

Adventures in FanFiction

MIDNIGHT



BY THE
WEASLEY WATCH

By excessivelyperky

Everything belongs to J.K. Rowling, except the emir and Rafi (you'll meet them in future chapters). Her pitch, her Snitch, and her players. Also, this story has a lot to say about chess. If you are allergic to chess, you'd best wander off (though I think I've managed to keep the games from being too terribly boring). If you are truly expert in chess, have mercy, I'm doing the best I can. The title is a tribute to story about chess (well, sort of) by Fritz Leiber called "MIDNIGHT BY THE MORPHY WATCH", which itself was a tribute to Paul Morphy, the first American grandmaster.

Let the games begin!

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Red Hen Edition

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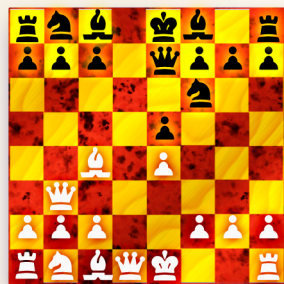


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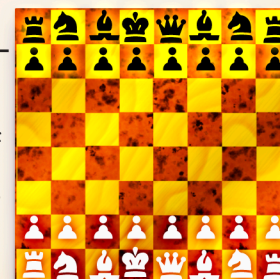
Setting the Pieces

Chapter 1



on was excited. Who wouldn't be after learning about the Hogwarts Wizard Chess Championship? Students were going to play other members of their own House first and establish a

champion. Then the champions would play off against each other, along with members of the staff. "The winning professor plays Dumbledore," Ron said, as he explained all the rules in exquisite detail to the members of the Gryffindor common room who had yet to make their escape. "And then the staff and the student Hogwarts champions go to the *real* chess tournament in Bulgaria." He decided not to mention the prize money for the top placers in Bulgaria. He didn't always miss the looks even Harry and Hermione gave him sometimes when he complained. But it would be nice to see Mum's face if he could put a sack of Galleons in her lap, instead of always having to make do.



It would have been nice to walk into Mr. Ollivander's as a First year and get a wand that was really his. Then he glanced at his sister, sitting as close as Harry would let her. Ginny ought to have better than the leftover junk that all her brothers had already been through. Mum did her best, but there just wasn't enough for everybody sometimes. And Ginny had to have *some* new things, just because she was a girl.

Filled with dreams of glory and (maybe) money, Ron pored over the rules again in silence, barely noting the looks of gratitude as he finally shut up. The games between the House champions and the staff would be timed, though that usually wasn't his problem. Students who were eliminated in the earlier rounds would be asked to help, or more to his liking, allowed to observe the games higher up the ladder. Ron had never seen anyone but McGonagall play, though he knew that Dumbledore did. His father got him chess magazines sometimes and they went over old games during the summer when there was time. But the other members of the staff were a mystery to him.

"What are you going to do for the tournament, Harry?" he asked absently.

"Go practice Quidditch," Potter answered. "Even if I *have* been banned. You've slaughtered me enough already."

"You're not *that* bad," Ron said. "You'll probably win a couple of games. Besides, we need to have a minimum number

of people signed up per house. What about you, Hermione?"

"I'm going to help Professor Binns," she said. "He's going to play, but he needs someone to move the pieces. It'll help my game to watch him."

Something's got to, he thought to himself, but decided not to say it out loud. If Granger gave chess half the concentration she did to anything else, she could play a lot better.

"Look, we'll be your cheering section," Harry said. "I'll sign up if I have to, but as soon as I get wiped off the field I'll come watch you. I won't have any idea what I'll be looking at, mind, but I'll be there."

Ron nodded. "The games for Gryffindor begin in a week. I wonder who else is going to play?" Lee Jordan might; strategy at Quidditch and chess weren't all that different.

He was worse than usual at his classes for the next few days. Of course it was in Potions that he was the most absent-minded.

"Mr. Weasley, *do* try to pay attention. Even Mr. Longbottom has completed the assignment adequately. Five points from Gryffindor and a detention this evening."

Ron glumly complied that night, though he brought along his chess set in case he was left unsupervised. Professor Snape spotted it immediately, unfortunately, and made him set it aside. Washing cauldrons was not his idea of a pleasant evening, but it wasn't as bad as it could have been as Snape spent most of the time scowling at papers instead of him.

Just before he was dismissed, the Potions Master asked him

a question. "Mr. Weasley, what sort of set do you have?"

At first he didn't want to show anything that meant so much to him to Snape, who would only sneer at it, but he grudgingly obeyed.

"That's a better one than I expected you to have, given the condition of the case," the professor said, looking at the pieces intently.

"They were Grandfather's," Ron said, fondly remembering the old man who had taught him how to play. "He left them to me because I'm the only one besides Dad who really likes the game. Mum does, some, but she usually doesn't have time."

"I would imagine not," Snape said, with only a little bit of sting to it. "If you don't mind some advice, Mr. Weasley, I would suggest that you play more than just Gryffindors this next week. There will be time for non-tourney games and plenty of boards once the first eliminations are over. You will also be able to observe members of the staff playing the week after that. Filch, for instance, has a very unpleasant endgame just when one thinks it's over."

Ron's jaw dropped open to hear something *helpful* from the greasy git. "T-thank you, sir," he managed, then packed up his chess set and left.

Once he was back in the Gryff common room, he found that Hermione had snagged a few books on wizard chess out of the library, though she complained the Ravenclaws

had been there before her. Ron recognized most of the titles already, but thanked her anyway. They were all basic ones, but it couldn't hurt Hermione to have some idea of what was going on.

During the next few days he quickly became aware of his potential rivals. Draco Malfoy made himself odious as the uncrowned chess king of Slytherin, though nobody had played any games yet. Ron bit back a number of rejoinders. *Maybe next week I ought to play him and find out if there's anything to back up the mouth.*

He thought McGonagall's classes were great. She'd given up on getting anyone to care about Transfigurations for a while and talked about chess. Ron listened carefully, since she was the one who had designed the chess trap to guard the Philosopher's Stone.

"The All-Wizards' Tournament is held every five years," she began. "Each school sends one student and one member of the staff to represent them. Of course, any wizard may enter if they like, though players who are already rated are placed in the eliminations differently than those who are not. The only allowed transfiguration during a game of chess is when a pawn reaches the eighth row and may become any piece it likes, though usually a queen is chosen. However, some players have made that piece a knight instead. Unfortunately there have been some *unallowed* transfigurations during a game. One of

them led to a wizard's duel between Auguste Dupin and an American from New Orleans in the mid-nineteenth century in the streets of Paris. Mr. Weasley, since you were so kind to bring your set with you to class today, would you please allow me to demonstrate?"

Hermione mouthed *busted!* at him. Ron took his case up to Professor McGonagall and set out the board and pieces at her direction.

"Pawns are usually bespelled to transform on the eighth square. Most of the other pieces are resistant to any spells at all for obvious reasons," the teacher said. "I shall attempt to change this pawn into a rook while it's on the third square. Watch."

She chanted a spell and waved her wand. The pawn writhed for a moment, shook all over, and then sighed as it stayed a pawn. Then it bent over, briefly pulled down its trousers, and stood up again.

"I see the Weasley sense of humor extends everywhere," McGonagall said with a sigh. "But most professional grade wizard chess pieces do have some kind of reaction set into them against being transformed improperly. As an additional precaution, no wand use will be allowed in the tourney area, not even by the staff. Part of the main hall will be cordoned off for student and staff play.

"Student play begins next week. The champions and the staff will play the week after. This does *not* eliminate school-

work altogether during that time. Those of you who aren't playing are encouraged to review what we've done so far. Those of you who are playing—well, *try* to think about something besides chess every once in a while. Remember, only one person from each house will be playing in the second week. Of course, there will be some observation time allowed for the rest of you even if you don't make it past the preliminaries. However, your schoolwork must come first. I will be playing the week after next, but you will still be responsible for your work. Some members of the staff aren't playing and will be supervising your study."

She passed out the Gryffindor schedule to nearly everyone. "The other students will get next week's schedule from their own head of house. A copy of this will also be posted in the Gryffindor common room. Mr. Weasley, a word with you after class, if you please."

Ron couldn't think of anything he'd done wrong *this* time, but felt guilty out of reflex. Once the other students were gone, he started packing up his set.

"Oh, don't look so *doomed*, Mr. Weasley," McGonagall said dryly. "I only wished to ask if you'd like a bit of coaching when and if you slaughter the rest of your fellows. And don't get vain, you're not the only one I plan to speak to."

"Um, yes, I mean of course..." Ron stuttered.

"Good. Since you will obviously be playing the first week and possibly the week after, I suggest you take this

assignment sheet and get some of it done ahead of time. I would like to see most of it completed before I schedule any coaching sessions."

"Yes, Professor." Well, *that* was plain enough. If he wanted any help, he'd better do what she said.

Snape discussed the tournament in his class, too. His threats were more obvious. "Don't expect to get out of any work," he said in his usual unpleasant manner. "Most of you will be eliminated early anyway. You do need to know that there will be no Potions Class the week after next. Don't cheer too loudly or you'll wake up some of your fellow students. I will be holding office hours after the tournament is over for the few of you who actually care about keeping up. The Slytherin schedule will be posted in the House common room. I suggest you make notes."

Ron didn't know that the Potions Master played. Maybe he was going to be one of the judges, which was even more frightening. Draco smirked as if he'd already won. Once class was over, though, Malfoy looked sober enough as Snape spoke to him in a low voice. *Probably telling him the same thing McGonagall told me*, he thought ruefully.

Everyone in Potions got an extra assignment sheet, too. In fact, he picked up one in every class, including History. He took them back to the Gryffindor common room and looked at them blankly. There were a dozen things he'd rather be doing.

"Pick one. Do it. Then pick another one," advised Hermione, who sat down and plunked her books on the table next to his.

"Which one?"

"It doesn't matter." She closed her eyes and stabbed down blindly with one finger. "That one."

It was the Potions sheet, of course. Ron sighed, and decided Granger was right. All he really wanted to was to get out his pieces and run through a few games from memory. But if Snape was going to be playing or judging, or worse, both, it couldn't *hurt* to have as much of his stuff turned in as possible.



Opening Moves

Chapter 2

Warning: contains graphic descriptions of castling, with one really ugly pawn exchange.



In a few days, the Gryffindor tournament began under McGonagall's supervision. All games were played in the part of the main hall that was set aside for the different houses to determine their own champion.

Just as Ron thought, Lee Jordan was playing, too. But he looked at the schedule, and they weren't going to meet for a while even if both of them were undefeated. He was pleased that Potter actually *did* win a couple of games at first, though in the third round a couple of days later they were matched together.

"Well, this won't take long," Harry said ruefully. "I should have volunteered the way Granger did. She doesn't have to do a thing till next week."

Ron just nodded. Friends were important, but this was *chess*. Besides, if he became house champion, the games next week would be scored as well as tallied as wins, losses, or draws. As much as he wanted to go easy on

Potter, it wouldn't be right.

It didn't take long. Harry barely avoided the fool's mate that Ron set up just as a joke, but didn't have an organized strategy to manage Ron's concerted attack.

"Can I just resign now?" Harry asked, as they both listened to the whines of his fallen pieces at the side of the board.

"I don't think we're supposed to," Ron said. "Let's just play it out."

Then Potter's king pulled out his sword and dramatically stabbed himself. "I've never seen it do *that* before," Harry said.

"Neither have I. I guess he wants it to be over, too."

Only one game remained in this round for him, but that was scheduled for tomorrow, and it was still only early afternoon. Potter fled the scene of the massacre, no doubt heading directly for his broom. Ron briefly considered homework, shuddered in horror, and wandered around looking for someone to play. Ok, so he was following Snape's advice. Big deal.

Malfoy sat by himself staring at a board already set up, and obviously trying to figure his way through the problem in front of him. Apparently Crabbe and Goyle hadn't even entered, since Ron couldn't see them anywhere.

"Quick match?" Ron asked, bracing himself for the usual Malfoy malice.

"Sure," Draco said with a smirk.



"This mess is no good."

Ron thought Malfoy was giving up too easily. Just by glancing at the game he saw several possible lines of attack. But that wasn't his problem, so he helped Draco set up the board for a fresh game.

The pieces were quiet. No doubt they were from the school borrow chest, and had been handled by so many people they'd given up having any opinions of their own. Malfoy drew white, but Ron didn't mind. He wanted to learn his opponent's style more than anything else, and wasn't that worried about actually winning.

Draco's opening was conventional, and so was his. As the game proceeded, Ron realized that Malfoy was actually pretty good. A few moves later, he saw that Draco was re-creating a classic game from the All-Wizard's Tournament in Paris ten years ago. Fortunately, Arthur Weasley followed the sport. *A good thing Dad and I replay some of those games*, Ron thought. *Now what if I try for a queen's gambit instead of leading with the bishop like Duvalier did back then? It certainly can't hurt!*

Malfoy squinted, apparently stymied once Ron started changing his play. He became more hesitant about his moves.

He must have a good memory to get this far, but there's more to playing than that. But the game was no cakewalk, and Ron knew he'd better not follow that classic game too closely himself. "Play the pieces, not the player," Dad always said.

It was like Quidditch, in a way. You had to make the other side react to your moves, not the other way around. He bent down over the table and created a pattern he liked better.

At last Malfoy had to admit defeat, though it took checkmate to do it. "Good game," Draco said with obvious reluctance.

"Well played," Ron said, feeling the same way at having to be polite. Once Malfoy got up and left, Ron put the pieces back the way they'd been when he'd gotten here. *I wish I had as good a memory for schoolwork as I did for chess*, he thought. Then he looked at the problem, and began figuring out what to do. Once he started, the opposing pieces moved by themselves. Apparently getting back into their proper position reset the spell of whoever had set up the problem.

"Amusing yourself, Mr. Weasley?" Professor Snape said in a silky voice.

Ron was startled. "Yes sir. Malfoy went off after we played each other, and this looked interesting."

"A pity you don't find your other studies so enthralling."

"Umm..." At least he'd gotten the Potions homework turned in.

"Never mind," Snape said. "I am, of course, overwhelmed with gratitude that you took my advice about playing others. Any thoughts about what you've learned?"

He was about to blurt out what he'd seen about Draco so far, then realized that Gryffindor would probably lose

points if he said what he really thought. "Yes, sir. But I think I'll keep them to myself for now."

Snape's eyebrows raised a fraction of an inch. "Discretion from a Weasley. The world must be coming to an end. Carry on."

Ron was distracted for a moment, but got back to business after almost losing his queen. As it was, he ended up having to force a draw to avoid getting smashed.

Then the pieces arranged themselves into a new pattern. As tempting as this problem looked, he needed to play more with real people. *I might come back to this if I have time*, though, Ron thought.

Getting mowed down by a relentless Ravenclaw girl certainly *was* educational, Ron realized a couple of hours later. He would rather have missed the lesson if given the chance, but in a way he was still glad he'd played her. He made some quick notes on a scrap of paper while he still remembered the specifics. He set up his own pieces on a spare board and replayed it, though he had to ignore catcalls and insults as he tried to figure out what he could have done differently.

"I see you have met young Miss Brentwood," Professor McGonagall said dryly as she leaned over the board.

"I just wish I knew how she got a Bludger to whack me on the head," Ron said. The girl had set up one of the sneakiest pawn-swaps he'd ever been the victim of, and it had all gone downhill from there.

"I have a book in my quarters that may prove useful," the Professor said. "You might want to have a look at it tonight and have another go at it after that."

"Thank you!" he said. Wizard chess books didn't have pages of diagrams like Granger said Muggle ones did. One photo per game was all that was needed. Of course, that was what made them expensive, too. It took a long time for each game to slowly play itself out, along with the commentary. Of course McGonagall would have better books than the library. Why hadn't he asked her in the first place?

At last the long day was over. Ron ate with good appetite and chattered about the tournament, blithely ignoring the glazed eyes of his companions. "The board that played by itself must have been a teaching board," he added. "I hope it's still there tomorrow. I only have one more game on the schedule, but I still have a lot of work to do."

As soon as dinner was over, he went to McGonagall's office. She handed him the book. "I suggest you look at games 15 through 23," she said. "But don't stay up late tonight doing it. You need enough sleep to play Mr. Jordan tomorrow."

That sounded like she thought he could manage well enough without the book for that particular game. But once back in the bedroom he shared with Potter and the others, he looked at it for a little while anyway.

"Turn off the lights and go to sleep!" Potter finally begged. How could he sleep? Moves and countermoves danced in

his head. But it wasn't fair to everyone else to make them stay up, and he didn't feel like getting out of bed and reading in the common room. Finally he drifted off, only to dream of being a knight again like he'd been in the chess trap.

The next day he played Jordan in the final game that would settle the House championship. Ron got white, but didn't know if that was really an advantage. Some of his best play came in reaction to what others did. He decided to follow McGonagall's strategy in the chess trap and see if Lee could match it. *You're doing the same thing Draco did, part of his mind argued. Yeah, but if Jordan changes on me I can change right back. That's what chess is REALLY all about.*

Unfortunately, Jordan had studied the game, too. The Quidditch commentator used a lot of the same moves that Ron had used to win it. *Now I have to learn how to defeat myself!* Ron thought grimly.

Then he remembered last night's dream. *Last night—no, last knight!* he thought. He moved his king side knight further out into the middle. Knights were a lot more powerful than some people thought they were. They could leap over obstacles that blocked other pieces, even a queen. And it had been a knight's sacrifice that had beaten McGonagall the first time. Did Lee really understand what a knight could do?

A few turns later he moved one of his pawns ahead. If nothing else, that appeared to distract Jordan from trying

to trap *him*. Jordan must have been thinking of a possible line that he hadn't, since the next chance he could, the Quidditch commentator castled.

There were two schools of thought as far as protecting the king went. Some felt it was necessary to keep that piece surrounded at all times. Ron thought it was better to leave the king a few spaces to maneuver. Better a stalemate than checkmate any day!

Lee belonged to the siege-mentality type. But threatening the back row with a possible fork or two might force his opponent to move some of those pieces. Ron just hoped they would be the right ones.

Then it happened, as it sometimes did. He could see the whole game four or five moves ahead of where it was now. He *knew* what Jordan would do. Most of the time things weren't as clear as today, and sometimes he was totally wrong—but when everything came true, it was wonderful in a way that even Quidditch wasn't.

Jordan struggled, but soon the outcome was obvious. The pieces on Ron's side of the board started gloating early, but he silenced them with a glare. Lee sighed, looked at the board, and tipped his king over. "You got me this time, Weasley. Well-played. And congratulations on becoming the Gryffindor champion. Make us all proud next week."

"Thanks. I'll do my best." Then he told the Quidditch commentator his theory about Draco Malfoy. "Some good

players start out that way, if they have the memory for it. But if I remember the game, too, then I can mess him up."

"Nothing wrong with that!" Jordan said enthusiastically.

"But I'm going to have trouble with that Ravenclaw girl," Ron added. "Say, have you played any of the Hufflepuffs?" It would be just his luck to have one of *them* put a spike in his plans while he was worrying about the others.

"No. But I've heard someone named Abercrombie is probably going to be it. If he hangs around, play him today," Lee advised.

"I think I will, if I can find him," Ron said. "And I want to play the Ravenclaw again. Sometimes you learn more from when you lose than when you win."

"Then I learned a lot today!" Jordan said.

Ron shrugged. No matter how good anybody was, there was always someone better. Once they both told McGonagall the results of their game, the Transfiguration professor took Ron aside and congratulated him. "I was quite pleased to see you play others when you didn't have any other matches," she said.

He looked down, unwilling to admit that it had been *Snape's* idea. "I'll be playing a couple of them next week, I think," he finally said.

"If you mean Miss Brentwood and Mr. Malfoy, I regret to say you're right. Have you gotten the Transfiguration homework done?"

"Umm... if I get it done tonight, may I turn it in tomorrow and get some coaching then?" he asked. Some of the staff members were drifting in to get some play in, or so he thought. And he hadn't really figured out what Brentwood was doing yet, even with the book McGonagall had loaned him.

The professor sighed. "Certainly. The more types of play you're experienced in, the better. I'd like to see you go to Bulgaria. And don't worry about expenses. If you become the Hogwarts student champion, your fees, room and board will be covered. I also have a slush fund for anything else that might come up."

Ron felt his face go hot. He hated being reminded how poor his family was. "Thank you, Professor," he said. He hadn't thought what being a champion might cost.

"Well, then. Go play some chess," she said crisply.

That he could manage. He played Draco again, who was smirking about becoming the Slytherin champion later that day. "I only have to play Zabini," Malfoy said, "and I can beat him half-asleep."

Ron concentrated on following Draco's playing style. He tried to guess which classic game Malfoy was replaying, but didn't recognize the game at all. His opponent's moves were pretty fast, as if following a preplanned route, while Ron had to stop and think about his. That would become important next week, when the clocks would be up and actual score kept.

He was still able to figure out where things were going,

though. A little voice inside his head offered temptation. Let him win this one. *Let him get overconfident, and crush him next week, when the game will count.* Ron shook his head. He wasn't that kind of player and hoped he never would be. The game was more important than the players.

Draco's face clouded and he stopped bragging as the game proceeded. Some of the pieces on his side began shouting advice, sure sign of a player in trouble. His moves came more slowly, as if he was off the map again.

Malfoy said nothing at all when he finally tipped his king over. Ron didn't think that was a good thing. *Maybe I'd better be careful where I go by myself for the next days, in case I run into Crabbe and Goyle.*

Ron thanked Draco for the game, only to be met by more stony silence. Malfoy went off to his next game against Zabini. *I'd better not hang around and watch, he thought.*

When the standings were posted that night, Ron was champion for Gryffindor, Malfoy for Slytherin, Brentwood for Ravenclaw, and whoever Abercrombie was for Hufflepuff. Ron kicked himself for not trying to play him earlier. Just because Hufflepuff didn't have the reputation for it didn't mean they couldn't produce a good chess champion.

That weekend he hurriedly put together homework for McGonagall, turned it in, and enjoyed the coaching sessions. His head hurt sometimes with all he was learning, but he didn't mind—chess was *interesting!*

Possession of the Board

Chapter 3

hat weekend, Draco Malfoy read a letter from his father with dread. He was champion of Slytherin—wasn't that good enough? But he knew that somehow word had gotten out about

his losses to the Weasel.

My dear boy, it began. *I must congratulate you on becoming the champion of your House. However, I hear you have had trouble with those outside of it, despite all the care I have taken with your training. Teaching boards are hard to come by, and you must admit that Professor Snape has done his best to coach you.*

Draco knew it. He was sick of the



damned game by now. *Just because Father wants to waste his time with this nonsense, does that mean I have to as well? If he wants to go to the All-Wizards' Tournament, why doesn't he just go and leave me out of it?* He had to be careful about showing how he felt, though. Professor Snape was already aware of it, judging by the cutting remarks the older man had made in their private playing sessions. Once Draco had let slip how important this was to his father, though, Snape had sighed and let him work with the teaching board his father had sent.

If Snape wasn't here, I would have given up a long time ago. Only the Gryffs can trust Dumbledork—everyone knows the Headmaster thinks Potter's the greatest thing since the invention of fire. Even with all the sarcasm, Snape understood a lot of things none of the other teachers here at Hogwarts ever would.

Draco bent his head to the letter again. *I have taken the liberty of providing you additional help. Sometime before the beginning of the next round, go to the third floor and to the empty hall to the right. Follow instructions properly, and you will meet your new coach. I trust he will prove most helpful.*

For no particular reason Draco was afraid. *Maybe I ought to show this letter to the Professor and have him come with me.* Snape had already defused some unpleasant situations at Malfoy Manor itself that Mother hadn't been able to deal with. Father sometimes bragged how Voldemort could bring the Professor to his knees any time the Dark Lord wished; but didn't that show more strength than the way Lucius Malfoy willingly bent his own?

I'm not a child any more, Draco thought. *I can't go crawling for help every time something seems odd.* He read the rest of the instructions in the letter, and sighed as he put the note in a small chest near his bed.

Late that night he crept out of Slytherin and to the third floor of the main hall. He didn't have a special cloak like the one he'd heard that Potter had, but had learned that Mrs. Norris was especially fond of herring. It hadn't been hard to convince Mother to include a can or two in the packages she sent from home.

The hall on the right was empty. Potter and his friends must have been out of their minds to come here when that horrible beast of Hagrid's had been chained up in the place.

Go down through the trap door, a mental voice directed.

Draco did as he was told, then walked through another empty chamber. Again the voice told him which way to go. *I don't like this,* he thought, but kept following the instructions. He hated the way he was shaking. Surely it

was only the cold breeze making him shiver.

Finally he was in one of the basements. It was so dark. He couldn't make himself move forward. *I should have told Snape after all*, he thought. He knew that he wasn't particularly brave. Vince and Greg never suspected, but when he was by himself he had to face the truth.

"Master Draco," said the soft voice, this time out loud.

"Who... who is there?" he asked, his voice going high.

"S-someone to help you with chess." A ghost appeared.

Now that he could deal with. The Manor had an entire squadron of ghosts, many of them far more frightening than this one. He stepped closer.

The pale shade became more solid. Draco blinked. He was surprised the fellow was still hanging around. "I know who you are," he said.

"Yes. I s-see you do. I died here, after all. And *H-He* thought I might be useful again someday."

Draco could manage this. "You mean, you'll tell me the moves the way Binns will be telling Wormy Hermie when he plays."

"No. Another ghost out in the open w-would be detected. I have to cover up better than that." The spectre moved closer.

Draco stepped back, suddenly terrified. "No, wait! I can win on my own!" Then his back was against the wall and he couldn't remember where the door was. The ghost

embraced him like a brother and sunk inside.

Nobody heard Draco Malfoy scream.



Ron awoke on the first morning of the second week of the tournament. He was surprised he'd been able to sleep at all. He bolted down a quick breakfast and showed up over half an hour early. Even if he didn't win, he'd get to play and watch a lot of chess for the next week. It was going to be the most fun he'd ever had.

He looked at the schedule. The first two days would be devoted to cross-matches between the House Champions, while the staff played only each other. Matches between the champions and the staff would be played the second two days, while the last day would be used to settle any ties between students or staff.

Ron went to his assigned table. Abercrombie, the Huffle-puff champion, was already there. The large young man didn't look too bright, but his pieces were well-disciplined and quietly marched down the board. Ron had to work to avoid getting knocked down, but after a long struggle defeated the simple, but highly effective strategy.

"They said you were really good at this," Abercrombie said.

"You're not half-bad yourself," Ron said, after the result of the first game was recorded. "Um... after the tournament, let's play some more. I'd give you some advice now,

but I'm not entirely insane."

"Sounds like a plan," the older boy said. "Well, here goes game number two. You're white this time."

Ron had to watch himself this time. Abercrombie was a fast learner. Both black bishops were soon out and slanting back and forth through white's back row, despite Ron's attempt to use his pawns to screen his stronger pieces. *What a tactic!* he thought to himself. He was glad he finally found a way to surprise both pieces with his knights.

But in all his worry about those blasted bishops, he hadn't been paying attention to the rest of his back row. He fretted when Abercrombie ran his queen up out of nowhere to threaten the white king, and barely kept it from being checkmated. Then he sat for a bit without making any move. He looked at the situation fresh, as if it was on the teaching board he'd played last week. He nodded to himself as he finally figured it out, then moved out one of his bishops.

Just as the lunch bell rang Abercrombie sighed with disgust and tipped over his king. But it wasn't at all the same as it had been with Malfoy. They sat together at lunch and compared notes on the other players.

"You'd better look out for the Ravenclaw girl," Ron said. "Watch out for her pawns. And it helps if you know some of the classic games with Malfoy. Do something to break up his pattern, if you can figure out what it is. You'll know if you

succeed if he stops sneering at you and plays slower. As long as he's winning, he'll make lots of nasty shots at you."

The Hufflepuff boy nodded. "I should have played some of the others last week the way you did. That was smart."

"I got some good advice," Ron said hastily, though he didn't mention who'd given it.

After lunch he sat down against Miss Brentwood. *It's going to be a long afternoon*, he thought, and reminded himself about pawns.

It was dark already once they were done for the day, one win, one loss, and one draw later. Ron counted himself lucky to have done that well, actually. He was beginning to understand the Ravenclaw's pattern and came up with a good strategy against it, based on some of the games in McGonagall's book.

The Transfigurations Professor congratulated him that evening. "You and Miss Brentwood are nearly tied. Malfoy is next, and then Abercrombie. Your matches with Malfoy tomorrow will probably be the deciding factor. She will play him in the morning and you will play him in the afternoon."

He told McGonagall what he'd noticed about Malfoy the week before. "He knows the classic games really well. If Dad and I didn't go over them, I could be in trouble. But if I spot the game he's using, or break up his pattern some other way, then I have a good chance. I've done it twice so far. And he really doesn't *like* chess, I don't think."

"Mr. Weasley, few people feel about chess the way you do. Fortunately, I am one of them. You might wish to play one of the staff members, as some of them will come in early as well. Remember, you only have to play each staff member once, but do try to get them in when you can, since there are more staff members than students, and we are playing each other for two games out of three. But do not underestimate Mr. Malfoy. He is quite capable of luring you into complacency. I observed him with Abercrombie, and his play was more subtle than you give him credit for."

He hadn't thought of that. Of course a Slytherin might build up an opponent's confidence when it didn't matter, only to drop on him like a rock when it did. He tried to forget that he'd considered doing the same thing.

Ron went to the tourney area first thing after breakfast. Technically, he could have gone to a class or a study room, but somehow that wasn't really an option. And besides, McGonagall had said it would be the best.

He remembered what Snape had said about Filch. He felt awkward approaching the surly caretaker, but he might as well get it over. As he got closer, he saw that Filch had an extraordinary set. All the pieces were cats, from the Siamese queen to the row of Persian kittens as pawns.

Ron sat down and absentmindedly scratched underneath the black queen's throat. He was amazed when the piece began to purr.

"That's the best way of getting these pieces to behave," Filch said. He almost smiled.

"They're beautiful!" Ron said. "I've never seen anything like them!"

"Had these made special. Cost me a lot of Galleons, but they were worth it."

After a bit more chitchat, they began to play. Ron soon discovered that Filch's strategy was strictly opportunistic, based on sweeping as many pieces out of the way before he did much of anything else. Soon the air was filled with the cats' yowling, which soon turned to grim silence pierced by the occasional hiss.

Ron struggled to make what he could of the game. He passed up several opportunities for slaughter on his own account and kept his mind on the main objective. Once they got to endgame, though, he found out that Snape had been right. He nearly lost the game by not paying attention to his king. For once he wished he'd castled the damn thing. But after a bit of smash-and-grab on his own part using his bishops the way Abercrombie had, he managed to bring things back into order. (For the moment he mentally christened his bishops Vinnie and Greg.)

Then Filch crushed one of the bishops and seemed to be going after the other one, when Ron spotted how to open up a path to the back row. He took the rook's pawn with his bishop, as if he couldn't think of any other way

to get the piece out of the way of Filch's knight. Filch's rook took the bishop, his own rook took Filch's, and the caretaker stared down at the board, obviously unhappy at what he saw there.

Filch took his time looking. Then he finally moved one of the back pawns to leave an escape path for his king. Ron blocked it with his queen.

At that the caretaker tipped over his king. "Sneaky little bastard," Filch mumbled to himself. "But then I should have figured that out, the way you and your friends get around me into places where you shouldn't go."

Ron couldn't argue with *that*. Dodging Filch and Mrs. Norris was great fun. He quietly picked up the pieces, petted them till their fur lay down properly, and said, "Thank you for the game, sir."

"Well, at least you know how to soothe them properly," Filch said with grudging approval. "Maybe you aren't a total brat after all."

Ron gave the man a quick grin. How he loved playing so many different people! The more he played, the more he learned. He wandered over to watch Brentwood and Malfoy. Ron worried when he saw how much trouble the Ravenclaw girl was having against the Slytherin. He didn't recognize the game that Malfoy was using at all, or even the style. How sneaky could you get! A good thing he was watching this now. *I wonder what he'll pull on me this afternoon?*

He walked over to Professor McGonagall, who was playing Binns. Ron waved hello at Granger, who was moving the pieces for the discorporate History Professor, then sat and watched for a bit. The game was almost over, so Ron decided to wait and let McGonagall know what was going on with Malfoy.

The Head of Gryffindor soon checkmated her fellow staff member. "Have you seen any good games lately?" she asked.

"I played a gory one with Filch. I love his set, though."

"A lot of people have trouble with it," she said.

"I bet the pieces like *you*," he said. "But I got the queen purring right at first, and that must have helped."

McGonagall looked pleased. Ron added, "And Malfoy pulled a big surprise. I played him a couple of times last week and I thought I knew what he was up to, but it turned out to be wrong. He's playing really different today. The Ravenclaw was going down for the third time, or maybe the second, when I saw her. What's really weird is how quiet he was. Usually he smirks and brags whenever he thinks he's winning."

Granger, who was setting up the board for Binns' next game, looked up. "You're right. He natters on like that whenever he gets good marks in Potions, too."

"Maybe he's just paying more attention to the game," Ron said gloomily.

"I think I will watch your games this afternoon." McGonagall's lips were thinner than usual. "Professor Snape

can play me tomorrow.”

Ron was glad to hear it. He wanted to see how the Potions Master played, and he hadn't been able to so far.

“Yes, the Hogwarts Express is back,” Professor Binns said with a faint chuckle. “I want to watch those games tomorrow myself.”

Hogwarts Express? Who did they mean by that? Ron wondered. He was about to ask when the bell rang for lunch.

After everyone had eaten, well, except for Binns of course, Ron sat down at a chessboard with Draco. He hadn't been worried before. Now he was.

The first game was a disaster. He couldn't figure out what Malfoy was doing at all. The style was nothing like the way Draco had played before. But Ron blamed himself. *I should have figured he was only pretending to lose last week. Play the pieces, not the player, like Dad keeps telling me.*

The next game was better. Ron threw out any ideas about what he thought Draco was going to do and took the initiative more. It *was* funny how Malfoy hadn't crowed over his first victory, though. He wasn't even bragging about how badly he'd fooled everybody.

In fact, Draco didn't say much at all. Ron tried to get Malfoy to talk, but only got mumbled comments. Last week Draco had been full of insults about the Weasleys and so on as long as he thought he was winning.

Close to the end of the game Ron felt himself in trouble

again. One of his bishops was gone, so he couldn't send them out to play Vinnie and Greg the way he had with Filch. *What if I go out and slaughter everything that moves the way that Filch did? I bet Draco won't be expecting that.* It was fun to go pawn-hunting, even though doing it in such a random fashion was against everything he'd been taught. But the look of consternation on Malfoy's face was worth it. *Eat that, Ferret-boy!*

“Wh-what do you think you're doing?” Draco asked. His voice sounded odd.

Malfoy's moves took longer now, eating up some of the time on the chess clock he'd saved up earlier.

Ron looked at his clock carefully. He was going to have to play some combinations he'd used earlier to save time, though fortunately with other opponents. Draco *did* have a really good memory.

He was exhausted and had only a couple of minutes left on his clock when he finally forced a checkmate. Ron was amazed that Malfoy didn't say anything nasty.

McGonagall walked by and ordered an hour break. As Draco went off, the professor said, “That was a very hard-fought game, Mr. Weasley. I am about to ask you a favor for the next one. Do you remember my moves in the chess trap?”

“Of course I do,” Ron said. “I used them against Jordan, only he knew them, too.”

“I want you to open that way, even though the game

may go against you. I think I know what's going on, but I'm not yet certain. Remember, you will be playing against the rest of the staff for the next two days. They will judge your ability even if Malfoy ends up ahead now."

Ron didn't like the sound of that, but agreed. Once he'd visited the lav and gotten a bite to eat, he wandered over to Professor Binns, if only to be close to 'Mione. And it *was* restful, he argued to himself, to watch other people play. The History Professor's style was an oddly old-fashioned one, though it held up better than Ron thought it would against Filch's brand of savagery.

Once he was called back to the board he saw both McGonagall *and* Snape sitting by to observe. Ron gulped, Draco went white, and the game began.

At first Ron recreated McGonagall's chess trap exactly. But Draco's response wasn't like Lee Jordan's or his own. Maybe Malfoy had studied the game. It wasn't hard to find out how it had gone, as Ron himself had done the diagrams from memory later. But black's play was extraordinarily different.

He could see what was going to happen, and glanced at McGonagall for permission to change. She firmly shook her head. Ron carried on, and he was badly beaten. Malfoy wore an unpleasant look of triumph, but still said nothing.

Snape turned towards McGonagall and said, "I see what you mean." Then his eyes glittered and he looked at the board. "Mr. Malfoy, have you anything to say for yourself?"

"N-no, sir," Draco mumbled.

Malfoy looked frightened of Snape. Ron had never seen that before. Draco always treated the Potions Master like a favorite uncle.

But Ron had to speak out. "Professor—I mean, Professors—I haven't seen Malfoy use a crib or anything like that. I don't see how else he could cheat, if that's what you're thinking. He is playing different from last week, but I thought he was just being a proper Slytherin." He loathed coming to Draco's defense, but it was the truth.

Snape raised one eyebrow. "Have you noticed anything else?"

It was just weird talking like this about Malfoy while he was still sitting there. "Well, he's been less nasty than usual. Although he's been stuttering like the Squirrel some of the time. But he's probably just nervous." He certainly was.

"Squirrel?" Snape asked with acid in his voice.

"Well, you know, the professor who taught Dark Arts. The one who almost killed Harry. I mean, the first one," Ron added, since there had been a couple like that.

Then he noticed how Draco's face moved around funny, like he couldn't decide what expression to wear.

Snape's face smoothed out and showed no expression at all. "Well, then, Mr. Malfoy. May I be the first to congratulate you on your first place finish?"

Ron's jaw dropped. This wasn't fair! McGonagall ges-

tured at him to be quiet.

Draco looked smug. Then Snape continued. "We have a rather busy schedule for the next few days, so we are trying to get in as many games as possible. Your first game with a member of the staff will be with Professor Binns. Now."

Malfoy didn't look happy, but McGonagall looked a lot more cheerful, as if she knew what was going on. Ron wished he did.

Draco walked over to the ghostly professor's table as if he was marching to the gallows. McGonagall and Snape followed. After a moment's thought, Ron did, too.

The Transfigurations Professor murmured, "Thank you, Mr. Weasley. Remember, there were two people who got past my chess trap, not just one. The board I set up recalled both games for me, and I wrote them down."

But how could Quirrell still be around and helping Draco play?

Malfoy sat across from the board from Professor Binns and Granger. None of them looked happy.

Binns began chattering. "My, it's nice to play again, isn't it? Pawn to king-four, if you would, Miss Granger. Thank you, my dear. Have you finished that essay for me, Mr. Malfoy? I daresay not. You are quiet today... queen's knight to queen's bishop three, Miss Granger."

As Ron watched, both the Bloody Baron and Nearly-Headless Nick materialized behind Draco. A house-elf silently

walked in and handed a piece of paper to Professor Snape, who glanced at it, grimaced, and put it in his sleeve.

In the middle of moving a piece, Malfoy froze, one hand on a bishop. As Binns kept talking, a ghost started rising from Draco's head up into the air. Ron saw an unraveling turban and a thin man trying to flee, only to be caught by the Baron and Nick.

"Professor Quirrell. What a distinct *lack* of pleasure to meet you here today," Snape said angrily.

"You again! Why don't you stop meddling in things that don't concern you? The Master knows more about you than you think he does. Someday you'll find out just how much."

Snape glared at the ghost. "It is my job to make sure this tournament is conducted properly. Mr. Malfoy is responsible for his chess play, not anybody else."

An awesome idea occurred to Ron. Snape *knew* that Binns would be able to get Quirrell to come out, and that he would try to get away. That was why McGonagall wanted him to keep quiet.

The Baron smiled nastily. "We will deal with him, Herr Professor." Other Hogwarts ghosts appeared and took Quirrell away.

"Thank you," Snape said. "Now, Mr. Malfoy, what do you have to say for yourself?"

"It wasn't my fault!" Draco said, looking horribly pale and sick. "I never meant it!"

"We have the note from your father," Snape said gently.

"I only wanted him to give me some coaching!"

"Your games can't count now. You surely must understand that," the Potions Master said. "Come along with me to the infirmary. Possession is extremely unpleasant, even if the subject is willing."

"You know what my father will say!"

"Unfortunately, I do. However, you can't represent Hogwarts. Your helper would have stayed on much longer than you think. And it is against the rules not to play your own games."

Malfoy stood up with obvious reluctance and followed Snape. Ron slipped away out of curiosity to find out what would happen. He followed them behind to the door of the infirmary, and lingered outside.

In only a few moments, both Madam Pomfrey and Professor Snape burst out of the door. Ron wished he had Potter's invisibility cloak, but settled for cramming himself into a corner.

"You shouldn't have frightened the boy like that!" Madam Pomfrey said.

"I want him to be frightened, madam. I want him to be *terrified* of such things, or he'll see a lot more of them in future! Trust me, I know what it's like to think one can handle anything. I got into a great deal more trouble than you can possibly believe that way."

"You still do!" Pomfrey retorted.

"But I'm not only fifteen, nor do I have a father who will

inflict such things on his only son for the sake of a *game*."

"I suppose you're right about that."

"He'll be in a bad way for the next couple of nights. I'll bring by some potions that will help. Crabbe and Goyle can make themselves useful for once and sit by him tonight."

"It's hard to see such a proud boy so afraid," Pomfrey said.

"Well, he would be better off if he could bring himself to ask for help," Snape said. "And *you*, Mr. Weasley, had best get back to the hall before they announce the results!"

Ron fled like a hare. *He* knew when he should be frightened!



The Hogwarts Express

Chapter 4



McGonagall reprimanded Ron

for leaving once he returned to the main hall, now filling with people, and he knew that she was right. "Someday curiosity will get you into a trap you can't get out of," she said.

He looked at the floor and mumbled an apology. He had been wrong to snoop like that. Knowing that Malfoy was in trouble for a change wasn't as much fun as he thought.

McGonagall walked off. Potter sidled up. "Hey, champ! Heard Malfoy got himself disqualified!"

"Shh! Nobody's supposed to know anything until they announce it," Ron said. "Besides, you know Snape will cover the whole thing up."

"Granger told me everything. I didn't even know the Squirrel played chess. But I suppose he must have, or he never would have gotten past McGonagall's trap to the Mirror. None of us thought about it at the time."

Ron saw the sad look in Harry's eyes and knew his friend was remembering what he'd seen in the Mirror of Erised. Well, he'd never seen a chess championship when he'd looked for himself. Maybe Potter would find something he wanted just as much his parents someday.

"Quiet!" hissed Hermione. "They're going to make the announcement now!"

Professor McGonagall cleared her throat. The crowd settled down. "The preliminary results after the last two days are as follows: Gryffindor and Ravenclaw are tied for first place, Hufflepuff is second, and Slytherin has been eliminated." There was a buzz as the rumors started flying. "In the next two days," she continued in a slightly louder voice, "these three players will play the staff, while we complete our own championship games. Again, some of you will be allowed to observe, but only if your schoolwork is up to date. The rest of you will study in supervised rooms with those members of the staff who aren't playing. At least you will be quiet there. After the tournament we'll find out who has and has not kept up. Now to dinner, please."

Ron noticed Crabbe and Goyle talking to Professor Snape. Well, at least those two would be out of the way for a bit. He was a little nervous about what they might do if they thought it was his fault that Draco had gotten caught.



As he ate, he thought about the next two games. Would he and Brentwood have to play each other again, or would they play only the staff? Maybe he ought to go over the games he'd played with 'Malfoy'. The Squirrel was a horrible person, even as a ghost, but there was nothing wrong with his chess game. If Quirrell playing through Malfoy could crack the Ravenclaw in two straight sets, she might not be able to stand up to that style if someone else used it, too.

After dinner, he hastily made notes on the games he'd played with Draco. Fortunately the tourney boards were the kind that remembered what was played on them. The Squirrel depended more on a positional game, ready to pounce on any flaws in an opponent, rather than a more aggressive style. Ron knew how much he'd hated to be on the other side as the Squirrel's spider web started closing in.

"You need to go to bed," McGonagall observed from over his shoulder. "It's getting late. It will take longer than you think to analyze Quirrell's play.

"Well, it did throw him off when I used Filch's style at him," Ron said.

"So it would. Off to bed anyway, young man."

Ron obeyed, though his head was whirling. Maybe it was better to let things rest. Sometimes his brain worked harder for him when he was asleep or doing something else than when he concentrated directly.

The next day his games were going to be with Binns,

Sprout, and Vector. The day after that, they were going to be with Flitwick, McGonagall, and... Snape. Fortunately it was only going to be one game apiece, not two out of three. He checked the schedule, and figured out his first game with Binns would probably be over in time for him to watch McGonagall against Snape. At least he would have *some* idea how the Potions Master played.

He sat down against the History Professor and Granger. It was a little distracting to have his friend actually moving the pieces while Binns kept up a constant chatter, but he managed all right. The ghostly professor's style seemed rather old-fashioned, but Ron had to pay close attention anyway. Some gambits Binns used had been given up by most players, and were brand new as far as Ron was concerned. But he managed to win respectably, bowed instead of shaking hands, and hastened over to another table to cheer on the Head of Gryffindor.

Snape's chess set was medieval, though he had cannon for his rooks. His pawns were miniature Swiss pikemen, and whoever had done the knights had really known horses. The bishops were in full ecclesiastical gear, while the queen wore a winged war-helm in place of a crown and carried a morning-star.

Then he stepped back and looked at the current state of the game. Ron had never seen anybody bring out so many powerful pieces down the middle so quickly.

Apparently McGonagall had. Her face was lit in a pleased smile, and she said, "I see the Hogwarts Express is back."

Snape nodded. "I need to go to that tourney."

"You could have asked, you know."

"But this is much more fun," said the Potions Master, with a smile that Ron had once seen on the face of a picture of a shark.

"Well, I suppose I *could* use an assistant while I'm there," McGonagall said, with an evil grin of her own.

Ron enjoyed watching the game, but for once it was way over his head. Granger had once said that 'you know you're in trouble when the light at the end of the tunnel is an oncoming train.' He made a mental note to ask Dad to look Snape up in the championship books. McGonagall wouldn't hand out a nickname like that just for fun, not when chess was involved.

He thought Snape was taking a terrible risk by running so many pieces down the middle the way he was, especially with the Transfiguration Professor on the other side. But as the game developed, it looked like the Potions Master was going to get away with it. Pawns were moved up just in time to support the main thrust. While McGonagall forced some exchanges, the result became clear fairly quickly.

"All right," she said with a touch of peevishness. She tipped over her king with a vicious swipe of her finger, "that was the first game. We still have two more.

They started again. McGonagall had white this time. Her attack was far more subtle, but just as vicious. Ron was glad not to be playing her himself just now. Snape fought back, and seized the initiative back with some odd queen maneuvering. Ron was just beginning to see some of the patterns when he was called to play Professor Sprout.

He had no idea that the Herbology Professor even played at all. Her set was all carved plants, but it was still fairly easy to tell what each piece was supposed to be. The queen was a mass of thorny roses, some of which were so sharp they actually drew a drop of blood when he held his wrong.

She was better than he expected her to be. It was a fairly long game, and he really should have known better than to fall for a little maneuver she called "the Devil's Snare." After he tipped over his king, his face hot with embarrassment, she showed him how it worked, in case he ran into it later. "See, it looks like you have a chance at my queen, if you bring your bishop down like this. And there's nothing apparently in the way for a couple of moves ahead. But then I bring in my knight like *this*, and a couple of moves after that you've left yourself wide open at home to my rook. And once you're pinned down, here comes my queen to finish everyone off."

He admired it greatly. Any player who got just a bit too greedy might easily be suckered by that gambit. Someone like Filch, for instance. Ron pulled out some tattered

paper and a pencil from his pocket and made notes.

The second round of the McGonagall-Snape match was still going on. Ron had to pass it by to play his game with Professor Vector. He started it eagerly, hoping to find some way to end it quickly so he could watch the other game.

Ron soon discovered that playing with half a mind was good way to get into a bad position. Well, his father had always told him that a good head for numbers often meant a good head for chess, especially when sighing over Ron's refusal to sign up for Arithmancy. But last spring 'Mione had brought in some weird stories by a mathematician even older than Binns (alive or dead). Ron had never been able to get that strange chess game from the second one out of his head. He tried a few moves from it, leading with the white knight.

Vector betrayed no emotion except for blinking her eyes, but judging by her response, did not find them congenial. Ron followed them up with an initiative of his own which had worked for him before. Vector responded with a sudden thrust down the middle, but Ron had left some pawns behind in a diagonal just in case.

The game turned out to be a draw, as Vector's endgame was just as unpleasant in its own subtle way as Filch's. They shook hands, and Ron hurried back over to watch the others.

As he passed the board, he glanced at today's standings so far. Abercrombie had played Flitwick to a draw and lost to Sprout and Filch. Brentwood had drawn with

Sprout, won against Binns and Filch, and was going to play Vector after lunch.

Ron bolted his meal, despite Potter urging him to sit and talk a bit, and went back to watch. He was done for the day, unless he wanted to get his game against Flitwick in, though the Charms Professor was apparently busy gunning down Filch.

McGonagall and Snape were on their third game. Ron couldn't make sense of the board at first. Both the Potions Master and the Transfigurations Professor seemed to be in equally good positions at first. But Snape appeared to have the upper hand in board control. Ron watched as Snape tenaciously nibbled at McGonagall's defense. It was odd how the cannon on either side kept their barrels trained on the opposing player no matter where they were on the board.

McGonagall took longer to make her moves than Ron remembered her doing so earlier. A few of her pawns fell, though she managed to remove one of Snape's heavily armored knights in exchange. But that was enough for Snape to stop working the edges and start rolling out more major pieces down the middle again. McGonagall looked grim. She put up a fight worthy of Filch, but at the end she sighed and watched as her king prostrated himself on the board.

"Well, Severus, unless Flitwick comes up with a miracle this evening, it looks like you're going to Bulgaria."

Snape picked up the pieces. "Yes, it does. Still have your personal invitation?"

"Always do. A pity you never went back to the game till now. You'd have quite a rating if you hadn't gotten involved in other things." McGonagall's voice had just a touch of acid in it.

"We all make choices, Minerva," Snape said. "Ah, Mr. Weasley. Don't you have any more games to play?"

"Not till tomorrow. This one was the most interesting to watch." Ron was glad that McGonagall was going, too. He and Dad talked about the tournaments all the time. Then he finally got up enough courage to say what he should have before. "And thank you, sir, for telling me to play other people last week. It helped a lot."

Snape nodded. "I will be playing Dumbledore after I've played Flitwick and you three students. You might wish to watch that, too."

"Thank you, sir." As much as he sometimes loathed the greasy git, Ron wasn't going to pass up a chance like *this*.

McGonagall said, "Go along and eat now, Mr. Weasley. You and Brentwood are still fairly even in the standings, and you will be facing the best of the staff tomorrow."

Ron took off and had a good dinner talking over the day with Potter and Hermione. Once back in the Gryffindor common room, he realized that he'd forgotten to pick up his own chess set from the tourney floor. He went back down to get it and was going back when he saw Crabbe

and Goyle in the hallway. He tried to duck away before they noticed he was there, but it didn't work.

"Hey, Weasel! Malfoy wants to see you!" said Crabbe.

"I didn't squeal on him!" Ron protested.

"He knows that," Goyle said, who sounded like he was trying to be polite and didn't know how. "He just wants to talk to you."

Ron reluctantly followed the pair, clutching his chess-case, and hoped he wouldn't be stuck in the infirmary all the next day. Once past the Slytherin common room, where he was greeted by jeers and catcalls, the two took him to one of the bedrooms. *Malfoy must have gotten better faster than they thought if he's out of the infirmary already.*

He was awed by how much stuff was in the room. He'd give anything to be so rich. Robes that obviously came from stores where they were personally made, books that hadn't been marked on by a legion of previous owners, and a broom that even Harry would drool over provided just part of the background.

Draco stepped forward and offered his hand. Ron didn't know what else to do but to tuck the case under his left arm and accept the overture, especially with Crabbe and Goyle still hanging around. "I want to apologize for what happened at the tournament," Malfoy said.

Ron was so astonished he didn't know what to say at first. After a moment, he stammered out, "Um, McGonagall asked me to play that third game the way she'd set up the chess

trap. I think she suspected what was going on then."

"I wouldn't know. I don't remember thing from when I saw Quirrell's ghost to waking up in the chair across from Binns." For a moment Draco looked terrified, then closed it off.

Ron wondered if Malfoy was telling the whole truth, but knew he wasn't going to find it out here. And he wondered if the three Slytherins still carried a grudge for what happened on the train last spring. "It must have been awful," he said.

"Almost as bad as getting three curses at once," Malfoy said, his eyes glinting.

"All right, we overdid it there," Ron had to admit. "But you three had no reason to say what you did about Dig-gory or Voldemort. Harry still hasn't forgiven himself for Cedric's death yet, and Voldemort almost killed him. But I suppose we shouldn't have been surprised after Potter told us that your father was there with the rest of the Death-Eaters." *Oh shit. I'm in for it now.*

"My father *disciplined* all three of us for what we said," Malfoy said, his face growing hard. "None of us had a good summer last year. But I'm sure that Potter only saw what Voldemort wanted him to see. Wouldn't it be nice for the enemy if we all suspected each other? What do you think the Headmaster was getting at in that speech of his at the Leaving Feast last year, anyway?"

"You're right," Ron said reluctantly. After all, Potter had seen Snape and Sirius Black actually shake hands. If *that*

could happen, anything could.

Malfoy nodded. "You see? It's time for all of us to pull together. My father owed me this morning and included a note for you." He handed Ron a piece of paper.

Ron looked at it suspiciously. The small piece of parchment had the Malfoy crest delicately etched in one corner, and read *Mr. Weasley— if you go to*

the All-Wizards' Tournament, look me up. I may be able to introduce you to some people who might be helpful to you.

Lucius Malfoy, Malfoy Manor

"Why should he care?" Ron asked.

"He respects anyone who plays chess well." Draco looked unhappy for a moment.

Ron snorted. "I'd better play as well as I can! Nobody would notice me at all if I didn't."

"It must be strange growing up in a crowd like that," Malfoy said. "From the outside, it looks like you're practically a House all by yourselves."

"It'd feel even stranger being the only one," Ron said, staring down at the letter. "It'd be nice to be the center of attention, and not have to fight for every scrap of it."

"Being the only one isn't that much fun sometimes,"

Draco said. "Look how Granger works like a Hufflepuff to be perfect at everything."

Ron hadn't thought of it that way. And then Potter was kind of the center of attention with the Dursleys, but not in the way that anybody would ever want. As for him, neither Mum nor Dad got on him about his grades that much as long as he didn't actually fail anything. Did that mean they didn't care? "It's hard to figure out what you want for yourself sometimes, when you don't know what they want. Or if they remember who you are in the first place." It wasn't really that bad, but it felt like it some days.

"At least you can do what you want," Draco said, his face stony again. "Well, enough for that tonight." He began to turn away.

"Why did I get a note?" Ron asked. "The girl from Ravenclaw is pretty good, too."

"The odds are 5-2 on you in the Betting Book right now. You asked me what it was like to have that ghost around. What's it like to enjoy chess so much?"

Ron had never been asked that before. "I don't know. Maybe it's like flying is for Potter, or reading books for Granger. Or maybe like drawing things is for you."

"What do you mean by that?" Malfoy's voice was sharp.

"Everyone knows you're the one who did those cartoons that kept appearing the walls and drove Filch out of his mind when school started this year. They were awfully mean, but you got everybody's faces perfect. I actually kind of liked

the one showing McGonagall and Mrs. Norris in a cat-fight." Ron half-smiled, remembering how even the Gryffs had laughed themselves sick over it. "And I bet Snape blew his top when he spotted the one with the big-nosed snake getting stuck in the toilet in Moaning Myrtle's loo."

Draco grinned. "It was worth every cauldron I had to clean, even Longbottom's."

"Well, I'd play chess even if got me in trouble. Sometimes it's like the sky opens up and I can see what's going to happen ahead of time. Sometimes games are ugly, and sometimes they're beautiful, but it's always chess, and that makes it fun."

Malfoy shook his head. "Better you than me. Get out of here now, and don't fall down the stairs, Weasel."

"Same to you, Ferret," Ron said with a smile.

"My, you're not as soft as you look."

"I had Fred and George for older brothers. Who do you think they practiced all their jokes on first?" On that note, he left—fortunately without the escort he came with.

He went directly to McGonagall's office with the note. She handled it as if it were about to explode. If it had come from one of the twins, that would have been a distinct possibility.

"Oh, my," she said. "I must think about this. He will undoubtedly be there, and it may be difficult for you to avoid him completely. I will discuss it with you when I know something."

Ron went back to his bedroom, one he still shared with Potter and a couple of others, and told Harry all about it.

"I'd be really careful if I were you," Potter said. "Voldemort was going to kill me, Ron. Why should he care who I saw with him? I know Lucius Malfoy was there. And... this is something I heard Voldemort say to his Death-Eaters. I told Dumbledore as soon as I could, though I'm sure he warned Snape about it."

"What do you mean?"

"Snape used to be a Death-Eater, too, and didn't obey Voldemort when he was called. Voldemort said that one of the Death-Eaters was a coward too afraid to come, but that the other had left him for good. 'He will, of course, be killed,' is what he said about the second one. Just after that Dumbledore sent Snape on some kind of mission, and now he's going to this tournament. I'll bet a dozen Galleons that our Potions Master is going to be doing more than playing chess."

"A good thing that McGonagall is going too, then," Ron said. He knew which category Snape fell into.

"Now that we're both going to have nightmares tonight, we'd probably better turn in," Harry said, though he didn't look like he was joking.

"I have to survive Flitwick, McGonagall and Snape at the chess table tomorrow," Ron groaned. He was glad to have chess to distract him from anything to do with Voldemort. He had never forgotten seeing the Dark Mark hanging over the World Cup campgrounds last year. "That's going to be enough for me to worry about!"

Oh, Merlin, I HOPE that's all I'm going to have to worry about.

Kings Play Chess on Fine-Grained Sand

Chapter 5



he next day Ron played Flitwick first. The tiny professor was rumored to have some goblin blood to account for his size, and that didn't make his chess game any easier to deal with. Ron drew white, but that wasn't much help. *Play the pieces, not the player,* he thought to himself. *That's what Dad always says.*

He stopped for a moment about an hour into the game and studied the board as if he'd come to it fresh, like the teaching board Snape had left out for Malfoy. Once he saw what was going on, he knew he could make up any time he was using on the clock.

Aha! Ron thought. *So that's what he's up to!* Flitwick was using a flanking maneuver down the black queen's side, or at least that was what it looked like from the way he was developing his pawns. Ron decided to gamble



and began rolling pieces down the middle, though he made sure his own pawns backed them up. It wasn't quite Snape's game, but it seemed to rattle the Charms Professor a bit. Then Ron sent Vinnie and Greg out hunting, while his knights lay in wait. Flitwick moved more hesitantly, obviously not sure what his opponent was up to. Well, that was reasonable. Ron wasn't sure, either, but he'd certainly distracted Flitwick from his own strategy.

Then Ron led another charge with his knights, usually his favorite gambit. Soon many of Flitwick's major pieces were boxed in or complaining at the side of the board. Not long after that the small professor tipped over his king. "Congratulations, Mr. Weasley. A well-fought game."

One down, two to go, Ron thought as he and Flitwick shook hands. He suspected the Charms Professor's game with Snape last night had been interesting indeed, and wished he'd been able to watch it, but McGonagall had been extremely insistent on making sure he went to bed early for a change.

He took a break, and then came back to watch McGonagall play Brentwood. He should probably take a look at how Snape was dealing with Abercrombie, but he wanted to see how the Ravenclaw was playing in case a tie had to be worked off.

He looked at the chess board. As far as he could tell, Brentwood was giving the Transfiguration Professor as good as she got. But it looked like she was using the same

strategy she'd used on him. It was an excellent one; but could she change if McGonagall got around it?

As he watched, McGonagall slowly nibbled away at Brentwood's pieces and put the girl on the defensive. Brentwood tried to set up a pawn exchange like the one she'd nobbled Ron with, but McGonagall didn't fall for it and took the opportunity to firm up her position on the board. The ultimate outcome was clear to Ron, and probably to the Transfiguration Professor, before Brentwood started trying for a stalemate. But the Ravenclaw was cornered anyway. Her king complained out loud and struggled against being tipped over, but it was inevitable.

The pieces that Brentwood used were all badly shaken. Ron took a moment to reassure them when he sat down across from McGonagall. Just as he made his first move, he *saw* what to do. His own style had won against the Head of Gryffindor before, and she would be expecting it. What was new was realizing how to integrate what he'd seen of Quirrell by way of Malfoy with what he'd learned in the tourney so far. He wasn't sure he could pull it off, but since Brentwood had lost her first game, and he had won his, even a draw would keep him ahead.

Once more he left his knights back, as he had with Flitwick. He'd make more use of them later. His pawns soon spread out like advance scouts, though with enough support behind them so they weren't vulnerable. Except for one, of course.

He wanted that one to be on its own. Would McGonagall take the bait, thinking he'd overextended himself?

At first she played cautiously, obviously suspecting a trap. She set up her own position and made it stronger as she went. Ron continued, making what he hoped looked like a few mistakes. And she *still* didn't go after that pawn! Well, if she wasn't going to bring the battle to him, he was going to bring it to her. Now he went after her own pawns, though with an occasional loss of his own. He was going to miss that bishop later on!

Then McGonagall sprang her trap, and Ron stared at the mess he was in. But for once his knights were actually where they could do the most good instead of haring off after anything that came within their reach. He couldn't believe she'd actually forgotten where one of his pawns was for a bit. Then he took another look and almost gulped when he figured out what would happen if he *did* take that knight with the pawn. Not many used rooks well before the end of the game, but Ron suspected he was sitting across from someone who did. So he left the poor little fellow exactly where he, despite the piece's pitiful cry of abandonment, and brought up a pawn from his queen's side instead.

"Hmmp," McGonagall said, and moved her queen into the middle of the board.

And took the pawn that Ron was hoping she'd do *something* with since the beginning of the game. His moves

came quickly then, and McGonagall was forced to retreat.

She counterattacked a few moves later, and Ron worried about losing the whole game right then. Fortunately his knights came through for him as they always did and maneuvered well enough to blunt the force of the opposing pieces. Then he started clearing her pieces off to open up her back rows.

The game ended up a draw after McGonagall played a little like Filch right back, but Ron felt triumphant. They shook hands. "Well-played, Mr. Weasley. You made me work for this."

"Thank you," he said.

It was lunch time now, and he was hungry. Granger and Potter sat by him and hardly interrupted at all as he told them all about the two games. "But the last one's against Snape," he said, miming his throat being cut. "I'll put up a good fight, but I saw what he did to McGonagall."

Hermione nodded. She had a book with her at table, probably to make up the time she'd spent helping Binns. Ron panicked briefly when he thought of all the school-work waiting for *him*. Then he decided not to worry about it till tomorrow. After all, he'd beaten Flitwick and drawn McGonagall. Brentwood had beaten Flitwick, too, but had lost against McGonagall and Snape, while Abercrombie had died gloriously against all three. Granted, the Hufflepuff *had* won against both Sprout and Filch.

No matter how this last game came out, he was proba-

bly going to be the winner of the tournament. Then again, he had no idea where he stood on either time or points, and Brentwood might have done better than he had on both. So he'd better not crow ahead of time! He remembered a certain Slytherin who had a tendency to do that, and decided he was better off doing just the opposite.

Lunch was over. He sat down against the Potions Master. "Play the pieces and not the player," he mumbled to himself.

"Mr. Weasley?"

"Oh. Just reminding myself of what Dad tells me—play the pieces and not the player."

"Ah. Unfortunately, many times you must play both." Snape drew white.

Ron knew just why the professor had gotten the nickname 'the Hogwarts Express', because he soon felt like he was tied down in front of one of the school trains. Or facing a big Muggle truck, or something like that.

But McGonagall had beaten the Potions Master, if only once. Maybe if he encouraged Snape to get ahead of himself, or commit too many pieces, he could flank around. Normally he didn't castle, but he wanted his king safe before he threw down his own challenge.

Then Ron let Vinnie and Greg loose to hunt and destroy. Abercrombie had probably used this tactic, too, but Snape still seemed annoyed by it. Between these forays, Ron quietly brought his pawns forward, supported by pieces

behind. He was going to take back the territory he lost.

Ron noticed that Snape's back row didn't look as well-defended as it had been when the Potions Master had been playing McGonagall. He let Vinnie make a run near the area, only to find out it was nastier than he'd thought. Fortunately he'd left the poor bishop a line of retreat, so he was able to get the shrieking piece back out again.

Snape grimaced and began a hunt of his own. Ron defended as best he could, but soon found himself down to one knight and one bishop. He moved the pawns ahead of his king to give it room to maneuver. Snape's pieces were oddly silent, except for Vinnie, whose wail when he'd been taken had been really pitiful. Well, besides Snape's queen, who uttered a joyous war-whoop whenever she smacked anything with her morning-star.

Ron's queen just looked miserable, till she got out and began to threaten the Potions Master's back row, along with his remaining bishop. Then he was distracted as Snape's pieces went after the guard around his own king.

Then Ron grinned. People forgot a king could take other pieces, too, and one of Snape's bishops had gotten a little too close. Instead of moving behind it, where it would probably be threatened by a knight in the next move, Ron took the bishop.

He was astounded to see his king bring out a tiny wand, which emitted a spark of green light as the bishop

fell over. *Death-Eater chess pieces*, he thought morbidly. He stared down at the pieces, wondering if any of them had the Dark Mark on them underneath their carved robes.

But the game was still on, and that was more important. And he was getting massacred, despite his own attempts to clear the field a bit. He took some of the pressure off his king, and quietly moved it where he could keep it maneuverable. *Maybe my endgame isn't as vicious as Filch's*, he thought, *but I can try to keep it memorable*.

In a gentler, kinder chess game, he never would have taken so many chances with his king, but right now he had nothing to lose. He attacked, attacked, attacked, and then cut forward once more. His few remaining pawns were sent forward in a desperate attempt to get them to the last square to replace his perished queen, now moaning softly at the side of the board.

Unfortunately, Snape saw rather too clearly what he was up to. Ron's king ran for its life, one space at a time. Once again his king took a piece, this time a pawn too close to becoming a second queen. Once again the tiny green spark flared.

And then it became obvious that his king was going to have to move back and forth between two squares in perpetuity while Snape attempted check after check.

"We seem to have a stalemate," the Potions Master said in disgust.

Ron breathed a sigh of relief, then looked at the board again. Snape was only a few moves from getting his last remaining pawn down to the end. After that, it would take three moves at most to finish it.

"I wish," he said unhappily, and tipped his king, despite the way the piece tried to turn and wave its wand at *him*.

"I hope you do not surrender so easily in real life," Snape said acidly.

"Chess isn't real life. And you would have gotten me in five, maybe six moves."

"Yes, I see it now," Snape said. "Well-played. But remember not to give an advantage like that in future."

Ron nodded, but knew that chess had rules for a reason, and what kept it going was willingness to abide by them. And he knew he had to make the right judgment for himself. Maybe there was a little bit of Percy in him, after all.

But he wasn't going to argue with Snape over it right here!

The Potions Master put away his pieces while Ron looked at the standings. They had automatically updated themselves, and showed him at the top, mainly because of his draw with McGonagall. Brentwood was ahead on time, but he had beaten her in body count. He wondered if he ought to go thank Crabbe and Goyle for inspiring him to name his bishops Vinnie and Greg, then decided they wouldn't get it. *Draco probably would*, Ron thought, *and then I'd be spending the evening in the infirmary. I'll tell*

Harry and 'Mione, though. They'll have fun with it!

"Mr. Weasley." Snape's voice broke through his reverie. "I am about to play the Headmaster. Do you wish to observe?"

Ron had forgotten, and gulped. "Of course!" Dumbledore was down at one of the tourney tables and opening a case. He dashed about and gathered up both the Ravenclaw girl and Abercrombie to come with him. Being together seemed to cheer everyone up.

The Headmaster and Snape sat down together. "I'm glad you're returning to some of your old interests, Severus," Dumbledore said.

"I never quite gave it up."

"I see. I suspect you learned some of the disadvantages of using live pieces then."

"Speak for yourself, Albus," Snape said with a smirk.

"Point taken." Dumbledore finished setting out the pieces, then moved the king's pawn in a classic opening.

The Headmaster's set was a Quidditch team! Ron adored it instantly. The King was a Keeper, the Queen a Seeker, the Rooks Bludgers, and every other piece was holding a broom, except for the pawns. They were all tiny golden Snitches—one side edged in white, the other in black.

The game the two played was so far above Ron's head that all he could do was take notes. He'd replay it later with his dad and try to make sense of it then. Dumbledore's strategy reminded him a little bit of the way Binns

played. Snape began rolling his pieces down the middle the way he had before, only to discover that getting there was only half the fun, as Dumbledore quickly swallowed up any attempt to break through his own defenses. Snape then began working his way around the edges, as Ron saw him do with McGonagall, only to meet Dumbledore coming back at him there, too.

Then the game settled down into one of maneuver and position. Ron thought he detected bit of Quirrell's strategy on both sides. The oddest thing was that Snape was actually looking pleased with himself, despite the fact he obviously was not doing as well as he had against the other members of the staff. Neither player said much, but Ron had the strangest feeling they were talking to each other through the way they moved their pieces.

At no time did it seem like the Headmaster was in serious trouble. Yet Ron didn't think that it was as easy for Dumbledore to defend against Snape's relentless attack as the elderly wizard made it look. A wintry smile occasionally appeared on the Potions Master's face, as if he were enjoying the game for its own sake.

It didn't seem like a long time until Snape finally tipped over his king, but Ron checked the clock and it had been two and a half hours. It would probably take him at least that long to replay it properly, but knew it would be worth the effort.

That night the Gryffindor table cheered for Ron and

Slytherin cheered for Snape, while the other two tables cheered for everybody. McGonagall seemed almost as happy as if Gryffindor had swept both places. But since she had her own rating, she'd be going to the tournament anyway. Ron was glad about that.

Being singled out this way was *wonderful!*



Arthur Weasley riffled through books and old magazines out in the family garage and ignored the cold. He already had a stack on McGonagall; she had placed at a very high level in several All-Wizards' tournaments, though she had yet to take the cup. But wizards and witches lived a long time, and she still had many more chances. It wasn't unknown for some of the players to keep on past a hundred and change, like old al-Hadoud or Headmaster Dumbledore.

He ended up going back over five tournaments before he found Snape. *Child prodigy*, Weasley discovered in a "Where Are They Now?" article. *Entered Hogwarts a year early—well, he was tall for his age, judging by the picture—swept both house and Hogwarts championships. Bet Lucius Malfoy was in a snit. The bastard was several years older, and still got wiped out. Pity someone else hasn't done it since. Then Snape went to the All-Wizards, where he took the juvenile cup.* Arthur noticed the awkward gangly child

looked defensive at first in the picture, then relaxed and actually showed a shy smile. *But so often prodigies don't prove out as adults.* Then he looked at the dates, and realized what else had been going on five years later when the next tourney was held. *Snape was supposed to have gotten involved with the Death-Eaters before he left Hogwarts, he remembered. No doubt chess tournaments were too trivial compared to taking over the world.*

Since then, the Potions Master had stayed out of organized chess, though Malfoy occasionally boasted of beating Snape in private games. Arthur had paid no attention then; but now he wondered if the sod had been telling the truth. He was glad that he and Molly had been out of school and married before Malfoy had become so notorious there at Hogwarts. *The Marauders went after the wrong Slytherin, if you ask me!*

Now Severus Snape was coming back. Ron had owled him with accounts of the games he had seen, and Arthur had owled him for more details, especially the McGonagall-Snape matchup. The Head of Gryffindor normally went as Hogwarts champion, and Arthur very much wanted to see the kind of play that had defeated her.

He was so proud of Ron he could hardly speak—not only for the games, but for the sportsmanship the boy had showed against Snape. He might have grasped at that stalemate himself. His son was still learning from others,

and that was the way a real champion operated. Arthur read an old interview where al-Hadoud claimed that even at a hundred and twenty that he was still picking up new things about the game. Weasley had never met the old Arab, though his father had a long time ago. The fellow hadn't gone to the All-Wizards for a couple of decades, but everyone in the chess world certainly knew of him. He would love to see Dumbledore and the Arab meet once more, as they had in a fabled series of games in 1955.

Arthur grimaced when he came across a more recent magazine extolling Lucius Malfoy as a player. Weasley couldn't finger it exactly, but he thought there was a weakness to the man's play than seemed apparent to anyone else. *Hope someone knocks him down a peg or two someday, he thought. Pity it won't be me who does it, unfortunately, at least not this time.* His Ministry duties would keep him away, especially since there were rumors that Karkaroff had finally surfaced.

He reluctantly stacked the magazines. *Oh, how I wish I could go this time! But Ron will have to uphold the family honor by himself. Maybe the next one,* he thought, knowing deep within his heart if they were all still alive five years from now that he'd consider himself well off. That idiot Fudge *still* wouldn't admit that Voldemort was back!



Progress Across the Board

Chapter 6

month later Ron was called to McGonagall's office. "I'm not going to the tournament," she informed him. "I have been called away on family business."

He must have shown his dismay, as she continued. "Professor Snape is not always the most comfortable traveling companion, but you would have had to share a room with him anyway. You'll both be busy with chess most of the time, and likely won't see each other that much. Do show some responsibility and stay out of trouble," she said crisply.

"Yes, Professor."

"It would be extremely embarrassing to Gryffindor, and to me, if you fail to represent us, and Hogwarts, properly. For one thing, I'd never hear the end of it at staff teas," she said with a brisk smile. "I know you haven't been on



your own very much. Don't let it go to your head."

"Wait a minute," Ron said. "What about that note that Malfoy's father sent me?"

"I've given it to Professor Snape. He knows what Lucius Malfoy is capable of rather better than anyone else, I daresay." Her smile faded for a moment. "But then, only a Slytherin could possibly keep track of all those family histories."

Ron was puzzled. From what he'd seen, Snape bent over backwards to keep any Malfoy happy. Then he remembered how angry the Potions Master had been about Quirrell's ghost. He couldn't figure it out.

"You'll be gone for a week," McGonagall said. "Here's a reading list and some essays you can work on when you don't have games. I suspect you're going to get other lists for the rest of your classes. You have one more weekend before you leave. I suggest you make use of it to complete as much as possible before you go."

"Yes, Professor." Of course he was disappointed that the Transfiguration Professor wasn't going. Then he began to see some of the advantages. If Snape's schedule kept him busy, he *would* be on his own. That didn't happen very often, either at home or at Hogwarts.

He talked with Harry and Hermione about it that evening.

"Professor McGonagall's right," Granger said. "If you get in trouble and mess up Snape's schedule, you know what the rest of the year in Potions class is going to be like."

Potter looked glum. "It's going to be awfully quiet around here while you're gone."

"Well, I'm going to miss all of you, too. It's going to be strange to be anywhere without the family or you two." Ron's stomach felt funny. Probably just nerves, or terror at the prospect of being under Snape's thumb for a whole week. He tried not to think that the three of them might be split up forever in just a few years.

He started one of the assignments on the various lists he'd gathered so far, but kept sending owls home or looking in one of McGonagall's chess books instead of actually getting anything done.

At last the day dawned. His trunk was packed with enough clothes for the week, even though he'd had to borrow some of them from Fred or George. There weren't going to be any house-elves eager to launder shirts mid-week to hide the fact he didn't have a closetful of them. At least it wasn't as bad for him as it was for Ginny; nobody cared what boys wore, but if she had to wear the same dress under her robes more than once a week, all her friends noticed at once. *If I win any prize money, it's all going to her*, he suddenly decided.

He went to Dumbledore's office with his luggage floating behind him, since they were going to use the Headmaster's fireplace. It was hooked into a much larger network than most of the other fireplaces, or so he'd been

told. Professor Snape was already there, with a trunk that looked older than he was.

The Headmaster congratulated both of them. "I know the two of you will make Hogwarts proud. And Severus, try to find some time just to enjoy yourself."

The Potions Master shrugged dourly. "That will depend on a number of things," he said, and glanced at Ron.

Ron vowed to stay out of trouble. He knew he wouldn't get any sympathy from anybody this time if he didn't. For one thing, it would probably be all his fault, and not spread out among the three of them. "I'll do my best," he said.

"I know you will, boy," said Dumbledore. "Now show them all what Hogwarts has taught you both!"

With that they entered the fireplace, Professor Snape first. Ron had little trouble with the Floo network (unlike Harry, who had a real gift for getting lost even after that first horrible time) except that the powder always made him sneeze.

They arrived in a lavish hotel lobby just behind a huge entourage who barely got out of their way in time. Ron had never seen such a beautiful room in his life. Pillars were scattered around, decorated with living vines, some of which were blooming. The floor was tiled in black and white. *How do they keep it clean with so many people going through?* he wondered. They must have an army of house-elves, or do it all by magic, he concluded.

The Potions Master led the way to a tall counter. "Snape

from Hogwarts, party of two, two bedroom suite," he said curtly. When the clerk didn't do anything, he said something in a language Ron didn't know, one that seemed full of consonants hopelessly searching for a vowel.

The clerk found some papers for them after that. Then the man cleared his throat and said, "Chess over there," with a thick accent, as he pointed to another section of the lobby.

A couple of other men appeared and took their luggage, lifting it physically from the floor. Ron was about to protest when he saw Snape just handed each man a coin.

He followed the Potions Master to a table set up at one end of the lobby. Snape produced some papers, spoke in yet another language that Ron recognized as French, and got two thick envelopes with a couple of badges. Snape's was different than his. *Probably because I'm still a student*, Ron thought.

They went up to the room in silence, though Ron wanted to ask a million questions. If only McGonagall had been able to come!

Their floor was the second one, two flights of stairs up. It had a quiet corner where a couple of plush chairs were arranged next to a long hallway with lots of doors. An old man with a sparse white beard in pale green robes, who looked older than Dumbledore, sat in one of them and looked at some papers in his lap.

Snape broke into a genuine smile and stepped forward. Ron's jaw dropped. There was a running bet that the professor was incapable of looking pleased about anything,

and here he was without a camera!

"Salaam aleikum," Snape said in a voice full of gladness. "Too many years have waited upon our meeting!"

The old man glanced up through the tiny glasses and said, "Salaam aleikum, indeed. How may I serve you?"

Snape bowed, and gestured towards Ron. "I am at Hogwarts now. And this is Mr. Weasley, who speaks English only."

"Hmmm. It has been years since I spoke it myself," said the old man, who didn't have much of an accent as far as Ron could tell. "The last time I did so was when a tall skinny boy from the place fetched and carried for me when he was playing for that school." The ancient man looked amused, then glanced at Ron. "I am al-Hadoud, young man. If you are playing for Hogwarts, you must know something about the game. Have you ever heard the term 'chess rat'?"

"No, sir," Ron said, feeling drawn to the man already. It was really amazing how different the Potions Master looked just now.

"Snape here once ran my errands and brought me my tea, and in exchange I endeavored to teach him a little of what I know about chess in the short time we had together. Has it really been so many years, Severus?"

"Yes," Snape said, his head slightly bowed as if he were still the old man's servant.

"Where have they gone? The world moves so quickly these days, and I hear of so much wickedness." The

frail-looking old man sighed, then frowned. "Ah, now I remember." He looked up at Snape. "I heard that you were involved in that horrible business yourself. I wish it were not so, but there it is. Is it not so that you bear a sign of loyalty to such evil?"

Snape's face settled back to its old lines as if a spell shining light on it had suddenly failed. "Yes," he said in a toneless voice.

Ron nearly burst out with *But he isn't one any more!* He didn't know why he cared, but it was wrong for someone that the Potions Master obviously liked to think that way. Yes, Snape was a greasy, unpleasant git, but it wasn't fair to hate him for something he really wasn't any more.

And then he remembered what Harry had told him about Snape probably having something else to do here besides playing chess. Ron held his tongue, but he didn't like it.

The old man in the chair continued. "I am disappointed, Severus." His voice was soft, but his words clearly struck the Potions Master like a blow.

"I hope your displeasure does not extend to Mr. Weasley. He is free from any such taint. I do not corrupt those in my charge." A touch of the whip had crept back into Snape's voice.

"Is this true, boy?"

"He assigns us too much homework and yells at us in class," Ron said, hoping his frank speech wouldn't come back to bite him. "Of course, Draco Malfoy gets away with a lot more."

"Malfoy," al-Hadoud said with a sigh. "I am not surprised at anything he does. So you have charge of his son, eh?" he added, looking at Snape.

"I have that privilege."

"Well, that is trouble enough for any man. I shall teach this boy if he is willing. I only wish that things had not gone as they have with you, Severus."

Snape's eyes glittered. "That is a wish that many have, Emir."

"You have my leave to depart. The boy—your name is what, Weasley? I would like him to remain and begin his instruction now. That is, if he agrees."

Ron looked at Snape. "I would like to, sir, if it's all right with you."

"As you will have it," Snape said. He bowed to the old man and walked down the hallway.

Ron felt slightly panicky. Who was this old man, really? Had he just made a huge mistake?

The old man rose, though with difficulty, and said, "Now it is time for tea." Ron followed, not knowing what else to do. The emir entered a room a few doors down where a short, plump man with brown, glossy skin, dark hair stood. His outfit looked all the world like pajamas. "I am Rafi," the fellow said with a pronounced accent. "The tea will be done in just a moment, master."

"Please sit," the emir said to Ron, who complied. While Rafi laid out cups and a platter of finger food, al-Hadoud

asked Ron to talk about himself.

That was never hard. Ron got over his initial fear, especially once he had a cup of tea in his hand, and chattered about the Burrow, his mum and dad, all his brothers, Ginny, and the cousins who came and went. He decided not to talk about his friends at school right now. Potter's business was his own, and 'Mione was nobody's business at all.

"Weasley... hmm. It seems I have heard that name before."

"My father plays some. His first name is Arthur."

"Ah—no, not that one. Perhaps my memory is failing after all these years," said al-Hadoud.

The emir had Rafi bring out a chess set. It was beautiful! The rooks were minarets, the knights rode on tiny camels, and the bishops wore turbans like the emir did. Both queens were veiled, but each carried a deadly-looking sword. The kings, which al-Hadoud called caliphs, wore crowns over their turbans, while the pawns were men-at-arms in Arab dress. "You have a set of your own, do you not?" al-Hadoud asked.

"Of course I do. Do you want me to go back to my room and get it?" Ron asked.

"If you would," the old man said.

That made sense. You could sometimes tell a lot about a player by how his own pieces treated him. Ron went out to the hall and tried to remember what the room number was. He knew it was only two doors away from this one,

but he couldn't decide in which direction. He knocked on one, apologized when it turned out to be the wrong one, and then went to the right one. Snape opened it. Ron explained that he needed to get his own set. The Potions Master, clearly not wanting to talk much, motioned him to the left-hand bedroom. Ron was surprised that all his stuff was already in there and set out, which made it easy for him to find the case.

"Wait," Snape said. "Here is your key. Don't lose it. You may take your meals either here, with al-Hadoud, or downstairs. Sign for it with the room number, it's all been taken care of."

"Thank you, sir," Ron said cheerfully, who hadn't even thought about it. He marked down the number of both rooms in his head, since it looked really easy to get lost around here.

He knocked, entered the room, and set out his own pieces. They started jumping up and down and waving once they faced the emir. He'd never seen anything like it before.

"Yes, I recognize those pieces!" said al-Hadoud with a smile. "Who did they belong to before?"

"Grandpa Bart," Ron said.

"Is that short for Bartholomew? I think I played him quite a bit one year. I wish I could remember when... how is he these days?"

"Um, he died when I was ten," Ron said, who still missed him.

"That is a pity. I would have liked to have seen him again. How the years pass!" The emir sighed. "Then let us play

in his memory."

Ron was hoping for a game. No doubt the elderly man wanted to check *him* out, too.

He drew black, which would give him a chance to find out how the emir liked to play. Oddly enough, the old man's strategy was closer to Quirrell's than to anyone else's. Ron was glad of that—if al-Hadoud played like Dumbledore, he might as well resign now. He hated using Filch's kind of play against it in such august company, but so far it seemed to be the kind that worked the best, at least at first.

Once the spiderweb seemed to be broken a little, Ron reverted to his normal style, which leaned on his knights. He kept his bishops in reserve to play Vinnie and Greg if he had to.

And then the emir sprang his own surprise. Ron gulped as the old man's queen made havoc among the black pieces. Then he noticed that white's back row appeared vulnerable. Yes, it would be nice to double-team that awful queen and get revenge for her slaughter, but the point of the game was to trap the king.

First one of his bishops slid into the middle of the board, and then the other. He was hoping the emir would forget about the knight that looked like it was stuck in the upper right-hand corner of the board. He had plans for it.

The old man's eyes widened a bit. Then the white queen sailed to the rescue and threatened Vinnie. Ron moved his knight, knowing it was toast, but also knew that the move required to

take it out of play would open the field to his bishops.

Instead, al-Hadoud moved his king. Ron knew if he took the other fork just for the pleasure of threatening the white rook that he might as well not do anything at all.

Anything at all. His pieces towards white's back file were actually fine just the way they were. If the emir's queen took his bishop, then his knight would be there next, and in a position to set up a fork in the move after. Ron moved one of his pawns forward instead. You never knew when a pawn could come in handy, even if it never made it to the eighth square.

The emir sat up a little straighter. Then he moved his queen back down towards Ron's king.

That made Ron sit up. What did al-Hadoud have in mind? He decided to ignore the situation for now and moved his bishop to clear a space for his knight.

Then al-Hadoud's queen took his rook and Ron's king was trapped. Ron tipped over his king and said, "Thank you, sir."

"You are still finding your style, I see," said the emir. "But that is quite reasonable at your age. You will be quite good in a few years."

Ron thought he was already, but knew the old man was probably right.

"Let us eat and drink again, for we have labored hard and are weary. Rafi, serve us."

"No, sir, if I'm going to be your chess rat, I should serve you now." Ron got up and fetched another tray of finger food,

and had Rafi show him how to brew a fresh pot of tea. He quickly put away his pieces, then laid out the cups and little plates the way that Rafi had done before. Once the tea was poured, he sat down. He was proud at how careful he'd been, the way Mum was, and hadn't spilled a drop.

As he ate, the emir asked some more questions. "Young Snape there, is he the Potions Master at your school?"

"Yes, sir. He's supposed to be really good."

"I thought as much. It always shows in the hair and skin with alchemists. They can never leave their work long enough to get rid of the fumes they breathe in. And a teacher, of course, is likely often surprised at what comes out his students' cauldrons."

"If they don't melt," Ron said darkly. "I haven't done in mine all year, for a change, but Longbottom still ruins his about once a week."

The old man laughed. "Perhaps it is just as well that Severus must suffer for his art so. Are there young ladies at your school?"

"Of course. One of them is better than all the rest of us." He still didn't feel like saying anything about Harry or Hermione.

"That's right. I keep forgetting that English schools do not separate you as much as I would consider seemly. Severus is wise to appear the way he does, then. No doubt it helps avoid scandal, since young ladies are impressionable and not always prudent."

Ron suddenly remembered Gilderoy Lockhart and all that nonsense with the valentines. Even Hermione had gotten stupid over *him*. "Well, that explains why Professor Snape wears those horrible robes in class. You wouldn't believe what gets on them."

The old man snorted with laughter. "I daresay that drives your house-elves to despair."

Ron winced. Dobby had told him several times what he and the others had to do to get his own robes looking decent again. He didn't want to know how they dealt with Longbottom's gear.

"I have kept you long enough for today," al-Hadoud said. "I would like to see you here early tomorrow morning, though. We shall go down to the tourney floor and find out what changes they have made in our schedules."

"Isn't that in our packets?" Ron asked.

"Oh, yes, but there are always changes," the emir said. "It is much easier to update one board than all of our pieces of paper. Now, go and rest. You will play all the better for it tomorrow."

Ron left reluctantly, not wanting to leave this peaceful room for one that might contain an upset Professor Snape.



Preliminary Maneuvers

Chapter 7

on sighed with relief when he got back in the room and Snape wasn't there. The Potions Master had left a note on the front table.

Mr. Weasley, I am down in the restaurant and will return shortly. If you have not eaten yet, I suggest you do so. The room service menus in the top drawer of the desk if you prefer to stay there. I also suggest you begin work on your assignments tonight. The emir and your scheduled games will keep you busy for much of this week.

Snape



He's probably right, Ron thought. He really didn't want to go downstairs by himself and take the chance of getting lost, at least not till he could look the place over. He glanced at the menu, only a small part of which was in English, and ordered the most reasonable meal. Even its price made him gulp. While waiting for the food to arrive, he got out his books. Ron was glad Harry had taught him about tellyphones. He was surprised to find a Muggle invention like that here, but it made sense. Nobody wanted that many owls in a kitchen, and how else were they going to get their orders? Before he sat down to study he owed his father about the emir and what being a chess rat was like so far.

When his meal got there he signed for it, like he'd been told. Then Ron remembered how Snape had given a coin to the men who had brought the luggage up here, and went for his pouch. He hoped a couple of Knuts would do, then thought better of it and gave the servant a Sickie instead. *I'm going to eat down at the restaurant from now on*, he thought. His pocket-money would be gone in two days at this rate. McGonagall hadn't said anything about a slush fund when she'd said he was going, and Ron hadn't wanted to bother her about it after she'd said she wouldn't be able to go herself. Harry had offered to lend him some money. Ron wished now he'd taken his friend up on it.

He ate as he read a chapter in Transfigurations. For once

the letters didn't turn themselves around as they sometimes did. That always gave him a headache. Hermione had told him once that Muggles had books you could listen to. Ron wished he could find some for himself. He typically learned more from lectures than he did from books (though he fell asleep in History of Magic just like everybody else).

He was struggling with an essay for McGonagall when Snape came in. The Potions Master nodded at Ron, muttered a greeting, and headed for the bathroom. When he came out, he turned towards his bedroom, the one on the right.

Ron cleared his throat. "Professor, I have a question."
"What is it?"

"When I sign for a meal, how much extra do I add in?"

Snape blinked, as if he hadn't expected anything like that. "They won't expect much from someone your age. About ten percent of what the meal cost should do."

"Even in the restaurant?" Ron wondered if he was going to be able to eat this week.

"Of course. But you simply add it to the meal total and sign for the whole thing," Snape said. "You'll get better service this week from the staff once they know you are thinking about them. Word gets around very quickly in a place like this during a large gathering."

"I saw you give money to the men who took the trunks," Ron said.

"That's observant. For most of this week you'll be with

the emir unless you're at the chess table. He'll take care of everything then. In fact, he would be insulted if you tried to pay. In return, it's appropriate to leave him a gift at the end of the week or send him one shortly afterwards. He won't expect anything expensive, but something you put a bit of work into would be appreciated."

Ron wondered what he could get, and hoped he could afford something halfway nice from the souvenir table. "Yes, sir."

"How did your meeting go with him?" Snape sat down.

Ron's head whirled. The Potions Master wasn't yelling at him, but how long would *that* last? "It went really well. My chess pieces recognized him, and the emir said that he'd played my Grandpa Bart a long time ago. Then we played a game. I got murdered, but it was fun watching how he played. I think he was testing me to find out if I really knew what I was doing."

Snape nodded, scowling a bit less than before. "Continue."

"We had a platter of some stuff I didn't recognize, but it tasted good, and then I poured tea, and then he said I needed to get some rest for tomorrow. I have to be there tomorrow morning. How early should I go over there?"

"Close to dawn. He was always an early riser. I doubt he's changed. If you're too early, Rafi will have you wait."

"Rafi was his servant back then, too?"

"Yes. I don't think he sleeps much, so don't worry about waking him." Snape looked off into the distance, as if

remembering something. "It's good you're getting some of your homework done before things get too busy." He got up and turned back towards the bedroom. "I will be reading in my room. Don't stay up much later."

Ron took the hint, finished up the last couple inches of his essay, and went to his own room. It was so quiet compared to either Hogwarts or the Burrow. Oh, he could hear a little noise, but nothing like what he was used to. Snape might be used to being by himself, but he wasn't. The only time he'd ever slept in a room this big by himself was the one time he'd spent a few nights in Hermione's place in the spare bedroom. Even there the noise of the telly had drifted up a bit and made it more comfortable for him.

He almost wished for a few thumps on the ceiling from the family ghoul. Ron changed into his pajamas, ducked into the bathroom to brush his teeth, and saw shaving gear, a brush, and small bottles lying about, like the stuff Dad left on his side of the bathroom sink at home. At Hogwarts the older boys passed down shaving and pimple-erasing spells, but some of them preferred the old-fashioned ways. Ron realized he would be pumped for information about Snape when he got back. What the emir had told him about what happened to Potions Masters was interesting, and explained a lot. And someone who didn't bathe certainly wouldn't bring along a box with his favorite soap in it.

He finished his teeth and left his own junk away from Snape's. Funny how bathrooms were. At home everyone always knocked on the door, though Ron knew that the usual banter exchanged through it ('hurry up already, we're dying out here') could possibly be fatal here. He definitely didn't want to know what Snape's reaction would be to Fred and George's rendition of "How Dry I Am" in two-part harmony.

It was weird. Nobody ever spoke in the boy's loo at Hogwarts, at least not much, while Hermione had hinted the girls' side was a bit more social, and that anybody who wanted a little peace and quiet had to put up with Moaning Myrtle.

Ron went to bed. As he lay down, more of the noise of the city and the hotel came through the bedstead somehow. Strange how that worked. But the background hum didn't bother him at all, and soon he was out.



Snape finished unpacking, except for the secret compartment in his trunk. *That* held the robe and mask he hoped he wouldn't have to wear on this trip. He looked at the message in Karkaroff's handwriting asking for a meeting. The Potions Master tested it to make sure it had actually come from Karkaroff and that the man was still alive.

It could still be a trap, of course, and the message sent

to lure him. He rubbed his forearm, hating the way it ached these past few days.

He heard the light snores from the other room. He'd given Weasley the one that caught the most sound, knowing the boy was used to it. He wished he dared a *Silencio* spell for himself, unfortunately, under the circumstances he needed to keep a watch on the boy even with the wards he'd placed on the door and windows. One of the reasons he preferred the dungeons was that at night the place was quiet, at least by the time he finally got settled down.

But he'd had one bit of luck he hadn't expected. Al-Hadoud was always invited to the All-Wizards' Chess Tournament, but rarely came. Weasley would make a good chess rat for the old man, and Snape wouldn't have to watch the boy full-time. He stifled his regret that the emir had refused him hospitality. However, al-Hadoud's open disapproval of him might be helpful in persuading certain people that he could be trusted.

At least Draco wasn't here. The younger Malfoy would be under orders to spy on *him*. *If I had asked al-Hadoud to take Draco on as his chess rat, the boy would have been suspicious. No doubt he would have done something to get out from under the old man's eyes.*

No, Weasley was a much better choice under the circumstances. His head was going to be full of chess and not much else. *There's more behind those vacant-looking blue eyes than*

I thought, he grudgingly admitted to himself. If only I could get him to use his brain for anything besides a game!

That had been a perceptive question Weasley had asked about tipping, too. It had been easy to spot the despair on the boy's face when he'd been told what was proper, so Snape had felt charitable enough to rescue him.

He sat down in a chair by the bed, weary himself but unable to close his eyes. He knew what would happen if he tried going to sleep now. Some unexpected noise would wake him just as he was starting to drop off, till he ended up lying there wide awake for most of the night. Granted, there had been times when such sensitivity had saved his life. Still, if he dozed off in the chair, then he knew he would be able to fall asleep in the bed. It made little sense sometimes, but that was how it worked for him. He had brought some Dreamless Sleep potions, along with others in the satchel now heavily warded and sitting in the corner of his closet, but he might as well put up a Silencio spell as use anything. Either way would leave Mr. Weasley unguarded.

I suppose Bagshot would put ANYBODY to sleep, he thought.



Ron woke up early, thanks to hearing Snape running the shower. He got up and puttered around till it was his turn for the bathroom. He was well-trained at that. Then

the Professor emerged in a bathrobe, and Ron ducked in. It didn't take long to get presentable, and then he left for al-Hadoud's room, bringing his case with the pieces in it.

Rafi greeted him and had him sit. "The master does not sleep well in a strange place. He is still resting, but will arise soon," the short servant said. "You are diligent, though, and that is good." Rafi gave him tea and a hot roll with some meat in it. It tasted a little funny, but Ron didn't mind and made it disappear.

"Is there anything I can do to help?" he asked once he was done.

The servant inclined his head. "It is good of you to ask. But you will be with him all day, and I can rest then. There is little to do here."

Mum would like a place like this a lot, Ron thought. She never just sat and rested as far as he could tell. Even at night after dinner, she'd get out her knitting or her wand and the mending basket. But then, that's when we're home. I wonder what it's like for her when we're all at Hogwarts and none of the older ones are visiting? He still thought she'd enjoy a trip to a nice place where she didn't have to cook or clean. Another thing we don't have the money for.

Then Rafi said that he could see the emir now. Ron almost tripped over his own feet in eagerness. Al-Hadoud greeted him cheerfully as he sat in a comfortable chair in another part of the large suite. "You have slept well, I

see," said the old man. "Ah, to be so young again! Let us eat first, and then we shall go down to the tourney floor."

Ron was about to say he'd already had something, then thought better of it. He'd find room somewhere. Rafi brought in a small table and plates, and shook his head again when Ron jumped up to assist him.

They ate companionably as al-Hadoud spoke of past tournaments. It was really interesting to hear the famous names of the past talked about as if they were just people. "Now, Dumbledore is a subtle player. He has an open invitation to come here whenever he wishes, just like I do," the emir said during the conversation. "I wonder if your feeling that he had to work harder than it appeared to defeat your Professor is a correct one? I should find time to play him this week."

"What was Snape like, I mean, when he was here before?" Ron itched with curiosity.

"Oh, tall for his age. And quiet. He hardly said two words the first couple of days, though he spoke more as he got to know me. But then, his uncle was a quiet man, too."

"Did he ever talk about his home or his family? Who was his uncle?" None of the students knew anything about Snape's background, except maybe Malfoy, and he would never say anything. Ron knew it was hopeless to pump any of the staff. Neither Fred nor George had ever been able to get anything out of them, not even Hagrid. If they

couldn't, he knew it was impossible.

"I played young Gerasius a few times, though he wasn't as good as his nephew. I would have said he was unsuited for raising a child, but after Snape's parents died, no doubt he felt obliged to try. But the boy didn't talk about his uncle much. He did talk about his school, and how much he liked it. He was worried about some older boys in the same year who picked on him, though. He was glad they weren't in the same house, but didn't know what to do about them."

Ron had a chilling feeling the emir was talking about the Marauders. "Did he go into any details?"

"Not really. I told him to try to make friends with them if he could, and to talk to his head of house if he had too many problems. Perhaps it is just as well your school will not let anyone in early these days. Young Severus has always looked older than his years, but in this case I do not think it was much help."

Ron wondered what exactly had led up to the Shrieking Shack. He knew what it was like to be taunted, but at least he had friends around him.

Al-Hadoud continued. "We wrote back and forth for a few years, at first in English, and then in Arabic as he learned it. Then I heard nothing for a few months. Rumors flew about Voldemort and the followers around him. I asked about the boy, and was told there had been an unpleasant incident at the school. Snape did not answer

my letters. I stopped trying after learning he was caught up with his cousin Malfoy and the others.”

Ron gritted his teeth. “I think I know what it was. There was a group of four boys called the Marauders, and one of them was a werewolf. He didn’t want to hurt anybody, so whenever he changed he went to the Shrieking Shack and hid. One of the other boys wanted to play a joke on Snape, and got him to come out there during the full moon. According to what I heard, Snape was almost killed. If it hadn’t been for a third member of the group who thought the joke went too far and stopped it, Professor Snape probably would have died.” *Black never did sound too sorry about it.*

Ron remembered the incident, almost two years ago. *We were paying more attention to Wormtail, and my leg hurt so much I didn’t really care. I’m still amazed Snape never got back at us for making him fall over like that.* But now he recalled that it had been Lupin who had bent over and checked to see if Snape was still alive, not Black.

“Surely the boys were punished, especially the one who did not care if his friend became guilty of murder?” The emir looked incredulous.

“Not as far as I ever heard.” Ron shifted uncomfortably, thinking of how the three of them, and the twins, had cursed Draco and his thugs on the train last spring. But that had been five on three, not four on one, even if the

one was Snape. Black had done the kind of thing that made people think of Slytherin, not Gryffindor.

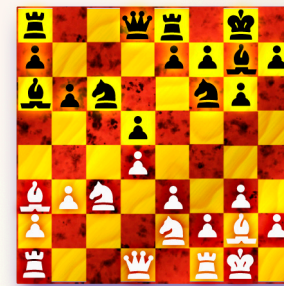
“Ah,” al-Hadoud said with a sigh. “I wish Severus had written me. I would gladly have found him an apprenticeship with an alchemist friend of mine if his school was not safe for him. No doubt he looked for protection and found it in the wrong places.”

Ron pushed the rest of his food around on his plate. He didn’t like Sirius Black as well as Harry did; Black always seemed about the same age as Fred or George in some ways. Even Percy was more grown-up. All right, especially Percy. Then again, anybody would look good compared to the Dursleys. And Black really did care about Potter.

No doubt Snape hadn’t even tried making friends! And to join Voldemort!

But then, Scabbers had turned out to be Pettigrew, who had been one of the Marauders too.

Ron had the uneasy feeling that he was still being unfair to Snape, and didn’t like it.



Pawn Advance

Chapter 8

Everyone finished breakfast

(except for Rafi, who didn't eat anything). The servant stayed behind, while al-Hadoud and Ron walked down to the tourney floor. The day's schedule of games was up on a large board by the chess tables. Fortunately Ron had remembered his badge, while the official sitting at the registration table stood and bowed to the emir.

Most of the games for juveniles were in the mornings and afternoons, while the adults usually had theirs in the afternoons and evenings. Ron looked at his elimination tree and didn't recognize anybody. Then he glanced at the adult schedule. Snape was up against several names he *did* recognize, and early, too. Whatever his record was before, the Potions Master was going to have to earn a new one as an adult. Lucius Malfoy and al-Hadoud wouldn't meet each other till late in the tournament. Snape was in the middle leg, and stood a strong chance of not meeting either one if he didn't hack his way through his other opponents first.

Then Ron noticed that one side of the board had nothing but blanks, and asked the official about it. "Oh, that is for private games, young sir. Some people won't meet each other in the tournament but still want to play grudge matches against each other. Sometimes they're the most interesting games in the lot. If they're recorded, they can count for personal ratings."

Ron's first game began in less than an hour. Al-Hadoud had them both sit while the old man regaled him with stories from other tournaments, including his first one as a youth. Ron listened with fascination, though he flat out didn't believe the one about the chess-playing monkey. But it was a good story anyway, so he saved it up for later. Fred and George would like it, even if nobody else did.

Then it was time. He went up to registration, signed in, and went to his table. This wasn't just for his personal glory; this was for Hogwarts, just like if they were playing Quidditch against another school. For a moment he was distracted as he decided who would play what in an all-Hogwarts team—Harry for Seeker, but Malfoy would have to be Reserve, since the Slytherin really *was* good. He wondered if Crabbe and Goyle would remember not to go after Harry if they were picked for Beaters, since they worked as a team almost as well as Fred and George



did, then realized he'd better play chess right now.

The boy sitting across from him was from Beauxbatons and his English was so heavily-accented Ron could barely understand him. They shook hands and began to play.

His opponent's game seemed oddly hesitant. Ron rapidly developed his knights and began supporting them with his pawns. The boy desperately built up his pieces to protect his king. Ron remembered the way McGonagall had reacted to Snape's rolling thunder down the middle, and wondered if he could risk trying it in this game. So far his own style seemed to be working, but he had enough pawns out of the way to bring more powerful pieces out.

The actual pieces were obviously tournament-trained and never opened their mouths at all. One of his pawns had a tendency to lie down if he didn't have anything to do. Well, Ron didn't blame him a bit. He hastily covered a yawn, feeling a bit sleepy after such a big breakfast. Then he stared down at the board, feeling he was walking into a trap.

But this time things were the way they appeared to be. Despite the protective wall of pieces that his opponent had around his king, Ron obviously dominated the board.

Then things started happening. The Beauxbatons player began ripping through Ron's pattern, as if he'd played Filch, too. Several of Ron's pieces shouted their dismay, especially the once-sleepy pawn. *All right, so that's his plan*, Ron thought. He attacked right back, but in a way that

kept his pieces threatening the opposite side. His opponent was good, but Ron thought the boy had left his thrust forward till too late.

Indeed he had. Ron was able to preserve both bishops, though one of his knights was gone, several pawns lay by the side of the board, and it was going to take a queen sacrifice to clear the way for victory. When the queen was taken, she stomped her foot and looked indignantly back at Ron for letting this happen to her.

And then both bishops pinned down his opponent's king. The boy glumly tipped it over.

They shook hands and reported the results of the game, though al-Hadoud had been watching, too. Ron hadn't even noticed the old man coming up and getting into a chair close enough to watch.

The emir congratulated him. "An auspicious start to your first of many tournaments," he said. Both of them noticed Ron's next game was in about an hour, and sat together in a quiet corner of the lobby near the tourney area.

"I'm surprised someone who won a school tournament wasn't better," Ron said.

"Perhaps Beauxbatons does not have many chess players this year. I suspect your competition was somewhat harder."

"I'll say! There's a girl in Ravenclaw who's really good. And Malfoy, I mean Draco Malfoy, could be good if he played because he wanted to and not just because of

his father. Abercrombie in Hufflepuff is fairly decent." He was about to wish out loud that both Harry and Hermione were more interested, but decided the less he said about them the better. "It would be neat if we had a chess club. I bet Professor McGonagall would help."

"Ah, yes," al-Hadoud said. "I have played her by owl a few times. She would likely be pleased if you were to ask. I heard a story once about a live chess trap she set to protect something stored there at the school."

Ron nearly bit his tongue in two to keep from boasting about beating it. But he couldn't think of a way to say anything without telling about stuff he shouldn't. He knew he was no good at talking around a subject. Once he started, everything spilled out. And besides, he didn't want to be Harry Potter's friend here. He wanted to be *him*, Ron Weasley.

"It was interesting to play her and the rest of the staff during the second part of the tournament," he finally said. "Professor McGonagall is hard. But playing Snape is like getting run over by a train."

"Ah yes, 'the Hogwarts Express'. It will be interesting to see what he has remembered."

"Well, he beat McGonagall two out of three, so he's got to be pretty good. But they're not the only ones who played. Professor Binns still plays, though he has to have someone move the pieces for him."

"Is he crippled?"

"Um, no, he's a ghost. He teaches History of Magic, probably because he was there for most of it if you want my opinion. We all fall asleep in his class, but he never seems to mind," Ron said. "Filch is the caretaker, but he plays, too. His set is all cats, and if you want them to behave it helps if you get them to purr. Professor Sprout teaches Herbology, and her set is all plants. She's got a nasty trick you have to watch out for, too. You've probably heard of Vector and Flitwick already." Ron couldn't remember seeing the Arithmancy or Charms teacher in any of his dad's chess magazines, but he hadn't looked that hard, either.

Al-Hadoud nodded. "When you get back, be sure to continue playing them as well as your friends. You are incredibly lucky to have so many there who are interested. You would be wise to take advantage of it."

Ron hadn't thought of it that way, but knew the emir was right. He spent the rest of the time before the next game telling the old Arab stories about Fred and George, and some of the pranks they got up to. Al-Hadoud laughed like anything at them, especially the time they dyed Mrs. Norris in Slytherin colors so Filch would go after the wrong house.

His next game began. The boy he was up against this time was much younger, and didn't have a school affiliation. Konstantin Smerdlov didn't look old enough to go to any school, let alone one like Hogwarts. That worried Ron. He

didn't want to take advantage of a little kid, but discovered in a very short time that he was in deep trouble. His opponent had an unusual attack that Ron had trouble countering. He certainly wasn't able to set up one of his own. *Well, if you can't dazzle them with brilliance, you can try to baffle them with baloney*, he thought. *Maybe if I throw some of the Squirrel's spiderweb at him it'll at least slow him down.*

It seemed to help. And then Ron saw a chance for a Brentwood pawn swap that might open up a way to the other side, and took it. He was surprised the younger boy fell for it, but then again, he had the first time he'd seen it, too.

After what felt like hours, they ended up in a draw. Ron would have been humiliated if he'd been beaten by someone so young. The boy looked like he was going to cry, so Ron offered him a piece of candy from his pocket. "You're really good," he said. "And I'll probably get beat by someone else later today. Is this your first tournament?"

"Yes," said the boy, who had brownish hair, blue eyes, and an accent. He took the candy. "I beat grownups all the time."

"I bet you do," Ron said. "Well, my dad says you learn more from the people who beat you than the ones you win against."

"But you don't have a regular style!"

"If you stick with one thing all the time, someone's going to figure it out," Ron said. "I've gotten whacked enough that way to learn that much. I know people who smile every time

they see me lead with my knights, because I like to do that a lot. So I try to change around. But you have a lot of time. I was never this good when I was your age.

The boy looked happy about the compliment. A harassed-looking older man with a really big mustache the same color as the boy's hair came and got the boy and took him off somewhere.

Ron didn't know if he ought to be jealous or not. Maybe the boy's father was like Malfoy's and *expected* him to win all the time.

It was past noon already. The game had taken a lot longer than he thought. Al-Hadoud, who had been watching the whole thing, went with him to the restaurant. Both of them had lunch, though it was an educational one. The emir critiqued the game while Ron eagerly listened.

After that they went to the table and looked at the schedules again. Ron saw how his name had moved up the ladder a bit. His last game for the day would be later that afternoon, while the emir would have two today. His first one would start in just a little bit. Professor Snape had three games scheduled, two this afternoon and one at night. *He ought to be pleased about that*, Ron thought.

"I will retire early this evening," said al-Hadoud. "If you could observe your professor's evening game and take notes for me once your last one is over, I would appreciate it."

"Of course, sir," Ron said. It was that or homework. The

choice was easy. And it would be interesting to see how the Potions Master played against opponents outside of Hogwarts.

Al-Hadoud's first game began. Ron kicked his heels sitting in a chair watching the emir slowly and thoroughly demolish the other player. The old Arab's style was a bit like Dumbledore's, with a dash of the Squirrel, in its patience and inevitability. *Wouldn't it be great to watch the emir and the Headmaster play?* Ron wondered.

The game wound to its conclusion. The gray-bearded gentleman on the other side of the board tipped over his king, then rose and bowed. "It is a privilege to play you, sir," he said.

Al-Hadoud remained sitting and inclined his head. "You still have promise, Kittering. Do not give up so easily." After the man had left, the emir snorted and said, "Flatterers! They will be the death of you if you let them! Give me an honest man who digs in his heels and refuses to surrender rather than someone who offers poison with his honeyed words. It is too easy to let your game go soft if you listen to men such as that fellow."

Then you should definitely play Snape! Ron thought. In fact, he saw the Potions Master on the tourney floor now, looking like a raven among the rest. "The Professor fights to the last pawn," he said. It was only right to tell the truth.

"Hmm," the emir said, looking displeased.

"I know you don't like what he did, but he's still a good player."

"So is Lucius Malfoy," al-Hadoud said, still looking grim.

Maybe he's more angry at Snape because he used to like him? Ron didn't know. "Do you want me to get anything more to eat or drink? I can go to the restaurant here or run upstairs and see what Rafi has."

"If it is not too much trouble, then go upstairs. I forget how young you are. Only the old really know how to sit for so long," the emir said with a smile.

Ron took al-Hadoud to one of the big chairs over to the side and then took off. All this sitting had gotten to him. It felt good to tear up the stairs and to the emir's room. Rafi answered the knock.

"How is the master?" the servant asked.

"He looked fine to me. We both had lunch downstairs and he ate most of his." Needless to say, Ron had cleaned his plate and then some.

"Good," Rafi said. "His appetite sometimes fails as he grows older."

It never had for the Headmaster as far as Ron had been able to tell, but everybody was different. "Do you have anything for me to take to him? Is there anything special he should eat or drink?"

"He is to have this potion in a cup of tea after his second game," the servant said, handing him a little green bottle. "Three drops only, no more or less. And then he should come upstairs for his dinner, for he grows sleepy early these days. I only wish he did not wake in the night."

"I have a game later this afternoon. If his second game goes long, I might have to leave in the middle of his game to go to mine."

"Then send a boy up here with a message and I will manage from there."

Ron blinked. Then he thought of something. "Are you able to leave this room?"

"Wise boy, to guess so soon. No, I may not, unless the emir commands me. He dislikes doing that among strangers, though as the slave of his ring I will gladly do his bidding. To be honest, I find it uncomfortable being out of my bottle for this long a time away from one of his palaces. Many masters would not care, but this one does."

"Are you a *genie*?" Ron's mouth dropped open.

"A djinn, if you please. But I can move about if I must. Take the potion to the emir, and with luck I will see you both this evening."

Ron thanked him and raced back down again. *Harry and Hermione will never believe this!* Even if the servant was having him on, it made a wonderful story and he wouldn't change it a bit.

He got down there just in time to see the emir sat down to his second game. From where he was sitting, he noticed that Snape was still on his first game. The light-haired man on the other side must be Morris from the States. He longed to go over and check out how the professor was

doing, but knew he had to stay with the old man.

This time al-Hadoud had to struggle. His opponent, a much younger man, was obviously out to dethrone the older one.

Ron was distracted by a noise from the lobby during the middle of the game. Lucius Malfoy and his entourage stood near the counter waiting to be served. Draco's father stood gleaming from the top of his pale hair to the toes of his brightly-polished boots. *He's probably standing there because he knows he'll catch the light*, Ron thought cynically.

He deliberately turned away from Malfoy back to the emir. *I need to talk to Snape about the note Draco's father sent me right before the end of the Hogwarts tournament*, he thought, not looking forward to it.

Al-Hadoud finally won the game, but had to work at it. The old man sighed and bent his head.

Ron leaned forward with the bottle in his hand. "Your servant said you were supposed to have three drops of this with tea once you were done with this game, sir."

"Then let us go upstairs," al-Hadoud said. "For I am weary, and once I return to the room, I will not want to go anywhere else."

Ron couldn't understand why the emir's room was two flights up, then. The old man looked really tired. "I'm not too bad at levitation any more," he volunteered. "Just let me levitate the chair you're in and you won't have to climb any stairs. I still have to work on direction, but once you're

up in the air, it won't be any trouble to haul you along."

"Why, thank you, child." The emir smiled sweetly at him. "But I was not thinking. Rafi was right all along. Once I have drunk my tea I'll—oh, what is the English for it?—move myself to the room with a spell."

"Oh, yes, Apparate," said Ron. "We're supposed to start practicing that this spring. But you could always use the hotel fireplace and Floo up."

"Hmph. Such things can be meddled with."

Ron went over to the restaurant and signed for some tea. He carefully measured out three drops into al-Hadoud's tea. Between Mum and Snape, he'd learned a *few* things!

Afterwards, the emir's color looked better. The old man simply disappeared. Ron took the teapot and the cups back, not wanting to make extra work. After that, he quickly ran up the stairs and went to the door. Rafi let him in, and then they sat down to a real dinner.

Al-Hadoud wanted to talk about his second game, which he obviously found far more interesting than his first. Ron was glad he'd brought his notebook and had recorded the moves. He was going to have to get a new one pretty soon, and a new pencil, too.

Once the emir leaned back in his plush chair and began to snore, Rafi told Ron that he could go for the evening, but needed to be back first thing in the morning. It was a good thing that the emir's game had been shorter than

usual, even if it had been hard. He still had a little bit of time before his third one for the day started.

Ron stopped at his room and got out his alarm clock. If Snape was up late with a game, he would be, too. When he had to be up for an Astronomy class, he always slept hard the next day, and sometimes Potter had to shake him awake. Because of that, Mum had gotten him this alarm clock. It was a good thing that it was loud, because when he was really tired that was the only kind that would wake up him. But Snape was sure to hear it in the next room. Everyone knew the Potions Master was up half the night during the week, though he was always on time for the first class. However, everybody *also* knew that anyone disturbing the Slytherin dungeons on Saturday or Sunday morning had better have a really good reason to be there or the unlucky student was going to spend the rest of the weekend scrubbing cauldrons the hard way. Even Malfoy wasn't immune—Ron had heard Draco complaining about it once. He wished he could figure out a way to wake up that didn't bother anybody else.

He scrambled in his luggage looking for another notebook, and didn't see one. He'd have to use some of the paper meant for homework after recording Snape's game tonight.

Ron went back downstairs. He wasn't as worried about getting lost now as he was before. Once he'd gone over new places physically, he didn't get turned around as

much. He got a cup of tea for himself at the restaurant, because his own game was starting soon. Once back on the tourney floor, he saw on the board that Snape had drawn his first game and was in the middle of his second.

Now it was time for his third game of the day. His opponent this time was a boy about his own age from Jamaica. They said hello to each other. Ron knew there were several dark-skinned boys and girls at Hogwarts, but he'd never seen anyone with such *black* skin before. It was like Snape's eyes had been turned into dye and this boy was covered in it.

They started playing after Ron drew black. It was a fairly long game, and turned into another draw. *I'm sure glad I had something to eat with the emir before playing this one!* he thought, scribbling the moves once it was over. He was so tired he wanted to go back to the room, but remembered that he'd promised to look at one of the Professor's games for the emir.

He walked over to where Snape and his second opponent were playing. Ron could tell by looking at the game that the Potions Master had this one in the bag unless he did something really stupid right at the end, and that wasn't likely to happen.

In less than half an hour Snape's opponent tipped over his king. The piece cursed in a tiny voice. Ron recognized the man's face from one of his dad's chess magazine. The Potions Master had just beaten Jorg Biggerson of Sweden. And then he remembered that the game that Snape drew had been against

David Morris of the States, rated as one of the favorites.

This is going to be a really interesting tournament, Ron thought.

"Mr. Weasley. Avoiding homework again?"

"The emir asked me to take notes on your third game."

"I saw he won both of his today," Snape said.

"But he didn't have the kind of opponents you had," Ron said. "Dad follows chess, and lets me have his magazines to read when he's done. A draw against Morris is worth two wins against almost anybody else. Lots of people would like to say they beat Biggerson, especially as quickly as you did it." He'd taken a look at the chess clock, of course.

Snape seemed surprised at the compliment. "My next game is in less than half an hour. My time is fairly good, but Biggerson took forever to decide on his moves."

"I can run over to the restaurant and get you something. That's what I've been doing for the emir all afternoon. But he's done for tonight and Rafi told me to come by early tomorrow again. Oh, and I just remembered! My alarm clock is really loud. Is there any way to fix it so only I can hear it?" It felt really strange to talk to Professor Snape like he was a real person. He knew it wouldn't last, but it was interesting while it did.

"Don't worry about the clock. I'm supposed to keep an eye on you," Snape said. "But you can fetch me a cup of tea. I'll be at table three for the next game, in case there's

a line and it takes longer than you think.”

Ron dashed off. When he got to the head of the line (and there was one), he was amazed at all the different kinds of tea listed. He picked one called Basic English Tea, since Snape might have a hard game and would want to stay awake. He didn't know if the Potions Master took sugar or cream, so he took two cubes and a miniature cream dish along with the cup, and put it all on a small tray. Then he realized that Snape probably hadn't had dinner yet, with his games running so long, and ordered sweet roll to go with it.

He quickly signed for it and took it over to the table three. The board at the registration table had said this game was Gerrit of Germany vs. Snape of English (the highest rated player was always listed first for the adult players, he'd noticed). The game had already started. Ron set the food and drink down on a little side-table, and quickly scribbled down the few moves that had already been made.

Snape nodded, then turned his attention back to the board. Ron noticed that the Potions Master was already beginning to move out his more powerful pieces. He tried to remember if he'd ever heard of this Gerrit, and didn't think he had.

The game proceeded fairly rapidly. Ron wished he'd been able to watch Snape's first two games. He made notes as the Potions Master quickly developed a column of pieces, brought together his pawn support, and beat

off a quick attack from the other side.

Thing bogged down a bit as Gerrit rallied his defenses. Ron could guess what might happen if Snape tried to crack through them out of impatience, and wasn't at all surprised that his teacher seemed to see it as well. Snape changed to a different tack of nibbling at the German's edges. That took longer but had the advantage of exposing fewer of his own pieces in case Gerrit reversed course and attacked again.

Ron also saw that his teacher was spreading his pieces out over the entire board, controlling all the squares on his side and protecting those ahead.

Then Gerrit sent a bishop and knight out hunting together. Ron hadn't seen that combination very often. He preferred to send out a pair of knights, or if playing Abercrombie's way, Vinnie and Greg the Bishop Beaters. It was interesting to watch what the German was doing with them, though.

Snape quickly drove them off with his queen and a knight, though he looked irritated. After that, he stepped up the pace in pawn-hunting, though he had to neglect his attack for a while doing it.

The end was inevitable, though. Less than two hours from the start of the game, the other man tipped over his king.

“Well played,” Snape said, though Ron could tell he didn't mean it.

“I can say the same,” Gerrit replied, and left.

Snape drank the last few drops of his tea and ate the

sweet roll. "The emir is training you well," he said. "How were your games today?"

"Won the first one, and drew the second and third. The second one was some little kid hardly old enough for any school, let alone Hogwarts. I don't know where he's from. I think his father brought him. But he's really good." Ron quickly finished writing his notes.

"Each player gets a program afterwards detailing all the games," Snape said.

"But the emir asked me to watch your game. I remember them better if I write it down. It's not the same as reading it."

"If you can read your notes," the Potions Master said sarcastically.

Ron ruefully looked at his stub of a pencil. "Then I'd better recopy this tonight, while I still remember most of the moves."

"If you're going to be up early, then you'd better get some sleep instead," Snape said. "I'll be up in a bit. Don't stay up too late."

"Yes, sir," Ron said, and left. Besides, this way he would get first crack at the bathroom.

There was an owl waiting for him. Dad had written him a note. *Ron—you don't know how lucky you are to be a chess rat for al-Hadoud. I had no idea your professor knew him, or that the old Arab would even be there. Behave yourself, and don't muck*

it up. Oh, and stay away from Lucius Malfoy as much as you can.

Ron didn't need reminding about *that*! He continued reading the note.

He is a good chess player, but you know what I think of him. You did well in your first two games—that little Russian boy is getting quite a reputation. Drawing him is no dishonor. I haven't heard much about any of the rest of your opponents.

We are all so very proud of you. Do your best in the days to come. Just play the pieces, and not the player.

There was a short note from Mum, too. *Hope you're having a good time so far. Stay warm and be polite to your teacher.*

As if I'd dare be anything else! Ron thought.

Love you.

Mum

He felt warmer just holding the note. He never dared mention it at school, but sometimes it felt like he could feel his mother's love just from holding something she'd sent to him.

Sometimes I wish Harry could too, Ron thought. I know that Mum would take him for the summer like a shot. It's not like the Dursleys really WANT him there. Nobody in the family got jealous over Mum's attention, unlike some families he heard about. Everybody always knew that she had enough love for everyone, even if she didn't always have time.

Ron got out some paper and a quill to recopy the game so anyone could read it, not just him. Before he was done, though, he wondered when Snape was coming up. *I'd better get the loo while it's still open, he thought. I'll finish this in the morning.*



Snape dawdled on the tourney floor and looked over the standings. How strange it felt to use his mind for something that wasn't life or death! It was like stretching muscles he hadn't exercised for a long time and finding they still held him. His first game against a champion even he had heard of had been full of fierce joy when he'd found himself equal to the occasion. *A pity McGonagall wasn't here to see it!*

There were stares and whispers, of course, from those who knew of his past. But at the board it didn't matter as much. How ironic that Malfoy, who truly *was* a Deatheater, had far more public reputation left.

He could have been a star in this world by now, if he

hadn't chosen another path. Yet here he was, and not doing too badly. He was supposed to have been an easy win for both Morris and Biggerson. Snape smiled a little, knowing how he had frustrated them.

If only the tourney was like this the whole week. If only he didn't have a separate reason for being here.

A boy much too young to be up this late running errands for tips came up to him and handed him a slip of paper. Snape took it and gave the boy a few Knuts. He waited till the messenger was gone, then unfolded it.

Three nights from now. Back room of Gemm's. We have to talk. LK

Snape recognized the handwriting, though that could be faked. The initials, drawn with their usual Cyrillic flourish, would be much harder. There was no way to reply, of course. It would be much too unsafe for either one of them.

A lot of people thought Igor Karkaroff was a coward, but anyone intelligent enough to be afraid of Voldemort was someone he wanted to talk to.

And I had better do so before someone else does.





A Warm Reception

Chapter 9

he next morning Ron hastily shut off his alarm, got washed and dressed, and went to the emir's room. Snape's door had been closed, so he must have come back after Ron had

gone to bed. *I sure hope he didn't hear the alarm, or gets back to sleep anyway*, he thought. So far the tourney had been relatively sarcasm-free, and he would really like to keep it that way.

This time al-Hadoud was up when Rafi let him in. Ron was glad he'd remembered the notes from the game he'd watched last night.

Once the emir was done with his tea, Ron began his report. He illustrated the game with his own set. Between the notes and his memory of what he'd seen, it didn't take long.

"Professor Snape used the same attack he did on McGonagall and didn't have much trouble ramming it through. I think the Morris or the Biggerson game would probably be a lot more interesting. Do you want me to

get the moves, especially from the first one? It was a draw, but it should be a pretty interesting game anyway."

"Yes, if you would. This is much how he played as a child, but he guards himself much better now. I wonder how much experience he's had since then?"

Ron remembered the remarks about playing with live pieces that Snape and Dumbledore had swapped at the beginning of their game, but decided not to mention them. Besides, the Headmaster couldn't really be like that.

Then he and the emir went downstairs. This time they used the ellyvator, a Muggle invention that was kind of scary, but easier for al-Hadoud than stairs. Ron had visited Hermione for a week last summer, and she'd taken him someplace called a mall that had one, so it wasn't too bad for him. But the old man looked sour and said, "I should have stayed on the ground floor, but Rafi didn't like the idea. He said that thieves could come through the window in a strange city like this. But thieves can walk up stairs, too, or even stand in this infernal machine."

"At least the lazy ones will go after other rooms first," Ron said. The emir probably had wards on his windows even though they were off the ground. Even he could tell that Snape had put strong ones on theirs. Considering how he, Fred and George, had gotten Harry out of his at the beginning of



second year, maybe Snape had the right idea.

But moving staircases like the ones they had at Hogwarts would have been more fun, except then he would have gotten *really* lost here. The only way he'd coped with the arrangement his first few weeks at the school had been following the others around.

They stopped at the registration table. His games were all in the morning or as close to it as time allowed, while al-Hadoud's were later.

He started the day with his first loss against an older boy from Durmstrang that he vaguely recognized from the Tri-Wizards' Tournament the year before. The emir was a real help afterwards, though. They both went over the moves and Ron discovered where he'd screwed up. The next game against a girl from the States went better. He had no tendency towards chivalry on the chessboard, not after being trampled by Brentwood back at school. These days even Ginny was better than Harry was. She would have gotten further in the tournament at Hogwarts except she'd gone against Lee Jordan for her first game and had lost heart afterwards. But just before he'd left for this tournament, she had come very close to winning against him, and that didn't happen very often.

Besides, after getting beaten so badly by Petrosian, he felt like beating someone back. But he did offer to get his current opponent a sweet roll afterwards. She shook her head. "I have to go to another game, and so do you."

"This afternoon?" he asked, then realized he'd be with al-Hadoud. The emir's first game would start right after lunch.

"Afraid not," she said. "Mom wants me to stick pretty close to her."

"Wait, is she Glenna Jefferson?" Since the girl's name was Lisa Jefferson, it wasn't a hard guess. Jefferson was one of the few rated women players, along with McGonagall and some others.

"Yes. She'll probably go over this game with me, too." She stared down at the board.

"Watch out for Petrosian. He does some really weird stuff with his queen. And Smerdlov is just a kid, but he's a lot better than some of the grownups."

"I got creamed by Petrosian yesterday. I have to play Devereaux later today."

"Oh, he's the one from Beauxbatons. You have a good chance against him. Go after him hard and fast, but watch for his counter. Say, if you ever come to Hogwarts, I'll introduce you to Professor McGonagall. She keeps saying she doesn't understand why there aren't more girls involved in chess. My sister Ginny isn't too bad, and there's a girl in Ravenclaw who's *good*. She's probably working up every game there is to get the drop on me when I get back,"

"Isn't the Tiger here this time? Her name was in the article in the magazine Mom and I read, but I haven't seen her name on the board."

Ron had heard of the nickname for McGonagall in chess magazines himself, but since he wanted to live, had never used it. "No. She had some family thing. But Professor Snape beat her this time anyway. He played chess a long time ago and is getting back to it. Look, there he is." The Potions Master was at the registration table talking to someone.

Lisa's eyes widened a bit. "Wouldn't mind having that tall and dark one teaching at *my* school! He looks so... interesting."

"Are you nuts? He hates everybody," Ron said, certain she must have bad eyesight. "By the time he's done ripping us to pieces, we're just glad to get out of Potions alive."

It was true. Girls were insane. There was a vague rumor at school that some little Hufflepuff actually *had* written a love note to Snape, only to get it back corrected for spelling and grammar.

"Well, I have to go," she said. "Good game."

"Same for you." They shook hands tentatively.

Al-Hadoud was smiling as Ron came over to see if the emir wanted anything before he had to go to his next game. "I see a little romance among the pawns, perhaps?" the old man said.

"Not hardly. She thought *Snape* was interesting to look at. That would last for less than five minutes if she was ever in one of his classes."

"Of course he must discourage such nonsense. In your bizarre system where both girls and boys learn together,

there might be serious trouble if he did not. Do you know if he is married?"

"He isn't as far as I know," Ron said. The whole idea of Professor Snape in a close relationship with anybody hurt his brain. "Actually, none of the staff is." Teachers were... well, *teachers*. Imagining them with a personal life had never crossed his mind, though others at school had more vivid imaginations. "But if you ever saw Snape run a class, you would see just how weird the whole idea is."

Then it was time for his third game, against some boy from Singapore. It was a long, nasty draw, and he was starving by the time it was over. Al-Hadoud had already begun his first game, so he went to the restaurant and got something quick to eat. As soon as he was done, he went to the emir's table and asked if he wanted anything.

"Not till after the game is over. I shall eat then."

Ron sat down to watch. For a moment he felt bored, and wished he was back at Hogwarts where he could go outside and fly around the Quidditch pitch. *I haven't been outside since I got here, he thought.*

Then he started watching the game. Al-Hadoud was playing black and in a little trouble this time. Ron could see why. The rules didn't allow him to suggest any moves, though. He began taking notes. The emir had helped him enormously already. It was time for him to do what he could.

At one point he saw where the old man needed to watch

his right flank. Ron stared pointedly at white's knight, hoping that al-Hadoud would notice it. He couldn't say a word, of course, but he was sure that once the emir noticed where it could go in the next couple of moves that something could be done about it.

Apparently that worked. Al-Hadoud brought up a pawn where it would threaten the knight if the piece wandered in that direction. After that the game began going better for black, and ended in a draw.

Once it was over, they went to eat a real meal in the restaurant. "I must thank you, boy, for noticing that knight," the emir said when they were settled at the table. "I cannot think of what is wrong with me today."

"I made some notes," Ron said. "I think it was when white's queen-side bishop moved towards your queen and you decided to take it that things started going bad. I would have done it myself, but I think he was hoping you'd do it. Maybe you should have brought the queen between those two pawns instead."

"That wouldn't have worked," al-Hadoud said. "There was a trap there, too. I think I chose the move I did because it was the best one there. Now *after* that I should have retreated, and brought up some other pieces. Even the best can sometimes get overconfident."

Ron nodded. *That* was certainly true! Then a girl brought the food, and he concentrated on it for a while.

Then he wondered what kind of gift he ought to get the emir. He hadn't gone by the souvenir table yet, because he already knew he couldn't afford anything on it that didn't look cheap. *Maybe I can write up one of the better games, like the draw between Snape and Morris.*

Once they had eaten, the emir rested in one of the overstuffed chairs in the lobby. Ron went over to check the standings. Snape was doing remarkably well so far, with two wins and one draw considering who his opponents were. Malfoy had won two games yesterday, but hadn't started any for today so far. Ron didn't recognize the names of his partners, though.

The Potions Master was playing some Russian in just a little while, but had only one game after that. That was strange. Why weren't there any evening games today?

"Don't forget about the reception tonight, Mr. Weasley." Snape's familiar voice came from behind.

"What reception?"

"The invitation should be in your packet up in the room. You don't have to stay for very long, especially if al-Hadoud leaves early, but you do need to show up."

Ron almost gulped. He had just enough clothes so he could wear fresh ones each day, but hadn't brought anything for a party. "Yes, sir," he said.

Then Snape strode off, no doubt on his way to his next opponent.

Ron went back to the emir after finding out when al-Hadoud's next game was. The Arab was asleep in the chair, but otherwise looked all right. Ron sat down and waited, checking his wristwatch every few minutes.

When there were ten minutes left, Ron gently shook the emir by the shoulder and said, "Sorry to wake you, sir, but it's almost time for the next game."

Al-Hadoud looked startled for a moment, and said something Ron didn't understand. Then he seemed to realize where he was, and said, "Ah, yes. The game. Who am I playing?"

"Gerrit of Germany. He's the one that Snape played last night. We talked about the game at breakfast."

"Yes. I know him." Al-Hadoud stood up and sighed. "Let us go meet him, then."

Ron didn't think the emir looked too steady. He made a note to fetch some tea and a sweet roll. The old man hadn't eaten much of his lunch today. *Maybe I ought to run upstairs and talk to Rafi after this next game.*

Once at the chessboard, though, the emir straightened up and seemed more awake. Gerrit glared at him a bit, clearly remembering him from Snape's game the night before.

Al-Hadoud drew white and set his pieces out in a pattern that Ron was beginning to understand, though not quite ready to emulate. It reminded him of the way Dumbledore had played, but not quite. *I wonder how the emir and Professor Binns would play?*

Gerrit's strategy seemed to be a little more effective in this game than it had with Snape, but Ron got the feeling that his cheerful air wasn't going to last much longer. Al-Hadoud blunted the right-side attack and replied with a few feelers of his own. Gerrit sent out a knight and bishop hunting team as he had before. It was interesting how he coordinated them.

The emir appeared to falter before that attack, only to lure the two pieces into a trap after a pawn sacrifice. After one piece was gone and the other in retreat, the old man briskly sent out his queen and a bishop to lead a charge on his left-hand side.

The German started looking unhappy then. He made a couple of moves that Ron thought were mistakes. Apparently al-Hadoud did, too, because his eyes brightened and he attacked with some pieces that he had managed to slide up through his pawn-screen in the middle.

It was by no means hopeless for black, at least Ron didn't think so, but then Gerrit lost his temper and resigned. He stalked off in rage, judging by the way he walked. Ron thought he knew what that looked like by now after many years in Potions class.

"Well," said the emir. "I certainly didn't expect that."

"Neither did I," said Ron. "I didn't think his side looked that terrible."

"Ah, I have an idea. Let us go record the results, and then see what you can do with what he left you."

Al-Hadoud and Ron went to the judges' table, only to find that Gerrit had already told them the result of the game. The emir told said, "I wish to teach this boy how to salvage bad situations if possible. May we play out the game?"

"Certainly," said one middle-aged man. "We don't have to reset the table today anyway, but we will have to clear it off in a couple of hours to start getting the room ready for the reception."

They went back to the tourney table and sat down. Ron studied black's position and didn't find it nearly as appalling as it could have been. Al-Hadoud had several pieces' advantage on him, but that could be taken care of. No, he'd been in worse shape in lots of games and still managed a draw.

He was tempted to pull a Filch to even the odds. And then he thought, *Let's see how much I remember how Quirrell played. The emir might not expect that.*

Ron began pulling his remaining pieces into a web of defense, ready for anything the emir might send him.

"I have not seen you use that style before," al-Hadoud said.

"I saw it during the Hogwarts tournament," Ron said. "Malfoy's father was worried that Draco wasn't good enough to win, and so he sent a ghost to help. Only, it took over Draco instead of just giving him advice. Professor Binns, the teacher who is a ghost, too, played Draco and made the ghost come out. The Bloody Baron and Nearly-Headless Nick grabbed him and took him away.

Then Snape took Malfoy to the infirmary."

"How long did it take this ghost teacher to get the other one to come out?"

"Not very long. They were barely into the game when Quirrell rose up, turban and all, and the two others grabbed him." Ron moved his remaining pawns into a net and then started sending them forward, supporting them with a bishop on one side and a rook on the other.

"Then the boy must not have let the ghost in willingly," the emir said, "or it would have taken stronger measures than the presence of another ghost to draw him out. I pity this Draco."

You wouldn't if you knew him, Ron thought. Then again, at least he didn't have a father who would sic Quirrell on him if he didn't play well enough. "Oh, well, he's Snape's favorite there at school." He carefully scanned the board. He didn't want to get too distracted.

"Hmm." Al-Hadoud moved his knight forward. "Your school seems very interesting."

That's not the half of it, Ron thought. *If it got any more interesting, we'd all be dead!* Of course, according to Trelawney they were going to die anyway. So far she'd been wrong.

He ended up losing anyway, but at least he fought for it. By the time their impromptu game was over, he was starving. The emir looked exhausted. "Do you want me to go upstairs and get Rafi?" Ron asked. "Or the ellyvator can take us up, if you need to go to the room."

"I think I shall rest a bit down here first," al-Hadoud said faintly.

Ron walked really close to the emir as they went over to the bigger chairs. If nothing else, he could break the old man's fall. He wished he remembered more of what Madam Pomfrey had taught him and the two others a couple of months ago. McGonagall had told them that they needed to know some basic mediwitch magic, just in case. She hadn't had to say in case of what.

Hermione had already known some Muggle first-aid, but had eagerly accepted every book Madam Pomfrey would lend her. Harry had been pretty hopeless, but had learned a few spells to stop bleeding and mend broken bones. Ron had gone in there knowing only a childhood charm for scrapes and cuts, but had learned what Harry had.

The mediwitch had cornered him away from the others afterwards, asking him to come in another weekend. "You might have the Touch like your mother does," she had said. "But I'm not quite sure. I need to see you when you're by yourself."

It was true that his playground charm had worked better for him than anyone else in the family, especially the summer that Ginny had somehow gotten a Muggle toy called a skateboard. She had come to him dozens of times then for skinned knees and elbows, especially after Mum had told her to stop playing with the wretched thing.

I wish I'd done what Madam Pomfrey had asked me, he

thought. He might know something to help the emir now if he had. He finally got al-Hadoud settled in a plush chair, then ran up the stairs to consult the genie.

Rafi frowned once Ron told him how the emir was. "He is exerting himself too much again."

Ron apologized for keeping the emir in the game. The djinn shook his head. "He has a will of his own, and there is not much a boy your age can do about it. Take this bottle down to him after I have gone in it, and I will care for him from there."

"What about the reception tonight?"

"I hope I shall be able to talk him out of it. But I am but his slave, so who knows if he will listen?" Rafi sighed.

"I could ask Professor Snape if he has something that could help," Ron said.

"If he has a restorative suitable for an elderly man, I would not turn it down," Rafi said. "It would be easier than going to one of the emir's palaces for something. I have more than one bottle, you see, and I can go between them. Yet if young Snape has something already made up, it would be welcome."

It felt weird to hear people talk about the Potions Master that way. If he remembered what al-Hadoud had said right, Snape was actually a year younger than Lupin or Sirius Black. He sure didn't look it.

Ron nodded to the genie. Rafi somehow leaped into

the bottle, and left Ron holding it. He quickly went down the stairs and brought it to the emir, who still looked sick as he sat in the chair in the lobby corner.

The old man grimaced, obviously recognizing the bottle. "I see that Rafi is going to insist that I rest with him a while," he said.

"Sorry, sir," Ron said.

"Well, we might as well go." Al-Hadoud stood up with an obvious effort. Rafi came out of the bottle, then held the emir's hand and somehow took the old man with him going back into the bottle.

Ron walked carefully up the stairs, trying not to shake the container too much. Once he got to the room, he realized that he'd left the door locked. A beam of light suddenly emerged from the bottle and the door opened. He went inside and set the bottle on the table where it had been before.

Rafi leaped out first, and bustled around preparing tea. Once everything was ready, he folded his arms and chanted a spell in a language like the one Ron had heard Snape and al-Hadoud talking in when they'd first met.

The emir appeared, looking dazed. Rafi caught al-Hadoud as he fell and carried him to the bedroom. The djinn returned and said, "Thank you for bringing me. Come here again two hours after sunset, in case he recovers more quickly than I expect."

Ron agreed and left the room. He went back to his own

to look for the invitation. He didn't have anything fancy to change into, so he just stuffed the pasteboard in his pocket and left it at that.

He went back down to the tourney floor to see if he could find Snape and ask about the potion. As he passed by the restaurant, a boy asked him if he could take a tea-tray to a player named Jinowitz. "Only players are allowed on the tourney floor when the games are going. I thought he would stick around long enough to pick this up after he signed for it, but he didn't. You can split the tip with me if you'll take care of this."

Ron had the boy show him which player was Jinowitz, then took the tray. The man, who was busy with a game, gave him a few Knuts and thanked him. As he spotted Snape and walked towards him, he passed right by Gerrit of Germany again. The man grimaced and said, "Here's a Sickle if you stay away from me! You're nothing but bad luck!"

He cheerfully accepted the money and moved on. Ron noticed other players his age or younger were going back and forth with trays. Wouldn't it be nice if he could pick up a little change? He might even be able to afford the emir's gift from the souvenir table this way. But he'd better check with the Potions Master about al-Hadoud first.

Snape was in the middle of a game, but appeared to be winning it handily. Not long after Ron got there, the other man tipped over his king and left without a word.

"Well? What is it, Mr. Weasley?"

Ron was glad Snape had won. He couldn't imagine asking this favor if he'd lost. "The emir isn't feeling well. Did you bring a potion that might help him? Rafi said something suitable for an elderly man would be all right."

Snape scowled. "So I am good enough for that. Fortunately, I did bring something that should work. Let's go up to the room. You wouldn't be able to get to it, but you'll have to take it to al-Hadoud."

Ron felt kind of bad about that. "It was Rafi who asked, not al-Hadoud."

"I know." Snape strode off, obviously expecting Ron to keep up.

Once in the room, the professor disappeared into his bedroom and emerged carrying a flask. "This shouldn't do any harm unless the emir overexerts himself. Tell Rafi it's a tisane, not a tincture. Do you know the difference?"

Pop quiz time, Ron thought. "Um... a tincture has alcohol for a base, right? And a tisane doesn't."

"Correct, though there's more to it than that. But Rafi will want to know. And when you get back, you'll need to prepare for the reception. If the potion works the way it's supposed to, you'll probably be with him. I suspect he'll want to introduce you to a few people. You have been doing well."

A compliment from *Snape*? Ron knew there was something wrong. "Um, thank you, sir. So have you."

"Don't let it go to your head. You still need to work on your middle game. That's where Petrosian got you this morning," Snape replied crisply. "Now take this potion over to the emir."

Ron obeyed. Rafi let him in, and Ron told him what his teacher had said about the potion.

"Ah," said the genie. He opened the flask and sniffed it. "This should help my master."

"Snape also said that al-Hadoud shouldn't do too much just because he feels better," Ron said. Those weren't the exact words, but it was close enough.

"I will see to that. The emir will wish to have you accompany him to the reception tonight, but tomorrow you will have to play your games in the morning by yourself. Come back in an hour."

Ron went back to the room. Snape had taken the bathroom, so he went back to his bedroom to see if he had anything he could change into. He was so *tired* of being poor and making do with hand-me-downs! At least Ginny got *some* new stuff every once in a while.

If he changed into a clean shirt tonight he'd have to wear it tomorrow, or run out before the tournament was over. He'd seen the laundry chart in the bathroom, but wouldn't dare run up those kind of expenses even if he could sign for it. Not at those prices!

Well, if the emir wasn't going to be with him tomorrow

morning, it wouldn't matter so much as long as he aired out the shirt overnight on a separate hanger. He hoped. Ron shook out his best robe and brushed it down, wiped his shoes down with a dirty sock, and decided the rest of him was all right. After combing his hair, anyway.

The bathroom was finally free. Ron ducked into it and cleaned up a little more. There wasn't really time for another shower by now, but he felt fresher. He clipped his badge on the robe and left. Snape was already gone.

Once over there, al-Hadoud was sitting in a chair in the outer room, and looked much better. He said something in Arabic to Rafi, and then nodded at Ron.

They went down the ellyvator again. The playing floor was clear of chess tables now, and was set up for a party. Lucius Malfoy was holding court in one section, though he looked annoyed and kept glancing over to where Snape was standing. The Potions Master was in green robes with silver buttons and trim, with dark pants, white shirt, and dark green vest. Ron almost whistled out loud in admiration. Sure, his teacher was still a greasy git, but there was nothing wrong with his clothes.

And there was a knot of people around him, only a little smaller than the one around Malfoy. As soon as al-Hadoud entered the room, though, several broke away from other groups, including some from around Draco's father, to greet the emir. A babble of different languages broke out

and Ron was soon completely lost. The best he could do was to find al-Hadoud a comfortable chair and run tea and cakes for people. Nobody paid any attention to him at all. Under the circumstances it didn't bother him.

He was glad he'd brought his watch, though, and reminded himself to talk to the emir about his medicine in a couple of hours. Ron stood around for a bit, saw the old Arab was deep in conversation with someone else in Arabic, and wandered off. Where was the boy who had sent him after Jinowitz? He hadn't meant to run off with money that belonged to someone else.

Then he saw the little Russian boy kicking his heels on a chair too high for him while his father was talking to someone else. Ron went over to keep the child company. Fortunately he had some of the latest toys from Fred and George that he'd left in his school robe pocket. It was fun teaching the smaller boy how to play Exploding Snap. It was noisy enough already that hardly anybody noticed, really. Ron showed off some of the tricks as well (though he thought the Canary Creams might be overdoing it in public), and Konstatin was awe-struck. "You mean your brothers own a store and they let you try them out?"

It had just opened last summer, and was now only going part-time, of course. "Sure. Fred and George make sure I show them around school so they can find out if anybody likes them before they make or buy too many

of a new trick. But I have more than two brothers. Percy is the next oldest. He's in the Ministry is really boring these days. Bill is a curse-breaker for Gringott's Bank, and Charlie handles dragons in Romania."

"Is there anybody younger than you?"

"Yes. I have a sister named Ginny a year behind me." Ron was still angry at himself for failing to protect her during her first year at Hogwarts. He should have watched over her more and noticed how strange she'd looked. Ginny would have told him about the diary if he'd paid her more attention. He tried to do better now, though he sometimes forgot. He'd better send her an owl tonight or tomorrow with a letter just for her.

"I don't have any brothers or sisters," Konstatin said wistfully. "And Papa and I never play anything but chess."

"You go ahead and keep these, then. Just take them to school and tell your friends about Weasley's Wizard Wheezes. You can owl me if anybody wants to buy more of them. I'm Ron Weasley, and if you send me something at Hogwarts, I'll get it."

"Thank you!"

Ron checked his watch. He'd better go see if the emir wanted anything. "I'm with al-Hadoud tonight, and I'm supposed to get things for him. Can I owl you sometime?" He didn't normally hang around with younger kids, but Konstatin looked lonely.

"I'll send you one, if Papa will let me."

"Tell him you want to play chess by owl with me. I don't think I'm going to win the cup, but I'm doing well enough. You can even tell him that you're mad you didn't beat me and want another try!"

The boy laughed. "How do you know it's not true?"

"Hey, maybe I want another chance to beat you, too! But I better go." They shook hands.

Just as Ron reached the outskirts of the crowd around al-Hadoud, a cultured voice said, "You have a knack for making useful friends, Mr. Weasley. First Mr. Potter, then the emir, and now a boy who will likely become great in the chess world someday."

Ron turned around to face Lucius Malfoy, who was smiling in a way that implied they were in some kind of conspiracy together. "He was sitting all by himself. That's no fun. I don't make friends because I think I can use them."

"Isn't it amazing how it works out for you anyway?" Draco's father looked pleased at the thought. "Believe me, I am complimenting you."

Ron gritted his teeth so he wouldn't say something that would get him into trouble. "I have to see if the emir needs anything, sir."

"Oh, of course! I shan't interfere. But just let me warn you that ignoring my invitation may have consequences you don't like."

"I'm sorry if I have offended you, sir," Ron said, though he wasn't. "Professor Snape introduced me to the emir, and I do need to get back to him."

"Certainly," said Malfoy. This time he glanced with annoyance at Snape who was across the room, still with his own small knot of people around him.

Ron took the opportunity to escape into the crowd around the emir. If Snape couldn't manage mister Malfoy, nobody could. Al-Hadoud seemed glad to see Ron, and even remembered to use English to talk to him.

"Is there anything I can bring you, sir?"

"Ah, the lost years of my youth when I could talk until dawn and still play chess all the next day!" said the emir.

Ron made a show of looking through his pockets and coming up empty. "Sorry, sir, can't find them," he said with a smile. "I must have left them back in the room."

Al-Hadoud applauded. "Then you will have to make do with more tea and some honey cakes," he said.

"I can manage those all right." Ron went to one of the buffet tables. Snape was away from any group now at one end of a table, talking to a woman who looked vaguely familiar. Ron was startled at the way the Potions Master was using his voice. He didn't know his teacher could make it sound like, oh, like silk the older man was trying to wrap around someone. Then he remembered the girl he'd played earlier today. The woman must be Glenna Jef-

erson, Lisa's mother. And she was obviously pleased at whatever Snape was telling her.

Ron quickly picked another pot of tea and a small plate of food for the emir. It felt strange to see Snape acting so differently than he did at Hogwarts. What al-Hadoud had said about teachers having to avoid scandal suddenly began to make sense. *I'm surprised the Headmaster let Gildylocks carry on the way he did in second year*, Ron thought. *Of course, since he was the Dark Arts professor, maybe Dumbledore knew he wouldn't last.*

He served the emir, who looked happy to see him. Ron decided to stay by the old man for the rest of the evening. He wanted to avoid Lucius Malfoy, and he *definitely* didn't want to have to think about Snape chatting up women Mum's age.

Ron kept checking his watch, though. When he saw it'd been two hours, and then some, he leaned over and asked, "Are you feeling all right, sir? Rafi is worried that you might do too much."

Al-Hadoud sighed. "I am well, but Rafi is right. And you have been up late too much already." The emir spoke to those around him. "I am old, gentlemen, and you must forgive my departure. The years have not been kind to me."

The others protested, but began to drift away. Ron stood close to the elderly Arab, but he seemed to be walking all right. But he took the emir to the ellyvator instead of to the stairs. He was getting used to it by now, and hoped al-Hadoud didn't mind it too much.

Rafi was glad to see both of them. The emir invited Ron to stay for a bit. Ron shook his head. "I'm so far behind on homework I'll never catch up!" he said. "And I want to go over that game I lost this morning. You pointed out what I should I have done differently, and I want to try something."

"Then we shall see you in the morning," al-Hadoud said. Rafi shot him a grateful look.

Ron was glad to sit down in his room and just do nothing for a little while. Then he remembered he needed to send an owl to Ginny, as well as to Harry. He wrote his sister a quick note, then looked at his homework as well as his game notes. Overwhelmed by it all, he just hauled the papers back to his room and got ready for bed. *I wish Harry and Hermione were here, he thought. Even with Snape not being too horrible and being around al-Hadoud I miss them.* There didn't seem any point in staying up and looking for adventure without the other two.



Well, Albus, you ought to be happy, Snape thought. *I am enjoying myself tonight.* The reception was going just as he could wish. Al-Hadoud had been welcomed after his long stay away, the Weasley boy had gotten some of the reflected glory, and Malfoy was in a snit because for once he wasn't the center of attention. What more could one ask?

It was pleasant to drop the sneering mask for once. He

would never be the life of any party; but it was a comfort to know there were other things in the wizarding world besides Voldemort and death.

It wouldn't last, of course. But he could savor this evening all the more for knowing how rare it was. Snape circulated, listening to gossip of the chess world. A few people actually sought him out, apparently impressed by his victories so far. They seemed happy to pass on anything they knew about opponents he would meet later. As far as he could tell, they had nothing to gain that he could think of by doing so.

He had been pleased when he saw the Weasley boy amusing young Smerdlov. How many evenings had he spent on similar chairs while his Uncle Gerasius had basked in his nephew's victories? "Ten points to Gryffindor," he'd muttered softly to himself. Fortunately the boy had been able to break away from Malfoy without any need to intervene. And without losing his temper, too. There was more to the boy than appeared on the surface.

It had been fun to watch Mr. Weasley immediately change course and head back to the emir when he'd been talking with the woman from the States. Perhaps he could take advantage of the boy's embarrassment a couple of nights from now.

Glenna Jefferson had obviously been ready for a little adventure of her own. Unfortunately he wasn't going to be able to oblige her. Though he'd gone through more

women than Longbottom did cauldrons shortly after Lucius's marriage to Narcissa, Bellatrix Lestrange had cured him of married ones. No doubt he had kept himself out of all sorts of trouble that way.

Of course, by then it had been too late. He wondered quizzically what might have happened if he had owed al-Hadoud after the Shrieking Shack incident, instead of accepting Malfoy's false comfort. What kind of life might he had? Then again, perhaps the emir might have brushed off the attempt on his life the way Dumbledore had. A few days under the care of the older man at the All-Wizard's Tournament twenty five years ago and some letters afterwards obviously meant nothing to the Arab now.

Snape considered the Weasley boy again. He would have to find a way to get him to use his brain for something besides Quidditch or chess once they were back at Hogwarts. If nothing else, he could make a few peevish comments to McGonagall, who had played the boy as well. Her academic standards were almost as high as his own, and she might well prove an ally in this quest. They had all let those vacant blue eyes fool them for much too long.

He drained his drink when Malfoy approached him. "Lucius," he said. "What a pleasure to see you here tonight."

"Snape," Malfoy said with a scowl. "Why haven't you let Weasley accept my invitation?"

"Don't frown like that," Snape said in a lighter tone.

"That's my job. Seriously, I didn't think you wanted the boy underfoot. I knew al-Hadoud wouldn't mind. You can't imagine what kind of trouble the brat can get into if left on his own. You despise the family anyway."

Lucius Malfoy stopped to think for a moment, though it was clearly an effort. "I didn't mean I wanted to babysit the boy, just show him around a bit."

"Frankly, I doubt you would enjoy it much."

"I was just surprised he beat Draco."

Snape wasn't. It was fairly obvious that Lucius's son played chess to please his father, and not for love of the game. He did well anyway, but only through application and memory. Weasley, on the other hand, would rather play than eat, which was saying something for a boy his age. He was obviously in his element here. Now, if one should hand Draco a pad of paper and some paint, one need not worry about him for hours thereafter. Snape had gleefully confiscated the plague of supposedly anonymous cartoons, and still chuckled over them in private—even the one with the big-nosed snake stuck in Moaning Myrtle's toilet. Draco had cleaned a lot of cauldrons that weekend, and it had taken constant vigilance to keep the boy from etching designs on their bottoms.

"Sons do not always inherit the gifts or enthusiasms of their fathers, Lucius." And in Draco's case, he clearly took after Narcissa's side, which had several noted artists. Of

course, Malfoy's towering ambition would never let him listen. "Draco is talented in his own right. It is best sometimes to step back and let a child discover his own gift." He was rather proud at his restrained tone of voice, given that he was still angry at Lucius. *How DARE he force a ghost on his own son just for a damn game! At least now that idiot Quirrell can't bother anyone else.*

Malfoy blinked, as if feeling the edges of his wrath. "You know what he's going to have to do next summer," Lucius said quietly. "You keep telling me he isn't old enough. But the touch of a ghost is nothing compared to what he'll have to endure for the sake of our Lord."

Snape's left arm began aching, as if he needed another reminder. *How can I keep Draco from having to suffer this?* he wondered. "This is not a good place to speak of this," he said.

"You're right. We'll talk about it at New Years, then. I'm certain the others who will be there will agree with me," Lucius said with an unpleasant smile. "You will accept my invitation, I hope?"

"Of course. I always do, you know." New Year's Eve at Malfoy Manor was one tradition he would rather give up; but he had more than himself to think about.

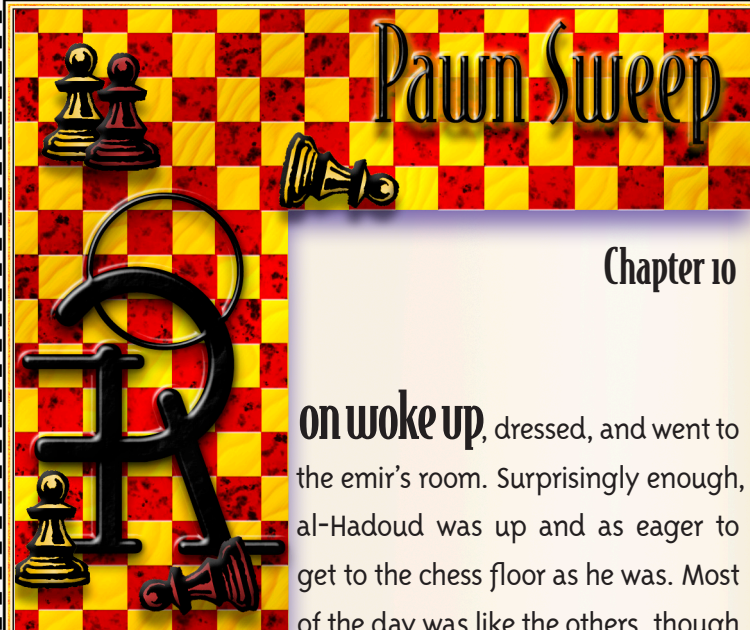
"Ah." Malfoy smiled again, this time more graciously. "And I must congratulate you on the showing you've made so far. Perhaps we'll meet on the chessboard here as well."

Snape nodded, smiling on the inside. They had played

at Malfoy Manor on occasion. At times he had carefully lost hard-fought games for reasons of his own. He hadn't quite decided what he would do if they met on the table here. Keeping Lucius in a good temper had literally saved his life several times, but right now he was not inclined to be charitable.

The two of them separated. Malfoy joined another group and quickly began to dominate it, while Snape stood by himself at one of the picked-over buffet tables. Even here he wasn't free from the shadow of Voldemort. Al-Hadoud was right to shun him.





Chapter 10

on woke up, dressed, and went to the emir's room. Surprisingly enough, al-Hadoud was up and as eager to get to the chess floor as he was. Most of the day was like the others, though he lost the second game to a Chinese boy from Singapore. He watched the emir carefully, but tried not to let his concern distract him from playing.

That afternoon, he was worried about the old Arab, but he still looked fine. Al-Hadoud admitted that he had used half of some potion that Rafi had procured for him the night before, and had taken the rest that morning. "So tomorrow I am likely to need more rest," the old man admitted ruefully while they sat in the restaurant eating an early dinner. "The gentleman at the table actually apologized for scheduling a night game for me."

Ron nodded. He didn't want to admit it, but he was beginning to feel tired, too. But there was only one more

day of games for the juveniles after today. In just a couple days the whole thing would be over, and he and Snape would be on their way back to Hogwarts. It felt like he'd been here forever. There were some tours of the city scheduled, but between his games and al-Hadoud's, he wasn't going to be able to go. Besides, he doubted he would be able to get Snape's permission.

That night he drank several cups of tea just to stay awake. If nothing else, needing the loo kept him from nodding off! The emir lost that game, though, and wanted to talk about it once they'd gotten back to the room. Rafi mercifully intervened and sent Ron back to his own room. "You have taught me enough, master, that we can play this game over ourselves. Tomorrow is the boy's last day, and he will need his rest."

Ron had been amazed at how high he was in the ladder, all things considered. He had three more games to play before the final standings were calculated, unless he needed a playoff session. If he won all of them, he had a chance to come in third. The small Russian boy was likely to be second or third, while the boy from Durmstang was clearly going to be first unless he was hit by lightning tomorrow. Lee from Singapore was right above him, but Ron knew he could do better if he played him again. During the



emir's last game, al-Hadoud's opponent had done something really sneaky with his queen, maneuvering it one or two spaces per turn till she had been in just the right spot to swoop down and corner the emir's helpless king.

But he was too tired to set up his board right now, and went straight to bed. Snape was still playing, or so he thought. The Potions Master had either drawn or won all of his games. The adult schedule went a day longer, since there were a lot more of them. Al-Hadoud, Malfoy, and Snape seemed to be the three leaders, though the emir had probably dropped a spot after tonight. Morris of the States was right behind him, though he might move up depending on how Snape did tonight. Biggerson of Sweden wasn't doing nearly as well as he probably should have. Ron wondered as he lay in the bed if losing to Snape right at first had disheartened the man. Jefferson of the States was doing all right. *I still wish McGonagall had been able to come.* He'd never really thought about it before, but it was strange how few women or girls played chess at tournaments. *Maybe Ginny will be the next Tiger! Too bad Percy doesn't play much. Dad would like it if the Weasleys carried on the family tradition.*

He dreamed of every Weasley showing up at a tournament and making Dad proud by sweeping all the places...

The next morning Rafi told him that the emir was resting till noon again. "Is he all right?" Ron asked. "I mean, I know how

old he is, but the Headmaster never seems to be this way."

"Ah, but he is in his own place. As wizards and witches age, they sometimes develop an affinity for a certain place and draw strength from it. My master is far away from his. I wish he would let me take him home at night through the bottle so he could sleep in his own bed and thus rest much better than here."

"How does that work? Didn't you get here through the Floo like everyone else?"

"Of course, but once here I can go to other bottles, which are in his palaces. And as you saw, I can take him with me. But alas, he said it would not be fair to the other players, some of whom are also old. The rules also do not allow any to sleep in other than the place where the tournament is taking place. This gives an advantage to any wizard born in the place where the games take place, of course, or why many compete fiercely for the privilege."

That was interesting! And it also explained why Dumbledore almost never left Hogwarts that Ron heard about, even in the summer. The Ministry often met with the Headmaster right there at the school, too, though he knew from Dad that they preferred seeing people in London.

"Thank you, Rafi. I'll be here."

This was his last day. He checked the standings again, though in his category they shouldn't have changed from last night. Petrosian was first, as he thought, and

Lee from Singapore second. Even with his losses, Ron was happy knowing he was tied with Smerdlov. *Ok, so he's only seven years old. But I'm still proud of that draw!* On the adult board, Snape was third. Malfoy was first since he'd won more games, but against lesser opponents, while al-Hadoud had dropped to second after his loss last night. Morris was fourth, and Biggerson was all the way down in tenth. Gerrit was fifteenth, and Ron smiled to himself. *That's what happens when you give up too soon!*

He sat down to his first game for today, with a boy from Argentina. They could barely understand each other, but it didn't matter. The pieces would talk for them.

His opponent's style was deceptively simple, a bit like Abercrombie's. Ron led with his knights as he generally liked to do, and opened up a way for some of his other pieces. The various strategies he'd learned over the past few months were starting to feel less like separate bits and pieces and more like a whole, though he was sure it wasn't there yet.

Then the Argentinian began running his pieces down the middle. *Someone else has been watching Snape*, Ron thought. *But not well enough.* The other boy hadn't taken the trouble to guard with his pawns the way the Potions Master usually did. Ron grinned and let Vinnie and Greg out to play among the lesser pieces his opponent had left behind.

Then white had his queen lead a wrecking crew against Ron's defense. As interesting as that certainly was, Ron

noticed a hole where he could send his own lady to pin down half of the other back row. He carefully checked the rook on that side—McGonagall had taught him to be wary of *that* piece—and slid his queen into the right spot despite her loud protests.

His opponent's eyes went wide as he realized his peril. The boy drew his bishop back in an attempt to scare the queen into retreating, but when Ron maneuvered one of his knights into a fork between the king and rook on that side, the fellow tipped over his king.

One game down and two to go, Ron thought. He felt twitchy and restless. Then he spotted the boy he'd run tips for the day before. "Here's your two Knuts!" he said, and gave the boy the coins. "I didn't mean to cheat you out of anything. Remember, I'm the one you asked me to take that tray to Jinowitz."

"Right. Thanks!" The kid jingled the money, then put it in his pocket. "Say, I could really use someone tomorrow morning."

"I bet most of the other kids will sleep in," Ron said. "But I'm used to getting up early at my school. I'll be here." He'd already checked the board, and the emir didn't have any morning games tomorrow. Since he didn't have anything scheduled either, this being the last day, al-Hadoud would probably sleep, too. "I've got a half hour till my next game," he added. "Anybody need anything out there?"

"No adult games till another hour," said the other kid.

"And you're the only juvenile except for the little kid's dad who tips. Why are you helping me out?"

"The school takes care of what I sign for, but I get to keep what I pick up," Ron said.

"Smart! Well, be here tomorrow. The adults will play all day, and the way I see it, whoever shows up first gets to help out as much as he wants."

"You speak English really well."

"Have to. I get paid extra for every language I learn."

"Wish / did!" Ron said.

"You're lucky, going to school like you do. I have to work evening shifts whenever I'm going to school. It'd be nice just having school or work, not both at the same time."

"Yeah, I guess I am lucky," Ron said. Now that he thought of it, things could be lots worse, even with Potions class with the Slytherins and the annual attack by Voldemort.

"Here's an extra cake. Don't tell anyone I'm giving anything away for free, it'll get me in trouble."

"Thanks!" Ron said, and munched it down. He looked up at the clock. It was time for his second game. It was against another Russian from Durmstrang, someone named Suvarov, who was also near the top. Ron quickly discovered why. It was hard to describe his opponent's game, because it was a style he wasn't familiar with, but it was certainly a good one. Ron counterattacked as hard as he could, but it didn't do any good. He was ready to resign.

Then he remembered Gerrit of Germany, and the way Draco had given up on the teaching board back at Hogwarts. Ron also recalled how the emir had felt about giving up too easily. Though it used up some time on the clock, he forced himself to look at the situation as if he'd just come to it.

Yes. There was a way to drag things out. Suvarov would have to earn his win. Ron moved a pawn forward. When the greater pieces were mostly gone, you made do with what you had left.

About an hour later, they shook hands on a very ugly draw. The pieces were still arguing among themselves about what should have been done, which Ron suspected was unusual for tourney pieces.

It was close to noon, and Ron was starving. By that time Snape was at the board looking at the standings. As he walked up to the Potions Master, the board changed to reflect his draw with Suvarov. "That was a long game," Snape said.

"And I was glad to get the draw," Ron said. "A good thing the book will have all the games. Dad and I will be replaying them all summer, if he has the time."

"I hope he does," Snape said, a peculiar look on his face as he rubbed his left arm.

Ron realized what his teacher meant, but tried to look like he didn't. Voldemort didn't care about chess, or if he did, played like Filch with real people. "I hope so, too," he finally said.

He didn't have as much appetite as he thought once he

finally ordered something, but finished a plate of noodles with meat sauce anyway.

Then it was time for his third game of the day, and the last of the tournament for him. He was surprised to find his opponent was little Konstantin Smerdlov again, probably to play off the draw. The only other game scheduled for the juveniles was between Lee of Singapore and Petrosian from Durmstrang. Ron realized what that meant, once he looked at the standings and the scores. He would need a win for third, and a draw for fourth, as he'd drawn Suvarov, and the other Russian was right behind him. The money awards only went down to third, but even that place was worth fifty Galleons.

He sat down across from the child, and drew black. Ron closed his eyes for a moment, then opened them again. Each game was a new one, no matter how many times you played someone. He felt a little dizzy for a moment. Ron began to play once Smerdlov opened.

About five moves into the game, something clicked. It all made sense now. He understood how Konstantin was playing, and how he needed to play back. It was like that one game with Abercrombie when he could see ahead almost all the way to the end. Only, as long as Konstantin played the way he was now, Ron didn't see any way to win.

But right now it didn't matter. He could see that the boy across from him had the same kind of understanding in

his eyes. "It's so simple sometimes, isn't it?"

Konstantin smiled and said, "Yes, it is. Almost nobody sees it but me most of the time."

"Except I want to change to where I win, instead of you." Ron knew their conversation wasn't making sense, but he didn't care.

He saw an alternative and took it. His vision changed, then, as he hoped it would. His moves were rapid and smooth.

So were his opponent's. *What is Konstantin seeing that I'm not?* Ron used up some of the time he'd saved and tried to follow the path all the way to endgame.

Yes. There was a way. It like during McGonagall's chess trap, when it didn't matter having to sacrifice himself to move Harry forward. Now in this game he ruthlessly allowed both bishops to go to the side. It was necessary. His pawns were waiting for Konstantin to enter the killing ground now.

But the boy held back and played defensively. Ron was puzzled. That hadn't been in his visions. He stopped again. Aha! What looked like hesitant play was really a trap. Change, and change again. Ron drove his pawns forward, creating a net of controlled squares between them.

He barely noticed the people standing around, even though he had a vague feeling that Snape was watching. A survival skill he'd learned at Hogwarts, no doubt. It didn't matter. Nothing mattered but the chessboard in front of him. He wasn't using bits of strategy from others

any more, or if he was they had become his now. "Is chess like this for you all the time?" Ron asked, knowing the boy would understand.

"Only with one or two people," Konstantin said.

The game ended in a draw, but Ron wasn't surprised. He was a little disappointed not to make third place, but playing chess like this, the way he dreamed of it sometimes, was worth coming here even if he didn't win any money.

Konstantin's father didn't look angry with his son after the game. In fact, the man came over and shook Ron's hand. "Boy, I know enough to see good play. Owl us in Ekaterinburg any time you like."

"Thank you, sir. Your son is really good. I am Ron Weasley from Hogwarts in England. It would be great to play by owl." Then the elder Smerdlov went off with his son.

Snape came forward out of the crowd and nodded approval. "I suspect you'll be playing him for many years."

"Yes," said Ron. "I think I will." He was beginning to feel a bit letdown now that the game was over. "I hope someone kept notes. I don't think I understood what I did."

"Then you have some work to do," the Potions Master said, but with only a little of his usual sting.

Snape withdrew as the emir came forward. "Weasley, that was a splendid game," said al-Hadoud, who embraced him. "It is such a joy to see a student grow like that. Sometimes when two players meet it is so, they strike sparks and play

better than they could against anyone else. I remember it was like that the first time I played Dumbledore."

"I wish I could have won, though," Ron said. But he wasn't going to bother the emir with the reason. His empty purse certainly wasn't anyone's problem but his own.

"There is no shame in ending up fourth in such a tournament," al-Hadoud said, taking Ron with him over to the registration table. "And with such a game! I am sure your family will be very proud of you."

Ron cheered up, knowing they were proud of him already just for being here. When he went home for Christmas, he knew Dad would rub his hands and set up the board on the kitchen table, no matter how much Mum complained. But she wouldn't mean it, and would just make everyone fill their plates at the stove and put their dishes in the sink afterwards. They'd done it enough last summer, after all.

The standings board rearranged itself and glowed to show no more changes would be made. Petrosian of Durmstrange was first, and Lee of Singapore was second. Smerdlov of Ekaterinburg was listed third, while his own name and that of Hogwarts was just below. Yes, he could have done a lot worse. He'd just have to find another way to get enough money for a present for al-Hadoud and send some to Mum for Ginny.

The emir took him to the restaurant and listened as Ron rambled on about the game. "It was wonderful. I still don't

know how to explain how I could see all the way ahead through all the changes. I wish I could do that every game."

The old man smiled. "Understanding sometimes comes later. Some can analyze well, but cannot play. Others play without a thought in their heads how they do it. I think you will be able to do both superbly someday. Almost all the great games, though, are played for joy."

"Almost?" Ron asked.

"A few that are played for blood and revenge reach that level. But passion is the root of them all, even if the passion cannot be seen."

"Professor McGonagall plays like that!" Ron said. "She doesn't seem like that in person, but on the chessboard it's different."

"That is why she is called the Tiger, young man. Malfoy, now, he plays for joy, but it is the joy of destroying others."

"And Professor Snape?"

Al-Hadoud looked sad. "He was not much older than the Russian boy when I first saw his uncle taking him around. When he was with me, he played chess as if the pieces were the only things that were real to him. It was a joy to see how he grew as well. He was like a plant shut away from light finally put into the sun... but now I do not know him, or why he is here."

"When he played the Headmaster he didn't seem to mind losing. It was like the game was the only thing that

mattered," Ron said, trying to find the right words. "Of course, you could tell he enjoyed crushing McGonagall."

"Well, who wouldn't! Winning against her means something. You speak with great kindness of a teacher you don't like, though."

"Dad and Mum said to always speak the truth about people, even if we aren't friends with them," Ron said, who knew he wasn't always good at that. When he was angry at someone, it was hard for him to see anything good about them. It was only right to be fair to the greasy git some of the time.

"Then your family has taught you well."

It still bothered Ron that he couldn't tell the emir that Snape wasn't really a Death-Eater now. But al-Hadoud might tell the wrong person, and even he could figure out what could happen then.

That afternoon he ran tea and sometimes sat as the emir played on his schedule. It felt funny to be done with his own games. He'd probably better work on some of his homework tonight. Tomorrow night after the awards ceremony he and Snape would probably Floo back to Hogwarts. Now that the tournament was almost over, he didn't want to go back to go back to regular life again.

Maybe McGonagall would help him organize a chess club, though he hoped Draco wouldn't want to join. *His dad will probably make him*, Ron thought. He was really

glad not to be Draco now, even with all the money.

Late that afternoon he escorted al-Hadoud back up to the room, and helped Rafi with tea again. Instead of going back to his room, he went back to the tourney floor to run for tips. *Maybe they don't add up to a lot, but at least I can get the emir something. I wish I could have made third place. Fifty Galleons would get Ginny all the clothes she'd need for the rest of this year and maybe I could have gotten a new case for my set.*

He didn't find the serving boy that he knew already, but found another who didn't mind splitting the take. Ron knew mister Malfoy was on the floor, and hoped he didn't have to take *him* any orders. He was a few Sickles richer when Snape finished a game and spotted him.

"Mr. Weasley," he said acidly, "you are better off upstairs working on your homework this evening. I will be going out and I think it best you stay in the room."

"This is going to be the last night here," Ron said.

"No, that will be tomorrow night. The awards ceremony includes dinner, and won't be done till late. We won't leave till the morning after. You will have tomorrow morning, at least, to worry about the emir's gift. It doesn't have to be given him before we leave. Even one of your mother's famous sweaters would likely prove acceptable," Snape said. "You might consider writing up the game you played with the Russian boy and sending him a fair copy. I found it fairly interesting myself."

Ron blinked, startled by the compliment. "It would be easier to write a game I didn't play, sir. "I'm not sure I understand what I did yet."


"Then you would learn something by doing so," Snape said crisply. "Now we are going to eat and then we're both going upstairs."

Their meal in the restaurant wasn't as much fun as the ones with al-Hadoud were, but that didn't slow down Ron's appetite. Snape spoke little and ate less. That was normal, though. The Potions Master was known for leaving the staff table sooner than anyone else.

They finished, went up to the room, and Snape immediately claimed the bathroom. Ron wished he'd had first go, but dragged out his books and some paper as he heard the shower running. He was so far behind! A good thing the weather was getting too bad for Quidditch, he was going to have to give up his weekends for a while catching up.

At last the Potions Master emerged in a robe and went into his bedroom. Ron didn't understand why his teacher looked so dour. He hoped he wasn't the cause of any ill-temper. So far it had been an easy week that way. He would have gotten yelled at a lot more in class normally than he had so far here at the tournament. *Longbottom will never believe me, he thought. He acted like I was going to my funeral when he heard I was going to have a share a room with Snape.*

He used the loo, then decided he'd better neaten



up the main room a bit. Snape had gotten a couple of issues of THE DAILY PROPHET and one local paper as well. Ron scanned through them quickly, looking for any articles about the tournament. Snape's surprising progress through the ladder was written about in the most recent paper, so he carefully folded that one and set it aside. The only local one wasn't in English, but it had a lot of color advertisements in it. He opened it briefly just in case they believed in page three girls like some of the Muggle tabloids that Harry had stolen from his cousin Dudley.

He hastily put it down when the professor came out, all dressed up in the same robe he'd worn to the reception two nights ago, except tonight he was wearing a silver waistcoat, too. Ron almost gaped in astonishment.

"I will be at a club called Gemm's," Snape said. "I won't be back till late, and you should be in bed by then. Try not to wake me in the morning, and don't forget to go the emir's room first thing. Rafi may be able to help you pick out something for al-Hadoud. *Don't owl me tonight unless there's a real emergency.*"

"Yes, sir," Ron said.

"And stay up here in the room tonight. There will be consequences if I find you have not," the head of Slytherin said in a harsh voice.

Ron didn't like that at all. Then again, if the emir wasn't feeling well tomorrow, he'd have all morning to add to his

purse. And he really did have an awful lot of homework. "Yes, sir," he said.

Snape peered into the small mirror on a stand just by the door, made an odd, yet familiar-looking gesture at his hair, and left.

Once the door was closed, Ron realized that Harry made that same gesture at *his* hair whenever he went out to see Cho. And where was Gemm's? Ron had seen the name somewhere, but couldn't exactly remember when.

He picked up the local paper again, and found the ad. It was in color, and the girl in it smiled in a way that made Ron blush all the way down to his toes. Part of the ad was in English and mentioned something about fulfilling every desire. *I won't owl Snape unless the hotel is on fire!* Ron thought. *Maybe not even then!*

He sat down to a Transfiguration essay with dismay. *I'm not used to doing this on my own. I wish Harry and Hermione could have come.* Of course, by now they would have killed him out of sheer boredom, he was sure. And this stupid essay wouldn't get written just by staring at the paper.

He sighed and bent to work.



The Disorderly Knights

Chapter 11

everus Snape walked down the street outside the tournament hotel holding the traditional box of expensive candy in his hand, then quickly Apparated to the front door of the gentlemen's club. With any luck the boy had figured out what sort of evening his teacher had planned, and would be far too embarrassed to ask questions later.

He entered the place. For two Knuts he'd abandon his meeting with Karkaroff and *have* that sort of evening for once, but with the Dark Mark on his arm hinting at a summons soon, he doubted he would have the chance. He didn't mind risking himself, but gambling with the Weasley boy's welfare at the same time bothered him.

But what if Igor was in the same situation he'd once been in? Voldemort's reappearance had caused many to rethink their priorities. Dumbledore had risked the school by allowing *him* to teach there in the first place.

Snape walked over to the hatcheck area. He was about to pitch the candy, a traditional gift in this area of the world to signal one's availability to an escort, in the waste bin. Then he changed his mind. Someone may as well enjoy it. "Here," he said to the girl behind the counter. "She didn't show up, and now it's too late. You might as well have it."

She smiled at him and took the box. Then he wondered if she knew enough English to understand what he'd said. He supposed it didn't really matter.

He sat down and counted all the ways things could go wrong. Karkaroff might not show up. Well, he really wouldn't mind that one at this point. Karkaroff would show up and want to talk. Karkaroff was being held as a hostage. Karkaroff was going to lead him into a trap, either willingly or unwillingly. That seemed to cover most of the alternatives.

The thin black robe and the Death-Eater mask were in a pocket on the inside of his dress robe. It was a possibility that a meeting would be held for tonight, with Karkaroff the main entertainment. Snape ordered a brandy and just stared at it. He would give Igor one hour to show up, and then he would go back to the room. Or perhaps he would buy a ticket for the revue and enjoy the show. It had been a long time since he had spent a whole evening away from responsibility.

Then his left arm began hurting

again, which ended *that* train of thought. He took one sip of the brandy, which was worth almost as much as he had paid for it, and left his table as if looking for the toilet. Once in the dark hall away from the main room, he swiftly covered up with the darker robe and held the mask in his hand. People were going into a room at the back one or two at a time. As Snape observed them from the shadows, one man stopped and put on an odiously familiar white mask before entering.

He followed, though he walked stooped over trying to disguise his height. This would be the first time he would be in a full meeting of the Death-Eaters. His interview last summer with Voldemort, arranged through Malfoy's good graces, had involved only the three of them. He'd spent a week after it in the infirmary at Hogwarts recovering from his attempt to explain his absence from the first gathering where Voldemort had murdered Cedric Diggory and nearly killed the Potter boy. There had been other, smaller gatherings he'd managed to attend. It was strange how Pettigrew had been at none of them, despite Potter's insistence that the former Gryffindor had been instrumental in helping Voldemort regain his body. He'd tried to ask about the little rat, but had paid for his insistence with pain. *No doubt Potter still wants everyone to believe the dog is innocent, he thought.*

The back room was poorly lit; one small lamp burned near an exit, but that was all. Snape eased himself into

a seat and let himself slump over. As far as he could tell, only a dozen or so men were sitting down so far.

Then he saw the short, balding man with no mask and a silver hand. *Damn! Potter was right about Pettigrew!* And wasn't *that* an annoying thought! Knowing Sirius Black might be telling the truth after all did not fit his normal world-view.

Even from here he could feel the kind of magic the rat's silver hand could wield. He would have to be careful. When he and the Marauders had made Hogwarts history by their feud with each other, he'd always discounted Pettigrew. Though the rat was by no means a Squib, and helped provide his friends with eyes and ears, Snape had never worried about Pettigrew's ability with hexes or any other offensive spells. But he suspected things were different now.

"I wonder if he'll take the bait?" said a man's low voice not far away. It sounded like the elder Goyle.

"Igor said he would. He's here for the tournament, isn't he?"

Ah yes. Where there was a Goyle, there was always a Crabbe. And somewhere in the background, a Malfoy to tell them what to do. *Where is Lucius tonight?* Snape wondered. He thought his old 'friend' had a game earlier this evening.

"Serves the snake right if he *does* show up. Why should we have to be the only ones that have to listen to Wormtail brag on about killing the Potters and framing Black for it? Yes, it was a great thing, but it was fourteen years ago."

"You'll smile and nod like everyone else if he does."

Snape grimaced. Neither man was bright enough to make that kind of thing up even if they knew he was listening. Potter had been right about his godfather all along. How aggravating.

"Someone saw him in the front room tonight," continued Goyle. "It might cause trouble if we have to go get him from there."

"Not if our Lord summons him properly," said Crabbe. "Malfoy said he's been disciplined pretty thoroughly. But we can go to the hotel if he's trying to duck out again. If we can grab the boy at the same time, so much the better. Malfoy wants to have a talk with the brat."

That chilled Snape's blood. He had to get out of here now, knowing what Lucius was capable of. Arthur Weasley's youngest son would make quite a hostage against the Ministry official.

Another Death-Eater entered the room, probably Malfoy by the way he walked. Snape sent out a quick spell to check the wards, and found the room was guarded against Apparating in or out. Why hadn't he brought a portkey for Hogwarts? More to the point, why hadn't he made sure the Weasley boy had one?

The Dark Mark in his arm ached again. The pair who had been sitting near him were gone. Then Crabbe and Goyle reappeared, this time dragging forth a terrified Igor Karkaroff. *All right. That means the option for tonight is Karkaroff is here, unwilling, and this is probably a trap.* Snape was

glad the back room was so crowded now. That made one individual harder to track.

The two men dumped Karkaroff in the chair right next to his, a coincidence that Snape found highly suspicious. *They already know I'm here,* he thought with a chill. *And if I wait till Voldemort arrives, I'll be the evening's entertainment.*

Fortunately the people around here were still talking among themselves. He leaned over and whispered, "Karkaroff." If Igor could move under his own power, there was a chance they could escape.

Igor's eyes glittered as he looked at Snape. "He said I'd have a chance to redeem myself," the former head of Durmstrang said. Suddenly a knife appeared in his hand.

Snape barely turned sideways in time to take the blade in his left shoulder instead of in his chest. He pushed himself back. As he stood up, he seized the edge of Karkaroff's chair with his right hand and tipped it over with Igor still in it.

Then he took out his wand and began clearing his way to the door. The closeness of the quarters worked for him, rather than against; the Death-Eaters were unwilling to destroy each other just to get him. If they chose to pursue him in public, where even Muggles could see, he was in serious trouble anyway.

There had been no attempts on anyone at the chess tournament. That was no guarantee, considering what had happened last year at Hogwarts, but he had to get

back to the hotel for the boy's sake.

His left arm was going numb. Snape briefly wondered what kind of poison was on the knife, but it didn't matter if he didn't get out of here. Since Igor's attack had been made before Voldemort's arrival, he could always claim he was the victim of a private vendetta.

In fact, it was clear much of the crowd had no idea what was going on, and was interfering with the attempts of those trying to capture him. He sent hex after hex after the men in his way, with the occasional sharp elbow or quick kick at those not moving fast enough.

Now only two people stood between him and the door. Naturally they were Crabbe and Goyle, who had learned long ago how to work together to subdue anyone at Malfoy's pleasure.

It was time to do the unexpected. He hit one with a potent Jellylegs, while subjecting the other to a brisk Imperio, and commanding him to open the door, then guard it against anyone going after him. It would take even Lucius a couple of minutes to counteract it, and that might be all he needed.

Snape burst into the hall. He removed the mask and thin over-robe and put them back in his dress-robe pocket. He hoped he'd never have to wear them again. Naturally the Dark Mark chose that moment to ache again, reminding him that he would never be free. He smiled grimly to

himself, wondering what the Dark Lord would think once he arrived and discovered that the elusive Potions Master had escaped once more. *Oh, I'll pay for it*, he thought, his smile fading. *But not tonight.*

He began searching for another way out of the building. As he turned a corner, the hat-check girl stood in the hall.

"Are you all right? What's going on in there?" she asked.

"Probably nothing much, now," he said. "Is there another way out of here?"

"This way," she said, and pointed to a door

He wondered if this was still another trap, but went that direction anyway. "Thank you," he said, and discovered he was in a lot back of the club. He hexed the door to stay closed, then Apparated back to the hotel. He didn't know the building well enough to land in a specific room.

Snape felt hot and dizzy despite the cool air outside. Yes, there *had* been poison on Karkaroff's knife, and he thought he knew which kind. He'd better get back up to the room and use the antidote before trying to get Weasley back to Hogwarts tonight.



Ron heard muffled noises in the bathroom, as if someone was in pain. He grinned to himself. When Mum and Dad went out, every once in a while Dad overdid it. To think of the story he could carry back to school if Snape had done the same!

The bathroom door was half-open, which was a surprise. The Potions Master had his shirt off and was trying to treat a slice in his left shoulder. Ron shuffled closer, hoping the green look to the cut was just an effect of bad lighting. There was a scrape on the professor's jaw, too, as if someone with a ring had tried to break it.

"Mr. Weasley, since you are already awake, perhaps you can help," Snape said briskly. "Go into my room, look in the closet, and bring me the black satchel. Pick it up *only* by its handle or you will regret it."

Ron felt reassured by the Potion Master's tone of voice and did as he was told. Snape's room was far neater than his own, and the closet full of robes much better than Ron had ever seen the man wear at school. The satchel was on the floor of the closet right next to the shoes.

He gingerly picked it up and carried it to the bathroom. Snape waved his wand over the lock and the satchel popped open. Ron leaned forward. The wound on his teacher's shoulder really *was* turning green. That couldn't be good. Besides, Snape was covered in sweat, and the room wasn't that warm. Ron avoided looking at the horrible black tattoo on the professor's left forearm, though he wondered where all the other scars on the back and chest had come from. Harry was right. Snape had come here to do more than play chess.

His teacher swiftly pulled everything out of the satchel

right-handed. "You may as well learn something tonight," he said. "Obviously, there was poison on the knife that caused this wound. Now we can both learn what kind and the proper antidote. This will not be on any test in class, but since you're a friend of Potter's you may need to know this anyway."

Ron relaxed a bit. It couldn't be that serious if he was going to be lectured on it. Snape was right, though. He did need to know this kind of thing. "Of course, sir."

"Once I was away from the fight I tried to let it bleed a bit, since I wasn't sure it was poisoned at the time, and I wanted to prevent infection. Unfortunately, the knife probably went too deep for that to help much. Whatever the poison is doesn't seem to be working fast, which is good. One of the antidotes I brought should work on the cut itself, and another to take care of what I've already absorbed internally."

Ron was fascinated. "What kind of poison do you think it is?"

"Oil of trenner root is often used in Eastern Europe," Snape said. "Since Karkaroff is the one who stabbed me, I suspect he used that one. The symptoms I've been having so far are consistent with it, too. The antidote that goes on the skin is in a paste form that is spread on top and is rapidly absorbed that way. I also need to drink three ounces of distilled roseapple root." He pulled a small green box and a dark bottle out of the group on the counter.

Ron opened them both, since it was clear Snape didn't

have the use of both hands just now. Under his teacher's directions, he spread the paste on the cut and wiped his fingers on a wet towel. Then Snape drank the potion after Ron had measured out the correct amount.

The cut turned darker under the paste, and the green area got bigger instead of smaller. "Is it supposed to do that?" Ron asked.

"Hmm." The Potions Master's eyes flickered for a moment. "Interesting. The paste is supposed to turn my skin back to its normal color. I wonder, did he use serpent tongue instead?"

"What's that? A kind of snake venom?" Ron remembered what Harry had said about Nagini, the huge serpent that his friend had seen with Voldemort last year.

"Not really. It's made from a rare plant found by the Caspian Sea. It has similar symptoms to trenner root, but works faster and reacts badly with the antidotes I've just used." Despite the calmness of his voice, Snape's face was turning ashen.

"What is the antidote for it, then?" Ron was beginning to feel frightened.

"Nightingale oil. And it doesn't have anything to do with nightingales, either, but with the tree they like to nest in. It's an ornamental once found in gardens during the time of the caliphs."

"Like the Arabian Nights, then?" Ron asked. *He knows more weird stuff than Hermione does!*

"Precisely. The relevant point is that I don't have any. Let

me see what else I've got. I may be able to substitute something else for it. At the very least I can test it and make sure it's not something else entirely." The professor's mouth tightened as he checked through the various bottles and other containers. "I don't see anything so far..."

Ron didn't like his teacher's color at all now. Wasn't an emir like a caliph? It couldn't hurt to ask about this nightingale oil. "I'll be right back," he said, and took off. Besides, if Rafi was really a genie maybe al-Hadoud's servant could find it.

"Where do you think you're going?" Snape said, though his voice didn't sound good.

Ron was out of the room and knocking on the emir's door before anyone could stop him.

Rafi answered and let Ron in. "Now, what can be wrong this late at night?"

"Someone's been hurt. He got a knife slash on his left arm," Ron said, pointing to his own. "It's not me, okay? But the knife had poison on it, something called serpent tongue, maybe, but he put the wrong antidote on it and it didn't work."

Rafi's eyes went wide. "We need not wake the emir for this," he said. "It is a wonder this person is still alive. I am glad you came to me, though."

Ron was really worried now. "He said something called nightingale oil might work. Is there any around here? He's not looking good."

"There is none here. But I can search one of my master's palaces for it, and the potion he must drink along with it. I shall return." Rafi dissolved into his bottle.

Ron stood there, hoping it wasn't going to be too later. Judging by what Rafi said, Snape could die. Now he had a moment to think, he wondered how his teacher had gotten hurt in the first place. Just a knife wound could have been a bar fight getting out of hand—both Bill and Charlie had a few stories about those that Mum and Dad hadn't heard—but poison on it sounded personal. Especially a poison that reacted badly to the antidote that Snape had with him. That sounded like someone who knew the Potions Master well enough to use his own expertise against him.

Then the genie appeared with a couple of bottles in his hands. "The small one has the oil," Rafi said. "That must be spread on the wound and the skin around it. The larger one must be drunk. He cannot use any other potion for pain with it, no matter how much he wishes to."

"What is the other potion? He'll want to know," Ron said as he took the bottles.

"It is tincture of flowering melotis," the genie said. "It will counteract whatever else he has taken. Its effects are unpleasant, but necessary."

"Thank you, Rafi!" Ron left, and soon was knocking on the door of his own room. He wished he'd remembered the key!

After a few moments, Ron said, "It's me, Professor Snape,"

and knocked again. What was he going to do if Snape couldn't open the door?

At last it did open. The Potions Master was there, his shirt still off, and breathing heavily. "We need to leave for Hogwarts," he said.

"Rafi found it!" Ron said, holding up the two bottles. "You'd better use this stuff first." Even he knew it was a bad idea to go through the Floo network when you were feeling sick.

Snape moved to let him in and closed the door. "What is it?" he asked.

"He said the potion in this bigger bottle will counteract the antidote, and the stuff in the smaller bottle goes on the wound. He said you couldn't take any pain potion with it, though."

The Potions Master sat down wearily in the bathroom again. Ron opened the vial with the nightingale oil in it and put it on the cut. Snape didn't say a word, but his face tensed as bubbles came out of the wound and spread over the skin. The green coloring began to retreat, though, and the cut itself didn't look as bad as it had before. Then Ron opened the second bottle. His teacher sniffed it first, and grimaced. "Yes, this is melotis. Rafi is right, it *is* unpleasant." He drank it anyway, though for a moment it looked like Snape was having trouble keeping it down.

The Potions Master began to shiver. Ron fetched a heavy robe from the closet. "Bandages in the bag," Snape said quietly, waving away the robe.

Ron found them and put one over the cut once it was done bubbling. Then he helped Snape get the robe on. "Professor, I could fix that scrape on your face."

"Really?" Snape looked doubtful.

"I fix them at home all the time when Mum isn't around. It's just a charm, so it probably wouldn't affect either potion any."

"You must be behind on your reading again. But I doubt some playground chant would actually do much, so go ahead if you really feel you must." A glint of amusement reached the professor's eyes.

Ron felt embarrassed, but wasn't going to give up just because of that. He *knew* it worked. It certainly had on his brothers, and especially on Ginny. He focused on the scrape on Snape's jaw and said,

"Don't tell Mum and don't tell Dad,

Now it doesn't hurt so bad.

Now the scrape has gone away,

Shake hands and get back to play.

"Now we have actually have to shake hands, sir, or it won't work."

The Potions Master raised one eyebrow but offered his right hand. Ron took it in his own, surprised at how hot it felt, and shook it. At first it didn't look like the charm was going to work, but then the discolored jaw faded till it became its normal sallow color.

Ron yawned. He felt really tired now.

"Tell me, does your family even *get* a letter about underage magic during the summer?" Snape asked, fingering the now-healed jaw.

"Not since Fred and George," Ron said through another yawn.

"Somehow I am not surprised," Snape said. His voice sounded a bit stronger. "You had best get some sleep, Mr. Weasley. I will be up for some time, and we can go to Hogwarts in the morning."

Ron wanted to ask his teacher if he had any games left, but was too exhausted to worry about that now he knew Snape probably wouldn't die tonight. He stumbled to bed and was asleep before he hit the pillow.



Snape put on another robe and sat down in a chair in the outer room of the suite. He'd taken tincture of melotis once before, and knew he was in for a long night. While in the chair he could brace his still-numb left arm and read something to distract himself from the pain.

He had been surprised by the Weasley boy's resourcefulness and clear thinking. He was annoyed at having to be grateful, but things could easily have been much worse without the boy's presence.

It had been a mistake to go to that meeting. When he was by himself he could take such risks, but not when he was responsible for somebody else. If Voldemort had

showed up, he would probably still be there and possibly in no shape to go anywhere.

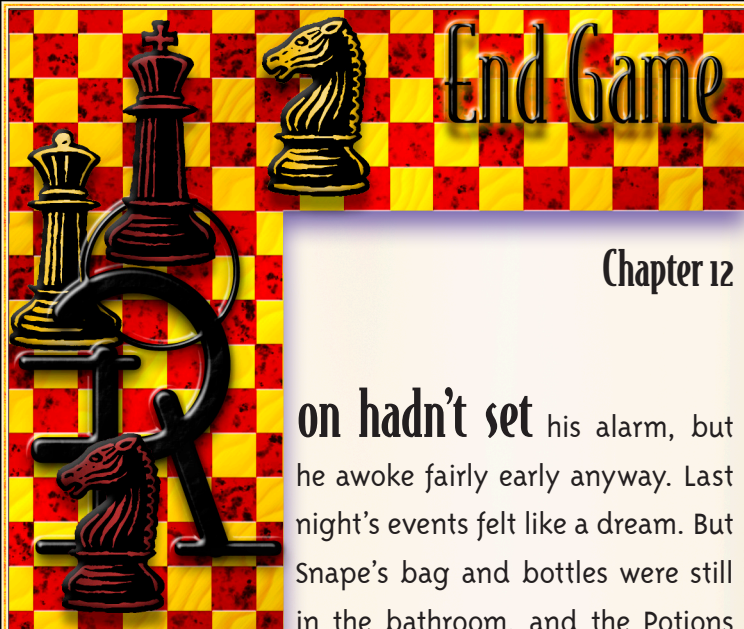
There would be consequences for his hasty departure tonight, of course. But he wouldn't have Weasley to worry about, though if the next meeting was at New Year's, he might have Draco. He would have to talk to Dumbledore and have some tasty tidbit of disinformation to feed to the Dark Lord to convince Voldemort that his services were still of value. Fortunately, he hadn't said anything to Karkaroff besides his name.

Strange. The pain this time wasn't as bad as the last time he'd used an extract of melotis, though that had been only a small sample taken as a test. Perhaps it was being absorbed by the other poisons in his body, though according to the texts that interaction was supposed to make it worse. At least his jaw didn't hurt. He didn't remember being hit there, but hadn't been surprised to see the marks on his face when he'd gotten back here. No doubt that was why the girl had asked how he was.

Dumbledore had told him about the Gryffindor Trio learning some basics of medical magic from Madam Pomfrey, but Snape had no idea they'd had any talent for it. But then, Molly Weasley had been in training as a mediwitch when she'd quit and married Arthur Weasley instead. The boy's charm had worked as neatly as one from a professional.

He felt his eyes drooping, and stumbled towards his bed. He hadn't really expected to sleep tonight, but wasn't going to turn down the gift. The wards on the room were strong. He'd renewed them just before leaving for the meeting, and the racket they would make if someone tried to break through them would certainly wake the Weasley boy, if not him. They could Floo to Hogwarts in the morning.





Chapter 12

on hadn't set his alarm, but he awoke fairly early anyway. Last night's events felt like a dream. But Snape's bag and bottles were still in the bathroom, and the Potions

Master himself snoring behind a closed door so loudly Ron had heard him in the next room.

He dressed as quietly as he could. Then he noticed a letter on the table next to his clock. He opened it, and it said, *If I am not back by the time you read this, go to the emir's room and ask him if he will help you speak to Dumbledore. Do not take any time to pack. Give the rest of this note to the emir. He will be able to read the rest of it.* After that came a few lines of snaky-type writing that must be Arabic.

But Snape had come back. Then Ron figured it out. The professor must have forgotten to take the note away last night. He was afraid to think how close Snape came to dying. A good thing that Rafi had found the right stuff! Ron folded the paper up and left it by Snape's door.

He finished getting ready and went to al-Hadoud's room. Rafi was there. "It worked and he's sleeping now," Ron said quietly, in case the emir was awake. "Thanks a lot!"

"That is good," said the servant. "I would offer you breakfast, but the master is still resting. His last games are late in the day, just before the ceremony, and he will rise at noon. I will be glad when he is back in his favorite palace again."

Ron could take a hint. "I'll be here then," he said, and left. He wondered what would make a good present for a genie. Just saying thank you didn't seem like enough.

He had breakfast down in the restaurant, signed for it, and looked around. The tourney floor was full this morning as the adults finished out their schedule. He checked the board, and sighed with relief. Snape didn't have a game till after noon, either. He'd stop by and remind the professor about it before he went to al-Hadoud's room.

Ron was undecided about what to do when the serving boy he'd talked to before beckoned to him and offered to split tips again. He did fairly well and had made several Sick-



les worth in change, when a too-familiar voice spoke to him.
"It's sad to see a pure-blooded family reduced to this," said Lucius Malfoy, who was playing Gerrit of Germany.

Ron bit back several words he was certain Mum would smack him for.

"Didn't I tell you to go away already?" Gerrit said, looking at him.

"Now, why is that?" Malfoy purred.

"The kid's a bad-luck charm! I've lost two games when he was hanging around, one to the Arab and one to that damn big black raven. And both times this red-headed boy was watching every move."

"Sounds like I should offer him a chair."

Ron began backing away. He didn't want any part of this.

"Please don't go, Mr. Weasley," Malfoy said in a gentler tone of voice. "Trust me, I can make it worth your while." He put a single Galleon on the table.

Ron knew he should get out of here. But he couldn't help realizing that the coin could help him get a proper present for the emir, and not just the cheapest thing on the souvenir table. He nodded, and pulled up a chair. *It couldn't hurt to watch, could it?*



Molly Weasley had just finished the morning dishes when she heard the family clock tick loudly. She scurried

over to it and bit her lip. Ron's hand had just moved from
AWAY TO DANGER.



Snape finally woke up. His left arm hurt like fury, but only on the shoulder. At least he had feeling there now, and he could move it a little. He picked up the note that the boy had left. *I hope he went to the emir's room*, he thought. He still wanted to leave for Hogwarts as soon as possible. He felt a momentary pang of regret at the games he would miss, but that wasn't as important as the Weasley boy's safety. The hotel seemed all right, but so had the area for the All-Wizards' Tournament last year before the storm had broken loose. Of course, Malfoy would certainly object to any Death-Eater activity interfering with his personal glory, but Voldemort would have no compunction about staking out anyone as bait, even someone as high in the inner circle as Lucius was.

He changed the bandage, shaved and dressed, and cleaned up the mess in the bathroom. It was just as well that the Weasley boy had not tried, as some of the other items should be handled carefully. Then he picked up the box and the bottle that belonged to Rafi. They were obviously ancient, and likely valuable in themselves. Snape left, then knocked softly on the nearby door.

Rafi opened it. "Greetings," the servant said. "The emir

is still resting and cannot see anyone. I fear he could not see you even if he were up."

"I know," Snape said, trying to keep the bitterness out of his voice. "I only wish to return these, and to inquire after young Mr. Weasley." Naturally they both spoke in Arabic.

Rafi's face changed. "I wondered if he was asking for help for you," he said. "The boy mentioned no names, but it wasn't hard to guess."

"Yes. I commend you on the speed with which you found such rare potions."

"I had to go to a palace the emir no longer uses. Time is different there, you see. I could spend hours looking there if I had to without taking long in the real world. I am amazed you lived long enough for these cures to be of help, though. Only a real alchemist could endure such poison."

"If my students cannot kill me, then I doubt others can manage it," Snape said dryly. "I have one who can make his cauldron explode just by looking at it. But I must thank you. I apologize for not observing the formalities, but is Mr. Weasley here?"

"No. I believe he went downstairs to eat. I wish I could have had him stay, but the emir was not well last night, and is still resting. I will be glad when he has returned to his favorite palace."

Snape knew how some older wizards gained power from a specific place, and understood. "Then I need to find the boy.

I must warn you, this hotel may not be as safe as one would wish. Take precautions in case one must depart rapidly." He was saying far too much, but he owed Rafi his life.

"Ah. I shall do so. And there is one minor matter. The emir was concerned about Mr. Weasley at the reception. One does not expect much at his age, but he did not dress perhaps as well as he could have. Could you offer the boy some guidance?"

"He wore the best he had," Snape said, trying to suppress his temper. "The family is poor but very proud. There are seven children to provide for, and a Ministry salary is not always enough."

"His father is a government official and they are *poor*? He must be an honest man indeed!"

"Yes," Snape said with grudging admiration. "There has never been any question of that." *A pity the same couldn't be said of others. Fudge, for instance...* "But if Mr. Weasley is not here, then I need to go find him."

"Of course. Was it he who put that charm on you? I can feel its presence."

"Yes. When he used it, I believed it only a child's playground chant, but it worked much better than it should have. If you will forgive my haste, Rafi, I really need to find him." He wanted to chat with the genie as much as it appeared Rafi wanted to see him, but his time was not his own just now.

"I am sorry. I wish I did not have to keep you out in the

hall like this," Rafi said. "Perhaps we shall meet again."

"I hope so as well." Snape half-bowed, then walked away. Now that he thought about it, he shouldn't have been able to sleep so well or feel this strong after last night. Mr. Weasley was going to have more sessions with Madam Pomfrey if *he* had anything to say about it. Then he remembered the boy had done the charm wandless. No wonder the Ministry had never detected it.

He sighed as he headed down the stairs. He certainly didn't approve of how the Weasley boy scrambled for every coin, but under the circumstances he couldn't blame him. He'd felt obliged to tell the boy about the need to get al-Hadoud some kind of gift without thinking how difficult that might be. *Well, I hope he picked up enough this morning to manage something*, Snape thought. *If not, I hope the emir doesn't mind one of Molly Weasley's famous sweaters. Someone his age probably feels the cold even on a warm day anyway.*



Ron still didn't know how it had happened. But now he was in the middle of a game that could cost him twenty Galleons if he lost it. Lucius Malfoy was on the other side of the table. *I did it to myself*, Ron thought. *When he offered three to one odds I let my greed get the best of me. What am I going to do if I lose?*

Malfoy kept talking at him, which made it hard to con-

centrate. "I can see how worried you are, boy," he said. "If nothing else, you can always tutor Draco. It's no shame to take a little while to pay off a debt of honor."

Ron sweated with fear and stared at the pieces. How had Malfoy gotten one of his pawns so far up the file already? It was a pretty set, and remarkably well-disciplined. Malfoy was playing white, and those pieces were old-fashioned French ones. The king wore a funny wig, while the queen had wide skirts and poofy hair with lots of ribbons in it. One bishop was a genial-looking man with a walking stick, and the other a stiff-necked looking fellow with a nose almost as big as Snape's. The knights were men on horseback carrying swords, and the rooks were massive towers. The pawns were little soldiers in fancy uniforms.

The black pieces were different, though. The king was a short man whose chin stuck out and whose hand was forever tucked into his coat. The queen was a tall, beautiful lady with flat hair and a long, straight gown, who held roses in her hands. The strange thing was that one of the bishops was the same man with the walking stick that was on the white side, while the second bishop was sour looking, like Snape on a bad day in Potions class. These knights were also men on horseback, but with different hats and uniforms, and the rooks were tall, deadly guillotines. The pawns were little cannons, and there weren't nearly as many of them on the board by now as there should be.



"Why is the one bishop the same on both sides?" he asked. He might as well find out.

"Because that one represents Talleyrand, who managed to convince the King of France, the revolutionaries, the Directory, Napoleon, and the king who came after him that he was loyal only to them."

"Wow. How did he do *that*?" Ron scanned the board. There had to be a way out of the mess he was in.

"Very carefully," Malfoy said smoothly. "He managed it only because he *was* loyal to France, which he separated from whoever happened to be its ruler at the time."

Ron couldn't see what to do. He was doomed. *I'll be getting Howlers from Mum and Dad till the end of the year.*

Malfoy smirked. It was easy to tell where Draco had gotten the expression. Then he moved his lead pawn forward again.

It was so frustrating to have that piece there! He had to pay all his attention to it and none to his regular game.

"Mr. Weasley, would you care to explain what is going on here?"

Ron never thought he'd be glad to hear Snape's voice, but he was now. "Umm... a private game, sir."

Malfoy glanced up at the tall, dark figure standing nearby. *Am I imagining it, or is he surprised to see the professor? I wonder how much knows about how Snape got hurt.*

Then Malfoy looked at the chessboard again. "This doesn't concern you, Severus. You have a game of your

own not too long from now."

"Mr. Weasley is one of my students, Lucius. It annoys me when one of them ignores what he was taught. Speaking of which, boy, how many times have you been told to play the pieces, not the player?"

The acid tongue stung, but Ron didn't mind. For a moment, he ignored Snape and Malfoy flicking snot at each other. He ignored the wrath that poured out of the Potions Master like heat from a fireplace. He ignored everything but the pieces on the board. *If I came to this fresh, the way I did to Gerrit's pieces after he was done playing the emir, what would I do? And what if I didn't care so much about winning as making sure Malfoy didn't?*

Once he asked those questions, things became clearer. He tried to reach the state of mind he had yesterday against Smerdlov, but couldn't. Well, he'd won at Hogwarts and reached his first draw with Konstantin without it.

You know, Ron thought, I really doubt someone like Malfoy has ever played Filch. He moved a piece forward. *Let the slaughter begin.*

Malfoy raised one perfect eyebrow not long after. "I thought you were a better player than that. Really, this kind of thing belongs with your schoolmates, not at a tournament like this."

Ron didn't say anything back. He didn't care about *looking* good right now, as long as some of his enemy's pieces went

to the side. Some of the exchanges were not always to his advantage, but several of them were. Then Malfoy decided to copy him, and his queen began hauling off pieces with her shepherdess crook. During one confrontation, Ron used his king to attack when too closely pressed. The piece pulled his hand out of his coat and used the tiny pistol it held to finish off Malfoy's bishop, the big-nosed one.

Then Ron got rid of that horrible pawn in front, even though it cost him a knight. He ran his one remaining bishop (the one with the walking-stick, of course, it was a survivor) up the line till it threatened Malfoy's back row. That made Malfoy drag his queen back. Ron retreated the other direction and knocked off another pawn. Malfoy moved his knight back towards his own side to threaten the bishop. Ron moved up a pawn to support the bishop, then Malfoy thought better of forcing the exchange and moved his queen back out.

By that time one of Ron's rooks was able to join in. Since Malfoy had castled, one of his rooks had been out and around already, but the white king was less mobile because of it. Ron, on the lookout for evil pawn exchanges since he'd met Brentwood from Ravenclaw, ignored the main line of play for a moment and took another white pawn.

Now that really upset his opponent, judging by the way his pale eyebrows went up. In a few short moves white was threatening Ron's back row again. Ron was glad his

king could move, since this was beginning to look like his game with Snape back at Hogwarts. In fact, soon he was shuttling the piece back and forth between two different squares, praying for a miracle, when one of the officials wandered by and watched for a moment.

"Looks like a stalemate to me," Snape said in a neutral voice.

The official nodded. Malfoy sighed unhappily and agreed. Ron looked for a moment. No, this was different from the game he'd played with the Potions Master. The moment that Malfoy stopped putting him in check, he would be able to move his bishop and put *Malfoy's* king into check. And if that happened, Malfoy would have to move his queen in harm's way to block it. Ron had plans for when and if that happened. It was obvious that Malfoy had a good idea where that might lead, too, or he wouldn't have agreed with the official.

Snape glared down at him. "It seems that way to me, too, sir," Ron said.

"Then it's settled," said the Potions Master.

"Here, sir," Ron said, bringing out the gold coin that Malfoy had let him take after agreeing to the game. "You must have dropped this earlier." There were worse things than being poor.

Malfoy grimaced. "Thank you," he said curtly, and stood up.

Snape smiled unpleasantly. "Ready to face a grownup in a bit?"

Ron hastily got out of his chair. Snape looked pale, but his dark eyes glittered.

Malfoy smiled back, just as nastily, and sat down again. "I don't need any rest to play you, Severus. Are you sure you're feeling well enough?"

"Why shouldn't I?" Snape sat down. "I didn't stay out as late as some people I know."

"He wasn't pleased by your absence."

"He won't be pleased to learn that private grudges are interfering with his plans. I may have a few words to say about that the next time."

Ron was terribly afraid he could guess what, and who, they were talking about. Then Snape jerked his chin in his direction and said, "But we have a game to play right now. Other matters can wait."

Malfoy grimaced and picked up two pawns to draw for color. Snape ended up with black.

At first white and black mirrored each other. As Ron watched, he checked the time. *Snape is going to miss his second game with Morris*, he realized. *He might as well get credit for this one, however it turns out*. He quickly walked over to the registration table and wrote down Malfoy and Snape in one of the blank brackets reserved for grudge matches.

In just a few moves, Ron saw that both Malfoy and Snape were trying to clear the way for their stronger pieces. Snape quickly got both knights out, the kind of

move he preferred himself, while Malfoy had a knight and a bishop, and a diagonal cleared for his queen. It didn't take Snape long to bring his queen out, either. Ron hastily got his tattered notebook out and kept track, though his pencil was only a stub by now.

Tension filled the air. Ron remembered what al-Hadoud had said about some games being played for blood or revenge. The Potions Master leaned forward intently, with a look on his face that would send Longbottom hiding under his desk. Malfoy leaned back with a smile.

Ron was vaguely aware of some other people gathering around the board, but firmly kept his place. It felt as if the two players were communicating with their pieces, the way he and Konstantin had. Judging by the occasional comment, Malfoy and his teacher had played before. But Ron had never felt such fury in Snape before, not even in the Shrieking Shack.

Snape stared at the board for a moment, then slid his bishop down left-handed. Malfoy's eyes widened just a bit. Ron thought that Snape had found out just what he'd wanted to, given the quick glint of satisfaction that showed in his eyes.

Then Malfoy's knight took a black pawn too deep in white's territory. Snape's response was to bring his queen back to safety. Malfoy had a smug look on his face, while the Potions Master grimaced. Ron wasn't so sure that Snape really felt he was in trouble. *He probably wants*

Malfoy to think he is, though.

Malfoy gleefully took Snape's knight, but just as quickly lost his bishop. Ron couldn't think what the point of that exchange had been. Then one of Malfoy's pawns snuck up and threatened Snape's bishop.

Snape quickly took the piece back. Malfoy curled his lip contemptuously, but Ron thought it was the only sensible thing to do. Ron remembered how Abercrombie had taught him what a pair of bishops could do. Maybe Snape remembered *him* sending Vinnie and Greg out to play back at Hogwarts.

But Ron didn't like the way Malfoy kept moving up his pawns. He recalled their little march from the game he'd just played.

Then both players castled. Ron didn't quite see why, till he noticed how the rooks on either side were now able to reach the center. Ron's heart sank, though. His teacher's pieces seemed cramped, while Malfoy's controlled over half the board, especially in the center. This was looking *very* familiar.

Malfoy smiled again, obviously pleased with the situation. Snape's face was oddly still, as if he were thinking so hard he couldn't be bothered with a facial expression. Ron took heart from that. Some of his own best play had come from those blank spaces.

Both players continued to move their pieces towards the center, though white still held control. Snape's eyes suddenly took fire, as if he knew what he had to do.

Malfoy continued to look pleased with himself.

Snape continued fighting for a better position as he brought his knight forward. Then Malfoy took his own knight back. *Of course*, Ron thought, *my favorite strategy leans on my knights. It's just weird to see other people who don't realize how important they are.*

Then he saw how moving the knight left Malfoy more room to bring in other pieces. Maybe it hadn't been such a bad idea after all.

Then Snape slid out his bishop after moving his queen over and back. Suddenly the board looked quite different. In just a few moves the game looked a lot more equal. This time Malfoy was the one who took his time studying the board.

Malfoy got a calculating look in his eyes and moved his rook over. Ron couldn't figure out why, though. Snape could have captured a white pawn with his bishop, but he would have lost it immediately after. Looking further ahead, Ron vaguely guessed there were some other combinations involved, but since Snape raised his eyebrows and moved his queen again, it must not have been worth the risk.

Then again, taking the alternate path would have given Snape a way to sneak his knight further on. But that wasn't the way the pieces had actually been played, so Ron decided he'd think about it later. He had a funny feeling the Potions Master had plans for that queen that he was maneuvering so casually right now.

Malfoy brought up a pawn to threaten the black knight. Snape retaliated by swinging it over to fork both of Malfoy's rooks, even though the white queen was obviously sitting there to take it, which it did. Snape then moved his own queen again in a patient march towards an unknown goal. *I don't know about Malfoy, but the way he's moving that queen would make me nervous.* It reminded him of the way Konstantin played.

But Draco's father still appeared confident, and he should, since the board appeared to show white in the lead. The next few moves seemed to confirm it. Malfoy's pawns were still asserting control. Ron wondered why Snape hadn't used his normally aggressive strategy in the beginning of the game. Maybe he'd played Malfoy before and knew it didn't work.

Then Snape stretched a little, only to grimace for a moment as his left arm obviously hurt him. Malfoy had a nasty look in his eyes.

Ron could have kicked himself for forgetting last night. *Snape almost died, and Malfoy knows it,* he realized. *It's amazing that Snape can play decently at all.*

And Malfoy kept moving his pawns on up. Things didn't look good at all. Then Snape finally moved one of his pawns, obviously setting up an exchange. Draco's father naturally took the one that brought a piece closer to the center. But now there was room for Snape to send

his bishop to threaten white's rook if he wanted to, once he'd passed the surviving pawn up.

Instead, he took white's pawn with one of his own. Then Malfoy advanced his knight to a better position, as least as far as Ron was concerned, by taking that black pawn. White's layout was looking all too familiar. *I wonder how Snape is going to get out of this,* he thought.

Then Malfoy's knight moved to fork both the black king and the bishop. Snape instantly responded by taking the knight with his bishop, though it was an obvious sacrifice to that nasty little white pawn.

Now Malfoy had a pawn too close to the end, just as he had the game before. But Snape just let it sit there, instead of taking it with his queen, and sent his rook down to threaten Malfoy's king. Ron wasn't sure he understood that move. Of course the white rook took the black one to keep the king out of check.

Then Snape faced off one of the white bishops with his last remaining one, both of them the walking-stick ones. Ron *really* didn't understand that move, till he spotted how the black bishop was protected by Snape's other rook. Then Malfoy did something Ron didn't understand either, and moved his rook closer to the king. Then Snape moved his queen, and both moves suddenly made sense. Malfoy *had* been watching how his teacher maneuvered his queen, and it was worrying him. *I wonder why Malfoy isn't using his*

queen very much, Ron thought. He had thought of several things to do with the piece, and Malfoy hadn't done any of them. Then again, considering how badly he'd played against Draco's father, he wasn't the one to ask.

Although if he had been Snape, he would have moved the black queen all the way over to the left and made white sweat about what he was going to do next. Instead he moved it over just one square.

Malfoy brought his rook up a couple of squares, probably thinking about threatening the black queen. Snape advanced a pawn one space. *Why isn't Malfoy's queen taking that pawn?* Ron wondered. Instead, Malfoy advanced the white pawn over on the right one square.

And put it right where the black bishop could take it without any threat from Malfoy's queen. Ron couldn't figure out that move, unless Malfoy was setting up some kind of trap.

But Snape neatly blocked the pawn with one of his own. He probably had plans for that bishop and Ron wanted to see what they were.

Malfoy drew his bishop in closer to his king. Draco's father was playing a lot more defensively now.

Ron's pencil broke as he rapidly recorded all the moves. An ancient hand gave him a new one. Al-Hadoud was standing by him now, staring at the game as avidly as all the rest. There was a pretty good crowd watching by this time, but neither Snape nor Malfoy appeared to notice

anything but the game.

Ron nodded his thanks to the emir, then turned to watch the game himself. Snape captured the other bishop with his own, though he had to know what the king's response would be. Ron watched the plump white piece pull out his sword and execute the bishop with a wild look of joy in his eyes, echoed on Malfoy's face.

Then Snape put the white king in check with his queen. Everyone's mood sobered. Malfoy slid his king to safety, and Snape moved two squares over. *Why isn't Malfoy using his own queen? That piece could cause a lot of trouble just by taking the black pawn and hunting down that last rook.* It just didn't make any sense.

Of course, Malfoy had other things to think about now. He moved his rook to threaten black's queen, although Ron still thought he ought to use his own instead.

Snape moved his queen over to the right. Malfoy moved his rook up again. Then Snape moved his king up and over to the far left. Ron tried to figure out why the emir was nodding his head and smiling. Well, Snape had kept Malfoy's rook from being a threat, and that was always good. And if Malfoy decided to move his queen down to the first black row, or move it at all, then Snape was safer this way.

Malfoy finally did move his queen to take the black pawn all the way over to the right, though Ron thought he should have done it long ago.

Then Snape moved the pawn furthest up one more space. Ron wanted to jump up and down and shout. If Malfoy's queen took it, then she was gone, and the white king nearly unprotected if white's last rook didn't move fast enough. And after that spot, there was nothing left to guard the king! Malfoy had one pawn pretty close to promotion, but it was blocked.

Malfoy moved his queen down instead. And for some reason Ron couldn't figure out, Snape moved his king back to its original spot. Several in the crowd, including al-Hadoud, looked as if they knew what was going on. Ron wished he did.

Draco's father moved his queen over to threaten the pawns around the black king. Snape replied by moving his own queen to threaten the white rook, whether it stayed in place or attacked his own king.

Then the white queen threatened the black rook, and Snape maneuvered his queen to protect it. Now the black queen was now also in position to take the pawn protecting the white king! This was a *pretty* move!

Malfoy moved his rook over to give it a chance at the black king, and to get it out of the way of the black queen at the same time. Snape put the white king in check again by taking one of the pawns guarding it.

The white king fled over to safety. Snape put the white king in check once more by settling his queen on white's

back row. Ron saw how neat a move that was, too. The forward black pawn was within only two square of promotion, and now had the black queen to guard it.

By now Malfoy was looking angry. Snape was smiling, the same smile Ron had seen when the Potions Master had played Professor McGonagall.

Malfoy moved his king to safety again. Not that it did him any good, as Snape cheerfully slid his queen over to put the king in check *again*. Malfoy moved his king back to its old spot. Maybe he was hoping for a stalemate?

But Snape must have guessed it, because he did something different this time. He moved his rook over to protect his king and get it out of the way of the white queen, and the white rook.

Now that Malfoy was finally using his queen, it looked like he couldn't think of anything that he could do with the other pieces. He slid it over to threaten the forward black pawn, or maybe to get the black queen to do something besides check the king.

No, Snape was not distracted by it. He put the white king in check *again*. This time the white king drew his sword and waved it around, saying things in French that Ron would bet his Mum would clout him for if he said them in English. Snape's queen smiled, and lifted the roses she carried to her face to sniff them.

Once more Malfoy took his king out of danger. He

wasn't quite so calm any more, while Snape looked gleeful as he threatened the white rook while still protected from Malfoy's queen—and continued protecting the forward pawn. But Ron could see where white could still cause trouble. The game wasn't over yet.

Malfoy moved his king to give it more maneuvering room. Snape almost mirrored that move by tucking his own king out of the way of a marauding rook or queen. That made sense. If Draco's father moved down his rook, forcing Snape to take it, then Malfoy could use his queen to trap the black king.

The white queen threatened the forward black pawn instead. Snape responded by putting the white king in check. Once more, the white king ducked for cover. Snape moved a little closer this time, though not in check. Malfoy moved his rook in closer, trying to protect his king and threaten the forward pawn. Snape moved his queen to threaten the rook.

Malfoy took the temporary breathing space to move his king back to a more open area. Snape suddenly pounced backwards and took Malfoy's forward pawn. *How long has he been planning that move?* Ron wondered.

Malfoy was now enraged. He leaned forward and stared at the board. Then after a few moments, he moved his only free pawn ahead. *I bet he really wanted to take the black pawn, but knew he couldn't*, Ron thought.

The emir looked disturbed. "White's got it in the bag

now," someone behind Ron said.

How can they think that? Snape's pawn is a lot closer. Yeah, the white queen is after it, but if Snape keeps putting the king in check, Malfoy is going to have other things to think about.

Snape brought his last rook out towards the center. *Good idea*, thought Ron. Even if that pawn got smashed, a queen-rook combination could run white's king into checkmate anyway.

Malfoy stubbornly kept moving his pawn ahead. Snape responded by putting his queen down to white's back row, and threatening the white rook at the same time.

Malfoy moved his queen over to protect his king—and away from the traveling black pawn. Snape brought his rook down, not to the back row, but to protect that pawn.

Of course the white rook took the black one—and then the pawn took the rook! *Beautiful set-up!* Ron thought.

Malfoy grimaced at the inevitable, and moved his own free pawn forward.

Snape slid his own to the last row. Everyone was quiet as the small pawn transformed into a duplicate of the slim, beautiful woman who had given the white king so much grief.

And then Malfoy's pawn did the very same thing in the next move.

Four queens stood on the board. Ron was reminded of one of 'Mione's Muggle sayings, "Too many drugs or not enough". He'd *never* seen a game where this happened before.

But Snape was in a lot better position. His king was carefully guarded by a pawn diagonal, while white's was in *deep* trouble.

Especially when the first black queen moved right *next* to the white king. Malfoy moved his king out of danger, but by now everyone knew it was hopeless.

Then the second queen moved right next to the first, checking the king on the diagonal.

There was no way out now, even if Malfoy moved his queen to block the second black queen.

Lucius Malfoy slowly tipped his king over, and the royal head rolled an inch or so away. "Good game, Severus," he said as if the words had been forced from him at knife-point.

Snape merely nodded. Many stood around to congratulate him as Malfoy put away his pieces.

The crowd finally cleared. Snape took Ron by the arm. "We need to leave now," he said in a voice dripping with menace. "I will speak to you about your own game later.

Ron felt he was in no position to argue, though he would have liked to stay for the closing ceremonies. Then again, he was in enough trouble. They went up to the room, got packed, and headed down to the lobby. Snape paid for the rooms while Ron watched the luggage. People kept trying to talk to the Potions Master about the game, but it wasn't hard for Snape to snarl them away.

They went through the hotel Floo. But they didn't end

up in Dumbledore's office. Instead, they stood outside the tall gates of some closed-off estate.

Snape sighed. "I see Lucius wasted no time exercising his sense of humor. In case you don't recognize the place, Mr. Weasley, we are just outside the gates of Malfoy Manor."



Putting Away the Pieces

Chapter 13



Malfoy Manor? Ron asked.

"But how do you mess up a Floo?"

"Easily. A few coins to someone there at the hotel. Perhaps he distracted the wizard in charge of it and reset it himself. I'm just surprised he worked so quickly." Snape looked disgusted.

"Or he did it last night. You wanted to go to Hogwarts right away when the first antidote didn't work."

The Potions Master blinked. "That's a possibility, too. Playing this much chess has certainly improved the quality of your thinking. Except for this morning, of course."

Ron ducked his head. Part of him was still wistful over losing so many Galleons.

Then Snape did something really strange, and rang the bell at the gate. A servant answered it. "Yes, who is it? Oh, Professor Snape! Mister Malfoy said we might be expecting you fairly soon."

"Unfortunately I can't stay. Might I oblige you for the loan of one of the carriages?" Snape showed several Galleons in his hand. "Your master is still at the tournament, but he won't be in a good mood when he gets back. He just lost a game and didn't look pleased about it."

"Madam Malfoy will be disappointed not to see you."

"Not this time. Since I'm the one who beat him, I doubt my presence here when he returns would improve his temper. Madam Malfoy has seen our arguments before, and has told us both what she thinks about them. It would be a favor to her to see me on our way."

The servant reached through the gate, took the money, and disappeared. In just a few moments a horseless carriage arrived. The man piled up the luggage for them, though Ron picked one bag to keep with him. Snape gave the man yet another golden coin. Ron gulped to see so much money thrown around, but had enough of his wits left to realize how much danger they were in.

Soon they were on their way to Hogwarts. "This will take longer," Snape said, "but it'll be safer than trying to Apparate everything all the way. A public floo in Diagon Alley should be all right, especially if I'm rested enough to check it myself."

"Now that we have a little time, Mr. Weasley, would you care to explain yourself?"



Ron began, knowing there was no way to get out of it. "I was running for tips on the tourney floor when Malfoy gave me a whole Galleon to be a bad-luck charm against Gerrit of Germany. The German lost twice so far when I was around, and the other night he tossed me a coin to go away. Then Draco's father beat him, and started talking about how well I was playing. I shouldn't have stayed. I know how awful he is. But he was *different*, I don't know how to explain it."

"Grown men have fallen to the Malfoy charm when Lucius bothers to use it," Snape said grimly. "Continue."

"Then he suggested a game, and some money to make it interesting. I never meant for the stakes to get all the way to twenty Galleons. But with three to one odds..." Ron shook his head. "I know I was stupid."

"Yes, you were. You do not *ever* want to be in debt to a Malfoy!" Snape thundered.

"I... I was in real trouble when you got there," Ron said. "I don't know how I would have told Mum or Dad if I'd lost."

"No doubt Malfoy was hoping that you wouldn't so he could use your debt against you. And possibly against your father. I can just imagine how he would have had you pay it back."

"He said that maybe I could tutor Draco in chess," Ron said, knowing how lame it sounded.

"And how long would it have taken before either father or son started asking questions about your friend Potter?"

"Oh!" Ron hadn't thought of that. "But I'd never —!"

"You would be surprised, Mr. Weasley. And there might even be questions about Miss Granger. Lucius Malfoy is not pleased that she continues to get higher scores than his son in all their classes. You know what he is capable of, even against his own son."

"Quirrell."

"Yes. I should not have been surprised that a Gryffindor vain of his prowess would try to bite off more than he could chew. But it could have been worse. He could have let you win."

"What?" Ron didn't understand that at all.

"Sixty Galleons is a lot for someone your age. You might have liked having that kind of money to spend, and Lucius Malfoy undoubtedly has ways of helping you earn more. He likes finding out what people want and giving it to them. There is more than one way of being in debt to a Malfoy." Snape seemed to be looking inward.

Ron bit his tongue. The Potions Master continued. "You are extremely lucky that it turned out the way it did. Your little gesture in returning the other coin, though, will enrage him. Don't be surprised if he tries again."

"He might think he still had me in his pocket if I'd kept it," Ron said.

"Granted. But it's just the sort of foolish gesture your father tends to make, which led to the financial situation you're so dissatisfied with. What were your plans for the money if you had won? Did you have any?"

"There are worse things than to be like my dad!"

"About time you realized it. But answer my question."

Ron looked down at the floor of the carriage. "Mainly for Ginny. I can always borrow what I need from one of my brothers, but she's a girl. She has to have new stuff. But there's never enough. She never says anything, but she hates wearing the same dress more than once a week, even with the robes. I know she says she has to study on Hogsmeade weekends, but it's really because she doesn't want her friends to see she doesn't have any money."

"Why is this your worry, Mr. Weasley? She has two parents and several other brothers."

"It *is* up to me! She won't complain to Mum and Dad. Charlie and Bill are gone, and Percy's too busy being important. Fred and George worry some, but their idea to keep her occupied is to have her work in the shop. For one thing, they don't have to pay her.

"She almost died her first year because I wasn't watching her, Professor! If I had paid any attention, she might have told me about the diary. 'Mione — I mean, Miss Granger — might not have been petrified."

"But that was several years ago." Snape didn't sound so angry now.

"But Voldemort's back! Harry told me how ugly he was. What if he wants to become Tom Riddle again? Maybe he doesn't need the diary any more. Maybe he only needs

Ginny." *Please tell me I'm full of it*, Ron thought. *Yell at me for being an idiot, or something.*

Instead his teacher's eyes went narrow and his lips thin, as if he'd spotted a nasty trap on the chessboard he hadn't noticed before. "I shall speak to the Headmaster about this," Snape said quietly.

The carriage continued, though Ron didn't recognize the road or the countryside around them. Then again, he wasn't really sure where Malfoy Manor was, or how far from Hogwarts they were now. He wished that Snape wasn't so quiet. He didn't *like* getting chewed out, but that would be better than wondering what might happen to his sister. Having these thoughts in his own head was bad enough, but having the Potions Master take them seriously was worse.

The road started looking funny. The sky went all gray and dark, but not like a storm. "Where are we, Professor?"

"We're going a different way than anyone expects," Snape said. "I don't believe that Lucius knows this route." His face looked pale and drawn, as if his arm was hurting again.

"Um... are we making any stops?" It'd been a long time since breakfast, and almost as long since he'd last visited the loo.

"In a couple of hours."

Well, Ron wasn't going to argue when hearing *that* tone of voice from the Potions Master. He opened up the bag that had been left inside and pulled out one of his school books. He also found a Canary Cream and a couple

of chocolate frogs that he'd missed during the week. He was about to devour both of the frogs, then remembered his manners. "Chocolate frog, Professor?"

"Yes, thank you," Snape said unexpectedly.

Ron handed it over, then realized that his teacher had probably slept through breakfast and had the game on top of it. He decided not to push his luck by asking for the card, though.

"What was that other candy?"

"That was a Canary Cream. Fred and George make those," Ron said, and explained how they worked. "I gave a lot of those to Konstantin to show his friends when he gets home."

Snape smiled sourly for a just a moment. "That reminds me how I cured Black of getting into my book bag," he said. "I left a tube labeled pimple cream in there, and he took it. It was pimple cream all right, but not the way he thought it was."

Ron figured it out, and grinned. "Brilliant! My brothers could sell a million of those!"

"The formula is not difficult, Mr. Weasley. I suggest you do some research."

I bet Hermione could find it for me, Ron thought.

"I also suggest that you do the research, and not add to Miss Granger's study schedule," Snape added acidly.

How did he do that? Ron wondered. He nodded in hasty agreement and pretended to read his book for a little bit.

The Potions Master slumped against a corner, obviously

exhausted. Ron tried to make sense out of the chapter about the goblin wars he was supposed to have read two weeks ago, but it was no use. Reading was hard for him anyway, and the motion of the carriage made the letters bounce around even worse than usual.

Something suddenly occurred to him, and his mouth acted before his brain could stop it. "Professor... what did Malfoy offer you?" He realized what he'd said and thought, *Oh Merlin, I am so dead now!*

Snape blinked, coming up out of a half-doze. "You don't want to know, Mr. Weasley. You really, really don't want to know."

A while later Ron had one last question that wouldn't keep. "How many points have I lost for Gryffindor this trip?" he asked in a quiet voice.

"Oh, that. You're still twenty-five ahead. You would have been thirty-five, but you lost ten for being an idiot this morning. But this journey isn't over yet."

Ron hastily turned back to his book.



At lunch, Arthur Weasley came home to eat. He sat by his wife and watched the family clock. They both breathed a sigh of relief when Ron's hand clicked over from DANGER to TRAVELING.

"I didn't think the tournament was over till tonight," Molly said.

"It isn't. Let me turn on the wireless and see if they have any news." Arthur had heard rumors at the Ministry this morning about another Death-Eater meeting, this time in the same city as the tournament. Of course he didn't say anything about it to Molly, but he disliked that kind of coincidence. *That bastard Snape! If he's put my son in danger, I'll find a way to get him sacked!*

"And now the world of chess," burred the commentator on the radio. "Experts are still talking about the grudge match between Lucius Malfoy and Hogwarts Professor Severus Snape. The professor's unexpected and brilliant victory put him further up the ladder. Lucius Malfoy had no comment on his loss. Hogwarts is represented well this year at both levels, since one of its students, Ronald Weasley, placed fourth overall. Actually, his final game was an extraordinary draw against young Smerdlov of Ekaterinburg."

Both Weasleys cheered loudly for their son.

"Many people thought we wouldn't hear much from Hogwarts this year since McGonagall was unable to attend," said another commentator.

"Well, they were wrong. If they had checked the records, they would have found that Severus Snape won the cup as a juvenile for Hogwarts twenty five years ago. Let's hope he doesn't leave again."

"Indeed. In his first few games at this tournament, he drew against Morris of the States and beat Biggerson of

Sweden, which certainly wasn't the way to bet. However, the professor has not shown up for his next scheduled game. That one has been declared a forfeit. One hopes we will see him for his last game against al-Hadoud. We've owed Hogwarts itself, and the Headmaster expressed his pride in both entrants. Obviously, both he and Professor McGonagall encourage the game at the school judging by this year's players..."

Arthur Weasley wondered if the rumors about the Death-Eater meeting and Snape's departure had any connection. *At least it seems he's getting Ron out of there. A shame he gave up his own games to do it, though.* He had never liked the man much, but he could bring himself to approve of anyone who set his priorities the way the Potions Master had.

He sat down to eat, though he knew he couldn't tell Molly any of it. She'd send Snape a month's worth of Howlers if she thought the teacher had put Ron into any danger. *Not half of what I'd do myself!* Arthur thought wryly, though he realized just how likely it was he'd still be alive after trying anything on the irascible wizard.

But he was bristling for no reason. Ron was most likely fine now.



Ron was embarrassed that he'd fallen asleep in the carriage over the history book. At least that was probably

why he was slumped in a chair in the Headmaster's office. It appeared to be fairly dark, with only a couple of candles giving any light.

"You went by that road? Did you really think you were in that much danger?" Dumbledore asked, obviously talking to Snape. Ron kept his eyes closed to listen in better.

"I have learned never to underestimate Malfoy's sense of humor," Snape said acidly. "It was driven home last night that I can't take the same risks encumbered that I normally do alone."

"It turned out just as well."

"True. Weasley was more assistance than I expected. I believe we have all underestimated him. It's that vacant look when he's trying to get out of something, I suspect. From now on I think I shall give his work more attention."

Ron gulped. He got as much as he wanted already!

"It couldn't hurt. If nothing else, Mr. Longbottom will likely be grateful for anything that distracts you from him."

The Potions Master laughed harshly. "My vigilance is the only thing that keeps him from blowing up the dungeons."

"The boy does seem to have a special gift," Dumbledore conceded. "I still think you're too hard on him. But I digress. How do you think Malfoy will react to losing the chess game?"

"I'll find out at New Year's, I daresay. But it was still worth it. I've known how to beat him for years, but it seemed unwise. It was probably wrong of me to lose my

temper the way I did. Still, I can attribute any spite of his at the next meeting to the game, and not to other things."

"Must you go to Malfoy Manor then?"

"If I am invited, yes. It would be suspicious if I stayed away. Besides, it does Draco good to see that not everyone is afraid of his father. I am in favor of anything that persuades the boy to think for himself!

"I am also afraid that Lucius is lying about waiting till next summer for Draco to take the Dark Mark. Madam Malfoy is quite worried, too. I may be able to prevent it, but only if I am there."

This isn't the first time he's talked about Draco's mother like he knows her pretty well, Ron thought. The gate guard didn't seem surprised when Snape mentioned her, either, like it was normal. Weird.

"You are taking a grave chance, Severus."

"Almost as much as the one you took on me. That's why I wanted to meet with Karkaroff. He might have been ready to think for himself, too."

"Well," said the Headmaster, who sounded pleased. Then his voice changed. "Your left arm appears to be hurting again. Surely you aren't being summoned again so soon."

"It's not what you think. I did see Igor, only to have him greet me with a poisoned knife. The poison mimicked one that I thought I knew. Unfortunately, he knows his potions almost as well as I do, and it turned out to be a different

one calculated to react badly to the antidote I used. Mr. Weasley obtained the correct antidote through his friendship with al-Hadoud and Rafi. It's healing nicely now."

Ron was astounded to be given so much credit. Then Dumbledore sighed. "You will go see Poppy and have it looked at. That is not a request."

Snape sighed right back. "If you say so, Albus."

"But before you go, you'll have something to eat. I know you spent less time on the road than the hours that passed outside of it, but somehow I suspect you've been skipping meals again."

"I'm not going to argue this time," Snape said. "Oh, and Mr. Weasley, you can stop pretending to be asleep. I hope you got an earful. The next time you're annoyed with young Mr. Malfoy, remember what sort of father he has, and what sort you have. You have made that comparison once already."

Ron sat all the way up and grudgingly nodded. "But what about my sister?" he asked.

"What?"

"He has a valid concern about her, but I would rather talk about it later," Snape said, as he scowled at a house-elf bringing in a tray of food.

"Ah. The two of you had best eat, then."

The Headmaster sat in silence as Ron and the Potions Master tucked into a late supper. Ron was starving, and barely noticed what was on his plate before devouring it.

"Now, off with both of you. And don't forget to see Madam Pomfrey, Severus. You know what she's like — wants to collect the entire set."

Snape rolled his eyes and left. Ron hesitated for a moment, then said, "The whole tournament was great, sir. Thank you for letting me go."

"I am not the only person you should thank, Mr. Weasley. You aren't the only one who will have a great deal of work to make up because of this trip." Dumbledore smiled.

Ron sighed. "I know, sir. I'm just not looking forward to the next Potions class when he's going to be yelling at everyone again."

"Many people have survived it. You will, too. Now go on to bed. I'm sure your friends are sitting up waiting for you."

"Yes, sir!" Ron took off for the Gryffindor common room, with a brief stop at a loo, any loo, on the way. Once with his friends he could really *talk!* Well, about almost everything. He wasn't sure he wanted Harry or Hermione to find out how stupid he'd been about money again.



The next night at supper McGonagall announced the results from the All-Wizards' Tournament. "In the juvenile division," she said proudly, "Mr. Ronald Weasley of Gryffindor placed fourth, a fine showing for a first tournament. I am also pleased to announce that Mr. Weasley

participated in the juvenile game which was chosen as the most interesting. His match against young Mr. Smerdlov shows great promise for the future. Three cheers for Mr. Weasley and Gryffindor!"

Most of the room erupted into shouts and clapping. Then McGonagall became sober. "I am also proud to announce the results for the general competition. Our own Professor Snape placed fifth overall, though it has been over twenty years since he was at any tournament."

Slytherin went wild, then, though the cheers from the rest of the room were more subdued. Ron clapped enthusiastically, though, and eyeballed Harry and Hermione into joining him. He was the reason Snape had forfeited his last two games, which might have placed the Potions Master higher yet.

"Hogwarts has done doubly well this year. Professor Snape's victory over Mister Malfoy was chosen as the most interesting game among the adult participants. Three cheers for our own Potions Master!"

Ron noticed she failed to say *and Slytherin*, but wasn't surprised. The Snakes whooped and hollered anyway, though Draco was obviously torn. No wonder. Slytherin had won, but his father had lost.

It could have been a lot worse, Ron thought. I could have had to tutor the Ferret in chess!



Preparing for the Next Game

Chapter 14

uring the next couple of days, Ron moaned to all his friends about his make-up schedule. He had just gotten caught up from the Hogwarts Tournament before going to this one,

and now he was way behind. The only light on the horizon was the curtly-worded note from Snape saying that *due to the complexity of the assignments and the difficulty of scheduling extra time in the lab, you will have one week extra to make up work in Potions.*

I ought to save his life more often, Ron thought, though he nearly changed his mind during the first Potions class after the tournament. The only good thing about Snape breathing down his neck was the grateful look that Longbottom threw him afterwards.



And his first DADA class felt strange, too. He suddenly remembered that one set of scars on Snape's back had looked like claw marks. Surely something that had happened so long enough would have healed by now. But for a brief moment Ron considered the wolf that Lupin really was. Then the current professor spoke, and things were back to normal.

Now that he was older, Ron realized what it must have been like for Snape to come looking for students knowing that Lupin might be out there—and after bouncing his head on the floor of the Shrieking Shack when the three of them had accidentally knocked him out, too. Ron tried talking to the other two about it, they weren't grateful for him bringing back their own memories of that night. But Hermione, especially, looked thoughtful.

A couple of weeks later and it was the afternoon before everyone went home for Christmas. At least this year Harry was coming home with him. Ron looked at the bulletin board outside the Great Hall and noticed a new section called JOBS. There was only one notice, and that was from Madam Pomfrey.

Part time assistant needed during weekends to assist with preparations and restocking. Must have passing grade in Potions. Additional training in healing offered as time permits.

A modest pay rate was mentioned, about what Fred and George were having to pay their assistants that weren't family.

Ron looked at it for a few minutes. Part of him wanted to jump at the offer. Madam Pomfrey had already cornered him once and asked about that charm he'd used on Professor Snape. "We need as many things that work as possible," she'd said, though she hadn't explained for who or why.

It would be nice to have a bit coming in. He could save up and start his own account at Gringotts where (according to Bill) the money itself would earn without him having to do anything if he chose a statement account, and not a vault like most had. He didn't understand how that worked, but he was willing to take his brother's word for it.

Hermione looked at the notice, but shook her head. "I get caught up with my studying on weekends. Nobody bothers me at the library as much then," she said. "Besides, if you make a lot of simple potions for the infirmary, you're bound to get better at it just from the practice."

That made sense. And then Harry came up and looked at it, too. "No, that one's for you, Ron. I'm sure you can fit it in around Quidditch."

Ron hadn't thought about that. He was Keeper this year, but he knew it was mainly because he was Harry's friend. Balfour in fourth year was already twice as good as he was at the position. He thought he held his own in strategy planning sessions, but as far as actual playing went,

he had to admit that making the Chudley Cannons was probably not in the picture.

Besides, as much as he enjoyed playing, it still hadn't felt the same as all that chess had—especially the second game with Smerdlov. He hadn't made any sense at all describing it to his friends, but it was a feeling he wanted to have again.

"Do it, Ron," Hermione said in his ear. "Learn enough to save our lives. You're getting better in Potions, even with Snape breathing down your neck. Of course, after what happened at the tournament, maybe he's got a good reason for wanting everyone to be as good in Potions as he is."

Ron nodded, but was still a little doubtful. He liked his weekends the way they were now.

Then Malfoy walked by and sneered. "You really should take that job, Weasley. But you probably won't. People like you would rather complain about being poor than do anything about it."

Ron grinned. "Wait till you fall off your broom and see *me* waiting for you at the infirmary, Malfoy." He nearly laughed when he saw the dismay on the Ferret's face. "You talked me into it."



Draco scribbled a quick note and dropped it into Professor Snape's box. He didn't know why the Potions Master wanted the Gryffindork to take the job, but sneering at



the Weasel was such fun he probably would have done it anyway. But he owed Snape for helping get rid of Quirrell. He owed Snape for a lot of things.



Not long after, Ron and the others opened up some of the presents that had been owled in early while sitting in the Gryffindor Common Room. For one thing, Hermione was going home and wouldn't get to see their reactions to what she'd gotten them. Harry would get most of his presents on Christmas Day, but seemed happy enough with the quill set he got from Hermione and some amazingly garish socks from Dobby. Hermione's face lit up at the yearly sweater from Mum, the book on Magical Beasts that Ron had found for her, and the box from Honeydukes that Harry had gotten. "I'll have to hide it and eat most of it here," she said, looking wistful. "My parents never have sweets, not even on the holidays."

Ron already had his present from Hermione. Just last week he'd finished his commentary on Snape's game against Lucius Malfoy, and she'd found a place in Hogsmeade where they could copy it several times over with a Dicta-quill. She wouldn't let him pay for it, either, saying it was in self-defense — "I want to be able to read it, too, you know!"

Just as they were cleaning up the wrapping-paper, a fiery bird that looked a bit like Fawkes flew in the window and dropped off a package. "That wasn't a phoenix, was



it?" Harry asked.

"No," said Hermione, "that was a firebird. It's addressed to you, Ron."

It was a small, hard package with foreign-looking writing on it. Ron unwrapped it. "It must be from the emir. He should have gotten the stuff that Mum and I put together." Molly Weasley had contributed a sweater, he'd sent her a copy of the game analysis, and had gotten Ginny to agree to the other thing.

"That's why you wanted a good copy of the chess game," Hermione said.

"Yes," said Ron. "And I got something for Rafi, too."

"What can you get a *genie*?" Harry asked, amazement in his eyes.

"Ginny said she never played with her dollhouse any more, so Mum put in some of the furniture with everything else." Ron tore off the last bit of the paper carefully.

"Where is she, anyway?" Harry asked.

"Oh, she wanted to get in one last game with Abercrombie before he left," Ron said. "See, I had to promise to coach her in chess and let her borrow my set whenever she wanted for the doll furniture. I've been telling her how many more boys than girls there were at the tournament, and she wants to go to one sometime. Professor McGonagall thought it was a good idea, too." *And if you can't take that hint, Harry, then she ought to have the chance to go looking somewhere else!* Ron thought.

Harry chewed his lip. "A good thing she's the youngest," he said. "Am I going to get murdered at chess by everybody in the Weasley family?"

"Yes," Ron said heartlessly. "Mum hasn't had a chance at you yet, but maybe this Christmas she will." He looked at his present from the emir, which was a book.

"That looks really old," Hermione said.

Ron flipped through the pages. It was obviously a chess book from the diagrams. "There's only one problem," he sighed. "It's in Arabic!"

"A translation spell ought to work on it," said Hermione. "It'd be easier if it were cast by someone who knows the language already, though."

"And I know someone who does," Ron said with a grimace. "Of course it has to be *Snape*." He wasn't quite as frightened of the Potions Master as he used to be. "I think I'll wait till after Christmas to ask him." He knew he was going to get the book translated, though. He could just imagine what McGonagall would say if he didn't take advantage of what the emir wanted to teach him just because it meant dealing with Snape.

It doesn't matter that much what he thinks of me. I'm braver than Longbottom anyway. What's important is doing what's right.

Severus Snape looked at his invitation to Malfoy Manor with distaste. He had to accept, of course. Just as he'd told Dumbledore, he couldn't take the chance that Lucius had moved up his timetable. And if *another guest* were there, he would have the opportunity to claim that Karkaroff had attacked him out of private spite, and not on orders. That would allow Voldemort, if he wished, to pretend he'd known nothing about it. A few remarks about the tournament would also be in order, if only to establish that Lucius was acting from wounded vanity, and not from concern for the movement.

He tossed it down on his desk for now. Happy Christmas indeed with *that* in his future! Then he looked with more enthusiasm at the other packages in his office. Dumbledore had sent something, of course. He'd open that on Christmas morning at the staff get-together. But there were two somewhat larger packages wrapped in thick brown paper, along with a large envelope. There was also a scroll wrapped in red and gold ribbon that had been left in his box, along with a cryptic note from Draco assuring him that Weasley had taken the bait about the infirmary job.

Snape looked at the scroll first. He recognized Weasley's handwriting, even though Gorgio's Dicta-Quill Service had neatened it considerably. He would bet several Galleons that Miss Granger had thought of taking Mr. Weasley there. *Well*, he thought, *at least I'll be able to read it.* Ron

Weasley's papers were often an exercise in cryptography.

He scanned through it quickly. It was interesting to see the game that he had won against Malfoy through the boy's eyes. Weasley had pointed out several flaws in both sides of the game, and alternate lines of play to go with them. *Come to think of it, Lucius often does let his queen sit till it's almost too late. And I nearly let myself get boxed in at the first.* What he found truly interesting was a comparison of his own queen maneuvering to that of Quirrell in some games played about ten years ago. The Squirrel — oh, what a nickname! He wished he'd thought of it himself! — had been an excellent player. For Weasley to see the similarities in the game he'd played with Lucius and then research them to find out if they were correct showed some good work. Some of the observations were quite naïve, but then the boy was young. It would be interesting to see a similar study on the second game between Mr. Weasley and Smerdlov.

Well, it wasn't as if he had that much to do between now and New Year's Eve. Hogwarts was almost deserted except for a few students like Potter who were better off here, though the Boy-Who-Made-Life-Severely-Annoying was the Weasleys' problem this Christmas. Snape doubted either the youngest Weasley boy or Smerdlov had actually understood what they had done in their game, and it couldn't hurt for either one to learn.

Then he opened the thick envelope. Snape actually

smiled to see the emir's handwriting, only to remind himself that it wasn't likely to be the kind of letter he had subconsciously hoped for all these years. It had been a while since he'd read much Arabic, but it quickly came back.

My dear Severus, it began. I shall skip the usual inquiries into your health, though I am glad you returned to Hogwarts safely. Strange men came to the third floor late the last afternoon of the tournament, or so Kafe said, and were apparently disappointed to find no one there. Perhaps it was just as well you left earlier, if only for the boy's sake.

It pains me that I failed you so badly. I must apologize for my sorry lack of hospitality. I have heard rumors since the tournament that evil men gathered to destroy one they felt was a traitor to them, and that he was nearly killed. Kafe finally confessed all to me, and so I know who that man is.

Yet it should not have mattered. Were you

Voldemort himself, you were still my pupil at one time. I forgot that. I grudgingly accepted your student as my own, and thought myself virtuous to do that little. Now I must face my own lack of honor. I hope these gifts make up in some small way for that.

I must admit, I was quite surprised to find out that the boy is a close friend of the famous Harry Potter and the young lady who is said to accompany them. Naturally, I would not expect Weasley to say much about the girl in regard to her modesty; but he also did not boast of his friendship or even mention the Potter boy. But then, I suspect you teach discretion as well as Potions.

Snappe sat upright when he read that paragraph. This was the last thing he'd expected to hear about Mr. Weasley. He'd always thought the boy had no brake between his brain and his mouth, especially after that astounding little question he'd been asked in the carriage on the way

back from Malfoy Manor. Once more I've underestimated him, he thought wryly. He continued reading the letter.

I know discretion, too. When the committee argued over your placement in the tournament, I sat back and glared disapprovingly at anyone who wished to discount the forfeited games. After all, everyone knows what I think of Death-Eaters. However, Lucius Malfoy is not as popular as he might like, and there was a great deal of sentiment in favor of anyone who beat him. Thus a compromise was reached, or why you placed fifth instead of any higher. But you will be invited in your own right to the next tournament. And there are lesser tournaments before then that may ask for your presence. I look forward to seeing you at them.

The gifts require some explanation. We were not able to play at the tournament. That is my fault; I could have arranged for a private game, but did not. You behaved prop-

erly at all times and did not push yourself forward after I had shown you my disapproval. And given Malfoy's unpleasant behavior once you were gone, it was as well you left when you did.

You will recognize the second gift. It means more than you think. One of my Palaces is set in a region out of time. One can spend an entire year there, and only a month will have passed in the real world. The life of a teacher is ruled by the clock and the calendar, so I thought perhaps the gift of additional time might be welcome. I do not go there myself now, of course; I am so old that I cling to each moment. I have visited there in the past, though, and still long for its beauty. But you are so young that it could do little harm. The djinn in charge of the place would be most happy to serve you as my guest. Use the bottle to summon Pafu, and he will gladly take

you there. He will also let you know when you must return to the outer world. There are all sorts of books there, as well as a laboratory that has not been used in decades. I would be delighted to have you there, even if I could visit you for only a little while.

Snape unwrapped the other two packages. The first was a box containing a beautiful chess set, a twin to the one that al-Hadoud always used. He pulled them out and set the pieces up. When the last one was in place, the white queen's pawn moved forward two places on its own.

Severus almost laughed. Well, this certainly beat the slowness of playing by owl! The other gift was a bottle, as the letter had said. He took the stopper out, looked down into it, and said, "Rafi?"

The djinn materialized and said, "Young sir! The master will be happy to know you have gotten his gifts safely. I shall return and tell him."

"And offer him my most sincere thanks," Snape said in Arabic. "I will be forever grateful." Oh, what would it be like to be out of time for a little while!

"I will convey your greetings," Rafi said, and disappeared. Snape finished the letter.

No doubt it will be safer for both of us for any future messages to be sent by Rafi. Yet I wanted to tell you how I sorrow that I was so blind. Let us hope that the eyes of your enemies remain so, but I fear that may no longer be the case. If there is no place else safe for you, take the refuge that I have offered. No afrit can enter my domain, not even one as foul as Voldemort.

I know you have responsibilities to those in your care. Dumbledore has told me little, but it was enough. Take care for yourself as well. Do not risk more than you must. I hope there are those at your school that you can trust. If what I believe is true, your path is darker than any I dare to walk. Take what light you are offered, and do not refuse it.

Know that you have friends, even though you may think you put them in danger by

acknowledging them. Give them a chance to acquire virtue as well. If you feel you must destroy this letter for safety's sake, yet commit the words and my love to your memory. Fare you well. May we see each other again when the darkness is gone at last.

The emir had signed the letter with all his names and titles. Snape knew he ought to dispose of the letter as al-Hadoud had mentioned, but he couldn't. Instead, he opened a drawer in his desk with a spell in it. He laid the letter in it, and the paper was absorbed by the wood till the drawer looked empty. Only he could call it back by pressing his hand on the bottom of the drawer. Then he placed Weasley's scroll inside, and muttered a charm so it wouldn't follow the letter. That way no one would wonder what might be inside an empty drawer, and would think they had found everything.

Snape sat and looked at the chessboard for a few moments, overwhelmed by the gifts he'd been given. *Time*. To have weeks of time that need not be accounted for to anyone... weeks of time when he need not fear being summoned, or to follow the daily grind of the school day no matter what... oh, that was a gift beyond measure.

He rubbed his left shoulder. Madam Pomfrey had had to re-open the knife wound in order to clean it properly, and then had charmed it closed again, but it still ached for now, and probably would for a while. Without Weasley's presence, he might have died of it.

He'd almost forgotten what it was like to be fully rested. He had a double life, but only the same number of hours as before. Maybe, just maybe, with the emir's gift he'd get to find out what it felt like to have some time for *himself*.

Then he heard a strange thumping against the door to his office. Snape got up and opened it after quickly hiding the bottle, only to find a very confused owl. *What is the Weasley family owl doing here?* he wondered. Errol was a familiar sight in the Hogwarts dining room.

Errol dropped a note and a package, then flew into the wall. Snape led the idiot ball of fluff out into the hallway, up one floor, and out a window. The stupid owl would have gotten lost in the place for a day or two otherwise.

Snape opened the note. *Dear Professor Snape—our Ron told us what happened at the tournament. We've warned him against gambling before.* Ah. That would explain the Howler Mr. Weasley had gotten about a week or so ago. *Both of us thank you for caring not only for his safety, but for his honor. Arthur is particularly delighted that you gave Malfoy what*

he deserved at the chess table, and wouldn't mind playing you himself sometime.

Ron is forever telling us how cold it is in those dungeons of yours. We hope this will help.

Sincerely, Molly Weasley

Snape had a horrible feeling about what was inside the soft package. His fears were confirmed when he pulled out a large black sweater. Astoundingly enough, it looked like it would fit. Normally he had to get his sleeves tailored, since his arms were so long. He felt the texture. The yarn was unusually silky, and his hand sank down into it. As he looked at it closely, he noticed it wasn't completely black. The strands had flecks of green and silver in them. Fortunately Mrs. Weasley had had the good taste not to put a huge 'S' on it.

He put a quick spell on it, and was surprised to find that it had been completely hand-knitted, instead of on self-moving needles. A woman like Molly Weasley had very little time to herself, particularly now, with the anxiety over the attack on her husband, but apparently had spent a great deal of it on *him*. The only magic in the sweater was a minor warming spell.

Well, the Weasley boy was right. It was always cool down here. Many potions ingredients reacted badly to heat, and

it was a tricky balancing act some days to put just enough warmth in the air to keep him from getting chilled.

He supposed it couldn't hurt to try to the sweater on. Just to make sure it fit right. And it would be far too rude to return it. It *was* comfortable.

Severus Snape allowed himself to sit back for a few moments and enjoy the warmth, both of the sweater and of knowing he was not completely alone. It couldn't last, of course; he rubbed his left forearm absent-mindedly when thinking of Malfoy's invitation, sitting like the Bad Fairy on his desk. But moments like these were all the more precious for their rarity. The least he could do was to appreciate them.



Checkmate



Author's Notes

Chapter 5

(just a note—the title is a popular mnemonic for people in zoology to keep all the classifications straight—kingdom, phylum, class, order, family, genus and species. But as you'll see in this chapter, the king, rarely an active piece, does have a role to play in one of the games besides that of helpless victim. Snicker).

I'm amazed at how many of you readers are considering taking up the game for themselves. It is fun, and well worth the trouble. My own playing ability puts me somewhere between "Fresh Meat" and "After Dinner Mint" despite how I write about it. As we all know, Ron's better than that.

Some of you have noticed that Ron calls his friends by their last names at times. I'm not British, but I have noticed that this is fairly common even among friends in the English school system. The Goddess (JKR) generally has Harry, Ron, and Hermione use first names among each other in dialogue to indicate their special friendship for each other, but under casual circumstances Ron could easily use last names for his friends and not mean anything by it. Of course, for him Hermione is a special case—

she's either Granger, Hermione, or 'Mione, depending the way he's thinking about her at any particular time.

Chapter 11

Why, yes, I did steal this title from the Dorothy Dunnett book of the same name. Heh. Now we find out Snape's real reason for going to the tournament.

Chapter 12

This chapter has The Game in it. It's based (ok, stolen from) on the eleventh game in the 1927 world champion series between Capablanca and Alekhine, I must thank taka_aerie for finding me the game and A.J. Goldsby at for displaying and analyzing it (go visit the site if you're interested in seeing the full analysis. This guy is such a Ravenclaw!).

Fischer and Spassky, eat your hearts out!

Notes on Lucius Malfoy's chess set:

The white pieces are those of the ancien regime, while black is obviously Bonapartist. For white, the King is Louis XVI and the queen Marie Antoinette. The bishop with the walking stick is Talleyrand (who really did have the kind of political career Malfoy mentions), while the stiff-necked one is Necker, the Finance Minister (who was Swiss). On the black side, the king is Napoleon Bonaparte, while the queen is Josephine (you ought to read Anthony Burgess's Napoleon Symphony, if only for the bit about Josephine and the roses of Malmai-

son). Talleyrand is one of the bishops, while the second one is Fouche, Napoleon's spymaster.

Another note on Talleyrand: there are only two other politicians that I know of who have come close to his record for um, 'flexibility' and longevity. The first is William Cecil of England, who was a clerk for John Dudley (Earl of Northumberland) in the reign of Edward VI, a clerk during the reign of Mary I, and Elizabeth I's chief councilor during her long reign. The next is Deng Hsiao Ping of China, since Mao's changes of heart were just as deadly as regime changes anywhere else, and who ended up Premier of China after Mao's death (actually, China's system of rotation is far more useful to it than the executions in other totalitarian countries, and I suspect we can all name Western politicians that a year or so of rice-picking just might improve).

I hope you have enjoyed this story. I know I did writing it. I thank you all for reading and appreciating what I've done.



COLLOPHON

The layout and formatting of this document was created in Adobe InDesign, utilizing commercial clip art from Dynamic Graphics, modified in Adobe Photoshop. Cover was created in Adobe Photoshop, Chess diagram is from the "Opera" Match of Paul Morphy, 1857. Diagrams on Table of Contents pages are also from this match. Information from Wikipedia.

Fonts used in this publication are: the Triplex family, by Zuzana Licko, distributed by Emigré foundry for body text. Titling and various other decorations are set in Bodega Serif and CHANK!'s Snipple. Various script fonts used in the project are P22's Cezanne, Edward Hopper, Rodin and Vincent, Adobe's Arcana GMM, and additional shareware and freeware fonts; Regallo A Playa, and Jane Austin. Adobe's Cheq was used in the chessboard graphics.

The chess game depicted in the graphics through the story is the match for the U.S. Championship of 1963-'64, played in New York between Robert Byrne and Robert J. (Bobby) Fischer. Information from A.J. Goldsby's web page of Best Short Games, which may be found at:

http://www.geocities.com/lifemasteraj/short_games.html#List%20of%2010%20best%20short%20games

Special mention should probably also be extended to Jack Davis and Linea Dayton for their efforts in producing The Photoshop 7 One-Click WOW Book.

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