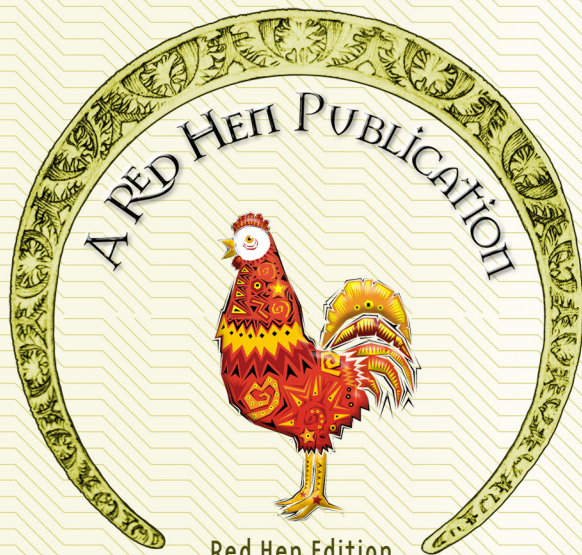


THE PERFECT'S PORTRAIT



BY ARSINOE DE BLASSENVILLE



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OBVIOUSLY, THIS STORY EXISTS only because J.K. Rowling created the world of Harry Potter. My thanks also to those great fanfiction authors who inspired me to follow the primrose path from reader, to reviewer, to writer. I must note that I am obliged in particular to shadowycat, whose stories caused me to think about the living art of Hogwarts. And to J. Odell, whose idea for this project was a pleasant inducement for me to finish the story, much appreciation. As to the rest, it is hard to specify particular influences when one is a long-time, eclectic reader. Every library I have known had its part to play in the creation of THE PREFECT'S PORTRAIT.

"I am a part of all that I have met..."

HOGWARTS LIBRARY



THE PREFECT'S PORTRAIT

THE READING ROOM

HERMIONE HAD WALKED PAST the picture for weeks. Down the stairs from the Gryffindor common room, past the archway leading toward the library, and into a dusty, narrow hall that suddenly opened into an inviting windowed alcove: she had worn a path day after day and night after night, looking for a quiet place to read.

The picture hung on the south wall, close to the window seat. Hermione liked the picture, for the girl in it was quietly reading herself, pale profile turned to the viewer. It was a wonderful picture of the Hogwarts Library, the girl sitting at the very table, and the very chair, that Hermione herself favoured.

She had stumbled on the place by accident, one sunny Saturday afternoon early in her sixth year. Everyone else had gone to Hogsmeade for an adolescent orgy of candy buying and butterbeer drinking. She had decided

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to delve into the little-known history of the Thulian Magus, when she was distracted by a persistent and subliminally annoying series of throat-clearings and sighs. She looked up to find Madam Pince staring at her.

"Yes, Madam Pince, what is it?"

"Miss Granger, it is nearly four o'clock." Hermione stared at her blankly. The library hours were clearly posted as nine to noon, and one to five on Saturdays. "Miss Granger," the librarian continued, "have you noticed that you are the only student in here?"

Hermione looked about her, disoriented by the sudden withdrawal from her book. The Library was indeed echoingly empty but for the two of them. None of the first or second years fidgeted and whispered among the shelves; there was not even the usual unhappy sprinkling of upperclassmen denied Hogsmeade permission. The fair weather had seemingly lured them all away to other pursuits. She opened her mouth, but the librarian cut her off. "Are you writing an essay for a class?" Hermione shook her head. "Preparing a special report?" Hermione shook her head again. "Researching a topic at the request of an instructor?"

"No, Madam Pince, but I —" Hermione began, turning red.

"No, you are doing none of those things."

The librarian narrowed her eyes. "You are taking up my time with your recreational reading. You could check out those books and allow me to have an occasional respite. Instead, you chain me to my desk on a lovely afternoon. You could be reading in your room. You could be reading outside. You could be in the Gryffindor common room." Madam Pince rose, brushing invisible dust off her immaculate robes. "It's absurd to keep the library open for only one student, and that student not even needing it for schoolwork. I shall speak to the Headmaster about it."

Hermione, now hot with embarrassment, had snatched up her books, and brought them to the librarian's desk, standing impatiently while the librarian flicked her wand over them, eyeing her coldly.

"Thank you," Hermione bit out, and then stalked furiously out of the library, muttering. "I thought I could at least have a moment's peace in the library! I didn't know I needed my own bloody *READING ROOM!*"

At the unladylike bellow of "*READING ROOM,*" an undistinguished painting of HELGA HUFFLEPUFF HEALING THE HYBORIAN HOBBITS swung open, revealing a dim hall that appeared to be lit at the end. Hermione started down it hesitantly, and then rounding the corner, saw

the soaring Gothic window with a stained glass insert of the Tree of Life. She took in the deep stone window seat, the dust on all the surfaces proclaiming them long unused, and realised that she had found a piece of Hogwarts for her very own. She turned away from the window and saw a large oil painting of a girl in the Hogwarts Library. She came closer, and the girl looked up briefly and smiled, before returning to the volume on the table in front of her.

Since then, she had restricted her library stays, making a point never to be the last student there. It was an easy thing to check out the books and wait a moment for the corridor outside to be clear, before whispering the password and slipping down the hall to her secret place. She had long ago brought a few cushions to scatter on the window seat. A muttered "*Lumos!*" and she had her own private reading room, away from the rigidities of Madam Pince, the noise of the common room, and the imbecilities of her roommates. She decided to keep the secret even from Ron and Harry, not wanting her private study to become the Gryffindor common room annex.

Time passed, and she studied and absorbed, while the girl in the picture read companionably nearby. Silence reigned, broken only by the whisper of pages turned by a living girl,

and more softly still, by the painted image.

Perhaps habit had made her careless. Planning to start off her weekend with a pleasant late night of reading, Hermione hurried to get away from her friends and plunge into *ARS ANIMAGI*. Slipping out of the library, she waited in the shadows for the last student to leave. Anthony Goldstein and his wretched girlfriend were dawdling along, while Tony held forth, as usual.

"We prefects bear a heavy burden, Mandy," he mourned. "Professor Flitwick has confided to me that I'm definitely in the running for Head Boy next year. With great honours must come great responsibilities." Hermione rolled her eyes.

"Oh, Tony," Mandy condoled, squeezing his hand, "I wish I knew how to help you!" Tony looked down at her hopefully, as she leaned back against the wall.

"Well, Mandy, there is something you could do — something that would mean so much —" he broke off at the sound of quick, booted strides coming toward the library. "*Cripes!*" Mandy gaped at him. Tony grabbed at her, pulling her along in the other direction. "It's Snape!" he hissed. "Hurry!"

The two of them scrambled off, while Her-

mione dashed to the scene of Hufflepuff glory, gabbled the password and ran down the well-worn corridor. She called out "*Lumos*," spread her books about her, settled herself comfortably on the cushions, and lost herself in the discipline of Advanced Personal Transfiguration.

She was getting along nicely, reviewing the meditation techniques necessary for visualising one's animal alter ego. *Perhaps this year, Professor McGonagall will agree to tutor me. What would I be?* She imagined herself a cat. *Whoops, that could cause embarrassing encounters with Crookshanks — I don't think I'm ready for that!* She couldn't see herself as a dog. *I'm just not a dog person. I do hope I'm not a snake or anything nasty — I don't even like the Reptile House at the Zoo. Perhaps a bird? It could make up for my lack of flying skills. Yes, I'd quite like a bird — a swallow, a robin — or something bigger? A stork, a raven, or a great black BAT!*

"Merlin!" she shrieked, clutching her heart.

"No, Miss Granger, not quite. What are you doing here?" Looming over her, The Great Black Bat himself fixed her with his patented glare. Hermione slid awkwardly off the window seat, dropping ARS ANIMAGI with a thud and puff of dust. *I didn't even hear him! However does he DO that? Oh, no! I forgot to close the picture behind me! Stupid, stupid, stupid!*

"Studying, Professor Snape," she faltered, her voice sounding thin and girlish in the silence. He paused, and raised an eyebrow with a smirk.

"You appear to me to be simply throwing valuable Hogwarts property to the dirty floor. An interesting interpretation of studying. Do you plan to abuse the other volumes in the same way? Or will you tread on them as well? And why here? Has the Gryffindor common room been laid waste by your friends? Perhaps your dormitory has been sacked by the Goths, Vandals, Weasleys, or Potters?"

"I was just looking for a quiet corner, sir, and I found an open door —"

"It is past curfew, Miss Granger," he said coldly. "Past curfew by over half an hour, and even a Gryffindor prefect should have more respect for rules known to her for years. You have lost your house twenty points. Twenty-five," he amended, looking at ARS ANIMAGI on the floor. "Now gather up those books as carefully as you are able and get to your dormitory immediately."

He stood over her, dark and intimidating; making no move to help her, as she hastily retrieved ARS ANIMAGI, adding it to the pile of volumes that she gathered from the window seat. She dared a glance at Snape, who was looking curiously about the alcove. He paused in front of the picture, and his face grew stony.

THE READING ROOM

"Shall we make it an even thirty points, Miss Granger, or will you *get moving*?" he snarled, the velvety baritone strangely rough. Hermione trotted past him, arms full of tomes. She picked up speed past the picture and made a dash for Gryffindor tower, leaving an irritated Potions master in her wake.

He turned back to the picture of the girl in the library. It was very like her. Pale, delicate face, thick red hair half pulled back and falling almost to her waist, Gryffindor tie neatly knotted at the base of the slender, long neck.

The girl looked up, did a double take, and asked, shocked, "Severus, is that *you*?"

Snape cleared his throat. "Hello, Lily."



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THE GIRL WHO DIED

NOT UNTIL WEDNESDAY NIGHT did Hermione have a chance to get back to her secret study. Harry and Ron appeared to think themselves joined to her at the hip throughout dinner, until distracted by a flurry of green feathers exploding from the Slytherins' ice cream bombe. "Bombs away!" squeaked Colin Creevy, while Dean and Seamus, the perpetrators of the prank, smiled with heart-felt satisfaction. Ron was gleeful, and Harry, for once, laughed out loud with sheer joy. For their part, the Slytherins looked ready to declare all-out war, using handfuls of feathered ice cream as missiles. Goyle grabbed up the entire platter; and striking a pose not unlike Hector before the ships, was heaving it over at the Gryffindors, when the Head Table noticed the disturbance and came down rather heavily on the combatants.

The Slytherins, restrained by their Head of House, were screaming and

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waving the disgusting remains of their pudding under his distinguished nose, demanding justice. The Gryffindors, not even pretending innocence, were either roaring with laughter or making a cacophony of bird noises. Parrot calls, rooster crows, canary song filled the hall. Professor McGonagall, vainly attempting to look reproving, quietly gave points for ingenuity. The Hufflepuffs were scandalised at the noise, while the Ravenclaws, irritated beyond tact, appealed to Professor Flitwick "to *do* something about this whole Slytherin-Gryffindor thing — which has gone too long!"

"Really," sniffed Padma Patil, "you'd think they were the only houses in Hogwarts! It's always about *them*!" "Indeed," agreed Terry Boot, "I predict that the unending psychodrama of that rivalry will ultimately bring down the British wizarding world. It's high time the Ministry stepped in." Then, remembering the last time the Ministry *had* stepped in at Hogwarts, he groaned in despair, head in his hands.

Hermione, meanwhile, had fled the scene. When the Headmaster regained command of the Great Hall, which was certain to happen within the next ten seconds, all houses would be sent directly to their respective common rooms. *If I don't actually hear the order, I won't feel so bad about disobeying him*, she rationalised.

Within minutes, she was running, books, parchment, and quills in arms, toward the Hufflepuff painting. "Reading Room," she gasped. Slipping through the passage, she carefully shut the painting behind her, and leaned back against the cold stone, catching her breath. A little more composed, she called out "*Lumos!*" and walked over to the window seat.

"Hello there!" a voice called out. Hermione smothered a shriek and whirled about, to see who had followed her.

"Hello there," the voice called again. "Miss — Granger, is it? Up here!"

It was the girl in the picture.

"Hello," responded Hermione, a little tentatively. The Gryffindor girl pushed her books to one side and waved her closer.

"I've been waiting for simply ages to talk to you! I thought you weren't coming back after the little fracas the other night with Severus Snape."

Hermione shrugged. "That was nothing. He's always on me about one thing or another. He hates my friends, too."

The girl in the picture looked surprised. "I'd hardly call losing twenty-five points nothing." She peered at Hermione. "But you're a *prefect*!" She beamed, "So am I!" and tapped her badge complacently. "So — Granger, is it?"

"Hermione. Hermione Granger."

"Delighted to make your acquaintance, Hermione. I'm Lily —"

"*Lily Potter!*" cried Hermione, astounded. Looking carefully at the picture, she could see the resemblance to the pictures Harry had shown her. This girl was her own age, but the wonderful green eyes, the charming dimples, and the dark red hair proclaimed the woman she would be. Or had been? Hermione was uncertain.

The girl in the picture paused, taken aback. "No, *Lily Evans*. I don't know any Lily Potter. There's a Potter in my year — in my house, in fact, more's the pity — but we're no relation. He's an ever-so-pureblood Potter, and I'm but a lowly Muggleborn."

Hermione thought quickly. Of course the picture was of Lily Evans — a student like herself — long before she married Harry's father James. Apparently this picture was not current with Hogwart's gossip. Curious, she decided on a tactful approach.

"I'm Muggleborn myself," Hermione said, and the girl in the picture smiled back in an interested, friendly way. "Pardon me, but I was under the impression that the pictures talked to one another, and visited about the castle. You — don't?"

"No, no. I'm rather a different sort. Has to do with the way I was painted. I'm pretty much tied

to this picture, but it's never bothered me. In fact, I thought I had just been finished and bespelled the other day, but then I saw Severus..." The girl's — well, Lily's — voice trailed away, and she looked uncomfortable. "He's a grown man! And he looks so — I don't know — so *worn*. I made him talk to me a bit, though, and he told me he's teaching here now."

"Yes," Hermione answered faintly. "Yes. He's Potions master. And Head of Slytherin."

Lily-in-the-picture seemed impressed. "He didn't tell me that. How very distinguished. Mind you, it's hardly a great surprise. He was no end of a swot here at school, though I would have placed him in Defence. He's frightfully good at that too, you know."

"I know," Hermione replied, rather stiffly. "Now and then he takes some Defence classes, when the regular professor is unavailable."

"Dumbledore still Headmaster?"

"What? — oh, yes."

"Not surprising either. That man will never die. Does he still twinkle?"

"Occasionally."

Hermione was feeling increasingly uneasy. This girl hadn't a clue what had become of the woman of whom she was the image. What if she asked about her? What ought she to say?

The girl looked at her sharply, as if reading

her mind. "You know me, don't you? I mean — the other me, the one outside the picture."

"Yes, I've heard of you." Hermione groped for something cheerful to say.

"From my book?"

"Your book?" Hermione shut her jaw carefully. Of all things the picture might have asked, this was one she was not prepared for. Desperately she searched her mental card catalogue for any published works by Lily, either Potter or Evans, and answer came there none. "I'm sorry, I don't recall any book by you."

Lily-in-the-picture was becoming more serious with every exchange. She looked down at her books, and then blurted out, "She's dead, isn't she — the other me?"

Hermione saw no virtue in lying. "Yes, she died quite awhile ago."

"While in school? That could explain why the book wasn't finished."

"No, she died later." The picture was looking more puzzled, and Hermione explained, "She was married with a baby. Perhaps she was too busy to finish the book right away." Seeing the girl turning pink with annoyance, Hermione tried to defuse her anger. "I'm sure she would have finished it, once she was not so busy..." She was painfully aware how lame that sounded. Hermione felt that if she herself

ever had hopes of publication, *seven* little wizardlings would not prevent her.

The girl in the picture seemed to have reached an unpleasant conclusion, and nearly shouted, "*Lily Potter!* You mean she *married* that arrogant tosser? Was she *mad*? He'd be just the sort to keep her barefoot and pregnant! She'd have done better to marry Remus, out of that lot! He at least listened to me about the book, and had the grace to pretend interest! What? Did she die of boredom or booze?"

Pink herself, Hermione felt unaccountably protective of the Lily-who-was-Harry's-mother. "She and James were killed by a Dark wizard." She took a breath, and daringly said the name. "Lord Voldemort."

"That lunatic," Lily said contemptuously. "I read about him in the *Daily Prophet*. That title is fake, you know, and most people think he's a joke. She must have gotten frightfully feeble, I'd say — to let some jumped-up Lord Oldygart do her in. Changed too many nappies and went soft."

At once indignant, reluctantly admiring, and surprised at Harry's mother being so entirely different from her own ideas, Hermione gave her a concise but colourful summary of the rise of Voldemort and the Death Eaters, the fate of the Potters, and the survival and further adventures of the Boy-Who-Lived.

Lily-in-the-picture listened in silence, but seemed to be repressing growing fury. "You mean that the other Lily defeated this Oldyfart with a brilliant piece of ancient protective magic, and it's the *boy* who gets all the credit?"

Hermione had never thought about it quite that way. "Yes, that's right, I'm afraid. But Harry —"

"And they sent her child off to live with Petunia! I daresay they both enjoyed that!"

"I don't think the Dursleys have been very nice to Harry —"

"Dursley, eh? Horrible name. So she and her — I presume Muggle? — (Hermione nodded) husband treated the boy badly. What a shock! How could they *do* that?" The picture's pretty mouth twisted a little. "I supposed Dumbledore is so old, he's forgotten what childhood is really like — or perhaps his long-ago Victorian childhood was so perfect that he can't imagine a child in real misery. That would explain a lot of what he allows to go on around here."

This caught Hermione's attention at once. There were a lot of things that she felt Muggle schools managed better than Hogwarts, but no one to discuss them with. The purebloods knew nothing else — and thought reflexively that any thing of theirs must be superior to the creations of mere Muggles — and Harry, ignorant of the Muggle world as he was, was no better.

She admitted cautiously, "There's a great deal of bullying and prejudice here —"

"I should say so!" the picture agreed, now roused fully in pursuit of a favourite topic. "The things that Potter and his gang have done to Severus wouldn't be tolerated for a minute in a proper school. I don't know what Dumbledore's thinking — maybe that it will toughen him up. I'd think it would just make him angry and bitter. There's so much snobbery and favouritism here!"

"And the Muggle Studies program is a joke," added Hermione, becoming excited herself. "There's no study of literature, no music, no art, and the history as taught by Binns —"

"Binns is still here?" groaned Lily. "Does he cover Grindelwald?"

"No, we never get that far, much less cover the last war." Lily-in-the-picture looked at her questioningly, and Hermione clarified, "The rise of Voldemort —"

"Oldyfart," muttered Lily, rebelliously.

"Voldemort," repeated Hermione, with a touch of pedantry. "He goes over the Goblin Rebellions in great detail, though."

"Never covers anything relevant. I used to think it was laziness. Now I think Dumbledore wants it that way. Wouldn't do to raise hackles by discussing anything controversial." She

added, a little sourly, "That's why I was so excited about my research."

Hermione could hardly keep from hugging herself. It was so very delightful to talk to another girl with whom she had so much in common. It was a novel experience, in both the Muggle and magical worlds; and while she knew her next question would lead to a lengthy answer, she could not resist.

"Would you tell me about your book?"

Lily-in-the-picture glowed, pleased to be asked. Her green eyes sparkled, and showing her dimples, she began her tale...



"SUPPOSE IT'S STILL THE SAME now," Lily began. "I can't believe things have changed much. Everything changes so slowly in the wizarding world. It's still the pure-bloods, the halfbloods, and, if you'll forgive the expression, the mudbloods."

Hermione shrugged. "The expression has been thrown in my face a few times. Voldemort's supporters all believe in pure blood. They think Muggleborns are ruining the wizarding world."

"Well, are we?"

Hermione started to object, and then stopped, confused.

Lily raised her brows. "You see. Everyone's full of opinions on the subject. People say they know one thing or another, but it all comes down to a childish 'Is so!' and 'Is not!'"

"But it's ridiculous! Not to boast, but my O.W.L.s —"

"And that's my point! One witch doesn't prove anything. Someone who

doesn't like Muggleborns would use someone else who didn't do well as an example, and consider you an aberration. You may have a true opinion, but you haven't offered any hard evidence." Lily tapped her quill against the parchment on the library table. Hermione decided it was a mannerism that bespoke a thoughtful mood. Lily, after considering how to continue, went on. "My father's a teacher, and you know there's always some new study or other about education in the Muggle world. He asked me if I knew of any proper research done on Muggleborns in the magical world, and when I looked into it, I found there wasn't — there were only a lot of silly opinionated books with nothing behind them." Lily paused a moment, and asked, "Do you know if my parents are still alive?"

"I'm not sure, but I don't think so," Hermione confessed. "Harry's never said anything about any grandparents."

Lily looked rather sick. She sighed, and tapped her quill again.

"Anyway, what matters is establishing the impact of Muggleborns on the magical world. It wasn't that hard to design such a study. There's plenty of data: the Hogwart's registry gives parents' names, and it's possible to track down if they're purebloods or halfbloods or what-

ever. We have O.W.L. and N.E.W.T scores going back centuries. Further examination of the birth registry indicates children of Hogwarts graduates and whether they were invited to study at Hogwarts or not. Once I buckled down to it, it wasn't that hard to start compiling figures on whether Muggleborns had lower scores or were giving birth to more Squibs."

"Were you doing this in Professor Binns class?"

"Oh, no! It was an independent project for Muggle Studies. I know it sounds silly, a Muggleborn taking Muggle Studies, but my schedule was such that it was that or Divination, and I couldn't stick *that*."

Hermione nodded sympathetically. Lily shrugged. "It was just a preliminary report anyway, using the last ten years of O.W.L and N.E.W.T scores, but I was going to continue work on it, and put something together for publication after I graduated and had some academic credibility." She sniffed. "Apparently, I was distracted." A new thought occurred to her. "Do you suppose the boy knows what happened to my notes?"

"Harry? Not very likely — and from what I heard, the whole house was destroyed when you — I mean — when his parents were killed."

"All that work..."

Hermione was still waiting. "Well?"

"Well, what?"

"What did you find out? Are Muggleborns the bane of the wizarding world or not?"

"Oh, that! Well, it was impossible to say for certain, but genetically, it seems probably not. There was no obvious difference between Muggleborns and purebloods in Squib-producing, but the test scores for Muggleborns tended to be slightly higher."

Hermione flushed with self-vindication.

"Of course," said Lily, "It was only a very slight total variation, and it might not mean that Muggleborns are uniformly better students or more magically powerful. There's more to it. Further study seemed to indicate that the Muggleborns who actually come to Hogwarts have manifested magic very strongly prior to entry — and quite a few Muggleborns never study magic at all."

"Why?"

"Well, think! A lot of Muggleborns have parents like my sister, who hates magic. Or they think it's all a silly confidence trick. Or they're very religious, and they think it's evil. From what I gather that's always happening in the States. Why else are there those outbreaks of hysteria, where parents say their children have been abused by Satanists? Every year, scores of young witches and wizards around the world are killed by their families, sometimes during

exorcisms. That's why in the States and in some places in South America and Africa the wizarding authorities have a policy of removing talented children from abusive homes, and those children simply vanish from the Muggle world. They didn't do that here at Hogwarts in my day, though. Has it changed?"

"I don't think so. But when Harry first got his letter, the Dursleys destroyed it, and the Headmaster had to send hundreds more letters, and then finally Hagrid to deliver one."

"Well, the Headmaster really must think he's special, because, as you know, the usual policy is to send one letter by special messenger and then drop the subject. Occasionally they send out Obliviators if the family starts kicking up a fuss. In short, my girl," Lily looked at her significantly, "Muggleborns don't even *get* to Hogwarts unless they come from supportive, liberal-minded families — the sort of family that would create a predisposition for the child to do well, in *any* school."

Hermione thought a moment, and then said, "Purebloods also complain about the corruption of wizarding customs, and about security —"

"With that last they may have a point. I haven't looked into that yet. It would be interesting to track down serious security breaches and see if any of them had any real impact. I'd

need Ministry approval, though, for that —

“And that’s not likely,” said Hermione, tartly. “The Minister of Magic is an idiot. Last year he sent a representative to take over Hogwarts and she was the vilest, wickedest creature —” Hermione felt a flash of rage, remembering the odious Umbridge. “I’ll tell you all about her someday. She was the worst person I have ever known — even worse than the Death Eaters, because she seemed normal at first — anyway — let’s not get into that now. I hate thinking about it.”

“Well, let’s talk about someone more pleasant — like Severus Snape,” Lily suggested.

Hermione made a face. Lily laughed.

“Oh, don’t go all Gryffindor on me. Severus is all right. We’ve been partners in Potions since the beginning of the year. A new policy of inter-house co-operation. It hasn’t worked for everybody, but in N.E.W.T Potions everyone’s serious enough about the class to make an effort. It was touch-and-go at first: he once threw a rather nasty insult my way and he’s never apologised, but considering the circumstances I decided not to make an issue of it. He has every reason to be wary of Gryffindors — luckily none of Potter’s gang is in the class to muck things up. We found we could work well together and had some interests in common. Severus is sort of odd-man-out, even in his

own House, so I think he likes having someone to chat up on his favourite subjects.” Lily smiled mischievously. “I never thought he’d grow up so — *interesting*, though. The other night he was quite impressive in the black robes, sweeping about ever so grandly. He wasn’t so tall when we were in Potions together. He really does the tortured Heathcliff thing rather well, I think. And his voice!”

Hermione curled up on the window seat, hugging one of the cushions. “Heathcliff! I see what you mean. But it’s Heathcliff from the later part of *Wuthering Heights*, after he’s lost Cathy, when he’s all twisted and cruel and horrible.”

“And did he?”

“Did he what?”

“Lose Cathy! You know more about grown-up Severus than I.”

“I don’t know if there ever was a Cathy.”

“That could be just as bad, I suppose.”

Hermione had been thinking about the picture and the library, and a new idea struck her. “This is a bit of a non-sequitur, I’m afraid, but can you read any book in the library?”

A little at a loss at the change of subject, Lily-in-the-picture stared at her, and then said, “Well yes, I suppose so. I hadn’t thought about it. You must understand that time isn’t the same for me. It really seems like I’ve been here only an after-

noon, but from watching you I can see it's different outside. I'm still reading the book I had when I was being painted by Master Prætorius." She held up a smaller book hidden inside a large magical tome. Hermione peered closer, and saw that it was *PRIDE AND PREJUDICE*. She beamed, delighted to meet so unexpectedly another fan of Jane Austen in the environs of Hogwarts.

"I love Jane Austen too. Nobody else here has ever heard of her."

"Have you ever read what passes for a wizarding novel? The most awful trash. They tend either to be feeble, insipid romances, or gruesome tales of curses and lurking horrors — and not at all well written. The purebloods go on and on about Turlough Niggle, but his stories are out-and-out thefts from Poe and Lovecraft."

Hermione had given this some thought. "I suppose the wizarding world is so small that there's not a large pool of talent. When a person has magical talent, it would be too much to expect them to have artistic talent as well. Their excuse for music is pretty grisly, too. What about this Master Prætorius?"

"Well, he's the exception that proves the rule. I'm surprised you haven't heard of him. He's one of the few magical artists working now. There was quite a drop-off after the invention of the magical camera in 1871." Hermione

secretly vowed to do some research. Lily went on. "The Headmaster brought him in to paint some places in the school: the library, the Great Hall, the quidditch pitch, and a few others." She leaned toward Hermione confidentially. "I think there was something special about the pictures — something linking them to the magic of Hogwarts. I was chosen pretty much at random to be in the library picture — or at least, only because Master Prætorius liked my hair, and needed people to be in the pictures for scale purposes."

"Did it take long?"

"The sitting? No, only a few hours. But," she said, "it wasn't like sitting for a Muggle picture. His paints were more like potions. He used samples from the library — a bit of dust, of bookbindings, of ink and parchment. And then he wanted samples from me, and that was not so pleasant — hair and nail clippings, and some skin from my cuticles were no problem — but then he also wanted some blood, and then," she said, with a look of distaste, "he insisted on removing a little of one of my back teeth."

"Eew," managed Hermione, thinking of her dentist parents. She was also uncomfortably reminded of the spell Voldemort had used at the end of the Tri-Wizard Tournament to reincarnate himself.

"Anyway," said Lily, "that tied me to the picture, because Master Prætorius said it was useless to have a person in a painting for scale, if that person were to go wandering off. But I think," she said, weighing every word, "that it also made me very much — me."

Hermione was fascinated, determined to find out what kind of potions and incantations were involved. A long conversation ensued, continuing late into the night. Lily wanted to know everything about Hogwarts, the wizarding world, and the Muggle news. She wanted to know the date, and who was Prime Minister, and if the Prince of Wales had ever married. They discovered mutual interests in ancient Egypt, in museums, and in the books of J.R.R. Tolkien. Hermione had never talked so much at a stretch, and felt herself growing hoarse.

With a shock, she finally became aware of the time. Reluctantly, she said, "I must get back to Gryffindor Tower."

"You'll come back, won't you?"

Hermione gathered up her belongings. "Yes, of course. We have so much more to talk about." They both laughed.

"Please don't forget." Lily-in-the-picture seemed very anxious. "Come back as soon as ever you can. And bring some recent *Daily Prophets* and a Muggle newspaper, too. If you

hold them close enough I can read them. Time has got so far away from me!"

Hermione cracked open the painting and peered out cautiously. Slipping away, she was struck by how eerily silent the castle could be at night. Echoing footsteps resounded faintly, and she was startled by odd shadows, but her luck held good; and within ten minutes she giving the password of "Longbottom Leaf." (Neville had not understood the reference, but had been pleased when Hermione had proposed it.)

It was late, and the common room was empty but for Harry, slumped in a chair and gazing off into empty space. Ron had told her that Harry's sleep was constantly disturbed by nightmares and visions. It was hardly surprising that he submitted himself to as little slumber as he dared. Earlier in the year, Hermione had urged Harry to ask for sleep potions, and had been rewarded with a furious tirade for her pains. He had worked through the worst of his grief over the summer, but he still suffered dark moods.

She wondered if she should tell him about the painting or even show it to him. Lily-in-the-picture was not Lily-who-was-Harry's-mother. The girl in the picture was a sixteen-year-old student, engrossed in her studies, friendly with

Severus Snape; and she despised the boy she would someday marry. *No*, thought Hermione, struggling with the paradox. *Lily-in-the-picture will never marry James. She hasn't even shown any interest in Harry. After all, he's not her son.*

Hermione murmured a good night to Harry, who nodded absently, still intent on the nothingness before him. She crept into the dormitory, trying to be considerate as she shivered out of her robes and into her pyjamas. Alone in her bed, listening to the soft breathing of the other girls in the room, she herself looked into the darkness, searching for answers.



SHE WAS TOO OBSESSIVE A STUDENT to neglect her assignments for two nights in a row, so it was Saturday morning when Hermione slipped away from her friends, carrying a peculiar and somewhat suspicious bundle. Potions, in the long and dreary Friday afternoon, had been a curious experience. Professor Snape had looked at her oddly several times, and had seemed on the point of keeping her after class, but had apparently changed his mind, and turned his back on her rather rudely, even for him.

Perhaps he wanted to ask me how to find the reading room again. Hermione felt comfortably smug. Her special corner of Hogwarts was still exclusively hers. No doubt Professor Dumbledore knew of it, but it was possible that he did not know that *she* did. There is, after all, a decided pleasure in knowing things known to no one else.

She turned her secrets over in her

mind, handling them with the pride of possession. Professor Snape and Lily Evans had been friends — or something close enough to have no other obvious name. Hermione wondered what Harry would think about that. His dislike of the Potions master, however just, had developed into a fierce and reflexive hatred that had already crippled the struggle against Voldemort.

Oldyfart, she thought, using Lily's contemptuous term, and smiled reluctantly. While it would be foolish to despise their enemy's powers, it was just as foolish to concede to him a name and a title that implied subservience. Perhaps Fudge's silly 'Lord Thingy' was not inappropriate. Or maybe they should ignore their enemy's demands, and simply call him by his real, but loathed name. *Why not just call him plain Tom Riddle?* Why not just publish the truth of it — the orphaned, rejected halfblood, raised by Muggles, longing desperately for a place amongst the elite of pureblood wizarding society? It would humiliate and infuriate him, and expose the weak and perverse foundations of the Death Eaters and their idiotic bigotry.

That brought Lily's projected book to mind. Bigotry is always stupid, but expressing concern about a proven threat would not be bigotry. Lily's study was dangerous. However important the issue, it would certainly anger

one faction or another, and pour fuel on an already blazing issue.

Lily was delighted with the papers. Hermione had levitated them up into reading position; and caught up on her own classwork while Lily murmured and exclaimed as she leaned close, taking in the news of an unimagined future. Hermione had brought the copy of *THE QUIBBLER* with Harry's interview as well. Learning more of his story had filled the simulacrum of his mother with indignation.

Hermione, concentrating on her transfiguration, half-heard the mutters of "Are they mad? It's just as I feared — the Ministry of Magic is worse than useless! Thick as planks! No, worse — malicious and willfully ignorant!" She learned on an elbow, covering an ear with her hand, until roused by Lily's raised voice.

"Hermione! Hermione! Over here! *Hermione!* GRANGER!"

Startled, Hermione looked up. Lily was standing in the foreground of the picture, green eyes blazing, a spot of bright colour on each pale cheek.

"Look here," Lily began, trembling with fury. "This won't do at all."

"It's been horrible," Hermione agreed. "A few of the worst Death Eaters, like Lucius Malfoy,

were sent to Azkaban after the battle in the Department of Mysteries last year, but as you read, they didn't stay there long."

"Doesn't anyone know where they are?"

Hermione had her own suspicions, but naturally had been told nothing, 'for her own protection.' She told Lily this, and then confided her private fears.

"I think they're here in Britain, right under the Ministry's nose. Things have broken down — the Ministry doesn't seem able to monitor all the suspicious activity in the magical community. They watch for the easy things — like underage magic, or splinching alerts, or obvious public problems with Muggles — but real, sophisticated, complex Dark Arts are simply too difficult for them to detect or deal with. There's too much going on, and not enough competent people to call on."

"I think it's always been that way," nodded Lily, her anger changing to an air of determination. "The Ministry's always been full of people who like their thinking done for them. They're no good with the odd mad genius. Look at the whole Grindelwald debacle. The Magical Ministries of Europe were helpless against him, and it finally took a fellow eccentric original like Dumbledore to put paid to that lunatic."

Hermione decided she could tell Lily about the

Order of the Phoenix. No one else was going to be here, talking to her, and Hermione had found it was helpful to discuss her thoughts with an intelligent friend. She briefly recounted the activities of the Order, Sirius's fall into the veil, the loyal people on their side; and then she decided to reveal Severus Snape's role as a double agent.

Lily listened in tense silence, pacing the light-filled space in front of the library table. She picked up her quill, twirled it between her fingers, and tapped it nervously. Finally, her eyes suspiciously bright, she choked out, "You mean he's a hero."

Putting aside her own very great dislike of Professor Snape for the moment, Hermione quietly agreed. "Yes. He's at risk of a very painful death constantly. He's our best source of intelligence about Voldemort."

"I knew it." Lily's pale face was enraptured. "I always knew that Severus would show them all, someday. There are all sorts of good things in him — he's clever and brave and loyal — and I thought only I could see it." Her face clouded over. "But you say the boy hates him."

"They've never got on. Professor Snape is horrible to the Gryffindors — horrible to nearly everyone but the Slytherins. Some of it is necessary, I suppose, for his cover story, but he was miserable to Harry from the first. We always assumed it was because of his dislike of

Harry's father and his friends."

"Well," said Lily acidly, "it's no more than they deserved. Those bullies tortured him at every opportunity. That smug James and his friend Sirius, who thinks — thought — himself so irresistible — and their horrible little toady Pettigrew. And then Remus, who turns a blind eye to anything his friends do. I've always wondered if they have something on him, and that's why he never challenges them." She stopped pacing, and turned an intent look on Hermione.

"I've got to get out of here. I've got to help."

Hermione stared, and began to sputter a weak objection. "I don't see how it could be possible —"

"Don't tell me it's impossible. I was put in here: there must be a way for me to get out."

Hermione stared some more, and then began to feel the irresistible urge to research, to accomplish the amazing, to show the wizarding world again what a Muggleborn could do. Her spirits rose at the magnitude of the deed, but then her inner Hermione, the one who obeyed the rules and respected authority, whispered to her words like "create terrible complications," "might be unethical," and the dreaded "could be construed as Dark Arts."

Lily must have seen the conflict in Hermione's face, for she snapped impatiently, "Don't start about misuse of magic. You need me. You

need everyone who can help. Severus is my friend, and *he* needs me."

"How far are you prepared to go —"

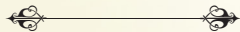
"How far?" Lily made a powerful, sweeping gesture. "All the way!" She was radiant and fierce, pressing against the boundaries of the canvas. "If you care about people, I mean really care about them, you should never put limits on what you'll do for them. It doesn't matter what'll they'll do for you. It doesn't matter if they ever know what you've done. You've got to do everything in your power for them, and you can't stop and count the cost, *because you're doing the right thing.*" She paused, and took a deep breath, still glowing.

Hermione was still too, at last seeing the Lily who had faced Voldemort and given her life for her baby.

Hermione squared her shoulders, and said thickly, "I'll do it."

"You'll help me? You mean it?"

"Yes." Hermione's mind was racing. They had the full resources of the Hogwarts library. They had the combined wits of two powerful, clever, and determined Muggleborn witches. They had a private place to work undisturbed. Hermione might have to attend class, but Lily had all the time in the world for research. "And we'll start right now."



Lily found several books about magical art in the Restricted Section. She also located a few in the non-restricted area, which Hermione declared she would bring here for the project.

"It seems plain to me," said Hermione, in her most didactic manner, "that the key to this is knowing all about Master Prætorius: how he mixed his paints/potions, and what charms he used."

Lily tapped her quill thoughtfully. "I'm going to write down in detail everything I remember about the process. It was only a short time ago for me, so it's quite fresh in my mind. However, knowing what he did isn't enough: we have to discover how to turn the process inside out and release me from the picture."

"If it can be done," conditioned Hermione.

"It must be possible," Lily said firmly, "I can't spend eternity in here reading *Pride and Prejudice*, no matter how pleasant it is. The other me is gone. I've got to get out there with you and join the fight."

Hermione had an uneasy moment. "What about Harry?"

"The boy? What about him? Of course I'll help him, but I'm not his mother!"

"He'll think you are."

Lily smoothed a stray lock from her fore-

head, and fastened her hair more securely. "Well, we'll deal with that when the time comes. Maybe he won't recognise me. I hope he's not much like his father, because James Potter is really irritating — always dancing attendance, and smirking in that 'I know what you need' way." She dimpled placatingly at Hermione. "Who knows — maybe we'll be friends. Anything can happen." More seriously, she went on. "What I do know is that the more people he has on his side, the better chance he'll have."

"There's a prophecy," Hermione blurted out. Lily looked at her curiously. "Harry told me about it. It's what the Death Eaters were looking for in the Department of Mysteries. They don't know what it said, but Harry does. It says that Harry and Voldemort must face one another and that only one will survive."

"All the more reason to throw in with the boy. He might have to face Oldyfart, but if enough of us are there to watch his back and fight the idiot Defecators, he can at least face the toerag alone, and not worry about the mob of flunkies." She drew breath, looking righteous.

"Defecators?"

Lily had the grace to look a little embarrassed. "Yes, well — why not?"

Exhausted from strong emotion, they both began shaking.

The walls echoed with shrieks of laughter from two overwrought witches.

Hermione found that it was actually quite easy to discover Master Prætorius's techniques. It was all neatly laid out in an unrestricted book that required only a witch who read Latin. She wondered again at the Hogwarts curriculum. Latin had been offered as late as the early '70s, but had been dropped at the retirement of the last Latin teacher. The current Ancient Runes class gave only a journeyman's smattering of dozens of ancient languages and their symbols. Hermione was thankful that she had had a good grounding in Latin at her Muggle school, and then had continued studying it on her own in the summers. In many cases, such as the Patronus charm, knowing a little Latin prevented some stupid and even dangerous mistakes. Once again, she wondered if it was deliberate. An unreadable book might as well be in the Restricted Section, or might as well not exist. Translation charms were unreliable at best, and a disaster at worst.

Master Prætorius's techniques themselves were not so easy. They required great skill in Charms, Potions, and Transfiguration, as well as an exceptional ability to concentrate and visualise. The

potions involved were named, but Lily found the actual recipes hidden away in a dusty, crumbling codex (also in Latin) that had not been read in decades. Even more exciting, there was information concerning reversal of the process, which had been used by the Egyptians as a last resort if a mummy were destroyed.

"No wonder Ramses II ruled for over sixty years," Lily laughed. "His faithful priest Satipy kept bringing him back, using tomb paintings. In the end, there was no one capable of bringing back Satipy himself, and Ramses met his long-delayed end. Satipy must have had extraordinary powers, for I can't see most wizards being able to cast the charm alone. It needs a witch or wizard both inside and outside the image for it to work really well."

"How can you cast the charm?" asked Hermione. "You don't have a wand."

"Of course I have my wand!" Lily pulled the object in question from her sleeve, gave it a flick, and then dropped her voice into a fey, confidential imitation of Mr Ollivander. "Ten and a quarter inches long, swishy, made of willow. Nice wand for charm work."

After an intense weekend of research, it became clear that there would be some diffi-

culties in completing the project. A *Seba* potion must be brewed. The potion, which when painted onto the picture itself would open a door (*Seba*) between the world of the image and the outside, was tricky enough; but it would also require some ingredients not found in the standard Hogwarts potions kit.

"We'll need blood — not much, but some," stated Lily flatly. "We might be able to use yours, in a pinch, but we'll get better results from Harry's, since he's actually related to me." She cocked her head to one side. "I'd rather use Petunia's. Serve her right to be used for potions ingredients." She shrugged, "All right, I know. Harry's here, and Petunia isn't. Too bad though. Do you think you'll have any trouble getting some?"

"Not if I make up a good enough lie," Hermione said, feeling rather wormish. The whole thing was sounding more and more like Voldemort's Dark resurrection spell. "I can always tell him I'm working on a special project, and I need boy's blood. Ron will look so horrified that Harry will help me out."

"And it's not really a lie," comforted Lily. "You really *are* working on a very special project."

"All right then," Hermione sighed. "What else is on the list?"

"Lots of water — a great tubful. What odd things... a cup of Professor's Sprout best pot-

ting soil should do for the earth, I think, and then some myrrh, some scarab beetle eyes, the blood you already know about, fresh lotus petals, a piece of gold — jewellery or coin — either will do... Oh, and this is curious. The potion needs to be mixed with the breath of the living. Apparently you have to blow on it continually while stirring widdershins, while the whole thing heats to just the temperature of human blood. You must immediately paint the door onto the picture, using a brush made from the hair of a cat. We say the *Sinube* charm together, and I walk through the door before the potion dries. If all goes well."

"If all goes well," Hermione repeated, thinking about all the ways it might not.





THE FEATHER OF MA'AT

SEVERUS SNAPE PROWLED THE hall outside the library, examining the wall minutely. He was absolutely certain that he had found the Granger girl in a small windowed room off this corridor, but there was no sign of an entrance. The door had been open, and he had not looked carefully at it when he had left the dusty little place in such a turmoil of memory and emotion.

He had been so overwhelmed when the picture of Lily had spoken to him, that he had not stayed long. Afterwards, he cursed himself for not taking his time, not enjoying such a miracle. This Lily was the Lily of his secret, happy memories: the Lily of the all-too-brief era of their friendship. The beginning of his sixth year had been the beginning of his best times at Hogwarts. After the horrors of his fifth year, he now had a wonderful, clever friend who shared his interests and listened to his dreams.

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THE PREFECT'S PORTRAIT

THE FEATHER OF MA'AT

She had had dreams, too, in those days: dreams that did not include Potter and his entourage. She was as ambitious as a Slytherin, and was full of plans for expanding her study of the effect of Muggleborns on the wizarding world. No one since had ever attempted such a book — or even thought of it, as far as he knew. She was to be the author of a powerful, controversial work, one that would rivet the attention of not just British wizarding society, but of wizards and witches throughout the world. She would be a recognised authority, a force for educating and shaping public opinion.

And she was willing to go where her research took her. She was willing to accept the consequences. That was the Gryffindor in her: fearless and energetic, not bound by preconceived ideas.

He had spent the last few nights huddled miserably over a bottle of Ogdens Old, pretending that he was not longing to see her again. Last night, he had surrendered, and had begun his search for the marvellous picture. *It's in yet another lair for the Gryffindors to use for their usual tricks*, he told himself. *As such, I owe it to the school to find it and render it off-limits*. The thought of that arrogant chit Granger pawing about the place, looking with her commonplace eyes at the picture of his friend, and possibly bringing Potter and that dolt Weasley to goggle, raised the stakes considerably.

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THE PREFECT'S PORTRAIT

Snape considered the pictures on the wall. One of them must be the entrance to the secret room. He paused briefly in front of the wizard Waterhouse's picture of Circe poisoning the sea. The brilliant green potion poured endlessly into the waves at her feet. Circe glanced at him briefly, with a nasty smirk, "Ever tried this?" she asked.

He looked at the pretty, malicious face with no sign of the distaste he felt. "No, I cannot say I have ever had occasion, having no sea-going enemies. Is there a small room behind you by any chance?"

Circe gave a sharp laugh, and returned to poisoning the water. "Wouldn't you like to know?"

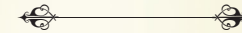
Rebuffed, Snape moved further down the hall, and looked at the big canvas of Helga Hufflepuff doing something extraordinarily virtuous and dull. "Excuse me," he said, trying to attract the notice of Hufflepuff and the odious, squeaking creatures around her. They were oblivious to him, clamouring at the witch in the picture to rid them of what appeared to be an infestation of fungal chronolytes. The fungus itself was well depicted. Snape leaned forward, admiring the detail of the reddish-brown growths.

"Do you mind?" A furry-footed midget glared at him. "Hobbits are being healed here." The hobbit turned its green-clad back on him. Helga gave him a quick, harried look of reproof.

"I beg your pardon," Snape said with icy

control, "I merely wished to ask if there is a small room behind you." He was ignored.

It was one of these two pictures, he was certain; but which one, and the necessary password to admit him, he knew not. Another option was to approach Granger, and ask (!) her how to find the entrance. After a long shudder, he devised a new plan...



"Cripes, Hermione," whined Ron. "Now you want *blood*?"

"Don't be such a baby," Hermione chided. "It's only a little blood, and it's for a very important special project."

"Hermione's 'I'm Getting 175% In All My Subjects Project,'" Ron muttered. "Will it hurt?"

"You can have my blood, Hermione," Harry interposed wearily. "Just leave a little for me."

Hermione smiled uncertainly, rather ashamed at how easily she had manipulated them. They and their books were comfortably spread out in the common room. She had made a point of spending the whole evening with them, to atone for a week's neglect. Harry looked idly at her pile of books.

"MOST POTENTE POTIONS, OPERA PRAETORII, MALLEUS MALEFICARUM, and — Hermione, this is THE BOOK OF THE DEAD! Do you think

you should be playing around with this?

"It's only a book," Hermione declared, distributing Flossing Mints. "No harm ever came from reading a book."

Ron and Harry exchanged a look of disbelief. "You're joking, right?" asked Harry.

Hermione huffed, and moved the stack of tomes away from Harry, over to her other side.

After awhile, they headed off to their dormitories. At Hermione's request, Harry carefully washed his hands, came back, and let Hermione draw a small vial of blood off, using a *Crudus* charm. Ron turned green and pointedly faced the wall.

"Thank you, Harry," Hermione said earnestly. "This really means a lot to me." Impulsively, she hugged him. Harry seemed surprised, and gave her an embarrassed pat. Ron rolled his eyes.

"Come on, mate," he urged Harry. "Maybe Hermione has bled you enough that you'll be able to sleep tonight."

Harry managed a smile for both of them and went slowly up the stairs. Hermione watched them off, feeling like the lowest form of life.

"It is odd that the charm is in THE BOOK OF THE DEAD," Lily observed. "I'm not dead. Never have been."

"Well," said Hermione, "the ancient Egyptians would have described you as Lily's *ka*, the embodiment of her spirit. As you know, the mummy was usually the home of the *ka*, but statues or pictures would do — the *ka* never died as long as an image of the person remained."

"Yes, yes, yes. Still, I don't think of myself as the image of anyone. I'm just myself."

"I suppose that's the way a good image is supposed to think."

Lily shrugged. "So the boy let you have the blood?"

"Please call him Harry," Hermione said. "It really bothers me when you call him 'the boy.'"

"Sorry. I don't care much for the name Harry. I can't imagine naming a child of mine that. It must have been Potter's idea."

"I don't know." A shiver ran up Hermione's spine, a feeling that she was climbing a stairway leading to the empty sky. "Lily, if this works — if you step out of the picture and are all right — what do we do then?"

Lily's smile slipped. "Tell the Headmaster, I suppose. I wonder if he'll be much put out."

It was quite an undertaking to fill the huge, number 30-sized cauldron with water. The *Seba* potion recipe was frustratingly vague in

some of its details, but Hermione had a feeling that conjured water might not yield satisfactory results, and was reduced to smuggling the miniaturised containers into the secret room a few at a time. The soil had been casually scooped up; Parvati Patil had good quality myrrh amongst the confusion of her cosmetic preparations; Hermione sacrificed a gold chain bracelet that she rarely had occasion to wear; the scarab beetles eyes were out in easy reach in the potions classroom; and she had spotted some lotus flowers blooming in Professor Sprout's water garden. No doubt the good professor would be unhappy to find some of her prized flowers ruthlessly stripped of their cool, sweet petals; but no price was too high for success in this venture, Hermione decided.

The nearly impossible item, surprisingly, turned out to be the paintbrush. She was unsure if a transfigured item would be sufficiently a true cat-hair brush to meet the requirements of the ritual. Filch had some large, filthy brushes that he kept for daubing paint on scratched walls: these would unquestionably contaminate the potion. There were no art supplies *per se* at Hogwarts, so Hermione was compelled to fire off a request via owl to her mother to buy her a selection of artists' brushes. Once deposited before her (and they raised Ron and

Harry's brows nearly to the ceiling), she borrowed a housemate's cat (Crookshanks she sadly rejected as part kneazle), and gave the lucky feline a long grooming. The sable hair of the brushes was removed and the cat hair charmed on. The resulting tools looked crude, but usable. The attaching charm could not be helped. The brushes were real wood and real cat hair. It was the best she could do.

Tonight she had decided to forgo dinner, so eager was she to see her enterprise through. She *had* conjured a worktable, laying out her books, equipment and ingredients with mathematical exactitude. The great cauldron was placed against the wall under the painting, and the water was beginning to heat. She had already determined the sun's path relative to the hidden room, so she would stir the potion in the opposite direction. Lily was pacing nervously around the library table, murmuring bits from the *Sinuhe* charm.

"Are you absolutely sure that this is what you want?" Hermione looked up at Lily, who did not seem to hear her at first.

Lily-in-the-picture swallowed, and said firmly, "Yes. Let's get on with it." She leaned back against the table, fingers drumming a quick, percussive rhythm. The painted library's copy of *THE BOOK OF THE DEAD* was open next to her.

The ingredients were added in the proper order, and the air became fragrant with myrrh and lotus. Hermione bent over the cauldron, blowing softly on the surface of the potion that she continually stirred with her wand. Lily watched her anxiously, mirroring Hermione's every breath. Steam began to rise in soft, white wisps, gradually obscuring the picture. Hermione's exquisite and extravagantly expensive magical thermometer was set to alert her when the perfect temperature had been reached. She had finally chosen the thickest of the brushes for the critical work, but the others were there in case something went wrong.

It was a slow process, even with a magical fire giving strong, evenly distributed heat. The jewel-like colours of the Tree of Life window began to fade with the setting sun. Hermione's arm grew tired, but she dared not stop or even slow down. Lily, glimpsed through the steam, was pale and determined, her lips moving soundlessly.

A curious, low, vibrating hum, more felt than heard, drew Hermione's attention. The book had said nothing of this, but it was most likely a side effect of such a powerful spell. It sounded a little like the whirring, deep-pitched sound of an Aboriginal bullroarer, that she had heard once in a travel program. Lily's eyes were very wide. She knew her own must be, too.

Wearily, she made herself continue stirring,

trying to maintain an even, unhurried motion. She began to feel light-headed from all the puffing, and from the perfumed air. Sweat trickled into her eyes, and she reminded herself to use only her left hand to wipe it away. The stirring must not be interrupted. The vibrating buzzed under the soles of her feet, and travelled through every bone in her body. Her teeth began to chatter. Unwillingly, she briefly wondered if she were doing something, very, very wrong.

The thermometer chimed sweetly, pronouncing the potion complete. Fumbling, Hermione picked up her brush, and dipped it into the potion. Not surprisingly, it was quite watery, but it also had a slick, iridescent sheen on it, as it dripped heavily from the brush. Hermione nearly panicked, not sure that she knew how to draw a door. She remembered the symbol in the *THE BOOK OF THE DEAD*, the heavy pillar-and-lintel gateway, and accomplished it in a few shaky strokes. As she painted the doorway around the motionless shape of Lily, curls of colour spiralled out of the picture, streaming around the edges of the door in a fantastic pattern. The humming grew louder.

Hermione stepped back. She and Lily looked at each other, drew breath, picked up their copies of *THE BOOK OF THE DEAD*, and began to read aloud:

*"Hail, Lord Anubis, Opener of Roads —
Hail, Lord Anubis, Opener of Roads,
Hail, Lord Anubis, Opener of Roads,"*

A grinning, jackal-headed shape formed out of the mist. It seemed interested in the proceedings, but was neutral, waiting on events.

*"Hail to thee, the Twelve who wait in the
Hall of Osiris,*

*O ye who open up the way, who act as
gatekeepers between the worlds,*

*And hail to thee, Lord of the Dead,
Osiris who is Pharaoh forever,*

May there be no opposition to her,

May she be found light in the balance,

*Let her be tested by the Feather of Ma'at,
she who is Truth,*

*Let her not fall to the Eater of the Dead,
to the Devourer of Amenta —"*

The hidden room was transforming. The ceiling was higher, much higher, painted blue and spangled with golden stars. On either side of Hermione marched a row of huge stone columns, each topped with a carved lotus capital. Incense floated on the air. Lily was at the other end of the hall, standing by a radiant goddess in a diaphanous robe, who placed a feather on a great golden scale, weighing it against a human

heart. Growling low, its rumble blending with the vibrations all around them, was a monstrous creature: crocodile-headed, with the upper body of a leopard and the hindquarters of a hippopotamus. Behind them, Hermione dimly saw the enthroned green mummy who was the pharaoh of the dead.

The vibrating was unendurable. No building could stand long against such an earthquake. Hermione felt tears filling her eyes, running unhindered down her face. Her nose was dripping. She did not dare move. She was afraid, so terribly afraid of the Judges. They were intent on Lily, but one inhuman, impassive face was turned briefly toward her, and she trembled. They must finish the incantation!

*"Let her go forth, gatekeepers, let her
return to the lands of Horus,*

Let her go forth to the living lands,

Let her not be driven away,

Nor cast upon the wall of blazing fire,

Nor eaten by the Devourers,

But let the way be opened!

I have spoken in Truth,

I have spoken in Truth,

I have spoken in Truth,

Djedeni em Ma'at!"

The humming swelled suddenly to a roar,

and climaxed in a distant, triumphant shout. The Halls of the Dead had vanished. They were in the secret room again, and Lily, with a wild look on her face, was staggering to the foreground of the picture. The doorway was a pulsing, glowing rectangle.

"It looks different," Lily called to her. "There's a light."

A shockwave blasted out of the picture, knocking Hermione flat on her back, cracking her head painfully against the stones of the floor. Dazed, she could only lie there helpless, while a twisting two-dimensional figure rushed crazily from the painting. Hermione screamed, and screams came from the distorting, fluttering shape. A wall of water crashed in all directions as it fell into the cauldron.

A wave surged up; and it was Lily, screaming and gasping, thrashing frantically, as she stretched and contorted into three dimensions. Hermione screamed again, and she realised at last that they must have help, *now*.

She ran to the door, smashing it open; smashing it open in the face of Severus Snape. Hermione could not form intelligible words. She grabbed his hand, and a fold of his robe, and pulled urgently. He flinched away reflexively in disgust, and then saw over her head, into the secret room.

Lily Evans was peering over the edge of a massive cauldron, her robes sodden, her hair in dripping, dark red elf locks around her white face. She feebly stretched a hand toward him.

"Severus," she whispered. "Help me."

The world had changed. Dumbledore, reading in his office, felt a quiver in the air and a crackle of ancient, dark magic. He got up deliberately, and began his investigations.

Harry Potter, sitting inattentively at the chessboard with Ron, felt a hot, wild rush of blood, and his eyes widened at an unexpected vision. Ron asked him, alarmed, "What is it, mate? Was it — *him*?"

"No —" said Harry, confused and oddly happy, "I saw my mum."

All over the castle, unusual events were noticed, or dismissed. Arithmantic tables shifted, well-known objects shimmered at their edges. The castle shook briefly and intensely, and then settled into quiet with a few creaks and groans. There was unusual activity amongst the ghosts, and after a long silent moment, the staircases, shocked into immobility, began moving again.

Snape thrust the irrelevant Granger aside,

and rushed to Lily. She was twitching, trying to keep her head above the liquid in the cauldron, and falling back limply. Snape reached into the warm, perfumed potion, his subconscious professionally noting details that he could analyse at a later time. He lifted the soaked, shaking girl out; and, pulling her closely to him, carried her out of the room and toward the Hospital Wing. He had been waiting, ever since dinner, for Granger to attempt to enter the secret room. He had been so focused on his plan that he had not noted her absence from the Great Hall. *She must have been here for hours... what has she done this time?*

Granger had recovered, unfortunately, her ability to speak; and was babbling at him, telling him some lunacy about a door and the Halls of the Dead. Snape ignored her; and saw only that it was indeed Lily, wonderful Lily, whom he was holding in his arms, carrying through the halls of Hogwarts. Lily looked up at him, squinting as she attempted to see him better. She clutched her wand in a white-knuckled grip.

"I was tired," she murmured thickly, "of being in the picture..." Her voice trailed off, and her eyes closed. Snape quickened his pace, barely hearing behind him the insufferable, pattering footsteps of the insufferable Granger.

HERMIONE, UNLIKE HER FRIEND Harry, was not accustomed to visits to the Headmaster's Office. She suspected that she was due for one, and spent the next few days waiting for the shoe to drop. The school was rustling with gossip about the strange events of Sunday night; and everyone was on edge, thinking that they portended some sort of disaster.

Lily had been taken to the Hospital Wing. Madam Pomfrey's shocked gasp told her that here was another who had recognised Lily Evans. Lily had disappeared behind a screen, and Hermione had been told to "wait, *there*," by Professor Snape. An imperious gesture of his hand punctuated the order. Hermione had perched on the designated chair, nervously triumphant.

He had come back within a quarter of an hour, and began interrogating her. "What had she done?" "What was in that potion?" "Had she told anyone

what she intended?" "Who else knew about the picture?" He had paused between questions, beetle-black eyes boring into hers, and she felt a kind of mental intrusion, as if someone were rifling through her thoughts.

Legilimency, she thought, indignant. *How dare he? I'm sure this is not authorised by the Governors!*

Snape had said nothing: nothing about her story, nothing about whatever memories he had examined. He said nothing at all, and merely stared at her, expressionless, for a disconcertingly long time.

Finally, he said, "Return to your dormitory at once. Say nothing of this to *anyone*. That includes your usual partners in crime. If I find that you have disobeyed me, you and they will probably have to be Obliviaged; and I shall personally see to it that your entire magical education is accidentally and irrevocably erased."

The dreaded summons came at last. Professor McGonagall, with an unusually reproofing look in her eye, told her at the end of Transfiguration class on Wednesday to report to the Headmaster after dinner that night. She sat silently at the table, picking at her food. Ron had decided, over the past week or so, that Hermione was in a snit, or obsessing over her

classes again, or having some sort of unmentionable female problem; and he had decided to pretend that nothing was happening. Harry, more sensitive to the unspoken around him, and constantly vigilant about any possible threats to himself or his friends, probed gently.

"Something's wrong, Hermione. Something must be worrying you. Don't say there isn't. I hate it when people lie to me."

Hermione was becoming more and more uneasy about the situation. Neither Madam Pomfrey nor Snape himself would give her any information about Lily's condition. She hated being in the dark as much as Harry.

She lowered her voice, speaking for his ears only. "There is something going on, Harry, but I just don't know enough to tell you about it yet. I promise I will as soon as I can." She saw his look of defeated anger, and clutched at his arm. "You *know* I will. I'm hoping to find out something tonight. I've been told to report to Professor Dumbledore after dinner."

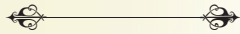
Harry looked at her amazement: partly out of concern, but also surprised that any other student would merit an audience with the Headmaster. He was instantly ashamed of his conceit, and gave her a reluctant nod.

The students were trickling out of the Great Hall. Hermione took a deep breath, and rose

from the table to keep her appointment. Harry patted her shoulder.

"Good luck, then."

"Thanks." She straightened her back, and headed to the Headmaster's Office.



Oddly enough, the whimsical password and her familiarity with the impressive entrance to the Headmaster's Office from Harry's description did not lessen Hermione's anxiety. She found the process all rather tedious. Her brief glance around the Office itself was more gratifying. The Headmaster's personal library was extensive; his collection of magical instruments, impressive; and while the presence of Dumbledore was expected, and the presence of Snape unsurprising, Lily was also there, comfortably ensconced in a squashy chair.

"Sit down, Ms. Granger," the Headmaster quietly commanded. The level blue gaze was unnerving. Lily came and sat by her, and gave her a sympathetic smile.

"I'm afraid we're really for it," Lily whispered.

"But you're all right, aren't you?" Hermione asked her anxiously. Certainly she looked very well indeed: eyes clear and bright green, hair and skin radiant, and seemingly full of energy.

"Never better," she was assured. "Madam Pom-

frey poked about me a bit — and there were some problems with vitamin deficiencies and some things not being exactly where they should —"

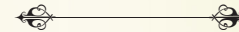
Hermione stared at her, alarmed.

"— but not to worry. There wasn't anything she couldn't sort out."

Hermione gave a sigh of relief. "Then all's well that ends well."

Snape snorted.

Dumbledore looked at her gravely. "Ah, that is not entirely true. Miss Evans's current status is hardly resolved, and your own position as the person who reincarnated her is also rather at issue. It would be a matter of some distress to me if Hogwarts's foremost sixth year student were to spend the rest of her life in Azkaban."



Not when facing the Judges, not even in those terrible hours in the Department of Mysteries, had she been so shocked and frightened. She had flattered herself that she had considered releasing Lily from all viewpoints: personal, moral, magical. She had never considered the legal ramifications.

"Oh, yes," the Headmaster assured her. "Were your actions and the result of this spell to become public knowledge, you would certainly be condemned for the rest of your natural life."

My dear Miss Granger, you used ancient Blood Magic to resurrect a dead person.” He looked at her keenly, and asked, “Was it Harry’s blood? Did you tell him what it was for?” She bit her lip, and was silent. He sighed. “That is unquestionably Necromancy, and it is illegal everywhere in the world. Did you never think about this?”

“No —” she faltered, “not really. Lily wanted to come and join us. She wants to help in the fight against Voldemort. It never occurred to me that helping her could be wrong.”

Dumbledore looked the closest to appalled Hermione could remember. “Miss Granger, there is a very good reason such magic is forbidden. What human who has lost a loved one has not longed to have him — or her — back? You were incredibly lucky to try this spell using an image painted by the genius of Uriel Prætorius, which contained some of Lily’s essence. Were news of your success and your techniques to be known, bereaved witches and wizards everywhere would be attempting to raise their loved ones with snapshots, with silhouettes, with sketches hastily drawn on tablecloths. Can you begin to imagine the hideous, abortive caricatures of life that might arise to torment the unlucky wizard with a horror worse than grief? If your potion had been even slightly cooler, or less meticulously

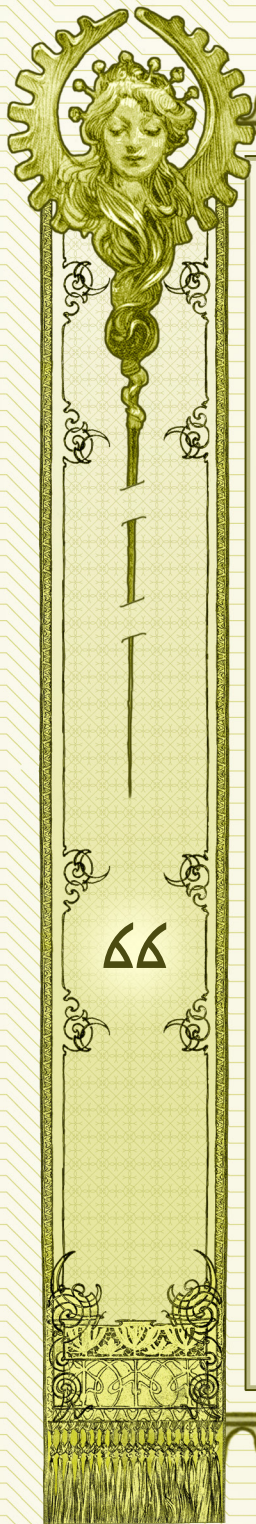
stirred, Miss Evans would certainly have died — or more accurately — gruesomely failed to live. She nearly died anyway.”

Hermione’s head went up, and she looked worriedly at Lily.

Snape observed coldly, “It was the cup of earth. You used Professor Sprout’s potting soil. It does not have quite the same composition as Egyptian earth from the banks of the Nile. The lack of trace elements and decayed animal matter —” He lifted his brows, enjoying Granger’s discomfort. Actually, she had done an astonishingly good job on the potion, but hell was welcome to freeze over before he would admit it.

Dumbledore continued, in a milder tone. “The research, the potion, and the incantation were quite brilliant. You’ve expended great thought and energy in doing this. I could have wished you had expended as much considering whether you should have attempted it at all. Have you thought what impact your actions might have on Harry?” Hermione eagerly began to reassure him, and then was stopped by the disappointed look in the wise blue eyes. Snape, standing behind the Headmaster, and pretending to examine a crystal armillary sphere, threw her a contemptuous and knowing glance.

Dumbledore quietly rebuked her. “How can you possibly imagine that this would be a good



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thing for him? To see an image of his mother who is not his mother? Instead of his tender and loving ideal, a fellow student who cares no more for him than any other classmate. It could cause him nothing but pain and misery. Therefore I tell you that Lily Evans cannot return to Hogwarts."

Lily stiffened and cast a fierce look at the Headmaster. "You can't just send me away! You can't deny who I am! I *am* Lily Evans! I'm here — *inside*." She thumped her chest with her fist, rising to her feet. "When Hermione told me about that filthy Oldyfart, and how he killed the other Lily, how he threatens everything that makes life worth living — I knew I had to do something. Severus risks his life constantly to fight him, and no one knows it." Dumbledore and Snape exchanged quick, alarmed looks. "Yes, I know about the Order of the Phoenix. I know how few, how very few people are willing to stand up and fight. You need my help, Severus needs my help, and that boy — Harry — needs my help. You'd better get used to having me around, because I'm here to stay. Find work for me, *and let me get to it!*"

Snape reflexively muttered something about "Bloody Gryffindor heroics," but his heart was not in it, and he stared at Lily with only a veneer of his customary scorn. There was a light in his

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eyes Hermione had never before seen there.

Dumbledore gave a long sigh, and agreed sadly, "You are, I grant you, a *kind* of Lily Evans. Perhaps the Lily Evans as seen by Uriel Prætorius, on the day you were painted."

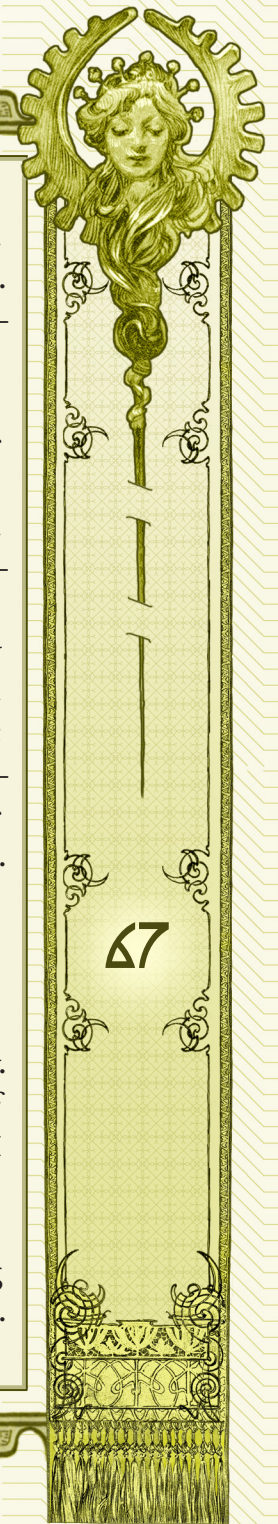
"In that, I'm no different than anyone else. We all change throughout our lifetimes. Would your own Headmaster recognise you as you are now?"

He smiled, mild and reasonable. "A valid point. Nonetheless, it is unlikely that the Ministry of Magic would acknowledge you as the real Lily Evans. They could conceivably deny you any rights as a living being and whisk you off for further experiments. I take it that is not what you would prefer. A sixth-year, sixteen-year-old student needs, first of all, to finish her education to be of any use in the present struggle. Lily Evans cannot return to Hogwarts. Thus you will simply have to be — someone else."

There was a long silence.

Lily steadied herself and asked, "Who?"

The Headmaster studied her compassionately. Leaning back in his chair, he told her, "One of the advantages of a life as long as mine, is that I have made a great many people indebted to me in the course of it. I have now called in some of these debts on your behalf." He drew a long parchment document from the pile on his desk. "Have you ever been to Canada, my dear?"



"Never, Professor," answered Lily warily.

"Nonetheless," he declared with a dreamy smile, "though you may not have been *to* Canada, you will be *from* Canada. The principal of Medicine Hat Lodge is an old ally and associate, and he is willing to provide thorough documentation of your birth, background, and studies. I believe it would be best that your new identity have nothing in it that would make associations easy, and thus, we have arranged that you will be a pureblood orphan from the Jones family."

"The Joneses!" interjected Snape, making no effort to conceal his disgust.

"I want to keep the name Lily," Lily said, in a tone that suggested that this would not be negotiable.

Dumbledore considered her request. Lily added, "It's not that uncommon a name. The other Lily didn't have a patent on it. I have a right to my own name. No one could possibly imagine who I am."

Dumbledore looked at Snape, who shrugged. "Why not? It's not as if anyone is expecting Lily Evans to turn up."

The Headmaster said slowly, "Very well. I understand your need to have something of your old identity —" Lily glowed with relief. "But —" Dumbledore was not finished with Lily. "There is the matter of your appearance. Some-

thing must be done. There are still some people capable of noticing a resemblance. Professors McGonagall, Flitwick, and Sprout, as your former teachers, have been informed of your incarnation. They were too familiar with your manner of speech and your distinctive magical style to be deceived for long by any appearance charm. I will talk to Remus in due course. No one else at the school is likely to recognise Lily Potter, even in your current guise."

"*Evans, Lily Evans,*" Lily muttered. Snape appeared oddly smug.

Dumbledore smiled benignly. He seemed to have recovered from his dark mood, and was once more the Headmaster Hermione knew and loved. "We simply need to avoid accidental associations made by more casual acquaintances. Any real structural changes could only be transitory, and glamours are easily penetrated, but some charms are quite long-lasting and harmless."

With a whimsical air, he waved his wand lightly toward her.

"*Tingeo.*"

Lily's auburn hair lightened to a golden glory: her eyes altered through a sea-green, to a sky-blue, and then to a stunning azure. Dumbledore cocked his head and regarded his work with a certain pride. Hermione stared at Lily, impressed. She looked rather goddessy.

Snape was stunned; and Lily, glimpsing the blonde tresses contrasted against her black robe, fled to the nearest mirror to get a good look.

Snape said slowly, "Rather showy, perhaps."

Hermione, rather daringly, suggested, "People would be so busy looking at her hair, they might not see anything else."

Lily, still admiring her mirror image, tossed her golden locks. "Don't hate me because I'm beautiful."

Snape very nearly smiled. He saw Hermione gaping at him, and glared at her poisonously. Lily craned her neck to have a better look at the back of her hair.

Dumbledore cast the spell again. "*Tingeo*."

The shadows in the room rushed toward Lily. They pressed around her, and her hair darkened like quills drawing up ink. In a moment, her hair and eyes were impenetrably black — blacker than Snape's own. Snape himself was pleased and admiring.

"You look a little like a vampire," remarked Hermione. Lily's fair skin appeared even whiter, contrasted with her jet-black hair and eyes.

Lily leaned closer to the mirror, grimacing to reveal any changes to her canines.

"She does not look at all like a real vampire, you silly girl," Snape corrected acidly. "Your Muggle roots are showing."

Lily considered. "You know, Professor, I think this might do. I really look quite different." She turned to him, smiling mischievously. "This is better than a masquerade! How long does it last?"

"As I cast it today," Dumbledore smiled in return, "it should last indefinitely. The counter-spell, luckily, is not '*Finite Incantatem*,' which would certainly cause problems. It is, in your case, '*Propria*.'" He looked at her again. "A different hair-style is also in order."

With another wave, Lily's hair was plaited into a neat long braid down her back. A few curling wisps of inky-dark hair framed her face.

Lily beamed at Dumbledore. "Professor, you should teach a special seminar in cosmetic and hair-styling charms!"

Dumbledore beamed back. "Master Prætorius worked on canvas. I find it more intriguing to work on the living subject. Another useful bit of subterfuge seems wise." He uttered, "*Vox nova!*" with a flick of his wand.

Lily looked at him, puzzled. He smiled enigmatically.

Lily asked, tentatively, "What does that do? —" and stopped, touching her throat in confusion. Her voice had changed, the accent flattened and Americanised, the voice itself somewhat lower. Snape smirked at her.

Lily began muttering to herself, cocking her

head as if to hear her voice more clearly. "*Lily Jones from Medicine Hat Lodge? Let's go roond and aboot in a boat?*" She gave an amused snort, and laughed to Dumbledore, "It will take quite of bit of talking to get used to *this!*"

Dumbledore regarded them all seriously. "Harry, of course, must never know of your identity. I rely on all of you," he looked pointedly at Snape, "to protect him from such useless and hurtful information."

Hermione fidgeted in her chair. Lily was more forthright.

"Professor, forgive me for saying so, but I believe it would be better to tell the boy the truth. He might otherwise learn it by accident, and that would be worse for him. He'll understand the reason for secrecy about my identity as well as anyone." She paused then, seeming distracted by the strange sound of her own voice. "Besides, if he doesn't know who I am, he might take it into his head to fancy me, and what then?"

Hermione murmured, "Eeww."

Dumbledore shook his head. "I hesitate to burden him with such knowledge. Harry has suffered a great deal for one so young, and this could well make his situation worse."

"Harry is certain to recognise her eventually, Professor," Hermione blurted out. Dumbledore looked at her curiously. Snape raised

his brows. "I mean, he has pictures of her, sir, and he *studies* them. And I think you should tell him right away, because nothing makes him angrier than not being told things. He's stronger than you think."

Snape's mouth twisted in distaste. Lily gave him an arch look and declared, "My boy. Defeats Dark Wizards in the cradle." Snape growled, but let it pass.

Dumbledore gave a resigned sigh. "It never seems to end for Harry. In this case, though, I believe you are right, Miss Granger. Harry does not respond well to deception. You and I will speak to him early tomorrow."

Hermione groaned to herself. She really hadn't thought through the situation to the inevitable confrontation. *It won't be pretty.*

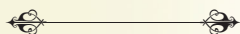
Dumbledore had turned his attention back to Lily, and said, "You will have to be Sorted publicly. Anything else would raise questions. And you are, after all, new to Hogwarts, so I must ask you to remove your Gryffindor tie, and —" he calmly extended his hand, "to surrender your prefect's badge."

"I really *liked* being a prefect," Lily admitted ruefully.

Hermione regarded her with sympathy, as Lily reluctantly removed her gleaming badge, and laid it in the Headmaster's palm. She loos-

ened and pulled off her red and gold tie, and thrust it into the pocket of her robes.

"I think, for now, you should go to the Guest Apartments, and spend the night there. Your luggage," Hermione and Lily stared at each other, and Dumbledore smiled beatifically, "has already arrived."



The three of them left the Headmaster's Office in varying moods of anxiety and elation. Hermione was already wondering how many classes she and Lily would share, and if Lily could be her partner for Potions. How pleasant it would be to have a friend in the sixth-year dormitory. She had always felt subtly excluded by Lavender and Parvati. Now she would have a friend of her own, with whom she could whisper secrets as they fell asleep.

Snappe had composed himself with difficulty. Lily was back. Lily would be at Hogwarts for the foreseeable future. *She is here, but instead of being separated by house rivalries, we are separated by over twenty years!* He could have wept at the irony. Nevertheless, she would be in his N.E.W.T. class — *Another Gryffindor will be in my class!* He began to consider how best to deal with her in public...

His thoughts were interrupted by Lily's

new, strange voice.

"Severus, what's wrong with the Joneses?" Lily whispered urgently.

He rolled his eyes, and Hermione felt she had suddenly, in that reaction, seen Snape the student and classmate of Lily. "You'd better learn all you can about wizarding North America. The wretched little busybodies with whom you'll be associating are bound to quiz you. Jones," he began, with the air of one giving a lesson to a pair of hopeless dunderheads, "is the most common wizarding name in Canada and the States. Even as late as 1850, wizarding criminals from Britain and Europe were not generally punished by imprisonment, or death, or even the Kiss. They were transported to less populated areas, from which there was little chance of their escape. Transoceanic Apparation is still extraordinarily difficult and dangerous, and in those days, completely impossible. From 1025 until 1692, most transported witches and wizards were sent to North America."

"Yes, I know," Hermione eagerly interrupted, "and then there was the security breach and the Salem Witch Trials; and the Ministries decided that North America was no longer isolated enough —"

Snappe rounded on her, eyes blazing black fire. "Who is telling this story?"

Hermione, stopped, abashed. "Sorry, professor. You are."

Snape sneered disdainfully. Lily laid a soothing hand on his arm. "Please go on, Severus." She shot Hermione an exasperated look behind Snape's black-clad back. Hermione shrugged a mute apology.

"When a condemned witch or wizard was transported," Snape continued, in icy tones, "their families generally wished to renounce their connection to the felon. Thus the individual was stripped of his or her family name. A custom sprang up, from a large group of Welsh wizards banished in 1455, of adopting the name Jones. Thus the name Jones means absolutely nothing. Your ancestors could be Moodys or Malfoys or McGonagalls. There will be some speculation amongst the purebloods, but a typical pedigree will be provided you that reaches back to, say, 1650 — and goes no further. The name Jones simply indicates that you are a witch whose family patriarch hailed from the British Isles."

"What about French-Canadian witches?" wondered Lily.

"DuBois," answered Snape, concisely. "Laveau, in Louisiana. Ramirez in Latin America. There are other names, of course, but Jones, DuBois, Ramirez, and Laveau, with a sprinkling of Smiths, Mankillers, and Walkers, are

by far the most common."

Words bubbled irrepressibly from Hermione. "And of course, the boundaries between the magical and Muggle worlds have always been more porous in the Americas, and are practically non-existent amongst the Native American population —"

Severus Snape's wand was instantly pointed between her eyes.

"*Silencio*," he hissed. Hermione found herself mouthing soundlessly. Snape gave a satisfied grunt, and continued his lecture. "You would do well to read the history of Medicine Hat. It's in the library, and I shall bring you the book. As to why you are here, a few hints will be dropped — your new guardian finds the curriculum at Medicine Hat too non-traditional — you have been sent here to put you out of the way of an inappropriate admirer. Such rumours are easily started; and in your case, the more obfuscation, the better."

Snape and Lily kept pace going down the halls, Hermione trotted behind them, trying to counter the silencing spell, and mutely insulting Snape behind his back. *It wasn't fair!*

They had reached the Guest Apartments, and Snape gave the password: "*Advena!*" A painting of a young shepherd playing a bone flute swung away from the wall, and Lily

entered. Hermione glanced in.

It was all very luxurious, in a 16th century sort of way. The carved oak chairs were cushioned, and there was a noble blaze in the elaborate fireplace. An arched doorway allowed a glimpse into an equally grand bedroom, complete with a bed that looked equal to accommodating most of the Gryffindor girls, after they had climbed the steps necessary to accessing it. Tapestries softened the stone of the walls. Purple velvet draped the windows.

"Smashing!" she mouthed to Lily. Lily looked around her, bemused and amused.

"Might as well enjoy it as not," she smiled at Snape, "since I'll only have it for the night."

Snape stood outside the doorway, stiff and uncomfortable. "I shall bring you the book shortly."

"Perhaps we could have some sandwiches or something, too," Lily suggested. "I haven't had a proper dinner. We can look over the book and have a good chat together." She gave Hermione a smile and a wave, which Hermione returned. "Goodnight, then, Hermione. I'll see you tomorrow. And Severus, do be a sport and take that spell off her?"

Snape gave her a nod and shut the painting.

He turned to Hermione. Staring down his nose, he snarled, "You can't leave anything

alone. You must always be prying into things that do not concern you. You must always try to impress everyone with your cleverness. Do you know what you've done? Do you know how this could change everything?" Grudgingly, he waved his wand at her. "*Finite incantatem.*"

Hermione was tired and tense. She thought of Harry's reactions; she thought of Lily, and herself, and how her achievement must forever remain secret. She muttered, mostly to herself, "She's my friend, and she wanted to get out and be free. She's your friend and she wanted to get out and help you. That's what she said," she continued, her voice rising. "She wasn't thinking about Harry or me or anyone else. She said, '*Severus is my friend, and he needs me.*'"

Their eyes met. Hermione flinched away.

"Go to your dormitory, you tiresome little twit."

Throat swelling with resentment, Hermione turned her back on him and stalked back to Gryffindor Tower. She entered the common room to find Harry in front of the fire again, waiting for her.

"So? What's happening? What can you tell me?"

Hermione felt overwhelmed by the day, the fright she had had, the complicated story she must know, and now by this energetic young male. In his current mood, intense and curious, looking at

THE HEADMASTER'S OFFICE

Hermione with his mother's green eyes, he was eerily like Lily. It gave her an unsettled feeling, as if she were seeing two images at once.

"Dumbledore is going to tell you everything in the morning. I'm going to be there too, since I'm involved."

Harry was concerned and grim. Hermione couldn't bear that he might worry all night. "But please understand: it's nothing terrible. It's very strange and peculiar, but sort of — *wonderful* as well. I can't tell you any more right now, but you will know everything about it tomorrow."

"So you're all right, then? I was worried about you."

Please, please don't let him be angry with me about this. "I'm all right. It's been a long day, and I've got to get some sleep. You too."

Harry gave her his beautiful smile. "Good-night, then."

They walked out of the common room and separated at the stairs. Hermione, full of hopes and fears, spent a restless night wondering what Lily and Professor Snape were talking about, thinking how she might have done things differently, practising what she would say to Harry the next day, and stubbornly maintaining that it was all for the best.

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THE CANADIAN SIXTH YEAR

N.E.W.T CHARMS WAS THE FIRST class on Thursday morning for all three of them. Harry and Hermione shared a free period afterward, while Ron went off to N.E.W.T. Divination, so it was not surprising that the message to report to Dumbledore came at the end of Flitwick's class. Harry had been quiet all morning, obviously aching with curiosity, but too generous to torment Hermione with it. Nonetheless, the curiosity manifested itself physically, as Harry bounced a little on the balls of his feet as they waited to be admitted to the Headmaster's office.

Hermione was curious herself. She wondered if Lily would be there when they arrived. Dumbledore, however, had evidently decided to break the news to Harry more gradually. The ritual sweets were offered and refused. The suggestion to sit down was not.

Dumbledore gave Harry a kind and paternal smile before beginning

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their talk. Hermione could hardly meet the Headmaster's eyes.

"Harry," he began, "you must have surmised that something extraordinary has taken place over the past few days."

"Yes, sir," Harry admitted. "We thought we were having an earthquake Sunday night, but that wasn't possible, was it? So we knew it must be magic, and pretty powerful magic at that."

"Just so. A quite remarkable magical effort. Miss Granger here was involved, obviously; and since it concerns you, we agreed to tell you the entire story. I think, Hermione, "he directed, "you should begin with the Reading Room and the picture."

Hermione took a deep breath, and spoke, looking at her hands. "Several weeks ago, quite by chance, I found a new room here at Hogwarts near the library. I was using it as a study room, because Madam Pince was so — because Madam Pince felt I was spending too much time in the library. There is a picture of the library in this hidden room, and in the picture was a student from several years ago. You know how pictures like to talk sometimes."

She glanced up at Harry, and he nodded encouragingly.

"Well," she continued, "this student and I started talking, and I explained about the War,

and about Voldemort, and about The Boy-Who-Lived." She looked a quick apology at him, and went on. "The student was terribly upset to hear about what had been going on and wanted to help us in the War. Before I knew it, I was researching how to reanimate portraits and release them from the canvas —"

Harry jumped to his feet, overjoyed. "It's Sirius! You've brought Sirius back!"

Hermione and Dumbledore looked at him, appalled at the misunderstanding.

"Not Sirius, Harry! No, it's someone else." Her heart was wrung by his anguished expression. He slumped back into his chair. "It's someone else who cares a lot about you and about fighting the war. But you must understand the picture was made when she was sixteen, so she didn't know about you at first, and everything was different for her then —"

Harry's eyes were huge. He looked wildly at Dumbledore, who nodded slightly.

"Mum?" he whispered. "I saw her then — right after all the strange things happened. I saw her as plain as anything." A tiny, wondering smile touched his lips. "Mum is alive again?"

Hermione saw Dumbledore's face, and hurried on. "You have to understand that she's just sixteen, Harry. She's just like us. It was a time in her life when she and your dad were

not even good friends yet. She's different than I imagined — really interested in school work and her special projects."

Harry smiled — shakily. "Something like you."

"Well, a little. We had a lot in common, and we enjoyed talking together. She hadn't really thought about being anybody's mother yet; but when she heard about Voldemort and the Death Eaters, and how — well, she calls your real mum "the other Lily" — when she heard about how Voldemort had killed her, she was so angry that she begged me to help her. And I did." She took another deep breath, hoping Dumbledore would spare her any more.

Harry looked at her in awe. "Hermione, that's brilliant!" He looked at Dumbledore. "That's really brilliant! That's Order of Merlin brilliant!"

Dumbledore shook her head, gravely. "No, Harry. It was brilliant, but it must remain absolutely secret for many reasons. First of all, what Miss Granger did is forbidden magic that would certainly earn her a life's sentence in Azkaban, were this to become known."

"But —"

"No, Harry. She used your blood to perform Necromancy. No one in the Wizengamot or the Ministry would show her any mercy. This event must never be revealed to *anyone*."

Hermione was hot with shame. She glanced

at Harry briefly, and looked down again. Harry frowned a little, remembering how she had taken his blood, but he pushed the memory aside in favour of the amazing situation before him.

"We can't tell Ron, even?"

"No, Harry, the fewer people who know, the better. Even knowing that this spell has been performed and not reporting it could subject us all to severe penalties. Enough people know already: the three of us; Professors McGonagall, Flitwick, and Sprout, who taught Lily and would recognise her; Madam Pomfrey, who had treated her before; Remus Lupin, with whom I spoke last night; and Severus Snape."

Harry snorted in disgust. "Snape! Why tell *him*?"

"Professor Snape, Harry," Dumbledore corrected him. "And he did after all, attend Hogwarts with your mother, just as Professor Lupin did." He cast a glance in Hermione's direction, and she understood.

"Lily from the picture was painted in her sixth year, Harry," she told him. "She was Professor Snape's partner in Potions and they were pretty good friends at the time." Harry shook his head angrily, but Hermione knew he must hear this. "Yes, Harry, they were friends, and I can tell that he thinks a lot of her — there were problems with the spell, and I went to get help. As soon as he saw her, he carried her to

Madam Pomfrey and did all he could —”

Harry had stopped listening. He was now waiting for Hermione to stop talking. “When can I see her?”

Dumbledore smiled slightly. “In just a moment.” Harry glowed with excitement. “Her appearance has been modified to disguise her. I’m sure you can see why.” Harry nodded eagerly. “She will admitted to Hogwarts under the name Lily Jones, as a pureblood transfer student from Canada. She understands the need to finish her education. She also knows about the Order of the Phoenix.” His eyes slid inexorably to Hermione’s, full of rebuke.

A door to the office had opened, and Lily quietly entered the room. Harry got to his feet unsteadily, and the two of them stared at each other for a long moment.

“Mum?” Harry managed.

Lily flinched. She said carefully, “You’re obviously Harry. I’m your age, and I’m not exactly your mother.” She saw his lost look and quickly added, “Think of me as your mother’s twin sister. We’re just the same genetically, but we’ve had different experiences. I’m here to help you and everyone else who’s fighting Voldemort.” She looked at him again, and burst out, “I’m sorry if this hurts you. It’s all pretty strange to me too. Mind you, I asked for it. I

couldn’t just sit there in the painting, seeing my friends grow old and not helping them when they needed me.”

Harry was staring at her, not unhappily, but full of eager curiosity. “Are you supposed to sound like that?”

Lily attempted a laugh. “This is the Headmaster’s disguise. The hair and eye colour too.”

“It makes you look like — Professor Snape.”

Dumbledore interposed. “A piece of misdirection that should help protect her true identity.”

Harry asked, still gazing at Lily, “What classes are you in?”

“I hardly know myself.” She turned to Dumbledore. “Let’s see — you provided me with the books for Transfiguration, Charms, Defence, Potions, Arithmancy, Runes — and History! What happened to Herbology and Muggle Studies? Why am I doomed to more of Professor Binns?”

Dumbledore observed mildly, “If you are still interested in your special project, a N.E.W.T in History will give you more academic credibility. It is not advisable, as your assumed identity is that of a pureblood, for you to take Muggle Studies at the present time.”

“That’s still four classes together.” Harry smiled. “It’s going to be brilliant. When are you coming back to Gryffindor Tower?”

"Miss Jones must be Sorted first, Harry," said Dumbledore. "I'm sure you understand. The ceremony will take place tonight. Lily and I still need to meet with Professor Lupin and go over some details of her story."

Hermione got up, feeling that, all in all, it could have gone much worse. "Well, Professor, this is working out fairly well. It will be wonderful to have Lily join us tonight —"

"Onelastthing, Miss Granger," Dumbledore said gravely. "There is the matter of your punishment."

The three students stood frozen. Hermione squeaked, "My punishment?"

"Oh, yes, quite indispensable. Nothing like a life sentence in Azkaban, of course, but still something memorable enough to remind you of the need to consider your future actions more carefully. I am quite astounded by your skill with the potion you devised. It seems to me that such a remarkable talent should not go uncultivated. Therefore, you will be assisting Professor Snape every Friday evening for the rest of the school year. I'm sure he has much to teach you."

Hermione gaped at him. "I'm to be Professor Snape's skivvy — his Potions slave for my entire sixth year?"

Dumbledore was perfectly calm. "Yes, that is correct. It is an extraordinary opportunity — it

could well develop into a full assistantship next year, or even an apprenticeship after graduation."

Harry and Hermione regarded him with horrified disbelief.

Lily shook her head. "It doesn't seem fair that she's being punished and I'm not."

Dumbledore did not smile. "You did not make the potion. Miss Granger did."

To anyone else, it seemed an ordinary evening at Hogwarts. Harry and Hermione, however, went down to dinner bursting with anticipation. It was painful to keep such a secret from Ron, but so it must be. It was particularly painful to conceal that there even *was* a secret. Hermione glanced at Harry, and saw that he had made a special effort tonight. His robes were spotless, his hair was brushed as neatly as his hair would permit, and he was almost *squeaky* clean.

Never had it taken so long for the students to gather at the tables. Never had it taken so long for the teachers to find their places. Finally, Dumbledore rose from his chair and commanded their attention.

"I am pleased to announce that we have a new student joining us tonight. Lily Jones has transferred to Hogwarts from Medicine Hat Lodge in

Canada, and will be in sixth year. I know you will all welcome her to our school." He looked down to the doors of the Great Hall. "Miss Jones, you will now be Sorted into your House."

Lily walked through the Great Hall, head high, under the anxious eyes of Harry and Hermione, the concerned ones of Snape, Lupin, and the other staff in the secret of her identity; and ignored the vocal speculations of the student body — especially those of the older boys.

She reached the stool in front of the Head Table and sat composedly. Professor McGonagall, with a little hesitation, handed her the Sorting Hat, and Lily set it firmly on her head.

There was a tense silence. This was always a moment of high drama at Hogwarts, and most were enjoying it to the full. The silence lengthened. Hermione could see a variety of expressions crossing Lily's face, and wondered what was being communicated.

Lily, sitting before all of Hogwarts, was outwardly serene and inwardly uneasy, for the first words addressed to her were:

"Ah, here's someone I've looked into before! What! You're back! It was Gryffindor the last time, wasn't it? Oh, yes, I never forget a mind I've met! Very courageous indeed! Better than clever, too, as I recall — briefly considered Ravenclaw for you — but no! Much too

aggressive for them! Let's see — bold as ever, and wanting to do even better this time! Full of ambition, you are! And using a false name to get here? Sly of you!"

"I am *not* sly," Lily answered back, annoyed. "This is a ruse to get me back into Hogwarts and prepare me to help fight against that horrible Oldy — oh, you knew him as Tom Riddle! And I can't use my real name, because no one must know who I am!"

"Very, very, cunning," insinuated the Hat. If it had had a proper face, Lily would have wanted to punch it. It purred, "And very ambitious too, if you want to be a match for our Tommy! Maybe Slytherin is the place for you!"

"I'm not a pureblood, you know. I'd hardly fit in!"

"Ah, but they won't know that, will they? You're presenting yourself as a pureblood, and they'll be none the wiser! Tommy wasn't a pureblood, either, you know. Ambition and cunning trump blood in my reckoning. And besides, I've been having reservations for some time about the house divisions. You'd do well in Gryffindor, of course, amongst all the other lions, but you'll go farthest in achieving your goals — in **SLYTHERIN!**"

The Slytherin table erupted in cheers. The girls were not quite so delighted, but the boys scuffled

discreetly amongst themselves to provide a place for their lovely new housemate. Draco Malfoy, whose prestige had slipped notably as his father's fortunes fell, was still someone to be reckoned with, and Miss Jones was soon seated beside him. Blaise Zabini, suave and soigné, however, had unobtrusively managed to appear at her other side. The two boys eyed one another warily, but both approved of the new Slytherin's pureblood looks and coolly polite demeanour.

Harry and Hermione's jaws had dropped. They stared at each other in confusion and disappointment, and looked up at the Head Table. Snape was gloating. Lupin was a picture of resigned melancholy. McGonagall, Flitwick, and Sprout all appeared astonished. Dumbledore's reaction was by far the most interesting. He seemed genuinely pleased; for he caught Harry's eye and gave him an almost imperceptible smile.

Dinner began. Whilst stuffing his face, Ron loudly gave his opinion.

"Well," declared he. "There's another filthy Slytherin to keep an eye on! Did you see her, swaggering in here like she owns the place? And she looks just like Snape — probably his long-lost daughter or niece or grandmother or whatever! You know those Joneses are all criminals anyway, so I reckon she'll fit right in with that lot!"

Harry looked sick. Hermione decided to put

a stop to this sort of talk immediately. "Stop it, Ron! You don't know anything about her! She's probably perfectly nice — the Hat puts people in Slytherin because they're ambitious, and there's nothing wrong with that! You could do with a little more ambition yourself!" She found Harry's hand under the table and squeezed it.

Harry stared down at his plate, and then murmured quietly in Hermione's ear. "The Hat wanted to put me in Slytherin, too."

She gave him a startled look, and then decided to put the best face on the situation. She whispered back, "It might be a good thing. It will help protect her identity, and we'll have a friend amongst the Slytherin students. We've never had one of our people there before. You saw that Dumbledore wasn't upset. I'm disappointed, too, that we won't have her in Gryffindor, but this could be a *really* good thing!"

Snape was consuming his dinner with an uncommon degree of enjoyment. Lily would be in his own house. *I can favour her openly. I can give her House points. Potter won't have as many opportunities to make her his little mother. This could be a really good thing.*





THE SERPENTS' DEN

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LILY WAS NOT AFRAID, not *exactly*, sitting at the Slytherin table; but she was certainly on her guard. This seemed to do her no harm with her new housemates. Based on Severus' briefing the night before, the handsome blond boy on her right was Draco Malfoy, the spoiled son of an escaped Death Eater. Severus was concerned about him, for this year Draco was alienated and sullen. The world he had taken for granted all his life was collapsing around him, with his father's imprisonment and flight, and the confiscation of much of the family's holdings. Friends had fallen away: his girlfriend had told him it was time to "see other people." Slytherin was accustomed to hostility from the other houses, but the present political situation had made it a house divided.

The dauntingly well-groomed boy to her left would be Blaise Zabini, whose cosmopolitan family had a long

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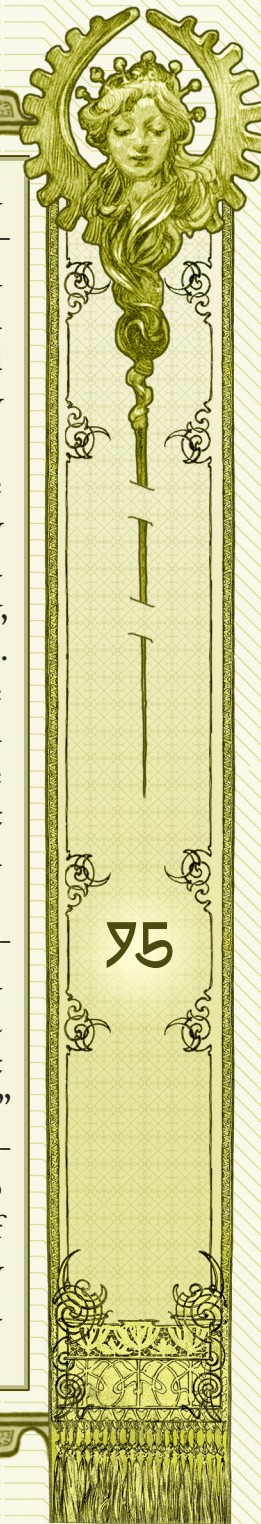
THE SERPENTS' DEN

history of remaining carefully neutral. It had served them well for centuries, as they quietly amassed fortunes in both the magical and Muggle worlds. Blaise had effaced himself in his earlier years at school, but now he was well positioned to challenge Draco for supremacy amongst the sixth year boys of the house.

The girls were a special problem, and one Lily was unsure she could handle well. Only a few days ago, from her perspective, she had been living in the Gryffindor girls' dormitory, and it had never been an unqualified success. She was the only Muggleborn there, and there were not even any halfbloods with whom she might have had more in common. She had learned a great deal from the girls about wizarding society: principally that her place in it would always be lower than theirs.

Honoraria Fudge, and the McDougal cousins, Flora and Heather, had frequently pointed out her great good fortune in Sorting into a broad-minded house like Gryffindor, one that would tolerate "her kind" if they were "nice." They had shown little compassion for the ignorant Muggleborn when she had first come to Hogwarts, and she had been within an inch of going home several times that first year. Only the thought of Petunia's triumphant "I told you so!" kept her there.

THE PREFECT'S PORTRAIT



Well, courage and tenacity had paid off well for her. She was the prefect: the popular, pretty one. She was top student in Charms and Runes of her year; and only just behind Severus in Potions, and Potter and Black in Transfiguration. She had earned more O.W.L.s than any other girl last spring, a feat somewhat diminished by the realisation that none of the other girls cared. They had marriage prospects, or family connections that would see them safely into good positions. Lily had only her wits, her talent, her courage, and if it came down to it, her looks.

"Not what you're used to, I daresay," said the voice to her right. "Still, you don't seem very impressed."

Lily gave Draco a slight smile. "Should I be?" She applied herself to the plate of duck and potatoes Anna before her.

"You're not at all what I expected a girl from the wilds of Canada to be like. I certainly didn't expect to see you *here*."

"Perhaps it's the ability to eat with a fork," she replied, innocently. "When necessary, I can tear at a buffalo shank with my teeth very creditably."

A sharp-voiced girl, with a curiously pug-like face, leaned across the table. "What brings you here? Bad grades?"

Lily looked up and feigned surprise. "No. Are the standards that low here?" Both Draco

and Blaise snickered, and the girl bridled. The rest of the table listened intently. "That's not what I had heard. Hogwarts is supposed to be one of the top schools."

Blaise murmured quietly, "It can be. Which classes are you in?" Lily noticed that his hands were exquisitely manicured, the nails buffed to a mirror shine.

All right, she thought, let's see what you make of this. "Transfiguration, Potions, Charms, Defence, History, Arithmancy, and Runes."

Draco asked idly, "What level?"

"N.E.W.T."

"What, *all*?"

"That's right." She savoured another mouthful of duck with orange sauce. "That what the Headmaster said when he saw my grades. We went over some of it, along with Professor Snape and Professor Lupin, to make sure, but yes, they said N.E.W.T. level for me. Why? Does it matter?" *Professors Snape and Lupin, she thought, it still sounds ridiculous!* Seeing Remus so grey and weary had been painful: the news that he was a werewolf, and had been, even in their days at Hogwarts — shocking. She wondered how Dumbledore could trust him. She returned to the present, aware that the Slytherins were still looking her over.

Draco remarked to the table as a whole, "Per-

haps we have our own Hermione Granger." There were a few nasty laughs.

"Who's she?" Lily asked.

"Over there. At the Gryffindor table — the Mudblood swot with the bush on her head."

Lily carefully did not respond to the word Mudblood. "I have better hair, I think. No resemblance as far as I can see."

"She's made quite a name for herself. Most of the teachers fawn over her, aside from Professor Snape of course. He's our Head of House, and he can be trusted to see through a pathetic Mudblood."

Lily shrugged. "Sometimes they try harder. I can't see that it has anything to do with me. When I met with Professor Snape, he left me in no doubt as to which house he thought would suit me best."

Draco sat back in his chair, looking pleased. Blaise courteously passed her some bread rolls. The rest of the Slytherins, following their lead, eased off somewhat.

Draco, seeing Blaise about to speak to her, forestalled him. "I've been remiss, I'm afraid," he said, taking upon himself the role of host. "I believe introductions are in order. I'm Draco Malfoy, sixth year prefect," he began, watching for her reaction. Lily gave him a polite nod. Satisfied, he continued. "The importunate dandy to your left is Blaise Zabini. This," he said, coolly indicating the pug-faced girl,

"is Pansy Parkinson, another prefect. You'll be rooming with her." Lily gave her another appraising look. The girl was not exactly ugly. With a pleasanter expression, she could have been appealing. Pansy's look of anxious dissatisfaction, however, did not become her.

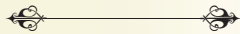
"This is Millicent Bultstrode," Draco went on, motioning towards a big girl who eyed Lily with a suspicious stare, which Lily feared was her only expression. "And that is Daphne Greengrass." Daphne was mousy but bright-eyed, much given to watching those around her for their reactions. *Playing it safe*, thought Lily, *I can hardly blame her. It will take some time to sort out the cliques and house politics. Reserve is better for now.*

Briefly, she bitterly lamented her Sorting, and her lost opportunity to be with her ready-made friends in her old house. She had always wanted a girlfriend in Gryffindor Tower. She must find a way to keep up her wonderful friendship with Hermione. It might save her sanity in the difficult and disorienting days ahead. And Harry, too, seemed a sweet boy; not at all like James or Sirius, despite Severus's snide remarks. She thought of Severus, and sighed to herself. *That boy can hold a grudge like no one else. No — man.* It seemed incredible that she would be in his Potions class tomorrow. And then Defence with Remus! She really had

stepped through the looking glass.

She stole a glance at Severus, complacently polishing off his dinner. He looked back surreptitiously; not smiling, of course, but appearing curiously relaxed. *He seems happy. I'm glad someone is.*

The boy Harry was dolefully picking at his own meal, sitting by Hermione. They were exchanging whispered remarks, and the boy looked over at her wistfully. Lily felt mingled pity and annoyance. Hermione got his attention, no doubt telling him not to look at Lily in public. She would try to befriend the boy; she was perfectly willing to fight for the boy; but she was certainly not going to mother him.



Afterwards, they led her down to the Slytherin common room. Lily fiercely suppressed a wave of panic. It all felt so *wrong*. She was entering a foreign land, and was not sure she knew the language. She remembered Severus's advice, and concentrated on keeping cool and controlled.

Draco gave the password, "*Semper integer*," and they filed in, one after another, going down some wide stairs to reach an impressive underground room, furnished with handsome dark woods and black leather, decorated and lit in mysterious greens and blues. The fireplace was

massive, and the blaze there comforting. *All in all*, Lily thought, looking about her, *I quite like it*. It was somehow more *wizardly* than the Gryffindor common room, and she was glad she had had that experience before this.

Draco turned to her and raised an eyebrow. "Do you approve?"

She was able to give him a genuine smile, and some dimples. *There, that often works*. It did. Draco smiled back responsively. She had always found boys easier than girls. "Very much."

"Please — sit down, and we can meet you properly."

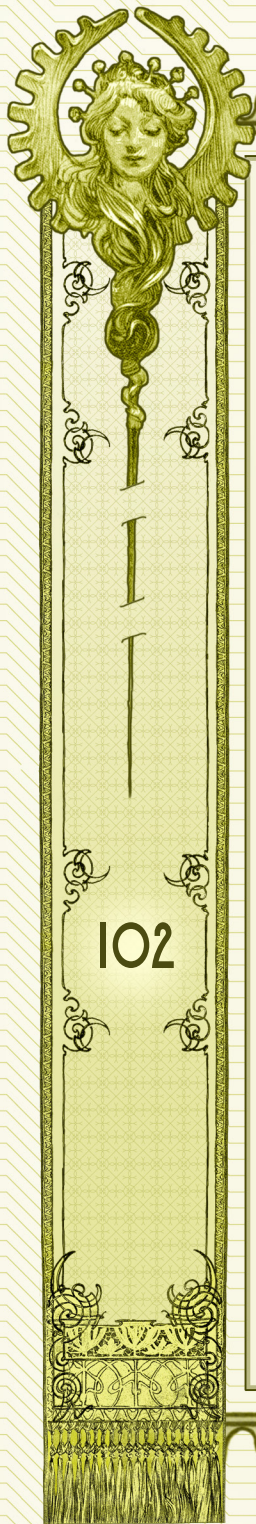
Lily was herded onto the middle of one of the very soft black leather sofas. Draco and Blaise flanked her on either side once more; and she was surrounded and confronted with a group of sixth and seventh-years, evaluating her more frankly than they had in the Great Hall.

"So, you're from Canada?" began a tall seventh year, who introduced himself as Warrington.

"Yes, from Rime Island." Her cover story had her family hailing from a wizarding island off the Pacific Coast, remote enough to be unknown to any of the Slytherins or their connections. Better yet, the people she was claiming as her parents had actually existed.

"Parents purebloods, then?"

"Well, yes. At least they were." This piqued



their curiosity. "They're dead now. My great-uncle is my guardian, and he didn't want me underfoot, or even on the same continent."

"What happened to your parents?" Pansy asked, narrowing her eyes.

Lily regarded her limpidly. *Thank you, thank you very much. Not even a 'So sorry to hear you're an orphan.'*

"Muggles," she answered, and was satisfied at the stir amongst them. "They were always travelling, once I was away at school. They got caught in the middle of some sort of Muggle row."

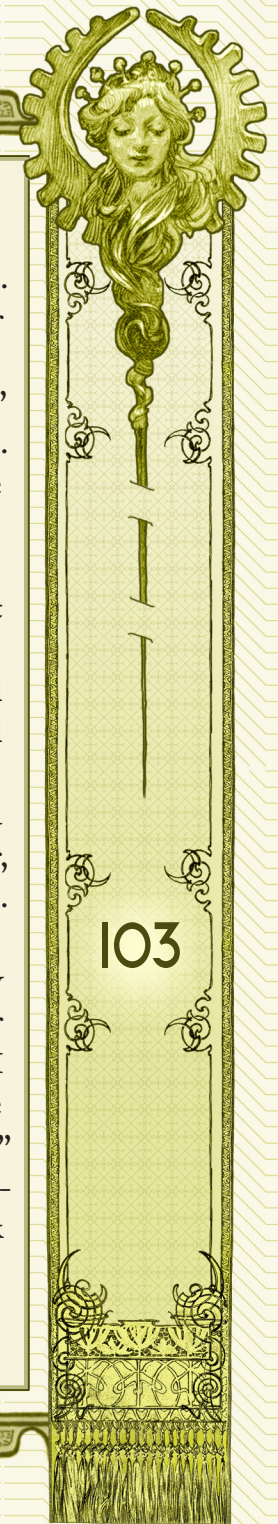
"They couldn't defend themselves against *Muggles*?" sneered another boy.

Lily felt she could allow herself to sneer back, in this case. "Some Muggle terrorists set a bomb, and they were caught in the blast. If you know a way to protect yourself from a bomb suddenly blowing you apart with no warning, be sure to let me know!"

Most of the Slytherins were coolly sympathetic. "Filthy Muggle rubbish. One can hardly step outside without tripping over it." Draco said, to murmurs of agreement.

Lily brushed it off. "I'd really rather not talk about it any more. It's still fairly fresh in my mind."

Blaise smoothly interposed. "I'm sure we don't want to upset you, your first evening



here. How about some old news?"

Lily gave him a puzzled look.

He smiled, and looked past her to Draco. Catching her eye again, he clarified. "Your pedigree. How far back does it go?"

What is this — a dog show? Lily shrugged. "1652."

Draco resumed control of the interrogation. "Not bad," he said. "Not bad at all. At least nine generations."

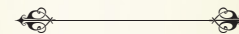
"Ten, actually."

He grimaced reflectively. "A Jones. What was your mother's name?"

Lily laughed. "Jones. And the same for all my grandparents but my Dubois maternal grandmother."

A boy standing by the fireplace said, "You know, we might be able to push it back farther, looking at the records of those exiled in 1652. Theodore Nott, by the way."

"Theodore." Lily gave him a nod. "It's really contrary to tradition to look into it. When our ancestors left, they *really* left and cut all ties. I suppose I might easily be related to everyone in this room, but I couldn't know for certain." She decided she had had enough of the inquisition for now. "I haven't had a chance to unpack yet, so you'll have to excuse me."



She should have guessed that the girls would want to "help" her.

Had the colour not been so relentlessly symbolic here at Hogwarts, the heavy green draperies and deep cushions would have looked rich and inviting. They served, however, to remind Lily constantly of where she was. Nevertheless, this was her home for the next two years, and she must make the best — and the most — of it. The bathroom, with its capacious green marble tub, surprised her pleasantly. *Very posh, very nice. That could be a real consolation.*

Pansy sat on her own bed, the one next to Lily's, and examined the newcomer's belongings critically. Lily pulled some toiletries from the trunk, and in disarranging the contents revealed a splendid cloak of white apt fur.

"That's nice," Pansy said with affected indifference, getting up and fingering the garment. Lily glanced at her non-committally, whilst organising some crystal scent bottles on her dressing table. She reached past Pansy to retrieve some other personal items provided to establish her identity, and one of them she fastened to the head of her bed.

Daphne Greengrass cocked her head to one side. "What's that?"

"A dreamcatcher." Severus had told her the theory last night, over their impromptu feast.

"It's to ward off nightmares."

"Does it work?"

"Yes." It would not prevent night terrors of the sort Hermione had told her Harry endured, partially induced by the filthy Oldyart; but Lily need not fear dreaming of Petunia snapping her wand or burning her fashion dolls at the stake.

The girls were watching her every move: Pansy and Daphne were particularly interested in Lily's enchanted ivory and silver brush and comb set, accompanied by an elaborate hand mirror. The Headmaster had gone to great lengths to provide her with the sumptuous trappings of a wealthy pureblood. In the trunk, Lily had also found fragile and exquisite dress robes, and some very lovely heirloom jewellery. Lily saw the girls looking at the mirror and remarked off-handedly, "My mother's."

"Oh," responded Daphne. Pansy raised her brows in acknowledgement. Millicent was still staring at her. Lily wondered about her orientation. She had never had problems in Gryffindor, but she knew other girls who had been troubled (or delighted) by persistent admirers of their own sex. It could be awkward in the same room.

She pulled out a delicate white night dress, embroidered with lilies in white and pale green. This also seemed to pass muster. Lily was tired

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of their curiosity, and said curtly, "Sorry, but I've a frightfully long day and I must turn in now if I'm to face the morning."

Daphne and Pansy took the hint and moved away. Millicent finally nodded and said, "Lily." Apparently she simply had been occupied with remembering Lily's name and face, and connecting the two. Lily rolled her eyes discreetly. *Purebloods and their inbreeding.* Being in Slytherin House should give her invaluable opportunities to observe them in their natural habitat. She still had an earthshaking social history of wizards to write, if Oldyfart and his flunkys didn't kill her first.



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THE PREFECT'S PORTRAIT



THE POTIONS SLAVE

HERMIONE HOPED THAT TODAY she would have a chance to speak to Lily in Runes, but found that her friend was being squired about her classes with provoking gallantry.

N.E.W.T. Runes was a fairly small class. Hermione and Dean Thomas were the only Gryffindors in it, but as Dean had never been close friends with Hermione, he generally sat with Terry Boot from Ravenclaw, with whom he shared interests in sports and art. Hermione took her favoured seat, in the middle of the first row, and as always, there were seats vacant on either side. Sitting there allowed her to focus on the professor, and ignore the distraction of other students.

She heard the Slytherins come in as a group. Runes was a popular class in their House. Old families tended to own very old heirloom artefacts, and often hoped to collect more. Thus Runes was par-

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particularly useful for them, and over the years had developed a certain cachet as a class for the elite. Hermione had hoped to sit with Lily, but the new Slytherin did not arrive alone. Malfoy, Zabini, and Nott swept into the room with her, more loudly than usual, each vying for Lily's attention. Pansy Parkinson and Daphne Greengrass were slightly behind, and the edge in Pansy's voice indicated that she was not entirely pleased that the boys were showing off for Lily's benefit. Malfoy claimed the third row, as was his custom, and Lily once more was between Malfoy and Zabini.

Hermione eavesdropped on the Slytherins' conversation before class, which was mostly about schedules and which professors were impossible. Draco, it seemed, was put out that Lily's next class was History of Magic, which he was not taking. Whilst he was off in the Astronomy Tower with Nott and Pansy, Zabini would have Lily to himself.

"Not exactly all to himself," Lily objected, tapping her quill emphatically. Hermione buried her face in her parchment to hide her smile. "He'll have to share me with Professor Binns."

"Binns!" replied Malfoy, dismissively, as if the Professor mattered no more than — a ghost.

"And," said Lily, "with Millicent and Daphne."

"Hmph." Hermione heard Draco grunt, unimpressed.

Hermione was disappointed herself, since Care of Magical Creatures was her next class. That still left Transfiguration and Potions in the afternoon. She began to plot how to manage a word alone with Lily. They had double Potions this afternoon, and there would surely be a moment then —

Potions! I have to spend the entire evening with Professor Snape! Hermione groaned inwardly.

Hermione wondered if the scheduling were deliberate. Then she scolded herself. *Of course it's deliberate. Dumbledore will give Harry the best possible opportunities to meet Lily!*

Hermione, Ron, and Harry all took N.E.W.T. Transfiguration together. There were two sections of the classes, and the Slytherins and Ravenclaws were in the other. Hermione's first warning was Ron's low growl, of "Bloody hell! Who let *her* in here?"

Lily had come in alone. She looked around the room carefully, as if unsure what to do, but Hermione knew she was looking for her. Hermione threw her a glance, and Lily put her books on the seat next to her.

"Is this seat taken?"

"Yes!" snarled Ron.

"Ron!" Hermione hushed him. "No, it's per-

fectly fine. Let me show you where we are in the book.”

The two girls looked at each other from the corners of their eyes, waiting for their chance. Hermione casually took out a piece of parchment, and wrote on it:

Meet me tomorrow morning at 9 in the place where it all happened. It's outside the library, and the door is the Hufflepuff horror there. Password is "Reading Room."

She slipped the parchment into her Transfiguration book, and laid both before Lily, pretending to show her the lesson. Lily glanced at the note and said, "Yes, I see. Thank you very much." Hermione saw her secret smile, and smiled herself. What a lot they would have to talk about!

Professor McGonagall glanced briefly at Lily in a somewhat perplexed way. She never called on Lily, or took notice of her otherwise. It was not until some time into the lesson that Hermione realised that the Transfiguration professor was not calling on her either. She still raised her hand, but her teacher seemed not to see her.

Disappointed and uneasy, she gathered her things together after class and tried to chat with Lily on their way to potions. Ron made it impossible, shouldering Lily aside and hovering protectively between her and Hermione. Harry was silent and thoughtful, and manoeu-

vred around them all to walk near Ron but next to Lily, and to murmur some sort of polite greeting to her.

Lily looked up at him, pleased, and began talking about the lesson in a friendly way. Ron had sped up, to avoid her; so Harry and Lily dropped behind, talking, when Ron noticed that Harry was not beside him.

"Oi! Harry!" he shouted, rather red-faced and irritated. "Don't waste your time on a snake!"

Harry flashed him a dark look, and then smiled oddly. "It's all right, Ron. Remember, I know how to talk to snakes."

Lily was trying to ignore the rude redhead. He seemed to be doing his best to pick a fight, and Lily was not sure why. True, there had always been rivalry between Gryffindors and Slytherins, but she had always thought the Slytherins the aggressors. Looking back, she acknowledged that the boy was treating her the way Sirius and James had treated Severus. It was very unpleasant. She decided to disregard him for the moment, since Harry was trying so hard to be friendly.

"What do you mean, you know how to talk to snakes?"

Harry blushed, and looked down. "I'm a Parselmouth." It was said casually, but Lily was astounded.

"That's amazing! It's very rare." *You didn't get that from me, my boy*, she thought. A teacher was passing them in the hall.

"Hello, Professor Lupin," Harry called. Lupin gave them both a bemused look and a tentative smile, as he watched them walk past.

Lily lowered her voice. "I still can't believe it. Remus Lupin is my teacher." Trying to lighten her mood, she asked Harry, "Is he any good?"

Harry smiled, genuinely this time. "He's the best! He taught me how to summon a Patronus my third year! It saved my life."

"What about —" she cast about for a tactful way to ask what she really wanted to know, and failed. *Here's for it*. "Did you know he was a werewolf then?"

"No, not until the end of the year."

She whispered, "Is it still a secret?"

Harry laughed bitterly, "Not anymore. Snape just happened to drop the news, and got Professor Lupin sacked. But he's back now, "he said with fierce satisfaction. "Everyone knows, and the parents who have a problem with it can bloody well keep their little darlings at home!"

"How is Severus in Potions?"

Harry stopped and looked her. Lily noticed that he had winced at her use of Severus's name.

"He's a right bastard. Sorry — but I don't know any other way to describe him. He's

treated me like rubbish from the first day — asking me questions that no Muggle-raised — except Hermione — could possibly answer. Maybe he'll be all right to you. You're in Slytherin and you've been friendly in the past. I don't know. But as far as I'm concerned, he's foul. He's a rotten teacher, and he's a disgrace to Hogwarts. You'll see for yourself."

They started walking again. Lily took a breath. "I'm sorry you've had such a horrid time. I know he's a champion grudge-holder. I'll see if there's anything I can do."

"I don't want to put you in the middle of it." He was striding along, energised by his dislike, and Lily had to trot to keep up.

"Nonsense. What are friends for?"

In Potions, Lily was once again engrossed by the Slytherins. They jostled around her, in Hermione's opinion, in rather a nastily possessive way. She was relieved when the Potions master strode into the dungeons and called them to order. *He's washed his hair*, Hermione noted. She remembered that he had been looking much better groomed for the past few days, as well. There was a new vitality in his step, and he looked curiously pleased with himself. He gaze swept the classroom, and swept back to focus on Lily.

"Miss — Jones," he drawled. Lily, unintimidated, looked back at him with polite attention. "Despite your excellent marks from your former school, there may yet be things you have to learn about potions-making the Hogwarts way. It would be best if you were partnered with an outstanding student. Therefore, there will be some changes."

Hermione's heart beat faster. Snape was not so bad after all! He was going to let Hermione sit with Lily!

Snape continued smoothly, "Mr Malfoy, I rely on you to make Miss Jones's transition to our class a seamless one." Lily went down to sit by Draco, who had been alone at his desk since the beginning of term. Draco positively preened, and welcomed Lily a little more expansively than was strictly necessary. Pansy, sitting next to Daphne, observed it all with narrowed eyes.

Hermione sighed. She could not have deserted Harry anyway. The two of them sat shoulder-to-shoulder in the dungeon classroom, the only Gryffindors determined enough to brave this battlefield. The two years they must somehow survive until N.E.W.Ts and freedom stretched out interminably. Harry bore the class stoically, ignoring the jibes, the hostility, and the outrageously low marks he received from Snape.

Grimly, he had explained his position to Hermione their first day back at Hogwarts. "It absolutely doesn't matter what marks he gives me. The only thing that matters is getting a Potions N.E.W.T at the end of seventh year, and he can't control that. All I have to do is sit here and learn the material."

Hermione admired his resolve and said so: but she considered it all an unreasonable test of Harry's maturity, and an additional and unnecessary drain on his spirit and strength. Once again, she failed to understand Dumbledore's motives. It would be so easy to come down hard on Snape — and it would hardly jeopardise his position as a spy. A nasty, niggling thought tickled at the back of her brain. *Was torturing Harry a privilege granted Snape? Perhaps Harry had been thrown to him like a bone. Or was defending Harry from Snape not worth the risk of losing Snape's loyalty?*

These were ugly notions, and Hermione cleared her mind of them, concentrating instead on creating the perfect Nutrix Solution. *An ancient and reliable diet supplement. Can be used as a substitute for mother's milk; can be used to feed the injured; can be used in desperate situations, when ordinary food is unavailable and conjured food inadequate.* Wizards exploring unknown territory, such as the Arctic, generally took a supply

of Nutrix Solution with them. Apparating was not always an option in unfamiliar landscapes; and they had all learned, back in Binns's third year class, how the party under Aberforth and Delacour had journeyed to the South Pole in 1712, largely sustained by Nutrix Solution. Binns had managed to make it sound like a dreary suburban outing.

Snape prowled amongst them, quietly advising the Slytherins, and either damning the rest with faint praise or openly sneering. He was otherwise uncharacteristically quiet. There were no Neville Longbottoms in N.E.W.T Potions. Neville himself was doing quite well in his own N.E.W.T. classes, aided by his new and far more compatible wand. His work in Charms and Transfigurations had improved; he was a better than good Defence student; and his work in Herbology had him well on track for an apprenticeship in the field. Neville was beginning to grasp the possibilities of life post-Hogwarts: it was not necessary to be good at everything to succeed outside school. He needed only to be good at one thing to have a fine career. For the rest, Charms and Transfiguration were for daily life, and Defence to see that he *had* a daily life.

Their Nutrix potion was shaping up well: creamy, pearl-white, and smoothly emulsified.

She gave Harry a nod. He considered himself a perfect fool at Potions, but he was not. Hermione wondered briefly how many potential Potions masters had been taught to loathe the subject by their teacher. A shame, really.

Snape had stopped by Lily and Malfoy. "An excellent effort. Ten points to Slytherin." He gave them each a tight-lipped smile.

Morag McDougal, behind Harry and Hermione, whispered to Terry Boot. "He likes that Jones. You can just *see* it."

"I like her too. She's — *owwww!*"

Snape approached Harry and Hermione, and viewed their work contemptuously. He was on the point of sarcasm, his mouth shaped in the familiar and hated way, when Hermione noticed that Lily had turned in her seat and was looking at them. Snape paused.

"An acceptable effort. Bottle it." Lily was still looking. Snape said slowly, "One point to Gryffindor."

There was a rush of whispers, like wind through dry grass. Snape turned his back. Hermione took Harry's hand in hers and they slowly lifted their arms over their heads in a silent gesture of triumph. For Hermione, it was the sweetest moment of her Potions career. She knew she would pay for it tonight.

At seven o'clock, she was on her way to the dungeons. She had barely noticed dinner, eating automatically whilst Harry told, for the tenth time, the saga of "the point." He had looked over at the Slytherin table and received a discreet smile in return. Ron was suspicious, and even more so when Hermione told him where she would be spending the evening.

"Bloody hell! Dumbledore wants you to be Snape's assistant? Why didn't you say no?"

"Honestly, Ron! It's a wonderful opportunity. This will look good on my record someday."

Ron caught Harry's eye, and jerked his head toward their mutual friend. "Barking mad. Always has been."

Lavender leaned over the table. "*Every* Friday, Hermione? What about Halloween?"

Hermione stared blankly. Parvati laughed. "The *ball*, of course. Or are you going with Snape?" The girls dissolved into giggles, which rippled down the Gryffindor table as the joke was repeated and elaborated on.

Dumbledore had proclaimed a Halloween ball this year for the fourth through seventh years. It was an old tradition, now being revived after a hiatus of twenty years. Hermione thought it not a bad idea. The Halloween Feast, though

splendid, was still, after all, just another wonderful dinner at Hogwarts. The only problem with a ball would be the inevitable scenes of angst over who would escort whom. Perhaps it was Dumbledore's idea of a counterirritant. If the students were miserable over finding partners for a dance, they would have less time to be miserable over the lurking terrors of the wizarding world.

It would be nice to be asked by someone, as long as that someone were not Ron. They had tried their hands at romance last summer, and it had not been pretty. Hermione had heard that "opposites attract." Those opposites must not be quite so opposite as she and Ron. They had done nothing but quarrel. They had no interests in common, and Hermione found that she was not so desperate for a boyfriend as to give up reading and pretend interest in the intricacies of League Quidditch statistics. *Wait, that's not true. Our common interest is Harry. Talking with a boyfriend about another boy is not a rational basis for a relationship.*

All things being equal, perhaps Halloween in the dungeons might not be as bad as playing the loyal date.

The door of the Potions classroom was closed. For one wild moment, she wondered if she could knock, run away, and tell Dumbledore

that she had waited for Professor Snape, but he had not been there. She rather feared not.

She took a deep breath, and rapped on the door. There was no answer, and for a moment she thought she could make her escape. Her bubble burst with the sound of Snape's sonorous "Enter." He was crouched over a silver cauldron, stirring meticulously. The steam of a nearby alembic rose in grey wisps, and Hermione was reminded, not for the first time, of Browning's poem, "THE LABORATORY."

*"Now that I, tying thy glass mask tightly,
May gaze thro' these faint smokes curling whitey,
As thou pliest thy trade in this devil's smithy —
Which is the poison to poison her, prithee?"*

Snape took no notice of her, still concentrating on the acrid-smelling mixture in the cauldron. Hermione ran through her knowledge of potions to analyse what it was, but was not sure without closer acquaintance. She walked up to the worktable, and waited.

Snape continued his stirring, an outward spiral of fours. *A healing mixture of some kind, then.* The smell suggested a bandaging or bonding potion.

"Is it *Novum Corium*, Professor?" she asked with what she fancied was commendable aplomb.

Snape ignored her, his rhythmic stirring

almost hypnotic. Hermione was fascinated by it: and between the smell and the stirring began to feel somewhat dizzy. A skin-like membrane began forming on the top of the mixture. It was a disturbingly raw shade of pink, and Hermione averted her eyes.

"I should have known. You look away at the critical moment."

Hermione's eyes snapped back to the Potions master. He was still intent on his potion, and his stirring began gradually to slow. "Fetch me the blue jar on the second shelf, and the silver funnel below."

The jar was pristine, open, and ready for the potion. Hermione collected the items and brought them to her teacher. Snape decanted the vile pink sludge, sealed it tightly and turned his back on Hermione. "Clean the cauldron, the funnel, the ladle, and the desk."

Please. Hermione appended sourly. Snape was making notes in a tatty green book. *His potions diary*, Hermione thought excitedly, closer to lust than Ron had ever brought her. *I'd give anything to know what's in it!*

Hermione began to wash the items gingerly, taking care not to get the potion on her own skin. The potion was sticky, and clung resolutely to the bottom of the cauldron. Hermione longed for one of her mother's scrubbing pads.

"What do you think you are doing?"

Snape was looking at her with disgust and disbelief.

"Cleaning the equipment, sir —"

"Are you a witch or not?"

"Sir?" *Oh*. "I'm allowed to use magic?"

"The Headmaster, in his wisdom, has decreed that you are to be my assistant. This is therefore not technically a detention. I have better things to do than watch you slopping about like a Muggle. Clean the items at once. I have other work for you."

Within moments she was standing in front of his desk. He gave orders without bothering to look at her. "Make a strong infusion of *Platycerium*. Chop the root in equal cubes, one eighth of an inch to a side."

Hermione stood before him, steaming. She walked to the storeroom, snatched up the root and went to the worktable. *I am not a house-elf. Not even house-elves should be treated like house-elves.* "You're *welcome*," she muttered.

Snape was still writing. "Do I detect a fumbling attempt at sarcasm?" Hermione was mute, not daring to speak her mind.

"I hope not," he continued, "for I have taken you in hand as a favour to the Headmaster, and it would certainly grieve him to know of your ingratitude."

"Ingratitude?"

Snape was down from his desk and looming before her with frightening speed. Hermione tried to back away, but the worktable was behind her.

"Do you know why you are here?"

"I am being punished for making a forbidden potion —"

"You stupid girl. Dumbledore has *told* you that this is an Azkaban matter, and you hold fast to your Gryffindor self-righteousness."

"I did what was right," she managed, ready to defy him and the Ministry as well. "You would have done the same for Lily."

He stared at her inscrutably. "Ah, but in this case, I am not the guilty party. No. It's one of Dumbledore's pet Gryffindors who has not dabbled, but delved rather deeply into the Dark Arts." He smiled unpleasantly. "A Necromancer! At Hogwarts!" he said, in McGonagall's Scots burr. "You should have seen her horror."

Hermione's eyes burned, and she tried not to cry in front of this pitiless man. She wanted so much to please her teachers that the thought of Professor McGonagall's consternation cut deeply.

"No doubt," he began, and then paused, looking at her with a bitter smile. "*No doubt* you know of my former allegiances." Hermione found the continued proximity almost unbearable. He considered her a moment, and went

on. "In my youth I thought limits were for others. I was full of intellectual arrogance, just as you are. I knew myself better, smarter, quicker, *superior* to my classmates. Someone found out my weakness — someone very vile. I abased myself before him for what I imagined would be unlimited freedom to explore my ideas. Instead, I bound myself to a madman and will carry his mark until the day I die. You are here to assist me here, true; but also to see the outcome of such arrogance. It is a lesson I am uniquely qualified to teach."

Hermione was horrified. "The Headmaster can't imagine that I would turn Dark," she protested.

Snape smiled, incredulous, "My dear Miss Granger, you already *have*."

"It's not true! Whatever I did, I did not for myself, but for someone else. Motives matter, no matter what you say. Lily wanted to live again. Lily is good, and her being alive is good. I would never serve Vold — Voldemort. I'd die first."

"I suppose you think you sound very brave," he sneered, looking down his nose. "You don't. You sound like a stupid teen-aged girl who knows nothing of life. You know so little about it that you would throw yours away like so much rubbish. Your ignorance does you no credit. You think yourself heroic, but at this point in your

life you simply have *nothing to lose*.

"There are nine people in the world who have the power to send you to Azkaban for the rest of your life. You think nothing of it now, but I assure you that in years to come you will think of little else. You will wonder which of us is displeased with you, or babbling in delirium, making you an item of delicious gossip, or offering you up as a lover's confidence; and you will breathe a sigh of relief when you hear of any one of our deaths. Yes," he smirked, "even of the deaths of Dumbledore, or McGonagall, or the werewolf, or your precious Potter; because each of these deaths brings you just a little closer to safety. You will wonder, as time goes on, when the blow of discovery and disgrace might fall: will it be at your graduation, or on your wedding day; will it be the morning you see your child off on the Hogwarts Express? Might one of the nine, haunted by the terrible secret, leave a letter containing a deathbed confession and a denunciation of you?"

"Every time you make a choice you change your destiny. Do you know, I wonder, how your choice to perform Necromancy has affected your future? It has certainly closed some doors for you. You will never be Head Girl now; and you can bid a fond farewell to any hope of an apprenticeship with Professors McGonagall,

Flitwick, or Sprout. The werewolf I cannot answer for. Perhaps," he whispered, his face close to hers, "he will regard you as a *fellow dark creature*."

He stepped back, looking her over like something found on the sole of his boot.

"Chop the root, make the infusion, and then get out of here."

Hermione could hardly trust herself with the knife. She stood trembling with rage, and appreciated at last how much Harry hated this man. He was seemingly oblivious to her existence and sat calmly at his desk again, quill scratching quickly in his green leather book.

She snivelled back some tears of self-pity, and set about chopping the roots into mathematically equal cubes.



SEVERUS SNAPE WAS IN EXCEPTIONALLY good spirits. The Dark Lord had not contacted him in over two months; the Granger chit had been put firmly in her place, doing scut work for him on a weekly basis; and Lily Evans (*no — Jones, I must learn to think of her that way automatically*) was alive, in his House, and at the moment, having tea with him.

It had been the easiest thing in the world to inform her that she would be expected to attend scheduled counselling sessions, to help her adapt to her new environment. True, too, of course. Even in the slow-moving wizarding world, things had changed; and these pleasant Sunday afternoon appointments were spent discussing her classes, and bringing her up-to-date on current developments and recent history.

"Battenburg cakes," she approved, taking one. "My favourite."

"How is the situation with Pansy?"

"Better, I think. Just as you suggested, I've been respectful of her prefect status, and asked for her opinion and guidance whenever an opportunity presents itself. She still doesn't much care for the fuss the boys have made over me, but I laugh it off as the boys' eternal quest for novelty. And I keep my things warded."

"Good. She may have jilted Draco, but she doesn't like him showing interest in another girl. I've seen her watching the two of you."

"Dog in the manger."

"Just so." He sipped his Earl Grey, savouring such an agreeable teatime. "A number of my colleagues have been singing your praises."

"Oh, *jolly* good! Who?"

"That," he smirked, "would be telling."

"Severus, don't be a beast. Tell me all."

"Let's see. Vector is in awe of your arithmantic accomplishments. Ogham thinks you're a splendid addition to the Runes class. When pressed to agree about your talents, Flitwick smiles weakly, and Lupin quietly assents. Minerva merely sniffs, and says 'We'll see,' in that insupportable way she has."

"No surprise there."

"McGonagall is not actually being difficult in class, is she?"

"No, not really. She mostly pretends I'm not there. The same for Hermione, which I think distresses her."

"Idiot girl. What did she expect of a witch as rigidly principled as Minerva?"

"Please be fair, Severus." Snape sighed complacently with the pleasure of being addressed so. He could trust Lily to be discreet, after all. "Neither Hermione nor I quite pictured the horrified reaction our little experiment would cause. We're *both* Muggleborn, you know, and all of this 'You have broken the unwritten law' tosh was rather unexpected." She swallowed the last bite of her cake thoughtfully, and added, "It's all like going to Korea and being told one's eaten dog. *We* might be appalled, but the Koreans would think we were the odd ones."

"Have another cake. No, it's not the same, Lily. First of all, it's a very clearly *written* law, and I would have expected a know-it-all — yes, an irremediable know-it-all like Granger — to be have been better informed."

"Well, no more was I. You don't realise how much of wizard lore is bred in the bone for you purebloods. You grow up with all the traditions, and students like Hermione and like me — yes — don't deny it — are often pitifully ignorant of things you take for granted. Don't you remember how you sneered at me in Potions class that first year when I asked about human/animal shape-shifting formulae?"

Snape rolled his eyes. "The ethical issues are

perfectly clear —”

“Ha!” she cried, thumping down her plate. “Perfectly clear to someone who has already heard the arguments from childhood. Who in fact probably asked the question when a small child, and had the issue clearly explained by amused adults. When Muggleborns ask a question you associate with three-year-olds, you purebloods are frightfully unsympathetic.”

“One expects Hogwarts students to have suitable backgrounds.”

“Why? It’s all a *big secret* until the summer after we’ve turned eleven, and then our lives are turned upside down. We have to accept the existence of a world that’s not only unknown to us, but one we’ve been told all our lives could not possibly exist. We go to Diagon Alley for our books utterly gobsmacked, and our parents are no help, for *they’re* in shock. We have a few days to look the books over, and then we’re confronted by powerful and terrifying wizards in black asking us how one brews the Draught of the Living Death!”

Snape made a face, and sipped his tea as if it disgusted him. “Potter’s been whinging.”

“Don’t malign my child.” Snape huffed an incredulous laugh. “Well,” she insisted, “he is in a way, and I feel a little responsible for him. He’s a very sweet boy —”

“Oh, *please!*”

“— a very sweet boy,” she repeated. “I don’t know why you think him like James: he’s not like him at all. He’s quite friendly and unassuming, and he’s had a rotten time. No, really, Severus, it’s not whinging. No one should be treated the way Petunia’s treated Harry. And I know her well enough to believe him.”

Snape had had enough of discussing Mr Harry Potter. From his glimpses during the ill-fated Occlumency lessons last year, he had seen enough to concede that Potter’s home life might not have been the pampered and indulged one he had previously assumed. The boy apparently had been locked in a cupboard when the Muggles were displeased with him, and they had verbally abused him on a regular basis. It had been unpleasant, certainly, but any number of children he knew had endured worse.

“Another thing. If you *must* continue your assignations with Potter and Granger, I remind you how essential it is that they remain secret.”

“Yes, I must,” she countered, with a naughty smile. “Friends are too precious to waste.” He grunted in resignation. Sometimes he forgot that she was still only sixteen, and not his own age. Wizards were long-lived, and she would catch up to him in time, but he was occasionally disconcerted by evidence of her youth.

She dimpled, and leaned over to pat his hand. "That's why I'm here for tea, Severus."

He relented — minutely. "Have another cake."

"No, thanks! I won't be able to fit my robes for the ball! Must keep in fighting trim for that." She eyed the platter regretfully, and poured herself another cup of tea.

Desperately attempting to sound casual, he asked, "Are you going with anyone?"

"Yes, Draco's asked me, and as Pansy's already planning to go with Warrington, I thought she might be able to bear up."

Snape managed a polite, if somewhat mechanical, smile. Lily and the Halloween Ball brought back painful memories. Everything had been going so well between them that term. He had asked her, and she had accepted.

She doesn't remember it, he reminded himself. It all happened a few days after the portrait was painted.

"I can't *believe* you're going to the ball with Draco Malfoy!" Hermione stared at Lily in horror. They were having one of their periodic "assinations," as Snape had called them. Over the past weeks, their reading room had changed dramatically. They now had transfigured chairs and a big library table to work

at. It was still a private hideaway, but infinitely more comfortable and useful. They met on different days, and never at the same time, and so far it seemed that their secret was safe.

"Why ever not? He's gorgeous."

"No, he's not," Hermione contradicted primly. "He's evil."

"Evil? Oh, *too* bad." Lily smiled mischievously, curling up in the window seat and putting her feet on the window frame. "He's been quite nice to me, actually."

"He wouldn't be so nice if he knew who you really were."

"I daresay not. So, my dear, we must see to it that he never knows the awful truth. Where's Harry?"

"Quidditch. He's coming."

"And so is Christmas."

They laughed. Lily looked at her speculatively. "You've been keeping secrets yourself. Which mystery man is your escort to the ball?"

"I'm not sure I'm going."

"Not going! What do you mean?" She flashed her dimples. "I could set you up with one of my Slyth brethren..."

"One of your *Slyth brethren*, as you put it, is the reason I may not be there. The ball is Friday, and Professor Snape is standing by his rights."

"He expects you to come in and slave for him

on Halloween? Now *that* is evil, if you like.”

It was not the first time that Lily had used her talent for Charms and Transfiguration to manage being well dressed in the wizarding world. Her parents, though supportive of her studies, were not wealthy, and had not seen any reason to indulge the eccentricities of Lily's strange school. In Lily's fifth year, her mother had, really and truly, *sewn* her a long dress and had given it to her with all the love in her heart. It was pretty, and nicely made, and absolutely impossible as an item of formal wear at Hogwarts. The Slytherins would have sneered viciously, the Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs would have looked pitying and disapproving, and the Gryffindor girls would have angrily pulled her into the privacy of the dormitory and given her an earful about 'letting down the side.' Flora McDougal had taken a picture of Lily in it, at Lily's request. Then Lily had gone to work, and transfigured the nice pale lilac dress into a set of dazzlingly rich purple silk robes, embroidered with golden flowers. The laces from a worn pair of trainers were transfigured into gold ribbons to weave into her intricately braided hair. She had looked beautiful. Even better, she had looked like a powerful young witch who belonged at Hog-

wart's School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

She had already considered what to wear this year. (*No, the other this year, the one in which I will be at a ball with Severus and James, and Sirius and Remus; with Honoria and Flora and Heather — I've promised to help Flora with her hair — did I?*) She took a deep breath. Occasionally the past was superimposed on the present in a disconcerting way. She had been planning to wear silver this year, and the Headmaster, for reasons of his own (*did he remember?*) had provided her with some lovely silver tissue dress robes. This year, as in the past, they were to have a costume ball at Halloween, and she and Draco had decided to attend as Oberon and Titania. Like most purebloods, he knew his Shakespeare: who, after all, had written prior to the Great Breach of 1648. Though the Bard's descriptions of fairies and witches were sometimes wide of the mark, Shakespeare's reasoning behind it was well understood and accepted as necessary for the time. And after all, no matter how many witches complained about *Macbeth*, the fact was there really were quite a few witches in those days — and a few even today — who were not so far from the cackling hags he presented.

Would Severus be angry? That was the question. It was he who had had the idea for Oberon and Titania so long ago (*no — three weeks ago*).

They were going together — *as friends* — she had insisted, and had spent hours deciding on just the right personae. Dark Oberon and Bright Titania stuck them both as full of possibilities. Severus could wear his preferred black — he could even wear robes; and Lily would wear moon-like robes of silver, and unleash her fancy upon them.

It was so odd. She was not, after all, going to attend the ball with Severus, but with Draco Malfoy. She felt curiously guilty. *Well, obviously the Potions master can't take a student to the ball.* Draco would be a handsome Oberon — though inappropriately blond.

She had some ideas of her own. A nice silver necklace was slowly and painstakingly transfigured into an amazing silver head-dress: tendrils of silver bending around her head, curling exquisitely past her ears, and then topped with a gleaming crescent moon. The robes she charmed at hem and sleeves' edges into clouds of tiny silver stars, which drifted in her train as she moved. In some ways the effect was better with her new black hair than it had been with auburn. *I do miss my green eyes, though.*

She looked away from her mirror, and was startled to see her Slytherin dorm mates staring at her. It was unfortunate that she had been thinking of Shakespeare, for the three witches popped into her head, and nearly made her laugh, which

would have been tactless. Pansy was dressed as a fairy herself, in an impossible shade of pink. (*Dare I suggest a different colour? That harsh pink is awful on her!*) The wings were nice, though, and Lily fixed on them immediately.

"The wings *move*? That's smashing!" She decided to give Pansy some full-on flattery — she seemed to get little enough of it, and the girl, though suspicious, began to bloom like the Rose Fairy she had intended to be.

Pansy blurted out, "I'm not sure about the colour. What do you think?"

"Well, it's certainly exactly like a rose, but if you're not sure, we could go through some others. I've learned a pretty good colour charm."

The other girls looked on with interest, waiting for the show; and Lily thought of the finest roses her father had even grown.

"*Tingeo!*" Pansy's robes changed into the soft lavender of a Moonshadow.

"It's pretty." Millicent seemed impressed. It was better, and set off Pansy's hair nicely, but was not exactly what Lily wanted.

She thought again. "*Tingeo!*" The robes resembled a Double Delight, creamy white shading suddenly to crimson at hem and bodice.

"I like that one better," Daphne said thoughtfully.

Pansy cocked her head. "It's a little more magical," she agreed.

"No! I know!" Excited, Lily remembered her favourite rose of all. "*Tingeol!*"

Pansy's dress and wings changed again, to a delicate pale yellow, shot with the loveliest of pinks. The girls all sighed with approval. It was just right for Pansy. *A Peace rose. It may not suit her nature, but it suits her*, Lily thought. She had pleased Pansy, really pleased her: it was obvious. *That should quiet things down for awhile.*

"Wait," she said. "I have another idea. She raised her wand once more. *"Now sleeps the crimson petal, now the white,"* The full skirt of Pansy's robes split open like a flower, with long, petal-like flounces draping gracefully over a pink underdress. It was a nice effect, and Lily briefly regretted not using it on her own robes. *Still, she thought, any sacrifice for the cause of peace in my dormitory.*

Daphne and Millicent were ready for the ball as well. Daphne looked exceptionally nice in silvery green. Her brown hair and wistful eyes furthered the resemblance to one of Waterhouse's water nymphs. *Without the bare breasts, of course. Though perhaps Theodore might have preferred that.*

Millicent had secretly asked Lily's advice when considering her costume, and had shown great good sense in following it. Dressed as a thirteenth century Italian witch, the heavy,

imposing robes of antique brocade gave her dignity to match her size. Millicent's thin, frizzy hair was covered by a gold and pearl netted coif. Goyle ought to be grateful and impressed.

He was being used, he realised, just as he always had been.

Snape studied the Granger girl, as she patiently crushed mandrake seeds into a fine powder. She was proving quite useful, and had ceased bothering him with any conversation at all. It was restful, in a curious way, to have another person in the laboratory, working quietly. She was in every way as satisfactory an assistant as the Slytherin graduate he had trained ten years before; and vastly superior to that disappointing Ravenclaw who had walked away from her apprenticeship after only two years in order to marry and pop out (when last he heard) four sprogs in as many years.

Curious too, how abruptly her other teachers had thrown her off. She had been tossed to him, he knew, as a punishment. No one would protect her now. Potter might put other students lives in danger on a whim, his father and his friends had nearly murdered Snape himself out of spite, but they had all found instant pardon. Granger, however, in restoring to the living world a gifted

young witch, had incurred permanent censure. For her, evidently, there was to be no forgiveness. Oh, Flitwick was too tender-hearted to treat her badly in class, and Lupin apparently felt some compassion; but McGonagall's lips thinned to a hard line at the mention of her name in staff meetings, and Sprout reddened and stammered. Dumbledore was difficult to read. On the surface, he seemed bland and benevolent. Snape knew, though, that the girl was tolerated only because of her closeness to Potter, and for her usefulness as a tool in the Headmaster's epic struggle against the Dark Lord.

Much as I am, he reflected bitterly. *And so she, too, is relegated to the dungeons as serviceable enough to keep, but not precious enough to cherish.*

Snape particularly resented what her treatment implied about himself. *They think me so predictable. 'Of course he'll make her life miserable. That what he's for.'* Thinking ahead, he guessed that Granger now had few options, if she wished to remain in the wizarding world. Who would write her letters of recommendation? Who would trumpet her talents to others in their fields when she was looking for apprenticeships or positions? Either her teachers would refuse to write them, or they would send such lukewarm epistles that she would be summarily rejected. Her chances for a position with the Ministry, never good anyway

as a Muggleborn, were also compromised.

Perhaps Dumbledore has decided that she deserves ultimately to be banished. If she finds all doors closed to her, maybe she'll just go away. After she has served her purpose, of course: tutoring Potter for the next two years. After Potter has either succeeded, and she is superfluous; or he has failed, and we're all dead anyway.

The rest of the students were at the ball, he recollected. He had begged off this year, as usual; but unlike every other year, his request had been granted. *Instead of punishing me by forcing me to supervise the dunderheads, Dumbledore thinks it more important that I be here to punish Granger by causing her to miss the ball.* On the whole, he found that decidedly mean-spirited.

Lily was at the ball, with Malfoy. He felt faintly ill at the thought, but the fault was his. He had done his utmost to keep her from Potter, and in so doing had thrown her in Malfoy's way. This evening was the fruition of his meddling.

It was yet another unfair thing in an existence compounded of unfair things. The Halloween Ball his sixth year had been the most anticipated event of his youth. He and Lily were to go together, Oberon and Titania, and he had rushed out of the Slytherin common room to collect her that night. He had not seen the spelled slick at the top of the staircase, but he remembered fall-

ing, painfully slamming his head on countless steps, lying in a defenceless heap at the bottom, the faint sound of mocking laughter fading as he slipped into unconsciousness.

He had lain there some time. Professor Flitwick had found him and levitated him to the Hospital Wing, where Madam Pomfrey had healed his bruises and scrapes, and kindly even repaired his ruined robes as far as possible. She had allowed him to leave, to go to his own dormitory, he had told her; but she must have known he would try to go to the ball, in the end. He had reached the door and stood there, looking for Lily. He had seen her, bright as a silver moon, dancing happily with James Potter; surrounded by admirers, amongst them the laughing Black and the nasty little Pettigrew. Snape had slunk away; and when she rounded on him the next day, asking why he had never come, he had been too proud and too ashamed to own the truth. That angry encounter had marked the beginning of the slow death of their friendship, just as it had seen the beginning of her romance with Potter. To this day, he had no idea if Potter had been party to Black and Pettigrew's prank.

His jaw tightened. No one had ever been punished of course. He had been deemed unworthy of protection from the day he had entered Hogwarts. Now Granger had been

dismissed in the same way. Dumbledore was once again manipulating his pawns.

Snape had had enough. He stood up, and strode over to Granger. Her head bowed over her work, she did not bother to acknowledge him.

"Miss Granger, you may finish this some other time."

She looked up, surprised. "I'm really almost done, sir. Another half-hour should take care of the lot."

Desirous that she not misconstrue his lenience as kindness, he said brusquely, "You must be eager to get off to the ball and join your friends."

She stared. "No, sir. I had no plans to attend. You said I would be working here tonight, so there was no point in accepting an invitation or finding a costume. I might as well just finish my work and then go to bed." She started to go back to grinding, but Snape, now put out by her rebuff of his generous offer, took the mortar away and set it on a shelf. He pulled his wand and turned toward her.

Oh, my God. She wondered, *Is he going to curse me? I should have told him I was going to the bloody ball and scarpered!*

His black regard was fixed on her unnervingly. He raised his wand.

"When I ask a question, you must answer, 'Oui.'"

With a swish, he pointed the wand directly at her. *"Tu voudrais bien aller au bal, n'est-ce pas?"*

Hermione stared at him. He glowered, and she immediately yelped, *"Oui!"*

"Seras-tu bonne fille, je t'y ferai aller."

It felt strange, like suddenly being swathed in fabric and pricked with pins. After the spots before her eyes faded, she looked down at her robes, and saw that they had changed. Still black, but shimmering velvet: full-skirted, with a low square neckline and exquisite puffed and slashed sleeves showing pure white silk beneath. Her prefect's badge was a silver filigree necklace. She could feel that she was wearing some sort of velvet snood gathering up her hair in the back. Something of a sixteenth-century look. She longed for a mirror.

"Well, Miss Granger, are you coming or not?" He strode past her, and held open the door. *He's holding the door for me*, she thought, dazed.

They were moving at full speed to the Great Hall. She could already hear music. "Professor, what did you do?"

"A Cinderella charm. It will last until midnight, which should be quite enough time for you to swan about."

"It's so surprising..." She stopped, embarrassed.

"You are astonished that I would know such a charm? May I remind you that I am a Head of

House here, and have been for years. I cannot tell you the number of times young Slytherin girls have come to me in tears, victims of malicious pranks." He gave her a sideways look of amusement. "However, the results depend largely on the caster's concept of what is beautiful. You must submit to being not so much a fairy-tale princess, as a Sorcerer's Apprentice. Tell your friends you are Sidonia von Bork."

"It's wonderful, sir: I can't thank you enough." She muttered to herself, trying to commit the charm to memory. *"Tu voudrais bien aller..."*

"Later, Miss Granger," he said impatiently. They were at the threshold of the Great Hall; they were going in. The Hall, with its starry ceiling and sumptuous golden light, was the enchanted castle of everyone's dreams. All but one of the tables had been removed, and the last remaining was pushed to the far wall and sagged under the weight of the refreshments. The dancers, freed from their everyday black robes, were splashes of unfamiliar colour. Some of the students were disguised by amazing masks: animals, magical and mundane, the Green Man, Herne the Hunter, the Corn Woman, and a shocking Medusa, complete with live snakes. They hissed at Hermione, and she flinched.

The noise level had dropped alarmingly: people were turning around. Hermione noted

with surprise that they were staring at her and at Snape. They were staring at her *and* Snape — no — they were staring at her *with* Snape. Parvati and Lavender, dressed as Sita and Pomona, were open-mouthed with stupefaction, and then giggled madly.

A little group of teachers had turned and looked her over in surprise. Lupin gave her a small, kind smile. The Headmaster, alone, was inscrutable. After a moment, he resumed his conversation with the staff members, and they turned their attention from her.

Several people were still staring at her. She nearly laughed aloud at Draco Malfoy's face. He had looked at her with surprise and admiration: the first pleasant expression he had ever directed at her. It was immediately replaced by recognition and confusion, and he looked away hurriedly. Lily caught her eye, however, and raised her brows approvingly. She was obviously dying to find out the sequence of events that led to Hermione arriving at the ball with Severus Snape and dressed in Snape black.

Snape smirked coldly at the stir their arrival had made. He had seen Dumbledore look their way, and met his eyes briefly. There was a certain satisfaction in proving people wrong, now and then. Then, with irritation, he saw Potter, grinning like the idiot he was, making his way toward

Granger, holding the Weasley girl by the hand; and he withdrew to the fringes of the Hall.

Harry and Ginny were flushed with dancing and sparkling pumpkin juice.

"Hermione, you look wonderful!" Harry admired.

Ginny agreed. "You look so mysterious. I like your make-up, too. It goes with the costume."

I'm wearing make-up? What do I look like?

"You said you weren't coming," Lavender had joined them, dragging Ron in her wake, who was goggling at Hermione. Parvati and Seamus were not far behind, and the girls could hardly fire off their questions fast enough.

"You're a slyboots!" "Where did you hide your costume?" "Where did you get dressed?" "Who did your makeup?"

I'm wearing makeup! I've got to find a mirror.

Hermione gave them all a polite smile. "Do any of you have a mirror? I'm not sure what I look like in this light."

Lavender and Parvati pulled mirrors from their costumes in unison and with lightning speed. Lavender was closer, and Hermione took a quick look.

That is some charm! Along with the black and white clothing, the charm had given her face an equally vivid and dramatic look. It looked strange to Hermione, who was not used to so much — well,

drama. *Interesting. So this is what Snape thinks looks good. Maybe he has good taste. Pity he doesn't direct his good taste at himself more often.*

Ron and the rest of the boys were still gaping. "Crikey, Hermione, you look *good!*"

Ginny elbowed her brother. "Don't sound so surprised, Ron! You've seen her looking good before!" She nudged Harry. "Go on. You dance with her first. I'm so glad Snape decided to let you come! How did you manage it?"

"I didn't. It was his idea. He was pretty nice about it, actually." This statement was met with flat disbelief from all her housemates, and Hermione decided not to belabour the issue. Instead, she smiled happily at Harry, as he whirled her away to the music.

"Lily looks wonderful, too," he said, "I think I'll ask her to dance."

"Oh, Harry," Hermione cautioned him. "I'm not sure that's such a good idea. She's still getting established with the Slytherins, and that could make them suspicious."

"I suppose you're right," he sighed. He caught Lily's eye across the room and smiled at her. She seemed distracted by something, but she saw him, and smiled back. Harry's heart contracted for a second, and he wished for impossible things. *Mum.* She could have been such a good friend, if she didn't have to make up to her

wretched housemates. He prayed that whatever she was trying to achieve with the Slytherins would be worth the danger she was in now.

Lily saw Harry, dressed handsomely as a knight, dancing with Hermione. She hoped he wouldn't try to approach her tonight, and start a row. They were building a kind of clandestine friendship, but it was fragile, and any kind of unpleasantness might spoil it.

She had also witnessed Hermione's dramatic entrance with Severus, and felt a twinge of guilt, and then a little jealousy. *It should have been me.* She had accepted that Severus could not attend the ball with a student, and then he arrived with a beautifully costumed Hermione. Dressed as her friend was, they made a strangely impressive couple. *Couple! That's absurd. He doesn't even like her!*

She gave herself a little mental shake. *I'm glad Hermione got to come. Yes, I'm glad. Of course I'm glad.*

Draco had gone to get them both drinks, and she found herself standing next to Blaise.

"Well met by moonlight, proud Titania."

Lily admired Blaise. He looked rather Shakespearean himself — velvet doublet, with particoloured tights and codpiece that emphasised his attributes. Lily blushed. *I can hardly look him in the face.* He saw her embarrassment and flashed an amused smile.

She cleared her throat. "Mercutio? Orlando?" She strove to look anywhere but at the bulging green and silver codpiece.

"Not Shakespeare. Leonardo da Vinci, actually." He struck an elegantly casual pose. "We're related, believe it or not — though not directly, of course."

"Of course." *Is this a code? Is he telling me he's gay?*

"Draco was too fast for me this time, but it's early days yet."

Wait. Possibly not.

"Dance with me?"

"I'm her escort, Zabini." Draco had returned with their drinks, and quickly gave Lily hers, leaving him with a free arm to drape possessively around her. Lily gave Blaise an ironic smile.

"Later, perhaps. I'd like to." Draco looked at her sourly. She cheerfully defied him. "What? I think all the sixth year Slytherins should dance with one another. It promotes solidarity."

Blaise's smile broadened. Lily said loftily. "Don't look at me like that. You know what I mean. All the boys and girls should dance with one another."

"What a relief," Draco sniped at Blaise. "I thought she was going to have me dancing with you."

"You wish."

"Come on, Lily," Draco said, taking her arm. "Finish your drink and we'll shake off this

low fellow." He handed Blaise his empty glass. "With my compliments."

Lily gave Blaise a resigned wave as Draco steered her away, his hand on her elbow. The Hall seemed suffocatingly crowded.

"Can't we get out of this mob?"

Draco nodded, pleased. "Splendid idea, my lady Titania."

The décor extended to the gardens, lit with thousands of tiny fairy lights. They seemed to be alone, but muffled moans from the shrubbery indicated that it was not so. Draco smirked at her, and she shook her head in mock reproof.

"No shrubbery for you, my lad."

"Pity. Some say I'm at my best in the shrubbery." He had moved closer, the warmth from his body palpable between them. *He's really charming, when he's not trying to prove himself superior to all the world*, Lily admitted to herself. He seemed happy, and simply himself.

Don't be stupid, Lily. He's got you in his sights. Mustn't let your guard down.

"You look even more beautiful out here, you know. When it's just the two of us."

"Just the two of us and the anonymous snoggers."

He laughed, and then put his hands gently on her shoulders, stroking down her arms. "They don't matter. You do."

Bit by bit, he drew her against him. One hand reached up to stroke back a tendril of hair from her face. Lily's stomach did a startling flop. *He's going to kiss me. Well, all right. It's not like I've never been kissed. I've been kissed lots of times — oh!*

His mouth was wonderfully warm and soft, as he brushed first against her lower lip, then her upper. She quivered a little, as if shocked, but he held her firmly and then pressed his mouth slowly and oh, so sweetly to hers. It was quite unlike any kiss she had known before: not the sloppy, tooth-chipping fumbblings of past boy-friends, nor the rough, dry kiss James Potter had surprised her with at King's Cross when they had left for home last June (unable to hex him, she had repaid his impudence with an indignant shove and a rude name), nor yet the shy peck on the cheek that Severus had once worked up his courage for. This was a new thing.

Draco pulled her completely into his arms, and she could feel his blood pounding, as if it were her blood, her heart. She leaned into the kiss, and was on verge of losing her head completely, when a loud wail issued from the nearest yew.

"Don't stop!"

Draco and Lily jumped apart, and Lily muffled a nervous laugh. "Who is that, do you suppose?" she whispered.

Draco had not laughed, and was looking at

her intently. "Just that useless Hufflepuff Abbott. Not worth thinking about." He tried to pull her close again, but Lily backed away cautiously.

"I think it's time we got back to the Hall. I still owe Blaise a dance."

He did not move immediately. "I'm not sorry, you know. You're quite wonderful."

You're a fool, my girl. Making an ass of yourself over a boy who wouldn't think you fit to wipe his boots, if he knew the truth. Bloody hormones. With a tight smile, she turned to leave the garden. Draco offered his arm with a certain ceremony, and after a little hesitation, she took it.

Snape, covertly watching the handsome young couple from the shadows, desperately wondered why he forced himself see things that could only cause him pain. Draco and Lily left the garden; and the Potions master, sick at heart, stood silently until the last of the silver stars trailing after Lily's gown winked out.





THE HOGSMEADE SATURDAY

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HERMIONE AWOKE IN A DELICATELY balanced state of anticipation and foreboding. In the week since the ball, there had some been some personal adjustments. Hermione had herself been the surprised recipient of the sort of attention she had always thought would be the preserve of other, prettier girls. Some of the younger girls, both Gryffindor and Hufflepuff, had stopped her in the halls to tell her how nice she had looked that night, as did a number of boys, curiously mostly from Ravenclaw. Harry and Ron had been treading cautiously around her, thrown off balance by her extraordinary appearance, and her continued avowal that it was all due to Snape.

Hermione had practised the Cinderella charm, and had taught it to Parvati and Lavender to silence their wails of "please, please, *pretty* please!" Ginny had joined them, and Hermione had to admit that Snape was right:

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the charm's value depended entirely upon the taste and imagination of the caster. Some of the results were ludicrous, others downright obscene. The girls had found even those entertaining; and they stayed up late Sunday, shrieking with horror and laughter, and occasionally *oohing* and *aaahing* at a good attempt. Hermione found she could largely recreate the look Snape had devised for her at the ball. It was attractive, in a sort of "*I am a Dark Witch: Fear Me*" way. Ginny also did well, showing an interesting flair for the colours that suited her. It took a great deal of power and skill for a charm that Hermione ordinarily would have dismissed as frivolous; and they had slept so heavily afterwards that they had all nearly missed their first class the next day.

But it was not really frivolous, she now admitted. Looking that good gave a girl a certain power, and it followed that that same power gave her confidence and assurance.

She still laughed to herself when she remembered Malfoy's horrified face the moment he had recognised her. Other Slytherins had reacted differently that evening. Blaise Zabini had brushed past her lightly, with a suavely whispered, "Very nice, Granger." Yet other members of the House of the Snake had expressed their appreciation in less sophisticated ways. In

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Potions Class on Monday, there had been some rather loud remarks about how much better certain Gryffindors looked “when they didn’t cover their assets.” Harry’s clenched jaw showed him ready to explode, when Lily had defused the situation by asking Nott for some acromantula venom, and then whispering something to him that looked like a rebuke. Nott had been about to reply in a silly jocular way, when Snape had appeared from nowhere, stared hard at them all, and the room had fallen silent.

When she and Harry had seen Lily after Transfiguration on Wednesday, she told them that Snape had spoken to the Slytherins about Hermione. He had told them that Dumbledore had assigned her to be his assistant; that there was nothing to be done about it; that he would appreciate his House not making his life difficult by giving a Gryffindor reason to complain to the Headmaster. Miss Granger was officially off-limits; and unless she provoked them first, his snakelets would ignore his strictures at their peril.

By Thursday, it was all over the school that Hermione Granger was Professor Snape’s assistant. Ron and Harry, who of course had known, had said nothing about it, and Harry apparently had somehow persuaded Ron that going on about it was not helpful. Her other housemates, and indeed the other houses were not so

restrained, and she was constantly irritated by well-meant expressions of sympathy and the odd scathing remark. Some of the seventh-year Ravensclaws, to her astonishment, were actually jealous of her. The Slytherins, loyal to their Head, said nothing, absolutely nothing.

Some aspects of her situation had definitely improved over the past two weeks. Flitwick and Sprout had somewhat recovered from their shock, and were treating her nearly normally. Lupin had always been kind, and McGonagall simply continued with the fiction that Hermione and Lily were invisible. Her other teachers, ignorant of the secret drama, had been surprised at Hermione’s new duties. Vector, particularly, seemed a little put out. “Had I known you wanted an assistantship, Hermione, you had only to come to me...”

“Oh, Professor Vector! I didn’t ask Professor Snape! The Headmaster just told me I was to be his assistant and I couldn’t say no to him, could I?”

Her Arithmancy professor was still disappointed, but admitted that Hermione could not have been expected to cross Dumbledore in his decision. “Still, my dear, if things don’t go well with Professor Snape — you know — if there are *difficulties*, I would be very happy to have some help. Perhaps you haven’t considered Arithmancy as a career, but you could defi-

nately do this work — and there are so many opportunities for a good Arithmancer — in the Ministry, at Gringotts, in business — and there are even some private Arithmantic firms that would be happy to have some new blood — I mean,” the teacher grew embarrassed, “that your not being connected with any of the old families might not be such a handicap as it might be... oh, dear.”

“I think I understand, Professor,” Hermione said quietly.

Vector drew a deep breath. “What I mean to say, in my clumsy way, is that talented Arithmancers are *rare*: just as rare as first class potions makers. Arithmancy, as my students are so fond of telling me, is *hard*, after all. A Muggleborn witch can sometimes find herself viewed with a certain prejudice, when it comes to finding a place in the adult world — those parchment-pushers at the Ministry tend to be snobbish about blood — but a top-drawer Arithmancer, especially one with a mastery in her credentials, will always find employment of some sort.”

“That’s very good to know, Professor; and I promise to think it over.”

On the whole, Hermione had been quite cheered by the conversation. She had been more frightened and depressed than she had admitted to anyone by Snape’s predictions about her

future lack of prospects. She had invested so much of herself in being an outstanding student. In the Muggle world she would have been working toward admission to the best possible university, and would have had years more of being an outstanding student. There were, however, no wizarding universities: the wizarding population was not large enough to support such institutions. Instead, one could find an entry-level position, as Percy Weasley had; or one could train as a healer at St. Mungo’s; or one could apply for an apprenticeship with a master in one’s preferred field. Fred and George Weasley, she had come to realise, were nearly unique in starting out as proprietors of their own business.

Friday Potions had been eerily quiet. They were finishing a Blood Tonic preparation, and the air in the dungeon was heavy with a tang of iron that could be tasted as well as smelled. Hermione overheard the excited murmurs from the Slytherin contingent planning to make the most of their Hogsmeade outing tomorrow. Since the summer’s great Azkaban breakout, there had been no sign of Voldemort and his Death Eaters, and people were beginning to settle back into a complacent agreement that the lot of them had gone to ground or fled to foreign parts. And good riddance.

Dumbledore did not seem to be of that mind,

however, and had made elaborate arrangements for the security of the students. Harry and Hermione knew that some Aurors would be on duty there in Hogsmeade, and both the teachers and the students were warned to be on the alert for any suspicious activity.

Quiet too was her Friday night with Snape. He had spoken to her gruffly, but not rudely.

"Here," he had said, gesturing at the worktable covered with monkshood flowers. "Remove the stamens without dislodging any more of the pollen than you can manage. Grind them finely in the number 3 gold mortar. Why are you wearing a ring? Is that silver?"

"White gold, sir."

"Muggle jewellery," he had sniffed. "Remove it. It probably contains silver as well as nickel, as you should well know. If you must wear jewellery, pure gold is chemically more stable, and thus a far better choice. Then wash your hands thoroughly if you wish to learn to make the Wolfsbane Potion."

She was learning to deal with him on a one-to-one basis, when there were no Slytherins about that he need pander to. Sensibly, but with difficulty, she managed to suppress the questions that bubbled to her lips. Was this to be for Professor Lupin? *Obviously, Hermione*, she chided herself. *Don't ask Snape stupid questions — you*

know it irritates him. Try to think before you speak.

Instead of chattering about the procedure, she spent the next hour and a half meticulously plucking out the stamens and grinding them until they were in fine pieces, but not yet powder; and then displayed the mortar and its contents to Snape in silence. He gave it a careful look, and then nodded. "That will do for now. Cover it and set it just over there. Now," he had continued, producing his green potions diary, "copy the ingredients and procedure from this book. I want you to study the process carefully, so that when you are here again next Friday, you will understand where we are, and can participate intelligently."

He had paused, hesitating, and then told her, "I shall be stopping at Hogsmeade Apothecary tomorrow during the outing. If you wish to learn something, I shall be there around ten thirty, and you would have an opportunity to see the shipment of African imports."

She thought, *People will make silly remarks, and then, too, I suppose he will treat me like an idiot child.* Nonetheless, she answered immediately, "It sounds very interesting, Professor. I'll be there."

Now it was Saturday, and she was nervous about her appointment with Snape, but rather excited about it as well. It made her feel like a person he considered worth teaching.

First, to placate her friends, she dutifully accompanied them to the Hogsmeade branch of Quality Quidditch Supplies. Harry, back on the team after last year's enforced hiatus, was a Seeker with something to prove. He had generously and quietly stepped aside so that Ron could be team captain. "It means so much more to him, Hermione," he had explained. "And besides, a Keeper sees much more of the game than a Seeker. It's enough for me that I can fly." Ron did not know of Harry's sacrifice, and was quite dizzy with joy at his new position as the "King of Quidditch."

Hermione smiled through her boredom, willing her eyes open as the boys droned on about the new Grip-EEZE flying gloves, and looked about for some oddments that might please them at Christmas. Through the shop window, she saw the laughing group of sixth-year Slytherins pass by on their way to Gladrags. Lily was in the midst of them, her expression set in the reserved smile she nearly always wore now. She would be seeing Harry and Hermione in the Reading Room tomorrow afternoon, whilst Draco and the rest of the Slytherin team were at quidditch practice. She had promised to tell Harry more stories of her first years at Hogwarts; and Dobby, now admitted to the secret of the Reading Room, would no

doubt provide them with a superlative tea.

Lily said little of her daily life in Slytherin, other than that she was getting on well enough with the other girls. Harry had sneered at "pug-face" Parkinson, but Lily replied that she didn't like Harry criticising Pansy for her looks.

"If you think she's a rotten person, say so; but don't attack a girl's appearance — it's very mean. She can't help her face, and I grant it would look better with a nicer expression; but I don't like to hear boys going on about girls' shortcomings."

Hermione had to agree. "I hate it when people laugh at my hair, the way they use to laugh at my teeth."

"What's wrong with your teeth?" Lily asked, puzzled.

"It's a long story," Hermione sighed.

Remembering, she laughed again at Lily's indignation when she had heard the "I see no difference" anecdote.

Hearing her, the boys turned around. Ron was outraged.

"Don't laugh, Hermione! The Cannons are going straight to the top of the league this year!"

"Sorry, Ron," she apologised. They moved on to Honeyduke's, and she picked up her usual flossing mints; but when the boys were ready to visit Zonko's, she saw it was nearly ten thirty.

"I need to stop at the Apothecary's. I'll meet

you at the Three Broomsticks for lunch.”

“What’s at the Apothecary’s?”

“Professor Snape wanted me to see the new shipment there. I thought it would be interesting.”

Harry only raised his brows, but Ron sputtered a good ten seconds; and before he could manage to frame an intelligible protest, Hermione had waved goodbye and slipped out the door.

Hogsmeade Apothecary smelled a little like the Potions classroom, but greener and dustier. Jars lined the ancient oak shelves; and bins, appearing to be open, but really warded against contamination, held scores of fascinating items. Hermione saw Snape, already deep in conversation with the proprietor when she came in. He gave her a slight nod, and the apothecary, a plump, wrinkled witch of indeterminate age, beamed at her.

“And this must be Miss Granger! I’m Madam Leech. Professor Snape’s been telling me about his new assistant. Well, come over here, girl, I don’t bite.”

Hermione approached the counter and jumped back in shock as the roaring head of a Tebo popped up before her, teeth gnashing.

“But this might!” shrieked the old witch, sobbing with laughter.

“Oh!” Hermione gasped, clutching her heart, and noticed that Snape had neither drawn his wand, nor even moved.

Instead, he gazed calmly at her, remarking

sourly, “Apothecary humour.”

Madam Leech gave the horrible dried head on the stick another shake, and then set it in a corner. As the woman wiped her eyes with a huge red handkerchief, Snape drawled, “Madam Leech, if you are quite finished terrorising Miss Granger, I was hoping to obtain some Erumpent Exploding Fluid.”

At once, the apothecary became all business, displaying a huge variety of African imports, some of which Hermione had read about, but never seen. Unlike the endless boredom at QQS, this was interesting; and she found Snape’s hard bargaining with the shopkeeper as interesting as the items she displayed. She asked Hermione a few penetrating questions, and giving Snape a nod, said, “You’ve got a good one there.” Then nothing would satisfy Madam Leech but to call her assistant to mind the shop, and take Snape and Hermione to a back room where she kept “the really good bits.” That the “good bits” included a huge stuffed sea serpent phallus, suspended magically from the ceiling, was a cause for even more hilarity.

His bargaining finished, and arrangements made for delivery, they left the shop together. Snape was silent, and Hermione felt a little awkward. A group of students, seeing them together, nudged one another.

Hermione drew breath, and remarked, "Thank you, sir, for the opportunity. I know Madam Leech would send up whatever you required, and it wasn't really necessary for you to go there personally —"

Snape cut her off brusquely. "I like to go to the Apothecary's." Bluntly said, but with an openness and frankness that surprised her. Snape seemed slightly off-balance himself, and Hermione realised that she now knew one personal thing about her dreaded teacher.

He likes to go to the Apothecary's.

She smiled briefly up at him. "So do I."

His face closed down and he snapped, "No doubt you are meeting your friends for lunch, Miss Granger. I suggest you do so now." He turned and strode away quickly, a tall and solitary figure in black.

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Draco had asked her to lunch. Lily thought it nice of him, if a bit pushing. It was hopeless to try to find a moment to visit with Hermione and Harry. Draco was attached to her side as if by a sticking charm, and she could give no more to her secret friends than a discreet smile as the Hogwarts party left the school grounds.

Hogsmeade was much the same as it had been the last time she was here — only last month by

her reckoning — but really over twenty years before. There were some subtle changes, and some new proprietors in once familiar places. She fixed her eyes on the Shrieking Shack, as a constant in an altered universe. They strolled about the shops, visiting Gladrags, Zonko's, Honeyduke's (which she had always found pleasant); and then she stopped for a browse at the bookshop. She was so deeply engrossed in the new publications, that she was startled when Draco spoke to her and then tapped her gently on the shoulder.

"It's time for lunch."

She looked up, a little wild-eyed. "Already?" She had been so lost in the anthropology of Australian Aboriginal Magic that she had literally forgotten where she was.

Draco smirked, "It's nearly noon, Lily. You were in a different world."

She shook her head to clear it. "Yes, I was."

The Three Broomsticks was exactly as she remembered it. She felt a brief shock at the changes in the lovely Rosmerta's face. *She's gotten middle-aged, but hasn't completely lost her looks*, she decided.

Rosmerta gave them a professional, somewhat muted smile, and told Draco, "You can go straight on through."

Draco took Lily by the hand, and pulled

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her through the big, open room. A few people bristled at Draco; others whispered; some pretended not to see him, and turned their backs. Draco ignored them all, and brought Lily with him to a closed door.

"A private room, Draco?" Lily asked coolly. "I don't think so."

He gave her a naughty smirk, and held the door for her. A well-bred, feminine voice called softly from inside, "Is that you, Draco?"

"Yes, Mother." He urged Lily through the doorway, and passed her to kiss the elegantly slender witch whose perfect smile included them both. "And here is Lily."

His mother. Lily felt her cheeks burn as she warily approached the lovely woman, who was dressed in fashionable but not ostentatious style. "How do you do, Mrs Malfoy?"

"I'm so delighted to meet you, my dear, after all Draco has said about you." Lily's hand was warmly shaken, and she was shown a seat at the prettily arranged table.

His mother! She was determined not to be intimidated by a Mrs Malfoy; not by the clothes, not by the pureblood air of entitlement, not by the wealth obvious in her jewellery, her hair, and the means to offer lunch in a private room to her son and — *his girlfriend.* Lily's lips thinned slightly. She was going to have set

Draco straight, and soon.

Rosmerta herself served them: pub food that had ascended into heaven. It was a leisurely lunch. Lily willed herself to eat, though her stomach roiled with tension, and the food went down her throat in hard, square-feeling bites. Mrs Malfoy, in the guise of small talk, interrogated her mercilessly about her family, her former school, her studies, her ambitions, her impressions of Hogwarts. Draco watched them with amusement as he enjoyed his meal. Lily understood that she was being tested and examined, and decided it was pointless to feel angry. Instead, she surreptitiously examined Mrs Malfoy in her turn.

Draco's mother was not all that different from upper-class women Lily had met in the Muggle world. She well remembered Lady Wentworth's visit to their primary school to talk about her work abroad, and she had seen the royals on the telly for years. Here was the same polished, meticulously groomed surface. Here was a pampered and privileged woman whose career — if one could call it that — was that of a trophy wife: a valuable social asset, a giver of select parties, a patroness of charitable causes.

For all that, she was no fool. She obviously had standards that she expected any prospective Malfoy bride to meet; but she was neither over-

bearingly arrogant, nor falsely sweet. All in all, as mother-in-law material went, Lily suspected there might be worse candidates out there.

Don't give her so much credit, she scolded herself. She's being nice because she thinks I meet her rock-bottom requirement: she thinks I'm a pure-blood. She's willing to forgive me for being a provincial Canadian witch with no family influence and possibly no money; for being a stranger transferred to Hogwarts under mysterious circumstances. What she wouldn't forgive is a Mudblood dancing with her precious Draco: not if I were as beautiful as Titania or as powerful as Queen Mab. What matters is that she believes I'm a pure-blooded pedigreed poodle and acceptable breeding stock. What awful rubbish.

Mrs Malfoy was obviously aware that Draco's own marital prospects had shrunk rather alarmingly. He was a Malfoy, true: he was also the son of a fugitive felon. If Lucius Malfoy had still been a free man and one of the arbiters of wizarding Britain, Lily guessed that her reception today might have been decidedly more frosty.

"A charming place," observed Lily, looking about her.

"Yes," Narcissa Malfoy agreed vaguely. "And so much more private this way. One hates to be stared at, now that —" her voice trailed off, and she looked fixedly at her plate.

Lily felt a twinge of compassion. No matter what Draco's father had done, it hardly seemed fair that his family should suffer. *Still, if a few hard looks are all she has to bear, she's better off than the Defecators' victims! Oh, dear, I've got to stop thinking of them that way. I'm going to say it out loud at the worst moment.*

Mrs Malfoy looked up a moment later, with a brittle smile. Draco gave Lily's hand a stealthy squeeze under the table, and the rest of the lunch passed without incident.

"Lunch with Mrs Malfoy, Lily?" scoffed Harry. "Aren't we moving in exalted circles now?" It was a mad, uproarious tea party in the Reading Room. Dobby could never do things by halves: the table was covered with scones, with clotted cream, with wonderful chocolate biscuits, and with some delicious tea sandwiches. Each was hardly more than a mouthful, but such a huge platter of them added up to a great many mouthfuls indeed. Hermione wondered if she would be able to eat any dinner at all.

Lily was pink with embarrassment and laughter. Hermione noticed that she always sat with her back to the picture of the Hogwarts Library. The picture looked rather forlorn now, bereft of its occupant; and Hermione did

not wonder that Lily disliked looking at it. *If I had spent twenty years in the library reading PRIDE AND PREJUDICE, I might be tired of it too.*

"She wasn't so bad."

"I can understand that," Harry agreed. "Within the small circle of those she considers fit to live, she's probably *very nice*. I remember seeing her at the World Quidditch Match. I thought she was nice-looking, except for acting like she was smelling something nasty. Probably that something was me."

"At least nothing terrible happened. No Death Eaters slinging curses!" Hermione shuddered, and then reminded Harry, "We were going to tell Lily about starting up the D.A. again."

Harry's face lit up. "That's right! We're going to have regular meetings now that it's an official Hogwarts club. Professor Lupin's agreed to supervise, and we'll get together on Tuesday evenings."

"Harry's a wonderful teacher," Hermione told Lily, and ignored Harry's suddenly red, pleased face. "Everyone in the D.A. did splendidly on their DADA O.W.L."

Lily began to catch their excitement. "I can't wait to come! I think Hogwarts should have more clubs. It would make the Houses mix more, and the students would get to know each other better."

Harry and Hermione exchanged an uneasy glance. What would the others say about a Slytherin member? Hermione considered explaining the delicate situation to Lily, who ought to be able to understand. Harry, however, felt differently.

He said decisively, "We'll be glad to see you there. I hope you'll be all right though: Malfoy might send his goons after you." *And he'll lose interest in her pretty quickly if he thinks she's not Death Eater material.* It was one thing to know that Lily was trying to infiltrate Slytherin House. It was quite another to see her dancing with Draco Malfoy.

Lily began to understand, and Hermione remarked off-handedly, "We've never had anyone from Slytherin. It had to be secret last year, so we only invited people we thought were reliable."

"And not all of them were," Harry informed her grimly. "Hermione did the neatest bit of jinxing you ever saw on that little rat Marietta Edgecombe."

Lily questioningly raised her brows. Hermione explained, "When she told tales to that revolting Umbridge, her face came out in spots that spelled 'SNEAK.'"

Lily burst out laughing. "That's brilliant! You are a wicked girl, and my idol!" She sobered, and said, "Are you sure you want me to come? It's going to put the cat amongst the pigeons. For that matter, could I bring some others? I can

simply feign ignorance of house politics, and say I want to sharpen my defence skills."

Harry frowned. "It seems stupid to train my worst enemies." In a momentary flash of memory, he saw a furious Snape before him, sneering, "*You are handing him weapons!*"

Lily said gently, "Harry, it seems to me even stupider to make all the Slytherins feel they have nowhere to go *but* to Voldemort. They are a close-mouthed lot, but I definitely get the feeling that not all of them are Oldyart fans."

He shrugged. "Just be careful. Once you come to a meeting, it's going to get around. Maybe it *would* be a good thing to have some others to back you up."

"Or watch your back," Hermione added, with a shiver.

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Tuesday evening, the old members of the Defence Association (the tactful, public name of the group) gathered in the DADA room. Harry gave Cho a distant nod when she arrived nervously, without Marietta. Hermione knew that he had not forgiven Cho for what he considered her disloyalty last year; but she was a good student, Head Girl this year, in fact, and was thus was not only good public relations for the club, but a member whose swan Patronus had inspired others.

Harry approached Professor Lupin, who was unobtrusively watching from the sidelines. "Professor, when are you going to call us to order? I think a few more might be coming —"

"Harry, I'm just here to lend support. This is a student club. It's a good opportunity for all of you to work together, and I don't want to muck up what worked so well last year." He looked around thoughtfully, and told Harry, "If I were you, I'd start talking with them and get a feel for how the members want to organise."

"*Bloody hell!*" came Ron's surprised shout, near the doorway. "*Stupefy!*"

"Ron!" bellowed Lupin, too late. "Put up your wand at once!"

Hermione and Harry pushed through the others crowding near the commotion; and saw Lily, Blaise Zabini, Millicent Bustrorde, and four Slytherin fifth years, wands out, responding to the sudden attack.

"*Protego!*" countered Lily, her shield charm sheltering her and those standing behind her. Beside her Blaise Zabini had cast his own counterspell, the cold blue glare of it reflecting vividly off their faces.

Harry ran up behind Ron, pulling his wand arm back. "Ron! It's all right! They're supposed to be here!"

Ron whirled on him, his face a mask of fury.

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"Slytherins! Have you gone mad? They're all on his side!"

Lupin had come between the hostile parties. "Now listen! All of you! This is an official Hogwarts club. As such, any student in good standing may take part. That is the decision of the Headmaster, and I expect all of you to respect it." The students stirred, and whispered amongst themselves. Lupin gave Harry an encouraging look, and then turned to the Slytherins, standing tensely in the doorway.

"Miss Jones, Mr Zabini, Miss Bullstrode. And this is Lark Moran, Strabo Bletchley, Amethyst Grimstone, and Caius Llewellyn."

Harry stepped forward and spoke clearly enough to quiet all the mutterings. "Welcome to the Defence Association."

"Charmed," Lily dimpled back, with only the slightest edge to her voice.

Blaise Zabini, with unruffled poise, extended his hand to Harry. "I see you don't take kindly to latecomers, Potter. Won't happen again, I assure you."

Ron snorted with disgust.



"WHAT DID YOU MEAN BY going to bloody Potter's bloody fan club meeting?"

"Belt up, Draco, I'm not going to talk until you're able to talk back civilly."

"Don't walk away from me!" Draco grabbed Lily by the shoulder and spun her around. Her wand was up and pointed before she finished turning.

Blaise had entered the Slytherin common room behind Lily, and just ahead of Millicent Bullstrode and the fifth years. He drew his wand with deceptive languor, and smiled like a predator. "Unwise to cross a witch who's just been at duelling practice, Malfoy."

Pansy joined Draco, a frown knitting her brows nearly inseparably. "We don't mix with that sort, Jones. Even *you* should know that by now."

Draco's fury had been diverted to Blaise. "You lured her into it, didn't you, Zabini? She was curious, and this

was your chance to get her away from me.”

Blaise’s smile grew broader. “Believe that if you like. I had my reasons.”

Slytherins called others out of the dormitories. Within a few minutes, a circle of the hostile or merely curious had surrounded the small knot of new Defence Association members. Millicent had her back to Lily, hunkering down in attack position. Lily found it reassuring. Millicent had expressed her great gratitude to Lily since the night of the Halloween Ball. With the fierce loyalty of someone who had never been shown much kindness by her peers or really anyone else, she now was Lily’s faithful admirer and henchwoman.

Lily, however, was not going to hide behind Millicent or behind Blaise, for that matter. Speaking up clearly, she declared, “I thought it was better to know what was going on, than not to know. Potter received the highest O.W.L. for Defence in Hogwarts’s history. He’s known to have defeated Voldemort” (there was a panic-stricken storm of whispers) “at least five times. Like him or not, he’s a kind of genius at Defence, and I for one am not going to miss any opportunity to learn how to protect myself.”

Draco’s stared at her, face blanched with horror. “You *dare* say the name of the Dark Lord.”

Lily felt her temper slipping. When she and

Blaise had put out tentative feelers to one another, one day after History, they had known that their attendance at the D.A. would cause controversy. Now, her careless use of a madman’s name had well and truly fanned the flames. She gritted out, “He’s not my lord. He’s not any sort of lord.”

Pansy was angry and afraid. “You’re going too far, Jones. You may come from some backwoods school and think you’re clever, but we know the Dark Lord’s power, and show respect for his name.”

That’s it. Lily felt her fury rise up like fiery wings, and tried not to shout. “Which name? He may have made up some ridiculous title for himself, but everyone knows he’s plain Tom Riddle, former Head Boy of Hogwarts, now would-be Evil Overlord of the Wizarding World.”

She was surprised at the absolute silence, and then realised that her words had shocked the other students in the room. She seized the initiative, and went on. “Irony, isn’t it, that the leader of the pureblood movement is the halfblood son of a witch and a Muggle?”

Draco was still horrified. He stared wildly at his friends: Nott, who stared back dumbfounded; Goyle and Crabbe, who had failed to follow the debate, and were hopelessly confused; the older Slytherins, Warrington, and the Rosier cousins, who appeared stunned that

such a discussion was even taking place. Wands were out, but no longer pointed.

Warrington began, "That can't be true —"

"It's true," Blaise supported her serenely. "His birth is still known to a few old-timers in Italy and the south of France — my mother's family territory — and he hasn't managed to kill all of them and the truth with them. He is a halfblood, and, it would seem, insanely ashamed of it."

"Who wouldn't be?" called out an anonymous jokester.

Lily, now knowing herself committed, decided to be open about what she knew. "Voldemort — or Tom Riddle, if you prefer, grew up in a horrible Muggle orphanage. His mother died, and his Muggle family wanted nothing to do with him. *Of course* he hates Muggles. He came to Hogwarts and was Sorted into Slytherin — some of you must know that," (there were some wary nods) "and was a model student" (*except for setting a basilisk loose on his fellow students, she thought, but now isn't the time to digress*), "and there's an award with his name on it here at the school."

Draco's first shock had worn off. He stood, serious and incensed, forcing his voice to a reasonable level. He was hearing unpleasant new allegations tonight, from an unexpected and distressing

source, and he was trying to force the new information into his old frame of reference.

"All right," he began, rather coldly. "Let's say for the sake of argument that these stories are true. They may call into question the Dark Lord's heritage, but they really have nothing to do with his policies or ideas."

"I disagree," Lily said decidedly, also with forced calm. "I think his birth and upbringing have *everything* to do with his ideas, his policies, and his motives. This is a person who was mistreated by Muggles, and then, halfblood though he was, came to Hogwarts and was Sorted into Slytherin. My guess is that he had a fairly rotten time for at least the first few years. Imagine — a halfblood whose books were no doubt paid for by the Governors' fund for charity cases. He would have had nothing — and would have been wearing the shabbiest clothes. How do you think he was treated by this House?" She paused to let her words sink in.

Draco was white with tension and fury. "What's your point, then?"

Lily drew a harsh breath. "My *point*, Draco, is that maybe *that's the point*. Maybe Voldemort hates purebloods just as much as he hates Muggles. In fact, he probably hates the entire wizarding world for leaving him with the Muggles and then treating him wretchedly

when he was in school. Voldemort promises his followers 'rewards beyond their dreams.' Maybe he's having his little joke on them. What have his faithful followers got in return for services rendered? Let's see — years in Azkaban, dispossession, living in hiding — and let's not forget The Kiss. *That's* a good one. I'm sure none of his followers dreamed of any of those rewards. Meanwhile, the new Evil Overlord has risked nothing himself, because he has nothing worthwhile to lose."

The room was eerily silent now. Lily had learned the names of the Death Eaters captured at the Department of Mysteries. She knew that that their sons and daughters, nephews and nieces, were confronting her: some white and strained as Draco, some red-faced and furious as Crabbe. Still and all, no curses were flying yet. *The night is young, though. I wonder if the seven of us will make it out of here alive. But if we don't say these things, who will?*

Pansy broke the quiet. "You think that the Dark Lord's ideas about Muggleborns and the purity of wizarding blood are only a cover for his real aims, then?"

Blaise answered her. "What better way to divide the wizarding world, create chaos, and betray us to the Muggles? The Aurors are going mad, trying to obliviate all the Muggles who

have seen the Dark Mark. If this goes on, our secrecy will be breached beyond repair, and then we'll see days that will make the Witch Hunts look like perfect peace."

Lily added quietly, "What better way to destroy the purebloods forever, than by deceiving and discrediting their natural leaders?" She could not know this was true, but it was so byzantine and devious that it sounded reasonable to her. More importantly, it seemed reasonable to the Slytherins. And it was a sop to Draco's pride. It portrayed his revered father not as an enemy, but as a fellow victim.

Theodore asked Blaise. "So you're coming out publicly against the Dark Lord?"

"Yes," Blaise answered simply. "The time has come for all of us who do not want to be regarded as Death Eaters to clearly proclaim ourselves. Voldemort" (The other Slytherins looked at each other uneasily) "cannot win. He can create chaos, he can kill or torture, he can destroy our world; but he cannot create a functional new one in its place. Even if he destroys his current enemies, a society built on terror or torture — even of his own followers — will collapse in the end. It always has, throughout history. Some of us remain awake in Binns's class." There were a few scattered laughs. He went on, with unusual intensity, "The Zabini have

always been businessmen. We want a world in which we can do business. You cannot do business with a madman demanding that you kiss the hem of his robes, and then cursing you if you tell him unpleasant truths. In the end," he concluded proudly, "Voldemort has nothing to offer me that I cannot get for myself."

Lily added, more quietly, "If Voldemort were really sincere about his ideas, he wouldn't be going about them as he does. He's not consistent. He kills purebloods as often — or even more often — than anyone else. Ordering his followers to kill a few Muggles here and there really doesn't advance his policies at all." She saw Draco's blank expression — and he was not the only one — and felt annoyed. "Do any of you know what the Muggle population is? How many of them there are? There are millions — literally millions of Muggles in England alone. What is the wizarding population of the British Isles?" She waited.

Amethyst Grimstone, standing behind her, answered instantly. "Twelve thousand, three hundred forty-five, as of yesterday. And that includes Squibs."

Twenty points to you, Amethyst, thought Lily. *You should have been a Ravenclaw!*

Lily followed this up immediately. "We're a tiny population, and hopelessly outnumbered.

We can't afford to lose *anyone*."

Goyle, still bewildered, blurted out, "You mean it doesn't do any good to kill Muggles?" Lily was not pleased to see the amused smirks of her housemates.

"I can see why Voldemort might order his followers to kill Muggles. It makes the true believers imagine that they are advancing the cause. It's a way of proving his control, and it desensitises his followers to acts of violence. After all, once a Death Eater has killed a Muggle, why not a Muggleborn, and then why not a halfblood, and then why not a pureblood? Violence is a tool of Voldemort's; but it's a tool he wields for his own advantage, not ours."

Draco would not be diverted from his own thoughts. "None of this solves the Mudblood Problem. Even if Voldemort is just using us, he's still the only one who has any ideas about preserving wizarding society from contamination."

I really don't want to get into this now, Lily thought, starting to sweat a little. *This is going to be the hardest issue to deal with.* Knowing that she was walking on eggshells, she began mildly, "Is there a Mudblood Problem? If there is, what exactly is the problem?" Seeing outraged looks, she said quickly, "I'm not trying to be deliberately obtuse, but what if this issue is something Voldemort has made up just to suit himself?"

Pansy snarled, exasperated, "It *is* a real issue! This school is deluged with ignorant, vulgar Mudbloods who know nothing of wizarding tradition. They swagger around Hogsmeade in their ugly, common, Muggle clothes with stupid Muggle slogans — they bring in their repulsive music and dance, and they tell their Muggle relations all about us." She took a deep breath, and declared, "*It's not safe!*" Shouts of agreement seconded her.

Draco agreed. "Wizarding culture is under attack! Our first-year classes are watered down to explain the simplest principles of magic to mudbloods." He flushed angrily, "Oh, I grant you a freak here and there, like that Granger! But she's just as bad. She's doesn't understand wizarding culture at all, with her hand waving and her shouting answers out of turn in that crass, pushing way!"

Lily reined in her impulse to rise to her friend's defence. In all honesty, she had to admit that Draco's perception of Hermione, though coloured by prejudice, was not that far off the mark. Hermione's aggressive and competitive behaviour in class was born of her fierce desire to prove herself; and Lily could see that other students, trampled in her rush to excellence, might find her intolerable. She could be tactless, she could be insensitive, and

had Lily not met and befriended her outside of class, Hermione's idiosyncrasies might have put her off as well.

She said, "I agree that the wizarding world here is not assimilating the outsiders very well, but there are effective ways to improve that situation. In the Americas, there are programs to orient Muggleborns early on; the families are screened for potential security leaks; and children at risk are removed from their Muggle families, who are then obliterated." She winced inwardly. *Oh, well done, Lily, let's convert the Death Eater progeny from murder to kidnapping. I'll worry about that later.* She raised her voice to make herself heard, "The Muggleborn may exist for a reason! When Amethyst told you the population figure, I don't think some of you realised that the total wizarding population is going down, not up. That's the real crisis, and that's what Voldemort and his mania about the Muggleborn is keeping unnoticed and unaddressed."

Her listeners quieted down, somewhat interested. A few had sat on the floor, as if watching a play. She went on, more sure of herself on this topic. "How many of you are only children?" A large number of students raised their hands, including a reluctant Draco. "How many of you have only one other sibling?" The balance of the room responded. "Anyone with

more than one?" A single third-year held up a hand. "The British wizarding world is not doing very well reproducing itself. The Muggleborns are the only thing keeping our population from plunging."

"And the Weasleys!" snapped Pansy. There were snorts of disgusted laughter.

Lily went on. "There are a lot of factors, I know that: the custom of not having so many heirs as to divide family fortunes down to nothing — the war — the fact that a lot of witches and wizards never marry at all — look at our professors!" (There were groans and laughs) "It could be that the Muggleborns are an important resource that we're not making the most of." She impulsively confided, "I was working on a study of Muggleborns in my old school — trying to really see what the effect was. There's a lot we don't know — why Muggleborns suddenly appear in the population — how reliably they produce magical offspring. I just think that we need to know more, before we dismiss a group of people that could be useful."

Blaise broke in smoothly, "So let's set that whole issue aside for the moment. We can deal with the Muggles, and the Muggleborns, and the halfbloods when we can deal with them from a position of strength. Until Voldemort is defeated, many of us from old pureblood

families will be under suspicion. If Voldemort is defeated without our help, our power and prestige will be permanently compromised. If we concede leadership in this struggle to the Gryffindors, we will face a future with the likes of Arthur Weasley as Minister of Magic. And that," he said emphatically, raising his voice above the outraged clamours, "is why we decided that Slytherin House needs to be a visible presence in the fight against him. Finally, it's unwise to have the rest of the school learning who-knows-what in the way of jinxes, hexes, curses, and defensive shields, without having our own people in there to even the odds."

Draco visibly relaxed. This argument obviously made sense, both immediate and concrete, to him, as it did to a number of his housemates. He said so, grudgingly. "I see your point. But it's still *Potter*."

"Yes, well, that's unfortunate," said Blaise blandly, "but Potter is nearly an institution, and we have to put up with him if we want to maintain our influence. I will say that he was surprisingly decent about us showing up at his meeting. It was Weasley who nearly had a stroke."

Grins and derisive laughter followed that remark. Draco was uncommonly thoughtful. "Potter overruled Weasley, then."

Lily said, "Granger hushed him, and Potter

ignored him. I think both of them recognise the value of Slytherin co-operation." Draco made a face, but said nothing. She added, "And then Professor Lupin made it clear that any student could participate."

"It's our best opportunity to win respect and gain advantage in the coming war, and in the inevitable power vacuum afterwards," Blaise observed grimly. "It won't present itself again."

Theodore nervously suggested, "Perhaps we should talk to Professor Snape about this —"

Draco cut him off sharply. "No!" He collected himself, and drawled, "You know how the Professor hates Potty and his friends. No chance of a balanced view there. Besides, he may have his own loyalties."

Uneasy glances were exchanged. Lily knew that many of the students believed Severus to be a follower of Voldemort. She longed to defend him. Although his position as a spy and a suspected Death Eater might be useful to Dumbledore, she felt it was harmful to his Slytherins. Many of them respected him, and would be swayed by his rumoured endorsement of Voldemort. Many others, afraid to confide their opposition to him, would take the path of least resistance, and either fall into Voldemort's orbit, or keep their heads down, hoping that the war would somehow pass them

by. Lily saw Daphne in a corner, trying not to be noticed by anyone. *It must be terrible to be afraid all the time.*

The Slytherins were breaking up into small groups: some, like Daphne, were slipping away to their dormitories, to be out of sight and out of mind. The fourth years, none of whose parents were known Death Eaters, were open to the ideas of those who had attended the Defence Association meeting. Even more, they seemed a little envious of the adventure.

The seventh year boys, who seemed to want to conceal the divisions amongst them, muttered together angrily for a short while: a hushed discussion punctuated by a few discreet shoves. After a few more minutes, they decamped for their dormitory as a unit, still in hot debate.

Millicent, surprisingly calm through it all, looked about the room. She told Lily gruffly, "We should put perimeter wards on our beds tonight. Not that I think Pansy or Daphne would try anything. But just in case."

Blaise heard her, and smiled grimly. "And don't accept any chocolates — for that matter, don't accept anything that can be ingested, breathed, or absorbed through the skin." He eyed Lily with some amusement. "I thought we weren't going to get into the whole "Oldy-fart" issue tonight."

Lily knew she had nearly ruined everything, and was bitterly regretting her temper. "I lost it," she admitted. "You saved the day, Mr Smooth."

"It's just as well that it's out in the open. I would have had to say all that someday. Better now, when it will have some impact, than later, when it might be too late to do anyone good." He laughed lightly. "Perhaps you should have been a Gryffindor. You certainly charged into battle like one tonight."

Crabbe walked by, and blustered, "Afraid to sleep in the room with us tonight, Zabini?"

Blaise smiled sweetly. "No," he said. "I'm not." With a nod to Lily and Millicent, he swept away.

Draco was brooding, slumped on one of the huge leather sofas. He looked up as Lily passed by. "We need to talk."

Lily stopped. "Talk, not yell," she warned. He nodded gravely.

Lily touched Millicent's shoulder. "I'll be all right. Try to calm Pansy down, and tell her I'll be up in a bit."

She sat on the sofa opposite Draco and waited.

"I can't go against my father," he said, finally.

"You need to consider your own future, too, you know," Lily suggested.

He licked his lips, and went on, as if he had not heard her. "Our family has so much invested in supporting The Dark Lord. My

father has lost his governorship of this school, his position in the Ministry, his freedom — all because he *believes*. Do you really think," he asked Lily, "that the Dark Lord meant for all of those things to happen to him?"

"Draco, I can't *know* that, but I'll tell you this: I don't think your father's sacrifices mean a thing to Voldemort. I can well believe that he enjoys seeing a man like your father ruined and made completely dependent upon him. I don't think he cares about anything other than his own power; and I think he sees his followers as nothing but pawns. Your father may have been useful to Voldemort, but Voldemort has not been useful to him."

He said slowly, "The last time, the Ministry didn't punish him because he told them he had been under Imperius. This time, he wasn't even given a trial. I don't blame him for getting away."

Lily thought this over. "If Voldemort had put your father under Imperius successfully, he would remain highly susceptible. We all know that."

"He says that no one can resist the Dark Lord — that the best one can do is remain essential." He sat a moment longer. "If Father really were under Imperius, that would be horrible. It would be making a puppet of a Malfoy."

She had an idea, and asked Draco, "Did your father's father go to Hogwarts?"

"Of course."

"When?"

"I don't know — he died back in the '70s." He caught on, and said, "Are you thinking that he might have gone to school with the Dark Lord?"

"It's possible. We should find out. It might be important to know if he did, and what sort of relationship they had."

Draco put his head in his hands. Lily waited tensely. She knew that her hypothesis — that Voldemort hated the pureblood elite and was engineering their destruction — required a paradigm shift in Draco's entire worldview. He had had his share of knocks in the past few months, and here was another. Still, with Blaise's help, it had been presented in a way that would appeal to Slytherin ambition, and be congruent with the undercurrents of paranoia that permeated Slytherin House.

The fire burned lower, flashing glints of green and hot blue. Lily stared at it absently and thought about Severus. She needed to talk with him as soon as possible about tonight's events. Perhaps some Voldemort supporters amongst the students might tell him, but it might be kept from him entirely.

She needed to talk with Harry and Hermione, too. Harry's acceptance of the Slytherins at tonight's meeting required immediate follow-

up. *If only Draco can be made to see that he doesn't need to embrace Voldemort just because he dislikes Harry! It's mad, for a schoolboy rivalry to determine life and death loyalties!*

"I need some sleep," Draco said, his voice muffled by his hands. "I'll think better in the morning." He got up, and was halfway to the dormitory staircase, when he turned and asked, pain in his voice, "I just need to know if you *like* Potter. Did you go because you like him?"

"I was there because I don't want anyone else to know more than I do in a duel," she answered, with perfect truthfulness.

"I hate Potter," Draco muttered, half to himself. "*Saint Potter*. Wouldn't even touch my hand our first day. Didn't want to be friends with *me*." He looked even more desperate. "Is it Blaise, then? You went to be with him?"

No, I went because I want to kill Oldyfart, you silly boy. Lily decided she had been reckless enough for one night, and instead of uttering her first thought, she got up and walked over to Draco. She took him in her arms and held him tightly. His arms finally came around her. He was feverishly hot, and his heart pounded as if he had been fighting an army. Perhaps he had. He smelled of potions herbs, of expensive wizarding scent, and of weary boy. Her hands rested on his back, and she could feel the slight

play of Quidditch muscles over the ribs and shoulders. He sighed.

She pushed him gently away. "Go to bed." He managed a slight smirk, and his hand touched her cheek. Turning, he trudged up the stairs and out of sight. Lily was alone in the common room, and she went back to the luxurious sofa and collapsed back onto it, blowing out a breath.

"Well," a honeyed baritone growled. "That was quite a spectacle."

Lily leaned back, and was rewarded with the sight of an upside-down Severus Snape. Groaning, she sat up and faced him properly. Severus was not quite in glare mode, but he was not happy.

"Oh, gods, Severus, please don't sneer, snark, or snarl at me. I'm dead knackered. How much did you see?"

"Enough. I have ways of monitoring the common room." He looked down at her, eyes black and unreadable. "Don't call me Severus here," he corrected her in an undertone. "We don't know who may be listening. Come to my office immediately after Charms tomorrow. We must talk."

She nodded. "Yes, sir, Professor Snape, sir."

He fixed her with a sour look, and remarked regretfully, "You really are such a Gryffindor, after all. Get off to your dormitory and don't forget to set wards. I don't want to deal with the paperwork if you're murdered in your sleep."

She did not move. "Now, or I'll deduct points." He lowered his voice further. "From Gryffindor."

He was gone in a whirl of black robes.

Lily huffed a wry laugh, and headed upstairs for a restless and unsatisfactory night.





THE UNINVITED GUESTS

NARCISSA!

The shout startled Narcissa Malfoy out of her luxurious, lonely bed. She was sure it had been a dream. She often heard his voice in dreams, and it was hard to tell the difference between sleeping and waking in the darkest hours of the night.

"Narcissa!"

She stood in the darkness, groping for her wand. "Lucius?"

The bedroom door slammed open, and he was silhouetted against the glow of the hall chandelier. "*Lumos!*" he shouted impatiently. "We're leaving!"

"Lucius!" She flung her arms around him. "Are you all right?" She looked him over, and decided he could not be. Bruised, dishevelled, and blood trickling from his temple, he was in that dynamic state of intense concentration that she had seen only a few times in their life together.

"Lucius! You can't be here! Every-

THE UNINVITED GUESTS



one's looking for you —"

He snarled a laugh, and looked about the room, going over to the hiding place in one of the bedposts for some items he thrust into his soiled cloak.

"You're too bloody right everyone's looking for me. That sister of yours has convinced the Dark Lord we're plotting against him!" He looked her over, dressed as she was in her filmy, transparent night-dress. "You have your wand? You'll do! Come on!" He grasped her by the hand and pulled her out into the broad tapestried hall. "*Accio Nimbus!*"

Within seconds, an expensive broomstick had appeared, flying directly toward them. Malfoy caught in expertly and pulled his wife against him with an arm about her waist. Outside, there was a clamour as their household wards wailed in protest.

"He's here!"

The first popping noises were already sounding around them, when Malfoy Apparated them both away. In a split second, Narcissa Malfoy found herself standing barefoot on wet grass, in a cutting wind spitting cold rain. The forested landscape seemed familiar. Hastily, she cast a warming charm on herself, and wished she had taken a moment to don slippers.

"I *can* Apparate myself, you know," she pointed out, rather huffily.

"Yes, yes, yes, of course, you can, my love," he replied impatiently, mounting the broomstick. "Just get on the broomstick like a good girl, and we'll be off."

"Off where?" Running away was something for teenagers, not pillars of British wizarding society. Especially a pillar as inappropriately garbed as herself. *Somewhere warm, I hope.*

He shouted, at the end of his tether. "*Get on the bloody broomstick!*"

She obeyed instantly, gathering up her already sopping night-dress to straddle the broomstick. Instantly, painfully aware that she was wearing no undergarments, she cast a cushioning charm; and indignant, heard her husband's snigger. He took off abruptly, with a jolt that forced her to hold fast to him.

The cold wind rushed past them, whipping Lucius's hair into her face. "Where are we going?" she asked again.

"To Hogwarts!"

It was their only real chance, he had reasoned. His bolt holes in Malta and Bali would do no more than delay the inevitable; or at best, give him a disgraced and diminished existence, far from everything he valued. He had information. If he could strike a bargain with Dumbledore, he could yet save himself, save his family, and still have a life worth living.

Going to the Ministry was out of the question: it was riddled with the Dark Lord's minions, and he would only be cast back into Azkaban, this time with Narcissa for company.

He pushed the broomstick to its limits, with some of the panache of his old Seeker days. His impromptu plan was working perfectly: to Apparate to the Hogwarts boundary, then to fly to the castle as quickly as possible. His ties to the Dark Lord were irreparably severed, and he was possessed with a glorious feeling of freedom. After all, a wizard — a powerful wizard, like himself — really needed very little. He had his wand, his broomstick, and his witch: he could charm, summon, transfigure, or conjure anything else. Slicing through the wind, Narcissa's warm arms wrapped about him, he could make out — dim at first, but growing brighter — the luminous towers of his destination.

"Oh, damn, damn, *double* damn!" The slimy pulp escaped her again, plopping wetly to the stone floor. Hastily, Hermione retrieved it, hoping that Snape had not seen her fumbings. She glanced over to his workbench, where he was stirring patiently. He had not rounded on her for her clumsiness, but she thought she could detect the faintest twitch in the corner of his mouth.

"Language, Miss Granger."

"Sorry, sir."

She would have to peel another quarbarl — the mess before her was now unusable. Peeling the mushy pods left her with a substance like melting grape jelly. How was she supposed to dice this? The protective gloves only made her more awkward. She needed to have another look at the instructions, but dared not touch her notes or her wand with purple goo dripping from her fingers.

He was definitely smirking. Insufferable man. He had finished stirring, and was decanting his perfect potion with the virtuous air of genius enduring ineptitude. *There must be an easier way to do this!* Jaw clenched, she cleaned her work area, snatched up another pod, and readied her knife. A deft cut, just so —

A jet of viscous purple juice struck her in the eye. She gave a little shriek, and ran to wash her face.

Snape was at her side in a moment, tilting her head back. "Let me see." He held her firmly, and opened her flinching eye. "No damage, but you'll have a radiantly purple iris for a few days."

He was inches away, examining her carefully. She was familiar enough with his scent. He had been looming over her for years; and she could identify the sharp-herbal-oil-alkaline-Snapeness with her eyes closed. His nose was even larger,

seen close to. She carefully repressed a giggle at the vast caverns of his nostrils.

"Oh, joy."

He released her and smirked slightly. "A very striking feature." He retrieved a book from his desk. "Read the chapter entitled: 'On the flaying of the quarbarl.' You may find it illuminating."

She stripped off her gloves and took the volume, laying it with her other belongings.

"No," Snape objected sharply. "Do not add it to your mountain of books. Read it here. It's very rare, and I don't want it out of my keeping."

"It must be rare. I'd never heard of a quarbarl before today."

"An obscure but useful plant, found only in the Comoros Islands. Hardly a potions maker in a hundred has heard of it, but it's a very serviceable substitute for the euphorbias, and without all the toxins."

"It merely turns one purple."

"There is that."

She had adapted. First she had endured these Fridays; then she had found them stimulating. Now she looked forward to them as a highlight of the week. Snape occasionally rowed her if he thought she was being impossibly obtuse. Generally, though, she made a thorough effort to eschew obtuseness and prepare herself for the Friday evening efforts.

How proudly she had presented this month's batch of Wolfsbane Potion to Professor Lupin. "Your work?" he asked, and she nodded, unable to hide her triumph. He had looked at her with such gratitude and respect, and thanked her so sincerely, that any amount of criticism from her Potions Professor seemed worthwhile. Professor Lupin drank it down immediately, thought a moment — and said, "I do believe you've managed to make it less foul. But don't worry, I won't tell Severus!"

She had laughed a little, and it had seemed that nearly all their old ease was restored.

She put such thoughts aside and read the text Snape had given her. Within minutes she was protesting indignantly.

"You should have told me not to use a knife —"

Snape was smug. "You will never, until the day you die, forget to use magical means in dealing with these plants. Skin it using '*Pellem detrahe*,' and then dice it with a standard '*in tesseras*.'" He added inconsequentially, "Much like preparing an avocado."

She growled and read the rest of the passage. Sneaking a look at the rest of the book, she discovered that it had been written by an 17th century wizard explorer by the name of Boethius Lestrage. His style suggested that he had been a fairly odd fellow, but he certainly knew his

potions ingredients. It also appeared to be a personal journal of his adventures, and Hermione thought it looked extremely interesting.

"It's quite remarkable — a study of the flora and fauna of the Indian Ocean. I'm surprised I haven't seen it in the Hogwarts library." She began thumbing through it, when Snape came over and took the book away, looking oddly embarrassed.

"It is a remarkable work, but it has never been published. This is the only copy, and it came to me through my mother's family. Some of the material is unsuitable for students." He paused, and grew uneasy. "The Headmaster would have my ears if you were exposed to some of Lestrage's more exotic escapades."

Now tremendously curious, Hermione wondered how she could persuade Snape that she was mature enough for anything a 17th century wizard might have experienced. Marshalling her arguments, she had drawn a deep breath, when her professor clutched his arm and hissed

Mouth open and eyes wide, she asked, "You're being called?"

Snarling, "Get back to work!" he strode over to the fireplace. "Headmaster!"

"Yes, Severus?"

"I find it necessary to take my leave rather suddenly."

Even distorted by flames, Dumbledore's

expression was evident. "Not surprising. Come on through to my office, and bring some Veritaserum. This should not take too long."

Hermione jumped up and ran to the store-room. She plucked a small phial from a rack, and brought it back to Snape, who grunted in lieu of thanks. He issued a series of crisp orders. "Finish the Aglanoema, and bottle it. Check on the progress of my Wit-Sharpener, and set it to simmer. Clean the place up and set the wards before you leave." He took another look at her and snorted. "You may want to use some quarbarl pulp on the other eye for a matched pair. Who knows? You could be the envy of Miss Brown and set a new fashion!" He plunged through the flames and was gone.

"Good luck, sir," said Hermione to the empty hearth. Worrying was unavoidable, but useless. *I'd do better to show him that I can be relied upon to follow his instructions.*

She went quickly to work. The quarbarl was flayed and diced within seconds and blended into her potion. Whilst that finished, she attended to the Wit-Sharpener, and then began tidying. Within minutes, she was bottling her thick purple cream. She checked the small mirror above the sink and jumped in alarm at the sight of her left eye, glowing — yes, lavender. *Perhaps having only one is more disturb-*

ing. I look like Mad-Eye Moody! She thought a moment, and with a sigh, flayed another quarbarl. A few drops, and she took another look in the mirror. *Perhaps not such a good idea. I scarcely look human, and now Professor Snape will think me an idiot.* She groaned. It was done, and she didn't want to go to Madam Pomfrey and confess. She would brazen it out somehow.

She brightened, remembering the book. She dared not remove it from the dungeons, but there was no reason not to indulge herself now. She finished the washing up, and carefully dried her hands before handling the precious volume. It was thick, and she could not hope to get through all of it tonight, but she would give it her best.

They had met in the Reading Room for an evening of stories and pictures. Harry had brought his precious album, and had shown Lily herself as a grown woman holding Baby Harry. There she was, happily in love — with James Potter. Shaking her head in amazement, Lily leafed through the volume slowly, and then backtracked.

"Well," she said dryly. "You certainly were an adorable baby."

Harry grinned, and turned the page. CHRISTMAS AT GODRIC'S HOLLOW. She remembered James mentioning Godric's Hollow to Sirius. The

Potter family home was there. She examined the pictures carefully. They were disconcerting, but good in a way. The pictures gave an intermediate stage between the teenaged Remus she knew and the prematurely middle-aged Remus she had suddenly been presented with. She wished there were pictures of Severus. The photographs of Sirius Black were disturbing. Aside from his harassment of Severus, he had always been a dreadful tease, and she had not particularly liked him. Yet here she was, one arm around Potter, the other around Black. Remus and Peter were behind them. They were all waving at her, obviously caught in a high-spirited moment. She pushed the book away.

"Let's go to the library sometime, and find all the yearbooks. I'd really like to see my seventh year." She drummed the worktable idly. "Actually, I've been thinking quite a bit about those yearbooks. They could tell us a lot about the past. I'd like to do a little research for the years around 1938 to 1945 or so."

Harry looked at her, interested. "That's about the time Voldemort was here! What do you think you could find out?"

"Oh — who went to school with him — who was in Slytherin at the same time — I have a theory about him. I haven't had time this week to look into it."

"Let's go now!"

"Not a good idea." She shook her head. "It wouldn't do to be seen together in the evenings, much less studying together in the library. Not good for your image, or mine."

"No one needs to know. We'll use this!" He got up and shook out his invisibility cloak. He often used it to slip into the Reading Room, and Lily was not surprised to hear that it was a Potter heirloom. *No wonder that lot got away with so much!*

"Are you sure there's room for both of us?"

"Of course! Hermione and I use it all the time! Come on! No time like the present."

Lily took parchment and quill in case she needed to make notes. Harry flung the cloak over the two of them, and they crept cautiously from the secret room, cracking the painting open a little to see if anyone was standing in the hall. It was only a few short steps to the library.

Lily felt horribly exposed. The quiet of the library, a soft hush of occasional whispers and scratching quills, was unnerving. Her breath was loud in her ears, and she nearly stumbled over Harry's big feet. She felt, rather than heard him laugh silently. Madam Pince was surveying the room with her usual suspicious contempt. Oh, God! There were Theodore and Daphne sitting only feet away, looking right at her! Slowly they crossed the library, heading to the far wall. A second-year Hufflepuff stood suddenly, and

nearly ran into them. Harry expertly pulled Lily aside, and the Hufflepuff girl paused, puzzled for a moment, as a mysterious breeze from a fold of the cloak fanned her.

They were finally out of immediate danger, hidden behind a comforting wall of books. Lily had a good idea where the yearbooks were; but when located, they were inconveniently placed. The volumes for 1935 through 1949 were high on a top shelf, and had the air of books that knew no one cared about them anymore.

"I'll have to *accio* them," Lily murmured.

"No, I'll do it," Harry whispered back. "I'm fairly good at catching things. Which one first?"

Lily chose at random. "1942."

"*Accio Hogwarts Yearbook 1942!*" The volume shot out from between its fellows and smacked softly into Harry's hands, cushioned by the invisibility cloak. Quickly, he fumbled it under the cloak, and they sat on the floor together, book on his lap, and paged through it in the dim light.

Harry recognised Headmaster Dippet, his mild, rather ineffectual face peering at them benevolently at the beginning of the book. He turned to the staff section. "I want to see Dumbledore."

Dumbledore was there: younger, but still an old man in Harry's eyes. The future Headmaster looked at them in amusement, and actually gave them a wink. Harry snorted and turned

the pages toward the student section. The liberal use of green signalled that they had found Slytherin House. The students eyed him suspiciously. A few of the older boys leered at Lily, and she glared back at them, much to their amusement. Amongst the fourth years was the thin, attractive face of Tom Marvolo Riddle.

He's really good-looking! Lily thought unwillingly. Tom's picture looked back at them rather pleasantly. He seemed a nice sort of boy — well mannered, quiet, serious about his studies. He gave Lily a courteous, reserved smile as he noticed her continued scrutiny. Very disturbed, Lily forced herself to study his housemates. There were eight other Slytherins in his year.

Harry scowled at Tom Riddle, who seemed a little hurt at Harry's hostility. After a moment, his face hardened into a cool, expressionless mask. Harry was also disturbed by the picture. *I was never more wrong about anyone that I was about him. I thought he was really all right. I thought he was a friend from the past. I thought he was going to help me save Ginny.* Hatred and resentment surged in him, and it was all he could do not to slam the volume shut.

He studied the names of the housemates: *Mulciber, McKinnon, Flint...* they were familiar names... *No, there's a Spellwell. I've never heard that name before... Greengrass... hmmm.*

Lily got out her parchment, and began writing down the names. When she had finished, she whispered, "Let's look at the fifth years."

And so it went. Names, known and unknown; faces, many resembling those he knew. They both stopped and gave each other a look when they found the sixth year prefects. Amongst them, blond, handsome, and arrogant, was a pale, pointed face that gazed approvingly at Lily and ignored Harry altogether. *Apollonius Malfoy*.

A real sorcerer's name, Lily admitted. *Like Apollonius of Tyana. I wish I could ask you what you think of Tom Marvolo Riddle*. Quickly she added him to the list. There were other well-known names: two Goyles, a Nott, a curiously long and lanky Crabbe, a good-looking Avery, and a Perseus Black. Harry wondered if this was Sirius's father or uncle. He could be either. Dark hair, obviously blue eyes, and a striking air. He gave Lily a little smile that was so like Sirius's that a pang of loss twisted through Harry.

Hurriedly he began to close the book, but Lily whispered, "We need to see the sevenths and then the first through third years, too."

Madam Pince was closing the library. The students filed out, and began talking in normal tones as soon as they reached the hall. Madam Pince did a quick check of the library; peering around the shelves and staring at them,

blind to their presence. She extinguished the light, and locked the door behind her. After a moment. Lily illuminated her wand under the cloak and they continued their reading.

It got no better. There was a Roderick Lestrange in seventh year. There was another Black in second year — *Antares*. He was a handsome little fellow with a pugnacious air. He made such outrageous faces that they nearly missed the dark and sulky little first year at the bottom of the page. Too much nose for the small face, and the makings of a permanent sneer. *Tiberius Snape*.

"At least Snape comes by it honestly," Harry observed.

Lily elbowed him, and jotted down the rest of the names. Harry looked them over. It was practically a playbill of the Death Eaters.

"They haven't changed much."

"I don't know." Lily tapped her quill thoughtfully. "I think Severus isn't the only Slytherin who's never let go of schoolboy grudges."

"Against the other *Slytherins*?" Harry thought a moment, and simply said, "Oh."

He could picture it. If Malfoy could be miserable to the Weasleys about their lack of funds, he could imagine the treatment the orphaned halfblood Tom Riddle would have suffered. And they left him in that orphanage, year after

year. *The way they left me in the cupboard.*

They paged through the rest of the book. There were pictures of the students together and pictures of the Quidditch teams. The Slytherin team was particularly interesting. Apollonius Malfoy, Diotimus Nott, Gregory and Gerald Goyle, Roderick LeStrange, Perseus Black, and Caradoc Avery. The young men in it all displayed a certain elegant languor that reminded Lily irresistibly of male models in a magazine fashion layout. The reserve players were not as polished, but equally sure of themselves: Little Antares Black was there, smirking at them, along with Mulciber, Flint, the long, tall Crabbe, and an attractive young girl named Electra Rosier.

"Now," said Lily, "let's find out more about these people."

WHO'S WHO AMONGST BRITISH WIZARDS AND WITCHES listed them all, naturally. The article on Apollonius Malfoy was particularly long. He had been well on his way to a spectacular career in the Ministry when he died in a tragic accident in 1971. Strangely enough, the entire team had died fairly young, all in mishaps, or of unusual wizarding ailments. Not one was still alive after 1973, with the possible exception of Electra Rosier, who disappeared under mysterious circumstances in 1954.

Lily shivered. "When we have more time, we should check on the rest of the Slytherins. And not just for the year 1942."

Harry was thinking. "We should check the back issues of the Daily Prophet to find out more about the deaths."

"Right, but not tonight. I can't take anymore." She finished the parchments, rolled them up and thrust them into a pocket. "He killed them all and then made slaves of their children. I think it makes Severus look remarkably forgiving." *Draco needs to know about this*, she thought. *Blaise, too. Perhaps Dumbledore himself has not connected the dots. Everyone needs to know.*

They left the library, locking it after them. The castle was full of strange sounds after curfew. Huge shadows danced across distant walls. The castle's many familiars scurried restlessly, claws scratching on stone. They had to pass the entrance hall to get Lily back to her dormitory. As they reached the adjoining hall, they saw Hermione trudging back from the dungeons. Harry grabbed Lily's hand, and they ran, absurdly on tiptoe, to catch up.

Hermione was deep in thought, and seemed totally unaware of her surroundings until Harry hissed, "Oi! Hermione!"

She whirled, and at the sight of her both Harry and Lily jumped back. Lily tripped, and was tan-

gled in the cloak. She fell to her knees, pulling the cloak with her and revealing them both.

"Crikey, Hermione! What happened to you?" Harry wondered for moment if this was Hermione or some Polyjuiced version of her gone horribly wrong.

Lily stared up from the stone floor, and smothered a laugh. "Do you know your eyes are purple? More a bright lavender, really," she amended.

"Potions accident," Hermione curtly explained. "Don't sneak up on me like that. You scared me to death!"

Voices echoed from the end of the hall that led to the Headmaster's office.

"Someone's coming!" Hermione snatched frantically at the cloak. Harry, with more presence of mind, hauled Lily up and deftly covered the three of them. It would hide them, but it was now absolutely impossible to move in a normal human manner. They found they could walk in lockstep, taking tiny steps with the same feet: right, right, right, or left, left, left. Lily felt ready to burst out laughing. "It's like dancing," she muttered, "only much sweatier. No music either."

"Shh!" Harry was watching the shadows coming their way. He nudged the girls (right, right, right) behind a statue of Virgilius the Sorcerer.

The voices came closer. Dumbledore's soothing tenor was unmistakable. Two other shadows were accompanying him.

The shadows resolved into human beings. A woman was speaking in hushed tones. "Is it really not possible to let Draco know?"

Lily clutched at Harry's arm. He mouthed a name at her, and she nodded. *Mrs Malfoy!* Cautiously, they peeked around the statue, and Harry drew a quick breath at the sight of the man beside her. What was Lucius Malfoy doing in Hogwarts, talking seriously with Dumbledore? *More secrets!* He had a sudden, ghastly notion that Malfoy was a spy for the Order, and he had never been told. *No, that can't be right!* And yet he knew Dumbledore had secrets that he entrusted to no one.

He pulled the girls back behind the statue. Dumbledore could see through invisibility cloaks. He hoped that the Headmaster was too engrossed with the Malfoys to look deeply into the corners of the hall. He was saying, "You should be perfectly safe here, in the meantime. It is essential that your presence be kept a secret from everyone, and that must mean Draco as well. Therefore, please stay in your quarters, unless you are summoned by Severus or by myself. You can then go through the fire directly to us. With any luck, Voldemort thinks

you have fled the country. It would be best if he thought so as long as possible."

He dared another quick look. Mrs Malfoy's long blonde hair was down, nearly to her waist; and she had a man's long, black cloak wrapped around her. She turned, as she walked along beside her husband, and the cloak opened a little, revealing that she was wearing a nearly transparent night-dress. Harry goggled, and blushed, and realised he was ogling Draco's mother's — *very nice!* — figure.

Lily leaned over to look, too; and Harry tried unsuccessfully to push her back. He knew she was smiling, and he knew that she and Hermione would have plenty to say later.

Hermione leaned out from the other side, wondering what they were staring at. She pursed her mouth disapprovingly. *So much for the Hogwarts dress code!* Lucius Malfoy seemed completely unembarrassed, and his conversation with the Headmaster was inaudible. *The Veritaserum!* Dumbledore had wanted Professor Snape to bring it to the office. He must have questioned the Malfoys. They had evidently abandoned Voldemort and were taking refuge at Hogwarts. *Meanwhile, what is happening to Professor Snape? Voldemort must be furious!*

Lily's thoughts were quite different. *So that's Draco's father! What a handsome family. Evil, of*

course, but quite nice-looking. Draco resembles his father a good deal. So they're going into hiding here at Hogwarts. Pretty cool of Malfoy, after all he's done. I shall remember in future to place no limits on the impudence of an impudent man. She remembered the parchments in her pocket. Not tonight, but sometime this weekend she would find an opportunity to share this information with her Slytherin friends. It wasn't proof, but it was suggestive circumstantial evidence of Voldemort's malice toward them.

Dumbledore and the Malfoys vanished up a staircase. The three students were silent until the last footsteps faded.

Harry was horrified. "What are they doing here? How can Dumbledore trust them?"

Hermione put a calming hand on his arm. "I was with Professor Snape when his Dark Mark burned."

Lily looked worried, and Hermione told them the rest. "He firecalled Professor Dumbledore, and was told to bring some Veritaserum to his office first. Dumbledore must have had the Malfoys drink it before questioning them."

"Malfoy probably knows Occlumency," Harry nodded, with a look of distaste.

"Anyway, whatever they said must have satisfied him, if he's going to let them stay here."

Lily was thinking. "I know it's for their

safety, and I know the Aurors would be rounding them up in a moment if they knew they were here, but it's a shame Draco and the rest of the Slytherins can't know about Malfoy Senior's defection. A lot of them aren't sure what to do, and this would give them a good hard push over to our side."

Harry shrugged. "If they're so undecided, they're really of no use to us."

"Well, they might be useful to Voldemort," Lily retorted.

Hermione agreed. "It's true, Harry. All this secrecy makes people think Voldemort has more support than he does." Her chief worry surfaced. "And now Professor Snape is with Voldemort. He's probably going to ask him if he knows where the Malfoys went, and try to get him to look for them. He must be terribly angry."

Sobered, they each took a breath. Harry changed the subject. "Anyway, let's get Lily back to the dungeons, before they send a party out looking for her!"

Narcissa Malfoy sat at on the edge of the ornate four-poster, diligently brushing out her wind-tangled hair. She suspected that they were locked in for the night. It could be worse. At least she was locked in with Lucius,

and no one was dragging them off to Azkaban yet. The familiar routine of undressing and preparing themselves for bed was comforting, but also strange, in such a different place. She had not slept at Hogwarts since the last day of her seventh year, when she had left with such hopes for the future.

She looked at Lucius, now bathed, and relaxing gratefully on huge bed beside her, one knee bent. She could not begin to imagine what was going through his mind. She had given up long ago. She loved him, but he was still a stranger in many ways. She refused to blame him, preferring to hold others responsible; most particularly Bellatrix, her sister, after whose name Narcissa had silently appended the description, *the crazy bitch*, for many, many years.

It had not been enough that Bella had made her childhood a misery of bullying and petty torments. Bella had made herself the axis of the family: her temper, her strident opinions, her neediness had occupied much of her parents' time. And finally, when Bellatrix had concluded the mad drama of her many courtships and actually settled on that slavish Lestrangle, Narcissa had hoped that she would be rid of her. They would gradually see less and less of each other, and Narcissa would finally have to endure only the annual agony of the holiday family dinner.

She had been so happy in her first years with Lucius. She had a lovely husband and a lovely home; but ruthlessly and inexorably Bellatrix had inserted herself into their private paradise.

"Lucius, there's a wonderful wizard you simply must meet." So it had begun. Bellatrix had sunk her claws into Lucius: not with sex, but with politics. She became a fixture in their lives. They attended meetings together. They had secrets together. Even in the early bizarre days when that Lord Voldemort had been living with Rodolphus and Bella — apparently on the most shockingly intimate terms with both — Lucius had made excuses for them, entranced by Lord Voldemort's charisma and plausibility. Narcissa had listened silently and agreed to none of it, but they were all too strong for her. Later, she had had Draco; and Bella had hung over his cradle, giving Narcissa inappropriate and overbearing instructions, trying to take Draco away, too. Narcissa had hated her and resented her, and had never been as happy as the day her sister was put away in Azkaban with the rest of the rubbish.

Now Bellatrix wanted more than control of their lives. She wanted them dead. Narcissa understood, she imagined, better than Lucius. *Bella never could endure competition. She wants her Dark Lord all to herself. I pity the rest of them.*

Lucius suddenly spoke up.

"What's this Dumbledore said about Draco and some Jones girl?"

"Oh, yes. Draco's found himself a little girl-friend here at school. They went to the Halloween Ball as Oberon and Titania and sent me the loveliest picture — I have it somewhere... Anyway, my dear, he's so touchingly proud of her. Her name is Lily. She's quite pretty and charming, and he found her all by himself. I took them to lunch the week after the ball to see if she were impossible or not. I rather liked her." She stopped the interminable hair brushing and turned to her husband, a smile on her lips. "She has the most adorable dimples, and she has Severus's colouring of all things! Black hair and eyes, and a very fair complexion. Mind you, it looks better on her than it does on him! Of course, one never knows with Joneses — there might be a good reason for the resemblance..."

"What do you know about the girl?"

"I pulled a few strings and got her school records from that ridiculous Medicine Hat place. She was their prize student, evidently."

Lucius snorted.

"Well, yes. Obviously that's nothing to boast about. There can't be more than thirty students there! Quite gifted in Charms and History, it seems. Draco says she's been doing well

at Hogwarts: she was Sorted into Slytherin, and she's taken that horrid mudblood down a peg or two. Anyway, the Bloodline goes back to their exile in 1652, so that's all right, if not very impressive. The girl has no family left, except a reclusive and repulsive great-uncle who hates witches and sent her out the country to be rid of her. The parents are dead — harmless eccentrics who travelled constantly and got themselves blown up by a Muggle bomb. Yes, yes, I know. Nothing to boast of there, either, and no money to speak of. Pansy told Olivia Parkinson that Lily has some nice old jewellery, some decent clothes, and a few good heirlooms — a toilette set with an 18th century Silverthorn mirror, in fact. Not much else, though. Still, the girl is pretty, and clever, and all in all — I think she might do. The lack of family is something of an advantage, since we won't be bothered by backwoods relations, or have to share any potential grandchildren. Draco's quite besotted. The girl herself, I think — not so much. She's very earnest about her studies and her future career."

"She sounds like someone I know."

"Yes, she does." Narcissa looked at herself in the long mirror opposite the bed, and wondered what had become of the girl who had dreamed of being Minister of Magic. *We are talking together as if we have a future. Oh, please let it be so!*

Lucius lazily stroked down the length of her spine. "Does she have any politics?"

"If she does, she's not telling; but I think that's all to the good, don't you? — *Oh!*"

"*Nox,*" her husband whispered.

Professor Snape was not at breakfast. Hermione came down early, and looked anxiously at his empty place. He often skipped breakfast, especially on weekends, so his absence was not particularly ominous. Lily was at her own house table, demurely framed on either side by Draco Malfoy and Blaise Zabini, as usual. Hermione tried to catch her eye, but Lily was staring at her plate and playing with her breakfast, oblivious to the blandishments of her companions.

Ron appeared, sat beside Hermione, and threw himself on the food before him. He was shovelling down his eggs, when he managed to mumble around them, "Come out and see the team practice, 'Mione! You've been down in the dungeons with the old bat so long you're looking a bit pasty yourself."

"Ron," said Hermione wearily, "you have a silver tongue."

Harry reached around Hermione to give Ron a warning shove.

"What? What'd I say?"

"I'll try to come out later," Hermione surrendered, "but I've got to stop by the dungeons and check on a potion."

Ron made a face, and then turned and caught sight of her.

"Bloody hell, Hermione! Do you know that your eyes are *purple*?"

Hermione and Harry answered simultaneously, "Potions accident."

Hermione added primly, "And they're not purple: they're lavender."

Ron grimaced sympathetically. More curious stares were directed her way from dozy, bleary-eyed housemates.

Harry nodded, understanding her. "Go on then. Ron, you know she won't be happy until she sees it's perfect! Give her some space."

Hermione got away then, hurrying past the other students, eyes discreetly cast down. She had to know if Snape had returned unharmed. If Voldemort had the slightest suspicions of him, Snape would be killed, and a powerful weapon lost to the Order. She had a secret, selfish interest herself. *If anything happens to Professor Snape, my Friday nights with him will be over.* It was shamefully mean and petty, but her special relationship as Snape's assistant was becoming important to her. Not often, but now and then, he would remark on a book, or on his research

in a way that made her feel like a grownup colleague. Gratifying, yes: it made her feel validated as a serious student. There was no hope of such behaviour in their class, for a variety of reasons; but when they were alone, there was always the chance of that magic moment of harmony.

She also might get another glimpse of Lestranger's AROUND THE OCEAN OF IND. She blushed. Professor Snape had not been exaggerating when he said the book had inappropriate material. Lestranger's explorations of the people, animals and — even *plants* — had sometimes been on the near side of sick-making. *No one could describe his research as incomplete!*

She stood before the door of his office. It was early Saturday, and even if he were back, he might not be answering. She drew a breath, and knocked anyway. A minute passed slowly, and she knocked again.

The door abruptly opened inward; and Professor Snape, in his long white shirt sleeves, half of his buttons undone, stood before her. He looked quite awful: bed-hair sticking out oddly, dark shadows under his eyes, and acid on the tip of his tongue.

"What do you want?"

Meekly, she replied, "I was wondering about the Agla — I wasn't sure —" She heaved another breath and spilled it. "I just wanted to

see if you were all right.”

He stared at her suspiciously; then focusing, he barked a laugh. It took Hermione a moment to process it, as she had never heard Snape actually laugh before.

He sneered, taking in her extraordinary appearance. “Not even I would have credited that you would actually dye your other eye purple.”

Hermione cleared her throat, and tried to put the best face on it. “It’s more a lavender, really. It seems to me there might be commercial, cosmetic applications —”

He snorted. “Never, Miss Granger, and I mean *never* experiment upon yourself. I want two feet from you by next Friday detailing the reasons why it is a foolish and ineffective practice. And now, go away, you silly girl! You’ve seen me, I’m fine, the potion’s fine, the dungeons are under control without your interference, it’s Saturday, and I’m not supposed to have to put up with you!”

Rather dashed, she turned to go, as the Slytherins began returning from breakfast. Lily saw her, and then saw Snape. She gave the Potions Professor her nicest, most relieved smile.

“Good morning, Professor.”

The others with her made their own salutations. Snape grunted at them, and shut the door with a bang. Hermione found herself moving

against the flow, hindered by students who did not appear to see her.

She ran full against Draco Malfoy, and looked fixedly at his chest, not wishing to raise her eyes.

“It’s Professor Snape’s *Muggleborn* assistant,” he drawled. “Can’t stay away, even on a Saturday, you fawning little swot?”

Hermione felt hot with fury, and flashed him a glare. The eyes seemed to work. Malfoy jumped back, surprised, and then laughed.

“Do you know your eyes are *purple*?”

Lily interposed. “Leave her alone, Draco! You know what Professor Snape said!”

Blaise, with a courtly gesture but a widening smile, waved her off.

Lily added, dimpling helplessly. “Besides, they’re not really purple — they’re more a — hmmm — *lavender*!”

Fuming, Hermione stamped away, ears ringing with uproarious, intolerable laughter.





THE SACRIFICIAL LAMB

HERMIONE WONDERED IF HOGWARTS had ever been so full of secrets. By now, Lucius Malfoy must know that Professor Snape had been Dumbledore's spy for years. Was he angry, or disappointed, or envious, or pleased? There seemed little likelihood she would know any time soon. Not a hint of the Malfoys' presence had surfaced.

She met with Harry and Lily in the Reading Room, and they looked over their list of names and dates. This data, when combined with Voldemort's known murders — such as the massacre of the McKinnon family — created a persuasive pattern of revenge.

"Clever lad," remarked Lily, "to use the pureblood's own snobbery to destroy them. I wonder if he's still human enough to laugh about it."

Harry's eyes lost their focus, and he turned inward. "He laughs," he said tonelessly.

THE PREFECT'S PORTRAIT

THE SACRIFICIAL LAMB

Since Voldemort's unsuccessful attempt at possession in the Department of Mysteries, Harry no longer received visions of Voldemort's waking activities. Voldemort seemed as desirous of keeping Harry out of his own thoughts as Harry himself could wish. Still, at night, in the dark, Harry wandered strange roads in his sleep. It seemed to him that Voldemort must also still sleep; and their dreams leached into one another's. It was a torment and a horror for Harry to visit these wastelands. He fiercely hoped that Voldemort found his dreams as disorienting and painful.

"We should show this to Severus," Lily suggested. "He might find it enlightening."

"You can show it to Snape," Harry said shortly. "I don't want to be any part of it."

Lily turned to Hermione. "You'll come with me, won't you?"

Hermione was not sure her presence would be helpful. "If you really want me to, I'll come, but it might irritate him."

"Rubbish! You're his very own potions slave, and he's well pleased with you!"

"Really?" Hermione was a little fluttered. "What exactly did he say about me?"

Harry groaned and rolled his eyes. "I don't want to be there, but I do need to know what's said. In fact," he remarked thoughtfully, "we need a better way to communicate amongst

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THE PREFECT'S PORTRAIT

ourselves. The charmed galleon was all very well for D.A. meetings, but too many people have them now, and we may need to talk at a distance. My dad and Sirius —” he ground to a halt, took a breath, and started again. “My dad and his friends had charmed mirrors they could use for private long distance communication. The three of us need something like that.”

Hermione remembered an applicable text. “It’s not really too hard! I know where to go to find the incantation. We need good quality mirrors, though.”

Lily leaned back, looking dreamily at the ceiling. “They wouldn’t need to be big. In fact, better that they be inconspicuous.”

“And unbreakable,” Harry added uncomfortably.

“You can charm a mirror surface onto lots of things,” Lily pointed out. “Metal works well — especially silver.”

Hermione made a few notes. “All right. This will be more complicated than the D.A. galleons. We want an unbreakable mirror of inconspicuous size. We want it charmed for communication, and charmed to alert us when someone needs to talk — just like the galleons!”

“We can use sickles!” Lily enthused. “And we can charm a hole in them and wear them on a cord around our necks like amulets. If

we wear them under our clothes, no one will know. They can grow warm when someone has something to say!”

“Do we want more than three?” wondered Hermione. “Should we have extras in case of danger? We wouldn’t have to give them all out right away — but whatever we make, we must make at the same time, or they’ll never communicate well with each other.”

It took two evenings to complete the work, but they soon had silver amulets that appeared to be ordinary sickles, but when reversed revealed a highly polished mirrored surface. Each was strung on a long black silk cord and disappeared under their robes. Three extras were made, and were hidden in their wardrobes. A soft call of ‘Hermione’s sickle,’ or ‘Lily’s sickle’ or ‘Harry’s sickle,’ or a pattern of taps caused the amulets to grow warm. The receivers then had to find a discreet place to talk, since the devices would hardly remain a secret if they began chatting to sickles hung about their necks in class.

Blaise Zabini woke to the sound of strange, muffled whimpers. It was pitch black in the sixth-years’ room, but for the faint blue glow from Nott’s scrying glass. He looked across the

room, toward Draco's bed, toward the source of the whimpering. Two large shapes loomed at the head and foot of the bed, hovering over Draco.

Crabbe and Goyle, he realised. They seemed to be trying to calm Draco down with gruff whispers. Blaise rubbed his eyes, and listened.

"Hold still?" No! *"Hold him still!"*

Blaise pulled his wand from his wrist holster with one movement. *"Lumos,"* he cried.

Light spilled out, illuminating every corner of the room, casting deep black shadows. Blaise squinted, his eyes dazzled. Crabbe and Goyle, surprised by the glare, tried to shield their eyes whilst holding on to the struggling Draco.

Blaise, horrified, saw that they were not soothing Draco, but smothering him. Goyle had his legs pinned, and Crabbe was holding a pillow over his face, pressing down, using his bodyweight to overcome Draco's frantic thrashing. A faint, high whining came from under the pillow, softer now; and Draco's feet, uncovered in the assault, twitched spasmodically. Draco's elaborate bed wards were useless against simple, brutal, physical attack.

"Stupefy!" Blaise shouted, pointing his wand at Crabbe. His aim was true, but Crabbe was not a Beater for nothing. Slow of wit, but quick of reflex, Crabbe threw himself down on Draco. Goyle launched himself across the room

at Blaise; and took no notice of Nott, sitting up sleepily in bed, croaking, "What's going on?"

"Get Snape! Now!" Blaise ordered.

Sleepy and confused, Nott rolled out of bed, and stared at the melee in the room. Crabbe was mercilessly smothering Draco; and Goyle, without even a wand, was grappling with Blaise for his. Nott snatched up his own wand, and gabbled, *"Stupefy!"* at Crabbe. It was not a very good effort, but it loosened Crabbe's grip on the pillow for a few seconds. Nott saw the pillow bounce from side to side as if of its own volition, and heard Draco's raw gasps for air.

Crabbe, furious, looked at Nott over his shoulder. His face, normally vacant, was red, suffused with killing rage. It was the face of a murderous stranger. The sight frightened Nott more than anything else: he scrambled over his bed and made for the door. Crabbe immediately snatched up the pillow and redoubled his efforts to smother Draco, who was pinned under his blanket.

Goyle was squeezing Blaise's wrist in a painful grip, and the wand fell to the floor with a faint wooden clatter. Shadows danced around them, and light shone out from underneath the bed. Before he could be rendered helpless under Goyle's greater weight, Blaise brought his knee up into Goyle's crotch, and slammed up with the heel of his hand into Goyle's great,

doughy nose. Goyle groaned with pain and surprise. Blaise slithered away and fell off the bed, bruising elbow and knee, and felt wildly for his wand. His fingertips just brushed it, and then he had it in his hand.

He twisted, just as Goyle yanked his head up by his hair, and he screamed "*Stupefy!*" again. And meant it. Goyle toppled over, falling on Blaise.

"Ugh!" Blaise shoved impotently at the bloody dead weight. He could hear Crabbe's effortful grunts, and Draco's muffled mewls, like a horrible parody of lovemaking. Blaise shortened his grip on his wand and was able to point it at Goyle again. "*Wingardium Leviosa!*" he commanded, and Goyle's limp body rose three feet in the air.

Crawling away, Blaise was finally able to turn and snarl a final "*Stupefy!*" at Crabbe, who promptly collapsed on Draco, as if satisfied. He levitated the massive body off of Draco, who fought his way free of his tangled bed-clothes. Blaise moved both Crabbe and Goyle away from the beds, leaving them floating over the stone of the dormitory floor. Smiling, he said, "*Finite Incantatem!*" and dropped them with a satisfying crunch.

Theodore Nott had first run next door to the room of the seventh year boys, and called for help.

Warrington and the rest staggered out of bed, fairly alert. They had followed him to the door of the sixth year boys, and stopped warily. A fight was in progress, and it was not at all clear who was winning. The seventh years glanced at each other uneasily, but made no move to interfere.

"Come on!" shouted Nott, but the seventh years, with closed faces, seemed content to watch.

Nott pushed them aside furiously, running toward the common room. The other boys were crowding into the hall, asking what was going on. The girls piled out of their rooms, voices shrill as starlings.

Lily Jones, wraithlike in a pretty white gown, grabbed at him. "What's going on?"

"Crabbe and Goyle are trying to kill Draco! I've got to get Snape!"

Lily shoved him backwards. "I'll get Snape! You go help Draco!"

She hiked up her gown and sped down the hall. "Professor Snape! Professor Snape!"

Snape's eyes opened in alarm. The subtle wards set for disturbances in the Slytherin dormitories were causing his scalp to prickle with their high, high whining. He rose with the ease of many years of interrupted sleep, and flung on a robe. A practised flick snapped

his wand into his hand. He went first to his viewing window of the common room. It was an ancient and treasured secret of the Heads of Slytherin. The little snakes had no idea that the Ourobouros tapestry was charmed to act as a window allowing him to monitor nearly every corner of the common room.

Lily, in her night-gown, had appeared, calling for him. It was plainly an emergency; and he went through the fire directly into the Common Room, startling her horribly as he spun her around.

"What is it?" he asked brusquely, ignoring her gasp.

She grabbed his robe and pulled him toward the dormitory. "Crabbe and Goyle are killing Draco!"

Blazing, he brushed past her, his long strides leaving her behind.

His Slytherins were blocking the hall, whispering amongst themselves, trying to look unsurprised and knowledgeable. They dispersed like frightened geese as he bore down upon them, roaring.

"Out of my way! Everyone but sixth and seventh years to your rooms. AT ONCE!"

He shouldered the seventh year boys aside, hearing the last hostile snippets of a quarrel.

"— always remember what a *help* you were, Warrington!"

"Sod off, Zabini! It's none of our business

what the Death —" Warrington did a double take at Snape, who glared blackly back as he pushed through the door.

Crabbe and Goyle were stupefied and bleeding on the floor. Zabini was holding a wand on the seventh years, angrier than Snape had even seen him. Nott had his wand out as well, sitting hunched on his bed, back to the wall. Most alarming was the sight of Draco. Blood from a broken nose covered his jaw and his chest. His bed was spattered, and there was a huge round bloodstain in the middle of his pillow. His wrists and hands were so badly bruised he could barely hold a wand. His eyes were rapidly blackening, and he swayed drunkenly as he tried to remain sitting up.

"Wands down! Warrington! What happened?"

Warrington was uneasy, but ready with an answer. "The sixth years were brawling, Professor. Some broken noses and knuckles. Crabbe and Goyle didn't have their wands, but Zabini pulled his on them and dropped them hard to the floor."

Snape rounded on him, voice icy. "And where were *you*, prefect?"

Warrington replied stiffly, "I arrived too late to do anything. Zabini attacked them before I could stop him."

Blaise stared at him venomously, but made no attempt to shout him down.

Dismissing Warrington with a contemptuous look, Snape conjured stretchers for the three injured students and prepared to move them to the Hospital Wing. Goyle looked particularly bad.

"Mr Nott, Mr Zabini."

"Professor?"

"Come along with me. We'll get the three of them to Madam Pomfrey, and then pay a visit to the Headmaster." At the head of the sorry cortege, Snape saw the students whispering, and growled, "All of you. Back to your rooms. Now." All but the sixth year girls fled. They alone huddled in the door of their room, waiting to see their classmates. Lily gave a little cry of anguish at Draco's injuries, but had not (*thank the gods!*) completely lost her wits.

"Miss Jones," he ordered, "run on ahead of us to the Hospital Wing. Alert Madam Pomfrey that I am bringing her three injured students. Two broken noses and a possible skull fracture. Other possible fractures as well."

Lily darted away in a flutter of white. Pansy was wide-eyed at the sight of Draco's mangled face.

"Will he be all right?" Her plea tore Snape's nerves like nails across a blackboard. He snarled, and she gulped and backed away, tearful. Millicent, quieter but equally horrified, stared at the huge contusion swelling Goyle's temple. Daphne hid behind the other girls, her bright

eyes peering out fearfully. They shrank back into their room and closed the door.

Hermione awakened with the sickle amulet nearly burning a hole in her chest. *Lily?* It was the middle of the night, but either Harry or Lily needed to speak to her. She slipped soundlessly out of bed, and slid her arms into a robe. The only sounds in the room were those of Lavender and Parvati, breathing quietly and evenly in deepest sleep. Crookshanks, making his nocturnal rounds, gave her a cat's blasé stare. She waved him a farewell, as she ran down to the Gryffindor common room. Once there, she knelt by the hearth, and by the glowing embers pulled out her amulet and looked at it. A tiny image of Lily, black eyes enormous, looked back at her impatiently.

"Lily! What it is?"

She had called Harry as well, for he was down the steps, his cloak over his arm, and already pulling out the amulet. He saw Hermione and joined her at the fireplace.

Lily's voice, soft but intelligible, replied, "There was an attempted murder in Slytherin tonight. Crabbe and Goyle tried to kill Draco in his sleep, but Blaise and Theodore fought them off. Severus just left Draco, Crabbe and

Goyle in the Hospital Wing, and now he's taking Blaise and Theodore up to the Headmaster."

"Crabbe and Goyle!" Harry was astounded. "I can't believe it!"

The little reflection gave a miniscule shrug. "Not so loyal, it seems. I heard Blaise telling Severus that they weren't even using magic: they were holding Draco down in his bed and trying to smother him with a pillow. They almost succeeded."

Harry and Hermione looked at each other, thinking the same thing. Hermione said, "It must be related to the Malfoys defecting from Voldemort."

"It would be just the sort of revenge Voldemort would like," agreed Harry. He frowned. "You mean Snape left Malfoy there in the Hospital Wing with the ones who just tried to kill him?"

Lily snorted. "They're neither of them in any shape to cause trouble. Goyle has a fractured skull, and Crabbe a nasty concussion. Blaise sorted them out pretty thoroughly."

Hermione bit her lip. "Could they have been under *Imperius*? I mean, they must have known they'd be caught."

"I don't know," Lily said. "I only heard part of the conversation. I'm supposed to be on my way back to my dormitory now, but I wanted you to know that our friend Oldyfart has infiltrated Hogwarts, one way or another. Keep your eyes open."

"I'm most impressed with young Mr Zabini," Dumbledore remarked, after the boys were dismissed.

"There's more there than meets the eye," Snape agreed. "He has quite a flair for defending himself. This year, he's been less hesitant about showing it."

"Luckily for Draco Malfoy."

"Indeed."

Dumbledore sighed. "Once the two boys are well enough, we shall have to examine them for magical controls of all sort, and then question them. A sad business."

"I've already asked Poppy to check their blood for potions. Whatever we find, though, we can hardly send them home. They'd be off to the Dark Lord in a trice."

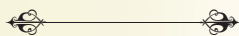
"Sending them to the Ministry could be as bad as simply expelling them. Poppy will be co-operative about keeping them in the Hospital Wing for the foreseeable future. We will need to get Draco away from them, though."

Snape gave a mirthless laugh. "His appearance may be a blow to his not inconsiderable vanity, but he wasn't that badly hurt. He should be back in class tomorrow, somewhat the worse for wear."

"We ought to inform Draco's parents of his injuries."

"Why?" Snape asked. "There is nothing they can do for him that Poppy cannot do better. Narcissa will worry, and Lucius might lose his head and seek revenge recklessly."

Dumbledore shook his head. "Nonetheless, they are his parents, and they will feel greater concern for him than even Poppy can." He sucked thoughtfully on a sweet. "Besides, dear boy, between the ghosts, the pictures, and the very walls of this castle, Lucius and Narcissa are bound to find out about the attack. All Hogwarts will know by breakfast tomorrow."



"I need to see him," Narcissa repeated for perhaps the tenth time. Dumbledore had pressed a soothing cup of tea on her, but it was forgotten as she twisted a lock of her long blonde hair. Her husband paced the floor. Lucius Malfoy had gone from captivity in Azkaban to the paranoid claustrophobia of Little Hangleton, and now to the forced inactivity of Hogwarts. Though sharing a room with Narcissa after several months separation had its pleasurable aspect, he was now ready to do something other than make love to her all day long. The news that his son had been attacked had him

wild with the desire to do something violent and painful to his enemies.

"What are you waiting for?" Lucius asked bitterly. "You know where the Dark Lord is now. I can lead you to the very house. I've given you the names of his supporters in the Ministry. I've told you the names of the three Aurors who are under Imperius. Let's go kill the bastard now, before he changes all the wards and all the schedules." Dumbledore gave him a bland smile. Lucius was not done. "I've told you the truth. You had your pet Potions master dose me with Veritaserum until I was bloody near comatose."

"All in good time," the Headmaster said. "I have no doubt you told the truth, as far as that goes. Until I have some independent verification, however, it is not clear how much of the truth you told. Surprises are not always delightful."

Lucius hissed with disgust and impatience. Narcissa looked imploringly at him.

"I need to see him."

Malfoy looked away from his distraught wife, and at the two wizards who had so thoroughly deceived him for so long. *Dumbledore, that clever, slippery old devil, playing the holy fool — and Snape, his trusted spy. Is he right, or does Snape have his own agenda? My bloody world is tottering!*

"Yes," he finally agreed. *First things first.* "We

must see Draco." He shot Dumbledore a cold look. "At the very least, he needs to know that I was not party to a plot to kill him. He deserves to understand what has happened."

Dumbledore smiled mildly and considered a moment. "Very well."

Snape spoke up. "It would be best if you came with us, Headmaster." He deflected Malfoy's hostility with a shrug. "If I alone accompany his parents, Draco might believe we were all Death Eaters together. Your presence will prove beyond all doubt that we oppose Voldemort."

He enunciated the name carefully, with a lift of his chin. Malfoy raised an astonished eyebrow, but nodded his agreement. Narcissa was already up and at the door. Lucius followed her and caught her by the hand.

Dumbledore led them through the dark, empty halls. They were silent, until Narcissa whispered to her husband, "I wanted to have another child in '86, but you said no. This is why having an only child is such a *bad idea*!"

Lucius raised his eyes with a long-suffering expression. "My dear, I remember, if you do not, what you went through with Draco. You were sick from the second week on. We discussed it thoroughly and agreed —"

"I never agreed," Narcissa interrupted rebelliously. "I just submitted. I've always let you

make the decisions, but this time *I'm* going to decide. If we live through this, I'm going to have another baby."

Lucius wisely forbore to argue at the moment, and only squeezed her hand with a condescending smile. Dumbledore and Snape, walking in front on them, pretended they were not listening.

They entered the cool, quiet room, and Dumbledore took Madam Pomfrey aside, explaining the situation to the startled witch with a few hushed words. Snape led the Malfoys to their son's bed.

Narcissa whimpered at the sight of her son's bruised and bandaged face. Lucius put his arm around her, his jaw tightening with fury at the thought of an attack on something of his.

Draco was asleep, but at a gentle touch, he painfully squeezed his eyes open and saw his mother's lovely face, haloed with witch-light. She smiled at him tremulously.

"Mother?" he whispered. His eyes moved, and he took in the unbelievable sight of his father standing in the Hospital Wing at Hogwarts. "Father?"

"We're here, Draco," Lucius assured him.

Draco's eyes slid to Snape, and he began to panic; but Dumbledore appeared beside them, and said, "It's quite all right, my boy. Your parents have been at Hogwarts for nearly a week, after escaping from Voldemort."

THE SACRIFICIAL LAMB

"Then —" Draco's mouth was horribly dry. He stared at Snape with growing terror. "But —"

Snape smiled crookedly. "Mr Malfoy. Things are not always what they seem."

Draco was still trying to take it all in. "Then you're all against him." He decided that the thought was not disagreeable. He explored it further. "You're against the Dark Lord, and that's why I was attacked."

Narcissa made a soft, dreadful sound. Lucius, tense and edgy, told him, "I had no idea that the Dark Lord would sacrifice you to have his revenge on me. I never, never wanted to put you in danger. If you believe nothing else, believe that."

"But it fits," Draco tried to explain, but felt himself falling back into a doze. "It's just as Lily said. He hates us. He always has. It's all part of his plan to destroy the purebloods and..." His voice trailed off, and he was once more asleep.

"Lily?" Lucius turned to Snape. "Was he talking about that girlfriend of his? What has the girl been telling people?"

Snape twitched unpleasantly at the word "girlfriend." He traded sneers with his oldest friend/enemy. "I have no idea."

But I'll bloody well find out.



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THE PREFECT'S PORTRAIT

THE BLOOD TIE

THE NOISE IN THE GREAT HALL was beyond belief. Whispers, gossip, strident debate rang from wall to answering wall. It was the noisiest breakfast in Hogwarts history. It proved impossible to keep the news of the attempted murder of Draco Malfoy within the bounds of Slytherin House. Too many of the students had siblings and friends in other houses: above all in Ravenclaw. Once the news had travelled abroad from the Slytherin table, it was rapidly the property of the entire school. Draco had not appeared at breakfast, and his absence contributed to every colourful speculation.

Most thought it was too good to be true. Draco Malfoy had received his well-deserved comeuppance. The story was that the worms had finally turned, and that there had been a fight, and Draco had been thoroughly trounced by his former henchmen.

Many were openly gleeful. Ron

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THE PREFECT'S PORTRAIT

Weasley declared that he might actually owe a Wizard's Debt to Crabbe and Goyle for their efforts. He was surprised that Harry was not more pleased by the event.

"Come on, mate! This is a great day! I hope they rearranged his nose permanently!"

Harry smiled tightly. He was no friend of Draco Malfoy's and privately thought a little pain was in order. But the question remained: who was behind it? It was improbable that Crabbe and Goyle acted alone. The most likely figure behind the attack was none other than Voldemort himself.

Dumbledore, seated at the High Table, was keeping his counsel. Hermione and Harry caught each other's eye. Ron, seeing that they were looking at Dumbledore, understood that there was more here than a simple brawl.

"Reckon it was Death Eater business?" he whispered to Harry.

"Could be," Harry shrugged. "Dumbledore probably hasn't had a chance to question them yet. Not that he'd tell us what he found out."

Hermione looked across at Lily. Her friend was paler than usual, she decided. She gave Hermione a direct glance. Under her robe, Hermione's sickle lay hot against her chest. They needed to talk it all over as soon as possible.

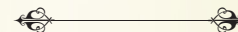
Parvati came back from the Ravenclaw table, where she had been quizzing her sister.

"Padma says that Crabbe and Goyle tried to kill him in the Slytherin dormitory, but Blaise Zabini woke up and hexed them so badly they'll be the hospital for days."

"Too bad," grunted Ron, enjoying his sausages.

"Blaise is pretty quick with his wand," Harry said. "Looks like Malfoy owes his life to the D.A."

This drew some laughs. Ron snorted pumpkin juice out his nose. Hermione buried her face in her hands. Then remembering, she looked up through her fingers. Snape was not at breakfast. *He's probably still trying to sort out last night. What will happen to Crabbe and Goyle?*



"They should be killed," Lucius Malfoy snapped, pacing the Headmaster's office. Dumbledore watched him with a faint smile. Malfoy clarified, rather hopefully, "I'd like to kill them myself."

"No doubt, Lucius, no doubt," Dumbledore acknowledged breezily. "But Mr Crabbe and Mr Goyle have a story to tell that I need to hear."

"What story?" Malfoy stared out the window. *A beautiful day, but not for me.* "The Dark Lord set them on Draco to punish me for my fancied disloyalty." He paused and corrected himself. "My *revealed* disloyalty."

Dumbledore was too old and too experienced to utter the snort this bit of revision-

ism deserved. He knew that this was the way Lucius would play his cards: if Voldemort were destroyed, he would declare that he had been deep undercover, spying on Voldemort — even enduring prison to lull Voldemort into complacency. If all worked out as he hoped, Dumbledore considered letting him get away with it. Lucius Malfoy had been for many years a keen disappointment to Dumbledore. Such a handsome, talented boy: a natural leader, an accomplished wizard, a remarkably polished businessman and politician — wasting it all on a shabby, deluded creature more damaged than himself. He had appointed Lucius Head Boy in his year, hoping that responsibility would broaden his views, but it had only swelled his sense of entitlement. The few months in Azkaban, he hoped, had been salutary. Even more so, probably, was the recent, overdue epiphany that his Dark Lord was a gullible lunatic, living in a fantasy world of sycophancy and paranoia. Finally, the attack on his son surely had opened his eyes to the fact that Dark Lord respected none of his followers or their families: they were all so much meat to the grinder.

Dumbledore smiled again. Lucius had his part to play. “And how,” he asked, “is the map coming along?”

Lucius stopped his restless prowling. “Well.

It’s coming along well. I’ll finish it by tomorrow.” He saw Dumbledore’s raised brows, took the hint, and headed to the fireplace. “Oh, all right. But I expect a full report.” He vanished, back to his own room.

Dumbledore waited a little before approaching the fireplace himself. Once there, he leaned in and said quietly. “Severus.”

In a moment, the fire-wreathed head appeared. “Yes, Headmaster?”

“Are your two charges ready to talk, dear boy?”

Snape frowned. “Ready enough. I’m not sure how much information you’ll get from them. I think they’ve been tampered with.”

“Imperius was used?”

“Something was certainly done to them. Of course, they would be easy marks for any kind of magical coercion. But it’s clear that they were also threatened. They haven’t made much sense, so far.”

“Poor boys,” Dumbledore said feelingly. “Pawns of the most helpless kind, unaware they are even on the board.”

Snape sneered. “Like all the rest of us but the chessmasters.”

Hermione and Lily had decided to approach Snape at the earliest possible moment. He was

going past the library, later in the morning, when the two girls waylaid him.

"Professor Snape," Lily addressed him, in her most persuasive tones. "We'd like a word with you."

"No doubt," replied Snape, giving Hermione his haughtiest stare. She stared back pugnaciously, to his great annoyance. *Gryffindors*, he thought wearily. *They feel they must always rise to the challenge. How predictable.*

"What is it?" he asked shortly.

"We have some historical information that might be of some interest to you."

"History is Professor Binns's preserve. I suggest you bother him."

Lily did not move out of his way. She raised her brows meaningly. "It would be of *some interest* to you."

Snape forbore to groan. If Lily wished to speak to him, that was all very well; but why was she bringing in Granger?

Lily smiled sweetly. "If you prefer, you could speak to Harry. He's been investigating the issue along with us. You could have a man-to-man —"

"Thank you," Snape interrupted her hastily. "I am quite free at the moment. Come into my office and say what it is you have to say."

Their presentation was not lost on him. The two girls gave him a brief history of Hogwarts

in the 20th century, recapitulating the more questionable events, and rather surprising him with their analysis of the fate of the Slytherins of '38-'45. He had been aware of the general unluckiness of members of the house in the past fifty years. He had never put all the events together, though. Seen as a whole, it explained many things that he had previously attributed to fate, including the rather ugly demise of his late, unlamented father.

He stared thoughtfully at the little picture of Tiberius Snape, who scowled back sullenly. "You think he's had his eye on us from birth, then?"

"He's not one to let go of a grudge," Lily observed. "It's been his life's work, ruining the families of his housemates: killing them, getting them condemned to the Kiss or to Azkaban, making them his followers and flunkies."

Snape winced slightly at the word "flunkie." After a moment's reflection, he shrugged it off. Flunkie was a perfectly legitimate word to describe his relationship to the Dark Lord.

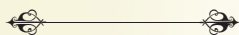
He leaned back in his chair, gazing at the ceiling. What better way to be the world's most powerful wizard, than by being the world's only wizard? To his knowledge, Voldemort had only a small group of Death Eaters — thirty at the most, and then an amorphous number of supporters and sympathisers. He did not need

more to destabilise wizarding Britain. He had been temporarily stymied by the failure to retrieve the prophecy from the Department of Mysteries, and had withdrawn to regroup. Soon he would unleash a new reign of terror.

Snape had managed to mislead him somewhat, feeding him false rumours that Lucius Malfoy was in hiding in South America. As far he could see, Voldemort had not the smallest inkling that Lucius had done something as bold as switch sides and offer Dumbledore his services.

They knew Voldemort's location now. Lucius was engaged in drawing a detailed map of the Riddle House and the environs of Little Hangleton, complete with all the magically expanded rooms and the labyrinth of dungeons and tunnels the Dark Lord had created.

Once the map was finished, Snape supposed Dumbledore would send out Order members to scout the area. He had suggested as much, but Dumbledore had positively twinkled, and said that first, the map would be "enhanced."



After class that afternoon, Harry received a summons to the Headmaster's office. He was still wary of these visits. He had largely worked through his anger and grief over the summer. Or more properly, exploding at Dumbledore at

the end of last term had been a cathartic experience. Once his anger had been fully released and examined, Harry had been better able to direct it at the proper targets. The scouring of Grimmauld Place, his simple, elegant solution of painting over Sirius's mother (inspired in the last few days with the Dursleys, as he touched up the window trim), the knowledge that Kreacher had not survived his treachery: all these had done much to help him heal. Knowing that Umbridge would never set foot in Hogwarts again, and the equally welcome news of Lupin's return to the DADA position had also done their part. Still, his improved spirits since September or so were to a large extent due to the presence of Lily. She was his-mother-who-was-not-his-mother, she had been put in Slytherin House; but she was a friend, and even better, a constant reminder that anything was possible in the wizarding world. In the simplest sense, she was a symbol of hope.

Harry entered, and smiled to see Professor Lupin, seated opposite Dumbledore. That was always a good sign. They seemed quite relaxed, and were having tea together.

"Cup of tea, Harry?"

"Thanks." He decided that Fawkes's calm and the general atmosphere of the room signalled a positive experience. He sipped his fragrant, steaming cup of Dumbledore's favourite Earl

Grey, waiting to see what would be said, when Lily entered, giving them all an arch look. She sat near Harry and gazed curiously at Dumbledore. She declined Dumbledore's excellent brew, too impatient to know the reason she was there.

Smiling, the old wizard drew a roll of parchment from his desk, and spread it out before them.

Harry read an inscription. "The Riddle House," he whispered. His eye travelled down to the graveyard. *Yes, that's the place.* A brief chill made his hair prickles, as if it were standing on end. He finished his tea, glad to have its warmth inside him.

Lupin caught his eye with a compassionate glance. Lily was full of questions.

Dumbledore explained. "A map of the ancestral home of Lord Voldemort. His Muggle family's manor, now derelict since their murder at his hands." He leaned forward. "His hideout, so to speak."

"Lovely. There's no place like home," Lily quoted to no one in particular.

"I have brought you three here," said Dumbledore, "for a special purpose. Lily is extraordinarily gifted in Charms; and Harry here has long experience with another map that was created in part by you, Remus. That map can serve as a template for this undertaking."

Harry smiled slowly. "You want a new Marauder's Map."

Lupin grinned wolfishly. "A Marauder's

Map of —" he peered at the name of the village — "Little Hangleton."

His nose was still too painful for him to manage a proper sneer. Draco attended to his dinner, and refused to notice the inquisitive glances and whispers from the other tables. Crabbe and Goyle, fixtures in his life since he could remember, were being held in the Hospital Wing. No one had been allowed to see or speak to them. Draco would never have described his feelings toward the two great lumps as fondness, but their absence left an echoing hollow in a life that Draco now had to admit had not been exactly full of friends. *Slytherins don't have friends, we have temporary allies.* What rubbish. He knew now that he did not want to live his life like that. Surrounded by classmates who had helped him, sympathised with him, and to whom (in Blaise's case), he now owed a Wizard's Debt, he felt friendship and support; and decided it was a very pleasant thing.

Lily had come to dinner positively glowing. She had been off somewhere by herself. Draco had begun wondering at her frequent absences. She certainly spent a lot of time in the library.

"You're in a good mood."

"Yes," Lily agreed, spearing some asparagus. "I've been given a fascinating special project in

Charms. I'll be working on it this evening."

"I'd hoped you'd spend some time in the common room." He tried not to sound sulky and pitiful, and knew he had failed.

She patted his arm cheerfully. "I'll be in later. I have some things I want to show you. I found your grandfather in the Hogwarts yearbook."

"Apollonius? I never knew him."

"I *know*. I discovered that most of the Slytherins who went to school here around 1938 to 1945 met untimely ends."

Blaise raised a quizzical brow. "Suspicious circumstances?"

"Hardly that. I am perfectly certain that most of them were murdered."

She had riveted their attention. "By —"

"Yes, it looks that way. He started with the quidditch team. Oldyfart's not a sporting man."

Warrington overheard them, and grumbled. "Too right he's not. He's taken out our beaters."

Draco eyed him coldly, and returned to dismembering his chicken. The talk turned to quidditch, but Draco remained silent. He longed to tell Lily that his parents were at Hogwarts. He longed to introduce her to them, to show them that here was something of his they could find no fault with. He wanted to tell everyone that Lily was right: Voldemort was plotting their ruin, playing them for fools. So she had evidence that

— Oldyfart — had started killing them off in his grandfather's day? It was old news, and while Lily might find it interesting, it was academic now. Oldyfart had tried to kill *him*. That was all he needed to make it personal. *Filthy halfblood. I've always heard you have to watch out for them.*

Lily wished with all her heart that she could tell Draco that his parents were at Hogwarts, and safe. It would be such a comfort to him. Surely Dumbledore could trust Draco to that extent.

Instead, she whispered in his ear, "So, Draco — are you in for the next meeting of the Defence Association?"

He groaned. *Not Potter. Please don't tell me I have to be polite to Potter.*

She whispered even more softly, "And what if I tell you that Harry Potter will offer to shake your hand when you arrive?"

Hmmm. I could snub him. That might be worth my time.

Hermione, her head full of Harry's news, hurried to her duties in the dungeon. A Marauder's Map of Oldyfart's family stamping grounds was all very well; even better was that a number of copies would be made. It did not solve the central problem. Even if they could use the map to track down and destroy all of Voldemort's

Death Eaters, what would they do when they confronted Voldemort himself?

The words of the prophecy jangled in Hermione's head like a horrible tune. Prophecies were awful rubbish: they were twisted things that were hopelessly and needlessly obscure. They were invariably fulfilled in ways that completely confounded the interpretations of those who depended upon them.

"THE ONE WITH THE POWER TO VANQUISH THE DARK LORD APPROACHES —"

Why doesn't it just say 'kill?'

"BORN TO THOSE WHO HAVE THRICE DEFIED HIM, BORN AS THE SEVENTH MONTH DIES —"

All right, that could certainly be Harry's parents — or Neville's — and the two of them were born in July.

"AND THE DARK LORD WILL MARK HIM AS HIS EQUAL, BUT HE WILL HAVE POWER THE DARK LORD KNOWS NOT —"

Harry's scar, it would seem... but what power? That could mean all sorts of things — mushy things like his mother's love, or his friends' loyalty, or some hidden power that hasn't manifested itself — or some sort of weapon that Voldemort won't know about and can't be prepared for — the map could be that. No, that's not enough.

"AND EITHER MUST DIE AT THE HAND OF THE OTHER FOR NEITHER CAN LIVE WHILE THE OTHER SURVIVES."

Well, that's a depressing bit. Obviously, Harry can't live with Voldemort about, because Voldemort's always trying to kill Harry. So it's kill or be killed, but the prophecy never says kill. But it says die. Harry could cause him to die. At the hand? Harry killed Professor Quirrell with the touch of his hand, but I think Voldemort is tougher than that. And even if he's killed, like before, his spirit could take form again. Unless it's trapped somehow.

Or maybe Dumbledore's plan is simply to go in, destroy all of Voldemort's Death Eaters, and drive him from his base. With no supporters, his ability to harm people would be greatly reduced, and perhaps Harry would have time to grow up and develop that special power. But Voldemort has a mortal body now — it could be injured, it could be damaged. And what could trap his spirit? You'd need something tremendously powerful —

Like a god?

Shuddering, she remembered the Halls of the Dead. What would Ma'at make of Voldemort's shrivelled spirit?

She stopped a moment.

And then broke into a run.

Snape glanced up with a frown as she pounded into the room. "Miss Granger, impetuous as always..."

"The *Seba* potion."

He raised his brows.

"It opens a portal between worlds. What if we were to send Voldemort's spirit somewhere really, really secure? Some place he could never escape from, because something there would probably —" she gulped, "— *eat him.*"

Snape looked at her, head cocked to one side, a thoroughly unpleasant smile on his face. She faltered, and then took another breath.

"*The Book of the Dead.* We found the spell that resurrected Lily, but it also has the incantations that — go the other way."

"Miss Granger," Snape said dismissively, "I assure you the Dark Lord has a very fine copy of *The Book of the Dead*, and is quite familiar with its contents. There is nothing there that we could use to surprise him."

She ran into the storeroom, looking to see where he had kept the sample of her own, flawed version of the potion.

Her voice floated out of the room. "But the potion isn't in *The Book of the Dead*. It's in the Shrewsbury Codex here at Hogwarts, and as far as I know, no other copy exists."

Snape looked at her narrowly. "The potion only worked for Lily because you used Potter's blood in it. We have no one here at Hogwarts with whom Voldemort shares blood."

"Of course we do." She emerged from the room and stood there; potion phial in fist, eyes shining.

Comprehension struck Snape like a blow to the head. *Voldemort's resurrection rite — 'blood of the enemy!' Why, that over-achieving, crassly assertive little chit. It's inspired, really. Voldemort himself has given Potter the power to destroy him.* It was gloriously ironic.

He headed out the door. She stared at him, mouth already open to protest.

"Come along, Miss Granger. I think we should share this with the Headmaster. Perhaps he knows someone with connections in Egypt who can find us some first-rate soil from the banks of the Nile."

Hermione followed in his wake, discreetly smug. "Perhaps he does."





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ACOLD RAIN DRIZZLED OVER the matted dead leaves. The cat with curious spectacled markings around the eyes crept slowly through the brush toward the ruinous shell of the Riddle House. There were stealthy rustles all about, but the cat was not hunting for food, and the small terrified creatures in their burrows huddled there safely. With a sudden burst of speed, the cat dashed up a hill into the deserted garden, and slunk behind a crumbling statue of a reading cupid. Picking her way carefully, the cat trotted up to the French doors that let out into the garden, and looked into the house through a broken pane.

A shadowy figure was just inside, and saw her. "Hello, Puss."

Another, deeper voice growled, "Who're you talking to, Avery?"

The first man emerged from the shadows and grinned at the cat. "Just

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a nice little pussy-cat. I love cats. There's all sorts of things you can do with cats." He called, high and coaxing, "Here, kitty, kitty..."

The cat, wisely, stepped backwards and then raced away along the side of the house. *Yes, Avery, and I think Mulciber. I'll remember their scents, now.*

After her recovery from the Ministry attack, Minerva McGonagall had told Dumbledore in no uncertain terms that she was taking an active role in the fight against Voldemort. When he revealed the creation of a map of Voldemort's hiding place, she knew this was the ideal mission for her. Invisibility cloaks could be seen through: human beings, however cautious, would set off wards. Rarely did anyone bother to ward anything against the odd feral cat.

She was to scout the area, but not to enter the house — not yet. She needed to get a good look at the place, so others in the Order could start learning to Apparate to the site. She had found an excellent spot at the base of the hill, sheltered from the road. It was outside the wards, and big enough to allow multiple Apparition. She would bring Dumbledore, Severus, and Remus here tomorrow.

The Weasleys, thought Dumbledore for not

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the first time, were a very useful sort of family to know. Bill Weasley made a quick visit to Cairo, ostensibly on Gringott's business. He met Dumbledore in the comfortable private room of the Leaky Cauldron.

He stretched his long legs out under the table, and studied Dumbledore thoughtfully over his glass of Laphroaig.

"I don't suppose there's any hope of you telling me what you wanted soil from the Nile Delta for, is there?"

Dumbledore gave him a smile like the eternal sun. "None whatever, dear boy."

Bill snorted. "Whisky's good, though."

"I may be contacting you again in the next few days. Do try to remain available."

"No worries."

They finished their drinks and parted pleasantly. Dumbledore had another errand in Diagon Alley. Yes, the Weasleys were an *extraordinarily* useful lot.

"The value of potions in combat has always been underestimated. Yes — I know Aurors pay lip service to them, by demanding the Potions N.E.W.T., but their actual use is fairly circumscribed. Not surprising, of course, given the bureaucratic lack of creativity throughout the Ministry."

Hermione was holding the lushly aromatic myrrh, while Snape added it into the mix, stirring with obsessive precision. She had learned to be quiet at this stage of brewing, but she could not help fidgeting, as she waited for Snape to straighten up from the cauldron so she could reply. He sensed her impatience, and continued stirring, a faint smirk visible.

The rich scent permeated the dungeons, heady and exotic. Hermione knew her clothes would be redolent of myrrh when she left the dungeons. She could smell it on Snape as well. It was Madam Leech's finest stock, and had come in a carved teakwood box, lined with rose-coloured silk. Hermione remembered that she still owed Parvati some myrrh to replace the amount she had borrowed making the original *Seba* potion.

Snape had analysed the original recipe she had used, and had decided to experiment with different brewing times. He was especially interested in this stage, partly due to the significance of myrrh as part of the Egyptian embalming process.

At length Snape was satisfied, and stood back from the worktable.

Hermione, seeing her opportunity, said, "Harry is working very hard at Potions this year. Because of this project, he'll always respect their importance. Things will be dif-

ferent when Harry becomes an Auror.”

Snape was looking through his notes, and vouchsafed an ironic glance in Hermione’s direction. “Potter will never be an Auror.”

Hermione rose to the bait in spite of herself. “I think Harry would be an excellent Auror. He’s shown time and again —”

Snape’s smirk had broadened, as he enjoyed her indignation. “Miss Granger, you astonish me. I would have thought that as Mr Potter’s *very good friend*, you would understand him better. Can you actually imagine him taking orders from Cornelius Fudge, or his ilk? Potter is unable to follow any orders at all, even those of the Headmaster, whom he pretends to respect. How will it be any different once he has left Hogwarts? If anything, he will be free of the few feeble restraints imposed by those of us who have attempted to help him reach adulthood. What do you suppose will happen, the first time he is given an order he disagrees with?”

Hermione’s mouth set in a straight line. It was uncomfortably true. Harry was a law unto himself — and he was right to be so, most of the time. Working for the Ministry — timid, sluggish, and generally in denial — would drive Harry mad.

She refused to let what seemed a slight to her friend pass, however. “If you *knew* Harry — if

you knew how he was treated by those horrible people who raised him — you’d understand why he doesn’t trust or listen to people in authority.”

“That’s enough, Miss Granger,” he said, cutting her off. “I know more about Potter than you may realise.” Snape remembered the Occlumency lessons: the heavyset, hectoring Muggle, the huge bully-boy, the ugly memories of Potter’s childhood crowding squalidly together. It occurred to him that that could have been part of the plan. Dumbledore had no better way to create a weapon capable of independent action. It would fit, he reflected. Dumbledore was very fond of music: mostly chamber music, but also opera. He had taken Snape along a few times. They had had a box to themselves at Covent Garden for a performance of SIEGFRIED — how long ago was it? It must have been in his first few years of teaching, when Potter would have been very young. Wagner was not unknown to wizards. His mythic themes, his magical plot devices appealed to the wizards and witches with refined tastes. Snape remembered the growing unease he had felt as the opera had unfolded: the orphaned boy, saved in babyhood by his doomed mother. Invulnerable to forces deadly to others, he was exiled from his rightful place to a world of lesser beings.

Since then, Snape could see other resem-

blances as well. The unloved child, independent and bumptious, full of contempt for his loathsome fosterer. The sudden recognition of powers previously unknown. Potter, like Siegfried had used a magic sword to kill a monster. Potter, like Siegfried, understood the language of animals — if only that of snakes. Potter disregarded authority and normal standards of behaviour. Snape felt the greatest concern remembering that Siegfried had been manipulated by Wotan, king of the gods, who wanted a free hero to use in his struggle against the Frost Giants. Did Dumbledore see himself as Wotan? If so, they were all in desperate straits — for Siegfried had scorned Wotan's friendship and guidance when they finally met, and had followed his own agenda, to the ruin of the gods and himself. And where did that leave Snape? As one of the denizens of the underworld?

"Are you familiar with Wagner, Miss Granger?"

He had flummoxed her. He saw her visibly calling up all references, trying, no doubt, to think of a wizard of the name. He explained, in his most patronising tones, "*Richard* Wagner. The *composer*."

She flushed. He enjoyed her confusion. Pushing her a little farther, he smiled primly, and said, "I would have thought that your parents would have seen to your cultural education.

Or do your wide-ranging interests not extend to classical music?"

Still red, and suspicious of his motives, she replied warily, "I took piano lessons until I came to Hogwarts. After that, there didn't seem to be any point to it."

Little philistine, he thought, pleased and disappointed at once. *If it's not on the N.E.W.T.s, we can't be bothered, can we?*

She could see that somehow, she had let herself down. She offered, rather pugnaciously, "I *have* been to the opera. With my parents."

He countered, ready to pounce. "Which opera?"

Somehow knowing this would not be a good answer, she told him. "*La Boheme*."

"Ah." A sigh consigned her intellectual pretensions to the rubbish heap, and he turned back to the potion with infuriating dismissiveness.

Hermione wondered what would happen if she kicked him in the shins. *Wagner*. They had been speaking of Harry. Somewhere she was missing a clue. She would owl her mother for a book about Wagner. If Snape deigned to converse with her, she would not be bested by his cultural references.

She saw someone standing in the doorway out of the corner of her eye. It was Lily, and Hermione smiled.

Lily saw Snape and Hermione, to all appear-

ances working diligently together, intent on the improved *Seba* potion. She felt the now-familiar twinge of jealousy. Severus was *her* friend. They were never able to do things together or spend much time together, aside from the occasional "counselling" session. Lucky Hermione, to be working with him openly.

Noticing that Hermione was distracted, Snape looked up, a rebuke on his lips. He saw Lily, and his expression rearranged itself into pleasanter lines.

Lily breathed the scented air. "It smells gorgeous. You should bottle it as a perfume and make your fortune."

Snape snorted. "Following in the distinguished footsteps of Guerlain." He saw the curiosity on the two girls' faces and unbent slightly. "The founder of the house in the 19th century was indeed a wizard. He trained in potions at Beauxbatons, but found the huge Muggle market irresistible. He remained in the Muggle world and married a Muggle, in fact. Occasionally the family still throws a wizard or witch, but even the most Mugglish of the descendants has kept a nose for potions."

Hermione bit her lip, as she and Lily exchanged looks. Lily, more confident, grinned impudently, and remarked, "I'm sure their noses aren't a patch on yours."

Snape growled, "How amusing." Brusquely, he told Hermione, "Bottle one-third of this component. Stopper the jars tightly. Leave the rest to simmer, and be back here tomorrow evening after dinner. And take the werewolf his Wolfsbane. Full moon starts tomorrow, and we don't want a brute beast running amuck in the halls."

Hermione wrinkled her nose, and stalked away to pour a goblet of the steaming mixture. She turned to leave, and Lily called, "Good night, Hermione."

"Good night, Lily." She paused, looking at Snape's back, and said sweetly, "Good night, then, Professor Snape."

Grudgingly, he replied, "Good night, Miss Granger," nearly politely, adding, "— and shut the door behind you."

Hermione paused, mastering her temper. She shook her hair out and shut the door with exaggerated care.

Lily laughed. "You two are getting on smashingly."

"Smashingly," Snape grunted ominously.

"No, really, you're quite a team. And you seem to be having such a wonderful time. Mind you, I'm not quite the potions swot that Hermione is, but it looks like great fun, the way you're working together."

"Miss Jones, you are mad. Quite mad." He

looked down his formidable nose at her, and was once again the Severus she had known since the day she entered Hogwarts.

It's so awkward, she reflected, being a student. Well, only two more years to go. What good times we shall have then!

"How goes the potion?" she asked, taking a seat on a high stool by the worktable.

"Well enough. With more time, I could test further variations, but I think I've achieved a working recipe. And how goes your Charms project?"

Lily leaned forward, terribly excited by the topic. "Hurrah for our team! We've finished a brilliant map of Oldyfart's digs. Don't flinch like that, Severus. He doesn't deserve the courtesy of his made-up title."

"Call him what you like, but never underestimate him as a wizard. He's tremendously powerful and utterly without limits. You've not dealt with anyone who is capable of absolutely *anything*. He doesn't care how he maims, how he kills. And his followers have been trained to be the same."

"All the better that we have the map. It's stupendous, Severus: a three-dimensional chart of the house, the tunnels, the village itself — and what's better, it has the ability to track individuals there. By name, at that. Even here at Hogwarts, we're able to see some of their activity. I suppose

Professor Dumbledore will use his copy to monitor the villains' comings and goings."

"I should think so."

"I hadn't grasped what a talented wizard Remus is. Oh, he was always a terrifically good student — except for all the absences — but he's really brilliant, Severus. The wizarding world doesn't understand what a talent it's been wasting."

Unwilling to discuss the werewolf, and not caring to hear Lily sing his praises at any more length, Snape interrupted, "Is Potter of any use at all?" Lily's expression made him back-pedal. "Yes, very well — perhaps he's capable of work when the subject interests him."

"Yes," Lily said forcefully. "Indeed he is. He's powerful, Severus. You never give him proper credit."

Annoyed, Snape defended himself. "Power has never been Potter's problem, I grant you. Discipline, control, focus — those are where I've found him wanting."

"Well, he's doing splendidly with Remus and me. He's working extremely hard. I can't think why you call him unfocused. If you saw how he can concentrate on the map — it's rather eerie, really. I recognise some of those Evans study genes."

"We'll see how he does when he actually *uses* the map."

Lily looked at him anxiously. "When do you think it will be?"

"Soon, perhaps. Dumbledore and company are developing strategies. I daresay that the attack team will include me, and Potter because it must — possibly the werewolf if the moon permits, and some of the Order Aurors. Possibly a few others." He thought of Lucius Malfoy, pacing his quarters, more hot-headed every day. His loyalty was only to himself and to his family; but he was a powerful wizard, and once committed, would be a valuable combatant.

Lily had her own dark thoughts. Everyone seemed to take for granted the idea of sending Severus into danger. It was always presumed that he would be at risk. She had contemplated all the hideous things that could happen to him, and no one else appeared to care. Whilst others tried their utmost to help Harry, no one thought of Severus. He, too, needed an edge in battle. Something unexpected.

"Wait here," she said, slipping off the stool. "I'll be back in a few minutes. I've got something for you."

She ran to the dormitory, giving the most cursory of greetings to her friends. Draco was not in the common room, but Blaise was, and Lily put him off with a promise of a chat later. She rummaged through her trunk, hands scrabbling over the wooden interior, until she dug down to the bottom, and found the smooth cool metal of her

extra sickle communicator. She snatched it up, and ducked away, back to the Potions room.

"Here," she said, shoving the necklace at him. "It's a long-distance communicator. If you say, 'Lily's sickle,' or tap it three times, you'll be able to talk to me, no matter where you are. If I need to talk to you, you'll feel the thing grow warm." She smoothed the cord nervously, and then slipped it over his head. Snape gazed at her, surprised and touched, and fingered the flat coin, turning it over to study the mirrored surface.

"You made this?" he asked, and then had to clear his throat. "A fine piece of Charms work. Always your forte."

She shrugged, and dimpled ironically. "Just playing to my strengths. Anyway," she said, pulling her own sickle out from under her blouse, "I have one too, and I shan't take it off. You'll never be lost. I swear it."

"I want you to have this," Harry insisted, showing Remus the sickle communicator. "I was a prat about Sirius's mirror, but I'll never make a mistake like that again. No matter what happens, we'll be able to talk to each other."

Remus beamed. "Harry, it's a wonderful idea, and a fine piece of Charms work. You should show it to Flitwick, when this is all over."

Harry shrugged, and smiled wryly. "Lily helped. She's the Charms genius, you know. Hermione too. They each have one of their own. We'll be able to talk, if we get — separated or anything. I won't lose you. I swear it."

Lupin's quarters off the DADA room were more littered than usual. The desk was covered with copies of the Riddle Map, general maps of the north of England, and a selection of reference books. Harry stretched. They had been working for ages, and his neck was getting stiff.

There was a knock, and Lupin called, "Come in."

It was Hermione, carefully bearing the goblet of Wolfsbane potion. Lupin smiled. *At least I get the potion without Snape staring at me like a creature in a Muggle zoo.*

"Thank you, Hermione," he said. He downed the unpleasant liquid, and sighed.

Harry remarked, "At least something good has come out of all that time with Snape. It's brilliant that you can make a potion like that."

"Brilliant," Remus agreed lightly.

Hermione saw THE BOOK OF THE DEAD on the desk, and told them, "I saw Lily just now in the dungeons. Have you learned the incantation yet?"

Harry groaned.

Remus nodded, with a wry smile. "We've just about mastered it. It's fairly long and must be recited perfectly, and almost certainly from

memory. The more of us who can join in the better, so we'll want to start bringing others into the team. The question now is: how is the wonder potion, and how are we going to drench Voldemort with it?"

"The potion's doing splendidly. We have a fair bit of it stored, and Professor Snape is experimenting with variations. Of course, it will have to be the proper temperature to be effective. As to the delivery system, Professor Snape says that Professor Dumbledore has an idea about that. Mind you, being Professor Snape, he said it was completely insane."

Harry snorted. "I just hope you've done with asking me for blood."

"Remember, Harry — you mustn't get the potion on yourself."

"Right, right," he agreed impatiently. "Lily told me that would be a Very Bad Thing. I've thought of using the Duck's Back charm on myself."

Remus got a fresh pot of tea, and motioned for Hermione to sit. She pulled over the parchment inscribed with the incantation, and began murmuring the words.

"Not you, too, Hermione," Harry complained. "I'm going to be dreaming about it. Lily's been drilling me every time we meet."

"Well," Hermione pointed out, "now you know what a demanding sort of mother she

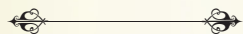
would be. She has very high standards," she added, approvingly.

Remus poured Hermione a cup, and told Harry, "She's a very caring person, Harry. You know how absolutely essential this is. She wants you to be as safe as possible. When you were a baby —"

Harry looked up, interested. "What about it? Tell me."

"Well —" Remus began, and paused. A painful feeling of nostalgia swept over him. It was so hard to see Lily in his class, in the D.A., in the halls, seeing the young girl she was, remembering the woman she had become, and trying to reconcile the different realities. Already, the Lily Jones Harry knew was subtly diverging from the Lily Evans of his own memories. Different experiences — the different House — the life-and-death challenges — were beginning to shape her out of all recognition.

The two students were still looking at him. He cleared his throat and said, "Lily had high standards as a mother — yes. She wanted to be the best mother she could be, and she loved you more than anything in the world."



"You know that we love you more than anything in the world."

"Please, Mother, don't be all broody!"

Narcissa gave Draco's shoulders an insistent squeeze, and traded exasperated looks with her husband.

Draco had slipped away to spend a few hours after dinner with his parents. They welcomed the visit, and not just to reassure themselves that he was recovered from the assault. They were both suffering from the severest sort of cabin fever. Narcissa missed her familiar rounds: the teas, the luncheons, the trips to Diagon Alley and Hogsmeade, the familiar comforts of her own home.

Lucius was starved for action of some kind. Obviously, their luxurious quarters in Hogwarts were infinitely superior to the accommodations of Azkaban or the Riddle House; but though it was a gilded cage, a cage it still remained. He had finished the map, and Dumbledore had smiled approvingly and whisked it away. Snape came to see them regularly and told them nothing. Lucius knew he was in no position to expect anyone to trust him, but he was anxious to know that he would have some part to play in the coming conflict that could redeem his public image. The attack on Draco would probably gain them some sympathy, but Lucius also wanted revenge on his erstwhile associates, and above all on his sister-in law. The die was cast: they could never be safe or happy until she and his former Master were dead.

Lucius said, "What your mother is trying to tell you, in her inimitable way, is that we don't want you taking any foolish risks. That means staying within this castle for the foreseeable future: no Hogsmeade trips, no flying any farther than the quidditch pitch, no strolling about the grounds."

Draco growled sullenly, "I need to start looking for Christmas presents."

"You mean you want to buy some expensive trinket to please that little girlfriend of yours!" Lucius was too tense to be tactful.

Draco lifted his chin, and replied, "Yes, I do! You're one to talk, always showering Mother with things." Narcissa smiled discreetly.

"She is my wife," Lucius glowered.

"Well," Draco shot back, "she wasn't always your wife! You had to get her to marry you!" He saw that his father was close to exploding, and caught his mother's warning look. "Look," he said, more reasonably, "I just want to know how long this is going to last."

"I can't tell you," Lucius said in sharp, clipped tones, "because I have no idea myself. I have hopes that the old fool will finish his everlasting plotting and order a strike against the Dark Lord; but who knows? He may be reluctant to risk Potter, who I am sure has a part to play in this." He saw the look of disgust on his son's

face, and added, "And don't look at me like that. I've told you before — it would have been far better to have made a friend of Potter than an enemy. If we live through this, I suspect he will be the darling of the Ministry again, and could be a very useful young man to know."

"All right, then," Draco bit out. "I'll give it a try. Lily asked me to go to the Defence Association meeting next Tuesday. She said if I went, Potter would offer to shake hands with me."

"Did she indeed?" Lucius thought this over. *So the girl is friendly with Potter. She gains great influence rather quickly in Slytherin, and now it seems that she has connections with Potter himself. A remarkable young witch. I must make her acquaintance very soon.*

Draco wanted his father to understand about Lily, and added, "She's the one who put it all together about — the Dark Lord — and what happened to Grandfather's generation. She makes a pretty good argument that they were all killed off by him out of revenge." Draco then blurted out, "He's a half-blood, you know, and she thinks he hates the whole wizarding world because of how he was treated."

"Does she?" Lucius replied, rather interested. "Yes, I know he's a half-blood. I discovered that for myself some years ago, to my considerable disillusionment. You see, Draco," he began

slowly, "one is sometimes taken in when very young by grandiose ideas that later in life one realises are quite impracticable." He leaned back in his chair, looking into the fire, and continued thoughtfully, "I agree that the Dark Lord's theories, if taken to their logical conclusion, would destroy our world. There is no real way to keep out the halfbloods and mudbloods, short of tracking them down and killing them at birth, and that is logistically impossible for a number of reasons. Furthermore, I am willing to concede that they may have their uses. Our world is not populous, and if properly regulated, a niche could be carved for them."

"Lily's brilliant at history, and she's very interested in mudbloods — where they come from, you know — why a witch or wizard suddenly crops up in the midst of the Muggles."

Lucius looked at him gravely. "Narcissa, my dear," he said gently, "could you leave us for a little while? Draco and I need to have some time to ourselves."

Narcissa was dozing, but awakened enough to get up, give them each a kiss, and slip away into the bedroom.

Once she was out of earshot, Lucius continued. "I hope, Draco, that you will discourage your friend from such questions. The whole squalid Mudblood Problem is an inappropriate

study for a pureblood young witch."

Full of curiosity, Draco waited.

His father said, "Of course, when Muggles with Squib blood on either side mate —" he grimaced with distaste — "they often breed true. However, you are nearly full-grown, and there are some facts about our world you are old enough to understand. Pureblood witches like your mother and your little friend are very precious and important beings, and require care and respect; but wizards have certain needs, and there is a whole world of beautiful Muggle females out there. It is not uncommon to make use of this world. Even those wizards not blessed with an attractive appearance —" he preened slightly — "find that a judicious use of magic can make available any Muggle female they desire. Then, a quick memory charm — and one goes home to one's honoured wife. A *responsible* wizard takes precautions to avoid impregnating these females, but some wizards, I regret to say, are either too careless or too vain to trouble themselves."

Draco's jaw was hanging open. "You mean — Slytherins —"

"This has nothing to do with one's house, Draco! It is an ancient tradition of wizarding life. You see now, why it is hardly the thing for an innocent young witch to be exposed to. A great

many mudbloods are actually halfbloods.”

“Is Granger —”

“That is not my secret, but I can tell you that there are good reasons for that girl’s abilities. The problem with the old fool bringing these cuckoo’s chicks into Hogwarts is that it throws them together with unknowing young wizards and witches of good family, and inappropriate liaisons may result.”

“Lily said that in the Americas, sometimes the mudbloods are removed from the Muggle world as babies and raised wizard.”

Lucius considered this. “Interesting. Yes, that could be a fair and balanced solution. One could identify them early and educate them according to their station. A politically viable solution. I really must have a talk with your young lady.”

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The morning owl post was the usual organised chaos. Birds swooped, dropping letters and parcels. Excited voices shrilled over their news. Lily was tucking into her sausages, when a heavy green envelope fluttered down next to her plate. It was unsealed, and the enclosed parchment was tantalisingly visible.

“Well, this is extraordinary!” Pansy remarked. “Lily has a letter!”

Lily’s attention was drawn to the envelope, which was incontrovertibly addressed to ‘*Miss Lily Jones, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.*’

Blaise, sitting next to her, leaned over. “From Medicine Hat Lodge, Lily. Your old school.”

Lily stared at the envelope, stunned and alarmed. It was impossible that anyone would actually send her a letter. *What is this?* She regarded the alien green thing, wondering what it could portend. *Nothing good.*

I’ll ask Severus to have a look at it, she decided. Carefully, she held a pocket of her robes open, and levitated the letter inside. *I can catch him later.*

She actually forgot about it for a few hours. This was one of her busier days: she had to run from Charms to Runes to History without a break. After her last class, Arithmancy, she stopped to talk with Professor Vector about the Firbankian Matrices. Hermione and Blaise stayed too, and they were so engrossed in their conversation that time slipped by.

“My dears,” cried Vector, catching sight of the clock. “We must hurry or we’ll all miss dinner!” She left them, hurrying off to her quarters to tidy up.

The students set out at a jog for the Great Hall. Through the windows, they could see that it was nearly dark outside. They dashed

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through the doors, and Lily gave Hermione a brisk wave, as they separated. Draco was waiting for her, looking grumpy. *So spoiled*, she reflected. *Definitely a high-maintenance prospect*. He caught sight of her and smiled charmingly. *Well, there are compensations*, she conceded.

As she ran, something fluttered behind. Blaise saw it, and stopped, calling to her.

"Wait, Lily! You've dropped your letter!" He turned to pick it up, and she cried out a warning.

"Blaise! Don't touch it!" She clutched at his arm, but too late. His hand touched the letter, and without warning, the two of them vanished.

The Slytherins stared at the empty space in bewilderment. Draco rose slowly to his feet, suddenly came to his senses, and ran to the head table, calling for Snape.

The rest of the houses turned toward the Slytherins, and began buzzing curiously, not certain what had happened.

Harry had seen it all. Attuned to her, hearing her voice amongst all the other Slytherins, he had registered the note of alarm; and had looked up to see her try to stop Blaise, and then the awful emptiness. There was no doubt for a moment what had happened. Voldemort had failed in one attempt to harm Draco, and had tried a proven trick out of spite. Lily would pay the price of the Malfoys' defection. Lily and

Blaise. *Kill the spare*.

Rage so great it nearly blinded him, he got up and left the table, not exactly running, but already planning what he needed to do. Frightened students saw him leave, including a distraught Draco Malfoy, who narrowed his eyes, and followed him.

Hermione had frozen in shock. *A portkey!*

"Bloody hell!" croaked Ron.

Dumbledore shouted, "Silence! All but those Slytherins who witnessed the incident will leave the Great Hall at once." He came down from the table to question the students. "Come, Severus."

Snape, whiter than ever before, was still staring at empty air. A horrible sickness seized him. What use to question the Slytherins? He knew where Lily had gone. He caught Dumbledore's eye, and shook his head. He immediately strode away to find who and what he would need now.

Harry ran up to the Astronomy Tower to get his bearings. Firebolt in one hand, the map of Little Hangleton in the other, he climbed up into the stone-framed window, and opened the casement wide.

"Where do you think you're going?" Draco Malfoy was glaring at him, clutching his own broomstick as if for dear life.

"I don't see that it concerns you."

Draco grabbed the front of Harry's robes, and shoved him up against the wall. "You're going after her — to save her, aren't you?"

Harry slowly adjusted his glasses, and stared him down. "Get out of my way."

"You fancy her. I knew it. Luring the girls to your little club, chatting them up, playing the *hero*."

Harry pushed him away. "I don't have time for this, Malfoy. Believe it or not, I didn't organise the Defence Association to meet girls. Lily is my friend."

Draco watched Harry's preparations, nearly paralysed with loathing.

"*Saint* Potter. What do you think you're going to do — kill the monster, rescue the damsel in distress, and save the world?"

"Something like that."

Draco sneered. "All by yourself?"

Harry shrugged. He pocketed the map and mounted his broomstick. "I've risked my friends' lives too many times."

"Don't worry. *I'm* not your friend."

Harry shot out from the tower, with Draco following a split-second behind. The two of them cut through the icy air, their robes whipping around them.

Draco glared at Harry's back, only yards

ahead, and finally shouted out. "I suppose you have a plan?"

Harry called back over his shoulder. "Yes. I'm going to pay a call on Voldemort, and bring Lily home."

Below, at the windows of Hogwarts, students and staff pointed at the two little figures flying away at tremendous speed into the twilight.



Blaise and Lily stumbled over each other, as they whirled out of the portkey's enchantment. Lily's first impressions were of darkness and a dank, unsavoury smell. They were in a windowless chamber, possibly underground.

A voice behind her crowed, "About time you showed your face, love. Shouldn't have kept me waiting. *Stupefy!*"

She scrambled for her wand, but before she could point it in the voice's direction, Blaise called out "*Petrificus Totalus!*" Lily looked up to see a tall and scrawny wizard falling flat on his face with a thud.

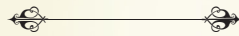
"Idiot," snarled Blaise. "If he hadn't had to talk about it, he could have hexed us both."

He helped her to her feet, and they looked around them.

"I wonder where we are," Blaise said, peering cautiously down a darkened hall.

"I think I know," Lily confessed. He raised an inquisitive brow. She told him, "The Riddle House." He frowned, not understanding.

She gave him the bad news. "Oldyfart's ancestral home." She pulled the sickle necklace out from under her robe. "I think we'd better call for help."



Hermione felt her sickle grow warm and ducked into an empty room. "Yes! Lily's sickle!" she called frantically. Lily's tiny image appeared.

"Hermione?"

"Yes! Where are you?"

"In the Riddle House. Blaise and I are all right. There was a welcoming committee, but he's safely petrified now. I don't have a copy of the map, and we need to get out of here."

Hermione was appalled. She didn't have a copy of the map herself. "Wait!" she cried. "I know where to get one."

Lily's voice, tiny and clear, said, "Harry has one, I know."

"Harry's gone, and he hasn't answered my call," Hermione told her. "I think he's coming for you. He and Draco were seen flying south."

"Oh my God," Lily groaned in despair. "Are they mad? The whole plan is falling apart. I'll call Severus. He has my spare sickle."

"All right." Hermione was twitching in her anxiety. "Meanwhile, I'll find a map. Then I can coach you through the place."

She ran upstairs. Dumbledore must have a copy, but he would want his. She knew of one more copy, and decided that she must have it.

Ron saw her, and called out, "Oi! Hermione! Stop!" She kept on running, and he joined her. "Where's Harry gone?"

The perverse staircases took her inexorably out of her way. She kicked at the baluster, and ran on when they finally stopped.

"When Lily and Blaise vanished, they were taken by portkey to Voldemort," she replied. "I think Harry's already on his way there."

"Without us?" Ron was horrified. "He'll be killed!"

Hermione was gasping for breath now, and managed to puff, "He's never got over what happened at the Department of Mysteries. He's afraid for us."

"Well, I'm bloody afraid for him!" He caught her by the arm. "He likes that Jones, doesn't he? There's something about her."

There was no time to be cautious. "Yes, there's a secret about Lily. I can't, absolutely *can't* tell you what it is. Dumbledore knows, and so do a lot of the teachers."

Ron had the look of one who has seen the light.

"She's a spy, isn't she? Dumbledore fiddled the Sorting Hat, and planted her in Slytherin!"

Hermione had started running again. The door she was looking for was just down the hall. "Yes, something like that. But nobody can know, Ron. You can't tell anyone!"

They were at the door of the DADA classroom. It was locked, and Hermione remembered that this was the night of the full moon.

"Uh, Hermione," Ron gulped. "I don't think you want to go in there right now."

The lock did not stand long against a clever and determined witch. "I have to, Ron. Professor Lupin has had his Wolfsbane Potion, and he's quite safe. There's a map in there that we simply must have."

The room was oppressively dark. Hermione whispered "*Lumos*," and the room filled with a glaring light, casting black shadows. They walked softly to the front of the classroom, and Hermione headed to Lupin's private quarters. Ron stifled a moan.

The desk was in sight, and the litter of parchment. She tiptoed to the desk and reached for the map lying on top of everything else.

There was a growl. Hermione flinched, and took a deep breath. In the corner of the room, two great yellow eyes glared at her. Ron tried to step in front of her protectively.

She gently pushed him aside, and said, "Professor Lupin, we need the map. There's been a muddle, I'm afraid. Lily's been kidnapped by a portkey to the Riddle House. I think Harry has gone to get her. Lily called me with her sickle. She's all right so far, but I need the map to keep her safe."

Slowly, the shaggy grey werewolf stood, crouching on two hind legs. He growled again, showing his long, pointed fangs; but Hermione could see human intelligence in the eyes. Quickly, she rolled up the map, grabbed Ron by the hand, and ran from the room. "Good night, sir!" she called over her shoulder, leaving the room in darkness.





THE HALLS OF THE DEAD

SNAPE WAS DREADING LUCIUS's reaction to the news, and dreading Narcissa's even more. The dread he felt was overshadowed by his fear for Lily. The unbearable thought pounded at him: *She's probably already dead by now.* He had known torture in many forms, but never torture so exquisite as this: the excruciating balance of hope and despair. He must act on hope now, however. Later, there would be all the time in the world for despair.

The Malfoys were at dinner when he burst into their sitting room. They looked up, reading his face, and immediately drew their wands, thinking that the Dark Lord was there, at Hogwarts, and hard on their friend's heels.

It was impossible to be gentle or tactful. It was all he could do to speak coherently. "Draco's gone," he told them brusquely. They looked at each other, full of dismay and confusion.

THE PREFECT'S PORTRAIT

THE HALLS OF THE DEAD

Snape took a breath. "Lily was kidnapped by portkey from the Great Hall. It's pretty clear who's taken her. The Zabini boy too. Lily was sent a letter and the boy touched it at the same time. Draco's gone after her."

Lucius managed a weak, incredulous laugh. "Gone for the girl? Not possible. He doesn't know where the Dark Lord is."

Snape did not spare him. "Harry Potter knows. Draco followed him. I saw them flying south out of the Astronomy Tower."

"Potter!" The name was spat out like a curse.

Narcissa was standing wordless by the table. A scream erupted from her, high and wild. Lucius went to her, and the scream stopped. Narcissa took a long sobbing breath, and screamed again, a horrible anguished keening that rattled the very stones. It would have gone on longer, had not her husband taken her by the upper arms and given her a hard shake.

"There's no time for this!"

"I can't even Apparate!" she moaned, and was promptly sick on the floor.

"Narcissa, are you certain?" asked her husband, quickly conjuring a silken cloth to wipe his wife's face. "I thought you were going to wait until this was all over."

"We could be dead by then," she said dully. "What's the use in waiting? We'll live or we'll

THE PREFECT'S PORTRAIT

die. I've nothing else to think about and I think about it all the time. And now Draco —" she shuddered. "I'm not sick from the baby. I'm sick from all the fear. I just want it to be over." She took the cloth from Lucius, gave herself a last wipe with it, and Vanished it. Lucius righted one of the dining chairs overturned in their alarm. She sat in it, trembling, and took a long drink of water.

Lucius stared at the floor and then shook out his hair slightly, and with a ghost of his sneer, told Snape. "I trust you will not hinder me as I leave. Thank Dumbledore for his hospitality, but if I go now, I can Apparate there ahead of Draco and forestall this disaster."

"I had no idea of preventing you. I am going myself, but I must take a few items along. Come with me to the dungeon and I'll tell you my plan. McGonagall showed me a good Apparition point a few days ago." He looked at Narcissa with something like compassion. "I'm sorry you must be left alone, but we must go now if we're to save Draco."

She nodded quickly and got up. She wrapped her arms around Lucius's neck and kissed him gravely. Then doubling up her fist, she struck him on the chest, crying, "You bring him back to me!"

Lucius caught her hand, kissed it, and left

without a word. Narcissa sank back into the chair, her head in her hands.

Hermione was standing in the hall, trying to control the panicky ideas fluttering around her mind. *Think!* She told herself. *It's what you're good at.*

Nervously, she smoothed the map. She could use it to coach Lily out of the Riddle House. But Harry was already on the way, not responding to his sickle. *Why not?* She could not see him, and could not see the sickle dangling at the end of its black silk cord, fluttering in the night wind, *outside* Harry's robes as he forced his broom to its highest speed.

If he was not responding, it was entirely likely that he would enter the Riddle House himself. Draco Malfoy was with him. She couldn't imagine how *that* was going to play out. Harry had a copy of the map and presumably would be cautious, but what if Lily were taken prisoner? He might well find himself once more before Voldemort.

The incantation! Harry knew the incantation, but it was useless without the potion! *The potion!* *I've got to get the potion to Harry somehow!*

She glanced briefly into Ron's anxious eyes. He could fly her there! *No! It will have to be someone else.*

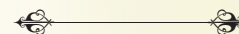
There's something Ron must do for me right away.

"Ron, listen to me — this is important! I've got to get to the dungeons, but in the meantime, I need you to go to Gryffindor Tower. Have Ginny go to my room and look in my trunk. The password is "Heathcliff." There is a sickle on a black silk cord. You've got to take it to Dumbledore right away. It's a communicator, and he can use it to speak to Harry, or me, or Lily." She saw his frown gathering, and cried frantically, "There's no time to be angry because we couldn't tell you! I'm telling you *now*. I think Professor Lupin has one too, but I didn't think to look for it." A stray thought occurred to her. "Maybe Professor Snape has one. I'm not sure." (*I'll call Severus...*) "Anyway," she babbled, pulling out her own sickle and showing him. "It looks like this. See, it's a mirror on one side. It gets hot if someone needs to talk to you. Harry's not answering his now. I don't know why, but if Dumbledore has this, he can talk to whoever *does* answer. Go!" He gaped at her, overwhelmed at the amount of information. She gave him a shove. "Go now!" Hesitantly, he started to run, and she shouted after him, "He can tap it three times, or say 'Harry's sickle!'" Ron was nearly down the hall, waving his acknowledgement. She shouted again, "And remember! *Heathcliff!*"

She set out running herself. She would find

Professor Snape. They could decant some of the potion into a bottle that would break when thrown. She would pick up a pair of her brushes that she had contributed to the effort. If worse came to the worst, they would have *something*. Professor Snape could Apparate; and either stop Harry, or give him the potion to use as a weapon.

She ran down the hall panting, a stitch in her side. She clutched at it, crumpling the map. *But what if he doesn't find Harry? What if he has the potion and runs into Voldemort? The potion is useless without the incantation! Oh no! Professor Snape doesn't know the incantation!*



Snape had gathered the necessary things, and was flinging a cloak over his shoulders, when his fingers tangled in a black silk cord. Automatically, he began straightening it, and then simultaneously remembered what it was, and realised that it was hot.

He snatched at it, turning it over to see the mirrored side, and hissed, "Lily's sickle!"

He nearly sobbed when the little face appeared. "Yes! Severus!" Thin and silvery, Lily's voice spoke from the sickle. "I've been calling and calling! Blaise and I are all right. I think we're somewhere in the cellar. Hermione is looking for a copy of the map."

Fiercely, Snape growled at her, "Stay where you are, and I will come and get you!"

"We can't stay here forever," she protested. "We have the fellow who was waiting for us petrified, but someone may come looking for him. I heard that Harry and Draco were on the way."

"Yes!" Snape barked impatiently. "Those idiot boys are on their broomsticks, on their way to be killed! Draco's father and I are Apparating there and we should be there before them. Lucius knows his way about the place. Describe where you are."

Lucius was staring at him, his curiosity aroused to the highest degree. Reluctantly, Snape motioned him nearer and held the sickle up so Lucius could hear Lily speaking.

"It's a windowless room with a low ceiling. The walls are stone. There's a plain wooden door that opens to a hall. It has a low ceiling too. There are empty crates in the room, and a long table with green wooden chairs. There's another door that opens into a narrow hall. There are lots of doors along that hall. I think I hear someone coming! I can't talk anymore!" There was a silence, and the picture disappeared.

Snape swore. He then saw Lucius, a knowing smirk on his lips, obviously convinced that he had solved a mystery.

"Jones, indeed!" Lucius laughed grimly. "May

I congratulate you on the birth of your daughter? Clever of you, hiding her all these years! I should have guessed, when Narcissa said she had your colouring."

Severus stared back at him, stunned, but did not attempt to deny it. When Lucius thought of anything but Draco's danger, he felt rather smug at uncovering Severus's secret. So the girl had been raised abroad by the mother and the putative father. With their deaths, Severus had been forced to bring her to Hogwarts. Not legitimate then, but still a pureblood, and the child of his old friend. If anything, it made her even more suitable. Yes: if the girl survived her ordeal, she would be quite suitable indeed. He had always given Draco everything he wanted, and was not about to stop now.

Snape gave him a curious brush. "Cat hair," was the mysterious explanation. "Absolutely essential." Gamely, Lucius stowed it in a pocket, and followed his friend out of the dungeons. At the very first turning, they were nearly run down by the intolerable Granger girl, hair more enormous than usual, waving a parchment. She was panting, and grabbed insolently at Snape's robes, but Severus was far more merciful than he would have been, and heard the girl out.

"I have a copy of the map," she gasped. Snape seized it, understanding its value at once.

He turned on her furiously. The parchment was blank. "Is this some sort of joke?" he snarled.

Exasperated, she sniffed at him, and tapped the parchment with her wand. "*I solemnly swear I am up to no good.*"

The complex details appeared. Both wizards were astounded and reluctantly impressed. Lucius knew the basic map well; but dots moved along the surface here, their names emblazoned. Snape looked for the dungeons. He and Lucius snatched the map away from the indignant Hermione.

"There!" said Lucius triumphantly. "The east cellar. Blaise Zabini — and Lily —" he raised a sardonic eyebrow at Snape — "*Jones.*"

Snape's heart had nearly stopped. He had feared for a moment that the map would show the name "Evans." Apparently Lily had taken precautions against that. He paused, and said, "Thank you, Miss Granger. This will prove useful." He was striding away with Lucius, when she caught up with them.

"Wait!" she squawked. "Do you have the potion?"

"Of course, I have the potion! What am I, an idiot?"

"How are you going to douse Oldyfart with it?"

"Oldyfart?" mused Lucius.

"That," snapped the impatient Snape, "has nothing to do with you. You are delaying us.

Get out of the way."

She grabbed his robe again. "I'm going with you."

"Absolutely not."

"You don't know the incantation."

Snape stopped. Lucius looked a question at him, and then slowly smiled. "So you *do* have a weapon against him."

"Yes," Snape bristled. "There is a weapon —"

Hermione broke in, "— but it's useless without the incantation. I know it."

Snape muttered, "Know-it-all."

Hermione refused to be deterred. "Yes. That's right. I'm a know-it-all. *I know everything.* I know the incantation that will finish off Oldyfart for good and all. I know how to use the potion. You know about the potion, and Harry knows the incantation; but I'm the know-it-all, and I know both — and you'd better stop talking and take me with you!"

Lucius shrugged. "Bring her along. The worst that can happen is that the Dark Lord will kill her." He and Snape set off at a quick pace to the Hogwarts boundaries, Hermione trotting behind.

She called out, "Do you have the cat hair brushes?"

The men striding ahead of her pulled the brushes from their pockets, and displayed them to her satisfaction. Lucius murmured low, "She's worse than I imagined, the nagging little harpy."

Snape grunted in reply, "Say what you like: she's the best assistant I've ever had or ever will have. If we live through this, I'm going to offer her an apprenticeship."

Lucius was politely incredulous. "Better you than I."

Snape met his eye. "Yes, that's right."

The voice called "Rookwood!" from down the hall. Blaise put his hand on Lily's arm, and she hastily whispered, "I think I hear someone coming! I can't talk anymore!" She slid the sickle away, under her robe, and she and Blaise flattened themselves against the wall, hidden by a stack of crates. Blaise could see through a crack to the doorway, and they held their breath, as footsteps came nearer.

"Did the bloody girl ever show up?" queried the newcomer, peering into the cellar room. "Rookwood?" The wizened, greying Death Eater swore. "Stupid bastard. He'll shred your hide for skiving off." He took another step into the room. "Rookwood!" he hissed. "Are you drunk?"

Lily heard Blaise swallow, and they both slowly raised their wands. The Death Eater paused, muttered something unintelligible, and left the room.

They both took deep breaths. Lily felt her sickle grow hot again.

Hermione was incensed at being carried about like a sack of oats. Professor Snape had seized her without asking her leave; they had Apparated, and now found themselves at the base of a hill, hidden by trees. Snape dumped her unceremoniously onto her feet, and he and Malfoy studied the map intently.

"They're still in the cellar. Rookwood too. He must be the one they petrified. Nott's in the hall outside."

"All right," said Snape. "Which is the quickest way to the cellar?"

Lucius sneered. "I suppose the *quickest* way would be to knock at the front door, but I freely admit I favour a more subtle approach. There's a tunnel that lets out near the river, and it's not far. Look," he said, tracing the map, as Snape nodded, and Hermione stood on tiptoe, trying to see between them. "The boys can't be here for at least another fifteen minutes. If we can slip in and get the girl out, we can stop Draco before he makes a dead hero of himself." He considered Hermione, head cocked to one side. "I suppose she could stay here to warn Potter and Draco when they arrive."

"Alone?" Hermione protested.

Malfoy's mouth curved in an amused half-

smile. "I'm afraid neither of us is available to hold your grubby paw."

She narrowed her eyes and glared. "Not a good idea to separate me from the potion, if we're forced to use it. I told you. I know the incantation." She took a step closer. "In fact, I'd say we should leave *you* out here, while Professor Snape and I go in for Lily and Blaise."

Her voice rose, and Snape hushed her furiously.

"Ridiculous. We're all going, if you can stop sniping at one another. The tunnel is empty right now. What about wards?"

Lucius smirked. "Our marks will get us through, and the — Miss Granger — too, as long as one of us is touching her. Inside, there are anti-Apparition wards, unfortunately."

Snape gave the map back to Hermione. "Here. It looks like there's no one in our way until we reach the house and enter the conservatory. Rabastan and Rodolphus are there now."

She examined the map, looking for movement, and then said, "There's Voldemort. And Bellatrix Lestrange too. They're upstairs. They're — very close — ew." That was something she did not want to think about.

Malfoy huffed an ironic laugh. "Shall we?"

He and Snape, wands drawn, led the way. Snape turned to her, "And you, Miss Granger, shall be our navigator."

Lucius's estimate was quite wrong. He had no idea how hard Harry could push his Firebolt, and how hard Draco could push to keep up with him. Whether conjured by their ardent wishes, or simply due to the forces of nature, a strong north wind sped them across the border, and then on to the village of Little Hangleton. After studying the map for so long, Harry had little trouble recognising the place from the air, and with Draco behind him, landed softly on the roof of the Riddle House.

The wind was still blowing hard: too hard to look long at the map in this exposed place.

He partially unfolded it, and Draco could not help but admire the craft implicit in it. They were above the old servants' quarters. There was an empty room below them. Carefully, they went to the edge of the roof and looked down. They could just swing down through the broken window if they helped each other. They shrank their brooms and pocketed them, and repressing their distaste at touching the other's hands, they swung down: first one, then the other, and were in a bare bedchamber, which held only a narrow iron bed frame and no mattress. Standing in the dim light by the window, they looked at the map again.

The little dots were stationary, or moved to and fro. Draco was first to see the names “Blaise Zabini” and “Lily Jones” marked in the east side of the cellars. They also saw “Augustus Rookwood” only a few yards away.

“Do you think they’re prisoners?” Draco felt ill. He had actually met Rookwood. A tall and scrawny man, who seemed somehow half-finished. He had made a great deal of Draco when he was little: always wanting to touch him, always wanting to hold him on his lap, always pressing a little too close with his unpleasant breath and his greedy eyes. Draco had dreaded him as a small child, and as he grew older, came to understand that being a Malfoy had been his only protection against a particularly nasty sort of predator. As his eyes were opened, he also had come to understand that this was just the sort of person who would gravitate to the Dark Lord: a person whose desires lay outside the accepted bounds of behaviour; who would find in this service the only place he could indulge his appetites freely.

Harry was worried too. “He’s not moving,” he said slowly. “Maybe he’s got his wand on them.” He looked closer. “Still, they’re moving a little. Maybe they’ve got *him* prisoner. And look, they can’t get out of the room because Nott is in the hall a few yards away.”

“Nott’s no trouble, the pathetic old geezer. Once we get there we’ll stupefy him and go out through the tunnel to the river — there.”

“All right, but first —”

“But first? But first you’re going to die, little baby Potter, and my baby sister’s little baby.”

Bellatrix Lestrange was in the doorway, looking as if Christmas had come early.

Some people freeze in alarm — deer in the headlamps of fate. Harry had never been one of them. He had his wand out already, and automatically shot a curse at his loathed enemy. “*Stupefy!*”

She dodged the curse easily, with a shrill laugh. “He knows you’re here, silly little babies! Did you think you could just walk into Our Lord’s house like a pair of Muggle vandals? *Diffindo!*”

Harry rolled out of the way, as the slicing curse tore through the walls. He could hear shouts from downstairs already.

Draco erected a shield. “You must be my Aunt Bella. I’ve heard all about you.” Narcissa really had told him all about her sister: how Bella had tormented her, ruined anything she valued, lied to get her into trouble, manipulated their parents to get her way. He decided that further conversation might distract her, if only Potter would understand his intention.

“That’s right, baby dragon. Put the wand down and come to Aunt Bella. We’ll have such

fun, just the two of us. I'll send you back in teeny bits to naughty Narcissa, and then she'll know she can't hide her toys from Bella."

Harry eased back against the opposite wall, waiting for his moment. As Bellatrix turned her eyes to Draco, he roared out, "*Expelliarmus!*"

She shrieked, "*Protego!*" but not in time. Harry struck her a glancing blow, knocking her off balance. She clung like a limpet to her wand, and raised it for another curse; but Draco followed up immediately, with an "*Expelliarmus*" of his own.

She was standing in front of the window; and the second curse struck her, hurling her back and through the window frame. Her outstretched wand hand slammed against the wall in passing, and the wand flew into Draco's left hand with a smack. She was outlined in moonlight, seeming to pause in mid-air. Then she plummeted, falling down the slope and then to the garden retaining wall all the way to the road.

"We can't stay here!" Harry pointed out. He longed to follow Bellatrix and finish her off forever, but there was no time. He smoothed the map and glanced at it. "Dolohov and Mulciber are coming up the stairs!"

Draco took a brief look himself, and said. "Stupid to let them come find us. I'll take Mulciber."

"Fine with me." They each took a breath,

and then rushed for the hall doorway.

"Stop!" Hermione whispered. "Crabbe is coming into the tunnel. He's just up on the left at the turn."

Lucius snorted. "*Crabbe.*" He caught Snape's eye with a derisive look. "We can do this silently."

Snape nodded briefly, and the two men prowled to the bend in the tunnel. From long practice, they went into combat mode, appearing without warning before Crabbe even had time to register their identity. He crumpled to the ground, and was immediately bound with conjured ropes.

"That's two down," Lucius said with satisfaction. Crabbe was levitated out of the way, and they moved on to the tunnel's entrance to the house.

Hermione murmured, "The two Lestranges are still there. They're not moving."

"In the conservatory," Lucius considered. "They're playing chess."

They were. In the draughty, high-ceilinged room, ringed with long-dead plants, the two wizards sat on either side of a small table, focused entirely upon their game. Snape and Lucius eyed them carefully from the doorway before stepping out into the room and disabling them. They, too, were bound and deposited behind some large pots.

"This is almost too easy," purred Lucius. He

regarded the two brothers with dislike: they had backed Bellatrix immediately when she had made her ridiculous accusations against him. It was always so satisfying to make clear to people what a bad enemy he was.

Hermione was studying the map with growing unease. She whispered, "Shh! Peter Pettigrew is on the other side of the wall! He seems to be going back and forth." She pointed at the middle of the wall, separating them from the morning room. If they could get to the hall leading out from the conservatory, they should be able to make their way to the kitchen, and then down to the cellars. Once they were in the hall, however, Pettigrew might see them if he were facing that way.

Quietly, they hurried through the conservatory and toward the doorway. The house creaked ominously, and a sudden breath of cold air rushed through the room. Hermione looked around for an open window.

Suddenly, there were shouts from upstairs. A woman's screech rang through the house with a faint echo. It could only be Bellatrix Lestrange. Malfoy and Snape looked at each other, horrified.

"They're here already!" cried Lucius. He broke into a run, heading to the open door.

"Lucius!" Snape followed him. Hermione was trying to look at the map, which flapped

forward in the cold draught.

"Wait!" she called out, trying to catch the men up. Lucius was nearly at the door when there was a shout of "*Expelliarmus!*" and Lucius crashed sideways, his wand flying. Snape whirled, wand at the ready, but there was another "*Expelliarmus!*" and he flew back into the pots by the window.

Peter Pettigrew was in the room behind them, blasting curses their way. "*Stupefy! Stupefy!*" Hermione ran behind a mummified potted palm, and the crafty little man saw her flight, firing an "*Incendio!*" at her hiding place. The palm blazed like a torch, and other plants caught fire like matchsticks. She ran out, firing "*Expelliarmus!*" back at him, trying to disable him. Snape was behind the plants, not moving. She glanced at the doorway, and Lucius was lying still, apparently unconscious. From upstairs, she could hear screams and shouted curses. The sickle against her chest was scorchingly hot, but there was no time to stop and talk. She hid behind a corner of the room, and Pettigrew blasted it apart. She rolled low and tried to run, but her legs failed her. She collapsed to the floor, and then with a quick shout of "*Expelliarmus!*" she was wandless and vulnerable. *A Jelly-legs jinx*, she thought, mortified. *He must think I'm beneath contempt.* She turned over, trying to see around the room.

Pettigrew approached her, grinning. "For such a clever girl, you make a habit of picking the wrong friends. I never expected to see you with Lucius. He eats little girls like you for breakfast. Not this time though." He smirked down at her. "It sounds like your friends are upstairs. I'll let Bella deal with them. If they're some of your school chums, I rather not kill them myself. I'm tender-hearted that way. That's the worst of me."

Hermione stared stonily at him, trying not to let him see her thoughts. *He doesn't know what's going on. Does he even know that Lily's in the house?* "Probably not the worst, really," she disagreed. The horrible little man had her wand, and was collecting Snape's and Malfoy's now.

He came back, looking down at her thoughtfully. "No, you're wrong. I'm very sorry for you, you know. These two deserve whatever the Dark Lord decides for them, but you're just a little girl. I don't like to see children hurt."

Hermione bit her lip. She moved carefully into a sitting position, arranging her useless legs more comfortably. "Then let me go. No one even need know I'm here."

"No," he shook his head sympathetically. "He'll know. He knows everything, and when he gets to work on those two," he jerked his head toward the unconscious wizards, "they'll tell

him all about you being here; and then where will that leave me? No." He thought a minute, and then, with a generous air, said, "I'm going to do you a kindness, because you're really a nice little girl, for a mudblood, and I'll kill you now. He won't be pleased, but he knows that accidents happen in a duel. Much better for you, and I don't have to see you suffer."

He lifted his wand, with an apologetic smile; and then his face changed into something quite terrible. "*Avada* —"

He was knocked flying by a roaring rush of grey. Bewildered, he staggered up, and was knocked down again by the sweep of a powerful paw.

"Professor Lupin," Hermione called. "He has our wands! Don't let him get away!"

Pettigrew was shrinking already, his body shortening, falling onto four feet: he was a rat, scurrying toward the safety of the holes in the wall. Lupin bounded after him, horrifyingly fast and unstoppable. The rat changed direction, trying to shake his pursuer, but the distance to the wall was just too great. The wolf's jaws met with a snap, and the rat was caught; squeaking, flailing in mid-air, he was shaken in a blur of motion. There was a distinct snap of bones, and the creature hung limp.

The werewolf cast the rat away, and stood, furious and panting, while the corpse reverted to

its natural form. Peter Pettigrew was quite dead, his neck broken, his head twisted around at an odd angle, a most distressed look on his face.

Very frightened, Hermione crawled toward the dead animagus, and felt in his pocket for the missing wands. There were not three, though, but six. Hermione wondered whose the others were, and then looked again at one of them. It was identical to Lily's wand. *Maybe it is. Maybe it's the other Lily's wand, and Pettigrew stole it when she was killed by Voldemort.* She took all the wands and used her own to end the jinx on herself. Cautiously acknowledging Lupin, she searched behind the pots for Snape.

"*Ennervate!*" Snape's eyes opened wide, and he was on his feet with astonishing speed, despite his visible bruises. She handed him his wand. "It was Pettigrew, but he's dead." She saw that she had impressed him, and shook her head. "I didn't do it. It was Professor Lupin."

Snape saw the werewolf then, standing in the moonlight that streamed through the windows. He froze, repressing a reflexive shudder of fear. Straightening his robes, he mastered himself and gave Lupin the barest of nods.

Hermione said, "I'll contact Lily, and see if she's still all right." Snape stared in astonishment as she pulled out her sickle. He had not fully realised until that moment that any one

else had them. *Yes, Lily had said she spoke to someone about the map.* He might have known that the know-it-all would have a hand in that as well. He strode over to Malfoy and roused him. There was a faint growl from Lupin.

"He's on our side now," he told him coldly. "Don't blame me if Dumbledore doesn't share information. Lucius and Narcissa have been in hiding at Hogwarts for nearly a month."

"It's true, Professor Lupin," Hermione said hurriedly. "Harry and I saw them with the Headmaster the night they arrived. That's why Draco was attacked."

The werewolf made no other sound, but leaned over Lucius as he awakened. The wizard managed a strangled gasp at the sight of the dripping muzzle close to his own face.

Snape reassured him. "It's only Lupin. He's finally earning his keep catching rats."

"Ah," said Malfoy, regaining his composure. He rose, and granted Pettigrew's dead body a complacent glance. "Very good of him." He looked anxiously toward the hall again. "We have to help Draco. My wand, please."

Hermione handed it to him, and he reflexively wiped it on his robe. She glared at him furiously, and he realised what he had done. With an insincere shrug of apology, he desisted, and turned to leave the room.

"Wait!" Snape stopped him. "Let's find out what going in the cellars."

Lucius paused as she opened the map, and Snape called quietly. "Lily's sickle."

Lily appeared at once. "Where are you? What's that noise upstairs?"

Snape hastily replied. "We are in the conservatory. We've accounted for four of the Death Eaters." He glanced over Hermione's shoulder. "Nott has gone upstairs because Draco and Potter have entered the house from an upstairs window. Go out of the room and turn left. Go up the stairs to the kitchen. Turn right and right again, and follow the hall. We'll meet you there."

Meanwhile, Hermione was trying to call Harry. "Harry's sickle. Please, Harry, answer me!" Her sickle was still hot, and suddenly Dumbledore appeared, looking concerned.

"Miss Granger! Why has Peter Pettigrew's name disappeared from the map?"

"He's dead, sir. We're going into the hall, and Lily and Blaise are coming to meet us. I can't get Harry, but we see him and Draco moving around upstairs and hear a great deal of noise."

Lucius Malfoy was furiously impatient. "We don't have time to talk to the old fool! I'm leaving!"

Dumbledore smiled calmly, "Ah, yes. Hello to you too, Lucius. Do be careful going up the back stairs, won't you? If you'll notice, Volde-

mort's name has also dis —"

There was an unearthly crash upstairs. Lupin bounded past them, with Lucius Malfoy running behind. Hermione clutched at the map and followed Snape, while he strode quickly but more warily out into the wide hall that led to the kitchen and the servants' dining hall. Reaching into his robes, he pulled out a black, egg-shaped object that slowly conformed to the shape of his hand. He whispered "*Caldus!*" at it.

Hermione's attention was riveted. "Is that —?"

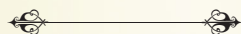
"Silence!" he answered sharply. He paused in the hall, and turned to her. "When the two of them reach this hall, take them back out through the conservatory and through the tunnel to safety. Call Dumbledore back. He'll no doubt send some of the Order to retrieve them. I cannot leave Lucius and Draco to fight alone."

Or Harry and Professor Lupin, Hermione thought mutinously. *Especially now that you owe Professor Lupin a Wizard's Debt.* There was a man's hoarse scream from upstairs, and Hermione felt torn. "I can't leave Harry either!"

"Miss Granger, for once in your life, try to obey your elders! I cannot stay to argue with you. I was prepared to offer you an apprenticeship upon graduation, but not if you cannot *do as you are told!*" He looked up the stairs, and then back at her, and added, "You must help

Lily and Blaise. There is no one else."

He pulled at a corner of the map, and she held it out for him to take a last look. Hermione, listening for Lily, hardly glanced at it. Snape was gone, like a tall black shadow, and the corner of the map folded over again. She hardly had a chance to notice the name there. *Nagini. I know that name.* Then she was once again distracted by the sounds of the duel overhead. There was a wild and terrible roar as Lupin drove into the Death Eaters, and screams of fear. Hermione thought she heard running feet.



Blaise had grabbed Lily's hand, and they began running through the low-ceilinged cellar hall. There were a few steps going up to a door. The door was closed, but they slammed it open and ran through it as an act of faith. They were in the kitchen: large, grimy, and with the sour-sweet smell of food long left to rot. Filth caked the windows. Cobwebs threaded across their path, whipping sticky gossamer threads around them as they ran. There were two doors up ahead.

"Right!" declared Blaise, and the door was flung open, its hinges complaining. A blind hall led nowhere.

"Right again!" he remembered, and they ran together, breathing in the dank and foetid air.

There was a smell of burning up ahead. A few wisps of smoke drifted aimlessly through the hallway.

"Hermione!" called Lily. Her friend was there, burdened with wand and map, but she broke into a relieved smile at the sight of them.

"This way!" Hermione called back, pointing the source of the burning smell.

"Where's Severus? Where's Harry?" Lily asked, looking around frantically.

"Upstairs, holding off the Death Eaters. Professor Snape said to get you out!"

Lily stopped, "I'm not running off and leaving them to be killed! You two go on."

"Right!" Blaise agreed with amazed sarcasm. "I'm going to run away and leave you to protect me." He looked at the ill-used map clutched in Hermione's left hand. "What's that?"

Quickly, Hermione began unfolding it. "Look," she pointed. "There are Harry and Draco. His father and Professor Snape are going up the stairs behind Professor Lupin. It looks like they have the Death Eaters caught between them."

"Brave," muttered Blaise, raising his brows.

"Opportunistic," countered Hermione. "Professor Lupin is in werewolf form and resistant to magic. He's pretty impressive." She tugged at Lily's sleeve. "Professor Snape ordered me to get you out. It's important to him."

"It's important to *me* to help him."

Lily and Blaise looked at each other. He saw something in her eye, and smiled oddly. "Yes, you're right. There will never be a better time."

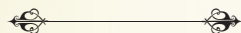
Hermione knew it was hopeless. As one, they turned to the stairs, and started running up them.

As they turned at the landing of the next floor, Blaise remarked quietly to Lily, "He's your father, isn't he?"

Startled, Lily nearly tripped on the stairs. *Why contradict him? It will do for now.* They reached the next floor, and turned to run to the floor above.

Hermione did trip, and she dropped the map. She had forgotten something important. "Wait!" she cried. "Where's Voldemort?"

"Behind you."



Harry was sitting on the floor behind a section of the wall, the map spread out on his lap. Mulciber was down, moaning wandless in a corner; but Dolohov was a vicious, clever bastard, and had kept on the move, pinning them down with the odd curse. Draco was bleeding from a glancing *Diffindo* but was still alert and functional. They had to put Dolohov out of action. Harry, using the map, could clearly see Dolohov's sheltered position.

There was nothing for it. He began blasting at the wall hiding the Death Eater. Draco

joined in, and the wall was collapsing before their eyes. There was further noise from downstairs, and a distant roar. Harry wondered what would be heading their way next.

He looked down at the map again. "Wait!" he shouted to Draco, in sudden elation. He motioned furiously to the map, and Draco crossed the room, running low. Potter's dirty index finger pointed to dots below marked "Severus Snape," "Remus Lupin," and best of all, "Lucius Malfoy." He grinned at Potter, forgetting to hate him for a moment.

Dolohov fired another "*Dirumpi!*" into the room, shattering more plaster, and sending splinters of wood and glass flying. "*Protego!*" shouted Potter, shielding them both.

Outside he heard another wizard shouting up at Dolohov, "Where's Bellatrix? Where the bloody hell are Rabastan and Rodolphus?"

Dolohov snarled back, "We don't need them to kill two boys!"

Harry wished he could contact Hermione at Hogwarts and get some more help. He heard running below and took a deep breath, wiping his face with a sleeve. A little silver sickle on its black silk cord caught on a button, and Harry gave a tug. Then he remembered and gave the sickle a tap.

"Lily's sickle!" There was no answer. "Hermione's sickle!" He tapped again in exasperation.

Professor Dumbledore's face appeared. "Professor!" he cried, relieved. "Draco and I are in the Riddle House. The map shows Remus, Snape and Malfoy coming this way. We're holding off two or three Death Eaters —"

Dumbledore interrupted him, looking concerned. "I know where you are Harry, I see you all on the map. I have sent all the Order members I could find to join you, but it will take a little while to get there. Listen, Harry! Voldemort's dot has disappeared. It is possible that he has Disapparated, or that he has caught on that he is being monitored, and is deliberately confounding the map charm. Be very alert. Nagini is there too, on the floor below you, and dangerously close to Hermione, Lily, and Blaise. You must get them out of there as soon as possible."

There was another blast of plaster, and then a full-throated howl and a surprised scream. Draco looked at him, appalled.

"Yes." Harry smiled triumphantly. "That's Professor Lupin on a night of the full moon."

Feet were pounding up the steps. A voice belled "Avad —" and was cut short. A body rolled down the stairs, head thudding on the steps.

Dolohov burst into the room, firing curses like a madman. He demolished Draco's shield, and whirled around, looking for an escape route. He fired another curse, and rushed

to the window. Harry and Draco shouted, "*Expelliarmus!*" simultaneously, and the man crashed face first into the wall. He collapsed to his knees, nose gushing blood, and squinted to see a werewolf in the doorway. He fell sideways to the floor, and was bound in a moment by Snape, who pushed Lupin aside.

Lucius Malfoy rushed to his son. "Draco! Are you all right?"

"Father!" He gave him a sheepish smile. "We were rescuing Lily —"

Lucius snorted, and snorted again at the sight of Harry hugging Lupin. Draco grimaced. It *was* a truly creepy sight.

Snape rolled his eyes, and tapped his sickle. "Lily, where are you? Granger, I told you to get them out!"

Harry broke away from Lupin and said, "Professor Snape! I just talked to Professor Dumbledore. Voldemort's name disappeared off the map. He thinks he's either Disapparated already or confounded the map charm. Nagini's on the floor below."

Lucius muttered, "That can't be good."

Harry went on, hurriedly. "The rest of the Order is on the way. Do you have the potion?"

Snape's hand plunged into the deep pocket of his robes. He pulled out a soft, black ovoid, and handed it to Harry.

It was warm: around body temperature.

Harry looked at Snape questioningly.

Snape said, obviously loathing the very words. "It is a Weasley Bath-Water Bomb. It explodes on impact, and each bomb contains 50 gallons apiece. It will certainly be enough to drench the Dark Lord." He gave bombs to Draco and Lucius, and kept another for himself, saying, "They can be opened with the word 'tap-water.'" He caught Lucius's eye. "Once he has been splashed with the potion, we need to use some of the potion to draw a door with one of the brushes."

Lucius huffed a disbelieving laugh. "What kind of door? You think the Dark Lord will stand still while we draw doors?"

Snape growled, "Any kind of door. It doesn't have to be large: it just has to be drawn with a cat-hair brush using some of the potion. Once the potion is delivered, he will be nearly immobilised. In theory. Then Potter must recite an incantation, and it should send the Dark Lord somewhere he cannot escape." He strode away, heading to the staircase.

Lucius looked unhappily at Draco. "Stay behind me. If things go wrong, try to find a way out. Get away. Don't be a hero."

Draco lifted his chin. "I still have to find Lily."

Lucius groaned in helpless disgust, and followed Snape.

Then they heard the screams.

They had stopped at the sound of the thin, cold voice. Hermione's heart pounded frantically. Unwillingly she looked into the slitted red eyes. Lily's breath caught, and she and Blaise stood frozen in shock.

"Hello, children. Have you been playing hide and seek? Well, *you're caught*." The unlovely face stretched painfully in a mockery of a smile. "The game is over, but you still have a part to play." He studied them thoughtfully. "Potter's mudblood friend, the Malfoy brat's little sweetheart — so touching! And a spare." He looked at Blaise, uninterested. "I only need two."

Blaise flung his wand hand out. "*Incendio!*" Flames billowed, roaring over Voldemort, setting his robes alight; and Blaise shouted, "Lily! Take Hermione and run! I'll hold him off!" It was a powerful curse, but with a flick of his wand and a word, Voldemort had extinguished the fire and held their wands. Another flick and an *Impedimenta* and they were unable to escape. Hermione stumbled over her feet, and hit her head so hard against the banister she saw stars.

"That hurt," said Voldemort with cold wonder. "That was unpleasant. I really must return the compliment." A stream of hisses issued from the lipless mouth.

Blaise gasped, and then cried out in pain. Lily and Hermione turned and then screamed. A huge serpent reared back, having already struck him. Blaise gave Lily a look of disbelief and regret, and screamed again, his back arching. His eyes rolled back and he collapsed; bleeding and jerking in the rigors of nerve poison.

"Well," Voldemort asked dispassionately, "who's next? Your friend Potter should be along soon."

Hermione tried to think of something, anything to play for time. Her head throbbed, and her vision was blurred by the concussion. Lily dropped to her knees, holding Blaise's hand. "No, no one else ever again!" she cried fiercely. "*Not Harry!*"

Voldemort blinked slowly, his attention suddenly riveted. He swept closer and gazed down piercingly at Lily. His eyes widened, and he hissed furiously at the snake, which moved away from the girls.

Snakelike himself, Voldemort's tongue flicked out, wetting his lips greedily. "How did you do it? How? I've got to know!" He stretched his hand out toward her almost caressingly. "Clever, clever girl!"

"Don't touch her!" A young voice called out.

Simultaneously, another voice commanded in Parseltongue. "Nagini, look up here!" Voldemort's eyes flicked upward to see four wizards

and a werewolf coming down the stairs toward him. The traitor Malfoy and his spawn, his personal potions-brewer Snape, Dumbledore's pet Lupin, no doubt, and his nemesis, Harry Potter.

It was an alliance he had never imagined in his worse nightmares, and it gave him a split-second's pause. No pathetic Ministry Aurors, but a union of considerable power and no restraint. Malfoy fired a curse at Nagini: the snake was hurled back, skidding back down the hall, its bones crushed. The two boys and Snape raised their hands, and were not holding wands, but some strange black objects. They were thrown, and flew end over end at him. He prepared to hex them aside, when the black-haired little witch snatched at his robe and spoiled his aim.

Furious, he slashed a curse at her, and reared back to kill. A moment too late. Two of the black objects struck him directly, and another exploded at his feet, drenching him with warm, perfumed water. In the first reflex of alarm, he threw out a blasting curse — an expanding blue sphere of force that knocked his opponents flat and rocked the house.

The staircase and part of the floor, rickety from decades of disrepair, tore loose from the wall, and telescoped to the ground floor in pieces. Stone and wood, shattered into razor edges, exploded in every direction and rained

down upon them all. They fell, enemy and friend alike, tangled together, and crashed painfully to the ground floor below. Gallons of the perfumed potion poured over the broken floor above, a waterfall of myrrh and lotus that soaked not just the Dark Lord, but those who fell nearest to him, Lily and Blaise.

Lily gradually returned to full awareness. She was staring up through the hole in the floor, and felt a dull pain in her chest, but nothing below it. Trying not to whimper, she looked down and saw the splintered rail that had impaled her. Blaise was lying underneath her, and she was bleeding into his bleeding wounds. The pain would be far worse without the potion, she suspected. The scent filled the air, filling her with an oddly peaceful sense of detachment.

Blaise was dying, she realised dimly. The spasms had stopped, and his breath had slowed to no more than a faint stirring. Only two yards away, Voldemort was futilely attempting to get up. He had cast some sort of levitation charm to cushion his fall, but he too was in the spell of the potion. A deep humming filled the room. Lily found it comforting. She wondered where Severus was. She wondered if she would see him again. There was no sound from Hermione, who like Lily had had no wand to help slow her fall. As if from far away,

she heard Lucius Malfoy anxiously trying to rouse his son, and she called out to him.

"Is there a door?"

There was a silence. "Miss Jones?"

She tried again, knowing she sounded irrational. "There must be a door, or it won't work. Someone open the door."

Hermione's voice, coughing out dust, seconded her. "Who has a brush?"

She faded out a moment, but heard Lucius Malfoy's voice saying, "I'll do it."

The humming turned into a rolling vibration that made her wound throb. She felt for Blaise's hand. *Am I dying, too? No...*

There was something left unfinished. She coughed and tried to clear her own throat.

In a croaking whisper, she began:

*"Hail, Lord Anubis, Opener of Roads,
Hail, Lord Anubis, Opener of Roads,"*

Hermione's voice, weak and hoarse, joined hers.

"Hail, Lord Anubis, Opener of Roads."

The house began to tremble with the vibrations. The ragged edges of the floor above smoothed and vanished. A great pillared vault soared above, bright with stars. The foul and shabby halls of the Riddle House gave way to the spacious and noble Halls of the Dead.

*"Judge him, you Twelve, who sit before
everliving Pharaoh Osiris!*

*For he has waged war,
He has upheld strife,
He has created the fiends,
He has worked magic against the innocent,
He has made slaughter.
Let him be given over to destruction,
And to the shackles of the goddess Serq."*

As if from far away, she heard Harry cry, "No! Lily! We've got to get her out of the potion!" and crash to the floor. *He's trying to come to me*, she thought. *He mustn't touch me!* She could not pause in the incantation, but struggled on. Blaise was very still now, his chest no longer moving at all. *He's dead, then. Not fair.* Hermione's voice was thick, but she was still reciting with her:

*"Let him be judged by the feather of Ma'at.
Let him pass over the threshold —"*

Harry joined in at last, half a beat late, uttering the incantation as if every syllable caused him pain:

*"Let his soul be devoured.
For the pure rise up to the throne of Isis,
But the souls of the wicked are consumed."*

She could hardly whisper now. Harry was

crying: sobbing out the incantation almost defiantly. Draco had been roused and was demanding to know what was happening. He sounded young and frightened. She herself felt very old. Where was Severus?

*"I have spoken in truth,
I have spoken in truth,
I have spoken in truth,
Djedeni em Ma'at!"*

She was becoming weightless. Severus was looking down at her, his face anguished and covered with dust, his robes heavy with the potion. She was rising up, and Blaise with her. *We shared blood, it seems, from our wounds. I hope he's not too angry.* Voldemort was rising too, and they were hurrying down the great hall, down to the shining figure and her scales beyond, down to the green enthroned mummy and the waiting monster. She hardly noticed Tom Riddle, already looking quite different, fighting in vain against the power of Ma'at. Blaise touched her hand, and she felt alive and not hurt at all. She gave a look behind her and saw her friends, far, far away; and gave them a little wave of farewell.

Blaise was puzzled, but unafraid, and asked, "What happens now?"

She answered with a smile. "An awfully big adventure."

Hermione had curled up on the floor, and only gradually managed to sit up, supported by the steps. The incantation had taken all her strength, and when the last word was recited, she was knocked over again by the wind rushing into the rectangle of light on the shattered wall. The fluttering shapes surging through the lotus-pillared hall passed her by, leaving behind the whisper of their passing. Her heart nearly stopped at the sight of the judges, but they were too intent on those coming before them to have time for her. She sat in a stupor of shock and grief, and tried to come to grips with what had happened.

Snapes's leg was broken, and he had crawled over to Lily only to see her leave forever. She and Blaise were small, bright figures, already in the distance. Lily turned and waved good-bye, and the door was closed.

The humming rose to a roar, and the house imploded. Every support, every load-bearing wall, every upright piece of the structure shook violently, and began the inexorable collapse.

Lupin stood first. He had pinned Harry to the floor, knowing that for him to touch Lily during the incantation was to share her fate. Harry painfully got his feet, wiping his eyes.

He had lost his glasses, and saw Hermione in a blur. The floor shifted beneath their feet.

"Hermione!" he ran to her, looking her over. "Can you walk? I'll get you out!"

Draco was shouting incoherently, hitting at his father, who grimly stunned him, and hefted him over his shoulder. The door to the garden was the closest, and he set off at a run.

"My wand!" Hermione remembered. "*Accio wand!*" It was scarred, but unbroken. She leaned against Harry, and saw Snape, still slumped on the floor, oblivious to the apocalypse around him.

"Harry! Professor Lupin! We've got to help him!" Snape looked up to see the werewolf approaching, and lashed out in rage.

"Don't!" he snarled. "Leave me!" He was white-lipped with the pain, and too weak to resist when levitated away. Snape gave up the struggle and lay passively, shutting his eyes as he floated out of the crumbling Riddle House. Granger was doing most of the work, a small, warm hand on his head to protect him from crashing into wall or door-frame. The house groaned and screamed like a dying thing, but Snape was silent.

There was cool air up ahead, and the untainted smells of clean earth and frosty evergreen. They were going out into the moonlight, and leaving behind the smells of blood and

THE HALLS OF THE DEAD

decay, of dust and ashes, of myrrh and lotus. There were voices coming toward them; relieved voices anxious over their injuries, and exclaiming gratefully over their safety. Snape kept his eyes firmly shut, intent on retaining as long as possible the picture of a vast hall and a bright little figure, running away.

He longed to weep, but felt his heart more empty than a desert.



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THE PREFECT'S PORTRAIT

THE ORDER OF MERLIN

THE WIZARDING WORLD WAS EUPHORIC. Lord Voldemort (or, as everyone now began to call him, Tom Riddle) had vanished from the earth. After a month of investigation and recovery, the Ministry of Magic declared a three-day holiday, which was capped with a ceremony on New Year's Day honouring those who had faced He-Who-No-Longer-Frightened-Anyone. The Order of Merlin, First Class, had not often been awarded; but Cornelius Fudge was in an expansive mood. The honour was presented to Harry Potter, Severus Snape, Lucius Malfoy (whose heroism in enduring Azkaban Fudge particularly lauded), his son Draco, Remus Lupin, and Hermione Granger. A witch had never been awarded a First; and Rita Skeeter and her colleagues described her courage in the most purple prose, at the same time mercilessly dissecting the young heroine's background, possible romantic entanglements, and appearance.

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THE PREFECT'S PORTRAIT

For the fallen, there were Orders of Merlin, Second Class. Some thought the Ministry showed very bad taste in offering the second-class award to the grieving Zabini family, who refused to attend the ceremony. His name was announced with that of the mysterious Lily Jones, about whom there were so many fascinating rumours.

Other participants in the victory received recognition as well. The Order, Third Class, was awarded to Ronald and Ginny Weasley for their help in co-ordinating the attack from Hogwarts, and to their brothers Fred and George for their inventiveness.

It was a triumph of an ambiguous sort for the Slytherins. Of the eight who took direct part in the events at the Riddle House, five were from the House of the Snake. Two of their best had died fighting against the Dark Lord. And yet, for the most part, their adversaries had been Slytherins as well. Others tried to analyse the situation, and it was finally Hermione Granger who offered the most quote-worthy explanation: "Perhaps Slytherins *will* do anything to achieve their ends. Perhaps, though, those ends may not always be selfish."

Draco Malfoy was sullen and withdrawn. This victory was a bitter one. Although he now equalled Potter in public esteem, he had been robbed of what was rightfully his. Lily had died

to save him, and he would cherish the memory forever; but he wished with all his heart that it had not been necessary. If only that wretched mudblood had had her wits about her. *She* could have distracted the Dark Lord, and *she* could have fallen onto the broken stair rail. He looked at the assembled dignitaries, a tightly controlled sneer on his face. He had a mission now, to act on Lily Jones's theories as he understood them, and nothing would stand in his way.

The ceremony was over. Photographers pushed through the press of admirers to get the perfect picture.

"Let's have the students in the middle. That's right. How about the girl between Mr Potter and young Mr Malfoy?"

Draco pulled back sharply as Hermione was pushed against him. "I think," he said, his nose twitching, "that Potter should be in the middle. He's the Boy-Who-Lived, after all." He moved to Potter's right, putting him in between the mudblood and himself. His father put a hand on his shoulder. It looked affectionate, for the picture, but Draco felt the strong grip's warning pressure. He gave a brilliant smile, and the pleased photographers set to snapping pictures. He relaxed. He looked better standing next to Potter, anyway. They were good foils for each other's looks. Potter wasn't so bad in a tight spot. And it was immeasurably comforting to

know that Lily had preferred Draco to him. At any rate, he was better than Granger. Father was right: it was a new world, and he would do his best to cultivate the great Harry Potter.

Lucius Malfoy, of all the recipients, was the one feeling the most unalloyed enjoyment. He was exonerated, he was vindicated, he was a hero. His son and heir was safe, his property restored, and his wife able to hold her head high in public. He knew that he was a different person now. He had seen an extraordinary feat of magic: a feat so extraordinary that it had changed his life, his views, and to some extent himself.

He was sorry, of course, for his friend's loss, and even sorrier for Draco's disappointment. But though it was a shame about the girl, there were many consolations in the new wizarding world order. Chief amongst them was the eternal banishment of Tom Riddle, the mad half-blood. Every morning and every night, Lucius admired the unmarred skin of his forearm. He had regained his seat amongst the Hogwarts Governors; and wearing his Order of Merlin, he had regained his influence in the Ministry.

It was useless to regret the mistakes of his youth. He had had time to think over the political situation now with the patience of maturity. Draco might be anxious to get on with his Lily's work, but Lucius knew it would take time to

educate public opinion. The girl, as Draco explained her ideas to him, though, had been right: the Muggleborn were not the problem.

The great problem facing the wizarding world in the 21st century would be the Muggles, of course. The problem had always been the Muggles. It was the Muggles who bred like maggots, spreading over the land like a cancer, consuming natural resources, destroying vital species of magical plants and animals. The Muggleborn witches and wizards in that mundane world were a tiny, oppressed minority, looked upon with fear and hatred by the non-magicals. Tom Riddle's abandonment in a filthy Muggle orphanage was plainly at the root of his insanity and hatred of the wizarding world. He was not alone in his mistreatment.

Severus had let slip something of the Potter boy's background. It appeared that Dumbledore had hidden him with his mother's Muggle kin, and that those people were violently prejudiced against magic, even going so far as to imprison the boy in a cupboard. It was typical of Muggles, of course, to hate those superior to them. He intended to learn the whole story; and then the scandalous abuse of the Boy Who Lived would be a keystone of the legislation that he would sponsor to protect the Muggleborn by bringing them into the wizarding world in infancy;

and to protect the wizarding world from being known to vicious Muggles such as Potter's relations. It would not do to attack Dumbledore's wrong-headed decisions whilst the old man was still alive: but Dumbledore would not live forever. Lucius would lay the foundations, and then in ten years — or not more than twenty — he would be free to openly pursue his agenda.

He sighed. It was great, important work: worthy of a Malfoy. Everything would be done openly. Everything would be legal. As early as the law allowed, he and Narcissa would set the example by taking an unfortunate Muggleborn infant into their home to foster in the ancient traditions of the magical world. They would need access to the book of magical newborns written by the Hogwarts Quill. It would not be impossible. In ten to twenty years, Minerva McGonagall would have become Headmistress of Hogwarts, and keeping the magical birth records would devolve upon the new Deputy Headmaster. Severus would be an essential part of his plans, and Lucius would see to it that Severus won the position he merited.

Some breaks with tradition might be necessary along the way. Allowing magical children to attend Muggle primary schools must stop. That sort of promiscuous mixing with the Muggle world was an invitation to disas-

ter. Early on, he would promote the establishment of wizarding primary schools. A charming, wizard-built, cottage-like school in Hogsmeade, perhaps, would be the first. It was time, he reflected. And it was an idea that Dumbledore might even support. Surely amongst his recently graduated, there would be some nice, intelligent young witches who would enjoy teaching the young for a few years until they married; or there might be some mature witches, their own children already at Hogwarts, who would be glad of such a career. It was such a good idea that he would not propose it himself. He would discuss it with Severus, perhaps, who could then make some sort of snarky remark about unprepared students to his assistant, Miss Granger. Lucius smirked. He could picture the scene: the earnest, uncouth young witch, full of excitement over her scheme, bending Dumbledore's ear. When publicly proposed, Lucius would make a show of resistance to such a radical plan. He would be gradually won over, and then see to it that Narcissa sat on the board of the new school. She would like that very much, he decided. She always enjoyed doing things for children.

He smiled, genuinely happy. Certainly, their own little Lyra would be amongst the small pupils. That, too, would set a good example.

The newest little Malfoy was to be a witch, the first Malfoy-born witch in three generations, and Lucius unreservedly proclaimed to all his acquaintance his very great joy and excitement. With her Malfoy blood and her Black strain, she would a princess in the wizarding world, and the best of everything would scarcely be good enough for her. Narcissa had redone the nursery most exquisitely, and even Draco showed some interest in his new sister. Narcissa was talking about yet another child after Lyra; but perhaps if they could find someone suitable for Draco, she might be satisfied with grandchildren.

"Mr Malfoy! Can we have another one?" Graciously, Lucius turned his good side to the photographers, who took some pictures of him alone, and then of Draco, and then of the two of them together: "*Father and Son Heroes!*" the headline would read tomorrow.

"Professor Lupin! Can we have the Gryffindors all together?"

Remus Lupin bitterly regretted Lily's fate, but was far more concerned for Harry. Lily had died before: many had died in the war against Voldemort, and he had learned to busy himself with the living. The boy had taken Lily's loss hard, but was greatly comforted by Remus's interpretation of events. He had told Harry that she had entered another universe,

and not died in an ordinary sense. This way of thinking seemed to help, and Harry talked to him with growing enthusiasm, imagining her adventures with Blaise in a new world. Picturing her as alive and happy, even if they might never meet again, drew the sting from the wound. Remus sighed. The heartbroken Zabini's were not so easily comforted.

Harry managed a small smile. It was nice picture, and one that he always treasured: standing between Remus and Hermione, with their arms around him. There was a hurt inside him that could not even be publicly acknowledged. No one would ever know the truth about Lily and what she was to him. He knew, though: she had given her life for him yet again. He was proud of the Lily who had been his mother. He was equally proud of the Lily who had been his friend. Her sacrifice would not be in vain. The wizarding world was a better and safer place for her having lived, not once, but twice. He thought of her now, and wondered what she and Blaise were seeing, once they had passed through the pillared hall. He imagined a brilliant sun, and a vast, unexplored landscape. They would find their place there, and look after each other.

Another picture was taken, with the four Weasleys receiving awards. Ginny put her arm around Harry's waist, and stood close. He felt a

curious jolt of excitement. Being a lonely hero could be difficult, but being a hero amongst other heroes was pretty neat.

A little hot glow of satisfaction stirred in him. Two weeks after the departure of Voldemort, Bellatrix Lestrange had been found. Wandless, injured, and incoherent, she had hidden in the woods, living rough; until starving and half-frozen, she had wandered onto a roadway, and had been hit by a passing lorry. The driver, terribly upset, had called for help. Pitying Muggles, ignoring her wild shrieks, had taken her to hospital and cared for her as best they could. In vain. She had died under the ministrations of those she considered less than human. Confusion and mislaid paperwork had prevented the Ministry from noticing the report of the unidentified dead woman for a few days. It was an ironic, sordid end to a foul, wasted life. Harry could not know that Narcissa Malfoy was even happier than he.

The photographers whispered together. One, a Ravenclaw of the class of '58, too old to have known Snape either as student or teacher, respectfully asked the professor if he would be so good as to allow them to take his picture. Snape stared him down contemptuously, but the photographers had their livelihoods to earn, and felt safer behind their cameras, anyway.

The resulting portrait of Severus Snape, taken by the DAILY PROPHET staff photographer, was the best picture of Snape ever published. He had not had time for the sneer to harden, and in the picture he simply looked grave and dignified — perhaps even melancholy.

There was considerable sympathy, though muted and privately expressed, for Professor Snape. Lucius had confided his discovery about Lily's parentage to Draco, who was deeply affected. Draco had quietly shared it with his fellow grieving Slytherins. From there, it had gradually spread throughout the school, and from the students to their families, until everyone knew the tragic secret: Lily Jones was Professor Snape's daughter, raised in Canada for her safety, but then brought to Hogwarts when her mother died. He had tried to protect her, but she had been killed in the last battle that destroyed Voldemort. Hufflepuffs sobbed over it in their cosy dormitories, Ravenclaws drew wise morals, and the Gryffindors felt sorry and a little ashamed. Snape ignored the pitying glances as he ignored everything but his work. His thoughts were his own.

Much as it had hurt to lose Lily just as he had found her again, he considered that it would have hurt more for her to have married Draco. He would never know now, how Lily would

have acted; but he doubted that she could have resisted the combined charm of the entire Malfoy family on their best behaviour. There were few who could. It was a bitter pill, but he suspected he would have never been more than a valued platonic friend. Lily would never have been his. In the darkest recesses of his heart, he admitted that he would rather cherish her memory as a friend who died going to his assistance, than see her the happy and pampered daughter-in-law at Malfoy Manor, her friendship for him gradually fading to an distant good will. Hardly a pleasant reflection on his nature, but he had few illusions about himself.

The ceremony was followed by a gala reception. The Ministry's Grand Ballroom was alight and decorated in the best taste — and perhaps a little beyond it. Hors d'oeuvres, so elaborate as to be hardly edible, circulated freely. More freely circulated was the champagne. The recipients themselves did not stay very late. Lucius, indeed, might have remained until the early morning hours; but Narcissa was looking tired, and Draco had had just a little too much to drink, and was becoming quarrelsome.

He had started muttering again. "*I still* don't see why she was pulled through the door with Riddle! The potion was designed for *him*! That mudblood was soaked with it and she wasn't

hurt by it. It doesn't make any sense!"

Lucius hissed in his ear. "Stop it! You'll make a spectacle of yourself. There's the Minister! Give him a nice smile. Yes, that's right. I've told you, and Severus has told you. The potion worked because Riddle was not entirely alive. She and the Zabini boy were dying, and covered with the potion. There wasn't anything anyone could have done. If she hadn't been drawn through the door, she simply would have been dead in our world. It's all very sad, but there it is. Now come along. Severus will take you back to school. Your mother needs to get home and get some sleep."

Snape heard the exchange and nodded a sour acknowledgement their way. Lucius and Draco had swallowed his explanation, luckily knowing nothing about the real nature of the *Seba* potion. Had they done so, the fact of Lily's blood relation to Potter would have become apparent. She had been dying, certainly. But it was the potion laced with Potter's blood — the very blood that had resurrected her in the first place — that had made her susceptible to the enchantment. Blaise had been lying underneath her, evidently with some open wounds that she had bled into, and that in turn had drawn him in as well. They had been drenched with the potion, as the Dark — as Riddle had been: but

that was still not the crux of the matter.

The werewolf had explained it to him, as he lay in the infirmary. Snape himself had protested the outcome.

"But the incantation! It was for an evildoer! It had nothing to do with Lily — or Zabini for that matter! How could the incantation have applied to her?"

Lupin sat in the visitor's chair by his bed, thoughtful and compassionate. Snape would have cursed him had he been strong enough to hold his wand. It drove him to distraction to know that Lupin had saved his life in his werewolf form, and that he owed him a Wizard's Debt. The DADA professor looked at him sadly, and quoted:

*"For the pure rise up to the throne of Isis,
But the souls of the wicked are consumed."*

"That's it?" Snape asked incredulously.

"The ancient Egyptians were very wise folk," Lupin observed. "They knew how dangerous it is to curse someone as an evildoer — especially if it were to be a lie. In such a case, the curse would rebound very unpleasantly on the wizard doing the cursing. The incantation simply had a safety mechanism built into it. But the point is moot: if Lily had not gone through the door to whatever awaits the pure, she would have been dead here in our world, and we would be burying her body. As it is," he remarked mildly, "there is now no physical evidence that such a person as Lily Jones ever existed."

"That solves Granger's problem," Snape snorted. He turned his head away then, implying that the conversation was over. Lupin took the hint and departed.

Hermione and Harry had spent most of the reception with the Weasleys and Remus. Ginny, Ron and Harry had never before tasted champagne, and sipped it doubtfully. They dutifully admired their decorations, and all of them clinked glasses gravely. People came to gush over them, and were met with reserved smiles, and then were herded away by the tactful Mr Weasley.

Hermione began to be terribly tired, and wanted only to return to Hogwarts. She felt like a squashed cabbage leaf. Lily was gone, and very likely she would have never have a friend like her again: someone who understood every aspect of her life. During the ceremony, she had amused herself comparing Cornelius Fudge, as he stood there uttering his pompous fatuities, to Mr Collins in *PRIDE AND PREJUDICE*. Lily would have laughed. No one else she knew would understand the joke. It was a great thing that Voldemort was gone, but it was cruel that he had taken with him Lily and the handsome, courteous Blaise. Almost angrily, she watched the happy celebrations of those who knew nothing of the dead. These were adults: the generation that should have settled Voldemort over twenty years before, and they

had left it to a sixteen-year old boy, his friends, a pair of turn-coat Death-Eaters, a werewolf, and a spoiled, arrogant, upper-class twit. It had cost these cheerful partygoers nothing.

No, she admitted wearily, I'm not being fair. Many of these people lost loved ones in the War. I can't judge them. Each one of them has a story, and I have mine. I just wish —

"Mr and Mrs Weasley! Have the young people had enough champagne yet?" Dumbledore, splendid in purple and gold, approached them. Smiling, yes, but in a way that did not make light of their feelings. He noted Ron's glass, still half-full. "And how did you like it?"

Harry answered quickly, "Very much, Professor. Very — bubbly."

"Yeah," added Ron. "It's great. We're just a little tired."

"Well, then, perhaps it's time to return to Hogwarts. The Ministry has given us special portkeys for the occasion." He looked across the room, and caught Snape's eye. Snape then rounded up Draco, and headed over to the Hogwarts group. Lucius was leaving with a radiant Narcissa on his arm, making his way through the crowd like a Muggle rock star. He paused, and bowed courteously to Dumbledore, who returned the bow with an enigmatic smile. Draco swaggered up to the knot of Hogwarts students, a little more pink-

faced than usual. Ron scowled, and Harry and Hermione kept their faces expressionless. Draco smirked as he surveyed their glasses.

"What's the matter, not used to champagne?"

Harry smiled tightly. "We were just toasting the end of Tom Riddle. There's that at least — no more Dark Lord."

"Ah, Harry," sighed Dumbledore, with a grave look. "The Dark Lord is indeed gone — for now. When you are as old as I am, however, you will realise that there is *always* a Dark Lord, or a wizarding plague, or a goblin rebellion. There is always *something*, and it's always something just different enough that one does not see it coming. Your lifetime, I'm sure, will have its share of challenges, as mine has." But," he said, more lightly, "They will be *your* challenges; and for now, we know nothing of them. So, therefore, back to Hogwarts, to Hogwarts! Where there's nothing more to worry you than this week's Transfiguration essay!"

He passed the second portkey to Snape, and Draco took hold of it along with his Head of House. There were too many to easily hold the other key, and Hermione found herself doing the polite thing and joining the Slytherins. Draco grimaced in distaste, and avoided touching her hand.

In a moment, they were jerked away and found themselves in the entry hall of Hogwarts, a good

fifty yards away from the other group. Lupin and Dumbledore were talking something over with the Ginny and the boys. Hermione stumbled, and Snape reached out automatically to steady her. She smiled a surprised thanks, and was disappointed when a moment later his concerned face became the usual forbidding mask.

"Well," she said, for lack of anything else, "Here we are again."

Draco was more than a little tipsy, and unpleasant with it. His anger had been growing all through the ceremony and the reception. Having to share a portkey with Granger was too much. "Yes, here we are! Back at Hogwarts, where you can go back to being the class know-it-all. Now that you've got rid of Lily, you don't have to worry about competition anymore. Pretty convenient for you."

"Mr Malfoy —" growled Snape.

Hermione protested, "That's not fair! I miss Lily too! I was her friend as much as you were, and she —"

Draco exploded. "You were nothing to her! You couldn't have been! She was powerful — she was *pure*! A dirty mudblood like you could never understand a witch like Lily. I'll never forget her, never. All her ideas, all her plans — I'll see that they're followed through. Lily Jones will be remembered forever." He turned to the dun-

geons, and looked back, cold-eyed. "You were able to appreciate her on some limited level, I'll give you that. At least you were able to see what a superior person she was. But always remember that *you* should have died, not Lily."

He strode away with an air of finality. Hermione was still, thinking his words over.

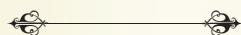
She said, "Horrid as he is, I can't help feeling sorry for him. He did love Lily. What will become of him?"

Snape snorted. "A fate better than he deserves. He'll go through the world, looking for Lily; or at least, looking for a pureblood witch like her, and never succeeding, of course. He'll certainly marry, and sooner rather than later: Lucius and Narcissa will insist upon him doing his duty. For the rest, he'll be wealthy, comfortable, and coddled: only unhappy to the extent he wishes to be."

Hermione wondered, "What does he mean about Lily's ideas? I can't imagine what kind of jumbled version of her theories he thinks he knows all about. She didn't have a chance to finish her research at all. Someone *should* certainly, but it's not exactly my thing. Anyway," she remarked, thinking about what it would mean to be married to Draco Malfoy, "I wouldn't want to be the witch he settles for."

Snape laughed: a dry, short sound. "There's little likelihood of *that*. I daresay his parents

will go bride shopping at Beauxbatons. A pretty, pureblooded witch as spoiled as himself. He'll throw himself into the Malfoy family businesses, and in a few decades he's likely to be a power in our world." His eyes narrowed, and he said slowly. "I would walk softly around him. He's not likely to forget about you."



Snape had not visited the staff room in days, preferring the silence of his own workroom. He was not perfectly comfortable with the acclaim and sympathy that met him everywhere. Though he kept up his mask of indifference, the unwanted owls containing the sentiments of people for whom he cared nothing were grating. Lucius might bloom like a flower in the sun, but Snape was too unaccustomed to public admiration to accept it easily now. His Dark Mark was gone. He would never cower in a cold sweat before Tom Riddle again. He could pursue his work without distractions. It was enough.

Minerva McGonagall, wanting to discuss some schedule alterations, finally tracked him down in the dungeons, and breezily informed him of the plans. She was proud of her students, past and present. She was delighted that the shadow of Tom Riddle no longer hung over them. Hogwarts could be a school again, not a training camp for

magical warriors. Perhaps Severus, no longer bowed under the pressures of his intelligence-gathering, could have a life of his own.

The nightly patrols would be reduced, she told him. They would include only the school itself, and with only half the staff previously involved.

"It is my custom to patrol on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Saturdays," he grunted, continuing to mince durian roots. "I see no reason to change my schedule."

"Really, Severus! Anyone else would be pleased to have less to do."

"I am not pleased to surrender the asylum to the lunatics."

Minerva was growing irritated. "Well, we can certainly take Miss Granger off your hands. I'm sure you're tired of her being about."

Snape glared at Minerva, a growing dread spreading through him. "Miss Granger is *my* assistant. Dumbledore turned her over to me for the entire year."

McGonagall waved an impatient hand. "Yes, yes, I know. It was important to teach the girl a lesson. But now, of course —" She saw the dark fury in Snape's face. "I would have thought you wanted to be rid of her."

Snape growled, his shoulders tightening as they did before a duel. "She is *my* assistant. I have work for her. Her services were promised to me for the

entire year. I expect to see her Friday evening at the usual time, Order of Merlin or not."

The Deputy Headmistress huffed. "Just as you please, but I think it very petty of you to insist on continuing her punishment."

Snape fixed her with a frosty stare, and she left, rather put out. Snape brought the knife down on the inoffensive roots with a vengeance. *How dare they? Did they wish to deprive him of everything?* He had lost Lily. It was only fair that he keep Granger. They owed him that much. She was a great asset in the laboratory, and it was incomparable experience for her. And with whom else would he be able to talk about Lily, about the truth of the past few months' events? Who else would understand him?

He had been thinking with some consolation and considerable complacency about the future. Next year, she would continue her assistantship and her exploration of medicinal potions. Once her N.E.W.T.s were successfully completed, she would be granted a full apprenticeship, and from the first could be entrusted with the tuition of the first years. It would relieve him of a considerable burden, and be a very fine opportunity for her. Even with the current number of students, it was nearly impossible to for him to teach every potions class. After her undoubtedly successful apprenticeship, it

might be most judicious for the Headmaster to offer her a permanent position. She would be saved from decades of wage slavery as an entry-level Ministry employee, and more importantly, from the possibility of an unequal and unfortunate marriage. She would have important, respected work, and he would have a gifted colleague with whom he could collaborate and confer. For years and years and years. He had never before imagined a future so satisfactory. He dared not allow himself consciously to hope for more. Not yet, at least.

Remus Lupin was in the staff room when Minerva came in, tight-lipped and irate.

"You've been in the dungeons," he guessed with a smile.

"That man is impossible! He's actually insisting that Miss Granger serve out her punishment for the entire year!"

"Well," Remus observed mildly, "That was the Headmaster's decision. And as for me, I'm only too happy to know there's another expert out there who can make the Wolfsbane potion. And who gives it to me without all the sneering," he added, returning to his book.

Minerva was not satisfied. "I shall ask the Headmaster to reconsider. Everything has

changed. And now that the disturbing revenant she raised is gone, I think we can agree that she's been punished enough! One forgets how ignorant the Muggleborn can be. I understand now that she meant no harm."

Remus set his book down. "A disturbing revenant? Is that how you would describe Lily?"

"That thing was not Lily Evans!" Minerva regarded him fiercely, her accent as thick as Dundee oatmeal. "I knew Lily Evans, and the creature from the picture was not the student I remember! I'll grant you a physical resemblance. I'll even grant that there was some likeness in behaviour and that the creature had her memories, but she was not a real person."

"She seemed real enough to me."

"And to Severus, too, I'll warrant." She sat by Remus, looking sternly into his eyes. "I'm not a sentimentalist. I'm not one to be blinded by *wishful thinking*. For Severus it was a dream come true. I'm not ignorant of that. To you and to Harry she seemed a gift, the lost past returned to you in an attractive guise. But you were wrong. She was never more than a phantom, and she's better banished. Better for you, for Harry, for Granger, and above all for Severus, who can get on with his life." She smoothed her robes briskly, and stood. "I have the third years now." She gave him a sharp nod, and left.

Remus sat thinking, understanding Minerva but not agreeing with her. Was that being with Lily's face truly Lily Evans? It was beyond him to say. There had been differences, certainly; but they were possibly simply differences of time and situation. He was convinced that she had been a real girl — she had been too full of opinions, ideas, feelings — too full of life to be anything else.

For him, the events at the Riddle House marked a turning point in many ways. Necessity and the fierce desire to protect Harry had impelled him to attempt the unthinkable: to Apparate in his werewolf form, his wand clenched in his jaws. Unsure that anything else was possible, he had left the wand at the Apparition point and retrieved it later that night. He knew of no other werewolf performing magic at that level — ever. He would try more spells at the coming full moon. Those requiring vocalised incantations and precise wand movements would be impracticable; but a whole array of others might be feasible, and could somewhat normalise his life. It was an exciting prospect.

He fingered his Order of Merlin idly. Dumbledore insisted that he wear it. Receiving such an honour had subtly changed his situation. He was still a werewolf, but he was *that* werewolf — the good one. Strangers repeating their tired prejudices could turn and assure him that they did not mean

him. Acquaintances could feel liberal-minded and pleased with themselves, knowing that they were not bigots — after all, some of their best friends were werewolves. Attractive witches were pursuing him, wanting to play at danger in safety.

He gave himself a shake. It was foolish to wallow in cynicism. The award would make his life easier. It would be a wedge against the blind fear of werewolves. Legislation against werewolves was stalled and in some instances being repealed. And who was he to complain? He had a respected position, that now appeared to be his as long as he liked. He had a comfortable home at Hogwarts, and enough money at last. Harry was alive, and Voldemort was gone. It was a new world.

Despite the sorrow of Lily's loss he had seen to it that the Christmas just past had been the most wonderful Christmas of Harry's life. Some time at the Burrow, some time at Hogwarts — even some time at Hermione's house, so the boy could see how decent Muggles lived. There had been presents, of course, but above all there had been peace, and security, and closeness with friends now unthreatened.

Harry need never see the Dursleys again. This summer, he decided, he would take a cottage on the Cornish coast, and he and Harry could have a real holiday. Harry's friends could all come, and the boy could be a boy at last. Harry had

never been to the seaside: he had never been anywhere, really. That would soon change.

Hermione sat in the reading room, studying the picture of the Hogwarts library. It was curiously static now, indistinguishable from a Muggle painting. A chair was pulled back at an odd angle. A few books cluttered the table. THE BOOK OF THE DEAD lay on the floor, dropped by Lily the night they had performed the ritual. It would remain there forever undisturbed, like the dust particles glinting in the painted light.

"What is that book in the middle of the table?"

Hermione started at the sound of Snape's voice. She wondered how he had got in. It was useless to ask him a question, if he did not wish to answer it. Instead, she replied, "*Pride and Prejudice*."

"Never heard of it."

Hermione could not resist. "By *Jane Austen*. The great 19th century novelist." She added, "It was Lily's favourite book."

He grunted non-committally.

"Like any really great work, it speaks to all times and all societies. It's about the difficulties of a clever, spirited young woman and her relationship with a proud and powerful man who considers her beneath him because of her birth and background."

"The Muggleborn and the Pureblood! Spare me your heavy-handed parallels!" He pulled up a chair and sat down, stretching out his long legs.

Earnestly, she continued. "There's a great deal more to it than that! Jane Austen was a writer of the most subtly-drawn and brilliant social comedy."

"But they marry and live happily ever after in the end, do they not?"

Hermione could not deny that they did.

Snape grunted again. "A romance. McGonagall thinks you should be let off your Fridays with me."

Hermione was horrified. "But I'm in the middle of some very important potions. It would put me back terribly if I stopped now. Surely Professor Dumbledore hasn't said I must stop?"

"Don't complain to me. I'm just telling you now that she's probably going to speak to the Headmaster. I can hardly command an award-winning recipient of the Order of Merlin to work in the dungeons against her will, when there is no evidence of a malfeasance that requires punishment."

"But I'm your assistant!" she protested, and then faltered, "Aren't I?"

He shrugged, still gazing at the picture. "I have no objection to your presence, but I can hardly overrule the Headmaster's decision. If

you wish to continue your work, I suggest you speak to him yourself; and in addition, reassure your Head of House that it is your own wish to further your study of potions making. You seem to be once again in favour."

Impetuously, she clambered to her feet. "Let's go see him right now, sir! We can explain how vital to my training the work is, and he'll see that I can't give it up!"

Snape raised a brow. "You are suggesting that I accompany you to the Headmaster's Office?"

"Yes, sir! I mean, please, won't you? If I go alone, he'll tell me he has to talk to you, anyway."

She waited, watching him expectantly. It put Snape in mind of an eager puppy, hopeful that people were glad to see her, but not entirely sure of it. He let her wait a bit, just until her face started to fall, and then he relented.

"Perhaps it is as well to settle the business at once. Come along." He led the way through the halls, making no allowance for her shorter stature. She found she was learning to match him stride for stride, and nodded in a pleased way at those they met in passing.

At the entrance to the office, there was some confusion. Snape thought the password was Mars Bars (which he considered oddly astronomical for one so devoted to sweets), and Hermione thought it was Cadbury Crème Eggs.

Neither was correct, and they named half a dozen more tooth-destroying dainties before the staircase suddenly admitted them.

Dumbledore had heard them squabbling below, and prepared himself for a most interesting interview. As the two of the them swept into his office, full of protests, plans, ideas, and suggestions, he smiled benignly, knowing that this was only the first of many times he would see them thus.

Really, the Headmaster reflected, *one of my more brilliant ideas*. He offered them chairs, cups of his favourite Earl Grey, a silver tray of particularly fine sherbet lemons, and settled back to watch them striking sparks off each other.



THE GREAT BREACH OF 1648

JKR MENTIONS AN ACT OF WIZARDING Seclusion of 1692; but analysing the situation historically, that must have been the official acknowledgement of the de facto situation at the tail end of a century-long process of divorce from the Muggle world. I recommend to those interested Hugh Trevor-Roper's, *THE EUROPEAN WITCH CRAZE OF THE SIXTEENTH AND SEVENTEENTH CENTURIES AND OTHER ESSAYS*. Despite all the clichés of medieval witch burnings, it was not until the Reformation and the Counter Reformation that the real fury against witches was unleashed. Then you read the true horror stories of princes in Germany executing every woman and girl in certain towns. JKR makes a light-hearted reference to it being impossible to burn a real witch, but in England, most witches were executed by hanging or drowning. I suspect that the stories in PS/SS are the tidied-up versions taught to first years. The Witch Finder General, Matthew Hopkins, died in 1647, but he was a real factor in forcing the wizarding population of England into hiding. As I conceive it, he was a Squib who knew plenty about wizards and witches: mainly, that if

you got the witch's wand away from her, it was an easy matter to torture and execute her, and he found great satisfaction in it. (Perhaps he also knew about that burning might not hurt them.) Imagine a Filch granted unlimited powers by the government to kill any witch or wizard he could catch. There is a legend that Hopkins enraged the populace of one small town, who subjected him to the same water ordeal he had used on accused witches. When he floated, just as the witches had (and as a Squib might), they killed him.

The Great Breach of 1648 occurred when a number of wizards in the court of the Elector of Saxony got wind of the secret clauses in the Treaty of Westphalia, which marked the end of the ghastly Thirty Year's War in Germany. (The masculinity of wizards initially made their power more socially acceptable, and they were a fixture at many Renaissance courts — John Dee was Elizabeth I's wizard). The Protestants and Catholics had at last made peace with one another, but agreed in the secret provisions to turn their energies toward wiping out their common enemy: wizards and witches. By that time, there were enough people in the wizarding world to make their own little communities viable and to have something resembling self-government. The very idea of a "wizarding world" would have

been a revolutionary concept to witches and wizards, because as bad as things had gotten, many couldn't imagine ceasing to be part of the world they had always known. 1692 is the year of the Salem Witch Trials, but they were nearly the last gasp of the witch craze — no longer in fashion in Europe, and appearing finally in New England. The Great Breach was the point at which the European wizarding world at last comprehended that its long history of integration with non-magicals had to end if witches and wizards were to survive at all. There really was a wizarding Holocaust: thousands out of an already small population were executed (not to mention the tens of thousands of innocent Muggles). The purebloods are long-lived and have long memories, and no doubt have many passed down many cautionary tales to the young. JKR doesn't seem to fully recognise that there are real reasons for the wizarding world to hate and fear Muggles. Prejudice isn't always blind or stupid. When I read the actual accounts in the *MALLEUS MALEFICARUM* of what was done to trick and torture witches into confessions, and the slow and agonising deaths even small children suffered, I'm pretty afraid of Muggles myself.

THE MUGGLE VERSION OF *CIRCE INVIDIOSA* BY Waterhouse is in the Art Museum of South Australia.

The incantations from *THE BOOK OF THE DEAD* are adapted from *THE BOOK OF THE DEAD: THE HIEROGLYPHIC TRANSCRIPT AND ENGLISH TRANSLATION OF THE PAPYRUS OF ANI*; edited by E.A Wallis Budge (not Fudge); Gramercy Books, 1996, (originally published 1890 and 1894).

Snape's incantation to dress Hermione for the ball is from Charles Perrault's *CENDRILLON*: "You wish to go to the ball, do you not? If you are a good girl, I shall contrive to send you there."

Sidonia von Bork is the heroine of an 1849 gothic romance by William Mienhold, *SIDONIA THE SORCERESS*. Snape is thinking of the wizard painter, Edward Burne-Jones, and his watercolour entitled *SIDONIA VON BORK*, 1560. Sidonia has Hermione-hair in it. Snape added the black velvet snood to contain said hair.

The Silverthorn hand mirror is a tribute to a favourite story: *MIRROR OF MY DREAMS*, by Lady Jenilyn.

I cite JKR as my authority that just as there are no wizarding primary schools, there are no wizarding universities. She may have

changed her mind since I read that interview, but really, the wizarding population of Britain is just too tiny. Look at the small size of the wizarding shopping district around Diagon Alley, at the small size of Hogsmeade, which is the only all-wizarding village in England, the fact that there is only one wizarding hospital, and as far as canon indicates, only one wizarding school. This is a small, insular population, no larger in total than that of a moderate-sized town. Due to the long lifespans of wizards, however, the age distribution is very different from that of the Muggle world. The wizarding world is dominated, indeed ruled, by the elderly, who probably hang onto their positions for decades. I would guess that it is even more difficult for a young witch or wizard than it is for a young Muggle to find employment that will lead to promotion very early on. I've always wondered if Tom Riddle, leaving school to travel the world and not taking the usual routes of apprentice or entry-level office boy, was trying to find a way around the gerontocracy as much as he was trying to find a way to cheat death.

Lily's observation about the impudence of Lucius Malfoy is from *PRIDE AND PREJUDICE*.



COLOPHON

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