

ADVENTURES IN FANFICTION

LEGACY OF SLYTHERIN



BY ANGIE ASTRAVIC

A RED HEN PUBLICATION



Red Hen Edition
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LEGACY OF SLYTHERIN

A HARRY POTTER
COLLECTION

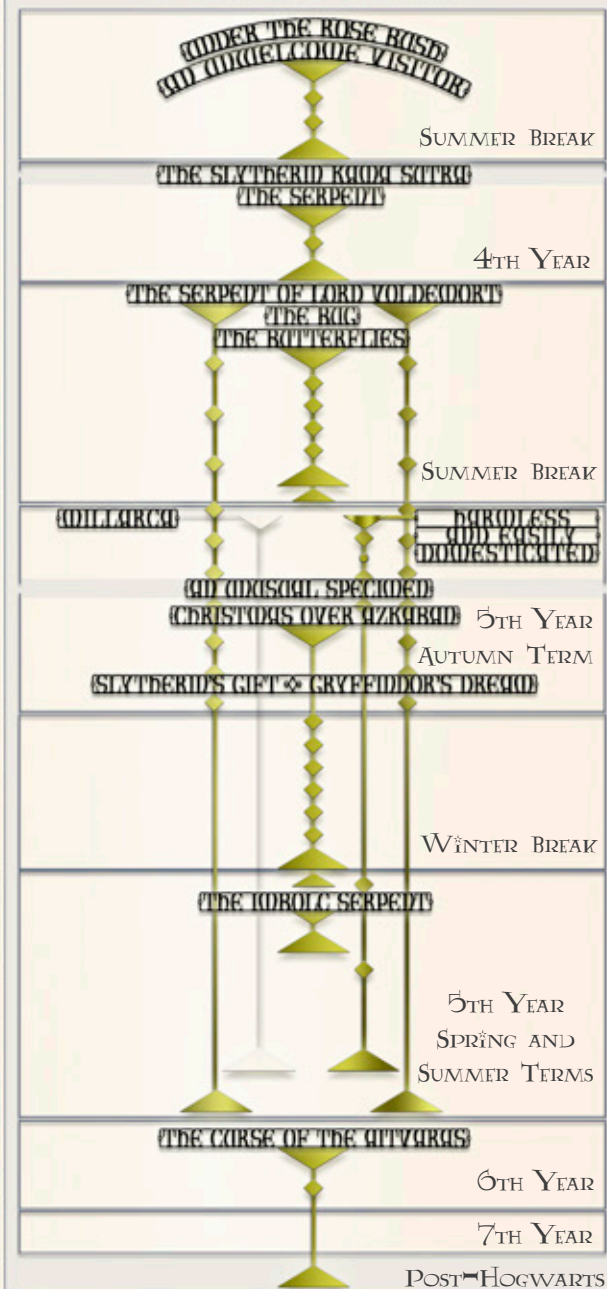


BY ANGIE
ASTRAVIC

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IN ORDER OF OCCURANCE



UNDER THE ROSE BUSH




Author's Note: This story is set during the summer of the Quidditch World Cup and was written before GOBLET OF FIRE was published.

HARRY POTTER leant against his shovel and mopped the sweat from his forehead. He eyed the hole he had just dug, trying to tell if it was deep enough yet for him to plant the new rose bush. Probably not, he decided. Sighing deeply, he picked up the shovel and carried on digging.

Harry tried to take his mind off the hot and boring work by thinking about the Quidditch World Cup, which would be held later that summer. He'd been invited to go and see it with his best friend, Ron Weasley. Uncle Vernon, however, had made it clear that permission to do so would be contingent on Harry's good behaviour during the weeks prior.

Since then, the Dursleys had taken great pleasure in finding unpleasant tasks for Harry to do. With the threat of missing the Quidditch World Cup hanging over his head, he didn't dare protest. That morning at breakfast, Aunt Petunia had looked at him pointedly and said that one of the rose bushes in the back garden was covered in blackspot, and *someone* would have to cut it down and plant a new one in its place. Harry had had no choice but to volunteer.





Harry's attention was yanked back to the job at hand when his shovel hit something and wouldn't go any further into the ground. It didn't seem to be a rock. It felt almost rubbery, but even when he put all his weight on the shovel, he couldn't cut through it. Curious, Harry began carefully removing the dirt that covered the mysterious object. When the last shovelful scraped away, the cause of the blockage was revealed: an envelope, made of yellow parchment.

Turning his back to the house in case any of the Dursleys were watching, Harry snatched up the letter and stuffed it in his pocket. He finished planting the rose bush as quickly as he could, his thoughts racing. The envelope might merely be one of his Hogwarts letters that Uncle Vernon had missed, or one of the letters Dobby had stolen summer before last. Wizarding parchment was normally no stronger than Muggle paper, though. One of those letters shouldn't have made it past the first heavy rain, much less stopped a shovel dead.

As soon as he got back to his room, Harry took the letter out of his pocket and sat down on his bed to examine it. The envelope had a dark brown wax seal with a frog on it. In ink the same colour as the seal, it was addressed to *Mr and Mrs Vernon Dursley, 4 Privet Drive*. Harry stared at it in astonishment. What witch or wizard would want to send a letter to the Dursleys? Could — could it have been written by his mother before she'd died?

With shaking hands, Harry opened the letter. He couldn't seem to tear through the flap of the envelope, but with a few sharp tugs he was able to pull it loose

from the wax seal. The letter contained two sheets of parchment folded together. When Harry took them out, several small heavy rectangular pieces of paper fell to the floor. He reached down, picked one up and read:

HARRY POTTER, the only wizard ever known to have survived an attack by He Who Must Not Be Named.

Although the curse destroyed his house, Harry himself was left unscathed except for a lightning-shaped cut on his forehead. Immediately after, the Dark Lord disappeared. Harry Potter is currently residing with his Muggle aunt and uncle, Petunia and Vernon Dursley.

On the other side was a picture Harry recognised from the photo album Hagrid had given him — himself as a baby, being held by his mother, with his father's arms around them both. Underneath were the words HARRY POTTER — THE BOY WHO LIVED. It was a Famous Witches and Wizards card from a pack of Chocolate Frogs — of Harry.



Harry gaped at the card for a moment or two, then opened up the letter and began reading:

THEOBROM AND RANIDAY

PURVEYORS OF FINE MAGICAL CONFECTIONARIES

Dear Mr and Mrs Dursley,

We are pleased to inform you of our plans to add your nephew Harry Potter to our series of Chocolate Frogs Famous





Witches and Wizards cards. Unfortunately our three previous letters seem to have gone astray. The Tracing Charms on the last two revealed that while those letters were delivered to your doorstep, one was torn to pieces and the other burnt shortly after delivery.

We have reported this possible interference with the owl post to the Ministry of Magic. If you have any suspicions as to the parties responsible, you should do likewise, particularly as some of 'You-Know-Who's supporters may still be at large. We have taken the additional precaution of enchanting this letter against all common types of parchment damage.

Enclosed for your consideration are samples of our three proposed card designs. We would prefer to use the christening photo; little Harry looks just like a baby angel in that white lace robe.

Harry could recall no such photo from his album, and this remark sounded alarmingly like the sort of thing Aunt Petunia often said about Dudley. Somewhat apprehensively, Harry gathered up the rest of the cards from the floor. The next card he turned over was iden-



tical to the first, but the one after that had a picture of his baby self in the arms of his godfather, Sirius Black, who looked up and smiled at him from the photo. A woman Harry had never seen before stood beside them, waving. Several other people were moving around in the background. One in particular caught his attention. Harry's mouth thinned and he glared at Peter Pettigrew, who refused to meet his eyes.

The christening robe wasn't nearly as bad as some of the outfits Dudley had worn in his baby pictures, but it certainly was extremely lacy. Lace at the collar, lace at the cuffs and a panel of lace over a foot long at the hem, with a fantastic design of moons and stars and trees and cats and owls. Harry shuddered. He could well imagine what Draco Malfoy would have to say about a Famous Witches and Wizards card of baby Harry in a lacy white robe.

Harry set the cards down and went back to reading the letter.

We feel certain that with the proper spells Sirius Black can be removed from this photograph

'Good, you can use them to get rid of Pettigrew,' said Harry savagely.

— but either of the other two would also be suitable. Can you give us any information about the dog that appears in the Christmas picture? The original photo

had the words 'Harry and Padfoot, First Christmas' written on the back of it, yet no one we've spoken with recognised either the name or the animal itself, nor did they recall the Potters ever owning a dog.

Harry flipped through the remaining cards. Another christening photo, then one of an enormous black dog, the transformed Sirius Black, lying in front of a Christmas tree with a bright red bow around his neck. On the rug beside him was a five-month-old Harry, who opened his mouth and stared curiously out of the picture at his much older real self. Sirius-Padfoot raised his head and thumped his tail against the floor.

The last card in the stack was a second copy of the Christmas photo, but felt heavier and thicker than the other cards. Harry took a closer look and saw that it was actually two cards stuck together. He put his fingernail between them and pulled them apart. Sandwiched inside, holding the cards together, was a bit of parchment with a Sticking Charm on it. It was a note, which read:

Sabella:

Have you ever seen such a monster in all your life? The Potters must have been mad, letting a baby anywhere near that thing, it could eat him with one swallow. He's lucky to have lived long enough for

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ADDER THE ROSE BUSH

the Dark Lord to have a go at him. Pret you five Galleons the beast turns out to be a present from Hagrid they got rid of as soon as they decently could.

Viridius

Harry grinned, then finished reading the letter:

Please sign the enclosed release form and return it to us as soon as possible.

Yours sincerely,

Sabella Theobrom

Director

Harry smiled grimly. It didn't look as though Theobrom and Raniday had had much luck getting their form signed, either. Still, considering the picture they'd wanted to use, it was just as well. For the first time in his life he was glad the Dursleys had such a horror of all things magical. He spread the cards out on his pillow and lay down on his front to look at them for a while, wondering where his godfather was and what he was doing, wondering whether he and Harry would ever have their second Christmas together.

'HAAAAAAAAA-REEEEEEE!'

Aunt Petunia's screech echoed up the stairs. Giving a sigh, Harry picked up the cards and letter, hid them under the loose floorboard under his bed, and headed downstairs to find out what new work his aunt had found for him to do.

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ADDER THE ROSE BUSH



'Here, I've got something to show you,' said Harry, rummaging in his trunk. 'I found a Chocolate Frogs card you don't have yet. You can keep it if you like, I've three of them.'

'Thanks,' said Ron. 'Is it Agrippa? Because I found Ptolemy, last summer in Egypt.'

'No, it's not Agrippa, sorry,' Harry replied. He finally located the letter from the Chocolate Frogs company. Taking out one of the cards with the Christmas photo, he held it up for Ron to see, covering the name with his fingers. 'Recognise anyone?' Harry grinned.

Ron came over and looked at the card in puzzlement. 'That dog — it looks exactly like — but it can't be — and who —' Ron took the card from Harry's hand. When he read the name under the picture, his mouth fell open. 'Harry, is this real?' he gasped.

'Of course it's not real,' Harry laughed. 'It's a sample the manufacturers sent the Dursleys. Wait'll you see the note that was stuck to it, it'll give you a laugh.' Harry reached back into the envelope. 'There were some others with different pictures, too. I'll show them to you if you swear never to mention the one with the christening robe around Malfoy.'

'Yes, I've heard of that one,' said Ron eagerly. 'And the other one, with your mum and dad?'

'You've *heard* of it?' Harry echoed, his smile vanishing. 'These cards, they never actually came out, did they?'



'No, the one with your parents on it was about to, but some of their friends got wind of it and complained to the Ministry of Magic. There was an enquiry, and it turned out the company didn't have permission from a guardian to use your picture.'


'Yeah, the Dursleys were tearing up their letters,' Harry said. 'They put some kind of spell on this one, I found it buried underneath a rose bush. I suppose they gave up when they still got no answer.'

'It wasn't only that,' said Ron. 'It came out that there was another card with Sirius Black on it, and how they'd got the photos — sent someone round to Pettigrew's mother's house not two days after he was killed ... well, after everyone *thought* he was killed. Theobrom and Raniday were getting a lot of bad publicity. It wasn't the first time they'd been investigated for dodgy business practices. Nor the last either — Dad was in on a Muggle labour exploitation case a few years ago.'

'Muggle labour exploitation?' Harry asked. 'What's that?'

'Hiring Muggles, which is illegal anyway, and then instead of paying them, using a Memory Charm to make them forget they'd done the work. There wasn't enough evidence to make any charges stick, though. Sabella Theobrom is quite clever, Dad says. She started at Hogwarts after he left — Slytherin, of course — but he's heard things from people who were there with her. Anyway, Theobrom and Raniday must have been up to something back then too, because they really didn't want the Ministry poking around the place. Instead of putting up a fight, they agreed to pay a fine and





cancel the card. But they'd made nearly three hundred samples of the one with your parents and most of them were already gone — for advertising, to big customers, people who worked there taking them for their children...'

'What about the one with the christening robe?' asked Harry anxiously.

'The ones with Sirius Black — the human Sirius, I mean — are a lot rarer. Theobrom and Raniday were trying to have the pictures enchanted so he'd hand you to someone else and leave the photo, but no one they asked could get the spells right. There were less than thirty samples of those cards made, they go for hundreds of Galleons at auction.'

'Oh, come off it, Ron,' Harry scoffed. 'Who'd pay that much for a Chocolate Frogs card?'

'A serious collector would!' said Ron indignantly. 'I have an old value guide if you don't believe me!' He looked back down at the card Harry had given him. 'As for this one, I didn't even know there was a third design being planned. None of them have ever turned up before.'

Ron stared at the card in awe. Then his face fell. He reluctantly held it out to Harry.

'You can't give me this, it probably *is* worth more than our whole house...'

'Too late now, I've already given it to you,' said Harry firmly. 'Er — those auctions — the Sirius Black cards — Malfoy's never got hold of one, has he?'

'I dunno,' Ron frowned. 'His father's certainly rich enough to afford it, but I've never heard of him being

a card collector. Mind, a lot of them have gone to anonymous bidders, a lot more than rare cards usually do. I mean, buying a card with You-Know-Who's second-in-command on it — it looks a bit suspicious.'

'Once we prove Sirius is innocent, no one will be embarrassed by them anymore,' said Harry sharply. 'Well, no one except me. But I reckon if Malfoy had one the whole school would know by now. That lace robe — he'd have a field day.'

'Don't worry about it,' advised Ron. 'They don't turn up that often. Unless someone else finds a letter under their rose bush, you should be safe.'



Professor Snape woke to the light of the midday sun shining through his window. He dragged himself out of bed, poured some water from the jug and basin set on his chest of drawers and splashed it on his face. Finishing off that bottle of nettle wine had definitely been a mistake. Now he had a splitting headache to contend with in addition to the newly appointed Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher.

Snape sat down on the edge of his bed and reached into the drawer of the bedside table. He was positive there was a Comforting Concoction in there somewhere. It would be nearly seven years old, but even if it had started to go off, drinking it wouldn't do him any harm — it simply wouldn't help his headache very much.

Three bottles later — Flesh Eating Slug Repellent, Attar of Crabgrass and the special hairball remedy he brewed on occasion for Professor McGonagall

— Snape gave up, pulled out the whole drawer and dumped its contents onto the bed. He began pushing aside pieces of wrinkled parchment, quills with bent feathers and other bits of rubbish. There was the packet of dried sea squirts he'd been looking for since April... There was the root-chopping knife he'd been looking for since March... There were McGonagall's spare glasses *she'd* been looking for since February.

How they'd found their way into the drawer of his bedside table, he didn't really want to know. Perhaps the wretched things truly could move about under their own power, as she'd often claimed. More likely Fred and George Weasley had something to do with it. McGonagall would be well served if he returned them to her that evening at dinner, and told the entire staff table where he'd found them. She let the students in her house get away with anything, particularly *Harry Potter — The Boy Who Lived*.

Snape froze. Slowly he drew the card out from under the mummified rat that half-covered it. Sirius Black glared angrily up at him and tightened his arms protectively around the baby Harry. Headache, Comforting Concoction, and McGonagall-baiting forgotten, Snape let an evil smile creep over his face. The upcoming school year was suddenly looking to be a much better one than it had the night before.

* THE END *

AN UNWELCOME VISITOR



THE MISSING GODFATHER

A

LTHOUGH IT WAS Harry Potter's fourteenth birthday, he didn't feel much like celebrating. This wasn't really the fault of his relatives the Dursleys. They were ignoring this birthday as completely as they'd done all the others since Harry had started at Hogwarts, but he'd been expecting that, and at least this year they weren't forcing him to put up with any guests.

Nor had his friends from Hogwarts forgotten him. A flock of owls had been by earlier that night; the cards they'd brought — from Ron, Hermione, Hagrid and Professor Lupin — were lined up on his bedside table... and he wished he could trade them all for a single scrap of parchment from his godfather, Sirius Black. Sirius had promised to write again soon in his last letter, delivered to the Hogwarts Express at the beginning of the summer, but over a month had gone by with no word from him.

At first, Harry hadn't been particularly concerned. He knew that as Sirius was on the run from the Ministry of Magic and might have difficulties using owl post. The Dursleys kept Harry almost completely out of touch with the wizarding world over the summer,

but the Muggle government was in on the search too. Harry felt sure any progress would be reported on the evening news. He had been watching it of night all summer (to Uncle Vernon's great annoyance) and so far there had been no mention of Sirius Black.

As the days turned to weeks, however, Harry had grown more worried. It wasn't just the Ministry of Magic from which Sirius was in danger. To prove his innocence, Sirius had to find Peter Pettigrew, who in turn would be seeking out his master, Lord Voldemort. If Sirius had encountered Pettigrew or Voldemort and come off worse, Harry doubted anyone involved would send a press release to the DAILY PROPHET.

Harry had resolved that if he didn't hear from Sirius before his birthday, he'd have to do something to find out why not. So when his birthday cards — but still no message from his godfather — had arrived, Harry sent a note back with Ron's tiny owl, asking Ron to see if his father had heard anything more about Sirius. Mr Weasley worked for the Ministry of Magic, and would presumably know any information being kept from the general public.

Harry then set his alarm clock so he could slip downstairs next morning to phone Hermione before the Dursleys woke up. Hermione didn't have an owl of her own, but she did have a subscription to the DAILY PROPHET, and, knowing her, read it front page to back every morning. Hermione was the cleverest witch Harry knew; if anything had been reported in the wizarding newspaper that might explain what was up

with Sirius, she would have noticed and remembered it.

Nonetheless, Harry was hoping he wouldn't have to risk calling her at all. If the Dursleys caught him at it, they'd likely be angry enough to stop him visiting Ron for the Quidditch World Cup. Sirius might simply be having trouble finding an owl, or writing materials, and Harry had taken steps to solve that problem, too. After scribbling *'Been worried, please write'* near the top of a blank piece of parchment, wrapped it around a Muggle pen, bound the lot to Hedwig's leg and told her to go and find Sirius.

Now, Harry thought as he slumped back onto his pillow, he could do nothing more but wait.

Harry was jerked awake to the sound of her wrathful screech as she came swooping back through the open window. Bits of what looked like cobweb clung to her wings and body, and she was missing several tail feathers. The pen and parchment were still tied to one leg. The talons of the other were coated with blood.

Hedwig herself didn't appear to be injured. The wisps of greyish stuff stuck to her feathers dissolved the second Harry touched them, and once they were gone she soon calmed down. Harry, on the other hand, went from worried to panicked. Clearly something had gone very badly wrong for Sirius... but *what?* At that moment Harry would have given anything to be able to talk to owls as well as snakes. As he couldn't, there was nothing else for it but to go have a look himself.

Harry dressed quickly, stole down the stairs, picked the lock on the cupboard underneath, got his wand, broomstick and Invisibility Cloak from his trunk

and raced back up to his room. He intended to send Hedwig to find Sirius again, this time following behind her. Hedwig, however, flatly refused to cooperate. She dug her claws stubbornly into the window sill, and when Harry tried to go out the window himself, she flew up and dove at his face, driving him back into the room.

'Hedwig, let me out,' Harry whispered urgently. 'If Sirius is in trouble, I have to go and help him.'

Hedwig hooted sympathetically, hopped on to his shoulder and nibbled his ear, but still wouldn't let him near the window. Harry finally gave up and went to sit dejectedly on the edge of the bed. Even if he did manage to get past Hedwig, he had no real chance of finding Sirius without her. The more he thought about it, the less certain he was that he should try.

Hedwig wouldn't be acting this way without a good reason. If Sirius had got away from — from whatever it was, he no longer needed Harry's help. If Harry went looking for Sirius, he might very well end up leading something back to him, or getting caught himself. It was also entirely possible that the creature that had attacked Hedwig had nothing to do with Sirius.

Harry lay down again and tried to go back to sleep, but other, less comforting thoughts kept intruding. If the thing that Hedwig encountered wasn't after Sirius, why hadn't the owls that brought his birthday cards been attacked too? And what sort of beast was it? The webs suggested some kind of spider, and Aragog and his relatives were definitely big enough

to eat an owl. But surely their webs wouldn't simply vanish when touched? No ordinary spider Harry had ever squashed had had red blood, either.

Harry went over in his mind every terrifying monster he'd studied in Defence Against the Dark Arts, to no avail. More horrible than any of them was the possibility that Hedwig didn't want him going to help Sirius, because Sirius was already dead.

It was nearly morning before Harry at last fell asleep. He slept through the clock's alarm, only to be woken by Aunt Petunia's voice, calling Dudley to lunch. Harry stumbled downstairs and choked down his food, neither speaking to nor being spoken to by the Dursleys. Once finished, he went straight up to his room. A little while later he heard Dudley and Uncle Vernon going out the front door, and the sound of the car starting.

Harry had spent the next hour stretched out on his bed brooding pointlessly over the events of the previous night. If only he'd woken up in time to call Hermione... surely *she'd* be able to figure out what was going on. It suddenly occurred to Harry that he had a perfect opportunity call Hermione right now. Dudley and Uncle Vernon were gone, and as Aunt Petunia spent as much time spying on the neighbours as washing up, she'd probably still be at it.

Harry had just swung his legs off the bed when the doorbell sounded. He drew a sharp breath of frustration. There would be no chance of using the telephone until whoever it was had gone. After what happened to Aunt Marge last summer, the Dursleys had become even

stricter about keeping him away from visitors. He only hoped it wasn't Aunt Petunia's friend Yvonne. Harry knew from experience that the two of them could gossip for hours on end, and if he so much as showed his face downstairs with her in the house... he didn't even like to think about the row that would follow.

A great shriek of terror from Aunt Petunia brought Harry's gloomy reflections to a halt. 'Sirius!' he whispered joyfully, as he leapt off the bed and shot out of his room — only to stop short in astonishment at the top of the stairs. It wasn't Sirius Black who stood looming on the threshold before the cowering Aunt Petunia. It was, rather, the last person Harry would have wanted or expected to have visit him for his birthday: Professor Severus Snape.

Aunt Petunia let out another ear-splitting screech, even longer and louder than the first. Snape stared at her, looking slightly taken aback. While many students at Hogwarts lived in fear of his sharp tongue and foul temper, not even Neville Longbottom was reduced to hysterics by his mere presence. Moreover, Snape seemed trying to make himself inconspicuous by wearing Muggle clothes.

Unfortunately, the particular items of Muggle clothing he had chosen (as the closest match for his usual black wizarding robes, Harry suspected) had exactly the opposite effect. With his greasy shoulder-length hair, sallow complexion and menacing demeanour, Snape wouldn't have been a reassuring sight to Aunt Petunia under any circumstances. Dressed in black jeans, black Doc Martens and a black

trench coat, he looked as though he'd been sent by a sinister terrorist organisation to kill James Bond.

As Aunt Petunia had no way of knowing who Snape was, Harry couldn't blame her for screaming. Snape wasn't so understanding. He surveyed Aunt Petunia with mounting irritation. As she drew breath to shriek yet again, he snapped his fingers, and the sound of her voice cut off in mid-screach.

Aunt Petunia clutched at her throat. Snape took a step towards her and opened his mouth to speak. Before he could get a word out, she turned and ran, fast as her legs could carry her, up the stairs, past Harry and into her bedroom, still screaming silently. The door slammed, and Harry heard what sounded like a large piece of furniture being dragged in front of it.

Harry turned back towards Snape, who was gazing up at him with such an enraged expression on his face that Harry seriously considered running into his own room and dragging something heavy in front of the door. But it would take more than a chest of drawers to keep Snape out, and if the Dursleys discovered who he was, they were certain to blame Harry for the entire situation. He had to get rid of Snape before Uncle Vernon got back.

Harry began walking slowly down the stairs. It would help if he had some idea why Snape was there in the first place. Harry hadn't got his Hogwarts letter yet; perhaps one of the school owls had been attacked too, and Snape had come to investigate. If so, he had obviously already made up his mind that Harry was in some way responsible, and wasn't likely to be per-

sueded otherwise.

Harry reached the bottom of the stairs and started down the hall. Snape swept into the house. The front door slammed magically shut behind him, hard enough to rattle the windows. Before Harry could say anything, Snape reached into his pocket, taking out a piece of parchment.

'You've been writing to him, haven't you?' he snarled. 'You stupid boy, do you *want* to be murdered?'

Harry stared at the parchment, then at the half-healed scratches on Snape's hand.

'You've been taking his letters!' he yelled, torn between outrage and relief.

He snatched the piece of parchment away from Snape and skimmed his eyes over it.

Dear Harry

...hope this finds you well... should have thrown the Ministry off the trail... Buckbeak safely hidden... will try to visit for your birthday... let me know what plans you have...

Sirius

'He's coming to kill you, Potter, just as he killed your parents,' hissed Snape.

'He's not — he didn't —' Harry shouted, so furious he could barely speak. 'D'you think I'm still Confunded, after two months?'

Snape gave Harry a look of utter loathing. 'I think you're exactly like your father,' he said softly. 'Too arrogant to admit you were Confunded... too arro-

gant to admit you could be wrong. If he had listened to me, he'd still be alive today...'

'Told him not to trust Pettigrew, did you?' Harry asked coldly. 'Does Dumbledore know you're here?'

The effect of this question on Snape was frightening. His sallow face went closer to white than Harry would have imagined possible, and the look in his eyes... Harry backed away. He had thought he'd seen Snape at his angriest last year in the hospital wing when Sirius had escaped. Clearly, he'd been mistaken.

2.

A CASE OF IDENTITY

From just outside the front door came the sound of tyres on gravel. For the first time in his life, Harry was glad to hear Uncle Vernon's car pulling into the drive. Before the engine had even stopped, Dudley let himself in the house, calling out gloatingly, 'Harry, come and see what Dad bought me!'

When he caught sight of Snape, his small piggy eyes lit up.

'Dad!' he yelled. 'Harry's got his godfather in the hall!'

'He isn't —' Harry began.

'Look at the state of his hair,' Dudley interrupted, eyeing Snape insolently. 'It's nearly as bad as yours.'

'*Nearly* as bad?' said Harry, highly affronted. 'My hair may not lie flat, but at least I wash it!'

Snape glared from Harry to Dudley and back again,

as though trying to decide which of them to strangle first. Next second, Uncle Vernon came rushing in, his purple face even purpler than usual with rage.

'You! Get out of my house this instant!' he roared at Snape. Turning to Harry he bellowed, 'How dare you bring this man to our home! I warned you, boy...'

'I didn't invite him here! And he's not —'

Before Harry could finish, he was shoved unceremoniously out of the way by Aunt Petunia, who had apparently heard the car and come running back down the stairs. Her lips were moving at full speed, but no sound was coming out. She darted behind Uncle Vernon, gripped his shoulder and at that moment Snape's Silencing Charm gave out from the strain.

'Vernon!' she shrieked. 'I opened the door... and he... and he...'

Uncle Vernon didn't wait to hear what Snape had done. He let out a roar of fury, grabbed the collar of Snape's coat and drew back his fist. Snape's eyes flashed, and with a loud cracking noise Uncle Vernon was hurled several feet away, into the living room. Snape yanked out his wand and sent a beam of silver light to strike a photograph of the Dursleys in the centre of the mantelpiece.

The figures of the Dursleys in the picture began to glow. A strong wind sprang up, ruffling Harry's hair and Snape's trench coat. The real Dursleys — who seemed to be getting smaller and smaller — were blown off their feet and into the photo. Snape watched with an unpleasant smile as Uncle Vernon banged his fist against the glass and shouted — noiselessly, as sound

didn't appear to carry from inside the picture.

Harry started edging his way back towards the staircase. He had just put his foot on the bottom step when Snape's voice stopped him in his tracks.

'Where do you think *you're* going?'

'I'm going to my room,' said Harry. 'You wait for Sirius if you're so keen.'

'So you can come sneaking back under your Invisibility Cloak? I don't think so,' said Snape coldly, pointing his wand at Harry. 'You're staying right here.'

Harry glowered at him, then stuffed the letter from Sirius into his pocket and sat down at the foot of the stairs. In fact he still had his Cloak — and more importantly, his wand — with him from the night before. Luckily Snape didn't seem to have realised this, probably because Dudley's old clothes were so large on Harry that he could have practically kept a live Hippogriff in his pockets with no one the wiser.

Harry tried not to think about the trouble he'd be in if Sirius turned up and Harry violated the restrictions on underage wizardry to stop Snape recapturing him. Surely Sirius wasn't still planning to visit? He wasn't stupid, he must have figured out there was something dodgy going on when Harry didn't answer his letter.

Snape had taken up a position near the bannister and was glaring at the front door, his eyes occasionally flicking back to check on Harry. Harry leant away from him and slowly eased his hand into his pocket. The minutes crept by. Harry wondered how long Snape was planning to wait, and what he would

do when Sirius failed to appear. Snape seemed to have gone back to normal — well, normal for Snape — but Harry wouldn't soon forget the look on his face, just before Dudley and Uncle Vernon had returned.

The doorbell rang. Harry's stomach contracted, and he clutched his wand even more tightly. Snape muttered a word and the door flew open — revealing the startled face of Dudley's friend Gordon. Harry was a bit surprised to see him; neither Gordon nor the rest of Dudley's gang had been around much since the summer Harry found out he was a wizard. He suspected that Dudley had been warned by his parents to see that they all stayed as far away from Harry as possible.

'Get rid of him, Potter!' Snape hissed out of the corner of his mouth, keeping his eyes fixed on the door.

This Harry was only too happy to do. His chances of going to the Quidditch World Cup looked about zero right now, but that would be the least of his worries if Snape worked magic in front of Gordon and it got back to the Dursleys. If any stories of odd goings-on at number four made their way around the neighbourhood, Uncle Vernon wouldn't just lock Harry in the cupboard, he'd stuff him into his trunk as well.

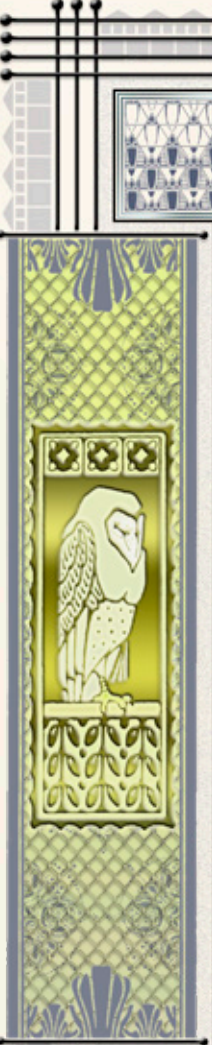
'Gordon,' Harry said flatly. 'Dudley isn't in right now. Try coming back later.'

Gordon stared at Harry, open-mouthed. Then his eyes wandered over to Snape.

'Who's he?' Gordon asked.

'One of my teachers from school,' said Harry shortly.

'Why's he dressed like that?'



Harry was getting annoyed. ‘Professor — Professor Sharif was the top assassin in the Middle East, before he made too many enemies and had to flee to England. As there’s not much work for hitmen in this country, he took a job at St Brutus’s Secure Centre. He hates teaching and he hates students, but if he killed any St Brutus boys, the school would lose their fees and he’d be sacked. Of course, *you’re* going to Smeltings, aren’t you?’

Harry hadn’t really expected Gordon to believe this story. It seemed that he had vastly overestimated Gordon’s intelligence, however. From the gormless expression on his face, Harry doubted Gordon had even *understood* it.

Gordon gazed at Snape in befuddlement for a while longer, then turned back to Harry. ‘I need to give this to Dudley,’ he said, holding out a black canvas bag.

‘Clear off!’ said Harry irritably. ‘I told you Dudley wasn’t here.’

Gordon stood there, looking stupid. Snape stirred restlessly.

‘Here, give it to me. I’ll see he gets it,’ said Harry, getting up and walking down the hall. When he got to the door, he reached out for the bag — then ducked under Gordon’s outstretched arm and went haring off down Privet Drive.

When he’d got several streets away, Harry skidded to a halt. He leant against a low wall to catch his breath and reached into his pocket for the Invisibility Cloak. Before he could take it out, his arm was caught in a painfully tight grip. Harry gasped and whirled

around, to find Snape’s face inches from his own.

The two of them stood staring at one another, Snape apparently too furious to speak, and Harry too surprised. How on earth had Snape managed to get there so quickly? Harry would’ve thought he’d had more of a start on him than that. He hadn’t even heard Snape coming up...

The silence was broken by a voice calling out sharply, ‘What’s going on here?’

Harry twisted his head to see a woman getting out of a police car and moving swiftly in their direction. As she approached, he recognised her as Police Constable Rose Pascoe. Three years ago, when Dudley had knocked down old Mrs Figg with his racing bike, Constable Pascoe had come round to number four to tell him she’d be keeping her eye on him. Harry had been locked in his cupboard for accidentally releasing a boa constrictor at the zoo, but even there he could hear quite clearly Uncle Vernon’s angry shouting.

From then on, the very sight of Constable Pascoe driving by sent Uncle Vernon into a rage. For hours after, he would mutter indignantly about malicious and unwarranted persecution of an innocent young boy, and throw out dark hints as to the sort of woman who would join the police force in the first place.

Harry always found this extremely entertaining, and normally would have been quite pleased to see her. Right now, however, the last thing he wanted was Snape explaining himself to the Muggle police. As far as Harry knew, the hotline the Ministry of Magic had set up for Muggles to report sightings of

Sirius Black was still running. If Snape mentioned his name it would very likely be used. Protecting Sirius from Snape would be difficult enough; Harry had no desire to take on the Magical Law Enforcement Patrol as well.

He tried desperately to think of something to say to Constable Pascoe, but came up blank. There was no explanation she was likely to believe for why one of his teachers would be chasing him down the street in the middle of summer holidays, dressed like something out of a Mad Max film.

'You're young Harry Dursley, aren't you?' she said, eyeing him with some concern.

'I — yes — *no!* I —' Harry panted, out of breath from running, not having the faintest idea what to tell her and completely floored at being described as a Dursley. It was too bad Uncle Vernon wasn't around to hear, Harry thought wildly, he would have got done for assaulting a police officer for sure.

'And who might you be?' Constable Pascoe demanded of Snape, concern giving way to deep suspicion.

Snape let go of Harry's arm and reached into his coat for his wand. Her expression changed from suspicion to alarm. She must have thought Snape had a gun. She flung herself on him, sending both of them tumbling over the wall.

Harry stepped up to the wall and looked down. Constable Pascoe, having landed more or less on top of Snape, was hanging grimly on to his arm, trying to get his wand away from him before he could take it out of his coat. Harry didn't think Snape would be

able to keep her off it for long; she was a sturdy young woman and Snape was half-stunned from his fall.

'No, wait, it's all right!' Harry cried. 'He — he's my godfather, he's a professional magician, he was taking out a wand, not a gun!'

Constable Pascoe let go of Snape and stared up at Harry in amazement. Suddenly she and Harry shot straight up into the air like rockets, so quickly that by the time Harry realised what had happened, they had already begun to drift slowly down. Looking groundwards, he saw Snape wrapped up like a mummy in a cocoon of bandages.

The flowering shrubs along the other side of the street shimmered and blurred, and a dozen green-clad witches and wizards came pouring out. One of them looked up at him and called out, 'All right there, Harry?'

It was Percy Weasley.

3.

THE MAGICAL LAW ENFORCEMENT PATROL

Harry and Constable Pascoe landed with a slight bump. Percy was waiting for them alongside a slender witch with an enormous halo of frizzy black hair. She led the shocked and speechless Constable Pascoe away, murmuring soothingly, 'Special Air Servants... new hostage rescue technique... well done distracting him, we'll take it from here...'

Six of the witches and wizards had gathered by the wall to cover Snape with their wands. Two more witches — one fantastically pretty and the other with

a number of live bats clinging to her robes — walked around muttering spells. A nervous, weedy-looking wizard was tending to several floating tea trays of whirring silver instruments. The apparent leader of the group, a wizard no taller than Harry and quite ordinary-looking apart from his height, kept a watchful eye on them all.

‘What are you doing here, Percy?’ Harry asked. ‘What’s going on?’

‘I’m here with the Magical Law Enforcement Patrol,’ Percy said importantly, ‘to apprehend Sirius Black.’ He gestured at the mummified Snape.

‘Percy, that isn’t Sirius Black,’ Harry laughed. ‘That’s Professor Snape you’ve got wrapped up in there.’

Percy shook his head and looked at Harry sorrowfully. ‘It’s no good, Harry,’ he said. ‘We’ve been listening the whole time. You told the Muggle policewoman he was your godfather. Your cousin said so too.’

‘I was trying to get rid of Constable Pascoe and Dudley made a mistake,’ said Harry, exasperated. ‘Take the bandages off his face, go on, you know what Snape looks like.’

‘I know Sirius Black was one of the top Transfigurers that Hogwarts ever turned out,’ countered Percy. ‘He could be looking like Neville Longbottom’s grandmother by now if it suited him.’

The leader of the patrol came up to them. ‘McNair should be here any minute,’ he said. ‘Weasley, take Potter back to his house. He doesn’t need to watch this.’

‘You’re going to execute him? Right here and now? Wait, you’ve got the wrong man!’ Harry said urgently.

‘Harry...’ said Percy sternly. ‘You can’t still believe he’s innocent. After the way he was threatening you? After the things he said about your father?’

‘No, you’ve got the *wrong* wrong man! It’s Professor Snape, I tell you!’ The patrol leader turned to leave. Harry grabbed him by the back of his robes. ‘You can’t let McNair kill him, not without even checking!’

The patrol leader twisted around and gave Harry a long cold look.

‘Better that than the Dementor’s Kiss. Black is lucky we caught up to him in a Muggle neighbourhood,’ he said.

He suddenly seemed rather frightening for such a small and unprepossessing wizard, but Harry thought of McNair about to arrive and forced himself to hold on.

‘He’s not Sirius Black, you’ve got to listen to me —’

Percy seized Harry by his wrists and pulled him off the patrol leader. ‘Leave him to me, sir, I’ll talk some sense into him,’ Harry, listen to me,’ Percy said. ‘Sirius Black was the Dark Lord’s spy. He betrayed your parents, murdered thirteen people, and broke out of Azkaban to kill you. He was pretending to be innocent because he thought he could persuade you to join the Dark Side. When he realised it wasn’t working, he showed his true colours. It must be obvious —’

‘SIRIUS WASN’T WORKING FOR VOLDEMORT, IT WAS PETTIGREW, I SAW HIM!’ Harry shouted furiously. ‘And it’s not Sirius anyway, it’s Snape...’ he trailed

off. As soon as he had yelled out Voldemort's name, the entire Magical Law Enforcement Patrol had wheeled around to gape at him in absolute horror. Raising his voice to address his new audience, Harry said, 'How d'you think this will look in the DAILY PROPHET, with all the trouble you've had catching Sirius Black, if you end up executing the wrong person?'

'If it was Snape, who'd miss him?' muttered one of the patrol members, a tall burly young wizard.

'I heard that, Mamble,' said a very cold voice off to Harry's side. While the Hit Wizards had been distracted by Harry's shouting, Snape had somehow managed to get himself out of the bandages. 'No wonder the Ministry can't catch up to Black, if they're hiring idiots like you,' he sneered. 'I do hope they don't let you brew the tea, we lose quite enough Magical Law Enforcement officers in the line of duty as it is.'

Mamble's face went brick red. 'Professor Snape?' he said in a small voice. At that moment he reminded Harry quite strongly of Neville Longbottom, in spite of looking nothing like him.

The patrol leader fired off a spell, which Snape blocked, with some difficulty. He staggered back, his wand arm shaking.

'Don't be a bigger fool than you already have been, Ormesby,' he gasped. 'If I had been Sirius Black, you'd all be dead, thanks to Potter here.'

'Well, that's nice!' said Harry indignantly. 'Next time they want to cut off your head, I'll just let them get on with it, shall I?'

'Yes!' said Mamble, in a betrayed tone. Plainly he

felt that Harry had sadly failed to live up to his reputation as a vanquisher of evil wizards.

Before Snape could round on him, Ormesby called out, 'Krysia! Kuiama! Niall!' The two witches who had been casting spells and the wizard with the tea trays hurried over. 'Check him out,' Ormesby ordered, keeping his wand pointed at Snape.

The three of them stepped over the wall. The witches waved their wands and the wizard consulted his instruments. Snape glared but didn't try to stop them.

Finally the bat-festooned witch shrugged and said, 'There's no disguise or concealment magic on him that we can detect, and he isn't Transfigured.'

Ormesby was not pleased. 'Even if you aren't Sirius Black, you've just seriously interfered with a major Magical Law Enforcement operation,' he told Snape. 'What are you doing here?'

'The same thing you are, trying to keep famous Harry Potter from getting himself killed,' snarled Snape. 'He invited Black here for his birthday, and he's been writing letters to him all summer!'


'Is this true?' Ormesby asked Harry.

'No...' said Harry slowly. 'I didn't invite Sirius for my birthday, and I haven't been writing to him all summer.'

This was the truth, as far as it went. Harry had never got a chance to invite Sirius for his birthday, having sent him only the one brief note of the previous evening.

'You sent him an owl last night!' hissed Snape.

'How do you know who that letter was for?' Harry asked coolly. 'You didn't manage to get it away from Hedwig, did you?'



Ormesby eyed Snape suspiciously. 'How would you know who the letter was for, if you didn't read it?' he asked.

Snape opened his mouth then closed it abruptly. 'Black's been writing to him,' he said to Ormesby. 'He's got the letter in his pocket.'

'Let's see it,' said Ormesby, holding out his hand to Harry.

With a feeling of dread, Harry took the letter from his pocket and gave it to Ormesby. Surely Sirius wouldn't have sent Harry anything the Ministry could use to track him?

Ormesby looked at one side of the parchment, then the other. 'This parchment is blank,' he said.

'Potter!' bellowed Snape.

'I didn't do it!' Harry protested, moving nervously closer to Percy, now rather glad to be surrounded by Hit Wizards.

'He didn't do it,' confirmed the tea tray wizard. 'He hasn't worked any magic all day.'

'*Was* there a letter from Sirius Black on this parchment?' Ormesby asked Harry.

'I thought there was,' admitted Harry. 'Mind, he didn't give me much time to read it,' he added, shooting Snape a dirty look.

Now that Snape wasn't in any immediate danger of joining the Headless Hunt, Harry felt no particular need to defend him to the Magical Law Enforcement Patrol. The less certain they were of what Sirius had or hadn't written, the better for Sirius.

Ormesby was disgusted. 'If Sirius Black was ever

here, he'll be long gone by now. Potter, go home. You,' he said to Snape, 'come with us. There'll be questions raised at the Ministry about your part in this.'

'And I'll be raising some questions at the Ministry myself, about the way this whole affair has been mis-handled,' Snape replied venomously.

Harry didn't wait to be told twice. Snape would be angrier than ever after this, and he didn't really want to be around when Mcnair showed up to find that his quarry had eluded him yet again. Pausing only to say good-bye to Percy — who looked quite put out at this new turn of events — Harry set off at a brisk pace towards Privet Drive, arriving shortly at number four.

The door of Uncle Vernon's car had been left open, and a large box was sitting next to it. The box — presumably what Dudley had wanted Harry to see — turned out to be a large and expensive-looking stereo system. Harry scowled at it. Buying Dudley presents on *his* birthday was an all time low even for the Dursleys.

The Dursleys! Harry sprinted up to the house, flung open the front door, and dashed into the living room. To his alarm, he could no longer see the Dursleys in the photo. The car was pressed up against the glass, with a crumpled fender and a broken headlight — fortunately there didn't seem to have been enough room in the picture for it to have built up much speed. Going in for a closer look, Harry noticed several of Uncle Vernon's drills strewn about the photographic lawn and — he was relieved to see — tiny figures moving around in the windows of the photographic house.

As Harry wasn't allowed to work magic over the summer holidays, he couldn't have let the Dursleys out even had he known how. He'd have to go back and get one of the Hit Wizards to do it. Harry wasn't looking forward to letting the Dursleys out of the photo, but the longer they were left in there, the angrier they'd become. Perhaps Magical Law Enforcement could explain to them what had happened, although he doubted the Dursleys would be in any mood to listen.

Harry heard the front door close. Stepping out into the hall, he saw to his displeasure that Gordon had returned.

'You again?' Harry asked in annoyance. 'Dudley's still gone, he probably won't be back until late tonight, try coming back tomorrow.'

Gordon began to laugh. Harry took a step towards the kitchen, ready to bolt should the need arise. Without Dudley to call him off, Gordon might very well decide to take up Harry Hunting again. Perhaps Harry could come back with the Invisibility Cloak and convince him that the house was haunted...

'That was brilliant, Harry,' Gordon said, still laughing 'But Mamble was right, you should have let them chop his head off.'

'Gordon?' said Harry, completely nonplussed.

'Happy birthday, Harry,' said Gordon. He took something small and silver-coloured from his pocket and tossed it to Harry. It was a Sickle-sized coin with an eye stamped on either side. Harry looked back up to see Sirius Black, standing inside a flickering silvery Gordon-shaped cloud.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

'S — Gordon!' said Harry in an urgent whisper. 'You've got to get out of here! The Magical Law Enforcement Patrol — they were here, they might be listening in, they — they think Sirius Black is coming! You're a Muggle, you don't want to get in their way, they were angry enough at Snape!'

Sirius looked amused. 'Yes, they are,' he said, gesturing towards the front door. 'Well, two of them at any rate. Second and third rose bush to the left. Don't worry, they won't see or hear anything to upset them.' He lifted the black canvas bag. 'Let's go to the kitchen, I've brought you a cake.'



'...but honestly, you should've seen Snape in his trenchcoat. He *looked* like a dangerous criminal. I reckon he's in serious trouble with the Ministry of Magic now,' Harry finished with deep satisfaction.

It was nearly eight o'clock. Sirius had departed not long after dinner, and Harry hadn't been sorry to see him go. As pleased as he was to see his godfather again, he couldn't help but worry about the terrible risk Sirius was taking by visiting him right under the noses of the Magical Law Enforcement Patrol.

Harry decided to take advantage of his Dursley-free evening by calling Hermione and telling her the whole story — up to the point that he'd left the Magical Law Enforcement Patrol. He didn't think it wise to men-

tion Sirius. The Hit Wizards were almost certainly still around, and whatever magic Sirius was using to keep them from overhearing had likely gone with him.

'I don't know...' Hermione replied slowly. 'I mean, your aunt let Snape in, didn't she? He didn't break into the house. And when your uncle told him to leave, he didn't give him very much time before he tried to hit him. Of course Snape shouldn't have been using magic in front of Muggles except in an emergency... but if Sirius Black was about to show up, it *was* an emergency, and the Ministry thought he was going to, so they can't say Snape shouldn't have.' Hermione paused, then asked, 'Why *did* they think Sirius was going to show up, if they didn't know about the letter?'

'I dunno,' said Harry, 'but if the spell on the photo hasn't worn off by morning, I'm going to send an owl to Mr Weasley about the Dursleys. I'll ask him.'

In fact Sirius had assured Harry that the spell would not wear off on its own. Harry had wanted to leave the Dursleys trapped in the picture for the rest of the summer, but according to Sirius only the rooms whose outsides were visible actually existed inside the photo. This meant no kitchen, and no food. Sirius hadn't been certain whether or not the Dursleys had electricity or running water. Harry rather hoped not, it would serve them right to spend a night without either.

'Maybe if you told the Magical Law Enforcement Patrol about Hedwig,' Hermione continued. 'Snape must have cast an Owl Net with your name and Sirius's woven into it. He has plenty of your old papers,

and I suppose some of Sirius's must still be lying about Hogwarts. But then they'd know you were sending that letter to him...'

'An Owl Net?' asked Harry.

'Yes, they're illegal, without special permission from the Ministry of Magic. And dangerous — broomsticks can get tangled in them, people have fallen and been killed. It's a good thing Hedwig wouldn't let you go flying off to find Sirius.'

'If Snape hurts Hedwig, I'll chop off his head!' said Harry furiously. 'Is it going to be safe to let her out at night anymore? What if he puts another one of those things up?'

'I've never heard of an owl being killed by an Owl Net — only witches and wizards, and even that's quite unusual,' said Hermione. 'Normally they tear right through, but if they get knocked off their broomsticks, the Owl Net isn't strong enough to hold them up. In any case, Hedwig wouldn't get caught unless she was carrying a message from you to Sirius.'

Harry was not reassured. 'Maybe I should leave her with the Weasleys this year. I mean, Snape tried to kill Neville's toad for no reason, and he hates me more than ever, especially after this, and Hedwig clawed his hand, and — and I think he might be going mad.'

'Dumbledore didn't think he was,' Hermione said sceptically.

'Not because of that! When he was here today — it was weird, all I did was ask if Dumbledore knew where he was — and I've never seen him that angry, never. If Uncle Vernon and Dudley hadn't got back

just then, I don't know what he'd've done to me. And then he acted as though nothing had happened. Why would a simple question set him off that way?'

'He'd probably realised that during the summer he couldn't take a hundred points off Gryffindor or give you two months detention for answering back,' said Hermione dismissively. 'He only *seemed* scarier than usual because he was, you know, in the Muggle world, in your actual house. I'll read up on some owl protection charms... or maybe Hagrid can keep Hedwig at his hut...'



Next morning, after breakfast, Harry sent Hedwig out with a note for Mr Weasley. A couple of hours later, a green Ministry of Magic car pulled into the drive. Out stepped Mr Weasley and, to Harry's surprise, Ron. When Harry opened the front door, Ron waved and called out, 'Pack your things, Harry, you're coming with us!'

'What, now?' said Harry. 'But it's a week early, and after what happened yesterday the Dursleys aren't likely to let me go at all.'

'I'll — er — talk to them, Harry,' said Mr Weasley. 'Let's get your trunk out to the car, and then we'll see about that photo.'

Even though most of Harry's school things were packed from last year, it was over an hour before his trunk was stowed in the boot of the car. Mr Weasley had dozens of questions about every Muggle-made object in the house, starting with Dudley's stereo

system, which was sitting just inside the front door.

Harry would as soon have left it outside to be rained on or stolen, but when Sirius arrived Harry had been afraid the neighbours might notice and investigate. He'd had to be very careful not to stare too obviously at the silvery outlines of the wizards in the rose bushes whilst dragging it into the house.

When Harry and the Weasleys finally made it to the living room, the Dursleys were inside the photographic house. 'I can't reverse the spell with them in the house — they'd be smashed against the walls,' Mr Weasley said. He tapped against the glass with his finger.

'I don't think sound carries through the glass,' Harry told him. 'Uncle Vernon was banging on it and yelling yesterday — I mean, I could see him banging and yelling — but he wasn't making any noise.'

Harry thought for a bit, then found a piece of paper and wrote a quick note on it — '*Mr Weasley's here, come outside and he'll get you out*'. As Harry was propping it up in front of the photo, Mr Weasley pointed at the drills in the photographic front garden. 'Harry, what are those things?' he asked

'They're called drills, Uncle Vernon sells them. Here, I'll show you how they work.' Harry fetched the latest Grunnings model from Uncle Vernon's bedroom and explained its operation to Mr Weasley. That done, he didn't particularly want to be in the house when the Dursleys got out of the photo.

'Let's go outside, Ron,' Harry said.

They left Mr Weasley happily drilling holes in the Dursleys' living room wall.

‘Be careful when you do let them out — Uncle Vernon tried to punch Professor Snape,’ Harry called back to him.

Mr Weasley gave him an absent-minded wave. He had turned his attention from the wall and was eyeing the sofa and coffee table speculatively.

‘Your Dad’s quite sure the Dursleys will let me visit you?’ Harry asked Ron, once they were out in the front garden. ‘They said if they had any trouble out of me they wouldn’t, and trouble doesn’t come much worse than Snape on your doorstep.’

‘Dad’s got his orders directly from the Minister for Magic,’ Ron replied, sitting on the wall near the parked car. ‘You’re to stay at our house, whether your relatives want you to or not. Fudge was quite upset — Snape turning up here like that, and you still thinking Sirius was innocent. Dad’s been assigned to look after you for the rest of the summer, and —’

‘Why *were* the Hit Wizards here yesterday?’ Harry interrupted. ‘They didn’t seem to know Sirius had written me until Snape told them.’

‘It was all Percy’s fault!’ Ron said furiously. ‘He saw the note you sent me, about how you were expecting to hear from Sirius before your birthday. I tried to tell him Sirius was innocent, but that only made it worse. He went and told the Magical Law Enforcement Patrol!’ Ron sat fuming at his brother’s intransigence for a moment, then continued more calmly, ‘As they weren’t really convinced at first, they just sent one wizard to keep a lookout. Snape walked right past him, he thought Snape was a Muggle —’

Harry grinned, remembering what Snape had

been wearing. ‘This lookout — he was from an old wizarding family like yours, wasn’t he?’

‘Er, yes, how did you know?’ said Ron, somewhat puzzled. ‘Anyway, he was taken completely by surprise when your aunt started screaming — didn’t dare take on Sirius Black by himself, and it took time for the rest of the Magical Law Enforcement Patrol to get here. By then Snape was holding you at wandpoint, but they thought he was Sirius —’

‘What happened to Snape, anyway?’ asked Harry.

‘Nothing!’ said Ron in great disgust. ‘There wasn’t much to charge him with, and the Ministry was afraid of what he could tell the *DAILY PROPHET*. It was all very embarrassing for the Magical Law Enforcement Patrol, you know... not only mistaking Snape for Sirius Black and nearly killing him, but the way he got past their surveillance and out of the binding spell they’d put on him. Fudge thought Snape was mad — wanted to have him committed to St Mungo’s for observation — but Dumbledore talked him out of it.’

‘Hang on — Dumbledore talked him out of it?’ asked Harry, surprised.

‘Yeah... he said he knew very well Snape was perfectly sane, and it would make the Ministry look even worse when St Mungo’s confirmed it,’ said Ron.

‘It’s just that Snape acted really weird when I asked him if Dumbledore knew he was here. I thought maybe Dumbledore had sacked him, or would do when he found out. Wasn’t Dumbledore angry?’

‘It didn’t sound like he was,’ said Ron. ‘Of course, I wasn’t there — I heard all this from Percy. He was

decorative border: top left, top right, bottom left, bottom right, and a central vertical strip on each page featuring a yellow background with a blue owl illustration and a blue and white geometric pattern.

furious with both of them — Snape for trying to catch Black himself instead of notifying the Ministry, and Dumbledore for not taking the whole thing seriously enough. First time I've heard him criticise a Hogwarts teacher... ' Ron gave Harry a sideways look. 'He wasn't too happy with you either... did you really grab Ormesby's robes? You're lucky to still have your hands! He was thrown out of the Magical Law Enforcement Patrol for brutality, you know, about a year after You-Know-Who disappeared.'

'What, Ormesby?' said Harry in disbelief.

'He was,' Ron said. 'It's only with the Sirius Black crisis dragging on so long that he managed to get himself reinstated. I'm a bit surprised he didn't curse Snape on the spot instead of waiting for McNair — he must have been on his best behaviour...'

'I think he may have tried to, but Snape blocked it,' said Harry uneasily. He thought of the way Ormesby had looked at him when he'd grabbed Ormesby by the robes. Ron's story didn't seem quite so preposterous anymore.

'Why'd you have to tell them who Snape really was?' asked Ron. 'We could've been rid of him at last! Mind, it would've looked really bad for Ormesby — executing the wrong person his first week back on the job. He took Snape's side at the Ministry, you know... said Snape had done the Magical Law Enforcement Patrol a favour, showing them how unprepared they were to deal with the real Sirius Black... if they couldn't even keep a Potions master and a fourteen-year-old in hand...'

Ron sniggered. Seeing the offended look on Har-

ry's face, he held up his hands placatingly.

'Sorry, that's what Ormesby said. He was really angry about the way the patrol acted when you mentioned You-Know-Who. Course, it was partly because they were afraid he might actually be hanging around. They thought when Snape was talking about Sirius, it was Sirius talking about You-Know-Who. Ormesby's started making all Hit Wizards say the name... two of them have resigned over it already —'

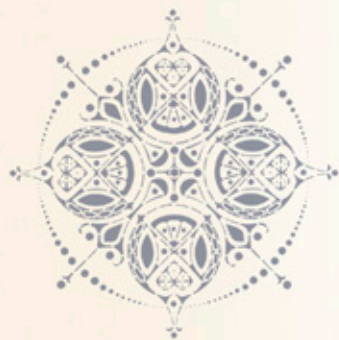
A tremendous bellow of rage echoed from the house. Seconds later, Mr Weasley came hurrying out the front door.

'Come along, boys, it's time for us to leave,' he told them, looking slightly flustered. As they were getting into the car, he gave Harry an embarrassed look and said apologetically, 'I, er, would have repaired their living room, if your uncle had given me the chance.'

* THE END *



THE SERPENT



Author's Note: This story is the follow-up to UNDER THE ROSE BUSH and AN UNWELCOME VISITOR. Those stories were written before GOBLET OF FIRE was published and are now alternate histories, but this one, which takes place during Harry's fourth year, merges back into the GOBLET OF FIRE timeline.

1. THE SERPENT OF DRACO MALFOY

W

HAT COULD'VE HAPPENED to Professor McGonagall?' Hermione asked anxiously. 'She's never been this late before.'

The fourth year Gryffindors had been sitting in the Transfiguration corridor for nearly half an hour that late September morning, waiting for Professor McGonagall to let them into the classroom.

'First time for everything,' Ron shrugged.

'Well if she doesn't get here soon, there won't be much time left for the lesson,' muttered Hermione, checking her watch.

'One missed lesson won't kill you, Hermione,' Ron said in exasperation. 'We've *had* classes cancelled before.'

'Yes, *cancelled*, but never a teacher just not shown up!' said Hermione, now sounding quite upset. 'Something might really be wrong!'

'You worry too much,' Ron told her. 'McGonagall probably got called off right when the bell rang — something urgent came up, and she didn't have time to come and tell us about it.'

'But surely she would have sent someone...' said Hermione.

'Not if everyone was already in class,' Ron came



back swiftly.

Harry sat slumped against the wall, only half-listening to their wrangling. He had problems of his own to brood on. Snape had been casting dark looks at him all through breakfast that morning, and he hadn't the faintest idea why. This was especially troubling in light of what had happened between the two of them over the summer. Although Snape had loathed Harry from the moment he started at Hogwarts, Snape now had more reason to hate him than ever before... and Harry had reason to believe Snape was going mad.

Harry's gloomy reflections were cut short when Hermione, in a steely voice very much reminiscent of the absent McGonagall, said, 'We've sat here long enough! Harry, go and see if anyone in the staffroom knows something. Ron, you check her office. I'll go to the hospital wing and ask Madam Pomfrey if she's ill.'

The look on Hermione's face made it clear she would brook no argument. Harry reluctantly heaved himself up from the floor and trudged off to the staffroom.

When he rapped on the door, a sharp voice from within called out, 'Enter!' Harry's heart sank; it was Professor Snape. Before Harry could decide whether he should risk going in or not, the door was yanked open and Snape was glaring down his hooked nose at him.

'What are you doing here?' demanded Snape. 'Why aren't you in class?'

'I was looking for Professor McGonagall,' Harry replied. 'She never showed up for Transfiguration.'


'Return to your classroom,' Snape snapped. 'And

that will be twenty points from Gryffindor. For being in places you shouldn't be,' he added, giving Harry a meaningful look.

Then, instead of going back into the staffroom, Snape swept past Harry and went striding down the corridor. Harry stared after him in bewilderment. Twenty points from Gryffindor for going to look for a missing teacher was unusually harsh, even for Snape. And where was he going to in such a hurry? There was nothing in that direction except some unused classrooms, the staircase to the Ravenclaw common room... *and a secret passage to the Owlery.*

Harry felt as though he'd been hit in the stomach by a powerful Freezing Charm. He'd been dreading that Snape would try and do something horrible to Hedwig ever since summer, when Snape had got his hand badly mauled trying to take a letter away from her. Next second, Harry was hurtling off in the opposite direction. The secret passage to the Owlery wasn't that much shorter than the regular route; if Harry ran flat out, he might be able to get there before Snape did.

When Harry arrived at the Owlery — gasping for breath, his heart pounding — all was calm. The owls were mostly asleep, and neither Snape nor any other person was present. Harry collapsed against the doorway in relief. Still, he thought, as he stood catching his breath, what with the funny way Snape had been behaving, it would be best to get Hedwig away from Hogwarts for a while. Snape could easily turn up at the Owlery later, and Harry couldn't stay there all day to guard her.




Taking quill, parchment and ink from his bag, Harry scribbled a brief note to Mrs Weasley asking if Hedwig could stay at the Burrow for a couple of days, as she'd had a quarrel with another owl. This wasn't really fair to Hedwig, who got on quite well with her fellow birds, but Harry didn't think Mrs Weasley would take him seriously had he tried to explain the situation with Snape. Harry poked Hedwig into disgruntled wakefulness, sent her soaring off and went to rejoin Ron and Hermione.



Professor Snape walked swiftly along the Ravenclaw corridor, barely able to suppress a smirk. Not only had he managed to give Potter his comeuppance for last night's bit of attempted larceny, but it appeared that McGonagall had overslept for the first time in all his years at Hogwarts, and he intended to be the one to wake her up. Coming to a halt in front of a statue of Philippa the Slothful, Snape barked out, 'Patronus!' The statue slid aside to reveal a passageway to the staff quarters. Snape stepped inside and the statue moved back into place behind him.

When he reached the door to McGonagall's rooms, Snape hammered on it loudly. There was no response. After waiting nearly a minute, Snape banged on the door again, shouting, 'McGonagall! Are you there?' Still no one answered. He seized the doorknob, meaning to give it a good rattling, but to his great surprise it turned easily and the door opened.

In an instant, Snape had flattened himself against



the wall just outside the door frame and drawn his wand. However heavy a sleeper McGonagall might be, she wasn't stupid enough to leave her door unlocked — not with the sort of things that had been going on at the school during the past three years.


Snape stretched his arm out and tapped the door with his wand, causing it to fly violently open and hit the wall inside the room with a crash. It didn't sound as though there was anyone standing behind it, nor did any retaliatory curses come blasting out.

Snape cautiously leant over to peer through the doorway. McGonagall's sitting room looked much the same as it had the one time he'd previously seen it — walls lined with shelves full of old, tattered books, overstuffed armchairs gathered round a low table near the fireplace and an odd collection of objects on the sideboard. He supposed these must be the results of past Transfiguration experiments, as they certainly had no ornamental value. There was no sign of anything amiss, no sign of a struggle... and no sign of McGonagall.

'McGonagall?' Snape called, with the same lack of results as before.

His eyes fell on a door at the far side of the room. Wand at the ready, he edged over to it and went through the same procedure opening it as he had with the first one. This door led to a bedroom. Curled up on the unmade bed was a tabby cat with square, spectacle-shaped markings around its eyes, looking up at him with an expression of mild startlement.

Snape surveyed the cat, eyes narrowed. It *looked*



like the transformed McGonagall... but why had she not answered him? Even if she somehow hadn't heard all the racket he was making, she certainly knew he was here now. He would have expected rather more of a reaction than this. Particularly, he thought with a twisted smile, if she'd had to transform herself quickly because she wasn't dressed.

'McGonagall?' said Snape. Another possibility suddenly occurred to him. 'Are you not able transform back?'

The cat completely ignored him. It lowered its head, eyes half-shut, and kneaded the bedspread with its paws.

'Can you understand me?' Snape asked. 'Meow twice if you can.'

The cat closed its eyes and rested its chin on the bed, settling back to sleep. Snape gazed down at the creature, not at all happily. Apart from their abnormal reactions to certain potions, he knew very little about Animagi, but for one of them to no longer understand English could not be a good sign. Best Dumbledore have a look at her as soon as possible.

Snape started towards the bed then stopped, realising that he had no idea how to handle an animal he wasn't planning to kill and pickle for future use as a potion ingredient. He had seen Filch pick up Mrs Norris, of course, but he had also seen the blood splattered along the Defence Against the Dark Arts corridor two years ago, when an exceptionally dim pair of Slytherin second years had tried to duplicate this feat.

It had been some time since Snape had taken Care

of Magical Creatures as a student, and it had not been a subject which interested him much anyway. As a teacher, at the staff table, he had heard Professor Kettleburn holding forth at great length on the importance of not showing fear, waving the stump of his left arm and pounding his wooden leg on the floor for emphasis. Hagrid's methods were evidently more effective, but appeared to consist mainly of being much too large for most magical creatures to damage. This was not a skill that could readily be passed on to others, as proved by the unfortunate incident of Draco Malfoy's arm.

Draco... he'd had cause for complaint against Hagrid on yet another occasion, Snape recalled... something about a biting set book. In his mind's ear Snape could hear young Malfoy grumbling, "'Yeh've got ter stroke 'em," *honestly*.' But it seemed to have worked, as none of the *books* had ended up in front of the Committee for the Disposal of Dangerous Creatures.

So... show no fear, and stroke them. Snape squared his shoulders and summoned up every ounce of authority that he had developed in thirteen years as a master of Hogwarts. A trifle stiffly, he placed his hand on the cat's head and ran his fingers down its back. 'Good girl!' he said tersely, more as a command than an endearment. 'Nice puss!'

After several seconds, the cat began to purr. Snape was not much comforted by this, although it probably meant he could carry her without having his arms ripped to shreds. Had McGonagall been in anything approaching her right mind, Snape suspected his

arms would have already been shredded for taking such liberties. He scooped the cat up and made for Dumbledore's office, moving as quickly as his dignity — and the cat's temper — would permit.



When Harry finally got back to the Transfiguration corridor, Ron and Hermione were waiting for him.

'Did you find her?' demanded Hermione.

'No, and Snape took twenty points off me for going to look,' said Harry. 'I tell you, he's —'

'He's *coming*,' hissed Hermione, craning over Harry's shoulder.

Harry dodged behind Ron and made himself small. He needn't have bothered, though; Snape swished past them at top speed, looking neither left nor right.

'Well, something's definitely up with him,' Ron said, once Snape had passed out of earshot. 'Did you see? He had a cat!'

Hermione was staring after Snape, open-mouthed.

'Ron, that was *Professor McGonagall* he was carrying down the hall!'

Ron and Harry boggled.

'You're *mad*,' said Ron. 'It was a *cat* — oh.'

'D'you think he — he did something to her?' asked Harry. 'Should we tell Dumbledore?'

At that moment the bell rang for the next class.

'I'll tell Professor Vector,' Hermione decided. She added rather nastily, 'Don't bother telling Professor Trelawney, I'm sure with her All-Seeing Inner Eye she already knows all about it.'

Hermione headed off to the Arithmancy classroom, and Harry and Ron to Professor Trelawney's tower.

When they met again for lunch in the Great Hall, Hermione said in a low voice, 'Professor Vector spoke with Dumbledore. She said he was taking care of things and to try and keep it quiet.'

Professor McGonagall wasn't at the staff table. Snape was, looking even angrier than he had at breakfast, but it was Fred and George Weasley at whom he was now glowering. Towards the middle of the meal, Dumbledore stood up and announced that afternoon Transfiguration classes were cancelled, as Professor McGonagall wasn't feeling well.

After lunch was double Potions with the Slytherins, which had become a greater trial than ever to Harry this year. Snape had somehow got his hands on a Chocolate Frogs Famous Wizard card of Harry as a baby, wearing a lacy white christening robe. Even more embarrassing than the robe was the letter from the manufacturer that had apparently come with the card.

First Potions lesson of the year, Snape had read this letter out loud in his most sarcastic tones to the entire class. Its flowery descriptions of the baby Harry made Aunt Petunia's cooing over Dudley sound dignified and restrained. Harry had felt like sliding under the table and staying there until the end of term. The card was now prominently Spellotaped to the blackboard, so it wouldn't slip Draco Malfoy's mind to make snide remarks about it every lesson.

Most unusually, Snape wasn't in the classroom yet when the bell rang.

'I do hope nothing's happened to him,' said Hermione. 'Why on earth not?' asked Ron, staring at her as though she'd gone mad.

'I mean, after Transfiguration — missing two lessons in one day —'

Malfoy, who was sitting at the table in front of them, twisted around and gave her a contemptuous look.

'You just couldn't stand to go that long without showing off, could you, Granger?' he sneered.

'You shut up, Malfoy!' said Ron furiously.

'Ignore him,' Harry told Hermione, not particularly quietly. 'He's just jealous because you came out ahead of him in the Transfiguration exam last year — and all the other exams, all the other years, too.'

Malfoy had a very ugly look indeed on his pointed face.

'Hey, Granger!' he said. 'I'll give you a Transfiguration lesson!'

Malfoy waved his wand in a complicated pattern and pointed it at Harry. A cloud of yellow sparks came shooting out, momentarily blinding him. This, however, was the least of Harry's difficulties. It felt as though a blanket had wound itself about his entire body, pinning his arms to his sides. His legs refused to hold him up and he fell forward, though fortunately not nearly so heavily as he would have expected to.

When Harry's vision cleared, he was lying on the floor surrounded by the feet of stools, tables and his fellow students, all of which had grown to an enormous size. Strong odours filled the room — dust, stone, wood, leather and a peculiar combination of

soap and people who hadn't bathed in a good while. Harry flicked out his tongue to get a better whiff. His tongue seemed to extend much further than usual — and why would sticking it out help him to smell?

Hermione screamed, and Ron bellowed, 'Malfoy!'

There was a great shuffling of feet — Harry could feel the vibrations in his very bones. Then Snape's voice roared, 'Weasley!' Harry felt a lesser shuffling and heard the sound of cloth uncrumpling.

'He turned Harry into a snake!' Hermione shrieked.

2.

THE SERPENT OF PROFESSOR SNAPE

No I didn't, sir, she did,' said Malfoy at once. 'She said she'd missed her Transfiguration lesson and needed to practise.'

Hermione spluttered in wordless indignation.

'Silence!' snarled Snape. 'Stand away from him, all of you!'

The feet — the human ones, that is — moved away from Harry. Snape barked out some unfamiliar words, and Harry felt as though the blanket he was wrapped in was starting to unwind. Somehow, he pulled it tight to his body. After this morning's events, he was in no mood to cooperate with anything Snape was trying to do to him. Snape performed the spell twice more and both times Harry stopped it working.

Snape took several deep breaths, then said, 'Mr Malfoy, go and fetch Dumbledore. He should be in —'

Dumbledore! With a tremendous effort, Harry

wriggled free of whatever it was that held him bound. The room returned to its normal size and Snape broke off in mid-sentence. Harry stood up, doing his best to seem innocently confused.

‘What happened?’ he said. ‘What was I doing on the floor?’

This turned out to be a complete waste of his acting skills. After sending the rest of the class off to the library to write essays on Sweating Solutions, Snape marched Harry to the hospital wing, leading him through a door at the end of the ward and up a corridor Harry had never been in before.

Through an open doorway off it, Harry could see Dumbledore in an armchair reading a large and dusty book. Snape went into this room, and Harry followed him. Dumbledore glanced inquiringly up at them.

On the opposite side of the room, Professor McGonagall was sitting up in bed with an even larger and dustier book propped against her legs. She wasn’t reading it at the moment, as her head was turned to allow Madam Pomfrey to peer into her ear with a tiny brass telescope.

‘There’s been another incident,’ said Snape abruptly. Madam Pomfrey and Professor McGonagall stopped what they were doing to listen to him. ‘I arrived at my afternoon Potions class to find that Miss Granger had turned Mr Potter into a serpent.’

Harry wasn’t letting this go unchallenged.

‘Hermione? The last thing I remember was Malfoy pointing his wand at me.’

Professor McGonagall gave Snape a sharp look.

‘Potter and his friends are constantly disrupting my lessons — naturally they would try to shift the blame to someone else,’ said Snape venomously. ‘The point is, I was not able to reverse the Transfiguration. After performing the reversal spell three times without success, I was about to send for the headmaster. At that moment, the Transfiguration reversed itself. Mr Potter claims to have no memory of anything that occurred while he was Transfigured.’

Professor McGonagall began flicking rapidly through the pages of her book. Dumbledore gazed at Harry, a grave expression on his face.

‘I think, before anything else, Harry should be checked for adverse side effects,’ he said. ‘Poppy, if you would be so good...’

Madam Pomfrey took Harry to the dormitory for a thorough examination. After apparently finding nothing much wrong with him, she brought him back to Professor McGonagall, who questioned him intensively while Dumbledore looked keenly on. Harry was by now deeply regretting his impulse to resist Snape’s efforts to un-Transfigure him, but didn’t dare admit the real reason why the spells had failed. He told Professor McGonagall that all he remembered was a lot of smells and noise, and then finding himself lying on the floor.

‘But honestly, I feel fine,’ he said. ‘Malfoy probably just mucked up the Transfiguration somehow.’

‘There seems to have been no lasting damage done,’ Professor McGonagall finally said. ‘And some amount of confusion is only to be expected in a

non-Animagus. This was the first time you've been Transfigured, Potter?'

Harry nodded.

'Spontaneous reversal of a Transfiguration is unusual but not unheard of,' she continued, 'and as this was the work of an only partly-trained wizard —'

'Witch,' corrected Snape tersely.

Professor McGonagall's beady eyes grew beadier yet, but she nonetheless amended, '— wizard or witch. As for the failure of the reversal spell — Transfiguration never was your best subject, Severus. You probably weren't bending your wrist properly on the downstroke. Here, let me show you — Potter, you may go.'

'I know perfectly well how to reverse a Transfiguration!' Snape spat, as Harry exited the room.

Harry had to fight down a grin.

After leaving the hospital wing, Harry made his way to the library and sat down at the table where Ron and Hermione were studying.

'Guess what?' Harry said quietly, 'I saw Professor McGonagall! She was in the hospital wing, Snape took me there —'

'Was she all right?' asked Hermione. 'Was she — human?'

'As far as I could tell,' said Harry. He filled them in on what had happened.

'Another incident?' said Hermione, her eyes widening. 'Could Professor McGonagall have not been able to change back either? Perhaps there's something interfering with Transfiguration reversals... Snape *was* doing the spell correctly — I would have told him

if he hadn't been.'

'Good thing you didn't have to, he'd've probably taken *fifty* points off Gryffindor,' Ron snorted.

Harry looked around carefully and said even more quietly, 'I don't know what was up with Professor McGonagall, but the only reason Snape couldn't change me back was because I kept his spell from working. Stupid thing to do, but I was angry with him for scaring me about Hedwig. When he was going to send for Dumbledore, I changed myself back.'

'Harry, that's impossible,' said Hermione. 'There's no way for a Transfigured person to counteract a reversal spell... or to reverse the Transfiguration themselves.'

'I did,' said Harry. He tried to recall exactly how he'd done it. 'I could feel something pulling at me... and I pulled back...'

The library and its contents swelled to enormous proportions, smells became much more pronounced, and the odd feeling of being wrapped in a blanket returned. Ron leapt up, knocking over his chair, and Hermione let out a strangled scream. Harry, realising what he'd done, quickly transformed back. Some of the students at nearby tables were twisting their heads to stare and Madam Pince the librarian was bearing down on them with a fire in her eyes, but luckily no one seemed to have noticed that Harry had been a snake for a few seconds.

'Let's get out of here,' hissed Hermione.

She and Ron hastily stuffed their books into their bags. The three of them hurried out of the library just ahead of the wrathful Madam Pince. Hermione

pushed Harry and Ron into the first empty classroom they came to.

'You're an Animagus,' Ron said to Harry in amazement, as he shut the door.

'But you couldn't be,' said Hermione. 'You didn't understand the Waldemar Effect until I explained it to you last week... or the Petrovich Principle... and... and when did you have the time to train? Did *you* get a Time Turner too?'

'Of course not,' said Harry. 'I've never trained for anything except Quidditch, and I still don't understand that Petro-whatsit thingy. I just...'

He transformed himself again. Ron and Hermione, now hugely tall (and rather smelly), bent over to peer at him.

'Harry?' asked Ron.

'Yeah?' Harry answered.

Ron and Hermione jumped back.

'You can talk!' said Ron.

'Yeah...' said Harry. 'And Animagi can't, can they? Not when they're animals?'

'Usually not,' said Hermione. 'There was a raven Animagus in the eighteenth century who had her tongue split...'

Hermione pulled her Transfiguration book out of her bag and began leafing through it. Ron simply stood there, goggling down at Harry

Harry lay on the floor exploring the very strange sensation of being a snake. He could feel vibrations in the flagged stones as people walked past the classroom. He tried slithering along the ground, which

wasn't as easy as it looked. It was a most bizarre feeling to have his body curving back and forth from side to side behind him.

He flicked out his tongue and the scent of Ron and Hermione filled his nose. The soapy parts of their respective odours were much the same, but their sweat smelled quite different, in ways Harry didn't really have the words to describe. Perhaps he should find a real snake and ask it for advice...

'Hermione, could this have something to do with me being a Parselmouth?' Harry asked. 'Can they turn into snakes as well as talk to them?'

'Not that I've ever heard,' said Ron.

'But Parselmouths are so rare... there isn't all that much known about them,' said Hermione, raising her head from her book.

'Dumbledore said I was a Parselmouth because Voldemort put some of his powers into me,' said Harry. 'Could he have been an Animagus and passed that on too?'

'If he was, no one knew about it,' said Hermione. 'Of course, that doesn't mean much where You-Know-Who is concerned. But even if you *are* an Animagus, you shouldn't have been able to block a reversal spell.'

'Harry, change back. This is weird...' said Ron. He had been looking extremely nervous ever since Harry mentioned Voldemort's name.

Harry changed back.

'Could Malfoy have done this somehow?' Ron asked. 'Accidentally Transfigured Harry into a snake



Animagus instead of a snake?’

‘You can’t make someone an Animagus by Transfiguring them,’ said Hermione. ‘Mind, it looked like Malfoy was trying to change Harry into a toad, not a snake,’ she added, sounding a bit puzzled. ‘I don’t think he was doing it quite the right way, but he shouldn’t have got a perfect snake from a botched toad Transfiguration. Harry should have just gone all green and warty or something. We need to tell Professor McGonagall about this.’

‘Hermione, we can’t!’ said Harry. ‘Snape would know I’d been messing him about! He’d say we faked the whole thing to get Malfoy in trouble! And it’s illegal for me to be an Animagus anyway, I’m not registered with the Ministry!’

‘But if other Transfigurations haven’t been working properly, Professor McGonagall needs to know!’ said Hermione.

‘We don’t know that this has anything to do with what happened to Professor McGonagall,’ Harry said.

‘And Snape’s taken enough points off Gryffindor for one day,’ Ron said. ‘Let’s at least wait and see if any other weird Transfiguration stuff happens first.’

After a little more argument, Hermione reluctantly agreed.



Professor McGonagall was back at breakfast the next day, apparently none the worse for wear. Hermione, with Harry and Ron trailing after, went over to the staff table to ask her how she was feeling.

‘Quite well, thank you, Miss Granger,’ said Professor McGonagall crisply, in a voice that discouraged further questioning.

Ron and Harry had to drag Hermione back to the Gryffindor table — she was plainly bursting to tell Professor McGonagall the whole story. Next Transfiguration lesson, Harry was very glad she hadn’t. Professor McGonagall gave the class an extremely stern lecture on the dangers involved in the Transfiguration of human beings.

‘Any unauthorised experiments and I will personally make sure that all students involved are expelled,’ she finished, her nostrils flaring.

‘You see?’ said Harry to Hermione, once they were back in the Gryffindor common room. ‘We can’t tell Professor McGonagall, we’d be thrown out of school.’

‘But — we don’t know *why* you can turn into a snake,’ said Hermione. ‘You’re not a normal Animagus — and human Transfigurations aren’t safe, you heard Professor McGonagall. She might be able to —’

‘I’m not risking being sent back to the Dursleys because of this,’ said Harry flatly. ‘If you go to Professor McGonagall, I won’t back you up. I’ll tell her you’re lying, or having hallucinations...’

Hermione looked at him as though he had slapped her in the face. Harry felt terrible, but didn’t back down.

‘It’s for your own good,’ he said. ‘Professor McGonagall would know I couldn’t have become an Animagus by myself, my marks in Transfiguration aren’t good enough. And after Malfoy said you were the one who Transfigured me in Potions — really, it’s

more likely they'd expel you than me.'

'And I reckon that's why Snape did it,' said Ron suddenly.

'*Snape?*' said Harry and Hermione, almost at the same time. They both rounded on Ron, completely distracted from their quarrel.

'How could Snape have done it?' said Hermione. 'He wasn't even in the room.'

'And he's rubbish at Transfiguration, Professor McGonagall said so,' Harry pointed out.

'He must have given you a potion — at breakfast that morning, probably,' said Ron. 'Like the Polyjuice Potion, but instead of turning you into another person, it made you able to turn into a snake. It activated when Malfoy tried to Transfigure you — I bet Snape put him up to it and came in late on purpose. And Professor McGonagall — funny how Snape knew exactly where to find her after you told him she was missing. No doubt he's planning to blame us for that one too. We'd be playing right into his hands if we said anything about this.'

Hermione looked sceptical. 'There are potions that can turn people into animals,' she said, 'but I've never heard of one that would let someone change back and forth.'

'Well, I think Snape knows a few things about potions you don't,' said Ron. 'He *is* —'

Ron abruptly fell silent, staring at Hermione in astonishment. Harry didn't blame him — never before had he seen her with such an utterly horrified expression on her face.

'No,' she breathed. 'He *wouldn't* have...'

'Wouldn't have *what?*' demanded Ron.

'There *is* a potion...' Hermione whispered, staring at the floor. 'It lets werewolves transform at will, painlessly, and keep their minds... but to make it you have to — to kill someone...' She looked up at them bleakly. 'You-Know-Who invented it. That was how he got a lot of the werewolves on his side. And how the Wolfsbane Potion was discovered — it was the closest anyone could get to a formula that used legal ingredients.'

'But I'm not a werewolf,' said Harry uneasily.

'You're a Parselmouth,' said Hermione. 'You must have a bit of snake in you somewhere, to be able to talk to them.'

'*Kill* someone?' said Ron. 'You mean Snape gave Harry a potion with bits of *people* in it? Eurgh!'

'And not bits they could spare, either,' confirmed Hermione.

Harry felt as ill as Ron looked.

'But if it was a potion, it should have worn off by now,' said Hermione more briskly. 'Harry, can you still change into a snake?'

Harry thought for a moment. 'I feel as though I could,' he said, with some relief. 'But I'm not going to. Professor McGonagall said it was dangerous, and what if someone saw?'

'Snape might still be putting the potion in your food,' said Ron, clearly unwilling to give up on his idea.

'If he is, he's putting it in your food too,' said Harry, annoyed. 'We eat out of the same dishes — everyone

in Gryffindor would be getting some.'

None of them had much appetite that evening at dinner. Harry picked at his food morosely, wondering if he'd ever dare eat anything from the Hogwarts kitchens again. He'd been expecting Snape to try and get some sort of revenge on him, but this was worse than anything he could have imagined. Snape would have to be truly mad, killing someone just to make a potion to get Harry into trouble. If he was willing to commit murder, why not simply kill Harry?

Harry was worried enough that he skipped breakfast the following morning. During lunchtime, he snuck down the tunnel behind the one-eyed witch into Hogsmeade, where he bought a large bag of sandwiches from the Three Broomsticks and a box of Chocolate Frogs from Honeydukes. For the next three days, Harry stayed away from Hogwarts meals entirely. But after finishing off the last of the food from Hogsmeade, he was still able to transform.



In the weeks that followed, there were no more Transfiguration accidents, nor did Professor McGonagall miss any more classes. Hermione spent a great deal of time in the library, but found no useful information. After the sandwich experiment, Harry did not try to change himself into a snake again. Apart from not wanting to be expelled, he had been made rather nervous by Professor McGonagall's lecture on human Transfigurations gone awry.

Snape made no move to unmask Harry as an illegal

Animagus. Malfoy on several occasions threatened to turn Harry into a snake again and leave him that way. He seemed immensely frustrated at how thoroughly unimpressed by this Harry was. If Malfoy had somehow given Harry the power to become a serpent, he didn't appear to realise it.

Most unfortunately for Malfoy, about the fourth time he did this Professor Moody overheard him. Moody hauled Malfoy off to his office, muttering something about 'a *long* sharp shock, this time'. Malfoy reappeared that evening at dinner looking considerably paler than usual and severely shaken. The threats stopped, and for the next few days he avoided Harry altogether.

Then, at the end of October, Harry was chosen as the fourth Triwizard Champion, and the entire snake incident was driven from everyone's mind.



So matters stood, until one afternoon soon after the Christmas holidays. Harry had forgotten his Charms book in Gryffindor Tower and was going back to get it, when Snape's voice stopped him in his tracks.

'Potter!'

Harry turned and felt a sudden nasty pang of apprehension. Snape was obviously trying quite hard not to smile. He only ever looked that pleased with himself when Harry was in very deep trouble.

'So you finally found the counter to the Tangler Charm,' said Snape, a malevolent gleam in his eyes.

Harry's nervousness was replaced by utter con-

fusion. Not only had he not found the counter to the Tangler Charm, he hadn't even known there was such a spell.

'The what?' he asked Snape.

'I know you've got it,' Snape said, his eyes glittering. 'You were clever, but not clever enough. You broke the Tracing Charm on the card. You broke the Tracing Charm on the Spellotape. You neglected, however, to break the Tracing Charm on the chalk dust on the back of the Spellotape!'

Light suddenly dawned. 'Someone took your Chocolate Frogs card?' Harry asked.

'Yes!' snarled Snape. 'You did! Pull out your pockets!'

Harry pulled out his pockets, taking out some Chocolate Frogs, his wand and the latest Quidditch scores from the DAILY PROPHET.

Snape glared at him. 'Your bag, empty it out!'

Harry emptied out his bag. Books, quills, parchment and bottles of ink spilled on to the floor. Snape waved his wand, causing each of Harry's books to magically rise into the air, flip over, and shake itself out. He turned Harry's bag inside out and ran his hands over every inch of it, searching for secret compartments. He tapped each pack of Chocolate Frogs, making the wrappings go transparent to reveal the cards they carried — Nostradamus, Anne Boleyn and Saint-Germaine, but no Harry Potter.

'So you've already made it to Gryffindor Tower and back,' said Snape, sounding furious but undeterred. 'Fast work, but I'm sure you know all the shortcuts. Very well. We'll go back there and have a search of

your dormitory. Follow me.'

Harry followed. He wasn't particularly worried about his dormitory being searched. Snape wouldn't find his Famous Wizards card there... but he *would* find the two copies of it Harry had dug up over the summer. Harry felt twinge of fear, but only for an instant. The other cards and the letter they all came in should be proof enough that neither was Snape's missing card.


Harry wondered idly what Snape would make of the card with Sirius as a dog on it. Although Snape knew Sirius was an Animagus from overhearing Professor Lupin in the Shrieking Shack, he didn't know what animal Sirius transformed to — only that it was very large... *and that its nickname was Padfoot.*

Utter panic flooded through Harry. He couldn't let Snape find the letter and cards — not only would Snape realise what kind of animal Sirius was, he'd have a picture of him to give to the Magical Law Enforcement Patrol. And Sirius was back in England now... Harry had to get to Gryffindor Tower before Snape did and get rid of the evidence. With a sickening sense of *deja vu*, Harry darted past Snape, ignoring his enraged shout, and tore off down the corridor.

3.

THE SERPENT OF MADAM TURPIN

Harry ducked round the corner, yanked back a tapestry and went racing down the passageway behind it — luckily he *did* know all the short-



cuts to Gryffindor Tower, thanks to the Marauder's Map. Snape would no doubt realise where Harry was going... but would he know the password to get in? If he did, Harry wouldn't have much time to act... and the cards and letter were charmed against damage; Harry couldn't just toss them into the fireplace.


He'd have to use his Invisibility Cloak to sneak past Snape... hide the cards inside the one-eyed witch's hump, or behind the mirror on the fourth floor. Snape was going to hang him out to dry for this one... maybe Harry could explain to Dumbledore afterwards, privately...

Harry burst from the passageway, clutching a stitch in his side. He sprinted down to the end of the Gryffindor corridor, gasped out the password to the Fat Lady and dashed through the common-room, up the spiral staircase and into the fourth year boys' dormitory.

To his astonishment, there was someone already there, rifling through his things — but it wasn't Snape, it was a woman. She gave a small shriek and spun around. With a bit of thought Harry identified her as Madam Turpin. Plump, nondescript and middle-aged, she had been hired on as staff early in the year... something to do with the kitchens... Dumbledore had introduced her one night at dinner...

'What are you doing?' Harry demanded.

'You scared me half to death,' she said reproachfully, one hand pressed to her chest. Then in a flash she had pulled out her wand and sent ropes shooting out of it, which lashed themselves around Harry's arms and legs. Before he could open his mouth to protest, she



said briskly, 'That Famous Wizards card — the one of you as a baby — where have you hidden it?'

'I *haven't*,' said Harry in exasperation. 'I don't know what happened to Professor Snape's card, but I swear, I didn't take it!'

'Of course not, dear,' said Madam Turpin. 'I took it. I meant your one. I know you have it, you and your friends were talking about it one evening at dinner last fall.'

Harry remembered. Draco Malfoy had been in particularly fine form that day in Potions — ickle Harrykins this, ickle Harrykins that. They had been wondering how much longer Snape was planning to leave the card up on the blackboard, and puzzling over how he could have got hold of it in the first place. Come to think of it, Harry did recall that Madam Turpin had been bustling around in the background...

He stared at her blankly. 'You took Snape's card — and you want mine — but why?'

'For the gold, of course,' said Madam Turpin. 'I'm a thief, dear, this is how I earn my living ... and you *will* tell me where you've hidden that card, unless you want to spend the rest of your life as a snake...'

'You —?' said Harry, now truly dumbfounded.

'Yes, me. I may not look it, but I know a lot about Transfiguration. I'm a thief — ' Madam Turpin vanished for a second and a small brown ferret took her place '— and an Animagus,' she said, reappearing. 'I can enchant Transfigurations so they can't be reversed — Snape was only able to bring you back after I removed the spell, and not even Albus Dumbledore

could figure out what I did to Professor McGonagall.'

'So...' said Harry carefully, '...it was you who changed me back, when Snape couldn't?'

'Yes, dear. I hope you weren't too badly frightened. Professor Snape needed something to occupy his thoughts. He almost caught me in Professor McGonagall's rooms, and she almost caught me in his classroom, right after I'd escaped the Tangler Charm — she'd been prowling around as a cat that night. I'd hoped to convince her that her Animagus transformation had become unreliable — a transformed cat might too easily recognise a transformed ferret.'

A look of extreme annoyance came over Madam Turpin's face. 'I hadn't expected anyone to come looking for her so quickly,' she continued. 'Really, Professor Snape is the nosiest man in the world... but to go into a woman's bedroom like that...'

'I knocked first,' said a voice from the dormitory door.

Harry whirled, over-balanced and fell backwards on to the floor, nearly hitting his head against the post of Ron's bed. Madam Turpin shrieked again, but before she could raise her wand Snape had disarmed and put the full Body-Bind on her.

'That time,' he added, with a nasty smirk.

Harry sat up as best he could, bound from neck to ankles. Snape glared down at him.

'I ought to bring you to the Headmaster's office like that,' he said softly, 'and if you ever run from me again, I will. We shall be taking Madam Turpin to see Dumbledore. He should be quite relieved that

the cause of last year's Transfiguration mishaps has been discovered.' Snape pointed his wand at Harry, paused, and gave him a twisted smile. 'Unless you have some reason to believe Madam Turpin is not the guilty party after all... Perhaps she has been framed by Miss Granger's cat... or maybe Mr Longbottom's toad is the true culprit...'

'No, sir,' said Harry quietly.

In fact Harry was fairly certain that Madam Turpin *wasn't* the person behind the snake incident — she didn't seem to realise it had been Harry himself who blocked Snape's reversal spell and then transformed back on his own. Harry didn't think it wise to mention this to Snape, however.

The ropes vanished and Harry got up. Most fortunately, Snape did not insist on completing Madam Turpin's search of Harry's trunk before setting off. He made Harry walk ahead of him ('where I can keep an eye on you') with the Body-Bound Madam Turpin floating between them.

They must have made an extremely peculiar sight as they went down the corridors, past the gargoyle sentry and up the revolving stairs to Dumbledore's office. Harry knocked and the door swung open. Dumbledore was sitting at his desk.

'Harry, Severus,' he said pleasantly. Then, in a more puzzled tone, 'Jane?'

'Madam Turpin has just claimed responsibility for tampering with Professor McGonagall's Animagus transformation and thwarting my reversal spell,' Snape said. 'I overheard her telling Potter — she had

him tied up and was searching his trunk.'

Harry nodded in confirmation. 'She was after Snape's Famous Wizards card, and she'd found out I had another copy.'

Snape looked down at Harry, his lip curling. 'Because she's president of the Harry Potter fan club, I suppose,' he sneered. 'Just because Madam Turpin has confessed to one crime, don't think you can —'

'Because it's *valuable*,' said Harry. 'Worth hundreds of Galleons.' At Snape's disbelieving look, he added, 'Ron said so, he had a value guide.'

Dumbledore raised his wand to perform the counter-curse on Madam Turpin.

'Watch out, she's an Animagus — a ferret,' Harry said quickly.

Dumbledore put his wand back down. 'I think Minerva should hear about this,' he said in a very serious voice.

Dumbledore tossed a handful of glittering powder into his fire and soon Professor McGonagall was clambering out of the fireplace. Snape told his part of the story — he had arrived in the dormitory just as Harry was asking Madam Turpin if she'd reversed the snake Transfiguration — and Harry told his. He claimed he had run to Gryffindor Tower after hearing Snape's card had been stolen because he was afraid the real criminal might try to take his one too.

Professor McGonagall was frowning thoughtfully as Dumbledore shut and magically locked the door before releasing Madam Turpin.

'What do you have to say to this, Jane?' said

Dumbledore mildly.

Madam Turpin gave a frightened squeak and scuttled behind Dumbledore's desk. '*He* did it!' she said in a petrified voice, pointing at Snape. 'I caught him in the kitchens... trying to put a potion into Professor McGonagall's water jug... he made it all up to blame me... told the boy he'd turn him back into a snake and pickle him if he didn't go along...'

The murderous look on Snape's face would have convinced anybody who didn't know better that Madam Turpin was telling the truth. Cornelius Fudge would have had him arrested on the spot. Even Harry, who knew quite well that Snape hadn't threatened him with pickling, had to wonder — Madam Turpin's accusation was so close to what Ron had suspected Snape of doing to Harry.

Snape had just taken a step towards Madam Turpin when Professor McGonagall held up her hand. 'Leave her to me, Severus!' she barked.

Harry stared at her, amazed. He had never heard Professor McGonagall's voice so filled with fury, or seen her mouth go so thin. With a wave of her wand, every object in the room — including Harry, Snape and Dumbledore — rose off the floor and hovered three feet in the air. She then pointed the wand at Madam Turpin, who turned back into a ferret, and transformed herself into a cat.

Round and round the room the cat, hissing with rage, chased the squealing, terrified ferret. After a minute or so of this, the ferret stopped short right under Harry and gathered itself up for a jump. Harry

tried to back away — he didn't want it climbing up his leg — but floating above the floor as he was, his feet merely churned the air.

Luckily at that moment the cat pounced. It seized the ferret by the scruff of its neck and shook it back and forth like a terrier worrying a rat. When the cat finally let the ferret drop, Professor McGonagall and Madam Turpin reappeared. Professor McGonagall's teeth were bared and several strands of hair were escaping from her bun. Madam Turpin cowered away from her, shaking with fright.

'Now, *Enid Kelly*...' Professor McGonagall snarled. 'Are you ready to tell us the truth?' Madam Turpin gazed at her in terror, took a couple of gasping breaths and fainted dead away.



'How did Professor McGonagall know her real name?' asked Hermione. 'Enid Kelly wasn't on the Ministry's registry when I checked it last year.'

'She was,' said Harry. 'The Australian Ministry's registry, that is. Not that it's done them much good. Madam Turpin — I mean, Kelly — hasn't got any unusual markings, and so many thieves use enchanted ferrets... she's been a suspect in loads of cases in Australia, but nobody could ever prove it was her and not some other ferret. It's a good thing Professor McGonagall keeps up with that sort of thing — once Professor McGonagall called her by her real name, Madam Turpin knew the game was up.'

'What had she done to Professor McGonagall?' asked Ron.

'Slipped her a Confusing Concoction,' replied Harry. 'Animagi — if they transform while they're confused — as animals it can take days for their minds to come back, unless someone reverses the Transfiguration. It happened to Madam Turpin one time, that's how she knew about it. Snape reckoned it was something like that, but he thought Fred and George did it as a prank, that's why he was so hacked off at them that day.'

'But how on earth did she make you able to change into a snake?' said Hermione.

'She — she swears she didn't,' said Harry. 'I asked about that potion you told me about, and Snape didn't reckon she could have given it to me. She didn't seem to know I *could* turn into a snake. Course, as many times as she'd changed her story...'

At first, Madam Turpin hadn't even been willing to admit being the cause of Professor McGonagall's difficulties.

'Yes, I tried to steal the cards,' she said tearfully. 'But I didn't interfere with any Transfigurations — how could I have? I was only trying to scare the little dear...'

No one had an answer to this, until Harry rather hesitantly spoke up. 'Hermione, she thought Sn — somebody — gave me that potion Voldemort made for werewolves — put it into the food at breakfast. Because I'm a Parselmouth... and Malfoy was trying to turn me into a toad not a snake.'

Dumbledore's eyes flashed. Professor McGonagall's fists were clenched; she looked on the verge of

attacking Madam Turpin as a woman. Snape gave a contemptuous snort.

‘Exactly the sort of melodramatic nonsense Potter and his friends would come up with,’ he said. ‘The Lycaon Potion is too delicately balanced to be taken with most foods, and in any case, you would have certainly noticed the taste.’

He turned to Madam Turpin, a most unpleasant smile stretched across his thin face.

‘Which is not to say they won’t be believed. Our current Minister for Magic is not a wizard known for his logic. If he thought you’d given a potion made from human remains to the sainted Harry Potter... really, life in Azkaban would be the best you could hope for. Perhaps being a foreigner, you are not aware that the use of the Dementor’s Kiss has recently been revived in this country?’

Madam Turpin looked about to really faint — Harry was fairly certain she’d been faking it the first time.

Snape pressed his advantage. ‘As we’d already suspected the use of a potion in McGonagall’s case — one of the few things she remembers from that morning is taking a drink of water...’

At that Madam Turpin had finally cracked and confessed to giving Professor McGonagall the Confusing Concoction. She still denied having done anything to Harry, however.

‘Dumbledore says she’ll probably get a fortnight in Azkaban for using a dangerous potion on someone,’ Harry told Ron and Hermione. ‘Unless the Australian Ministry lodges a protest — and likely they

won’t, they’ve been trying to get her for something for ages. Then be deported.’ Harry brightened somewhat. ‘And Dumbledore’s making Snape take that card down! He said if it was so valuable people were breaking into Hogwarts to steal it, it needed to be kept somewhere safer.’

‘How valuable *are* those cards, anyway?’ asked Hermione.

Harry looked at Ron questioningly.

‘The last one I heard of went for around seventeen hundred Galleons,’ Ron said. ‘Mind, that was several years ago. None of them have been up for auction since then, which is bound to drive up the price...’

‘Still, coming all the way from Australia... to try and steal something from Hogwarts... and after she nearly got caught once...’ said Hermione. ‘It hardly seems worth it. Wouldn’t it have been easier to rob one of those other collectors?’

‘Other collectors would know what that card was worth. They’d keep their ones protected, not hanging out in plain sight,’ said Ron.

‘Snape *was* protecting his,’ said Hermione. ‘Tangler Charms are very hard to cast — he probably had to get Professor Flitwick to do it for him — and even harder to get around. Snape was *expecting* someone to try and steal it —’

‘Snape was expecting *me* to try and steal it,’ interrupted Harry. ‘He had no idea it was valuable, he’d got it because he was in on the investigation of Theobrom and Raniday. That letter from Sabella Theobrom he read was sent with one of the cards with my parents, not

Sirius Black. Dumbledore asked Snape about it because Snape had shown him *that* card. It was Dumbledore who complained to the Ministry about it...'

'Why was Sabella Theobrom sending Snape *any* Famous Wizards card of you?' said Ron. 'Not a collector, is he?'

'Dumbledore says she and Snape were in the same year in Slytherin,' said Harry.

'That's still a bit strange,' frowned Hermione. 'If they were in Slytherin together, she must have known Snape hated your father. Why send Snape a Famous Wizards card with his picture on it — and that soppy letter about what a sweet baby you were? And even if Snape was behind the complaint, why would he be helping with the Ministry investigation? He's never worked for Magical Law Enforcement, has he?'

'If he has, Dad's never said anything about it,' said Ron.

Harry went on more quietly, 'I told Dumbledore about the letter and cards I found, after everyone else had left. He said he'd take them to Gringotts for me. Yours too, Ron. Sorry, but until we find some way to prove Sirius is innocent — if anyone saw that dog...'

Ron shrugged. 'Ah, well — Mum would have made me give it back anyway when she found out what it was worth.'

'It's still yours!' said Harry fiercely. 'As soon as Sirius is cleared you'll have it back... and you, d'you want the other one, Hermione? I know you don't collect them —'

'I think Sirius might want to have it,' said Hermione diplomatically. 'What I want is to know why you can change into a snake.'

'As long as it's not Snape giving me that potion, I don't care,' said Harry. 'Which I reckon he wasn't — Dumbledore said he was telling the truth about it tasting bad... and now we know why he was acting so weird last fall...'

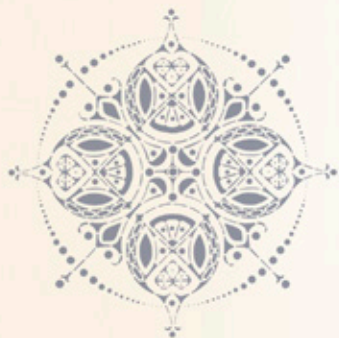
Hermione was clearly not at all mollified by this.

'Just forget it, all right?' Harry told her. 'Professor Moody's going to have a talk with Madam Turpin before the Magical Law Enforcement Patrol takes her away... if she was up to any other funny business, he'll get it out of her...'

* THE END *



THE BUTTERFLIES



1. A GRIM SITUATION

W

ELL, I COULD certainly use more Hinkypunk gizzards,' sighed Mr Borgin. 'But seven Sickles an ounce? No, I'd be bankrupt within the month if I paid those sorts of prices. But do come back if you decide be more reasonable, Mr Lupin.'

Remus Lupin exited the dimly-lit shop, shaking his head sadly at Borgin's tightfistedness. Once outside, he dropped his air of mock sorrow and let the very real exhaustion and worry that he was feeling show through. After nearly an entire morning spent prowling about Knockturn Alley, he'd not got a single new lead on Harry's whereabouts.

Direct enquiries into rumours of strange occurrences (made ostensibly for the purpose of scrounging a Dark creature extermination job) had turned up nothing. The Ministry had surpassed itself in keeping Voldemort's latest atrocity hushed up — in the fortnight since, not so much as a whisper had got out, even in the Dark community. Lupin's other, subtler means of gathering information — offering for sale, under the counter, potion ingredients that were usually strictly controlled by the Ministry of Magic



— had also failed to reveal anything of importance.

Notorious for his overcharging, Lupin was considered a source of last resort by most of the shopkeepers in Knockturn Alley. When trade was slow, they seldom even bothered to haggle with him. When they were actually willing to meet his grossly inflated prices, he knew something really serious was afoot. Though Lupin had had no takers today, all the people he'd spoken with had treated him extremely politely, which indicated that the demand for Dark ingredients was brisk, but not yet urgent — yet the wizards whose business it was to anticipate such things believed it might soon *become* urgent.

As they'd been acting much the same way for a number of weeks, however, this told Lupin fairly little he didn't already know. Perhaps Borgin's voice had been a tad oilier this time... or perhaps it was just Lupin's imagination. Lupin rubbed his forehead tiredly. Even if Borgin truly was growing more deferential, there could well be an innocent explanation for it.

When Lupin required an immediate excuse to talk to a particular shopkeeper or look around inside a particular shop, he would feign a pressing need for gold and sell off his wares at prices as ridiculously low as they normally were ridiculously high. Borgin might merely sense the possibility of a bargain in the near future — Lupin probably did appear quite close to desperation.

Without a doubt, the previous month had been one of the worst in his life. Lupin had known that Dark days were looming on the horizon from the moment Sirius had shown up at his house bringing news of

Voldemort's return, but he'd never dreamed the Dark Lord would strike so swiftly or so devastatingly.

Lupin could still vividly recall the ashen expression on Dumbledore's face when, little over a week later, he'd come by to tell Lupin and Sirius that Voldemort had somehow got past protections which ought to have been unbreachable to demolish the house in which Harry was living. What was more, Harry and his relatives had vanished without a trace, and the best efforts of both Dumbledore and the Ministry of Magic had so far proved insufficient to find them.

Dumbledore hadn't stopped for long. Lupin and Sirius couldn't do much to help him. Lupin had made his weekly trip to Knockturn Alley the day before the attack occurred, and hadn't observed anything out of the ordinary. Neither he nor Sirius had expertise in the kinds of powerful protective charms that Dumbledore had employed to try and keep Harry safe — those had been Lily's specialty, when she was alive. If Dumbledore himself didn't understand how his magic had failed, neither of them was likely to figure it out.

Nor were they able to offer any fresh suggestions about places where Harry might be hiding, or to which he might go once he decided the coast was clear. The obvious locations — Privet Drive, Diagon Alley and The Burrow — were already being watched by far less suspicious persons than a shabby, greying werewolf and a giant black dog.

It had been every wizard's worst nightmare when Voldemort was in power that a friend or relative would disappear in this manner, for no one so taken

by the Dark Lord had ever returned alive. On rare occasions a body would be recovered, but invariably in such horrifying condition that the grief of the survivors was only increased.

Sirius had gone off into a trance of despair. For three days he'd wandered the house as a dog, sniffing in corners and whimpering forlornly. Then he too had vanished, leaving no word behind as to where he was going. There'd been nothing for Lupin to do except notify Dumbledore, and ask specifically after Grim sightings the next time he was in Knockturn Alley.

The former action at least had met with some success. Night before last, Dumbledore had brought Sirius back to Lupin's house, giving him a stern lecture about staying out of sight and warning him that it would do Harry no good for his godfather to get himself killed, or worse. Lupin still wasn't clear on where Sirius had been or what he'd been doing; he hadn't been able to get any proper answers out of him once Dumbledore left.

Lupin had originally planned to cancel today's journey to Knockturn Alley — he'd not thought it a good idea to leave Sirius alone. Sirius, however, had begged him to go on, in the desperate hope that this would be the day Lupin finally found some sort of clue... and now Lupin had to return home and tell him he hadn't.

Lupin heaved a weary sigh, collected his thoughts and Apparated. He tapped the kitchen door with his wand to open it and stepped into the house, calling out, 'Snuffles, I'm —'

'*Stupefy!*' roared a voice behind him.



Lupin opened his eyes, gazed around in puzzlement and sat up. He was in an unfamiliar room, empty except for a fireplace, several cloaks hanging from iron hooks in the stone walls and a very small, very angry-looking wizard wearing green robes embroidered with the crest of the Magical Law Enforcement Patrol. The wizard glared down at Lupin, wand at the ready, Lupin's own wand stuck in his belt.

'Remus Lupin, you are wanted for questioning by the Magical Law Enforcement Patrol,' he said coldly. 'You have *been* wanted for questioning by the Magical Law Enforcement Patrol since nine o'clock this morning. The first wizard sent to fetch you said he heard a terrible growling from your house, and that he refused to enter a dwelling with a transformed werewolf inside — this despite it being broad daylight not four days past the dark of the moon. The second returned in a state of nervous collapse, having apparently peered through a window and seen the Grim.'

The wizard paused to draw a deep, outraged breath.

'I don't know what you think you're playing at, but if spending the day in Azkaban for obstructing the Magical Law Enforcement Patrol in the course of its duties is what you're after, you are very close to getting your wish.'

Before Lupin could respond, a loud, furious barking filled the air. An enormous, shaggy black dog (gone slightly grey from soot and ash) was clamber-

ing out of the fire. The wizard wheeled about and pointed his wand at it.

'Snuffles!' said Lupin brightly. He scrambled to his feet, hurried over to the dog and flung a restraining arm around its neck. 'It's all right, Snuffles, good boy. Mr — er —' ('Ormesby,' the wizard supplied) — Mr Ormesby just wants me to assist the Magical Law Enforcement Patrol with one of their investigations.'

The dog stopped its barking, but continued to survey Ormesby with a most unfriendly glint in its eyes.

'This is my dog, Snuffles,' Lupin explained. 'He must have followed us through the Floo powder. I've been off shopping all morning, and he guards the house while I'm gone. I do apologise if he frightened your men.'

Lupin smiled pleasantly at Ormesby (whose face had turned an alarming shade of purple) but inside he was quite upset.

This was not because he'd been taken in for questioning by the Magical Law Enforcement Patrol — that had happened to him a number of times over the years. Being anywhere within fifty miles of the scene of a crime whilst a werewolf was considered highly suspicious behaviour by them. Usually Lupin was let go again after an hour or two. Calm, reasonable and polite answers from a dangerous monster tended to put the Magical Law Enforcement Patrol completely off its stroke.

It wasn't himself Lupin was concerned about, but Sirius. Sirius Black was at the top of the Magical Law Enforcement Patrol's most wanted list. The last place he should be was inside their very headquarters, and Lupin didn't trust him to keep his head down. Sirius was even

more reckless and impulsive as a dog than as a man, which was saying something, and Harry's disappearance seemed to have thoroughly unhinged him. Lupin had to get him away from there as quickly as possible.

'I'll just take Snuffles back to the house, shall I?' said Lupin. 'Shouldn't be gone half a minute...'

'You won't,' snapped Ormesby. 'I've had enough trouble getting you here.'

Ormesby shoved his wand inside his robes and swept towards the door.

Lupin trailed after him, protesting feebly, 'I really don't think... a good dog, but he can be quite boisterous... not used to being indoors for so long.. or around strange wizards...'

Ormesby gave no sign of having heard him. He poked his head out the room and looked up and down. 'Mr Snape!' he called out sharply.

'Yes?' came the reply.

Ormesby strode into the hallway. Lupin followed him, Sirius at his heel. There, in a bench along the right-hand wall, sat Severus Snape.

Lupin wasn't sure whether to be relieved or more worried yet to see him. Snape was on their side; he'd be able help Lupin cover up for Sirius. On the other hand, Snape's presence suggested that there was something more going on here than the mere fact that Lupin was a werewolf. The only connection between Snape and Lupin was that the pair of them were working for Dumbledore against the resurrected Voldemort. If the Ministry had got wind of this and was determined to put a stop to it, they could all be in very deep trouble.

‘We’ll interview you as soon we’ve finished with Mr Lupin,’ Ormesby told Snape. ‘He’ll be leaving his dog here — see that it doesn’t go wandering off.’

‘You remember Snuffles, don’t you, Severus?’ said Lupin.

Snape’s eyes flashed with a momentary, swiftly suppressed rage. Then, keeping his face carefully blank, he gave the dog a long, appraising look.

‘Now that I think of it, *I have* seen the beast around Hogwarts,’ he said. ‘I’d not realised it belonged to you. Nor do I believe that animals are allowed in the offices of the Magical Law Enforcement Patrol —’ Snape turned to Ormesby, ‘— and I would strongly advise that you not make an exception for Lupin’s dog. It has been running wild in the Hogwarts grounds for over a year; I certainly cannot take responsibility for its behaviour.’

‘He’s quite right,’ said Lupin to Ormesby. ‘If you’d just let me bring Snuffles home... I could be there and back again in no time...’

Ormesby completely ignored him. ‘If you don’t think you can handle the dog by yourself, I can send someone to stay with you,’ he said to Snape.

‘That won’t be necessary,’ said Snape in an icy tone.

‘You stay with Severus, now, Snuffles,’ Lupin told the dog sternly. ‘Don’t give him any trouble and don’t go roaming about. You were a bad boy to follow me here... a very bad boy indeed.’

Sirius shot Lupin an almost human look of disgust, but obediently stretched himself out on the floor at Snape’s feet.

‘Lupin, come along,’ said Ormesby irritably. After one last glance back at Sirius, Lupin set off down the corridor after him.

2.

THE WEREWOLF’S CURSE

Ormesby led Lupin around a corner and into another tiny room, where a single battered but sturdy wooden chair stood facing a table with several rather more comfortable-looking chairs arranged behind it.

It came as a most unpleasant shock to Lupin that one of these was occupied by none other than Cornelius Fudge. For the Minister for Magic himself to sit in on a Magical Law Enforcement Patrol interrogation was unheard of — bang went the last chance of this being some trivial matter. To cap it all, standing at either side of the table were two towering, black-cloaked Dementors. They turned their hooded faces towards Lupin as he walked through the door, and the bad feeling he had about the entire situation got abruptly worse.

Ormesby stalked over to the table, scowled at Lupin, pointed to the chair opposite and ordered, ‘Sit!’

Lupin sat; so did Ormesby. He picked up a quill, dipped it in ink and set it at the top of a roll of parchment, where it remained balanced on its point.

‘Now, Mr Lupin —’ Ormesby began, the quill copying down his every word.

‘I say, shouldn’t he be chained down?’ interrupted Fudge.

‘He’s not under arrest yet, Minister,’ said Ormesby.
‘But a *werewolf* —’ said Fudge.

‘Well, it’s not standard procedure, but if you insist...’ said Ormesby, looking not at all displeased when Fudge did.

Ormesby conjured up a set of heavy iron chains that wrapped themselves around Lupin, binding him to the chair. Under ordinary circumstances, Lupin would have hinted that the Office for Werewolf Support Services might take a dim view of this treatment, but with Sirius in the building he didn’t dare risk either prolonging the interview or annoying Ormesby.

Fudge frowned. ‘Shouldn’t those chains be silver?’

‘No,’ said Ormesby in a very definite voice. ‘Short of a killing blow, steel will do as much damage as silver to a werewolf that isn’t transformed, and unlike silver, injuries caused by steel can be healed magically. If we used silver chains and he cut himself struggling, it could be grounds for a complaint of cruel treatment. He *is* only here for questioning.’

Lupin didn’t like the sound of this one bit. Ormesby seemed to be implying that he *expected* Lupin to cut himself struggling. Whilst Lupin’s previous visits to Magical Law Enforcement Patrol headquarters hadn’t exactly been fun, he had yet to become a victim of police brutality. On the single occasion he’d been in any real danger of being wrongfully charged with a crime, Dumbledore had stepped in to vouch for him, and that had been the end of that.

The leftmost Dementor made a hollow, rattly noise deep within its throat. The room grew suddenly colder and darker, and Lupin felt a sharp surge of

misery and guilt. He hadn’t deserved Dumbledore’s help. He had abused and betrayed Dumbledore’s trust, both before and after —

‘Where were you on the afternoon of July the thirteenth?’ asked Ormesby, jerking Lupin back to the present.

When the question finally sank in, Lupin realised with a nasty jolt that he’d been brought in to be interrogated about Harry.

Lupin had naturally been aware that the Ministry was investigating Harry’s disappearance, but he hadn’t expected much to come of it — not so long as Fudge was still burying his head in the sand about Voldemort being back. During their most recent conversation, Dumbledore had told Lupin that the Minister now had some crackpot notion that the whole thing was a plot to embarrass him by unknown political enemies.

If Fudge had fixed on Dumbledore and his allies as the persons responsible, events had taken a serious turn for the worse. Not only would the Magical Law Enforcement Patrol have no hope of catching up with the true perpetrator, they’d be thwarting the efforts of the one group of wizards who did.

Lupin did his best to hide his panic, putting on an expression of innocent helpfulness.

‘July the thirteenth?’ he said mildly. ‘I’d have been at home in bed the entire day. There was a full moon the night of the twelfth.’

‘Can anyone corroborate that?’ demanded Fudge.

As it happened, on that particular day, for the first time in close on fourteen years, there *had* been someone who could corroborate that, but Lupin didn’t

think the fact that he'd been harbouring an escaped mass murderer would go down well with the Magical Law Enforcement Patrol as an alibi.

'Er — no,' he said. 'I never have visitors on the day after a full moon, I'm too ill.'

'Exactly as I said, Minister,' said Ormesby. 'A werewolf is one of the least likely creatures to be responsible for this incident. I was a member of the Werewolf Capture Unit for five years, and I've known Cornish Pixies to put up more of a fight than the werewolves we caught on the day after the full moon. Of course, by then, the damage was usually already done...'

'But it would fit the absence of bodies,' Fudge argued. 'If he ate them...'

'Two adults and two fifteen-year-olds, leaving no traces behind?' said Ormesby sceptically. 'Transformed werewolves can't eat meat, let alone cloth or bone, and —'

'Can't eat meat!' echoed Fudge in disbelief. 'Of course they can eat meat! Wolves are carnivores, meat's the only thing they *can* eat!'

'Wolves are carnivores, yes, but a werewolf isn't a wolf,' Ormesby explained patiently. 'Or at least no more so than a vampire is a man. Werewolves bite humans to drink their blood, not to eat their flesh. In fact,' he continued, obviously warming to his subject, 'surviving a werewolf attack is a fairly simple matter: just lie still and let the beast lick at the wound until sunrise. The trouble is that few wizards manage to keep their heads well enough to follow this advice — they'll panic and struggle and end up bleeding to death from multiple bites... but then, "survive"

almost inevitably means "survive as a werewolf", due to the increased contact with the creature's saliva and the greater amount of time the bite is left untreated. Many would prefer to run the risk of being killed for even the slimmest chance of getting away clean.'

Ormesby gave Fudge and Lupin a genuinely happy smile, quite at odds with the extreme gruesomeness of his dissertation. Fudge's face had gone thoroughly green, and Lupin felt nearly as sick as Fudge looked. Lie still and let the beast lick the wound... That was what he had done, not from choice but because at three years old he'd been far too small for his struggles to have any effect.

Lupin gave a shudder of remembered horror.

His Aunt Lis had tucked him into bed at a rather earlier hour than he was accustomed to, and thus he had still been awake to hear her going out the back door. As his mother had so strictly warned him to remain in the house that evening, he had scrambled out of bed to go and call his aunt back indoors.

The instant Remus set foot in the garden, the werewolf had pounced, knocking him off his feet, flopping on top of him and sinking its teeth into his arm. More than twice his size, it had had not the slightest difficulty holding him pinned down whilst it lapped up his blood...

The Dementor to Lupin's right took a long, rattling breath. A penetrating coldness swept over him. It cut through his robes, through his very skin, freezing his insides, dragging him under. He was falling, falling through white fog, falling onto hard, rocky

dirt, where the werewolf's contented growling filled his ears as its teeth scraped the bone of his arm.

His fingers scrabbled desperately at the ground as he fought to pull himself free, but it was no use. The werewolf was simply too much bigger than him. It probed at the wound with its rough tongue, sending waves of pain through his arm, pausing only when the bleeding slowed to bite down once more and draw fresh blood. The nightmare seemed to go on for ever... Remus' terror grew almost past endurance... his heart was ready to burst in his chest...

Then, in the distance, he heard his mother scream, and felt the weight of the monster lift off him as it charged her down.

'Stupefy!... Stupefy!... AVADA KEDAVRA!'

In a blinding flash of green light, the werewolf fell to the ground and changed back into his Aunt Lis.

The fog rose up again, then cleared slightly. Remus was indoors now. A poultice of herbs was being pressed to the bite. It seared the wound with a blazing agony a thousand times worse than the werewolf's tongue, but he hadn't the strength left to yank his arm away, and he'd long since worn out his voice with screaming.

Through a haze of pain, he could hear his mother crying.

'I said she was cowardly, I said she didn't look that ill! I told her if she was too afraid to hunt the werewolf with us, she could at least watch Remus for me. Oh, Lis, Lis!'

She broke down once more into great, racking sobs.

'Exactly why the Ministry advises that this sort of thing be left to the Werewolf Capture Unit,' said

a cool, satisfied voice. *'Rogue werewolves nearly always turn out to be local residents — when members of the public insist on taking matters into their own hands, they often end up either killing a friend or relative, or leaving us with yet another monster to deal with... in this case, both...'*

'You were teaching at Hogwarts when Sirius Black was in the area, were you not, Mr Lupin?... Mr Lupin?... Mr Lupin!'

Lupin was back in the Magical Law Enforcement Patrol's interrogation room. He stared at Ormesby in appalled recognition.

'It was you...' he said stupidly.

The wizard sent by the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures to investigate his aunt's death and Lupin's becoming a werewolf — it had been Ormesby.

'What are you talking about?' said Ormesby sharply.

Lupin shook his head, slumping down as far as his chains would allow. He felt weak and nauseous; his robes were drenched with cold sweat, and not just because of the terrible memories the Dementors had forced him to relive. Lupin didn't normally believe in evil omens, but for Ormesby, who'd represented the Ministry on what had arguably been the most horrific occasion of Lupin's life, to also be presiding over this enquiry — it could not bode anything good.

A GIANT MISJUDGEMENT

You stop that!’ said Ormesby in cold fury. ‘I’m warning you...’

Lupin looked up blearily, but Ormesby wasn’t talking to him.

Ormesby had his wand out and was pointing it at the right Dementor, a cloud of silver gas hovering around its end. The Dementor moved back a pace and the coldness and despondency that Lupin was feeling diminished somewhat. He forced himself upright in the chair. It was the effect of the Dementors, making him frightened and superstitious. He had to fight it — he needed all his wits about him.

Ormesby gave the Dementors a final glare, took a deep breath and turned to Lupin.

‘You were teaching at Hogwarts when Sirius Black was in the area,’ he said, more a statement than a question.

‘Yes, I was,’ said Lupin.

‘I fail to see what Sirius Black has to do with any of this,’ said Fudge testily.

Lupin regarded the Minister with some surprise. Given that Fudge refused to believe that Voldemort had returned, it seemed Sirius Black would be his most likely suspect. This was an extremely worrying thought, and one that had only just occurred to Lupin — yet Fudge didn’t appear to consider it a possibility.

Ormesby’s gaze flicked to Fudge and then back to Lupin. Lupin thought he could detect a trace of

resentment in the short wizard’s eyes.

Nonetheless, Ormesby chose not to pursue the subject. ‘Why did you leave the Dark Arts job?’ he said.

‘I — I wasn’t able to — take sufficient care in controlling my symptoms,’ said Lupin. ‘I — didn’t feel it safe I remained at Hogwarts, around children.’

‘And what have you been doing since then?’

‘Jobbing Dark creature exterminations, mainly,’ Lupin said.

He wasn’t going to admit to selling potion ingredients unless he had to. It might lead to potentially awkward questions about his customer base.

‘Set a monster to catch a monster,’ snorted Fudge.

This was by no means the first time Lupin had heard such sentiments expressed. Still, there were few wizards willing to hire a known werewolf even for that purpose, especially as the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures provided similar services free of charge.

Some of Lupin’s clients mistrusted the government; others simply wished to avoid the long waits and reams of paperwork that dealing with the Pest Sub-Division would entail. A fair number, however, had good cause not to want the Ministry poking its nose in their affairs. Usually they were up to something illegal but mostly harmless, yet on occasion Lupin was able to tip Dumbledore off to some serious Dark Magic. Because of this, Lupin’s rates for *exterminations* were eminently reasonable.

Ormesby plainly found as little to interest him in Lupin’s answer as he did in Fudge’s attempt at humour.

‘What is your connection with Harry Potter?’ he asked Lupin.

‘I taught him Defence Against the Dark Arts in his third year at Hogwarts,’ Lupin replied. ‘His father and I were friends.’

‘Disastrously bad judgement in choosing his companions,’ Fudge muttered to Ormesby. ‘Son turning out just like him, unfortunately.’

Lupin winced. There was too much truth in Fudge’s words. All of James Potter’s friends had played their part in bringing about his tragic and untimely death: Peter by betraying him to Voldemort, Sirius by giving Peter his opportunity and Lupin by not being around to put a stop to Sirius’ ill-advised plan. If he’d kept in closer touch with his friends... if he hadn’t let himself drift away...

But it had been difficult, after Hogwarts. James had had Lily and his interesting Transfiguration research to occupy him. Sirius was doing something new and exciting every week, and with a different girlfriend, too. Even Peter seemed to be muddling along. Lupin had become increasingly reluctant to spoil their happiness by telling them he’d been sacked from yet another job when his condition was discovered, and rather concerned that they might try and help him.

The Potters were a wealthy and influential family and the Blacks were even more so. Sirius in particular would have been only too happy to find some hapless witch or wizard whose business depended on the Black family’s patronage and bully them into taking Lupin on. Lupin could think of few things less pleas-

ant than having to spend his days working amongst people who hated him but didn’t dare get rid of him.

Then Dumbledore had pointed out to him that an unemployed, down-on-his-luck werewolf was uniquely well positioned to keep tabs on the rising Dark Order. As Lupin grew more deeply embroiled in spying and surveillance, he’d thought it best to allow his contacts with respectable persons to lapse altogether.

So Sirius had come to believe Lupin was in league with Voldemort and hadn’t told him that Peter was to take Sirius’ place as James and Lily’s Secret-Keeper. Lupin would never have permitted them to go through with it had he known, not because he’d suspected Peter, but out of fear for his safety.

Well, perhaps in the back of his mind Lupin would have worried Peter might give James and Lily away in a moment of panic — he’d realised that Peter was weak. He hadn’t dreamed that Peter was *evil*... that he’d deliberately become the Potters’ Secret-Keeper intending to sell them to Voldemort, then cold-bloodedly murder twelve Muggles to send Sirius to Azkaban for his own crimes.

If Lupin had harboured any doubts as to Wormtail’s true nature, however, his recent activities had more than laid them to rest. Thanks to Wormtail, Voldemort had been restored to his body and Harry was almost certainly dead. Another catastrophe for which Lupin shared the blame — he should never have let Harry talk him and Sirius out of giving Wormtail his just deserts.

The two Dementors sucked at the air with an ugly

double rattle. Lupin was once again engulfed by numbing white fog. This time he could hear Dumbledore's voice —

'James and Lily are dead... their Secret-Keeper betrayed them... Sirius... Peter... he murdered them... the house was completely destroyed... Harry... we can't find him anywhere... Sirius... Sirius has been handed over to the Dementors...'

Lupin was drowning in cold and guilt and despair... then someone slapped his face, hard.

'Snap out of it!' barked Ormesby.

If not for the chains binding him to the chair, Lupin would have collapsed to the floor. He felt horribly sick and shaken. Not even in the days prior to his mastering the Patronus Charm had he experienced Dementors feeding on him like this...

'Can we not send those things away, Minister?' said Ormesby with ill-concealed exasperation. 'He's chained down, and we aren't going to get much sense out of him otherwise.'

'The Dementors stay,' said Fudge flatly. 'Now get on with your questioning.'

Ormesby stalked back to the table and glowered from one Dementor to the other.

'If you lot interfere with this investigation one more time, I'll have you up in front of the Committee for the Disposal of Dangerous Creatures,' he bit off. 'We have the wherewithal to execute rogue Dementors, and don't forget it.'

Ormesby sat down and turned his scowl on Lupin.

'What is your connection with Bartemius Crouch?'

he demanded.

Lupin, his brain still half-frozen, stared at Ormesby blankly.

'I — I once gave evidence before the Council of Magical Law when Crouch was Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement,' he finally said, 'during the trials after the fall of Voldemort...'

Fudge flinched when Lupin said the name, then sat up very straight and glared at him. Ormesby merely raised an eyebrow.

'I meant Bartemius Crouch Jr,' he said.

'Ah,' said Lupin. 'No connection. It was not his trial that I was involved in.'

'He's lying, Ormesby!' said Fudge immediately. 'They were at Hogwarts together!'

'Oh... so we would have been,' said Lupin, 'but years apart, in different houses — we weren't acquainted with one another.'

Ormesby eyed Lupin calculatingly.

'What is your connection with Sirius Black?' he said.

Before Lupin could reply, Fudge exploded. 'Sirius Black has fled the country! There have been no sightings of him in over a year! He is utterly irrelevant to this enquiry!' In a more reasonable tone, Fudge went on, 'If it wasn't the werewolf, it must have been the giant. A giant could eat four people, no trouble. They consider human bones a delicacy —'

'— when ground into meal and baked into bread, yes,' said Ormesby. 'They can't actually chew them up with their teeth. And a giant would no more eat clothing than you'd eat a cloth table napkin. *Some* remains

should have been left behind — even a full giant isn't large enough to swallow a grown man whole.'

'He could have carried them off with him,' said Fudge stubbornly.

'Well, something must have carried them off,' said Ormesby. 'Carried them off *alive* — there's no indication anyone was killed on site. But there's also nothing to suggest it was a giant. That house wasn't smashed with a club! The Improper Use of Magic Office registered a very powerful Reductor Curse and a very powerful unknown charm — presumably the spell used to conjure the Dark Mark —'

'That was not a Dark Mark, that was not a Dark Mark!' said Fudge furiously. 'The Dark Mark's made of lights in the sky, not burnt grass on the ground!'

'Regardless of the nature of the — marking — it took a skilled wizard to make it,' said Ormesby. 'Destroying an entire garden with one curse — not to mention breaching the protections Dumbledore put on the family —'

'The protections Dumbledore *said* he put on the family,' said Fudge darkly. 'I'm not certain we can rely on anything Dumbledore says anymore. Getting a bit past it, in my opinion. Mind's starting to go...'

'Even so, all the evidence we have indicates that this attack was the work of a Dark wizard, not a monster,' said Ormesby.

'So you think it's Snape, then,' said Fudge. 'I always said the fellow was mad...'

'Snape is undoubtedly a dangerous man, with an unhealthy fixation on the Potter boy,' said Ormesby,

'but he's had nearly fourteen years to act on it, and none of this trouble started until Sirius Black escaped.'

'That will be enough about Sirius Black!' roared Fudge. 'Black is continents away by now, and I won't have you causing a public panic by suggesting otherwise!'

Ormesby didn't look convinced, but was clearly unwilling to press the matter.

Fudge sat breathing hard for a few seconds, then said, 'Have you made any progress in discovering the giant's whereabouts? I find his disappearance highly suspicious. He needn't have eaten them himself, you know. Perhaps he brought one of his creatures with him and it got out of control...'

'Do you mean Rubeus Hagrid?' said Lupin.

Ormesby and Fudge turned to stare at him, Ormesby with narrowed eyes and Fudge as astonished as he would have been had Snuffles just spoken up to offer him advice.

'Only Dumbledore told me he'd gone on holiday abroad,' Lupin continued, 'with a woman he met last year, apparently. Dumbledore didn't say where, but I'm sure he knows. Have you tried asking *him*?'

Lupin gave Ormesby and Fudge the most cheerful smile he could muster.

There was a brief silence. Then Ormesby said abruptly, 'Right, that's all the questions I had. Is there anything else you wished to ask, Minister?'

Fudge shook his head, looking disgruntled.

'That will be all, then, Mr Lupin,' said Ormesby. 'For now, that is. We may be calling you back in future. Don't *you* plan on going on holiday abroad this summer.'

Ormesby waved his wand and Lupin's chains vanished. 'Go and tell Mr Snape we're ready for him,' he said.

4.

THE DEATH EATER'S PATRONUS

Lupin walked back up the corridor, his spirits rising a notch with each step he took away from the Dementors. When he arrived at the bench outside the Floo room, the smile he gave Snape was entirely heartfelt.

'Ormesby says they're ready for you now,' Lupin said. 'Thanks for looking after Snuffles for me.'

Snape nodded curtly, got up and headed for the interrogation room.

'Come along, Snuffles,' said Lupin. 'Let's go home.'

But Snuffles didn't come along. Instead, with a whimper of fright, he began backing away, his eyes fixed over Lupin's shoulder. Lupin whirled and beheld a tall, hooded Dementor, gliding towards them.

The Dementor drew in a deep, rattling breath. A wave of cold washed over Lupin. White fog gathered at the edges of his vision. He reached for his wand, then with a thrill of horror realised that Ormesby still had it.

'Snuffles — run — Floo room —' gasped Lupin. He stepped in front of Sirius to block the Dementor's path.

The Dementor lowered its hood. Scabbed, greyish, rotting skin covered an eyeless face with a great gaping hole of a mouth. Lupin felt as though an avalanche of ice had been dumped on him. The fog swirled up to cloud his sight. Sirius let out a long, despairing howl.

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THE BUTTERFLIES

The Dementor brushed past Lupin and swooped down upon the dog.

'No!' shouted Lupin.

He reached through the mist, grabbing at the Dementor's clammy, decaying arm as it seized hold of Sirius. Even through its robes, the Dementor's flesh was piercingly cold, biting into Lupin's hands. It swivelled its head as if to peer down at him with its empty sockets. The white fog grew blindingly thick. Dumbledore's voice echoed in Lupin's brain —

'James and Lily... Harry... dead... Sirius... taken to Azkaban...'

'No... he didn't... he's innocent...' whispered Lupin.

The cold was inside him now. He was drowning in mist and freezing water; he could no longer feel his hands. He had to find his way back to Sirius, to save him, but it was no use — Sirius was gone, lost in ice and fog.

Then, from a long way off, Lupin heard footsteps pounding in his direction and a voice bellowing, 'EXPECTO PATRONUM!'

The white fog thinned and faded. Lupin found himself lying face down on the floor, Sirius in an unconscious heap beside him. He lifted his head and saw Snape a mere foot away, staring past the two of them with an expression of horrified fascination on his gaunt face. Lupin rolled over and craned his neck to see what at.

The passage beyond was filled with small glowing specks of silver — some sort of Patronus, but it didn't seem to be working properly. Instead of retreating, the Dementor was staggering around in circles. Its shapeless mouth worked frantically, horrible gag-

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ging noises issuing forth.

Lupin tried to stand up. It was difficult; he was shivery and weak, his hands completely numb. Just as he managed to heave himself onto the bench, the Dementor toppled over, lay twitching feebly and dissolved into a puddle of slime.

The silvery specks fluttered about the hallway in confusion and slowly, one by one, began to vanish away. A lone straggler — a butterfly, by the look of it — landed on Lupin's wrist, beat its delicate wings once, twice, then disappeared with a *pop*.

'You've killed it,' said Ormesby, in a tone of utter amazement. Apparently he'd rounded the corner just in time to witness the Dementor's final moments.

Lupin was equally astounded. Executing a Dementor normally required a team of at least seven highly trained wizards. It was barely within the realm of possibility that a Dumbledore or a Voldemort, using the most advanced and complex spells of destruction, might finish off a Dementor single-handedly. Certainly Lupin would never have credited Snape with that level of ability.

'I had no choice,' said Snape tensely. 'Its hood was lowered. It was trying to kiss the werewolf, but his dog was holding it off. When I returned to see what the commotion was, it turned on me. I did what I did in self-defence.' Snape's voice rose slightly with anger. 'I came here in good faith to assist the Magical Law Enforcement Patrol with its investigations. I scarcely imagined that I'd be putting my soul at risk in doing so! Your Dementors have evidently got the impres-

sion that they can attack the innocent and the guilty alike with impunity. Unless you quickly disabuse them of this notion, you will find the public's willingness to cooperate with the Magical Law Enforcement Patrol growing very thin on the ground.'

To Lupin's immense relief, Ormesby accepted Snape's story without question.

'Well, you definitely disabused that one,' he said drily, surveying the fallen Dementor. 'Maybe this will... encourage the others.'

As Ormesby turned to go, Lupin forced himself to his feet. In a voice taut with rage, he said, '*Give me back my wand.*'

Ormesby took Lupin's wand from his belt and held it out to him wordlessly, but Lupin couldn't bend his fingers to grasp it. Ormesby finally had to put the wand into Lupin's pocket for him before setting off down the corridor. With a single backwards scowl at Lupin, Snape followed Ormesby.

Lupin dropped to one knee to examine Sirius. He was still out cold.

Wrapping his arms around the dog's chest, Lupin dragged him into the Floo room. He wasn't sure how he managed; as a dog Sirius weighed close to three hundred pounds, and the Dementors' attacks had left Lupin hardly able to walk. Perhaps sheer terror lent him strength. There were doubtless other Dementors prowling the building and it did Lupin no good to have his wand back now that his hands were useless.

Lupin laid Sirius down in front of the hearth. On the mantelpiece was an old coffee tin full of Floo power,

which mercifully had been left open. He clamped the tin tightly between his wrists and tossed the lot into the fire. With a deafening roar, the flames blazed incandescent emerald and shot halfway up the chimney.

He'd used far too much Floo powder, Lupin thought as he pulled Sirius into the fireplace, but if the offices of the Magical Law Enforcement Patrol became infested with Ashwinders, it would serve Ormesby right.



Hours later, Lupin was sitting at his kitchen table sipping hot chocolate from a cup that floated near his lips, when Professor McGonagall Apparated in the middle of the room. Her hair hung loose, falling almost to her waist, and she was wearing black robes instead of her usual green. These robes seemed to have been borrowed from a taller, thinner witch, as they were a bit long in the sleeves and — Lupin hastily averted his eyes — rather snug across the chest.

'Have you taken complete leave of your senses?' snarled Professor McGonagall. 'Bringing that creature to Magical Law Enforcement Patrol headquarters — and telling Ormesby I knew the beast! If he'd been discovered, all three of us would have been packed off to Azkaban!'

Lupin gawped at her, speechless, for several stunned moments.

Then he said calmly, 'You're quite right, Severus. Won't you sit down and have some hot chocolate? I'm afraid you'll have to pour it yourself...'

He held up his frozen hands apologetically.

Professor McGonagall — or rather, Snape transformed into Professor McGonagall — looked far from taking up Lupin's offer.

'Dumbledore will be hearing of this, make no mistake,' she said in a soft, menacing tone.

'I've already heard most of it, from Remus,' said a deep voice near the kitchen door. Albus Dumbledore came to the table and set a jar of bluish-white paste in front of Lupin. 'Madam Pomfrey said this should help mend your hands.'

Lupin reached for the jar without thinking, then realised he could neither pick it up nor unscrew the lid.

'Er — could you —'

Sirius, who'd been sprawled out behind Lupin's chair, got up, placed his paws on the table and gave Dumbledore a short, sharp bark.

'Yes, we all need to be able to speak freely,' Dumbledore murmured.

He took out his wand. Silvery vapour poured from its tip, drifting out to cover the walls, ceiling and floor. Sirius changed back into a man. Throwing a dark look at the fake McGonagall, he opened the jar and began applying the paste to Lupin's hands.

'Severus, what in heaven's name did you do to that Dementor?' said Dumbledore.

To Lupin's surprise, Professor McGonagall appeared somewhat reluctant to answer this question.

'You — you are familiar with the form my Patronus takes, Headmaster?' she asked Dumbledore stiffly.

Dumbledore nodded and gazed enquiringly at her over his half-moon spectacles, but she did not seem

inclined to elaborate.

‘It was a flock of butterflies, was it not?’ prompted Lupin.

‘A flock of *butterflies*?’ Sirius gave a derisive snort. ‘And I thought James had a stupid Patronus.’

Professor McGonagall eyed him with pure hatred.

‘Were they — venomous butterflies?’ said Lupin, bewildered. ‘Mamba Moths? But — it wouldn’t matter, would it? A Patronus may take on an animal’s shape, but it won’t have its powers. It’s the substance of the Patronus that affects Dementors — it makes no difference that your one has the form of *any* sort of butterflies.’

‘It makes a difference,’ snapped Professor McGonagall, ‘if the Dementor happens to swallow one of them.’

The mist-covered kitchen rang with the sound of Dumbledore’s laughter.

5.

THE POST MORTEM

Remus Lupin stepped out into his garden and raised his hands to the moonlight. Madam Pomfrey’s paste had unstiffened his fingers somewhat, but they were still too feeble and shaky to hold a wand properly. Being a werewolf, however, had one advantage to it: any injury not inflicted by a silver weapon would, under the right conditions, magically heal itself.

This healing occurred almost instantaneously when the werewolf was transformed. In human form, it required the same triggers as the transformation

itself: exposure to direct moonlight after dark, or failing that, the moon’s reaching its highest point in the sky. Fortunately, as it was a clear evening, Lupin didn’t have to wait for the next moon transit.

Feeling the strength return to his hands as the moonlight soaked in, Lupin flexed his fingers — a bit achy yet, but it would do to be going on with. He turned and went back into the house through the still fogged-over kitchen door. Sirius was at the table, wand in hand, mouth set in a grim line, eyes fixed on the doorway. His watchful air relaxed slightly when he saw Lupin emerging from the mist.

‘There, good as new,’ said Lupin, holding out his hands. It was a small lie, but a necessary one.

Sirius came over to have a look. ‘You can use a wand again?’ he said. ‘Show me.’

Lupin obligingly took the wand and summoned the pot of now rather cold hot chocolate from the sideboard.

‘You really ought to be starting off for Mundungus’s,’ he told Sirius. ‘It’s not safe for you here, now that the Magical Law Enforcement Patrol have their eye on me. You should have gone when Dumbledore did — I would’ve been all right by myself until sunset.’

Sirius stared off into the fog, a haunted look in his shadowed eyes.

‘He asked me not to leave him...’ he said quietly. ‘...that night in the hospital wing, after he’d got away from Voldemort. And I told him — I told him —’

Sirius’ voice broke. Lupin reached out and gripped his shoulder tightly.

‘Severus doesn’t think he’s dead, you heard what he said.’

‘And you heard what else Snape said!’ Sirius replied harshly.

Unfortunately, Lupin had.



After Snape had explained the cause of the Dementor’s extraordinary death by misadventure (and Dumbledore had wiped the last tears of mirth from his eyes), they’d all sat down to discuss the troubling new developments in the Ministry’s investigations. It was a highly peculiar experience to see Snape’s speech and mannerisms combined with McGonagall’s voice and body. Lupin wasn’t at all sorry when, halfway through the conversation, the Polyjuice Potion wore off and Snape changed back into himself.

Snape, it turned out, had been given an even more cursory interview than Lupin (luckily, Argus Filch could confirm that he’d been in the Hogwarts library at the time of the attack). The Dementor Snape killed had been one of Fudge’s from the interrogation room. The remaining Dementor had left him strictly alone, and Fudge had seemed quite as nervous of Snape as the Dementor. Ormesby — perhaps having learnt his lesson with Lupin — didn’t try asking Snape about Sirius, nor, surprisingly enough, did he raise the subject of Snape’s past association with Voldemort.

‘Although I’m not certain Ormesby knows about that,’ said Dumbledore, ‘and considering how determined Fudge is to believe Voldemort had nothing to do with the incident, I doubt he would have mentioned it to him.’

‘I suspect the only reason Ormesby took us in for

questioning was because Fudge made him,’ said Lupin. ‘Ormesby was obviously convinced Sirius Black was responsible, but Fudge wasn’t even ready to accept that possibility.’

Dumbledore looked thoughtful.

‘I believe the Minister’s wish that all this be kept quiet can be made to work in our favour,’ he said. ‘I will speak to him about Hagrid... warn him that if any of my staff — or former staff — are charged on insufficient evidence, I shall see to it that the entire affair is made public...’

‘Sirius, you can’t stop here,’ said Lupin suddenly. ‘Fudge could be having the place watched... and Ormesby will probably have Severus and me brought back to headquarters at some point, to interrogate us without Fudge interfering.’

‘Yes,’ said Dumbledore, ‘it would be best if Sirius went and stayed with Mundungus Fletcher for a while.’

‘Have you found out *anything* about Harry?’ Sirius asked him urgently.

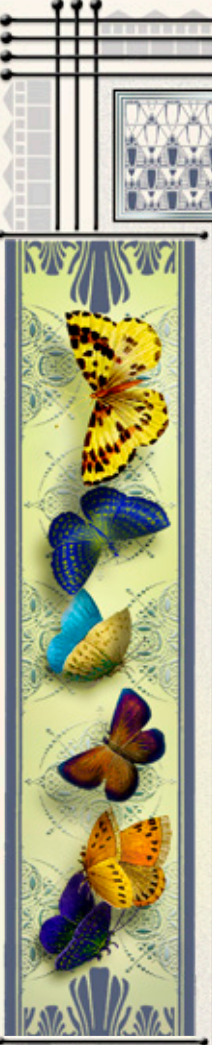
Dumbledore’s face grew sombre.

‘I have not,’ he said. ‘Hedwig and I have searched the length and breadth of Britain and seen no sign of him. It would take strong magic indeed to conceal a wizard from his own owl...’

Left unspoken were the words, ‘...if he was still alive.’

Dumbledore gave a heavy sigh and turned to Snape. ‘Have you anything to report, Severus?’

‘Nothing of any real importance,’ said Snape. ‘Since our last conversation, all the Death Eaters have been



instructed to lie low and forbidden to conjure the Dark Mark without permission. The only fresh orders the Dark Lord has given me specifically are to keep you under observation and notify him of any unusual behaviour. When I told him you were not replying to owls and nobody knew where you were, he appeared satisfied. Apart from that, he still has me fetching and carrying. The Dark Lord seems to have lost all interest in the Potter family since cursing Dursley's house. It was not merely my research into their background that was halted, but everyone's, at least as far as I have been able to learn. He has offered no explanation for this. In fact, he has not so much as mentioned the incident in passing whilst talking to me.'

Snape stared down at the threadbare tablecloth. Lupin could almost see the wheels going round inside his head.

'It may be,' Snape said slowly, 'that the most significant thing I have discovered is not what the Dark Lord has been doing, but what he has *not* been doing. The Dark Lord was — most upset — when Potter once more escaped death at his hands on the night of his rebirth. Had Potter somehow managed to slip through his fingers yet again, I cannot imagine he would have simply decided to let the matter drop. Nor would he have murdered Potter and kept the deed secret. He'd have boasted of it to his Death Eaters, if no one else.'

Snape fixed each of them in turn with his unfathomable black eyes.

'If the Dark Lord is not searching for Potter, it is because

he already has him. If the Dark Lord has not killed Potter, it is because, for some reason, he needs him alive.'

A nasty silence fell over the room as they all considered just what that reason might be. Then Sirius stood abruptly and began to pace the kitchen.

'Right, so Voldemort's holding him prisoner somewhere. What about Crouch's house? There'd be nobody living there... and that graveyard — have you searched the surrounding area?'

'I have checked all the places Voldemort has previously used as hideouts,' said Dumbledore. 'All those we're aware of, at any rate. None are currently occupied. I didn't really expect he'd be foolish enough to return to one of them...'

'So where is he now?' muttered Sirius. He looked sharply at Snape. 'You say he's had you fetching and carrying. Where's he had you fetching and carrying to?'

'I — don't — know,' said Snape through gritted teeth. 'I Apparate where he summons me. Some kind of stone building — he has a study and a room outside for us to wait in. There are other doors, but I've not been through them —'

'Why haven't you, then?' demanded Sirius. 'Harry's been missing for over a fortnight, why haven't you searched the place top to bottom?'

'Because I'd be caught before I'd gone five paces,' snapped Snape. 'I can't Apparate there unless I'm summoned and I can't Disapparate until the Dark Lord dismisses me. He has a serpent in a tank to keep an eye on us in the waiting room; the wretched creature watched me like a hawk the last time I was there —'

‘Well, if you’re not willing to risk your neck looking for Harry, I am,’ said Sirius flatly. ‘You can take me with you the next time you go — Dumbledore can Transfigure me into a mouse or something —’

‘You think no one has ever thought of that?’ said Snape angrily. ‘We can’t carry living creatures with us when we Apparate in the Dark Lord’s presence. Not even down to the size of a flea — I’ve tried it.’

Sirius surveyed Snape intently. ‘Polyjuice Potion,’ he said.

‘Brilliant deduction, Black,’ sneered Snape. ‘I could hardly afford to have it get back to the Dark Lord that Severus Snape had been spotted in Dumbledore’s pet werewolf’s kitchen —’

‘No, *I’ll* take Polyjuice Potion,’ said Sirius impatiently. ‘Turn into you, Apparate in your place. I can bring James’ Invisibility Cloak with me —’

‘Polyjuice Potion won’t give you the Dark Mark,’ said Snape, sticking out his left forearm.

‘Nor will an Invisibility Cloak hide you from Voldemort,’ said Dumbledore.

‘And may I remind you,’ Snape continued, ‘there is more at stake here than one boy’s life. Our prime concern is stopping Voldemort, not safeguarding Harry Potter. I will do what I can for him, of course, but only insofar as it does not compromise my effectiveness as a spy.’

It was a good thing for Snape that Sirius’ pacing had taken him to the opposite end of the kitchen. Even so, Lupin was barely able to intercept Sirius in time. He had to literally fling his arms around Sirius

to hold him back as his fingers weren’t sufficiently mended to keep a grip on Sirius’ robes. Sirius, moreover, was evidently quite prepared battle his way across the room with Lupin clinging on to him like a limpet, if that was what he had to do to get at Snape.

‘Sirius, sit down,’ said Dumbledore.

For a moment or two, Lupin was afraid that Sirius wasn’t going to heed Dumbledore. Then all the fight seemed to go out of him. He ceased his attempts to drag Lupin bodily across the floor and stumbled to the nearest chair.

‘Dumbledore, you can’t let him — you can’t just abandon Harry to die!’

But there was a note of desolation behind the raw pleading in Sirius’ voice. He must have understood as well as Lupin did that Snape was right: preventing Voldemort’s return to power was more important than the fate of any one wizard. Lupin waited miserably for Dumbledore to tell Sirius exactly that.

Dumbledore was silent for nearly a full minute. He appeared to be carefully weighing his words.

‘There is indeed more at stake here than one boy’s life, Severus,’ he said at last. ‘Nonetheless, we *must* have Harry back. You are not to risk yourself pointlessly — I agree that a search of the building you spoke of is out of the question under the present circumstances — but if you see any chance of getting Harry safely away, any chance at all, do not hesitate to take it — even if it means sacrificing your cover as a Death Eater.’

Ignoring the flabbergasted expressions on the faces of his companions, Dumbledore stood briskly.

‘Now I must be off. I will notify you if I learn anything new; you all know how to contact me should you do likewise.’

He gave them a small smile, and Disapparated.

* EPILOGUE *

EAGLE, SERPENT AND CAT

Albus Dumbledore sat in his study, staring out the window at the darkening sky and mulling over Severus’s latest report. The Potions master’s logic was irrefutable as always, but it had merely served to confirm what Dumbledore already knew. He’d never had any real doubts that Harry was still alive. Divination was a fuzzy and inexact branch of magic, and even true predictions were notoriously subject to misinterpretation — yet Dumbledore was all but certain that *this* was not the way Harry Potter was going to die. As for Voldemort having him, it was the obvious explanation for why no one — not the Ministry, not Dumbledore, not even Hedwig — had been able to find Harry.

It was a bit puzzling, though. Voldemort had seemed quite intent on murdering Harry that night in the graveyard; Dumbledore couldn’t imagine what had happened to so quickly change his mind. Even if Voldemort had at last seen through James Potter’s ruse, he had other reasons for wanting Harry dead, particularly if he grasped the full implications of his having taken Harry’s blood to restore himself.

The only thing Dumbledore could think might

induce Voldemort to spare Harry’s life was if he’d discovered something else, unique to Harry, that could somehow be used to facilitate his takeover of the wizarding world. According to Severus, Voldemort had learnt of his and Harry’s shared wand cores several days prior to the attack. But whilst Harry’s wand might be of some value to Voldemort, he certainly didn’t need Harry to wield it, nor had he made any attempt to retrieve the wand itself from Arabella Figg’s.

That left Voldemort’s research into Harry’s family history. Dumbledore had never expected anything to come of this. The Potters were an old wizarding family, but for the most part an unexceptional one. Indeed, he’d been rather pleased that Voldemort had been gulled into embarking upon such a colossal waste of his time. Had Voldemort’s enquiries yielded up something of significance after all? It seemed far-fetched, but there was nothing else to account for the Dark Lord’s behaviour. Clearly, Dumbledore would have to launch his own investigation of the Potter family’s background... once he’d sorted out Cornelius Fudge, that is.

Dumbledore rubbed his forehead wearily. He wasn’t looking forward to that interview, but the Minister had to be headed off before he managed to cause some serious damage. The man had a positive talent for doing the worst possible thing at the worst possible time. It occurred to Dumbledore, not for the first time, that Voldemort may simply have realised that it would create infinitely more disruption and difficulty, for both Dumbledore and the Ministry

of Magic, to leave Harry alive and in need of rescue, rather than dead and beyond help. And he still had no idea how Voldemort had got past the protections he'd placed on Harry and his relatives. None of the Death Eaters had been studying these types of spells, at least not to Severus' knowledge; they'd all been busy researching the Potters...

Dumbledore felt a sudden coldness in his stomach. Was that what Voldemort had discovered? Something about Harry's family — some inherited magic or peculiarity of the bloodline — that acted to cancel out protective charms? It would explain why no similarly protected sites had been attacked, and why Voldemort hadn't killed Harry. If he believed that this power could be extended to break through other protections, but hadn't yet figured out how... if he required Harry's cooperation to do so, and hadn't yet managed to obtain it...

Dumbledore gave a shudder. He'd been trying very hard not to think about Harry's probable treatment at Voldemort's hands during his captivity. His chances of extricating Harry from the Dark Lord's clutches were extremely remote. In the eleven years of his initial rise to power, no one had ever succeeded in tracking down either Voldemort himself or any of his permanent bases. Barring unforeseen developments, Dumbledore had little hope of —

WHOOSH.

Something small and grey came pelting through the window, aimed straight at Dumbledore's face. He ducked to one side; the object bounced off the

armchair's high back and landed in his beard with a *flump*. Dumbledore looked down. A tiny grey owl, with an even tinier white scroll held in its beak, lay on its back emitting a steady stream of muffled twitters as its minute legs kicked at the air.

With some difficulty, the owl found its feet. It tried to take off again, but whilst getting up its claws had become hopelessly ensnared in Dumbledore's long silver hair. Fluttering its wings madly, the owl rose a few inches into the air (dragging most of Dumbledore's beard along behind it), then sank back, exhausted, onto Dumbledore's lap.

The little owl gazed up at Dumbledore appealingly. Smiling to himself, Dumbledore took the scroll from its beak and performed a Disentangling Charm. Once free, the owl began rocketing around the room hooting with joy, as Fawkes regarded it benignly from his golden perch.

Dumbledore turned his attention to scroll. It was made of Muggle paper, white with blue pinstripes, and tied closed by what appeared to be a length of dental floss. He pulled off the fastening, unrolled the strip of paper and read:

Dear Professor Dumbledore,

I think I know how Harry's been hiding.

Hermione



On a fine clear morning in early August, a hand-

some white-tailed eagle circled the sky above the stockbroker belt of Surrey. Such a bird would have been a remarkable sight in Britain even in the countryside, yet none of the people in the suburb below seemed to notice anything out of the ordinary. They paid no heed when the eagle dropped like an arrow into a neat Greater Whinging garden and rose again with a hoarse cry of triumph, a small green snake clutched in its talons.

The eagle glided to a nearby street lamp, upon which was balanced a round straw basket. It dropped its quarry into the basket's narrow mouth to join the half-dozen odd other snakes that it had caught in the course of the day.

Next instant the eagle was gone and Albus Dumbledore stood floating in mid-air beside the basket. Very gently he lifted out his most recent catch, which hung limply in his hands.

'Harry?' he said.

The snake made no reply. Taking his wand from his robes, Dumbledore began poking and prodding it, muttering incantations. The snake remained as unresponsive as ever, and after several minutes Dumbledore lowered it back in the basket to rejoin its fellows.

'Getting a bit crowded in there,' Dumbledore observed. He picked up the basket and silently vanished.



Sitting cross-legged on the fluffy pink carpet of Hermione Granger's bedroom, Dumbledore took the snakes from their basket one by one, holding them out for

her great ginger cat Crookshanks to inspect. Hermione herself watched anxiously from the edge of the bed.

Crookshanks gave each snake a desultory sniff, but showed no particular interest in any of them. When they'd all been checked over, Crookshanks leapt up on the bed and onto Hermione's lap, looking up at her and purring. Hermione stroked him absent-mindedly, but continued to gaze, downcast, at the basket of snakes.

'I'm not sure Crookshanks would recognise Harry as a snake,' she said in a low, worried tone. 'I mean, he detected Wormtail, but Wormtail was an Animagus and I don't think Harry's one, and Crookshanks wasn't around any of the times he transformed...' She went quiet for a second or two, then burst out, 'And if Harry did turn into a snake, why hasn't he changed back? Could he be stuck, do you think? Could something have gone wrong with the transformation?'

'That would be highly unlikely,' said Dumbledore. 'You said he became a serpent on four separate occasions without incident. Once the Animagus transformation is successfully established, it's quite rare for it to miscarry at a later date, and such failures in natural shape-shifters are practically unheard of.'

'Reversal spells didn't work on him,' said Hermione dully. 'If he did get stuck, we couldn't turn him back. And what if he was run over by a lorry, or eaten by something? If he's — if he's — *dead*... if he stayed a snake, we'd never know...'

She buried her face in her hands. Dumbledore reached up and patted her knee comfortingly.

'He could be halfway across the country by now,'

Hermione said in a muffled voice. 'I should've thought of this *sooner*, you could've started hunting for him before he'd time to get very far...'

'I've put the word out amongst the larger birds of prey that they are not to kill any snakes at present,' said Dumbledore soothingly. 'They'll report it to me immediately should they spot one behaving strangely. All the snakes I've captured are being kept in a safe place, whilst Professor McGonagall and I research fresh ways to reverse Transfigurations.'

'If I hadn't been so afraid of getting in trouble...' said Hermione bitterly, 'if I'd told Professor McGonagall when we first found out Harry could change into a snake, she'd probably have already worked out how to reverse it. Or after Madam Turpin was caught... I *meant* to try and convince Harry to tell someone, but Rita Skeeter'd just written that foul article about Hagrid, and with helping Harry with the Triwizard Tournament, it completely slipped my mind. It was only when you asked me if I knew how he could've stayed hidden for so long, and I remembered Rita...'

Hermione's lips thinned into an angry line.

'Well, at least that's one thing we don't have to worry about in any more —' she said grimly, '— her snooping around for stories.'

* THE END *

THE BUG





IT WAS A BRIGHT, warm summer's afternoon in Privet Drive. Four teenage boys sat on the garden wall of number four, watching the men who were rebuilding the shattered front half of the house. The smallest boy, a skinny, rat-faced specimen named Piers Polkiss, was leaning towards the others and speaking in a low, excited tone.

'Everyone's saying it was a freak sinkhole, but it wasn't, it was terrorists. They've been after Dudley's family for ages, and finally found out where they live. Dudley called me last night — luckily he and his parents were in Majorca when the bomb went off. Now they're lying low while the government arranges protection...'

His three friends gawped at him. Piers sat up very straight, thoroughly pleased with the interest he'd created. The beetle that had been perched on his shoulder took flight. Malcolm, who was sitting on the wall beside Piers, snatched it out of the air and idly ripped off one of its wings.



Arthur Weasley checked his watch — almost time. He turned the Ministry Portkey (appropriately enough, a large bronze key) over in his hands. It had been delivered by owl that morning along with a request for his assistance from Morpheus Quitch, whom Mr Weasley vaguely recalled as a rather earnest young wizard with the Accidental Magic Reversal Squad. This was something of a turnabout of standard procedure. As Head of the Misuse of Muggle Artefacts Office, it was normally Mr Weasley who sent for an Obliviator, not the other way around. Quitch hadn't said what it was he needed assistance with, either. Just as Mr Weasley was wondering for the dozenth time what Quitch could possibly want, the Portkey went off.

When the wind had died and the swirling colours faded, Mr Weasley was left in total darkness. Drawing his wand, he muttered, '*Lumos.*'



He found himself inside a cupboard, surrounded by mops and brooms, but Muggle brooms, not wizarding ones. Taking his right foot out of the bucket it had landed in, Mr Weasley seized the nearest one and flipped it over. He gazed avidly at the long, flattened, rag-covered end, Quitch and his mysterious task utterly forgotten.

A sudden bright light filled the cupboard as the door was pulled open.

'Arthur Weasley?' said a nervous voice.

'Ah — yes,' Mr Weasley replied, hastily setting the broom down.

He stepped out of the cupboard into a blindingly



white hallway. White-clad Muggles scurried along it on unknown errands, paying no attention to the two Ministry wizards.

‘You had a — a Muggle artefact you wanted me to have a look at?’ he asked.

‘No,’ said Quitch. ‘I wanted you to have a look at Rita Skeeter.’

‘Rita Skeeter?’ said Mr Weasley blankly.



‘You’ve not heard what happened to her?’ said Quitch.

‘Er — well — I knew she’d been injured...’

In fact Mr Weasley knew quite a bit more than this. Rita Skeeter had been found unconscious and gravely wounded by a group of Muggle labourers in the rubble of Harry Potter’s aunt and uncle’s house, nearly four weeks after it had been blown up — by You-Know-Who, although Cornelius Fudge refused to admit it. The Dursleys hadn’t been there at the time; unfortunately, Harry apparently had, and had been missing ever since.

What had caused Rita’s injuries was a complete mystery to everyone. The Muggles said she’d appeared out of nowhere, and that was exactly where the Magical Law Enforcement Patrol’s investigation had got. Because of the connection with Harry’s disappearance, Mr Weasley had kept fairly close tabs on their efforts, but he didn’t want word of his interest getting back to Fudge.

The Minister for Magic was desperate to keep the whole thing quiet from the wizarding public. Mr Weasley had only learnt of what had befallen Harry



because he and his wife had been planning to have him visit over the summer. If Fudge discovered the full extent of Mr Weasley’s nosing around, he’d probably arrange to have his memory wiped.

‘She’s here,’ said Quitch tensely. ‘This is a Muggle hospital. She’s been here for five days and they still haven’t mended her back, and — and — Arthur, they’ve stuck *needles* into her! Come and see!’

He pulled Mr Weasley up the white corridor, past a number of white doors and into an equally white room. Lying face down on the bed, eyes half shut, was Rita Skeeter. Her face looked shockingly pale without its usual thick application of makeup; her normally rigidly curled hair lay flat and straggling; her heavy jaw hung slack.

Mr Weasley had little reason to like Rita Skeeter, but he couldn’t help feeling a twinge of pity. The Muggles had indeed stuck needles into her, needles that were attached to some sort of elaborate potion-brewing apparatus. Mr Weasley suppressed a shudder. As fascinating as he ordinarily found Muggle ways of getting by without magic, this was one occasion on which he was extremely grateful to be a wizard. Nonetheless, he tried not to let it show in his voice when he spoke to Quitch.

‘Yes, that’s how Muggles treat injuries like this. I realise it looks — er — very bad, but the — the needles will keep her alive until you can move her to St Mungo’s.’

Mr Weasley frowned. He was surprised Rita Skeeter hadn’t already been moved to St Mungo’s. It was Friday afternoon, and the Ministry had located the Muggle

hospital she'd been taken to on Tuesday morning.

'She's not going to St Mungo's,' said Quitch.

'Not going to St Mungo's?' repeated Mr Weasley. 'Why on earth not?'

'Minister's orders,' said Quitch, not quite meeting Mr Weasley's eyes. 'Can't risk exposing the other patients to dangerous Dark Magic.'

Mr Weasley stared at him in disbelief. He'd never heard of anyone not being brought to St Mungo's after suffering such a severe magical injury, nor of any curse that might remain harmful to others five days after it was cast. Was Fudge doing this to punish Rita Skeeter for the many times she'd criticised the Ministry in the *DAILY PROPHET*? No, of course not — Fudge wasn't that vindictive... or that cunning. But there were plenty at the Ministry who were. Any one of them could've put this notion into Fudge's head; he'd be panicky enough not to question it.

'...so *she* has to stay here, and *I* have to stay with her, to stop the Muggles asking questions,' Quitch was going on. 'I didn't think it would take this long.. You know Muggles, Arthur, you talk to them. There must be something more they could be doing for her...'

Feeling slightly out of his depth, Mr Weasley stepped out the room, looked up and down the corridor and intercepted a passing Muggle nurse.

'Excuse me, Madam... May I speak to the, um, medimuggle in charge of the Skeeter case?'

The nurse gave him a look of deepest suspicion. It was good that Mr Weasley had an Obliviator with him. Quitch had to modify the memories of three nurses and

a burly orderly before Mr Weasley hit on the unsavoury but effective tactic of pretending to be Rita Skeeter's husband, who had just learnt of her whereabouts from Quitch, a family friend. The pair of them were quickly ushered into the office of Dr Balaghat Bhandara, a tall, distinguished-looking Muggle whose outstandingly neat hair and clothing strongly reminded Mr Weasley of the late Bartemius Crouch.

'So you're the husband of our mystery woman, Mr —?'

'Weasley, Arthur Weasley,' said Mr Weasley.

'And your wife's name?' said Dr Bhandara, pen poised above a chart.

'Mo — Rita Skeeter. She's a reporter — goes by her maiden name professionally,' Mr Weasley explained. 'How — how is she? Is she going to be all right?'



'She's in no immediate danger of dying,' said Dr Bhandara. 'Her condition, however, is quite serious, and there's still the possibility of infection setting in. The reattachment is taking as well as can be expected, but even with intensive physiotherapy, I anticipate major loss of function in the left arm and some impairment of the left leg.'

Mr Weasley made an appalled noise. Doctor Bhandara gazed at him soberly.

'You said your wife was a reporter. Have you any idea what stories she might have been working on recently? Because the nature of her wounds — did the nurses explain to you exactly what happened to her?'

'Ah — no, not really,' said Mr Weasley.

'I don't mean to distress you, but — you need to understand the urgency of the situation. Your wife



was, literally, skinned alive. From left buttock to left shoulder, from the centre of her spine to the left edge of her body, almost a square foot of skin was removed from her back, and a fair-sized piece of muscle torn from her shoulder. This could not have come about accidentally. The absolute precision with which it was done — I myself, a trained surgeon, using the most advanced modern hospital equipment, would have great difficulty duplicating it. Considerable skill was required on the part of the perpetrator, skill that could only have been gained through extensive practice. Needless to say, the police are taking this matter very seriously. Had your wife ever done investigations of Satanists, serial killers, that type of thing?

‘Er — well, I —’ floundered Mr Weasley.

‘Is your wife connected with some sort of — of New Age religious group?’ asked Dr Bhandara. ‘Only she — well, she’s been claiming to be a witch. We weren’t certain whether it was an effect of the anaesthesia — we’ve had to keep her rather heavily sedated to stop her trying to leave the hospital...’

Mr Weasley opened his mouth and then closed it.

‘If you have reason to suspect that your wife knew her attacker I would strongly suggest you say so,’ said Dr Bhandara sternly. ‘If she wasn’t the random victim a murderous lunatic — if this was some — some ritual sacrifice or punishment for disloyalty... then the person or persons responsible may well attempt to come back and finish her off.’

As Mr Weasley was struggling to frame his reply, he was distracted by a loud thumping sound: Quitch

had slid from his chair in a dead faint.

Dr Bhandara stared down at Quitch with an alarmed expression. He reached for the fellytone on his desk — ‘*Obliviate!*’ said Mr Weasley sharply.

The medimuggle watched on in a state of dazed placidity as Mr Weasley brought Quitch around with a series of sharp taps to his face, hauled him onto his feet and hustled him out of the office.

‘Have a nice day,’ Dr Bhandara called vaguely after them.

Mr Weasley dragged Quitch into the first empty bedroom they came to. The young Obliviator sat on the bed, white-faced and trembling, barely able to speak.

‘Morpheus, calm down,’ said Mr Weasley. ‘What’s the matter?’

‘People with bits torn out of them, you heard him...’ gasped Quitch. ‘My God, it’s like Tighernan O’Doyle all over again!’

Mr Weasley winced. The O’Doyle case had been, if not the largest, then arguably the most gruesome mass killing of You-Know-Who’s era.



‘Morpheus, this is nothing like Tighernan O’Doyle,’ he said reasonably. ‘He didn’t live five hours, never mind five days... and you didn’t run across any Death Adders slithering around the scene, did you?’

Mentioning Death Adders was definitely a mistake. Quitch let out a moan of terror and pressed his fists against his mouth.

‘That house is cursed,’ he whimpered.

‘Oh, now surely —’ Mr Weasley began.

‘The Grim was there! It howled and howled... our Spirit Levellers had no effect! The Minister had to





send for Dumbledore to get rid of it! Then, a week later...' Quitch gave a shudder. 'She's doomed to die, Arthur. You heard that Muggle, they'll be coming back for her. I'm an Obliviator, not an Auror, I can't fight Dark Magic...'

'Morpheus...' Mr Weasley trailed off.

Quitch was thoroughly panic-stricken and there wasn't much he could say to reassure him. As Dumbledore had explained to Fudge, the reason the Spirit Levelling Charms hadn't worked on the Grim was because it wasn't a Grim, but a real dog. Practically no one else at the Ministry believed this story, though; they all thought it was part of Fudge's attempts to keep the incident at Harry's house covered up.

Nobody was certain what sort of Dark Magic had been used on Rita Skeeter. Most Flaying Curses removed the whole skin, and of the ones that took off pieces, none could be aimed with sufficient accuracy to have caused her wounds. Moreover, the Improper Use of Magic Office had no record of any spell whatsoever being performed in the area on the day she'd been found. Mr Weasley's sources in Magical Law Enforcement told him that they suspected the actual attack had occurred at a separate location — that it was an unconnected act of revenge, and that Rita Skeeter had been dumped near Harry's house in order to obfuscate the ensuing investigation. They had not, however, managed to find any definite proof of this.

According to her editor at the *DAILY PROPHET*, she'd got a lot of hate mail after her last story on Harry Potter (and deserved every piece of it in Mr Weasley's



opinion). That in itself was not unusual, yet she'd apparently been sufficiently upset to start publishing her articles under a different name. Those letters the Ministry was able to trace had all turned out to be the work of harmless (for the most part) cranks. Considering the lengths to which the culprits had gone to cover their tracks, it hardly seemed likely they'd have risked giving themselves away beforehand by sending a threatening letter. What was more, in order to have known what happened at Harry's house, Rita's attacker had to have been either a Ministry member or a Death Eater — or worse, both.



Now there was a thought that would really send Quitch into hysterics. Mr Weasley eyed the petrified young wizard with concern. He couldn't leave Quitch on his own in the Muggle world in his current condition. Nor could he abandon Rita Skeeter to the horrors of Muggle medicine, no matter what she'd written about anyone. Then inspiration struck.

'You say the Minister had to send for Dumbledore...'



Rita Skeeter sat in the Weasley's kitchen, her right hand shaking slightly as she held her cup of tea. Her left arm rested limply on the scrubbed wooden table — in spite of Madam Pomfrey's best efforts, she still had some trouble using it.

Mr Weasley had Apparated back to the Ministry with Quitch for just long enough to send Dumbledore an owl. Dumbledore had turned up at the hospital a couple of hours later, the Hogwarts matron in tow.



With a few well-chosen words, Dumbledore soon had Quitch settled down. It took Madam Pomfrey rather longer to heal Rita Skeeter's back.

Afterwards Rita had still been somewhat groggy from the Muggle potions; Mr Weasley hadn't felt she ought to be wandering about. Although Mrs Weasley was putting a good face on it, she'd been as little pleased to discover that her husband had invited Rita Skeeter to spend the night as he'd been to invite her. But Rita should be fit to travel by next morning and then they'd be well shot of her.

The kitchen door flew open and Mr Weasley's youngest son Ron came hurtling in.

'Mum, where've you put —'

At the sight of Rita Skeeter, his voice cut off abruptly. His face went deep red, twisting into an expression of such hatred and fury that he was scarcely recognisable.



'What's *she* doing here?' he spat.

'Rita is — is recovering — from a — from a very serious injury...' Mr Weasley stammered.

He hadn't imagined that Ron would be particularly happy to see Rita either, but the fierce, unchild-like rage in his son's eyes shocked him deeply. He glanced towards his wife, expecting that at any moment she'd begin telling Ron off for being rude to a guest, but she seemed just as stunned at their son's reaction as he was.

'It's her fault Fudge didn't believe Harry, it's her fault he's dead!' Ron exploded. 'The Ministry would've been protecting him, if she hadn't written that article!'

Ron's fists clenched. Then his eyes fell upon the



long poker by the fireplace. He snatched it up and advanced on Rita Skeeter, who gave him a single terrified look, scrambled from her seat and Disapparated.

'I HOPE YOU-KN— I HOPE *VOLDEMORT* GETS YOU!' Ron shouted after her.

This broke Mrs Weasley out of her trance. 'Ronald Weasley, I'm going to wash your mouth out with soap!' she shrieked.

'It's your fault too!' snarled Ron, rounding on her. 'If you'd let Harry come here at the start of summer, he'd still be alive!'

Throwing the poker aside with a clatter, he wheeled and stormed out the kitchen, slamming the door behind him with such force that the whole house shook. Mrs Weasley swelled with anger, drew a number of heaving breaths — and burst into tears. Mr Weasley hurried over to her.

'Molly, don't — he didn't mean it — don't cry...'

Mrs Weasley buried her face in his robes and cried all the harder.

'That boy — when I get hold of him — he's not too big for a broomstick across his backside...'

But that wasn't strictly true. Ron was almost as tall as his father now. If he'd actually tried to — to beat Rita Skeeter with the poker, Mr Weasley would've had a job stopping him without magic. With five older boys, this wasn't the first time Mr Weasley had had it brought home to him that one of his children was no longer a child, but it was definitely the most disquieting.

'Molly...' he said again, hugging his wife closer.

'It *is* my fault,' sobbed Mrs Weasley. 'I let him go

back there, to those horrible Muggles. It wasn't You-Know-Who that broke Dumbledore's spell, it was *them!* They went off and *left* him!



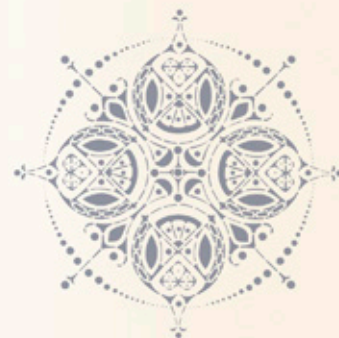
Ron Weasley ran, through the yard, past the hedges, up the hill and into the orchard. He collapsed against a gnarled apple tree and leant there gasping for breath. After several of minutes, when the painful thumping of his heart had subsided, he reached in his pocket and took out a wrinkled bit of Muggle parchment — his last letter from Harry, delivered on the very morning that Harry's house had been destroyed. Ron smoothed the parchment out against the tree and began to reread it, as he had done every day for the past month:

Dear Ron,

How are you? I'm all right, the Dursleys have left me with Mrs Figg for the holidays. Remember how your mum said I might be able to come and stay with you later in the summer? Only Mrs Figg's back's been hurting her, and I'm not sure how long she'll be able to keep me on...

* THE END *

THE SERPENT OF LORD VOLDEMORT



1.
SERPENT IN
PRIVET DRIVE



RS FIGG?’ Harry called down the hall. ‘I’m going to number four, OK?’

‘Say hello to your aunt and uncle for me,’ Mrs Figg’s voice floated back from the kitchen.

‘Er,’ said Harry.

That would be difficult. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia were not currently in residence at number four. Harry was staying with Mrs Figg; her back had started playing her up earlier in the year and the Dursleys had volunteered him to live in over the holidays and keep an eye on her.

Uncle Vernon had informed Harry of this as they were driving away from King’s Cross at the beginning of summer. Then, rather than taking Harry back to Privet Drive, Uncle Vernon let him off in Paddington station and handed him a train ticket to Little Whinging.

‘...and I shall expect you to look in on the house and garden every day,’ Uncle Vernon growled. ‘If they aren’t in perfect condition when we get back, you’re going to be very sorry indeed.’

‘Get back?’ Harry asked, slightly stunned at this

sudden turn of events. ‘Where are you going?’

‘Majorca,’ said Uncle Vernon curtly. He slammed the car door shut and drove off at top speed.

Harry arrived at Mrs Figg’s house late that night and had been sleeping in her spare room ever since. Once he got over his surprise, he was quite relieved he wouldn’t have to put up with his relatives that summer, particularly in light of everything that had happened last year at Hogwarts. Old and boring Mrs Figg might be, but living with her was still infinitely preferable to living with the Dursleys.

Her cat stories were as deadly dull as ever, but Harry had worked out a routine to avoid the worst of them. He spent his mornings doing whatever work he could find around Mrs Figg’s house and garden that he judged might strain her back. After lunch he made the excuse of going to visit the Dursleys’ house, taking care to remain outdoors until nearly dark. Of evening he kept to his room, ostensibly doing homework.

Harry had been at Mrs Figg’s for almost a week before he noticed that she didn’t seem to realise the Dursleys were away. At first Harry was somewhat concerned, but a few days close observation revealed nothing else apparently amiss with her mind, memory or hearing. He supposed his aunt and uncle had simply neglected to mention their trip to her.

Harry hadn’t been sure what to do about this. The Dursleys had left him with Mrs Figg on previous occasions, but not without telling her, and not when she was in poor health — although come to think of it, her back hadn’t appeared to be hurting her all that much

lately either. Even so, Mrs Figg wasn't likely to be pleased when she found out the truth, and the longer Harry waited to tell her, the less pleased she'd be.

It was possible the Dursleys might return before Mrs Figg discovered they were gone, but Harry had no idea how long they'd be in Majorca, or for that matter where they were staying. This was another problem — he'd have a job explaining his magic things to social services if Mrs Figg reported him as an abandoned child.

Harry finally decided to write and tell his friend Ron Weasley. Ron's mother had spoken of inviting Harry to stay with them later in the summer. It would give him a place to go if Mrs Figg felt she couldn't keep him on, and Mr Weasley would no doubt be able to smooth over any troubles with the Muggle authorities. Hedwig had soared off yesterday evening, carrying his letter to The Burrow.

Blazing sunlight poured down on Privet Drive, and all appeared as it should be in the front garden as Harry approached number four. Going round the back, he saw that the rose bushes needed watering. He had just begun dragging the hose towards them when a blinding pain seared across his scar.

It felt as though someone had driven a red-hot nail through his skull. Harry staggered, tripped over the coils of the hose and fell to the ground. The burning in his forehead grew steadily worse, along the terrifying realisation of what it must mean — that somehow, impossibly, Lord Voldemort was nearby.

Now Harry could hear someone moving around

inside the house. He had to run, to hide, but his scar was hurting so badly he couldn't stand up. If he could get to the greenhouse... if he could crawl there... Using every last ounce of strength, he fought to drag himself across the ground, but even that seemed to require more of an effort than he was capable of.

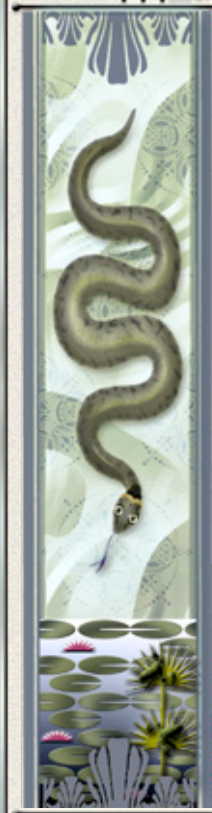
Suddenly the pain in Harry's scar faded to a dull ache and crawling became miraculously easier, in spite of the fact that his arms and legs had vanished. The grass had grown enormously high about him and the scent of the flowers had increased tenfold. The greenhouse towered in the distance, larger even than Hogwarts castle, but now Harry was making speedy progress towards it — now that he had transformed into a serpent.

The back door opened. A foot hit the ground, sending vibrations through Harry's entire body, and a most peculiar odour reached his tongue. Harry shot under the nearest rose bush and froze, heart pounding rapidly. He watched as a tall, cloaked figure strolled out into the garden, doing his best to remain still and calm. Even if Voldemort had seen the snake, he couldn't possibly realise it was Harry. All Harry had to do was stay quiet and keep out of sight...

Voldemort looked around him. His snake-like nostrils dilated and his red, slitted eyes fixed upon Harry's hiding place.

'You! Under the rose bush! Come here!' he said sharply.

Something about the cold, hissing voice made Harry obey it unthinkingly. With a flick of his tail he sent himself slithering across the grass towards the



speaker, coming to a stop a few feet away and raising his head attentively.

When Harry gazed up into the livid scarlet eyes of Lord Voldemort, his trance was shattered. Terror clogged his brain and snake instinct took over. In a weird, all-over, twisting-inside-out motion, he flopped on to his back and went limp.

'It's no good, I know you're not really dead,' said Voldemort, now sounding quite amused. 'I'm not going to hurt you — I only want to ask you some questions.'

Harry reluctantly unflopped himself. Voldemort went down on one knee and held out his left arm. Harry slowly and awkwardly wrapped himself around it. In addition to being scared out of his wits, he'd not spent enough time as a snake to be entirely at ease with its body's movements. Voldemort stood up and Harry tightened his coils convulsively to avoid slipping off.

'The people who live here, where are they?' asked Voldemort.

With some difficulty, Harry stopped himself blurting out 'Majorca'. He didn't think that even the Dursleys deserved to have Voldemort set on them.

'They — they're gone,' Harry said, trying hard to keep his voice from shaking. 'Been gone for days.'

'Did you see them leave?'

'Yeah,' Harry forced himself to lie. 'They carried a bunch of boxes to the car and drove away.'

This last was probably true; he'd had to put his trunk in the back seat of Uncle Vernon's car as there was luggage in the boot. Aunt Petunia and Dudley hadn't been with him — Harry assumed Uncle

Vernon had left them off shopping or something.

'What kind of boxes?' demanded Voldemort.

'Brown — squarish — leather,' said Harry vaguely. He wasn't sure a snake would know what a suitcase was.

Voldemort paced up and down the garden, obviously thinking hard. 'The smaller boy —'

'He wasn't with them,' Harry said before he could stop himself. After a brief internal struggle, he added, 'He hasn't been here since last summer.'

'But you'd recognise him, if he came back,' said Voldemort.

'I reckon so,' said Harry. 'He used to do a lot of the gardening in the summer.'

Harry was starting to feel a bit less apprehensive. If Voldemort thought the snake could be useful as a spy, to keep a watch for Harry's return, he wasn't likely to do anything horrible to it.

'Excellent,' said Voldemort.

He walked round to the front garden, Harry still clinging on to his arm, and turned to face the house. His lipless mouth curled into a most unpleasant smile.

'As no one seems to be in, I shall have to leave a calling card,' he said. He pointed his wand at number four and snapped, '*Reducto!*'

CRACK!

With tremendous thundering roar, the whole front half of the Dursleys' house collapsed into rubble. Voldemort stepped over the garden wall on to the pavement and waved his wand again. Grass and flowers shrivelled and blackened in the shape of a Dark Mark covering a better part of the front garden.

Remembering his uncle's last words to him in Paddington station, Harry surveyed the destruction with a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach (which now took up most of his body). If Voldemort didn't kill him, Uncle Vernon certainly would.

Harry began to hear shouts and screams from neighbours who were hurrying out to see what had made the great racket. Then his vision blurred, and the sounds and smells of Privet Drive grew fainter and vanished.

When Harry's eyes cleared again, he was inside a large stone room. The fear he had initially felt upon being caught by Voldemort returned in full force. Where had Voldemort taken him? And, more importantly, *why*?

Harry flicked out his tongue. Wood, stone, dust, books — the smells reminded him strongly of the Hogwarts classroom in which he was first transformed into a snake. He swung his head from one side to the other, taking stock of his new surroundings.

It looked as though he was in some sort of study. Bookshelves and cabinets lined the walls. Directly in front of him was a desk made of dark, highly polished wood, carved into an elaborate design of entwined serpents, their eyes set with tiny green and yellow jewels.

On the desk was a roll of parchment weighted open by a fat, warty bronze toad and an enormous faceted emerald nearly the size of a man's fist. A stack of books had been pushed aside to the far corner. Lying beside them was a knife with a black metal blade and a plain wooden hilt.

All in all, the room had an only recently occupied look to it. There were many empty spaces amongst

the books on the shelves, and bare spots on the walls where pictures should have hung.

'Where are we?' Harry asked nervously.

'Your new home,' Voldemort replied.

He walked past the desk towards a door in the wall that it faced. Harry, wrapped about his arm, perforce went with him. They came out into a much smaller room, empty except for several chairs. Although of the same style as the desk in Voldemort's study, these chairs were rather shabby — wood scratched, velvet padding stained and worn, jewelled eyes missing from some of the carved snakes.

Voldemort waved his wand, and the chairs rose into the air and floated to the left side of the room. All along the right-hand wall he conjured up a kind of stone enclosure, roughly four feet high, with a round stone basin in the middle of it.

The basin filled itself with water and the area around it filled with dirt. A patch of tall grass sprang up on one side of the basin and some shorter grass, a rose bush and a large rock appeared on the other. The rose bush bore a suspicious resemblance to the one Harry had hidden under in the Dursleys' back garden.

Voldemort looked down at Harry and said, 'In a few weeks, I will have a very important job for you to do... what is your name?'

It was very hard for Harry to lie to Voldemort as a snake, but sheer self-preservation prevented him from saying 'Harry Potter'. He had to tell Voldemort something, though, and he hadn't the foggiest notion what kind of names real snakes gave themselves.



'I — I don't think I have one,' Harry replied after some moments of frantic thought.

If challenged, he planned to say he'd been hatched out in a pet shop and never known his mother, but Voldemort didn't seem made unduly suspicious.

'Then I shall call you Seeker,' he said with a twisted smile. Harry tensed at the mention of his Quidditch position. Luckily Voldemort didn't appear to notice. 'For now, you'll be living in here,' he continued. 'What sort of things do you like to eat?'

Harry wasn't certain what snakes ate, either. He suspected it would be an extremely bad idea to ask for steak and kidney pudding... and the thought of eating it was actually quite revolting to him. Nasty brown sludge — what he really fancied was a plump, green, juicy —

'Frogs,' said Harry. 'I eat frogs.'

Voldemort set his hand on the grass near the rose bush so Harry could slide off his arm. With one last wave of his wand, he conjured a glass front for the enclosure, sealing it into a tank.

That done, Voldemort disappeared into his study. Harry stared out at the empty room in shock for several long moments. Then a new feeling came over him, a feeling of being horribly exposed and vulnerable. At the fastest slither he could manage, Harry made his way past the stone-lined pond and headed into the tall grass to take cover.

Halfway to the back wall of the tank, he came across what looked like an abandoned rabbit-hole. He crawled inside, curled up and simply lay there, shaking from head to tail, scarcely able to believe he was still alive.

Alive — but a prisoner of Voldemort, who thought he was a real snake and had a job for him to do. Something foul, no doubt. Harry recalled with a shudder the wizard quoted in Rita Skeeter's last article, who'd said that snakes were used for Dark Magic of the very worst sort.

He had to get away from here, as quickly as possible... but how? Harry could see no way of escaping from his tank, not with Voldemort in the next room. His wand was in his trunk at Mrs Figg's, along with his Invisibility Cloak, his Firebolt, his penknife from Sirius — anything, in fact, that could be of any use to him.

Mrs Figg... it felt like years since he'd left her house. What would she think when he didn't show up for dinner? Of course she'd hear about number four being blown up long before then. She didn't know the Dursleys were in Majorca — she'd think the whole family had been murdered!

Harry wondered what the neighbours would make of the Dark Mark burnt into the Dursleys' lawn, not to mention the Muggle police. He assumed the Ministry of Magic would eventually wipe everyone's memory. A brief hope that they might somehow manage to track Voldemort to his hideout flickered and died.

Voldemort wouldn't be stopping here if this place was easy to find, and it wasn't a sure bet that the Ministry would even be looking. Would the wreckage of the Dursleys' house be enough to convince Fudge that Voldemort truly had returned? Harry didn't have high hopes — Fudge would be desperate to believe anything rather than that. He'd probably reckon Harry had gone mad and done it himself.



Dumbledore would know Harry was innocent, but he'd have no reason to suppose that Harry had survived. Only Ron and Hermione were aware that Harry could turn into a snake, and it would hardly occur to either of them that he had somehow become Voldemort's pet — the notion was simply too far-fetched.

He could count on no rescue from outside. Harry drew his coils tighter in despair. He had always known in the back of his mind that he would have to face Lord Voldemort again, but not so soon or so unexpectedly or so alone.

The only bright spot to his situation was that he had a little time to come up with a good plan. Harry settled himself into a more comfortable position and started thinking.

2.
SERPENT IN A TANK

Harry emerged from his burrow the next morning in immensely low spirits. He had slept quite badly the night before, dreaming that he was once more in the graveyard where scarcely two weeks ago Lord Voldemort had risen again. Only this time, Voldemort had somehow got Cedric Diggory's body back and was wanting Harry to wriggle down Cedric's throat and fetch a bezoar from his stomach.

In the cold light of dawn, the memory of Cedric's blank dead grey eyes was still very much with Harry, and his prospects for escape looked exceedingly dim. All his thinking and planning of the previous day had

served only to run into one snag after another.

Getting out of the tank would involve, necessarily, breaking its glass front, which was certain to attract the attention of anyone within earshot. At that very moment Harry could feel the reverberations of Voldemort's footsteps in the study, and there might well be other people about that he'd not seen yet.

Then he'd have to find his way out of the — house? Building? Castle? Harry could be inside Gringotts or Azkaban for all he knew. To do this would require his becoming human again; he was far too small a snake to reach doorknobs.

If Harry was caught wandering around as himself, he was dead. If he was caught wandering around as a snake, he'd have a lot of explaining to do. Should Voldemort become suspicious, or decide the snake wasn't reliable enough for whatever work he had in mind, he'd probably have it chopped up for potion ingredients.

Once outdoors, Harry would have no way to travel except on foot — or rather on stomach; he'd be too easily spotted as a human being. He had no idea which direction he should head in or how far he'd have to go to reach a place of safety. He might not even be in England anymore — if Voldemort had gone to ground in Durmstrang, for example.

Harry crawled disconsolately to the pond to have a drink. There were several tiny green frogs swimming around in it. They gave off a wonderful smell, warm and rich and meaty. Harry caught one in his mouth and swallowed it whole. This took some time, but after he'd eaten Harry felt a little less worse.



He saw that a patch of light from a small round window at the top of the tank had fallen on the rock near the rose bush. It looked invitingly warm and sunny. Harry slithered over to it and, after some trial and error owing to his unaccustomed lack of arms and legs, clambered on.

As he basked on the rock, more optimistic thoughts began to fill Harry's mind. Maybe he'd be able to vanish the glass as he had at the zoo on Dudley's birthday. If he had to smash it, he could wait until Voldemort went away. This was bound to happen at some point; Voldemort wasn't likely to stop in his study day and night for weeks on end. There might be Floo powder left lying about, or a broomstick...

The situation, Harry told himself firmly, was far from hopeless.



He had to remind himself of this fact fairly often in the days that followed. Harry decided to hold off on an escape attempt, partly to give himself a chance to get the lie of the land, and partly because if at all possible he wanted Voldemort gone when he finally did make a break for it.

None of what he discovered was particularly encouraging. His tank was in a sort of waiting room, into which masked, hooded Death Eaters would Apparate, to sit in the dilapidated chairs until Voldemort summoned them into his study. Harry initially had hopes of overhearing some scrap of useful information to take back to Dumbledore, but

that turned out to be a non-starter.

Never was there more than one Death Eater in the room at the same time, nor was the entrance to the study ever left open. The door itself was too thick and heavy for Harry to eavesdrop on conversations inside, but when Voldemort got upset with one of the unfortunate Death Eaters, the shrieks of agony carried through it all too well.

Harry had terrible nightmares whenever this happened and became quite afraid he might accidentally change back to human in his sleep. Although Wormtail had never done so whilst pretending to be Ron's pet rat Scabbers, Harry was not a normal Animagus.

Transfiguration reversal spells didn't work on him if he chose to fight them and even when a snake he could speak English as well as Parseltongue. (That he might do so while asleep was another serious worry.) Nor had he gone through the long and arduous training process that Hermione assured him was necessary to becoming an Animagus.

He had been Transfigured into a snake last year in Potions by Draco Malfoy and from then on could transform himself back and forth at will. Hermione hadn't been able to determine why, and Harry hadn't dared ask anybody else for fear of being expelled from Hogwarts as an illegal Animagus. For the same reason, he had made practically no use of this power since first discovering it.

He was now deeply regretting that. There might be other peculiarities to his condition, and this was not a good time to learn of them the hard way. Worse, he

had almost no experience of moving about as a snake. Except when acting on pure instinct, he was extremely slow and clumsy. As Harry intended to change back only when absolutely necessary during the course of his flight, this would present a real problem.

Even so, after a few days in the tank Harry had grown sufficiently apprehensive that he resolved to have a go at vanishing the glass and making his getaway late at night while Voldemort was sleeping. Instead of retiring to the burrow when evening fell, he lay awake waiting for the feelings of movement in Voldemort's study to subside.

One of the major advantages to being a snake was his ability to sense vibrations through the ground. Harry could always tell when someone was moving around, not just in the waiting room but in Voldemort's study and the unknown rooms that adjoined it. Harry suspected there were living quarters connected to the study — rarely had any significant length of time gone by without his receiving some indication of Voldemort's presence.

Unfortunately, he realised as the first rays of sunshine began to brighten the room, this was as much the case in the night as in the day. After staying up two more nights with much the same results, Harry was forced to conclude that either Voldemort was an exceptionally restless sleeper or he didn't sleep much at all. Clearly, a midnight defection was right out.

Tired and dispirited, Harry crawled into his burrow to get some rest. When he woke, late in the afternoon, he cheered himself with the thought that

if Voldemort ever did stay still for very long, it would be a good bet he really had left the area.

When he did, Harry would know, and when sneaking through the house he'd be forewarned of anyone else approaching from rooms away. Although he was beginning to doubt there was anyone else — apart from the times when one of the Death Eaters had come to call, he had never noticed more than a single set of footsteps.

While Harry waited for Voldemort to leave for a bit, he passed the time learning to get around properly as a snake — slithering laps of the tank, climbing over the rock and swimming and diving in the pond. He also practised sneaking and hiding — darting behind the rose bush and lying perfectly still, or creeping through the tall grass as slowly and silently as he could, trying to reach the burrow without causing a visible disturbance.

Despite the obstacles facing him, Harry reckoned he stood a fair chance of getting out of this one alive... and then Nagini came slithering by.



Harry was sunning himself on his rock when he heard the door to Voldemort's study open. That was funny, there was no Death Eater in the waiting room. Harry hadn't felt any footsteps, either, just a steady sort of dragging. He glanced up, saw Nagini's great ugly head peering down at him and got some unexpected practice in ducking and covering.

Nagini banged her nose imperiously against the glass. 'Come and play, little boy,' she hissed mockingly at



Harry, who had dived behind the rock.

Harry stayed where he was. He didn't think Nagini could get into the tank, but she had given him a nasty shock.

'Nagini,' Voldemort called out reprovngly. 'I said you were not to tease him.'

Nagini gave Harry a last sibilant sneer and glided back into the study. Harry crept out from behind the rock and slipped into the tall grass to ponder this most unpleasant development.

Nagini... Harry had forgotten all about her. He'd definitely not bargained on having a real serpent hanging around. This was bad, very bad... Harry had managed to hoodwink Lord Voldemort, but he wasn't sure he could fool another snake... and if she had the run of the house, it would make his escape a thousand times more difficult than any number of other wizards in the vicinity.

Nagini would be able to feel him when he was moving and smell him when he was hiding. Probably track him too, Harry could easily follow the trails he himself left on the floor of the tank. Even when he was human, Nagini was a lot bigger than him, and Voldemort had said she was venomous. He'd be no match for her... no match for her, unarmed.

Harry remembered the dagger he'd seen on Voldemort's desk. He'd have to remain human to carry it, which would mean losing his snake senses, but if it was still there, if he could get his hands on it, it would give him some chance against Nagini. Still, Harry didn't relish the notion of taking her on. It reminded

him strongly of his fight with the Basilisk, which he wouldn't have survived without Fawkes the phoenix, who wasn't likely to be showing up here.

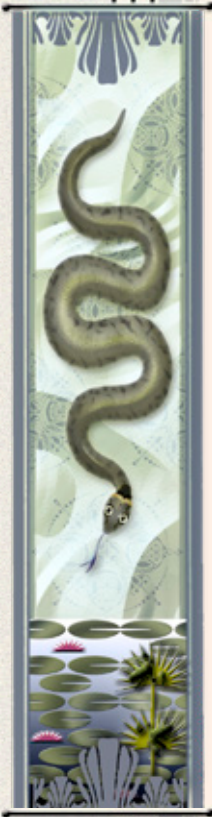


Harry spent the rest of the week in a thoroughly depressed mood, which wasn't helped by the fact that Nagini made a point of crawling past his tank nearly every day. Sometimes she merely looked in on him for a few seconds before sloping off. Occasionally, however, she draped her massive diamond-patterned body over one of the chairs and sat leering into the tank for hours on end, only to hurry away upon feeling some distant tremor through the floor.

Harry could no longer claim, even to himself, that the situation was far from hopeless. Really, it was quite near. But he'd not believed it had actually got there until the third time Nagini came into the waiting room to keep a watch.

As soon as he saw she'd be stopping for a while, Harry retreated into his burrow, followed by the sound of her low, spitting laughter. He wasn't actually afraid of Nagini, not so long as he was inside the tank, but he couldn't run the risk of her catching him in some obviously unsnake-like behaviour.

Nonetheless, it was most annoying to have to hide underground all day. Harry shifted his coils restlessly. How much longer was she planning to wait here? She'd arrived late morning and now it was starting to get dark. Nagini had never stayed this long before. She usually went scurrying off at the



first sign of movement in the study. And what was up with Voldemort? It wasn't like him to be so quiet for such a length of time, either...

Harry felt as though his insides had suddenly frozen solid. What if — what if Nagini was coming in to guard his tank when Voldemort was away from the house? Perhaps Voldemort had told her to keep an eye on Harry, or perhaps she had simply seen an opportunity to disobey his injunction not to taunt the new snake... it hardly mattered.

Trying to escape with Nagini in the house would be dangerous. Trying to escape with Nagini in the same room, staring right at him, would be sheer suicide. He wouldn't make it to the study to search for a weapon.

He was going to die, Harry thought numbly. Either Nagini would kill him when he broke out of the tank, or Voldemort would kill him when he refused to perform the task Voldemort set him. And he would refuse — he'd rather die than help Voldemort in any way.

The next several days left Harry feeling rather as though a Dementor had moved into the tank with him. He kept to the burrow mostly; he could no longer see much point to practising being a serpent. Even lying on the sunlit rock Harry felt cold and miserable, and he'd given up eating altogether. He didn't appear to experience hunger pains when a snake and catching frogs seemed entirely too much bother.

Although Harry had faced death on a number of occasions, it always had been *imminent* death, turning up with barely any warning and pushing off again just as quickly. Never before had he had such

an endless amount of time, to wait and to worry and to dwell on what dying would actually mean.

'*To the well organised mind, death is but the next great adventure*', Dumbledore had once told him. Too bad Dumbledore hadn't mentioned anything about minds that *weren't* well organised. The only thing Harry seemed able to do with his at present was brood on all the things he'd ever wanted to do and now never would — play Quidditch for England, become an Auror, take Cho to a ball...

The next great adventure was little consolation when his first one was about to be over before it had properly begun. And how good could any adventure be, with none of his friends on it with him? He'd never see Ron and Hermione again... at least not for an extremely long time... or Sirius, or Hagrid, or anyone from Hogwarts.

Well, Cedric Diggory would be there, Harry supposed. Cedric wouldn't be doing any of that stuff either, and it was all Harry's fault. Would Cedric be very angry with him? At least Harry had returned Cedric's body to his parents. There would be no one to bring Harry's body back to — to who? The Dursleys certainly wouldn't want it, and most of the wizarding world believed Harry's godfather a mass murderer.

Harry would be rejoining own parents, which was something, but he'd be bringing them such terrible news. He'd have to tell his father that his best friend had spent twelve years in Azkaban for a crime he'd not committed and was still on the run, with one less witness to argue for his innocence. He'd have

to tell his mother that everything her sacrifice had won them had been lost again — Harry was dead and Lord Voldemort was back.

That was the worst of it, really. Harry could have just about resigned himself to dying, if only he could have been certain his friends would be all right after he was gone. But they wouldn't be, of course. A dark and difficult time was coming, and Harry wasn't going to be there to meet it alongside them.



It was this thought that finally pulled Harry out of his funk. A determination slowly grew within him — Voldemort might be going to murder him, but Harry intended to do as much damage as he could to the rising Dark side before he died.

Exactly how to go about this, however, proved an even thornier problem than escaping. Harry hadn't previously given all that much consideration to what Voldemort might be getting up to. Obviously, he had gone to number four with the intention of doing Harry in. Which was strange, now that Harry came to think of it. Hadn't Voldemort said something about not being able to get at him when he was in Privet Drive last summer?

In any case, Voldemort had evidently given up on that scheme once he found out the Dursleys were on holiday. He'd mostly remained here in his study since capturing Harry, doing whatever he did behind closed doors, receiving visits from Death Eaters. He'd been quite furious with some of them right after Harry

first arrived. There had been a spate of tortures, which thankfully had tapered off after a couple of weeks. Had Voldemort sent the Death Eaters out to search for Harry and become enraged when they didn't find him?

Apart from wanting Harry dead, it seemed likely that Voldemort would try and pick up where he'd left off prior to his downfall thirteen years ago. Taking over everywhere, Hagrid had said. Dumbledore meant to stop him before he got a good hold and thought Voldemort would attempt to enlist giants and Dementors in his cause. There'd been none of that lot coming round here, though, no one but the Death Eaters.

If Harry was going to sabotage Voldemort's plans, he'd have to start by figuring out what they were. Harry concentrated harder than ever on the outside of the tank, but with no greater success than during his initial stab at being a spy. The waiting Death Eaters were as silent and uninformative as before, and if there was a pattern to their comings and goings, Harry couldn't see it.

They sometimes carried brown paper packages, but none of these were ever unwrapped in his sight. His sense of smell could only give him a general idea of what the objects inside were made of — paper, wood, metal, cloth, glass, dead animals or plants, a number of the substances he couldn't even identify...

During his first week in the waiting room Harry had learnt to judge how well or badly the Death Eaters' interviews with Voldemort had gone. There was a particular odour to their sweat that grew more intense the longer they were made to wait. Those

who stumbled out of the study after being tortured positively reeked of it. Harry suspected that this smell was caused by fear.

This knowledge was of limited usefulness, however, as he never did become able to distinguish the scents of individual Death Eaters. He *could* pick out which of them used the same brand of soap, and two of the smaller ones had a smell which was subtly different from that of the others. Harry reckoned those ones might be women.

Voldemort also had a somewhat unusual scent. Harry thought he smelled a bit like a snake as well as looking like one. It was hard to be sure, though. Harry got brief whiffs of him whenever the door to the study opened, but Voldemort himself never came into the waiting room. In fact, aside from calling off Nagini, Voldemort had completely ignored Harry since putting him in the tank.

For the first time ever, Harry was beginning to regret this, because all the bits of information he'd managed to gather so far added up to absolutely nothing. After over a week of straining his powers of observation to their utmost, he was no closer to discovering what was afoot here than on his first day in the tank.



Then one morning as Harry was slithering along his obstacle course (he'd restarted his training programme, more out of frustration than anything else), the study door opened and Voldemort stepped out.

Harry stopped short in front of the rock.

Voldemort strode over to the tank and rapped on its front, calling out, 'Seeker... breakfast!'

He stuck his other hand through the glass, which parted like water around his arm, and deposited a fat, grey and all too familiar-looking rat directly in front of Harry.

It was Wormtail.

3.

SEEKER IN THE CELLAR

Hissing and spitting with fury, Harry reared up and struck at him. The rat gave a terrified squeal and streaked for the rose bush, scuttling behind it to cower in the corner of the tank.

Harry slithered back and forth in front of the rose bush, so enraged he could barely think. It was Wormtail — Wormtail, who had betrayed Harry's parents, framed Sirius Black and murdered Cedric Diggory with Voldemort's wand.

Harry wanted nothing more than to drag the rat from his refuge and strangle him, which would be somewhat difficult with no hands. Harry lashed his tail angrily. If he crawled after Wormtail and flushed him out into the open, could he perhaps use his coils to crush him?

'Don't like rats much, do you?' said Voldemort, sounding slightly surprised.

'I *hate* them!' spat Harry, without thinking — he'd have to come up with a good story on very short notice if Voldemort asked him why.

But Voldemort merely said with a smirk, 'Well, he'll only be in there for a day or so. See to it that he has an interesting time.'

With a swish of his robes, Voldemort returned to the study.

Once Harry's initial rage died down, he settled himself beside the rose bush to glare at the petrified rat. He could go after Wormtail with his teeth, he supposed, but to have that foul, hairy creature in his mouth — it was a sickening thought. Odd that, he'd been eating live frogs for weeks with no trouble.

Did Voldemort seriously expect him to eat a rat? Although Harry knew snakes could swallow fairly large meals, Wormtail looked a tad *too* large for him. Voldemort had said the rat was breakfast, but then he'd told Harry that Wormtail would be in the tank for the rest of the day. Had he meant tomorrow's breakfast?

As Harry replayed Voldemort's words in his mind, he suddenly realised that Voldemort had been speaking English, not Parseltongue, when he'd mentioned breakfast. The only instruction the snake had actually been given was to see that Wormtail had an interesting time...

Harry didn't go into his burrow to sleep that evening. He stuck close to the rose bush, keeping a sharp eye on Wormtail, giving a warning hiss whenever the rat so much as twitched a whisker.

When the next morning dawned, Harry glided over to the pond and had a drink. Wormtail gazed yearningly at the water, but clearly didn't dare leave the shelter of the rose bush whilst Harry was nearby.

Harry returned to his position, resisting the temptation to catch a frog. Let Wormtail believe he was in danger of being eaten, even if he wasn't.

It was late afternoon before Voldemort reached back into the tank and took the rat out.

'Dear, dear,' he said. 'It doesn't seem that Seeker eats rats after all. I must remember to Transfigure you into a frog, should I ever have cause put you in his tank again.'

He let Wormtail drop. The rat hit the floor with a smack and changed into a man. Peter Pettigrew, quite hysterical, lay grovelling and sobbing at Voldemort's feet.

'Master... forgive me... I thought... I thought...'

'Wormtail, you don't have the brains for thinking,' said Voldemort lazily. 'If *I* thought for one second that you had deliberately misled me, I would have given you to Nagini. She doesn't eat rats either... but she does eat wizards.'

Voldemort turned on his heel and swept back into his study. As soon as the door shut, Wormtail staggered to his feet and Disappeared.



Although the incident had provided Harry with a break in his routine, he was unable to deduce anything of much value from it. Wormtail had done something stupid, obviously, but Voldemort had wanted him frightened, not killed... this time. Two more useless facts were added to his growing list, as well as yet another horrible thing to worry about.

The possibility that Voldemort might turn Wor-

mtail into a frog disturbed Harry deeply. He had never thought to wonder where the frogs he ate were coming from — they simply turned up in his pond every few days. Voldemort's remark had quite spoilt his appetite. It also rekindled his fears about the task Voldemort intended him to do, a task which could only be drawing nearer.

From then onwards, Harry made certain to observe his frogs carefully for any signs of human intelligence prior to swallowing them, as carefully as he observed the Death Eaters in the waiting room for clues to what Voldemort was doing. Both activities proved to be an equal waste of effort.

It was looking less and less likely that Harry would have an opportunity strike a blow against the Dark side before he was called on to do the 'very important job' that Voldemort had for him. Which left the job itself.. Harry just hoped that it was important enough and that he could make enough of a mess of it to do some serious harm.

So Harry waited... and he waited... his nerves stretched to the breaking point by a peculiar combination of boredom and terror. In a way it was almost a relief when Voldemort came out of his study and reached into the tank once more, this time taking out Harry.



'Seeker...'

Harry was woken by the sound of a low hissing voice, calling.. calling *him*. Still half asleep, he struggled out of his burrow and crawled towards it. The room was

filled with a dim and strangely flickering light; Harry couldn't tell whether it was night or morning.

When he poked his head out of the tall grass, Harry saw that a torch had been lit in the sconce by the door. The glass front of his tank had vanished and Voldemort was leaning inside, scarlet eyes fixed on the pond.

'Wha —' said Harry blearily.

Voldemort's hand shot out like a striking snake, into the water and out again with a particularly plump and juicy-looking frog clutched in its long spidery fingers. Voldemort popped the frog into his mouth. This woke Harry right up.

'Ah, there you are,' said Voldemort when he'd finished swallowing the frog. He held out his arm, saying, 'Climb on.'

Harry climbed on, his heart racing. It appeared that the hour was now at hand for the work that Voldemort had brought him here to do.

Voldemort carried him through the door opposite the tank, which Harry had never before seen opened. Outside was a corridor. Voldemort walked along it until he came to a wooden panel carved with snakes.

'Open,' hissed Voldemort.

The panel slid aside to reveal a spiral staircase. Voldemort lit his wand and started down it. After what seemed like ages, the two of them reached the bottom. Harry found himself in a dark, windowless room with a dirt floor.

Some thirty or so chairs — one bigger and more ornate than the rest — were arranged around a circular table. On the back of each chair was a large,



square patch of a weird, silvery white, glowing material. The squares weren't entirely solid, rippling like water and sending out occasional wisps of vapour. In fact, they resembled nothing so much as firmed-up pieces of the substance in Dumbledore's Pensieve.

The torches along the walls burst into flame. Voldemort stepped over to one of the chairs and tapped the square on its back with his wand. A picture of Harry became visible in it: the photo from Rita Skeeter's horrible Triwizard Tournament article.

'Do you recognise this?' asked Voldemort.

'Er — yeah,' said Harry. 'It's — it's the boy. From — from the garden I used to live in.'

'Very good,' said Voldemort. 'His name is Harry Potter.'

Voldemort pointed his wand at the base of the nearest wall. Dirt began to bubble up from underneath it, leaving a gap between the wall and the floor. Voldemort leant down and let Harry slip off his arm. Harry saw that a small pit had been hollowed out below the wall.

'You are to wait in there,' Voldemort said. 'In a few hours, some people will come and sit at the table. When they have all arrived and the torches go out, you shall come out, find the chair with Harry Potter's picture on the back and bite the person sitting in it.'

'Er — OK,' said Harry. 'But I'm not, you know, poisonous.'

At least he didn't think he was. It felt as though it was the truth, however, and he'd been right about eating frogs.

'That's quite all right, I don't expect you to kill *him*,' replied Voldemort. 'In you get.'

Harry squeezed into the pit and lay coiled there, feeling Voldemort go up the stairs again. So this was it... what he'd been waiting for all these weeks ... his last chance to ruin Voldemort's plans as completely as possible before he died.

Yet Harry still had no more notion than ever of how this was to be accomplished. Voldemort had said Harry was to bite someone — who? — but *not* kill him — what use was that? And what did Harry's picture have to do with it?

Harry could think of no satisfactory answers to any of these questions and the coldness of the room was making him sluggish and sleepy. Time passed, his thoughts drifted... then an unpleasantly familiar sensation snapped them back into sharp focus.

Something was dragging itself across the floor. The vibrations grew stronger and stronger, then abruptly cut off. A great amber eye appeared in the narrow fissure that led to Harry's pit. It was Nagini — and now there was no glass to hold her at bay.

Harry pushed himself as far back into the pit as he could get. Nagini sniffed at the entrance, but her head was much too large to fit through it.

Harry let out a small spitting sigh of relief. Nagini couldn't get at him, and Voldemort would surely send her away when it came time for Harry to carry out his orders.

Nagini drew back her head with a disgruntled hiss. Harry relaxed, loosening his coils and sliding

forward a bit. Then —
'Yeuch!' he yelled.

Nagini's head might have been too big for the mouth of the pit, but her tongue wasn't, and she'd just licked him in the face. This was no laughing matter; Nagini's tongue was nearly the size of Harry's head.

Nagini flicked out her tongue again. Harry ducked his head amongst his coils to avoid getting hit in the face, but there wasn't enough room in the pit to move the rest of his body out of range.

'Stop that!' he shouted indignantly. 'Go away! I'll tell of you!'

Nagini gave him one last lick to show she could if she wanted to, and slithered off sniggering. Harry was left to wipe the snake spit off his face as best he could without hands.

Not long afterwards, a load of quite scared-smelling wizards began Apparating into the room. To Harry's astonishment, they all seemed to be Death Eaters. They wore the same sort of hoods and masks, at any rate, and Harry was catching whiffs of brands of soap that he remembered from in the waiting room.

When the Death Eaters had taken their seats at the table, Voldemort silently materialised in the great throne-like chair, adding his distinctive odour to the mix. He waved his wand and the torches extinguished themselves, leaving the room illuminated only by the eerie light from the shimmering squares, and his own burning red eyes.

Harry crept from the pit, made his way over to the chairs and looked at the back of nearest one. On the

square was a picture of Ginny Weasley, waving furiously. Harry came to an abrupt halt and gaped up at it. He noticed that Ginny looked rather younger than she actually was; after some study he recognised the image as being from a photo of the Weasleys taken in Egypt two summers ago and printed in the *DAILY PROPHET*. Somehow colour had been added and the rest of the family taken out.

Good though it was to see a friendly face after so many weeks alone in the tank, the fact that Voldemort had a picture of Ginny Weasley did nothing for Harry's peace of mind. He went on to the next chair, which even more bizarrely contained a picture of Vincent Crabbe — a fairly recent one as far as Harry could judge. Crabbe gave Harry a sullen look and cracked his knuckles. The chair after that had an image of Dumbledore, who smiled and winked at him.

As he made his way around the table, Harry saw pictures of Ron and his brothers from the Egypt photo, Malfoy and Goyle, Viktor Krum from the Quidditch World Cup posters, Snape and Hagrid (the latter also from a Rita Skeeter article), Pansy Parkinson smiling coyly and several other students Harry had seen at Hogwarts but didn't know the names of. He did not, however, see any pictures of himself.

Harry went round the table once more just to be sure, then stopped at the chair he'd started from. It now had an image of Bill Weasley on it. The pictures were evidently moving about, though still none of them were of Harry.

'I can't find him!' Harry hissed at Voldemort. 'And



I've been twice around the table!

'Keep searching,' replied Voldemort imperturbably. 'At your own pace, don't tire yourself. It may be a good while before he shows up.'

During their conversation, the fear smell coming off the Death Eater in the chair Harry was behind had increased steadily.

Harry continued around the table more slowly, wondering what on earth the point of this was. The Death Eaters were plainly terrified, but he couldn't understand of what. Was this some sort of spell? There didn't seem to be any magic being done — no wand-waving, no chanting of incantations, nothing.

Harry recalled the last spell of Voldemort's he had unwillingly assisted in. Wormtail had been gathering ingredients, mixing a potion... no one here was doing anything... just sitting and growing more and more frightened.

The scent of terror filled the air — except near Voldemort; he smelled much the way he had when Wormtail had lain writhing on the floor after being taken out of Harry's tank. The more petrified the Death Eaters grew, the more thoroughly Voldemort appeared to be enjoying the situation. Was that what this was about? Had Voldemort cooked up the whole thing merely to scare the Death Eaters?

If that was the case, Harry thought as he proceeded round the table yet again, it might be best to go ahead and bite whoever happened to be sitting in front of his picture when it finally turned up. He saw very little opportunity here for making a last stand.

The Death Eaters had wands inside their robes (Harry could smell the wood and polish), but even with the element of surprise he doubted he'd be able to wrest one away from its owner before the other Death Eaters got him. Even if he did, what damage could he do in the few seconds before he was killed? He'd be in the same fix he'd been in back at Tom Riddle's grave, but with no Portkey and no Priori Incantatem to save him.

But what if he bit the man and it turned out this was a real spell? Harry further reduced his speed, thinking hard. If Voldemort *was* working a spell, the most likely target was Harry himself — either to find him or to kill him would be his guess.

If the spell was a deadly curse, though, Voldemort was taking an awful risk by using Malfoy and Crabbe and Goyle's pictures. What if the snake made a mistake? That might be why the Death Eaters were so afraid, if their own children were in danger. Should Harry choose Malfoy's picture instead?

As much as he hated Malfoy, he didn't really want him dead... but killing Malfoy would rob Voldemort of his most effective servant at Hogwarts, and Ron and Hermione would definitely be a lot safer there if Malfoy was — out of the picture. Harry choked down a fit of semi-hysterical laughter.

In spite of all that, the thought of signing Malfoy's death warrant in such a manner was not a pleasant one. Harry had a sudden vision of Malfoy lying dead on the ground, staring at him accusingly with eyes as grey as Cedric's... and what if he picked Malfoy's

picture and it wasn't a spell after all? Harry shook his head angrily. He didn't know what to do, and his photo could be showing up at any minute.

Then an even nastier possibility occurred to him. Might the purpose of the spell be to kill not only Harry, but everyone whose image was displayed in the circle? Harry wouldn't put it past Voldemort to sacrifice any number of his own followers to get rid of Albus Dumbledore, if that was what the enchantment required. Harry didn't dare bite anybody, and once his picture appeared, Voldemort was going to be very keen on knowing why not.

Maybe he could claim that the wizard smelled so horrible he couldn't bring himself to do it. Harry suspected he wasn't the sort of snake that bit anyway; the idea of sinking his fangs into someone's leg held as little appeal as eating Wormtail had done.

Even when Harry had been attacking the rat, he'd instinctively kept his jaws tight shut. Could he do that to the Death Eater? Strike at him close-mouthed and tell Voldemort his teeth must've missed? It was the best excuse he could come up with. If it wasn't good enough, he'd just have to go for a wand and die fighting.

Harry carried on circling, feeling somewhat calmer now that he had a plan of action. As he passed behind Voldemort's chair for what felt like the thousandth time, Voldemort's excited smell became noticeably stronger. Several chairs further along, Harry stopped short. From a whitish silver square, his own face was staring back at him.

Harry slithered under the chair and fluttered his

tongue, drawing scent from the air. This Death Eater smelled rather less of fear than the others did — also rather less of soap. Under his robes he was wearing leather boots that, unless Harry's nose deceived him, came roughly halfway to the knee.

Harry wrapped his body round the leg of the chair, sighted a spot right above the Death Eater's boot and lunged, giving the man a good hard poke in the leg with his snout. Next instant, Harry darted beneath the table, stopping as close to the centre as he could manage. He didn't wish to be trampled if there was a panic, which he deemed all too likely considering how wound up the Death Eaters were.

As it came to pass, he needn't have bothered. The scent of fear from the poked wizard rose sharply and he gave a slight shudder, but otherwise didn't react. Nonetheless, Voldemort apparently knew something had happened — the smell he had of being extremely pleased with himself also intensified.

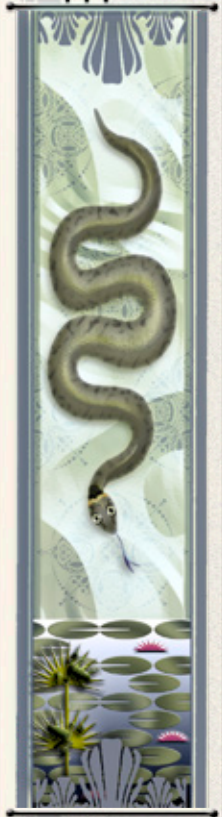
'Is it venomous?' the Death Eater asked, in an almost steady voice.

Harry jerked his head in shock. That voice, unmistakably, belonged to Professor Snape.

4.

SERPENT AT MALFOY MANOR

Voldemort laughed, a cold, high-pitched laugh that filled the room and reverberated through Harry's very bones. Harry trembled with fright; the smell of the Death Eaters' terror



grew chokingly thick.

‘Not yet,’ Voldemort said, once the last echoes of his laughter had died away. ‘That will be all for tonight. You may go.’

The scent of human fear faded slowly from the room as the Death Eaters Disapparated.

‘You can come out now,’ said Voldemort, sticking his head under the table. ‘Well done.’

Heart still thumping hard against his many ribs, Harry crawled over to Voldemort’s chair and on to his outstretched arm.

He spent the trip back to the waiting room in a daze. Not only had nothing magical happened, Voldemort didn’t even appear to realise that Harry hadn’t actually bitten anyone. Had Voldemort merely been playing a nasty joke on the Death Eaters after all? It seemed too good to be true that the job Harry had been so dreading should turn out to be no more than a stupid game.

But really, Harry thought, once he was back in his burrow, what kind of work *could* a snake that was barely two foot long and non-venomous have done for Voldemort? He had Nagini for any truly important missions... If all he wanted from Harry was a means of bullying his servants, Harry could afford to bide his time until he found a way to perpetrate some genuinely damaging piece of sabotage. Or maybe one day Voldemort would take Nagini with him on one of his errands, leaving the coast clear for Harry to slip away. In the meantime, Harry might yet overhear something useful.

With these comforting thoughts, Harry rested his head on his coils to sleep, in better spirits than he had been in at any time since being put into the tank.



After that night, life in the waiting room went on as normal. Harry had been a prisoner of Voldemort for nearly five weeks, plus the unknown number of days he’d lost track of when he’d been so miserable about dying. His initial burst of optimism notwithstanding, Harry knew that it could be months or even years before any of the opportunities he was waiting for arose.

Now that there was no mysterious task looming over him, Harry was left adrift and curiously lethargic. When Nagini came into the waiting room, he stayed put on his rock, to her obvious annoyance, even when she slithered right up to the glass and tapped lightly on it with her snout. It wasn’t that Harry had decided to finally stand up to her; he just didn’t feel like moving.

He didn’t feel like doing much of anything, really, although he did wonder a bit about Snape’s presence amongst the Death Eaters. Evidently Snape had somehow convinced Voldemort of his loyalty.

Or had he? Why had Voldemort chosen *him* to be bitten?

Perhaps it was simply because Snape had been the least scared of the Death Eaters. Harry had come to the conclusion that Voldemort, so much like a snake in other ways, had almost as keen a sense of smell. On the other hand, it could have been meant as a warn-

ing, if Voldemort didn't fully trust Snape and wanted to let him know he had his eye on him.

Harry briefly considered asking Snape to help him escape, but quickly discarded this notion. He didn't fully trust Snape either.

Even if Snape *was* on their side, if he heard a snake speaking to him with Harry's voice, he might well assume that Voldemort was testing him and report the occurrence. Worse, if Snape tried to smuggle Harry out and got caught, they'd both end up dead, and Harry would have cost Dumbledore a valuable spy.

In any case, it was doubtful that Harry would be able to recognise Snape again under his mask and hood. None of the Death Eaters ever spoke aloud in the waiting room, and Harry couldn't gamble on distinguishing Snape by smell. It would be all too easy to mistakenly pick out some other Death Eater who happened not to have washed recently.

The Death Eaters didn't seem to be calling on Voldemort as often as they used to, and only once did a visit result in one of them being tortured. This occasion served as a sharp reminder to Harry that he was still in a quite serious fix.

Even so, he didn't see what further action he could take. All the watching, thinking, planning and worrying he had done since being captured had accomplished nothing... nothing but to leave him too tired and drained to do any more. Harry couldn't even manage to be properly frightened when, one cloudy afternoon, Voldemort took him from his tank and brought him into the study.

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Voldemort sat down at his desk and stared at the door he and Harry had just come through. He seemed to be waiting for something. Harry, twined about Voldemort's arm, had a surreptitious look around the room.

The bookshelves held considerably more books than they had done the last time Harry had been in the study. Above the fireplace hung a black silk banner emblazoned with a Dark Mark in shades of green — a livid pale green skull and a poisonous bright green snake, drawn with dull dark green lines. The top of the desk was completely empty; the bronze toad, the emerald and most importantly the knife were nowhere to be seen.

So much for using it to attack Voldemort, Harry thought glumly. He wasn't at all sure that that would have done any good, though, when not even the dreaded Avada Kedavra Curse had sufficed to finish Voldemort off. If Harry did somehow contrive to stab him, he'd probably pluck the knife out of his heart, toss it aside and laugh.

Harry swung his head back to keep a watch on Voldemort. There was a strong odour about him that Harry couldn't identify — not enjoyment as when he was terrorising the Death Eaters, and not fear either. Then a smell that *was* fear wafted under the door from the waiting room — someone had Apparated.

'Enter,' said Voldemort curtly.

The door opened and a masked, hooded wizard slipped into the room. He closed the door, dropped to

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his knees and crawled towards the desk.

Voldemort stared down at the Death Eater for several endless moments, then said in a deadly quiet voice, 'I had a rather interesting conversation last Sunday with a Madam Enid Kelly.'

The apprehensive smell from the Death Eater became more pronounced. Harry gave a twitch of surprise. Last year at Hogwarts, Madam Kelly was caught trying to steal a Famous Witches and Wizards card of Harry from Professor Snape.

Harry couldn't imagine why this should interest Voldemort, however, or what it had to do with the wizard on the floor. Harry was fairly certain he wasn't Snape — not tall or thin enough, and there was a noticeably soapier smell to him.

'They nearly called off the Triwizard Tournament, you know,' Voldemort continued in the same soft, menacing tone. 'Couldn't be having foreign visitors with a mad Transfigurer on the loose. If there had been one more incident...'

Harry's forehead was throbbing dully. He considered this an extremely bad sign. In all his time in the tank, his scar hadn't so much as twinged, and that with Voldemort not only in quite close proximity, but on some occasions very angry indeed, judging by the screams Harry had heard coming from the study.

Voldemort's elongated white fingers clutched the edge of the desk so hard that his hands shook. The unidentifiable smell coming off him grew stronger, and Harry realised what it must be: pure rage. The Death Eater quailed.

'My Lord... I didn't know...' he said hoarsely.

Harry twitched again — the kneeling wizard was Lucius Malfoy.

Unnerved though he was by the odd turn the situation had taken, Harry couldn't help but feel a degree of spiteful satisfaction as he remembered Draco Malfoy's last words to him on the Hogwarts Express. He wondered whether Malfoy would be so pleased with the side he had chosen if he could see his father now, cringing before Lord Voldemort.

'Thought you'd have Gryffindor's legacy all for yourself, did you?' Voldemort snarled. 'Well, I have been going through the Potter family's background with a fine-toothed comb, and James Potter was no more the heir of Gryffindor than you are! Snape was not passing me disinformation after all — that spell Wormtail told us about was something completely different.'

His voice fell to a near whisper. 'Thirteen years, all for nothing...'

The wood of the desk began to smoke where Voldemort had dug his fingers into it. The smell of his anger was overpowering, but it was as nothing compared to the effect of his words on Harry. He mustn't react, Harry thought wildly, he mustn't give himself away. Then he was almost flung off Voldemort's arm when Voldemort stood abruptly, yanking out his wand.

'Thirteen years in which you did nothing but plunder what I left behind for your own gain!' he hissed at Mr Malfoy. '*Crucio!*'

Lucius Malfoy's agonised shrieks filled the air. Harry shivered in mingled shock at what he had just heard



and terror at the horrible noises Mr Malfoy was making. Then Voldemort lifted his wand and the screaming stopped. Mr Malfoy lay on the floor, gasping.

'You deserve far worse than that,' said Voldemort coldly, 'but this time I need you able to Apparate.'

Mr Malfoy's scent changed — there was still fear, but also something else.

'Yes, Lucius, I'm giving you one last chance,' said Voldemort. 'Do you know what this is?'

He stepped out from behind the desk and thrust the arm Harry was wrapped around into Mr Malfoy's face. Mr Malfoy and Harry both recoiled.

'It — it is a snake, my Lord,' said Mr Malfoy, sounding both bewildered and petrified.

'Yes,' said Voldemort. 'A snake. A common, harmless grass snake. A common, harmless grass snake that can recognise Harry Potter.'

He went back to the desk, opened a drawer, took out a small, roughly hewn wooden box and raised its lid. Inside was a ring, its band a pair of entwined copper serpents. A jewel that resembled a golden moonstone was balanced between their heads.

'And do you know what *this* is?' Voldemort asked, holding the box so Mr Malfoy could see its contents.

'An Aitvaras Eye!' breathed Mr Malfoy in sudden comprehension. Harry was left just as perplexed as before.

'Your son will be returning to Hogwarts tomorrow —' said Voldemort.

Another jolt of surprise went through Harry. He hadn't realised term would be starting so soon.

'— wearing an old family heirloom and bringing a new animal with him,' Voldemort went on. 'Young Draco has Care of Magical Creatures with Harry Potter. Before his first lesson, he will work the Aitvaras transformation on Seeker — it is a fairly simple spell. I am given to understand that the class is now being taught by that brainless, monster-loving oaf Rubeus Hagrid...'

Voldemort paused for a brief sneer, then said, 'There have been questions raised at the highest levels of the Ministry of Magic concerning Albus Dumbledore's fitness to stay on as headmaster of Hogwarts... questions concerning his disastrous staff appointments, his mishandling of disruptive pupils, his mad stories about the Dark Lord having returned...'

A nasty grin played about Voldemort's lipless mouth. 'When Harry Potter is *tragically* bitten and killed by one of Dumbledore's tame giant's dangerous pets, I believe these questions will be answered once and for all.'

Voldemort gave a final smirk and began hissing to Harry in Parseltongue. 'I am sending you away with this man. His son will bring you to Harry Potter. You are to bite him as you did the wizard in the cellar. After that, you will make your way back to me. Do you understand?'

'I'm to bite Harry Potter and come back to you,' repeated Harry mechanically. He neither knew nor cared how Voldemort expected him to find this place again. He was going back to Hogwarts!

'I have given Seeker his instructions,' Voldemort



told Mr Malfoy. 'He has proven himself most capable of following orders promptly and reliably. Nonetheless, he will need careful looking after. He is skittish and easily frightened — even with me, and snakes usually aren't. I suspect he may have been struck on the head at some point — he has suffered episodes of confusion and disorientation, and that groove between his eyes isn't natural.'

Voldemort ran a finger down Harry's head, starting right where his scar would have been, had Harry been human. Harry gave an involuntary shudder.

'I am holding you personally responsible for the success of this plan, Lucius.' Voldemort's voice grew arctically cold. 'Take better care of my Aitvaras than you did of my Basilisk.'

Voldemort conjured up a cage made of green, lacquered wood and had Harry slither into it. He handed the cage and the box with the ring to Mr Malfoy, who crawled backwards on his knees to the door before standing up again.

Voldemort's study faded from Harry's view, replaced by a bedroom as large as the entire first storey of the Dursleys' house. The velvet curtains on the windows and the bed (which was big enough for Hagrid to have slept in comfortably) were a shade of red so dark as to be nearly black, with silver-grey ties and trim. A rug the same colour with a pattern of silvery lines along the borders covered most of the floor.

Mr Malfoy set Harry's cage down very gently on a marble-topped bedside table. He pulled off his mask and cloak, bundled them up and shoved the lot under the bed

whilst muttering an incantation. Harry was reminded of the loose floorboard under his own bed in Privet Drive.

Mr Malfoy staggered through a door into what Harry presumed was a bathroom. Retching noises and the smell of vomit soon reached Harry's cage.

When Mr Malfoy came out, he had a small crystal phial of milky white potion in his hand. Sitting rather shakily on the edge of the bed, he tossed it down in one gulp, then curled up on top of the bedspread still fully dressed. After a while, his breathing slowed and his fearful scent diminished. He appeared to have fallen asleep.

Harry was left to his own astounded thoughts. He was scarcely able to believe his luck. Everything he had struggled so futilely to achieve all those weeks in the tank had been delivered to him on a silver platter: escape, a means of frustrating Voldemort's plans, even information of a sort to take back with him.

Voldemort himself was the heir of Slytherin; apparently Slytherin's old rival Gryffindor also had an heir. Harry couldn't see how knowing that James Potter *wasn't* the heir of Gryffindor would be of much use to Dumbledore, though. If only Voldemort had said who was... He'd mentioned something about a spell...

Then the full implications of what Harry had overheard in Voldemort's study hit him like a rogue Bludger. Voldemort had murdered Harry's father because he thought James Potter was the heir of Gryffindor. Wormtail had told him so, Wormtail and Snape... except it wasn't true. Harry's parents had died for no reason.

A corrosive mixture of bitter rage and aching sorrow surged through Harry. *Thirteen years, all for*



nothing... Voldemort had been restored to his body, but no magic could bring back James and Lily Potter. Wormtail had betrayed them, not once but twice.

Harry raised his head and struck at his own coils in thwarted fury. He should have killed Wormtail when he had the chance. He should have bit him till he bled to death; he should have dragged him to the pond and drowned him. He should have eaten him if he had to. And Snape, whom Dumbledore trusted —

Mr Malfoy rolled over and murmured in his sleep.

Harry checked himself in mid-strike. If Lucius Malfoy woke and thought the snake was having some sort of fit, he might return it to Voldemort for examination. Harry dared not let that happen. Now more than ever, he had to get back to Hogwarts — Dumbledore needed to be warned about Snape.

Harry forced himself to lie still, forced himself to take deep, steady breaths. He mustn't dwell on his parents' deaths right now. He had to put the whole thing from his mind. He had to think of something else... think of Hogwarts, of seeing Ron and Hermione, of playing Quidditch, of Cho Chang...

By the time Mr Malfoy finally did wake up, Harry had — almost — got himself calm again.

5.

SERPENT ON THE HOGWARTS EXPRESS

Mr Malfoy took Harry's cage down two flights of stairs to a large, airy drawing room. Putting the cage on an end table, he called out

sharply, 'Bandy!'

A house-elf with ears so long they flopped over and a tiny round button of a nose appeared with a crack. Mr Malfoy drew back his foot and kicked the unfortunate creature like a football, sending it the bouncing across the room squealing with pain.

Lucius Malfoy was bearing down upon the elf to give it another kick when Harry's outraged hiss halted him in his tracks — apparently he remembered what Voldemort had said about the snake being easily upset.

'Silence this instant!' spat Mr Malfoy. 'Else I'll give you something to squeal about!'

The house-elf clapped its long fingers over its mouth, its goggling eyes going wider still with terror.

'Now go and tell Draco I want to see him in here at once,' Mr Malfoy ordered.

The elf vanished, and a few minutes later Draco Malfoy came swaggering into the room. When his father informed him of the task the Dark Lord had assigned him, Malfoy's pale face lit up with glee and he gave off an odour unpleasantly reminiscent of Voldemort's when he was torturing someone. Using a ruby ring from his own finger, Mr Malfoy taught Draco a simple charm to pop out the stone and then a slightly more complex one which, combined with the jewel from the ring Voldemort had given to him, would evidently turn Harry into an Aitvaras, whatever that was.

Once Malfoy had mastered the wand movements of the spell to his father's satisfaction, Lucius had him very carefully take Harry out of the cage to practise



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on. Harry was sorely tempted to get his own back on both of them by being as uncooperative as possible, but didn't dare risk jeopardising his return trip to Hogwarts. So he put up no resistance when Malfoy laid him on the table, held him rather tightly at the neck and balanced the ruby on top of his head.

Despite Harry's good behaviour, Mr Malfoy's frightened smell returned in full measure the second that his son touched the snake. When Draco (unaccustomed to working charms whilst bent over an end table using his other hand to pin down a serpent) had some initial difficulty managing the spell, his father grew quite snappish and short with him. This in turn caused Malfoy to become sullen and ill-tempered and even less able to do the thing properly.

It took him twice as long it normally would have to get the hang of the Aitvaras Charm, and he gave Harry several painful squeezes in the process. Harry had to work extremely hard to stop himself hissing with irritation, which would have only made Mr Malfoy more nervy yet and drawn the proceedings out that much longer. Mr Malfoy made Draco keep at it until he had cast the spell correctly seven times in a row. Even though the real Aitvaras Eye wasn't being used, a nasty shiver went down Harry's spine each instance the charm was successfully completed.

'...and try to get it right the first time when you do it at Hogwarts,' Mr Malfoy said coldly, as Draco left the room still looking thoroughly put out.



Lucius Malfoy seemed to take very seriously Voldemort's admonition to take special care with the snake. He didn't let Harry's cage out of his sight for the rest of the day and placed it in close reach on the bedside table that night. This resulted in some coolness towards him on the part of his wife Narcissa, who felt that the presence of such a drab and unprepossessing creature subtracted markedly from the bedroom's decor. To her even greater displeasure, Mr Malfoy insisted on bringing Harry down to breakfast with him the next morning, keeping the cage on the table right beside his plate.

When Draco arrived in the breakfast room, he was wearing his Hogwarts robes. Pinned to his chest was a bright silver badge with the letter *P* on it. Harry gazed at the badge resentfully, but it was only to be expected that Malfoy would be made a prefect — he was Snape's favourite student amongst the Slytherins.

But thinking of Snape brought on too many other unhappy thoughts. To distract himself, Harry turned his attention to the Malfoys' sideboard, which was laden with more hot dishes than he had seen on the tables at most Hogwarts feasts: bacon, sausages, ham and smoked fish; eggs cooked five different ways; porridge and newly-baked rolls with marmalade, honey, cream, butter and seven kinds of jam; fried mushrooms and tomatoes and an enormous bowl of fruit, as well as a number of highly peculiar-looking foods Harry couldn't even put a name to.

Mrs Malfoy was shooting affronted looks at him between bites of what appeared to be a thick slice of

clear jelly on toast. When Harry fluttered his tongue at her, attempting to identify the curious substance by scent, she pushed her breakfast away half-eaten, a revolted expression on her face.

Harry considered this something of a waste. The clear jelly had an enticing odour of prawns to it and was practically the only food on the table he could have brought himself to eat as a snake. To varying degrees the rest of the dishes smelled burnt, greasy, over-salted or rotten. It was weird for Harry to remember how good they had all tasted to him when he was human.

After breakfast, Draco and his parents went out the manor together. Parked near the massive oak front door was a dark red, silver-trimmed Aston Martin being driven by a man who looked a lot like Malfoy's friend Goyle. The resemblance was easy to spot, as Goyle himself sat in the front seat beside the driver. Malfoy's other friend Crabbe was sitting in the back.

Mrs Malfoy hugged and kissed her son and Mr Malfoy handed him Harry's cage. Draco climbed into the back seat with Crabbe and the car started off down the long and winding drive.

Crabbe and Goyle immediately leant over to get a better view of Harry. Malfoy told them impressively but vaguely that he had been entrusted with the snake as part of a special mission for the Dark Lord. He had hardly finished speaking when a low rumble went through the car. Seconds later, it pulled to a halt.

Harry was bewildered. They hadn't been driving for five minutes; surely Malfoy Manor couldn't be that close to King's Cross station? Had the car broken

down? But no — when the doors opened, they were inside platform nine and three-quarters.

Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle scrambled out of the car and made their way towards the Hogwarts Express. Malfoy brought Harry's cage with him, but neither he nor his two cronies were carrying any other luggage. When they stepped into a compartment near the front of the train, however, three trunks were waiting for them in the luggage racks.

Harry thought gloomily of his own trunk, left behind at Mrs Figg's so many weeks ago. No doubt she'd given it to the Dursleys when they returned from Majorca. He didn't much relish the prospect of trying to get it back from them, not after what Voldemort had done to the house and garden. A vision of Uncle Vernon's large, purple face, screwed up with wrath, floated before Harry's eyes. He shuddered.

Could an entire trunk be sent by owl post? Harry devoutly hoped that he wouldn't have to go back to Privet Drive and fetch his things personally. Even the ten months of the school year felt like far too short a time before having to face his relatives again. Maybe he could ask Dumbledore to let him stay at Hogwarts next summer holidays...

When Malfoy and his friends had settled into their seats, the three of them began discussing how immensely improved Hogwarts would be once Voldemort took over. Or rather Malfoy began holding forth on the subject whilst Crabbe and Goyle listened, giving the occasional grunt or snigger in response.

'...at least we won't be having to put up with

Dumbledore for much longer... or that ugly great moron Hagrid, or *famous* Harry Potter. And once the Dark Lord's properly back in power, all the Mudbloods'll be thrown out, and Muggle-lovers like the Weasleys...'

Malfoy's thin mouth curved into a malevolent smirk.

'Well, maybe we'll keep Granger around. We can use that bushy head of hers to scrub the toilets.'

Crabbe and Goyle chuckled stupidly. Harry tensed his coils in fury.

'Professor Snape will be able teach us the Dark Arts,' Malfoy went on. 'He knows some really good curses, but he says he won't show them to me until I'm older.'

A petulant note crept into Malfoy's voice.

'And Father's just as bad... Once I've carried out the job the Dark Lord gave me, perhaps he'll stop treating me like a child...'

With a small spluttering noise, Harry let out the breath he'd been holding. The task Voldemort wished Malfoy to perform was an impossible one, though neither of them realised it. Considering what Harry had seen of how Voldemort customarily treated failure on the part his supporters, Malfoy would be lucky if all the Dark Lord did to him was use his hair to clean toilets.

As for Snape, he wasn't going to be teaching anything at Hogwarts after Harry told Dumbledore what he'd done. At the memory of the Potions master's treachery, Harry's insides churned with anger once more. He had half a mind to let Malfoy go ahead and transform him into a poisonous snake, so he could bite Snape.

The conversation then turned to Slytherin's

Quidditch prospects for the upcoming year. Malfoy seemed to take it as given that he'd be made captain now that Marcus Flint had left Hogwarts, and promised to install Crabbe and Goyle as Beaters. A little later Pansy Parkinson came into the compartment to simper at Malfoy and admire his prefect badge.

When the lunch trolley arrived, Malfoy bought huge quantities of sweets and pasties, nearly all of which were pigged by Crabbe and Goyle. After his fourth stack of cauldron cakes, Goyle left off stuffing himself long enough to try feeding Harry a Jelly Slug. Its smell was indescribably repulsive to Harry now that he was a snake — he'd've rather eaten a real slug as a human being. Harry buried his face amongst his coils to block out the stench. Goyle shrugged and ate the Jelly Slug himself.

In the afternoon Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle went off to visit friends in other compartments. As soon as the vibrations of their footsteps faded away, Harry had a go at the door of his cage. It was a simple up-and-down sliding door, and no one had troubled to fasten it shut. By pressing his nose firmly against the horizontal bar at the bottom and raising his head, Harry was able to lift it sufficiently to wriggle underneath.

He could have got out of the cage at that point, but chose not to. If he, Harry, suddenly turned up on the Hogwarts Express, he'd have a lot of explaining to do, which he didn't really feel up to at present. If he reappeared in Malfoy's compartment at the same time that Malfoy's snake vanished, someone might put two and two together. Being a secret shape-shifter was

the only thing that had saved Harry from Voldemort — he wasn't eager to give that secret away.

If he waited until the other students were at the feast, then sneaked off and lay low until morning, it ought to put enough time between the snake's disappearance and Harry's arrival to confuse matters a bit. Thus Harry lay quietly in his cage as the Hogwarts Express continued on its journey north.

The door of the compartment had been left wide open, allowing him to eavesdrop on what people were saying in the corridor. The main topic of discussion was Harry himself. By now the whole train knew he wasn't aboard, and mad stories were flying around as to why.

News of what had happened to the Dursleys' house had spread like wildfire, although the damage was greatly exaggerated. Rumours ranged from number four being completely flattened to the entire street having been left a smoking ruin. The Dursleys themselves were universally presumed dead, and so, for some reason, was Rita Skeeter. Harry's fate was the subject of some debate: murdered, in hiding or on the run from Magical Law Enforcement, being himself responsible for the carnage.

Other suspects included Voldemort, Sirius Black, students from Durmstrang or Beauxbatons (to pay Harry back for winning the Triwizard Tournament), members of the Diggory family or Hufflepuff house (in revenge for Harry's supposed murder of Cedric) and, most disquietingly, Albus Dumbledore having faked the whole thing to convince the Ministry of

Magic that Voldemort truly had returned.

Certainly Malfoy professed to believe the latter theory.

'Of course I don't think he's dead,' he was snapping at Crabbe as they re-entered the compartment. 'Father says Dumbledore's hidden him somewhere and is staying quiet about it to put the pressure on the Ministry. Just you wait, he'll be back at the Gryffindor table by the time the Sorting starts.'

Harry spent the rest of the trip in a very subdued frame of mind. When he was trapped in Voldemort's hideout, he hadn't given a second thought to what might be going on in the outside world — he'd had too many other things to worry about. The snatches of talk he'd overheard had served as a nasty reminder of what he was escaping *to*: a school that suspected he was dangerous and disturbed and had killed Cedric Diggory, and a Ministry of Magic that refused to accept that Voldemort was back and was at odds with the one man who stood some chance of stopping him. Worse, it looked as though Harry's disappearance over the summer had only added fuel to the fire...

Once the train arrived at Hogsmeade station and all the students disembarked, Harry wasted no time in squirming under the cage door. He glided down the carriage, peering into open compartments. If he could conceal himself in a Gryffindor's luggage, he'd be taken straight to Gryffindor Tower. Unfortunately, it hadn't occurred to any of his fellow Gryffindors to write their house name on their trunks.

Just as Harry was starting to panic, he heard familiar loud spitting sounds issuing forth from of one the

doors he had just passed. Doubling back, he saw that the source of the noises was a small wickerwork basket lying on the floor. On top of a nearby seat was a cage with a maroon velvet cover that suspiciously resembled Ron's old dress robes. The instant Harry stuck his head into the compartment, Pigwidgeon added his mad twitters to Crookshanks' angry hissing.

'Crookshanks, Pig!' gasped Harry in relief. 'It's all right, it's me, Harry!'

The spitting from the basket grew even louder and it began to rock from side to side. Harry hastily changed back into himself, slid the compartment door shut, crouched down and unfastened the straps of the basket. Crookshanks emerged, purring as Harry patted him.

'Crookshanks, I need to hide,' Harry whispered urgently. 'I'm going to have to turn into a snake. Don't — don't try and eat me or anything, OK?'

Crookshanks purred harder than ever. Harry transformed, ready to become human again at any moment should Crookshanks — now the size of an elephant from his perspective — attack. But Crookshanks didn't attack; instead he placed his front paws on the rim of the basket and tipped it onto its side. Standing away from basket's mouth, Crookshanks fixed his great yellow eyes unblinkingly on Harry.

Harry, realising what Crookshanks wanted, slithered inside. Crookshanks pulled the basket upright, leapt in and caught his claws on the lid, drawing it shut. He prodded Harry to the rear of the basket and curled himself up in the front, still purring softly.


It was dark inside the basket and naturally smelled quite strongly of cat, but Harry didn't mind — soon he'd be safe in Gryffindor Tower. Outside, Pigwidgeon was finally beginning to calm down. Harry made a mental note to ask Ron to send him to fetch Hedwig first thing in the morning. She'd been off carrying a letter to The Burrow at the time Harry was captured by Voldemort, which had been of some comfort to Harry when he was languishing in the tank. Whilst the Dursleys' deep fear of magic had likely kept them from damaging his trunk, if Mrs Figg had turned Hedwig over to them they'd've probably had her stuffed and mounted.

Loud cracking noises and the shrill voices of house-elves suddenly filled the compartment. Tiny footsteps pattered over to the basket, then stopped. The basket jerked slightly and a sound like two firecrackers going off one after the other rent the air.

Harry heard several more distant cracks and felt a number of muffled thuds. After some time had passed since the last one, Crookshanks pushed open the lid of the basket and had a look around. Apparently seeing nothing amiss, he hopped out and pulled the basket over so Harry could crawl out.

Harry found himself inside a circular room which apart from small differences in the furnishings was indistinguishable from his own dormitory. He wormed his way beneath the red velvet hangings of the nearest four-poster and coiled up in the corner by the bedside table to wait for daybreak.

It was quite cold under the bed, but there wasn't



anywhere else in the room for him to hide. Harry couldn't afford to be discovered inside the castle that night, either as a serpent or as himself. Malfoy had to believe that his snake — Harry gave a huge yawn — that his snake had disappeared off the Hogwarts Express into thin air. Then tomorrow... when Harry showed up... no one would... no one would...

Harry was joggled awake by the reverberation of many feet pounding the floor. There seemed to be an enormously large number of Death Eaters about. Odd, that — Voldemort had never previously summoned more than one at a time to attend him in his study. Harry's tongue flickered weakly. The Death Eaters didn't smell as scared as they usually did, and, strangest of all, they were all women.

'Hermione?' said Lavender Brown.

'I'm all right, Lavender,' said Hermione.

She didn't sound all right to Harry.

'We don't *know* he's dead, you heard Dumbledore,' said Parvati Patil, in what was clearly meant to be a bracing tone. 'He may still turn up.'

That was rather decent of her, thought Harry muzzily. Given how Parvati and Lavender hero-worshipped Madam Trelawney, who was constantly predicting Harry's death, there was no way the pair of them could truly believe he hadn't been killed.

The vibrations in the floor died away as the fifth year girls settled quickly down to sleep. Harry was dimly aware of Hermione opening and closing her trunk, walking around a bit, then climbing into bed. A short while after the lamps went out, Harry heard

a muffled sobbing from directly above him.

He should say something to Hermione, he should let her know he was still alive. Harry struggled to uncoil himself, but it felt as though his body had turned to lead...

He must have drifted off again, because the next thing he registered was a paw on the back of his neck and the smell of cat on his tongue.

'Crrrr —' Harry tried to say the cat's name, but his voice was as frozen as the rest of him.

Crookshanks sniffed at Harry, then lay down beside him, purring worriedly. Slowly, the heat from the cat's body began to thaw Harry out. Once he was able to move a little, Harry heaved himself on top of Crookshanks to bask. Luckily Crookshanks made no objection to this.

Crookshanks was as warm as Harry's rock and considerably softer, and within minutes Harry was feeling more awake and alert than he had done all day. Everyone else appeared to be sleeping, though; the room was silent and utterly still. If Harry tried to wake Hermione, he'd run a serious risk of having the whole dormitory find out he was there. He had no reason to disturb her rest, anyway. She'd be seeing him as soon as she —

It abruptly dawned on Harry that the absolute last place he wanted to make his reappearance at Hogwarts was in a girls' dormitory under Hermione's bed. He'd have to sneak over to the boy's side, once he was certain that everyone in Gryffindor Tower had gone to sleep.

Harry poked his head beneath the curtains and

looked up at the alarm clock on Hermione's bedside table. It was nearly midnight — better to hold off a couple of hours before making his move. Harry crawled back to drape his coils over Crookshanks once more. This time Crookshanks raised his head and gave Harry a grumpy look.

'Just for a bit longer,' said Harry in his lowest voice.

He was afraid he might freeze up again if he strayed too far from the cat's warmth. It was much colder at Hogwarts than it had been in his tank. Being cold-blooded, Harry had always grown sleepier and slower of evening, but never to the point of not being able to wake up properly.

When it was two o'clock, Harry slithered out from under the bed, muttering gratefully to Crookshanks as he left, 'Next time we have kippers for breakfast, you can have all of mine.'

He transformed himself, quietly opened the door and crept down the girls' staircase, across the dark common room, up the boys' staircase and into the fifth year dormitory at the very top. Harry had intended to spend the night under Ron's bed as a snake, perhaps taking a shirt from Ron's trunk with him so he wouldn't have to lie on the icy stone floor. When he stepped into the room, however, he saw that his own four-poster was still in its place.

It had been weeks since Harry had slept in a proper bed. Surely no one would be checking in it until morning? Harry kicked off his trainers, crawled beneath the blankets, drew the hangings and was asleep the moment his head hit the pillow.

THE BOY WHO RETURNED

Harry was woken next morning by the thumpings and murmurings of his fellow fifth-years getting dressed. He sat up, yawned and, without really thinking about it, twitched back the hangings of his four-poster. At the foot of the bed beside Harry's, Ron Weasley was bending over his trunk.

'Ron!' said Harry happily.

Ron straightened up slowly, with an almost comical expression of absolute astonishment. He stood rooted to the spot, goggling at Harry. His face had gone totally white, freckles standing out in stark relief. He looked as though he was about to faint.

'Ron?' said Harry, now a bit concerned.

Ron abruptly found his voice.


'I DON'T BELIEVE IT!' he yelled. 'WE THOUGHT YOU WERE DEAD! WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN?'

'Ron, it was Voldemort, he came to my house,' said Harry. 'I —'

He broke off. Seamus, Dean and Neville had gathered in the centre of the circular dormitory to gape at him, Dean and Seamus with great interest, Neville seeming quite terrified. Harry couldn't tell Ron he'd transformed into a serpent while they were listening in.

'We thought you were *dead*,' Ron repeated, staring at Harry like a Muggle seeing a ghost.

'I'm sorry,' said Harry, as he climbed out of bed. 'I would've let you know if I could, but I was — I didn't — I had to stay hidden.'



‘But where *were* you?’ demanded Ron. ‘The Ministry looked everywhere... *Dumbledore* looked everywhere...’

Harry stepped close to Ron and muttered, ‘I’ll tell you later in private, I can’t explain in front of them.’ In a more normal tone he said, ‘We need to go and see Hermione, she was crying last night.’

Ron eyed Harry rather strangely, but accompanied him towards the door. As they approached Neville Longbottom, Harry noticed a shiny silver badge with a ‘P’ on it, pinned to his robes slightly askew.

‘All right, Neville, you’re a prefect,’ said Harry brightly.

Neville jumped and gave a tiny squeak.

‘What’s the new password, then?’


Neville gazed at Harry in utter bewilderment.

‘It’s “constant vigilance”,’ said Ron, ‘Harry, how —?’

He fell silent as Harry cast him a warning look. They continued out the room and down the spiral staircase, Seamus, Dean and Neville trailing behind them. Boys from other years, having heard Ron’s shouting, were sticking their heads out of their dormitories, mouths falling open in shock when they spotted Harry.

A wave of whispers preceded him and Ron into the common room, which was nearly deserted: most people were either still upstairs or had already gone to breakfast. All those present, however, turned to stare at Harry. With a small scream, Gryffindor Chaser Katie Bell leapt to her feet and shot out the portrait hole.

‘Katie?’ Harry called after her, but was then distracted by a shrill voice just above him.



‘Harry, Harry, Harry!’ cried Colin Creevey, wriggling his way past a pair of seventh-years, both of whom were twice his size. ‘I knew you were still alive!’

He joined Harry and Ron at the foot of the stairs, hopping up and down with excitement.

‘That — that’s good, Colin,’ said Harry weakly.

Harry and Ron headed for the girls’ staircase. Before they could set off up it, Hermione came flying down in her dressing gown to meet them, Ginny Weasley hard on her heels. Hermione threw herself on Harry’s neck and dissolved into sobs.

‘Oh, Harry, I thought you were dead!’

Harry patted Hermione awkwardly on the back. He could hear that Ginny had also started to cry, and Ron saying uncomfortably, ‘Oh, buck up, Ginny, he’s all right.’

Hermione finally lifted her head from Harry’s shoulder.

‘What happened to you?’ she said. ‘We were so worried...’

‘It was V—’ Harry began, but before he was able to finish, Ron had wheeled around and clamped his hand over Harry’s mouth.

‘It was You-Know-Who!’ said Ron furiously. ‘Showed up at his house! And no wonder, eh? How many times —’ he shook Harry for emphasis, ‘— have I warned you, don’t — say — his name?’

Harry tried to wrench himself free, with no success whatsoever. Ron had always been bigger than him, and had got even more so over the summer. The top of Harry’s head was inches below Ron’s shoulder. With Hermione directly in front of him, he didn’t

have the space to put up a proper struggle.

‘How on earth did you get away?’ said Hermione. ‘And where have you been all this time?’

Ron removed his hand from Harry’s mouth. Harry now rather wished he hadn’t. He had a sinking feeling that he was going to be asked this quite a lot, and it was the one question he didn’t dare answer. The entire common room, which had been quickly filling up since Harry’s arrival, was regarding him with intense curiosity.

‘I can’t tell you, not with all these people about,’ Harry said in a barely audible voice. ‘After classes... we can meet behind the mirror on the fourth floor...’

Hermione nodded slowly, looking very serious.

‘Is Hedwig OK?’ said Harry to Ron. ‘She did go back to The Burrow, didn’t she, when she couldn’t find me in Privet Drive?’

‘Yeah, Dumbledore’s got her,’ said Ron. ‘He wanted to use her to search for you, but it didn’t work.’

‘Harry!’ came a squeal from the portrait hole. It was Angelina Johnson, the other Gryffindor Chaser. (The third Chaser, Alicia Spinnet, was to be gone for two terms on an exchange trip to Uzbekistan.) Angelina scrambled into the room and swooped down upon Harry. Before she could say anything (such as ‘I thought you were dead’ or ‘Where have you been?’), Katie Bell clambered in behind her — immediately followed by Professor McGonagall.

Professor McGonagall was completely out of breath. Strands of hair were escaping her bun and there was the most extraordinary expression of mingled outrage and relief on her face. Harry was suddenly very

conscious of having turned up at Hogwarts with no robes, no books, no supplies and no homework, his Muggle clothing filthy and grass-stained from trying to crawl across the Dursleys’ lawn so many weeks ago. Professor McGonagall leant against the wall, gasping for air, her eyes fixed on Harry. Then —

‘HARRY POTTER, *WHERE* HAVE YOU BEEN?’ she shrieked.

Harry’s heart plummeted. ‘I — I’ve been hiding. From — from Vol—’

Once again, Ron seized hold of Harry and pressed a hand to his mouth.

‘*Professor, make him stop saying the name!*’ he hissed at Professor McGonagall.

Professor McGonagall took several more deep breaths, then said, ‘Weasleys, let him go. Potter, come with me, we must speak with the Headmaster.’

She spun on her heel.

‘Er — Professor?’ said Harry. ‘My shoes are up in the dormitory...’

Professor McGonagall pulled out her wand, conjured Harry’s trainers directly onto his feet and vanished through the portrait hole without another word. Harry, with one last look back at Ron and Hermione, went after her. They proceeded down the corridor, Professor McGonagall striding along so rapidly that she barely managed to avoid ploughing into Fred and George Weasley as they jogged up.

‘Harry!’ the twins shouted in delight.

‘Where have you been?’ demanded Fred. ‘Mum’s been worried sick!’

‘We didn’t know if you were dead or alive!’ said George indignantly. ‘Why didn’t you contact us?’

‘I —’ said Harry.

‘Back to the common room, you two,’ Professor McGonagall said sternly. ‘Harry can talk to you once he’s seen the Headmaster. Harry, come along.’

She and Harry continued on their way to Dumbledore’s office. They passed other students in the corridors, all of whom stopped to gawp at Harry, but — warned off by Professor McGonagall’s fierce glower — didn’t attempt to speak with him.

Harry’s apprehension rose another notch with each step he took. There was nothing else for it: he was going to have to admit to Dumbledore that he could turn into a snake. Would Dumbledore believe that Harry hadn’t set out to become an illegal Animagus? Particularly as Harry’s father had done exactly that... More importantly, would Dumbledore believe Harry about Snape? Harry didn’t think he could bear sitting in Potions lessons week after week, knowing that Snape was responsible for his parents’ murders...

Harry and Professor McGonagall reached the stone gargoyle, which sprang nimbly aside when McGonagall barked out the password (‘Canary Creams!’). She led Harry up the moving stairs and through the oak door at the top. Dumbledore was at his desk.

‘Minerva,’ he said, beaming, ‘you’ve found him.’

Dumbledore’s eyes had lit up when he caught sight of Harry, but he still looked older and more tired than Harry had ever seen him. His face was thinner and more deeply lined; even his silvery hair

seemed noticeably less bright. Harry was shocked by the changes in his appearance. Had Dumbledore been that upset by Harry’s having gone missing? No wonder Professor McGonagall was so angry with him. Or — had something else happened? Harry never *had* worked out what Voldemort and the Death Eaters had been up to that summer...

‘Katie Bell found him,’ said Professor McGonagall grimly. ‘She came tearing into the Great Hall in the middle of breakfast, screaming at the top of her lungs to Miss Johnson that Harry Potter was in the common room.’

Professor McGonagall gave Harry a sharp sideways glance.

‘He says he was hiding from — from You-Know-Who. It’ll be all over the school by the time classes start, or some mad story will be.’ Professor McGonagall was sounding more agitated with every word. ‘Dumbledore, there’s no way the Minister will believe you had nothing to do with this now!’

Dumbledore sighed. ‘You’ll have to try and control the rumours as best you can. An official announcement should be made as soon as possible. Most of the students will not yet have finished breakfast...’

Professor McGonagall nodded and left. Harry looked after her in deep dismay. In spite of all the talk on the Hogwarts Express, he had never seriously thought that the Ministry of Magic might actually blame Dumbledore for his disappearance.

‘Harry, sit down,’ said Dumbledore in a concerned tone. ‘What happened to you?’

Harry seated himself nervously in one of the chairs in front of Dumbledore's desk.

'Voldemort — he was at the Dursleys' house. I'm sorry, I — I couldn't get away from him any sooner...'

Harry trailed off. He could only too well imagine how Cornelius Fudge was going to react to his story. If Fudge had mistrusted Harry simply because he could *talk* to snakes, how much more suspicious would he become when he learnt Harry could change into one? Never mind being thrown out of Hogwarts, Harry'd be lucky not to be packed off to Azkaban. Yet keeping quiet wasn't an option. He couldn't let Fudge go on thinking that Dumbledore —

'*What did he do to you?*' said Dumbledore, cold fury in his voice.

Harry blinked. It took him a second to realise that Dumbledore was talking about Voldemort.

'Nothing, he didn't know it was me,' Harry said. He drew a steadying breath. 'D'you remember last year, when Malfoy turned me into a snake?'

'And you found that from then on you were able to transform yourself at will?' said Dumbledore. 'Yes, Miss Granger told me. Is that how you hid from Voldemort?'

Harry nodded.

'But why did you not return to Mrs Figg's once Voldemort was gone?'

'Because Voldemort had taken me with him,' said Harry. 'He thought I was a real snake. I couldn't escape, Voldemort was always around — well, nearly always, and whenever he went off, Nagini'd come and watch

me. It was only after he gave me to Mr Malfoy —'

Harry abruptly remembered what he'd overheard in Voldemort's study.

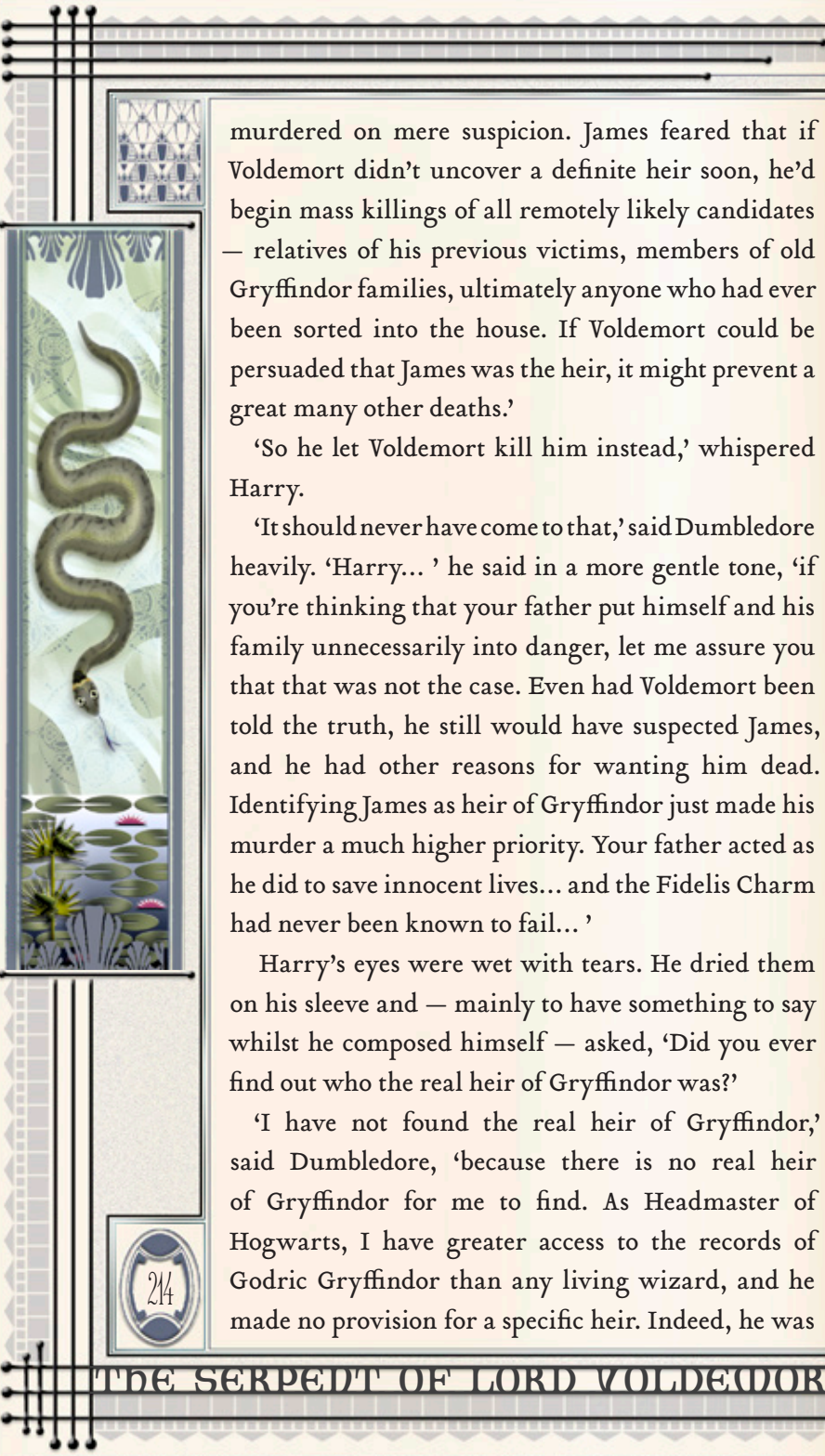
'Voldemort said he killed my father because he was the heir of Gryffindor! Only he wasn't, but Wormtail told Voldemort that he was — Wormtail and *Snape!*' Harry positively spat the Potions master's name.

A grave expression passed over Dumbledore's face. 'Yes,' he said sombrely, 'Professor Snape told Voldemort that your father was heir of Gryffindor. But he did so at your father's insistence, and very much against his own wishes in the matter.'

'He — my father — *what?*' said Harry.

'Your father had helped me perform a certain spell,' Dumbledore went on. 'Voldemort received a somewhat distorted account of this — from Wormtail I now realise — and came to believe that it meant James was the heir of Gryffindor. He confronted Professor Snape, who had also assisted in the casting, with his knowledge. Professor Snape did his best to put Voldemort off and then came straight to me. He wanted to inform Voldemort of the true nature of the spell. As it hadn't worked properly, this would not have hurt our side, and Professor Snape thought it would serve to convince the Dark Lord of his full loyalty, as well as raise doubts about the source of Voldemort's information.'

'Your father, however, was afraid that Voldemort might be — growing impatient. The Dark Lord had been searching for the heir of Gryffindor for some time; a number of witches and wizards had been



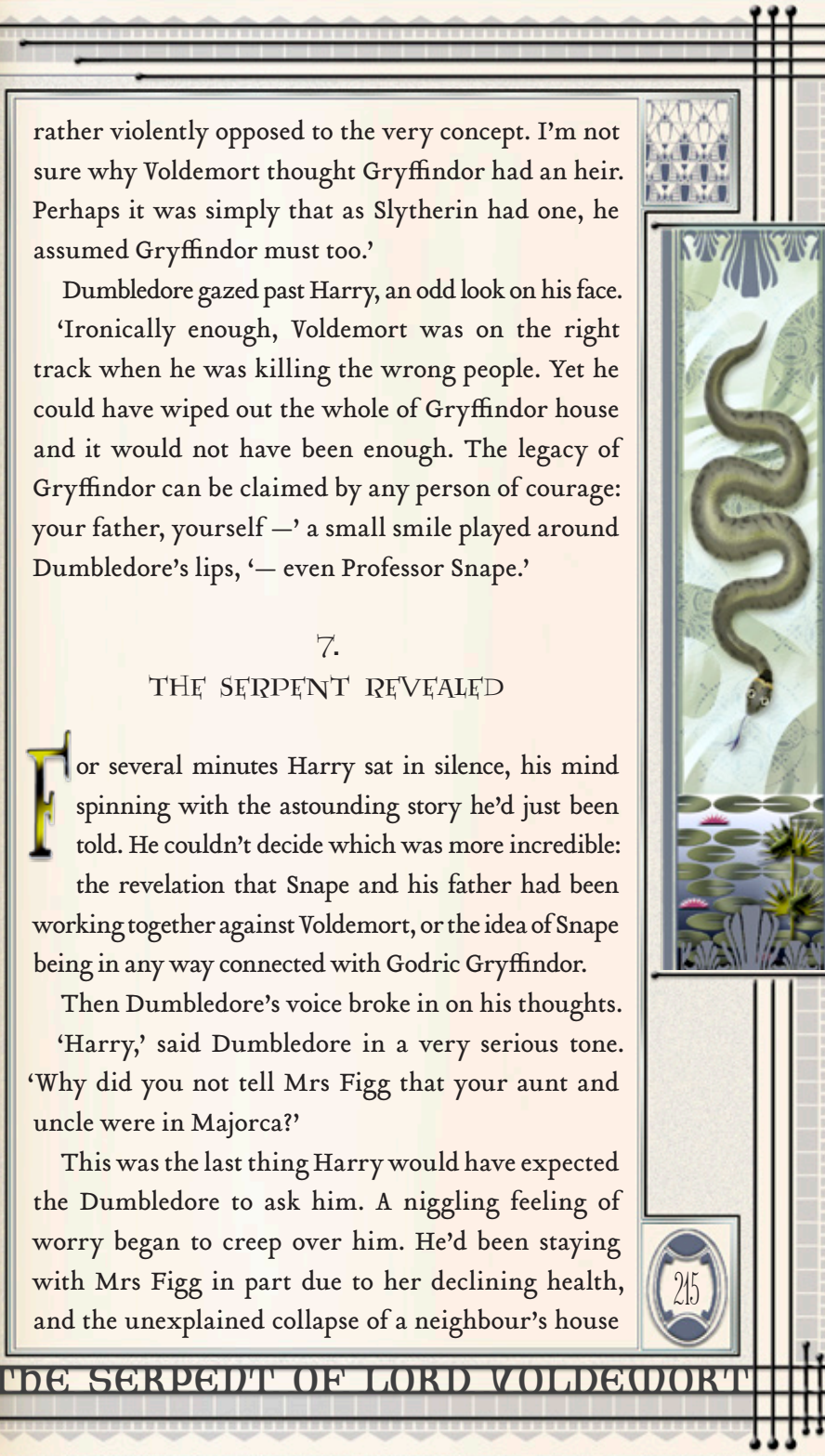
murdered on mere suspicion. James feared that if Voldemort didn't uncover a definite heir soon, he'd begin mass killings of all remotely likely candidates — relatives of his previous victims, members of old Gryffindor families, ultimately anyone who had ever been sorted into the house. If Voldemort could be persuaded that James was the heir, it might prevent a great many other deaths.'

'So he let Voldemort kill him instead,' whispered Harry.

'It should never have come to that,' said Dumbledore heavily. 'Harry...' he said in a more gentle tone, 'if you're thinking that your father put himself and his family unnecessarily into danger, let me assure you that that was not the case. Even had Voldemort been told the truth, he still would have suspected James, and he had other reasons for wanting him dead. Identifying James as heir of Gryffindor just made his murder a much higher priority. Your father acted as he did to save innocent lives... and the Fidelis Charm had never been known to fail...'

Harry's eyes were wet with tears. He dried them on his sleeve and — mainly to have something to say whilst he composed himself — asked, 'Did you ever find out who the real heir of Gryffindor was?'

'I have not found the real heir of Gryffindor,' said Dumbledore, 'because there is no real heir of Gryffindor for me to find. As Headmaster of Hogwarts, I have greater access to the records of Godric Gryffindor than any living wizard, and he made no provision for a specific heir. Indeed, he was



rather violently opposed to the very concept. I'm not sure why Voldemort thought Gryffindor had an heir. Perhaps it was simply that as Slytherin had one, he assumed Gryffindor must too.'

Dumbledore gazed past Harry, an odd look on his face.

'Ironically enough, Voldemort was on the right track when he was killing the wrong people. Yet he could have wiped out the whole of Gryffindor house and it would not have been enough. The legacy of Gryffindor can be claimed by any person of courage: your father, yourself —' a small smile played around Dumbledore's lips, '— even Professor Snape.'

7.

THE SERPENT REVEALED

For several minutes Harry sat in silence, his mind spinning with the astounding story he'd just been told. He couldn't decide which was more incredible: the revelation that Snape and his father had been working together against Voldemort, or the idea of Snape being in any way connected with Godric Gryffindor.

Then Dumbledore's voice broke in on his thoughts.

'Harry,' said Dumbledore in a very serious tone. 'Why did you not tell Mrs Figg that your aunt and uncle were in Majorca?'

This was the last thing Harry would have expected the Dumbledore to ask him. A niggling feeling of worry began to creep over him. He'd been staying with Mrs Figg in part due to her declining health, and the unexplained collapse of a neighbour's house

was unlikely to have brought about a sharp improvement in this. Had the shock of believing the whole family dead caused her to have a heart attack, or a nervous breakdown?

'Is — is she OK?' Harry asked a bit guiltily.

'She'll live,' said Dumbledore. His light blue eyes regarded Harry intently.

Harry realised that he hadn't answered Dumbledore's question. 'I was afraid she'd have me put into care. She wasn't well, and Uncle Vernon hadn't left an address or a phone number for me to contact him. Even if Mrs Figg had known the Dursleys were gone, she couldn't have done anything to get them back —'

'She could have told me,' said Dumbledore.

'You *know* each other?' said Harry, astonished. Then an even more bizarre possibility occurred to him. 'Mrs Figg's not a witch, is she?'

Dumbledore eyed at Harry strangely. 'Harry, she's your godmother.'

'She's my *what*?' said Harry.

'She's your godmother,' Dumbledore repeated.

'You were not aware of this?'

'No!' said Harry. 'She — why didn't she ever say something?'

'I shall be sure to ask her that when I write to let her know you've been found,' said Dumbledore calmly.

Harry shook his head, struggling to take it all in. Mad old Mrs Figg, with her horrible cats and her cabbage-smelling house, was his *godmother*? If it had been anyone but Dumbledore telling him this, he would have been convinced they were having him on.

'But it's lucky I didn't tell her, then,' Harry said abruptly. 'If you'd fetched the Dursleys back, they would've been there when Voldemort turned up. He'd have killed the lot of them —'

'He would not have,' said Dumbledore.

'He killed Cedric, didn't he?' said Harry, feeling a dull stab of pain at the memory. 'And Cedric'd done nothing to him. Uncle Vernon would have yelled at him, or tried to hit him — he wouldn't have had the sense to run away, even if Voldemort gave him the chance...'

'Voldemort would not have killed your relations, he'd not have been able to,' said Dumbledore. 'There is a great power in shared blood. When you were sent to live with your aunt and uncle, it was invoked for your protection. Had you been in their care, Voldemort could not have come anywhere near them, or you.'

'Oh, so that's what he was going on about,' said Harry. At Dumbledore's enquiring look, he elaborated, 'In the graveyard, Voldemort told the Death Eaters he couldn't kidnap me in summer because you'd done some sort of magic.'

'And that was the first you'd heard of it?' said Dumbledore.

'Yeah...' said Harry. 'I didn't realise the Dursleys had to be around for it to work. Do they know about this spell?'

'I have explained its workings to them quite carefully on more than one occasion,' said Dumbledore. He looked suddenly aged and careworn again. 'I had thought that during the holidays, at least, you would be safe.'

'But I'm all right now,' said Harry spiritedly, 'and

I bet the Dursleys have learnt their lesson, Voldemort blew up half their house!

Then Harry recalled what Professor McGonagall had said when she'd brought him into the office.

'D'you think the Ministry of Magic will blame you for this?' he said nervously. 'Look, I'll tell them it was my fault. Fudge won't believe me about Voldemort, but I can prove I can turn into a snake. I'll say I was avoiding the Dursleys. If you — if you expel me for being an illegal Animagus, that ought to convince him you didn't know —'

'Absolutely not,' said Dumbledore firmly. 'You are to tell no one of this ability; it saved your life when all my precautions failed. I shall simply have to come up with some other story to keep the Minister happy.'

'Voldemort *wants* you in trouble with the Ministry, that was his plan,' said Harry darkly. 'He was going to frame Hagrid for murdering me and get both of you sacked!'

'And it very nearly worked,' said Dumbledore. 'Quite fortunate, really, that I'd sent Hagrid abroad for the summer. Even so, Fudge would have had him taken to Azkaban weeks ago if he'd been able to do it quietly. It's good that you showed up when you did. Now that you clearly have not been eaten by a Lethifold, the Minister will be more interested in sweeping this entire matter under the rug than in hunting for scapegoats —'

'What did he want to put Hagrid in Azkaban for?' said Harry, startled. 'I haven't been murdered *yet*... and it was an Aitvaras, not a Lethifold.'

'Voldemort has an Aitvaras?' said Dumbledore, standing up swiftly. 'And he brought it to your relatives' house? Harry — do you know — is it still there?'

'I — I don't think so,' said Harry. 'He wanted Malfoy to change me into an Aitvaras, he never said anything about already having one.'

Dumbledore sat back down. 'I think you'd better tell me everything that's happened to you over the holidays. Start at the beginning — when you boarded the Hogwarts Express at the end of last term.'

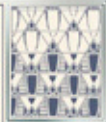
So Harry explained how Uncle Vernon had met him at King's Cross station and sent him on to Mrs Figg's, about gradually coming to realise she didn't know the Dursleys were in Majorca and deciding to write a letter to the Weasleys instead of telling her, that Voldemort had arrived in Privet Drive the next day; of hiding from him as a snake, but being caught, questioned and borne off to the Dark Lord's lair; how Voldemort had spoken of some mysterious task and put Harry in a tank —

'*You* were the serpent in the waiting room?' said Dumbledore, as close to gobsmacked as Harry had ever seen him.

'Yeah, I was...' said Harry. 'Hang on, how did you know Voldemort had a serpent in his waiting room?'

'Professor Snape happened to mention it to me,' said Dumbledore, 'but do go on.'

Harry told Dumbledore how he'd given up on escaping, as either Voldemort or Nagini was always nearby; that he'd made up his mind to try and sabotage Voldemort's plans but hadn't been able to figure



out what they were; of Wormtail's being left in his tank as a punishment and the curious episode of the chairs in the cellar.

'That wasn't a real spell, was it?' Harry asked Dumbledore. 'I was supposed to bite Professor Snape, but I only poked him, and Voldemort didn't seem to notice.'

'I imagine Voldemort was merely testing the snake to see if it truly could recognise Harry Potter,' said Dumbledore. 'He'd want to be satisfied that it was up to the job before he had it transformed into an Aitvaras.'

'I reckon Voldemort's part snake himself,' said Harry. 'He could smell the Death Eaters too, when they were scared — and Snape was less scared than the others...'

'Very likely,' said Dumbledore. 'Please, continue.'

'Then Voldemort sent me off with Lucius Malfoy,' said Harry. 'He was really angry — that's when he said my father wasn't the heir of Gryffindor. Anyway, he gave Mr Malfoy a ring and said Draco was to turn me into an Aitvaras in Care of Magical Creatures. That way everyone would think it was Hagrid's fault when I bit Harry Potter. Malfoy brought me with him on the Hogwarts Express. I didn't want anybody to find out I was the snake, so I waited 'til all of them had left to get out of my cage, and stayed hidden until morning. And here I am...'

'Extraordinary...' said Dumbledore. 'That accounts for — quite a number of things, actually...'

'So — so what was Voldemort doing?' said Harry. 'I mean, it looked as though he just sat in his study the whole summer and had the Death Eaters bring him packages.'

'To the best of my knowledge, that's all he *was* doing,' said Dumbledore. 'I suppose after being gone for almost fourteen years he had a fair amount of resupplying to do. Possibly he wished to have me out of the way before he made his next move and was waiting for this Aitvaras plot to come off. Certain of his supporters do appear to have been laying the groundwork for it at the Ministry...'

That reminded Harry. 'What will we tell Fudge?'

Dumbledore thought for a few moments. 'The truth, more or less, up until the time Voldemort removed you from Privet Drive. We'll say that you were several streets away when your scar started to hurt. You ducked behind a wall, watched as Voldemort destroyed your house — and found yourself in Hogsmeade.'

'Hogsmeade?' said Harry. 'How did I get there?'

'An accidental Apparition,' said Dumbledore. 'You've done it before, it's in your record with the Improper Use of Magic Office. You sneaked into Hogwarts — there's a secret passage between Hogsmeade Church and the staff room. The entrance is through the wardrobe in the vestry —'

'Yes, I know about that one,' said Harry. It was one of the tunnels into Hogsmeade written on the Marauder's Map. Unfortunately, Argus Filch also knew about that particular passageway, which rendered it useless for Harry's purposes.

'You met up with a house-elf,' Dumbledore went on. 'Dobby, in fact. You told him that Voldemort was after you and asked him to help you hide. The next

thing you remember is waking up this morning in Gryffindor Tower.'

'Er — why don't I remember anything?' said Harry.

'We'll have to ask Dobby that. I expect he Transfigured you into something inconspicuous — a warming pan, perhaps — concealed you in plain sight for the rest of the summer, slipped you into your bed last night and changed you back into yourself.' Raising his voice slightly, Dumbledore called out, 'Dobby? May I have a word?'

With a sound like the crack of a whip, Dobby appeared. His goggling green eyes fell upon Harry; straight away he flung his arms around Harry's still rather grimy knees and burst noisily into tears.

'Harry Potter, sir!' wailed Dobby. 'Harry Potter is alive!'

Harry reached down and patted the house-elf's tiny shoulder. Dumbledore pulled a handkerchief from his robes and passed it across the desk to Harry, who handed it to Dobby. Dobby gave a final hiccupping sob and blew his long, pencil-shaped nose loudly.

'I've called you here because we need your help to keep the secret of *why* Harry is alive,' Dumbledore told him. He explained the alibi he'd concocted, adding, 'It's doubtful you'll be questioned, but should anyone ask —'

'— Dobby is telling them *he* hid Harry Potter!' squeaked Dobby triumphantly.

'Yes,' smiled Dumbledore. 'Thank you, Dobby.'

Dobby beamed delightedly at Harry and vanished once more.

Dumbledore checked his watch.

'Once your fellow students are in class, I'll take you to the hospital wing,' he said to Harry. 'You've spent nearly two months as a warming pan, after all; there could be lingering effects. I shall send Professor McGonagall to examine you as soon as she's free — as I've already informed her you can turn into a snake, she may be given the real story of what happened to you.'

'Does she have any idea *why* I can turn into a snake?' said Harry.

'Not much of one, I'm afraid,' said Dumbledore. 'Your ability to resist reversal spells and your lack of Animagus training suggests some sort of inborn talent. Your speaking English as a snake seems the logical inversion of the gift of Parseltongue, yet we found no record of other Parselmouths transforming themselves in this manner. You say that you discovered this power when Mr Malfoy attempted to change you into a toad?'

Harry nodded.

'It is a little known fact that Animagi can deflect unfriendly Transfigurations by assuming their animal form —'

'But I'm not —' Harry began.

'Presumably a non-Animagus shape-shifter would be able to do the same thing. If you tried to fight Mr Malfoy's spell, you might have instinctively triggered the transformation. Rare as Parselmouths are, it's difficult to believe you're the first ever to be Transfigured against his will, but we really have no other explanation for your ability. No recognised type of natural shape-shifter changes exclusively from human to snake... at least none that has been

proven to actually exist... ’ Dumbledore gazed at Harry thoughtfully over his half-moon spectacles. ‘Do you know what a Lamia is, Harry?’

‘No,’ said Harry.

‘The Lamia is a creature similar to a centaur, except that its lower body is that of a giant snake rather than that of a horse. And there is another difference, one which has a direct bearing on your situation... ’

Dumbledore conjured a large, leather-bound volume onto his desk. Embossed on the front in letters of gold was the title: A FIELD GUIDE TO NATURAL SHAPE-SHIFTERS. Dumbledore riffled its pages, murmuring ‘Beasts... birds... fishes... myths and folktales... ah, yes... the Segregated Lamia.’

He read aloud to Harry:

...a most peculiar legend, the earliest mention of which is found in volume seventeen of Radolphus Pittiman’s biography of URIC THE ODDBALL: URIC THE ODDBALL VISITS THE HOLY LAND:

“...our guide claimed that the Lamiae were a people made up wholly of women, mothers bringing forth daughters without need of a father – but Uric said it wasn’t so. An old Efreet once told him that just as a family of good blood may produce a Squib, so may a Lamia bear a son. Such offspring, invariably abandoned by the mother, can take on the appearance of human infants and be adopted by unsuspecting travellers. For whilst in the female Lamia, human and serpent are for ever joined, in

the male they are for ever apart: he shifts at will from one to the other...”


‘You think I’m one of those — those Separate Lamia?’ said Harry. ‘But I had a father, I look just like him! And my mother wasn’t some kind of — of snake woman!’

‘That *is* rather the problem with that theory,’ Dumbledore admitted. ‘Of course, you could still be a Segregated Lamia if both your parents had ancestors who were ones... but the Segregated Lamia has long been considered mere myth. Uric the Oddball is — er — a less than reliable source, and no living example of such a shape-shifter has ever turned up, in the Middle East or anywhere else. Until now... It would be *fascinating* to see what the Order of Circe might make of your case... ’

For a brief instant, Dumbledore wore an expression very much like Hermione’s right before she went scurrying off to the library. Then he gave a regretful sigh.

‘...but in the current climate, presenting a paper on it would be utterly out of the question. In any event, we may never find out for certain why you can transform into a snake. Nobody knows how the first werewolf became a werewolf, or why some wizards are born Parselmouths. The Slytherin family believed they were descended from Gorgons... but it hardly seems likely that a wizard encountering such a creature would survive to have a child with it... ’

Remembering what he’d learnt of Gorgons in Defence Against the Dark Arts, Harry was inclined



to agree. A rare and dangerous type of hag found mainly in Greece, the Gorgon had snakes growing out of its head instead of hair and a deadly gaze similar to that of a Basilisk. Luckily most of them were happy enough to keep to their desolate island homes (rendered unplotable by the Greek Ministry of Magic) and be left alone.

‘But for now, hospital wing,’ said Dumbledore. He stood and ushered Harry out the office, following him onto the moving staircase.

‘I don’t have any robes or books or anything,’ said Harry as they descended. ‘My trunk’s at Mrs Figg’s, unless the Dursleys took it back.’

‘I have your trunk,’ said Dumbledore. ‘It will be brought to your dormitory along with your new set books for this year.’

‘What about Hedwig? Ron said you’d got her — is she all right?’

‘Hedwig is fine,’ said Dumbledore. ‘She’s in the Owlery. I’ll send her to visit you when I post the letters I’ll be writing.’ He beamed down at Harry. ‘Your godfather will be extremely happy to know you’re still alive.’


8.

THE VANISHING SERPENT

Harry and Dumbledore stepped off the revolving stairs and set off down the corridor. Just as the stone gargoyle had hopped back into its place, a voice called, ‘Headmaster!’

Professor Snape was hurrying towards them.

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Harry watched his approach with an odd mixture of emotions. Had Harry met up with Snape as little as an hour earlier, he would have yanked out his wand and cursed the Potions master with the worst hexes he could manage, believing that Snape was responsible for passing Voldemort the information that had led to the deaths of Harry’s parents. Now Harry *knew* Snape was responsible — but he had done it solely as part of James Potter’s plan to stop Voldemort murdering countless other witches and wizards.

Something of Harry’s thoughts must have shown on his face. When Snape’s gaze fell upon him, a flicker of puzzlement replaced the infuriated expression he customarily wore in Harry’s presence. Then the anger returned, stronger than ever.

‘I have come to report a theft,’ Snape said. ‘Last evening, a pet snake belonging to Draco Malfoy vanished from the Hogwarts Express. He tells me it was in its cage when he left the train. I have questioned the house-elves; they claim the cage was empty when they transported it to the Slytherin dormitories. The Bloody Baron has assured me that Peeves had nothing to do with it. This leads me to suspect that it was taken by a student as a prank.’

Snape stared pointedly at Harry. Harry didn’t say anything, although he could have denied stealing Malfoy’s snake with perfect honesty. Harry hadn’t *stolen* the snake, he’d *been* the snake, sent to Hogwarts with Malfoy on Voldemort’s orders, to kill Harry Potter.

Naturally, Snape wasn’t to know this, despite the fact that he had unwittingly helped prepare the snake

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for its mission. Harry fought down a wild urge to ask Snape how his leg was feeling and to advise him that if he could smell more frightened next time, perhaps Voldemort wouldn't single him out to be bitten.

'I'll have Mr Filch keep a watch for it and give out a notice to the school at lunch,' said Dumbledore calmly. 'But as I recall, Mr Malfoy already has an owl. No special permission was given for a second animal, or for an unusual pet such as a serpent. I must therefore insist that when the creature is found, it be brought straight to me.'

Snape's eyes narrowed. He looked from Harry to Dumbledore and back again. Harry had the horrible sensation that Snape really was having a go at reading his mind. Snape, however, merely said, 'Of course, Headmaster.'

Dumbledore and Harry went on to the hospital wing. Dumbledore informed Madam Pomfrey of Harry's purported stint as a warming pan and asked her to verify that he had suffered no permanent damage.

Madam Pomfrey felt Harry's forehead, peered into his eyes, patted his hair and pushed it aside to inspect his ears. She took his pulse, then turned his hand over and gripped it hard, apparently checking that all the bones were present and in their proper shape. Finally she had Harry recite the alphabet, backwards. This wasn't nearly as easy as it sounded — Harry narrowly missed skipping over Q.

At the end of the examination, Madam Pomfrey seemed somewhat perplexed. She gave Harry a dose of nasty-tasting Wizard Tonic and a pair of pyjamas,

directing him to a bed in the back of the ward with screens pulled around it.

Harry lay there feeling rather let down after the morning's excitement. His mood improved considerably when Madam Pomfrey returned with a breakfast tray that included kippers and stewed tomatoes as well as the usual hospital wing porridge, and even further when Hedwig came swooping into the ward. She fluttered down onto Harry's bedside table at once, hooting ecstatically, bobbing her head and ruffling her wings. Harry had never before seen her act so much like Pigwidgeon. Madam Pomfrey looked on disapprovingly, but as Hedwig's visit had been given the OK by Dumbledore, said nothing.

Harry stroked Hedwig's feathers. 'I'm sorry I left you — I didn't have a choice. I would've come back sooner if I could, honestly...'

At lunch Ron and Hermione came to see him, the latter with a gleaming silver prefect badge on her chest.

'People are saying that you were changed into a *warming pan* by a *house-elf*!' she said. 'Is that true, Harry?'

'Yeah,' said Harry loudly for Madam Pomfrey's benefit. Then in a softer voice he said, 'No, I was a snake, but Dumbledore doesn't want anybody to know.'

He told them how he'd spent his holidays as Voldemort's pet and of being dispatched to Hogwarts to murder — himself. Ron and Hermione listened wide-eyed, Ron giving a nervous twitch whenever Harry mentioned Voldemort's name.

'So that's how you hid from everyone for so long!' said Hermione. 'We've been *looking* for snakes. I — er

— told Dumbledore you could transform...’

She glanced at Harry anxiously, as if afraid he might be angry with her.

‘That’s all right, I would’ve had to tell him when I got back anyway,’ said Harry. ‘Just don’t tell anyone else, whatever you do.’

‘And Snape was there?’ said Ron. ‘D’you really think he’s on our side?’

‘For a while I was sure he wasn’t,’ said Harry.

He recounted what Voldemort had told Lucius Malfoy about Snape and the heir of Gryffindor, and what Dumbledore had told him. Harry’s throat grew tight as he explained what his father had done. Even though he understood why James Potter had wished Voldemort to go on believing he was Gryffindor’s heir, Harry couldn’t help wondering how things might have worked out differently if Professor Snape had instead been permitted to follow his own inclination and tell Voldemort the truth.

‘But now You-Know-Who knows your father *wasn’t* heir of Gryffindor,’ said Hermione, sounding petrified. ‘That means he’ll be searching for the real heir! You’ll have to start being very careful, Ron...’

‘Me?’ said Ron in astonishment. ‘Why’ll *I* have to be careful?’

‘“*Old Gryffindor families*”,’ said Hermione. ‘You Weasleys —’

‘Oh, that,’ said Ron. ‘Nah, don’t worry, it’s only our family that’ve all been in Gryffindor. Most Weasleys are — most Weasleys haven’t been.’

‘What houses were they in, then?’ said Harry curiously.

‘Well, my great-uncle Ronald — I was named after him — he was a Ravenclaw. And — and Mum had a — had some cousins in Hufflepuff...’

Ron’s ears had gone bright red. Hermione gave him a sharp look.

‘Anyway, we’re not old Gryffindors,’ he said hurriedly, ‘not like the Longbottoms. I wouldn’t want to be in Neville’s shoes if you’re right. Or Eleanor Branstone’s — she’s a Hufflepuff, but there’ve been Branstones in Gryffindor for ages. It was a Branstone who became Head of house after Godric Gryffindor was murdered. Or Vidge Atkins —’ Ron looked suddenly horrified. ‘If You-Know-Who kills her, we’ll have no one to play Keeper!’

‘Vidge’s our new Keeper?’ said Harry, interested.

Although the Quidditch season had been cancelled last year, Angelina Johnson had decided to get a head start training future players. Harry had been too pre-occupied with the Triwizard Tournament to pay much attention to her programme, but Vidge Atkins was difficult to overlook: a huge girl, as tall as Ron and rather heavier, in spite of being two years behind him.

‘Yes, and I’ll be taking Alicia’s place as Chaser,’ said Ron. ‘Fred and George bought me a Nimbus 2001! Second-hand, but they mended the tail, it hardly lists at all now. Mind, they probably just felt sorry for me because everyone thought you were dead —’

‘How can you talk about Quidditch at a time like this?’ demanded Hermione. ‘Neville and Eleanor and Vidge could be murdered! We’ve got to warn them!’

‘I dunno, Hermione...’ said Harry slowly. ‘Nev-

ille's panicky enough as it is, and Eleanor and Vidge are a bit young to be worrying over something like that. And how would you explain how you'd found out Voldemort was after them?'

'Well, I'll certainly be having a word with Professor McGonagall,' said Hermione severely.



Professor McGonagall herself turned up in the hospital wing that evening to discuss Harry's condition with Madam Pomfrey.

'I didn't see any signs of injury due to mis-Transfiguration,' Madam Pomfrey told her. 'Although I'm no expert...' Madam Pomfrey hesitated, then said, 'If I didn't know better, I'd say he was suffering from nervous exhaustion. There's no way he could have remained conscious whilst a warming pan, is there?'

'No, of course not, he'd have no brain to be conscious *with*,' Professor McGonagall assured her. 'Being Transfigured into an inanimate object can be very disorienting for precisely that reason, particularly if the subject is already in an over-excited state. I'll have a quick look, though, to be sure nothing else is the matter with him...'

Professor McGonagall took Harry into one of the private rooms at the end of the hospital wing. As soon as the door was shut, she fixed him with a gimlet stare and said, 'Potter, why didn't you tell me about this before?'

'I was afraid I'd be expelled,' said Harry, not quite meeting her eyes. 'I mean, I couldn't *prove* I wasn't an illegal Animagus.'

He expected Professor McGonagall to begin telling him off. Instead she gave a weary sigh. 'Just as well you didn't, I suppose. One of the first people I'd have consulted with would have been Professor Moody.'

Professor McGonagall had Harry describe how it felt when he changed shape and his experience of being a serpent. She watched him transform, then turned into a cat herself to sniff at him and lick his face. She tried various reversal spells, which only worked when Harry chose not to fight them.

'Are you feeling up to being Stunned?' she said. 'I'd like to see if the Transfiguration can be reversed when you're unconscious.'

'Yeah, OK,' said Harry.

He sat on the edge of the bed and changed into a snake.

'*Stupefy*,' said Professor McGonagall.

There was a flash of scarlet light. Harry felt as if Aunt Petunia had finally succeeded in catching him a blow with her frying pan. He swung his head from side to side to clear it.

'Potter?' said Professor McGonagall.

'Hang on, I'm still awake,' said Harry.


Professor McGonagall gave a slight start. 'You really can talk when you're a snake... Let me try Stunning you again, I hadn't wanted to use full strength.'

'*Stupefy*,' she said, more firmly this time.

Her spell left Harry numb and thoroughly dazed, but conscious.

'Still didn't work,' he said blearily.

'*Stupefy!*' shouted Professor McGonagall.



Not exactly Stunned, but not truly awake either, Harry let out a feeble moan and, more on instinct than anything else, wriggled under the pillow to hide. From the soft, feathery depths, he could dimly hear Professor McGonagall saying, 'Potter, are you all right? *Enervate! Enervate!*'

'I'm fine,' said Harry poking his nose out. 'You almost had it that time, though. Try it with a bit more magic...'

'Now that *is* peculiar,' said Professor McGonagall. 'You seem to be quite hex-proof as a snake...' She eyed her wand uneasily. 'I don't think we ought to experiment with stronger spells at present. Back to the ward, Potter. You should get some rest.'


She reached for the doorknob.

'Hang on, I need to ask you something,' said Harry, slithering from beneath the pillow and turning back into himself. 'You know how Voldemort wanted to kill my dad because he thought he was heir of Gryffindor?'

'I'd known that He Who Must Not Be Named suspected James was the heir,' said Professor McGonagall. 'I *badn't* known that James had put Severus up to egging him on.' The tone of her voice implied that, had she done so, she definitely would have had something to say about it.

'But now Voldemort's found out he wasn't,' Harry ploughed on, 'Hermione reckons he'll be looking for someone else. Neville and Vidge may be in danger, and Eleanor Branstone...'

'You're not to concern yourself with that, Potter,' said Professor McGonagall sharply. Harry opened his



mouth; she raised her hand to silence him. 'I'll speak with Dumbledore. You may be certain he'll take the appropriate precautions. But stopping You-Know-Who is none of your concern. Your father had his whole life ahead of him, he should never have been allowed —' Professor McGonagall's voice broke. Her eyes were strangely bright. 'I realise we haven't done the best job of protecting you in the past, but —' she swallowed and went on in a more normal tone, '— but this year, you need to concentrate on your O.W.Ls.'



Madam Pomfrey let Harry leave the hospital wing next morning after a final check-up and another spoonful of the revolting Wizard Tonic. Ron and Hermione showed up at the ward to accompany him to breakfast. When they reached the Entrance Hall, Ron said, 'You go on, I want a word with Neville. And Hagrid's really keen to see you, Harry.'

Hagrid wasn't the only one keen to see Harry, judging by the number of people craning to catch a glimpse of him in the Great Hall. Harry hadn't been gawped at so much since his first week at Hogwarts. Even Snape turned to glare at him for a second or two before going back to haranguing a blonde Slytherin girl, who appeared utterly bewildered by his behaviour. Snape must have been in an especially foul mood: normally students in his own house were spared the worst of his temper. Hagrid himself was waving energetically at Harry and Hermione from the front of the Hall. He came down to meet them at

the Gryffindor table.

'Harry! Yeh look awful!' he said by way of greeting. 'I, er, don't think being a warming pan quite agreed with me,' Harry mumbled.

'Ah, well, don' worry — food an' fresh air'll soon set yeh righ'.'

Hagrid grabbed a dish of scrambled eggs and another of fried mushrooms, dumped the lot on Harry's plate and topped it off with half a jar of orange marmalade. Harry suddenly realised that he was hungry enough to actually consider tucking into this bizarre concoction.

As he pulled up his chair he said to Hagrid, 'How'd you get on with that job you were doing for Dumbledore? He said he'd sent you abroad over the holidays...'

'Oh... coulda bin better, coulda bin worse,' said Hagrid evasively.

Once Harry had eaten several forkfuls of egg and mushroom (doing his best to pick out the bits that hadn't been touched by the marmalade), Hagrid headed back for the staff table. Harry noticed that the blonde witch Snape had been remonstrating with was sitting there beside him.

'Who's that woman next to Professor Snape?' he asked Hermione.

'That's Professor Millarca,' Hermione said, 'the new Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher.'

At that moment Ron cleared his throat behind them.

'Neville's got something to tell you, Harry,' he said.

Harry twisted his head to see Neville Longbottom fingering his prefect badge nervously.

Neville drew a deep breath and said, 'You can't say You-Know-Who's name any more, Harry — I'll have to take points from Gryffindor if you do.'

'I don't reckon Dumbledore will let you,' said Harry, 'as it's him who told me to say "Voldemort".'

'Oh,' said Neville, reddening slightly. 'Right.' He took the empty seat on Hermione's other side and busied himself buttering some toast.

Ron sat down by Harry, wearing a disgruntled scowl.

After breakfast, as Harry, Ron and Hermione were recrossing the Entrance Hall, their path was blocked by Crabbe and Goyle. Harry (who had assumed that Malfoy merely had a few sneering comments to make about his summer as a warming pan) was taken aback at the sheer rage that twisted the pale boy's pointed face when he stepped forward between his two hulking companions.

'You took it,' said Malfoy, and there was nothing at all bored or drawling about his voice now. The venom with which he spoke was frightening.


'Took what?' said Harry, for a moment honestly having no idea what Malfoy was talking about.

'You took my snake! Off the Hogwarts Express! If you don't tell me where you've hidden it, right now —' Malfoy drew his wand.

'I never laid a finger on your snake,' said Harry.

This was technically the truth, although Malfoy clearly didn't believe a word of it.

'Had you remembered to feed him that morning?' Harry asked innocently. 'Perhaps he went looking for something to eat.'



Malfoy's face grew visibly whiter. As Harry was well aware, the snake had been given no food whatsoever in its entire stay at Malfoy Manor. Pressing his advantage, Harry continued, 'He's probably off to the lake to find a nice frog. I'd get after him straight away if I were you, before he's eaten by the Giant Squid.'

Malfoy turned a lighter shade yet.

'Or Hagrid feeds him to one of the Skrewts,' Ron put in, obviously enjoying Malfoy's discomfiture. 'I bet Hagrid knows all about catching snakes. Course, after the way you tried to have Buckbeak executed, he's not likely to help *you*.'


Malfoy didn't bother replying to this. 'C'mon,' he said to Crabbe and Goyle.

The three of them hurried off. Harry watched them go, not nearly as pleased as he normally would have been to see Malfoy in such a flap. He hadn't given a second's thought to what might happen to Malfoy when the snake went missing. With a cold feeling in his stomach, he recalled the screams of the Death Eaters who had visited Voldemort's study that summer.

'Malfoy's going to be in loads of trouble for losing that snake,' he said quietly. 'Voldemort was furious with his father. Told him this was his last chance and he was holding him personally responsible —'

Before Harry could say any more, Ron whipped round and seized him by the shoulders, snarling, *'Will you stop saying the name?'*

Harry angrily wrenched himself free. He opened his mouth to tell Ron that he was being as stupid and superstitious as Professor Trelawney with her death



omens and that he, Harry, would call Voldemort by whatever name he liked. Then Harry remembered how miserable he'd been the previous autumn when he and Ron hadn't been speaking to each other, and choked back his words.

'Ron,' said Hermione in a pacifying tone, 'You-Know-Who's been trying to kill Harry since he was a baby. I don't think Harry's not saying his name will do anything to change his mind.'

Ron looked abashed at this.

'Sorry,' he muttered to Harry.

'Why was You-Know-Who upset with Lucius Malfoy?' said Hermione.

'He — I'm not sure, actually,' said Harry. 'He smelled angry from the time he took me out of my tank. Then when Mr Malfoy came in, he started shouting about my father not being the heir.'

'He blamed Lucius Malfoy for that?' said Hermione, frowning.

'I dunno... ' said Harry. He strained his memory, trying to bring back the details of the conversation he'd overheard in Voldemort's study. 'He said my dad was no more Gryffindor's heir than Mr Malfoy was — that Snape and Wormtail had been wrong. Oh, and before that he said he'd been talking to Madam Turpin.'

'Madam Turpin?' said Hermione keenly. 'I knew there was something fishy going on with her! What did he say about her?'

'That she'd almost got the Triwizard Tournament called off,' said Harry.

'I don't see what that has to do with Lucius Malfoy

either,' said Hermione, extremely puzzled.

'Maybe Vol— maybe You-Know-Who was just taking it out on him,' shrugged Harry. 'But Mr Malfoy smelled really scared. He carried my cage with him everywhere at the Manor, until he gave it to Draco. I wonder if Malfoy's told *him* about this...'

9.

THE FERRET AND THE GRIM

After last term's nightmarish ending and the extremely stressful events of the holidays, returning to the normal daily routine at Hogwarts proved something of a shock to Harry's system. He had been so certain for so many weeks that he was going to die fighting Voldemort, that it was difficult for him to get on with the business of ordinary life. Lessons and homework and the upcoming O.W.Ls simply didn't seem as important as they used to do.

Harry had trouble concentrating in class and on several occasions forgot either books or homework in Gryffindor Tower. Hermione began reminding him to check his bag each morning, an anxious note in her voice. Madam Pomfrey never failed to intercept him before breakfast with her foul Wizard Tonic, and every time he passed Cho Chang in the corridors, it brought back painful memories of Cedric Diggory's death.

But things could have been much worse. No officers of the Magical Law Enforcement Patrol showed up to arrest Harry, Hagrid or Dumbledore, nor was Harry's reception from his fellow students as chilly

as he'd feared. Dumbledore's warming pan story was deemed so ridiculous that it had to be true, and served to allay a great deal of the suspicion with which Harry had previously been regarded.

One person who was not at all mollified, however, was Professor Snape. He held Harry back after the first Potions lesson of the year to give him a talking to. Snape was incensed that a whole summer had been wasted searching for Harry and considered Harry himself entirely to blame for this.

'Everything that has happened to you has been your own fault,' Snape spat. 'You cheated at the Triwizard Tournament, you lied to your godmother and I *know* you stole Mr Malfoy's snake!'

Harry couldn't manage to feel properly angry at this. He thought of Snape, fourteen years younger, plotting strategy with his father, and wondered if Snape had been one of the Death Eaters he'd heard being tortured in Voldemort's study. Baffled and frustrated by Harry's lack of reaction, Snape finished his rant by informing Harry that his potion-brewing would embarrass a first-year, and assigned him a six-foot long essay on the use of human blood in Dark potions, to be handed in to him in two weeks time.

Malfoy was likewise convinced that Harry had taken the snake. He shot Harry murderous glowers whenever they encountered one another. Fred and George, noticing this, congratulated Harry on finding such a superb way of winding Malfoy up. 'Course, it's not nearly as good as what we've got planned for him...' smirked Fred, but neither twin would say

exactly what that was.

Nor was Snape the only teacher dishing out loads of extra work. Most of them evidently shared Professor McGonagall's wish that the fifth-years focus on preparing for their O.W.Ls. Hermione threw herself into this endeavour wholeheartedly, drawing up elaborate timetables to account for every hour of the next nine months.

Ron, on the other hand, was mainly interested in Quidditch. He was badgering Angelina to set a date for their first practice and dragging Harry out onto the pitch of evening to throw the Quaffle for him to catch. When Hermione grumbled about this frivolous squandering of valuable revision time, Ron told her, 'Hagrid said he needed fresh air.'

Maybe Harry and Ron should have invited Hagrid to join them. Hagrid was in a thoroughly depressed mood. The Ministry of Magic had forbidden him to bring any creature of higher classification than XX (harmless/may be domesticated) into the Hogwarts grounds, which had taken all the joy out of teaching Care of Magical Creatures for him. He made an obvious effort to be kind and encouraging to Harry, but was gloomy and morose around practically everyone else, and frightened the entire class Harry's first day back by exploding at Draco Malfoy.

They had been collecting their things to leave after a very wet lesson on Augureys when Hagrid's great bellow of rage stopped them in their tracks.

'WHAT, SO YEH CAN USE 'EM FER SOME KIND O' HORRIBLE DARK MAGIC?'

Everyone turned to stare. Hagrid, looking twice as big as normal, towered over the quaking Malfoy, who made some sort of whimpering protest.

'Don' give me that!' snarled Hagrid. 'Yer whole family's a viper's nest o' Dark wizards, always have been! An' if anyone turns up dead of snakebite, I'll know what ter tell Magical Law Enforcement!'

Malfoy blanched at these words, as well he should have. He set off for the castle at top speed. Harry, whose ears had pricked at the mention of snakebite, sidled over to Hagrid.

'What did Malfoy want?' he said.

'Wanted me ter teach him how ter catch snakes,' said Hagrid, still breathing hard.

'Oh,' said Harry. 'You won't, will you?'

'O' course not,' growled Hagrid.

Harry was only partly reassured by this. He didn't much fancy the idea of Malfoy laying traps for him, even without Hagrid's assistance — he might need to hide as a snake again. Even more worrying was the possibility that Malfoy, deprived of his serpent, was hatching some new plot against Hagrid. As he headed up the lawn with Ron and Hermione, Harry resolved to keep a closer eye on Malfoy in future.



That night at dinner, Malfoy and Professor Snape walked into the Great Hall together. The pair of them cast identical looks of loathing in Harry's direction before continuing on to the staff table. They made a beeline for Hagrid, who was seated in his usual spot at the far end of

the room. Harry couldn't hear what was being said, but when the conversation was over Hagrid's expression had grown noticeably grumpier. Snape, however, appeared well satisfied, and Malfoy only slightly less so.

Harry, Ron and Hermione caught up with Hagrid as he was exiting the Hall after the meal.

'What were you and Snape talking about?' Harry asked him.

Hagrid looked disgusted. 'Ruddy Malfoy's pet snake's run off. Snape was askin' me ter help find it.'

'And you said you would?' said Ron, incredulous.

'Yeah, well — it disappeared from the Hogwarts Express. Tha' makes it the school's responsibility, an' I *am* Care of Magical Creatures teacher. Snape says Dumbledore knows about it, so I reckon it's OK. I'll teach Malfoy how ter make Snake Baskets, can' do any harm with them...'

'Snake Baskets?' Hermione said curiously.

'Baskets made out o' snake-grass,' Hagrid explained, 'an' yeh put in other stuff ter attract 'em. Don' worry, they won' be on the exam.' The ghost of a smile showed through his bristling beard. 'No need fer the rest of you ter bother with 'em. I'll jus' have him come down to me hut one evenin' —'

'Let us come too,' said Harry swiftly. At Hagrid's surprised look, he hurried on, 'Malfoy may be trying to get you in trouble again. If that snake bites him or something, we can be witnesses it wasn't your fault. And — and Malfoy's saying I'm the one who stole it. I need to — to clear my name.'

'Well, if yeh really wan' to,' said Hagrid dubi-

ously. 'Can' start straigh' away, though. Hogsmeade apothecary'll have ter order the snake-grass specially. I'll let yeh know when it gets here...'



In spite of Harry's misgivings as to what Malfoy might be up to, the next week and a half saw a gradual improvement in both his spirits and his attentiveness. He was feeling particularly pleased with himself Tuesday night at dinner. He had finally persuaded Madam Pomfrey to let him off his morning dose of Wizard Tonic, he had correctly answered all Professor Flitwick's questions on enchanting objects in Charms and, while the cooking at Hogwarts had always been good, it tasted more wonderful than ever after a summer of nothing but frogs.

Harry had just demolished a helping of roast chicken and was starting on the buttered peas when outraged cries from the other side of the Great Hall caused him to look up from his plate. Something massive, black and shaggy stood atop the Slytherin table amidst splattered food and overturned goblets. Most of the Slytherins were scrambling to get away from it; a few were drawing their wands, but before they could do anything, the beast gathered itself up and jumped to the Ravenclaw table.

'Sirius!' gasped Harry, getting up so rapidly that he almost knocked over his chair.

Luckily his voice was drowned out by a long, high, panic-stricken wail from Lavender Brown.

'*The Grim, it's come for us, we're all going to die!*'

At that moment, Sirius spotted Harry. He let



out a series of thundering barks and traversed the Hufflepuff table in two enormous bounds, students fleeing in his wake. Reaching the Gryffindor table, he hopped to the floor and hurled himself on Harry. Harry clutched at the dog's thick black fur to keep from being bowled over and sat down heavily. Sirius placed his paws (which were larger than most men's hands) on Harry's shoulders. He licked Harry's face and snuffled his hair, giving small contented yips. His tail lashed the air ecstatically.

'I missed you too, Snuffles,' Harry grinned, patting Sirius on the head.

'That will be enough of that,' said a cold voice.

Professor Snape had managed to shove his way through the mass of people crowding the staff table in an effort to put as much distance as possible between themselves and the supposed Grim. He pointed his wand at Sirius and a lead and collar flew out, fastening itself around the dog's neck.

'Come along, *Snuffles*, we're going to the Headmaster's office.'

Snape gave the lead a hard jerk. The huge dog didn't budge. It turned its head slowly and growled, a low, menacing sound that filled the Hall and raised the hairs on the back of even Harry's neck.

'I don't think he likes you,' said Harry. 'Here, why don't you let *me* take him —'

'I think not, Potter,' sneered Snape and changed into a ferret.

'Professor Snape?' said Harry.

For a mad instant Harry thought Professor Moody

had returned to Hogwarts, but a quick scan of the Great Hall revealed no sign of him. Nor did Ron or Hermione appear to be responsible; they seemed as nonplussed at Snape's transformation as Harry.

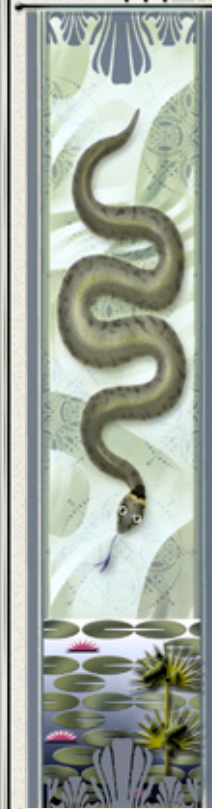
Sirius lowered his head to sniff at the erstwhile Snape. The ferret's fur (greasy and matted though it was) stood on end. It laid back its ears, hissed and leapt. Sirius drew back just in time. The ferret's yellowish teeth snapped shut less than an inch short of his nose. Then Sirius pounced. He seized the ferret by the scruff of its neck, clambered onto the Gryffindor table and began jumping back across the Hall.

'Snuffles!' yelled Harry. 'Bring it back!'

Sirius, now on the threshold, glanced over his shoulder, wagged his tail and vanished. Harry looked frantically about the room. Hundreds of petrified students were bunched at either end, trapping the teachers at the High Table and blocking the path to the doors. His godfather hated Snape, but surely he wouldn't eat him?

Harry decided he couldn't take the chance. Dropping to his hands and knees, he crawled awkwardly under the house tables, wishing he dared turn into a snake to slither across the flagged stones. Once inside the Entrance Hall, Harry could hear the clanking of a chain being dragged up the marble staircase towards the second floor.

He found Sirius sitting beside the stone gargoyle in front of Dumbledore's office, the enraged ferret still wriggling in his jaws. Sirius eyed Harry expectantly. His tail swept the floor. Harry briefly considered trying to take the ferret away from the him, but judging by the vigour with which the transformed Snape



was thrashing and snarling, he had been in no way harmed by his precipitous abduction, and anyway, Harry didn't have his dragon-hide gloves on him.

'Canary Creams,' he said, and the gargyle hopped aside. Harry and Sirius stepped onto the moving stairs. When they reached the top, Harry knocked on the polished oak door. Dumbledore's voice bade him enter.

'Ah, Sirius,' said Dumbledore. 'You're late. Er — what's that you've got there?'

'It's Professor Snape,' said Harry. 'He turned into a ferret at dinner, I don't know why. Sirius caught him and carried him here.'

'On the chair, Sirius,' said Dumbledore calmly.

Sirius dropped the ferret on a chair near the desk. Dumbledore waved his wand and Professor Snape reappeared.

'Black!' he spat, twisting around to glare at the dog.

With a small *pop*, Sirius changed back into a man.

'I didn't do it,' he laughed, unbuckling the collar, which had remained on his neck.

'Potter!' snarled Snape, rounding on Harry.

'I didn't do it either!' Harry protested, then had a sudden awful idea who might have done.

Snape must have seen the guilt on his face. 'Don't lie to me, Potter,' he hissed, rising from the chair to loom above Harry.

There was a deep, rumbling growl. A dog once more, Sirius crouched at Harry's side, teeth bared, poised to spring at Snape should he come any closer.

'Sirius, that will do!' said Dumbledore sharply. He fixed his piercing blue eyes on Harry. 'Harry, if you

know anything about this incident, I ask that you tell me now. I would prefer not to waste time searching for non-existent plots by Voldemort if there is another explanation.'

Harry gulped. The last thing he wanted was to shop Fred and George; if they really were behind Snape's transformation, they would undoubtedly be expelled. But when Dumbledore put it that way, Harry couldn't refuse to answer him.

'I don't — know anything,' he said miserably. 'But your password — "Canary Creams" —' Harry turned to Snape. 'Did you have a cake or a sweet from someone before dinner?'

It seemed a safe question. Fred and George were not sufficiently foolhardy to give hexed food to Snape in person, nor was Snape stupid enough to eat anything the Weasley twins offered him. If, indeed, it *had* been Fred and George — other people could enchant puddings.

'The Cauldron Cakes!' said Snape.

In three strides he was out the door and pelting down the staircase.

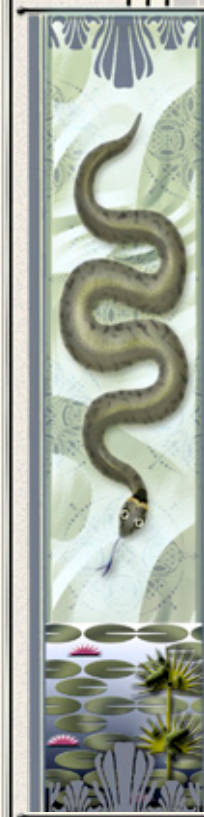
'I'll be back!' his voice floated up at them.

'That's got rid of him,' grinned Sirius. Then in a more serious tone he said, 'Harry, where have you been? And why didn't you tell Mrs Figg the rest of your family had gone to Majorca?'

'Er —' Harry looked at Dumbledore.

'He's your godfather,' said Dumbledore. 'He should know the truth.'

So Harry told Sirius about being the serpent of Lord Voldemort. 'I didn't know the Dursleys had



broken Dumbledore's spell by going away, or that Mrs Figg was my godmother,' he finished. 'I thought she was just another Muggle.'

'Your aunt and uncle never told you Mrs Figg was your godmother?' said Sirius. 'But — why? I mean, I can see why they wouldn't want to tell you about me, but I'd thought they were friends with Arabella?'

'Well, they couldn't have *known* she was my godmother, could they have?' said Harry. 'Uncle Vernon didn't believe I had a godfather until I showed him your letter, and if they'd realised there was a witch living two streets away... I suppose they couldn't very well have gone to the police, but they wouldn't have stayed in Privet Drive. They'd've — sold the house and moved to a different suburb.'

'Harry's relations are terrified of magic,' explained Dumbledore, 'and I'm afraid I'm somewhat to blame for it. They raised Harry as a Muggle, not telling him anything about his parents or Voldemort or the wizarding world. I imagine they thought they were protecting him. When the letters from Hogwarts began arriving at their house, they took Harry and went on the run. I had assumed that the post was being intercepted. I sent Hagrid to deliver one by hand and he only alarmed them all the more. Had I known, I would have gone myself.' Dumbledore gave a heavy sigh. 'I should have realised... losing a sister at such an early age, in such an appalling manner, would be enough to turn any Muggle against magic.'

'It wasn't your fault!' said Harry hotly. 'The Dursleys have always hated magic. And Aunt Petunia wasn't upset that Voldemort killed my mum. She said

she was a freak and she'd got what she deserved for becoming a witch!'

'Your aunt said that?' said Sirius weakly.

'Yeah, when Hagrid brought me my letter.'

'Harry, sometimes when people are angry or frightened, they say things they don't mean,' said Dumbledore gently.


Before Harry could inform Dumbledore that he was certain Aunt Petunia had meant every word, Sirius spoke up. 'You really think they didn't know Arabella was his godmother? I know they weren't at the christening — wizarding world wasn't all that safe for Muggles then — but surely Lily would have written them?'

'I don't believe they did,' said Dumbledore thoughtfully. 'Unfortunately, Harry is most likely correct in his estimation of their reaction had they done so. It's odd they didn't hear about it from Lily, but things were so unsettled for her and James at the time...'

Harry didn't think this was odd at all. If he ever had a child, the last person he'd send word to of its christening would be Dudley Dursley.

'I shall have to warn Arabella not to mention it to them,' Dumbledore went on. 'Now that Harry knows, there isn't much point and even with the protection on his aunt and uncle, we need her able to keep an eye on them. Arabella quite likes Mrs Dursley — it would be a pity to end their friendship unnecessarily.'

Harry gave a snort. It didn't surprise him in the least that Mrs Figg liked Aunt Petunia, the way his aunt smarmed up to her. There was no one else the Dursleys could risk leaving Harry with. Should any-



thing funny happen whilst he was at Mrs Figg's, everyone in the neighbourhood already thought she was mad. For this reason, they were careful to stay on her good side. Aunt Petunia (who detested animals) had once gone so far as to pat Mr Paws. She'd washed her hands in carbolic for five whole minutes when she and Harry got back to number four.

'The spell's working again?' said Sirius.

'Now that Harry is here, we can bring it up to full strength,' said Dumbledore.

'Will he have to leave Hogwarts?' asked Sirius, looking tense.

'No,' said Dumbledore, 'it can be done at a distance.'

'And you're positive what you're doing will work?' Sirius demanded.

'Yes,' said Dumbledore patiently. 'We can discuss the details... but it will be rather dull. Perhaps Harry would like to return to his meal?'

'Oh — right,' said Harry.

'I'll see you after dinner,' called Sirius as Harry left the office.

But when Harry got back the Great Hall, he found it utterly deserted...

10.

SLYTHERIN'S BIRTHDAY

Harry gazed bemusedly at the empty tables of the abandoned Great Hall for several moments. Then, not knowing what else to do, he headed back up the marble staircase for Gryffindor Tower. The

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entire house seemed to be gathered in common room, chattering excitedly. Fred and George waved frantically from the table in the corner that they and Ron were sharing. Several chairs away, Hermione sat tight-lipped and glowering, her arms folded angrily.

'Where've you been, Harry?' said Fred. 'You missed all the fun!'

'What fun?' said Harry. 'Why'd everyone leave dinner so soon?'

'The teachers sent us to our dormitories while they tracked down the last of the Slytherins,' said George.

'The Slytherins?' said Harry. 'What have they done now?'

'The *Slytherins*,' said Hermione, her voice trembling with fury, 'haven't done *anything*!'

Harry listened in mounting astonishment as she explained what had transpired.

Following Harry's departure, everyone in the Great Hall had stood frozen with shock, until two events broke the stillness.

Lavender Brown let out another petrified moan.

'Oooooooh, Professor Snape! The Grim's taken his soul!'

Then the Slytherins began turning into ferrets too.

'Nobody realised what was going on,' said Hermione.

'Snape had vanished, then other people started to disappear, and then there were all these crawly things underfoot. The four houses were all packed together, so it wasn't obvious just the Slytherins were affected. Everyone was terrified they'd be next.'

All-out bedlam had ensued. Students screamed and pushed and fought for cover under the staff table. (In

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spite of the disappearances, no one was willing to flee the Hall with a Grim on the loose somewhere outside.)

Miraculously, none of the transformed Slytherins were trampled, in no small part thanks to Hermione's quick thinking. She and Ron had been the only people to remain at the house tables and thus had an unobstructed view of the rest of the Hall. When she saw the ferrets, Hermione put two and two together, and performed a Mass Hover Charm (*Mobiliferrets!*) to lift them above the fray.

The sight of an army of ferrets suspended in mid-air beneath the floating candles had by its sheer strangeness quieted most of the students down. At around this point, Professor Snape came charging in.

'Look, it's Professor Snape!' cried Ginny Weasley. 'Harry's saved him from the Grim!'

It was a mark of how rattled people were that a ragged cheer went up. Few of them would normally have been pleased to see Snape back, particularly wearing such a surpassingly wrathful expression on his face. After that, the teachers were soon able to restore order and return the Slytherins to their proper shapes.

Snape immediately confronted Fred and George, who admitted to having produced a batch of Ferret Fudge but denied putting it on the Slytherins' Cauldron Cakes.

'We made it to *sell*,' said Fred indignantly. 'It cost us our whole summers' pocket money for ingredients.'

'Then Fred went and left the box in a passageway, and when we came back for it, it was gone,' George said in an aggrieved tone. ('Which was true,' he told Harry later in the common room. 'We left it in the kitchen corridor

near the painting of the fruit-bowl with a note saying *Chocolate Icing — Slytherin's Birthday*, and when we came back next morning, it was gone.')

Nonetheless, Professor McGonagall's fury was extreme.

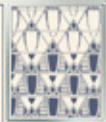
'Never in all my time as Head have Gryffindor students so utterly disgraced the house!' she snarled. 'If I had the slightest shred of evidence you did this deliberately, you'd be packed and waiting for the Hogwarts Express this very minute!'

She took fifty points from Gryffindor off each of them, and fifty more off Lavender Brown for her role in causing the furore. She also gave Fred and George detention every evening for the next month. Students at Hogwarts often spoke in jest of receiving such a punishment, but this was the first time Harry had heard of it actually being administered. Hermione was awarded fifty points for her heroic rescue of the Slytherins, but even so, this early in the term, Gryffindor's house points were left well in the negative numbers.

Snape was convinced that Harry, Ron and Hermione had been in on the joke. He had bitterly protested Hermione's fifty points. The only reason she had managed to keep her head, he asserted, was because she knew about the Ferret Fudge in advance.

'I didn't panic because I'm not stupid enough to believe in Grimms!' Hermione retorted. 'It's Professor Trelawney's fault, she's been scaring people with them for years. You should take fifty points off her!' (Professor McGonagall plainly deeply regretted that this was not feasible.)

In any case, Snape had little time to argue. The



ferrets closest to the doors had bolted before Hermione's spell took effect, and needed to be rounded up before they could come to any harm. The remaining students were ordered back to their dormitories to keep them out of the way.

That had been half an hour ago. Hermione was still in a towering rage at Fred and George.

'It wasn't funny!' she said fiercely. 'Someone could have died!'

'Some Slytherin,' muttered Fred. 'No great loss there.'

'How can you joke about that,' said Hermione quietly, 'after what happened last year?'

This wiped the smile off Harry's face — up to then he'd found the notion of the whole of Slytherin house being changed into ferrets highly entertaining. Even Fred and George had the grace to look guilty.

'The Slytherins would've been perfectly safe if that Grim hadn't showed up,' said George defensively. 'How were we supposed to know that would happen?'

'D'you think any of them would have cared if Harry'd got it along with Cedric?' said Fred darkly. 'You saw what they were like at the Leaving Feast. We wanted to pay them back for You-Know-Who murdering Harry this summer.'

'Which he hadn't done,' said Hermione coldly.

George brushed this aside. 'It was too good a plan to call off. We'd already made the Ferret Fudge, and Slytherin's birthday was the perfect opportunity. The Slytherins get Cauldron Cakes in their common room after classes, Higgs has boasted about it since we were first-years —'

'How come *we* don't get Cauldron Cakes in our common room on Gryffindor's birthday?' Ron interrupted.

Hermione turned her scowl on him. She was almost as put out with Ron as she was with his brothers, even though Fred and George really hadn't told him about the joke beforehand. Ron, she complained, had rolled on the floor laughing like a mad hyena while she struggled to levitate two hundred odd ferrets single-handedly.

'Well, for a start, nobody knows when Gryffindor's birthday is,' she said irritably. 'Still haven't read HOGWARTS, A HISTORY, have you? Slytherin left instructions in his will: every year on his birthday, each of his students was to be given a Cauldron Cake, a sachet of spikenard and compass-weed and one-seventh of a silver Sickle. And if your brothers had spent the holidays revising for their N.E.W.Ts instead of planning stupid tricks, Gryffindor wouldn't be going to lose the House Championship this year! I'm off up to bed!'

She rose from her seat and stalked up the girls' staircase. 'That'd be around four Knuts, wouldn't it?' said Harry.


'What would be?' said George.

'A seventh of a Sickle,' said Harry.

'Oh,' said Fred. 'No, it's an actual Sickle, chopped into seven pieces. Dunno how Slytherin fixed it with the goblins, they normally get quite shirty about damage to the currency...'



Next morning Professor McGonagall turned up in the common room, crosser than a goblin who had just



stumbled upon an entire vaultful of minced Sickles. There were dark circles under her eyes from hunting ferrets late into the night. She searched Fred and George's trunks, confiscated a fair assortment of suspicious items and forbade them on pain of expulsion to make or sell any more enchanted objects of any sort.

When Harry, Ron and Hermione went down to breakfast, venomous glares from the Slytherins in general and Draco Malfoy in particular followed them to the Gryffindor table. Snape had obviously made no secret of his belief that they had been fellow conspirators in the Ferret Fudge plot. (Malfoy, Harry later learnt from Sirius, was the last of the transformed Slytherins to be run to ground. He had taken refuge in Moaning Myrtle's bathroom, where the mouldy lavatory odour masked his smell from Mrs Norris, Professor McGonagall and Sirius himself. Malfoy was only discovered when Myrtle noticed him cowering in the corner of the end cubicle and went sailing through the wall in a fright, screeching that the ghost of a rat was haunting her toilet.)

At the staff table, Dumbledore's face was unusually grave. Once all the students had arrived, he stood and began to speak.

'Last night nearly a quarter of your number narrowly escaped serious injury or even death — in part from a dangerous and ill-advised joke, but mainly as the result of an unnecessary panic over a harmless animal. The Grim is merely a warning; it has no power in itself to bring misfortune. The creature that appeared at supper was not even that, but an

ordinary dog... as you may see for yourselves.'

Dumbledore went out into the Entrance Hall and returned with a giant black dog strolling beside him.

'This is Snuffles,' Dumbledore said.

A nervous muttering filled the room but no one screamed or tried to run. Dumbledore walked up and down the house tables with Sirius, letting everyone pat him to prove he was solid. Upon completing his circuit of the Great Hall, Sirius came to lie on the floor behind Harry's chair, where Harry, Ron and Hermione fed him bits of bacon and toast.

When the three of them left breakfast, Sirius trotted after them. In the Entrance Hall, he caught hold of Harry's belt with his teeth and pulled him towards the marble staircase. Ron and Hermione made to follow; Sirius waved them off with a massive paw.

'I think he wants to talk to me alone,' said Harry.

Sirius led Harry up to the fourth floor and along a narrow, winding corridor, at the end of which was a dull silver mirror in a rough ebony frame. Sirius gave three short barks and plunged through the glass into the secret passage beyond. Once Harry had joined him, he turned back into himself.

'I want a word with you about your aunt and uncle,' Sirius said abruptly. 'Dumbledore tells me that things have been strained between you and them ever since you started at Hogwarts...'

'Yeah, they have,' said Harry. He could have told Sirius that things had been strained between him and the Dursleys for considerably longer than that, but he was too curious to hear what his godfather had to say.

‘He doesn’t want to make the situation worse by speaking ill of them in front of you, but Harry, you could’ve been killed!’ Sirius began to pace the tunnel. ‘The truth is, your relatives are idiots even for Muggles. Going off and leaving you with Arabella like that, and them not even knowing she was a witch! Dumbledore’d written to them about Voldemort at the end of term — they hadn’t even opened the letter! He found it under a pile of newspapers in their kitchen!’

Sirius was practically spitting with rage. He paused to get hold of himself and continued more calmly, ‘What I mean to say is you can’t rely on them in an emergency. If any trouble comes up, you go straight to Mrs Figg. Don’t mess about with your aunt and uncle.’ He gripped Harry’s shoulders and stared him in the eye. ‘Swear to me that you’ll do that, Harry...’

‘Er — all right,’ said Harry.

It wasn’t as though he could ask the Dursleys for help anyway. Sirius, however, appeared satisfied with this promise

‘I’ll have to be getting back to Remus’ house,’ he said. ‘I’ll see you again when I can.’

Without warning, he reached over and hugged Harry tightly. Then, before Harry could say anything more, Sirius changed into a dog again and went bounding off.



On Friday Harry turned in the essay Snape had assigned him as punishment for having gone missing during the summer. It was only half-finished — four

foot nine rather than the required six feet — and, Harry had to admit, a poor job even by his usual standards for Potions homework. Not the least to his surprise, Snape gave him a detention.

Harry arrived at Snape’s dungeon that evening to find Fred and George waiting outside. The twins were to spend the next month scouring the fireplace in the Slytherin common room with toothbrushes, and tonight it seemed Harry would be helping.

Snape gave each of them a bronze amulet with an engraving of a Salamander on it (to protect them from burns, George told Harry) and a bag of Streeler shells, which he had them grind up and mix with water to make a glittering, multi-coloured paste. When they were done with that, Snape took them down a damp corridor, stopping by bare stretch of stone wall. He drew a silver key from his robes and inserted it into a crevice. With a sharp click, the concealed door to the Slytherin dormitories slid open. A sickening stench came billowing out.

‘Eurgh, what’s *that*?’ gasped Harry, staggering back.

‘Poison, I expect,’ said Fred. ‘Don’t go in there.’

‘Quick, Harry, run and fetch Madam Pomfrey,’ said George. ‘Most of the Slytherins are probably dead, but she may be able save a few of the tougher ones.’

Harry glanced nervously from one twin to the other, trying to tell if they were serious.

‘You stay where you are, Potter,’ said Snape coldly. ‘There’s nothing poisonous about those fumes.’

‘How do you know?’ challenged Fred.

‘I’m sure I smell devil’s-foot root...’ said George, wrinkling his nose.

Snape's enormous nostrils dilated. 'I smell stink-horn, asafoetida, rancid pilchard oil and burnt garlic,' he said flatly. 'All perfectly harmless. Now get inside!'

The few Slytherins still in the common room all wore what Harry assumed were silver nose-plugs. Closer to the fireplace, the smell grew even more intense. Harry was feeling thoroughly ill as he, Fred and George stepped into the crackling flames, picked out likely stones and started scrubbing.

'Don't worry, you get used to it after a bit,' said Fred in a low voice. 'The Slytherins've been chucking horrible-smelling stuff in the fire every night before Snape brings us here.'

'Yeah — we're getting some brilliant ideas for an improved line of Dungbombs,' said George. 'But you want to watch your back. First detention, one of the Slytherins cancelled our Flame-Freezing Charms when Snape wasn't looking. That's why we're wearing these.' He tapped his amulet. 'Fortunately Madam Pomfrey had lots of Burdock's Burn Balm on hand from the dragons last year.'

'We hadn't reckoned they'd blame you for the fudge as well,' said Fred glumly. 'Sorry, mate.'

'No more talking, Weasley or you'll all be staying an extra hour,' Snape called from the opposite side of the room, where he sat in a carved chair marking papers and eyeing them like an evil-tempered vulture.



Harry had cause to remember George's warning Monday morning at breakfast, when the usual mass

of owls delivered the post. Not one but two packages were dropped by his plate — sent, apparently, from 4 Privet Drive, Little Whinging, Surrey.

Harry's first thought was that the Dursleys had finally decided to throw him out of the house and were returning the few things he'd left in their smallest bedroom. When he unwrapped the largest package, however, it proved to contain a chocolate cake. Harry stared at the box in bewilderment. Aunt Petunia hadn't once in his whole life baked a cake for him, and it was neither his birthday nor any other special occasion he could recall.

'Cool!' said Ron. 'Can I have a slice?'

'No!' said Harry sharply. At Ron's startled and faintly affronted expression, he explained, 'The Dursleys would never send me a cake. I'd bet anything that this is from the Slytherins.'

Ron leant away from the cake as though afraid it would leap off the table and attack him. With a dirty look at the Slytherin table, Harry shut the box and stowed it under his chair. After breakfast he tipped both packages into a convenient dustbin beneath the marble staircase.

'Sending me a cake and saying it was from the Dursleys — as if!' he said to Ron and Hermione as they walked away. 'I thought Slytherins were supposed to be *cunning*...'

There was a rustling noise behind them. Harry turned to see Crabbe and Goyle bending over the dustbin, scooping out great handfuls of cake and cramming it into their mouths.

'Cunning, are they?' said Ron, stifling a snigger.

‘Well, mostly cunning,’ Harry amended.

But as he watched Crabbe and Goyle stuff themselves, an uneasy feeling crept over him. If the cake had been an attempt at revenge by the Slytherins, surely the two of them would have been told about it?

‘D’you reckon the Slytherins *didn’t* send that cake?’ he asked worriedly.

‘If they didn’t, you know who must have,’ said Hermione in alarm. ‘Don’t eat that!’ she shouted.

Crabbe and Goyle merely smirked at her as they licked the last few crumbs from their fingers and ambled out the giant oak front doors.

‘They look OK,’ said Harry.

‘Mind, it would take strong poison to finish off that pair of trolls,’ said Ron.

‘Maybe it was the other package that You-Know-Who jinxed,’ said Hermione. ‘I mean, he must have realised by now that that snake isn’t going to bite you...’

She pointed her wand at the dustbin and the smaller box rose up out of it.

‘I’m taking this to Professor McGonagall!’

11.

SNAKE BASKETS

Hermione kept the smaller box drifting several feet ahead of them all the way to Professor McGonagall’s office.

‘But what makes you so certain these packages aren’t from your aunt and uncle?’ said Professor McGonagall when Harry explained the situation.

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‘They missed your birthday this summer.’

‘The Dursleys haven’t given me a birthday present since I was ten,’ said Harry, ‘and after what Voldemort did to their house, they’re not likely to start now.’

‘But they send you Christmas presents,’ said Professor McGonagall.

‘Yeah,’ said Harry bitterly, ‘a tissue, a toothpick, a fifty-pence piece and an empty box. Don’t know why they bother, really.’

‘I — I see,’ said Professor McGonagall, looking faintly alarmed. ‘These Christmas presents — you wouldn’t still have any of them, would you?’

Harry stared at her.

‘Ron’s dad’s got the fifty-pence piece,’ he said at length.

Harry had seen it whilst visiting The Burrow for the Quidditch World Cup. The Muggle coin claimed pride of place in the display cabinet that housed Mr Weasley’s plug collection: front and centre on a tatty green velvet cushion with gold tassels on three of its four corners. As for rest of the Dursleys’ offerings, Harry had made it something of a tradition to toss them into the fire before going down to breakfast on Christmas morning.

‘You don’t have to break the curse, just get rid of the — whatever it is — safely,’ he added. ‘And Madam Pomfrey should definitely have a look at Crabbe and Goyle...’

‘Yes, of course,’ said Professor McGonagall distractedly.

With a flick of her wand she sent the package gliding towards the door and strode out the room behind it.

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Next Transfiguration lesson, Professor McGonagall called Harry to her desk at the end of class.

'I've spoken with Dumbledore. He says your aunt and uncle did send you those packages; in fact, he brought the boxes to the Hogsmeade Post Office himself. There wasn't much of the cake left, unfortunately, but I was able to assemble this from the crumbs...'

She opened a drawer and took out what looked like (and, Harry realised, probably was) a shrunken cake-box, which held a biscuit-sized sliver of chocolate cake.

'You should eat that directly,' said Professor McGonagall, turning her quill into a fork and holding it out to Harry.

'Er — why?' he asked.

'It's necessary to restore the protection on you and your relations,' said Professor McGonagall.

Feeling rather stupid, Harry took the fork and popped the bit of cake into his mouth. Professor McGonagall drew a second box, long and flat, from the inside of her robes. She lifted the top to reveal a handsome golden wristwatch.

'Wear this every day, if possible... and when you get your Christmas present, don't throw it away. Keep it in your trunk if you've got no use for it.'

Under Professor McGonagall's beady gaze, Harry put on the watch. He exited the classroom, stunned. A fair few strange things had happened to him since the beginning of summer — spending his holidays

as Voldemort's pet, returning to Hogwarts as Draco Malfoy's, learning Mrs Figg was his godmother and Professor Snape was, if not heir of Gryffindor, then the nearest thing to it — but receiving a gold wristwatch from the Dursleys was by far the weirdest.



Harry had been wearing his new watch for little over a week when, after a quite short lesson on Diricawls, Hagrid said to Malfoy, 'C'mon out to me house tonight. I got the snake-grass.'


That evening, Harry, Ron and Hermione followed Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle across the grounds to Hagrid's cabin.

'What are they doing here?' spat Malfoy when they stepped through the door.

'They're gonna be helpin' us with the Snake Baskets,' said Hagrid.

Malfoy looked both angry and suspicious, but evidently didn't dare risk annoying Hagrid by complaining. There weren't enough chairs to go around, so the six students sat on the floor of the hut, where Hagrid showed them how to fashion coils out of bundles of snake-grass (which was grey-green and smelled strongly of lavender) and stitch them into an egg-shaped basket.

Malfoy wasn't very good at it. He appeared thoroughly disgruntled at having to do what he no doubt considered servant's work. Harry, with his vast experience of doing servant's work for the Dursleys, had no difficulties. Crabbe and Goyle didn't even try



to learn how to make Snake Baskets. They amused themselves by poking each other (and occasionally Harry, Ron or Hermione) with longest stalks of snake-grass they could pick out. After half an hour of this, Hagrid ordered the pair of them back to the castle. Hermione *was* trying, but to her great frustration she was even worse at it than Malfoy. Ron put aside his own basket early on to assist Hermione.

‘Yeh’ll want ter set them Snake Baskets out quick as yeh can,’ Hagrid told Malfoy as they worked. ‘Snakes’ll start hibernatin’ soon, an’ it sounds like yer one’s a grass snake. They never come this far north on their own, they’re used ter warmer weather, see. Tha’ may be why it ran off, ter find a place ter hole up fer the winter. In that case, it won’ turn up again ‘til March or April. Any other snake yeh catch round here’ll be an adder. Adders’re poisonous — they bite you, it’ll hurt like anythin’ — but yeh won’ die of it, s’long as yeh stay calm an’ get ter Madam Pomfrey. Good par’ is, when we find yer snake it’ll be easy ter recognise.’

Hagrid had exceptionally fast fingers for such a large man. In the time it took Harry to produce a single basket, Hagrid had made two of his own, converted four of Hermione’s false starts into lids and finished Malfoy’s basket for him. Once the baskets were done, Hagrid had them smear the insides with frog tripe. He then gave the milk jug to Hermione and told her to pour a few drops in each one. They put the Snake Baskets around the lake: one at each quarter, laid on its side and half-buried in the mud.

‘They like water, grass snakes,’ said Hagrid. ‘Wher-

ever yer one ended up, it’ll be makin’ its way down here eventually. We jus’ got ter wait.’

Harry, Ron, Hermione and Malfoy headed for the castle, Gryffindors and Slytherin keeping a fair distance between them by mutual agreement.

Hermione’s persistent inability to make a proper Snake Basket had left her in an extremely bad mood.

‘Malfoy’s setting these things to catch *me*, remember?’ said Harry, in an attempt to cheer her up. ‘We don’t *want* him to have loads of them.’

‘I could help you practise some more,’ said Ron hopefully. He had spent the evening sitting close to Hermione — peering over her shoulder, holding her hands and brushing away tendrils of her bushy hair when they drifted into his face.


Hermione muttered something about going to the library.



Next night as Harry and Ron were doing their Divination homework, Hermione came bursting through the portrait hole. Clutched to her chest was an unusually thick book with a cover of tapestry.

‘I know why Lucius Malfoy tried to steal your Famous Wizard cards last year, Harry,’ she said triumphantly, dropping the book (AN ILLUSTRATED ENCYCLOPEDIA OF MAGICAL PATTERN WEAVING, WITH SAMPLERS) on their table with a loud thud.

‘Mr Malfoy never tried to steal my —’ Harry did a double take. ‘You mean — Polyjuice Potion? Madam Turpin was *him*?’



‘No, of course not,’ said Hermione impatiently. ‘He hired her to steal them. And I bet it was him buying up those other copies anonymously, too.’

‘You’re mental,’ said Ron. ‘What would Lucius Malfoy want a Famous Wizard card of Harry for?’

‘For the photos of his christening robe,’ said Hermione. ‘I was reading up on Snake Baskets and I found this...’

She opened the book. A panel of lace very much like the one that adorned the hem of that embarrassing garment was bound into it. On the page opposite was a picture of a witch pointing her wand at an arrangement of pins and thread on a wooden table, which was busily weaving more lace.


‘The pattern of the lace is used as a code to write down spells,’ Hermione said. ‘Mr Malfoy believed your dad was heir of Gryffindor — he probably figured the christening robe was a record of some sort of important old magic.’

‘Voldemort said he’d been stealing things,’ said Harry. ‘I’d thought he meant *his* things. So it *was* Lucius Malfoy’s fault the Triwizard Tournament was almost cancelled...’

‘Right, that’s why You-Know-Who was upset with him,’ said Hermione. She looked at Harry keenly. ‘If we can get hold of that robe, I should be able to translate the spell. D’you have any idea where it is now?’

‘I expect it was blown up along with my parents’ house,’ said Harry gloomily. ‘The only thing I have that belonged to them is my Invisibility Cloak.’

‘Oh,’ said Hermione, disappointed. ‘Well — we



could try and read it off one of the Famous Wizard cards, I suppose, although it doesn’t seem Mr Malfoy was having much luck with that.’

‘Not ‘til next year, we can’t,’ said Harry. ‘The cards are in my Gringotts vault.’

‘If you think it’s that important, you could always ask Professor Snape to borrow his,’ said Ron with a sly grin.

‘Oh, I’m sure it’s not,’ said Hermione hastily. ‘I mean, as Harry’s father wasn’t the heir after all...’



Malfoy checked the Snake Baskets every day (and scowled ferociously if he saw Harry so much as glance at them), but no snakes were caught. October gave way to November and the weather grew steadily colder; of morning frost covered the grounds.

‘Migh’ as well bring the baskets inside,’ Hagrid said to Malfoy. ‘Snakes’re all hibernatin’ by now fer sure.’

Malfoy looked as though he had just received news of a death (which, Harry thought uneasily, was not far off the mark, considering how angry Voldemort would undoubtedly be about his failure to recapture the snake).

‘You can leave ‘em out if yeh really wan’ to,’ said Hagrid quickly, ‘but they’ll’ve fallen apar’ by spring, an’ then yeh’ll have ter make new ones.’

The Snake Baskets stayed out. Harry noticed that Malfoy continued to check them even in the worst of weather, but at that point he had problems of his own to contend with. Trying times had come upon the Weasley family; in addition to his own misery over the situation, Harry had to support Ron through it all.

Voldemort remained oddly quiet. If he was working on some fresh plan to discredit Dumbledore or locate the non-existent heir of Gryffindor, he did a remarkably good job of keeping his activities under wraps.

Malfoy stayed at Hogwarts for Christmas to keep an eye on the Snake Baskets. Harry, however, went home — and learnt exactly why the Dark Lord had been lying so low during autumn term.

In fairness to Voldemort, he was not directly responsible for the uproar that rocked the magical community over the Christmas holidays (and, ironically enough, brought about the resolution of the Weasleys' troubles). That had been one-third the fault of an incompetent underling and two-thirds the fault of Harry himself.

The young Death Eater took full blame, although the more intelligent members of the Ministry of Magic realised he must have had accomplices. Unfortunately, Cornelius Fudge was not among them; thus the Ministry's official policy on Voldemort's non-return remained unchanged. So, apparently, did Voldemort's policy of waiting for the serpent plot to come off, as Malfoy carried on checking the baskets throughout the winter.

By spring the Snake Baskets had indeed fallen apart. Malfoy put out seven handsome new ones, far too fine for him to have made himself. As March turned to April, he caught a number of fat, splotchy adders. Hagrid suggested that Harry ask if any of them had seen a grass snake about, but Malfoy flatly vetoed this idea. Not only did he still blame Harry for stealing the

snake, he and the rest of the Slytherins now also suspected him of having murdered Professor Snape.

Summer approached. Malfoy was looking increasingly tense each morning after he checked the Snake Baskets. Harry was nearly as anxious as Malfoy was — he knew all too well how Voldemort dealt with wizards who failed him. Harry had little reason to like Malfoy, but he couldn't help feeling somewhat responsible for the fix Draco was in. If only Harry had told someone sooner that the Dursleys were gone, Voldemort would never have got his hands on the snake in the first place.

Ron and Hermione tried to keep Harry's spirits up.

'Malfoy deserves whatever he gets,' said Ron. 'You're forgetting, he wants that snake back so he can murder you with it...'

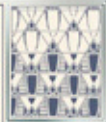
'You should be worrying about your O.W.Ls, not Malfoy,' said Hermione. 'You-Know-Who's not likely to do anything really horrible to him. It wasn't Malfoy's fault the snake disappeared, he couldn't very well have brought it to dinner with him. And this was his first mission — he'll get a second chance.'

'This *was* his second chance,' said Harry moodily. 'Well, his father's second chance ... Voldemort'd given him a Basilisk and I reckon something happened to it. He told him to take better care of me.'

Hermione looked suddenly aghast.

'What's the matter, Hermione?' said Ron.

'I — I don't think Lucius Malfoy had permission to give You-Know-Who's diary to Ginny,' she said. 'That was the Basilisk he was talking about, the one in



the Chamber of Secrets, the one Harry killed. Honestly, I'm surprised You-Know-Who didn't curse Mr Malfoy to death the minute he found out...'

This was not what you could call reassuring.



Near the middle of May, Professor Snape turned up alive and Professor Millarca departed under something of a cloud, but no one had expected her to last long anyway. Soon afterwards Harry overheard Malfoy and Hagrid arguing in Care of Magical Creatures.

'I don't care what Professor Snape said. S'as close ter Dark Magic as makes no diff'rence,' Hagrid growled.

'I'd be using *my* blood,' said Malfoy peevishly. 'I don't see why —'

'Yeh couldn', Hagrid interrupted. 'That spell needs blood from a woman ter work. No, I forbid yeh!'

Hagrid stumped off to tend to the giant fish tank of silvery Ramoras that sat in front of his cabin. Malfoy gazed resentfully at his retreating back.

Harry, however, no longer had time to dwell on Malfoy's predicament. The O.W.Ls were rapidly approaching. Hermione's exam nerves had reached a fever pitch. She spent every moment of her spare time revising frantically and was forcing Harry and Ron to do the same (at wandpoint if necessary: when Ron attempted to knock off early one evening, Hermione put the Leg-Locker Curse on him).

Harry was torn between the fear of doing badly on his O.W.Ls and the fear that it wouldn't matter if he did. Should Voldemort succeeded in taking power, a

hundred O.W.Ls would not be enough to save Harry from his wrath.



The night after the last exam, Harry fell into bed feeling drained as an empty Butterbeer bottle, and dropped off to sleep almost immediately. He dreamed he was in his tank again. He slithered through the tall grass, searching for his burrow, but the unbroken earth seemed to go on for ever. Now the grass was curling around his body, binding him. He thrashed about, struggling to free himself; the grass merely wrapped itself tighter —

Harry woke abruptly, entangled in blankets. He threw off the bedclothes and flung back the hangings of his four-poster. Still half-asleep, he fumbled for his glasses and staggered to the pond to have a drink — only to find himself staring out a window at the Hogwarts lake. Two people were crouched beside one of the Snake Baskets. It was Malfoy and Pansy Parkinson.

Malfoy stood up and began waving his wand, leaving a trail of purple sparks that slowly descended onto the Snake Basket. Not stopping to worry about getting caught by Filch, not stopping to grab his wand or his Invisibility Cloak, not even stopping to put on his trainers, Harry ran from Gryffindor Tower. It was as though he was back in his dream as he sprinted through deserted corridors, down six floors to the marble staircase and out the great oak front doors.

Harry tore across the lawn towards the Snake Basket. Malfoy and Pansy were walking away from

it along the lake; hearing his pounding footfalls, they turned and gaped. The sight of their shocked faces brought Harry to his senses.

'Hagrid said you weren't supposed to use that spell,' he said accusingly.

Malfoy raised his wand. Ropes flew out, twisting themselves around Harry's arms and legs. Malfoy gave the ends a hard jerk, sending Harry crashing to the ground. He stepped up to Harry and kicked him in the head with all his strength.

Harry's vision went black. When he came round, there was a hammering in his skull and his entire body was being bumped and jolted painfully. Malfoy was dragging him into the Forbidden Forest.

Coming to a halt by a convenient clump of bushes, Malfoy rolled Harry underneath them with his foot.

'You wait here, Potter. I'll be back for you when I've caught my snake...'

12.

THE AITVARAS

Malfoy's footsteps faded in the distance. Harry struggled pointlessly against his bonds for several minutes, then slumped to the ground once more. He wasn't certain how long he lay there, exhausted and gasping for breath. It was difficult to keep his thoughts focused; his head ached abominably.

But why, Harry reflected through a blur of pain, should being tied up pose such a problem for him? He had no trouble getting around as a serpent without

the use of his arms and legs. It was simply a matter of curving one's spine correctly...

Harry flailed and squirmed, but his spine obstinately refused to curve. Finally, out of sheer frustration, he transformed into a snake. That was much better. Not only could he now wriggle his body in proper side-to-side waves, he was tiny enough to crawl easily out of the ropes. Yet although more mobile as a snake, Harry was still disoriented and badly hurt. He had to get away from there, his instincts told him, it wasn't safe. He needed to find a place to hide and rest.

Harry fluttered his tongue. A peculiar smell rode the evening breeze. Strangely drawn, he glided through the undergrowth in its direction, managing a fair turn of speed in spite of his weakened condition. Soon Harry was out of the Forest and heading for the lake. The smell was noticeably stronger now. It appeared to be coming from — there! A wickerwork cavern rose up from the muddy shore as though it had sprouted there. Harry slithered gratefully inside and coiled up to sleep.

Some time later he was woken by a bright light and a cry of triumph. His burrow was wrenched violently upwards, flinging him about. Before Harry could get his bearings, a hand reached in, gripped his neck tightly and pulled him out. Malfoy's grotesquely enlarged face filled Harry's vision.

Harry was shaken to and fro as Malfoy rummaged in the pocket of his robes. Then something hard but warm touched his head. Malfoy drew his wand and spoke an

incantation. The warmth grew blazingly hot, coursing through Harry's body, soaking into his very bones.

Malfoy dropped Harry back into the Snake Basket. Harry gazed upwards. He could see stars through the mouth of the basket. Malfoy's spell had driven away most of the pain and dizziness he'd been suffering, and the night sky seemed to call to him. A fresh wave of heat surged over Harry. He shot straight up out of the basket like a bullet from a gun.

It was as if he was riding a Firebolt — as if he *was* a Firebolt. Wind whipped past him; all of Hogwarts was receding below. He could see Malfoy and Pansy standing by the lake, gaping down at the burning Snake Basket. He could see the castle, the vegetable gardens, the greenhouses, the Whomping Willow... and Hagrid's hut.

Harry went into a steep dive. The ground rushed towards him and he did not pull up. The force of his impact sent a shock through his entire body, yet he felt no pain.

Harry clambered out of the smoking crater made by his landing. A door as tall as a cathedral loomed in front of him. It swung magically open as he approached and closed behind him once he had crossed the threshold. He found himself inside a vast, dimly lit room. Its cupboards and ceiling were full of food, and there was gold in the pockets of the great black overcoat hanging by the door. Warm embers glowed invitingly in the fire.

As Harry was gathering his coils to slither towards it, a low, sleepy voice growled, 'Who's there?'

'It's me, Harry,' said Harry.

He felt an almighty thud as two gigantic feet hit

the floor and heard massive fingers scrabbling at the bedpost. Hagrid lit his lamp. Harry swiftly changed back into himself.

A small, flinty object bounced off the end of his nose and the pain in his head returned, worse than ever. He collapsed against the door-frame and slid to the floor. Then Hagrid, wearing a voluminous canary-yellow nightshirt, was bending anxiously over him.

'Yeh've got blood in yer hair! What's happened?'

Harry looked up at Hagrid owlishly. 'Malfoy kicked me in the head. He was doing that spell you didn't want him to.'

Hagrid threw on his overcoat, scooped Harry up in one arm, flung open the door with the other and began striding across the lawn.

'Hagrid!' said Harry indignantly. 'I can walk!'

It was just as well that Hagrid didn't take him up on this. Merely lifting his head made Harry feel horribly sick and dizzy. Perhaps it *would* be best to let Hagrid carry him, Harry thought, so that he himself could concentrate on not throwing up. He had the oddest notion that this was not the first time Hagrid had done so, but trying to remember the previous occasion only made his skull pound harder...

Harry tugged at the giant's beard. 'Who're you?' he asked irritably. 'Where's my mum?'

The giant threw him a worried look and stepped up its pace.

'Jus' hang on, now, Harry, yeh're gonna be fine. Madam Pomfrey'll have yeh right in no time.'

'Oh — oh, right, Hagrid,' muttered Harry, sinking back.



Next thing he knew, Hagrid was setting him carefully down on a bed in the hospital wing.

'You jus' lie still,' he said. 'I'll go an' fetch Madam Pomfrey.'

Hagrid quickly reappeared with the Hogwarts matron, who clucked over Harry's injury and gave him a potion. Harry drifted off to sleep shortly after drinking it, but he didn't rest easily. He dreamed he was a prisoner again in the Dursleys' smallest bedroom. Hot, bright sunlight poured through the window and Ron was hovering above the trees in a golden car. Harry tried to fly up to meet him, but Uncle Vernon clutched at his ankles with hands as cold as iron...

Harry awoke at the first light of dawn in an unfamiliar room. He was lying on his front with his head at the foot of the bed. When he attempted to roll over, he discovered that his feet had been chained to the headboard. As there was no one about, Harry freed himself by the simple expedient of changing into a snake and back.

There was a jug of water on the bedside table. Harry drank nearly half of it, then checked the door, which wasn't locked. He set off down the corridor outside. A second door led him to the main hospital wing, where his attention was drawn to an apothecary cabinet at the other side of the ward. He went over to it and pulled open a drawer, which turned out to be full of chocolate.

As Harry was starting on his third piece, a voice behind him said in an incensed whisper, *'What do you think you're doing?'*

Harry suddenly realised that he was eating his

way through Madam Pomfrey's medicine chest.

'I was hungry...' he said lamely.

'Back to bed at once,' she stormed, grabbing him by the arm and hustling him across the ward and back up the corridor. When they reached Harry's room, Madam Pomfrey saw the manacles lying unopened on the bed and stopped short. 'How in heaven's name did you —'

'Er — magic?' said Harry. His eyes narrowed. 'What's that you've got round your neck?'

Madam Pomfrey's hand flew to her throat. 'This? It's my mediwitch's amulet...'

She pushed the chains aside so that Harry could get into bed right side up and conjured him a bowl of porridge.

'I don't suppose you recall how you came to be injured?' she said as he ate.

'Malfoy kicked me in the head,' said Harry.

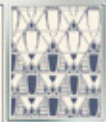
'Yes, Hagrid said you told him that,' said Madam Pomfrey, 'but you're positive he did nothing else to you?'


'I'd caught him casting a spell to catch snakes,' said Harry. 'Hagrid said it was almost Dark Magic.'

Madam Pomfrey eyed Harry dubiously but didn't press him further. She would not permit him return to Gryffindor Tower, however, insisting he remained in the hospital wing for observation.

Harry lay in his bed feeling very stupid. What had got into him to go chasing after Malfoy like that, alone and without his Cloak or his wand? He was lucky Malfoy hadn't decided not to bother with the snake and finished him off then and there.

When Ron and Hermione showed up to visit Harry





later in the day, their expressions of deep concern made Harry feel all the worse. This was the third time in less than a year that his own poor judgement had nearly got him killed. They'd be furious with him, especially Ron. Why hadn't Harry woken Ron up when he saw what Malfoy was up to, or gone and found a teacher?

Harry briefly considered telling Ron and Hermione that he'd banged his head on the bedside cabinet whilst climbing out of his four-poster, but of course they'd soon learn the truth from Hagrid, if they hadn't already.

'Look, I'm really sorry about last night —' he began.

'What happened last night?' said Ron tensely.

'I woke up and saw Malfoy messing with the Snake Baskets —'

'What, again?' said Hermione, frowning. 'Hagrid told me he'd chucked them all in the fire —'

'I expect he did, afterwards,' said Harry. 'Anyway, I went running down to stop him. I don't know, I must not've been properly awake. Malfoy tied me up and kicked me in the head —'

Ron and Hermione exchanged nervous glances.

'Harry, that was last week, not last night,' said Ron.

'You've been in hospital wing for almost four days.'

'*What?*' said Harry.

'You were delirious,' said Hermione in a trembling voice. 'You had a fever — you got so hot the sheets caught on fire. Madam Pomfrey had to put an Unburnable Charm on the bed, that's when she moved you to a private room. Then you started flying, really flying, which is supposed to be impossible. You kept

trying to go out the window, so she borrowed some of Filch's manacles and chained you down.'

'Nobody knew what was wrong with you,' said Ron. 'Potions lessons were cancelled on Monday, Snape was so busy brewing stuff for Madam Pomfrey to try giving you. Dumbledore was going to call in a specialist from St Mungo's if that last batch hadn't worked.'

Harry stared at Ron in astonishment. Then his gaze snapped back to Hermione.

'What's that you've got round your neck?'



It was another day and a half before Madam Pomfrey agreed to let Harry leave the ward. He felt perfectly normal. Strain his memory as he might, he could recall none of the behaviour Ron and Hermione had described. Whatever damage Malfoy had done by kicking him in the head and turning him into an Aitvaras had evidently been completely mended.

In Harry's absence, a fashion for gold jewellery had sprung up overnight amongst the girls (and even some of the boys) at Hogwarts. His fellow Gryffindors were caching food and Galleons in their dormitories like Muggle survivalists battening down for a nuclear war — maybe Harry's accident had finally persuaded them to take the threat of Voldemort seriously.

Rumours of his bizarre indisposition had definitely spread. People eyed Harry furtively at breakfast, although nothing to how they had done the previous year after Cedric's death. That was one consolation: as humiliating as it was to have let Malfoy get

the drop on him, at least this year nobody had been murdered... yet.

Malfoy himself was trudging around the school with the look of a man faced with the end of the world, or his own execution. This was not because of any punishment for his attack on Harry. Malfoy and Pansy had managed to sneak back into the Slytherin dormitories with no one the wiser whilst Hagrid was bringing Harry to the hospital wing. When confronted by Hagrid next morning, Malfoy denied everything, maintaining that Harry had hit his head walking into a tree and hallucinated the whole incident. As Hagrid had already destroyed the Snake Baskets, he had no evidence to the contrary.

No, it was clear that what Malfoy was dreading was going home with his mission for Voldemort uncompleted. Harry had hoped Malfoy would have the sense to blame his illness on an Aitvaras bite, but apparently he did not. That night, Harry fell asleep brooding over how he might suggest this course of action to Malfoy without giving away his secret...

High above the clouds, Harry was flying. A fiery snake once more, he sizzled across the sky, then started abruptly to descend. He was plummeting towards a grey stone building — either a large, showy manor or a small, plain castle.

Harry dropped into one of its many chimneys. The rising hot air broke his fall, so that he landed gently in the fireplace. He settled himself amidst the crackling flames, feeling pleasantly warm and contented. Then he caught a whiff of the wizard sitting at the desk in front of

the fire. It had been months since Harry had last smelled that curious mixture of human and snake, but he would never forget the scent of Lord Voldemort.

There was anger in Voldemort's smell and, more alarmingly, there was excitement — the same excitement he always smelled of when he was tormenting his servants. Harry could smell fear on the draught of a door at the far side of the room, and he suspected that it was only too well justified.

Voldemort shifted in his seat. The door opened and the frightened smell grew much stronger. Odd shuffling vibrations travelled through the floor.

'So,' said Voldemort. 'The end of another year at Hogwarts... and Harry Potter is still alive.'

'My Lord —' said a terrified voice.

Though the desk blocked Harry's view of its owner, he had no difficulty identifying the voice as Lucius Malfoy's.

'I told you, did I not, that this was to be your last chance?' said Voldemort conversationally.


'My Lord, it was Dumbledore, he must have found out,' said Mr Malfoy rapidly. 'Snape must have told him...'

'Indeed?' said Voldemort coldly. 'Unless *someone* was foolish enough to mention it to him, Snape did not know.'

'No — no, my Lord, I swear, I didn't —'

'Many years ago, I was given reason to doubt Snape's dedication to our cause. He offered me a rather convincing proof of his loyalty. Surely you have not forgotten this?'

The smell of dread coming from Lucius Malfoy increased tenfold.



‘Yes...’ hissed Voldemort. ‘I said I would hold you personally responsible... but truly the failure was your son’s... it hardly seems fair that you should suffer for his blundering. Bring him here... I’m certain we can settle upon an appropriate punishment...’

‘Y-yes, my Lord,’ said Mr Malfoy in a barely audible tone.

Harry felt him crawl out of the room. The door swung shut and Voldemort’s high, mad laughter filled the air. He swivelled his chair to face the fire. Harry gazed, petrified, into the gleaming red eyes —

‘Harry, wake up! It’s eight-thirty!’

He was back in Gryffindor Tower. Ron had drawn the curtains of his four-poster and was looking worriedly down at him. Harry climbed shakily out of bed.

‘OK there, Harry?’ said Ron. ‘Not having a relapse, are you?’

‘No,’ said Harry. ‘I had a dream.’

Harry and Ron met up with Hermione in the common room and Harry recounted what he’d dreamed.

‘And when Voldemort was talking about a punishment for Malfoy — he’s going to kill him. He’s going to have his father bring him there, and he’s going to kill him.’

‘How can you be sure?’ said Hermione in a slightly higher voice than usual.

‘I could smell it on him,’ said Harry quietly. He stared into the fire. ‘Voldemort hates the Malfoys, he hates them because their blood is purer than his. It’s not just the Muggle-born who want to watch out for Voldemort ever really gets in power...’

‘Does Malfoy’s father realise?’ said Ron.

Harry remembered Lucius Malfoy’s panic-stricken odour.

‘Yeah...’ he said. ‘He realises.’

Harry slumped in his armchair. Another year, another death... it should have been Harry, but Malfoy would die in his place... just as Cedric had done.

‘I need to tell Dumbledore,’ he said abruptly.

As Harry strode along the corridors to the Headmaster’s office, he couldn’t help thinking that telling Dumbledore wasn’t going to do much good. Dumbledore could scarcely refuse to send a student home to his parents, even if they were planning to hand him over to Voldemort. Perhaps Malfoy could go into hiding in one of the secret passageways... Harry could lend him his Invisibility Cloak... but would Malfoy believe Harry that Voldemort intended to murder him if his father told him otherwise?

Harry drew level with the gargoyle. Just as he was opening his mouth to speak the password, it hopped aside on its own. The wall behind it split apart, leaving Harry face to face with Lucius Malfoy.

It would have been impossible to say which of them was more appalled at seeing the other. Mr Malfoy gave Harry a look of such utmost loathing that it made Snape’s glowers seem friendly and benign in comparison. Harry gaped back at him in horror. Before Mr Malfoy could react, Harry dodged past him, bolted up the moving staircase two steps at a time and went skidding into Dumbledore’s office.

‘Mr Malfoy — he’s come to take Draco, hasn’t he?’ Harry gasped. ‘You can’t let him, Voldemort will kill

him, I had a dream —'

Funnily enough, Dumbledore did not appear to be at all distressed at receiving this information.

'Have you now?' he said calmly. 'Tell me about your dream.'

Harry told him.

'Could we say that the snake *did* bite me?' Harry asked Dumbledore. 'Only Hagrid had an antidote in his hut, and that's why I didn't die...'

But Harry had a nasty suspicion that this would not be enough to satisfy Voldemort. At the close of his interview with Lucius Malfoy, Voldemort hadn't even smelled particularly angry any more. It was as though murdering Draco was a treat he was looking forward to.

'I'm afraid we could not,' said Dumbledore. 'The Aitvaras is not, strictly speaking, a venomous serpent. Its fangs inject a concentrated form of liquid fire — the victim is burnt to ash in a matter of moments. There is no known antidote, and no time to administer it even if one was discovered.'

'But Malfoy —' said Harry. 'Voldemort will kill him. Can't you do *anything*?'

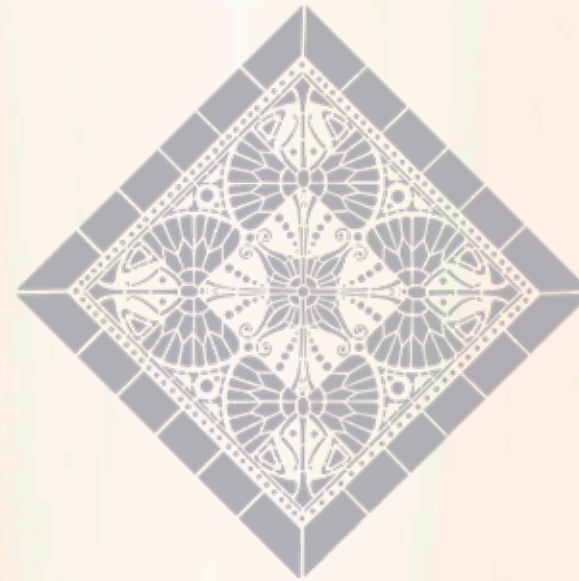
'As it happens, I can,' said Dumbledore with a sudden, brilliant smile. 'You were wrong about Lucius. He did not come to Hogwarts to take Draco away, but rather... to seek asylum. I was not certain whether to trust him — I could not risk having Voldemort plant a spy on us yet again. But as your dream has confirmed that he is acting in good faith, I have no more qualms...'

Humming to himself, Dumbledore took a piece of

parchment from the drawer of his desk and reached for a quill.

'Yes... I shall be accepting Mr Malfoy's application for the post of Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.'

* THE END *



HARMLESS AND EASILY DOMESTICATED



1. THE AUGUREY

H

ARRY'S FIRST DIVINATION lesson of the year was a short one. Professor Trelawney was extremely put out to find he'd survived the summer. She shot glances of frustrated bafflement in his direction all through her lecture on animal omens and dismissed the class a quarter hour early.

Because of this, Harry and Ron arrived at Hagrid's cabin for Care of Magical Creatures before anyone else. They found Hagrid sitting on an overturned cast-iron cauldron that was almost as big as the Dursleys' kitchen table. He looked to be in scarcely a better temper than Professor Trelawney. A bucket-sized pewter tankard, nearly empty, lay on the ground beside him.

'What's up, Hagrid?' said Harry.

'Aaah, I dunno abou' me classes this year, Harry,' Hagrid sighed. 'Ministry o' Magic's bin interferin' ...say I can on'y teach creatures that've been classified XX — harmless an' eas'ly domesticated.' He gazed moodily into the tankard, then added, 'An' X, but that's jus' Flobberworms.'

'And Horklumps, surely?' said Hermione, who



had come strolling down the sloping lawn the join them.

‘There’ll be no Horklumps comin’ through the Hogwarts gates s’long as I’m Keeper of Keys and Grounds!’ Hagrid growled.

Harry and Ron looked at each other, eyebrows raised. What sort of magical creature could be so unpleasant that even Hagrid wanted nothing to do with it?

‘An’ here I was plannin’ ter get yeh some Chimaera eggs ter hatch...’ said Hagrid in deep disgruntlement.

Once the rest of the students had gathered round his hut, Hagrid went inside and came out again carrying a covered cage.

‘We’re studyin’ Augureys today,’ he told them, and jerked the cover off the cage.

Harry had never imagined he’d encounter a bird uglier than a phoenix on a Burning Day, but the Augurey was definitely that. Scrawny and vulture-like, its feathers a sickly greenish shade of black, the Augurey stood huddled on its perch gazing out at them mournfully.

‘Now the cry of the Augurey is so frightenin’,’ said Hagrid, for the first time showing a glimmer of his old enthusiasm, ‘that wizards’ve died o’ hearin’ it.’

‘Died!’ exclaimed Hermione. She whipped out her copy of *FANTASTIC BEASTS AND WHERE TO FIND THEM* and started flicking through the pages. If the Augurey’s voice was anything like its appearance, however, Harry could well believe Hagrid’s claim.

‘But there’s on’y one thing that’ll make an Augurey sing,’ Hagrid went on, ‘an’ tha’s rain.’

He put the cage on top of the massive cauldron, drew his flowery pink umbrella from his overcoat and waved it at the Augurey.

Nothing happened. Hagrid lowered the umbrella, looking crestfallen.

‘So — so yeh’ve gotta wait fer some rain. You lot keep a watch on the Augurey. I’ll be in me house... doin’ stuff.’

He picked up the pewter tankard and stumped off into his cabin.

As soon as Hagrid was out of earshot, Malfoy began to snicker. ‘That brainless oaf thought he could convince an Augurey it was going to rain by waving an umbrella at it? What an utter pillock!’

‘He must’ve been trying to do a weather spell,’ Hermione muttered to Harry and Ron (the three of them were fairly certain that Hagrid’s pink umbrella held the pieces of his broken wand). ‘That’s illegal, and dangerous, and *very* advanced...’

‘Lucky it didn’t work, then,’ Ron muttered back.

For several minutes they stood watching the Augurey, which was very boring. Hermione went back to reading *FANTASTIC BEASTS*.

‘It says here that the feathers of the Augurey will repel ink,’ she said brightly. ‘Let’s test it out, shall we?’

Hermione reached through the bars of the cage and plucked a feather from the Augurey’s tail. The Augurey gave her a tragic look but remained weirdly silent. Hermione took out an ink bottle, unscrewed the top and dipped the Augurey-feather quill into it.

SPLAT!



Ink shot from the bottle, hitting Hermione square in the face. She emitted an outraged squawk. The Slytherins fell about howling with laughter.

'There's *mud* in your eye, Granger,' gasped Malfoy, putting particular emphasis on the word 'mud'.

Hermione rounded on him, jaw rigid with fury, and yanked out her wand. For a moment Harry thought she was going to curse Malfoy, but instead Hermione pointed the wand at her own head.

'*Dimitto!*' she snarled.

The ink flew off Hermione's face. Most of it landed on Malfoy, who gave a loud yell. Hagrid poked his head out the door of his hut to see what was the matter.

'She threw ink on me!' complained Malfoy.

'Don' worry,' Hagrid told him, 'it'll wash off.'

He stepped out the cabin, lifted the water barrel and began striding towards Malfoy. Suddenly a great throbbing moan of agony filled the air. The low, terrible sound pierced at Harry's heart like a shard of ice. The whole class stood transfixed with horror. Hagrid stumbled and the contents of the barrel went flying.

All of the students were liberally splattered. Malfoy, who had been standing directly in Hagrid's path, was drenched to the skin. When the last of the water had hit the earth, the Augurey mercifully went quiet, and the spell of its voice was broken.

'Now look what you've done!' said Malfoy in a fury.

'Got the ink off, didn' it?' said Hagrid shortly. He held out a hand to Malfoy. 'Take off yer robes, I'll wring 'em out fer yeh.'

Malfoy backed away from him, arms folded pro-

ductively across his chest. Hagrid let his hand drop (Pansy Parkinson and her gang of Slytherin girls looked disappointed).

Hagrid's eyes travelled over his dampened students. 'Er — yeah... Now that yeh've heard the Augurey, yeh might' as well get back ter the castle an' dry off...'

Shivering slightly, the Care of Magical Creatures class started trudging up to the school.

'A *proper* teacher could have cast a Drying Charm,' Malfoy was saying in an angry hiss. 'If I catch cold, my *father* —'

'Nex' lesson's Bowtruckles!' Hagrid boomed across the grounds at them.

'Oh, good,' said Ron. 'Perhaps next lesson Malfoy'll get his eyes gouged out.'

Hermione looked askance at this. She extracted her copy of *FANTASTIC BEASTS* from her bag and turned to the entry on Bowtruckles. After reading over it, she said in a shocked tone, 'These things are considered *harmless*?'

2.

THE CLABBERT

Despite Hagrid's promise to bring a Bowtruckle to the next Care of Magical Creatures lesson, they continued to study Augureys another fortnight. Then one cool Monday morning in mid-September, eight enormous great horned owls sailed into the Great Hall carrying a large wooden crate suspended between them in a net of rope.

BOOM!



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The owls dropped their burden at the staff table in front of Hagrid, sending his toast and kippers flying. When Hagrid leant down to inspect the crate, a delighted expression came over his face. Professor Vector, whose breakfast had also been squashed by the delivery, looked considerably less delighted.

After Hagrid finished eating, Harry, Ron and Hermione followed him out of the Great Hall. As they drew closer, Harry could make out the words that were daubed on each side of the crate: Joe-Bob's Auror Surplus Depot, Irrigation Ditch, Oklahoma.

'What's that you've got there, Hagrid?' said Harry.

'Clabbert,' said Hagrid proudly. 'All the way from America. Didn' reckon it'd get here so soon.' He lowered his voice slightly. 'Good thing it did, though. Bin spendin' half me life trampin' through the Forest lately, an' I haven' seen a single Bowtruckle.'

'I'm amazed it got here at all,' snorted Ron.

The crate was addressed to:

Rubious Hargid

The Hut at the Edge of the Forgotten Forest

Hog Wars

England

Hermione giggled. 'The Department of Witchcraft and Wizardry — that's what the Americans call their Ministry of Magic — must have sent the box through customs special delivery when they saw what was inside it.'

Harry and Ron were halfway to Divination before it occurred to Harry to wonder: if Clabberts were supposed to be harmless, why had the American Ministry been so keen to get rid of that one?



Once the class had gathered for Care of Magical Creatures, Hagrid led them round the back of his hut where a cage hung from a small, scrubby oak tree. In it was a creature that appeared to be part monkey and part frog, with horns and a massive white lump in the centre of its forehead.

'Great lesson today,' said Hagrid happily. 'We're gonna find out how dangerous yeh are! This's a Clabbert...'

He explained that the pustule on the Clabbert's head would turn red and glow when danger approached — how brightly indicated how much danger.

'Erm — do you mean dangerous as in magically powerful,' asked Hermione, 'or dangerous as in violent?'

'I mean dangerous as in dangerous,' said Hagrid.

He stood directly in front of Clabbert and glared at it. Its pustule glowed very brightly indeed.

Hagrid had the students take it in turns to step up to the Clabbert, instructing them to 'think dangerous thoughts'. Generally speaking, boys were more dangerous than girls and Slytherins more dangerous than Gryffindors, with Malfoy being the most dangerous Slytherin boy of all. Hermione, however, proved to be nearly as dangerous as Malfoy (Millicent Bulstrode, the former most dangerous girl, cracked her knuckles ominously at this), and Neville Longbottom was nearly as dangerous as Hermione, which Harry would never have expected.

Then it was Harry's turn. He faced the Clabbert, doing his best to mimic Hagrid's frightening scowl.

There was a blinding flash of scarlet light; for a brief instant Harry thought someone had cast a Stunning Spell. Something stung at his cheeks. Harry blinked, trying to clear his vision, and realised that his glasses were speckled with drops of thick yellowish white liquid. He lifted his hands to take them off, but Hagrid beat him to it.

'Keep still, Harry,' Hagrid ordered.

He gripped Harry's head between his thumb and forefinger and began scraping his face with what felt like a garden trowel (but was in fact merely a Hagrid-sized penknife).

'What happened?' said Harry, the moment Hagrid let him go.

'Yeh popped it,' said Hagrid. 'Got ter collect the pus.'

He transferred the pus he'd removed from Harry's face to a small jam jar and turned his attention to Harry's glasses.

'Real useful fer potions, see. Yeh drink a potion made with Clabbert pus an' it won' work right away. It'll stay in yer blood, up ter seven years — until you really need it. On'y it's gotta be popped naturally, an' most things dangerous enough ter pop a Clabbert's pustule'll kill any wizards nearby. Professor Snape'll be really happy with this,' he added in satisfaction, as he scraped the last bit of pus from Harry's glasses and handed them back to him.

'Just what I've always wanted,' muttered Harry, rubbing at his face, 'to make Snape happy.'

'I wanted to find out how dangerous *I* am,' said Ron crossly — he had been standing behind Harry in the queue.

'How long will it take for the pustule to grow back?'

'Oh, aroun' seven years,' said Hagrid, offhand. 'Well, I reckon that's all fer today... next lesson's Bowtruckles!'

'Next time we do anything like this, I'm going ahead of you,' grumbled Ron as they walked up to the castle.

'Fine,' said Harry, annoyed. 'D'you think I made the Clabbert pop its pustule on purpose? I wouldn't've got near the thing if I'd known that could happen!'

He rubbed his face (which was starting to itch rather painfully) again.

When they reached the Transfiguration classroom, Professor McGonagall took one look at Harry and sent him straight to the hospital wing. The Clabbert pus had raised angry welts on his skin; Madam Pomfrey applied a dab of paste that smelled suspiciously of Bubotubers to each one. This stopped the itching, but by dinnertime Harry's face was still noticeably red and blotched. He had to endure being called 'Spotty Potty' by Malfoy and the rest of the Slytherins as he crossed the Great Hall to the Gryffindor table.

'But you don't really look spotty, you know...' said Hermione comfortingly, then spoiled it by tittering, '...more as though you did a really bad job shaving.'

Then she had to explain what shaving was to Ron — it seemed wizards used Beard Banishing Charms instead.

At the staff table Harry saw Hagrid give the jar of pus to Snape, who did indeed look quite pleased. He looked even more pleased when Hagrid gestured towards Harry, apparently recounting the manner in which the pus had been procured. Snape turned to

survey Harry's splodgy face with a nasty smirk.

Harry stuck his fork vindictively into a jacket potato.

'I miss the Skrewts,' he said.

'Look on the bright side,' Ron advised him. 'You're more dangerous than Malfoy.'

* INTERLUDE *

THE REDNECK WIZARD

It was over a week before Harry's face returned to normal. The de-pustuled Clabbert took up residence in the oak behind Hagrid's hut. The class spent their next few lessons preparing a variety of slimy, squelchy and foul-smelling things for it to eat, following a special pus-building diet Hagrid had drawn up. Harry was never able to feed these unappetising dishes the Clabbert himself, as it retreated to the top-most branches of the tree whenever he approached.

Hagrid was still having no luck finding a Bowtruckle, which in Harry's opinion was just as well. After his experience of the Clabbert, he thought it entirely possible someone actually would have their eyes gouged out. Nonetheless, when Harry, Ron and Hermione went to visit Hagrid Sunday after lunch, he was looking so depressed that when he asked them to help with his search, they couldn't bring themselves to refuse.

'If I don' find a Bowtruckle today, it'll be Diricawls next lesson, an' they're really borin', Hagrid told them gloomily.

'Can we study Nifflers again instead?' said Ron.

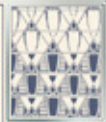
'You might want to try reading FANTASTIC BEASTS AND WHERE TO FIND THEM, instead of just scribbling in Harry's copy,' said Hermione waspishly. 'Nifflers are rated XXX, Hagrid would get in trouble with the Ministry if he brought one to class.'

Harry couldn't help thinking that it was most unfair (and typical of the Ministry of Magic) that Augureys and Clabberts were classified harmless whilst friendly, useful Nifflers were not. But as the Ministry was unlikely to change their rankings overnight on his say-so, off he set with Ron, Hermione and Hagrid to hunt for Bowtruckles.

Going into the Forbidden Forest wasn't what you could call a lark at the best of times, and the damp, chilly October weather did nothing to make this endeavour a more pleasant one. All the Bowtruckles seemed to be sensibly staying in their nests. Three hours later, their search was brought to an ignominious conclusion when Ron blundered into an abandoned Acromantula web and nearly had heart failure.

When they got back to Hagrid's cabin, Hagrid and Ron remained outside to try and get the webs off Ron's robes, whilst Harry and Hermione went in to make hot chocolate. Harry filled the kettle with water and carried it to the fire. The crate the Clabbert had arrived in stood by the hearth; apparently Hagrid was using the packing materials for kindling. As Harry waited for the kettle to boil, he spotted a piece of parchment that had fallen out. He picked it up and flicked his eyes over it.

'Hermione?' said Harry. 'What's a redneck wizard?'



'A *what* wizard?' said Hermione, who was ferreting for cocoa in Hagrid's cupboard.

'A redneck wizard,' said Harry. 'Red. Neck. There was a parchment about them in the Clabbert's crate.'

'Oh, a redneck,' said Hermione. 'A redneck is someone who lives in the American South. It's a bit of an insult, really — an offensive stereotype. Rather like —' she threw a quick look around to make sure Hagrid was nowhere nearby, '— people in Britain with West Country accents.'

'Ah,' said Harry.

He checked the kettle. It still wasn't boiling. For lack of anything better to do, he began reading about redneck wizards. Most of it didn't make much sense:

You Might Be a Redneck Wizard If:

- You have ever heard the phrase, "*Don't let the Muggles get y'all down.*"
- Your robe is a camouflage color.
- You have ever used your wand to open a bottle of Boone's Farm Strawberry Hill.¹
- At least one door of your enchanted Ford Anglia is primer colored.²
- You have ever used magic in conjunction with fishing/bowling.³
- Voldemort has ever said to you, "Shoot, son, come on over to the Dark side... it'll be a hoot."

Harry was surprised to see Voldemort's name written out; even in print most wizards referred to him as You-Know-Who. Perhaps in America they were more relaxed about saying the name. He went on reading:

- You have Bicorn horns on the front of your Firebolt.

- You can easily describe the taste of a Puffskein.
- You have ever had a flying carpet up on blocks in your yard.
- You ever lost an eye during a wizard duel because you had to spit.
- The worst part of going into the Forbidden Forest is the dadgum skeeters.
- You think Hagrid would look better in a flannel cause he looks like a big sissy in that moleskin waistcoat.
- In your opinion, that Snape feller just "ain't right."

Harry's mouth fell open. 'Hermione!' he said loudly. 'This parchment from America has stuff about Hagrid and Snape on it! Come have a look!'

'Hang on, I'm washing the milk jug,' said Hermione. Harry stared back down at the parchment:

- Trolls are offended by your body odor.
- You have ever used magic to get yourself another beer so you didn't have to wait for a commercial.
- You have ever used sparks from your wand to get the barbecue grill to light.
- Your flying carpet is woven in the pattern of a confederate flag.
- You have the doors of your enchanted Ford Anglia welded shut and you have to get in through the window.
- You ever fantasized about Cho Chang wearing Daisy Duke shorts.⁴

Harry felt himself blush to the roots of his hair. Unfortunately Hermione chose exactly that moment to walk over and pluck the parchment out of his hand. Face burning, he tried frantically to think of a way to distract her before she reached the part about Cho, but once Hermione started reading, there was

very little that could make her stop.

'Oh!' squeaked Hermione. Her cheeks went bright crimson. 'I — I know why this parchment mentions Hagrid and Snape and — and other people,' she said rather rapidly. 'It's got a Personalisation Charm on it. See — when I'm holding it, it says "redneck witch" instead of "redneck wizard".'

Harry noticed she kept the item that described fantasising about — well, presumably not Cho — carefully covered with her thumb.

'Let's have it back, then,' he said, tugging the parchment away from her.

'*You ever fantasized about Cho Chang*' now read '*You ever fantasized about Ron Weasley*'. As Hermione's fingers left the parchment, the letters rearranged themselves. For a horrible instant, the words became '*You ever fantasized about that Snape feller*', then mercifully returned to Cho.

Harry finished reading the list:

- Although you had to destroy his diary, you kinda thought that Tom Riddle had a pretty good handle on how to treat his women.
- You have ever accidentally referred to the Slytherins as "them damn Yankees."
- You have a cousin who bears a strong resemblance to Fluffy.
- You suggested that they outfit the Gryffindor common room with redwood deck.⁵
- You were the only person drinking Jack Daniels on the rocks in the Leaky Cauldron scene.⁶
- Voldemort has ever told you, "I am your grandfather, Harry — both of them!"

It took Harry several seconds to work that last one out. 'Eurgh!'

He crumpled up the parchment and tossed it into fire.

3.

THE DIRICAWL

Next Care of Magical Creatures lesson, Hagrid led the class to the small vegetable patch behind his house. A peculiar-looking bird was pecking contentedly amongst the cauliflowers and leeks. It resembled a fat grey chicken, with a long curving neck and a great golden hook of a beak.

'Now, this's a Diricawl,' said Hagrid. 'What yeh need ter remember about Diricawls is they'll disappear at the firs' sign o' danger —'

Harry stepped forward to take a closer look. With a soft, feathery *pop*, the Diricawl vanished.

'Ah, yeah, like that,' said Hagrid. He gazed at the empty space where the Diricawl had been, then said brightly, 'Nex' lesson is Bowtruckles!'

'Bet it's not,' muttered Ron.

4.

THE CHIZPURFLES

Harry had just added a pinch of shredded starchwort to his cauldron and was reaching for a lungfish liver, when —

PLOP!

His first thought was that Malfoy had thrown a

Shrivelfig at him. His second thought was that that was the largest, roundest, plumpest Shrivelfig he'd ever seen in his life. His third thought was that Shrivelfigs didn't have legs.

'Blimey,' said Ron, peering into Harry's cauldron, 'what's that?'

Hermione leant over to have a look and jumped back with a squeak of horror.

'It's a Chizpurfle!'

'What, those things Hagrid showed us last lesson?' said Ron. 'No way, it's *massive*...'

As Ron had predicted, their most recent Care of Magical Creatures class had not been Bowtruckles. Instead Hagrid brought a jar of Chizpurples — small, crab-shaped insects that fed on a variety of magical substances, most notably the blood of other magical creatures. But those Chizpurples had been tiny, barely a twentieth of an inch high. The thing in Harry's cauldron was nearly as big as a Snitch.

'And what is it, pray tell, that makes Mr Potter's work so much more fascinating than your own?' said a soft, dangerous voice behind them. Whilst Harry, Ron and Hermione were engrossed in the Chizpurfle, Professor Snape had stalked over to their table.

'*That,*' said Harry, pointing into the cauldron.

When Snape beheld the Chizpurfle, his face took on an expression of loathing of the sort that he normally bestowed only on Harry.

'Stand back!' he snapped.

Once the three of them were well clear, Snape whipped out his wand and muttered a spell. Harry's

potion erupted and the Chizpurfle shot skywards, ricocheting off the ceiling to land on the table where Pansy Parkinson and Daphne Greengrass were working. The pair of them retreated shrieking to the opposite side of the room, knocking over a jar of peccary bristles in their haste to get away.

Snape swished about and took aim again, but the Chizpurfle leapt off the table just ahead of his hex. Things continued in this manner for some time, Snape jabbing with his wand and hissing curses as the Chizpurfle bounced from wall to wall. Students scattered in its wake; cauldrons were overturned and a number of Snape's jars of horrible things were smashed. The Potions master himself grew steadily more enraged.

Finally Snape got hold of himself. He stood quite still, panting with fury, and waited for the Chizpurfle to settle down. At last it came to rest on a shelf behind his desk. Snape crept slowly forward, wand at the ready. At the edge of the desk he drew to halt and in a voice scarcely louder than a whisper said, '*Avada Kedavra.*'

In a flash of emerald light the Chizpurfle exploded, spraying the front of the room in general and Snape in particular with foul-smelling liquid. Not even pausing to clean himself up, Snape stormed over to the store-cupboard and took out what appeared to be a crock of honey. He set it on his desk, pulled off the lid, tapped it with his wand and said, '*Accio Chizpurples.*'

Black specks of varying sizes converged on the crock from all around the room. A noticeable quantity of them emerged from Snape's slime-drenched robes and hair, but after the way he'd dealt with the first Chizpurfle not



even Ron was brave enough to snigger at him.



That night in the Great Hall, Harry, Ron and Hermione saw Snape stop to have a word with Hagrid at the staff table. Snape looked wrathful; Hagrid was making placating gestures with his enormous hands. They could easily guess what that was about.

'You really can't blame Professor Snape for being upset,' said Hermione ('Just watch me,' muttered Ron). 'Chizpurfle infestations can destroy a Potions laboratory if they aren't brought under control quickly enough. The one in your cauldron must have been *scoffing* ingredients to get the size it did.'

After the meal, the three of them waited for Hagrid in the Entrance Hall to find out exactly how much trouble he was in.

'Nah, Professor Snape wasn't too happy about the Chizpurples,' said Hagrid, 'but I told him I knew a good private exterminator, an' I'd be sendin' him an owl fir's' thing tomorrow mornin'...'

Next evening at dinner, an extra chair had been added to the end of the staff table. Sitting in it was none other than Professor Lupin. A tide of shocked whispers swept over the Great Hall, because of course everyone third year and above knew that he was a werewolf.

'May I introduce Mr Remus Lupin, who has come to Hogwarts to deal with our recent pest control problem,' said Dumbledore brightly. 'He'll be working in various areas of the school over the next fortnight — please give him every cooperation.'

In the days that followed, older students delighted in scaring younger ones with lurid and entirely made-up stories about Lupin's tenure as Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher.

'Obvious, really, why the Ministry never caught Sirius Black,' Harry overheard Fred and George telling a group of petrified second-years. 'That night he was loose in the grounds, Professor Lupin ate him right up!'

Harry wished they wouldn't: Lupin was visibly hurt by the smaller students' fearfulness in his presence. Saturday morning, Harry, Ron and Hermione decided to pay him a visit to cheer him up. The Marauder's Map showed Lupin patrolling near the Slytherin common room, so they headed down the seven flights of stairs from Gryffindor Tower. As they were crossing the Entrance Hall, a tiny figure came pelting up from the dungeons sobbing hysterically and ran headlong into Hermione.

'It's Pagford, isn't it?' she said, helping the little first-year up from the floor. 'What's the matter?'

'V-Vincent!' wailed Pagford. 'The w-werewolf is eating him!'

Harry seized Pagford roughly by the collar, nearly lifting him off his feet.

'Professor Lupin wouldn't eat a student!' he snarled.

Pagford looked up, saw who it was and gave a moan of fright. Harry abruptly realised that he was bullying a boy who was scarcely half his size.

'Er — sorry,' he said, releasing his grip on Pagford and tugging the minute Slytherin's robes straight.

'Harry's right, Jill,' said Hermione sternly (Harry

abruptly realised he'd been bullying a *girl* who was scarcely half his size). 'Professor Lupin wouldn't eat a student. Now tell me what's really going on down there.'

'He is, he is!' shouted Pagford.

She bolted between Ron and Harry and went tearing up marble staircase. Hermione turned as if to go after her, then stopped.

'We'd better see if Professor Lupin's OK,' she said worriedly.

'Yeah,' said Ron. 'Wouldn't put it past Crabbe to try and eat *him*.'

Halfway down the dungeon corridor they met up with Crabbe and Lupin, and for a mad instant Harry thought Ron had been right. Crabbe's long, gorilla arms were wrapped tightly around Lupin's shoulders; his face was buried in Lupin's neck. Then Harry saw that Crabbe was crying. Huge, glistening tears streamed down his cheeks to soak Lupin's robes.

'Walk this way, there's a good lad...' Lupin was saying as he attempted to usher the hulking fifth-year towards the staircase, without much success — Crabbe was taller than he was and considerably heavier.

'Oi!' said Ron furiously. 'Leave him alone!

He sprinted over and dragged Crabbe off Lupin. Crabbe simply batted on to Ron and carried on howling.

'Gerroff me!' choked Ron.

He slammed Crabbe into the stone wall and punched him hard in the stomach.

'Ron, don't hurt him, he's not in his right mind!' said Lupin (unnecessarily in Harry's opinion, as Crabbe barely seemed to notice he'd been hit). 'We

need to get him to Madam Pomfrey. Hermione, if you could work a Mobilicorpus Charm —'

'What is the meaning of this?'

At the foot of the stairs stood Professor Snape. From behind his billowing cloak, little Pagford was peeking out.

'Nothing serious, Severus,' said Lupin calmly. 'We're bringing Mr Crabbe to the hospital wing, he's been at my Glumbumble treacle.'

'You left it lying about for him to find?' spat Snape, his face twisted with hatred. 'You haven't learnt a thing, have you? Endangering students with your carelessness... why Dumbledore let you back into this school, I'll never know...'

'I shall certainly keep a sharper eye out in future,' said Lupin in a steady tone. 'But may I suggest that as Potions master you take stronger measures to drum into your students the dangers of tasting an unknown magical substance?'

Snape shot Lupin a murderous look and took the sobbing Crabbe by the arm.

'Come, Vincent,' he said, and swept off — or rather, tried to sweep off. Snape had a somewhat easier job of bundling Crabbe along than Lupin as he was taller, but he was still fighting very much outside of his weight. The best he could manage was a fast stagger. Pagford trotted ahead of him, casting nervous glances back at Lupin and Harry.

When Snape was out of sight, Lupin sighed deeply, pulled a stone crock from his bag, opened it and said *'Accio Chizpurples.'*

‘I expect I should have been more careful,’ he said heavily, as one or two small black dots sailed towards the crock. ‘But I’d only stepped away for a moment and I never imagined anyone might actually want to eat Glumbumble treacle...’

Harry peered into the crock. The Glumbumble treacle bore a quite strong resemblance to troll snot: thick, cloudy, grey and speckled with the corpses of dead Chizpurples.

‘Definitely not,’ said Harry. ‘Snape was just being horrible.’

‘Mind, I thought you were a bit hard on him,’ Ron told Lupin.

Harry and Hermione gaped, and even Lupin looked mildly astonished. Ron standing up for Snape was rather like Voldemort applying to become an Auror.

Ron grinned at their expressions. ‘Not Snape’s fault those two idiots go around eating everything they see — he’s a Potions master, not a troll trainer!’

5.

THE BOWTRUCKLE

Although there were no more catastrophes on the scale of the Chizpurple infestation, Hagrid’s next few Care of Magical Creatures classes definitely had their share of action.

The gnome escaped, leaving Hagrid in a state of near hysteria over the havoc that would be wreaked upon Hogwarts’ beautifully maintained lawns and gardens. When Crookshanks trotted into the

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Entrance Hall that evening carrying it by the scruff of its neck, Hagrid was so relieved that he swept up the great ginger cat and kissed him.

After that was a series of lessons on Jobberknolls: small, black-speckled blue birds that remained silent their entire lives, only to repeat, backwards, every sound they’d ever heard the instant before they died. Hagrid, who plainly found Jobberknolls quite boring, hung a cage on a hook outside his cabin and instructed the students to keep an eye out for signs of the Jobberknoll’s impending death.

‘Can’t you just kill it?’ Malfoy had asked peevishly.

‘Jobberknolls’re a protected species,’ growled Hagrid. ‘Yeh’ll jus’ have ter be patient, Malfoy.’

This turned out to be a vast understatement, as Hermione discovered whilst consulting *MAGICAL AVIFAUNA OF BRITAIN AND IRELAND* to find out the expected lifespan of a Jobberknoll.

‘The degree to which speckling of the feathers has progressed is indicative of both the age of the Jobberknoll and the efficacy of those feathers as a potions ingredient... Jobberknolls can live upwards of seventy years...’ She looked up from the book in dismay. ‘Hagrid’s Jobberknoll is practically pure blue! Our great-grandchildren may be at Hogwarts to hear it sing, but we certainly won’t!’

Next they learnt about Puffskeins, custard-coloured balls of fur with fantastically long tongues, which they used to search for food. Hagrid attempted to demonstrate this by setting a plate of dead spiders on his front doorstep and taking the Puffskein into

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the back garden. Seconds later, what looked like a slimy pink ribbon came snaking round the hut. It stopped well short of the spiders, however, making a sudden sharp turning in Draco Malfoy's direction.

Malfoy had loudly announced at the beginning of the lesson that no one over the mental age of five retained any interest in Puffskeins, and was now deep in conversation with Pansy Parkinson. The rest of the class watched, fascinated, as the Puffskein's tongue circled behind Malfoy's back, reached stealthily over his shoulder and flicked deftly in and out of his nose, causing Pansy to screech and Malfoy himself to jump nearly a foot in the air.

Hagrid cheered up noticeably when it came time to study Grindylows, although he couldn't teach them much that Professor Lupin hadn't already covered two years ago in Defence Against the Dark Arts. Harry did rather wonder what Fleur Delacour would think of the Ministry's decision to classify Grindylows as harmless.

After the Christmas holidays, a Porlock flew in from Beauxbatons on one of Madam Maxime's elephant-sized winged horses, which according to Newt Scamander were called Abraxans. The winged horse was quite impressive but Harry never got a very good look at the Porlock, as it kept dodging behind the horse's legs to stay out of view.

When Hagrid told them the next lesson would be Bowtruckles, nobody really believed him; he'd been saying this at the end of each class since the start of the year. Amazingly enough, however, when they

turned up the following Monday, Hagrid told them to leave their bags beside his cabin and go with him into the Forbidden Forest. He had apparently, at last, managed to track down a Bowtruckle.

Hermione insisted on bringing along a bag of Honeydukes sweets, which she refused to share with Harry and Ron, to Ron's great annoyance.

'These are for the Bowtruckle, you wouldn't like them,' she snapped, slapping his hand away.

Shouldering a wickedly sharp axe nearly as long as Harry's Firebolt, Hagrid led them down a winding path for a quarter of an hour, then plunged off suddenly into the undergrowth. After fifty feet of bramble and bracken, they arrived at the foot of an ancient, gnarled sycamore.

'You lot stand clear,' Hagrid ordered.

He ran a thumb along the blade of the axe to test its keenness, drew it back and swung. With a shriek of fury, what appeared to be a bundle of twigs detached itself from the tree and launched itself at Hagrid's head, thorny talons outstretched. Hagrid caught the Bowtruckle in his free hand as though it was a long, wooden Snitch. Just before the axe hit the tree, it hissed a very rude word in Parseltongue and turned into a giant rubber snake.

This served only to further enrage the Bowtruckle. It chattered angrily and tried to swipe at Hagrid with its sharp fingers, but couldn't reach over his enormous fist.

'Bowtruckles're normally quite peaceable,' said Hagrid, 'but they get very upset if their tree's threatened.'

As if to confirm Hagrid's words, the Bowtruckle



sank its teeth viciously into his thumb, which seemed mainly to hurt Hagrid's feelings.

'Ron, what have you done with my Honeydukes bag?' said Hermione.

'I haven't touched your Honeydukes bag!' said Ron.

'But I put it down right here... where could it have got to?'

Hermione had just begun rooting amongst the ferns when a thunderous bellow rent the silence of the Forest. They whipped round to see Goyle dancing about, waving a hand that was covered with small, moving brown specks. Hermione's Honeydukes bag lay open at his feet.

The Bowtruckle took advantage of Hagrid's distraction to wriggle free of his grasp. With an almighty bound it leapt onto Goyle, who let out another howl and went bolting off into the depths of the Forest.

'I'll go an' fetch him,' said Hagrid. 'The rest o' yeh, get back ter the school...'

He vanished into the trees after Goyle.

'Those Cockroach Clusters must've been *really fresh*,' said Ron, as they made their way along the path out of the Forest.

'They weren't Cockroach Clusters,' said Hermione. 'Honestly, I suppose you haven't read *FANTASTIC BEASTS AND WHERE TO FIND THEM* yet, either...'

At Hagrid's hut, the class stood by anxiously awaiting his return. The Slytherins were clustered around Malfoy, who was whispering furiously and casting angry glances towards the Forbidden Forest.

'If anything happens to Goyle, Hagrid could be in a

lot of trouble,' said Hermione worriedly.

'Why?' said Harry. 'He's supposed to be teaching harmless creatures — Bowtruckles are classified xx.'

'Unless it was a misprint,' said Hermione, biting her lip.

Half an hour later, Hagrid strode out of the trees in his shirtsleeves, despite it being the middle of an unusually cold January. Goyle was nowhere to be seen.

'Er...' said Ron. 'How come Hagrid's carrying a handbag?'

As Hagrid drew closer, it became clear that the 'handbag' was in fact his moleskin overcoat, tied to the axe by its sleeves and tails to form a sort of litter, in which rode Gregory Goyle. Goyle's eyes were open but he appeared to be in deep shock, staring off into the distance at nothing in particular. One of the sleeves of his robes had been ripped off and there was a nasty bruise on his cheek.

'What happened to him?' said Hermione in a hushed voice.

'Ran inter a tree,' said Hagrid shortly ('A likely story!' spat Draco Malfoy).

Hagrid untied his overcoat and propped Goyle against the wall of the cabin. He went inside and came out again with a large pewter tankard.

'Here, drink this,' he said to Goyle. 'Yeh'll be OK...'

The stuff in the tankard made Goyle cough and splutter, but seemed to bring him back from wherever it was that he'd been. As soon as Goyle was on his feet, Malfoy hustled him off to the castle 'where a proper mediwitch can have a look at him'.



Harry, Ron and Hermione hung back until all the other students had gone.

'Hagrid,' said Hermione seriously, 'Goyle didn't really run into a tree, did he?'

'Ah — no,' said Hagrid. 'He ran inter a spot o' bother with a troll. Don' worry, I got there in time —'

'Goyle was attacked by a troll?' squeaked Hermione. 'Hagrid, we've got to go to Dumbledore at once and explain what happened. When Malfoy finds out he'll be owling his father, trolls are XXXX —'

'Oh, I don' reckon Goyle'll be tellin' him,' said Hagrid.

Harry, Ron and Hermione exchanged disbelieving looks. They couldn't imagine Goyle keeping a secret from Malfoy, especially one that might get Hagrid sacked.

'Yeh see,' said Hagrid, lowering his voice, 'it was a lady troll... an' she didn' exactly want ter fight...'

6.

THE DOXYS

After Bowtruckles, they learnt about ghouls. Hagrid got Mrs Weasley to bring the one from The Burrow to show the students, but this proved to be rather a disappointment. The ghoul was highly distressed at being removed from its attic and clung to Mrs Weasley's robes, sobbing, the whole time. When the lesson was over, she decided it would be best to take the creature home at once.

'Don' know what we'll do after we finish ghouls, I'm runnin' out o' harmless things ter teach,' said

Hagrid to Harry, Ron and Hermione, as Mrs Weasley and the ghoul set off for Hogsmeade. 'Try ter get some imps or fairies, I s'pose — Mooncalves an' Ramoras're too rare.'

In the event, that was to be the least of Hagrid's worries a fortnight on when their study of ghouls was complete. Harry, Ron and Hermione arrived for Care of Magical Creatures to find tubs of Flobberworms and bowls of lettuce set out. Hagrid sat on his cauldron holding a massive pewter tankard and looking exceptionally morose. Malfoy was whispering gleefully to Crabbe and Goyle; somehow Harry didn't think the opportunity to learn more about Flobberworms was the cause of his excitement.

The three of them exchanged anxious glances and headed over to have a word with Hagrid.

'Goyle told Malfoy about the troll,' guessed Harry.

Hagrid reached wordlessly into his overcoat and handed him a crumpled letter.

Dear Mr Hagrid,

An official complaint—has been made to the Ministry of Magic that, in contravention of Educational Decree Number Twenty-two, you have exposed Hogwarts students to magical creatures of classification TTT or higher, to wit, Gumbumbles, Winged

Horses and Bowtruckles.

An interdepartmental sub-committee has been appointed to investigate this matter. Their enquiry will take place at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry on March 4th.

*Yours sincerely,
Robin Barnswallow
Beast Division
Ministry of Magic*

‘Doesn’t say anything about trolls,’ Ron noted.

‘This is rubbish, you never taught Glumbumbles,’ said Hermione, ‘and Bowtruckles are XX, I went to the library and checked. And *Winged Horses?*’

‘Diff’rent breeds have diff’rent ratings,’ said Hagrid, ‘but Dumbledore reckons I’ll be OK with Madam Maxime’s. He don’ think I got much ter worry about. There’ll have ter be a hearin’, though — they’ll be comin’ down ter observe one of me lessons. Lucius Malfoy’s behind it, o’ course... leas’ this time there’s nothin’ fer him ter have executed... can’ chop the head off a Flobberworm...’

But as Hagrid took a long swig from the tankard, it was plain that this fact was of little consolation to him.

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On the day of the hearing, Harry, Ron and Hermione made a point of showing up at Hagrid’s cabin as early as possible. Hagrid let them inside, looking considerably less gloomy than they had expected him to be.

‘Shipment o’ fairies delivered this mornin’,’ he said happily. ‘Not very impressive, I know, but anythin’s better than Flobberworms, eh? An’ these ones’re sorta cute...’

He whipped off the cover of the cage to reveal quite the ugliest fairies Harry had ever seen in his life. Thick black hair grew all over their bodies. Their shiny black wings rustled angrily as they bared double rows of pointy fangs and they appeared to have two pairs of arms and legs.

‘Hagrid, those aren’t fairies,’ said Hermione in an appalled tone. ‘They’re Doxys, and they’re classified XXX!’

Before Hagrid could say anything, there was a hammering on the door.

‘Open up!’ said a sharp voice. ‘Sub-committee for the Enforcement of Educational Decree Number Twenty-two!’

‘Don’t open the door!’ shrieked Hermione at the top of her lungs. ‘The fairies are loose, they’ll escape!’

She hissed a quick Locking Charm as, in express defiance of her orders, the doorknob began to turn.

‘Go outside and get them away from the house,’ she said tensely to Hagrid. ‘Tell them we’re catching the fairies, take them to see the Flobberworms — pick them up by the backs of their robes and carry them if you have to!’

Hermione released the Locking Charm just long

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enough for Hagrid to squeeze outside. Seconds later, a great, ululating scream pierced the air. From beyond the door came a scuffling noise, several flashes of fiery red light and Hagrid's voice saying, 'Hey, none o' that!'

'Mr Dawlish, put your wand away!' a witch's voice screeched. 'Dolores, get a hold of yourself!'

The commotion gradually subsided and they heard footsteps moving away from the cabin.

'Right,' said Hermione, breathing heavily as she turned back to the Doxys. 'Right...'

She stared at the cage for a moment, then drew her wand.

'Depilo!'

The Doxys' thick black hair fell out. The skin beneath was hideously wrinkled and fish-belly white.

'Melano!'

Though still hideously wrinkled, the Doxys now had a nice, healthy tan.

'Iridio!'

The Doxys' beetle-black wings took on a shimmering, rainbow hue.

'Lumos!'

The Doxys shone with a radiant golden light.

'Won't they notice the extra arms and legs?' said Ron. 'And the teeth — those'll be pretty hard to miss.'

Far from being grateful for their makeover, the Doxys were spitting with rage, stamping their feet and shaking their tiny fists (of which they had twice the normal complement).

'Not if they don't get a close look at them,' said Hermione grimly.

She seized the cage of tarted-up Doxys, strode to the window, pulled back the curtain and peered out. The Sub-committee was several yards away, gathered around the Flobberworm tubs.

'You two go ahead of me — block their view as much as you can. Intercept any of them who get too near.'

Immediately Harry and Ron emerged, Lucius Malfoy came hurrying over. They stepped up their pace to meet him —

'OH!' cried Hermione. Then, much more softly, *'Reducto!'*

Harry and Ron swivelled to see her sprawled on the ground. For a brief instant, Harry thought the Trip Jinx he'd been preparing to cast on Mr Malfoy had gone off prematurely and in reverse. Then he spotted the Doxys' cage, lying in a shattered heap. Small, glimmering specks were zooming rapidly away from it.

'Accio!' yelled Mr Malfoy. *'Accio Doxys!'*

It did him no good; Hermione was muttering Banishing Charms non-stop under her breath.

'Dimitto Dimitto Dimitto Dimitto...'

'They're fairies, not Doxys,' said Harry, raising his voice so the rest of the Sub-committee could hear him. 'You won't fetch them back that way.'

Lucius Malfoy gave Harry a venomous glare and his fingers tightened convulsively on his wand, but of course he couldn't hex anyone in front of the other Sub-committee members.

'All right, Hermione?' said Hagrid, ambling over to help her up.

'I'm fine,' said Hermione, 'but — oh, Hagrid — your fairies are gone!'

‘Tha’s OK, they weren’ really —’ (Ron kicked Hagrid hard in the ankle) ‘— ah, they weren’ really very interestin’, were they?’

‘You should get your gold back from the shop that sold you them, that cage was definitely faulty goods.’ Hermione’s eyes narrowed. ‘Who did you buy those fairies from, anyway?’

‘Dunno,’ shrugged Hagrid. ‘None o’ the usual places had ‘em in stock, then these turned up by owl...’

Hermione gazed piercingly at Mr Malfoy, but all she said to Hagrid was, ‘Why don’t you ask Professor Flitwick to conjure some for the next lesson? He puts them up as ornaments every Christmas —’

‘Well, if that’s settled, perhaps we can be getting on with this enquiry,’ interrupted a tiny, grey-haired witch, so loudly that Harry gave a slight jump.

For the first time, he was able to take a good look at the members of the Sub-committee for the Enforcement of Educational Decree Number Twenty-two. The doddering old wizard from the Committee for the Disposal of Dangerous Creatures who had attended Buckbeak’s execution was there, more ancient and withered than ever. Macnair, thankfully, was not, but two other well hardened-looking wizards were.

One had very short wiry grey hair; the other was tall, black and bald with a gold hoop in one ear. Both appeared quite capable of acting as executioner should the need arise. From behind the pair of them a squat, mousey-haired witch with a face like a toad was shooting petrified glances at Hagrid — maybe he really had picked her up by the back of her robes and

carried her away from the cabin.

The witch who had just spoken was stooped with age and had more wrinkles than a depilated Doxy, but there was nothing the least bit feeble about her voice.

‘The first complaint before the Sub-committee!’ she bawled. ‘That on or about the 23rd of October! You did bring Glumbumbles into the Hogwarts grounds! Resulting in the treacle-poisoning of a student! Vincent Crabbe!’

‘Hagrid never taught Glumbumbles!’ said Hermione, speaking nearly as loudly as the grey-haired witch. ‘Crabbe stole that treacle from the wizard who came to exterminate the Chizpurples!’

The entire Sub-committee wheeled round to stare at her.

‘We have signed statements from Professor Lupin and Professor Snape,’ she said, nudging Hagrid in the thigh with her elbow.

At the sound of Lupin’s name, the toad-like witch gave a hiss, but was clearly too frightened of Hagrid to offer any further objection. Hagrid drew two rolls of parchment from inside his overcoat and handed them to the grey-haired witch.

‘Here y’are, Professor Marchbanks...’

The parchments were passed around the Sub-committee, to much clucking and muttering.

‘This boy ate actual Glumbumble treacle?’ they heard the Dangerous Creatures wizard say, his reedy voice full of amazement. ‘This was not a case of beehives becoming contaminated?’

‘Hmph, well, all this appears to be in order,’ said Professor Marchbanks at last. ‘Which brings us to the

second complaint! Winged Horses!

‘The Winged Horses were Abraxans, which are normally classified xxx,’ said Hermione, who seemed to have appointed herself Defence Counsel. ‘However, as these particular Abraxans had in fact been domesticated, a reduced classification for exceptional specimens was obtained from the French Ministry of Magic. Reciprocal reclassification was extended by the British Ministry when the horses in question were brought into this country for the Triwizard Tournament.’

Hagrid gave Professor Marchbanks another sheaf of parchments. The members of the Sub-committee examined them closely, but evidently could find no fault.

‘The third complaint!’ shouted Professor Marchbanks. ‘The Bowtruckle attack on Gregory Goyle!’

‘Bowtruckles are classified xx, according to Newt Scamander,’ said Hermione, holding out her copy of *FANTASTIC BEASTS AND WHERE TO FIND THEM*.

‘These things are considered harmless?’ said the black wizard, lifting an eyebrow, when the book was passed to him.

‘Yes, Mr Shackbolt,’ said Hermione, ‘and have been for some time. I’ve got earlier editions from 1969, 1935 and 1927.’

She pulled a set of battered old books from her bag and handed them round the Sub-committee.

‘Dear, dear, the Department will certainly have to be reconsidering that rating,’ said the Dangerous Creatures wizard wheezily. ‘But it appears Mr Hagrid acted within the letter of the law as presently written...’

‘Then that should conclude the enquiry!’ hollered

Professor Marchbanks.

As the Sub-committee turned to go, she tugged on Shackbolt’s sleeve.

‘I’ve a few things to discuss with Dumbledore,’ she said, in what was plainly meant to be a whisper but came out as a normal speaking voice. ‘If you could make sure Dolores gets back to the Ministry safely — I think Hagrid scared her.’

Professor Marchbanks set off towards the castle at a brisk totter. The other Sub-committee members headed for gates. Lucius Malfoy took up the rear, in such a fury that smoke seemed to be billowing up from his cloak. Only it wasn’t smoke, Harry realised, but dust: Mr Malfoy was leaving a faint white trail across the lawn behind him. He pointed this out to Ron and Hermione.

‘Looks like he’s got a hole in his Floo bag,’ sniggered Ron.

Hermione bent down and plucked a powdery blade of grass.

‘This doesn’t look like Floo powder,’ she said, frowning. ‘Too grainy, and not glittery enough...’

‘Oh, come off it,’ said Ron. ‘What else could it be?’

A week later when the first of the Horklumps sprouted, they found out.

7.

THE RAMORA

After that, Care of Magical Creatures lessons were mainly spent poisoning the Horklumps with Streeler venom. Though Horklumps

looked like flesh-coloured, black-bristled mushrooms, they were really animals, pushing their root-like tentacles through the soil to hunt for earthworms. From the trail of eggs Mr Malfoy had scattered, they spread across the Hogwarts grounds like wildfire.

Hagrid was in despair.

‘Once yeh’ve got Horklumps in yer lawn, yeh’ll never get ‘em out,’ he told Harry, Ron and Hermione. ‘If I get me hands on that Lucius Malfoy —’

His massive fingers made vigorous wringing motions.

Hagrid did manage to procure some Imps — brown, flightless, marsh-dwelling Cornish Pixies. In short order, they escaped from their cage and took up residence in the bulrushes by the shore of the lake, where they made a terrible nuisance of themselves shoving and tripping anyone who strayed too close. When Dennis Creevey hit his head on a rock and had to be rescued from drowning yet again by the Giant Squid, Professor Lupin was called back to Hogwarts recapture them. Ron asked if he could stay on to help them deal with the Horklumps, but Lupin regretfully declined.

‘I couldn’t do a thing you students aren’t already doing, and a single extra pair of hands won’t make much of a difference,’ he said. ‘Once you’ve got Horklumps in your lawn, I’m afraid you’ll never completely get rid of them...’

After a month of hard labour, Harry began to fear that Lupin was right. At long last, however, the Horklumps’ numbers were sufficiently reduced for Hagrid to keep them under control without assistance. At around that time, the Ramoras arrived.

A rare species of magical fish native to the Indian Ocean, Ramoras were fiercely protected by the International Confederation of Wizards and the Indian Ministry of Magic. For weeks Hermione had been pelting their own Ministry with owls seeking the special permissions required to obtain specimens, and her efforts had finally paid off.

Slender, darting and brilliantly silvery, the Ramoras were undoubtedly the most beautiful creatures they had studied that year. The flickering patterns they made as they swam about were strangely fascinating to watch. The merpeople who lived in the Hogwarts lake came up to see them. One or two of them could nearly always be found floating by the water’s edge, gazing raptly into the Ramoras’ tank and giving soft, screechy croons. Even Hagrid liked the Ramoras, which was saying something, as they truly did appear to be genuinely harmless.

The Ministry had sent three Ramoras in a tank the size of a large television set. A fortnight after their delivery, the tank had to be enlarged — the original trio had spawned a dozen tiny, glittering babies. Hagrid was quite pleased: it meant that the Ramora lessons could be prolonged indefinitely whilst the students observed them growing up. (The alternative was going back to Horklumps and Flobberworms.)

He was less pleased ten days later, when twenty odd more babies turned up. The tank had to be enlarged once more, to roughly the size of a teacher’s desk. Moreover, the first batch were now over half the length of their parents. It clearly would not be long

before they started producing broods of their own.

'I've never read anything about Ramoras breeding like this,' said Hermione anxiously. 'Perhaps we're overfeeding them... I'll try and see if someone in the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures can contact the Indian Ministry for information...'

That proved not to be necessary, however. Scarcely a week afterwards, the Indian Ministry contacted them.

The class was clustered around the tank taking their twice-weekly measurements of the young Ramoras when they were distracted by a loud thump. A coil of rope had dropped out of the sky behind them. One end rose up to vanish into the air; climbing down it was a white-robed, brown-skinned and very angry-looking wizard.

Immediately his feet touched the ground, the wizard spotted the tank of Ramoras. He staggered back as though he had been punched in the stomach, a look of outraged horror on his face. When Hagrid lumbered over to see what was the matter, the wizard flew at him shouting wrathfully in a foreign language, and would have pummelled Hagrid with his fists had Hagrid not caught him by the collar and held him at arm's length.

'Calm down, now, calm down...' Hagrid said, but the wizard either didn't understand English or was too incensed to speak it.

'What's he saying?' Ron asked Hermione.

'I don't know, I don't speak — Hindi, I suppose, or Urdu —'

'Bengali, actually,' said Parvati Patil. 'Load of

insults, mostly — shameless bandit... filthy son of a pig... thieving rakshasa — I think he thinks Hagrid stole the Ramoras.'

'*What?*' shrieked Hermione, looking nearly as angry as the Indian wizard. 'He never! We got them from the Ministry of Magic! I went through the proper channels, I filled out all the forms, I have letters! You tell him, Parvati, you tell him I have letters!'

Parvati backed away. She plainly wanted nothing to do with the situation, and Harry couldn't blame her. The Indian wizard was practically frothing at the mouth as he shouted at Hagrid with unabated fury. Hagrid's face was screwed up in concentration, in the apparent belief that if only he listened intently enough, he would somehow magically begin to comprehend the other wizard's language.

'I reckon we'd better tell Dumbledore about this,' said Harry. 'If there's a problem with the Ramoras, he'll sort it out. Hermione, you go fetch those letters. We'll meet you by the gargoyle.'

Hermione tore off up the lawn to the castle. With Harry and Ron flanking her as bodyguards, Parvati was persuaded to approach the Indian wizard and request in Bengali that he accompany them to Dumbledore's office. The wizard was sufficiently astonished at being addressed in his own language (or possibly merely starting to run short of breath) that he actually did as they asked him.

Hermione was waiting in front of the gargoyle with an armful of parchment. Hagrid gave the password and they all trooped up the stone staircase, through



the polished oak door and into the circular room. When the Indian wizard caught sight of Dumbledore, he let out a fresh torrent of speech.

‘Er — he says —’ began Parvati.

Dumbledore said something to her in the same language and she subsided.

‘Hagrid didn’t steal the Ramoras, we got them from the Ministry!’ Hermione butted in. ‘Look!’

She dumped her pile of parchments on Dumbledore’s desk. Dumbledore sorted through them, making the occasional remark in Bengali. Some of the rolls of parchment he passed on to the Indian wizard, who tapped them with his wand, turning the letters into odd squiggles. After reading the last, he said a few words to Dumbledore, who waved his wand, causing the parchment to split into two identical copies. The wizard thrust one of them into his robes with an air of grim satisfaction; Dumbledore magicked the other back to English. Craning his neck, Harry was able to catch a glimpse of it before Dumbledore rolled it up again:

Dear Miss Pranger,

*Here are your perishing Ramoras!
now will you please stop burying my
office in owl...*

‘What are they saying?’ Hermione hissed at Parvati.

Dumbledore raised a hand to forestall her reply.

‘Mr Serendip works for the Indian Ministry of Magic in their Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures,’ he said. ‘Under laws

put into place by the International Confederation of Wizards, it is illegal to remove a Ramora from Indian territorial waters for any reason, although no one in our own Ministry appears to have been aware of this fact. Last month, a serious poaching incident occurred off the coast of Brahmapur. A number of the local merpeople were magically attacked by a group of wizards who were trawling for Ramoras with a net. As the merpeople were unable to identify their assailants, there seemed little chance of the culprits being brought to justice — until Mer-chieftainess Murcus happened to mention to an Indian counterpart that Hogwarts had recently acquired Ramoras of its own, thus tipping off Mr Serendip to a Scottish connection. I believe, however, that I have convinced him that the school and its staff were acting in good faith. He will pursue his case against the responsible parties in the Ministry of Magic — but the Ramoras must be returned at once.’

Dumbledore went with them to Hagrid’s cabin to help arrange the transport of the Ramoras. When they reached the tank, Mr Serendip walked around it slowly, studying the Ramoras from every angle. Coming full circle, he muttered something that sounded like grudging approval.

He and Dumbledore held a brief conversation, after which Dumbledore said, ‘Mr Serendip says that Hagrid may keep a pair of Ramoras for teaching purposes whilst he is in Britain — he’ll take them with him when he returns to India.’

‘Be’er make it a pair o’ males,’ said Hagrid, ‘or the

rate they breed, there'll be thirty more by the time he comes back fer 'em.'

Mr Serendip must have understood at least a little English, for he looked thoroughly shocked at Hagrid's remark. He peered into the tank and began to speak excitedly.

'You mean that some of these Ramoras were bred at Hogwarts?' said Dumbledore.

'All of 'em excep' the biggest three,' said Hagrid.

Mr Serendip's voice grew even more excited as he directed another volley of words at Dumbledore.

'Only nobody has ever before succeeded in breeding Ramoras in captivity,' said Dumbledore. 'It's one of the major impediments to the Indian Ministry's conservation efforts. Er —' he cast wary glance at the Care of Magical Creatures students, who were gazing on in deep interest, '— dare I ask how you managed it?'

'I wasn' *tryin'* ter breed 'em,' said Hagrid. 'I didn' do anythin' but feed 'em. Mind, Hermione reckoned I mighta bin givin' 'em a bit much —'

'A bit much what?' said Dumbledore.

'Ah, Horklumps, mostly,' said Hagrid, sounding slightly embarrassed. 'We had loads, an' they seemed ter like 'em, an' Gawd knows there's no other use fer Horklumps. An' Professor Snape's Goldfish Tonic — they was lookin' a bit tarnished when we got 'em. Had ter swear never ter teach Chizpurples again before he'd brew it, but it shined up them Ramoras a treat.'

Mr Serendip insisted on being taken to see Professor Snape straight away. Hermione dragged Harry and Ron along too, very much against their wills.

'This may well be the magizoological discovery of the century!' she told them sternly. 'And Goldfish Tonics could come up in our O.W.Ls.'

'The Three Heavenly Lotus Formula?' said Snape, after Dumbledore had explained the situation. 'A commonly used potion in Japan — many wizards there keep magical goldfish as pets. I obtained the instructions through Slug and Jigger from their supplier in the Far East.'

He produced a grubby sheet of rice parchment from the inner recesses of his desk. Mr Serendip surveyed it narrowly.

'You follow exact recipe?' he said.

'Naturally I followed the exact recipe,' said Snape coldly. 'With certain standard substitutions of locally available ingredients,' he added.

'If you could write down the instructions for the potion just as you brewed it, I'm sure Mr Serendip would be most grateful,' said Dumbledore.

So Snape took out a fresh roll of parchment and he wrote... and he wrote... and he wrote. For nearly ten minutes, not a sound was heard but the scratching of Snape's quill. The piece of parchment he at last tore off and gave to Dumbledore was easily seven times as long as the original.

'Gillyweed blossoms for Heavenly Lotus... agrimony for crane's herb... milkwort for *juan zhi*... yes, I see,' murmured Dumbledore, running a finger down the parchment. 'But surely an infusion of frogspawn isn't magical enough to take the place of Kappa brine?'

'It is if it's made with Hogwarts lake water,' said

Snape shortly.

‘And *mock* pickle of Chung K’uei?’

‘A decoction of dill weed, dragon’s blood, Ogden’s Old Firewhiskey and Muggle curry powder,’ said Snape. ‘The instructions for brewing it are in the fourth footnote.’

‘Severus, is there a single ingredient in this entire potion that you did not use a substitute for?’ said Dumbledore, a note of amused exasperation in his voice.

‘When I make substitutions,’ said Snape haughtily, ‘they work.’

But exactly how well they worked Harry was not to learn until one morning near the end of term.

‘Oooh, look...’ said Hermione, opening her copy of the *DAILY PROPHET*. ‘Hagrid’s been shortlisted for the Marjoribanks Prize!’

‘The what?’ said Harry.

‘The Marjoribanks Prize,’ said Hermione. ‘Awarded each decade for outstanding contributions to the field of Herbology.’

‘Herbology?’ said Ron. ‘*Hagrid?*’

‘Yes,’ said Hermione, ‘for finding an actual use for Horklumps.’

‘I thought you said Horklumps were animals, not plants,’ said Harry. ‘They should be giving Hagrid a Magical Creatures prize...’

‘Well, there’s still some debate about that,’ said Hermione. ‘And it’s Snape who’s up for the Magical Creatures prize. If his Ramora Tonic lives up to its promise, he has a fair chance of becoming the first Western wizard to receive the Order of Quang

Po. Hogwarts has done quite well out of this Ramora poaching,’ she went on as she buttered her toast. ‘Far better than the Ministry of Magic. Questions have been raised in the International Confederation of Wizards, Britain could end up paying a stiff fine. There’s a bright side to that as well, though — Dumbledore says that Educational Decree Number Twenty-two will be getting revoked any day now. What with everything that’s happened this year, the Ministry decided that harmless creatures are just too dangerous!’

* THE END *



SLYTHERIN'S GIFT ✠ GRYFFINDOR'S DREAM



H

ARRY POTTER TRUDGED down the icy passageway that led to the dungeons. His latest Potions essay had been returned to him with the words '3/10. See me.' scribbled at the top. This had come as no surprise to Harry. Since the Ferret Fudge incident at the start of term, Snape had no longer been content with criticising him during lessons: he had begun summoning Harry to his office after classes to discuss the shortcomings of his work in person. The resulting meetings were invariably horrible experiences.

Reaching Snape's office, Harry drew a deep breath to fortify himself and knocked on the door.

'Enter,' snapped Snape.

Harry opened the door. As he stepped over the threshold, the air itself seemed to turn solid around him. He was held irresistibly in place as the walls sped past him in a grey blur. There was a ringing in his ears... the floor shifted sickeningly under his feet... he would have yelled in shock, but his voice was just as frozen as the rest of him...

At last the corridor stopped moving. Harry found himself once more gazing into Snape's office.



Although the room itself was the same, its contents had changed drastically. The shelves with jars of slimy things were gone, a cosy fire crackled in the grate and the wizard standing, wand outstretched, behind a handsome, elaborately carved desk was definitely not Snape.

The wizard surveyed Harry with a triumphant expression. He lowered his wand and said a few peculiar words.

'Who're you?' said Harry. 'Where's Professor Snape?'

He tried to back away, but whatever magic had brought him there still had him firmly in its grip.

'Let me go!' said Harry furiously, reaching for his wand. It was like trying to force his arm through a sea of treacle.

For a second or two, the wizard looked puzzled. Then his face cleared. He picked up a box from the desk and held it out for Harry to see. The box was made of green lacquered wood and had a pair of silver bands around it, each in the shape of serpent. The wizard opened his mouth and a strange, hissing noise came out, but now Harry could understand him perfectly. He was speaking Parseltongue.

'Don't be alarmed, descendant. I've summoned you here from the future by means of a Temporalis Charm. It's the pull of your own time on you that's holding you back. I am your ancestor — Salazar Slytherin.'

Harry gaped at the wizard for a full minute. Then — 'You're mad,' he said, again struggling to draw his wand. 'You're not Salazar Slytherin, you can't be!'

'Why can't I be?' said the wizard reasonably.

'Because you don't —'

Harry broke off. It was true that he could detect little resemblance between the wizard behind the desk and the wizened, simian features of the statue he'd seen in the Chamber of Secrets. But this wizard was a much younger man... in his thirties rather than in his nineties...

'— and anyway, Salazar Slytherin isn't my ancestor,' he finally said. 'Dumbledore said he wasn't.'

'Then I assure you, this Dumbledore was wrong,' said Slytherin. 'You may not be a part of the, ah, official line of descent —' he gave a slight smirk, '— but I recognise my own flesh and blood. You have the Slytherin hair... the Slytherin eyes... Great Aunt Arethus's nose and chin...'

He eyed Harry fondly. Harry stared back with a sick feeling in his stomach. Slytherin or not, there was no denying that this wizard looked a lot like him. Bright green eyes... jet-black hair... something of James Potter in the line of his jaw...

'Dear old Auntie Ari...' said Slytherin mistily. 'It is almost as if someone had Transfigured her into a boy. She could put the fear of God into a filthy Muggle better than any witch or wizard I've ever known. And you, young Slytherin — have you been doing your bit to uphold our family's proud tradition of Muggle-baiting?'

Recalling the many clashes he'd had with the Dursleys, Harry gave a hollow laugh.

'I know all about frightening Muggles,' he told Slytherin.

Whilst living in his cupboard, Harry had often



dreamed of being found by some other relation. But to have it be Salazar Slytherin...

'And what of the heir of Gryffindor?' said Slytherin. 'It was predicted that his successor and mine would come into conflict...'

'I — well, I'm not sure,' said Harry. 'Nobody in my time knows who the heir of Gryffindor is.'

It abruptly dawned on him that there was a ray of sunshine in this whole appalling situation. If Slytherin could tell Harry who Gryffindor's heir was, he'd be able to help him instead of fighting him. It was Harry's choices that mattered, after all, not his ancestors.

'Er — this heir of Gryffindor — can you give me any clues how I'll recognise him?'

Slytherin thought for a moment.

'If the Gryffindor blood has run true — which considering the company Godric keeps, I very much doubt — his heir should look something like that.'

He pointed past Harry at a large portrait that hung on the left wall. There were four people in it: Slytherin himself, a pair of witches and —

'That's Godric Gryffindor?' choked Harry.

The red-robed wizard gazed serenely out of the portrait at Harry. His face was brave and kind and wise and good — and apart from that, the very image of Draco Malfoy.

'Remind you of someone, does he?' A hungry gleam had appeared in Slytherin's eyes.

'He... yeah... he's a boy in my year at Hogwarts,' stammered Harry, his mind reeling at the sight of Malfoy... wearing Gryffindor colours... looking noble...

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SLYTHERIN'S GIFT

'Well I hope you've been showing this Gryffindor brat who's the better man!'

Harry suspected Slytherin would have spat the words even if he hadn't been speaking Parseltongue.

'Yeah,' he said, remembering the Quidditch matches he'd won against Malfoy. 'I've been showing him.'

'Excellent,' said Slytherin. 'And you've found my Chamber of Secrets?'

Harry nodded.

'Well done.'

Slytherin swept over to Harry and tucked the green, serpent-bound box into the crook of his elbow.

'Take this. It contains the Eye of the Seventh Serpent. You'll know what to do with it, of course.'

'Of course,' Harry repeated.

And he did know what to do with it: hide it away in the safest place he could find — his vault at Gringotts, perhaps — where it would never be used for any purpose Slytherin intended.

Slytherin stood aside and waved his wand, and the corridor rushed past Harry once more. When he could see the office again, Snape was back at his desk, scowling suspiciously. His eyes fell on the green box Harry was carrying.

'What's that you've got there?' said Snape sharply.

'Present from a relative,' said Harry, stuffing the box into his bag.

* THE END *

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SLYTHERIN'S GIFT

GRYFFINDOR'S DREAM

DRACO MALFOY SAT at a table by the fire doing his Ancient Runes homework. It was hard slogging; the runes refused to remain in the shape they'd been put on the parchment. Draco lifted his quill, and the *feob* he had just written turned a somersault and shifted rapidly from a *ny>* to an *efiel* to a *daeg*. He shook his head, sighed in frustration and inscribed his next rune, a *man* that changed instantly into a *peor>*.

Suddenly there was a violent hammering on the stone wall that concealed the entrance to the Slytherin common room.

'Open up!' shouted an angry voice. More and louder banging followed. 'I built this bloody school, damn you, now let me in!'

To Draco's astonishment, the door slid open. A burly blond wizard in scarlet robes strode through it. There was something oddly familiar about him...

The wizard caught sight of Draco and stopped short. 'Salazar was spouting some rubbish about my heir being here,' he said. 'So it's you, is it?' He looked Draco up and down in a rather insulting fashion. 'Can't say you look like much. Ah, well — with what my daughters have given me for sons-in-law, I wasn't expecting great things from my descendants... Godric Gryffindor.'

Gryffindor held out his hand. Draco didn't take it. Drawing himself up with a sneer, he said, 'Yes, I've

heard of you. You're the reason they've been letting Mudblood filth into Hogwarts for the past thousand years. You think *I'm* your heir? My family have been Slytherins for ages. Now *his* heir's back, he'll be putting those jumped-up Muggles in their place, and I'll help him do it!'

Gryffindor's pale eyes narrowed. Draco was strongly reminded of how his father looked whenever Arthur Weasley was mentioned. It occurred to him that Gryffindor was rather bigger than he was, and Crabbe and Goyle were nowhere to be seen.

'One of Salazar's indolent little weasels, are you?' said Gryffindor. 'Yes, baiting a Muggle would be right up your alley. Don't have the nerve to hunt a real man's game — dragons and giants and wild Hippogriffs...'

He stalked towards Draco, a most unpleasant expression on his face. 'You may not be my heir, but by God I'll teach you some manners!'

Gryffindor seized Draco by the shoulders and shook him till his teeth rattled. The room began to spin around him; Draco yelled in fright:

'Crabbe!... Goyle!... Godric!...'



'...Godric! ...Godric! ...That's *me* you're trying to strangle!'

Godric Gryffindor opened his eyes to meet the wrathful gaze of Rowena Ravenclaw. He hastily released the two handfuls of her blue silk nightrobes that he was clutching.

'Sorry, dear,' he mumbled.



This turned out to be a mistake. Rowena took a deep sniff.

'Pickled eels! *What* have I told you about eating those things before bed? You do this *every* year...'

Godric cowered from her fury. Rowena twisted onto her side, yanked open the drawer of the bedside table and drew out a small amber bottle.

'...but this time I'm ready! I asked Helga to brew a potion — drink!'

She uncorked the bottle and thrust it under his nose. Godric drank.

She'd probably asked Helga to make it extra bitter, too, he thought with a silent shudder, as he curled up on his third of the bed (the other two were Rowena's) and waited for the foul taste to fade from his mouth...



'AAAAAAAARRRRRRRGGHHH!'

Draco Malfoy's eyes flew open. Gregory Goyle loomed above him, looking worried; his massive hands gripped Draco's shoulders.

'I'm *awake*, Goyle,' said Draco crossly, 'you can let me go.'

Goyle let him go. Draco sat up shakily and wiped the sweat from his brow. When he looked up again, he noticed Goyle staring hungrily at the jar of pickled eels on the bedside table.

'Have a pickled eel, Goyle,' said Draco in a sarcastic tone. 'Have the whole jar — I don't want it any more.'

Goyle bore the jar off greedily to his own bed. Draco tugged the dark green hangings of his four-

poster shut. Dearly as he loved pickled eels, they gave him nightmares and always had done, although never before as bad as this.

'*That* was Godric Gryffindor? What an absolute git!'

When Draco was small his father had told him stories about his ancestor Vitius Malfoy, who had beaten Godric Gryffindor to death with twenty whacks of a Manticore's thighbone. Whilst Draco approved of Gryffindor killing in principle, he'd thought that twenty whacks was going it a bit: a round dozen should have been enough to finish off the toughest wizard. Now, however, he could quite see his ancestor's point of view.

'I would've made it twenty-one,' Draco muttered, as he rolled over and fell back asleep.

* THE END *



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CHRISTMAS OVER AZKABAN



1. HOLIDAY PLANS

ONE MORNING IN late October as Harry, Ron and Hermione were leaving the Great Hall after breakfast, they were intercepted by Professor McGonagall.

‘Weasley, come with me,’ she said. ‘The Headmaster needs to speak with you.’

‘What about?’ said Ron with a trace of apprehension.

‘You’ll find out when you see him,’ said Professor McGonagall, but not sharply as she normally would have done. ‘Now come along.’

Ron followed her up the marble staircase and out of sight. Harry and Hermione stared after him curiously.


‘What d’you think Dumbledore wants with Ron?’ said Harry. ‘You don’t reckon he’s in any trouble, do you?’

He couldn’t imagine what Ron might have been getting up to that would earn him a visit to the Headmaster’s office, or why he would have kept it secret from Harry and Hermione.

‘No, I don’t think so,’ said Hermione slowly. ‘If Ron had done something wrong Professor McGonagall would have been angry, and she wasn’t. She — it was almost as though she was being kind.’

Ron didn’t show up for any of their morning classes.





This left Dean Thomas without a partner in Charms, when the students were called to the front in pairs to cast Strengthening Spells on each other and attempt lifting Professor Flitwick's desk above their heads.

When it came Dean's turn, Professor Flitwick said, 'Why don't you try your spell on Mr Longbottom's toad?'

Dean waved his wand, then prodded Trevor with it to make him hop. Trevor sailed majestically across the room, nearly grazing the ceiling at the top of an approximately thirty-foot leap.

'Oh, very good!' cried Professor Flitwick.

'Still, I would've liked to have had a go at that desk,' said Dean regretfully as they trooped out the classroom.

'Me too,' sighed Seamus Finnegan. His partner had been Neville, whose feeble Strengthening Spell had done little more than make Seamus slightly dizzy.

'Where's Ron?' Dean asked Harry.


'Professor McGonagall took him off to Dumbledore's office after breakfast,' said Harry. 'She wouldn't say what it was about.'

'That's funny,' said Lavender Brown. 'She came to the table and got Ginny as well, after you three had gone.'

'I don't remember seeing Fred and George at breakfast, either,' frowned Parvati Patil. 'I do hope there's nothing wrong at home.'

An uncomfortable silence fell. If something had happened to the Weasley family, they all had a fair idea who was responsible. But Voldemort had no reason to attack the Weasleys, Harry told himself firmly... except Mr Weasley was working against Voldemort at the Ministry... and Ron was Harry's friend...

'Out of my way, Mudblood!'



As he pushed through the Gryffindors, Malfoy gave Hermione a hard shove — and was flung halfway down the passage when she automatically shoved back. Crabbe and Goyle gaped and skirted carefully around her before jogging over to help Malfoy up. Harry, who had partnered Hermione in Charms, was pleased to see that his Strengthening Spell had been a good, long-lasting one.

On their way to Gryffindor Tower, Harry and Hermione craned their necks trying to spot Ron amongst the throngs of students in the corridors, but saw no sign of him. Once they reached the common room, they had to duck past Dean and Seamus, who had put Strengthening Spells on one another and were tossing an armchair back and forth, and dodge Neville's futile attempts to catch Trevor, who was bounding from one end of the room to the other. Ron was slumped in a chair near the fire, looking both miserable and shocked.

'Ron, what is it?' said Hermione.


'It's Percy,' said Ron in a stunned voice. 'He's been arrested for murder. They brought him to Azkaban yesterday afternoon.'

Harry and Hermione gazed at Ron, speechless. Harry found his voice first.

'Murder? But he couldn't have. I mean, this is Percy we're talking about.'

'Who was murdered and why do they think Percy did it?' Hermione asked practically.

She and Harry listened while Ron explained. Two




weeks ago, a Hit Wizard named Gideon Watchett had been found dead in his office. In the course of the investigation, it had come out that Watchett had eaten lunch with Penelope Clearwater in the Ministry canteen on several occasions and had once been observed going into her office. This in itself would not have been particularly damning, but a witness had stepped forward claiming he had seen Percy leave the Ministry on the night before the body was discovered, from a door near the Department of Magical Law Enforcement instead of the one he normally used. The prevailing theory was that Percy had learnt Penelope and Watchett were having an affair, and killed him out of jealousy.

‘They arrested Percy because he left from a different exit than usual and the dead man spoke to his girlfriend a couple of times?’ said Hermione in amazement. ‘Ron, that’s *very* flimsy circumstantial evidence.’

‘It’s more than they’ve got on anyone else,’ said Ron bleakly. ‘Fred and George reckon the Ministry had to pull in someone, what with the Quidditch World Cup and not being able to recapture Sirius Black. A bunch of other embarrassing stuff was leaked to the DAILY PROPHET recently, too. Fudge is under a lot of pressure — worried about a vote of no confidence. And Percy’s been in the Ministry’s bad books since Crouch was killed. He was sent to the Centaur Office back in July...’

‘Oh, dear,’ said Hermione sympathetically.

Harry made a mental note to ask her what was so awful about the Centaur Office at some future time when Ron was less distraught.




‘Why did Percy go out that door, anyway?’ said Harry. ‘He says he didn’t,’ said Ron. ‘He says whoever it was must have mistaken him for someone else.’

‘And Penelope, what does she have to say about this Gideon Watchett?’ said Hermione. ‘She wasn’t actually — interested in him, was she?’

‘No,’ said Ron. ‘She told Magical Law Enforcement that Watchett stopped by her table once or twice to discuss Ministry business, but never visited her in her office. She didn’t think enough of it to mention him to Percy, and Percy didn’t ask. It makes no difference, though,’ he went on gloomily. ‘Percy could’ve heard about Watchett and Penelope from someone, or seen them together himself and decided they were — you know. But the Ministry’s still investigating,’ Ron added with a note of forced confidence in his voice. ‘They’re sure to find another suspect. They’ve got to...’

But the week went by and the Ministry didn’t find another suspect. The obvious culprit — Voldemort — wasn’t even being considered. Fudge continued to insist he had not returned. Mr Weasley and his Ministry allies were unable to press the Minister on this point, as they could think of no reason why Voldemort would have wanted Gideon Watchett dead. Watchett had been a very junior Hit Wizard, assigned none but the most routine cases.

Word of Percy’s arrest spread rapidly through the school. Malfoy made snide remarks about people from poor families being apt to turn to crime; Harry suspected he was mainly responsible for the speed with which the news had travelled around Hogwarts.



All of the Weasleys were showing the strain. Ginny became almost as depressed and withdrawn as she had been the year the Chamber of Secrets was opened. Fred and George grew sullen and morose. Fred especially was given to unexpected outbursts of temper. He had a nasty quarrel with Lee Jordan over nothing in particular, after which Lee started sitting with Katie Bell and Angelina Johnson at meals. Poor Ron seemed hardest hit, probably because he had seen first-hand the effect that Azkaban had had on Sirius Black. The worst part of it all was that there was nothing any of them could do — they could scarcely help investigate a murder at the Ministry of Magic from Hogwarts.

Hermione consulted a number of books on wizarding law. She thought the arrest might have been illegal, but, as she told Harry and Ron dispiritedly, ‘The Dark Force Defence Emergency Powers Acts of 1977 have never been revoked. The Minister for Magic can send anyone he likes to Azkaban for as long as he likes. He doesn’t even need to have a reason...’

November stretched agonisingly into December. One night at dinner, as Malfoy was loudly regaling his fellow Slytherins with descriptions of the terrible state of the prisoners his father had seen in Azkaban, Ron abruptly left the Gryffindor table. He had particularly bad nightmares that evening, twice waking Harry up with his flailing and shouting. Next morning, he refused to go down to breakfast with Harry and Hermione, saying that he wasn’t hungry.

‘They’ve got to find some evidence to clear Percy soon,’ said Hermione. ‘He *couldn’t* have actually

murdered someone.’

She had cast a Greaseproof Charm on a Zonko’s bag and was surreptitiously shovelling in bacon and eggs to take up to Ron.

‘I could murder Malfoy,’ said Harry darkly, scowling across the Great Hall at the Slytherin table. ‘I *could* murder Malfoy,’ he repeated in a thoughtful tone. ‘Don’t expect *he* knows the counter for the Curse of the Slithering Death.’

‘No, Harry, you mustn’t!’ said Hermione in a terrified whisper. The Zonko’s bag fell to the floor with a squelch as she clutched at his arm. ‘I can’t stand it if you get sent to Azkaban too!’

‘Of course not,’ said Harry, startled at the vehemence of her reaction. ‘That was just talk. I didn’t mean I’d really do it.’

‘Swear you won’t,’ said Hermione, gripping his arm more tightly still. ‘Swear to me you won’t use Dark Magic to kill Draco Malfoy!’


Harry duly swore. This seemed to satisfy Hermione; she let go of Harry’s arm and began buttering a couple of pieces of toast.

‘The Slithering Death... is that something Professor Millarca is teaching you?’ she asked disapprovingly as she picked up the Zonko’s bag and dropped the toast into it.

‘Only to defend against,’ said Harry quickly.

‘Well, I wish she’d teach the rest of us,’ said Hermione grumpily.


Professor Millarca was the newest Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher. It was widely agreed that in hiring her, Dumbledore had scraped the very bottom



of the barrel. Barely older than many of her students, not only was this Professor Millarca's first teaching position, but her first job of any sort. She mostly taught straight from the set books, with occasional stabs at duplicating the lessons of previous masters (including, according to Dennis Creevey, Lockhart's infamous Pixie class, although she at least had the sense to release the Pixies one at a time, and managed to correctly perform the *Peskipiksi* charm on her third go.)

She was, however, developing lessons of her own and had chosen Harry to test them out on, having somehow got it into her head that he was the school's top Dark Arts student. Hermione, who considered the regular classes to be less than challenging, had asked to join them. To her great annoyance, Professor Millarca had determinedly put her off, even after Harry pointed out that Hermione had always got better marks than him and volunteered to let her take his place. Harry didn't exactly dislike Professor Millarca, but it was difficult not to compare her unfavourably to Professor Lupin or even the fake Moody, and he hadn't been keen to spend an extra evening on lessons each week.

They had been interesting lessons, though, on curses and counter-curses. Harry had thought he'd got a fair grounding in hexes preparing for the Triwizard Tournament, but Professor Millarca knew a few he'd never run across in the Hogwarts library (with good reason, Harry suspected, as they all seemed to involve death in one form or another). And while he didn't truly wish to kill Malfoy, Harry couldn't help thinking how pleasant it would be if Malfoy was sent to the hospital



wing for a few weeks, just long enough for Percy to be released from Azkaban. He resolved to ask Professor Millarca next lesson about curses that merely caused lingering minor injuries.


As Harry and Hermione made their way back to Gryffindor Tower with Ron's breakfast, Fred came hurrying up to them.

'I want a word with you about Quidditch practice,' he said to Harry. 'You go on, Hermione, Ron'll need time to eat that lot before classes start.'

Harry was a bit surprised at this. Fred and George had stopped attending the team's training sessions since receiving news of Percy's arrest. Angelina hadn't even been certain they'd bother turning up for the first match of the season. They had, but it soon became obvious, only for the opportunity to pay Malfoy back for the things he'd been saying about Percy.

Fred and George had marked the Slytherin Seeker ferociously, sending Bludger after Bludger pelting in his direction. Despite — or perhaps because of — their Beaters' not-so-hidden agenda, Gryffindor had won handily. Most of Slytherin's highly trained players of two years ago had left Hogwarts. The new Beaters, Crabbe and Millicent Bulstrode, didn't have the experience to stand up to the Weasley twins, nor were the three Slytherin Chasers a match for Angelina and Katie. With Malfoy effectively out of the game, Harry had had a clear field to catch the Snitch. Neither Fred nor George, however, had shown the slightest scrap of interest in Quidditch since then...

Fred watched Hermione climb the stairs, then



flicked his eyes up and down the corridor. Seeing no one around, he leant over and murmured, so softly that Harry could scarcely hear him, 'Meet me behind the mirror on the fourth floor after classes. Don't ask questions now and don't tell anyone where you're going, not even Ron or Hermione. It's life or death that nobody know about this.' In a normal tone he said, 'You'll be there, right?'

It was hard for Harry not to ask questions, as there were about a thousand of them flitting through his brain. But heeding the warning look on Fred's face, after a brief pause, he simply said, 'Right.'

Harry had considerable trouble keeping his mind on lessons that afternoon, wondering what Fred and George could possibly be up to. Under ordinary circumstances he would have assumed they wanted his assistance with one of their jokes, but after Percy's arrest they had apparently given up on that sort of thing.

When their last class let out, Harry told Ron and Hermione he'd forgotten a book in the library and headed for mirror on the fourth floor. Although the passageway to Hogsmeade it concealed was caved in, the space behind the mirror made for an ideal secret meeting place. Harry tapped the glass with his wand and stepped inside.

A box of Dungbombs stood by the entrance, dust-covered and forlorn. Some wooden crates from Honeydukes had been placed in the middle of the stone-lined tunnel. On one of them was a candle stuck in an empty pumpkin juice bottle. Fred and George were seated on two others, looking more serious than

Harry had ever seen them. Harry drew another crate up to the makeshift table and sat down.

'We want to talk to you about Percy,' said Fred abruptly. 'It's been six weeks with no new evidence uncovered, and we don't expect there ever will be. Whoever murdered Watchett just didn't leave any clues behind.'

Harry felt a cold sensation in the pit of his stomach. In spite of all the time that had passed, he'd never actually let himself believe that Percy wouldn't eventually get out of Azkaban.

'Could he really be found guilty on what little they've got? Hermione said it was very flimsy...'

'If Percy's left in Azkaban much longer, it won't matter,' said George flatly. 'There've been all kinds of delays — Dad thinks Lucius Malfoy's behind most of them. He may be able to pull enough strings to get a conviction when the case finally does come to trial. The Ministry needs *someone* to pin the blame on...'

'We can't afford to wait any more,' said Fred. 'It'll do Percy no good to be acquitted if he's gone mad or lost his powers in the meantime. This is killing our dad, he knows what it's like in Azkaban. Charlie says he looks fifty years older, and Mum's not much better off.'

'But what can we do?' said Harry desperately.

'We have a plan to break Percy out of prison,' said George, 'but we need your help.'

It took a moment for Harry's brain to accept what his ears had heard.

'Us break Percy out of Azkaban?' he said in a strangled sort of voice.

He would have been certain this was a bad joke,

except not even Fred and George would joke about something so serious.

'It's not as barmy as it sounds,' said George. 'Azkaban hasn't had human warders for almost three months. The Dementors have been getting more and more aggressive, ever since they were sent back there from Hogwarts. Around the middle of last summer, something happened to really set them off. No one's sure what, but they somehow managed to overpower the governor and his staff —'

'Fed off them for nearly a month before it was discovered,' Fred confirmed. 'All evacuated, of course, and for some reason the Ministry's had a tough job finding anyone to replace them.'

'Could the Dementors have gone over to Voldemort?' said Harry tensely. 'Dumbledore thought they might.'

'No, I don't reckon it was anything like that,' said George. 'I mean, the Ministry's been sending teams of Hit Wizards to inspect the place every fortnight, and the Dementors haven't interfered with them.'

'The Ministry's set up spells to warn them of unauthorised visitors and damage to the fortress, but they haven't quite got the bugs worked out yet,' said Fred. 'They've had a fair few false alarms. Fudge tried giving the Dementors a Signalling Spell, but they just used it continually for no reason.'

'We think we've found a way around the spell that detects intruders,' said George. 'Even if it doesn't work, between the false alarms and the way the Dementors have been acting, the Ministry won't be too quick to investigate.'



'With your Firebolt, we could fly out there, get Percy and be gone before anyone showed up to check on things,' said Fred. 'But we must have a Patronus to keep the Dementors at bay while we're doing it. George and I've been practising for over a month, but neither of us can work the charm properly. That's why we need you to come with us.'

'You won't have to set foot on the island,' said George. 'You can conjure the Patronus from the air. We wouldn't be asking you if there was any other way —'

'Of course I'll go with you,' said Harry.

'Excellent!' said Fred and George, beaming at him. It was the first time in six weeks Harry could remember either of them smiling. 'Now here's what we've got to do...'



Next day in Transfiguration, Professor McGonagall began the lesson by making a list of the people who were spending the holidays at Hogwarts.

'You'll be staying, of course, Potter,' she said, dipping her quill in a bottle of ink.

'Er — no,' said Harry. 'This Christmas I'll be going back to the Dursleys...'

2.

CHRISTMAS WITH THE DURSLEYS

'Er — no,' said Harry. 'This Christmas I'll be going back to the Dursleys.'

Professor McGonagall's hand jerked sharply,



sending the bottle of ink flying.

'You — you *are*?' she said.

'Yes,' said Harry brightly. 'I'm making it up with them. We've quarrelled long enough... and Christmas is a time for family.'

Professor McGonagall stared at him as though he'd gone mad. After several moments, she collected herself sufficiently to summon back the ink bottle (fortunately charmed to be unbreakable and unspillable) and carry on taking names, pausing every once in a while to survey Harry with a very peculiar expression indeed. Harry suspected he'd had much the same befuddled look on his face when Fred and George first revealed this part of their plan.

'I don't see what use the Dursleys will be in getting Percy out of Azkaban,' Harry had objected, 'and Snape will make Neville Slytherin Seeker in Malfoy's place before they forgive me for being a wizard. I couldn't mend fences with them even if I wanted to.'

'I should hope not, it would ruin everything if you did,' said Fred. 'But you need an excuse to spend the holidays at their house. Sneaking away from Hogwarts is too risky.'

'Poor Harry, you wanted so much to finally get on with your relatives —' said George in tones of mock sorrow.

'— but they weren't having any,' said Fred with a theatrical sigh.

'So on Christmas Eve —'

'— after that huge row you had with them —'

'— you went outside to calm down —'

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CHRISTMAS OVER AZKABAN

'— didn't want to risk any more accidental magic, after all —'

'— and wandered around for simply hours —'

'— depressed —'

'— discouraged —'

'— disappointed —'

'— completely lost track of the time —'


'— at least that's what you'll say if you're asked,' Fred finished. 'Not that you're likely to be, if everything goes according to plan. Obviously once the Ministry finds Percy gone they'll suspect Weasleys were involved, but it'll be mainly us older ones, not Ron and his friends.'

'If everything goes according to plan,' George repeated grimly. 'If worst comes to worst and we're caught in the act, your line will be that we tricked you into it. You flew up to visit Ron but we headed you off at the orchard. We asked you to help us get some things for our Christmas party. When you realised we'd brought you to Azkaban, you conjured the Patronus in self-defence.'

The Christmas party was to be the Weasley family's alibi. Charlie, who had come back from Romania to support his parents during the crisis, was arranging for as many people as possible to drop in on Christmas Eve, ostensibly to cheer Mr and Mrs Weasley up. This group, which included a generous sprinkling of Mr Weasley's colleagues from the Ministry of Magic, would serve as witnesses that none of the Weasleys could have been anywhere near Azkaban when the breakout occurred.

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CHRISTMAS OVER AZKABAN



‘Fred and I will wear our Christmas jumpers,’ said George. ‘Only one of us will actually go with you to Azkaban. The other will have to stay at The Burrow and make it look like we’re both there by changing the letter on his front.’

‘And Ron can wear a maroon jumper and turn it blue to impersonate you from behind,’ Harry suggested. ‘That way some of the guests will be able to swear they saw you together.’

‘Absolutely not,’ said Fred. ‘Ron’s knowing nothing about this, nor is anyone else. Why d’you think I picked that fight with Lee Jordan?’

‘The only person we’re letting in on this is you,’ said George. ‘If someone let something slip beforehand, even unintentionally, Percy could be stuck in Azkaban for the rest of his life. If someone let something slip afterwards, we could all be. This isn’t a kids’ joke.’

‘But Ron’s having nightmares!’ said Harry. ‘Malfoy won’t leave him alone, you heard him at dinner last night. What if Ron tries to — to curse him or something? Then we’d have two people to break out of Azkaban!’

After some argument, Fred and George reluctantly agreed to give Ron and Ginny a false story.

‘We’ll tell them the Ministry’s got a fresh lead,’ said Fred. ‘We can always say later we were making it up so they’d have a happier Christmas.’

In exchange for this concession, Fred and George made Harry swear some truly frightening wizarding oaths not to breath a word of their scheme to anyone for any reason. So Ron slept easier, although the Skull Horse and the Hounds of Noon gave Harry a few bad

nights, and Malfoy was spared a trip to the hospital wing from the Curse of the Slithering Nasty Accident.



For Harry it was the secrecy that proved to be the most difficult part of the plan. He had never before kept anything so important from Ron and Hermione. They still blamed the Dursleys for Harry’s month-long disappearance the previous summer and were exceedingly unhappy about his decision to return to Privet Drive for Christmas.

‘What if they go off and leave you again, and You-Know-Who comes back?’ demanded Ron.

‘If they go off and leave me, I’ll know to tell Mrs Figg this time,’ said Harry. ‘But I don’t reckon they will. Don’t want their house smashed twice, do they?’

Harry wasn’t nearly as offhand about this as he sounded. Having to stay at Mrs Figg’s during the holidays would spoil his plans quite thoroughly. To forestall such a contingency, he had taken the precaution of informing Uncle Vernon that his visit was necessary to maintain the magical protection on number four.

Now that Harry knew something was to be done about Percy, the remaining days of term passed quickly. In what felt like no time at all, the students going home for Christmas were gathered in the Entrance Hall, waiting for the procession of carriages that would take them to Hogsmeade. Professor McGonagall gave Harry one last worried look as she handed out the notes that forbade magic during the holidays. (Harry had asked Fred and George if this would be a problem, but they

assured him that the Ministry wouldn't be checking for underage magic around Azkaban.)

Harry, Ron, Hermione and Ginny rode the same carriage to the station. A light snow was falling outside. Ron and Ginny were sober but not deeply miserable. Fred and George had hinted to them that the Ministry was following up on some promising new evidence and Percy might well be free before the end of the holidays. They'd been warned to remain quiet about this, as Lucius Malfoy would certainly try to sabotage the investigation if he got wind of it. Ron had told Harry and Hermione anyway, which made Harry feel all the more guilty about the secret he was keeping from Ron.

The Hogwarts Express was decorated with wreaths of holly and garlands of mistletoe. The lunch trolley brought mince pies, Christmas cake and eggnog as well as the usual pumpkin juice and Cauldron Cakes. Harry seized the opportunity to stock up on sweets, as he wasn't expecting much in the way of food from his relations. Considering what he'd let happen to their house and garden over the summer, Harry thought it entirely possible that the Dursleys would force him spend the whole of the holidays locked in his room, or the cupboard under the stairs.

This troubled him not a bit. He had the penknife Sirius had given him that could unlock any lock, and an escape would be as good as a quarrel for an excuse to fly up to The Burrow. Percy would soon be out of Azkaban and the Weasley family would once more be a happy one, and knowing that made all of the Dursleys' unpleasantness bearable.

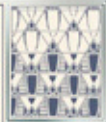



As the Hogwarts Express approached King's Cross, students began changing into Muggle clothes. Harry had outgrown his coat two years ago (lengthwise if not widthwise — it was second-hand from Dudley). He hadn't bothered to ask Aunt Petunia to replace it, as he was never in the Muggle world during winter. Luckily Harry had the jumpers Mrs Weasley knitted him each year for Christmas. He was wearing all four of them: larger, newer ones on top of smaller, older ones.

Mrs Weasley and Charlie were waiting beyond the barrier. Fred and George hadn't been exaggerating: Mrs Weasley looked dreadful. Her face was lined and streaks of grey dulled her vivid red hair. There was a suspicious wetness in her eyes as she hugged her remaining children, and she seemed very reluctant to let go of them.

Hermione's parents stood awkwardly nearby with a pair of trolleys. They were giving Harry a lift to Diagon Alley so he could stop by Gringotts. Fred and George had given him two hundred Galleons to exchange for Muggle money. It would have been considered highly dodgy had the Weasley twins done this themselves, but Harry had Muggle relatives to buy presents for. Harry assumed Percy would lie low as a Muggle after his escape, but Fred and George had told him that the less he knew about Percy's final destination, the better. Once Harry traded the bag of gold (to which he quietly added fifty Galleons of his own) for a stack of fifty-pound notes, the Grangers dropped him off at Paddington station to catch the train to Little Whinging.

He arrived in Privet Drive to find number four





looking as if Voldemort had never flattened it. Apart from being constructed out of slightly newer materials, the rebuilt front was exactly the same as the old one. The door was locked and nobody came when Harry rang the bell, so he used the Skeleton Key attachment on his penknife to let himself in.

A tall, blond boy, who would have been rather good-looking if not for the nervous, hunted expression on his face, was emerging from the living room. Apparently Dudley had brought home a friend from Smeltings. Harry was astounded that Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia had allowed it, knowing Harry would be in the house too.

‘Hello,’ said Harry, holding out his hand. ‘I’m Dudley’s cousin — Harry Potter.’

The boy gave Harry an appalled look, turned tail and ran down the hall and up the staircase. Harry heard the sound of a door slamming shut upstairs. Obviously Dudley had told his guest quite a lot about Harry. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia would be livid if they found out.

Harry stayed in his bedroom until the delicious smell of roast beef lured him down to dinner — at least the Dursleys seemed to have given up on Dudley’s diet. Although Harry had expected his relations to be furious with him after the events of the previous summer, he was taken aback at the looks of sheer hatred his aunt and uncle directed at him when he entered the dining room. Neither Dudley nor his friend was anywhere to be seen.

As Harry sat down, Aunt Petunia left the room. Harry could hear her voice in the hall, speaking in

low, soothingly tones. She came back in leading Dudley’s friend by the hand. He looked petrified. Harry eyed him in confusion.


‘Where’s —?’ Harry started, and then it hit him. The tall, blond boy was Dudley.



Several times over the next couple of days, Harry caught himself ogling his cousin in stunned disbelief. On those rare occasions he could see him, that is — if Dudley saw Harry first, he would invariably scurry off to hide. Clearly, Voldemort’s attack on number four had affected him far more severely than it had his parents. Dudley hadn’t dared bully Harry personally since learning Harry was a wizard, but he’d always thoroughly enjoyed it when Uncle Vernon did. That had changed. Dudley now became so terrified whenever Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia were horrible to Harry that they soon went back to ignoring him altogether.

All in all, life with the Dursleys was as tolerable as it had ever been. Aunt Petunia was cooking wonderful meals (and not stopping Harry from eating them), though strangely enough there were no puddings. With all the weight Dudley had lost, Harry would have thought surely he’d be allowed them again. Though Dudley was still somewhat thicker than a normal boy, this probably actually was due to having big bones.

In fact, Harry was beginning to feel rather sorry for Dudley. It was difficult to hold a grudge against someone who both looked and acted like a completely different person. If Harry hadn’t known better, he




would have suspected Smeltings had simply sent home the wrong boy. Harry was also beginning to worry that he might not be able to start a row with the Dursleys when the time came. Fortunately, there was a box of Dr Filibuster's Fabulous No-Heat, Wet-Start Fireworks in his trunk from last Hogsmeade weekend. If all else failed, letting off a few of them inside the house should do the trick.



On Christmas Eve, Harry spent the afternoon poring over a fold-out map of Britain. Before leaving the tunnel behind the mirror, Fred and George had asked Harry to toss a coin to decide which of them would accompany him to Azkaban. George had won; he and Harry were meeting in Grimsby. Harry would make his way up there by following the motorways: circling round London along the M25, taking the A1 to Peterborough and then the A16. It was a journey of nearly a hundred and fifty miles, but on his Firebolt Harry could make it in a single hour if need be.

It was with some trepidation that Harry finally went down to dinner. For all the ill feeling between him and the Dursleys, he didn't normally go out of his way to stir up trouble with them. Doing so when they were still smarting over the damage done to their house on his watch seemed about as safe a prospect as calling a Hippogriff a bastard. But Harry thought of Percy, languishing in Azkaban, and halfway through the meal he nerved himself and launched into a long, pointless tale about his past Christmases at Hogwarts.




Uncle Vernon's face grew redder and redder as Harry nattered on about wizard crackers and fairy lights that were real fairies. Dudley, however, trembled so fearfully every time his father opened his mouth that Uncle Vernon couldn't quite bring himself to give Harry the savage ticking off he so plainly burnt to. When Aunt Petunia stonily began removing the dishes, Harry knew it would have to be the fireworks.

Trudging up the stairs, Harry couldn't help feeling a bit guilty about his cousin. All the talk of magic at dinner had clearly placed a great strain on Dudley's nerves, and a load of enchanted fireworks going off under his nose was unlikely to have a calming effect. As he rummaged in his trunk for the Filibuster fireworks, Harry's eyes fell upon the pile of Chocolate Frogs he'd bought on the Hogwarts Express. If he gave them to Dudley and warned him to eat them out of his parents' view, it would keep him in his room during Harry's upcoming indoor fireworks display. Scooping up an armful of Chocolate Frogs, Harry headed back downstairs.

Dudley was tiptoeing down the hall, seizing the chance to sneak up to his room whilst Harry was out of the way. When he caught sight of his cousin, Dudley let out a petrified squeak.

'No, wait, it's all right,' said Harry. 'I don't want to talk about — You-Know-What. I've got some spare Chocolate Frogs you can have for a pudding, your mum and dad needn't know...'

He held one out to Dudley, who drew back from it in horror.



‘They’re not made of actual frogs,’ Harry assured him, ‘just chocolate.’

He ripped open the pack and showed the Chocolate Frog to Dudley. Dudley backed away. It suddenly occurred to Harry what must be bothering him.

‘It’s OK, they’re not jinxed,’ he said. ‘Look —’


Harry took a bite of the Chocolate Frog. Dudley was now sobbing with fright. Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon came charging out of the dining room to see what was the matter.

‘Darling Duddykins!’ wailed Aunt Petunia, flinging her arms around Dudley (who was taller than his mother, Harry noticed with a start). ‘What have you done to him?’ she spat at Harry.

‘I didn’t do anything to him,’ said Harry in bewilderment. ‘I just thought he might like a sweet.’

At these words, Uncle Vernon swelled like a great purple toad and pitched into Harry as never before. From the spittle-flecked diatribe that followed, Harry was given to understand that Dudley had been deathly afraid of sweets since the incident of the Ton-Tongue Toffee, and moreover, that this fact had not gone unnoticed by the many smaller boys Dudley had bullied in his first three years at Smeltings. As a result, not only had Dudley not had any sweets for almost eighteen months, he’d also spent a lot of time running. The secret of his extraordinary weight loss was revealed.

‘But I wasn’t... I didn’t...’ said Harry. Then he realised he’d been handed his cue. ‘You always blame me for everything,’ he shouted at Uncle Vernon. ‘It’s your fault what happened to Dudley, if you’d told Mr



Weasley he’d’ve come and put a Memory Charm on him, but I reckon you hate wizards too much to ever ask one for help. I’ve had it with the lot of you! I’m off!’

Harry threw the Chocolate Frogs to the floor, shoved past the three Dursleys and stormed out the front door right on schedule. Rather than heading down the drive, however, he slipped round to the back garden and crept into the greenhouse, where he had concealed the things he’d be needing for his trip north: his Firebolt, his Invisibility Cloak, his four Weasley jumpers and the brass compass from the Broomstick Servicing Kit Hermione had given him (his wand, the maps and the bundle of Muggle money he had kept in his pockets). Although Harry was aware he was flying into a fairly dangerous situation, as he soared up into the freezing air his main emotion was relief at leaving Privet Drive and the Dursleys far behind.

Soon Harry was streaking along above the motorway, overtaking the few cars that were out as if they were standing still. The evening was clear, though extremely cold. Harry ran into the odd flurry of snow but no serious bad weather, reaching the Grimsby docks little over ninety minutes later. He and George had arranged to rendezvous at the hydraulic tower. Circling the Royal Dock, Harry spotted a flash of red hair in the shadows and glided towards it.

‘George?’ he called quietly.

George gazed upwards, eyes darting to and fro (Harry was still invisible). With a small thump, Harry landed beside him.

‘Ah, Harry, good,’ said George.

George ducked under the Invisibility Cloak, climbed onto the Firebolt in front of Harry and flew them across the dark water to a rickety wooden shed at the back of a fish curer’s. Inside the shed, George pulled a bundle of black cloth out of a backpack that was sitting a stack of crates and tossed it to Harry.

‘Here, change into these,’ he said. ‘If we run into anyone on the way, we don’t want to be identified by our clothes.’

Harry put on the outfit George had provided, which he was pleased to see included a thick black cloak. It was an unusually icy night even for December and four jumpers hadn’t been enough to keep Harry properly warm whilst flying at high speed.

When George finished changing his own clothes, he opened the backpack again and drew out two leather belts. One of them was strung with a pair of leads and collars; George fastened it around his waist. He passed the other belt to Harry.

‘We’ll make better time if we use the Firebolt to tow the Cleansweeps. I’ll charm you and Percy to be feather-light and attach the collars to your belts,’ said George, ferreting in the backpack once more. ‘And we mustn’t forget this, it’s the most important thing.’

He produced a small, grubby-looking square of parchment with a flourish.

‘What is it?’ said Harry.

‘A pass from the Ministry of Magic to visit Azkaban,’ said George. ‘As long as I’m carrying this, I won’t set off the intruder alarms.’

Harry’s mouth fell open. ‘How’d you get *that*?’

‘Old one of Dad’s,’ said George. ‘The Ministry doesn’t bother taking them back. They won’t work unless your name’s been written on with a special quill by the Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, and the ink fades after a day.’

‘And you got the Head of Magical Law Enforcement to write your name on it?’ said Harry incredulously.

‘Of course not,’ said George, ‘but a blank pass will work for a wizard with no name.’

‘But you’ve got a name,’ Harry pointed out. ‘It’s George Weasley.’

‘Are you sure of that?’ said George with a crooked smile.

By now Harry had no trouble telling the Weasley twins apart at point-blank range. The red-haired boy in front of him was definitely a Weasley twin, but as Harry inspected him more closely an alarming realisation swept over him.


‘You aren’t Fred *or* George!’

Harry’s wand was in his hand and levelled at the unknown twin almost before he’d had time to think.

The twin laughed. ‘Relax, Harry, I am George,’ he said, holding up his hands as though to ward off a curse. ‘Or I was until I used the Gemini Charm to give my name to Fred.’

‘Used the what to *what*?’ said Harry, now completely at sea.

‘The Gemini Charm,’ George repeated. ‘Lets twins transfer powers to each other. And not just magical powers, but things like strength and reflexes. Fred



and I use it for Quidditch a lot, we can Doplebeater from opposite ends of the pitch. If I had a scar like your one, I could move it onto Fred's forehead or we could share it — both have scars, only fainter. Instead of a scar, I moved my name. Fred is Fred *and* George now, and I'm no one. See how the ink on the pass turns green when I touch it? That means it's activated. You'll have to stay in the air, but I can go on the island and get Percy without raising an alarm. It'll be days before he's discovered missing.'

George paused for a satisfied smirk, then reached into the backpack and took out a couple of black balaclavas.

'Remember your alibi,' he said as they pulled them on. 'When you flew up to the party, I intercepted you outside the house and asked you to come with me to fetch more food.'

Fred and George's Cleansweep Fives were propped against the back wall. George handed one to Harry and strapped the other to his back with a third belt.

'You should get on your broom before I cast the Feather-Light Charm,' he told Harry, drawing his wand.

Harry swung a leg over the Cleansweep and George performed the spell. It felt very weird being feather-light; the slightest motion sent him drifting gently up into the air. George fastened one of the collars hanging off his belt to Harry's, mounted the Firebolt, draped the Invisibility Cloak over the pair of them and shuffled awkwardly out the shack. Harry was tugged along by the lead and collar, his feet floating inches above the ground.

'Right, Harry, we kick off on the count of three,'

said George. 'One — two — three —'
And they were off.

3.

CHRISTMAS OVER BRITAIN

George pushed the Firebolt to the limit of its speed. Breathing was difficult and talk impossible as he and Harry tore through the bitter North Sea air. In scarcely a quarter of an hour, a mound of weathered stone appeared on the dark horizon. It grew rapidly into a large and forbidding castle, a ruin of jagged walls and broken turrets that took up most of the island it was perched upon. George brought them to a halt a hundred yards from the shore.

'Right,' he said, unfastening his belt from Harry's. 'This is it. Conjure your Patronus and wait here under the Cloak while I get Percy.'

Harry nodded. He drew his wand and concentrated on a happy memory: of meeting Ron on the Hogwarts Express and making his first friend.

'*Expecto Patronum!*' he shouted.

A silvery white stag erupted from the tip of his wand and streaked towards Azkaban, with George in hot pursuit. Harry saw them land in a sort of courtyard. George pointed his wand at the entrance to the central tower and its heavy iron grating rose slowly upwards.

Three tall, hooded Dementors swept out. Harry's Patronus chased them off, but several others came gliding after them. The stag circled round. Whilst it was occupied with the second batch of Dementors, a

dozen more sallied forth.

There seemed to be no end of them. The stag galloped hither and thither; the instant it charged down one group, the rest came swarming back. Each time George approached the fortress, their icy, draining power sent him reeling. Then, to Harry's horror, he swayed and crumpled to the rocky ground. The Dementors closed in.

In the nick of time, the silver stag came pelting over. It stood beside George, antlers lowered menacingly, as he struggled onto the Firebolt and took off at full tilt.

'It's no good, one Patronus isn't enough to handle them,' George panted as he pulled level with Harry. 'We'll have to go back.'

There was a sick despair in his eyes that reminded Harry of Sirius when he spoke of his time in Azkaban.

'No!' said Harry furiously. 'Not without Percy.' He called to mind how he had felt as he soared away from Privet Drive with Ron, Fred and George in their flying car. 'EXPECTO PATRONUM!'

A second burst of silver shot out his wand and headed for the island.

'You stay with George!' Harry called out to it rather breathlessly.

The Patronus, a dazzling white wizard with long, flowing hair, halted in mid-air and beckoned George to follow. George gave Harry a swift, astounded look, then zoomed after it into the dark fortress.

Harry hovered over Azkaban feeling very queer indeed. It was as though someone had drilled a hole in his head and all of his thoughts had dribbled out of

it. He knew he should be worried about George, battling his way through the prison's Dementor-infested corridors, but simply holding on to his broomstick took every ounce of Harry's attention.

He gazed vacantly down at the courtyard below, where the stag was still herding Dementors to and fro. After some time, the shining silver wizard emerged from the fortress again, trailed closely by George and, Harry was vaguely pleased to note, Percy. Percy was obviously in a very bad way — hardly able to walk, half dragged and half carried by his brother.

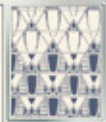
George and Percy's appearance seemed to enrage the Azkaban guards. Every Dementor in the courtyard jostled towards the two Weasleys, pressing as close as the Patronus would allow. Percy stumbled and fell. The sight of George trying frantically to get him to his feet roused Harry from his stupor.

'Spec,' he muttered. He shook his head to clear it. Gripping his wand tightly, Harry dredged up an image of Mrs Weasley smiling kindly at him and carefully and deliberately enunciated, 'Expecto Patronum.'

The next thing he felt was a cold so intense that it burnt. He gasped in shock and choked on salty water. There was light above him; he kicked towards it with all his might. At last his head broke the surface. Spotting his wand floating nearby, Harry floundered in its direction, so frozen he could barely swim.

As his fingers clutched the wand, a voice yelled, 'Harry! Is that you? *Wingardium Leviosa!*'

Harry was lifted out of the sea and into the air, where he hung shivering and dripping as George



looked him up and down in consternation.

'Harry, take off the Cloak, I can't see you,' said George.

Harry wriggled out of the Invisibility Cloak. George cast rapid Drying and Thawing Charms on him.

'*Accio Firebolt!*' said Harry.

His broom came sailing over. He clambered shakily onto it... and nearly tumbled off again when George ended the Levitation Charm.

'George,' panted Harry, 'put a Strengthening Spell on me!'

'*Stabilio!*' said George.

Harry's grip on the Firebolt steadied. He glanced around and saw Percy huddled feebly on the second Cleansweep beside George.

'I reckon Percy could use one too.'

George flicked his wand impatiently at his brother 'What happened?' he asked Harry tensely. 'Was it the Dementors? Were you attacked?'

'No,' said Harry. 'That last Patronus — it did me right in.'

'It saved our lives,' said George. 'Scattered the Dementors just long enough for me to get Percy on the Cleansweep. I didn't realise it was possible to conjure up more than one.'

'Nor did I,' said Harry. His lingering feelings of cold, exhaustion and light-headedness were washed away by a powerful rush of happiness. 'You did it! You got him!'

'Thanks to you,' said George.

They grinned at each other.

'All right, Percy?' said Harry.

Percy looked up at him but didn't smile. There was a horrible emptiness in his eyes. The grin vanished from George's face.

'We've got to get out of here, fast,' he said. 'Those Dementors have gone spare, even the Patronus couldn't quite hold them back. I had to knock down a few of the walls to keep them off. The damage alarms will have the Ministry heading this way for sure.'

He tossed one of the leads attached to his belt to Harry. 'Put this on and throw that Cloak over you and Percy.'

Harry fastened the collar and arranged the Invisibility Cloak.

'You two hang on tight,' said George, grasping the Firebolt with both hands.

'Wait!' said Harry. He pointed his wand skywards and shouted, '*Morsmordre!*'

Green and glittering evilly, the Dark Mark rose over Azkaban. George gaped up at the blazing skull, then back at Harry.

'Let Voldemort take the blame for this one,' said Harry grimly.

George leant forward and sent the Firebolt hurtling off, yanking Harry and Percy along in his wake. He drove the Firebolt even harder on their return journey. In mere minutes, they were back at the shack in the Grimsby docks.

Harry and George changed hurriedly into their own clothes. George had brought a Muggle outfit for Percy and a bottle of Gilderoy Lockhart's Thestral Feather Black Hair Potion, which he poured over his



brother's head to disguise his flaming Weasley hair.

Percy looked terrible. His hands moved slowly and shakily; his face was gaunt and hollow and dreadfully pale beneath his newly blackened hair.

Whilst Percy was dressing, George took Harry aside.

'Now that the Ministry knows something's up at Azkaban, we'll have to do things a bit differently,' he said. 'I'll take the Firebolt — I've got to be at The Burrow when Magical Law Enforcement turns up, and rather I'm found with it than you. You'll fly Percy to Bristol on the Cleansweeps under the Invisibility Cloak. Here —'

George took a map out of the backpack and ran his finger over it.

'Can't go through Nottingham, you might run into Ministry wizards flying up from London,' he muttered. 'Detour through Manchester... don't bother trying to follow the motorways, just fly due west and you'll spot the city by its lights... only mind you don't get drawn off course by Sheffield. Then it's the M6 to Birmingham and the M5 to Bristol.'

George looked up at Harry.

'It's a long flight. D'you reckon you can manage it? I'd send Percy on alone, but the state he's in, I honestly don't think he'd make it.'

'I got here from Little Whinging, didn't I?' said Harry.

In truth, he was far less confident than he sounded. It would mean travelling through more large cities in a single night than in the entire rest of his life. But George was right: left to his own devices, Percy would never reach Bristol.

George gave Harry an envelope with a key. The name and address of a hotel were scribbled on it.

'Stay under the Cloak until you get to Percy's room. There's a bag of food in the wardrobe, try to see he eats something. You've got the Muggle money?'

Harry passed George the bundle of notes. George turned and handed them to Percy.

'You go with Harry, Perce. Lie low until —' George leant over to whisper the rest of his instructions in his brother's ear. 'Sorry, mate,' he said to Harry as he straightened up. 'Less you know, the better.'

George heaped their kit from Azkaban in the middle of the shack, took a box of wooden matches from his pocket, lit one and set it on top. When the match had burnt all the way down, the whole pile was consumed in a flash of white fire. George gave the box to Harry.

'Take both Cleansweeps with you when you leave Bristol. Once you get to your house —' a flicker of pain crossed George's face, but he went on resolutely, '— burn them. Put the matches on the fire as well, that will destroy all the evidence.'

'Burn your Cleansweeps!' said Harry in horror, recalling the many Quidditch matches those valiant brooms had won.

'We can't have them being found in your or Percy's possession,' said George flatly. He glanced down at his watch. 'Right, we'd best be off...'

As George headed for the door, Harry had a sudden, awful thought.

'George, what about your clock?' he said urgently. 'The one in your living room, with hands for all your

family — won't it show Percy's not in prison any more?"

For an instant, George looked panicked. Then relief spread over his face.

'The clock's in the cellar with its face to the wall,' he said. 'Charlie brought it down there weeks ago — it was upsetting Mum.'

George hopped on the Firebolt and with a great whoosh of air was gone. Harry and Percy flew more slowly westwards to Manchester. The Cleansweeps' top speed would still have allowed them to hold a conversation, but Percy didn't seem to want to talk and Harry was too intent on his navigations.

They arrived in Bristol around three in the morning and made it to the hotel room without incident. Percy slumped on the edge of the bed, looking as exhausted as Harry felt. Harry opened the wardrobe, found the bag of food, unwrapped a package of sandwiches and offered one to Percy, who waved it away. Harry took a bite himself and set the rest of the package on the bed beside Percy.

'You should eat,' Harry said as he poured tea from a flask. 'You need to keep your strength up. We'll find a way to prove you didn't kill Watchett. The Ministry of Magic's still investigating, and your dad —'

'Father's working on the Watchett case?' said Percy, his voice aghast. 'Harry, you've got to stop him!'

'Stop him?' said Harry. 'How come?'

For a long while Percy was silent. When he finally spoke again, his tones were flat and deadened.

'You've got to stop him because I did kill Watchett.'

Harry dropped his sandwich.



'You mean Watchett *was* having an affair with Penelope?' he said stupidly.

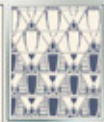
'No, of course not,' said Percy, in his irritation momentarily sounding like his old self. 'He'd caught me in the Magical Law Enforcement wing, rifling their files for information to give to the DAILY PROPHET —'

'*You* were behind those leaks Ron was talking about?' said Harry in high astonishment. 'But — why?'

'I wanted Cornelius Fudge out of office!' said Percy fiercely. 'He's been running the Ministry into the ground. Mr Crouch was dead, murdered by Dark wizards, and all he cared about was covering it up!'

Percy glared at the wardrobe as if he thought Fudge might be hiding it, then continued more quietly, 'A Hit Wizard named Murdock Riversedge came to me. He had a plan to get rid of Fudge and replace him with someone who took their Magical Law Enforcement seriously. As I'd been transferred to the Centaur Liaison Office, I had a lot of spare time. I combed the Ministry's records for things that would make Fudge look an idiot and leaked them the DAILY PROPHET. Only somehow Watchett got wind of what I was doing. He started investigating me — that's why he talked to Penelope. When he found me in the filing room...' Percy's voice dropped. 'I only meant to Stun him. But hexing a person when you're scared or angry — it's not like Defence Against the Dark Arts lessons. I lost control... hit him too hard...'

Harry shook his head. He couldn't believe what he was hearing... he didn't want to believe it. But Percy



wasn't finished yet.

'Watchett — before I — before I killed him — he said Riversedge was working for You-Know-Who. He thought I was, too — I wasn't, I swear, but Riversedge was. He had the Dark Mark branded on his arm, he showed me after I was arrested. He told me if I said anything, he'd convince the Ministry that Father was involved. So I kept quiet. I shouldn't have let George rescue me... I deserved Azkaban... but I couldn't bear it any more... I couldn't...'

Percy buried his face in his hands. Harry gazed down at him, utterly lost for words. Percy was guilty... a murderer...

But it had been an accident, Harry told himself. Fudge said they didn't send people to Azkaban for accidents when he'd blown up Aunt Marge. Yet Harry knew that there was a very big difference between accidentally inflating an aunt and accidentally killing a policeman. *Hexing a person when you're scared or angry...* he was suddenly extremely glad he hadn't proceeded with his plan to curse Draco Malfoy into the hospital wing.

Remembering Malfoy and how he had tormented Ron over Percy's arrest yanked Harry's thoughts back to the present.

'You can't go to Azkaban, think of your family,' he said to Percy. 'Your mum's in a right state, and Ron too. You've got to get a grip... do what George told you... here, eat your sandwich.'

Harry picked up the sandwich he'd dropped and thrust it at Percy. After watching Percy eat it, Harry collected the Cleansweeps and the Invisibility Cloak

and made for the door.

'I need to be getting back to Privet Drive,' he said. 'You'll be OK, won't you?'

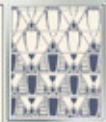
'But Father, he's in danger,' said Percy urgently. 'Riversedge — the Watchett case — you've got to warn him off —'


'I will,' promised Harry as he slipped out the room.

It was good that Harry's route from Bristol ran straight along the M4. George's Strengthening Charm had long since worn off. It was all Harry could do to keep his broomstick pointed in the right direction on the long, icy flight to Little Whinging.

He stared numbly at the motorway beneath him, his mind reeling with what Percy had told him. He couldn't stop himself picturing the scene: a sudden blaze of scarlet light... a man falling to the floor and lying there, unmoving... in his imagination, Watchett looked very much like Cedric Diggory. Harry thought of Cedric's father, sobbing beside his bed, and wondered how Watchett's parents had taken the news of their son's death.

Then he thought of the Weasleys. Would knowing Percy had been given to the Dementors for a crime he'd actually committed make it any easier for them to endure? And how on earth was he going to warn Mr Weasley about Riversedge? After Percy's escape, Magical Law Enforcement would be keeping a close watch on the Weasleys. Any attempt to contact them would draw the Ministry's attention, and with all the time he'd been gone, Harry's alibi for the evening wasn't exactly watertight.






He could tell Dumbledore, of course, but it would mean admitting his part in the breakout, not to mention the fact that Percy really was responsible for Watchett's murder. Dumbledore had helped Harry keep an innocent man out of Azkaban — would he be willing to do the same for a guilty one? If Percy was sent back because of Harry, he'd never be able to face the Weasleys again...

Harry came in to land near the spot where he had first encountered his godfather before catching the Knight Bus. It had snowed whilst he was away. Several inches of glittering white powder covered the pavement. Harry stumbled off his broom and ducked into the gap between the garage and the fence of number two, Magnolia Crescent. He laid the Cleansweeps on the ground, along with the belt, the lead and collar, the maps and the box of enchanted matches, and burnt the lot.

When the fire faded, Harry moved deeper into the narrow alleyway and sank down, shivering, against the garage wall. He checked his watch. It was almost five o'clock in the morning. In little over eight hours, he'd flown halfway across the country and back. At least he didn't have to worry about sneaking into the house — the Dursleys must certainly be asleep by now.

It abruptly hit Harry that on top of all his other problems, he was facing a fortnight with a surpassingly infuriated Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia. He shuddered and slumped down further... and felt something prick him painfully in the leg.

Harry reached into his pocket and pulled out his



wand. His jaw dropped. The wand had sprouted three tiny sprigs of holly. The spiky green leaves and plump red berries glowed with a soft inner light in the dim alleyway. Thinking he might have begun to hallucinate from tiredness, Harry smacked himself in the side of the head, but the holly was still there afterwards.

Too exhausted to ponder what this startling development might signify, Harry tore off the bits of holly, stuck them in his jumper and shoved the wand back in his pocket. Snow was falling again, but somehow he didn't feel cold. I'll just rest here a bit longer, he thought to himself, leaning back against the wall...



Aunt Petunia was shaking him and calling his name, but Harry was too tired to get up, or even to tell her to leave him alone. Then the smell of smoke reached his nostrils. She's set my bed on fire, he thought indignantly.

Harry's eyes flew open and he sat bolt upright. He wasn't in his room at number four and the man in wizard's robes goggling down at him was definitely not Aunt Petunia. Nor did there appear to be any fire — merely a light dusting of ash on his jumper and two sprigs of holly instead of the three he'd had the night before.

'I don't believe it!' yelled the wizard. He ran to the door shouting, 'Minister! Minister, come back! He's alive!'

HOLIDAY CATASTROPHES

Cornelius Fudge came puffing into the room, a pair of witches in fiery orange twinsets and lavender-tinted pearls at his heels. One of the witches was plumpish with mousey hair worn in a bun. The other Harry recognised as the black Hit Witch who, summer before last, had taken Constable Pascoe off after the Magical Law Enforcement Patrol rescued her and Harry from Professor Snape (whom they had mistaken for Sirius Black). The three of them stood gaping at Harry, the witches in pure astonishment and Fudge looking as though he'd just been told Christmas wasn't going to be cancelled after all.

'Harry, what happened to you?' said Fudge. 'We thought you were dead!'

Harry swung his legs off the table he'd been lying on and brushed the soot from his clothes. He was inside a tiny, stone-walled room, whose only other furniture was a battered desk and a shelf of peculiar-looking objects. His whole body felt stiff and sore, as if he'd slept on the ground all night.

'I... had a row with the Dursleys and went out for a walk,' said Harry guardedly. 'Where am I? How did I get here?'

'You were lying in an alley under six inches of snow,' said the brown-haired witch reproachfully. 'I shook you and shook you, but you didn't answer me!'

'I thought you were my Aunt Petunia,' Harry told her.

'Minister, I don't understand it,' the wizard broke

in. 'He was cold as ice, he had no pulse... I performed the Sickle test, you watched me, and the water didn't smoke. Then when I cast the Thawing Charm to start the post mortem, he woke right up!'

Harry frowned at his jumper. 'You set my holly on fire.'

'Harry,' said Fudge, 'think carefully. Can you remember anything — anything at all — about the person who attacked you?'

'What?' said Harry, staring at him. 'No one attacked me. I walked for a couple of hours and stopped to rest. I must've fallen asleep. Did the Dursleys report me missing?'

'You were out in that weather with nothing but a jumper?' said the black witch.

'Four jumpers,' Harry corrected her. 'I didn't have a Muggle coat.'

Four jumpers and his Invisibility Cloak, which he spotted hanging on an iron hook near the door.

The black witch eyed Harry uneasily. 'Minister — do you think — is it possible he simply froze to death?'

'On the same evening as the attack on Azkaban and the robbery at the British Museum?' said Fudge. 'You'll forgive me if I have difficulty believing in that sort of coincidence. Good God, the DAILY PROPHET would've had a field day!'

'Robbery at the British Museum?' said Harry. He quickly added, 'Attack on Azkaban?'

'Never you mind that,' said Fudge firmly. 'Lichfield, look after him, we don't want him dying again. I must notify Ormesby of this at once. White, Sargent, if you could spread the word to the rest of the Min-



istry... you know how stories travel around here... wouldn't want any unfortunate rumours reaching the ears of the wizarding public...'

Fudge bustled out of the room. The two witches gawked at Harry for a moment longer, then hastened after him.

Lichfield began rather timidly to examine Harry using the instruments from the shelf in the corner. He dithered over each selection, as though genuinely frightened that Harry would drop dead once more if prodded in the wrong place with the wrong object. The mediwizard was tapping Harry in the kidneys with a small glass hammer when Fudge returned with Ormesby in tow.

Harry sat up, his heart beating faster. Ormesby had been the leader of the squad of Hit Wizards who had come to Privet Drive looking for Sirius Black. The short, innocuous-looking wizard had a notably sinister reputation: according to Ron, Ormesby had, years earlier, been thrown out of the Magical Law Enforcement Patrol for brutality. Sirius' escape, however, had brought about his reinstatement, apparently to a position of some authority. All things taken into account, Ormesby was one of the last people Harry would have wished to run into the morning after breaking somebody out of prison.

Ormesby raked Harry over with beady eyes.

'Is he fit to answer questions?' he demanded of Lichfield.

'I — well — I don't know,' floundered Lichfield. 'He seems to be in good health, apart from being dead five minutes ago.'

Ormesby shot Lichfield an irritated look and turned to Harry, who tried to appear as recently deceased as possible. The more ill he was reckoned to be, the less likely he'd be suspected of having anything to do with Azkaban.

'Sargent spoke with your uncle,' said Ormesby grimly.

There was a long pause.

'I — I hope he wasn't too horrible to her,' Harry finally said.

Uncle Vernon's opinion of black people was scarcely a notch less low than his opinion of wizards, and Sargent's hair — which stood out nearly a foot from her head in all directions — would have been another very serious strike against her.

Plainly this was not the response Ormesby had been expecting.

'Your uncle told Sargent you threatened your cousin with hexed chocolates and ran off when he confronted you,' he said sharply.

'I didn't *threaten* him,' said Harry indignantly, 'I offered him one. I didn't realise Dudley was scared of sweets. And they weren't hexed — just ordinary Chocolate Frogs.'

'If that's the case, why did you run away?' countered Ormesby.

'Because I was sick of being blamed for everything that went wrong around there,' said Harry bitterly.

'We'll be checking the frogs for jinxes, you know,' said Ormesby, watching Harry carefully for his reaction.

Harry shrugged.

‘Had you eaten any of them yourself?’

‘Yeah,’ said Harry. ‘Not that day, but I’d bought the box on the Hogwarts Express.’

‘Hmpf,’ grunted Ormesby. ‘Where did you go after you left your relatives’ house?’

‘Just — around,’ said Harry. ‘I was waiting for the Dursleys to fall asleep before I went back.’

‘So you’d have been keeping fairly close track of the time?’ said Ormesby, for the first time sounding truly interested in what Harry had to say.

‘Er, yes...’ said Harry. ‘The Dursleys usually go to bed at eleven. I stopped in Magnolia Crescent about a quarter before...’

‘Roughly the same time the alarms went off at Azkaban,’ said Ormesby thoughtfully. ‘Did you see anyone else while you were out walking, or notice anything out of the ordinary?’

Harry shook his head.

‘I’ll have the Patrol check for signs of magical concealment,’ said Ormesby to Fudge. ‘Definitely a suspicious set of circumstances, and not only due to the timing. A fifteen-year-old boy was gone the whole night and most of the next day, yet his family made no attempt to find him? We’ll want to examine them for curses, as well.’ (Harry had to stifle a snigger, imagining the Dursleys reaction to that.) ‘We can put Potter up in one of the spare offices until we’re convinced it’s safe for him to return home. Under guard, of course, and Lichfield should stay with him tonight.’

Ormesby pointed his wand at the door and sent a silver arrow shooting out of it into the corridor. Min-

utes later, a dark-haired, square-jawed man wearing Hit Wizard’s robes came strolling in. In a few terse sentences, Ormesby explained the situation to the newly arrived Hit Wizard, who was called Lamplough.

Lamplough escorted Harry and Lichfield down a maze of narrow, torch-lit corridors, up a stone staircase and along another, wider passageway. Through the windows of open offices, Harry saw that darkness had fallen again. A number of harried-looking Ministry members were still at work; they gaped at Harry as he passed.

When they reached the spare office, Lamplough laid claim to the chair from the desk and stationed himself outside the door. Lichfield magicked the remaining furniture to one side of the room, conjured up a camp bed with two thick eiderdowns and started a roaring fire in the grate. Clearly he was taking no chances on Harry freezing to death a second time.



Once Harry was under the eiderdowns, Lichfield knelt and stuck his head into the fire, emerging shortly with a floating tray clenched between his teeth. He carried the tray to Harry’s bed. On it was bowl of turkey soup and, to Lichfield’s annoyance, a small dish of trifle.

‘Now, really,’ he said, upon spotting the latter, ‘I specifically told the house-elves, no puddings!’

‘Oh, go on,’ said Lamplough. ‘It’s Christmas.’

‘Be that as it may,’ said Lichfield stiffly, ‘I don’t feel he ought to be having such rich food so soon after being dead.’


He turned to see Harry scraping the last dollops of





custard from the bottom of the dish. Fourteen years of living with the Dursleys had left him practised in the art of wolfing down his food before it could be taken away from him.

Whilst Harry ate his soup, Lichfield used a Summoning Charm to bring a stream of potion bottles sailing into the room, until there were nearly a dozen lined up on the mantelpiece. Harry was afraid the mediwizard might make him drink them all, but Lichfield finally settled on a single one, which proved to contain the same foul-tasting Wizard Tonic that Harry had been dosed with in autumn by Madam Pomfrey. When Harry finished the potion, Lichfield let him have the empty bottle as a vase for his surviving sprigs of holly, on condition that he lie down and get some sleep.

Harry rolled onto his side and pulled the eider-downs over his head. The Ministry thought someone had tried to kill him. Tomorrow they'd be combing Little Whinging for evidence. That was all right — Harry had burnt the Cleansweeps and all his gear, except for the brass compass, which was still in his pocket. There was nothing to left to connect him with Azkaban...



In the morning Lichfield took Harry back to the room in the basement for another examination. After that Harry was questioned to see if he had recalled any more details about the previous evening, first by Ormesby and then by the other Hit Wizards who were in on the investigation.



Unsurprisingly, they had found no clues to the identity of Harry's attacker in Privet Drive. Various odd theories were being put forth to account for this; Harry spent the next two hours failing to provide corroborating evidence for any of them. No, he had not noticed the moon turning pink, or a strange tingling in his earlobes, or the smell of burning beetroot (not that he would have recognised this odour if he had smelled it).

At lunchtime the whole Weasley family crammed themselves into the spare office to visit Harry, all of them looking highly upset.

'Out in the snow with only a jumper on, what were you thinking?' said Mrs Weasley in a trembling voice. 'If you'd died, on top of everything else...'

'It was four jumpers, actually,' said Harry, but nobody was listening.

'It's all our fault,' said George bitterly. 'We should never have let you spend Christmas with those Muggles, we knew what they were like.'

'Do you remember anything about what happened to you on Christmas Eve?' said Fred tensely.

'Nothing happened to me,' said Harry, 'I walked around Little Whinging for a couple of hours and —'

It dawned on him that Fred and George must be mad with worry about Percy, particularly if they believed as the Ministry did that Harry had been attacked by Dark wizards.

'I did meet a man,' said Harry, keeping his voice offhand but locking his eyes on George's. 'He was a bit grotty-looking — homeless, I suppose — but I gave him some Muggle money so he could, you know,

make it to a night shelter. I expect he managed to *get where he was going...*

'Ah,' said George, 'good.'

Mr Weasley gave Harry a look of keen interest.

'You met a man?' he said. 'Can you recall what he looked like?'

From the corner of his eye, Harry saw the Hit Wizard who was guarding him quietly get up and slip out. His heart sank.

'Well, I didn't really get a good view of his face, as he was all wrapped up from the cold.' Hoping to change the subject, Harry continued, 'Fudge said there was an attack on Azkaban. Have you heard if Percy's OK?'

Mr Weasley sagged. 'No, we've had no word. The Ministry's still trying to reason with the Dementors and having very little luck. The prisoners the Magical Law Enforcement Patrol managed to remove haven't been able to give us much information either. Perhaps when they've had a day or two to recover —'

'Reason with the Dementors?' said Harry in puzzlement. 'I thought Fudge said Azkaban had been *attacked*.'

'It was,' said Mr Weasley, 'we think. There was damage to the fortress the Dementors couldn't have done themselves, and several of the prisoners say they saw wizards flying around outside.'

'Er — anyone they recognised?' said Harry.

'Why, yes,' said a cool voice from the door. 'Father Christmas and his reindeer and a partridge in a pear tree. All barking of course — time in Azkaban obviously affecting their minds. One of them even swore she saw Dumbledore.'



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Ormesby swept into the room, scattering Weasleys in his wake.

'Now tell me about this man you met.'

Harry's main concern in the interview that followed was to say nothing that might lead the Magical Law Enforcement Patrol to Percy. He kept his descriptions vague, telling Ormesby that the man had worn a long, shabby, light brown coat (George had got Percy a new black puffer jacket) and that his hair and face had been hidden by a woolly hat and a long scarf, both also fraying and brown, or possibly olive. Harry did admit that the man had been taller than he was. Few fully-grown wizards weren't, Ormesby himself being a notable exception.

'But I'm sure he didn't attack me,' said Harry. 'I definitely would've remembered that.'

'He may not have needed to,' said Ormesby. 'If you'd been cursed, the Improper Use of Magic Office should have detected it, and they report no unauthorised spellcasting in the area that night.'

He fastened a gimlet eye on Mr Weasley.

'We're leaning towards the theory that an enchanted object was used. There was a patch of ice near the place he was found, as if the snow was melted and then froze again. It's likely something was burnt there with a magical igniter. A blanket with a built-in Sleeping Charm, for example: toss it over him, leave it for an hour and the cold would do the rest. We'll be requesting the assistance of your Office in tracing it. A list of all confiscations over the past seven years, for a start...'



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‘Yes, certainly,’ said Mr Weasley.

As Ormesby turned to go, Mrs Weasley spoke up. ‘We were hoping that Harry could come and stay with us once you’d finished questioning him.’

‘No, I don’t think so,’ said Ormesby. ‘He’ll be remaining in protective custody until the wizards behind this are apprehended.’

The Weasleys had brought Christmas presents for Harry, including a box of Chocolate Frogs from Ron, a bag of assorted Weasleys’ Wizard Wheezes from Fred and George, a wreath of mistletoe from Ginny, a fifth hand-knitted jumper from Mrs Weasley and a large and fancy Christmas cake. After watching Harry open them, Mr Weasley returned to his office and Mrs Weasley took the rest of the family back to the Burrow, except for Ron, Fred and George, who were staying to keep Harry company.

As soon as his parents had left, Ron rounded on Harry. ‘What did you think you were playing at, sleeping rough in the dead of winter? You could have died! Don’t you think we’ve got enough to worry about, with Percy in Azkaban and all?’

‘Ron, we need a word with you,’ said Fred.

He and George seized Ron by the arms and hustled him out of the room. When they came back, Ron seemed very much subdued.

‘Look, I’m sorry I shouted at you,’ he said to Harry. ‘Have some cake, it’ll make you feel better.’

‘Did you tell him?’ Harry muttered to George as Ron was slicing the cake.

‘That you’d tried to top yourself because you could-

n’t patch things up with your relatives?’ George muttered back. ‘Yeah.’

Harry was surprised that Ron would believe this story, being well aware of how little Harry cared for the Dursleys. Harry’s close brush with death must have severely shaken him. Harry felt a surge of guilt for the additional distress he’d caused the Weasleys. He should have gone directly to number four after burning the Cleansweeps; it had been stupid to stop for a rest in such icy weather. He was lucky he really hadn’t died.

Harry noticed Ron staring at him anxiously, and forced a cheerful expression onto his face.

‘So — what’s all this about a museum robbery?’ he said brightly.

‘Someone broke into the Department of Magical Antiquities at the British Museum,’ said Fred. ‘Got caught by a Tangler Charm and blasted their way out. Made a huge racket and set off the Muggle alarms —’

‘Happened right as our party was winding down,’ said George. ‘The Ministry had to send every wizard they’d got, to conceal the damage and put Memory Charms on all the Muggles who were turning up. Only as it was Christmas Eve, practically no one was on duty. It would have been a real catastrophe —’

‘Worst breach of Clause 13 since the Statute of Secrecy was passed, Dad reckons,’ Ron put in.

‘— except the Magical Law Enforcement Patrol had a squad on hand they’d been rounding up to send to Azkaban,’ said Fred. ‘The alarms there had gone off about an hour earlier, but only damage detectors, no intruder alerts. Nobody realised it was an attack

— they thought the fortress had been struck by lightning or something.’

‘As they didn’t think the situation at Azkaban was all that urgent, they were waiting for a few more Hit Wizards to show up,’ said George. ‘Then, of course, all available Ministry members had to be diverted to the museum. It was Christmas morning before they got things under control there and could send someone out to Azkaban to investigate.’

‘Yes, what about Azkaban?’ said Harry. ‘Your dad said something was up with the Dementors?’

‘The Dementors have gone mad,’ said Fred. ‘Attacked the Magical Law Enforcement Patrol immediately they landed. The first squad of Hit Wizards had to fly back to London and fetch more people for a full-scale assault. They pulled several prisoners from the outer cells and captured a Dementor for questioning, but the prisoners couldn’t tell them much and the Dementor refused to cooperate.’

‘Not that they would’ve got much out of it in any case,’ said George reassuringly. ‘Dementors can’t see. They can identify people they’ve encountered before by their auras, but Dementor testimony isn’t considered reliable. They’ll say whatever they think will get them more prisoners.’

‘Why aren’t the Dementors cooperating with the Ministry, though?’ said Harry. ‘D’you reckon they’ve all joined up with Voldemort?’

There was a sharp hiss of indrawn breath from the guard at the door.

‘Dunno,’ said Fred. ‘The Ministry’s not sure if the

museum was a distraction for Azkaban, or Azkaban was a distraction for the museum. They’re still cataloguing to see what was stolen and what was just smashed.’

‘Then there’s you,’ said George. ‘Somebody sent an anonymous owl yesterday afternoon telling the Ministry to check your house. Sargent and White learnt from your aunt and uncle that you were missing. Sargent’s been specially trained to handle Muggles — she went house-to-house while White searched the neighbourhood. White noticed a funny-looking mound of snow, stepped in for a closer look and tripped right over you.’

‘An anonymous owl!’ said Harry, sitting up in astonishment. ‘But — I don’t understand. Who could’ve sent it?’

‘Fudge reckons it was the killer,’ said Fred. ‘Wanted to be certain the body turned up in time for the Boxing Day PROPHECY. “Harry Potter Found Dead on Christmas Day” — he thinks it’s all a plot to get him thrown out of office.’


‘But there wasn’t any killer,’ said Harry.

He was sure there hadn’t been... but then who had sent that owl?

5.

CHRISTMAS IN THE MINISTRY

Ormesby was apparently serious about having Harry stay at the Ministry for the rest of the holidays. When a fresh Hit Witch came to relieve the guard at Harry’s door that night,



his trunk from the Dursleys was floating behind her. Before the old guard departed, he conjured up a softer mattress and extra pillows for the camp bed and taught Harry a charm to transform the last sink in the toilet down the hall into a shower.

Next day Ron, Fred and George came back to visit. Fred and George went off to talk to some friends who had left Hogwarts and gone to work for the Ministry. Ron made a determined effort to keep Harry's spirits up, discussing the Quidditch scores from the DAILY PROPHET and letting Harry very nearly beat him at wizard chess. In the afternoon, a Ministry witch took the pair of them on a tour of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement.

It would be quite easy to get lost in the Ministry of Magic, Harry thought. The building contained as many winding corridors and narrow staircases as Hogwarts, but no statues or paintings to act as landmarks. His sole means of orienting himself was by peering into the offices, many of which were well worth a second look.

There was one whose walls and ceiling were upholstered in maroon velvet, another with a pond and a live orange tree growing out of an earthen floor, and a third in which half-a-dozen pure white, floppy-eared dogs were lounging on silk cushions. Mr Weasley's office reminded Harry of The Burrow: shelves of Muggle objects crammed together willy-nilly and towering stacks of parchment that must have been held up by magic. Perkins the warlock's office could have been a room in Mrs Figg's house, right down to

the boiled cabbage smell and profusion of cat photos.

In the Muggle Disguise Room, Harry was allowed to pick out a battered brown leather flying jacket only a size too large for him as a Christmas present from the Ministry. He was beginning to think spending his holidays there might not be so bad... until he and Ron returned to the spare office.

Fred and George were waiting for them.

'Good news!' said Fred, with an air of rather strained cheer. 'They're letting Percy out of Azkaban!'

'The Ministry's given up on getting the Dementors under control again any time soon,' said George. 'They've decided to remove the short term prisoners, and Percy's at the top of the list!'


'Yes!' said Ron ecstatically. 'Percy's coming home!'

Harry forced himself to smile.

'That's great, Ron,' he said. 'Really great.'



And it *would* have been great, Harry thought that evening as he lay awake brooding, if Percy had still been in Azkaban. How long would it take the Ministry to realise he'd escaped, if the Dementors weren't speaking to them? When they did, they'd be taking a close look at what the Weasleys had been doing the night the fortress was attacked — the Weasleys and all their friends as well. There were loads of witnesses that Fred and George had been at the Christmas party, but the Ministry only had Harry's word for it that he was dead at the time. And what of Percy himself? Fred and George couldn't have counted on



this kind of uproar whilst making their plans for spiriting him off afterwards... an uproar for which Harry was partly responsible...

Harry was too anxious to enjoy next morning's tour of the Department of Magical Catastrophes. Ron, however, chattered away happily.

'Mum started cleaning Percy's room at five o'clock this morning... hey, maybe you can have dinner with us, I bet she cooks something really good... course, we're not sure they'll let Percy come back to The Burrow straight away, but anywhere's better than Azkaban, eh?'

This merely gave Harry one more thing to fret over. What would the Weasleys make of Percy's disappearance? They were expecting him to be rescued from Azkaban, by evening at the very latest. It would be a nasty shock for them when they learnt he hadn't been.

'Have they brought Percy in yet?' Ron asked his father hopefully when he and Harry met Mr Weasley for lunch in the Ministry canteen.

'No, not yet,' said Mr Weasley. Perhaps it was just Harry's imagination, but he seemed to sound slightly uncomfortable.

That afternoon, Harry and Ron were shown around the Department of International Magical Cooperation. Ron kept stopping to poke his head into fires to see if his father had had any news of Percy. After the dozenth time, Mr Weasley evidently became fed up with this.

'He said to quit badgering him, he'd shoot me an arrow if he heard anything,' said Ron irritably (Ministry members used magical silver arrows to send

each other messages inside the building). 'But how will it catch up with us if we keep moving about? Let's go back to your room.'


So they cut short their tour and returned to the spare office, where Ron was so distracted watching out for his father's arrow that Harry almost actually did win one of their chess matches. A couple of hours later, Mr Weasley turned up in person. His face was grave.

'The last of the Hit Wizards have just flown in from Azkaban,' he said. 'They weren't able to bring Percy back today. There was — considerable difficulty with the Dementors; they were extremely angry at having so many prisoners taken from them. But the Ministry will be sending out another squad first thing tomorrow. We must think positively... and not lose hope...'

It was clear, however, that Mr Weasley was having some trouble following his own advice, and Ron showed up next morning radiating such palpable misery that it made his father seem nothing short of buoyant in comparison.

'Percy wasn't in his cell,' he told Harry in a low voice. 'We overheard Dad telling Mum. They're afraid the Dementors may have moved him. The Ministry's going to try and search for him, but they'll have a real job of it with the Dementors on a rampage...'

Ron refused to go on any tours that day, even when the witch guide offered to take them round to the Department of Magical Games and Sports and introduce them to Gwenog Jones. Harry desperately wanted to tell Ron the truth about Percy but didn't dare, as there was a Hit Wizard sitting right outside the door.



The best he could do was suggest diffidently, 'He might've got away while the fortress was being attacked...'

'That's what Fred and George said,' Ron replied gloomily. 'But can you imagine Percy breaking out of prison? I mean, he's not exactly Sirius Black.'

Hearing Sirius' name, the guard sat up straighter.

At half past three, Fred and George, who had been off as usual collecting gossip, came into the office looking grim.

'They've brought in the last batch of prisoners from Azkaban,' said George. 'Everyone's been accounted for except Percy.'

'The Hit Wizards say some of the walls were blasted apart on the way to his cell,' said Fred. 'That git Lucius Malfoy is claiming this proves Percy killed Watchett — that he was part of a conspiracy against the Ministry and his accomplices helped him escape.'

'Fred and I still reckon Percy managed to escape when the Dementors were fighting the attackers,' said George. 'Percy can pick locks, we taught him how.'

Ron looked askance at this and Harry didn't blame him. He could hardly see boring, rule-following Percy allowing Fred and George to teach him any such thing. It was unlikely that anyone else who knew the Weasley family would give the notion much credence, either.

'The Ministry doesn't think any of you —' Harry began.

'Of course not,' said Fred. 'Everyone knows we were at the Christmas party all night.'



That evening, Harry ate his dinner at the desk in the spare office as usual. He had just set down his goblet after a sip of pumpkin juice when a strange feeling came over him. An odd creeping numbness was spreading upwards from his stomach. His brain was growing sluggish and fogged, his thoughts grinding slowly to a halt.

As he gazed blankly at his plate, the Hit Wizard who was guarding him said, 'Potter? Can you hear me?'

'Yes,' Harry heard his own voice say. His scar throbbed dully on his forehead.

The guard called down the corridor, 'Sir? You can come in now. He's under.'

A few moments later, Ormesby walked through the door, followed by Cornelius Fudge, Lichfield the mediwizard, a number of other Ministry members Harry didn't recognise — and Lucius Malfoy.

Although his body remained paralysed, the pain in Harry's scar was prodding him back to full consciousness. This was not entirely to the good, as it left him free to worry about what was happening to him. Plainly he had been slipped some sort of potion, but *what* sort, and why? And what was Mr Malfoy doing here?

Ormesby placed a quill, a roll of parchment and a bottle of ink on the desk in front of Harry. The quill sprang up, dipped itself in the ink bottle and stood poised to write.

'The Veritaserum interrogation of Harry James Potter in the matter of the Christmas Eve incidents of

1995 will now commence,' said Ormesby.

Veritaserum.

A thrill of horror shot through Harry. He couldn't tell them about Percy, he had to fight the potion... but Professor Snape's voice was echoing inside his head. *It is Veritaserum — a Truth Potion so powerful that three drops would have you spilling your innermost secrets for this entire class to hear...* Was there any way he could stop himself?

Harry drew up every scrap of will he possessed, trying to resist the potion as he did the Imperius Curse. But the Veritaserum was in his blood, coursing through his veins — its effects were not so easily thrown off.

Harry was so engrossed in his struggle that he almost didn't hear Ormesby say, 'Tell us what happened to you on Christmas Eve.'

As Harry opened his mouth, his scar burnt more fiercely yet. The pain seemed to diminish his compulsion to speak and he realised that he could indeed fight this. It was harder than lying to Voldemort whilst transformed into a snake, but Harry forced himself to repeat the story he'd previously given.

Ormesby appeared disappointed but not terribly surprised. 'So you had nothing to do with the break-in at the British Museum on that same night?'

'No,' said Harry, without effort as he was now telling the truth.

'Do you have any information regarding that incident which might be of interest to the Magical Law Enforcement Patrol?'

Mechanically Harry started to recite everything Fred

and George had told him about the museum robbery.

'Stop,' said Ormesby. Harry fell silent. 'I mean, do you know who was behind it?'

'Yeah,' said Harry. 'It was Voldemort.'

Fudge blanched. A spasm of terror flitted over Lucius Malfoy's face. Harry was as startled at what he'd said as either of them. He hadn't given much thought to who was responsible for the museum robbery, more or less assuming it to be the work of ordinary wizarding burglars. Nor had he been intentionally lying: the words had just popped out of his mouth.

'Was it?' said Ormesby keenly. 'How do you know?'

The true answer to that question was that Harry didn't know how he knew, but he could see that this would sound a trifle peculiar to his interrogators.

Instead he replied, 'Who else could it have been?'

Ormesby looked disgusted. 'But you have no evidence beyond your own suspicions?'

'No,' said Harry.

Before Ormesby had a chance to ask anything more, Lucius Malfoy stepped forward and said, 'It was you who attacked Azkaban, you and Dumbledore!'

'No, it wasn't,' said Harry. He noticed it was rather less difficult to tell a partial lie than a whole one.

'Your Patronus is a reindeer!' said Mr Malfoy furiously.

'No, it isn't,' said Harry, which was technically true.

Lucius Malfoy rounded on Ormesby. 'He's lying, it's not working, you didn't give him enough —'

'Kindly let *me* handle this interrogation, Mr Malfoy,' said Ormesby coldly. 'Were you in any way involved with the attack on Azkaban?' he asked Harry.

‘No,’ said Harry.

‘Was Albus Dumbledore in any way involved with the attack on Azkaban?’

‘No,’ said Harry.

‘Were any members of the Weasley family?’

‘No,’ said Harry.

‘To your knowledge or belief, was any other specific person involved with this attack?’

‘No,’ said Harry.

‘Are you in fact able to cast the Patronus Charm?’

‘Yes,’ said Harry.

It would be dangerous to lie about this; too many people knew the truth.

Ormesby raised his eyebrows. ‘What form does your Patronus take?’

‘It’s a Scottish stag,’ said Harry.

‘Is it?’ said Ormesby. ‘Well, you were nearly right, Lucius. But ungulate Patroni aren’t especially uncommon and he has confirmed under Veritaserum that he did not take part in the attack. Unless any of you have further questions, this interview is over.’

There was a general shaking of heads. Even Mr Malfoy, although exceedingly disgruntled by the look of him, had nothing more to say. Led by Fudge, the Ministry wizards filed out, leaving only Lichfield and the guard. Harry should have been relieved that the interrogation was finished, but his scar was hurting him as badly as ever. Did that mean Voldemort was nearby? If the Dark Lord came after him, Harry was in no condition to get away. His mind was starting to drift again and he could scarcely feel his arms and legs.

Lichfield used his wand to float Harry to the bed. He poured a few drops of potion into Harry’s mouth and closed Harry’s eyes with his hand. Harry began to feel extremely drowsy. But he couldn’t let himself fall asleep... not when Voldemort was lurking about...

Whatever had protected Harry from the Veritaserum did no good against the potion Lichfield had given him. The room swirled away from him as he sank into darkness.

Harry dreamed that Voldemort stood by his bed and spoke to him in a cold, hissing voice. ‘One of our people was questioned tonight... I felt it through the Dark Mark...’ Then, a little later, ‘You have done well, my newest Death Eater... drink the bitter wine of Slytherin...’

It was very bitter wine indeed. It scorched Harry’s throat and burnt in his stomach, and the taste of it remained on his tongue until morning, when he had forgotten the rest of his dream.



It was noon before Harry finally woke, tired, muzzy-headed and rather surprised that he was still alive. His scar felt perfectly normal, which meant Voldemort had gone — for now. So, apparently, had everyone else. There was no longer a guard at the door and Ron, Fred and George didn’t seem to have stopped by to see him that day.

Harry picked up his wand, glanced nervously up and down the passage and set off for the Misuse of Muggle Artefacts Office. Mr Weasley was at his desk reading a piece of parchment, his brow furrowed. He

looked up as Harry walked in.

'Voldemort was here last night,' Harry said in a hushed voice.

Mr Weasley's hands clenched, crumpling the edges of the parchment. 'How do you know?'

'My scar,' said Harry.

He described how he had been given Veritaserum and questioned about Azkaban and the museum robbery. He didn't mention the potion not working, merely that his scar had started to hurt when the Minister and his party entered the room.

'D'you reckon one of them was Voldemort using Polyjuice Potion? Mr Malfoy kept trying to get me to say Dumbledore attacked Azkaban... except if Voldemort was there, I don't understand why he didn't finish me off while I was sleeping.'

Mr Weasley looked as tense as Harry had ever seen him.

'The Ministry has spells and enchantments that ought to prevent that kind of thing, but the Dark Lord has got round so many of our magical protections... Harry, I wish I could take you away from here, but the Minister won't allow it. Dumbledore's been trying to get you sent back to Hogwarts since he heard about the attack, but Ormesby says he's a suspect and now it appears I am too.'

Mr Weasley shook his head. 'Using Veritaserum to interrogate a child! It wouldn't surprise me if that's what caused the pain in your scar. Nasty stuff at the best of times and combined with an old head injury... I'll owl Dumbledore, perhaps he'll be able to think of something. For today, I want you to stay in my office.'

Even if You-Know-Who can't get in here, it's quite likely there's a traitor in the Ministry. Someone murdered Watchett, after all, and evidence is pointing to Azkaban and the museum being inside jobs as well.'

A traitor in the Ministry. Harry felt as though he'd been punched in the stomach. Waking up to find himself in the middle of the Magical Law Enforcement Patrol's investigation had driven his last conversation with Percy clear from his mind. Now it all came rushing back to him.


He had to warn Mr Weasley about Riversedge... but how could he, inside the Ministry of Magic? If Harry told Mr Weasley that Riversedge was the traitor, he'd have to explain how he knew. He'd have to admit that Percy had killed Watchett and that Harry, Fred and George had broken him out of Azkaban. Someone might overhear them, Mr Weasley's office might be bugged — he'd said the Ministry suspected him — and Mr Weasley had no scar to protect him from Veritaserum.

'Harry... Harry, are you all right?' Mr Weasley was saying anxiously. 'Here, sit down... are you ill? Shall I arrow Lichfield?'

'No, I'm fine,' said Harry weakly. 'I — haven't had breakfast yet, that's all.'

Mr Weasley accompanied Harry to the Ministry canteen and sat at his table while he ate. All through the meal, Harry racked his brains for a way of safely passing on his information but could think of nothing that had much chance of success. If only he had his Invisibility Cloak... but Ormesby had taken it, 'for safekeeping'.

When they got back to the office, Mr Weasley said,



‘Why don’t you give me a hand with these reports, Harry? They need sorting by date — I’ve been making that list of confiscations Ormesby asked for. The ones from 1989 and afterwards you can put on my desk. Everything else goes in those three crates: eighties, seventies and sixties or earlier.’

Harry began ploughing through the nearest ceiling-high stack of parchment. Worried though he was, as he read the reports Harry had to laugh, imagining some of the hexed Muggle artefacts they described falling into the hands of the Dursleys. When the witch who had taken him on his earlier tours dropped by to ask if he’d like to see the Department of Magical Transportation, Harry told her ‘no thanks’.

Halfway through his second stack, Harry came across a roll of parchment that was crisper and less dusty than the others. What really caught his eye, however, was the first line:

ORMESBY: Now, Mr Lupin —

FUDGE: I say, shouldn’t he be chained down?

ORMESBY: He’s not under arrest yet, Minister.

When he finished reading it, Harry said to Mr Weasley in amazement, ‘Fudge thought Professor Lupin tried to eat me?’

‘What?’ said Mr Weasley distractedly. He’d been paying little attention to the reports Harry gave him, spending most of his time staring out the door and fingering his wand.

‘Last summer when I disappeared — here, look.’

Harry passed him the parchment. Mr Weasley ran his eyes over it.

‘Where did you get this?’ he said sharply.

‘It was in your stack of reports,’ said Harry.

Mr Weasley frowned, strode over to the fire and stuck his head into the flames. Harry heard him speaking as though from a great distance.

‘...in with my reports... Harry found it... one of your people must have laid it down and forgotten about it...’

Mr Weasley pulled his head out, put the hand with the report in, and removed it again, empty.

‘Honestly, no wonder they’re having trouble with leaks in Magical Law Enforcement, if that’s the care they take with their paperwork,’ he muttered as he returned to his desk.


In the evening, Mr Weasley escorted Harry to the spare office. The guard was back; Mr Weasley conjured up a chair and sat down beside him. The pair of them were talking quietly to one another as Harry fell asleep, but when he woke next morning, he was alone again.

Harry went to the canteen for breakfast. Even though it was Sunday, there seemed to be as many people in the corridors as ever. After finishing his meal, he made for Mr Weasley’s office. Mr Weasley wasn’t there but two other Ministry members were. A cross-looking old woman sat at the desk, pursing her lips over one of Mr Weasley’s reports. A young man with a tangle of curly hair and a fixed, slightly mad smile stood by the door.

Harry stopped short.

‘Where’s Mr Weasley?’ he said.

The old witch ignored Harry, but the wizard at the threshold gave him an even wider grin.



‘Precisely the thing we were wondering ourselves!’ he said, practically bouncing on his heels. ‘Arthur was supposed to meet us here half an hour ago. He left a note saying he’d gone to have a word with Agnes Hammersmith in Magical Creatures. Why don’t you run down there and see what’s taking him?’

So off Harry went. It was a while before he managed to locate the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures. It hadn’t been one of the departments he’d visited previously and the directions the wizard gave him turned out to be completely wrong. When he finally got there, nobody could tell him where Agnes Hammersmith’s office was. In fact, most of them were quite certain there was no Agnes Hammersmith in the department, nor did they know of anyone by that name anywhere else in the Ministry.

After much consultation, Harry learnt that there was an Agnes Armstrong in Magical Games and Sports, and an Agnes Footit and a wizard named Ogma Hamper in Magical Transportation. Thinking to kill two birds with one stone, he set off for the latter department, where he found Agnes Footit (Ogma Hamper was out checking the anti-Apparition spells around Azkaban) but no Agnes Hammersmith and no Arthur Weasley.

At last Harry had had enough. During his search he had been continually held up by people wanting to shake his hand, hear what had happened to him on Christmas Eve or merely stare at his scar, none of whom had been of any assistance in finding Mr Weasley. It was nearly lunchtime. Wherever he had gone,

Mr Weasley was undoubtedly back at his office by now. Harry decided to head in that direction himself.

As he trudged down the long main corridor of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, an unpleasantly familiar voice from the office ahead froze Harry in his tracks.

‘...as for Azkaban, the only way we’ll be able to salvage *that* situation is by proving Dumbledore was behind it. Obviously he took the precaution of putting a Memory Charm on Potter. If I can convince Fudge — or better yet, Ormesby —’

It was Lucius Malfoy. Harry stood very still, straining to hear what was being said.

‘What about the rest of the stuff?’ a second voice interrupted. ‘Anything you want before I tip it in the Thames?’

There was a pause, then —


‘You fool, you should have got rid of those things days ago,’ hissed Mr Malfoy. ‘If Magical Law Enforcement comes nosing around...’

‘Why would they do that?’ said the other voice. ‘Even Ormesby doesn’t make a habit of searching his own men’s flats for no reason.’

‘It seems I’ve been spending half my life covering up for your mistakes lately,’ said Mr Malfoy in a deadly quiet tone. ‘If you’re caught this time, don’t expect any help from me.’

‘If I’m caught, I’ll take you down with me,’ said the other wizard, now sounding quite menacing.

‘Don’t you threaten me, Riversedge,’ spat Mr Malfoy. Riversedge! For an instant Harry was dumb-



struck. Then, like a lamp being lit inside his brain, he realised. He now had a way to warn Mr Weasley about the traitor at the Ministry: simply tell him what he'd just overheard.

Harry started off at a dead run — straight into the tall wizard who stepped suddenly out of a side passage...

6.

CHRISTMAS AT THE BURROW

What happened?' said the wizard sharply. 'Did someone hex you?'

It was Lamplough, the Hit Wizard who'd guarded Harry his first night in the spare office. Harry saw that Lamplough's wand was drawn.

'No, I... was looking for Mr Weasley. I heard — I thought —'


Lamplough frowned. He took Harry by the chin, tilted his head back and peered into his eyes.

'What's up, Lamplough?' said a voice behind Harry, the same voice that seconds earlier had been conversing with Lucius Malfoy.

Harry glanced over his shoulder. Mr Malfoy and a sharp-featured wizard who must have been Riversedge were walking towards him and Lamplough. When Mr Malfoy spotted Harry, his eyes narrowed.

Before Lamplough could answer, Harry said brightly, 'I thought I recognised your voice! Why didn't you tell me you were a wizard? I could've given you Sickles for the Knight Bus.'

'What?' said Riversedge.



'That's the man I met on Christmas Eve,' Harry said to Lamplough. 'You see, I told you it wasn't a Dark wizard. It was him!'

It was difficult to say who looked more appalled at this, Riversedge or Lucius Malfoy. In one quick movement, Lamplough thrust Harry into the passage he'd come out of and levelled his wand at the pair of them. Riversedge seized Mr Malfoy by the back of his robes and threw him bodily at Lamplough, knocking them both to the floor. He yanked out his own wand and started muttering a spell, which Harry identified at once as the Curse of the Slithering Death.

Wand in hand, Harry stepped out of the side passage and launched into the counter-curse, as though he was back in the Dark Arts classroom practising with Professor Millarca. The two incantations wound simultaneously to an end. As Harry had correctly performed the counter, nothing happened. Riversedge stared at him, flabbergasted, then lifted his wand again.

'*Expelli-*' Harry began.

'**STUPEFY!**' bellowed Lucius Malfoy.

A blinding flash of crimson light filled the corridor, followed by a dull thump. When Harry's eyes cleared, he saw Riversedge lying in a crumpled heap at the base of the wall, which he had hit with such force that the oak panelling had cracked. Lamplough went cautiously over to examine him.

After a couple of minutes, he straightened up and said quietly to Mr Malfoy, 'You've killed him.'

'That was the Curse of the Crawling Death he was casting!' said Mr Malfoy. His face was white and

Harry had the impression that the fear in his voice was not entirely feigned. 'If he'd managed to finish —'

'What do you mean, the Curse of the Crawling Death?' said Lamplough suspiciously.

'I was at Doyle's Rift,' said Mr Malfoy. 'Under Imperius, of course, but I will never forget... when I heard him I couldn't believe it... I — lost control...'

Lucius Malfoy let his wand drop and put his hands over his face. None of what he'd said meant a thing to Harry, but Lamplough's expression went grim. He sent a silver arrow shooting up the corridor, no doubt summoning reinforcements.

Harry gazed down at Riversedge's body, a sick feeling in his stomach. He had hoped that identifying Riversedge as the man he'd spoken with might lead to an investigation, and the truth of Riversedge's involvement with Voldemort would be discovered. He hadn't intended for him to die...

'Harry, what's happened?' said an anxious voice.

Harry raised his head. Mr Weasley was at his side.

'I was looking for you,' Harry said, 'but I couldn't find Agnes Hammersmith's office.'

'Agnes who?' said Mr Weasley.

'Agnes Hammersmith,' said Harry. 'Those wizards you were supposed to be meeting with said you'd gone to see her.'

'Those wizards I — Harry, what are you talking about?'

Before Harry could explain further, he and Mr Weasley were distracted by Lamplough, who was speaking animatedly to Ormesby.

'...noticed him acting funny right after he passed Riversedge's door. Stood still for nearly five minutes as if he was in a trance, then suddenly started running... There was a mad look in his eye — I reckoned I'd better stop him before he did himself harm. That snapped him out of it, but he didn't seem to remember what he'd been doing. Then Riversedge came along. Potter recognised his voice: Riversedge was the man he'd met on Christmas Eve. When he said that, Riversedge attacked. He tried to cast the Curse of the Crawling Death on us —'

'The Curse of the Slithering Death,' Harry corrected him, but no one paid any attention — except for Lucius Malfoy, who shot Harry a swift but genuinely terrified look.

Mr Weasley looked at Riversedge's body, then back at Ormesby, whose lips were curved in a satisfied smile.

'I see,' said Mr Weasley coldly. 'I trust there will be no objections now to Harry coming home with me?'

'Once we've taken his statement,' said Ormesby.

A Hit Wizard led Harry off to a side room, where he gave his version of recent events as a charmed quill took down his words.


'...Mr Malfoy called it the Crawling Death. It's the one that goes *Corpus Colubrifer* —'

'Don't say it!' yelped the Hit Wizard, flinging himself across the table to press a hand over Harry's mouth.

'It wouldn't have worked without a wand,' Harry pointed out.

'Yes, yes,' said the wizard edgily. 'Sign this, please.'

Mr Weasley was waiting outside. He went with Harry to the spare office to collect his things. They



headed back to the Misuse of Muggle Artefacts Office, Mr Weasley floating the trunk along the corridors whilst Harry carried the bottle with the holly sprigs, which had begun putting out tiny rootlets.

Mr Weasley kept his Floo powder in a battered Muggle drinks can. He shook out a handful and tossed it into the fire; moments later, Harry emerged gratefully into the welcoming warmth of the Weasleys' kitchen. Mrs Weasley was slumped disconsolately at the scrubbed wooden table as the last of the washing-up from lunch finished itself in the sink. When she caught sight of Harry, she leapt up with a shriek.

'Harry — what —?'

Mr Weasley stepped out of the fireplace with the trunk.

'Molly, look after Harry,' he said. 'Murdock Riversedge was just killed by Magical Law Enforcement trying to murder him. It was Riversedge who attacked him on Christmas Eve, Ormesby's been using as Harry as bait flush him out. I've got to get back to the Ministry...'

Mr Weasley ducked into the fireplace and disappeared.


'Murdock Riversedge tried to murder you?' said an astonished voice.

Fred and George, drawn by their mother's cry, had come hurrying down to the kitchen.

'I — yeah,' said Harry, 'I was looking for your dad —'

Without further ado, Fred nipped into the fireplace after Mr Weasley, yelling, 'The Ministry of Magic!'

'Oh, Harry,' said Mrs Weasley, steering him to a chair. 'Sit down, you look awful.'



George joined his mother at the kitchen table, where he made a great show of taking Harry's pulse and feeling his forehead.

'He does look awful,' George opined. 'Bring him up to our room, he can have Fred's bed.'

George's tight grip on Harry's arm told him it would be best to go along with this suggestion. Once Harry was tucked up in bed, Mrs Weasley went downstairs again, promising to make him a mug of hot, sweet tea.

'Why'd Fred go rushing off?' Harry asked George when she was out of earshot.


'Riversedge was the witness who saw Percy leaving the Department of Magical Law Enforcement the night Watchett was killed,' said George. 'He must've been lying because he murdered Watchett himself, we should've thought of that sooner. If we can convince the Ministry, the charges will be dropped and Percy can come home. Fred's gone to help Dad. He's listening to us, by the way — he and I used the Gemini Charm to swap the hearing in our left ears so we could stay in contact. We may need you to provide a bit of supporting evidence if Fudge decides to be stubborn —'

Next second, the door flew open and Ron came bursting in.

'I thought I heard your voice,' he said accusingly to Harry. 'What're you doing here, why didn't you come up and see me —'

'Ron, shut up, or I'll put a silencing spell on you,' George said through gritted teeth.

'Come here, I'll tell you what happened,' said Harry hastily.



Ron sat on the bed and Harry explained the situation in a hurried whisper. They waited in tense silence as George kept them updated on what was transpiring at the Ministry.

‘Right, Dad and Fred’re waiting to talk to Cornelius Fudge... Ormesby’s there as well... Dad wants them to hunt down Riversedge’s accomplices, he thinks they may know what’s become of Percy... now Fred’s asking about Riversedge and the murder charge... Fudge’s waffling as usual, but I expect he’ll come round...’

At last George gave a huge sigh of relief.

‘The charges are being dropped. They’re coming back to The Burrow to tell Mum.’ He hesitated, then said, ‘Mind, Fudge is only doing it to humour us. Ormesby says Percy’s probably dead — the wizards who attacked Azkaban killed him to stop the investigation. Dad believes it, too, he’s really upset.’

Ron looked stricken. ‘They couldn’t find Percy in Azkaban... Harry, you don’t think —’

‘Of course not,’ said Harry firmly.

George strode out the room and clattered down the staircase. Ron and Harry scrambled after him. In the kitchen, Mrs Weasley sat crying as Mr Weasley held her hands. Ginny stood by, wearing an extremely miserable expression. Fred hovered over the pair of them, looking both distressed and put out.

‘He could have got away, George and I’ll start looking for him right now —’

‘Fred, as much as I’d like to believe that, I’ve seen the state of the prisoners in Azkaban,’ said Mr Weasley. ‘If those Dark wizards got to Percy’s cell, he’d

be a sitting duck. The best we can hope for is that they were driven off by the Dementors and Percy was moved to a different location because of it. It may be some time before we know for certain — a full-scale search of Azkaban won’t be possible until the Dementors have calmed down — and if he’s dead, it’s not likely his body will ever be found.’

‘It’s not knowing that’s the worst,’ said Mrs Weasley emptily. ‘I could bear it if Percy was dead, if only I *knew*.’

George gave Fred an agonised look. Fred shook his head, looking alarmed. George took a deep breath.

‘Mum...’ he said.

Harry could see Fred reaching for his wand.

‘Why don’t you check your clock?’ he said.


All the Weasleys wheeled about to stare at Harry.

‘Your clock with the hands — if it shows he’s in prison, you’ll know the Dementors moved him. If it shows he’s travelling or something, maybe he did get away during the attack.’

Mr and Mrs Weasley moved as one for the cellar stairs, Harry and the young Weasleys close behind them. The clock was in a far corner facing the wall. Mrs Weasley drew her wand, spun the clock around and said, ‘*Lumos*.’

The hand with Percy’s name on it was pointing to ‘in hiding’.

Ron let out a great whoop, seized Ginny about the waist and swung her around as she squealed with delight. Mrs Weasley was crying again, this time with happiness. Mr Weasley hugged her tightly. George and Harry exchanged relieved grins.



'I knew it!' said Fred triumphantly. 'Don't worry, Mum, George and I'll find him! We know loads of places Percy might go if he was on the run.'

'You'll do nothing of the sort,' said Mr Weasley sternly. 'Riversedge had accomplices, if Percy escaped they'll be looking for him. The last thing we need is the two of you blundering into a gang of Dark wizards. It's Magical Law Enforcement's job to find Percy — until they do, I'm forbidding either one of you to leave The Burrow.'

'We're seventeen years old, you can't forbid us to do anything,' said Fred angrily.

Mr Weasley's voice was deadly quiet. 'Perhaps not. But I can ask Ormesby to put you both under house arrest, and I'll do it if I have to.'


'Dad's right, Fred,' said George suddenly. Fred turned his outraged gaze on his brother, but before he could speak George went on, 'Best it's not us who find Percy, some git like Lucius Malfoy might say we'd been hiding him. We can make a list of places for the Magical Law Enforcement Patrol to check. In fact, we should stay inside all day tomorrow, with plenty of *witnesses*.'

The meaningful tone in which George said 'witnesses' finally got through to Fred.

'I suppose you're right,' he said grudgingly.

'That's very sensible of you, boys,' said Mr Weasley in relief.

They trooped back up the stairs. Mr Weasley returned to the Ministry to tell them that Percy was alive. Mrs Weasley began bustling around the



kitchen, looking cheerier than Harry had seen her all Christmas. Harry sank weakly into a chair. At last, at long last, all the Weasleys knew that Percy was OK. Even better, now that he was no longer wanted by the Ministry, Percy could come out of hiding and rejoin his family.




Although next day was New Year's, Mr Weasley left for the Ministry as normal, bringing Charlie (who, to his younger brothers' disgruntlement, was being allowed to take part in the search for Percy) along with him. As soon as they were gone, Fred put on Harry's Invisibility Cloak and slipped out the house.

Under instructions from Fred and George, Harry stayed in bed all morning, saying he didn't feel well. This provided George with an excuse to dash up and down the staircase every fifteen minutes, checking up on the 'invalid' Harry and changing the letter on his jumper each trip.

In truth Harry *wasn't* feeling all that well. He'd had nightmares about Cedric Diggory again, this time mixed up with Riversedge's killing. Ron thought the showdown with Riversedge was the coolest thing he'd ever heard of, and had made Harry describe it in excruciating detail last night before bed. Harry knew he shouldn't waste sympathy on Riversedge after everything he'd put the Weasley's through, but he couldn't help feeling a sickening stab of guilt whenever he recalled Riversedge's dead eyes staring up at him.

Harry's condition wasn't helped by the Gemini



Charm that George had cast to impersonate his brother. George seemed to flicker continually between himself and Fred. Merely looking at him gave Harry a terrible headache.

‘But it’s only because you know I’m me,’ George told him. ‘Anyone else would look at the letter on my jumper and see what they expected to see. Reckon you’ve got a bit of a fever,’ he added loudly for Ron’s benefit. ‘I’ll send Fred up with a damp flannel for your forehead.’

Fred got back just before lunchtime so that both twins could put on an appearance in the kitchen.


‘Percy and I’ve worked out his story,’ he told Harry in an undertone, ‘and he knows how to pick locks *now*. That suspicious bastard Ormesby will probably make him do it...’

With Fred’s return, George stopped flickering, but this did little to relieve the pounding in Harry’s head. Out of bed, Harry felt unaccountably cold. He wore two jumpers down to the kitchen and still couldn’t keep from shivering. Mrs Weasley took one look at him and sent him directly back upstairs.

Harry ended up sleeping in Ron’s room for most of the day. When he woke it was dark. Mr and Mrs Weasley were standing in the doorway talking in low voices.

‘...but I’m sure it’s just a bout of flu,’ Mrs Weasley was saying.

‘No doubt you’re right, Molly,’ said Mr Weasley, ‘but if he’s not better in a couple of days, we’re taking him to St Mungo’s. Honestly, Ormesby should be up on charges of endangering an underage wizard, he was only questioning me about that file to get me



away from Harry. Mayfair and Drummond were waiting at my office — sent him off on a wild goose chase after a witch who didn’t exist, hoping whoever attacked him on Christmas Eve would have another go. And when Nigella was showing him and Ron around... if anything had happened to either one of them, I’d never have forgiven myself...’

Harry opened his eyes and reached for the goblet of water on the bedside table.

‘Harry?’ said Mrs Weasley.

‘Did you find Percy?’ he croaked.



Mrs Weasley glanced at her husband.

‘No, dear,’ she said, ‘but the Ministry searched Mr Riversedge’s flat. They found some of the things from the British Museum, which means he was involved in the robbery, too. They’ll be rounding up his friends for questioning — perhaps one of them will know something about Percy.’



As dreadful as Harry felt, he was grateful to have fallen ill at The Burrow rather than at number four. Aunt Petunia left tins of soup outside the door of his room when he was sick and forbade him to come out when the rest of the family were around. Mrs Weasley, on the other hand, cooked Harry light, nourishing meals — toast and orange juice for breakfast, fresh chicken broth and pumpkin juice for lunch, weak tea and a coddled egg for dinner — and dosed him with potions that weren’t nearly as horrible as Madam Pomfrey’s.

As a result, Harry was well enough two days later



to go sprinting down the staircase with Ron when Mrs Weasley answered a knock at the door and let out a loud scream. Harry and Ron reached the hall to find her with arms flung around Percy, sobbing. An older man stood beside them. He bore a strong resemblance to Percy apart from his hair, which was brown instead of red. This was Mrs Weasley's cousin Andrew — a Muggle accountant, Ron told Harry in hushed tones.

George was dispatched to fetch Mr Weasley and Charlie from the Ministry. The rest of them sat round the table to hear Percy's story.

Late Christmas Eve, Percy had heard a great commotion in the corridors outside his cell. The Dementor that was guarding him went away; once his mind was free of its influence, Percy picked the lock on his door. Following the noise, he caught sight of a pair of wizards in the passage ahead of him. One was supporting the other, who seemed to have been overwhelmed by the Dementors' power. Percy trailed the two of them out the fortress, where several more wizards were fighting a pitched battle with what looked like every Dementor on the island. Spotting an abandoned broomstick, Percy snatched it up and flew off.

Upon reaching the mainland he had hidden himself, terrified of being sent back to Azkaban, not daring to contact his family. Eventually he got the notion of going to their Muggle cousin for help. As Mr Weasley had spoken with Andrew the previous day to ask if he'd heard from Percy, he was able to tell Percy about Riversedge, and gave him a lift to The Burrow.

It was a good story, Harry thought. Fred and

George had done a sterling job concocting it. But would it satisfy the Ministry?

Mr Weasley turned up shortly afterwards to bring Percy to the Ministry to give his statement. Fred tagged along; from George's distracted expression Harry could tell he was using the Gemini Charm to listen in. When George began giving Harry odd looks, Harry was afraid something had gone wrong, but the Ministry evidently accepted Percy's tale at face value, for about an hour later he and Fred returned to The Burrow.

As Fred clambered out of the fireplace, he too gave Harry a very strange look before hurrying up the staircase with George. Mrs Weasley went back to fussing over Percy; Harry and Ron followed Fred and George to their room.

'What happened?' said Harry. 'The Ministry believed Percy, didn't they?'

'Oh... yeah,' said Fred. 'Dad thinks Lucius Malfoy might still try to make some trouble, but —'

'He'd better not!' said Harry fiercely. 'If he tries anything, you tell him I'll tell the Ministry that he hexed Riversedge *after* I'd done the counter-curse.'

'What are you talking about?' said Fred.

'Mr Malfoy said he hexed Riversedge to stop him finishing that Crawling Death Curse,' said Harry, 'but he'd already finished it. I worked the counter, that's why it didn't do anything. I bet he killed Riversedge on purpose to shut him up. I heard them talking in Riversedge's office — Riversedge said he'd take Lucius Malfoy down with him if he was caught.'

The three Weasleys gaped at Harry.

‘Why didn’t you say something before?’ said George in astonishment.

‘Didn’t think of it,’ shrugged Harry. ‘And I don’t expect anyone would’ve believed me if I had done. I mean, with all those donations to good causes Mr Malfoy’s made —’

‘Like Fudge’s election fund,’ muttered Ron.

‘Exactly,’ said Harry.

‘At any rate, Ormesby believed Percy,’ said Fred. ‘Fudge didn’t, exactly, but he thought Percy was hallucinating, not lying. Ormesby wanted a description of the attackers. As they were wearing masks, Percy couldn’t tell him much, but he did get a good view of two of the Patronuses. With the ones the prisoners saw, Ormesby reckoned there had to be at least four or five wizards involved — said it would’ve been a mad thing to try with any less than seven.’

‘Fudge didn’t like that, he wants to close the case,’ said George, ‘and a couple of Riversedge’s friends did a bunk before they could be interrogated. Fudge is claiming it was them who attacked Azkaban — Percy and the other prisoners had been around the Dementors so long it made them see things that weren’t there. At first he tried to say that the attackers could have conjured up more than one Patronus apiece. But Ormesby said —’

Here Fred and George gave Harry their most peculiar looks yet.

‘— Ormesby said that maybe Dumbledore could cast two Patronus Charms at once without dropping dead from magic loss, but he doubted anybody else could — and not even Merlin himself could have managed three.’


Harry didn’t know what to say to this. Remembering his fall from his broomstick, he could well believe that conjuring multiple Patronuses might prove fatal. He had no idea how he’d survived the experience, though, and under the circumstances there was no one he could ask.

In the days that followed, neither the Ministry nor Lucius Malfoy made any more difficulties for Percy and the Weasleys. It came out that one of the wizards who vanished had an owl for a Patronus, which was thought likely to be the ‘partridge’ seen by the prisoners. The other’s father was a Death Eater who had died in Azkaban a number of years earlier.

Three of the people the Ministry did question confessed to giving Riversedge confidential information to leak to the DAILY PROPHET. They had all wished to see Fudge removed as Minister, although each had a different notion of who was to be put in his place. None of them knew anything about Azkaban or the museum or, apparently, Voldemort. Fudge was convinced that the whole thing had been a conspiracy to take over the Ministry masterminded by a group of Young Turks with Death Eater ties, which meant Percy was off the hook.

Percy’s condition, however, left much to be desired. To Harry he seemed not a whit less ill and miserable than he had been in the shack on the Grimsby shore. He passed the time moping in his room, scarcely speaking to anyone. Mr and Mrs Weasley were growing seriously concerned.

On Saturday morning, Mrs Weasley decided



that a trip to Diagon Alley would be just the thing to take Percy out of himself, and bullied the rest of the family into accompanying them. Harry might have been allowed to beg off, but he wanted to stop by Ollivanders. Breaking the sprigs of holly off his wand had left three rough patches, which he wished to have smoothed out if possible.

The Weasleys left Harry at Ollivanders before heading on to Gringotts, making him promise not to leave the shop until they came back for him. Mr Ollivander emerged from the back almost immediately the bell rang. Harry showed him his wand and asked if it could be mended.

Mr Ollivander surveyed the wand intently, turning it from side to side. 'Very odd indeed... what precisely was the cause of this, Mr Potter?'

'Dunno,' said Harry. Telling Mr Ollivander that the wand had sprouted might lead to questions he didn't want to answer. 'I was looking at my wand a couple of days ago and I noticed those spots.'

Mr Ollivander fixed Harry with his moon-like eyes. 'If you have any idea at all, it would be best if you share it. Certain techniques ought not be used to repair certain types of damage, as they can make it worse... or destroy the wand altogether. I assure you that anything you say to me will be kept in the strictest of confidence.'

'Would you swear not to tell anyone?' said Harry. He recalled the oaths Fred and George had demanded of him behind the mirror. 'By the Skull Horse and the Hounds of Noon?'

'By the Skull Horse and the Hounds of a Noon, I so

swear,' said Mr Ollivander.

His voice sounded deeper than normal, echoing weirdly in the gloom of the shop. A gust of chill air stirred the hairs on the back of Harry's neck.

'Right,' said Harry. 'May the Hounds trample you and the Horse bring you down — no, sorry, it's the other way around —'

'In any case, I've sworn,' said Mr Ollivander mildly.

'My wand grew bits of holly,' said Harry. 'The spots are where I broke them off.'

'And what had you been doing with your wand, to make it grow holly?'

'I don't *know*,' said Harry. 'It was fine when I stowed it in my pocket. I didn't realise anything was the matter until the leaves pricked me.'

Mr Ollivander turned the wand over again, regarding it thoughtfully

'There is only one thing I know of that will cause a wand to put out shoots,' he said. 'When a wizard drains out his life through his wand, a bit of that life may remain within it, making the wand living wood once more...'

'Drains out his life?' said Harry. 'What — how —?'

'By casting so many or such powerful spells that all of his magic is used up, and he dies,' said Mr Ollivander.

Harry felt a cold shiver run down his spine. *Not even Merlin himself could have managed three...*

'Yeah,' he said quietly. 'That's what I did... but I don't understand why I didn't stay dead...'

HOLIDAY RESOLUTIONS

As I'm not a mediwizard, I really couldn't say,' said Mr Ollivander calmly. 'I would suggest speaking with Madam Pomfrey about this on your return to Hogwarts. Might I ask what you did with the pieces of holly after you broke them off?'

'A Ministry wizard burnt one of them,' said Harry. 'I've got the other two in a bottle of water. They've started putting out roots...'

'Then you should try potting them,' said Mr Ollivander gravely. 'I can have your wand ready on the morning the Hogwarts Express leaves King's Cross.'

'But that's almost a week from now!' said Harry. 'What will I do for a wand till then?'

With Voldemort back, the notion of being unarmed for even an hour was frightening to him.

'Ah, well, as to that...'

Mr Ollivander vanished into the depths of the shop, reappearing in short order with a pair of boxes. He opened one of them and took out a wand that was slimmer and slightly darker than Harry's.

'Willow and phoenix feather, give it a wave...'

Harry swept the wand through the air, sending green and golden sparks bouncing around the room.

'This one's all right,' he said. 'Not as powerful as my wand, but faster and — easier to handle.'

Mr Ollivander nodded at him approvingly.

'That was Lily's wand,' he said. 'Dumbledore left it with me for safekeeping.'

Harry gazed at the wand, thunderstruck. Apart from his father's Invisibility Cloak, he owned nothing that had belonged to his parents — until now. His eyes were drawn irresistibly to the other box.

'Yes, that's James' wand,' said Mr Ollivander. 'Mahogany and dragon heartstring. You can try it if you like...'

Harry opened the second box himself. If not for its deep, reddish-brown colour, he might have mistaken the wand it contained for his own. It took three tries, however, before he was able to get any sparks out of it.

'This one is — different,' said Harry. 'I'd have a job working spells with it.'


'As I expected,' said Mr Ollivander. 'Really a more suitable wand for someone whose strength lies in Transfiguration. If you can't use it yourself, perhaps you know of another person who can.'

Mr Ollivander gave Harry a pale, piercing look. Harry stared back at him, wondering if the old wand-maker could possibly mean what Harry thought he meant.



Harry and the Weasleys ate lunch at the Leaky Cauldron. In the middle of the meal, a strange witch and wizard came to their table. These turned out to be Watchett's parents. They thanked Harry earnestly for helping to catch their son's murderer and apologised to the Weasleys for the ordeal of Percy's imprisonment. This made Harry feel unspeakably guilty — but not nearly so unspeakably guilty as Percy, to judge by the look on his face.

As soon as the Watchetts had gone, Percy pushed



his food away, saying he wasn't hungry any more and was going back to The Burrow. Mrs Weasley went with him; the rest of them finished their lunch in subdued silence. As an attempt at cheering Percy up, the expedition was a notable failure.

The Watchetts' visit, however, served as a reminder to Harry that the situation with Riversedge was far from satisfactorily resolved. That night, as Mr Weasley sat in the living room reading the *EVENING PROPHECY*, Harry sidled over to have a word with him.

'Riversedge broke into the museum to steal something for Voldemort, didn't he?' said Harry.

Mr Weasley winced at the sound of the name but said in a steady voice, 'Yes, Harry, I believe he did.'

'Do you have any idea what he was after?'

'Not the foggiest,' sighed Mr Weasley. 'No objects of any great magical power are kept in the British Museum, and in any case, most of the stolen property was recovered from Riversedge's flat. None of the things still missing have particular monetary value or historical significance, either. It's possible the thieves were forced to leave without getting what they came for after the attack on Azkaban failed to draw off the Magical Law Enforcement Patrol... although there were certainly enough robberies when You-Know-Who was previously in power, more than a few involving items he had no obvious reason for stealing.'

Mr Weasley gazed moodily into the fire.

'Or maybe they weren't after anything... maybe the Christmas Eve attacks were only intended to spread

panic and loss of confidence in the Ministry...'

'So Fudge would be thrown out of office?' said Harry. 'I reckon it was Lucius Malfoy that Riversedge really wanted to replace him with,' he added darkly. 'If Mr Malfoy was ever made Minister, he'd send us all to Azkaban!'


'Oh, there's little worry of that happening,' said Mr Weasley reassuringly. 'It would take extraordinary circumstances for Lucius to become Minister for Magic, he isn't a career Ministry member. If Fudge was voted out, a Department Head would get the tip, most likely either Magical Law Enforcement or Magical Catastrophes. There, too, I suspect Riversedge's real goal was to disrupt the Ministry and unsettle the public, not put a specific person in or out of power. The more muddled and ineffectual the magical community sees their leaders as being, the more inclined they'll be to believe that Etin's Last Prediction is coming true —'

'Sorry, believe *what*?' said Harry.

'Etin's Last Prediction,' Mr Weasley repeated. He eyed at Harry curiously. 'You've not heard of it?'

'No,' said Harry.

'Not surprising, I suppose,' said Mr Weasley. 'I don't imagine it's been much spoken of since You-Know-Who's fall. Etin, you see, was a ninth century Scottish Seer. On his deathbed, he made a prediction: that in the last years of the millennium, a Dark Lord would rise to power. When the first millennium ended and no Dark Lord did, people thought it must not have been a real prediction, and the story was all



but forgotten... until You-Know-Who came along. His followers claim he is the Dark Lord that Etin foresaw, in the last years of *this* millennium. They're keen to convince as many people as possible... it's well known that the authentic predictions of a genuine Seer always come true... if You-Know-Who's taking power actually was predicted by Etin, then fighting against him is pointless. So even if the prediction isn't a real one, if he can make enough wizards believe in it, it will come true anyway...'

'You don't think it is real, do you?' said Harry uneasily.

Mr Weasley shuddered. 'I very much hope not.'

Harry would have been a great deal happier if Mr Weasley had just said no. To add to his worries, after the encounter with Watchett's parents, Percy took a serious turn for the worse. He stopped coming downstairs for meals, refusing to leave his room even when Fred and George set off one of their new, extra-smelly Dungbombs under his bed.

'He didn't even shout at us,' said George, looking anxious.

'This is Fudge's fault,' said Fred angrily, 'his and Lucius Malfoy's. Leaving Percy in Azkaban for two months — he may never recover!'

'He'll get better,' said Harry. 'Hagrid was in Azkaban for two months and you'd never know it to look at him.'


'Hagrid,' said George, 'is a lot tougher than Percy.'

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On the second from last day of the holidays, Mrs

CHRISTMAS OVER AZKABAN



Weasley announced at breakfast (to loud groans from her offspring) that they would be cleaning the house from top to bottom, as Dumbledore was coming to dinner that night.

'And he said to tell you he's bringing Snuffles,' she said to Harry.

Harry would have set about cleaning with a will, knowing he'd soon be seeing his godfather, but Mrs Weasley wouldn't hear of it.

'You're a guest in this house, and you've been ill,' she said firmly.

Harry felt rather Dudleyish sitting around the kitchen while the others worked, eating the small tarts Mrs Weasley baked him 'to make sure the pastry's all right'.

That evening, Dumbledore emerged from the fireplace accompanied by a giant black dog, which hurried over to Harry, sniffing him and whining anxiously. Harry patted the dog's head.

'How lovely to see you again, Albus,' said Mrs Weasley. 'Would you care for a drink before dinner?'

Mrs Weasley ushered Dumbledore into the living room.


'You lot set the table,' she called from the threshold to Ron, Fred, George and Ginny. 'Harry, you take Snuffles out for a walk — keep him from getting underfoot.'

'Hang on, I've got to get something,' Harry said to Sirius.

He dashed up to Ron's room and grabbed the box with his father's wand. When he returned to the kitchen, Sirius was sitting by the door. Seeing Harry,

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CHRISTMAS OVER AZKABAN



he gave an impatient bark; Harry let him out into the yard. Sirius trotted over to a small, lop-sided shed, opened the door with a paw and slipped inside.

Harry stepped after Sirius — and stared around him in shock. The tiny shed contained a vast, dimly lit room full of odd bits of Muggle rubbish: cases of pens and pencils, tubes of toothpaste and suntan cream, stacks of tins (many of them without labels), a hairdryer, a yoghurt-maker, a car-tool kit, a rusted, ancient-looking shotgun (unloaded, Harry devoutly hoped), electric torches, clocks with plugs, plastic dustbins... there was even an old blue police box standing in one corner. Whilst Harry was gazing about, Sirius nosed the door shut and changed back into a man.

‘Dumbledore told me what happened to you on Christmas Eve,’ he said grimly. ‘Walking alone in the snow for three hours — Harry, you promised me you’d go to Arabella if there was trouble.’

‘I thought you meant magical trouble, not rowing,’ said Harry guiltily.

‘What on earth had you quarrelled over that would make you stay out on a night like that?’ said Sirius.

Harry had to think for a second. ‘Oh — I gave Dudley a Chocolate Frog and they thought it was hexed. You know what they’re like about magic,’ he added at Sirius’ disbelieving stare.

‘You nearly froze to death over a Chocolate Frog,’ said Sirius dully. The haunted look of Azkaban was back in his eyes.

Harry hung his head. ‘Sorry,’ he muttered. ‘It was stupid... I’ll go to Mrs Figg’s next time...’

He could hardly explain to Sirius that the reason he’d stayed out so long was that he’d been off breaking Percy out of Azkaban, and even so, it really had been extremely stupid of him to fall asleep outdoors in the middle of winter.

Sirius was still looking devastated. Thinking to raise his spirits, Harry held out the box he’d brought.

‘I’ve got you a Christmas present,’ he said. ‘I went to Ollivanders and he gave me this. Said it was meant for someone good at Transfiguration.’

Sirius opened the box. His eyes widened.

‘This is James’ wand,’ he said hoarsely.

‘Yes,’ Harry. ‘Mr Ollivander’d been keeping it for Dumbledore.’

With a dazed expression, Sirius took the wand out of the box. He used it to turn a string of fairy lights into fireflies, then placed it carefully inside his robes.

‘Harry,’ he said in a choked voice, ‘don’t worry about your aunt and uncle. It will be all right, I promise you.’ He gripped Harry’s shoulder tightly. ‘Now I think it’s time we were going in to dinner...’



Mrs Weasley had cooked a feast of roast goose with cranberry sauce. Harry fed pieces of it to Sirius under the table. Normally it would have been a bit unnerving to eat in such close quarters with the Headmaster of Hogwarts, but Dumbledore entertained them all with the story of how his brothers, Aberforth and Aberfan, had Transfigured the family pig into a sled one Christmas, only to have it revert to its usual form when they

and Dumbledore were halfway down Pismoule Hill.

After dinner, Harry and the young Weasleys were shoed upstairs so the adults could talk privately. For several days, Ron had been attempting to charm the cannonball on his Chudley Cannons bedspread to actually fly around the bed. He resumed this endeavour with as little success as previously.

'I'd've thought those Shuffling Charms Flitwick taught us would do the trick,' he said irritably. 'Fred and George got the letters on their jumpers to change back and forth but they won't tell me how they did it. Harry,' he said suddenly, 'why don't you go ask them? They might tell *you*.'

Harry started down the staircase to Fred and George's room, but on the fourth floor landing he heard something that stopped him in his tracks. Dumbledore's voice was coming out of the airing cupboard, clear as if the Headmaster was crouched inside it.

'You do realise what this means, Sirius...'

Harry opened the door of the cupboard and peered in. It was empty, but —

'Yes,' said Sirius flatly, 'but I've made my decision. I'm not leaving Harry with those Muggles another hour. When the protection fades, we'll simply have to hope for the best.'

It was as though his godfather was standing beside him. Harry was so astounded that it took him a moment to register what Sirius had just said.

'I, er, really don't believe you have anything to worry about on that account,' said a third voice, Mr Weasley's. 'The protections on The Burrow are at least

the equal of what Harry had with his aunt and uncle. The Dark Lord's never managed to get past them, and we've certainly given him cause to try. If you think it's necessary, I can perform an Adoption Charm. We'd welcome Harry into the family in a second...'

'That's not what Sirius meant,' said Dumbledore sombrely. 'The Weasleys are one of the oldest wizarding families in Britain; your family holdings are nearly as well defended as Hogwarts. We have no concerns regarding Harry's safety so long as he is with you. But his relations — without the magical protection Harry's shared blood affords them, they will not survive the year.'

'Can't other protections be put on them?' said Mrs Weasley.

Dumbledore gave a deep sigh. 'None strong enough to keep Voldemort away, or any other reasonably skilled Dark wizard for that matter. Lily Potter, a Gringotts Vault Warder, spent almost a year laying the groundwork for the spell I invoked to protect her sister's family. The Ministry, I'm afraid, will not take the threat to them seriously, nor would they expend much effort guarding Muggles if they did. Voldemort will soon learn of it when the spell fades — Arabella tells me that the protection has been tested on a number of occasions, both before and after last summer's attack. Sirius and I discussed removing Harry from his aunt and uncle's care at that time... but to do so would have condemned them to certain death.'

'Better them than Harry,' said Sirius. 'His parents trusted his safety to me. If he'd died that night, I'd

have killed those Muggles myself. They've had their second chance.'

There was a long, uncomfortable silence.

At last Dumbledore said heavily, 'As you are Harry's godfather, I shall abide by your decision.'

'It seems to me the spell is fading anyway,' said Sirius, sounding slightly defensive. 'Riversedge managed to get through it to try and murder Harry —'

'Riversedge had no intention of murdering Harry,' said Dumbledore, 'and that, I am convinced, is how he was able to get through the protection.'

'What do you mean by that?' said Sirius curtly.

'With everything else going on that day, I very much doubt the Ministry would have dispatched a pair of Hit Witches to Harry's house on the strength of an anonymous owl — had Lucius Malfoy not insisted upon it. He told them Harry's Patronus was a reindeer... made a great fuss over the fact that one of the prisoners claimed to have seen me in Azkaban... I have made my feelings about Dementors quite clear to Cornelius Fudge in the past. Funnily enough, it was Lucius who sent that letter to the Ministry in the first place: Fawkes had a word with the owl that delivered it. I imagine it was a most unpleasant shock for him when he learnt the circumstances of Harry's discovery. Being found dead in an alley is an excellent alibi. Harry was considered more a witness than a suspect... carefully guarded until he was well enough to be given a Truth Potion. The best Confundus Charm in the world might linger for two days... it would not linger three.'

'The Death Eaters attacked Azkaban to frame you,' said Mr Weasley, his voice hollow. 'Riversedge Confunded Harry so he'd confess. I — had wondered why You-Know-Who didn't simply tell the Dementors to... deal with Percy themselves.'

'Unless I'm much mistaken,' said Dumbledore calmly. 'If Riversedge truly believed his actions would bring no harm to Harry or his family, the protection would have done little to impede him. Voldemort could have persuaded Riversedge that as an underage wizard, Harry would not be held responsible for his part in the supposed breakout by the Ministry — reinforcing it with a Confundus Charm of his own, if necessary. A serious weakness in the protection which Arabella shall have to be on guard against in future...'

'No, she won't,' said Sirius.


There was another very awkward pause.

'Er — Mr Black,' said Mr Weasley, rather quickly, 'before you go — I wanted to speak with you about my son, Percy. You know he recently spent two months in Azkaban?'

Sirius made an affirmative noise.

'He's in a terrible state, and he seems to be getting worse, not better,' Mr Weasley continued. 'Molly and I don't know what to do. I thought, having been in Azkaban yourself...'

'Yes...' said Sirius, sounding suddenly as drained and careworn as Percy looked. 'In Azkaban, you live with nothing but your worst memories. You lose sight of the fact that there's a future — that what-



ever you've done wrong, you have a second chance to make right. Harry is *my* second chance. Surely you can understand why I've made the choice I did...' Sirius trailed off. In a brisker tone, he said, 'Your son just needs reminding of that. I'll go up and have a word with him.'

Harry heard the scraping of a chair. Realising Sirius would shortly be coming up the staircase, he pulled himself out of his state of shock and went sprinting back to Ron's room.

'What took you?' said Ron. 'Did Fred and George give you the spell?'


'I didn't ask them for it,' said Harry. 'Your airing cupboard — I heard voices —'

'Ah, you found our listening post,' said Ron. 'Bill put a Sonorus Charm on it ages ago, you can hear everything that's being said in the living room. What were Mum and Dad talking to Dumbledore about?'

'Nothing,' said Harry. 'Nothing important. I'm going to sleep, I'm really tired.'

Rest, however, was the furthest thing from Harry's mind as he lay with his face buried in his pillow. When he'd first grasped that Sirius and Dumbledore were contemplating letting him stay at The Burrow, Harry had felt nearly ill with excitement. Never again to have to endure Uncle Vernon's bullying, or Aunt Petunia's spite, or their endless revolting fawning and simpering over Dudley... he could come to live with people who actually liked him. It would be Harry's fondest wish come true.

But the price of his wish was the Dursleys' lives...



Surely Dumbledore was being overcautious, Harry told himself. Sirius seemed to think it quite likely that the Dursleys would survive. Even if Voldemort found out the protection was gone, he'd have no reason to attack Privet Drive if Harry wasn't there.

Yet even as Harry thought this, he realised it wasn't true. Voldemort didn't need a reason to kill — look how he'd murdered Cedric. Dumbledore was right, the Dursleys wouldn't live out the year. Sirius realised it too, he simply didn't care. He reckoned the Dursleys had had their second chance. He couldn't know that Harry would have gone out into the snow regardless of what they did, in order to rescue Percy.

There was nothing else for it — Harry would somehow have to talk Sirius into allowing him to remain at number four. Life with the Dursleys wasn't so terrible now that they knew Harry had a godfather looking out for him. Harry certainly didn't want them to die. Of course he didn't...

But old and painful memories kept floating up from the depths of his mind: the many nights he'd gone to bed hungry after Aunt Petunia had snatched his plate away because Dudley wanted more, even though half the time Dudley was sick of it later... being laughed at in primary school for his baggy clothes — the few times anyone had seemed willing to be his friend in spite of it, Dudley and his gang had scared them off... all the toys he'd so desperately wished to play with, that Dudley beat him up if he went anywhere near and then broke within a fortnight... the occasions on which Uncle Vernon had locked him in his cupboard

for accidentally working magic...

Harry hadn't understood what was happening, but his aunt and uncle had done, and they never told him. For two-thirds of his life they let Harry believe no one cared if he lived or died. They only spoke of his parents to insult them, after his mother spent a whole year arranging their protection. They treated Harry like a large and particularly disgusting specimen of Flesh-Eating Slug, when all the time it was his presence in their house that kept them safe. Now he knew why they hadn't packed him off to a Muggle orphanage...

As Harry drifted off to sleep, a treacherous voice in his head was asking: did the Dursleys truly deserve a second chance, considering what they'd done with their first one?



When Harry came down to breakfast next morning, Sirius, a dog once more, was curled up on the living room rug. He followed Harry to the table to share his bacon and sausages. After they finished eating, Mrs Weasley sent Ron, Fred, George and Ginny out to de-gnome the garden.

'You're still looking a tad peaky, dear,' she told Harry. 'Why don't you go upstairs and have a rest?'

Sirius bounded up the staircase after Harry, transforming into his godfather the instant the door to Ron's bedroom was shut.

He gave Harry a brilliant smile. 'Dumbledore and I've been talking... we understand you haven't been happy at your aunt and uncle's for some time. I

thought it might be better for you to stay with Ron and his family instead...'

'I know,' said Harry flatly. 'I overheard you... and I can't leave the Dursleys. I don't want them dying because of me.'

He had to force the words out of his mouth. More than anything, Harry wished he could abide by his godfather's decision, as Dumbledore had done. But in the grey light of dawn he had made his choice, between doing what was easy and doing what was right, and he wasn't backing down from it now.

For a brief moment Sirius appeared chagrined, but he swiftly rallied.

'The Dursleys aren't going to *die*,' he said airily. 'Honestly, Dumbledore can be such a mother hen. A simple Unplottable Charm on the street and they'll be safe as — safe as —'

Under Harry's level gaze, the cheer drained suddenly from his godfather's face.

'James could always tell when I was lying to him, too,' he said in a broken voice.

Sirius wheeled around and began pacing the tiny room.

'Dumbledore warned them last summer... he distinctly told them if they didn't take better care of you, he'd find someone who would, and they'd have to take their chances without the magical protection...'

'Staying out in the cold was my fault, not the Dursleys,' said Harry. 'I won't do it again, I promise.'

'And they let you!' said Sirius angrily. 'With nothing but a jumper! They didn't go looking for you or

even report you missing! If Lucius Malfoy hadn't sent that owl to the Ministry...'

Sirius turned back to Harry. For a long time he stood quite still, studying Harry's face.

'All right,' he said finally. 'You can stop with your aunt and uncle over the summer, for just long enough to keep the protection going. But I'm not leaving you there alone. I'll be staying with you.'



Although Harry put on a brave face until Sirius had left, he spent his last day at The Burrow in deep gloom, mourning the chance he'd lost to escape the Dursleys for ever.

On the bright side, whatever Sirius had said to Percy had obviously done some good. Percy came down to lunch on his own initiative, pale and drawn but with a purposeful glint in his eye. After eating his shepherd's pie, he announced that he was going to the Ministry to see his father.

They returned together that evening, Mr Weasley looking both nervous and hopeful. The last meal of the holidays took place in an atmosphere of mounting relief at Percy's apparent recovery. Though still feeling a bit sorry for himself, Harry was glad that for the Weasleys at least, things were looking up.

Next morning, Harry and the Weasleys stopped by Ollivanders to pick up Harry's wand before meeting Hermione in King's Cross station. On the same day the Weasleys' cousin Andrew had brought Percy back to The Burrow, Ron had received a frantic owl from Hermione asking what was going on and why hadn't

he answered her two earlier letters. (They later discovered that Magical Law Enforcement had been intercepting the Weasleys' post.)

Harry and Ron had written back directly. Hermione had been horrified to learn that Harry might really have been attacked (the *DAILY PROPHET* merely said he was taken into custody after anonymous threats were received by the Ministry) and her first order of business on platform nine and three-quarters was to scold him roundly for running away from the Dursleys' house on Christmas Eve.


Once they were settled inside the Hogwarts Express, Harry told her the rest of the story, or as much of the rest of the story as he'd told anyone: his visit to Ollivanders (though not what actually caused the damage to his wand), Mr Weasley's tale of Etn the Seer and the opportunity Harry had turned down to leave the Dursleys, which even Ron hadn't heard about.

Hermione was particularly dismayed by Voldemort's plans for Etn's Last Prediction.

'People will believe it, you know how superstitious wizards are,' she said, 'and You-Know-Who probably made the whole thing up himself. *I've* never read of any ninth century Seer called Etn.'

'How would you have done? You dropped Divination third year,' said Ron. 'And you,' he said to Harry, 'I can't believe you're going back to those Muggles when you could live with us instead!'

'Don't make me feel worse,' said Harry. 'Of course I'd rather stay at The Burrow, but I don't want the Dursleys murdered!'



‘You’re as bad as Percy,’ grumbled Ron. ‘He says he wants to be a Hit Wizard! Says he can’t change the past but he can stop other people being killed because of Dark wizards like Riversedge. Honestly, he’ll get *himself* killed, and after everything you went through to prove he was innocent. I mean, Percy’s clever and all, but I don’t reckon he could keep his head in a real fight.’

Harry happened to know for a fact that Percy couldn’t keep his head in a real fight. He also knew why Percy was determined to become a Hit Wizard anyway, but naturally he couldn’t explain any of this to Ron.

‘Oooh, Harry, where did you get that?’


Hermione had caught sight of the sprigs of holly, now in a bigger bottle with an Unbreakable Charm on it, and giving off a visible glow.

‘I — found them in an alley,’ said Harry. ‘They’ve started putting out roots. I’m going to ask Professor Sprout to help me pot them...’

EPILLOGUE:

The new term at Hogwarts started in a far more satisfactory way than the old one had ended. With the murder charge against Percy no longer hanging over their heads, the Weasleys had returned to their usual cheerful selves. Ron was taking an interest in Quidditch again, and Fred and George had made it up with Lee Jordan.

Whilst Harry didn’t dare risk drawing attention to himself by asking Madam Pomfrey how he’d survived his night out in the snow, he had potted his remain-



ing holly sprigs as Mr Ollivander suggested, obtaining permission from Professor Sprout to keep the young plants in Greenhouse One. In fact, Harry had very nearly managed to put the unfortunate events of the previous year from his mind when, one evening after dinner, Fred and George caught up with him as he was heading back up to Gryffindor Tower.

‘Need to ask you a few things about flying a Nimbus, Harry,’ said George, brandishing a copy of WHICH BROOMSTICK.

The Weasley twins had reported their Cleansweeps stolen soon after returning to school and were now considering which makes and models would best serve as replacements. Harry followed them; to his surprise, Fred and George led him not to an empty classroom but into the passageway behind the mirror on the fourth floor.

‘Dad said you were questioned under Veritaserum at the Ministry,’ said Fred, the instant they were safely inside.

‘Yeah,’ said Harry. ‘Don’t worry, I didn’t tell them anything. The Veritaserum made my scar hurt — kept me from going under, so I could still lie when I needed to.’

‘And Riversedge’s curse, you really countered it?’ said George. ‘I mean, you knew the actual counter-curse?’

‘Professor Millarca taught it to me,’ said Harry.

‘Our Professor Millarca?’ said Fred.

‘Yes, her,’ said Harry.

Fred and George exchanged meaningful looks.

‘Why, what’s up?’ said Harry.

‘Oh, nothing —’ said George.

A piercing whistling noise filled the air. It seemed

to be coming from one of the Honeydukes crates that furnished the passageway. Harry strode over and lifted the lid; inside, a full-sized Sneakoscope was spinning and glowing.

Harry turned to scowl at Fred and George, who had the grace to look slightly embarrassed.

‘What do you think you’re playing at?’ he said angrily.

‘Look, Harry, we’re grateful that you helped us save Percy and all —’ said Fred.

‘— and it’s not that we reckon you aren’t trustworthy —’ said George.

‘*You* didn’t set off the Sneakoscope,’ said Fred, with a dirty look at his brother.

‘— but there’s definitely something funny going on,’ said George. ‘You cast the Dark Mark, and three Patronuses, and Professor Millarca says she never taught you that Crawling Death counter —’

‘After what happened to Professor Moody, we had to be sure,’ said Fred.

‘What?’ said Harry, staring at them. ‘Of course Professor Millarca taught me the counter to the Crawling Death. How else could I have done it?’

‘Really, Harry, she couldn’t have,’ said George. ‘This is Professor Millarca we’re talking about.’

‘Even if she wasn’t completely hopeless, she couldn’t have taught you the counter to the Curse of the Crawling Death because nobody knows it,’ said Fred. ‘You-Know-Who invented the Crawling Death. He taught the curse to his followers but kept the counter-curse to himself. If any of the Death Eaters had known how

to work it, they’d’ve made a deal with the Ministry to stay out of Azkaban. It was one of the pieces of information that would have got them automatic amnesty.’

‘Another one was the secret of resisting Veritaserum,’ said George.

He reached over, took the Sneakoscope (now dark and silent) from the crate and put it in his bag. With a last glance back at Harry, the twins stepped through the mirror, out of the passageway and into the corridor beyond. Harry sat down heavily on the nearest unopened Honeydukes crate, gazing in shock at their departing backs through the mirror’s smoky glass...

* THE END *



THE IMBOLC SERPENT

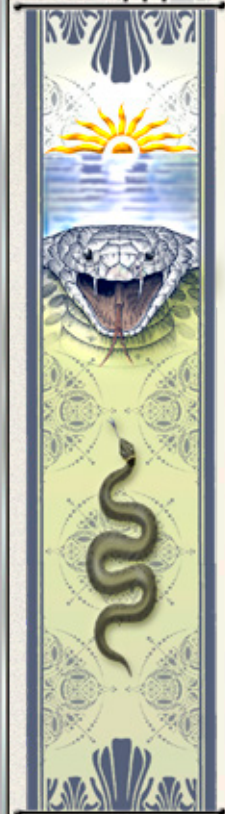


* PROLOGUE *
A 'TERRIBLE' JOKE

IT WAS A COLD January morning soon after the new term had started. The usual flood of owls had just finished bringing the post. Harry was heaping his plate with bacon and eggs when a murmur of astonishment ran through the Great Hall. He raised his head to see a hundred or so more owls streaming into the room. These were no ordinary owls, however; they were all black as ravens and had ruby-red eyes. The sinister-looking flock circled the room seven times whilst the entire school goggled, before swooping down to deliver their letters.

The letters were as jet-black as the owls that carried them. Most went to Slytherins, a few to Ravenclaws, none to Hufflepuffs and exactly one to the Gryffindor table, dropped neatly by its owl into Harry's porridge. Harry plucked the envelope out of his bowl, porridge sliding off it like water from a duck's back. It was addressed in silver ink to *Harry Potter, Parselmouth, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry*.

'Harry Potter, Parselmouth?' said Harry, raising his eyebrows. Ron shrugged; Hermione pursed her lips thoughtfully.



Harry turned the letter over. Its seal was a perfect round dome of translucent red glass embedded in silver wax. The instant Harry's fingers touched the glass dome, it glowed scarlet and the flap of the envelope sprang open. Ron and Hermione looked on with great interest as Harry pulled out a rectangle of thick black parchment and read:

*The honour of your presence is requested
at the Dark Wizards' Ball
to be held at Tobermory Castle
on the evening of Thursday the 1st of February
at ten o'clock*

'The Dark Wizards' Ball?' said Harry. 'Is this some kind of joke?'

'No, it's real, I've read about it,' said Hermione.

'Should we — should we tell Dumbledore?' asked Harry.

He realised how stupid this question was as soon as the words left his mouth. After the spectacle of the black owls, Dumbledore hardly needed telling. Harry's eyes flicked to the staff table. Snape was leaning over, his greasy black hair falling into his face as he reached past Professor McGonagall to hold out a similar piece of black parchment for Dumbledore's inspection.

'No, I mean it's a real event,' said Hermione. 'Not — not real Dark wizards. Just people pretending — like a masquerade.'

'Oh, yeah, I've heard of that,' said Ron.

'Why invite me, then?' said Harry, surveying the

letter with deep suspicion.

'"Harry Potter, *Parselmouth*"', said Hermione, tapping the envelope with her fingernail. 'Certain classes of wizard automatically get invitations — to give the party a proper Dark atmosphere. Parselmouths, werewolves, old wizarding families who have historical associations with Dark magic... Mind, the invitations are usually delivered a bit more discreetly...'

'Trust the Tobermorys to completely overdo it,' snorted Ron. 'More Galleons than sense, Dad's always said.'

'But it would be fascinating to visit Tobermory Castle,' said Hermione keenly. 'You *are* going to go, aren't you, Harry?'

'I dunno... all this Dark stuff... even if they're not serious...' muttered Harry. 'Maybe if the Tobermorys were giving a — a Bright Wizards' Ball...'

'A *Bright* Wizards' Ball?' said a withering voice. 'You *are* showing your ignorance, Potter.'

Draco Malfoy had come over to the Gryffindor table, flanked by Crabbe and Goyle. All three bore black invitations of their own.

'If there *were* a ball for bright wizards, *you* certainly wouldn't be invited to it,' Malfoy went on. 'I thought everyone knew —' his lips curled into a malevolent smirk, '— only Dark wizards have balls.'

THE IMBOLC SERPENT

And for the close of our Dark Revels we shall be travelling to Cornwall, to await the coming of the Imbolc Serpent!



Lady Tobermory gave a breathless little laugh. Despite the magnificent necklace of gold, amber and ivory skulls that covered her front, she did not, in Harry's opinion, make a particularly convincing Dark witch — too short, too plump, too rosy-cheeked and above all, too giggly.

Yet in a way this was quite fitting. A fortnight previously, Harry had been flabbergasted to receive an invitation to the Dark Wizards' Ball, addressed to *Harry Potter, Parselmouth*. Hermione, however, had assured him that no actual Dark Magic was involved: the Dark Wizards' Ball was strictly fancy dress.

Even so, he would never have agreed to go had Draco Malfoy not made such scathing remarks about Hermione's interest in visiting Tobermory Castle. Harry had accepted the invitation for the sole purpose of bringing her along; the chance to pay Malfoy back by granting Hermione's wish was too good to pass up.

It still felt rather like tempting fate with Voldemort so recently revived, though, and Harry hadn't been able to completely shake the suspicion that there had to be some sort of real Dark Arts mixed up in this somehow. He didn't much like the sound of this — this in-bulk serpent.

'You did say there'd be no Dark Magic, didn't you?' he muttered to Hermione.

'Waiting for the Imbolc Serpent isn't Dark Magic,' said Lupin, overhearing them (as a known werewolf, he too had been invited to the Dark Wizards' Ball). 'Although I'm afraid it will be something of a waste of our time. The Imbolc Serpent is a myth, it's a bit like

staying up to try and see Father Christmas...'

'Does the Imbolc Serpent bring presents?' asked Hermione curiously.

'No,' said Lupin, 'but the Serpent is very wise. Once a year, when the days first begin to lengthen — at around this time, in fact — he emerges from his cave, and in exchange for a cauldron of ewe's milk he'll answer any question you care to put to him. Not many people remember that old tradition. Lady Tobermory must have really done her homework —'

'Or somebody must have done,' snorted Professor McGonagall.

She had come to the Dark Wizards' Ball with Professor Snape to help keep an eye on the Hogwarts students (most of them Slytherins) who were attending. Harry had got the distinct impression over the course of the evening that her estimation of Lady Tobermory's intelligence was not the highest.

'Pity he isn't real, actually,' said Lupin, almost to himself. 'We could use his advice on fighting Voldemort...'

As Lupin spoke, silver goblets of milky punch appeared on the many small tables that dotted the ballroom.

'The cups are Portkeys,' cried Lady Tobermory merrily. 'Drink up and you'll be transported to the Serpent Rocks.'

'Not yet!' Professor McGonagall called sharply to the students gathered round her. 'We'll all go together when we go...' Once everyone had a goblet in their hands, she said, 'On the count of three —'

'Here's mud up your bottom!' said Tonks with a wink at Malfoy, who gave her an affronted glare.

The pale, dark-haired young witch (who bore the unfortunate forename of Nymphadora) was Lupin's partner. For some reason, Malfoy had taken a dislike to her from the instant he set eyes on her in the Hogwarts Entrance Hall.

Harry downed his punch and felt the jerk of the Portkey behind his navel, pulling him through a howling whirlwind of colour to land staggering onto a rocky beach. Witches and wizards were materialising on all sides of him; luckily their goblets seemed charmed to be spill-proof. Although nearly morning, it was quite dark and extremely cold. Harry shivered, wishing he had his cloak.

'Inc-c-endio,' said Hermione, her teeth chattering.

A bright blue fire sprang up. The group from Hogwarts clustered around it to warm themselves. Other guests were thinking along the same lines as Hermione — fires were being conjured up all over the shore. By the glow of the flames, Harry saw that they had arrived in a sort of cove surrounded by towering cliffs. At the base of the escarpment a standing stone of weathered granite rose from the ground, marking the entrance to a cave. Lady Tobermory stood beside it with a large silver cauldron.

Spotting Harry, she waved at him vigorously.

'Harry! Harry! This way!' Her Sonorus-amplified voice boomed across the sand. 'Our Parselmouth will do the calling!'

'I'll do the calling?' said Harry.

Lady Tobermory was beckoning even more frantically. People were turning to stare.

'Oh, go on, it can't do any harm,' said Professor McGonagall crossly.

She gave Harry a small push. He stumbled forward, making his way slowly over the uneven ground.

'And here's Harry!' said Lady Tobermory, when he reached her side. 'Now stand before the stone, dear, and call the Serpent. Tell him we've brought ewe's milk!' she added, laying a hand on the rim of the cauldron.

Harry faced the standing stone. Near the top was a carved serpent, with an inscription below it in some unfamiliar alphabet. Feeling rather stupid, he spoke to the snake on the stone.

'Imbolc Serpent? Hello the — er — cavern.'

His words echoed back to him in a hiss of Parseltongue, then silence fell once more. Harry stood there, arms folded against the chill, as the minutes crept by. The sky was growing noticeably brighter. He wondered what Lady Tobermory would do when the Serpent failed to show up...

Then it struck him that the source of the increasing light was not the sun but the mouth of the cave. Harry watched, his mind blank as though a sponge had wiped it clean, as the Imbolc Serpent slithered out. It was larger than the Basilisk he'd fought in the Chamber of Secrets — almost as long as a dragon. Its hide was white and luminous, with splotches of pale grey running down its back like clouds on the moon.

The Serpent's molten silver eyes swept the crowd, all of whom seemed just as bewitched as Harry. Its gaze fixed on Hermione. Harry looked vacantly on as it glided towards her... lowered its head... flickered

its tongue whilst she stared up, oblivious...

'Leave her alone!' shouted Harry at the top of his lungs.

Wrenching himself from his trance, he drew his wand, preparing to cast a Conjunctivitis Curse. But if the snake went writhing about in agony, it would crush the people around it, starting with Hermione —

With astonishing speed for such a massive beast, the Imbolc Serpent whipped round to face him.

'*Accio Hermione!*' yelled Harry.

From opposite side of the cove she was flung into his arms, nearly knocking him to the ground. It was only with great effort that Harry kept the two of them on their feet and his wand pointed at the Serpent.

'You stay back!' he hissed at it.

'Good Heavens!' said the Serpent. 'It can talk!'

It had a voice bigger than any snake Harry had ever heard, like the rushing of a stream swollen beyond its banks by melted snow.

'I wasn't going to hurt her,' the Serpent went on, sounding a tad miffed, 'and a Conjunctivitis Curse wouldn't have worked anyway. We snakes don't have eyelids as dragons do — our eyes are protected by clear scales, and there's too much magic in mine for mere jinxes to get through.' It paused meditatively, then amended, 'Well, most of us don't have eyelids. That boa constrictor you freed from the zoo had kelpie blood in him, unless I'm much mistaken.'

'How did you know about that?' said Harry, thunderstruck.

The snake gave him a patronising look.

'I *am* the Imbolc Serpent,' it said.

Harry abruptly recalled his conversation with Lupin. 'And you'll answer a question if I give you ewe's milk?'

'Certainly,' said the Serpent.

Harry carefully let go of Hermione. Gazing bemusedly at the Serpent, she hadn't reacted in the slightest way to what had just happened to her, but thankfully proved still capable of standing on her own.

'There's the ewe's milk,' Harry said, pointing to Lady Tobermory's cauldron, 'and my question is, how can we stop Voldemort?'

The Imbolc Serpent lapped daintily at the cauldron, then gave a sputtering laugh.

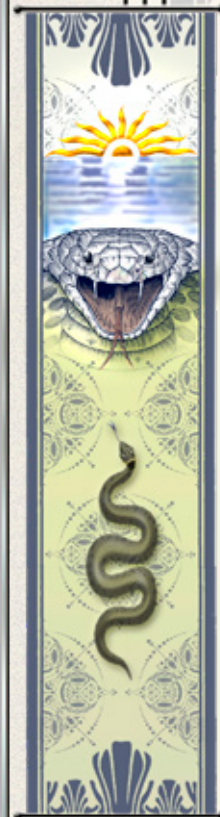
'You wouldn't believe me if I told you,' it said. 'But if you'll change into a snake, you can see for yourself.'

Harry gaped. The fact that he could transform himself into a serpent was a deep secret, one which he'd shared only with Ron, Hermione and Dumbledore.

'How did you... oh, right. Why do I have to —' he looked nervously around to make sure his fellow guests were still entranced, '— turn into a snake?'

'Ewe's milk won't give the Sight to a human,' said the Serpent. 'Don't worry about them, they won't remember any of this.'

Harry drew a deep breath and transformed. Hermione and Lady Tobermory grew into giantesses; the Serpent stretched out like a motorway. The crash of the waves against the beach reverberated through his body and the air was filled with smells — stone and salt water and human sweat, metal and milk and



the indescribable odour of the Imbolc Serpent itself.

The Serpent stuck its forked tongue into the cauldron and let a puddle-sized drop fall from one tip onto a large, flat rock. The smell of the ewe's milk was rich and creamy, rather to Harry's surprise (he knew from experience that most human food held little appeal for him as a snake). He crawled over and began to drink.

From the Serpent's talk of 'the Sight', Harry had expected to receive the answer to his question in a vision, but it didn't happen that way. The information simply appeared inside his head, as if it had always been there: Harry could stop Voldemort by taking his place. The prediction Mr Weasley had been so afraid of was a real one; in the last years of the millennium, a Dark Lord was destined to rise to power — but it could be Harry instead of Voldemort.

'Me take Voldemort's place?' said Harry in a strangled voice. 'You're mad, I'm too young, I — I've not finished school yet...'

The Imbolc Serpent lifted its head from the cauldron, where it had been greedily gulping milk.

'You're older than Riddle was when he took the first Dark Lord's place,' it observed. 'Six days older, in fact. He hadn't finished school yet, either, as I recall.'

'Hang on, the *first* Dark Lord?' said Harry.

'Yes, they're a bit like buses, Dark Lords,' said the Serpent. 'You wait and you wait, for a thousand years — then three of them come along, one right after the other.'

Once more Harry had the peculiar sensation of knowledge trickling directly into his brain.

'Noddy Crackenthorpe,' he said flatly.

Harry had never heard of the man before the ewe's milk brought his name to mind, and neither had anyone else — Crackenthorpe had been very careful of that. An expert on the Founders and a secret Parselmouth, he'd discovered the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets over a century ago whilst teaching History of Magic at Hogwarts. Having no interest in purging the school of Muggle-borns, Crackenthorpe had let the Basilisk slumber on, but took with him the books and parchments that Slytherin had left in the Chamber for his heir.

After decades of study, he'd started work on an enchantment that in the fullness of time would have allowed him to seize total power over the wizarding world — had he not surprised a fifteen-year-old Tom Riddle burgling his library and been hexed to death for his pains. Crackenthorpe's notes on his research were hidden elsewhere; Riddle never found them or even learnt of their existence... or realised that he'd vanquished the first Dark Lord of the millennium's end.

Harry's insides felt suddenly leaden.

'But — I don't *want* to be a Dark Lord,' he said desperately.

The Serpent ran a tip of its tongue down his back in what was clearly meant to be a comforting gesture.

'There's Dark Lords and there's Dark Lords,' it said. 'Voldemort has used the Dark Arts to kill, maim, torture and cast a blight upon the lives of thousands of people. You, on the other hand, have occasionally spoken to snakes. Yet in the eyes of your own kind, both of you are Dark wizards.'

‘No,’ said Harry, shaking his head. ‘No, there must be some other way.’

But there was no other way; he knew it as surely as he knew his own name. *The authentic predictions of a genuine Seer always come true* — Mr Weasley had said it, and Etin’s Last was one of them.

Harry slumped against the rock in misery. For what seemed an age he lay there, feeling the tide pound the shore. Then, slowly, he became conscious of another vibration, from somewhere far inland. It grew steadily stronger... drowning out the ocean... he couldn’t imagine what might be causing it...

‘Look, Harry!’ said the Imbolc Serpent. ‘My bride is coming!’

Harry raised his head. A second Imbolc Serpent, blazing golden and even bigger than the first, was crawling over the hills towards them. Harry’s Serpent slithered up the beach to meet her... as they drew level, the pair of them became too bright to look at... Harry turned human again to cover his eyes with his hands... and saw that he was staring into the newly risen sun.

The crowd began to stir, murmuring to each other in astonished tones.

‘Did you see?’

‘Could have sworn —’

‘— the Imbolc Serpent!’

Apparently most of them had woken just in time to catch a glimpse of the Serpents as they vanished into the horizon.

‘Harry?’ said Hermione in a bewildered voice. ‘What’s happened?’

Harry gazed at her numbly. How could he explain to Hermione that their only hope of defeating Voldemort was for Harry to become a Dark Lord himself? She’d think he’d lost his mind. Or worse, she’d think he *hadn’t* lost his mind — that he was at last revealing the Dark tendencies he’d had all along. And even if Harry was willing to have a go at supplanting Voldemort, the thing seemed all but impossible...

‘Mr Potter! Miss Granger!’

Professor McGonagall was hurrying towards them, looking outraged.

‘Miss Granger, have you been Apparating?’

‘I don’t know, I don’t remember,’ said Hermione, rubbing her forehead.

‘She didn’t Apparate, I Summoned her,’ said Harry quickly. ‘I thought the Serpent was attacking her.’

Professor McGonagall’s gaze flicked to the cave’s entrance, then returned to Harry. She viewed him with an expression of deep concern. Harry had difficulty meeting her eyes.

Professor McGonagall turned to Lady Tobermory, who appeared still half entranced — and caught sight of the standing stone. She stared at it for several seconds, lips moving soundlessly. Her mouth went suddenly thin.

‘Madam Pomfrey can have a look at you both when we get back to Hogwarts,’ she said grimly. ‘We’ll Portkey there at once. Come along...’

They followed her to the spot where the rest of the Hogwarts contingent were waiting, buzzing excitedly to one another about the Serpent.

‘Harry, are you all right?’ said Lupin.

‘He’ll be fine, Remus,’ said Professor McGonagall. ‘He was standing a bit too close when the Confundus Charm went off, that’s all.’

‘Confundus Charm?’ said Lupin.

‘The one Lady Tobermory used to make us believe we saw the Imbolc Serpent,’ said Professor McGonagall, her nostrils flaring. ‘Wanted to end things with a bang, I suppose.’

‘I wouldn’t have thought Adela had the power to put a mass Confundus Charm on a crowd this size,’ said Lupin, sounding quite impressed.

‘Of course she didn’t cast it herself, it was an enchantment on the standing stone,’ said Professor McGonagall. ‘Activated by the sunrise, most likely. There was a rune inscription — *The Serpent Goes Forth with the Sun.*’

‘You mean — the snakes and everything — it was all a Confundus Charm?’ said Harry.

‘Precisely, Potter,’ said Professor McGonagall. ‘So you see, Miss Granger was never in any danger at all.’

Harry would have laughed aloud with relief, if not for the extra worry it might cause Professor McGonagall about his mental state. The idea of him, Harry, replacing Voldemort — how could he have taken it seriously for even a minute? It was nearly as ludicrous as the notion of a Dark Lord named Noddy.

Professors McGonagall and Snape handed out bronze badges in the shape of winged boars: the Portkeys that would be returning them to Hogwarts. In no time at all, the entire group was back in the Entrance Hall. The yawning students rapidly dis-

persed, heading for their dormitories. Harry and Hermione hung back to say goodbye to Lupin.

‘I’ll be sending house-elves to fetch our things from Tobermory Castle,’ Professor McGonagall said to Lupin and Tonks. ‘If either of you would like a cup of tea, or breakfast...’

‘Perhaps someone should go with them and see that Lady Tobermory is all right,’ said Lupin. ‘She was standing fairly close to that stone herself.’

‘Fortunate for her, then, not to have enough brains for a Confundus Charm to scramble,’ said Professor McGonagall tartly. ‘And why aren’t you two in the hospital wing?’

She turned her scowl on Harry and Hermione. As they made to leave, Emmeline Vance, the tall, stately-looking witch who had accompanied Hagrid to the ball, spoke up.

‘I’d like a word with Harry in my office before he sees Madam Pomfrey.’

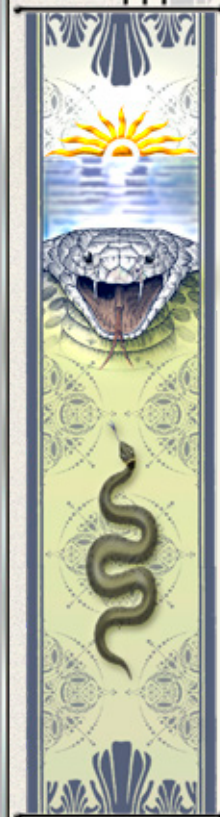
‘Of course,’ said Professor McGonagall.

Harry eyed her in confusion. Emmeline Vance was not, so far as he knew, a Hogwarts teacher. Did she mean to take him somewhere outside the castle?

Observing his perplexity, Madam Vance gave him a small smile.

‘The Polyjuice Potion should be wearing off right about — now,’ she said.

With a wave of her wand, she transformed her bottle green dress into a handsomely embroidered set of wizard’s robes, and not a moment too soon. Her hair grew longer and more silvery, an equally long beard sprouted from her chin and Harry was suddenly gaping up into



the beaming face of Albus Dumbledore.

Harry followed Dumbledore up the marble staircase, wondering what the Headmaster wished to talk to him about. He could think of nothing he'd done at the Dark Wizards' Ball that would earn him a telling off — surely Dumbledore realised he'd had no part in Fred and George's spectacular gatecrash. Maybe it was something to do with why Dumbledore, too, had been attending the ball in disguise...

When they reached Dumbledore's office, he sat down behind his desk and gave Harry a piercing stare.

'So,' he said. 'You spoke with the Imbolc Serpent. Not an opportunity that many wizards have had, to be certain...'

It took a few seconds for the full meaning of Dumbledore's words to sink in. When it did, Harry felt as though a bucket of freezing water had been poured down his throat and into his stomach.

'You — you saw it too? It *wasn't* just a Confundus Charm?'

'Not a Confundus Charm, no,' said Dumbledore, 'but rather the most powerful Entrancing Enchantment I have ever encountered. Nonetheless, I saw, and remembered.'

Harry buried his face in his hands.

'Of course, as you were speaking Parseltongue, I didn't understand a word of it,' said Dumbledore, a note of worry creeping into his voice. 'Er — what did the Serpent say to you?'

'I asked him how to stop Voldemort,' said Harry. 'He said the only way was for me to take Voldemort's

place. Etin's Last Prediction is coming true, but either of us could be the Dark Lord.'

'Ah,' said Dumbledore.

There was a long and (to Harry at least) highly unpleasant silence.

'Harry,' said Dumbledore at last, 'do not let this upset you unduly. Very little is known about the Imbolc Serpent — I myself would have regarded the creature as mere legend before this evening. We cannot be certain how truthful or how accurate its information is... and even if the Serpent is correct, predictions are often fulfilled in ways we would never expect. It would be foolish to ignore this, certainly, but it would be more foolish to dwell on it too deeply. What's coming will come...'

Dumbledore's voice trailed off for an instant, then went on more briskly, '...for now, you'd best be getting down to the hospital wing. Though I doubt Madam Pomfrey will find much amiss, you'll feel better for a night's — for a morning's rest.'

Harry hadn't truly registered how tired he was until Dumbledore mentioned sleep. He'd been up all night... he was no longer sure what to make of the Serpent or its answer... Dumbledore had told him not to dwell on it... well, he was too exhausted to do that.

But from his last glimpse of Dumbledore's face as he headed out the door, it was plain to Harry that Dumbledore, for one, would be dwelling on this very deeply indeed...

* THE END *

THE CURSE OF THE AITVARAS



1. AITVARAS QUIDDITCH

G

GINNY, KATIE, look out!' yelled Harry.

WHAM!

Ginny Weasley and Katie Bell crashed hard into each other in a tangle of arms and legs. Harry sent his Firebolt into a steep dive, levelling out directly below the two Chasers. If one of them fell off her broom, he could catch her. Catching the pair of them, however, would be a serious challenge...


Luckily both girls remained mounted. When they drifted apart, Katie sported a bloody nose and Ginny was flying in an extremely wobbly circle.

'Ginny, are you OK?' said Ron, gliding over to check his sister for injuries.

Harry stayed where he was — a fall from her broomstick still appeared to be a real possibility for Ginny. He heard Ron mutter 'hospital wing', then in a louder voice call out, 'Right, let's head for the changing rooms, I reckon we've done all the training we can for this evening.'

Harry and Ron accompanied Ginny and Katie to the hospital wing, where Madam Pomfrey mended Katie's nose and sent Ginny to bed with a goblet of potion,






assuring Ron that his sister would be right as rain after a night's rest. Nonetheless, Ron was in very low spirits as he and Harry climbed the stairs to Gryffindor Tower.

'It's no good, we're not going to learn it in time,' he said abruptly to Harry. 'Ginny's too new and Katie's too used to doing things the old way. It's all down to you. You've got to catch the Snitch as fast as you can. If we win this match, or don't lose by much, we'll still have a chance at the Cup, and I can work out a simplified Weasley Welter for the next one. Wish I'd had you practise Seeking more...'

But there would be no time for that, either, Harry knew. Gryffindor's first match of the season, against Slytherin, was to take place the following morning.

Undeniably, they were in poor shape for it. Four of their strongest players — Fred and George Weasley, Angelina Johnson and Alicia Spinnet — had left Hogwarts the previous year. The replacement Beaters, Andrew Kirke and Jack Sloper, could charitably be described as dreadful. Ron and Ginny had come on as Chasers, but although Ron had trained with the team in fifth year and Ginny was surprisingly capable despite her lack of experience, neither of them were near the equal of Angelina or Alicia in their prime.

As the only person on the team able to make head or tail of Oliver Wood's old training diagrams, Ron had become Captain. To compensate for their current weaknesses, he'd devised a fresh set of Chasing tactics he dubbed the Weasley Welter, which worked beautifully well — on parchment. In the air it proved rather more difficult to bring off. For their training sessions, Harry



had been assigned the role of Slytherin Chaser — 'We'll get the hang of it quicker if we've got someone to practise it on, and you always catch the Snitch, anyway.'

If that was the case, Harry didn't like to think how long it would take them *without* a fake opponent. After two months of training, the 'Slytherins' — Harry, Keeper Vidge Atkins and whichever of Kirke and Sloper had been designated Attacking Beater (in theory, at least; in practice this had little effect on whom they hit their Bludgers at) — had never ended a training session less than a hundred points ahead of the three Gryffindor Chasers.

The real Slytherins could scarcely be any less proficient. Moreover, Ginny and Katie's hadn't been the first collision to occur in the midst of an especially complex manoeuvre, although it was, to date, the most serious. Unless Harry managed an early capture of the Snitch, Gryffindor would be lucky merely to lose the match without making complete fools of themselves in front of the entire school — and Harry had had no practice at Seeking since last year.

Next day the weather was cold but brilliantly sunny; any errors in play would be blindingly obvious to the spectators. The Gryffindor team walked out onto the pitch to cheers and applause they seemed hardly likely to earn. Ron went white under the freckles as Slytherin Captain Millicent Bulstrode crushed his hand, and Harry couldn't help thinking it an omen of things to come. Madam Hooch blew her whistle —

Harry's head whipped suddenly about and his eyes locked on the Snitch, hovering high above him,

behind and to his left. He wrenched his broom around and shot towards it. It zipped sharply upward and rightward; he adjusted his course, reached out... and plucked the tiny, shimmering golden ball from the air.

'I've got it!' he shouted. 'I've caught the Snitch!'

There was an instant of stunned silence, then the stadium erupted.

'I DON'T SODDING BELIEVE IT!' yelled Kevin Ent-whistle, the Ravenclaw who'd succeeded Lee Jordan as commentator ('Language, Kevin!' squeaked Professor Flitwick). 'SEVEN BLOODY SECONDS! FOUR SECONDS SOONER AND WE'D'VE HAD A NEW WORLD RECORD!'

Shocked but triumphant, Gryffindor's supporters spilled onto the pitch to congratulate Harry and pound him on the back.

'Couldn't've waited a few minutes for us to try out the Weasley Welter in a real match, could you?' said Ron happily. 'I'll never tell you to catch the Snitch as fast as you can again!'

Indeed, the whole thing had transpired so rapidly that it scarcely felt like a proper game, but it meant that Gryffindor was still in the running for the Quidditch Cup, with a decent if not commanding lead.

Over the next couple of months, Ron, Ginny and Katie mastered a pared down variation of the Weasley Welter and actually started to hold their own against Harry and Vidge. Harry wasn't sure how promising a sign this was. As three Chasers to his one, they should have been outscoring him handily even without the Weasley Welter, only he had a Keeper and they didn't.

'You've also got a Firebolt,' Ron pointed out when


Harry asked him, 'and you're a better Chaser than any of the Hufflepuffs. Honestly, you're a better Chaser than me or Ginny — your flying's improved no end since last season, and it was damned good then. But we're really coming along with the Weasley Welter. Just give us time to score some goals before you get the Snitch!'

The Gryffindor team went into their second match with rather more confidence than the first — at least on the part of the Chasers. Ron had fine-tuned the Weasley Welter up to the last moment; as a result, Harry hadn't put in so much as an hour of training as a Seeker. He didn't reckon he'd have a choice about postponing his catch of the Snitch until the Weasley Welter could be used to good effect.

The sky was clear and a light breeze was blowing on the morning of the match against Hufflepuff. The crowd shouted and clapped as the two teams came out of the changing rooms and gathered on the pitch. Madam Hooch released the balls... and then a very strange thing happened.

Harry's gaze was unerringly drawn to a spot at the far side of the stadium, halfway up the central Hufflepuff goalpost. The distance was too great for him to see the Golden Snitch, but somehow he was certain it was there. Recalling Ron's instructions to delay its capture, Harry hesitated and the Snitch was gone... closer and higher, towards the Slytherin spectators... straight across to the Ravenclaw section of the stands... lower and nearer yet, in the middle of the pitch...

The match that followed was one of the weirdest Harry had every played. He always seemed to know




where the Snitch was, always. There was nothing left for him to do but dodge Bludgers (a fair number sent pelting his way by Kirke and Sloper themselves), keep an eye on Hufflepuff Seeker Summerby and watch as the Weasley Welter slowly ran up the score, despite intense punishment by Hufflepuff's considerably more skilful Beaters.

After six hours, with Gryffindor over two hundred points ahead, Harry decided he'd better end the match so they all could have their dinner. Ron was ecstatic ('Four hundred and ninety to a hundred and thirty! Even if we lose the final, we might still take the Cup on points!') but Harry couldn't enjoy their win. Finding the Snitch had been simply too easy for him... and he had no idea how he'd done it.

Harry felt more left out than ever at the inevitable post-match party in the common room. His fellow Gryffindors were at a fever pitch of enthusiasm after their hard-fought victory. Nobody had seen anything like the Weasley Welter before, and Ron, Ginny and Katie were the centre of attention.

'And that was only the intermediate level,' Ron told his admirers jubilantly. 'Once we have the advanced Weasley Welter off pat, that Quidditch Cup will never leave McGonagall's office!'

'Mind, we'll have a job doing that,' he said, a bit later and far more quietly, as he flopped down in an armchair beside Harry's. 'The Chasers might manage it, but the advanced Welter needs Beaters, and our ones aren't up to beginning level yet. Hufflepuff's Beaters were killing us, and Ravenclaw's Beaters are better



than Hufflepuff's. Their whole team's very good, I'm not sure we'll be able to beat them even with the Weasley Welter. Unless you can pull off another seven second Snitch catch...'

He eyed Harry uncertainly.

'You did hold off catching the Snitch on purpose, didn't you? I mean, I know I haven't been letting you practise much...'

'I *could* make another seven second catch, actually,' said Harry in a low voice. 'I could catch the Snitch whenever you want it caught. I wasn't just holding off — I knew exactly where that Snitch was, from the minute Madam Hooch let it out of the crate. Even when she was bringing the balls back into the castle, I could feel where it was going...'


Ron stared at him.

'You've been hit on the head with a Bludger,' he said flatly. 'If it was Kirke or Sloper, I'll murder them... I'll murder them anyway, they're supposed to be keeping those things away from you —'

'I didn't get hit by a Bludger,' said Harry testily. 'It wasn't only this match, how d'you think I caught the Snitch so quickly last time? Am I — am I hexed or something? Could someone have cast a — a Snitch-Finding Spell on me?'

'Wizards have tried to all sorts of mad ways to rig Quidditch matches,' said Ron, looking deeply uneasy, 'but nothing I've heard of like this. And who'd bother rigging a Hogwarts house match? There's no serious betting on them, the goblins won't cover it.'

'Why not?' said Harry.



‘Dumbledore doesn’t allow Anti-Cheating curses. Says it’s too dangerous for the students. Mind, if somebody did invent a Snitch-Finding Spell, this would be a great place to test it out.’

Ron gave a sudden frown.

‘We should report this to Madam Hooch... but Gryffindor would forfeit both matches... there’d be a huge investigation... this late in the season, the whole Tournament would probably be cancelled.’

He and Harry exchanged glum looks.

‘What’s happened?’ said Hermione, strolling over. ‘The two of you look as though someone just died.’

As usual, Harry’s attention was drawn to the small gold locket she wore, glittering at her neck like a tiny Snitch...

‘Hermione, could you walk around the room a bit?’ he said. ‘To the portrait hole, to the fireplace, to the staircase and back again?’

‘How come?’ said Hermione.

‘I want to try something,’ said Harry. ‘I’ll explain after you get back.’

He shut his eyes tightly. The locket remained where it was for several moments, then moved behind him towards the portrait hole, paused, circled round to the staircase and headed back, stopping in front of him once more. Eyes still closed, he reached out and tapped it with a finger.

‘It’s your locket,’ he said.

‘Yes, it is,’ said Hermione, eyeing him askance.

‘I mean, I can track it too,’ said Harry.

Nor was it merely Hermione’s locket he could

track. The common room, he now perceived, was filled with Snitch-like objects — jewellery, watches, things in people’s pockets that Harry suspected were Galleons... even the sweets on the tables registered as softer, blurrier presences.

‘What do you mean, track it too?’ said Hermione irritably. ‘What’s going on with you?’

Harry told her about the Snitch.

‘...and your locket’s the same way. I’ve been noticing it since last year, when you visited me in the hospital wing.’

‘After Malfoy kicked your head in?’ said Hermione. ‘Harry, you could have some kind of wizarding brain damage! Have you gone to Madam Pomfrey?’

‘If it’s a Snitch-Finding Spell, I bet Malfoy put it on you,’ Ron chipped in. ‘Planning to get Gryffindor disqualified for cheating, I expect. D’you remember him casting a jinx when he was kicking you?’

‘No, I — er,’ said Harry.


Ron and Hermione looked at him keenly. Harry felt his face go red.

‘Malfoy didn’t put a jinx on me,’ he muttered. ‘He turned me into an Aitvaras.’

Harry explained how he’d freed himself from the ropes Malfoy tied him with by changing into a snake, only to be caught in a Snake Basket and transformed into an Aitvaras. By the end of his story, Ron and Hermione were goggling at him in amazement.

Hermione found her voice first.

‘Why didn’t you mention this last year?’ she demanded.



‘Didn’t think it was important,’ said Harry. ‘I got better, didn’t I? Well, mostly better...’

The truth was he hadn’t wished to admit to them he’d been stupid enough to let Malfoy trap him.

‘We need to tell Madam Pomfrey,’ said Hermione.

‘We can’t,’ said Ron. ‘Gryffindor would forfeit the tournament!’

‘Are you saying that you care more about winning at Quidditch than Harry’s health?’ snarled Hermione.

‘Hermione, we *can’t* tell Madam Pomfrey,’ said Harry in an undertone. ‘She doesn’t know I can turn into a snake.’

‘Oh,’ said Hermione, temporarily stymied. ‘Well, then, we need to tell Dumbledore.’

‘Why?’ said Harry. ‘I’m not ill, not really, and he’s got enough on his plate, with the Council of Heirs and all.’

As humiliating as it had been to confess the Aitvaras incident to Ron and Hermione, telling Dumbledore would be infinitely worse.

‘So you’ll be resigning from the Gryffindor Quidditch team?’ said Hermione.


‘Resigning?’ said Ron. ‘What for?’

‘If he’s finding the Snitch by magic, it’s cheating, isn’t it?’ said Hermione severely.

‘No it’s not, there’s no rule against having an Aitvaras for a Seeker,’ said Ron.

‘There would be if the International Association of Quidditch heard about this!’ Turning to Harry, she continued, ‘It isn’t fair to the other teams, you know it isn’t, and Dumbledore would tell you as much.’

Harry stared past her into the fire for nearly a full minute.



‘I suppose I’ll have to, won’t I?’ he said in a strained voice.

The thought of giving up Quidditch, for ever, was almost enough to make him reconsider asking Dumbledore for assistance. What he’d told Hermione, however, was perfectly true: Dumbledore had far more important matters to occupy him than helping Harry keep his place on the Gryffindor team.

‘You can’t!’ said Ron in horror. ‘We’ll never beat Ravenclaw without you, we don’t have a reserve Seeker! Can’t you just look for the Snitch without using magic?’

‘I don’t know,’ said Harry.

He closed his eyes and concentrated, trying to see if there was any way he could shut down this odd extra sense. But it did no good. If anything, he was making himself even more aware of the food and valuables around him.

‘Sorry,’ he said at last, ‘I don’t think this is something I can switch off.’

‘This is all your fault!’ Ron spat.

Harry’s eyes flew open in astonishment. Then he saw that Ron was talking to Hermione.

‘You’d just better work out how to break this curse before the final if you want Gryffindor to have a shot at the Quidditch Cup!’

‘My fault?’ said Hermione, her voice shrill with outrage, but before she could say anything more (and by the look of her, she had quite a bit more to say) Ron stormed off, leaving her to sit fuming impotently.

‘*Could* you work out how to break the curse, d’you reckon?’ Harry asked her quietly.

'I won't!' said Hermione glaring furiously after Ron. 'Ravenclaw can have the Quidditch Cup, Professor Flitwick can drink his cherry sodas from it —'

Catching sight of Harry's miserable face, her expression grudgingly softened.

'I can have a look in the library,' she said. 'Not a word to Ron I'm doing it, though, unless you fancy being an Aitvaras for the rest of your life!'

This proved an easy promise to keep. Next day Ron avoided the pair of them. He sat with Ginny at meals but didn't seem to be getting along terribly well with her, either. Harry spotted them having a fierce whispered argument in the Entrance Hall when he and Hermione went down to dinner.

Later that evening, Ron came up to the table in the common room where Harry and Hermione were doing their homework.

'Er,' he said awkwardly to Hermione. 'I wanted to say I'm, ah, sorry for shouting at you on Saturday.'

'Are you?' said Hermione coldly.

Ron glanced nervously over her shoulder. Twisting his head, Harry saw Ginny perched on the edge of her seat, staring intently at Ron and Hermione.

'It was Malfoy's fault, not yours,' Ron ploughed on. 'I shouldn't have lost my temper. You were right, it would be cheating for Harry to play Seeker. I'm having him and Ginny switch positions. She's not as good at Seeking, but with the Weasley Welter, we'll still have a chance — a slim one.'

Ron's gaze flicked to Ginny. She locked eyes with her brother and, to Harry's befuddlement, held up

seven fingers.

'And — and don't bother with trying to break the curse,' Ron resumed. 'You're too busy, you're taking seven N.E.W.T. classes, you wouldn't have the time...'

Ginny dropped her left hand, leaving a V for victory — or so Harry initially assumed.

But Ron wasn't finished. 'It'd be no use, anyway. I mean, you're brilliant and all, but You-Know-Who taught Malfoy that spell, no student's going to be getting round it. I never should've asked you in the first place... and, er, I'm really, really sorry...'

Ginny settled back into her chair. She and Ron were both looking at Hermione expectantly.

'Well, I'm glad you've finally decided to be sensible,' Hermione said primly, 'but there's no need to be making changes in your line-up just yet. I have a few ideas about countering that curse, as it happens...'


Behind her back, Ginny gave Ron the thumbs-up.

2.

HOGSMEADE CHURCH

Three weeks later, Hermione was no longer feeling quite so confident. She had combed the library, ploughing through every book she could find on Charms, Transfiguration and Magical Creatures, even going so far as to obtain a note from Professor Malfoy (Harry didn't like to think how) to use the Restricted Section. Not one of the slew of counter-curses she attempted on Harry had any effect.

'It's likely there's a particular spell required to



reverse the transformation, as none of the all-purpose counters have worked,' she told Harry and Ron dispiritedly after her latest failure. 'But the only book that even mentioned Aitvarases said they didn't exist. *A figment of the Muggle imagination accepted as truth by Baltic warlocks, notorious throughout the wizarding world for their ignorance and credulity...*'

'Aitvarases are real, Dumbledore knows about them,' said Harry. 'He was really upset when he thought Voldemort had left one in Privet Drive.'

'What *is* an Aitvaras, anyway?' said Hermione. 'Some sort of venomous snake, obviously, but is there anything else magical about it?'

'Not exactly venomous,' said Harry. 'Dumbledore says the people they bite catch fire and burn to death. And when I was an Aitvaras, I could fly.'

'You what?' said Ron, his jaw dropping.

'I flew out of the Snake Basket to Hagrid's house,' said Harry.

'Can you still fly?' said Hermione. 'When you turn into a snake, I mean?'

'Dunno,' said Harry. 'I haven't become a snake since Malfoy enchanted me. I'm supposed to be keeping it secret that I can transform, remember?' he added, at Ron's exasperated look.

Hermione shook her head. 'Baltic warlocks — there are probably whole books on Aitvarases at Durmstrang. Pity Viktor's left school...'

Ron made a sour face at the mention of Viktor Krum. 'Easter holidays are coming up,' Hermione went on. 'I could go and have a search in the Magical Col-

lections of the British Library.'

'The British Library has Magical Collections?' said Harry.

'Well, not that Muggles have access to, but I expect Professor McGonagall can get me a pass for the Wizarding Reading Room,' said Hermione. 'It's the only place I'd have a chance of tracking down the spell if not at Hogwarts...'



The day the students who had gone home for Easter holidays returned to school, Harry and Ron were waiting for Hermione in the Entrance Hall.

'Did you find anything?' said Ron, the instant she stepped through the great oak front doors.

'I didn't find anything in the Magical Collections,' said Hermione. 'But I did run across some very interesting information in the Muggle section of the library!'

She brandished a sheaf of parchment in triumph.


Harry and Ron followed her up to the Gryffindor common room, eager to hear what she'd learnt. Hermione spread the parchment out on a table.

'The Aitvaras takes the form of a fiery flying serpent and goes forth to steal grain, milk and coins for its master,' she read aloud from her notes. *'An Aitvaras may be bought from the devil, at the cost of one's soul.'*

'The devil!' said Ron.

He moved away from Harry, looking suddenly wary.

'Oh, Ron, that's pure superstition,' said Hermione. 'Quite a lot of things were blamed on the devil in the Middle Ages that turned out to be perfectly ordinary



Dark Magic. The point is, those Muggles must have got hold of a real Aitvaras, as it matches Harry's symptoms. And they had a cure. *Should an Aitvaras be driven over the threshold of a church, the power of Satan will fall from it, and it shall be from that day forward a holy serpent, a Zaltys.*

'What's that mean, the power of Satan?' said Harry uneasily.

'It means that the curse can be broken,' said Hermione. 'Don't worry about it, Ron!' (Ron's eyes were nearly popping out of his head with horror) 'Honestly, there's no magical proof that devils even exist. The Department of Mysteries tried every spell they could think of to call one up back in the eighteenth century —'

'*They tried to summon the devil?*' said Ron, 'Were they out of their minds?'

'They had Aurors with crosses and cauldrons of holy water standing guard in case anything showed up,' said Hermione impatiently, 'but of course nothing ever did, and the few modern wizards who've claimed to be in league with Satan were all proven to be either mad or lying to frighten people.'

'I'm more worried about the power of Voldemort,' said Harry. 'Malfoy got the ring from him. Does that make Malfoy my master?'

'I — I'm not sure,' said Hermione. 'You haven't been stealing things and giving them to him, have you? It won't matter once we break the curse, that's what I've been trying to explain. If that church was built before 1692, wizards may have helped build it.'

They'd have put spells on to protect it, and forcing the Aitvaras through those enchantments is what untransformed it —'

'Was the Aitvaras really untransformed?' interrupted Harry. 'You said it changed into another kind of snake — a Saltis? What are they like?'

'The book didn't say much,' admitted Hermione. 'A Zaltys is supposed to bring good luck, and if they eat from a dish, you'll know the food isn't poisoned.'

'Could come in handy if Snape ever decides to slip me something,' said Harry. 'But will I stop finding the Snitch?'

'They wouldn't call it a holy serpent if it was still stealing,' said Hermione, 'so I don't think it can find gold. You haven't been inside a wizarding church since you became an Aitvaras, have you?'

'I've never been inside a church at all,' said Harry. 'The Dursleys only went for weddings and christenings and things, and they definitely didn't take me.'

Hermione looked shocked.

'You — er — you do know who Jesus is?' she said.

Harry rolled his eyes. 'They let me out of the cupboard to go to school. Of course I know who Jesus is. Born in a manger as there was no room at the inn? They *said* there was no room at the inn,' he added darkly.

Had his own mother turned up pregnant in Privet Drive, there wasn't a doubt in Harry's mind that he himself would have been born in the Dursleys' greenhouse, or more likely a cell in the Little Whinging Police Station.

'Well... yes...' said Hermione, sounding a mite

dubious. 'Anyway, whatever protections a pre-Separation church had, Hogsmeade Church will have too. We can go there on our next visit to Hogsmeade and get you put right.'



Next Hogsmeade weekend, Ron and Hermione set off down the road to the village. Harry rode along in Hermione's bag as a snake, so as not to risk having someone see him transform. When they reached the church, Ron pushed the door open and Hermione tipped Harry out of the bag. Harry peered inside, gaining a confused impression of many benches forming an aisle to a screen of carved wood, beyond which was a table on a raised platform.

SMACK!

Hermione brought the empty bag walloping down on the stone doorstep at Harry's tail. He shot through the door in fright to take refuge beneath the nearest bench.

'I'd have gone in on my own,' he said peevishly, changing back into himself and crawling from under the bench.

'The book said you had to be driven,' said Hermione. 'Did it work?'

Harry looked around. 'The candlesticks on the table are plate, but there's real gold behind the wall, and food too. That — thing — is full of Galleons, there's one more between those stacks of books and you've got two of them in your pocket. No, I'm still an Aitvaras.'

'*Accio Galleon,*' said Hermione. The Galleon flew from the books into her hand. 'Fallen out of the col-

lection bag, I expect,' she said, dropping it into the coin slot of what resembled a cast iron parking meter (but without the actual meter) to join its fellows. 'I'm sorry, Harry, I was certain this would do the trick. I don't know what else we can try.'

'How about some holy water?' said Ron, pointing to a marble statue of a cauldron on a pillar, which did indeed have water in it.

'Where are the goblets?' said Harry.

'You don't *drink* holy water,' said Ron, scandalised. 'You dip your fingers in it... and cross yourself — here, like this. No, other side first,' he said as Harry imitated him.

Harry waited a while, but his awareness of the presence of gold did not diminish.

'Sorry, no good,' he said to Ron.

'Ah, well,' said Ron. 'It would've been a miracle if it had worked. A *real* miracle, they'd've had to make you Saint Harry. I mean, Jesus broke curses with mud and water, but I don't reckon anybody else could.'


'Hang on, Jesus was a wizard?' said Harry, laughing. 'I should tell the Dursleys, they'd never set foot in a church again.'

'Course he was a wizard,' said Ron. 'How many Muggles do you know who can change water into wine?'

For some reason, this seemed to annoy Hermione. 'How many wizards do *you* know who can change water into wine without a wand?' she asked.

'He *had* a wand, the wise men brought it to him,' said Ron. 'It was made of frankincense and myrrh.'

'I've never heard of Jesus having a wand,' said



Hermione sceptically.

‘Look in the Bible if you don’t believe me!’ said Ron.

He stalked up the aisle to a tall stand by the wooden screen, Hermione trailing after him. There was a book on the stand, massive and ancient-looking. Ron flung it open.

‘You see? A wand!’

Hermione elbowed Ron unceremoniously aside and began riffling the book’s pages. The figures in the stained glass windows all crowded into the nearest pane to watch and the angels painted on the ceiling stopped the tossing game they’d been playing with their halos to gaze down curiously.

Harry, however, was more concerned with the fact that his last chance to keep his position as Seeker was slipping away. For the thousandth time, he tried somehow to shut his gold-seeing Inner Eye, but as always that simply made the Sight keener. He could sense every ounce of gold in the church: the hoard in the back, the potful of Galleons at the door and the numerous smaller specks scattered about in odd corners. These puzzled Harry until it occurred to him to use a Summoning Charm, which collected six unmatched earrings and the front of a locket with the portrait of a pretty but rather timid-looking young witch.

‘Incunabula Press!’ said Hermione triumphantly.

Harry turned to stare at her.

‘Ron, this is a wizarding Bible,’ she continued.

‘Drawing Jesus with a wand is just artistic licence.’

‘What d’you mean, artistic licence?’ said Ron.

‘Well, look at him,’ said Hermione. ‘He looks like

an Englishman, doesn’t he?’

‘I suppose you think he should look French,’ said Ron sarcastically.

‘Don’t be silly,’ Hermione snapped. ‘He was born in the Middle East, he should look like an Arab!’

Ron opened his mouth, to make a withering retort, Harry was sure.

‘Hermione!’ called Harry loudly.

Ron and Hermione looked up from their argument.

‘Does Hogsmeade have a village PC?’

‘No, why?’ said Hermione.

‘I found this lot,’ said Harry, holding up the jewellery. ‘Reckoned we’d better hand it in to someone.’

‘We’ll give it to the vicar,’ said Hermione. ‘Close the Bible, Ron, we shouldn’t be quarrelling in a church.’


She swept down the aisle towards Harry. Ron slammed the book shut, so roughly that had it been one of Madam Pince’s books, it would have started beating him about the head.

‘If he was an Arab,’ he snarled under his breath, ‘he was a wizarding Arab.’

Hermione led them round to the vicarage. She told the vicar, a dumpy witch in faded brown robes, that they’d discovered the earrings whilst making brass rubbings. The vicar did not question this story, merely thanking them in an absent-minded voice as she squinted near-sightedly at the picture in the locket.

Ron was in a thoroughly bad mood as they made their way back to Hogwarts, muttering things like ‘load of Muggle rubbish’ and ‘an Arab, I ask you’.

‘And I’d like to know,’ he rounded on Hermione,



'exactly what's so lucky about a snake that *can't* find jewellery and Galleons?'

Harry was expecting Hermione to bite Ron's head off, but instead she looked thoughtful. A few paces further along, she stooped to pull up a dandelion that was growing on the edge of the street.

'Can I eat this?' she asked Harry abruptly.

'Eat it?' said Harry. 'It's a dandelion!'

'You can detect food as well as gold, can't you?' said Hermione. 'Is this food?'

'Oh... oh, yeah, it is,' said Harry.

As they were walking by a hedge on the outskirts of Hogsmeade, Hermione reached over and broke off a piece of vine with tiny, greenish-white flowers.

'How about this?' she said.

Before Harry realised what he was doing, he had slapped it out of her hand.

'That's not food,' he told her flatly.

'It's white bryony,' said Hermione. 'Poisonous, except in very small doses.'

Immediately they arrived at the castle, Hermione went off to the library. Harry and Ron returned to Gryffindor Tower to break the news to Ginny that she was their new Seeker.

'At least we know you're not possessed,' said Ron, as they climbed through the portrait hole. 'The holy water would've scalded you.'

'Nice of you to have warned me!' said Harry.

'I'll rearrange the Weasley Welter to take advantage of your sharp dives,' said Ron, ignoring him. 'Look at it this way, you've been a Slytherin Chaser

all year in practice. Now you'll be punching a Quaffle for the right house.'

Ginny was far from grunted at being put off the Chasing Squad, but Ron promised it was only for one match.

'Next season we'll train a replacement Seeker and you can have Katie's position,' he assured her — which still left Harry facing a Snitchless future.

As if that wasn't bad enough, he received an unpleasant shock on Monday afternoon when he spotted the vicar stumping up the marble staircase. It was the first time Harry had ever seen her at Hogwarts. That she should make an appearance a mere two days after his visit to Hogsmeade Church struck him as a rather sinister coincidence. Had she somehow guessed what they'd been up to? Could one of the stained glass saints or painted angels have tipped her off to the odd goings-on in the church?

Harry was torn between fear and a strange sort of hopefulness. If the vicar went to Dumbledore with her suspicions, he, Harry, would have a lot of explaining to do. On the other hand, Dumbledore just might know the right spell to break the Curse of the Aitvaras. Gryffindor would no doubt forfeit this year's tournament; Ron would be devastated... but Harry would be allowed to play Seeker again.

Moving as silently as he could, Harry nipped up the stairs behind the vicar. She headed down the corridor to the staff room, knocked on the door and entered. Unable to follow her inside, Harry lurked beside a suit of armour. After several minutes, the

door opened once more and the vicar came out — accompanied by Professor Snape.

‘...must be getting back to the vicarage,’ she was saying to him. ‘Good I managed to locate you so quickly.’

‘Yes... thank you,’ said Snape in a distracted tone, sounding quite unlike his usual self.

He was gazing intently at something in the palm of his hand — something, Harry registered, that was made of gold. So wrapped up was Snape in his contemplation of the mysterious object that he walked past Harry without even noticing him, to Harry’s not inconsiderable relief. Harry waited until Snape had rounded the corner before going after him, keeping the Potions master out of sight, using his Aitvaras power to track the gold.

‘What’s that you’ve got there, Severus?’ Professor McGonagall’s voice floated up the passage.

Harry paused to listen.

‘A portrait of my mother,’ said Snape. ‘The vicar just brought it. It was — lost to me — many years ago, when I was a student at Hogwarts.’

‘And it’s turned up after all this time?’ said Professor McGonagall. ‘That was a bit of luck.’

‘Yes,’ said Snape, ‘wasn’t it?’

[INTERLUDE OF SEVEN YEARS]

‘So how did you finally break the curse?’ said Oliver Wood, taking a swig from his pint of MacSweeney’s Old Peculiar Thistleseed Lager.

‘We didn’t,’ said Harry. ‘That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you.’

Oliver looked confused.

‘There are nine Galleons in the till,’ said Harry, with jerk of his head towards the bar of the Leaky Cauldron. ‘Looks like Tom keeps most of his gold in the back room. His Thief’s Curse is getting weak, I should warn him about that, not that a Thief’s Curse would be much use against an Aitvaras. You have five Galleons in your money bag and a gold — er.’

Harry stared at Oliver’s middle in astonishment. Oliver went bright red and spat out a mouthful of beer.


‘You — you really can —’ he choked.

‘Right,’ said Harry. ‘Which means I can’t play Seeker for Puddlemere, even as a temporary replacement.’

Face still scarlet, Oliver took another deep drink of his Thistleseed Lager.

‘Yes — yes, I see...’

Silence fell between them. Oliver gazed past Harry into the fire. Harry sipped from his own pint, recalling his stint as a Gryffindor Chaser. They’d lost the sixth year Quidditch final to Ravenclaw, but with enough points to win the tournament anyway — Cho had been forced to catch the Snitch prematurely to stop Ginny getting it. In seventh year, with their



new Seeker Dennis Creevey and a Weasley Welter of Harry, Ron and Ginny, Gryffindor had managed to take the Cup properly.

All in all, life as a Chaser hadn't been bad, but seven years on, Harry still missed the thrill of Seeking: the wind whipping in his face as he zoomed round the pitch, eyes peeled for the Snitch... the first sight of glimmering gold after a long search... the breathless acceleration to beat the other team's Seeker... the feel of tiny wings fluttering hopelessly against his fingers as he soared high in the air to the cheers and screams of the crowd. There was nothing, truly, to compare to that experience... an experience that Harry could never have again.

'Did you ever figure out how you were able change into a snake in the first place?' said Oliver, breaking in on Harry's thoughts.

'Hermione had a theory,' said Harry. 'She didn't reckon I could've been the first Parselmouth to be Transfigured against his will, but I might have been the first to be Untransfigured. I fought Professor Snape's reversal spell because I was angry with him — that's how I learnt to transform. Most people would've *wanted* to be turned back. Of course, the only way to know for certain would be to try it out on another Parselmouth...'

Harry trailed off. He didn't need to tell Oliver how unlikely it was that Hermione would get that opportunity. The gift of Parseltongue was such a rare one that the chances of another speaker turning up in their lifetimes were vanishingly slim.

'Actually,' Harry went on, 'Hermione thinks I did

break the curse, mostly, when I changed back in Hagrid's hut. The Aitvaras Charm's meant to work on snakes, not people. But even human, there's a bit of snake in me that lets me speak Parseltongue, and that bit stayed an Aitvaras.'

'Any idea what your range is for finding gold?' asked Oliver curiously.

'I've always been able to push it out as far as I needed to,' shrugged Harry. 'Wider than a Quidditch pitch, definitely. I tracked Hermione once by her locket over nearly a mile.'

'Only Kennilworthy Whisp is bringing out a new edition of *QUIDDITCH THROUGH THE AGES*,' said Oliver. 'Have you heard the story of the Wild Snitch of Bodmin Moor?'



Kennilworthy Whisp was fascinated when Harry and Oliver apprised him of Harry's Snitch-finding ability. Harry thought it best not to mention Aitvarases, simply saying that the talent had mysteriously emerged during the match against Slytherin, a presumed attempt at game-rigging by witches or wizards unknown.

'I kept quiet about it because I was scared I'd be expelled, or banned from playing Quidditch for Gryffindor in any position,' said Harry. 'S'pose I should have them take that seven second record off the books at Hogwarts,' he added gloomily.

Harry wasn't looking forward to the interview with Professor McGonagall that would inevitably

follow such a request.

‘Astounding,’ said Whip. ‘I’ve never heard the like. I can tell you that this — this charm, or whatever it is, hasn’t come into widespread use —’

‘How d’you know it hasn’t?’ said Oliver.

‘The goblins take note of suspicious betting patterns,’ said Whip. ‘A series of wins based on the timing of the Snitch capture would tip them off that something was up, even if they weren’t sure what. Gringotts would have sent a delegation round to the Department of Magical Games and Sports to complain. I don’t remember a single very large bet being placed at the time, either, which would have been the wise thing to do — although most dodgy gamblers find it impossible to stop after one go, which is how they get caught.’

Whip’s face clouded over suddenly.

‘Of course, that does raise the question of *why* the spell has never been used. When the action of a charm becomes permanent, as happened in your case, it’s usually a sign that something’s gone badly awry. The enchantment could be flawed or inherently dangerous; it may have nasty side effects. I must check if there were any unexplained Seeker deaths on the continent that season.’

He turned to Harry with an extremely serious look.

‘You really should speak to the Healers at St Mungo’s about this. Keen as I am to confirm the existence of the Wild Snitch of Bodmin Moor, if there was any risk to your health —’

‘Oh, you don’t have to worry about that,’ said Harry, dismayed at the hornets’ nest he’d inadver-

tently stirred up. ‘I mean, it’s been seven years, if the spell was going to hurt me somehow, I reckon it already would have done.’


It took some convincing on Harry and Oliver’s part (as well as Harry’s promise to pay a visit to St Mungo’s at his earliest convenience), but Whip at last agreed to meet them on Bodmin Moor the following weekend.



The moor was cloudy, warm and very muggy when Harry and Oliver landed their broomsticks a quarter of a mile east of the Trethevy Quoit burial chamber. Whip was waiting near the stones; he spotted Harry and Oliver the instant they dropped their Disillusionment Charms, and waved them over.

‘We’d better get started straight away,’ he said. ‘Even with your talent, finding *this* Snitch won’t be easy. I can’t tell you the location of the original pitch, I’m afraid — as it was an amateur game, no records were kept, and after a hundred and twenty years the few surviving spectators don’t remember much. I haven’t been able to track down anyone who’ll admit to being a player. Well, it’s got to be a tad embarrassing, your Seekers not managing catch the Snitch for a whole six months...’

‘If we did know the boundaries of the field, I’m not sure it would do us much good,’ said Oliver. ‘Bodmin Moor’s a funny place. My aunt Erna works for the Department of Magical Creatures, and they’ve had more trouble with this area of Cornwall than the rest of Britain combined. The local ghosts are continu-



ally being seen by Muggles — they claim it's unintentional, that the Muggle-Repelling spells don't always work properly. Some of the Muggles seem to realise that the moor is bigger than they think it is, too. A third of it's been made Unplottable as a refuge for Cornish Giant Kneazles,' he explained to Harry. 'They don't stay put either.'

'Legend has it that the Half-blood Prince died here,' Whisp chipped in, 'and the moor's been cursed ever since. There's certainly evidence of an unusual amount of stray magic in the air. Some of that may well have had a hand in preventing the capture of the Snitch.'

'We'll just have to fly around until I get a lock on it,' said Harry. 'Like Seeking a normal Snitch, really.'

Harry, Oliver and Whisp put their Disillusionment Charms back on and took to the sky. Bodmin Moor could almost have been a single enormous Quidditch pitch: a vast and empty plateau, dotted with grazing sheep and cattle and the occasional granite standing stone. Harry stretched his Aitvaras sense to its limits. He felt the pull of the gold the other two wizards were carrying, as well as that of a surprising number of objects buried in the ground below. Many of them were protected by Thief's Curses, several of which were sufficiently powerful to give pause even to an Aitvaras. None of these things were moving, however, as a Snitch definitely would be.

Then, far to the west, came a flash of gold on the edge of Harry's awareness. He stopped in mid-air, waiting. The gold appeared and vanished once more as it darted in and out of his range.

'I think I've got something,' he said. 'This way!'

Harry leant down on his Firebolt and rocketed off, Oliver and Whisp racing behind him. As he approached the Snitch, his perception of its gold grew steadier. When he was close enough to actually see it zigging and zagging about, Harry glided to a halt.

'There!' he said, pointing. 'Hang on, it's dropped down by that big rock... now it's gone right... and up again...'

Oliver and Whisp had their Omnioculars out and were following Harry's directions.

'My God, it's really — oh, blast, it's moved on already,' said Whisp.


'Yes, into that gorse bush,' said Harry. 'Back and leftward... towards the flock of sheep... sideways, above the field of heather... and to the right, it's in the fog bank...'

Whisp lowered his Omnioculars and rubbed his eyes.

'Here, I'll go and catch it for you,' said Harry, sending his broom into a dive.

Not having chased a Snitch since he was sixteen years old, Harry found himself somewhat out of practice, but it soon became obvious that that would be the least of his difficulties in capturing this one. The ball was a tiny golden blur, zipping along nearly ten times faster than a normal Snitch. Harry needed all the Firebolt's speed to keep up with it. Moreover, the Snitch appeared somehow to realise when Harry was closing in on it, streaking away just as his fingers brushed its wings.

The Snitch flew in complicated looping patterns over the bare ground, turning tors and hedges into



an obstacle course. Then it led Harry southwards into a stretch of woodland, where it wove and dodged madly through the trees. When he finally ran it down against the trunk of a massive oak, Harry was dripping with sweat and gasping for breath, but felt a sense of triumph that he hadn't done in seven years.

The Snitch buzzed in his hand like an angry bumblebee. Its wings stung Harry's fingers and he had to keep a firm grip on his broomstick to avoid being dragged through the air by the Snitch's acceleration. Luckily, Oliver and Whisp came flying over scarcely a minute later.

'Got it,' said Harry, holding up the Snitch, which continued to struggle violently.

'Good heavens,' said Whisp, peering at it closely. 'Enchantment's drastically overpowered — no wonder they couldn't catch it.'

He conjured a sort of soap bubble around Harry's hand. Harry released the Snitch and pulled his arm out of the bubble. The Snitch whizzed to and fro inside, almost too rapidly to see. Whisp took out his Omnioculars and used their slow motion replay to get a better look at it.

'Yes... wing configuration typical for the period,' he muttered. 'Unusual satin finish on the body... possibly worn down by exposure to the elements...'

Whisp produced a quill and roll of parchment from his bag and began scribbling notes, pausing on occasion to view the Snitch through his Omnioculars.

'That was an amazing bit of flying, by the way,' he said to Harry. 'And on an old Firebolt Mark 1! Even

if you can't play Seeker, any professional team would be willing to sign you as a Chaser on the spot.'

'What will you do with the Snitch?' Harry asked, as Whisp was putting his quill and parchment away.

'I was planning on giving it to the Museum of Quidditch,' said Whisp. He hesitated. 'Mind you, it does seem rather cruel — penning it up after it's been living wild for over a century...'

He gazed at the Snitch for a while, then gave a long sigh and prodded the bubble with his wand. It disappeared with a pop and the Snitch soared off. Harry, Oliver and Whisp watched as it flitted out of sight.

'Would the pair of you care to join me for lunch at the Leaky Cauldron?' said Whisp.

'Sure,' said Oliver. 'Er — Harry?'

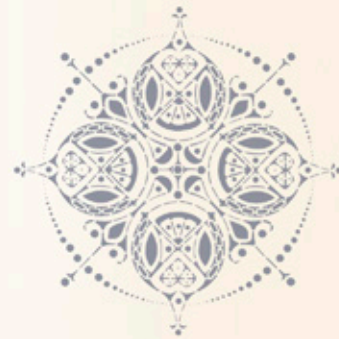
'You go on,' said Harry, who was still staring off into the horizon after the Wild Snitch. 'I want to catch it again...'

☆ THE END ☆
(REALLY!)



ADDENDA

(JOKE*PIECES)



AN UNUSUAL SPECIMEN



WELL, *THERE'S* TWO HOURS gone down the dumper,' grumbled Sirius Black, throwing A SPOTTER'S GUIDE TO NATURAL SHAPESHIFTERS across the dormitory. 'Did *you* find anything useful, James?'

'Not really,' replied James Potter, setting THE GIFT OF THE ANIMAGI down on his bed. 'But did you know that an Animagus who dies as an animal transforms back to human once he's dead? Could come in handy ...'

'I don't see how,' said Sirius, giving him a funny look.

'I mean, if you're a rabbit or something, and you get swallowed whole by a Blood-Sucking Bugbear, you'll get your revenge inside its stomach!' James said with relish.

From behind the cover of MY LIFE AMONGST THE LIONS, Peter Pettigrew let out a small, frightened squeak.



'Headmaster?' a voice called out of the fire in Albus Dumbledore's office.

'Yes, er, Severus?' Dumbledore answered, looking up from the letter he was writing to the Minister for



Magic. It had taken him a moment to identify the speaker; there was an odd, un-Snape-like note to the Potions master's voice.

'Could you come to my office? I — I think you ought to see this.'

Dumbledore stepped into his fireplace and emerged seconds later in Snape's office. Snape was standing near the fire, bleeding slightly from a shallow cut just under his left eye and staring at the floor with a shocked expression on his face. Dumbledore looked down.

'Oh, dear,' he said.

Snape went rather shakily back to his desk and began to speak. 'The fourth years were to study Sustaining Solutions this week... my order with the Hogsmeade Apothecary had been delayed... rather than postpone the lesson — a single animal could provide blood enough for the whole class, and I thought surely in a castle this size ...'

Snape swallowed. 'It — *he* — would have drowned in the Preserving Potion before the Stunning Spell wore off. I never imagined... I had truly believed that Potter was Confunded.'

'You could not have known,' said Dumbledore soothingly.

Snape was as rattled as Dumbledore had ever seen him. But he certainly had cause to be, Dumbledore thought, as he gazed down at Peter Pettigrew's body, lying amidst the exploded remains of the jar Snape had put him into as a rat.

THE SLYTHERIN KAMA SUTRA



Publisher's query: How many people remember the mysterious (and completely apocryphal) Icicle?



HOW ARE THEY, Poppy?' said a low voice from the hospital-wing door. Harry opened his eyes just wide enough to see that it was Professor McGonagall.

'Potter doesn't appear to have suffered any ill effects,' replied Madam Pomfrey, a bit grudgingly. She never liked admitting a student *didn't* need care. 'Malfoy...' Madam Pomfrey gave a heavy sigh. 'Malfoy will live, and that's more than I could have said a day ago. A Succubus attack by a fourteen-year-old girl on two fourteen-year-old boys... Minerva, what is this world coming to?'

Professor McGonagall nodded glumly. 'And Harry had no idea there was anything amiss when she kissed him. I've spoken to Severus — about the lessons. We're going to have to start teaching them earlier... to fourth and fifth years as well as sixth and seventh...'

Harry shot a disgusted look at the next bed over, where Draco Malfoy was sleeping curled up in a tight ball. Malfoy seemed somehow both younger and smaller than usual, and deathly pale even by his own standards, but now that Harry knew Malfoy wasn't going to die, he could go back to being furious with him. Not only was

he, Harry, stuck in the hospital wing until who knows when, he'd be having extra lessons when he got out — extra lessons with Snape. It was all Malfoy's fault, Malfoy and his — his *fiancé*.

Harry shook his head in disbelief. It was a mad thought, Malfoy being engaged — having been engaged for a number of years, apparently. Still, Harry didn't imagine the engagement would last much longer, considering what Malfoy's future bride had tried to do to him...



A few days later when Harry was allowed to return to Gryffindor Tower, there was piece of parchment pinned to the notice-board. On Wednesday afternoon, fourth and fifth year girls were to report to the hospital wing, while boys were to go to the dungeons.

'Odd, that,' said Ron. 'We've always had classes by house, not boys and girls.'

'It's because of Icicle nearly killing Malfoy — I heard Professor McGonagall telling Madam Pomfrey,' said Harry. 'Some kind of extra Defence Against the Dark Arts, probably — and Snape'll be teaching it too. To the boys, I reckon; our class is in the dungeons.'

'Boys have Snape and girls have Madam Pomfrey?' said Ron, outraged. 'That's sex discrimination, that!'

'Icicle had to kiss Malfoy and me to cast that spell,' said Harry thoughtfully. 'Maybe it wouldn't have worked on another girl?'

He turned to Hermione, who was gazing at the notice in a preoccupied sort of way. Strangely enough, she had nothing to say to any of this.



‘That was definitely the weirdest class I’ve ever had,’ said Ron, when the three of them were back in the common-room Wednesday evening. ‘Did *you* understand what Snape was going on about?’

‘Not a word,’ said Harry. ‘That book he was reading from must’ve been written in America, though — they had a Congress instead of a Parliament. Right, Hermione?’

‘Yes, in America they call their Parliament, “Congress”,’ said Hermione.

‘I know *that*,’ said Ron. ‘What’d you make of the rest of the story?’

‘I — we didn’t read it,’ said Hermione. ‘You must have had a different lesson.’

‘What did you do, then?’ asked Ron.

‘Oh...’ said Hermione vaguely, ‘Madam Pomfrey showed us how to make a potion.’

‘You made a potion?’ said Ron. ‘You should’ve had Snape, then, not us — he’s the Potions master.’

Hermione, suddenly quite busy rummaging in her bag, made no reply. ‘What kind of potion did you make?’ asked Harry curiously.

Hermione looked about to make sure no one else was listening. ‘A potion to prevent pregnancy,’ she said, sounding rather embarrassed.

‘Hermione, you’re fourteen,’ Ron laughed. ‘You’re too young to get pregnant.’

‘I’m not, actually,’ said Hermione. ‘Not that I’d do something that stupid...’ Clearly eager to change the

subject, she said, ‘So — tell me about that book Snape read to you. What was it called?’

‘THE SLYTHERIN KAMA SUTRA,’ said Harry. ‘Most of it didn’t make much sense, but there was a Congress in it — the Congress of the Basilisk and the Chamber of Secrets...’

Hermione flushed. ‘Harry, that wasn’t a — a government Congress,’ she said. ‘It was congress, meaning —’ she lowered her voice ‘—sex.’ Seeing Harry’s astonishment, she asked, a bit patronisingly, ‘You do know what sex is, don’t you?’

‘Course I know what sex is,’ said Harry. As Hermione appeared somewhat sceptical of this claim, he explained, ‘Dudley had a top shelf magazine. Aunt Petunia thought I’d given it to him...’

Summer before last, Aunt Petunia had come bursting into Harry’s room with the offending publication clutched in one bony fist.

‘You... *filth*... my *baby*!’ she shrieked. Then she raised the rolled-up magazine and hit Harry about the face.

Harry gaped at her, more surprised than hurt. The Dursleys generally preferred to pretend he didn’t exist over the summer, and he did his best to stay out of their way. He couldn’t imagine what he might have done to set Aunt Petunia off like this.

Aunt Petunia took another swing at him with the magazine. Harry ducked and snatched it from her hand.

‘What are you rabbiting about?’ he demanded.

‘My Diddy Duddidums...’ she sobbed. ‘*You* gave

him that... that...'

'I didn't,' said Harry. 'I couldn't have, you never give me Muggle pocket money.' He opened the magazine to a random page and held it out for Aunt Petunia to see. 'If this was a wizard magazine, the people in the pictures would be moving around,' he told her. Harry glanced down at the picture, then stared. 'What are those women doing, anyway?' he asked.

Harry didn't think he'd ever seen Aunt Petunia blush so furiously. Her mouth worked soundlessly for a few seconds, then she whipped around and positively ran from the room. Harry watched her go with grim satisfaction. That'd seen her off, all right. He had just broken the Dursleys' two most important rules — '*Don't talk about magic.*' and '*Don't ask questions.*'

It had been a very good question, really — what *were* those women doing? Harry turned back to the magazine and began reading. Soon he had a fairly good idea of what, although *why* was something of a mystery...

'I hope you didn't take anything you saw in that magazine too seriously,' said Hermione disapprovingly. 'The women in those things are all heroin addicts and desperate for money, otherwise they wouldn't be doing half that stuff.'

Harry nodded wisely. 'That explains the courgettes, then,' he said. Hermione went bright scarlet.

Ron was eyeing the two of them with great puzzlement. 'Heroines?' he said. 'Courgettes?'

'But a Basilisk?' frowned Harry. 'Wouldn't that be very dangerous?'

'Not a *real* Basilisk,' said Hermione. 'It's, you know,

a — a *symbol*.'

'A symbol? What... *ob!*' said Harry.

'Would one of you mind explaining what you're talking about?' said Ron angrily.

Hermione's cheeks were still rather pink.


'When we're back upstairs I'll tell you,' Harry muttered to Ron.

He ended up telling the whole dormitory. Ron and Neville for the most part really hadn't known what sex was. At first they refused to believe Harry when he told them about Dudley's magazine. Fortunately Dean Thomas, who also came from a Muggle family, backed Harry up.

'Mum caught my brother with one of those magazines and she went spare,' he said. 'It was just a few weeks after some of the women from her church tried to make the shop at the corner stop selling them.' An arrested look came over Dean's face. 'You mean Snape was reading to us from a *sex manual*?' he said incredulously. 'And the bit about the Basilisk — finding the entrance — to the chamber — under the — under the —' Dean couldn't finish his sentence for laughing.

Next lesson, he wasn't the only one. Snape had barely started in on the Congress of the Flesh-Eating Slug and the Abandoned Boomslang Burrow when the fourth year Gryffindors were overcome by a wave of uncontrollable sniggering — even Neville Longbottom, who seldom laughed at anything and had never displayed any emotion besides terror during Snape's classes.

Snape looked up from the book with an expression of extreme displeasure. 'I see some of you are already



familiar with this material,' he said coldly. 'Five points from Gryffindor, Thomas... Finnigan ... Longbottom... Weasley...' His eyes fell on Harry, whose face was still perfectly straight. The third most important rule for avoiding trouble with the Dursleys was knowing when and how not to laugh. 'Potter... don't tell me your friends figured it out and didn't tell you?'

'No, sir,' said Harry. 'I told them.'

'I should have known,' said Snape. His eyes glittered. 'Come to the front of the room, Potter,' he said.

Harry nervously did so, wondering what Snape was planning


'Now...' said Snape with a twisted smile, 'You can tell everyone else.'

The fourth and fifth year boys gazed at Harry curiously. Harry stared back at them in panic. He felt as though he must be nearly as red-faced as Aunt Petunia had been. His voice seemed to have scarpered off somewhere to hide... perhaps in the Boomslang's burrow with the Flesh-Eating Slug...

Then Harry pulled himself together. He'd told the Gryffindor fourth years, this was just more people. He would have preferred that Draco Malfoy not be one of them — but if Malfoy made any sneering remarks, mentioning Icicle ought to shut him up quick enough.

Harry took a deep breath and began. 'You know that Basilisk Professor Snape was telling us about last lesson? Well it wasn't really a Basilisk...'

He managed to explain the meaning behind the metaphor without stammering or blushing much more than he had done, to Snape's obvious disappointment.



'...and when a girl kisses you, it's not supposed to feel like you're freezing to death, even if she *is* a witch,' Harry finished.

If anyone had ever bothered to tell *him* that, he would've reported Icicle the first time, and none of them would have to be here. Most of the class appeared too shocked to benefit from this practical advice, however. A surprisingly large number of them seemed to have known as little about sex as had Ron and Neville. This included Malfoy, who was trying to maintain his usual bored, supercilious air with no success whatsoever. Crabbe and Goyle, sitting on either side of him, looked absolutely gobsmacked.

A few students, mostly Muggle-born, were in fits of hysterical laughter. They evidently *had* known about sex, but until now hadn't connected it with what Snape was reading them.

Snape glowered around the room and then down at Harry. 'And how did you find this out, Potter?' he asked.

Harry would rather have kissed Icicle again than explain the Congress of the Courgettes to Snape.

'I — er — from — from my aunt,' he said.

'Your aunt told you?' said Snape disbelievingly.

'She didn't — tell me,' said Harry. 'She — showed me.'

It took Harry some time to identify the extremely peculiar expression on Snape's thin, sallow face — he had never before seen Snape look horrified. Harry suddenly realised what Snape must be thinking.

'She — she didn't show me *personally*,' Harry said. 'She used — she had — a magazine.'

Snape looked slightly less horrified, but only

slightly. Eventually he composed himself sufficiently to send Harry back to his seat and tried to restore order. On this occasion, however, Snape's natural ability to control a class utterly failed him.

He couldn't even cow poor Neville Longbottom into silence. At Snape's baleful glare, Neville froze for a second, emitted a rising series of high-pitched squeaks and dissolved back into giggles. Snape finally had to call an early end to the lesson. He warned the class that if there were any more such outbursts next time, they would all be in very deep trouble.

As they were gathering their things to leave, Snape said in his most dangerous voice, 'One word of caution before you go. You are being given these lessons at an earlier age than you normally would, as some of your number are constitutionally incapable of staying out of trouble...'

He scowled at Harry, who bristled at the unfairness of this. The only reason Icicle had attacked him in the first place was because Malfoy put her up to it.

'They are being taught to you for informational purposes only,' Snape went on. 'Should any of you be tempted to... put the theory into practice, you should be aware —' he gave the class an exceptionally nasty grin '— Peeves will be watching you.'

* THE END *

AUTHOR'S NOTES



Questions from reader reviews will be shown in italics, Author comments/statements/replies in roman.

THE SERPENT

How do Tangler Charms work?

A Tangler Charm will catch and hold in place anyone who touches the object on which the charm was cast. Removing a Tangler Charm is very difficult, as they can be performed using an infinite number of different combinations of wand movements, and the countercharm will only work if it's done with exactly the same combination of wand movements as the Tangler Charm it's being applied to.

Casting a Tangler Charm isn't easy either, because not just any combination of wand movements can be used — they all have to balance each other out by the end of the charm. It's a bit like drawing one of those Celtic knotwork patterns. The more complicated the wand movements, the harder this is to do, but simple combinations can be too readily broken by pure guesswork.

When Madam Turpin was caught by the Tangler Charm the first night, she was able to wriggle free by turning into a ferret. To actually steal the card, however, she needed to figure out the countercharm. Being an experienced magical criminal, Madam Turpin was able to determine the correct pattern of wand movements by feeling the resistance of the spell to unsuccessful countercharms.

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This involved a lot of trial and error, however. The spell Snape had put on the card was very complex (Hermione was dead wrong about him needing Flitwick's help; he has the exactly the right sort of twisted mind for Tangler Charms), and of course Madam Turpin had to be careful not to get caught at it.

THE BUG

So what's going to happen to Rita now?

Rita has gone into hiding and possibly left the country. She doesn't realise her injuries were due to Piers tearing off her wing as a beetle and thinks Voldemort really is out to get her.

When does the epilogue of THE BUTTERFLIES take place?

Most of THE BUTTERFLIES takes place on Harry's birthday, 31 July 1995. Dumbledore gets Hermione's letter that evening. He goes to her house and learns Harry's secret the next morning. Later the same day, the Dursleys get back from Majorca. They turn up at Mrs Figg's when they can't find their own house (due to the all the Muggle-Repelling Charms the Ministry put on it after the attack). The rest of the epilogue takes place several days later — Dumbledore isn't able to start searching for snakes immediately because he has to deal with the Dursleys. A few days after the epilogue to THE BUTTERFLIES, Rita is caught by Piers, and a few days after *that*, Mr Weasley meets Quitch at the hospital.

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THE BUTTERFLIES

Why does nobody realise that the Dursleys are in Majorca? Didn't Harry write a letter to Ron?

Letter to Ron? What letter to Ron? Oh, you mean this letter to Ron:

Dear Ron,

How are you? I'm all right, the Dursleys have left me with Mrs Figg for the holidays. Remember how your mum said I might be able to come and stay with you later in the summer? Only Mrs Figg's back's been hurting her, and I'm not sure how long she'll be able to keep me on.

Harry.

P.S. Ask your dad what I should do about my spell-books and stuff if I'm taken into care.


Harry sent this letter the night before Voldemort's attack; Ron would have got it the following morning. Ron told his mother he'd got a letter from Harry and asked her when Harry could come to The Burrow, but he had no reason to show her the letter itself. Mrs Weasley said she'd have to check with Dumbledore first to see if it was OK. She sent Errol with a letter that afternoon, at around the same time Mrs Figg was sending Hedwig to let Dumbledore know about the Dursleys' house. Hedwig, of course, reached Dumbledore first.

What with all the Apparating back and forth that Dumbledore was doing whilst investigating Mrs

Figg's report, and Errol being so old and feeble, it was late next evening before Errol finally found him. The morning after, Dumbledore went round to the Weasleys to tell them what had happened. After hearing Dumbledore's story, Ron assumed that 'left me with Mrs Figg' simply meant that Harry was staying at her house, not that the Dursleys had gone somewhere. (Ron also didn't understand the meaning of the phrase 'taken into care' — he thought it referred to some kind of Muggle transportation Harry intended to use to get to The Burrow.)

In the course of the Magical Law Enforcement Patrol's investigation, Mrs Figg's assertion that the Dursleys had still been at number four was never seriously challenged. None of the neighbours realised they were gone either. Their trip was taken very much on the spur of the moment (prompted by the terrible state Dudley was in when he got back from Smeltings, but that's another story). They didn't brag about their holiday for months in advance as they normally would have done, nor did they cancel their milk or their newspapers. (Harry brought them in every afternoon when he visited the house. If Voldemort hadn't happened along, the Dursleys would have returned home to find a month's supply of spoiled milk in the fridge and a dirty great pile of DAILY MAILS on the kitchen table.)




Someone may have noticed that they hadn't seen



the Dursleys' car around lately, but the Magical Law Enforcement Patrol wouldn't have grasped the significance of this, as most wizards neither have nor need their own cars. Presumably Mr Dursley left word at Grunnings that he'd be away, but nobody thought to ask the people there about the incident. The Dursleys sent postcards to Aunt Marge and Aunt Petunia's friend Yvonne, but again, no one had spoken with them. In fact, because the Magical Law Enforcement Patrol had moved so quickly to modify the memories of witnesses and conceal the damage, they never even learned that number four had been demolished.

Why on earth does Snape have a flock of butterflies for a Patronus?

Because I thought it would be really, really funny. Oh, all right, I actually did try to come up with some justification for it in terms of his character. The idea was that Snape had to go far back into his past to find a good, happy memory. As a small boy, he once stirred up a large flock of butterflies whilst walking in a meadow, and was quite taken with the way they went fluttering all around him. This may seem silly and trivial as happy memories go, and of course Snape has been happy on other occasions (when tormenting James and Harry, for example), but the butterflies were practically the only good memory he had that didn't end up going horribly sour in one way or another. Besides, if you think about



it, butterflies — being symbols of transformation and rebirth — are a very appropriate Patronus for a reformed Death Eater.



So what was James' Patronus, then?

A Nose-Biting Teacup. James was protected from the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune by his sense of humour, see. (And it was probably Snape's nose he imagined being bitten as one of his happy memories when learning the charm.) Rowling didn't mention whether Dementors have noses or not, but as Lupin said, it's the substance of the Patronus that affects them. James' teacup didn't need to actually bite their noses to work — simply charging them down whilst snapping its rim was enough to drive them off.

Why did Snape turn himself into McGonagall of all people?

As Snape said, he couldn't afford to be seen making his reports to Dumbledore as himself. McGonagall, being Deputy Headmistress of Hogwarts, could speak with Dumbledore anywhere and at any time without arousing suspicion. She could presumably be trusted with Snape's secret, and thus cover up for him if someone asked her about something Snape had done when disguised as her.

Of course Snape shouldn't have gone to Lupin's with his hair and robes in such a state. If anyone had seen him, they'd have assumed McGonagall



and Lupin were having an affair, and McGonagall would've been severely unamused had she found out. Snape didn't plan to be at Lupin's for very long, however, and after the Boggart incident he wasn't about to show up there wearing women's clothes, even when he was in fact a woman.

He may also have subconsciously thought that it would serve McGonagall right if somebody did see him. Snape believed that Lupin had brought Sirius to Magical Law Enforcement Patrol headquarters on purpose as a Marauders' prank. He held McGonagall somewhat responsible for this, as he felt she'd not been strict enough with them when they were her students.

Padfoot weighs 300 pounds? I can't imagine a dog that big.

You have a firm grasp of reality, then. 'Close to three hundred pounds' may have been an exaggeration on Lupin's part, but I was working under the assumption that Sirius is bigger than any natural dog.

Relevant quotes from PRISONER OF AZKABAN:

"There was a big black thing,' said Harry, pointing uncertainly into the gap. 'Like a dog.. but massive...'"

Sirius was so large, Harry wasn't certain he was really a dog.

"...it was dragging Ron away as easily as if he were a rag doll —"

Your average 14-year-old boy is around 5'4 and 112 pounds, and remember, Ron is big for his age.

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'Sirius and James transformed into such large animals, they were able to keep a werewolf in check...'

Wolves are as large as the largest dogs and can weigh up to 175 pounds. Note that Sirius was able to send the transformed Lupin fleeing for his life after a fight which lasted roughly 30 seconds.

You could certainly get a dog that was less than 300 pounds from all that, but given the above, but I'd consider 175 pounds to be the lower limit for Padfoot's probable weight. I just liked the idea that when Rowling said 'giant' and 'bear-like', she meant it literally, in terms of size.

SERPENT OF LORD VOLDEMORT

What was going on with the pictures?

As you may have figured out from this chapter, Voldemort was testing the snake to see if it could recognise Harry Potter in a crowd. The squares on the backs of the chairs were basically magical television screens showing different photos in a randomly changing sequence. Voldemort did control when and where Harry's picture showed up; he picked Snape's chair more or less for the reasons Harry thought.

The other pictures were all of people who had recently been at Hogwarts, and of whom Voldemort could easily obtain photographs. Harry, the Weasleys and Hagrid came from the Daily Prophet, Dumbledore's famous enough that there are pictures of him float-

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ing around everywhere and Viktor Krum was on all those Quidditch World Cup posters.

Most of the other photos Voldemort got directly from the Death Eaters — their children, their children's friends, their friend's children and, in Snape's case, himself. Note that Voldemort didn't tell them why he wanted these pictures, or what was going on with the chairs. This was partly for security purposes and partly to mess with their minds as a punishment for abandoning him.

Why didn't Harry want to eat Wormtail?

Apart from it being too much like cannibalism, Harry could instinctively tell that Wormtail really was a bit too large for him to swallow. Also, as Voldemort said, Harry is a grass snake (*Natrix natrix helvetica*). Grass snakes have no way of killing their prey before eating it — they aren't venomous and can't use their coils for crushing. Because of this, they normally don't eat live mammals, which unlike frogs have claws and teeth, and could attack the snake while being swallowed.

Aren't most grass snakes closer to one foot long than two?

Not *Natrix natrix* — according to *The Snakes of Europe*, the average length of a full-grown male is around two and half feet. This is the European or Old World Grass Snake; in the US there are other species commonly called "grass snakes" that are actually types of green snake or garter

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snake. Note that a snake on the ground may look shorter than it is if seen from a distance and/or moving along in curves.

How did Snape know it was a snake that poked his leg? Why wasn't he as scared as the other Death Eaters?

Snape knew it was a snake because he'd heard Voldemort speaking to it in Parseltongue (in Chapter 3, after Harry had first gone around the circle and was telling Voldemort he couldn't find his picture). Snape smelled less afraid partly because he really is one of the braver Death Eaters and partly because he'd taken a potion before coming, which among other things affected his scent.

What does the Aitvaras Charm do?

It transforms a snake into an Aitvaras, which is an actual beastie from Lithuanian folklore. An Aitvaras takes the form of a fiery serpent when outdoors and that of a cockerel when indoors, and steals food and gold for its master. The gold part is going to cause a lot of problems for Harry when Malfoy finally turns him into one, although probably not in the way you're thinking.

I find it interesting that you're using the 'middle' version of the Aitvaras, the one that's a combination of the original creature and the 'Christianized-and-therefore-now-demonic' version. I'd thought for sure you'd be using the original version; what made you decide on the middle one? Will Harry still be able to fly?

Actually, my Aitvaras probably won't exactly

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match any of the existing versions. I'm still deciding what powers it will have, and to what degree Harry will retain these powers once he resumes his human form. He'll definitely be able to fly as a snake, at least initially; beyond that it will depend on what ideas I get for future stories. I mentioned the middle version because of its affinity with gold, which as far as I could tell the original didn't share. This affinity has the potential to complicate Harry's life in an interesting way (think Quidditch).

What is a cockerel?

A young male chicken.

Er — wouldn't it be really inconvenient for Harry to turn into a chicken whenever he goes indoors?

Well, yes, it would be. But some of the things Muggles believe about certain magical creatures (and even some of the things wizards believe about certain magical creatures) don't always turn out to be true.

What was really going on when McGonagall tried to Stun Harry?

Like that of dragons, manticores and Erumpents (although obviously to a much lesser degree), the skin of Harry's snake form repels curses.

Is Harry going to let Malfoy transform him? Has he taken on any snake traits in his human form?

Funnily enough, the answers to these two ques-

tions ('not exactly' and 'in at least one very subtle way, yes') are not unrelated, as will be revealed in Chapter 11.

I take it being licked by McGonagall in cat form is preferable to being licked by Nagini?

Definitely. Smaller tongue, less spit. (Also, Nagini was deliberately trying to get slobber all over Harry, whereas McGonagall just wanted to see if he tasted like a real snake.) Now, Sirius, on the other hand ...

I'm very curious about Millarca - is she any relation to le Fanu's Millarca?

No relation to the actual character, but they have one or two things in common.

How come Harry didn't tell Dumbledore that he had to report back to Voldemort?

Harry had completely forgotten about it, mostly as he had no intention of ever actually doing so. (Note that Harry also didn't think to tell Dumbledore what Voldemort said about Madam Turpin.)

Will a snake-basket attract Harry in human form?

Not by itself, no.

Note: Lavender and rosemary are two herbs that in historical times were believed to give shelter to snakes.

Fun Fic Fact: The spikenard and compass-weed mentioned in the fic are old-fashioned names for these two herbs. The provisions in Slytherin's will for satchets of such to be given to the students of his

house each year on his birthday wasn't just idle generosity on his part: he left strict instructions with the Basilisk not to Petrify anyone whose robes smell like *this*, unless directly ordered to do so by the Heir.

Snape will know about Harry's serpent form later in the story, right?

Not later in *this* story. Snape is currently scheduled to find out about Harry's serpent form right after Voldemort is defeated at the end of seventh year, which is about a dozen stories down the line. Of course, this plot point is subject to change without notice if I happen to get a better idea.

Is Harry an Animagus or is he some other kind of a shape-shifter?

Some other kind of shape-shifter, but not even Dumbledore is sure exactly *what* other kind.

Is this [students boarding food and gold] really what's happening, or is Harry just now sensing these things because he's an Aitvaras?

He's just now sensing these things because he's an Aitvaras.

When Harry turns into a snake now, is he actually changing into an Aitvaras instead, or can he change into either one at will?

He's changing into an Aitvaras instead of an ordinary snake, albeit an Aitvaras that no longer has its "third eye" (which fell off when Harry

became human again in Hagrid's hut).

Is his improvement in general flying ability also a result of the Aitvaras thing, or did he honestly get even better?

It's a result of the Aitvaras thing. That was a Clue: Harry doesn't really have a chance to improve his flying in summer, living with the Dursleys as he does.

Hmm, will he actually tell Dumbledore what is happening?

Not in the foreseeable future, but big chunks of the 6th and 7th year of Legacy of Slytherin aren't plotted out yet, so it might eventually happen.

Will we see Defense against the Dark Arts with Malfoy Sr. as teacher?

Well... you won't actually *see* it, no. And keep in mind that references can be misleading...

HARMLESS AND EASILY DOMESTICATED

The Augurey [Clabbert, Diricawl, Chispurfle, Bowtruckle, Doxy Ramora and others] is one of the many terrifying monsters, I mean, interesting creatures, described in FANTASTIC BEASTS AND WHERE TO FIND THEM. You should buy this book (and its companion volume, QUIDDITCH THROUGH THE AGES). As Albus Dumbledore says on the back cover:

Proceeds from the sale of this book will go to COMIC RELIEF, which means that the pounds and Galleons you exchange for it will do magic beyond the powers of

any wizard. If you feel that this is insufficient reason to part with your money, I can only hope that passing wizards feel more charitable if they ever see you being attacked by a Manticore.

You will also learn:

- The complete Ministry of Magic classification system (X through XXXXX and — in the case of Pixies and Acromantulas — beyond)
- Why Hagrid so violently objects to bringing Horklumps into the Hogwarts grounds
- The Augurey's association with phoenixes, fairies and Uric the Oddball
- Why it would have been a bad idea for Hagrid to get the class Chimaera eggs
- How to keep a Bowtruckle from gouging out one's eyes (always useful, that)
- The decorative uses to which American wizards put Clabberts (what, you thought Martha Stewart was a Muggle?)
- Why the American Ministry is nonetheless so eager to get them out of the country
- What Puffskeins and Acromantulas are
- The name by which Muggles formerly knew the Diricawl
- What Glumbumbles are
- Why the treacle they make is so dangerous
- Why Ron nonetheless finds them amusing
- The type of potions Jobberknoll feathers are

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used in

- What the Puffskein was searching for up Malfoy's nose
- The names of several other breeds of winged horse
- What Hermione had in the Honeydukes bag
- You will also learn about Horklumps, and why you don't want them in your lawn.

The first bit of serious ORDER OF THE PHOENIX AU turns up in Chapter 6. In canon, Educational Decree Number Twenty-two gave Fudge the power to appoint a Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher if Dumbledore couldn't find one. In the LEGACY OF SLYTHERIN timeline, a teacher was located at the last minute, and Fudge had other things on his mind anyway (read THE BUTTERFLIES to learn more). Educational Decree Number Twenty-two was instead used to limit Hagrid to teaching harmless (and easily domesticated) creatures.

The toad-like witch was Umbridge, of course, still making trouble. Hagrid did pick her up by the back of her robes, and swung her all about when Dawlish was trying to Stun him, which is why she was screaming her head off. Due to the events of the previous summer (read THE SERPENT OF LORD VOLDEMORT), Ron and Hermione have met Kingsley Shacklebolt, but Harry hasn't. He's also never seen a Doxy before.

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AUTHOR'S NOTES

DISCLAIMER:

“You Might Be a Redneck Wizard” is a shameless rip-off of “You Might Be a Redneck Jedi”, and represents my own work only insofar as choosing the appropriate Harry Potter terms to replace the Star Wars ones. The Redneck Jedi list can be found on web pages too numerous to cite (a Google search on “Redneck Jedi” yields about 13,800 hits), for the most without attribution. However, the RHF Joke Archives credits the original concept to one Steve D Maurer, and they’re usually pretty good about getting their sources right.

All characters and concepts from the Star Wars films copyright George Lucas; all characters and concepts from the “You Might Be a Redneck” comedy sketch copyright Jeff Foxworthy; all characters and concepts from the Harry Potter series copyright J K Rowling.

FOOTNOTES:

[1] Boone’s Farm Strawberry Hill: A strawberry-flavoured “malt beverage” (i.e. beer) sold in bottles as cheap wine.

[2] primer: The stuff that’s put on a car before painting it, to make the paint stick to the metal.

[3] You have ever used magic in conjunction with fishing/bowling.

As his Famous Wizard card says he “enjoys... tenpin bowling”, Dumbledore probably actually meets this qualification. You might be a redneck



wizard if you have a brother who was prosecuted for practising inappropriate charms on a goat...

[4] Daisy Duke shorts: Very short denim cut-offs.

[5] redwood deck: *Sodomy non sapiens*, as Terry Pratchett would put it (i.e. bugged if I know). Some kind of special flooring, I assume.

[6] Jack Daniels: An old and very good brand of Tennessee sipping whiskey.

SLYTHERIN'S GIFT/GRYFFINDOR'S DREAM

I used the Old English names for the runes Draco was writing; some readers may be more familiar with their Viking equivalents:

<i>feoh</i>	ƒ	Fehu	Possessions
<i>ny></i>	†	Nauthiz	Constraint
<i>efiel</i>	⌘	Othila	Separation
<i>daeg</i>	⌘	Dagaz	Transformation
<i>man</i>	ᚱ	Mannaz	The Self
<i>peor></i>	ᚦ	Perth	Initiation

CHRISTMAS OVER AZKABAN

The Centaur Office (and what’s so bad about being sent there) is described in FANTASTIC BEASTS AND WHERE TO FIND THEM. You should buy this book, and its companion volume, QUIDDITCH THROUGH THE AGES, the profits go to *Comic Relief*.

Thestrals are from FANTASTIC BEASTS AND WHERE



TO FIND THEM; the Doppelbeater Defence (mentioned last chapter) is from *QUIDDITCH THROUGH THE AGES*.

Why Harry Didn't Stay Dead: I'm sure a lot of you would like a better answer than 'Go ask Madam Pomfrey', particularly as for obvious reasons Harry isn't going to do that. It was partly due to the nature of the Patronus Charm (when the Patronuses faded, a big chunk of the magic used to conjure them was returned to Harry) and partly for other reasons that will be revealed in future stories (but silverblaze in her review of chapter 6 on Schnoogle is very much on the right track).

THE IMBOLC SERPENT

The festival of Imbolc was an old Celtic holiday that inspired the modern Groundhog Day. The Serpent Rocks are mentioned in the Agatha Christie short story, *INGOTS OF GOLD*; if a real place of that name exists in Cornwall, I haven't been able to find it by Googling. The kelpie is one of the many terrifying monsters, I mean, interesting creatures, described in *FANTASTIC BEASTS AND WHERE TO FIND THEM*, and if you've been reading *HARMLESS AND EASILY DOMESTICATED* (and if not, why haven't you?), you already know how the rest of this paragraph goes.

I enjoyed this story, but what about Grindelwald? Why doesn't he count as the dark wizard before Voldemort?

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The Imbolc Serpent was only concerned with dark wizards who had the potential of fulfilling Etin's Last Prediction. There's a bit more to it than simply "rising to power in the last years of the millennium".

Is Dumbledore wise enough to see what the Serpent meant about the difference between Dark and Dark?

Dumbledore is wise enough to realise that real predictions always come true, and that given a choice between Voldemort being the Dark Lord and Harry being the Dark Lord, Harry is better (he could hardly be worse).

THE CURSE OF THE AITVARAS

The title of this chapter was inspired by *IMPERIUS QUIDDITCH*, a very good Tom Riddle Quidditch fic by Alec Dossetor and Teri Krenek.

The story of the Snitch of Bodmin Moor is told in *QUIDDITCH THROUGH THE AGES*. You should buy this book (and its companion volume, *FANTASTIC BEASTS AND WHERE TO FIND THEM*); the profits go to *Comic Relief*.

Is Harry a Zaltys now, bringing good luck to Snape?

Yes, pretty much.

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