

Adventures in Fanfiction



Birds of a Feather

by

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GirlTalk



HELLO NARCISSA," RITA SKEETER SAID

when the Elf showed her into the parlor. "It was so kind of you to invite me to tea."

"Well, Lucius and Draco are away on business at the moment, and I thought it would be a good time to enjoy a bit of 'girl talk'. Please have a seat. I'm eager to hear how your latest book is coming along."

"I'm having so much fun with it," Rita said, settling into one of the ornate chairs as an Elf brought a tray with tea and cakes. "Snape's story is fascinating." She paused while the Elf poured the tea and served each of them.

"I know everyone is expecting me to drag his reputation through the mud — that's what I usually do, after all — but I'm going to surprise them this time. I won't gloss over his flaws, and Merlin knows he had more than his share of them, but I'm going to play up his remorse and his courage, and how he tried so hard to make up for his sins."

"Everyone will think that's out of character for you," Narcissa observed. "I'm sure they'll be expecting a hatchet job."

"Of course they will, but almost everyone has disparaged Snape so thoroughly over the years," Rita said, "and where's the challenge in trying to top that? That's old news, everyone knows it, and there's not much left to say about it. No, I'm going to startle everyone by presenting him as a hero. Or as close to a hero as I can, realistically. I think I'm going to call it 'Severus Snape: Scoundrel or Saint?' And do you know what the best part is?"

"What?" Narcissa asked, leaning forward eagerly.

Rita gave her a conspiratorial look. "It will give me new opportunities to make Albus Dumbledore and his Chosen One look bad."



"Oh, that's wonderful! I'm so glad to hear it," Narcissa said. "Those two get much more credit than they deserve. And poor Severus had such a tragic life."

Rita smiled. "I know. It's going to make a wonderful story. It's sure to be a best-seller."



"You're sure you're okay now?" Kat asked as he and Severus left the infirmary. "It looks like Arusha did a pretty good job of fixing you up."

Severus snorted and said nothing. What she'd done was threaten to turn him into a pink pigmy puff unless he stayed in bed and rested, and he'd actually obeyed her because he knew she would do it — she was worse than Pomfrey. The rest had done him a world of good, of course, but he'd never admit it.

"And I'm sorry about those two boys," Kat added. "I thought I got rid of them."

"It's not your fault," Severus told him. "They're an insufferable nuisance. They always turn up where they shouldn't be." The only time that he'd ever been truly happy to see them — overwhelmingly happy, in fact — was when he'd been dying in the shack. They'd done nothing to help him then, of course, but at least they'd been there so he could give Potter the information that the boy had to have. It had seemed miraculous at the time.

Which reminded him of the vial of memories that Potter had returned to him. He'd kept it, of course, but he wasn't sure he was happy to have it.

He and Kat continued down the hall and passed one of the former Slytherins, Mick Bletchley. Mick didn't make eye-contact, but Severus felt something appear in his pocket. He'd look at it later, when he was



alone. Right now he needed to get ready to leave.

It didn't take long for him to pack the few things that he'd brought with him and then he went to the kitchen where the Elves happily supplied him with a box of desserts for Fawkes. He couldn't imagine why he kept indulging that silly bird, but for some unknown reason watching Fawkes gobble up treats made him feel sort of ... happy. It was ridiculous.

He found Armstrong waiting in the Dining Hall. "Some of the Ghou! Busters are going to stay and continue patrolling the area until they're sure there are no more Dementors around," he reported. "And in a way, that hurricane did us a favor; the Muggles were too busy coping with it to notice that there was anything going on out here. The last time they spotted the light from some spells a group of Muggle scientists came out to investigate, and we had to convince them that there'd been a massive occurrence of foxfire."



"Did you know Lily Evans?" Rita asked.

"No, I didn't. I finished a few years after Lucius, but several years before Severus. Lucius had asked me to keep an eye on young Severus — he recognized the boy's potential — but I can't say I ever really noticed the Evans girl."

Rita sighed. "That's too bad," she said. "I'd love to get some dirt on her. Do you know if there were any other girls in Snape's life? Or women?"

"Well, Priscilla Nott once told me that Severus had a fling with a Hufflepuff girl that he was tutoring. Priscilla didn't mention her name, but that would have been after the Evans girl dumped him. I suppose he'd got over Evans until he found out she was in danger." Narcissa frowned and



added, "She wasn't worthy of him, you know."

"That only makes the story better," Rita said, writing down some notes. "But what about later, when Snape was with the Death Eaters?"

"Oh yes, I saw him with a number of fairly attractive women over the years. He was a capable young wizard with the potential to rise in the Dark Lord's ranks, and even though he wasn't very handsome or rich, many women are attracted to men who are on their way up. And of course Severus could be quite charming when he wanted to be." Narcissa thought for a moment. "I don't know whether he really cared for any of them, or whether he was just using them for political alliances, or to deflect suspicion or whatever."

Rita's pen hovered over the paper. "You wouldn't care to name names, would you?"

Narcissa shook her head. "No, the way things turned out, no one wants it brought out that they were involved with Death Eaters, so it's best left unsaid."

"That's unfortunate," Rita said, pouting a bit. "Let me know if you change your mind. I suppose it might seem more romantic if Evans were the only one, but that's just too implausible. None of my readers would believe it. I'll just have to hint that there were others and let everyone wonder about them."

"You certainly are an expert at dropping hints and asking leading questions," Narcissa said, quickly adding, "and I mean that as a compliment."

"Yes, that's the best part of writing," Rita said. "I pride myself on getting the facts straight, of course, but then I always go a bit further and add a bit of speculation to get people thinking. My readers love it."



Severus and Kat stood on the deck waiting for the captain to start the engines. Everyone had assembled by the dock to watch their departure. The Elves, being the shortest, stood at the front, proudly wearing their lovely school tea-towels. Mr Cohen, Vic Armstrong, and Angie were in the center behind them, along with Ms Applewood, Ms Larose, and the rest of the staff. The students stood wherever they could find a spot. Darkness and Mysteria, who were off to one side, held up Alvin and Fingerella so they could see over the crowd. Larose smiled and waved, and Severus felt his pulse increase. "She must have some Veela blood," he said to Kat, but Kat was too busy waving back to her to hear him.

Severus looked around for Arusha and Doc, but they'd already left to start rebuilding the boat works. Then he spotted his Slytherins and wondered what Mick had given him. He'd take a look at it after they were under way. He gave the four of them a barely perceptible nod. Their eyes sparkled and they had difficulty hiding their grins.

"Thank you for everything you've done," Mr Cohen called. "Please come back and join us for Thanksgiving dinner!"

"And Christmas, too, and whenever you want! You're always welcome here!" Armstrong shouted.

Angie waved and so did many of the students, and Fawkes, who was perched on a railing, raised his wings in reply. That inspired several turkey vultures who were sitting in a hurricane-wrecked tree to whistle and flap. *Cheeky buzzards!* the phoenix thought. He wanted to turn around and flip his tail at them, but he couldn't do something like that in front of the fledglings.



Finally the magic engines hummed to life and Kat and Severus cast off. The boat pulled away from the dock and headed out into the channel. Then the captain sounded the horn twice and the boat vanished.



"Ironically, you might actually be in agreement with Harry Potter this time," Narcissa said. "I'm sure you know how he proclaimed Severus a hero in front of everyone when he faced you-know-who for the last time, and he's been repeating that story to everyone who'll listen, including *The Daily Prophet*. He even lobbied for Severus to be awarded the Order of Merlin, and I've heard that he had a portrait painted for Hogwarts, too."

"That's true," Rita agreed, "but I'm not going to let that stop me. I'm investigating everything that Potter has said, and everything that he neglected to mention, too. In fact, I'm planning to interview him and his little friends soon." She smiled knowingly. "I'm sure it will prove to be very interesting."





The Persistence of Memory



AS SOON AS THE BOAT WAS PROPERLY UNDER

way Severus ducked into his cabin to look at whatever Mick Bletchley had magically slipped into his pocket. It proved to be a scroll. He unrolled it and a note fell out. It said: *Your codename is Onyx. It was signed Golden Girl, Shadow, and friends.*

That must be Marigold, Mick and the others, he thought. And they're using codenames. What childish nonsense! Then he remembered calling himself the Half-Blood Prince for a year or two. "Well, students will be students, I suppose," he muttered.

The scroll was blank, but not for long. He tapped it with his wand, whispered "*Aparecium*", and saw that he was holding Issue No. 1 of THE SLYTHERIN SENTINEL. It was dated October 1998. It featured the Slytherin crest at the top and was bordered by intertwined snakes and dragons. The text said:

Welcome to all Slytherins, both young and old, and Slytherin sympathizers, too! This newsletter aims to keep all of us in touch, providing up-to-date information and promoting discussion in these difficult times. To protect your privacy, we're assigning everyone a code name. Yours should be included with this issue. If you want to change it, just let us know.

What do you think of the way McGonagall closed all four Houses and invented four phony new ones to 'end discrimination'? We all know that her real objective was to end Slytherin House!

We want you to write and tell us how you feel about it.



Do you want to let the House die, or should we try to keep it alive? Have you suffered discrimination? Where were you and what were you doing during the battle? Let us know, and we'll publish your responses (using your code names, of course!).

**Sticking together will keep us strong!
Golden Girl, Acting Editor**

Severus tapped the scroll again and the message disappeared. He sighed as he tucked it away in his small desk. *Slytherins have always had to stick together. Maybe this will help them do that. The future is in their hands now.*

He was interrupted by a knock on his door. It was the cook, Seabiscuit, with some papers. "You've got mail," he said. "I've been keeping it for you while you were ashore. And I just made a fresh pot of tea, if you're interested."

Severus was indeed interested. Biscuit made excellent tea. He followed the cook to the mess where he helped himself to the tea and proceeded to go through his mail.

Lydia in Melbourne had sent a letter addressed to all of them. She said that Stan Shunpike was working out well at the bookshop. He'd discovered that he liked reading and was currently in the middle of the Ring Trilogy. He'd found himself a girlfriend, too. "*She was a regular customer at the shop, and she kept teasing him about his accent,*" Lydia wrote. "*He started flirting with her, and eventually he asked her out and they hit it off. They're quite sweet together, really.*"

Shunpike has a girlfriend? he thought. *Amazing! It must have been that pimple potion that I made up for him.*

Beneath Lydia's letter there was one from Lucius. He broke the seal



and opened it. It was on the most expensive stationery, of course, lightly scented with sandalwood.

I arranged for Draco to sit all of his exams and finish without having to return to Hogwarts, Lucius wrote. Now he is learning to look after our many business affairs so he can assume his role as the Malfoy heir. And I am delighted to tell you that he has started to date Astoria Greengrass. She's a lovely girl from an excellent family. It's unfortunate about the Parkinson girl; she went into seclusion after the debacle at Hogwarts. Really, I fail to understand why it should be such a terrible crime not to want to die for Harry Potter.

Severus flinched at the thought of Harry Potter. What had he said to the brat? He thought he remembered something about singing. Well, it was too late now. At this very moment Potter was probably telling the whole world that Severus Snape was still very much alive. That would bring his sojourn on the boat to an end. He'd have to go into hiding somewhere.

And then there was that vial of memories that Potter had returned to him. What was he going to do with that?

"So Severus Snape might have had a girlfriend during his Hogwarts days, someone other than Lily Evans," Rita Skeeter said to herself as she read over the notes from her visit with Narcissa. "That certainly is an unexpected revelation. I'll have to find her, if she exists. But how?"



"First things first, though. I need to do a bit more 'research' on Potter and his friends before I try to interview any of them again. That old house of his is too well protected to get near, but I've heard that he spends a lot of time at the Weasley place. The Weasleys have no sense at all and that old house of theirs is probably wide open. Maybe I should 'bug' them and see what I can find out."

She changed into a plain wool jumper, slacks and trainers, then she donned an inconspicuous cloak and hurried out the door.



"He was off his nut, Hermione," Harry said. "They'd given him some sort of medication that made him crazy. He even sang for a while! I couldn't make sense of any of it. But at least now I know that Professor Snape survived."

Hermione nodded. She'd suspected that Snape was alive since she and Luna had searched for his body, but there was no need to tell Harry and Ron about that.

"That's wonderful," she said, "but we must never tell anyone. He obviously doesn't want anyone to know or he wouldn't be hiding under an assumed name. The least we can do for him is keep his secret, after all that he did for us and for Hogwarts."

"We wanted to talk to you about that," Harry said. "We must all owe him a life debt, since he saved our lives a few times, and when we had the chance to repay him we didn't even think of it."

"We were a bit distracted at the time," Ron pointed out. "But maybe it's not too late. Maybe we could arrange an accident for him and then rescue him."

"Ron!" Hermione said.

"Just kidding," he said, grinning. "Don't get excited."



"We all owe him," Ginny told them. "Remember when he caught Neville, Luna, and me trying to steal the sword? Snape gave us detention with Hagrid as punishment. At the time we thought he was an idiot because that wasn't really a punishment, but now we know he did it to protect us. If he hadn't caught us, the Carrows might have got us and I'd hate to imagine what they would have done. Snape caught us and sent us to Hagrid to keep us safe."

Harry nodded. "When you were held captive in the Chamber of Secrets, Snape was genuinely upset about it," he added. "I was hiding and overheard him." He thought for a moment. "Maybe we should have gone to him instead of Lockhart. It would have saved us a lot of trouble, but we didn't know any better."

"Going to Lockhart was a really stupid move," Ron agreed.

"Maybe the unpaid debt is why I've been so obsessed with finding him," Harry said. "I really want to do something to help him."

"All we can do for him right now is keep his secret," Hermione repeated. "We must never tell anyone, or even talk about it among ourselves. We have to act like he really is dead."

"Good idea," said Ron, who was beginning to get tired of the topic.

"Who's dead?" said Molly Weasley as she bustled through the front door levitating some bags full of groceries.

"Professor Dumbledore," Harry said quickly. "We were just talking about how much we miss him."

"Yes," Molly said, and tears began to glisten in her eyes as she remembered Fred. "So many people died."

"Come on, everybody," Ginny said, "let's help mom with those groceries!"



They all rushed to help and in the ensuing confusion they didn't notice the beetle that flew in through the open door. It landed quickly, folded its wings, closed its iridescent green wing-covers, and scurried under the couch.



Underneath the letter from Lucius was a copy of THE QUIBLER. Severus picked it up. *What sort of rot has Lovegood cranked out this time?* he wondered. *Perhaps there will be something amusing.*

On the front page was a story about the Ministry's proposed plans for a monument to those who had died defending Hogwarts in the final battle. It would consist of life-sized statues of attractive young witches and wizards, wands held high and spouting water. Plated with gold, of course. It would be installed in the Ministry's atrium to replace the Fountain of the Magical Brethren.

It will undoubtedly be a tasteless monstrosity, Severus thought, chuckling. *Fortunately, I'll never see it.*

The next few pages were filled with the usual speculation about imaginary creatures, complete with hand-drawn illustrations, and the usual conspiracy theories. Lovegood noted that Stan Shunpike and Argus Filch were still at large and opined that they were probably hiding out with the surviving members of the Rotfang conspiracy.

Then came a report about the opera that Celestina Warbeck was working on. Severus thought nothing of it as he read that she's hired an Italian wizard and two American Muggles to assist her.

Silly witch, he thought. *I wonder what it's going to be about?*

Then his eyes widened with horror as he found out: It was going to be



about him! And Lily! Celestina was going to call it "LILY POTTER AND THE HALF-BLOOD PRINCE" and she was planning to play the role of Lily personally.

He read on in disbelief until he came to the final shock: "The boathouse?" he said out loud.

A group of passengers seated near the door glanced quizzically at him.

"It will be wonderful for *mise en scène*," Celestina was quoted as saying. "Oh, the clever things we can do with the lighting there!"

"She's going to move my death scene to the boathouse?!" he shouted, jumping up from his chair. "That idiot! It's intolerable! Disgraceful! Who does she think she is?" He slammed the paper down on the table.

The passengers rose quietly and headed off to their cabin.

Seabiscuit looked up from the stove where he was preparing a pot roast. "What's that?" he asked.

That brought Severus to his senses. "It's nothing," he replied quickly, reigning himself in. "Nothing. Just... just some nonsense in this stupid paper."

I've got to keep my temper, he thought. I don't want to have to explain this mess to the crew. And what would I tell them? That I was a turncoat Death Eater and a spy? That I caused people's deaths? That I murdered Albus Dumbledore? That I was nearly murdered myself but Fawkes saved me? That I'm supposed to be dead? And now some idiot witch is writing an opera about it! And she's not even getting the facts right!

He took a deep breath and sat back down.

"You okay?" Biscuit asked, coming over to renew the warming spell on the teapot. "Here, have some more tea." He refilled Severus's mug.

"There are some things I ought to tell you," Severus said slowly. "All of you."

"You don't have to," the cook told him. "Only if it will make you feel



better. We don't need to know."

"Maybe later, then," Severus said. *It feels like I've spent most of my life lying to everyone, and I'm still lying, pretending that I'm dead,* he thought. *But I don't want to lie to the crew any more. They're... friends.* He'd had so few real friends in his life that he was almost afraid to use the word.

He sipped the tea and thought. *The boathouse — what a joke! I haven't been near the boathouse since my last year as a student, when I used to sneak down there with Holly for a bit of snogging.* He smiled to himself as the memories came back. He hadn't thought about that in a long time. *Those were good times. Wherever she is and whatever she's doing now, I hope she's well and happy.*



"I'll be sorry to miss Christmas here," Hermione announced when they returned to the sitting room, "but I want to spend it with my parents."

"In Australia?" Molly asked.

"Well, no," Hermione admitted. "I didn't really send them to Australia. I convinced them to take that trip around the world that they'd always dreamed of. I didn't even have to use magic. Or not much, anyway. They arranged for some dentist-friends to look after their practice and some of the neighbors looked after the house. They got back in August."

"You never told me that," Ron said accusingly.

"I thought that it was better if no one knew. And anyway, no matter what happened, the wizarding world would have forgotten about them by the time they got back." *Only wizards could believe a stupid story like that,* she thought. *They know so little about Muggles. Muggle affairs are com-*



pletely under the radar for most of them. In fact, most of them wouldn't even know what radar is.

"Muggles can't just move to another country, settle down and start practicing dentistry, you know," she added. "There are a lot of formalities, and a lot of paperwork. It can take years."

"Amazing," said Arthur, who'd joined them. "Muggles are such fascinating creatures. Imagine, they have paperwork just like we do."

"Well, I'm glad to hear that you didn't really purge their memories," Molly said. *And my children had better not try a stunt like that on me!* "What about you, Harry, are your Muggle relatives back?"

"Yes, they're back at Number 4 Privet Drive now," he said, frowning. "I'm sure they're furious about the whole thing, and I'm not going to visit them at Christmas. Or ever."

Under the couch, the Rita-beetle's antennae perked up. She'd started to think that she was wasting her time, but now she'd struck gold. *That's right, he has Muggle relatives. I'd forgotten all about that. They probably knew his mother! I'll have to have a little talk with them.*

She endured their small talk until finally they all went off to bed. Then she crept out, squeezed under the door, and flew off to find her clothes.



The Knight Boat stopped in Halifax to pick up a crate of frozen Nipsters, magical lobster-like creatures that jet about in the ocean like squid. Nipsters are slightly psychic, which makes them almost impossible to catch, but eating them is believed to give a witch or wizard a temporarily enhanced ability to foresee the future. Their rubbery flesh tastes much like





a burnt tire and few can stomach it long enough to get any benefit, but there are always those who are willing to try, and Nipsters always bring a high price at magical fish markets.

Night had fallen by the time they pulled out of the harbor. Severus was off duty and he stood on the deck looking at the vial of memories that Potter had returned to him. He longed to pull out the stopper and watch them drift away into the darkness. Shadows of those memories, most of them painful and some of them shameful, still remained to haunt him. Why return them to his head and refresh the pain?

But what would he be without his memories? What would anyone be? His memories, distressing though they might be, were part of him. They were of things he had done and experienced, and they made him what he was. Without memories a man would be a blank slate. There were witches and wizards who had deliberately disposed of their worst memories, and most of them eventually ended up in St. Mungo's, vaguely happy but mindless, like Gilderoy Lockhart.

No, they were his memories of his deeds and his decisions, and he would have to bear them. He pulled out the stopper, teased them out with his wand, and let them slip back into his head. Then he stood there for a long time, staring out into the night.



Plans and Schemes



ON'T WORRY ABOUT IT," CAPTAIN CLARK

said as he sat down at the table. "We don't need to know about your past. It's none of our business."

Biscuit passed him a cup of coffee. "Actually, we saw something about you in *The Daily Prophet*," he confessed, "and it said you were a big hero. It said you were a master spy, you died a heroic death, and they couldn't have won that war without you. They even gave you a medal."

"There was nothing heroic about spying," Severus said. "I lied to everyone, all of the time, year after year. And I'm still lying. I'm lying about who I am. I must, if I hope to leave my past behind. But I'm sick of lying and I don't want to lie to you. Not any more."

"And now you're not, so there's no problem," Clark said, reaching for the sugar. "Any time you want to talk about your past, we'll be happy to listen, but if you don't want to, then that's okay, too."

"We're cool with it," Kat agreed.

"Good," Severus said. "But I want you to understand that I was *not* a hero. I was a fool who got involved in something I shouldn't have, and I caused some ... terrible harm. No matter what I do, I can never make up for that."

He looked across the mess to where some passengers were feeding marzipan to Fawkes.

"There was nothing heroic about my 'death' either," he added. "The whole thing was quite stupid, actually, and I'm only alive today because of that overgrown budgie."

Fawkes looked back at him and chirped happily





Rita Skeeter put on the dark green trench coat and picked up the badge. Her Muggleborn friend Gertie had given them to her along with a plain leather shoulder bag, and assured her that they would help her pass as a Muggle police detective. The badge was very impressive looking and she wondered what spell had been used to create it.

She looked at herself in the mirror. "Pretty sharp," she said, although she thought the low-heeled black pumps were rather boring. "Now all I have to do is find that Privet Drive place. I'm sure Potter's aunt wouldn't talk to a witch, but I'm betting she'll talk to a police detective."

She left her flat and went out into Diagon Alley where she got quite a few strange looks from passing witches and wizards. *It works*, she thought. *I must look like a Muggle. Or at least I don't look like a witch.* Then she strolled through the Leaky Cauldron and out into Muggle London to find a taxi.



Minerva McGonagall called the staff meeting to order. "Now I want someone to tell me what happened," she said.

"It was another of those fights between former Gryffindors and former Slytherins," Pomona said. "It started off as a shouting match. A Gryffie said it was all Slytherin's fault that all the old Houses had been abolished. A Slythy said some nasty things about the Gryffie, his ancestors, and his broom, and soon a crowd was gathering. A Prefect — who was a former Hufflepuff, I might add — tried to calm them down but she got hit in the head when someone threw a shoe at her. Then everyone started hurling spells and nine people ended up in the infirmary."

"Someone threw a *shoe* at her?" Horace said. "What an uncouth, Mug-



gle-like thing to do!"

"Everything is always Slytherin's fault, of course," the portrait of Phineas Black sneered.

"You just stay out of this, Phineas!" Minerva scolded. "And that goes for the rest of you portraits, too!"

Black shrugged and left his frame. The others were nowhere in sight, except for Albus Dumbledore who was snoozing and didn't notice.

"It looks like our plan to end this sort of thing by closing the old Houses isn't working very well," Filius observed.

"It will," Minerva said. "We just have to give it time. Without sorting, in six years there will be no more former Gryffindors, Slytherins, Ravenclaws or Hufflepuffs at this school, and then things will settle down."

"I hope you're right," Filius said, but he had his doubts.



"Hey Ballard," Clayton Urquhart called from his infirmary bed. "It's McGonagall who ran us off and used us as an excuse to shut down the Houses. She's the one who wants to change everything. Your quarrel is with *her*, not us. We don't like the new regime either."

"Go 'way," Bentley Ballard mumbled. His nose had been smashed by a flying textbook and he was in no mood to talk. If it had happened in a Quidditch match, if it had been a Bludger, that would have been different. That would have been an injury to be proud of, but this wasn't and it just hurt. A lot.

"If we work together, maybe we can change things," Urquhart mused. "We could get together with Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff and, I don't know, maybe go on strike or something."



"That's not a bad idea, you know," Melody Nowak called from her bed. "We should talk about that." Melody was the Prefect who had tried to prevent the brawl. Nurse Pomfrey had bandaged her head and insisted that she remain in the infirmary for further observation.

As usual, no one paid any attention to Melody.

"You know who got your kid brother home safe, Ballard?" Urquhart called. "Slytherins, that's who. After McGonagall ran us all off, we got dumped at the Hog's Head with all our little Firsties and everything. The town was crawling with Death Eaters and Snatchers and all sorts of creeps who were hoping to get in on some looting, and then all the little kids from the other Houses started pouring in, too. What were they supposed to do? They were too young to apparate, and it wasn't safe for them to stay there. There's only one floo in that crummy old pub and the bartender told us it didn't always work right."

"Oo cares?" Bentley mumbled, mopping at his bloody nose.

Urquhart ignored him. "There were some older ones from the other Houses too, but most of 'em apparated away pretty quickly. They were scared, otherwise they would have stayed to fight. A few of 'em had the presence of mind to take some younger ones along, but most of 'em just lit out right away.

"Sharrup," Bentley mumbled and threw a bloody handkerchief at him.

"Most of the older ones from the other Houses helped, too. You know that," Melody interjected.

Urquhart continued unfazed. "So the old bartender stood guard and all of us who knew how to apparate started taking the kids out, one by one. We took 'em to the Bletchley place — we all knew how to get there — and they were safe there while Mr Bletchley worked on contacting their parents. Mrs



Bletchley served them cocoa and reassured them while they waited."

In the background they could hear the sound of gagging as Poppy gave someone Skele-Grow.

"Then a bunch of us went back to fight. Most of us were no fans of Lord Moldy Shorts, you know." They were no fans of Albus Dumbledore or Minerva McGonagall, either, but there was no point in bringing that up. "But when we got back to the Hog's Head," he continued, "the tunnel was filled with fire and the bartender was trying to hold it back. So we went outside and ..."

Poppy interrupted them. "Oh, Mr Urquhart, you've got Elf-ears!" she said, trying not to laugh. "I haven't seen that spell before. It must be a new one. I'll get to you in a minute.

"And you, Mr Ballard, need the Nosey-Growsey spell." She readied her wand. "This will only hurt a little bit."

"Arrgh!" Bentley gasped as the spell hit him.



Mavis, the captain's parrot, looked admiringly at Fawkes. "It sounds like it was quite a harrowing adventure," she squawked. "I'm so glad all those horrid things were stopped and you were able to rescue your wizard."

"Yes," Fawkes chirped, "there are all sorts of dangerous things in the world, and we can't leave wizards to deal with all of them alone." He fluffed his feathers. "A bird's work is never done."

"You've done such a fine job, looking after him," Mavis squawked. "Your wizard was so bedraggled when he first got here."

Fawkes beamed with pride. "Yes, the poor creature had a really rough time of it. My previous wizard, Albus, was horribly cursed and even my



tears couldn't save him. He had to be put down, and poor Severus had to do it. Everyone hated him for that. And then he was almost killed by a possessed serpent. It was terrible for him but he's coming along quite well now. Much better than I originally expected."

Biscuit looked across at the two birds. "I wonder what our feathered friends are chattering about," he remarked to Severus, who was helping him clear the dishes. Captain Clark and Kat had gone back on duty.

"I'm sure the term 'bird brain' covers it," Severus said.

"While you were away, the Captain and I got to thinking," the cook said, changing the subject. "You were some kind of potions expert, weren't you?"

Severus nodded. "One of the best," he said proudly.

"Well, we've been doing pretty well selling the phoenix droppings, and with your knowledge of potion ingredients and my haggling skills, we could go a step farther."

"My haggling skills are second to none," Severus said, scowling at the cook.

"Of course," Biscuit said, refusing to be drawn into an argument. "So why don't we start buying up potion ingredients where they're plentiful and cheap," he said, "and selling them at a mark-up where they're rare. We're travelling around all the time anyway, and as long as we keep to small quantities, the bosses at Knight Lines will never notice."

Severus thought for a moment, and then he smiled. "That could be ... interesting," he replied.

"We thought you'd like it," Biscuit said.



"Mrs Dursley?" Rita asked when Petunia opened the door. "I'm with the



Mug... er, Metropolitan Police." She brought the badge out of her pocket, showed it quickly, and tucked it away again. "We're investigating your nephew, Harry Potter. May I come in for a moment?"

"Harry Potter?" Petunia said, hustling Rita inside before the neighbors could notice anything. "What has that awful boy done now? You can't begin to imagine the horrors that he put us through. We were frightened to death. We were forced to go into hiding. Forced! By those vicious friends of his. Someone ought to put a stop to it!"

"That's why we're investigating," Rita said. "We'd like to stop them, but we don't have enough information. We need to know what's been going on. Anything you can tell me will be helpful."

"Well, you just sit down, then," Petunia said, "because this is going to take a while. Would you care for some tea while we talk?"

"That would be very nice," Rita said. "Time is no problem. We need to know everything." She smiled sweetly. "I hope you don't mind if I take some notes."





Petunia Begins



ITA SKEETER BROUGHT OUT HER NOTEBOOK.

Petunia Evans Dursley had been so easy to fool. All it took was a trench coat and a phony badge to make the Muggle woman believe that Rita was a Muggle police detective investigating the recent wizard problems. With a little bit of prodding the woman would tell all.

Petunia started by prattling on about her family's suffering during the war. They'd been forced to stay in some old hotel on the coast in Devon where the owner, a fellow named Fawcety who was more than a bit barmy, had been very rude to them, and now they were having financial difficulties. Vernon had lost his job and was still looking for a new one. They couldn't get Dudley back into Smeltings and had to put him in one of the awful local schools to finish his last year. The yard was overgrown with weeds, the neighbors had been avoiding them and giving them very strange looks, and Aunt Madge kept telling them that it was all their own fault for harboring a freak.

"It's all been so horrible," Petunia said, sniffing a bit, "completely and utterly horrible."

"I'm sure it has been," Rita said with fake sympathy, "but we must begin at the beginning to see how it all came about. Tell me about your sister, the ..." she paused for effect, "... witch. What was she like as a child?"

"Lily?" Petunia snorted. "She was always everyone's favorite. They all thought she was so pretty and so clever, but she was really quite nasty, at least to me. They never acknowledged that, though. She had them all fooled. They all thought she was little Miss Perfect."

"When did you realize she was ... not normal?"

"A freak, you mean?" Petunia said, and Rita had to stifle an intense urge to hex her. "It took a while. Strange things used to happen around Lily, and



I thought that was normal. I thought that I was the abnormal one because those things didn't happen for me."

"What sort of things?" Rita asked gently. Her phony smile wasn't very convincing but Petunia was too busy feeling sorry for herself to notice.

"Little things would leap into her hand when she reached for them. Toys, flowers, forks and spoons, things like that. And sometimes things would fall down for no apparent reason, like a vase or the clock over the mantle. And of course I'd get the blame whenever that sort of thing happened.

She's just jealous, Rita thought. *It's hardly surprising. She's just a poor, stupid Muggle, after all.*

"I don't think my sister understood it herself until she met that horrible boy," Petunia continued, making a face like there was a bad smell in the room. "He was the one who told her she was a witch and encouraged her to do witchy things."

Rita's heart leapt with excitement, but she managed to sound casual. "What boy was that?"

"The *Snape* boy."

"Snape?" Rita asked innocently.

"Yes, Snape. He was the son of one of the workers at the plant. Our dad worked at the plant, too, but he was a supervisor, of course. He said Tobias Snape, the Snape boy's father, was just plain lazy. It was no surprise what happened to him."

"What did happen to him?"

"He was killed in a riot at some stupid football match. It was in the papers. Dad said he was probably drunk."

"Hmmm," Rita said, writing in her notebook, "but what about his son? What about the Snape boy?"



Knight Lines
Transport

Petunia Continues?

CHAPTER

5



SEVERUS WAS QUITE PLEASED. HE AND BISCUIT

had just finished haggling with a fellow called Monterey Jack. They had ended up with two dozen very nice Chupacabra claws in trade for the smeeches that had fed on Harry and Ron (Kat had kept them), and they had sold him a small bag of Chinese fireball scales for a very nice profit.

Biscuit looked at the gold coins and did a quick calculation, converting between the various types of wizard currencies in his head. "We made about 34 of your British Gold Galleons on those transactions," he reported happily, covering his remarks with a discrete *Muffliato*. If they could keep this up, some day they might be able to buy a boat of their own. Then they could go independent, or work on contract for Knight Lines as owner-operators.

Severus glanced at his reflection in the shop window as they walked out. Work boots, dark blue work shirt, black Muggle jeans, and a dark blue bandana to hide the scars on his neck. Despite the lack of a ball cap, he looked very much like a working-class Muggle. In fact, he looked very much like his father. What had his mother ever seen in that man? For that matter, what could anyone ever see in *him*?

Perhaps the purebloods were right; perhaps you could never really rise above your origins, no matter how hard you tried. Here he was, working on a boat. There was no denying that it was a working-class job. They even did manual labor sometimes, as it was often easier to simply pick something up and move it rather than going to the trouble of focusing a spell to levitate it.

And the worst part of it was that he was rather enjoying it all. Working on the boat was a lot more interesting than teaching wizard brats

Knight Lines
Transport



at Hogwarts had ever been. He was travelling the world, seeing exotic places and meeting a wide variety of people, most of whom didn't hate or despise him. And then there was the joy of haggling. Yes, it was a great improvement over his life at Hogwarts and Spinners End. He was glad that the Malfoys didn't know about it, though.



"Snape?" Rita Skeeter had asked innocently.

"Yes, *Snape*. I'm sure his mother was one of *them*," Petunia said. "That's why he knew so much about witching. She kept to herself but everybody knew that there was something wrong with her. Whenever anyone got sick or anything bad happened, we knew she must have been behind it. I don't know how they got their groceries and such; you never saw them in the shops, which was just as well, actually. People like them used to be burned at the stake, but now they're allowed to do whatever they want. The police ought to stop them. You are going to stop them, aren't you, Detective?"

"We're doing our best," Rita told her. She crossed her legs and smoothed down her trench coat. Impersonating a Muggle police detective was turning out to be fun.

"Well, it's not good enough," Petunia said haughtily. "We've been threatened. *Threatened!* That Alvin Dumbledown fellow came right here to this house and threatened us, and there's one called Something Black, and what if Snape turns up here — he must be a grown man now — or that Voldywort one?"

"They'll never trouble you again," Rita assured her.

Petunia's eyes lit up. "You mean you got them?"



"Yes, all of them," Rita lied. "We took care of it quietly." *This woman is an idiot, she thought. I'd better get her back on topic.* It would be so much easier just to take a quick look into her mind, but no one wanted to look into the mind of a Muggle, and especially not the mind of a Muggle like Petunia Evans Dursley. Rita shuddered at the thought.

"Oh, thank heaven!" Petunia said happily.

"The Potter boy is still on the loose, though," Rita reminded her, "and we're trying to build a case against him. We need to know all about him and his mother. You were telling me how the Snape boy influenced your sister Lily. Could you tell me more about that?"

"That Potter boy!" Petunia's face turned a violent shade of reddish purple. "He was forced on us. We never wanted him, and I guess they didn't want him either because they never lifted a finger to help us. They just threatened us and forced us to keep him. I wish he'd frozen to death before we found him on our doorstep that day in November. That little viper was a constant danger to us all, and especially to my poor Dudders! You can't begin to imagine what it was like." She brought out a handkerchief and started to sob.

That's all true, Rita thought. She'd gone there to learn about Lily and Snape, but more dirt on "Alvin" Dumbledore and the Boy Who Lived would be just as good. Maybe even better. She scribbled furiously in her notebook.

"Dumbledore simply dumped the helpless baby on these stupid Muggles and then vanished for 10 years," she wrote. What was wrong with that man? I wouldn't let this Muggle cow look after a potted palm, let alone a wizard child! Didn't Dumbledore care about the welfare of his precious Chosen One? What if the boy had survived the Dark Lord only to succumb to neglect or abuse here?





(I know I asked that question in my Dumbledore exposé, but I'm going to put it in the Snape book, too. People need to be reminded!)

"Magic is pure evil!" Petunia said, wiping her eyes. "It destroyed my sister. First it built a wall between the two of us, and then it took her away from me, and finally it killed her. I thought it was over then, but I was so wrong. Then magic started to destroy us. My poor Dudley was almost killed several times, and look at us now, our life is in ruins." She paused and looked at Rita with teary eyes. "Why us? Why couldn't Lily just have been normal, like the rest of us?"

"Can you tell me more about your sister?" Rita interjected. "What happened to her?"

Petunia snorted. "My sister had a thing for bad boys, that's the truth of it. She thought they were exciting. It was bad enough when she was intrigued by that Snape brat, but then there was that one she married, the rich one; he was her downfall. If she had chosen a good man like my Vernon, I'm sure she'd still be alive today."

Unless she died of boredom, Rita thought



"So Albus gave him the bird?" Minerva asked.

"He must have," Harry said. "Fawkes was there when we saw Professor Snape in that infirmary."

"Well, I'm relieved to hear it," the Headmistress said. "I'd hate to think that Albus had left Severus in such a dangerous position without any sort of help." She looked over at the portrait of Albus Dumbledore. "You did give Fawkes to him, didn't you, Albus?"



In the portrait, Albus looked rather uncomfortable. "Yes, I must have," he said. "I don't really remember. As I'm sure you know, I was quite ill from that curse in those days."

"It was certainly a brilliant plan!" Minerva said happily. "We all thought that Fawkes had abandoned us, but it was really just a clever ruse and Fawkes was actually standing by until he was needed. Severus must have felt so much better knowing that Fawkes would be able to help him, even in the most desperate situation, just like he helped Harry in the Chamber of Secrets. I'm so glad you thought of it."

"Yes, I'm glad, too," the portrait said, looking a bit confused. "I just wish I could remember doing it."

"Thank you for telling me, Harry," Minerva said, turning back to the young wizard, "but I want you to promise me that you won't tell anyone else about Professor Snape. He deserves his privacy, if that's what he wants. And you must make the others promise, too."

"I thought you ought to know, Professor, but don't worry," Harry said as she walked him to the door, "we won't tell anyone else. You can count on us."

She watched Harry as he disappeared down the staircase. *What a fine young man he's become*, she thought. Then she returned to her desk where she poured herself a wee glass of Scotch.

"Albus," she said to the portrait, "I don't know what to do. Voldemort is gone for good, but somehow things don't seem to be very much better. We're not really happy any more, like we were in the old days. Yes, there were some serious challenges after Harry first arrived, like the Troll in the castle, and the Philosopher's Stone, and that awful basilisk, but somehow we were happier then, weren't we? Where did it all go wrong?"



The portrait of Albus watched quietly as she took a sip of the Scotch.

"Remember when House rivalry used to be fun?" she asked. "Maybe I didn't enjoy Gryffindor's losing streak, but it felt so good when we started winning again, even if you did have to tweak things a bit to make it happen. It was such a pleasure to take the House Cup away from Professor Snape in Harry's first year. Severus certainly did scowl when he handed it over." She chuckled at the memory. "It was always fun to wind him up a bit, but he always gave as good as he got, and it was a friendly rivalry back then, or at least I like to think so. I like to think that we both enjoyed our competition.

"But things took a turn for the worse after poor Cedric was killed and Voldemort reappeared. All those deaths! Students, former students, friends and colleagues; I knew them all, including the ones who became Death Eaters. I taught almost all of them at one time or another. And I started to hate poor Severus. I didn't know that he did more than most of us — certainly more than I did — to stop Voldemort. None of us knew. I just wish you'd told us, Albus. And I wish we'd been nicer to him when he was a student. Maybe he wouldn't have turned to Voldemort if we had been."

"His association with Voldemort turned out to be very useful to us; essential, in fact. And he was a Slytherin, after all," the portrait said, "although eventually I came to realize that his sorting might have been mistaken."

"That was the problem, really — our assumption that all Slytherins are going to go bad," Minerva said. "And I'm afraid that I was as guilty of that as anyone." She took another sip of her drink and sighed as she remembered how she'd driven the all Slytherins out before the battle.

"When did we start feeling that way about them?" she asked. "They were always a bit snooty, of course, but so were the Ravenclaws. And



they were ambitious; it was one of their signature traits. We always thought they were annoying, and we didn't particularly like them, but we didn't really think of them as evil."

"Tom Riddle corrupted them," the portrait told her solemnly. "You mustn't blame yourself."

Minerva glanced over at the portrait of Headmaster Snape. It remained unchanged, although for a moment she thought its eyes had grown more intense. It was probably just her imagination, though.



"Hi, Melody," Clayton Urquhart said, appearing at Melody Nowak's side as they left Charms class. "Remember that conversation we had in the infirmary?"

"Um, not really," the former Hufflepuff said, "but I think you're going to remind me."

"Right you are! We were talking about working together to get our Houses back. You want to get Hufflepuff restored, don't you?"

"Yes, of course I do." She stopped walking and gave him a quizzical look. "What are you suggesting? That we go on strike or something? Everyone wants the Houses back, after all. The new system of 'house roulette' is a joke."

"A strike would make things worse," he said. "It would make McGonagall mad, and then she'd dig in. You know what she's like. A strike might succeed in the end, but it would take too long. It would be too much work, too. No, we have to give her what she wants." Then he smiled a sly smile and said, "Or we have to pretend to."

Melody thought for a moment and then asked, "So, what does she want?"

"She wants us to stop fighting among ourselves," he said. *Even though*



it's partly her fault for the way she treated us, he thought, but he decided against saying that out loud.

"So you're going to start getting along with the Gryffies?" Melody said, laughing at the thought.

"No, we're going to *pretend*. But we'll have to get the Gryffies to go along with it, and we'll need your help with that.

Uh oh, Melody thought. *Here it comes*.

"The Gryffs won't do it if they think it's a Slytherin idea. But if they think it's *their own* idea, they'll embrace it. They want their House back as much as we want ours."

Melody was incredulous. "And you think I can convince them that it's their own idea?"

"Absolutely. We have complete faith in you. Just go to Bentley Ballard and tell him that you want to talk about the great idea that he mentioned while we were all in the infirmary. And when he says, 'What great idea?' you just 'remind' him. He'll fall for it, no problem. And when he says, 'But those stinking, treacherous Slytherins won't go along with it,' you tell him that you'll get us to think it's our own idea. Then you go do something similar with the Ravenclaws. After that, you tell everyone that you'll be the go-between and set up a meeting of House reps. It'll work out just fine. You'll see."

Melody smiled. "You know, I think you just might be right about that."



"Lily was a thrill-seeker," Petunia continued. "That's why she took up with that horrible Snape brat. He taught her witchy things, and she thought he was cool. He was always showing off for her. He was crazy





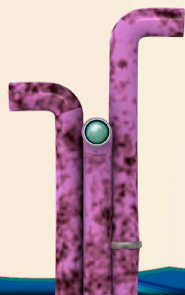
about her, everyone could see that, and she loved the attention. I knew it wouldn't last, though. He was really just an ugly, unkempt street brat from a bad family, not worthy of her at all, but he kept her entertained until she found someone more exciting."

Rita wrote, "*Thrill-seeker who liked bad boys — that explains a lot!*" in her notebook and said, "It must have been a trial for you."

A look of sadness came over Petunia and she said, "Well, Lily and I were still close in those days, despite the Snape boy. We fought sometimes, of course, and I tried to get her to stay away from Snape, but we were sisters and we loved each other. That all came to an end when she got the letter from that witch school, though. By the time she got on that train she was so snooty that I just couldn't stand it. She said I was jealous — and that's a nasty lie! — and I called her names. And when she got back from that school the next summer, she didn't care about me anymore. I could hardly even get her to talk to me after that."

"So the school changed her?" Rita asked. Then for a moment she accidentally made eye-contact with Petunia, and even though she tried not to, she could hear the Muggle thinking, *I loved my sister so much. Why I couldn't I have been magical, too, like her, and gone away with her?*

Rita quickly looked away as Petunia started crying again.



Learning to Fly



EVERUS AND KAT WENT UPONTO THE DECK OF

the Knight Boat together.

"You start with a spell called Levicorpus," Severus said.

"Do you know it?"

"I'm afraid not," Kat said. In fact, he'd never even heard of it. "It must be a British thing."

"Yes, I suppose it is."

Severus didn't like thinking about the origins of Levicorpus. He and Lily had worked on that spell together after he'd seen her floating from the swing so long ago, and they had perfected it during their early years at Hogwarts. He believed she had betrayed him and taught it to his enemies — how else could they have learned it? He certainly hadn't told anyone. And then they had used it against him on that horrible day. Her betrayal had hurt him beyond words.

Sadly, he would never know the truth: Lily hadn't deliberately given away their spell. She'd been practicing near the lake, levitating a doll when she thought she was alone, and James had been spying on her under his invisibility cloak. He had learned their secret then and taught it to all the Gryffindors.

"It takes a bit of practice, Kat," Severus told him. "You have to master it and learn to cast it on yourself before you can move on to flying. I'll show you how it's done."

He cast it wordlessly and rose up into the air, hovering above the deck. Then with a silent Finite he dropped back down, landing gently on his feet.

"That's the first step," he said. "Then once you're up, you have to learn to move forward."



"*Levicorpus!*" Kat cried excitedly, pointing his wand at himself. Up he went, rising unsteadily, until suddenly he tipped over and fell. Only by grabbing a railing did he stop himself from falling overboard. "I guess it takes a bit of practice," he muttered, looking a bit sheepish.

"Hmmm," Severus said, raising an eyebrow and folding his arms. "Maybe you should start by casting it on something other than yourself. That lazy kneazle, perhaps. But tie a rope on him first so he doesn't float away. It would annoy the captain if you lost him."



Fawkes cackled heartily. "Poor humans!" he twittered to Mavis the parrot as they watched from a nearby perch. "They long to fly but they don't have wings. At least my Severus can do it without using pathetic contraptions the way most humans do."

"It's so nice of him to teach Kat," Mavis squawked.

"Yes, I think humans have wing-envy," Fawkes fluffed up his feathers. "They make clothing and dye it to emulate our feathers, too. But some of them actually steal our feathers to decorate themselves." He shuddered. "They've hunted some of our kind to extinction in their horrible greed."

Mavis nodded sadly.

They were quiet for a few moments, and then she said, "It's too bad that Kat has such an awful name. I mean, *Kat*? Why not a nice bird-name like 'Robin'? There was once a great outlaw named Robin, I've heard."

"Robin Hood? He was a bit of a booby, actually. Didn't live up to the name; it was all just an overblown legend, I'm sad to say. But Merlin, who was the greatest wizard of all, was named after a hawk. I knew him well."



"Oh yes!" Mavis twittered. "Did you know Jack Sparrow, the famed pirate of the Caribbean?"

"Captain Jack Sparrow? Oh yes, he was quite a loon. Never a dull moment when he was around," Fawkes cackled.





An Albatross Arrives



ITA SKEETER GOT QUITE A FEW STARES AS SHE

passed through the Leaky Cauldron. She was still dressed in her Muggle policewoman disguise and looked suspiciously like a Muggle to the patrons. At least she no longer had to go through the hassle of finding a taxi and confunding the driver. Now that she knew where Privet Drive was, she could apparate back and forth in an instant.

She was miffed. Her interview with Petunia had been going very well. The Muggle woman had been complaining about James Potter. Petunia had made the mistake of inviting Lily and James to the wedding when she had married Vernon.

"Potter kept babbling about his broom," Petunia had said. "His *broom*! What kind of a man talks about a broom? Does he really expect people to believe he *rides* one? It was ghastly. I wanted to crawl into a hole and die, and our parents ... it must have been agonizing for them. Fortunately Vernon's father is a bit deaf and he thought Potter was talking about curling. As for the other guests, I'd warned them before the wedding that Potter was quite daft and possibly dangerous, so they stayed well away from him. The two of them didn't stay long, thank goodness. I don't know why I invited them, or why they decided to come. I certainly didn't go to *their* wedding! It would have been terrifying, being surrounded by all those freaks."

But then the boy had come home from school and Petunia had shooed her out. "You have to leave now," she'd said frantically. "I don't want poor Dudley to ask why you're here. It would remind him of his cousin and that would be too traumatic for him."

Well, there was no point in worrying about it. Rita had learned quite a



lot from the Muggle, and she could always go back for more if she wanted to. Meanwhile, there were other leads to chase down. She clutched her notebook and smiled to herself.



Life was reasonably normal on Knight Boat Number 6, or as close to normal as life gets on a magical boat. They had just dropped off passengers in Sydney and visited Lydia and Jack in Melbourne. With Jack's help, they had obtained a large bottle of top-quality Australian Austromantula powder in trade for a pouch of genuine Welsh wyvern scales.

"Austromantulas are smaller than your Acromantulas," Jack had explained. "They're about the size of a Cocker Spaniel, and they live in burrows. They rush out and grab you by the leg, and if you don't curse 'em off quick, they paralyze you with their venom, drag you down their burrow, and suck out all of your juices."

Fortunately, the nasty things shed their exoskeletons as they grow, which can then be collected without getting dangerously close to a live one. The exoskeletons are ground into a powder that is exceptionally valuable for use in Skelegro, and Severus and Seabiscuit were very pleased with the acquisition. It had been a very pleasant and profitable visit.

Kat and Seabiscuit were on deck getting ready to practice Levicorpus as the boat started for New Zealand. They hadn't quite gotten the hang of the spell yet, and had taken to wearing Muggle sports helmets and protective padding to avoid injuries.

Severus stood near the railing looking out over the sea as the boat left the harbor. He had dreamed about Hogwarts the previous night, and it



had been a pleasant dream instead of a nightmare. He had been patrolling the halls on a quiet night. There had been no Marauders or Death Eaters lurking in dark corners. No Gilderoy Lockhart, no Peeves, and no Albus; just peaceful solitude. And of course the pleasure of catching the occasional hapless student who had ventured out after hours. Such simple pleasures; he almost missed them.

He'd been feeling relatively good recently and he wondered why. Perhaps it was just the passage of time and being far away from wizarding Britain. Or perhaps it was because he'd poured out so much of his anger when he cast Fiendfyre through the gateway to the evil beings. Maybe it was the mushroom tea that the old witch had given him afterward. Or maybe it was just the salt air and sunshine. Whatever the reason was, he hoped it would last, but feared that it wouldn't.

The captain sounded the horn. "Get below decks, you guys!" he called out. "We've gotta dive and make up some time now! Passengers are waiting!"



Clayton Urquhart, former Slytherin, sat down next to Bentley Ballard, former Gryffindor, in the Great Hall. They were both in East House now, after all.

"What do you want, Slytherin?" Bentley hissed.

"We're supposed to pretend that we're all getting along with each other to appease McGonagall, like we decided at our meeting, remember?" Clayton reminded him. "You do want to get your House restored, don't you?"

"Oh, yeah," Bentley said, looking rather unhappy. It was easy enough to talk about it at a meeting, but he wasn't too keen on actually doing it. Especially while he was trying to eat lunch.



"How about if I help you with your runes assignment," Clayton proposed. Everyone knew that Bentley was pants at runes. "Bring it down to the common room this evening, and I'll give you some pointers."

Bentley thought for a few moments. *I guess I've got nothing to lose, and I could use some help, I suppose.*

"Okay," he finally said.

"Good, see you tonight," Clayton said as he left the table.

What a dunderhead! he thought. *I should be given the Order of Merlin for this, or maybe one of those Oscar things that they give for acting.*

Then he spotted Melody Nowak, the former Hufflepuff, now in South House. He waved and wandered over to her.

"Hi, Melody. Would you like to go to Hogsmeade with me next weekend?" he asked, trying to sound much less nervous than he felt.

She looked surprised, and then smiled. "Why yes, that would be nice," she said.

"Good, I'll see you then," he said and thought, *Maybe this inter-House fraternizing isn't going to be all bad after all.*



An albatross with a mail pouch was waiting for them when the Knight Boat surfaced near Christchurch. There was a letter from Angie for Kat, and copies of THE NEW WORLD WIZARD, THE DAILY PROPHET and THE QUIBBLER. For Severus there was a plain brown envelope with no return address.

Seabiscuit grabbed the newspapers and hurried off to start on the word puzzles, while Severus cast a few spells on the brown envelope to make sure that it didn't contain anything dangerous, or lethal.



Fawkes had settled on a railing. The albatross gave him a funny look. "What kind of bird are you?" he squawked. "I've never seen one like you before."

Fawkes flew over to him. "And you probably won't again," he twittered. "I'm a phoenix. We're extremely rare."

The albatross snorted. "You think I'm stupid? Phoenix is some kind of city, not a bird." Then he took a look at Mavis the parrot. "That your girlfriend?" he asked.

"Of course not!" Fawkes said. "She's way too young for me, and besides, she's a parrot. It would be totally inappropriate."

The sea bird obviously didn't believe him. "Is that so?" he said, making a sneering sort of noise.

Fawkes was about to put the bird in his place when Mavis broke in.

"Yeah?" she hissed. "Well, may the Bluebird of Happiness fly up your beak, ya dumb bustard! I should give you such a peck!" She was dwarfed by the albatross, who was even bigger than Fawkes and had a 12 foot wing span, but she didn't care.

Fawkes was shocked. "Mavis! Such language!"

So was the seabird. "Bustard? I'm an albatross, not a bustard!"

"You're a big bloated bag of feathers!" the little parrot screeched.

"Settle down, birds!" Severus said, scowling. "Some of us are trying to read our mail." Then he headed below decks with the envelope to escape from the racket.



Ignoring the continued squawking on deck, Severus opened the envelope and found the second issue of the *SLYTHERIN SENTINEL*. The front page



featured a nostalgic picture of Slytherins hanging around the common room in happier days, and inside it told him how the remaining students planned to try to get the House restored. They hoped to win McGonagall's favor by trying to get along with everyone. No revenge, no pranks, and no showing off (too much) at Quidditch. Everyone was to be on their best behavior.

He read it through quickly, and his heart swelled with pride in his former students. It was a good plan, and they'd thought of it themselves. There was a flaw in it, but they could deal with that when the time came. Right now, the thing to do was encourage them.

"Hold that albatross, if it's still there," he shouted, and he sat down to compose a letter.

"Dear Slytherin students," he wrote,

"I want to commend you for your excellent plan. We must restore our reputation if we are to regain our House, our self respect, and our place in the wizarding world.

Yes, it will be difficult to be friendly toward those who despise us. Just remember what's in it for you, and hold the course.

Follow the example of your former Head of House, the late Professor Snape. He had to make both sides believe that he was their loyal pawn, even though he no doubt loathed them all. He did it for years, day after day, even though they all despised him. And he succeeded. If he could do that, you can do this.

P.S. Don't forget to watch your backs at all times!"

He signed it with the code name they had given him, "Onyx."

It's up to them now, he thought, I've done all that I can. I'm out of it at last, thank Merlin.

"Where's that albatross?" he shouted.



A Letter from Lucius



FAWKES AND MAVIS THE PARROT WATCHED AS

the big albatross faded into the distance.

"What a nasty bird!" Mavis chirped. "He has such a dirty mind. And they had to feed him six cans of anchovies before he would leave. *Six cans!* Are all albatrosses like him?"

"Most of them are very agreeable fellows" Fawkes assured her. "That one must have hatched from a rotten egg. At least he took my wizard's letter. I think my wizard is worried about his fledglings back at the school."

"Are they in some sort of danger?" the parrot asked.

"Not exactly. They are outcasts, shunned by all the others. The school is called Hogwarts — a stupid name, really, when they could have called it something nice like Lark Song or Bird Feathers. I wish I'd known; I would have stopped by and had a word with the founders. I mean, why the obsession with swine? Hogwarts, Hogsmeade. It's ridiculous!"

Mavis nodded. "Yes, but what about the fledglings?" she chirped.

"The fledglings are sorted into four Houses by a ratty old hat that belonged to one of the founders. The Houses were supposed to provide newly arrived fledglings with a nest and nest-mates, so they wouldn't feel lost and alone. Fledglings that age are insecure and they need to feel that they belong. The Houses seemed to serve that purpose, and the interhouse competitions used to be fun, from what I could tell, but over the last few decades it got totally out of hand. Quite vicious at times, in fact. And no one did anything about it, not even my former wizard, Albus. I don't know what the old boy was thinking; I really don't."

"Maybe they should get rid of the hat," Mavis said.



"Yes, it's a very old hat and it's been on so many heads that it's probably infested with moths and cooties by now. And worse, it's probably senile, but it must still have a bit of sense because it said that all of the Houses must come together. No one listened, though, not even Albus, and nothing has changed. An owl told me that they've stopped the sorting now, but it's too late. The stigma that's attached to poor Severus's House will follow his fledglings for the rest of their lives. They don't deserve that. I'm sad for them. Hogwarts just isn't what it used to be."



"Our plan seems to be working," Minerva told the weekly staff meeting. "The students seem to be getting along a bit better now. They're probably adjusting to their new Houses. There hasn't been a major fight all week."

"I disagree," Filius said. "Nobody cares about the new Houses. There's no House loyalty. You can see that at Quidditch. North House, South House, whatever House; nobody cares who wins a match, it's just an opportunity to take a shot at anyone they don't like."

Poppy nodded. "It's been too quiet lately, if you ask me. There have only been a few minor injuries this week. No one has tried to bash anyone's head in, at Quidditch or anywhere else."

"They're probably up to something," Horace opined. "They haven't even been complaining about anything. As a Slytherin, I see that as suspicious. And not to change the subject, but have you made any progress toward finding a replacement for me? I wish to return to retirement."

"You're not all that old, Horace," Minerva pointed out. "You can hang on for another year or two, I'm sure. Good Potions Masters are hard to find, and it



was good of you to take on Defense Against the Dark Arts, too. There is still a belief that the job is cursed, and no one seems to want to apply for it.”

“You’re going to have to try harder, Minerva,” he said. “It’s more than I can handle. I only came back because Albus twisted my arm, and I never agreed to stay indefinitely. Now that the crisis has passed, I want to return to private life.”

“Please be patient, Horace,” she said. “I will have to find someone to take over Transfiguration for me, so I will have more time to devote to my role as Headmistress, which will include recruiting new staff.”

Horace sighed and turned to look out the window. It just wasn’t any fun anymore. His popularity with the staff and students had waned to nothing because, despite his efforts during the battle, he was a Slytherin and everyone knew it. He no longer had enough influence to interest anyone, and his attempts to reestablish the Slug Club had come to naught. No one even cared very much about finding a replacement for him. He was starting to feel like Professor Binns.

“Neville Longbottom has agreed to help with Herbology,” Pomona said happily. “He’s such a lovely boy, and he certainly has the right touch with plants.”

“I wonder if we could get Neville to teach Defense, at least for a year or two,” Minerva mused. “He was a late bloomer as far as that sort of thing goes, but he must have some natural talent because he certainly proved himself against Voldemort.”

Horace and Pomona flinched to hear the name, and Filius looked uneasy.

“On the other hand,” Minerva continued, “Neville is probably weak on theory, given some of the Defense Professors that we’ve had over the years.” She sighed. “It’s too bad that Harry and Hermione don’t want to





join the staff, but Harry has always had his heart set on being an Auror, and Hermione says she wants to undertake some independent studies before she decides what she's going to do. She has such a brilliant mind."



"I've been doing the Arithmancy," said Hermione, "and the best I can work out is that you owe Headmaster Snape 3.141592 ... well, the decimals just keep going — life debts."

"Three-point-what?" Harry exclaimed. "How did you get that?"

"Life debts are really tricky to calculate, Harry. Think about your first Quidditch game when Quirrell was hexing your broom. In one sense I saved your life when I accidentally knocked Quirrell over on my way to set fire to Professor Snape, but if Professor Snape hadn't been counteracting the hex, you would have fallen off before I even realized what was happening. That's at least a partial life debt to the Professor."

Ron said, "I think you and Snape need to split that one, Hermione."

"And all of us owe him for saving us from Remus and the Dementors that night outside the Shrieking Shack when he took us up to the hospital wing."

"Wait a minute, wait a minute!" Harry objected. "I saved us from the Dementors by casting my stag Patronus. He didn't take anyone to the hospital wing until after I drove the Dementors off."

"Well, that's the thing. If he hadn't carried us all up to Hogwarts —"

All of us, including Sirius, Hermione refrained from saying aloud, on stretchers, not banging anyone's head against things and risking death from Second Impact Syndrome ...

"— we wouldn't have been there, in the hospital wing, for Dumbledore



to hint that you and I should use the time turner to go back in time to save Sirius and Buckbeak and the rest of us ... and Snape for that matter. It's the circular causality that makes your total life debt come out to pi."

"Pie?" said Ron.

"It's an irrational number."

Ron muttered, "This is irrational, all right."

"Okay," Harry said, "so I owe him for those two, but how do you get more than three?"

Hermione continued, "Who knows if any of us would have survived the Department of Mysteries if Professor Snape hadn't sent the Order, or wandering around with the locket Horcrux if he hadn't brought us the Sword of Gryffindor? I personally owe him another full life debt for the Department of Mysteries, and Ron owes at least another partial one, because of the brains that were attacking him. For you, Harry, I'm counting the basic debt for that particular rescue at thirty-three percent. The Death Eaters were trying to avoid killing you, which meant you had a decent chance of surviving anyway, at least for that evening; but that's just the base percentage, before I put it through the algorithms. The Sword of Gryffindor is even harder to calculate, since your life debt to Ron is involved, for when he pulled you out of the pond."

"Yeah," said Ron, "and don't forget Snape kept the other Death Eaters from killing you when you went chasing after them when Dumbledore died, so that's another."

"But the first one — when Quirrell was hexing my broom — that shouldn't count against me, should it? What about the life debt he owed my dad?"

Hermione sighed. Harry wasn't going to like this at all. "Well, it turns



out Professor Dumbledore wasn't exactly truthful with you about what happened with Professor Snape and Remus and the other Marauders."

Ron snorted out a laugh. "Dumbledore lying to Harry? No news there!"

Harry looked stricken. "But, my dad saved Snape's life. I know he was keeping Remus and Sirius out of trouble, too, but... Anyway, how could you know so much about what happened? No one was there except dad and Snape and Remus, and Remus wouldn't remember because he was transformed at the time. Dad and Snape had to explain it to Dumbledore afterward, and he would have known if they were lying."

"That doesn't mean he told you the truth, Harry," Hermione said. "There were other people who knew at least some of it. I've been investigating, and putting the stories together. Just listen and I'll explain everything."

As usual, Ron thought. But at least her explanations are more reliable than Dumbledore's.



"Our plan seems to be working," Melody Nowak, the Hufflepuff representative said. "There hasn't been a major fight all week, and I think Headmistress McGonagall has noticed. If we can get everyone to keep this up for a few months, maybe we can start lobbying her to restore the original Houses."

"Even Harry Potter has been going around saying nice things about Slytherins and Professor Snape," Bentley Ballard, the Gryffindor rep, pointed out.

"That's *Headmaster* Snape," Clayton Urquhart said, "and if I have to hear any more about Harry Freakin' Potter, I'm going to vomit."

"Well, don't do it here; it will stink and stain the rug," Zinnia Goldstein,



the Ravenclaw rep, said. "We need all the help we can get, and like it or not, 'Harry Freakin' Potter' has a lot of influence. I want Ravenclaw restored. I've got a cousin who's going to start Hogwarts next year, and it will break his heart if he doesn't get a chance to be sorted into Ravenclaw like the rest of the family."

Bentley scowled. "We're trying to be nice about Slytherins and *Headmaster* Snape, so *you* can try to be nice about Harry Potter, okay Clayton?"

Clayton crossed his eyes, put his hand over his mouth and said "Urp!", pretending that he was going to be sick.

"Stop that and act like an adult, Clayton!" Zinnia said. "Harry has been telling everyone how a lot of you Slytherins came back and helped Professor Slughorn during the battle, despite the way that the Headmistress kicked you out."

"Yeah, the area was crawling with Lord Moldy-Shorts' minions and people had to sneak back into the castle without being spotted by them or the defenders," Clayton said. "Everyone cast Glamours on themselves and used the tunnel from the sweet shop."

"That was very smart of you," Melody said, "and brave."

Clayton tried not to blush and continued. "Anyway," he said, "Potter's only been saying that stuff because he owes Headmaster Snape at least a gazillion life debts, and he's starting to feel guilty."

"Who cares why he's been doing it?" Zinnia said. "All that matters is that he's been doing it. Maybe we can get him to talk to McGonagall for us. I'd bet he'd like to see Gryffindor restored."





"Actually, Harry," Hermione said, "I think your dad saved Remus's life. Those scars on his face? Those were Sectumsempra scars."

"No, Remus said he attacked *himself* when he was left alone with no one else to attack. He said werewolves do that."

"Werewolves don't attack themselves. If you hadn't skived off the reading Professor Snape assigned way back in third year you'd know that. They might harm themselves trying to escape when they're confined, but they don't claw themselves up or bite themselves."

"But Remus said ..."

"Hey," Ron broke in, "Remus also said Snape was jealous of your dad's Quidditch talent. Remus was a great guy, but he wasn't exactly reliable. Besides, if he turned up at school every month with fresh wounds on his face, I don't think you'd have to be the brightest witch of your age to figure out that something was going on."

"I wish people would stop calling me that! I wasn't being brilliant at all," Hermione said with a blush. "I had real bad cramps all that year, and I remember thinking it was — I don't know — *unfair* that I always seemed to have Professor Snape for Defense just at that same time. Then I realized Professor Lupin and I were getting sick on the same twenty-eight day cycle, and I knew *he* wasn't cramping."

Ron covered his ears: "Too much information, Hermione!"

Hermione ignored Ron, continuing in her best lecturing voice, "I admit that some of this is speculation, but Professor Snape must have developed Sectumsempra specifically as a defense against Remus. I've looked into it. Professor Slughorn is pretty sure that the root spell of Sectumsempra was 'Seco', that spell we learned in fourth year for cutting soft,





sticky potions ingredients. That's why it doesn't cut bone or other hard materials. Snape must have strengthened it with Dark magic to make it effective against Dark creatures, since it's one of the few spells that actually works against werewolves. It's their immunity to most magic that makes werewolves so dangerous to wizards, otherwise they'd just be dangerous to Muggles."

"Remember the Half-Blood Prince's book, mate?" Ron said. "It said Sectumsempra was 'for enemies.' Snape's enemies were the Marauders. It was four to one, and they had the Map and the Cloak, so they could ambush him anywhere. He probably had to spend all his free time inside Slytherin House whether he wanted to or not."

Hermione said, "Your mum really wasn't being fair when she expected him to give up all his Slytherin friends, Harry. They were a bad crowd, but he couldn't avoid them — not when he had to keep away from the Marauders."

"But my dad saved his life ..." Harry said in a small voice.

"Madame Pomfrey was attending to Remus when Professor Dumbledore interviewed them. She heard everything, and she let me read the old medical records," Hermione said. "Remus was cut up horribly with Sectumsempra. Your father showed up thinking he was going to save Snape's life, and ended up having to save Remus. Your dad stunned Snape and dragged him out of the tunnel, giving Remus a chance to crawl back to the Shrieking Shack. Haven't you ever wondered why your dad was safe from Remus that night?"

"Wasn't he in his Animagus form?"

"Not in the tunnel; he wouldn't have fit. Don't you remember how low that tunnel was? Even though he wasn't yet a full-grown stag, he was a



red deer, the biggest deer species in Europe. He had to stay human, and Remus would have attacked him too, if he could have. But Remus was too badly wounded."

Ron said, "So what about Snape getting sworn to secrecy?"

"That was all Dumbledore's doing. Madame Pomfrey told me that she was there in the hospital wing when Dumbledore blackmailed Snape into keeping silent about Remus's lycanthropy. He threatened to report Snape to the Ministry for creating a dangerous new Dark spell. It didn't matter that it was intended for defense against Dark creatures; it could have got Snape tossed into Azkaban for doing unauthorized Dark research."

Harry didn't know if he could stand hearing any more about what Dumbledore had done.



"There was another letter for you, Slade," Seabiscuit said, holding up an envelope. "It was mixed in with the newspapers and we didn't notice it at first."

The envelope was of obviously expensive paper, faintly scented with sandalwood, and addressed to "Severus Snape, location unknown" in an ostentatious hand. It could only be from Lucius Malfoy.

Severus opened it. *Not bad news, I hope*, he thought.

Then he read it through and chuckled.

"What's up?" Kat asked.

"An old friend of mine is trying to rebuild his reputation as a pillar of the community, and he's sponsoring a masquerade ball on New Year's Eve to raise money for war orphans. It's going to be held at Hogwarts, that school where I used to teach. And he sent me a ticket."



He held up the ticket and laughed.

"You gonna go?" Biscuit asked.

"Of course not. I'd have to be crazy. They think I'm dead, remember? And most of them like me much better that way. It wouldn't do for them to find out the truth."

"Can I have the ticket, then?" Kat asked. "It sounds like a cool party."

Severus gave him a sour look. "You've never had anything to do with Hogwarts. They'd wonder who you were and what you were doing there," he said.

"But that's the point," Kat protested. "It's a *masquerade* ball. They're not supposed to know who you are. And I'd be disguised. I'd be a mysterious stranger. It would be great fun."

"Can you get another ticket, Slade?" Biscuit asked. "Then I could go, too."

"Absolutely not," Severus said firmly. "Nobody is going anywhere near that place."

"Well, just let me know when you've got it all worked out," Captain Clark said, "so I can arrange to have your jobs covered while you're away. No more than two days, okay?"

"Nobody is going, and that's the end of it," Severus repeated, folding his arms and scowling.



Halloween



HALLOWEEN, WITH THE TERRIBLE MEMORY

that it held for Severus, had come again. As always, Severus felt miserable, but at least his shipmates celebrated a bit differently, decorating the ship in 'Day of the Dead' fashion. There were mountains of marigolds everywhere, and decorative pumpkins were replaced by decorative skulls made of sugar and amaranth. It looked different than the Halloweens that he remembered and that helped a bit.

On the designated night, gifts and memorials for lost friends and family members were created in the mess hall. Seabiscuit brought cakes decorated with skulls and put out bags of sugar, flour and spices for everyone to use. Katfish transfigured imaginative fish-shaped sugar cookies, and Captain Clark created lovely sugar sailboats. The two passengers, who were from Belgium, liked the idea and joined in eagerly, adding their own creations to the display.

Severus waited until everyone had left before he approached the table. Quietly he transfigured a sparkling sugar-rose for his mother. Then he created a sugar-snake for his fallen Slytherins, and after a few moments he added a sugar-badger and sugar-eagle. It took a bit of will power before he could add a sugar-lion, but he forced himself to do it. Gryffindors weren't *all* bad, theoretically at least, and many of them had died in the war, but he made a mental note that the lion was absolutely *not* for James Potter and his minions. They'd called themselves 'The Marauders', but he'd always called them something much worse.

His thoughts turned to Albus for a few moments, but he didn't create a memorial. The old man had got more than enough from him in life, and he'd



got precious little in return. Some genuine respect, or even a sincere 'thank you', would have meant so much to him at one time. But more importantly, why hadn't Albus warned him about that 'Elder Wand' business, or left some kind of documents to prove that Severus was actually working for the Order? And why did he expect mere children to find the Horcruxes, fight the war, and die for the cause? The Headmaster had used him, and everyone else, too, with little or no regard for their lives. What would have happened if the old man had lived, he wondered? What if he hadn't blundered into that fatal curse? Severus wasn't sure that he wanted to know.

He sighed then and created a lily. He had made such a fool of himself over her in his student days. Especially on that terrible day. There he was, hanging upside down, helpless, and she was ... she was using it as an opportunity to *flirt* with James Potter. *Flirt!* He could hardly believe what he was seeing and hearing, but he couldn't deny it. How long had this been going on? How long had he been in denial?

In his shock he had called her that terrible name then; he couldn't stop himself. But later he couldn't stop himself from languishing by the Gryffindor entrance, hoping for the chance to apologize and beg for her forgiveness. He finally got that chance, but there was no forgiveness, and he'd been a laughingstock for weeks afterward.

He had thought she was his friend and believed that she respected him, and the truth had cut him to the bone: she had used him. Painful thoughts of her haunted all of his waking moments, and of course he couldn't sleep. He couldn't eat, either. Finally he realized that it was destroying him, like an addiction to a bad drug, and it had to stop. He twisted his skill at Occlumency to the task, forcing himself not to think



of her. It had been terribly painful and taken all of his will power, but he did succeed. After a while he even convinced himself that he didn't see her whenever she walked by, which happened way too often, because at Hogwarts there was no way to avoid her. There was no way to avoid attacks by James and his goons, either, but he got progressively better at spotting their 'pranks' and ambushes and fighting them off.

Time passed. He dated a few girls, had some fun, joined the Death Eaters, and was finally getting a bit of respect and recognition, even from the terrifying Dark Lord. Especially from the terrifying Dark Lord. He was very proud of that fact, back then. But then came the prophecy, and the child. And then came that fatal Halloween.

The memories came flooding back and he shuddered. He had tried as best he could to save her, but he had failed. So he let his mind turn her into an ideal, a guiding light to help him do what he believed he had to do. And somehow that ideal had kept him going through the long years of misery, pain and horror that had followed. Thank Merlin he didn't need that any longer, but the after-effects were still hard to cope with at times.

He picked up the delicate white lily. He shouldn't have made it. Maybe he should destroy it. But she had been his friend when they were young. It had been real in the beginning, and if she had abandoned him for someone else later, that was her choice. Potter was a very poor choice, in his opinion, but Severus knew that he would have been an even worse choice. He put the lily back on the table and retired to his cabin.

It was many hours before he was able to fall asleep, and when he did, he dreamed of Hogwarts. He was striding through the halls past small groups of smiling students. He heard a young witch in Gryffindor robes whisper, "He



was so brave! He faced death countless times and never faltered.”

“And cunning,” said a Slytherin. “He fooled the Dark Lord, and everyone else, too.”

“Most intelligent,” murmured a Ravenclaw.

“Hard working and loyal,” whispered a Hufflepuff.

Severus turned sharply. “Why are you people loitering in the halls when you should be studying?” he snapped.

“Sorry, Headmaster!” one of them said, and then they all fled toward the library.

Feeling strangely contented, Severus resumed his journey.

Then he woke up.

What utter rot! he thought. *My life at Hogwarts was never anything like that.*

His dreams about Hogwarts had long been nightmares, until recently when they’d mysteriously shifted to these disgustingly nice fantasies.

These dreams can’t be coming from my mind, he realized. *There’s something very odd going on.*

He cast a suspicious look at Fawkes, but the bird was asleep on his perch with his head resting peacefully beneath his wing.

I’ll have to investigate, he thought, *but it’s not urgent.* Then he turned over and went back to sleep. It was difficult to object to having pleasant dreams, after all.

The cakes and sugar-sculptures were gone when he went for breakfast. He didn’t believe for a minute that the spirits of the dead had taken them. Seabiscuit had probably cleaned them up, and Fawkes had probably eaten more than a few. Severus didn’t ask.

Biscuit handed him a plate of scrambled eggs, sausages and toast, and he poured himself some tea. The latest copy of the DAILY PROPHET





was on the table and there, on the front page, was a story about the upcoming masquerade ball at Hogwarts.

"Have you decided to go to the ball yet?" the cook asked casually.

"Don't be absurd," Severus snapped. "You can't even begin to imagine the trouble that would ensue when they saw me."

"But it's a *masquerade* ball, so you'd be in disguise. They won't see you, they'll see a mysterious stranger. And the ball isn't until New Year's Eve, so we have lots of time to come up with a great costume. Muggles disguises can be very effective and they don't wear off like Glamours, so you'll be safe all night."

Severus just gave him 'that look' and said, "No one is going to go anywhere near Hogwarts, and that's final."

"Okay," Biscuit said, "it was just a suggestion," and he headed back to the galley.

But as he dug into his breakfast, Severus recalled his dream. Could someone be sending him absurdly pleasant dreams about Hogwarts? If so, what did they want from him? They were probably trying to lull him into a false sense of complacency before something nasty struck. He really ought to find out before it went much further. And unfortunately, the best way to investigate would be to go to Hogwarts, and the safest way to do that would be to attend the ball.

He frowned. Like it or not, he would have to give it serious consideration.

He picked up THE PROPHET and started to read about the ball. It was being sponsored by Lucius to raise funds for war orphans (and to cleanse his reputation and restore his standing in the community, of course). It would be a grand occasion, absolutely everyone, important or otherwise, would be there, and blah blah blah blah ...

He turned the page to find a photo of Tracey Davis and her band. They



were calling themselves *Parslemouth* now, and they were hoping to play at the ball and preview some songs from a rock opera that they'd been creating. He'd heard them practicing a few times in the Slytherin common room in the old days, and he had to admit that they'd actually become pretty good. It might be interesting to hear them.

Then he saw the name of the rock opera: 'THE HALF-BLOOD PRINCE'. He was so stunned that he almost fell out of his chair.



Hermione thought her explanation to Harry about their life debts to Snape had gone fairly well, considering. She was just glad Harry hadn't asked why Snape had gone to the Shrieking Shack at all when he had obviously already figured out that Remus was a werewolf. That would have meant explaining how she had learned that Sirius had tricked Snape into believing Lily was in danger, so he went to the Shack intending to rescue her. And *that* would mean talking about her conversation with Anthony Goldstein and Tracey Davis about their rock opera, which was based mainly on rumors and stories about young Snape known only in Slytherin House.

And *that* would mean explaining that 'Looney, Wormtongue, Piddles, and Horns' were the villains of the piece, and that 'Horns' was the worst villain of the bunch who lured 'the Prince' into believing 'Asphodel' was in danger in a deliberate attempt to have 'Looney' kill him. She didn't think Anthony's abstract discussion about the requirements of dramaturgy and the difference between 'artistic truth' and 'literal truth' would go over well with Harry.

"I had hoped for something a little more nuanced myself," Anthony had said. "I thought 'Piddles' should be behind it, like he was in real life. Then



'Horns' could realize at the last minute that they'd gone too far. You know, like Pinkerton in the last act of *Butterfly* when he recognizes what a cad he's been. But everyone else in Parselmouth is a Slytherin, and they're not in the mood to be nuanced about Gryffindors."

Tracey had just said, "I'm not Puccini."

Hermione wondered what Tracey and Anthony knew about drama-turgy. It certainly wasn't taught at Hogwarts. She had to admit, though, that the introductory song for the four 'Vandals', still a work in progress, was shaping up pretty well:

*"Hey, hey, we're the Vandals!
And people say we vandalize,
But we're too busy pranking
To be cut down to size.
We're just tryin' to be funny,
Come and watch us bully and hex.
something-something-something,
We like it more than sex."*

In a way Hermione was glad they were still tinkering with that second-to-the-last line. She didn't want to think about whatever Tracey and Anthony decided it was that the Marauders liked more than sex.

She wished there was some way to keep Harry from finding out about the rock opera. It was going to upset him terribly, and Ron, too. But sooner or later they were bound to find out. It was inevitable. She'd just have to deal with the fallout when it happened. Harry and Ron were both adults now and they'd just have to cope, wouldn't they? But she certainly wasn't looking forward to it.



Investigations



CONFLICTING EMOTIONS WASHED OVER SEVERUS

as he continued to stare at THE DAILY PROPHET. A rock opera called 'THE HALF-BLOOD PRINCE'? Should he feel honored? Possibly, depending on the plot, but mostly he felt stunned.

Potter and his friends would likely throw a fit when they found out about it, if they hadn't already — that thought brought a smile to his lips — but it was bound to reopen unhealed wounds, and that would no doubt cause more problems for his Slytherins.

His Slytherins? No, that was finished. He'd done all that he could, and 'his' Slytherins would just have to look after themselves. Really. He would absolutely not get involved. Would he?

But as hard as he tried to put his Hogwarts years behind him, he couldn't quite do it. Hogwarts, and especially Slytherin House, had been his home for almost three-quarters of his life, and although most of that time had been far from good, it was still a big part of who he was. He liked his new life, roaming the seas like Sinbad the Sailor, buying and selling potion ingredients, but he couldn't quite bring himself to turn his back on his past. Not completely.

Maybe he ought to go back and see for himself what was going on. He should be able to do it without being recognized, especially at a masquerade ball. Was he not a Slytherin? Was he not the greatest spy that the wizarding world had ever known? It would be a piece of cake.

But it was early November and the ball wouldn't occur until New Year's Eve. That meant there would be almost two months in which things could get totally out of hand. He ought to do something sooner than that.

So what to do? Controversy was going to erupt over the opera, even if



Parselmouth decided not to proceed with it (which was extremely unlikely, knowing Tracey Davis, who was undoubtedly the most stubborn witch of her generation, as well as a very good musician). The word was out, thanks to that article in *THE PROPHET*, and the matter wasn't going to go away.

Was there a way to defuse the thing, he wondered? Then an idea occurred to him and he smiled. This might actually be amusing. He'd compose some letters and send them off, just as soon as he finished his security rounds.

"Did you see Rita Skeeter's column on the editorial page?" Biscuit called from the galley.

Severus skimmed through the paper until he found it.

fawkes: feathered friend, or fickle fowl?

By Rita Skeeter

An unanswered question about Dumbledore's phoenix looms large in my mind: Why did the bird abandon us in our time of need? Yes, Dumbledore was dead, but that was no reason for the phoenix to simply take off and fly away. Or was it?

The bird appeared to be devoted to Dumbledore. It even sacrificed itself to save the old man during the battle at the Ministry. (Why couldn't the old man have saved himself, I ask, if he was such a powerful wizard? Everyone claims that he was 'the only one that the Dark Lord feared', but you really have to wonder.)

If the bird cared about Dumbledore, then what about the old wizard's precious protégé, Harry Potter? What about the school and the students? What about the so-called 'Order of the Phoenix'? And what about all of us? Where were its invaluable tears



when Battle of Hogwarts was raging? How many young witches and wizards could they have saved?

But perhaps the bird wasn't devoted to Dumbledore at all. Perhaps Dumbledore had enslaved the poor bird, and with his death the spell was finally broken and it was free to escape. Perhaps it never wanted to be here at all. We will never know.

"What absolute rot!" Severus said, tossing the paper down on the table.

"Do you think Fawkes can read?" Biscuit asked.

The phoenix was perched by a porthole, happily watching for flying fish.

Severus thought for a moment. "I doubt it," he said, "but I don't really know." Then he laughed. "You'd better make sure that you don't use that paper when you line the dropping-pan under his perch, just in case."



"Thanks for coming," Harry said when Hermione stepped out of the floo at Grimmauld Place. She dusted herself off with a quick charm. Ron and Ginny were already there.

"Have you seen this thing in *The Prophet*?" he said, holding up a copy of the paper. "About Parselmouth and their 'rock opera'? Do you think my Dad and Sirius are in it?"

Hermione knew they were in it, and they weren't going to be the heroes of the piece, either. "Um, ..." she said, trying to figure out the best way to put it, when Ron bought her some time by interrupting.

"It's probably going to be an outrage," he stated. "An insult to Gryffindors. And an insult to the war dead."

"I'm sure it will be horrible," Ginny added, making a sour face. "Help



yourself to some tea, Hermione."

"Thanks, Ginny," Hermione said as she took a seat next to Ron. "Let's not fly off the handle here. *Parselmouth* is entitled to their opinion. But yes, I've heard that James and Sirius and their friends are in it, and I don't think it will be very complimentary to them."

"It's probably slander," Ron said, "or libel, or something. They can't have any evidence. They probably made the whole thing up. Is there a legal way to stop them?"

"Evidence?" Harry asked. "What evidence could they possibly have? I mean, I know that Dad and Sirius weren't always the nicest guys, but everybody liked them. Well, everybody except for Snape and his Slytherin friends, I guess."

"That might be stretching the truth a bit, Harry," Hermione said. "Remember when Snape made you go through all those dusty old records during that detention? You told me that they did all sorts of nasty things, and not just to Snape, either. You said that almost anyone could be a target. They even 'pranked' other Gryffindors sometimes."

"But that was all in fun," Ron said angrily, "just like the stuff my brothers used to do. And Sirius said they changed. You told me so."

Harry looked very uncomfortable. "I really wanted to believe Sirius," he said. "I really did. It bothered me a lot when I first found out how they went after Snape, and I really wanted to believe that they stopped doing stuff like that. But I know they didn't. Sirius lied to me. And I think Dad lied to Mom about it, too."

Ron slammed his hand down on the table so hard that the teacups jumped. "It's none of *Parselmouth's* business! They have no right to go



making up stuff about people that they never knew and things that happened before they were even born. Who do they think they are, anyway?"

"Rita Skeeter does that sort of thing for a living, and she gets away with it all the time," Harry complained. "It isn't fair! I defeated Voldemort and we won the war. Why can't they just leave things alone?"

"They never have appreciated you, Harry," Ginny said. "They've always been mean to you, right from the very beginning, but you're the greatest hero ever." She smiled at him. "You really should have your own chocolate frog card."

"At least there won't be anything about the Shrieking Shack incident in that opera," Ron assured him. "There's no one left who knows about that except us. Dumbledore hushed it up so well that even Snape couldn't talk about it."

"I wouldn't count on that," Hermione said cautiously. She knew that the business in the shack would be in the opera. Tracey Davis had told her so. "I've heard that there were rumors about it in Slytherin House, so it's possible that they do know something."

Ron gave her a puzzled look. "Where have you been hearing this stuff?" he asked.

Harry saved her from having to answer that question by asking, "Do you think they know what really happened? I want to know the truth. Even if it hurts."

Ginny took his hand. "I'm sure no one will ever know the truth. That Tracey Davis and her horrible friends are just making things up. Please don't worry about it."

"But I *do* worry about it. I want to know," Harry said firmly. "I *need* to know. Maybe I should ask them."

"No, Harry," Ginny said. "Bad idea. You'd be outnumbered, and Tracey



would probably turn you into a pile of skrewt droppings before you could even say 'hello'. Everyone knows how nasty she can be. Promise me you'll stay away from them."

Good luck with that, Ron thought. It's never worked for me.



Rita Skeeter sat at her desk looking through her notes. She had amassed a fair amount of information about Snape's childhood. It had obviously been miserable. She planned to emphasize how horribly wizard children were treated by Muggles, including his father, and how horribly half-bloods were treated by wizards, including their fellow students. It was a no-win situation. If she wrote it well, it would tear at her readers' heartstrings.

She would write about how Snape was driven into the arms of the Dark Lord by a society that despised him for his unfortunate beginnings. She still didn't have any detailed information about his experiences while he was with the Death Eaters, but if she couldn't come up with anything solid, she could always fill the space with speculation. And she had heard some juicy tidbits about his years with Dumbledore. She ought to be able to whip up some outrage with those.

But there was so much more that she wanted to know. She had obtained some excellent information about the early days of his relationship with the Evans girl from the Muggle sister, Petunia, but she still wanted more dirt about the breakup. And what about other girls, and women? She would have to do more digging and start interviewing Snape's former school mates. If she was lucky, she might get more dirt on Albus Dumbledore and his cronies, too. There was no such thing as



too much of that!



It was a few days later when Anthony Goldstein answered the door at his parents' place in London and found Harry Potter standing there. His heart skipped a beat when he realized that there was only one thing that could have brought Harry there: the rock opera. *He wouldn't Crucio me right here in my parents' doorway, would he?* Anthony wondered.

"Hi," Harry said cheerfully. "I was wondering if we could talk for a few minutes. Can I come in?"

Anthony was home alone. He thought fast. "I was just about to go for coffee," he said. "We've run out. There's a nice coffee shop around the corner, and they have really good snacks, too." *And with luck it will be crowded and he wouldn't dare do anything in front of a bunch of Muggles.*

Anthony accio'd his coat and discretely stuffed his wand up his sleeve as they started down the street.

They made small talk about the weather and Hogwarts until they'd got their coffees and settled down at a corner table. The shop wasn't very crowded, but Harry cast the *Muffliato* charm around them, just to make sure.

He came right to the point then. "I'm trying to learn more about my parents," Harry said, "and I was wondering about that rock opera that you and your band mates are working on. Like, what do you know for sure about Snape and my parents? Or are you just making most of it up?"

"We are *not* making it up," Anthony retorted, annoyed by the assertion. Tracey might have changed some parts around a bit, but he was pretty sure that most of it was true. "All that stuff, about the 'pranks', and the



werewolf and everything, all that stuff really happened.”

“The werewolf? Look, I’m not mad or anything,” Harry said, trying to sound calm and reassuring. “I just want to know the truth, even if it’s ... well ... unpleasant. Do you know what happened with the werewolf? Dumbledore told me a little bit, but I think he might have lied or left things out. What do you and your friends know, and how did you find out? I thought everyone involved in that werewolf business was sworn to secrecy.”

Gryffindors are unbelievably stupid sometimes, Anthony thought to himself. “Legilimency, of course,” he said. “According to what Tracey told me, it was obvious that something really bad had happened to Snape and, not surprisingly, it looked like the so-called Marauders were involved. The senior Slytherins wanted to know what had happened, and they were not about to be kept in the dark about it.”

Harry’s mouth fell open in shock. “They legilimized *Snape*?” he asked.

“Are you kidding?” Anthony said. “That would have been suicidal. Even when Snape was young he could cast one heck of a curse. No, they legilimized *Sirius*.” He looked over at Harry. *Unbelievably stupid*, he thought.





Black Memories



HEY LEGILIMIZED SIRIUS?" HARRY ASKED.

He was stunned.

"Sure," Anthony said. "Tracey said it wouldn't have been particularly difficult. They're Slytherins, after all. Known for cunning, and that sort of thing, right?"

"So what did they do?" Harry's eyes were open wide behind his glasses as he leaned forward across the table. "What did they find out?"

I suppose I'll have to tell him eventually, Anthony thought. I'll never get rid of him otherwise.

"Well, if you promise not to get mad at me," Anthony said hesitantly, "and if you promise not to blab it all over the place. Tracey says this sort of thing is known only to certain select Slytherin insiders, and I don't want to get in trouble with my band mates."

"Okay, no problem," Harry said, looking very serious. "I promise I won't get mad at you, and I won't tell anyone that I talked to you, or what you told me."

"Not even your best friends?"

Harry paused for a second. "No, not even them."

For a moment Anthony wondered if he could get an Unbreakable Vow from Harry, but was no third wizard to serve as the bonder, and you can't do that sort of thing in a Muggle café anyway.

Anthony took a sip of his coffee, checked their Muffliato spell, and settled back in his chair. "Well then, this is what Tracey told me," he said.

"Tracey says the senior Slytherins were dying to know what had happened. Snape was obviously unsettled and withdrawn, and the so-called Marauders were keeping to themselves, so they must have been involved. James and Sirius were doing detention with Dumbledore, and Snape was



in detention with Sluggie.

"They all knew that Snape wouldn't talk, so some of the seniors got together and owl-ordered some Polyjuice potion from a shop in Knockturn Alley. Then they kept an eye on Peter Pettigrew until one of the guys managed to get some of his hair — picked it out of a sink in one of the bathrooms after the rat combed his mop. And one of them, Tracey thinks it was probably Mulciber, volunteered to do the dirty work and drink the stuff. He shadowed Sirius until he spotted the Gryffindor alone near the Quidditch pitch. Then he hid in the shrubbery, downed the potion, and suffered through the transformation."



Not surprisingly, Fawkes knew more about the matter than most people. He'd been around at the time, and he first heard about it from an old barn owl called Barney (all barn owls are called Barney, of course). Barney had been trying to get some shut-eye on a cross-brace under the Quidditch stands when the two students woke him up, much to his great annoyance. He complained to Fawkes about it afterward.

"You've got to talk to that Dumbledore fellow about the students," Barney had griped. "It's getting so a poor owl can't get a good day's sleep around here anymore!"

"I was dreaming that I was about to snatch up a fat juicy mouse," he continued, "when I heard this little ratty kid yell, 'Hey Sirius! Come on! I've got some fire whiskey. The others will be along soon, but we can get started without them.' It was so rude!" Barney huffed. "Kids today have no manners."

"Quite so," Fawkes agreed, nodding sagely. "So then what happened?"



He was always up for a bit of gossip, even though he was not particularly fond of hanging out with owls.

"Well, Ratty and this big guy he called 'Serious' plopped right down underneath me and Ratty uncorked a bottle. An orange flame burst out of it — the light hurt my eyes! And after it died down Ratty took a swig, but I think he was just pretending, and then he passed it to the Serious guy, who took a big gulp. 'Wow! That stuff kicks like a Hippogriff!' the guy said.

"I was so mad! I pooped on them then," Barney added, "and I think it hit the big guy, but he didn't seem to notice."

"That's too bad," Fawkes said, and the two of them chortled.

"Personally, I think Ratty must have put a double dose of Doofus potion in that whiskey or something, because it wasn't long before the big guy was higher than the moon," Barney said. "Ratty put the bottle to his mouth again, but I think he was faking it. Then he handed it back to the big guy, who took another gulp. Then the big guy twitched, groaned, and sprawled back against a post with little flames dancing on his breath.

"After that, things got really weird. The ratty one slipped his wand out of his robe and put one hand up to his face. 'Hey,' he said, 'I think I've got something in my eye. Would you take a look? You'll have to lean in close; it's pretty dark under here.' Then suddenly he cried out '*Legilimens!*' and there was a lot of thrashing and moaning from both of them and I couldn't figure out what was going on at all. Eventually Ratty left but I couldn't get back to sleep because the big guy passed out and kept snorting."

"Well, there's no making sense of wizards. Or witches. Or Muggles. They do the darnedest things sometimes," Fawkes said.



"But you will complain to that Dumbledore chap won't you?" Barney asked. "This sort of thing has got to stop!"

"There are limits to what a phoenix can do," Fawkes told him. "Maybe you should find a more secluded place to sleep." He didn't want to admit that he had never been able to make the old wizard understand him.



"So the Slytherins found out everything!" Harry gasped as Anthony continued his tale.

"Not everything," Anthony admitted, "but quite a lot. Dumbledore got to Mulciber, or whoever it was, and shut him up, but not before he had reported to the senior Slytherins."

Harry gulped. This was what he'd come for, but he knew he wasn't going to like it.

"Apparently Black's memories were chaotic," Anthony said, "and the Slytherin spy was kind of shook up from the experience. He said it was a pretty rough ride, and he had a lot of trouble finding the memories they wanted."



Fawkes had learned for himself just what that experience had been like when Dumbledore interrogated Mulciber. Somehow the old wizard had found out what the Slytherins had done and he summoned Mulciber to his office. It was against the rules to use Legilimens on students, so Dumbledore would make them take out their memories and put them in his pensieve where he could examine them without breaking the rules.



Fawkes was bored and his curiosity quickly got the better of him. While the Headmaster was berating the young Slytherin, threatening him with expulsion and administering some sort of Spell of Silence, Fawkes glided over and quietly stuck his head into the mist of memories. Suddenly he was swamped with one chaotic scene after another. *Maybe this wasn't such a good idea*, he realized.

Black's mind was probably a pretty messy place on the best of days, but now, thanks to the firewhiskey and the potion, it was completely out of control. It was like some madman had the remote control for a Muggle TV and was frantically clicking through the channels.

A Quidditch scene flashed by; Sirius nailed a Ravenclaw with a bludger and she lost control and crashed into the stands. Then toddler Sirius was having a tantrum and throwing his pumpkin juice at a House-Elf. Suddenly James Potter was making a crude joke about Snape in the Gryffindor common room and everyone was laughing. Orion Black was telling Sirius that he was a disgrace to the Black family and they were going to disinherit him. Minerva was scolding Sirius for transforming Snape's tie into a flobberworm; she gave Snape detention for striking back with a stinging hex.

There's Snape! Mulciber realized.

He struggled to latch onto the memory but it slipped away, and then Sirius was buying a magic motorcycle with money he'd borrowed from James. Toddler Sirius was crying after his cousin Bellatrix hexed him. James and Sirius were in detention, cleaning cauldrons for tossing a dung-bomb in the potions lab. Sirius whimpered in pain as Madame Pomfrey extracted a bronze knut from his shoulder. Peter and Lupin tagged along with Sirius and James on a trip to Hogsmeade.



Mulciber wasn't sure if he could take much more of this, and neither was Fawkes. It was so much more than anyone had ever wanted to know about Sirius Black.

Then Snape appeared again. The Marauders had cornered him at a bend in a hallway. There were a few other students around, but it was obvious that they weren't going to interfere.

Such nasty boys!, thought Fawkes.

Again Mulciber tried hang on to the memory, and this time he succeeded.

"Want to see me make Snivelly dance?" Sirius asked, pointing his wand at Snape's feet.

"Sure. I'll even help you!" James replied, smiling. Peter sniggered and Lupin, who was hanging back a bit, said nothing.

Snape eyed them coldly. With one hand, he had his wand pointed at them, and he furtively fished something out of a pocket with the other.

As James lowered his wand toward Snape's feet, Snape threw some coins in an arc and shouted "*Volare!*" There was a flash and the coins flew at his surprised tormentors, tumbling end over end. The boys yelped in pain as the coins struck, and Snape took the opportunity to flee down the hall.



"Do you think that really happened?" Harry asked after Anthony told him the Slytherins' version of that scene.

"Probably," Anthony said. "It's a matter of record that Snape spent time in detention for 'injuring other students' on more than one occasion."

"If he'd thrown those coins a bit higher, someone might have lost an



eye,” Harry said angrily, “and if he’d spelled them to fly harder, someone might have been killed.”

“True,” Anthony said, “but you have to admit it was a cool way to take out four enemies at once.” Then he winked and added, “And if he’d thrown them a bit lower, you might not be here.”

Harry didn’t know what to say to that.



As Fawkes watched, Mulciber laughed and the memory escaped. There was a glimpse of Sirius and James, arm in arm, weaving drunkenly down a street and singing a dirty song. Sirius and James were hanging out in the Gryffindor common room together. Sirius and James were ...

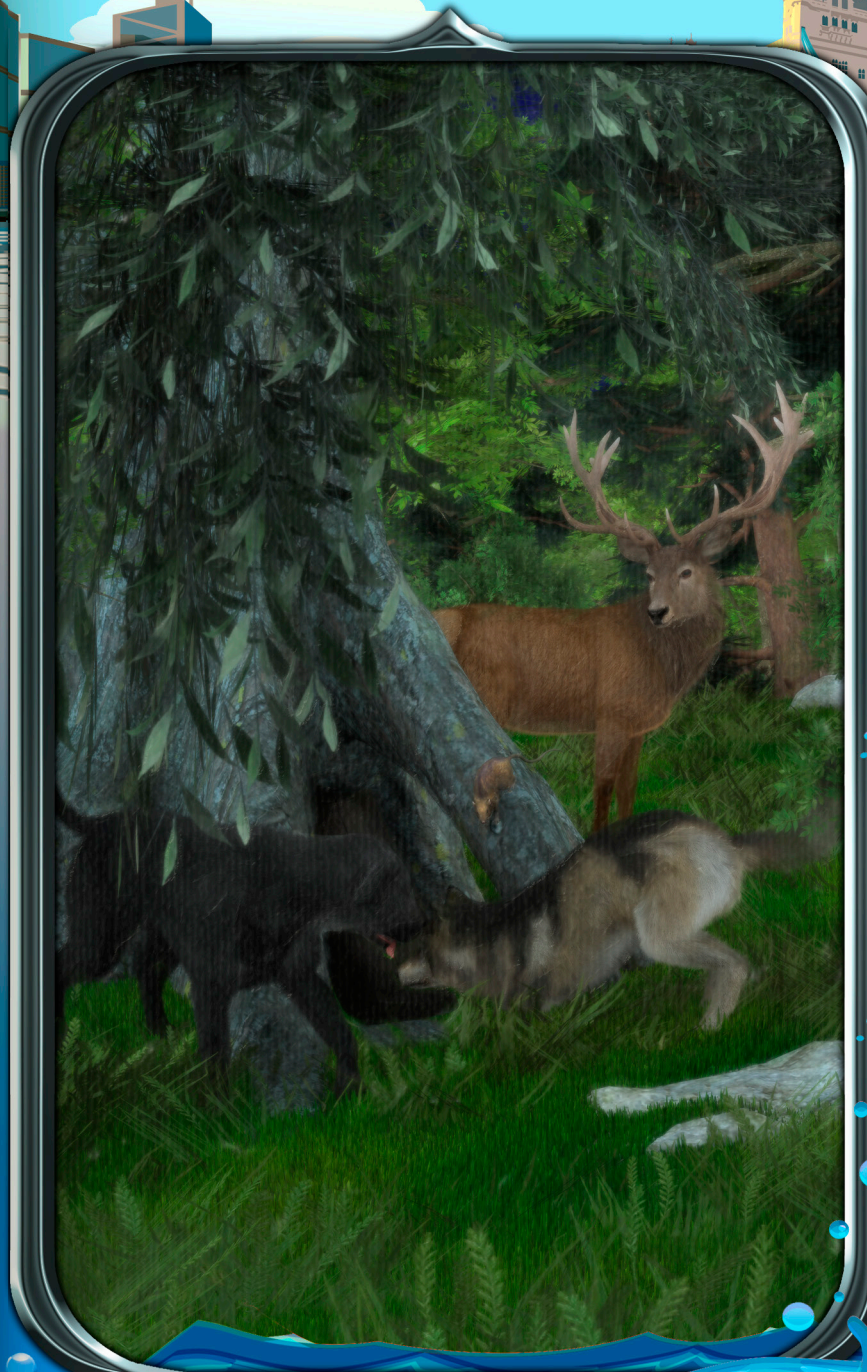
Mulciber shook the semi-conscious Gryffindor by the shoulders. “Enough of this palsy-walsy ‘Sirius and James’ rot! Show me what you did to Snape!” he demanded.

A new memory formed, and Mulciber and Fawkes saw a big black dog with a rat clinging to its back, running down a street in the moonlight with a stag and a wolf-like creature.

What? Fawkes wondered. *Where’s Sirius, and is that a werewolf? What’s going on?*

Mulciber managed to catch hold of the memory and follow it. The stag tossed a screaming woman aside while the dog herded the werewolf away from her, and they continued their wild romp until dawn approached. Then they turned toward Hogwarts and stopped before the Whomping Willow.

The rat jumped to the ground, scurried under the willow’s thrashing





branches, and pressed a knot on a root. The tree became quiet. Then the dog herded the werewolf into a tunnel beneath its roots while the stag and the rat waited outside.

Mulciber lost hold of the memory, and as it swirled away the stag turned into James Potter and the rat turned into Peter Pettigrew.

"They're Animagi!" the Slytherin realized. "Sirius must be the dog, and Remus Lupin is a werewolf! I've gotta tell them all!"

Fawkes felt something tap him on the back and he pulled his head out of the pensieve.

"Naughty bird!" said Dumbledore, who'd finally noticed what the phoenix was up to. "Bad! That is NOT a birdbath."

Werewolf! Animagi! Danger! Fawkes shrieked Do something!

"Be quiet and go back to your perch!" Albus scolded.

Fawkes took off and pooped as he passed over Albus's desk. The old wizard assumed it was an accident.



Back to the Birdbath!



SO THE SLYTHERINS FOUND OUT THAT LUPIN

was a werewolf!" Harry said, interrupting Anthony's narrative.

Anthony finished off the last of his coffee, which had grown rather cool. "The surprising thing is that no one had figured it out sooner," he said. "The monthly absences should have been totally obvious if anyone was paying attention, but I guess nobody was."

"Then why didn't they tell on him?"

"Because they knew they'd get into really serious trouble if they did," Anthony said. "It was obvious that Dumbledore wanted the whole thing covered up. He was keeping James and Sirius in detention with him, and Snape wasn't talking. If anyone started making trouble, they'd have been expelled, and probably had their memories modified, too. Dumbledore would do whatever it took to protect Lupin. And himself. Slytherins aren't stupid, you know."

"Most of them aren't, I guess," Harry said, remembering Crabbe and Goyle. "But did they find out what happened in the Shrieking Shack?" He figured they might as well get to the point and get it over with.



Fawkes had gotten another look at the memories after Albus sent Mulciber away. The old wizard had paced the room for a while and then left. He seemed quite distracted. *He must be upset about the werewolf*, Fawkes thought. He glided back to the pensieve and plunged his head into the swirling mist again.

A few random memories floated by. Sirius was enjoying Christmas



pudding with James and his parents. Sirius turned a first-year's books into green slime and she started to cry. Sirius and James were shopping at Zonko's and Sirius slipped a few dung-bombs into his pocket when no one was looking. And then Sirius was under the Quidditch stands again, with Mulciber looking into his eyes.

"Come on, pooch-boy!" Mulciber was saying, "let's have the rest of it. What did you do to Snape?"

The Gryffindor moaned and tried to break eye contact, but Mulciber hung on.

Suddenly it was early evening and Snape was standing near a window outside the library.

Sirius came hurrying up to him. "Did you see that?" he asked.

Snape just gave him a look, his hand tightening on his wand.

"I think I saw Lily Evans out by the Whomping Willow, but I'm not sure," Sirius said. "Did you see anything? I'm kind of worried about her."

"No," Snape said, now looking intently out the window. "I don't know why she'd be out there, but I'm sure she'd stay away from the Willow."

"Well, Madame Pomfrey goes there with Lupin sometimes, and maybe Lily was wondering about it," Sirius said. "And I've heard that if you take a long stick and poke the big knot on one of its roots, the tree gets quiet and there's a tunnel under there that you can get into." Sirius said. "I don't know if that's true, though," he added.

Snape had noticed Lupin's regular absences, and he'd furtively observed him and Pomfrey making their monthly journey to the tree just before moonrise. He had a very good idea what that meant, and he had a very good idea what could happen to Lily if she got into that tunnel.



"Maybe I'd better go tell McGonagall," Sirius said. He turned toward Gryffindor tower, but Snape had already taken off at a dead run.

Sirius broke out laughing and said, "Oh, I've gotta tell James about this!"



"I don't know why Dumbledore decided to take a crazy risk like that," Anthony said. "Was there something special about Lupin? Other than being a werewolf, I mean. Maybe Dumbles just wanted to prove how open-minded he was."

"Don't call him that!" Harry snapped.

"Okay, okay," Anthony said. "Look, I know werewolves get a really bad deal in life, everybody hates them, and there are some very good reasons for that, but how was hiding a werewolf in the school going to change anything? It was a *secret*, so nobody was going to know. It might have helped Lupin, but it wasn't going to do anything for any other werewolf kids. Maybe Dumbledore just thought Lupin was cute or something."

Harry scowled. "Don't be absurd!" he said. "I'm sure he just wanted to help the poor kid. Lupin wouldn't have had a hope of making a decent life for himself without an education."

"Look who's talking," Anthony said. "You're not exactly the poster boy for studying hard and staying in school."

Harry stifled an urge to tell the Ravenclaw to go kiss a skrewt.



Fawkes followed along as Mulciber continued to hang onto the memory and Sirius told James about his 'little prank'.



"You idiot! You're gonna get us kicked out of here, or worse!" James shouted when Sirius told him what he'd done.

"Don't sweat it," Sirius said. "Lupin is locked up in the shack. Snivellus will probably just get a good scare."

"We've spelled that lock open so many times it doesn't work right any more. Remus can get it open, even when he's transformed, and you know it. If Snivellus gets killed, or even if he survives, everyone will find out about Remus! And US!" James ran off as fast as he could go.

Suddenly Fawkes felt himself being lifted from the pensieve. "Bad birdie!" Albus scolded. "I told you before, this is not a birdbath. Now you settle down on your perch and I'll bring you some nice lemon drops."

Fawkes liked that idea a lot.



"We don't know what happened in the tunnel," Anthony said, "because Sirius didn't go in with James. He just watched from outside until James reappeared dragging an unconscious Snape. But we can make a pretty good guess. Lupin had some bad gashes that took a long time to heal — there was no hiding them; he was bandaged up for a couple of weeks — so he must have been hit by Dark Magic. He must have encountered Snape, and Snape tried to defend himself.

"Sirius is really the one who should have gone in after Snape. As a dog, he would have fit through the tunnel, but there are some really tight places and there's no way a stag could get through. So James must have gone in untransformed, and he would have been in danger from the werewolf, just like Snape was. But Sirius let James go in alone."



Harry was horrified. He hoped that it wasn't true, but it fit with what Hermione had heard from Madame Pomfrey. He didn't want to think that his godfather would do something like that, but he knew the man was reckless. Perhaps that's why his dad hadn't made Sirius his secret-keeper.

He remembered how Sirius had met his death. The man had been taunting his opponent, like a superhero in a Muggle comic book, when he should have been fighting with all his might. For a long time Harry had blamed the whole thing on Snape for goading Sirius with accusations of laziness and cowardice. Later he had thought it was his own fault for letting himself get tricked into going to the Ministry. But really, it had been his godfather's fault for not taking the situation seriously enough.

Had it even occurred to Sirius that he might get killed in that fight? Or that Lupin might have killed Snape, or James, or both of them, in that tunnel? Maybe he hadn't bothered to think anything through. Or maybe he just didn't care.

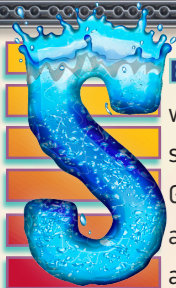
Harry felt sick.



Fawkes felt chipper. He didn't really understand those crazy memories, but he was confident that his wizard Albus would take care of the werewolf now and the students would be safe. Everything was going to be just fine. And not only had he received a half-dozen lemon drops for his efforts, but the very next day Albus brought him a lovely Italian marble birdbath with pretty carvings of birds around the rim.



Catching Up



SEVERUS SENT HIS LETTERS VIA OWL-POST

when the Knight Boat docked near London to drop off some passengers who wanted to watch the fireworks on Guy Fawkes night. What Guy Fawkes had tried to do was a terrible thing, but the way they'd tortured him to death afterward was sickening. Civilization had advanced a lot since those days, thank Merlin.

The letters went to Millicent Bulstrode, Marigold Montague, and Harry Potter. Potter owed him several life debts and it was time to request a small payment. There was also a letter to Lucius Malfoy thanking him for the ticket to the New Years Eve masquerade ball at Hogwarts and requesting tickets for Kat and Seabiscuit. Severus offered to pay for them, but he hoped Lucius would provide them at no charge, or at least at a reduced price. The event was intended to restore the Malfoy family's standing in wizarding Britain and Lucius would want it to be well attended. Mysterious visitors from far-away America would make the affair seem even more important. But on the other hand, Lucius was Lucius, so he'd probably want full price.

Severus was very wary of going back to Hogwarts. It could reopen old wounds and send him spiraling back into depression. But he needed to find out why he'd been having pleasant dreams about the place lately, instead of the usual nightmares. Was someone trying to lure him back there? If so, he needed to find out who, and why. What could someone want from him now? He had to get to the bottom of the matter. It might become dangerous.

His last dream had been ridiculous. He'd been brewing potions for the school and people kept stopping by to thank him. No one had ever thanked him except Poppy Pomfrey. What utter nonsense!



"I brought you some coffee," Seabiscuit said as he came onto the bridge.

Kat was on duty, steering the boat through the cold, dark depths of the North Atlantic. Fawkes was perched by the chart table and chirped at the cook. Everyone else was asleep.

"Yes, I have sugar cookies for you, you big beautiful birdie," Biscuit said, putting a plate of cookies on the chart table. Then he handed Kat a mug of coffee. "I'm so glad Slade has decided to attend that masquerade ball. I think it'll give him closure."

"Or it might push him over the edge," Kat said, snatching a cookie before the phoenix could grab it. "Remember what he was like when he first got here?"

Biscuit smiled. "Don't worry! We'll be there to look after him."

"Somehow, I don't think he'd find that comforting. He probably thinks we'll get into trouble and he'll have to rescue us."

"Then we'll just have to do our best to disappoint him," Biscuit laughed. "Anyway, he's agreed that we'll go as pirates. He can be Captain Hook. I'll be Mr Smee, and you can be Jolly Roger. We've got hats and cutlasses, but we'll need a few other things, plus some hair dye and contact lenses for Slade. I'll make a list and go shopping when we get to the next major port. This is going to be fun!"

"I hope you're right," Kat said.

Fawkes looked out the window and winked at a whale that was diving past. Then he gobbled down the last cookie.





It was a few days later when Clayton Urquhart joined some of the other former Slytherins at a table in the library. He cast Muffliato and called the meeting to order. Meetings of the disbanded Houses were forbidden, so small groups got together discreetly to make plans and pass along information.

"We're doing pretty well, making it look like we're getting along with the others now, even Gryffindor," Clayton said. "And the others are holding up their end of the plan, too. I've even had some reasonable conversations with a few of the Gryffies lately."

"Be careful or they'll give you crawlies," Theodore Nott sneered. "They despise us, and everyone knows it."

"And we despise them, too, but we've got to pretend, and so do they. So just keep it up." Clayton unfolded a letter that Millicent Bulstrode had forwarded to him. "The word is that Harry Potter might try to help out, so if he approaches any of us, we're supposed to be civilized about it."

"Says who?" Theodore Nott snarled. "If I see Potter, I'm going to hex his eyeballs right out of his stinkin' head."

"Then make sure you don't see him," Clayton told him firmly. "Don't go wrecking things for the House."

"Potter is the reason that my dad is in Azkaban," Nott said, slamming his hand on the table.

"Keep it down!" Clayton hissed. There are limits to what Muffliato can cover up.

"Your dad's fondness for Lord Moldy-Shorts is the reason he's in Azkaban, and you're lucky that you're not in there with him," Lawrence Butt interjected.



"We thought the Dark Lord was going to win," Nott said, "and we were going to be on the winning side. He promised us he would restore purebloods to greatness and put the Muggles in their place. And he would have succeeded, too, if it hadn't been for *Potter*." He spat out the name like it was poison.

"The Dark Lord would have succeeded if he hadn't been so *stupid* about it all," Clayton told him.

Clayton felt sick when he remembered how he had once flirted with the idea of joining the Dark Lord. His parents had been involved, albeit very discreetly. Clandestine meetings, mysterious plans, and secret missions; it all sounded so exciting. He had thought it would be a great adventure.

Fortunately, Professor Snape had discouraged him. "You'd be of no use to them at present," his Head of House had sneered. "Your defense skills need improvement, and your knowledge of herbology is abysmal. You must focus on your school work for now. Otherwise you'll be an embarrassment to yourself, your family, and Slytherin House."

At the time Clayton had felt hurt and resentful, but he had sullenly returned to his studies, and he knew now that it might have saved his life. His parents had managed to lie their way out of any consequences, too. They were some of the lucky ones.

"At least conditions in Azkaban are a lot better than they used to be, thanks to Shackbolt's reforms," Butt pointed out. "I hear they've even started to allow visitors."

"Yeah," Nott said. "I'll be going to see my dad on Saturday."





"It's from Snape!" Harry said as he unfolded the letter. "He didn't even disguise his handwriting."

Uh oh, Ron thought. *Here we go again*. "What does it say?" he asked cautiously.

Harry read it over. "He wants me to help get the Houses restored, including Slytherin."

"You've lobbied McGonagall about that for months now," Ginny said, "until she told you that she doesn't want to hear another word about it. What more could you possibly do?"

"Snape wants me to make a show of getting along with Slytherins. Like, being friendly and fraternizing with them," Harry told her.

"Don't do it!" Ginny said. "They'll probably hex you on sight."

"I'm not afraid of them!" Harry said. "And if it will help get the Houses restored, I'm willing to try it. And besides, I owe Snape a lot."

"You're the Boy Who Lived," Ginny said, "and we want you to keep on living."

"I'm not a boy any more!" Harry said.

"I think it's worth a try," Hermione interjected. "Getting the Houses back might not help mend the divisions or heal the war wounds, but Minerva's new plan isn't working either."

"What are you children arguing about?" Molly Weasley asked as she came in from the kitchen. "Here, I brought you some nice cookies and milk. Now I think it's time to talk about the wedding."

Harry sighed. So did Hermione.



"They force pure-bloods to do *Elf work*?" Theodore Nott gasped. "That's *cruel*!"



"Yes," His father said, "it's outrageous. The Dementors are gone and Azkaban's not the cold, filthy dungeon that it used to be, but they make us do all the chores, instead of getting some House-Elves in here like they ought to. We have to do it all the Muggle way, too, without our wands. All the cleaning, all the laundry, all the cooking, and all the dishes. Gah! It takes all day!"

"And the food is disgusting," his cellmate Yaxley griped. The man was sprawled on his cot reading *VACATIONING WITH VEELAS* by Gilderoy Lockhart. Azkaban now had a prison library.

"It's too bad Snape's dead," Yax added. "If he was in here, he could probably figure out how to cook. What I wouldn't give for a meal that wasn't burned!"

"I'll see if I can smuggle in a few chocolate frogs next time," Theodore said.

"Make it a couple of ham sandwiches, kid," Yax told him, "and use a spell to shrink 'em down so you can hide 'em."

"Things may seem better now," the elder Nott said sourly, "but people still go crazy in here. You remember how old Crabbe hung himself in June?"

"Crabbe didn't hang himself because of Azkaban," Yax said, "Crabbe hung himself because his son got burned to death in the war. And Crabbe figured it was his fault for getting the kid into Dark Magic. You're lucky. Your kid survived. And so did you, for that matter."

Theodore tried not to think about what could have happened to him and his dad. He'd tried to go back to join the Death Eaters in the fight, but someone had hit him from behind with a stunner. He never figured out who did it, but when he woke up he was lying in the street in Hogsmeade and the battle was over.

There was a loud bang from down the hall as Dolohov slammed his fists against the bars of his cell. "I can't remember!" Dolohov wailed. "I



can't remember!"

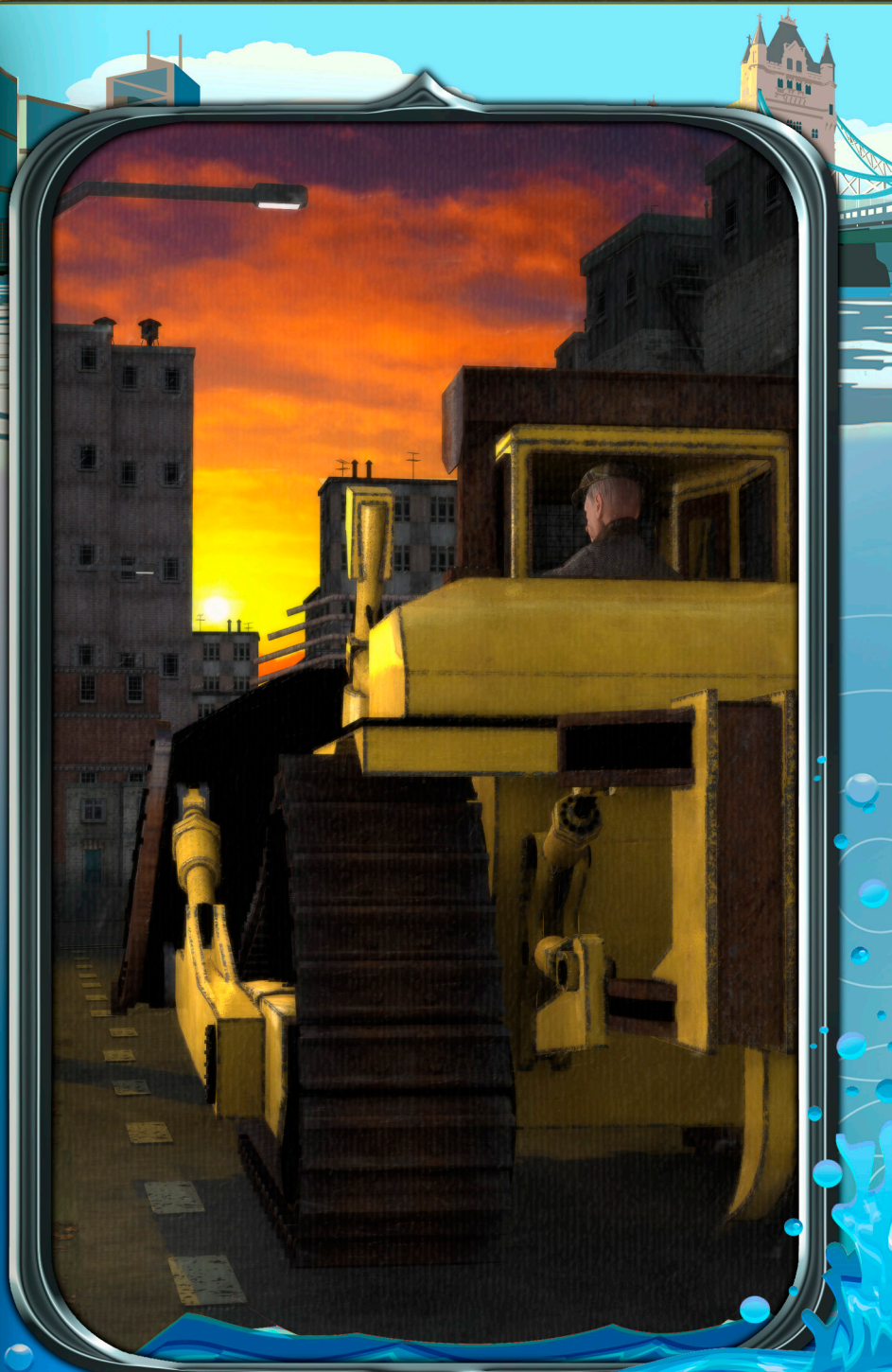
"There he goes again," Yax said. "I feel sorry for his cellmate." Then he turned back to his book. "Too bad about Snape," he muttered. "We sure could use a decent cook in here. And Argus Filch, too. That man knew how to mop a hall!"



The sun was rising in Philadelphia as the big yellow D-9 Caterpillar bulldozer snorted to life. Dan McCracken, AKA Cat-Man Dan, AKA Argus Filch, née Argus Doolittle, had a new identity thanks to the Wizard Immigration Assistance Agency, and he had recently completed a training program in heavy equipment operation. He smiled as he started the powerful machine rumbling toward the abandoned industrial complex. Soon its shabby buildings would fall before his mighty blade.

Mrs Norris lounged in her basket beside the operator's seat, watching her three half-kneazle kittens wrestling with each other. They were shielded from the noise and vibration by a weak but adequate Serenitas charm; Filch had actually managed to learn a thing or two from those KwikSpell courses.

At last, Argus Filch had the power he'd always craved. Granted, it was Muggle power, but it was very impressive nonetheless. Soon he would begin to study for his blasting licence. Life was good in the Muggle world.





The Holiday Season Arrives



WHEN THE THANKSGIVING HOLIDAY DREW

near each of the crew invited Severus to come home with them to celebrate with them and their families.

"You should come to Baltimore with me," Captain Clark had said. "Mom and dad have a nice place near the bay. You haven't lived 'til you've been to Baltimore."

"You'd be welcome at our place in Pittsburgh," Seabiscuit told him. "Mom and dad taught me to cook and the food will be fantastic!"

"Or you could come home to Memphis with me," Kat said. "Angie would be glad to see you. I just hope she doesn't bring up Sylvia again, like she did last year," he added. His ex-girlfriend Sylvia had dumped him for a Muggle who made nature documentaries and the memory was still painful. The last he'd heard of them, they'd been filming volcanoes in Vanuatu.

But Severus had firmly declined their offers. Seeing happy families would remind him of his family and how profoundly *unhappy* it had been. "I'll stay aboard and guard the boat," he told them. "I want to be alone. I happen to *like* being alone."

Captain Clark wouldn't hear of anyone being alone at Thanksgiving, however, so Severus accepted an invitation from the Bayou Academy of Magical Arts. There would only be a few people there then and he could brew whatever he wanted in the school's potions laboratory. There were limits to what he could brew on board the Knight Boat, after all. The middle of an ocean is not a good place to risk toxic fumes and explosions.

Fawkes accompanied Severus, of course, and the school was indeed exceedingly quiet. Mr Cohen was there with his wife, their kids and their



grandkids, all of whom had flown in on brooms for the holiday, but all of the others had dispersed to their homes. Severus welcomed the quiet and went off to organize things in the potions lab. Fawkes found it a bit too quiet and went off to hang out with some ibises at the school fountain. He missed his colorful fledgling friends with their movies and cartoons.

When they were all gathered around the table for the Thanksgiving feast Mr Cohen asked everyone to take a few moments to think about all the things they had to be thankful for. *Thankful?* Severus thought. *I'm thankful just to be alive!* And on further reflection he realized that he was thankful for his new friends and his life on the Knight Boat, too. It was a vast improvement over his earlier life. And he was thankful for Fawkes. He looked over at the bird. *If it hadn't been for that bird, my desiccated corpse might still be lying on the floor in that filthy shack,* he realized.

Fawkes, on the other hand, had no idea what was going on and was impatient for them to bring out the food.

When the food arrived it proved to be excellent. The elves had prepared the all the traditional dishes: turkey and gravy, cranberry sauce, mashed potatoes, sweet potatoes, corn, squash, and Brussels sprouts, with pumpkin pie and pecan pie for dessert. Fawkes liked the latter but had little interest in the rest of it. The pumpkin pie was too squishy for his taste and the cranberry sauce too tart. He wasn't sure how he felt about the turkey, either. Many birds eat other birds at times, so that wasn't what bothered him, but he knew that most domestic turkeys were raised under miserable conditions. They were not exceptionally bright birds, but they were rather elegant with their big fan of tail feathers and their bright red snoods and wattles. The phoenix felt that they



should have decent lives before they ended up on the dinner table.



Severus spent the rest of his visit absorbed in his brewing and he was starting to cook up a large batch of floo powder when he heard someone at the door. It turned out to be Ms Larose, the Divination teacher, looking lovely in lavender robes and smelling faintly of lilacs. His pulse quickened. "Please come in," he said, trying not to look startled. "I didn't know you had stayed here for the holiday."

"Yes," she said, "I always stay but I keep to myself. I have no place to go, actually. Which is what I'd like to talk to you about. Do you have a moment?"

Severus tried to compose an answer but his mind kept wandering to how stunningly beautiful she was.

"Don't worry," she said, "I know I'm distracting. I have Veela blood, you see; my mother was a Veela, so I have this effect on men." She crossed the lab and took a seat beside one of the windows.

Severus took a deep breath and focused his mind. "Excuse me a moment," he said. "I must see to my potion." He waved his wand, reducing the fires so the solutions would simmer. Then he moved to stand behind the lab bench.

Finally he said, "I suspected as much. What can I do for you?"

"I'm looking for someone who can make a potion that will nullify my Veela allure. Some say that it can't be done, but what do you think? Arusha says you have a way with potions. I'm only half Veela, after all; half of me is human, so it might be possible."

Severus tore his gaze away from her beautiful eyes and focused on a spot on the window frame. "I'd have to give it some thought," he said, "but why



would you want such a thing? To be a Veela is to have great power over men."

"That's the problem," the Divination teacher said. "I want to be able to tell if a man really cares for me, or if he's simply drawn by the Veela effect. That was my mother's downfall, you see. She thought my father really loved her — and so did he — but after a time it became apparent that he did not. He was strongly attracted to her, but he did not really love her. Finally he broke free of his obsession, cursed her for 'enchanting' him, and fled. After that she sort of stopped living and slowly died of a broken heart. That's why most Veelas live in enclaves together and seldom ever marry."

"I don't want what happened to my mother to happen to me. Maybe it's because I'm part human, but I'm tired of being alone. The men here at the school, like Mr Cohen and Mr Armstrong, all know what I am and avoid me — I don't blame them, it's the only sensible thing they can do, poor fellows. Veelas won't associate with me because I'm part human, and human women avoid me because they're not sure what to think of me. Many are jealous. And then of course there are the disruptions in the classroom. It's a very lonely life."

"Hmmm," Severus said. "Many people would like to have your problem. They turn to love potions to get what they want, but the 'love' that those brews inspires isn't real, either. It always leads to trouble and heartbreak. There is no shortcut and no way to tell if love is real or if it will last." He thought of Lily and frowned. "Love is overrated. You might be better off alone."

"No!" Larose cried. "I just want a chance to meet a man without him immediately obsessing over me. I want a chance to be fully human, a chance to find true love, even if I don't succeed."

Severus gave her a skeptical look. "If you're sure that's what you want,



I'll try," he told her, "but I'll have to give it some thought and obtain the ingredients." Part of him was intrigued by the challenge. *I'll need henbane*, he thought, *lots of henbane*.

Her eyes lit up. "Oh, thank you!" she cried. "You can't imagine how much this means to me."

She doesn't know what she's asking for, he thought. He remembered how wonderful love had felt with Lily, but that had ended in pain. Later there was Holly, the girl he'd been tutoring in potions. Due to his experience with Lily he'd tried not to have any feelings for Holly, but the feelings had developed despite his best efforts. He thought she had cared for him, too, but right after they'd finished at Hogwarts Holly had disappeared without a word. *Larose doesn't know how terrible the pain can be*, he thought, *and no one is as lonely as a person who's been rejected by someone they love*.



The period between Thanksgiving and Christmas was extremely busy on the Knight Boat. Lots of passengers were travelling and lots of gifts were being shipped. The crew was getting tired, so when Captain Clark called them together for a short meeting they were afraid he was going to announce more work assignments. Fortunately, he wasn't.

"You'll all be glad to know that I've managed to get us some extra time off," Clark told them. "In addition to Christmas, Mr Flushwell has given us time off for New Year's Eve. He's been much more kindly disposed toward us since Slade took over filing all our paperwork," he added, smiling at Severus.

"It's nothing," Severus said, recalling the mess he'd sorted out at Hogwarts when he took over as Headmaster.



Biscuit chuckled. "That's great!" he said. "We'll need the extra time for that masquerade ball!"

He and Kat were brimming with enthusiasm for the ball. Severus definitely was not.



"What are we going to do for entertainment at the ball?" Pomona Sprout asked. "The holiday season is almost upon us. We need to do some planning."

Faculty meetings were beginning to get on Minerva's nerves in a big way. "Lucius Malfoy wants us to let that Slytherin band that calls itself *Parselmouth* perform a song from that rock opera that they've been working on," she said. "We really can't allow that, but Lucius is getting very pushy about it and he's the one that's paying for everything."

"Why can't we allow it?" Horace Slughorn asked angrily. "Because they're Slytherins?"

"It would be way too divisive," Minerva told him. "You know what their songs are about. We have to put all that behind us."

Horace scowled at her. "It can't be more divisive than when you drove all the Slytherins out before the battle. Lots of the older ones came back to join the fight on our side — I know you saw them there — but nobody cares about that."

"I think we need to face the past, not sweep it under the rug," Filius said.

"I agree," Pomona added. "We can't heal and move forward if we don't come to terms with the past."

Minerva slammed her hand down on the table so hard that everyone's teacup bounced. "I apologized for driving them out. What more do you



people want me to do?" she asked angrily.

Unfortunately, no one had an answer to that.



Severus went back to the Bayou Academy for Christmas just as he had for Thanksgiving, and when the boat arrived to pick him up he was waiting on the dock with Fawkes, several crates of completed potions, a few House-Elves, Mr Cohen and his family, and Ms Larose. The latter, dressed in a simple light blue robe, beamed happily and blew Severus a kiss as he levitated the crates up the gangplank.

"Oh ho!" Biscuit laughed, "What have you been up to?"

Severus almost told him to shut it, but then he realized that he really should give the crew some sort of explanation. They were his friends, after all.

"I designed and brewed a potion for her. She is part Veela and she wanted something that would counteract the attraction that comes with that heritage."

"I don't think it worked," Kat said, waving happily to her.

Severus raised an eyebrow at him. "My potions always work," he said sternly. "She just happens to be quite attractive in her own right and she doesn't need a magical boost."

None of them dared to mention the faint trace of lipstick that lingered on their friend's cheek.



"New Year's Eve is coming up fast so we've been working on your disguise," Biscuit told Severus after the boat was under way. "You'll look



great as Captain Hook. We've got a broad-brimmed hat with an ostrich plume for you, a frilly white shirt, a long coat, and a sword and stuff."

"You can do the hook with a Glamour," Kat said. "It won't matter if the spell wears off occasionally because that won't reveal your identity. You can just renew it as needed."

"You can use a large domino mask to conceal your nose and cheekbones," Biscuit told him, "but you'll need to colour your hair. First you have to bleach it, and then you add the colour. The directions are on the package." He handed Severus several boxes, one of which featured a picture of a lovely young lady with chestnut-brown hair. *AUTUMN ADVENTURE*, the label said, promising hair colour of unsurpassed richness.

"And we got some tinted contact lenses for you, too. You've got to practice wearing them." Kat handed Severus the lens kit and a sheet of paper. "Here are the instructions."

Severus took a look at them. The lenses were a vivid blue colour. *I'm supposed to put these in my eyes?* he wondered. *Well, Muggles do it all the time, so it can't be too difficult.*



At the next faculty meeting the subject of entertainment at the ball was once again at the top of the agenda.

"I'm happy to announce that the Lawrence Lombard Quintet will be playing for us and everyone can dance the night away to their 'sweet champagne music'. Lucius Malfoy has agreed to pay their fee in exchange for allowing *Parselmouth* to perform a song. I'm not happy about it, but Mr Malfoy drives a hard bargain."



"Did you ask Celestina Warbeck if she would be willing to perform a song or two for us?" Pomona asked. "I know her fee is very high, but perhaps she would do it for charity. I would love to hear Celestina!"

"Celestina met with me here over tea last week and I'm sad to say that she declined," Minerva told them. "She will be attending the ball, however, which is good news. She also reminded me that she's currently writing an opera and would like to perform it here at Hogwarts when it's finished." *That will no doubt be another headache that I don't need*, Minerva thought. "It's called *Lily Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* and Celestina says it will be an epic tragedy."

"Hmmm," said Filius. "Flawed characters in a doomed love-triangle that ends in death? That certainly sounds like a suitable topic for an opera."

Minerva scowled. "That's true, I suppose, but the problem is that it will reopen so many wounds. It's not ancient history like other operas. We all lived through it very, very recently."

She remembered her meeting with Celestina all too well.

"When it's finished I want to stage it right here at Hogwarts," Celestina had told her. "The Quidditch stadium should be large enough. The students can help with the production. It will be an excellent experience for them. I will play Lily, of course. It will be the greatest wizard-opera ever!"

"I'm sure it will be wonderful," Minerva had said, although in fact she wasn't sure at all, "but I don't think Hogwarts is really the best venue." How could they put the past behind them if people were going to keep writing songs and stories about it?

"Of course it is!" Celestina had declared. "This is where it all happened! I'm sure the Board of Governors will be happy to approve it. All proceeds will go to the Magical Orphans Fund. Except for my fee and royalty, of



course. The script isn't finished yet but I should be ready to start rehearsing some of the scenes next spring. I'll see you then, Minerva."

Celestina had drawn herself up, taken a deep breath, and sang out "*Severus! Deliver us!*" as she left the room. Her voice had rattled the windows.

Minerva had been stunned.

The portrait of Phineas Black had laughed so hard he nearly cracked his paint.



"I can't call myself 'Jolly Roger'; that was the name of Hook's ship, or his flag, or something," Kat complained.

The cook frowned. "Well, we'll call you 'Jolly Jake' then," he said. "And since when do we have to be historically accurate, anyway?"

The sound of splashing and swearing could be heard from Severus's cabin. It was followed by the sound of Fawkes chortling, the wizard chasing him out into the passageway, and the door slamming shut.

"I think Slade's making progress," Biscuit said. "I haven't hear any crashes in there for a while now."

"I'm sure he'll manage," Kat agreed. "He's probably trying to mix up a better hair dye. Do you think he'll explode when we try to get him to wear the gold earrings?"

"Absolutely!" Biscuit laughed, "but we'll win in the end, and that'll be the best part."

Fawkes flew over to them and Biscuit conjured a perch for him. The bird gave them a quizzical look.

"You know what?" Kat said. "We ought to take Fawkes to the ball. I'm



sure he'll enjoy it. In fact, he'll probably be miffed if we leave him behind."

"True enough, but what could we disguise him as?" Biscuit asked. "He's pretty distinctive."

"I'm sure we'll think of something," Kat assured him.



The Masquerade Begins



SOLOMON SLADE, THE WIZARD FORMERLY

known as Severus Snape, examined himself in the mirror, making the final check of his Captain Hook costume. Domino mask, check; blue contact lenses, check; hair and moustache dyed brown, check; long red leather coat, check; yellow silk scarf, check; frilly white shirt, check; cutlass, boots, tricorne hat with plume, check. He'd add the hook with a Glamour spell when he arrived at the masquerade.

At Biscuit's urging he'd donned one gold earring, some gold chains, and an emerald ring, too. "If it's stuff that Snape guy would never wear, you should absolutely wear it," the cook had pointed out. "It will enhance your disguise." Sadly however, no one could convince him to braid a few colorful beads into his hair.

Severus had to admit that it was a very effective disguise. He did not look at all like Professor Snape, the dreaded Potions Master of Hogwarts, and certainly not like the harried, burned-out Headmaster Snape of the final pre-battle days. In fact, he had to admit that he actually looked kind of sharp.

He spelled his wand to be a bit shorter than his forearm, slipped it up his sleeve, and secured it there a sticking charm; a wandless *Accio* on top of a quick *Finite* would bring it to his hand in a second. Then he made a few final adjustments to the scarf that covered his scarred throat and he was ready to go.

He found Biscuit and Kat in the mess. The former was dressed as Mr Smee in a loose-fitting shirt with big blue stripes; his hair was wrapped in a black bandana decorated with a classic skull-and-crossbones motif. The latter was wearing a battered leather vest, tattered trousers, and a tricorne



hat. Both had stout sashes across their shoulders that held their cutlasses.

Captain Clark emerged from his quarters dressed as Long John Silver, complete with a crutch and a bushy black beard. A conjured replica of a parrot sat on his shoulder; he didn't want to take Mavis along in case there was trouble. "You guys didn't think I was going to let you go without me, did you?" he laughed. "There's no telling how much mischief the three of you would get into if I left you on your own."



Standing near the entrance to North House, Theodore Nott was feeling sorry for himself. "No dressing as anything nasty. No werewolves, vampires, scary monsters, or hit-wizards. Absolutely no badgers, lions, ravens or eagles, and of course no *snakes*. Dressing as anything Muggle is uncool, in my personal opinion, and dressing like wizards and witches is what we do every day. There's nothing left. Nothing exciting, anyway."

"Just because the ball is free for students doesn't mean you have to attend," Melody Nowak pointed out as she adjusted her tail. She and Clayton Urquhart were going as Merfolk. Their feet were hidden by Glamours.

Clayton smirked at Nott. "You could always go as the Bluebird of Happiness."

"That's not funny! I should hex you 'til your socks catch fire!" Nott raged.

"Okay, sorry," Clayton said. "Look, we need to remember that our objective here is to get Slytherin House restored, and in order to do that everyone has to be *nice*. We have to set a good example. Anyone who can't manage that should just stay in their room. If you want to do that, Nott, I can bring you some of the food."



"No, I'll think of something," Nott pouted. "But I won't like it. I wanted to go as a blood-sucking vampire."



Captain Clark brought the boat to the surface through the ice on the Hogwarts lake and Severus gathered everyone together for a final talk. "Before we go," he said, "I'd like to review our cover story. Remember, we're all important members of the American wizarding establishment and we're here unofficially, so we mustn't reveal our names or positions lest we get in trouble with our superiors. Try to be as vague as possible.

"As for the Malfoys, we can tell them that we're partners in a small but profitable potions business and we've chartered this boat for our visit. The Malfoys are indebted to me and I'd like to keep it that way. Lucius might try to pay me back by buying the boat for us, or even by buying Knight Lines." He thought for a moment. "That is, assuming that he doesn't own it already.

"It's a short hike up through the cliffs to the castle. I'll lead the way. And when we get there, try to be inconspicuous," he said, although he doubted that they could manage that.

"And I want everyone back on the boat before noon tomorrow at the latest," Captain Clark added. "We need to get ready to sail then."



When Severus handed Narcissa Malfoy his ticket she looked down at the ticket and then up at his face. "Severus, is that *you*?" she asked hesitantly. She, Lucius, and Draco were dressed as a family of Muggle shep-



herds. They wanted to appear as harmless and likable as possible. Narcissa was lovely as always in a light blue dress and a white apron embroidered with alpine flowers. It was probably the first time Severus had seen her in flat shoes since their student days. It was certainly the first time that he'd seen her with her hair in braids.

Lucius and Draco looked handsome in lederhosen and Tyrolean hats. Lucius was holding a shepherd's crook. Astoria Greengrass, also dressed as a shepherdess, was standing next to Draco, smiling sweetly and holding his hand.

"Great Merlin!" Lucius said, staring at Severus. "I never would have recognized you!"

"That's the general idea," Severus said warmly. "It's good to see you all again. Especially you, Draco. You're looking quite well. And Astoria. It's good to see you both."

"Uh, yeah, you too, sir," Draco stammered. Could this tanned pirate really be his old Head of House? "You look great!"

Narcissa hugged Severus and then he and Lucius shook hands. "Nice legs, Lucius," he whispered.

"Ah, that's the man I remember!" Lucius laughed.

"Please introduce us to your friends," Narcissa said, smiling at the crew.

Gesturing with his conjured hook, Severus introduced them all by their pirate names and repeated their cover story. "We would like to keep all our identities secret at present," he added, "to ensure against anyone tracing me."

"Of course, that's quite understandable," Lucius said. He turned to the group. "Welcome to Hogwarts, all of you, and to the New Year's Eve War



Orphans Benefit Masquerade Ball. I'm so glad you could come! Please enjoy the festivities."

Severus took a look around. The Great Hall was festooned with sparkling icicles, silver stars and streamers, and it was beginning to fill with costumed witches and wizards, most of whom were heading for the tables of refreshments. His companions set off to join them.

"Avast, ye Sea Dogs!" they heard the Captain say. "Let's see what sort of vittles these wizard folks have conjured up for us."

Narcissa laughed. "Let me get you a drink, Severus," she said.

"Perhaps later. I'd like to circulate a bit first and take a look around. See how the repairs turned out, and that sort of thing. Please excuse me for a little while."

"Of course," she said. "It must feel strange to be back, after everything that's happened."

"Very, very strange," he agreed.

He wanted to get away from the crowd as soon as possible to investigate the source of his mysterious dreams. Perhaps he would try to sneak into the Headmistress's office for a word with the portrait of Phineas Black. Phineas was usually a source of reliable information.

He felt tense as he crossed the Great Hall but no one paid any attention to him. He'd cast a strong Notice-Me-Not charm on himself but one could never be certain. He spotted Minerva McGonagall who was dressed in a cat costume inspired by the Muggle musical. The old gal always insisted that she'd seen the musical only because she was a cat Animagus, but in fact Muggle theater was one of her secret guilty pleasures and she was a regular at the Edinburg Fringe Festival. She was conversing with



Pomona Sprout, who was dressed as a pineapple. Her billowing orange gown was decorated with diagonal patterns, and a bunch of long green leaves crowned her head.

Severus dodged into a hallway that led past some of the classrooms. He'd take a back way up to the office.



The crew was standing beside a fountain made of pale blue ice when a passing suit of armor offered them a tray of canapés. They accepted some large crackers loaded with smoked salmon, shrimp, and scallops. There might have been a person inside the armor but it was impossible to know for sure.

Biscuit took a glass of champagne from a nearby table and looked around the Great Hall. "I like the ice sculptures," he said. "The floating sparklers are a nice touch, too."

"Hey, is that Jack Sparrow over there?" Kat asked.

"Captain Jack Sparrow? I heard he'd died," Biscuit said.

"He did, a couple of times," Clark observed. "Or so I've heard."

But before they could go talk to the fellow, a small man dressed as a penguin greeted them and introduced himself as Filius Flitwick. When they told him they were visiting from America, Filius offered to show them around.

"The pantomime zebra over there is Professor Vector," Filius told them, pointing with a silky black wing, "and the chap dressed as a Roman emperor is Professor Slughorn. The gypsy is Professor Trelawney; she always looks like that, actually, except for the mask. The big fellow dressed as a monster must be Hagrid, our groundskeeper."



The monster, who looked somewhat like Godzilla, waved happily.

"And I have no idea at all what *that* is," he said, looking up.

Something that appeared to be a cockatrice was perched on a rafter above them. His feathers and beak were colored an iridescent blue-green and his head sported a big red coxcomb and long wattles. A fake dragon tail studded with spikes floated out behind him.

"Is that *Fawkes*? Did you guys help him do that?" Clark whispered.

Fawkes looked down and said, "Beep beep!" Then he chortled.

"Yup," Biscuit whispered back. "He looks great, doesn't he? And we gave him chocolate-covered coffee beans to help him stay awake all night."

Filius looked over at them. "What was that you said?" he asked.

"We were just saying that it must be an Animagus," Clark answered quickly. "He looks great, doesn't he?"



Severus was passing an empty classroom when he heard a squeaky voice behind him cry out, "Hello Headmaster Professor Snape! I is so glad to see you again!"

He whirled around to see a House-Elf grinning at him. He should have realized that no disguise could fool a House-Elf. The Elves always knew everything. The little fellows had their own sort of magic that no one really understood.

Severus held a finger to his lips to indicate silence. "It's *Former* Headmaster Professor Snape now, Bingle, and my visit is a secret. You Elves mustn't tell anyone about it, even after I've left."

The House-Elves had been essential to him when he was Headmaster.



He couldn't have managed without their support. Bingle had been one of his best spies.

"Yes, secret! We knows!" the Elf replied happily. "We is glad you is okay! Can Bingle help you?"

"No." Severus paused, and then he said, "Well, actually, yes. You know that special Scotch that the Headmistress has? The very old Glen Mystic?" She'd shared it with other professors on special occasions, but never with him. "I'd like a glass of that, please. In fact, make it a double."

Bingle nodded vigorously, his big ears flapping like wings. The Elf would have no difficulty accessing the Headmistress's office and Severus could just follow along behind him.



There was a smattering of applause and a few cheers and whistles when the trio and Ginny entered the Great Hall. They were dressed as musketeers with big plumed hats and bright blue tabards emblazoned with gold designs. The costumes were Hermione's idea. Most witches and wizards were ignorant of Muggle literature, including *THE THREE MUSKETEERS*, but the costumes would look fabulous whether anyone knew the book or not.

Molly Weasley followed after them dressed at Mother Goose in a long grey dress, apron, and bonnet. Arthur was done up as a gander. There was a long orange beak attached to his mask and a plump gander body was charmed to float around him. Orange flippers on his feet completed his ensemble. Arthur had wanted to dress as a Muggle but Molly had nixed that idea.

Molly and Arthur were followed by Bill and Fleur who were dressed as snowy owls.



Owls? Why owls? Fawkes wondered as he watched them enter. *That's so unimaginative. There are so many wonderful birds to choose from.*

To Molly's disappointment, George had decided not to attend and Charlie was back with his dragons. Percy arrived later, alone, in formal evening wear, a fez, and a small black mask.

"Ewww," whispered Lawrence Butt, one of the former Slytherins. "It's the Wonderful Weasley Family and the Chosen One."

"Chosen by whom, or what, I wonder?" Clayton muttered.

"Pipe down, everyone, and keep smiling," Melody told them. "Let's go get some food." She was a true Hufflepuff.

Theodore Nott was already at the food tables. He was wearing a plump yellow-and-black striped body and a black mask. He stuffed a canapé into his mouth.

"Oh, you're a honeybee," Melody said.

"Shhh," Nott hissed, blowing a few cracker crumbs toward her. Then he leaned a little closer. "I'm secretly *killer bee*!" he whispered.

"Oh, of course, I should have realized that," Melody said, trying not to laugh. "You're such a Slytherin!"



Severus made himself comfortable at McGonagall's desk and sent Bingle off to attend to other duties. He savored a sip of the Scotch. It was indeed excellent.

The old portrait frames were empty and there was no sign of Phineas, or Albus. He supposed they'd all gone to watch the festivities so he had to content himself with enjoying the Scotch and searching through the



desk drawers. Nothing interesting there, just the usual paperwork.

He flipped through the minutes of recent faculty meetings. It appeared that they were considering hiring a Mr Fang to teach Defense. The fellow had been born in London but had studied in Asia. And they had hired Kirby Pond, a former Hufflepuff, to teach Runes and Dead Languages. Longbottom had been hired to do herbology research and assist Sprout, and it was expected that he would take over the position when she eventually retired. Slughorn wanted to return to retirement but would continue to teach Potions until a suitable replacement could be found. And there was much grumbling about the new House system, but the Sorting Hat appeared to be incapable of making any sense and McGonagall was holding fast to her decision.

McGonagall had made some changes to the décor but the office still looked much like it had when he and Albus had occupied it. It still had that stuffy smell of candles, old books, and parchment, too. Unwanted memories began to unsettle him. How often had he sat at this desk during his time as Headmaster, unable to sleep and sick with fear and worry? He looked up and saw his own portrait staring down at him, stern and unmoving.

I've got to get out of here, he realized as panic started to grip him.

He gulped down the last of the Scotch and hurried down the stairs, past the gargoyle, down a hall, and out onto a balcony. The light from the Great Hall and the happy voices from the masquerade floated out across the snowy courtyard below him. It was so different from the darkness and tense silence that prevailed when he was Headmaster. He took a deep breath of the cold winter air and let it out slowly. It quickly turned into a cloud of ice crystals.

Suddenly he realized that this was exactly what he used to do to clear his head when he was Headmaster. He'd better get out of here,



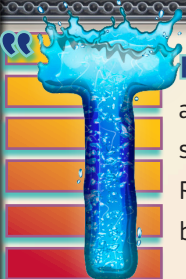
too. This was where ...

Then a hollow voice close beside him said, "Oh, Professor! I'm so glad you survived! I felt so bad when I heard about your death."





Dragon Dance



HERE WERE FOUR HOUSES, EACH NAMED

after one of the four founders," Filius told the crew. "That stairway over there leads to what was, until recently, Ravenclaw Tower. The entrance to Hufflepuff House was back near the kitchens."

"Could we tour the kitchens?" Biscuit asked eagerly.

"Yes, of course," Filius said. "I want to show you our ever-changing stairs first. I believe they were created by Godric Gryffindor himself."

"Hogwarts has such a rich history," Hermione said, coming over to them. "I couldn't help overhearing you. I hope you don't mind. You sound like Americans."

"Aye, that we are, musketeer-lass," said Captain Clark, doffing his pirate hat and bowing deeply. "'Tis a pleasure ta be meetin' such a fair young flower as yerself."

"Ahem!" said Ron, hurrying up behind them. "This lady happens to be my fiancé." He folded his arms and scowled at them.

Clark looked puzzled.

"Is there a problem, Ron?" Hermione asked, putting her hands on her hips.

Ron backed up a bit. "Um, no," he said.

Harry and Ginny hurried over to see what was happening.

Those two guys seem familiar. Do I know them from somewhere? Clark wondered.

Oh, no! It's those guys that had that wyvern! Kat realized. *And they turned up at Bayou, too. What if they recognize us?* "Er, can we go visit the kitchens now, Professor Flitwick?" he asked nervously.

"Good idea," said Filius, who thought it best to leave Ron and Hermione



to work out their issues on their own. "Follow me."

Fawkes recognized the word 'kitchens' and took off ahead of them.



There is really nothing much that you can do about a ghost. Threats of bodily harm are useless because ghosts don't have bodies, and they're immune to most spells. It's usually best to ignore them, but the Hufflepuff ghost could be very difficult to ignore.

When Severus first encountered the Fat Friar on this balcony while he was Headmaster, he had simply ordered the spirit to leave. But although the ghost did leave, he kept coming back. Severus had blustered at him, yelled at him, shrieked at him, and threatened him, but to no avail. The ghost kept coming back.

The Friar had told him that it was his duty as a member of the Little Brothers of Merlin to comfort people in their time of need. That made Severus furious. He didn't need comforting, especially not from a stupid ghost. But somehow Severus kept going out on that balcony late at night, and the Friar continued his attempts to soothe the troubled Headmaster.

Severus hated to remember it, but he had been so painfully lonely in those final days that he had eventually loosened up a bit and started talking to the Friar. They had had quite a few conversations and perhaps he'd told the ghost more than he should have about his past and his mission. There was no harm in it, though. His secrets were safe with the Friar. No one could make the ghost talk. And now that he thought about it, no one could make the ghost shut up, either.

"I was so honored that you let me hear your confessions," the Friar said,



"and I wish you had let me give you Last Rites before you left. I felt terrible when I heard about your death."

"I was *not* confessing," Severus snapped.

"If you say so." The Friar smiled.

"And as you know, I had to leave on rather short notice."

"Well, you didn't die after all, so all is well. I'm so glad."

What a Hufflepuff! Severus thought.

Then Severus remembered his objective. "By the way, you wouldn't happen to know anything about someone sending me dreams lately, would you?" he asked the ghost.

The Friar looked puzzled. "Dreams?"

"Yes, I've been having pleasant dreams about Hogwarts lately instead of the usual nightmares. There must be someone behind it, sending them to me, trying to lure me back here or mislead me somehow. But I don't know who, or why. Whatever they want, it can't be good."

The Friar laughed heartily. "You are such a hopeless pessimist! It's probably the castle, you ninny. The castle is somewhat sentient, as you know. It's not just a pile of old rocks. And it tries to look after those who defend it and its students. It's probably trying to help you heal."

Severus had been called a lot of things during his life, but a ninny wasn't one of them. Despite that, he didn't react because he was so startled by the realization that the Friar might be right.

He reached out and put his hand on the castle's stone wall. It felt warm despite the fact that it was a cold winter night. The warmth began to creep into him and he felt reassured. Against all odds, his efforts had been successful. Potter had been set up to destroy the Dark Lord,



and the young wizard had survived, too. Even if his mission had failed, Severus had done everything that was expected of him, and more. The castle was pleased.

Startled, Severus snatched his hand away from the wall. He wasn't sure what to make of this. He must have been out of his mind to come back here. He turned and fled the balcony.

"Whenever you need to do more confessing, you know where to find me," the Friar called after him. "Great costume, by the way."



"Did that boy really think I was hitting on his girlfriend? I must be older than her father!" Clark said indignantly as they headed for the kitchens.

"I'm afraid he probably did," Filius sighed. "Our Ron is a bit insecure, it seems. I don't think their relationship is going to go smoothly. In fact, it's always been rather rocky, now that I think about it."

"You should have challenged him to a duel," Kat joked. "Pirates versus musketeers! It would have been great fun."

"Knock it off," Clark ordered him. "We're supposed to keep a low profile, remember?"

"Aw, you're no fun!" Kat laughed.



Try as he might, Severus couldn't quite shake off the warm feelings that his recent encounters had generated. It was unsettling. He entered the Great Hall and waved off a suit of armor that offered him a tray of canapés.

He scanned the crowd. Everyone had obviously put a lot of time and



effort into conjuring their costumes. He spotted Xenophilus Lovegood dressed as a Druid with a long white beard. The copy of *TALES OF BEEDLE THE BARD* under his arm suggested that he was supposed to be Beedle. There were several Vikings with horned helmets talking to a Mexican in a sombrero; they appeared to be students. A unicorn and a ladybug were laughing and drinking champagne. Percy Weasley was chatting with a red hen. There were two Merfolk with long green fish tails. A panda, a tiger, and a hummingbird. Some butterflies with big colorful wings. An Egyptian pharaoh with dark skin and a golden mask. A princess with a tall conical hat. Captain Clark and the crew were nowhere to be seen, however. He hoped that didn't bode trouble.

He turned around and came face to face with a daisy wearing radish earrings. "It's nice to see you looking so well, Professor," Luna said, smiling at him from among the long white petals that surrounded her face.

Alarmed, he replied, "I'm afraid you've mistaken me for someone else, miss."

"Of course," she said, still smiling. "It's okay." Then she wandered off to join Professor Sprout, who was conversing with a tall saguaro cactus that was probably Neville Longbottom.

That girl is uncanny, Severus thought as he retreated to the edge of the Hall and took a seat on a stone bench. Hopefully no one would notice him there.



Headmistress McGonagall appeared behind the lectern on the stage at the front of the Hall. "Quiet, everyone, please!" she shouted. That didn't have the desired effect, so she waved her wand and created a



bright flash and bang. That got everyone's attention.

"Welcome, everyone, to the New Year's Eve War Orphans Benefit Masquerade Ball," she announced. "Some of the students are now going to usher in the New Year by performing a traditional Chinese Dragon Dance for us. That will be followed by *Parselmouth*, a band of former students, who will preview a song from the rock opera that they've been composing." She thought she managed to hide her distaste for the latter quite well. "Then at midnight we will ring in the New Year, after which the Lawrence Lombard Quintet will charm us all with their 'sweet champagne music' and there will dancing until dawn. Thank you everyone, and Happy New Year!" She created another flash and bang as she left the stage.

Soon a glowing cloud of greenish smoke poured from one of the side halls and a bright pink and green dragon's head poked out. Operated by an unseen student hidden underneath, the head flapped its bearded jaws and more green smoke poured from its nostrils. Fireworks popped and sparkled as it slowly emerged into the Great Hall, its many segments weaving and bobbing as the team of supporting students tried not to get tangled up with one another. Remarks like "Watch it, you clod!" and "Hey, you stepped on my foot!" could be heard from a few of the segments, and the young lady with the rear section shook it vigorously, bringing happy laughter from the crowd as the dragon meandered through the room.



Filius heard Minerva begin her announcement just as they were reaching the kitchens. "I must return to the Great Hall now," he told the crew. "The Elves will show you around here. Then come join us for the festivities."



It was a good thing that he left because the Elves had recognized Fawkes and were making a big fuss over him. Fawkes was chattering happily at them and they seemed to understand him.

"He wants his birdbath, Mr Pirate, sir," Bingle told Clark. "Come on, we has to get it for him."

"Birdbath?" said Clark. "Well, why not? Lead the way, Elf."



The trio and Ginny grabbed Clayton Urquhart, pulled him aside, and cast Muffliato.

"What sort of sneaky, backstabbing Slytherin rot is this?" Ginny demanded. "*Parselmouth* is going to perform? They never miss an opportunity to slag Gryffindors! Harry told me you were having a truce!"

"Er, we are," Clayton said, trying to smile, "but the *Parselmouth* bunch have sat their exams and they're finished. There's nothing we can do about them. And anyway, McGonagall said they could perform."

"It's an insult to Gryffindors!" Ginny raged. "An insult to the war dead! An insult to ..."

"You've dropped out, Ginny, and you've got no say in what happens here at Hogwarts any more, so butt out," Clayton said a little more sharply than he'd intended.

"Just cool it, Sis," Ron said. "He's right. Minerva said they could perform and there's nothing anyone can do about it."

Ginny was seething. She kept quiet, but she was going to have a word or two with Harry later.

"I'll circulate and apologize to all the Gryffindors that I can find," Clay-





ton told them. "It won't be easy, though, with everyone in costume."

"I'll go with you," Harry said. "It's essential that we keep the peace."

"And anyway, *Parselmouth* might even be *good*," Ron added. "Better than 'sweet champagne music', anyway."

"Mom loves Lawrence Lombardo's music!" Ginny retorted.



Bingle lit a lantern and Clark and Kat followed him through a door at the rear of the kitchens. Fawkes flew along with them. Biscuit stayed behind to swap tips and recipes with some of the Elves.

They went up several flights of stone stairs and stopped in front of a small wooden door. "This is our Keeping Room," Bingle told them. "Elves made this place to keep mementos of the Headpeoples when Hogwarts got founded." He put his hands on his hips and told them very firmly, "They threw these things away. Elves never steal."

"Of course not," Clark assured him. "You guys take out all the trash, so everything that's in it is rightfully yours."

The Elf opened the door and gestured to light the lanterns that lined the walls. Fawkes flew in without difficulty, but Clark and Kat had to get down on their hands and knees to get through the Elf-sized door.

There were many old wooden chests stacked neatly along the walls. "Most of our treasures is packed away in those chests," Bingle said, "but our things from the Four Founders are in this case." He gestured toward a glass cabinet that was lit with a soft glow.

He pointed to a pair of faded red shorts in the centre of the case. Their gold trim was missing in places and the drawstring at the waist was



badly frayed. "Those shorts belonged to Headmaster Founder Professor Godric Gryffindor," he said proudly.

Fawkes whistled.

"Lovely," Kat said with a perfectly straight face. Clark gave him a warning look.

"Those slippers belonged to Founder Professor Salazar Slytherin," the Elf continued. They were fuzzy green and silver slippers with curled toes. There was a hole in the sole of the left one.

"This was Founder Professor Rowena Ravenclaw's rain-cloak." It was a grey hooded poncho with a dark blue stripe near its frayed margin. There was a long rip near one shoulder. Presumably it had once been spelled to be waterproof.

"And this helmet belonged to Founder Professor Helga Hufflepuff." It was a somewhat corroded and dented bronze helmet. Fawkes thought it needed a big pair of wings.

"It looks like it could withstand quite a hit," Kat observed.

"They says it used to have a little bronze badger sitting on the top," the Elf noted, "but it got broke off in a battle or something."

"Do you have anything from Headmaster Snape?"

"Oh, yes" Bingle said happily. He went to a set of shelves and picked up a cracked copper cauldron. "This was one of his favorite cauldrons. We think it got cracked when he throwed it at Peeves." Then he pulled an old grey nightshirt out of the cauldron. "This was his, too."

"That's very nice," Clark said, but he wanted to get back to the masquerade to keep an eye on 'Captain Hook'. "Is that the birdbath over there?" he asked.



Severus sat back and began to relax. He had accomplished his objective. He looked around for the crew but it was difficult to see through the dragon's smoke. If he could spot one of them, he could tell them he was leaving early and get out of there before anything went wrong. It would probably be safe to leave the crew on their own. Probably.

Then he saw an iridescent green figure coming toward him through the swirling smoke. It was difficult to make out the details at first, but as it came closer it became obvious that it was a woman. A pair of antennae adorned her blonde hair, a mask with big red eyes covered her face, and he realized that she was dressed as a praying mantis. Her long, green gloves had serrations along their outer edges and her hands were clasped together in front of her, holding her dragon-skin purse.

He fought down the urge to get up and make a run for the exit. That would look way too suspicious, so he sat quietly and hoped that, somehow, she would pass him by.



Werewolf of Hogwarts



HELLO, CAPTAIN HOOK," RITA SKEETER SAID.

She looked rather scary in her praying mantis mask. "Mind if I join you?"

Severus stood up and bowed. "Please be my guest, Ms Mantis," he said, using a very convincing imitation of Kat's accent. He gestured toward the bench with his hook. *I should have run for it, he thought, but it's too late now.*

Rita waved down a suit of armor and told it to bring some champagne, and while she was distracted Severus silently renewed the sticking charms on his mask and the scarf that covered his scarred throat.

"My name is Rita Skeeter and I'm an investigative journalist. Most people here are afraid to talk to me," she told him. "They're afraid I'll quote them. You're one of those visitors from America, aren't you? Don't worry, I know you've been sent here to check up on things. I promise I won't get you in trouble."

The armor returned with the champagne. Rita took two glasses and handed one to Severus as they settled down on the bench.

"I don't blame the Americans for being worried" she continued, taking a sip of her champagne. "I'm sure they're not the only ones who are concerned. After all, what kind of a country leaves school children to defend against a major attack? Where was everyone else? There was that so-called Order of the Phoenix, of course, but they were just a bunch of ineffective bumbler. The United Kingdom has a large population of witches and wizards. They should have been able to mount a proper defense."

Severus was mildly surprised to find that he was now playing the role of an American spy. "Well, yes, we were wondering what really happened,"



he said. "We heard that the Dark Lord had infiltrated the Ministry of Magic, which is why nothing was done. It's all finished and settled now, isn't it?" His best bet would be to keep her talking until there was an opportunity to slip away.

"The so-called 'Chosen One' did manage to destroy the Dark Lord through some strange combination of dumb luck and ancient magic," Rita told him as she took another sip of her drink. "But the Dark Lord — his name was really Tom Riddle — should have been stopped long before that. Albus Dumbledore just stood by and watched him grow into a major threat."

"Albus Dumbledore?" Severus asked. "Wasn't he the Headmaster here at this school? The fellow who defeated Grindlewald?"

"Yes," said Rita, "he fought Grindlewald, but he never tried to defeat Riddle. He seemed to think it was fated that a Dark Lord must rise, and that only the 'Chosen One' must defeat him."

"Leaving it to play out according to 'fate' sounds like a dangerous plan," Severus said. "According to the Greek myths, trying to fight against fate is futile, but one ought to at least try, I think." *I should never have trusted Albus*, he thought. *What a fool I was!*

"Dumbledore didn't just go along with 'fate', he did his best to make it happen that way," Rita replied. "He brought young Riddle here to be taught magic, even though he knew how dangerous the boy was. And then he stood idly by and watched as Riddle grew stronger and stronger. It was incredibly irresponsible of him. In the end, he left young Potter to deal with the threat on his own."

Potter, and me, and everyone else, Severus thought. "Quite a few people must have died as a result," he remarked.



"Yes, quite a few." Rita finished her champagne and signaled for more. *Almost including me*, Severus thought.



"Put it right over there," Tracey Davis said as the two roadies levitated the drum kit up onto the stage. Anthony Goldstein climbed up after them, followed by the drummer and the bassist. They were all dressed in black. "And get that lectern outta here," Tracey ordered. "We've gotta get this right tonight. It could give our careers a big boost."

"I just hope no one gets too upset," Anthony said as took up his guitar. "Remus Lupin was one of the best Defense teachers we had, and he was a war hero, too."

"Yes, he was a war hero, and so were a lot of other people," Tracey reminded him. "You were there and so were the rest of us. The main difference is that we managed not to get killed. Anyway, we never actually say that it's based on Lupin, and I added a verse saying he might become a hero, just to soften it a bit."

It was true that they had all been in the battle. Anthony had been with Tracey and the others when Tracey had been seriously wounded. A Gryffindor had mistaken her for an enemy because she was a Slytherin, and he had cursed her from behind. Tracey had never liked Gryffindors, but that had sent her animosity over the top. Anthony couldn't really blame her for that.



Rita started on her second glass of champagne. "Everyone always said that Albus Dumbledore was the only one that the Dark Lord feared. You



wouldn't have guessed that from Dumbledore's actions though. Or rather his lack of action. If he did anything, it was very furtive. And ineffective."

Severus wondered if he should try to change the subject. It was rather interesting to hear her point of view on the matter, however, so he let her ramble on.

"This is rather good champagne," she said. "Not the best, but certainly better than average. I must remember to thank Lucius."

"Yes, it's lovely," Severus said, taking a small sip of his. He'd discretely drunk an entire vial of Soberall potion to ensure that his mind and reflexes would remain sharp despite the alcohol. He was imbibing very slowly, too. He wasn't going to push his luck in a situation like this.

"It looks like the band is going to set up," he said. "Let's go have a look."

"Oh, yes, I've heard they're rather good. Let's go."

He hoped he could lose her when the music started, but when they stood up she took him firmly by the arm.



"It looks like the band is setting up now. They're Slytherins, aren't they?" Celestina Warbeck asked. She was dressed in a flowing lavender gown and long strings of pearls. She wanted to be easily recognizable for her fans. "It's not my kind of music, but I've heard they're rather popular. Were they in Slug Club?"

"Sadly, no, they weren't," Horace Slughorn said. "Things were a bit chaotic at that time and I was unable to properly reestablish the club."

"The connections you helped me make through Slug Club were essential when I was launching my career." She smiled at him. "I really appre-



ciate that, you know."

Horace smiled back. "It was a pleasure, my dear. I'll always think of you as the 'Sweet Songstress of Slytherin', but of course lately people have come to think that being a Slytherin is something to be ashamed of. I've noticed that you never mention it in your interviews."

"Well, I ought to admit it, I know," Celestina said. "I'm an ambitious Slytherin, and it was my ambition to bring my songs to the witches and wizards of the world. Entertainment is a cut-throat business. If I weren't ambitious, and even a bit ruthless at times, I'd still be singing to myself in the shower. As it is, I'll be starting a world tour next spring." *And being paid very well for it, too*, she thought.

Molly Weasley and several of her friends interrupted them. "Could we have your autograph, please?" Molly asked as they all held out photographs of Celestina blowing kisses toward the viewer. "We love your songs!"

"Of course, my dears," Celestina said as she brought out her magical signing pen.



A crowd of students was gathering in front of the stage as Tracey took her place at the keyboard. "You guys ready?" she whispered, looking at her band mates.

They all nodded and she cried out, "Helloooo Hogwarts! We're *Parselmouth* and this is the latest song from our rock opera. It's called 'Werewolf of Hogwarts' and we hope you'll like it!"

The drummer struck the drums several times, Tracey started the introduction, and then Anthony and the bass player joined in.



The students watched in anticipation as she sang the first verse:

*"I saw a werewolf with a battered suitcase in his hand
Boarding the train for Hogwarts in plain sight.
Could it be that there's a werewolf at the school?
A werewolf at Hogwarts tonight?"*

Then Tracey howled: "Ah woool!"

The students clapped and whistled. Most of them, anyway. Bentley Ballard and some of the other former Gryffindors stood by watching suspiciously.

Lucius glanced at Draco. "Maybe I shouldn't have let you talk me into this," he said.

"It's okay, Father," Draco said. "They're good. Everyone is going to like it. You'll see."

*"Do you hear him howling
In that shack late at night?
His friends are gonna let him out!
Hogsmeade got terrorized late last night.
It's the Werewolf of Hogwarts, no doubt!"*

"Come on, people, howl with me now! Ah woool!" Tracey shouted.

"Ah woool!" the crowd answered. People were starting to rock back and forth along with music. Bentley noticed that he was tapping his foot.

"I think I kind of like it," he muttered.

*"He's an unassuming gent
That his friends have sometimes sent
To terrorize their unsuspecting foes.
He's a really nice guy
When the moon's not in the sky.*



Otherwise there's danger where he goes."

Minerva wrung her hands. "Good grief!" she said. "This is worse than I thought. Poor Remus!"

"It's all in fun, I think," Filius told her, although he wasn't exactly sure of that, "and there is some truth to it, as you know."

Minerva sighed. "Remus was in my House, and after a few months I realized what was going on. Albus neglected to mention it until I brought it up with him, though." *I used to think that Albus was just absent-minded, but sometimes now I wonder,* she thought. *Did he think I wouldn't notice?*

Tracey kept on singing:

*"He's just lonely, don't you know?
He tries not to let it show,
But he's fallen in with bad company.
He's got a friend in a high place
Who will hide all his disgrace.
But he's still got a problem, don't you see?"*

Then the band launched into an instrumental break. Anthony stepped forward with his guitar. Sweat was running down his face. Tracey pounded on the keyboard. The bass player struck a classic pose as he plucked the strings, and the drummer was going wild behind the drum kit.

"Oh, this is too much fun!" Rita said. She let go of Severus and clapped. Severus knew he should try to disappear into the crowd then, but he just stood there and stared in amazement. The lyrics were quite accurate, and that idiot Lupin deserved every word of them. *Ten points to Slytherin!* he thought, *and a few to Ravenclaw, too.* He fought down an urge to laugh.

Anthony took over the vocals:



*"If you hear him howling around the castle gate
You'd better not let him in!
Kids almost got mutilated late last night.
It's the Werewolf of Hogwarts again!"*

"Come on, Celestina, let's get closer," Horace said happily.
Celestina clutched her pearls. "No, no, it's way too undignified. You go ahead. I'll wait here."

"Righty-o," Horace said and headed into the crowd.

*"He doesn't mean you any harm,
There's no need for much alarm
Except when he forgets to drink his potion.
Then his teeth begin to grow,
Yes, it's terrible, I know.
In fact it really is quite atrocious."*

The crowd cheered. Theodore Nott punched the air and screamed out
"Parselmouth rocks!"

Ginny grabbed Harry by the arm. "This is disgraceful!" she said. "Lupin was such a nice man. How can Minerva let them do this?"

"Well, the song is kind of true," Ron observed. "Remus was a great guy, but he did sort of try to kill us, you know. When he was transformed, I mean."

"He couldn't help it," Harry said, frowning.

He could have remembered to take his potion, Hermione thought. "Come on, Ron, let's dance," she said, taking his hand. "It will help show that we're not angry with Slytherins."

"Sure," Ron said. He was happy for any reason to dance with Hermione.

"Ginny?" Harry asked.



"Well, okay, I guess," she replied, although she didn't look very happy about it.

Tracey took over again:

*"He might become a hero
instead of being such a zero
when push comes to shove in the end.
Perhaps he'll rise to the occasion.
It might take some persuasion
But he might decide to fight for us, my friend."*

"Let's prow!" Tracey shouted.

The roadies jumped up onto the stage. They were now wearing furry ears and tails, and they began to dance. They pranced across the stage leaning forward and back, raising their arms and clawing the air.

Clayton and Melody looked at each other, laughed, and began to imitate them. The two of them looked ridiculous, dressed as Merfolk and pretending to be werewolves. Others quickly joined in, including Bentley Ballard and his friends, most of whom were dressed as Vikings.

Severus watched as a unicorn, a leopard, a Cornish pixie, and a Niffler started dancing in a circle. "Ah woool!" Horace cried as he fell in with them.

Lucius put a hand on Draco's shoulder. "Don't even think about it, son," he warned.

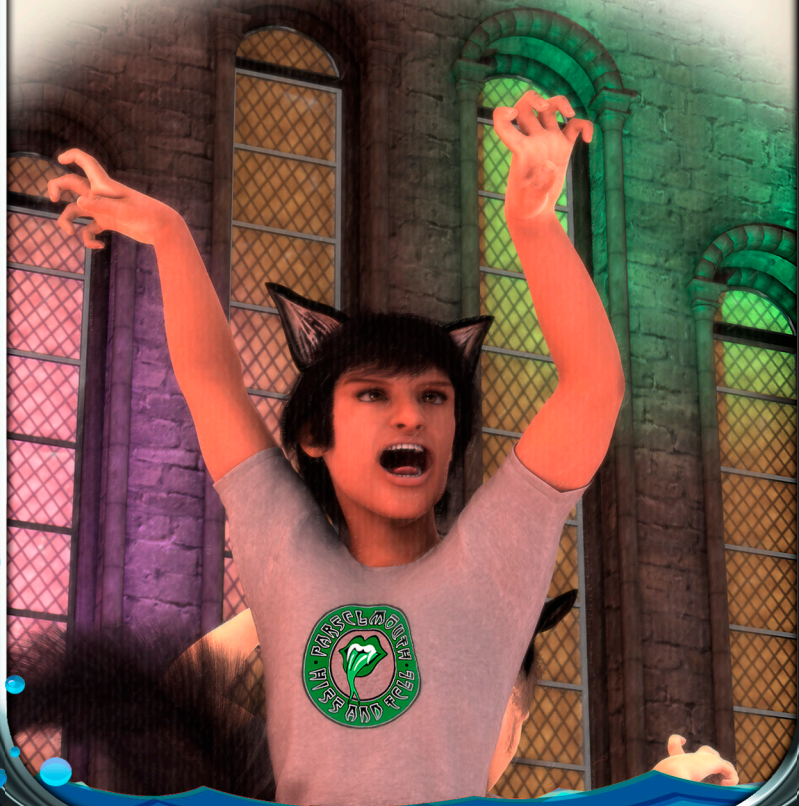
Draco gave Astoria a disappointed look. She nodded sadly. One must always remain mindful of one's dignity when in public, she knew.

The band played on and the dancing continued:

*"I saw a big black dog dancing with the wolf
And they were doing the Werewolf of Hogwarts."*



I saw a great big stag dancing with the wolf
And they were doing the Werewolf of Hogwarts.”
“Oh this is too much fun!” Rita said, laughing. “I must write a review
for ‘The Prophet!’”
Well, at least she doesn’t want to dance, Severus thought.



Happy New Year!



THE CROWD CHEERED, WHISTLED, AND SCREAMED

for more when *Parselmouth* finally ended the song, but there was no possibility of an encore. Minerva had been very clear about that.

“Thank you, Hogwarts!” Tracey called out. “Our time is up and we’ve got to go now, but if you want to meet with us, we’ll be out in the courtyard. We’ve got copies of several of our songs for sale, and some T-shirts, too.”

“Come on, Captain Hook, let’s go meet the band,” Rita said, taking hold of Severus’s arm again. “I need to get their names for my review. That song is fairly accurate, you know.”

“It is? There really was a werewolf here at this school?”

“Oh yes,” Rita told him. “I can’t imagine what Dumbledore thought to accomplish by hiding a werewolf here. The fellow’s name was Remus Lupin, and he was incredibly irresponsible. Lupin must have known that he was a danger to the public, but apparently he was glad to have his pals turn him loose to go for a romp. He managed to get through his student days without killing anyone, at least as far as we know, although a few people reportedly had some very close calls.”

Severus suppressed a shudder. He remembered his encounter with the werewolf all too well.

Rita paused to sip her champagne. “Years later, Dumbledore brought Lupin back as a professor,” she said. “But even then, when he was an adult, the man sometimes forgot to drink his potion. He forgot. Can you imagine that?”

“That Dumbledore fellow sounds like a madman,” Severus said. *And I trusted him with Lily’s life. And my life. How could I have been so stupid?*



"He certainly was," Rita continued, "but many people worshipped him. Many still do. I keep trying to enlighten them, but there are those who refuse to believe it. Some get quite hostile about it, in fact. You should see some of the Howlers I get!" She finished her drink. "I should give you a copy of my unauthorized biography of him, *The Life and Lies of Albus Dumbledore*. It explains everything. I'll autograph it for you."

Severus gave her a warm smile. "That would be very good of you. However, I must excuse myself for a few minutes. I need to locate my friends. I'm not sure where they disappeared to. It could jeopardize our mission."

"I'm sure they're fine," Rita said, holding tightly to his arm. "They're probably off fact-finding somewhere. Stick with me. I can give you lots of information. And I must tell you about the new book I'm currently working on. It's an unauthorized biography of the double-agent, Severus Snape. It will include a new look at Albus Dumbledore, among other things."

I've got to find a way to escape from her, Severus thought, but she started to pull him toward the courtyard. Resistance was futile.



"The Sssshippers of Sssshlytherin," Kat said, imitating Daffy Duck as they returned to the Great Hall. "And the D-d-d-dentures of Dumbledore!"

"Dentures?" Clark asked. "Really? I missed those."

"No, I made that up, but I bet Lord Whatzisname would have loved to make a Horcrux out of them!"

Clark gave him a look. "Are you ever going to grow up?" he asked.

"It looks like we missed the first band," Kat added, ignoring the captain. "Where's Slade?"



"Over there, on the other side of the Hall, with a lovely lady on his arm," Biscuit said, grinning.

Clark chuckled. "We mustn't disturb them then."

"Aye, matey," Kat laughed. "Let's find some more of that champagne."

Fawkes flew in after them and settled in the rafters. He had a distressing feeling that something bad was going to happen. Something evil. But he couldn't tell what, or who, the source was. His golden eyes scanned the room. He'd keep watching until he found it.



A matador watched Severus and Rita as they made their way through the crowd. "Are you prepared?" he asked the cowboy beside him. "You must strike at midnight, when everyone is distracted."

"Yes! Dumbledore must be avenged!" the cowboy replied woodenly. Despite the venom in his words, he seemed to be in some sort of trance. He stared blankly toward the crowd.

"Excellent!" the matador said. "You will go down in history as a great hero. Just go closer and wait for the fireworks to begin. The noise will provide cover for your attack."

"Yes," the cowboy muttered. "I must strike at midnight."



After the crowd had quieted down a bit, Minerva levitated the lectern back onto the stage and the Lawrence Lombard Quintet began setting up behind her. "Attention, everyone!" she announced, rapping her wand on the lectern. "We will now begin the countdown to midnight and the



start of the New Year!"

People cheered and soon bright silver numbers began to appear in the air: 60 seconds, 59, 58 ...

Severus and Rita entered the courtyard. "How nice," Rita said. "The Elves have cleared the snow out of here and cast a warming charm."

Forty-five, 44, 43 ...

Parselmouth came out and started shaking hands with the gathering fans, Draco and Astoria among them.

Thirty-seven, 36, 35 ...

The cowboy marched out and stood rigidly at the edge of the courtyard.

Twenty-four, 23, 22 ...

The matador stayed in the Great Hall and stationed himself near the main entrance where he had a clear view of everyone inside.

Ten, 9, 8 ...

Fawkes kept watching as his premonition grew stronger, but he still couldn't see anything unusual. Everyone seemed to be watching the numbers, waiting to toast the arrival of the new year.

Three, 2, 1! 1999!

Fireworks started popping, the Quintet launched into Auld Lang Syne, and everyone cheered. Almost everyone, that is.

No one noticed as the cowboy stepped forward, but as the man raised his wand, Severus's sixth sense kicked in and he whirled to face him.

"Death to the Dumbledore-hater!" the man screamed. "Avada...!"

Severus shoved Rita hard to the left as he dove to the right.

"Kedavra!"

The green flash passed between them as Severus hit the ground and





rolled. He came up in a crouch with his wand in his hand.

People were screaming and throwing themselves flat as the green flash burst against a wall. Somewhere in the background, Tracey Davis was swearing.

Severus cried "*Incarcerous!*" and the cowboy was wrapped tightly with magical ropes from his shoulders to his ankles. He tipped over and fell, dropping his wand.

How did he recognize me? Severus wondered. He ran to the attacker and bent over him. "Evil lying witch!" the man managed to croak.

Severus didn't think he'd ever been called a witch before, but then he realized that he wasn't the target. The target had been Rita.



Inside the Great Hall, Fawkes recognized the flash and crack of the Killing Curse. *My wizard!* He leapt off the rafter and swooped toward the courtyard as people below him screamed and ran for cover.

The pharaoh ripped off his mask and pulled out his wand. It was Kingsley Shacklebolt, the Minister for Magic. "Aurors! To me!" he shouted.

There he is at last! the matador realized. His wand appeared in his hand, he pointed it at Kingsley, and he screamed "*Avada Kedavra!*"

A suit of armor threw itself in front of the curse and exploded as Kingsley threw himself flat on the floor.

Several of the Aurors cast Petrificus Totalus at the assassin, but their spells bounced off his shield charm as the man turned and fled out the main entrance. Kingsley jumped to his feet and gave chase, followed by the Aurors, including Ron, and Harry, as well as Bill and Fleur, all still in their costumes. Several suits of armor clanked after them.



"Get him!" Ginny yelled and ran to join them.

"Ginny! No!" Molly shouted and ran after her.

Fawkes sailed into the courtyard and saw that the cowboy had been captured. Then he heard the second curse. *I've been fooled!* he realized. *It was a diversion!* He went into a tight turn, flew back to into the Hall, and followed the Aurors out the main entrance.

The crew looked up from behind an overturned table. "Come on!" Clark said. "We've gotta find Slade!"



"Ms Skeeter! Are you all right?" Severus asked as he helped her to her feet.

"Yes, I... I think so," she said. She was shaking and was probably in shock.

"Stay down until it's safe, Astoria!" Draco shouted as he ran to Severus. "That was a smooth move, sir," he said admiringly.

"No, it wasn't, Severus told him. "I almost tripped over the stupid cutlass." He'd practiced quite a few moves, both defensive and offensive, until he could do them in his teaching robes as well as his Death Eater robes, but he'd never expected to be doing them while wearing a sword.

"Draco, please ask Lucius to tell the Aurors that I've taken the lady home. She's had quite a scare and she needs to rest. She can give them a statement tomorrow, if it's necessary."

"Yes, sir!" Draco said, and he ran off to find his father. He passed Captain Clark and the crew running the other way.

"Are you okay, Slade? What happened out here?" Clark whispered as he arrived beside Severus. "Someone just cast a Killing Curse back there in the Hall. Our bird-friend and a bunch of Aurors took off after him."



"This chap cast a Killing Curse at us here," Severus told him in a hushed voice, pointing to the prisoner. "I'm going to see the lady home. I need to get out of here before the Aurors decide to question me. I want you all to go back to the boat where it's safe. I'll join you when I can."

"Sure thing," the captain said quietly. *But not until we find out what's going on here. Slade is right, this school can be a dangerous place. Stuff like this never happened to us at Bayou!*



After Midnight



POPPY POMFREY CAME RUNNING FROM THE infirmary with her medical kit in one hand and her wand in the other. "What's going on here? Is anyone hurt?" she asked. "I wasn't expecting anything worse than drunkenness and a few minor fist-fights tonight."

"Someone tried to kill Kingsley, but they missed," the Headmistress explained. "Everyone seems to be all right here, but you'd better take a look around. I don't know what happened out in the courtyard."

"I'm so glad we charmed those suits of armor to act as guardians as well as waiters," Pomona said. "Do you think we should try to send everyone home?"

Minerva surveyed the scene. The Elves were already starting to set the tables back up and clean up the spilled champagne and canapés. Some of them were casting *Reparo* on broken plates and champagne flutes.

"I think it's safe here now that the assassin has fled," the Headmistress said, "and I don't think anyone would listen to us at this point anyway." She turned to Lawrence Lombard, who was crouching beside the stage, clutching his accordion. "Do you think your group could play something soothing for us? It might help a bit," she asked him.

"I'm not sure where the violinist went, but we could try," Lombard said, getting to his feet.

Bentley Ballard was getting to his feet, too. He'd found himself hiding under a table with Clayton Urquhart and Melody Nowak. "You guys okay?" he asked them.

"I think so," Clayton said. "I tore my tail, though. I thought this sort of thing wasn't supposed to happen anymore."

"Yeah, we were all supposed to live happily ever after," Theodore Nott complained as he crawled out from behind an ice sculpture.



"Good luck with that," Melody said.



The Quintet was playing a waltz but no one was dancing when the Aurors started to straggle back into the Hall. They were still in their costumes but very disheveled. Captain Clark cast the Notice-Me-Not charm on himself and wandered over to listen to them.

"Do you have any idea what this was all about, sir?" Harry was asking Auror Morris.

"Not really," the officer said. "That man was apparently trying to assassinate Minister Shacklebolt. He had a shield charm that was stronger than anything I've ever seen. We're lucky that the force of our attacks was strong enough to push him over the cliff."

When he had looked over the edge Harry had expected to see the man dead on the icy rocks below, but the fellow had been getting up. His shield charm had protected him. He tried to Accio his broom but the Aurors destroyed it with Incendio. He was trying to conjure another broom when Fawkes arrived and started to attack him.

"That cockatrice-thing was ferocious!" Ron said. "He kept trying to tear at the guy, but he couldn't get through the shield any better than we could."

It has been quite a sight. Fawkes had screeched and clawed at the man, but to no effect. In his frustration, Fawkes had even tried smacking the man with his costume's spiked tail.

When the assassin started firing Killing Curses at them, the senior Auror, Inspector Waverly, had been forced to cast the lethal curse back at him. The curse struck the man in the chest, but even then he had man-



aged to walk a few steps before he fell dead.

"I've never seen anything like it," Morris said. "But did you see those red daggers tattooed on his chest? He must have been one of the Nameless."

"The Nameless?" Harry asked.

"They're a band of assassins. I've never heard of them striking in the British Isles before, but they're greatly feared on the continent. Their symbol is a crimson dagger, and each tattooed dagger represents a person they've killed."

Only a small part of the man's chest had been exposed where his costume was ripped, but Harry had seen two red daggers on it.



PARSELMOUTH and their fans were guarding the bound cowboy under the watchful eyes of Lucius Malfoy when Auror Morris finally got to the courtyard. Kat and Biscuit were loitering nearby to eavesdrop.

"What happened out here?" Morris asked.

"This cowboy guy attacked a couple with the Killing Curse," Tracey said. "His victims ducked, the curse missed, and then the man hit him with a binding spell. He seems to be in some kind of trance."

"The lady was Rita Skeeter, the reporter," Lucius told him. "I'm not sure who the fellow with her was. Skeeter was badly shaken and he took her home. She said she'll give you a statement in the morning."

"Well, if it's Rita Skeeter, I'm sure she'll file her story first," Morris mused. He knelt down to examine the captive. The fellow was mumbling incoherently.

"I think he's under the Imperius Curse," Morris announced. "We'll take him in and charge him. Maybe we can get to the bottom of all this when we question him."



He got up and turned to Lucius. "It's probably not the first time someone has wanted to kill Skeeter," he said, "but I don't think anybody's actually tried to do it before."

"Well, he totally killed our T-shirt sales," Tracey complained.



Bill and Fleur Weasley found Ginny sitting on a bench at the back of the Hall. She looked extremely unhappy. "Are you okay, Sis?" Bill asked.

"Yes. Sort of, I guess. Mum just finished hollering at me for going after you guys. She still treats me a baby sometimes. Everyone does."

Bill took off his owl mask and sat down next to her. "No, you're a hero, Ginny. You fought in the war with the rest of us."

"Well, I don't feel like a hero. Ever since I got imprisoned in the Chamber of Secrets I've felt like I'm just a stupid little girl who got fooled by Tom Riddle. You can't imagine what it was like. I was so helpless and alone. And afterward I felt like everyone was laughing at me. Ever since then I've been trying to prove myself, but it's just not working."

"Everyone knows how brave you are, Ginny, but maybe you're trying too hard. And if you're going to go charging into danger, maybe you should get some training with the Aurors," Bill suggested. "Most of the defense training you got at Hogwarts was a joke."

"I can't. I'm not eligible for the Aurors because I didn't finish school. They made an exception for Ron and Harry, but they're not going to make one for me." She sighed. "Do you know why I wanted to quit school? I told Mum it was because I wanted to marry Harry and start a family, and that's why she went along with it. But the real reason is that I can't go



back into that hallway where Fred died. I can't face it. I'm okay here in the Great Hall, but I can't go *there*. And I would have to. Sometimes every day. And I couldn't be in Gryffindor, either. I'd have to be in one of those stupid made-up Houses, and there'd be Slytherins there, too."

"Do you want to get married so soon, then?" Bill asked her. "I could talk to Harry and Mum for you."

"Yes... no... maybe... I don't know. I don't know what I want any more." She started to cry.

Fleur conjured a handkerchief for her. "I felt really awful for a long time after zee Tri-Weezard Tournament, you know," she said. "I did pretty well on zee first task, but after zat theengs sort of fell apart for me. I felt like I was an embarrassment to my school, an embarrassment to girls everywhere. It took me quite a while to get over eet."

Ginny blew her nose. "Yes, I remember." *Everyone was laughing at her accent and calling her 'Phlegm', especially me. That was just plain mean.*

"Look, Sis, why don't you come stay with us for a few weeks," Bill said. "Have a change of scenery and get out from under Mum's thumb for a bit. We'd love to have you, wouldn't we, Fleur?"

Fleur nodded happily.

"You could hit the books and get ready to sit the exams," Bill added. "We could tutor you and help you with the practical stuff."

Ginny wiped her eyes and thought for a moment, and then she said, "Yes, I think I'd like that a lot." Then she hugged Bill, burying her face in his feathered costume.





Mavis was asleep on her perch in the captain's quarters when Fawkes got back to the boat. He shoved the door open to let the light in and crowed loudly to wake her up.

"Has my wizard come back?" he asked. "Have any of them?"

Mavis blinked her big yellow eyes. "I don't think so," she said sleepily. "What happened?"

Fawkes told her about the two attacks. "I wasn't fooled by the diversion, of course. When I saw that Severus had subdued his attacker, I turned back and went after the other one. I had no problem catching up with him, but he managed to shield himself against me somehow. When I slammed into his shield, I bounced off! It hurt! Then I tried to fight my way through it, but I couldn't get to him. Finally someone cast the Killing Curse on him. Nothing can stop the Killing Curse."

"It sounds dreadful!" Mavis said.

"I have no idea where Severus went. The others are still hanging around at the castle. I think they're trying to figure out what it was all about."

Mavis nodded. "I'm sure your wizard will come back soon. He's rather good at taking care of himself. Why don't you try to get some sleep. It's the middle of the night and you're not an owl, you know."

"No," the phoenix said, "I'm going to wait up for them. They're only humans, after all."

Fawkes shook off his costume's tail and flew to the dining area. He settled on the back of a chair to wait for his friends, but after a few minutes he had fallen asleep.



Severus got back before dawn and found the crew sitting around a table, drinking coffee and waiting for him. They were still in their costumes and Fawkes was asleep on a chair near the door. Severus took off his mask and joined them.

"Is the lady all right?" Captain Clark asked.

"Rita was badly shaken. She didn't want to be alone, so I stayed with her. She knows that a lot of people hate her for her exposés, but she never expected anyone to attack her physically, let alone try to murder her. She swore she wouldn't let it stop her, though. Eventually she fell asleep with her head on my shoulder, and after a while I managed to slip away without waking her."

"I hope you didn't take off your mask," Clark remarked.

"Of course not! I left her a note of apology, explaining that I was sorry to leave but I had to avoid the Aurors so as not to jeopardize our 'secret mission'. I signed it 'Captain Hook'."

"Well, from what we heard when we were leaving," Clark said, carefully omitting the fact that they'd stuck around after Severus had told them to go back to the boat, "one of the Nameless assassins was there to kill the Minister for Magic. He Imperiused some poor jerk and sent him to attack Skeeter, hoping that it would cause the Minister to reveal himself."

"And it worked, too," Biscuit said, "although nobody actually got killed, except for the assassin."

"They got him, then?" Severus asked.

"Yes, but they don't know who sent him. Some of them suspect the Dolohov family," Clark said.

Severus nodded. "That's a good guess. The Dolohovs are very influential on the continent. I'm sure they're not happy that Anton is in Azkaban, and they



could easily afford to hire an assassin. Killing the Minister wouldn't free Anton, but it would avenge what they would see as an insult to the family honor."

"I can't wait to see the next issue of *The Prophet*," Biscuit interjected. "I bet Skeeter's column is going to be a real zinger!"

"Well, I've got the birdbath," Clark said, pulling it out of his pocket. He had shrunk it to the size of a mushroom. "You guys are going to have to get the dye off our 'cockatrice' friend when he wakes up." He placed it on the floor and enlarged it to its original size.

"Aye, aye, sir!" Kat said, saluting.

"And now that we're all back," Clark said, "let's sail out of here before the Aurors decide that 'Captain Hook' is wanted for questioning. I'd hate to have to explain that to Mr Flushwell at Knight Lines."

Severus couldn't have agreed more.



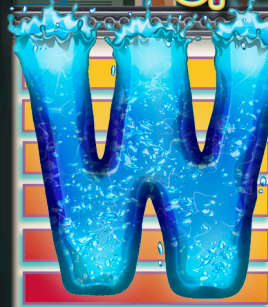
Severus was asleep in his cabin when the boat entered the North Sea and turned southward. He dreamed he was standing on the stairs in Hogwarts. Several students were cowering on the landing behind him and the Carrows were marching up the stairs toward him, side by side. They were gnashing their teeth and pointing their wands at him. They were obviously furious about something, although he wasn't sure exactly what.

Suddenly the Carrows stepped on one of the vanishing stairs and it disappeared beneath their feet. Severus watched as the pair fell through in slow motion. Their eyes and mouths were wide open in surprise. The students laughed and cheered.

Severus smiled in his sleep.



New Year's Day



WHEN SEVERUS AWOKED THE NEXT MORN-

ing and looked in the mirror, he wondered if he should dye his 'chestnut brown' hair back to black, or just let it grow out. The moustache definitely had to go, however. He cast the shaving spell and vanished his facial hair. Then he

cast the tooth-cleaning spell.

He was in an unusually good mood. The masquerade was over and he had managed to attend without being recognized. Or killed. And although it had been quite disconcerting to discover that the castle had been sending him pleasant dreams, he realized that it was rather nice to be appreciated, even if it was by an old, marginally sentient pile of rocks.

It had been good to see Bingle again, too. The Elves had been invaluable to him when he was Headmaster. The little fellows could be counted on to keep his secret. He must write to them and thank them.

Seeing the Hufflepuff ghost had been an unwanted surprise, but he had to admit that the annoying spirit had been trying to help him, in its strange, bumbling way. The castle, the Elves, and a ghost. It wasn't much of a fan club, but it was better than nothing. Not that he needed to be appreciated. Of course he didn't. But it did feel rather good.

The song about Lupin had been a delightful treat! That man had been such an irresponsible coward. Even young Longbottom had the courage to stand up to his friends when he knew they were wrong, but Lupin? He couldn't even be counted on to drink his potion. *Parselmouth's* song had painted an excellent portrait of that useless fool. He was almost sorry that the wolf-man wasn't around to hear it. Almost.



And then there was that business with Rita Skeeter. He smiled to himself. He had managed to escape her clutches, and he'd saved her life, too, all without being recognized. He wondered if 'Captain Hook' was wanted for questioning. Well, let the Aurors search. They wouldn't find him.

He went to get some breakfast and found Seabiscuit wearing a Parselmouth T-shirt. It had their logo in the center: a pair of big green lips, a long green forked tongue, and a pair of white fangs, surrounded by the band's name and the slogan "Hiss and Tell".

"Nice, isn't it?" the cook said. "We missed their performance but they sold us a recording and some T-shirts. We got one for you, too."

"Their singer gave me this," Kat said happily, holding up a signed photo of the band. They were standing in the Forbidden Forest, holding their instruments and looking terribly serious. "She's kind of pretty. We should go see them perform some time."

Severus snorted. He'd never thought of Tracey Davis as 'kind of pretty'. One oughtn't think about one's students that way. That was a slippery slope that could lead to trouble. She was no longer a student, of course, but still, she was very young and it was inappropriate. Instead, he thought of her as smart, talented, determined, and stubborn. He had encouraged her interest in music. It had kept her and her band mates too busy to take an interest in the Dark Lord and his minions.

Severus looked out a porthole and saw that the boat was currently submerged. "Where are we going?" he asked.

"We just picked up a few people in Amsterdam," Kat told him, "and someone's calling in St. Petersburg. We're going to swing close to the UK on our way so we can get our mail. I can't wait to see what *The Prophet*



and *The Quibbler* have to say about the masquerade!"

Severus didn't really share the mate's enthusiasm for that, but as he set off to make his security checks he found himself humming 'Werewolf of Hogwarts'.



When Jeremy Lesser awoke he found himself alone in a holding cell at the Aurors' headquarters. He had a terrible headache, he was dressed as a cowboy, and he couldn't remember how he got that way. *I must have really tied one on last night, he thought. Maybe I ought to quit drinking. That fire-whiskey is gonna be the death of me!*

After a while Inspector Waverly came in. Kingsley Shacklebolt was with him. Waverly handed Jeremy a mug of strong tea. "What's your name, sir?" the Auror asked him.

"It's Jeremy Lesser," the man replied. "Look, I'm sorry about last night. Really, I am. I won't do it again, I promise. I'm going to quit."

The inspector gave him a funny look. "Um, let's back up for a minute," he said. "Do you *know* what you did last night?"

Jeremy took a big gulp of the tea. "I got stinking drunk, I guess. I don't remember, really."

"You don't remember that you tried to murder someone?" Kingsley asked.

"Murder? What do you mean? I wouldn't murder anyone. I just got drunk, that's all. I'm sorry." He took another gulp of tea. The fog was beginning to lift from his brain.

"You tried to murder Rita Skeeter at the masquerade ball last night," Waverly told him.



Jeremy almost laughed. "Rita Skeeter? You're kidding, right?" The Inspector and Kingsley just stood there frowning at him.

"Look, this has got to be some kind of mistake. I admit I hate that lying witch. She has no right to spread those filthy lies about Professor Dumbledore. He was the greatest wizard of our time! I've sent her a few Howlers, and she deserved them, but I'd never attack her. I'd never attack anyone. It can't be true."

"There were more than a dozen witnesses," Waverly said firmly.

Slowly it began to dawn on Jeremy that he might be in serious trouble. "Oh no. No! I didn't ... I couldn't ..."

"We want to question you under Veritaserum," Waverly continued, "and we want to use Legilimency to examine your memories. We want you to give us permission to do that."

"Sure, sure. Whatever you want," Jeremy eagerly agreed. "You'll see that I didn't do it. I could never do something like that."

"I'll get the paperwork for you to sign," Waverly said as he and Kingsley left the cell.

"It wasn't too long ago that we wouldn't have bothered to get his permission, let alone do any paperwork," Waverly said as they walked back to his office.

"True, but the war is over and I've rescinded the Emergency Decrees. We have to go back to doing things properly now. So don't forget to do the paperwork for using the Killing Curse on that assassin. There will have to be an inquiry. Which reminds me, I have to have a talk with young Mr Potter."



Rita Skeeter had awakened before dawn. She was deeply disappointed to see that 'Captain Hook' was gone but when she read his note, she understood. He mustn't endanger his mission. He was a dedicated professional, and she admired him all the more for it.

She hoped she would see him again some day. She sighed. He had such beautiful blue eyes!

Thank Merlin he'd been there when the cowboy attacked! He had saved her life and captured the man before she even realized what was happening. She shuddered when she remembered how the cowboy had tried to kill her, just because she'd exposed the truth about Albus Dumbledore. What was it about that old phony that attracted such fierce devotion?

Well, she wasn't going to let it stop her. She tossed a few treats to the DAILY PROPHET's owl that eyed her suspiciously from its cage, and she took up her quill:

Assassins Strike at the Masquerade Ball! by Rita Skeeter. Yes, gentle readers, your correspondent was on the scene when the murderous attacks occurred, and narrowly escaped death when ...

If she hurried, she could make the morning edition.



It was early afternoon before Clayton Urquhart woke up, and he was a little bit late to the secret meeting of the House representatives.

"Glad you could join us, Slytherin," Bentley Ballard, the Gryffindor rep, said sarcastically. "Zinnia was just explaining that the Ravenclaws think that your man Snape isn't dead, weren't you, Zinnia?"

Anthony Goldstein's younger sister Zinnia was the Ravenclaw rep.



"That's right," she said, smiling. "We've given it a great deal of thought. The evidence is all circumstantial, but after careful consideration, we think that Headmaster Snape must have survived the attack in the shack. If he died, he must have done it later, somewhere else. He many well still be alive."

"That's good news," Melody Nowak, the Hufflepuff rep, said, "but it's not really relevant to our problem here. We need to get the administration to restore our Houses. The new House system is a joke. Furthermore," she added, "we've heard a rumor that the real problem is the Sorting Hat. It's reportedly been damaged too badly to do the sorting, and the professors haven't been able to find a way to fix it. If that's true, they can just blame the whole thing on the Hat."

"Where did you hear that?" Bentley asked.

"Well, I heard it from Willy Jenkins, who heard it from the Fat Friar, who said he heard it from one of the portraits. That's not very a reliable source, I know, but it could be true."

"I think it's a pretty good source, actually," Clayton said, smiling at her. "The portraits can listen to pretty much everything, and I've heard that the Friar can be quite talkative. The ghosts can't too happy about the House thing, so the Friar is bound to be on our side."

"Nearly Headless Nick has been in a tizzy ever since our House was abolished," Bentley told them.

"And we haven't seen the Grey Lady since before the battle," Zinnia added.

"Likewise for the Bloody Baron," Clayton said, "so it's up to you Puffs to keep the Friar talking. You never know what we might find out."

"Keep him talking?" Melody gave him a look. "It's usually hard to get him to shut up!"



"Anyway, if it's true about the Hat, we'll have to make them find a way to fix it," Clayton declared.

"Do you really want kids to be sorted into Slytherin, Urquhart?" Bentley interjected. "Think about it. It's a stink that will follow them for the rest of their lives. No one will ever trust them if they're sorted into Slytherin. They'd be better off under the new system, even though it's totally stupid."

"It's so kind of you to be concerned for us," Clayton sneered. "But don't worry, we're going to find ways to restore Slytherin's reputation. We know there were a lot of Slytherins who went over to the Dark Lord, but plenty of people from the other Houses did that, too. Or have you forgotten about Peter Pettigrew? He wasn't the only one from your House, either. But when Minerva kicked out all the Slytherins, the innocent and guilty together, that's what really destroyed our reputation. We have to restore our good name. But leave that to us; it's not your problem."

Bentley snorted. "It certainly isn't."

"Let's get back on topic here," Melody said impatiently. "We have to set up a meeting with Minerva. We have to try to make her see reason."

"It won't work," Zinnia sighed, "but I guess we have to try."



Poppy Pomfrey was fixing herself a cup of tea when Bingle came in carrying the Sorting Hat. She had had an unexpectedly busy night. *I hope they won't want to have another masquerade again next year!* she thought. She had tended to a fair number of scratches, cuts and bruises, and she had handed out a lot of chocolate to people who were shaken by the assassination attempts, but no one had been badly harmed except for



the now-deceased assassin. Even the cowboy that had attacked Rita Skeeter hadn't been seriously harmed.

"The Hat says to come to you," the House-Elf said, holding the Hat out to her. The abuse that it had suffered during the Dark Lord's attack was obvious. In addition to being as dusty and battered as ever, it was badly singed, its peak was gone, and there were several new holes in its brim.

"You want me to fix the Hat?" the nurse asked. "I'm afraid I only know how to fix people, not magical objects."

"No, no. The Hat wants to *talk* to you. You got to put it on," the little fellow said.

Poppy gave the Elf a puzzled look, took the Hat from him, and put it on her head.

She stood quietly for a few minutes and then she said, "Really, Mr Hat? I don't know." And after another pause she said, "I see. Well, I'm not sure, but I'll try." A few moments later she sighed. "Yes, yes, I understand. I'll do my best."



It was midmorning before Minerva noticed the empty glass on the corner of her desk. She picked it up and sniffed it. Whiskey! She went to one of her cabinets and took out her bottle of Glen Mystic. The level appeared to be a bit lower than she remembered, and she called for Bingle.

The Elf arrived almost immediately and when he saw the glass, his expression turned to one of horror. "Oh, Bingle is so sorry, Headmistress Professor McGonagall! Bingle forgot to clean it and put it away!"

The little Elf started slapping himself on the head with both hands, but



Minerva quickly intervened to stop him. "It's not a problem, Bingle" she assured him. "It's just that I hadn't realized that I had a visitor."

The Headmistress paused for a moment. She had to be careful how she phrased her question. If she upset the Elf, he might decide to punish himself again instead of answering her. Finally she said, "I'm sorry I missed them. I'd like to apologize to them, but I don't know who it was."

Bingle held his index finger up to his lips. "Former Headmaster Professor Snape said I mustn't tell anyone." Then he winked at her and added, "It's a *secret*!"

"Oh!" Minerva said, and then she quickly adopted the role of a co-conspirator. "That's right! We must keep it a secret, just the two of us. You can return to your duties now. I'll take care of the glass."

Of course Bingle wouldn't allow that, and Minerva had to wait while he cast a cleaning spell and put the glass away before he left.

When she was alone, Minerva brought out the Pensieve and started looking through her memories of the masquerade. She saw a druid, a unicorn, some Vikings, and a tiger. No, he couldn't have been any of them. A niffler, a ladybug, a honeybee? She laughed at the thought. Then she noticed the pirate walking quietly across the back of the hall. Why hadn't she noticed him before? She took a closer look. Captain Hook? He had blue eyes and brown hair, but that didn't mean anything. He was the right height, and he moved like Professor Snape. *That's got to be him!* she realized.

She thought for a moment and then looked up at his portrait. "You rascal!" she said. "I wonder what brought you here?"





Kat jumped back as Fawkes crowed and flapped his wings in the birdbath, sending water and blue-green dye flying in all directions. Biscuit pointed his wand at the bath and refilled it with more warm water. Both the cook and the mate were soaked, and the passengers, who were watching from a safe distance, were enjoying the show. One of them brought out a camera to record the fun.

"Whose idea was it to dye him blue, anyway?" Kat complained as he dried his face. "In fact, whose idea was it to take him to the ball?"

"I think it was yours," Biscuit told him.

"No way!" the mate said.

Fawkes continued to splash happily. They should do this more often. Showering with his friends was so much *fun*!



Minerva's Headaches



OUR BOAT FUND IS GROWING QUITE NICELY,"

Severus reported as he handed out copies of their financial report. "We don't have enough to buy a boat yet, of course, but we're making good progress. Our trade in potion ingredients has been very profitable. The potions that I brewed over Christmas should sell quite well, too."

Fawkes squawked from his perch.

"Yes Fawkes," Biscuit laughed, "the sale of your phoenix droppings has been a big part of it. We couldn't do it without your doo-doo." He winked at the bird.

Captain Clark smiled. "I suppose that, in a way, we really do owe it all to him. He saved Slade and brought us together."

"When we get our own boat, I think we should name it *The Ocean Phoenix*," Kat said.

Fawkes whistled happily.

Severus sighed. *Now we're being supervised by a bird*, he thought. *Well, better Fawkes than Albus Dumbledore.*



"It's pretty much what we expected," Inspector Waverly said. "That guy Jeremy Lesser was drinking in the Leaky Cauldron a few nights ago. He was on his third or forth drink and he was babbling on about how awful he thinks Rita Skeeter is, which is apparently something he does quite often. Most of the folks in the Cauldron avoid him when he gets like that, but this time a stranger joined him and bought him a drink. There must have been some kind of potion in that drink because pretty soon



his memories become disjointed and then they fade out. We couldn't get anything more from him with Veritaserum or Legilimency. He must have been Imperiused, and Obliviated, too. It was much more effective than anything I've seen before. Usually the victims remember a few things afterward, but not this time. In any case, there's no point in keeping him."

"Before you let him go, be sure to give him a good talking to and warn him about his drinking," Minister Shacklebolt told him. "Accepting drinks from friendly strangers can be very dangerous."

Waverly nodded. "I think he's figured that out now."



"It's about the masquerade, isn't it?" Minerva said when the student representatives came to see her. "We're really sorry about the violence. We had no idea that anything like that could happen. You needn't worry, though. We will *not* be having any masquerades again in the future, I can assure you."

"Actually, I thought the masquerade was a lot of fun," Melody mused. "Except for the assassination attempts, I mean."

"No, it's something else," Bentley said.

"That's right," Zinnia added. "We want to talk to you about restoring the Houses."

Minerva crossed her arms and gave them a stern look. "We've been through that before. We will not be returning to the 'old ways'. It's out of the question. And you must stop identifying with your old Houses and getting together like this. It's not permitted!"

"But we're all getting along really well now," Clayton said, smiling. "We've put all of that, uh, nastiness, behind us. So it's okay to restore



the Houses now."

Minerva smiled. "Yes, you've all been very good, I'm happy to say. Obviously, the new plan works and the new Houses are effective."

The students tried very hard not to show it, but they were all quite put off by that last remark. Clayton looked at the floor and gritted his teeth.

Minerva must have noticed their discomfort because she quickly moved on. "The heart of the problem, if you must know, is the Sorting Hat. It was damaged beyond repair during the battle and it can no longer sort, so there is really nothing that can be done."

Bentley crossed his arms and frowned. "You have to find a way to fix it," he said firmly.

The Headmistress frowned back at him. "We've tried everything we could think of. All of us have, and nothing has worked. You have to understand. There is nothing that can be done."

"You have to try harder!" Zinnia retorted. "If you don't fix it, we're going to have a sit-in. All of us. Everyone. We're all going to sit down in the Great Hall and not budge until sorting can be resumed and the Houses are restored."

As they turned and marched out, Minerva felt a headache coming on.



"You wanted to see me, Minister Shacklebolt?" Harry asked when Percy showed him into the Minister's Office.

"Yes indeed," Kingsley said. "It's about your use of Unforgivable Curses."

Harry looked puzzled.

"Specifically," the Minister continued, "it's about your use of the Cruciatus curse on Amicus Carrow."



"Oh, that. Well, he deserved it. He's a filthy stinking Death Eater and he spat on Professor McGonagall. He *spat* on her! She said I was gallant!"

"It was certainly *not* gallant. Mr Carrow is a deplorable person, it was a disgusting act, and he's going to spend many, many years in Azkaban where he belongs. But using the *Torture* curse? I could understand it if you'd hit him with a stinging hex, or even a swift kick in the pants, but the Cruciatus is way, way out of line. There is *never* an excuse for using that curse. It is truly unforgivable.

"Ordinarily that act would disqualify you from becoming an Auror, but we decided to make an exception for you because of everything that you did in the war. However, it's on your record and I'll be keeping an eye on you. If you ever use that curse again, or the Imperius Curse, you will find yourself in Azkaban, just like Mr Carrow. Do I make myself clear?"

Harry looked stricken. "Yes, Minister. I understand. I'll never do it again."

"I trust that you are also clear on the circumstances under which an Auror is permitted to use the Killing Curse?"

"Yes, sir. Only as a last resort, to protect oneself or others, like Inspector Waverly did at the masquerade."

"Exactly. And don't forget it. Stick to your famous Expelliarmus spell. And remember, I'll be watching you."

"Yes, sir," Harry said, and he hurried out the door.



"I'm glad you're here, Poppy," Minerva said. "I'm at my wit's end and I have no idea what to do. I need someone to talk to. And do you happen to have anything for a headache?"



"I'm worried about you," the nurse said, handing her two tablets from her medical kit. "You're trying to do way too much and it's going to destroy your health. In addition to the responsibilities of being Headmistress, you're still teaching Transfiguration. And you're not getting any younger, you know. It's too much."

Minerva sighed. "Well, I suppose I could drop Transfiguration, if you think that would help. I'll have to find someone to take it on, though. It will have to be someone highly qualified."

Poppy hesitated for a moment while she gathered her courage, and then she plunged in. "I was thinking of the other way around, actually - keep Transfiguration and step down as Headmistress."

Minerva just stared at her. After a long uncomfortable silence, she finally said, "That's just not possible. There's no one else who could take on the Head position. I have to carry on." *And besides, it might look like I was admitting defeat*, she suddenly realized.

"Filius and Pomona are both quite capable," Poppy told her, "and I'm sure either of them could grow into the position. You'll be here to help them. You became Headmistress during the emergency, and you pulled the school through the battle and the rebuilding. You've done the hard part, and now you can pass the job to someone else. Look at the advantages: you could devote yourself to teaching, which you've always loved, and you could take the summers off to relax or travel."

"I can't believe that you're telling me to quit," the Headmistress said bitterly. "I thought you were my friend."

Poppy looked hurt. "I *am* your friend, and that's why I'm telling you this. You can't keep going like this indefinitely. It's too much."



Minerva glared at her. "Did the *students* put you up to this?" she asked. "Or was it that idiotic ghost? That meddling spirit won't leave me alone!"

"They most certainly did not!" The nurse replied. "No one did." Admittedly, the Sorting Hat had played a role, prodding her to speak to the Headmistress, but she had been worried about Minerva for a while now.

"You should get back to your work, Poppy. I have enough problems without you telling me to resign!" Minerva said coldly.

Poppy sighed. "As you wish, Headmistress."

As she walked slowly down the stairs past the gargoyle, Poppy wondered, *What ghost? And the students? It's worse than I thought. She's getting paranoid.*



The Malfoys were gathered in their dining room, relaxing after a lovely meal. Soon the Elves would bring dessert.

"Severus suggested that we have someone do a series of interviews with Slytherins about what they did in the war as part of our campaign to restore our House's reputation," Lucius announced. "I'm sure I could persuade *The Prophet* to publish it, but I'm not sure who should write it. Rita is too busy with other stories and, sadly, some people tend not to believe her."

"Rita has always told the facts truthfully, even if she does tend to put a bit of a 'spin' on things sometimes," Narcissa said as she set her empty wine glass on the table.

"Sometimes?" Draco laughed. "I suppose we could write it ourselves, but a lot of people wouldn't believe us, either," he said. "Maybe I could ghost-write it and we could get Sluggie to pretend that it was his. Or Millicent Bulstrode could do it, or Marigold Montague, but she's out of the country now."



"Maybe we should get someone who isn't a Slytherin, to give it an aura of neutrality," Narcissa suggested.

"No Gryffindors!" Draco said, grimacing as a vision of Ron Weasley interviewing Theodore Nott flashed through his mind. *How about a Ravenclaw?* he wondered. *There's Luna Lovegood — Gad! What a thought! She'd probably have them riding Snorkacks into battle! Perhaps a Hufflepuff?*

"There's a Hufflepuff girl who's been going out with Clayton Urquhart; her name is Melody something-or-other. She's been helping with the effort to get the Houses restored. I'll talk to Clayton about her."



"Ack! Get off me!" Minerva shouted when the Sorting Hat jumped off its shelf and landed on her head. She grabbed its brim and tried to pull it off, but the Hat hung on.

She could hear its voice in her mind. *We've gotta talk!* it said. The voice was strained and harsh, as though the effort was painful.

"What do you want?" the Headmistress asked. "We don't know how to fix you!"

Then the Hat began to sing:

*"The Houses must all come together, I said,
But instead you drove them apart.
I know this will hurt your feelings,
But I'm afraid that wasn't too smart."*

There was a choking sound followed by some coughing as the Hat's voice failed for a few moments.

"Now you listen, Mr Hat ..." Minerva started to say, but the Hat inter-



rupted her. She could hear its voice straining in her head.

"No, Minerva McGonagall, you listen:

I know that you're not going to like it,

But really, that's just tough.

You're going to have to step down now,

Because words alone aren't enough."

The Hat started coughing and choking again.

"I meant well," Minerva said. She wrung her hands anxiously. "Really, I did. When that horrible Parkinson girl wanted us to capture Harry Potter, I just snapped. I expelled all the Slytherins then because I was sure they would turn against me. I was under so much pressure."

"I know," coughed the Hat, abandoning its attempt to sing, *"but that's irrelevant now. It was wrong to paint all the Slytherins as traitors, the innocent and the guilty alike. You've got to prove that you're sorry. Hogwarts cannot heal until you do."* It fluttered its brim and then it added, *"Your words need deeds to back them up."*

If Minerva had been wearing pearls, she would have clutched them.

"When I sort, it's not to condemn anyone," the Hat continued. *"It's a rough guideline; nothing more. An attempt to group the students with others that they will get along with. Children change as they grow. No one's future is set at age 11. You must give them a chance. You must guide them and help them make good choices. All of them, not just the ones that you happen to like."*

As the Hat plunged into another coughing fit, Minerva thought about Severus. Could he have been helped and prevented from turning to the Dark Lord? They had never tried, of course. She hadn't liked young Severus or any of the Slytherins, and had paid as little attention to them



as possible. For that matter, could young Tom Riddle himself have been helped? She didn't think so, but she knew that no one had tried. Albus Dumbledore had said that young Tom had been 'born bad' and there was nothing to be done about it. He was probably right, but she had simply accepted his judgment without question.

"Can you still do the sorting?" Minerva asked when the Hat had settled down again.

"Not really. I'm worn out. My voice has been damaged. I want to retire to my shelf."

"Then it doesn't matter, does it?" Minerva said. "The sorting is finished."

"Don't be silly," the Hat said. *"Just get Helga's Helmet to do it."*



The owls caught up with the boat as it was passing along the coast off Yorkshire. "Great!" Kat said. "They've brought *The Daily Prophet* and *The Quibbler*!" He grabbed THE PROPHEET and started to read it while Biscuit gave the owls some treats.

"Listen to this!" Kat announced. "*The Prophet* says the Aurors have determined that the cowboy was Imperiused — just like we thought — and it was a plot by the Nameless Assassins to kill the Minister for Magic — we knew that too."

"That's bad," Severus said. "The Nameless never stop after they've accepted an assignment. Even the people that hired them can't call them off. It's a point of pride with them: they never give up until the target is dead. Kingsley had better watch his back from now on."

"Are there many of those assassins?" the Captain asked.

"In order to join them, one must pass their tests," Severus told him,



"and it's said that very few survive the testing. The Dark Lord thought there are only three or four of them at present."

"Well, there's one less now," Biscuit said. "I can't imagine why anyone would want to join a group like that."

"Some people simply get a thrill from killing. They find it exciting. Getting paid for it sweetens the deal. The Nameless charge a lot of money for their 'services', from what I've heard."

Some of the Death Eaters had been like that, seeking opportunities for violence and looting. Others, like the Malfoys, had been attracted by the pureblood ideology. Severus was ashamed to remember it, but when he was just an angry, bullied kid who wasn't as smart as he thought he was, he thought it would be 'cool' to part of a mysterious, powerful, and much feared group. He craved the respect and secret knowledge that the Dark Lord appeared to offer. The reality turned out to be nothing like the fantasy, of course. What an idiot he had been back then!

"You've gotta hear Skeeter's report!" Kat said:

My gallant pirate captain pushed me to the ground as the Killing Curse flashed over my head, and he easily subdued my attacker. Then he reached down and gently helped me to my feet, his blue eyes filled with concern. "Are you all right, my dear?" he asked tenderly as he ...

"That will be enough, Katfish!" Severus snarled.

Captain Clark was trying very hard not to laugh.

"Gimme *The Quibbler*," Biscuit said as he opened another pack of owl treats.

A few minutes later two very large, very tired owls turned up with packages, one addressed to "Captain Hook" and the other to "Severus Snape, wherever he may be". Severus groaned.



Regime Change



HEY GUYS, LISTEN TO THIS: *THE QUIBBLER*

says that the Rotfang Conspiracy was probably behind the attempt to assassinate the Minister for Magic," Biscuit announced.

Severus scowled. "Somehow, I doubt that."

"So are you going to open your packages, or are you gonna wait until next Christmas?" Biscuit asked as he gave treats to the newly arrived owls. "Who's a pretty birdie?" he said, smiling as they gobbled up his offerings.

Fawkes snorted. *What's so pretty about an owl?* he wondered. *They come in such boring colors.*

Severus eyed the packages. They didn't seem to be cursed. He might as well get on with it.

He opened the one addressed to 'Captain Hook' first, and as expected, it proved to be from Rita Skeeter. It was a copy of *THE LIFE AND LIES OF ALBUS DUMBLEDORE*. She had signed it 'To Captain Hook, with thanks, Rita. P.S. My book about Severus Snape should be coming soon!'

At least she didn't add any pink hearts, he thought, and he wondered if there was anything that he, or anyone, could do to stop the Snape book, but he knew that there wasn't. Even the assassination attempt hadn't slowed Rita down for long.

The one addressed to 'Severus Snape, wherever he may be' was much more worrisome. He opened the accompanying card. "To 'Captain Hook', with thanks, Minerva," it read.

The old gal must have found out about his visit! She could be pretty sharp at times.



Carefully, he charmed the box free of its brown paper wrapping. It was a bottle of Glen Mystic!

Kat and Biscuit applauded.

"That's much better than a book!" Kat said. "You're going to share it, aren't you?"

"Of course you are, Slade," the Captain announced, "but not until we're off duty. We've got to cast off and get under way now. Passengers and cargo await!"



"Thank you, Bingle," Minerva said as the Elf handed her the Helmet of Hufflepuff. Minerva said as the Elf handed her the Helmet of Hufflepuff. It was a sturdy bronze helmet with nose- and cheek-guards. It was rather corroded, and Minerva suspected that it had once been decorated with runes, but they had worn off long ago.

"It's from our Keeping Room. You can keep it as long as you need to," Bingle told her. "We doesn't mind."

"That's very kind of you," Minerva said as she donned the helmet. She looked in the mirror. *It's like something out of Beowulf*, she thought.

She could hear the helmet's voice in her mind: "*Hello, Headmistress,*" it said. "*Do you suppose I could trouble you for a new lining and a bit of bronze polish? I'm not looking my best these days.*"



"I guess Minister Shacklebolt is right," Harry said. "I shouldn't have used



the Cruciatus curse on Carrow. But he made me so furious. I hated him, and I kind of enjoyed watching him twitch and scream. Maybe it was the Horcrux that made me do it, that piece of Voldemort's soul in my head."

"Well, the Horcrux is gone now and so is Voldemort, so you don't have to worry," Ron told him.

Hermione looked thoughtful. "Maybe, but I don't think you should blame it on the Horcrux. I think it's important to recognize that we all have the potential to do things that are nasty, or even evil. We have to do our best to resist those impulses, especially when we're under pressure." She remembered how her spell had scarred Marietta Edgecombe's face. She had wanted those scars to be permanent at the time. Now she was ashamed to think about it. She wondered what had become of Marietta.

"Does anyone know what's up with Ginny?" Ron asked, changing the subject. "She packed a bag and went off with Bill and Fleur. She told Mom they were going to help her get ready for the exams."

"That's what she told me, too," Harry said. "Then she gave me a quick kiss on the cheek and off she went."

"It's wonderful that she wants to sit the exams," Hermione said, "and I think the change of scenery will be good for her. She's been awfully distant lately, and, well, sort of crabby. Very crabby, in fact. I think the war affected her more than she lets on."

"I think it's affected all of us," Ron admitted. "I have nightmares about that locket sometimes." *And the Dementors, and the Acromantulas*, he thought, *and I can't bear to think about how Fred died.*

"We're all expected to go back to life as usual now that it's over," Hermione said, "but nothing will ever really be the same again."



Then Harry asked the question that had been in the back of everyone's mind. "Has anybody seen George lately?"



"“You want me to interview Slytherins about what they did in the war?” Melody asked when Clayton told her about the plan. “And the interviews will get published in *The Prophet*?”

“We would really appreciate it,” Clayton told her. “It will help people realize that not all Slytherins are bad. And that will help all of us get our Houses back.”

“I guess I could, if it doesn't interfere with my studies. Are you volunteering to go first?”

Clayton looked uncertain. “I suppose so. I'm not ashamed of anything I did. It ended up kind of embarrassing, though.”

That piqued Melody's curiosity. “Really?” she asked. “Tell me about it.”

“Well, okay,” Clayton said hesitantly. “Like I told you before, a bunch of us worked to get all the little kids to safety. We took them side-along, one at a time, apparating to the Bletchley place where Mr and Mrs Bletchley looked after them. Then we gathered in Hogsmeade. We joined up with some Ravenclaws and a couple of Hufflepuffs there.”

“Hufflepuffs? That must have been Malcolm and Fern,” Melody said. “They said they saw you there.”

Clayton nodded. “The tunnel from the Hogs Head was filled with flames so almost everyone else went off to try the tunnel from the sweet shop. I ran up the road to the school instead. The front gate was wide open. It had been blasted off its hinges. The courtyard was full of Death Eaters and



Snatchers and all sorts of crazies. They were screaming like wild animals and casting curses at the windows. Some of them were circling on brooms, and a few were trying to climb up the outside walls. I could hear muffled explosions coming from inside the castle. It was awful!

“I was hopelessly outnumbered so I pretended to be one of them. I started yelling nonsense and waving my wand around over my head. I was trying to get through to the front doors, but just when I got close, a couple of Death Eaters came running out. One of them grabbed me by the arm. ‘We've got to get out of here!’ he hollered, ‘there's Dementors in there! Dementors!’ I tried to pull away but he apparated and took me with him!”

“It's just as well that you didn't get inside,” Melody said. “You might have had both sides trying to curse you.”

“I was kind of worried about that,” Clayton admitted. “I transfigured my Slytherin robes into everyday clothes because I hoped it might disguise me.”

“So where did you end up?”

“We spun around a bit and then landed in a kitchen. That's when I recognized him. It was Mr Nott, Theodore's dad. He thought he was rescuing me! Mrs Nott was frantic, asking us if we'd seen Theo. She started crying when we said we hadn't.”

“The poor lady must have been sick with worry,” Melody said.

“She sure was. Mr Nott was obviously shaken by his encounter with the Dementors, but he said he'd go back and look for Theo. I said I'd go, too – I thought it might give me a chance to slip into the castle – but Mrs Nott wouldn't let me leave. She ...” he hesitated.

“She what?” Melody asked.

“This is the embarrassing part,” he said sheepishly. “I tried to leave



anyway, but before I could apparate, she turned me into a potted plant – it was a Dieffenbachia, I think – and I couldn't move!"

"Goodness!" Melody said, trying very hard not to laugh. "I've heard that Mrs Nott was head of the Transfiguration Club when she was a student."

"She levitated me to a spot by the window and told me that I was going to stay right there where I would be safe until Mr Nott and Theo came back."

Melody took out a notebook and started writing notes. "It must have been terrible for you, Clayton."

"It got worse. I'm not sure how long it was, but after a while several Aurors arrived looking for Mr Nott. They didn't recognize me, of course, but they took Mrs Nott away for questioning. They didn't have any reason to hold her, but it was at least two days before they let her go. By the time she got home I really needed to be watered."

"Oh, dear!" Melody said, scribbling rapidly.

"Mrs Nott started crying again. She still had no idea what had happened to Mr Nott and Theo, but she changed me back, gave me some water, and let me floo home. And that was it, really. I didn't get to do anything heroic, my mum and dad were really mad at me for making them worry, and ..." he paused for a moment and then added, "suddenly I have a really intense interest in plants and herbology!"

"Herbology is very important," Melody observed, "and I'm glad you didn't get killed."

Clayton nodded. "Me too. Please leave out the part about the Dieffenbachia, okay?"

"I won't mention it," Melody assured him. "And I won't reveal the Notts' names, either." *Maybe interviewing Slytherins will be fun, she thought. I*



wonder if I can get some sort of extra course credit for it?



Minerva surveyed the meeting room. The faculty were all present and watching her expectantly. Even Horace looked attentive. She glanced at the empty walls – she had ordered the Elves to put all of the portraits out in the hall.

"I have an important announcement to make," she said, "and I don't want any arguments from anyone. This has been a difficult decision for me, but I have realized that the time has come for me to step down as Headmistress."

There were some audible gasps from her audience.

"No!" Hagrid bellowed, which almost burst everyone's eardrums. Minerva ignored him.

"I have accomplished my objectives. The war is over, the castle has been repaired, and classes are back in session. It is time for me to step down and devote myself to teaching again. As an added benefit, I can frame my resignation as a gesture of apology for having expelled all the Slytherins before the battle. Any injury to my pride will be a small price to pay for school unity. I have already submitted my letter of resignation to the Board of Governors."

She surveyed the room again. Most of the staff looked stunned. Horace's mouth was open so wide that a Hippogriff could have flown into it. Poppy seemed to have forgotten to breathe.

"Professor Sprout has agreed to take my place as Headmistress, and I'm sure that the Board will accept her. She is the logical choice because



Neville Longbottom can take over most of her teaching duties. She can help Neville as needed. Professor Flitwick will become Assistant Headmaster and he will assist Pomona, as will I. Are there any questions?"

Professor Vector raised her hand. "Pomona, how do you feel about this?" she asked.

Professor Sprout stood up. "I can't say I'm completely happy about it," she said, "but I agree with Minerva that it's the logical thing to do. Sadly, I will have to cut down on teaching and puttering in my greenhouses, which I love so much. Neville is quite capable of filling in for me in the classroom, however, and I know that Minerva and Filius will help me with my new managerial duties.

"I would like to add that I think Minerva is very brave to take responsibility for her actions. I hope that my reputation as a Hufflepuff will give the students confidence in my fairness and aid in the healing process."

There was silence for a few moments and then Filius started clapping, after which the others joined in.



The boat was well under way and the passengers were settled in their quarters when Severus completed his security inspections. His protective spells were holding well and no threats were detected.

He could feel the vibrations of the magic engines as they propelled the boat through the water, and he could smell the aroma of exotic spices from the curry that Biscuit was simmering in the galley. Fawkes and Mavis were perched in the passengers' lounge, chattering quietly. All was well and he could relax for a while.



Perhaps he could catch up on some reading. He levitated a box of books out from under his bunk and took out the copy of *THE LIFE AND LIES OF ALBUS DUMBLEDORE* that Rita had sent. No, not that! He had read it before, and one of the last things that he wanted to think about at the moment was Albus Dumbledore.

Perhaps *POISONOUS PLANTS OF AMAZONIA*? Or maybe *A HISTORY OF BABYLONIAN WIZARDRY*? Then he spotted the copy of *MOBY DICK* that the captain had loaned him. Yes, that would do nicely. He got comfortable on his bunk and let the book transport him into another world.





Knight Lines
Transport



Colophon

The layout and formatting of this document was done in Adobe InDesign, utilizing commercial clip art from Getty Images/ Dynamic Graphics, Red Hen Logo is adapted from a design by the incomprable Marwan Aridi, modified in Macromedia FreeHand and Adobe Photoshop. Cover was created in Adobe Photoshop, and the DAZ studio. Illustrations were created in the DAZ Studio.

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