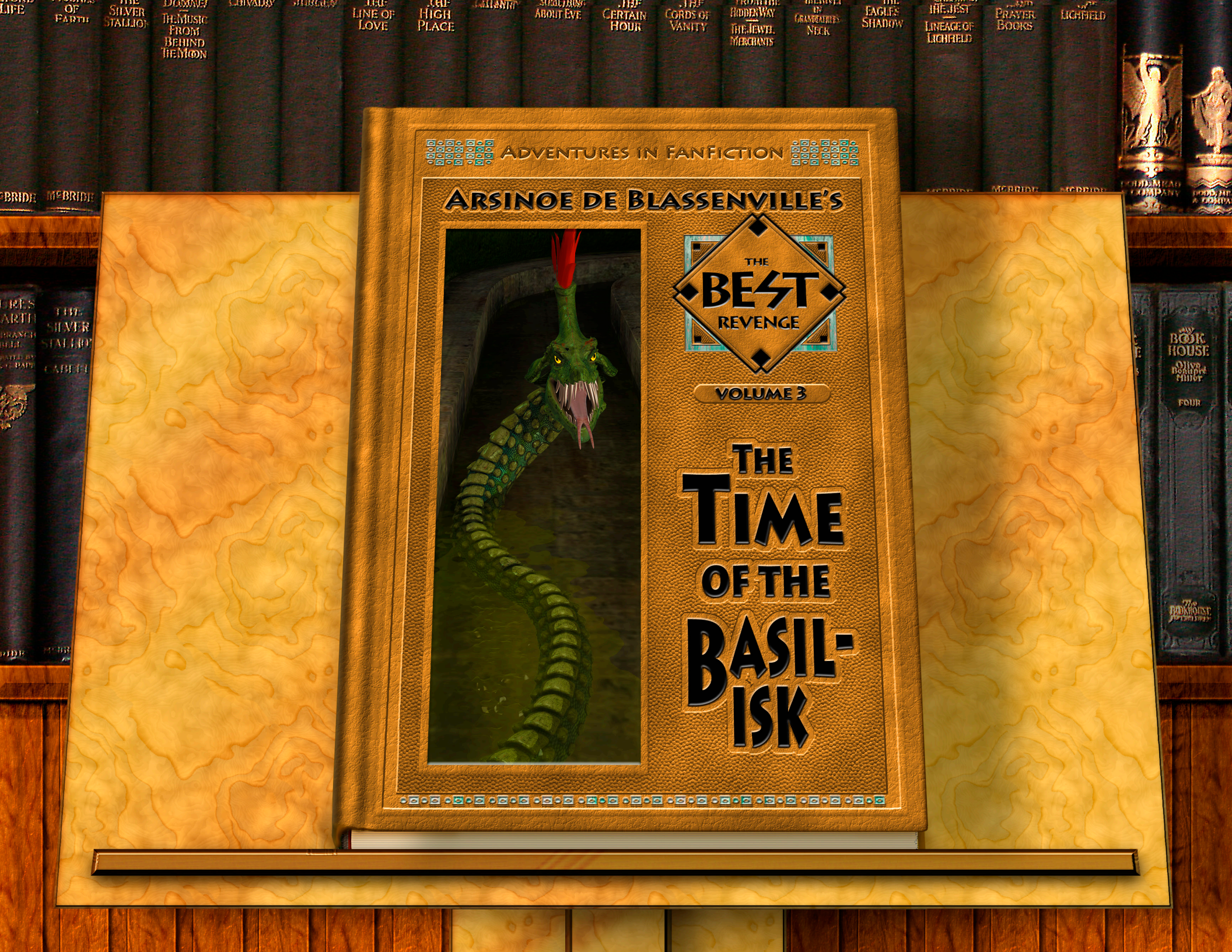

Adventures in Fanfiction
Arsinoe de Blassenville's
The Best Revenge
Volume 3
The Time of the Basil-isk

A Red Hen Publication

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

Arsinoe de Blassenville's

The Best Revenge

Volume 3

The Time of the Basilisk

CHAPTER 1

"PROFESSOR?" Harry asked uncertainly. "Are you all right?"

Snape scowled. His fury was so great that it was in danger of boiling over and scalding innocent bystanders. He attacked his sandwich ravenously, and did not answer straightaway.

He would have preferred to enjoy their next to last lunch before the return of the rest of the students. The intimacy of the single table would be gone, and everyone would return to the rigid separation of student and teacher, of house against house.

But Harry was still looking at him in concern. Snape swallowed, and tried to compose himself.

"Professor Quirrell is unable to continue teaching this year. He will need considerable time for rest and recuperation. The Headmaster has found a substitute instructor for Defense."

"Hmmm..." Harry considered. "And—it's some-

body you don't like." He smirked. "You're eating that sandwich like you'd like to bite someone."

Snape muttered, "It's not I who am likely to do the biting."

Dumbledore had at least warned him before the staff meeting. Otherwise, very unpleasant things might have happened. He had four hours to pull himself together before the blast from his past was in his face and personal space.

Charity arrived and sat down by him. After a brief glance, she asked, "Severus? Are you all right?"

The staff meeting went smoothly enough. Remus Lupin had gone rather grey, Snape smirked. More a true wolf-colour than the disguise of youthful humanity he had worn as a teen.

Minerva stood by Lupin as if sponsoring him—or protecting him from Snape. He cast her a level look. How could she expect him to be happy about this? He understood the difficulty of finding a substitute at short notice, but *Lupin?*

Once again, were the students to be put in danger unnecessarily? Or if they were not to be in danger, was that to be because Snape himself was asked to take additional duties upon himself?

The rest of the staff was welcoming enough. Who else knew his secret?

Not Sprout or Flitwick, who remembered Lupin as a diligent student. Not Kettleburn or Sinistra or Vector. Certainly not Trelawney, who was not only as clueless as usual, but three sheets to the wind on the Headmaster's sherry.

And not Charity, alas, who looked over at Snape with a smile, after the introductions.

"How nice! There'll be someone else our age on staff."

Snape growled, and casually put his hand on Charity's waist. He caught Lupin's eyes, and narrowed his own.

Just so there's no mistake, wolf.

He might be sworn to silence, but Harry could surely draw his own conclusions when they began working together on the Wolfsbane Potion. Even more so, when the boy realized they were making it *every* month.

One more thing to do. They had been busy enough in the past few days, between going through the owlery presents and dealing with Hagrid's dragon.

Was Hagrid out of his mind? Of course, after getting away with bringing a Cerberus into Hogwarts, no doubt he thought a guardian dragon would be equally welcome. Harry had eventually remembered about the dragon's egg, and told Snape, and Snape had told Dumbledore.

And it was in fact, the next subject of the staff meeting.

Dumbledore put the best possible face on it.

"Our own Hagrid happened upon a dragon's egg, and has managed to keep it viable. Professor Kettleburn has determined that the hatching is not imminent. Therefore, the egg is

a wonderful educational opportunity—even for our youngest."

There was a murmur of interest.

"—How did he find an egg?"

"—What breed of dragon?"

"—Will we keep it for the hatching?"

Dumbledore beamed.

"Indeed yes. Our Norwegian Ridgeback will hatch here at Hogwarts. I have obtained Ministry leave, since Professor Kettleburn will be overseeing the process. All the students will be given the opportunity to see the egg and the hatchling—something I daresay that will be extremely well-received. Afterward, a Hogwarts alumnus, Charles Weasley, will take the hatchling to the Romanian dragon reserve where he works. A special event indeed!"

"Can't wait to tell my N.E.W.T class!" Kettleburn agreed. "A dragon! They'll all want to help!"

"Yes—well—" Dumbledore's smile grew a bit forced, "Do see that your N.E.W.T. class ends the project with the same number of fingers with which they began it."

"Hear, hear!" McGonagall added, shooting Kettleburn a dark look.

Something had shifted between Snape and the Malfoys. He was enjoying himself at their New Year's Eve party.

He found himself unintimidated and at ease in the midst of the self-promoting grandeur. And in part, he admitted, because the Malfoys themselves were more at ease than he had ever seen them.

Was it the untainted friendship between Draco and Harry? It was astonishing what the boys had achieved together in only a few months. They had largely united their yearsmates behind them, defied years of bad old school traditions, and defeated a Dark Lord, not once but several times. And they had defeated him convincingly. The Dark Lord was gone—gone for good—or at least as gone as such creatures could be.

Snape was not surprised that his Dark Mark remained, though it was nearly invisible. There was the horcrux in Harry, of course, and the fact that Tom Riddle had not precisely ceased to exist. He did exist, though in a different dimension. Snape felt more confidence in the mirror prison when he heard from Nicholas Flamel that the alchemist had taken a hand in the disposal of the mirror.

Lucius' Dark Mark must remain as well, a secret reproach to him for the rest of his days, or until the horcrux was removed from Harry. That might indeed rid Riddle's remaining flunkeys of that most distinguishing of marks.

I must remember to tell Harry why he must never get a tattoo. One grows up and changes one's mind, and then there is that reminder of a time when one was daft and stupid and utterly bereft of taste…

He no longer felt that Lucius held any power over him. More than that, he no longer felt that Lucius wished to hold any power over him. Without the fearful favour of a Dark Lord to vie for, there was nothing left but to be—friends. Yes: he supposed they really were friends, after all, since they had shared unique experiences and understood each other's follies in a way few others could.

And Narcissa, too, seemed very relaxed. Her smile was warmer, less measured. Snape suspected that she had always feared that some day the Dark Lord would return, and with him her dreaded sister Bellatrix. He supposed that Narcissa might even love Bellatrix, after a fashion; but it was a love mixed with terror and apprehension and pain. Bellatrix had loved Draco when he was a baby—very much, apparently—but she had been a danger to him, even then, mad as she was. It was one of those unaccountable mercies that she had had no children of her own. Dark Magic poisoning, he supposed. She had done more than dabble, and while her outward appearance had not altered like Riddle's, Snape knew the dire consequences to anyone who used magic to torture children for pleasure. She had boasted of it, time and again, and magic had exacted its own punishment.

Not that the Malfoys had changed entirely. That would be too much to hope for. The guest list was much the same as in years past, though Snape wondered if that was because the invitations had been sent out weeks ago. Next year might see a very different cast of characters—especially among the youngsters.

But enough of reflection, he finally decided. Charity was looking at him, brows raised, waiting for him to join her as she spoke to the Australian Magical Ambassador. Perhaps he was enjoying himself this year simply because he had a date.

Draco downed another ginger wine in between dances. The adults had decided watching the "children" dancing was just the dearest thing ever. Next they had to perform the Solstice Circle, and Harry cringed, wondering if he would trip on the girls trailing scarves. Maybe if they hid here in the corner behind the plants, the girls would just do the dance without them…

"Are you going to ride the Hogwarts Express tomorrow, Harry?"

"I suppose. It would be fun. I won't have any luggage, though I might bring a picnic hamper—"

"No need! My turn this time! Look here, let's grab a lot of compartments close together for our club and we can have a regular party. I could bring heaps of food, and we can play games and hear about the holidays. I'll send Hermione an owl about that stealing the Crown Jewels game. That's fun." He whispered, "I wish we could tell everyone what we did. Defeating the Dark Lord! I'd be Minister for Magic straight out of Hogwarts!"

"Boys!" screeched Pansy, "I see you, malingering behind

those potted palms! We need you here and now!"

Harry asked Draco, "So we defeated the Dark Lord. What are we going to do about the Dark Witch of the Dance, I wonder?"

"Obey her, for now," Draco advised. "Her power is too great."

Though the whole story of Voldemort was to remain a secret, Snape agreed that Harry was going to have to tell his Hufflepuff friends *something*. Harry had warned them that Quirrell was dangerous. Now that Quirrell was no longer dangerous, an explanation must be given.

An innocent man under the Imperius curse was the obvious solution. A malicious foreign wizard had wished to cause trouble at Hogwarts. Quirrell had been his victim, but had at last escaped his influence. The situation would be kept quiet to salvage the poor man's life and career.

And Quirrell himself would have to be apprised of the decision of his colleagues. Dumbledore and the Heads of Houses came to visit him on New Year's Day. Charity came along, as one privy to events. Poppy Pomfrey stood watch, ready to remove anyone who caused too much distress to her patient.

"I must say," Quirinius managed, "you're all being awfully generous about all this. It's not like I just made an ass of myself. I made a *monster* of myself. I tried to kill students. I really could have. It was purest luck that I didn't. If you gave me the boot, Albus, or had me arrested, it would be no more than I deserve."

"Quirinius," Dumbledore replied in his kindest tones, "I've always believed in second chances. It has been made clear to me that the possession was not your doing. Wiser heads than mine prevailed, thank Heaven, and your life has been spared to us. I want you to make the most of it."

Quirrell sighed and studied his pale hands. "You do know my magic has been damaged."

Poppy was nodding regretfully. The professors glanced unhappily at one another.

"Yes," Dumbledore. "We are aware that it will be somewhat—limited—in future. But you will have your extended holiday with your family. Take strength from that—and them. I will find a solution. I am sure there will be something for you next September."

Greatly daring, Charity spoke up. "Perhaps Quirinius could take over the History position. We could use a highly motivated teacher there."

"My dear child!" Dumbledore answered, a little scandalised, "would you ask me to sack poor Binns?"

"Binns needs to go, Albus," Snape declared. Charity would never forgive him if he didn't back her. Besides, she was absolutely right. "He's dead, Albus. He's incapable of adapting his material to the needs of the students. They need to know the past, if there's to be any hope that they won't repeat it."

"Professor Binns might be the given the position of Professor Emeritus, Albus," Minerva suggested. "He would be welcome to advise us at staff meetings, if he wishes. It is indeed time. Our History scores on the O.W.L.s and N.E.W.T.s have become a scandal!"

"I am—rather fond—of history," Quirrell agreed timidly. He clutched the idea like a drowning man grasps at a piece of flotsam. "You wouldn't regret it. There's a great deal I could do…"

"No doubt, no doubt." Dumbledore looked at the faces about him and saw their determination. "Perhaps the position needs someone who will bring new life to it—"

"—Or *any*," Snape muttered.

"Where's Sally?" Harry asked, looking around the compartment. The train was pulling out at last, and he was set to enjoy a few hours with his best friends.

They had squeezed in like sardines in a tin: Justin and Ernie, Susan and Hannah, Hermione and Neville and Draco and Harry. Next door were Greg and Vince and Ted and Blaise with the Ravenclaw lads. Pansy and Daphne were sitting quite amicably with Lavender Brown and the Patel twins. Lisa Turpin was there as well, and had encouraged Millicent Bulstrode to join them. Lisa's father knew Millie's from work, and he had asked her to make an effort there. Dean Thomas and Seamus Finnegan were in the corridor, making a tremendous racket as they acted out part of a film they had seen together over the holiday.

Justin shifted uncomfortably at Harry's question, and gradually all eyes were fixed on him.

Finally he said, "Sally's not coming back to Hogwarts."

A stunned moment, followed by a half-dozen "*Whats?*" and two goggling stares of disbelief.

Justin took a deep breath and told them the whole story. "You knew my family was getting together with Sally and her mother to see *The Nutcracker.* So—there we were and we all got on awfully well. I wish you all could have been there. The ballet was gorgeous and we had a super time. Sally's mother had been a dancer, you see, and she and my mother knew some of the same people. And my mother took a look at Sally and got all interested in her. She had Sally and her mother over for tea, and Sally danced for her. And my mother started calling people. You've got to understand, my mother doesn't just like ballet—she gives quite a bit to different companies, and she *knows* people."

Draco was already nodding sagely, understanding better than the rest the concept of personal influence.

"Well" Justin went on. "She got Sally a special audition at the Royal Ballet School. And there was an opening. And Sally got it. And she's going there from now on."

Hermione was horrified. "But what about her magical edu-

cation? That's very important, too!"

There was a storm of agreement. Harry didn't know what to say. If he were as good at something other than magic as Sally was at dancing, what would he choose?

Justin shrugged. "Sally's going to be a day student, and live at home. Her mother is going to write to Professor Dumbledore and ask if he can recommend a tutor for her magic. Maybe not right away, because she needs to get adjusted to the Royal Ballet School, but maybe by the summer. Sally knows that she needs to get some O.W.L.s in order to be a qualified witch and have a right to use a wand independently. Maybe Professor Sprout will go and talk to her mother. I don't know. All I know is that Sally was over the moon about going to the Royal Ballet School. That's what she wants, and I promised I would owl her and tell her what I'm doing and help her however I could."

"But what will she do after her dancing school?" Hannah asked, a little frightened. "How will she live? Can she make money dancing?"

"Of course she can," Justin assured her. "If she does well, they'll take her into the Royal Ballet, and she'll dance all the time. Look here," he said, thinking hard. "Why don't we all go to a ballet together sometime—like a field trip? We could get a box together. In the spring they'll be doing *Giselle*. Maybe if you saw what it's like, you'd feel better about it."

"Not everyone at that school becomes a ballerina," Hermione pointed out wisely, knowing more of the muggle world than the others.

"That's true," Justin agreed, "but Sally has a lot of talent, and if they felt that dancing wasn't going to work out for her, they'd let her know. She can get a tutor and keep up with her magic and maybe learn to do something else. I've heard of witches and wizards who never went to Hogwarts and still became qualified."

"She'll never work for the Ministry," Susan said darkly.

Harry considered. "That probably wouldn't be what she'd want, anyway. Maybe she can learn all about dance and then teach ballet to witches and wizards. Or teach a class in it at that Wizarding Theatre place. It might be something new and different. Imagine if there were a theatre in Diagon Alley, and it could show plays and films and even have music and dance, too. Why not?"

"That's a great idea, Harry!" Neville was entranced. "I loved that show you 'Puffs put on! I wish I could see something like that all the time!"

Draco considered bringing up magical theatre in Paris, but decided that would not be tactful. Not everyone was fluent in French, after all. Sally's dance had been very pretty, and a whole entertainment of dancing with nice costumes and music might be novel and diverting. It would be an adventure. And a box—just as the Malfoys had in Paris—would mean they wouldn't have to mix quite as much with the muggles.

"Perhaps we should see what Professor Burbage would say

about it," he suggested with his best Malfoy air of authority. He barely noticed Hermione and Harry rolling their eyes at each other. "Perhaps something might be arranged. Of course we'll miss Sally—she's so good at the magical dances—but it's not like she can get her ballet lessons at Hogwarts!"

Harry knew *he'd* miss Sally. She had been the 'Puff he had paired up with the most, since Ernie was usually with Justin, and Susan with Hannah. He'd be a bit of an odd-man-out, now, but Sally would love all the dancing…

There was certainly no accounting for tastes. He'd rather have needles stuck in his eyes than go to a dancing school, but looking at it realistically, he knew that Sally was not the most powerful or talented witch of her year. She was, however, certainly the best dancer.

The conversation moved on to other things—above all to the excellent luncheon in the bottomless picnic hamper Draco produced. There was wonderful hot white chocolate to drink, and some pastries from Summerisle's as a special treat. Hermione thought they were almost too gorgeous to eat. Almost.

"Too bad about Sally," Draco remarked a little later, as he wiped his fingers. "A pretty girl. Even Father thought so. Well, we'll still have most of our year in the club. Millie will be coming regularly now, I'm told."

"And Ron Weasley, too," Harry said. "I spent some time with him in the past few weeks. He really wants to be friends, and he's a really good chess player."

"Smith won't like that," Draco smirked.

"Not at all. I wonder what he'll do while we're all at the club meeting?"

"Nothing of interest even to himself, I'm sure!"

The train pulled into Hogsmeade station, and the students milled about. No one noticed that one of them was still seated, and writing furiously in a second-hand diary.

CHAPTER 2

THE NEW Defense Teacher was a tremendous hit with the students. At the first Explorers' Club meeting after the holidays, the members shared their unanimous approval over spiced cider.

"Did you hear about the boggart lesson he gave the third years?" Ernie asked excitedly. "That sounded like so much fun!"

"He has such kind eyes," sighed Hannah.

"He seems to know the subject," Draco said, with more measured approval. "But he should make more of an effort to look the part of a Hogwarts Professor!"

Justin laughed. "I suppose some girls like that raffish, bohemian style. Very daring."

Hermione agreed. "Knowledge is much more important than how one dresses."

"One can be both scholarly and decently turned out," Draco said stiffly. "Don't you agree, Harry?"

"I suppose. Professor Snape always dresses well in class."

"In *black*," Lavender snorted.

"Hey!" Harry leaped to his guardian's defense. "I like black! And it suits him. It's his style. And I've seen him in other colors—now and then."

"Well—" Hermione said patiently, "Maybe being tweedy and shabby and—and—bohemian—is Professor Lupin's style. I *like* it."

Draco muttered, "There's no accounting for lack of taste."

Hermione huffed, but stood her ground. Most of the girls—even the Slytherins—liked the new Professor very much. He was clever and unthreatening and—

"—And he doesn't stutter!" Pansy pointed out. "I thought Quirrell would drive me completely mad. Professor Lupin has a very nice voice. Soothing."

Neville saw the look Harry and Draco shared, and whispered, "*Girls*."

There was a lot of chat about everyone's holidays. Harry, of course, could not recount the tale of The Destroying of Lord Voldemort, so he joined with Ron Weasley, their newest member, in describing the glories of their snow fort, otherwise known as the Weasley Winter Palace.

"We should make the most of the snow while it lasts," agreed Dean. "Maybe we should go out next week and everybody can build something. Or we could make a really, really big fort together."

That idea was considered interesting. Ron assured them that he had learned a lot, and could find out the charms for smooth-

ing the walls and floors and even making ice windows.

"All right," Harry nodded. "If we still have enough snow next week, let's do that. Then we'll enjoy warming up over tea all the more afterwards."

And then there was a great deal of head-shaking and regret about Sally. Most thought she was making a terrible mistake.

"—What if the Ministry decides to snap her wand?"

"—What if they obliviate her?"

"—She'll never work in the magical world!"

Some of the girls did express interest about the kind of clothes Sally would be wearing. Her costume for the Hufflepuff program had been a big hit. It was Justin, of course, who was her greatest defender. Once again he brought up the idea of actually going to see a ballet, so her friends at Hogwarts would understand what it was she was doing.

It was a daring idea to some.

"You mean—actually go out among the muggles?" Daphne Greengrass asked, a little fearfully. "What if they see that we're—different?"

"What is this Royal Opera House like?" wondered Lavender. "Are there—chairs? How would we get in? Do you have to pay anything?"

Draco became irritated. "I daresay it's much like going to any theatre! We go all the time in Paris. You buy the ticket, you go into the theatre. There's a stage and, yes, of course there's seating! There's nothing to be afraid of!"

"I'll bring pictures," Justin promised. "It's a gorgeous place. My mother would love to arrange it for us."

"And there are so many other places we could go!" Hermione burst out, catching fire at the idea. She sat down and began making a list of absolutely essential places to see in the London area alone.

"I wish we could go to the zoo," Harry said wistfully. "I went there once."

"The—zoo?" Draco frowned.

"They have all sorts of animals there!" Harry told him. "Of course not the magical ones, but really interesting ones—like—like lions and tigers. And snakes. I like snakes."

"Of course you do," Draco smirked.

"It's brilliant!" Harry said. "I'll bet the Professor would be happy to take us sometime." He lowered his voice, "especially if it were just you and me. You can get treats and everything. I'll never forget the time I was there with my cousin—"

Hermione stood up and began reciting her list.

"The British Museum, the Victoria and Albert, the National Gallery, Kew Gardens, the Tower—so you can see the *real* Crown Jewels, Draco—"

"We couldn't do all these if we stayed at Hogwarts for ten years!" Ernie protested.

"I'd like to see where muggles shop," Hannah suggested.

"Isn't there a big place called Harold's?"

"Harrod's," Hermione corrected. She allowed, "It *might* be interesting for you. It's certainly very different than Diagon Alley!"

"We'd need muggle money," Ernie pointed out sensibly.

"So?" Parvati dismissed his concerns. "We'll go to Gringotts first and get some money changed. I like the idea of seeing shops. Things like that are on the Muggle Studies N.E.W.T., you know."

"But we should take some wizarding field trips, too!" Blaise Zabini spoke up. "We're supposed to help the muggleborn learn about wizarding things. We're not allowed to go to Hogsmeade until we're third years, but maybe there's somewhere else we could go."

Susan had a moment of inspiration. "We should go to the Ministry!"

Everyone turned to look at her.

She waved her hands. "Yes! We should! I'm almost sure I could get my aunt to agree to it. We could see the reception area and some of the offices and maybe where they do research… maybe even meet some Aurors and see their training! Aunt Amelia might even arrange for us to have tea there."

"That," said Harry, "is an absolutely brilliant idea."

After a little more consideration, there was a groundswell of approval in favor of a Ministry visit.

"Do you suppose," asked Theo Nott, "that we could meet some Unspeakables? I've always thought they sounded mysterious and incredibly neat. They're so secret that nobody even talks about them!"

"Then I daresay we'd have to request that in writing," Draco answered, without cracking a smile. "The Ministry! Yes—I think—that would be just the thing. I've never been in the Minister's office itself. Perhaps we could go have a look."

Harry nodded sagely. "You can decide how you'll redecorate it when it's yours."

Mr Harker, of Harker & Dedlock, agreed to show Snape the house on Sunday afternoon.

Harry would be at his club meeting. Charity would be there as well, supervising the young fiends. Snape would go and have a look at the property Madam Fletwock had bequeathed Harry in her will, and if the place was impossible, he could tell the lawyers to get rid of it, without complaints or second-guessing from anyone else.

Clothilda Fletwock had been very old indeed when she died. She was related to the wealthy Fletwock family, who were famous for raising winged horses, but had not raised them herself. She had outlived her brothers and sisters, and her children and only grandchild, and that grandchild had died without heirs. She had left the world quite alone in it. She had not been particularly wealthy, but she was not penni-

less, either. She had inherited family money from a number of her dead relatives, and had lived the second half of her life in her aunt's little cottage in Cheshire.

Shortly before she died, she decided to leave everything to the Boy-Who-Lived, "who saved us all, poor dear." She had died only two years before, and so this inheritance had not yet reverted to the Ministry, as a number of others unfortunately had. And there had been no other heirs to litigate against the bequest.

"Harker—Jonathan Harker," arrived at the appointed time, and took Snape there by portkey. They arrived in the middle of a dirt lane, which wound in between a dense wood of oak and beech.

"This side of the road is the property in question," Harker informed him. "Only eleven acres in all, but I wanted you to see how well sheltered the place is from muggles and that sort."

Any sort would be hard put to penetrate the secrets of the wood without taking considerable trouble. Harker led Snape through a narrow gate. A weathered stone by the gate was inscribed, "OLD PIGGERY CLOSE."

Snape raised a brow. "Old Piggery Close? Interesting name."

"The stone is a relic of a former owner," Mr Harker replied dismissively. "Madam Fletwock's aunt renamed the property Lacewing Cottage."

There were some good anti-muggle wards still in place. The dense little wood gave way to a grassy meadow of two or

three acres, fenced neatly, and dotted with—"

"Are those *goats*?" he asked, peering at the little creatures.

"Yes, Madam Fletwock kept pygmy goats. Her instructions were to care for them until the property changed hands legally. Useful creatures. Keep the grass clipped short, you see. She used the goats for her cheesemaking—especially her famous Pantysgawn. The goats were quite her pets."

"Hmmph!" Snape grunted. Goats. At least they weren't pigs.

Beyond the meadow was quite a nice little orchard and garden. Not tended properly, unfortunately, but with interesting possibilities. Snape saw the remains of a water garden, as well, guarded by a pretty statue of a nymph. Beyond a hedge the house revealed itself, long and low and roofed with slate.

"There you have it," Mr Harker gestured, for all the world like a muggle magician doing a trick. "Lacewing Cottage."

Snape privately thought it might well have been a piggery at some point. It was certainly shaped like one—if a big one. When they reached the door, however, he could see it had always been a house, for there was a second floor, and the casement windows did not have the look of afterthoughts.

He liked it. It was a funny sort of place, and it smelled like an old woman who made cheese had lived there a long time. Still, it was—worth considering. The furniture was worn and covered with hideous chintz, of course, and there was too much fussiness throughout. That could be remedied easily enough.

The big kitchen was really the main room downstairs. There was an inglenook fireplace with an old settee in front of it, and a big sanded table with benches on either side. The little overdressed parlor could be stripped down into a library, and the even smaller downstairs bedroom could be turned into something less—floral. The plumbing was primitive but usable—certainly better than the nonexistent plumbing at the Spinner's End of his youth.

He went back into the parlor/library. There was a small fireplace here as well. He began measuring the room with his eyes, considering how to begin here. Above the mantel was a painting of a pretty young woman in a garden, dressed in Victorian style.

"Who're you?" she asked, in a high, girlish voice.

"I am Severus Snape," he answered absently. *The wallpaper must go. And the curtains. Then, a desk. A table. Bookcases against the east wall. Hmm..*

"What are you doing here?" the picture asked. "Are you another lawyer?"

"I am not. I am Harry Potter's wizarding guardian."

The pictured girl jumped up from her garden swing, and cried, "Is he coming to live here at last?"

Snape studied the picture. "Madam Fletwock?"

"Yes! It's me! How exciting! I hoped he would."

"I will be making—a great many changes," Snape told her.

"Well—all right," the picture sighed. "I suppose that was

inevitable. How old is he now?"

"He is eleven, and in his first year at Hogwarts."

"I suppose he has all sorts of places he could go," the picture said wistfully, "but I do hope he comes here sometimes. I would love to see life in this house again! Make whatever changes you like!"

"I must see the rest of the house, first."

"Oh, do! And bring him with you, next time!"

Up the narrow, uneven stairs were two bedrooms under the eaves, an airing cupboard, and a little bathroom. All the rooms had been used as box rooms for years, and were piled high with papers and old clothes. The ceilings were low and slanting, and the windows mullioned. Once one dug through all the detritus, there might be something worthwhile here. He peered through a grimy window. There was a large vegetable garden behind the cottage. The trees surrounding the property were tall. It might be possible to play quidditch—after a fashion.

It was a house for Harry, at least. A place where his friends could visit. A place where he could go out of doors without fear. Hartwolde Hall might never be his, but he could have this. Snape would do a bit of preliminary work, and they could come here in the spring for a few days.

"All right." Warily, he asked the lawyer. "I don't have to keep the goats, do I?"

"It seems—complicated," Harry remarked, looking at the instructions for the Wolfsbane Potion. Snape had asked Harry to meet him after dinner on Sunday to go over a special project they would work on together.

"Very complicated," Snape agreed. "You'll only do some preparatory work, but it would be helpful, as I will have to keep my attention on the potion itself. It is essential that this potion be absolutely correct."

"But what does it do?" Harry wondered.

Snape went into lecture mode. "The Wolfsbane Potion," he declared, "allows werewolves to retain their minds—such as they have—during the period of the full moon when they undergo their transformations. The theory is that if the creatures have human consciousness, they will then refrain from the bestial behaviors that have made werewolves pariahs."

"They won't go on a rampage and kill people and eat them," Harry specified, liking the gory details. "That's neat. That's a really great invention! It's really nice of you to do this, Professor! Thanks for letting me help. I get tired of things like boil salves. This is really doing a good thing for somebody!"

"Yes, it is. And it's tremendous work, since it must be done every month without fail."

"I'll be glad to help. Will I get to meet the werewolf? Who is it?"

"I am not—permitted—to reveal his identity. You will have to guess."

"Hmmm—"

"Not with me!" Snape said sharply. "I'm not playing a game. Be discreet. I am forbidden to discuss it because revealing that someone is a werewolf is tantamount to ruining the person's life! Keep your speculations to yourself, and be *careful!*"

They worked together quietly enough. Snape glanced at Harry and smirked at the frown of concentration. All things considered, he had done his duty. Harry would be able to draw the proper conclusions for himself soon enough, and he would know to be wary around Remus Lupin. Now, if he could just warn Charity, too…

"Are your thank you notes complete?" Snape asked, staring into an alembic.

"I am done!" Harry declared, pleased with himself. His hand had nearly fallen off with weariness. He had loads of loot and thanked everyone who could or should be thanked. "So now—if people write wanting a signed photograph, what do you think I should do?"

Snape rolled his eyes.

"I know it's silly, " Harry persisted, "but if they do, I don't want to be rude. Maybe Professor Burbage could take a picture of me and I could sign it and we could make a lot of copies. I've learned the replicating charm—"

"Yes—very well done," Snape interrupted brusquely. "Words fail me when I wish to describe how idiotic I think those people are who write a young boy for a signed photograph, but I suppose it does no harm to reply civilly to your admirers."

"No, it doesn't," Harry agreed. "I don't want anybody thinking I'm stuck up or that I think I'm too good to write to the common folk."

Snape snorted a laugh. "Use your best handwriting. Otherwise they'll think *you're* the idiot. Now get busy with those roots."

Harry chopped diligently for some time, before he looked up and commented, "Professor Lupin is a really good teacher. I think Defense Against the Dark Arts is going to be one of my favorite classes."

"You don't say," Snape growled. Perhaps no one would notice if he substituted strychnine for aconite just this once…

CHAPTER 3

DEAR TOM,

I can't tell you what a relief it is to have someone to confide in. It's impossible to be open about my real feelings. Hogwarts might as well be Azkaban, for all the freedom I have. If I try to tell the truth about Potter and his gang, someone's sure to tattle. The way he swaggers around, you'd think he owns the place! And he's never alone. He's always surrounded by his toadies. Like Draco Malfoy. What a boot-licking nancy boy he is. They say his father is just the same. I heard he used to be the right hand of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, but everyone was too scared to admit it. It looks like the apple didn't fall far from the tree.

And that disgusting Granger girl hangs after them. Nobody likes her, really. She has disgusting teeth that stick out all over the place, and the ugliest hair – like a sheep dog's, only worse. I'd shave myself bald if I had hair like hers. She follows Potter and Malfoy around, agreeing with them, mostly, or showing off. She's in Ravenclaw, and Flitwick has made a pet of her, so no one dares do anything openly anymore. Though someone did manage to spoil some letters that Granger got from home – purely by accident, of course!

The most pathetic of them all is Neville Longbottom. He's practically a squib, and by rights shouldn't be allowed into Hogwarts at all, but for his grandmother using her influence. He's a moron, too, and I daresay would fail every subject but for Granger propping him up. He used to keep his trap shut, but ever since we came back after the holidays, he's been very full of himself, swaggering about as if he were something other than a waste of space.

All of us have to go to that ghastly club of theirs. No escape, there. Even the last holdouts found themselves roped in. Really, if one doesn't go, all the upperclassmen look at one pityingly, and talk about house loyalty. And it's the only way to do anything recreational here. It's the club, or nothing. Potter was so very magnanimous and condescending to everyone. It made me want to hex him. I don't care. I tell everyone that I'm just there for the food.

I looked up that bit of info you wanted. Nothing about Riddle that I could find after leaving Hogwarts. I asked a few professors and got some frosty looks for my pains. I was told very sharply that he was dead. Not popular with them, I take it...

Dear Tom,

Right you are. Dumbledore – or Bumblebore as I call him – is still Headmaster. The Heads of Houses are Minerva McGonagall for Gryffindor (and a dried-up old bitch she is), Filius Flitwick for Ravenclaw (part goblin if you ask me – he's the one who made a pet of Granger), Pomona Sprout for Hufflepuff (a harmless sort, but pretty good at her subject, which is Herbology), and Severus Snape for Slytherin. Snape is the one who's POTTER's guardian. He's a creepy, evil sort, but POTTER can do no wrong in his eyes, which tells you all you need to know, I suppose. He teaches Potions, and is an utter tartar. Favors the Slytherins quite a bit. Knows his Defense, though. He absolutely slaughtered a troll that got loose last Halloween and had the stones to attack POTTER.

For the rest – that club thing is sponsored by Professor Burbage, who teaches Muggle Studies. She's sort of an old-maid sort, but not bad looking. She adores POTTER, too. I heard some gossip about her and Snape, but that can't be true, because if she tried to get within kissing distance, she'd slip on the grease.

Before the holidays, we had a bloke named Quirrell for Defense. He had a stammer and was a bit of nitwit, but he did give one really good lesson about protecting oneself from muggles. POTTER got blasted, so the day is memorable to me! Now we have this chap Lupin. He's a quiet sort, but knows what's what. I rather like him. Honestly, so many of the teachers are useless it's a relief to meet someone competent.

Hagrid – yes – there's a Hagrid here. He's the groundskeeper. Bumblebore keeps him around because he's supposed to know all sorts of things about magical creatures.

Binns still teaches History. It's a disgrace, but you know all about that, I daresay. I can't tell you much about the rest.

Hope this helps...

Dear Tom,

We're going on some outings, sponsored by the club. I must say that I look forward to going to the Ministry. Bones has an in, as her aunt is head of Magical Law. It was her idea, and not a bad one. She is close to POTTER, but doesn't seem to mind setting him straight when he gets above himself. That's something, I suppose. We're to have tea at the Ministry dining room.

This is good – POTTER got his nose broken the other day! I could hardly stop laughing. He and the club were making snow forts. A few of us knew some good spells, and some of the structures were pretty elaborate. POTTER and his friends wandered down, looking for deep snow, and walked right into the Whomping Willow! I ran up to see Draco Malfoy being whipped about like the wet little weed he is, squealing his head off! Burbage was wringing her hands – the woman is a fool at Defense, it seems – and it wasn't until Snape came storming down that the little swine were rescued. You don't mess with Snape. He's the main reason I don't start anything with

POTTER. Snape acts like hes his father or something. Unfortunately, Pomfrey set POTTER's nose right. Too bad. It looked pretty funny.

About that thing you wanted to know He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named went by the name of Voldemort. Lord Voldemort. There – don't expect me to write it again. He was pretty terrifying, from all accounts. Looked really scary, too. All that Dark Magic twisted his appearance, and he was hardly human by the end. Wanted to get rid of the mudbloods, which I wouldn't mind, but took it much too far. Obviously blood should count for something, but going about killing people was more likely to attract the notice of the muggles. Wouldn't you agree?

Tom?

Tom?

Are you there?

Dear Tom,

Are you angry with me? Please write back! You're my only real friend!

Dear Tom,

Sorry to hear that you were having trouble on your side. I thought I'd never hear from you again!

Lot of things have happened. The Huffepuffs are in the lead for the Cup. There was a terrific game. Cedric Diggory caught the snitch only inches from the ground. I think I'd rather like to try out for the team in a year or two.

As to what you asked. Yes. POTTER is the one who defeated – well – I'll call him LV, because that's easier. LV attacked his parents and killed them, and somehow infant POTTER managed to make the Death curse backfire and kill LV instead. LV just disappeared, like he was blown up into a million bits. No one

seems to know how he did it, but it's made him everyone's little hero, and that's why he's called The-Boy-Who-Lived, and all that rot. LV's followers were called Death Eaters, and the ones they caught were sent to Azkaban, and they're still there. The trials went on for months, ending with Rodolphus and Rastaban Lestrange, and Rodolphus wife, Bellatrix, who was a Black before she married. And Sirius Black, of course, who was the worst of them. There were others, of course, but the Blacks and the Lestranges were the inner group. Lucius Malfoy was acquitted on an imperius defense, but that's just tosh. He's married to a Black, too, so it's clear that he was in with them. Of course, he denounced LV like everyone else does, now, and with his son and POTTER being such bosom buddies, (vomited, but better now) he's entirely in POTTER's camp now.

Sirius Black was supposed to be the best mate of POTTER's father, but he was a sly one, and betrayed them to LV. There was a

Fidelius charm and all, but none of it did a bit of good, since the idiots made Black the secret keeper. Black tried to escape and blew up a street full of muggles and killed one of POTTER's father's other friends. Interesting times – thats what my grandmother calls those days!

Anyhow, LV was totally destroyed. A lot of people were scared of him, but now they say he never could have won – not really. There are too many mudbloods, and not enough purebloods, and the half-bloods like that POTTER – don't toe the line like they ought. He had his moment, but in the end he was a complete failure. At home they say it was a huge waste of magical talent, and a shame, really. LV could have amounted to something if he wasn't cracked on the subject of blood.

I swear before Merlin – POTTER is a halfblood. His mother was a mudblood, so he oughtn't to be of any account socially, but since he's THE-BOY-WHO-LIVED, everyone bows down and kisses his dragonhide boots! What a tosser...

Dear Tom,

I haven't been well lately. I keep losing track of the time. Blacking out, do you suppose? I'm wondering if I should see Madam Pomfrey.

We got to see a dragonling today! Somehow old Kettleburn got his hands on a dragon's egg, and the Ministry gave permission for him to have it hatch here at Hogwarts. Everyone's quite excited. It's a Norwegian Ridgeback. Dragons are very interesting creatures. Hagrid was hovering in the background, helping out. He's a toady of POTTER's, too, I found out. Carried him about when he was a baby, it seems. Curious sort of nursemaid. You know Hagrid, you say, so you know he's like a giant (in fact, I'll bet he is part giant), and he's just enormous.

At the club meeting there was talk about Snape and Burbage. The girls are all saying they're going to get married. It's disgusting, but Burbage smiled at Snape when he showed up at the end of the meeting, and she smiled at him in this very strange way...

"Severus—" Charity began. Such a lovely evening. No classes tomorrow, and the cold had relented. They would have a pleasant walk down to Hogsmeade. "Severus?"

"Umm?"

"Wake up. You'll nod yourself into the fire. I need to talk to you."

Snape rolled his head on the wingchair over to look at Charity. She was a little nervous. "What it is? Something wrong?"

"No—I mean—No—It's just—well—I don't know what I mean. We need to talk."

"Whenever you shuffle like that, I know something, as my father would say, is 'oop.'"

She moved his feet over and sat on the ottoman, leaning her head on his thigh. He played with her silky little braids, admiring the interesting designs they made.

"Yes," she mumbled into his leg. "Something is indeed 'oop.' My mother, to be exact. She's talking about coming to visit—maybe for my birthday next month. She wasn't happy that I didn't see her at Christmas."

"Your—mother," he echoed, somewhat wary. "Is that good or bad?"

"Good. Really. My mother is lovely. She's very sweet—"

"But—?"

"She's going to ask questions, Severus. She always does. She's going to ask if I'm seeing someone, and if not, why not, and if so, who is it? And what does he do? And—well, you get the picture."

"Hmm." He was not sure he did. Was she worried that her mother would not approve of him?

"So—what *are* our plans?" she asked anxiously.

"Plans? You said something about going to Hogsmeade tomorrow. Fine with me."

She sat up, shaking out her braids, and looking uncommonly stern.

"Very well then," she said briskly. "You don't want to talk about it."

"What is there to talk about? I can leave by half-past ten. Is that all right?

She blew out a breath. "Yes. All right."

She was looking so disappointed that he puzzled over it, and tried to be extra-pleasing in his attentions. That sort of thing seemed to be going very well, so something else must be bothering her

By the next morning she was quite herself, and went out to grade papers before their outing. Snape checked on some potions, and then thought again about last night. Something was on Charity's mind, but it was hard to decipher her meaning at times. She seemed to think that he could read her—well, he *could*, but if she caught him using legilimency, she would probably give him the boot for good and all. Too risky.

Had he done something? Or was there something else? He knew she preferred being in her rooms to using his, and tried to imagine why that was, other than having more hairpins within reach.

Walking through his quarters, he tried to assess them with an outsider's eyes. What might cause difficulties? Any questionable magical aritifacts? Any dirty laundry, as it were?

His rooms were spotlessly clean, due to Muffy's efforts. That wasn't the problem. Maybe it was something—

He stopped at the wall between his bedroom and his private study.

Oh.

That would have to go. It was a wonder Charity hadn't complained about it before. Maybe it was too embarrassing for her.

The lovely picture of Lily in her wedding robes was taken down, and the picture of Charity with the Explorers Club was substituted.

Snape sat at his desk, studying Lily's beautiful, glowing face, her iridescent wedding garb, and the amazing ancient jewels that adorned her. He had nothing similar to offer Charity. He found a place for the picture in a lower drawer, and his thoughts turned to the living woman in his life. No, he had no ancient family jewels, but on the other hand, he was not a poor man. He had patents on a number of important healing

potions, and he had not spent his full salary—ever. So she had a birthday coming up. Maybe she would like a present. He must give it some thought.

It was not a Hogsmeade weekend, so The Three Broomsticks was blissfully uncrowded. Rosmerta showed Snape and Charity to 'their' table, and smiled on them as she walked away. All very pleasant—the usual table, the usual lunch, the usual sights and sounds and regular customers.

And a new one.

"Oh, there's Remus!" cried Charity.

Snape looked up from his pint to see the murderous creature waving back at Charity. He scowled and returned to his drink. Too soon.

"Oh, Severus!" Charity whispered. "You don't mind if I ask Remus to join us?—just this once! It's the friendly thing to do."

She was so sincere that he bit back the reply that yes, he minded it very much. For all he cared Lupin could make do with a bowl of doggie kibbles on the kitchen floor, but Charity was always so *nice*…

"Remus! Do please join us!" She was actually inviting the monster to have lunch with them. This was the last straw. He was going to tell her afterwards what Lupin was. She was in danger. They were all in danger.

"Thanks—if you're sure you don't mind." Lupin pulled up a chair, and sat down, quite at his bestial ease.

Charity began chatting happily about her classes, and asking Lupin about his. Snape sat silently drinking, waiting for his food. That would give him an excuse to be silent, too, but he must be careful.

It was horribly apparent that he must not tip his hand too soon. If he was as nasty to Lupin as the brute deserved, Charity would not understand. She might actually blame him for bad behavior. Once he made it clear to her what the situation actually was, it would be easier going, but for the moment he must put on a show of civility. Rosmerta came to take Lupin's order, and Snape tried to compose himself.

"And you, Severus?" Lupin asked. "How are your classes?"

"Well enough," Snape grunted. "I take it *you* have settled in."

"Indeed." Lupin smiled, in his oh-so-mild-wolf-in-sheep's-clothing way. "I was very grateful to Albus for the opportunity. It's fascinating seeing the school from the other side."

"I know what you mean," Charity laughed. "Some of the tricks I got up to don't seem so amusing now."

Snape fixed narrowed eyes on Lupin. Lupin looked back, and then down at the table. "Very true," he agreed.

Well, that was *something*.

"Muggle Studies seems much more popular than I remember," Lupin remarked. "That must be your doing, Charity."

"It's kind of you to say so, but I owe a great deal to my wonderful firsties! It's been so inspiring! And they're not even *in* Muggle Studies yet."

"Yes—the Explorers' Club. Many of the upperclassmen wish they had something of the sort. It must be great fun."

"Oh, I love it! It was Harry Potter's idea, you know. He's been such a wonderful influence on his classmates."

Lupin looked so sad and nostalgic and regretful that Snape wanted to curse him on the spot. Surely he would not dare…

He would.

"I heard that you've been acting as Harry's magical guardian, Severus. Harry obviously thinks the world of you."

His astonishment robbed Snape of the ability to come up with a properly acerbic response. What was the werewolf trying to do?

Carefully, he answered, "Harry's aunt did not feel equal to dealing with a magical child's schooling."

Lupin's habitual smile turned bitter. "Petunia. I'm sure she didn't. I used to worry that she wouldn't allow Harry to go to Hogwarts at all. Lily told me she was very hostile toward the magical world. Sour grapes, mostly."

"I am surprised that you know so much about the situation. You might have known more had you ever attempted to see Harry. Rather curious that you took no interest in a close friend's orphaned child."

Charity was growing uneasy, her eyes moving back and

forth as if watching a tennis match. "Oh, look! Lunch! Lovely!" she spoke up, trying to distract them.

Good food did make a difference. It gave them all something to do.

After a few bites, Lupin said quietly, "I was interested. I am interested. I was told I was not to visit by a number of people."

"Really?" asked Charity. "How unkind! Who would do that?"

Lupin gave Snape a surprisingly grim look. "Albus. Petunia. Officials from the Ministry of Magic. I was not in a position to defy any of them."

Snape grunted. It was very likely true. Not that he really disagreed with the Ministry in this case, but it was a dilemma, he admitted. Who was likely to harm Harry more? A hateful bitch like Petunia, or a well-meaning but potentially lethal werewolf? It was just as well that Snape had intervened to save the day. As usual.

"Well, now none of them can say anything about it," Charity said brightly. "You and Harry have all the rest of term to get to know each other. So everything worked out, after all."

Lupin dug into his steak-and-kidney pie with relish. "It would seem so. Now let's talk about you, Charity. I heard a rumor that you're working on a new textbook! Tell me all about it."

Charity blushed becomingly, and bubbled over with excitement, glad to have an attentive audience. Snape followed the conversation with growing displeasure. He slashed fiercely through his cutlet with the tightly-gripped table knife, wishing it were silver…

CHAPTER 4

"SO THAT'S the Wolfsbane Potion," Harry murmured, rather in awe. He was even somewhat in awe of himself for helping. What a lot of work. And what a lot of fussy, detailed, had-to-be-*perfect* work.

"Isn't it supposed to be given when it's fresh?"

"Of course." Snape cleaned his hands carefully, and inspected Harry's. "If our patient doesn't come soon, I'll have to deliver it to him—or her."

"You said 'him' first! I'm sure it's a wizard. And it's obviously Professor Lupin, anyway."

The slightest hint of a smile lifted the corners of Snape's mouth. That hadn't taken long. Harry was no fool. "I am unable to confirm or deny your conclusion."

"I know, I know. You promised and everything. But he's the new professor, and none of the other professors was injured over the holidays—that I know of. But a werewolf bite would be a bad injury, and there would have been signs. So Professor Lupin is a werewolf. That's kind of cool."

"It is nothing of the sort. Cool, indeed!"

"Being dangerous is cool. Dudley had a film called *An American Werewolf in London*. I saw part of it. Creepy, but kind of cool."

"Muggles don't understand anything about werewolves, Harry," Snape told him sharply. "They're just storybook monsters to them. Werewolves are real. They are real and horribly dangerous, and I want you to promise me you will always be very, very careful and keep your potions knife where you can reach it."

"But Professor Lupin is nice!" Harry objected. He helped carry the jars and flasks back to the storage closet, arguing as he trailed behind Snape. "He wouldn't hurt anybody."

"Am I going to have to order you to read the werewolf chapter again? Werewolves are not in control of themselves during the full moon. That is the tragedy of the werewolf. Even the kind, the mild-mannered, the meek, the well-meaning become ravening monsters each month. It's the nature of the beast."

"But the Wolfsbane Potion changes all that, Professor."

"Only if the werewolf actually takes it! The full moon is tomorrow, and I want to get a dose of potion into the werewolf's system in time for it to do some good!" Snape growled. He had told Lupin to come to his office at nine o'clock precisely, and it was now a quarter past. Was Lupin playing some sort of tiresome passive-aggressive game with him?

"You'd better be on your way, Harry," he told the boy. "I've got to track our friendly local lycanthrope down, and pour this down his throat—or her throat, taking great care to avoid the fangs."

Harry chuckled a little. "Good night, Professor!"

He hurried through the corridor, aware of a thousand little rustles and creaks that were the constant background music to the existence of an ancient castle. More rustles lately than usual, it seemed to him. The figures in the paintings murmured and whispered amongst themselves. A shape surprised him, and made him whip his head to the side, but it was only his own reflection in a darkened window. Harry stopped and looked again. He had seemed—taller—for a moment. Older.

He huffed a wry laugh. Taller would be fine with him. He was no longer the shortest boy in the first year, but he was still having to drink nutrient potions. The Dursleys had done him no favors—but of course if he were small and weak he would be a better and safer target for Dudley. He wondered briefly how Dudley was doing at Smeltings. It was manifestly impossible that Smeltings could be as brilliant and amazing as Hogwarts. Dudley might have found some new kids to bully, or he might be a victim himself. He would be a first year, too, after all. Maybe it would do Dudley good to be on the receiving end for a change.

He wondered how Aunt Petunia was doing, too. Her whole world revolved around Dudley. What would she do, with no Dudders to mother and smother? Harry grinned to himself, proud of his wit. Aunt Petunia would have nothing to do but drink tea and spy on the neighbors and feed Uncle Vernon. Of course, *that* was a full-time job.

"S-s-so hungry…"

Harry looked around him. Was he hearing things? Some-

times the corridors played strange tricks. He must be hearing something from the Hufflepuff Common Room, up ahead, but all distorted. Actually, he was a bit peckish himself. Maybe Muffy could be persuaded to bring them a snack.

He rounded a corner, and heard yelling. *Right. That's what it was.*

"—So horrible, that monster of yours! Keep him away from Scabbers!"

"I didn't set Widdershins on your poxy rat!" Ernie was shouting back at Ron Weasley, who was standing outside the entrance to the Hufflepuff Common Room, a rat in one hand and his other hand clenched in a fist.

"He could have killed Scabbers! He's dangerous. Keep him in your dorm, or I'm telling Professor McGonagall!"

"Tell her what you like! My kneazle didn't do anything. Maybe you should shell out a few knuts for a cage! Keep that sickly creature locked up so he can die in peace!"

Oh, good. Fighting words. Harry hurried forward, a disarming smile pasted over dismay.

"Er—hi—Ernie—Ron. Did I catch you at a bad time?"

So they turned and shouted at him, telling him of the other's outrage. Widdershins was out hunting, and had managed to corner Ron's rat, Scabbers. Ron had chased his rat down to the dungeons, and had tried to kick Widdershins away.

"Scabbers could have been *eaten*—"

Harry shuddered briefly at the name. *Scabbers. That's just—gross.*

He was going to have to calm them down. Others were emerging from the Sett, ready to defend their housemate.

"What's the matter?" Susan asked, reaching out to pet Widdershins, who was the very image of purring, milky innocence, held close in Ernie's protective arms.

Harry held up a hand to quiet the two angry boys. "Ron's rat was out exploring, and Widdershins was acting like a cat—er—kneazle. Both. Tragedy was averted. Really, Ron, it's dangerous for a rat around here. It's not just Widdershins. There are owls and other peoples' cats. It could have been Mrs. Norris!"

"Eeew!" Hannah burst out. She and Susan exchanged a disgusted grimace. Hannah had actually once tried to pet Mrs Norris, and had received a bad scratch requiring a visit to the Hospital Wing.

"That's true, Ron!" Susan chimed in. "Mrs Norris is vicious. I'm sure your rat is very brave and all that, but it's just not safe out here. The professors don't think it's all that safe for *us!*"

"Come on, Ron," Harry said, hand on Ron's shoulder. "I'll walk you back to Gryffindor. It might take two of us to watch that rat of yours if he's so determined to face danger!"

"He shouldn't have tried to kick Widdershins," Ernie insisted, clutching his pet closer.

Cedric arrived on the scene, and was all for Hufflepuff. "Kick a kneazle? Not very sporting."

"Unless it's Mrs Norris," Hannah muttered, "I'd like to kick her."

"All in defense of his pet rat," Harry told the growing knot of

the curious. "We'll just get old Scabbers home to Gryffindor—"

The crowd broke up. Ernie followed them down the hall part-way, still scowling.

Harry and Ron turned a corner.

"I hope your rat wasn't badly hurt," Harry offered.

"Naw, he's all right, I guess. He's been through a lot, so I reckon he can survive a Hufflepuff attack kneazle."

"He's missing a toe," Harry remarked. "That must have hurt. Does he get in a lot of fights?"

"He was like that when Percy found him." Ron laughed self-consciously. "He was Percy's rat first. We make do with hand-me-downs a lot in my family. When Percy became prefect, Mum and Dad gave him his own owl, and he passed Scabbers on to me. Scabbers mostly sleeps, but he's been a bit more alert lately. Maybe it's the weather. I know we're not really supposed to have rats, but he's what I've got."

"I know about hand-me-downs," Harry told him, not wanting to seem too grand for his company. "Back when I was with the Dursleys, I always wore my cousin's clothes when he was done with them."

The hall opened out, as they headed to the staircase. Ron considered Harry's words. "Were they not allowed to use your family money because they were muggles?"

"Something like that. They didn't even know about it, really."

"Come to me—"

"Did you hear that?" Harry asked, pulled up sharply. He stood on the landing, eyes searching a big painting of gleaners in a wheat field, wondering if they were speaking amongst themselves. The figures in the paintings were always talking, always whispering. Sometimes it was annoying—and hard to tell if someone was speaking to him or to some other painted figure in a landscape.

"Hear what?"

"I thought I heard—never mind. Probably just the wind, or one of these paintings."

Ron snorted. "They're always full of suggestions," he agreed. "That one over there is always telling me to stand up straight!" He pointed at a dozing, elderly witch wearing an elaborate linen headdress. "Come on." He beckoned Harry to follow, and they crept up on the portrait.

"WAKE UP!" Ron bellowed. The portrait's faded blue eyes stretched wide with alarm, and a thin shriek burst out of the toothless mouth.

The pictures, all startled, set up a racket of *"What's this, then?"* and *"Away with you, young ruffians!"*

Ron sniggered and hurried down the corridor. Harry ran to catch him up, thinking about the Herbology essay he needed to get to. The staircase loomed ahead, already clanking in preparation to swing away. Ron and Harry leaped aboard, catching on to the banister with the tips of their fingers.

"What's on the docket for the next club meeting?" Ron

asked, as they reached the top.

"Wizarding Wireless. Most of the muggleborn have never heard of it. I'd never heard of it until Hannah mentioned it."

"Never heard of it. Just fancy! Never even heard of Glenda Chittock?"

"I've never heard of her, either! Who's she?"

"Only the most popular presenter! What about Celestina Warbeck. You must have heard of her!"

Harry remembered. "Yes—but not because of the Wireless. She lives in the Potters' old family home. My father leased it to her for the next hundred years or so. Is she on the Wireless?"

"She's the Singing Sorceress! Mum never misses a programme! The muggleborn had better hear about her. She's really popular and everybody knows her songs."

"Is she any good?"

"Good?" Ron drew himself up in indignation, and then abruptly deflated. "Nah—she's always screeching about 'Hot Cauldrons of Lo-ove!' Right silly if you ask me, but Mum loves it."

Harry laughed, shaking his head.

Ron thought about it a little more. "How do muggles get their news, then? Just through the newspapers, I reckon."

"No—there's wireless and television, too." Seeing Ron's blank look, he explained. "There are pictures as well as sound. It's fun, really. They do plays and that sort of thing."

"Sounds all right. Look here, I appreciate you getting me out of that fight, but you don't have to walk me all the way back to Gryffindor. I'm not five, you know."

"I don't mind."

"Well, I do. I don't want people saying I need a child minder."

"Just as you like, then. See you in History tomorrow."

A little hurt, Harry turned back toward the stairs, and then paused to straighten his robes. Ron's footsteps faded away to silence, and Harry wondered if it was worth it to go to the library. Too late, probably. He strode along, head down, and hardly heard the muttered, *"Impedimenta!"*

So it was a surprise to see the floor coming up to meet him. Elbows and knees slammed hard against the stone floor. A blue light shot past his nose as he lay there, winded.

Scrambling away behind a corner, he pulled his wand, and heard feet pounding away. The rotten sneak had attacked him, and then was trying to run away before Harry could fight back.

"Bloody hell!" Harry shouted, running back down the hall. "Ron! Was that you? That's not funny, you berk!"

One thing that Dudley had taught him was how to run really fast. He dashed down the hall, wand at the ready, reviewing suitable spells in his head. A flutter of robes melted into the shadows ahead, and Harry shouted *"Tarantallegra!"* That would sort out whoever thought ambushing him was a good idea.

Had he missed? He thought not, but the footsteps moved along faster ahead, and Harry rounded a corner, moving low,

hoping that his attacker wouldn't have a chance to fire off a spell from cover.

The corridor ahead was empty—or sounded like it. There was only the hushed susurration of snoring portraits. Harry clung to the wall, ready to fight back if attacked again. He really wanted to know if this was Ron or not. The torchlight was dim here, and Harry flinched at the sensation of wetness puddling under his boots. He looked more carefully. A thin film of water had spilled over the floor of the corridor, spreading blackly into infinity. Where was it coming from? He wished he had his invisibility cloak with him, but if he went back for it, his attacker would make his escape.

A door closed up ahead, very softly, but not so softly that Harry could not make out the distinctive thud and click. He crept up slowly. These rooms only had one door. If his attacker thought he could hide, he was pitifully out of his reckoning.

He moved as quietly as ever he had when hiding in the bushes from Dudley and his gang. Soundlessly, he approached the waiting door—the only door it could be.

It was a girls' toilet with a big OUT OF ORDER sign. Could his attacker be a girl?

That was a stupid assumption. Or was it? Who was mad enough at him to try something like this? He reached for the door knob, and then hunkered down ready to go through the door as quickly as possibly. A quick push, and a scramble, and Harry slipped inside, looking around, heart beating in his ears so loudly he wondered if the whole school could hear.

There was no other sound but the echoing drip of water. Harry's eyes roamed the walls, the slanting moonlight from a pair of high, narrow windows, the shadowy recesses of the stalls. It was the gloomiest, most depressing bathroom he had ever seen. A large cracked mirror loomed over a row of chipped sinks. The candle holders held nothing but a few burned-down stubs. The paint on the wooden doors of the stalls was flaking and scratched. One of the doors dangled on a single hinge. Why was this place such a shambles? Wasn't Filch supposed to take care of things like this?

He listened intently for the slightest sound: the pattering of footsteps in water, the scrape of a shoe on stone. The absence of such sounds pressed on his ears almost painfully. His attacker must be here…

Still in a low crouch, he made his way to the stalls, and quickly opened the first door. Nothing. He moved down the line, careful not to bang the doors against the partitions. He reached the next to last, and pushed the door open—

"EEEEEK!" Nearly transparent, a wisp of a girl ghost, mouth opened in full scream, shot out of the stall, bowling Harry over into the wet. His head swiveled, looking for a mortal attacker, but the ghost made it impossible to see or hear anything but herself.

"Who *are* you, you horrid boy? she shrieked. "This is *my*

bathroom. Boys aren't allowed!" Narrowed eyes of foggy grey peered at him from behind thick spectacles. The ghost seemed more frightened of him than he was of her.

"I'm Harry. Harry Potter. Somebody shot off a spell at me and ran away. I followed whoever it was here. Did you see anybody come in?"

The ghost shook its head, sniveling a little. "I was thinking about my death, and how awful everything is. So someone was tormenting you. People used to do that to me all the time," she whimpered. "Olive Hornsby made fun of my glasses, and no one would stop her. They whispered behind my back, and called me fat and ugly and miserable, moping, *moaning Myrtle!*" Her voice rose to a wail, and then subsided into noisy sobs.

Harry recalled the girls talking about some ghost called Moaning Myrtle. There couldn't, surely, in any just universe, be more than one of them.

"Pleased to meet you Myrtle. I'm sorry people were mean to you. I know what that's like. That's why I bothered you, running in like this. I'm really sorry I scared you. I just wanted to find that sneak who attacked me."

The ghost drifted a little closer. "You're nice—for a boy. It's nice to talk to someone who isn't holding me up to ridicule. You can come back some time if you like."

"Thanks!" Harry faked a smile. "You're sure you didn't see anyone? I don't see how he could have got away."

"I wasn't paying attention to anything but my *feelings*," Myrtle declared, drawing herself up. "Nobody cares about them but *me*."

Harry tried to pay her the compliment of taking her words seriously. "I think that's true about most of us, Myrtle. Nobody really understands all of what one feels. It's hard, sometimes."

Myrtle came closer still. "You're so *sensitive*, Harry Potter. I don't know anything about *boys*, but you're not like the others."

"Well, I know I don't care for people to play mean tricks on me, so why should anybody else? Really, it's late, and I've got to get back to Hufflepuff before I get in trouble, but if you do see someone, would you let me know?"

She cocked her head, considering. "Well, if I do, I'll tell you, but you'll have to come and visit me if you want to know. People always say they'll come back, but they never do."

"I'll be back. I promise."

He made a circuit of the bathroom, trying to find lurkers in corners. There was no one in the room but the two of them. Shrugging, he left, pausing outside the door—*just in case.* There was only the water under his feet, the painted snoring of the pictures, and muffled by the wall, the moans of Myrtle's renewed self-pity.

CHAPTER 5

"IT'S AMAZING, how quickly it all came together," Hannah remarked.

"When Auntie decides to do something, it gets *done*," Susan declared, very proudly.

Harry and Draco smirked at each other. Within two weeks of the suggestion, they had their trip to the Ministry. Professor Burbage had gone to the Headmaster, who had insisted only on parents' permissions and adequate chaperonage.

Susan had contacted her aunt, Amelia Bones, who was simultaneously approached by Dumbledore. What Susan wanted, she often got; and something so sensible and proper, so appropriate and educational, something that Amelia could hardly credit never having thought of herself, was not to be refused. The Head of MLE seized on the idea, turned her full, intimidating attention to it, and an hour later had a draft itinerary to present to the Minister, to the Headmaster, and to the Heads of those Departments that she thought would be of particular interest to the children.

The first years were to be excused from class on Friday, so they would experience a Ministry bustling with activity. The Minister of Magic himself would welcome them, and Amelia would lead the students through the vast underground maze.

Not a parent refused permission, not even the parents of those children who had joined the Explorers' Club late or with reluctance. This was a too good an opportunity to miss. "Adequate chaperonage" for twenty-eight children was defined as six adults, in addition to Amelia Bones. Charity, of course, as faculty sponsor would go, and Snape understood without being told that it was very important that he make clear he would be happy to assist her. Lupin immediately volunteered as well.

Dumbledore was not eager to cancel all classes for the day, and fortunately there were parents eager to take up the slack. Narcissa Malfoy owled at once, offering her services, as did her friend Olivia Parkinson. Lavender Brown's mother Rosemary was persuaded that she could spare a day.

History class on Thursday thrummed with the undercurrent of gossip and notes, planning for the morrow.

"My mum wanted to help," Ron told the rest of them glumly, "but she couldn't leave my little sister, and Professor Burbage didn't think it would be fair to let her come, when nobody else with younger children had the chance."

"Well, we'll meet your Dad anyway," Harry said to cheer him. "He's right there on the itinerary. Misuse of Muggle Artifacts: Arthur Weasley."

"That sounds very interesting," Hermione assured Ron. "Very important work. It really goes to the heart of protecting the magical world from muggles. Think of the secrets that a moment's carelessness could reveal!"

Draco muffled his snort, and nodded sagely instead. Misuse of Muggle Artifacts was a joke of a department, but that, of course, should make it good for a laugh. In fact, the muggleborn would find it interesting, he supposed. It did no harm to throw a bit of entertainment their way.

Ron shrugged off Hermione's enthusiasm, and Draco's veiled amusement. "At least we'll meet Ludo Bagman!"

"I can't believe so much time was scheduled for the Department of Magical Games and Sports," Charity complained. "Who wants to talk to an idiot like Ludo Bagman?"

"His loyal fans," Snape shrugged. "And the children of his loyal fans. I suppose it's regarded as a treat. The students probably think it will be as exciting. It might do them good to know that it's just another department full of brow-beaten bureaucrats, anxiously plotting out schedules and regulations at their grubby desks."

"More dreams dashed!" laughed Charity. "You are so cruel!"

"It's not being cruel," Snape insisted. "Students leave Hogwarts

without a clue as to what the world outside will be like—unless they have parents or guardians who have taken the trouble to teach their children what's what. That's why the muggleborn notoriously do badly once they leave school. They don't know how the magical world works—on bribery and nepotism, of course—and they're completely at sea. And even those children who do know something want to get into a department like Magical Games and Sports, imagining it's all one big everlasting quidditch game. Instead, a bright girl like Hermione Granger, for instance, if she were hired at all, would spend her pathetic career making tea for the likes of Ludo Bagman!"

"That does happen more than it ought." Charity gave a little sigh. "I've always thought it a mistake not to give career counseling to the students until fifth year—which is after the children have already committed themselves to their electives for the prior two years! Another reason to give them a bit of a heads-up beforehand. Speaking of which, I'm told our Hogwarts dragon is almost large enough to travel, so the children will be meeting with Kettleburn again before it's gone."

"He told me he was definitely retiring by the end of the year."

"Well, I hope Dumbledore gets a good replacement. Magical Creatures is a fascinating subject."

"Says the woman who sneezes in the presence of crups."

"I knew I shouldn't have told you that!"

Snape smiled, walking along beside her to the staff room. His smile evaporated at the sight of Remus Lupin, lounging in Snape's favorite place by the window. Charity gave him a warning look.

It was nearly impossible to believe that the entire staff knew that Remus Lupin was a werewolf. Snape, the evening after that hideous luncheon at the Three Broomsticks, had taken Charity back to her rooms, sat her down, prepared her for something fairly awful, told her the truth, and then had had the wind taken out of his sails when she blithely informed him that she already knew about Lupin.

"Dumbledore told us all. He said it wouldn't be fair to keep it a secret. I daresay he didn't have that conversation with you, because you already know."

"Of course I bloody well know! The bastard tried to eat me in our fifth year!"

That had required a little more explanation. Much to his dismay, Charity did not blame Lupin for the affair, though she had many hard words for James Potter and Sirius Black.

"Imagine! Using your friend's disability like that! It's hardly surprising in a criminal like Sirius Black. I don't blame you for being angry at the Headmaster. He was very wrong, not to expel him immediately. At least James Potter thought the better of it—"

"Thought he didn't want to deal with the bother of a murder investigation!" Snape stormed, unwilling to give James Potter any credit for normal human decency.

"You may well be right," Charity agreed. "Even so, he's still a

better man than Black, who behaved throughout like a sociopath. I supposed he really was a sociopath—so charming and so cruel—"

"—And Lupin was their best friend!"

"Was he?" Charity wondered. "Maybe he was just a roommate who had a dreadful secret and had to keep two—no, three—dangerous young rowdies friendly. Imagine what they could have done to him if he had crossed them in the least. And he would have had nowhere to hide."

Snape still felt that Lupin had much to answer for, but Charity's words had made an impression on him. It was not a bad explanation for Lupin's behavior—neutral when not in the presence of the rest of the Gryffindors, and carefully oblivious to their conduct when he was. He had never joined in the worst of the attacks, it was true. Snape supposed it was marginally possible that Potter and Black had victimized him in the privacy of their dorm. The idea of Snape himself sorted into Gryffindor and in their power was a formidable one.

What was more irritating than Lupin's mere presence at Hogwarts—and even more irritating than his evident and growing popularity as the new Defense teacher—was Lupin's assumption that they were *friends*. He always gravitated to Snape—and by default to Charity—in any gathering and always at meals. He was mild and deferential, and careful not to trespass against Snape's territorial claims to Charity. And here he was, doing it again.

Charity saw Snape's jaw clenching, and murmured, "Yes—well, it's only natural, Severus. We're about the same age. You're classmates, for Heavens sake! We all *ought* to be friends!" She looked away. It was easy enough to say, but she remembered hearing of an episode down by the lake that was truly terrible…

Snape, with Charity on one side and Lupin on the other, felt his blood pressure soaring, barely comprehending Dumbledore's prattle about the Safety of our Youngest Charges. It was outrageous. Lupin was attempting to form some sort of ghastly pack to replace Potter & Company, and Snape was damned if he would manipulated into playing alpha wolf.

The much-anticipated trip to the Ministry was not without its surprises.

"Harry. Potter." Cornelius Fudge beamed, focusing his attention on the Boy-Who-Mattered-At-The Moment. Most of the children had never visited the Ministry, and were a bit disoriented, gawking about at the dark, high ceiling, and at the huge and gaudy fountain in the middle of the Ministry commons. Hermione Granger narrowed her eyes at the object, pursing her mouth in disapproval.

"That's a very patronising representation of the magical world—" she began, before being shoved aside by bustling adults. Lights flashed and popped.

The DAILY PROPHET was there: more specifically Rita Skeeter with a wage-slave photographer in thrall. Fudge's welcome to the Explorers' Club was turned into a photo opportunity, and Harry Potter was dragged forward to shake Fudge's hand for the camera. There were more pictures: Fudge and Harry; Fudge and Harry and Draco; Fudge and Amelia Bones and Harry; Draco, Hermione, and Neville; a photograph of all the children with their sponsor, Professor Charity Burbage. Rita and her hapless sidekick Bozo followed them throughout the day like leeches, listening in for useful bits of chat, the odd phrase that could be taken out of context, the proper fawning praise of the Ministry.

Draco managed to manipulate the situation enough to get a peek at the Minister's private office: all shiny dark wood and soft, fragrant leather. He gave Harry a smirk, clearly imagining himself behind the great mahogany desk with its bronze dragon feet. Harry admired the place briefly, while thinking nothing would be more awful that being its prisoner. Whatever he wanted in life, that was definitely not it.

"—And you're welcome to it," he whispered to Draco.

"Thanks. I think I'll have the desk overlaid with some green marble, though."

"And maybe a couch in front of the fire for when you need to think deep thoughts?"

"Of course!"

"Come along," Narcissa dragged them away, quite amused.

She was enjoying her visit with Draco's classmates. And she had now met "Granger," who turned out to be a girl. Not to worry of course: the hair and teeth alone eliminated any threat to the purity of the Malfoy line. A bright girl, and very grateful to Draco for his guidance. Perhaps future material as a reliable undersecretary…

Snape's hopes were realized when they visited Magical Sports and Games. While Bagman was still something of a celebrity, the visit was a yawner: charts and graphs, and not much in the way of actual sports or games. He thought the boys, especially, seemed disappointed. They did not resist much when ushered away to the next stop.

"And this is Mr Bartemius Crouch, students, Head of the Department of International magical Cooperation."

"Thank you, Amelia. What a fine group of boys and girls! Traveling all the way from Hogwarts to visit the Ministry? A good start if you work in my department, for we travel the world!"

Snape's jaw dropped, and he began to see why Crouch was so successful at diplomacy. The canny wizard had clearly decided that for the day, in front of his colleagues, it was worth exercising some of his professional charm on this group of prospective employees. He had maps. He had exotic magical artifacts: gifts from magical governments around the globes. He could talk about why they should consider learning other magical languages, and why they should learn them sooner rather than later. He could regale them with tales of luxurious travel and dangerous adventures. He had printed handouts prepared, detailing the necessary qualifications for his department.

And Amos Diggory, the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, fell into the spirit of the thing, too. Diggory tended to favor the Hufflepuff students a bit, chatting with them about his Cedric, but he showed them all wanted posters from Romania, which was currently suffering a resurgence of vampires. Amos, prodded by Hermione Granger, was persuaded to discuss qualifications, too, and then presented each of the children with a little chocolate redcap in honor of the occasion. The chocolates were inhaled, and Diggory hurried the children along, not pausing at the door marked "COMMITTEE FOR THE DISPOSAL OF DANGEROUS CREATURES."

"Walden is always so busy," he told them, with a rather glassy smile.

"I hear he uses an axe," Greg Goyle told Crabbe, very distinctly.

Cuthbert Mockridge in the Goblin Liaison Office spoke a few words of goobledygook to them, and held forth on the Importance of Maintaining Friendly Relations. Most of the students had heard all they wanted to of goblins in History Class, but they listened politely enough. The Floo Network Office was also not particularly exciting, but the muggleborn students learned a great deal, and were given the rules and fee schedule.

They all received a very intimidating lecture from Mafalda

Hopkirk of the Improper Use of Magic Office. Intimidating, and delivered in a sing-song voice that threatened horrors to the delinquent. The students grew restless, and Snape caught himself trying to edge away.

The surprise hit of the morning was the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office. Arthur Weasley had a jinxed chess set to show the children that had them in fits of laughter. There was a hexed football that caused Dean Thomas and Seamus Finnegan to present an impromptu lecture on a proper muggle game. The ball, when struck, would bounce back defensively, knocking the player down. After a few tries, Dean and Seamus gave up, promising that they'd give a "proper show with a proper ball" another time.

Thinking that the children were not taking the problem seriously enough, Arthur produced something "more menacing."

"And this, students, is nothing to laugh at. This is called a revolver."

"An automatic," Snape muttered. Justin said the same thing, only much louder.

"That's an automatic: All you have to do is pull the trigger, once it's loaded." He noticed the other students looking at him, and said, "Well—my Dad has one. He travels to all sorts of dodgy places, working for the Foreign Office."

Arthur was listening intently. "Yes—thank you—so useful to have an expert about. This is a pistol, at any rate. It is a kind of muggle wand, and shoots lead pellets called bullets out this end when you move your finger on this bit—which is called the trigger."

"Can't people just dodge the pellets?" Pansy asked scornfully. "It looks so clumsy."

"Ah," warned Arthur, with great excitement, "but the pistol shoots them out with incredible speed and noise! It's a very dangerous weapon. This one is even more dangerous, for it's cursed to shoot them out of the wrong end. I believe the point of the curse was to kill the pistoler—er, the shooter."

Seamus stared. "That—would be quite a surprise, I reckon."

"Oh, yes. Yes, indeed. It was quite a surprise, and it required a number of Aurors and Obliviators to deal with the consequences of the surprise."

The students thought about that for awhile.

"Do lots of muggles have these kinds of wands?" Nott wanted to know.

"Mostly the longer kinds," Arthur told them. "Shop-guns and rivals. Very dangerous. Shop-guns shoots a spray of little pellets and don't require a good aim."

"That's an interesting idea for a spell," considered Harry. "A spell like a cloud or a spray of spells. That would be quite a weapon. Do you know of a spell like that?" he asked Snape.

"No," Snape replied, thinking it over. "It is indeed an interesting idea. Something of the sort might be easier to achieve with a potion and an atomizer to spread the effect."

Harry nodded. Some of the other students found the conversation rather peculiar.

"Listen to that Potter," Mandy Brocklehurst hissed to Zach Smith. "Practically Snape's apprentice already. A creepy pair, talking about spraying clouds of curses. I wouldn't want to turn my back on either of them."

Lunch was arranged for the students in the employee canteen. The same lunch for everyone, to save trouble and fuss.

"Shepherd's Pie," Ron groused. "Dad says they always have Shepherd's Pie on Fridays. Shepherd's Pie made with actual shepherds, he says."

A number of forks were set down, and more attention focused on the breadrolls and shortcake biscuits provided. Crabbe and Goyle exchanged looks, shrugged, and kept eating.

"It's pretty good, anyway," Crabbe opined.

The piece-de-resistance of the day was the visit to the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. Quite a few of the students were interested in this. Amelia Bones was in her element, showing them the courtrooms, the magical analysis laboratories, and even allowing them to step into a (carefully cleaned) jail cell. Playing at danger was an agreeable pastime for a Friday afternoon. Justin and Ernie grew silly, confessing to horrendous crimes. Daphne and Morag could hardly be persuaded to approach the cell at all.

Hermione and Terry Boot really liked the laboratories, and lingered there for some time, asking questions of the evidence witches and wizards. The students visited the Obliviation Office (DON'T FORGET THESE ESSENTIAL STEPS!) and were properly impressed. One of the witches had a picture of a very handsome wizard on her desk.

"That's Gilderoy Lockhart," gushed Lisa Turpin. "He's a famous monster hunter. Do you know him?" she asked the blushing Ministry witch.

"Bless you, yes!" The witch told the girls, "He used to work here, before he became who is he now. He sat right over there," she pointed to another desk by the door, now occupied by a portly older wizard. The girls all regarded the place in awe.

"Gilderoy Lockhart," Lisa repeated reverently. Then she and her friends squealed and clutched each others' hands.

Harry overheard the girls talking and asked Draco, "Who's Gilderoy Lockhart?"

Ron interrupted. "A ponce."

Draco snorted, and then actually laughed. "Right. A ponce."

"Claims to have killed all these vampires and ghouls and whatnot. Mum fancies him."

"I guess girls would think he's good-looking," Harry remarked. He wondered if the wizard was tall. Girls seemed to like men to be tall.

"Father thinks he's a complete fraud," Draco whispered.

Not softly enough. Narcissa leaned down and whispered, "And he's right."

They moved on to the Auror Office. A training room, complete with targets, was available, and each student was urged to take a shot at the menacing dummy dark wizard. Here, too, the academic requirements were explained.

"But why do you need a Potions NEWT?" Michael Corner complained. "If you're fighting a dark wizard, you're not going to stop and take tea with him!"

Snape glowered, and readied a crushing response, but it was unnecessary.

Amelia Bones was on the scene. She read his name tag with a sneer. "Yes, very droll, Mr—Corner." Then she explained, in excruciating detail, just why an Auror needed to be able to identify a large range of potions: not just poisons that were ingested, but contact poisons, air-borne poisons, and the antidotes an Auror had better remember within seconds. And then she had pictures to show them what happened when they didn't.

It was food for thought, even if no one thought they would want to eat ever again.

The door flew open, and a hulking figure stumped in. "New recruits, I hear? I reckon you'd need some help sorting out this lot, Amelia!"

"Mad-Eye Moody!" Neville shouted, and then clapped a hand over his mouth in horror.

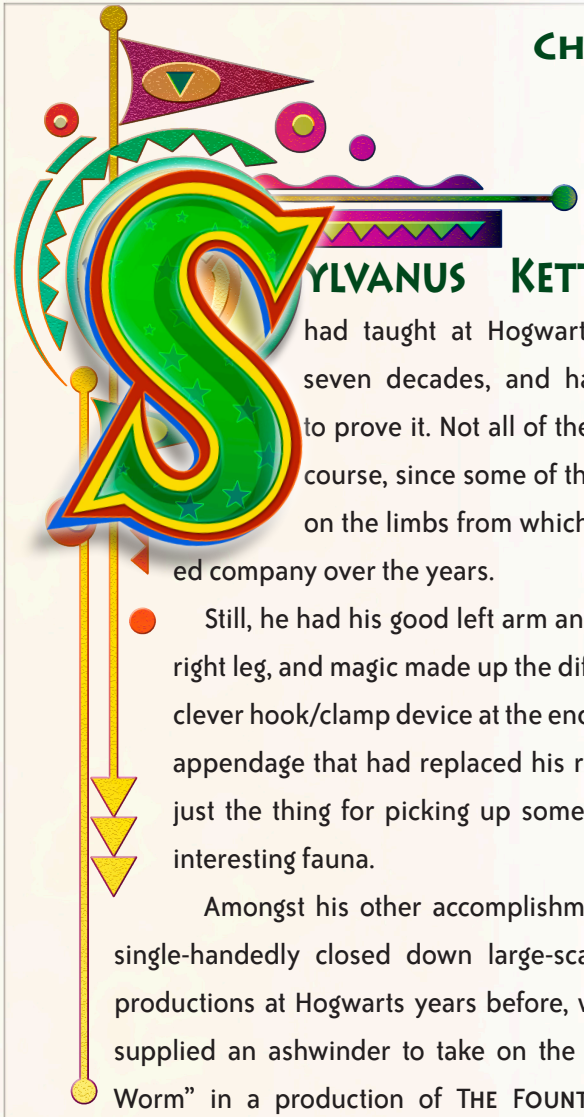
Harry was horrified, too. The old wizard looked as if he had been run over by a lorry, and then put back together by a tailor.

"Alastor!" Amelia welcomed him. "I was just showing the Hogwarts first years the place. You've met my niece Susan, of course, and her friend Hannah Abbot. This is Neville Longbottom, Ron Weasley, Harry Potter—"

Moody grinned at him: a horrible sight. "Harry Potter, eh? Want to be an Auror do you, Mr Harry Potter? You could do worse. The Aurors made me the man I am today!"

Harry considered the map of scars, the spinning eye, and the wooden leg in the wreckage before him. He considered running for the door. "That's—good to know."

CHAPTER 6



YLVANUS KETTLEBURN had taught at Hogwarts for nearly seven decades, and had the scars to prove it. Not all of them visible, of course, since some of the scars were on the limbs from which he had parted company over the years.

Still, he had his good left arm and most of his right leg, and magic made up the difference. The clever hook/clamp device at the end of the metal appendage that had replaced his right arm was just the thing for picking up some of his more interesting fauna.

Amongst his other accomplishments, he had single-handedly closed down large-scale theatrical productions at Hogwarts years before, when he had supplied an ashwinder to take on the role of "The Worm" in a production of THE FOUNTAIN OF FAIR FORTUNE. The engorgement charm *had* been perhaps a little over the top, for the creature had exploded in a shower of hot sparks, the eggs it had laid set the stage on fire, and two of the actresses had begun dueling over the leading man. Kettleburn had been on probation for months afterward. Poor Herbert Beery, the director, had left Hogwarts in disappointment, and established the Wizarding Academy of Dramatic Arts. After all these years, he still cut Kettleburn dead whenever they met.

"And I'm getting too old for this," Kettleburn told little Norbert, with wistful resignation. "Better to go out on a high note and enjoy what's left of my limbs in peace."

The dragonet flamed agreement. Handsome little chap. A dragon at Hogwarts! They would certainly talk about this year, long after Kettleburn himself was gone.

The familiar clamor of young voices grew louder. The first years were coming to bid Norbert farewell. The Weasley boy—who knew which one? Kettleburn felt he had taught scores of them over the years—

Oh, yes—Charles. Nice lad.

—would be by tomorrow with some of his chums to take little Norbert to his new home at the Romanian reserve. Kettleburn was not entirely happy to let the little creature go so soon: young dragons needed expert care. However, Albus had ruled that it must be so, and Kettleburn knew better than to argue the point. Albus was frightfully good at getting his way. Always had been.

Professor Burbage poked her head through the door, and

smiled brightly. Nice young girl. Fine head of hair.

"Are you ready for us, Professor Kettleburn? I've got the Explorers here with me."

"Yes, yes. Do come in. Don't stand on ceremony. Norbert and I are quite ready to receive guests."

On their first visit, the lights had been kept low, and only a few children at a time could have a peep at the hatchling. Norbert was older now, and quite the little performer. Kettleburn though he would rather enjoy the attention. Dragons always liked it when humans worshipped them as they thought they deserved.

And young Snape was here here as well. Considerate of Professor Burbage to provide an additional wand in case the children were excessively curious. There was talk about the girl and young Snape. He was certainly attentive enough, and his intentions appeared to be honorable, as he was making no secret of his attachment. Kettleburn would not lower himself to gossip like a witch, but he *had* overheard Pomona and Minerva agreeing that it might be a match at last. Rather nice if there could be the wedding before he left. That would be quite the event. Even old Sluggy might come back for that!

Harry could see why Hagrid was barmy about dragons. Little Norbert was pretty amazing. In his carefully warded habitat, the dragonet was putting on quite a show: flaming, flapping his little wings, uttering a squeaky cry that made the girls coo.

"He's so cute!" Hannah, then Susan, then Lavender, then nearly ever single girl squealed exactly the same words. Hermione had a little more self-command, or perhaps more imagination.

"He won't be cute when he's fully grown. And that little squeak will be a terrifying roar."

"Well, he's cute *now*," Pansy pointed out defiantly.

No self-respecting boy could use such a word, but Harry did think that Pansy had the right of it. Of course, most baby animals were cute. Many small creatures could fit that description: Kettleburn's tank of fairies and even his captive Cornish pixies. However, if they were as big as a human, the pixies, especially, would be fearsome.

It was a pretty interesting room, all in all: almost as good as a zoo. In fact, it really was a small zoo—a zoo of magical creatures. Kettleburn had spent decades building up this collection, and it was one of the best of its kind in Britain. Outside, he understood, Kettleburn had some paddocks for flying horses—Harry had not caught what kind, but still—*flying horses!*

The grounds of Hogwarts were extensive, and blended gradually into the Forbidden Forest, where even more magical creatures lived. The Forbidden Forest was the home of unicorns—of centaurs—and who knew what else. That, of course, was why it was forbidden.

There was such a crowd surrounding Norbert that Harry grew

bored trying to see past other students' heads. He took a tour of the room, admiring the other specimens. He'd always liked snakes. Maybe Kettleburn had some kinds Harry hadn't seen…

A large, vulture-like bird eyed him dolefully. The stand was labeled "AUGUREY, OR IRISH PHOENIX."

"Cool," Harry admired.

An aviary was full of round little birds. Harry had a look at them, and noticed the label "SNIDGET." They looked oddly like Snitches—right! He remembered now from his dad's book about quidditch, that these live birds were originally used in quidditch. He frowned. It sounded like a mean thing to do to birds. Much better to use snitches, they way they did now.

Over *there* was a snake. And Harry could have the animal all to himself, because the girls were squealing again as Little Norbert puffed fierce, tiny flames at them, adorably murderous.

"A little less noise, if you please," Professor Snape drawled. Professor Burbage grinned up at him. He rolled his eyes.

Harry smiled. He liked seeing them together like that. The girls all wanted to know if the professors would be getting married, and if Harry thought any of his classmates might be bridesmaids. The safest answer was always, "Dunno." Being a bridesmaid was evidently something to which they aspired. He couldn't see Professor Snape wanting to put himself on display in the way he would have to for the kind of wedding the girls went on about. In fact, he would prefer to think that Professor Burbage wouldn't either, but she was a girl, and girls were odd about such things.

"Screaming, noisy humans," hissed a little voice. *"Someone should eat them."*

Harry whipped his head around, wondering if he was hearing things again, but then noticed the little snake in the tank. A mottled, mostly green snake, labeled "BOOMSLANG." A warning note was below the name.

WARNING: HIGHLY VENOMOUS

Venomous or not, Harry liked snakes. And this one might be willing to chat.

"They're not so bad," Harry replied. *"They're just excited about the dragon."*

"It is stupid to make noise and jump up and down, then. It is stupid to attract a dragon's attention. They are stupid humans, and the dragon will eat them. Good riddance."

"The dragon's leaving tomorrow. It won't be big enough by then, so it should all work out."

"Wait! You are human! You comprehend True Language!"

"Of course I do. Who did you think I was?"

"Sam, perhaps. Or the One in the Walls."

Harry's brows knit. *"Sam?"*

"The Ashwinder. He was here briefly. I wish him to return. I thought him amusing and pleasantly warm. His name was Sam, or at least that was the strange noise the old human who feeds

us made at him. I deduce that the human considered that to be his name."

"What's your name?"

"Sssisssxx. My true name. I cannot reproduce the sound the human makes at me."

"I'm Harry. Pleased to meet you."

"And I you. Do you bring food?"

"I'll ask Professor Kettleburn if I can give you something." Something at last occurred to him. *"What did you mean about the One in the Walls?"*

Hermione was growing tired of the other girls' squeals, and looked around the room for Harry.

"There you are," she called out. "What that?"

"That's Sssisssx," he told her. "Isn't he great? He wanted to know if he could have something to eat." Turning to the snake," he said, *"Don't worry. I'll talk to Professor Kettleburn now."*

"Harry!" Hermione screeched. "Were you talking to that snake?"

"Shh!" he hushed her, remembering that this was supposed to be a secret. "You don't have to tell the world!"

It was too late. Some of the students on the periphery overhead the conversation.

Mandy Brocklehurst rushed over, full of righteous horror. "You're a parselmouth!" she accused him. She raised her voice. "Harry Potter is a parselmouth!" She pointed a shaking finger at the boomslang. "He was—*talking*—to that snake!"

Snape heard it first, and was instantly alarmed. "Don't be an idiot, Miss Brocklehurst," he snapped at her.

"He was! He really was! He confessed to Granger! I heard him!"

The squeals and shrieks around Norbert died down. Faces turned towards Harry: astonished and frightened.

Not all of them. Draco and the Slytherins were variously impressed and amused.

"A parselmouth!" Draco grinned. "You really *are* in the wrong house!"

Pansy and Daphne looked at each other, and nodded, as if something they had always suspected had been proven true beyond doubt. Other students backed away, clearly alarmed.

"Harry!" Susan gasped. "is it true?"

Charity looked at Snape, concern in her wide eyes. He shrugged and whispered to her, "Harry might have said something about it. I've never heard him myself." She glared at him, and he knew he'd hear about this later.

Kettleburn had gradually caught on to the gist of the shouts, and bustled over, very interested.

"Mr Potter!" He examined Harry as he would any very interesting specimen. "Did you indeed communicate with the boomslang?"

Every eye in the room was on him. Harry hated it, but refused to lie. He was what he was, and he wasn't going to pretend to be stupid, the way he had had to in his Dursley days.

"He said he'd like something to eat. That's all."

Kettleburn was still staring, enraptured.

A silence. Snape struggled to think of a way to defuse the situation.

Harry ventured, "That really was all he said. Except for missing the ashwinder. He liked him."

A gasp, and another silence.

It was broken by Mandy. "I *knew* he was evil," she declared to Zach Smith. There was an uneasy rustle in the room.

Charity said, "I don't think that's at *all* true—"

"*I* think it's very impressive," Draco said airily.

"You would!" Seamus Finnegan shot back. "Evil snakes, the lot of you!"

Snape glowered. "That's quite enough—"

"What absolute tosh!" Kettleburn interrupted, drowning out everyone else. "Snakes evil, indeed! Snakes are animals, Mr—?" He looked at Charity.

"Finnegan," she supplied. "Seamus Finnegan."

"So, Mr Finnegan! You think snakes are evil. That is a canard. I have refuted it repeatedly in my monographs. Evil implies moral choice. Animals cannot be evil. Why do you think snakes are evil?"

"Well—" Seamus stared around wildly. "They just are! They're all slimy and that! Sneaky and poisonous. They bite and all. A snake like that could kill someone!"

"Oh?" Kettleburn was delighted. Someone had given him the perfect prompt for his favorite rant. "Are lions evil, young man?"

"Well—no. Of course not."

"But, Mr Finnegan!" Kettleburn looked at him reprovingly. "Lions eat people, given certain circumstances. Isn't that evil?"

"Well—no. Not really. They're just doing what lions do."

Kettleburn burst out joyfully. "Exactly!" He turned to the rest of the students. "Are sharks evil? Are tigers evil? They are far more dangerous than this snake, which would only defend itself if threatened. Animals are not evil. They may be dangerous, but not morally culpable for anything they do that inconveniences human beings." He looked very sternly at the students. "Mr Potter has a marvelous ability. The fact that he shares it with an unpleasant wizard or two does not make the ability evil. Does Mr Potter speaking with any animal harm any of you in any way? It does not. I wish I could speak to my creatures. Now, Mr Potter, you say that poor old Bob wants a bit to eat. Here, let's have a visit with him. Come on, everyone, this is a unique opportunity!"

Some students were more willing than others, but gradually they were herded around the snake's little tank.

Kettleburn began his lecture. "This is a Mottled Boomslang from the Congo Basin. That's in *Africa*," he added, annoyed at the blank expressions. "I shall not take Bob from his tank, as he is quite venomous and requires special handling. We have some other snakes I shall have you examine at closer quarters.

Snakes are not at all slimy, but rather extremely smooth and pleasant to the touch. Snake skin is very much like dragon hide, and none of you appear to consider little Norbert slimy and evil. Or do you?"

"Oh, no!" cried Lisa Turpin. "Norbert is a darling!"

The girls agreed for the most part. The boys smirked and shrugged.

Kettleburn felt he was getting through to some of them, at least. "Meanwhile, let's give Bob his treat. I believe he's very fond of Spurred Dust Beetles. We'll give him a few."

It was so handy, sometimes, having an artificial limb that was immune to venom and insensible to pain. Kettleburn used a scoop to gather up a few of the beetles from his feed jars, and deposited the insects in front of the wriggling snake.

"My favorite!" hissed the boomslang in satisfaction. *"So crunchy when I swallow!"*

"Well, Mr Potter?" Kettleburn asked excitedly. "Is he—speaking?"

Harry felt himself flushing at all the attention. "Yeah—yes, he is. He said they're his favorites. They're crunchy."

"He'd probably think *we're* crunchy," Ron muttered.

Kettleburn gave a deep, pitying sigh. "Perhaps if you were the size of a beetle, yes. As that is not the case, I would say that as long as you kept your fingers more than two feet from the snake's head, you are far more dangerous to him than he is to you. Really, this is all most irrational. For you to think this small creature evil, when you've been oohing and aahing over Norbert, who will someday be very large and dangerous indeed!" He turned again to Harry. "What else does he say?"

Embarrassed, Harry ducked his head, and spoke to the snake, *"Professor Kettleburn wants to know if you have anything else you want to tell him."*

"I wish to be warmer. Go away now. I do not wish to share my food. After I eat, I shall sleep."

"He says he'd like it to be warmer in the tank. Then he told me to go away and let him eat. He doesn't want to share the beetles with us."

That raised a few laughs, some of them genuine, some of them a little uncertain. Kettleburn thought his point had been made, at least, and took the students on a tour of his realm, showing them the other snakes and making them understand, through Harry, that the snakes were not thinking up evil plots, but were invariably thinking about eating and sleeping. When they did think about humans, it was to wish that humans were not standing between them and the sunlight through the window.

He was also able to tell them about other abilities related to Harry's—about those witches and wizards reputed to be able to speak to birds, or to specific mammals. He even wanted Harry to try to speak to Norbert, but it was no go. The little dragon's squeaks conveyed nothing to Harry, and Harry could

not form any kind of language understandable to the dragon.

"Well, well, it was worth a try." Kettleburn gave Harry a pat on the shoulder. "Dragons and snakes are not very closely related, after all. I hope you will take up the study of Magical Creatures, Mr Potter. It is clear that you have a talent worth developing!"

"Why didn't you *tell* me that Harry was a parselmouth?" Charity asked. The children were stuffing their faces, and she had drawn Snape off into a corner to berate him.

"Why should I?" Snape replied stiffly. "You could see how everyone reacted! Besides, I had never seen or heard it for myself, and I had told him to be *discreet*. Something that is beyond his powers, it would seem."

"Don't blame Harry!" she replied hotly. "He's just a little boy. Of course everyone was surprised. And the news will be all over the castle by the time dinner is over! Thank goodness that Sylvanus was there to talk sensibly about it all. How in the world did Harry inherit such an ability? People are bound to be curious."

"Why didn't you *tell* us you were a parselmouth?" Susan asked for the tenth time.

"I didn't know you'd all make such a fuss about it!" Harry defended himself. "I'll bet there are lots of people who can do it!"

"No, Harry!" Ernie told him seriously. "It's very rare. And it's always been associated with dark wizards."

Harry's jaw tightened. "Do you think I'm some sort of dark wizard?"

"That's not what he said," Hannah cut in. "You should have told us, instead of surprising us like that."

"I think it's kind of neat," Justin said, mostly to himself. "I wish I could talk to animals."

Harry gave Justin a grateful look. "I mentioned it once to Professor Snape, and he told me not to tell anybody. So I didn't. I don't even think about it very much. I just happened to see that snake, and it was complaining about all the noise we were making."

Justin grinned. "We were pretty loud."

Harry grinned back. "It said we were stupid to attract a dragon's attention, and that the dragon would eat us if we weren't careful!"

Susan smiled rather reluctantly. "That's all very well, Harry, but this is going to make trouble for you. You should have told us, so we could have prepared people."

"You'll probably make the front page of the *Prophet* again," remarked Ernie dryly.

They all groaned. THE PROPHET had run the story of the

children's visit to the Ministry, and the article had covered most of the front page and two more pages inside, complete with pictures. Someone had overheard some of the children's private conversations, and printing them had caused no little embarrassment. Harry was particularly annoyed at some of the ridiculous words put in his mouth—words he could not possibly have said.

"I try to model myself after the Minister…We all owe a great deal to the policies of the Fudge administration…"

Cedric moved down to talk to him.

"So—parselmouth, are you?"

Harry nodded dolefully, waiting for the rebuke.

"Should have told us, Harry. I could have let my Dad know. I reckon with a talent like that, you'd be a shoo-in for his department."

Harry looked warily down the table to the rest of the Hufflepuffs. For the most part they looked friendly and supportive enough, though some of the expressions seemed a bit forced. There were whispers that there was to be a Council of the Sett tonight.

Looking around the rest of the hall, he could see other people looking his way and whispering. Some of the teachers, too. The looks made it clear to him that not everybody was going to be easily convinced that Harry Potter was not a danger to them.

CHAPTER 7

THE COUNCIL of the Sett was not really so bad. Professor Sprout was more concerned about Harry's reputation than Harry himself was. And she served them cocoa and biscuits.

His friends got up and repeated the gist of what Professor Kettleburn had said. Harry told his housemates that he had always had this ability, and that it was no big deal. He even told them the story of the zoo, describing Dudley just enough that Harry himself would not seem a monstrous bully, terrorizing his innocent cousin by throwing him to the snakes.

"I know Harry, and I know he's all right," Cedric declared. "And anyone who says different will answer to me!"

There was a murmur of approval, but then Merton Graves rose to ask some hard questions.

"That's all very well, Cedric," he said. "It's right that we stand by our housemate. Harry—my only question is: why you didn't tell us up front that you had this—talent?"

"Professor Snape told me not to," Harry answered instantly. "He said it would worry people—and he was right!"

"Still—don't you find the whole thing rather odd?" Merton persisted. "The only other known Parselmouth in this century was the wizard you defeated. Could you have wrested this ability from him inadvertently? Sort of like the 'prize of battle' spells back in the tenth century?"

"I don't know anything about that," Harry objected. "I didn't know there was such a thing. I was just a baby!"

"Maybe there are other Parselmouths," Cedric ventured. "Maybe there are lots of them, and they keep it secret because they know everybody will act just like this!"

"That's certainly food for thought," Primula McMillan allowed. Ernie and Harry were friends, after all. "Professor Kettleburn is a very nice man, and he doesn't think snakes are evil."

"Maybe when You-Know-Who exploded, the Parselmouth bit got stuck in Harry," Hannah suggested innocently.

The younger students laughed. A few of the older students frowned, thinking it over. Merton Graves was inclined to take Hannah's idea seriously, and had a brief, whispered discussion with his friends about precedents from the days of Merlin.

Pomona Sprout's eyes opened very wide, and she glanced keenly and anxiously at her favorite first-year. *Out of the mouths of babes…*

She must thresh this out with Severus, no matter how closely that man guarded his secrets.

"My dear," Lucius told Narcissa, glancing through Draco's latest letter, "it appears that Harry Potter is a Parselmouth."

Blue eyes opened very wide, and an amused smile spread sun-like over the lovely features. "Really? How extraordinary! A Parselmouth? That must have set all Hogwarts on its ear."

"So it would seem. Their club visited the dragonet before its departure for Romania, and Harry was exploring some of Kettleburn's other specimens." He began reading from Draco's note.

"—Harry spoke to a boomslang! That wretched Mandy Brocklehurst starting screeching, and it would have all ended in tears had not old Professor Kettleburn come through. He gave some of those lot a set-down, I can tell you, and explained why snakes are not at all evil, but merely animals. Then he had Harry translate for the creature. It talked about wanting to be warmer and liking crunchy beetles!

Of course, there is bound to be talk, but Slytherin is behind Harry. I still think it astonishing that he was not sorted with me, but I daresay it was all part of his grand scheme to unite the houses. He gets on well enough with the Badgers, anyway. I hope the Prophet won't make too much of a fuss—'"

Narcissa laughed. "There's a hint."

"Yes," Lucius nodded judiciously. "I'll have to pay some

calls. No doubt this news will indeed cause some trouble for Harry, and it's important that the official view is fair and balanced from the first."

"Harry Potter is a *Parselmouth!*" Molly Weasley shrieked, startling her husband and daughter. The Hogwarts owl backwinged indignantly, and escaped through the open window with a quick and dismissive flutter.

More calmly, Arthur Weasley took the crumpled missive from her and looked it over thoughtfully. "Strange. I wouldn't have expected that. I've never heard of it in the Potter family."

"*Strange?*" Molly gasped. "*Strange?* Arthur Weasley! You just learned that a schoolmate of Ronnie's is involved in the Dark Arts, and you pass it off as '*strange?*'"

"But Mum!" Ginny protested. "Harry Potter is a hero, and Ron says he's been quite nice to him since Christmas. He *can't* be a dark wizard!"

"No shouting at the dinner table, Ginny," Arthur rebuked her mildly. "We don't know that Harry is a dark wizard. It's just a very unusual ability that's usually linked to dark wizards."

"—*Always* linked to dark wizards," Molly corrected, very disturbed.

"Now, Mollywobbles—" Arthur shook his head. "We don't know that Harry is a bad boy. In fact, Percy himself said just the opposite. You know that Percy thinks well of Harry. Studious and serious, he says, but making friends with all his classmates. The twins seem to like him, too. Ron's had good fun at school since he started going to the club that Harry organized. It's likely just an odd fluke. You get them in the best of families. Funny how things get passed down, and it's no end better than being a squib—"

"I suppose," agreed Molly, only half convinced. "All the same, I'll tell our Ron to keep his wits about him!"

"But Harry's a *hero*," Ginny repeated, in a mutter only overheard by the butter dish.

Amelia Bones read the note from Susan again. A Parselmouth at Hogwarts! She felt the hairs on the back of her neck prickle with alarm. And Harry seemed like such a nice, normal young wizard—

She summoned her secretary.

"Get me Croaker in the Department of Mysteries."

"I'm sorry, Professor," Harry said. "I know you said I was supposed to be quiet about the whole Parseltongue thing, but it was really fun, talking to that snake. We talked about it in Hufflepuff, and everybody agreed to stand by me. Unless I turn evil, or something."

"What's done is done," Snape agreed. "The news is out, and the best thing is just to act as if it's all perfectly normal. Although—" he tried to suppress the smirk "—Professor Kettleburn would like you to assist him in a bit of research. 'A last fling,' as he puts it. He wants to write a paper on the secret lives of snakes, and he wants you to help him share their true stories with the wizarding world at large."

"There's not really that much to say, Professor, " Harry grinned. "Snake's lives really aren't all that complicated!"

"Still, it's not a bad idea to present your ability as something benign and natural and useful, rather than letting people think you're keeping a shameful secret. Kettleburn's open-minded attitude toward snakes does not reflect our world as a whole."

Charity was certainly disturbed by it, and pretending not to be—even trying hard *really* not to be. The fear of Parselmouths was something peculiar to Britain and some parts of Europe. It was not a feature of magical life in New Zealand. However much the British settlers had brought with them, other traditions had entertwined, and some traditions revered those called *"Speakers to Animals."* Those wizards and witches who could communicate with snakes were considered particularly wise. Not as esteemed as those who could converse with dragons, but nearly.

Thus Charity was trying hard to set what she called her "narrow British prejudices" aside. That did not mean she wanted to tell her mother—at least not yet. Mum knew about Severus, and she knew he was the guardian of a young student. She had recently been informed that that student was Harry Potter. Charity was not sure her mother could take much more at the moment.

"Severus!" called Minerva McGonagall's face in the fire. "Charles Weasley and the dragon handlers are here. Harry might want to meet them."'

"They're here!" Harry jumped up, very excited. "They've come to take Norbert away! We'd better hurry if we want a last look!"

Snape hated to be in such a crush, but it was important to Harry. Everyone at Hogwarts was turning out to bid the little dragon a fond farewell. It was like a prize-giving, or a quidditch match. Heads poked out from upper windows, students streamed out to the gates of Hogwarts.

Kettleburn, with Dumbledore at his side, was talking earnestly with a red-haired young man, whom Harry could easily identify as a Weasley from his resemblance his brothers. With him were two other wizards: one of them much older than he, and one about the same age. Hagrid towered behind the party, blowing his nose noisily into a handkerchief the size of a tablecloth.

"Poor Hagrid," Harry said to Snape. "He's really going to miss Little Norbert."

"I daresay," Snape agreed impatiently, turning to glare at the malefactor who had dared to bump against him.

"Severus," Professor Sprout eyed Snape without apology. "Hello there, Mr Potter. Seeing our little dragon off, are you?"

"I guess everyone is, Professor," Harry said. "Norbert was really neat. I hope I get to go to Romania someday and see what he looks like all grown up!"

"It would be very interesting," she agreed kindly. "Professor Snape, if you're at leisure, there's something I need to talk to you about in private!"

"If you like," Snape answered, wondering why she was frowning at him.

Pomona's office was a cozy place. Snape had not visited here as frequently as he had in Minerva's office, or even Filius'. It certainly expressed her interests and personality: a range of plants- some rare, some bizarre, some simply beautiful—vining up at windows and along the walls. Bookcases lined the wall least likely to get sun. The seats were cushioned, and the atmosphere friendly. For all that, Pomona could be very direct.

"This Parseltongue business—" Pomona began without preamble. "There's something dodgy about it."

"I would not have expected you to be as blindly prejudiced as the ordinary witch or wizard, Pomona."

"Don't talk down to me, my lad. I remember you when you were a skinny first-year. You know perfectly well what I mean. Harry Potter just happens to be a Parselmouth. The most notorious Parselmouth in a century just happened to be the wizard who was killed trying to murder the boy. When things are too coincidental, then they're not. There's a relationship here, and I believe you know what it is. Cause and effect, Severus. Little Hannah Abbott piped up in our meeting and suggested that when— Voldemort—exploded, the Parselmouth bit of him was lodged in Harry. Remarkably insightful, wouldn't you say?"

"I'm not sure I know what you mean—"

"Oh, rubbish! We're talking about that horcrux in Harry, aren't we? You already told Filius and me about it, Professor I-Know-More-About-the-Dark-Arts-Than-You!"

Snape knew that denial might do more harm than good. Pomona pursed her lips, and looked very sad.

"I was right, wasn't I? A shot in the dark, but I was right. That horcrux isn't just a passive piece of You-Know-Who, is it? It actually *changed* Harry."

Snape shrugged. "No trace of the Dark Lord seems to have manifested other than the Parselmouth ability."

She actually scowled at him. He was startled. Pomona almost never got angry.

"Well, what do you plan to do about it?" she shouted. Pulling herself together, she sat down heavily, and motioned Snape to a chair. "Sorry," she muttered. "You just can't let the child go about with that… *thing*… in him!"

"I told you before. I've done enough research to know that trying to remove it while he's still so young could be fatal either to his life or his magic. Flamel and I were going to devise some possible extraction techniques this summer. It can be done, but it will be dangerous."

She nodded, and then asked, "And how dangerous is Harry?"

"You can't mean—"

"How dangerous is Harry?" she repeated. "He's got that much of the most dangerous wizard in a generation in him, and it's awake and active. What else is there? Any more surprises, Severus? Were you ever going to tell us?"

"No one knows much about horcruxes," he said defensively. "Harry told me about being a parselmouth when we first met, and I told him to keep it a secret. I give you my word that I have seen no sign of anything else that resembles the Dark Lord."

"Perhaps not,' she granted. "But the horcrux has got to go, and sooner rather than later!"

"You are in no danger from Harry. What has he ever done to make you think he's a dark wizard? The idea is preposterous!"

"I never said I thought Harry was a dark wizard. Harry is good lad—one of the best. But the thing in him is not good, and we've all seen good people do terrible things when they weren't in control of themselves. Now we are going to talk to Filius and Minerva. I'm willing to give Harry the benefit of the doubt…for now…but I think we all need to be extra careful—especially you."

Not everyone felt they had any reason to give Harry the benefit of the doubt. There were scowls from students from other houses—Gryffindor and Ravenclaw especially. Some students shouldered against Harry in the halls. Some, more timid, took care to hug the far side of the corridors as they passed him. Now and then he heard whispered conversations: *"Dark wizard,"* some of them said, peering at him, watching him from the corners of their eyes as if he might run amok at any moment.

It was surprisingly hurtful. He had grown used to being a different Harry Potter, here in the wizarding world: popular, well-known, well-*liked* Harry Potter.

"I thought," he muttered, slumping in his chair in the library, "that I'd got past the days when Dudley bullied anybody who wanted to be my friend, and spread lies about me."

Susan patted his shoulder, and Ernie gave him a chocolate frog to cheer him up.

"We're with you, Harry," Justin assured him.

"Of course we are," Hannah agreed, "even if You-Know-Who *did* explode all over you!"

Their suppressed giggles made Madam Pince fire a glare their way. Other students eyed them narrowly. At one table Mandy, Morag, and Zach sat together, regarding the outed Parselmouth with suspicion. Or at least Mandy and Morag were. Zach was immersed in a huge tome of MODERN WIZARDING HISTORY.

"It's *subtle*: that's what it is," Morag hissed indignantly. "It's all been a plot to be oh-so-nice, when he's really planning to take over the wizarding world, just like You-Know-Who!"

"I always knew he was too good to be true," Mandy agreed. "My older sister—" she said significantly, with a nod to some older Ravenclaws sitting not to far away "—well, she's spreading the word there. We're all going to watching Mr Harry Potter very carefully!"

"At least we won't have to go to that *club* and pretend to be his *friends* anymore," Morag said. "Will we? Zach?" She poked him, "Zach!"

The boy scowled and looked up from his book, "What now?"

"You're not going to that club of his anymore, are you?"

He looked at her as if she were insane. "Of course I am. What else is there to do on Sunday afternoons? And the food's good."

"That's true," Mandy said, after a moment. "That's very true. And we can watch him better that way. You're very clever, Zach."

Zach grunted, and returned to his book.

More students were coming to the library, among them Hermione, who had a new notebook, ready for an exciting new project. She plumped down at the Hufflepuff table and looked at Harry with huge and hopeful brown eyes.

"Do you think you could teach someone else how to speak Parseltongue?" she asked.

"Dunno," he answered warily, surprised at the question. "Are you saying you want to learn?"

"I think it would be thrilling to communicate with another species!" she gushed. "We could make an English/Parseltongue dictionary!" She opened her notebook, and urged him, "Say something in Parseltongue!"

His other friends watched him expectantly. Harry fumbled for words, and then said, "I don't think it works that way, Hermione. I can't speak it unless I'm looking at a snake." Seeing her face fall, he felt badly. "But tell you what: Professor Kettleburn wants me to work on a research project with him, talking to snakes and finding out all about them. You could help with that."

"That's a wonderful idea!" she exclaimed. "Thank you so much, Harry! Let's go see Professor Kettleburn right away!"

"It's getting late—"

"We have time! Come on!"

She hooked her hand under his arm, and he was lifted out of his seat by the force of her enthusiasm. His friends were no help, and only sniggered at him as he was swept away by Hurricane Hermione.

The noise in the halls was subsiding, as more and more students turned in for the night. Their footsteps echoed, hers quicker than his.

"So tell me about this research project!"

Well, why not?

"Professor Snape said that Professor Kettleburn is retiring after this year, and he wants to do a last bit of writing before he goes. Something about me translating, so he can write about the 'private lives of snakes.'"

Hermione was much struck by the idea. "That's wonderful. I mean, to show understanding and compassion for a much-misunderstood creature. It's such a worthy undertaking."

"Professor Snape said it would be a good idea to use this Parseltongue thing for something like that. Show it's natural and not evil. Show *I'm* not evil."

Hermione patted his arm. "Oh, Harry! I'm sure you're not evil."

Kettleburn's big classroom was down yet another hall: this one dark and quiet. The echoes faded here to faint sussurations and rumbles.

"Let me catch you…"

Harry stopped, waving at Hermione to be quiet. "What was that?"

"What was what?"

"I heard someone say they wanted to catch me!"

"I didn't hear anything. Not like that, anyway," Hermione looked at him anxiously. "The draughts in these corridors do play strange tricks!"

Harry waited, listening so fiercely that his ears ached at the silence. There was only a faint *swooshing* sound through the walls, like water rushing through ancient plumbing.

"It's gone," he finally said. "Let's go."

Professor Kettleburn's door was closed, but he answered their knock.

"Enter."

Harry slipped into the high-ceilinged room, his nose twitching at the mixed scents of straw and animal and magic. They passed by the dark and empty enclosure that had held Little Norbert.

The professor was seated at his desk across the room, his wrinkled face shadowed oddly by the candlelight.

"Young Mr Potter! Come in, sir. And who is that with you?"

"Hermione Granger, Professor," Hermione answered readily. "Harry told me about your project, and I think it's ever so exciting!"

The old man rose to greet them. "Do you? Do you indeed? Well, well!"

Kettleburn had made plans, and enjoyed explaining them to the children. They would interview the snakes in his collection at least three times, both in the morning and at night. They would visit the snakes in the collection of a fellow enthusiast. They would go into the Forbidden Forest, and Harry would talk to the wild snakes there.

"The Forbidden Forest!" Hermione exclaimed in alarm. "Isn't that—dangerous?"

"Hermione!" Harry muttered, rather embarrassed.

Kettleburn paused, considering Albus' views and young Snape's temper. "Of course I'll look after you, Miss Granger! We'll take every precaution. No trouble in the world!"

CHAPTER 8

"IT'S ASTONISHING," Charity remarked one evening, "how quickly people can accept change."

"Some people, I suppose." Snape shrugged. "In my experience, most people are totally ruled by habit and custom. Are you speaking of Harry's extraordinary ability, and the fact that not everyone in the school is running and screaming at the sight of him?" He poured them both a glass of nettle wine and sat back down with her on the comfortable sofa.

"Well, that, of course," Charity admitted, taking her glass and clinking it against his. "I'm so glad that the students in his own house have rallied around him. I feared more of a response from the parents, but that hasn't materialized yet—or has it?"

"Albus has received some letters." He had received more than a few—including a handful of Howlers, which the Headmaster's newly tweaked post wards had neutralized before setting the Great Hall in an uproar. "However, only two were from parents of Harry's classmates."

There had been a Howler from Morag McDougal's mother.

Snape knew the woman from his schooldays, and remembered her as prone to hysteria even then. *"Think of the children!"*

Zacharias Smith's father had sent a frosty missive, inquiring into the security of Hogwarts, and threatening the removal of his son if "the parselmouth" were not carefully watched. After showing the letter to Snape, Albus had simply raised his brows at Snape in a "typical of the man" dismissal. Nothing had yet been published in the DAILY PROPHET. Snape was waiting anxiously to see what the muckrakers there would do to Harry's reputation.

Lucius had sent a letter of support to Snape, alluding to some influence at his command to quiet public fears. Surely his influence did not run to completely suppressing the matter?

"But that's enough about that," Snape said, girding himself to deal with the terrors of the upcoming conversation. "Your birthday is almost upon us. What would you like to do to celebrate it?"

"Really, Severus—" Charity was pink and hesitant. "—there's no need to make a to-do over it. We can just—"

Stiffly, he disagreed. "I *wish* to make a to-do over it. It's a fair enough question. Tell me what you would *like* to do, and we shall do it."

"Well—it falls on a Friday—maybe we could go somewhere muggle for dinner. We could even take in a film. I should like to get away, I think."

"Done, then. We can walk down to Hogsmeade and floo wherever you like. London, perhaps?"

"Yes! There's an Indian place there I love—southern Indian, though you might not like it because it's vegetarian—"

"It's your birthday. I am certain I can survive a meal without ingesting entire animals at a sitting." He had never had Indian food that he could recall. It was supposed to be spicy. He had better take some Stomach Soother with him.

So far, so good. Dinner. That was always a reasonable thing to do together. Now for the awkward part.

"You haven't said what you'd like as a gift, yet. Some guidance would be appreciated."

Charity set her glass down, and sat in thought, looking into the fire.

Finally, she took a deep breath, and said, "I rather think I should like a ring. If that thought is not what you had in mind, I wish you'd say so."

"A ring?" Snape considered her words, and then his eyes widened at the implications. "Are you saying—?"

"I asked you before what your plans were for us, and you deflected the question. Feigning ignorance, of all things! I'm asking you again. Is this a ring-worthy relationship? I need to know."

He was in heavy seas, his leaky rowboat awash. "Ah… well…perhaps…"

"I see." She rose, smoothed her robes, and prepared to leave, head held high.

"Charity!" He caught her by the arm and pulled her back.

"Sit down, you silly woman. We've got to talk."

"Let go of me."

"No." He dragged her back to the sofa. "Sit."

Hope blossomed again in her, but she tried to keep her face composed.

Snape began pacing, back and forth, crossing the hearth rug over and over. Finally, he stopped and glared at her. "I take it you believe this to be a 'ring-worthy' relationship."

"That sounds very accusatory. Yes, I thought we were happy together. I've had such a lovely time with you these past months. It seemed to me that you were having a lovely time, too. I thought we were becoming more and more compatible—or complementary, at least. Severus, I know that it's hard for a reserved man like you—a man who's had a hard life—to let down his guard and believe in his future. It's hard for me, sometimes, and I have a wonderful family to fall back on! Don't look at me like that—all suspicion and withdrawal! I love you and I love being with you. I love you in bed and out of it. I believe we can have a worthwhile marriage. For once, I beg you: put your trust in life. Put your trust in me."

"You're asking me to marry you?"

"Well, I got tired of waiting for you to propose! 'Had we world enough, and time' as the poet says. But we don't. Witches and wizards live a long time, yes. But they live their lives mostly as old people. I want children, Severus. I want a father of intelligence and good sense for them. When I see you with Harry—how generous and understanding you are—how you protect him, and guide him, and teach him—I knew that my children could not have a better father."

Snape looked away, a drunken brute and a cowering woman in his mind's eye. "I'm not fit to be anyone's father."

"Who told you that? No friend of yours, I daresay. What complete rubbish. We go through life seeing ourselves as we were as stupid teenagers. I was fat and pimply and boring, and I didn't leave Britain because of Voldemort! I went happily with my parents to New Zealand, wanting a fresh start where no one knew me as fat and pimply and boring. I came back to Hogwarts looking for another fresh start. It paid off, but even now I look in the mirror and I hardly recognize myself. It's been harder for you: spending your whole life here. It's so much harder for you to put the past in the past. But do it, Severus! Put it all behind you. You buy me a ring. I wear said ring. We get married. We make a new life together. It will be good, I *know* it."

On the precipice of glorious possibility, already half convinced, Snape wavered. "I'll still be Harry's guardian. That's going to make things complicated—perhaps even dangerous for you."

"I adore Harry. I admit that danger follows him like a big, evil puppy, but he's worth it all. And so are you. So—what do you say to my proposal?"

He grimaced. "I feel guilty…"

"Oh, Severus!"

"I feel guilty that I've forced you to propose. Give me a moment." He collected his shattered thoughts, trying to think of appropriate words. There! That would do.

He sat by her and took her hand. Repeating the words haltingly from memory, he declared; *"In vain have I struggled. It will not do. My feelings— will not be suppressed. You must allow me to tell you how ardently I admire—and love you."*

She beamed at him, and Snape swallowed, rather undone. "Severus!" She reached out with her other hand to touch his face. "Severus, that was wonderful! A ring-worthy speech indeed."

"It's from a book," he muttered.

"Yes, I know," she said softly, pulling him close. "But you say it so beautifully."

She kissed him lightly, and then he kissed her with some urgency. The urgency guided them to his bedroom and out of their clothes. It was quite a wonderful way to celebrate a complete change in their lives. By now, Snape thought dimly, his thoughts in the usual happy disarray of rapture and release, they had really got it *right*. There was a great deal to be said for polishing one's technique.

He took a deep breath, smiling lazily at the ceiling and asked, "What kind of ring do you want?"

"We could look for it together," she suggested. "Tell me the price, and we can choose something we both like. It can be something daring and unusual. Shall we start at Borgin & Burke's?"

He snorted, untangling an arm and wrapping it around her as she rested her head on his chest. "Actually, they often have magnificent pieces. Some of the old families trade there for items that aren't even cursed. I had thought, however, of going muggle, and then enchanting it afterward. Filius might be helpful."

"That is such a good idea!" She sat up excitedly, and Snape admired the view. "When people got married back at The Village, there was a party, and all the guests put a blessing—a charm, really—on the wedding ring. We could ask our friends here at Hogwarts to do something of the sort!"

Snape was instantly wary. "I think we should be extremely careful about who is allowed to perform that sort of magic. Lupin might put a hirsute curse on all our future children!"

She laughed. "Nonsense! You make people tell what they're doing and it's a kind of magical contract. It's very unwise for them to do anything secretly malicious. Think of all the magical talent under this roof! At least consider Albus and the other Heads of Houses. And perhaps Flamel and his wife would come to the wedding. Wouldn't that be delightful?"

"I suppose," he said grudgingly, really rather elated at the prospect. "We'd be married at Hogwarts, then?"

"Hmm. My mother won't like it, but it makes more sense than going to New Zealand. The whole family will have to

come by international portkey, though, and that will be rather horrid. There will be at least twelve, but—"

Snape shuddered at the thought of twelve in-laws, and then relaxed, remembering that they would be, nearly always, on the far side of the world.

"—but really," she said, continuing her reflections, "really—I think they might like to visit. It might be just the perfect time. No war, a wedding, a chance to reconnect with old acquaintances. They could book rooms at the Three Broomsticks. It would be a wonderful holiday for them! And my nieces and nephews have never seen the mother country."

"Let's speak to Albus. He'd have to perform the ceremony if we marry at Hogwarts."

"Of course! Anything else would hurt his feelings."

"We can schedule it for a few days after the end of term."

"Hmm. I think we should be married before the end of term. How else can the students attend?"

Snape stared at the ceiling, overcome at the awfulness of the image. "Students—at—wedding?" he croaked.

"I know my students would be very disappointed not to see our wedding at Hogwarts. The little Explorers, too. And think of your Slytherins. They'd all want to support you. We don't have to include them in any bridal dinner, but they could see the ceremony."

"Only if I can erect a spell shield beforehand."

"You are so paranoid."

"You have no idea."

He was growing quite accustomed to the whole idea by the time her birthday arrived. Rather smug about it, in fact. And Indian food, Snape discovered, was *wonderful*.

A world of taste and scent: velvety sauces redolent of ginger and cardamom and cumin; the varying bites of different peppers, the tang of caraway; the freshness of coriander; the comfort of rice and lentils; the sensuous desserts flavored with mango and with rose-water. Why had he not been eating like this his whole life?

"You looked pleased," Charity said, rubbing her ankle against his.

"I like it. It's interesting. Very ingenious combinations of spices. It's all rather like brewing potions, I suppose."

"Have you told Harry about us?"

"Not yet. Tomorrow, over tea. I daresay he'll be over the moon."

That widened her smile. "You think so?"

"I know so. He was trying to play matchmaker from the first."

She sipped her tea. "You haven't said what we can spend for the ring."

"Get what you like. I trust you to not be ridiculous."

"That's not very helpful. And we'll do this in the wizarding style, I presume, with the ring serving both for betrothal and marriage."

"Agreed."

She asked shyly, "Do *you* want a ring?"

"Certainly not," Snape told her without hesitation. "I can't have any kind of metal on my hands when I'm working with potions ingredients. Thus I would be have to remove it, and then I would lose it, or it would fall into a crucible and be turned to goo, and then we'd all be very sad, and our colleagues would make insufferable remarks about the symbolism of losing one's wedding ring."

"If you say so." She managed a rueful laugh. "When we get to the shop, point out some examples of rings that are within budget."

"I suppose I can do that. You need to think about the gem, too. You wear a lot of amethysts, but they're not really suitable for this kind of ring. You could have a diamond in the muggle style, if you like, but I was thinking Burmese ruby, perhaps, or sapphire."

She laughed at him. "I thought you'd suggest emerald, to protect me from poisoning. Oh! But emeralds are fragile. A cousin of mine had an emerald that cracked."

He waved an impatient hand. "One can always put an unbreakable charm on the stone. Let's see what there is."

The shop assistant was well-dressed, and sized them up, obviously unsure if they were grand enough to rate as customers of his fine establishment. They seemed to have adequate funds, and the man seemed to have some knowledge of gemstones. The woman was interested in their collection of estate jewelry, and dithered over her choice.

"That's gorgeous," Charity said, pointing out a early twentieth century piece in Art Nouveau style: a large opal surrounded by diamonds. Fire burned in the gem, with subtle hints of blue and green as well. The gold setting was prettily worked in complex curves.

Expensive, but not too expensive. Distinctive, too. Snape thought it quite attractive. It seemed to be just the sort of thing for Charity. "If it pleases you, it pleases me."

"Some muggles think opals are unlucky for anyone not born in the month of October."

"A silly superstition," he sneered. "Opals are extremely receptive to spells of all sorts. Curses, too, though I think I can prevent any of our friends from making a disastrous magical error. If that is the ring you want, then it is yours."

The shop assistant offered to size the ring to fit Charity's smaller finger, but Snape knew that Flitwick could do the work more quickly and reliably. "We'll take it as it is, and have it sized later."

"I want to wear it," Charity said, shaking her head at the velvet box. Then she took the box along anyway. "I'll be careful. This is so pretty, Severus. Thank you so much." She nearly walked into the wall, admiring her outstretched, bejeweled hand. Snape snorted and guided her along, holding the door open for her.

Outside, she looked at him, eyes shining. "We're engaged."

It was really rather exciting. "We are."

"Who shall we tell first?"

"Let's go home and celebrate. I'll tell Harry tomorrow, and then we'll see."

She put her hand on his arm and snuggled close as they walked past the shops together. She smelled very nice, and her ring sparkled in a very satisfactory way. Snapes had no famous family jewels, but his own wife would have a beautiful wedding ring. No—wait. As soon as they were actually married, Snapes *would* have a wonderful piece of family jewelry.

"So your mother is coming at the end of the month. Do you think she'll be pleased?"

"With my ring? Naturally. It's shiny. My mother likes shiny."

"She's bound to ask questions about where we're to live. Obviously we'll both be at Hogwarts most of the year. However, you should know about my worldly goods. I own a house in Sheffield, but it's a tip. My parents' old place. I'd get rid of it, but real estate in that part of town is nearly unsaleable, and it was a place to get away when I didn't want anyone to find me."

"I'd like to see it, all the same. It would be a way of knowing more about you."

"It's not the sort of thing I want you know about me. It's a tip, I tell you. I put in a bathroom some years ago, which it did not have in my parents day. Two tiny bedrooms, and a dismal kitchen."

"I'm sure it has infinite possibilities, given a woman's touch."

"My mother," he told her sourly, "*touched* it for years, and

it wasn't a bit better for it. I suppose I'll have to take you there sometime so you know the worst of it. Actually, though, we're more likely to spend holiday time in a cottage that Harry inherited. Lacewing Cottage, it's called. Pretty place with a garden. If you want to do some redecorating, you can help me there. An old woman who kept goats bequeathed it to him."

"Oh! The cute little ones? I think they're adorable!"

Snape groaned. "Don't start making cheese, or anything ghastly of that sort."

She laughed at him. "It sounds like fun. Let's go there soon!"

"All right. I want you to see it in daylight first. Don't mention it to anyone, though. Harry's supposedly living with his muggle relatives, but that's something of an exaggeration."

They would be husband and wife, so Snape considered it a decent offering to marital unreserve to tell Charity about Harry's little suite-within-a-house, and how it made him independent of the Dursleys. Some bits of the tale, when he thought about them, did not reflect particularly attractively upon himself, and he was loath to confide them. He did tell her that the Dursleys had been unkind, that they had been charmed to take little notice of Harry, and that Snape had more or less blackmailed Petunia into ceding guardianship of Harry to him.

"I doubt that you'll ever have any dealings with the Dursleys, and in fact I hope you do not. Despicable people, and not just because they're muggles. The less Harry sees of them, the better."

"That's clear to me. The cottage sounds lovely. Let's go there before my mother's visit, so I can describe it to her in detail. Your plan, I daresay, is to fix the place up for Harry, so he'll have a house when he's of age. Odd, though. I thought the Potters had some sort of mansion."

So he had to tell her of the liquidation of the Potter assets, and the long-term lease to Celestina Warbeck. Charity was properly indignant, but her vexation was tempered by the knowledge of Lacewing Cottage.

"What a nice name. Has Harry been there?"

"Not yet. I was hoping to sneak him out during the spring holidays, but we'll have to be discreet."

"You'll find," she said proudly, "that I can be the *soul* of discretion."

CHAPTER 9

"I LOVE THIS PLACE," Charity declared, exploring the upstairs bedrooms of Lacewing Cottage. "This is a wonderful house. Harry's going to love it here."

From the moment she woke up that day, she had been wild to see the cottage and get to work on it. They had celebrated their engagement again, of course, but after that, they had put themselves in order and breakfasted quickly, for nothing would do but that Charity should see Lacewing Cottage right away. It was Saturday morning, after all, and neither of them had any appointments. Besides, Snape would be talking with Harry later in the day, and perhaps they would have more information about their plans after Charity had a chance to see the cottage.

"Oh, look!" she called to him. "There's a lovely view of the meadow from this window. I love an eastern exposure. And there's a window to the south, too," she noted, struggling past crates and boxes. "There's the pond. I think this should be Harry's room. We can put things in the other room while this is arranged."

Snape snorted, enjoying her delight. "The other room will explode if we put much more in it." He peered through the grimy east window, and then *scourgified* it with a frown. "That's better. Yes, I think Harry will like the view. Let's just do the basics here, though. Harry will enjoy filling in the details. He worked with Minerva on his room at the Dursleys, and he has his own ideas about what he likes."

The estate agent had maintained the rooms on the ground floor more respectably. Other than redecorating, there would not be a great deal to do.

"I love the kitchen," Charity said decisively. "I love it. It's just right. And the bedroom isn't as bad as you think, Severus. Let me show you."

They went downstairs, and she stood in the bedroom, considering. "The furniture is rather fun."

"It has *roses* on it," Snape complained. "Everything in here has *roses* on it."

"Well, it's a bit overdone, but before we gut the room, let's try this first." She charmed the busy wallpaper to the lightest of celadon greens. "See?" she said. "Already much nicer."

"It brightens the room considerably," Snape admitted.

She worked on the room for some time. The chintz curtains would be plain forest green, and the lace portieres would remain. The fussy cushions were removed, and they

discussed their preferred linens. The oval china plaques, painted with roses, on the bed's headboard and on the dresser would also remain. Altogether the room was still much more feminine than Snape's ideal, but it was far better and no longer ridiculous. It would be Charity's room, too, and she seemed to like it. Some degree of compromise, he supposed, was necessary in a marriage.

And he found that because he had been willing to compromise about the bedroom, Charity was very open to his ideas about turning the parlor into a library.

"A nice idea. A cozy place for Harry to work on his summer assignments. I can work on my book here, too. Yes, built-in bookshelves are best. The mantel is very nice. What a charming painting!"

"The former owner in her youth," Snape told her. "Come and meet her."

The painting looked up in surprise and pleasure at their approach.

"Madam Fletwock," Snape said, "may I introduce Professor Charity Burbage, my—fiancée." He stumbled over the unfamiliar word, trying not to grin stupidly.

Charity squeezed his hand. "It will sound more natural in time, Severus." She smiled at the painting, "How delightful to meet you, Madam Fletwock. I adore this house, and I know Harry will, too!"

"So happy to meet you, my dear!" the painting replied, with a friendly nod.

More pleasantries. To Snape's dismay, Charity and Clotilda Fletwock agreed that the goats were adorable and very much a part of the whole character of Lacewing Cottage.

"And if the bonded caretakers are already looking after them in return for the milk, why not keep them?" Charity asked, sweetly reasonable. "Though perhaps we can get a share when in residence. Goats' milk is very wholesome, I understand. It might be good for Harry. Oh! Is that the orchard? I'm sure it's lovely when in bloom…"

Snape could not help but wonder what she would manage to find attractive about Spinner's End.

"Come in, Harry," Snape called. He was oddly nervous about this conversation. Foolish of him. Harry would be thrilled.

"Professor!" Harry bounced in, looking very pleased with himself. "Hermione and I were with Professor Kettleburn today, and I talked to a runespoor! It was neat. They have three heads and they all have different brains, but they're linked, and so they argue with each other. One head is the planner, one head is the dreamer, and the third is the critic. *He* was nasty, I can tell you! I translated, and Hermione wrote it all down. Professor Kettleburn said they were worth a whole book in themselves!"

"It does sound interesting. Did you finish your Defense essay?"

"I brought it. Here."

Snape took it with a nod, and settled back in his chair to read. He tapped the table in the signal that told Muffy to serve tea. It appeared, almost instantly.

"Potted shrimp sandwiches!" Harry enthused.

"Go ahead and eat," Snape gestured, still reading.

Harry dug in, the saltiness of the sandwich filling stinging his tongue in pleasant way. It had been a good day, and almost nobody had glared at him. Of course, he had been in the Magical Creatures classroom most of the time. Kettleburn had even given them lunch there. It was a lot of fun.

Snape looked up from the paper to say, "Don't put an 'e' at the end of 'develop,' Harry." He showed the boy the paper.

"Sorry. I'll fix it."

"And add a bit more to your paragraph about the reasons why red caps are a greater danger to muggles than to wizards. You need to be *specific*."

"Okay."

Snape set the paper down, and reached for a teacup. "Otherwise it's quite acceptable. Well done."

"Thanks, Professor!" Harry took a ginger biscuit and munched it slowly, enjoying the fire.

Taking a breath, Snape said, "Harry, I have a bit of news that may surprise you."

"Yes, sir?"

The green eyes were wide and a little anxious.

"It's good news," Snape said, to reassure him. "At least, I hope you'll think it's good news," he added, a little self-consciously. "The fact is—" he hesitated, but then soldiered on, "—the fact is that Professor Burbage and I are engaged to be married. We wanted you to be the first to know."

"Whoa!" Harry sat straight up in chair, beaming. "That's great! That's *really* great! When are you getting married?"

"Just before the end of term, here at Hogwarts."

Harry grinned. "I *knew* you liked each other! Didn't I say so? Is she going to be called Professor Snape, too? That's going to be confusing."

Snape actually hadn't thought about that at all. "I really don't know. We haven't discussed that. Perhaps she should keep her professional name. That will be her decision, of course."

"Did you give her a ring and everything?"

Snape inclined his head. "I did. A ring and everything."

"So this summer she'll be with us when we do stuff. That's neat. I really like Professor Burbage. The girls will be excited. They've been predicting this for a long time. They all want to be bridesmaids."

Grimacing, Snape shook his head. "Nothing is planned, Harry. Don't say anything about this anyone until we make the public announcement. And Professor Burbage has a sister and other friends, by the way. It's quite unlikely any of your Hufflepuff friends will be asked to be in the wedding."

"That's what I thought, but you know girls."

"So you're all right with this? No concerns?"

"You're not going to not want to be my guardian because you're married, are you?"

"Of course not."

"Well, there you are. I'm fine. I think it's neat that you're getting married, Professor. Are you going to live at that house of yours during the holidays?"

Snape groaned. "I haven't shown Spinner's End to her yet. I intend to put it off as long as possible."

Harry laughed at him. "She'll want to fix it up. Isn't that what girls do?" He took another sandwich. "These are great."

Leaning back in his chair, Snape considered. "Yes, they are," he agreed absently. "First though, she'll help fix up that cottage of yours!" He told Harry briefly about some of the ideas for the place. Harry knew the place existed, and that a Madam Fletwock had left it to him in her will, but not much else.

"Could we go there during the spring holidays?" Harry asked.

"That's the plan. You'll have to go to Privet Drive first, as that's your official residence, but we'll only stop there briefly and then move on to the cottage. You'll also have to return to the Dursleys' briefly before leaving. A legal formality. I'll meet you at the train and see you get there and back safely."

"I hope my room at the cottage can be just like the one at Privet Drive. I miss it sometimes."

"As you like. As I told you before, one of the upstairs rooms will be your bedroom. I'll be downstairs. The parlor will be redone as a library-study room for all of us. I'm also changing the wards there to make them more effective. Don't tell anyone about the cottage yet. Very few people know about it, and most of them are under heavy wizarding privacy bonds."

"And I can do runes there, too!" Harry said proudly.

"You can indeed. An excellent suggestion. It's your house, after all. And you can have the final word about the goats."

"Yes! You said the old lady kept little goats! I can't wait to see them!"

Snape grimaced. "Professor Burbage liked the goats, too." He poured himself another cup of tea. "So you see, we'll probably be spending much more time at Lacewing Cottage than at Spinner's End. A good thing, too. I haven't decided what to do about that horrible place of mine."

"Lacewing Cottage," Harry said to himself, trying out the name. "It's nice, but a little—girly, you know."

"It's better than the original name," Snape told him grimly. "Would you rather be the master of Old Piggery Close?"

"Maybe not. Lacewing Cottage really is a nice name, when you think about it."

After dinner, they made their announcement in the staff

room. Not a great deal of surprise, but much well-wishing and many kind words. When they expressed their hope to be married at Hogwarts just before the end of term, there was even considerable excitement.

Charity's ring was admired by all, and sized to fit her in short order by Flitwick.

"An opal!" Minerva exclaimed. "And a fine one, too! You have excellent taste, the both of you." She could not have been more pleased. Severus' life had taken a wonderful turn for the better. She had spent so many years fighting with him and worrying about him, and now it seemed everything would come out all right at last, with him matched to a charming, sensible witch, and with a fine son ready-made in Harry. She knew she was indulging in foolish speculation, but what if Charity and Severus had a child of their own—or *children?* It would be so interesting to see what *that* mix would produce. Clever, of course: that went without saying. She amused herself, imagining it all. It had been a long time since a professor had raised a family at Hogwarts.

She smiled over at Albus, who was beaming: nearly *glowing.* This must please him no end—and ease quite a bit of the guilt and unhappiness that he must feel about his relations with Severus.

Dumbledore, in fact, was quite ecstatic about the betrothal, and furthermore was convinced that he had always foreseen it. In fact, when he had received Charity's application for employment, it had been in the back of his mind that this might be a chance for Severus to meet a nice woman his own age. The poor lad didn't get out much, after all. Yes, he had made the match, and it was an accomplishment he would look back on with particular satisfaction. And to be asked to perform the ceremony here at Hogwarts! He had just the right robes for the occasion, too…

Snape winced. His cheeks were strangely sore. He realized that he had been smiling throughout, and hitherto rarely-used muscles were complaining. Charity looked very nice, blushing and bright-eyed. Snape even permitted Lupin to shake his hand and wish him well without hexing the brute. Lupin was not so bad, after all, without his *friends* to egg him on.

"My heartiest congratulations, Severus," Lupin was saying. "I hope you'll both be extremely happy!"

"I'm sure we shall be," Charity said smiling, coming to his side. "Severus and I are happy already!"

Then there were more questions, mostly from the witches: what would Charity wear? And what flowers would she carry? And who would be her bridesmaids?

In reply they were told that Charity was thinking about it, Charity liked pink roses and violets, and Charity's sister Hope would be asked.

"You must understand," she said, laughing, "that I haven't told my own family yet! I'll have to make sure that Hope can come! And the rest of my family, naturally. It will be such a delightful

holiday for them. But yes, I was thinking of just the one attendant. Severus must make his own arrangements, of course."

Severus realized what she meant. A best man? Who? Blast! Lucius, he supposed. Lucius seemed to approve of Charity, and was unlikely to refuse. In fact, he might be pleased. He had better write to Lucius right away, before the news slipped out and Draco tattled to him.

He did so immediately, sending the note off with an owl as soon as the meeting and shoulder-patting ended.

Lucius:
Charity has accepted my proposal of marriage. We plan to hold the ceremony at Hogwarts before the end of term. No date set yet, but would you consider standing with me?
A

"Narcissa!" Lucius read the note, brows raised. "You were right! She's *got* him!"

Not quite frowning, because frowning made lines, Narcissa took the note from him and read it. "Well! How nice! We must have them both to dinner next week. I wonder where she intends to have her robes made? I could help her there."

Breakfast was far noisier than usual, as the news spread from student to student.

"—It's true! Professor Sinistra said so! They're going to be married before the end of term and the students will be invited!"

"—I love weddings. I hate *him*, but I love weddings. I wonder if we'll be allowed to wear dress robes?"

"—Brother mine, I sense the opportunity of a lifetime."

"—I saw her ring! It's gorgeous!"

"—They're both so *old*. It's positively sick-making. Eeeww!"

"—I think she's rather nice-looking for a woman her age. I wonder if she'll wear white?"

"—She must have been utterly desperate! Snape, of all people! Pathetic!"

"—Well, *I* think he looks very distinguished. He's quite brilliant, you know."

"—Harry! Are you going to be in the wedding party?"

"Well," answered Harry, all untutored in the ways of weddings, "I guess they'll have *some* sort of party. Maybe dinner?"

The girls set him right about their meaning, and were disappointed at his ignorance of the vital details. "*Make* Professor Snape tell you," Susan instructed him. "We want to know!"

"We can ask Professor Burbage herself at the club meeting

today!" Hannah realized. "We can talk about wizarding weddings the whole time!"

The excitement about the wedding deflected much of the negative attention Harry had received lately. Everyone was too focused on the current wonder of the world to bother with Harry's status as apprentice Dark Lord. Even Hermione had turned disturbingly girly at the news, though she at least saw beyond the day of the wedding to the marriage itself.

"I think they're such a wonderful couple. They're both so intelligent, and they respect each other as professionals. That's so important, Harry! Weddings are very nice, and all that— and I hope we can wear dress robes, though I don't know where I shall find any—but living happily together afterward is even more important. Does Professor Snape have a house for the holidays?"

Harry longed to tell her about Lacewing Cottage, but had promised to keep it to himself. It would be fun to invite friends there someday.

Draco grabbed him as soon as he finished eating, and dragged him off to talk it over.

"Father sent an owl last night! The Professor told him first, you know."

"Well, actually he told *me* first—"

"I suppose so, but he told Father next. Father's to be his Best Man, just as he should be! I daresay it will be a tremendous affair. A Hogwarts professor is Somebody, after all, and for two of them to marry is quite the event. The Prophet is sure to cover it, and there will be no end of pictures. Father and Mother might offer the manor for the bridal dinner. We could use the Orangerie, and that's very nice. Yes, I'm sure we shall, and we can spread out into the gardens. The ceremony at Hogwarts, and then to the manor for the rest. Of course there will be dancing, and I expect Professor Burbage will see that we learn the wedding dances—"

"Dancing? Does that mean Professor Snape will have to dance?"

"Of course."

"I have got to see that!" Harry grinned. "But first, I've got to see his face when he's told about it!"

CHAPTER 10

ONE MORNING at breakfast, Harry raised a subject that had been troubling his conscience. "I *promised* her," Harry told his fellow 'Puffs. "I told Moaning Myrtle I'd visit her again. She said she be watching for whoever it was attacked me that time. Maybe she's seen something. I won't know unless I visit her. We don't have class for an hour, so why not now?"

"So you want us to come along?" Hannah asked. She licked the last of the oatmeal from her spoon and looked questioningly at Susan. "I suppose it wouldn't do any harm."

"It's a *girls*' toilet, Harry," Ernie pointed out. "It's sort of—odd. All of us walking into a *girls*' toilet!"

"You shouldn't let that put you off," Susan said, feeling it was The Right Thing to Do. "I thought I heard the the Fat Friar say that Moaning Myrtle was a Hufflepuff once. It would be polite. Harry promised, and he has to do it. We can pay a social call on a former Hufflepuff. In fact, maybe she's still a Hufflepuff, really, if you look at it the right way. She never left school, after all."

"I wonder what happened to her," Hannah said. "I mean, she must have died at school. How did that happen? It must have been an awful scandal. We get hurt all the time here, but for someone to *die*…"

Susan bit her lip. "I'm not sure its polite to ask. Is it the done thing to ask ghosts how they died?"

"Neville says that Nearly Headless Nick likes to talk about it," Harry said. "We can ask, and then say were sorry if it upsets her."

"All right, then," Susan said, very decisively. "We'll go, and stay fifteen minutes. A quarter-hour is the correct length of time for a social call. What do you say, Justin? *Justin?*"

"What?" Justin looked up from a letter. "Sorry, this is from Sally."

Distracted from their conversation, this was met with questions and interest.

"How is she?" Harry asked. "How does she like that school?"

Justin glanced back over the letter.

"Dear Justin...Wonderful experiences here, but very hard work, too... Darcy admired my turnout... Hope you are all well and safe... I'm glad that Professor Quirrell is getting help for his problem, and even more glad that I won't be seeing him again, because he gave me the creeps... We work on musicality here, so I'm taking piano lessons again, and they're quite fun..."

"Piano," Susan considered. "I've heard pianos. Those are

nice instruments. I wouldn't mind learning to play the piano, but it's not a wizarding sort of instrument. I don't think there's a piano in all of Hogwarts."

Ernie told her, "You could learn harp. Merton's sister Ambrosia plays harp, you know. Maybe she could teach you."

Susan nodded, contemplating how pleasant that might be. "How does one go about laying hands on a harp of one's own, I wonder?"

"Muggles have music shops," Harry told her. "They have shops that just sell instruments. But you know what? Hermione plays the piano. She might be able to help you. Maybe we could tell Professor Burbage that Hogwarts needs a piano."

Susan thought about that, while Justin went on with Sally's letter.

"I hope you're all still up for a visit to the Royal Ballet. They're doing La Bayadère right now, and that's gorgeous. It's set in ancient India, and has beautiful costumes and a famous white scene. That's a scene in which all the female dancers in the corps de ballet wear white. You might like that. Or you might like Giselle better. That's about a girl who dies and comes back as a ghost. That has a white scene, too. Anyway, my mum talked to your mum about it. If the school will let you go, you should get tickets soon. I'll be there and I'll see you! We'll have such fun."

Justin looked down the page. "That about it, except for her ranting about technical dancing stuff. I haven't a clue what she's on about, but she seems happy. No wait—there's a bit on the back."

"Mum heard from Professor Sprout. She's found me a tutor, and I can get back to work on magic at the end of term. It has to be soon, Mum was told, or the Ministry of Magic will make trouble for me and want my wand back. Anyhow, my Dad practically went spare when I left Hogwarts, but he's going to pay for the tutor, so that's all right..."

"And then she sends her best love and all that," Justin said. "I think she's going to be fine. She seems happy, anyway."

Harry said, "I'm glad. It wouldn't be right to make her give up her dancing." He wiped his mouth and got up from the table. "So are we going to see Myrtle or not?"

They were. Trekking to the unused toilet, they found water on the floor, just as Harry had on his first visit.

"Disgusting," Susan complained, walking gingerly through the wet. "Why doesn't Filch do something about this?"

There was an OUT OF ORDER sign posted. Harry pushed the door open and called, "Myrtle? Are you here?"

A white phantom flitted down from the ceiling, and wailed at the sight of them.

"Who's that?" she sobbed. "Come to throw something else at me?"

"What? No!" Harry answered, "It's me! Harry Potter! I said

I come back to visit, and I did, and I brought my friends, too."

Myrtle sniveled a little, and whimpered, "Oh," in a small and tremulous voice.

Harry pointed to his housemates in turn. "This is Susan Bones and this is Hannah Abbott. This is Justin Finch-Fletchley, and Ernie Macmillan. We're the Hufflepuff first years."

"How do you do?" Susan said politely. "We heard that you were a Hufflepuff, too, and we wanted to make your acquaintance."

Myrtle came a little closer, peering suspiciously through thick but immaterial glasses. "That's very nice, I'm sure," she made a face. "But I'm a Ravenclaw!" She burst into noisy sobs. "Nobody even remembers my ho-u-se!"

There was much embarrassed shuffling. Susan vowed to tell off the Fat Friar off for leading her astray.

When Myrtle's noise subsided a little, Justin said, "Pleased to meet you, all the same."

Myrtle kept staring, evidently waiting for the punchline that would send these potential tormentors into gales of laughter. And waited.

Kindly, Harry asked, "We're sorry we got your house wrong. We're still glad to visit you. What happened? Who threw something at you?"

"I don't know!" she whined. "I was here, minding my own business, thinking about death, when someone came in and threw a book at my head!"

"Well, it couldn't have hurt you," Hannah pointed out reasonably. "I mean, it would just go right through you, wouldn't it?"

It was the wrong thing to say. Myrtle shrieked, "Well, why don't you all throw your books at me, because I can't feel it? Well, ha, ha, ha! What a lovely game, I *don't* think!"

"Sorry," Hannah muttered, stepping back.

"It sounds very mean," Susan soothed her. "If we find who did it, we'll tell them off good and proper!"

Myrtle pointed over at the sinks. "It fell right through the top of my head. It's over there. It got washed out—"

Harry saw a thin book under a sink. He stepped forward to pick it up, when Ernie grabbed at his robes.

"Be careful!"

"It's just a book. How could a book hurt me?" Then he remembered some things Professor Snape had told him about books that hurt you just by touching them, and books that could curse you so you would never stop reading them. He put up a hand to stop the words that were about to come bursting from all his friends' mouths. "Yeah, I know. Let's have a look, all the same."

This book looked harmless and very unmagical: just a shabby, soggy little book with a black cover. Harry poked at it with the toe of his boot, but nothing awful happened. He bent to pick it up, and saw the back cover of the book first.

"It's muggle," he told the others. "It's from a variety store on

Vauxhall Road in London."

Everyone let out a relieved breath.

"Why did they throw it away, I wonder?" said Justin.

Harry turned it over and saw that it was a diary, and the faded year on the cover told him that it was fifty years old. Opening it, he could just make out the name "T. M. Riddle" in smudged ink.

T. M. Riddle? Harry thought and then the realization struck him. *Tom Riddle?* He knew that name. He remembered the Boxing Day dinner. That was what Professor McGonagall had called Voldemort. This was the *Dark Lord's diary!*

Did his friends know Voldemort's muggle name? He thought not. Why frighten them? He would take it to Professor Snape after dinner tonight. The Professor would know what to do with it.

"Just an old muggle diary," he lied casually. He flipped through the pages. "And it's completely blank."

That made him feel better at once.

"I'll dry it out, and see if there's any school history in it," he said, pocketing it. "Anyway, we we're here to visit with you, Myrtle. Other than mean people throwing things, how have you been?"

"Awful!" she complained. "I've waited and waited for you, but only horrible people came, and I tried to talk to them, but they made fun of me, and one of them wrote something stupid on a mirror, and I can't get rid of it."

"Show me," Harry said.

Further down the row of mirrors was written:

The Chamber of Secrets is here.

"Chamber of Secrets," Myrtle complained indignantly. "It's very rude to write on mirrors, if you ask me!"

"What did these horrible students look like?" Harry asked. "Maybe one of them could have been the one who attacked me!"

"They—" Myrtle shrugged, white wisps trailing. "They looked like students! Horrible! They walked right past me! Like I was—was—"

"—a ghost?" guessed Hannah.

"—nothing!" Myrtle moaned.

"That was very unfeeling of them," Susan agreed. "We would never do something like that to a fellow student."

"*Chamber of Secrets,*" Justin chuckled. "Is that some sort of wizarding term for a toilet?"

"No!" Ernie said, a little excited. "There's a legend about a Chamber of Secrets at Hogwarts! There's supposed to be a secret room with a monster, and it got loose a long time ago. I don't know the whole story, because it's the sort of thing that makes the grown-ups stop talking when I come into the room, but I remember my Aunt Maybelle talking to her lady friends one time."

Harry considered it. "We already know there are secret rooms at Hogwarts. Or if they're not secret, they're not known to many people." He turned to Myrtle, "Did any of them come more than once?"

"I don't know! Why would I want to pay attention to horrible people like that?"

"They might be troublemakers," Susan said, "And we would be so grateful if you would help us put a stop to them. Next they'll be writing on walls! Do tell us if you see them again."

"Well—maybe," Myrtle considered. "But you'll have to come see me if you want to know!"

Cedric very kindly used a drying spell on the mysterious diary. Harry felt its presence in his pocket in all his classes. The day could not pass soon enough to show it to Professor Snape.

The last class of the day was History, and it could not have been duller. Harry fidgeted, thinking about the diary, and finally, he pulled it from his pocket and laid it in front of him, while Professor Binns droned on about Ghastabard the Unconquered.

Sure enough, every page was blank. Harry flipped through once, and then again, and even shook the diary discreetly to see if anything might be lodged there. He stared at the first page, and glanced up to see Professor Binns looking this way. Pretending to take notes, he dipped his quill in his ink, and it dripped onto the yellowed first page in a trail of blots.

To his amazement, the ink blots vanished into the paper. Harry gasped, and then looked around. He should have known there would have been something dodgy about any-

thing belonging to Voldemort.

He nearly gasped again when a single word appeared, in neat handwriting.

Hello.

Harry stared at the word, his curiosity unbearable. Very cautiously, he wrote back.

Hello. My name is Dudley Dursley. Who are you?

The writing melted into the page and disappeared. New sentences were forming.

Hello, Dudley Dursley. My name is Tom Riddle. How did you come by my diary?

A shiver of alarm. He must be very, very careful. How could Tom Riddle be writing in this diary, when he was trapped in the Mirror of Erised? He wrote:

Someone tried to flush it away.

The reply came quickly:

I always knew there would be those who would not want this diary read. Lucky that I recorded my memories in some more lasting way than ink. This diary holds memories of terrible things that happened at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Terrible things that were covered up.

Harry bit his lip, and then wrote:

Do these things have anything to do with a place called the Chamber of Secrets?

A pause.

Yes. In my day, they told us it was a legend, but that was a lie. The Chamber was opened, and a student was killed. I caught the person who opened the Chamber, and he was expelled. I can show you what happened, if you like.

The pages flipped forward of themselves, stopping halfway through the month of June. Harry felt himself tilting forward, until he was pitched headfirst through the page, whirling into shadows.

When he was on his feet again, and focused, he found himself still at school, observing events as unseen as if he were wearing his Invisibility Cloak. There was an office—an imposing place full of portraits and an elaborate desk—and somehow Harry knew this was the Headmaster's office. A student came in, dressed in old-fashioned robes—a boy older than Harry, and taller—a handsome boy with jet black hair.

"Ah, Riddle," said the strange Headmaster.

It was like seeing a film, but Harry was too edgy to enjoy it much. Maybe these were things that had really happened, but surely Tom Riddle was showing Harry only those things that he wanted to be seen.

Riddle was afraid of being sent back to an orphanage if the school closed. That was understandable enough. There was a monster roaming the halls, and Riddle was desperate to put a stop to it. A student—*"that poor girl"*—had been killed.

The vision changed and they met Dumbledore: a much younger Dumbledore. Harry noted with interest that Dumbledore's hair was red. It seemed to Harry that a surprising lot of wizards and witches were red-haired. It was also interesting that Dumbledore was suspicious of Tom Riddle. That showed good sense.

Harry followed Riddle down into the dungeons, where Riddle lay in wait for something for a long time. Eventually he heard a loud, familiar voice. Harry grinned. It was Hagrid, a very much younger Hagrid, telling someone that he needed to get out of here.

Riddle confronted Hagrid, telling him that monsters didn't make good pets. The large boy protested, claiming that *"it never killed no one."*

His voice smooth and commanding, Riddle ordered Hagrid to stand aside, and cast a spell that lit the whole corridor. The door Hagrid was guarding flew open, and a creature rushed out: all hairy body and black legs and beady eyes, with a pair of sharp pincers that clacked. The creature bowled Riddle over before the young wizard could cast again, and Harry was cast out of the vision, falling…

"Harry!"

"Harry!"

Harry opened his eyes. He was flat on his back, and the air was filled with giggles. Draco and Hermione were leaning over him. Closer still, Neville was tugging on him.

"Can you get up, Harry? Do you need to see Madam Pomfrey?"

Professor Binns floated over.

"Mr Poldark? Are you unwell?"

"Uh—er—"

"It was your lecture, Professor," Hermione gabbled. "The story of the Goblin Legion is so terrifying!"

"Yes—yes—very well—" Binns drifted away. "It *was* a defining moment in goblin history of the sixth century. Such a response, though—interesting—perhaps my lectures have become overly stimulating for your age group. I shall correct this. Class is dismissed. Do you require medical assistance?"

"No, Professor." Harry shook his head, still woozy. "Need to pick up my things, though. All over the place."

His books and papers lay scattered. A number of students had lent a hand, stacking everything neatly on the desk.

Hermione fluttered over him, and Draco smirked.

"Fell asleep, didn't you?" he whispered. "You must have had quite a dream!"

"You don't know the half of it!" Harry admitted.

Susan packed his bag for him, and he was helped to his feet.

"Maybe you need a nap, Harry," Hannah suggested. Draco snorted first, and then everyone began laughing.

"Come on," Ernie said, "You can tell us about this dream at dinner."

But he didn't. There were plenty of other things to talk about. Harry gobbled his food quickly, and tried to catch Professor Snape's eye. That was no go, of course. He was sitting next to Professor Burbage, and they talked quietly to each other all through dinner. And then they had dessert, Professor Burbage smiling and Professor Snape looking calm and pleased in that way that was not *quite* smiling.

Everyone was talking about the wedding again. Harry decided he would wait until seven. Surely the Professor would be available by then.

It was a miserable, empty time. He dragged his bag with him, not wanting to touch the diary again. What was Riddle trying to tell him? That Hagrid had a monster that had killed someone? That was possible, Harry supposed. Hagrid hadn't even seen that a dragon could be dangerous. He called a three-headed dog *Fluffy*, of all things.

What was more than unlikely was that Riddle had heroically saved the school. If he had saved anyone, it was purely from sheer self-interest. He wanted Hogwarts open so he wouldn't have to go back to the orphanage. At least Professor Dumbledore didn't seem to be taken in by him.

He checked his watch, for the hundredth time. At last!

He rushed to the Professor's door, and knocked. No answer. He knocked again.

"Professor!" Harry called. "I really need to talk to you!"

A longer silence.

"Professor!" Harry pounded now, feeling desperate. "Professor! It's Harry! I've got to see you!"

The portrait opened, and Harry nearly fell through it, fist pounding the air. Professor Snape was there, framed in the opening, his hair sticking out every which way, without his coat, and his shirt half-buttoned.

"Harry! What the bloody hell is wrong?"

A strong hand grabbed him and dragged him into the room. Harry was tangled in the strap of his bag, and yanked at it. The air smelled like lime flowers, but Harry was too upset to take note of it.

"I've found Tom Riddle's diary!" he told Snape. " He knows about this place called the Chamber of Secrets! He made me see things!"

Exasperation turned to dark concern.

"Show me!" Thinking again, Snape said, "No—give me the bag."

With great caution, the bag was emptied, one book, one parchment at a time.

"It's gone!" Harry shouted. "Someone must have taken it at the end of history class. It was there, Professor! I'm not making it up! Susan and Hannah and Justin and Ernie all saw it. It was a little black muggle diary with the name T. M. Riddle written inside. It looked like nobody had ever written in it, but when I wrote in it, the ink vanished, and then his answer appeared. Then it vanished, too."

"Calm down," said Snape, buttoning his shirt, and then, with a muttered curse, his pants. "Tell me everything that happened."

More slowly, Harry described the visit to Moaning Myrtle—and then had to backtrack to tell Snape about the previous attack. And then, reluctantly, about hearing strange sounds in the walls from time to time.

Snape's brows rose, and Harry rushed over that part, embarrassed.

"Anyway, we found the diary under the sink. Somebody tried to flush it away, and the water's all backed up. And the words "The Chamber of Secrets is here" was written on a mirror."

"This being or whatever in the diary—*did you tell it your name?*" Snape asked, his frown stormy.

"I said my name was Dudley Dursley."

Snape sighed and then huffed a small laugh. "Well, that's one good thing. Come on then, show me this mirror."

The corridor was still flooded. Harry led Snape back to Myrtle's toilet with a certain trepidation.

"You do notice that door is marked Girls, do you not?" Snape asked acidly.

"Well—yes, of course, but I was chasing the person who attacked me and they ran in here, and then I got talking with Myrtle. It's not like the girls actually use this toilet, anyway."

There was no writing on any of the mirrors. Snape gave Harry a skeptical look. Harry ran down past the sinks.

"It would have been—here, I think. Look, Professor! It's smudged."

Snape looked. Perhaps there *had* been writing there, but it was gone now.

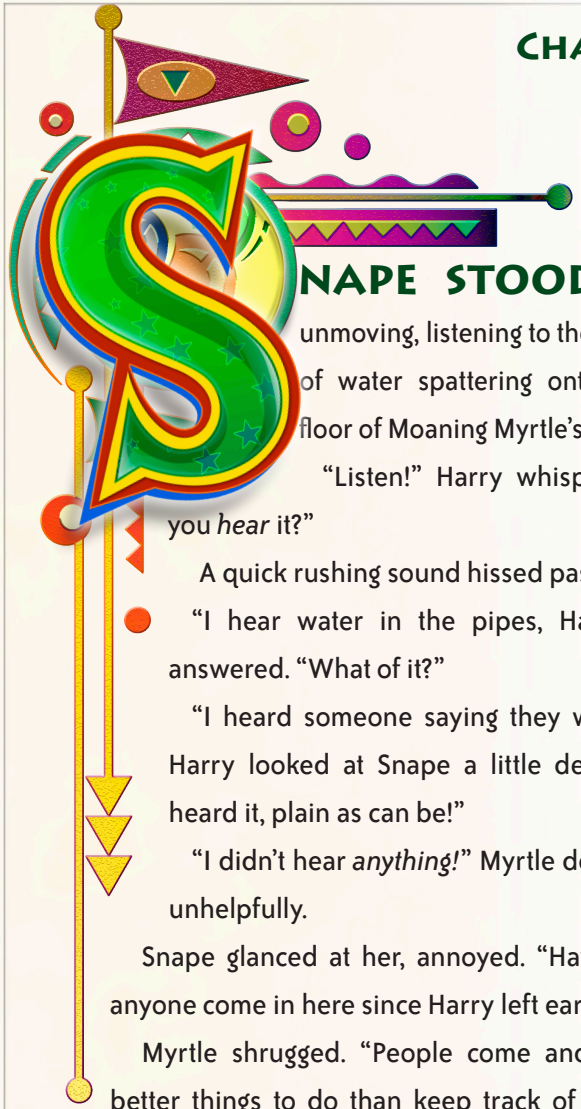
"You shouldn't have touched that book, Harry. You should have told me right away!"

"I know. I'm sorry, Professor! I couldn't stop thinking about it in History class, when I was bored—"

"Well, there's no help for it now. I'll have to tell the Headmaster and the other staff to keep an eye out for a book like that. Perhaps the prefects too. It needs to be confiscated and brought to me immediately. But that doesn't mean, Harry, that I'm letting you off lightly. Looking at something like that was bloody stupid. Harry! Are you listening to me?"

"Professor!" Harry said in a whisper, eyes wide, "Can't you *hear* that?"

CHAPTER 11



SNAPE STOOD silent and unmoving, listening to the steady drip of water spattering onto the stone floor of Moaning Myrtle's toilet.

"Listen!" Harry whispered. "Can't you *hear* it?"

A quick rushing sound hissed past them.

"I hear water in the pipes, Harry," Snape answered. "What of it?"

"I heard someone saying they were hungry." Harry looked at Snape a little desperately. "I heard it, plain as can be!"

"I didn't hear *anything!*" Myrtle declared, very unhelpfully.

Snape glanced at her, annoyed. "Have you seen anyone come in here since Harry left earlier?"

Myrtle shrugged. "People come and go. I have better things to do than keep track of them. Everybody but Harry is *so rude!*"

She was useless. Snape turned from her in disgust, and asked Harry, "What exactly did you hear?"

"So hungry, for so long," Harry told him, the sibilants dominating.

"Oooh, Harry!" Myrtle cried, "You sound like a snake! Hissing and sssisssing!" She giggled.

Snape knew that Dumbledore did not approve of exorcising castle ghosts, but anything that giggled like that should be fair game. However, he did consider what she had actually said. "Might you be hearing a snake in the pipes?" he asked Harry. "Do you think you were hearing parseltongue?"

Harry considered that. Other people were not picking up on the words, and he had never thought of himself as having extraordinary hearing. "Maybe so, Professor. I swear I'm hearing words, but nobody else seems to hear them. *Could* there be a snake in the pipes? I've heard that can happen. I heard that there are snakes and alligators living under New York City. They're probably everywhere."

"Harry," Snape sighed. "That's a ridiculous urban legend."

"Really?" Harry was surprised. "It was in a magazine that Aunt Petunia read."

"Don't believe everything you read. I can't imagine Petunia reading anything but rubbish. The question is: if there is a snake in the pipes, what kind of snake is it?"

"Maybe we should talk to Professor Kettleburn," Harry suggested. "He knows all about snakes. Maybe it got in from the lake."

"Possibly."

Snape moved over to the smudged mirror, and counted. Sink number four. *The Chamber of Secrets is here*, the message had said. What could that mean?

"Come on," he said. "We'll talk to Kettleburn, and then I have some other visits to make."

"Good-bye, Myrtle," Harry called over his shoulder.

Snape was silent for some time. Harry wondered if this was the prelude to shouting, but when his guardian finally spoke, he was grim rather than angry.

"I'll tell the Headmaster about the diary first. I'll want you there so you can give him every detail. Anything you remember could prove of use."

Kettleburn was happy to see them, and happy to talk about the progress of their research. Snape allowed him to ramble a bit, before asking what was uppermost in his mind.

"Harry believes he heard a snake in the wall. It might be in the pipes. Do you have any idea what it might be?

"What? A snake? I had no idea. Tell me all about it, Mr Potter."

Harry then had to repeat the strange words he had heard, while Kettleburn shook his head in puzzlement. "In the pipes? Can't have that. We'll have to try to lure it out, I suppose, though it would probably be a good idea to have a notion what it is before were all unpleasantly surprised."

"I just thought of something!" Harry spoke up, and ran to the boomslang's tank.

"Bob! Are you awake? I need to talk to you!"

"It is you, the Boy Who Speaks. I was sleeping. Do not speak so loudly."

"Sorry, Bob, but I need to know something. Once you said something about a snake in the walls, and I need to know what you meant."

"Did I? Yes, the One in the Walls. A Great One. I hear him from time to time. He is hungry and wishes food to be brought to him. I wish food to be brought to me, too."

Harry hurried to the treat jar, and returned to the boomslang with a handful of beetles. "Sorry!" he called to the two men. "Bob wants a bit to eat. I think he knows what I'm talking about, though."

Snape and Kettleburn came over and waited while the snake slowly ingested its meal. Harry explained to them.

"Bob once said something about The One in the Walls, and I didn't think about it until now. He says it's big and it talks about being hungry. That's what reminded Bob about wanting something to eat."

"See if you can find out how long its been there," Snape said, watching the snake eat. It was an interesting creature, and would soon be shedding its skin again, which was always handy.

Kettleburn shook his head. "We can try, of course, but snakes don't exactly have the same sense of time as humans."

So it proved. When asked, the snake said, *"The One in the Walls? It is there now. It was there before now, also."*

Harry tried something else. *"How big is it? What does it look like?"*

"It is a Great One. It looks like that."

Harry translated for the two professors. "Bob only knows that it's really big. He can't tell us how long it's been there."

"Hmm. This could be a problem," Kettleburn admitted. "A large snake which appears to be comfortable in water. I will do some research. I have never heard of such a creature getting into the pipes at Hogwarts. Our plumbing is supposed to be warded against intruders, which suggests either something that has been here for some time and recently emerged from hibernation, or something that is magically powerful enough to bypass the wards altogether."

"Perhaps one of the serpents from Loch Ness?" Snape wondered. "Perhaps an egg somehow made its way north—"

"That is one possibility," Kettleburn acknowledged. "Those are entirely aquatic, and not likely to start roaming the halls. However, if they pop up in any of the bathrooms, we might have some very startled wizards—or witches." He shuddered. "Some witches have an irrational fear of snakes, and they might start blasting curses wildly… Saw that once in the Amazon. Made a frightful mess. Don't want to see it again"

They left Kettleburn to his research, and hurried upstairs to talk to the Headmaster. Harry was feeling very wormish about the diary, and knew he had been horribly stupid. It was not

pleasant, spilling all the details about his stupidity even to someone as mild and kind-eyed as Dumbledore.

"A diary, with the name 'T. M. Riddle.'" Dumbledore sighed. "And this being wrote to you and said his name was Tom?"

"'*My name is Tom Riddle,*'" Harry confirmed. "That's exactly what he said."

Dumbledore rose from his chair and searched through some books on a nearby shelf. "And you say you saw a vision of this Tom as a young student, talking to me and other staff?"

"Yes, Professor," Harry said. "Your hair and beard were red!"

"Time does fly," Dumbledore murmured. He came back with a thick volume, some photographs stuck between the pages. "I am going to show you some pictures, Harry. I want you to point out to me the people you saw in your vision."

Such a lot of old-timey faces. Harry took the pictures in his hands and thumbed through them, shaking his head.

"Don't know him, don't know him, don't know him…" he muttered. "Wait. Him I know." He laid the photograph on the desk. "Tom called him 'Headmaster.'"

"Armando Dippet." Dumbledore looked rather sad. "He was, indeed, Headmaster in Tom Riddle's day. Go on, Harry."

"Don't know her, Don't know him, Don't know him, Don't know—that's Moaning Myrtle, Professor—or it was her before she became Moaning Myrtle—"

"Quite. Go on."

"Don't know him, don't know him, don't know him—except he looks a little like me—"

"Your grandfather, Guy Potter," Dumbledore told him, leaning over to look at the picture.

"Don't know him, Don't know her—" Harry stopped, and then laid a picture on the desk in front of Snape. "That's him, Professor. That's the Tom Riddle I saw in the diary vision. He looks a little older here, though, but that's him."

Snape found himself staring. Much the same face as the one captured forever in the Mirror or Erised. "Yes, Harry. That's Tom Riddle."

"No question," agreed Dumbledore. "This is a picture of him just after leaving Hogwarts. He took a position with Borgin & Burke's, much to everyone's surprise. After such a sterling career at Hogwarts, so many expected him to step into the Ministry as an assistant to a high-level department head. Tom, however, always had a mind of his own…"

"I thought we trapped him in the mirror," Harry objected. "How did he get into the diary?"

"That, Harry," Dumbledore declared, "is question that we must answer as quickly as possible." To Snape he said, "We must have a staff meeting immediately. All the teachers must be alerted to the diary. I will want the Heads to perform a room search, preferably tonight. The students' bags must be searched as well. We must secure this diary."

"What is it, Professor?" Harry asked. "How can a diary be so smart? Is it like a recording, like a film or something?"

"Not exactly, Harry," Dumbledore said heavily. "I fear it is something far more dangerous. I would like you to return to your room now. You may use my floo and pop right back to the Sett."

Harry blinked, "You know it's called the Sett? That's supposed to be secret!"

"I know many things, Harry," Dumbledore tried to smile, "but not always the things I need most to know."

"Good night, professors," Harry said, wishing he could talk more to Snape in private. He would tomorrow, anyway.

"Good night, Harry," Snape said. "Don't mention any of this to *anybody*. Not even to your very best friends."

"All right."

"And don't play the martyr! And fix your essay—"

But Harry had already swirled away.

The two men were quiet for three deep breaths.

"This is very bad," said Dumbledore.

"Another horcrux," Snape nodded, looking into the fire Harry had just passed through. "It must be another horcrux. The Dark Lord made one when he was in school, for God's sake! How is it possible?"

"Such brilliance…" Dumbledore let the words drift away. "I wonder if the diary and the sudden appearance of this alarming snake are somehow connected."

"Early days yet. We don't know the snake is a real threat. Perhaps it's merely a coincidental nuisance. Kettleburn is at work on it."

"I think I'll have Remus assist him," Dumbledore decided. "Remus has a sound knowledge of the Dark Arts—"

Snape sneered. "—And an intimate knowledge of Dark Creatures! Yes, yes, I take your point. By all means, let's not have eruptions of toilet serpents causing hysteria amongst the witches of Hogwarts! We don't need that kind of disruption while were trying to make an orderly search for the diary. *That* is our objective, Headmaster! *That* is what matters! The snake might even be a diversion, created to distract us from the diary itself."

"Possibly. And Harry spoke of the Chamber of Secrets. The message was on a mirror in Myrtle's bathroom, you say?"

"The ghost claims to have seen nothing, but the mirror was smeared. I have always regarded the Chamber of Secrets as a myth. I realize there was the scandal when a girl was killed, but—"

"The Chamber of Secrets is real," Dumbledore told him. "I am sure of it. I am also sure that it is somehow central to the mystery we must now unravel."

The staff took Dumbledore's warnings about the diary very seriously. They were not, of course, told it was a horcrux: merely that it was an extremely dangerous magical book

that could and would enthrall students, and that the current owner might be in deadly peril. They were to assist in searching the students' rooms and backpacks. In class, they were to keep their eyes open. If found, the book was to be brought to the Headmaster instantly. No one was to look at it, or open it, or otherwise try to play the hero. Rather, they were to bring it to the office, along with whomever had it. The student might need immediate medical attention.

"And as to our other problem. We appear to have a snake—possibly a magical snake—at large in the walls and pipes of Hogwarts."

There was shuffling and alarmed murmurs. Dumbledore hastened to reassure them all. "We don't know if it represents any real threat, but we do want it sorted out. Remus, dear boy," Dumbledore said, "I would like you to help Sylvanus catch our uninvited guest. We must discover what sort of creature were dealing with, and then determine the best means of dealing with it—whether trapping it or luring it or simply killing it would be the best thing."

"Splendid idea," Kettleburn seconded. "These old bones aren't as nimble as they used to be—what I've got left, anyway—and I think some help crawling about the plumbing would be just the thing."

"You can count on me, Headmaster," Lupin answered, pleased to be asked.

Snape sneered, but managed to look away before Charity could catch him at it.

After that meeting, the Heads of House were asked to stay behind. At Snape's insistence, they were told the truth.

"He made another horcrux!" Minerva was appalled and astounded. "And he made it as a student! Where did he get such information? Who taught him this magic?"

"I cant believe that Merrythought would have done it," Flitwick said, shaking his head. "Too scrupulous. Too *smart*, for that matter. Of course, Merrythought is dead, and beyond questioning."

"Perhaps a random question in class, or something in the library," ventured Sprout.

Snape had his own ideas. "Or perhaps an indulgent Head of House, vain of his knowledge and his brilliant student?"

"Horace?" Dumbledore asked. "Not intentionally. Not Horace, poor old chap!"

"Not intentionally!" Minerva sniffed. "You know perfectly well, Albus, the place that is paved with good intentions!"

"I don't for a moment think that Slughorn is capable or even desirous of making a horcrux himself," Snape granted. "He wouldn't have to be. As brilliant as the Dark Lord—as *Riddle* was—he was capable of making huge intuitive leaps with very little information. A random question, Pomona, as you suggest, but not in class. At a meeting of the oh—so—exclusive Slug Club, more likely!"

Minerva looked wearily at Dumbledore. Just as she thought Severus was over his awful youth, something like *this* had to remind him of it. Horace had never treated Severus fairly. Horace, to be honest, always favored the pretty and talented over the merely talented—even over the extremely talented. Severus appearance in his teens had been rather deplorable. His second-hand robes and scuffed shoes did not reflect the sort of image Horace had of himself, or what he was pleased to consider the *crème-de-la-crème* of Hogwarts. Of course, Severus had grown into his looks as he matured—especially that very *distinguished* nose—and he cleaned up very nicely now. Some of that was Charity's influence, naturally, and a very good thing too. They probably should confide in Charity. She was a responsible girl, and would help Severus get over the bad memories that this event was bound to generate.

Dumbledore nodded, though he was thinking along very different lines.

"I shall seek Horace out, and discuss the matter with him. In the meanwhile, I urge all of you to search diligently and to study all your students with fresh eyes. Has anyone's behavior changed markedly since the beginning of term? Who is withdrawn or absent-minded? Whose grades are slipping? These could all be signs. We must find the student and get help for him or her as quickly as possible. I don't have to tell you that the consequences of this diary possessing a student would be disastrous. It is hard to say exactly for what purpose Riddle intended this creation, but it bodes no good for anyone else."

"I think we need to bring Charity into this discussion," Minerva said. "If Harry lost the book in History class, he lost it to another first year. Only Charity and Professor Binns habitually see all the first years together. It's useless to ask Binns to take any notice whatever of his students, but Charity should be alerted."

"Another first year," Snape agreed, feeling very uneasy. He had deduced something of the sort himself, but hoped that the first year might have passed the book off to someone older, at the older student's instance. "It's awkward if it's a first year. They're the ones we know the least. It will be harder to gauge behavioral changes among them."

Charity was called back, and looked a bit harassed. It made Snape feel a bit guilty, knowing that she was dressed, and then undressed, and then dressed, and then undressed, and now dressed one more time. She shot Snape an exasperated glance, and he managed a shrug of apology.

She was not exasperated, but appalled, when she was told the whole truth.

"A piece of You-Know—of *Voldemort?*" she managed. "A piece that *thinks?* That's—" she paused, at a loss for words.

"It is an extremely dangerous situation," Dumbledore completed her thought. "As we think it most likely that a first year has the diary, we need you to watch the students, especially

during your club meetings. Take notes, if it helps you, but let no one see them. We must find this diary and help the student involved."

She looked so horrified that Snape felt for her, and he accompanied her through the floo to her rooms.

Sinking into her sofa, and kicking off her shoes, she moaned, "Oh, poor Harry, the danger magnet!"

He sat down with her and took her feet in his hands, rubbing them. "Afraid so. Yet again he's in the center of a potential disaster. Dumbledore thinks everything is connected in some abstruse way or other: the diary and the snake and the mysterious Chamber of Secrets."

"Oh, the snake!" Charity groaned again, face-palming herself. "I hope they can do something about that right away. Mother's coming next week, and the last thing we need is for some snake to make its appearance in her toilet!"

Snape considered the matter. It would be very bad, of course: simply appalling. However, it was one way to solve any potential mother-in-law problems.

CHAPTER 12

THE SEARCH of the dormitories turned up no end of dangerous, scandalous, and forbidden items, but what it did not turn up was the old and shabby muggle diary of Tom Riddle. It was tacitly agreed among the Heads of Houses that they would ignore all but the dangerous items they found at the moment, or they would be bogged down by side issues while the true goal slipped through their grasp. Minerva found she would have all her time monopolized dealing with the Weasley Twins and their hair-raising cache if she did not focus on what needed to be done.

The prefects' bags were searched next, equally without success. They were put to work searching their housemates' bags, with the supervision of the teachers. The search was duplicated by being performed in each class. No sign of Tom Riddle's diary resulted. Snape approached Dumbledore with an unusual request.

"Allow me to use legilimancy on every one of the first years, Albus. It may be the only way."

Dumbledore stroked his beard, genuinely worried. "I don't

think I can, Severus. We might get away with it if we limit it to the muggleborn, but the other children might notice something amiss and tell their parents. It's quite illegal, unless we have written permission from parents or guardians, and we won't get blanket permission unless I tell them what were looking for. We're bound to have some hold outs. Some people value their privacy very strongly, and quite a few have things to hide. It's even possible that some of the children have been taught the rudiments of occlumency. No, Severus. I can't see that it's worth it. We'll earn a lot of ill will, without definite gain. Even the muggleborn might notice your intrusion and mention it to their friends. We'll have to continue to use other means."

Harry did not enjoy the searches himself. He had stood by his bed when Professor Sprout came through and he watched her sort through his trunk and book bag with considerable embarrassment. He hadn't been folding his clothes as he should, and his trunk was a complete mess. His bookbag was not much better, and his Head of House told him sternly to clean away the melted sweets. Justin and Ernie shook their heads in disapproval, standing there like proper young Hufflepuffs who knew how to fold clothes and keep book bags neat. His friends wondered about the reason for the search, but Harry had promised to say nothing, and this promise he was determined to keep.

Professors Kettleburn and Lupin were on the track of the snake. Harry himself was tasked with listening for said creature, and alerting the professors at once if he heard anything suspicious.

In the middle of this, Patience Burbage arrived to visit her daughter.

Snape was braced for every variation of the monstrous creature known as mother-in-law. He had read of them and heard of them, and wondered what kind of misery this aspect of marriage would visit upon him. With the furor over the snake and the diary, it had been decided that it would be best if Madam Burbage stayed at the Three Broomsticks. Charity arranged it, telling her mother that it would give the three of them more privacy. Patience could join her daughter in her rooms for tea and a Hogwarts tour on Saturday. Snape slunk along with Charity to Hogsmeade on the day appointed for her mother to arrive at the International Portkey site.

Promptly at three, a robed figure spun out of nothingness, and sat down abruptly on the floor.

"Oh, my! Hello, Charity darling! That was—oh, you *are* tall!"

He was not prepared for her to be quite a bit like Charity—and the nice bits at that. Between them they helped her to her feet.

Plumper and rounder: greyish rather than blonde. She had the same cheerful smile and snapping brown eyes. She seemed quite ready to be friends with the man who had asked for the hand of her daughter in marriage. He simply had not expected his prospective mother-in-law to be *nice*.

He supposed he should have. Charity was certainly nice, and it must have come from somewhere. Maybe her father was the vicious bastard of the family…

"I'm so happy to meet you, Severus," she said, beaming at him. "I've heard such wonderful things about you. Please call me Patience. Charity, darling, you're right. He's so very tall and distinguished-looking! Even when I'm standing up! Don't mind me gushing, Severus! I'm so happy that you and Charity have found each other here at Hogwarts, and that you have so much in common. That's so important in building a relationship." She caught sight of Charity's hand, "Oh! Is that the famous ring? How gorgeous! Severus, you have such wonderful taste!"

"I let Charity pick it out," he grunted, rather ungraciously.

"All the better!" Patience answered, without missing a beat. "That shows so much consideration and respect from the very start—doing these important things together, and consulting one another's feelings!"

She was quite evidently determined to like him and make the best of things. That too, was very like Charity. So like Charity, in fact, that Snape felt quite disarmed. Sarcasm and disdain, his social weapons of choice, were of no use here. It would be like kicking a puppy. Like kicking a puppy in front of its owner. Like kicking a puppy in front of its owner, whom Snape wished to marry.

And after all, it was not quite alien. Lily's mother, Virginia Evans, had been kind to Snape and had always behaved as if she liked him. Even after his friendship with Lily was over, she had never cut him dead or spoken rudely to him. Some people, he accepted, really were nice. If this was not just an act in public—and Charity was not behaving as if she thought it was—then his fears might well be groundless.

All the same, he could take comfort in the fact that she lived on the far side of the world, and that International Portkeys were quite expensive.

She continued to be nice throughout the afternoon and well into dinner. Afterward, they strolled through Hogsmeade, stopping first at Honeydukes, so Patience could reacquaint herself with the owner and his wife.

"Ambrosius Flume!" she cried, "Don't you remember me? I'm Patience—Patience Smethwyck—and Patience Burbage for donkey's years! How are you? How is Theobroma?"

Theobroma was fine, it became evident, as the woman herself appeared. There was a great deal of hugging and crying and shaking of hands and introductions. Snape tried to stand behind the women, but his height made it impossible to avoid discovery. Of course they knew Professor Snape! Oh, and he and young Professor Burbage were engaged to be married? What wonderful news! Snape painfully arranged his features, muscle by muscle, in what he hoped was an agreeable expression, and they were deluged with gifts: a box of licorice wands

for himself (and he had to admit that he did like them very much); a box of chocoballs for Patience, which she and her old friends laughed about significantly and immoderately; and finally a huge box of deluxe chocolates "for the bride!"

They were not done there, because Patience had to buy gifts for everyone she knew at home.

"So difficult to get the real thing in New Zealand. You ought to open a branch in The Village," Patience told them. "Most of the magical chocolate we get is that inferior stuff from Antwerp!"

She was pitied and given a bulk discount. Promises of a nice long visit later were made, and they shrank the parcels and moved on. Snape shuddered, hoping Patience was not friends with every merchant in Hogsmeade. Was this what was meant by a "bridal shower?" His prospective mother-in-law did have a serious flaw, it appeared. She seemed to like *everyone*.

She was ready to like Harry, too, fortunately.

"Charity tells me that you are the orphaned Potter boy's guardian. How kind of you to step forward! You were childhood friends with the mother, I understand?"

"Yes. Her sister is a muggle and unable to deal with a magical child. She asked me for help." That was his story, and he was sticking to it. Charity caught his eye and gave him a naughty grin.

"Well, that's wonderful! Charity has written to me, telling me what a fine boy he is—so full of ideas, and so willing to befriend his fellow students. A true Hufflepuff!" She laughed self-consciously. "And I suppose I just gave away my house affiliation. Of course, it's silly to make too much of it when you're my age, but I confess I've a soft spot for the Badgers still. I hope I can meet him. He sounds delightful."

"Of course, Mother," Charity said. "Severus, if it wouldn't be too much trouble—could you and Harry join us for tea on Saturday? I know it's your usual bonding time, but I'd really like him to meet my mother."

"Fine with me." Not entirely, but he could have a chat with Harry about various developments some other time on Saturday.

"And you're redecorating his cottage? That sounds like such fun! You have a house of your own in Sheffield, I understand."

Oh, no.

"It's not much," he shrugged. "I inherited it from my parents, and it's a bit of a slum. Only a two up and two down, and I had to put in a bathroom myself. Half the houses in the street are vacant. I'm thinking of trying to sell it, actually."

"Really?" Patience's expression was thoughtful and—Snape was surprised—just a touch *shrewd*. "I've heard that Sheffield is ripe for redevelopment. Some of my relatives here invest in real estate, and they think that those decaying mill towns might be the next big thing. Is the house next to it vacant?"

"Yes."

"Well, there you are!" she said, looking a bit excited. "I've heard that people are buying these little old places two at

a time, gutting them, and making something quite lovely of them! I seem to recall that the British wizarding world is always short of decent housing—especially decent housing that's—how shall I say it? Suitably *private*."

"What a wonderful idea!" cried Charity. "It would be such an opportunity! We should find out what houses are going for there. It could be a brilliant investment!"

Bloody hell, now she's gone and got Charity all excited about it, too. Who knew she was interested in things like investments? Snape was not eager for these women to see his bachelor digs, and even less eager to reveal his working class origins quite so nakedly. He was so used to despising his home, he had never imagined anyone seeing any value in it.

"I suppose we can look into it," he said, with admirable calm. "We can't visit there anytime soon of course, with everything going on at Hogwarts, but in a few months, why not?"

It was obviously not what the two women wanted to hear, but the excuse was plausible enough. He would have to find a way to clean the place up before Charity's inevitable visit.

The two wizards had been in the drained, huge central pipes below Hogwarts for what seemed like hours.

"It looks like whatever it was slid through here," Lupin said, his boots soaking wet. Something glittered in the dim light at a bend in the pipe, and he bent to retrieve it. Not far away was another. "What do you make of these?" he asked Kettleburn.

The old professor brightened his *lumos* and peered at the flat, shining objects through his spectacles.

"Scales! Well done, Lupin! Well done, indeed!"

"Can you identify them?"

"I am sure I can, with time and the proper reference materials. If you are asking if I can identify them instantly, I fear not. However, this is definitely credible support for Mr Potter's claim of a snake at large in Hogwarts." The scales were carefully wrapped in cloth and tucked away in a pocket of his robes.

Lupin threw another glance around the corner of the pipe. "I never doubted Harry. He's not the sort of boy to invent a story in order to make himself more important."

"I quite agree. A fine lad. We might wish to bring him down here to have a listen." He sighed. "I believe that this is all I can manage for now. Let us return to my office and see what we can make of your find."

Magic could do only so much. The pipes stank, and everywhere was the sound of dripping water. Kettleburn used a cane for balance. Lupin stayed ahead, looking about cautiously. He had no great knowledge of snakes, but those scales had seemed to him rather *big*. He listened intently, not liking the idea of being surprised down here. "There's the ladder," he said finally. "May I help you, Professor?"

"Oh, well, yes, I suppose—just a bit. Right, thank you, Lupin. I can handle the rest, I think."

They had emerged in a stone chamber in the dungeons. Lupin considered all their options, and remarked, "Perhaps we should collect Severus on our way. I imagine he would be very interested."

"What? Oh yes, yes. Good idea. Sensible chap, young Snape."

Snape, however, was not in his office, nor in his rooms.

"That's right," Lupin remembered. "Charity's mother was arriving today."

"That would be Patience Smethwyck, I believe," Kettleburn nodded. "Good student. Not squeamish, as I recall. Well, then, to the laboratory…"

Charity and Snape returned to Hogwarts after ten, a little tipsy from too much good sherry in one of them, and Fire-whisky in the other.

Filch met them the moment they stepped through the door. "Headmaster wants to see the two of you," he smirked, much as he would to a pair of truant third years.

Charity refused to take notice of his expression. "Thanks," she said blithely. "So nice of you to wait up for us!" Snape tucked her hand in the bend of his elbow and the two of them swept past in their grandest manner.

"Mother likes you," she confided. "I knew she would. She's trying so hard not to be all 'I told you so,' with me, because she knows I can't stand it when she does that. Nonetheless, she *is* all 'I told you so.' She's so happy that you're a wizard. She feels very strongly that mixed marriages are a mistake, and she gave me no end of awful warnings before I married Brian. It's not that she cares about blood: she just doesn't think a muggle can really adjust to life with a witch or wizard, and quite honestly, I now see her point."

"My father was a muggle," Snape admitted.

"Oh!" For a moment Charity looked horrified at her gaffe.

"—and he certainly never adjusted to life with a witch. I have to agree with your mother."

"Oh!" This time Charity sounded profoundly relieved. She cuddled closer to him as they walked, and he gave her hand a pat. Charity thought about telling him about the other thing her mother warned her about: that marriage to a muggle would *"ruin her babies!"* Severus had not expressed himself eager to start procreating, but he had not outright refused. Talking too much about babies before the marriage might make him bolt like a spooked stallion. She bit down hard on the words, and resolved to save them for the day their first child showed signs of magic.

They ascended to the Headmaster's office, and found it full. Flitwick and Sprout and McGonagall were there, along with Kettleburn and Lupin. Dumbledore nodded at their entrance, looking as grave as Snape had ever seen him.

"Charity—Severus—" He nodded to them. "I hope Madam Burbage is well."

"Quite, Headmaster," Charity answered.

"Since we are all here," Dumbledore said, "I think we should not delay in hearing about what Sylvanus and Remus have discovered. They have been poking about down below Hogwarts for the past week, and have quite a bit to show for it." He gestured to his desk, where a linen handkerchief was spread out. On it lay two iridescent objects that Snape first took for decorative tiles. He looked again, and realized that they were too thin.

"I think," Kettleburn said, "that I must recapitulate the processes by which Professor Lupin and I reached our conclusion earlier this evening. As the Headmaster indicated, we have been exploring the less-traveled paths beneath Hogwarts for the past week. In the big drains we found some animal remains in the form of masses of bone and gristle: cats, owls, rats, and other small creatures—even an unfortunate jarvey. There was spoor and there were trails. Everything pointed to a large predator of the order *Squamata*. The lack of prints indicating limbs suggested that it was indeed a member of the suborder *Serpentes*…"

"A snake," Lupin explained.

"I believe I said that," Kettleburn said. "A rather large snake, given that its trail could not be found in the pipes that Professor Lupin himself could just barely squeeze into."

Lupin nodded, with a grimace of disgust. Snape smiled happily. *What an excellent use of Lupin's time and abilities.*

"So far, we have not been able to find any breach of our walls or drains that would permit such a creature ingress into Hogwarts. Nor are there signs of the wards being penetrated."

"That would mean," said Flitwick, "that whatever it is has been here a very long time."

"Exactly," agreed Kettleburn. "Not a new arrival. A long-time inhabitant, certainly. Possibly it has recently emerged from a hibernation, either natural or magical. It could be that it has been here for hundreds of years and we have only now noticed it because Mr Potter is a parselmouth, and heard it speaking."

"There have been other parselmouths at Hogwarts," Minerva said darkly.

"Well," shrugged Pomona, "*He* was not likely to share anything unless he could make something of it for himself, you know. Maybe he did hear it, and had a good laugh at our expense."

"There is something in that," Dumbledore agreed. "Tom did not like to share information. So you think that this creature has been here for many years. Perhaps its presence is benign, other than devouring the odd pet that wanders into the sewers?"

"That is one interpretation," Kettleburn said. "The two beautiful objects in my pocket handkerchief are scales, very probably from the creature. The size of the scales suggests that the beast is at least thirty feet long. That particular iridescence, with the reverse polarization and the subtle fluorescence, makes it almost certain that our subject is magical in nature."

Snape drew close for a look, wondering if they could be useful potions ingredients. "Have you identified them?"

"Not precisely. I suspect they are from a very rare creature. The illustration in some of my older books are pen and ink and do not reflect the gorgeous colors we see here. These scales could be from a number of magical snakes, though their size narrows down the candidates considerably. What suggested the identity of this creature was something else entirely."

Patiently, Dumbledore asked, "And that is—?"

"May I direct your attention to the curious matter of the spiders?"

There was a bewildered stir at the apparent *non sequitur.*

Pomona frowned, and said, "I don't believe I've seen *any* spiders lately."

"Yes: and that is the curious thing," remarked Kettleburn.

CHAPTER 13

"A BASILISK?" Minerva McGonagall repeated for the third time. "A basilisk? A *basilisk* has been living in the drains of Hogwarts, possibly for years and years?"

"Possibly for centuries," Kettleburn confirmed. "There are ways a very small creature might have slipped into the drains, but considering the slow growth rate of basilisks, and the creature's large size, it is evident that it has lived at Hogwarts far longer than any of us."

"But that's all right then, isn't it?" Flitwick wondered. "I mean, no one's been hurt or killed. There doesn't seem to be a way for it to get out of the drains and harm anyone. It's just been down there, living its basilisk life, eating the odd pet or wild animal. It can't come up into any of the toilets, because the pipes are too small. So," he struggled with the idea, "it's essentially quite harmless."

"I wouldn't say it's *harmless*," Snape put in grimly. "It is simply *contained*."

"It's interesting, though," Lupin cocked his head, looking more than ever, in Snape's opinion, like the wild animal he was. "Most legends are founded in fact. We all know the old story about the Chamber of Secrets. Salazar Slytherin was supposed to have left a monster in there. I'm not saying that this basilisk is a thousand years old, just that there is the story, and a thirty foot basilisk certainly counts as a monster."

Snape felt deep alarm. He stared at the Headmaster, not sure what might come next out of the old man's mouth. Kettleburn was frowning, looking like he was making connections.

"I'm not sure" he began, and stopped. "Most of you know that back in the forties there was a scandal when a student died under suspicious circumstances…" He looked at Dumbledore. "Albus! You remember that! There was talk that the Chamber of Secrets had been opened, and then no end of trouble. Almost had to close down Hogwarts."

"I remember it all too well," Dumbledore sighed. "The matter was considered closed, after a cursory investigation and the punishment of someone I was convinced was only a scapegoat."

"Poor old Hagrid," Kettleburn agreed.

"Hagrid!" Charity burst out. "Has Hagrid something to do with this? We all know he loves fantastic beasts. We should ask him what he knows!"

"My dear girl," Albus said, "I am quite convinced that Hagrid is not involved in this in any way. It is quite possible that the student was killed by magic, and not by a creature at all."

Kettleburn was shaking his head throughout this speech, and it was obvious that he entirely disagreed with Dumbledore—or at least with his last words. "No, Albus. While it's possible it might have been the Killing Curse, based on the unmarked condition of the body, there were other traces that suggested a large creature of some kind had been present. I'm not saying that Hagrid summoned it, but he did have some sort of large pet at the time that got away, and the Ministry was only too happy to blame him."

"That's why he never finished Hogwarts," Lupin said, suddenly understanding.

"He was expelled, and had nowhere to go," Dumbledore confirmed. "I was certain of his innocence then, just as I am today, and gave him a place and a home."

Snape thought of the diary. Clearly it had shown Harry something of this event. However, he did not want any more people knowing the true nature of that book. He would question Harry himself. Perhaps Hagrid might have something to contribute.

"For the sake of clarity, Headmaster," he said, "I think we *should* have Hagrid in to tell us his own account. We are grown witches and wizards, and the Ministry is not eavesdropping at the moment. Perhaps he saw something at the time—something that the investigators ignored because it did not fit their preconceived ideas—something that might throw light on that event. A basilisk could kill and leave no mark. If there is a way for the creature to find its way into the school, we must explore every avenue to prevent it!"

"Hear, hear!" agreed Sprout. "Very sensible, Severus! Let's have Hagrid up—not to frighten the poor fellow, but to have a chat and hear his side."

The consensus was clearly with the idea. Hagrid was summoned, and the wait was sweetened with tea and biscuits.

Minerva whispered to Snape, "I have such misgivings about all of this, Severus. Too many extraordinary things at once. Something unpleasant is happening. I feel it in my bones."

"Taking up Divination, are you? he quipped.

She glared at him. "It's not at all funny."

He shrugged. "No, it isn't."

Hagrid made his appearance rather soon, in fact, dominating the room through sheer size.

"Somethin' you wanted, Professor?"

"Yes, come in, Hagrid, come in."

He is uneasy at being the focus of their interest. Snape sympathized to a certain extent. He would not wish to be summoned and questioned like this. Dumbledore, as always, found a way to sugar-coat it all.

"We believe we've found a most remarkable creature living under Hogwarts, Hagrid. Professors Kettleburn and Lupin wanted you to know about it, as you're so fond of magical beasts."

"Wha' sort of creature?" Hagrid asked, excitement making

his oversize teacup tremble dangerously.

Kettleburn took over. "It might be a basilisk, Hagrid. Everything points to it."

"A—a—basilisk?" Hagrid's face beamed like the everlasting Sun. "Never seen one of *those*."

"Few have. And we think it might be the answer to a fifty-year-old mystery here at Hogwarts."

Dumbledore interposed. "Hagrid, I know this is painful for you to speak of, but we need to know everything that happened during that terrible time of yours—when those rumors about the Chamber of Secrets were circulating, and when that student was killed."

The half-giant looked stricken. There was some embarrassed shuffling, and Dumbledore said kindly. "No one here suspects you of anything, Hagrid. We are trying to understand what really happened. You told me at the time that the creature you were keeping was an acromantula."

"An acromantula!" Charity burst out, and covered her mouth, glancing at Snape in embarrassment. "Sorry," she whispered. "Not too fond of spiders."

There was a ripple of amusement, and Hagrid chuckled ruefully. "Not too many are," he agreed. "But Aragog was a real good sort. I still see him from time to time, out there in the Forest. Always has a friendly word for me, does Aragog."

"I daresay," said Kettleburn, accepting this without much

surprise. "And the girl's condition revealed no toxin in her whatever, much less any stabbing wound that would have been present had she been killed by a spider. However, at the time, you were not able to produce Aragog, and the Ministry did not seem much interested in a thorough investigation. Tell us, how did Aragog happen to get away from you?"

"'Twere him, Professor!" Hagrid looked at Dumbledore with a hint of desperation. "You know the one! It was Tom Riddle, sneakin' after me, accusin' me. He cast a spell at Aragog, but Aragog was a mite too quick for him. Ran away, and a good job, too! Tom Riddle allus' had it in for me. And there he was, getting a medal and his name stuck up in the Trophy Room, and me blamed for it all!"

"Tom Riddle?" Flitwick murmured. "But that's—"

"Quite so," Dumbledore said. "The boy-who-would-be-Voldemort used Hagrid and his exotic pet to divert suspicion from himself. I am certain that Tom Riddle was behind the episode, which begs the question: if Tom Riddle could command a monster capable of killing without leaving a mark, what might it be? That we have discovered a basilisk suggests the answer."

Minerva disagreed. "But you said it was contained. How did it get out into the school?"

Lupin glanced at Kettleburn. "The two of us were able to get into the drains through the access in the dungeon. Since Riddle was a parselmouth, he heard the beast, realized the possibilities, and opened the trap door."

Kettleburn nodded. "It is as good a working theory as any. The trap door is warded, and has an elaborate locking mechanism. The basilisk certainly could not have done it itself. I don't recall any work being done on the drains at that time, so it is unlikely it happened by mere carelessness. However, we might check the records for any odd events occurring when repairs were underway."

"A basilisk!" Hagrid was once again thinking of the glory of it. "A basilisk! Just fancy! Love to see it. Read about 'em, 'o course. Wouldn't want anythin' to happen to it."

Sprout laughed. "You'll have to keep the roosters away from it, you know!"

"Tha's right!" Hagrid nodded eagerly. "A rooster's crowin' kills a basilisk. Lucky, I reckon, that somethin' killed all my roosters not too long ago. I was that put out, but now it seems all for the best."

"Something killed your *roosters*?" Snape asked, glancing uneasily at Dumbledore.

"Killed em dead. Blood and feathers all over. Figgered it was a fox. Left all the hens, though. Never saw anythin' like it!"

Snape asked Harry to come to his study a half-hour before they were to have tea with Charity and her mother. In a way, he

hated involving Harry at all, but the boy was their best source of information. He had to be told *something*.

"…Listen to me, Harry," Snape said very seriously. "I don't want you looking for this creature. If you hear it talking, tell me, or the other Heads of Houses, or Professors Burbage or Kettleburn—and I suppose Lupin, too. Find the closest of us and tell us exactly what you heard and where you heard it."

"Do you have any idea what it is, Professor?"

"This can't leave this room. Do you understand me?"

Now very wide-eyed, Harry nodded. "Yes, sir."

"The evidence suggests the presence of a basilisk in the school drain system. Yes, you're right to look impressed. Basilisks are powerful and dangerous creatures and are nothing to be trifled with. How do basilisks kill, Harry?"

"Uh—there was something in the Defense book—we're supposed to run away—Wait! I know! Their eyes! I remember now. If they look you in the eye, you die right then and there!"

"Exactly right. I don't want anyone playing the hero. The Headmaster hasn't even decided what's to be done. It's apparently coexisted with us for hundreds of years, according to Professor Kettleburn. Understandably, he is not one of those individuals, who, on hearing of a fabulous creature, cries, 'Oh, good, a basilisk! Let's kill it!'"

Harry chuckled. "He wants to study it, I expect."

"Of course he does. The man is nearly as mad on the subject as Hagrid. The problem would be approaching it. Basilisks are not simply dangerous because of their glance. Their bite is deadly poisonous, and a thirty-foot basilisk might well regard a human as a tasty snack. Whatever we do must be done with the greatest caution."

"Do you want me to talk to it?" Harry asked, rather excited at the idea. "Professor Kettleburn can add it to his article!"

Snape blew out a breath. "Professor Kettleburn has indeed proposed that very thing. However, until he can come up with a proposal that poses no danger to you whatever, he will have to live with disappointment. There are places that the beast cannot access. Perhaps if you and the professors monitoring the study—and I assure you I will be one of them—can be behind a wall, or around a protected corner, we might be able to do something."

"That would be really amazing, Professor. I'd like to help."

"It will be important research, Harry. No one has ever done this. Kettleburn's article would be groundbreaking enough as it was, but a basilisk is a whole order of magnitude more astonishing. No word of the creature's existence can leak out before we finish our own research, because if it does, all the students' parents and the Ministry will unite in calls to put the beast down at once."

"I won't tell, Professor. I promise!"

"Good." Snape was rather excited himself at the idea of a live basilisk. Dead, it would be a priceless source of potions

ingredients, but alive, it might be even more valuable. There would be a renewable supply of cast off skin and shed teeth: possibly even fresh toxin and blood. What he could do with such ingredients was staggering. If the creature could be reasoned with, or even rendered comparatively docile, it would be the find of a lifetime. "I'll take you at your word. Another thing before we go: what exactly did Tom Riddle show you about the Chamber of Secrets?"

Harry slumped in his chair, thinking hard. "Well…he showed me the old Headmaster and Professor Dumbledore. Tom Riddle was afraid he'd be sent back to his orphanage if the school closed, so he had to find the monster that killed the girl. He showed himself talking to Hagrid, and telling him that he couldn't keep dangerous creatures at school. Hagrid shouted that 'Aragog never hurt no one!' You know how he is. Then Tom Riddle shot a spell at Hagrid's creature."

"What kind of creature was it?"

"It was dark, Professor, but I'm pretty sure it was a really big spider."

Snape considered the matter. Independent confirmation of Hagrid's story. All to the good. Yes. Riddle made Hagrid out to be the culprit, and had got away with murder. At the age of what—?

"How old did Tom Riddle look to be?"

"Older than me. He was wearing a prefect's badge."

"About sixteen, yes. That's what I was told."

"But the vision couldn't have been right, could it, Professor? Hagrid's creature was the monster from the Chamber of Secrets place?"

"I think the vision was true, but carefully edited and framed to make you think that Hagrid was guilty. I don't think Hagrid's creature was from the Chamber of Secrets at all. It's the sort of trick the Dark Lord played many a time. A useful trick in this case: Hagrid was expelled, the Dark Lord escaped punishment, and even received an award for Special Services to the School."

"Is Professor Dumbledore going to take it away?"

"Take what away?"

"The award. Tom Riddle cheated and didn't deserve it. I think he should lose his award."

Snape snorted a grim laugh. "Harry, Tom Riddle is dead."

"So what? He still has his name on an award, so people who don't know the story will see his name and think, 'What a splendid chap he was. Not like students today!'"

The posh tones Harry attempted made Snape laugh in earnest. "I will bring up the matter to the Headmaster, Harry. I may not match your eloquence, but your point is well taken. Now come along. Professor Burbage wants you to meet her mother."

Harry muttered, "I hope she's *nice*."

It was surprising, Harry decided, how very, *very* nice every-

body else's family was compared to his own. Madam Burbage was like an older version of Professor Burbage. She smiled at Harry, and gave him cocoa and cat's tongue biscuits, and asked about his favorite subjects in school and if he liked flying. She was interested in the fun things he and the Professor had done together, and she hoped he would get to visit that cottage of his *soon*.

"I hope I can, too, Madam Burbage! I'm hoping at the break in April. It sounds brilliant!"

"Do you think your aunt can spare you?"

Harry did not trust himself to answer at first. He pretended to ponder the matter. "I think so. It's special and important, and I'll see her this summer, after all."

Snape said smoothly, "I daresay there will time for a brief visit."

"And what do you think about the upcoming wedding, Harry?" Patience Burbage could not help referring to the most exciting topic on her mind.

"I think it's great. All the girls in my class are excited. I almost forgot! I'm supposed to ask if they're supposed to wear dress robes."

Charity laughed. "They can if they like. Don't worry, Harry, I promise to answer questions about the famous wedding during the club meeting tomorrow."

There was a tapping at the window. Patience saw the owl's impatient fluttering outside. "It looks like you have post, dear."

"I'll get it," Snape said, striding to the window. He saw the bird off and said, "It's for me."

Curious, he unrolled it. The cover note was from Lucius Malfoy.

My dear Severus:
Enclosed is an advance copy of tomorrow's Daily Prophet, including a column that Professor Kettleburn graciously agreed to submit. I hope it resolves a certain minor issue.

L.

Circled boldly in red was a headline: "THE NOBLE AND MISUNDERSTOOD GIFT OF PARSELTONGUE," by Sylvanus Kettleburn, D.M.A., F.R.A.C.M.C., O.Z.

They were all looking at him, so Snape felt he had to say something. "A friend of mine with ties to the *Daily Prophet* wanted me to know about Kettleburn's latest article." This was not the best time to discuss it, though it would lay invaluable groundwork when the matter of the basilisk came to light. Unfortunately, Charity did not take the hint—nor did Harry.

"Is it about snakes?" he asked excitedly, reaching for the paper. "Wow! It's about Parseltongue! Look here, he says Saint Patrick was a Parselmouth. That's really neat!"

"Really?" Patience Burbage asked, a little weakly. "You like—*snakes*—Harry?" She laughed a little self-consciously. "I liked Care of Magical Creatures a great deal myself."

"I can't wait to take it," Harry told her. "And I *love* snakes! I'm helping Professor Kettleburn with a really neat project. I talk to the snakes, and he writes about what they think about and like. It's really fun."

"You *talk* to the snakes?" Patience looked at her daughter, silently demanding answers.

Charity gave her mother her nicest smile, though she had been dreading this. "We're so proud of Harry. Being a parselmouth is incredibly rare, and he wants to use his gift to help dear old Professor Kettleburn with what will probably be his very last scholarly paper. Isn't that wonderful?"

Patience opened and closed her mouth twice, and then smiled gamely at the nice little boy. "Absolutely." She also shot Charity another look that promised a long inquisition into anything else that Charity had heretofore kept secret. Another look was aimed at Snape, who wondered just how small a pipe a basilisk *could* manage to slide through.

CHAPTER 14

IT WAS HARDLY the first time that the professors of Hogwarts had put on a good show for the world, while walking, as it were, on eggshells.

Occasionally Harry heard the basilisk speaking through the walls. He had been instructed, very firmly, not to initiate a conversation with the creature until everything was in place for his protection. To be sure, he had little interest in speaking to a being whose vocabulary seemed to consist only of the words *"so hungry,"* and *"rip…tear…kill."*

Professor Snape told him that they were using his information to plot the creature's movements, and find out where exactly it seemed to have access. As long as there appeared to be no danger of a basilisk unleashing itself on the school, it was deemed best to wait until the end of term, when the students would be gone, and then pursue the matter. In the meantime, life went on much as before, and he was expected to study hard and make good grades, and not worry about things that were the responsibility of the adult staff of Hogwarts.

Madam Burbage stayed a little longer than originally planned, to help Professor Burbage get ready for the wedding, and to give her opinion as to how the redecoration at Lacewing Cottage was progressing. After she left, Professor Snape said that she and Professor Burbage and Madam Malfoy went dress shopping "at interminable length." Harry had known that brides wore special clothes, but now he learned that mothers of the brides and sisters of the bride and even casual acquaintances of the bride were expected to look very grand indeed. Professor Snape was having special dress robes tailored for the occasion—in *black*, he told Harry, looking a little harassed.

"Do I need new clothes?" Harry asked, rather anxiously.

"Your green dress robes will be fine," Snape assured him. After a beat's pause, he added, "As long as they still fit you. Try them on tonight. They can be stretched a bit, but if they're much too small, we'll order new ones during the holidays."

"Are you going to have the party after the wedding at Malfoy Manor?" Harry asked. "Draco said you were."

"Draco was indulging in wishful thinking," Snape said grimly. "I have no desire to make myself appear to be a dependent of Lucius Malfoy. We are friends, but I am not his vassal. We will have the wedding dinner in a temporary pavilion on the grounds of Hogwarts. A large, *sturdy* pavilion," he added, "as it will undoubtedly rain."

"What about the dancing?" Harry wondered.

Snape grimaced. "There will be room. There is a dance floor in the center of the pavilion. Charity will probably ask you and some of your friends to put on a show. The first years are all being invited, you know."

"No, I didn't!" Harry said, very excited. "Am I allowed to tell everybody? The girls will be thrilled."

"Charity will invite the club at the next meeting. It would be best if you said nothing."

"All right." Harry grinned, imagining the reaction. "Could she invite Sally, too?"

Snape was feeling generous. "I suppose she could."

"Are *you* inviting any students?"

"Yes, the Slytherin prefects and the seventh year N.E.W.T. preparatory class. But they will not be required to perform a traditional Potions dance."

Harry grinned, sitting back in his chair. "Traditional Potions dance! I almost believed you for a second. What about you, Professor? Isn't there a dance you're supposed to do with Professor Burbage? How do you feel about that?"

"Actually," Snape replied loftily, his large nostrils flaring. "I'm a *superb* dancer. I simply do not dance for the sake of dancing. I will however, be perfectly happy to dance with my wife."

"I can't wait."

Snape scowled. He was not any sort of dancer at all—yet. By the time of the wedding, though, he would be ready to

show every one of the purebloods present that he could match them, step for bloody step.

The announcement about the wedding invitations caused a tremendous stir. Owls flew back and forth, arrangements were made. It appeared that everyone intended to be there, dressed in their best—which varied greatly from student to student—and ready to dance.

Since there was not an even number of girls and boys in the Explorers Club, all the children would participate in a round dance called the Wedding Ring, and then seven couples would perform the Tree of Life dance. There was so much interest in the latter that Charity was forced to draw names, after declaring that the four officers would be participating. Harry had expected as much, and knew he mustn't complain. It was a way of being included in the wedding, and it wouldn't be that hard, after all.

And that was not the only excitement in the club. Justin's mother, Lady Barbara, had arranged a date for their trip to the Royal Ballet. She needed to know the exact number attending, both children and chaperones, in order to purchase the tickets. Justin admitted that his mother was going to cover the cost of the tickets herself.

"She doesn't want anyone not to come because they can't afford it. I mean—I don't mean to brag or anything of the sort, but you need to understand that my family is pretty well off. Mum wants to share this with anybody who'll go."

It would fall on a Sunday, shortly after their spring holidays, and take the place of a regular meeting of the Explorers. They would see a matinee performance of GISELLE, traveling by portkey to Diagon Alley, and then go by muggle limousines (arranged by Lady Barbara's secretary) to the Royal Opera House. Since there would be some resistance from certain parents about the trip from the very first, it had been decided that the children would not travel to any other muggle venue. They would be brought back to the Leaky Cauldron, and pay a set amount to have their dinner in the big private room upstairs before portkeying back to school.

So the plan stood for a few days, until the Malfoys, who had agreed to come as chaperones, understood how much money the muggle Lady Barbara was spending on the outing. Unwilling to be overshadowed, the Malfoys suggested a change in plans to balance the charms of magical world with the muggle. They would take the children and their chaperones to dinner at Summerisle's, entirely at their own expense. For that evening, the restaurant would be closed to anyone other than their own private party.

This change altered the feelings of a number of students toward the whole prospect.

In the Gryffindor boys' dorm, Ron urgently asked a calm Neville. "Is it true, then? What they say about the desserts at Summerisle's?"

"That they're really good? Yes, that's true. The best any-

where. Going there always puts Gran in a good mood. They make this thing with hazelnut mousse and chocolate—"

"Reckon I should go…" Ron considered. "I don't want to seem ungrateful— Justin's mother going to all that trouble, and wanting us to know more about muggles and all…"

"I think you *should* come," Neville agreed. "We're going to have a great time, and ride in muggle limousines, too."

"Yeah…" Ron thought it over. "I'd probably learn a lot. And they say we're to wear school uniforms, without the hats, so clothes aren't a problem…I'm in, then. I'll send the permission off to Mum and Dad to sign right away!"

Harry was really looking forward to the spring holidays. Even though going to the Dursleys would be only play-acting, and the Professor would apparate them off right away to his new cottage, Harry was excited about seeing his little room again. It had been the first place that had been truly his, and he had loved it so much for those weeks before he went to Hogwarts. No matter how nice the cottage was, he couldn't imagine having a room he liked more than his room at the Dursleys'.

They packed, and the students from Slytherin and Hufflepuff flooded up the stairways. Harry waved at Draco, who came over to chat about his family's plans for the holidays.

"You know we're off to the South of France (his tones clearly capitalizing the words) for the week, of course. We're going to have a splendid time, and see some business friends of Father's. We'll be back by Friday night, though," he lowered his voice, "so we can come for tea on Saturday at that *place*—" he whispered, fancying himself discreet. The news about Harry's cottage had been slipped to the Malfoys, with a request that they not share this information. Harry wanted his friends to be able to visit, and the Malfoys' visit would test out how well that could work. However, Snape did not want reporters or strangers or idle well-wishers dropping by to gape at the-boy-who-lived.

"It's going to be great," Harry whispered back. "I know that the Professors have already done a lot to fix it up. It doesn't have winged horses, but Professor Burbage told me all about these little goats, and they sound neat. And maybe there's room enough to fly, so bring a broom!"

"I will—oh, look at those carriages!"

Harry did, feeling disappointed. "I wish we were going back by boat again," he complained. "That was fun. The professor says there's a little pond on the cottage property. Maybe it's big enough for a boat."

"I liked the boats, too," Draco agreed. "We may be going out on the water down at the St. Germains' place. They have a private island, and the sand on the beach is pure white, and the water is turquoise blue."

"Neat." Harry liked the idea of islands. His room at the Dursleys' was kind of an island, if you thought about it the right way.

The train ride to London was fun, as always. Hermione dozed

off, but not before telling them that Professor Burbage had talked the Headmaster into buying a piano for Hogwarts. It would be locked up in a small room, probably, and you would have to sign up to use it, but it might not be a bad idea to practice now and then.

"I quite liked my music lessons, but I didn't think I'd have the time. Still, one should have an interest beyond one's schoolwork. I'm going to have some piano lessons this summer. After all, I'm never going to be much good at sport—"

Draco interrupted, "You have to *practice* on a broom, Hermione. It's like anything else."

"—and its very nice, and all that," Hermione bickered back, "but I'm never going to be even second-rate at it."

"You should still learn how to fly well," Neville said gravely. "It's a skill that you need as a grownup. Gran can still fly pretty well. She thinks sometimes that the old ways are best."

He was looking forward to his visit home. Gran had been so much kinder since they had fought You-Know-Who. She was proud of Neville—the same way she had been proud of his Dad. She had even told Dad and Mum about Neville's bravery when they visited the hospital. They had smiled in a vague sort of way, but Neville was happy that Gran thought it worth telling them. She even wrote back and forth to Professor Sprout, asking about how she could encourage Neville's gift with plants. He just hoped Uncle Algy would stop making those jokes. Neville had decided they weren't funny anymore.

After Hermione fell asleep, they lowered their voices, talking about their adventures to come. Harry had to stop himself several times from mentioning The One in the Wall. It was odd, and sort of scary, to remember that there was a huge, dangerous, magical creature moving underneath Hogwarts; but foolish gossip about it would just create a panic, and that was not something that Harry wanted to do.

It was Saturday, and Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon were at home, watching the telly when Harry and Snape popped into Privet Drive. Harry could hear it, even outside the house in the back garden. Professor Snape made a face, and Harry grinned, and then they slipped through Harry's private entrance and went up the winding staircase to his very own door. The air in his room was a bit stale. Professor Snape cast a spell, and then opened the window for good measure. Harry looked about him happily. There was his curtained bed, and his desk and his gorgeous lamp. There were his books and toys and the runes along the wall. He stroked his globe wistfully.

"We can bring that along if you like," Snape told him. "Pack up the books you want, and anything else you fancy. We'll want to get your room fixed up to suit you. That's one of the goals for the holidays. There's no reason not to have some of your things there."

Harry found the broom they had set aside from his presents in the owlery. "I want this for sure," he said. "I want to have it there, even if I can only fly low to the ground around

the house!" He looked through the other things. "And maybe the fancy chess set." He looked at the bed, thinking about how nice it would be to sleep in it. Then he peered into the tiny bathroom, admiring the Finn's Window set into the wall, and the golden light pouring through it.

Snape shrank the odds and ends Harry had chosen. It was surprising that the boy was so sentimental about this cubby-hole, but well—really—perhaps it wasn't so surprising. He shut the window firmly, and recast the wards.

"Come along, Harry," he said gruffly. "We don't want to keep Charity waiting. She's meeting us at the cottage."

They popped from the suburbs into the country, and paused at the sight. Spring had come early, and fresh, young, bright green was everywhere. Harry said, "Whoa!" and then grinned at Snape. "This is great!"

Snape forbore to grin back, but put his hand on Harry's small back. "It's not a bad place."

"Not bad?" Harry laughed. "It's brilliant!" He cocked his head. "I thought it would have a thatched roof, like in the fairy tales."

"Slate is traditional in this area, and it is far cleaner and more practical," Snape countered. "You're not disappointed, I hope?"

"No, it's all just different than I pictured. The house is bigger, for one thing. And I didn't picture all the flowers."

"I didn't describe them to you, since they weren't in bloom when I came here in the winter. We'll have to do something about the weeds, of course."

The house, surrounded by huge oak trees, was prettier than he remembered it, perhaps because of the vines of big blue morning glories climbing up the trellises by the door. There were roses, too, but it was too early for them to bloom. Snape had no idea what color they were. They would find out this summer, and that would be a pleasure of its own.

Harry hopped from flagstone to flagstone along the path, making a game of it. Tulips and daffodils nodded to him as he passed by. "What's that?" he asked, pointing.

"An arbor," Snape said. "Those are grape and wisteria vines."

"Where are the goats?"

"In the meadow, I suppose. Over there is their shed. We'll take a walk around the entire property."

"I want to see the pond. Is there a boat?"

"A boat? I have no idea."

"Severus! Harry!" Charity came out of the cottage, smiling at the two of them as they walked down the low hill.

Harry broke into a run. "Hello, Professor!" he called. "Isn't this great?"

She laughed. "It's even better on the inside. Come and see."

Quite a bit had been accomplished. The big kitchen was shining clean, and smelled of cocoa and gingerbread. The old settee had

been freshly upholstered with a subtle tapestry weave in dark green and red. A pair of comfortable chairs framed it on either side, both with footstools. Harry was entranced by the inglenook, and had never seen anything like it. His voice softened.

"I love this place. It looks like home is supposed to look."

Charity gave Snape a brief, sweet smile. "Let's show you the rest of it."

The bathroom had been improved, though they had kept the huge, claw-footed tub. Snape showed Harry the downstairs bedroom.

"This is where I'll be sleeping, if you need me for anything. Knock first, though."

"All right." Harry recognized it as a grownup sort of place, admired it briefly, and then was wandering off to see the other rooms.

The little parlor was well on its way to becoming a library, though the new bookcases were half-empty.

"This is your bookcase, Harry," Snape told him, gesturing at the one to the right of the fireplace. "Fill it as you like, though your schoolbooks should have pride of place for now."

A leather sofa stretched out in front of the fire, a good place to sprawl when reading. A desk and chair was on either side of the room, and up against the windows was a good-sized library table, with a chair on each end and two on the side. The paneled room looked like a place for serious study, but comfortable for all that.

Harry was introduced to the delighted former owner.

"Thanks for the house, Madam Fletwock. This is a great place. I really appreciate you thinking about me."

"I'm only too happy, Harry dear. It was probably the best idea I ever had!"

He was eager now to see more, and thumped quickly up the stairs. Charity decided that they needed carpet on them, as soon as possible. By some instinct, Harry turned to the left, and so found himself in his own room at once.

The roof angled low above his head. The room was sunlit, with two windows, and they were open, the light curtains puffing out from the meadow-scented breeze. Harry ran to the window, eyes greedily taking in the view.

"There is! There is a boat!" He turned and grinned at Snape. "I love boats. You know how first years come to Hogwarts in boats? I'd never been in a boat before, and it was great. I have a boat," he told himself. "And I can mess about in it all I like." The bed looked soft and wide, and was covered with a crazy quilt. Harry sat and bounced on it, and declared, "This is nice. I like this place. It's different from my room at the Dursleys, but it's nice all the same. Or maybe it's nice because it *is* different, and just right for this house. I'll still want to do the runes, though."

Snape nodded. "A good idea, especially for your own room."

The room was decently but plainly furnished: only the bed and a bedside table, a tall old-fashioned wardrobe for clothes, and a carved chest for odds and ends. The floor was plain, unvarnished wood, with a rag rug by the bed. The walls had been tinted a pleasant light green. Harry took it all in approvingly, but restless and excited, he wanted to see more. He ran out to the little hallway, and opened the door to the other room.

"What a mess!"

"I'm afraid so," Charity laughed. "We need to go through all of that carefully. Some of it is rubbish, but some things you might want to keep, and some things could be sold."

"What's that other door?"

"Just an airing cupboard."

"Well!" Harry said, coming back to sit on his bed again. "This is a good house! This is brilliant! This is really mine?"

"It is yours, Harry," Snape confirmed. "It is all yours to keep forever."

"I have a house," Harry mused. It was still not quite real.

"Oh!" Charity cried, "The gingerbread!" She ran downstairs to take it from the oven. Snape walked over to the window and peered out. The weather was fine, and they would have a good walk.

"Harry…" he began. "It is your house, after all, and I thought I should ask…" He cleared his throat. "It won't be just the two of us. I had planned…that is, Charity and I had planned…well, she will be staying with us for the holidays."

"You mean, like a sleepover?" Harry asked, liking the idea. "We'd better clear out that box room!"

"She will be staying with me. In *my* room," Snape clarified. "Does that make you uncomfortable?"

Harry turned a little pink, and considered. This was a grownup sort of thing, and none of his business. "No. I like her, and it's nice for her to stay, and she'll be here all the time once you're married, anyway, so it's sort of like practice for that, isn't it?"

Snape felt he was turning a bit pink himself. "Very like," he agreed.

"Well, there you are," Harry said, more interested in the pond. "Can we go outside now?"

CHAPTER 15

LACEWING COTTAGE!"

Minerva McGonagall called out the name, and funneled though the labyrinth of light and shadow, suddenly emerging into a pleasant kitchen where Severus Snape and Charity Burbage stood waiting.

"We're so glad you could come, Minerva!" Charity cried, extending her hand.

Harry Potter stepped into view from behind Severus, smiling broadly. "Hello, Professor! Come see my house!"

"Let her catch her breath, Harry," Snape reproved him.

"Sorry," Harry said, "but it's just so great."

"Well, thank you for inviting me—all of you."

"Some tea?" Charity asked.

Harry was vibrating with urgency, so Minerva shook her head. "Thank you, but I'd much rather have the grand tour."

This was just what Harry wanted to hear. Snape too, because he had invited Minerva here for more than one purpose.

"No need to run, Harry. We have all day. We'll show her the house, and then go for a walk around the perimeter."

Minerva nodded wisely. "You want to improve the wards. Have you found the boundary stones?"

"Yes. We've been busy, as you can imagine, but I have the legal plan of the property, and the stones are marked there. However, for obvious reasons, I'd like to have wards that are not based solely on work done who knows how many decades ago!"

Harry led the way around the little cottage, pointing proudly at his own bookcase, and showing her his own room with delight. A plea to have a runic border like the room at Privet Drive was answered by a promise to see to it before the end of the day.

"However," Minerva added, unable to set aside her role as pedagogue for even the length of a social call, "this time you shall help!"

Minerva entirely approved of the cottage. A healthy, airy environment: just the thing for a boy who had had a most unhealthy childhood. Plenty of room for exercise and exploration. Plenty of privacy for magic. Plenty of things to occupy a child's time in a worthwhile manner.

"The estate agents certainly did not worry themselves overmuch with keeping up the kitchen garden," she noted, in a dry, unamused way.

Snape shrugged. "It's not hopeless. I'm going to sow more herbs once it's all tilled."

"And I've claimed a part of it for a cutting garden," Charity smiled. "We'll have great fun with it this summer."

"There's a pond, Professor!" Harry told her excitedly. "A pond with a boat! But I'm not allowed to go out in it alone," he admitted.

"Certainly not," Snape said grimly. "Not until you learn to swim, at least!" He told Minerva. "It's fairly good-sized, and fairly deep, and seems to be decently stocked for fishing. There are fish in it, at least. I know absolutely nothing about the art of angling, myself."

"Neither do I!" said Harry. "But I'd like to learn. Professor Burbage knows how to fish."

"I do indeed," Charity declared smugly. "That is on the agenda, but I'll have to get us some tackle. Tomorrow, I promise."

The little orchard was budding out well. In a month it should be in bloom.

"And I'll miss it," Harry sulked.

"You'll get to see the fruit," Charity comforted him. "Well, the cherries, anyway. The apples might ripen after you've gone back to school."

"Very nice," Minerva nodded. "And the meadow is charming. Oh! What delightful creatures!" she smiled, admiring the little goats.

Snape rolled his eyes, as Charity and Harry joined her in general admiration. "A neighboring couple look after the goats, but they were bonded to secrecy long ago, and that appears to be holding."

"We get a share of the milk, though," Charity told her.

"It's not as bad as you'd think," Harry remarked. "I mean—you hear the words 'goat's milk' and it sounds sort of gross, but it's not bad at all."

Minerva felt a pulse of magic up ahead. "That's one of the stones, isn't it?"

"Right." Snape walked her over to the mossy, inscribed rock. "The wards are nothing special, but they're old and tenacious. They do need refining and adjusting to the new owner, of course."

"Well," Minerva murmured in Snape's ear. "You know the simplest way to achieve that!"

He agreed. "Harry allowed me to draw a vial of his blood, and I can certainly sprinkle a few drops on each of the stones. I'd like you to have a look at the inscriptions, and see if they seem adequate."

The first stone took the longest, obviously. It was there that the discussion took place concerning the proper incantation, the addition of Harry's name, the choice of incising charm. Minerva also recarved some of the original inscription that was heavily weather-worn. Harry was prompted to help with the incantation, and spill a drop of blood from the vial on the tiny runes of his name, inconspicuously inscribed beside the body of the lacewing Minerva thought needed to be carved into the stone.

"There's nothing about the name of the cottage in the inscription," she said, looking puzzled.

"Lacewing Cottage is a fairly new name. It was called Old Piggery Close before then."

"That wasn't on the stone either. Not even the picture of a pig. I'm so glad you're updating these wards. Let's move on, then."

There were three other stones to see to outside, and more of the property to admire. Minerva agreed that flying was quite feasible here, as long as it was limited to tree-top level. She agreeably listened to the various ideas for improving the small formal garden and the outbuildings, and even to Harry's plans for a treehouse.

"Are we going to cast wards on the cottage?" he asked.

"Of course!" Minerva replied. "Hearthstone and cornerstone and threshold. We want your home to be a safe place!"

And they made it so. A discreet word in Charity's ear led to the confirmation that the downstairs bed had been blessed with the usual charms. They were of limited value, since she and Snape were not yet married, and were not Harry's parents nor even of his blood. Nonetheless, they provided a extra layer of protection, and Charity understood what needed to be done on a continuing basis to improve the charms. The younger woman smiled to herself. Minerva pursed her lips, glad that Charity knew her duty.

"There is a book I want to show you," she told her. "Sometime when Severus and Harry are somewhere else."

Then Charity took Harry off to help her and Muffy put lunch together. Minerva stepped outside to join Snape in his consideration of their handiwork. Her own spell indicated everything was as it should be. Severus, however, was frowning.

"Do you detect any weaknesses?" she asked, concerned.

"The wards? No—they're solid enough. I meant to ask…" he paused, disliking to ask favors for himself. "It's just…"

"Well?"

"Do you suppose you might…? Would you consider…?" He gri-

maced and burst out, "Minerva, I need you to teach me to dance!"

"Oh!" She refrained from laughing at him. This was too important. She did allow herself a small smile. "I would be delighted. My office, tomorrow, at nine."

Nor was Minerva their only visitor. Tuesday evening saw the arrival of an elegant gentleman with crystal-white hair. He carried a long loaf of crusty bread and a bottle of very old wine.

These were presented with solemn courtesy to Harry, as lord of the manor.

"Bread that there always be sustenance for your body and spirit, and wine that the house may be full of joy," said Nicholas Flamel.

"Wow!" Harry said, pleased and surprised to be accorded so much respect. "Thank you, sir! I'm so glad you came to see me!"

Harry was not quite so uninhibited as he was with McGonagall. Surely Master Flamel was really here to see Professor Snape.

Actually, he was there to see both of them. Snape had already told Charity that Flamel was here to discuss research with him; so after dinner, she took herself off to the little study to work on her book, leaving the kitchen to Snape, Harry, and Flamel.

"Has your scar ached since the demise of Tom Riddle?" Flamel asked.

"Not at all!" Harry shook his head. "I've felt fine."

"Does the scar still cause you discomfort?" Flamel asked Snape.

"I don't know," Snape said uneasily. "Harry, if you don't mind" He reached out, and touched the scar with a fingertip. A nasty surge of menace tingled up his arm, and he hastily withdrew his finger. "The curse is still there."

Harry shrugged. "It's not bothering me at all."

"Master Flamel," Snape said reluctantly, "I did not wish to commit our news to paper, but something appeared at Hogwarts recently that is cause for concern. Something of Riddle's."

Flamel raised his brows, and waited in silence.

"Harry," Snape directed, "Tell Master Flamel everything you remember about the diary you found."

Flamel listened to the story, his face carefully controlled.

"And that's not all, Master Flamel," said Harry. "We think there's a basilisk under the school!"

That story was told as well. Flamel allowed himself a frown. "So there is a message about the Chamber of Secrets, and at the same time a basilisk manifests, and a personal possession of Tom Riddle's is in circulation. Surely these things are connected."

"That's what Albus says," Snape admitted, "but so far we can't make the connections."

"I need to think on this," Flamel said, and was silent.

Snape and Harry looked at each other, but Flamel showed no signs of leaving. He merely sat in his comfortable chair, feet up, eyes fixed on infinity. After five minutes, he spoke again.

"This ghost you mentioned…"

"Moaning Myrtle," Harry said.

"Yes—a ghost named Moaning Myrtle. I do not know such a ghost. She is after my time. Tell me about her. Does she haunt the rest of the school, or does she keep to this girls toilet?"

Snape answered. "I had never seen her before I visited the place with Harry. I had heard of her when I was a student, but not much. She is dressed in a standard school uniform, though the robe is slightly longer than customary."

"So she probably died in the first half of the twentieth century," Flamel deduced. "The uniform changed greatly around 1912, I recall. It was startling." He thought a little longer. "How did she die?"

Snape blinked. "I have no idea. I know next to nothing about her."

"I would wager," Flamel said slowly, "that Albus knows a great deal about her. You said, Harry, that in the vision there was great disturbance because a student had died. Repeat to me what Armando said about that."

"He said something about 'that poor little girl,' Master Flamel! Do you think *Myrtle* was killed by the monster?"

Flamel smiled. "Perhaps we should ask her. I don't think anyone ever has."

Charity was surprised when Snape popped into the study to say that they were going to Hogwarts, but she could tell it was something important. "Do you want me to come along?"

His impulse was to protect her, but that was insulting. If anything, she would be there to keep an eye on Harry if there was trouble. And he wanted Harry there, *just in case* something snake-like had something to say.

"Do you mind?" he asked. "Flamel has an idea about the basilisk and the diary being connected."

She frowned. "How does he make that out?"

"Not sure, but I'm willing to hear him out. He wants to talk to that ghost."

"All right!" she agreed. "We'll all apparate to the gates of Hogwarts."

As soon as they were clad in robes against the cool of night, Snape took Harry with him and met the others. The castle was dark and silent, and no one—not even Filch—came to challenge them as they entered. Without delay, they headed down the corridor.

Myrtle was perched above a window. The adults were of little interest to her, but she smiled at the sight of Harry.

"Oh, it's you! How nice of you to visit!"

"Uh—Myrtle—You know Professor Snape, and this is Professor Burbage…"

"I remember you from my schooldays, Myrtle."

"And this is Master Nicholas Flamel, the famous alchemist. They have some important questions for you."

"Oh?" she fluted, rather surprised.

Snape said bluntly, "We need to know how you died."

Myrtle actually brightened. It was clear she felt flattered at being asked the question.

"Ooooh, it was dreadful," she said with relish. "It happened

right here." She floated to the tank over the end toilet. "I died in this very stall. I remember it so well. I'd hidden because Olive Hornby was teasing me about my glasses. The door was locked, and I was crying, and then I heard somebody come in. They said something funny—like in a foreign language. Anyway, what really got me was that it was a boy's voice. So I unlocked the door, to tell him to go and use his own toilet, and then—" She swelled importantly. "—I *died*."

"Yes," Snape said with forced patience, "But *how?*"

"No idea," Myrtle whispered. "I just remember seeing a pair of great, big, yellow eyes."

The three adults looked at each other, their suspicions confirmed.

Myrtle went on, enjoying being the center of attention. "My whole body sort of seized up, and then I was floating away." She looked dreamily at Harry. "And then I came back again. I was determined to haunt Olive Hornby, you see. Oh, she was sorry she'd every laughed at my glasses!"

"Do you recall when this happened, Myrtle?" Charity asked. "Do you remember the year, or who was Headmaster?"

Myrtle stared at her in contempt. "Professor Dippet's the Headmaster, of course. Fancy not knowing that!"

"And where did you see the eyes?" asked Flamel.

Myrtle gestured vaguely at the sinks.

Harry said, "I think that one," he pointed, "was the one with the message on the mirror. But it's all clean, now."

They came closer, and studied the copper taps on the sink, and the mirror itself. There were some scratches on the side of the tap below the mirror that had been written on, but they were recent and heavy, and there were scratches on the other taps, too.

"There might have been writing or a symbol here," Snape said, "but these newer scratches have obliterated it."

Charity looked about uneasily. "Perhaps we should come back in daylight."

"Perhaps so," Flamel agreed, very thoughtful. "I shall then take a tracing of the taps, and we shall see if we can determine what the original marks might indicate. And we should tell Albus our discovery."

Though the hour was late, Dumbledore was happy to see them. They were given cocoa, and Harry sipped his slowly. His eyes felt very heavy, and soon he was dozing in his chair.

"Yes: of course I knew that Myrtle was the girl killed during the Chamber of Secrets scare," Dumbledore said. He seemed surprised at their annoyance. "I thought everyone knew that. I certainly never made a secret of it. However," he sighed, "it seems to be one of those facts lost in the mists of time."

"We need to make a thorough search of that room," Snape insisted.

Dumbledore shrugged. "Severus, I assure you that I did search that room at the time and came up with nothing. However, I admit that circumstances do suggest something odd going on there. Sylvanus is away, and Remus, as you know—well, it is a full moon, and if anything involving the basilisk is to be done,

I feel they must be included."

Snape hissed impatiently and turned away. Charity put a hand on his arm.

Flamel considered this. "Very well. I understand your reluctance when the students will be returning so soon, as well. I shall make the tracing, nonetheless, and examine it."

"Excellent," Dumbledore agreed. "It is our first new piece of evidence in some time."

"We also need to acquaint everyone else involved about Myrtle's role in all this," Snape said sternly. "We can no longer simply *assume* that everyone knows what they need to know."

Charity sighed. "Yes, Severus, but now we've got to go home. Harry is exhausted and needs to be put to bed. No one seems to be in mortal danger at the moment."

"True," Flamel said, rising.

"Please, use my floo," Dumbledore urged.

Snape almost fell for it, and then immediately said, "Privet Drive is not on the floo system, Headmaster. You know that. I will apparate Harry home."

Charity shut her mouth with a snap, horrified that she had nearly let slip the news of Harry's cottage—and that he was living there. Flamel merely smiled blandly.

Harry was roused, and stumbled along, held steady by Snape's strong hand on his shoulder. There was much to say, but no one felt like talking, surrounded by the portraits of Hogwarts. Harry yawned hugely, fluttering back and forth between awareness and a strange state near sleep.

"Let me out…"

A rush of water, deep in the walls, and a low hissing penetrated his consciousness. "It's the basilisk, Professor," Harry muttered drowsily, "It wants out."

Snape pointed to the left. "Over there?"

"Yeah. That's it."

They were nearly to the door. Snape told Flamel. "We're plotting every location Harry hears, and matching it with the plan of the drain system. Kettleburn and Lupin are working on the exact territory of the creature, and then we may make an attempt at contact. Kettleburn, obviously, would prefer we find a way to spare the creature's life."

"Admirable, if possible." Flamel sounded rather skeptical.

They were outside at last.

"If you do not object," Flamel said, "I shall return with you. There are a few issues that we did not settle earlier, and it will not take long."

"Of course," Charity agreed.

Snape wondered if this had to do with the horcrux. He shot Flamel a questioning look, but the man was being very close-mouthed. Very well. He could wait.

In moments they were back on the doorstep of Lacewing Cottage. Charity excused herself, and helped Harry upstairs. It was

perfectly obvious to her that Master Flamel wanted a private word with Severus. It was annoying that they were keeping secrets, but she mustn't be the prying, nagging sort—until it proved that it was absolutely necessary. Flamel bowed a grave good night to her.

Left alone, Snape turned to Flamel, wondering what he had to say. "Why don't we sit down?" He gestured to the chairs in front of the inglenook. With a wave of his wand, the fire burst forth once more.

"You are most gracious." Flamel looked rather sad, Snape thought.

After seating himself, and thinking through his words, Flamel began:

"First it is young Harry, with a horcrux in his head, caused, it is thought, by a ritual gone wrong. We think, at first, that it is the culmination of Tom Riddle's evil. That at the last, he uses murder to keep a piece of himself alive. A vile thing. It is effective, of course, and the spirit of Riddle is bound to this plane of existence and finds a host in that unfortunate young Quirrell. I hear he is doing well, by the way."

"I'm glad," Snape said briefly, wondering where Flamel was going with this.

"And yet, it was not the culmination—not really—for now we find that Tom Riddle had done this before: as a boy, in fact. This diary you speak of—how I would love to see it! It is great and brilliant magic, though evil. A diary which can think and communicate with the living! I suspect it can do much more. It is clearly a horcrux as well."

"Yes, we had concluded that."

"To create a horcrux at such a young age!" Flamel was impressed and disgusted at the same time. "You realize he must have killed to do this, and I suspect it was not the death of that young girl which powered the creation of the object."

"How do you make that out? He's certainly responsible for her death."

Flamel shook his head. "Harry tells us that the diary records events after her death. Such a delay would invalidate the murder's power. The death would be part of the ritual. Since life goes on after Myrtle's death in the diary, it is clear that the diary was enchanted as a horcrux at least several days after her death. Someone else died, but we may never know who it was. Riddle killed many. For all we know, he might have transformed that diary into a horcrux years later. It hardly matters. We do know that somehow Riddle released the basilisk."

"Right now, the theory is that he opened the access door to the drains," Snape told him.

Flamel merely raised a brow. "And no one saw a huge basilisk in the corridors?" His smile was ironic, the side away from Snape in sinister half-shadow. "Tom Riddle made a horcrux, possibly as a very young man. Dark Magic is addictive, especially when first used at a young age. Having successfully made such a creation, I am not surprised he wished to do it again. And yet, such a gap of years is surprising…"

"Perhaps he felt he needed yet more protection in that phase of the war," Snape suggested, feeling ill. Had the threat of the prophecy forced the Dark Lord's hand?

"That is—possible, I suppose," said Flamel, with a heavy sigh.

"Albus is trying to reconnect with Horace Slughorn, who was the Slytherin Head of House in the—in Riddle's day. He might have answered a question, given Riddle some information. We don't know what, exactly."

"I can search out Horace. He and I corresponded at one time."

"I wish you would."

"And there is another thing to consider, before I take my leave," Flamel said, rising to his feet, studying the flames. "The appearance of the diary itself is very suggestive, don't you think? It had been hidden so long, and yet now, just as Tom Riddle is dealt with in one form, he manifests in another. Perhaps one led to the other. Who had this diary? Was it hidden at Hogwarts and found by chance? I think that unlikely. I would attribute nothing to chance where Tom Riddle is concerned. Who knows of the Boxing Day Battle? Who did *you* tell? Consider the matter. We shall speak more of this—later."

He stepped into the fire, and was gone.

Snape rose, and paced the room. He was going to kill Lucius Malfoy.

No. He was going to *question* Lucius Malfoy. Then he was going to kill him in front of his wife and son. Over tea, perhaps.

CHAPTER 16

LACEWING COTTAGE was at its shining best for the Malfoys' visit. The whitewash on the outside was freshened, the flowerbeds weeded, and the floors swept and sanded clean. The windows were open to the scents of lilac and daffodils and freshly cut grass.

The Malfoys duly appeared, dressed in what they considered appropriate for such an outing. Charity nudged Snape discreetly, at the sight of Narcissa's gorgeous flowered chiffon frock and wide-brimmed, beribboned hat. Lucius and Draco, predictably, wore ties. Of course, knowing that they would, Severus and Harry wore ties, too.

"Such a darling little cottage!" Narcissa gushed. "So quaint and pretty! Such a charming hideaway! How nice for Harry to have this adorable *pied-a-terre* in the country!"

Draco smirked at Harry, who smiled politely. He knew his house must seem *really* small to the Malfoys, but he loved it all the same.

They had a very nice tea at the farmhouse table, now draped in white linen and arranged with flowers from the garden and tiered trays pleasantly burdened with cakes and finger sandwiches. Muffy had worked tirelessly to make a sublime country tea.

"Yes," Lucius agreed judiciously, enjoying a marzipan-covered petit four. "The country is always a healthier place for a growing child. This is just the thing: a pleasant little place to rest after one's efforts at school." He frowned, puzzling over a memory. "You have a house in some muggle town or other, don't you, Severus?"

"I do," Snape answered, struggling to be polite. He wanted to get Lucius alone as soon as possible. Killing him in front of Draco was perhaps too brutal. He certainly did not want to offer up Spinner's End for the condescension and amusement of the Malfoys.

Charity did not see it that way. "Severus has a place in Sheffield. It seems a prime spot for investment. Muggles have been buying up the old row houses, upgrading them, and making a fortune off them. My parents are considering buying the house next to Severus' as a wedding present. We can combine the two, and make quite a comfortable home. It would be such an interesting project, and such fun! We may buy more as an investment."

Lucius pricked up his ears at the possiblity of anything that could make money—even off the muggles.

"Very sensible of you. The area is in demand, you say?"

"Primed for redevelopment. There is a huge old mill standing empty nearby. The muggles have been doing all sorts of things with such buildings: gutting them and turning them into flats or office space; or even making shopping malls of them. The mill is quite beyond our means, of course, but it will be interesting to see what's done with it, eventually."

"Remember that muggle indoor mall we went to, Professor?" Harry asked. "Wouldn't it be neat if we had something like that? You could put up a sign that it was something else, and then wizards and witches could come and go and shop and everything inside, and the muggles would never know!"

Lucius smiled blandly. "A very interesting idea, Harry. I'm glad that you have given thought to ways to make our world a better place." Privately, he was already resolved on scouting the place out for himself. The Malfoys had made a fortune for decades from the flats above the shops in Diagon and Knockturn Alleys, and demand far exceeded the finite supply. Wizard space could be expanded only so far.

Now as to this muggle town… The houses, yes—possibly, but to have a large block of wizarding flats concealed from the muggles—that was an amusing idea!

Harry finished his tea, and grew restless.

"May I show Draco my room, please?" he asked Snape. "and then maybe the pond?"

"You may show him your room. We'll all go out together after a bit." He knew that Harry wanted to surprise Draco with the boat, but there was no way he would let the boys mess about in it without close supervision.

"All right," Harry conceded. "Excuse us!" He darted away, with Draco at his heels, and ran up the steps.

The room had improved over the past few days: it was more personalized, and now filled with Harry's prized possessions. A band of runes marched around the room, a few inches below the ceiling.

Draco liked the runes, and approved of the view. "A pond! That's nice. Is that a boat?"

"Yes," Harry said proudly, glad he had something remarkable that Draco did not. "It's my boat. I'm learning to row it and everything. We go fishing in it, because Professor Burbage knows how to do that. They don't want me to go in it alone yet, but I will eventually. It's brilliant."

"Might we go out in it today?"

"Yes! They promised."

"Charity, my dear," Narcissa said, "I was at the de Farge's last Tuesday, and saw them working on your sister's robes. They're going to be fabulous!"

"I'm so glad," Charity laughed. "Hope has always thought I had terrible taste. My mother's been doing her best to calm

her down, but she simply doesn't trust that I'm not going to dress her, as she put it, "in a potato sack!"

She laughed, but remembered how awful her own robes had been at Hope's wedding. They were a shade of orange—no—"shrimp" that had looked good in Hope's imagination and terrible on Charity's body. And then Hope had pouted, blaming Charity's complexion and not her own choice of color. Charity loved her sister, and wanted choosing her as her attendant to mend things between them somewhat. Not having a 'proper wedding' with Brian had caused a lot of talk and hurt feelings in the tightly knit magical community. Charity hoped that this wedding would make up for all of that.

"Well!" Narcissa said, "I hardly think those lovely robes could be considered a potato sack! Such an attractive shade of blue, too. I cannot imagine it not being becoming on—well—anyone! I had a new idea about your flowers…"

Snape glanced at Lucius. "I'm sure it's extraordinary, Narcissa, but perhaps you'd excuse me if I take Lucius away for a moment?

Narcissa burst out laughing and waved them away.

"I'm dreadful, I know! Oh, go hide and drink brandy. Charity and I can have a lovely chat."

Charity was laughing too, but more softly. She gave Severus a wink.

"This way, Lucius," Snape said, leading him into the study. "I have something I need to talk to you about."

Snape shut the door, very softly. It had been a struggle to keep his countenance in front of the others, but now he had Lucius to himself, and there was much he had to say.

"Sit," he said, gesturing Lucius to a chair. He felt like cursing Lucius, but he would put his questions to him first.

Lucius studied his friend with growing disquiet. Magic was practically steaming from the top of Severus' head. He was smiling very oddly. For some reason, he was very, very angry about something. Lucius uneasily catalogued everything that might have come to light that Severus might find objectionable.

Snape glowered a little longer, and then abruptly began. "Such a triumphant time, back on Boxing Day, wasn't it? The Dark Lord exiled forever. Called for a bit of celebration, didn't it? Perhaps a bit of *housecleaning*, as it were?"

A chill knifed through Lucius' gut at the words. *Is he talking about what I think he's talking about?*

Snape went on, smiling horribly throughout. "I don't suppose you know about a thin muggle diary, do you? One with the name 'T. M. Riddle' scribbled inside?"

Lucius was very still. "And if I do?"

"What the fuck were you *thinking*, Lucius?" Snape exploded. "What possessed you to give it to a student? Was it the Dark Lord himself?"

"I *never* gave such a thing to a student!" Lucius shot back. More calmly, he said, "—if such a thing were really in exis-

tence, which I do not admit for a moment."

Snape looked ready to draw his wand. "Well, you had better admit it. I need to know everything you know about that book, now that it's at Hogwarts, causing no end of trouble and danger to the students!"

"At Hogwarts?" Lucius' cool façade slipped a little. "I give you my word, Severus, that I never gave any such book into a student's hands. Who has it?"

"We don't know! Harry handled it briefly, and it put him in deadly danger. For all I know Draco's hiding it, now. I suggest you tell me everything, because no one's safe with that thing in the wrong hands. What were you *thinking*?"

The reference to Draco was a cheap shot, but it hit the mark with Lucius. The man's face paled, if that were possible. He sat down, and started thinking hard.

"This is between us, is it not? It must be. The knowledge is unbelievably dangerous."

"I can't promise that entirely, Lucius. Dumbledore will probably have to know, eventually, but there is no advantage in the item becoming public knowledge. I'll keep it secret as long as we can protect the students. But we've discovered that it's quite dangerous, and we have not been able to track it down. Tell me everything!"

Deciding to risk it, Lucius gave a nod and started talking. "The Dark Lord gave me something to keep safe. At least, those were his orders. He said it was precious to him and that no one was to have it. I was to hide it until further orders, even if I had to wait a hundred years. I never meddled with it in any way, because I thought *he* might find out."

Snape grunted, understanding. "Go on."

"There's not much more to say. After hearing of his defeat and banishment, I decided to get rid of the thing. I didn't want to put it in the Gringotts vault, where Draco would find it someday. And leaving it anywhere in the house might be unwise for all sorts of reasons. I tried to burn it, but it resisted—strongly. So I took it to Borgin & Burke's and planned to leave it there."

"At Borgin & Burke's?" Snape repeated. "Could someone have bought it there?"

"Don't even bother to go there," Lucius said. "It was closed that day. I ended up leaving the book in a bookshelf belonging to one of those second hand vendors—Wensleydale, I think. It was wedged between some pointless drivel. I don't see how anyone browsing would even notice it. There was nothing on the spine identifying it in any way."

"Unless you were seen, and someone was curious. I'll talk to Wensleydale, and see if he remembers a purchaser. Do you remember the date?"

"New Year's Eve—the morning."

"That's something, I suppose."

"The book—" Lucius ventured, very worried. "What does it do?"

"It writes back to anyone making entries. It seems to have

quite the mind of its own. It can also pull the reader into visions of the Dark Lord's past. For all I know it can do worse. Harry only had it briefly before he fainted from the visions, and someone stole it from him in class. The person who stole it must be a first-year. If Draco is acting oddly, let me know *at once*."

Lucius was listening in growing horror. "A mind of its own? The Dark Lord is in the book? For all we know, it could be a—" He stopped, not wanting to reveal more.

"Be what, Lucius?" Snape asked, sweetly mocking. "Be—a *horcrux*, maybe? A bit of the Dark Lord? Nothing to bring him back, of course, since the rest of him is gone for good, but enough to raise merry hell among innocent first-years!"

"A horcrux," Lucius gasped. "I should have known! That's why he didn't die that Halloween night!"

Snape had no intention of telling him anything about Harry's scar. This was all Lucius needed to know. He nodded, "That's what we think. We must track it down and destroy it. We have searched the dormitories and the trunks, but nothing has turned up yet."

Lucius blazed, "You should use veritaserum on the students!"

Snape waved that away with the contempt it deserved. "As if Dumbledore would ever agree to that! No, Lucius, that bookseller is our best lead so far. I'll use Legilimancy on him and see if I can recognize the student who bought the book from him. After that—"

Lucius was still considering the horror of it all. "Wait—"

"What?"

"Severus,.." Lucius tried to remember the events so many years before. "It may be possible that this book is not the only one."

"What do you mean?" Snape glared at him, hating the possibility that Lucius might have deduced the meaning of Harry's scar.

Lucius found the decanter and poured himself a drink. "The Dark Lord gave Bella something, too. I'm sure of it. She was so elated—so proud of herself. She kept hinting about the Dark Lord's trust. I think she might have put whatever it was in her vault."

More of them? Snape felt the hair on his head stir and prickle at the notion.

He had a drink himself. After a moment, he said, "Narcissa has power of attorney over the vault, doesn't she?"

"Certainly."

"Then we need her to let us in and then we need to make a thorough search, and I do mean thorough. The object won't be something as humdrum as a coin, probably. More like—a souvenir of sorts."

"Another piece of student memorabilia," Lucius considered, "Or a trophy?"

"Possibly." He downed the brandy in a gulp. "We should get rid of it as quickly as possible. Once Bella dies, the vault will be Narcissa's anyway. Coming across it without warning might well make her sick or damage her in some way."

"Bella loves her little jokes," Lucius agreed. "Do you know how to destroy such an object?"

"If all else fails, we'll use Fiendfyre. I don't know of much that will resist that."

"Yes—of course. Who else knows about the book?"

Snape smirked at him. "All the Heads of House, obviously, Charity, because she sees all the first years. Lupin and Kettleburn, because they're working on a related project…"

"Which you will not divulge to me," Lucius sulked.

"Can't. Sworn to secrecy. It also relates to our old friend Tom Riddle, I'll tell you that for nothing. That bastard really wanted us to remember him. Now, can you remember the Dark Lord giving anything to any one else among the old crowd?"

The door opened. Charity smiled and said. "We promised to take the boys out for a walk, Severus."

Snape nodded, grimacing briefly. Charity caught the odd expression, and decided to ask him about it later.

Two days later, Snape arrived in Diagon Alley with the elder Malfoys.

They all had errands of their own before the visit to Gringotts. Snape strode down the Alley to find the outdoor book vendors. He found them, but was disappointed in the results.

"Nothing," he muttered to Lucius. "Absolutely nothing. Wensleydale doesn't remember selling anything that day, and has no memory of any students around that time. The book must have been pinched while he slept."

They placed their hopes in accessing the vault of Bellatrix Lestrange.

It took time. The goblins had to examine Narcissa's documents, and inspect the key minutely. The owner was an inmate of Azkaban, and the goblins wanted no interference from the Ministry later, if proper procedures were not followed. Narcissa waited, cold and scornful, while the creatures she despised took their taunting, bureaucratic time.

The three of them were silent on the ride down, down, into the depths. Lucius muttered, "We must all be very careful. Sister or not, Bella would certainly not make it easy."

So it proved. But the artifact was there, nearly glowing with baleful magic. Bella had arranged a sort of shrine to the Dark Lord, with the cup as centerpiece.

"A cup?" Snape considered. "What is this?

"I believe that must be the cup of Helga Hufflepuff. A relic of the Founders!" said Lucius, very impressed. "It disappeared from the Smith family decades ago. Evidently the Dark Lord had it all along."

"Evidently."

And it was indeed clearly booby-trapped. It took time and anxiety, while the curses leashing it to the vault were unraveled. Time passed, and Snape's stomach roiled with hunger while they undertook the careful, painstaking work to extricate the cup.

"It will still be safer for Narcissa to be the one who handles it," Lucius remarked.

"Of course," agreed Snape. "Here," he said to Narcissa, handing her a pair of thick dragon-hide gloves. "Don't let it touch your skin, and drop it quickly into the bag."

Narcissa's hands were shaking a little. Some of the curses they had spotted here were foul, and they made her angry at her sister. Angrier, really, since she had been angry with Bellatrix for years: angry with her meddling and her tricks and her general craziness. Narcissa had obsessed over the matter, trying to pinpoint when it all went wrong, but it was foolish to blame everything on the Dark Lord. He was perhaps the spark that had ignited it all, but a spark was useless without fuel, and the great pureblood families had gladly made themselves that, offering themselves up for that foul half-blood's greater glory. She, Narcissa Malfoy *née* Black, had been as easily deceived as the rest.

No more. They would track down every trace of the quondam Dark Lord and rid the world of him. She was proud to be a part of it.

The cup was within her grasp. Quickly, she dropped it into the opened bag Severus held, and then Lucius hissed. "We need to go. Now!"

Their working wards were slipping. Not even bothering to remove the ugly gloves, Narcissa hurried through the doors, the two wizards at her heels. The goblin obligingly slammed the door. Within they could hear the fury of the traps springing belatedly on escaped prey.

She sat in careful silence during the trip to the surface, not

trusting herself to say anything. It was possible, just possible, that she might have gone alone into that vault after Bella's death. Or—Draco might have, expecting no malice of his own blood kin.

How wrong he would have been. Narcissa thought she needed something now. Something with a great deal of sugar and chocolate. Something that Bella would never have again.

And the following day, Snape made his report to the Headmaster. The two of them met in his office, while Dumbledore dithered a little, playing the dotty old man. The pretense was dropped just as soon as Snape pushed the sides of the bag down and revealed its contents.

"The cup of Helga Hufflepuff!" Dumbledore exclaimed, gazing on the golden, tainted object in astonishment. "I am astonished that you could put your hands on it!"

Snape eyed him narrowly. "I am not putting my hands on that in any literal sense. You are not astonished that the Dark Lord had it in his possession, or do I mistake you?"

"No," Dumbledore admitted, his voice low. "I knew that Tom was interested in relics of the Founders. The diary as horcrux surprised me, I confess, because I had not expected that at all. This is not such a surprise."

"How did you know that—Tom—was interested?" Snape pressed.

"I have been following Tom's career for more years than you have been alive," Dumbledore told him gently. "You cannot be surprised at that. Tom took a position at Borgin & Burke's after leaving school. He used that to gain knowledge of and access to significant magical artifacts. It seemed clear to me that he wished to collect a full set, and not simply for sentimental reasons."

Snape snorted. "Let us be specific. Which artifacts do you believe he put his hands on? How many of these horcruxes might there be? We know of the diary, and now the cup. What else is there?"

Dumbledore looked back at him, weighing his words carefully. "I believe there was a locket dating back to the time of Slytherin. It was an heirloom of the Gaunt family—the family of Tom's mother. She sold it to Borgin just before Tom's birth, when she was in dire circumstances. Tom, I believe, found a way to get this locket back when it fell into the hands of Hepzibah Smith, a wealthy collector. He killed her, I believe. He was very seductive in those days."

"So this locket might also be a horcrux."

"In the light of our recent findings, I fear it must be so."

"Then we must find it. But first, we must destroy this thing."

"Then come. There is a room nearby which we can use."

A small and windowless chamber of stone: floor, ceiling, and walls. The cup was set carefully in the middle of the floor, and Dumbledore, taking a deep breath, cast Fiendfyre.

Snape backed away, intimidated, despite the presence of Dumbledore, by the intensity of the flames. The older wizard was sweating with the effort of containing the blaze in a dazzling column of fire. The breath hissed between Dumbledore's teeth, bared like a fighting dog's.

A cry squealed out from the cup, furious and thwarted. It stopped, as if cut off by a knife. Dumbledore turned his efforts toward dispelling the flames, which fought back, and died hard.

The cup, blackened and dead, stood alone in a wide, scorched circle.

"One down," Snape growled. "Who knows how many to go?"

CHAPTER 17

THE REST OF THE holiday floated like a dream: a very good sort of dream. They all spent an uncommon amount of time out of doors. There was the garden to overhaul and plant; there was the pond for boating and fishing; there was Harry's flying practice, every morning and every afternoon.

There were also the goats. Charity assured Snape that the "adorable creatures" would grow on him, but Snape himself could not regard that as a desirable outcome. Aside from the general noise and smell, there was a small black one that always followed him whenever he was out and about outside.

"Oh, Severus!" Charity laughed. "She likes you!"

"Ugh. Smelly brutes."

"Maybe it's because you wear black, Professor," Harry chimed in. "She must think you're the leader." The little goat trotted at their heels as they walked to the orchard. Snape turned and glared at it. The goat innocently nibbled at the grass until they moved on. Then it capered after them, hurrying to keep up with Snape's long, and increasingly longer strides.

Other than making certain that his dress robes fit, there was little to be done to prepare Harry to return to school. His schoolwork was reviewed and approved, his trunk was painstakingly cleaned out and repacked under Charity's watchful eye; likewise his bookbag, which had somehow become filled with crumpled parchment and broken quills.

Charity herself had more to do. She had sent out the wedding invitations just before the holidays began, and was now getting replies. With the replies came requests to bring such-and-such old friend or distant relation along; hints that the guest list was not inclusive enough. She sighed, wondering how far the pavilion could be expanded.

And there was the correspondence about the upcoming outing. Most of the notes from parents were appreciative permissions to take their child on such a delightful/educational/worthwhile adventure. Some were not.

"I'm afraid poor Theo Nott won't be able to go," Charity sighed over her owl post. "His father was even nastier about it than Zacharias Smiths'. And at least *he* simply considered it a foolish waste of time. Mr Nott thinks I'm a disgusting muggle-loving deviant, who is leading the children astray. And Daphne's mother wants assurances that her daughter will not be forced to converse with a muggle. That I cannot give, since I expect all the children to at least thank Lady Barbara, who arranged it all for them!"

"I'll write to her," Snape growled. "Ethne Greengrass can be made to see reason. Nott was always a lost cause."

"I'm sorry for Theo," Harry said. "He's not so bad. I don't care if Zach comes or not. He's a complete tosser."

"That word is unnecessary, Harry," Charity said mildly. Before he could say anything else, she added, "—and don't substitute anything worse. He is still a Hogwarts student."

Harry grumbled, "He's always been rotten to me. Neville says it's because he thought he would be really important, because he's descended from a Founder, but then I came along, and Draco, and Hermione with her cleverness and good grades, and we overshadowed him. The Smiths go back to Helga Hufflepuff, and he was angry that nobody made a fuss over him."

Snape listened, thinking of the cup, and how Tom Riddle had stolen it long ago. Dumbledore had hinted that he was after other relics of the Founders. That might be a lead…

There was tremendous excitement on the train. All the first-years were abuzz about the upcoming outing. Most were going. Theo Nott sat gloomily with the other Slytherins, and Harry came by to commiserate with him.

"I never get to do anything fun," Theo complained. "My father just sits around all day brooding and drinking firewhisky, and he won't let me leave the house. I think he's completely cracked. He's says I'll be polluted if a muggle talks to me. He was making noises

about the Club, too. Goyle's father blabbed to him that there are—" he paused, thinking about his next words "—people like Hermione Granger and Terry Boot in the club. My father thinks it's disgusting, and he doesn't know what the world is coming to."

He lowered his voice, "Then he drank some more, and started going on about the good old days and the Dark Lord." Theo made a face. "He *cried*. I didn't know what to do, so I went up to my room and stayed there most of the time. Our elf Dimsie brought me my meals. I couldn't wait to go back to school!"

Harry fidgeted, uncomfortable with the information. "I'm sorry, Theo."

"Not your fault. Oh, wait, yes it is—but I'm not blaming you. If you hadn't got rid of the Dark Lord, things would be even worse!"

"At least you get to come to the wedding—don't you?"

"Yeah— my father rambled on about solidarity, And I get to sit with you lot. My father's been invited, too, but he'll probably be drunk. Maybe he'll be too drunk to go. Half the time he doesn't even know what day it is. With any luck, he won't remember to come."

They were sympathetic, but Blaise said, "At least your father won't be carrying on with everyone. My mother's coming, and she'll be dressed to kill. Literally."

There were embarrassed giggles, which Harry did not understand. After he left the compartment, Draco went with him, to fill him in on the checkered love life of Blaise's mother.

"But if her husbands all *die*," Harry objected, "why would anybody want to marry her? That's daft."

"She's really beautiful. Mother says she's awfully good at convincing men that they're her One True Love— the One she's been waiting for. Mother won't let Father so much as talk to her, and she told the witch that if she ever comes near him, she'll be dead within the week. Mother can be scary when she wants to be."

"She's quite right to protect your father. Blaise's mother sounds dangerous. I can't wait to see her."

Minerva McGonagall thought Percy Weasley a model prefect, but she did not expect to see him at her door the very first night of the students' return from the holidays. With him were his younger brother Ron and Neville Longbottom.

"Sorry to bother you, Professor, but I was doing the bed check, and something came up…"

"What is the trouble, Mr Weasley?"

"Of course, you may already know about this," Percy dithered. "Perhaps I simply wasn't informed…"

He saw her waiting impatiently, and came out with it. "We can't find Zacharias Smith. He's not in the dorm."

Neville's round face was alarmed. "His luggage isn't here either, Professor. We don't know where he is!"

Minerva frowned briefly, thinking through the class lists. "Mr Smith went home for the holidays. Perhaps there has

been a family emergency, and he was unable to return. I shall inquire at once. Now back to the dormitory with you!"

Annoying, but not unheard of. The Smiths ought to have owled her if their son would not be arriving in a timely manner. She quickly scratched out a note to them and summoned an owl. The boy might even have dragonpox. Better to have it at home than to expose all Hogwarts to the infection.

The alarm awakened Snape and Charity from a deep sleep.

"I'll take care of it," Snape mumbled, patting Charity's soft shoulder. She hummed, not quite awake, and rolled over.

Snape stumbled to the fire, rubbing his eyes.

Albus' head was there, looking uncommonly grave.

"All Heads of Houses to my office at once," said Dumbledore. "We have something of an emergency on our hands."

Snape threw on a robe, and crammed his feet into his boots. He was through the fire and into the Headmaster's Office almost immediately. He moved aside to let Flitwick and Sprout come through behind him. McGonagall was already present, and practically wringing her hands in distress.

"Well?" Flitwick asked, pushing the wayward tassel of his nightcap back from his eyes. "What's happened, Albus?"

"A student is missing," Dumbledore informed them gravely. "Zacharias Smiths' father is on his way to Hogwarts as we speak."

"He may have run away from home," Minerva told them, very concerned. "He was on the list of students who went home, and his housemates saw him on the train."

Pomona Sprout shook her head. "Dreadful! And so alarming for the parents. Still, it sounds like a matter for the DMLE. Surely it can't be that hard to track down a pureblooded young wizard. Where could he go?"

"Maybe he hasn't used his wand," Filius said shrewdly. "If he were a bit older, it might be a matter of a muggle girlfriend. But so young? Maybe he simply didn't want to come back to school."

Dumbledore looked even more grave. "He sent an owl to his parents, telling them that he intended to stay at school and study during the holidays. They did not meet the train, since they did not expect him. In fact, they spent most of the holidays in Greece with their younger children. They have heard nothing from him. No one has reported seeing a young wizard wandering on his own in London, but they might not. If the boy wandered away with no one to look after him, he might be anywhere by now, and not in the wizarding world at all."

"Why would he *do* such a thing?" Sprout wondered.

Rehoboam Smith arrived, and was admitted to the Headmaster's Office. He was big, and angry, and frightened, too: that was clear to everyone in the room.

"Dumbledore, what have you done with my son?" he shouted, not a second after walking through the door.

"My dear Rehoboam, we've done nothing at all with Zacharias. We are as alarmed as you. Please sit, have some tea, and let us think this through."

"I won't sit, and you can't possibly be as alarmed as I am! He's my son! *Where is he?*"

Minerva was sympathetic. "Shouting does no good, Mr Smith. Please sit down. We will do everything we can to help."

The man collapsed into the offered chair, his head in his hands. "We were in Greece! Why didn't he tell us he was coming home? Why don't you make sure the students find their parents once they're off the train?"

"Recriminations and self-reproach are equally useless," Snape said to the man, passing him a cup of tea. "Has the boy ever run away before?"

"Never! I knew he wasn't happy, but lots of children hate school. It's not all that unusual."

The educators in the room looked around at one another, a bit nonplussed. Minerva cleared her throat. "It was my understanding that he got on well enough with his dorm mates. Had he had a fight with anyone recently?"

"Don't know," the man muttered. "He hasn't written to us much since Christmas. Said he was busy with his studies, and wanted to do us proud. A bit worried about his Transfiguration and Potions, but that's normal, too. Are you sure he's not here somewhere?"

"I spoke to the boys in his dorm, Mr Smith," Minerva told him

sadly. "Zach told them he was going home. He packed, and his luggage was put on the train. Dean Thomas and Seamus Finnegan sat with him briefly when they got on the train, but then Zach said he wanted to talk to some of his friends in Ravenclaw, and they did not see him again. And the Ravenclaws said they saw him, but no one remembers seeing him get off the train."

"He might have waited, or hid in the lavatory, and got off after everyone else," Snape deduced. "Do you have any relations that the boy might confide in?"

"There's my wife's brother. Zach's fond of him, and tells him things he doesn't tell anyone else. And his grandmother—my wife's mother— but surely if he were there, she tell us." He paused, rage building. "Or maybe not, the dried-up old bitch!"

"Rehoboam!" Dumbledore said, alarmed. "Do not jump to reckless conclusions. Have you contacted Magical Law Enforcement, as I advised?"

"Yes, yes, of course. My friend Dawlish is an Auror. He said he'd help. Said he'd turn the muggles inside-out if he had to. I mean, where can a twelve-year old boy *go*?"

"I am sure your friend will deal with the matter. A very gifted and thorough wizard. For our part, we will speak to all the students who know him, and all his teachers. We will learn all we can about his state of mind and exactly what happened the day the train left. Meanwhile, you should go home and be with your family. There is nothing you can do here."

Minerva saw the anguished man out, while the others talked over the situation in soft tones.

"I suppose we should have Remus and Charity here," Filius said. "They see all the first years. Maybe Rolanda and Irma, too. We need to know who the boy was friendly with. Surely he confided in *someone*."

"We could do that now. Minerva won't be back for some time."

Snape got up to summon Charity. Albus called Lupin.

"How horrible!" cried Charity, when she was awake enough to understand what was being said to her. "Why would a boy run away to London? Oh, well—maybe he wanted an adventure. Maybe he was upset with his father for not letting him go on the outing. The children are so looking forward to that!"

She was not quite clear-headed yet, so Snape said gently. "The boy wouldn't have known about that yet, Charity. Unless there was some correspondence between them beforehand. Remember, you only heard from the father during the holidays."

She shook her head, still groggy. "Yes, of course. Still—perhaps the father had owled his dislike of the idea to Zach. We've been talking about it for weeks."

Minerva, on her return, was able to tell them that Zach was somewhat at odds with his dorm mates: not enemies; not openly hostile. It was mostly related to his dislike of Harry and his friends, and his feelings that Harry has stolen a position among the first years that Zach had thought his by right.

Snape agreed. "Harry told me much the same. He had it from Neville, it seems. I know the boys don't care much for each other, but I hadn't heard of any harassment or pranking." He paused. "Wait. There was an incident just after Christmas. Someone threw a spell at Harry one night, but Harry couldn't see who it was. There hasn't been anything of the sort since. Unless you heard otherwise?" He asked Minerva, hoping he would not hear that Harry had been acting like his father.

"Not at all," Minerva assured him. "They simply haven't much to say to one another. Zacharias has been rude on occasion, but less so, now that he attends the Explorer Club meeting. What have you seen, Charity?"

Now that she was applied to, Charity tried to remember Harry and Zach *ever* speaking to each other. She had to admit she could not. "They never sit next to each other. I suppose you could say they avoided each other. Zach was with Dean and Seamus mostly, and sometimes with Mandy Brocklehurst and Morag McDougal…"

"Hmmph!" Flitwick tapped his fingers, thinking. "Those are the girls who so much dislike Hermione Granger, and treated her so poorly earlier in the year. Do I detect a clique?"

To their surprise, Irma Pince spoke up. "You may be right. The Smith boy always sits in the library with those two girls. They *just* don't make a disturbance, if you know what I mean. They talk all the time, but just softly enough I wouldn't be justified in throwing them out. That is— the girls talk. The boy does a great deal of studying."

"He's a good student," Remus Lupin put in quietly. "Quite good in Defence."

"We'll need to talk to all the first years," Minerva sighed. "And perhaps everyone in Gryffindor. Surely someone knew of his plans."

"Maybe he *has* gone to stay with his grandmother," Charity said, managing a hopeful smile.

Nobody knew anything.

That was the first impression. Zacharias Smith did not have a great many friends at Hogwarts. He had offended Ron Weasley at Christmas, and the boys had never quite reconciled. He spoke to his dorm mates, but had not confided anything so radical as a scheme to run away from home to any one of them. Dean and Seamus were bewildered. Neville was equally puzzled.

"I thought we were getting on better. He started to come to Explorers after Christmas. He never put himself forward much, but he danced and ate the treats and all. He doesn't like Harry or Draco, but it seemed like he wasn't so angry."

Zach's library friends, Mandy and Morag, were a little more difficult to interview. Flitwick found them evasive and uncooperative, and suspected they knew more than they would admit. As the days went by, and nothing was heard about the boy, Dumbledore met with Snape, and they decided that they would have to risk using Legilimancy on the girls. For all they

knew, the boy's life was at stake.

Mandy and Morag were summoned to the Headmaster's office, and in the presence of the Heads of House, were questioned about Zach.

"We *told* Professor Flitwick," Mandy said sullenly. "We don't know *anything*. Zach isn't a talker."

"He's a listener, sir," Morag added, a little more helpfully. "He listens to us talk. Sometimes he agrees, and sometimes he doesn't."

Dumbledore gave them his most grandfatherly smile. "And what do you talk about?"

Snape rose and paced behind Dumbledore as casually as he could, waiting for one of the girls to lock eyes with him.

"Oh—" Mandy shrugged, "—things. Nothing much. A bit about classes, a bit about the professors."

A library table, with Zach sitting across from the two girls. The boy was scanning through the pages of a thick book, hardly glancing up at all to acknowledge their outrage. "That Snape is a toerag, he is," Morag hissed to her friends. "Gave me a T for the day. A lot of rubbish anyway. Every one knows who he favors…"

"Do you talk about your families?" Dumbledore probed gently.

"Sometimes."

The red face of an angry older woman, Mandy's step-mother, flashed into his mind. "Think we're made of money, do you? Well, my girl, you'd better think again!"

Snape remarked, "Mr Smith has been doing quite a bit of reading lately. Did he do much writing? Does he keep a diary!"

Damn. Instead of looking at him, the two girls looked at each other, and smirked.

Morag replied demurely, "Never heard of a *boy* keeping a diary, sir."

"I'm sure you're all very much looking forward to the Explorers' outing to the ballet. Has Zacharias said anything to you about that? Was there any hint that he might not be going?"

Mandy made a face. "Well, it's not like any of us care much about muggle dancing, but I always thought Zach would go. He was very firm about going to Explorers' Club. Nothing else to do on Sunday anyway, and he liked to learn new things."

Dumbledore considered this. "Ah, yes. We know about all his diligent study in the library. All of this reading he's doing—is it all school books? What has Zacharias been reading lately? "

"All sorts of things, sir," Morag told them. "He likes history. Just fancy!" She blushed, "I mean, it's not my favorite subject."

Mandy added, with a touch of impudence. "He was looking at a book of maps once, and he made notes about it. I asked him what he was doing, and he said it was no business of mine! So there you are. Maybe he's off to see the world."

The boy glanced up from the atlas, frowning. "And why shouldn't I? There's more to the world than Hogwarts and the shops in Diagon Alley! If I want to know about it, I don't see that it concerns you!"

Dumbledore smiled. "Seeing the world. That is an exciting

prospect. Do you happen to recall which map he was studying?"

"Couldn't really say, sir."

"Think *hard*, my dear."

A jumble of images. A broad and colorful page, and the boy's ink-stained hand casting a shadow across it.

"Sorry, sir. Can't help you."

"Well, well," Dumbledore said soothingly. "I do appreciate the effort. If you think of anything else, let Professor Flitwick know."

The girls were dismissed, and a quiet discussion ensued.

"So closemouthed and unhelpful!" Pomona remarked, displeased. "You'd think they'd want to help find their friend."

"I'm sure they know more than they let on," Minerva agreed.

"You were legilimizing them, weren't you?" Flitwick asked Dumbledore. "You and Severus both. Did you discover anything significant?"

Snape and Dumbledore looked at each other. Snape shrugged, "They don't like school much. They don't trust us. Mandy Brocklehurst hates her stepmother. And Morag McDougal hates me."

"That was my impression as well, I fear," Dumbledore agreed, rather ruefully.

A light ripple of laughter spread through the office.

"No, really," said Minerva, her brief smile fading. "Did you discover anything about the *boy*?"

"Other than his interest in a map of magical New Orleans? No. Not really."

Rumors spread among the students about Zach Smith's mysterious disappearance. Some of them were amusing. Some were foolish. Some were ugly and appalling and the stuff of nightmares. He had run away to the muggle world to act in films. He had been murdered by his parents. He had thrown himself from the Hogwarts Express, and been killed. He had thrown himself from the Hogwarts Express, and was wandering the country lanes of England as an itinerant shepherd. He was hiding out in Knockturn Alley. He was staying with his grandmother because he father was such a stuck-up bastard. He been captured by a depraved muggle child-killer, and was even now a prisoner in a secret dungeon. He had been attacked by a werewolf, and eaten.

This last rumor so distressed and offended Professor Lupin that the student caught whispering it lost twenty points and was given a week of detention.

Harry did not know what to think, himself. He disliked Zach Smith very much: probably as much as Zach Smith disliked him. He ought to be more concerned for a fellow student's safety, but for the moment, he was perfectly glad to have the boy gone from his life. There were too many interesting and exciting things going on for him to give Zach Smith much thought.

CHAPTER 18

"IS THERE ANY possibility that the diary and the Smith boy's disappearance might be connected?" Lupin wondered.

The room stirred uneasily.

Dumbledore considered this seriously. "Is there a possibility that the boy had the diary in his possession? That he saw things that frightened him—things that made him wish to stay away from Hogwarts? I'm afraid there is a distinct possibility."

"Or might he have taken the diary with him? Who knows what sorts of visions are in it? Perhaps he was promised power or treasure," Minerva suggested.

"Or perhaps he was threatened," Sprout said heavily.

"Has the family had any word at all?" Charity asked anxiously. "This must be horrible for them."

"None." Dumbledore shook his head sadly. "The Ministry has had no success in tracing his wand. That implies that either he is not using his wand at all, or he is in a wizarding area, surrounded by other wizards—perhaps at a family home, as Rehoboam Smith believed. The Aurors have searched the grandmother's and the uncle's houses, but have turned up nothing. We can only hope that young Zach will go home of his own accord."

"Well, one thing good will come of this, I hope," Flitwick said. "I believe we must institute a policy of ensuring that students find their families at Kings Cross. Even if a teacher must ride with them, and check off the names, it will greatly improve the students' safety."

"It's just so sad," Sprout mourned. "It's never been a problem before. Not in all these years. The poor, silly boy must have been planning to run away for a long time."

"I'm so glad the ballet outing isn't to be canceled," said Charity. "We're going to be meticulous in taking care of the children, I promise you."

Not surprising that she was relieved. Had the Malfoys not been involved, and had not Lucius Malfoy been on the Board of Governors, the trip certainly would have been scrapped. Lucius, however, gave assurances, and insisted that all the first years not be punished because of the bad behavior of another student.

Snape returned after the meeting to find he had a message:

My good friend—
I have found Horace Slughorn and spoken to him. Though reluctant to

divulge such information. I ascertained that the student in question was interested in the number seven. It is, of course, an exceptionally powerful number, arithmantically speaking, though in the present context it seems absolute madness to me.

In addition, the student wore a family ring of ancient date. Horace seemed convinced that this ring would be the first object to be attended to by the student. That it ceased to be worn in the last year or two of his studies suggests that it had been altered in some way as to make it unwearable. All very suggestive, I think. I believe that you and I should meet with Albus and discuss this information. He may yet know things that he has not confided in anyone else.

I examined the tracing of the faucet with great care. The scratches are a jumble, but it would appear that the lowest and first scratch is an elongated letter S. Slytherin, perhaps? I shall visit soon and we should investigate further.

Flamel

A ring? Snape felt like pounding his head against the wall. Seven? No wonder the Dark Lord was the demented ruin of a human being. He had ripped himself apart—sacrificed the integrity of his soul—merely to live a little longer. Very well: the cup, the diary, whatever object he had meant instead of Harry. He had desperately hoped that three was Riddle's magic number, but such hopes had been premature.

Seven? That was utter idiocy. Possibly the Dark Lord had meant to create six horcruxes—leaving himself as the seventh soul piece—but had never completed them. It mattered not. They would find all there were, and they would destroy them all, and the Dark Lord would be banished forever.

Professor Snape wouldn't confirm it, but Harry knew—absolutely *knew*—that Zach must have had the diary. He had asked around—and had friends of friends ask. Zach had been seen writing a lot in a book. For a long time, too: maybe since Christ-

mas. It was Zach who had thrown it away, and then Zach who had stolen it back from him in History class.

Harry couldn't help but wonder if Zach had taken it with him when he ran away. Really, though…why would he?

If Zach were so unhappy, and didn't want to come back to school, why would he bother with the old diary, which was all about Hogwarts, anyway? The more Harry thought about it, the more he wondered if Zach hadn't just thrown it away again. It worried him.

The diary was dangerous, of course, and Harry had been careless that one time. Now that he knew better, he would never open it again, and obviously he would never do anything so stupid as to write in it. It was really important that they find the diary before someone else did.

Maybe Zach had thrown it where he had before. Harry had promised Professor Snape that he would not go looking for the basilisk. That was not a hard promise to keep, because everything the basilisk said was pretty creepy. However, he hadn't promised not to look for the diary.

In fact, he *should* be looking for it. It was his responsibility. If he hadn't been stupid and written in it, Professor Snape would have had it by now, and it wouldn't have been a temptation for Zach to steal. Maybe those visions had scared him. Maybe it was Harry's fault that he had run away. Professor Snape would be really pleased if Harry found the diary and gave it to him to study.

But everyone was out patrolling more than ever: the prefects, the professors, Argus Filch and his cat. And Harry would sound conceited if he claimed that only he could find the diary. Maybe he should go alone.

And he would be very, very careful. That's what Invisibility Cloaks were for. Tonight. After curfew.

Despite the gossip about the Smith boy running away, and the instructions to the prefects about turning in a blank book if they found it, and all the searches and the questioning and the excitement of the first-years about their muggle outing, Percy Weasley knew he had to do himself justice on his O.W.L.s.

This was the great test of his life so far: if he failed in this, he failed in all. His parents were depending on him. He needed to set a good example for his younger siblings, and put himself in a position to take N.E.W.T. classes that would allow him the career path he dreamed of. Richer purebloods might sneer at his clothes, but he would not let them sneer at his mind.

But it was just so *hard* to study. The Gryffindor common room was hopeless, absolutely hopeless. The noise level was almost painful at times, and Fred and George loved nothing more than to prank him when his concentration was elsewhere. How many essays had they spoiled over the years? How many brilliant ideas were gone, slipped away when he

was turned green, or clucking like a chicken, or in an agony of itching, or trying to stop them from doing the like to others? He loved his brothers—he hoped—most of the time—but sometimes it was very, very difficult.

His room in Gryffindor Tower was not so bad. Oliver was out a great deal, flying or making plans. Percy was distantly cordial to his other roommates. The elves kept the room fairly tidy, but there was no space to spread out his notes and books as he liked.

That left the library, which was not ideal for other reasons.

Of course, he loved the library. He loved the very idea of a library. Some day he planned to have a library of his own, in a small but well-kept house, with matching furniture and polished floors. There would be a garden: also well-kept, with attractive cottage flowers, useful herbs, and nutritious vegetables. There would be no chickens and no pigs. Ever. A soft-spoken, intelligent wife would share the house with him, and perhaps one or two bright and well-behaved children. They would respect his library, and learn to enjoy it in due course. Percy had played with the shape of his future for years, jotting down notes, drawing plans, adding and altering as he matured. These dreams gave him no end of comfort and pleasure, and he did not want to cast them away due to his own sloth and incompetence.

The Hogwarts library, however, was full of distractions. Pleasant distractions, many of them—especially books that he did not need to read when he needed instead to revise for O.W.L.s.— but not all: some were the annoyances of whispered inanities, of vulgar behavior, of crude noises and giggles, of snores when students fell asleep, drooling on their parchment. Sometimes someone wanted to speak to him, which he hated when he was busy. It was his duty to listen, of course, just in case they were legitimately seeking the assistance of a prefect.

He particularly hated it when someone else sat too close to him. He needed sufficient space to work, and felt it was his right, as the top student of his year.

But tonight the library was crowded, and Herman Wintringham and his musician friends were at *his* table. Percy liked them all right, and they were studying diligently and not talking, but Wintringham had an irritating way of breathing tunes. Not whistling, certainly, but absently breathing out on pitch. It was very soft, and most people would probably take no notice, but in Percy's heightened state of awareness, it was unbearable. He gritted his teeth, resolved to ignore it, but found himself distracted, glancing angrily at the Hufflepuff every few moments. Should he say something? No one else appeared to be bothered by it, and it was just the sort of thing that gave him a reputation as a fusspot. Could he bear it? Perhaps this too was a test, of sorts.

He sat back, blinking, and wiped his glasses. He caught Wintringham's eye, and the older boy chuckled.

"Sorry. I do that sometimes. Drives my mother absolutely spare."

"Quite all right," Percy said stiffly, though it was anything

but. "Everyone has nervous habits." He wiped his glasses again, trying to settle back down to work.

Yes, quite crowded the library was, though it was not surprising, this time of year. The tables were nearly a sea of black-robed students. Percy glanced around the room, hoping to see some red heads bent over their books. There was a red head, but it was the young Hufflepuff Susan Bones, sitting with that other little Hufflepuff girl, Hannah Abbot. Hufflepuff was a nice House. Percy sighed to himself, wishing that Ron had Sorted there. At least Ron and Harry were friendly now. That parselmouth thing was a bit dodgy, but Percy felt his Dad had the right of it. A fluke from some long-dead ancestor. Harry was a serious student, with sound ideas.

Neville was in the library, too, but no Ron. Instead, Neville was sitting with Hermione Granger, the Ravenclaw prodigy. Percy considered asking Neville what Ron was up to, but he would find out himself when he went back to the House. For a moment, Percy glanced over the rest of the students, and then—

He glanced back to the table by the shelves. *Wait…*

He looked again. The object of his gaze must have sensed the unwelcome scrutiny, and walked quietly from the library. Percy felt it incumbent on him to follow after. He hastily gathered his books and parchment, and hurried to catch up. He must get to the bottom of this…

"Percy!"

Was he underwater? Everything was blurred around the edges. Sounds were blurred, too.

"Percy!"

Everything was very slow. Percy forced his eyes open, and saw two vaguely Harry Potter-like shapes looking down at him anxiously. For some unknown reason, he was lying on the stone floor of a corridor.

"Percy, are you hurt? Do you need Madam Pomfrey?"

A hand was on his shoulder, helping him sit up. He swayed, blinking, and tried to focus.

It was an effort to move his jaw. "Where am I?" Why wasn't he in the library? How had he come to be here?

"You're not far from the library, Percy," Harry told him. "Maybe you passed out. I can get Madam Pomfrey…"

"No." Percy struggled to his feet, confused and embarrassed. "Really, this is most—thank you so much for your help, but I suppose I should just go back to the dorm and sleep. Probably been overdoing it a bit."

"I expect so. Do you want me to walk with you?"

"No" Percy took a deep breath, and managed a smile. "I'm all right. Nothing that a good night's sleep won't cure. It's odd though…"

"What's odd?"

"I don't remember leaving the library…wait…yes, I do. I was wanting to speak to someone, but they're not here." He gave

himself a shake. "Nonsense, I daresay. Thanks for lending a hand. I do appreciate it." He laughed self-consciously. "Just don't go telling Ron or the twins that you saw me sleeping in the corridors. I'd never hear the end of it."

Harry nodded to him, and set off in a different direction, in pursuit of the other student he had seen speaking to Percy before he fell.

Harry had been at the top of a staircase, and could not see them well. The other student had been wearing a hat, whereas Percy's bright head was bare. Harry wondered if this was the same person who had attacked him a few months ago. He pulled the cloak from his book bag, and hastily covered himself. Would they be going to Myrtle's toilet?

But no…the footsteps ahead were moving in quite a different direction. Harry hastened on, trying to be silent, listening to the confident strides, wondering who it might be.

He had always thought it was Zach who had attacked him that time, but this person was not Zach. He was certain of it.

Up more steps, down another hall. They were going higher, and higher, and were now on the seventh floor. Harry did not know this part of the castle well, and uneasily wondered if he would remember his way back. Were they going to Ravenclaw Tower? He had never been there. Hermione did not encourage her friends to accompany her there.

He felt a bit guilty for not helping Percy more, for not calling a teacher. It couldn't be helped. If he didn't follow *now*, he would lose the trail.

The dark figure turned to the right. Harry could hear the steps quicken, and then stop. He hurried to keep up, and rounded the turn.

His quarry was gone, and before him was a blank wall. Harry paused, trying to think what might have happened. Then, very stealthily, he moved on down the hall. Surely there must be a way…

No. There was no outlet. He put his hand to the cold stone of the wall, but felt nothing. A secret room? A hidden room? Did Professor Snape know about this? Had he checked this place?

Harry studied his surroundings, trying to remember the place. It helped that there was an ugly old tapestry of a wizard and some trolls, who appeared to be — dancing. Harry made a face. Sometimes the wizarding world was just *weird*.

But it was a good landmark. There was a window at one end of the blank wall, and a man-sized vase at the other. Harry walked back and forth, trying to fix all of this in his memory.

Then he sat down, back against the opposite wall, and waited.

"But nobody came out," Harry confessed to Professor Snape the next morning. "I waited until it was nearly curfew, and then I had to go. I thought about staying, but I knew it would make you really mad, and it would upset Professor Sprout, too." He did not tell Snape that he had considered going out again after curfew, and had simply been too tired.

"You're absolutely right," Snape agreed. "Sneaking after someone who had just taken down a prefect was reckless." He could not find it in him to punish the boy. What he said was true enough. At least now they had a clue to where the attacker had gone.

Even if it were a blank wall. Well, Hogwarts was full of secret passages. Snape checked behind the tapestry and then behind the enormous vase. It was possible that the attacker had slipped through the window and flown away on a hidden broom.

Percy was questioned. He remembered very little of the night before. He was in the library, and then Harry spoke to him outside. He had felt ill and light-headed, and had gone to bed immediately. It was very distressing, and he still had an unpleasant feeling that he had had something important on his mind that was now gone forever. It might be just another day of Hogwarts pranking, but with everything else going on, Snape feared it was not.

After the meeting, Harry headed back to the Sett, thinking hard. He came to a stop when the way was blocked by two taller students.

"Ah, it's the brooding and heroic Harry of Potter, brother mine." Fred/George Weasley beamed down at him.

His twin nodded sagely. "Indeed it is. Fresh from his rescue of our unworthy brother Percy. You have our thanks, O mighty Harry."

"—Absolutely. Nobody pranks Percy but us. Nobody."

"Have you laid hands upon the malefactor as yet?"

Harry smiled wanly and shook his head. "He got away. I'm not sure, really, if it was a he or a she. Too far away. Anyway, I chased whoever it was up to the seventh floor and then they just—vanished."

The twins were still smiling, but with a feral gleam.

"Vanished, eh?" remarked Fred/George. "A worthy challenge. We'll have to keep an eye on the seventh floor. Maybe two or three. Might be one of those saucy Ravenclaws."

"Entirely possible," agreed his twin. "More than likely, in fact. Percy has some competition in that House. While we scoff at the O.W.L.s, they mean a lot to the Perfect Prefect."

"I solemnly swear I am up to no good," declared Fred Weasley, as the twins hid in the nearest empty classroom.

"Let me have a look, you goggle-eyed git," hissed George, pulling at the parchment impatiently. "Ha! There we are!"

"Harry said the seventh floor," Fred mumbled. "Seventh floor, seventh floor, seventh floor…Don't see a room there, but it's not far from Ravenclaw. Reckon the Marauders missed a passage?"

"Could be. Look! There's the Gryffindor Common Room! Ron's sitting at the chess table. One-note wonder, that one. Playing with Dean, it looks like. " George paused, frowning. "And…"

"*Who* the bloody hell is *that?*" wondered Fred, his smile entirely gone. "*What* is a bloke named Peter Pettigrew doing in our Common Room?"

CHAPTER 19

DEAN'S CHESS GAME

was improving. Ron beat him in a dozen moves now, rather than five. And he'd come back for more, too: he was really trying to learn, and would at least still play with Ron. Most of the rest of the firsties wouldn't even try to compete anymore.

It was nice to be the best at something. Professor Burbage had heard he was a good chess player, and talked about organizing a chess tournament. Of course, she was also organizing the club outing and her own wedding, so Ron reckoned the chess tournament was pretty far down on her to-do list. But she had talked about it.

The twins came in through the portrait hole, eyes gleaming. They had something going, then. They'd tell him or not, but he hoped he wasn't the target. They glanced over at him briefly, and then sat down on one of the couches together, looking over some parchment. He'd bet fifty galleons it wasn't schoolwork. They whispered together and looked in his direction.

The hair on the back of his neck lifted in alarm. He knew what the way they looked at him meant. He was doomed. Maybe he should just do a runner, like Zach Smith.

He wondered where Zach was. There was a lot of crazy talk, but Zach was smart. He must have had a plan, It was a shame that they were on the outs, because then he would have told Ron about it. Secretly Ron sympathized. There were times he'd like to forget about Hogwarts, too.

Especially when the twins looked him the way they just had.

Charity would look quite nice for their outing, Snape thought. She had found herself something elegantly muggle in London to wear to the ballet. There had been quite a bit of owling back and forth, first with Lady Barbara and then with Narcissa about the subject; but Narcissa's wardrobe was extensive, and she had something to wear for just about any conceivable occasion, including the End of the World.

No hats. No robes. He was allowed to wear his beloved tweed jacket. Lucius would no doubt be wearing something bespoke and exquisite, but Snape cared not. He always felt very confident in that jacket.

More owling between Charity and Sally-Anne and her mother, and Charity had enough information to brief the chil-

dren at the last meeting before the outing, and explain what they would be seeing: the story, what a corps-de-ballet was, what a pas-de-deux was. They would now understand what it meant when the hero, pretending to be a peasant, was found to have a sword in his house: that it was proof that he was really a nobleman, and thus deceiving poor Giselle.

Draco Malfoy raised his hand. "It's just as if a muggle found me with a wand, and knew I was really a wizard."

"That's right!" Charity said. "And in those days, a peasant girl like Giselle would know that whatever Albrecht had said, and whether or not he had given her an engagement ring, he really could not mean to marry her. It just wasn't done."

The purebloods, especially, had no trouble with the concept.

"And so poor Giselle's heart was broken, and she fell down dead," sighed Hannah.

Hermione said impatiently, "Her mother making that gesture of hers means that Giselle already had a weak heart. That's why her mother was worried about her dancing. The shock was so great that she had a mental breakdown, and then a heart attack."

"That's what I *said*," muttered Hannah.

The second act was of even greater interest to the children. There one entered the magical world, for Charity had done some reading, with Snape's guidance, on the subject of the creatures called willis or vilyas in the ballet, but which were not really true veelas at all. The beings in the second act of GISELLE were actually rusalki. Muggles had confused them, as they were both beautiful and female.

A rusalka bore some resemblance to a vampire, but was always female. The ballet portrayed the creatures in white as the vengeful ghosts of betrayed young girls, but that was not a very accurate or complete description. Unlike veelas, which were living magical beings, the rusalki were generally nasty and malicious undead, and would trick the unwary into dangerous situations. And they too, were able to use wands, after a fashion, which explained their Queen's use of a myrtle branch. Myrtle was symbolic of love, was very, very rarely used in wand making, but the fact that Myrtha used it must be emblematic of the power of love: in this case specifically, the power of love scorned and misprized and warped.

And the ballet did make clear that these were undead creatures. Charity explained that the miming gesture often used by the rusalki in the ballet—arms crossed over the breast, really did proclaim that they were dead, since that was the old traditional way that muggle dead were laid out to be buried. There would be a dance of the corps-de-ballet that ended that way.

"Apparently they really have been known to force young men to dance themselves to death—or do other things until they died. I asked Professor Lupin to include a bit about them in your lessons this week. They are nearly always found in the Slavic nations for some reason, so I don't think you'll run into

one on the way to Hogsmeade!"

That raised some giggles, and more whispers about veelas. Charity sighed, and decided that Remus could handle the veela discussion, too.

"Harry!"

He stopped staring at his surroundings, and turned around at hearing his name called out.

"Sally!"

"Oh!" Susan cried, "Look! It's Sally! Come on!"

She was as pretty—perhaps prettier—than ever, and dressed very nicely. Just behind her was a dark-haired, rather young woman—also very pretty—who must be her mother. And there was a tall, very strikingly well-dressed woman and a girl who Harry guessed might be eight or nine years old.

The two groups surged together, meeting in the magnificent foyer of the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden.

Harry had never imagined such a place. Hogwarts was splendid in its own way, but it wasn't gorgeous like this. Simply being here made him feel very grand. And it was nice to see Sally again. Or it would be, when the girls stopped squealing and hugging.

They were introduced to Lady Barbara and Justin's sister Alexandra.

"Hello, Lady Barbara," Harry said, well-briefed before-

hand. "Thank you so much for inviting us!" There were polite murmurs behind him. Eventually all the children would be expected to make their thank yous, like proper gentlewitches and gentlewizards. Narcissa's eyes met Lucius' and their brows mutually raised in approval. Lady Barbara was well-dressed, even by their standards.

The Hogwarts group was divided into five, each with its own assigned chaperone. Charity and Narcissa had charge of the girls, and Snape, Lucius and Lupin divided the boys among them. The students had been threatened with expulsion if they wandered away, used their wands for *anything* short of self-defense in the face of mortal danger (which should not be necessary unless they wandered away), or did anything to breach wizarding security. The continuing rumors about Zach and what might have happened to him since he ran away made the children more subdued than they might otherwise have been. No one wanted to be abandoned in muggle London, not even the muggleborn.

"Mum," Sally said excitedly, "This is Harry—and Ernie—and Susan—and Hannah. And you know Justin already."

"Hello, Madam Perks," Susan greeted her politely, echoed by the others, and a "Hello, Mrs Perks," from Harry.

Sally's mother laughed and shook her head. "I'm just Deborah. Mrs Perks is my mother." The more formally-raised students were surprised at that, but Sally's mother did seem kind and pretty.

"Oh—and this is Professor Lupin," Harry said, as the Defense Professor came forward, shepherding his group. "Professor, this is Sally's mother Deborah."

"Deborah?" Remus glanced, a little scandalized, at Harry.

Deborah Perks put out her hand, laughing. "Yes, really. Just Deborah."

"Oh…well…" He smiled slightly. "Then it's just Remus."

There were more introductions, and more chat, and excited talk about the grandeur of their surroundings. Lady Barbara knew all about the history of the place and about the planned renovations. Alexandra was a beautiful child, and Hannah and Susan appeared determined to make a pet of her, as she seemed to them to be their rightful property.

Charity whispered to Severus. "Look at Narcissa and Lady Barbara getting on famously. I shouldn't be surprised. Aristocrats always have more in common with each other than they do with the hoi-polloi of their separate worlds."

Snape nodded, one eye on the boys he was especially charged with. He was not worried about Harry's behavior, other than chattering like a magpie with the little Perks girl. Ernie was a good lad, and Justin would not dare misbehave in the presence of his awfully forceful mother. The Ravenclaw boys were a different matter: Michael Corner and Anthony Goldstein talked in low tones, eyes darting about in fascination and amusement. Terry Boot was the loosest of the cannons,

and so interested in the foyer that he might be left behind, as he contemplated gilding and pillars.

Draco was holding forth with his fellow Slytherin boys, speaking a little louder than usual to make sure his father heard him as well. "All very fine, and pretty much what I expected. Of course, the Theatre de Sorcières in Paris is much smaller, but absolutely exquisite. It's a great pity *we* haven't a theatre. Harry and I have often spoke about it. We feel it would be a fine thing to offer entertainment to our own kind in suitable surroundings. I'm hoping to learn quite a lot today."

It was Narcissa rather than Lucius who was listening, and thus it was she who filed the idea away for further consideration.

Charity had her muggle camera with her, and took pictures of everyone. She also had her magical camera, but the group pictures with that would be taken at Summerisle' s. Eventually the group was gathered and captured in the lens, but it was like herding cats. Severus helped conscientiously, failing to hide his smirk from her.

The auditorium itself raised even more interest. The adults had planned who would sit where most carefully, making sure at least one adult was in every box. There was approval of the great space and the beautiful seating, the lights, the grand curtains, the mob of people coming in. There were interesting programs to read. Some students had brought omnioculars, and these had been previously enchanted to look like ordinary opera glasses. Harry had a fine pair of his own, and was pleased to have a chance to use and share them with his friends.

"What does ER on the curtains mean?" Pansy wondered. The Slytherin and Gryffindor girls shared a box, chaperoned by Narcissa and her new and interesting acquaintance, Lady Barbara Finch-Fletchley.

Lady Barbara answered the question. "This is the Royal Opera House. ER stands for Elizabeth Regina—the Queen."

"Oh."

"Wouldn't it be super to have one's initials on nice things like this?" said Lavender. "Very grand."

Narcissa entirely agreed.

In Charity's box, filled with the Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff girls, the conversation was much the same. Deborah Perks had been in the corps-de-ballet before Sally was born, and knew all about it. Alexandra sat with them, excited to be with older girls who were real witches. It must be so amazing to be them. Hermione was reading the programme avidly. She had been to other muggle performances, but never to the Royal Opera House, and was pleased as any of her fellow students. Her parents had been delighted that she had this opportunity. Professor Burbage had promised everyone would have copies of the pictures.

"You're from normal people, too, aren't you?" whispered Alexandra.

"Yes, I'm muggleborn like Justin and Terry," Hermione replied, looking up from her programme.

"Isn't Hogwarts *wonderful*?"

"Yes, it is." Hermione felt there was more to be said, but this was not the place to go on about snobbery and nasty dorm mates. It was enough that Mandy and Morag did not wish to come along today. Lisa and Padma seemed to be enjoying themselves, and Hermione did not want to say anything to set them off. There had been quite an altercation in Ravenclaw, when Padma had told Mandy what a stuck-up twit she was for missing a chance at a Summerisle's dinner. If Alexandra *did* turn out to be a witch, though, Hermione would make sure she was properly prepared.

The Gryffindor boys were enjoying themselves, too.

"Pretty spiffing, isn't it?" Dean enthused. "Never thought I'd visit a place like this."

"'S nice," Ron agreed, a little disoriented by all the splendor. At least he was far from the twins, even though he found his current surroundings pretty puzzling.

"It's beautiful," Neville agreed gravely. He admitted, in a low voice to Remus Lupin. "It's a bit scary, though, with all these muggles around. It's so *different*. I know there's nothing really to be afraid of, but I can't help feeling nervous."

Lupin gave him a kind smile. "Of course. it's not what you're used to. Think of it as a grand adventure, with plush seats and entertainment. Much better than some adventures I've had. If it helps, I've never been anywhere like this before either, and I feel a bit intimidated myself. It's nice, though."

The lights dimmed, and the children had been told to applaud when the conductor came out. The music began, and the Hogwarts students and their chaperones—for the most part—were completely enthralled.

"See, if it were a *magical* version of the ballet, you could have the rusalki do their animagus transformations, and that would be incredibly cool," Seamus said, thinking it over in the limousine with the rest of the blokes.

"Yeah, turning into swans and all," agreed Ron. "That would be really neat."

"Professor Lupin!" asked Neville anxiously. "So if we ever meet a rusalka, all we really have to do is pluck out one of her hairs?"

Lupin smiled. "There are very few rusalki anymore," he assured the boy. "And all of them live in Eastern Europe. But yes, they die if you pluck out even a single hair, so if Albrecht had known that, he could have defended himself."

"Hmph. Instead, his *dead girlfriend* had to save him," snorted Seamus.

"It was nice, though," Neville said to himself.

"It was nice," Harry said, feeling rather wistful now that it was over. "It was really pretty. I mean—it was *everything*: all

the music and the costumes and the dancing. When I was in that play at school I could feel what fun it was to be on stage. Those dancers must really love what they do."

"They'd better," Justin said. "They don't really make all that much money—at least the corps de ballet doesn't. They work awfully hard, too. Lesley Collier's a friend of Mother's—that's the ballerina who danced Giselle. She's really nice and really funny. She's older than she looks on stage."

"She's beautiful," Ernie said solemnly, and most of the boys agreed, though Michael had his own opinion.

"I liked watching Albrecht. How do dancers jump so high without magic?"

"Don't know," Justin admitted. "They practice for years and years and years."

Harry thought it over. "I wonder if you *could* use magic to make your dancing better. That would be neat. Maybe Sally could do that."

Snape was quiet, letting the boys gossip. The theme of a girl who died was mildly disturbing. The second act, with ghostly Giselle rising from her grave, had reminded him uncomfortably of that mirror vision of the resurrected Lily. Albrecht might mourn, but Giselle was better left in her grave.

"What a lot of pretty muggle dancing girls!" wondered Blaise Zabini. "Did you see them? Every one of them was good-looking!"

"They're *chosen* for their looks," Draco declared scornfully. "*Obviously*. That and their dancing. But I daresay their looks are extremely important."

Lucius decided not to say anything about their looks. It was certain to get back to Narcissa. He had never before seen such a lot of good-looking muggle girls himself. Ballet was a very estimable art form.

"It was so *gorgeous*," gushed Hannah. "All those beautiful white robes and those wreaths of roses! Rusalkas have very good ideas about clothing."

"The music was beautiful, too," Hermione remarked. It still rang in her head, very pleasantly. She promised herself that she would practice piano faithfully until the end of term as soon as the instrument arrived.

"I liked that, too," Susan said. "It was so loud, though, and with all those instruments at once! An orchestra! But I liked it. I wish we could learn more dancing. It's such good exercise!"

Deborah Perks smiled at Charity.

"It was so *gorgeous*," gushed Narcissa Malfoy. "Such beautiful white robes. Those bouffant skirts: so easy to dance in, and

so becoming! A delightful entertainment. I so liked the part when the two lines of dancers crossed each other. And Giselle crossing her arms over her breast, and sinking into her grave at the end," Narcissa sighed. "Very beautiful, and very effective. How was the floor vanished so she could do that?"

Lady Barbara kindly explained muggle stagecraft, including the use of the trap. It was her turn to be a bit nervous. She had no idea what a wizarding restaurant might be like.

But a posh restaurant was a posh restaurant, after all. The food was a little different, but quite delicious. Lady Barbara was taken with the subtle, effective lighting, and it was explained to her that the effect was achieved by magic.

The interior had been rearranged for the evening to resemble dining in the Great Hall of Hogwarts, at least to a certain extent. The tables were arranged in a T, with the short end occupied by the adults, who faced a longer table with the youngsters seated on each side. Charity was pleased to at last have an opportunity to spend a little time with Severus, or at least a chance to rub her ankle against his under the table. Severus was talking quietly to Lucius, while Narcissa chattered a mile a minute with Lady Barbara. Remus and Deborah Perks were on the other end of the head table, deep in conversation. Charity could certainly see where Sally got her looks. She smiled to herself, happy that the event had come off so successfully.

All of the children were accustomed to good food, but not necessarily elegant food. Ron found that he was able to cadge two desserts, and was perfectly happy. Proper food was better than muggle dancing any day.

"So, Sally," Harry said, quickly swallowing a delicious bite. "Have you found a tutor yet?"

"Professor Sprout's still looking into it, but she's heard from my father. He's furious with me, of course, but he'll pay for a proper tutor, and I have to agree to earn at least five O.W.L.s and three N.E.W.T.s."

"What do you want to get your O.W.L.s in?" asked Susan.

"Well, Charms, of course…"

Susan nodded in serious approval.

"And I can do History and Muggle Studies, of course, very easily. I can't see Herbology or Potions or Care of Magical Creatures being very practical in my situation. I was thinking I'd like to do Runes and Defense."

"I love Runes," Harry said immediately. "You should definitely study Runes. You can do all sorts of magic without a wand using them!"

"Defense?" Hannah asked, a little doubtfully.

Sally nodded, very serious. "Yes. The world being what it is, I think Defense is a sound idea. I haven't been much good at it, I admit…"

"—that's because Quirrell was completely useless as a teacher," Harry put in.

"There's that," agreed Sally. "I just feel I've *got* to know it. Mum agrees. She feels a girl ought to know how to protect herself."

"Well, I think you should study Transfiguration, too," Susan suggested. "It's a core subject, and very important. If I were you, I'd try to get a least an O.W.L. in it!"

The last dessert plates were scraped bare, pictures were taken, and farewells were made. Each child was trotted up to give personal thanks to Lady Barbara and to Mr and Madam Malfoy. Lady Barbara and the Malfoys then exchanged compliments and mutual respects and thanks, and Justin was hugged by his mother and sister before they and Deborah and Sally-Anne were whisked away in a limousine.

"Your mother's very nice," Susan told Justin.

"Kind of—impressive," added Hannah.

Justin shrugged, fairly amused. "She can be pretty scary when she's really stirred up about something."

"Enough!" Snape called. It was growing late, and they had to return at the appointed hour. "Students will gather in their assigned groups for the portkeys!"

Ron sniggered to his friends, "Old Snape isn't so bad when he's with his girlfriend!"

Neville disapproved. "Professor Burbage is his fiancée, Ron."

"Whatever. He's not so bad. Maybe it's all the chocolate, too. That was prime."

Portkeys were distributed, and the students moved in to touch them. Draco said good-bye to his parents, and hurried to join his group. A moment's dizzying confusion, and the students reappeared in the Great Hall of Hogwarts. A great wave of gossip and laughter and excitement swelled up. They would have so much to tell everyone.

Snape noticed that Albus and all the other Heads of Houses were there to meet them. Rather than looking pleased and benign, Albus was looking very serious indeed. Had something happened in his absence?

"Good evening, children," the Headmaster greeted the first years kindly. "I hope you had a pleasant excursion." He smiled at the enthusiastic response.

"Yes, yes, splendid! Splendid! Now, alas, it is time for you to return to your common rooms. As soon as that is safely accomplished, I would like Professors Snape, Burbage, and Lupin to come to my office and tell me about your wonderful outing."

Snape frowned. It was obvious that there was more to it. Dumbledore whispered something to Lupin, who nodded, and went to speak to the Weasley boy.

"You wished to see us, Headmaster?" Snape asked, as he and Charity entered the Headmaster's Office.

He paused on the threshold, just behind Charity. Not only were all the Heads of Houses there, and Lupin, but the Weasley boy was there, too, small and trembling in an armchair. Beside Dumbledore were Amelia Bones and Mad-Eye Moody. Snape tried to take in the mood of the room, and failed. People were not exactly frightened, but there was an excited and unsettled air about the place, as if people had not yet decided how they felt about a piece of exciting news.

"Indeed I did," replied Dumbledore. "An event of the most extraordinary nature took place while you and the first-years were gone from the school. Fred and George Weasley were performing experiments on Mr Ron Weasley's pet rat in his absence, when they were shocked to find that the creature was not a rat at all, but Peter Pettigrew, once universally considered heroically dead by the entire wizarding world."

CHAPTER 20

PETER PETTIGREW ALIVE!

The DAILY PROPHET had never run such a story. The sky was dark with owls, as friend sent to friend, wanting to know what they thought of the astonishing news. However much the Ministry of Magic would have liked to keep the entire matter confidential, too many were in on the secret.

IN AN EARTH-SHAKING development, it has been revealed that Peter Pettigrew, Order of Merlin First Class (post-humous), is not dead. He was discovered to be alive and in hiding at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, after having disguised himself as a rat for the past ten years.

Reliable sources say that Pettigrew, long thought to be the victim of the notorious Sirius Black, was never dead at all. Whether in hiding because of fears for his life, or for some more sinister reason, Pettigrew is indeed alive. It is well known that the only part of his body that the authorities could locate after his confrontation with Black was a finger. It is reported that the Pettigrew found at Hogwarts is missing the exact finger. Was it an accident? Was it deliberate self-mutilation in order

to fake his own death? The wizarding world demands to know!

In addition, the survival of Pettigrew throws into question the imprisonment of Black himself. Perhaps his case must be reopened, since he was imprisoned for the murder of Peter Pettigrew, who is apparently not dead. Black may well be responsible for the deaths of the muggle victims on the scene. If so, his sentence might be commuted to time served. When asked about the ongoing investigation, Ministry officials have 'no comment."

"Do you think they'll let Sirius Black go?" asked Hannah, wide-eyed, reading the Prophet at breakfast.

"How could they?" Ernie demanded hotly. "Everyone knows he was one of You-Know-Know's most dangerous followers. His right hand, I heard! He must have done *something* to be thrown into Azkaban!"

"But if he didn't do what they convicted him of, how could it be fair for him to be in jail? At the very least, they'll have to give him a new trial, won't they, Susan?" Hannah pleaded.

"I don't know," Susan said, a little shortly. "I'm not supposed to talk about it. That's what Aunt Amelia says. Her department is looking into it."

"Well, if you ask me," said Justin. "I think it was sneaky and rotten for this fellow Pettigrew to let Black stew in prison all these years, when he was really alive. How can that be fair? If someone did that to me, I don't know how I'd feel. It's not honest. It's like lying without saying anything."

"I'm with Justin," Harry agreed. "Pettigrew must be the worst coward in the world: letting someone go to prison for killing him, when he's been all right all the time. And it's really creepy that he *was* here. I wonder where he was hiding."

"Eww," said Susan, pushing away her plate. "Maybe he was watching us all the time!"

Charity shook her head. "I know, Severus, but at some point you're going to have to tell Harry about Sirius Black. If you don't tell him some one else will, and who knows how they'll make it sound? The man is Harry's godfather, for Heaven's sake! What if he's released? What if he wants to see Harry? " She put her head in her hands, and sighed. "What if he wants custody?"

Snape was up and pacing, tense and furious. "It's never going to happen. Never going to happen! Even if Black didn't kill Pettigrew, there must be other things he's guilty of. The Ministry doesn't want to look like a pack of fools! They'll go through his case page by page, word by word. Even if they release him, the man must be a wreck after ten years in Azkaban! He'll need years of treatment."

Charity took his hands in hers, trying to calm him. "He may

want to see Harry."

Snape snarled, "He may *want* that, but I see no reason to grant it."

"What if James and Lily appointed him guardian? This could be a mess. You've got to warn Harry."

Snape sat down, and noticed idly that his heart was racing. "I'll tell him. I need to find the Potters' will. If there's no will, Black has no real case."

At that moment, Amelia Bones was asking an aide, "What do you mean, there's no transcript?"

"Madam Bones," said the anxious underling. "I mean there's no transcript, because I don't think there was an interrogation."

He flinched, and kept flinching, as Amelia Bones relieved her feelings.

"No, Madam Bones, I really do mean that. There is no record of Black's interrogation. There is no record that such an interrogation ever took place. In fact, I'm almost certain that it didn't."

"Get me Alastor Moody. Now."

"But Albus!" Lupin pleaded. "Sirius has a real chance now. He might not be guilty—he might never have been. He might be completely innocent. All these years, he might have been in Azkaban—completely innocent. We've got to stand by him, and we've got to do it now!"

"And what of Harry?" Dumbledore asked. "Is he to be taken from a loving home and a guardian to whom he's deeply attached, and forced into the company of a complete stranger? We know how Sirius and Severus felt about each other as boys. Do you want Harry thrust into the middle of their quarrel? Yes, I certainly want justice to be done, but I want it done with measured regard for everyone involved."

"Harry!" Draco gestured to him after History, drawing him aside against the corridor wall. "What has Professor Snape said about Black?"

Harry frowned. "He hasn't said anything? Why should he?"

It was Draco's turn to frown. "Harry. There are things you ought to know…"

He wandered the halls that night, long after curfew, wearing his cloak, wondering what he had better do. Sirius Black, the notorious convicted murderer, was his godfather. He was his father's best friend! Why hadn't the Professor told him?

Well, it was obvious. Nobody ever told kids anything, and no doubt Professor Snape wanted to protect Harry. It made

him mad, but what was the Professor supposed to do? Harry couldn't imagine the Professor giving him a big smile over tea and saying, "By the way, Harry, you have a godfather, but he was sent to prison for betraying your parents and killing one of his friends and a street full of muggles. He's a psychotic killer, but hey, everybody has skeletons in the closet!"

No, he couldn't blame Professor Snape. If this Pettigrew fellow hadn't been caught, Sirius Black would be in Azkaban for life, and what good could it possibly do to talk about him? The Professor had done the right thing, but circumstances had changed, and Harry was going to have to deal with the consequences.

What did a godfather do? He had once heard Uncle Vernon mention that Aunt Marge was Dudley's godmother. All she did was bring him presents and visit once a year. Presents were always welcome, though Harry didn't want to seem greedy, especially since this poor guy Black had been locked up for years and years.

In fact, maybe *Sirius Black* would be the one who needed help! He had lost his job and been put in prison. Maybe he'd be released and have no money and no home and no friends, since Harry's mum and dad were dead. Draco had said that Black's parents were dead, too, but he hadn't said anything about Draco's parents taking him in. There had been some sort of big family quarrel. Maybe Harry should see if Sirius Black needed some money. Maybe Harry could spare some from that big pile in Gringotts. What was a godson supposed to do in these sorts of situations?

He would need to talk to Professor Snape about this, and soon. The Professor would know what to do.

"Explain to me, Alastor," Amelia Bones said coldly, "why Sirius Black was never questioned."

The veteran Auror sat back and fixed her with a madly spinning eye.

"Because Crouch wouldn't have it. I told him it was a mistake, and that likely we'd find out all sorts of useful things, but that was exactly what he didn't want. He said that with Voldemort out of the picture, it was time to quiet things down. That's what he said. What he meant, of course, was that too many members of the Wizengamot were still in Abraxas Malfoy's pocket. And then there was the whole debacle of Barty Junior. He took me off the Black case completely. Wouldn't even let me see Black off to Azkaban. "

Amelia rubbed her face. "Well, I want a *thorough* interrogation. I didn't let you question Pettigrew for a reason. I have the transcript of yesterday's interrogation, and I need to see how it matches up with Black's memories."

"Black's mind might be gone by now."

"I'm aware of that," she said bitterly. "And if the Ministry of Magic has imprisoned a man for a decade and cost him his mind, then we are all in the wrong profession."

"What is Fudge saying? Will he go along with this?"

"Cornelius has been *persuaded*," she said, with a grim smile, "to spin the matter very much in his favor: a fearless Minister of Magic determined to see the illegal and cowardly doings of the past brought to light, and to see justice done whatever the cost. Who knows? He might be right."

Moody slapped the table and gave her a nod. "I'll see to it. If Black remembers anything, I'll get it out of him."

"And remember, Alastor, you may be dealing with an innocent man."

"Ah!" He grinned toothily. "Something new, even at my age. Wonders will never cease!"

"Well, I hope Flamel comes soon," Sylvanus Kettleburn declared to Remus Lupin. "Our map of the creature's movements is as complete as we can make it. We haven't found a new location in over two weeks. Of course I want Harry to be safe, but I also want to track the creature down before I'm gone. Surely it wouldn't hurt just to try to make contact?"

Harry's path had taken him to the seventh floor, moving toward the mysterious blank wall. There were voices up ahead, and he clutched the Cloak tightly, making sure that not even his feet were visible.

"There's something here, brother mine. I know it like I know Mum will have us throwing gnomes from the garden this summer. A passage? Maybe even a room?"

It was Fred Weasley. Or George Weasley. A Weasley twin. Harry tiptoed down the hall and stood watching them.

They had a number of magical tools with them, and on the floor of the corridor was a wide piece of parchment.

"Check the map again," a twin—Harry thought it was George—said to his brother.

"Not until we see something happen. Nothing's happening."

"Well—look anyway. My Weasley sense is tingling."

"Sod your bloody tingling." Fred grumbled, and picked up the parchment. He froze, looking at it and said, "Er, George. I need you to look at this."

"Busy."

"No. I need you to look at this *right now*, Georgette."

With an impatient huff, George strode over to look at the map. He took a quick breath and froze, looking at his brother from the corner of his eye.

"That's—extremely interesting, Winifred…"

"Told you. Now what do we do about it?"

Harry crept closer, wanting to know what they were looking at.

The brothers were still studying the parchment, and Harry moved behind them, to see what it was.

A map! A wonderful map of Hogwarts! Harry had only a quick look before the twins whirled, dropping the map, and they both grabbed at him. Harry grunted with surprise and leaped back.

"Oooof!"

The cloak slipped away, and Harry's disembodied head bobbed in the corridor, staring back at the Weasley brothers' wide-eyed amazement.

"Whoa, Harry—" one said.

"—neat trick," said the other.

"It would appear that we are not the only students in Hogwarts who have—"

"—an edge, so to speak."

Harry watched them warily, holding the cloak close in one hand, his wand out in the other. "You're looking for the mystery student, aren't you? So am I. He went through that wall. I know it." He waved at the parchment. "What's that?"

"That, Harry," George said proudly, "is the secret of our success. Nicked it from Filch's amazing collection."

Fred said, his head cocked cautiously, "If you swear on Potter honor not to try to make a grab for the map or tell anyone about it, we'll swear on Weasley honor not to make a grab for that spiffing cloak of yours, or tell anyone about it. It is a secret, isn't it?"

"Of course. Not even Professor Snape knows about my cloak. All right, I swear, but I'd like to at least have a look at the map."

"Fair enough," agreed George. "We swear on our measley—

"—Weasley honor, too," Fred affirmed. He put out a hand, "Give us a look, then."

Each party gingerly handed the other its chiefest treasure. The twins played with the cloak, finding new and bizarre ways to mask odd portions of their anatomy, discovering new methods of locomotion under its folds, while Harry delved into the mysteries of what was called "The Marauders' Map."

"Who are the 'Marauders?'" Harry asked, watching the activity down in the Hufflepuff Common Room. Susan and Hannah, Ernie and Justin, Cedric and Periander…

"No idea," said George, smothering a giggle. "They *call* themselves Padfoot, Prongs, Moony, and Wormtail—"

"—But those are clearly *noms de guerre*, in a manner of speaking," Fred considered.

"*Noms de guerre.* You ponce," George scoffed.

"Well, if the French have a word for it, why not use it?" Fred asked, sweetly reasonable.

"This is fantastic!" Harry said. "You know—everything!"

"Not quite everything," Fred disagreed. "We know the Marauders missed this passage."

Harry said, without thinking. "Right. And they missed the Chamber of Secrets, too."

The twins' eyes grew large and joyous. "And just where is the Chamber of Secrets, O wise and powerful Harry?"

Harry blushed. He had slipped up. "Don't know. Trying to find it. But I'm *sure* it exists." He looked at the map some more. "Er—maybe you should know that Professor Vector is headed this way…"

George rushed over to confirm this, and hastily snatched the map from Harry. "Fred! Give him the cloak! Time to go!"

"It's really nice, George…" With a sigh, Fred tossed the silken garment over to Harry. "There you go, Potter. Honor maintained. Not a word to the Powers-That-Be, mind."

"I swore," Harry said fiercely, arranging the cloak around himself.

The twins chuckled, and disappeared almost noiselessly down the corridor.

Harry decided that he would wait it out. The professor wouldn't come any closer than the place where she could see down both ends of the hall.

It was so frustrating. He knew that there was something here. He simply *had* to see it.

I've to get in where that other student was. I've got to find the place they went to!

Professor Vector's heels were tapping in the distance. Harry was sure he was safe, but his heart thudded with anxiety all the same.

And quite suddenly, an ancient wooden door came into view in the middle of the blank wall.

Harry gaped in wonder, reaching out hesitantly for the big brass doorknob. The footsteps were closer…

He took a deep breath, opened the door, rushed in, and

shut the door behind him. He hardly knew what to expect…

And what was before him was something beyond imagining.

This was no narrow secret corridor, but a vast warehouse of wonders.

Trunks and boxes and bags; piles of books and magical instruments; flasks of potions; golden dishes and ivory statues; hats and cloaks and past finery of all the ages and houses of Hogwarts; chairs and desks and pillows and velvet curtains draping over painted folding screens. There were perfume atomizers, and umbrellas, and chess sets, and umbrella stands, and cabinets of strange curios, There were photographs and tiny miniature paintings on porcelain and a huge crate full of odd buttons. There were ties and banners from the four houses of Hogwarts. There were silver candelabra, and little pewter candlesticks, and big iron torchieres.

It was a magical treasure house, and Harry explored it with immense delight. He was hardly aware of the passage of time, pulling out an old set of wizard's dress robes in black and purple velvet and trimmed with yellowed lace. He flicked a peacock-feather fan, and made a face at a number of arrangements of flowers and fairies under glass. They seemed rather morbid to him, and he hoped that was not the current wizarding fashion. There were heavy plaques hanging on the wall, one of which caught his eye. It was a representation of Finn's window, just as it had appeared in Professor McGonagall's book. He had learned Finn's Eye as well—yes there it was, further down. Finn's Door was there as well, missing the last symbol along the magical parabola that would cause the wall to crack open with a noise of thunder.

Some jewelry was displayed: dainty pendants and heavy collars. On a stand was a battered and tarnished tiara, ugly and shabby compared to the Potter jewels he had seen at Gringotts. He walked past it, moving on to more interesting items.

There were a number of screens standing together a little further on, past a maze of opened crates and trunks. Their contents spilled out temptingly. Harry brushed past them and peeped behind the screens.

There was an amazing oriental bed, draped in green and silver satin, and an elegant little table, carved and inlaid with ivory and mother of pearl. A perfectly proportioned chair was pushed into it. On the table were a gold plate and a gold goblet, and the remains of someone's dinner. Harry looked at the bed again.

Someone was living here. Or had been, very recently.

CHAPTER 21

SHOULD HE HAVE waited? If so, should he have waited inside, or outside? Harry wrestled with these questions until he drifted off to sleep in the Hufflepuff dorm, listening to the soft breathing of his roommates.

Perhaps he should have gone to Professor Snape, but he really, really, really did not want to tell Professor Snape about his wonderful cloak. There was no doubt that it would disappear into his Gringotts vault. Professor Snape would not approve of Harry using it to stay out investigating after curfew.

However, there was no doubt that he would have to tell the Professor about the mysterious room. After dinner tomorrow, in fact, he would.

And as it was the Professor was fairly upset that Harry had entered the room at all.

Professor Burbage was with him when Harry knocked at the door, and they sat him down right away to talk about it.

"It didn't occur to you that it might be dangerous?" Snape demanded.

"Not really," Harry confessed. "I was so surprised when the door appeared I couldn't resist. Nobody was there. It was just a really big room filled with neat stuff. Well…a lot of old junk, too. It was just sort of a storage room."

"I'd like very much to see this Storage Room of yours," Snape said slowly.

"You have to really want to be there," Harry warned him.

"And I want to see it, too," Charity cried, excited at the prospect. "A secret room at Hogwarts filled with 'neat stuff?' Who could resist that?"

The walk to the seventh floor took quite a long time. Charity was full of news about her family and their doings. "My nieces and nephews can't wait to see Hogwarts! I wonder if my sister Hope will change her mind. I've told her it's perfectly safe for them to study here now, but of course that's a bit of an exaggeration, what with trolls and basilisks and secret rooms, I suppose!"

They reached the blank wall, and Harry concentrated his thoughts at it.

I need to be in the room where the mystery student was. I have to show the Professors what I saw.

As before, there was a brief delay, and then a massive door appeared. Harry grinned triumphantly, while Snape and Charity exchanged surprised looks.

They entered, and found that Harry had not embroidered upon reality. Charity would have darted about, looking at every-

thing at once in her excitement, had not Snape hushed her.

"Get behind me," he ordered tersely. "You too, Harry. We don't know *what* is here."

"I saw the bed behind those screens up there," Harry whispered, pointing.

Snape scowled, as he moved slowly through the room, looking for traps. Much of what he saw was rubbish, or things of small value. It was as if everything forgotten or mislaid had made its way to this room.

Harry looked about, frowning. It seemed to him that some of things he had seen last night were missing…

With a quick, smooth movement, Snape was around the screens. He stopped, and cast a quick revealing spell.

"No one here," he muttered. "Though I agree that someone was."

"He's been here," said Harry pushing forward. "But he tidied up. There was food on that table when I was here."

"Not anymore," remarked Charity.

The bed was neatly made. The table was clean and wiped, and the elegant chair was in a new place-against a far wall. Harry looked at the place, thinking hard.

"I think there was a trunk here by the bed that's gone now," he said finally. "Some gold dishes were out, too. I remember seeing some fancy jewelry that's gone. Maybe more than one trunk is gone. I didn't stay long enough to remember everything that was here."

Snape nodded. "Did you touch anything when you were here, Harry?" he asked. "It's possible that our mystery guest saw that someone had found him, and decided to clear out."

Harry's face fell. He should have told Professor Snape this morning about the room. Instead, the person who had dwelt here had been given time to make a clean getaway.

"It's a pretty neat place, anyway," he sighed.

"Yes, it is," said Charity. She smiled, and admired a curio case. "So who could have been living here?"

"I think it's something we need to know, very soon," said Snape. "We'll need to talk to Albus about this."

Harry knew that it would all end with the adults forbidding everyone the secret room, so after they left he ran to the library to find his friends.

"I have something incredibly neat to show you!" he whispered to the Hufflepuffs. Hermione was in the library as well, and he waved her to their table. There was no sign of Draco or Neville, to his disappointment, but there was no time to lose.

"Come on with me!" he was bursting with excitement. "I found a secret room. The professors know about it, and they've gone to talk to Professor Dumbledore about it. They'll probably hide it, so if you want to see it, we have to go *right now!*"

"What if we get in trouble?" Hermione asked anxiously.

"That's the beauty of it!" Harry told them all. 'Professor Snape was in such a hurry to tell Dumbledore what was going on, that he didn't tell me I couldn't go back! He certainly hasn't told you!

Let's go right now. It's full of amazing stuff!"

A secret room was as irresistible to them as it was to Charity. They ran after Harry, giggling and shoving. After their long walk and their long climb upstairs, they slowed in bewilderment, seeing a blank wall.

"I have to concentrate now," said Harry. "I have to think about going into the room."

"But Harry…" Hermione protested, and then abruptly was silenced. The door had appeared and they all looked at each other in delight.

Harry opened the door, and bowed. "Ladies first!"

Hannah, Susan, and Hermione hurried in, and began 'oooh-ing!' and 'aaaahing!' as they explored the lofty chamber. Justin and Ernie smirked, trying to maintain a more manly demeanour, but they were visibly impressed.

They dressed up in forgotten robes, and fingered forgotten trinkets. They wondered who had slept in the green bed, and who had dined at the fancy table. Hangings and scarves shrouded items and were yanked aside, puddling silken on the floor.

"Look here!" cried Hermione, pointing at an old tiara, black with tarnish. "I know what that is! It's just like the tiara that Rowena Ravenclaw owned. There's a statue of her in our Common Room. Of course, this is just a cheap old copy—it's dirty."

"Pretty battered, too," snickered Ernie. "Rowena Ravenclaw must have had quite the oddly-shaped head." Hermione made a face at him, full of indignation.

Susan considered it. "I think this might be real silver, Hermione. It might be all right if you pushed out the dents and used a polishing spell. I don't know that spell, but my aunt does. Silver does get so very grimy if one doesn't make an effort!"

Hermione was charmed by her find, and pushed and pulled cautiously at the tiara, trying to reshape it. "That's better! I wonder if anyone would mind if I took this? The other Ravenclaws would love to see it!"

"Try it on," Hannah urged her. "Maybe someday we'll have a costume party. You could be Rowena herself."

Tempted, Hermione held the tiara against the wall and gave another careful push. "There! I think I can put it on now!" And she set it on her head.

Harry called out, "All hail, Rowena Ravenclaw…" He stopped, seeing Hermione's expression. "Are you all right? " he asked.

"Yes…of course…" she said quietly. "I just felt so strange for a moment…" More slowly, she walked around the room, looking at the old textbooks scattered and piled about.

They played a little longer, but Harry noticed that Hermione seemed upset.

"What's wrong?" he finally asked.

"Everything!" she burst out. "I wish I weren't in Ravenclaw! It's all so hard all the time. I mean…Professor Flitwick is nice, but the girls are horrid-even the ones who pretend they can put up

with me. Nobody likes me there! Nobody likes me anywhere!"

"That's not true," Susan said kindly. "We're your friends, and if we didn't like you, we wouldn't want to go exploring with you. I expect you're tired."

"Maybe," Hermione whimpered. Tears stood in her eyes. "Maybe some sleep would be good."

"Let's go, then," Harry said, leading the way.

They walked out the door and every one of them jumped. Harry had never thought himself discovered, because no one had tried to enter the room. He had not expected to find the Headmaster and the four Heads of House waiting just outside the door.

Hermione promptly burst into noisy tears. "I knew it!" she sobbed. "Nothing ever goes right for me!" She shouted at Harry, "Did you do this just to get me in trouble?"

"Er…" Harry looked at the adults rather sheepishly. "We didn't expect to see you, Professors."

Snape's glare was black ice. "Evidently."

Hermione's sobs redoubled.

"I don't know what's up with Hermione," Harry said, feeling very shifty. "We were just looking at stuff."

Filius Flitwick was staring at Hermione. "Miss Granger!" he squeaked. "What are you wearing?"

Her brown eyes overflowed. "I was just bor-ror-ror-rowing it!"

Harry told them, "She says it's a model of Rowena Ravenclaw's tiara!"

Hermione tried to pull it off, but her frizzy hair tangled in the metalwork. "Ow!"

Snape was closest and with a huff of impatience, attempted to help the silly girl free her hair. Heat and pain stabbed through his Mark, and he hissed, flinching away. He gripped his arm, struck by a horrible suspicion.

Dumbledore and Flitwick, however, did not hesitate for a moment. Flitwick had recognized the relic at once and was already moving in, wand at the ready, a fold of his sleeve caught in his hand so he would not touch the tiara with his bare hands.

"Harry, step aside," Dumbledore ordered in a soothing voice. Snape reached out and grabbed the boy away.

"What is that thing?" Hannah asked fearfully. "Is it cursed?"

"Yes," Minerva McGonagall declared, furious and impatient. "It's cursed, you silly girl. Have any of you taken anything else from that room?"

The students shook their heads, eyes enormous.

"Then you four go to Hufflepuff House right now!" Pomona scolded her Badgers. "We'll see to your friends."

Madam Pomfrey pronounced Harry fine, and Hermione merely in need of some good, wholesome chocolate. In fact, both students were given plenty of good, wholesome chocolate and immediately felt quite well. Snape growled a threatened punishment of lines to Harry, but hurried away with Dumbledore and the rest to dispose of the newly discovered

horcrux. Angry as he was the boy's recklessness, he was also elated to have found yet another of the cursed objects.

"And there is also the question of who was living in The Room of Lost Things," said Dumbledore.

"I'd heard once of a Room of Requirement," Flitwick frowned. "Is this similar?"

"I believe it is the same room," Dumbledore replied. "The elves call it the 'Come-And-Go-Room.' A student found it and has been using it as a hideaway."

Snape had been silent for some time. "Is is possible," he said slowly. "That Zacharias Smith never left Hogwarts at all?"

A silence. Then, on consideration, the remark stirred quite a bit of excitement and debate.

"But he was seen by other students on the train!" said Minerva.

Flitwick was intrigued by Snape's idea. "But did they see him after the train had left Hogsmeade station? I did not think to ask. We must revisit our interviews."

"And make certain that we are getting the whole story," Snape agreed.

"So it is not possible to enter the room when it is already occupied?" Pomona Sprout hazarded.

"It would seem so," agreed Dumbledore. "Unfortunately, it has been cleared of recent evidence so thoroughly that I cannot guess how long it was occupied or by whom."

The diadem was taken to the room used before, and subjected to Fiendfyre, under the watchful eyes of the Heads of Houses. A thin, high wail of thwarted fury rose up and faded.

Snape smiled grimly. "Another piece of the Dark Lord, gone forever. May the rest of him follow suit. And soon."

Amelia Bones' team sat glumly around her conference table.

"Well," Alastor Moody grunted, "there's no way any of this is going to reflect much credit on us."

"Be as that may," Amelia snapped. "We are not covering anything up. We will not stall or obfuscate. And Merlin himself could not persuade me to make any of the parties involved *disappear*."

"Of course not!" Dawkins agreed hastily.

"The fact is," Amelia said acidly, "an innocent man, who said something rash and foolish while grieving, was sent without a trial to Azkaban, where he has been for ten years. The real perpetrator has been at large, hiding among a family of young children, hoping for his master's return for as long. And I don't care how bad this makes Bartemius Crouch or the Ministry look. We're going to do this *right*."

Croaker, from the Department of Mysteries, spoke up. "Black is in poor condition, both physically and mentally."

"Bloody near off his head," another Auror snorted.

Croaker glared at the interruption. "As you say. We can't simply release him and hope for the best. He's likely to be

deranged and violent. Not his fault, but that's the way it is. We've done quite a bit of research on the wizarding brain, and long-time exposure to the influence of Dementors is very damaging. Our Healers recommend he be transferred to St. Mungo's as soon as the new trial is over and his acquittal declared."

"Shouldn't take more than a week," Moody nodded. "He's already been moved away from the Dementors, and they've been giving him proper treatment in the upper levels. The Minister will have to sign off on an involuntary commitment, but there seems little choice."

"Dumbledore's been asking to see him," Amelia said. "He and Professor Lupin from Hogwarts, who's an old friend of Black's."

Croaker pursed his mouth, and glanced at the Director, knowing that she knew what he did.

She chose to ignore his expression, and went on, "Of course we can't keep the Grand Mugwump away. Besides, Black is entitled to seek counsel, even if the verdict is a foregone conclusion. The old friend will not be admitted, however. They can catch up once Black is vetted as safe for company by the Healers at St. Mungo's."

The young apprentice Auror seated behind Moody leaned forward to whisper, "He's Harry Potter's godfather, you know. How is that going to play out?"

"Good point, Tonks," Moody agreed. "Black feels a lot of guilt about that. He'll probably want to see the boy at some point."

"Lives with his muggle relatives, doesn't he?" considered Croaker.

Amelia felt sure of her ground here. "Yes, he lives with them, but Severus Snape is the magical proxy. Any request for a visit from young Harry will have to go through him. I can't see it being a good idea at the moment."

"A sodding bad idea!" Moody seconded her. "Black may be innocent, but he's dangerous all the same now. He might have the best intentions in the world toward the boy, but it's possible he could lash out at a moment's notice."

He had been moved twice, and his surroundings were inexplicable. A bed? A real toilet? There was a little metal table with a bench, both bolted to the floor. His cell was not a proper cell at all, but a plain room, painted white, with heavy glass in the door so the guards could keep watch on him.

Sirius Black huddled in the corner, wondering what sort of game they were playing. It was unthinkable to lay his filthy body on the pristine white bed. Instead, he propped his back against the wall, shutting his eyes against the painful brightness of the little white room.

This place was disturbingly quiet. After years of shrieks and moans and pleas for mercy, this sterile environment was a soundless world. He sat, quiet and watchful, afraid to make any noise himself for fear of attracting unfavorable attention.

If the guard would get away from the windowed door, Sirius could transform into a dog, and be warmer…

A guard unlocked the door, and another guard brought a tray with food on it. It smelled like the food of the gods. Perhaps it was poisoned. Even if it killed him, a meal like that would be worth it anyway.

"Lunch," the guard said, unnecessarily.

Sirius watched him until he was out of the room and the door was locked once more. *"Lunch?"* That was a word he hadn't heard in a long, long time.

A cup of rich broth, steaming hot. Buttered rolls and a wedge of yellow cheese, its tip delicately crumbly. An apple, shining red. Sirius was transfixed by the unnatural, blazing crimson of the apple in this monochromatic room, in this black and white world. Was it real?

He peered through the window. The guards were ten yards away, on the other side of a locked door, and they were not looking his way. If he were fast…

He was across the room in two steps, sweeping the food up like a wolf pouncing on its prey. He was back in his corner in a flash, the food hidden as best he could, and he hoped that no one has noticed that he had it. Teeth tore at the bread and cheese, bit into the apple. Sirius gasped as the taste exploded in his mouth. An apple. He had never imagined what a perfect thing an apple could be…

He slurped at the broth, heedless of his scorched tongue. He likely had only a few moments before they caught and punished him…

Yes, there was talk and commotion outside. Sirius stuffed the food into his mouth with angry rapture. No matter what happened next, he had eaten well today. The door was opening, and he licked at his filthy fingers, capturing every drop of apple juice.

"My dear boy, I hardly know how to face you…"

Sirius looked up, gaping. It was Albus Dumbledore.

He seemed older somehow, and he sat on the little bench with a long sigh.

"Don't mind me, Sirius. Finish your meal, though you'll find that your dinner in six hours will be equally good. I have great news for you, my boy. Great news."

Sirius did not respond, but lowered his head like a wary dog. Dumbledore spoke softly and soothingly.

"We found Peter. He had been hiding from us all these years, faking his death, but he has been found at last. His trial begins in three days. After he is sentenced, you will have a trial yourself, though Peter's guilt establishes your innocence already in most eyes. Nonetheless, the forms must be followed, all the more because they were not before." Dumbledore gave the huddled man a kind and rueful smile. "We are aware how you have suffered, unjustly, all these years. I can never apologize sufficiently for my own lack of faith in you. I hope someday you can find it in your heart to pardon a foolish old man." He looked sadly at the floor, shaking his head.

"As soon as you are acquitted, you will be taken to St. Mungo's, so you can be restored to perfect health once more. Once you are there, you will have visitors. Remus has begged to see you. Your cousin Andromeda, too, has asked. She has a daughter, you know, and young Nymphadora is an apprentice Auror, who has been proud to have had a hand in your vindication."

Dumbledore watched the man's eyes grow just the least bit less mad. Then he said, "And then there is young Harry. Yes, Harry is fine: wonderfully well, in fact. He is at Hogwarts, and has made a great many good friends. A fine boy, who has a comfortable home with Lily's sister and her family. No doubt he will enjoy making your acquaintance when you are more yourself. And that, my friend—becoming more yourself—is your great goal at the moment. Fresh robes will be brought to you, since you will want to make a decent appearance at your trial."

Sirius said thickly, "'m filthy."

Dumbledore nodded calmly. "You know, I was permitted to bring my wand in here largely because of that. Why don't we see what a few cleaning spells will do? Tonight, I understand, you will have a shower. That's something to look forward to, surely: a shower, clean clothes, a shaving spell from one of your guards, another good meal, sleep in a decent bed. Better days are coming for you, Sirius. We all want you to be able to enjoy them."

"Peter…" Sirius growled.

"A prisoner," Dumbledore replied instantly. "And we know about his rat form, so he will not be able to escape us with *that*. Clever lads, all of you. I would not be surprised if you had an animagus form of your own…" He let his voice drift up questioningly, but Sirius only stared at him, fierce-eyed and alert. Dumbledore smiled disarmingly, not showing his teeth.

"Yes, better days for you, Sirius. Peter's trial and his sentence, and your trial and your innocence established once and for all. I will be back tomorrow, after you've slept yourself out, and we shall make plans at our leisure…"

CHAPTER 22

FLAMEL ARRIVED the next day: and not alone.

Perenelle, his wife, did not look anything like the way Snape had imagined her. The old chocolate frog card had somehow suggested a plump and dainty grandmother: all snowy hair, embroidered apron, and freshly-baked country loaves.

Well, the superbly groomed hair was indeed white: the classic chignon was the same glittering crystal as her husband's. The pure lines of her smooth and ageless face did not bring the word "grandmother" to mind, though of course she was one, many times over. Snape remembered, after staring for a few moments, that she was in fact his own great-great-grandmother, many generations removed. That she was likewise Charity's ancestor, and Harry's ancestor, and even Dumbledore's ancestor made the situation even stranger.

Her eyes were coal-black, a startling contrast with her white hair and pale skin. Quite fine eyes, though the piercing nature of her gaze forced Snape to con-

sciously hold himself still, and not shuffle guiltily. A very different gaze than Nicholas' lucid blue one.

And she was certainly not wearing an apron.

"Severus Snape," she said, lingering over the name. "I have heard many good things of you. A pleasure." She gave him her hand, a hand that was indubitably not that of an old woman. Gravely, he took it.

Respectful room was made for her and Nicholas in the Headmaster's Office. Large as it was, it was fully occupied at the moment.

The remains of the Ravenclaw tiara were inspected. The Horcrux was gone indeed, and young Miss Granger appeared to have taken no permanent harm from wearing it so briefly. From her Founder's portrait, Rowena Ravenclaw was leaning in, staring at the ruins of her once-beautiful diadem, and muttering her displeasure.

Dumbledore began the discussion of recent events. "The nature of the object, and its presence in close proximity to the subject's brain, made the affects of the curse immediate and drastic. She became angry and depressed. It was fortunate that she took it from her head within less than hour, and that her hair was so thick as to prevent any contact with her scalp. Of course," Dumbledore told the group, "she is quite well now, and will no doubt remember to be cautious in future with unknown magical items."

"One would hope," Flitwick agreed wryly. "It would be too dreadful if something befell yet another of our first-years."

They had not been able to determine if the occupant of the Room of Lost Things was Zacharias Smith, or some other student who had found and reveled in a secret hideout. The search for Zacharias had so far proved fruitless. The students' memories of his presence on the Hogwarts Express were so vague as to make the professors wonder if they had not been somehow tampered with.

Kettleburn and Lupin had been brought into the meeting and the secret of the Horcruxes due to the insistence of the Heads of Houses. All the mysteries now appeared so entwined that all points of view were valuable. The issues of the basilisk, the lost boy, and the relics of the Dark Lord were all imperiously demanding resolution.

"Based on my conversations with Horace Slughorn," said Flamel, "it would seem that the first of Riddle's Horcruxes was a family ring that had come to him under questionable circumstances. Horace recalled seeing it on his finger perhaps in his fifth or sixth year. Sometime later, the young man ceased to wear it. It was notable due to this individual's comparative poverty, of course. An heirloom, suddenly worn by a boy who so demonstrably had never claimed family before? It was the ancient ring of the Gaunt family, Horace believes. For myself, I believe that it was made a Horcrux, possibly the first of them; and in making it a Horcrux, Riddle rendered it—perhaps unknowingly and unintentionally—unwearable."

"It seems obvious that we must search for this ring," said

Flitwick. "Could it have been given to one of Riddle's followers, like the cup?"

"The ring of the Gaunts," said Perenelle, startling everyone with her soft vibrant voice, "I believe to have been a remarkable artifact in its own right, before having been made use of for Riddle's purposes."

Dumbledore glanced sharply at her, but bit his lip and said nothing. Perenelle had noticed his response, but only continued her own thoughts.

"Nicholas and I, as you might imagine, have made quite a study of certain legendary artifacts. So many are in fact mere legends, but there are others that are perfectly real. I believe that all of you have heard of the Deathly Hallows?"

A quick intake of breath, but no voice was raised in protest. Snape caught Perenelle's eyes considering Dumbledore.

She said, "Three there were, a wand, a stone, and a cloak. The Elder Wand that Cannot be Defeated, the Stone that Calls to the Dead, and the Cloak of Invisibility."

Sprout beamed with pride. "The Three Brothers! My firsties did the jolliest little play based on it. You remember, Albus, how beautifully little Sally danced the dead sweetheart, and how amusing Harry was as the brother with the cloak!" She told the Flamels, "At the very end, he made himself look like Albus himself. How we laughed!"

Perenelle raise a delicately arched brow. "I wish I could have seen this entertainment. Clearly, the tale of the Deathly Hallows is still well-known indeed."

Rather shyly, Charity asked, "Are you saying that this story—these items—are *real*?"

Nicholas and Perenelle looked at each other, understanding the other's thoughts without words. Nicholas answered. "The items are certainly real. It is entirely possible that the legend of the brothers was embroidered somewhat, but yes: the Elder Wand, the Resurrection Stone, and the Cloak of Invisibility are all entirely real. I believe that Albus would concur. Do you not, my friend?"

Dumbledore felt he could not deny it. "Yes. They are quite real, though as to their location…"

Flamel said, "Perenelle and I long ago came to the conclusion that the Resurrection Stone is small, only the size of a pebble. Knowing this, we could then see how it could be set in a piece of jewelry—perhaps in a family ring. The location of the Elder Wand we know."

"Do you have it?" Flitwick cried, in a burst of excitement.

"No," Nicholas told him. "It is not in our possession, but we feel it is in good hands. We have traced the provenance of the Cloak only so far. The Ring, however, is our great concern here. A consideration of the Peverell genealogy caused us to wonder if it were not possible that this Gaunt family ring might indeed be set with the Resurrection Stone. The Gaunts are

related to the Peverells, are they not?" he asked Dumbledore.

"They are," Dumbledore confirmed. "My own research indicates that yes, the Gaunt ring is set with the Resurrection Stone, handed down from the Peverells."

A murmur of wonder. Snape frowned, thinking about what he knew concerning it.

"It is my understanding," he said slowly, "that this stone, though it is *called* the Resurrection Stone, really does nothing of the sort. It does not restore life to the dead, but rather enables one to see and speak to the dead across the Veil."

"You are correct," Perenelle told him, with the faintest hint of approval. "That is all that is does."

"—and yet," Dumbledore pointed out, "that alone is extraordinary."

"I do not deny it," she agreed, "but the use of it could inflict great pain and suffering. It would be a great temptation, but I cannot think that actually making use of it would be wise."

Minerva asked, "Do you believe that Tom Riddle was looking for the Hallows?"

"No," Dumbledore replied. "No doubt he would be glad to get his hands on the Elder Wand, but I do not believe he knew that it existed. Besides, it was beyond his reach. Tom's connection with the Hallows is really only tangential."

"—except for the Gaunt Ring," Nicholas agreed. "In that case, I do not believe that he fully understood the nature of the artifact in his possession. It was merely a ring: a ring of pedigree and distinction, and an object that validated his own importance, but a ring and nothing more. That he understood that it contained the Resurrection Stone is unlikely."

Lupin nodded. "Then we need to search for this ring. Are there any hints as to where it is right now?"

Dumbledore felt the Flamels' eyes on him. Reluctantly, he said, "It was a family heirloom. Tom might have hidden it in a place that was family-related."

"Do you mean the ancestral home of the Gaunts?" asked Pomona. "I have no idea where that would be, Albus. Do you?"

Even more reluctantly he conceded, "Yes, I believe so. I have something you may want to see."

There was a silence, and then a great deal of talk after viewing the memories in Dumbledore's pensieve.

"So much Parseltongue!" said Kettleburn. "We need young Harry here to interpret. Horrible lot, those Gaunts. Magical creatures don't do well if you breed them too close, and I've always known that witches and wizards fare no better. Inbred to imbecility, I'd say."

"I can't help feeling sorry for that poor Merope," said Charity. "What a terrible life she must have led there. You say she was Marvolo's daughter and Morfin's sister? Who was her mother, then?"

Dumbledore appeared disinclined to answer, and Kettleburn snorted. "Keeping it all in the family, weren't they? Imagine it was only a matter of time before they'd be expecting the daughter to make more Gaunts for them, if they hadn't already. What happened to her?"

"Despite the fact she was hardly more than a squib," Dumbledore said, "she succeeded in brewing a love potion to ensnare the son of the local muggle squire. Merope Gaunt was in fact the mother of Tom Riddle."

This caused even more excitement and talk. Charity seemed angry, and whispered earnestly in Snape's ear. He whispered back, his hand laid calmingly on her arm.

Perenelle noticed her distress, and said softly, "Yes, my child? Something else troubles you?"

Charity glanced apologetically at Dumbledore and said, "I don't know why you call her a squib. She never had a chance to go to Hogwarts. She never was fitted with a wand of her own. She learned only what that horrible old man chose to teach her. She looks strange and ugly to us because she was clearly never given any kind of Healing for her eyes. She *must* have been a proper witch to brew an effective love potion. I think it's horrid that the Ministry did nothing to protect her from that ghastly situation."

Dumbledore said mildly, "My dear Charity, brewing that potion was very, very wrong…"

"And why would she know that, when she'd lived with those people her entire life!" Charity blushed, and muttered apologetically, "Sorry. It's just so unfair to blame her when she seems such a pitiful victim to me. What happened to her?"

"Yes, Albus," Minerva said. "We would all like to know that."

And so the rest of the story came out: Merope ceasing to give the muggle the potion; his departure, leaving her destitute; her helpless despair and her sale of her last treasure, the Slytherin locket, to the unscrupulous Burke; her wretched death in childbirth; and the fate of Tom Riddle Jr., brought up as a foundling in a muggle orphanage.

The witches, especially, were very compassionate toward the ignorant young witch. "If I were miserably abused like that, and in probable danger of rape and incest," said Pomona, considering the matter, "I certainly would have run away. Of course brewing the potion was wrong, but as Charity says, she might not even have been aware of that. Times were different then, and I'm old enough to remember that, but the Ministry is still sometimes excessively traditional in respecting a parent's rights and not the child's welfare."

Minerva agreed, "It's a great pity there were no older witches for the poor girl to turn to. There are things that could have been done," she added, with a meaningful glance at Pomona and Perenelle.

"What about that locket?" Snape asked Dumbledore abruptly. "You told me about that locket before. That's likely to be a Horcrux now."

Flamel smiled at the potions master, and nodded to himself.

"Yes," Lupin agreed. "If it's a family heirloom, and related to Slytherin himself, I would think that it would be just the sort of the thing that—Riddle—would have been interested in. Did he know about it?"

"It seems probable," Dumbledore said. "Tom Riddle worked for Borgin & Burkes after finishing school. He used the opportunity to trace a number of Founders' relics. The cup, of course, but also the locket. I believe he did indeed manage to gain possession of it."

"So he hid some of his trinkets with his followers, and it's possible that he hid some in the Gaunt—" Flitwick grimaced and paused, searching for the appropriate word "—hovel."

"And in the Room of Lost Things," remarked Snape. "The diadem was found there. Clearly, that place was also of importance to him. While I doubt he would hide more than one Horcrux in any one place, I will still search the Room thoroughly for any other traces."

"No doubt there are other curses and other dangers surrounding the Horcruxes," Flitwick said.

"No doubt," echoed Dumbledore. "For that reason, our search must be painstaking and meticulous. Obviously, we cannot all leave the school to hunt for the ring and the locket. Those searches must wait until after the term ends. I may have more information about the locket, especially, but now is not the time."

"The ring and the locket do not seem to call for immediate action," agreed Flamel, "but all of this discussion brings us back to the other Horcrux we know of: the diary. It brings us to what I believe is the diary's probable location: the Chamber of Secrets. And it brings us inevitably to what I believe is protecting both: the basilisk, which only young Harry Potter can hear and comprehend. The presence of a basilisk, a creature that is known to have killed a student in the past, does seem to me to be a matter of some urgency."

Snape said, "Harry can not be endangered in any way. That is non-negotiable."

"I completely agree," said Flamel. "He will be protected by us, and if it is impossible to subdue the basilisk in any other way, we will bring with us a rooster that can be roused and spelled to crow on command."

"I'd rather *not* kill the creature," Kettleburn said unhappily. "Only as a last resort…"

"Why do you think the diary is in the Chamber of Secrets?" Pomona asked.

Flamel said, "The avatar of Tom Riddle in the diary was apparently powerful and persuasive, and very likely caused his pawn to place the diary there, where access was nearly impossible. My guess is that the avatar does consider it completely impossible. We know where the entrance must be, but we have not yet found it. We must examine the area minutely, and I believe that Harry ought to be with us, in case the basilisk speaks."

"You're still upset," Snape said, rubbing Charity's feet. They had adjourned to her rooms, and were thinking over Flamel's plan to search for the Chamber and its protector. It seemed fairly safe for Harry, but accidents could happen…

"Yes, I'm still thinking about Merope Gaunt. I can't stand the way Dumbledore was so dismissive of her—so judgmental. I know that she was—Voldemort's—mother, but why would that make her an evil person? I never thought someone as liberal toward the muggleborn as Dumbledore would think that evil could run in a person's bloodline. It doesn't fit in with his other beliefs at all."

Snape snorted. "I understand what you mean, I think. If a muggleborn cannot be blamed because his or her parents did not have magic, how can a pureblood be blamed because his parents—or children—are evil? All I can say is that Dumbledore is great but fallible, and he is profoundly antipathetic to anything related to Tom Riddle."

"—Who grew up in a muggle orphanage. Who knows what happened to him there? Maybe the seeds of his hate of things muggle were sown there. And he lived there all through the Second World War, I understand. That's absolutely mad. The Ministry should have allowed all the children to stay safe at Hogwarts throughout the war."

Snape shook his head. "But that's not how it's done, you see. The students have been sent home for the summer for the past thousand years, and no muggle bombs could possible change that. Yes, it was cruel and stupid, but it's not the first cruel and stupid thing the Ministry's ever done, and it won't be the last."

"At least that poor Sirius Black will be released from Azkaban soon." She gestured at the current issue of the DAILY PROPHET. "Dumbledore will be going to the Ministry for Peter Pettigrew's trial tomorrow. I can't think that will take more than a day."

Snape rose from the sofa and began pacing. "Just because Pettigrew is found guilty of murdering the Potters and those muggles," he growled, "it hardly means that Black's innocent of all wrong-doing. I still think it's possible that the Ministry will find him guilty of *something!*"

Charity sighed, and got up to pour both of them a drink. "I know you hate him, Severus, but he's served ten years in Azkaban! Surely that counts for a great deal."

"He tried to kill me. He arranged that whole episode I told you of before: Lupin and the full moon and the Shrieking Shack. For that he and his friends received nothing but detention!"

He snorted a bitter laugh. "And so did I. Detention for nearly being killed. Dumbledore forced me to swear not to reveal Lupin's condition. They knew they were unassailable after that. You might remember what they did to me down at the lake during O.W.L.s."

"I still wonder why Black and Potter weren't expelled," she sighed, setting down the decanter. "What you went through was beyond horrible. I sometimes wonder how you can bear to be here!"

"You think I'm a glutton for punishment?"

She walked over to him, and put her hands on his chest. "I

think you must be the bravest man I've ever met."

There was almost no natural light to speak of in Myrtle's toilet. Therefore, it seemed reasonable to search the Chamber of Secrets after curfew, when the students would be in bed. The only exception, of course, would be Harry. They would search on Saturday, and claim that Harry had leave to attend to some family business that would necessitate sleeping overnight at his home. He would actually sleep in a Hogwarts guest room, and with luck, no one would be the wiser.

"I'm glad it's *after* curfew on Saturday," he told Snape. "Hermione wanted to have a meeting with Draco and Neville and me about the practice schedule for the dances." The dances were something of a sore point with him. He was glad enough to take part in the wedding, but the girls especially had become so obsessive about achieving perfection in front of all the distinguished guests that they wanted to practice at every single meeting. There were lots of other programmes Harry wanted to schedule: a talk about wizarding baking; tales of Padma and Parvati's experiences in wizarding India, descriptions of the weird game of quodpot, which Michael Corner had actually played.

So Charity would come to the meeting too, and they would try to work out some extra times for dance practice that did not cut too much into study times or into the sacrosanct game of Quidditch. Harry certainly did not want to miss the Ravenclaw-Slytherin game because he had to practice dancing!

They were to talk in the club room, in the cozy sitting area in front of the fire. Harry met with Draco and the two walked together, joining Hermione and Neville who had come downstairs to find them. Inevitably, they talked about the wedding. Hermione had received her dress robes by owl order, and Professor Flitwick had promised to teach the students how to perform any small alterations that might be necessary.

"Of course," Draco said, a bit pompously, "it's best to go for a fitting in person, but that's right out in this situation. I'm sure you'll look perfectly acceptable, Hermione."

"I'm so glad," she declared. "It's my very first wizarding wedding. Actually it's my first wedding anywhere, but it's my first real wizarding event. It's so important to respect the occasion."

"Hear, hear!" agreed Draco.

"Gran's sent me red velvet robes," Neville said dolefully. "And there's no way I'm going to be able to get out of wearing them or get away with changing them the least bit."

Harry tried not to look too horrified, since that would not be helpful.

Draco tried harder. "Red shouldn't be a bad color for you," he said judiciously. "And I'm sure they'll be of the very first quality, even if they're a bit—traditional. Tradition is important, too."

"It certainly is," Harry agreed hurriedly.

Hermione nodded. "It will be nice to see everyone in something other than black for a change."

"Well, *my* robes are pearl-grey silk twill," Draco informed them. "Not showy, but extremely well-tailored. It is spring, after all, and Mother felt that at my age black did not set exactly the right tone…"

Charity was sitting by the fire in the club room, waiting for the students, when something bumped against the door.

"Come in," she called.

Another thump, somewhat muffled, like a body slamming against the heavy oak.

"Harry?"

Thump. Whatever it was, it was big. It must be at least as big as full-grown man.

"Who is it?" she asked thickly, drawing her wand.

Beyond the door, something hissed like a dozen simmering teakettles at once, and she took a deep, shaky breath.

"Well," she muttered. "This isn't good."

She certainly was not going to open the door and confront whatever was thumping ever more insistently for admittance. Perhaps she should just step back through the fire…

But the children were coming. They would be here any moment. She needed to know what was out there.

Some months ago she had once noticed an elaborate peep-hole in the wall behind the screen, drawn round with symbols. Surely she could risk a quick glance…

Harry paused at the familiar rushing sound. It was going away, luckily.

"So hungry…so hungry."

"Er—guys?" Harry said, laying a hand on Hermione's arm. "Hold up a bit. I thought I heard something."

"Something wrong, Harry?" Neville asked.

"I don't know," Harry admitted.

Silence. The club room was only yards away.

"Ugh!" Draco said, "Look at this slime on the floor. Disgusting. Dumbledore should sack Filch."

"Slime?" Harry muttered, stepping carefully to the door.

Quickly he opened it, wanting to be inside very, very much. He looked around for Professor Burbage.

"Where is she?" Hermione wondered, and then—"Oh, there you are Professor. What are you doing?"

Charity Burbage was standing, face to the wall, very still.

Draco whispered. "I think she found that the magical thing you put in the wall that time. I won't tell that you did it."

Harry's heart was sinking with dread. He walked up to the unmoving witch, and put out a hand.

"Professor?"

She was precariously balanced, leaning with her forehead pressed against the wall, a thin beam of light from outside the room illuminating one brown eye. Harry touched her, and quite suddenly she fell sideways to the floor with a heavy crash, stiff and rigid as stone. The children jumped back, screaming.

"Is she dead?" wailed Hermione, her voice breaking with horror. "Is she dead?"

"I don't know!" Draco shouted.

"We need help!" stammered Neville, at exactly the same moment.

"The fire!" Draco cried, running to the big fireplace. "We'll call for help!" He skidded to a stop, nearly falling into the flames, and shouted, "Professor Snape! Professor! Come to the fire!"

Hermione and Neville rushed after him, clamoring before they were even in range.

"Please! Someone!"

Harry tore his eyes away from Charity, and ran after Draco, adding his own shouts to the others.

Severus Snape's face appeared, green and glaring. "What is it, Harry? What's wrong?"

"It was the basilisk, Professor!" Harry shouted, not caring that his friends heard. "It was the basilisk! It was here!"

"*Basilisk?*" yelped Draco. Neville's jaw dropped.

Hermione shrilled, "And it got Professor Burbage!"

CHAPTER 23

"CEDRIC?" Susan tugged at the boy's arm. "What's going on?"

"No idea, but we're all to go to the Sett and stay there."

"Less talking, more moving," Professor Sprout rapped out.

"I've never seen her looking *so fierce!*" Hannah whispered to Susan.

Puzzled students followed their professors to their dorms. The Hufflepuffs in the library packed up their belongings, quieting their questions under Sprout's stern eye. The prefects had strict instructions to make certain no one left the House for any reason.

The Slytherins wanted to know where Professor Snape was, and were told no more than that he was "dealing with a situation with the Headmaster." Professor Sinistra came down to the Slytherin Common Room, and checked the list, making sure every one was in.

In each House, there was one student missing. But in each case,

the students were assured that the student was accounted for.

"Granger's going to be in so much trouble!" hissed Mandy Brocklehurst to the other girls, eyes gleaming.

Professor Vector raised her voice a little. "Miss Granger is quite all right, I assure you. And she is *not* in trouble." Vector had heard that Hermione Granger was a remarkably good student, and she remembered unpleasant girls from her own days in Ravenclaw, long ago. The rest of the story she had been told to spread about the children she kept to herself, since it would obviously please this lot entirely too much.

Pansy loudly complained, "Draco promised to be back by eight—"

"Mr Malfoy had a minor accident and is being cared for by Madam Pomfrey," Sinistra told her, her face a mask of calm.

"Harry's not here!" Justin protested. "He's at a meeting with Professor Burbage!"

"Yes, I know," Professor Sprout assured him. "There was a little accident. He's in the Hospital Wing overnight, but he'll be just fine."

"But what *happened* to Neville?" Ron Weasley demanded of his brother. "Why are we all being locked up? What's going on?"

Percy was short with him. "We're staying in GryffindorTower, because that's what Professor McGonagall ordered. She says Neville's fine. He'll just stay overnight in the Hospital Wing. Some sort of silly horseplay gone wrong at that meeting of his, I daresay."

George and Fred retreated to a corner, eyeing the confusion in the Common Room with a a certain skepticism.

"Right," whispered Fred, "There—the Hospital Wing. There's Madam Pomfrey, all right—and there's Neville, and Malfoy, and Granger. And—Professor Burbage…"

"—But Harry's not there!" George added, his eyes ranging over the map. "—he's with *them!*" he said in a triumphant whisper, pointing to a swarm of dots on the first floor.

"Distinguished company for a mere firstie," Fred said, brows raised high in wonder. "Dumbledore, Snape, Flitwick, Lupin, McGonagall, Kettleburn—whoa!"

Fred looked up at his brother, face incredulous. "Nicholas Flamel? Perenelle Flamel? What sort of adventure has our Harry fallen into this time?"

She's only petrified, Snape repeated to himself. *She's only petrified.*

Seeing Charity lying lifeless and stiff on the floor of the club room nearly unmanned him. Her eyes stared at the wall, open

and blank, and for one ghastly, unspeakable moment he had believed her dead. But it was petrifaction, not death, and he sank to his knees rather limply beside her, checking her for other curses and injuries. The children were frantic, shrilling like birds, darting back and forth, gabbling out nonsense. Snape could not summon the strength to shout for silence.

Within moments, Dumbledore and the Flamels responded to the alarm and were coming through, concerned but calm, confirming that yes, somehow Charity had been petrified rather than killed when she looked at the basilisk.

"She was looking through the peephole I made, Professors," Harry babbled. "See, it's Finn's Eye. I learned it from Professor McGonagall…"

Minerva had just emerged from the fire. "…And it would mean that Charity's view of the basilisk's gaze would have been filtered by magic."

A group gathered by the little magical diagram in the wall, admiring the product of McGonagall family magic.

Snape, however, slumped on the floor, winded with relief at this confirmation, his mind already ticking over the possiblities.

Mandrake potion, mandrake potion…are the mandrakes in the greenhouses mature?…If not, the Longbottoms might have some…

Dumbledore interrupted the talk about Finn's Eye, saying, "We must move up our plans to confront the basilisk. We can lose no time in subduing the creature."

Sprout was told to take charge of locking down the students. Snape would take Charity and the children to the Hospital Wing. The children could rest there for the night, while Poppy cared for the petrified Professor.

Except for Harry, of course. He was essential to their plans. As soon as Snape was back, they would put those carefully designed plans into motion.

They all had mirrors for looking around corners. Mirrors would protect them from death, if not from petrifaction. Harry moved along with the hunting party, and within moments he could hear the basilisk complaining about the lack of food.

"It's not going upstairs," he whispered to Snape. "It doesn't like stairs much."

"So much the better," Snape said briefly. "'It will be easier to find that way."

Kettleburn snorted. "Especially if the beast doubles back on us. Let's move to that place you think is the opening. Perhaps we can persuade it to return to its lair."

The house elves were warned not to go wandering about, and were also requested to ready a large amount of fresh, uncooked meat as bait.

By the time they reached Moaning Myrtle's toilet, the rest of the trap was nearly complete.

Harry whispered that that he could hear the basilisk complaining on the far end of the corridor.

"Then let us go in," Dumbledore gestured.

Myrtle squeaked when she saw them, sitting high up by the window, trembling violently.

"Hullo, Myrtle," Harry greeted her. "Are you all right?"

"All right?" she wailed. "*All right?* A gigantic snake wriggled through my bathroom! You ask me if I'm *all right?*"

"That's a basilisk," Harry told her importantly. "It's the one that got you. We're trying to trap it so it never hurts anyone else."

"Fat lot of good that does me!" she sobbed.

Snape's wand was out, and he was thinking of exorcism at the very least, but Perenelle Flamel gave the ghost a kind but stern look, and a little flick of her wrist. Myrtle darted up to the ceiling, wary and impressed.

Perenelle said, "My child, we mean you no harm, but you really must be silent so that we can do our work. it will not be long."

They all hoped that was true, for they had all looked around the toilet as they entered, and there was still no sign of the entrance of the Chamber of Secrets. Harry's eyes roamed the room desperately.

It came out of this place! It had to!

Quickly, Flamel showed him a quick sketch of a curving shape. "What is that, Harry?" he asked.

"It's a snake," Harry answered at once.

Flamel raised his brows, intrigued, and looked at Snape. "Not a letter 'S'?"

"No." Harry shook his head. "It's a snake."

"Harry, that mark is there." Flamel took him down to the scratched tap. Do you think you could use some Parseltongue? Could you, perhaps, ask it to 'Open?'"

"Open?" Harry ventured. "I'm sorry. Maybe if I look at the snake." He studied the little sketch again.

"Open," he commanded.

Everyone moved back, and some gasped, as the floor opened and a dark pit was revealed beneath their feet.

Dumbledore murmured, almost delighted. "The entrance to the Chamber of Secrets. At last."

"Then let us descend," Flamel urged them, quite intrigued himself.

Brooms were conjured, some of them not very good: but they were good enough to let the professors descend into the Chamber.

"This is certainly the lair," Kettleburn said. "What a curious odor! I must mention it in my paper."

Bones crunched underfoot, and a strange light shone up ahead. Another doorway was already open before them, and a vast and lofty chamber was revealed..

"Salazar Slytherin, I presume," said Dumbledore pointing to the huge statue. "This is the ideal place for the trap, is it not, Sylvanus?"

"Couldn't be better," Kettleburn affirmed.

"Then let us summon the house elves," said Flamel, "and ready our bait."

With a clap of Dumbledore's hands, the elves of Hogwarts arrived, bearing fresh meat from the vast larders of Hogwarts: fresh and bloody as ordered: chickens, ducks, and geese; tenderloins of pork and beef, two fresh, just-slaughtered lambs. The elves were dismised, and the hunters waited.

The reek filled the Chamber. Some of the hunters wrinkled their noses; others waited impassively. All flew up to the roof of the Chamber, well out of range of the basilisk's fangs. All but Snape and Harry, who flew over the bloody offering. Snape poured an entire jug of Draught of the Living Death over it.

"It will be slow, on a creature of its size, but it should certainly still work," Snape muttered, more to himself than anyone else.

"Call to it, Harry," Dumbledore ordered.

"I have to look at that sketch thing again," mumbled Harry. He was cross because Snape had demanded that he ride on Snape's broom with him. He wasn't a baby, and could fly better than anybody in the room! Nonetheless, he was cooperative enough when Flamel flew up beside him. He looked at the liitle snake of ink and concentrated.

"Hullo, Basilisk!" he called. *"We've got a lot of food for you. You should come back to the Chamber!"*

A pause, and then there was a rushing sound like a rampaging flood approaching. *"A Speaker! Have you brought food at last?"*

"Yes! Lots! You'd best come if you want it!" Harry stared at Flamel, reminding himself of human speech, and shouted to everyone, "It's coming!"

"Talk to him, Harry!" Kettleburn pleaded. "Talk to him!"

Everyone heard the basilisk as he exploded down the tunnel, bones crackling, slobbering in his greed. They turned their backs on the beast, only watching it through mirrors. Snape and Harry alone had no mirrors, trusting in others to warn them of danger, for Snape knew that he could not risk being petrified, when Charity needed him to rescue her from the same state.

Harry tried to talk, but the basilisk saw nothing but the food before him, and its few words consisted entirely of *"Meat!"* and *"Tasty!"* and *"Crunchy bones!"* which Harry dutifully reported. It really was not a very *interesting* snake from the conversational point of view.

"You're such an amazing creature," Harry called, trying again. *"How long have you lived here?"*

"Always," the creature grumbled through its meal. *"Always and always."*

Prompted by Snape, Harry asked, *"Did you see a boy here before?"*

"There was the Lord. He was not the First Speaker. He was good, and brought food."

"When was this?"

"Before. He brought sweet meat." It was growing lethargic, falling under the influence of the potion and the huge meal.

"Did he say his name?"

"There was Speaker, and there was Lord," the basilisk answered,

a little irritated. *"Wish to sleep now. Much sweet meat in my belly feels good."*

The basilisk was drowsy now, drowsy almost to morbidity.

"Sweet meat," it rumbled. *"Sweet meat…"*

Urgently, Kettleburn begged Harry to ask it his list of questions. The basilisk answered slowly, and without much interest. It liked meat. The kind he killed himself was best, but this was good, too. It knew no others of its kind, nor did it care to. Yes, it remembered the First Speaker. He commanded it to watch for danger.

"Watch for danger…and then to sleep…to sleep…"

Kettleburn nodded to Lupin, who crept up from the back, as planned. peering over the massive head.

"The lids are down…" he murmured, cautiously using his mirror and leaning over. "Down…yes! Lids are down…The eyes are covered!" he called back in an urgent whisper.

The witches and wizards moved into action at once, flying down from the roof of the Chamber, and alighting with various degrees of dignity. Fllitwick and McGonagall stood over the basilisk, wands at the ready to petrify the beast if it awakened. Nicholas and Perenelle began extracting the basilisk venom from the undevoured carcasses. Kettleburn and Lupin collected the discarded skin, and even found some outgrown teeth amidst the unsavoury rubbish littering the floor.

Dumbledore and Snape searched the Chamber for the diary. They were on the watch for any magical items, for

that matter, hoping there would be more secrets to uncover here. Snape had fancied that there might be a hidden cache of ancient lore, but the room seemed to be no more than a hiding place for the basilisk itself. He kept Harry at his side at all times, not letting the boy stray for even a moment.

"Here!" called Dumbledore.

In a little alcove to the side of the statue there was proof of recent human habitation: some boxes, some discarded clothes. In one of the boxes were a few clean dishes, and an unopened bottle of cider. There were no crumbs or crusts, or dirty dishes of course: a capable wizard would have scourgified or vanished the more sordid remnants.

"Our mystery student came here," Dumbledore thought aloud, "after it was clear that we had found his other bolt hole. And we know now that he had to be a parselmouth. Perhaps the gift is not so rare as is commonly thought…"

"He didn't stay long," Snape agreed. "Possibly the basilisk was released to create a diversion?"

Harry was tired of being dragged along by Professor Snape, even if it was for his own good. He looked around at the other activities, curious about what the Flamels were doing. Basilisk venom was rare and valuable, he knew. You could do all sorts of things with it…

Behind the edge of Professor Dumbledore's purple robe was a dim and dusty corner. Something white fluttered there…

"That's it!" He tugged on Snape's sleeve. "That's the diary!"

His clear boy's voice echoed off the stone walls of the Chamber. Heads turned, looking his way.

It had been cast aside, falling open in such a way to make it look at first glance not even like a book. Snape gripped Harry's shoulder, pulling him away. Dumbledore moved in, curious and wary, ready to pick it up with a fold of his sleeve.

The others were drawn in, all but McGonagall and Flitwick, still guarding the torpid basilisk.

"Harry," Snape said, "are you *sure* that's the diary."

"Absolutely—" Harry said eagerly. "Look inside."

Dumbledore opened the volume. "'*Property of T.M. Riddle,*'" he read. "A blank journal, just as you said, Harry." He frowned. "And yet…"

Flamel cast a brief spell on the diary, and frowned himself. He cocked an eyebrow at Perenelle.

"Severus," Dumbledore said, "I dislike having to ask this of you, but would you be so good as to *touch* this book?"

Gritting his teeth, Snape reached out, touched the book…

And felt nothing.

Well, that was an oversimplification. He felt a book. A simple muggle blank book, suitable for a journal. Pasteboard and paper. He took the book from Dumbledore, thumbing through it.

"Nothing." he said. "There's nothing here. It's just a blank book. Harry, are you *sure* this is the same?"

"Sure, I'm sure! Here, look at the back. It's from that place—Vauxhall Road! I wrote in it, and it wrote back to me, and then

it showed me those visions!"

Quickly, Flamel produced a quill. "Self-inking, Harry," he explained. "Go ahead and write in the book."

Snape took a quick breath, but did not object. Harry peered around at the breathless adults, and scrawled out, *"Hello,"* on a white, waiting page.

"Hello," stared back at him, black ink on white paper.

"This is weird," he protested, shaking his head, and giving Flamel the quill. "This isn't what happened before. The ink disappeared back into the page. Now it's just…there. It's the same book, but it's not working the same way."

"So it would seem," Flamel agreed, with a deep sigh. "Whatever enchantments existed on this book are no more. I can detect traces of magic, but this enchanted object has been disenchanted. It is indeed now nothing more than a muggle book."

General objections, and much chatter.

"How can that be?" Lupin asked, very alarmed. "How can a horcrux stop being a horcrux without being destroyed, like the diadem?"

Dumbledore considered the little black book. "Perhaps it was not a horcrux at all. We might have been misled as to its nature. It might have been enchanted in somewhat the same way as a penseive, but its memories have now been erased."

Flamel was more uneasy, but agreed in part. "It is now impossible to tell if it was merely an enchanted book, or a horcrux that has been *used*. And no one in this room has the least idea what a used horcrux would be like."

More basilisk parts were gathered in silence, and the basilisk itself was returned to its enchanted sleep, with the joint efforts of Dumbledore, Kettleburn, Flitwick, and the Flamels. The grisly remnants of the basilisk's feast were vanished. They all returned up the tunnel, and Harry was told to order the inner doors, and then the outer opening to *"close."*

They made a grim group, sitting in the Headmaster's Office in silence for a time.

Dumbledore spoke up. "I will begin work at once on wardings for the Chamber of Secrets. It is important that it cease to be available simply due to the use of parseltongue. Whoever used the Chamber is gone, and I believe that we agree that we do not want anyone else intefering with the basilisk."

Quiet agreement. Flitwick said, "Whoever was here might have been gone for days. Who knows where he's got to?"

Dumbledore looked harassed and tired. "There is little we can do about it, at any rate. Now I hope you all will forgive me, but I must get a few hours sleep if I am to speak at Peter Pettigrew's trial tomorrow."

"I shall go with you," Minerva said instantly.

"And I," Lupin agreed. "Now that we have the basilisk issue

settled, Peter's trial, and then Sirius', must be our first concern."

Harry yawned, and Snape was grateful for the interruption.

"Harry's tired," Snape told them all. "I'm going to take him to the Hospital Wing, and see to Charity. Pomona, do we have any mature mandrakes?"

Sprout beamed. "Indeed we do! Greenhouse Three. We ought to get to work on that."

Snape nearly puddled to the floor in relief. "Yes. I shall meet you in Greenhouse Three shortly, and will harvest—two, I think. That should be sufficient."

"*Mon enfant*," Flamel said kindly. "I would consider it an honor if you would permit Perenelle and myself to assist you in the brewing."

Snape nodded numbly, knowing that he was not in the optimum state for an optimum result. "I shall be in my workroom within the hour."

Kettleburn rose, in good spirits despite everything. "And I shall be in my laboratory, writing up my notes. An interview with a basilisk! A crowning moment, my friends: a crowning moment."

CHAPTER 24

"BUT I COULD HELP!"

Harry objected, cranky with exhaustion. want to help!"

"Tomorrow!" Snape rapped out harshly, too stressed to care. "Go to bed!"

Nicholas Flamel took Harry by the hand, and urged him away, his voice warm and persuasive. "Come, *mon enfant*, your guardian requires your obedience. A few hours rest in the Hospital Wing, and then you can tell your friends all that has occurred. That will be pleasant, yes? We will certainly still need assistance tomorrow, after you have slept and eaten. Even the great Dumbledore needs rest, as you see."

Perenelle came up beside Snape, a faint smile on her thin lips. "And we, too, can sleep, once the mandrakes are harvested and steeping in the Canephora Solution. That cannot be hurried, after all. After the required five hours, there will still be the brewing before us, but your Charity will be back amongst us by dinner-time tomorrow. And she will find you more agreeable if you are not so weary."

"It isn't just the potion," Snape confessed. "It's the entire situation. A parselmouth was in the Chamber of Secrets, up to no good, I'm certain. We need to search the entire castle

thoroughly. We need to look for the ring and the locket. I have a very bad feeling about all of this."

"Of course you do," she said soothingly. "We all do; but there is only so much we can do at once. Nicholas and I shall prepare the Canephora for you. Filius Flitwick has awakened Professors Vector, Sinistra, and Mesdames Hooch and Pince. They are making a search as we speak. There are other means as well, to see if we have an intruder. Once the potion is complete and Charity is well, of course we must proceed with our other tasks."

He grumbled and muttered, but she succeeded in pushing him in the direction of the greenhouses.

After a few hours of sleep, restless though it was, and a cup of hot, strong tea, he was more himself. He looked in at the Infirmary. Charity was still frozen in place, pale and lifeless; but she was not more lifeless than she had been when he last saw her. The four children were still sound asleep. They would have to stay here until they were properly briefed as to what they could and could not say.

Poppy smiled up at him from her neatly-kept desk, and whispered. "A little extra sleep won't hurt the students!"

"I promised Harry he could help with the potion," he whispered back. "When he wakes, make sure he has a bit to eat before you send him through the fire to my work room. I don't want him going anywhere else."

Minerva appeared in the doorway, and gestured to him. He went with her into the corridor, closing the door softly behind him.

"No sign of any intruder, I'm told. Whoever it was," she said a little breathlessly, as if she knew who it was and did not like to say. "Whoever it was, he's not here anymore! I think the release of the creature really was a diversion so he could make his escape."

"Then we need to make the hunt for the horcruxes a priority," Snape said. "We cannot wait for the end of term."

"Well, we cannot undertake it today," she countered. "Albus, Remus, and I will be leaving in an hour for the Ministry. I daresay we'll be there all day with one thing and another. No doubt he'll want to tell everyone the news on our return."

"With any luck, Charity will be conscious by then."

Surprising him, she pressed his hand, and spoke very kindly. "I certainly hope so! A terrible shock for you, but it could have been so much worse!" A sharp nod, and an arch look followed. "Thanks to the power of McGonagall magic!"

"As you say."

What a difference a few hours can make!

Neville, Hermione, and Draco were told to say nothing to anyone about the basilisk or the petrifaction of Professor Burbage. They were not to owl their parents or guardians either, as that would taken care of by the Headmaster. The basilisk was contained, now that everyone knew about it, in an enchanted

sleep and by heavy wards. This made the children a bit uneasy, but when told that the only other option was to kill it outright, Hermione saw sense, and made her friends see sense, too.

Harry was happy running errands and fetching things while the Mandrake Potion was brewing. Professor Snape was in a much better mood now, and the Flamels told them some funny stories about times gone by.

By four o'clock, the potion was ready, and Madam Pomfrey spelled it directly into Charity's stomach, rather than using a nasal tube. Harry stood back with the Flamels, letting Poppy pull Snape forward.

"Sit, Severus," she said. "Sit right here on the edge of the bed so she can see you right away." They waited, but not long. Within minutes the potion was at work: Charity's skin pinked up, she began breathing once more, and then she blinked, once…twice…and consciousness returned to her eyes.

"I'm not dead!" she shouted. "I thought I was done for! Severus!" She reached out and pulled him to her. Snape was glad that he could hide his face in her hair, because he was not one to let other people see what was in his face at the moment.

And then Charity insisted on kissing him in front of everyone. His face felt very hot, and he glanced about warily, but these were friends, and there was nothing but kindness in every face. Other than Harry's, of course, as the boy appeared utterly repulsed. Still, that was perfectly natural.

"No, you're not dead. Harry's peephole was magical, and protected you from the full effects of the basilisk."

"Those yellow eyes! I never saw such eyes!" Then she grew fearful that it was still loose, and so the events of the previous evening had to be explained, and Harry interrupted fairly rudely at times, too excited to wait his turn.

"—And then we made the Mandrake Potion, and I helped!" he completed his tale. "And nobody but the basilisk was in the Chamber of Secrets, and we found the diary there, but it wasn't a horcrux after all!"

Charity caught the more reserved expressions on Severus' face, and knew there was a story there. In the meantime she only thanked Harry and the Flamels and told them that she was astonishingly hungry.

"You can find your friends and tell them that Professor Burbage is fine now," Snape told Harry. "But don't talk where anyone can hear you."

And then he and Charity left for her rooms to enjoy their tea and renew their betrothal.

Harry waved at the Flamels, and hurried off, full of secrets. It would be hard to keep this quiet, he thought.

However, his worries were for naught. He could have shouted the word "Basilisk!" at the top of his lungs in the Great Hall, and no one would have heeded him, because everyone was already talking at the top of their lungs about the trial of Peter Pettigrew.

He glanced over at Ernie's copy of the PROPHET, and saw the headlines, enormous and inky, covering the front page:

You-Know-Who's Secret Agent Revealed! Pettigrew His Right Hand!

How Pettigrew Betrayed First the Potters, and then Sirius Black!

Peter Pettigrew Found Guilty and Sentenced to the Kiss!

How Will His Conviction Play Out in Tomorrow's Trial of Sirius Black?

Black's Exoneration a Foregone Conclusion, based on Veritaserum Evidence!

His Years of Unspeakable Suffering in Azkaban, by Rita Skeeter.

Harry wondered if every student and teacher in Hogwarts had their own copy of the special edition of the PROPHET. The noise level was unbelievable.

Susan looked up from hers. "Are you all right, Harry?"

"Fine. It was nothing, really."

"Well!" Hannah said, "You've missed all the excitement! Peter Pettigrew was a Death Eater, not a hero! Just fancy!" Then she blushed and feel silent, remembering what the man had done to Harry's parents. "I"m sorry—"

"It's OK, Hannah," Harry said. "I've had time to get used to the idea. And I don't remember either Pettigrew or Black, so it doesn't hurt as much. I'm glad an innocent man will be free."

"As soon as he's had his trial," Susan said sententiously.

"One should never take anything like that for granted, no matter how they go on in the *Prophet!*"

"But that's tomorrow," said Ernie, trying to eat and read at the same time. Peas dropped, bouncing, on his newspaper, and rolled under the table.

The interest at the Ravenclaw table was purely academic, at the Slytherin table it was a little more political. Draco answered a few questions. Having a member of the Black family found innocent would be an advantage for his family. That would leave only crazy Aunt Bella in Azkaban, and somehow Draco could not imagine new evidence suddenly exonerating *her.*

Most vocal were the Gryffindors, and most prominent among them were the Weasleys.

Fred and George gazed at their brothers in compassion.

"We can't believe that—"

"—you *slept* with Peter Pettigrew—"

"—for years and years and years."

"Eewww, gross!" groaned Ron.

Percy muttered, "I hate you both so very much…"

The noise level at the Head Table was somewhat lower. Professors Burbage and Snape were absent, and some of the other teachers seemed tired. The three who had attended the trial were very quiet indeed.

Remus Lupin had been a in continuous state of self-recrimination since sentence was passed on his old friend Peter.

"I don't understand myself!" he confided to Minerva. "How could I imagine that Sirius would ever betray James and Lily?"

"We were all deceived," Minerva tried to comfort him. "We all made terrible mistakes. It was inexcusable that he was never given a trial. Let us all hope that by this time tomorrow he's a free man."

Sirius Black sat in Courtroom Ten, hardly understanding what was going on around him. Dumbledore was sitting nearby, with some fellow he was told was representing him. No one was asking him to say anything: he simply sat in the dock, studying his strangely clean nails. It was all very odd. They had shaved him too. His face felt unlike it ought to, with no beard on it. Being clean was a very peculiar state of affairs. The sausage he had saved from breakfast was in his pocket, a comforting weight. He found it made him feel safer to hide a bit of food about him. You never knew…

The barrister was yammering at length, in a pompous, portentous voice that made Sirius want to set a grease trap in the fellow's path. Nothing like a pratfall to moderate overweening pride. He should know. He had taken the biggest pratfall in the history of pratfalls, and it had landed him in Azkaban. For ten years, Dumbledore told him. Sirius supposed he would have to believe the old man. McGonagall was here too, looking like she had a pickled plum in her mouth, but that was just McGonagall for you.

"…and further, I shall prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that my client is utterly and indisputably innocent of all wrongdoing; most specifically innocent of the crimes committed on October 31, 1980, for which he unjustly suffered in Azkaban for an entire decade…"

Sirius looked up, seeing a face that looked—was that *Moony?* But he looked *old!* Yes, bloody hell! He gave Remus a huge grin, confusing the poor old fellow. Sirius wondered if he himself could possibly look that old and dismissed it out of hand. Being a werewolf certainly took its toll.

Poor Moony. He had probably had to denounce him for fear of being imprisoned himself. No reason to hold it against him. After all, they didn't let even Dumbledore visit until they were certain he hadn't killed James and Lily. So Moony was alive. That was bloody marvelous!

It seemed to be going all right. Dumbledore said that they had Kissed Wormtail last night. Couldn't happen to anyone who deserved it more.

Sirius fidgeted in the hard chair, bored. He should make plans, he supposed. The whole Black estate was his now, so he need never work. The lawyer fellow had told him. Dear old Mama might have blasted him off the family tapestry, but she hadn't made a proper record of his disinheritance at the Ministry, so the joke was totally on her. Just as well. He had once considered being an Auror, but there was no way he was ever

working for the bloody incompetent Ministry, the same buffoons who had taken ten years to grant him a trial.

Harry was all right, Dumbledore said. That was good news, too. He hadn't thought much of Lily's sister when they met that time, but she had apparently done all right by Harry. A good student! Sirius chuckled to himself, oblivious to the whispers and pitying stares that such behavior provoked. Sirius only hoped the boy had a bit of James in him, and was not some prefect-to-be with a stick up his arse. Sirius would have to teach him a bit about enjoying himself!

They were going to look at the pensieve memories now: his memories and Wormtail's. It was marginally more interesting than that lawyer's endless rigmarole. Oh! There he was. Rather dashing, if he said so himself. It surely wouldn't be much longer…

"…and it is the judgment of this court that you are not guilty of the crimes of which your were accused. It is further the judgment of this court that you be committed for appropriate treatment at St Mungo's, until such a time you are well enough to function normally amongst your fellow witches and wizards."

Sirius' attention was caught by the words *"committed,"* *"treatment,"* *"St Mungo's,"* and *"normally."*

He struggled against the magical bonds of the chair, infuriated. "Committed!" he shouted. "Am I not to be set free?"

Cornelius Fudge looked at him in astonishment. "Of course you are free, Mr Black. You have been found not guilty. But first you must be treated for the dreadful and unjust trauma you have suffered. The Ministry owes it to you, to itself, and to the entire Wizarding World!"

"Sod the bloody Ministry!" Sirius roared. "Let me out of here, you cowardly little fucker!"

Lupin covered his face with his hands. Minerva McGonagall winced. Dumbledore managed a weak smile as the Healer in attendance cast a sleep spell over the wild man in the dock.

"Sirius?"

Sirius warily squeezed his eyes open. "Moony? Did they lock me up again?"

Dumbledore was in the room, too, kindly grave: very Dumbledorish. Moony was still Moony too, despite being old. He was giving Sirius that look that meant that this time it *mattered*, and that Sirius was going to have to listen carefully and do something that was not at all fun.

"You're at St Mungo's, Sirius. You're not in good health, and the Ministry wants to make sure you're in tip-top shape before they let you go. It wouldn't do for you to collapse in the street from malnutrition from your time in Azkaban."

"But I was found not guilty!"

Dumbledore came over, eyeing Sirius with a very faint smile.

"Yes, you were found not guilty, but you know that the Ministry

can commit people to St Mungo's against their will for an indefinite period of time, if their physical or mental health seems to warrant it."

"That *reeks* of injustice—"

Remus said, very testily, "Of course it's not fair! What is? You've got to play their game, Sirius. You've got to abide by their rules, and eat the balanced diet they give you, and not make inappropriate jokes. The sooner you can behave yourself, the sooner they'll let you go."

"Not fair…" Sirius muttered. He looked up at Moony, who was so very sad. It wasn't fair that Moony was a werewolf, either. "Sorry."

"Don't be sorry," Remus said. "Do as you're told. Get yourself well, and don't argue with the healers!"

"How have you been, Moony?" Sirius remembered to ask.

"I'm very well, Padfoot. I'm teaching at Hogwarts now. Defense against the Dark Arts."

Sirius' face widened in a grin. "Professor Moony! That's great news! At least there's one of us still stirring the pot at Hogwarts! Do you see Harry much?"

Remus and Dumbledore both smiled at that. Remus said, "At every Defense class. He's very good at Defense."

"Do you suppose I could see him…sometime?"

Dumbledore frowned. "I can ask the healers, but the quickest and most reliable way to see Harry is to get yourself in order and celebrate your release with a visit. I would certainly permit him a release to see you at Hogsmeade, if you

were well enough before the end of term. I'll be in touch with the healers. It lies with you."

"You're saying I have to be a good boy and eat all my carrots," Sirius said sulkily.

"That is indeed what it amounts to, my dear boy."

The healers declared visiting hours to be over. Sirius pouted, but hugged Moony goodbye, and shook Dumbledore's hand manfully. "Come back soon," he called after them. Lupin waved and grinned.

After they were out of earshot, Lupin sighed heavily.

"I didn't have the heart to tell him that Severus is Harry's guardian, Albus. Not yet."

Dumbledore considered the matter. "He needs to be told soon, so he can get over it."

"And we need to discuss this with Harry, too. It might not be a good thing if Sirius were to contact him out of the blue and Severus were there for a confrontation."

"No, not a good thing at all."

They returned to Hogwarts to a great surprise, and not entirely a pleasant one from Dumbledore's point of view.

Nicholas and Perenelle visited the Headmaster's Office almost immediately, and Nicholas dropped a black and twisted ring on the desk. A pebble-sized stone set in it was cracked and dull.

"You were busy with the trial of Sirius Black, mon ami," Perenelle said gently. "The others, they had their work to attend to. We were quite free, and thought it best to deal with the matter expeditiously."

Dumbledore stared at the ruined Resurrection Stone mournfully. He had had such hopes…

"It does not do to dwell on dreams, Albus," Nicholas counseled him. "The Ring and its Stone are better destroyed. If, as I fear, the diary was used to a dark purpose, we did not wish this object to fall into the wrong hands."

"Or any hands," Perenelle added. "It carried the vilest of curses."

If thinking about the horcruxes, Sirius Black, and his upcoming wedding were not stressful enough, Snape found himself with yet more on his plate. An owl dropped off a message one morning that he puzzled over for some time.

My dear Professor Snape:

While we are not personally acquainted, we are in fact bound by the ties of blood. I am your uncle, Gordianus Prince, your mother's elder brother. You may not be aware that my father, your grandfather, Septimus Prince, departed this life last October. While he lived, he forbade any contact with you, as he had cast off your mother subsequent to her marriage.

As he is gone, and my mother is now free to follow her own inclination, she confided to me her hopes of meeting you. Having read of your engagement to your colleague, Professor Burbage, she thought that this perhaps was the appropriate time.

We are having a family get-together next Saturday evening. Would you and Professor Burbage be available to join us for dinner, perhaps at seven o'clock? Your grandmother will be there, of course, as will I and my wife Deirdre (née Diggle). Also present will be my son Probus and his wife Violet (née Grimstone). Probus and his wife are somewhat older than you, and I believe that you did not cross paths with either of them in your Hogwarts days. With us will be their delightful children: Tansy, age ten, Marigold, eight, and Octavius, seven. Tansy will of course be attending Hogwarts next September, and it would be such a good opportunity for her to become acquainted with her distinguished cousin.

Hoping to receive your owl, I am, most sincerely,

Your uncle,
Gordianus Prince

Snape's first reaction to this slimy epistle was to want to throw it in the fire. The Princes had turned their back on his mother, had allowed her to live in grinding poverty, had not even responded in any way to her death, and *now* they wanted to see him? Or was it that they now had a child about to enter Hogwarts, and they did not want the Potions Master, who would certainly have her in his class, to hate her?

Charity, who came from an affectionate, extended family, was herself in favor of giving the Princes the benefit of the doubt.

"We can meet them this once, Severus, surely? If they're horrid we needn't see them again. But Madam Prince is your grandmother! That's very important. And for all your know this Probus and his wife might be quite decent people. Do you know anything about them?

"The Princes have a smallish estate in Somerset. There's a dairy and and some cheesemaking. That sort of thing. I once heard third-hand that Probus handles the business end of the farm—the manor, *they* call it. Pretentious lot."

"Well, let's go. Just this once. It's family, after all. Perhaps they're hoping to be invited to the wedding."

He sneered. "Isn't everyone?"

CHAPTER 25

"He's a Hufflepuff?"

Remus Lupin sighed, and began again. "Yes, Sirius. Harry was Sorted into Hufflepuff. He's very happy there, and he's been doing extremely well…"

"James' son is a *Hufflepuff*?"

Lupin wondered if they would get past this point anytime soon. Dumbledore had exerted pressure as only he could. Sirius had to be brought up to date about Harry *today*, and if his House were such an issue, what would he say when Lupin mentioned Snape's role in Harry's life?

"Yes, Sirius. He's a Hufflepuff. He likes it. He has friends in all the Houses, in fact. He's near the top of his year, and he's had only one detention that I know of…"

Sirius' face was a study in horror, spiced just the least bit with contempt. "A Hufflepuff!" he muttered, very put out. "Even Lily was a Gryffindor! What did that sister of hers *do* to him?"

"That's another thing, Sirius…"

"A Hufflepuff." Sirius walked to the warded window and looked out, shaking his head. "At eleven it might be too late to undo the damage."

"Harry doesn't regard himself as *damaged*, Sirius," Lupin protested. "I'm sure he'd like to meet you and get to know you. Dumbledore says he can manage a meeting in Hogsmeade, once they release you."

"I'd like that," Sirius said. "I owe it to James. I can tell Harry about the great times we had…"

Lupin gritted his teeth, thinking of Dumbledore. He would rather do just about anything, rather than do this. "You need to know something else about Harry, Sirius…"

It was such a good idea to have silencing wards on the rooms. Lupin's next piece of news provoked bellows that shattered the air. Sirius turned an unhealthy shade of purple, and kicked the wall violently.

"How the bloody hell did that happen? *Snivellus*? Harry's Guardian? Harry's executioner, more likely!"

Lupin took hold of himself, trying to still the impulse to turn tail and flee. This had to be done. The worst was over, already.

"Severus has changed, Sirius. He's a Hogwarts professor. And he's not the legal guardian, but the wizarding proxy. Petunia didn't feel equal to dealing with the magical issues. She's known Severus since they were children together, and so she asked him. He's very good to Harry…"

"He's practically gelded him, from what you've told me. No

detentions! Good grades! A Hufflepuff! Snape must have plotted the whole thing, and I'll bet anything he thinks it's funny!"

"He does not. Severus is very kind to Harry, and Harry thinks a lot of him. I'm telling you, Sirius, he's changed. He's grown up! He's getting married in two weeks!"

"Married!" Sirius laughed, a husky loud bark, and grinned broadly. "Who'd marry *Snivellus?*"

"Charity Burbage," Remus told him instantly. "She's teaching at Hogwarts too, and…"

Sirius hesitated, trying to recall the name. Then he laughed again, pounding his hand on the wall in glee. "That pimply cow! That's rich! The greasy git and the pimply cow. She must weigh as much as one by now—"

"Don't!" Remus interrupted him. "Don't say such things about her! You haven't seen her in years, and she's become a very attractive woman! And Harry would hate it if he knew you called her that. He likes her too!"

"Fine!" Sirius threw himself on his bed, sulking. "I was thinking about being Padfoot and going to see him, but what's the use?"

Horrified, Remus said, "I'm so glad you didn't. Your healers say you're making progress. They say they'll probably let you out in a week or two. Don't do anything reckless." Personally, Remus did not see that Sirius had made much progress at all, but Sirius could be very charming and convincing when he cared to be.

"I won't," Sirius said, lying back, his hands under his head. "I'll play whatever game they like. I've got that idiot Phyllida Uffish making eyes at me already. Once they let me out, they are never getting their grubby paws on me ever again. I'm going to get rid of Grimmauld Place, move to Unicorn Key, and go back to nature."

A little more hopeful, Lupin moved closer, and sat down by his friend. "Tell me about Unicorn Key."

"It's in the Bahamas," Sirius said, smiling dreamily. "As far as I know the old hag didn't sell it off. A little private island—that's what 'key' means in those parts. There's a bungalow, and there used to be a pair of house elves there. Nobody else. Nobody to tell me what to do. My own piece of paradise. You'll come see it with me Moony, won't you, even though you are a distinguished professor and all?"

Remus nodded. Surely Sirius couldn't get into too much trouble there. "That sounds like a plan. I'd love to come after the end of term. You'll need to clear out Grimmauld Place first. I'll be happy to help. And you should still see Harry."

"Right, right, right. I'll see Harry, but there's no need to rush that. Sounds like it's too late to do any good there." He glanced over and saw Lupin's expression, and barked another laugh. "He's much more your type than mine anyway. When they say I can leave, I'll owl you. We'll go to Grimmauld Place and sell the whole lot off." He frowned. "I haven't been there in years, of course, but there are a lot of magical items, and some of them are seriously Dark."

Lupin considered this. "We probably could use some help. Maybe your cousin Andromeda would like to see some of the old things, and her daughter is an Auror trainee, I understand. Even Dumbledore would probably like to help out."

Sirius nodded, thinking it over. "It could be like a party!"

"Exactly," Lupin agreed, happy to promote this more pleasant train of thought. "We'll clear it out and then put it up for sale. There might be things in the Black vault that need to go, too. You can catch up with your friends and your cousins. I'll talk to Dumbledore about it. Once that is in hand, you need to schedule a time to see Harry."

"You can schedule a time for me, Moony," Sirius said, growing sleepy. "Too bad the pup isn't old enough for anything but butterbeer…"

"They're coming at the end of the week," Charity announced. "I've made the reservations at the Three Broomsticks. There will be my mother and father, my mother's parents, my sister Hope and her husband Jocko—"

Snape smothered a snort. Charity found it hard not to laugh in response. "Yes—Jocko. My brothers and their wives. My aunt Abstinence Spellman, my great-aunt Purity Grosbeake, and six children between the ages of nine months and nine years."

"Too horrible for words," Snape assured her.

"Once we meet *your* family, we'll have some measure as to how horrible mine are, now won't we?"

He nodded, feeling a bit despondent. Tonight was the Prince dinner, and it loomed unpleasantly before him.

"—At any rate," Charity said, "other than the dinner with them the night they arrive, they will mostly be entertaining themselves. They know your schedule is heavier than mine. The only one likely to be demanding is Dad, and he's already said he's got to see your place in Spinner's End, so after we're done meeting the Princes, let's schedule some time to clean up there."

"I've some things I have to do for Dumbledore," Snape warned her. "We're still looking for that Slytherin locket, you know; and Flamel thinks he has an idea for fixing the horcrux in Harry's head."

"Dumbledore can look for the locket himself. He doesn't have a wedding to plan. Really—we can get Spinner's End ready in only a few hours. My plan is this: shrink all the furniture and box it up. Clean the walls and ceilings and color them plain white. Cast cleaning spells on the windows. Cast a cleaning spell, and then a shining spell on the floor. That's all, really. The house will look empty and neat. It will give us all a tabula rasa to work with."

"You make it all sound so easy."

"It *is* easy, Severus," she assured him, squeezing his hand. "I will *make* it easy for you."

Charity quite liked the look of Surlicote Hall, ancestral home of the Princes. They were not the oldest of pureblood lines, but sometime in the last century they had got their hands on one of the old Peverell properties by marriage, and they subsequently gave themselves airs as having held the estate back to the time of Merlin.

Their expert house elves tended a superb dairy that produced notable cheeses: Surlicote was specific to wizarding Britain, and there was not only the splendidly tangy Surlicote Lump—reminiscent of Cheshire, but with a curious bouquet of Mandrake, but also the famed Surlicote DoubleBlue, Surlicote Crumbly, Surlicote Whimsy (with the purple bits), and of course, Surlicote Simple.

Did she like the look of the Princes themselves? That was harder to say. Severus was inclined to dislike his uncle Gordianus, simply on the basis of a somewhat oily letter. The uncle was here now, gathered with the rest of the family in a rather nice entry hall, and she searched their faces for resemblances.

Well, the men were tall, but Gordianus was hardly lean. Probus, his son, was as slender as Snape himself, but his hair was a plain brown, and a bit thinnish, receding back from his forehead as if it were about to slip off his scalp completely.

They were going through the introductions now, nodding and bowing and smiling like anything. She felt no embarrassment at staring, since the Princes were peering so hard at Severus that it was a wonder he wasn't half-skinned. Where was the old lady?

"My mother, you see, is awaiting you in the drawing room…"

Oh dear, the man spoke just as he wrote, and it was rather dreadful. His sharp-eyed wife seemed to be trying to tone him down a bit, chatting volubly, filling them in, asking Charity to call her Deirdre—"We're *family*, after all." —and doing the introductions with less fuss and better manners than Gordianus would have managed.

Probus' wife Violet, too, looked all right. A bit stiff and uncomfortable, but it was a stiff and uncomfortable situation, and Charity was feeling stiff and uncomfortable herself.

And Severus had fallen back into glowering mode, which did not bode well. It was his unfortunate default response in any situation in which he did not feel in control. The little boy, Octavius, was fidgeting at the sight of him, but the children were going through the curtseys and bows in the proper old manner. Charity threw Severus a discreet look, implicitly asking him to moderate the glare.

Probus was shaking Severus' hand, and talking in a blessedly off-hand way about putting "all that foolish nonsense of Grandfather's behind us."

"Would you like a drink?" Probus asked the two of them next. "God knows I need one. This can't be easy for you, after the way your mother was treated."

His wife nudged him, and smiled pleasantly at Charity and more hesitantly at Snape. "Yes, do. Dinner's not until half-past, and we can all have a drink and chat a bit."

Gordianus gestured to them grandly, "Severus, my boy—"

Snape glared at him, Gordianus did not seem to notice.

"—Professor Burbage, do come this way. Mother," he called, leading them into a large and quite nicely arranged drawing room. Old-fashioned, like most pureblood homes, but not particularly creepy or foreboding, other than having the usual plethora of family portraits gossiping in whispers at the newcomers. At the far end, in a throne-like oaken chair, sat a small, shriveled, and imperious figure.

Madam Prince greeted them as she greeted all her visitors: with a suspicious stare.

"Mother, this is—" Gordianus began.

"Who is that?" she interrupted loudly, a bony, wrinkled finger pointed at Snape.

Charity shuddered. She had been looking for family resemblances, and here she found them. This horrible old harpy's burning black eyes were just like those of the man she was going to marry. *The brows, the nose, oh, dear—*

"This is Severus, Mother," Gordianus simpered dutifully. "Eileen's boy."

"He's better looking than I expected," the old witch declared tactfully. "Eileen was plain as porridge. Who's that woman with him?"

"This is Professor Charity Burbage, his betrothed, Mother," Deirdre said soothingly.

"His what?"

"HIS BETROTHED!" Probus shouted. In an aside to Snape, he muttered, "She hears as well as you or I, really—"

"I knew a Burbage at school," Madam Prince cackled. "Haughty minx. I hexed her with dandruff. Purity Burbage."

Charity knew all about difficult old ladies. "That would be my great aunt, Madam Prince. She is now Purity Grosbeake."

"I know that! Wasn't I at the wedding?" She turned to Gordianus. "Was I at the wedding?"

"I really can't say, Mother."

"Come over here!" the old woman demanded of Severus, exactly as if he were six years old and of doubtful character.

The other four adults silently begged Snape to acquiesce without cursing the matriarch. He sneered at them, but complied.

"So you're Severus," said his grandmother. "My sister Cornelia used to visit you. She thought she was clever, keeping it a secret, but I knew. I was glad," she added, surprising Snape. "Septimus had me under geas, so there was nothing I could do while he was alive. You're not marrying that girl in the old style, are you?"

"Actually—" Charity began mildly.

"Well, be careful what you swear to, that's all I say!" the old lady rasped at her. "Read the vows beforehand, and examine the parchment for Vanishing Ink. It's easy for them to slip

things by you during the ceremony when you're distracted by the moment. There's absolutely no reason for a witch to be put under submission to a wizard. Don't let their beguiling words fool you. That's what they all want, you know. You're going to have children, aren't you?" she asked with breathtaking impudence. "It's a witch's duty, even if you are a Hogwarts Professor. Do you like children? Not that it matters."

"Yes," Charity answered faintly. "I like my students very much, and of course I'm very fond of Harry…"

Snape sighed. In only a few moments, it became known that he was Harry Potter's wizarding proxy. This was very interesting to the adults, and his sterling charm for the children.

"You know *Harry Potter*?" gasped Octavius.

"Of course he does, you ninny," Tansy said waspishly. "He's his guardian!"

"Do you get to spank him?" asked black–eyed little Marigold. "Do you spank him *hard*?"

"Young Mr Potter's behavior," declared Snape repressively, "has never been of the sort that required that kind of punishment." Charity looked like she might burst out laughing.

"I knew it," sighed Tansy. "He must be practically perfect in every way." She and Marigold exchanged significant, excited looks.

Madam Prince began fussing again, restless in her great chair. "Deirdre! Where's my Wide-Awake Wine?" she demanded. "I don't want to fall asleep in my soup tonight…"

Deirdre and Gordianus fussed over the old lady, and Probus diverted the guest to another part of the room, with a "What can you do?" shrug. He set about pouring them the promised drinks.

Marigold, the eight-year-old, had the temerity to give Snape's robe a tug. He glared down at her, and she smirked up at him, unabashed, coal-black eyes glittering.

"I like to make potions, Cousin Severus," she announced. Her older sister grimaced.

"*Do you*?" Severus asked, in a way that no student at Hogwarts would care to hear.

She only grinned. "I like to 'speramint," she explained. "Tonight I 'speraminted with Great-Grandmother's Wideawake Wine. I added valerian, and sleepwort, and—"

The adults were already rushing to the old woman's aid before the black-eyed little menace could finish her litany of destruction. Madam Prince was snoring, head thrown back.

Snape sniffed at the wine. "She'll sleep. She's not in any danger, but she'll sleep until tomorrow morning."

"Well, well," said Gordianus genially, patting little Marigold on the head. "No harm done, then." He summoned a house elf. "Dinky, help my mother to bed."

And so the ancient champion was carried from the field, while her smiling great-granddaughter reigned triumphant.

Dinner was served, and Snape examined all the food and

drink minutely. Marigold beamed at him admiringly from the other side of the table.

"I can't *wait* until I go to Hogwarts," she declared.

Snape thought he could wait indefinitely, himself.

The dinner was good, if a little heavy on the cheese. The conversation was a bit cheese-heavy as well. Of course, it was the family business.

Gordianus was interested in picking Snape's brain for potions applications to the cheese-making process, and seemed impressed by Snape's ideas.

Deirdre was promising Charity a plentitude of recipes, all using family cheeses. "And who will be your attendants at the wedding…?"

Probus wanted to know if Hogwarts was ever going to reinstitute the farming and animal husbandry classes that had once been offered; most especially, of course, the class in cheese-making.

Violet wanted Snape's opinion on every offering on the cheese platter, and praised his talented palate.

"It's the princely nose of the Princes," Gordianaus proclaimed, in weighty jest. "Never fails. I notice you fancy that," he said, pointing to a particularly creamy cheese.

"It's excellent—"

"You'll never taste that again," Gordianus informed him. "That is the ineffable Fletwock Pantysgawn. We're having the

last of it to celebrate this family reunion. The old lady went to her reward, and we shall not see her like again!

Charity opened her mouth, but Snape caught her eye, and she shut it immediately. Snape breathed again.

There was a brief, solemn moment of remembrance, and the platter was passed to the children.

Little Octavius groaned, hands up to protect himself, "Noooo! No more cheese!" he wailed.

Violet smiled weakly, and told Charity, "He doesn't mean it, of course. He's tired, poor lamb."

"I'll have his cheese, Grandmother," Tansy said, with smug virtue. "I love it."

"That's our good girl!" Deirdre beamed proudly.

Marigold rolled her eyes, and made an evil, adorable face at Snape.

The meal was over at last, and Snape and Charity found that the Princes still observed the archaic custom of the separations of the sexes subsequent to dinner. The women vanished, hauling the awful Princelings away. Snape was left with his uncle and cousin, and wondered how soon he could escape.

"There's a bit of business we need to broach with you, my dear boy," Gordianus began.

Reminded of Dumbledore, Snape ground his teeth, expecting to be asked to do something impossible.

Instead, he was being offered thirty thousand galleons.

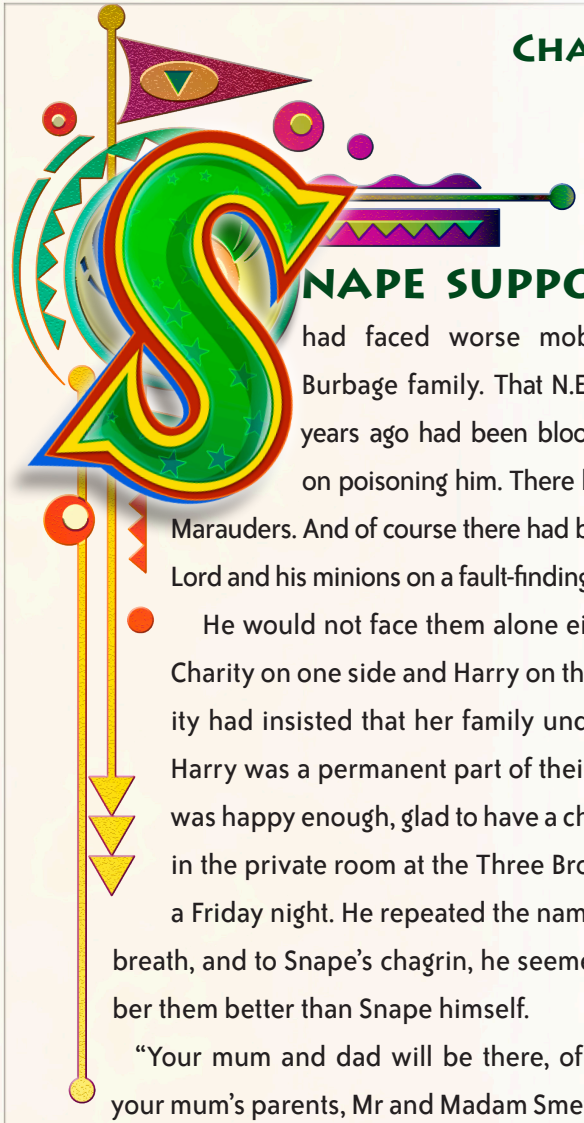
"It was Aunt Eileen's dowry, you see," Probus explained. "It was put by for her when she was a child. Grandfather wouldn't give it to her, because he didn't approve…well, *you* know.. but it was set up in such a way that he couldn't just take it back, so…"

"—It seemed so appropriate," Gordianus added, "when here you are on the eve of your own marriage to a fine young witch from a respectable family! Mother was all for it…"

And so he was to be given the money that should have been his mother's. Snape considered dashing the offer in their teeth, but in his head he could already hear Charity's calm voice, telling him not to be a dunderhead. He would bloody well take their money, and enjoy it.

Even though taking the money ensured that they really would have to be invited to the wedding.

CHAPTER 26



SNAPE SUPPOSED he had faced worse mobs than the Burbage family. That N.E.W.T class six years ago had been bloody well bent on poisoning him. There had been the Marauders. And of course there had been the Dark Lord and his minions on a fault-finding spree…

He would not face them alone either. He had Charity on one side and Harry on the other. Charity had insisted that her family understand that Harry was a permanent part of their lives. Harry was happy enough, glad to have a chance to dine in the private room at the Three Broomsticks on a Friday night. He repeated the names under his breath, and to Snape's chagrin, he seemed to remember them better than Snape himself.

"Your mum and dad will be there, of course, and your mum's parents, Mr and Madam Smethwyck. Your brothers are Pelleas and Palamedes. They are married to Phoebe and Vera. Pelleas has two sons who are younger than me, and they are—are—Gareth and—"

"Gareth and Gawain, Harry," Charity supplied. "And their little girl's name is Linnet."

"And Palamedes and Vera have a little boy named Tor. That's a strange name."

"It's the name of a Knight of the Round Table," Charity told him with a sigh. "The Burbage family goes in for them."

"And your sister's name is Hope, and she's married to—to—Jocko Cassidy." Harry snickered, and grinned at Snape, who found it impossible not to smirk back. Harry asked, "Is that really his name?"

"I believe his real name is Jacobus," Charity said, "but nobody calls him that. So, Jocko it is."

"Jocko," Harry chuckled.

Charity asked him, rather than interrogate Snape: "And what are the names of Hope's children?"

"Uh…Brian. And the baby is Fiona."

"And my Aunt Abstinence Spellman will be there, and my Great-Aunt Purity Grosbeake."

Snape snorted.

Charity was amused, remembering what they had been told at the famous Prince dinner. "Yes, Severus, we must ask Aunt Purity if she remembers your grandmother. What was her maiden name?"

"Ketteridge. Livia Ketteridge."

"Really?" Charity stopped dead in the road to Hogsmeade and

started laughing. "I think one of my great-grandmothers was a Ketteridge. We may be distant cousins! How funny, though not that unusual, of course. I daresay my family will know all about it."

"Probably," he agreed, rather despondent.

What a lot of in-laws! He must have more in-laws than any wizard in Britain. Yes, that was true. None of the Weasley boys was married yet. Pity the wretches who bound themselves *there*.

They arrived at the Three Broomsticks, were ushered upstairs to meet the family, and to Snape's horror they were all smiling at him. It was rather alarming. Wait…no…*that* man wasn't. That must be Charity's father! What was the fellow going to do? Threaten him to curse him if he didn't treat his little girl properly? Snape nearly sneered, but suspected that it would not be the right move in this company. Instead, he manhandled his face into an expression of slightly aloof courtesy. He hoped it was, anyway. He had no idea what it looked like to the woman in blue robes talking to Madam Burbage…no, *Patience*. Said Patience gave him a big, Charity-like smile, and was coming over, hands outstretched to greet him. The woman in blue was coming too.

Hope. Was that Charity's sister Hope? For one wild instant he considered using Occlumency.

Charity made the introductions, and Snape was glad that he had not made an ass of himself, for the woman in blue was not Hope, but the older brother Pelleas' wife Phoebe. It was rather horrible, meeting all these people who knew each other so well. He felt a complete stranger, intruding on an exclusive club. Everyone was very polite, but he was not one of them: not one of the pleasant, round-faced people with blonde or light brown hair and normal noses. He must look like a dark and shifty foreigner to them. They seemed to be treating Harry well, though.

"This is my father, Bedivere Burbage…"

The grey-haired man was not glaring at him, after all, but shook his hand in a reserved, if civil fashion. Snape sensed that the man would like to speak to him privately, and that was only to be expected. The two aunts were nothing like his shriveled, bony grandmother, but more like puffy cottage loaves. Great-Aunt Purity remembered Livia Ketteridge very well indeed. She gave Snape a raking, hard-eyed glance up and down.

"You look just like her," she remarked. "I remember her eyes."

Then there was Hope, a bit thinner and blonder than Charity. Some might call her prettier, but she had a pinched, dissatisfied look to her than Snape found unappealing. Her husband Jocko seemed *entirely* satisfied with himself, and had the sort of loud, quidditch-idiot voice that Snape disliked. Nonetheless, they all looked normal in a way that the Princes or Snape himself did not. There was much fussing over Hope's nine-month-old daughter Fiona, who was thrust in Snape's face to admire.

The infant's blue eyes opened wide at the sight of Snape, the tiny pink mouth formed an "O" of horror, and a soul-piercing shriek issued forth.

"Oh dear," tutted Hope, whisking the human tea-kettle away. "Poor darling." She murmured to Phoebe, over her shoulder, "Children can *tell* about people, you know."

Charity was not even attempting to smile. "I can tell about people, too," she muttered to her mother. "I can tell you all sorts of things about people who fling their squalling babies in people's faces…"

"There, there, darling," soothed Patience. "Hope is a little *tense* tonight. You know how she gets when she travels by portkey."

Charity's youngest brother ambled forward and stuck out a hand. "Palamedes Burbage. Ghastly, I know. You don't have to tell me, and I promise I won't scream in your face like Jocko's spawn."

His parents exchanged long-sufferings looks. Harry actually laughed. Snape did not laugh, but thought that Palamedes was not a bad sort at all. His older brother Pelleas was not bad either: at least they had teaching in common, though Snape thought Pelleas and Phoebe allowed their children entirely too much license. The two boys were running around the room like a pair of crups. Their little girl was all right, but Marigold Prince could eat her for breakfast. To his astonishment, Snape admitted to a certain pride in his family at the thought…

"And Harry," Patience said, "Why don't you go sit at with Gareth and Gawain and Tor? There's a special table for the boys."

Harry was too polite to refuse, though he was rather put out at being shunted off to sit with *little boys*. The only chil-

dren at the big table would be the babies who needed help eating, and Linnet, who made her dislike of boys in general very clear. Tor had to sit on a chair his mother charmed for him. Harry took his seat with the gravity of a martyr.

Then Gawain asked him, "Do you like Quidditch?" and things rapidly improved from there.

Snape was pleased to see Harry getting on with his tablemates. At the moment the only pleasant thing was the prospect of all these people being gone in a week or so. As odd as the Princes had been, they were odd in ways that were not so unfamiliar.

"Do *you* have any brothers or sisters, Severus?" Hope asked. "Mother told me you have a *friend* standing up with you."

"No," he answered briefly. "I'm an only child."

Hope made her disapproval clear. "I think people who have only one child are very *selfish*."

Charity was talking to her mother, and did not hear. Snape regarded Hope with disdain, and said, "How interesting. I shall remember to be guided through life by your unsolicited opinions."

"*Well!*"

Snape ate his dinner in comparative peace after that.

The visitors at the Explorers Club meeting caused quite a stir.

It was the first time visitors from abroad would be attending a meeting, and the guest speaker was Professor Burbage's brother Pelleas. Special permission was obtained for the two oldest children to attend. As their father was giving the program, it was felt that there would be someone to help keep an eye on them. And Dumbledore felt a certain outreach was in order. It would do the children good to see Hogwarts, and carry the story home to the other children in that isolated settlement…

Pelleas Burbage was a teacher, like his sister. However, he had remained in New Zealand, teaching in a muggle school some miles from The Village, as their wizarding settlement was known.

There was nothing like Hogwarts in New Zealand. Magical education meant homeschooling, or classes by owl. "Of course," Pelleas explained, "I had my sister here to tutor me."

Charity took a bow, and the children clapped.

Pelleas went on. "And then I decided that I would have an adventure, so I went to muggle university. What could I learn there, you wonder? All sorts of fascinating things. I studied literature and art, which are things there's not much call for in a tiny village up in the mountains; and I learned about the muggle world, so I could judge for myself what I liked and didn't like about it…"

So he told them about student life at university, and going to films and playing Dungeons and Dragons (Charity smiled nervously through this bit).

The game caught the imagination of many of the children, and there was a long digression about it. Mr Burbage promised to pass on information, and some copies of the appropriate books.

He talked more: about his travels, and about Australia and what he had seen of life there, both wizarding and muggle, and about surfing and all sorts of water sports, and swimming at the Great Barrier Reef.

And then he and his sons, Gawain and Gareth, joined in the Wedding Ring dance with great good humor. It would be the last chance to practice before the wedding, but the steps were not that difficult, and the boys enjoyed the stamping bits. They were doing well enough that they might even be allowed to dance at the wedding itself. Then the children selected for the Tree of Life Dance performed for everyone else. Harry still felt something of a fool when dancing, but he knew all the moves now, backwards and forwards, and was confident he wouldn't spoil everything.

After the dancing came the treats. The children crowded to the table to sort though them. There was more chatter about the wedding. Owls were arriving everyday with dress robes, new and refurbished. Now and then a group of girls would plague Charity, wanting to see her ring again. Gawain, the elder of the two Burbage boys, chatted happily with Neville about the glories of Hogwarts. Ron Weasley joined them, and from his broad gestures everyone could tell he was talking about quidditch.

Harry stood with some others, talking more quietly about how much they would like to travel.

"Such a lot of adventures he's had, Professor Burbage's brother," Justin said thoughtfully, munching a biscuit. "I think it's rather exciting, blending the two worlds like that. One presents oneself as a mere muggle to the muggle world, but underneath it all, one has special powers."

"I know! Like Spiderman!" Harry burst out, grateful to Justin for understanding about superheroes.

Justin frowned a little. "I was going to say like Superman. I like him best. He can really fly, after all."

Terry Boot broke in. "Batman is my favorite. He's not such a ponce."

"Batman doesn't *have* super powers," Justin declared scornfully. "He's only insanely rich!"

"I *like* Batman," Harry said, "He's really smart, and he had a tragic childhood. Besides, the villains are fun."

There was that, certainly. The wizarding children were very curious about the subject. They had their own comics, but nothing so exciting. Harry explained about Spiderman's special powers…

"Ewwww!" cried the girls.

"But it's really neat…"

"It really is sort of what Mr Burbage does," Hermione remarked. "Muggle superheroes look like everyday muggles, but they have a secret identity, and in an emergency they use their special powers to save people and right wrongs."

"The Ministry wouldn't have it," Susan said, shaking her head a bit dolefully. "If we did things like that, it would break the Statute of Secrecy."

"But maybe if you Obliviated every one afterward…" considered Ernie.

"But then no one would know you were a hero!" complained Terry.

"Nobody *does* know about the superheroes," Harry pointed out. "Sometimes not even their best friends. They have the satisfaction of saving the world and knowing the truth, and they never ask for any reward." He hugged his secrets to himself: a possessed wizard, an evil mirror, a monstrous basilisk… Only a handful of people knew the truth, but that hardly mattered. What mattered was doing the right thing. Professor Snape hadn't asked for anything special, and he had done heaps of brave things, too!

Draco had come in late to the conversation, and broke in impatiently. "Well, if *I* saved the world," he declared, "I'd want something for my trouble!" He buttonholed Harry. "Look here, Harry! You're going to see more of Professor Burbage's family. Try to get hold of those books and all. I want to play that game!"

The following day, Harry had another interesting meeting, this time in the Headmaster's Office. It was revealed to him that the former prisoner Sirius Black was his godfather. Harry revealed that he was aware of the fact.

"You knew about this, Harry?" Remus asked, shocked.

"Well, yes, sir," Harry said mildly. "Draco told me. He even explained how we're related. I mean, me and…I mean, how Sirius Black and I are related. I already know how I'm related to Draco."

"I see." Dumbledore stroked his beard. "And just how do you feel about making his acquaintance?"

"It's fine with me, " Harry assured them. "I'd like to meet my godfather. He was good friends with my dad, you say?"

"Yes, Harry," Remus said quietly. "Sirius and your father and I were all good friends together. We were all in Gryffindor, and were very close at one time."

Harry smiled up at Professor Lupin, very pleased. "You were good friends, too? That's great! Could we talk about that sometime? I'd like to know more about him. Professor Snape told me he was good at Transfiguration and a great flyer, but not much else. He talks more about my mum."

Lupin was pathetically grateful that Severus had said something kind about James to Harry. "It's understandable, Harry. Professor Snape and your mother were very good friends."

"Yes, I know. And she was really good at Potions and Charms. They knew each other before they went to Hogwarts, even. But I'd like to know about my dad, too." He asked. "Couldn't you come to Hogsmeade too? I mean, I know you, but I don't know Mr Black. And if he's your friend, wouldn't you like to spend time with him, too?"

"I see him frequently, Harry, " Lupin informed him. "I thought you'd prefer some time alone with your godfather."

Dumbledore had thought about it a little more. Sirius was making progress, but on further consideration, Dumbledore was not sure he was completely to be trusted. Perhaps Remus' presence might be advisable.

"I see no reason we cannot honor your wishes. It would be a pleasant get-together. As you say, you do not know Sirius, and he does not know you. Remus, my dear boy, do make the arrangements and include yourself."

Remus had thought about it a little more himself, and agreed instantly. "Of course, Headmaster."

"You've made wonderful progress, Severus," Minerva said, stopping the music. Snape's dancing lessons had proceeded apace: a secret even from Charity. He had trusted Minerva not to talk, and his trust had not been misplaced. Dancing had proved more complicated than he anticipated, but he was determined to impress his own family and Charity's too. Especially that bint Hope, who reminded him unpleasantly of Petunia Dursley.

Hoping she was not giving him empty praise, he smoothed his hair a bit. "You mean my dancing has improved from 'troll' to merely 'dreadful?'"

"No, you passed 'dreadful' two weeks ago. I'd say you were now at the 'exceeds expectations' level. With a little more experience you'll be 'outstanding.' Next Tuesday then?"

"What about Friday? I'd really like to get in another practice before the weekend."

"I suppose I could manage that. Don't you have dinner with the Burbages that night?"

"I told them I have to be back at Hogwarts early. Being a Head of House is a splendid excuse."

Minerva gave him a wise look. "They're your future wife's family, Severus. You can run, but you can't hide. Are they really so terrible?"

"They're no worse than my own family. Better, I suppose," he grimaced, "but that's faint praise indeed. They're rather dull, really. My family is more interesting, for all their oddities."

"Oh, yes…Charity told me about the reconciliation. I taught Probus and Violet, of course. They were rather decent students, as I recall, though nothing special. For that matter, I taught Charity and the siblings when they were at Hogwarts. They were all quite nice."

He threw himself into a chair, scowling. "My future father-in-law has taken an intense, vicarious interest in Spinner's End. They've bought the house adjoining mine as a wedding present. The plan is to put the two houses together, and make one decent-sized dwelling."

"Well?" she asked, taking a seat herself. "What's wrong with that? It's a generous gift."

"They're considering buying yet more property there. They're

thinking about having a permanent place in England for visits."

"Severus," Minerva said mildly, "If they have their own place, they won't be staying with *you*."

"That's true," he admitted, his brow clearing. "Very true. I suppose it could be worse."

"And it may come to nothing," she said briskly. "But now I must get to my marking."

"You invited *Lupin?*" Snape protested.

He lounged on the sofa in Charity's pleasant sitting room, reading the PROPHET, while she worked on the last of the invitations. The guest list had grown distressingly large, and she was still getting owls from the uninvited, full of hints. It seemed that the wedding of the two Hogwarts professors had become something of an *event*.

"Of course I did, Severus, " Charity said. "I invited the entire Hogwarts staff. How could I not, when the wedding is right here at Hogwarts?"

"But…*Lupin!*" he growled.

"I thought the two of you were getting on better."

"We were. We are. I just hadn't thought he'd be coming to the wedding. A werewolf at a wedding? That's something to raise eyebrows."

"Only if people *know* he's a werewolf," Charity said firmly.

"We should have scheduled the wedding for the fifteenth. At night," Snape said bitterly.

"Don't be unkind. I like Remus. He's very nice, and other than that monthly problem of his, he has no irritating habits."

Snape coughed out "Sirius Black!"

"Very funny. I think it's kind of him to visit his sick friend. Sirius Black has been very hard done by. No matter what he did to you in school, he paid for it with ten years of his life. Think of all the things you've done in the past ten years. He's had none of that. Isn't that revenge enough?"

She put her hands on her hips, and gave him a stern look.

"You are a respected Hogwarts professor, known in your field. You have friends, and a home, and now money and a family… even if they *are* the Princes and the Burbages. And you have me. Would you rather be Sirius Black than yourself? What is he to you?"

Snape scowled, and returned to reading the news. Of course, there was something in what Charity said. Black had tried to kill him, but had failed. He had made Snape's life miserable in school, but that lasted only for seven years. Black, on the other hand, had been miserable for a decade. All things considered, perhaps Sirius Black had paid his rightful debt to him.

What *did* he care for Sirius Black? As long as the swine stayed out of his way and left Harry alone, Snape supposed he could bear for Sirius Black to be alive and free…and far away.

CHAPTER 27

HARRY TOOK another sip of tea, and then, greatly daring, said, "Now that they let Sirius Black out of Mungo's, he'd like to meet me."

Snape stared at him. "Whose idea is this?" Somehow, Black had talked his way out of the loony bin after only a week. It was very alarming, and had destroyed any faith Snape had ever had in the healers there.

"Well, he *is* my godfather! Professor Dumbledore said so, but I already knew because Draco told me. He'd like to meet me. I think Professor Dumbledore and Professor Lupin think it'd be good for him. Professor Lupin says that Mr Black is going to stay in this place of his family's in the Bahamas, and get some rest. Professor Dumbledore said I could meet Mr Black at the Three Broomsticks for lunch, and I asked if Professor Lupin could be there too, since I know him. And they both said yes."

Charity looked anxiously at Snape, who frowned.

"I don't like this," he said slowly. "I don't mind telling you that I don't like this at all. Sirius Black is not to be trusted, and I don't trust Lupin to control the situation."

"Don't you trust *me*?" Harry asked, plaintive and a little sad.

Snape felt guilty, but he knew that Sirius Black could be dangerously charming. What if Harry decided he liked Black better?

"Of course he trusts you, Harry," said Charity. "And I trust Professor Lupin to see that nothing happens to you. If Sirius Black says anything to you that makes you uncomfortable, just tell Professor Lupin that you want to leave."

This was an acid test, and Snape writhed, wanting to put a stop to it all. Charity and Harry were looking at him, and the wrong word could cause irreparable harm.

"Yes." He finally said. "I do trust you Harry, but I cannot trust Black—not entirely. Things can happen in a split second. You can go, but I want you to have a portkey to keep you safe. If the Headmaster is so very determined that this meeting take place, he will arrange it. You can touch the portkey and be returned here if you feel threatened."

It was amazing, how quickly Dumbledore got permission for the portkey. Harry was sent off for his luncheon appointment, walking and chatting with Lupin. Snape watched them go with terrible apprehension in his heart.

Harry was not particularly impressed with Mr Black's tales of pranks. Dudley had enjoyed playing pranks on Harry in days

gone past, and somehow they had ceased to be very amusing to Harry. However, it was nice to be told about the good times his father and his friends had had at school, flying and larking about, and how his father and mother had got together. All the same, Harry was very happy that Professor Lupin was there.

"And so you're a Hufflepuff. How is that working out for you?"

Harry got the impression that Mr Black—no, *Sirius*, the man insisted—was not very pleased about Harry's Sorting.

"I love it," Harry replied stoutly. "I have great friends and we have loads of fun. We had a talent show earlier in the year and we put on a skit. We acted out the tale of the Three Brothers, and I wore a disguise that looked like Professor Dumbledore! Professor Sprout is a super Head of House."

"Well," Sirius agreed reluctantly, "that *does* sound like fun. And you like quidditch?"

"I love it. I didn't know anything about it before I went to Hogwarts, but I'm good at flying, and I think I'll make the team next year or the year after. My friend Cedric Diggory is on the team, and he thinks I'll make it. Chaser or Seeker, depending on what they need."

"How are you getting on with Snivel—" Sirius saw Lupin's furious glare. "I mean—how are you getting on with old Snape?"

Harry scowled at this slur on the Professor, and pushed his chips around his plate. "He's the best! He looks out for me, and helped me get used to Hogwarts! If it hadn't been for him…" Harry stopped, remembering that there were things he could never tell outsiders.

"What?" Sirius demanded.

Harry slunk lower in his chair. "I would have had a hard time at Hogwarts. I didn't know anything about magic. Aunt Petunia doesn't like magic and wouldn't talk about it."

There was a gleam in Mr Black's eye that Harry did not like. "But it looks like Petunia and old Snape get on pretty famously. Good enough for her to sign you over to him. It's a wonder he didn't try to make a slimy snake of you—"

Lupin opened his mouth, but Harry interrupted. "I have a lot of friends in Slytherin," he said flatly. "And snakes *aren't* slimy. I helped Professor Kettleburn on a project, so I *know*."

"A lot of friends in Slytherin?" Sirius challenged. "Like who?"

"Like Draco Malfoy!" Harry shot back. Lupin winced.

"Lucius Malfoy's boy?" Sirius was outraged.

"He's my cousin!" Harry said fiercely. "Just like you are! And Mr and Madam Malfoy have been really nice to me."

"I'm not surprised," Sirius sneered. "*Snivellus* probably couldn't wait to introduce you."

"Don't you call him that!" There was a brief, tense silence, while Harry took in the name. "I think I'd like to go now," he said to Lupin.

"Harry…" Lupin began, feeling wretched.

"I want to go *now*," Harry insisted, glaring at Sirius. "He can't call the Professor that in front of me. It's mean!"

"But it's *Snape!*" shouted Sirius, completely baffled.

Remus got up. "Come on, Harry. We'll let Sirius think it over. He's just out of St Mungo's, after all," he whispered, very apologetic.

"Let's go," Harry growled, head down.

And they did.

Remus arrived that evening, knocking at Sirius' door at the Leaky Cauldron to tell him what he thought.

Sirius was there, sulking.

"You can't just insult people's friends with no consequences, Sirius," Remus said mildly. "I *told* you that Harry likes Severus. Severus has been a good guardian to him."

"But—"

"I'm serious. If you want to see Harry, you've got to accept that Severus is part of the package. Life has moved on, and Severus Snape has grown up. Maybe it's time you did, too."

"Maybe," Sirius allowed, "but not quite yet."

"What kind of bachelor dinner can I give Severus?"

In the old days, the guest list and the entertainment would have been simple enough. In these more enlightened times, Lucius Malfoy found he must tread softly—and tactfully.

There was a very beautiful room upstairs at Summerisle's for private events. The décor could be customized for the event. A starry summer's night would be pleasant.

The guest list and the entertainment must be interwoven: and the current guest list ensured that the entertainment would be many orders of magnitude tamer than Lucius would originally have preferred. Severus' own uncle and cousin were one thing: however, it now appeared that time and tide had put him in a position requiring the presence of Charity's male relatives as well, so nothing particularly salacious could be on offer.

There was a father, Bedivere Burbage; a grandfather, Caius Smethwyck; two brothers, Pelleas and Palamedes, and a brother-in-law whom Severus seemed not at all charmed by, Jocko Cassidy. Lucius mentally paused over the name, thinking unutterable things.

And the male teachers of Hogwarts. Ancient Kettleburn was surprisingly blasé, Lucius had discovered in conversation, partly from his long study of exotic beasts and their habits. Flitwick was part-goblin, and you never knew what might set off someone like that. That left Lupin, who Lucius knew for a fact had once been the lackey of the Marauders, and was now Dumbledore's doormat. And Dumbledore himself.

Dumbledore, Dumbledore, Dumbledore. There was no way not to invite the man. The problem was that Severus had no real friends, other than Lucius himself. Severus had lived in his own head and in his potions so long that he had not

really cultivated them. Perhaps with his marriage, this would change. Perhaps Charity would force such a change.

Lucius drew the line at staff. He was not inviting Filch or Hagrid to Summerisle's. *He* was throwing the party, and he should have some say. Severus had kept his head down, and told Lucius to do as he liked, so long as no one offended Charity's family and on the condition that Lucius invited Nicholas Flamel.

Now that was a feather in his cap! He had invited Flamel, and the great man had accepted! Flamel was, it seemed, broad-minded enough to forgive Lucius for his father's attempt to bully Flamel so long ago. Realistically, though, he suspected that Flamel had agreed for Severus' sake. Apparently Severus planned to leave Hogwarts to do research with Flamel once Harry and Draco finished school. There was talk that the Princes had given Severus a tidy sum that should have been his mother's dowry. And of course there was the house, not only paid for, but expanded by the generosity of the Burbages. Severus would be a well-off wizard. If his research bore fruit, he might even be rich one day.

So there must be nothing vulgar or flagrant. An excellent meal, plenty of good wine and brandy, and a traditional Moon Dance performed by a trio of Rumanian Veelas, portkeyed in and well-paid for the occasion from Malfoy funds. An evening in which all the senses could be indulged in an elegant and refined atmosphere.

Perhaps the veelas had been a mistake. Lupin was already looking rather green. Perhaps it was the escargots, but Lucius could have sworn that Lupin's face had become agonized the moment the image of a full moon had risen in the starry ceiling of Summerisle's private room. Dumbledore looked at the young man in concern, and actually patted his hand. And what was that? Lupin was using his own knife and fork! How bizarre was that?

Lupin answered Dumbledore's concern with a weak smile. Severus on the other hand, was smirking at Lupin, apparently very pleased at his colleague's discomfort. Old school grudges died hard.

Ethereal music filled the room, and the three veelas floated in, dressed in diaphanous white, and began a most…athletic…dance. Astonishing flexibility there.

"Dancing girls!" roared Jocko Cassidy, downing another bottle of Chateau Malfoy. "Bring 'em on!"

The Burbages were trying to quiet their in-law, but Cassidy was already enthralled by the veela allure, and making a complete ass of himself. Lucius' hand twitched on his wand, seconds away from a curse, but he caught the eye of Nicholas Flamel, who seemed mildly amused. Flamel looked over at the New Zealanders, and Cassidy abruptly collapsed snoring into his chair. His head struck the table, levering his dessert

fork into a shining arc that spun madly and then imbedded itself in Dumbledore's tasseled cap.

There was a brief hush of horror, and Malfoy hastily covered his mouth to push back the howl of laughter that threatened the destruction of all good order and propriety. Severus' eyes were glinting rather oddly. Pelleas Burbage reached out a tentative hand and yanked on the fork. The cap came with it.

"Sorry," he muttered to Dumbledore, removing the fork and quickly handing the elderly wizard his cap. "Jocko gets like that."

The Burbages sat down. Bedivere thoughtfully moved Jocko's head to one side, so he would not suffocate in the *Bombe Sortilège*.

With a haughty glare at the wizards, the veelas resumed their graceful and most stimulating gyrations. Lucius sipped his champagne, recapturing his equilibrium. Lovely beings, really, and Lucius had decided that dance was his very first favorite art form…

The door burst open. With a baying like thunder, an enormous black dog leaped into the room, and barreled pell-mell around the table. Severus was on his feet, wand at the ready, and Lucius followed suit a split-second later.

"Bloody hell!" shouted Palamedes Burbage. "Is that a Grim?" He pulled his wand, and fired off a hex at the dog. It missed, and Gordianus Prince flew against the wall, felled by a stunner.

"How dare you!" his son Probus shouted. With a beady-eyed

glare, he hexed Palamedes, whose sudden look of nausea was prelude to an enormous slug that erupted from his mouth.

"Eww!" groaned Pelleas. "Thats—not right!"

"You hooligan!" said his father, furious. "If I'd known the bloody war was still on, I'd have stayed in New Zealand!"

The dog dove under the table and nipped at Snape's ankles. Unable to curse through the heavy table, Snape satisfied himself with a hearty kick from a steel-capped boot. The dog yelped and doubled back, racing at the screaming veelas. He snatched one of their filmy white gowns away with a snap of white fangs and a frisky wag of a black tail. The veelas screeched in outrage and transformed, their beaks lengthening, their claws extending…

"That's not actually a Grim," Kettleburn expounded to Flitwick, salvaging his wine glass, while the smaller professor climbed up on the table, wand held in a perfect duelist's stance. "You can tell by the eyes. I believe it's actually…"

"Padfoot!" shouted Lupin. *"Bad Dog!"* A stinging hex shot from his wand, connecting with the retreating black hindquarters. The hell-hound yelped and bolted, white chiffon trailing from its slavering jaws. Lupin vaulted over the table with a bestial growl, and knocked the veelas aside, pounding downstairs after the dog. The gentlewizards barely noticed the pandemonium coming from the stairs, as they were engaged in their own life-or-death struggle.

Flamel alone was untouched, and took his champagne to a comparatively quiet corner. It was clear to him that the dog was actually an animagus, but his human identity was a mystery to Flamel. He was soon joined by Dumbledore, wiping whipped cream from his face, and angrily jamming on his cap once more. Chocolate dripped from the tassels.

Through the window, Flamel saw the enraged Lupin pursuing the animagus through Diagon Alley, his robe flapping, sparks blazing from his wand.

There was obviously an interesting story there. He smiled and waited for the young ones to expend their excess energy.

The ladies had enjoyed a lovely party at the Three Broomsticks. Hope made faces, but her mother guilted her into dutifully writing down all the presents and the givers' names. The old ladies sniped at each other, and the others tried to make friends in more conventional ways.

"…and my darling Charity will wear the Smethwyck tiara…" Patience told Narcissa Malfoy.

A knock at the door, and Rosmerta, her face pink with mirth, said, "Pardon me, but you have visitors."

"Severus! What happened to you?" asked Charity, aghast at the ragged robes and bruised face. Lucius Malfoy was there too, equally disheveled. "I thought you were all having

dinner together at Summerisle's." She looked beyond them to her father, grandfather, and brothers. They were in no better shape. Jocko was propped up between Pelleas and Palamedes, asleep on his feet and snoring. "Were you in a *fight*?"

Palamedes burst out excitedly. "We were attacked by a Grim! It was great!"

"I don't think it was really a Grim," argued Pelleas. "I think it was that fellow Lupin's dog. Damned thing ran wild and yanked off the girl's…" he halted, shuffling nervously.

"What *girl*?" asked his wife.

"*What* girl?" asked his mother.

"What girl?" wondered Charity, looking at Severus in bewilderment. Narcissa rolled her eyes, not even bothering to ask.

Truth was best. Lucius Malfoy said, as suavely as the state of his robes would allow, "I hired a trio of veelas to dance. It was a charming and refined entertainment until that mongrel rushed in. Chaos ensued. The last I saw of Lupin, he was racing after the brute, howling like a mad dog himself."

Minerva pushed through the press, and asked, "Where was Albus? Why didn't he put a stop to it?"

Snape snorted, still enjoying the memory. "Albus was rendered *hors de combat* by a dessert fork and a *Bombe Sortilège* to the face. I predict complete recovery after a night of rest and a change of clothes. Flamel was there, and he apparently thought it all a tremendous joke."

"I suppose it was," agreed Probus wryly. "Though it was entirely on us."

"It was great," sighed Palamedes, completely happy.

Dumbledore was a mighty wizard, but could not, alas, control the weather. Nevertheless, the day was fine as days go in the north of Scotland in the month of June.

"You don't have to look like you're going to your execution," Lucius told Snape, as he put the finishing touches to his friend's appearance. "You could assume…well, perhaps not a smile, but perhaps an expression of mild benevolence. Is that possible?" he asked. "Can you manage it?"

"I don't see any reason to pander to the public," Snape said haughtily, buttoning a button. He looked as well as it was possible for him to look. Lucius had forced him to have his hair attended to by his own hairdresser, and Snape's head felt marginally lighter. "And I don't feel as if I'm going to my *execution*. How I feel is nobody's business but my own and Charity's."

"The Minister is here, and half the Heads of Department. It would not hurt—"

"Scroungers," growled Snape. "People have been hounding Charity for invitations for the past month."

"It's become quite the event," Lucius agreed.

The Great Hall was garlanded with flowers, and somehow

the benches had become hundreds of little gilt chairs, lined up neatly before the dais at the end of the huge room. There were more flowers, and a great pointed arch, also decorated with flowers. White roses, peonies, anemones, vines of stephanotis and clematis, pink carnations, and blue delphiniums released their perfumes to the guests assembled.

There was a wide aisle in the middle of the room from the huge doors to the dais. Harry, dressed in his best green robes, was sitting in the first row, with the Prince family. They had been briefly introduced this morning, and seemed disposed to be friendly, especially the little kids. The older girl, Tansy, was inclined to sigh over him. Harry preferred Marigold, who only grinned. He also liked her because she looked a little like the Professor, with her black hair and coal-black eyes. The two girls were dressed in beautiful little white robes. Tansy had a pink sash, and Marigold's was green.

Everybody was turned out in their best: jewels glittered and silks gleamed. Most of the students were wearing dress robes. Harry twisted his neck, looking at all the amazing hats, until Madam Malfoy, seated just behind him caught his eye with a reproving smile. Next to her were Nicholas and Perenelle Flamel, who were wearing amazing robes of velvet and satin, like something from one of the old pictures at Hogwarts. They looked like a King and a Queen, especially since Perenelle was wearing a beautiful little coronet studded with diamonds. Her black eyes sparkled at Harry.

On the other side of the aisle were the Burbage family members. Harry waved at Madam Burbage. She was really nice.

The Ravenclaws and Slytherins sat further back, behind the Princes. The Gryffindors and all the Hufflepuffs other than Harry sat behind the Burbages. Most of the Ministry people were on the Prince side.

There was nice music, too. Ambrosia Graves and her brother on harp and cello, and Herman Wintringham playing his lute.

"I always say," Deirdre Prince whispered loudly to her husband, "there's something about *real* music. The kind you magic up just isn't the same."

Dumbledore appeared—really, just *appeared*—under the arch in front, dressed in purple and gold. He absolutely glowed, and Harry squinted a bit, looking at him. Nicholas Flamel murmured something, and his wife seemed amused. Harry heard Madam Malfoy's light laugh.

The big doors swung open and in came the bridal party. The music changed, and everyone rose to the their feet to greet them. Nobody minded Harry craning around to see *them*. In fact, Madam Prince glared at her son, and he let Harry stand in front so he could see better. The young Princes pushed past the adults to stand with him.

Professor Snape looked dignified, just like he always did, but he looked *better*, somehow. His hair was a bit different: soft

and black as a raven's wing. Black, too, were his well-cut robes, and he seemed taller than anybody in the room. Beside him was Mr Malfoy, elegant in grey, a pearl pin in his cravat, striding along, light to the Professor's dark, urbane and slightly smiling.

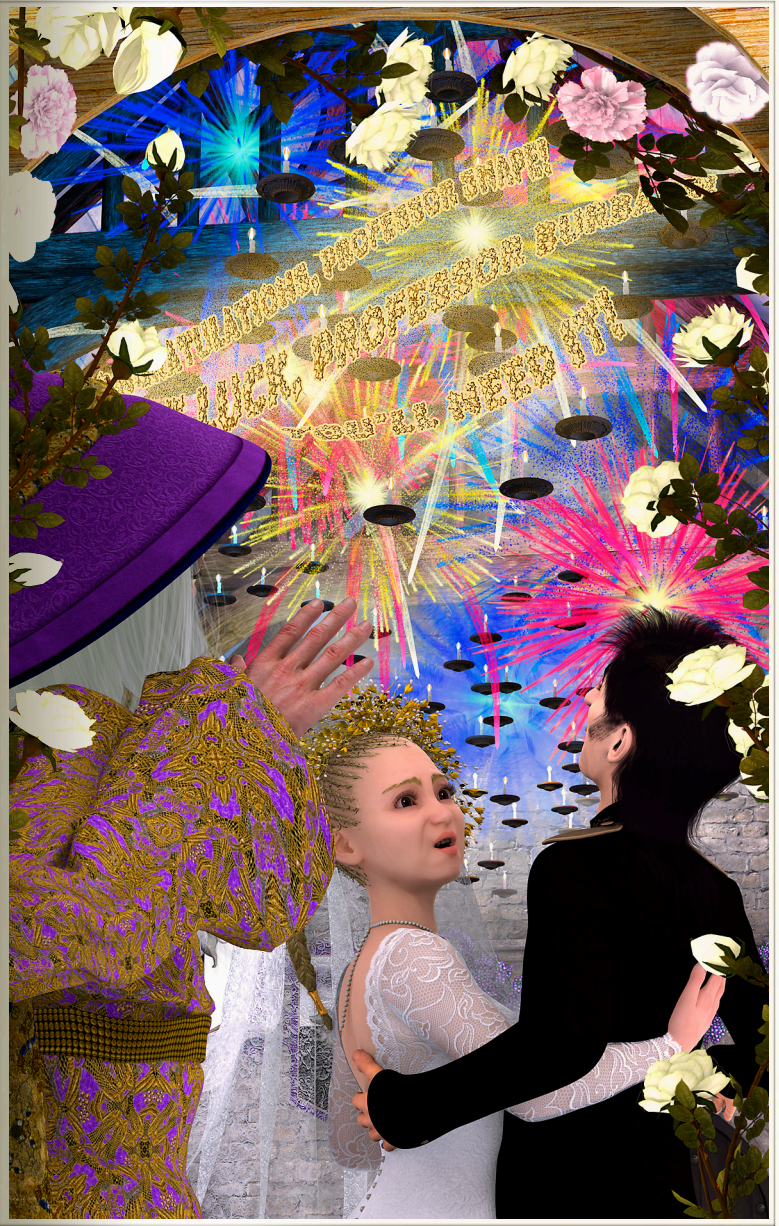
Harry beamed at the sight of Professor Burbage. Her sister was dressed nicely in blue, but Harry could not bring himself to be interested. He thought Professor Burbage looked like a princess in her white robes. She had a crown, too, with little trembly pearls dangling among golden vines, set on elaborately braided hair. Her veil trailed all the way to the floor, and swept behind her with a soft rustle. All the girls sighed with approval. There was a hum of soft talk and admiration through the room.

"She's wearing white," whispered Violet Prince. "I thought she'd been married before."

"It was only a muggle," hissed old Madam Prince. "This is her first *real* marriage, so she has a right to dress properly!"

They were teachers, so the two Professors had no trouble speaking up and letting everyone hear their vows. They promised to love each other and all, and Harry thought it very nice and comforting. Professor Dumbledore twinkled like a merry old star, and pronounced them witch and wizard together, and there were magical warnings about those who would be so stupid as to try separate them. Then they turned to the guests, and everyone cheered.

A tremendous *BANG!* and brilliant sparks fizzed through



the room, pink and blue and gold. Words appeared near the enchanted ceiling.

"Congratulations, Professor Snape! Best of luck, Professor Burbage! You'll need it!"

There was laughter and some embarrassment. Snape glared around the Great Hall. At the back of the Gryffindors, Fred and George Weasley shook hands, satisfied at a job well done.

There were no such accidents outside, where a huge pavilion had been erected for the luncheon. For one thing, not all the students were invited to this event: only selected N.E.W.T. students, the Explorers' Club, and Snape's Slytherins. The rest of the students were given a splendid tea in their various Common Rooms to assuage their disappointment. Photographers rushed about, their cameras popping with magic. The bride was photographed, and the groom was photographed. They were photographed together, then with their attendants, and then with their families. Alll the distinguished guests were similarly hounded. The Flamels allowed one picture, and then no other photographers could seem to find them.

The cake was magnificent, the finest art of Hogwarts elves, who had wept at the threat of having the cake catered by Summerisle's. A fountain flowed with champagne, and another with ginger wine for the youngsters (and some older people who really loved ginger wine).

Snape tried to take in the scene, feeling rather dazed. Charity smiled back at him, understanding.

"Only an hour more to go," she murmured in his ear, and then kissed his cheek. "And we never have to do this again!"

"I should bloody well hope not," Snape growled. "What a lot of rubbish! We should just have gone to the Ministry and had our marriage registered there."

She was still smiling, and looked extremely pretty. Snape relented. "Of course you wanted your family here, and to wear an elaborate gown and all. I understand that. I hope our families are satisfied with the show."

"I think they are."

"So they should be. We really can leave in an hour?"

"Yes. One hour: a little more chat, a piece of cake, and the children's dances. The portkey is right here, pinned under my sleeve. It will take us straight to the Malfoys' villa. It was so kind of them to lend it to us for the weekend."

Snape grunted, rather glad that they were getting away, no matter how short the time. He had never imagined being involved in such a spectacle. He had never imagined being reconciled with his mother's family, much less being given a small fortune of his own. He had never imagined that the Minister of Magic would take it into his head to want to come to his wedding. He had never imagined being married at all, and yet here

he was: Severus Snape, the married man.

"Sally!" Harry shouted with glee. "Here you are!"

"Of course I am," she smiled. "Professor Lupin fetched me."

"Professor Lupin!" Harry grinned. "I hear he has a crazy dog!" Everybody had heard that Professor Lupin's dog had made a row at Professor Snape's bachelor dinner.

"He told me about that, and also to tell anyone who wanted to know that Padfoot was chained up for the day." She smiled. "I'm so happy to be here, and I know the Wedding Ring dance, too."

She looked so pretty, in white robes sashed with coral-pink. She seemed to have grown a little, and was very happy and healthy. The girls gathered round to chat and admire each other. They were terribly jealous of Sally when she revealed that Professor Lupin would be tutoring her in magic over the summer. The boys sighed at the gossip, raised their brows, and were very manly and forbearing.

"Harry," whispered Hermione, "who is that little girl who keeps grinning at you?"

"Her?" Harry glanced around. "Oh! That's Marigold Prince. She's the Professor's cousin. She told me she likes potions."

"She certainly likes *you*," Hermione said tartly.

A bagpipe skirled, played by Gideon Crumb, the first warning that it was time for the Wedding Ring dance. Professor Dumbledore addressed the guests, telling them of Professor Burbage's work this year with the Explorers' Club, and what a tremendous success it had been. He then invited the guests to thank the children for the wonderful entertainment they were about to provide.

Quickly, with some nervousness, everyone got in place. Harry rolled his eyes at Neville, and Neville rolled his back at him. This really was not hard, but if Harry forgot which direction to move in, he'd crash into Susan, and that would be embarrassing. She was so certain he would that she kept up running instructions in a low voice:

"Three steps left. Kick and kick. Three steps right, and turn three times…"

Somehow they got through it. Sally certainly knew the simple steps, and moved gracefully, toes pointed, her robes flaring. She seemed to think it all great fun.

The Tree of Life was harder, and Susan was his partner for this, too. Hermione was dancing with Draco, and Neville with Daphne Greengrass. The seven couples moved in a circle, and then divided, the girls to the left and the boys to the right, and then they broke off and twisted through the double line, ducking under raised hands. Harry's carefully brushed hair ruffled against a silken sleeve, and they moved back to the first position to do it all again.

Everyone was watching them: the pudgy man in green whom they said was the Minister of Magic; the grim man in

black that Sally pointed out as her father; the elegant Malfoys; the kindly, indulgent Flamels. There were all his teachers, and so many of his classmates' parents.

Ron Weasley's eyes were a little wild. Harry guessed he had forgotten the next move. No matter. Lisa Turpin grabbed his hand and spun him around, pushing him in the right direction. Ron sighed with relief.

And the applause went on forever. The cake was served and toasts were drunk. Ladies came over to ruffle his hair—and look at his scar, Harry realized sourly. At least they did until the Professor saw what was happening, and put a stop to it.

Theo Nott was standing beside an older man's chair, looking angry and miserable. That must be his father. The man was sobbing uncontrollably, and smelled like he had had too much to drink. Something about the "Dark Lord" floated Harry's way. Theo looked up, met Harry's eyes, and then looked away, turning red.

"Harry!" Someone grabbed Harry's hand. "I want to see Hogwarts!"

It was Marigold Prince. Her little brother Octavius was with her, staring at Harry like he was some sort of hero.

"I want to see Hogwarts, too," Octavius pleaded. "Can't we? All the grown ups are *talking*."

Hermione overheard and approved. "I think children should see their future school. Do let's go Harry! We can take them on a tour."

Draco got away from his parents and grinned, ready for an escapade. Neville and Susan joined them, and then the older Prince girl, Tansy, saw them and threatened to tell if they didn't take her too. Quickly, they moved around the corner of the pavilion and then ran for the gates.

The other students were in their Common Rooms, so the halls were silent and echoing. Everyone had a different idea of where they should go, but they all eventually agreed that the children should see the Explorers' Club Room. The little Princes were much impressed, and even more so to discover that Harry was President. On the other hand, that was only natural, of course…

"Maybe they'll still have the club when you come to Hogwarts," Harry hoped. "It's been great."

"They'd *better*," said Tansy.

They could not spare much time, so they ran down the halls, giggling. There was no way they were going into the dungeons. The older children had the sense not to take their visitors there, even when Marigold asked questions about "Cousin Severus" and Potions. They went upstairs instead, pushing and shoving. Tansy's sash came untied, and they had to fix that. Marigold kept trying to hold Harry's hand, and her grip was as tight as if their hands were nailed together.

"Geroff!" Harry muttered, tugging. She tugged back.

"Stop roughhousing!" Hermione ordered. "You'll spoil your clothes. And this is the Defense classroom…"

Harry gave another tug, and Marigold suddenly let go, laugh-

ing. He crashed to the floor, face-first, and his forehead hit the threshold with a painful crack. He grunted with the shock to his scar, and tried to push himself up, the room whirling around him.

"That wasn't at all nice!" Hermione scolded Marigold.

"You're not my mother!" Marigold defied her.

"Shhh!" Susan hushed them. "Be quiet! You'll bring Filch down on us. Can you sit up, Harry?"

"Yeah. Just a minute. There's something here." He squinted at the stone threshold, trying to make out the tiny scratches.

"What is it, Harry?" Hermione asked.

"Runes. Those are Runes. I wonder what they mean?"

They slipped away rather guiltily, except for Marigold, who was extremely proud of having seen Hogwarts ahead of time. The grown ups were still talking and laughing and drinking, and some of the professors were rounding up the students to go back to the school. Harry and Draco blew out breaths of relief, and laughed at doing it simultaneously.

"There he is!"

Professor Burbage hugged him, and he let her, because he liked her and because she always smelled so nice. Professor Snape shook his hand, and everyone slapped everybody else on the back.

"Professor…"

"Charity and I will be gone for the weekend, Harry," Snape told him, rather in a rush. "Do try to stay out of trouble…"

They portkeyed away in a swirl of black and foamy white, and more toasts were drunk. Others were leaving: Sally with Professor Lupin, the Minister, Theo's father, the Malfoys.

"Mr Potter!" called Professor McGonagall. "We really must be going!"

"Professor!" Harry called back gratefully. "I need to talk to you!" He ran up and started walking beside her. "I found some runes I'd like you to look at."

"Where?"

"On the doorway of the Defense classroom. They're on the threshold, and they're really tiny. I just wondered what they were."

"Later. We must get you lot back to school. Wave goodbye, Mr Potter, and quick march!"

CHAPTER 28

"ARE YOU ALL RIGHT, Harry?" asked Hermione.

He supposed he looked stupid, lying on his stomach in front of the Defense classroom on a Sunday morning, but he was still curious about what he had seen yesterday.

"I'm trying to make out these runes here. I wonder what they mean."

She got down on the floor too, and peered at the stone of the threshold. "Where?"

He pointed. "Right there. They're really tiny."

She leaned over, and frowned. "Are you pranking me? I don't see anything."

"But they're right there!" He moved his finger under the long string of characters. "Right there! There's Eihwaz, Isa, Mehwaz, Fansuz…"

Hermione sat back, scowling. "Are you sure you're not making it up?"

"Making what up?" Remus Lupin asked, coming from his quarters to work on marking. "Harry, are you hurt?"

"No, Professor!" Harry assured him. "I just saw some runes here yesterday, and I'm trying to figure them out. Hermione says she can't see them."

Lupin leaned over the two children. He had extremely good vision himself, and had never noticed anything there. "Where exactly?"

Exasperated, Harry jabbed at the writing. "Right there! The first character is Eihwaz. It's a little bigger. See?"

Lupin frowned, drawing back. "Harry, I really don't. I'm not saying you're making it up. I just don't see it. There could be all sorts of reasons for that." He rubbed his chin, thinking. "I have an idea…"

Going to his desk, he pulled out a wide sheet of parchment and chose a soft pencil. He shooed the children away, laid the parchment on the threshold, and began taking a rubbing. "Sometimes this is a way of getting text from stones," he explained. "Mind you, I'm no expert where runes are concerned, but I've studied them a bit on my own. Occasionally… well, look there!"

"I see it!" Hermione said excitedly.

"Told you! Let's show it to Professor McGonagall!"

Lupin was about to propose showing it to Ogham, the Runes Professor, but then thought again. If only Harry could see the markings on the stone, something odd had been done to conceal them, and perhaps it would be best to discuss this with Minerva first, after all…

Snape returned from his brief honeymoon to discover that the curse on the DADA position was broken.

Well, not exactly *broken*. It had been discovered, and Lupin and his effects were being shifted to another, previously empty classroom. He was being given entirely new quarters as well. The curse, it transpired, had been on the DADA classroom itself, and Harry had found it. There was a meeting, and the matter was hashed over at length.

"But why was only Harry able to see them?" Sprout wondered.

"It must be connected to the horcrux in him," Dumbledore said. "Tom bespelled the incantation to be undetectable by anyone other than himself. Somehow the magic interpreted the horcrux to be Tom, and revealed the writing."

"A very nasty and pernicious curse," Minerva shuddered. "I destroyed the rubbing. It was dangerous to have it about. Over the summer, it would be best to replace the threshold of the DADA classroom entirely."

Dumbledore was very pleased at the outcome, and did not minding letting everyone know about it. "I cannot tell you the trouble it's been to find a new teacher every year. Remus still seems to be all right, and with a dollop of luck, he will be back next year, and the next!"

Snape was not sure how he felt about that. The werewolf was, he was forced to admit, a far better teacher than most who had held the Defense position, and he had behaved decently for the most part. Nor could Snape blame him for the actions of Sirius Black. In fact, he had acted very properly, taking Harry away at once when requested by the lad. As long as he never brought that filthy mongrel of his to Hogwarts, Snape felt he could endure Lupin's presence.

Now, if Flamel's proposal about getting the horcrux out of Harry could be implemented during the summer, Snape would be a happy man.

He paused at the enormity of it. To consider himself a happy man was simply…*extraordinary*. Yet rather happy he was. He enjoyed his brewing, his students this year were not complete dunderheads, he had Charity in his life forever, and he had made friends with the great Nicholas and Perenelle Flamel. Most strangely, he had won the loyalty and affection of a remarkable young boy.

In light of all of that, he could certainly allow Lupin a roof over his flea-bitten head. It was absurd to pursue the grudge against him any longer.

End of term examinations had come and gone. Harry had dutifully revised with the Hufflepuff study group, and then revised again with Draco and Hermione and Neville. And then

he was quizzed: anxiously by Professor Snape, and proudly by Professor Burbage.

He felt he had done pretty well. Professor McGonagall beamed at him, so he knew his Transfigurations were all right. Defense came naturally to him, and of the rest of his courses, he had only come up completely blank on a few of the History questions. His marks should be good enough that his summer would not be one of Professor Snape glaring blackly at him over the breakfast table.

Hufflepuff seemed to have the House Cup locked up. The Headmaster had given Harry a huge number of house points, first for helping save Professor Quirrell (it was called rescuing him from a near-fatal accident), and then for finding Tom Riddle's journal (it was called alerting the Headmaster to a magical hazard), and then for helping with the Basilisk (it was called being Professor Kettleburn's research assistant). Of course, he also had points for helping found the Explorers' Club. He kept trying to explain that it was originally Hermione's idea, but no one ever seemed to quite get that. At least she'd won some points for that, too.

He would never have guessed that school could be so exciting and so much fun. He had passed the best year of his life here, dangers and all. It was worth it, to feel accepted, to have so many good friends, to win a place of his own. So much of it was due to Professor Snape, who Harry decided was the best thing that had ever happened to him. Of course, they would have met when Harry came to school, but it was nicer that they had had that month together beforehand, and that the Professor really understood Harry's situation. It was possible that if he had not come to Harry's house that day, he would not be Harry's guardian, but just another friendly teacher, like Professor Lupin. Proxy for the guardian? That was rubbish. Aunt Petunia might be his legal guardian, but as far as his real life was concerned, she was more a ghost than Moaning Myrtle, whom he should visit before school ended, by the way.

But Professor Snape *was* Harry's guardian, and they had an exciting plan. Harry must go to Privet Drive, and spend one night there. He was sort of looking forward to that, because it would be like camping in a secret hideout. After that, Professor Snape would come for him and they would go to Lacewing Cottage, where Professor Burbage would be waiting.

And then the three of them would have so much fun! Harry wanted to go boating and help in the garden. He could have his friends over, as soon as they finished work on the guestroom. Draco would come, of course, and Neville and Hermione, too. He could invite all the Hufflepuffs—even Sally. He could fly, and explore the woods, and play with the little goats. He would study more about runes and maybe learn a little about magical creatures. Best of all, Professor Snape promised him that he would have a real birthday party this year, his first ever.

His imagination soared, thinking of the possibilities…

"So old Kettleburn is calling it a career, is he?" Sirius asked, sprawled on the sofa at Grimmauld Place. Everyone else was bustling about the house, cleaning and breaking curses. There were piles of books, and piles of magical artifacts, and a huge trunk of clothing that Sirius claimed he might want.

"Yes. Over the summer he'll finish up a paper that Harry helped him with. We're having a bit of a party for him the day after tomorrow, and *no*, you are *not* invited," Remus told him firmly, sorting through a heap of family papers. "No. Dogs. Allowed."

Sirius smiled lazily, remembering Snape's bachelor do. "It was beautiful."

Remus snorted, and tossed some parchment his way. "I believe you were *supposed* to be working on a list of the furniture you want."

"Don't want any," Sirius insisted. "I'm going to furnish my new place completely new. None of this antique rubbish. If you want anything," he said, gesturing grandly, "take it."

"I live at Hogwarts," Remus said flatly. "I don't need any furniture. But let's get Andy here and ask her."

A very large group of wizards had gathered to clear out Grimmauld Place. Dumbledore himself had come, and Minerva McGonagall, eyeing Sirius' slumped form on the sofa with disapproval. A lot of the old crowd had shown up: Emmaline Vance, and Daedelus Diggle; Hestia Jones and Sturgis Podmore. Even old Mad-Eye was here, muttering with Dumbledore. It seemed they were looking for something. Dumbledore had asked about a locket, but Sirius hadn't a clue.

His cousin Andromeda Tonks was here, along with her daughter, young Nymphadora. Nice-looking girl, that. If they could get through the wards to his late mama's jewelry cache, they were welcome to it. Maybe there was a locket *there*.

Kreacher vibrated back and forth, wailing about ungrateful children and bloodtraitors, setting off the godawful portrait.

"I'll tell you one thing I *don't* want, Moony," Sirius snarled over the shrieks. "I don't want that bloody house elf!" He shouted, "You! Stop insulting Nymphadora, or I'll stick your head to the wall myself!"

"That's *Tonks* to you!" the girl shouted back from upstairs.

"Brave Master Regulus would not have looted the house. He would not have broken his mother's heart! He…"

"Shut up!"

Another pair of visitors made their appearance: the Flamels. Remus gave his friend a hard stare, and Sirius got up from the sofa and made a decent show of welcoming them to his home. Nicholas eyed Sirius with recognition and amusement, and exchanged a knowing look with his wife.

The elder wizards took themselves off to the library, and

after some time called Kreacher in. The voices were quiet, but for the sound of Kreacher's sobs, as he told them some cock-and-bull story about "Brave Master Regulus."

Moody appeared in the doorway, and jerked his head at Lupin. "It's here," he said, enigmatically. "You might want to listen to this."

"Surely you want *some* of the books, Sirius," Remus said wearily, as he went to join Moody. "Work on a list, and I'll be back in a tick."

Sirius lay back and shut his eyes. Nobody could make him do anything. He didn't give a fig for anything in this tip. After today, he was off to the Bahamas. Remus had agreed to spend a week there. It would do the poor fellow good. There would be a full moon during his visit, but there were no people on Unicorn Key to be endangered, and apparently Snivellus was giving Moony a potion to help him through the worst of it. The house-elves would be sent away at night. Dumbledore himself had come out to bring the muggle-repelling wards up to date. The two of them could run wild all night, with no one the wiser. He was rather looking forward to it himself. Too bad Moony couldn't stay longer, but he had found a job tutoring for the summer. The full moons would be fun, though.

He supposed that if he wanted to, he could get a little cottage in Hogsmeade, or a flat in Diagon Alley. He certainly had money enough. That might be a sound plan. It would be good to get out and mingle a bit. Closer to Moony, too. All newly furnished, of course. New furniture, new books, new life. New broom, too. As soon as this lot cleared out, he and Moony could go for a bit of supper, and then he would get a top-of-the-line broom for himself. He'd heard good things about the Nimbus…

"From what we can gather, Regulus turned against Voldemort, and tried to destroy the locket himself. Ironic, really." Dumbledore told Snape. "It's a sad thing. Regulus Black was misjudged, just like his brother. Sirius has consented to let that pitiful elf leave the house and serve Narcissa Malfoy."

"At any rate, that horcrux has been destroyed, too," Snape said briskly. "Let us see to Harry now. I see no reason to delay the procedure. Nicholas feels that it will work. Perenelle says that she is sure of it. Apparently she and Minerva have something planned, but they're not talking about it."

"I still think that the link, however perilous, is of value…" Dumbledore began.

"And I say that the perils outweigh any *possible* value," Snape shot back. "We *will* remove the horcrux. The potions will take at least a week to brew. We can work here, and Harry can rest in my quarters afterward. If there are complications, Poppy is willing to be on hand. Perenelle and Minerva have already spoken to her, apparently."

"That's very interesting," Albus said, stroking his beard, "I wonder…"

The ride on the Hogwarts Express was tremendous fun. Everyone was full of plans. Draco and his parents were going to the South of France again, of course, because that's what they did. Hermione and her parents were going to France, too, but to tour the Loire Valley. Neville had ideas for his greenhouses. Susan and Hannah would be visiting everyone, sometimes together, and sometimes separately. Ernie was going to see some relatives in Canada for a few weeks, and promised to take pictures. Justin was hoping to go somewhere with his father.

"You never know when everything is going to fall through. Father might get a call anytime, but the plan is to do some sightseeing in India and Pakistan. Mother got after him about mixing me up in his work, but he swears this has nothing to do with it. He's been there and liked it, and thought it would be fun to hike along the border and do some camping. It will be a real adventure!"

"Well, *I* think you should take your wand," said Draco. "You can never tell with muggles!"

"That's remarkably like something my father would say," laughed Justin. "He's always well-prepared. He can take all sorts of things in a diplomatic bag!"

And then there was "Uncle Vernon" at the station, ready to take him home to Privet Drive. As he walked away with the Professor, Harry asked, "You look different. I mean, Uncle Vernon looks different. Thinner. Quite a bit thinner, really."

"Such a relief," snarked Snape. "At least my ankles are no longer in danger of snapping like twigs!"

There was no hurry at all. They did a bit of shopping in muggle London, took in a film, and then had an early supper. Snape found a quiet place to disapparate, and in a moment, they were in Surrey.

"Whoa!" said Harry, looking about him. "I feel like a stranger in a strange land!"

They walked down Privet Drive, under a Disillusionment spell. Harry had another surprise. Dudley was mowing the grass! He was thinner, too, and was sweating profusely. Harry and Snape slipped through the open garage to the back, magical entrance, and Harry was in his little haven. The bicycle was waiting for him, and Harry asked Snape to reinflate the tires, which he did, after briefly puzzling over the appropriate spell.

"I'll be here to fetch you at nine tomorrow."

Harry grinned. "You'll really be here? Do you *promise?*"

"Idiot boy," grunted Snape, ruffling the messy black hair. "Be ready on time."

He was gone then, and Harry changed into some of his new muggle clothing. He should have time for a nice long ride before dark…

"And how are the Dursleys, Harry?" Dumbledore asked.

They were gathering at Hogwarts for the procedure to remove the horcrux. Even a week after the end of term, the castle was a different, deserted place. It reminded Harry of Christmas, and he liked it the better for that.

"They were all right, Professor," Harry answered dutifully. "Uncle Vernon and Dudley have gone on a health kick, and lost a lot of weight. Dudley is doing the lawn work now, but he doesn't really like it. I guess he did all right at Smeltings. It's not like we talk."

Snape allowed himself the tiniest smile. Harry was learning subtlety. Nothing he said was a lie, though all of it was learned in less than a day.

Harry smiled back at the Professor. They were going to the Hospital Wing, where he could lie down for the procedure. It was comforting to have the Professor there, and Master Flamel, too. Dumbledore would be there as well, watching carefully, along with Madam Pomfrey. Harry wondered where Charity had gone. She said he must call her Charity over the summer when they were at home, but it sounded strange even in his own mind.

"I'll be with some other friends, and we'll be thinking of you, Harry. Don't be afraid for a minute," she had told him, when she left the Hospital Wing.

The potions he knew all about…well, maybe not *all*. They were very complicated, and the removal would be done in two stages. The first stage would use a base of basilisk venom injected into his scar, and would *hurt*, he was warned. They couldn't put him to sleep and they couldn't numb the spot, so they would have to immobilize him. That was fairly scary. Then after the basilisk venom was allowed to work, there was a healing potion of phoenix tears, which had come from Professor Dumbledore's very own Fawkes!

Master Flamel was leaning over the first potion right now, and taking it up into a strange, rather ominous-looking instrument. It was something like a hypodermic needle, but bigger. Professor Snape seemed perfectly calm, and Harry took confidence from that. Still, Harry hated needles, and shut his eyes tightly.

One floor down, a group of women and girls all dressed in white formed a circle; while Perenelle Flamel, the mother of them all, stood in the middle, reading from a thick red codex.

Minerva McGonagall, Pomona Sprout, Narcissa Malfoy, Charity Burbage, Amelia Bones, Susan Bones, Hannah Abbott, and Hermione Granger caught hands, and slowly circled to the left, chanting.

"O magna mater, adviua nos…"

"Harry."

He blinked, noting that the Professor had a *really* big nose. That made him grin, but it took longer than usual. His face was stiff. Stretching it into a smile was like pulling taffy.

Madam Pomfrey was there too, looking like everything was all right.

"How do you feel?"

Harry thought about it. "I feel fine. I guess. Strange. Kind of calm. Is that the phoenix tears?"

"Possibly." Snape stood back and let Pomfrey examine the boy. The scar had faded to the faintest of thin white lines. It was still the mark of the Sun, but no longer red and angry. He unbuttoned his cuff, rolled up his sleeve, and then sighed a long, long sigh.

Dumbledore looked. "It is done, then."

"It is." Snape felt like falling to his knees, wanting to thank the hitherto-uncaring God of the Universe for the stupidity of Tom Riddle, the wisdom of Nicholas Flamel, and the loving heart of Harry Potter.

His Mark was gone. Not subdued, not faded. It was well and truly gone. He would owl Lucius right away and ask after his health. All over the British wizarding world and beyond, Dark Marks would be vanishing. Snape wondered if the bearers would give thanks for a second chance, or if they would grieve themselves to death for their lost Lord. Some of both, perhaps. Some might not even notice for a few days, and then quietly move on with their lives.

"Are *you* all right, Professor?" Harry asked, a little thickly.

"Never better. Rest a bit, and then I'll take you home."

Harry smiled, more easily now, thinking of Lacewing Cottage.

"How is he?" ask Charity, a hint of lime flowers drifting into the room.

"Professor Bur—I mean—Charity—I mean Professor Burbage! I'm great. Hi, Hermione! And…what are you all *doing* here?"

Minerva McGonagall smiled. "Oh, a little tea party and a bit of women's gossip. We just wanted to see that you were well."

The girls passed by his bed, patting his hand and smiling secretively. Madam Malfoy gave him a kiss, and Professor Sprout beamed at him proudly. Too soon, Madam Pomfrey shooed them away. There were whispers and a few giggles from the girls, and they were gone.

"One last experiment, Harry," said Nicholas Flamel. "I would like you to say hello to this." He showed Harry a brightly colored picture of a snake.

"*Hello,*" hissed Harry. He looked quickly at the interested faces around him. "I did it, didn't I? I can still speak parseltongue!"

"Yes," said Snape. "How do you feel about that?"

"I'm glad," Harry said. "It was a part of me for so long. I'm glad I've still got it. But the horcrux *is* gone, isn't it?"

"It is gone, *mon enfant*," Flamel assured him. "To the extent it was a discrete piece of the soul of Tom Riddle." He glanced at Snape and Dumbledore, who both seemed to understand. They had thought it possible that the abilities that had already bled over the barrier might remain with Harry. He would always be a little different than the Harry Potter he might have been, but who was to say he wasn't the better for it?

CHAPTER 29

YOUR ROOM IS READY, Mr. Gaunt. Enjoy your stay."

Merlin Gaunt nodded casually, as he walked through the exquisite lobby of the Salem Grand Hotel and Magical Spa. A bit of luxury would be a treat, before he settled down to rigorous study at university.

At *the* university, he corrected himself mentally. While his British accent opened many doors and softened many silly hearts and heads, it was still important to master the local idiom.

And there were so many idioms to master in magical North America! A fascinating place, really. A whole new world to conquer, as it were. And he had the means to do it in considerable comfort.

Gold and information were his currencies of choice. Gold had bought his false identity and his imaginary O.W.L scores from the Ministry. Those, in turn, enabled him to present himself as Merlin Gaunt, an orphaned wizard of legal age. He had taken the N.E.W.T.s—or their North American equivalent—at the New York offices

of the I.F.W., and had done brilliantly.

Of course. A powerful tool, even a weapon, those N.E.W.T. scores. No one would ever look twice at his O.W.L.s, now that he had his N.E.W.T.s. Taking the tests in North America had broken the trail that led back to Britain.

The pretty witch serving drinks at the bar was smiling at him. Merlin smiled back, naturally and beautifully. He might chat her up later on. An amusing creature for a night, and such girls always knew useful and interesting information: the other patrons' names, their comings and goings, the local chatter…

The internal floo took him to his room, at a flash from his keycard. Such efficiency. His room was most satisfactory, too. He enlarged his trunk, and meticulously laid out his things, every item of the best quality. He removed his beautifully tailored outer robe and hung it carefully in the closet, then looked in the long mirror to adjust his appearance.

Yes, young and handsome. *This* face would never distort into a monstrosity. *His* would never become a name of horror and contempt.

How many men had groveled on their knees, begging a pitiless God for a second chance? And yet, all undeserving, it had been granted by some mysterious Jokester to one Tom Riddle.

Why not go down to the bar? Being of magical age had its privileges. He admired himself a little longer, smoothed his hair, and went off to seek adventure.

Such a magnificent place: as different as possible from the dingy orphanage where he had grown up; very different from Hogwarts, which had been his true home for so long. This was beauty and comfort combined, the carpet sinking lushly under his boots, the walls gleaming with soft color, the lights abundant and golden.

He had taken care to have a look at where he would be living, once the term began, and was gratified to find that the university had very civilized ideas. A room of his own, one he was permitted to furnish or transfigure to suit himself. There he could make use of some of the things he had removed from Hogwarts: a wonderful bed, its head and posts carved with magical creatures; a desk and chair, the legs of which were bronze serpents; a trunk that with a wand's tap became a splendid wardrobe; an astonishing three-shelved bookcase that could house an entire library; a pair of silver candlesticks with shades of opalescent glass; an ivory inkstand, flourished with golden tracery. All these were his, just as his new life was his. All his, indeed: with no Dumbledore to peer at him disapprovingly over his spectacles, and stick his long and pointed nose into things that were None of His Business.

Life was good, and was even better when he slid onto the comfortable bar stool and asked for a gin and tonic. That was a proper drink for North America in summertime, surely?

"Right away!" smiled the girl. She was very pretty indeed: a

type of American beauty, all brownish-blonde hair and magnificent white teeth. She used her wand, her stirring rod, and her knife with estimable deftness. Handing him the drink, she flashed those astonishing teeth again, and asked, "And who are you? I thought I knew everybody who stays here in August!"

"Merlin."

"No, *really*."

"Merlin," he repeated, smiling. "Merlin Gaunt."

Her eyes lit up at the sound of his voice, "Oh, my God!" she said. "Are you *British?*"

He modestly assured her it was so.

"I *love* your accent."

Merlin Gaunt reminded himself never to lose the accent.

"I rather like yours as well. And now you have the advantage of me."

She regarded him blankly.

He pointed out, "You know my name, but I don't know yours."

"Oh!" She blushed. "I'm Brooke. Brooke Proctor, and yes, I'm sort of one of *those* Proctors, but not one of the rich ones, hence the summer job at the hotel. Is the drink all right?"

"Perfect." Merlin considered the pretty witch, rearranging his plans somewhat. The Proctors were among the oldest and most influential of the magical families in the Salem-Arkham area. Even a "poor" Proctor could conceivably open doors. He sipped appreciatively. "And what do you do, Brooke Proctor, when you're not mixing drinks for strange Englishmen?"

"Oh, I go to Arkham. I'm majoring in Potions and Alchemy. Are you a student?"

"Always. I am student of many things, but yes, I will be at Arkham next month. For now, I'm studying Salem, and as I'm speaking to you at the moment, I daresay I'm studying you."

Another blush. "You talk like a book."

He smiled, very attractively. "I *am* a book. An open book."

"No way."

He had mastered *that* idiom. "Yes, way."

"I don't believe that for a second, Mr. Man of Mystery, but I can see that there's more to you than meets the eye."

"Yes—and no." He considered the matter. This would be risky, but not very, and it should be very amusing. "I certainly hope there isn't less! But I really am a book, and I'll tell you why."

"I've got to hear this. Want another?" She asked, gesturing with the bottle of gin.

"Why not?" He admired her skill, suspecting that she might be quite a good student of Potions. There was absolutely no reason not to tell her, since she would not remember most of this conversation tomorrow.

"A long time ago, in a faraway land…"

"I think I know that one," she laughed.

He laughed too, echoing her tone appropriately. "A long time ago, in a faraway land," he repeated, "a wizard died. This

wizard was extremely powerful, and wished to cheat death. To that end, he left a little bit of himself in a book."

"What kind of book?" she asked.

He frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Was it Shakespeare? Was it a spell book? Was it a Bible or a Talmud? A Kabbalah?"

"It was a diary. His own diary."

She nodded. "That makes sense. The book might actually absorb his personality."

He was pleased with her acuteness. "Precisely. That was indeed the point. If he perished, the book could be used to resurrect him."

She made a face. "Not like the Ra-Eshgaroth rite, I hope. Yuck."

He agreed. "Not at all. When he died, there was scarcely anything left, so that rite would have been impracticable. There is always the Bone, Blood, and Flesh ritual…"

"I suppose," she said, "but you might get a pretty peculiar looking body out of that, and it would be very dependent on getting the right donors. If one of them had a chronic disease, for example…"

"Exactly." He took a long, luxurious swallow. "He created a horcrux."

"A horcrux!" She slammed the bottle down in excitement. "But to use that for revival, you'd need a blood sacrifice…"

He smiled again, and made a little twirling gesture with his finger, urging her to go on.

"But if you're trapped in the book, how do you control anyone? Unless…"

"Unless…"

"The book can communicate! Am I right?"

"You are. The ink of any message seeped into the book and I was able to manipulate it to return messages. After long enough, the correspondent fell under my sway."

"Man or woman?"

"Neither. A schoolboy. He trusted me implicitly." He swirled the ice in his drink.

The girl watched him impatiently. "Well? Go on! This is great!"

He smiled. His legilimency revealed that she was happily convinced that he was making it all up to charm her. She was very proud of being a Proctor—even a poor one—and was determined not to seem credulous and gullible. But the day had been long and dull, and she was ready to be entertained. He obliged.

"I learned such a great deal from that tiresome boy! I really ought to be more grateful to him, but that's never been my way, I'm afraid. I went with him to class, to the library, to adorable little club meetings with other first-years, where I learned simply heaps about current history and the muggle world. In particular, I learned about all the stupid mistakes I had made the first time round, and how I'd actually managed to get myself killed chasing a ridiculous prophecy. There were

even pictures, and they were quite enough to convince me that I was not going to do that to myself this time. Life is hardly worth living if one can't be beautiful. But of course, *you* would understand that."

"*That* is a brilliant line."

"It is nothing more than the truth."

"That is also a brilliant line."

"I have an unending supply of them."

"I'll just bet you do."

This was all very entertaining, he decided. He must keep the story light, very light. It was only an amusing fiction to her: only a fantasy, so he did not wish to talk about those first, earliest days, when he had confronted the disaster of his first life. It was distressing even now to remember how he had raged and struggled, coming to terms with the shipwreck of all his hopes and dreams. He had failed, utterly failed. He had chosen the wrong means, the wrong followers, the wrong tactics. He had chosen to keep himself outside society and established institutions. He had turned himself into a hideous monster and then been foiled, either by a year-old toddler or by a colossal blunder of his own making. Both scenarios were equally humiliating. The past was to be consigned to the oblivion it deserved. He had a future, and it would be as different as he could make it from his last, catastrophic life. He let the pleasant bitterness of the tonic slide over his tongue.

The girl smiled, and let him drink. When he set down the his glass, she asked, "So what happened?"

He decided to change the timeline a bit. Artistic license would lend the story more drama and blur his own involvement.

"Well, my hold grew stronger, and I knew it was time to seize the day, as it were. Just before Christmas, my donor owled his parents, telling them he needed to stay at school and study. He told his housemates that he was going home. He packed, got on the train for London, and then slipped off the train just before it left the station, disillusioning himself. He returned to the empty school, and in a very private place, the horcrux absorbed the boy's life energy, and I was back. Such a marvelous Christmas present."

"That must have been a surprise for the teachers!"

"Well, obviously, I couldn't allow myself to be seen by them. The Headmaster knew me in my last life, after all! Old fool."

"Wait! You're talking about the British school—Hogwarts, aren't you? The Headmaster is that famous guy—Albert Blunderbore?" She grinned.

"I'm going to give you the most tremendous tip for that."

"So you hid in the school. How did you manage that?"

"Nothing more easy. I had access to a room the Headmaster did not even know about. In addition, I had access to a room that he had no reason to believe any student had access to. The first is still secret, and can only be visited by one of my special abilities. The second is called the Room of Lost Things."

She smiled dreamily. "The Room of Lost Things…What sorts of things?"

"Everything you can imagine. A lot of it was rubbish, and a lot was damaged, but in a school that lasted a thousand years, it's not surprising that there was also every kind of magical artifact: wands, scrying devices, brooms, staffs, crystals, trunks, and bags of holding. And then of course, there were books, robes, jewels, gold and silver objects, toys of all sorts, relics of past Headmasters. Some were enchanted, and some were simply beautiful. There was furniture there too, of course. I found myself a bed and set myself up very comfortably while I completed my studies of everything I would need to know to begin my new life."

"Did you go out into the school?"

He nodded. "From time to time. I visited the kitchens, where the house elves were happy to supply me with food. The library, of course. Carefully. Judiciously. With a subtle charm. Who would look at another student all that carefully? A student from another house? For no one could ever remember my house. Handy, that. Once or twice I attracted a bit of notice, but there was nothing a little misdirection couldn't overcome."

"Why didn't you leave right away?"

"First, because the authorities were energetically, if ineffectively, looking for a Hogwarts student. They believed my donor

had run away when the train arrived in London. It would not do to be young, a wizard, and on my own: not until my plans were perfect. The older version of me hid me in that book in the 1940's, you see. There was such a *great* deal to learn!"

And of course it took time to dispose of the boy's body. He would not mention that to the girl either, for well-disposed as she was, that would probably not be a very attractive part of the story. It had not been particularly pleasant for him, for that matter. Binding up the undigested remains of the basilisk's meal and banishing it to the deepest part of the lake had been necessary housekeeping, not glorious adventure. It was, like using the toilet and cleaning one's teeth, not essential to the story.

"I had to learn the history of the past fifty years and learn it fast. Even in the wizarding world, there had been changes. I decided to make a complete break with my past, and to seek my fortune in the New World, rather than the Old. There were too many people in Europe who would recognize me. Wizards, after all, can live a *very* long time. I poked through the students' belongings. I listened in on conversations. I chatted up students who would not remember me. I assiduously studied all the library had to offer about wizarding North America, and when I read about the university at Arkham, I decided to extend my student years. Britain, as you no doubt know, has no magical university."

"Good thinking," she approved. "You'll love it here."

"So I believe. At any rate, I would also need money in my new life, so I found some Bags of Holding, and set about collecting money and valuables. In a forgotten trunk, I began packing the necessities."

"How did you cross the Atlantic?" she wondered. "I've heard your Ministry is very nosy about international portkeys."

"A transatlantic portkey was out of the question," he agreed. "Once again, I might have been recognized, My age, too, would have directed attention to me."

Her eyes sparkled, thinking over the possibilities. She guessed, "You flew!"

"Exactly!"

"That's amazing! I can see how you could do it, though. Maybe north to Iceland, and then to Greenland, and then over to Canada. It would be hard, but with Wide-Awake potions and heating charms you could do it. You should write an article about it for the *Arkham Oracle* or the *Salem Intelligencer*."

He laughed at her. "And a pretty piece of fiction it would be! I did not fly on a broom, but on a muggle airliner."

"You must have done some fancy spellwork, then." She was disappointed, but only a little.

"Very fancy, but that's a specialty of mine. I learned all I could from some muggleborn students who sent for some information for me. Once I knew how to find the airport, it was no great matter to disillusion myself, and find a flight with

an empty seat. Once aboard, no one noticed my presence. Luckily I thought to carry some provisions, so I spent the time quite pleasantly. In a few hours I was in New York. I've spent the past few months traveling and disposing very profitably of my booty from the Room of Lost Things: by train, by broom, and even sometimes…" he grinned charmingly, and flicked his thumb in the universal gesture of the hitchhiker.

She regarded him solemnly. "Muggles can be dangerous. Hitchhiking just isn't done anymore."

"I assure you that none of them was one-tenth as dangerous to me as I was to them. Yes, I've learned a *great* deal."

"What are you going to major in?"

"Lore."

"Whoa! One of *those* guys! They're a scary bunch, the Lore Masters. You'll want to watch your step."

"Oh, I think I'll manage. Such interesting things one can learn here. Such delightful people one can meet."

"That is a fabulous story," she smiled, thinking it over. "I know who you're talking about. That guy—Voldemort?" She said, "You really should write this down and publish it. The university has a literary magazine. *Voldemort*," she chuckled, and then made a show of believing the fantasy. "I notice you don't use that name anymore."

"No. I don't." He cocked his head, looking at himself in the mirror behind the bar, pleased at his appearance. He had not *entirely* covered his tracks. Someday, word might cross the Atlantic of a brilliant young wizard named Gaunt. There was really only one wizard likely to sit up and take notice, and there would be absolutely nothing Dumbledore could do about it. Some words long-forgotten from Sundays at the orphanage came to him. "'When I was a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man I put away childish things.' It was a silly name, anyway. When are you done here?"

"Are you asking me out?"

"I thought we might have dinner together. I have so many questions about Arkham. I'm sure you're an absolute mine of information."

She smiled coyly. "Maybe I am. I don't get off until eight, though."

"A late supper, then. How about it?"

"All right, why not?" She cleaned his glass, thinking about the story. "And you didn't go after Dumbledore or that kid—that Potter kid? You didn't want revenge?"

He frowned, and said seriously. "Of course I do. On Dumbledore especially. But there are all sorts of ways of seeking vengeance, and I like mine the best." He propped his chin on an elegant hand. "I'm going to astonish the faculty of Arkham University. I'm going to be a brilliant academic success and meet all sorts of influential people, and I'm going to enjoy myself thoroughly while doing it. After all," he asked, "wouldn't you agree that living well is the *best* revenge?"

CHAPTER 30

THE DOORS and windows were open at Lacewing Cottage. It was one of those perfect summer days, just right for reading or potions brewing or walking about or simply sitting and thinking.

Snape was actually engaged in a combination of all the above, with a few other tasks thrown in. It seemed he worked harder during the summer holidays than at any other time. He leaned against the wall of the cottage by the door, waiting.

In only a few seconds, a tanned and fit-looking boy made his appearance and alighted on the path, stumbling a little.

"I hate portkeys," he complained.

"So glad to see you survived the week with Black, Harry," Snape said snidely. For all the sarcasm, he was genuinely happy to see the boy. Harry enjoyed his visits to Unicorn Key, but always seemed pleased to return home.

"Oh, I survived, and I brought presents!"

"Then I suppose you're allowed to come in."

With a mug of tea before him, Harry talked and talked about his adventures, while Snape enlarged the trunk and parcels.

"—Then we swam down to the reef. Did you know about gillyweed? I had gills! I could swim anywhere! We had a great time. I'll have to tell Cedric about gillyweed. It would have worked better than a Bubble-head charm during the tournament…" He paused to take a breath, and laughed at himself. "I'm babbling like Hermione. Here," he said, "these are for you."

Snape unwrapped the parcel, and admired the contents. The stomatolite and the Sargasso Sea Grass were wonderful ingredients, and very hard to put one's hands on.

"Thank you, Harry. You must have gathered these yourself."

"I did! And I found this for Charity…" With great excitement, Harry opened a little box. "Do you think she'll like it?"

It was a rare Caribbean pearl, the product of a queen conch: opaque and delicately pink, swirled with traces of white. "A large one," Snape said. "Ground up, it would be worth a great deal for use in skin treatm—"

Harry laughed. "Oh, no! This is *not* meant for potions ingredients. It was too hard to find, and I was nearly eaten by a shark then and there! This is for Charity, and I think she'd like to have it set in a piece of jewelry."

"I know she'll love it. She'll be in from the garden shortly." He gave Harry a critical look. "You should be more careful

about excessive exposure to the sun," Snape said. "You used the No-Burn cream I gave you, I hope?"

"I did," Harry laughed, exasperated. "I really did! It was great! We were just out all the time." He drank his tea, smiling to himself. He had found out that Sirius was an animagus: a dog. It was so incredibly neat. Sirius promised to teach Harry how to transform, on the condition that Harry never, ever tell anyone (especially Professor Snape) about Sirius' ability. Remus knew, but nobody else. Harry wondered what he might transform into. Something exciting, he hoped. A bird would be best, but anything would be wonderful.

"Now that you're home," Snape said, "perhaps we can begin to prepare for next year. Not that I anticipate any problems, but your O.W.L. year is a serious matter!"

"Meaning this year wasn't?" Harry shook his head. "I do see your point. It was a really strange year, but I worked pretty hard." He grinned pointedly. "The rest of Hufflepuff did, too."

Snape grimaced. "I hope," he said acidly, "that you're not going to do yet another victory dance because the Badgers won the House Cup. It was hardly a surprise this year, since Diggory was Tri-Wizard Champion"

"It sort of put a hole in the whole month of May," Harry confessed. "Nobody could think about anything else!"

"Bad as it was, it would have been far worse if we'd gone with the original plan. The events would have been spaced out over an entire year! Fortunately, cooler heads prevailed."

"That would have been weird," Harry agreed. "And it would have been really hard to schedule the quidditch matches."

"The Headmaster was planning on canceling quidditch entirely," Snape said dryly. "I can tell from the look of mute horror on your face that that would not have gone down well."

"Cancel quidditch?" Harry gasped. "When I was going to start as Seeker?" As captain, Cedric had decided that he needed to be paying more attention to game tactics, and had switched position to Chaser. Most students agreed that was sensible, since it was largely thought that Cedric was getting simply too big to play the position any longer. And there was lean and eager Harry Potter, ready to step in. With some regret Cedric surrendered the position to Harry, deciding that it was the best thing for succession planning, and the team as a whole.

And there was no doubt that Harry was a brilliant Seeker. So brilliant, in fact, that sometimes Snape worried that the boy would go quidditch-mad and decide to play professionally after he finished school. With all Harry's talent for Potions and Defense, that would be a horrendous waste.

There was a rustling in the far corner of the room, like a small and timid mouse. Snape and Harry sat still, waiting. Another rustle, and a squeak, and quick, light footsteps.

"Who *is* that?" Harry asked, peering theatrically around the edge of the table. "Is that *Chloe*?"

The toddler, awakened from her nap, squealed in delight. She ducked back out of sight, then slowly peeked out again. Harry made a face at her, and she laughed uproariously. Without any ceremony, she put her hands on his knees, and demanded, "Up."

Once successfully in Harry's lap, she reached for his mug, kicked at the table, and grinned at her father. Snape looked at her, as he always did, with awed astonishment that he had produced anything so pretty. She certainly did not look much like him, other than having very dark eyes.

He had been a little taken aback by Charity's ardent desire to have a child as soon as possible, but given their ages, there was good reason to start immediately. She had planned carefully to have Chloe in early August, to allow her to finish one term and then start the next after a few weeks of recovery.

He had been rather surprised at how he took to Chloe, once she was on the scene. He did not care much for babies as a rule, but Chloe was no ordinary child. She was uncommonly attractive—*very* pretty, in fact, and had been from her earliest days. She was exceptionally intelligent, too. Charity laughed at him, and teased him about fatherly partiality, but it was clear to him that Chloe was *special*. He wondered what she would think of the sibling her parents planned to present her with next year. Charity wanted a boy, and already had chosen a Princely Roman name: Sebastian. Snape did not object. The idea of one more child (though *no more* than one) was not unbearable, and he simply did not care if it was named Sebastian or Celia. Charity liked both names, and she agreed they could definitely forget about naming any daughters, Smethwyk—style, after *virtues*.

The problem with having a family, is that you had a *family*. Snape now found himself invited to birthday parties and holiday dinners. They had spent two weeks in New Zealand last year. An interesting experience, but not one calculated to make Snape throw everything over and permanently move to the Antipodes. Furthermore, he now had so *many* families: his own family he had created with Charity and Harry and Chloe; the family he had been born into; the family he had married into; the family of friends and colleagues he had chosen for himself, which now, most wonderfully, included the Flamels. The things he was learning from Nicholas and Perenelle…

Harry was still going on about his holiday in the Caribbean. Snape supposed he should be glad that the boy and that idiot Black were getting on better now. However…

"Lupin did not join you, after all?" he asked.

"Just for a few days. He's pretty busy in the summers tutoring Sally."

Snape snorted. "And flirting with the girl's mother." He suspected there was a great deal more than flirting going on there, but he was happy to say that it was None of His Business. They had seen the girl in the Nutcracker at Covent Garden last

Christmas, and she had looked very pretty and danced very well. And they had seen her again, only last month. Whether her strange half-magical, half-muggle life was sustainable was a question not yet answered. There was too much going on in their own lives to worry much about it.

Charity was incredibly busy with her book. The latest draft was back, and it looked like it might actually be done and printed before next term. It was far longer than she had originally projected, and would be infinitely superior to the tripe currently in use. He hoped this draft was the last. Revising drafts made even the sweet-tempered Charity a little crazed. She would be too busy to deal with it when school began, now that every new class was forming its own Explorers' Club.

Charity had insisted on that. Aside from the fact that a club that included all years would be ridiculously unwieldy, the younger children would be in awe of their elders and not have the opportunities for leadership and creativity that they experienced when associating only with their peers. These clubs were also a good opportunity to spot problems early on, and deal with them. Snape would never forget the amount of concern and work Charity and Flitwick had put into helping Luna Lovegood adjust to Hogwarts. Or, more accurately, helping Hogwarts adjust to Luna Lovegood. Of course, a great deal of the credit there was due to Hermione Granger.

"Are there any biscuits?" Harry asked, bouncing Chloe on his lap.

"Ginger." Snape summoned them over.

"Great!" Harry and Chloe each had a biscuit in seconds. She was very messy with hers: he, thankfully, much less so.

"I thought I'd owl Draco," Harry said, after swallowing. "It might be fun to have him and Theo visit." Theodore Nott had been living with the Malfoys for over a year, ever since his father's suicide. He was doing better, but was still sometimes sad. Snape wondered why Theo regretted that vicious, drunken fool, but he had been all the boy had, for so long. The Malfoys and Notts were not very closely related: only fifth cousins, but the boys were classmates, and the Malfoys certainly had no lack of space. At least he and Draco got on well enough, and the arrangement gave Draco the experience of a sibling, and some awareness that the needs of others ought sometimes to be considered. Draco could be overbearing, especially now that he had inherited all of his late Aunt Bellatrix's money.

Snape considered Harry's proposal, and said, "Actually, we are invited to dine with the Malfoys on Saturday, but if you want to see him before that, by all means invite him. You need to start thinking about your birthday, too. Charity keeps saying that, so I'll say it for her this time."

"I was thinking about another trip to muggle London. We could go to the cinema together and then come back here for dinner. Muffy makes the best cakes!"

Snape groaned to himself, thinking of what it would be like

to herd two dozen teenagers for a day. "Tell me you're not going to invite the Weasley twins!"

"I think they're brilliant!" Harry defended them. "If I had money, I'd invest in the joke shop they're planning. They've already sold some of their ideas. Besides, if I invite Ron, I ought to invite them, because they're really more my friends than he is."

Snape was not amused. "And the entire Hufflepuff quidditch team, too, I suppose."

Harry grinned slyly. "Nobody can accuse me of not being a team player! The cinema idea is good though: better than having a dance, like Cedric's mother insisted on!" He grinned more widely. "A quidditch game, followed by a dance. What a concept! Lucky for us you were there!"

The Diggorys had thrown an enormous party to celebrate their son's victory in the Tri-Wizard Tournament. Cedric's birthday was during term, and thus he could not have a party then, so the Diggorys had overcompensated on a very grand scale. There had indeed been numerous injuries, and Snape himself had been called to treat some of them. The young crowd seemed to have had good time, at least. Harry had danced with all his—what to call them?— "girlfriends" was not the right word, really, but Harry *did* have a lot of friends who were girls.

Of course, there had also been the dance at Hogwarts to celebrate the Tournament. Harry had wanted to ask Hermione, but had been too late off the mark, and she had gone with Neville instead. She had looked quite nice, too. Charity thought Hermione the sort of girl who would grow into her looks, as she herself had. Draco had wanted to ask Hermione himself, and had sounded Snape about it, but he, like Harry, had been too late. Perhaps it was just as well. Snape was not sure that Lucius and Narcissa were really ready to see pictures of their son in the DAILY PROPHET: pictures in which the muggleborn witch beside him would inevitably be described as his "girlfriend." The day might come, however, when they would just have to get over it.

Susan and Hannah had been snapped up early by Justin and Ernie, and Harry had been maneuvered into asking Tansy Prince, of all people. Tansy was nice-looking enough, and a decent student, but she was such a *fan*. And then there had been the business of the incredibly loud Howler, full of embarrassing information, which arrived in the middle of the dance, sent by her little sister Marigold.

So, just to avoid that situation, Harry invited Sally-Anne Perks to the Diggory dance, and told no one about it beforehand. They seemed to have had a very good time, though the situation involved Lupin having to bring her and fetch her back.

THE DAILY PROPHET did indeed send photographers, and there had been a particularly annoying one of Harry and Cedric together, describing the Diggory boy as "Wizarding Britain's Newest Hero!" If that were not ludicrous enough, Harry was labeled, "Yesterday's Hero, The Boy-Who-Lived!"

Sometimes Snape thought of starting his own paper, filled entirely with verified, incontrovertible facts, as a corrective to the sleazy lies and insinuations of THE DAILY PROPHET and the utter insanity of THE QUIBBLER.

He sighed. "Whatever you decide, make up your mind and put it on the calendar. We're going to be extremely busy for the next month."

It was something of a relief, really, that the world had moved on and had stopped revolving around Harry. The number of fan letters had markedly decreased, as had the requests for autographed pictures. Harry did not seem bothered by it, saying that he would rather have people talk about him for doing something he could actually remember. Snape had always known that the prophecy that had Albus so concerned was bunk: or at the very least, had already been fulfilled when Harry was a baby.

And now Albus knew about Lacewing Cottage. He had found out, in his nosy Dumbledorish way, during the spring holidays last term. He had not been angry, but had come to the cottage and examined the wards very carefully. He was a distinguished old wizard, so Snape forbore to complain… much. Really, while protecting oneself and one's family was certainly a sound scheme, Albus persisted in acting as if Lord Voldemort would someday pop back into their lives.

He was gone: quite gone. Flamel had disposed of the mirror, where Tom Riddle experienced eternal joy in another dimension as the master of the Philosopher's Stone. Snape's Dark Mark had vanished, and that meant that the last of the Dark Lord was gone from this world, didn't it? Certainly, all the horcruxes had been destroyed.

All but one, perhaps. Sometimes, in the dead of night, Snape woke, thinking about the curious diary that now was stored away in a locked and warded drawer of the Headmaster's Office. Had it been a horcrux, or merely enchanted? If it were merely enchanted, how had it spoken to Harry and shown him visions? If it *had* been a horcrux, what had happened to it?

No one had ever found Zacharias Smith. His disappearance was one of the mysteries of the British wizarding world, and a number of speculative books had been written about it, suggesting a number of scenarios, each more absurd than the last. Snape had a pet theory of his own, but it was so far-fetched, and so *disturbing*, that he had no wish to speak of it to anyone else, much less commit it to paper for publication.

It was just possible that a diary horcrux could have lured the boy back to Hogwarts, and that somewhere—perhaps in the Chamber of Secrets itself—it had consumed him. A body would have remained, certainly, but that could have been disposed of: by fire, or by the basilisk that they sometimes visited for potions ingredients.

What then? The resurrected Tom Riddle would have been a boy of sixteen, adrift in an alien world of fifty years in the

future, with no money, no qualifications, no home and no family. He would have had no connection to the Dark Mark or to any of his previous followers. If he had managed to slip out of the school, he certainly would have attracted attention.

But then, Snape would think more on the matter, and imagine ways in which he himself could have successfully escaped. If he had no other virtues, the Dark Lord had been bold and resourceful, and very, very clever…

Always, with the first light of dawn, came the realization that such fantasies were ridiculous. Tom Riddle was *gone*.

Harry smirked at Snape. "I did learn something really neat from Professor Lupin, so it wasn't all playtime and potions ingredients!"

Snape regarded him skeptically. "And what would that be?"

Harry told Chloe, "I'm going to show you something amazing!" He drew his wand, took a deep breath, and incanted, *"Expecto Patronem!"*

White mist swirled from his wand and took shape before them: a snout lengthening, streaks of white fur smoothing along flanks, feet planted firmly in the earth. It was a creature fierce, truculent, and unintimidated by predators larger than itself. The badger patronus ran about the room, sniffing at Snape and then Chloe. She stared at it wide-eyed and reached out to pet the phantom. It bared sharp little teeth, and dissipated with a soft growl. Chloe screamed out, "More! More!"

"Too much sugar!" laughed Charity, peeling off her gardening gloves as she came through the door. "Oh, there you are, Harry! Did you have a good time?" She kissed the top of his head and took the wailing Chloe from him, "Oh dear! Somebody needs a change, I'd say! Tell me all about it in a minute!"

She vanished from the kitchen, and they could hear her soothing the overexcited baby.

"A patronus?" Snape said. "I'm impressed. Any particular reason Lupin decided to teach you that?"

Harry shrugged. "We had time. Sirius always sleeps really late. And there was the thing about Barty Crouch and the Dementors…"

"Right."

Barty Crouch, Jr., whom everyone thought long dead, had not been. His father had hidden him at home, having somehow got him out of Azkaban. No one was certain about exactly what had happened. Perhaps the disappearance of the Dark Mark had lulled Barty Sr. into complacency. At any rate Barty the younger had messily killed his father, and then roamed at large for some weeks. There had been a panic of sorts, and as it was believed that Barty might go after Harry, the Ministry had insisted on stationing Dementors at Hogwarts.

Harry had reacted very badly to them, and it was a tremendous relief when Barty was caught and killed by the Aurors, ironically nowhere near Hogwarts at all. The situation had caused Snape weeks of anxiety.

He said, "All things considered, it's just as well that you know

as much as you possibly can about defending yourself."

Harry grinned, "And Professor Lupin thought it would be good for extra points on the O.W.L.s."

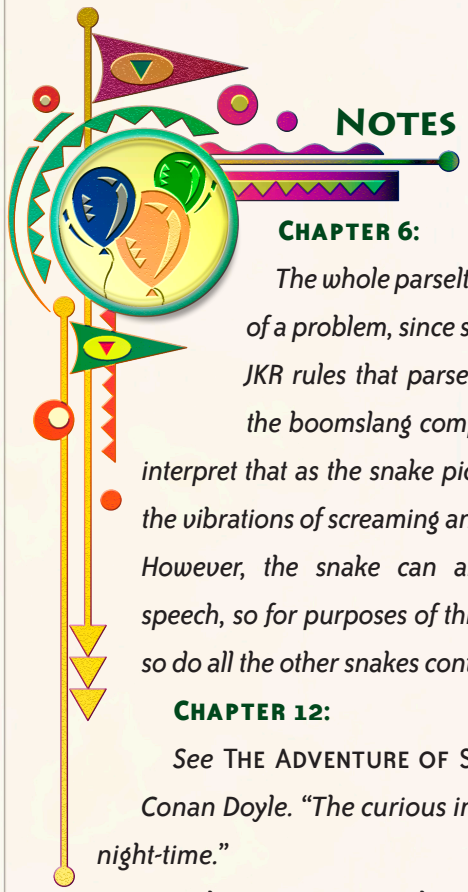
"There is that."

"And it could come in handy if I ever have to save the world."

"How very droll you are. It must be Black's influence. I hardly think you need to worry about that! After all," Snape snorted, quoting their favorite caption from THE DAILY PROPHET, "you're only Yesterday's Hero!"

Harry laughed, and took another biscuit. "Thank goodness!"

FINIS



NOTES

CHAPTER 6:

The whole parseltongue thing is something of a problem, since snakes are deaf. However, JKR rules that parselmouths exist, so I have the boomslang complain of noise. We might interpret that as the snake picking up through its skin the vibrations of screaming and jumping up and down. However, the snake can also understand Harry's speech, so for purposes of this story it is hearing. And so do all the other snakes contained herein.

CHAPTER 12:

See THE ADVENTURE OF SILVER BLAZE, *by Arthur Conan Doyle. "The curious incident in the dog in the night-time."*

As to the remains—JKR has lots of skeletons in the CoS. Snakes generally vomit up the indigestible bits of their swallowed prey in wads of bone and cartilage. Icky, but that's what I'm going to pretend a basilisk would do. Lucky for Myrtle (and the people who found her) that the basilisk hadn't got around to eating her.

CHAPTER 13:

A number of reviewers have rebuked me for calling a Harry a first year. He really is still a first-year. We are now moving into the spring of his first year.

CHAPTER 22:

As to the slime on the floor: I am aware that snakes in themselves are not slimy. However, in its travels through the drains and elsewhere the basilisk has picked up a lot of general nastiness that it tracks wherever it goes.

CHAPTER 23:

Yes, I'm aware that the nictitating membranes of snakes are translucent and not exactly like eyelids, but basilisks are weird and wonderful creatures with plumes on their heads, and for purposes of this story they have eyelids to protect those huge yellow eyes.

CHAPTER 25 & 26:

And I swear to you that Pantysgawn is a real cheese. Could I make that up, I ask you?

The last of cheesipedia: Pantysgawn is a Welsh cheese made from goats milk, obtainable through Abergavenny Fine Food Co., UK. It is sold in logs of 150g or 1 kilo. It has a high moisture content and limited shelf life. It is similar to Chèvre (Chabichou), though Pantysgawn is made with pasteurized milk.

CHAPTER 27:

When I considered the Snape/Burbage wedding, I glanced back at the Weasley wedding in DH, and remembered what I thought of it

at the time. I got the impression that that particular wedding was a parody of ridiculous, over-the-top nuptials, the like of which I detest. I decided against having the Burbages give Charity away. She is a grown witch, and not a chattel. Besides, she has been married before, so perhaps they gave her away then, and that didn't work. Magic is magic, and there is little hint in canon (as opposed to fanon) of patriarchal authority over witches. Charity and Severus are over thirty, professionals, and social equals, and their wedding should reflect that reality.

Thanks to someguyfawkes for reminding me that Snape needed a bachelor party.

CHAPTER 28:

For the name of the Runes professor I used Ogham, which I used in The Prefect's Portrait. In an early draft of PoA, JKR used Bathsheba Babbling, but that was never published. Since Babbling is not strict canon, I used Ogham, which I like better, as Ogham is an early Celtic form of writing, and sounds more like a real name.

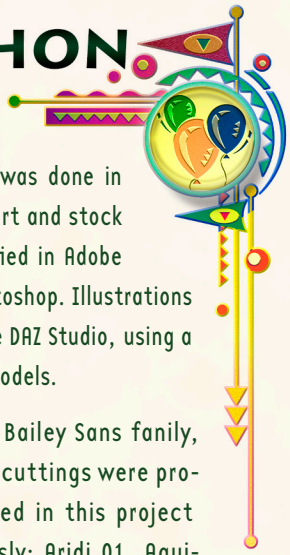
"O magna mater, adviua nos..." O Great Mother, help us...

In answer to the following question:

"If the curse on the defense position is controlled by runes rather than linked to Tom's life energy, why would he not have had Quirrel remove the runes?"

I believe that Tom could have, but didn't care about it. Quirrell was disposable. Tom was totally focused on the Stone.

COLOPHON



Layout and formatting of 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 some decorations were produced in the DAZ Studio, using a wide selection of commercial and freebie models.

Fonts used in this publication are: the Bailey Sans fanily, 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 (JOdel@aol.com)