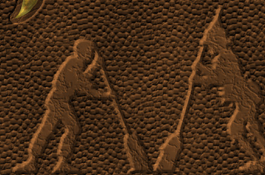


ADVENTURES IN FANFICTION

Squib Apprentice



By Ozma

A RED HEN PUBLICATION



AN ADVENTURES IN FANFICTION EDITION

All recognizable Harry Potter
characters © J.K. Rowling.

The plot plus any original characters
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Squib Apprentice

A HARRY POTTER FAN-FIC

A FLASHBACK STORY

ABOUT FILCH'S EARLY DAYS AT HOGWARTS

EVERYTHING IN THIS STORY BELONGS TO J.K. ROWLING
EXCEPT FOR MADAM VALERIAN, WHO HAS ALCHEMINE'S
PERMISSION TO COME OVER AND PLAY

(SPECIAL THANKS TO RABBIT AND JINX, WHO LET ME BORROW
A BOTTLE OF THEIR ELLA'S ENCHANTED EVERKLEEN!)

BY OZMA

(My thanks to J. K. Rowling who gave Filch life, and David
Bradley who portrayed Filch so brilliantly in the films.)

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Foreword

BY OZMA

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

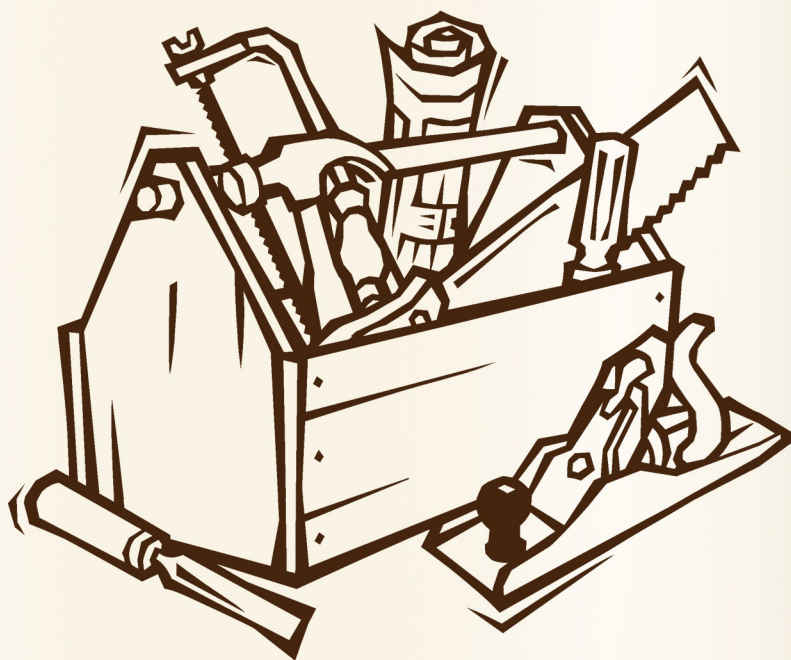
My kids are Harry Potter fans who were eager for more stories about the Potterverse. While they were waiting for J.K. Rowling's next book, we discovered the existence of Harry Potter fan fiction on the internet. Eventually, after enjoying quite a lot of these stories, I felt inspired enough to try writing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

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

Since Filch is one of my favorite characters, I was disappointed that his appearances in fan-written stories were so rare. It was even more unusual to see him treated sympathetically. I began to think about Filch, his place in the wizarding world and his relationships with the people around him. These ideas grew into stories and eventually became an epic which JOdel had now made, most wonderfully, into a series of books.

The results are yours to enjoy...

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Of Caretakers and House-Elves

CHAPTER ONE:

Of Caretakers and House-Elves

"ARGUS FILCH IS HUNGRY?"

"No," I said miserably, keeping my face buried in my pillow. My words were muffled and barely audible.

The house-elf heard me anyhow. A house-elf's ears are as sharp as they are large. "Argus Filch is thirsty, then?" the little creature asked me.

"No," I mumbled, untruthfully. My throat felt as dry as sandpaper. But I wanted to be alone.

The house-elf wasn't leaving. I heard the soft clunk of a tray being set down on the floor by my bed. Then I felt the bed move slightly. The little creature was suddenly right beside me. She patted my head gently. "Poor boy! Browly knows that he is not meaning to be so bad."

At nineteen, I was older than the oldest of the Castle's students. If I had been born a proper wizard then I'd be considered of age in the wizarding world.

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But Squibs have no real place in our world and I could never truly come of age as a wizard. So Browly wasn't wrong when she called me a boy.

The elf's kindness brought on the tears I'd been holding back. It was like a dam breaking. She smoothed my hair and made comforting sounds while I wept.

"Browly, I swear that I closed up that bottle of Ella's Enchanted Everkleen tightly!" I choked. "I really did! And even if I *had* been careless enough to leave the bottle open, I never would have left it balanced right on the edge of the shelf."

The storeroom had been such a dreadful mess. Broken glass everywhere and Everkleen in a huge puddle on the floor. And thousands of tiny bubbles (each bubble containing a tiny charwoman, singing a song about a nightingale) had completely filled the small room, along with the overpowering scent of primroses.

Looking furious enough to breathe dragon-fire, Apollyon Pringle — Castle caretaker and my master for all of a fortnight — had ordered me to clean up the storeroom. When I'd finally finished, he'd dragged me down to his office. Glaring at me, he'd taken off his belt, coiled it in one hand and tapped it meaningfully against his other hand.

"That Everkleen's EXPENSIVE stuff, boy!"

My parents had believed in long, earnest lectures. But Mr. Pringle took a more physical approach to teaching life's hard lessons. "Pain is the best teacher!" he often said.

When Mr. Pringle had finished expressing his displeasure over the spilled Everkleen and the mess in

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the storeroom he'd gone on to make his views plain on a number of other things that I'd done wrong. And he'd let me know, in no uncertain terms, that these mistakes were never to be repeated.

It seemed that yesterday, I'd misplaced an entire toolbox. He still hadn't found it. "Tools must ALWAYS be returned to their proper places!" The day before yesterday I'd knocked over and chipped a statue of Winnifred the Woebegone while dusting. "Always pay attention to what you're doing!" On the same day, I'd nearly knocked Pringle himself down the stairs while helping him carry a ladder. "Always watch where you're going!"

Mr. Pringle was fond of saying that he wasn't a well man. Bitter experience was teaching me that he was a good deal stronger than he looked. Particularly when he was angry, which seemed to be most of the time.

"Circe's Pigs, Filch!" the caretaker had growled when my punishment was done. "Isn't it bad enough that Headmaster Dippet saw fit to send me a Squib for my apprentice? Why in Merlin's Name did he have to choose one who's careless and clumsy and completely incompetent into the bargain?"

"Listen, boy," Pringle had continued, grimly, "it may be that only one of us will survive your apprenticeship! At the moment, I'd say the odds are in your favor. I'm not a well man!"

"I'm sorry, sir..." I'd mumbled. It had seemed the safest thing to say.

"SORRY!?!!" he'd snarled. "Does 'sorry' sweep up the glass and mop up the puddles?"

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"N-no, sir..."

"Don't ever be SORRY, Filch! Just learn to work hard and do what I tell you!! In the likely event that your ineptitude is enough to put me into an early grave, it's important that Hogwarts Castle is left in GOOD hands! Now, do something right for a change and get yourself out of my sight!"



"I'm sure that I put his toolbox back on the shelf exactly where he told me it should go," I told Browly. "I don't know how it got lost. And, that statue that fell...? I-I hardly even bumped it!"

I wiped my eyes with the back of my hand. "Almost knocking him down the stairs with the ladder... well, that really was my fault," I confessed, sadly. "I've never carried such a big ladder up so many stairs before. I didn't mean to be clumsy. I truly don't want to hurt the old man, let alone put him in his grave. It's just that the ladder was so heavy..."

Gingerly, I sat up to accept the cup of pumpkin juice that the house-elf was offering me. The cool drink soothed my throat.

"Do you think that Mr. Pringle will have me dismissed?" I asked. My voice quivered.

"Browly cannot say for certain. But Apollyon Pringle is waiting so very long for an apprentice caretaker. Browly is hoping that sir will give Argus Filch another chance before he is wanting to send poor boy away."

"I can't afford to make any more mistakes," I said, feel-

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ing quite miserable. "He mustn't send me home. My parents... they were so glad when I was given this chance. What would they say to me if I was sent away from the Castle in disgrace? I'd never be able to face them."

Browly patted my hand. The elf looked thoughtful. "Sir is wanting to be a good boy," she said. "Browly is seeing this plainly. It may be that the clumsiness and accidents is not Argus Filch's fault at all."

"I don't understand," I said.

"Argus Filch should be resting now. 'Tis a new day tomorrow. And maybe Browly can be helping Argus Filch."



"Cursed brats!" Pringle snarled. "Gorging themselves into a stupor on sweets from home, and then going off to be sick in dark corners. It's an absolute disgrace! Inconsiderate little wretches! At the very least whoever did this could have tried a little harder to make it all the way to a toilet! If I had my way, I'd forbid all the families from sending their brats sweets from home!"

He paused to glower at me. "What's the matter with you, Filch? You're positively green."

"I'm sorry, sir, I've never cleaned up another person's..."

"Well, you'd better get used to it then, hadn't you!" Thrusting a mop into my hands, Mr. Pringle stalked off down the corridor.

Swallowing hard and averting my eyes from the reeking pile of vomit, I leaned against the wall. A suit of armor nearby began to shake. Then, right before my

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horrified eyes, the whole thing simply fell to pieces! It made an incredible noise. And the helmet landed right in the puddle of sick.

What had made the armor fall? I hadn't even touched it! Aghast, I waited for Pringle to come storming back to scold me about my clumsiness. But apparently he was out of earshot.

Trying not to breathe too deeply, I picked up the helmet as carefully as I could and dipped it into my scrub bucket to wash it clean. Clouds of tiny charwomen rose like miniature valkyries, warbling sweetly. I had no idea how to go about putting a suit of armor back together again.

Deciding to deal with one problem at a time, I mopped up the pile of vomit, too upset about the broken armor to gag at the stench. Then, carrying the bucket of dirty water, I went to the nearest broom cupboard to rinse out my things.

With a sound like whip-crack, Browly appeared in the broom cupboard the moment I opened the door. I wanted to ask the house-elf if she knew anything about fixing suits of armor, but she was scowling fiercely.

"Oh! Bad!" Browly hissed, "Is very bad! Not *you*, silly Argus Filch!" she added, when I flinched. "Is HIM!" The house-elf shook a tiny fist at the empty air behind me.

I didn't have time to ask her who she meant. A small man had appeared, floating in mid-air in the corridor just outside the broom cupboard. He was cackling wickedly.

"Peeves!" Browly shouted, stamping her foot. "Why

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is you getting poor Argus Filch in so much trouble?"

"What is *that*?" I asked, wide-eyed. I'd already met some of the Castle's ghosts. They were pearly and transparent. And they made the air grow cold around them. This little floating man wasn't like that at all. "It doesn't seem quite like a proper ghost..." I said.

The creature's nasty little eyes glittered. "Oh, so I'm an '*It*' am I? And a '*That*' too? Fine beginning! What is THAT, then? Surely, IT doesn't seem quite like a proper wizard! IT's been here for over two weeks now and IT hasn't done a single spell! Can IT be a Muggle?"

Cupping his hands around his wide mouth, the little man began to shout, "Invaaasion!! Attaaaack!! Muggle in the Castle!!"

"Bad Peeves!!" Browly shouted. "Be quiet!!"

"I'm NOT a Muggle!" I yelled angrily. "I'm a Squib!!"

As it happened, neither Browly nor Peeves had been making noise at that particular moment. My shout echoed loudly. The young witches and wizards, all resplendent in their black Hogwarts robes, were poking their heads out of doors up and down the corridor.

My face flamed in humiliation. I wanted to crawl into a deep hole somewhere and stay there until I died.

Peeves howled in glee. He rolled about in mid-air clutching his sides. "An ickle Squib, is it? What fun!!"

Hissing, Browly grabbed a dust-cloth from a sack in the broom cupboard. Dipping it into my bucket, now filled with vomit-water too repulsive to produce any singing bubbles, she flung the soiled, dripping cloth at Peeves.

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SPLAT! She caught the wretched creature in the head.

"You is the one who is hiding Apollyon Pringle's toolbox!!" Browly cried. "You is knocking down statues and suits of armor! You is leaving bottles open and balanced on the edges of shelves! Bad, BAD Peeves!!"

"Bad house-elf!" Peeves retorted, venomously. (Apparently he didn't like getting hit in the head with disgusting dust cloths very much.) "Good house-elves are supposed to be quiet! This one is rude and loud! Maybe it's really a Goblin, eh? Little Goblin wants Pringle's tools, does she? Well, she can have them!"

Poor Browly squealed in pain as a rain of hammers, screwdrivers and wrenches began to fall all around her.

"Leave her alone, you foul thing!" I bellowed. Without stopping to think about what I was doing, I picked up the scrub bucket. Then I flung the filthy water at Peeves.

Shrieking in revulsion, the creature vanished. Most of the foul water went through the place where he'd been floating. The putrid mess splashed all over someone who'd come up behind Peeves to see what all the noise was about.

I stared in horror at Apollyon Pringle.

The caretaker's stunned expression slowly turned livid. He reached out a gnarled hand, befouled with dirty water, and grabbed me by the ear.



The old caretaker was in a dreadful rage. His grip was threatening to tear my right ear from my head.

"Filch," Mr. Pringle snarled as he dragged me after

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him into his office. "Do you understand that we do NOT fling buckets of filthy water about? EVER? No matter WHAT the provocation?"

I stumbled as he released me, then caught myself on the edge of his desk.

"Yes, sir," I gasped, clutching at my numbed ear. "I understand. I'm terribly sorry!"

"What have I told you about being SORRY, boy!"

"I'm sorry!" I repeated, not knowing what else to say. Then I shut up. I didn't want to make him angrier than he was already.

The students feared Mr. Pringle even more than I did. With good reason. Pringle had a cat o' nine tails. He'd told me that he used it on the students. I didn't doubt it, as I'd heard the young witches and wizards screaming in pain when he punished them.

Until now he'd treated me less harshly. This was not done out of kindness. "A flogging like that would put you off your work, boy. Then you'd be even less use to me than you are now!"

He kept manacles and heavy chains in his office, hung on the wall for use in "really severe cases." The thought that he might use those things on me now made me tremble with fright. When Pringle continued to remain silent, apparently trying to get himself under control, another dreadful possibility occurred to me.

"Please, sir? Are you going to have me sent away?"

"Dismissed, you mean?" the old man growled at me. "Is that what you want?"

"Oh, no, sir, please...! I can't go back home! Don't

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dismiss me. I'll do anything, I'll work harder, I swear it! Please!"

Pringle ran a gnarled hand through his hair, grimacing at the smell. "*Merlin's Teeth*, I need a bath..." he growled. Then he sighed. "Who said anything about having you dismissed, Filch?"

"No one, Mr. Pringle. But I've been doing everything wrong. And I-I thought..."

"If I could send anyone away, it'd be Peeves!" Pringle snarled. "I heard what the house-elf said. Peeves was the one who took my toolbox, chipped the statue and spilled my Everkleen!" The old man sighed again, visibly wrestling with his temper. "You haven't got enough magic to turn cream into butter, you've got ten thumbs on your hands where you should have fingers, and I've never seen anyone who can get lost in the Castle as easily as you manage to do! But it appears that none of the things that I blamed you for yesterday were actually your fault."

As incredible as it seemed, the fact that he'd punished me for things I hadn't done appeared to be troubling him.

"But I did almost knock you down the stairs with a ladder," I said, not wanting him to remember that detail later and grow furious with me all over again.

Pringle shook his head. His anger had faded, but he was still scowling. "You're not a very bright lad, Filch," he said, after a moment. "But you're an honest one, which is a rare enough thing. No, I won't be sending you away. Merlin help us both."

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Weak with relief, I sagged against his desk.

The old man studied me for a long moment. "Being sent home is the worst thing you can think of? Was living with your Mum and Dad as bad as all that?" he asked me.

"Oh, no, sir!" I was ashamed of myself for having given him the wrong impression. "I miss my parents," I said, earnestly. "And I miss being at home. It's just that, well, Mum and Dad have always been worried about what's going to become of me."

Explanations were probably unnecessary. But I wanted him to understand. "Years before I was born, my Mum and Dad knew someone who was... like me," I continued softly. "Gerrity. I don't know if that was his first name or his last. He was a tramp who wandered about doing odd jobs, sometimes even for Muggles. When he couldn't find work to do, he would go begging. Gerrity froze to death, sleeping out of doors. It was early spring. No one knew there'd be snow.

"Mum and Dad don't mention Gerrity much, but I know that they think about him. They want to know that I'll always have a roof over my head and enough to eat. I don't want to make them worry about me again, just when they thought I was settled. Thank you for letting me stay, sir. You won't be sorry!"

"I'd better not be," Pringle muttered, gruffly. He rubbed at his eyes, then grimaced again.

"I'm not a well man, Filch" he said, taking refuge in his familiar refrain. "I won't be able to bear too many weeks like this one. Give me your word. No more hurl-

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ing slop-water at poltergeists, eh?"

I gave him my word. "A poltergeist?" I asked, a moment later. "Is that what Peeves is?"

"Yep." Pringle settled into the chair behind his desk. "Haven't you ever met one before?"

I shook my head.

"This Castle has stood for nearly a thousand years," he said. "Think on it. All those centuries of adolescent witch-brats and wizard-brats with all their fears, their mischief, their uncontrolled powers and their nasty little urges soaking into the walls. That sort of thing leaves a foul residue. And, near as I can figure, that loathsome little creature is the result. If anyone wants proof that the brats are evil to the core, well, Peeves is it!

"And, if it was up to me," the caretaker went on, "I'd have Peeves Exorcised and good riddance! But the Headmaster says 'he's always been here' and that's the end of it."

Pringle waved me toward his office's other chair. When I sat down, wincing a bit, the old man gave me a look that was almost sympathetic. "By rights, I ought to beat you for dumping that water on me," he said. "But you didn't deserve the beating you got yesterday. We'll say that your account is settled, for now."

His bushy, iron-grey eyebrows lowered threateningly. "Filch, so help me, if you ever breathe a word to anyone that I let you off, I'll hang you up by your thumbs."

"I won't tell," I said. "I promise."

"As far as everyone else in this Castle is concerned, I've just thrashed you within an inch of your life. I've

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got a reputation to uphold, I do."

"Yes, sir."

Pringle studied me for a few moments in silence. "I didn't want to take you on," he said, gruffly. "I suppose I've made that much pretty plain."

"Yes, sir," I said softly.

"I thought you'd be completely useless. But you're not afraid to work hard, I'll say that much."

"Thank you, sir."

"You don't have to keep calling me 'sir', boy. I'm not a professor, am I? Call me 'Mr. Pringle'."

"Yes, Mr. Pringle."

He frowned. "I won't lie to you. I have my doubts that you'll ever make a proper caretaker. There's a lot of things that need doing in this castle that you simply need magic for! I don't know what the Headmaster was thinking when he took you on. Hogwarts is a grand place, Filch. Old and deep, full of secrets and mysteries from the deepest dungeon to the tallest tower. But, make no mistake, it's full of dangers, too. And it'll be worse for you, being what you are. Keeping the brats safe and out of trouble is one of my responsibilities. And now I've got to make sure that I keep you safe too. Even if it kills me. And it probably will..."

His frown deepened. "I never would have expected Peeves to choose you as a target. Normally he picks on the students and leaves the staff alone."

"Sir, what should I do about the poltergeist?" I asked plaintively.

"You? There isn't much you can do. I'll have a word

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with the Baron. You do remember the Baron? I introduced you to him in the dungeons, on your first day."

I nodded, shuddering.

"Peeves is terrified of him."

How sensible of Peeves, I thought.

"I'll ask the Baron to keep an eye out for you. We can't have the poltergeist annoying the staff, can we?"

"No, sir. I mean, Mr. Pringle." I smiled, tentatively.

The old man gave me a grimace that actually had smile-like overtones. Then, standing up and sliding his wand out of his pocket, he sent a small wave of magic towards a kettle on his desk.

"I'm going to go and have a bath now, Filch. You can stay here for a bit and have some tea."

"But, Mr. Pringle, what about the corridor upstairs? The bucket and the dirty water? I should go clean up the mess."

Exasperated, Pringle glared at me. "Not now, Filch. Consider my reputation! You're indisposed at the moment. Remember, you've just been beaten black and blue for the second time in two days. I'd wager there's a whole corridor full of brats laying odds against your survival, even as we speak.

"Intimidation," he whispered confidentially, leaning towards me. "It's the best way I know of, to keep the brats in their proper place."

His voice deepened to a threatening growl. "But, if you're having some difficulty in following my line of reasoning, then your new bruises can always be genuine ones."

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I shook my head, quickly.



Apollyon Pringle went to take his bath. After a decent interval which included time for a cup of tea, I crept slowly back up to the corridor where I'd thrown the dirty bucket.

The corridors still had a few black-robed students hurrying to class. I kept my head low and didn't meet anyone's eyes. The thought of the young witches and wizards making bets on how bad my punishment had been was dreadfully humiliating.

I was scrubbing the floor when Browly appeared beside me. The house-elf flung her arms tightly around my neck. "Poor Argus Filch!"

"Ow! Browly, don't!" I gasped. House-elves may be small, but they are quite strong.

The little creature let go immediately. "Argus Filch is hurt?" she asked sadly. "Apollyon Pringle is beating you again?"

I couldn't bear to lie to her. But I didn't dare break my promise to the caretaker either. How should I answer? "It was nothing worse than I deserved," I said, after a moment.

"At least Mr. Pringle saw what Peeves was doing," I comforted her, quickly. "And he heard and believed what you said about the poltergeist. He knows I didn't break or lose his things. And he said that he won't send me away if I work hard and try to be good. Thank you for helping me, Browly. Are you all right?"

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The house-elf nodded.

"I was afraid that Peeves had hurt you with all those heavy tools," I said.

"Browly is fine," she said. "And armor is not needing fixed any more."

"Thank you, Browly! You haven't seen Peeves anywhere about, have you?" I asked.

She shook her head, solemnly. "The Baron," she said, in hushed tones. "He is come to look for Peeves! Wicked poltergeist is hiding. So Peeves is not bothering Browly or Argus Filch for a while."

I smiled.

"Is Argus Filch wanting Browly's help with this floor?"

I shook my head. "No, you have enough work to do, Browly. This is my job!"

CHAPTER TWO:

Hagrid

DON'T TRY TO SHIFT *all* the cursed snow at once, Filch!" Pringle snapped. "You'll be of no use to me with a broken back."

The old caretaker moved briskly as he flung a small shovel-full of snow off to the side of the path that we were digging. "Pace yourself, boy. This stuff's the worst sort of snow, dense and wet. Lift only a bit at a time."

The sun hadn't yet risen, but the Castle grounds seemed lit by a pale, ghostly light. It was the begin-

Hagrid

ning of December and nearly two feet of snow had fallen during the night.

The professors and the students were presumably still asleep in their beds. But the groundskeeper Ogg and his apprentice Hagrid, along with a contingent of house-elves, Mr. Pringle and I were all hard at work, digging out paths to the greenhouses and to the groundskeeper's cottage. The students would not have to tramp through two feet of snow to reach their morning classes.

The old man was right, it was easier for me to lift less snow at a time. But then I felt more conscious than ever of being the slowest worker.

Mr. Pringle was using a small levitation spell to lighten the weight of his shovel. The fifteen house-elves who'd been recruited from the kitchens were working in a warm swirl of magic that made my nose itch. Their bright little shovels moved rapidly and tirelessly. Ogg, a short, burly wizard, had put a Heating Charm on his shovel.

Hagrid wasn't using any magic, but he didn't really need to, I thought enviously. The boy worked as rapidly as the house-elves, with no sign of growing tired.

When I'd first seen Hagrid at a distance, I had assumed that he was a grown wizard. It was only when I saw him close up that I realized how young he was. Surely, he couldn't be any older than fourteen or fifteen. I'd wondered why he wasn't at school with everyone else his age. He certainly wasn't a Squib. The magic in him was obvious.

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When I'd dared to ask Mr. Pringle about Hagrid, the caretaker hadn't said very much.

"He's a bad one, that boy," Mr. Pringle had muttered darkly. "Don't associate with him, Filch. Not any more than you can avoid."

This was easier said than done. Hagrid and I often took our meals in the Castle's kitchens at the same time. The huge boy was friendly and talkative. Thus far, he'd been undiscouraged by my monosyllabic answers to his attempts at conversation.



Sweating underneath my layers of clothing, I gasped for breath as I tried to keep up with the others. I barely had enough energy to take offense at the sympathetic look I saw on Hagrid's childish-rouned face.

I scowled. I didn't want anyone's pity! Maybe I wasn't huge and strong. Maybe I couldn't do any magic, but I wasn't useless...

Suddenly, my shovel seemed to weigh less. Wide-eyed, I turned to look at Mr. Pringle, who had his wand clutched in one gloved hand.

"Thank you, sir..." I panted.

To be honest, I was more worried than grateful. Slowly, as my weeks at Hogwarts became months, I was learning that the caretaker was not a very powerful wizard. He was adept at using what magic he had, but the flow of his powers tended to fluctuate widely. At the moment, keeping the Levitation spells on both our shovels was quite a strain for him. I could feel it.

Hagrid

Mr. Pringle was always saying that he wasn't a well man and that looking after me would be the death of him. I'd realized that it was just something he liked to say. Poor old man. I didn't want it to be true.

But the stern look on Ogg's craggy face kept me from refusing Mr. Pringle's help. The groundskeeper was perhaps the caretaker's only friend. Ogg knew Mr. Pringle's touchy pride, even better than I did.



The last path that we completed was the one that led out to the groundskeeper's cottage at the edge of the Forest. When we'd finally finished, the house-elves (clad in warm, fluffy Hogwarts bath towels, which fit them like winter cloaks,) vanished almost instantly. The whip-crack sound of their *en masse* departure sounded very loud in the crisp dawn air.

Mr. Pringle and I leaned on our shovels. Both of us sighed. Hagrid was still bright-eyed and energetic. Ogg was studying Pringle with understated concern.

"Care to come in for a wee drop?" the burly man asked the old caretaker in his gravelly voice. "We can have the lads put the shovels away, eh?"

Pringle allowed himself to be persuaded.



Carrying Pringle's shovel and my own, I stumbled after Hagrid as the huge boy strode easily along the path that we'd dug away from the tool shed. My arms, shoulders and back were aching.

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"Alrigh' there, Filch?" Hagrid asked, cheerfully.

"Fine!" I gasped. "Never better. It's a pity that we were finished so soon. I was just getting started. Could have gone on shoveling for ages longer..."

"Glad ter hear it," Hagrid said. The hint of mischief in his voice really should have warned me. But the snowball he flung at me came as a complete surprise.

"Stop that!" I snapped, brushing snow off my coat.

Hagrid's reply was to fling another snowball at me. The boy wasn't throwing as hard as he obviously could. It was a clear invitation to play.

Foolishness, I thought, irritably. We had a busy day ahead and neither one of us had breakfasted yet. I didn't know about him, but I was cold, wet and weary. I really didn't have time for this childish nonsense.

Then his next missile smacked me in the face! I suddenly discovered new reserves of energy. Dropping the shovels, I leaned down and quickly gathered a handful of snow. The battle was joined.

Yelling like a pair of first year brats, we alternately chased and pelted each other with snowballs. It had been ages since I'd played like this. I'd forgotten how much fun it was.

"Yeh missed me!" Hagrid shouted, gleefully, as one of my snowballs sailed over his head. "How could yeh miss? Aren't I a big enough target...ooof!"

My next throw had scored a direct hit.

Whooping, Hagrid picked me up and rubbed snow in my hair. Since he'd been kind enough to give me a lift, I was able to retaliate by shoving a handful of

Hagrid

snow down his back. Shrieking, he released me.

We'd scrambled off the path, chasing each other along the edge of the Forest. Hagrid could move more easily through the deep drifts than I could, but I was still able to hit him plenty of times. The boy was right, he was a big target.

Stumbling backwards to dodge an attack, I tripped over something behind me and went sprawling on my back into the snow.

The 'something' that I'd fallen over was growling. I heard Hagrid bellow "NO, BOB!"

A creature that looked like a large, long-legged dog was leaping at me. Stumbling through the snow, Hagrid grabbed the beast before it could bite.

"Easy, Bob... it's alrigh'... yeh saw us having fun an' yeh jus' wanted ter play with us, didn' yeh?" He set the creature down, still holding it tightly.

"H-Hagrid...?" I said in a very tiny voice, staring at the beast's sharp teeth before gazing into its intelligent yellow eyes. "That's not really a wolf... is it?"

"Course not!" the boy said.

Thank you, Merlin! I thought.

"Bob here is a werewolf!" Hagrid told me, brightly.



"Filch? I took Bob back ter the Forest. It's alrigh'. Now, say something, will yeh?"

Hagrid had collected the shovels and locked them in the tool shed. All the while, I hadn't moved from my place in the snow.

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"Talk ter me, Filch!" Hagrid said, crouching next to me.

"How...?" I whimpered. "How could that have been a werewolf? There's no moon at all, let alone a full moon..."

"Bob's not a human who got scratched or bitten. He's one o'the four-legged werewolves. I've known him since he was cub. Playful, he is. Friendly too, at least if yeh don't go tripping over him."

"Are you telling me that you PLAY with that... thing? One bite, or the tiniest little scratch, and y-you'd...!"

"Bob's never bitten or scratched me," the boy said, earnestly. "An' I know enough ter stay away from him during a full moon."

"Hagrid," I cried, my voice rising. "You go into the Forbidden Forest to play with werewolves?! Don't you know how dangerous that is? You're not even *allowed* in the Forest! Mr. Pringle..."

"The Forest is off-limits ter the students. I'm staff." The boy sounded as if that made everything all right. "Pringle don' like it much, but he can't punish me now."

"You're howling MAD!!" I wailed. "Surely your Mum and Dad must've told you never to play with werewolves!!"

"As a matter o' fact, they didn'," Hagrid answered, a bit sharply. "Are yeh alrigh' now, Filch? Are yeh coming in ter breakfast?"

"NO!"

"Suit yerself, then. But, if yeh ask me, I'm not the one who's howling mad! Wasn't me who spent the past ten minutes jus' sitting in the snow, was it?"

Hagrid

After the huge boy had stumped off along the path to the Castle, I finally picked myself up.

Trembling, I stumbled along the path to the groundskeeper's cottage.

I didn't want to tell on Hagrid. Nevertheless, someone had to, for his own good.



Groundskeeper Ogg let me in when I banged on his door. Two big mugs were resting on his scrubbed wooden table. But Ogg was alone.

"Apollyon's gone back to the Castle," Ogg said in his gruff way.

"S-So has H-Hagrid." My teeth were chattering. Being in the cottage, which had a warm, cheerful fire going, made me realize how terribly cold I was.

Ogg helped me tug off my wet coat. He put it to dry over the back of a chair near the fireplace. Stepping around Ogg's two huge dogs, Belle and Towser, I stood close to the fire, shivering. The hut was warm and tidy, everything in its place. Ogg's bed was neatly made up, as was Hagrid's huge cot.

"Is something wrong, lad?" Ogg asked.



The groundskeeper had rinsed out a mug for me. Sipping at something that burned its way down my throat, I told him about Hagrid and Bob-the-werewolf.

"Well?" I asked. "Mr. Ogg, what are you going to do to him? He could be torn to pieces wandering around

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in the Forest like he does! He really ought to be punished! Mr. Pringle would...!"

"Poor Apollyon," Ogg said. "He's just as glad that trying to keep Hagrid out of the Forest isn't his headache any longer. I'll have a word with Hagrid myself. Tell him to make sure that his ...friends don't follow him onto the Castle grounds, ever, even in the wee hours of the morning."

"That's ALL you're going to do?" I cried, appalled. I'd already suspected that Ogg was much too soft-hearted to punish his apprentice. "Talk to him? It doesn't matter if he's staff or not, Hagrid's only a boy!"

Ogg looked as if he thought that the difference between Hagrid's age and mine was negligible. This made me feel indignant.

"You could at least write to his parents," I said.

"I can't, lad. They're ...gone. Professor Dumbledore, the Transfiguration Master, is the closest thing that Hagrid has to a guardian. I'll speak to him."

I felt a flutter of fear in my stomach. I'd got Hagrid in trouble with a Professor! The Professors scared me even more than Mr. Pringle did.

Well, it was no more than Hagrid deserved, I told myself. Served him right, really. Someone certainly ought to take that boy firmly in hand. I had no reason to feel guilty about this. None whatsoever.

"Mr. Ogg?" I asked apprehensively, as my conscience gave me a twinge anyhow. "The Transfiguration Master... he won't have Hagrid d-dismissed, will he? His parents are dead, he'll have nowhere to go..."

Hagrid

"Don't fret, laddie," Ogg comforted me, gruffly. "There's some here that'd want to see Hagrid sent away, but Professor Dumbledore isn't one of them."



Hagrid was pale and red-eyed the next morning at breakfast. He poked aimlessly at his porridge without eating it.

Presumably, Ogg had spoken to the Transfiguration Master and then the Professor had punished Hagrid. The boy looked as if he'd spent the entire night weeping his heart out. He was still sniffing. What had the Transfiguration Master done to him?

Hoping that I would *never* give Professor Dumbledore any reason to be so angry with me, I discovered that I didn't have much of an appetite for breakfast either.

"It was for your own good," I told Hagrid, as firmly and virtuously as I could.

Listening to his desolate sniffing wasn't easy for me, even though I knew he'd only got what he deserved. "Werewolves should stay in the Forest. And you should stay OUT of it," I went on.

"Professor Dumbledore already tol' me everything that needed ter be said," Hagrid muttered, without looking at me. "The Professor is a great man, Filch, but yer a GIT. I've got nothing ter say ter yeh."

"Fine!" I snapped. "You're an OAF. I've got nothing to say to you either."

With a show of unconcern, I ate my breakfast, even though I wasn't hungry. Then I stormed out of the kitchen.

CHAPTER THREE:

A Riddle in the Dark

(Apologies to JRR Tolkien)

HAGRID, YOU OAF!" I said indignantly, from the kitchen floor. "Why'd you do that for?"

"It was jus' a little nudge, yeh git. Didn' mean ter knock yeh clean off yer chair. I jus' wanted ter wake yeh. Yeh were fallin' asleep with yer head in yer breakfast. Again."

"No, I wasn't!" I retorted, grumpily. "I was only resting my eyes." Picking myself up, I got back in my chair, trying to stay awake enough to eat my porridge.

"Restin' yer eyes. Tell me another," Hagrid snorted.

I was too busy yawning to reply.

Today was a Delivery day. Hagrid and I had to be up at dawn with the house-elves. Helping the little creatures put away the Castle's kitchen supplies was one of our regular jobs.

"Filch," the huge boy said, his tone a bit uncomfortable now. "Yeh really look terrible. Yeh're not sleepin' much, are yeh?"

"None of your business," I mumbled around a mouthful of porridge.

"S'not good fer yeh, stayin' up an' working most a' the night. Doesn't Old Pringle..."

"That's 'Mr.' Pringle to you!"

Hagrid scowled. "Mr. Pringle then. Doesn't he want

yeh in yer bed at night?"

"That's where he wants the *students* to be," I snapped. "I'm staff!"

For a moment, Hagrid looked as if he wanted to knock me off my chair again. Intentionally this time. Then his expression gradually changed to one of sympathy. "Filch," he said, his young voice gruff, "it's been over a week since it happened. They've forgotten all about it by now. The students, I mean. Yeh don' have ter keep doing most a' yer work at night, just ter avoid seein' 'em. It wasn't all the students who laughed at yeh, anyhow. It was jus' a few."

I stared into my bowl, feeling the blood rush to my face. "It was nine days ago," I muttered. "And the story's all over the Castle and no-one's forgotten. You certainly haven't."

The quiver in my voice shamed me. I wanted to be angry but even after nine days, humiliation was all I could feel.



I'd been sweeping the floor along the Charms corridor. Students had been hurrying by, or lining up for their classes. I'd been doing my work and minding my own business. There had been a sudden surge of magic. A young voice had spoken a spell.

"*Tarantallegra!*"

The spell had been aimed at me, but I hadn't realized it. Not until it was too late. My legs had begun moving of their own accord. I was suddenly dancing down the

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corridor, twirling my broom on my arm as if it was a pretty witch-lass. There had no way for me to break the spell, no way to defend myself. I was helpless, a jigging ape, clowning for the students' amusement.

There'd been a roar of noise all around me. Shrieks of laughter. A confused impression of grinning faces and black robes. I had wanted to strike out at the laughing faces but, to my shame, all I could do was dance and dance and dance.

There was another rush of magic.

"Finite Incantem!"

More confused impressions. My rescuer. A tall girl with long black hair, tied back with a tartan ribbon. She had the face of an angel. I saw pity in her grey eyes when she looked at me. When she released me from the spell that had forced me to dance, I fled, awkwardly stumbling over my own feet in my haste to get away.

My dustpan, my broom, my work were abandoned. The laughing students and my rescuer were left behind.

But my shame stayed with me. I carried it still.



Pringle found me in one of the broom cupboards. (Later, I wondered if he'd searched every broom cupboard in the Castle.) I was putting away supplies. My work in the Charms corridor had been left undone. I thought that he was going to beat me. For the first time I felt no fear at the prospect. I was too numb to feel anything.

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The caretaker didn't beat me. He didn't shout at me either, though my work was slow and clumsy. Pringle simply picked up the things that I'd dropped. He helped me turn the bottles and jars around so that their labels faced outwards. Together we arranged the shelves neatly, everything in its proper place.

When we'd finished with the supplies, Pringle helped me to break up the crates that were too battered to be used again. They'd be burned later, on the rubbish-heap.

Later when I asked him if I could be allowed to sweep and dust the corridors at night after all of the students were in bed, he told me, somewhat gruffly, that I could.



"Filch," Hagrid sighed. "Yeh know there's things worse than bein' laughed at."

"Yes, I suppose there are," I mumbled, staring into my porridge bowl. It was still mostly full. I was very tired and not especially hungry.

"What happened ter yeh... well, it's the sort o' thing that we... I-I m-mean the students, do ter each other all the time. Fer a joke," Hagrid said, earnestly. "Sometimes, even the ones who've had the spell put on 'em... they laugh too."

Lifting my head, I gave him a look filled with misery.

"Surely, yeh must've been laughed at before..."

"Of course I have. It doesn't get any easier with practice."

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"Look, Filch, yeh've got ter show yer face again sometime," Hagrid said. "Yeh can't go on like this. Barely sleeping and doing yer work at night when no-one can see yeh! Yeh've still got work ter do in the morning, and yeh have ter be awake ter do it!"

"The house-elves manage to work both day and night easily enough," I yawned.

"Yer not a house-elf! They don' need ter sleep as much."

I wanted to tell the young oaf to mind his own business. But I was too busy putting my head down on the table.



I must have dozed off. Hagrid and the elves had let me sleep. I woke to the sounds of squeaky elf-voices, and many heavy boxes and bundles being moved.

"Lally! You is not ordering cinnamon AGAIN! Where is we going to put all these new bags? We is having no more room!"

"If silly-headed Gillyflower is bothering to look at this weeks' menu she will plainly see cinnamon rolls on Wednesday, and cinnamon cake on Sunday morning!"

"Here is pickles. We is not needing any more pickles! Where is the onions? Why is they not ever bringing our onions?"

"Where is tea leaves? Hurry, we is needing them right away for Professors' breakfast..."

"Someone is needing to fetch the cheeses..."

Sitting up, I rubbed my eyes then I rose and stag-

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gered into the noisy kitchen to help.



The house-elves were busy with breakfast preparations. The Castle's kitchen was filled with noise and bustle. But the big storeroom beneath the kitchen was dim, peaceful and quiet.

Now that everything had been put away I'd given in to the temptation to rest my eyes again, just for a few moments. A sack of dried beans made a comfortable pillow. I was half-dozing, when I heard Hagrid's voice nearby.

"Yeh alrigh' there, Mosag? I brought yeh some cheese, an' a piece of chicken..."

A voice answered Hagrid. A strange, clicking voice. I couldn't understand what it said. But the huge boy seemed to understand well enough, because he answered in a comforting tone.

"I'm sure Aragog is jus' fine. Safe an' snug in his hollow. The snow's still too deep yet fer me ter take yeh ter him. In a day or two, maybe. He'll be so glad ter see yeh. He's bin lonely..."

The strange clicking voice said something else. It seemed a bit worried.

"Well, o'course he'll like yeh. Yer jus' like him, 'cept yer prettier! Now, yeh've got ter get yerself back ter the cupboard. Nobody'll hear us over poor old Filch's snoring, but it's better ter be safe than sorry..."

"Hagrid?" I called, woozily. "Who in Merlin's name are you talking to?"

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Silence.

"Hagrid...?" Groggily, I lifted my head off the sack of beans.

Hagrid stumbled into view, dark eyes wide and startled. "I wasn't talking ter no-one."

"Yes, you were. I heard you."

"Yeh were dreaming, Filch," the boy said, gruffly. "Who could I be talking ter? No one's down here but us."



"Hagrid's right," I thought. "I can't go on like this."

It was now the middle of the afternoon. I was resting on the floor in front of the kitchen fireplace. I couldn't remember walking over to the hearth. The last thing I remembered clearly was coming into the kitchen and sitting down for lunch.

Around me, house-elves murmured in concern.

"Poor boy. He is needing to rest."

"If Apollyon Pringle is finding Argus Filch sleeping, then boy will be punished!"

"Argus Filch must be hidden!"

There was a rustle of movement. I felt many small hands busily piling things on top of me. Was that a blanket? No, more likely it was a tablecloth. The tablecloth was swiftly followed by a heap of warm, soft dish towels. When I was completely covered up, a small hand gave my concealed head a gentle pat.



Sleeping in front of the fire, I dreamed.

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The Castle corridor was empty, except for the tall black-haired girl and me. She looked at me and smiled. I held out my hand to her and she took it. Her smile was the only magic I needed to make me want to dance.

A foolish dream but a very sweet one, nonetheless.

Abruptly, I was awakened by new voices in the kitchen. They were too deep to belong to house-elves. Wizards...

I could feel them as well as hear them. Their magic overwhelmed me, bone-weary as I was. The elder of the two was very old indeed. Age, time and many cares had dimmed his strength. Now his power was like a great bed of smouldering embers.

In contrast, the other wizard's magic was a white-hot, roaring furnace.

House-elves greeted the pair in squeaky voices. "Good afternoon, Headmaster Dippet, sir! Master was not at lunch! He is wanting tea?"

"Hello, Professor Dumbledore! Sir is missing lunch too! Is sir hungry? Is sir wanting some hot chocolate?"

Merlin's Teeth... the Headmaster himself! And the formidable Transfiguration Professor who had reduced poor Hagrid to tears! From the sound of things, they were seated at the table where Hagrid and I usually took our meals.

I heard the house-elves fetching them tea, hot chocolate and something to eat. Then the little creatures went about their business, washing up from the students' lunch. The Professors were left alone to talk. If I'd had even the smallest amount of magical talent I would have used it

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then, to avoid eavesdropping. Spying on the private conversations of my betters... well, I knew Mr. Pringle would never approve. If the old caretaker ever found out about this, he would have the skin off my back.

The Professors scared me even more than Mr. Pringle. If they discovered me, I might find myself wishing for the caretaker's relative mercy. I tried to keep very still under my nest of tablecloth-and-dishtowels.

Headmaster Dippet had just mentioned Hagrid's name.

"...behaving himself," the old wizard said. "No more trouble since that last incident? What was it ... a werewolf? Albus, I do understand that, in spite of everything, he means no harm. But the safety of the students must always be our first concern."

"I agree, Headmaster. Hagrid feels the same as we do. Young as he is, he would willingly place himself in harm's way to protect any of the students, or any of the staff. When I explained the danger to all concerned, Hagrid was considerably chastened."

Dippet sighed. "Albus," he said in a quavering voice, "I am troubled by the notion that the boy needed an explanation in order to understand that a werewolf is dangerous."

"Hagrid is so much at home in the Forest," Dumbledore said, quietly. "Realizing that the same is not true of everyone is difficult for him. His affinity for the wild creatures and places of this world is a gift. As with any gift, it may take years for him to understand it."

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"A gift, Albus? Perhaps so, but I fear that it is a Dark one. Oh, my dear boy, please don't look at me like that. I haven't said that the child himself is Dark. But, surely you must admit..."

"Headmaster, you know I have never believed that Hagrid, or any creature of his, was truly responsible for what happened."

Both wizards were keeping their magic and their emotions carefully in check. They might disagree, but there was clearly friendship and respect between them. Even so, the strength of their feelings was making their powers flare and surge. Aged and diminished as he was, the Headmaster's power was still enough to make me flinch. And the incandescence of the Transfiguration Master's magic was painful. A soft whimper escaped me. The Headmaster and Professor Dumbledore continued speaking, and I prayed that neither one of them had heard.

"Albus, you must continue to impress upon Hagrid the profound importance of keeping the Forest's creatures IN the Forest," Headmaster Dippet was saying.

"Yes, of course I will, sir," Professor Dumbledore replied.

"I know that you're very fond of the boy. But he's running out of chances."



For a time after the wizards had left the kitchen, I remained hidden, too filled with guilt and misery to move. What had I *done*? I should have kept my mouth

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shut. Why couldn't they just beat Hagrid or lock him up in chains? Those punishments would have been reasonable. But the Headmaster sounded ready to have Hagrid dismissed. The boy had no family. Mr. Ogg had said that Professor Dumbledore was the closest thing that Hagrid had to a guardian. If Hagrid was banished from the Castle, would he lose Dumbledore too?

To be cast out, alone, to starve in the snow...! Poor child. He didn't deserve that.

Exhausted and distressed, my work that afternoon was slipshod at best. Impatiently, Mr. Pringle boxed my ears. I hardly felt a thing.

Even now, Hagrid had a creature concealed in a cupboard in the storeroom beneath the kitchen. He'd denied it of course. Still, I knew what I'd heard. There was really only one thing I could think of to do.



That night, instead of attending to my dusting and sweeping, I crept down to the kitchen storeroom. The torch I carried made the shadows of all the boxes and bags seem threatening.

"H-Hello...?" I called out, my voice shaking. "I know you're in here! 'Mosag,' he called you. If anyone finds out that he's keeping you, he'll be sent away! You have to leave..."

Silence was my only answer. Nervously, I went deeper into the storeroom.

"Mosag?" I called. "Answer me!"

Suddenly, a black shadow rose from the floor, directly in front of me. It was huge, monstrous! Yell-

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ing with fright, I backpedaled frantically. Tripping over a crate of tins, I sat down hard. A huge hand caught my torch before it could set anything on fire.

"Filch! Shut up, yeh git! D'yeh want ter wake up the whole Castle?"

"H-Hagrid?"

"Couldn' leave well enough alone, could yeh? I honestly didn' think yeh'd have the courage ter come snooping down here, but I figured it was better ter be safe than sorry!"

"Hagrid, you're supposed to be asleep, not lurking in here!" I hissed.

"An' yer supposed ter be working upstairs, not sneaking about!" Hagrid retorted.

When the boy spoke again, his tone had turned plaintive. "Mosag never hurt no one, Filch. All she wants is a home an' a family. In a day or so, when the snow melts a bit more, I'll take her out ter the Forest!"

"No, you've got to take her outside now! I-I heard them talking... the Headmaster and your Professor Dumbledore. The Professor defended you, but Headmaster Dippet told him that you're running out of chances. If anyone finds out what you're doing..."

"Are yeh going ter tell on me, Filch? Again?" Hagrid tried to growl at me but he sounded more scared than angry.

"It'd serve you right if I did! But, no. I'm not going to tell, I promise. As long as you take that thing out to the Forest, tonight, right now!"

We stared at each other for a very long moment. Then Hagrid sighed. "Done," he said, handing back

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my torch. "Help me. I need yeh ter find a big empty box, or a nice big sack ter carry her in."

There was a large box that was mostly empty of food tins on a lower shelf. Stacking the tins on a nearby wooden pallet, I dragged the box over to Hagrid. The boy was crouching in front of a cupboard at the very back of the storeroom. He was speaking soft, coaxing words.

"C'mon, Mosag. It'll be alrigh.' I won' let anyone hurt yeh. An' I promise I won' leave yeh, not til yer safe with Aragog."

I heard a rustling movement. And the same strange clicking sounds I'd heard this morning. Curiously I moved my torch closer to Hagrid, meaning to get just a glimpse of Mosag. A glimpse was all I got. But it was more than enough.

The creature had a large, round, hairy body. And many eyes, gleaming. And legs! Lots and lots of long, hairy legs!

I screamed until I ran out of breath. Then I took a great gulp of air and screamed some more. Hagrid put his huge hand over my mouth. I sank my teeth into his thumb.

"YEEE-OW!" Hagrid bellowed. "Filch, yeh stupid GIT!!! NO, MOSAG, I'm alrigh'... DON' HURT HIM!!!"

It seemed that Hagrid's creature was as protective of the boy as he was of her. Her razor-sharp pincers gleaming, the beast leaped at me.

Still wailing, I swung my torch at her. Mosag leaped over me, her pincers slashing at the arm I'd

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flung up to protect my head.

Clicking and wailing almost as loudly as I was, Mosag scuttled rapidly towards the storeroom door.

"Git!" Hagrid snapped at me, clutching his bleeding thumb. After stomping out the torch that I'd dropped on the floor, he hurried after his monster.



Hardly aware of what I was doing or where I meant to go, I stumbled through the Castle corridors. It was very late. I still had work to do. Dusting and sweeping. Let Hagrid worry about his awful monster. As long as the creature was safely out of the Castle, the poor stupid oaf wouldn't be sent away.

Where was my dustmop? My broom?

Shivering even though I was sweating, I leaned against a wall. There was a soft whisper of magic, like a door opening. I tumbled through the wall to land on a soft rug.

Daylight. Sunshine and flowers. The room with the fountain, the loom and the tapestries. I would be safe here. The monster couldn't get me. Oh, Merlin, I was going to be sick! Mustn't make a mess in this tidy room. Hands pressed over my mouth, I leaned back against the wall and fell through again.

Retching miserably, I curled up on the corridor floor. Damp. Cool. The dungeons? How had I ended up here? Was I near the caretaker's office? I thought maybe I was. "Mr. Pringle... help me..." I whimpered. My voice was faint and weak.

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I sensed something then. A whisper of magic. As if another door had opened. Strong emotions accompanied the magic. *Elation! Recognition!* Then the joy darkened. *Anguish. Traveled Through, yes, but still no answering Recognition. Lonely... so lonely.*

Nearly delirious, I wept broken-hearted tears for something that couldn't weep for itself. I wasn't alone in the corridor now. A tall, black-haired boy had nearly fallen over me. On the wall at his back was an extremely plain tapestry.

"I know you," he said, quite dispassionately.

He didn't seem aware of the emotions swirling all around us. I sensed that he was overlooking something precious and important. But the feeling was too difficult for me to put into words, ill and fevered as I was.

"You're Pringle's Squib," the boy said. "What's happened to you?" Kneeling, he peered into my eyes and felt the pulse in my throat. His nose wrinkled at the stench of vomit. He lifted one of my arms, noting the tear in my sleeve and the gash left by Mosag's pincer.

"Poison, in a defensive wound," he murmured. "When fresh, the secretion of an Acromantula has a scent. Subtle, but quite distinctive. My goodness. How many of those creatures does Hagrid have?"

"No..." I gasped, frightened at how swiftly he'd figured out the huge boy's involvement. It was hard for me to stay focused and coherent, but I'd promised Hagrid that I wouldn't tell anyone. Making promises was something that I rarely did, but I always tried my best to keep the few promises I made. "Not Hagrid..."

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he didn't... he had nothing to do with..."

"Oh, no. Of course he didn't," the boy said in a very dry tone. Then he laughed softly. "Hagrid may not be as subtle as the scent of an Acromantula's poison, but his ...effects are certainly just as distinctive."

"Please..." I begged him. "They'll send the boy away. And he has no one."

"How terribly sad. The world is full of orphans, you know." The young wizard's voice was very cold.

I curled into a ball as dry heaves shook me, too sick to go on pleading with him.

"Foolish Squib. If you had any sense you would be less worried about Hagrid and more worried about yourself," the boy said. Then he sighed. "Another death in the castle would be most inconvenient. The memories are still too fresh. And then there's the fact that a certain sharp-eyed, suspicious individual would be bound to notice that your symptoms are nothing like those of the first victim. Perhaps you're right. Amusing as it would be to blacken Hagrid's name further, it would be best to leave him out of this, entirely. Though, if you're to live, we can't have you remembering anything about our conversation."

A surge of power from him made me cry out.

"Obliviate."



"Mobilicorpus."

Gently, I rose from the floor to float in front of a tall, dark-haired young wizard.

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"Well, I shall try to look on the bright side," he was saying. "At least you've given me another opportunity to play the hero."



"Filch, I'm sorry. I didn't know..." Hagrid said, miserably. His face was white. He looked very young and frightened. "I didn't know that she'd scratched yeh. They secrete a poison when they're afraid. Yeh scared her! She wouldn't have hurt yeh, if yeh hadn't yelled like yeh did."

"I scared HER? She scared ME. I didn't want to yell. I couldn't help it."

"I suppose yeh couldn't. Poor, silly git." The boy sighed and looked at his bandaged thumb, ruefully.

"Hagrid, dear, hold still..." Madam Valerian said, gently. The medi-witch was standing behind Hagrid, who was sitting, cross-legged on the floor next to my bed.

The school nurse had helped the boy take off his shirt. Now she was holding a bowl of water and a soft, clean cloth. She was carefully bathing the welts on Hagrid's broad back.

"Hagrid... you told Mr. Pringle what you did! Why? I lied to him for you. I told him that I didn't know where the creature had come from. You oaf! They'll send you away...!"

Madam Valerian frowned. It was clear that she didn't approve of Mr. Pringle's methods of discipline. "No one is being sent away," she soothed both of us briskly. "Professor Dumbledore told the Headmas-

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ter that he intended to keep Hagrid with him, and Mr. Ogg spoke up in Hagrid's defense and then Mr. Pringle spoke up too. He said that he'd already punished the boy quite severely, and it would be a shame to deprive Mr. Ogg of his apprentice."

My eyes widened. "Hagrid? Mr. Pringle defended you?"

Hagrid sighed, wincing. "Well, he was in a good mood an' feeling pleased with himself, I guess. Bin wanting ter teach me a lesson fer a while, hasn't he? The old man finally got his chance."

I didn't mind when Pringle thrashed the students. And I thought that Hagrid's punishment was well-deserved. Still, the fact that Hagrid had been beaten was unexpectedly troubling.

"It's alrigh' Filch," the boy said, gruffly when he saw my expression. "It doesn' hurt so much, really. Other things that happened las' night bother me more. Of all the people that yeh coulda' picked ter collapse in front of, why'd it have ter be him? I wish that yeh'd puked yer guts all over him! Though he'd still have found some way ter come out smelling like a rose..."

I frowned, thinking of the young wizard who'd found me and brought me to the hospital wing. My recollections of the encounter were confused and disjointed. I thought that I remembered wanting to tell him something important, but the memory was gone.

Madam Valerian had finished tending Hagrid's back. Patting his dark tangled curls in a motherly way, she stood up to put away the bowl and the cloth.

When she went out of earshot, Hagrid leaned closer

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and whispered, "Mosag is safe in the Forest, with Aragog and they're happy. Love at first sight it was. An' that's what makes everything alright s'far as I'm concerned."

I shuddered. "The whole Forest will be full of those... things."

"Yep. That's the point, isn't it? They wanted a family. No one *wants* ter be lonely, Filch. No matter who, or what they are."

"They're monsters, not people," I mumbled, frowning again. I knew that he was right. People weren't the only ones who could be lonely...

Madam Valerian was giving Hagrid a pointed look. The boy picked up his shirt and stood.

"At least yeh can have a proper rest now, Filch, instead of nodding off into yer breakfast tomorrow," Hagrid said, comfortingly. He left me alone to sleep.

CHAPTER FOUR:

Coming of Age in Dangerous Times

"**B**OY," MR. PRINGLE SAID TO ME GRUFFLY, "I've been too easy with you." He took a deep breath. "From now on there'll be no more working at night. All your jobs *will* be finished at a reasonable hour, no matter WHO else happens to be about

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while you're working! Do you understand me?"

"Yes, sir," I murmured, twisting my hands together nervously.

The caretaker handed me a list of jobs that needed doing. After reading it, I raised my eyes to look at him in apprehension. The first item was dusting the portraits along the right hand fifth floor corridor. There were classrooms all along that corridor.

I saw both sympathy and resolution in the old man's craggy face. "Filch, if any of those brats make trouble for you," Pringle growled, "you tell me. I'll make 'em sorry!"

This was some comfort to me, but I was still anxious. Swallowing hard, I went to start my work.



To my relief, no one bothered me that day, or over the weeks that followed. For the most part the students behaved as if I truly was as invisible as I was trying to be. Hagrid had been right. The students usually had other things on their minds besides tormenting me.

Still, for a long while I couldn't help feeling sick whenever I encountered a group of black-robed young witches and wizards. Their magic whispered and teased at me as I moved through the corridors. The sensation made me feel both fearful and disappointing. Unwilling to give the brats any reason to notice me, I kept silent, rarely looking up to meet their eyes. The memory of jeering faces and pity glimpsed in an angel's grey eyes continued to be painful.

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I became busier than ever. Now, apparently resigned to having a Squib for an apprentice, Mr. Pringle began teaching me in earnest about the Castle and everything in it. He gave me copious notes to study on the various magical knickknacks located throughout Hogwarts.

I read about their histories, learning which ones were dangerous to touch, ("always dust *around* that vase, boy, it's not exactly Cursed, but it IS very temperamental,") and which ones needed to be kept far away from each other. (We had several feuding suits of armor, a few portraits who didn't get along and a valuable but tricky vanishing cabinet with a tendency to make anything small that was kept too close to it vanish.)

Some of the Castle's items weren't what they seemed. There was a grandfather clock in the staffroom which was really a shortcut up to the Astronomy tower when you opened it and went inside. There was a stained glass window in the dungeons which was really a painting. And several of the mats in the professor's bathroom on the seventh floor seemed to think that they were really flying carpets. (They had a tendency to escape and needed to be rounded up with nets and long poles.)

I learned how to assemble suits of armor and restore damaged portraits and paintings. To accomplish the latter, I used enchanted paintbrushes and specialized cleaning potions. To Mr. Pringle's surprise (and my relief) I proved to be not entirely incompetent at these tasks.

The caretaker taught me how to mix simpler cleaning solutions myself. Different cleansers needed to be used

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for stone, metal, glass and cloth. Some could be mixed in a bucket. Many were ordered ready-made, but others we needed to obtain from the Potions master.

There were always drains to be unclogged and leaky water taps to be fixed. Mr. Pringle had plenty of opportunities to instruct me on the intricacies of the Castle's plumbing system.

And then there were the never-ending stacks of detention forms which provided me with a chance to learn how to file and organize paperwork.

Mr. Pringle didn't have to worry about me going to sleep at a reasonable hour. I fell into bed exhausted at night. I was kept too busy to worry very much about the students.



In fair weather, Mr. Ogg and Mr. Pringle liked to do their drinking outside, on a small hill behind the Castle where they burned the rubbish. But on cold winter nights, they could often be found at the pub in Hogsmeade. The Three Broomsticks always had a warm fire and an interesting crowd.

Sometimes Hagrid and I were invited to accompany the groundskeeper and the caretaker to the village pub. It was a wonderful treat for Hagrid. The boy listened eagerly to all the talking. He chattered away like an overly large magpie to anyone who seemed friendly. Shy around so many strangers, I stayed quiet and kept as close to Mr. Ogg and Mr. Pringle as I could.

Mixed in with the amusing stories and the homey

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gossip about doings in the village were mentions of more sinister things. The Dark wizard, Grindelwald, was spoken of in hushed whispers. People told of deaths and mysterious disappearances. And frightening tales of the terrible Muggle war were sometimes told as well.

Soft-hearted, indulgent Ogg might have allowed Hagrid to stay up drinking, chattering and listening to stories all night long. But Mr. Pringle had firm ideas about the wrongness of young people being permitted to stay out so late, whether they were staff or not.

Sternly, Pringle kept track of the passing hours. He made sure to let Hagrid and me know when it was time for us to take our leave and head back to the Castle.

The caretaker had warmed up to Hagrid. Being allowed to punish the boy and reassert his authority over him had mollified the old man considerably. And Hagrid's genuine remorse over the fact that I'd been injured by his creature hadn't escaped Pringle's notice.



Late one February night, Hagrid and I were making our way back to the Castle from the village pub. We were accompanied by Belle and Towser, the two large dogs that Ogg kept as pets. Ogg was well-liked at the pub and no one objected when he brought the dogs along to see Hagrid and me home.

Perhaps I had drunk a bit more than I should have done but I was still able to hold our lantern steady. Hagrid, who had consumed an impressive amount of fire-whiskey, was lumbering along behind me, sing-

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ing a song he'd just heard this evening. To my irritation, he was getting most of the words wrong.

I was trying to decide if it was worth the bother to correct him or not, when both dogs stopped and raised their heads. Belle, the bolder of the two, growled softly and Towser whimpered.

Almost at the same moment I felt ...something. A cold brush of magic, horribly Dark and foul. Suddenly frightened, I wanted to run up the road all the way to the Castle, though the pub was much closer.

My body wouldn't move. I halted, shivering. Hagrid bumped into me from behind and nearly knocked me down.

"What is it?" he asked me curiously. Then he noticed the dogs. Belle's growl had deepened and Towser had his tail tucked between his hind legs.

"S-Something's out there! I don't know what it is. Something horrible. Over that way..." I held up the lantern with a shaky hand.

Belle and Towser were looking in the same direction. There was nothing to see except for the snow-covered hill on the side of the road. But the wind carried a very faint sound to us. It might have been a cry of pain.

Fearfully, I tried to convince myself that I was just hearing things. Then to my horror, Hagrid, with Belle at his side, promptly stepped off the road and began to crunch uphill through the snow. The oaf was going to investigate!

My paralysis left me. I felt very sober indeed.

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"No, you idiot! Stop!" I hissed, hurrying after him. I grabbed his arm. "Either we go back to the pub for help, or we go on to the Castle! Whatever's out there, it's too much for the likes of us!"

"Yeh don' know that fer certain, Filch. We can't jus' go away an' do nothing! Someone migh' be out there, hurt bad an' needing our help righ' now!"

Shaking me off as if I weighed nothing (compared to him, I did) the huge boy strode off into the darkness accompanied by the still-growling Belle.

Caught for a moment in indecision, I clutched nervously at Towser's collar with one hand and the lantern with the other. Well, I couldn't seek the safety of the pub or the Castle now, no matter how badly I wanted to! It would mean abandoning Hagrid. I considered it my duty to look after the boy. It didn't matter if Hagrid was bigger and stronger than I was. It didn't matter if he had magic while I had none. The young fool wasn't supposed to use his magic. I was the elder of us two, and the only one with any common sense! Maybe I couldn't do much to protect him, but I had to try. There wasn't anyone else around.

Trying not to whimper aloud as poor Towser was doing, I stumbled after Hagrid. Much to his credit, the boy did not mock my obvious terror. Nor did he tell me to turn back because I was useless. Hagrid is as good-hearted as he is foolish. He had never teased me for being what I am. His matter-of-fact acceptance meant more to me than I ever could have told him.

I followed Hagrid as he climbed the slippery hill-

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side. The snow under our feet had hardened to ice in many places and the ground itself was uneven. When Hagrid stumbled, Belle's collar slipped from his fingers. The dog bounded off into the darkness, disappearing over the top of the hill.

Calling Belle's name, Hagrid started to run after her. I sprang forward and grabbed his coat, shaking my head wildly. The Dark magic was surging again somewhere very near us, perhaps just on the other side of the hill. It was thick, almost enough to choke me. We heard the yelping cry of an animal in pain and then silence.

"Belle!" Hagrid shouted.

He wrenched himself out of my hands and ran, stumbling over the crest of the hill. Before he disappeared from view, I saw that he'd pulled his umbrella from inside his coat. He was holding it in front of him like a sword.

"Idiot!" I thought, my heart pounding as Towser and I followed him.

I heard Hagrid wail in anguish. I had a terrible feeling, even before I reached the top of the hill, about what I was going to find.

When I got to the top of the hill and looked down, I saw Hagrid on his knees in the snow, clutching Belle's lifeless body. The boy was sobbing as if his heart would break.

Nothing else moved nearby. The Dark-magic feeling was fading now, but the echoes of it still hung heavy in the air all around us. I swayed, feeling ill and dizzy.

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There had been someone very Dark here, just moments earlier. Someone who had been startled to see a huge, growling dog lunging at him, and the noise of people approaching from the other side of the hill. Perhaps the Dark wizard had even seen Hagrid's large, threatening shape as he'd followed behind poor Belle.

The Dark wizard wouldn't have known that Hagrid was only a boy, who wasn't even allowed to use his magic.

Towser nosed Hagrid and Belle and then let out a long, mournful howl. Hagrid cried harder.

I was furious, even as the boy's sobs tore at my heart. I wanted to shout at Hagrid and shake him until his teeth rattled. If *he'd* been the first one to come over the top of the hill...

Turning away from the sounds of Hagrid's grief, I was sick in the snow.

It was a little while before I realized that Hagrid was calling out to me. He sounded even younger than he really was, and very frightened. Wiping my mouth with one hand, I stumbled over to him as quickly as I could.

"Filch...?" he said, in a voice thick with tears. "Could yeh shine yer light over there...?"

For the first time I noticed huddled shapes lying on the snowy hillside. Towser was sniffing at one of them. The light of my lantern revealed what they were.

Corpses.



There were three of them. A witch and two wizards.

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A Dark Curse had killed them, but they'd also been attacked by some creature that had torn and mutilated their bodies. I hadn't taken a very good look at their remains. The glimpses that I'd had would haunt my dreams for a long time to come.

The men from the pub had shaken their heads grimly and muttered "Grindelwald," in fearful voices when, pale and shaking, Hagrid and I had stumbled back into the Three Broomsticks with Towser and tried to describe what we'd found.

This terrible thing, happening on the outskirts of the village and so close to the school, horrified everyone who knew of it. The incident was hushed up as much as possible. In the days that followed, Hagrid and I were questioned several times by different witches and wizards who were investigating the murders. It was eventually determined that the three victims had Apparated to the hillside from somewhere else, only to be pursued and killed.

Hagrid and I were told very little. Neither of us were particularly inclined to go nosing about for more answers. Hagrid was too upset over Belle's death and both of us were numb with shock.



Our questioning took place in the Transfiguration Master's office. Professor Dumbledore always stayed with us while we were questioned. This time, we'd been joined by Mr. Ogg and Mr. Pringle as well.

"You boys had no business leaving the road!" Pringle

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snarled at us when the questioning was over and the strange wizards had gone. "It's not your place to meddle with such Dark and terrible things, either one of you!

"What were you *thinking*?" the old caretaker raged. "One of you is as helpless as a Muggle and the other one is as brainless as a Troll! I ought to beat both of you bloody! Don't you know that you brats could have been KILLED?"

I cringed. I'd never heard Mr. Pringle sound so savage. He'd been in shock himself over the past couple of days, unusually quiet and distracted. Now he seemed like himself, only more so.

"Apollyon!" the Transfiguration Master's deep voice was stern. "Hagrid and Filch have done nothing wrong!

"Quite the opposite," Dumbledore continued, his tone softening as he looked at us. "Hagrid wanted to aid those in peril and Filch would not allow any child in his charge to walk alone into danger. It seems to me that you and Ogg have taught your apprentices their proper responsibilities most diligently."

Ogg nodded, studying Hagrid with mingled pride and concern, but Pringle was still scowling at us.

"With respect, Professor, it still falls to us to keep the pair of them safe," the caretaker said firmly, getting himself under better control.

Pringle truly wouldn't feel that he'd done his job unless he punished us. The old man looked from Hagrid to me and growled, "There'll be no more visits to the pub for either of you, until further notice!"

I wasn't too distressed on my own account. But the

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dismay on Hagrid's already sad face troubled me.

"Filch! Come! We have work to do!" Pringle snarled.

"He'll be along in a moment, Apollyon," Dumbledore promised the caretaker. "I'd like a brief word with him first." The Transfiguration Master was standing with his hand on Hagrid's shoulder.

"Don't fret, lad," Ogg said to Hagrid in a gruff, comforting voice after Pringle had gone into the corridor. "Apollyon will change his mind about the pub in a week or two if I keep at him. And I will."

A few moments later, when Hagrid and Ogg had also left, I was alone with the Transfiguration Master.

All of the Professors at Hogwarts were powerful witches and wizards, but Dumbledore was in a class by himself. The strength of his magic burned with such fierce intensity. He had never spoken a harsh word to me, but he frightened me all the same.

"Please, look at me, Mr. Filch. You've been here at Hogwarts since September, and I don't think I've ever actually seen your face."

Dumbledore's voice was kind. When I raised my head, he smiled at me. "Please sit down," he said.

Nervously, I obeyed. "What did you wish to speak to me about, sir?" I murmured.

"Hagrid," he said, quietly. "The boy means a great deal to me. For now, he has no thought beyond mourning the loss of poor brave Belle. He does not realize that you probably saved his life. But I realize it. Thank you for looking after him. It isn't the first time that you've done so."

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Blushing with embarrassment, I stared down at his desk. It was terribly cluttered, which made him seem more human and a bit less terrifying.

"Hagrid's all right," I said, gruffly. "Maybe he'll have more sense when he's older." I felt brave enough to look at Dumbledore again. His eyes were twinkling as if I'd said something amusing. But he wasn't laughing at me. The expression on his face was warm and approving.

I felt a rush of pleasure when I thought about what he'd said. Everyone had always treated me as a boy. I'd been resigned to being treated that way for years to come, but Dumbledore spoke as if he truly saw me as someone grown-up and responsible.

"Sir?" I said, feeling braver still, "perhaps Mr. Pringle is right? Maybe it's not such a good idea to allow Hagrid to visit the Three Broomsticks? I know the boy enjoys it, but considering what happened..."

"You have a point, Mr. Filch," Dumbledore said, gravely. My opinion really did mean something to him! "But Mr. Ogg and I both feel that Hagrid needs to find companionship and acceptance somewhere *other* than in the Forest."

"Oh," I said, pausing to consider this.

I supposed that he had a point too. It really was better for Hagrid to be with people than it was for him to spend his time playing with werewolves and large clicking things that had too many legs.

"A good solution might be if Mr. Pringle and Mr. Ogg would let us stay with them at the pub for a few

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more hours until they're ready to leave," I ventured. "The three of us together might have an easier time keeping Hagrid out of trouble. But Mr. Pringle would never allow such a thing."

Dumbledore smiled. "No, I agree that would not be likely. Though I wouldn't be at all surprised if Apollyon lets Ogg convince him that they ought to leave the pub a few hours earlier to see you and Hagrid home safely."

His tone softened, becoming more grave. "Poor Apollyon. He's blaming himself for what could have happened, you know."

I did know. "He only sent us home early because he was trying to look out for us," I said. "It's not his fault."

Frowning, I continued. "I can't tell him so, of course. He'll think I'm out of bounds and then he'll punish me. I'll just try to tread lightly until he's feeling better."

Dumbledore continued to look at me as if he approved of what he saw.

I sat up a bit straighter, pleased that he was interested in my opinions. In spite of what had happened and the awful things I'd seen, I felt almost happy. Imagine a wizard with all his power, speaking to me as if I was someone who mattered!

(In memory of Richard Harris, who was such a kind, comforting Dumbledore.)

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CHAPTER FIVE:

The Squib and the Cat

APOLLYON PRINGLE HAD TAKEN ME to the Forest's edge during my first week at the Castle.

"Filch," the old caretaker had told me gruffly, "The Forest is no place for a Squib. Even the most powerful wizards need to keep their wits about 'em in there. If you're stupid enough to go in and lucky enough to come out again in one piece, the first thing I'll do is thank Merlin. And the second thing I'll do is give you the beating of your life. Have I made my meaning plain, boy?"

"Yes, Mr. Pringle," I'd said. "I won't go into the Forest. I promise."



Breaking my word to Mr. Pringle wasn't something I did lightly. I knew he'd be furious. And I knew that he was dead serious about the beating, too. I'd never wanted to break my promise. The Forest frightened me. It was the last place at Hogwarts that I wanted to go. But this was a matter of life and death.

Cradling Miss Gerrity's limp, battered body in my arms, I hurried through the trees. It was early spring and the new leaves overhead weren't enough to keep the damp rain from falling on us.

Miss Gerrity's small heart was still beating, however

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feebly. I had wrapped my coat around her to keep her warm and dry while I moved as carefully as I could over tree roots and uneven places hidden beneath last year's dead leaves.

It was afternoon but the Forest was gloomy on this miserable day. Maybe the moon-pale glow of the Unicorn I'd just glimpsed would show up brightly against this murk? I hoped so.

"Please stay with me," I begged the cat in my arms. "Don't die..."



For months I had thought of her as 'that stray.' A lean, foul-tempered veteran of many fights, lacking an eye and most of a tail. A surly feline slinking around the Castle's grounds, hissing at anyone who came too close. Including me.

Many of the young witches and wizards at Hogwarts had cats. There were cats everywhere, inside the Castle and outside prowling the grounds. Sleek cats, well-fed, well-groomed and obviously well-loved.

The stray wasn't one of those. It was an outsider who belonged to no-one. The creature avoided staff and students alike, dodging the brats' occasional kicks and the stones that were sometimes thrown in its direction.

The winter just past had been a hard one, especially cold and snowy. Sometimes, while working or walking outside, I had caught glimpses of the stray. I had seen that the cat's lean body was becoming increasingly skeletal.

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"Mark my words, Filch. One day soon, Mr. Ogg will find that beast stretched out dead in the snow," Mr. Pringle had said gruffly, following my gaze.

I had thought of old Gerrity then, the Squib my parents had known. A vagabond, an outcast, a homeless tramp. He'd died of exposure years before I was born, killed while sleeping out of doors by an unexpected snowstorm.

From that moment on, the stray became 'Gerrity' to me. And I wanted Gerrity to live.

Determined, I had filled my pockets with choice morsels of meat from the Castle's kitchens. And fillets of broiled fish, soft, moist and tender. Or fried fish, crisp and golden-brown. Always taken from my own plate so that no-one could accuse me of stealing. Wrapped carefully in napkins, carried outside as I kept my eyes always peeled for a glimpse of Gerrity.

Though the creature was starving, it had taken time before it would accept the food I offered. I had learned to approach very slowly, to leave the food on the ground and then back away. Far away at first.

After I'd been feeding Gerrity for a week or so, I had finally been allowed close enough to note that 'Miss' Gerrity was the proper form of address.



So Miss Gerrity had survived the winter and I had been glad. But there were dangers beyond winter storms and slow starvation. Miss Gerrity was fierce enough to hold her own against kicking, stone-throw-

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ing brats. But against Hexes and Curses, she was as defenseless as I was.



When I'd found her this afternoon, I'd been sure she was dead. She'd been lying nearly hidden in the grass by the rubbish heap on the hillside behind the Castle.

I had come outside with a wheelbarrow full of broken old chairs. Mr. Pringle wanted them burned when the rain stopped. It was the stench of Dark magic that had caught my attention.

At first I didn't recognize her. Then, to my horror, I did. Her single golden eye was wide and staring, her back looked like it might be broken, her legs were twisted at impossible angles. Most of her patchy grey fur had been Cursed off.

Too shocked for tears, I thought of the Dark wizard who'd killed a witch, two wizards and Hagrid's dog, Belle only a month earlier. Was this more of his handiwork?

Maybe, but probably not. I had felt the edges of the Curse that had killed poor Belle. Her death had been swift; her life taken by a single powerful Curse. This Dark magic was a combination of Curses and Hexes. A cruel experiment, perhaps. Or maybe just target practice? The echo of the Dark magic around poor Miss Gerrity made me feel sick.

Broken-hearted, I sat on the damp ground beside her body, my head in my hands.

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I knew that soon Mr. Pringle would come to see what was keeping me. Rainy days like this one always made him especially bad-tempered. Damp weather really made his bones ache. What would he say to me, neglecting my work to sit here, grieving, next to a dead cat?

How I'd hoped to truly earn Miss Gerrity's trust someday. How I'd hoped she'd let me pet her. My hand trembled as I rested it on her relatively undamaged belly. Evidence that she'd been on her feet, fighting for her life for as long as she could. Poor brave cat.

I thought she'd be stiff. She wasn't. She wasn't cold either.

Was that a heartbeat?



I thought of taking Miss Gerrity into the Castle to Madam Valerian, the school Nurse. But Mr. Ogg's cottage was closer and he was the one who tended the outside animals. He could call Madam Valerian through his fireplace.

Poor Miss Gerrity was hurt so badly. I doubted that Ogg and Madam Valerian would be able to save her. But even a slim chance was better than nothing.

Taking off my coat, I wrapped it around her as carefully as I could. Tenderly I carried her towards Ogg's little house. The swiftest way was to follow along the edge of the Forest.

When I saw the pale shape of the Unicorn through

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the trees, my breath caught in my throat. The Unicorn was the loveliest creature I had ever seen. For an instant, even my sorrow ceased to matter.

And then I remembered the healing magic in the touch of a Unicorn's horn. Perhaps, I thought, Miss Gerrity's chances weren't so slim after all?



Chasing after a Unicorn is no easy thing, even under the best of circumstances. Certainly not while cradling a dying cat in one's arms. But as long as the Unicorn's milky gleam was within my sight I felt confident and unafraid.

Of course the Unicorn was much too swift for me. Once I could see it no longer and I came back to my senses, I realized that Mr. Pringle had been right about the Forest. It was a dreadful place.

Old, Wild magic clung to my hair, my skin, my clothes. It made me itchier than the vines and creepers I'd been unable to avoid. The Magic buzzed in my ears like a horde of persistent insects. It tickled the inside of my nose like a sneeze that wouldn't come.

Eventually I realized that I had managed to lose both the Unicorn and my way back to the Castle. The gloom beneath the trees was beginning to darken into twilight and I hadn't even brought a lantern. Exhausted, bruised and scratched, I realized that I was very hungry because I hadn't eaten since breakfast.

I had done one incredibly stupid thing after another. Mr. Pringle was surely going to kill me. Assuming

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that I lived long enough for anyone to find me.

Worst of all, this journey had probably done poor Miss Gerrity more harm than good!

Cradling her in one arm, I stroked her belly gently. To my relief, she was still warm and alive. To my astonishment, she answered me with a deep purr!



A short while later I was lucky enough to find us shelter inside a hollow tree. There was just enough space for me to sit, holding her on my knees. It was damp and chilly, but at least the rain wasn't hitting us.

I rested my hand on her belly again. She was still breathing, thank Merlin.

Her endurance and tenacity humbled me. I would rest for a bit, and then I'd continue to hunt the Unicorn for her. I would try very hard not to be afraid.

And then something large moved in the gloom nearby! My heart slammed against my ribs as I curled protectively over Miss Gerrity.

"Little man! Are you the one called 'Filch?'" It was a deep voice, one I'd never heard before.

I could tell that the speaker was impatient and a little bit cross, but I couldn't tell if he was human. His words were perfectly understandable, but they were underscored by a faint clicking sound.

"If you are Filch, then Hagrid has asked me to search for you," the voice said. "He is my good friend, though I have no great concern for *you*... the wretch who frightened my dear wife with a torch!"

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"P-Please, sir," I faltered, hoping my guess about his identity was wrong. "There must be some mistake! I don't go about attacking ladies..."

"Her name is Mosag." The voice managed an impressive growl.

Oh, Merlin. I wasn't wrong. Among Hagrid's monstrous friends were a pair of giant spiders. I'd already had a brush with the female, Mosag, and this was the male. Whimpering, I held Miss Gerrity close against me.

Then I heard the cat hiss. In the gloom I saw that her head was turned in the direction of the deep voice. What remained of her fur was bristling. If she had the courage to fight, could I do any less?

"You'd better not try to eat her!" I told the spider. "I won't let you!" My voice only quavered a little bit. I was proud of that.

"I prefer my meat untainted by Curses, thank you very much," the spider retorted testily. "And I promised Hagrid that I would not eat you. Now, be quiet and come along. I will bring you to him."

There was a rustling noise. I didn't see the long, hairy leg reaching towards me until I felt its touch.

I screamed, pressing back against the inside of the tree. "NO! Don't touch us!! We're not going anywhere with you!"

Shielding Miss Gerrity as best as I could, I reached out of the hollow space, frantically feeling about for anything that could serve as a weapon. Discovering a fallen tree-branch within my reach, I slammed it down on the long, hairy leg.

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The spider yelled in pain.

"Ungoliant take you, ungrateful wretch!" the spider snapped, withdrawing its leg. "Wait here then! I will tell Hagrid where to find you. And you had better hope that nothing comes along and eats you before he arrives!"



Should I have trusted the spider? Maybe it had told the truth about fetching Hagrid, but maybe it had really gone to fetch its mate so they could share a cozy dinner for two! I couldn't decide whether to take Miss Gerrity and run, or stay where we were.

I was still undecided when Hagrid arrived a short while later. When the huge boy knelt down to peer inside the hollow tree, I nearly brained him with the tree-branch.

"Git!" Hagrid snapped, though he sounded relieved to find me still in one piece. "Why'd yeh have ter be so rude ter poor Aragog? He was jus' trying ter help."

"You sent a M-MONSTER after me!" I choked.

"No, jus' Aragog," Hagrid said, sounding as exasperated as his spider-friend. "Nobody knows the Forest better 'n he does. Well, 'cept fer me an' Ogg, o'course."

The boy sighed. "We needed all the help we could get. Even with Ogg, Pringle, some of the professors an' me all searchin', it was still Aragog who found yeh firs'."

What terrible trouble I'd caused! Mr. Ogg and Mr. Pringle out searching for me, and even some of the Professors too.

I felt wretched.

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"Is Mr. Pringle very angry?" I asked miserably.

"What d'yeh think? He's beside himsel'," Hagrid said, regarding me with sympathy. "Wouldn' want ter be in yer shoes when he gets his hands on yeh."

I gulped.

"Well, c'mon, Filch. Yeh might as well get it over with. Up yeh get."

"No. Not yet. Miss Gerrity needs a Unicorn."

"Who?"

"Miss Gerrity." I tugged back the corner of my coat to show him the battered cat in my lap.

Hagrid had brought a small lantern. He lifted it to study her. "I recognize that one. Foul-tempered stray. Jus' as soon scratch yeh as look at yeh. Didn' know yeh'd named her."

"I've been feeding her too. I don't care if she's foul-tempered. I like her that way!" Furious, I tried to ignore the stinging tears in my eyes.

"Summat's bin after the strays this year, on an' off. The ones nobody'll miss. Ogg an' me, we've found a few dead ones. Don' know what's bin killin' 'em. Terrible business." Hagrid sounded sad, no doubt thinking of poor Belle.

I shuddered, afraid for Miss Gerrity. "Well, someone would miss her if she died, even if that someone's only me!" I snapped.

"Yeh never do things by half, do yeh?" Hagrid said, wryly. "Firs' time in the Forest and most a' the staff's out looking fer yeh already, an' now yeh want ter stop and hunt Unicorns?"

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"It's not like there aren't any about!" I told him. "There was one right on the edge of the Forest this afternoon. I chased it until I got lost."

Hagrid's voice managed to be both gruff and gentle. "It's no easy thing ter catch a Unicorn. Takes time an' skill, not ter mention luck. An' Pringle's gettin' more worried an' furious by the minute."

"I know. I'm sorry. He can punish me later. This is too important."

The pity in Hagrid's face made me so angry that I wanted to punch him. My fists clenched, but I didn't want to let go of Miss Gerrity.

I opened my mouth to say something rude, but Hagrid interrupted. "At least yeh don' want ter actually catch the beast, yeh jus' want ter ask a favor. Makes things simpler."

"It'll be quicker if I help yeh."

Suddenly, punching the boy was the furthest thought from my mind.



Hagrid was very young, but I soon realized that he'd probably forgotten more about unicorn-hunting than most people ever knew.

I don't know how long I spent following him through the trees with Miss Gerrity tenderly cradled in my arms. Sometimes Hagrid would motion for me to wait for him while he scouted ahead. I checked on Miss Gerrity while I waited. She still lived. When I stroked her belly, she even purred at me. It was the

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most wonderful sound in the world.



Hagrid motioned for me to stop in a place where the trees were huge and very old. Even the Wild Magic was still and respectful here.

"I don' know if she's the same one that yeh saw, but there's a Unicorn who loves these trees, an' she's jus' ahead. I'll go left an' yeh can circle around from the right. She'll try ter avoid us but there's a ravine blockin' her way. We should be able ter make her stay still long enough fer yeh ter show her yer cat and ask fer her help. But yeh'd best be polite about it, Filch. They're sharp, Unicorn horns."



With a ravine at her back and Hagrid and me closing in on her front, the Unicorn was cornered. Tossing her horned head gracefully, she snorted and pawed at the leaves with one delicate cloven hoof. Hagrid was right about the horn. It looked dreadfully sharp.

"H-Hagrid?" I asked, feeling very nervous. "What should I do?"

He sighed. "Talk to her, nice an' gentle."

"But I don't know what to say!"

"Well, yeh'd better think o'summat quick before she charges at yeh."

"That's not much help!"

"Yer welcome. Next time, Filch, yeh can find yer own bloody Unicorn."

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I would have glared at him, but I was afraid to take my eyes off that horn.

Carefully I knelt and placed Miss Gerrity gently on the ground. She was too weak now to purr when I stroked her.

My gift for fine words is about the same as my gift for magic. I hoped that plain words would be enough. I wished that Miss Gerrity had a friend more eloquent than I to speak for her, but I would have to do.

"Look at her," I said to the Unicorn. "She doesn't deserve to die like this."

"Filch," Hagrid scolded, reminding me of my manners.

He was right. The Unicorn appeared unimpressed.

I tried for a slightly softer tone as I studied the Unicorn. "Madam... I've been taught that I should try to fix whatever my hands have the skill to mend. I wish I could mend her, but my skills are very small next to a power like yours."

Well, honest flattery seemed to be effective. The Unicorn was looking a bit less fierce now.

"You're the only hope she has," I continued even more softly, my voice cracking, my heart aching. "You're very beautiful and you look so kind. I can't imagine that you would really leave this poor cat broken and dying when you have the power to mend her. If you could bear to turn your back on her when she's suffering, ...well, then you wouldn't be much of a Unicorn, that's all I can say."

"Filch!" I heard Hagrid groan. "What a way ter talk.

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I can't take yeh anywhere."

"I don't want anything else from you," I told the Unicorn. "If you heal her, I promise I'll go away and not trouble you again."

Unable to think of anything more, I stood slowly and backed away. Hagrid put his hand on my shoulder, catching me before I could trip over my own feet. Poor Miss Gerrity rested on the ground before the Unicorn, like an offering.

The Unicorn stood still for a moment, regarding Hagrid and me. Then she looked down at Miss Gerrity. Gracefully, she came forward, lowering her head until the horn rested gently on Miss Gerrity's still body. I felt a surge of Old Magic.



Purring, Miss Gerrity rubbed her head against my face. The Unicorn's touch had not been able to restore either her missing eye or the lost part of her tail. But her legs and her back were straight and whole, and patchy grey fur covered her thin body once more.

"Who's my brave one? Who's my sweet?" I crooned. "Look at her, Hagrid. Isn't she the sweetest cat you've ever seen?"

"Yeh don't want an' honest answer ter that, do yeh?" Hagrid asked me wryly. The boy was studying Miss Gerrity with interest. Especially her large, sensitive ears and what there was of her tail.

"Filch, I don' think she's a cat. I mean, not exactly. She's a Kneazle."

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He punctuated this pronouncement with a loud sneeze. Miss Gerrity hissed at him, looking affronted.

"Are you sure?" I bit my lip, anxiously.

The boy gave me an exasperated look. Of course he was sure. Hagrid knew his magical creatures.

"I'll need to have a license for her then! But Mr. Pringle is the one who gets them for the students if they need one... the application forms are in his office. What if he says I can't keep her? What if he won't get me a license?

"Someone tried to kill her. They might do it again. Miss Gerrity can't be a stray any more. She has to be mine, for real." My voice shook.

Miss Gerrity rubbed her small head against my chin and purred.

"She's not a stray any more, Filch," Hagrid said, gruffly. "She already belongs ter yeh fer real, license or no license. Don' worry so."



The first person that we encountered was Professor Hellebore, the Herbology teacher. She used her wand to send a jet of bright red light skyward, to let the other searchers know that I'd been found.

Cuddling Miss Gerrity, I followed Hagrid and Professor Hellebore out of the Forest. We emerged near Mr. Ogg's hut.

When I saw that Mr. Pringle was among the group of people who stood waiting for us, I put Miss Gerrity down, to follow at my heels.

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The caretaker's face was ashen. True to his word, the moment he set eyes on me he gasped, "Filch! Thank Merlin!"

Then he gave me a clout on the head that made my ears ring. "You ungrateful brat!! Do you have any idea what you've put me through tonight?"

I could guess. The caretaker's magic was never very powerful at the best of times. Nevertheless, the strength of his distress was making it flare and surge.

"Do you know what one of my worst nightmares is, boy? That someday I'll have the sorry task of writing to your mum and dad, trying to explain how I let their boy get himself killed!" He shook me, hard. "All the time I've been searching, I've been thinking about that letter!"

He gave me another clout. "You could have been eaten up by werewolves or goblins! Ripped to pieces by harpies! Carried off by trolls! What were you *thinking*?"

"I-I'm sorry, sir," I gasped when he stopped to breathe and I could finally get a word in edgewise. I didn't regret saving Miss Gerrity, of course. But I did feel truly dreadful about how much I'd frightened him.

"Well, you're not as sorry as you're going to be!" Pringle snarled. "Not by half!"

He grabbed my arm, dragging me towards the Castle. "Come along, boy!"

Looking back over my shoulder I saw Hagrid looking after me sympathetically, and Miss Gerrity trotting along behind the caretaker and me.



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After I'd been beaten, the caretaker sent me to bed without dinner.

Miss Gerrity had not left my side. When I lay down on my stomach in bed, she curled up next to me.

I'd been afraid that she might attack Mr. Pringle while he was punishing me, ending any chance that I'd be allowed to keep her. But, though she had fixed the old caretaker with a most evil and unfriendly glower, she'd made no move against him. I was relieved that she was wise enough to see how things were.

"He can have me dismissed if I make him angry enough," I explained, just to be sure she understood. "I hope I haven't already made him so angry that he won't let you stay here with me. I don't want to lose you again. Maybe tomorrow is too early to ask about a Kneazle license, but I can't put it off for too long. It's the law, you see."

I shut my eyes and tried to rest, but I was worried and my back ached.

A short while later Madam Valerian knocked gently on my door, then came in to check on me. While she soothed my back with Cooling Charms, she agreed that Miss Gerrity might not be beautiful, but she was a fine Kneazle nonetheless.

My sweet one regarded the medi-witch with something approaching approval and the nurse gave me a potion to help me sleep.

"You're safe now, Filch. What's troubling you?" she asked.

"Miss Gerrity needs a..." I murmured.

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"Is that all? Don't worry, dear. It's taken care of," Madam Valerian comforted me.

Drowsily, I struggled to keep my eyes open. What? Did she have a spare Kneazle license application form lying about?

I heard the whip-crack sound that announced the arrival of a house-elf. Blinking sleepily, I saw Browly setting a medium sized pan of earth down in one corner. I felt the strong Deodorizing Charm that someone had put on it.

Oh! Of course, Miss Gerrity needed *that* too. I felt grateful to Madam Valerian for thinking of such things.

A second house-elf, Nonny, arrived with a bowl of cream and a plate piled high with table scraps. She set them down in a different corner.

"Apollyon Pringle is saying 'Argus Filch is in Disgrace... we is not to make a fuss over bad boy' but Apollyon Pringle is never saying that we is not to make fuss over boy's Kneazle," the house-elf pointed out, triumphantly.



I was allowed to sleep until lunchtime the next day but there were still jobs for me to do when I got up. Stiff and sore, I had to move slowly as I dusted the cases in the trophy room and polished the trophies.

Miss Gerrity was curled in a shaft of sunlight nearby. No-one would ever call her beautiful (well, no-one except me) but life in the Castle seemed to agree with her thus far.

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The house-elves had given her a large breakfast which she had attacked with gusto. It had pleased me to see her eating well.

While I worked, I considered what I would say when I asked Mr. Pringle about her license.

"Mr. Filch? Might I have a word?"

Turning too swiftly for comfort, I winced at the pain in my back.

It was Professor Dumbledore. Deep in thought, I had not heard him enter. How long had he been standing there?

"Good afternoon, Professor," I murmured.

The usual twinkle in his eyes was absent as he studied me. With a rush of shame, I realized that the Transfiguration Professor had very likely been out in the rain for hours last night, searching the Forest for me. No wonder he was angry. He was the only person at Hogwarts who treated me like an adult. Disappointing him was something I hated to do.

I looked at him for a moment then I stared down at the floor.

"I'm very sorry, sir. I know that what I did was wrong. I won't go into the Forest again, ever."

"Last night is over and done with, Mr. Filch. There is no need for you to be troubled. And, according to Hagrid, you and he had a most interesting time."

I didn't know how to respond to that. Hopefully, Hagrid had had enough sense not to mention the fact that he still fraternized with giant spiders. I didn't want the oaf to get himself in trouble on my account.

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"Hagrid mentioned that you are quite concerned about getting a Kneazle license for your Miss Gerrity. Last night I spoke to Mr. Pringle on your behalf. Your application was owled this morning."

I looked up swiftly.

He was smiling at me.

"Oh! Professor Dumbledore, thank you, sir! I-I don't know what to say!"

A bit more softly I asked, "Did Mr. Pringle offer any objections?"

"Not a one. He could tell that Miss Gerrity had already chosen to keep you, and he quite approved. Kneazles are loyal and intelligent. He thinks that she will be a most excellent companion for you."

(I knew that 'the brat could do with a full-time keeper' was probably closer to what the caretaker had said, but it didn't matter.)

Miss Gerrity had come over to rub against my ankles. Somewhat gingerly, I leaned down so I could pick her up and give her a cuddle.

"Mr. Filch," Professor Dumbledore said quietly. He sounded grave again. "Your actions last night were not as bad as you seem to think."

"Yes, the rules must be respected and one's superiors must be obeyed," he agreed, forestalling my protest. "But it would have been a greater wrong to allow a fellow creature to die. You did what you thought was best, and you accepted the consequences bravely."

Blushing, I rubbed under Miss Gerrity's chin.

"Mr. Ogg has kept the Headmaster informed of the

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deaths among the Castle's strays. We hope to find the person or people responsible, but thus far we have not been successful. Last night your actions demonstrated that an assault on any creature, even a little animal who seems completely unwanted and vulnerable, can cause quite an uproar.

"Mr. Filch, I do not consider that a bad thing. Not at all."



When my Kneazle License arrived in the post, Mr. Pringle presented me with a frame to put it in.

Thanking the caretaker, I promptly framed the document, then studied the results.

"Mr. Pringle?" I asked timidly. "When you filled out my application, did you intend to write 'Mrs.' Gerrity, instead of 'Miss?'"

"Yes, boy. It's an old rule. Lady-cats are always 'Mrs.'"

"Why?" I asked.

"Is Mrs. Gerrity your first cat, Filch?"

I nodded.

He grinned. "Well, it's spring. Don't worry. You'll understand soon enough."

The End

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Colophon

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