

ADVENTURES IN FANFICTION

The Squib Chronicles



Volume Two

By Ozma



AN ADVENTURES IN FANFICTION EDITION
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Hogwarts, and all the characters from the
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COVER INSET
BY
DURAYAN

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Foreword

BY OZMA

The Squib stories were written in the interval between the release of the first "Harry Potter" film and the publication of HARRY POTTER AND THE ORDER OF THE PHOENIX.

My kids are Harry Potter fans who were eager for more stories about the Potterverse. While they were waiting for J.K. Rowling's next book, we discovered the existence of Harry Potter fan fiction on the internet. Eventually, after enjoying quite a lot of these stories, I felt inspired enough to try writing my own stories set in Harry's world.

Argus Filch, the caretaker of Hogwarts, is one of my favorite characters. He's a man without magic in a world where it's normal to be a wizard. A bitter old grouch who's touchingly devoted to his cat. He does his best to keep the castle clean and in good working order, and no pesky poltergeist or bratty student had better stand in his way!

Since Filch is one of my favorite characters, I was disappointed that his appearances in fan-written stories were so rare. It was even more unusual to see him treated sympathetically. I began to think about Filch, his place in the wizarding world and

his relationships with the people around him. These ideas grew into stories and eventually became an epic which JOdel had now made, most wonderfully, into a series of books.

The results are yours to enjoy...

(My thanks to JOdel, Jelsemium — my co-writer for "Squib Summer," and Durayan, the artist who did the lovely cover portrait of Filch and Mrs. Norris. And also J. K. Rowling who gave Filch life, and David Bradley who portrayed Filch so brilliantly in the films.)

Squib Wizard



CHAPTER 1

Points for Gryffindor and A Life Saved for Slytherin

I STEPPED OUT of the faded, nondescript green and silver tapestry into the gloom of Professor Severus Snape's office. Severus has his office sealed with a protective spell that only a wizard could break. But the spell had not even slowed the Squib Door down.

Snape's office had been cleaned up a great deal over the past few days. All the debris left over from the battle with the vine-monster had been cleared away. The Professor's remaining belongings, the few things that had escaped destruction, had been placed on new shelves, surrounding a new desk. Everything in the office seemed to be bristling with dangerous protective curses and hexes. Severus knew that his office was now vulnerable to invasion, and he was taking no chances. The collective prickly "push" of all the protective spells made me want to press back against the tapestry. Instead, I made myself walk forward to the Professor's new desk.

There was a clean piece of parchment on the blotter, with a quill and an inkwell beside it. These were the only items on the desk that were not protected by some spell or other. I dipped the quill into the ink.

"I can still get in," I wrote. "Sorry." I dipped the quill again and made a note of the time.

Twirling the quill in my hands, I debated the wisdom of adding an encouraging word or two. "Keep trying? Carry on? Chin up?" No, the professor would find probably find that condescending, coming from me.

I also pondered the wisdom of mentioning that the protective Charm which Professor Flitwick had placed on his own office had succeeded in making the Squib Door pause. The journey into the diminutive Charms Professor's domain had been slower than usual. I'd still been able to gain entry, but it seemed that whatever Flitwick was working on, it was a step in the right direction.

Professor Flitwick had been given the task of finding a Charm that would prevent me from using the Squib Doors to gain entry into any room in the Castle. He'd given me permission to enter his office at random intervals to try out the effectiveness of the Charms he was using.

Over the past few days Headmaster Dumbledore had changed his mind about not telling anyone else about the Squib Doors. After careful consideration, he'd decided that additional people would be informed about this new potential risk to the Castle's defenses on a "need to know" basis. Flitwick had been the first

additional person who "needed to know."

(Professor Snape had decided that he couldn't wait for Professor Flitwick to come up with something. He was trying, on his own, to find a spell that would block the Squib Doors. He'd also given me permission to enter his office at random intervals to test his spells.)

Losing my nerve on the matter of mentioning Flitwick's greater measure of success, I simply wrote my name underneath my brief message: "Argus Filch." I was just stepping away from his desk, when the locked door to Snape's office opened. I didn't have time to jump through the tapestry to safety.

A tall, burly Slytherin fifth year girl stood there, staring at me in horror.

"Professor Snape!" Millicent Bulstrode shouted. "Come quickly!"

"Wait! It's not what you're thinking!" I said, desperately. "Don't ..."

"PROFESSOR SNAPE!!!!" she bellowed, even louder.

Behind Millicent, out in Snape's classroom, were several other Slytherin girls. I recognized blonde Pansy Parkinson, another fifth year, and the tiny Morgan sisters, Lilith and Gehenna; a second and first year, respectively. All the girls stared at me, wide-eyed as Severus Snape entered from the corridor.

He caught sight of me and his eyes narrowed to cold, black slits.

"He was in your office, Professor! And the door was locked!" Millicent reported, breathlessly.

"Thank you, children. Now, please step out into the

hallway. I want to have a little ...chat with Mr. Filch. In private."

"Go!" he ordered them, when the girls lingered for a moment, obviously curious about what he was going to do to me.

Knowing that he would be obeyed, Severus stepped into his office and shut the door behind him with a slam.

"IDIOT!" he hissed.

"How could I have known that you would be sending students in here?" I demanded.

"You knew full well that we're cleaning the corridor out there!" Severus snapped. "Since you are the one who organized the work schedules!"

"Well, I expected the children to stay out in the corridor! If you needed something from your office, why didn't you fetch it for yourself?"

"How could I have known you would choose such an inopportune time to test my wards?" Snape demanded. His voice dripped acid and his eyes burned darkly in his pale face.

I had clearly made him angry. Nervously, I retreated. "You did say `random intervals!'" I reminded him, defensively.

"I assumed that you would have the sense to wait until no one was nearby! Perhaps at night, or during a meal! Not when I have the corridor filled with children, scrubbing down the walls and the floor! There are Gryffindors out there with my Slytherins. I sent Millicent in here to fetch more lye because I preferred to keep an eye on things!"

His tone changed, suddenly. "Filch. Stop. Don't back up any further...!"

Snape was reaching out to grab me. His expression was so fierce that, despite his words, I took another involuntary step backwards.

Right into a protective curse in front of one of his shelves.

I was told later that my howl of anguish was heard by the house-elves all the way over in the kitchens.



"Please tell me that these porcupine quills don't have poison on them!" I moaned.

"No, there's no poison," Snape was making an attempt to sound soothing, but I could hear amusement in his silky voice. "I considered them enough of a deterrent without added enhancements. Hold still, Argus. This is going to hurt. You may want to grab the desk."

"Y-you sent the Bulstrode girl in here to fetch lye...? Was she supposed to get her bum shot full of quills too?"

"Don't be absurd. Miss Bulstrode knows the countercurses. Filch, hold still. I won't tell you again...."

Both of us heard voices out in his classroom. A moment later, someone was pounding on the office door.

"Professor Snape?" That was Millicent. "The Gryffindors won't stay out! I tried..."

"Mr. Filch?" I recognized Neville Longbottom's voice. "Answer me! Are you all right?"

Snape chose this moment to murmur "*Tracto!*" The sharp quills embedded all down my back yanked

themselves out simultaneously.

I wailed in agony.

"Mr. Filch!" That was Neville again, sounding worried.

"He'll be all right, Longbottom!" Snape said with a sneer in his voice. The sneer didn't match his expression which was quite definitely amused. "In a day or two..." he added.

Rubbing my wounds, I gave him a baleful look.

It was the first time in ages that I had seen Severus looking anything other than haunted and bone-weary. If I'd been in a more charitable mood, I would have been pleased. I was not feeling particularly charitable at the moment.

"You should get yourself to the hospital wing, Filch. In case I didn't get all of them. Take the long way, don't use your Door. Otherwise the children are likely to think that I've done away with you completely. Can you walk?"

"Oh, I can walk. Just don't ask me to sit down..." I growled.

"It's your own fault," Snape replied. "The next time you test the wards on my door, remember to steer clear of the curses by the shelves."

"There won't be a next time!" I said, sullenly. "I'm going to be working strictly with Professor Flitwick from now on. He's making some progress..." I added, snippily.

I had the satisfaction of seeing Snape's expression change from amusement to chagrin. Glaring at me, he opened his office door to drag me out into a knot of milling young Gryffindors and Slytherins.

The look of concern on Neville's face, when he saw

me limping and obviously in pain, surprised me. I knew that Neville was fond of me. I was fond of both him and Ginny Weasley too.

But, really, I hadn't expected either child to continue to show it so openly. Liking the foul old caretaker would hardly increase their standing with their fellow students, after all.

Gryffindor courage comes in many forms, however. Neville and Ginny always smiled at me when they saw me in the corridor. They always said cheerful "Good Mornings" to me in the Great Hall at breakfast. It took some getting used to. I always returned their greetings gruffly, wondering how long their friendliness towards me would last.

"Longbottom!" Snape said, scowling. "Mr. Filch needs to be helped up to Madam Pomfrey in the hospital wing. Can you manage that?"

Neville nodded, giving Professor Snape the angriest look I had ever seen on the gentle boy's face. He came forward to support me with his left arm. His burned right arm was still in a sling.

To my surprise, I saw that Neville's fellow Gryffindor fifth years, Parvati Patil and Dean Thomas, were also directing looks of concern at me and dark looks at Snape.

"You poor man!" Parvati said. "What has he done to you now?"

I suspected that I had Peeves to thank for this. The miserable poltergeist had been telling people that the Headmaster had allowed Professor Snape to beat me for the part I'd played in awakening the magic-eating

vine-creature that had left "his" dungeons in such a shambles. In truth, Severus hadn't laid a finger on me. Though it had amused both him and Dumbledore to allow Peeves to think he had. It had certainly shut the poltergeist up for a few days. No one seemed to believe my protests that it hadn't happened. And this little incident was not going to help matters any.

"He hasn't done anything to me," I muttered, embarrassed. "It was the protective curses on his cleaning supplies..."

"He should have asked you for your permission, before he went skulking around in there! Right, Professor Snape?" Pansy said, giving me an angry look.

"I believe that is a mistake Mr. Filch will not make again any time soon, Miss Parkinson." Severus said, amusement in his voice once more.

"You were busy..." I muttered. "I didn't want to bother..."

At the same time, Neville spoke up. "He didn't mean to do anything wrong, Professor!" the boy said, hotly. "You know he didn't."

Neville looked Snape right in the eye. Unlike the other children, he knew exactly how I'd gotten into Snape's locked office. He could probably make a fair guess at "why" too. Neville understood the necessity of keeping the secret, but he didn't like to see me being treated like a common thief.

The whole room went silent. Neville Longbottom had been bullied by Professor Snape ever since his very first Potions lesson back in his very first year. Everyone knew how frightened the boy was of Severus. He'd

never talked back to him before, never defended himself against the sarcastic taunts and the harsh criticism. Neville was gentle and self effacing. He found it difficult to stand up for himself. But I had recently seen how very bravely Neville could stand up for other people.

Severus's eyes narrowed. This was an attack from a completely unexpected quarter. In his all too recently violated dungeons. In front of his precious, all too recently threatened Slytherins. Oh, my. It seemed that gentle Neville could choose his battles as recklessly as any of the more hot tempered young Gryffindors.

"Well, now..." Snape's voice was an icy whisper, that nevertheless carried to every corner of the very quiet dungeon. "Mr. Longbottom..."

The temperature in the dungeon appeared to be dropping. Neville kept his eyes locked on Professor Snape's and didn't look away. Parvati and Dean had moved up on either side of him to offer him support, but Severus didn't spare either of them a glance. Poor Neville had sown the wind and he was about to reap the whirlwind.

This could be very bad. I had to do something.

"You should have remained silent, idiot boy!" Snape hissed. "You've just earned yourself..."

"Twenty-five points for Gryffindor!" I spoke up, hastily.

Everyone was staring at me now. Snape's dark eyes went wide. Another attack from an unexpected quarter!

"F-for what happened... with the... the vines. Neville saved me, then. And Ginny did too. So another twenty five points to Gryffindor, for her as well..." My face

white, I locked eyes with Severus. 'If you're going to be angry with anyone,' I pleaded with him silently, 'let it be with me. Not the boy.'

"Professor...? C-can he DO that?" Pansy asked in a small, indignant voice. "Can he actually *give* points?"

"Of course I can!" I said. "I've just never done it before. I am well within my rights, and Professor Snape knows it."

Severus took a deep breath. "Get this wretch out of my sight. Now!" he snarled at Neville. "And yourself too!"

Neville took me by the arm and pulled me out of the dungeon as fast as I could limp. Parvati and Dean stared after us with incredulous delight, while the Slytherins stood around in shocked silence. Neither of us spoke a word until we'd turned a corner away from the area where other children were scrubbing the floors and walls of the corridor.

"Neville, you shouldn't have..."

"He had no right to treat you like that! What did his curse do to you?"

"Oh, nothing much, really. Just shot me full of porcupine quills..."

The boy looked at my back. "You're bleeding! He doesn't need to have such vicious spells guarding his things! He knows that you're the only one who can use the tapestries. It's not as if anyone in the Castle can just walk in there. He should trust you." His voice was as indignant as Pansy's had been.

"He does trust me. But Professor Snape doesn't like to feel ...vulnerable. He's under a great deal of pressure."

"I can't believe you're actually sticking up for him!" Neville said. Then he sighed. "I can't believe I'm arguing with you. I know you can get to the hospital wing much more quickly without me, Mr. Filch. Call one of your Doors."

"Neville... do you realize that Professor Snape sent you with me, precisely because he knows that I can call a Door in front of you?" I asked, leaning against the stone wall.

My attempts at summoning the Doors were not always successful, but the tapestries nearly always responded quickly when I was in some sort of distress. The faded yellow-and-black Door was there in an instant.

"I'll know it's difficult, but try to be patient with him," I said, not yet stepping into it. "Don't argue with him on my account. Maybe it would be best if you stayed out of his way for a while." I thought about the various jobs being done all over the Castle and its grounds.

"Professor Sprout and her seventh years are outside in front of the greenhouses, dissecting the dead vine-creature's main root. I know that she wouldn't mind if you wanted to observe," I added.

Neville nodded. "All right, I will." But he stood and watched me sternly until I stepped into the tapestry.

"Take me to the hospital wing... please," I moaned to my Door. Those porcupine quills really did hurt.



Poppy would not let me return to work. She removed some deeply embedded quills that Professor Snape's spell had missed. The medi-witch was much gentler than Snape had been, but it was still a painful process.

When the quills were finally out, Poppy put me to bed with soothing poultices all down my back. The potion that she gave me dulled the pain and made me too sleepy to argue with her.

I woke up several hours later and lifted my face out of my pillow to find myself being stared at by a pair of angry golden eyes.

"It wasn't my fault!" I told Mrs. Norris, who was sitting on the bed beside me in a rather Sphinx-like pose. "Don't look at me like that."

She flicked an ear and continued to give me the same glare.

"Thank you for giving me twenty five points, Mr. Filch."

Bleary-eyed, I turned to look at Ginny Weasley who'd come into the hospital ward with my cat. "You're welcome, Ginny."

"Neville, Parvati and Dean told me what happened! How do you feel?"

I felt tired and sore but I didn't want to discuss it. Instead I managed to smile at her. "I suppose the Unicorn and the Maiden were glad to have their painting back again?"

She nodded. "Yes, they were. And those men were glad to be back at their banquet. And the old woman was glad to be back at her distaff..."

"You were very clever to have put an Unbreakable Charm on those crates. I didn't even realize you'd done it," I said.

"I wasn't sure it would hold," she confessed. "But we did such good work, Neville, you and I. It would have been terrible to have lost those paintings."

She stayed with me for a while, chattering away

comfortably enough until I began to drift off to sleep again. Evidently the potion hadn't worn off yet. I heard Ginny talking but it wasn't to me. "Poor Mr. Filch. He looks so frail. Will he ever be completely well again?" Her voice sounded sad.

"I don't know, child," Madam Pomfrey answered quietly.

I knew they weren't just talking about my little mishap with the porcupine quills. Brave Ginny was asking Poppy a question that I hadn't dared to ask. Not since I'd awakened for the first time after the Death Eaters had gotten through with me. I was afraid of her answer. Or perhaps I already knew it.

"He needs more time, more rest and he needs to stop doing foolish things. Even so, he may never again be as strong as he was," Poppy said. I felt her gentle hands adjusting fresh poultices on my back.

"She knows, doesn't she?" Ginny asked. "Don't you, Mrs. Norris?" I heard the answering purr of a sleepy cat. "That's why she doesn't like to leave him alone."

Don't be sad, Ginny... I think this old man may still have a few years left.



When I woke again, the ward was dark. I heard frantic voices.

"Severus! What's happened to the poor child!?"

Professor Snape's voice was harsh with fear. "The girls were working in the corridor by my office. One of those cursed vines had gotten caught in a crack in the flagstones! We thought they were all dead! But a

piece of creeper still had some life left in it!"

His voice changed, softening. "It's all right, Gehenna, child. Don't cry!"

I lifted my head from the pillow. I saw Severus cradling mousy little Slytherin first year, Gehenna Morgan. Barely conscious, the child clung to him, weeping silently.

"It wrapped around her throat, a piece as thin as a wire. She couldn't breathe, she couldn't cry out for help," Snape said, raggedly. "If her sister, Lilith, and Pansy hadn't seen and screamed for me..."

"Look at your hands, Severus. You've burned them..."

"I had to rip the cursed vine off her throat! Damn my hands! Help the child..."

Poppy took Gehenna into her arms and rocked her, murmuring cooling charms, healing charms. Her wand was held gently over the child's heart.

"I won't allow them, any of my Slytherins, back into the corridor where my office is, until Sprout and her Badgers have gone over it, inch by inch!" Snape was snarling. "I thought it was safe or I never would have..."

Pushing off my blanket, I slid myself gingerly out of bed. The poultices slipped from my back. I didn't even disturb Mrs. Norris. Carefully, I hobbled over to Severus.

The Potions Master sat, rocking slightly, as if to help Poppy soothe Gehenna. His burned hands were held away from his body, face white with shock and pain, dark eyes huge. If Neville and Ginny, or any of the Gryffindors could have seen him now, they wouldn't have recognized him. But if they were to see him now,

he would never have forgiven them.

"It would have taken them, Argus..." he said, looking up at me. "The littlest ones. Just like that. Swiftly, silently. No chance even to scream. None of us knew that the parts could keep twitching for so long after the brain was destroyed. None of us knew! Well, Albus knows now. And Sprout. And it will be dead, every last bit of it!" He took a deep breath, slowly winning his battle for control.

Poppy stood up, cradling Gehenna. She carried the child over to an empty bed and tucked her in. Then she fetched salve and bandages for the child's burned throat. Afterwards, I helped her bandage Snape's hands. As soon as we were finished, he stood up to leave.

"Don't say a word!" he hissed at Poppy. "Lilith is awake, waiting for me to bring news of her sister! I'm going back to my children."

Poppy smiled, and didn't argue with him.

"Argus?" Snape said, a little more calmly. "It may be that the protective curses in my office are a bit... unnecessarily... harsh. If I were to ask Flitwick's advice, would you consider resuming your efforts on my behalf?"

"Of course, Professor," I told him.



The next morning I felt so sore that I didn't protest when Poppy told me that I was to rest instead of returning to work. I lay on my stomach in bed and brooded.

"There, there, Argus. You'll be fine in a few days," Poppy said comfortingly as she gave me a dose of a mild pain-killing potion. Then she added briskly, "I

need a favor from you. Would you go and talk to Gehenna Morgan for a little while? Try to cheer the poor child up a bit?"

I turned my head to give her an incredulous stare. "W-What? Me...? No! I can't..."

Folding her arms, the medi-witch looked down at me in exasperation. "Of course you can. Please do try. She's been fretting about Severus's hands all morning."

"Haven't you told her that he's going to be all right?" I asked.

"Yes," Poppy said. "And, for that matter, so has Severus. He came in to check on her before he went to the Slytherin-Ravenclaw match." Her voice softened. "He spoke to her, but the child barely took her eyes off his bandages. She's blaming herself for his injuries."

She sighed. "'The Professor needs his hands!' That's what Gehenna said to me after he'd left."

"Foolish child!" I muttered. "How can she think that Severus's burns are her fault? She didn't ask the vine to wrap itself around her neck, did she?"

"That's the spirit," Poppy said. "Since you seldom make an attempt to be comforting perhaps the shock value alone will be enough to get Gehenna's attention."

I could see Poppy's point. Slytherins, even ones as small and quiet as Gehenna, do require careful handling. Sometimes a sneak attack is the only way to console a troubled serpent. "All right," I sighed. "I'll do my best."

"No one could expect more of you than that," Poppy smiled. "And it is an excellent way to get you to stop feeling sorry for yourself," she added.

I sputtered indignantly.

"I need to go and mix some more ointment for you," she said. "It will take me a little while. Go into the front ward and have a nice chat with Gehenna."



A few moments later, I was standing uncomfortably by Gehenna Morgan's bed. The small mousy Slytherin first year looked pale and feverish. Drowsy with pain-killing potions, she blinked up at me with large, sad eyes.

"Hello, Mr. Filch," Gehenna said, sleepily. Her voice was hoarse. It hurt her to talk, but pressing a hand to her bandaged throat seemed to help.

"You're missing the match, too," she observed. "Slytherin against Ravenclaw. The Professor went to watch. I hope that Draco will catch the Snitch."

"I hope so too," I said, honestly. The poor, jumpy Slytherins could certainly do with a victory.

There was a long silence. Scolding some sense into an injured child takes effort even for an old curmudgeon like me. Scowling, I was trying to work out what I wanted to say when Gehenna asked, "Are you feeling better?"

"Yes," I replied, gruffly. Thinking about the last time that Gehenna had seen me was embarrassing. And Poppy's remark about me feeling sorry for myself had stung. Of course I knew that my wounds were nowhere near as serious as the poor child's burned throat. But it wasn't the physical discomfort that really bothered me... it was the shame of being considered a thief.

The child was studying me with sympathy. Yes-

terday she and the other Slytherins had thought I'd deserved what I'd got. To a fair number of Slytherins, getting caught is the worst crime of all. But Gehenna wasn't the sort to gloat.

"I'm glad that you're feeling better," she murmured. "Yesterday you yelled so loudly that the Gryffindors thought you were being murdered."

I sighed.

"Lil and I were afraid too," she confessed. "But Pansy and Millicent told us that Professor Snape would never do anything permanent to you. He was only teaching you a lesson."

"You would yell pretty loudly too, Missy, if the same thing ever happened to you..." I grumbled.

"I'd never go into the Professor's office without his permission. And I know the counterurses in case he ever sends me in there," the child pointed out. Then Gehenna remembered that knowing Snape's counterurses wouldn't have done me any good whatsoever. She looked chagrined.

I didn't mind what she'd said. She'd given me the opening I needed. "Professor Snape makes sure that you Slytherins know his counterurses. Why do you think he does that?" I asked her.

"He trusts us," Gehenna murmured.

"Yes," I agreed, "and he wants to keep you safe. I've known Professor Snape since he was your age. He's always taken his obligations and responsibilities as seriously as the best of you serpents tend to do. He'd risk his life to protect any student at this school. You

know that, don't you?"

She nodded. Of course I did not have to explain the proud and subtle intricacies of Slytherin honor to one of Salazar's chosen.

"Well, it goes even deeper than honor for him where the children of his House are concerned," I said. "Seeing any of you hurt tears him up inside."

"As completely UnSlytherin as it would be for him to admit it..." I couldn't help adding.

Gehenna studied me, looking grave. She didn't dispute the truth of what I'd said. She didn't say anything. I sighed, wondering if I was getting through to her at all. Gehenna isn't one of the children that I know well. She's a rule-abiding child who has never had a single detention.

What little I do know about her I've learned from her sister. Lilith Morgan's overwhelming ambition is to write plays. She and her closest friend, Mallory Crippen, also a Slytherin second year, receive frequent detentions because they often talk and pass notes in class.

Ambition, that most famous of Slytherin traits, comes in many forms. From a stream of Lilith-and-Mallory chatter, I had plucked the tidbit that Gehenna wanted more than anything to be an expert brewer of potions. So I understood what Gehenna meant when she held her small pale hands out in front of her.

"But his poor hands..." she said sadly. "It was too much of a risk."

"The Professor would tell you that it was a calculated risk. Using *'Incendio'* on a vine wrapped around your

throat... that would have been too much of a risk. The slightest miscalculation would have killed you. He had less than a second to decide what to do," I said.

"Professor Snape trusted that Madam Pomfrey would be able to heal his hands. But not even Madam Pomfrey can raise the dead. If you had died, then he never would have forgiven himself. Ever. Do you understand, Gehenna?"

To my relief the girl nodded. Her hands were relaxed, resting on her coverlet.

"Good," I said, gruffly. "It's all right, then."

Gehenna was studying me again. "Mr. Filch?" she asked wistfully, around a sleepy yawn, "if you had gone to the Quidditch match today, would you have sat with the Gryffindors and cheered for Ravenclaw?"

"I would have had trouble sitting with anyone," I said ruefully. "No," I added, after a moment when I realized what the child was truly asking me. "I would have stayed with you Slytherins."

Gehenna smiled. "Some of the others wonder why you always like to cheer for us at Quidditch. I've heard a few theories. One guess is that you used to be a Slytherin," she told me, drowsily.

"Hmm. I'd imagine that's enough to utterly horrify some of you," I said in a very dry voice.

"There are those who think that you must do it out of loyalty to Professor Snape. Or because you lost a bet with someone years and years ago. Or because you'd rather support us than any team with Fred and George Weasley on it. Of course, that doesn't explain why you

didn't choose to support Ravenclaw or Hufflepuff."

"Why do you suppose that I cheer for Slytherin?" I asked, a little distractedly. My feet ached from standing. Borrowing a pillow from an empty bed to use as a cushion, I lowered myself gingerly into a chair.

"I think that you probably just like to keep all of us wondering," she murmured, closing her eyes. "It's really almost Slytherin of you."

"Coming from you, child, I'll consider that a compliment," I said. "As long as you promise to never say that about me in front of your Professor. He wouldn't be amused."

"I won't," Gehenna promised. She fell asleep, with a smile on her face.

I stayed beside her until Poppy returned.

CHAPTER 2

Constant Vigilance!

The students at Hogwarts are not allowed to be out of their beds, running around the Castle corridors, using magic in the wee hours of the morning. I could give you two dozen good reasons why not, right off the top of my head without even needing to think. But "After Midnight, It's The Staff's Turn!" is a reason that I'd never thought about before.

Gasping for breath, a stitch in my side, I crouched just inside the door to the right-hand corridor on the third floor. Hagrid had long since found greener pas-

tures for Fluffy, but the corridor still retained (if only to my senses) a softly whispered memory of waves on a beach and a faint tang of salty sea air.

My heart was pounding nervously. Thank the Fates, I hadn't run into any wandering students! Meeting Fred and George Weasley right now would be a nightmare. And I wasn't too willing to have Peeves see me either. Sneaking around the Castle corridors, actually worrying about who might see me, was giving me an extremely uncomfortable and unwelcome look at life in the Castle from the students' point of view.

Still, it wasn't being found by the twins or by Peeves that worried me the most...

I strained my ears, listening for the dull thump of a heavy staff and the distinctive *clunk* of a claw footed, wooden leg. Moody wasn't anywhere nearby from the sound of things. That didn't mean I was safe.

I focused my mind and heart on a silent plea.

On the wall, just across the corridor from me, a tapestry appeared. Nondescript and so faded I could barely make out its faint blue-and-bronze hues, it was a very welcome sight. All I had to do was reach it.

I'd barely got to my feet when I felt the whisper of magic against my skin. I looked up to see a red, pulsating ball of light, the size of a grapefruit, flying down the corridor towards me, swifter than a golden snitch!

Throwing caution to the winds, I ran towards the tapestry.

I did not see or even sense the second red ball of light. It came through the closed wooden door to the

corridor, directly behind me. The next thing I knew, I was lying on the floor, dazed; the tapestry still beyond my reach. My back, still sore from a run-in with Professor Snape's protective curses a week earlier, felt like it just had been struck with a heavy fist.

Both balls of light circled me, buzzing like giant, angry red bees.

Clunk.... clunk... clunk.

A weathered wooden staff appeared in my line of vision. On one side of the staff, visible beneath a long, black wizard's robe, was a normal foot in a normal boot. On the staff's other side was a wooden leg ending in a clawed foot.

"Didn't take a moment to look behind you," said a low, gravelly voice above me. "Did you, Filch?"

Still breathing hard, I shook my head. I looked up into a face that appeared to have been carved out of wood by a sculptor who had very little idea what human faces were supposed to look like. Every bit of the face was scarred. Mismatched eyes studied me sternly. One eye was small, dark and beady. The other was vivid blue, large and round as a coin.

"Can my *Secutus* spells hunt you, and your Doors, through wood? Through stone?" Alastor Mad-Eye Moody asked me.

"Yes..." I replied. Those cursed tracking spells of his were swift. They could pursue me anywhere. They seemed to know where my Doors would appear even before I did. Aurors know some tricks that most other wizards don't.

"Can your Doors save you if you can't manage to

reach them?" the retired Auror growled at me.

"No..." I said.

He reached out a gnarled, scarred hand and pulled me to my feet. "What am I about to tell you?"

"Constant Vigilance..." I said, rubbing my aching back.

"Yep. You should be ready for an attack at all times!" The beady eye narrowed, glaring at me. The bright blue eye rolled about madly, keeping the entire corridor in view.

"One more thing, Filch. Did I say that this evening's lesson was over yet?" Moody grunted.

Oh, no.

The tapestry was only a few steps away, but I didn't have time to move.

"*Pendeo!*" Moody growled.

I was jerked roughly up into the air. Helpless, I simply hung there, my feet dangling above the floor.

Wingardium Leviosa is the first levitating spell that Professor Flitwick teaches his students. It's a powerful charm, but a witch or wizard can also use it for delicate work. There was nothing delicate about the spell Moody was using on me.

"I could be anyone..." Moody growled at me. "A Death Eater. The Dark Lord himself. And I could do anything that I wanted with you right now." His harsh words sent shocks of fear through me. I still woke up trembling, from nightmares of rusty chains and bitter cold darkness, and sharp knives and blood.

Moody's mismatched eyes bored into mine. He looked every bit as haunted as I felt. His staff thumped furiously against the floor. "Filch!" The old Auror lec-

tured me. "Were you supposed to let me near you until I told you that the lesson was over?"

"No..." I said, miserably.

He leaned in close. "Just when you think you're safe, that's when you should be the most afraid. The strongest magic in the world can't protect you, if you've let your guard down! Remember that!" He released his spell.

I landed hard on the stone floor, unable to suppress a yelp of pain.

"Now, Filch..." Moody told me, almost gently. "Tonight's lesson is over. I'll see you again in a few days."

I didn't move until he'd clumped away. When the last echoing clunk had faded, I got to my feet, rubbing the seat of my breeches. Thanks to Snape and his protective curses it had been a week since I'd been able to sit down comfortably. Now, thanks to Moody, I would still need a pillow on my chair tomorrow.

As I hobbled towards the tapestry door which had waited for me patiently, I heard a plaintive mew.

"Hello, my sweet," I said, softly. "Thank you for staying out of Moody's way."

Mrs. Norris wound her way in and out, around my ankles. I held out my arms and she jumped into them, climbing up onto my shoulder. Her purring soothed me. I knew that she feared and disliked Moody, though she did seem to have warmed up to him a little since last year.

"You don't like this, but it's necessary," I told her. "The Headmaster wants me to learn how to protect myself. I hope that Moody hasn't gone clumping off to tell Dumbledore that I'm a complete waste of his time."

Sighing, I looked at the tapestry in front of me. "You couldn't have appeared on the wall, right behind me?" I grumbled. "Oh, never mind. Just take me to the staff bathroom in the dungeons. Please."



A hot bath was just the thing to relieve my aches. I'd been taking a lot of them lately.

The staff bathroom down in the dungeons isn't the most luxurious in the Castle, though I've never had any complaints about it. The place has a copper tub with taps all around it, big enough to swim in. It's set on a rectangular platform. There are enough torches set in the wall to keep the place from looking too gloomy. (There's a staff bathroom closer to my rooms but the one in the dungeons is more private. Professor Snape is the only other person who uses it on a regular basis.)

The battle with the vine-beast had damaged the walls a bit but the plumbing was still intact and functioning. Luckily, the vines had left the tub alone.

Taking two towels from a wardrobe in the corner, I set them on the step and started filling the tub with the hottest water I could bear.

Mrs. Norris sat like a small, furry sentinel on the stone platform while I stood and waited for the tub to fill. When the water was high enough I slid myself into it, gingerly, and sighed. My cat busied herself with a bath of her own to keep me company.

"I'm really glad that I wasn't there to hear Moody's first reaction when the Headmaster told him what he

wanted him to do..." I muttered.

I could imagine what he'd said. An Auror, even a retired one, wasting his time on a Squib? Unheard of. But Dumbledore had been able to convince him, somehow.



A few days earlier when I'd been summoned to the Headmaster's office I'd found Moody waiting for me with Dumbledore, the matter already settled.

"Argus, you remember Alastor Moody. Alastor, you remember Argus Filch, our caretaker?"

Moody and I had both nodded. I'd kept a tight hold on Mrs. Norris who was lying across my shoulders. She'd been afraid of Moody when he'd taught at the Castle. But now she simply regarded him with calm golden eyes.

I'd tried to keep my face as unreadable as hers. I know that my looks aren't ever going to win me any prizes, (unless Witch Weekly ever decides to sponsor a "Least-Charming-Smile" award) but when it came to ugliness, Moody was in a class by himself. I knew it was rude to stare at him, but I couldn't help it.

Moody was probably used to being stared at anyhow, I thought.

Without preamble, Moody said, "Albus told me about what you can do with those Doors. Show me."

I gave the Headmaster an uncertain look and received an encouraging nod in return.

Nearly every space on Dumbledore's office wall is crowded with portraits of old headmasters and headmistresses. But I found a small, clear spot and rested

my hand against it. A moment later the wall changed and shifted to accommodate a tattered tapestry with faint traces of black and yellow still visible.

Moody stepped up to examine the tapestry closely with his magical eye. I retreated back to where Dumbledore stood beside his desk. Watching Moody examine my Door like that made me feel a bit anxious.

"Headmaster, what is he doing?" I whispered. "He's not going to harm it, is he?"

Dumbledore smiled, and shook his head.

"Filch," Moody said, gruffly, "I'd like to see one of the other Doors now. Send this one away and call a different one for me."

When I reached out to touch the wall, he caught my hand. "Try to do it without touching the wall," he said.

"I'm not sure if I can..."

"Try," growled Moody.

Once more, I looked uncertainly at Dumbledore. I got another encouraging nod. I eased Mrs. Norris off my shoulders and held her close, for luck. Shutting my eyes, I focused. Nothing happened for several, very long minutes. I could feel my heart beating hard and fast. Something in the room shifted, a moment before I nearly blacked out.

Dumbledore helped me over to one of the chairs in his office. The seat had a big, soft cushion. I gave the Headmaster a grateful look. He must have been talking to Poppy. Still clutching Mrs. Norris, I lowered myself carefully into it.

I hadn't been able to send the black-and-yellow

tapestry away. But it had been joined by two of the others. The red-and-gold tapestry and the green-and-silver tapestry now flanked it.

"I'm sorry..." I said, hoarsely. "That wasn't what you wanted."

"Close enough," grunted Moody. His blue eye examined the three Doors while his other eye studied me. "Took a lot out of you, did it?"

I nodded. "I've never called them without touching the wall before. It was ...difficult."

"You'll find it much easier by the time I'm through with you."

"Wh-what?"

"Alastor has agreed to help you learn to work with the Doors," the Headmaster explained, resting a hand on my shoulder.

"This talent of yours could be a serious threat to the Castle if a Death Eater ever gets a hold of you," Moody said, gruffly. "You need to know how to fight back, with everything you've got. Albus wants me to help you. I told him that we could start, tonight. Do you agree?"

Shocked speechless, I could only nod.

"Good. Put the cat down. Your first lesson is beginning now. The lesson won't be over until I say it's over. Understand?"

I nodded again, giving Mrs. Norris a gentle nudge off my lap. She hissed indignantly and stalked over to the foot of the Phoenix perch behind the door. Fawkes, who'd been sleeping, stirred and trilled a few soft, sympathetic notes to her. Curling up under his perch, she pretended not to take any further interest in the proceedings.

But she did keep one golden eye slitted open and fixed firmly on me.

"Ready? Good. Suppose I'm a Dark Wizard. I want to stop you from getting away from me. All I'd have to do is this..." His wand was suddenly in his hand. "*Pendeo!*"

I hung in midair like a prey animal, dangling from a wolf's mouth.

"Can't move, can you? Can't touch the wall either," Moody growled.

"It's all right, Albus," he said to Dumbledore, who was watching him, one bushy silver eyebrow raised. "Don't give me that look. I'm keeping him up like this so he won't hurt himself if he passes out. He's stronger than he looks. He's a Squib who's managed to live to a decent age. Most of 'em don't manage that. Sad, but true."

Wide-eyed, I stared at Moody. What? Most Squibs died young? No one had ever told me that. Why hadn't anyone ever told me that?

"Pay attention, Filch!" Moody barked. "I want you to call the fourth Door. The one that isn't here. Then I want you to send the other three away. Now."

By the time Moody said that we were through with my first lesson, I was limp, trembling and covered with sweat. But, I thought with satisfaction, I'd managed to do most of the things he'd asked me to do. Without touching the wall once!

"Good. You'll do," Alastor Moody told me, gruffly. I felt as if I'd been awarded an Order of Merlin.

"I've got homework for you, Filch. Practice calling the Doors without touching the walls. Singly and in

groups. Until you can do it easily. Got it? Good. I'll see you again in a few days. Albus, I'll be in touch, later."

Dumbledore had caught me as Moody's spell let me go.



Tonight's lesson, my second, had been rougher than the first. As before we'd started off in the Headmaster's office. Dumbledore and Fawkes had been elsewhere and Moody was waiting for me, alone.

At his orders, I'd also come without Mrs. Norris. Who wasn't very happy with me as a result.

"Filch, you're a Squib," Moody began. "I'm not saying that to be offensive, I'm saying it because it's true. You've never received any magical training. Anything you know, you've been able to pick up because you work at this school. You're probably not used to thinking of yourself as someone who could fight a Dark wizard on your own. Am I right?"

I nodded.

"You've got to stop thinking that way! I know it won't be easy. But sometimes it doesn't matter how much magic you have. It only matters how well you can use what you have. What I want you to do is very simple. We're going to play a game. Hide-and-go-seek. I'm a Dark Wizard and you mustn't let me catch you. Not until I tell you the lesson is over. Understand? Good. Call your Doors. All four of them."

Hands at my sides, I did as he asked. No sweating, no trembling. I'd been practicing.

The four Doors responded when I summoned them.

The last one to appear, the green-and-silver, came just as I felt a tingle of magic at my back.

"*Secutus!*" I heard Moody say.

Turning around, I saw the old Auror, surrounded by hissing, angry looking red balls of light. They swirled around him, making him look even more fearsome than usual.

My reaction to the surge of magic that had preceded his spell made his ordinary, human eye widen. "Felt that, did you? Even before I spoke the actual spell. Interesting. You're full of surprises, aren't you? Now, stay still."

I couldn't have moved if I'd wanted to. I was too frightened. All those buzzing lights were now flying around me! After doing that for what seemed like an eternity, they buzzed around my Doors too.

"My hunting dogs are getting a `scent,'" Moody explained. "All right, Filch. Let's see how long you can stay ahead of me. Pick a Door."



"I didn't do very well tonight..." I confessed to Mrs. Norris. "Oh, I managed to stay ahead of him and those ...things of his, at least for a while. But I let my guard down too soon."

I sighed. "It's funny. I always thought that learning how to use a magical talent would be easy. But it's not."

"Not Easy" was an understatement. The bath had helped my aching muscles considerably, but I still felt so tired that I wanted to sleep for a month.

Instead I had to be awake to go to work in a few hours.

Climbing from the tub I let the water out, carefully rinsing the copper tub clean with the last of it. At least I could have a few hours sleep.

"Every lesson leads to one that's harder..." I said, ruefully. "One minute I'm doing fine, and the next minute I feel absolutely hopeless. I'll never be able to do what he expects me to do."

My voice got softer. "How can the brats stand this day after day? Much less have any energy left over to get into all the various forms of trouble they get themselves into?"

Wrapping one of the towels around my waist and drying my hair with the other, I moved wearily towards the blue-and-bronze tapestry that waited patiently on the wall.

"My bedroom, please..." I yawned, stepping into my Door with Mrs. Norris padding softly beside me.

CHAPTER 3

An Abuse of Power

All my life I have longed for some magic to call my own. Just a little bit would have made me happy. (All right, I would have been happier with a *lot* of magic, but beggars can't be choosers. A little bit is better than no magic at all, isn't it?) But even a little bit of magic can cause harm. Even a little bit of magic can be abused. I ought to be grateful that my Doors

were only minor magic. A helpful way to get from one place to another within the Castle. A very small power for a very small man.

Professor Snape hadn't seen it that way. "Terrible danger," he'd said. "To Argus, and from him."

Poor Severus had been concerned about the damage I might be forced to do as a helpless tool of the Dark Lord and his Death Eaters. Funny, even when he was picturing me as a potential threat he still saw me as 'helpless.' A pawn of wizards more powerful than I was.

Yes, it was very funny...

I moved zombie-like through the front ward of the hospital wing, carefully cleaning up the mess. There was vomit everywhere. Vomit streaked with blood.

Mop inserted in pail. Mop wrung out. Mop moving across floor in slow, serpentine patterns. Wiping out the mess. Another stain, gone. The floor would be clean soon. I felt as if I'd never be clean again.

Mop inserted in pail. Mop wrung out. Mop moving across floor.

Again.

When I finished with the floor, I'd have to start scrubbing the walls.

"The joke's on you, isn't it, Professor," I thought. "I wasn't acting under anyone's control but my own."

The sound I made wasn't much like a laugh. And my face was wet with tears.



Poppy was still in the far ward tending to Severus

when I'd finished cleaning up the mess. She generally reserved the back ward for ill or injured staff members. It was more private.

I didn't have the nerve to go back there and ask her how he was. But I couldn't leave until I found out. Putting my back against the wall, I slid down to the floor. Rocking forward and back helped to keep my mind blank, the same way that mopping and scrubbing had done. I didn't want to think about what I'd done to Professor Snape.

"Argus?"

Dully, I looked up to see the Headmaster standing in front of me. His face, usually mild and humorous, looked grave. Poppy must have called him through the ward's fireplace.

"Is he all right...?" I asked.

Dumbledore nodded. "Severus is sleeping now."

Relieved but not comforted, I rested my head against my knees. I wasn't guilty of murder, but I was still guilty.

"Tell me what happened, Argus," the Headmaster said, quietly.

"I pulled Professor Snape through one of my Doors," I said, miserably. "I thought that he would only get sick, like Neville and Ginny did. I-I didn't know... I didn't know he would react like *that*..."

The memory of Severus, retching violently, his nose bleeding, his body curled up in helpless agony, rose in my mind. I saw him convulsing on the floor, unable to breathe. Choking on the blood and the vomit, his skin nearly blue...

"I didn't know the Founders' spells would hit him so hard..." I whispered, shutting my eyes.

No one else at Hogwarts could get into the Doors unless I took them through. The Founders hadn't taken Squibs into account when creating their protective spells. I'd taken Ginny Weasley and Neville Longbottom through a Door to save their lives. They'd been terribly sick for a few very long minutes afterwards but they'd recovered.

The Doors' effects on an adult wizard were apparently much, much worse. That possibility had honestly never occurred to me. It was still no excuse for what I'd done.

"Poppy was right there when we came through into the hospital ward. Without her, Professor Snape would have died..." I said.

"Why did you pull Severus into the Door?" Dumbledore asked me.

Too ashamed to meet his eyes, I whispered, "He made me angry, Headmaster. I lost my temper with him."



The day that was ending so badly, had begun badly too.

The night before, I'd fallen asleep at my desk, trying to catch up on some paperwork. Assigning detentions was a simple matter these days with so many cleaning jobs still to be done. There was a stack of detention forms on my desk, incomplete except for the students' names. I'd been meaning to finish them and file them away for days now. Instead I had put my head down on them and fallen asleep.

I'd only meant to close my eyes for a few minutes.

Even I needed more rest than I'd been getting lately. Within moments I was slumbering as deeply as if I'd been given a sleeping draught.

Vaguely I recalled Mrs. Norris purring loudly in my ear and poking at me with her claws. Unable to wake me, she decided to join me. Cats can sleep comfortably anywhere. Humans aren't so fortunate. And, for the record, a stack of parchment makes a dreadful pillow. Very bad for the neck.

When I woke up, it was late morning. My neck felt like some one had been using it for a bludger bat. My mouth and nose felt full of cat fur. Someone was shouting my name from my fireplace.

"Filch! Curse you! Wake up!"

"Professor Snape...?" I said, dazedly.

"Finally!" he sneered. "Come at once to the corridor in front of the Potions classroom. Bring your tools and a ladder! We'll see about this!" the Professor added, to someone I couldn't see. Then his head disappeared from my fireplace, with a pop.

Stiff and hobbling, my spine feeling as twisted as a strand of Devil's Snare, I did as he told me. Mrs. Norris, still curled up enjoying her catnap on my desk, didn't stir.

Snape was waiting for me in the corridor outside his classroom. His students, a class of fifth year Gryffindors and Slytherins, were with him. Tension was thick in the air. The Slytherin students were clustered around Professor Snape. The Gryffindors stood apart from them, surrounding Neville Longbottom. It looked like battle lines had been drawn.

Neville's round, usually cheerful face was as white as ashes. The boy stood up straight with his eyes locked on Professor Snape's. I wanted to ask Neville what was wrong, but I didn't want to say or do anything that might make Snape even angrier with my young friend then he was already.

"What did you want me to do, Professor?" I said, instead.

"It seems," Snape said, sneering, "that Mr. Longbottom has gotten a case of the vapors. He is claiming that he can actually sense more of those hideous vines somewhere in this corridor!"

He gave Neville a look that was pure venom. "Filch, I want you to check out his story and discover if he is lying and wasting my time!"

"...and trying to give my Slytherins more nightmares!" his tone said, plainly.

The children of both Houses only heard his fury. But I heard the fear under it. I knew that he was afraid for his Slytherins.

Professor Sprout had warned everyone that ridding the dungeons of the last bits of the vine-creature could take a long while. New vine growths appeared to be taking root in unexpected places down in the dungeons. Everyone at Hogwarts knew that the vine-creature's "brain" was dead and that the new vine growths could be dealt with easily as soon as they were found. Life at the Castle was slowly getting back to normal. But the Slytherins were all edgy. Many of them, especially the younger ones, weren't sleeping well.

Perhaps it was understandable that some of the

children in the other three houses were teasing the Slytherins. Danger had stalked the Castle in the past, but none of the students could remember the last time that the Slytherins had been its primary target.

Neville wasn't one of the ones who teased. No matter what Severus thought of him, Neville would never do such a thing. Ignoring Snape's tone, I turned at once to Neville. "Where?" I asked him.

"The ceiling.... I think..." Neville told me. "I'm not sure exactly where."

"Go on and look then," I said. "When you find it, show me."

Potter, Weasley, Granger, Thomas, Brown, Patil and Finnegan all relaxed when they saw that I believed Neville.

Well, of course I believed him. Neville Longbottom and Ginny Weasley were the only students to have fought the vine beast and they'd acquitted themselves as bravely as any of the professors. If Neville said he could sense the vines, then he could sense them.

Neville moved his wand slowly, the tip pointed up at the stones in the ceiling. He walked cautiously down the corridor, sweeping the wand back and forth.

"Longbottom!" Severus said in a cold voice. "You have already lost fifty points for Gryffindor because of your cheek! Would you care to lose any *more* points? Hurry up with your foolishness!!"

Poor Severus. He wanted so much to keep his children safe. He felt helpless, a feeling that he utterly loathed. He would be furious with Neville for wasting his time if the boy was wrong about the vines. But

he'd be even angrier if Neville turned out to be right. No wonder Snape was in such a foul temper.

My heart sank when I heard the amount of points that Severus had taken from Gryffindor. Fifty points was the exact number I'd awarded to Neville and Ginny for their bravery. I should have known that he wasn't going to just let that go.

(I supposed I ought to be grateful that Snape had waited until I was recovered from the injuries inflicted by his protective curse before he started looking for an opportunity to get some of his own back. I blamed myself for the lost points. Snape ought to be angry with me over that, not with poor Neville.)

"Please, Professor..." It was Hermione Granger. Like most Gryffindors, she tends to choose valor over discretion.

"It's not foolishness," she said, earnestly. "Neville's been doing extra credit with Professor Sprout and her seventh-years. They've been working on spells that will help them sense the vines while they're still small and dormant. Neville's spent hours, practicing..."

Snape gave her one of his most caustic glares. "Do you really expect me to believe that Longbottom is capable of such advanced Herbology study?" the Professor sneered.

Hermione was speechless with anger for a moment.

Draco Malfoy's drawling voice filled the silence. "If Sprout is as capable as all that, we'd be rid of the vines already. Maybe it's taking her so long to destroy the things because she depends on Hufflepuffs and Squibs for help."

His voice, an adolescent echo of his father's cultured

drawl, could send shivers of fear down my spine. The sight of Draco and his cronies, Crabbe and Goyle, still made me feel sick with anger. The contempt that young Malfoy managed to put into his words defied description. I bit my tongue until I tasted blood to keep myself from saying anything to him.

I had no pity for Draco and his two friends but I could still feel for the other Slytherins. All of them looked scared. Just when they thought that their dungeons were finally safe again, someone had raised the specter of more vines.

"Without Sprout and her Hufflepuffs going over the dungeons regularly, Malfoy, you'd be covered in those vines right up to your scaly..."

Ron Weasley didn't get to finish his sentence. Hermione had poked him in the stomach. She didn't want him getting in trouble. Still, he'd gotten his point across well enough. Luckily, before tensions could rise any higher, Neville gave a shout. "Over here, Mr. Filch."

Placing my ladder under the area of ceiling he was indicating, I climbed up to examine the stones. I could see one that was cracked, with pieces loose. Wiggling one of the smaller pieces, I was able to wrench it free.

"I need a light..." I said.

Immediately, the air around me was filled with little floating lights. I felt as if I was standing in a cloud of magic. An instant later all of us could smell the foul odor of the vines as they reacted to the magic lights.

"Everyone, back!" Professor Snape moved swiftly between the ladder and all the children, both Slytherin

and Gryffindor. Just as he did, a tendril of vine thin as a wire, whipped out from the ceiling like a tiny deadly snake, moving towards his head.

Without its brain the vines had lost the defense mechanism preventing them from attacking prey that was obviously too powerful. It made the bits and pieces much easier to deal with.

I grabbed the vine with my bare hands before it could touch Severus. All the children either flinched or gasped. The vine would have given any of them terrible burns if they'd tried doing the same. Neville's right arm was still in a sling. Professor Snape's hands were still bandaged. The pair of them were fortunate compared to little Gehenna Morgan, who was still in the hospital wing, with burns on her throat. The small quantities of magic I possessed weren't enough to get that kind of reaction.

"You'd better send someone for Professor Sprout..." I said to Severus, the vine still wrapped around my hand. "I think there could be a lot more of them in there."

"Draco... go to the Greenhouses and find Professor Sprout," Snape said. "The rest of you, go into the classroom where it's safe!"

Draco, apparently having forgotten his earlier comments about Sprout and the Hufflepuffs, left at a run.

As pale as Severus, the other Slytherins began filing into the Potions lab. The Gryffindors, only slightly less pale, lingered behind.

"Neville was right, Professor. About the vines." I could tell that Ron Weasley was trying hard to be as

respectful as possible.

"Gryffindor lost fifty points..." Seamus Finnegan pointed out. He was also trying to be polite.

I could have told them that they were wasting their breath. But it wouldn't have done any good. As a rule, telling Gryffindors that they are behaving recklessly will only encourage them.

"You should all be grateful that I didn't take away more!" Severus snarled.

I didn't know who I felt sorrier for. The poor Gryffindors, angry over their Professor's blatant unfairness or poor Severus who was faced with a seemingly endless nightmare invasion of his dungeons. He was angry, feeling helpless and lashing out at the only targets available to him.

"It's all right," Harry Potter said quietly, to Neville, who looked stricken. "Don't worry about the points. You were right and we all know it. That's more important."

Now I knew who I felt sorriest for. Potter. That boy has an uncanny gift for angering Severus. Now Snape looked ready to take away every point Gryffindor had earned since the beginning of the term. Either that, or simply feed poor Potter to the vines.

"Professor...?" I said plaintively, to distract him. "Would you mind getting this vine off my hand?"

Glowering, his wand balanced carefully in his bandaged fingers, he moved towards me.

I gulped, realizing how stupid I'd been. Considering the mood Snape was in, I had visions of him shouting "*INCENDIO!*" and blasting my whole hand clean off.

Snape might be seething, but his control over his magic was as excellent as ever. His spell, slow and careful, burned the vine tendril without touching my skin. It took both Severus and me a moment to realize that the young Gryffindors were still watching us.

I was not used to having the students at Hogwarts see me as anything more than a bad-tempered old man who took delight in making their lives miserable. But the whole pride of young lions were evidently standing guard to make sure that Professor Snape would do me no harm.

"Don't shout at them," I murmured to Severus. "It's your own fault. Thanks to the trick you and the Headmaster played on Peeves and those damn protective curses in your office, they think you've beaten me twice in the past month."

"Oh, for Merlin's sake...!" Severus hissed at me. He turned and gave the Gryffindors a look that a Basilisk would have been proud to own. "I'm not going to damage him!" he snarled. "*Someone* has to clean up the mess in my corridor after Professor Sprout has finished!"

Hermione Granger's pale face began to grow red with anger. "Professor Snape, sir," she cried, "that's the most appalling...!"

"Ten more points from Gryffindor!" Severus snarled. "Shall I make it twenty? Into the classroom!" He glowered at the children until they obeyed him. Neville was the last one to leave the corridor. The worried look on his face made me feel dreadful.

Severus continued to snarl imprecations against

the Gryffindors under his breath. I couldn't hear most of what he said. But I did catch the names "Potter" and "Longbottom."

I rubbed my hand, now free of the vines.

"Professor," I pleaded with him, trying to get the circulation back into my fingers, "just let it go. Isn't sixty points revenge enough?"

"Let it go?" His dark eyes narrowed. "You're a fine one to talk about lettings things 'go,' Filch! When have you *ever* managed to do that? You, with your filing cabinets filled up with every petty little grievance you've encountered here in the castle for the past thirty years or so?"

I had half-expected him to lash out at me. Better me than the children. I had not expected him to attack me in such a personal way! I was shocked into silence the way Hermione had been earlier. All I could do was stare at him.

"Wait here for Professor Sprout!" Snape ordered me. His satisfaction at how well his barb had drawn blood was almost palpable. Then he turned on his heel and went into his classroom, slamming the door behind him.



It took a while for Sprout to dig out the vine infestation that Neville had discovered.. She finished working just before dinner and I didn't get a chance to start cleaning up the corridor outside Snape's office until after dinner.

I was back on the ladder, patching up the cracks in the ceiling stones, when Snape came out into the corridor.

"Professor," I said coolly, not looking at him.

"Filch," he snarled.

I gritted my teeth. All right, it wasn't as if I'd been expecting an apology. I'd known Severus since he was eleven years old. He had an abundance of regrets and he carried them all deep inside where their sharp edges could cut him to pieces. He'd never been one to apologize.

He was quite correct about the way I could nurse a grievance. I knew full well that I collected them, counted them and poured over them lovingly like a Goblin with a pile of gold. That's the way I am. Sometimes I've felt that my grievances are all that I really have to call my own.

This morning's incident had troubled me all day so I had a heap of new grievances to nurse. Different aspects of what had happened had all taken their turns upsetting me.

Severus had called Neville a liar. He'd slighted the boy's abilities at Herbology. Neville was brilliant at Herbology. Anyone who doubted that was simply being spiteful!

Then there was the fact that the only fifty points that I'd ever given to any house had been coldly taken away with ten more points to keep them company.

And there were Draco's rude comments about poor Professor Sprout, who was working day and night to figure out a way to rid the Castle of those vines once and for all. If it wasn't for Ron Weasley, Draco's comment would have gone completely unchallenged. Severus really ought to have insisted that his Slytherins should

show respect for his fellow professor. Especially since she was working so hard to keep them safe.

There were other things too. The expression on Hermione Granger's face when Snape had said why he wouldn't hurt me, truly rankled. I'd seen Granger's "save the house elves" look before, but not directed at ME. It was humiliating! It was bad enough that the brats in the Castle sometimes thought of me as a sort of jumped-up house elf. When the *good* children started doing that and pitying me... well!

I knew that Granger really was a good child at heart, despite the fact that she'd fallen in with the wrong companions during her first year and had been a troublemaker ever since. She was one of only two students in recent memory who'd come down to my office and asked to see my List of Objects Forbidden Inside the Castle. (Percy Weasley was the other one.)

And then there was Severus's expression of contempt when he'd made his remark about the way I nursed grievances. As well as his satisfaction when he'd seen how the remark had hurt me.

Those particular thoughts ran themselves over and over in my mind.

I patched the ceiling with an almost savage ferocity, so intent on mulling over my new collection of "petty grievances" that I almost didn't hear Snape when he spoke to me.

"...Never be rid of those cursed things! When you're finished with the ceiling, I want you to go and fetch Longbottom. Have him do that... trick of his again. Make certain that this part of the dungeons are really clean now!"

My very real sympathy for Professor Snape and his continuing fear for the children of Slytherin had retreated to the back of my mind. I couldn't believe his nerve!

Teeth gritted, I snarled, "Professor Sprout told everyone that there's no way yet to detect the vines before they've actually taken root somewhere! Weren't you listening, Professor? If there were any more vines growing here at this very moment, then she or Neville would have been able to sense them already!"

My patch-up job on the ceiling finished, albeit somewhat more sloppily than my usual neat work, I climbed down from the ladder to face him.

"No, sir, I will certainly not go and drag Neville away from whatever else he's doing. I doubt he'd want to help you, anyhow, after the way you spoke to him this morning! Not to mention those points you took from Gryffindor for no reason except your own childish pique!"

He glared at me, black eyes smoldering like coals about to burst into flame at any moment." What did you say to me, you petty little man?"

Usually that tone in his voice, like a column of fire burning brightly inside a pillar of ice, would have sent me into a full retreat. But not now. I matched him, glare for glare.

Poor Severus. First Neville had started standing up to him and now I was doing the same thing. He must have felt as if his world were crumbling.

I didn't care. All my life I have walked, subservient and bitter, among the wizards who surrounded me. I'm a Squib, I'm useless, I'm nothing!

Recently, Alastor Moody has started trying to teach me to stop thinking of myself that way. It was difficult to change the attitudes of a lifetime but I was trying.

I knew that Severus had incredible pressures on him. He was living a dangerous double life as one of the Dark Lord's Death Eaters and as Dumbledore's spy. He still had the heavy responsibilities of his lessons and his students. And as the Head of Slytherin House he had all his children to look after, too. There were Dark things he couldn't protect some of his children from, a fact that broke his heart over and over again.

So many things beyond his control, so many things that left him feeling as lost and helpless as I ever had. And now those foul vines had invaded his dungeons to haunt his children's dreams. My heart ached for Severus, but he'd made me so furious that I no longer cared. I was tired of being one of the few "safe" targets for Severus Snape's anger.

"You heard me, Professor! I'm not getting Neville for you. Not even if you promise to apologize to him for your behavior this morning, on bended knee. Not even if you were to give Gryffindor one hundred points into the bargain!"

We stood, practically nose to nose.

"You... pathetic wretch!" Snape hissed at me. "Consider yourself fortunate that you are a Squib!"

"If I was a proper wizard then you would duel with me?" I shot back. "You should consider yourself fortunate that I'm a Squib! If I could I'd...!"

He laughed then, a cold, bitter laugh that sent chills

down my spine in spite of my anger. "A wizard's duel with you would be quite amusing, Filch. The most fun I've had in years."

"Really..." I hissed. "How about it, then? Here and now!"

He laughed again, derisively. "Finish cleaning up this mess and get yourself to bed. And be grateful that I have too much self control to take advantage of your momentary lapse of reason."

"Self control!" I was so enraged that my voice squeaked. "Ask Neville if you have any self control! Or ask Potter! You're lucky that the Headmaster doesn't keep you away from them, the way he won't let me near Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle!"

The barbs that hurt the most are the ones which hold the most truth. Pain showed briefly in Snape's eyes before he managed to hide his expression.

Too furious to enjoy my triumph, I focused and called one of my Doors. It was the green-and-silver one that came.

(Later, I realized that this was probably fortunate. A trip through any of the other three Doors might have come even closer to killing him.)

I was so angry that I was just going to leave this mess until tomorrow. As I was stepping through the Door, Professor Snape grabbed my arm.

"Filch," he said. "Wait."

I do not know what Snape meant to do. Threaten me, insult me or perhaps even apologize for the first time in his life. I didn't give him a chance to do anything. Responding as if I was being attacked, I pulled

him forward so that we stood side by side. And then, taking him with me, I stepped into my Door.



I looked up into Dumbledore's stern blue eyes.

"That's what happened," I said, miserably. "I didn't expect it to nearly kill him. That's no excuse. I'm sorry, Headmaster."

"Stand up, Argus," the Headmaster said.

I'd been braced for his condemnation. For his slow-to-waken, terrifying and rarely seen anger. But the Headmaster's voice was gentle. His eyes, when I looked up to meet them, were sorrowful. I was too shocked and numb to stand up. I'd just confessed to the near-murder of one of his professors! In his place I knew that I'd already be getting out the manacles and the chains.

When I did nothing except stare in bewilderment, he reached down and carefully pulled me up from the floor. Moving me across the hospital ward towards a chair, he asked,

"Did you originally intend to bring Severus here, to Poppy?"

"N-no... I was going to take him into the staff bathroom in the dungeons..." I took a deep breath.

"I knew that he was going to be sick. He'd want to clean himself up afterwards. And the bathroom floor would have been easy for me to clean..." my voice trailed off in misery.

I'd meant to strike back at Snape, to teach him a lesson, but I hadn't wanted anyone else in the Castle to see him wretchedly spewing his guts out. Giving Snape a chance

to recover in private had been my original plan.

And, yes, perhaps (I confessed to myself) I would have enjoyed gloating at him a bit too. All right, probably more than just "a bit." Gloating is one of my few real pleasures in life. That and my treasured, carefully filed collection of "petty grievances."

I shivered. So much for my original plan. Poor Professor Snape's reaction to a journey through the Squib Door had been far more terrible than anything I'd anticipated.

"When I first pulled him into the Door, he made the most horrible sound," I told Dumbledore. "As if he wanted to scream, but he couldn't breathe. I wanted to pull him back out at once. But there was too much ...resistance behind us. So I had to keep moving us forward."

My trembling increased as I remembered that nightmarish journey. I'd had my arm wrapped around Severus's chest and I recalled the fast, frantic beating of his heart. Like the rapidly fluttering wings of a snidget beneath the thin cage of his ribs.

My struggle to get Neville and Ginny through the Door had been nothing compared to my journey with poor Snape. It had been like battling against a river current through water nearly up to my neck, carrying a struggling, drowning man in my arms.

"I don't remember even asking the Door to take us to the hospital wing instead. When we finally came out, I was surprised to see Poppy. But then... Severus... he..."

Even with my eyes tightly shut, I could still see Professor Snape convulsing on the floor in helpless agony. I'd never seen anyone being so horribly, merci-

lessly sick. His skin had been waxy and blue and his nose had been bleeding profusely. Blood and vomit, everywhere. Poor, poor Severus.

My eyes shut, I rocked helplessly forward and back in my chair. I didn't realize that the Headmaster had moved until I felt the blanket that he was wrapping around me.

"No!" I protested, miserably. "Headmaster... I've done something terrible! Severus could have died! A-aren't you going to do something to me, punish me?"

"Argus." His voice was terribly sad. "What would you have me do?"

I couldn't believe he was unable to come up with something appropriate on his own. "Take me into the Forbidden Forest and leave me there, alone, chained to a tree all night!" I blurted out the first possibility that came to mind. "I'd deserve that!"

"There'd be nothing left of you in the morning," Dumbledore said firmly, shaking his head. "Out of the question."

"Then there's the chains in my office and plenty of dungeon space," I said.

"With all the work to be done in the Castle I cannot afford to keep our caretaker chained up in the dungeons."

A wry note had crept into the Headmaster's voice. "Argus, we've had this discussion before, many times. No one here is going to be clapped in chains. Not the students and not the staff. No matter how richly you may feel that such treatment is deserved."

I stared at him in disbelief.

"All right," I said, harshly. "Old Pringle had other things besides those chains you never let me use. He had

a cat o' nine tails... it's still in the desk, exactly where he left it. I've never mentioned it to you since you've never seen reason on the matter of the chains. You c-could..."

"No." Dumbledore sounded grave and serious again, every trace of humor gone from his voice. He sounded sickened as well. "There has already been too much pain tonight. Adding more will not change a single thing that has happened."

I wailed in frustration. The Headmaster and I have never seen eye to eye on the matter of punishment.

"Please..." I cried, "please, Professor Dumbledore, you have to do *something*. For Severus's sake... for pity's sake..."

I couldn't say any more, I was weeping.

Dumbledore said wearily, "Oh, Argus. The point of punishing someone for a misdeed is the hope that the culprit will understand that what they have done was wrong. That they will repent, feel true regret, and never repeat the misdeed again."

"No...!" I cried. "Repentance isn't enough! Regret isn't enough, without suffering..."

"You are already suffering." Now he sounded as frustrated as I felt.

"If you did not understand the seriousness of what could have happened," Dumbledore continued, "if you had not told me the truth, if you'd lied or made excuses or tried to put the blame on poor Severus... that would be different. If..." his voice grew very soft, "if... we h-had ...lost Severus... that would be another matter entirely." Dumbledore stopped, unable to speak, the blue eyes behind his glasses full of deep sorrow.

He looked like a father who had nearly lost a child.

The Headmaster cared very deeply for Severus Snape and the Potions Master counted Albus Dumbledore as one of his very few real friends. I'd known that for years. Recently, I'd seen them laughing together like children. Even if I hadn't known how strong the bond between the two men was, the catch in Dumbledore's voice and the look in his eyes would have told me.

My heart felt full of thorns. "Please..." I whispered. "You have to do something to me... something terrible." Inspiration struck. "Severus will be upset if you don't. You know how he gets..."

Dumbledore sighed. "Yes, I do know. You and that poor boy are a perfectly matched set!" He sighed again, heavily. "It's enough to make my pull out my beard, sometimes. Argus, what would you have me do to you? Is there anything I could do that would make you feel worse than you already feel?"

I nodded. Alastor Moody has been teaching me to use my strengths and coming up with punishments was certainly one of them.

"My Doors," I said in a very small voice. "You should forbid me to use them. Ever again." I took a deep breath and continued, my voice a little stronger. "Then you could report me to the Ministry. For abusing my magic."

"Argus..." Dumbledore was shaking his head, seemingly caught between tears and laughter. "According to the Ministry, you have no magic to abuse. The Doors are a secret that I feel it would be prudent to

keep from the Ministry, at least for the present. And I will not forbid you to use them."

He frowned at me, to forestall my cry of protest. "What happened tonight was very terrible, but it has made me realize what a truly formidable defense those Doors of yours can be. Hogwarts needs every available bit of defensive magic that everyone here, including you, can muster. You know that."

"Besides, Alastor is enjoying his lessons with you. He's told me about the two of you chasing each other all around the Castle, nearly till sunrise. He's pleased with your progress."

That last statement had been a gentle attempt to comfort me, because I was weeping harder than ever. He wasn't going to do anything to me! My pain and guilt were overwhelming.

"Headmaster, you don't understand...!"

"I understand, far more than you realize," Dumbledore said quietly. "It isn't punishment you truly want from me, Argus. You want absolution, which is something far more complex. I do not know how I can grant it to you."

"All right," I said, defeated, my head in my hands. "I'm sorry." Then inspiration struck again. "Severus!" I said. "Headmaster, when he recovers, let Severus himself decide what to do with me!"

"Oh..." Dumbledore said. "Argus... that is truly not a good idea. Believe me, it's not."

"B-but...!" I stammered. "It's perfect..."

"Hush!" the Headmaster sighed and frowned.

"Headmaster, you can't grant me absolution, and I

don't know how to find it on my own! But Severus could find some way. I know he could, and he deserves the chance. Please, please..."

I'm nothing if not tenacious. The Headmaster himself had sometimes compared my persistence to an endless series of water droplets, wearing away a stone basin.

(Unbidden, a memory came to mind, as fresh as if it had happened yesterday. Dumbledore had never allowed me to chain anyone up, but during Severus's childhood in the Castle, there had been four incorrigible brats who'd called themselves Marauders.

During their third year, after an especially horrid prank involving fireworks and the toilet in my office bathroom, I'd been given permission to place the four of them in four different broom cupboards in different parts of the Castle. Each cupboard had one thing in common; an especially drippy water tap.

Listening to the endless dripping of water for a few hours can be quite an effective punishment. Little Pettigrew had been in tears when I'd finally let him out. Lupin had been white as a ghost, his nails chewed to ragged stumps. Both Black and Potter had emerged drenched. They'd attempted to stop the leaks and had managed to flood their respective cupboards. They'd looked so wretched that I didn't even mind cleaning up the additional mess.)

There's a difference between outright torture and justly deserved punishment, though the line is very fine sometimes. Severus Snape was one of the few people, besides myself, who understands that.

Dumbledore sighed. "Severus will be unable to do anything for the next few days except stay quietly in bed. He's very ill."

I winced as if he'd struck me.

"When he's recovered enough, I'll discuss this with him. After we talk, I'll make my decision."

"All right," I said, morosely. It was the best I was going to get.

The Headmaster and I heard a soft sound. We looked up.

Mrs. Norris was suddenly there, leaping up onto my lap. The look in her golden eyes said plainly that she didn't know what she was going to do with me. She'd only let me out of her sight for a short time and look what trouble I had gotten myself into!

I held her tightly. My life has been a bitter one, and she's often been my only real comfort. Despite all my faults, my lack of magic, (not to mention my similar lack of charm, good looks, or almost any sort of redeeming qualities whatsoever) I have a cat who truly loves me.

The Headmaster left me in her capable paws while he went to the back ward to check on Severus again.

Dumbledore was back in a few moments, looking more cheerful. "Poppy has said that you should come and see him now. He seems to be resting more comfortably. He doesn't keep waking up to be sick any longer. She's finally gotten him to keep the sleeping draught down long enough for it to work."

Cuddling Mrs. Norris, with the blanket still around my shoulders, I followed the Headmaster.

Severus lay curled up on his side, lank black hair

spread out on a pillow only a little less pale than his thin face. One arm was flung up, over his head. One bandaged hand dangled over the side of his bed.

To the Headmaster, Poppy and me, he looked like an ill and vulnerable child. Hardly older than the small Slytherin girl who sat perched on the bed next to his, with bandages around her throat.

"Gehenna has been helping me look after the Professor," Poppy said fondly, ruffling the child's mousy hair.

"He's going to be all right..." the girl said, softly, in a hoarse voice. "Madam Pomfrey says he's going to be fine." She gave Professor Snape a protective look.

"I'm sorry, Gehenna..." I told her, miserably.

"Why?" the girl asked me. "Madam Pomfrey said that he took sick very suddenly and you brought him here as fast as you could."

Speechless, I stared at Poppy. I knew that my Doors were supposed to be a secret, though Dumbledore had now added Poppy to the "need to know" list. I didn't want to be thought of as a hero in this incident! The unfairness of that was unbearably painful!

Madam Pomfrey met my gaze evenly. "Severus has been running himself completely ragged lately. He's been through so much." Her tone hinted at things she wouldn't say in front of Gehenna. Severus had endured the Cruciatus Curse, and his battle with the vine-creature had happened shortly afterwards.

Ever since the creature had been killed, Snape had spent most of his time worrying and fretting over his children. Even before I'd hurt him, he'd looked exhausted

and he'd been losing weight he couldn't afford to lose.

Poppy answered my look of dismay with a firm expression. "He's exactly where he needs to be," she said. "And he's going to rest here until he's well, whether he likes it or not."

None of this was going to improve Snape's temper. When he finally recovered enough to talk to the Headmaster, and they decided what my punishment would be, it would be something truly awful. Well, good. That was what I wanted, wasn't it?

I watched Severus sleeping for a while, grateful that he was still alive. Then Poppy ushered the Headmaster and me out of the room.

"You'll tell me when he's well enough to talk..." I said. "Won't you? Please?"

Dumbledore nodded.

"Thank you," I said.

With Mrs. Norris following at my heels, I headed back down to the dungeons. I still had some cleaning to do in the corridor outside Severus's classroom.

CHAPTER 4

Unforgiven

I stepped from my blue-and-bronze Door into the corridor outside Professor Flitwick's office.

What...? The corridor...? I hadn't asked to be taken here...

Too dazed to realize what must have happened, I

stepped back into the tapestry.

"Professor Flitwick's office," I whispered. "Please. I have work to do. I've got to check his wards..."

Poor blue-and-bronze had to try very hard. Usually when I travel through my Doors alone or with Mrs. Norris the journey is instantaneous, no longer than a single step. But now the space inside the tapestry seemed to have grown.

My eventual emergence into Professor Flitwick's office was quite sudden. I tripped over my feet and landed in a heap on his carpet.

"Gracious, Mr. Filch! Are you all right?"

The small, white haired Charms Professor was sitting, cross-legged on his desk. Typically he was doing three things at once. An enchanted quill was floating over his head, writing out a lesson plan on a floating piece of parchment. Another quill and parchment were floating just over his desk, taking notes for an article he was writing for some scholarly journal, probably the CHARMED CIRCLE or DUELIST QUARTERLY.

Flitwick was also having a picnic lunch, complete with a cheerful red-and-white cloth spread out on top of his desk blotter, which was why there was no room on his desk for his paperwork.

"He's awake..." I said, from the floor. "Professor Snape. Poppy said that he could have visitors..."

Professor Flitwick was delighted. "Excellent news, excellent!"

Then he studied me, apparently worried about what he saw. "Would you like a cup of tea?"

I shook my head. "No, thank you, Professor." Belatedly it dawned on me why my journey into his office had taken so long.

"Your wards, Professor... the Unreachable Charms you've been trying... I think you've very nearly got it. The first time I tried to get in here, I couldn't."

He beamed. "We must go and tell Severus at once. I'm sure the news will cheer him up immeasurably! I promised him that his would be the second office that I made Unreachable, once the Charms were right."

Softly, I said, "You'd better be the one to tell him, Professor. He won't speak to me." My voice cracked. "Well, that's not strictly true. He did say just two words to me: 'Go away.'"

Snape's words had been painful for me to hear. Even more terrible had been the expression of betrayal on his pale, gaunt face as he'd spoken. Afterwards Severus had turned away, refusing even to look at me. My apologies, my pleas for his forgiveness, had died, unsaid.

Headmaster Dumbledore had tried to comfort me outside the ward. But I would have none of it. I'd told him that I was perfectly fine.

"You did try to warn me," I'd said. "You knew he'd be like this. I should have known. If this isn't a formal punishment, it will certainly do until something more drastic comes along. Please pardon me, Headmaster. I have work to do."

Not waiting for his reply, I'd turned to the wall where blue-and-bronze had just appeared. One step and I was gone. Checking Professor Flitwick's wards had been the first job that came to my mind.

Professor Flitwick's face was full of sympathy. Both floating quills had stopped moving.

Long before the deadly magic-eating vine creature had invaded the dungeons of Hogwarts, the Castle had already been infested with a vine of a different sort; a highly efficient grapevine. Every witch and wizard on the Squib Door "need to know" list appeared to be aware of what I had done to the Potions Master. Professor Flitwick didn't need to ask why Severus was refusing to speak to me, or why I felt so dreadfully guilty.

"When I speak with Professor Snape, I shall tell him that you are very sorry for what happened..." Flitwick said, to comfort me.

"Better wait until you've said everything else that you wanted to say first," I warned him, miserably. "Once you mention my name, he'll probably stop talking to you, too."



The Castle has been my home for longer than any other place I've lived. Some things here change, but others remain ever constant. One can always count on the periodic flooding of Moaning Myrtle's bathroom. It's rather like the Nile, in Egypt.

The ghostly brat had retreated, wailing, to her favorite stall. She never gets any sympathy from me and today wasn't going to be different. Each live brat only gets to be a thorn in my side for seven years. The dead one is a permanent fixture in this bathroom. Myrtle's been in the Castle even longer than I have.

She'll be here when I'm gone.

Usually I will bellow at her to be quiet, at least once. It never works but I can't help it. She gives me a dreadful headache. Today, however, I didn't mind her cat-erwauling. It suited my mood.

Busy mopping up the flood, accompanied by Myrtle's howls bouncing off the walls, I didn't hear the bathroom door open. Nor did I hear the quiet steps of a woman who always moves with cat-like grace, no matter which form she wears. When Professor McGonagall spoke my name, I shrieked even louder than the ghost-brat and whirled around to face Minerva, my mop held out before me defensively, like a weapon.

Minerva regarded me with raised eyebrows. "Moody's been saying that your reflexes are improving..." she shouted. "I can see it's true!"

"What?" I shouted back.

Minerva sighed and walked down to Myrtle's stall. I saw her knock and then go in. A few moments later silence reigned in the bathroom.

"How did you do that, Professor?" I asked her incredulously when she returned.

"I asked Myrtle, politely, to be quiet. I told her that I wanted a word with you."

I felt a flutter of fear in my stomach. I hadn't had a chance to speak to Minerva since I'd nearly killed Severus. She was probably furious with me. No wonder Myrtle had gone quiet, she enjoys it when other people get themselves in trouble.

"Is it about w-what I did to Severus?" I asked her hesi-

tantly. Distressed and ashamed, I couldn't meet her eyes.

"Yes," Minerva said.

"I wanted the Headmaster to punish me," I said, plaintively. "But he wouldn't."

"Albus has told me about his conversation with you. He's also told me about what happened when Severus saw you, today." She sighed again. "Poor Albus. He feels dreadful for both of you."

"He shouldn't feel badly about me..." I cried, guiltily. "He has so many more important matters on his mind." Upsetting the Headmaster was one of the very last things I'd intended to do.

"Argus, please do be quiet. I'm trying to tell you something that you truly need to hear."

The flutter of fear in my stomach got stronger. But I tried to face her bravely.

"Magic carries with it a certain responsibility," Minerva said. "Under normal circumstances young witches and wizards have many years to grow into their responsibilities. They may only use their magic at school and there are laws against the use of magic by underage wizards and witches during Holidays. The primary purpose of these laws is to teach young witches and wizards proper restraint."

I nodded, stricken. She was right, I'd misused my Doors worse than the most irresponsible underage wizard.

"I tried to tell the Headmaster that I should be reported to the Ministry..." I choked.

Minerva's voice grew gentle. "Hush. Listen. The years of magical study, of careful training... you haven't

had any of that. The Doors are new to you, and you are learning about them so very quickly. Albus, Moody, all of us, are learning with you. The Doors are new to us, too.

"In spite of the laws, in spite of years of careful teaching, many never learn restraint at all. There are Dark wizards and witches who misuse their powers without regret. Without remorse." Her voice shook.

"Argus," she said, fiercely, "You are not like that. You are nothing like that! Albus and I, we know that you did not intend to harm Severus so badly. We know!"

Her kindness undid me completely. The tears that had been threatening since Severus had turned away from me in the hospital wing finally started spilling over. Horribly embarrassed, I began to turn away from Minerva but she moved forward, her arms held out towards me, and I found myself weeping on her shoulder instead.

"S-Severus doesn't know I didn't mean it. He won't talk to me. Won't look at me. And he will never forgive me..!" I choked, too miserable to care that I was crying on her robe. "Minerva, if you had seen the look on his face...!"

"Poor Severus. I don't know if he has ever forgiven anyone for anything... including himself. Forgiveness can be more difficult to master than the hardest spells or the most intricate potions..." Minerva said sadly. "That's his burden, Argus. Please, don't make it yours."

"But I'm not much good at forgiving either..." I confessed, desolate. "Severus said that I don't let anything go and he's right..."

Not knowing what else to say, Minerva simply held

me until the flow of my tears began to lessen. Then, too drained and exhausted to feel as flustered as I might have done otherwise, I simply stumbled over to one of the sinks.

It was then that Minerva and I noticed the squat figure of a girl ghost. Moaning Myrtle was halfway through the door of her favorite stall, observing us. Her usually glum face had an incredulous expression and her eyes, behind her pearly glasses, were wide with astonishment. Apparently the sight of the Deputy Headmistress comforting the distraught caretaker wasn't something she'd been expecting.

"What are you looking at, girl?" I snarled. "It's not as if I need your permission to come in here and have a good cry!" I turned on the water and washed my face.

"Thank you, Myrtle. We do appreciate the use of your bathroom." Minerva said, with a great deal more politeness.

The ghost-brat was still staring at us, when we left.



Alastor "Mad-Eye" Moody had scheduled a lesson for me, at midnight. I was feeling more apprehensive than usual. Moody had said that it was going to be "different." As a favor, he'd told me that I could bring Mrs. Norris along. I was glad of my cat's company as I made my way up to Dumbledore's office, spoke the password ("peppermint humbugs") and rode the moving staircase. As usual, Moody was waiting for me alone. Headmaster Dumbledore and Fawkes, his phoenix, were not there. I hoped that the Headmaster

was asleep, enjoying untroubled dreams.

The old Auror was waiting for me, sitting in a chair and sipping something out of his hip flask. Mrs. Norris rode my shoulder, purring in my ear. Not even Moody's presence initially silenced that purr. I was surprised; she really did not seem to be as bothered by Moody as she'd been when he'd taught Defense Against the Dark Arts.

"Sit..." Moody said, gruffly, nodding towards another chair beside him. "Albus has told me about what happened. With Snape."

Of course. I stared at the floor, ashamed.

"Interesting," Moody said.

"That's not the word I would have chosen," I told him.

"I meant that it raises interesting questions about what you can do with those Doors. Albus said that you were able to change in your destination in mid-journey. You intended to bring Snape to a bathroom in the dungeons and you ended up in the hospital wing instead. Have you ever done that before?"

I shook my head. "When I'm alone, the trip is over too quickly. Ginny and Neville are the only other passengers I've had. And, it doesn't matter, because after what happened with Professor Snape, I will never take anyone through one of the Doors again. *Never*."

Moody gave me a long look. The expression on his face was unreadable.

I was relieved that he wasn't going to argue the point with me.

"Must you speak aloud to the Doors to tell them where you want to be taken?" he asked me after a few moments.

"Well, I usually do. But it's not necessary. Sometimes they just come to me when I'm tired, my back is aching and I'm thinking about what a long walk it's going to be to the next job on my list. And sometimes they take me somewhere I didn't realize that I wanted to go, if I haven't been specific about a destination. Maybe to the kitchens, if I'm hungry and missed a meal..."

Moody's scarred face looked thoughtful. "Call the Door that you took Snape through."

I obeyed. The portrait-filled walls of the Headmaster's office shifted to accommodate green-and-silver.

Moody stood up, leaning on his staff. His magical eye examined the tapestry. His normal eye remained fixed on me.

"You took Snape through this one? Salazar's Door?" he asked me.

"Yes," I said.

Mad-Eye is the only one besides me who can tell the Doors apart. I was astonished when the Headmaster told me that even he can't see the colors unless he stares at the tapestries for a while. The scarred old Auror's magical eye gives him certain advantages.

"What do you think might have happened if you'd taken Snape through any of the other three?" demanded Moody.

"I *don't* want to think about that..." I said, shuddering.

"Hmm." Moody studied green-and-silver with both eyes now.

"I was in Slytherin House myself, Filch. Did you know that?"

"No..." I said.

"Snape was in a very bad way for a few days, wasn't he?"

I nodded, miserably.

"He's on the mend now." The tone of his gruff voice made it a question.

"Yes," I said. "He's still very weak, but Poppy's letting him have visitors if they don't stay too long. He's had various Slytherin children in and out all day." My voice trailed off. Poppy had given me that news when I'd gone down to the hospital wing to ask about Severus. Perhaps visiting with his precious charges would put Severus in a more forgiving mood. I hoped so, desperately. Maybe Severus would talk to me tomorrow? Or at least maybe he wouldn't have me thrown out if I tried to talk to him.

"Filch, come here."

Still cuddling Mrs. Norris, I did what I was told. She'd stopped purring, and her attitude was wary. Looking back, with perfect hindsight, I should have suspected what Moody was going to do. No one can spot trouble about to start like Mrs. Norris can. But my mind was still focused on poor Severus, and the hope that he might be in a slightly better mood tomorrow. I'd forgotten Moody's first lesson. Constant Vigilance. I'd let my guard down.

"Filch!" Moody's voice had deepened to a harsh, dangerous growl. "Pay attention, man!"

That was all the warning he gave me. His heavy wooden staff was suddenly swinging at my head. Heart pounding, I ducked swiftly under a clout that would

have taken my head off, had it connected. What was going on? He'd never physically attacked me before!

Mrs. Norris jumped down from my arms, hissing.

"Have you lost your mind?" I shouted at Moody.

"Defend yourself, Squib!" he snarled.

Dropping his staff, he tackled me, knocking me off my feet. The two of us fell together, struggling, towards the wall of the Headmaster's office. Towards the green-and-silver Door.

Both Moody's eyes were locked on mine. His expression went from crazed to the look that I couldn't read.

"My fault, whatever happens..." he growled. "Not y-..."

It was all he had time to say. Side by side, we went through the Door.

CHAPTER 5

Squib Doors and Dark Marks

I was desperately glad that Mad-Eye Moody was still alive. Even though my first reaction, when Poppy had assured me that he was not in any mortal danger had been to snarl, "Good, then I can kill him!"

Moody was feeling so wretched that he might have considered death a mercy.

My very own Defense Against The Dark Arts (for Squibs) Professor, a wizard that I'd come to respect and admire, was shuddering violently while painful heaves wracked his body. I supported him with an arm behind

his back and held a basin out in front of him. He was shaking too badly to hold the basin for himself.

Though I was trembling nearly as much as he was, I did my best to keep the basin steady. My best wasn't quite good enough but Moody was too miserable to care about the splatters on his blanket, the bed and the floor around him.

Mrs. Norris had retreated to what she hoped was a safe position, underneath Moody's bed. Moody and I had tumbled through the green-and-silver Door into the hospital wing, but Mrs. Norris had taken the long way around to get here. She'd been giving me baleful looks ever since. I had a sinking feeling that she was not going to be trusting me out of her sight again any time soon.

Mad-Eye was so pale that all the scars on his face seemed to have vanished (except for the missing chunk from his nose.) His electric-blue magical eye had been removed and was now resting in an empty water glass on the table beside his bed. Both lids, the one over his empty socket and his normal eye, were tightly shut.

"I d-don't feel the slightest bit sorry for you!" I muttered to him. "Serves you right!"

Moody replied the only way he could. He gasped and threw up some more. Then he sagged against my arm and moaned.

"What were you *thinking*?" I cried. "Were you thinking at all? Didn't I tell you it would be horrible?"

"D-didn't... die," Moody managed to choke out. His voice was a very pale shadow of its usual gruff self. "Not e-even... cl-close to dead. Not like... Snape...!"

Incredibly, he managed to sound just the slightest bit triumphant.

"No," I snarled, exasperated. "You're not dead! Congratulations. You probably just wish you were! Of all the stupid...! Do you know how close I came to losing my grip on you?"

Moody's normal human eye opened to look at me with interest. But the interest was replaced a second later by abject misery. He began to heave again.

"Argus Filch," said a small squeaky voice behind me, "Winky is taking over now, sir. Mess in front ward is all cleaned up. Argus Filch must give Alastor Moody to Winky now."

I turned and looked into the huge brown eyes of a house-elf.

"Thank you for letting me sit here with him while you cleaned up, Winky," I said. "I just wanted to make sure that h-he was really all right." My voice shook.

Winky reached out one tiny, long-fingered hand and patted my shoulder fondly. Then she scuttled forward to take the basin from me, settling herself in front of Moody not a moment too soon.

The house-elf held the basin a lot steadier than I'd managed to do. She also crooned soft, comforting words to Moody while he was being sick, which was kinder than my scolding had been.

My experience with house-elves is limited to the ones that I know at Hogwarts. My family was old and pure blooded, but we were not the sort who had a manor or a house-elf. Winky is a newcomer to the

Castle. I don't know what her story is, no one has told me. She spends a great deal of time helping Poppy in the hospital wing. She seems far more content here than she does anywhere else in the Castle.

(I am guessing that Winky must have been freed by a former master before she came to Hogwarts. She wears clothes instead of the usual monogrammed tea towel. Though she's changed her style since she first came. Poppy has given her many scarves; pretty gauzy ones, plain ones, knitted ones and formal ones. Poppy pretends that they are old scarves that she doesn't want any longer. Winky wears them draped around her, like a kilt.)

Winky remained fond of anyone who had ever been "her" patient. I knew this from personal experience. Months ago, she had helped to take care of me while I was recovering from my little outing with the Death Eaters.

I thought that Winky seemed especially protective as she tended to Moody. And much sadder than she usually is, at least when she's taking care of someone who needs her.

"Where's Poppy with his sleeping draught?" I asked Winky.

"Madam Poppy is making it up now, Argus Filch. Madam Poppy's potions and draughts is running rather low, sir. Poor Professor Snape is being much too ill to help her make more."

She turned back to Moody.

Biting my lip, I looked down the dimly lit ward, to another occupied bed. I felt steadier now. And I needed to know how Severus was doing.

"Where is Argus Filch going?" the elf asked me as I got up.

"I just want to have a look at him, Winky," I told her sadly. "He can't get angry at me for doing that if he's asleep, can he?"

"Argus Filch must not wake Professor Snape!"

"Argus Filch wouldn't dream of it," I said, trying to walk quietly.

It was already too late. When I reached Snape's bed I was met by a glare that looked even more corrosive than usual on his pale, gaunt face.

"So..." he sneered, weakly. "The deadly Squib Flu has claimed another victim. Tell me, Filch, what did Moody do to annoy you? Was he clumping around the castle with mud on his wooden leg? Or did he presume to test your defensive reflexes with a Fanged Frisbee or a Screaming Yo-Yo?"

Severus was *talking* to me! (All right, he was insulting me, but maybe it was a start.)

"Or perhaps..." Snape's weak voice became even more venomous, "he just asked you to do one simple little thing for him." His sneer intensified. "And you did not like his tone. So you made a vicious attempt on his life!"

I felt heartsick. "Professor, forgive me, please...! I didn't know what going through the Door would do to you. I never wanted to harm you. Please believe me!"

"Argus Filch! You is being bad! You is waking poor Professor Snape!" Winky cried.

"It's quite all right," Snape said to Winky, politely enough. "He did not wake me. I was not sleeping."

Moody's voice was nearly as weak as Snape's. And nearly as venomous. "You... leave Filch... alone... Snape. Not his fault!" He broke off with a moan, fighting to control his nausea. "My fault. Tricked him.... -oooh—"

Losing his battle, he collapsed, gasping, over the basin again.

Snape's lip curled. "You tricked Filch into nearly killing you? Brilliant, Moody. Not quite as brilliant as being tricked yourself, captured and locked up in your own trunk. But it's close."

I had no idea what Professor Snape was talking about. Strangely enough, Winky seemed to know. She flinched.

Mad-Eye was clearly infuriated. His normal eye was blazing nearly as brightly as his magical one, in the glass on his table.

"The Door...didn't nearly kill me!" Moody choked, when he could talk again. "Traveling through it was very ...unpleasant. Though, compared to what happened to you,... I got off lightly. You...tell him... Filch."

Snape skewered me with a glower.

"That's true," I said quietly. "Moody's been even sicker than poor Neville and Ginny were. But that's all. He didn't stop breathing... h-he didn't... there was no blood..." I shuddered, clenching my hands tightly, remembering Snape's condition after I'd pulled him through the same Door.

I took a deep breath. "Poppy thinks that he may even be on his feet again by tomorrow."

Snape's dark eyes widened. His strength was returning very slowly, and he'd already been bedridden for several days.

"We're both Slytherin wizards, Snape..." Moody's voice was a little steadier now. "Both of us were taken through Salazar's Door. Both of us triggered some powerful protective spells. But you were hit a good deal harder than I was. Now, my question is ...Why?"

There was a look of satisfaction on Moody's pale, sweaty face. Weakly, he held out his left forearm. The old Auror had scars aplenty. But no Dark Mark.

"Could it be that Salazar's Door doesn't much care for your ... taint?" Moody growled. "Your still-active link to the Dark forces which are seeking to bring this Castle down?"

Moody might just as well have clubbed Severus with his heavy staff, the one that was still lying on the floor of the Headmaster's office. Snape withdrew in on himself, wrapping his blanket around him like a cloak. Pulling his left arm against his body, he winced in pain.

"It's not his fault!" I cried to Moody. "You know that thing won't ever come off!"

"Shut up, Filch," Severus said, bitterly. "Your help is neither wanted, nor needed."

"Not his fault?" Moody looked at me, incredulously. "Did you imagine that the Dark Mark just appeared on his arm by *accident*, Filch? That he had it done for a lark? He always was the sort of Slytherin that gives us all a bad name!"

"Not any more!" I said. I shivered helplessly as I was ambushed by a memory. December. Rusty chains. Terrible pain. Blood everywhere, almost all of it mine. And Snape's voice, even colder than the snow. Apparently indifferent to my suffering as he'd stood there in

a Death Eater guise he carried inside him always, and could assume at will. He had to be convincing. I knew that. If they didn't think he was one of them, they'd kill him. Or worse, they'd leave him to the "mercy" of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named.

Severus had saved my life. I'd rewarded him with a month of fear and mistrust. And later he'd paid a very painful price for his bravery. Severus was getting my help now, whether he wanted and needed it, or not.

"He's not that sort any more," I repeated. "Besides, there could be other reasons why the Door harmed him worse than it did you. He hasn't been well, not since he suffered the Cru..."

"Shut up, Filch!" Snape snarled.

"I'm right, aren't I?" Moody's single eye met Severus's gaze. "And you know it, even if Filch doesn't. Did going through Salazar's Door give you a pain in that Mark of yours?"

His movements slow, Severus turned so that his back was towards us. The desperate look of shame on his face as he turned away was like a knife in my heart. Both Winky and I glowered at Moody.

"You didn't have to do that!" I said to my teacher.

"Poor Professor Snape," Winky said, reprovingly, "is not being a bad Dark wizard any longer."

I reached out to adjust Severus's blanket, but stopped. I didn't have the nerve to touch him.

"I'm so very sorry," I said, to his impassive back. "Please believe that. Please."

Snape made no response. I hadn't really expected

one. His anger at me was twisted up in his own shame and guilt. He would never forgive me. I wasn't going to give up, in spite of that.

I stood up slowly. I walked back over to Moody's bed and collapsed into a chair beside it.

"Poor Argus Filch is not meaning to be so bad." Winky patted my shoulder again. Then she took the full basin away from Moody. His stomach finally seemed to have settled down, somewhat.

Mrs. Norris, suspecting that the coast was now clear, emerged from underneath Moody's bed and leaped into my lap. I hugged her gratefully. Apparently she'd forgiven me for the upsetting evening we'd just spent because she began to purr.

"Alastor Moody should lie down and rest now. Winky is bringing clean blankets and a clean robe for sir," she said. Then she vanished with a sound like a whip-crack.

Mad-Eye lay back against his pillow. A little color had come back into his face and his scars were visible again. He still looked ill and in pain.

"Filch," he said, gruffly, "I suspected why Snape had nearly died when you took him through that Door, but I had to test my theory. I had to *know*. You had to know, too. You thought what happened to him was all your fault. You're tearing yourself up over it. But some of the blame belongs to him. You didn't put that filthy Mark on his arm, did you?"

"No, but I took him through the Door out of spite, because he made me angry. That was wrong," I said quietly.

"Yes," Moody grunted, "it was. And I was wrong to trick

you. I'm sorry. I didn't think you'd agree to take me through, so it seemed like the only way to get what I wanted."

"What," I asked him, angrily, "if you'd been wrong?"

He smiled, wearily. "I trusted you to get me through to the other side, one way or another, Filch. Just like you were able to get Snape through, still breathing."

"It was a very near thing, both times," I said, furiously. "When I carry passengers, it's a struggle. It was hardest with Severus, but it was still bad enough with you."

Moody shivered. "You said you nearly lost your grip on me. What do you think would happen to a passenger that you let go of while they were still inside?"

I felt ill. "I guess they'd be left behind, trapped. I don't know how I'd ever find them again. When I go through on my own, the journey's over in a single step. I can't slow down and look for anyone. Please, don't ask me to take any more passengers. I won't do it. Never again."

"The Fates enjoy laughing at people who say 'never,' Filch," Moody told me. "But you have my word. I won't ask. And I'll play no more tricks."

"But," he continued, fiercely, "consider this. Those Doors of yours can be a powerful weapon, now that we know they have a particular dislike for Death Eaters."

Too tired to say any more, he reached out a shaky hand and clapped me on the shoulder.

My eyes widened. Distracted by my guilt and worry over Severus, I hadn't thought about my Doors as a potential weapon. It was a new idea, strange and frightening.

Deep in thought, I stayed by Moody's bed. When Winky came back she allowed me to help her change

his blankets and clean him up.

We were finishing up when Poppy came into the ward. She looked tired, and was carrying two doses of a sleeping draught. She stopped by Snape's bed first.

Wordlessly, Severus took the cup from her, balancing it carefully in his bandaged hands. He drained it, grimacing.

"I know, I know. Not nearly as smooth as yours..." Poppy sighed. "When you get back on your feet again, I will have plenty of work for you."

She looked at me, then. Her expression reassured me that Severus would be back on his feet, eventually.

It was Moody's turn next. He was too shaky to hold the cup, so she held it for him. Within moments they were both asleep.

Poppy sighed again, looking at Winky, Mrs. Norris and me. "Thank goodness. That's the only way I can leave these two alone together in this ward with a clear conscience!"

"Have you told the Headmaster about what happened tonight?" I asked her.

Poppy shook her head. "Albus needs a few nights of unbroken rest just as badly as the next wizard. This can keep until morning. Oh, dear, it is morning. Well, afternoon then. I believe I'll let Alastor try to explain himself to Albus. That should be ...interesting." She smiled.

"Get yourself to bed, now, Argus," she told me gently.

I realized that I was very tired.

"Make sure that he sleeps," Poppy said to Mrs. Norris. "Don't let him out of bed before lunchtime tomorrow."

Mrs. Norris blinked her golden eyes and fixed me with a stern glare.

The wall behind me shifted to accommodate poor, overworked green-and-silver, who could probably do with a rest as well.

Bidding Poppy and Winky a weary "good morning," I stepped through my Door with Mrs. Norris beside me.



Keeping a roomful of young wizards and witches from blowing themselves or their cauldrons to bits while they are learning the subtle science and exact art of potion making, is no easy task. Sometimes it's impossible.

Every Professor who'd covered one of Snape's Potions classes while Severus was ill had learned a new respect for the man. Today had been Professor Grubbly-Plank's turn with the fifth-year Gryffindors and Slytherins. I was on my way over to Snape's classroom, carrying a ladder, a bucket, plenty of magical mess remover (extra strength) and an assortment of scrubbing brushes.

"Filch! Come quickly! It's all over the ceiling!!" Professor Grubbly-Plank had shouted, via my office fireplace.

"Why is it *always* all over the ceiling?" I grumbled to Mrs. Norris. "I hate scrubbing ceilings! Mess remover dripping in my eyes, and my arms and back aching for hours afterwards! Why can't the brats just stick to blowing things up all over the floors and the walls?"

I hadn't had the heart to ask Professor Grubbly-Plank precisely what was all over the ceiling. Something dis-

gusting, no doubt. I would be finding out soon enough.

Mrs. Norris and I were heading down the main dungeon corridor towards Snape's classroom when we heard pounding feet behind us. In a foul temper I whirled around, prepared to shout at the brats for running in the corridor. It had been a while since I'd assigned a detention. Doing so would definitely cheer me up a bit.

But when I saw who was running and got a good look at their faces, I shouted for a different reason.

"Neville...! What is it? Are you all right?"

"Fine... I'm fine..." Neville gasped, though he was white as a freshly laundered sheet. "But, Draco... he's..."

Reluctantly, I looked at the three other boys who were with Neville. Draco Malfoy, Gregory Goyle and Vincent Crabbe. My stomach clenched like a fist. The sight of the three Death Eater Spawn always made me tremble. Being near them made me feel as if I was going to be sick.

I knew that my feelings towards them were unfair. Those boys had never treated me with an ounce of respect, but they had never truly harmed me either. It was their fathers who had tortured me. I didn't care about being fair. Some day I might be able to convince my mind that the boys were blameless, but I thought it would be impossible to convince my innards. Had these evil wretches done something to Neville? It wouldn't have been the first time they'd bullied my young friend!

I was going to start yelling at the three Slytherins. Then I noticed that they were as pale as Neville. And Crabbe and Goyle were supporting Draco Malfoy. Draco's face was nearly colorless. He was shuddering

violently, grey eyes clenched shut in shock and pain. His right arm, held slightly out from his body, had something wire-thin and sickly green wound around it.

"Sweet Circe, tell me that's not what I think it is!" I gasped.

Suddenly my hatred for Draco mattered little. A wizard-child with one of those vines wrapped around his arm was suffering the kind of torment I would only wish on an adult Death Eater.

"Help him, Mr. Filch!" Neville cried. "Please, help him!"

Draco was sliding to his knees when I reached him, nearly unconscious with pain. I didn't know how the boy had managed to stay on his feet for as long as he had done. Neville was keeping a steady cooling charm on Draco's arm, but the agony must have still been intense.

Crabbe and Goyle continued to hover over Draco, even if there was nothing they could do. They were loyal, I had to give them that. Pulling Draco into my lap I began wrenching the vine off his arm.

I felt the edges of a wave of cold. Neville had increased the strength of the cooling charm he was using on the injured Slytherin. Draco shuddered, crying out, but he managed to stay remarkably still until I'd gotten the vine all the way off him. As I flung it on the floor behind me I heard two voices shout,

"INCENDIO!!"

Crabbe and Goyle quickly reduced the vine to ashes. Fueled by their anger, their spell was too strong. A wave of heat scalded my back. I hissed in pain, shielding Draco and Neville with my body.

Mrs. Norris had retreated down the corridor to a safe distance. Her fur was bristling and her eyes were glowing like small, golden lamps.

"Stop!" Neville shouted at Crabbe and Goyle. "It's dead! That's enough!"

The two bigger boys obeyed.

"Hospital wing..." I said, after a few moments. "Malfoy should get to the hospital wing."

"That's where we were taking him," Neville said, getting his breath back. "We were lucky to run into you on our way. I don't know if Draco would have made it."

"I would have." Draco's voice was muffled, his face hidden against my shirt. He was shaking violently, as Neville had done under similar circumstances.

I saw Neville rubbing his own right arm in sympathy. His arm was no longer in a sling, and his bandages had finally come off. Poppy had assured him that the scars would fade, eventually.

"W-where did this happen?" I asked Neville. "Where did the vine attack him?"

Neville looked at the three Slytherins, his round face full of compassion. "Inside the Slytherin dormitory," he told me softly.

Draco was trembling so hard in my arms that I was shaking along with him. Crabbe's and Goyle's brutish faces were filled with fear. Suddenly, my hatred for the three of them seemed unimportant. The petty hatred of a small-minded man.

"Can't take me t-to ...hospital wing," Draco gasped. "Professor Snape mustn't ...know about any of this."

Don't want ...to worry him. I must get Professor Sprout. Br-bring her into our dormitory."

"Don't be stupid!" I said harshly. "You can't go anywhere but the hospital wing in the condition you're in!" I looked at Crabbe. "You. Go to the Potions classroom and tell Professor Grubbly-Plank that the ceiling has to wait."

Turning to Goyle, I said "You. Go find Professor Sprout. Tell her what's happening. She'll know what to do. Let her, and whoever else she needs to help her, into your dormitory. RUN!"

Once they'd left, I tried to stand up with Draco in my arms. The boy had grown tall and I couldn't manage it.

"Neville, can you levitate him and keep that Cooling Charm on him?"

"Wingardium Leviosa!"

I still held Draco to keep him steady, but Neville's spell took most of the other boy's weight.

"Tell me what happened!" I said, as Neville and I moved Draco gently through the corridor, Mrs. Norris padding softly after us.

"The three of them came to me. They..." Neville's eyes were wide, as if he still couldn't believe what he was about to say, "they asked me to help them. Actually, it was Draco who did the asking. He was ...polite about it."

Incredibly, the boy I carried was able to summon a very weak laugh. He murmured something into my shirt that sounded like "...better to ask a Gryffindor than a Hufflepuff."

"At first I thought," Neville said, frowning at Draco for his rudeness though the other boy couldn't see, "that they might be joking. But when I really saw the looks on their faces..." he shivered.

"Draco told me that the Slytherin first years, both the boys and the girls, were still having nightmares," Neville continued. "He said that the little ones kept saying that they heard rustling in the walls. And he realized that Professor Sprout had not been inside the Slytherin dormitories to check for the vines in nearly a week. Not since Professor Snape has been ill. He was always the one who'd let her in."

"She'd never found anything before," Neville went on. "The dormitories had always been clean. But today," he gulped, "today, when I went in there with Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle, I could feel the vines growing. The other rooms were clean, but in the dormitories where the first years sleep..." his voice trailed off in horror.

I could still hear Severus Snape's haunted voice. "It would have taken them, Argus..." he had said. "The littlest ones. Just like that. Swiftly, silently. No chance even to scream. None of us knew that the parts could keep twitching for so long after the brain was destroyed. None of us knew..."

The vines had invaded the place where his children slept! It was his worst fear.

"He mustn't know," Draco moaned into my shirt. "The Professor. He's so ill, and he can't spare the strength for more worrying. He trusted me. I'm the Prefect. It's all my fault. He said that I should let Professor Sprout

continue checking. I promised him I would let her. But I didn't. I thought the dormitories would stay clear. I thought that we didn't need Sprout's help!"

My heart froze. *It's not your fault!* I thought. *It's mine!* Snape had been the one who'd let Professor Sprout in to check the Slytherins' living areas. Until I had left him bedridden, with his children too suspicious of anyone outside their own House to ask for help until it was too late.

"C-couldn't bring myself to go to her... to Sprout," Draco confessed miserably. "But, Longbottom... can do that trick too. So we... Crabbe, Goyle and I, we surrounded him. If good manners hadn't worked... I would have threatened... had Vincent and Gregory knock him down. Would have dragged him with us. The dormitories are all empty now, everyone's at class. At least no one else g-got hurt."

"Did you really think that I would refuse to help you?" Neville said, exasperated. "For that matter, do you think that Professor Sprout would have refused you? I'm sure that if you'd waited much longer she would have come looking for you and *asked* to check your dormitories!"

Shuddering with pain, Draco didn't answer.

"It's a Slytherin trait. They can't seem to help it," I told Neville. "Slytherins don't trust anyone."

"...Because..." Draco gasped, "no one trusts us."

I felt too sick with shame and guilt to say anything.

Neville sighed. "Could be your attitude has something to do with that, Draco. Can you blame the Hufflepuffs for not trusting you? It's a good thing that Hufflepuffs are known for their patience! Anyhow, don't worry.

Professor Sprout will take care of everything now. I'm sure that your dormitories will be cleared of vines before tonight..."

We'd reached the hospital wing.

"Don't tell Professor Snape..." Draco moaned softly. "Don't let him see me. I'll tell him myself, when he's a little better. Not now."

"All right," I promised. "He's not going to hear about it from me."

"Nor me," Neville said, as the two of us got Draco onto a bed in the front ward. I did not dare glance in the direction of the back ward, where Professor Snape probably lay sleeping. (Poppy had muttered that Severus slept fine during the day and fretted all night, like a difficult infant. Fortunately, she had not said that where Severus could hear her.)

Alastor Moody was awake, sitting up in the chair by his bed, magical eye once more in place. Looking much better than he had last night, the old Auror stood up and limped into the front ward.

Draco was the only patient in the ward. Little Gehenna Morgan had finally been well enough to go back to class. I sighed, wondering if the poor child would be able to sleep in her own bed tonight, or if she'd even feel safe there.

Neville stood by Draco's bed, maintaining his cooling charm, while I went into Poppy's office. I didn't have to say anything. She took one look at my face and knew it was serious.

"Well," Moody was saying gruffly to Draco, as I came

back in followed by Poppy. "What's happened to you?"

It's true that Slytherins tend not to trust people outside their own House. But some Slytherins reserve their strongest mistrust for other Slytherins. Despite his pain, Draco was sharing a look of intense dislike with Moody.

"Those damned vines," I told Moody very, very softly, "have invaded the Slytherin dormitories. Draco was the only one hurt. Professor Sprout is probably dealing with the vines right now."

My voice got as deadly as I could make it. It's a tone that I usually reserve for Peeves. "Listen, Moody, if you breathe a word to Severus, if you taunt him about this..."

"Merlin's Beard, Filch! What do you take me for?" Moody looked upset. He also looked more chastened than I'd ever seen him look. I'd been asleep when the Headmaster had spoken to Moody about the events of the previous night. Apparently I'd missed an interesting conference. I hoped that Poppy would fill me in later.

"Headmaster Dumbledore!" I said. "I should tell him about this."

Poppy nodded, as she got to work on Draco's arm. "You can go, Argus. It's all right. He'll be fine..."

"Neville?" I said, "You'd better come too. You were there. I wasn't."



Once again, the dungeons of Hogwarts were in an uproar. When Dumbledore reached the Slytherin dormitories, the news had already spread among the students like wildfire. Most of the Slytherins were

standing outside the wall that concealed the hidden entrance to their common room. They were huddled together, looking terrified.

Even so, many of them tugged at Dumbledore's robe and sleeves. "Please, don't tell Professor Snape," the Headmaster was begged, over and over again. "He'll worry!"

Sprout had already taken care of the vines. The growth hadn't been terribly large, just several clusters of wire-thin tendrils. Severus had last brought her in to check, four days ago; the same the day I'd landed him in the hospital wing. Still, she looked furious with herself for not checking sooner.

"I was going to wait another day!" she berated herself.

The wary Slytherins allowed the Headmaster to accompany them into their dormitory as they went to check on any possible damage to their belongings. It was a measure of how frightened and vulnerable they felt.



I didn't get to clean the ceiling in Snape's classroom until it was nearly dinner time. I didn't stop working to eat. Not hungry anyhow. Food would choke me.

"My fault..." I whispered to Mrs. Norris, who sat, watching me from a safe distance where no Magical Mess Remover would drip down on her. "It's my fault that he wasn't there to watch over them. Everyone in the Castle means well, but no one else ever puts them first. Not like he does..."

When the work was finally done, I was too tired to do anything but sit on the lowest rung of my ladder.

Mrs. Norris came to me and I held her.

"I wanted to hate those three..." I said, dully. "Cursed little Death Eaters. It's so much simpler just to hate them."

"Mr. Filch...?" It was Neville.

"You didn't come to dinner," the boy said, quietly. "Ginny and I were worried about you. She's gone to see if you're in your office, but I remembered that you didn't get a chance to clean in here. Are you all right?"

"You did a brave thing today, Neville," I said, ignoring his question.

Neville blushed. "It wasn't brave, just decent." He smiled, wryly. "I know that Draco isn't very nice. I don't much like him, really. But that didn't matter. I know this may sound strange, but Draco was the one who was really brave. He asked me for help. I could tell it was a hard thing for him to do. He was frightened. He really thought I'd say 'no!'"

I winced. Yes, it had been hard for proud Draco Malfoy to ask Neville Longbottom for help. How much harder had it been for Professor Snape to ask me to bring Neville down to his dungeon corridor to look for vine-growths?

Maybe Severus hadn't wanted to bother Professor Sprout yet again. And Neville had proven his talent so well that day. How difficult it must have been for Severus to admit that he wanted Neville to help him. No wonder he'd been so rude and short-tempered.

I rested my head gently against Mrs. Norris's soft fur.

"N-Neville...?" I murmured. "Could you take your wand and check the corridor outside this classroom

for vines again? Please?"

"All right. Of course I will." He took his time and did a thorough job.

I didn't move until he returned to tell me that the corridor outside Snape's classroom was clean of vines.

"Thank you," I whispered. Such a simple thing for someone with his particular gifts. Neville did it well and it gave him pleasure to do it.

"Mr. Filch? What's wrong? Please, tell me." Whatever he saw in my face was making Neville anxious.

"It's my fault," I said.

"What... the vines? No it isn't!"

"Professor Snape," I said, dully, "is ill because of me. I dragged him through a Door. I thought it would affect him like it did you and Ginny. I didn't know it would be so much worse for a grown wizard. I almost killed him, Neville. Without Poppy, he would have died. He asked me for my help, the way Draco asked you. But he was rude about it. He made me angry."

"Oh!" Neville said, shocked.

I stared at my feet, unable to meet his eyes. "He was upset and frightened and he does so hate to ask for anyone's help," I whispered.

Neville was quiet for a while before he finally spoke. "Frightened? Professor Snape? I never thought about him that way... I never thought about him being scared of anything. He's just about the scariest person in the Castle, isn't he? What frightened him?"

"The thought of losing his Slytherins to the Dark," I murmured. "Or to a creature of the Dark. He'd do any-

thing to protect them."

Neville shivered. "I wonder what a boggart would make of any of those fears...?" he said.

"I probably shouldn't have told you any of this."

"I won't breathe a word to anyone," the boy said, sincerely. "I promise."

"You have a gift, Neville, and you use it like a proper wizard should. To help, not to harm. You should be proud of yourself. I am very proud of you."

And so terribly ashamed of me... I thought. Severus's forgiveness was something I needed. But I no longer felt that it was something I deserved.

CHAPTER 6

Home Fires

"Those cursed vines have seeds!" Professor Sprout had announced triumphantly, this morning. "Much too small to see. They've been attaching themselves to people's hair and robes and spreading through the dungeons!"

Now that she knew her enemy's most insidious form, Sprout had created a spell to force the vine-seeds to glow brightly, revealing themselves. Aided by Dumbledore, she was going through every inch of the dungeons.

Behind Hogwarts Castle, down a small hill, there is a desolate stretch of ground where rubbish and other things that cannot be gotten rid of any other way have always been burned. Earlier today there

had been a roaring bonfire here. A great many items contaminated by the seeds of the vine-beast had been destroyed in the flames.

Professors Sinistra, Flitwick and Vector had kept the pyre floating just off the ground. They also maintained strong, protective spells to prevent anything harmful from escaping the inferno with the smoke or the ashes.

The bonfire had contained items from all over the dungeons which had been contaminated by the vines. Rugs, wall hangings, bed curtains. Anything that Professor Sprout and her best Herbologists had deemed both "questionable" and "expendable."

A few of Professor Sprout's best Herbology students, Neville among them, had taken charge of a smaller collection. Things from the Slytherin first year dormitories that had been "contaminated" but were too precious to burn.

Many children, away from home for the first time, will need the comfort of a familiar doll, or an old, stuffed bear. (Not that I know much about children really, but you can't work at a school like Hogwarts for as long as I have, and not know something like that.) Slytherin children are no different from the rest in that respect.

"We'll do our best to clean these up," one of Sprout's seventh years had promised the youngest Slytherins. "Poor little mites," I'd heard her murmur under her breath.

The Slytherins were still busy sorting out items in their own dormitories. But the job of searching out vine-seeds in the dungeons had spread to include almost everyone in the Castle; house-elves, students

of all four houses, the Professors and the ghosts, who were particularly adept at spotting glowing nests of seeds. The dungeons were as lively as a recently kicked-over anthill.

Now, as a final precaution, Hagrid was sprinkling small, blue-green crystals of copper sulfate on the blackened ground. The crystals would discourage plant growth on this spot.

With Professor Snape's written permission, Slytherin fifth year Pansy Parkinson had fetched the crystals from his supplies and brought them out to Hagrid. I'd seen the note, scrawled on a piece of parchment. Much shakier than the Professor's usual neat hand, but still recognizable.

Poor Snape had written as if he could barely hold the quill. I didn't know who had thought of the crystals or who had asked the Professor for his permission to use them. When I'd last seen Snape in the hospital wing, he'd been in no condition to talk to anyone.

I sat on the ground and shivered in the chill evening air, watching Hagrid work. I was supposed to be helping him but he wouldn't let me do anything. The fact that I was covered with bruises, with my right arm bound up in a sling probably had something to do with that.

Hagrid had taken one look at me, sighed and shaken his head. Reaching into a pocket of that mole-skin monstrosity he wears, he'd pulled out a bottle and put in my good hand.

"Here, Filch. Yeh need it. An' it'll warm yeh up a bit."

I usually refuse anything that Hagrid offers me to drink. I've got no head for drinking and I suffer

terribly on the mornings after, on the rare occasions when I do indulge. Right now, none of that mattered. A drink was something that I needed desperately. I didn't know exactly what was in the bottle but I didn't much care. It burned its fiery way down my throat and into my stomach.

"Thank you, Hagrid," I muttered.

Mrs. Norris did not approve of what I was doing. Her golden eyes were regarding me reproachfully.

I'd been anxious about bringing my cat outside with me. Usually the corridors of Hogwarts are all the world that she needs or wants. But she'd mewed so pit-eously when I'd tried to leave her at the Castle's front door. Mrs. Norris had looked at me and decided that I could not be trusted to wander about on my own.

Her laid-back ears and lashing tail told me that I'd better not even think of bringing up a certain Basilisk, either. She'd gotten herself Petrified once, just once, and I never let her forget it!

Hagrid had brought Fang with him too, but the question of dominance was quickly settled with a hiss and a quick flash of Mrs. Norris's claws. Fang yelped and retreated, whimpering, to nurse his sore nose. Shaking his head, Hagrid patted the boarhound comfortingly and returned to his work.

Fang, the great slobbering beast, settled himself next to me, on the side opposite from Mrs. Norris. He rested his head on my knee. The mournful look in his eyes urged me to be kind to another creature who was among the walking wounded. Grumbling, I let Fang

leave his head on my knee. He drooled. Mrs. Norris ignored him, loftily.

After Hagrid had finished spreading the crystals he sat on the ground, just close enough to reach the bottle when I passed it to him. Being too near Mrs. Norris makes him sneeze. After a few moments, Fang got up and trotted over to lie beside his master.

Hagrid withdrew his battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. He pointed it and suddenly there was a small, cheerful fire, burning in midair, over the site of today's bonfire. He gave me a quick, furtive look, but I didn't comment. (Not even to remind him that he'd been proven innocent, and he could have a proper wand now, if he chose.) We spent a while in companionable silence. There were ghosts on this small hillside with Hagrid and me. Not real ghosts, like the ones in the Castle. Just shadows and memories.

"Jus' like old times," the big man said, gruffly.

I nodded. It almost seemed like the years had fallen away, leaving both of us younger. Two men, many years dead, felt so near that I could almost see them.

Ogg, the gamekeeper before Hagrid. Old Apollyon Pringle, my predecessor as caretaker. The two of them had been friends and they had spent many a night out here, drinking together over the years. Hagrid, Ogg's apprentice, had been with them, sometimes. I'd joined them, now and again, too. Not to drink, just to listen to their talk. Most of what I knew about Pringle, I only knew because I'd overheard him talking to Ogg.

Sometimes it's soothing to take refuge in drink and

the comforting safety of the past. Hagrid and I sat quietly, passing the bottle between us, and remembered them for a while.



Earlier today I'd been heading down the Castle's front steps, with a bundle of rugs meant for the bonfire, when I'd run into my worst nightmare.

Exhausted from days spent barely eating or sleeping, it took me a moment to recognize Lucius Malfoy. Clad in a long, black traveling cloak, he was standing at the foot of the stone steps.

I'd frozen as if Petrified by a Basilisk. The thuds and thumps as I dropped the bundles of rugs I'd been carrying, hardly registered.

"You," he said, in his elegant drawl. "Take me to Headmaster Dumbledore. At once."

For months I had felt ill and frightened in the presence of the children of Death Eaters. Young Slytherins who had not yet chosen their path. Now, here was the real thing. The wizard who'd had me chained up in a freezing pit and ordered his underlings to cut bits and pieces off me so that he could try to use my blood, flesh and bone to work an ancient Dark spell.

"N-no..." I said. "I c-can't do that. You can't..."

I wasn't supposed to remember what I had suffered at his hands. But I did. I remembered everything.

Lucius Malfoy was climbing the steps towards me. I hastily pulled the Castle's front door closed and then I blocked his way. The Castle's front door has protective

spells of its own. Students, staff and professors could enter freely. Everyone else had to be escorted. He knew that.

I tried to face him bravely, though the memories were making me tremble inside. Blood. Cold. Pain! Merlin, protect me. Don't let what I remember show in my face. Don't let him see. Merlin, protect poor Severus, lying ill in the hospital wing upstairs. Snape had lied to this Dark wizard. He'd said that he'd had put a Memory Charm on me. If Malfoy discovered the truth, I would not be the only one who suffered.

"You can't come in," I said, more firmly. My eyes locked on his. There, that was better.

"I insist!" Lucius Malfoy said icily. "I have just heard some very distressing news. Three of Draco's friends have owled their parents, saying that he has been severely injured by some plant that's invaded the Slytherin dormitories!"

He reached me, and stood at the top of the steps, looming over me. "Since I have not yet heard from Draco myself, I am assuming that my son is too badly hurt to write me a letter! I demand to speak with Dumbledore, immediately! How could he have allowed this to happen?"

"The Headmaster had nothing to do with what happened!" I exclaimed.

Lucius Malfoy looked as if the dirt beneath his feet had suddenly taken on a human form and gained a voice. His gaze was impersonal and disapproving, as if he was observing a disobedient house elf. I was nothing to him. Less than nothing.

"Don't be insolent," he said, dangerously. "You have been told to take me to Albus Dumbledore. Do so. At once."

Insolent! Well! No one has ever had cause to call me that before. Oh, I'm usually grumpy, but I generally give adult witches and wizards the respect that they deserve! Then again, this man was a Death Eater. He did not deserve my respect.

"The Headmaster is a very busy man," I said, brusquely. Inside, I was shaking with terror.

Eyes as cold and grey as swirling mist locked on mine. Then Lucius Malfoy gripped my right arm, twisting it, hurting me. I couldn't get free. He was very strong. His hand felt like iron. Causing pain came so easily to him. It was second nature.

"You. Will. Take. Me. Inside. Now." With each word, he wrenched my arm further behind my back. The joint in my shoulder protested. "Do as you are told... Squib."

He spun me around so that both of us were facing the Castle's front door. The pain in my shoulder and arm was making me dizzy. I wasn't even aware that I'd summoned my Door until I saw it. Black-and-yellow. The tapestry had appeared on the huge oak front door of Hogwarts Castle. Lucius Malfoy was staring right at the faded tapestry. He didn't seem to see it. And he was dragging us forward, together.

The memory of Snape's agony filled me with shame and would probably haunt me forever. Taking Lucius Malfoy through black-and-yellow would kill him outright. Could I really do that deliberately? To anyone, even Lucius Malfoy? Of course I could, if I

truly feared for my life. But such was not the case, now. It wouldn't be an accident this time. It would be premeditated, cold-blooded murder.

I hated this man with all my heart! His death would not grieve me in the slightest. But I didn't want to be the cause of it. He might be here for some Dark purposes. But he was also here as a father, worried about his son.

I tried to send my Door away. I tried. But black-and-yellow didn't seem inclined to go.

"Stop..." I gasped, struggling with Lucius Malfoy.

At the same time, Hagrid shouted "STOP!"

Still twisting my arm behind my back, Lucius Malfoy turned, pulling me with him.

Hagrid stood at the foot of the stone steps. There were four students with him. Through eyes that were watering with pain, I saw Harry Potter, Hermione Granger, Ron and Ginny Weasley. My small, red-haired friend was looking up at me, anxiously.

"Hagrid," Malfoy said coldly. "I'm here to see Dumbledore."

"Malfoy," Hagrid growled. "D'yeh have an appointment?"

Sick with fear, and the knowledge that Malfoy was only a few steps away from a messy, painful death at my hands, one I wasn't sure that I could prevent, I snorted with terrified, helpless laughter. *An appointment!* Oh, that was brilliant! I wished I'd thought of it.

Hagrid's eyes widened as he looked past Malfoy and me. To my surprise, I realized that he noticed the Door. He appeared to know exactly what it was.

"Jus' let Mr. Filch go, Malfoy. An' I'll send someone to fetch the Headmaster for yeh," Hagrid said. The big

man sounded a bit more conciliatory now.

Lucius Malfoy thought that Hagrid was only worrying about what might happen to me. The Death Eater didn't know that he was in mortal danger, too.

Malfoy made an angry sound. I didn't hear the spell he muttered. It was as if a huge hand had picked me up, dangling me in mid-air. Then, with sickening force, the unseen hand threw me down the stairs. My body slammed hard against the stone. Then, for good measure, Malfoy's spell threw me directly at Hagrid.

Hagrid is half-giant. Giants are an elder race. It's said that their bones are stronger than stone, sturdy as the mountains. It may be true. When Hagrid caught me, I felt as if I'd hit a wall.

"Ooof!" the big man grunted, nearly knocked off his feet. He was able to keep his balance, barely. He supported me with one arm. Stunned, barely conscious, I would have fallen otherwise.

"H-he... I-I..." I choked, painfully. "Hagrid... I wasn't going t-to... I *wasn't*..."

"It's all righ,' Filch," Hagrid said, gruffly. "Yeh've done no wrong."

He was breathing a bit raggedly. I supposed that being bludgeoned with a Squib had not been the high point of his day, either. The four children with Hagrid moved in front of us, protectively. It was a foolhardy thing to do, but they were a group of Gryffindors.

The Castle's front door opened, from the inside, interrupting the stand-off.

"Mr. Malfoy. I understand that you wish to see me?"

It was the Headmaster. His voice was calm.

"Yes," Lucius Malfoy said, icily. "I do."

"You had better come in then," Dumbledore said. His voice held none of his usual gentleness, or good humor. He sounded every bit as hard as Hagrid's unyielding giant bones.

Lucius Malfoy and Albus Dumbledore walked into Hogwarts Castle, side by side.



The next thing I knew I was in Hagrid's hut, lying on his huge bed. I supposed that I must have fainted. I ached like I'd been beaten. Hagrid was beside me, cleaning my bloody scrapes with a damp towel. When I groaned, Ginny Weasley came over to the bed, holding one of Hagrid's bucket-sized teacups.

"Here, Mr. Filch, drink this," she said, helping me sit up so I wouldn't spill tea all over Hagrid's quilt.

"What were yeh thinkin, 'yeh old git?" Hagrid demanded, waving the bloody towel at me. "Talkin' ter Lucius Malfoy that way! Yeh know what he is! Yeh're lucky that he didn't..."

"What?" I said, wincing. "Throw you at me instead? The result would have been the same... one black and blue Squib. How long was I...?"

"Jus' a few minutes. I brought yeh in here. Ginny came in, t'help me look after yeh. Malfoy wanted ter see Draco in the hospital wing, an' I thought it best ter keep yeh out o' his way fer a bit."

Hagrid's usually ruddy face was pale. "An' Malfoy,

that slimy git, was very lucky too, Filch. Wasn't he?"

I nodded, my face as pale as Hagrid's. No one had told me that Hagrid was on the "Need to Know" list. But, when I thought about it, he was an obvious choice. Of course the Keeper of the Keys at Hogwarts would need to know about every Door.

Ginny said quietly, "You could have done to Mr. Malfoy what you did to Professor Snape. But you didn't."

I choked on the tea. "Ginny! How did you...?" I asked, shame-faced.

"Neville told me. Please don't be angry at him. I've been worried about you and I didn't know why you've been so upset these past few days. Neville thought I'd feel better if I knew the reason. He was right."

Her eyes were bright with sympathy. "Professor Snape is your friend. You never meant to hurt him."

"He's not my friend!" I sputtered, spilling tea all over myself and the quilt. "I don't have friends! He's... just..."

I sighed, looking at her sweet little face. "Oh, Ginny. Professor Snape is not my friend any longer. He's never going to forgive me for what I did to him."

"I think he will," Ginny comforted me. "Once he finally feels better. Professor Snape has done much harder things in his life than forgive a friend, I'm sure of it." She patted my shoulder.

"And you still do have friends," she added, fiercely. "You have me. And Neville. And Mrs. Norris! I'm glad that you didn't kill Draco's father," she went on. "Even if he is..." her voice broke off, and she shuddered.

"They would have sent you to Azkaban, and it's

a terrible place, isn't it, Hagrid?" she said, her face so pale that all her freckles stood out. "Mrs. Norris wouldn't have liked it there at all. You know that she goes wherever you go."

She smiled at me. "Mrs. Norris is probably looking all over the Castle for you now. She's going to be out of sorts because you've wandered off again."

I managed a wry smile too. I've cared for a few students, here and there, over the years. Still, the strength of my feelings for Ginny and Neville was something new to me.

I wondered what Ginny's brothers made of her friendship with the surly old caretaker and his cat. Once, when I asked Ginny, she'd grinned.

"My brothers all know that you saved me and Neville from the vines. When I try to tell them that you and Mrs. Norris are really quite nice, they look at me as if I've gone mental."

"Ginny, you mustn't go about telling people that I'm *nice*."

"Why not? You are!"

The memory made me smile again, in spite of how dreadful I felt. When I drank as much of the tea as I could, I handed the cup back to Ginny.

Hagrid and Ginny tried to make me lie down and rest for a while, but I just sat on the bed and fretted. I'd just had a terrible thought.

"Lucius Malfoy! He's going up to the hospital wing and he knows about what's happened in the Slytherin dormitories! What if he tells Professor Snape? Severus

doesn't know yet. I can't let him find out that way. I have to stop Malfoy!"

Hagrid gave a shout. One of the walls of his hut had just ...shifted. The three of us stared incredulously as a faded, nondescript tapestry appeared on Hagrid's wall, the one nearest the bed.

"I didn't know yeh could do that in my house," the big man said.

"Neither did I!" I said, wide-eyed.

"Which one is it?" Ginny asked me.

"It's black-and-yellow again," I said. Mad-Eye Moody is the only one besides me who can tell the Doors apart. "The one that tried to save me from Malfoy."

"Maybe It wants to make sure that you're all right," Ginny said.

I blinked at her in surprise. Trust Ginny to sense the personalities inside my Doors. Not even Moody could do that. But the Headmaster knew about them too. Dumbledore had told me that the Doors had an awareness when I'd first shown them to him.

"The magical tools created by powerful witches and wizards can acquire a life of their own," he'd said. "The Tapestries have been ...lonely. I believe that they are quite pleased that someone is finding them useful again."

I remembered something else that Dumbledore had told me. "With more training I believe you may be able to learn how to summon them at will and use them to take you anywhere inside the Castle. Or maybe even outside, within its boundaries."

"Hagrid.?" I asked, "the protective spells from the

Castle, they extend out here to your house, don't they?"

He nodded. "Yeh can't Apparate or Disapparate from here, if that's what yeh mean."

Ginny's eyes went even wider. "Does that mean you can call them to you anywhere inside the Castle's defensive spells, Mr. Filch? How far around the Castle do the spells go?"

"I don't know, exactly," I said, climbing stiffly off Hagrid's bed.

"Maybe it's written down somewhere in HOGWARTS, A HISTORY," Ginny murmured, thoughtfully. "I can always ask Hermione. She'll know, if anyone does."

"I'm truly sorry about this, Hagrid," I said, limping towards my Door. "But Professor Flitwick has nearly perfected an Unreachable Charm if you want a way to keep me out."

"Not that I'd really *want* to come barging in here uninvited, mind you," I added in a lower voice.

"Where d'yeh think yeh're goin'?" Hagrid demanded, catching me as I stumbled.

"I've already told you, you great oaf!" I said, irritably. "To the hospital wing!"

"Listen ter me, yeh old git! Malfoy was headed there. Yeh want to keep yehself out 'o his way! The Headmaster can look after Professor Snape!"

I shook my head. He didn't understand! I could not explain, not in front of Ginny. And I wasn't sure how much Hagrid really knew about Snape's role as Dumbledore's spy among the Death Eaters, anyhow. But I knew that Dumbledore could not afford to let

Lucius Malfoy see how deeply he cared about Severus. Malfoy must see Snape only as a loyal Death Eater, a hidden turncoat within the Castle. So much depended on that. The Headmaster's ability to shield Snape from anything that Malfoy might say or do to him in anger would be very limited.

"I don't have time to argue about this!" I said. "Thank you for the tea, Ginny... Hagrid."

Struggling out of Hagrid's grip, I strode through my Door.

"Take me to the hospital wing," I said to black-and-yellow. "To Professor Snape."



Black-and-yellow did as I asked. I stepped into the hospital wing's back ward. The scene that I walked into was even worse than I'd thought it would be.

The room was dim. Not dim enough to hid the fact that the Professor was not in his bed.

Severus Snape's body was very weak. But his magic was as powerful as ever. It crackled around him as he stood, framed in the doorway that separated the back ward from the front one. Looking past him, I could see Lucius Malfoy.

The Dark wizard was near his son's bed, in the front ward, facing Severus. His power also hissed and roiled around him. He did not notice me in the shadows. His grey eyes, now the color of storm clouds, were fixed only on Severus.

I'd been afraid that this would happen. Accusing Dumbledore of negligence had not provoked

the Headmaster sufficiently enough to satisfy Lucius Malfoy. So he had accused Professor Snape as well.

I'd expected Alastor Moody to be mixed in, right in the middle of this, but the old Auror was nowhere in sight. Poppy had said that he might be well enough to be released from the hospital wing today. Apparently he had been. It was doubtful that he was well enough to leave the Castle entirely. I supposed that he was in the dungeons, lending a hand (and a magical eye) to the search for the vine-seeds.

This situation was volatile enough with just two angry Slytherins.

Albus Dumbledore stood, beside Draco's bed, across from Lucius Malfoy. His power was a tightly controlled inferno, held in check, at least for the moment. The Headmaster saw me. He frowned. Clearly, he also thought that the situation was volatile enough without adding any more ingredients to the mixture.

Nervously, I retreated. I felt helpless. There was nothing that I could do here! I'd been a fool to think that I could have done anything to stop this!

Poppy Pomfrey was sitting on the edge of Draco's bed. I could sense her magic as well, powerful as Malfoy's or Snape's. It was focused entirely on Draco, surrounding the injured, sleeping child like a protective barrier.

Draco had obviously been given a very strong sleeping draught. There was no other way that this confrontation could have failed to awaken him. The two Slytherin wizards were not shouting at each other. Their voices were quiet and deadly cold. But the

effect was worse than if they'd been bellowing.

"I was never told, Lucius!" Severus's voice was acrimonious, the way he sounds when he's furious at everyone and everything, including himself. "I did not know that the vines had gotten into the dormitories!" He was shaking with barely suppressed fury.

"It was your business to know!" Lucius Malfoy threw his words like daggers of ice. His usually elegant voice grew harsh. "Do you think it is enough to simply lie in bed, Severus, and wait to be *told* what is happening in the castle? You should have *known*! You should have been there!"

"How could you have let this happen to Draco?" Malfoy added, contemptuously.

Wrath over the secret that had been kept from him warred with pain and guilt on Severus's pale, gaunt face. He had no answer for Malfoy.

Lucius Malfoy pressed his advantage. "Why did you not keep me informed about those insidious things growing throughout the dungeons of this castle? Why didn't you tell me about this terrible danger to my son!?"

"The children of Slytherin are my responsibility," Snape said, bitterly.

"Yes! Exactly! And you have failed miserably to protect them from the perils in this Den of Lions!!"

Again, Snape had no answer for him. His thin face twisted in anguish.

Malfoy's control, such as it was, snapped. Suddenly, his wand was in his hand. More quickly than I would have believed possible, Lucius Malfoy flung some

dark and vicious spell at Severus.

My gasp of horror was drowned out by Poppy's cry.

Equally swift, Snape's wand was moving as well. He launched a counter-curse at Malfoy.

As fast as they were, Albus Dumbledore was faster. Wand blazing in his hand like a torch, he shouted something. It sounded like a thunderclap. The Headmaster's power, no longer muted or held in check, swept through the room.

"ENOUGH!" the Headmaster roared. Both Lucius Malfoy and Severus Snape staggered as Dumbledore wrenched control of their spells away from the younger wizards.

Their spells seemed to implode halfway between Malfoy and Snape with a deafening crack and a blinding flash. Even before the flash faded, Dumbledore was speaking another mighty thunderclap-word. Malfoy's wand and Snape's wand leaped from their hands and flew to land on the bed, next to Poppy, who scooped them up.

Severus slid to the floor, trembling, with his back against the door frame. He buried his face in his hands. Lucius Malfoy's face grew pale and he swayed, nearly falling.

Snape did not see the swift look of pain that crossed Dumbledore's face when he gazed at the Potions Master, huddled on the floor.

Draco moaned in his sleep. Perhaps some of the dark emotions and angry spells in the room had penetrated into the child's dreams. Poppy cradled the boy in her arms, murmuring soothing words. I cowered, hidden in the shadows, unable to take my eyes off what was happening.

"There will be no brawling in here." Dumbledore's voice had grown very quiet. It was the soft rumble of a lion, with his claws unsheathed. "Is that understood, Severus?"

"Yes, Headmaster," I heard Snape say in a toneless voice.

"Is that understood, Lucius?" The lion's rumble was even more pronounced now.

Lucius Malfoy said nothing for a long moment.

"Yes..." he hissed, finally. "Though, remember, I blame you for this, as much as I blame Snape!" He looked over at Draco, his face filled with pain. No matter what else I knew about Lucius Malfoy, or what I thought about him, I could not doubt that he loved his son.

"The lives of all the children here are precious to me," Dumbledore said, quietly. "I blame myself as well. But there is nothing that Severus could have done to prevent Draco from being hurt."

"Professor Snape has been unwell for many weeks now," the Headmaster continued, curtly, as he moved between the two Slytherins. The fierce expression in his usually mild blue eyes was frightening. He looked capable of doing almost anything to them if they angered him again.

"The initial battle with the vine-creature took what little strength he had. He was not informed of the vines' recent incursion into the Slytherin dormitories because he was already seriously ill. He could not have protected the children and he would have almost certainly lost his own life, besides."

"Professor Snape will not say what is wrong with

him," the Headmaster continued, angrily. "He will not allow Poppy to examine him as completely as she would like. He will not allow us to help him." A sub-vocal growl of frustration was apparent in the rumble of Dumbledore's voice.

I saw Lucius Malfoy flinch.

Of course, Lucius Malfoy knew the source of Professor Snape's first "mysterious illness." He had undoubtedly been present when He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named had used the Cruciatus Curse on Severus, probably pushing the Unforgivable Curse to the very limits of the Potions Master's sanity and endurance.

"Good!" I thought viciously, my fury at Lucius Malfoy overpowering my own terrible guilt for a moment.

"Maybe you'll learn to stand between Severus and the Dark Lord's anger! Particularly since it's Severus who bears the ultimate responsibility for watching over your own precious son!"

Severus flinched too. Some of the Headmaster's words had been to maintain Snape's cover as a spy. But Dumbledore's frustration with the way that Severus refused to look after himself properly was certainly real enough.

There was plenty of guilt and blame to go around. Including a generous amount for me, the real reason that Professor Snape was still an invalid.

But I couldn't help being glad that the Headmaster had finally put a portion of blame where it ultimately belonged; with the Dark Lord and his Death Eaters.

There was a long moment of silence.

"I am not leaving Hogwarts Castle until I have a chance to speak to Draco," Lucius Malfoy said, finally, his voice harsh. "Since he will not awaken for several hours I demand to see the children of Slytherin, the dungeons, those seeds, and whatever damage has not yet been repaired. You can not refuse me, Dumbledore!"

"I would not dream of refusing you, Lucius. Come. Severus and Draco both need their rest. I shall accompany you."



Lucius Malfoy had retrieved his wand. He'd given Draco a fiercely protective look before sweeping out of the room.

The Headmaster had paused, exchanging a glance with Severus, who still sat on the floor. Snape had met Dumbledore's eyes briefly, his expression twisted with pain and shame. He'd buried his face in his hands again as the Headmaster had followed Lucius Malfoy from the room.

Poppy settled Draco back on his bed and smoothed the boy's pale hair. Then she stood up. She and I reached Severus at the same time. Both of us helped him to his feet. Professor Snape let us help him, unprotesting, almost docile. Poppy and I supported him slowly back to his bed. His confrontation with Lucius Malfoy had taken whatever strength he had been able to muster.

"You did not tell me." Snape's voice was dull with fatigue. "None of you told me. Not Albus. Not poor Draco or Pansy or any of my children. *Why?*"

"None of us wanted to worry you, Severus," Poppy said gently, pulling his blanket around him. "We

thought it was for the best." She returned his wand to him, resting it beside his pillow.

"Really," Snape clearly wanted to snarl, but he was too weary and his voice cracked. "Was it 'for the best' that I learned what happened when Lucius Malfoy came in here, shouting about my negligence?" The pain in his voice tore at both my heart and Poppy's.

"Lucius was right. I failed them," Severus whispered. "I should have been there." I had never heard him sound so lost, so broken.

"It's not your fault that you weren't there, Professor," I said. "We both know that."

He shut his eyes as if he couldn't bear the sight of me.

Poppy gave Severus's blankets a final tug and rested her hand gently against his face.

"Leave me alone," Snape said, softly. "Please." To my shock, I saw the glitter of tears in his eyes.

I didn't comment, but my eyes started stinging too. The sight of him like that went straight to my heart. A year's worth of his best sneers and insults couldn't have driven home the point as well as the sight of his tears. He was feeling betrayed by everyone, now. Dabbing at her eyes as well, Poppy tugged me away from his bed.



I ached for Professor Snape. There was nothing I could do to help him. And there was nothing I could do to ease the terrible heavy feeling of guilt in my heart. The most I could do was try to drown my misery for a little while.

The benefits of drunkenness are one of many things that Hagrid and I usually do not agree on. I've never thought that excessive drinking is an acceptable answer to life's problems. All the troubles you've tried to drown will still be there, waiting, when you finally sober up again. And then the woes must be faced anew with bleary eyes and a head that feels as if it's going to split with pain.

Well... I would never admit this out loud to Hagrid, but he's right. There *are* some occasions when getting drunk is really the only thing you can do. For me, at least, the knowledge that a night of carousing will inevitably be followed by a morning of suffering satisfies my need for proper punishment. It's as simple and neat as filling out a Detention Form and filing it away, completed.



The muffled *clunk* of Alastor Moody's wooden leg was not as noticeable when he was walking outside across the Castle grounds. Still, Hagrid and I looked up as he came down the hill towards us. Fang whuffed a soft greeting to Moody, and thumped his tail. Mrs. Norris, now curled up in my lap, dozing, slit one golden eye open and blinked as the old Auror joined us.

The first bottle we'd started on was now empty. Hagrid pulled a second bottle out of another pocket and opened it. Neither of us bothered offering the bottle to Moody. He'd pulled out his hip flask and taken a seat on the ground between us.

"Lucius Malfoy's left the Castle," the old Auror said, without preamble.

"Good," Hagrid growled.

Moody turned and looked at me. "Sweet Medea! You look like someone's used you for bludger practice. Lucius Malfoy did that, did he?"

I did not bother asking how Mad-Eye knew what had happened. I just sighed.

"Are you going to tell me that I should have killed him when I had the chance?" I asked him, warily.

Moody shook his head. "No, Filch." He sounded disappointed with me, though.

"It would have been murder," I mumbled. Surely he hadn't wanted me to kill the man in cold blood...

Moody rolled his eyes at me, both the normal one and the magical one. He shook his head. "Don't misunderstand me, Filch. You did the right thing," he said. "But it was for the wrong reasons."

I blinked at him, confused.

It was Hagrid who said, "Dumbledore wouldn't a' wanted Lucius Malfoy dead that way. Would a' done no end o' harm. Made trouble fer the Headmaster, an' trouble fer Hogwarts."

"An,'" he added, after a moment, "yeh would a' been tossed straight inter Azkaban ter rot, jus' like Ginny told yeh this afternoon."

I thought about it. Lucius Malfoy had always been able to cover his tracks brilliantly. There'd been whispered rumors of his involvement with the Dark Lord for years but somehow none of the dirt had ever man-

aged to stick. As far as the Ministry authorities knew, Lucius Malfoy was a wealthy philanthropist and an upstanding member of an old and noble, pure-blooded wizarding family.

If he'd been murdered at Hogwarts, by a member of Dumbledore's staff, while trying to visit his injured son... The thought of what the Minister, already defensive and mistrustful of the Headmaster, might have done in response made me shudder.

"You weren't thinking of all the consequences when you decided to take Malfoy on, were you, Filch?" Moody said.

He was right. I was completely unaccustomed to thinking of how events in the greater wizarding world and events at the school affected each other.

Considering such matters made me feel as if the ground were slipping out from beneath my feet. Keeping the Castle clean, and the students out of mischief, those were the sorts of concerns I was used to dealing with.

Another gulp from the bottle was definitely called for.

"My reasons for sparing him were good enough!" I said, defensively. "There's rules, you know! Just because you can do something, doesn't mean you ought to do it!"

Frowning ferociously, Mad-Eye took a long drink from his hip flask. Apparently Professor Snape was not the only teacher who didn't like it when his students talked back.

"My point is, you've got to learn to look at a situation from every angle!" Moody growled. "Think, consider

every possible consequence. Then, you come up with a clear plan. Then, finally, you act on it!"

He glared at me. "Your risks should always be carefully calculated in advance!"

"A Slytherin's carefully plotted stupidity can be more dangerous than even the most reckless Gryffindor's foolhardy, spur of the moment fiasco!" I snapped.

"I know that the Headmaster put it a good deal more eloquently than that! But it's what he meant!" I couldn't resist adding.

Moody's scarred face flushed with embarrassment.

Earlier today, while Poppy had been patching me up, she and I had talked about the terrible dressing down that Moody had received from the Headmaster. The old Auror had conducted a highly dangerous experiment on my Doors, one that could have cost him his life. Albus Dumbledore had not been pleased with him.

Poppy had told me that Dumbledore had left the old Auror looking like a beaten puppy.

Moody and I sat and glowered at each other, while Hagrid smothered a laugh.

"I know that killing Lucius Malfoy would have been completely irresponsible and utterly reckless," I continued, waving the bottle for emphasis. "I know it would have been stupid!"

"That's enough out both o' yeh!" Hagrid said.

"An' speaking o' enough..." he reached over and tugged the bottle out of my hands. "That's more 'n enough fer you, Filch!"

I bit back a cry of protest, realizing that Hagrid was right.

Moody growled and grumbled, getting himself under control.

"My point," he said, gruffly, "is that you should have used your head before you decided to take on Lucius Malfoy in the first place.

"I shouldn't have to tell you any of this, Filch! Lucius Malfoy is a powerful Dark wizard. He'd just been hit in one of his few vulnerable places. He was worried sick about that boy of his. And you got in his way!"

Concern, anger and frustration were all evident in the old Auror's gravelly voice. "He could have caused you far greater harm than he did. You were lucky to get off with only bruises. He could have killed you, easily! You don't mess about with an enemy like him. If you weren't prepared to take him out, without mercy, then you shouldn't have provoked him at all."

"I-I wanted to keep him away from Professor Snape," I said.

"Snape doesn't need to hide behind you! He can look after himself!" Moody snapped.

I shook my head, not saying anything. I knew it was useless. When it came to the subject of Severus Snape, Moody's mind was closed. Poor Severus. He was so much more vulnerable than almost everyone who knew him seemed to think. Only Dumbledore and Minerva McGonagall seemed to understand that Severus was more fragile than he seemed.

"You should have just left Malfoy to the Headmaster! Spared yourself unnecessary pain." Moody's voice was quieter, now. "Think, man," he said. "Did your interference really help Snape at all?"

"No," I murmured. Now I was the one who felt like a puppy that had been beaten. "I only put Malfoy in an even worse temper."

I must have sounded as crushed as I felt. Hagrid gave me the bottle back. He patted my shoulder awkwardly and rather gently, for him. I winced anyhow.

Hagrid changed the subject. "So, how did the Headmaster deal with Malfoy?" the half-giant wanted to know.

Moody's harsh grin split his scarred face for a moment. "Albus gave our distinguished guest a complete tour of the dungeons. Took him about, showed him all the damage. The Headmaster didn't have to say more than a word or two. Everything pretty much spoke for itself."

He shook his grizzled mop of grey hair and sighed. "Some of the Slytherins were glad to take Draco's distinguished father into their dormitories and show him what had happened in there, as well."

The old Auror's voice was hard. "I was down there, myself, helping with the clean-up. I saw Lucius Malfoy's face when he came back out into the corridor with the children. He looked shaken. His face was white as the children's. He's a clever man, Malfoy. No one had to spell it out for him. Slytherin house could have been decimated."

No one was questioning the fairly obvious fact that the vine-beast had been an attack primarily against the Slytherins. All of them. Making no distinction between those who were supporters of the Dark Lord and those who were not.

"Lucius Malfoy looked like that up in the hospital

wing," I murmured. "Shaken. The Headmaster had made him think that Severus was too ill to protect the children because the Dark Lord had used the Cruciatus Curse on him."

Even the families who followed the Dark Lord most loyally could still fear for the safety of their children. I had seen that in Lucius Malfoy's face.

Moody took a long drink from his hip flask. His face was full of pain. Alastor Moody was a Slytherin.

Hagrid and I exchanged an uncomfortable glance. Strangely enough, no one really thought much about the fact that the rebirth of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named must cause deep, agonizing rifts in Slytherin House. Hagrid and I were no different from most in that respect.

Many of the families with children in Slytherin were ordinary wizarding families. Ambition, a love for power, a gift for subtlety and cunning, these things alone do not make a witch or wizard inherently Dark. Teachers. Alchemists. Poets. Artists. Writers. Aurors. Musicians. Quidditch players. All of these had been among Salazar's chosen, too.

"After Albus had shown Malfoy everything he'd asked to see," Moody continued, "Malfoy asked for some of those seeds we were finding everywhere down there. Albus gave him a few, sealed up in an unbreakable vial."

"Was that wise?" I asked, nervously. "What if Malfoy gives them to He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named? The Dark Lord might grow another one of those beasts!"

Moody's smile was a bitter, terrible thing. "Filch,"

he said, almost gently. "Where do you think the vine-creature came from in the first place?"

I was shocked into silence. My one consolation was that Hagrid looked as surprised as I did. He hadn't known either.

"Last year," Moody's voice was even harsher than usual, "an agent of the Dark Lord was able to literally plant the original vine-creature in the dirt floor of that dungeon storeroom." The old Auror closed both his eyes as if something had hurt him, deeply. His gravelly voice shook.

"This agent considered himself the most loyal of the Dark Lord's servants. He wished to strike back at the followers whom he considered less loyal than he was. He wanted to murder their children in their beds. And he didn't care who else got hurt along the way."

"An agent of the Dark Lord?" I faltered, trembling. "Last year... in the dungeons?"

"He's gone now, Filch. Can't hurt anyone any longer," Moody rasped.

It was a few moments before his voice grew steady again. "When Lucius Malfoy investigates the source of the attack that caused so much terror among the Slytherin children, he will find that the evidence all points back to the Death Eaters themselves. And, if anyone wants to know why the Head of Slytherin House was seriously ill and incapable of protecting his charges... well, they won't have to look very far for the answer to that question either, now will they?"

I couldn't say that I really minded the Dark Lord's

Cruciatus Curse taking the blame for my reckless act against poor Severus. I still felt guilty though.

Moody laughed, without humor. "Irony, isn't it? Albus hopes it'll give the Dark Lord's followers something to think about, at any rate."



Mad-Eye Moody, it seemed, agreed with Hagrid on the matter of drinking. Sometimes, it's really the only sensible thing to do.

We made a strange procession through the corridors of Hogwarts in the wee hours of the morning. Before returning to his hut, Hagrid considered it his duty to make sure that Moody and I both reached our beds without falling down too many times.

The three of us had to lean on each other in order to stay upright. Hagrid was singing in French. (At least, I think it was French.) Our inebriated condition appeared to worry Fang, but Mrs. Norris just looked embarrassed to be seen in our company. She needn't have worried. We saw no one except Peeves.

The poor poltergeist just shook his head, speechless.

CHAPTER 7

Penance and Absolution

Sometimes I have wished for a window to brighten my dungeon office. This morning, however, I was grateful

for the dimness. No cheerful sunlight to blind me and make my head throb even more than it did already.

I was supposed to be doing paperwork. My desk, usually very tidy, was overflowing with incomplete detention forms. But my eyes were so bloodshot that I could barely focus.

The door to my office was shut. The fire was out, leaving the room chilly. I hoped that the Professors would take the hint, and not call on me to go running all over the Castle, cleaning up messes. I especially hoped that whoever was covering Professor Snape's Potions classes today wouldn't need me to scrape anything revolting off the ceiling.

Mrs. Norris leaped up into the chair beside my desk. She moved as lightly as ever, but the slight sound that she made still seemed to echo inside my pounding head.

She mewed loudly, several times. I winced.

"Please, my sweet, must you be so noisy?" I whimpered.

The expression in my cat's golden eyes was decidedly unsympathetic. Industrious, she began washing between her small, grey foot pads. Seeing her moving about so energetically made me wince again. At least my headache served to distract me a little bit from how terribly sore the rest of me felt. I was bruised from head to foot. My right shoulder was stiff and my right arm hurt so much that I could barely move my quill.

Quietly, I heaped ineffectual, non-magical curses on Lucius Malfoy's aristocratic head for leaving me so battered. I was glad that I had not killed the wretched Death Eater. I could only have killed him once. And it

would have been over far too quickly!

My writing was clumsy and barely legible but I managed to make some headway into the pile of forms before the lingering effects of too much drink and not enough sleep the night before caught up with me. Gingerly, I rested my head on the desk, pillowed on my left arm. My eyes shut of their own accord.

The smell of fried fish awakened me. Usually, it's a pleasant smell, but today it made my stomach churn.

I heard the sound of someone setting a dish on the floor.

A small squeaky voice said, "Hello, Mrs. Norris! Mrs. Norris is hungry?"

A second, even squeakier voice, added, "Mrs. Norris is thirsty?"

Then there was the sound of happy purring, as my cat padded over to inspect her lunch.

A wave of shame swept through me. My poor sweet Mrs. Norris! I had not yet fed her today! No wonder she'd been mewling so loudly. Groaning, I picked my head up. My cat was daintily nibbling at some fish on a china plate. There was also a bowl of milk awaiting her attention. Two house-elves were crouched on the floor, watching Mrs. Norris eat.

Dobby appeared, as always, to have been taking fashion tips from Peeves. He was wearing bright purple shorts with a pattern of lime-green leaves on them. He had an orange and blue striped sock on one foot and a black sock on the other. Except for the black sock, all the colors clashed.

Winky, wearing a fluttery royal blue scarf wrapped

around her like a kilt, was a bit easier on my eyes.

"Thank you, Winky. Thank you, Dobby," I murmured. "Mrs. Norris and I really appreciate the service."

"Is sir hungry?" Dobby asked solicitously.

"Poor Argus Filch is not wanting any food right now, Dobby." Winky's little voice was gentle. It's been a while since she found solace in endless bottles of butterbeer. But she clearly had not forgotten the aftereffects.

Embarrassed, I muttered, "I-I don't make a habit of this, Winky. You know I don't. It was only.... I was just..."

"Winky knows, sir." Her huge brown eyes were full of empathy.

Suddenly, she was on my desk, sitting cross-legged among my papers. She touched a bruise on my jaw with a careful, tiny hand.

"Argus Filch should go see Madam Poppy," Winky scolded me. "Like poor Alastor Moody. This morning poor Alastor Moody is moaning and groaning. He is saying that the sun is too bright and he is wanting to pull both his eyes out and put them someplace dark! But Madam Poppy is helping him and he will soon feel better."

"I can't go up to the hospital wing right now, Winky. I have too much work to do."

Dobby joined Winky on my desk. "Punishment forms, sir?"

Punishment is very serious business to a house-elf. Both of them scanned my forms, anxiously making sure that I hadn't been sentencing any of the brats to anything unduly harsh.

"It's just a lot of polishing, sweeping, dusting and scrubbing," I murmured. "Nothing worse than what

we have to do every single day. Except the brats detest doing it, of course. So it's torture for them."

"But, sir is using no chains!" Dobby noted with satisfaction.

"No chains," I said, resignedly. "The Headmaster won't let me."

"Professor Dumbledore is wise," Dobby said. "No students is being chained at Hogwarts. Just as no house-elves is ever being punished here with terrible floggings or with putting ears or fingers in oven doors. No bad punishments here, sir!"

Winky looked me up and down, her huge brown eyes sad.

"But sometimes, Dobby," she said in a soft little squeak, "a heart is breaking over a very bad thing. Argus Filch is pining over what he has done to Professor Snape. A bad punishment is needed for him or his heart will not ever be mended."

"Dobby understands that sir is pining, Winky," the green-eyed elf said. "Dobby knows that Argus Flich is a good Squib who did not mean to do a bad thing."

He gave me a fierce look. "But, sir will please not let bad Dark wizard throw him down any more steps! 'Tis dangerous, sir! Bad Dark wizard is not knowing the difference between Squibs and house-elves. Squibs is much easier to break than house-elves."

"Dobby!" I sputtered in protest. "Do you think I *wanted* Malfoy to do this to me?"

He just looked at me.

Winky looked at me too, her large brown eyes brimming with tears.

"I didn't!" I said, shocked and dismayed.

Then to my horror, I wondered if maybe there wasn't some tiny bit of truth to the accusation after all. There are times when I feel that the house-elves understand me better than anyone, except Mrs. Norris.

Believe me, this is not a comfortable thought.

"Argus Filch," Winky said softly, "Winky understands that some hearts is never mending. Some hurts is never healing. But poor Professor Snape is not killed. Professor Snape can still say what sir must do to be forgiven."

"Argus Filch must promise that he will go see Professor Snape when his work is done. Only Professor Snape can truly help Argus Filch," Dobby said.

Winky nodded eagerly, long bat-like ears quivering.

"No! I can't!" I cried. "He won't even look at me and I don't blame him."

"'Tis just as much for poor Professor Snape's good as it is for the good of Argus Filch," Dobby said, earnestly. "Argus Filch will promise?"

"What do you mean it's for Professor Snape's own good? Staying away from him is the kindest thing I can possibly do!"

"Does Argus Filch think that poor Professor Snape would have been *glad* if bad, Dark wizard had broken sir all to pieces?" Dobby asked me.

"Well, yes, probably," I muttered. "I'm sure that it would have pleased him."

Both elves sighed. They looked at each other.

"Argus Filch leaves us no choice," Dobby said sadly.

Before I could stop either of them, they were making

a rush towards the collection of chains and manacles on the wall behind my desk.

"Oh, no!" I shouted, ignoring the effect that yelling had on my pounding head. "You leave those alone! Those are mine!"

"Argus Filch will get all his things back after he has gone to see Professor Snape!" Dobby said, firmly.

"Dobby! You can't do this!"

"Sorry, sir. Dobby can."

Then he and Winky vanished with a sound like a whip-crack. And all my carefully polished chains and manacles disappeared with them!

I stared at my empty office wall in horror, clutching my poor aching head.

Mrs. Norris, finished with her fish and her milk, just sat there calmly, washing her whiskers.

"Did you see that?" I gasped. "What nerve! What infernal cheek! What am I going to do?!"

My cat blinked at me coolly, as if to remind me that Winky and Dobby had already said exactly what I had to do.

"B-but I c-can't! Severus won't even see me!"

Her golden eyes were stern.

"Well, I'm going to finish my paperwork first!" I said, defiantly. "I've let it go long enough! And I need time to think about what I'm going to say to him. Assuming he does consent to talk to me at all."

My voice shook uncertainly. "You'll come with me, won't you, my sweet?"

She started to purr.

Later, with Mrs. Norris on my shoulder, I stepped from black-and-yellow into the corridor outside the entrance to the hospital wing. My spirits had been fortified by a clean desk and a neatly filed-away stack of completed detention forms.

I could have asked my Door to take me directly to Severus, but I didn't want to barge in on him unexpectedly and make him angry.

Angrier.

Hesitantly, I made my way into the front ward. I meant to find Poppy. Maybe she could ask Severus if he would talk to me. But I did not see Poppy. Instead I saw Draco Malfoy and Professor Snape.

Professor Snape was sitting in a chair beside the boy's bed. He looked paler and thinner than ever, though he appeared to be making an effort to seem as much like his usual self as he possibly could.

"...Forgive my father, sir," an almost equally pale Draco was saying, gravely, to Severus.

The boy looked even more vulnerable than he'd looked yesterday, sleeping in Poppy's arms, while the grown wizards all fought and argued around him.

"I should have written to Father myself. I would have, as soon as I didn't feel so ill. I know that I should have told you about what had happened in the dormitories. You mustn't be angry at Pansy or at anyone else."

Draco's voice shook and he sounded very young. "It was all my fault, sir!. I-I just couldn't... not after

the way I'd failed you... I should have let Professor Sprout..." the boy's voice broke off as he and Severus became aware that I was there.

Professor and student looked up with almost identical glares on their pale faces. My intrusion into such a private conversation was clearly unwelcome. I trembled with a combination of awkwardness and fear. My clothes were suddenly clammy with sweat.

The three of us stared at each other for what felt like an eternity.

"I'm sorry!" I choked out. Clutching Mrs. Norris, I turned to flee.

"Filch." Snape's voice was harsh. "Stop."

The tone of command in his voice made me obey him, instantly. I looked back at the two Slytherins, flushing with chagrin.

"What happened to you?" Professor Snape demanded.

I remembered that yesterday he'd hardly been in any condition to notice I'd been hurt.

Draco said quietly, "I think my father must have done that to him."

"Is that correct, Filch? Please tell me that you were not foolish enough to get in Lucius Malfoy's way," Professor Snape said. His voice wasn't as strong as usual but it was every bit as caustic.

"You may not have enough magic to turn cream into butter, but I always gave you credit for some intelligence!" he snarled. "Weren't you thinking? Didn't you realize what he could have done to you? You were lucky that you didn't need to be sent up to the hospital

wing yesterday in a matchbox!"

I bit my lip, cradling Mrs. Norris and staring down at the top of her small, grey head. Professor Snape had not mentioned what I could have done to Lucius Malfoy! Of course, he wouldn't, not in front of Draco. But the expression in his eyes told me that he understood precisely all the ramifications of my confrontation with Lucius Malfoy. And he knew just how messy things could have gotten.

I felt an absurd desire to laugh. Professor Snape's lecture on the subject of Lucius Malfoy sounded almost exactly like Alastor Moody's. I doubted that either Slytherin would appreciate the comparison.

"Mr. Malfoy was... considerably agitated," I said, forcing myself to meet their eyes. "He was demanding to see the Headmaster and speaking of him in ...less than respectful terms. I couldn't just... I had to..."

Snape stared at me as if I were a botched potion that had soiled the floor of his dungeon and splattered on his shoes.

Draco Malfoy cleared his throat. "Mr. Filch?" the boy said.

I blinked and stared at him. It wasn't the first time that he'd ever spoken to me, of course. But it was certainly the first time he'd ever done so politely.

Draco's voice was stiff and a little cold. But definitely polite. "My father was not aware of how you had helped me. When the vine..." He broke off, with a slight shiver, cradling his arm, before he continued.

"Please, try to understand. I am quite sure that he would not have been so ...harsh with you if he'd

known what you had done for me." The heir of the Malfoys met my eyes steadily, with quiet dignity.

Stunned, I could only stand there in silence. Had that been a sort of an apology? Offered by a Malfoy to a lowly Squib? When Neville had told me how Draco had spoken to him politely and asked for his help, I'd been surprised enough! What would Neville make of this, I wondered.

Professor Snape looked as if he didn't know quite what to make of it either. For a moment his dark eyes went wide and stunned. And I saw something in his face that surprised me, even more than Draco's apology had done. Joy.

Draco turned to his Professor, looking nervous, half-pleading, half-defiant. As if he was not certain how Snape was going to react to what he'd just said. By then Severus had his expression completely under control. What I'd seen in his face was masked and hidden. He regarded the boy coolly. After a moment Draco was able to meet his teacher's eyes. He was calm, his uncertainty swallowed up by pride.

'I know that what I did was correct,' the boy's look said.

Severus's face relaxed, briefly. He gave Draco a barely perceptible nod.



Draco was busy composing a letter to his mother, to reassure her that he was all right. I watched the boy with a sympathy I'd never expected to feel. I knew that the letter, written so painfully because of his injured

arm, would be difficult to read, full of inkblots and wavering letters. I'd looked at Severus questioningly, wondering why he didn't offer to write for the child.

"Narcissa will not be comforted by anything less than a letter written by Draco himself," Professor Snape murmured. "Yesterday she was out when Lucius learned what had happened to Draco. He left home at once for Hogwarts, determined to know the worst so he could break the news to her as gently as possible. I am sure that Narcissa is beside herself today. Draco knows best what to do."

Professor Snape and I were still in the front ward. He was sitting, stiffly on a bed near a window overlooking the grounds near Hagrid's hut. I stood nearby, looking out the window. There was no sign of Hagrid. I wondered how the big man was feeling today, if he was as wretched and miserable as Moody and I were.

Mrs. Norris waited, patient and protective, at my feet. "Oh," I said, a bit discomfited by this glimpse into the homelife of Lucius Malfoy; a man I hated, someone who always seemed to leave me black and blue at best, or at worst, half-dead.

Snape looked as if he understood my difficulties. He smiled grimly.

"Professor?" I said, timidly. "I wanted to speak to you. Would you rather go back to your own bed so we will not disturb Draco?"

"My own bed," he said, sneering, "is down in the dungeons, Filch. Once I have the strength to walk down there unaided, I shall do so with alacrity and never look

back. If I am ever forced to spend another night up here, convalescing from *anything* it will be too soon."

"I-I only meant..."

"I know what you meant. No, I do not wish to go into the other room. Moody is there, with Poppy looking after him."

His lip curled in contempt. "He's sleeping off what must have been a very ...interesting evening. Disgraceful. I was certain that he had to be the most pathetic sight I was going to see today. And then," Severus's voice became even more caustic, "I set eyes on you!"

"Professor," I murmured, "I can see that you're feeling better."

"Yes, I am. And no thanks to you."

"Has anyone told you that Professor Sprout has figured out how the vines are spreading? And that she knows how to destroy every stage of the creature now?"

He nodded. "Albus told me that himself. Last night, after Lucius had gone."

"I'm not going to ask you to forgive me," I said. "But I'm glad that you seem to have forgiven them. The Headmaster. Draco. Your other children. Because they meant well. They never wished to hurt you. Not even a little."

He faced me, his eyes snapping black fire. When he spoke, his voice was a quiet deadly hiss.

"Forgive them? Of course I forgive them, Filch. How could I do less? I failed my children miserably, just as Lucius said. I failed Albus too. He cannot possibly carry all of this Castle on his shoulders, unsupported. The children of Slytherin are my charges, my respon-

sibility. No one cares for them as I do."

He closed his eyes. "I failed all of them. And yet, whenever I looked at them I saw concern and forgiveness for me in their eyes. How could I possibly do less than forgive them?"

How I had misjudged this man. His tears yesterday, his pain, had not been for himself at all. I blinked back tears. He glared at me.

"You, on the other hand, did intend to do me harm. Yes, I know that you did not mean to nearly kill me. Tell me, how much consolation would that have been if I had died?"

"None, Professor."

"Exactly. I would like nothing better than to toss you down the front steps of the Castle myself! Unfortunately Lucius did it first. Now it would merely be redundant."

"Not to mention the fact that it would spoil Draco's apology," he added. Smiling.

The look on his face was the same one that had stunned me earlier. He looked like a man who had been given a precious gift. Something he had hoped for, worked hard for, but had not known if he would ever see.

"Albus told me how Draco went to Longbottom for help," Severus said. The joy in his face and in his voice made me glad. "That is something that I could not bring myself to do directly, even now. And certainly not when I was his age."

I remembered something that Minerva had once said to me. "It is not easy, but I know that Severus tries to show them, very subtly, that there are other paths besides the ones that lead to He-Who-Must-Not-

Be-Named. I know that, if he could, Severus would cut himself to pieces if he thought that it would save the children of his house from the Dark."

"It's hopeless," I'd told her, speaking of Draco Malfoy in particular. Now I was no longer quite as sure. There was more to Draco than just his father's son.

Severus saw me smiling. He glared again. "I have not said that I forgive you, Filch! I most certainly do not!"

"I know that, Professor. I understand."

With a sigh, I continued. "I suppose then, it would be a simple matter for you to come up with some sort of appropriately dreadful punishment for me."

"Oh, yes," he sneered. "Albus did mention you wanted that. Well, throwing you down the Castle steps is out. And Albus wouldn't agree to any of the other things that I suggested to him."

I shivered, not about to press him for details.

He hissed in frustration. "Listen, Filch. Finding suitable punishments is your particular gift. Not mine."

I stood quietly, waiting.

"Don't look at me like that," he snapped. "You cannot make this my problem. I have more than enough troubles of my own. And I do not want to look at that pitifully woebegone expression every time I need my classroom cleaned!"

"I'm sorry, Professor."

"You must think of something, Filch! Fill out one of those nasty little forms of yours with all the sordid details of your crime. Think of some type of self-flagellation that will not offend the Headmaster's sensibilities!"

You must carry out your own sentence! You can file your form away with all your other little forms. Then you must do your best to let this matter go."

"B-but, Professor...!"

He gritted his teeth and glared at me. "If you do all of that for me, then I shall endeavor to forgive you."

"Truly?"

"I have said so, haven't I?"

"You want me to punish myself?" I asked him, miserably. "But how? What shall I do?"

"That is your problem, Filch. Not mine."



Once more, I sat at my desk with a stack of just-completed detention forms in front of me. It had been a busy night. I'd never had a whole class assigned to a detention all together before.

The detention had gone well, all things considered. But I was still bone-weary. And I had glowing purple spots in front of my eyes. Every child at the detention had been the same painfully vivid shade of purple.

Professor Grubbly-Plank had drawn the short straw once again. The task of substitute-teaching Professor Snape's fifth year Gryffindors and Slytherins always seemed to fall to her. Everyone knew that particular group of children had been a volatile mixture from the word "go."

Poor Neville. He'd been too tired to notice that he'd added the wrong amount of one ingredient to whatever was in his cauldron, plus he'd added another ingredient that had absolutely no business being in

the potion he was trying to brew.

No one had been hurt. But the resulting explosion had made the dungeons rumble, blasted a disgusting mess all over the ceiling, and (for good measure) the resulting vapors had turned everyone in the room a shade of purple so vibrant that they glowed in the dark.

"Detention!!" Professor Grubbly-Plank had roared, shaking a purple fist at the entire class. "Tonight!! All of you!!!"

Even the Slytherins hadn't been too angry at Neville. Everyone knew he'd been sitting up late every night, for over a week, trying to remove all the deadly vine-beast seeds from an assortment of toys and dolls belonging to first year Slytherins. His current project, a stuffed toy octopus, was very hard to clean.

Setting the Potions classroom to rights again had been an ordeal.

"I don't suppose you'd consider letting us use magic to clean up, Mr. Filch?" a very purple Lavender Brown had asked me, without much hope in her voice.

I could tell that even the Gryffindors were really starting to miss Professor Snape. Severus would have sneered insults and taken away points, but he also would have been able to brew something up to make everyone the right color again.

"Use magic? Well, that depends," I heard myself say. "Neville, are there any vines in here?"

Neville, more purple than anyone, had taken out his wand and checked. "No vines," he'd said.

"Good." I'd said. "It's all right then. Everyone use

whatever magic you need! I don't want to be here all night any more than the rest of lot of you do."

I'd never seen so many flabbergasted people in my life before. Purple or otherwise.



By the time I had finished filling out every one of this evening's detention forms my right arm, already sore, felt like it was going to fall off entirely. Nevertheless, I moved the stack of completed forms over to the side of my desk and reached for a new, blank one. I picked up my long, black quill once more.

NAME: Argus Filch. CRIME: Attempted Murder!

I crumpled the parchment and reached for another piece. On the new form, next to CRIME: I wrote "Reckless Stupidity!" After underlining those words three times and adding a few more exclamation points, I sat and stared at it for a while. Sighing, I crumpled that parchment too. Wincing at the pain in my shoulder, I rested my head in my hands.



My desk was surrounded by crumpled up wads of parchment. I'd finally settled on,

CRIME: Reckless and Cruel Misuse of Magical Tapestry, Nearly Resulting In The Untimely Death of Professor Severus Snape, Potions Master of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry!

There. That seemed to sum it all up neatly. I sighed. That was the easy part. Professor Snape had charged

me with the task of finding an appropriate punishment for myself in order to earn his forgiveness. I had already written out a lengthy list of ideas. Directly after my detention with the Gryffindors and Slytherins, I'd taken my list to Headmaster Dumbledore who needed to approve of my self-imposed sentence. The Headmaster kept refusing all of my suggestions.

No, I could not spend a night alone in the Forbidden Forest even if I was not tied to a tree. No type of corporeal punishment would be allowed, so I had better not mention Apollyon Pringle's cat o'nine tails again. No, he would not let me ask Minerva if she would consent to Transfigure me into something horrible and leave me that way for a week. No, the Headmaster would not put a Curse on me. No, he would not let anyone else put a Curse on me either. No, I could not sentence myself to exile in Moaning Myrtle's bathroom. (That wouldn't be fair to Myrtle, or Mrs. Norris, now, would it?) No, I could not have his permission to go without water and food for any length of time. No, I could not wear a hair shirt or shackles on my feet, or any sort of chains at all. No, I could not let one of the ghosts engulf me completely until I turned blue with cold every day after dinner. Most of the ghosts would find that distressing. (No, I could not ask the Baron. The Baron had better things to do.)

And no, I could not teach Fifth Year Potions with the Gryffindors and Slytherins, even if Professor Grubbly-Plank had said that it was perfectly all right with her.

When I'd started unrolling my list further, the Headmaster had put a gentle hand on my arm.

"Please, Argus. Just go to bed. It's very late."

A solution to my problem seemed no closer than before, so I finally took his advice.



After a restless night, followed by a breakfast I'd aimlessly picked at, I opened my office door. A whiff of magic and the faint glow of something silver in the dimness provided me with a few seconds warning. It wasn't enough to save me or Mrs. Norris who was at my side from a powerful spell. I crouched on the floor with my arms in front of my face and waited for something dreadful to happen.

A Weasley Twins prank! I knew that I should have expected something like this but it's been so long! Fred and George have had their minds set on life beyond school and on the joke shop they intend to open. They had not pulled any pranks on me since their giant exploding giant soap bubble back in December.

I heard a soft whoosh and a gentle twinkling sound as if from small bells or wind chimes. Surprised, I opened my eyes to see many softly glittering sparkles of light, like fireflies dancing. They were drifting down from dozens of delicate silver globes floating along the ceiling.

These effects were accompanied by a sweet whiff of cinnamon in the air. A sense of peace and well-being blossomed inside me. It was all part of a powerful, gentle Cheering Charm.

I stood up slowly. At my feet, Mrs. Norris purred. She batted playfully at the floating sparkles as if she

was a kitten again. This was Weasley magic, all right. But it was certainly not the twins' doing. Moving slowly through my office, now transformed from its usually dingy self into an enchanted, glittering, sweet-smelling place, I went to my desk.

There was a note resting on the blotter, next to all the forms that were waiting to be filed from last night's detention. I picked up the note and read:

Dear Mr. Filch,

Please don't be so unhappy!

Love,

Ginny

*P. S. The sparkles and globes
will disappear by themselves. I
didn't want to leave a mess for
you to clean.*

For a while I simply stood there, holding the note. My heart would have been full, even without the effects of the Cheering Charm.



The effects of Ginny's Charm lingered pleasantly for a while. Even after they faded, like the glitter and the silver globes, I felt better. My head was cleared of the despair and shame that had been plaguing me ever since I had hurt Severus.

I had made a terrible mistake. But no permanent harm had been done. I'd been lucky. All that remained was finding some meaningful way to let Severus know how truly sorry I was. My punishment did not need to be painful or humiliating or dangerous. It only needed to be appropriate.

All of my prized chains and manacles were once again in their proper places on the wall behind my desk. Dobby and Winky had been as good as their word. I took down one of the chains and began polishing. It helps me think. The clean, smooth, coolness of the metal links soothed me.

Once, when I'd been polishing away, I'd looked up to see that Professor Snape had paused in my office doorway. One dark, sardonic eyebrow was raised in amusement.

"Some people just use worry-beads, you know," he'd said to me, dryly. "They're smaller and more portable. But you never do anything the easy way, do you?"

"Neither do you!" I'd yelled after him, as he'd swept off down the corridor.

Was there an easy solution to my problem? I polished the chains, waiting for inspiration. None came. I continued working, doing the things that comforted me most. Filing away the detention forms was my next task. While I worked I thought about exactly what Severus had wanted me to do.

"Do your best to let the matter go," he'd told me. On the night I'd almost killed him, he'd made me furious. "You're a fine one to talk about lettings things 'go,' Filch! When have you *ever* managed to do that..?"

I was kneeling on the floor with a stack of forms in my hand, when the obvious answer finally occurred to me.



The day was grey and gloomy. There was a misty drizzle falling too. This would make things more difficult, but hopefully not impossible. I'd had to make many trips, carrying a great number of heavy things. With my sore arm and aching shoulder it would have been much harder without my Doors to help me. The Headmaster had been right. Ginny had been right. I could use my Doors to go anywhere within the protective spells that surrounded Hogwarts Castle. Even outside, on the grounds! I only needed to have a clear image in my mind of exactly where I wanted to go.

The work took me a very long time. Most of the day was gone when I'd finished my preparations. The drizzle continued. I'd left Mrs. Norris inside, despite her protests. She would have been miserable out here and there was no point in that. She'd been patient enough with me lately.

I knew that I would need some help to do this right. Stepping into ever-patient black-and-yellow I said, "Take me to Hagrid. Wherever he is."

I didn't know if the Doors could do that. But I hoped they could. Finding a particular person wasn't that much different from finding one room out of the hundreds in the Castle, was it?

"Hagrid!" I said, picturing his great, hairy face and wild black beard. "Please."

I stepped through my Door into the grey chill of Hagrid's garden. When I thought about it later, I realized how the sight of a tapestry blinking into view in thin air right in the middle of his vegetable patch might have surprised the gamekeeper a bit. Sneaking up on Hagrid is never a wise thing to do. He's awfully quick with that crossbow.

The sight of a startled half-giant aiming a huge crossbow at me made me shriek with fear. I cowered in the freshly turned earth he'd been working on. The bolt I expected never came. Fortunately for both Hagrid and me, Professor McGonagall had been standing with him, chatting in the gentle rain. She'd caught Hagrid's arm just in time. Her cat-quick reflexes had saved me from getting shot. It was Minerva who walked over to me and pulled me up, shaking, out of the dirt.

"Argus!" she said, shocked. "You could have been killed!"

"Yeh stupid old git!" Hagrid growled, his face as white as mine probably was. "What were yeh thinkin'?"

"I-I'm sorry," I said. "I need some help. And some wood. Do you have any? I have plenty of lamp oil and some matches. I'm trying to make a fire. The Headmaster gave me his permission. Please?"



Both Hagrid and Minerva met me on the small hill behind the Castle. Hagrid had brought me a huge armful of thick branches. Minerva had levitated another huge bundle. When they saw everything that I had neatly

placed on the freshly raked, blackened ground their eyes went wide. Both of them stood there in silence while I began to stack the wood carefully around the things I wanted to burn. After a few moments, Minerva came to help me. Still wide-eyed, Hagrid joined us.

"Do you think that it's enough now?" I asked them.

"Yes..." Minerva said, very gently. "I think it is."

I began pouring lamp oil over everything. My hands shook when I tried to light the match.

Hagrid offered to use his umbrella, but I told him that I wanted to at least try to start the fire by myself. Finally I got the match to stay lit.

"All right," I said, when a tiny blaze was going. "You can help now."



With the aid of their magic, my tiny blaze had become a roaring bonfire in spite of the drizzle. It was very warm next to the fire, but I could not help shivering.

"Argus," Minerva said, resting a hand on my shoulder. "Are you all right?"

"Perfectly all right," I whispered. "I had to do this. He said that I never let anything go. And that's what he wanted me to do." I was sweaty, filthy and so tired I could hardly stand. Minerva was holding me up. She had her arm around me, not seeming to mind the dirt.

"I'm letting it all go," I said, quietly. "Forgiving them everything. All of the mud they've tracked across the Castle floors for years and years. And their dung-bombs. Their fanged frisbees. Their screaming yo-yos.

Their ever-bashing boomerangs. Their pranks. Their staying up till all hours of the night, running around in the corridors. All their magic in the corridors, all their sneaking food out of the kitchens. Their grubby little messes on the walls. Their gum stuck all over the stair railings, the desks, the woodwork and every other place you could possibly imagine. Their inquisitive little noses stuck everywhere they don't belong. All their infernal frog brains and rat intestines splattered on the dungeon ceilings."

"And," I sighed, "all my backaches and sore knees and blistered hands too. Everyone makes mistakes. And they're only children, after all."

I leaned on Minerva, who stood beside me. "Let's keep this between ourselves. The Headmaster already knows and the three of us. No one will know, or even care, if my file cabinets are empty. You won't tell, will you? I'm not going to tell anyone else, except for Severus."

"Don't worry, Argus," Minerva said. "I won't breathe a word."

"Nor will I..." Hagrid said, gruffly.

We watched the bright flames and the rising sparks. Hagrid blew his nose loudly. I supposed that the smoke was really bothering him. I was covered with soot and ash. But I felt clean inside.



"You idiot!" Severus said, his dark eyes wide with shock. "You ass!"

"Professor, what's wrong?"

Severus had been walking the corridors for exercise, trying to build his strength up. When I'd summoned black-and-yellow, the Door had brought me directly to him. Startling Professor Snape had been the last thing I'd wanted to do. I know that I am not a particularly pleasant sight even under the best of circumstances. I should have given some thought to what I looked like before I went to tell him that my sentence had been pronounced and carried out. I was filthy, dishelved and I smelled like smoke. The bruises left from my encounter with an angry Lucius Malfoy were turning a great many interesting colors as they healed, which didn't help.

"Filch," Severus said, shaking his head slowly. "I don't believe it. You burned *everything* in those cabinets of yours?"

"No, Professor, not everything. Just my forms. There's still all the things I've confiscated over the years. I can give some of it back. At least the stuff that isn't dangerous."

I reached a grubby hand into an even grubbier pocket. Pulling out a small, battered Sneakoscope, I held it out to him. "I think this belongs to you."

He stared. "I haven't seen that thing since I was twelve years old. It's broken."

"I know. You threw it at James Potter."

"I don't want it, Filch. Please get rid of it."

I pocketed the sneakoscope again. He appeared to be at a loss for words.

"Professor..." I said, hesitantly, "I'm sorry if what I've done upsets you. Though I don't know why it should. It seemed

the most fitting way of showing you that I'm sorry."

Even if he didn't forgive me, I knew that I'd done everything I could possibly do.

Snape shut his eyes tightly. He rubbed the bridge of his nose, between his thumb and forefinger. "My fifth years visited me today," he said, slowly. "They're purple! All of them."

"Yes, Professor, I know."

"It seems that my classroom has been the site of repeated explosions while I've been ill. I am hoping, desperately, that my room is still usable! I have lessons to plan, if I ever intend to resume my work. Madam Pomfrey's stores of potions are extremely low."

He looked at me with something close to his usual sneer. "My point, Filch, is that I have many important things to worry about! I have work to do! I can no longer be troubled with the state of your conscience!"

Severus sighed. "I forgive you," he said, very quietly. "The matter is ended and forgotten. Now, please, go and clean yourself up."

"Yes, Professor. I will. Thank you, Professor!"



I was very tired. I needed a bath desperately. But I still had one important task to take care of first. Among the many items that I'd confiscated from students over the years, I had found one treasure. The rightful owner was dead. But I could make sure that the item was properly presented to her next of kin. It would be a sensitive task. One too important and deli-

cate to be entrusted to a grubby old man, reeking of smoke and nearly falling down with exhaustion.

Fortunately, I knew someone who could handle the job quite well on my behalf.



Ginny was as alarmed by my appearance as Severus had been. Though she reacted in quite a different way. My little friend cried out in shock and concern.

"Mr. Filch, are you all right?"

"Fine," I said, smiling at her. "I've just been doing some cleaning. Getting rid of a few old things in my office that I don't need any longer. Your Charm was perfect. I feel like a new man. If those brothers of yours have any sense they will make you a partner in their enterprise. You could have your own side-line, with those Cheering Charms of yours!" I cleared my throat and got myself back on the subject.

"When I was cleaning out my office, I found this," I said, withdrawing a small bundle out of my pocket. I'd wrapped it in a handkerchief to keep it clean.

"It's not a diary," I reassured Ginny. "It's just a sketchbook. She probably bought it in some Muggle shop. She liked to sketch, and she had a good eye for it, too."

I let Ginny take the little sketchbook. I'd taken it from another pretty red haired girl, years before.

"She would draw anything that caught her eye," I said softly. "One day, I caught her sketching me. I was cleaning the corridor outside Gryffindor tower. She captured my foul expression perfectly. I told her that

she was a very rude and impudent girl and then I took her book away. It's been in a drawer in my office ever since. She bought another one to replace it as soon as she could. I'd forgotten all about it, till today."

Ginny looked at the battered little book. A stub of pencil was still stuck in the binding rings. On the back cover, a heart was drawn around the initials L.E. & J.P. Her eyes went round. She understood the importance of what she was holding.

"Oh!" Ginny said softly. "Mr. Filch! I don't think Harry has anything that belonged to his mother!"

"He'll have this now. You'll see that he gets it."

"Yes," she breathed. "Of course I will."

"Thank you, Ginny."

Quite suddenly, she hugged me.

"What," I gasped, a bit winded, "was that for?"

"For Harry! He's going to be so glad! Thank you, Mr. Filch!"

Smiling, I went off to take a bath.



From the outside my file cabinets look the same as ever. Only those who bother to look inside will know that anything has changed. Sometimes you have to look deeper into things and into people. Almost everyone is more than what they seem. Draco and Neville and Severus and Moody. Lucius Malfoy. Me.

Wise men like Dumbledore already know how to look beneath the surfaces. But anyone can learn. It's never too late.

EPILOGUE

Another Lesson Learned

I stumbled out of my red-and-gold Door into a dungeon corridor that seemed at first glance to be mercifully deserted. Blushing shades of red that even the Weasleys had yet to discover, I backed up against the wall opposite my tapestry and slid down to sit on the floor.

With a soft moan, I buried my face in my hands. The corridor was not empty. However, the approaching steps were familiar and trusted ones so I did not look up.

"Ah, Filch," a voice as smooth as black silk said. "What dreadful thing have you done now?"

I greeted his comment with a mortified silence. Professor Snape sighed.

"Have you landed anyone in the hospital wing?" Severus asked. His voice held very little of his customary sarcasm. And he'd had the courtesy not to add 'this time' to his question. The fact that he'd truly forgiven me for what I'd done to him warmed my heart, even though I felt miserable over my newest offense.

"No, Professor," I said, my voice muffled. "No one has been hurt."

"Surely then, it can't be that bad?"

I looked up at Severus, stricken. My mood could not help lightening a bit at the sight of him. Snape's condition was greatly improved. His color was back

to normal; still sallow, but no more so than usual. He was strong enough now to walk down to his rooms in the dungeons unaided and had finally been permitted to leave the hospital wing.

He would be able to resume teaching his classes in a few more days, though Poppy had given him strict instructions about "not overdoing things."

Professor Snape's expression, when he looked at me, was torn between amusement and concern.

"It seems," I told him sadly, "that every time I discover something new about how I can use the tapestries, I always find some new way to misuse them shortly afterwards."

"Yes," he agreed with me, "you certainly do have a gift."

Snape's quick agreement had stung, though I couldn't glare at him with a clear conscience. He was right, after all.

"I am not sure if you knew this," I said, "but the Doors can bring me to a person as easily as they can bring me to a room."

Professor Snape gave me the sort of look that he usually reserves for poor Neville. The 'it's not a question of *will* you get yourself into trouble with that, it's only a question of *when*' type of expression.

"Go on," he said.

"I had things to discuss with Professor McGonagall. A detention for some of her Gryffindors. So I asked red-and-gold to take me to Minerva," I gulped.

"It seemed perfectly reasonable," I went on, defensively. "She had asked to see me as soon as possible! How could

I have known that she would be t-taking a bath?"

"I don't suppose," Severus said, his voice carefully deadpan, "that Professor McGonagall was pleased by your intrusion?"

"Professor," I asked him, mournfully, "are you familiar with the story of Actaeon?"

"Of course. But you seem to have gotten your chaste goddesses a bit confused. It was Artemis that Actaeon disturbed at her bath."

"Well, the general idea is the same," I said in a very small voice.

"It would be quite impossible for Minerva to turn you into a stag and have you hunted to death by your own hounds, Argus. You don't have any hounds. I suppose that she would have to Transfigure you into a mouse and set Mrs. Norris on you. But she would not do it. She wouldn't even Hex you." Snape was trying not to smile, but he was losing his battle.

"If you had seen the way she *looked* at me..."

Severus shook his head, smiling openly now. "If your intention is to hide yourself down here, you are being foolish. The dungeons are the first place that Professor McGonagall will search for you."

"I'm not hiding," I said, with as much dignity as I could manage. "I'm just going to be in my office for a while. With my door closed."



I heard the soft padding of cat feet behind me before I reached my office. Somehow, I knew that it

was not Mrs. Norris. When I turned, I saw a sleek tabby regarding me sternly.

"Deputy Headmistress," I murmured, red-faced.

Minerva stood there a moment later. Dressed in her customary green robes, hair once more wound into a neat bun. The memory of that long, black hair swirling around her pale shoulders in the water made me blush. She had looked like a lovely mermaid.

"Mr. Filch," she began.

"Argus," she continued in a gentler tone when she saw my embarrassment, "I want you to know that I realize what happened was an accident."

"Yes, Ma'am." I said. "I'm very sorry, Ma'am."

"Mr. Filch, your apology is accepted. Now, please do not keep 'Ma'aming' me to death."

"Yes, M... er.. Professor." I was still blushing. "I j-just want you to know that I have nothing but the deepest respect... the most sincere admiration..."

"Yes, thank you." Minerva's face grew faintly pink too. "It's quite all right."

"All things considered, it would be in the best interests of everyone concerned if you were to use this new talent very sparingly in the future," she continued.

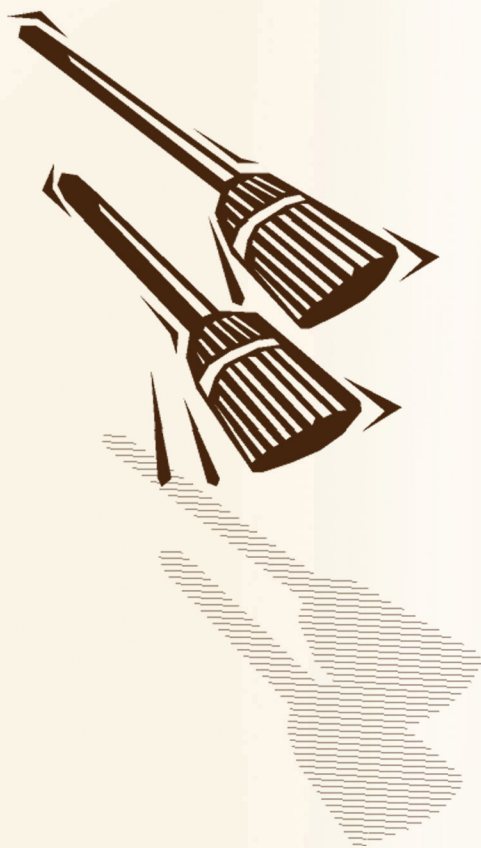
I nodded. "I agree. I shall only ask the Doors to take me to specific rooms. Not to people! I... I'm very sorry, Professor."

She smiled, a wry expression in her clear grey eyes. "Well there was no lasting harm done, and no reason for you to fret any further about what happened. We'll just put this down as yet another learning experience."

I sighed, unable to avoid the sinking feeling that I had a lot more 'learning experiences' coming my way.

The End

The Way
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PROLOGUE

Unofficial Observer

I RAN DOWN the left hand corridor on the first floor, just ahead of a glowing red, grapefruit-sized ball of light. Halfway down the corridor, a black-and-yellow tapestry waited. Behind me I could hear the triumphant buzzing of one of Mad Eye Moody's *Secutus* spells. It would reach me well before I reached black-and-yellow. To make matters even worse, another red pulsating ball of light had just appeared directly between me and my Door. I was surrounded.

Or was I? Ahead of my pounding feet, the stone floor of the corridor suddenly shifted. Green-and-silver didn't appreciate being used as a doormat, I was certain. But it was for a good cause. Being caught by Mad-Eye Moody's spells hurt. My job as Castle caretaker gives me enough backaches already. Without breaking stride, I jumped downwards, right through the corridor floor.

Momentum remains a problem whenever I use my Doors to jump through the floor. I have a tendency to emerge sprawling head over heels. Recently I had

started lessons with Madam Hooch. She'd been teaching me how to fall without damaging myself too badly.

Madam Hooch knew that to me a broom would never be more than a cleaning implement. But she hadn't questioned the Headmaster when he'd asked her to teach me about falling. Her yellow hawk-like eyes had swept me up and down, taking in the fading bruises still visible on my face.

"Good idea," she'd said, briskly. "Especially if Argus is not going to have the sense to keep away from Lucius Malfoy!"

I'd sighed. The list of people who Needed To Know seemed to be growing all the time, but my Doors were still a secret from most of the people at Hogwarts. However, nearly everyone in the Castle appeared to know that Lucius Malfoy had thrown me down the front steps when I refused to obey his order to take him to the Headmaster immediately.

Madam Hooch's expression had been approving in spite of her words. She'd been glad that I'd stood up to Malfoy. And she did her best to share her knowledge and training with me. There's an art to falling. Since even the best Quidditch players will fall, Madam Hooch was well qualified to teach me how to do it without breaking my neck. I was able to turn my tumble into a passable shoulder-roll when I emerged from green-and-silver, through a wall in the Charms corridor.

Getting my feet beneath me once more, I crouched behind a suit of armor to rest for a moment and catch my breath.

Straining my ears, I listened for the distinctive *clunk* of Moody's wooden leg. To my relief I didn't hear it. But I had heard...something. Soft breathing, perhaps? And had that been a quiet footfall nearby? I scanned the Charms corridor. There was no one in sight.

Sometimes the ghosts do like to move about invisibly. But they don't breathe and no one hears them walking. And it couldn't be Peeves. Peeves hardly ever does anything quietly.

Was it a student out of bed, perhaps? My heart sank at the thought. I didn't want to be interrupted in the middle of one of my lessons with Moody! It hadn't happened yet, I'd been lucky so far. I still wasn't sure what I would do if the situation actually ever arose.

Everything was perfectly quiet now. Or as quiet as the Castle ever gets at night.

I must have imagined those soft noises.

Stealthily I moved down the corridor in the direction of the main staircase. No red pulsating *Secutus* spells yet. I was still safe.

Near the top of the stairs was a statue, mostly hidden in the shadows. I didn't recognize it. A new addition to the Castle's decor? I was just wondering when the Headmaster had acquired this ugly thing, when I noticed the bright blue magical eye. Oh, no!

Wand outstretched, Mad-Eye Moody stepped forward. He looked pleased with me. This evening I'd been able to elude him for longer than ever before. He also looked triumphant, as he cast a Stunning spell at me. Capturing me had gotten to be more of a chal-

lenge for him lately, and the old Auror thoroughly enjoyed a challenge.

Good. Because I still had one more trick for him, literally up my sleeve. I'd been able to feel the surge in Moody's magic even before he'd cast the spell. And I was ready.

The wooden filing cabinets in my office are nearly empty of parchments now. I'd recently burned about thirty years worth of detention forms, each one a carefully hoarded grudge. But I still had a few file drawers with plenty of odds and ends in them.

One of the drawers is labeled "Confiscated and Highly Dangerous." I leave that one alone.

Another is labeled "Confiscated, but Probably Harmless." One of the items in that drawer had been a small hand mirror that I'd once taken from a nasty little chit named Rita Skeeter. (The mirror had seemed ordinary enough. But it had looked to me as if Rita had been trying to use it to reflect a curse at one of her classmates.) The mirror fit snugly into the palm of my hand, just as it had fit into Rita's. And Moody's Stunning Spell would reflect much as Rita had tried to do all those years ago with her curse.

Mad-Eye Moody froze as his own Stunning Spell bounced back and hit him. His magical eye swung about crazily. His normal eye rolled back in his head. I was alarmed to see that his nose was trickling blood. Just how hard had he meant to hit me?

I hadn't realized how close he was standing to the top of the stairs. Horrified, I watched him falling backwards into emptiness!

Had Moody ever played Quidditch? I had no clue. Had anyone ever taught him how to fall? I didn't know. And even if someone had, he was Stunned and completely helpless. He was going to break his neck!

I didn't know which of my Doors was there for me, when I stepped back. I didn't think about it. I just stepped backwards into one of them and emerged halfway down the flight of stairs. Stopping Moody's fall entirely would not be possible. But I could try to prevent him from injuring himself too badly!

I'd once seen Madam Hooch catch a terrified first year who'd fallen from her broom. She'd flown underneath the girl, allowing herself to be knocked off her own broom a few feet from the ground to cushion the child's fall. Neither of them had suffered anything worse than bruises.

Moody hit me with the force of a bludger. I was able to keep him from striking his head as we tumbled down the stairs together. I'd already sent whichever Door I'd used away. (Another journey through my Doors was the last thing Mad-Eye needed.)

At the landing, near the foot of the stairs, there was a pedestal with a heavy Grecian amphora on top. Moody and I slammed into the pedestal's base. The amphora started to shake. It was heavy enough to do terrible harm if it fell on us.

A proper wizard could have caught the amphora with a spell, but I couldn't. The best I could do was curl protectively over my helpless teacher and hope to cushion him from this impact too.

Body aching from my tumble down the stairs, eyes squeezed tightly shut and heart pounding, I waited for the crushing blow.

It didn't come.

After a few anxious moments I dared to open my eyes. The amphora was now completely steady on its pedestal. But it was not exactly in the center. The ring of dust made that obvious. (I couldn't help a flush of shame when I noticed the dust. All the recent havoc in the dungeons has put me so very far behind with my dusting!)

Someone or something had saved us, catching the heavy thing before it could fall and putting it back! Someone or something that I couldn't see.

"Who's here?" I wheezed, my heart still beating hard. "I know you're here!"

Silence was my only answer. I couldn't even hear anyone breathing. I looked up and down the stairs but nothing was moving.

Moody groaned.

"Filch?" he said weakly.

"I'm here," I said. "Are you all right?"

There! I'd heard it again. A very soft sound, as if someone was moving close by. Perhaps someone who was as concerned about Mad-Eye as I was.

The Auror's magical eye was rolling about crazily again. I couldn't tell if it had rested in any one direction longer than the rest. And Moody did not tell me if he saw anything unusual.

"Don't get yourself into a state, Filch," Moody said gruffly. "It's just your cat."

Mrs. Norris came slinking silently up the stairs, moving out of the shadows towards us. But I knew it wasn't her that I'd just heard.

"Keep alert, Missy," I whispered to her as she came softly over to me. "We're not alone on these stairs."

Her small grey ears began to swivel about like Moody's magical eye.

I didn't know how long Mrs. Norris had been nearby, but if she'd been in the vicinity for more than a few moments then she'd probably seen the falling amphora stopped by our invisible savior.

The old Auror watched my cat, speculatively

"What in Medea's Name did you do to me?" was the only thing he said. He pulled a handkerchief out of his pocket to dab at his bloody nose.

"I just reflected your own spell back at you," I told him.

Relieved to see that he was recovering, I was beginning to feel the first stirrings of resentment at the powerful Stunning Spell. He'd meant to use that spell on me!

"With this," I said.

The small mirror, unbroken, lay at the foot of the stairs. Wincing, I got up and fetched it to show him. The old Auror looked pale and dazed. But his magical eye swiveled to study the mirror.

"Nasty little thing," he growled. "Where'd you get it?"

"It was confiscated from a student. It's been in a drawer in my office for years. It's just a mirror, isn't it?"

Moody shook his head. "No. This thing was made for casting spells. And it's got a defensive spell on it too for good measure. It reflects magic back with nearly twice

the original force. Circe's Pigs, man! Did you really think that I was going to use a spell that strong on you?"

"I figured that you might have gotten carried away," I said. I was ashamed of myself.

He sighed, chagrined. "Listen to me, Filch. You are one of this Castle's defenders. As much as any other adult wizard here. Those Doors give you access to magic that no one else can use. I'm trying to teach you that you have claws and how to use 'em. That's the whole point of these lessons. I'm not trying to kill you!"

"I know. I'm sorry."

"You've done very well. I'm proud of you. Tonight you've earned ten out of ten."

I couldn't help grinning proudly.

"Which student did you take it from?" Moody asked me, rubbing his head.

I told him.

"Figures..." he growled, but I wasn't listening.

I'd just heard someone gasp, quite distinctly!

"Who's there?" I cried.

Both Moody and Mrs. Norris were no help whatsoever. Moody was staring into space. It almost seemed as if he were deliberately trying not to look anywhere in particular. Mrs. Norris was calmly washing her right front paw, with an attitude as casual as Moody's. Cats and Aurors love to keep secrets.

"That does it!" I snarled at Mad-Eye. "I'm tired of everyone around me always knowing more than I do! Mrs. Norris can't tell me who else is here, but you can. You just won't!"

Moody looked at me as if I'd lost my mind.

"All right. Fine. Don't tell me!" I grumbled. "It's probably one of the ghosts anyhow! Probably the Baron. As long as it isn't Peeves! Whoever it is, it's someone that Mrs. Norris isn't objecting to, and I trust her judgment. It's just maddening... the way that you enjoy secret plots, and wheels turning within wheels... name one other person who is as infuriating as you are!"

"Albus," Moody said, promptly.

"I am going to tell him you said that!" I said, outraged at such disrespect.

Moody grinned. "Please do."

I continued to glower for a few moments, then I sighed.

"Do you want to keep it?" I asked him. "The mirror, I mean."

"It's yours, Filch. Why would I take it away from you?"

"Because," I pointed out, "I thought that it was just an ordinary mirror. I couldn't test it with magic or use any spells to see exactly what it was capable of doing. Maybe I've got some other things in my 'Harmless' drawer that I should reclassify."

"I'll be glad to take a look at your collection, a little later. Right now, I don't feel up to it." He rested his head in his hands, massaging his temples.

I watched, feeling sorry for him.

"Sounds like you've amassed quite an unofficial little arsenal over the years," Moody murmured.

Stricken, I said, "But I would never use anything that I knew was dangerous!"

He sighed. "That's not the point I'm trying to make,

Filch. I don't disapprove of your arsenal. Quite the opposite. Unofficial things have a very important place among anyone's most valuable resources. You've got to learn how to use any advantage you've got. Unofficial weapons. Unofficial sources of information. Unofficial connections."

"For example," he went on, "the students aren't supposed to know about your Doors. Thanks to those tapestries you can come closer to Apparating within the Castle's defenses than any other wizard at Hogwarts. Neville and Ginny have been sworn to secrecy. They can't tell any of the other children. But isn't it true that it was really *Ginny* who figured out that a powerful wizard-repelling spell is what makes the Doors unusable for any witch or wizard who's not a Squib?"

I nodded warily, wondering what he was getting at. I knew all this.

"None of the students can know about your Doors, officially. But the students are one of Hogwarts' greatest resources. Full of intelligence, energy and ideas."

"Full of tricks and pranks and mischief!" I retorted. "You're not suggesting that I start telling *students*, are you?"

Moody smiled. "Of course not. You're not ready to take such a suggestion seriously. But I hope that you will consider my point. Don't overlook any advantage, any source of possible help. Xiomara Hooch and I are not your only teachers. You can learn from anyone. Even the students."

That brought me up short. I knew he was right about learning from the children. Both Neville and

Ginny had taught me a great deal already.

"Good," he said, approvingly. "You are thinking about it. That's all I'm asking. Now give me a hand up and help me find my staff. We'll go and have a look at that treasure trove of yours."

CHAPTER 1

Seekers

"Students out of bed!!!!"

Peeves' voice was unmistakable.

"Oi! Filch!"

Maybe I was just having a nightmare?

"Get up, Filch!"

No, Peeves was really here. In my room. In the middle of the night. Yelling. I burrowed under the blankets and put my pillow over my head. The wretched poltergeist began to lob stale dinner rolls at me. (He steals them from the tables at dinner and keeps them until they are harder than Hagrid's rock cakes.)

"Students! Out! Of! Bed!" Each word was accompanied by a chunk of bread bouncing off my back.

"Go away," I moaned. "I've had barely four hours sleep and that's over the last two days!"

"Oooh!" Peeves cackled at me. "Poor, tired old Filch wants his beauty sleep, does he? Well, one hundred years' beauty sleep wouldn't help that ugly phiz of yours!"

His voice turned oily. "Good ickle students should be

safe in their beds at night. Bad ones who go running about should be caught and punished! Neglecting your responsibilities just a bit, aren't you?"

Curse him, he was right. I never thought I'd see the day when I'd need Peeves to remind me of my proper duty. Blearily, I managed to sit up. For a moment or two all I could do was blink and stare. The poltergeist bounced a stale roll off my head.

"Listen, why don't you go and torment them for me, 'til I get there?" I asked him, too weary even to dodge.

Peeves gave me a wicked glare. I could see the gleam in his eyes, even in the dimness of my room.

"Lazy old Filch is just going to go right back to sleep!" Peeves said accusingly.

"I mean it," I yawned. "I'll be right there. Where did you say these students were?"

"In the entrance hall. And you'd better be quick! Or they'll be outside!!"

That woke me up.

"Delay them. I'll be right behind you," I said, fumbling around for my slippers.

Grinning with satisfaction, Peeves turned and flew out through my bedroom wall.

Mrs. Norris, who was curled up on my bed, stirred and had herself a luxuriant stretch. She looked at the bits of bread everywhere and blinked her golden eyes.

"Don't ask," I said. "Are you coming with me or would you rather sleep?"

She rubbed against me, purring even more affectionately than usual. Then she jumped down from the

bed. Blue-and-bronze was already there by the time I stumbled over to the wall.

"The entrance hall," I murmured. "Please."



Mrs. Norris and I emerged into another bread-storm.

"Merlin's Beard, Peeves! Don't you ever let the students have any of these accursed dinner rolls?" I moaned.

Peeves broke off his attack and hovered nearby to witness my confrontation with the miscreants. From the look of him, he was hoping that I was going to shout myself into a fit of apoplexy. I could see two boys in the middle of the vast entrance hall, brushing stale bits of roll out of their hair and off their robes. Fifth year Harry Potter and fourth year Colin Creevey, both of Gryffindor. Both were holding brooms. Potter had his Firebolt and Creevey was carrying one of the school brooms, a rather old Shooting Star.

Stale bread crunched under my slippers as I made my way over to them. Mrs. Norris padded softly after me.

"Where do the two of you think you're going?" I asked.

Thanks to the highly efficient Hogwarts grapevine, I already knew the answer to my question. As the only Seeker on the Gryffindor House team, Potter carried a heavy responsibility. At least one reserve Seeker was needed, and Potter had chosen Creevey from among several candidates. I'm no expert on Quidditch, but I thought it was a wise decision. Creevey, like Potter, is small, quick and agile. And enthusiastic. Very, very enthusiastic.

According to Minerva, who was pleased with Pot-

ter's choice, Creevey had the makings of a fine Seeker. Plenty of raw talent. Muggle-born Creevey was eager for all the flying practice he could get. Even if it was in the middle of the night.

To their credit, neither boy tried lying to me, or bluffing. It would have been obvious to the thickest troll what they'd been trying to do and they knew it.

"This is my fault," Potter said. "Not Colin's. It was my idea."

"No," Creevey piped up. "It was my idea, really! Don't blame Harry!"

I sighed. "Boys, it doesn't matter who had the idea. You're both here. You're both getting detention. As soon as I can think of one that's miserable enough. Flying around in the dark! What were you thinking?"

"Could have broken their necks," Peeves cackled gleefully, rubbing his hands together. He was prompting me, waiting for me to put on a good show for him. But I was too sleepy to work up any real anger. I felt more relief than anything. The boys had been caught before anything too terrible could happen.

"Go back to your beds," I told them quietly. "I'll speak to Professor McGonagall about the two of you in the morning and we will arrange a suitable detention. Tomorrow is Saturday. You don't have classes. You can practice your flying all day if you wish. In the light, like sensible people."

Both boys turned to go back up the stairs.

Peeves looked at me with anger and disappointment on his sharp little face. I was too busy yawning to care.

Sweeping up the entrance hall didn't take as long as I'd feared. When Mrs. Norris and I returned to our room, I discovered that one or more of the house-elves must have paid us a visit and set my bed back to rights. Not so much as a bread crumb in sight! Relieved, I crawled back under my blankets.

I slept right through breakfast as I've often done lately. Eventually, I was awakened by Mrs. Norris. She was making a most distressing sound. A long, low crooning yowl.

"What is it, my sweet?" I asked, petting her. "What's wrong?"

She pressed up against me, kneading the bedclothes with her claws. Her tail end rose as I stroked her. She continued making that pitiful noise.

"Oh... no!" I said. I buried my face in my hands. It had been a very long time, but I knew the signs. A certain long-standing Charm had worn off.

My poor cat was in heat.

Professor Flitwick had been given the task of finding a way to block my Doors and he'd risen to the challenge. The diminutive Professor was the most Unreachable person in the Castle. He had Unreachable Charms protecting his office and Unreachable Charms protecting himself. Both the Headmaster and Alastor Moody agreed that the Castle's defenses

should not include a weapon that we ourselves did not know how to fight. Any weapon had the potential to be turned against us.

When I tried to enter Professor Flitwick's office via blue-and-bronze, the journey took a long time. When I finally emerged into the corridor near his office (the closest the Charm would allow) I found the door locked.

In desperation, I asked blue-and-bronze to take me directly to him. It was an emergency! Professor Flitwick needed to renew the Charm which had kept Mrs. Norris safe from the demands of her urge to breed!

To my surprise I emerged from Rowena's Door to find myself back in the Charms corridor once more. Several more attempts produced the same results. I realized the truth that I'd been unwilling to accept. My Door could not bring me to Professor Flitwick because he must not be in the Castle or anywhere on the grounds! He must have had plans for today.

I hoped that he would return soon. Being cooped up in her current miserable state would be very difficult for poor Mrs. Norris! I'd left her shut up in our rooms, wailing her little heart out.

Perhaps one of the other professors might be capable of working the complex Anti-estrus Charm? But no one else would have Flitwick's gentle touch. Mrs. Norris trusted him. Professor McGonagall was the only other Professor that Mrs. Norris was as fond of.

Could I raise this delicate subject with Minerva? She was really my only choice.

Uncharacteristically Mrs. Norris hissed at Minerva when I brought the Deputy Headmistress into our rooms. Professor McGonagall was carrying a book describing the workings of the Anti-estrus Charm.

"She's seeing me as a rival," Minerva said. "Another female in her territory. Poor thing. She's really in quite a state!"

"Is there anything you can do for her?" I asked, anxiously. We had to speak loudly in order to be heard over Mrs. Norris. She was rubbing up against me with great affection, wailing piteously while simultaneously bristling and glowering at Minerva.

Professor McGonagall shook her head. "I'm afraid not. The Anti-estrus Charm is one I've never done before and I don't wish to experiment on Mrs. Norris. Besides, the Charm loses effectiveness once the cat in question has started a breeding cycle."

"Argus," she continued gently, "The Charm was never meant to be permanent. Filius must have told you that."

I nodded, biting my lip.

"It must have reached the end of its natural span. Perhaps now you must simply let nature take its course."

"No," I said stubbornly. "Never again! You remember what happened last time! Kittens are a bother that she and I can do without very nicely, thank you! A lot of trouble and heartache! There must be some other way! Perhaps when Professor Flitwick returns, he can try another Charm on her!"

"He's gone for the entire weekend," Minerva told me. "Are you really willing to let her go on like this?"

"I don't want to, but I don't have a choice!" I said.

Minerva's expression was stern. Her clear, grey eyes urged me to reconsider.

Frowning, I shook my head.

"Thank you for your advice, Professor," I said. "As long as you're here, we might as well discuss the detention plans for Potter and Creevey. Let's go into the corridor, so we can hear each other!"

I had to pause first, to pry Mrs. Norris away from me. Minerva gave my cat a very sympathetic look as I shut the door on her pitiful yowling.



Minerva suggested that I seek Poppy's opinion on what to do about Mrs. Norris. Poppy had not been much help either. She agreed with Minerva.

"Oh, the poor little thing!" she said, when I described Mrs. Norris's condition. "Filch, you ought to just let her do what comes naturally! There are plenty of healthy tomcats in the Castle. Once she's bred, she'll be fine."

"She won't be fine!" I wailed. "She'll be *pregnant*! She'll have kittens!"

Poppy remembered the last time, years ago. She patted my arm comfortingly. "She was a good mother, Argus."

"I know she was a good mother. I just don't want her put through all of that, again!"

Poppy sighed. "I've given you my advice. Take it or leave it."



Grumbling, I retreated down to my office. Minerva had left the choice of Potter and Creevey's detention up to me and I was still trying to think of something suitable.

Pulling a chain off my wall, I began to polish. Mrs. Norris and her problem were still uppermost on my mind. I'd already decided that she and I would wait for Professor Flitwick and hope that he knew another Charm to help her. It was going to be a long weekend for both of us.

Two long chains and a set of manacles were gleaming under fresh coats of polish before I calmed down. Potter and Creevey. I really needed a detention worthy of the intrepid Gryffindor Seeker and his enthusiastic little apprentice. I reached for another chain.

The third chain did the trick. I finally had an idea. The entrance hall floor could use another good scrubbing! I had only done it once since December. Ordinarily I would never choose washing that floor as a detention-task. Not because I wish to spare the children's backs, hands or knees. A little hard work never did anyone any lasting harm.

It's because I can't abide shoddy work. The entrance hall floor is something that I take particular pride in. Most of the students will try to pass half-hearted efforts off as their best job unless they are carefully supervised. Being expected to do something so menial as *clean* without magic like a Muggle is so demeaning for them.

But Potter is different from most of the other students. I'd discovered this when I had supervised him during a detention for Professor Snape a few years

back. Severus had asked me to have Potter scrub out a collection of filthy flasks, bottles and beakers. All with bits of unidentifiable old potions crusted in hard-to-reach places.

Severus had probably been hoping that Potter would break a lot of them which would give him a reason to sneer, scold and deduct points from Gryffindor. Potter hadn't broken a single one. And he'd gotten them to sparkle. All without any prompting or badgering from me.

"You should have seen him, Professor!" I'd said, later. "Not a word about how hard a job it was. He just washed them all, right down to the very bottoms, without being told. Even the tiny ones! He just picked up the right-sized bottle brush and went straight to work."

"And, then," I'd continued enthusiastically, "he dried each one carefully, making sure that there were no streaks! No matter what else you may think of him, Harry Potter really knows how to clean!"

Poor Severus. He had not been pleased by this report. He'd given me one of his nastiest sneers. "Please, Filch. Do try to contain your delight. The boy is a wizard, not a house-elf."

I'd sighed. Many pure-bloods in all four Houses have this same arrogance. Power is their birthright. They are the magic-wielding lords of creation, meant for finer things than scrubbing. (In my heart I know that I really can't blame the pure-blooded wizards for feeling this way. I'd be no different if I wasn't a Squib.)

Muggle-borns can be refreshing sometimes. At least the Muggle-borns know that their magic is a gift.

They truly appreciate what they've been given. Potter was not Muggle-born, but he was Muggle-raised. The effect was the same.

Severus had given me another caustic look. "I hope that you did not make a fool of yourself, singing the boy's praises like some empty headed celebrity-worshipper."

I'd blinked at him. "You know that wouldn't be like me, Professor. Potter was only doing exactly what he ought to do! He didn't act as if he expected praise and I didn't offer him any. I just wish that the other brats were more like him."

Severus had not been able to suppress a shudder.



"The entrance hall floor?" Minerva said. "That's quite a big job."

"Their offense merits it. They weren't only out of their beds, they were trying to sneak outside! Potter is certainly up to washing the entrance hall floor. He can clean like a house-elf! I mean that as a compliment, Professor. And Creevey is full of stamina. He's like Professor Flitwick after he's had one too many of those cherry syrup and sodas! It won't hurt Creevey to put all that energy into something useful. And, I'm not going to leave them to do it all alone. I'm going to work along with them. We can do the job tonight and get it over with."

"The boys have been practicing on their brooms all day," Minerva said, frowning. "They're going to be tired."

"Tomorrow is Sunday. They can sleep late."

She gave me one of her stern looks. "Admit it. You

wish for a good reason to stay away from your rooms this evening, so you will not have to listen to poor Mrs. Norris. Honestly, Argus..."

I knew that I was guilty as charged.

"If you would just..." Minerva began.

"No," I said, firmly.

Professor McGonagall sighed.

"What about Potter and Creevey?" I asked. "Do I have your permission to proceed with their detention this evening?"

After another sigh, Minerva nodded.

"Good. It's settled," I said.



Harry Potter and Colin Creevey were quite dismayed when Minerva informed them what their detention would entail. Scrubbing the floor of the Castle's vast entrance hall was not their idea of a fun way to spend a Saturday night.

Too bad for them. Some things are necessary, even if they are not pleasant.

I'd already started working when Minerva sent the boys to me.

"Don't just stand there gawking!" I said, waving my hand at more buckets, and a collection of brushes, mops and bottles of Magical Mess Remover.

"The sooner you begin, the sooner you will finish! Life isn't all glory on the Quidditch pitch, you know!" I growled.

Creevey continued to stare, his wide eyes taking in every inch of the vast stone floor. Then his head tilted

back to study the ceiling, so high up that it was hard to make out. He looked even smaller than usual, alone in the large hall except for Potter and me.

Potter went right to work, as he usually does. He chose a bucket (which I'd already filled with cleaning solution, to save time), a mop and a brush. Then he went to a part of the room well away from where I was scrubbing. He knelt down, dipped his brush into the bucket and began cleaning.

"Creevey!" I barked. "Are you waiting for an engraved invitation? Start helping! No, boy, don't go over there. Potter already has that section of floor. Start from a different side and we can all work our way over to the middle!"

I had been too tired to yell at them the night before, but I was making up for it now. My mood was particularly foul because I had just spent some time with Mrs. Norris in our rooms, trying to soothe her. My cat was wailing inconsolably, showing little interest in either food or milk. Her yowling broke my heart. The thought of her alone in such a state made me miserable. But there was nothing useful I could do for her if I stayed.

Creevey had finally started cleaning. And chattering. His clear little voice carried loudly through the echoing hall.

"...Dennis took lots of pictures of us practicing today, Harry! He says he thinks he got a good shot of that brilliant catch you made... remember when you were showing me how fast the Snitch can dive...? Do you think I'll ever be able to make a catch like that, Harry?"

"Of course you will, Colin," Potter said, with more patience

then I would have been able to muster under similar circumstances. "You just need a little more practice."

"Let's have a lot less TALKING and a lot more WORKING over there, boys!" I snarled. Then I suppressed a twinge of guilt. It was unfair of me to have included both of them in the scolding, when Potter was keeping pace with me quite well.

Creevey managed to keep silent for a while. I could tell that it was a real strain for him. Eventually, he blurted out, "Ron really is an excellent Keeper! Did you know that he would be so good? He's *wild*! Half the time, he was only holding onto his broom with one leg! Dennis said that Hermione never even finished one page of her book because she kept watching Ron. She kept muttering that he was absolutely insane! Dennis says he got some really good pictures of Ron..."

"Creevey!" I snarled, furiously. "If your hands could only move as quickly as that mouth of yours, we'd already be finished! Shut UP!"

I'd never seen little Creevey actually look abashed before. Potter, who can take any amount of scolding that's directed at him, didn't like me yelling at Creevey. He gave me a glare that was nearly worthy of Professor Snape.

I gave him one right back. No student, no matter how well he cleans, is going to look at me like that!

For a while the three of us scrubbed in silence. And then we heard it. A heart-rending yowl, echoing down, through the vast, empty space between the far-off ceiling and the stone floor of the entrance hall. Bouncing down the stairs, echoing off the marble of

the first two flights. Potter and Creevey looked at each other in confusion.

"Impossible! How did she get out?" I said.

Both boys looked at me.

"How did who get out?" Potter asked.

"Never mind!" I snapped. "Keep working, Potter. And try to keep Creevey working too. I'll be right back!"

As fast as I could, I ran up the first flight of stairs then into a corridor where the boys couldn't see me. Summoning red-and-gold, I said, "Take me to Mrs. Norris!"

I emerged near the entrance to the stairwell on the fourth floor. Mrs. Norris was crouched, barely two feet in front of me, wailing like a heartsick feline Juliet seeking her Romeo. To make matters worse, I could hear several "Romeos" yowling right back.

"Believe me, you'll be grateful for this when you return to your proper senses, my sweet," I said, softly as I knelt down and reached for her. "Now, let's just get you back to our room, and..."

Mrs. Norris darted nimbly out of my reach. She went racing down the corridor on the left hand side, rapidly disappearing around a corner and out of sight.

Cursing, I summoned red-and-gold once more. "Take me to Mrs. Norris!"

I caught up with her not a moment too soon. Several suitors, clearly smitten by her charms, were surrounding her, vying enthusiastically for her affections. The noise level was incredible. Wishing that I'd brought my mop along to use as a weapon, or at least a bucket of water, I waded into the melee to defend her virtue.

When I returned to the entrance hall I was triumphant, if considerably scratched and bloodied. Mrs. Norris had been returned to our rooms, her honor still intact.

Her swains had been left to mill about, wailing in disappointment. Potter and Creevey regarded my battered condition with raised eyebrows. Potter made no comment. Predictably, Creevey was full of questions.

"Are you all right, Mr. Filch? What happened? Harry said that you must have gone to break up a cat-fight! Were some other cats fighting with Mrs. Norris? Is she all right?"

"Yes," I said, grimly. "Some other cats were ...fighting... with Mrs. Norris. She's fine now. I've locked her up where she'll be safe."

Potter was biting his lip. He looked like he was trying hard to keep from laughing. I was sure that he knew perfectly well that the other cats hadn't wanted to "fight" with Mrs. Norris. Though I was glad he hadn't said as much to Creevey.

Critically, I scanned the floor. As usual it was impossible to find fault with Potter's cleaning efforts. My bad mood warred with my sense of justice. I almost never feel the urge to praise a student's work. Potter was one of the very few exceptions. I was forced to admit that Creevey's work wasn't too bad either. Not up to Potter's level, of course, but Creevey knew how to apply elbow-grease with the skill of most Muggle-borns.

Potter had kept scrubbing at a steady pace all

the time I'd been gone. Nearly to the middle of the entrance hall, his progress had far outstripped Creevey's. Or, for that matter, mine! Determined to catch up, I went back to work.

Soon afterwards, we all heard the same yowling as before echoing eerily down the stairs! I cursed very loudly, forgetting for a moment that the boys were present.

"How does she keep getting out?!?" I snarled, slamming my brush into the bucket.

"Does Mrs. Norris *want* to fight with those other cats, Harry?" Creevey asked, wide-eyed.

"I'll explain in a minute, Colin," I heard Potter saying, as I ran up the stairs again, this time bringing along my mop and bucket.

I was just as glad that I was going to miss out on Potter's little lecture. Grimly, I wondered how he happened to know so much about cats. He didn't have a cat, he had an owl! Well, perhaps those Muggles he lived with had a cat.

The number of suitors had increased. I had a difficult time getting Mrs. Norris away from them, particularly since she didn't want to be rescued. Though the mop and the bucket had evened up the odds a little. When Mrs. Norris was at last safely confined in her chaste bedchamber again, I limped back down to the entrance hall.

This time my appearance didn't amuse the boys. Potter and Creevey looked at my bloody face, scratched

arms and ripped shirt without grinning.

"Mr. Filch?" Potter said, a little hesitantly. "Maybe you should go to the hospital wing."

The thought of what Poppy would say to me if she saw me in this state made me cringe. "No!" I snarled.

Smarting all over, I went back to work. I was hoping that I'd discouraged them from asking me any more questions. No such luck.

"Mr. Filch?" Creevey piped up. "Don't you want Mrs. Norris to have kittens?"

I didn't have the energy to glare at him.

"Kittens are a lot of bother," I said, wearily. "Mrs. Norris will gain weight, feel very tired and she'll be ill sometimes, too. And pregnancy is only the beginning. Giving birth is no picnic either! And then her work really starts. All the nursing and the teaching! Never a moment to herself. She would not be able to have a quiet nap without the little beasts piling themselves up all over her."

"But Harry says that she's making all that noise because she really *wants* kittens."

"She can't help that. It's instinctive. Once Professor Flitwick returns he'll be able to fix her. He should be back tomorrow night." *I hope*, I thought.

"Fix her?" Creevey said. "You mean the same way that my cat at home is fixed? I didn't know Professor Flitwick was a vet! Did you know that, Harry?"

"Professor Flitwick isn't a 'vet,'" whatever that is! He's going to use a Charm on her," I said.

"Oh!" Creevey exclaimed.

Then he took a deep breath and launched into a somewhat lengthy explanation of what a vet was. Some sort of Muggle that "fixed" cats. Not with anything as clean and neat as a Charm, either. A 'vet' would put a cat to sleep and cut her open!

"Then," Creevey was saying, apparently not noticing that I had gone chalk white under my scratches, "after all those bits have been removed, the vet will sew her right back up..."

"Er... Colin?" Potter said. "I don't think that Mr. Filch wants to hear any more."

"It doesn't hurt! Our Grizabella had it done when she was young, and she was good as new in a week or so!"

"Colin," Potter said, reprovingly.

I was shuddering visibly. Muggles were so blood-thirsty! I'd had no idea of the sorts of crudity they were forced to resort to in place of proper magic!



When the horrific yawling began echoing down the stairs for a third time, I just buried my head in my hands.

"How?" I moaned. "HOW does she keep getting out?"

Then, over the loud wails of my poor love-sick cat, Potter, Creevey and I all heard the sound of a familiar cackle.

"Poor, poor old Filch! Doesn't want kittens, does he? Too much mess and bother! Well, isn't that just too bad for old Filch!"

"Peeves?" I said, faintly.

The wretched poltergeist appeared, floating in the air over my head. He was rolling about in mid-air,

laughing madly.

"PEEVES!" I shrieked, swinging my mop at him. "HAVE YOU BEEN LETTING MRS. NORRIS OUT OF MY ROOM?"

"Poor sweet Mrs. Norris!" Peeves said, in mock-sympathetic tones. "Poor dear, *lonely* Mrs. Norris! I was just doing her a favor, I was!"

The poltergeist floated just out of my reach, glaring at me wickedly. I knew that this was revenge. He was angry because I had not given him a proper show the night before!

Well, he was getting a show now. I could not remember the last time I had been so furious! My eyes were popping. I could feel my face and body trembling. Spit flew from my mouth as I raged incoherently. I knew that I didn't have the strength to fight Mrs. Norris's admirers off for a third time...

I tried to leap into the air and throttle Peeves. But both Potter and Creevey were holding my arms.

"Calm down, Mr. Filch," Potter was saying, alarmed. Then he said something that astonished me.

"Maybe I could get the other cats away from her for you? I could use a Stunning spell or I could put them to sleep..."

"Yes!" Creevey said, jumping up and down. "I'll help you, Harry! That's a brilliant idea!"

"You couldn't possibly..." I said, twisting my hands together. "Up all those stairs? You'd be exhausted by the time you found them! And being able to get to where the cats are isn't enough! I've done that twice already, and it's the easy part!"

It was, too. My Doors were only a little bit of help

with this particular problem. Mrs. Norris was still too fast for me, and she didn't want to be caught...

Shaking my head in despair, I went on. "You'd have to be able to keep up with them to Stun them, wouldn't you? All those cats, all moving so fast? You'd need to be able to fly!"

The three of us all looked at each other while Peeves cackled madly over our heads. The same thought had obviously just occurred to Potter, Creevey and me. The boys' eyes shone with delight.

"No," I said, weakly. "Never! Not inside the Castle! It's not allowed! Against the Rules..."

"Kittens!" Peeves crowed in delight. "There'll be kittens everywhere! Poor, poor Filch!"

Something inside me snapped. "Damn you!" I screamed, shaking my fists at the poltergeist. I turned and glared at Potter and Creevey.

"All right!" I bellowed. "Do it! Call your brooms! Get yourselves up there and STUN those amorous toms! Do whatever you have to do, but keep them away from Mrs. Norris!!"

I'd shocked Peeves. I'd shocked Potter. I'd shocked Creevey. For that matter, I'd shocked myself. But it was too late to take it back. Potter's eyes were dancing with delight. Creevey's face was shining.

"Accio Firebolt!" Potter said.

"Accio Shooting Star!" Creevey said.

Twin blasts of magic blazed past me, racing up the stairs, towards Gryffindor tower.

A Fate Worse Than Kittens

Mounted on their brooms, Harry Potter and Colin Creevey went soaring up towards the distant entrance hall ceiling. I stood in the entrance hall far below the boys, unable to believe what I had just done. I'd really given Potter and Creevey my permission to fly their brooms through the Castle corridors! At night! 'Against the Rules' did not even *begin* to convey the enormity of my crime!

Peeves was hovering in the air over my head. From the look of him, he was also having trouble believing what I'd done. The poltergeist's eyes were as wide as a house-elf's.

Peeves and I watched the boys as they paused at top of the stairs leading to the fifth floor. They hovered for a moment. Then, with Potter leading, they flew through the door and out of our sight.

Peeves found his voice. "Shall I start handing out detentions, then?" the poltergeist asked me, indignantly. "Shall I start punishing students? Filling out forms? Get myself an office?"

"What are you going on about, Peeves?" I muttered.

"If you're going to start making mischief, then what am I supposed to do?!" Peeves fumed.

"I'm not making mischief! I'm trying to prevent it!" I snarled.

The sound of yowling cats increased in volume.

Potter and Creevey had apparently herded the band of felines back towards the main staircase. With a cacophony of bouncing echoes, the cats surged down the stairs. Whooping and yelling and generally making as much noise as the cats, Potter and Creevey both went into heart-stoppingly steep dives.

"If you're preventing mischief, what's all this?" Peeves yelled over the noise.

"Shut UP!" I growled, trying to catch sight of Mrs. Norris among the other cats. There she was, visible in the midst of her troop of admirers! I estimated their number at around twenty cats, at least!

"Good shot, Colin!" Potter shouted, as Creevey dropped a large, white tom.

"That makes six for me, Harry!" Creevey exulted. "I've nearly caught up to you!"

"Not quite," Potter called back, "I've got eleven now!"

"Er... I guess that's twelve for you, then," Creevey said, as Potter quickly Stunned a rusty-red tom.

"Stop making so much noise!" I bellowed up at them, through cupped hands. "Between you and the cats, you'll wake up the whole bloody Castle!" My shout echoed off the vast, high ceiling. I cringed, putting my hands over my mouth.

"Sorry!" they shouted down to me in unison. Potter's voice was husky and deepening, while Creevey's was still very young and shrill. Even more echoes filled the entrance hall.

The cats, with Mrs. Norris leading, swept through the door leading to the third floor. Potter and Creevey raced

after them. The two toms that they'd just Stunned were left behind, resting quietly on the stairs.

Peeves started to cackle wickedly, his mood brightening. "Oh, what fun this is!" he gloated. "Maybe I should tell the Headmaster! It would be for your own good, really. Then again maybe I shan't. His Headship might have Snape beat you bloody this time and you're bloody enough already."

"Poor Filch," he added with gleeful false sympathy. "So many bites and scratches! What's the matter? Didn't Mrs. Norris and her friends *like* having their fun interrupted?"

Overcome with laughter, the poltergeist flew up towards the third floor, following the boys and the cats.



The boys, the cats and the Poltergeist were all moving very fast. But I was able to keep close behind them, thanks to my Doors. Everywhere I looked I seemed to see another Stunned tomcat.

Good! Each one down meant another ruffian who would not be able to pursue my sweet girl! Unfortunately, Hogwarts Castle seemed to have an endless supply of male cats! For every cat Stunned another one seemed to join the chase.

Grimly, I thought about what Creevey had told me about the Muggles called 'vets.' Did these Muggles also practice their barbarism on the males of the species? Most likely they did. It was easy to guess what a vet must cut off to "fix" a male. As much as the thought made me

wince, I almost wished that Creevey could fetch a vet for me and set the Muggle loose on the Castle's toms.

I was in the library corridor. The mob of cats must have changed direction because they were running towards me now. Ah, I'd been hoping for such a chance! When Mrs. Norris came into view I sprang towards her. Making a lucky catch, I grabbed her away from the circle of her admirers!

My sweet cat promptly became a bundle of claws and teeth in my arms. Yelling in pain, I was forced to let her go.

Then I had to throw myself flat on the floor as Potter and Creevey came speeding down the corridor, straight at me. The boys were flying extremely low, less than three feet above the floor.

I could hear Peeves' obnoxious cackles of delight.

"It helps a bit if you try to think of them as Bludgers with claws and teeth!" Potter was yelling.

"This gives me a whole new respect for Fred and George!" Creevey yelled back.

"Don't play Quidditch with them... STUN them!" I snarled, just as a terrible wave of cold swept over me from behind.

"What... is... the MEANING of this?" demanded a rather dry, dusty voice. "Explain yourselves, all of you!"

Potter and Creevey both performed flawless hair-pin turns and came back down the corridor to hover in front of the furious Professor. Peeves seemed to have disappeared.

"Erm, hello, Professor Binns," Potter said, breath-

lessly. "We're trying to help Mr. Filch rescue his cat!"

"On your brooms?" Binns demanded, getting even paler and more transparent than usual. I couldn't tell if it was from shock or anger.

"But Mr. Filch *said* we could!" Creevey piped up.

"Is this true?" Hogwarts' only ghost-Professor asked me, sternly.

"Yes, Professor," I said, picking myself up off the floor. I turned around to face him, flushing with embarrassment.

Binns stared at me as if he'd never seen anyone quite so appalling on either side of the grave. "I shall speak to the Headmaster about you, young Filch!" the ghost said, coldly. "And I shall speak to Mr. Pringle as well!"

He turned and glided off down the corridor, in a huff.

"Who's Mr. Pringle?" Creevey asked.

"He was the caretaker before Mr. Filch," Potter said. "Ron's Mum and Dad were at school then. It was ages ago."

"He's dead now," I said.

"Oh!" Creevey was wide-eyed. "Can Professor Binns talk to another dead person, even if they aren't a ghost?"

Potter looked at me, questioningly.

"How should I know? It never occurred to me to wonder about a thing like that!" I said, with considerable irritation. Honestly, where did Creevey get these questions?

"Do you think he's really going to fetch Dumbledore?" Potter asked me.

At least that was a sensible question.

"I don't know. Don't worry. I'm taking full responsibility for this," I said, glumly.

Potter straightened his glasses. He grinned at me as he ran a hand through his perennially messy black hair. "Well, the Headmaster isn't here yet, and we haven't rescued Mrs. Norris. Are you still with me, Colin?"

"Yeah, Harry!" Creevey said, with characteristic enthusiasm.

They took off down the corridor together like a pair of bolts shot from Hagrid's crossbow.

"Remember! No playing about!" I yelled after them.



I asked red-and-gold to take me back to the entrance hall. I simply didn't have it in me to chase the cats any longer. I would have to trust the boys to guard my sweet one's honor. Someone had to finish scrubbing the floor, didn't they?

The next time that I heard Hogwarts' feline version of the Wild Hunt, it appeared that Potter and Creevey had pursued the cats up to the highest staircase. I could only distinguish a very few distinct cats' voices among the yowls when they began to descend again.

When the chase grew close enough for me to see, I noted that Mrs. Norris was now accompanied by only two stalwart swains. One tom was large and black. The other tom was even larger with fluffy ginger fur and an oddly squashed-looking face.

Potter and Creevey were doing those heart-stopping steep dives once more, matching the cats' breakneck speed. Potter fired a spell and Stunned the black tom.

"Only one more left!" I shouted. "What are you wait-

ing for? Get him!"

Still diving, the boys exchanged a glance.

"Hermione may never forgive us," I heard Potter say, as he aimed.

It was then, just when I thought it was all over, that disaster struck. Peeves had not been heard from for quite a while. He must have been shadowing the boys, keeping invisible and enjoying the fun. But if Potter and Creevey were to eliminate the very last tom, the fun would be over! Peeves couldn't allow that to happen.

He appeared suddenly, directly in the path of the boys' flight. His arms were outstretched and he looked as if he intended to stay right where he was.

Potter swerved to avoid the poltergeist. Creevey, less experienced and probably tired to boot, crashed right into Peeves. The poltergeist had made himself very solid.

Creevey was knocked from his Shooting Star. The mousy-haired boy plummeted downward headfirst towards the stone floor forty feet below.

"Colin!!!" Potter shouted.

I was too terrified to make a sound. I was sure that the child would be killed! Sick with horror, I even forgot about Mrs. Norris. When she and the ginger tom reached the floor of the entrance hall and raced past me on their way over to the dungeon stairs, I didn't even try to stop them.

The pair of feline lovers went dashing down into the dungeons, out of sight.

Moaning, I covered my eyes. Poor little Creevey was doomed! It was all my fault! I couldn't bear to watch!

And so I missed seeing one of Harry Potter's greatest catches. I didn't open my eyes until I heard Creevey say breathlessly, "Brilliant save, Harry! Thanks!"

Potter had caught his fellow Gryffindor just six feet away from a very messy death. He was holding on to Creevey's ankles with both hands, hanging upside down from his Firebolt while clinging to the broom with his knees.

A moment later, the boys were back down on the clean floor. I was so relieved that they were both safe that I could have embraced them. Fortunately for all three of us I was still too badly shaken by Creevey's near escape to move.

"Wow!" Creevey kept saying as he Summoned his Shooting Star down into his hand. "That was so cool! I bet that no one in the history of Hogwarts has ever had a detention this cool! Right Harry? Right?"

Potter was as white as a sheet. I'd seen Alastor Moody like this, recently. So pale that his many scars were invisible. Potter was that pale. The famous lightning scar on his forehead seemed to have vanished.

As Colin continued to chatter and thank him, Potter looked at me. The expression in his green eyes made him seem almost ancient. No boy his age should ever look like that. It was especially shocking to see that look on a face that so resembled James Potter's. James had never lost that devil-may-care recklessness in all time I'd known him. Poor boy, he'd always seemed to have faith that things would turn out all right in the end.

Not Harry. He knew how close to disaster we'd come. I could see the specter of poor, lost Cedric Diggory in

his green eyes as he clapped Colin's shoulder.

"All right, Colin?" Harry asked gruffly, the color slowly returning to his face. "You did some excellent flying yourself."

"But Mrs. Norris still got away from us!" Colin cried. "She's with Crookshanks! I saw them running down to the dungeons! Do you want us to go after them, Mr. Filch?"

Faintly, echoing up the stairs from the dungeons, we could hear the two cats' voices raised in triumphant nuptial bliss.

"No," I said, weakly. "Let them go, Colin."

His eyes widened. "Does that mean...? Oh! Hermione's going to be a gran!! Isn't that wonderful, Harry? Do you think she'll be glad?"

"Yes, Colin. It's wonderful. I'm sure Hermione will be very glad." Potter managed a smile.

"Your detention is over, boys. Thank you for all you did," I said. My voice was very faint.

A sudden shriek overhead made all three of us look up. Peeves had been hoping to sneak away unnoticed. He hadn't been successful. The poltergeist was struggling helplessly in the grasp of the one being in the Castle that he truly feared.

A gaunt, staring ghost, covered in silvery blood stains, had Peeves firmly by the collar.

"Thank you, Baron," said a stern, clear voice. "You can leave the others to me."

Professor McGonagall was coming down the marble staircase, carefully stepping around the Stunned tomtomcats in her path. Her mouth was the thinnest of lines.

The fierce look in her grey eyes made Potter, Creevey and me cringe.

"Professor Binns was on his way to the Headmaster, with a most interesting tale to tell," Minerva said. "As it happens, he met the Baron and me instead."



I did not know what the Baron was doing to Peeves, but it must have hurt. The poltergeist's howls were audible from where I sat, in my broom cupboard on an upturned cardboard box.

Unfortunately I couldn't enjoy a good gloat at Peeves' expense at the moment. I was in too much pain myself.

"What is that stuff?" I gasped, when I could talk. "It STINGS!"

"Muggles refer to it as 'iodine.'" Minerva told me, briskly. "And it was your decision not to go up to the hospital wing and see Poppy like a sensible man would have done, so you have no one to blame for this except yourself."

Finished with the scratches on my arms, she dabbed a clean cloth dipped in iodine on my badly gouged nose. I yelled even louder than Peeves. I was sure that the poltergeist could hear me, just as well as I could hear him.

"These wounds must be cleaned out. Some of these scratches are rather deep," Minerva said. She was holding my chin firmly as I tried to flinch away. "Very prone to infections, cat-scratches are. Don't squirm about so, Argus!" Not looking terribly sorry for me, she began working at another nasty gouge under my right eye.

I cried out in misery once more. *At least Peeves will*

consider us 'even' now. And he won't want tonight's events referred to, ever again, any more than I will... I thought.

Potter and Creevey, both apparently familiar with the effects of 'iodine,' were watching me with sympathy. The boys were handing Minerva clean cloths whenever she asked. Minerva had already given all three of us a very stern Talking To. Even though I had admitted to her that the whole fiasco was my fault, she'd included the boys in her scolding.

"They should have known better than to listen to a man who had clearly taken leave of his senses!" she said, grimly.

Potter was still pale. "Yes, Professor," he said, quietly.

Minerva's face softened a bit when she saw the look on his face. "Well, there was no lasting harm done. As long as you and Colin both understand that tonight's antics are never to be repeated again."

"Yes, Professor," Potter said.

Creevey nodded vigorously. "We'll never do it again!" he said. Even he was looking a bit sober.

"I believe you. And I will not assign you a further detention. I shudder to think what Mr. Filch might have you do."

Ouch! That stung even worse than the iodine! I suppose I'd deserved it.

"I know we were lucky, Professor," I admitted, terribly ashamed. "But I wouldn't say there was no lasting harm done."

Minerva looked at me in exasperation. "There are fates worse than kittens, Argus."

"I know," I whispered, looking at Colin, grateful that he was alive and well. "B-but..."

"Why are you so set against Mrs. Norris having kittens?" Harry wanted to know. "She's not young but she's not old either. She'll take good care of them. It's what cats are supposed to do. She must have had kittens before."

The boy deserved an honest answer.

"The last time she had kittens was years ago," I said. "It was before you came. During Percy Weasley's first year. One of the kittens died. It was an accident."

The expressions of sympathy on the boys' faces made my voice grow harsh. "That particular kitten was always too adventurous for its own good!" I said, angrily. I would never forget poor Mrs. Norris's grief. She'd searched for her lost catling everywhere. Cried piteously when she'd found him.

"Well, these things happen," I continued gruffly. "Little animals are fragile. Life is unfair. At least I didn't get completely ridiculous about it and weep like Hagrid would have done! Wouldn't have brought the dead kitten back, would it?"

Minerva, Harry and Colin all looked at me, sternly.

It was Harry who spoke first, leaping to Hagrid's defense. "Hagrid isn't ridiculous!" Potter said, heatedly. "He might cry when something's hurting him, but he gets over things! Hagrid wouldn't be afraid to let Mrs. Norris have more kittens, if that's what she needed to do!"

I glowered at the boy, feeling as if I'd been dosed with pepperup potion. Surely there was steam coming out of my ears. What impudence! The worst thing

was.... he was absolutely right.

I looked away first, staring at the floor.

"What happened to the other kittens?" Colin asked.

"They went to good homes," Minerva answered him, smiling. "Heather Abbott, Hannah's sister took the two little queens. Named them 'Tansy' and 'Rue.'" Milton Bulstrode took one of the little toms. Named him 'Agamemnon.' Who took the other tom, Argus?"

"Cecily Brocklehurst. She named him 'Merlin.'" I said, still miserable. "Mrs. Norris saw to the choosing herself."

"Did the one who died have a name?" Colin asked me.

"No," I said, gruffly.

He was silent for a moment but perked up again almost immediately. "Do you think that Mrs. Norris will let me have one of this litter? I'd like a kitten! What do you think the kittens will look like? Will they be grey or ginger-colored? Maybe Mrs. Norris will let Dennis have a kitten too! That way my kitten and Dennis's could stay together, like Hannah's sister's two cats! I'm sure that Mrs. Norris would let Ginny have a kitten. Ginny's always wanted one. Mrs. Norris is very fond of Ginny. What do you think I should call my kitten, Harry?"

It was amazing. He'd said all that without even stopping to breathe.

Minerva had finished tending the last of my wounds. She stood up. "Off to bed with you, Harry. Off to bed, with you, Colin. It's very late. Carry your brooms, mind you. There will be no more flying in the Castle!"

"Yes, Professor!" Colin chirped, still bouncing enthusiastically as he headed into the corridor. "Do you want to have

a race, Harry? Don't worry, Professor, I mean a running-race! Harry's fast, but I can keep up. And I'm getting faster, aren't I, Harry? Seekers need to build up their stamina...." Still prattling away, Creevey trotted into the hall.

Harry grinned at the smaller boy with both affection and exasperation. For a moment he looked older than his years again. Not careworn and ancient, simply old enough to understand that little creatures might be a bother but they were also very precious.

The look was gone in a moment, but seeing it took my breath away. Potter deserved my thanks for many things; for saving Creevey, for his hard work, for his insight, uncomfortable though it was. But, by the time I found my voice again, he was gone.

He and Creevey were racing each other up the stairs towards Gryffindor tower, brooms over their shoulders.

Children.

Minerva was smiling at me, her eyes bright. She'd seen Potter's face too.

"I know," she murmured. "Sometimes the maturity in children can amaze me too. Almost as much as the immaturity in certain adults."

I winced.

CHAPTER 3

Terra Incognita

"Oh, honestly!" Hermione Granger exclaimed. "The

nonsense that woman comes up with!"

"That woman happens to be a Professor. You shouldn't speak of her that way. It's disrespectful." I tried to sound stern but my voice shook a bit.

"Professor Trelawney leaves most of the real work to her listeners' imaginations, Mr. Filch," Hermione said. "I wouldn't worry about anything she says she saw in your tea leaves."

"But she told me that the thing I feared would happen! Before the start of summer!" I said, miserably.

It wasn't the damp chill of the corridor outside Professor Snape's Potions classroom that made me shiver. It was the memory of the grave, knowing expression in Sibyll Trelawney's magnified eyes. These days I often felt as if the familiar Castle corridors had shifted into strange new pathways, leaving me lost and vulnerable. There was no use in trying to hide the fact that the Divination Professor had scared me.

I'd been in the dungeon corridor on my way back to my office when the Gryffindors and the Slytherins had come out of Potions, their last class of the day. Hermione had seen the frightened look on my face. She'd immediately stopped to ask me what was wrong. I'd found myself telling her, Harry Potter and Ron Weasley about my afternoon spent making repairs in Sibyll Trelawney's attic classroom.

Not long ago a conversation like this with a group of students would have been impossible for me to imagine. All changes, even changes for the better, can be a little frightening.

A greater, truly frightening change was coming. Mrs. Norris was to become a mother. Hermione's ginger tom, Crookshanks, was the kittens' father. Cats do not seem to spend an inordinate amount of time brooding about the past or worrying about the future but humans do. I was worrying enough for everyone. Mrs. Norris had known the joys and sorrows of motherhood before. She'd lost one of her kittens. It was a pain that I'd hoped she'd never have to endure again.



Hermione's response to the news of Crookshanks' impending fatherhood had been typical for her. She'd come up to me at breakfast in the great hall yesterday morning with several books in her arms.

"Have you circled today on your calendar, Mr. Filch?" she asked me in a business-like way after bidding me a polite "good morning."

"What?" I'd asked her. "Why?"

"Most mother cats deliver their kittens between sixty-four and sixty-six days after breeding," Hermione had said, as if the answer was obvious. "Of course, most female cats require more breedings within a twenty four hour period in order for ovulation to occur, so we can't be sure if conception has actually taken place yet. Though I haven't seen Crookshanks this morning. I'm assuming that he's still with Mrs. Norris. So, if we start counting from today..."

I'd slid my barely-touched breakfast aside and stared blearily at her.

As usual Hermione had been accompanied by Harry and Ron. Harry was looking apologetically at me and Ron was munching on a piece of toast.

"I've told Hermione about what happened at detention last night," Harry had said, when Hermione stopped to breathe.

"She's awfully excited about being a `gran,'" Ron had added with a laugh, nearly choking on his toast.

Hermione had put most of her books down on the staff table next to my breakfast so she could leaf through the largest one. I read the title. THE CARE AND FEEDING OF WIZARDS' FAMILIARS, VOLUME ONE: THE CAT.

"It's never too soon to start thinking about a nesting box," Hermione had said. "There are some illustrations in here that are quite good. Unless you still have one from last time? Harry told me that it was years ago."

"No," I'd answered, softly. "I didn't keep anything. Mrs. Norris will need a new nesting box."

Beaming, Hermione had started showing me the pictures. I had to admit that it was a comfort to have another human who cared as much for the kittens' safety and welfare as I did.



"Nothing is going to happen to these kittens," Hermione told me now, firmly. "They'll be well protected with you, me, Mrs. Norris and Crookshanks looking after them."

I was still upset and must have looked it. Hermione actually took one of my knobbly, scratched up hands and gave it a comforting pat.

"Professor Trelawney simply enjoys frightening people," she said, soothingly. "Not a very nice thank you for fixing those squeaky trap door hinges of hers, is it!"

"It's true," Ron agreed. "Professor Trelawney's nothing but a right old fraud and she does love to scare people. She's like a boggart with great big glasses. She gives you a few threatening hints in that misty voice of hers and your own mind does the rest. It's all rubbish. Harry and I used to make up our Divination homework most of the time. Tell him, Harry."

Potter's green eyes were serious. "How did Professor Trelawney sound when she made her prediction?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. Mysterious and omniscient. Like she always sounds."

The boy relaxed. "I wouldn't worry then. But the next time she offers you a cup of tea, you should just say 'no, thanks!'"

He was right.

"A quiet cuppa with Trelawney is far more dangerous than a few drinks with Hagrid..." I muttered. "I should have known better."

My heart was still pounding, though.

Ron's freckled face was full of mischief. "She probably doesn't even *know* about Mrs. Norris and Crookshanks. Maybe she just wanted you to think that someone else was going to play a game of Corridor-Quidditch during detention."

"Using cats for Bludgers, the Quaffle and the Snitch," Harry added, grinning.

"And that Professor McGonagall would find out,

blame you and claw you to bloody ribbons again," Ron concluded.

Both boys laughed. Hermione rolled her eyes at them and I glared.

"But that's what happened Saturday night," Harry said, innocently. "Haven't you heard the rumors?"

"That's just one of the stories," Ron said. "I like the version where Harry and Colin used Hover charms to fly around on your mops and chase cats all around the Castle."

I glowered even more. The boys seemed satisfied that they'd returned me to my proper mental state.

"Twenty points from Gryffindor for loitering in the corridor and making noise outside my classroom!"

Professor Snape was standing in his classroom doorway. He looked more sour than usual and rather tired. For once he didn't favor Harry with his most threatening sneer. That honor was reserved for Hermione and me.

"I might have known it would be the two of you!" Snape said, coldly. "You're as bad as those wretched animals of yours."

"Have you seen Crookshanks and Mrs. Norris, Professor?" Hermione asked. "We've haven't seen them since Saturday."

"Seen them?" Snape glowered. "Yes, briefly. Heard them? Constantly! For most of the past two nights! They've been in the corridor, outside my rooms!

"Cursed caterwauling copulating machines!" he snarled, under his breath.

This was too much for Harry and Ron. Both boys were turning beet red with stifled laughter.

Snape's eyes narrowed. "Twenty more points from Gryffindor."

"Please, Professor. We're waiting for Neville..." Hermione said.

"Don't bother. Mr. Longbottom will be awhile," Severus said, unpleasantly. "He believes that he can actually salvage his cauldron. Don't expect to see him at dinner. He may be here all night." His sneer dissolved into a yawn.

"What happened to Neville's cauldron?" I asked Hermione, Harry and Ron.

"You don't want to know," Ron said. "But at least he didn't turn everyone purple this time."

"Filch!" Snape snarled at me. "Where do you think you're going?"

"To help Neville clean his cauldron, Professor," I said. "You don't really want him in your classroom all night, do you?"



Severus locked up his classroom and swept off down the hallway, hopefully to have a badly-needed nap before dinner. I went with the four children to my nearest broom cupboard. Neville was carrying his cauldron which was covered with a thick coating of burnt-on slime.

First the children all tried scouring charms which removed a lot of the mess. Then I began scrubbing.

"Mr. Filch?" Neville asked, miserably, "do you think it's possible for someone to actually turn into a Squib?"

"No."

"How can you be sure?" Neville asked me, sadly.

"I can't be positive. But it doesn't seem likely. I was born a Squib and I've stayed one. You were born a wizard even if your magic showed up late. Muggles stay Muggles, don't they? We are what we are, all of us."

"But maybe I was a Squib. Remember, my great Uncle Algie...?"

"If you weren't a wizard, then you probably would have died when he dropped you," I said, gruffly. "The things that people say will cure a Squib won't work on a true Squib. You can't put magic into someone by drowning them or beating them, or locking them in a cupboard."

Harry had a wry smile on his face. "Or take it out, either," I thought I heard him murmur. But I might have been mistaken. It didn't make sense. Why would anyone who had magic in them ever try to take it out?

When Harry saw that my arm was getting tired he reached out for the cauldron. I handed it to him, expecting him to use a Scouring charm. To my surprise, he reached for my scrubber as well and began to clean like a Muggle.

He, Hermione and Ron were all looking at Neville. I had the feeling that each of them had tried without much success to reassure Neville that he wasn't a Squib.

"Remember, Neville?" Harry said. "Your family was so relieved when you got your Hogwarts letter? They must have known what it meant."

"Some wizards do fail," I said. "Apollyon Pringle, who trained me to be caretaker after him, had failed here. And some wizards get expelled and their wands get

snapped. But they remain wizards. Forbidding them to use their magic wouldn't be necessary if they had none to use, would it? You're a wizard, Neville. You always will be. An owl brought you a Hogwarts letter on your eleventh birthday. You went into Ollivanders and you were chosen by a wand. Neither of those things ever happened to me. Trust me. You're not a Squib."

I felt eyes on me. Turning, I saw Ron studying me thoughtfully. He could understand much better than Muggle-born Hermione, Muggle-raised Harry, or even Neville, who was still caught up in his own woes, what it meant not to get a Hogwarts letter when everyone in your family had got one for a thousand years.

"What house were your parents in, Mr. Filch?" Ron asked.

I blinked. No one had ever asked me that question before. I had to think about the answer. My parents had barely mentioned their school days when I was older. But I remembered them speaking of Hogwarts when I was quite small. They must have known long before I'd turned eleven that I would never be normal.

"They were in different houses," I said. "Mum was in Ravenclaw. Dad was in Hufflepuff."

Harry looked like his arms were getting tired now. I reached for Neville's cauldron and the brush. He gave them back.

Hermione sighed. "There must be books with answers to questions like why Squibs are Squibs and why Muggles can have wizard children," she said.

I shook my head. "I never found a book with those answers. My Mum searched though. For most of her

life, she did. And she never found an answer."

Hermione looked sad, then she looked resolute. "Perhaps there's an answer now," she said.

I smiled at her wryly. "You're always welcome to look."



Hagrid treats the students that he befriends to tea and rock cakes. I sit with them in dingy dungeon corridors and scrub cauldrons. Oh, well. Each of us has to find our own way of doing things. I'm new at this.

Between the five of us, we were able to salvage Neville's cauldron. Which saved him the trouble of owling his Grandmother for a new one. The three boys went to take Neville's cauldron up to Gryffindor tower before dinner. Hermione said that she'd see them in the great hall. She and I walked together through the labyrinth of dungeon corridors, towards Professor Snape's rooms.

"Crookshanks... are you here?"

"Mrs. Norris... where are you, my sweet?"

We found the pair of cats together. They were curled up side by side, dusty grey fur against fluffy ginger fur, both purring.

"She's definitely not in heat any more," Hermione said. "She must be pregnant!"

The cats were quite glad to see us. Crookshanks prowled towards Hermione, looking pleased with himself. Mrs. Norris padded towards me and rubbed against my ankles.

I picked her up, stroking her familiar bony body. Soon she would grow round and heavy.

My sweet one was purring so happily that I couldn't begrudge her the risk she was taking. Change is frightening, but it always comes. Whether I want it or not.

CHAPTER 4

Questions, Answers and More Questions

"Hold still, Mr. Filch," Ginny Weasley said, as soon as she and Hermione Granger came into my office. "This won't hurt a bit."

I felt a surge of power. Ginny's wand was out, tip aglow. "Anodynos!" she said.

Bright spots danced in front of my eyes. A whisper of magic, gentle as a breeze, brushed against my nose.

Blinking, I gingerly felt the spot where her spell had touched me. The scratches on my face and arms from my battle with Mrs. Norris's suitors were almost healed. Except for one deep gouge on my nose. Now that gouge seemed to be nearly healed too.

"There. It made my nose hurt to see you like that," Ginny told me.



I've never had any delusions about my appearance.

The few people who've cared for me over the years certainly haven't done so because of my looks. A bit of damage done to my face doesn't trouble me much. But Ginny had been bothered. It was a new experience to have a young friend who would be concerned about a minor thing like that.

Even the house-elves had just *tsked* and shaken their heads when they saw me.

"You is all scratches, Argus Filch. Should have left poor cats alone," Dobby had scolded.

"Poor Mrs. Norris. She is needing kittens!" Winky had agreed. "Young sirs on brooms in the Castle! What is Argus Filch *thinking*?"

Professor Snape had commented as well. "You look as if every cat in the Castle tried to use you for a scratching post. Keep this up and you won't need to drink Polyjuice potion if you wish to impersonate Alastor Moody."



"You don't have to keep avoiding Madam Pomfrey," Hermione told me. "She's not angry at you. Why should she be? Mrs. Norris is fine now and she's going to have kittens."

Ginny reached over to stroke Mrs. Norris. "You're going to be a Mum!"

Mrs. Norris responded with a happy purr, butting her head up against Ginny's hand. Pregnancy certainly seemed to agree with my cat thus far. She was unusually sweet-natured, at least with the small

number of people that she already liked.

Wisely, Hermione didn't attempt to pet my cat. She knew that befriending Mrs. Norris would be a slow, painstaking process. But she was resisting the temptation to offer my cat unsolicited advice, despite the fact that the kittens were Crookshanks' babies too. That was a good start.

Hermione was studying me. Her expression was troubled. It was plain that she had something on her mind.

"I've been to the library," she said. "You're right, Mr. Filch. There really isn't too much information on Squibs available."

Surprised, I said, "You've been researching Squibs? You didn't have to do that."

"Of course she did," Ginny said. "Ron and Harry told me that you've given her a new research topic. You know what Hagrid would do if someone told him that there was a new monster in the Forbidden Forest, don't you? Hermione is the same way when you tell her about a subject she hasn't studied yet."

I had a sudden disconcerting image of Hermione striding eagerly into the library with a crossbow slung on her back and Fang at her heels.

"I didn't find much that was useful," Hermione told me. "No one even seems to be sure exactly how many Squibs there are in the wizarding world."

"Most Squibs will hide it, if they can," I pointed out.

"The books don't even agree on what the actual definition of a Squib should be," Hermione continued, frowning. "Some sources use 'Squib' to describe

witches and wizards who have magic but don't seem particularly powerful. And other sources reserve the term exclusively for children born to a witch and a wizard who don't appear to have any magic at all."

"My Mum and Dad thought 'Squib' was used too broadly..." I murmured.

"Did you know that witches and wizards have argued over the precise definition of 'Squib' for years, and some have even come to blows and duels over it?" Hermione asked. The thought of such a lack of professionalism among scholars clearly bothered her.

I couldn't help grinning. Mum and I had been witness to a violent argument between two wizards who'd both wanted to use me as a research subject. Apparently the Squibs who manifest almost no measurable magic are the most rare of all. When the two fierce looking wizards had pulled out their wands and started dueling to decide who would study me, Mum had grabbed me and fled.

"At least all the sources I found did agree that there's no evidence that Squibs run in families," Hermione said. "Many of the Squibs who have been studied have normal siblings and no other Squibs among their relatives."

That made me sigh. My poor parents had married a bit late in life, and I had been their only child. I could still remember my two grandmothers fighting over which side was to blame for my 'condition.' Eventually both sides of the family had stopped speaking to each other entirely.

"And Squibs don't appear to be born as a result of curses or hexes," Hermione continued.

"My mother was frightened by a boggart," I murmured. "When she was six months along with me. Mum's friends always blamed the boggart."

Mum would have liked Hermione, I thought. In my most vivid memories of my mother, she was surrounded by piles of books and parchment. When all the healers and various experts she'd dragged me to couldn't tell her anything useful, she had continued researching on her own.

Poor Mum. None of her books could convince her of the one thing she really needed to know. That my lack of magic wasn't her fault.

"There's more," Hermione said. Her voice was sad. I thought I knew what she was going to say.

"Most Squibs die young?" I asked her. "I've heard that." (Actually, Mum had never shared that particular fact with me. I'd only just heard it recently from Mad-Eye Moody.)

"Well, it's safe to say that I've already missed my chance to die young." I was trying to make light of it, but neither girl smiled.

"Hermione, child, I'm sorry that you've put yourself through so much bother," I said, gruffly. "I do appreciate your efforts."

"But I haven't found any real answers!" she said, frustrated. "None of the books could even tell me why Squibs can't do magic!"

"Though," she added brightly, "there does seem to be

proof to support the popular belief that a powerful enough surge of adrenaline can awaken a Squib's magic. So, Neville's great-uncle really was acting on sound evidence when he dangled Neville out that attic window."

I shook my head, frowning. My parents had blamed all the 'Squib cure' stories on people who were using 'Squib' to describe wizards and witches whose magic simply showed up later than usual. Mum and Dad had both seemed to know that violent cures like the one Neville's great uncle had tried would have injured or killed me. I said as much to Hermione.

"It's a bit like when Muggles used to think that they were burning real witches and wizards," I offered. "The only way that the wretched Muggles could prove their innocence was to die. That's how my parents thought you could tell who the real Squibs were. They were the ones who died. Did the books only mention the success stories?"

"One of the books did talk about the deaths," Hermione said, soberly.

I sighed, remembering my own experience with a deadly Squib cure all too well. Some of us always have to learn things the hard way.



My parents hadn't been willing to do anything drastic to me. But I'd been desperate. And I'd heard a lot of 'cure' stories too, though Mum and Dad had tried to keep those sorts of stories from me.

So, one day in the summer following my twelfth

birthday, I picked up the heaviest rock I could carry. And I threw myself into the pond.

The pond was in a wooded area near our village. The small wood had been protected with Muggle-repelling spells. It was said that a unicorn lived in there, though no one had reported seeing the unicorn for many years.

The Muggle repelling spells crawled over me like a thousand small ants as I went through the wood. The spells didn't repel me. This was some small comfort, but not enough. Magic was always something that I could feel on my skin. Magic had never once come from inside me.

I wasn't thinking clearly about what I meant to do. I only knew that the thought of September was unbearable. This year, owls bearing letters from Hogwarts had come to children who were younger than I was. And when September started they would go off to become brave Gryffindors or crafty Slytherins or industrious Hufflepuffs or wise Ravenclaws.

My year of hoping was gone. No owl had come with a letter for me.

Most of my friends who had returned from their first year of magical studies had already begun to draw away from me. Some had done it out of pity and some were shunning me out of contempt or perhaps it was even fear. Maybe what I had might be contagious.

It was peaceful in the wood. The pond was still and deep. Carefully taking off my shoes and stuffing my socks into them neatly, I picked up the rock. I wrapped

my arms around it. Calmly I waded into the water and out, past the shallow part. I knew that soon I would be either a dead Squib or a live wizard. I was really hoping to be a live wizard. I didn't want to die. Surely, the magic would awaken inside me before I drowned.

The water closed over my head. I remember thinking, *Please, magic, please...!* I remember feeling that my lungs would burst. I remember thinking *any moment now I will feel the magic rising in me and I will be safe on the shore and Mum and Dad will be so proud and they'll take me to buy a wand, and the other children will never tease me again, because I'll be a wizard too...*

I remember choking as I tried to breathe and my mouth, nose and lungs filled with water.

I was drowning.

One of the other boys from the village had followed me. Ian had been sorted into Ravenclaw the previous year. He knew the spells to make a nearly drowned person breathe again.

"Argus! You idiot!" he'd shouted at me.

"I'm a Squib, Ian. I really am..." I'd said, when I could talk again.

It was the first time I'd ever said it aloud.

And then, I'd burst into tears.

My parents had never known about what I'd done. Ian and I had never told anyone. When September started, Ian went back to Hogwarts and onward to the rest of his life as a wizard. He and I had drifted out of touch over the years. No one else knew about what had happened at the pond.

I certainly wasn't going to tell Ginny or Hermione that I'd ever done anything so stupid.



Poor Neville. His grandmother, great aunts and uncles had all thought he was a Squib for years. Neville had thought so too. Even the letter and his wand had not convinced him. I could understand how Neville felt. Thinking you're a Squib isn't the sort of thing you can leave behind very easily, even if you're really a wizard.

"Neville's not a Squib," I told the girls. "Believe me, if he was then his family would have been mourning him instead of sending him to Hogwarts. He's a wizard. He's got plenty of magic in him. His power is just as strong as anyone's."

"What do you mean?" Ginny asked me curiously. "How can you tell?"

I blinked at her, confused. "You know. There's that feeling you get when other wizards or witches do magic."

The girls looked at each other, and then at me.

I felt perplexed. Hermione and Ginny didn't seem to know what I was talking about. "Sometimes magic has a taste, doesn't it? Or a scent," I said. "Some spells make me sneeze. But mostly, magic has a feel. Rather like a wind. Hot or cold, either way. In all varying degrees of strength, of course. And Neville's magic is strong enough to suit anyone. I wish he'd learn to believe the rest of you when you try to tell him so."

"Mr. Filch," Hermione said, carefully. "I *can't* feel it when other witches or wizards use magic."

"Neither can I," Ginny said.

I stared at them. "But that's impossible. I've always been able to do it. It's just about the only thing I *can* do."

The girls exchanged another glance.

"Believe me when I tell you this, Mr. Filch," Hermione said. "I have never heard anyone else say that they could feel magic or taste magic or smell magic before."

"Oh!" I said, surprised and confused. "I've always assumed that everyone could do it."

"What else can you do?" Hermione asked me, fascinated.

I shrugged. "Nothing much, really. Oh. I can tell when someone's about to use a spell because their magic gives a bit of a surge first."

As I spoke, I felt exactly the sort of surge I'd been describing. Quickly, I turned to look at Ginny. "You're about to do something. Were you testing me?"

Ginny grinned. "That's right, I was," she said, nodding at Hermione. "*Lumos!*" Her wand tip glowed.

"You didn't feel that spell coming?" I asked Hermione, incredulously.

She shook her head.



I couldn't understand why Ginny and Hermione would be so interested in my silly little tricks when their powers were so much greater than mine. But the pair of them spent quite a while asking me questions.

They made me realize that I had questions too. I'd always assumed that anything I could do, a proper wizard could do better. If that wasn't true, what did it mean?

After the girls left my office, (Hermione said something about going back to the library and Ginny shook her head, indulgently), I picked up Mrs. Norris and went in search of someone with answers.

"Jelly Babies," I told the Gargoyle outside the Headmaster's office. It jumped aside. Up the moving staircase I went, and knocked on the Headmaster's door.

"Enter!" I heard him call, cheerfully.

"Good afternoon, Argus, Mrs. Norris," Dumbledore said. He had a pile of paperwork in front of him and he seemed rather glad to have an interruption. "I understand that congratulations are in order."

"Yes, Headmaster." I felt a bit nervous, wondering if he was angry at me for allowing Harry and Colin to fly their brooms in the Castle. But he didn't bring up the subject and I certainly wasn't going to mention it if he wasn't.

"Sir? This may seem like a stupid question," I began, hesitantly. Then I blurted out, "Headmaster, can you *feel* magic? Other people's spells?"

Dumbledore listened gravely while I described what I had always been able to do, silly and useless though it was, and Hermione and Ginny's interesting reactions to it.

"Argus, what you're describing is a rare talent," he told me, quietly. "No, I cannot do it."

Feeling a bit shaky, I slid myself into a chair in front of his desk. Mrs. Norris slid down from my shoulder and curled up in my lap, purring.

"I'd hardly call it a real 'talent,'" I said gruffly, embarrassed.

"I disagree," the Headmaster said, very seriously. "I do not use the term lightly. It is a talent. One prized by Aurors, in fact."

Abashed, I studied the floor for a few moments. Stroking Mrs. Norris helped me regain my composure.

"Have you ever heard of anyone else who could do it?" I asked him.

Dumbledore nodded. "Yes. Two people, though not in recent memory."

I took a deep breath. "Were they both Squibs, Headmaster?"

He nodded again.

"Did you know that I c-could...?"

Dumbledore smiled. "You have never mentioned your abilities until now, Argus. And no, not every Squib I have known has been able to feel magic."

"Have you known very many Squibs?" I asked.

"Not many Squibs will admit what they are openly, Argus. I've probably known more than I realize."

"Oh." I had a sudden memory, as something he'd said finally clicked. "Prized by Aurors...? That's how he knew! Alastor Moody! During my second lesson with him, he noticed what I was doing!"

Dumbledore smiled. "Did he? He said nothing to me about it. Though he's always telling me that he's extremely pleased with your progress and grinning in a rather smug and secretive way. Well, if he asks to borrow you, I will know why."

"Borrow me!" I knew that I was repeating everything he said. I hoped that I wasn't irritating him.

Dumbledore didn't seem irritated. He grinned at me, like a small boy. "Aurors occasionally have a need for someone with your talent."

"Headmaster... if he asked, would you let me go with him?" The thought made me feel simultaneously excited and terrified.

Dumbledore said gently, "The choice would be yours, Argus. You belong to yourself not to me. Would you be willing to accompany Moody on an Auror's mission if he asked for you?"

"I-I don't know..." I said, nervously, twisting my hands together. "I'd have to think about it."

Mrs. Norris pushed her head against my hands, reminding me that I had stopped stroking her. I resumed petting and she resumed purring.

"I hope he doesn't ask any time soon," I said, anxiously. "I do have the kittens to consider now."

"Alastor would not ask unless he thought you were ready and was certain that you were willing," Dumbledore assured me.

That was a relief. It wasn't as if I didn't already have plenty to do. The Castle doesn't clean itself.

"Argus, Alastor has been keeping me well informed regarding your increasing skills with the Doors," the Headmaster said. "He's told me that you can summon them, making them appear in mid-air."

"Yes, sir."

"Excellent! I had an idea for something interesting that you might want to try. If I could use your Doors without getting ill, this is probably one of the very

first things I'd want to do."

Wondering what sort of defensive strategy he had in mind, I listened with interest.

"I believe that you like to use the bathtub in the dungeons, correct?" he asked.

I nodded, now a bit bemused.

"Well, I'd recommend using the main staff bathroom instead. That tub is even deeper. First I'd fill up the tub, all the way to the top," he said, blue eyes twinkling. "Then I'd get a running start, perhaps jumping through a floor somewhere to get some momentum."

I stared at him in total confusion.

He grinned. "Well, picture it, Argus. Imagine the diving possibilities. Flips! Cannonballs!"

"Headmaster!" I cried, scandalized, "Imagine the mess. The water all over the floor!"

He sighed. "Oh, Argus, everyone needs to have a bit of fun now and again. Using your own talents to their fullest potential means learning to truly enjoy them."

"I'm sorry, sir," I said firmly. "Making a mess is never going to be my idea of fun!"



Mrs. Norris and I took the long way back through the Castle. I needed to think. My life, predictable for years, was suddenly changing in ways I'd never imagined it could. The Doors weren't my only magical gift after all. I'd never realized the significance of something that was so much a part of me that I'd always taken it for granted.

I'd never thought of myself as a puzzle before. But the ways of Squibs appeared to be a mystery to most of the wizarding world. Hermione had not found many answers in those books of hers, but she'd seemed determined to keep right on looking. The girl was a force of nature. If answers existed she'd find them, eventually.

Moody had been right. The students at Hogwarts were a resource. Full of energy, intelligence and ideas. I had never thought about how much I could learn from them. And, perhaps, I could show them more than just the penalties for making messes and breaking rules myself?

Of all the new thoughts I'd had recently, that one was among the strangest and most frightening. If I could only find a way to convince Neville that he was a proper wizard, and a powerful one, that would be a good start. But in the meantime, I had an expectant mother to look after and a litter of kittens to prepare for. And I would take things one day at a time.

The End of Volume Two

Colophon

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