

Adventures in Fanfiction



Birds of a Feather

by
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The Bayou Academy of Magical Arts



BEEPING YOU," LYDIA CALLED, AS SHE

headed down the gangplank with Jack and Stan. She was already looking forward to their next trip. Life in Melbourne's wizarding community was going to seem rather ordinary after their recent adventures, but she was looking forward to seeing their son and telling him all about it. It would be nice to get back to their bookstore, too. In addition to a full range of wizarding books, they stocked Muggle literature for wizards, plus Muggle CDs and DVDs for those few wizards who could figure out how to use them. It was all magically hidden behind a shop where they sold Muggle books to Muggles

The oranges had been released in Borneo without incident. They had enjoyed the trip once they got used to the idea of being at sea, and they were overjoyed to get back to their true home in the trees. They attributed their rescue and safe return to Fawkes, whom they believed was a Garuda. They assumed he was in charge of the humans, a notion that the bird did not dispute.

"Next stop, Bayou Academy of Magical Arts," Captain Clark announced. He didn't want to leave Kat there alone to face unknown dangers but Knight Lines was still annoyed about the boat's disappearance during the hijacking. An albatross had brought a Howler from the Manager, Mr Flushwell, who said that he'd personally have the lot of them keel-hauled if they were late for any more pickups. Clark suspected that the mess that the bird had deposited on his deck was no accident.

He called Kat up to the bridge to discuss it. "I want to send Slade along with you," he told his First Mate. "I can probably manage without the two



of you for a few days. I'll tell Knight Lines that you two were sickened by a rotten shipment of murtlap tentacles or something, and get a couple of temporaries while you're gone. With Slade to help you, it shouldn't take too long to clear things up."

Kat had to agree. Aside from the fact that he liked Slade, he knew that the caustic grouch was skilled in the Dark Arts, and he'd feel a lot safer with Slade beside him. He had no idea what might be lurking in the bayous. Normally it was just vampires and zombies. Werewolves avoided the swamps; they didn't like to get their fur wet, or maybe it was just the bugs. But according to his sister, this was something new, something that left its victims apparently unharmed, but in some sort of deep coma. Vampires and zombies don't do that, and neither do werewolves.

Why couldn't his sister be an ordinary Agent, chasing after wizard criminals for misusing their powers? No, she had to join Department X, where they went after the really weird stuff: hauntings, supernatural creatures, eldritch horrors, and that sort of thing. Kat couldn't understand why she did it. And for that matter, he wondered if Slade would do it.

"Do you think he'll go for it?" Kat asked.

"I don't see why not," Clark replied. "A guy like Slade will probably find it interesting. And we wouldn't want him to get bored, now would we?"



Severus doubted that the matter would prove to be anything serious but he wanted to be prepared, so he packed an assortment of books, vials of potions, and potion supplies in a backpack that Kat had given him, along with his seafaring clothes. He also packed some of the magical and



Muggle-made tools that they used on the ship. He was particularly fond of the enchanted Swiss Army knife that he kept in his pocket. If only he'd had one of those during the hijacking!

Then he went through his old clothing and found some British Muggle money, along with his Muggle birth certificate and Muggle passport (being a half-blood had its advantages). But when he stowed them in a magic pocket, his fingers touched the torn picture of Lily and the scrap of her letter to Sirius.

Oh, that again. He'd meant to get rid of them.

He looked at Lily waving happily, and his heart sank. She'd showed him what it felt like to love and be loved, even if it was just childish puppy love that she had later outgrown. After all, he knew full well that it was not him that she was waving at in that photo.

Part of him longed to experience those feelings again, but part of him knew that the price was too high. He could never endure that kind of pain again. It had nearly killed him. He remembered a Muggle song from his youth (no matter where you went in the Muggle world back then, even at Spinner's End, there was always a radio, and always music). He hummed it:

*"And a rock feels no pain,
And an island
Never cries."*

A very sensible song, he thought, although unfortunately he still felt pain.

He headed for the porthole to dispose of the fragments, but then he stopped and changed his mind. He conjured an envelope and, disguising his handwriting with a spell, he addressed it to Harry Potter, slipped the fragments inside, and sealed it. They rightfully belonged to the brat,



after all. Severus knew he had stolen them, although he couldn't remember exactly when. He didn't realize that was because he'd given that memory to Potter.



Minerva awoke on her favorite cushion on top of her dresser and she yawned widely. She had always preferred to sleep in her Animagus form. Cats sleep so much better than humans do, although their dreams can be a bit strange. The ones where she was hunting prey were fun, even when she couldn't catch anything, but the ones about being chased by people and dogs were not. And then there were the ones about tomcats. She tried not to think about those too much.

She stood up and arched her back for a few moments, and then she stretched each back leg before jumping down to the floor. It was time for her to move, which she had been putting off all summer. Gryffindor Tower had been her home for decades and she hated to leave it, but the tower was going to be converted into classrooms and storerooms as part of the new plan. Professor Vector would take her place as one of the heads of the new houses, and she would be moving into the Headmaster's quarters.

She changed to her human form, washed and dressed, and began the process of packing. She shrank her furniture and it flew into her trunk along with her other belongings. There were pictures of her family, her favorite tea set, her books, her letters, her clothes, and way too many odds and ends that she'd accumulated over the years. There was really way too much of it, but she was a powerful witch and she managed to make it all fit in her trunk.



She had already redecorated the Headmaster's office and quarters. There had been reminders of Albus and Severus everywhere, which she had found somewhat distressing. She missed them both, despite their flaws. But maybe she would feel a bit more at home there after she moved her things in.



"What are you doing, dear?" Lucius asked.

"Writing to Severus," Narcissa told him. "I want to make sure he knows that they officially pardoned him for everything when they gave him that medal. He's free to come home if he wants."

"I doubt that he wants to. Especially with Rita Skeeter working on a book about him. Who knows what kind of dirt she'll dig up?"

"Why don't you and Mother give her some stories?" Draco said. He was reading in a chair by the window. "If she doesn't get enough stories, she'll invent them."

"I know a few good tales from when he was young," Lucius said. "It was much easier to get him to talk back then. A few glasses of scotch would usually do the trick. As he got older, you couldn't get anything out of him no matter what you did, which was understandable in hindsight."

"I doubt that it will satisfy her," Narcissa said.

"They don't have to be true," Draco pointed out. "She can invent stories, or we can. It might as well be us."

Lucius thought for a moment. "Hmm," he said, "the idea does have some merit. We could repay part of our debt to Severus with hardly any financial outlay at all. And it could be quite entertaining. Yes, let's plan



some stories and invite her over for drinks. She won't refuse the chance for a private interview with us. Or the chance for drinks, for that matter. Perhaps I'll tell her about the time that the Dark Lord sent young Severus to steal that cursed amulet."



The Bayou Academy of Magical Arts sat on a large patch of dry ground in the midst of the swamps. It looked like a large Greek Revival-style plantation house, with its white colonnade and broad, covered porches.

Fawkes flew ahead as Kat and Severus walked up the oak-lined path from the dock. Sunlight filtered through the thick clumps of Spanish moss that hung above them and Kat waved his wand lazily to keep the bugs away.

"One thing you've got to have here at Bayou is a really good bug-repelling charm," Kat said. "We have charms that attract 'em, too. They help keep the Muggles away. This area has the densest population of bugs on the Gulf Coast, and the greatest diversity, too. We get a few lost fishermen coming through here occasionally, and once we had some bird-watchers searching for rare woodpeckers, but usually the Muggles stay away."

They needed some cooling and anti-humidity charms, too, Severus thought. He could feel the sweat beading on his forehead already.

"We just tripped an alarm ward," Severus whispered as they approached the ornate wrought-iron gate. "I felt it."

The gate swung open and they continued across the wide courtyard toward the building. Then the front doors opened and a slim, dark-haired woman came out with her wand in her hand. She had on a dark green uniform and Severus thought it made her look like a Muggle forest





ranger, not that he'd ever actually seen one of those. *This must be Angie*, he thought. A large, bald-headed man followed her, scowling. There was no telling who he was.

"Kat!" she cried when she recognized him. She ran out and threw her arms around him. "I'm so glad you came! I see you brought extra help, too," she said, eyeing Severus.

"This is my friend, Solomon Slade," Kat told her. "He's the Security Officer on our boat. Slade, this is my sister, Angie. And this is Fawkes," he said as the phoenix landed on the porch railing.

"Why, he's *beautiful*!" Angie said, and she could have sworn the bird winked at her. "It was good of you to come, Mr Slade. This is Mr Armstrong," she said, indicating the bald man. "He's the Magical Martial Arts instructor here. Come on inside, all of you, and I'll show you around."



It was a magical structure, so Severus knew the plantation house would be much larger on the inside than it looked from the outside, and indeed it was. It was much cooler inside, too, fortunately. They entered into a large chamber with white marble floors and walls. Two faculty members were waiting under an elaborate crystal chandelier. Both of them had their wands in their hands and worried looks on their faces. Even the portraits lining the walls looked worried.

Fawkes swooped in and perched on a suit of armor on the far side of the room. *Nice place*, he thought, looking around. *I wonder why we're here? Are these new friends? And where's the kitchen? Maybe they have some goodies.*

Angie introduced Mr Cohen, the Principal, and Ms Applewood, the



Herbology teacher. "Welcome, and thank you for coming," Mr Cohen said. He shook hands with each of them. His palm was wet with nervous sweat, but his handshake was firm and his voice was steady. "We really are at a loss as to how to handle this, and we're glad for your help. We've never seen anything like this here before."

Ms Applewood smiled nervously at them. She was a tall, graceful woman with long brown hair. Mr Armstrong kept glancing toward the door as if he expected an attack at any moment.

"What can you tell us about this thing?" Kat asked.

"Not much," Angie said. "Aside from the victims, no one has actually seen it, and the victims were comatose and couldn't tell us anything. I think my partner and I got close to it one night, but then, well, I'm not sure what happened. I think I passed out." She looked embarrassed. "When I woke up my partner was scared out of his wits. He jumped on his broom and fled. He didn't even return to the school for his things. Headquarters said he sent an owl with his resignation."

"Where are the victims now?" Severus asked.

"They were in the hospital in New Orleans. The Medi wizards there tried everything they could think of, but after a few days, they died."

"Not good," said Kat. "Were they people we knew?"

"I'm afraid so," Angie said sadly. "Mr Greenly, the Charms teacher, was the first. He also taught Magical Painting, and he had gone out to paint by the lake at sunset, as he often did. When he didn't come back after dark they searched and found him lying beside his easel. At first they thought he was dead; he was so still and cold, just like a corpse. Then they realized that he was still breathing slowly, but they couldn't revive him and



neither could the Medi wizards in New Orleans.

"Everyone thought it was some sort of freak accident, but when the same thing happened to Mr French, the Magical Languages teacher, they realized there must be something evil lurking out there and they called us. Mr French liked to go for early morning walks and watch the sun rise. They found him by the river."

"Mr Greenly and Mr French?" Kat said. "I took classes from both of them. I liked them."

"Me, too," said Angie.

"Angie, why don't you show our guests to their rooms," Mr Cohen said. "They can get settled and then join us for dinner. We can discuss this later."

"Sure," Angie said sadly. "Two nice rooms are empty now." Severus and Kat didn't have to ask why.



A Night in the Swamp



SEVERUS PUT HIS PACK IN HIS ROOM AND TRANS-

figured a perch for Fawkes. The room must have belonged to the artist, Mr Greenly. The walls were covered with paintings of beautiful landscapes and ocean scenes. Fawkes liked the brightly colored birds that flitted in and out of the pictures and he watched them happily from his new perch.

After washing up, Severus followed Kat to the dining hall. Like the entryway, the hall had white marble walls and floors. Decorative columns supported the ceiling, which featured a large domed skylight. French windows flanked by potted palms at the far end of the hall let in the glow of the late afternoon sun. It was very bright and cheerful, in contrast to Great Hall at Hogwarts, which was quite medieval and rather dark.

Only a few of the tables were set, and Mr Cohen waved them over to one. "Come join us," he called. "I want to introduce you to more of our staff members.

"You've already met Vic Armstrong and Ms Applewood, of course. This is Ms Canto, who teaches Transfiguration, and Magical Music," he said, gesturing toward a large, middle-aged woman to the right of Ms Applewood. She smiled and nodded to them. "Mr Griffin teaches Magical Theory, and is in charge of the Magical Creatures Club." He indicated an elderly gentleman on the far side of the table. "The young lady who's coming in right now is Ms Larose, our Divination teacher."

Severus looked up to see a tall woman striding in, her burgundy robes flowing around her as she walked. A matching burgundy turban and large golden earrings framed her smiling bronze face, and her brown eyes glowed with warmth. The sight of the turban brought back some very



unpleasant memories — if only he'd known then! — but he forced those thoughts from his mind. It looked like there was something much, much nicer under this turban. *She knows how to make an entrance*, he thought to himself. Sybil Trelawney had never looked half so good. He found it difficult to take his eyes off of her.

"She's new here," Kat whispered. He was having trouble taking his eyes off her, too.

Severus forced himself to look away and turned to Mr Cohen. "When will the students be arriving?" he asked.

"There have been a few early arrivals, mostly children from difficult home situations, they're over there at that table," he said, gesturing toward a small group of children, "and there are some new students who have come early for orientation, but the majority won't return for a few days yet."

He waved his wand and platters of food appeared on the tables. The main course was catfish, which the House-Elves had prepared in Kat's honor. Severus thought it was really very good, despite being a bit spicier than he was used to.

"We should go out as soon as it gets dark," Angie said. "The sooner we find this thing, the better."

"I'll go with you," Armstrong said. "It's my school, and I'm the Martial Arts instructor. It's my duty."

"That's good of you, Vic," Mr Cohen said. "None of us will rest easy until this threat is gone."

Then he waved his wand again and the desserts appeared. There was pecan pie, and Severus saved his slice for Fawkes.



They set out after dark. Clouds, trees, and Spanish moss blocked what little light there was, and they had to cast Lumos to see where they were going. Even with the light from their wands, they could only see a few yards in any direction, and the tree trunks and bushes cast confusing shadows everywhere. Flying was out of the question. They would have to walk.

"Where do you think we should start looking?" Kat asked as they started down one of the trails through the swamp.

"I wish I knew," Angie said. "The thing seems to strike near water, but of course there's water everywhere around here, so that probably doesn't mean anything. I think we should just keep walking and see if it comes after us."

That plan didn't seem particularly brilliant to Severus, but he didn't have a better idea so he stifled his natural impulse to say something sarcastic. He could hear the whiney hum of mosquitoes and the chirping of frogs and crickets. Once he heard a splash nearby, maybe from a bullfrog plunging into a pool, or a fish jumping. Or possibly something more sinister. He was in unfamiliar territory. Were there grindylows here, or merpeople? Kappas or hinkypunks? He had no idea. He cursed himself for not reading up on the area after Captain Clark talked to him about going along, but there had been too little time.

They stopped when they came to an open area beside a large lake, where they could see the stars shining through gaps in the clouds.

"Perhaps the thing is staying away because there are too many of us," Severus said. "Perhaps I should go ahead, and the rest of you can follow behind to help me if it attacks." He didn't want to be bait, but it might be the quickest way to get this over with, and he wouldn't ask anyone else to do it.

"No, it's my job, and I should go first," Angie said firmly.



They all objected to that, and after much arguing they decided that they would take turns. Armstrong took the first shift. Severus was pleased to see that the big man could move silently and gracefully despite his size.

There were disadvantages to being in the following group, however, as Severus soon learned. To conceal their presence, they weren't casting Lumos, so it was impossible to avoid tripping over roots and stepping in muck in the darkness. He had to cast a spell to cover the noise.

"The next time we stop, we've got to tell that man to *slow down*," he hissed to Kat as he watched Armstrong's light dancing ahead of them.

Kat nodded his agreement as he splashed through an unseen puddle.



On her way down the staircase Minerva nodded to the portrait of the late Headmistress Heliotrope Wilkins, and the portrait smiled back at her. Minerva paused. It was rather late in the evening and it appeared that no one was around.

She approached the portrait and cast Muffliato. It was such a useful spell.

"Heliotrope," she said, "I'd like to know a bit more about portraits. Perhaps you can help me."

"I hope so, Headmistress," the portrait replied. "Our purpose here is to help you in any way that we can."

"How was your portrait created?"

"I had several painted just before I retired. When I died several decades later, they received the imprint of my soul, and my family brought one of them here to hang at Hogwarts."

"I see," Minerva said. "Did the portrait in the Headmaster's office



appear by magic?"

"Yes it did, a few days after my death. It gives me an additional frame to inhabit," she said happily.

"Do you think a portrait of Dolores Umbridge will appear there after she dies?" Minerva asked. "She was appointed Headmistress after Albus fled."

"Oh, I doubt it," Heliotrope replied. "The castle never accepted her as a true Headmistress. It never cooperated with her, and we portraits didn't either. The castle is somewhat sentient, as you know, and it has magic of its own. It must have felt that Albus Dumbledore was still Headmaster then, despite the fact that he was not present."

"I've been wondering why a portrait of Headmaster Snape didn't appear after he died," Minerva said. "Did the castle not accept him?"

"Oh, no, the castle accepted him, and we all tried to help him, as is our duty, especially Albus and Phineas. Phineas was well positioned to transfer information to and from Ms Granger, as you know, and he's very proud of the role that he played."

"Yes, so I've noticed," Minerva said dryly. "But then why was there no portrait for Headmaster Snape?"

"Well, Phineas claims that Headmaster Snape was so angry about the way that Headmaster Dumbledore left him to endure a horrible death that he refused to allow his soul to leave an imprint. Most of us disagree, however. While Headmaster Snape was certainly a very strong-willed man, I'm sure that during the snake's attack, preventing soul imprints for portraits would have been the farthest thing from his mind."

"On the other hand, Dilys Derwent thinks it's because Headmaster Snape abandoned his post, but he didn't really. He kept right on working



to protect the school and bring Voldemort down, even though he had left the castle, much like Headmaster Dumbledore did while he was gone."

"I'd agree that Phineas' theory does seem a bit far-fetched," Minerva said, "and Dilys' theory is weak, too, but that leaves the questions unanswered. Why didn't a portrait appear, and why hasn't the portrait that hangs there now become animated?"

"I think you know the answer to that," Heliotrope said, smiling.

"Yes, I think I do," Minerva said. "Thank you."

"My pleasure, Headmistress. We are here to help you."



Mr Cohen and the others were waiting anxiously for them when they returned from the swamp at daybreak. "We've got breakfast ready for you," he told them.

"We need to get cleaned up and showered first," Armstrong said as he cast Scourgify on himself. They were dripping sweat and muddy water in the entryway and they looked like the proverbial drowned rats.

Severus went to his room and peeled off his wet clothes. He was about to get into the shower when Fawkes shrieked and he saw the poopy-brown, worm-like thing attached to his calf. He'd never seen a live one before, but he knew what it was: a smeech! It was surrounded by a magenta glow, which meant it was already feeding on his magic. When he tried to lift it off he felt a sharp pain and he realized the thing had started to burrow under his skin.

Grimacing in disgust, Severus wrapped himself in a towel and headed for Kat's room.



"Yeah, it's a smeech, all right," Kat said, poking it gently. "They're not usually too active this late in the summer."

"Maybe you should explain that to the smeech," Severus grumbled. "What's the best way to get rid of it?"

"You have to curse them off, and you have to be quick about it. If they realize what you're up to, they'll inject you with poison."

"How nice," Severus said dryly. "What curse do you recommend?"

"I'll show you," Kat said.

Before Severus could stop him Kat whipped out his wand and cried "*Hirudo Nomoe!*"

He felt a flash of pain as the smeech was ripped free, and then it flew across the room, smashing into the wall beside the window. It stuck there for a moment, and then its magenta glow faded away and it fell to the floor.

"Ha! Got him!" Kat said triumphantly.

Severus cast a healing charm on the small hole that it left in his leg, and then he walked over and picked up the smeech by its tail end. It was a disgusting thing, but perhaps he could use it in a potion some day. It has absorbed a bit of his magic, after all. He conjured a vial and dropped it in.

"I'll see if I can get us some smeech repellant before we go out again," Kat said.

Severus scowled. He was starting to think that facing down the monster might not be the worst part of this job.



Harry didn't really like staying at Grimmauld Place, but he wanted privacy sometimes and the Black family magic still kept the old house



secure. He'd finally managed to get Mrs Black's portrait moved to the cellar, with a bit of help from Bill Weasley and a team of curse-breakers from Gringotts. The doxies were all gone now, of course, but lately he could hear something scampering around at night, and last night something had run across him while he was half asleep. Maybe it was a rat. An ordinary rat, not an Animagus rat, he hoped. He'd have to set a trap for it.

He was drinking tea and reading *QUIDDITCH TODAY* when the seagull brought the note with the picture of his mum and the fragment of her letter. Even though the handwriting was unfamiliar, he quickly realized that Snape must have sent them. After all, he'd seen Snape steal them in the memories he'd watched after Snape had died. Except that he must not have died! Harry's hunch had been right: Snape was still alive!

He had mixed feelings about that. Throughout his years at Hogwarts, he'd hated Snape. Snape had always been so rotten to him and his friends. Sure, he'd been a bit cheeky in class, maybe, and a lot of the time he and Ron hadn't paid much attention or put much effort into their assignments, but still, the git didn't have to be so nasty about it.

He'd thought Snape was trying to kill him during his first year, trying to curse him off his broom during the Quidditch match, and trying to steal the Philosopher's Stone. He'd been wrong about that, though. Snape had been trying to protect him, and had actually saved his life. Dumbledore said Snape had only done it because he owed Harry's father a debt, so Harry had never bothered to thank him, but maybe he should have. Maybe things could have been different between them if he had.

Of course Harry knew that Snape had only done it all as penance for betraying his mum, and because he hated Voldemort even more than he



hated Harry and Harry's dad. And Harry had hated him right back, too. But now he thought about how much Snape had loved his mum, and how he'd sort of got to know Snape from the Prince's potions textbook, and from the memories.

Harry didn't want to think about the way he'd watched Snape die without lifting a finger to help him. He always tried to help everyone, even Wormtail. And Draco. Everyone except Snape, that is. Snape, who'd worked so hard to protect him, despite the fact that it was a thankless task. Snape, who'd risked death countless times, spying on Voldemort for almost as long as Harry had been alive. Snape was the bravest man that Harry had ever known, and Harry had just stood there and watched him die. The sense of shame tied a knot in his stomach.

But Snape wasn't dead, and now he had sent these treasured keepsakes. Was it some sort of conciliatory gesture? Harry had to know.

He remembered the man from the Knight Boat, the one he and Ron had seen taking the creatures away from that barn in Scotland. His instincts had been right! That guy must have been Snape in disguise!

He tucked the envelope in his pocket, grabbed a jacket and his wallet, and caught a Muggle bus to the river. He wandered along until he found a spot behind some warehouses where there was no one around to see him, and he held out his wand. A Knight Boat soon appeared.

Harry was well on his way to Norway before he figured out that it was the wrong Knight Boat.



The Muggle Mobile



WHEN THEY AWOKE AND WENT DOWN

stairs the next afternoon, Mr Cohen informed them all that the school didn't have any smeech repellent on hand. "Ms Brewster, the potions teacher, can make some up, but it will take a couple of days. If you want some for tonight, one of you will have to go into the city and buy it. The teachers and I have to remain here because the students are returning today and we have to protect them."

Kat volunteered to go, and Severus, who was always interested in visiting potions shops and apothecaries, was eager to accompany him. There would probably be all sorts of exotic things available in a place like New Orleans. His dark eyes glittered with anticipation.

They chose a pair of brooms from a storeroom, and as they prepared to depart, Mr Cohen tossed Kat a set of keys. "Take the Muggle Mobile when you get over there. Remember, we're not supposed to fly in the city. And try not to cause any major incidents this time, please," he said, winking at Kat.

"Who, me?" Kat said, beaming. "Wouldn't dream of it!"

Perhaps this is a mistake, Severus thought, but his curiosity got the better of him.

They cast disillusionment and cooling spells on themselves and flew off across the swamps. The trees below formed a soft sea of green, broken here and there by sparkling blue rivers and bayous. Eventually they came to the Mississippi River itself, a huge expanse of water carrying a parade of ships and fishing boats. They followed it toward the city until Kat gave a signal and started to descend.





They landed at a rundown dock in a secluded backwater. A faded sign on a tin-roofed shack said 'DOCTOR PROCTOR'S BOAT WORKS'. A white-haired black man sat on the porch reading a newspaper in the shade. He looked like he was at least two hundred years old. So did the dog lying by his feet. The dog opened one eye, thumped its tail twice, and went back to sleep.

"Long time, no see, Kat," the man drawled. "How's the captain doin'?"

"Just fine, Doc," Kat replied.

"Well, tell 'im to stop by one of these days, 'fore I ferget what he looks like," the man said. Then he went back to his reading.

"Will do," Kat said. He motioned to Severus to follow him and walked over to a chain-link fence surrounding a large weed-choked lot. He unlocked the gate and led the way through the tall weeds, rusting cars, and wrecked boats to something covered by a large tarp. He levitated the tarp away to reveal a faded brown Buick station wagon underneath.

"Meet the Muggle Mobile," he said, opening the tailgate of the elderly vehicle and tossing his broom in.

Severus added his broom, got in on the passenger's side, and seated himself on the fuzzy brown seat cover. A cardboard cut-out of a spruce tree dangled from the rearview mirror. Perhaps it was some kind of charm. Severus had learned to drive one summer at Spinner's End, in an old Volkswagen that his dad had owned briefly, but that was long ago. It had been more than a decade since he'd set foot in a car.

"Better do up the seatbelt," Kat reminded him as he checked the gas gauge.

The Buick started easily and Kat drove down a rutted, unpaved trail through the woods. It led to a bumpy gravel road that led to a two-lane blacktop. Severus watched the forests, swamps, and fields go by. There



was almost no traffic, and he managed to enjoy the ride until they came to a large green sign announcing the on-ramp for the Interstate Highway.

"We should stay on the back roads," Severus said firmly, but it was too late. Kat had stomped on the accelerator pedal and the Buick shifted into its passing gear and roared up the ramp.

Severus gritted his teeth as Kat merged into the stream of traffic. They were on the wrong side of the road! Well, it was the right side for an America highway, he knew that, but they drive on the left-hand side in the UK and it just felt *so wrong*. Gripping his wand tightly, he braced his right hand against the dashboard and hooked his left arm over the back of the seat. This car was a Muggle car. There was nothing except the traction of four rubber tires to keep it on the road. That, and Kat's skill. They were doomed!

Kat cut to the left and flew past a big white boxy vehicle with a bicycle hanging on the back. An urchin waved from the side window. Severus was starting to feel car-sick. If he apparated from the car now, would he still be moving at the same speed when he landed at his destination? If so, he'd probably be killed. He'd better not try it unless a crash was imminent. That could be soon, though.



Fawkes was bored. His wizard had slept until early afternoon and then flown off on a broom. Well, he might as well explore the school a bit. The new term was about to start and the students were returning. Albus had always discouraged him from fraternizing with students, but this wasn't Hogwarts and Albus wasn't here, so why not? He flew out the window.



Circling above the courtyard, Fawkes saw two girls sitting by the fountain, watching a big spider. Both had totally tasteless plumage, one in very loud shades of green and the other in bright purple, magenta and black. Even Albus wouldn't have sported those colors! Not in those combinations, anyway. And they were wearing makeup, too; dark purple lipstick and heavy black eyeliner. What was the matter with fledglings these days, anyway? He landed beside them.

"Ack! Don't you dare eat Alvin!" the one in green said, scooping up the tarantula.

Fawkes puffed out his neck feathers and scowled at them. What did they take him for? An insectivore?! Really!

"Look, you've hurt his feelings," the purple one said. She turned to Fawkes. "Nice birdie," she said, and offered him an orange, finger-like thing. He sniffed it. It was some kind of processed cheese snack. Yuk! It was almost as disgusting as the tarantula. No wonder Albus had encouraged him to avoid students!



"Oh, I'll turn up the AC," Kat said, noticing the sweat on his companion's brow. By some miracle, they had survived. Kat had managed to get off the Interstate without harming anything except Severus's nerves.

"Keep your eyes on the road!" Severus snapped.

They drove through an abandoned-looking industrial district and Kat pulled up in front of a nondescript warehouse. He waved his wand out the window, the rusty garage door opened to admit them, and they drove in. As expected, the place was larger on the inside than it looked from the



outside. It housed a number of strange-looking vehicles including an odd carriage, as well as a few ordinary cars and an old Ford pickup.

"We can park here," Kat announced as the door closed behind them. "Rue Magique is through the back."

And indeed it was. Kat opened the back door to reveal a narrow street flanked by ancient buildings done in the French Creole style. It was bustling with witches and wizards in all manner of colorful robes. Lively music floated down from open windows and people lounged on high, covered porches with ornate wrought-iron railings.

"This place is quite a crossroads," Kat said, leading the way through the crowd. They passed two tall African wizards wearing feathered cloaks, and a shaman in a faded serape. A group of witches was chatting in an incomprehensible French dialect, and an old woman was selling candles and gris-gris from a makeshift stall. A few of the men standing around on one corner looked like old-time Caribbean pirates, which maybe they were.

It wasn't far to their goal: ANTOINE'S APOTHECARY, PURVEYOR OF FINE POTIONS AND SUPPLIES, the sign said. Severus opened the door and breathed deeply, savoring the exotic smells. They were perfume to him. How he missed potion-making! He longed to brew again.

While Kat waited in line at the counter, Severus headed down the nearest aisle, inspecting the wares. The first section was devoted to minerals. There were jars of moonstone, sardonyx, bloodstone, and orpiment. A hand-written sign said to ask at the counter for precious metals and rare earths. Then he came to the dried herbs: stinging nettles, henbane, poison ivy, and carnivorous plants; the material looked superb. Severus was running his fingers lovingly through a bin of datura pods when Kat



interrupted him. He hadn't even come to the pickled items yet.

"I've got it," Kat said. Come on, it's getting late. Angie and Vic will be waiting. We've got to get that monster before it gets anyone else."

Severus looked back wistfully at a large display of cauldrons and then allowed himself to be dragged away.



"I'll just take my broom and fly back," Severus had said when they left Rue Magique. "I want to get some air." *There, who says I can't be diplomatic?* he thought smugly.

"We're not supposed to do that," Kat complained. "It's against the rules. Muggles might see us, even though they usually don't believe it when they do. That's why the school has the Muggle Mobile. And I drive really well. I even have a license. Most American witches and wizards drive a lot. We're not isolationists like you Brits, you know," he added.

"Let me put it this way," Severus said, letting his diplomacy slip a notch. "Either we stay off that Interstate on the way back, or I fly."

"The back roads will take too long," Kat argued. "We have to get back to searching the swamps. It'll be dark soon."

"I'll get my broom," Severus threatened.

Thus it came to pass that the two of them were driving along an old blacktop on the outskirts of the city when darkness fell. "We have to fill her up before we drop her off," Kat said, turning into a brightly lit but seedy-looking plaza. He parked by a gas pump. "Come on, we've got to pay inside first."

Kat had turned off the motor and was about to get out when they heard shouting and swearing. They looked across the plaza and saw three young



men trying to force a fourth into the trunk of a black sports coupe.

"Drug gangs! I hate those guys!" Kat said and leaped out of the car. Severus threw his door open and tried to do likewise but he'd forgotten to release his seatbelt. He swore.

"*Reducto!*" Kat shouted, aiming for one of their tires, but he was too far away and his curse failed. The kidnappers slammed the trunk shut with their victim inside.

Kat tried again, "*Impedimenta!*" but again his spell was ineffective. The kidnappers jumped into the coupe, the tires screeched, and they roared off down the road.

Swearing, Kat got back into the Muggle Mobile, started it, and took off in pursuit. Severus, who had finally managed to get his seatbelt unfastened, promptly fastened it again. "This is a Muggle matter," he said angrily. "We should leave it to them."

"If we do, that guy in the trunk will be gator chow before morning," Kat stated. He was determined to play the hero.

What a stupid bloody Gryffindor-wannabe! Severus thought, fuming. *We should have taken the Interstate.*



Officers Hernandez and Marzello were pulled over behind some bushes when the coupe flew by. They were feeling sorry for themselves. Patrolling the back roads was pretty boring. They might catch a speeder or two, at best. Really, they ought to be in the heart of the city where the real action was, but this year they were assigned to the outskirts.

"What was that?" Hernandez asked. "Some kind of black coupe?"



Then the Muggle Mobile roared past.

"Being chased by two bozos in a Buick, it would appear," Marzello observed.

"Here, hold my coffee," Hernandez said as he hit the lights and pulled out.



"Oops! Muggle cops!" Kat said when he heard the siren whooping. He glanced in the mirror and saw the flashing red and blue lights in the distance behind them.

"Lovely," Severus said dryly.

On top of that, the coupe was getting farther and farther ahead of them. The Buick didn't handle nearly as well on curves and corners. Kat increased their speed anyway and Severus could feel his heart rate increase along with it.

Suddenly the coupe's brake lights flashed and it made a sharp right-hand turn across a narrow bridge.

"This calls for desperate measures!" Kat cried. "Hang on! Sometimes this doesn't work too well."

Severus cringed in anticipation.

Kat reached down and punched what looked like a cigarette lighter. The Buick started to tremble, and then it rose straight up into the air, nose first, like a hooked sailfish. It continued to accelerate until Kat hauled on the wheel and the vehicle flopped over in its side in the air. Then it started to fall earthward like a homesick refrigerator.

The cardboard spruce tree wrapped itself around the rearview mirror and Severus's stomach tried to escape through his throat. *I'll have to apparate before we hit the ground!* he thought desperately. Perhaps if he





apparated into the air beside the Buick, he could start flying and save himself. But what about Kat? He could take Kat side-along, but could he fly with a second person? Why, oh why, hadn't they just stayed at the school and put up with the smeeches?



"I didn't know you could do that in a Buick," Officer Hernandez said calmly as the Muggle Mobile soared into the air in front of them.

"Me neither," said Officer Marzello. "Must be one of those UFOs again. Clever of 'em, disguising themselves as a Buick this time."



Severus didn't have to apparate. Kat drew his wand, muttered some sort of spell, and smacked the dashboard three times. Then he kicked a lever on the floor and turned the wheel sharply. Miraculously, the Buick righted itself, stabilized, and went into a smooth glide.

They sailed across the creek and followed the road until they caught up with the coupe. Kat brought them down smoothly, landing right behind the kidnappers.

The sudden appearance of the Buick must have startled the driver because he accelerated so fast he lost control when he hit a deep pot-hole. The coupe bounced and skidded into the ditch where it came to a stop in the mud.

The Buick halted on the road beside the coupe, still floating about six inches above the asphalt.

"You didn't tell me this thing was capable of flight," Severus complained.



Kat's flying had unnerved him even more than Kat's driving.

"We're only supposed to do it in emergencies," Kat said. "The flying enchantment doesn't always work very well."

"I noticed," Severus said as he cast Impedimenta out the window and brought down a fleeing kidnapper. He used Tarantallegra on the other two, just for the fun of it, and popped the trunk with Alohomora.

A young teenager climbed out. "I don't wanna go ta yer stinkin' school, ya stinkin' jerks," he snarled. "It's not my fault my stupid parents moved here."

"We got ta haze ya," one of the kidnappers said as he struggled to bring his flailing legs under control. "It's tradition!"

"My dad's gonna kill me," another moaned. "He's gonna kill me. He'll never let me use the car again!"

It was a high school hazing? Severus rolled his eyes. Bullies weren't limited to Spinner's End and Hogwarts. It was probably good that they'd broken it up, although he still wished that they hadn't left the school.

"We'd better go," Kat said, hitting the gas as the police car pulled up behind them.



The victim watched angrily as Marzello herded the three confused kidnappers into the back of the cruiser. Severus had released his spells as the Buick fled the scene.

"I'm gettin' kind of tired of those UFOs," Hernandez said as the Buick's tail lights disappeared into the night sky.

"Yeah, me too," Marzello said.





"I suppose y'all didn't gas her up," Proctor said as they pulled up in front of the shack. The lights were on inside and they could hear a radio playing.

"Well, no, actually we didn't have time," Kat said sheepishly. "Sorry about that."

"Doesn't surprise me," the old man said. "Should I be expectin' th' po-leece?"

Kat grinned. "No, we lost 'em."

"Well, I'll put the coffee on, just in case, and I'll take care of the car. You boys run along back to the school now, 'fore ya cause any more trouble. Yer supposed to be protectin' th' kids."



After Kat and Severus departed, the old man levitated the Buick back into the storage yard, and with a flick of his wand he replaced its tarp and made it vanish from sight. He was one of the most powerful wizards in North America, though only a few people knew it.

"I don't know about young people today," he said to the dog. "Come on, let's go back and get ready for the nice officers. I do enjoy their visits. Hope I don't have to Oblivate 'em this time."

The dog woofed and wagged his tail happily.



Breakfast at Bayou



SO WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN?" RON ASKED

when Harry arrived for Auror training on Monday morning.

"You missed our study session with Hermione on Saturday."

"At Grimmauld Place," Harry said. "I thought I'd study at home."

"No, I stopped by a couple of times and you weren't in," Ron said, putting Harry on the spot. "What have you been up to?" Ron winked. "Come on, you can tell me."

Harry shifted awkwardly from one foot to the other. "Well, actually, I was in Oslo."

Ron waited, but no details were forthcoming. He thought for a moment. What was Harry hiding? Finally he asked, "Why? Quidditch season hasn't started yet."

"I was feeling a bit cooped up, and I just wanted to go somewhere, that's all," Harry said, as if he went travelling all the time, when in fact it was the first time that he'd ever been outside of the UK. "I wandered around a bit, had lunch, and then I came back. It was nice there." There was no way that Harry was going to admit that he'd been searching for Professor Snape on a Knight Boat when he'd been whisked off to Norway. Ron would think he'd gone crazy. And maybe he had.

Ron looked worried. "Did you have to eat anything weird, like lutefisk?"

That made Harry laugh. "No, I had a hamburger! Don't worry about it."

But Ron did worry about it. Why was his friend being evasive? *He's cheating on Ginny! That's got to be it. I better follow him next time.*



After several more all-night searches, Severus and the group had still found no sign of whatever it was that had killed twice at the Bayou Academy. All he had was a theory, with no real evidence to back it up. There had been two comatose victims without a mark on them, both of whom had later died without regaining consciousness, and Angie had told him that the nearby vegetation seemed to be sick and damaged. It wasn't much to go on.

The lack of progress was frustrating, but working all night and sleeping in the morning agreed with Severus and he had slept soundly. He was still haunted by nightmares at times, but this morning he had dreamed he was Headmaster again. He was dining at the head table with Albus, Minerva, and Merlin. They were discussing how Ms Larose had joined the staff to teach Divination and interest in the subject had skyrocketed, especially among the older boys. He smiled in his sleep.

When he awoke and went downstairs, he spotted Fawkes in the students' lounge. The phoenix was perched on the back of a couch behind two garishly dressed girls. They had set up some sort of Muggle device and Fawkes was watching a Muggle movie with them. On the screen, flocks of birds were attacking Muggles for no apparent reason, and the Muggles were fleeing in terror. Fawkes seemed fascinated. His golden eyes were glued to the little screen.

Severus wandered up behind them and asked, in a rather menacing tone, "What are you doing with my bird?"

The girls were unperturbed. "We're watching *The Birds* with him," the one dressed in purple and black announced. Her black socks featured wide red stripes that clashed with her purple shoes. "I think this is the first time he's seen it."





"Is he a phoenix?" the other one piped up. "What's his name?" She was wearing shades of green that did not look good together, and she had bottle caps and other odd bits of metal charmed into her teased-up beehive hair.

"He's a phoenix," Severus said, "and his name is Fawkes." *Don't they have a dress code at this school?* he wondered.

"Mine is Mysteria," the one in green volunteered, although Severus certainly hadn't asked.

"And I'm Lady Darkness, Queen of the Night," said the purple-and-black one. "Who are you?"

Severus scowled. If those were their real names, he was Santa Claus. Ignoring her question, he asked, "Shouldn't you be in class?"

"Nope," said the green one. "It's our lunch break."

These two girls made even the strangest Hogwarts student seem normal. Severus left them to watch their movie and went off in search of coffee and breakfast.

Entering the dining hall, he spotted Armstrong at one of the tables. "Come join me, Slade," Armstrong called. Although Severus would have preferred to eat alone, he was curious about how they taught "Magical Martial Arts" at Bayou, so he accepted the offer. He served himself from the platters of toast, scrambled eggs and bacon, all of which were being kept fresh by warming charms. There were bowls of fruit salad and oatmeal, too. It was amazing what traipsing around the swamps all night had done for his appetite.

"Do you like teaching here?" Severus asked. He wanted to get Armstrong talking about himself before the man could think to ask him any personal questions.



"Absolutely!" Armstrong replied. "I love it. I've developed an effective program for the kids, and I keep improving it every year. The kids really enjoy it, too."

"They enjoy it? What exactly do you teach them? How to duel and cast curses?"

"No, nothing like that," Armstrong said, pouring himself a cup of coffee. "Not at first, anyway. Since they start school here at the age of ten, we begin with games. The first thing I do is teach them simple camouflage and detection spells so we can play magical Hide and Seek. Then I give them challenging clues and send them to find hidden objects all around the school. There are target practice games, too. After that, we move on to indentifying and avoiding dangerous creatures, especially swamp creatures, and I take them on field trips into the bayous to see where some of them dwell. For the young ones, it's mostly about being alert, spotting threats, and avoiding them. We don't get into any rough stuff until they're older."

By "rough stuff," Severus assumed the man meant dealing with curses, werewolves, and such, rather than dodging Hinkypunks. When he was a boy, Severus would have found those games boring, but in those days he'd had a chip on his shoulder and was eager to learn things that he could use against bullies. Fortunately, he'd already mastered a few curses from a book that he'd found hidden away in his mother's trunk. In any event, he had to admit that Armstrong's program sounded reasonable for ten year olds.

Before he could ask what the older students learned, Angie came in with a tall young man in a dark green uniform like hers. They were talking earnestly and took seats at another table.



"That must be her partner, the one who ran off," Severus said, frowning.

"Yeah," Armstrong said. "That's him. His name is Greg Saunders."

Severus' usual reaction would be to insult the young man at the first opportunity, but then his spy instincts kicked in. The fellow might be able to provide useful information so it would be best not to alienate him right now. That could wait until later.



"This is lovely sherry, Lucius," Rita said after taking a sip. "May I call you Lucius?"

"Of course, my dear" Lucius said, smiling, although in truth he'd prefer that she didn't. She, Lucius, Narcissa, and Draco were seated in armchairs around an elegant carved coffee table. A fire burned brightly in the fireplace behind a decorative screen.

"Let's start with how Mr Snape became a Death Eater," Rita said, getting out her quill. "In fact, how did you become a Death Eater?"

Draco glanced furtively at Narcissa. What would his father say to that?

But Lucius remained unfazed. "Now Rita, remember your promise," he said smoothly. "No Quick-Quotes Quill. We want you to write it in your own words, with your own lovely and talented hand."

Reluctantly, Rita put the enchanted quill away in her green dragon-skin purse and took out an ordinary one. "So tell me about it," she purred. "How could a fine gentleman like yourself swear allegiance to that... reptilian... creature?"

"He didn't look 'reptilian', as you put it, until much later, when it was too late," Lucius explained. "When I first met the Dark Lord he was a rather



handsome man. He had dark wavy hair that was streaked with white, and his eyes had a mysterious red glow. He was charming, confident and charismatic. I liked him immediately.

"He told me that everyone, including Muggles, would be better off if wizards came out of hiding and brought order to the world. You must admit that Muggles certainly are making a terrible mess of everything. Crime, pollution, terrorism, weapons of mass destruction, genocide, one war after another, there's no end to it. It's quite frightening, really."

Rita nodded in agreement as she wrote.

"He told me that he was looking to the old, established pureblood families like ours to head the movement and assume their rightful place as world leaders. He said that intermarriage would make wizards as incompetent as Muggles, and it was essential to keep our blood pure so our power and intelligence would not be diluted. I'm sorry to say that I fell for it," Lucius said sadly.

Now, *don't overdo it, dear*, Narcissa thought to herself.

"Hmmm. It all sounds quite logical when you put it that way," Rita said. "But Mr Snape was the product of a mixed marriage, wasn't he? And whatever else he might have been, he wasn't incompetent."

"No, he certainly wasn't," Lucius replied, "but I thought Severus was an exception. At that time I didn't know about the Dark Lord's true parentage, or how degenerate the Gaunt family had become. It appears that, in his case at least, the addition of some Muggle blood might actually have improved things for Severus." Lucius wasn't sure he really believed that, but he knew it would sound good under the circumstances.

"The Dark Lord started to look worse and worse as time went on, like



the picture of Dorian Gray in that story by the Squib Wilde. Maybe it was due to the way he was deliberately fracturing his soul; I'm not sure. But when he returned in that new body that Pettigrew helped him create, he no longer looked human. Perhaps he wasn't. And it quickly became apparent that he'd gone mad."

"I see," Rita said, jotting it all down. "Let's get back to Mr Snape then, shall we? What made him join You Know Who?"

"We must begin with his student years," Lucius said, "and take a look his beginnings, and then we can consider the events that drove him into the Dark Lord's clutches."

Oh, good! thought Draco. He was eager to hear all about that, even if his father had invented most of it.



It was late in the day before Severus was able to catch Greg Saunders alone. He had been watching him furtively all afternoon. At last, the young man had gone off by himself into an empty classroom where he seemed to be lost in thought.

Severus closed the door quietly behind him and cast a nonverbal Muffliato over the room. "Mr Saunders?" he said.

Startled, Saunders whirled around.

"I don't think we've been introduced," Severus said. "My name is Solomon Slade. I'm a friend of Angie's brother, Kat, and as you probably know, we're here to help with the problem." He didn't offer to shake hands, but Saunders didn't notice.

"Oh, yeah," Saunders said. "We appreciate your help, Mr Slade, but I've



been reinstated by the Agency and I'll take it from here. You and Mr Fish can go back to your jobs now."

Mr Fish? Perhaps that was Kat's real last name. Severus suppressed a smirk.

"That's very considerate of you," Severus said, "but we are not required elsewhere at present and we can stay on for awhile. After all, we still have no idea what's going on here, and it's best to err on the side of caution. We mustn't let any harm come to the children."

"No," Saunders said. "No, of course not. The children's safety must always come first. You're certainly welcome to stay, if you wish."

Severus could barely keep himself from grabbing the young man and shouting at him. *This idiot can't even protect himself, let alone a school full of children! Aurors, Agents, wizard cops, or whatever you want to call them, they're all useless, self-important, over-confident dunderheads!*

Controlling his temper, Severus decided to get to the point. In a soothing tone of voice, he asked, "Can you tell me anything about what happened... *how should I put this?* "when you and Angie were overcome? Any sounds, or smells, or feelings? Anything you can remember might be important."

"You mean about what happened..." he paused, "that night? I'm afraid there's nothing. I've tried, of course, but there's absolutely nothing. Whatever it was, it must have Obliviated me."

Saunders looked down at the floor and Severus knew he was lying. *He wouldn't have lasted a day as a Death Eater, Severus thought scornfully. Even Stan Shunpike could tell better lies than this. It's time to stop pussyfooting around and get on with it.*

"That's unfortunate," Severus said, feigning sympathy. "It must be difficult for you."



"Yeah," said Saunders. "Yeah, it is." Then he looked up, and when he made eye contact, Severus pointed his wand and hit him with Legilimens.

Severus pushed his way into Saunders' mind and found it swimming with bad memories. Scenes of being bullied as a child, of being beaten up and humiliated, and memories of apathetic parents. Given his own experience, Severus considered such things a normal part of childhood. He shoved them aside and forged on. Then came a shocker: the boy had been kidnapped by a group of sadistic wizards, held for weeks, and forced to participate in repulsive rituals that they hoped would open the gates to the nightmare city of R'Lyeh. Even Severus understood that *that* wasn't normal. No wonder the man was a mess! Agents had rescued him, so he wanted to be an Agent and make the world a safer place. Unfortunately, he wasn't very good at it.

With difficulty, Severus dug down through the memories of the hideous rituals and found what he was looking for hidden underneath: the memory of that night in the swamp. Saunders was walking on a patch of dry ground a short distance from Angie when suddenly he felt cold. Ice began to crystallize on the puddles nearby, and icicles started to grow from the overhanging trees and Spanish moss. Then in a flash, all of his worst memories were released. The bullying, the overwhelming fear and loneliness, and those unspeakable rituals bubbled up in his mind and started to boil over. Saunders' head swam, and he was overcome with terror and despair. Then everything went black, and Severus *knew*. It was just as he had feared: a Dementor was loose in the swamps.



"How *dare* you!" Archibald Dolittle said when he saw Argus Filch standing in his parlor with Mrs Norris by his side. "I told you never to come here again!"

Filch looked even worse than usual. Totally dreadful, actually. His pale, angular face was unshaven, his hair was stringy, his cloak was dirty and threadbare, and he smelled like he'd been hiding in the sewers. Mrs Norris didn't look too good, either. Her yellow eyes glowed as brightly as ever but her fur was dull and matted. She coughed loudly, brought up a hairball, and deposited the nasty wet glob on Dolittle's Persian carpet.

"I missed you, too, father," Filch sneered. "I've come for my inheritance. Then I'll leave you and this cursed country for good. You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

"You've got all that you'll ever get from me, you worthless Squib," Dolittle said bitterly. "It cost me plenty to buy you that position at Hogwarts. And how have you repaid me? You've become a wanted criminal, a man on the run! Thank Merlin I had the good sense to change your last name!"

Filch snorted. "You only bought me that position to hide me away. What does a school full of wizards need with a non-magical janitor? I spent years mopping and scrubbing by hand, not that anybody cared. I tried to do a good job, I really did, and I tried to keep order, but the brats just kept tormenting me. They *enjoyed* it, the little sadists. So what if Headmistress Umbridge let me get a bit of revenge from time to time?" He smiled fondly as he remembered his days with her Inquisitorial Squad, helping to enforce discipline. He'd helped the Carrows a few times, too, even though Headmaster Snape had told him to stay out of it and stick to his janitorial duties.

"I helped evacuate the students before the big battle, didn't I?" Filch said proudly. "And so what if I just kept going afterward? What's a Squib



supposed to do during a wizards' war, anyway? And now they've all turned on me and declared me a criminal, just because I helped discipline some students a few times. First they kicked me out of my job, and then they tried to arrest me! No gratitude, any of 'em." He spat on the Persian carpet, which made Dolittle cringe.

"You're a complete disgrace to this family," his father said in disgust. "You cannot possibly be my son."

"Well, I guess it's just a coincidence that I happen to look like you then," Filch said. "It's too bad I inherited your face, but not your power. But if you'll just give me 20 thousand galleons from that safe behind great grandpa's portrait, I'll be on my way, and you and mum can go back to pretending that I never existed." Filch knew that his father didn't trust Gringotts and kept his entire fortune in that safe.

"You'll never see a single sickle from me," his father hissed. "Now get out, or I'll call the Aurors."

Dolittle was starting to reach into his jacket for his wand when the sawed-off shotgun emerged from under Filch's tattered cloak.

"Make that 25 thousand," Filch said.



The Spit



"WHAT?" SAID GREG SAUNDERS, SHA-

king his head a bit. "Did you say something?"

Saunders didn't realize that he'd just been Obliviated, but of course he wouldn't; Severus was an expert at memory modification, thanks to his career as a spy. And now that he'd found the information he needed, the young Agent would never remember him taking it.

"I was saying that I want to meet with everyone in the garden in a half hour," Severus said. "I have a theory about what's been happening here, and I want to discuss it with all of you."

"Oh, yeah," said Saunders. "Right. I'll be there."



"I believe our killer is a Dementor," Severus told them when they were all assembled by the fountain. "Last night I felt an unnatural coldness out there and experienced terrible feelings of despair." He'd felt nothing of the sort, of course; he'd been nowhere near a Dementor, but he wasn't about to mention that he'd been running around in Saunders' mind, viewing the fellow's disastrous encounter with the thing.

"I think maybe that happened to me, too," Saunders said quietly, realizing that he should have told them much sooner. "The despair was overwhelming. I... I couldn't handle it." He didn't want to admit that he'd been completely terrified.

"Those are symptoms of a Dementor attack," Angie agreed. "But there are no Dementors here." She had been well trained about unnatural



creatures at Department X. "From what I can remember, Department X records say that during the mid-1800's, a group of renegade wizards in England released the Dementors from another world. They couldn't control the creatures, but the British Ministry stepped in and somehow managed to negotiate a deal with the things. They let the Dementors act as prison guards, in exchange for allowing them feed on the prisoners. It got them out of circulation and made them useful to the government."

Kat looked alarmed. "They suck all the hope out of you until there's nothing left, don't they?" he asked. "And I've heard they'll suck out your soul, too, if they can."

Angie nodded. "Yes, I believe that the Ministry uses them as executioners, as well."

"That's true," Severus said. "It's called the Dementor's Kiss. I think that's what happened to the victims here. Their souls were taken." He suppressed a shudder, knowing that could have been his fate after the so-called First War, if Albus or Aberforth had revealed that he'd given the prophecy to the Dark Lord. At that time he had believed he deserved to die for what he'd done, because of what had happened to *her*, but no one deserves to have their soul sucked out, no matter what their crime. *Except that twisted creep Pettigrew*, he thought. *And possibly Sirius Black.*

"That's barbaric!" Armstrong said, thinking of his lost colleagues.

"But the Dementors are all in the UK, working for the Ministry, aren't they?" Saunders asked.

"They were until recently," Severus told him, "but the Ministry lost control of them. They got involved in the recent... difficulties ... in the UK, and I don't know what became of them after that. Perhaps they fled, and it's



possible that one of them might have come here."

"What can we do?" asked Armstrong. He wanted to destroy the thing before it got any of the children. He wanted to avenge his friends, too.

"Can all of you cast a Patronus?" Severus asked.

They all nodded that they could.

"Good," he said. "You may need to."



When twilight came Fawkes returned to his perch, but strangely, he didn't fall asleep. He kept thinking about the movie that he'd watched, where the birds were attacking the Muggles. It was very exciting, but he couldn't understand why the birds were attacking like that. He didn't realize that no one else, Muggle or wizard, who'd ever watched that movie had understood it, either.

He'd enjoyed the treats that the two girls had shared with him. The girls were okay, once you got used to their unusual plumage. They had given him some sort of roasted beans covered with dark chocolate. They were crunchy and quite tasty, although a bit bitter. And now he felt wide awake and strangely energetic, despite the fact that night was falling. It was inexplicable. Well, if he didn't fall asleep soon, maybe he'd go out for a night flight.



"Let's split up," Angie said enthusiastically. "That will double our chances of finding the thing."

"That's not a good idea," Severus said. "A Dementor can trigger over-



whelming despair, terror and panic. Or have you forgotten? We should stay together.”

Saunders eyed Severus suspiciously. “How would you know anything about it, Slade? Is that just hearsay, or were you in that British prison with them?”

Kat cringed. *Doesn't that guy have any sense?* After all, maybe his friend actually had been.

But Severus took the remark in stride. “I encountered one once when I was at the Ministry,” he said casually, implying that he'd worked there, when in fact he'd been dragged there for interrogation and they'd threatened him with the thing.

“Well, I still think that splitting up will double our chances, so I'm going off with Greg, and the rest of you can form a second team,” Angie announced.

“Then I'm going with you, Angie,” Kat declared, moving to her side.

“Oh no, you're not,” Angie told him. “Don't you pull that ‘protective brother’ stuff on me! I'm going with Greg; we're Agents, and he's my partner. You're going with Slade and Armstrong.”

Much squabbling then ensued, and even though Angie agreed that they'd be safer if they stuck together, she wanted to eliminate the Dementor as quickly as possible, so she kept insisting that they split up. In the end, Armstrong convinced Angie that he should join her team. “I want to study your methods,” the big man told her. “The Agency's training is top notch.”

As they parted ways, Armstrong gave Kat and Severus a look that told them he'd do his best to protect Angie. That made them feel a lot better about splitting up, even though it left the two of them on their own. They weren't worried about that, though.





With caffeine surging through his body, Fawkes flew out of the school and into the night. He felt terrific. The sky was filled with stars and there was a crisp crescent moon over the river. Perhaps nighttime wasn't really as bad as he'd thought. Perhaps he should take night flights more often. Severus and his friends had been going out every night and Fawkes had been wondering what they were up to. It might be something interesting, and now would be a good time to find out. He flew off in search of them.



Fawkes wasn't the only caffeine-fueled being who was out and about that night. Far below, the two girls who called themselves Darkness and Mysteria were wide awake for the same reason that Fawkes was, and they were busy sneaking out of the school.

"Where'd ya learn to do that?" Darkness asked as Mysteria conjured a rope and made it rise into the air like a charmed snake.

"From my big brother Manic, of course. It's really hard, ya know. I had to, like, practice all summer, but I finally got it. Come on, let's get over the wall." She grabbed onto the rope and let it pull her up to the top.

"Won't we set off an alarm?" Darkness asked as she grabbed the rope behind Mysteria.

"Nope," Mysteria said as they reached the top. "My brother says the alarm spells are set for things coming in, not things going out, except at the gates. The gates have both kinds. He made a study of it. He liked to go sneaking around the swamps at night. I dunno why. Maybe he liked talking



to gators or something." She waved her wand and moved the rope to the other side of the wall.

"Okay, so, like how are we gonna get back in then?" Darkness asked.

"My brother made a charm for that. Come on, let's see if we can catch up with Mr Armstrong and those guys. I wanna know what's up with them."

"I still don't like it!" Kat said as they marched down the path toward the swamp. "That guy Saunders is hopeless, and that Dementor-thing is extremely dangerous." He turned to Severus. "I've heard that Dementors can't be destroyed. Is that true?"

"There's nothing that can't be destroyed," Severus said. "But we'll have to find a way to do that, or else send it back to the world that it came from somehow. If nothing else, we should be able to drive it away from here."

"And hope that it doesn't come back later," Kat said despondently.

Severus looked grim. He wasn't looking forward to facing a Dementor again.

"Well, let's try to get the Dementor before it can get anybody else," Kat said. *Epecially Angie*. "Maybe we need a different strategy. Maybe it's hungry for hope and happiness, and we've been too intense to attract it. Greenly and French were probably happy and relaxed when they were attacked. Let's try to emulate that."

Severus frowned. He didn't have much experience with hope and happiness, after all, so he was glad when Kat volunteered to act as bait. "I've had a pretty good life compared to most," Kat said, "and I've got few regrets or bad memories for it to release. I'll just conjure a lawn chair near where Mr French was attacked, it's not far from here, and I'll lie there and



think happy thoughts. You can hide nearby and cover me.”

It seemed like a reasonable enough idea. After all, prowling around the swamps all night hadn't accomplished anything except getting them wet and muddy.

As they walked toward the river looking for the right spot, Kat suddenly stopped and said, “After a Dementor sucks out the soul, the body lives on indefinitely in some sort vegetative state, doesn't it?”

Severus thought for a moment. “That might be possible,” he said, “if the body were put on some sort of life-support system like the Muggles use. However, since almost all of the victims have been condemned criminals, no one has ever bothered. They just left the bodies to die. It doesn't take long without water or food. The victims here got some medical attention, so they probably lived a bit longer than most.”

“Look, I don't want to, like, burden you with this,” Kat said, looking around uneasily, “but if that thing gets me, I don't want my body living on as a soulless shell, you know what I mean?”

Yes, Severus knew exactly what he meant. “I'll make sure that doesn't happen,” he said, “and I'm sure I can count on you to do the same for me.”



Game On!



WHEN THE SORTING HAT CRIED ‘SLYTH-

erin’, I wasn't surprised,” Lucius Malfoy said. “Young Severus looked like a neglected waif, which of course is exactly what he was, but he had an intensity about him that caught my interest immediately. As a Slytherin Prefect, it was my duty to clean him up and get him started on the right foot, which actually proved to be fairly easy because he was thrilled to be sorted into Slytherin and he desperately wanted to fit in. For him, it was a dream come true.”

Rita Skeeter looked up from taking notes. “Some say that being sorted into Slytherin is what sealed his fate,” she said.

“Nonsense!” said Lucius. “If anything sealed his fate, it was the day he met that Gryffindor girl, long before he ever set foot in Hogwarts.” Then he smiled warmly and added, “You would have been a credit to Slytherin House, Rita. It's a great loss that you went to Beauxbatons.”

Rita smiled back and then returned to her notes. Lucius took the opportunity to sneak a quick glance at her long, shapely legs and her iridescent green stilettos. Not that he would ever dream of cheating on Narcissa, of course, but there was no denying that Rita Skeeter was an attractive woman and there was no harm in looking.

“As you might expect, Severus hated the idea of charity,” Lucius said, “but I convinced him that, as Slytherins, we had to maintain certain standards. I would give him some clothes that I'd outgrown, and he would pay me back in the future. When I said I'd throw in some of my old textbooks, his eyes lit up and I knew I had hooked him.”

“I'm so glad you insisted on helping him, Lucius,” Narcissa said. “He



looked quite sharp in your old things, really, if a little bit out of date.”

“We thought we might have to teach him manners, didn’t we, Narcissa?” Lucius said, “but his mother had done that much for him, at least. And he watched the purebloods like a hawk, always studying their speech and deportment. If it weren’t for his telltale last name he would have been able to pass as a pureblood in no time.”

“Muggles are all right in their place,” Rita said, “but I gather that Tobias Snape was no gem.”

“It’s a shame that such a promising young man was saddled with such an unfortunate family situation,” Narcissa agreed. “I said so myself at the time.”

“He didn’t let it hold him back, though,” Lucius said. “He soon came up with a way to make a bit of pocket money: gambling. Gambling is forbidden at Hogwarts, of course, but that never stopped anyone. Slughorn turned a blind eye to it, except when he wanted to place a small wager himself. And of course, when he did, we always made sure that he won.”

Draco smiled. When Snape was Head of House he had always turned a blind eye to it, too, and now Draco understood why: Snape was carrying on the tradition that he had benefited from under Slughorn.

“Severus was very good at Wizard’s Chess; apparently his mother had had some books on the subject and he’d whiled away some boring afternoons studying the game. He also knew a Muggle game called poker that he’d learned by watching his Muggle father and his friends.” Lucius couldn’t quite hide his distaste at the thought of Tobias Snape and his mates. “Despite its Muggle origins, it quickly became a hit in our common room, and eventually it spread to the other houses, too. The game seemed to be tailor-made for Slytherins, though, with the bluffing



and strategy and so forth, and young Severus excelled at it.

“He was smart enough to know that if he won too often, no one would play against him, so even though he hated losing, he limited his winnings to only a few percent, and he made sure that he occasionally had large losses. He would put on a good show, sulking when he lost, and he always had lots of eager opponents. But really, no one could hope to out-bluff him when he put his mind to it.

“Severus never gambled outside of Slytherin House, except for his big game against Sirius Black. That game was the stuff of legend, Rita! Not that it started out as a game of chance. The pooch-boy had slipped on the stairs and landed on his butt, and he claimed that Severus had tripped him. That might even have been true — who knows? — but he challenged Severus to duel him behind the greenhouses. I remember it like it was yesterday,” Lucius said, with a faraway look in his eyes. “Severus was in his third year, I think. It was the year that I finished.”



“I think not, Black,” Severus said. “You may not care if you get expelled, but I do.” He knew that, win or lose, he would be expelled for unsupervised dueling, even if he didn’t hurt the Gryffindor thug. Black, on the other hand, would probably get off with detention.

“Coward!” Black sneered. A crowd was starting to gather.

“No, just sensible,” Severus replied calmly, “but if you’re so eager to face me, how about a little game? Poker, perhaps.” He paused for a moment. “But of course, with your limited intellect, you wouldn’t have a chance. It’s a very subtle game and you probably couldn’t even figure out how to play it. Forget that I mentioned it.”



"I can beat you any day, at anything, Snivellus!" Black roared.

Oh, now I've got him! Severus thought. Black's family had cut off his allowance and he didn't have a lot of spare money, but Severus would be pleased to take anything he had, and make a fool of him in the process.

"In the Charms classroom then, tonight at seven o'clock," Severus said



"What was Black thinking?" Rita asked. "Poker is no game for Gryffindors."

"Nobody ever said that Mr Dog-Breath was smart," Lucius said, chuckling. "Unfortunately, his pal James Potter was a bit brighter."



Word of the challenge had spread quickly, although fortunately it hadn't reached the staff, and there was standing room only in the Charms classroom when seven o'clock rolled around and the two combatants took their places at the table. There was a ragtag assortment of Gryffindors and Slytherins, and naturally they gathered on opposite sides of the classroom. Some Hufflepuffs and a few Ravenclaws who'd turned up settled in the center. Kirby Pond, a Hufflepuff Prefect, agreed to be the dealer. Letting either player touch the deck would have been the height of foolishness.

"Poker?" said Black. "Isn't that the game where you have to bet your clothes, and the first one to get naked is the loser?"

"Don't be absurd. It's played for money," Severus sneered.



"I'd provided him with a substantial stake for the game, of course,"



Lucius said proudly, "and along with Potter, I was a referee, casting the privacy charms on the classroom, and the anti-cheating spells."



"No, it's called Strip Poker for a reason, Snivellus," Black said, "which is that you've got to take your clothes off."

"We're going to play Draw Poker, idiot. As in Five-Card Draw. For money. The thought of seeing you naked makes me ill."

"You don't get to decide," Potter said, grinning. "We'll put it to a vote! Who here wants to see them play Strip Poker? Raise your hands!"

James Potter always was a jerk.



"It happened too fast and there was nothing I could do to stop it," Lucius said. "The worst part of it was that Potter had invented a variation in which the players had to put the clothes on the table first, when they made a bet, and they couldn't put them back on again, no matter who won the round. I objected strongly, of course," Lucius added. "That is not how the game is supposed to be played! One should only have to take clothes off after one loses."

Narcissa looked aghast. "You've never actually played it, have you?"

"Of course not, dear," Lucius reassured her. "It's totally undignified. I am familiar with the concept, however."

"In any event," Lucius continued, "all of the Gryffindors voted for Potter's rules, and some of the others, too, so they passed, despite the fact that the Slytherins all voted against them. Some people would much



rather watch people losing their clothes than winning money, it seems.” He shook his head as though he found that impossible to comprehend.

“So Severus was trapped. I knew he was self-conscious about his body — he usually showered early, before anyone else was up, for example — but he didn’t want to let Black and Potter know that, so he had to pretend he didn’t care.”



The problem wasn’t that Severus was losing. He wasn’t. Black was losing, but he was raising his bets like a deranged stockbroker, and he proved to be wearing a lot of clothes. It was a question of which one of them would run out first.

I’ve been set up! Severus realized. They must have planned this after I challenged Black. Potter must have thought it up. It’s way too clever for Black.

“I’ll see that, and raise you a vest,” Black said. They’d bet their sweaters this time. Their robes, scarves, and ties were already gone. Black stood up and made a show of wiggling out of his sweater and unbuttoning his vest. Then he twirled the garments over his head before he tossed them on the table. The Gryffindors cheered.

A disturbing thought was starting to dawn on Severus: Black is enjoying this! He’s actually enjoying stripping in front of an audience. He loves the attention. Sweet Merlin, I’m doomed! At least Lily isn’t here to see it. He could feel Lupin and Pettigrew watching him intently, though.



“Severus was a scrawny lad,” Lucius said, “but no more so than many other boys his age, and he really had nothing to be ashamed of, although



I’m sure no one could have convinced him of that. Black, on the other hand, was more heavily built and a bit pudgy. His sojourn in Azkaban probably thinned him down later on, but then he must have filled out again while he was hiding out with the Order of the Phoenix. I was there at the Ministry when he met his end and he was really rather flabby then.”

Rita nodded. “I never met Mr Black but he certainly looked dreadful in his Wanted posters.”

“He was never an appealing sight,” Lucius agreed. “I remember I thought that Black was unusually hairy for a boy that young, but of course I didn’t know about his Animagus-dog thing at that time. None of us did.”



Severus wasn’t wearing a vest, so he had to substitute something else. “I’ll call that,” he said, putting one of his shoes on the table.

“No way!” said Potter. “A shoe doesn’t equal a vest. It requires a shirt, at the very least.”

“I beg to differ,” said Lucius. “That’s an excellent-quality shoe, far more valuable than that vest.” It had once been his own shoe, after all. “And that vest is worn and threadbare. In fact, isn’t that a rip I see in the lining?”

“Yup,” said Kirby the dealer. He picked up the shoe and admired it. “Real nice leather, this.”

“Who asked you?” Black snapped, but eventually he agreed to throw in his belt to bring up his bet. It had a gaudy Gryffindor belt-buckle that he claimed was extremely valuable. The Gryffindors hooted in agreement.





"So let me see if I understand this properly. Mr Black's strategy was simply to keep betting, win or lose, because he knew Mr Snape would run out clothes first?" Rita asked.

Draco winced. He knew what it must have felt like. He'd had a similar problem when Moody, or whoever it was, had transformed him into a ferret. His clothes hadn't been changed with him, and when he was changed back to human, he was sitting beside a pile of his clothes, stark naked, and everyone was standing around laughing at him. It had been a nightmare.

"That's right, Rita," Lucius said. "I'm not sure Black even knew how to play the game, but he was wearing more clothes than an onion has layers. His losses didn't matter. There was no way that Severus could outlast him and they both knew it."



Their shoes and socks disappeared in the next rounds. Even though Severus had been behind by one shoe, he won some small victories as Lucius continued to disparage the quality of Black's items, demanding that he make 'extra payments', while the spectators enjoyed the bickering. But Black didn't care. He happily threw in his shirt, revealing not his naked chest like everyone expected, but a layer of Muggle-style long underwear! It was Gryffindor red, too. The Gryffindors roared with laughter.

Severus was on the edge of panic, but somehow he managed to maintain his disinterested expression and relaxed posture. It would be his shirt next, and then...

His mind worked furiously, trying to come up with some way, any way, to disrupt the game. Perhaps he could he attract a Professor somehow. But how? Maybe he could Incendio a small fire under Flitwick's desk? Or maybe





he should just hex Black right through the wall and be done with it. Being expelled might not be so bad after all. Not nearly as bad as being forced to strip naked in front of Black and the crowd.



"All eyes were on the players, so there was really nothing Severus could do without someone noticing," Lucius said. "Even with the help of concealment charms, someone was bound to spot it. So I knew I had to do something.

"I was up to the challenge, of course," he said proudly. "Potter had cast the privacy spell that kept the noise from being overheard in the hall, so while the crowd was laughing at Black, I wordlessly cast the countercharm. After that, it was just a matter of time before the staff would notice the commotion. And everyone would think that it was Potter's fault because his spell hadn't been up to snuff." Lucius smiled at his own cleverness.



"Finished yet, Black?" Severus drawled as Black bowed to the spectators, "or are you going to give them an encore?"

"They love me, Snivellus," Black said, sneering, and he bowed again, making sure to point his derriere at his opponent. The Gryffindors whistled and cheered.

I might as well be hung for a wolf as hung for a lamb, Severus thought, and slipping his wand out under the table, he cast a silent, slow-acting itching hex on Black. A murmur ran through the Slytherin section. Some of them must have seen me, he knew, but I think the Gryffindors missed it; they're too busy laughing at Black's antics.

Grinning, Black sat down and Kirby dealt the next hand. It was Black's turn



to make the opening bet, but at least that meant he wouldn't get a chance to raise it. That wasn't much consolation, though, because Severus didn't have anything left that he was willing to take off.

"Trousers this time, Snivellus," Black said, starting to unfasten his. "And you have to match it with trousers. You can keep your shirt, for now." He reached over his left shoulder to scratch his back.

"My shirt is far better than your pants," Severus said, playing for time. "In fact, if I match your bet with my shirt, it amounts to a raise and you'll have to throw in that dreadful red undergarment."

Black wasn't really listening though. He was twisting around, trying to scratch his back with both hands, which meant that his unfastened trousers were free to fall down around his knees. That impeded him when he tried step forward, and he staggered and fell. Then he started thrashing around, rubbing his itchy back against the floor and making unintelligible noises.

"Unfair!" cried Lupin, jumping up from his seat. "They've done something to him!" Potter drew his wand. "Snape, you cheating creep..."



"I drew my wand then," Lucius said, "and of course Severus and the Slytherins followed my lead. Then all the Gryffindors did likewise and Pettigrew fired off a wild hex that barely missed Kirby Pond. Pandemonium broke out with Gryffindors and Slytherins sniping at each other. The Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws were caught in the crossfire and dove for cover. And Black continued to thrash about on the floor, trying to strip off the remainder of his clothes in a futile attempt to stop the itching."

Rita chuckled. She'd long ago stopped taking notes and was leaning



back in her chair, sipping her sherry and enjoying the story.

"The racket was incredible," Lucius added. "It sounded like a fireworks display was in progress, and it looked like it, too, so it was no surprise when Professor Sprout came barging in."



"Stop this at once, all of you!" Pomona Sprout shouted, waving her wand angrily. "What's going on in here?"

Everyone froze, of course, although Severus managed to discretely release the itching hex while she was looking around the classroom in shock.

"Mr Black! What in the world are you..."

Black had stopped thrashing and was lying there on his back, partially naked and tangled up in the long underwear. He looked up at her sheepishly, "I, errr, well I, uh..."

"Never mind!" Pomona said. "I don't think I want to know. Detention, each and every one of you, and 20 points each from your Houses!" She was particularly annoyed to see Hufflepuffs in the group, including one of her Prefects.

"You'll pay for this, Snape!" Potter hissed as they filed out of the wrecked classroom. "Some day, we'll make you pay!"



"So we all spent a lot of time doing chores over the next few weeks," Lucius said, laughing, "starting with cleaning up the Charms classroom. It was a shambles. And all of the Quidditch teams were a bit short-staffed for a while, except for Ravenclaw — there hadn't been many Ravenclaws in the crowd. Maybe no one had bothered to tell



most of them; they tend to be a bit stuffy.

"Anyway, it was a good thing that Professor Sprout never figured out what was really going on or it would have been a lot worse. Kirby Pond told me that the Hufflepuffs thought it had been worth it because it had all been so exciting. And the pooch-man's belt, with its big Gryffindor belt-buckle, graced the wall in the Slytherin trophy room right up to the end." A sad expression crossed his face. "I wish I could show it to you."

When the Houses had been officially disbanded during the summer, all of the House trophies, some of which were hundreds of years old, had been put into storage until the Board of Governors decided what to do with them.

Lucius picked up the cut-glass decanter. "More sherry, Rita? Narcissa?" Draco was on his second Elf-made beer.

"No, thank you," said Rita, looking longingly at her empty glass. "It's been lovely but it's getting late, and I'm afraid really I must be going. Could we continue this another time, perhaps?" Interviewing Lucius had turned out to be a lot more interesting and fun than she'd expected, and she'd gained a colorful story for her book about Severus.

"Of course, Rita," Lucius said, smiling, "I'm sure we can arrange another session whenever you'd like." He'd be happy to give her another story. One could never go wrong by gaining favor with wizarding Britain's most influential reporter.





Black Smoke and Green Mist



HERE THEY ARE, STANDING BY THE RIVER,"

Mysteria said.

"Yeah, it looks like Slade and that Kat guy." Darkness said. "I like Slade. He's, like, totally mysterious, ya know?"

Mysteria giggled. "Yeah, like tall, dark, and dangerous."

"Well, he's being tall, dark, and boring at the moment, just standing there talking to Kat. I hope they didn't come out here just to stargaze, or something stupid like that."

"Maybe. Who knows with grownups?" Mysteria said. "Let's wait. Something's bound to happen sooner or later, don't ya think? We can hide behind that big old tree over there and wait."

"I guess. I'm getting bored already," Darkness said, stifling a yawn. The caffeine was starting to wear off.



"Try to relax, and be careful what you think about, Slade," Kat said as he conjured a reclining lawn chair. "We don't want the Dementor to sense your presence." Then he settled down under the stars and began reminiscing about his favorite moments in life, hoping this would attract the Dementor that had killed the two teachers.

Severus took up a position in a nearby patch of tall weeds, watching and waiting. He listened to the high-pitched whine of mosquitoes and tried not to think about anything at all, but soon his mind began to wander.

At first he thought about Kat. For a while he had believed that, if Kat had gone to Hogwarts, he would have been sorted into Gryffindor, but on reflection, that couldn't be right. Yes, Kat was brave, and a bit reckless



at times, too, but he wasn't stupid, irresponsible, or obnoxious, so that ruled out Gryffindor. No, Kat would probably have ended up in Hufflepuff.

The Puffs weren't so bad, really. They could be brave, as Puffs like Cedric Diggory had proven many times, but Severus had never known a Puff to harass anyone. Although some people scornfully claimed that all Puffs were simpleminded, most of them were actually quite bright. They studied hard, didn't cheat or lie (at least not very often), and they were loyal to their families and friends.

Of course Hufflepuff had more than its share of weirdoes, since they got everyone who didn't fit anywhere else, but they didn't seem troubled by that. Severus had to admit that, when he was a student, he'd been a tiny bit jealous of the Puffs. Maybe that was why the other Houses liked to sneer at them: they were jealous. The Puffs seemed to know how to have fun. If they gave points for happiness, the Puffs would have come out on top. And Severus, of course, would have come out on the bottom.

Mustn't think about Hogwarts now. Too many bad memories. The Dementor might sense them.

Was it negative emotions that Dementors craved, or was it the happy ones? Happiness powered the Patronus spell that could drive them away, but on the other hand, it was happiness that Dementors drained from their victims. Maybe that was just to get the happiness out of the way, so they could feast on the remaining despair. It was difficult to be certain. However, if it was happiness that they sought, it shouldn't be much of a problem because Severus had never had much of that.

He'd had wonderful moments with Lily in the days before Hogwarts, but they were painful to think of now given all the things that had happened since



then. No, he needed to clear his mind. Then Kat would attract the Dementor, and Severus would set his Patronus on it. He hoped the silver doe would be strong enough to actually destroy the thing instead of just chasing it away.

He tried to Occlude and focus his mind on his breathing, but the humid night air brought the smell of plants and herbs, and that made him think of brewing. Brewing had been his means of escape at Hogwarts, both when he was a student and later when he was a professor. He had always been fascinated by the potions laboratory. He loved the myriad smells, the sound of bubbling cauldrons, the flickering of fires, and the jars of exotic ingredients on dark wooden shelves. He would lose himself in the potion-making process, slicing and stirring, watching the colors change as the ingredients were mixed together and combined to produce something altogether new. When he and Lily had worked together ...

He shouldn't have thought of Lily. He knew that, but the harder you try not to think of something, the more it will creep into your thoughts. He would need to think of Lily when the time came to generate the Patronus, but not before then. Not now. He tried to push the memories away, but they revived old feelings of guilt and a wave of despair washed over him.

His head started to swim and he could hear her voice scolding him: "You were only interesting before I got to Hogwarts. After that, there were so many more exciting and knowledgeable people. People like James and Sirius. People from good backgrounds, with bright futures. Only a loser like you could possibly hang onto some stupid, childish notions for so long. You're pathetic."

He could hear Sirius and James laughing, and Albus, too. He could see them looking down on him.

"Poor Snivellus," Albus sneered. "You disgust me!"



"Shut it!" Severus snarled. "What did any of you ever accomplish? You're all dead. You died without your wands, speaking of pathetic." Sirius must have had his wand when Bellatrix nailed him, but that was beside the point. "You defied the Dark Lord? You were like silly children playing games, and you lost."

"None of that would have happened if you hadn't given Voldemort the prophecy!" Albus bellowed.

"None of this would have happened if you had protected them, like you promised!" Severus spat back. "Greatest wizard of our time? What rot! I sold myself to you, and you did nothing. She was killed anyway, along with her useless husband. And in the end, you set me up to be murdered by the Dark Lord, after you set me up to murder you."

"And you did such a lovely job of it!" Albus said, laughing. "I never felt a thing. So much nicer than what Bellatrix would have done. Or Voldemort. So much nicer than what he and Nagini did to you."

Their laughter faded away and he saw the crew from the Knight Boat. They all looked angry, and Seabiscuit was holding a copy of THE DAILY PROPHET.

Kat pointed at him. "We know all about you now," he said. "You can't fool us any more. We're done with you!"

Severus was chilled to the bone and felt sick. "No, please! You don't understand," he pleaded. "I didn't want to deceive you — you're my friends — but I knew you'd hate me if you knew the truth. Please, give me another chance!"

But then he realized what was happening. Or rather, he realized what wasn't happening. None of this was real. No, it had to be the Dementor, bringing forth his innermost fears.

He opened his eyes and saw the thing looming in front of him, hover-



ing above the frozen weeds. Its head and torso were covered with what looked like a rotten burial shroud. There were no legs beneath it, and its arms were contorted and boney, but its mouth was gaping open and he could feel it pulling on him somehow, sucking out his emotions and feeding on them. The despair was unbearable.

He pointed his wand and cried, "*Expecto Patronum!*" He tried to think of Lily in the playground, but the playground was empty now. Silver mist poured from his wand but it failed to coalesce into a Patronus. He swore loudly.

"Huh?" said Kat who, despite his best efforts had dozed off to sleep. He twisted around to see what was going on, which caused his lawn chair to flip over and dump him on the ground. He cast from where he lay, underneath the inverted chair: "*Expecto Patronum!*"

Severus forgot about the playground then and remembered that night on the boat, after they'd defeated Dolohov's gang. His friends were laughing happily. There was Kat, and Captain Clark, and Seabiscuit, and Lydia and Jack, too. Friends. His friends. And of course, Fawkes. The phoenix had saved his life! Feelings of happiness welled up in him and the mist formed into a sliver streak. It struck the Dementor in the head just before the silver bolt from Kat's wand slammed into its torso. The thing spun around and fell to the ground in a smoking heap.

Then, in the bright silvery light from their spells, they were horrified to see several more Dementors hovering near the edge of the river. Severus wasn't sure how many there were, but he could see at least two or three. He swore again and watched as his Patronus swerved and went after them with Kat's Patronus right beside it.





There they are! Fawkes spotted the silvery light and turned toward the battle. *They're in trouble again, too. I can't leave those guys alone for a minute!*

Then the riverbank came into view and Fawkes was shocked to see the Dementors. The sight filled him with rage: *Filthy things! Unnatural things! Hateful, hateful things!* They were everything that the phoenix loathed.

He gave a mighty flap and drove himself into a dive, thrusting his beak forward and folding his legs and wings back to streamline his descent. He shot downward like a javelin. *Five seconds to impact ... four ... feet forward ... talons out ... two ... one ...*



"Who's Slade arguing with?" Darkness asked. She peeked out from behind the tree. "Himself? I don't see anyone else out there. I think Kat's asleep." A sliver light flashed near the lawn chair. "No, wait, I think he just woke up. What's 'Expecto Patronum' mean?"

"I dunno," Mysteria said.

Darkness peeked again and then she froze. "Oh crap! Look at those ... those ... those *things*. One of them is coming *this way!*"

Intense fear unlike anything they'd ever imagined gripped the two girls. *We're gonna DIE!* Darkness thought.

It was the hardest thing that she'd ever done in her short life. She was shaking and she felt sick to her stomach, but Darkness managed to raise her wand. She drew a three-fold pattern in the air and cast the worst hex that she knew: "*Ta ... Ta ... Toxicodendron!*" she shouted. Yellow-green goo streamed from her wand and splattered on the Dementor. The thing stopped advancing and hovered in front of her, slime dripping from its shroud. It seemed con-



fused. Perhaps no one had ever tried to give it poison ivy before.

Mysteria, too, fought her fear and tried to hex the thing. "*Tarantallegra!*" she cried, somehow overlooking the fact that the Dementor didn't have legs.

The Dementor was starting to advance again when Fawkes slammed into its head and drove it to the ground. *Impact!* He pecked and clawed at it furiously, sending chunks of its shroud flying through the air along with globs of some sort of grey goo. *Take that! And that! And that, you filthy soul-sucker!*

"Yaaay, Fawksie!" Mysteria yelled, punching the air. "Way to go, bird!"



The doe. Where is the silver doe? Severus wondered in confusion as the silver phoenix stopped in front of him, dissolved into mist, and disappeared into his wand. He knew that a life-changing experience could change one's Patronus, but he never expected it to happen to him. The doe was gone.

"A phoenix? I should have known," Kat said as a silver catfish returned to him. He looked down at the remains of the Dementor that had attacked Severus. "Is that thing dead?" he asked, staring at the lumpy grey heap on the ground. He poked at it with his foot.

Suddenly the heap began to twitch and the two wizards jumped back. A puff of thick black smoke, like diesel exhaust, burst out of it and began to float away.

"I think it's a soul," Severus said quietly. He wondered if it was anyone he'd known.

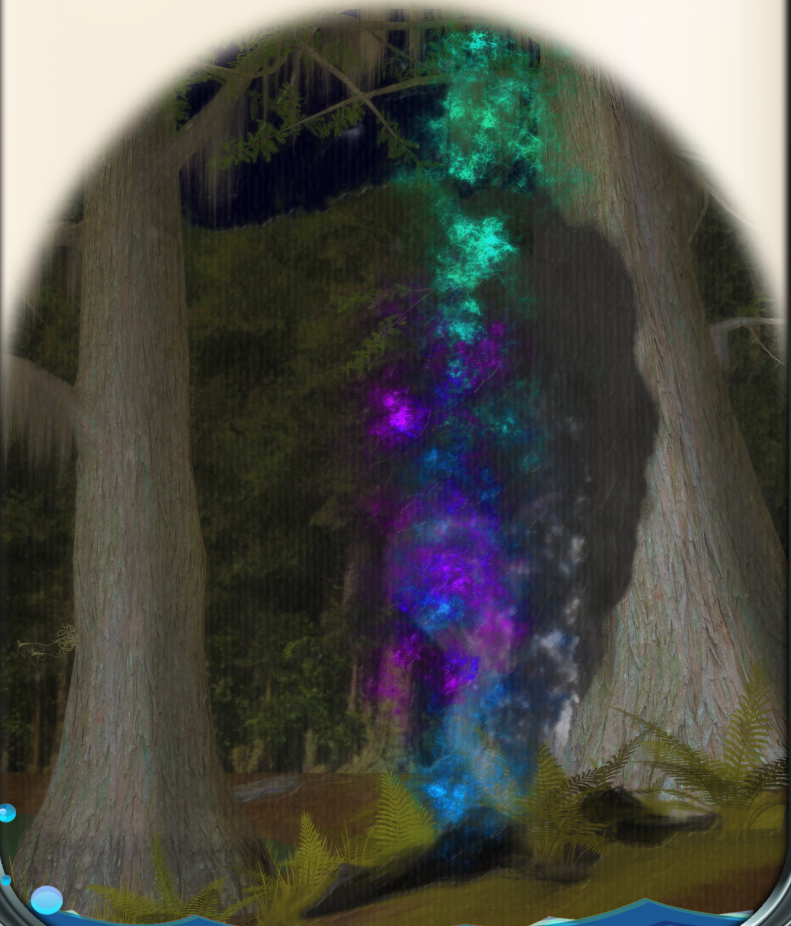
Another puff of black followed, and then a sparking green mist emerged. It twinkled in front of them for a moment, and then it rose upward and slowly disappeared into the night sky.



"Mr Greenly?" Kat murmured.

Then came more. Many were black or dark grey, but there was a sapphire blue one and a deep purple one, too. Severus wondered what color his would be.

"We've set them free," he said.



A Slytherin Reunion



SO LET ME GET THIS STRAIGHT," MR COHEN SAID.

"You destroyed one Dementor, Fawkes destroyed a second one, and there's at least one more still out there?"

Severus looked out at the rising sun through the window in Cohen's office, ignoring the conversation. He still felt chilled from the previous night's encounter with the Dementor. He couldn't quite shake off the hallucination the ghoul had brought him. *Did Albus really feel that way about me?* he wondered. *Did Lily?*

"That's right," said Kat. "Slade and I both struck it at the same time, and that was enough to kill it. Then we heard Fawkes screeching."

"And Blossom and Chastity were there?" Cohen asked.

"Those two girls? Yeah, we didn't realize they were there until we heard Fawkes."

Blossom and Chastity? That got his attention, and Severus almost laughed. No wonder they prefer to call themselves Darkness and Mysteria!

"We saw the light from the spells and Apparated to the site," Angie said, "and we found the girls with Kat and Slade and Fawkes, staring at what was left of a Dementor. Puffs of mist were rising out of it. Slade said he thought they were souls the Dementor had consumed, being released from some kind of dreadful captivity."

"Then we hurried back here and Armstrong took the girls to the infirmary," Saunders said. "They were trying to pretend that being confronted by a Dementor was no big deal, but it was obvious they were really shaken up."

"I guess it was a mistake not to tell the students about the danger," Cohen said, "but we didn't want to alarm them unnecessarily."



"You had better tell them so no one else tries to sneak out there," Severus said. Withholding information from students was a mistake. Albus had proven that on too many occasions. It was better that they should know the truth, even if it upset them. "And Armstrong should start teaching everyone the Patronus charm immediately. It may not be easy for some of them to learn, but it's time for them to start trying." The students probably had a much better supply of good memories to draw on than he did, after all.

"I'm gonna get some breakfast," Kat announced. "Anyone want to join me?"

"No," said Severus. "I think I'll go get some sleep."



Severus was back in the dungeons at Hogwarts and he knew the Dark Lord would be there soon. He was desperate. He had to protect the students and complete his mission, but it was hard to move. He tried to make his way up out of the darkness through a narrow, winding staircase, but Minerva and Draco blocked his way. They both scowled down at him. "The Dark Lord will love us now," Draco said eagerly, but before he could act, Minerva cast Fiendfyre. Severus turned and tried to flee back down the stairway but he couldn't move fast enough. He woke as the flames enveloped him.

He was drenched with sweat, despite the room's cooling charm. The Dementor's attack had revived old guilt and fears. Did all of his old 'friends' hate him? He remembered how Minerva had attacked him, in reality as well as in the dream. Flitwick had, too, but that was understandable, given the circumstances. But what about Albus? Albus had



known him better than anyone. Had Albus hated him, too?

When he thought about it, Severus realized that Albus had been a very fortunate wizard. Surely it hadn't been part of Albus' plan for the Potters to be murdered so that Severus would become his spy. At least Severus hoped it wasn't. That was a possibility that he didn't want to think about. But his role as a double agent had proved to be essential, and who else could possibly have done that job?

How many times did Severus have to smile and pretend to love the Dark Lord when in fact he wanted nothing more than to kill that red-eyed monster himself? How many times did he have to watch things, and sometimes do things, that made him sick in his soul? Could James or Sirius have sat there impassively and watched the murder of Charity Burbage and so many others? Could Albus? Lily certainly couldn't have. What was it about Severus that enabled him to do such things when he had to? Was there something profoundly wrong with him?

He knew wasn't going to get back to sleep with thoughts like those running through his head, besides which it was nearly noon, so he showered and dressed and set off for the dining room. He noticed that Fawkes's perch was empty. He had expected the bird to be tired after being out most of the night and destroying a Dementor, but apparently the phoenix was up and about.

When he reached the dining hall, Severus helped himself to a sandwich and some coffee. The Elves here made good coffee, but their tea was insipid. He noticed that the place seemed unusually quiet for lunchtime, especially since it was a Saturday. Only a few students were present, and most of them didn't seem to have much of an appetite. Perhaps



they'd been told about the Dementor attacks.

As usual, Armstrong came over to join him. "Good news, Sladel!" he said. "The Agency has finally realized how serious the situation here is. They don't want Dementors establishing themselves in the US so they're going to send a team to exterminate them. You and Kat can go back to your boat soon."

Severus had mixed feelings about that. He wanted to return to the boat, of course, but he was enjoying the school, too. He hadn't inspected the potions classroom yet or upset the potions teacher, and he would be remiss if he didn't investigate their library.

"Does your library have a good collection?" he asked.

"It's very good," Armstrong said proudly. "There's a lot of old French and Spanish stuff, an excellent Caribbean section, and lot of stuff about pre-Columbian times, too."

"That sounds interesting," Severus said. "I think I'll go take a look." Perhaps they'd have a good restricted section.



"If she makes us eat any more chocolate, I think I'm going to puke," Mysteria said, sitting up in bed. She and Darkness had been in the infirmary all night and the nurse wouldn't let them leave.

The thought of a puddle of warm, chocolaty brown vomit made Darkness turn pale green. "Don't you dare!" she said. Then she decided she'd better change the subject before they both started puking. "Whaddaya think it was like for those souls, being trapped inside that thing?"

"I dunno" Mysteria said, "but I think we came awfully close to finding out."

Darkness curled up in the bed and pulled the sheet up over her head.



"You're not making me feel better," she mumbled.

"Hey, it's Fawksie!" Mysteria said. "He's come to see us!"

The phoenix landed on the footboard of her bed and chirped softly. *Poor girls, set on by that horrid thing! They're so nice. They shared their treats with me and showed me that strange moving picture.*

Darkness peeked out and smiled. "He's concerned about us! That's so sweet!"

"Hi, pretty birdie!" Mysteria said. "Hey, maybe we can watch a vid; I think there's a Muggle video player thing here. You wanna watch a video with us, Fawkes? I've got a few in my bag." She leaned over and pulled a backpack out from under her bed.

Fawkes had no idea what they were talking about but he could see that they were both feeling better now, which pleased him. *A phoenix is the best cure there is*, he thought proudly. *Infinitely better than chocolate!*

"So what have we got?" Darkness asked. "Anything with birds?"

"I don't think so, but here's *Evil Dead II*," Mysteria said, pulling the cassette out of her bag.

Simultaneously both girls realized that they did not want to watch zombies. The Dementor had temporarily cooled their enthusiasm for that sort of thing.

Mysteria dropped the cassette back into the bag and pulled out another. "Hey, how 'bout some Road Runner cartoons?"

"Oh yeah, great!" Darkness jumped out of bed. "Fawksie will like those. Let's set up the video thing!"





Just after he left the dining hall, Severus turned a corner and was shocked to hear a startled voice say, "Profess..."

He looked up quickly and saw Jules Bulstrode, Millicent's younger brother, who was standing in the hall with a group of Bayou students. Jules had been a fourth-year Slytherin. Severus shot the kid a deadly look and lad immediately got the message and pretended he was coughing: "Ack! Off! Urk!"

"You okay?" one of the Bayou students asked.

Severus was none too happy to be recognized but thank Merlin it was a Slytherin and not someone from one of the other Houses! Slytherins know when to keep their mouths shut. Severus gave Bulstrode a barely perceptible nod, glanced toward an empty classroom, and then continued on his way. The lad would know what he meant.

What is Bulstrode doing here? he wondered. Why isn't he at Hogwarts? Did he transfer? Are there Gryffindors here, too?

When he was confident that no one was paying any attention to him Severus doubled back to the empty classroom. Inside, it looked like the younger students had been working on magical painting. There were childish-looking watercolors hanging on the walls. Smiling figures labeled 'Mom' and 'Dad' waved mechanically in front of little houses. Smoke rose from the chimneys and painted flowers bloomed in the yards. In one, a dog with a red collar bounced around in the foreground. Blotchy blue raindrops fell in another.

He didn't have to wait very long before Jules turned up. And he wasn't alone. Three other young Slytherins were with him: Marigold Montague, Mick Bletchley, and Donny Derrick. They closed the door and gathered around him excitedly.





"Professor! It's really you! You're alive!" Marigold cried. She looked as if she was going to hug him, but fortunately she got hold of herself.

"Obviously," Severus said, frowning. "And you'll keep that information to yourselves. My name is Solomon Slade now, and you've never seen me before."

"You can count on us, sir! It's a Slytherin secret!" Marigold said, making some sort of secret hand-gesture. The others nodded eagerly and repeated the gesture.

"How'd you do it, sir?" Jules asked, grinning.

Severus dismissed the question with a wave of his hand. "Never mind that," he said. "What are you doing here? Are there any non-Slytherins?"

"No, it's just the four of us, sir," Donny said. "We couldn't face going back to Hogwarts. Not after what happened. They're saying we're all cowards and little Death Eaters because McGonagall kicked us out and then we didn't fight in the battle. Everyone made it plain that we're not wanted. We weren't wanted then, and we're not wanted now. So some of us decided to go somewhere else to finish school. Somewhere where nobody cares about Harry Stinking Potter or the bloody Dark Lord."

"A lot of the seventh-years like Millicent and Blaise studied at home to pass their exams," Jules said, "and the ones who can afford it hired tutors. But the younger ones like us still have several years to go, so some of our parents started looking at other schools abroad. The ones in Europe where they don't teach in English, like Durmstrang, Zaubenberg, and Beauxbatons, would be tough for most of us, even with translation charms, but there are lots of good schools here in North America."

"It's not just Slytherins," Marigold said. "It's anyone who wasn't 'in' with Potter and his pals, or who didn't fight. Marietta's mum lost her job at the



Ministry because Marietta was a 'traitor', and they went to Canada — Montreal, I think. I heard that Cho Chang went with them. Marietta cried really hard when she heard you were dead," she added. "She was so grateful to you for creating that potion that healed those scars on her face."

That had been one of the first things he'd done after he'd become Headmaster. The poor girl had been left to suffer for way too long.

"Some stayed on at Hogwarts, of course," Mick said. "It's the cheapest thing to do, and some parents insisted on it. Family tradition and all that. Personally, I feel sorry for them. They're going to get treated worse than dirt."

"I'm sure you're right," Severus said. He remembered quite clearly what it had been like in his own student days. *I mustn't get involved. There's nothing I can do for them now*, he thought grimly. *But perhaps they can help each other.*

"I want you to get in touch with all of the Slytherin students, at Hogwarts and elsewhere," he told them. "Set up a Slytherin grapevine and write to one another, even the ones that you may not like. I'll give you a list of trustworthy Slytherins who have finished recently, and I want you to include them, too. They can provide advice. You're all in this together, and you need to help one another. Don't let anyone feel left out. And keep me informed!"

I've got to stop worrying about 'my' students, he thought as he left the classroom. *That part of my life is over. It's Minerva's problem now. But I must remember to give a vial of pimple potion to Mick.*



"We're definitely going to have to expand the restricted section," Minerva said, looking at the stacks of books. "Most of these are *not* suitable for students."



The Ministry had finally gotten around to processing Severus's will. He had left everything to Hogwarts and all of his belongings had been brought from Spinner's End and deposited in his quarters in the dungeons. Most of it was books, many of them ancient and bound in dark leather.

"Some of these books are disturbing," Pomona said, eyeing a black book covered with strange symbols and titled in what looked like Arabic script. She opened it and a malevolent-looking mummy glared at her from a hand-painted illustration. He lay in a stone sarcophagus, his yellow eyes glowing through a gap in his filthy wrappings. When he started to twitch she closed the book quickly but carefully. "You don't suppose he had a copy of the you-know-what, do you?"

Minerva looked at the cover but didn't touch it. "The Necronomicon?" she said. "I suppose it's possible. Severus couldn't very well pass as a member of Voldemort's inner circle without an exceptional knowledge of the Dark Arts."

"We'd better be careful what we touch," Pomona said. "There could be cursed artefacts in here."

"He left everything in perfect order, you know," Minerva said, changing the subject. "I'm sure Albus must have left things in a mess, but Severus had the bookkeeping up to date and the budget was balanced. He left his will in the top drawer of the Headmaster's desk where we would be sure to find it. There was even a letter of resignation. It said, 'As of the end of this term, or my death, whichever comes first.' He must have felt that he was doomed."

"He always was a stickler for details," Pomona said. "I almost miss him sometimes." She paused for a moment and then said, "Minerva, there's been another brawl in my House, former Gryffindors against former Slytherins again. Several of them had to be taken to the infirmary. I don't



know what to do, I really don't. Maybe it's hopeless."



Ron opened a butterbeer. The fridge at Grimmauld Place was always well stocked. "Hermione and I have been thinking of postponing the wedding," he said. "Do you and Ginny mind? I mean, it's supposed to be a double ceremony and all. It's not that Hermione and I don't love each other, but everything's been happening so fast."

If Harry had been cheating on Ginny, maybe this would get him to open up about it.

"Too fast, really," Harry agreed. "Your mum would have had us all married on my birthday if we hadn't talked her into waiting until next spring. I mean, I love Ginny, and I love your mum, too — she's the only person who's ever been like a mother to me — but I don't think I'm ready yet. You remember how the prophecy said that 'neither shall live while the other survives'? Well, I feel like I haven't really lived yet. First it was the Dursleys, and then it was the whole 'Boy Who Lived' thing, and then I was supposed to save the entire wizarding world, except the world couldn't seem to make up its mind whether it loved me or hated me, and... well, you know. You were there."

"I hadn't thought about it that way, about the prophecy, I mean," Ron admitted. "Was that why you went to Norway, because you wanted to get away from all that for a little while?"

"Yeah, it was fun." Harry paused. "But there was more to it than that."

Ah ha! Ron thought. I knew it!

"Do you remember that guy from that Knight Boat that we saw when we were on that training mission? I'm sure it was Snape in disguise. In fact,



I'm positive of it. Someone sent me that picture of my mum and the piece of her letter, and it had to be him."

Whatever Ron had been expecting to hear, this wasn't it. Harry must be off his nut, but saying so wouldn't help. No, he'd try a different approach. "Well," he said, "it's good if Snape's alive, but if he was disguised it means that he doesn't want anyone to know, so he'd probably want you to just forget about it."

"I don't know," Harry said. "I feel some sort of strange kinship with him now. Maybe it started when I was reading the Prince's potions textbook. I sort of got to like the Prince then, even though didn't know he was really Snape. And when I viewed those memories that he gave me in the shack, they were really powerful, maybe because he thought he was dying and he poured everything into them. Whenever I'd seen things in a Pensieve before, it was like I was just an observer, but with those memories, I could almost feel what he felt."

Ron wasn't sure where all this was going but it was making him very uneasy. Had Harry been possessed by Snape's ghost via those memories? He suppressed a shudder and forced himself to keep smiling.

"He didn't want me to die, you know," Harry continued, "and he was really angry at Professor Dumbledore for not trying to change that. Remember how he saved my life at that Quidditch match, even though he and I hated each other? Do you think I owe him a life debt? I didn't even lift a finger to help him when we thought he was dying."

"I think you should leave well enough alone," Ron said firmly.

"Probably, but I want to know if he's okay. That's why I hailed that Knight Boat that took me to Oslo. I was looking for Snape but I got the



wrong boat. I'm going to try again. You understand, don't you?"

Ron didn't, really, but he wasn't going to abandon Harry now. "Well," he said, "if that's what you've got to do then I'd better go with you. I can pick up the pieces and bring them back after he hexes you into the next millennium. Assuming he's alive, that is, and assuming we can find him." Ron sincerely hoped that Snape wasn't, or that they couldn't.

"Um, Harry," Ron said, putting his butterbeer down on the coffee table and slipping his wand out of his jacket, "is that a *hand* that I see under your couch?"

"Huh?" said Harry. He leaned down and looked, and sure enough, there was a detached hand hunkered down almost flat on the floor under the couch. "Yikes!" he cried. "It's one of those horrible hand-things that we let out of that cauldron! It must have escaped! Get it!"

Harry dropped down on one knee, pulled his wand out of his back pocket and pointed it under the couch, but the hand jumped up and galloped across the room on its fingertips.

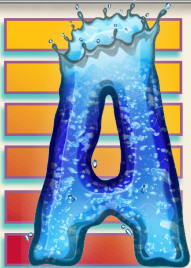
"Whaddya mean 'we'?" Ron said. "You're the one who let 'em out." He fired a stunner, but the hand jumped sideways and dodged it, and then it scampered off into the kitchen and slipped through the gap under the cellar door.

Harry sealed the door with a spell. "It must have followed me back here somehow," he said, scratching his head. "We'll have to figure out some way to trap it."

Ron sighed. The war was over, but being the best pal of The Chosen One wasn't getting any easier.



Elf Appreciation Day



ARMSTRONG CAUGHT UP WITH SEVERUS IN

the hall outside the library. "Today is Elf Appreciation Day," he announced. "We're celebrating the renewal of their contract. We're having a barbecue this afternoon and we want you guys to join us. We're hoping it will cheer the students up a bit," he added. "This morning Mr Cohen told them about the Dementor attacks, and the truth about what happened to Greenly and French. They're all pretty upset."

"It's best to tell them the truth, even if it's distressing," Severus said coldly. He couldn't help thinking of Albus for a moment. "But what kind of contract do your Elves have?" He'd never heard of an Elf contract but he didn't know much about Elves, even though they'd been a great help to him when he was Headmaster.

"Well, back when America was being settled, a lot of wizard families brought their House-Elves with them from Europe," Armstrong said, "but after the Civil War they decided that it was wrong to own them and they passed the Smiles-Crumley Act of 1867 which made Elf ownership illegal. After that, a few of the more adventurous Elves went out west and signed on as cooks for the cattle drives. It's said they revolutionized chuckwagon cooking by introducing new kinds of beans. A few others became cooks in the gold rush towns. Most, though, preferred the traditional role and opted to continue with their families by becoming employees instead of property. Today, families and organizations make contracts with their House-Elves. That's what we do here at the school," he added proudly.

"It's mostly a formality, of course. The Elves are very happy here with us and we're very happy with them, but it's the custom to renew the contract



every year. We make sure the Elves get proper salaries and benefits, but the thing they like most is being appreciated, so every year after classes have started we hold a barbecue in their honor. We really do appreciate them. They're a great bunch and I don't know what we'd do without them."

The same was true at Hogwarts; Severus couldn't imagine trying to run the place without Elves.

"Come on," Armstrong said. He almost clapped Severus on the shoulder but then he thought better of it. "Let's go find Kat and the others. Everything's set up out in the back courtyard and the Elves have started cooking. Let's bring Fawkes, too. The kids would love a chance to see a real phoenix."



When Severus entered the infirmary Darkness and Mysteria were watching the video player and arguing with the nurse. They were both dressed in white housecoats and infirmary pajamas, and Fawkes was sitting on the back of the couch between them. Alvin, Mysteria's tarantula, sat on her shoulder.

"We're not well enough to leave yet," Mysteria announced. "We need some more chocolate."

The nurse looked exasperated. As she turned and left the room, the video player emitted a loud 'twang' followed by a crash.

Severus raised an eyebrow. "Feeling better, are we?" he asked. He marched over to look at the screen and saw a stunned-looking cartoon coyote peering out from under a fallen anvil. A cartoon bird stuck its tongue out rapidly, said "Beep! Beep!" and ran off down the road.

Fawkes chirped "Beep! Beep!" and cackled happily.



"Mr Slade! You've come to see us!" Darkness said, grinning at him. Her mouth was smeared with chocolate.

Severus bristled. "I'm looking for Fawkes," he said sternly. "He's been invited to a barbecue."

"The barbecue?" Mysteria said. "I forgot all about that! We'd better get changed." She pointed a little box at the video player and the screen went black.

"Where'd she put our clothes?" Darkness asked. "These rags are, like, totally boring."

As Severus left the infirmary with Fawkes flying ahead of him the nurse whispered, "Thank you!"



The smell of smoke and barbeque sauce rose into the air as the Elves busied themselves over the charcoal fires. Since the barbeque was in their honor, they insisted on doing all the cooking themselves. It was a point of honor with them.

"I think they believe that all wizards are incompetent," Armstrong said. Severus nodded. "In most cases, they'd be right."

The students were milling around waiting for things to get started so Armstrong called them over to see Fawkes, who had obligingly settled on a low-hanging tree branch where they could all admire him.

"That's right," he said as the students gathered around, "this is Fawkes, and he's a real phoenix. They're extremely rare. In fact, he is the first one that I've ever seen."

The children craned their necks trying to get a better look.

"Do you see how the feathers on his body are iridescent? They vary



from scarlet to crimson to reddish purple, depending how the light strikes them. There are blue-green phoenixes, too, or so the legends say. Full-grown phoenixes, like Fawkes here, are about as big as swans and they have a wingspan of almost 10 feet."

Fawkes didn't understand what Armstrong was saying but he could see that the man was pointing to his wings so he obligingly spread them, eliciting a chorus of ooohs and aaaahs from the children. Some of them brought out cameras and snapped pictures.

"He really is beautiful!" Angie said, as she and Kat watched from the back of the group.

"That bird is the world's biggest ham," Kat said, chuckling.

"Note the feathers on the undersides of his wings," Armstrong added. "They're bright yellow, just like those long feathers on the crown of his head, and the ones over his eyes and in the center of his tail."

Fawkes folded his wings and looked down at the students. *Cute little fledglings*, he thought as they chattered happily below him. *They love me! I wish Albus had showed me to the little ones at Hogwarts like this, but he was always too busy.*

"Now I'm sure you've all heard how phoenixes live for millennia," Armstrong continued. "When old age catches up with one or it suffers an accident, it bursts into flames and then it's reborn from its ashes as a healthy chick. Fawkes has probably done this many times. Imagine all the marvels that he's probably seen throughout history. He might have travelled with Marco Polo, or sailed with Columbus. Why, he was probably there when they built Stonehenge!"

"Look at his claws!" one boy shouted. "They look like they're made of



gold! So does his beak!"

"Yes, and they're as sharp as daggers," Armstrong said, "so you must always treat him with the greatest respect."

"Yeah," Darkness interjected, "you should have seen him rip into that Dementor thing!"

"He was, like, totally awesome!" Mysteria added. Both girls were once again dressed in their preferred garish ensembles.

Armstrong went on to lecture about the healing powers of phoenix tears, the power of phoenix feathers in wands, and the use of phoenix droppings in medicinal potions. He continued until the Elves began sending platters of food to the tables.

Fawkes flew over to inspect the spread. The steaks, ribs, and pork chops did not interest him, and neither did the ears of corn that had been roasted in the husk, or the baked potatoes wrapped in tinfoil. *Coleslaw? No. Potato salad? No. Jello salad? Absolutely not!* Where were the cakes and pies? He flew off to raid the kitchen.

Severus, Kat and Angie joined the faculty members, and after the students had settled in at the picnic tables and the hubbub had finally died down Mr Cohen stood up and welcomed everyone to the Elf Appreciation Barbecue.

"We're all here to show our Elves how much they mean to us," he said as the Elves gathered in front of the group, all dressed neatly in their official Bayou school tea-towels. Everyone clapped and the Elves bowed and curtsied repeatedly, which made their big ears flap like bird wings.

Cohen showered them with praise for at least five minutes, and finally he announced, "This year, we have a special treat for everyone! The second-year students are going to start the festivities with a song that they



wrote for the Elves."

The Elves quivered with excitement, but Severus scowled. This did not sound promising.

Assembling in front of the Elves, the children began to sing:

"Thank you, thank you, little Elves;

We want to thank you all ourselves;

We know you're there behind the scenes;

You make us feel like kings and queens!"

Severus grimaced and cast the Gossypium charm on himself to block his hearing. He'd developed that spell after enduring things like the Valentine's Day nonsense that Lockhart had instigated during his disastrous year at Hogwarts. It came in handy on occasions like those, and it had been too bad that he hadn't dared to use it during the Dark Lord's interminable speeches.

The children continued singing:

"Thank you so much, little Elves;

You're all wonderful, yourselves;

We love it when you wash our jeans;

You fry our eggs and bake our beans!"

It was obvious that the Elves loved it. They tilted their ears forward to catch every note, and they clapped happily when the children had finished. Everyone else clapped too, possibly because they were glad it was over.



Barbarous! thought Severus as he watched Armstrong gnawing on a barbecued rib. Then Angie grabbed an ear of corn, ripped off the husk, smeared it with butter, and started chewing the kernels directly off the cob.



Just like some tribe of Paleolithic hunters celebrating a big kill! Severus was not going to sink to that level. Selecting a small ear of corn, he vanished the husk and charmed the kernels loose so that they fell into a neat pile on his plate beside his steak. Kat offered him a can of ice-cold Magic Dew but he turned it down in favor of some ice water. He'd tried a sip of that abominable canned 'iced tea' that some of them liked and it was all could do to keep himself from spitting the sickeningly sweet concoction across the table.

"Mind if I join you?" someone asked, and Severus turned to see 'Doctor' Proctor, the old man from the boat works who looked after the Muggle Mobile. "The wife's away visitin' the great great grandchildren in California, so I thought I'd do a bit of visitin' myself." He took a seat at the end of the table and helped himself to a steak and some potato salad.

"Good to see ya, Doc," Kat said. He and Angie had been arguing about Saunders. The young agent had stayed in his room saying that he didn't feel well.

"The Dementors have a really strong effect on him, that's all," Angie said. "He just needs some time. He'll be okay."

"That's the problem," Kat said. "He's too sensitive. It's too bad that he came back. He's going to get somebody killed, and it could be you."

"He's just trying to face his fears," Angie said defensively. "I think he had some bad experiences in his past and he's trying to get over them."

"Kat's right," Severus said harshly. "He's endangering people." Thanks to Legilimency, Severus knew what had happened to Saunders, but he had no confidence that the young man would ever learn to cope with it. The kid was drowning in his terrible past.

"I think he may be pushing himself a bit too hard," Proctor said thoughtfully. "You can't force these things. If it's something really bad, you never





truly get over it, but with time, you get better at livin' with it." The old man popped open a can of Magic Dew. "Maybe I should have coffee with him sometime," he continued. "I've seen a lot of things, both good and bad, in my long life, and I seem to have a knack for helping people put things into perspective."

"Is it true that you're two hundred years old, like everybody says?" Angie asked.

"No, I'm not quite that old," Proctor said laughing. "But almost. I came here from a village in Africa — Proctor wasn't my name back then; I borrowed it after I got here so I could blend in better — when I heard about the Civil War. I was a foolish young hothead back then, and I thought I could come over here and win it single handedly, free the slaves, and make everything right." He paused for a moment. "It would be fair to say that I did not understand the magnitude of the problem."

A hush fell over their table. Of course he would have been there then. Most of them realized that, but no one had ever had the courage to ask him about it. It was a very sensitive topic, but the old man continued his story as if he were oblivious to that fact.

"There were powerful wizards on both sides, as well as hundreds of thousands of Muggles," he said, "and when I got here on my flying carpet, I jumped right in, fool that I was. It was shocking. Horrible. The world had never seen killing on such a huge scale before, and it went on for years. Took me a long, long time to get over it. But let's not speak of such unpleasant things at such a nice picnic." He reached for the coleslaw. "Anybody else want some of this?" he asked.

Yes, I'm sure that would take quite a long time, Severus thought, but it



appeared that the old man had managed to do it. Severus's own past was beginning to feel a little bit more remote now, like he was starting to wake up from a very bad dream. Especially here, relaxing at a picnic, surrounded by interesting companions. But his close call with the Dementor had reminded him that the old emotions were still there, lurking in the back of his mind. He needed to let go of his past, of all the guilt and pain and resentment, but that was easier said than done. For a moment, he almost felt a touch of sympathy for Saunders, but he quickly pushed that thought away.



The Ghouls Busters, as the expert team from the Agency was called, flew in on their black brooms as the barbecue was wrapping up. They looked rather scary in their dark green robes and black helmets, but Severus doubted that the Dementors would be impressed.

"You can all go home now," their leader, Captain Pugh, announced confidently. "We'll take it from here." Then he marched off to organize his team.

"They have no idea what they're getting into," Severus muttered.

"It's just as well that they're here, though," Kat said. "I think I'm too full to move. There's no way I could go out there tonight." His plate was stacked with gnawed bones, corn cobs, and other food residue.

Angie gave him a disgusted look. "You didn't have to make such a pig of yourself!"

Kat just rolled his eyes. "I'll summon the boat in the morning," he said, yawning, "after I sleep this off."





Cosmo, the boat's kneazle, sniffed the air when the boat docked in Glasgow. *That's ... interesting*, he thought. *Very interesting. Do I detect... a female?* He bothered to get up, stretch, and jump off the captain's chart table. Then he wandered out onto the deck to check things out.

A rather ragged-looking fellow with long, stringy hair and a frown on his face was standing on the dock. Cosmo sniffed the air again. It smelled a bit like the fellow had been hiding in the sewers.

As Captain Clark waved his wand to run out the gangplank, the man handed a coin to the lad who'd called the boat for him. Probably a Squib, the captain thought as he watched the man lug his battered leather suitcase up the gangplank. It appeared to be quite heavy. A brown and black cat with large yellow eyes trotted in front him.

Cosmo's ears stood up, his eyes popped open, and his tail quivered. *Wow!* he thought, *What a beauty!* as the breeze brought him the scent of Mrs Norris. *I think I'm in love! In fact, I know I am!*



Harry and Ron got out of the taxi not far from the old warehouse that held the Knight Lines office. "I'll never understand Muggle money," Ron said. "Thanks for taking care of it. I mean, I know the driver thought I was a bit strange, but you didn't have to tell him I was an American."

"Well, it seemed to explain why you couldn't figure out the currency," Harry said. "But you're right. There's no reason for us to go around catching Knight Boats at random until we find the right one. If we're going to be Aurors, we should conduct a proper investigation."

"Exactly. So don't forget the cover story."



They walked around to the back of the building and used a charm to reveal the door. Inside a group of middle-aged wizards was seated at desks, busily writing on scrolls. Stacks of shipping crates filled the rest of the warehouse behind them.

Ron wanted to look important so he did his best imitation of Percy. He walked up to the front counter, cleared his throat, and rang the bell impatiently.

A thin wizard with a receding hairline looked up from his work and asked, "Can I help you?"

"We're from the Auror Department and we want to talk to someone about Knight Boat schedules," Ron said officiously.

"That would be me." The man's nametag said 'Flushwell'. He didn't seem particularly impressed by Ron, but fortunately he didn't ask to see their identification.

"One of your boats picked up some animals from an island off Scotland for us a few weeks ago," Harry said. "Could you tell us which boat that was?"

"That would be Number Six," Mr Flushwell said. "Their home port is Baltimore. That's in America, you know," he added. He looked annoyed. "What has that bunch of irresponsible good-for-nothings done this time?"

"Oh, they haven't done anything wrong," Harry assured him. "We believe a small magical creature escaped then and we're trying to track it down. We think it might have stowed away on that boat. Can you tell us where Number Six has been, and where it might be going?"

"Where *she's* going," Flushwell said, looking even more annoyed. "Ships are always referred to as 'she'." He took a scroll out of a rack and waved his wand over it to make a copy. "This might not be complete or accurate."



That bunch on Number Six is the absolute worst when it comes to completing their paperwork properly." He shook his head as he handed it to them. "Hopeless, the lot of them. Do you want me to contact them and tell them you're looking for them?"

"No, that's okay, we'll handle it," Harry said quickly. "Thanks for your help," he added as they headed for the door.

When they got outside a light rain was falling, and Harry cast Imperius to keep the scroll dry. Ron conjured two umbrellas.

"So what does it say?" Ron asked.

"Let's see." Unrolling the scroll, Harry read, "North Wales, Melbourne, an unpronounceable place in China, Borneo, Manaus, Lake Tanganyika, Lisbon, Acapulco, Baltimore, Pittsburgh... There's no pattern to it."

"There wouldn't be a pattern," Ron observed. "Knight Boats are like Knight Busses. They go where they're called, or where they're needed. Does it say anything about where they might be going?"

Harry read down the scroll until he reached the end. "Yes! Here at the bottom, it says they're expected to make a pick-up at the Bayou Academy of Magical Arts soon." Harry smiled. "Do you think we can get a port-key to New Orleans?"

Ron looked pained. "Probably," he said.



Whack-A-Mole



SEVERUS WAS BACK IN THE POTIONS CLASS-

room at Hogwarts. Draco was there. So were the Weasley twins, James Potter and Peter Pettigrew, all seated at their desks, waiting. Severus wasn't sure if he was supposed to be a student or the teacher, but he knew he was late. He felt lost. He opened a supply cabinet and was shocked to find a tiny werewolf staring out at him. Its little black eyes burned with hate. It wrinkled its ugly snout, exposing its yellow fangs, and began to growl. He slammed the door shut and there was flash of silver light.

He woke up suddenly as another flash lit his room. It must be the Ghoul Busters casting their Patronuses, he realized as the sleepiness vanished from his mind. *They're 'busting' Dementors — or trying to.*

He looked out the window. The swamps were dark and quiet for a moment, and then there were a few more flashes. *I'd better find out what's going on*, he thought.

He had just finished dressing when there was a knock on his door. He opened it to find a very agitated Mr Cohen. "I'm waking the staff because we need to protect the children," the Principal told him. "We're gathering in the dining hall. The Ghoul Busters seem to have stirred up quite a hornets' nest out there. There's a battle going on in the swamp and I'm worried that it could spill over into the school area. We'll have to evacuate the students. I'd rather err on the side of caution than have a tragedy." He then hurried off down the hall.

Fawkes was still asleep on his perch, making soft little whistling noises. *Snoring, I suppose*, Severus thought. *Ridiculous creature! He's probably dreaming. I wonder what a phoenix dreams about? Well, I won't wake him.*



He'd only get up to some sort of mischief. He conjured a cage around the perch, a tricky spell that he managed with ease, and then he covered the cage with a conjured cloth and floated it along to the dining hall.



Fawkes dreamed of the Ancient Ancestors who had ruled the world long before the first phoenix was hatched. They were strangely beautiful, graceful creatures that the Muggles called by awkward names like *Archaeopteryx* and *Confuciusornis*. He watched them in his dream. Some soared through the skies, some were flightless and, shockingly, many of them had teeth, but all of them were covered with beautiful feathers, just like today's birds. Fawkes knew they had all been destroyed by the wrath of the sky gods a long time ago. It made him sad to think of it.

An *Archaeopteryx* flew past and winked at Fawkes. *Carry on, little brother!* he sang.



When Severus reached the dining hall Cohen and Armstrong were already there and the rest of the staff were pouring in. "I need most of you to wake the children, organize them into groups, and escort them to New Orleans," Cohen announced. "We need to get them out, just in case some of those things get past the Agents. Use the Emergency Floo; it's big and powerful enough to take groups of up to ten all the way there. Now get going!

Then he turned to Armstrong. "If you and your group are willing," Cohen said, "I'd like you to stand guard on the wall in case any of those things approach. You'll be our last line of defense."





"We're ready," Armstrong said, looking at the others. "Let's go!"

"Look after Fawkes for me," Severus said to Cohen. He floated the covered cage with the still-sleeping phoenix over into a quiet corner, and then he apparated with Armstrong. The two of them appeared on top of the wall nearest to the battle area. Kat and Angie were already there, and somewhat to Severus's surprise, Saunders was there, too.

"So what happens now?" Kat asked.

"We wait," said Angie, staring out into the darkness.



"So where are you heading?" Seabiscuit asked as Argus Filch took a seat in the mess.

Filch poured himself a mug of tea. "America," he replied.

"Where in America?" Biscuit asked, just to make conversation.

"I haven't decided yet," Filch said irritably. He reached for the sugar.

"Well, I'd recommend a stop in Baltimore," Biscuit said. "My cousin works for the Wizard Immigration Assistance Agency there. They can help you get proper identification — the Muggles are very uptight about illegal immigrants these days — and they'll point you toward the various wizarding groups and communities. They have programs to help people get settled, and they have programs for Squibs who..."

"I am NOT a Squib!" Argus shouted.

Oops, thought Biscuit, I guess I hit a nerve there. "Of course not," he said quickly. "I just meant that they have programs for everyone there, no matter who or what they are."

"Hrummph," said Filch.



Biscuit left the man grumbling to himself and went back into the galley. He was in the midst of making vegetable soup when the silence was broken by a distant yelp.

"My cat!" Filch cried. "Something's happened to my cat!" He jumped up and ran off to find her.



Mrs Norris yelped in surprise when she spotted Cosmo, the ship's kneazle, watching her from behind a crate of books.

"Hi there, beautiful," he purred as he crept out of his hiding place and sauntered across the floor. "What's a nice gal like you doin' on a boat like this?"

Mrs Norris scowled. *The nerve of that big orange kneazle! Who does he think he is, giving me a corny old pick-up line like that?* She looked him over with her big yellow eyes. *He does have lovely fur and nice green eyes, though. Those black tufts on his ears and tail are kind of classy, too. Must be a pureblood. Well, I'll show him a thing or two!* When he got close enough she gave a mighty hiss and swatted him upside the head, knocking him head over heels and ripping his ear.

Wow! Whatta woman! Cosmo thought, shaking his head as he righted himself. He puffed himself up and started yodeling loudly. She answered him with a long, drawn out howl.



"So do you think the Ghouls can handle them?" Kat asked after a while.

"Probably," said Angie. "The Busters are kind of... insensitive, I guess you might say. They're really thick, actually; nothing gets to them. It's



one of the fundamental requirements for joining them." She thought for a moment. "Maybe that's why most of them are men."

Kat gave her a look. "Ha ha, very funny — not!" he said.

"There is some evidence that being incredibly obtuse and thick-headed can help one resist Dementors," Severus said, remembering Sirius Black's sojourn in Azkaban for a moment. "However, it probably does not help one cast a strong Patronus."

Angie scoffed. "I'm sure the Busters all have extremely powerful Patronuses. Things like lions and tigers and bears."

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

"The Dementors may be smarter than we think," Severus said. "I've heard that Dementors always flee before a Patronus. However, if they scatter instead, then some of them could double back."

"You mean that, while the Busters' Patronuses are busy attacking some of them, the rest could be heading back here?" Angie asked.

"Precisely," said Severus. "The Dementor that encountered those two girls last night, Darkness and Mysteria, or whatever their names are, was probably doing exactly that."

Armstrong increased the light from his wand. "Dementors are sooty black, and it's going to be hard to spot them in the dark. They could be on us before we know it."

Severus nodded, remembering the one that had sneaked up on him the previous night.

"I'll fix that," Angie said and she cast *Dementorem Revelio*. "There's one!" she cried. "Over there, to the left! *Expecto Patronum!*" A silver streak sprang from her wand and sped after the Dementor. "The rest of you hold



back! There may be more!"

And indeed there were. It wasn't long before their charms revealed at least four more hiding in the dark.

"*Expecto Patronum!*" cried Armstrong and Kat, and silver streaks flashed from their wands and flew toward the shadowy creatures.

Severus closed his eyes, took a deep breath and remembered how good it felt to be alive. Then he called out, "*Expecto Patronum!*" and his Patronus sped after the others.

Saunders was the last one to cast. His voice quivered and his Patronus failed to materialize so Severus wasn't surprised when the young Agent apparated away right afterward. With their Patronuses gone, they were completely vulnerable. There was nothing to stop any Dementors that managed to dodge the Patronuses. Not only were they unprotected, but so was the school. If any of the monsters got past them, they could get inside.



Inside the school, the evacuation was not going well. The staff didn't want to send the children unescorted, and there weren't enough teachers for every group, so after delivering a group, the teacher would have to come back for another. This had caused a major traffic jam at the floor.

"Be careful coming back — don't get in the way of outgoing groups!" Mr Cohen kept shouting, but it was no use. He watched helplessly as an incoming Ms Larose collided with Ms Brewster and an outgoing group. They all ended up in a heap on the floor, but the older boys didn't seem to mind too much. Most of them were quite enamored of the majestic Divination teacher.

"Boys are such morons," Mysteria said, rolling her eyes, "and so are teachers!"



"Hey, look," Darkness said, "I think that's Fawksie, asleep in that cage in the corner. He doesn't know what's going on."

"Well, I can fix that," Mysteria said. Leaving her place in line, she fished around in her backpack and came up with a packet of chocolate-covered coffee beans. She uncovered the cage, opened its door, and held some beans under Fawkes's beak. "Wakey wakey, pretty birdie," she crooned, "I've got some yummy treats for you!"



Contrary to Angie's expectations, the Ghoul Busters were having a rough time of it in the swamp. Even the toughest of them could feel the effects of the Dementors. Irrational fears began to creep into their minds and it became difficult for them to think clearly. Their Patronuses started to weaken.

Captain Pugh took a deep breath and reminded himself to stay calm. "Keep thinking good thoughts to keep yourselves strong!" he ordered. "And keep your Patronuses out there until all of those monsters have been destroyed!"

He turned to see a Dementor closing in on his sergeant, who was leaning on a tree and vomiting. He thought of his parents, visualizing their smiling faces with all his might, and he waved his wand to recall his Patronus. His silver boar responded and came charging back to gore the Dementor with its tusks.



Severus and his companions watched tensely as their Patronuses zig-zagged through the trees. The silver creatures would gang up on one of the Dementors and try to destroy it, but then they'd suddenly be distracted by



another. It reminded Kat of the Muggle game called Whack-A-Mole.

"Is it my imagination, or is the light from the Busters' Patronuses getting weaker?" Armstrong asked, peering off into the distance.

"So it would appear," Severus said grimly. "We could use a backup plan." In the worst case, he knew he could cast Fiendfyre on the monsters, but that would be an act of last resort. He wasn't certain that he could control the flames. It wasn't the sort of curse that one practiced, after all; it was far too dangerous. The Carrows had been insane to even mention it to the Hogwarts students. He could only hope that Cohen was almost finished evacuating the students.

Suddenly there was a loud 'crack' and Saunders appeared beside him. "Now what?" Severus started to growl, but the young Agent grabbed him and apparated away, taking Severus along with him.



Fawkes happily gobbled down Mysteria's coffee beans and then he looked around as the caffeine took hold and his sleepiness faded away. *What?* he wondered. *It seems to be the middle of the night. What is everyone doing? Have they all gone crazy? These fledglings should be asleep now! So should I! And where is my wizard? What's going on here?*

"The Dementor-things are back, Fawkes," Mysteria told him. "We've got to get out of here." She pointed at the floo. Mr Griffin, the magical creatures expert, had just tried to leave with a group of twelve, having failed to count them accurately in the confusion, and purple smoke was pouring out of the overworked floo. Mr Cohen was frantically casting spells at it, trying to get it back into working order.



The phoenix didn't understand the girl's words but he could sense the danger. He shrieked, took off, and flew straight through the nearest window, leaving a phoenix-shaped hole in the glass.



When they landed, Severus grabbed Saunders by the throat and slammed him up against the nearest wall. "You sniveling coward!" he snarled. "I should break your useless neck!"

"No! Listen!" Saunders managed to croak. "I need your help!"

"It's the students who need my help, not you!" he said, flinging Saunders to the floor.

He turned to apparate back to the others, but Saunders grabbed his leg and screamed, "I KNOW HOW TO STOP THEM!"

Severus hesitated and, for the first time, he looked around. They were in some kind of windowless wooden shack lit by a kerosene lantern that hung in one corner. An ominous-looking symbol that he'd never seen before was drawn in the center of the dirt floor, surrounded by a circle of black candles. There was also a bowl of what looked like blood, along with some smaller bowls that held powders, herbs, bones, and pickled monstrosities.

"I know a spell that should weaken them so they'll be easy to destroy," Saunders groaned. "I saw it done once, to some other... things. I tried to cast it, but I'm not strong enough to do it alone. I need help."

Saunders was bleeding from one wrist and Severus realized that the blood in the bowl must be his. He was also bleeding from his nose, but Severus had caused that when he'd thrown the young Agent to the floor.

"Let go of my leg and pull yourself together!" Severus snapped. He





pulled a vial of blood-replenishing potion from a pouch on his belt and tossed it to Saunders. "There's no time to waste."



"You fat orange furball!" Seabiscuit said as he picked up the kneazle. "Whaddya think this is, the Love Boat?"

Cosmo smiled back at Mrs Norris as the cook carried him off. See ya later, Sweetie, he purred.

"Lock him up somewhere!" Filch fumed.

Mrs Norris glanced toward the cargo hold and waved her tail. After midnight, then, Big Fella, she purred.



"Listen, Harry," Ron said, "this trip is going to take more than one day, whether we find Snape or not, so we can't leave until after Auror training on Friday night. And we don't want to arrive in New Orleans in the middle of the night, so we might as well wait until Saturday morning after breakfast." He was using every excuse that he could think of, desperately trying to delay their trip in the hope that Harry would somehow come to his senses and lose interest in finding Snape.

"No," said Harry, "there's a time difference that will work in our favor. It's several hours earlier there than it is here."

"Really?" Ron asked. He hadn't paid much attention in Astronomy class and he'd never given much thought to the Earth's rotation.

"It's true," Harry told him. "If it's early evening here, it should be mid-afternoon there, I think." He wasn't too clear on the details, either. "Tomor-



row is Friday, so we can leave right after training."

Ron sighed. He was running out of plausible excuses. It wasn't that he didn't want to go to New Orleans; that part sounded like fun. But what if they actually found Snape?

Well, how bad could that really be? Ron asked himself. *Sure, Snape can be pretty scary sometimes, but he's not Voldemort. He won't do anything lethal. And there won't be any Acromantulas there, or basilisks, or Dementors, or anything like that. No, there's no reason to be too worried.*





The Search for Snape



AFTER AUROR TRAINING HAD ENDED FOR THE

week, Harry and Ron had managed to get to Gringotts and take out some money just before closing time. Then they hurried to the London portkey office where they each bought a return trip to New Orleans. Ron was a bit shocked at the price.

"Hey, wait a minute," Ron said. "We should have brought our brooms. We're going to need some way to get around when we get there."

"We could rent some," Harry observed. "There must be a broom rental place there."

"Rental brooms are probably crummy," Ron said. And costly, he thought. I don't want to spend any more on this crazy project than I have to. Ron was far from wealthy, after all. "We'd better go home and get our own."

"Yeah, you're probably right," Harry agreed. If there was one thing that Harry was fussy about, it was brooms, and the thought of riding an inferior broom didn't appeal to him at all. "I suppose we ought to pack a change of clothes, too."

"Look, it's already pretty late," Ron said. "Let's both go home and pack our brooms and stuff, get some sleep, and meet in the morning." He wasn't eager to go searching for Snape, after all. He'd much prefer a good night's sleep. With luck, maybe Harry might even oversleep.



Where has my wizard gone and what is he up to? Fawkes wondered as he flew through the window of the Bayou Academy and into the dark sky. And why can't wizards restrict their misadventures to daytime? This guy's almost as



bad as Albus was. A phoenix just can't get a good night's sleep anymore.

It's surprisingly cold tonight, he realized. Freezing cold, in fact. And where did all this fog come from? This can't be natural! I can feel the evil. It's those horrible soul-suckers again! I'm going in for a closer look. Severus will just have to look after himself for a little while.



"Where did they go?" Kat asked. He was more than a little bit upset. "What has that idiot Saunders done now? What did he do with Slade?"

"I have no idea!" Angie shot back defensively. "He just appeared, grabbed Slade, and apparated away with him."

"This is no time to argue!" Armstrong interjected. "The Dementors are still out there, in case you've forgotten. We can search for our friends later, but for now we'll just have to carry on without them. We have to guard the school until they finish evacuating the students. We're their last line of defense."

"Yeah," Kat agreed, "but the Dementors haven't even come near us yet, and already we've lost two wizards."

"Well, the Ghoul Busters are still out there, so we probably don't have to worry," Angie told him. "I'm sure they can handle the Dementors on their own."

"I hope you're right," Armstrong said, although he had his doubts. He knew that the Dementors were causing the unnatural cold, and the cold had generated the fog. He couldn't see the Dementors anymore, but he knew they were out there.





Saunders knelt on the dirt floor in front of the strange symbol. "Just kneel opposite me, Mr Slade, and try to focus your mind on my chanting. I don't know what the words mean, and I hope I never find out, but the spell should siphon power away from the Dementors and weaken them."

"This had better work," Severus growled. Holding his wand ready, he took his place on the other side of the symbol, between a vase of ugly black flowers and a small pile of bones.

"I saw it done once, and it worked on things that were even more dreadful than those Dementors," Saunders said shyly. He didn't mention what had happened after that, though.

He saw it done once? Severus wondered. *I wonder if this kid knows what he's doing?* He had a nasty suspicion that there was something that the younger wizard wasn't telling him.



"I think they're weakening," Captain Pugh said as he watched his Patronus chasing after a Dementor.

"You mean our Patronuses?" asked his sergeant. "Yeah, they're getting pretty dim."

"No, you idiot! I mean the Dementors! They're getting sort of twitchy."

"It doesn't matter," said the sergeant. He looked lost. "There's no point. There's no point to anything. It's all meaningless."

"You're letting 'em get to you, man!" the captain warned. "Shape up! This is no time for an existential crisis!"

But the sergeant just stood there, staring into the distance.

Then they heard a musical cry above them.





"Look!" cried the captain. "Up in the sky! It's a bird!"

"It's a phoenix!" said the sergeant, as he spotted Fawkes through the swirling mist. His eyes lit up with happiness.

The others must have seen him, too, because the Patronuses started to glow very brightly.



Harry arrived at the Burrow at dawn to meet up with Ron. Unfortunately for him, Molly Weasley was already awake. "I'm surprised to see the two of you up so early on a weekend," she said. "I would have had breakfast ready if I had known. By the way, where are the two of you going?"

"We're going to Scotland for some special Auror training sessions," Harry lied. "You remember when we did that before, and we helped capture those Death Eaters and rescue those animals? We'll be back in a few days. We're not sure exactly how long it's going to take."

"You must remember to tell me these things!" she scolded. "You know how I worry." She glanced at the family clock: Fred's arm had vanished after the battle, but a new one had been added for Harry. There was no arm for Hermione, but maybe that would come later.

"Hi, mum!" Ron said as he came down the stairs carrying his broom and his backpack. "What's for breakfast?"

"Oh, we don't have time for that," Harry said quickly. "We have to get going."

"Don't worry, I'm sure there's enough time," Ron said, smiling at his mum. He was happy for any excuse to delay their departure, and as far as he was concerned, a hot breakfast would be a great improvement over searching for Snape.



"I'm going to cook you a little breakfast and I don't want any arguments!" Molly announced. "Now go sit down at the table. I won't be long."

Harry sighed and took a seat.



Fawkes watched in amazement, along with the Ghoul Busters and the Patronuses. "What do you make of that?" Captain Pugh asked, but no one could answer him. The nearby Dementors were twitching and writhing. Their shrouds had begun to dissolve, revealing their gelatinous grey ectoplasm, and as the souls that they had consumed broke free and streamed upward the Dementors became nothing more than grey shadows. Then they began to move away, all of them heading toward some unknown destination as if drawn by a magnet.

Although he was tempted to start picking off the stragglers, Fawkes knew that something was seriously wrong. *I'd better follow them. There's some sort of terrible power pulling them away, something terribly dangerous, and I need to find out what it is.*



Saunders had been chanting for quite a while, although it sounded more like chattering than chanting. He'd gone into a trance and his voice rose higher and higher until it no longer sounded human. He kept repeating the same short phrase over and over again, and it was incredibly irritating, like claws being scratched across a chalkboard.

Foul smells rose from the things in the bowls and mingled with the smoke from the kerosene lamp. Severus felt nauseous and he had diffi-



culty focusing on the chant. Then he heard a high-pitched chittering noise that seemed to be coming from inside the walls, and he looked up. Grey shadows were marching across the walls toward the darkness at the far end of the shack. It made his skin crawl.

I've never seen anything like this before, he thought, but it reminds me of a spell that I read about once in an ancient book. It opened the gateway to another world that was ruled by ancient beings. They consumed magical energy and Dark Magic, and anything else that they happened to desire. They may be consuming the power of the Dementors now, but such beings are never satisfied. We've awakened them, and soon they'll want more.

He shook his head, trying to clear his mind. The shack seemed to be distorted somehow, in ways that didn't make sense. *I must be hallucinating, he thought, or maybe I'm going mad.* Everything seemed to be twisting and the far end of the shack seemed to go on forever. The shadows continued to march toward it as though they were being sucked into a void.

At least nothing's coming out of there, Severus thought. Not yet, anyway. Saunders had better know how to stop this spell, and he'd better do it soon.



Harry and Ron got to the London portkey office much later than Harry had planned, thanks to Molly's 'little' breakfast, and after a transfer in New York they stepped out of the portkey office in Rue Magique carrying their brooms and backpacks.

"See," Harry said, "it's still dark here. I told you there was a time difference."

"Oh, I wouldn't have noticed that if you hadn't pointed it out," Ron said.

Harry laughed. "Let's get going. Maybe we can get to the Bayou Acad-



emy in time for a second breakfast."

"Another breakfast? Good idea, that." Ron was still stuffed with his first breakfast, but he knew that wouldn't last. "Do you know how to get there?"

"We'll fly down the river to the coast, and then follow the coast until we detect magic," Harry said. "We can use that variation of the Underage Magic detection spell that we learned last month in Auror training."

"Sounds good," Ron said, as he mounted his broom. "Let's go then. A new breakfast awaits!"



"Welcome to the Big Bayou Quidditch Dome, home of the Gulf Coast Griffins!" Mayor Finley, the mayor of the New Orleans magical community, announced to the assembled students and teachers. "Y'all just make yourselves at home while we conjure up some cots and blankets for ya." The evacuation of the Bayou Academy of Magic had been completed and a temporary shelter was being set up in the stadium to house everyone.

"It's a good thing you brought 'em here early, before the hurricane gets any closer," Finley whispered to Mr Cohen. "That was good thinkin'! We don't want to take any chances with the kids."

"The hurricane?" asked Cohen. "You mean Hurricane Georges? I thought that was supposed to hit Florida."

"No, didn't ya'll hear about that? It hit the Florida Keys all right, but then it kinda glanced off and headed northwest. It looks like it's headin' for us now. The Muggles are startin' to evacuate parts of the city."

"Oy!" said Cohen. "No, we hadn't heard. We were busy with a different kind of problem. I'd better get back to the school, organize the House



Elves, and start strengthening our flood-protection charms! Brewster, you're in charge here!" Then he dashed for the floo in the stadium office.



"We must be getting close," Harry shouted. They'd been flying for more than an hour. "I'm detecting strong magic coming from that fog bank." He could see some sort of faint silvery light moving inside the fog, too. It winked out occasionally, and then after a few moments it would reappear.

Ron flew closer, holding his hand to his ear to indicate that he couldn't hear. There was a very strong wind blowing from the sea and it swept their words away. Harry tried shouting louder and then he tried the Sonorus spell, but it was hopeless and Ron gestured that they should land. They descended into a small clearing at the edge of the fog.

"It looks pretty sinister," Ron said. "Just because there's magic there, it doesn't mean that we've found the school. It could be something else." *Something dangerous.*

"It's probably the school," Harry said confidently. "I'll bet they use the fog to hide the place. It must be a magic fog, after all, or it would be blown away by all this wind. There must be Muggle-repelling spells on it to make it seem sinister, too."

Ron was skeptical. "It seems sinister because it's a dark swamp with weird, moss-covered trees looming over everything. And that fog is really thick. It's going to be impossible to see your hand in front of your face in there, even with Lumos. How are we supposed to fly through that?"

"We aren't," Harry declared. "We'll walk. It can't be much farther."

"You're kidding! It's a magical swamp! It's probably full of all sorts of



dreadful things, like hungry man-eating plants and poisonous Lizagators and bottomless quicksand." *And spiders! Lots of spiders! Big ones!* "Why don't we wait until the sun comes up and the fog burns off?"

"If it's a magical fog, it won't burn off," Harry said, shouldering his broom. "I'm going in. You can go back if you want."

"No, I'm with you," Ron said quickly as he fell in beside Harry. "I just think that we'd better be careful, that's all." *Very careful!*

It proved to be slow going. The fog swirled around them, gusts of wind shook the trees, and the two young wizards couldn't see farther than a few yards in any direction. There was almost no dry ground and it was surprisingly cold. Ice crystals sparkled in the air.

"I thought it wasn't supposed to get cold around here," Ron complained as they sloshed through some ankle-deep muck. "It was hot enough in New Orleans. Maybe I should transfigure a coat." He was starting to feel despondent. His thoughts turned to Hermione and how much he loved her. *I don't know why Hermione loves me. She probably doesn't*, he thought. *Not really. She just thinks she does, because of everything we went through together. She'll probably come to her senses soon. I'm not worthy of her.*

Harry was lost in his own thoughts, too. *I'm not really the hero that everybody thinks I am. It was my mum's sacrifice that defeated Voldemort. And Professor Dumbledore's plan, and all the help from my friends. They're the real heroes. And Snape. He protected me and saved my life, even though he hated me. Snape...*

He imagined Snape sneering at him. "You never figured it out, did you, you clueless moron?" the imaginary Snape said, his voice dripping with disgust. "You were just a pawn, a weapon to be used against the Dark



Lord. The least you could have done was pay attention and cooperate, but no, you always knew better. You endangered yourself and your idiot friends repeatedly. You even got your useless godfather killed. It was a miracle that I was able to keep you alive all those years, and then you walked off and left me dying in that filthy shack. I knew you were a lazy, incompetent, rude little brat the first day I saw you, and you proved I was right, time after time.”

“No!” Harry shouted. “You were wrong about me! I was brave! I was willing to go to my death!”

“What?” said Ron, who was startled out of his brooding. Then he saw the Dementor right in front of them. Its shroud was hanging off it in tattered ribbons and it was twitching a bit, but it was still dangerous. Its huge, gaping mouth was lined with rings of wicked-looking curved teeth, just like the sucker-mouth of a lamprey, and beyond the teeth its throat disappeared into darkness.

“Ack!” Ron cried. He jumped back, thought of Hermione, and pointed his wand at the thing. “*Expecto Patronum!*” His Patronus appeared in a silver flash.

That brought Harry to his senses, but before he could bring up his wand the Dementor had fled.

“I... I think it's gone,” Ron said as his silver terrier returned. “I've never been so close to one before. I could even smell it.” He almost gagged as he remembered the stench. “I feel terrible, like I'm all cold inside and I'll never be warm or happy again.”

“That's what they do to you,” Harry agreed. He was shaken, too. Dementors had always unnerved him. “They make all your doubts and fears and worst memories bubble up in your mind, until they overwhelm you. They thrive on





pain and fear. We're lucky you realized what was happening. Thanks, mate."

"You're welcome." Ron looked around nervously. "I didn't know they had Dementors over here in the States. Let's get out of here before it comes back."

"Wait a minute," said Harry. He had to raise his voice a bit so he could be heard over the wind. "That silver light I saw before we landed must have been a Patronus! Let's go find it and it'll lead us to the school. Come on, I think I saw a glow over there."

Ron clutched his wand tightly. The wind was whipping up the water in the swamp and a clump of wet moss blew past his head. "I hope you're right," he said. "We'd better hurry, though. I think there's a storm coming."

I must be out of my mind, Ron thought as they set off toward the glow that Harry had seen. I spend too much money, get up too early in the morning, travel to the other side of the world, wander around in a freezing fog, face a Dementor, and for what? To find Snape? He grimaced. With my luck, we might actually find the miserable git, too.



Stormy Weather



WHAT ARE YOU TWO DOING OUT HERE?"

Captain Pugh shouted as Harry and Ron sloshed toward the Ghoul Busters. The water level in the swamp had risen by more than a foot and the Imperious charm couldn't stop the driving rain. Everyone was being soaked and battered by the wind.

"We're looking for the Bayou Academy of Magic," Harry called back.

"In the middle of a hurricane?" Captain Pugh was astounded.

"Is that what this is?" Harry asked.

Blockhead! the captain thought. "Come with us! We've gotta get out of here." He motioned to his men. "Back to the school! This storm is going to get a lot worse before it gets better!"

"I'll help you take these guys side-along," said the sergeant, taking Ron by the arm.

"Tourists! I hate tourists!" the captain muttered as he took hold of Harry.



Even a phoenix has his limits, Fawkes thought as he struggled to stay on course. He knew he was fighting a hurricane. He'd seen these huge storms before and he recognized the situation. Rain was coming at him horizontally, driven by a wind that was getting stronger by the moment. Below him trees were being uprooted and tossed into the rising water, and the ones that still stood were thrashing wildly as the storm stripped them of their leaves and branches.

The shadowy Dementors had melted away and Fawkes was following his instincts, trying to home in on the source of the evil. *I'm on the right*



track, he thought as he saw a rundown wooden shack ahead, surrounded by floodwater. *This must be it. I can feel it.*

He blinked the rain out of his eyes. *Stupid wizards! he muttered. I don't know why I put up with them! This is insane!*



A tentacle emerged from the darkness at the far end of the shack. Its tip was split into three oppositely arranged 'fingers' surrounding a single red eye. Severus's blood ran cold.

"Saunders!" he yelled as the thing started groping about in the far end of the shack. "End this spell! End it now!"

"Well, that's sort of a problem, sir," the young wizard said.

Sweet Merlin! Severus thought. "What do you mean? Whatever is there in the darkness is even worse than the Dementors. Far worse. You've got to close that gateway *now!*"

"That's why I needed you to come along," Saunders said quietly. "It... well, I'm not sure exactly how to put this..."

"Just spit it out! We haven't got all night!"

The tentacle was exploring the roof rafters.

"Well, if things get out of control, like they obviously have, in order to close and seal the gateway, I'm afraid that a human sacrifice is required."

There was a moment of silence as Severus simply stared at the young wizard. "You're planning to *sacrifice* me?" he finally asked.

"Oh, no sir!" Saunders said quickly. "Of course not! I could never do something like that! I need *you* to sacrifice me."

Severus was horrified. "What... what kind of monster do you people



think I am?" he stammered. Then he began to shout. "Nobody wants to get their hands dirty! No, you're all too good for that sort of thing! 'We'll just make Snape do it,' they say. 'There's no hope for him anyway; there never has been. A bit more blood on his hands won't matter. A few more rips in his soul? Who cares, as long as we stay squeaky clean?'"

Saunders cringed. He had no idea what Severus was raving about.

"I won't do it! Not this time! Not again!" Severus shouted as a vision of Albus clinging to the Astronomy Tower flashed into his mind. "Severus, *please,*" the old wizard begged.

Red-hot fury surged through Severus and he put it to good use. He whirled around and, pouring all of his rage into the spell, he pointed his wand at the far end of the shack and screamed "*Demonorum Ignis!*" A torrent of Fiendfyre shot into the darkness like napalm from a Muggle flamethrower. The tentacle jerked back and unseen things began to scream. Then the shack exploded.



"Hurry! Hurry!" the Elf called when she saw Kat, Angie, and Armstrong fighting their way toward the gate. She created a small opening in the school's protective spell and they dashed through it quickly.

It was quiet and dry in the schoolyard except for the water that had sprayed through while the spell was open, but they could see the storm raging outside. The spell enclosed the area like a transparent dome, holding back the floodwater and deflecting the rain and flying debris.

"Are Slade and Saunders back yet?" Kat asked as he wiped the water from his face.



"Or the Ghoul Busters?" Angie added.

"See there," the Elf squeaked, pointing out into the storm. "Busters are coming now. You go inside. Elves will stay and wait for others!"



Poop! Fawkes thought as the flaming debris flew past him. *It exploded!*

He could see the smoking wreckage of the shack a short distance ahead of him. The roof was gone and there wasn't much left of the walls, either.

Swooping lower, he saw Severus sprawled facedown on the charred floorboards. Saunders knelt by his side while the storm howled around them, tearing at the remains of the shack.

Fawkes landed beside them. *Is my wizard dead?* the bird wondered. *Oh no! No!* But when he looked closely Fawkes could see that Severus was still breathing. He was unconscious, though, and Fawkes couldn't tell how badly injured he was.

Saunders was woozy from the explosion but he was trying his best to help Severus. "I've got to get him back to the school," Saunders groaned as he struggled to lift him. "I've got to apparate!"

He'll never make it, Fawkes knew. He's in no condition to do it. He'll splinch them both!

Fawkes sprang up and grabbed the two wizards with his claws — there was no time to gentle about it. He hauled them into the air and started flapping toward the school with all his might. *At least I have a tailwind going this direction,* he thought as he flew off through the storm.





Harry and Ron used drying spells on themselves and then accompanied the Ghouls Busters to the dining hall where the Elves had mugs of hot chocolate waiting for everyone.

"So why are you here in the middle of a hurricane?" Captain Pugh asked. He had a good mind to give them a lecture about how dangerous hurricanes are but decided that it wasn't worth the effort. It had been a very long night and he was tired.

"We're looking for someone," Harry told him. "One of our former teachers. We have a picture." He pulled a soggy, rolled-up photo from an outside pocket of his backpack and dried it with a spell. "Here. Have you seen this guy?"

The picture had been cut out of the DAILY PROPHET. It showed Severus as Headmaster, standing at the lectern in the Great Hall, apparently addressing the students. He looked tired, bedraggled, and very annoyed.

The captain took the photo, looked at it, and handed it back. "Nope," he said. He'd been introduced to Angie's group, including Severus, at the picnic, but he'd been way too concerned about their mission to really notice any of them. "Try asking the Principal," he said, pointing to Mr Cohen.

"Yeah, I'll do that," Harry said, and he wandered over to Cohen, but the Principal was busy talking to Armstrong.

"I'm going to install a second high-capacity floo," Cohen was saying, "and from now on we're going to hold an evacuation drill at the start of every school year. I'm not going to let us get caught like this again!"

"Get another small floo, too, to handle anyone coming back against the flow," Armstrong suggested.

"Harry! Breakfast is here!" Ron called. "The Elves are bringing it out now!"

Harry suddenly realized that he was starved. The long flight, the



swamp, and the storm had used up all of his reserves, not to mention the experience with the Dementor. He dumped his soggy backpack beside a potted palm and hurried to join Ron at the table.



"Breakfast is served!" Mayor Finley announced to the sleepy students in the Big Bayou Quidditch Dome. Few of them had slept well. The conjured cots were not very comfortable and other refugees from the storm kept arriving from time to time during the night, waking everyone up with their chatter.

"We've got breakfast burritos for y'all," he told them happily. The Elves were too busy with storm protection to prepare breakfast, but someone had obtained a shipment of now-thawed frozen burritos that had been on their way to a Muggle convenience store before the storm had intervened.

Jules Bulstrode had never experienced a burrito before, and he wasn't sure he was ready for one now. He eyed them warily and decided he wasn't hungry.

"He's a Potions Genius

There has to be a twist,

A potions genius,

Yes, he's the Half-Blood Prince."

Bulstrode's head whipped round when he heard the badly-recorded music. Half-Blood Prince? That was Professor's Snape's pen-name from when he was a student; all Slytherin students knew about it, but no one else did. What was going on? He glanced over at Marigold Montague and cocked his head in the direction of the music and immediately the pair went in search of whoever had the recording. There was no need to say anything.

Four girls were gathered round a tape player, bouncing and swaying



to the music. Jules recognized the two with the garish clothes and silly nicknames: one called herself Lady Darkness, of all crazy things, and the other one was Misty-something-or-other. He didn't know the other two.

Darkness spotted the two Slytherins and waved them over. "You have to hear this. It's brand new from England — a rock opera by this new group 'Parselmouth'."

"It's totally brand new," the girl holding the tape recorder said proudly. "We recorded it live at a pub."

"How do you think he does it?"

I don't know!

What makes him so goo-ood?" blared from the machine.

"At a pub? What pub?" Jules managed to sound dubious despite having to yell over the music. Americans had places they called pubs, but they weren't really pubs, any more than American Quidditch was really Quidditch, no matter what name they gave this sports dome they were gathered in.

"Oh, you're English!" the girl said delightedly, hearing Jules's accent. "Our family was over there on vacation. It was, like, the best trip ever! They were just done with a war or something, and everything was completely *insane!*"

"Right, it was," Marigold said grimly. Her brother was brain-damaged because of two of the 'heroes' of that war. She was glad that at least one of those vicious, bullying Weasley twins was dead; she could wait to get the other one — years if necessary. "And you are..."

"Oh, yeah," said Mysteria, remembering that she needed to do introductions. "This is Madison Park and her sister Polly." Then she said to the American girls, "And this is Marilyn... uh..."

"Marigold Montague."



"Jules Bulstrode. You recorded this at a pub?" Jules indicated the still-blaring music, in which the phrase 'Half-Blood Prince' was regularly repeated. "Not the Leaky Cauldron?"

"No way!" said Madison. She turned down the music so they could hear each other. "That place was *boring!* They never had music there. It was at the Seven Stars in Hob Lane. York is, like, *totally cool.*"

Hob Lane, the wizarding business district in York, was every bit as ancient as Diagon Alley, but was much smaller. Including the bookstore (ODYSSEY BOOKS, NEW AND USED) that served as its entrance through a hidden backroom offering wizarding books, there were only half a dozen businesses. Rumor in Slytherin House held that eleven-year-old Severus Snape had found his ebony-and-manticore-spine wand while pawing through a jar of miscellaneous wands at THURSBY'S DISCOUNT MERCHANDISE in Hob Lane.

Polly said, "We talked with their keyboard player, Tracey-something —"

"Davis," Jules said. Tracey Davis was in his sister's year and used to jam with some of the older Slytherins, along with a Ravenclaw boy. They had called themselves 'Safari' — as in 'lion hunters' — but that was a Slytherin in-joke. 'Parselmouth' must be their public name; they would all be out of Hogwarts now.

"— and she said they were cutting a single —"

Madison interrupted her sister, "I can't *belieeeve* British wizards still record on vinyl! I mean, I know we can't use CDs and things because of magical interference, but —"

"You said it's from a rock opera?" Jules broke in, trying to get them back on track. They were complete dunderheads. Professor Snape would have eaten them alive.



"Yeah, it's called *'The Half-Blood Prince'*." Jules and Marigold tried to avoid visibly cringing, while Madison kept right on talking. "They said it was a work in progress but they wanted to release the title song for, you know, copyright? It's about this kid in school — you know that big school they have, Hogpits?"

"They *know*!" said Mysteria, rolling her eyes. "They *went* there!"

"You did? That's awesome! Is it true your potions teacher used to poison you?"

"Yes, he poisoned at least one of us each year to make sure we were paying attention to antidotes," Marigold said. "Usually a Gryffindork," she muttered under her breath. The thought gave her a warm, happy feeling.



"I hope they're okay," Angie said as she and Kat stood in the schoolyard waiting for 'Slade' and Saunders to return. They'd refused to go inside despite the urging of the Elves.

"Yeah, I... Hey, wait a minute, I think I see something out there!" Kat said. He was hoping it was Severus, but it turned out to be Doctor Proctor on his flying carpet. The old man and a companion were riding through the hurricane as smoothly as if it were a sunny day.

The Elves opened the protective spell for him and the carpet landed gracefully in the schoolyard.

"I'm sure you remember my good wife, Arusha," Proctor said, as he stood up on the carpet and offered a helping hand to the tall, white-haired black lady by his side. She appeared to be almost as old as he was.

"We sure do!" said Angie, rushing to hug the woman.





"The policemen wanted us to evacuate, so we decided to come here for a visit," Arusha said. "We didn't want them to worry," she added. "They're such nice boys."

"I've learned how to handle hurricanes pretty well," Doc said. "I haven't figured out how to stop 'em or deflect 'em, but my protection spells are the best there is. We put everything important under a protective spell, including that Buick."

Arusha added, "We're gonna let our old house wash away, and we'll build a new one afterward. People would get suspicious if our place survived the storm and we wouldn't want that."

"It's great to see you both," Kat said, noting that the two of them had passed through the storm without so much as getting wet. "Hey, Doc, maybe you could help us. Some of our friends are lost out there somewhere, and you seem to be able to fly through the storm. Maybe you could help us find them."

"Which way did your friends go?"

"I'm afraid we're not really sure," Angie said.

"Well, that does make it a bit difficult," the old wizard said thoughtfully. "I know a spell that might help, but —"

"They is here!" called the Elf. She opened the spell and Fawkes glided in with the two wizards held tightly in his claws. He deposited them on the ground as gently as he could.

I'm wetter than a cormorant, Fawkes thought as he shook the water off his wings.

"Why, thank you, Mr Phoenix!" Proctor said as he stooped to examine Severus and Saunders. Neither man was conscious and both were soak-



ing wet. "I think these fellers are gonna be all right, but we'd better get 'em up to the infirmary straight away."

"But the nurse isn't here," Angie said. "She went with the students."

"Don't you worry," Arusha said. "I always carry my medical kit." She patted her colorful shoulder-bag. "We'll take care of 'em."

Kat opened the front door for Fawkes, who flew in and soared up the stairs. The others followed after him, levitating their two patients on conjured stretchers.

The commotion in the entryway caught Harry's attention as he was finishing his second breakfast. "What's going on there?" he asked as he saw the stretchers being brought in. "It looks like some people were hurt in the storm."

"Hurricanes are really destructive," Ron observed as took another cinnamon bun from a platter. "Let's go out and watch it for a while. We'll be safe enough inside the spell, and we might never get a better opportunity to see something like this."

"Right," said Harry, and he got up from the table. The search for Snape could wait for a few more minutes while they did some hurricane-watching.

His backpack, which lay forgotten against the wall, shifted slightly and the zipper started to slide open. Slowly, a fingertip poked out from inside. It hesitated for a moment, and then it cautiously pushed the zipper farther open. More fingers appeared, and then the entire hand-creature emerged. It hopped down and quickly scurried behind the potted palm.



The Search Continues?



ANYWAYS... ” MADISON BEGAN AGAIN.

Marigold winced; that was ungrammatical even in American English.

“...the rock opera is about this kid, the Half-Blood Prince — he’s not really a prince, he’s kind of a geek. Not good-looking but *totally* brilliant — a genius at potions like it says in the song, and he invents spells, too — but there are these four jocks — rich purebloods — who are always bullying him because they say half-bloods like him shouldn’t exist...”

“You know, racists,” said Polly, “like those facists you people just had the war with. The Death-whatevers.”

“Death Eaters,” Marigold said.

“Yeah,” Madison continued. “So these junior Death Eaters are always attacking him, like, four-to-one, and they can ambush him anywhere because they have this invisibility cloak and this magic map — ”

“It’s a universal surveillance tool,” Polly broke in. “Perfect for spies.”

“ — so there’s nowhere to hide — ”

Polly added, “Their keyboardist said she’s working on a song called ‘Nowhere to Hide’ but it’s not finished yet.”

Darkness asked, “Didn’t you say they tried to feed him to a werewolf?”

Polly said, “It was an Animagus.”

“It was a werewolf,” said Madison. “There were Animagus in it, but it was a werewolf they tried to feed him to.”

“Animagi,” Marigold murmured.

Madison continued, “But he invents this totally awesome spell called ‘Sever Forever’ that works even against werewolves, and he’s, like, cut-



ting the werewolf to pieces when the Number One Bully shows up in his Animagus form and pretends to rescue him — ”

“That’s where the Animagus comes in,” Polly said.

Her sister continued as if she hadn’t spoken, “ — so he can claim this *completely fake* life debt — ”

“You still have life debts in England?” Mysteria asked the two Slytherins. “Don’t try it here. They’re against the Constitution. It’s in the Bill of Rights or something.”

Jules wisely ignored the issue of American wizarding constitutional law. “Weren’t the teachers or the headmaster doing anything while all this was going on?” He glanced at Marigold. They both had a pretty good idea what the teachers and headmaster were doing.

“The headmaster was on their side,” said Polly. “The bullies, I mean. He let them get away with everything. He was one of those bigoted Death-guys, too, I guess.”

“Oh, that wasn’t the *only* reason he liked them,” Madison smirked. “Listen to *this*.” She began to re-wind the tape player, looking for the right place.

While Madison was fiddling with the tape, Marigold asked, “So what happened to the Prince? Did he defeat the bullies?”

“Nah,” said Polly. “It’s an opera, you know, so it’s, like, tragic. He doesn’t get killed or anything, but the head bully steals his girl and fools everyone into thinking he’s a big hero even though he’s really a complete jerk. But eventually all the bullies get killed off because of their own stupidity. And the Prince gets the best music, of course.”

“Here it is,” said Madison. “It’s going to be the B-side of the ‘Half-Blood Prince’ song we played before, sung by the old headmaster, who’s, like, *totally creepy*.”



"Pretty boys

My lovely, lion-hearted pretty boys..."

The American girls swayed to the music and the two Slytherins listened quietly. Mysteria said, "Hey, Darkness, you know who should hear this? Fawkes's friend Mr Slade. He's from England, too. He'll like it."

Jules and Marigold stared at each other with expressions of horror. Jules said quietly, "He'll go spare."

Marigold nodded. "Hurricane Severus."



"He's out cold and completely exhausted," Arusha told Proctor as she passed her wand over Severus. "Completely. I've never seen anything quite like it. I have to know more before I can be sure how well he'll recover."

She turned away and walked down the ward to Saunders, who was the only other patient at the moment. He was sitting up in bed, nursing a mug of hot chocolate laced with brandy. He had suffered a few burns and an emotional trauma; burn paste had dealt with the former and hot chocolate would help sooth the latter, but Arusha needed to know what had happened to her other patient.

"It was a mystical gateway," Saunders explained, "into another reality, and there were powerful, evil things on the other side that wanted to come through. Mr Slade poured an enormous amount of power into a spell against them." He put the mug of chocolate down. "You should have seen it!" he said with enthusiasm approaching awe. "He cast Fiendfyre! Real Fiendfyre! He looked like a demon, silhouetted against the flames. He was furious and poured all of his rage into the spell, but he never lost control of



it. The things on the other side slammed the gateway shut with so much force that the shack exploded!"

"Hmmm," Arusha said. "Then probably what he needs is a good rest — for his mind even more than his body. I'll make up some of my special medicinal mushroom tea for him. That will help him sleep and give him lovely dreams to ease his mind."

Doctor Proctor poured more brandy into Saunders' hot chocolate. "It sounds like you know a lot about those gateways," he said.

Saunders looked uneasy. "Well, yeah," he answered. "When I was little, I was kidnapped by some evil wizards who wanted to use me in their horrific rituals. They eventually managed to open a gateway that they believed would bring them power, but they couldn't control it. They said they needed a sacrifice in order to close it, so they were going to kill me, but then a group of Agents broke in to rescue me. One of the kidnappers got killed in the fight, and I guess that counted as the sacrifice, because the gateway closed."

"What made you think opening that particular gateway would draw in the Dementors?"

"It was something I overheard the kidnappers say, about how those creatures craved dark, depressing things, so I thought they'd want the Dementors. And they did. It worked!"

"Yes, it did work," Doc said, "but it was kind of like using a shovel to swat flies. I don't think you should try that again."

"I just wanted to help," Saunders said sadly. "Do you think there are other realities with good things in them, or are they all full of monsters?"

The old man thought for a moment. "I don't really know — no one does,"



he said, "but if the Muggles are right, there could be an infinite number of other realities. I suppose there could be just as many good ones as bad ones, and probably lots of mediocre ones, too. It's best not to go looking for 'em, though. You never know what you might unleash."

"Yeah," Saunders said, "I see your point."

Proctor returned to Arusha, who was casting another diagnostic spell on Severus. "So it's just exhaustion, then?" he asked. "He didn't take any harm from the beings on the other side of the gateway?"

"No, but I bet they took harm from him. I did *Priori Incantatem* on his wand. He didn't just call up a spark of Fiendfyre and let it run wild; any third-rate conjure-man can do that. He was generating it in a continuous stream and forcing it through that gateway. Whatever world is on the other side of that gate had better have a good magical fire department."

She gave her wand a twist and a network of colors appeared. "Look at the depth of his magical core. He drained a lot of it, but it's already starting to build back up."

She cancelled the spell and smiled at her husband. "And take a look at his nose," she said. "The size of the nose is a surefire indicator of a wizard's power, they say." She winked at her husband.

"That it is, sweetie pie," Proctor said. He tapped his substantial nose and smiled at her, just like he used to do when he was wooing her in back on the 1870s. "That it is."



"I think the storm is dying down now," Harry said as he watched the muddy water surging against the spell that protected the school. The



rain and wind were still hammering against the spell, but they seemed to have less force than before.

"It's a good thing we don't have hurricanes like this at home," Ron said. "It's really made a mess of everything out there. Did you see it when that piece of the dock blew past?"

"It would have been hard to miss," Harry said. He turned back toward the school. "We're going to be late getting back home, but at least we'll have a good excuse. Let's go back inside and ask around about Snape."

"Oh," Ron said. "I suppose so. If you want."

"It's what we came here for, remember?" Harry said irritably. He was getting a bit tired of Ron's lack of enthusiasm for their quest.

Inside, the school seemed to be deserted. The students and most of the teachers were still away sheltering in the Quidditch Dome, and almost everyone else was catching up on their sleep. Between the Dementors, the evacuation, and the hurricane, they'd been up all night.

Kat was tired but he was still up and about. He'd been waiting outside the infirmary while Arusha and Doc attended to Severus and Saunders. As he started down the stairs he noticed the two young men coming in through the main doors, but he didn't give them much thought at first. As he got closer, though, he noticed the red hair. *Have I seen that guy somewhere?* he wondered. *And that other guy, with the glasses and the messy hair... They seem familiar. I must have met them at the picnic or something.*

It wasn't until he was halfway down that it hit him: *It's those two Aurors who picked up that vicious wyvern! They're the ones Slade seemed especially nervous about. Maybe they want to arrest him or something. That newspaper said he was a hero, but you never know.*



Kat barely had time to conjure a pair of glasses and cast a quick Glamour on his hair before Harry noticed him and started up the stairs. To Harry and Ron, Kat now appeared to have long blonde hair and he was peering at them from behind a pair of thick glasses. They might not have recognized him from the encounter with the wyvern, but Kat wasn't taking any chances.

"Hi!" Harry said. "We're looking for somebody and maybe you can help us. Have you seen this guy?" He pulled out the photo of Snape.

Kat studied the photo for a moment and then said, "Nope, I'm afraid not." He was trying to think of a subtle way to damage the photo when Harry thanked him and took it back.

"No point in going upstairs," Kat said a bit too forcefully. He wanted to keep them as far away from the infirmary as possible. "Everyone is asleep up there. You don't want to go waking 'em up. They've all had a rough night. Maybe you should get some sleep, too," he suggested.

"I don't think I could sleep," Harry said. "I think I've got portkey-lag. I'll just wait around for people to wake up."

"Let's go wait in the dining hall," Ron said. "We can have some tea, and the Elves probably left some snacks out, too."

Kat breathed a sigh of relief when they turned away, but then he realized that he hadn't really solved the problem. *Sooner or later, they're going to find someone who'll tell them. I've got to do something!* He turned and raced back up the stairs.



Lying in bed at the far end of the infirmary, Saunders was feeling awful, but not just because of his injuries. He had messed up badly and



he knew it. The chocolate wasn't helping and neither was the brandy.

The trauma of his childhood kidnapping had left him haunted by anxiety and nightmares. He had tried to make use of what he'd learned from his kidnappers in order to make something good come out of his ordeal, but it had nearly ended in disaster. He needed to find a better way to deal with his boyhood abuse and his unwilling involvement with demonic beings, but how?

Perhaps the mysterious Mr Slade could help him. The infirmary was empty of everyone save the two of them now. Arusha had gone to make more tea and Proctor had gone to see if the nurse had returned yet.

Cautiously, because he was slightly tipsy from the brandy, Saunders climbed out of bed and headed for Severus. He gathered his courage. "Uh, Mr Slade... sir?"

"Go away," Severus muttered sleepily, not bothering to open his eyes. Why was this idiot bothering him? He wasn't quite sure where he was or how he got here, but he had been having such a pleasant rest. Then the memory of Saunders in the shack came back to him, and that was quickly followed by the terrible memories that he's seen in the young man's mind. He suppressed a shudder. In his role as Head of Slytherin, he had seen traumatized students, and he had actually managed to help some of them. Spurring them on to find some sort of purpose sometimes worked. Not that he wanted to help this pest, but perhaps it would make him go away.

"You're going about this the wrong way!" he snarled. "You don't open those gateways, you idiot; you have to find ways keep them *closed*! And you've got to do it without any of your bloody-minded self-sacrifice. Find a better way than having yourself slaughtered like a pig. Try to *think*!" *There*, he thought. *That should do it.* Then he turned over, pulled the sheet



over his head, and went back to enjoying his dreams.

Quietly, Saunders backed away until he stumbled against the next bed. Fortunately it was empty. He sat down on it and thought for a while.

Maybe that's it, he decided. I'll study ancient scrolls, and I'll interview people who've had close encounters with this sort of thing, and I'll find better ways to keep the gateways closed.

And maybe he would even find closure for himself in the process.

"Thank you, Mr Slade," he murmured, but Severus just snored softly.



In the dining hall, the hand-creature scampered back behind the potted palm when it saw Harry and Ron coming. *They're back again! Why won't they just go away?* it wondered. It tapped its fingers frantically.

The creature wasn't sure that it was happy to be alive. It couldn't remember anything before a wizard had cast the spells to animate it, after which it had been locked away in a jar with others like itself. Life in the jar had been endlessly boring and had almost driven it mad.

When it was finally freed, the creature had joined the others in rioting. They had sought vengeance by attacking the nearest wizard, even though he wasn't the one who had been responsible for their plight. And eventually it had managed to escape by clinging to Harry's cloak.

I suppose I should be grateful to him, the hand thought as it watched Harry, but that old house of his is awful. It's dark and boring, and he keeps trying to stun me whenever he sees me. I thought I could get away from him by hiding in this pack, but he's still around. If only he would just go away!



Kat had hurried to his room, changed his clothes, and changed his disguise. *Short brown hair, bushy eyebrows, a few freckles; yeah, that ought to do it.* Then he headed back downstairs.

"Feelin' groovy," he sang to himself as he sauntered into the dining hall.

Harry approached him immediately.

"Hmmm," said Kat as he studied the photo. "Yeah, I think so. It looks kind of like one of the guys who stopped by and helped us chase off the Dementors, but they left a while ago, I think, before the storm hit. Said something about going to Singapore. Maybe if you hurry, you can catch up with them there."

"No, we've got to get back to London," Harry said, "but thanks. Was he okay?"

"Okay? Yeah," Kat said. "He looked a lot better than he does in that photo, that's for sure."

"Great!" said Ron. "We don't have to worry now; we know he's okay. Come on, Harry, let's see if we can use their floo to get back to the port-key office in New Orleans."



Harry and Ron stood around waiting their turn because the floo was busy with streams of students who were returning from the Quidditch Dome. Ron was just about to stifle a yawn when he heard a young girl cry, "Come back here, Alvin!" and he saw the tarantula scampering toward him with Mysteria dashing after it.

Ron gasped and started to draw his wand, but Darkness threw her magenta purse to stop him. It hit him squarely in the head.

"Ouch!" he said. "What was that for?" as Mysteria bent down and



scooped up her spider.

"Poor Alvin," she said, holding the big spider tenderly. "Did that nasty man try to hurt you?" She scowled up at Ron. Then she noticed the photo of Severus, which was lying on top of Harry's pack. She peered at it. "Is that Slade?" she asked. "It looks like him, but..."

"Lemme see that," Darkness said, picking up the photo along with her purse. She looked it over. "He looks awful! I mean, talk about a 'bad hair' day!"

"You know him?" Harry asked.

"Sure! He helped Fawkes save us from the Dementors," Darkness said proudly.

"Fawkes?" said Ron. "The phoenix? He was here, too?"

"You bet!" the strangely dressed girl said. "He swooped down out of the sky just like that," she made a swooping motion with her arm, "and he wiped out that horrible Dementor-thing. He's so great!"

"Do you know where they went?" Harry asked excitedly. This could be the best lead that they'd had so far.

"They're still here, aren't they?" Mysteria said. "We heard that Mr Slade was injured by monsters or something and he's in the infirmary. We're going to go see him after lunch."

"Injured?" Harry said. "I hope it's not serious! Where's the infirmary?"

"Up the main stairs, turn right, and go down the hall," Darkness told them. "There's a sign on the door."

"Thanks!" Harry said. He grabbed Ron by the arm and started for the stairs.

"It's nice that Mr Slade has such good friends," Mysteria said. "I'm sure he'll be happy to see them."



Thanks for the Memories?



SEVERUS WAS FLOATING PEACEFULLY AND WATCH-

ing the sky change color. It was currently a soothing shade of aquamarine with streaks of brilliant orange, pink and gold meandering merrily across it. He felt... contented. It was an unfamiliar feeling and he was enjoying it thoroughly. He had no worries about the future and no troubling memories from the past, and only a vague recollection of an elderly black woman encouraging him to drink some sort of unusual-tasting tea. Now he was just floating happily, enjoying the lovely colors.

After a time there was some noise. The scene shifted and he found himself in a comfortable bed. To his amazement, Harry Potter and his pal Weasley were standing near the foot of it, beside the black woman. It was a dream, of course; there was no way it could be real. Not only did they all look exceptionally tall and strangely distorted, but Weasley's hair was a brilliant, shimmering electric orange. It was all rather psychedelic and Severus found it quite amusing.

"I've given him something to help him rest, and it's very strong, so he may be a bit confused," the woman was saying. "You mustn't stay too long. He needs to rest. Call me if you need me."

Harry approached cautiously. "Hello, Professor," he said. "Are you okay?"

Yes, it's a dream; no doubt about it now, Severus thought. *Potter is being polite!* "Since when has that ever mattered to you?" he drawled.

"Since I saw your memories and had a chance to think about them for a while. I didn't understand before, but then I saw how much you cared for my mum, and how you grieved, and how sorry you were for what you'd done. You didn't want Professor Dumbledore to die, or me either, even though you don't like me."



Severus yawned.

Harry fished in his pockets and pulled out a vial. "Here," he said, "I brought your memories back." He put them on the bedside table.

"*Thanks for the memories,*" Severus sang, and then he started laughing. "How many times have I saved your useless life, Potter? Three, four?" He chanted, "*Three-four-six-eight...* And you just stood there like a lump with your mouth wide open and watched me die." He paused. "Do you know why I asked you to look at me then, Potter?" he asked. "Because staring at your eyes was better than staring at your tonsils!" He started laughing again.

Ron leaned over to Harry. "Wow!" he whispered. "I don't know what that lady gave him, but he's gone daft!"

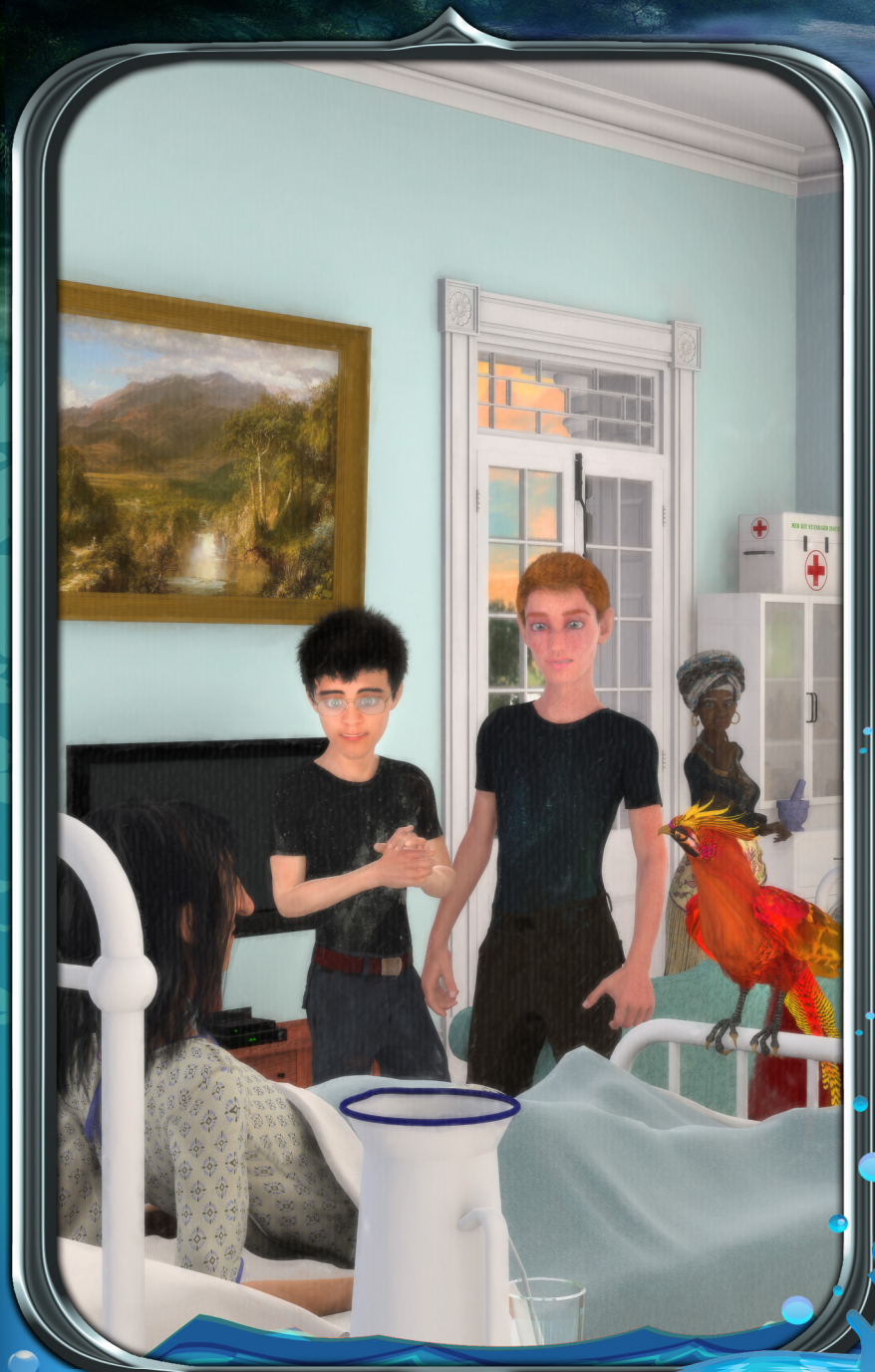
"It's a good thing we're not in Britain right now or I'd have you in court," Severus continued. "Sue your arse off for reneging on a life debt." He laughed a bit hysterically, "A dozen life debts, a hundred life debts... You too, Weasel King, and the Know-It-All. I know I saved your lives at least once. But life debts only count when Slytherins owe them to Gryffindors. No Gryffindor ever owed a Slytherin anything. It's all take-take-take with you privileged lay-about, and let everyone else do the dirty work."

"Did you really save my life three times?" Harry asked. "I can only remember two."

"*Two-four-six-eight, saving Potter is my fate,*" Severus chanted again. "*He's the brat I love to hate... Potter, Potter, he's just...shate?* No, that's not right. *He's always late, he's...*"

"Second-rate?" Ron suggested. Harry scowled at him.

"Nah, Weasel, you're the one who's second-rate. Potter is... werewolf bait. No, wait, Potter is Dark Lord bait. I'm the one who's werewolf bait."





He gave another laugh. "Potter, next time you see your friend Lupin, ask him where he got the scars on his face. He'll lie about it."

"Lupin is dead," Harry said quietly.

"Oh. I'm sorry. I read about that. I forgot." Severus paused for a moment, suddenly serious. "I didn't kill him."

"I know you didn't," Harry said.

"I just chopped him up a little. Werewolf burgers!" Snape's laugh progressed from hysterical to maniacal. Then he started to sing in a surprisingly true baritone:

"One, two, three, four,

Can I have a little more?

Five, six, seven, eight-nine-ten..."

Ron tugged on Harry's sleeve. "I think we'd better go, mate. He's not all here."

"You're the one who's not here, Weasley. This is all imaginary. Both of you are hallucinations." He laughed. "The tea that that woman gave me is really amazing. You should try some." His mind was hopping about like a March hare. He cocked an eyebrow and looked Harry in the eye. "I'll bet you want to know about your mum, don't you? You know she almost got arrested by the Muggle cops once? Shoplifting, it was. Tried to nick a Beatles record — *Yellow Submarine*, I think. Had to magic her way out of it and got in trouble for underage spellcasting." He laughed and started singing again. "*We all live in a Yellow Submarine...*"

Ron dragged Harry forcibly from the room. Fawkes flapped in before they could close the door.

*"And our friends
are all aboard..."*

Severus was starting to go off-pitch.



Fawkes didn't mind. His wizard was singing! He was much better than Albus. Albus loved to sing but he couldn't carry a tune in a bucket. Fawkes trilled in harmony. Where were his two friends with the garish plumage? They liked music, too.

It was nice of young Harry and his red-crowned friend to come and visit, Fawkes thought happily as he watched the two young wizards leaving the infirmary. *That's good. They've grow up into such fine young birds.*

Fawkes had wanted to be there for Harry at the end of the lad's mission but he knew that Albus had wanted him to stay away. Harry was supposed to act alone. It was essential to the plan, although Fawkes wasn't sure why. He didn't know that, if he had intervened to save Harry by absorbing Voldmort's curse, the way he'd done for Albus during the battle at the Ministry, it would have ruined everything.

Well, maybe he wasn't supposed to help Harry, but Severus had helped Harry, so Fawkes had helped Severus. It was all part of Albus's great plan, or so the phoenix believed, and he was happy that everything had worked out so well.



"Did you have a nice rest?" Arusha asked when Severus opened his eyes.

"I did," he replied. "That was a rather *interesting* potion that you gave me."

"It's my special recipe," the old witch told him proudly. "I grow the mushrooms myself. I wanted to make sure you got a good sleep. I didn't let any visitors in to disturb you, except those two boys. I made an exception for them because they had to get back to London."

Those two boys? They were just a dream brought on by that hallucinogenic tea. A



very stupid, pointless dream. Weren't they? A feeling of alarm started to creep over him. His eyes turned to the bedside table and fell on the vial of memories. Alarm turned to shock and he sat up so suddenly that he caused Arusha to jump.

"Is something wrong?" she asked.

But Severus didn't reply. *Oh, Merlin, no! What did I say to them?*



Now that the hurricane was over the New Orleans portkey office was jammed with travelers. It seemed like everyone was either coming back or getting out. Harry and Ron had taken a number and they were sitting on a bench waiting their turn. They'd been there for at least 20 minutes.

"What was Fawkes doing there?" Ron asked. "Why would he help Snape?"

"Snape was Dumbledore's man, right to the end," Harry said, "and it was loyalty to Dumbledore that brought Fawkes to me in the Chamber of Secrets, so I think it makes sense."

"Maybe, but did you see those scars on Snape's neck? It's hard to believe he survived. I remember what Nagini's bite did to my dad."

"If Fawkes' tears could save me after the basilisk's attack, I'm sure they'd work for Nagini's attack, too," Harry said confidently. "I was dying when his tears saved me."

Harry scratched idly at his leg. "I guess I really do owe Snape a life debt. Maybe that's why I've been obsessed with finding him and knowing that he's okay."

Ron nodded. "That might explain it. I mean, even if he owed your dad, he paid that one off by saving you at the Quidditch match, according to Professor Dumbledore. He sort of owed your mum, since he helped get her and



your dad killed, but he took care of that by making sure that you survived and Voldemort didn't. And he probably did all kinds of stuff that we don't even know about, too, so I guess he's at least one up on you, if not more."

"Well, he sort of helped get me killed, too," Harry pointed out. "Or at least he helped send me to my death."

"Yeah, but you're not dead, are you? And anyway, I think you've got Dumbledore to thank for that gambit. That was his plan, not Snape's."

They sat in silence for a few minutes. Harry didn't like to think about the fact that Dumbledore may not always have had his best interests at heart. He wanted to believe that the old wizard had been nothing but a wise, all-knowing father figure behind his somewhat silly facade. He didn't like knowing that the man had a hidden dark side. When he had finally admitted to himself that Dumbledore had deliberately misled him on many occasions, it hurt. Dumbledore must have known from the start that he had that Horcrux in him, but the old man had misled him — lied to him, in fact — time after time. And why hadn't Albus Dumbledore protected his mum, and his dad and him, like he'd promised Snape?

Harry had done his best to ignore Rita Skeeter's exposé and the things that Aberforth had said. Sure, Albus Dumbledore had made mistakes when he was young, but that was because he'd been led astray by Grindlewald, and anyway, it was a long time ago. Albus had realized his error and become a different man by the time he was Headmaster of Hogwarts. Or so Harry kept telling himself. But somehow, whenever he tried to picture the kindly old wizard smiling benevolently at him, Harry would hear Snape's caustic voice in the background saying, "Like a pig for slaughter." He wished he could forget about that. Why did Snape have to give him *that* memory?



Eventually Ron said, "Do you suppose that Hermione and I owe him, too? I mean, if Snape saved us, it was really just a by-product of saving you, wasn't it? I don't really understand life debts. I'll have to discuss it with Hermione after we get back."

Ron was starting to look very worried. *If I owe Snape, does that mean I'm going to start obsessing about him, like Harry's been doing?* he wondered. He wasn't sure he was ready for that. In fact, he was sure he wasn't.



"Don't you argue with me, young man!" Arusha said sternly. "You're still weak and you need to rest!"

"Nonsense!" Severus snapped. "Where are my clothes?" He snatched up his wand. "Accio pants!"

"Oh, no you don't!" Arusha reached out and caught the pants as they flew past her.

Fawkes whistled from his conjured perch. Wizards were so amusing sometimes.

The nurse, who had returned from the Quidditch Dome, took one look at the situation and wisely decided to leave it to Arusha. As she turned to leave, Mysteria and Darkness strolled in.

Mysteria waved. "Hi, Fawkes. Hi, Mr Slade. We've come to visit."

"Ooh, cool scars!" Darkness said as they drew closer to the bed. "I'll bet you got them fighting hideous monsters!"

Severus pulled the sheet up to his chin. Not only were the scars on his neck exposed for all to see, but he was dressed only in a thin white infirmary shift that left him almost naked.



Chuckling, Arusha tucked the pants and the rest of his clothes away in a closet and sealed it with a charm.

"Look what we found!" Darkness said, holding up the hand-creature.

Fawkes cawed and raised his wings in alarm.

Without dropping the sheet, Severus flicked his wand at the thing. "Levimanus!" he said sharply, levitating the hand away from the girl. "Those things are murderous! Where did you get it?"

"Give her back!" Darkness shouted. She scowled and put her hands on her hips. "She's okay. She was hiding in the dining hall. She was a bit skittish at first, but we made friends with her. All she needed was a little bit of love."

Mysteria plucked the hand out of the air. "We named her Fingerella. Mr Cohen says we can keep her."

Cohen is out of his mind, Severus thought. Almost as bad as Albus. Or Hagrid. I'll have a word with him.

"See how we've done her nails," the girl continued. She held the thing out so he could see that the nails were now neatly manicured and painted flat black with iridescent blue dots.

"The next time we're in town, we're going to get her a nice glove," she added. Severus scowled, and the creature waggled her fingers at him.



Harry and Ron were still sitting in the portkey office waiting for their number to be called.

"Do you believe that stuff Snape said about my mum?" Harry asked.

"You mean about the shoplifting?" Ron shrugged. "Who knows? You saw what condition he was in. He was higher than a kite! He was probably pulling



your leg about that, and about Lupin, too. My advice is to forget it.”

“I guess. You know, in those final moments in the shack, when he asked me to look at him, I think he was reaching out to me. I didn’t realize it at the time, but I think he was, even if he’s making fun of it now. Now he just doesn’t want to admit it.”

Ron said nothing. Their brief meeting with Snape seemed to have made Harry’s obsession worse, not better.

“Snape and Aunt Petunia are the only ones left who knew my mother very well,” Harry continued, “and I don’t think I could ever get either one of them to tell me much about her.”

“Not without a lot of Veritaserum. It would probably take a couple of pints each. I’d just forget about it, if I were you.” *Just forget about it. Please forget about it!*

Harry sighed, then he rolled up his pant legs and stared at his calves, which were spotted with round purple welts. He and Ron hadn’t known about smeeches, having skipped class the day they were described, and they had been horrified to discover the fat, glowing worms that had attached themselves to their legs during their journey through the swamp. Ron had nearly vomited.

“It was nice of that guy to hex those things off us,” Harry observed, “but the bites are starting to itch again.”

“Here, have some more of that ointment he gave us,” Ron said, pulling a tube of it out of his pocket.

“Next!” called the man behind the counter as their number lit up in the air above him

To Be Continued...





JUST A FEW NOTES FROM THE AUTHOR (AND OTHERS)

Chapter 1: The song 'I am a Rock' was written by Paul Simon and recorded by Simon and Garfunkle in 1965.

Chapter 11: The eye of Hurricane Georges reached the Gulf Coast east of New Orleans on 28 September, 1998.

Chapter 12: The song 'Potions Genius' was inspired by 'Pinball Wizard' which is the property of The Who and others, and can be enjoyed on YouTube.

Chapter 13: Collaborator's Note: According to the U.S. Supreme Court (Wizards Division), life debts are forbidden by the Thirteenth Amendment, which outlaws slavery.

Chapter 14: Song Credits: 'Thanks for the Memory' by Ralph Ranger and Leo Robin was first recorded by Bob Hope and Shirley Ross in 1938. 'Yellow Submarine' is from the album REVOLVER and 'All Together Now' is from the album YELLOW SUBMARINE. Both are by John Lennon and Paul McCartney and were recorded by the Beatles.

Young Severus saw the film YELLOW SUBMARINE in a movie theater in 1968, when he was eight years old. He sneaked in without paying.

Chapters 12, 13, and 14: The author would like to thank collaborator Very Small Prophet for contributing parts of the rock opera segments and other bits to these chapters.

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Fonts used in this publication: for body text, Darwin Pro Rounded and Darwin Ess Alternate Rounded, from Los Andes Foundry. Also used are cuttings of the Triplex family by Zuzana Licko, distributed by Emigré foundry. Titling was set in BeCreative by Corradine Fonts. Other font resources used are Bill's Dingbats, Bill's DECOrations, and Bill's Tropical DECOrations. Drop caps were generated from Juice Fonts Volume No. 1 by Digital Juice. The periscope dingbat was modified in Fontographer.

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Graphics design by J. Odell (J0del@aol.com)