid. The half-giant's response was clearly audible over the chatter.

"Glad yeh like it, Harry! Wasn't sure—but yeh did seem interested—"



He could not hear Harry's softer voice, but what he said clearly pleased Hagrid.

"Yeh fetch it right here, Harry, and I'll show yeh! No time like the present, I allus say!"

Harry ran off, presumably to find something—oh, that flute Hagrid made, most likely. Snape tried to reply intelligibly when spoken to, all the time watching Quirrell without being observed to watch him. The fellow was getting rather sleepy, just as he should...

He drank his own mulled wine, enjoying the scent, the taste on his tongue, the gold of his cup, and the joyful ambience of the feast and the company and the soft hand on his thigh under the table.

Perhaps this was what happy Christmases were like.



## CHAPTER 23

**THE FOOL** had to be allowed to sleep occasionally. The waste of time was infuriating, but the fool was fragile and already showing signs of damage. And so he, Lord Voldemort, the one who should be Master, must dance attendance for hours while a rush of insipid images flitted uncensored through his host's mind.

Usually, it was possible to withdraw somewhat and use the time to plan. Now and then, however, the images were too strong and spilled over: the white flash of a girl's inner thigh, or the voice of a long-dead grandfather. Sickening, really.

But the fool had been asleep a very long time indeed, it seemed, and was not responding to any attempt to awaken him. Nor were his dreams drifting across the barrier. All the usual things that hurt enough to waken him had failed. He did not seem to be dead—the first, most terrifying thought—but he was in a strangely deep sleep.

Eventually the power of possession would work its magic, and provide eyes to see without the host's coop-



eration. Such magic took time, alas, and the new eyes were only magical nubs in the host's brain, pushing the idiot's own tissue aside, giving him headaches of exquisite rigour...

That was in the future, if he could keep this pathetic sack of excrement functioning long enough. For now, he could not know the time if the fool would not open his eyes and perform the tempus charm. *Or simply look at the bloody clock.*

He had nearly been exposed by those Gryffindor thugs yesterday. Not that he had much animus against thugs, mind you. A thug was an excellent tool, when used properly. He respected that the red-headed twins were clever and vicious in their own way, but they were not likely to be recruited by him. They were their own closed circle, it appeared, from the off-hand way they treated their own blood kin, and already had an agenda of their own. Simply being twins gave them the extraordinary power of an unquestionably loyal and ruthless ally in any scheme one of them might hatch. With a twin as a partner, he himself would certainly have been unstoppable. One to attack and one to defend...

Useless to ponder the matter, though the Chinese had had some success with duplication spells. He had never been to China, which he regretted. He must put that on his to-do list. Minions were sometimes worse than useless, and their minds were always cluttered with their own futile hopes and dreams. If he could find a way to simply make duplicates of himself, he

would never need to play absurd games to lure allies to his side. Now as to those Weasleys...

If some unfortunate accident were to befall one of the twins, the other would be likely to be lost and disoriented, and *then* it might be possible, with the nicely judged application of sympathy...

What time was it? He could hear noises in the castle, but they were not the usual noises, since the brats were away.

Except for the blood-traitor brood and Potter, of course.

What to do about Potter?

He suspected that the little monster had been party to the assault. He had heard that laugh before. He really needed to do something permanent about Potter, and the sooner the better. It seemed evident now that Snape had always been a traitor: pining after the mudblood, spying for the old fool, and now fostering that little viper in a pathetic travesty of fatherhood. Doing something permanent about Potter would likely cause Snape considerable distress, which would be very agreeable until the time came to do something permanent about Snape himself.

Or should he deal with dear Severus first?

Perhaps that would be best from a practical standpoint. Potter would then be defenseless and could be picked off at his leisure. And it would make the boy's last moments that much worse to know that he was cause of not only his parents'



death, but of his guardian's. That might be nice. Yes, perhaps that was the way to go.

But first he must retrieve the Stone.

*Wake up, you idiot!*



"Are you really going to take all that to the Club Room?" Snape asked, rather exasperated.

"I want everybody to see what I got, and I can't take them into the Hufflepuff dormitories," Harry replied, clutching a bundle to his chest. He had been too excited to sleep longer, even after the pleasant supper of turkey sandwiches, and the haze of mulled cider and good-fellowship and winning a chess game against Fred. It had been a very nice Christmas, but he had really been looking forward to today. The Weasleys had been told he had plans, and so would not be looking for him. Today was for Draco, and Neville, and Hermione.

Ron and his brothers were still asleep, anyway. It seemed like everyone in the world was asleep but Professor Snape and Professor Burbage and Harry himself. The three of them had met for an early breakfast, and Professor Burbage had left already, gone to fetch Hermione back to Hogwarts.

It was a party, of sorts, and Professor Snape thought he should dress up a bit, so he was wearing his second-best set of robes—the tan ones with the cape-thing. He had smoothed his

hair a bit, and his boots were shining like mirrors.

They arrived at the Club Room. Snape pushed the heavy carved door open, and Harry hurried through, not wanting to drop his flute. Hagrid had taught him to play half of THE THREE BROTHERS last night. Well—he had really taught him to play the whole thing, but Harry could only play the first two phrases well. He played them over and over, and then tried to finger carefully through the third, but there was a note he couldn't find for the life of him!

Huffing as he dropped his burden onto the long table by the wall, he looked around him admiringly. The elves had set up the room perfectly, with the comfortable stuffed chairs drawn up by the blazing fire, and a tea table, and the square table with chairs if they needed to play a game or work on a project. And they would have their lunch there, he reminded himself with great content. What a day it would be!

"It's nearly nine!" he almost shouted. "Do you think—"

"Professor Snape! Harry!" Draco called, rushing in. "Jolly good to see you! Do you like my coat?" He pointed to the lapels of silken, curly black fur. "Look at that! It comes from unborn lambs."

Harry was glad he had not worn a jumper or his student robes. Draco did indeed look quite "spiffing," as Fred or George would say: his boy's version of a wizard's frock coat cut smartly and trimmed with the aforesaid—



"Er—you look great," Harry smiled, feeling rather queasy on the subject of dead unborn lambs. "I'm so glad to see you! Some amazing things have happened."

"You don't say?" asked Lucius Malfoy, striding into the room, glancing about in lofty approval. He nodded cordially to Snape. "Severus."

"Lucius."

"Happy Christmas, Mr Malfoy!" Harry called out, very excited, "Thank you so much for the book! I've really wanted to read it!" He was waving a thick blue and gold volume. Lucius gave him a slight smile.

"Narcissa will be glad you're pleased. The book is no longer in print, but we have a copy in our library, of course. Copying it for you was easy enough, and Narcissa took it to Diagon Alley to be bound to her own specifications. It is quite worth reading and discussing—" he paused, and collected himself—"but not today. Narcissa and I are needed for an event at St. Mungo's. Ordinarily we would take Draco, but I daresay he will enjoy himself better here. "

His gaze fell on his son. "Draco. Mind your manners. I shall be back at five for you."

"Father."

Snape noticed that Draco's posture subtly relaxed as his father's footsteps faded. He lounged by the fireplace, watching the boys chatter, waiting for Charity.

"What's all this?" Draco asked, looking at the pile of gifts.

"My Christmas presents!" Harry told him proudly. "I had a smashing Christmas. We had a really great feast in the Great Hall, and wonderful crackers, and well—it was my best Christmas ever!"

"Oh, I see! That's my sneakoscope! Do you like it? Have you tried it yet?"

The boys poked through the presents, as Harry proudly displayed each one to Draco.

Neville arrived, trailing behind his grandmother, and clutching a huge box of chocolates to his chest by way of shield. He was dressed very formally, in what appeared to be old-fashioned clothes for a little boy, with ruffles on his shirt cuffs, and a waistcoat of bright red and gold brocade under his black robe.

Augusta Longbottom traded stiff bows with Snape, and thawed sufficiently to nod pleasantly enough to Harry. Draco was presented to her, and she granted him a cool but civil acknowledgment. It was an awkward moment, and Snape thanked the Powers That Be that Lucius was not in the room as well.

"Well, Neville, I see that everything's arranged very nicely indeed," she allowed, peering about at the room and its furnishings. "It's certainly a relief that you've found some friends, at any rate. Don't take more than one helping of anything, and don't, for Merlin's sake, eat too much cheese. It'll give you gas."

Harry's cheeks burned, and he moved a little closer to Neville. Draco said nothing, but raised his brows and looked at the



floor. Neville simply looked tired.

Snape interposed. "The children will be cared for, Madam Longbottom. Would it be more convenient for you if I were to return Neville to you at five?"

"Thank you," she replied sternly. "But *I* shall retrieve him. It's best to do these things oneself, I always say."

On her departure, the three boys blew out deep breaths of relief. Snape noticed it, and then grimaced to realise he had done it himself.

"I put the picture you sent in my album, Neville," Harry said. "I really like it."

"I'm glad." Neville replied, a little tersely. "It was Gran's idea." He gave Harry the box of chocolates. "This is the part of the present I thought of myself."

"Ah! Belgian!" Draco noted, eyes gleaming. "Creams!"

"It's great, Neville. Thanks. We'll share them today. I'll open them as soon as—"

"Harry!" Hermione squealed. She burst into the room in a blur of blue velvet and flying brown curls. "Oooh! Neville! Draco! You're here already! Am I late? Mum and Dad just had to talk and talk with Professor Burbage. Hullo, Professor Snape! Happy Christmas!"

She finally had to breathe, and Draco remarked, "You look quite—nice, Hermione. Happy Christmas."

Hermione was much better dressed than they had ever

seen her. She wore a blue coat trimmed in velvet, and a simple long-sleeved blue velvet frock underneath. Her frizzy hair had been tamed into shining curls for the day, and was held back with silver hair slides.

Neville nodded, looking rather surprised. Harry agreed, "Yeah, you look great. We all look so great it's a shame we're not going somewhere!"

"Perhaps *you're* not," Draco drawled, "but *we* are having luncheon and tea at Hogwarts, and that counts as somewhere!"

Charity laughed, but Snape agreed. "Well said, Draco. Professor Burbage and I trust you will have an enjoyable day, and not destroy the castle. Professor Burbage will be in her quarters if you need anything, and I will be out and about, but she should be able to reach me in an emergency." He glared at them briefly. "An emergency which you should not be having under any circumstances."

Charity winked at him, and her hand brushed his arm as they left the room to the children. The Granger girl was explaining the boxes she had brought: board games that none of the boys had heard of.

"This one is called *Cluedo*, and you solve a mystery. It's lots of fun. And this is *Monopoly*, and the point is to win all the property and money. And this new one is called *Outrage* and it's about stealing the Crown Jewels from the Tower—"

"The muggle Crown Jewels?" Draco asked. "Really? I hear



they're rather fine. Let's do that."



"Don't worry about it," Charity said. "I want to work on my book anyway. I'll be here in my office if you finish early."

Snape went through the fire to his own laboratory, needing time and quiet to think. He took out his potions notebook and began writing his findings from the night before.

As soon as Quirrell was out of his quarters, it would be extremely interesting to observe him. The fellow had practically fallen asleep at the dinner table yesterday afternoon, and had not been seen since. The first result of the potion was thus achieved, but the later symptoms—the hallucinations, the confusion, the anticipated weakening of the power of a possessing spirit—those Snape would like to see and document in detail. The vague descriptions led him to believe that Quirrell should be awake sometime today. Perhaps Quirrell would make a complete idiot of himself at dinner. That was something to look forward to.

In the meantime, there were other things he must do. He had not looked at his owl post yet, and thumbed through it without much interest, until he saw the letter from the firm of Harker & Dedlock.

*News, indeed!* he decided, eyes widening as he read.

Muffy popped into view. "Master Potions Master!"

"Not now, Muffy!"

A brief, unseen look of anguish, a quick wringing of hands. "But Master Potions Master—"

"Later!" he commanded.

She popped away, and felt she had done her duty. If Master Potions Master was too busy, she must tell Little Master Harry. He was her true master anyway. She had been told to serve him last summer, and no one had yet troubled to change her orders.



Draco was rather disappointed that their game would not give them possession of the actual Crown Jewels, but had enjoyed playing it all the same. The concept of board games was new to him, and he could imagine all sorts of ways of adapting them to the wizarding world.

Still, they were all happy to get up and stretch, and Neville remarked, "It'd be nice to say hello to Hagrid."

"Are we allowed to go out?" Hermione wondered.

Harry glanced at his flute. He just needed that one note...

"If we're quiet, no one will know. I'd like to see Hagrid too. He's teaching me to play this," he said, showing them the flute. "Let's go see him and take him some chocolates."

"I don't know—" Hermione said anxiously, and then glanced at her fragile blue slippers.

"*Impermeable!*" Draco incanted, with a flick of his wand.



"Mother uses that one all the time! Let's see if it works!"

"I'll get my cloak!" Harry said, dashing off. "Be back in a tic!"

"We'll meet you at the door," Neville promised.

The castle was silent, save for the whistle and moan of draughts singing through the ancient corridors. Harry pulled out his invisibility cloak as soon as he was out of sight, and ran to the Sett. Meanwhile the three others clung to the walls and crept along, feeling they were on a grand adventure.

And they found opening the great doors trickier than they thought. There was dull thunder and ominous creaking, and a grinding of hinges that seemed to indicate very poor maintenance, in Draco's opinion.

At last they were out and walking briskly along the path to Hagrid's house. When they knocked on the door of the groundskeeper's hut, they were surprised to see that all the curtains were closed.

Hagrid called out, "Who is it?" before he let them in, and shut the door quickly behind them. It was like walking into an oven.

"Whew!" Draco gasped. "The chocolates won't last long in this heat. Better hand them over straight away."

Hermione hastily unbuttoned her velvet-trimmed coat, and the boys shed their outer layers quickly.

"I wanted to say hello to you on Boxing Day, Hagrid," Harry told him. "And bring you these." He handed over the bag of chocolates, which were already softening. "I brought my flute,

too. There's a note I can't find in that tune."

"Let's hear yeh then," Hagrid said, sitting down and listening to Harry's efforts with a judicial air.

Hermione fanned herself, feeling drop of sweat popping out and threatening her mother's efforts with her hair. Draco's scowled, and he and Neville surreptitiously poked at the fire, hoping to dampen it a bit.

"Nah, Harry—" Hagrid was saying, "yeh need to move yer thumb off the thumbhole for that. Like this. Try it."

The phrase worked this time. "I see!" Harry grinned, excited. He played it again. And again.

"Hello!" Neville said, seeing something in the fire. "What's that?"

Draco stared in disbelief. "It's a dragon's egg!"

"Oooh!" Hermione jumped up, and ran to see for herself. "Really?"

Hagrid looked sheepish. Harry stuffed his flute in a pocket and craned past his friends to see into the grate. "Where did you get it?"

"Won it," Hagrid admitted. "Coupla nights ago. I was down in the village havin' a few drinks an' got into a game o' cards with a stranger. Think he was glad ter get rid of it, ter be honest."

"But what are you going to do with it when it hatches?" asked Hermione.

"Well, I've bin doin' some readin'." Hagrid pulled a large book from under his pillow. "Got this outta the library—*Dragon Breeding for Pleasure and Profit*—it's a bit outta date, o'course, but it's all in here. Keep the egg in the fire—when it hatches, feed it a bucket of



brandy mixed with chicken blood every half hour—“

“Is that a Norwegian Ridgeback’s egg?” Draco breathed.

Hagrid beamed on the boy for the first time, and clapped him on the back until he nearly knocked the boy face-first in the fire. “Now that’s what I like to see! A young feller that knows his dragons! Well done, Draco! Well done, and no mistake!”

Draco grinned back, in spite of himself, but Hermione could not be distracted from the essential point.

“Hagrid,” she protested. “You live in a *wooden house!*”

—And you could get in the most awful trouble,” Neville pointed out anxiously. “It’s against the law to breed dragons at home.”

“Ain’t breedin’ a dragon,” Hagrid assured them. “Just hatchin’ it.”

Hermione wasn’t having any of that. “And what sort of person goes about carrying dragon’s eggs? It all sounds very dodgy to me. Did you know him?”

“Nah, never set eyes on him before—I think.” Waving his hands helplessly, he explained. “Kept his hood up. Yeh get a lot o’ funny folk in the Hog’s Head—that’s the pub down in the village. Didn’t quite see his face, but I was glad ter meet him. I allus wanted a dragon.”

“I daresay,” Hermione said stiffly.

“Anyway,” Hagrid went on. “We get to talkin’, and I told him I was groundskeeper and gamekeeper here...he asked a bit about the sorta creatures I look after, so I told him. He kept buyin’ me drinks, and we played cards for this egg he had. He





wasn't too sure at first—didn't want it to go to someone that didn't know how to take care of it—but I told him, that after Fluffy a dragon would be easy...”

Harry sat back, mouth open, and exchanged quick, horrified glances with his friends. “You told him about *Fluffy*?”

“Well—yeah—how many three-headed dogs d’yeh meet, even around Hogwarts? So I told him, Fluffy’s a piece of cake if yeh know how to calm him down. Jus’ play a bit o’music an’ he’ll go straight of ter sleep—”

He stopped, pulling on his hair in distress.

“I shouldn’ta told yeh that! He blurted out. “Forget I said it! Hey!—where’re yeh goin’?”

A whirlwind of coats and goodbyes as the four children left.

“Thanks, Hagrid!” Harry called, face tight with worry. “We’ve got to get back to the castle and take care of something right away!”

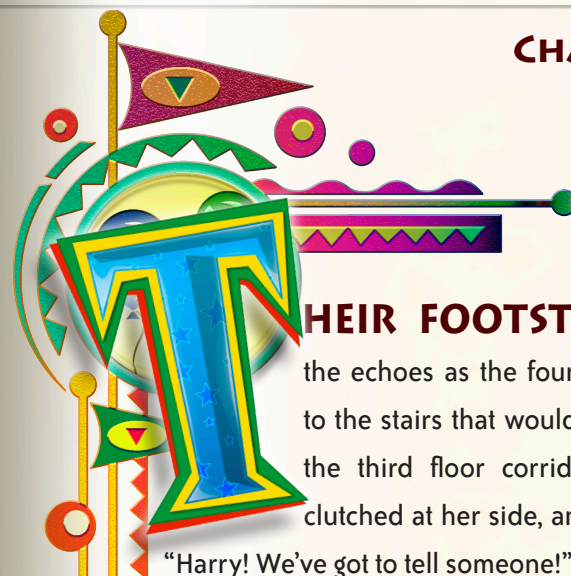
They pelted back at top speed. Hermione, heedless of her footwear, easily kept pace with the boys. They reached the entry hall, and were met by Muffy in full cry.

“Oh, Little Master Harry! You is back! Professor Purple Hat is going up those steps you tells me to watch!”

“When? How long ago?”

“Not long! Not long! He goes up, talking to himself, and then talking back to himself in a different voice!”

## CHAPTER 24



**THEIR FOOTSTEPS** roused the echoes as the four students ran to the stairs that would take them to the third floor corridor. Hermione clutched at her side, and gasped out,

“Harry! We’ve got to tell someone!”

“There’s no time!” he shouted.

“Yes, there is!” she shouted back. She made a grab at the back of his robes, and the two of them stumbled together. “Harry! We can’t go after him alone. Let’s stop and tell Professor Burbage!”

Draco and Neville looked at each other a little helplessly, trying to think what was best to be done.

“She’s right, Harry,” Draco finally said. “It’s mad to go haring after Quirrell by ourselves. We need Professor Snape, though. I don’t think Professor Burbage is going to understand.”

He was right. She didn’t.

Charity was startled enough when the children burst in



on her as she was sipping her mid-morning tea. As the story poured out, she looked at them in bewilderment.

"Please! One at a time! What is it that Professor Quirrell has done?"

"He's going upstairs to steal the Philosopher's Stone!" Harry yelled. "We've got to stop him. Call Professor Snape!"

She turned to Hermione. "Is this some sort of prank you're playing on me?" She smiled uncertainly. "The Philosopher's Stone at Hogwarts! That *would* be exciting!" Trying to act the part, she clutched her heart and cried, "Oh, mercy! The Philosopher's Stone!" She smiled, thinking it all very funny. "Is this some sort of scavenger hunt? Maybe I have something about that will do for a Philosopher's Stone..."

Exasperated, Harry yelled, "It's real! We're not playing! Professor Snape knows all about it! It's been here since the first of the year. Call him, and he'll tell you!"

Looking at their anxious faces, Charity relented, "All right then." She went to her fire and called out, "Professor Snape! Harry needs to speak to you?"

No reply. Snape had stepped into his supply closet, and did not hear her call.

"Severus?" She looked back the children, and shrugged. "I'm sure he'll be back in a minute. Why don't you have some of my biscuits? I've got some extra-nice ones—"

Her calm was making Harry even more frantic. As she proffered the treats, he jumped up and said, "I can't stay. When he

gets back, tell him we've gone upstairs to stop Quirrell. He'll understand!" He shouted at the others, "Come on, you lot!"

Hermione stood up, looking back and forth, and then rushed after Harry, followed by Neville. Draco reached out and palmed a biscuit, with a "Thanks, professor! Just tell him we've gone up to the third-floor corridor. He'll know all about it!"

Then he was gone too, running up the stairs, shouting, "Wait a bit! What's the plan?"

Charity, still stunned and mystified, set the plate down, and began to believe that this could be serious.

"Severus! I need to talk to you *right now*!"



The stairs had never seemed so steep. Up and up they ran, their legs starting to feel heavy as lead. A few seconds later, they were in the third-floor corridor—and the door was already ajar.

"Well, there you are," Harry said quietly. "Quirrell's already got past Fluffy." He turned to the others, "This could be bad. If you want to go back, I won't blame you."

"Don't be an idiot," Draco growled.

"We're coming," Hermione insisted.

"Of course we're coming," Neville agreed stoutly. "And if you try to stop us, I'll—I'll fight you!"

Harry grinned. "Save it for Quirrell. Come on!" He pushed the door farther open.



The hinges complained, and from within rose low rumbling growls. All three of the dog's noses sniffed in their direction.

"What's that in there?" Neville wondered.

Hermione peered through the crack between the hinges and the wall. "It looks like a harp. Quirrell must have left it there."

"I don't hear anything," Draco complained, trying to see inside the room. "It looks like this is where you get to play your flute, Harry!"

"Well," Harry gulped. "Here goes..."

He put Hagrid's flute to his lips and blew. The first phrase of THE THREE BROTHERS came out, and then his mind completely froze up. Hermione poked him, and he played the phrase again. Slowly the growls quieted. As Harry crept into the room, playing the same phrase over and over, the dog fell to its knees, and then slumped to the ground, fast asleep.

"Keep playing," Draco warned. They walked noiselessly to the trapdoor, feeling the dog's breath hot on their hands and faces as they approached the giant heads.

Neville reached for the ring of the trapdoor and hauled.

"What can you see?" whispered Hermione.

"Nothing!" Neville almost wailed. One of the dog's heads snorted in its sleep.

Draco peered down. "It's pitch dark. There's no way of climbing down. We'll just have to drop."

Harry was still puffing at his flute, and jerked his head at Draco.

"What?"

Harry stopped playing for a split-second, and whispered, "Me first!"

"Are you sure? Then give the flute to Hermione!"

"I don't know how to play it!" Hermione protested, and then grabbed at it and blew an aimless series of whistles as the dog stirred.

Harry let himself down into the darkness. Hanging by his fingertips, his feet felt nothing beneath them but air. "Draco! If anything happens to me, don't follow! Wait here for Professor Snape!"

"Yes—right—I'm staying in here with the three-headed dog..."

"See you in a minute, I hope..."

Harry let go, falling down and down until he landed with a thump on something soft.

"It's okay!" he called up. "It's a soft landing, on some sort of plant. You can jump!"

Draco, then Neville followed. The awful noise of Hermione's flute-playing stopped, followed by a mighty bark, and then Hermione landed beside them.

"We must be under the school," Neville said.

"Not at all," Hermione corrected primly. "We're no farther down than the second floor. Still we're lucky we landed on this—plant thing."

Neville felt about him, trying to see in the dark. Something smooth and cool slithered around his arm. He groped at it,



and recognised the shape of the leaves.

"Wait! I know what this is! Stop moving! It's Devil's Snare!"

Draco shuddered, and made an attempt at bravado. "How nice. I can see it now. *'Four students found strangled at Hogwarts—Local Vegetation Suspected.'* We will definitely make the front page of the *Prophet*."

"It's okay! It's okay!" Neville babbled. "You can drive it away with fire!"

"Right then," Harry choked out, as a branch poked questioningly at his mouth. "*Incendio!*"

Flame blasted from his wand. The plant shrank away from the heat and light. Hermione shrieked, beating at her sleeves.

"I'm on fire!"

"Bloody Merlin, Harry!" Draco bellowed, his clothes singed. "Just drive the sodding plant away. No need to cook it and us, too!"

"Sorry—sorry!" Harry muttered, wincing at the soot on Neville's shocked face. The dead twigs and leaves from the Devil's Snare were alight, and the tiny flames cast weird shadows. "Errr—this way. I think."

He pointed down a stone passage, and after taking care to stamp out anything burning, they were on their way into a labyrinth of stone.



Snape was in his private workroom brewing when Charity

burst in.

"Severus! I thought I'd never find you! I think the children are having that emergency you told them not to have."

They were through the fire and back to Charity's rooms in the space of seconds. Snape's ears were ringing with her questions.

"What is this about the Philosopher's Stone? Is this true? Why wasn't anyone told? What is going on with Quirrell? Why are those children chasing him? Do we need to call their parents?"

Snape shuddered. He caught Charity by the shoulders, and spoke slowly and clearly, cutting off her cataract of words.

"Yes, the Philosopher's Stone was hidden at Hogwarts. Yes, I believe Quirrell is after it. The children have somehow found out and have taken it upon themselves to prevent him. Rather than calling their parents, I think you should track down Minerva as quickly as possible. Tell her what is going on. I am going after the children immediately. There are dangers facing them that they do not know about."

She stared at him, mouth open. He raised his brows meaningfully, and then she shut her mouth with a snap. She took a breath and gave him a quick nod. He squeezed her shoulders and was out of the room in an instant, following four young hellions who were going to rue the day they put themselves in danger.

He tried using the shortcut that he and Minerva had found in the past, and to his exasperation, found it blocked. He would have to get past Fluffy, which was something of an annoyance.



The creature was stirring as he slipped through the half-opened door. Beyond, the trapdoor was open, and thankfully there were no small shattered bodies lying about. The Cerberus snorted, six eyes following his movements, narrowing slightly, the legs growing taut, gathering to spring...

Without thinking, he half-spoke, half-sang a song that popped into his head—a relic of his own youth, of another time and place. It suited this edgy, precarious moment, and he had never forgotten a word of it. The eyes drooped shut, and the Cerberus subsided into sleep, as Snape moved warily to the trap door.

*"We don't need no education—"*

Another step, as the creature snored in triplicate.

*"We don't need no thought control.*

*No dark sarcasm in the classroom..."*

He was almost there.

*"Teacher, leave the kids alone.*

*Hey Teacher— Leave us kids alone!*

*All in all, it's just another brick in the wall.*

*All in all, you're just another brick in the—"*

He dropped into darkness, and landed without much dignity. There was a faint smell of charred leaves.

*"—wall."*



The four friends were through the room of flying keys

rather quickly. Perhaps having two skilled fliers made all the difference, but Neville and Hermione had helped considerably by looking for variations in the keys, and the proper one was seized on and used. It had actually been quite a bit of fun, and there were giggles as they ran through the next door.

"Chessmen!" Draco shouted, running amongst them. "This is amazing!"

Neville touched one of the pawns, and jumped back with a cry as the stone sprang to life.

"Are we supposed to join you to get across?"

The pawn nodded. Draco surveyed the board with the grimace. "We don't have time for this, Harry," he whispered. Aloud he said, "I'd better get a good look at this before we get started. Come on."

The three others straggled behind him, following as he made a show of inspecting the board and its pieces. Very low he murmured, "We'll make a run for it. I'll say, 'Let's get started,' and we'll all make for that door opposite as fast as we can. Run between the bishops and the knights. If the pieces try to stop us, we'll blast them."

"Draco!" Hermione giggled. "That's so blood-thirsty. But it is very much thinking outside the box. It's very creative of you."

Draco scowled, trying to unravel the meaning of "thinking outside the box." They all moved as far away as possible from the black pieces, staring at them thoughtfully.



"Well," Draco drawled. "Let's get started."

They all yelled wildly, and turned and ran pell-mell through the white ranks towards the door. The pieces tried to attack at once, but were hobbled by their own limitations. The bishops could not attack directly to the side, and the children were past the pawns before the chessmen knew they had been tricked. A wild and gleeful shrieking signaled the victory. It was answered by a stony, sullen silence. Triumphant, the door was flung open, and Hermione screamed.

"Harry! Look out!"

Flat on the stone floor in front of them was a troll even larger than the one that had attacked them at Halloween. A disgusting smell filled the room, making them hold their noses or muffle their faces with their robes. The troll was unconscious, with a bloody lump on its head.

"Well, we don't have to fight that one," Harry said with the shrug. "Come on."

They peered more cautiously into the next room, but there was nothing particularly frightening there: merely a table with seven differently shaped bottles lined up on its top.

"Potions, do you reckon?" wondered Neville.

Harry nodded sagely. "I'll bet these different tests were made up by different teachers. I'll bet the Devil's Snare was Professor Sprout's, and this must be Professor Snape's. They each did something to protect the Stone."

They stepped over the threshold, and immediately a flickering purple fire sprang up behind them. At the same instant, black flames shot up in the doorway leading onward.

"We're trapped," Draco growled. "I don't fancy running through any of *that*."

"Look!" Hermione ran to the table and snatched up a piece of parchment by the bottles. She read the poem on it, which made the three boys stare at each other, completely baffled.

*"Danger lies before you, while safety lies behind...*

*Two of us will help you, whichever you would find."*

"Didn't seem very safe to me," Neville muttered.

"Nice rhyming," Draco said dryly, looking through the rest of clue. "But none of it makes any sense to me. '*Second on the right, second left...*' it's just a jumble!"

Neville looked rather sick. Harry was heartened to see that Hermione was smiling.

"No!" she said, beaming. "It's just a logic puzzle! I love doing them. A lot of the greatest wizards don't understand logic at all, and they'd be stuck here forever."

"Er—Hermione?" Harry commented. "That doesn't make me feel very encouraged..."

"Oh, Harry!" She waved at him dismissively, reading over the puzzle once more. "This isn't so bad! Everything we need is here on this paper."

She read through the paper several times, and then walked



up and down the lines of bottles, muttering to herself. At last she clapped her hands.

"Got it," she said. "The smallest bottle will get us through the black fire—toward the Stone."

Draco studied it and said, "There hardly a single swallow here. That's only enough for one of us."

Harry asked, "Which one will get you back through the purple flames?"

Hermione pointed at a rounded bottle at the right end of the line.

"Well—you drink that," Harry said. "Go back and find Professor Snape. He might already be on the way. Tell him what happened. I'm going to go on and see if I can hold off Quirrell."

Hermione's lip trembled. "But Harry—" She threw her arms around him, to the great embarrassment of the three boys. "Harry—you're a great wizard, you know."

"Not as good as you," he said shaking his head, as she let go of him.

"Me?" said Hermione. "Books and cleverness! Books can only get you so far, and I wouldn't dare face Quirrell myself! Oh Harry—be *careful!*"

"Enough of that," said Draco, pulling Hermione away. "Drink the potion and get going. No need to maul him."

She took a long drink and shuddered.

"It's not poison, is it?" Neville asked fearfully.

"No—but it's like ice."

"Quick!" Draco said, giving her a push. "Go, before it wears off!"

Hermione turned and walked through the purple fire.

"All right," Harry said to Draco and Neville. "I've got to leave you here, but you know what to do if Quirrell comes back through here."

Neville swallowed hard. Draco nodded grimly, "He won't be expecting us. We'll stop him, Harry. I swear it." He put out his hand. "Good luck, then."

They shook hands. Next, Harry slapped Neville shoulder and then took his hand. "Take care of yourself."

Neville sniffed. "You too, Harry."

"Here I go," Harry said, downing the little bottle in one gulp.

He shivered as the cold seemed to fill him up. He put the bottle down and braced himself. He walked through the black flames, and saw them lick at his body, but he felt nothing. And then he was on the other side, in the last chamber.

"Hello, Professor Quirrell."



The turbaned professor turned quickly toward him, eyes wide. "Potter!" he burst out, beaming crazily. "This is splendid! He's been wondering if you'd be meeting us. He thinks you're too nosy to live." Quirrell snorted. "Well, he would say that, wouldn't he? I don't know about you, but I was *definitely* too nosy to live! Hence the turban."



Harry stared. Was he—drunk?

Quirrell snapped his fingers. Ropes sprang out of thin air and wrapped themselves tightly around Harry.

Angry and defiant, Harry wrestled against them, and snarked, “Did you notice you’re not stuttering, Professor? You never stutter when you’re doing something evil.”

Quirrell eyed him owlishly. A knife-like pain bloomed in Harry’s scar, making him hiss. “That wasn’t me, Potter, That was him. He’s always doing that sort of thing. Sorry.”

“Who?”

Quirrell looked briefly miserable.

“My master,” he grimaced. “I met him on my travels, and I was careless. *‘If you gaze long into an abyss, the abyss will gaze back into you.’*” He flung his arms out theatrically. “And he got me. Potter. He’s in my head, and *I cannot get him out!*”

His face changed suddenly, hardening into smugness. Quirrell spoke again, but in a completely different voice, a voice Harry remembered from that terrible Defense lesson that had nearly killed him. Quirrell’s mouth moved, but the person speaking was clearly not Quirrell.

“No, he cannot get me out until I am done with him, but that will be sooner rather than later, I think. Such an absurd scene. I shall have to deal with you first, of course. Wait for death, Harry, while I examine this interesting mirror.”

It was only then that Harry realised that behind Quirrell stood

the Mirror of Erised. He glanced at it with distaste. At least when Quirrell looked at the mirror, the pain in Harry’s scar receded.

Not-Quirrell murmured, “This mirror is the key to finding the Stone. Trust Dumbledore to come up with something like this...but he’s in London...and I’ll be gone before he gets back.” He cocked his head. “I see the Stone...it is nearly in my hand...but where is it?”

“You’re Quirrell’s master?” Harry gaped. “Who are you? Why are you doing this?”

“He is a means to an end,” Not-Quirrell answered quietly. “We met when he was traveling abroad, and a foolish young man he was: full of ridiculous ideas about good and evil. I showed him how wrong he was...”

“I wasn’t wrong!”

The voice changed back into Quirrell, and Harry saw the real man’s face: terrified, defiant, anguished.

“And I’m not wrong now!” He flapped his hands at Harry. “It’s a nightmare, Potter! He’s foul and vile and evil and STUPID!” he shouted. “His thoughts are petty and cruel and boring, and I’m sick of them! It’s You-Know-Who, Potter!”

“Who?” Harry asked, feeling stupid.

Quirrell clutched at his head in frustration. “He-Who-Must—He-Who—He-Who—” He screamed out, “It’s Volde-mort, Potter! It’s Voldemort! If I had a knife I’d cut him out of my brain!” He moaned and doubled over, whimpering.



"Voldemort!" shouted Harry. "He's back?"

Quirrell shuddered, and then stood straight again, his face empty. He spoke, and voice was Not-Quirrell's.

"Yes, I am here," it declared coldly. The professor turned from Harry, gazing dreaming into the Mirror. "I attempted to teach the fool that there is no good and evil. There is only power, and those too weak to seek it. Since then, he has served me, though not always with success." A smirk twisted the thin lips. "I do not forgive mistakes easily. When he failed to steal the stone from Gringotts, I was most displeased. I punished him..."

Harry twisted his hands against the ropes, trying to find some slack. Quirrell was distracted. If he could free his hands, he could hit him— knock him down—*do* something. Quirrell was a grown up, but not a very big or strong one. Not like Uncle Vernon...Quirrell *could* be fought...

Quirrell shook his head.

"I don't understand. Is the Stone inside the mirror? Should I break it?"

Harry's eyes narrowed.

*The Mirror shows you what you want the most. What I want is to find the Stone and keep it away from Quirrell—or Voldemort—or Quirrellmort—or whoever! If I look in the Mirror, I'll see where it is!*

He tried to edge to the left and get in front of the glass without attracting Quirrell's attention. The ropes around his ankles

were too tight, and he tripped and fell.

"Perhaps...if I use the boy..."

Quirrell clapped his hands once, and the ropes fell from Harry.

"Come here," commanded the voice of Voldemort. "and tell me what you see."

Very cautiously, Harry moved forward, fearing that the madman would make a grab at him. He stepped in front of the mirror and saw his reflection: pale and scared-looking. In a moment, however, Professor Snape appeared, coming up stealthily behind Quirrell, and had him stunned and bound in a moment. Mirror-Snape and Mirror-Harry smiled with satisfaction. Harry glanced behind him, and was disappointed to see that he and Quirrell were still alone in the room.

*Does that mean that Professor Snape is coming? Harry thought wildly. Maybe so, but will he be in time to save the Stone? Or maybe I just really want him to come?*

"Well," the voice of Voldemort demanded harshly. "What do you see?"

Harry groped about for a good story.

"I see myself shaking hands with Dumbledore," he lied. "I won the house cup for Hufflepuff!"

"Good on you, Potter!" Quirrell declared brightly. "Well, it would seem *that* didn't work, master!" He pushed Harry away from the mirror, and Harry stumbled, nearly falling. His scar throbbed with every heartbeat.



"Idiot boy!" Voldemort's voice snarled. "I'm surrounded by incompetents! I *must* have the Elixir of Life! I can be free of you, you simpering weakling, and have a body of my own—a strong, powerful, beautiful body that will be worthy of Lord Voldemort!"

"—which is a ridiculous name, by the way," added Quirrell himself. "I should have told you before. I've wanted to, though I didn't dare, but today I feel strangely light of heart. How did you come up with something so ludicrous? If I were a Dark Lord I'd called myself Lord Blackdoom the Fourth, or Lord Killmuggle, or Gaxxxkangg the Unbound, or God, or something. Voldemort sounds—sort of *French*, actually. Affected. Dreadful. And all that talk about a beautiful body is pretty dodgy. Are you French? In fact..."

The voice stopped, as if cut off by a knife in the throat. Quirrell's eyes bugged as he stared into the Mirror unblinkingly.

Finally, Voldemort's voice grated out, "It's there! I see it! I can reach it, if I just—"

Harry backed away, his boots scraping on stone. Quirrell whirled on him.

"You! Don't think you're getting away, just because you're useless! *Avada*—"

A flash and a bang, and Harry was knocked down. Quirrell slumped in front of the mirror, limbs jerking. Grey fog issued from his gaping mouth and built into a raging storm. Wisps of it lashed out, like pale fingers reaching for Harry.

But impotently. As they snaked out, a glowing circle brightened at the foot of the mirror, blazing white and coppery-orange and verdigris. The fog could not pass the circle, and licked at the edges of it, baffled. Flashes of red light dazzled within it, and a disembodied voice shrilled in anger.

"It's there! It's there! *This was the answer!* Fools! You will learn to fear me—"

The brilliant glow from the circle brightened painfully, and a crackling in the air set Harry's teeth on edge. The fog rushed against the mirror, and was swallowed within it.

Quirrell was huddled on the stone floor within the circle, vomiting blood. Harry tried to sit up, and failed, his head spinning. The pain in his scar was fading, but he felt weak and sick all the same.

"Help.." Harry croaked. His eyes rolled back, and he realized that someone completely unknown to him was looking down at him with an air of mild curiosity.

"That went well, yes?" asked the man with crystal-white hair. "A triumph for all concerned, but now I must see to the unfortunate young man. And here is your guardian. You should not alarm him so, *mon enfant*. You make him old before his time."

And then there were quick footsteps—another presence in the room—and Professor Snape's voice crying, "Harry! Harry!"





504

## CHAPTER 25



**SO—"SNAPE** glared at the children. "A luncheon and games on Boxing Day was not enough. Nothing less would do than compassing the defeat of the Dark Lord as well."

"And hunting for the Philosopher's Stone!" laughed Charity.

Snape's private quarters had never contained such a gathering. A table was laid for ten, and the belated luncheon spread on it was fit for the occasion. The

children stared in awe at the Nicholas Flamel, who was much amused by their whispered comments.

"He doesn't look six hundred years old!" Neville remarked to Harry. "He doesn't look as old as Professor Dumbledore!"

"Oh, well spotted, Longbottom," Draco drawled. "How could anyone *look* six hundred years old, anyway?"

"Six hundred and sixty-five, actually," Hermione corrected. "But the card came out some time ago. Maybe he's really six hundred and sixty-six!"

"Shh!" Harry hushed them. "He'll hear you! And anyway, what

505



does a year or two matter when you've got the Elixir of Life?"

Flamel spoke up with a smile. "Miss Granger is correct. I am, in fact, six hundred, sixty-six years, one month, six days, eight hours, and fifty-two minutes old. Every year matters, Mr Potter. And that is the *point* of the Elixir of Life."

"Eat your vegetables," Snape told Harry repressively. "It's a miracle *you've* made it to eleven!"

The adults laughed long at that. Flitwick and Sprout were perhaps the most cheerful, having heard the news instead of seeing the events or their aftermath. It might be a victory by committee, which was unusual, perhaps, but everyone could feel they had played a part.

Minerva shook her head. "The most remarkable event. He-Who-Must— No — *Tom Riddle* gone for good. Trapped in that horrible mirror, I hope for all time."

Snape shrugged. "For all time? Who can say? However, he has little reason to leave, and those of us here have no reason at all to release him."

"At least Poppy thinks poor Quirinius will survive," Charity said.

Everyone was silent a moment. Quirrell had been rushed to the Hospital Wing, and Madam Pomfrey had understood why sending him to St. Mungo's might be a mistake. These events must be kept secret. No one needed to know how close Voldemort had come to returning. And it had been close, indeed.

"My friends," Flamel said, lifting his glass, "I salute your

resourcefulness, your courage, and your magic! I have seen many extraordinary things in a very long life, but this is a day to remember. And you four, brave and clever children of Hogwarts! Cherish your friendship, for it has already proven a powerful force in our world!"

"I'll drink to that!" Harry spoke up. His goblet of elf-made ginger wine sloshed a bit. "To friendship!"

"Friendship!"

Some attention was shown to the luncheon, especially by the children, who felt they were starving. They were all inordinately pleased with themselves. Neville spilled some of his ginger wine on Hermione's velvet frock, and she was too happy to complain. Draco approved of the meal, and privately resolved that he would have exactly this luncheon every Boxing Day for the rest of his life. And he would invite these very friends, and they could talk it over and be proud of what they'd accomplished.

Harry knew that Professor Snape was not pleased with him, running off into danger as he had. He shouldn't have, he knew now. The adults had laid a brilliant trap for Voldemort—really brilliant.

"I'm so glad you let me help with that potion, Professor," he told Snape. "I learned a lot, and it was great, hearing Professor Quirrell defying Voldemort. He made fun of his name," he told his friends. "He asked if he was French. No offense!" he said hastily to Master Flamel.



"None taken," Flamel laughed, with a courtly nod. "I was there myself, and found it all most amusing. Creatures like Tom Riddle have no real sense of humour, and so are helpless before it. It was good that the young man found his courage at last. When one can respect oneself, it is easier to get on with one's life."

"I could not have succeeded with the potion without your advice," Snape admitted quietly. "It was most timely."

Flamel shrugged elegant shoulders, his crystal hair ruffling. "Perhaps I had stayed away from events too long. Your letters intrigued me. And I was not quite ignorant of events. Even in Paris, I was able to inquire about you, Severus Snape, and I was aware that you were the guardian of The-Boy-Who-Lived."

Harry was curious. "I thought you and your wife were enjoying a quiet life in Devon."

Flamel's laugh was rich and musical. "Devon? Where did you hear such a thing?"

Draco spoke up, rather excited. "On your chocolate frog card! I showed it to Harry when we were trying to figure out who you were! It said you were the famous alchemist and opera lover, and that you and your wife Perenelle, were enjoying a quiet life in Devon. We thought you were hidden really well."

Flamel shook his head. "As good a story as any other. Let the gawkers search Devon. I never cease to be amazed at the British Wizarding World, attempting to make an Englishman of me. Paris has always been the city of my soul. If I desire country air,

there is my chateau in Normandy. Opera indeed delights me, so there is a grain of truth there, as in all the best lies."

"And you knew about Voldemort—Tom Riddle, too—I suppose," Harry considered.

"Yes, of course. I had followed his career with disgust for some time, but I knew he could not last. He was at once a great wizard and a very great fool." Flamel took a sip of wine, reflected, and told them, "It was amusing to me that he pursued my Philosopher's Stone, not understanding that it could be of no use to him whatever."

There was a short silence, while Snape came to his own surprised conclusion.

Hermione, however, was still confused. "I don't understand. Why couldn't he use it?"

Flamel gave her a small, wry smile. "Miss Granger, Perenelle and I had children. We had grandchildren and great-children. Do you not think we loved them?"

"Of course."

"Do you not think we would have given them the Elixir of Life to keep them with us, if we could have?"

"Well—of course—I mean—" she paused. "Oh."

"Yes," he agreed. "Oh. Perenelle and I said something similar about six hundred years ago, when we found that only the makers of the Philosopher's Stone could make use of its virtues. We had not quite thought it through, and were unpleasantly surprised."



"So all of them—"

"Yes. In time, they all perished, slipping away into Death. It was very distressing, but after the first two hundred years, we learned to keep our distance from our family."

"But why?" Draco wondered.

"Because, *mon enfant*, I cannot care about *all* of you. After some twenty generations, there are not many witches or wizards in Europe or America who are not my descendants—sometimes, like you, several times over. Those who follow the art I love—those are the ones with whom I still share a common language. They are dear to me: as are the brave, the clever, the kind—those who have made the world better because they were here. The others are strangers."

Steepling his fingers, he leaned forward and spoke quietly.

"The one who called himself Lord Voldemort—foolish name!—never charmed me. A handsome, cold-hearted boy who became a handsome, cold-hearted man. He was Head Boy of Hogwarts—yes!—but there is a new Head Boy every year. There are many schools, and an endless supply of handsome Head Boys and heartbreakingly lovely Head Girls. I saw something of him during the last great war, but he had sought his Potions N.E.W.T. purely for ambition's sake, and dropped the Art as soon as that was achieved."

"So even if he *had* taken the Stone—" Harry began.

"But he has a Stone," Flamel assured them. "Do you think

Perenelle and I made only one? We experimented a great deal with the formula, and created several, all slightly different. If Tom Riddle has one with him in his mirror prison, it does not matter to me. Let him have that illusory joy."

The dessert was served, and proved no illusory joy at all. Snape hoped that Neville's enormous helping would not revisit him after his Grandmother came to fetch him. The children all seemed somewhat aware that they had been foolish, but Harry was at once sorry he had worried Snape, and proud to have been part of defeating Voldemort. Perhaps it would not be wrong to let the boy enjoy this victory today. It was unlikely he'd ever face such a danger again.

He toyed with his own plate, and flicked a slight smile at Charity, thinking of the new—and now only—image to be seen in the Mirror of Erised: a pale and handsome wizard gazing enraptured at the Philosopher's Stone in his hand. Tom Riddle had achieved his ambition at last. He would live forever—or at least as long as the Mirror lasted—and be young, powerful, and the possessor of the world greatest magical artifact. In that mirror world, he would be the greatest mage alive, a moment of triumph stretching into blissful infinity.



And afterwards, Flamel withdrew to the Hospital Wing, to see what progress Quirrell was making, and the rest of them



were left to Meet the Parents, so to speak.

Madam Longbottom arrived, very punctually at five, and Snape let Minerva take the lead, as she urged the dowager aside and confided Neville's part in the very great—but necessarily *secret*—success of the day. Harry slipped around to watch Madam Longbottom's face change: from bafflement to alarm, finally softening into pride and concern. She put her arm around Neville as she hustled him away, only saying, "My dear boy! My dear, dear boy..."

Professor Flitwick went with Professor Burbage when they took Hermione home, so he, as her Head of House, could tell them something of what had happened. It probably would not be the whole story, which would be very confusing and take forever, but it would be enough that the Grangers would understand that Hermione had been reckless, but had been *safe* in the end, and that a malicious wizard who had wanted to threaten the students had been stopped.

"I hope, Mr Potter," said Professor Sprout, "that you will trust your elders in future. Of course we're all very proud of how brave and clever you children have been, but you mustn't go on thinking that we're not going to look after things. I hate to give a detention for something like this, and I certainly won't take points, but I want your word of honour that you will come to an adult—and wait—the next time you feel inclined to save the world."

She nodded her head, and really and truly shook her finger at

him, but then gave him a pat on the head, and bade them goodnight.

"What *she* said," drawled Snape, raising a brow at Draco. "You lot were lucky. You know that. It could have gone very, very badly in countless ways."

"I suppose so," Draco grumbled, "But still, you must admit—"

A knock at the door, and the Malfoys swept in, looking very grand, and full of the exciting events at St Mungo's. Draco and Harry caught each other's eye. This was either going to be brilliant, or ghastly, or a little of both.



"He's *gone*?" Lucius Malfoy asked again. "Gone—as in gone for good? You're certain?" He shifted in his armchair, rearranging his legs and his cane, and then reaching for the brandy snifter.

"Yes—quite certain," Snape repeated patiently. "He possessed Quirrell, but the Dark Lord's spirit was successfully exorcised and contained."

Narcissa still looked uneasy. "But—he could be released—or escape—and then—"

"He's not getting away *this* time," Harry interrupted. "He won't even *want* to get away"

"That's enough, Harry!" Snape said. "It is useless to lie to you when Draco already knows so much of the matter. Voldemort was lured by a Philosopher's Stone into an object called the Mirror of Erised. He will be quite happy there, and



after a short while, he will be incapable of functioning in the real world. He is as thoroughly imprisoned as possible, and the more so because he will be completely satisfied to be there. And do not ask where the Mirror is going. I do not know myself. The Dark Lord is indeed gone—for good. It is time to put him in the past where he belongs, and move on.”

“Quirrell made fun of his name,” Draco snickered.

Harry grinned, “That’s right! He said if he were Dark Lord he’d call himself Lord Blackdoom the Fourth! All sorts of funny things. I guess I’d stick to Harco, Dark Lord of the Sith.”

“Oi!” Draco objected. “Harco is *my* Dark Lord name!”

“Draco!” His mother was horrified. “It’s not funny!”

“Certainly not!” agreed Lucius, grimacing.

“Draco doesn’t need a Dark Lord name anyway,” Harry pointed out, “since he’s going to be Minister of Magic.”

“Oh—settled that between you, have you?” Lucius asked sardonically.

Draco smiled a little. “I think I’d rather like being Minister of Magic. It’s something to plan for.”

Lucius eyed him keenly, and then relaxed. “Indeed. A laudable ambition, if undertaken with the proper goals.”

“But for now,” said Snape, “the two of you should be satisfied with your Explorers’ Club, and the joys of the schoolroom.”

“And dinner with us on New Year’s Eve, of course,” Narcissa told them. “I’m so glad you boys have been practicing your dancing.”

Harry resigned himself. “Dancing.”

“Oh, come on, Harry!” Draco laughed. “It’ll be fun!”



Albus Dumbledore returned to Hogwarts to find that events had passed him by. After considering the matter, he decided that he was all right with it. Standing in front of the Mirror of Erised with Snape, he studied the handsome face of Tom Riddle, whose dark eyes were forever fixed on his object of desire.

“He seems—happy,” he finally said.

“I suppose so,” Snape agreed. “I hadn’t often seen him looking anything other than angry or malevolent or smug. And I never saw him when he was that young. It must be how he continued to think of himself.”

“Yes,” Dumbledore said sadly. “He is not the only one who thought of himself as forever twenty.” He turned to Snape. “You have done a wonderful thing, Severus. Doubly wonderful in that you saved Quirinius. You were right and I was wrong. There, I’ve said it. There are lessons for all of us here. Harry must be very proud of you. I know that I am.”

“Harry!” Snape growled. “That boy will be the death of me!”

Dumbledore laughed. “If you can’t manage him, Severus, then no one can. I take it that Nicholas was pleased with him. And you.”

Snape did not look at the Headmaster, but smiled darkly to himself. “We—found we had interests in common. He is a great



man. I can learn much from him. He has invited Harry and me to visit him this summer. In the future, I may study with him at length. Not while Harry is in school, perhaps, but some day."

"Nicholas is a great man, true enough. When I was young and working with him, I saw life very differently than I do now. Perhaps I should have stayed longer, but nothing is easier than playing might-have-been. And you are far and away my better in the field of potions, as you someday will be in alchemy, too, I daresay."

"You will find a safe place for the Mirror?" Snape asked.

"Yes. At a considerable distance, in a place unlikely to be disturbed—well—ever. Even if a foolish person tried to remove Tom from the Mirror, I believe it would be far harder than putting Tom in. For Tom does seem happy at last, for what it's worth. Let us leave him there."

"I agree."

They left the chamber, already moving on with their lives.

Snape had much on his mind regarding Harry. "Perhaps we can meet in the owlery in a day or so," he said. "Harry would like to have a look at more of his things. I'll start him on his thank-you notes tomorrow. He can consider that his punishment for recklessly charging into the fray."

"I would be delighted."

What Snape did not tell Dumbledore was that the response from the Fletwoc solicitor had come, and had been most interesting. It appeared that Harry would have a house after all.







With the approach of the new year, Lucius Malfoy decided he would make some new beginnings. Out with the old: in with the new. As the Dark Lord Voldemort was now utterly *passé*, it would be the wisest course to rid himself of anything that might lead people to imagine he had ever been a sympathiser.

Mask and robes: those were discreetly destroyed in a hidden chamber in the ancient dungeons. He had come to find playing dress-up rather silly, however exciting it had been in his youth.

The extra, untraceable wand he would certainly keep, and it remained with the cache of Malfoy family wands. Some were legacies from his ancestors; some were trophies of battle. He looked all of them over to see if there were any that might prove incriminating. Reassured, he locked them away with a feeling of satisfaction.

There was that other object: the special item that the Dark Lord had entrusted to him with the most hair-raising injunctions. Lucius Malfoy knew what it *was*, of course: a blank journal of muggle make. He did not know, however, what it *meant*.

Clearly, the Dark Lord had considered it of the greatest personal importance. Lucius knew that the Dark Lord had entrusted other items to various of his followers: to Bellatrix, to Regulus Black. Whatever they were no longer mattered. The Dark Lord would not be needing them.

And Lucius did not need anything with the Dark Lord's muggle name on it. It would have to go. He did not want to put it in the family vault at Gringotts, where another Malfoy might find it and know about his past. He had attempted to vanish it, and failed. An attempt to burn it was similarly—and frighteningly—unsuccessful. The journal glowed blue and green and sparked, but it remained unharmed.

If it could not be destroyed, it needed to be out of the house, and Lucius decided to make it inconspicuous, by leaving it tucked away behind a dusty shelf at BORGIN & BURKE'S. He would not bring anything else, or make any purchases there today. He wanted nothing that would associate that item—whenever it was found—with him.

Diagon Alley was busier than he had expected, two days before the New Year. Some students were there, supplementing their school supplies before their return to Hogwarts on the second of January. Older witches and wizards were there as well, for no doubt others were making fresh starts and resolutions. Lucius had slipped out early and alone, not wanting Draco's questions about any of this. Above all, Draco needed plausible deniability if anything went pear-shaped.

And then BORGIN & BURKE'S was closed.

The wind blew down Knockturn Alley, whistling through the cracks in grimy windows and stirring the dustings of snow on the cobbles. Lucius stood there undecided.



*I do not want to take this thing home with me.*

After a moment, he headed back into Diagon Alley, and noticed the shabby stalls of second-hand goods. Tables displayed threadbare robes and deplorable hats; shelves of books leaned crazily on the uneven pavement.

Where better to hide a book, than amongst other books?

At one bookstall, the vendor, an aged, ragged wizard, snored under a dirty quilt. His inventory was a collection of the unread and unwanted. Lucius slid the thin volume between RECIPES FOR THE VAMPIRE IN DENIAL and SQUIBS IN THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY. He left without a word, feeling he had been exceedingly clever.

But Lucius Malfoy had practiced attracting attention too long to be able to discard his trademark manner at will. He never noticed that one young visitor to the Alley had watched his every move.

**TO BE CONTINUED...**



## NOTES

### CHAPTER 2:

*Yes, I know this sorting will elicit comment and disagreement. I felt that Harry is too new to having people care about him not to worry about hurting feelings if he seemed to choose McGonagall's house over Snape's, or vice versa. Snape's encouragement of him to be true to himself would seem a subtle discouragement to insist on his parents' house. Harry knows enough about Slytherin to*

*understand why it might cause unpleasant comment if he were in it. Furthermore, while Harry has some Slytherin traits, a lot of them might be tied to the horcrux and so are not part of Harry per se. As to Ravenclaw—I just don't see Harry there. Not that he isn't intelligent. As we know from canon, very brilliant people are sometimes in houses other than Ravenclaw. Harry is not a scholar by nature, or if he was, his years with the Dursleys have quashed it. He will make better grades in this story than in canon, because he now has individuals who will be monitoring*



his progress, and who have given him the tools he needs to succeed at Hogwarts.

In the end, though, I chose Hufflepuff because I believe Harry will be very happy there. What a concept! Happy!Harry. I also think that sometimes people go into houses not because they already have the hallmark traits of the house, but because they desire them (Peter Pettigrew in Gryffindor) or because they need them. I think a healthy respect for hard work and loyalty would be extremely good for Harry. Hard work has been tainted in the past by the Dursleys' demands, and Harry hasn't had much experience of people being loyal to him, but all that is about to change.

And as to Ron—no, this is not an evil!Ron story. If I cavil at calling eleven-year-old Tom Riddle evil, you should guess I certainly wouldn't create an evil Ron. However, he and Harry did not meet well, and Harry has already made those crucial other first friends. Ron and Harry may be friends eventually, but that will take time, and there will be many bumps along the way.

I enjoyed some of the comments about WIND IN THE WILLOWS. All right, I agree: Neville is Mole, Harry is the Water Rat (dear old Ratty is my favourite, anyway), and Draco is Toad. Hmmm. I may do something with this later. Snape is certainly Mr Badger. And let's not forget Hermione's patronus!

**CHAPTER 3:**

I am very, very pleased at the response to this story. So

many of you have given me such encouragement and such useful criticism. It seems most of you are indulging my fancy for Happy!Hufflepuff!Harry.

As to Hermione—I'm going to try something a bit different here. No one doubts for a moment that Hermione has the brains for Ravenclaw, but I believe that personal dynamics would play a role in anyone's adjustment to his or her house. If you have four girls who are already good friends, and you drop a girl from a totally different background into that situation, all sorts of possibilities arise. In thinking about Hermione in Ravenclaw, I was forced to consider Luna Lovegood's experiences there. However, Hermione is not Luna, and a similar scenario would play out differently. Originally I was going to put Hermione in Gryffindor, but thinking though what life without Harry in that house might be like (we already know that Lavender and Parvati formed a tight bond with no discernable room for Hermione), I hadn't the heart. Of course, not knowing what we know, Harry might feel guilty for giving Hermione what appears at first glance to have been bad advice. It's early days for all of them, anyway.

**CHAPTER 4:**

My point is that a rather ordinary girl with normal social skills and better-than-average looks, is going to have an easier time than a very brilliant girl with very average (or somewhat odd) looks and poor social skills. It's human nature. Since canon has Sally-



Anne Perks disappearing from Hogwarts sometime in the next few years, I intend to make use of that, too. Is magic the only gift worth having? I think that's a question worth posing. I pose it to myself, along with the eternal "Would I want to go to Hogwarts?" or more uneasily, "Would I want my child to go to Hogwarts?" My answers generally are no, yeah (maybe), and certainly not.

I have to remember that if I take my eleven-year-old self, as I was (and I was no better looking or socially well-adjusted than Hermione at that age), and drop myself into Hogwarts, I'm not going as Harry Potter's new best friend. I will be alone, far from friends and family, among a lot of very parochial people who know each other very, very well, and me not at all. They will despise my background, while knowing next to nothing about it. There will be nothing familiar to soften the difficulties either: no music today and no prospect of any tomorrow (no piano at Hogwarts to my knowledge), no art, no dramatics, and only a few other students from a similar background who may or may not share an interest in the books I like best.

**CHAPTER 6:**

Wintringham and Graves are listed by JKR as members of the Weird Sisters, and based on the dates of birth she gives them, would still be students at this point. The instruments she assigns them are no doubt meant to be whimsical, but it all sounds like a handful of isolated musicians trying desperately to have some sort of musical culture.

I know that canon Hermione never says anything about playing an instrument, but considering how gifted she is, I tend to believe that her parents would have encouraged something as enriching as music lessons.

The "words" to the Barley Twist dance are in the ancient language of Noknown. I made them up, slightly influenced by H.P Lovecraft.

Please don't send me a review telling me I spelled Serjeant/ Sergeant incorrectly. "Serjeant-at-Arms" is the spelling used for the office in the House of Commons.

**CHAPTER 7:**

No, I'm not shipping Hermione/Draco. They're just little kids. However, Draco's parents are likely to be as watchful as any passionate Dramione shipper. Draco will no doubt refer to her as "Granger" when writing to his parents, and it may be some time before Lucius and Narcissa know that his muggleborn associate is female. Of more moment is that fact that Draco is doing that vexing thing that embarrasses the life out of parents: he is taking literally a throwaway remark that Lucius made as a sop to decency. When he told Draco to be flexible about outstanding muggleborns, he simply meant that there was no reason to insult Lily Evans Potter, who after all is conveniently dead. Draco, however, took the remark at face value, and since Hermione is the most outstanding muggleborn of his year, he thinks his father meant people like her. Someday Lucius will have to decide whether he wants to stick to his hard-line blood principles, or if



he would rather his son not think him a liar and a hypocrite.

**CHAPTER 8:**

Some of you have remarked that Lucius Malfoy works for the Ministry, because after the fight with Arthur Weasley at Flourish & Blotts, he said "I'll see you at work." That is film canon, not in the books. It is clear to me that Lucius Malfoy's career is being Lucius Malfoy. We know he has lots of money, but JKR really doesn't tell us enough about the workings of the wizarding economy for us to know where it comes from. All sorts of conjectures are possible.

Silphium, by the way, was a real plant, now extinct, that provided the women of the ancient Mediterranean with a safe and convenient abortifacient.

**CHAPTER 11:**

My friend Jodel, who has given me a great deal of help with this story, reminded me that braiding and knots (whether hair or cords or what-have-you) is part of a magical discipline called *ligature*. Sometimes it is used to summon winds, but I like to think it could be used for other purposes.

Many of you want to know what Minerva saw in the Mirror of Erised. I like it remaining mysterious, and up to the readers' imagination. However—Dumbledore may get a clue, by the fact that Minerva wanted to use the Stone, that she is not the happiest of witches. Here are some possible scenarios: she wants to de-age herself and live her life over, not spend

decades futilely crushing on a gay man who never regarded her as anything other than a good student and good friend; she may want to de-age herself and use a time-turner to settle Tom Riddle's hash back in their school days. She may want to extend her life and become Headmistress and change all the things about the school that have bugged her for years. She may want to enjoy her youth and beauty (and Maggie Smith was a very beautiful woman when young) and marry and have a family. Choose the scenario or combination thereof that you prefer!

**CHAPTER 12:**

I enjoyed the concept of Harry catching "the conscience of the King" without even knowing it. Some of the lines were my homage to CAPSLOCK! Harry, who otherwise annoys me so much in canon. Thank you all for your continuing support and reviews. Even when I don't agree, I find new things to think about. And when I do agree—I shamelessly adopt the ideas for my own.

The wizarding ballad "The Three Brothers," is known in our world as "The Three Ravens," and has different words. Same tune, though. It makes sense to me that the story would be known in ballad form before being written down in prose.

**CHAPTER 14:**

The motto and coat of arms of the Gaunts is stolen from Poe's CASK OF AMONTILLADO. I can see Tom Riddle behaving exactly like Montresor.



No—Charity has not bespelled Snape. The jolt he feels is the (for him) unfamiliar feeling of mutual attraction. To paraphrase Dumbledore: A magic beyond all they learn at Hogwarts!

I hope my glimpse of Quirrelmort has answered the questions I received about what he was doing in the last chapter!

**CHAPTER 15:**

I thought it would be interesting to let Tom teach a class for once, rather than for him to just hinder Quirrell. Harry has irritated him more at this point than he did in canon, and Tom has very little impulse control when it comes to revenge. It also gives him an opportunity to poison the children's minds against muggles, without saying anything that can be challenged as a lie. The murderers I cite are all real. Who knows what sorts of book Tom read when he was in the muggle world—or what sorts of ugly experiences he had there?

**CHAPTER 16:**

I was astonished at the number of reviewers who rebuked me for allowing Tom Riddle to be so unfair and unbalanced in his depiction of muggles. They were quick to point out to me that the Death Eaters had committed similar crimes. Well—um—I know that. Why in the world would Tom Riddle be fair and balanced? I have already warned my readers to take with a grain of salt anything that Severus Snape thinks or says about James Potter. I don't think I should have to follow every self-serving statement made by any of my characters with a pious

disclaimer! Whether reading historical documents or fiction, a reader should be aware of points of view. Tom Riddle, when giving a description of people he hates, will always give the most extreme and highly-coloured version possible. That is why, for example, when speaking of Belle Gunness, he tells the impressionable children the scenario of her escaping (which is entirely possible, as the headless dead woman found in her burnt-out house appears to have been too short to be Belle).

In addition, a number of you thought Quirrelmort should be instantly sacked for his dangerous demonstration. Why? In canon Dumbledore didn't sack him when Quirrell jinxed Harry's broom or set a troll on the students, even though it's evident that Hermione would have been killed but for Harry and Ron's rescue of her. The teachers were obviously far too late to do so. Dumbledore is never going to sack Quirrell and lose his opportunity to keep him under surveillance. Besides, painful injuries befall the Hogwarts students on a daily basis. Back in Tom Riddle's day, a student was killed and the Governors were satisfied with the expulsion of the student they held responsible. I've never understood how Hagrid got off so easily. In Harry's fourth year, Crouch/Moody turns Draco Malfoy into a ferret and slams him into the ground a number of times. He is briefly rebuked by McGonagall, but the other students are allowed to treat it as jolly fun and just what a school rival deserves.

However—you will see, in this chapter, that not all Hogwarts



teachers are happy that Hogwarts is so unsafe...

**CHAPTER 18:**

*I've always found Hagrid's Christmas gift of a wooden flute somewhat suspicious. Either Dumbledore suggested that Harry might like such a thing, or Hagrid, knowing that Harry knew about Fluffy, wanted to help him in his own way. I realize that JKR describes the flute as "roughly cut," but I think better of Hagrid than that, and a "roughly cut" flute would probably not really make a sound adequate to lull Fluffy. A decent recorder is really not all that difficult to make with the right tools.*

*There is some contradiction in canon about which of Susan Bones' relations were killed in the war: uncle and his family or grandparents. I decided to use Uncle Edgar, since he has a specific name.*

**CHAPTER 19:**

*In response to some of your questions, yes, Dumbledore knows that Harry's scar is a horcrux. He suspected something unfortunate from the first, but has had ten years to think about it. With the evidence that something of Voldemort had remained on this plane of existence, he eventually came to the correct conclusion. However, he does not know about any other horcruxes. At the moment he, like Snape, thinks that Voldemort's plan was to make a horcrux the night he murdered the Potters, and that something went awry. Making even one is so abominable that multiple horcruxes did not cross his mind. Voldemort considered that the beauty of his*

*plan. Did Slughorn know? That is an interesting question. I'm not sure that he did. However, he leaves the scene shortly after the destruction of Voldemort. It's possible that with the lack of a body, he might have suspected something and decided he did not need the visibility of a Hogwarts professorship. However, it's clear he never told anyone else until confronted by Dumbledore in Harry's sixth year, and even then it took Harry to get the truth out of him. From my reading of canon, I don't think that Dumbledore had a clue that there were more of the vile things until the revelation of Tom Riddle's diary. It must have been a horrifying discovery. I believe that up to that point Dumbledore probably believed that Harry was the only horcrux, created partly by accident, and the attacks were the result of Voldemort's spirit being abroad and possessing someone else, just as it had in Harry's first year. However, forever unanswered is the question: did Dumbledore know that Slytherin's monster was a basilisk? If Hermione Granger could unravel the mystery, why couldn't he?*

*So I think that in the summer after Harry's second year Dumbledore started his research into Tom Riddle's past and began the horcrux hunt. Why he did not tell anyone else I think points to his chief character flaw: a tendency to hoard knowledge. It's unfortunate that he did not trust his friends and followers enough to include them in his search. I really don't regard Dumbledore as evil or incorrigible, but he is so much older, or so*



*much more powerful, or so much more intelligent than nearly everyone he knows—sometimes all three—that he finds it hard to regard other people as equals, or even as adults. To a certain extent, I believe he thinks he's protecting them from horrors only he is strong enough to face. Sometimes he's right—and he's right so often that he has almost forgotten he can be wrong.*

**CHAPTER 20:**

*If you're interested in the real background of the witch hunts, and why a magical community might want to cut itself off from the rest of society, read THE EUROPEAN WITCH-CRAZE OF THE SIXTEENTH AND SEVENTEENTH CENTURIES by Hugh Trevor-Roper.*

**CHAPTER 23:**

*Yes, the unborn lamb is a real thing. I have an astrakhan evening capelet (astrakhan is the furrier's name for unborn lamb) of my grandmother's in my closet. And Outrage is a real board game and has adorable little miniatures of the Crown Jewels. It would have come out when Hermione was a little girl.*

**CHAPTER 25:**

*Yes, the Mirror is absolutely gone for good. However, we all know that that does not mean that Tom Riddle, or some version thereof, may not make a future appearance.*

**COLOPHON**

Layout and formatting this document was done in Adobe InDesign, utilizing commercial clip art and stock photography from GettyImages Ltd, modified in Adobe Photoshop. Cover was created in Adobe Photoshop. Illustrations and other decorations were produced in the DAZStudio, using a wide selection of commercial and freebie models.

Fonts used in this publication are: the Bailey Sans family, from ITC, for body text. The small caps cuttings were produced in Fontographer. Other fonts used in this project (Commercial and freeware) are, variously: Aridi 01, Aquiline Regular, Arcana GMM Std Manuscript, Bailey MF Regular, Bill's Tropical DECOrations Regular, Birch Std. Regular, Cenizas Regular, Dear Sarah Regular, P22's Declaration Alternate, Jane Austin Regular, Journal Ultra, La Danse Regular, Lithos Pro Bold, Mason/Mason Alternate Bold, Miss Brooks, and Webletterer BB Bold. Drop caps were produced through Digital Juice's Juicer 3 utility and based upon Digital Juice Font collection #1's Mr Bingo.

Special mention should probably also be extended to Jack Davis and Linea Dayton for their efforts in producing The Photoshop 7 One-Click WOW Book.

Graphics design by J. Odell (J0del@aol.com)