

Adventures in FanFiction

NEEMAD'S
CONSPIRACY
OF SILENCE
IN SEVEN PARTS



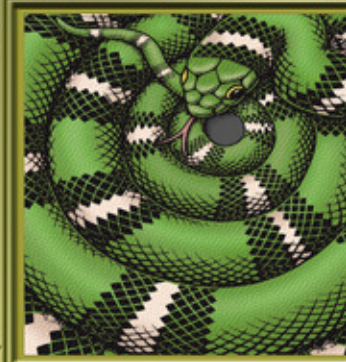
A RED HEN PUBLICATION



A Red Hen Adventures in FanFiction Edition

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CENSPIRACY OF SILENCE



By NEMAD

IN SEVEN PARTS

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FIRST IMPRESSIONS




ALONE OF ALL THE CHILDREN MILLING about on platform nine and three-quarters, Severus Snape was silent and still. The others laughed and chattered as they met old friends or sniffled and clung to their parents. Sev simply watched.

Even at eleven, he was a remarkably self-possessed boy. 'Cold' was the word some people would have used, and perhaps it was accurate. Whatever passions might or might not rage beneath the surface, all that he ever let show was carefully calculated and considered.

Orphaned at the age of six after an unfortunate magical accident, Sev had been raised by his mother's brother. His uncle was a kind enough man in his way, but he had neither the time nor the experience to raise a young boy in any way approaching normal. Severus was left to bring himself up — and bring himself up he did.

His uncle had owned a book collection to rival even that of the great library at Hogwarts, and Severus had studiously read his way through



it at an age where other boys were still getting used to sounding out their letters. He had paid careful attention to his uncle's many tomes on the Dark Arts; not through any intent to use what he learned, or even through simple curiosity, but because the Dark Arts represented knowledge few had — and Severus Snape prized nothing higher than knowledge.

He remembered little of life with his parents, but his father's words of wisdom to him had stuck in his head. It was wisdom his uncle and others might not have approved of... but to Severus, it made perfect sense.

Never let them see the real you, Sev. Never let them know what you're thinking. There are a lot of people in this world, and you'll find that you're smarter than most of them... but they don't need to know that. Keep it to yourself, Sev. Always play the double game.

And that was how Sev lived. Observing. Calculating. Watching the world around him, and fitting in to it however he chose to do so.

With his brains, he could have been the highest scoring student at his junior school. With his talent for understanding people, he could have made himself the most popular. He did neither. He was content to sit on the sidelines,

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unnoticed, and keep to himself.

And now he would be starting at Hogwarts. Not just any school, but a wizarding school. He would for the first time in his life get to use real magic... or so his uncle thought.

Though Severus had never owned a wand until a week ago, there were magics you could do without one. In preparing potions, he was already more accomplished than most of his fellow students would be when they left seven years down the line. And though he had never had opportunity or reason to use them, his studies of the Dark Arts had brought him into contact with a huge selection of curses and incantations. And Severus Snape had an excellent memory.


He could wow all the assembled students with some flashy display if he wanted — but that was far from his style. No, he much preferred to wait and observe.

Where other people might see only a confusion of people and noises, Snape saw patterns and intersections. In a matter of minutes, he could see things about the students around him that others might take weeks to find out. He amused himself by studying his fellow new students, and sorting them into Hogwarts houses.

A nervous girl with dark red hair and green

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eyes bit her lip as she stood with her family. An older blonde girl, obviously her sister, looked down her nose in disgust at the chaotic display around them. The family were Muggles, he could see at a glance, and they didn't much approve of her new career path. She was obviously strong-willed. She'd be a Gryffindor.

Not far away, a scruffy boy with glasses fussed with the back of his dark hair, trying to convince it to lay flat. He was laughing loudly with another boy, with a crop of black hair shoulder-length like Snape's own, but wildly curly. Gryffindors those, too.

Harder to place were the wallflowers. A skinny mousy-haired boy in faded, patched clothing hung back from the crowd. He seemed awkward amongst so many people, but there was a glint of intelligence in his eyes, and he seemed to be observing much as Snape was. A Ravenclaw, perhaps?

A short, pudgy boy on the sidelines seemed destined for Hufflepuff for sure. He was clinging to his parents and watching events with a wide-eyed suspicion. His father, an imposing man in stark black robes, looked thoroughly unimpressed with his timidity.

Only one other student was as short as he was,

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but the difference in their demeanor was striking. Slim, with golden-white hair and a self-possessed air, he carried a very expensive-looking case and was pontificating loudly about how his father had been head boy when he was at Hogwarts.

Slytherin, for sure. The home of the ambitious.

The home of Snape, too. Ambition was a knotty problem, and Sev would have to think for a long while to decide where his lay... but Slytherin was also the home of the devious and cunning. Severus Snape was nothing if not cunning.


The train was about to move out, and everybody filed aboard. Sev had hoped for an empty compartment to catch up his reading — people-watching was much less enjoyable in a small, enclosed environment — but no such luck. The red-haired girl and the shy boy in the shabby robes both followed him in.

There was an awkward silence. Awkward for the others, at least; Sev just ignored them both and started reading. His book was not one of the Hogwarts set texts — no, he was way beyond that. This was a complicated treatise on the latest advances in Transformation Potions.

Finally, the red-haired girl spoke up. "Hi," she said, with a brilliant smile. "Um, good to meet you all. I'm Lily."

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The mousy-haired boy smiled back. “I’m Remus Lupin.” He had a very gentle voice, but he spoke without a trace of the hesitation you would expect from someone who was outwardly so shy. Snape filed that away for later use, the way he did all such observations.

They were both waiting for him to join the conversation, so he said shortly “Severus Snape,” and flipped over another page in his book.

“Wow, that looks complicated,” Lily observed. “What is it?”

He was tempted to answer ‘a book’ but decided that — whilst it was undeniably the right sort of answer to give to a stupid question — such a comment was entirely too childish. “A Treatise on Transmogrification.” he told her, flipping up the cover for her to see.

“Wow,” she said again. Charitably, he ascribed that to nerves and not a limited vocabulary.


“It would appear that it is complicated,” Remus observed dryly.

Much to Sev’s relief, his two carriage-mates were fairly quiet for most of the journey, chatting quietly to each other and not trying to draw him into the conversation too much. He continued to read, paying little attention but missing nothing.

Lily, he learned, was indeed from a Muggle

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family. Her parents had known nothing of the existence of magic, and had been horrified at the very idea. It had taken her weeks of arguing, bribery and outright blackmail to get permission to go to Hogwarts. She’d only won her case after she convinced her older sister Petunia to back her up. Petunia, it seemed, was torn between disgust at the shame of having a sister who was a witch and glee at having the room they shared to herself for most of the year.


Remus was less than forthcoming about his family and history. He was wizardborn, that much was easy to tell from how he spoke and dressed, but he claimed his life so far had been “very dull”. From the quietly self-assured way he carried himself, however, Snape didn’t think it could be anything as simple as shame at coming from a poor family. Sev found the contrast in him before and after boarding the train interesting. It appeared it was mostly the size of the crowd that had unnerved him; where had he been all his life that he wasn’t used to so many people?

The quiet was disturbed, however, by the arrival of the witch with the snack trolley. Hot on her heels came the two loud boys he’d seen on the platform earlier.

“Ow! Sirius, mind where you’re going!”

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It was the scruffy-haired boy with the glasses who had spoken. His long-haired companion, an inch or two shorter, was like a human whirlwind, tearing about the place at speed.

The boy with the glasses caught sight of how Lily was staring at the display of snacks with fascination, and flashed her a mischievous grin. "Hi! I'm James Potter. You ever tried Pepper Imps?"

"I wouldn't, if I were you," Remus advised drolly.

"I want to try *everything*," Lily insisted excitedly.

James grinned at her. "Great idea." He turned to the witch. "Ma'am, can we have a portion of everything?"

Lily clapped a hand to her mouth. "Oh, you can't! Besides, I don't even have any wizarding money on me."

"That's okay. Sirius'll pay for it. Won't you, Sirry?"

"Huh? Oh, whatever." Sirius seemed more concerned with something in his coat pocket. He reached inside, and produced a tiny owl that was looking a bit ruffled.

"Oh, you have an owl!" Lily seemed delighted. "Oh, I wanted to get one, but my parents wouldn't let me!"

"You keep your owl in your pocket?" remarked Remus, eyebrows raised.

"This is Zipper," Sirius explained, carefully

smoothing out his ruffled feathers. "He doesn't like cages. Do you, Zip?"

The tiny owl fluttered his wings excitedly.

James came over to the with a huge armful of sweets. "Enough for everyone!" he announced. "Pay the lady, Sirius."

"That'll be twelve Sickles, please," said the witch.

"Twelve Sickles?" demanded Sirius, digging in a different pocket. "You spent *twelve Sickles* of mine on sweets?"

Lily looked distressed, but James clapped her on the shoulder reassuringly. "Ignore him," he advised. "He's rolling in it."

Sirius pulled a face, and pretended to menace him with his wand. Sev rolled his eyes in disbelief, a gesture that the others unfortunately noticed.

"I'm sorry, are we amusing you?" asked Sirius.

"Not intentionally, I'm sure," said Snape dryly.


Sirius scowled, but James grinned amiably. "Hi, I'm James Potter. This is —"

"I have ears," Sev reminded him.

James blinked. "Do you have a name as well?"

"I'm Severus Snape."

"Thank you." After a moment, when it was clear Snape had no interest in talking to any of them, they went back to chattering amongst themselves.



The train pulled up at the Hogwarts station and everybody tumbled out. A huge man with wild black hair, twice the size of the people around him, was bellowing for the first years.

A number of the new kids seemed intimidated by the sheer size of him; they'd never seen anything like it. Neither had Snape, but he recognized him for what he was immediately. *Giant's blood in that one, or I'm a Muggle.*

"Right, 'ere we go!" bellowed the enormous man. "No more'n four to a boat! Any more firs' years?"

They all scrambled for the boats. James, Remus, Sirius and Lily filled one. Snape ended up in the next boat, with the short blond boy and the nervous fat one he'd noticed on the platform, plus an extremely bulky boy who looked like he was taking up more than his fair share of the weight allowance.

"Right — forward!" The fleet of little boats started across the lake. The water had gone as still as glass.

Most of the students were gaping in awe at the spectacle of Hogwarts laid out before them, but Snape was more interested in watching them. He met the eyes of the little blond boy, who gave him a kind of companionable sneer; an expression that said 'look at all these losers around us'.

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Be careful before you put yourself into my league, kid, Sev thought, but he gave the boy a subtle nod of acknowledgement.

They got out at the other side, the pudgy Hufflepuff boy stumbling and almost falling in the water. The blond boy snickered, and James shot him an angry scowl. He came over and offered the other guy a hand up.

"Hi, I'm James Potter," he said yet again. Snape found himself wishing he could think up a more original line to introduce himself.

"P-P-Peter Pettigrew," stuttered the boy awkwardly. The blond kid snorted again, and the bulky boy who'd shared their boat chuckled with him. James glared at them angrily, including Sev by default — although he hadn't laughed or even reacted. Snape stared back impassively. Why on earth would he care what Mr. "Hi I'm James Potter" thought of him?

They filed through into the Great Hall. The four house tables were crowded with older students. Snape kept his face impassive under their collective gaze. The youngest kids there, the new second years, were craning their necks curiously, but the older students looked like they'd seen it all before.

At the top table the teachers awaited them. In

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the centre, of course, was Albus Dumbledore; a tall, thin man with a flood of auburn hair shot through with silver-grey. He peered kindly at the new students over half-moon spectacles.

As they waited, a tall, very thin man with a scrubby blond beard came forward. "First years, Hagrid?" The huge man nodded.

"Welcome," said the thin wizard, with a slightly distracted smile. "I'm Professor Fractalis. I teach Arithmancy, and I'm the deputy headmaster here at Hogwarts."

He wore chalk-dusted robes that were patched at the elbows, and in his hands he carried a hat that was even more battered than his own. He solemnly placed it on a stool in front of the assembled first years, and stood back.

There were some very puzzled faces in the crowd around him, but Sev had read HOGWARTS: A HISTORY back when he was seven. This must be the famous Sorting Hat.

They all watched the hat for a long moment. Suddenly, it twitched, and a rip near the brim opened like a mouth. The hat began to sing.

*A thousand years ago or more,
When Hogwarts school was new,
The founders formed their houses each,*

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*But wondered what to do.
For they each prized in their own mind
A different virtue clear;
But how to pick those virtues out
When they could not be near?*


*'Twas Gryffindor who thought it out
And saw the problem's end
And placed a spell on his own hat
On which they could depend.
For I'm the Hogwart's sorting hat
I know what's on your mind;
And so, no matter who you are,
A place for you I'll find.*

*If you are brave and true of heart,
In Gryffindor you'll go;
If you are wise above all else,
Then Ravenclaw, I'll know;
The cunning and the wittiest,
In Slytherin will be;
And those who work and toil hard,
To Hufflepuff I'll see.*

*I'm never wrong, I never fail,
I'll know by what I've read;
I'll sort you into your true home
So put me on your head!*

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The entire hall burst into spontaneous applause. Sev didn't join, just waited patiently. The blond boy didn't clap either, curling his lip into a sneer at how easily impressed his fellow students seemed.

Professor Fractalis cleared his throat somewhat nervously. "When I call your name, please, ahem, please come forward and sit down, and put on the hat to be sorted." He coughed again. Sev decided he wasn't very used to public speaking. "Ackerley, Solomon!"

Ackerley, Solomon, stumbled forwards and tugged on the hat. There was a moment's silence, and then the hat bellowed "RAVENCLAW!"

The Ravenclaw table cheered, and he skittered across to join them with a goofy grin.

"Avery, Nicholas!" was next up. He was sent to Slytherin.

The first half of the ceremony went off with no surprises. Lupin was put in Gryffindor, not Ravenclaw, but Snape had already reassessed him after the train ride. The blond boy he'd shared the boat with was Malfoy, Lucius, and the bulky one who'd joined his laughter was Crabbe, Colin. They were both in Slytherin.

It was when they came to little stuttery Peter Pettigrew that he nearly swallowed his tongue.

The hat sat on his head for a very long time... nearly two minutes. Finally, when people were beginning to shift uncomfortably, the hat suddenly bellowed "GRYFFINDOR!"

Gryffindor? House of the brave and true of heart? He tried to juxtapose that with the fearful little boy who'd been quaking like a leaf, and just couldn't begin to do it.

What was the Sorting Hat playing at? It claimed to have never been wrong — well, if it wasn't wrong, it was certainly up to something. Could the hat have an ulterior motive for assigning Pettigrew to Gryffindor? Sev couldn't image what that might be.

He was so bemused by the hat's odd choice that he completely blanked out Potter, Pucey and Quirke. Next thing he knew, it was his own name being called out.

"Snape, Severus!" Untroubled by the focus of attention suddenly on him, he calmly went forward to take the hat and place it on his head.

The hat took no time at all to reach its decision. A dry, whispery voice in his head said "*Hmm, a sly one... very, very sly... SLYTHERIN!*" He tugged the hat off, and went to join his table.

Lucius had reserved a seat for him. He gave a kind of triumphant sneer. "Thought you'd be

with us," he muttered. "You didn't look like one of the riff-raff."

The remaining students were quickly assigned houses; he was the last to be put in Slytherin. When they had all settled down, Professor Dumbledore got to his feet at the staff table. "Greetings, all. Welcome to a new year at Hogwarts. Before we eat, I'd like a brief word — dinner!" He sat back down.

"Stupid old fool," said Malfoy scathingly. Sev started to eat, and said nothing.

The students scoffed their fill from the magic plates. Severus ate little; he generally viewed food as fuel to be got out of the way with, secondary to the much more important things he could be doing with his time. Crabbe ate like a pig; Malfoy was extremely picky, critiquing everything he was served and making comments about how his parents wouldn't be caught dead using such commonplace table settings.

When they were finished, Professor Dumbledore stood up again. "Ahem. Right, a few more words before we all go off to bed. Welcome back, all those of you who've been here before. You may notice a few changes to the staff." A brief murmur ran through the older crowd.

"Professor Binns, as you may recall, sadly

passed away last term. However, as those of you were in his history class will be aware, his ghost remains with us, and he will continue to teach his classes. Professor Kirrelgun, on the other hand, has left us for a lucrative position in the Ministry of Magic. We are fortunate to have procured a more than capable replacement — may I introduce Professor McGonogall, the new Transfiguration mistress." There was polite applause. A stern-faced young woman with a flood of dark hair stood up and nodded briefly.

"And now, to your dorms. The Prefects will show you the way."

The Slytherin rooms were not far away from the Great Hall. The lead Prefect spoke the password — "Dragonhide" — and an entire section of the wall slid back.

There was a mass scramble as the first years fought over the different rooms. Snape ended up sharing his with Malfoy, Crabbe, and two other boys called Nick Avery and Stuart Flint. Malfoy cast a cold eye over their roommates, and appeared to find them acceptable. Snape suspected this had more to do with the fact that they both came from long-established wizarding families than anything to do with their personalities.

The others fell asleep almost instantly after their tiring day, but Sev stayed up long into the night, reading *A TREATISE ON TRANSMOGRIFICATION*.



It didn't take long at all for Sev to settle into the daily routine of life at Hogwarts. He, naturally enough, excelled in all his lessons, finding a lot of the early exercises painfully simple. However, he was careful to avoid being first to complete things all the time. Generally he would finish second or third — far enough down the list not to get noticed, but not so far down people started thinking he was stupid.

James Potter usually came in first, although he wouldn't have done so if Snape had been working to the best of his ability. His best friend Sirius was also very bright, but the teachers had extreme difficulty getting him to settle down long enough to do anything. He would much rather be poking and prodding things with his wand or setting off Dungbombs.

The one lesson where Sev couldn't disguise his expertise was Potions. He was light-years ahead of the other students, already nearly on a level with their teacher, Professor Fennel.

Saxius Fennel was a handsome, dark-haired


man with olive skin. He was a cold, harsh man, slow to offer praise, but that didn't bother Snape.

Other, more sensitive and less brilliant students had a lot of trouble with him. Remus struggled mightily with his Potions, and Lily was just plain hopeless — despite the fact that she had an excellent memory for detail and was always quick to understand. She knew exactly what she was supposed to be doing... she just couldn't make it work.

Lily was one of Lucius Malfoy's favorite targets. Malfoy had a very sharp tongue and an instinct for how to wound, and he wasn't afraid to use them. He and his gang picked on Peter Pettigrew for his nervousness and poor grades in class, but they reserved the worst of their venom for the 'mudbloods'.

All of the Slytherins came from long-established wizarding families. So did most of the others, but since Dumbledore had been made headmaster, there had been more and more students flooding in who had no magic in their family tree whatsoever. Snape had seen firsthand that this had absolutely no bearing on how well they did at school, but Lucius wasn't interested in such trifling little details.

Potions was the class where the worst of the



infighting went on, because Fennel seemed completely deaf to such things when it suited him. Slytherin shared Potions with Gryffindor, which gave Malfoy Peter, Lily, and two other mudbloods, Jade Creevy and Jerry James, to pick on.

Not all the Gryffindors were easy targets, however. James Potter was fiercely protective of all his housemates, and Sirius Black would take any excuse for a fight. And Lily herself had little patience for bullying — she seemed like a sweet little thing, but she had a biting wit and a no-nonsense attitude.

Snape himself couldn't care less about the fighting one way or the other. In his opinion, Lily was one of the least objectionable people in the class. She seemed to understand his personality fairly instinctively, knowing that his impassive coolness was completely different from Malfoy's sneering superiority.

Black and Potter had no such powers of distinction. So far as they were concerned, the fact that he was a Slytherin and that he didn't actively speak out against Malfoy made him part of the gang.

If either of them had as much brains as their test scores suggested, they would have realised that to do so, had he wanted to, would have been to

make the next seven years of his life hell. Malfoy, however unpleasant to what he considered his 'inferiors', was a born leader. All the Slytherins in their year had coalesced around him, following his lead and becoming his gang. Snape wasn't actively a part of that... but he wasn't stupid enough to try and set himself apart.

Somewhere inside, though, Snape found himself somewhat... disturbed by Lucius Malfoy. Oh, not by his antics and his attitude — that was standard schoolboy bullying in anyone's book. But there was something behind the sneer at times that worried him a little.

"The time is coming," Malfoy had disclosed to him in private once. "The time is coming when we won't have to put up with this rubbish anymore. Mudbloods in our schools, pathetic little weasels like Pettigrew — the true power of wizardry is being diluted. Idiots like Dumbledore are ransoming the future for their 'equality'." He sneered and made obnoxious little quote marks that made it quite clear he considered the likes of Peter and Lily no equal of his.

Then Malfoy had leaned in closer, a knowing light in his eyes. "But that's gonna change," he confided in Snape. "Oh, not this year, and not the next, but soon. We're gonna cleanse this

place. We're gonna purify the blood of wizardry, and put our people back where they belong."

Severus was an excellent judge of people. He knew when words were truly spoken, and when they were just bluster. And there was something behind Malfoy's words... He knew something. And this 'cleansing' he was talking of might well be more than just a twisted dream.

Sev might not be the most emotional of boys, but he recognized a bad deal when he heard one. Never mind 'mudbloods' and the magically weak... once something like Malfoy's dream was started, it just kept rolling on and on. The most important thing in Severus Snape's life was the gathering of knowledge — and when elitism came in, freedom of information was the first to go out.

So when Lucius Malfoy seemed to think of him as a kindred spirit, he did nothing to destroy that impression. When the gang of Slytherins made their cruel jokes and cackled at the others, he smiled thinly and said nothing. When James Potter and his friends scowled at Snape and the others, he scowled right back.

And when he was around Malfoy, he watched, and he waited. It was what he did best.

If he couldn't disguise his expertise in Potions, Defence Against the Dark Arts was nearly as bad. Their teacher was Professor Malachite, a very well-spoken wizard with icy white hair and a goatee beard. He was head of house Slytherin, and as well-liked as most of his students were reviled. He was always very warm and understanding with the students, aiding them whenever they needed help and seldom handing out any kind of punishment.


He paid special attention to Sev, and it was clear that his usual defence of pretending to be less sharp than he was would be hard to pull off. Malachite couldn't see through him — nobody Snape had ever met could do that — but it was clear he knew Sev wasn't pulling his full weight.

He pulled the young Slytherin aside after one lesson when Snape had refused to raise his hand to questions they both knew he could answer in a heartbeat.

"Now, young Severus," said Professor Malachite warmly. "I notice a certain reluctance to join in the class discussion, hmm? Nervous, perhaps? Shy about public speaking?"

There was no point in pretending to that. "No sir."

"Bored, then? Are we not stretching you enough?"



For perhaps the first time, Sev was genuinely torn. On the one hand, he didn't want to tip his hand and reveal the full extent of his ability... and on the other, Malachite's words hinted at the possibilities of more knowledge.

The professor appeared to take his silence as assent. "I'll tell you what, Snape. I'll give you permission to get books from my private library. And if you want to do a little extra reading on your own time, well... it can be our little secret." He tapped the side of his nose and smiled.

Snape took the permission slip, and said nothing. But soon after, he started to borrow books from the Dark Arts office.

And quite a collection Professor Malachite had. It was more extensive by far than the selection available in the main library, even in the restricted section. He wondered to himself what Professor Dumbledore might think if he knew that one of his professors was allowing an eleven-year-old free, unmonitored access to such material.

But then, Dumbledore was a law unto himself. Malfoy, and by extension his followers, regarded him as near-senile, taking his weird pronouncements and love for silly things as proof he was more than half mad. Snape, as

always, saw deeper.

And he had the uncomfortable feeling that Dumbledore did too. Sometimes there was a glint in those warm blue eyes that he had only ever seen before in a mirror. Perhaps the craziness was all for show — or perhaps it was truly part of his personality. But if it was, it was a long way from being all of it.

Yes, Dumbledore might hide behind an entirely different set of shields than Snape, but underneath they were two of a kind. Sev made a mental note to never try to stare the headmaster down. He had the feeling that it might just be the first time in his life he didn't succeed.

Time passed quickly, as it always did when he was learning. And he was learning, although not in lessons. The Hogwarts library held a great many books his uncle had never had the chance to get a copy of, and of course there was Professor Malachite's private bookshelf.

Malachite never asked Snape what he was studying. Sev found that strange, and a little worrisome; it went against every piece of the friendly instructor aura he projected. He wondered if the Professor wasn't planning on using him in some way to bring house Slytherin glory — but if so, why did he not

monitor what he was reading?

Another possibility that occurred to him was that this was some kind of experiment... Malachite was watching him, secretly, determining what a bright boy with a free pass would choose to study on his own time. Sev didn't care for that idea much at all; he was the observer, not the observed.

He resolved to watch Professor Malachite as carefully as he watched Lucius Malfoy.

But, like it or not, observation was a two way street. Malfoy might be bigoted, but he was sharp as a knife, and it didn't take him long to notice that the books Severus studied were never the ones on the set list.

He was most interested in Sev's Dark Arts books. A lot of the technicalities went over his head when he tried to flick through them himself, but he was a quick study when Sev explained it for him.

Sev weighed up the wisdom of giving Lucius Malfoy access to high-level Dark curses, and decided to keep the majority of his knowledge to himself. However, he stockpiled showy, harmless but humiliating curses for whenever his roommates got too curious. The gang of Slytherins became extremely pro-

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ficient at tossing off wicked little enchantments at their enemies.

Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff students tended to flee before them, but the Gryffindors were made of sterner stuff. Potter and Black masterminded the resistance, learning curses of their own until it was quite common for minor disturbances in lessons to explode into magical war zones.


Potions lessons were the worst, under Professor Fennel's lax eye, but Slytherins and Gryffindors also learned flying together — and the opportunities for magical sabotage in mid-flight were so much greater.

James Potter flew with a flair that had the older students muttering excitedly about Quidditch. Snape himself was extremely proficient, but few realised it since he never showed off. With Black, Potter, Snape and Malfoy in the air together, the students were ducking and dodging curses every time the teacher turned her back.

Snape seldom participated in the magical duels if he could help it, but the knowledge that most of the nastier curses were his discoveries had somehow leaked out. As the gulf between the houses widened, his seeming alliance with Malfoy grew ever more cemented.

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Most of the Slytherins were poor company, but since Sev preferred solitude it hardly mattered. Malfoy was really the only one with much of a mind to speak of, but his conversation was flooded with vitriolic attacks on mudbloods and Muggle-lovers, which Sev found deadly boring. It wasn't so much the prejudice that frustrated him as the complete lack of imagination.

It was always “mudbloods this” and “mudbloods that”. If any of them bested him Malfoy in a test — as Lily frequently did — Sev had to endure hours of ranting about how they'd cheated, how Dumbledore weighted the tests so they scored better, how the teachers were all Muggle-lovers...

Snape's reasons for looking forward to Christmas, then, were not quite the same as everybody else's. The vast majority of the students would be going home to be with their families. Snape, owing to his orphan status, was the only first year Slytherin to remain. He'd politely declined an invitation to winter with the Malfoys — he couldn't imagine Lucius' parents having anything more interesting to say than their son. All that mindless bigotry had to have come from somewhere.

Not only would he be free of his fellow Slytherins, but his self-declared enemies would

also be away for Christmas. Both Potter and Sirius had other plans, and the holiday season would be blissfully quiet. Snape intended to spend most of it shut up in the library.

That was the plan, anyway. However, he couldn't completely avoid the festivities, and with so few students remaining he could hardly skip out on Christmas dinner.

He was one of only three first years to remain. There was also a Hufflepuff girl who had older sisters who were also staying... and then there was Lily.

Lily and Lupin were, of the Gryffindors, the least antagonistic towards Snape. Both of them, he thought, had a touch of his personality in them, and understood him better than their fiery companions. They were, however, firm friends of James and Sirius, and lines of battle had to be drawn.

At Christmas, the lines were blurred. With so few students, they shared a table with the teachers and house divisions were forgotten. The Hufflepuff girl sat with her sisters, and for lack of a more familiar face, Lily sat with Snape.

Aside from polite chit-chat with the staff, they ate in silence. It was not necessarily awkward, though; silence was Sev's natural state.

It wasn't Lily's. Finally, as if coming to a decision, she seized one of the magical crackers and held it out to him. He regarded it with just the slightest hint of a smirk.

"What's that supposed to be?" he said, rolling his eyes.

Lily rolled hers right back, and prodded him with the end of the cracker. "Think of it as peace offering." He continued to regard her in faint amusement. "Oh, for God's sake, just pull the damn thing, will you?"

He took the end of the cracker and, as apathetically as possible, held onto it while she pulled. There was an explosion of sparks, and a hat with an enormous orange feather fell out. He blinked at it for a minute, then pushed it over towards her. "Yours, I suspect."

"Oh, you're no fun," she retorted. Before he could do anything, she snatched off his wizard's hat and dropped the offending thing on his head.

Snape reached up and removed it cautiously. "I don't think it's really my colour," he said dryly.

"Why not? It's better than green." Green was the colour of house Slytherin, and Snape had to admit the emerald green Quidditch robes his house team wore were really not his colour. But then, he'd never looked very good in any-

thing other than black.

"Aren't you fraternizing with the enemy?" he reminded her mildly.

Lily punched her palm in frustration. "Enemy? What enemy? Since when was this a war?"

"Slytherin and Gryffindor have always been at war. Fact of life," he reminded her. He'd read about the rivalry in all the histories; it stretched all the way back to the original Salazar Slytherin and Godric Gryffindor, two clashing personalities if ever there were.

"I've been watching you," Lily pronounced suddenly. "You're no Slytherin."

"No?" Sev was caught out by her sudden change of tone, but his face didn't show it. "Then you can't have been watching very closely."

"Oh, I know you're a *Slytherin*, but you're not really a Slytherin."

"Ah, well, that cleared it right up."

The corners of her mouth quirked, and to his surprise, his own threatened to do the same. It was surprisingly refreshing to talk to somebody whose sense of humour extended beyond sniggering when someone tripped over.

"I see you," Lily insisted. "You never join in. You're not the same as them. Why do you hang out with them?" she demanded.

Snape shrugged. "Why hang out with anybody? Because they're there."

"You don't have to," she pointed out.

"I don't care," he replied with another shrug.



On Boxing Day, he was sitting in the library, carrying out his original plan of reading the holiday away. Suddenly, something thwacked him across the back of the head. He looked up from his books to see it was Lily.

"You," she said without preamble, "are gonna do me a big favour."

"I am?" he asked dryly.

"You are."

"I just decided this of my own free will?"

"You did. Very generous of you, too."

"That doesn't sound like the me I know."

"You were possessed by the Christmas spirit."

He quirked an eyebrow at her. "I was clearly possessed by something."

She grinned infectiously. "Anyway, the point is, you're gonna do me this really big favour. You... are gonna help me out with my Potions tuition."

"Now, why would I want to do that?" She pulled a face at him. "Christmas spirit notwithstanding," he added.

"Because you're the best," she said with a shrug.

He gave her a cool look. "You think flattery works on me?"

"I think honesty will," she said, her flashing green eyes daring him to argue.

Before he could start to do so, she grinned again and started to walk away. "Anyway, thanks a lot. Tomorrow, ten o'clock in lab four. I'll try not to be late."

"Thoughtful of you," he called wryly after her.

"I'm cool like that," she agreed.



Despite himself, Snape ended up turning up for Lily's self-declared Potions lesson. It worried him a little that he did, because it wasn't a logical choice... but he was curious. And when you were as sharp as Severus Snape, there weren't many things to be curious about. Most people he could read like a crystal ball, so the fact that he couldn't do that with Lily intrigued him.

Lily was apparently serious about wanting to learn. She had brought along a pile of books, and even procured permission to use the lab equipment; Sev could only assume she'd gone straight to Dumbledore to ask, since she wouldn't have stood a chance in hell with Fennel.

“All I need,” she explained, “is someone to help me. I’m not stupid. You know I’m not stupid.” Perhaps wisely, she left no room for Sev to insert a snide comment there. “I could master this, if Fennel could get down off his damn high horse and go over things with me.”

“What makes you think I’ll be any better?” Snape asked, eyebrows raised.

“Because you’re not as bloody-minded as he is. If it’s not working, you’ll find a better way. And I think you can teach me.”

And, almost to his surprise, Sev found she was right. He had never imagined himself as a teacher, would have thought it ridiculous — how could he teach when he found it impossible to comprehend someone might find it difficult to learn?

Instead, he discovered that his uncanny sense for people extended to knowing how to explain things to them. Lily was very bright, but she seemed to have some kind of block about physically preparing a potion. Sev had to use all of his ingenuity to find a way around that block, find new ways of breaking things down and explaining them.

For the first time, he was actually doing something challenging. If learning was easy, helping others to learn was much harder. And,

to his shock, he actually enjoyed it. Lily’s hard won achievements gave him a better kick than any of his own easy victories.

And, as they ducked for cover under a table from an exploding batch of Swelling Solution, he found a strange and almost terrifyingly novel thought echoing through his mind.

A teacher. I want to be a teacher.



Having a mission in life was new to him. Slytherin might be the home of the ambitious, but Snape had never had any desires beyond learning, and continuing to learn. But now he had discovered an even greater hunger — the need to teach.

Of course, hanging out in house Slytherin didn’t give him a great deal of opportunity to do so. Trying to hammer anything into the head of Colin Crabbe was a lost cause, and all slimeballs like Malfoy and Avery wanted to learn were ever-more nasty curses.

Perhaps that was why, when an extremely frustrated Lily ambushed him in a corridor and demanded assistance, he forgot all common sense and agreed to give her another tutoring session.

They met in secret late one evening, something

which Sev found in a twisted way hilarious. Here they were, two young students, sneaking out of their dorms late at night, avoiding their teachers, dodging the caretaker... in order to study.

"You realise if anyone notices we've both snuck out, they'll think we're having a secret affair?" Lily remarked to him as they met up in a corridor. Snape snorted. "That's funny?"

"It really is," he nodded.

"Shut up, greaseball."

"Won't your boyfriend get jealous?"

Lily flushed. "James is not my boyfriend!"

"Oh, then how did you know who I was talking about?" She didn't have an answer for that, so she settled for poking him in the ribs with her wand.

"Shut up, you." She sighed heavily. "You know, I wish you guys would talk. I think James would really like you, if he got to know you."

"And Sirius Black?" he said ironically. They exchanged a look. No, not even a dedicated peacemaker like Lily would try to claim Sirius Black could ever accept a Slytherin into his heart.

"It'll never happen, Lily. They're Gryffindors, I'm a Slytherin. We can't be friends. You'd have to be insane to think it."

"I think you're my friend."

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He was sort of surprised to find he agreed. "Nobody ever tried to call you sane."

"Well, good. Anyone tries to suggest it, I'll come after them with my leg-lock curse."

"Or one of your infamous exploding potions."



So that was how the secret tutoring sessions started. It was not a regular thing; just every month or so, when Fennel's unreasonable demands grew too much, Lily would catch up with him in the library or pass him a note and they would arrange to meet. The rest of the time they barely talked, although Lily would sometimes nod or smile at him in passing. If any Gryffindors noticed, they just assumed it was her naturally sunny nature, being friendly even to the scummy Slytherins.

Snape, of course, remained impassive.

Since neither of them wanted the Gryffindors or the Slytherins to find out, and since Fennel was such an awkward old grouchbag, they got into the habit of breaking into the potions labs to borrow equipment. Sev had a few nifty tricks with locks, and they never used anything that would be missed or left anything out of place. If Fennel suspected something was up, he never

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let on. Truth be told, he seemed entirely too bored with the whole idea of teaching to care.

In fact, Sev wondered what he was even doing still at Hogwarts. He clearly hated being there, and time as a teacher at a school of magic was a springboard to practically any job you could want. So, if Fennel chose to stay instead, there had to be a reason.

He and Lily finally got a hint as to what that was on one of their late-night Potions sessions.

It had started out business as usual. This was the fourth or fifth time they'd met up, and they were getting to be old pros. Sneak out of the dorms, meet by the statue of the one-eyed witch, keep a wary eye out for old Pringle, the caretaker. Creep down to the labs, wait for Sev to cast his unlocking spell, and duck inside. The labs were down in the dungeons, and there was never any chance of somebody being down there late at night.

Except that this time, there was.

Lily froze in midstep, and suddenly clutched hold of his arm. "Sev! Fennel's still in his office!" she hissed, in shock.

Any normal boy would have flown into a well-justified panic at this point.

Sev had never been astonishingly normal. He calmly nodded to Lily, peeked around the

corner of the nearest classroom, and beckoned for her to follow him inside. Lily made to shut the door, but he quickly gripped her arm before she could touch it. He sat down with his back against the wall beside the door, and gestured for her to do the same. This way, they wouldn't be seen from outside, and Fennel wouldn't notice that a door had been moved.

He explained as much to Lily by calmly withdrawing a scroll from his pocket and writing it out for her. Lily shook her head in wonderment at him, but made a pantomime shrug and sat down beside him. Why the hell not?

Sev was growing to like Lily. She was fiery, not icy cool like him, but in some ways they were very alike. Lily might get passionately riled up about things, but she knew when to be pragmatic.

The other advantage of sitting there with the door open, of course, were that they were both able hear Fennel talking. For that was what he was doing, down here in his office in the dungeons in the middle of the night.

Who he was talking to, Sev couldn't tell. Either they were further away, had a very quiet voice, or were using some form of magic to communicate. Since this wasn't any reasonable

place or time for a casual conversation, he was leaning towards the latter.

Fennel, in contrast, was loud and distinctly snappish. "Yes, I know. I can hardly be expected to — Well, not with Dumbledore here!"

Beside him, Lily's bright green eyes grew wide. Sev, with his naturally devious mind, was far less easily shocked.

"I understand. Yes. Golden opportunity. Yes. I realise that. No, of course I haven't. You have to understand the Fletcher boy is very — He provided the chance himself. He's very keen, you know. Asked if he could help out tutoring the first years next week. And how could I refuse?" Fennel gave an unpleasant, sneering little laugh. It was not so much amusement as a scathing recognition of someone else's stupidity. It reminded Sev of Lucius Malfoy.

If Fennel said anything else to his mysterious communicant, it was too soft for Snape to pick up — and he had excellent hearing. A few moments later, and the office door slammed shut. They heard Fennel's footsteps echo along the corridor, and his shadow swept past their own doorway. He didn't look inside.

Lily turned troubled eyes to Snape. "Did he mean Audley Fletcher?"

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"I think so," he said, and his voice was far more certain than the words. Audley Fletcher was a popular, talented seventh year, the son of a famous Auror. If Fennel was planning something that he didn't want to do around Dumbledore, then it was almost certainly something to do with the Dark Arts. And if that was true, the Aurors were logical enemies.

He explained as much to Lily, and she looked worried. "But why Audley? He's just a kid. I mean — well, you know." She remembered that 'just a kid' in this case meant six years older than either of them. "He's not an Auror."

Sev gave a thin-lipped smile that had nothing to do with being amused. "Ah, Lily. Is your little Muggle world so uncomplicated?"

She scowled, half-seriously. "You know, you can be pretty damn offensive when you want to."

"It's a talent," he agreed flatly. Lily sighed.

"I'm not an idiot. I know that just because Audley's not involved doesn't mean somebody wouldn't..." She sighed again. "It's just... rotten, okay." She nibbled at her lower lip worriedly. "What'd you think Fennel's gonna do, Sev? Are they gonna kidnap him, hold him to ransom?"

"Not a chance. They're out to kill him."

Lily jumped in shock. "What? How could you

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possibly know that?"

Sev met her startled gaze with his usual cool mask. "Logic. You heard the same conversation I did; it's pretty clear Fennel's not working alone, and he's not in charge."

"And this leads to murder how?"

"Anyone who can command a powerful wizard like Fennel has more than one servant, and more than enough influence to get them where he needs them. If this is a kidnapping attempt... why farm it out to a Potions expert?"

Lily gasped. "They're gonna poison him!"

"No," said Sev.

"What?" Yet again, she couldn't follow his line of thought.

"Oh, it'll be poison that kills him," he said darkly. "But nobody will know it. They're clever. They don't plan to do this any way that can be traced back to them — that's why it can't happen in front of Professor Dumbledore. They know about him; they know how easily he sees through things."

"But they don't know about you," Lily added. She regarded him from under lowered brows for a long moment. "The way you think... it's pretty damn creepy, I've gotta tell you. Nobody should have to think like that."

"Ah, but they always will," Sev said coolly.

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"And as long as they do, so will I."

"And, thinking like you, what do we do now?"

"What I always do," Snape reminded her. "Watch. And wait. And see what's what."



The next day was a Sunday, which left them time for subterfuge before Audley Fletcher's life was put in danger. A few 'chance' words with Professor Fractalis in a corridor revealed that Dumbledore was coming back from his conference on Wednesday. A 'casual' remark to Professor Parilia, head of house Hufflepuff, revealed that the Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws had Potions Wednesday and Friday. Then he 'bumped into' Lily in the library.

That was, in actuality, the hardest part. He kept his nose firmly in his book whilst Lily surreptitiously tried to persuade James and Sirius to leave her alone. They finally quit when she threatened to have Sirius read through her notes on the Goblin Wars for her.

Lily waited a while more before casually sauntering over to the shelf by his table. "So, done your research yet?" she asked as she pretended to browse.

"Wednesday's the danger zone," he said softly.

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“Dumbledore’ll be back, but not ’til late, and Fennel might chance his hand if he’s desperate. We’re helpless if he’s in with the Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws. We need to make sure Fletcher only comes to our class on the Tuesday.”

“Oh, and how in the hell are we supposed to do that?” Lily demanded irritably.

“Simple. Fletcher’s in an exam year, and he’s studying hard. They won’t let him out of enough lessons to come to all the first year labs. So we just have to make him choose to come to ours.”

“I do believe my question still applies.”

“Who are the most giggly girls in Gryffindor?” he asked her.

She frowned in puzzlement, but answered promptly “Jade Creevy and Helen Beck.”

“Talk to them. Tell them Audley Fletcher’s gonna be sitting in on some of the classes, but he can only come to a few and it might not be ours. Send them to go giggle at him.”

Lily quirked an eyebrow. “You think Fletcher’s gonna be moved by a few lovestruck eleven-year-olds?”

“Yes,” said Snape simply. As always, he knew people. Audley Fletcher was a classic golden boy, handsome Quidditch captain with high marks — the kind of student James Potter

would be in a few years time. But unlike the mostly amiable Potter, Audley Fletcher had a deep-rooted vain streak — and hero-worshipping pre-teens were exactly what *would* prompt him to come along to their Potions lessons.

Lily shrugged, but deferred to Sev’s judgment. As she got up to leave the library, she turned back and said “Hey. D’you want to know the reason you’re still alive right now?”

“I’m sure you’re about to tell me,” he said, not looking up from his history assignment.

“Because you didn’t ask me to be one of those giggling girls for you.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” he said mildly.


“Well, good.”

“After all, I wouldn’t want you to upset your boyfriend.”

It was just as well he’d mastered the charm to stop fast-flying objects.



Sev was not at all surprised to see Audley Fletcher beaming goofily at them from next to Professor Fennel when they filed into class. The contrast between the two was striking; whilst both men would be considered attractive in classical terms, Fennel’s face was distorted into



a perpetual scowl, and Fletcher couldn't stop grinning. The sheer difference that made in the eyes of teenage girls was quite amazing.

Snape, personally, found Fletcher's vapid grin very irritating. Fennel might be unpleasant — and, apparently, embroiled in a murder plot — but at least he was intelligent. Fletcher might be pulling the top grades, but when it came to spontaneous wit he was sorely lacking.

For a change, the Slytherin and Gryffindor boys were near-united by mutual dislike. The girls were all blushing and giggling excitedly, and even icy Narcissa Salenica had an unusual touch of colour to her cheeks. Malfoy, who'd been practically marking his territory ever since he'd met her, was looking deeply annoyed.

Fletcher, as Snape had expected, was completely oblivious to the dozen or so laser glares headed his way. He bumbled his way cheerfully from cauldron to cauldron, excited girls flocking around him.

The only one to remain coolly unimpressed was Lily. James and Sirius were looking smug, as if they personally were somehow to thank for her attitude.

Sev had no time for such petty interplays, however, focusing his attention solely on Fennel.

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The teacher looked annoyed at all the attention Fletcher was getting, but you'd have to know he was up to something to guess it was anything more than his usual irritated attitude.

Whilst the other girls bugged the handsome seventh-year, Lily was playing her part to perfection — bugging Fennel. Every time he looked about ready to move towards his assistant, Lily was there, asking questions — just like she always did in Potions, only more insistently. Most of the time Fennel brushed her off quickly — but even so, it was enough of a distraction to lose him whatever tiny opportunity he'd spotted.

It couldn't last forever, however. Sev had the eyes of a hawk, and he didn't need to devote a fraction of a percent of his attention to the laughably simple potion work. He never took his gaze off Professor Fennel... and he saw when the teacher oh-so-casually let the tiniest drop of some purple solution fall into Sirius Black's cauldron.

Well-chosen, observed the cool, detached part of Snape's brain that always noted such things. A Gryffindor, for the Slytherins had a bad enough reputation to be suspected of doing something to Fletcher deliberately. Sirius

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Black, for he had a history of messing around with magic and trying things he shouldn't. No one would believe it had been anything but a foolish accident.

Sev's brain had already run through the possible purple liquids Fennel could have chosen to add to this particular mix, and come to a conclusion. Any minute now, Sirius' cauldron would hit exactly the right temperature... and its contents would violently explode.

A moment later; "Professor! My potion's gone *green*."

Fennel's eye-rolling sneer looked exactly the same as it always did. "Why am I not surprised, Black? Fletcher! Deal with it."

Audley reluctantly broke away from the trio of girls he was wowing with his Quidditch stories, and came over to Sirius' side. He leaned over the potion to study it more closely. "Now, what do we have here?"

Idiot. Anybody who did that over a potion that was already doing something unexpected deserved whatever they got. However, he doubted Lily would see it that way.

No doubt if it was Lily who had twigged what was about happen, her answer would be to cry out for them all to get back, the potion was

about to explode — because Lily was fundamentally honest. Sev, on the other hand, was fundamentally devious.

He moved in closer to Sirius Black, and fixed his best sneer in place. "What's the matter, Black? Can't make a simple Shrinking Potion? Or are you just sucking up to get your place on the Quidditch team?"

Sirius could always be relied upon to react explosively. His hand flew straight to his wand.

"*Expelliarmus!*" snapped Sev. He judged it perfectly, wrenching the wand from Sirius' grip with enough force that he staggered backwards — straight into his own cauldron.

The brilliant green mixture went everywhere, flooding harmlessly across the floor.



Sev and Lily were probably the only ones who knew the true reason behind Fennel's towering fury. Even Audley Fletcher flinched away from him when he started to rant and rave in earnest.

Sev and Sirius ended up in detention, naturally. So did James and Peter, who'd had the misfortune of standing nearby when Fennel went ballistic.

Sirius had obviously explained to his best friend how Snape had been the cause of it all,

and the two of them spent their detention period sending evil glares in his direction. Peter wasn't quite brave enough to do that, but he sat with them and sort of pretended to be joining in.

Sev had come no closer to guessing why the Sorting Hat had put Pettigrew in Gryffindor. In Remus Lupin, the Gryffindor qualities had been slow to show up because of his quiet voice and polite manner. In Pettigrew, they were simply nonexistent.

James had taken to him, in the manner boys like James Potter took to people they felt sorry for. Peter was fumblingly, pathetically eager to be a part of the gang, with a level of fawning hero-worship Snape found quite sickening.

The sickened feeling was decidedly mutual. Sirius Black was no friend to the Slytherins at the best of times. This, apparently, had been the final straw; now it was personal.

"We'll get you back for this, Snape," he muttered darkly as they finally escaped from the Potions dungeon.

"Oh, of course you will," he sniped back, with his most mocking sneer. He had no use for the friendship of Sirius Black, and his hatred served a purpose. The more the Gryffindors were convinced he was their enemy, the less he actually

had to do to make Malfoy believe that.

He swung by the library on a hunch, to see if Lily had waited for him. She had.

"We have to go to Dumbledore," she said instantly, abandoning their usual pretence of casually discussing homework assignments.

"With what?" Sev refuted. "While we were sneaking about in the middle of the night, we heard something that sounded like Professor Fennel might be planning to do something to Audley Fletcher, and we think he deliberately sabotaged a potion in an attempt to injure him?"

"You don't think all that stuff, you *know*," Lily argued.

"Such confidence you have in me," he noted dryly.

"Such confidence you have in yourself," she countered.

"And it's well-founded."

"If you're that sure, Dumbledore could —"

"Dumbledore could do exactly nothing, without proof."

"Yes, but at least he'd know."

"The more people that know, the more chance Fennel will notice he's being watched. Dumbledore's more than sharp, but he trusts too easily. We have to be spies, and that's not

something you share. The only safe spy is the one who works alone.”

Lily was shaking her head in something like disbelief. “You’re so... how do you live, being so cynical all the time? Not trusting anybody.”

He shrugged. “It’s how I’ve always been.”

“It’s awful,” she said, hugging herself as if the temperature in the room had suddenly dropped.

“It saved Audley Fletcher today,” he reminded her. “It’ll probably save a whole lot more people tomorrow.”

“Yeah,” she said softly, “but who’s gonna save you?”



In the weeks that followed, Professor Fennel and Audley Fletcher acquired two extremely discrete shadows. Most of the time, they were safe enough. Dumbledore was, as usual, seeming close to omnipresent. Fennel was growing steadily more bad-tempered; even the other staff fled from his scowls. Sev wondered if his unseen master was growing impatient.

Lily had convinced the not-exactly-poor Sirius to take out a subscription to the Daily Prophet, claiming that, being from a Muggle family, she wanted to learn about the

wizarding world outside Hogwarts. She did, too, but most of her attention was reserved for the activities of the Aurors.

Auror Fletcher was the current darling of the media, having bust up an entire coven of Dark wizards in Bulgaria. There were troubled stirrings about some new power rising in the world of magic, and in these times the heroics of men like Fletcher were very well received. Sev had read enough to know that the man doted on his only son, and should anything happen to him it would near destroy him. And that destruction would be an incredible blow to public belief in their safety.

So, much as the seventh-year failed to impress him, he kept a look out for the safety of Audley Fletcher. He quickly saw Fennel’s problem; it was almost impossible to find Fletcher alone. He was always surrounded by a crowd of adoring hangers-on, a group into which Fennel could hardly insert himself without being noticed.

So, thinking as he did so how much the idea would horrify Lily, he sat down and started to think like a murderer. It came perhaps entirely too easily.

Another opportunity like the potions tuition could not be relied upon. Yet there was barely

a single place Fletcher set foot without being followed... which left somewhere he wasn't setting foot. The air. Quidditch.

Yes. The more he thought about it, the more it made sense. *If I were planning to hide a murder...*

The question was, was Fennel as smart as he was when it came to planning one?

He shared his theory with Lily.

"At a Quidditch match? In front of all those people?" She worried at her lower lip. "Surely that's too exposed?"

"Where better?" Sev countered. "Hundreds of witnesses to say it was an accident. All it takes is a little creative hexing on his broom..."

"Yeah," said Lily slowly. "Okay. I can buy that. But even if he falls a long way, who's to say he'll be killed, or even badly injured? He could get lucky."

"Doesn't matter if he does. Somebody's fallen a long way, the staff are on hand... who's the logical one to rush to his side?"

"The Potions master," Lily agreed sickly. "God." She shook her head. "You really think that's how he'll do it?"

"It's how I would. — If I was ever planning the perfect murder," he added, perhaps a shade too late. Lily was looking at him oddly.

"I worry about you, you know that?"

"I'm touched," he said dryly, getting to his feet.

"Where are you going?"

"Malachite's office," he explained. "I need to find us a completely untraceable, unnoticeable poison, and somehow I don't think we'll find it in the student library."

As luck — good or ill — would have it, Professor Malachite himself caught the two of them in the act. "Ah, Severus." His tone cooled off noticeably. "And Lily." Obviously he was not exactly thrilled at Sev having extended the invitation to another student. Sev wondered if it was the fact that she was a Gryffindor that irked his housemaster.

"Felt the need for some company, Severus?" he asked dryly.

"It's always good to have someone to bounce your ideas off," he said neutrally.

Lily quickly excused herself, sensing that he'd overstepped his bounds here. "I'm sorry, sir, did you not want anyone else using your books?" he asked after she'd scurried away.

"Not at all, not at all," Malachite quickly backtracked. "Ah... but perhaps Malfoy might be better suited..."

"Oh, I share with him too, sir," he said, trying

to strike the right balance between innocent and sounding like he was acting. "I like to get multiple perspectives."

"Commendable," said Professor Malachite, in a tone that suggested it was anything but. Yes, a touch of inter-house rivalry there for sure.

He glanced at the weighty tome in Sev's hand. "MOSTE POTENT PARALYTICS; a little light reading before bed, Severus?"

"It's as well to be versed on poisons, sir," he pointed out. "Else how would anybody ever discover the antidotes?"

"Quite, quite. Planning on making a name for yourself as a research wizard, hmm?"

"Maybe," he said, neutrally. For some reason, he didn't like the idea of sharing his newfound ambition to teach with Carnus Malachite. The Slytherin head of house might find it a little... unambitious.

He retired to the dorms and read pages and pages about the deadly effects of a few hundred poisons. Lucius and the others read over his shoulder, and tossed about the more disgusting descriptions with glee.

"Wow, these are so cool," grinned Avery, as they all tried to picture exactly what exploding lungs might look like. Sev, however, was look-

ing for something altogether less flashy.

He finally found it, referenced in a brief footnote at the bottom of page 924. Called 'Callahan's Brew', it was a poison that had been used by unscrupulous wizards in the Dark Ages. Back then, when the rules about interacting with Muggles had been far less strict, it had been a favoured cushy job to act as 'court wizard' to some minor king or other. However, kings could be quite unreasonable at times, and the odd ambitious wizard would need a way to bump off their 'master' without provoking the slightest suspicion of magical involvement.

Enter the long-ago Callahan. He had perfected a poison that was the complete opposite of all the flashy brews Dark wizards delighted in. This one was subtle, quick, untraceable, and damn near invisible. The only drawback was the antidote was something any halfway competent wizarding student could brew up... but that would require them knowing in advance that the poison was going to be used.

Sev was a great deal more than halfway competent. And he strongly suspected that if Fennel read the same books he did, he too would have come upon Callahan's brew.

Lily was unconvinced. "Okay... out of all

the millions and billions of possible poisons in the world, you're betting Audley's life that he'll use this one?"

"Yes."

"And you're sure of this because...?"

He met her gaze coolly. "It's what I'd use."

They stared at each other for a long moment. Lily was the first to look away.



Audley Fletcher was Gryffindor Quidditch captain. That gave Lily ample excuse to be at his matches, especially since she had shown up at a number of the team's practises, even before they knew Audley's life might be in danger.

This, Sev suspected — however much she denied it — had more to do with James Potter's fanaticism for the game than any wild passion of her own. James and Sirius had attended every practise going, fielding escaped Quaffles and chattering loudly about how they would be the stars of the team when they were allowed to enter try-outs next year.

That made his own job only harder. Not only was he well known to be deeply disinterested in the sport, but he was a Slytherin to boot. It would stretch belief for him to show up to

support his own team, and he'd stick out like a troll at a tea party at Gryffindor vs. Hufflepuff or Ravenclaw.

It was actually Sirius Black's wild enthusiasm for the game that provided a solution. On the eve of the first game of the annual Quidditch cup, Gryffindor vs. Hufflepuff, he had donned a scarlet scarf over his uniform, and a magical badge that said 'Fletcher for the cup!'

This get-up was fondly tolerated by Gryffindor head of house Professor Vitae, but when it came to Herbology, a little bit of well-placed sniping did the job. "Professor! Can you tell Sirius Black to take that stupid scarf off? He's frightening the plants."

The Slytherins snickered. Professor Parilia, a small, dumpy red-headed witch, was extremely good-natured and easy-going. She was also head of house Hufflepuff, and a big Quidditch fan.

"Come now, Sirius. Do you think that's really appropriate wear for the classroom?"

"It's a greenhouse," Sirius scowled, but he took the scarf off. He shot Snape an evil look as he folded it up and put it away.

Later that lesson, Snape put a subtle little enchantment on his badge, so it read 'Fletcher for the cut' instead of 'Fletcher for the cup'.

The Slytherins got a good fifteen minutes' amusement out of that until Remus Lupin finally pointed it out to him.

Sirius threw down his baby Flutterby Bush, which quivered indignantly. "Oh, very funny," he snarled at the Slytherins. "Oh, that's so mature. What'll it be next? Writing 'Gryffindor stinks' on the toilet walls?"

"Oh, we don't need to do that," said Lucius Malfoy smarmily. "After all, everybody knows you stink." It wasn't a particularly funny line, but his gang of cronies bust-up laughing. Sev pulled one of his trademark tight-lipped smiles, which seemed to infuriate Sirius twice as much as the outright laughter.

"You're just jealous," he accused, practically foaming at the mouth. "You can't take it that we've got the best team in the school, and you're going down."

"Yeah, we're going down. We're going down to the Trophy Room to collect the Quidditch cup!" grinned Avery.

"You? Yeah, right. The only way you're getting your hands on that cup is if you steal it. Which, hey, knowing you, you'll probably try."

"Yeah, it'll be like stealing. After all, where's the sport in beating a team as crappy as yours?"

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At this point Sev stepped back in, sneering. "You're going to lose, Black," he whispered darkly. "You're going to lose, and we're gonna be there to see it. And every match, if you're not too busy looking at the floor in shame, you can look up and see us grinning at you. Because we are way out of your league. We are way out of your league, and you are gonna get thrashed tomorrow. Hufflepuff'll beat you, and Ravenclaw'll beat you, and when it comes to Slytherin... well, you might as well just tell your boys to stay back in the dressing room. The score'll be the same, but it'll be much less embarrassing for you."


And after that, of course, there was no way in hell anybody from house Slytherin was going to miss a single Gryffindor match.

Snape found Gryffindor vs. Hufflepuff breathtakingly dull. There was something to be said, he supposed, for mastering the difficult art of flying a broomstick, but zipping around throwing balls through hoops? What the hell for?

Fennel wasn't even there. Sev soon spotted the reason; Professor Dumbledore was right there in the front row, cheering as overexcit-

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edly as any twelve-year-old. He was normally far too busy to attend anything but the finals, but he'd obviously decided to make an exception for the first match of the season.

Gryffindor team were, to the Slytherins' dismay, every bit as good as Sirius had painted them. They were absolutely massacring Hufflepuff, tossing the Quaffle through hoops as if the defenders weren't even there.

However, a surprise twist soon had Malfoy and Co. crowing with delight. Audley Fletcher, Seeker, spotting a few girls beaming up at him, wasted a few crucial moments to wave — at the exact same time his Hufflepuff counterpart caught a flash of the Golden Snitch.

Even so, it was very, very close. Fletcher realised his mistake in a fraction of a second, and he flew like a maniac. Watching him twist through the air like a corkscrew, Sev realised Fennel had missed a diamond opportunity to knock the boy from his broom. Everybody but the deliberately unimpressed Slytherins had their hearts in their throats.

The Hufflepuff boy, though, reacted with desperation. His fingers closed around the Snitch when the Gryffindor captain's were literally half an inch away. Even that victory, though, was

overshadowed by the crowd's awe as Fletcher effortlessly peeled away to avoid a collision.

Hufflepuff had got the Snitch, but it wasn't enough to win them the game. By sheer virtue of their outstanding Quaffle-work, Gryffindor still came out of the game seventy points ahead.

Sirius and James were shouting down the Slytherins triumphantly, but Malfoy snarled right back. "Oh, right, right! Wow, your team can get a ball through a hoop — a Muggle could do that! You just wait 'til you're facing a team that actually knows how to defend."

"Oh, you'd better know how to do that, 'cause it's all you're gonna be doing!" James snapped back.

"Your Seeker needs glasses, Potter!" Malfoy shouted back. "Why don't you lend him yours? Oh, wait, no. You don't wanna give Audley Fletcher anything that reflects — he'll be stuck in front of it for weeks!" The Slytherins howled with laughter.

Malfoy, though, was in a very dark mood as they stormed away. "Bloody mudblood Gryffindors," he cursed. "Think they're so goddamn brilliant. They need taking down a peg or two."

"You wait 'til next week," Avery piped up eagerly. "Our team'll tromp 'em. They haven't got a prayer!"

"Oh, I'm not just talking about Quidditch," said

Malfoy slowly. A wicked grin started to spread across his features. "Oh, that's not the half of it."

And, dark mood suddenly forgotten, he wandered off, humming to himself. Snape stood watching him go; impassive on the outside, on the inside... troubled.



The next match to be played was Gryffindor vs. Slytherin which, as always, promised to be the grudge match of the season. Slytherin had soundly beaten Ravenclaw two weeks before, but there had been a bit of a stink kicked up over the dirty tactics on display. And that was just standard play — this time, it was personal.

Sev felt a buzz of certainty that was almost like second sight. This was, traditionally, the match where students were most likely to hex each other, commit fouls, and generally resort to all sorts of deviousness. If ever there was a good window for an attack on Fletcher, this was it.

The antidote to the poison had to be brewed freshly the day it was used. Sev had been keeping the ingredients ready to go at a moments' notice, but on match day he actually made up a batch and concealed it in the inner pocket of his robes. "What's that?" asked Colin Crabbe curiously.

"Oh, just a little something I might use at the match today," he said with an evil smile. Malfoy or Avery would have twisted his arm mercilessly for details, but Colin didn't have the imagination. He just laughed and went back to gazing longingly at Malfoy's designer broomstick.

Technically, first years weren't supposed to have their own brooms — not until they'd had at least six months' worth of flying tuition, anyway — but it was more a guideline than a real rule. A number of the better-off students from wizarding families had brought brooms from home, and the teachers didn't bother to confiscate them.

Remembering who else happened to have a broom of his own, Sev had an idea. At lunch that day, he suggested to Malfoy that he arrange to show up for the match riding his own very flashy, very expensive broom. "That'll show those pathetic Gryffindors."

He wasn't sure exactly what it was supposed to show them, but Malfoy seemed to like the idea. He liked any idea that involved showing other people how what his family had was better than anybody else's.

Then, in their usual 'chance' meeting in the library, he leaked the news to Lily. "Make sure it gets around to James and Sirius," he instructed.

“Okay.” She hesitated. “Um... why?”

“I want your boyfriend to be there with his broom. Fletcher’s going to take a fall, and all the antidotes in the world won’t save him if he breaks his neck. You keep an eye on him all through the match, and point it out to James the second he starts to fall. Trust me, he’ll be in the air and after him before you can blink.”

That was true enough; James Potter was nothing if not impetuous. Others might think his tendency to leap to the rescue heroic, but Snape was unimpressed. A truly smart person would see situations coming and prevent them before they even arrived.

“Okay. He’s not my boyfriend, but we’ve had this argument before so let’s just skip that. Why James?”

“He’s exactly what we need. If he’s the one heroically rescuing Fletcher, nobody’s watching me.”

“You think it’s gonna be this match.”

“Yes.”

“Why — No, wait. Don’t tell me. Because it’s when you’d do it.”


He shrugged and offered her a thin smile. “Exactly.”

The plan had worked beautifully, as he knew it would. People were so easy to manipulate.

Malfoy’s dramatic entrance was punctured when James and Sirius also turned up on their brooms, but he still got to call it a victory because their brooms were so much older and cheaper than his. James responded by going into a display of flashy acrobatics they all knew Malfoy couldn’t possibly match. However, the Slytherins got the last laugh when Professor Vitae called him down.

“Now, James, how about we leave the showing off to the actual players, hmm?” she said, although her tone was affectionate. The Gryffindor head of house could never muster a great deal of sternness, and she was very fond of James. He and Sirius got away with murder under her lax eye, to the Slytherins’ disgust.

Whilst everybody else was watching James and Malfoy, Sev studied the crowd. Dumbledore wasn’t there, but the rest of the staff were... including Fennel. Nobody seemed to think it particularly odd that he’d turned up for this match and not the others; he had been a Slytherin in his own school days, and the rivalry between the two houses was by no means restricted to current students.



All the players were in place; the game was about to begin. But the game Sev was watching was not the same one everybody else was.

Whilst the crowd oohed and aahed, Sev watched Fennel. Across the other side of the pitch, Lily kept her eyes firmly fixed on Audley Fletcher. If James hadn't been so wrapped up in the match, he'd probably have been jealous.

Play was fast and furious, eliciting gasps of delight and dismay every few seconds. Brilliant goals were scored, daring strategies tried, incredible defences mounted. Sev didn't see any of it, only heard the commentator's words. Every iota of his attention was focused on the Potions teacher. Lily might be keeping her own watch, but he trusted nobody but himself to read the signs exactly right.

The commentator, Greg McDonald, suddenly sucked in a sharp breath. "The Snitch! He's seen the Snitch!"

Sev's were the only eyes that weren't turned to the sky — and the only ones that saw Saxius Fennel suddenly tense and reach for his wand. This was it. Sev got to his feet.

"Where are you going?" gaped Avery beside him.

"I need a drink."

"But — the Snitch!"

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"He's a Gryffindor. He'll miss," said Snape coolly, and threaded his way past him down towards the bottom of the stands.

Only now did he first glance upwards, and catch a glimpse of Audley Fletcher wrestling with a suddenly errant broomstick. There were gasps as people started to realise something was wrong, but nobody moved.

Nobody except Lily, who Sev saw elbow James pointedly and say something that was lost in the noise. James looked startled for an instant, and then he suddenly grabbed his broom.

The gasps quadrupled as James launched himself into the air, zooming up towards the falling Fletcher. None of his confusedly circling teammates had thought to try something so crazy as to try and stop his fall.

James Potter, though, had just enough of a mix of recklessness and skill to try it. He whipped around and matched his broom to Fletcher's, barrelling down towards the ground at the same speed. It could only be seconds before impact.

Completely letting go with his hands, James steered the broom with his knees as he reached out to grab Audley's outstretched hand. There was a gasp of dismay as he missed... then he

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reached out again and connected.

Sev actually heard the crunch as Audley's arm was wrenched out of its socket by his sudden dead weight. His broom fell away from him, and Potter's was suddenly taking the weight of both of them. James tried desperately to pull up, but all he could do was slow the descent. They both hit the ground with a thump, Audley crying out in pain.

Fennel might not have counted on James' intervention, but either he'd decided it didn't matter or he was too desperate to abandon his plan at this late stage. In the sudden mass rush towards the two fallen boys, he was first off the starting blocks. Snape, having already woven his way down to the front of the crowd, was right on his tail.

"Here, drink this." Fennel quickly pushed a vial of potion against Fletcher's mouth.

Even here, now, in this virtually important moment, the cool and collected part of Sev's brain was observing the brilliance of it. Everything seemed perfectly, one hundred percent natural; the Potions master diving to the rescue of the injured student.

And now, for the third actor in their little play; keen young first-year trying to impress his Potions master with his skill.

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"Professor! I have the Numbweed potion here," he said, pulling out the little bottle of antidote. "Should I — ?"

Fennel looked for a moment startled, but quickly recovered. "Um — yes, by all means." Numbweed was a general anaesthetic that would dull pain without interfering with any other kind of medication. For the record, that *was* what was in the bottle — in addition to the antidote.

Numbweed — proper, non-altered Numbweed — would have no effect whatsoever on the poison. Fennel would know that — and he would also know that letting a student feed an untested potion to Fletcher gave him an absolutely perfect scapegoat if the boy suddenly died.

Always play to other people's best interests, thought Snape cynically, as he poured a dribble of the liquid into Audley's mouth.

For a moment, nothing happened. Then Fletcher started to cough. The coughs racked his athletic frame with ever-increasing strength and frequency, and Sev caught the flare of triumph in Fennel's eyes. Then Audley twisted to one side, and threw up. Repeatedly.

All thoughts of subterfuge were forgotten, as realisation dawned across Fennel's face. Fletcher had brought up Sev's potion, the one

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that had gone before it, and just about anything else he'd ingested in the last eight hours. The poison was out of his system.

Fennel snapped around to stare at Snape. Sev stared right back, with his most unreadable expression in place. After a moment, the Potions master spun on his heel and stormed away.



Sev caught hell for his little 'stunt'. Professor Vitae was furious, convinced that he'd deliberately given Fletcher something to make him throw up.

"Is this a *time* for jokes?" she raged. "Is this a *time* for silly little schoolboy rivalries? He could have been *very seriously injured*."

Audley had turned out to have nothing worse than a dislocated shoulder — and a very queasy feeling after the reaction of the two potions inside him. He was spending the night in the infirmary, under the watchful eye and clucking tongue of Madame Florence.

Fortunately, Professor Malachite turned up to rescue Snape. "Come now, Ellida. It's been a very stressful day for you, but you're being unfair. You mustn't take it out on the boy. The potion was a little too strong — it was an honest

mistake. No harm done, hmm?"

Still muttering darkly, Professor Vitae allowed herself to be led away. But as he left, Malachite threw a calculating gaze over his shoulder at Sev. In return, he sent the same carefully blank look he'd given Fennel.

Malachite wasn't fooled. They both knew Sev didn't make 'honest mistakes'. Especially not when it came to Potions.

His fellow Slytherins had reached the same conclusion — with an altogether different outlook. They threw an impromptu party for him in their dorm room, and Malfoy clapped him happily on the shoulder.

"Brilliant, Severus, brilliant!" He gave a wickedly triumphant smile. "And they couldn't prove a thing!" Snape suspected he thought Sev had not just used the potion but cursed Fletcher off his broom as well.

When the others had grown tired of celebrating, Malfoy spoke to Sev again. "That really was an inspired bit of trickery, Severus. I know some people who would love to hear about it." He gave a cold smile. "We're gonna need people like you, if we're ever gonna put wizardry in this country back where it belongs."

Sev just nodded, and wondered if Malfoy's

mysterious 'people' could be traced back to Professor Fennel's unseen master.

The plan had gone off almost perfectly. James Potter had been applauded as a hero, and Sev's part in the whole affair had been grossly misunderstood... by all except one. The most important one. Fennel had to know his cover was blown. You couldn't turn up and cure the Callahan's Brew poison by accident.

The way he saw it, Fennel had two options. Disappear before he could be caught—or kill Fletcher and then disappear before he could be caught. Given that his master didn't seem to be particularly tolerant, Sev's money was on the latter.

And that meant tonight.

Sev waited impatiently for the rest of his dorm to fall asleep. Colin started snoring abominably as soon as his head touched the pillow, but Malfoy took much longer to stop discussing Quidditch and curses with Avery. Neither of them, though, were quite as much a night-hawk as Severus Snape, and after a while he was the last one left awake.

The statue that took Slytherin passwords was the only one to mark his passage, and all it did was wink at him. It had seen him leave in the night before, for his secret lessons with Lily,

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and besides — house Slytherin was the traditional home of sneaking about.

However, he was not the only sneak in Hogwarts. He bumped into Lily in a side corridor, and only just managed to magically disarm her before she threw a leg-lock curse on him.

"Sorry," she hissed nervously.

"Going to the infirmary?" he asked her. She nodded.

"I should have guessed you'd be on your way there. I could've stayed in bed." He knew that she wouldn't have done so even if he'd specifically asked her to. "I figured Fennel might try to do something while Fletcher's still stuck in sick bay."

"You're finally starting to think like me," Sev told her. She grimaced.

"You say that like it's a good thing."

The two of them crept through the corridors together. It was almost like one of their usual midnight expeditions, except for the tension in the air. Sev's ability to plan might be unsurpassed, but even he had to fit himself around other people sometime. What if Malfoy's inability to get to sleep had delayed him too much?

The infirmary was no difficulty to get into. Audley was the only patient, and he was in no particular danger — at least not from his

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injuries. Madame Florence had doubtless long since wandered off to bed.

Motioning for Lily to guard the door, Sev stepped in and moved towards the bed. Fletcher looked still. Very still. Was he...?

Suddenly, he let out a huge, shuddering snore, like one of Colin Crabbe's. By the door, Lily let out a nervous giggle. Snape called her over to him. "Quickly. Lie down on one of the beds, and pretend to be another patient."

She frowned. "What if Fennel knows Audley's the only one here?"

"Then you're caught. Which is why I'll be hiding elsewhere." He stepped back into an alcove, and mumbled a little charm he'd found in one of Professor Malachite's books. It wasn't invisibility, exactly — that was a much more complex spell — it just made him... shadowy. He could be seen, but only by someone who was specifically looking.

He stood in the corner, motionless, and steeled himself to wait as long as necessary. Lily seemed less comfortable, shifting nervously, and fiddling with her wand under the covers. After a while she stilled, and Sev wondered if she'd actually gone to sleep.

In the minutes that followed, Sev's eyes roamed

over every inch of the darkened infirmary. They grew adjusted to the darkness, and he committed every detail of the view to memory.

Anybody else — less observant, less trusting of their own eyes — might have dismissed the tiny flicker in the moonlight spilling through the window as nothing. An optical illusion, a trick of the light.

Not so Sev. His muscles tensed, and he scanned the room even harder for another flicker of motion that would betray what he was sure he had seen — somebody moving through the room in an invisibility cloak.

Trusting his own senses, he was almost expecting it when Fennel abruptly appeared out of the air, the silvery cloak rippling into a pool at his feet. Lily was not, and he saw her bundled-up form flinch with surprise — but she didn't make a sound.

Well done, Lily.

Fennel's face was twisted into an even more ugly expression than usual. He looked down upon the sleeping Fletcher with equal parts venom and triumph, and started to raise his wand...

Perhaps, in her nervousness, Lily couldn't think of a single spell to stop him. Perhaps she just feared her own magic wouldn't be enough, and neither would Sev's. Or perhaps a little bit

of James Potter's influence was rubbing off.

Seemingly without stopping to think, Lily jumped off of the bed and tackled Fennel from behind. Either by design or sheer chance, the sheet she had been disguised under went over his head.

Sev had his wand at the ready, but there was no way to fire off a hex without it rebounding onto Lily. If he'd been James Potter, he'd have dived into the fray himself, but he wasn't that stupidly heroic.

In any halfway decent fairytale, the eleven-year-old girl with a sheet should have no problem trapping — and probably tying up — the ruthless evil wizard. Sev not being a great believer in fairytales, he wasn't phenomenally surprised when it didn't turn out that way.

Fennel threw off the sheet with a curse, and the valiantly struggling Lily with little more effort. He loomed over her with a sneer. "Ah, it's you. Strange. I would have expected it to be your stunt-riding boyfriend. Still, little matter."

Lily opened her mouth to make the traditional good-guy retort, but Fennel was having none of it. "*Stupefy!*" Lily slumped to the ground, stunned.

Fennel made the exact same expression he used in class when a student did something stupid,

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and turned back to the sleeping Audley Fletcher. Sev was just preparing to step out of the shadows and let loose a curse of his own, when a voice from the doorway startled them both.

"Hey! What the hell's going on?"



It was James Potter. He stood in the doorway still in his sleep-gear, eyes wide behind his glasses and hair even more ruffled than usual. "Hey! What did you do to her?"

Fennel rolled his eyes in disbelief. "Oh, good God, another one." He raised his wand to fire off a curse, but James was quicker on the offensive than Lily.

"*Expelliarmus!*"

The spell was not strong enough to overcome a master wizard like Fennel, but it was enough to make him briefly fumble with his wand. James, foolishly, chose to rush to Lily's side instead of try another spell.

"Lily! Are you okay?"

Sev could have told him not to waste his breath; the Stun spell would last a long time if it wasn't magically lifted. Realising she couldn't hear him, James twisted around, but Fennel was already pointing his wand triumphantly.

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“Care to try your luck, Mr. Potter?”

Unnoticed, Sev stepped out of the shadows behind the pair of them. His shadow-spell was falling away quickly, but he had a cure for that. Ducking over to Fennel’s discarded invisibility cloak, he tugged it over his head.

Unbelievably, James was actually raising his wand for another spell. But even his lightning reflexes weren’t enough this time. “*Stupefy!*” He slumped to the ground beside Lily.

Fennel shook his head, and moved over to the door to check no one had heard them. Audley Fletcher, amazingly, hadn’t even stirred. Sev couldn’t tell if he was charmed to keep him from waking, or just an incredibly heavy sleeper.

He’d hoped, when James had showed up, that this could have been fixed without him having to tip his hand. He should have known better than to rely on somebody else. Now he’d have to reveal himself — unless...

He looked across the room for a likely object. Ah! Under the cloak, he pointed his wand arm and whispered “*Accio beaker!*” The empty glass beaker on a table by the wall leapt into the air and sped towards him.

Before it could complete its journey, he reversed the Summoning Charm with a Banish-

ing Spell. Caught between two conflicting spells, the beaker came to its own conclusions — and fell to the ground in an explosion of glass.

Fennel jumped as if he’d been cursed, and whipped round. “Who’s there?” he demanded furiously. “Peeves? If that’s you —”

Had Sev not been busy, he would have stopped to consider the ridiculousness of Fennel shouting at the obnoxious poltergeist for interrupting his murder plot. However, unlike James Potter, he knew when to take advantage of a distraction.

Still invisible, he glided over to the unconscious Lily and touched the end of his wand against her shoulder. “*Enervate!*” he whispered, whilst Fennel was still staring round the room in furious anxiety.

Lily pushed painfully to her feet, and made as if to speak; Sev stepped directly behind her and covered her mouth. She struggled, but he whispered directly against her ear “It’s me.” She stopped trying to fight him, and allowed him to pull her down to the ground again where she wouldn’t be seen.

“I’ll wake James,” he whispered. “Keep him quiet. Use the Stun charm on Fennel — both of you, together, and I’ll do the same.”

She nodded in mute understanding, and Sev

dropped to his knees beside James. “*Enervate.*” he muttered, and then he quickly ducked out of the way before he could be aware there was an invisible person lurking over him.

Lily, he was gratified to see, performed perfectly. She gagged James as Sev had done her, and communicated in sign language the plan. Then she did a three-two-one count, holding her hand up so that Sev could also see.

Fennel, finally satisfied and turning back towards the sleeping Audley, never knew what hit him.

“*STUPEFY!*”

And in that roared command, who was to say if there were two voices or three?

“Get Dumbledore,” James urged Lily, going over to stare down at the unconscious Potions master. As she ran out of the door, Sev in his invisibility cloak brushed close by her ear.

“Don’t tell anyone I was here,” he asked her quietly.



Still wearing the cloak, Sev watched events unfold from the sidelines. Dumbledore and half the senior staff came charging up the corridor, and Fennel was carried away to the

dungeons by Hagrid.

James and Lily were fussed over, hugged, and inspected for injuries by every single person on the room. Sev was extremely glad to be out of it.

It was only about twenty minutes later that anybody actually thought to wake Audley Fletcher. He sat up with a stretch and a yawn, and said blankly “Why is everybody in the infirmary?”

The two young heroes were taken into Dumbledore’s office, where they sat sipping hot chocolate and were bombarded with questions. Their head of house, Professor Vitae, couldn’t seem to stop giving them comforting hugs; Lily didn’t seem to mind, but James was looking decidedly embarrassed. Professor Fractalis was stuttering incoherently, and only Dumbledore and Malachite seemed calm.

“Tell us again what happened, Lily,” Dumbledore urged.

Lily had given no word to Sev that she would do as he asked, but she did anyway. She told the truth, but not all of it; carefully editing out Sev’s involvement. “I just... at the Quidditch match, I was watching Professor Fennel. I thought, it seemed to me that he tried to poison Audley! I mean, he fell off his broom and everything, and we all know he’s never done that. It was just

something in his expression... and then Audley sicked it up, and he seemed so furious..."

"So you were worried about Audley, and you went to check on him in the middle of the night?" said Dumbledore gently.

Lily nodded emphatically. "I hid under the covers, and Professor Fennel came in, and he had his wand out ready to use a curse. I didn't know what else to do, so I just jumped out and tried to stop him, and he Stunned me." She frowned prettily. "And I guess that's when James arrived."

"Ah yes, Mr. Potter. Pray tell us why you were roaming the corridors late at night? On a similar mission of mercy?" said Malachite dryly. James and Sirius' mischievous exploits were already somewhat infamous.

"I was... I was..." For some reason, James glanced over at Dumbledore for reassurance. "I was going to check on somebody." Malachite opened his mouth to query him, but the headmaster waved him quiet.

"I know what this is about. Tell your story, James."

As James launched into a rambling explanation of how he'd heard a commotion in the infirmary and gone to investigate, Sev filed away the odd reaction thoughtfully. James Potter was up

to something in the middle of the night that the headmaster knew about. Interesting...

"— and so I tried to use the Disarmament Charm, but it didn't really work, and he Stunned me, too. But I guess the Stun must have been wearing off of Lily, and then she woke me up and we both cursed Fennel at the same time."

Dumbledore nodded slowly, digesting that. "And there was nobody else involved?" he asked, with sudden sharpness.

"Nobody," said James confidently. Lily didn't answer, and Dumbledore gave one of his unreadable half-smiles. Snape would swear that, just for a second, his eyes flickered over to where Sev was hiding under the invisibility cloak.

Professor Vitae hustled the two Gryffindors back to their respective dorms, still fussing over them loudly. Malachite lingered a moment, sipping his mug of chocolate thoughtfully. "What was that with the Potter boy?" he asked, arching one fine brow.

Dumbledore smiled mysteriously. "Nothing you need to concern yourself with, Carnus."

"Ah, but I am concerned," said the Defence Against the Dark Arts master. "You're too lenient sometimes, Albus. Let the children have their fun, by all means, but don't let them run riot."

"I hardly call foiling a murder plot 'running riot', Carnus," Dumbledore pointed out lightly.

"Yes." Malachite looked thoughtful. "Poor, deluded old Fennel. What do you suppose he thought he was doing?"

"I find, when it comes to matters of murder, that looking for logical answers seldom works," said the headmaster pensively.

"Yes." Malachite sighed. "Well, they'll get nothing out of him once the Dementors get hold of him."

"Dementors?" Dumbledore looked angry.

"The boy's father's an Auror, Albus," he pointed out. "He'll be furious — they'll drag Fennel off to Azkaban before you can blink, and what's left of him won't be much use to anybody."

"Fools," said the headmaster, in a dark tone Sev had never heard from him before. "The Ministry refuses to listen to the evidence that mounts before it. This is an evil time, Carnus. The darkness is ascending."

"Shadows, Albus," said Malachite reassuringly. "It's just shadows. It'll all come to nothing in the end."

"Perhaps," said Dumbledore, pushing around a few marshmallows on a plate. "Perhaps." But as Sev snuck out of the office on Malachite's heels, the

headmaster's troubled expression stayed with him.



It was only a handful of weeks from the end of term, and the remaining potions lessons were cancelled — to everyone's delight.

Lily and James were lauded as heroes. Everyone crowded around them, demanding to know the exact details of everything that had happened that night. Most of the students were almost indecently gleeful that their hated Potions master had turned out to be a would-be-murderer.

For a while Audley Fletcher was happy basking in the glory of being the intended victim, but fairly soon he was telling an all-new version of the story where he heroically faced down a rabid Fennel, and James and Lily were relegated to supporting characters only.

Content to be very firmly out of the limelight, Sev stuck with the Slytherins. None of them were half so thrilled as the rest of the school at how things had turned out. Malfoy was disgusted at the idea of James Potter playing the hero, and was heard to mutter in the secrecy of the dorm how it would have been better for all of them if Fennel had succeeded. After listening to Fletcher going on about his own brilliance, it

was worryingly difficult to disagree.

Sev kept the invisibility cloak, hiding it away in a secret compartment even Malfoy didn't know he had. He had a feeling this thing with Fennel was only the tip of the iceberg, and being able to sneak around unseen could be very useful in the near future...

He avoided Lily for as long as possible, but eventually she managed to throw off her crowd of admirers and gawkers to corner him in a corridor.

"You. Come with me." She dragged him off to a quiet corner of the dungeons. With the potions lessons all cancelled, nobody wanted to go down there. The dungeons were dark and dank at the best of times, and in summer most of the students found them unbearable. Sev, personally, rather liked them. He did most of his best thinking in the dark.

"Okay. It's time to tell me what you're playing at," Lily demanded.

"I don't know what you mean," he said lightly.

"You always know what I mean," she said, with a pointed look. And how could he argue? "I did what you asked!" she exploded. "I kept secret about your part in this. I had to lie to a lot of my friends! So the least you can do is tell me why."

"I would have thought that was obvious," he

said quietly. His soft, cool tone was a marked counterpoint to her impassioned ranting. "For the same reason I kept quiet all along. I'm the observer, Lily. I have to remain on the sidelines, if I'm ever to see anything at all."

"There's a difference between 'on the sidelines' and 'on the other side'!" she shouted. "They all hate you, Sev! They all hate you because you're one of the 'evil Slytherins', and I want to tell them all how completely wrong they are about you and you won't let me!"

Sev remained impassive. "I can live with their enmity, Lily."

She scowled, looking just about ready to spit. "If you only told them —"

"You can't tell them, Lily," he insisted firmly.

She shook her head at him. "This is crazy. You know the only reason they don't like you is because they think you never care about anybody. If they knew what you'd done, they'd all be your friends!"

"I don't need friends."

"Everybody needs friends, Severus," she shot back. "Even a cold fish like you."

Snape gave a humourless laugh. "Oh, wouldn't it be nice to be that childish and innocent? It's not about friends, Lily."

"Then what is it about?" she demanded.

"Enemies." He held her gaze, suddenly deadly serious. "There's something coming, Lily. The Ministry of Magic might not believe it, but Dumbledore knows it — and so do I. This is about more than just one potions teacher cracking up and hexing a student." He paused for a second. "The dark is coming, Lily. And if we don't have somebody right there where the dark is thickest watching for it, it's gonna be too late."

Lily's ire faded into something approaching resignation. "And you think that person's you?" she asked.

"I'm the only one it can be, Lily," he told her. "I'm the only one that knows what to watch for... and the only one that has a chance at getting on the inside. So right now, the worst thing I can have is friends. I need enemies, because all they understand is enemies. I need them to believe that I'm as bitter and twisted up and jealous as they are. So as of right now, I'm turning my back on friends." He hesitated for a fraction of an instant. "And that includes you."

He turned, and walked back up the steps and out of the dungeon without looking back.

That was the last time Sev spoke to Lily that year.

SECOND SIGHT



THE CHAOS OF PLATFORM NINE and three-quarters was incredible compared to the quiet of life with his uncle. However, Severus Snape was still glad to be going back to school — not that you'd have known it to look at him.

His mother's brother had reacted to his return with vague surprise, as if he'd already forgotten that he'd raised an orphaned nephew from the age of six. In truth, Sev had done much of the raising himself, and would rather have this amiable lack of interest than any amount of smothering enthusiasm. But after having the facilities of Hogwarts at his disposal, even his uncle's extensive library seemed too small to him. He was itching to get back to Professor Malachite's private book collection and read up on the Dark Arts.

Sev was exceptionally quick, and magically far in advance of his tender age of twelve. There was no disguising that he was bright, but the true extent of his brilliance he preferred to keep to himself.

Silently observing whilst drawing no attention was his trademark. It was a tactic that had come under some fire last year; definite lines were being drawn as disquieting changes swept over the wizarding world. If he stayed on the sidelines this time, he'd never learn anything until it was too late.

So right now, Severus Snape was very much in the thick of things. And that meant he had to be very, very careful what he said and did when there were witnesses.

Case in point; the pretty red-haired girl forging determinedly through the crowd towards him. Lily; the closest thing to a friend he'd made at Hogwarts. He had explained to her in great detail at the end of last year why he was going to have to avoid her from now on. And, since he knew her so well, he knew she wasn't about to take a blind bit of notice.

A crowded platform was hardly the place to have the kind of discussion she might want. He tried to vanish into the crowd, but she'd already seen him.

"Severus! Don't think you can avoid me," she warned darkly, catching him up. He shot her a very sharp look, and pointedly turned away.

"Hey!" she reached out and grabbed his arm

to turn him back towards her.

At that point, a familiar drawing voice interrupted.

"Slumming with the animals, Severus?" Lucius Malfoy made a 'tsk, tsk' noise with his tongue and looked Lily up and down with a sneer. She was wearing her Muggle clothes, whereas Lucius was in dark robes despite the rules about not drawing attention at the station.

Lily matched him sneer for sneer. "I can see why you don't like animals, Malfoy. It must be so disturbing for you to be around anything warm-blooded." She gave him an evil smile and flounced off.

Malfoy, irked at being put down, turned to frown at Sev. "Talking to mudbloods now, Severus?" he asked, with a definite chill to his tone.

Sev mentally cursed Lily. What she didn't seem to realise was that just because Malfoy might be bigoted and cruel, that did *not* mean he was unintelligent. Still, in deviousness he was no match for Snape.

"She seems to think I had something to do with Audley Fletcher taking his tumble last year," he lied smoothly, without a fraction's hesitation.

Malfoy smirked at the memory. "Ah, yes. Honestly, the nerve of some people — *daring*

to think that we would have anything to do with such a plot!" The grin that spread across his face rather belied his words. "After all," he added dryly, "nobody told us about it."

Sev gave his trademark thin smile, and filed that information away. Malfoy was amusing himself by being cruel, but he seemed serious enough all the same. He had dropped a few veiled hints about some action to be taken, and apparently Professor Fennel's attempt to murder a student hadn't been it.

Audley Fletcher, the son of an Auror, had been targeted by their Potions master in an attempt to get at his father. Fennel had failed, but Sev knew he hadn't been working on his own initiative. The Dementors had administered their deadly Kiss before he could be made to spill anything, so Sev was quite possibly the only one who knew the truth.

And Lily, of course. She had — pretty much accidentally — ended up his partner in investigation last time around. He wouldn't deny that her aid had been useful, but he couldn't afford to get near her this year. A Gryffindor, a 'mudblood' and a girl, she earned Malfoy's contempt threefold.

Of course, there were very few people he wasn't contemptuous of. Even amongst the

Slytherins in their year, of which he was the de facto leader, there were only three that he treated as any sort of equals; Sev himself, slimy Nicholas Avery, and the frankly disturbing Simon Lestrage. The beautiful but haughty Narcissa Salenica he treated like as a possession, and the others he seemed to regard as servants.

Aside from Malfoy's closest intimates and his personal thug, Colin Crabbe, Sev found most of the Slytherins no different from the rest of the students. Many of them were petty or mean, but that had as much to do with the schools' general opinion of Slytherins as anything else. Gryffindor house in particular was guilty of vilifying their long-time enemies; whenever it came to a confrontation, whatever the circumstances, Slytherin came off the villains.

One boy particularly undeserving of that title was Joshua Matthews. An extremely self-confident boy with a quick mind, he had all the Slytherin ambition without the usual arrogance. Sev remembered his Sorting as having taken a long time, and suspected his house selection had been a very close thing.

Josh was certainly uncomfortable with most of his fellow Slytherins. On the train journey, he selected a seat next to Severus. He had tried to

establish some sort of friendship with Sev several times last year, despite the lack of any encouragement. He seemed to prefer Snape's quiet detachment to Malfoy's venomous outlook.

Today, he had a younger boy in tow who was practically his spitting image. Josh was a handsome, sandy-haired boy who could make even a robe look ruffled. He would, Sev had often observed, look quite at home in James Potter's little gang of loveable mischief-makers. Not that they would stoop to associating with Slytherins.

"Morning, Sev," he said with a hesitant smile. Sev nodded, but didn't smile back. The only emotions that ever showed on his face were ones he put there for a purpose.

Josh indicated the smaller boy beside him. "This is my little brother Lewis. He's starting at Hogwarts this year." Lewis's expression was flickering between nervous and excited, and he couldn't seem to stand still.

Lewis was round-eyed and excited at everything, from the trolley of snacks to their first glimpse of Hogwarts. Malfoy and company, professionally unimpressed, kept shooting him killer looks, but Josh ignored them. He was obviously fond of his brother, and, Sev guessed, very glad that this year he'd have someone in his

house to talk to.

As they made their way into the Hogwarts grounds, the first years were herded away by Hagrid. Sev and his fellow second years made their way into the Great Hall to take their places at the house tables. Lily tried to catch his eye as they filed in, but he pointedly looked the other way.

The staff table was full of familiar faces. Dumbledore, of course, sat in the centre, flanked by his heads of house; Professors Malachite, Vitae and Parilia, with a space for the deputy head Professor Fractalis, who was dealing with the first years.

That wasn't the only empty space, however. For a moment Sev thought the position of Potions teacher had not been filled, but then he saw that a raven-haired woman sat in Fennel's old chair. A quick mental checklist told him it was Professor Cephus who was missing.

Auriga Cephus was a flighty young woman who taught astronomy. It was not unusual for her to forget where she had put her wand or the names of her students, but he wouldn't expect her to have missed the Sorting.

Josh leaned over, having noticed Sev's frown. "What's up?"

There was no harm in sharing an observa-

tion that anybody could have made. "Professor Cephus. She's not there."

"Oh." Josh pulled a face. "I hope she hasn't left; I always liked her."

"You would, Matthews," interjected Malfoy scathingly. "Trust you to like the only mudblood teacher in the school!"

Josh rolled his eyes, but didn't try to argue. His attention instead was focused on the Sorting ceremony just beginning.

A flustered Professor Fractalis got all the first years lined up and placed the Sorting hat on its stool. It looked even more battered than last year; not surprising, Sev supposed, when you considered it had been used at Hogwarts for the last thousand years.

A rip opened up in the brim of the hat, and it began its traditional Sorting song.

*The Hogwarts sorting hat am I,
I speak as I shall find.
I look inside your head and see,
Whatever's on your mind.*

*I know you as you know yourself
Or better; that's the truth.
I always know where you should go
My magic is the proof.*

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*If you are brave, and strong of thought,
If you are slow to flee;
If you can fight with all your might,
A Gryffindor you'll be.*

*If you are quick to think and choose,
If wordplay is your art,
In Ravenclaw your plans will find
The perfect place to start.*

*If you can work without a pause,
If you are firm and true;
If you can toil with your heart,
A Hufflepuff are you.*

*If you are fast to plot and plan,
If thinking big feels right,
House Slytherin is just the place
To make your future bright*

*So step right up and sit right down
And learn who you shall be,
And trust the Hogwarts sorting hat
For no one baffles me!*

The room burst into applause, and Malfoy used the cover of it to lean over and say "A singing hat; I ask you, how childish is that? If I was headmaster I would have done away with that foolishness years ago."

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Secund Sight

Josh was one of the few Slytherins to clap the song. His little brother gave him a shy wave from across the room.

“Andrews, Darren!” Fractalis called, and the first year boy nervously stepped up.

There seemed to be a surprising number of Slytherins this year; normally, the houses were very evenly balanced, but today their own seemed constantly ahead. Malfoy smiled triumphantly at every addition, and Colin greeted warmly one Graham Goyle. Apparently their families had been friends for decades, and Sev half-wondered if the association was closer than that. Goyle was like a miniature copy of Colin, with the same stocky build, closely cropped hair and dense expression.

“Matthews, Lewis!” Josh leaned forwards in his chair, watching eagerly. Malfoy made some sharp retort under his breath, and the boys around him all snickered.

Little Lewis stepped up and placed the hat on his head. For a long moment, all was silent. Seconds stretched into minutes, and Sev wondered if it was going to come to a decision at all... and then the hat spoke.

“GRYFFINDOR!”



The rest of the day passed in less dramatic fashion. Lewis looked somewhat lost over at the Gryffindor table, although his new companions were making an effort to draw him in. Sev was sure that whatever happened, he was going to have a better time of it than his brother.

Josh seemed vaguely numb with disbelief during the feast, and the other Slytherins were muttering darkly. Josh had never quite been ‘one of the gang’ last year, and apparently this was being taken as yet more ‘proof’ that he didn’t belong.

Logically, of course, whatever house Lewis got put in had no bearing on where Josh should be. In fact it was, whilst not common, not particularly startling for siblings to end up in different houses. Explaining this to Malfoy would be worse than useless. Boys like Malfoy didn’t want reasons to victimize people so much as excuses. Malfoy had already made up his mind not to like Josh, and any justification for this was filled in after the fact.

None of this infighting was incredibly important to Sev, so he ignored it in favour of more interesting things.

Dumbledore stood up to make his usual speech. “Welcome, one and all. Greetings to the new first years, and a warm welcome back to all

our returning students.” He cleared his throat and pulled on a sterner expression. “Now, as you know, after the... difficulty with Professor Fennel last year, the position of Potions master was left open, and none of you got to take your end of year exams.” The student body tried to look distressed at this, and failed miserably.

“However, I’m pleased to tell you that the post has now been more than adequately filled.” He raised a polite hand to the raven-haired woman whom Snape had noticed before. “Professor Ephemeria comes on the highest of recommendations from the Ministry of Magic, and I hope you’ll be as respectful to her as you are to the rest of the staff.” The slight twinkle in his eyes betrayed his knowledge of exactly how much ‘respect’ some of the staff received.

Professor Ephemeria gave an unexpectedly dazzling grin, that made her look little older than a seventh-year herself. The round of enthusiastic applause that followed was probably as much out of gladness to be rid of Fennel as it was for her.

Malfoy didn’t clap, of course. He looked vaguely bored, and remarked “They should have kept Fennel. *I* never had any problem with him.”

Leading them back to their dorms, Professor Malachite caught Snape’s eye. He gave him an

inquisitive look, as if he was wondering if Sev was ever going to explain himself. Sev knew the teacher suspected he was up to something after he’d ‘accidentally’ fed Audley Fletcher a potion to make him vomit (entirely ‘coincidentally’ saving him from the poison Fennel had already slipped him). Sev wasn’t sure how much of that story Malachite suspected, or why the teacher had allowed him free access to some very advanced books of magic. He returned his gaze with his usual unreadable look, and said nothing.

Professor Malachite was someone he would be watching closely this year. Of course, Sev watched everyone closely. The only difference was in how sure he was that he would find something.

As he lay in bed, reading over a few advanced texts whilst others slept, it occurred to him that Professor Cephus had never turned up for the feast, and Dumbledore had said nothing about it. He added that to his list of things to investigate.

It was getting to be a very long list.

Their new timetable had the Slytherins and Gryffindors in Astronomy together late on the first day. Sev was — perhaps surprised was too strong a word — mildly intrigued to see

that Professor Cephus had still not turned up. Instead, the class was 'graced' with the presence of Professor Alomanicia.

Professor Alomanicia taught Divination to the upper years, and was, like most Divination teachers, widely considered to be a mad old bat. Gazing into the future was a fairly difficult endeavour, and most people who indulged in it full time tended to become a little... altered.

Cracked she might be, but she was also amiable and none too strict. The dull old boredom of plotting stars was abandoned in favour of students pestering her about what their patterns predicted. Even a number of the Slytherins got involved, although of course not Malfoy's little cadre.

Sev wanted to hear the official line on Professor Cephus' absence, but it would have been out of 'character' for him to ask, and to his frustration nobody else bothered to. How was he supposed to gather information if everyone around him was too stupid to ask the most basic questions?

Finally, he decided he would have to hang back at the end of the class and just ask himself. Professor Alomanicia was hardly likely to have any contact with anyone who would care



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Sev was asking about a teacher, and she was nutty enough that he could deny everything.

So, right at the end of the lesson, he conveniently knocked over his astrolabe. The Gryffindors all laughed, naturally, causing Malfoy to snarl and shoot a minor curse their way. It reflected off one of the telescopes, and everybody grabbed their stuff and ran for the door.

Sadly, though, Sev was not left alone to pick up his scattered equipment. Lily had also decided to hang behind. This wouldn't be so bad, except for the fact that since their adventure at the end of last year, she and James appeared to have become magnetically attached.

"Professor, I just wanted to ask about Divination next year —"

"Ah, Lily, isn't it?" The Professor smiled at her cheerfully.

"I was just wondering if you could recommend some books? I wanted to get some reading done in advance."

How like Lily, Sev reflected, staying unobtrusively crouched under his desk. How like him, really. He personally had little interest in Divination, but he was still as well-read as any seventh-year on the subject.

"Don't worry my dear," said Professor Aloma-



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nicia fondly. "I foresee a great future for you in Divination. I —"

She broke off abruptly, and Sev looked up from under the desk to see her face abruptly slacken. James, lurking by the door, ran back inside. "Professor? Are you —?"

She began to speak, in a cold voice wholly unlike the friendly tones she had just employed. "*Choose wisely and well, for your doom will come too quickly. Love will not save you, but that which is most precious will survive. Beware; you think you see him, but the colours he wears are not his, and the face you know now is not the true one. He will betray you!*"

Lily and James stood frozen, almost afraid to breathe. After a moment, Professor Alomancia blinked, and shook her head as if to clear it. "I'm sorry... did I drift off for a moment? It's these astral tides, you know. I'm terribly unfocused. What was it you wanted, dear?"

"Uh... never mind," decided Lily. She grabbed James by the arm and started to drag him off. As she hustled him out, her eyes briefly met Sev's, and there was a strange look in them.

Sev knew what she was thinking... *the colours he wears are not his...* More than once last year, she had said to Sev that he was in the wrong house; that he wasn't really what the Gryffindors consid-

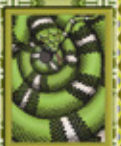
ered a 'true' Slytherin. She'd even made a comment about green not being his colour.

Professor Alomancia's words had the ring of a true prophecy about them. If that was true, was he destined to betray Lily and James in some way?

Anybody else might have shrugged such an idea off with a quick 'I would never do that'. Sev considered the prophecy more dispassionately. He knew that he had no intention of causing harm to Lily, and though he liked James less well, not him either. However, there were many kinds of betrayal, and should he find the need to practise one of them to further his campaign to get in with Malfoy... well, that was not too much of a stretch.

However, Sev was at heart a creature of logic. The prophecy was strongly-worded, but still vague. He had no doubt at all that he would come to unravel its meaning — just as soon as the events it predicted were over. Such was the nature of Divination.

Nonetheless, it was another nugget of information to squirrel away, and there could never be too many of those. Sadly, this one was bought with the loss of another. He never did get that opportunity to ask about Professor Cephus.



That evening, Malfoy launched the first phase of 'Operation Get Josh Matthews'.

Perhaps the operation wasn't named, but it was still planned with military precision. Malfoy was smart enough to know that division in the Slytherin ranks could only reduce his reputation. He was currently the commander of his own private little army in a kind of 'us against the world' scenario. Let the other houses know that not all his 'followers' were truly his, and suddenly his power fragmented and he was just another bully.

In classes, Josh was never in any way bullied, or even spoken harshly to. Malfoy never dissed his gang in public, however he might snap and snarl at them in private. Josh's isolation was not noticeable to the outside world; there were other Slytherins who weren't really Malfoy's creatures, and they would sit with him or share study notes. You wouldn't know that they weren't really what you could call 'friends' until you saw the way they quickly peeled away from him as soon as they hit Malfoy's home territory.

It started small; but in a shared dorm where nobody was your friend, small could be unbearable. Josh's socks would disappear a few minutes before it was time to go to lessons. His underwear

would be magicked pink, or his bed would be enchanted to throw him off in the middle of the night. The ink he wrote his homework in would fade into nothing after he'd finished writing, and the pages of his textbooks would be blanked.

Josh bore all this with stoic silence. He wasn't stupid enough to try and report it to the teachers; all that would bring would be a few warnings and maybe some deducted points, and then the bullying would just become more fiendishly subtle. Nor could he make himself some new friends; the houses were fairly insular at the best of times, and though some friendships crossed boundaries, Slytherin had always stood alone.

Josh's only link to the rest of his world was his little brother, and that was a fairly tenuous one. They couldn't sit together at meals, because of the house tables, and they couldn't enter each other's common rooms. Josh took to spending all his spare time in the library, and Lewis would meet him there — but not too frequently. Lewis was a bouncy, active boy who had quickly been accepted by the Gryffindors, and he didn't want to be stuck in the library at all hours.

So Josh was alone. And unlike Sev's self-imposed solitude, it obviously pained him to be that way.

Sev, with his sharp skills of observation,

missed nothing. He also did nothing. Befriending people was not his style in any case, and he could only harm his own position with Malfoy without helping Josh's. Josh would have to deal with it on his own terms.

Meanwhile, Sev was busy trying to ascertain what had happened to Professor Cephus. A few usefully overheard conversations — his invisibility cloak, he had found, was a very handy thing around the staff — let him know that he wasn't the only one in the dark. Most of the staff seemed to think she'd just got bored teaching and done a runner; many of them added half-serious wishes that they could do the same thing. Dumbledore was the only one who seemed truly concerned.

"It's just not like her, Carnus," he observed to Professor Malachite. Malachite was the one with whom the headmaster talked most about his worries. Though Professor Fractalis was the deputy head, in many ways Malachite was more senior. He had been with the Ministry of Magic for a decade before taking the Defence Against the Dark Arts appointment, and he cut a far more impressive figure than poor nervous Fractalis. No one was sure why he hadn't been made deputy instead, although there was a rumour going around that

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he'd been asked and refused the position.

Whatever the reason, he still had Dumbledore's ear in many things, and provided a sounding board for ideas the headmaster didn't like to share with the more excitable members of his staff.

"Auriga would never just wander off like this," said the headmaster worriedly. "Yes, she was absentminded, but you know she always had a keen sense of duty. Leave Hogwarts, without so much as giving notice? Preposterous."

"You think something may have happened to her?" asked Malachite with a frown.

"In these dark days? Almost certainly." The stormy look on Dumbledore's face was a strong contrast to the twinkly-eyed persona he usually presented.

"Now, Albus," his fellow teacher calmed him, "not every disappearance marks a plot. Something may have happened to her, but that doesn't mean it's something somebody else has done to her. Even wizards and witches have accidents, you know."

Dumbledore's frown failed to clear. "True, true... but there have been entirely too many disappearances for my liking, lately. People from the Ministry..." He shook off his dark mood with a visible effort. "Still, surely not

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Auriga Cephus, hmm? I can't quite see her being a danger to anybody."

"Quite," agreed Malachite with a nod. "What about her classes?" he asked, changing the subject.

"I'm not keen to appoint a replacement just yet," the headmaster admitted. "It seems a little too... final for my tastes. For the next month or so, at least, I'd like to keep using substitutes. Fortunately, Astronomy is a subject most of our staff are qualified to teach."

"Did you hear about Hepatososa?" asked Malachite.

"Had another vision in the middle of a class?" Dumbledore agreed, with a pensive frown.

"Well, at the end of one, fortunately." Malachite shook his head. "Lord knows that would have caused a panic. We're lucky she spouted off in front of a sensible pair like James and Lily."

"I'm not sure if 'lucky' is quite the right word," chided Dumbledore gently. "Apparently she warned them both that somebody they knew was going to betray them."

"Really? How charmingly vague of her," said Malachite snidely. "I don't suppose she saw fit to furnish them with a name, or even a time?"

"No; although I think Lily has a suspicion about who it might be. Not that she saw fit to share it, of course. A very independent girl, that

Lily," he said fondly.

"Hmm. How's James taking it?"

"Lightly, as I could have predicted." Dumbledore shook his head. "I fear for those boys, Carnus. James Potter and Sirius Black still think they're invincible. I only pray they don't have to find out the hard way that they're wrong."

"My, we're gloomy today," Malachite observed, and Dumbledore nodded wryly.

"Yes, I'm hardly the font of cheerfulness, am I? Still, this with Auriga, coming on top of what happened last year... I rather hoped Hogwarts had left this kind of darkness behind thirty years ago."

"What happened thirty years ago?" asked the younger man with a frown.

"Things which should never have been allowed to." The headmaster shook his head darkly. "I sometimes feel as if the world has never been the same since then. That was my rude awakening," he said, almost to himself. "I thought I could see the darkness in everybody... I was wrong."

"You're only human, Albus," Malachite supplied comfortingly. Dumbledore smiled, and his dark mood was abruptly broken.

"Yes. Let's just hope the students never find

out, hmm?” They smiled, and went their separate ways, leaving Snape to sneak back to his dorm with more questions than answers.

A quick check of Hogwarts histories confirmed what he had already been pretty sure of; there was no mention of anything out of the ordinary happening at Hogwarts three decades ago. In fact, the books were suspiciously quiet on those years altogether.

Books were not the only sources, however. Being Sev, he thought to go down to the trophy room and check for anything unusual awarded in that time period. The only thing he found was an Award For Special Services to the School, made out to one Tom Riddle. However, given that Riddle was also on the roll of Head Boys and had received a Medal For Magical Merit as well, it could have been for purely academic reasons.

The only teacher who had been around to give a personal account of those years was Dumbledore, and Sev wasn't foolish enough to try and pry information out of him. Sev avoided the headmaster as much as possible, recognizing a kindred spirit when it came to seeing through people. He was smart enough to recognize his own limitations, and Dumbledore wasn't somebody he was prepared to try and

outwit. He might be able to cross mental swords fairly successfully, but not without giving too much of his private self away.

Coming to dead ends in all his research avenues, Sev fell back instead on the old standby of people-watching. However, right now that was little more rewarding. He had hoped to get Malfoy to open up more about this 'new order' he had hinted was coming, but the other boy was entirely too occupied making Joshua's life a misery.

Malfoy was the kind of bully who wasn't happy unless he could hear the cries of pain. It didn't matter that Josh was surely suffering — he was doing it silently, and that didn't suit Lucius Malfoy at all. The cruel 'practical jokes' continued, but Malfoy also opened up another avenue of approach.

Namely, Lewis Matthews.

The impressionable new first year Slytherins had quickly fallen under Malfoy's charismatic spell. Two of his most zealous followers were Colin's friend Goyle, and a thoroughly nasty piece of work called Alexander Nott.

Malfoy gave these two junior thugs a new mission in life. As miserable as Josh was being made, it was to be nothing on how Lewis should be feeling.

Nott and Goyle had a great deal more freedom than Malfoy in this regard. They didn't have to put up two different faces in public and private. No, they could haunt Lewis' footsteps any time they wanted, and launch attacks at every opportunity.

Goyle was a simple thug, but Nott had that kind of flair for deviousness truly unpleasant schoolboys learn to use. He was the kind who could be twisting arms one minute, and angelically presenting a piece of perfect homework the next. None of the teachers saw through his mask any better than they did Malfoy's, and his pursuit of Lewis was practically unchallenged.

Lewis, on the occasions Sev happened to pass him in the corridors, was developing a truly haunted expression. He took the bullying far worse than his older brother, despite the fact that he had friends to back him up. He clung to Josh whenever he could, but his big brother couldn't be there when lessons started.

Things were escalating dangerously, and Sev knew Josh cared about his brother too much to let it slide the way he had when it was him alone. He would have to seek help from somewhere. Unfortunately, he chose to do so from the one place Snape really would have preferred him not to.

"Sev, can I talk to you a moment?" Josh asked, one day when they happened to have the library to themselves. Snape didn't answer, but the sandy-haired boy continued anyway. "Listen, I — I know this is nothing to do with you, but I really need your help. There's no one else I can ask. You gotta help me."

Sev, as much as he felt anything, felt sympathy for Josh. He was no fan of Lucius Malfoy, and Josh was by nature quiet and thoughtful — traits he could identify with.

He had no wish to see Josh and Lewis suffer more — but he couldn't help, either. He had got through thus far by being deliberately disinterested, neither joining nor attempting to stop the others' bullying. But now, Josh had tipped his hand, and he was going to have to come down on one side or the other.

Should he help Josh and betray his true loyalties, or go even further in his quest to gain Malfoy's trust?

"It's — it's Lewis," Josh began a little unsteadily. "My brother."

"I know who Lewis is," Sev pointed out expressionlessly.

“Yeah. Yeah, of course you do. I mean — ” Josh shook his head. “It was okay, before. Well, it wasn’t okay, you know, but I could live with it, when it was just me. But Lewis... Hell, he’s just a kid.”

It occurred to Sev that the gap between eleven and twelve wasn’t really enough to call anybody ‘just a kid’, but he didn’t point that out to Josh.

“What makes you think I can help you?” he asked bluntly. Why play around with verbal dances? Josh would get to his point regardless.

Josh seemed momentarily taken back, but rallied quickly. “I — I’ve seen you with the others. You’re not an outcast, not like me... but you’re not exactly one of them, either, are you?”

Sev blinked slowly, and chose not to comment on that. “And you think I’d help?”

“Somebody’s got to,” said Josh, with mounting desperation.

“What could I possibly do?” he asked; not accusing or bitter, just his customary neutral. Giving nothing of his emotions away whatsoever. Together with his naturally soft voice, it unsettled staff and students twice as much as the deliberately vitriolic tone he used in baiting James and Sirius. Josh, however, was too distressed to really care.

He let out an explosive sigh and slumped down

next to Sev. “I don’t know, I *don’t* know,” he said bitterly. “Can’t you do something? Malfoy listens to you. You could say something — ”

“Yes. And then not only would he continue doing what he’s doing, he’d also stop listening to me.”

“So you won’t even try?”

“It won’t help.”

“You know, sometimes that’s really not the point,” snapped Josh. In that instant, Sev thought he sounded very like Lily. She wouldn’t approve of this at all. But then, she didn’t see the world through the coolly logical filter he did.

“That’s always the point. It won’t make things better for you. It won’t make things better for Lewis. It will make things worse for me. That’s not help.”

Josh shook his head in disbelief. “Are you alive in there? Is there blood running through your veins, or are you just powered by clockwork? Do you have feelings?”

“When you let feelings overtake logic, you’re in trouble,” Sev said coolly.

Josh blinked at him for a moment, then shook his head and turned away. “You know, I think you got that backwards,” he snapped, storming out of the library.

Sev watched him disappear down the corridor for a moment, then went back to his Dark Arts essay.



A few days later, when Lily was making one of her regular attempts to corner him, he let her catch him.

They were down in the Potions lab in the dungeons; a fairly quiet part of the school at the best of times. Sev was very familiar with the place owing to the secret midnight Potions lessons he'd been giving Lily last year. Those had stopped, of course, but Professor Ephemeria was a much more patient tutor than Fennel, and Lily was no longer struggling.

Professor Ephemeria had pulled off the difficult trick of earning the undying love of students of all houses. This, she had achieved by allowing people to leave class a few minutes early if they finished quickly. Sev tried as a matter of habit not to be first to finish, but he was usually second or third.

This particular day, they happened to be making Cheering Charms. Lily's natural knack for Charm work cancelled her difficulty with Potions, and as Severus excused himself and left early, she was right on his tail.

"Severus Snape! You just try and run away from me, and I swear I'll hit you with the Full-Body Bind," she threatened from down the corridor.

Shooting her a disdainful look, he leaned against the dungeon wall and waited for her to catch up.

Somewhat surprised, Lily skittered to a halt and frowned at him. "Okay — what do you want?" she demanded.

Sev raised an expressive eyebrow. "What do I want? Who just chased who down the corridor?"

"Yeah, but you let me catch you," she said quizzically. He smiled internally. Surprisingly little got past Lily.

"I was floored by the force of your magnetic personality," he said perfectly dryly.

"Heh. Good for you. Why did you let me catch you?" she demanded.

Sev shot her a look, allowing his eyes to flicker pointedly back to the classroom whose occupants would be spilling out at any moment. "What did you want, Lily?"

He could see that the idea of her attempts to corner him succeeding hadn't really occurred to her. "Um... the usual?" she tried. "Explanation? Apology? Admission that I was right and you were wrong? A little bowing down and kissing of feet would probably not go amiss, either."

"You already know why I'm doing what I'm doing," he said, with half a shrug.

"And you already know that I think you're wrong."

"Yes, well. You're not alone in that," he remarked. In anybody else, that might have been considered a brief aside, half to himself—but Sev never said anything without thinking about it.

"What does that mean?" Lily seized on his words quickly. Maybe her time apart from him had been long enough for her to forget quite how calculated his conversation was, or maybe it just went against her open nature to believe it. Either way, it didn't seem to occur to her that he was quite casually steering the conversation the way he wanted it to go.

"Exactly what it says. You're not the only one who seems to disagree with my tactics. This, of course, having a great impact on my attitude," he added dryly.

"Who else knows?" Lily asked with a frown.

"Nobody knows," Sev told her. "Not even you." Lily might have the greatest insight of anybody into the workings of his brain, but not even she knew the whole story. Severus Snape's private thoughts were nobody's but his own. "But other people have noticed that I'm not as fully committed to death and destruction as

the rest of Malfoy's friends. Joshua Matthews seems to have picked up the idea that I might be able to help with his problem."

"Josh..." Unlike her friends James and Sirius, Lily could put a name to those Slytherins who weren't actively hostile, though it took her a moment. Once the name was matched with a face, she frowned. "What problem?"

Sev clicked his tongue disapprovingly. "Ah, Lily, Lily. You Gryffindors really don't see much outside your own house, do you?"

"Well, I could say worse things about the Slytherins, but you've heard them already," she snapped back, riled.

"Yes. You do so love to tar us with Malfoy's brush, don't you? Josh Matthews is the same as Lucius Malfoy, yes? Just like Peter Pettigrew is the same as James Potter."

"Hey! Leave Peter alone," she frowned. "So what if he's not school hero? I like him."

"No you don't, you feel sorry for him," he corrected her. "You 'nice' people have trouble telling the difference sometimes."

Lily should know his talents by now, but the fact that she knew he was pushing her buttons didn't make it unsuccessful. "If you're getting near a point, make it," she suggested icily.

“If you could possibly see beyond your narrow definitions of Gryffindor and Slytherin, you might notice that Joshua Matthews has very few of those qualities you so despise in us. Malfoy certainly has.”

She chewed at her lower lip. “Malfoy picks on him? I’ve never seen him do it.”

“And you never will. What is this obsession you have with ‘us’ and ‘them’? Is it something to do with these Muggle movies you’re all so caught up in? Why do you automatically assume that because Lucius is cruel, he must be stupid?”

“Because how could anybody who acts like that not be?” she tossed back at him angrily. “Okay, he might be cunning —”

“Ah, cunning,” nodded Snape dryly. “A good word that. I think you’ll find it means ‘just as smart as one of us, but if we use a different word we can pretend it’s not the same.’”

Lily made a face. “So you’re saying Malfoy’s bullying Josh? And he came to you?” She arched her eyebrows disbelievingly. “Must’ve been pretty desperate.”

“Oh, he is,” Sev told her coolly. “Of course, it’s not about him anymore. He does have a little brother, after all. And he’s one of yours. But I don’t suppose you high and mighty Gryffindors

have noticed him, either?” He smiled thinly, as the rest of the class started to pour out, and joined the crowd as it flowed away.



Whether Lily ever knew their conversation had an ulterior motive, he could only guess. Perhaps she thought he was just taunting her with how much he saw and she didn’t. Perhaps she thought it had been a clever way to deflect her attention. Perhaps she had wondered if he might be looking out for Josh, and then dismissed it as too illogical for him.

Sev was not in the slightest bit interested. As he had explained to the unhappy Josh, it was only results that mattered — not how things looked to others.

The results were not immediately apparent. Josh was still deeply miserable. Malfoy was still vindictive. Lewis was still looking haunted.

Then, one time, Nott and Goyle had leapt out on Lewis only to find James Potter happened to be walking with him. A few days later, a sneak attack had been foiled by Sirius Black. The corridors around Lewis Matthews had started mysteriously sprouting second-year Gryffindors whenever his enemies were near.

Malfoy would ordinarily have been quick to notice this, but he had other things on his mind. Rather like ninety-nine percent of the other Hogwarts students.

The time for Quidditch tryouts had come around again; and this time, they were all old enough to enter.

First years were not prohibited from trying out, exactly, but none had been on a house team for decades. The current flying teacher, Jagred Swift, had coached professionally, and the teams he turned out were so good no novice flyer would dare to try and get in.

All the houses except Ravenclaw had lost their captains when the seventh years had left. All of them had at least two places to fill, and there was certainly no shortage of applicants.

“Aiming for the team, Sev?” Malfoy asked him one day in the common room.

Severus was, as it happened, an excellent flyer, and with his quick thinking and ability to keep track of things, he’d probably make a great Keeper. However, being on the Quidditch pitch didn’t quite fit in with his desire to remain low-profile.

He gave another of his thin smiles. “I prefer to get my enjoyment of the game... off the pitch.”

Malfoy snickered appreciatively, no doubt

remembering Audley Fletcher’s near-deadly drop from his broomstick last year. It had actually been Fennel who had put the curse on him, and Sev’s sick-making potion had saved his life, but he and Lily were the only ones who knew that. However, if Malfoy chose to believe Sev got his kicks from sabotaging players, that suited him just fine.

Malfoy, of course, was talking as if he’d already been appointed captain. His parents had bought him the very latest in brooms, a Cleansweep 2. Most of the actual team players only had Silver Arrows.

There was one other Cleansweep 2 in the school, and that belonged to one of Malfoy’s arch-enemies — Sirius Black. Black, not exactly hard up for cash, had gone out and bought himself one over the summer; no doubt in response to seeing Malfoy on his.

Malfoy, of course, was deeply disparaging about Black’s flagrant copying. And truth to tell, on evenly matched brooms he was probably the better flyer. Sirius wasn’t bad, but he was heavy-handed, and he placed too much emphasis on speed. Malfoy was truly skilled, and in most years he would have been the best with no contest.

Most years, of course, did not contain James Potter.

James only rode the old-model Cleansweep, a generation behind Black's and Malfoy's. Sev didn't have to have been privy to their private conversations to know that Sirius had offered to buy him a better broom, and James had acted proud and refused. Study people closely enough, and it was easy to predict how they would act in any given situation.

You didn't have to be Sev's level of genius to predict what Quidditch tryouts did to the atmosphere in the classroom. The teachers, all ex-Hogwarts themselves and closely tied to their old houses, were nearly as excited as the students, and lessons were chaotic and loud.

Astronomy was particularly explosive. The lack of a regular teacher, plus the usual bad mistake of Gryffindor and Slytherin in the same room, had competitiveness written all over it. If only because more accurate terms for the atmosphere would probably be unprintable.

It was the latest boast from the Gryffindor tables, however, that had Malfoy and his cronies howling with laughter.

"You?" He demanded disbelievingly. "You, on a Quidditch team? Oh, you're killing me."

"I wish," said Lily icily. She placed her hands on her hips. "Mind telling me why, exactly?"

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"I really have to spell it out for you, honey?" Malfoy wiped tears of mirth from his eyes. "Oh, you're so delusional!" He cackled gleefully.

"Girls can't play Quidditch?" asked Lily dangerously.

If Sev was Malfoy, he would have been backing away at speed right then. But Malfoy's view of the universe, of course, wouldn't let him accept that Lily could be a threat.

"One, girls can't play Quidditch," he agreed smarmily. "Two, you call that a broom? It's a stick with bristles!" Sev had to admit, Malfoy had a fair point. Lily's parents had refused point blank to spring for any magical gear that wasn't mandatory, and she'd been forced to pick up a second-hand Comet. It was at least five years old, and she had to struggle mightily to make it go in a straight line.

"Third," said Malfoy, leaning in closer and lowering his voice, "you're a mudblood. And unless you zap them with a levitation curse, Muggles can't fly."

That was roughly the point when the air exploded with so many hexes half the class ended up in the infirmary.

Quidditch tryouts took place the following weekend. Despite Malfoy's often and loudly expressed disbelief, Lily did turn up and she

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did fly. Her broom was misbehaving, but she wrestled with it masterfully, and won herself a place on the reserves. Nobody was laughing, because it was rare for a second year to do better than that, and she was the first girl to get anywhere near a place on a Quidditch team. Reserves seldom got any chance to play at school level — not when you had magical healing on demand — but it near guaranteed her a place in the squad the following year.

Sirius Black flew with frenetic enthusiasm, and won himself a place as a Beater. It was a position he was well suited to, zooming about the place thwacking Bludgers with a club. When it came to Gryffindor vs. Slytherin, Sev suspected there were going to be a lot of Slytherin heads getting ‘mistaken’ for Bludgers.

Malfoy was heard to remark snarkily that they’d only put him on the team because he had a good broom.

“Oh, is that why you bought yours?” Lily asked in passing. She gave him a sweetly triumphant smile that reduced him to a quivering rage.

Reigning in his fury, Malfoy flew quite excellently, and when he was awarded a place as a Chaser there were more than just Slytherins applauding. Though there were three Chasers on

the team, it was a skilled position, and one that usually went to at least third or fourth years.

Malfoy was well pleased with that, opining that even if Potter got in, he’d still have won. “I got there first. Even if they pity him enough to pick him, I got there first.”

James Potter, however, wasn’t content to merely get in. He put on a blinding display of aerial acrobatics — juggling Quaffles, flying with one hand, flying upside down... When he finally touched down, he received a standing ovation from everybody but Malfoy’s cadre of Slytherins. Josh and several of Malfoy’s other non-supporters practically had to sit on their hands to stop themselves from joining in.

The applause redoubled when James’ new position was announced... that of Seeker, the most coveted spot in the game. Almost no one made it to Seeker without at least a year in another position under their belt.

Malfoy led the Slytherins back to their common room spitting and snarling. “Bloody tryouts are a bloody joke! Mudbloods and morons. And that show-off Potter — that’s not flying, that’s bloody circus tricks. As if juggling proves you’d be any good at catching the Snitch! It’s a setup.”

He snapped the password at the guardian

statue so sharply that it practically leapt out of the way, a nervous look in its stony eyes. Malfoy threw his very expensive broomstick to the floor with a thud. "How much d'you reckon Black paid to get him and his friends on the team, huh?" he snarled. "I wouldn't take him for a thousand Galleons!"

"Oh, shut up, Malfoy!" burst out Josh angrily. There was a sudden dead silence.

"Got a problem, friend?" said Malfoy icily, turning towards him and moving straight up into his personal space. Everybody else got out of the way, rapidly. When Malfoy was snapping and snarling, you cringed and looked obedient if you wanted to survive. When he called you 'friend' and gave that certain dead-eyed smile, you didn't stop to pack.

Josh, however, had been simmering too long, and he'd passed the point of no return. "Grow up, Malfoy! Nobody cheated, and nobody fixed anything. You just lost. You just *lost*, and you know why? Because they're *better than you*."

Aside from Josh, who was going red and panting with long-suppressed anger, nobody in the room seemed to be breathing. The assembled Slytherins were all holding their breath, and Malfoy had gone perfectly, perfectly still.

"Better?" he asked very quietly. Sev recog-

nized the tone; it was a variation on his own best cold voice. Except he used it when he was trying to psyche people out of picking a fight... and that wasn't what Malfoy was using it for.

"Yeah, better," snarled Josh, arrogant in the face of the inevitable. "Way better."

"You like James Potter, hmm? I suppose you'd rather be with him. Rather be with your Gryffindor friends, yes?"

"Well, I don't see how they could be any worse than you," sneered Josh darkly.

The two of them stood framed there for a moment. Malfoy was a good half-head shorter, but something in the way he stood made that seem very unimportant. The time stretched out longer and longer... and then Malfoy suddenly pulled away to regard his audience. The deceptively gentle smile on his face was such that several of them took a step backwards.

"It seems we have a traitor among us," he observed lightly. He pulled an exaggeratedly thoughtful expression. "Now, what do we do with traitors?" he asked rhetorically, tapping his chin. "Ah, yes." He turned back to Josh. "I do believe we make an example of them."

His smile widened, until it looked something like a tiger's.

With a sudden movement that made most of the watchers flinch, Malfoy produced his wand. Josh stared him down stonily.

“Oh, please,” he retorted. “What are you gonna —”

Malfoy cut him off with a single barked word. “*Crucio!*”

Unlike most of the curses and hexes the students casually threw at each other, there was no flare of light or other flashy effects. Josh didn’t sprout feathers or tentacles or suddenly transform. He just started to scream.

His hands were clamped to the sides of his head, face contorted in a helpless mask of pain. The scream was the most blood-chilling sound Sev had ever heard, a completely involuntary ululation of absolute agony.

Josh doubled over, still screaming, and then Malfoy flicked the wand away, ending the curse. He let out a rattling gasp, and managed to half-straighten up. Tears glistened in his eyes, not of fear or rage but simply squeezed out by the force of the pain.

Josh breathed raggedly, and pushed himself up to stand straight. He looked Malfoy in the

eye, and forced out the words “You... don’t... impress... me.”

“*Crucio!*” Sev was perhaps the only one there who didn’t wince, and that was only because his face was carefully schooled to betray nothing of what was going on beneath.

Josh fell to his knees, screaming again. His voice had cracked and gone hoarse with the strain he’d put onto it, yet he didn’t stop. He fell to the floor, writhing as if there were something inside of him trying to escape. Sweat was literally flowing from him, pouring down his tortured face. And still Malfoy didn’t stop the curse.

Avery and Simon Lestrangle were watching with a horribly eager light in their eyes, as if this was the most fascinating thing they’d ever seen. Everybody else in the room, even the thuggish Colin Crabbe, had looked away, unable to stand a moment longer. Jack Brisingamen had his hands jammed over his ears, although Sev doubted that it could be doing anything to block out that unearthly howl.

Sev didn’t look away. Every moment of this scene was burning into his flawless memory, probably forever.

Josh’s liquid brown eyes briefly met his. The state he was in, they had to be unseeing, but even

so the mute plea in them was unmistakable.

Sev couldn't meet those eyes, but he couldn't look away. He started counting inside his head, doubling numbers and doubling them until they were big enough to fill his head and blank out any other kind of thought.

Two. Four. Eight. Sixteen. Thirty-two. Sixty-four. One twenty-eight. Two fifty-six. Five hundred and twelve. Ten twenty-four. Twenty forty-eight. Forty ninety-six. Eighty-one ninety-two...

The numbers grew bigger, taking up his more and more of his thoughts until he had to think about the math, blocking everything out, not seeing or thinking or feeling...

Finally, Malfoy stopped. The silence that followed was like death.

Josh was locked up in a mute ball on the floor. Gradually his body untensed, but he made no attempt to get up or even move. Malfoy stood looking down at him with a satisfied expression for a moment, then aimed a final vindictive kick at the curled up boy and strode out of the common room.

Nick, Simon and Colin quickly followed. The rest of the Slytherin boys hovered uneasily; none of them wanting to just leave, none of them wanting to be the one to approach Josh

where he lay, possibly mortally injured.

Sev couldn't do anything at all whilst they were still there. Face as impassive as ever, he stepped around Josh on the floor and headed for the door.



Sev headed straight over to Professor Malachite's office. He knew exactly what he'd witnessed; the Cruciatus curse.

Many of the more advanced Dark Arts books made reference to the three Unforgivable Curses. One was Cruciatus, another was Imperius... the third was never named, but it brought only instant death.

The books spoke of the three curses; the dark days of their discoveries, what they did, how they had come to be unilaterally banned. But one thing even the very darkest tomes did not do — and that was tell you the words of command that brought them about.

From somewhere, Lucius Malfoy had learned to use one of the three most powerful, most deadly curses known to wizardry — and it definitely hadn't been from school.

Malachite's books had surprisingly little to say on the exact effects of the Cruciatus curse.

All they said was that it brought pain, and that some of its victims never recovered. Sev was sure that however nasty it had seemed, Malfoy at nearly thirteen couldn't have half enough power to make it that bad.

Now that was a thought that he didn't have any logical basis for. But some things, you had to just let yourself believe.

He headed down to the Potions dungeons. If Professor Ephemeria had been there, he would have had to think on his feet; he didn't have his invisibility cloak with him, and he wasn't about to go back and get it. However, the teacher wasn't there; she was probably up with the rest of the staff, still congratulating the new Quidditch players on their appointments.

It seemed odd to think that barely ten minutes had passed; that it was still a sunny Saturday afternoon up there, and people were still playing. Sev gave a humourless snort at his own sense of drama; what had he expected, a sudden dark and stormy night?



Sev raided the Professor's cupboard for ingredients, but even his great talent for Potions was drawing something of a blank here. None of the books had given him any guidance as to what he would need here, because none of the books

even entertained the crazy idea that you might be trying to avoid calling in a trained healer.

In the end, he trusted to his own skill, mixing ingredients he knew had healing and soothing properties. He worked as much through instinct as through knowledge, judging quantities and mixtures by what seemed to feel right. He heated the mix in his cauldron until its colour seemed to settle, and risked a small dab on his tongue. A numbness quickly suffused it, and he felt momentarily light-headed. He took a deep breath to clear his head, and poured the potion into a vial.

It was the first potion he had ever made up without adhering to a strictly drawn-up recipe. The school had very strict rules about that kind of experimentation. Magical ingredients could react extremely unpredictably, and even very experienced research wizards could be caught by surprise. But Sev's faith in his own intelligence was such that he'd never entertained the possibility he might do something wrong.

Slipping the vial into an inner pocket, he made his way back up to the Slytherin common room. Something in him was telling him he should be running, but he ignored it. He'd been brewing potions for an hour; any sense of urgency now was only in his own mind.





Josh had gone from his place on the floor when Sev returned. The common room was empty, but for Jack Brisingamen and Stuart Flint. They were playing a purely mechanical game of Exploding Snap, and when he came in they glanced at him and then quickly looked away, not meeting his eyes. There was an aura of shared guilt so thick it flavoured the air.

Sev passed through into his dorm room, and saw that it was empty; Malfoy and his lieutenants had not returned. He pushed the door lightly, so that it stood half closed, shielding the room from prying eyes but not clicking shut.

He quickly crossed over to his own bed, and fetched out the invisibility cloak. Smoothly sliding into it, he walked straight back out again. There was no telling how long the rooms would stay this deserted... although he suspected that most of the Slytherins would find good excuses to stay away as long as possible.

Moving in perfect silence was a habit he'd picked up living with his uncle, sneaking about in library stacks he probably wasn't supposed to be in. Since he'd acquired the invisibility cloak at the end of last year, it had become second nature to him.

He glided unnoticed past the two quiet



boys, and into the other dorm room. There were two second year rooms, each with five beds in. As he had rather suspected, this one was empty except for Josh.

The sandy-haired boy was lying awkwardly on his back; the way you might lie if you'd taken a tumble from a broomstick and had bruises all over. He was not sleeping, but simply staring at the ceiling.

Sev half-considered staying under the cloak and keeping his anonymity, but it was just wishful thinking. There was no way to do this without blowing his cover. Josh would have to be a pretty big fool indeed to take an unknown potion after what had happened an hour ago.

Sev went to stand beside him, and whipped off the cloak with a quick motion. He had a hand ready to stifle any outcry, but Josh just stared at him apathetically.

"What do you want?" he croaked, painfully but with a flash of dull insolence.

"Drink this," Sev advised simply, tilting the potion to his lips. Josh looked for a moment like he might want to refuse, but the lure of some release from the aches that covered his body must have been too much. He gulped greedily at the cure until Sev pulled it away from him.

He slipped the remaining potion into the top drawer by Josh's bed. "I'll leave the rest. Don't drink it now; I'm not sure how strong it is."

Josh's eyes followed his movements, but he didn't say anything. Not having expected any wild thanks, Sev simply picked up the cloak and turned towards the door.

"Thanks for coming by," said Josh, in a voice that was both stronger and thick with sarcasm. He licked his lips painfully, and added bitterly "You're a real hero."

Sev crossed back over to stand above him. He answered Josh not out of an urge to be understood, but just because he somehow felt that he owed him an explanation.

"Any halfwit can be a hero," he said quietly. "Go to the Gryffindors, if you want dumb courage. They might be able to leap up and brawl with Malfoy, but none of them could ever do what I do."

"And what do you do?" asked Josh sharply.

"Watch," he said, with a flicker of a shrug. "From the inside."

"Yeah?" he asked bitterly. "See anything interesting?"

"I won't, until he lets me in. And if I want him to do that... I have to do what I do."

"Oh, I see what you're doing," Josh remarked

quietly. "And I see what it's doing to you. How long can you survive, Severus? How long before you forget why you do what you do?"

"As long as it takes," he said simply.

"And how long is that?"

He didn't answer, just slid the cloak back on and drifted away.



The rest of the Slytherins trickled back in slowly. Eventually, Josh came out of the dorm to sit alone at a table and work. He walked stiffly, although Sev's sharp eyes saw that thanks to the potion, he was in less pain than he pretended. None of the others looked at him.

Eventually, too, Malfoy returned. There was a sudden flare of tension as he stepped inside, but he just glanced at Josh and briefly curled his lip. So far as he was concerned, it was 'lesson learned'. Sev didn't suppose it occurred to him for a minute that Josh might be anything less than terrified now.

Late that night, when everybody else was asleep, Sev sat up in bed and spoke to Malfoy. "That curse you used; what was it?"

Malfoy's cool grey eyes narrowed. "I would have thought you'd know that, if anyone did,

Severus." His tone was mild, but Sev recognized a challenge when he saw one.

"I do," he admitted instantly; pretending would have been a stupid move. "What I don't know is how you got it."

Satisfied, Malfoy grinned smugly. "Oh, I have powerful friends," he said enigmatically.

"I'd like to meet them," Sev threw out, sounding every inch the ambitious Slytherin.

Malfoy yawned and stretched. "Patience, Sev. These things move slowly, you know. He doesn't want to tip his hand."

"He'?" Snape asked, with just the right tint of eager curiosity.

Malfoy smiled darkly. "He' is the one who's gonna usher in a new age, Sev. And when he arrives..." he grinned to himself, in the semi-darkness "...oh, we're gonna have ourselves a ball."



All was quiet for the weeks that followed. It would have been easy to assume that Malfoy had all but forgotten about Josh, or that he was satisfied with what he'd done. Sev knew him better than that. Malfoy could hold a grudge eternally, and what satisfied him now would wear away with time. Sooner or later,

he would move against Josh again. Even if Josh never did or said anything else remotely rebellious, those impassioned words after the Quidditch tryouts had sealed his fate.

Lewis's unofficial Gryffindor bodyguards remained in evidence, and Nott and Goyle had pretty much left him alone. If only there could be such a simple solution to his older brother's situation.

If James Potter could be made to see past the fact that he was a Slytherin, Sev had no doubt that he would leap to Joshua's defence. That was because James Potter was too cheerfully heroic to have a clue how incredibly bad that would be.

If any Gryffindor so much as smiled at Josh in passing, he would surely suffer for it. Malfoy would never forget that final crack he'd made when Lucius asked if he'd rather be a Gryffindor.

That was why Sev went back to studiously avoiding Lily. Alerting her to Josh's problem had been a necessary evil, but he couldn't afford to let her know how bad it was. She was too compassionate to not take action, and her intervention might be even more disastrous than James'. Malfoy hated James, but to Lily he considered himself genetically superior. For her to stand up to him would be something he simply couldn't allow. His view of the universe wouldn't let him.

Sev could trust nobody else to watch Josh, so he did it himself. Probably even Josh, who was now much more aware of Sev's role in things, had no idea what he was doing.

One Sunday, he spotted Crabbe and Avery shadowing Josh as he wandered the grounds. The chain of events Sev sparked off to get Professor Malachite there without anybody knowing he was even involved ought to have won some sort of award. But of course, the whole point of such subterfuge was that nobody *did* recognize it.

As it happened, that particular temporary solution was better than he could have guessed.

Sev 'happened' to wander by in time to see Malachite catch the three boys on the edge of the Forbidden Forest. It was pretty clear that Crabbe and Avery had planned to chase Josh inside, maybe even get him lost.

Despite their repeated assurances that it was just a prank — Josh, of course, was not stupid enough to argue — Malachite went ballistic.

"It's the Forbidden Forest!" He told the three of them. "It's not called the 'ooh, probably not too smart to go in there' Forest. It's not the 'maybe ought to stay away from' Forest. It's Forbidden! It's Forbidden for a reason."

"We were only — " Avery began, trying on

the angelic look that usually worked with the Slytherin house-master. For once, it didn't.

"Quiet, Avery. No excuses. And you all ought to be ashamed of yourselves. We're all Slytherins here. We're all wizards here. Wizarding folk should stick together!"

Professor Malachite even took points off them for their foolish behaviour. Since he hardly ever did so, especially from his own house, the Slytherins were all treading warily for days afterwards.

Even so, Sev didn't relax his guard. He kept an eye on Malfoy, looking for any glimpse of chaos being plotted.

Fortunately, Malfoy had other things on his mind. The Quidditch season had started in earnest, and he was training with the Slytherin team most days. And Malfoy being Malfoy, he liked to bring his entire house-group along to show off in front of.

The Slytherin team had changed little from its previous line-up. The Keeper had been promoted to Captain, and Malfoy and a fourth-year boy had been brought in as new Chasers.

The new Captain, Adam Caulstone, was openly contemptuous of the Gryffindor lineup. "Hah! Four of their team graduated last year, including that poser Fletcher. Two of the newbies

are second-years, and it's not because they're talented like Malfoy here. There just aren't enough good players in Gryffindor to fill out the roster. Hell, one of their reserves is a twelve-year-old girl on a model one Comet." There was a ripple of laughter. "Now, you can argue that that's a charity case, but I think it's a good sign of how desperate they are."

Of course, his words were so much propaganda, but there was an element of truth to them. The Gryffindor team had suffered a blow losing so many players at once; Fletcher, being the kind of person who only cared about the world when he was in it, had gone against usual practice to use all sixth- and seventh-years. The team had been a powerhouse last year, but now there were no able third or fourth-years to step up and fill the gaps.

However, James Potter was anything but a token player. In fact, he was the only reason the generally scrappy team did as well as they did. They were often losing or barely holding even when he whipped the Snitch out of the air and won them the game.

Slytherin played Hufflepuff first, and then Ravenclaw. They really were a good team, and whilst their victories weren't as flashy as James' last-minute rescues, they were far more

solid in terms of gameplay. Malfoy proved himself an excellent Chaser, fast moving on his expensive broom and slippery because he was so small. He had a real flair for dodging Bludgers, and he scored a lot of goals.

The days leading up to Gryffindor vs. Slytherin were even more tense than usual. Last year, Gryffindor had been expected to win hands down — or at least until Fletcher's unexpected tumble from his broom. This year, though they'd won all their matches, they just weren't as good — and the debate raged endlessly over whether one brilliant Seeker and a scrappy team was better than a solid team with no particular flair.

Not, of course, that the Slytherins thought of themselves that way. Malfoy translated a few friendly staff comments about him being a promising new addition into his being the star of the team. He certainly considered himself a few thousand levels above Potter.

"I don't know why Gryffindor don't just concede the match right now," he announced loudly as they made their way to the pitch. "They must know they haven't got a prayer."

He followed the rest of the Slytherins as they squeezed themselves into a space on the stands.

The whole school had turned out, and Malfoy would insist on arriving late to make an entrance.

He hopped on his broom and made a few flashy circuits before the game started. Sev, of course, didn't join the general enthusiasm, and Malfoy swooped down to hang in the air before him.

"Cheer up, Sev," he smirked. "This is gonna be a good day for house Slytherin. A very good day." His smile grew more feral. "Today, I'm gonna take down all the thorns in my side in one go. It's gonna be a beautiful day." Whistling happily, he flew off to join the rest of this team.

With Malfoy's words hanging in his ears, Sev noticed for the first time that he'd been wrong; the whole school hadn't quite turned out. In fact, the deserters were from his very own section of the crowd. Nick Avery and Simon Lestrangle were nowhere to be seen.

And neither was Josh Matthews.



Sev was trapped. He was surrounded by house Slytherin on all sides; it was to be Malfoy's finest hour, and there was no way by any reckoning he could possibly hope to leave. Not without calling the attention of the entire school down on him, and shattering forever any hope of gaining Malfoy's trust.

So he was forced to sit through the entire match, contemplating what might be going on that he could do nothing about.

Sev had always relied more on logic than imagination, but there was little comfort to be had there. Logic quite happily agreed that Avery and Lestrangle were easily the most dangerous of Malfoy's followers. Both were intelligent, sharp, and took as much or more pleasure as he did in inflicting pain.

Sev was barely paying a flicker of attention to the match, running over in his head every place Josh and his tormentors might possibly be, and what he could do about it. His best chance was for James Potter to pull off his customary greatness, and grab the Snitch extremely early.

Of course, when it was so important, it didn't happen. James was ducking and diving as skillfully as ever, but the two Slytherin Beaters were hot on his tail all the time. Adam Caulstone might talk up how bad the Gryffindors were, but he wasn't entirely stupid.

It was a dark and dirty match. There were penalties every two or three minutes when somebody committed a foul, and Sirius Black nearly got himself sent off for deliberately clunking Malfoy's broom with his club. All of

the scheming enraged the crowd, but it only delayed play even further.

Something icy settled in the centre of Sev's chest as Nick and Simon returned to the crowd. They jostled their housemates aside for a place, exchanging satisfied smirks. When Malfoy swooped nearby during a lull in the game, Avery caught his eye and nodded very slightly. Malfoy gave a flash of a grin, and turned a quick victory loop.

Sev reluctantly set aside all his churning plans. Whatever had happened, it was already done. There would be no Gryffindor-esque rushing to the rescue today.

He only hoped that whatever Malfoy's pet psychopaths had done was repairable after the fact.



The mood in the Slytherin camp was one of celebration. James had, predictably, grabbed the Golden Snitch, but he had done it at the exact same time Malfoy got the Quaffle through a hoop. The draw he had been playing for had turned into a ten-point victory for Slytherin.

If Severus wasn't dancing around the room with the rest of them, nobody was surprised. He returned to the common room only long

enough to check Josh definitely wasn't there, then left again with his invisibility cloak. He had taken to carrying it around in his bookbag as a habit; shadowing your fellow students raised too many awkward questions.

For once, his powers of logic were slow to point him the right way. Perhaps it had just not occurred to him to check the library because his brain automatically tagged it a public place.

He had forgotten to take into account that when everybody was at the Quidditch pitch, nowhere else was 'public'. Since when did Severus Snape overlook something so obvious?

Since the icy dark feeling in his chest grew ever stronger, with the sick feeling that this was something he hadn't been able to fix, something he hadn't out-thought or out-schemed. He should have found a better way to keep an eye on Josh. He should have paid less attention to Malfoy and more attention to his followers. He should have —

Josh was in the library.

The lights were dimmed, and not even Mr. Litavori the librarian was there. After all, why would anybody want to in the library this late on the Saturday of the big match? A casual passer-by would probably have not even noticed

the tousled blond head slumped over a desk towards the back.

A slightly-less casual passer-by might have seen, and smirked a little over the spectacle of a student fallen asleep at his books.

Sev was not in any danger of smirking.

Irritated at himself for doing it, and yet unable to curb the instinct, he approached the unmoving boy with a great deal of caution. There was a thick tension in the air, as if Josh might at any moment leap up and yell something. And strangely, the fact that Sev knew with absolute certainty that it wasn't going to happen did make the possibility seem any less real.

He moved closer, to stand over the slumped Josh. He really did look as though he had simply dozed off over his homework... one cheek was flattened against the desk, and his scruffy hair danced slightly in a tiny breeze spilling through the ancient window frame. From this distance, Sev could see each individual blond eyelash, every line on the palm that dangled limply over the edge of the desktop.

He felt as though he probably ought to be paralyzed by guilt, or terror, or something. But even here and even now, that strange blankness at the core of him, that silent place that made

him Sev, was still there. Even as in some part of him his stomach surged nervously, there was still a piece of him coolly and dispassionately observing. He wondered if that part of him would still be there the day he died, quietly taking notes as his pulse ran down and his breathing stopped.

While the part of him that still believed in superstitions didn't want to make a move, didn't want to make things final by forcing himself to know the truth, the cool side of him kept right on moving. Any hidden observer wouldn't have seen the tiniest fraction of hesitation as Sev reached out and lightly touched Josh's shoulder.

Josh's arm was warm under his hand, almost startlingly so. Even Sev's soft touch was enough to disturb the balance that kept him in place, and he rolled from the desktop and slumped onto the floor. There was a soft thunk as he hit the ground, but he made no automatic gulp of breath.

At a time when no ordinary boy could have stopped himself from crying out, that dispassionate half kept right on rolling. Sev's face was a blank mask as he felt for a pulse, shifted his hand when he found nothing, felt again.

He didn't even jump for joy when he felt the unnaturally slow pulse of a heartbeat beneath his fingertips. He simply lowered Josh's arm back to the ground, got up, and quietly went to look for a teacher.

Sev had already surmised that Josh's coma was no natural sleep. The teacher he found, Professor Parilia, sent quickly for Professor Ephemeria and Madame Florence. Nothing either of them tried could do anything to wake him.

Gentle little Professor Parilia was bouncing about near to tears, growing more and more distressed. The Potions teacher was calmer, at first, but she became steadily more frantic as none of her tried-and-tested cures produced any result.

Madame Florence managed to prod Parilia into magically floating Josh off to the infirmary. Professor Ephemeria quickly led Sev down to see Dumbledore.

"Are you alright, Severus?" she kept asking him nervously. His silence obviously bothered her; perhaps she thought he had been shocked so deeply he'd gone near catatonic. He wondered if she'd be more or less worried if she understood the cold way his thoughts just calmly kept on ticking.

The professor led the way to the gargoyle out-

side the headmaster's office. She cleared her throat a little nervously and said raggedly "Sugar puffs." Sev was careful not to look at where the secret door was until it had started to open. Few people knew where the headmaster's office was, and he had only found out by following Lily and James in his invisibility cloak last year.

This time he was there on his own — but he didn't have to worry about it drawing attention. All attention right now would be focused on Josh.

Professor Dumbledore looked up over his half-moon spectacles as they entered. Professor Ephemeria kept a hand on Sev's shoulders, as if he might suddenly take flight if she didn't — or perhaps it was to keep herself steady.

Dumbledore's steely blue eyes were sharp. "What is it, Janeida?" he asked gently.

That was something Malfoy and his kind would never notice about Dumbledore. He might appear to be playful and silly all the time — but he always knew exactly when to be serious and what tone to take.

"Professor, there's been a terrible attack on one of the students," Professor Ephemeria said shakily.

"Attack?" asked Dumbledore sharply. "Magical?"

She nodded, gulping slightly. "Some... some kind of sleeping curse. Nothing I've ever seen

before. I couldn't lift it, and neither could Madame Florence."

Dumbledore nodded thoughtfully, taking this news far more calmly than any of his subordinates. "Who?"

"I, uh, I don't know," she stuttered. "I wasn't—"

"Who was attacked?" he explained patiently.

"Oh, I, yes sir. Uh—"

"Josh Matthews," interjected Sev smoothly. Dumbledore transferred his attention to the boy.

"Joshua Matthews," he said, with a slow nod. Perhaps another headmaster might not have been able to place the name of a medium-average student like Josh, but Sev had little doubt that Dumbledore could do it. He had a strong suspicion that stored in the headmaster's name were the exact same kind of carefully gathered scraps of information as he put together in his own. Dumbledore missed nothing.

He narrowed his gaze at Snape, and said amiably "A friend of yours?"

"Not really," said Sev, holding his gaze. In the moments' silence that followed, he was certain that Dumbledore knew exactly how Sev chose to interact with those around him, and probably more of his motivations than anyone else bar Josh and Lily.

"And you found him?"

"He was in the library." His voice remained as toneless as ever. He could have injected distress or anxiety into it if he desired, but Dumbledore wouldn't be fooled.

"And can you tell me who might have done this?" the headmaster asked.

Sev was intrigued by his choice of words; very intrigued. As if he was asking not if Sev knew, but whether he would tell. As if he had a very clear idea of what was going on here...


"No, sir," he said, meeting the headmaster's gaze steadily. The bright blue eyes that looked back at him were as unreadable as his own.



The Slytherin common room was abuzz before Sev got back. In a castle full of ghosts and moving paintings, nothing stayed secret for very long.

The gossip that filled the room and the questions that were begged of Sev might have sounded wholly shocked and innocent. That was until you noticed the slight aura of guilt, the furtive glances at Malfoy and his allies. The other Slytherins were shocked that this had been done to Josh—but none of them were surprised.

A few minutes later, Professor Malachite came



in to see them. He gave a big speech about how they shouldn't panic, and how this was a terrible, terrible thing but they should all pull together in this time of crisis. Malfoy made all the right noises and innocently shocked faces, but Sev could see the smile in his eyes throughout.

It had been Avery and Lestrage who had put the curse on Josh, he knew, but it hadn't been on their own initiative. This little slice of the Dark Arts had to be another present from Malfoy's mysterious 'friend'. Whoever he was, he clearly delighted in giving power to people who knew how to misuse it.

Perhaps Malachite noticed the way Jack Brisingamen and Stuart Flint were shuffling their feet and looking at the floor. If he did, he no doubt assumed it was a manifestation of their nervousness and distress.

At the end of his speech, he pulled Snape aside to speak with him privately. "Severus, do you have any idea who did this?" he asked, fixing him with an earnest gaze.

Carnus Malachite's stern but friendly visage might intimidate some students, but he was no Albus Dumbledore. "No sir," said Sev quietly, without a flicker of hesitation over the lie. He couldn't resist adding "Do you?" Nothing of

the barb to the words made it into his voice, but it was there all the same.

Professor Malachite just frowned worriedly, then clapped him on the shoulder and left the Slytherin rooms. If his mind flew back to the day he'd seen Crabbe and Avery tormenting Josh, he obviously never made the connection.

That night, as they retired to the dorms, Stuart Flint made immediately for his bed and curled up under the covers, avoiding the kind of casual chat he usually made with his roommates. Malfoy and Nick Avery, by contrast, were openly boisterous, crowing over the days victory, and occasionally exchanging little glances that made it plain they weren't really talking about the Quidditch match.

When the others had drifted off, Malfoy observed quietly "Terrible thing, about poor Joshua. Tragic, really."

Sev made a noncommittal noise.

"And then, well, to have one of his own housemates stumble over him like that... no wonder we're all so traumatized." It was dark, but Sev could picture the look in his eyes all too clearly. "Why, they must be scouring the school to try and find the perpetrators. I might suggest to them they take a look at that Sirius

Black. He was so annoyed when we beat his team at Quidditch. Yes,” he gave a breathy sort of chuckle. “Yes, I might just do that.”

He rolled over under his blanket, going back to what for him were probably pleasant dreams.

Sev didn't wait around. Normally he let everybody get deep into their sleep patterns before he risked going out in his invisibility cloak, but today he hopped straight up and pulled it on. He headed straight for the infirmary.

As he'd suspected, Lewis was seated there, staring down at his comatose brother with a broken expression on his face. Sev stationed himself unobtrusively in a corner to watch over the younger boy.

Listening to Madame Florence and Professor Parilia talking softly, he caught the words “Parents... Lithuania... Thursday.” He recalled something Josh had said once about his parents being research wizards in far-off parts. Clearly, the teachers were having trouble contacting them.

Lewis also appeared to be listening in on the adults' conversation. He tensed as their words sank in, and then got to his feet with a sudden sharp movement.

He moved over to his brother's bedside, and softly leaned down to kiss his cheek. He stood

looking down at Josh for a moment with a tremble to his lower lip, and then he turned on his heel and headed out of the infirmary.

Sev silently followed him back to the painting of the Fat Lady, the guardian of the Gryffindor dorms. He didn't go in, but waited outside. Something in Lewis's gait had reminded him of James and Sirius. He saw them sneaking around occasionally, when he was on his invisible midnight patrols, moving through the corridors with a quiet determination.

That was what he had seen in Lewis Matthews; determination.

A few moments later, Lewis emerged from the hole behind the painting. There was a bulky bag slung over his shoulders, and Sev suspected it contained all his worldly possessions.

Lewis had taken enough of the treatment that had been handed out to him and his brother this past year. He was running away.

There was an odd mix of nervousness and surety on his face as Sev padded through the corridors after him. For the first time, Sev could see the spirit of the Gryffindor behind the nervous little boy he'd seen cower from Nott and Goyle.

Lewis Matthews' courage was not the fiery James Potter kind, or the fierce self-confi-

dence you could see in Lily. He had the courage of conviction — the ability to go through with a plan that any other eleven-year-old might well have abandoned as too scary.

For, as Sev followed him out of the main building, he saw where Lewis had decided to run to; the Forbidden Forest.

In a way, it made sense. Nobody really had the first clue what was in the forest, not even Hagrid who seemed to like the place. Sev realised that Lewis was not just running but finding a place to hide out; somewhere he would be close enough to watch what was going on without the Slytherins knowing he was there.

However, though it was a brave plan it was not the wisest one he could have come up with. The Forbidden Forest was, as Professor Malachite had so loudly pointed out, Forbidden for a reason. In Hogwarts, keep out rules were never just because the teachers happened to say so. Sev resolved to follow him in and make sure he at least found somewhere relatively safe to hide.

As Lewis stumbled through the underbrush, Sev was able to follow him by the sound of his heavy breathing. Courage, after all, was not the same as fearlessness, and Lewis was plainly terrified.

It was harder to move through trees than cor-

ridors without making a sound. Sev was forced to pick his way slowly so as not to alert Lewis, and he fell gradually further behind.

Suddenly, he heard an ear-splitting shriek from up ahead. He heard the sound of Lewis' overloaded bag being thrown to the ground, and a moment later the crash of his panicked flight through the trees.

Trying to chase Lewis now would be worse than useless — the sound of Sev's pursuit would only terrify him further. Instead, Sev ducked a few branches and picked his way towards where he thought Lewis had been startled.

The gaps between the trees widened out into a mini-clearing; he could see a few stars peeking through the clouds far above. Hand on his wand, Sev looked around for some magical creature that might have put the younger boy to flight.

He was so busy looking around that he didn't look down. He tripped over something, and fell heavily. Inspecting his wand carefully to make sure he hadn't broken it, Sev said "*Lumos!*" and flicked the magical light over to the object he had caught his foot on.

It was a human skull.



Sev automatically stumbled a few steps backwards. Impassive or not, there was something utterly instinctual about recoiling from a skeleton.

Once automatic reaction was done, cool reflection kicked right back in. It was a skeleton; it was far beyond any help he could have provided, and there was no reason to be afraid of it. He took a closer look.

He tried to judge how long the bones might have lain there. They could have been picked clean by scavengers, but there were also remnants of clothes, and they were rotting. Sev was no expert on decomposition, but common sense could still guide him. In the damp atmosphere of the forest, this body had probably been here somewhere between a matter of months and a few years.

It was hard to tell anything from what was left of the clothing; it looked to have been a dark-coloured robe, but what did that prove on Hogwarts grounds?

The bones had been somewhat scattered; perhaps by animals, perhaps partly from when he — and presumably Lewis — had stumbled over it. Even so, he could glean some sort of rough idea of the size of the skeleton, and he didn't think it had been a child; not a young one, anyway.

Snape stepped closer, as his magical light glinted off something metallic on the ground. He knelt down, ignoring the slightly spongy ground as mud soaked into his robe, and picked it up.

It was a small golden earring, twisted into an elaborate coil. A cursory inspection of the ground found its twin. After all, the skull no longer had ears to hold them in.

Sev held the pair of them in his palms and studied them thoughtfully. They were familiar... He closed his eyes, and allowed his mind to flood back; back over a thousand vividly stored memories, snapshots of his life.

The right one slotted into place, and his eyes snapped open. Yes, he had seen these earrings before... last year in fact. In his astronomy classes.

He looked at the skeleton again, but it was still just bones. The knowledge hadn't changed it. Even knowing that this was her corpse, he couldn't see anything of Professor Cephus in it.

The mystery of her absence was no longer so mysterious. How long had she lain dead here? Since the start of this school year, or the end of the last?

He briefly pondered how she had ended up in the Forbidden Forest, but dismissed it as useless. There were too many ways she could have been lured out here, and there was no proof

that this was even where she'd died.

The silent bones offered no clue as to how it might have happened, so he started to comb over the immediate area. Perhaps there was no reason to expect to find anything, and yet...

It was something about the way the body had been dumped that bothered him. The incompleteness... of it. If you had gone to the trouble of hauling the body out to the Forbidden Forest, why not drag it deeper inside? Why not bury it, or cast some subtle masking spell?

And that, naturally, led to the conclusion that it hadn't truly been meant to be hidden. Whoever had dumped it had wanted it to be found... just not immediately.

The killer didn't want their actions to be known, but they wanted the result of them to be. A message was being sent. And somebody who wanted to send this kind of message wouldn't take the risk of it being missed or misunderstood.

He found the note pinned to a nearby tree. It was a rolled up scroll, held shut by a rusted nail through the bottom. Sev took the nail-head in his fingertips and pulled it free. The scroll flapped open.

The words were written in an ornate, cursive script. Sev wouldn't have been incredibly surprised if the ink it was written in turned out to be blood

— although he would have betted that if it was, it wouldn't be the author's. This was not a furtively scribbled note, but a carefully planned missive. Somebody was showing off their sense of drama.

It was difficult to read by the light of his wand, and he leaned in closely. The note read;

*The blood of wizardry has been
diluted. We will suffer these
wretched halfbreeds no more.*

*Signed: the Brotherhood
of the Death Eaters*

The name was unfamiliar to him. Next to the final 's' was what looked like a dark blot on the paper. Sev placed a hand behind the note to pull it closer to his eyes, and then leapt back as green light flared. Reflexes had him halfway across the clearing, wand out, before he recognized that this spell was not a magical booby trap.

The tiny star of sparkling green that drifted outwards and upwards seemed utterly incongruous — like a fairy light or a fragment of a firework. Then, as Sev watched, it split in half and in half

again. The lights multiplied rapidly, forming a globe of dancing lights several feet across, easily visible against the black of the night sky.

The lights swarmed around each other like miniature fairies. They bunched together, and then spread out again, taking on a new shape. Before his eyes, they formed into an obscenely grinning skull, huge and distorted with a snaking tongue. In one of the eye sockets the lights flared in a supernova wink.

Sev waited for the lights to dissipate, but they merely hung there. Even if Lewis hadn't gone dashing straight back up to the school to find the headmaster, it wouldn't be long before somebody noticed the unholy light display.

He still had his invisibility cloak, though he had tugged it off to move more easily amongst the trees. Now he slid back under it, and sat quietly on a tree stump to wait.

The huge magical skull high above bothered him far more than the real one lying inches from his feet.



He heard the voices of the searchers long before they appeared in the clearing. Malachite and Dumbledore; they had come alone, and come quickly. No doubt the enormous hover-



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ing skull had convinced them more powerfully than any wild story of Lewis's.

Professor Malachite sounded angry, and somewhat out of breath. "I'm telling you, Albus, it's a prank. I'll bet it's that Potter boy again. Ellida lets him and Black get away with murder."

"The same could be said for some of your house, Carnus," Dumbledore pointed out mildly. His voice carried through the silence of the night, but Sev didn't think he was too far away. He had of course extinguished his magical light, and the two teachers had a fair amount of ground to search even with the skull as a rough guide.

"I should think, with everything that's going on," Malachite observed bitterly, "people should see that my house are very much the victims here. But no; whenever house Slytherin is involved, all the old prejudices come out."

"It can be easy to fall into that trap," Dumbledore acknowledged. His voice sounded further away now; he was somewhere off to Sev's right. "And it can be easy to fall too far out of it."

"What's that supposed to mean?" he asked, sounding both irritated and confused. "You talk in riddles, old friend."

"Don't be blinded," Professor Dumbledore



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cautioned him. "Others see nothing because of their prejudices, but you see just as little when you're so defiant of them."

There was a brief silence, and then Malachite said sharply "This is about Malfoy, isn't it?"

Sev could picture the headmaster's expression — that gentle little upwards flick of his eyebrows that let you know your words were foolish, but he was going to let you dig your own grave anyway. "I merely warned that it might be wise to take a closer look at his activities."

"Well, I've looked, and I see nothing to be bothered by!" the Dark Arts professor snapped. "Lucius Malfoy has the potential to be a great wizard!"

"With that, I won't argue," said Dumbledore mildly. "But you should remember that there's a difference between a great wizard and a good wizard."

Malachite grumbled something inaudible. His voice grew louder as the two searchers turned back towards the clearing. "Why is it always Malfoy with you? He's far from the only mystery in house Slytherin. Take Severus, if you will."

Dumbledore made an acknowledging sound that might have been agreement.

"I mean, I don't know what's wrong with the boy," Malachite said, half to himself. "He's so bright! But he won't let anyone near him. Lord

knows I've tried to get him interested in things, tried to get him to open up, but he just doesn't seem to see what I'm doing."

"Oh, he sees more than you give him credit for," Dumbledore said quietly.

Malachite made an exasperated 'ha!' sound. "See, this is how it always is with you, Albus. You think you know these students better than they know themselves. Well, sometimes, you know, what's on the surface is exactly what's underneath. You're seeing things that just aren't there."

"No," the headmaster corrected gently. "I'm just seeing things that are really there. You'd be amazed how few people know how to do that."

Sev never got to hear Malachite's response to that, because at that point he stumbled across the clearing. He swept his lit wand out in a cursory inspection, and then froze. "Albus!" he called urgently.

The teacher moved gingerly towards the skeleton, and stood looking down at it. In the shadows, his expression was unreadable.

Dumbledore emerged from the trees to stand beside him. He didn't look shocked so much as gently sorrowful, as if this had been what he was expecting.

"Well, it appears young Lewis was less dis-

turbed than you all seemed to think,” he observed quietly. He looked up, at the still-hovering skull. It had been there near a half-hour now, but the light had not begun to fade. “And this, my friend, is anything but a prank,” he added darkly.

Malachite’s attention was still focused on the skeleton. “Who is it, do you think?” he asked.

Dumbledore’s expression melted back into sorrow. “That, Carnus, I can tell you. Dear Auriga; what could such a gentle soul have done to deserve this?”

Malachite started in shock and took an involuntary step backwards. He seemed genuinely startled for the first time. “Wha—How can you know?”

“I had my suspicions as soon as Lewis Matthews came charging into my office,” he said. He stepped forwards, and picked up one of the ornate earrings from where Sev had replaced it. “And this only confirms them,” he added softly.

“Auriga Cephus,” said Malachite, and he closed his eyes. He rubbed at his chest nervously, as if he was suddenly having difficulty taking breath.

Dumbledore’s sharp eyes had spotted the note Sev had untacked on the tree-trunk. He moved over and pulled it free. “Well, our culprits have identified themselves,” he said,

showing it to Malachite.

“Death Eaters?” The Dark Arts teacher clutched his arms up against his chest, as if hugging himself against a sudden chill.

“A name I’ve heard before...” Dumbledore admitted darkly.

“Before?” asked the other man nervously.

Dumbledore nodded slowly. “There have been rumours of a growing organization for some time now. I have friends amongst the Aurors; they send me news of what’s going on at the edges of society. A few times now I’ve heard mention of these Death Eaters. One of my correspondents spoke of a ‘mark’ they displayed over the scenes of their crimes.” He shot a dark look at the hanging skull. “Now I know what he meant.”

He scowled down at the piece of paper, then produced his wand from the inside of his robes. He whipped it towards the dark blot on the page and snapped “*Deletrius!*” The skull shrank down to a single point, and then melted back into the paper.

Dumbledore crumpled it, and thrust it inside his robe with the wand. “Come, Carnus,” he said, his face falling into stern lines. “The Ministry must be notified.”

Sev followed them back to the school.

The team of specialists from the Ministry appeared rapidly, and with minimum fanfare. Even Sev's invisibility cloak wouldn't get him inside their meeting; they set numerous wards and detectors outside the door of the headmaster's office.

However, he didn't really need to be inside to know what went on. The men from the Ministry went out to the forest and quietly retrieved the skeleton. Sev suspected they took the note, as well, and from the thundery look on Dumbledore's face he knew they'd ordered the headmaster to keep silent about it. It was just like the Ministry to 'not want to alarm people', but that had never been Dumbledore's way. He believed that however young they were, his students had a right to know the truth of what was going on.

Dumbledore had the Ministry men do one more thing before they departed; Sev followed them down to the infirmary and watched as they set up powerful anti-darkness wards around Josh Matthews's bed.

The following Friday, the headmaster called the school together for a special assembly. It was a much graver affair than most such gatherings; everyone had heard about Josh, and the rumour of the mysterious skull in the night had

been spreading around.

When Dumbledore stood, there was little trace of his customary twinkle on display. "I have grave tidings on two counts," he said without preamble.

"I regret to inform those of you who remember her from last year that Professor Auriga Cephus is no longer among the living." The ripple of dismay that spread through the crowd was subdued; it had been nearly a full year now, and old teachers quickly faded out of students' memories. "Professors Alomanicia and Melusine will continue to cover her classes until we can appoint a replacement next year." He paused briefly.

"You have all, no doubt, heard about the unprecedented attack on one of our number; Joshua Matthews." Most people's eyes flickered guiltily over to Lewis; Sev's went straight to Malfoy. He was gazing up at Dumbledore with an innocently curious expression. "It is a dark time when even students have to guard themselves against magical attacks; but it seems these are dark days indeed. I do not believe anything like this is likely to happen again on Hogwarts grounds in the near future, but I would ask you all to be on your guard. If you see anything suspicious, I would ask you

to come and see me or your head of house immediately. Perhaps a little paranoia is justified, in days such as this.”

A murmur of disquiet travelled through the room.

Finally, Dumbledore broke into a smile. “However, I now have some much better news on that front. Madame Florence informs me that the treatments she has been trying are now beginning to have some success, and she’s fully confident that Josh will awake from his coma in a matter of days.”

The relieved applause that exploded across the room was louder nowhere than at the Slytherin table. Perhaps only Sev knew that what they were really applauding was the lessening of the weight of their own guilt.



Sev was there when Josh awoke. He waited until Madame Florence chased out his weeping parents and overexcited brother to sweep off the invisibility cloak and reveal himself.

Josh didn’t seem surprised to see him. He smiled humourlessly, and said “I thought you’d be here.”

This was the time, if there was a time, for heartfelt apologies and confessions. But Josh wouldn’t

want to hear them, and Sev wouldn’t know how to give them. He just nodded in acknowledgement.

“You’re leaving,” he stated. It wasn’t a question, but Josh nodded anyway.

“Mother thinks it’s time Lewis and I went into private tuition. She always talked about us doing that anyway, but...” he closed his eyes briefly “I wanted to go to a proper school. Well, now we’ve had the Hogwarts experience.” He gave another bitter smile. “Wouldn’t have missed it for the world,” he said wryly.

“They asked you who did it?”

“And I said I didn’t know,” Josh confirmed. He shrugged. “It wouldn’t make any difference anyway.” He looked up at Sev. “You were right. I didn’t want to believe you, but you were right.” He laughed quietly to himself. “It doesn’t work if you fight. It doesn’t really make any difference.”

He fell silent for a long time, looking at the curtains. Then he straightened up in bed and met Sev’s eyes again. “Lewis and me, we’re getting out while we can,” he said. He gave Sev an unreadable look. “Maybe you should do the same.”

“I’m not trying to get out, I’m trying to get in,” he pointed out quietly.

Josh nodded slowly. “Good luck,” he said,

with a half-shrug. His face tightened. "I think you're gonna need it."



The Matthews family packed up and left the next day. Malfoy and his cronies were loudly triumphantly, but their glee rang hollowly in the suddenly oppressive common room. The other Slytherins didn't seem to want to meet each other's eyes anymore.

The departure of Lewis and Josh sent ripples of disquiet through the whole school. Even those who hadn't known them were disheartened by their leaving, and the atmosphere in Hogwarts was changing. The teachers, Dumbledore most of all, began to look stern and worried. People were beginning to be afraid.

Even the train ride home for the summer vacation had little of its customary jubilation. Sev suspected that Josh and Lewis were not the only ones who would not return next year. The fabled Hogwarts had lost some of its air of safety, and everyone was feeling the aftereffects of that loss of innocence.

Sev, however, hadn't had much innocence to begin with, and there were other, far more concrete matters to worry over. Malfoy had

revealed much more of his dark side and some of his newly-gained power, but Sev still was no closer to discovering his mysterious allies.

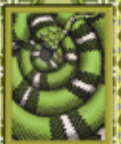
Even more troubling was that note left with Professor Cephus's body. The choice of Josh as Malfoy's victim had been near arbitrary; pure schoolboy spite. Josh had been a random victim; what happened when it was somebody Malfoy had a true vendetta against?

As the train pulled into the London station, Sev happened to glance across at the next carriage and see Lily and her friends tumble out. They had regained something of their sense of fun, and were cheerfully bidding each other goodbye.

Seeing Lily laughing with her friends like that made him feel a sudden pang of some melancholy he couldn't quite identify. He scrambled in his bag, and pulled out the invisibility cloak. Then he took out a scrap of parchment, and scribbled out a few brief words.

In the crush of the station, he managed to brush by her, and slip the cloak into her school bag, with the note tightly wrapped up in its centre.

*Be careful. and take this.
I think you might need it.*



TRIPLE EXPENSURE



THE CROWD ON PLATFORM NINE and three-quarters was markedly smaller than usual. Those that were there tended to be older; there was a definite scarcity of first years around the place. Those that were there were as nervous and excited as could be expected, but many of the older students seemed subdued.

A marked contrast to the dark atmosphere was the feline grin on the face of Lucius Malfoy. But then, he had no reason to be touched by the general depression — not when he was the cause of at least part of it.

Things had slowly been going bad in the wizarding world for a while now. Disappearances, random attacks, a rise in anti-Muggle sentiments. But at the end of last year, the first signs had appeared that even Hogwarts itself was not totally immune.

The murder of astronomy teacher Auriga Cephus could not be tied to Malfoy — at least not


directly, although he probably heartily approved of it. Or would, if he knew it was a murder. That was a fact that was currently known only to Dumbledore, Snape, the Ministry of Magic, and a twelve-year-old called Lewis Matthews.

Lewis Matthews, and his older brother Josh, were the other cause of the aura of darkness and distrust that had settled over school. And that, Malfoy *could* be held accountable for.

When Lewis had been sorted into Gryffindor house, his Slytherin brother Josh had borne the brunt of Malfoy's wrath. This had grown into a private vendetta, splitting the Slytherin house into those who favoured Malfoy, and those who were just too afraid to go against him.

Things had culminated with a magical attack that had put Josh in a coma for several days. His parents had taken him and his brother out of the school, but Josh had never named his attackers and only the other Slytherin boys from his year knew the truth.

Malfoy had been devious in diverting suspicion. Whilst all of them knew he was responsible, even those who knew couldn't have proved it. The only ones he'd let in on the secret were those he sent to actually perform the curse; Nick Avery and Simon Lestrangle.

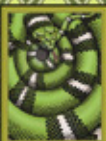


Even Sev, whom Malfoy trusted, had been cut out of the loop. Malfoy was quick enough assessing people to know that his cool attitude was better suited to deviousness than dirty-work. Further, by having Josh left unconscious in the library, he had practically guaranteed that the studious and solitary Snape would be the one to find him. He was the perfect choice; a Slytherin, for the sympathy value, but one who was cool and unreadable, and wouldn't crack under the headmaster's sharp gaze.

Yes, Malfoy was extremely devious. His fellow Slytherins might be split between fearing and worshipping him, but none of them underestimated him; the same could not be said for the rest of the school. The Gryffindors, in particular, regarded him as something like a pantomime baddie — sneering and snapping, but unable to do any real damage.

Sev, working on the inside, saw a rather different story.

Malfoy had the patronage of some mysterious but powerful figure, who could teach him curses no boy of his age should be able to master. Sev strongly suspected that this dark wizard had some sort of affiliation with the 'Death Eaters,' the group who had claimed



credit for Auriga Cephus's murder.

Sev believed he had as much of Malfoy's trust as anybody — but even that was not a lot. Malfoy was the kind of boy who greatly enjoyed having a secret, especially one that gave him power over others. He knew Sev was extremely smart, and would be wary about cutting him in — Lucius, no doubt, was worried about being eclipsed in his new master's eyes.

"Ah, Severus," said Malfoy pleasantly. "Looking forward to the new year?"

"I'm sure it's likely to be... exciting," he said, dryly. Malfoy barked a brief laugh — perhaps at the dark insinuations, or perhaps simply at the image of dry-as-dust Severus Snape getting excited over anything.

He put a casual arm over Sev's shoulder, which he avoided the urge to throw off. Sev was not at all a tactile person, and he certainly didn't like being touched by Lucius Malfoy. "I can guarantee it," Malfoy grinned, close to his ear, and then pulled away from him.

On the train-ride, they were joined by Nick, Simon, and Colin Crabbe. Over the last two years, they had become Malfoy's constant companions, although they couldn't be called 'friends'. No, they were more like a military escort; Crabbe as



the dull-witted muscle-man, and Nick and Simon to do the dirty work so Malfoy kept his hands clean. For reasons of deniability only — Malfoy certainly didn't steer clear of nastiness because he didn't enjoy it. However, he was smart enough to farm out anything that brought with it a chance of being caught in the act.

Sev knew where he fit into this little gang; the extremely dangerous position of senior advisor. He had to tread the fine line between proving his brains valuable to Malfoy, and being so far in advance of him that Malfoy started to feel threatened.

Back at Hogwarts, they slid into their places at the by-now familiar house table. Malfoy seemed to be regarding the students to be sorted with more than his usual contemptuous disinterest.

Sev ran an assessing eye over the ragtag assortment in evidence. There were only perhaps forty new first years, making for a year-group half the size of his own. The tables also had some empty places; mostly in Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff. Brave Gryffindors and ambitious Slytherins thrived on a more dangerous climate. Most of them, anyway.

The split in their own year group was all the more apparent. He, Malfoy, and Malfoy's three

hand-picked 'soldiers' sat on one side of the table; the other four boys, Jack, Stuart, Robert and John, sat on the other. They were all fairly quiet, and spent most of their time looking at their plates or at the ceiling.

The Sorting Hat sang its usual carefully-composed piece of doggerel, causing Malfoy to roll his eyes pointedly. But once it had finished, he leaned forward in his seat to watch the Sorting.

Sev watched with him, and also watched Malfoy's face for cues. A few minutes and a little knowledge of Malfoy made it crystal clear.

Malfoy was scanning the new intake for mudbloods. Technically, there should be no way to tell, but of course to them all magic was completely novel and astonishing. Any wizardborn kid might be intimidated by the sheer scale of Hogwarts, but those from Muggle families were similarly shocked by things like magically appearing feasts and the school ghosts.

When a slow smile began to curl over Malfoy's features towards the end of the Sorting, he knew why. "We seem to have been exceptionally... lucky, this year," he observed neutrally. There were as many Muggle-born students as ever... but not one of them had been Sorted into house Slytherin.

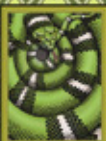
“Lucky?” Lucius smirked. “Hardly. Things are changing, Severus. It’s so obvious, even a singing hat knows it.” His smile darkened. “Of course, it figures that the lesser houses would be slower to take on the changes.”

He glanced up and down the Slytherin table, and then turned back to Sev. “House Slytherin is as close as it’s ever been to perfection. And by the end of this year, the last of these... impurities will have been cleansed.” He smiled, and rubbed absently at the dark metal ring on his left hand. Sev had noticed it earlier; it was in the shape of a twisting snake, and had leapt out at him because Malfoy was not normally one for jewellery.

“Why do you have that?” he asked, automatically lowering his voice. It was clearly the right time for conspiratorial tones, for Malfoy replied just as quietly.

“It’s a mark of favour,” he said with a self-satisfied grin. “I’ll tell you more when we get back to our rooms.”

At the lead table, Professor Dumbledore stood up. “Ahem. Welcome back, all... and welcome for the first time to our new students. As I’m sure you’re aware, things have been somewhat... tense in the wizarding world of late. However, I want to assure you that the grounds



of Hogwarts are as well protected as ever.” He nodded to the teachers on his right and left.

“Professors Malachite and Fractalis have been renewing the wards on the outer gates, and Professor Vitae has lent her assistance with some extremely powerful charms. In these troubled times, we are safest when we stick together; and at Hogwarts, we are all one family.”

Sev looked at Malfoy and pointedly raised an eyebrow, causing the other boy to snicker. At least Dumbledore hadn’t tried to say they were a ‘happy’ family.

“The staff, most of you will know by now,” Dumbledore said. “Professor Salubrius here will now be taking over the first and second-year Astronomy classes, and Professor Cuero will take up his old position as the Care of Magical Creatures tutor.” There was polite applause as the older students craned their necks to see the new teacher.

He was a narrow-faced man with reddish hair, a moustache and a snooty expression. He was looking at most of the students with the kind of contempt Malfoy reserved for them, although his face seemed to soften a little when he glanced towards the Slytherins.

Care of Magical Creatures was one of the

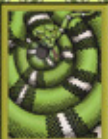


new subjects available in the third year. Sev had signed up for that, and Arithmancy with Fractalis. He had picked his lessons on the basis that Malfoy had also chosen them; it really mattered little which he chose, for he could excel at any without effort.

When the feasting was over, everybody stumbled back to their dorms. Hogwarts rooms were assigned on a rotating basis, so that a year-group kept the same places all through school, instead of shifting all the time. Sev returned to what was now Third Year Dorm B and took up his usual bed. When Stuart Flint tried to do the same, however, he was stopped.

"My bed now," said Simon Lestrange placidly. Simon was always very softly-spoken, and slow to speak or move. However, his was not a natural quietness like Snape's; his was the silence of a clock gently ticking down to zero. Simon Lestrange was the closest thing Hogwarts had to a psychopath, and they had all learned to tread around him very carefully.

"Okay..." Stuart slowly withdrew the suitcase he'd automatically thrown down. Something about the far-away look in Simon's eyes encouraged you not to use sudden movements. "Um... this used to be my bed." He was careful



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to make it sound half-questioning, and not in any way accusing.

"Mine now," repeated Simon with a vague smile.

"Fine." He retreated rapidly. "I'll, um, I'll go move in with Jack and Rob and Johnny, how about that?" Simon continued to smile at him in that slightly bemused way, as if he was undecided as to whether Stuart really existed or he was just imagining him. Stuart took the hint, and scuttled away.

Malfoy and Avery cackled in the wake of his departure. Sev smiled thinly, because it was wise to be amused by the same things as Lucius Malfoy. Slow-witted Colin didn't have time to work out the funny before the others had stopped laughing.

Malfoy got to his feet, and surveyed his troops approvingly. "At last; the company of *real* Slytherins." He smiled, and padded over to close the door. Then he stood with his back against it, and smiled again.

"You have all been loyal to me, and loyal to my cause. Don't think it has gone unnoticed. Those we work for reward loyalty... and brutally punish traitors." He shot a pointed glance behind him, as if he could see through the door to the place where he had once used a forbid-



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den curse on Joshua Matthews.

Avery and Colin listened with puppy-dog devotion — Simon with a variant on his usual detached gaze. Sev's face was blank as ever, although behind it he was cynically amused by this classical cult brainwashing.

"Soon... soon, I will be admitted to the inner circles — and you will quickly follow." He reached into his pocket for something. "Until then, I would give you these tokens of allegiance." He opened his hand, and in it lay four more dark metal rings like his own.

Sev accepted one from Malfoy, and studied it carefully. The metal was almost black, and polished to a fine shine. The ring was in the shape of a coiled snake, with its jaws open in a wide hiss. Within the jaws of the snake was a miniature skull.

Skulls and snakes... the symbols of the Death Eaters.

Sev slipped the ring onto the fourth finger of his left hand, the way Malfoy wore his. To display it proudly could be very useful; if there were other groups of followers like the one Malfoy was building, they would see him as one of their own.

Malfoy smirked triumphantly at them. "Soon," he assured. "Very, very soon."



Sev's first new lesson this year was Care of Magical Creatures. They dutifully trooped out to the school field where Professor Cuero waited for them. Hogwarts, magical or not, was not immune to the English rain, and the ground was damp and soggy underfoot.

Malfoy protested loudly about what the mud was doing to his expensive new robes, but that was nothing on the way he cursed when he saw their partners for this subject. "Gryffindors!" He sounded disgusted. "Will we never be rid of them?"

"Unfortunately for us, doesn't look like it," snapped Sirius Black. He scowled at Malfoy, who gave him a mocking smile in return.

"Love your new hair, Black. What did you cut it with, a penknife?" Sirius just sneered, but a few moments later Sev caught him surreptitiously trying to smooth his unruly curls into place.

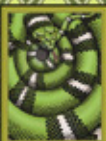
Sev's own hair was also black and shoulder-length, but it hung perfectly straight and had a tendency to appear greasy. There were few things in this world Sev could have cared less about than his own physical appearance. In his experience, people who spent a lot of

time working on their surface appearance did so because there was nothing worth knowing about underneath.

Professor Cuero regarded his new students with a sneer to rival Malfoy's. "Third years. Yes." He pronounced it much the way he might have said 'flobberworms'.

For their first lesson, they were dealing with a herd of odd, crossbreed creatures called leucrocottas. About the size of a small donkey, they were vaguely feline but with cloven hooves. Their strangest feature was the fact that instead of separate teeth, they had one huge flat slab of bone. They were kept in an enclosure, which was as well — they moved extremely rapidly, and could be sparked to flee with little warning.

Working with an air of absolute disinterest, Cuero explained how the creatures could mimic human speech, and how they could be lured close without sparking them to flight. He was casually dismissive of most of the students, and to Malfoy's delight extra-nasty to the Gryffindors. He was especially biting towards Lily and Jade — perhaps because they were girls, but Sev thought it more likely to be because they were both 'mudbloods'. Interesting; a teacher who shared Malfoy's prejudices. He was



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intrigued — it didn't seem like Dumbledore to miss such open enmity in one of his chosen staff. But where Dumbledore was seemingly as sharp as Sev himself, he suffered from one fatal flaw... he wanted to trust people.

That was one mistake Sev wasn't intending to make.

Several times in the lesson, Lily tried to catch his eye. He studiously avoided her gaze. At the end of last year, he had secretly slipped her an invisibility cloak that had once been his. Of course she knew who the gift was from, but he didn't intend to speak with her about it. He had a suspicion that she would take his gesture as proof that he too could sometimes be moved by emotion or compassion, which of course it wasn't.

She was a mudblood, and therefore in more danger than him. She was also one of the only two people who knew his real mission in getting close to Malfoy. He couldn't afford for her to be placed in a position where she might accidentally reveal his secret. Therefore, it was logical to protect her.

Pure logic. But of course, people who saw the world through emotional eyes refused to accept that you could live without doing so.

Sev's ever-observant brain picked out another Gryffindor who was earning Cuero's disgust.



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Remus Lupin; a quiet, thoughtful boy whose robes were always ragged and threadbare. Since Lupin was neither a mudblood nor a girl, and not particularly objectionable, Sev watched with interest to see why Cuero had taken against him.

He soon saw that in Lupin's case, the teacher had a genuine beef. He appeared to be trying in earnest, but he just couldn't make the leucocottas obey him. No matter what he did, the beasts just wouldn't go near him.

Sev was intrigued. Animals, especially the magical kind, had senses at their disposal that humans did not. What was it about Remus Lupin that they were so afraid of?



A few days passed, and Malfoy had said nothing more about the snake rings or his mysterious benefactor. Finally, late one night, Sev said in just the right tone of impatient nervousness "Lucius, don't you think we're moving a little slowly? We're just sitting around. We should be doing something."

Malfoy gave a wide smile. "I'm glad you said that, Severus. Everybody, listen up." The other three scrambled into varying states of attention-paying.

"Sev says we're moving too slowly here, and he's right. We've suffered under this outdated



system long enough—" Sev attempted to figure out how you could twist the current situation into 'suffering', and even with his exceptional brain couldn't quite do it — "and it's time for a change. Now, we all know it's coming... but even so, we should do our bit."

He smiled reflectively, and fiddled absently with his wand. "Now, last year... last year was a trial run. This year, we're gonna get a little more... ambitious." They all nodded and smiled; after all, weren't they all Slytherins? "Last year, we cleaned the trash out of our year-group. This year, it's time to purify the rest of house Slytherin."

"Next year the school, when we're fifteen the world?" suggested Snape wryly.

Malfoy smiled darkly at him. "Oh, it's not as outlandish as you might think..." he intimated softly.

"What can we do?" asked Avery, with oily eagerness.

"Well, it's not so much a question of what you can do as... what Severus can do." He smirked at the other boy encouragingly.

The correct response to that would probably be a 'Me? What can I do?' — but that was neither a Slytherin response nor a Snape response. He simply raised a fine eyebrow and waited for Malfoy to elaborate.



Malfoy turned to address the whole group. "I don't know if you've noticed, but we have a genius in our midst." He placed an odd accent on the word 'genius,' as if he couldn't quite decide if it should be mocking or not.

Slytherins might be ambitious, but — with the possible exception of Colin Crabbe — none of them stupid. They had all twigged by now that Sev's brains were really something quite extraordinary. Malfoy knew about the deal he had with Professor Malachite to be allowed to read up on all sorts of dangerous subjects, and they'd all seen him breezing through texts they couldn't understand a word of. Sev tried instinctively to disguise the true extent of his intelligence, but he had to read sometimes. He wasn't prepared to give up his books for any amount of protective illusion.

However, what Malfoy had in mind wasn't his usual quest for ever-more-nasty hexes. After what he'd done to Josh Matthews last year, Sev doubted he needed anything more powerful anyway.

"House Slytherin is, as you know, the home of deviousness." Malfoy managed to make that sound like something to be proud of. Sev noticed that he seemed to have developed a need to make dramatic speeches; probably a manifes-

tation of his newly puffed sense of importance. Lucius Malfoy had always loved the sound of his own voice. "Well, I think we all know that our Severus Snape is more devious than most."

More devious than you know. If he'd been James Potter or Sirius Black, he'd have said that out loud; the hero, making a cryptic comment so the bad guys could remember it at the time of their downfall and curse not having twigged.

Being Severus Snape, he smiled thinly and said nothing. Other people's opinions had never meant enough to him to want to show off.

Malfoy clapped him companionably on the shoulder in a way that Snape detested. "Well, Severus, this year we're finally going to put that brain of yours to good use." Sev suspected Lucius Malfoy's definition of good did not quite run parallel with most people's. "Sev, we need a plan," he said.

Severus quirked an eyebrow. "Anything specific in mind, or just a plan?"

Malfoy laughed, and squeezed his shoulder in a friendly way. What was all this need for physical contact? Sev couldn't see how people got any kind of comfort or validation out of it. It was an invasion of his personal space, and he found it extremely distasteful.



Malfoy's smile faded into seriousness, and he produced a small slip of paper from inside one of his textbooks. There were three names on it; Snape recognized them all. All Slytherins, and all... "Mudbloods?"

Malfoy nodded briskly. "I want them out. I want them out soon, and I want them out without anybody knowing why, how, or who got rid of them. Can you do it?"

There was only one possible response to that. "Of course."



Malfoy was, as Sev had long known, far from stupid. He had been able to get away with his victimization of Josh Matthews last year because it was an isolated incident, seemingly reasonless. Ejecting the last three mudbloods in house Slytherin in quick succession was a very different proposition.

Sev was someone who lived by spotting patterns — and however this was done, it would make a pattern. The only way to make it work would be to create a pattern that nobody less sharp than him could trace.

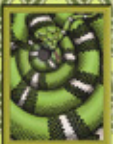
One thing that actually counted to his advantage was the general lack of prejudice against

mudbloods. People other than Malfoy's little cadre simply didn't care, and probably wouldn't even know who came from a Muggle family and who didn't. So the trick would be to get them all out of the school for entirely unconnected reasons.

Sev felt no moral qualms about conspiring to remove three completely innocent students from the only magical academy they could reasonably attend. If they stayed at Hogwarts, things would only go very badly for them. At least if he was planning this operation, he could control how badly burned they got from it.

It took no time at all to select his first victim; the oldest, a sixth year called Darren Kaye. If anyone began to suspect a pattern, they would automatically look to the sixth and seventh years; no one would expect students their age to be victimizing someone so much older.

Sev dredged his memory for anything pertaining to Darren Kaye, and then spent a few weeks surreptitiously observing him. He was, despite his Muggle ancestry, a typical Slytherin. Sly in a dully unpleasant way, he would cheat or lie whenever he could get away with it, and he had the kind of friends who would happily cackle with him over others' misfortune, and just as happily ditch him once he had some of his own.




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Sev's plan grew and solidified in his mind very quickly. Had he still had his invisibility cloak, he could have set it in motion himself... but for this, he had not just his own resources but people under command. He found himself in the unusual position of needing a favour from Colin Crabbe.

"Colin, I need you to do something for me. I need you to steal some things."

Colin grinned proudly. For a boy of his bulk, he was surprisingly light-fingered. All sorts of minor valuables had a tendency to wander into his possession, although he had learned quickly not to mess with anything belonging to his dorm-mates.

"Sure, Severus. D'you want me to get you some stuff from the staff offices? I know a way to get in."

Sev shook his head impatiently. "No, nothing like that. I just want you to go up to the sixth-year dorms every so often, and lift a few things. Spare quills, sweets, magical gadgets, any spare knuts and sickles that have been left lying around."

A frown made its way ponderously across Colin's flattened features. "But that's just small stuff. I take stuff like that all the time."

Sev permitted himself a tight-lipped smile. "Exactly." As Colin shrugged and dutifully turned to go, he called him back. "Oh, and one more

thing. There's a bed in the second dorm with a poster of a dragon above it. Take things from all the other places, but not from that one."

Somewhat to his surprise, Crabbe performed his assigned tasks without any difficulty. Sev allowed him to keep the sweets and the money he picked up, but anything fairly expensive or easily recognizable he hoarded under his bed, in the compartment where he had once hidden the invisibility cloak.

Crabbe's well-honed thieving instincts let him know how much to take and how frequently he could get away with it. At Sev's urging, he would pick pockets and bags of the sixth-years in the library or between classes — but only when a certain oblivious sixteen-year-old was in the area.

The sixth-years gradually became aware that there was a petty thief in their midst, but nothing was ever major enough to call in the staff. Many of the things Crabbe took should definitely not have been secreted about their dorms in the first place.

Perhaps people noticed Darren Kaye never had anything taken — perhaps they did not. But Sev knew that wouldn't matter. Whatever they saw or didn't see now, he knew they would have an entirely different recollection as soon

as somebody was in the frame for it.

The frame he drew together very neatly. From the third year and upwards, Hogwarts students were allowed on set weekends to visit Hogsmeade, the nearby wizarding village. They had to have parental permission first, but that hadn't been a problem — he'd dropped the slip on top of a pile of his uncle's papers one day, and he had quite absently signed it.

Unlike his fellow students, Sev wasn't in the slightest bit interested in Zonko's joke shop, or the incredible variety of sweets in Honeydukes. More to the point, everyone else would expect that, too. He allowed himself to be seen briefly browsing Dervish and Banges, and then made his way over to the bookshop. Not only was he genuinely keen to expand his personal library, but the bookshop was directly opposite Honeydukes — the one place students were virtually guaranteed to end up within.

Crabbe and Avery stuck with him — this year, rules had been imposed about sticking in pairs or threes — looking bored. Neither of them being great readers, it didn't take much acting. Avery lounged by the window, watching the street outside. Finally, he sat up with a lazy stretch and said "God, this is boring. I'm going



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across to Honeydukes. Coming?"

Colin got up, but Sev said "I'll stay here," not looking up from his books.

To anybody watching, it was probably a fairly familiar scenario. And after all, there were only five people at Hogwarts who knew it had been carefully planned that way.

Sev was careful to not watch them walk across, and doubly careful to pay zero attention to Darren Kaye and his friends where Avery had spotted them out of the window. He very much doubted anybody would ever try to link this to him in any way — but it was in his nature to be ridiculously over-cautious.

A more emotional person might have jiggled on the spot nervously, or been unable to avoid the occasional nervous flicker of a glance. Sev stood as still as ever, calmly flicking through a copy of *OLDE AND FORGOTTEN BEWITCHMENTS AND CHARMS*. He stayed that way until the commotion of the magical alarms was loud enough to disturb even the most devoted bookworm.

Honeydukes being a simple sweetshop, there were no crack teams of Aurors Apparating into position. However, half of the Hogwarts teaching staff came tumbling out of the Hog's Head, semi-drunk and more than semi-irritated.



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Darren Kaye was unconscious on the pavement outside the shop. The magical theft detectors, in addition to shrieking as badly as any Howler, had dropped him with an automatic stun spell.

He was restored with a tap of Professor Vitae's wand, and then the shouting began. Darren was — justifiably — furious, complaining that the packs of Ice Mice and Acid Pops had not got into his pockets by any will of his own. The Professors were all too annoyed at being interrupted on their day off to listen.

Professor Malachite confiscated Darren's wand, and snapped sternly "Go back up the school and wait outside my office. Stay there until I get back."

Darren scowled, but the Professor was the head of house Slytherin, and there was no arguing. His gathered friends all made sympathetic faces as he stomped off. And then, once he was gone, they started crowding round Professor Malachite to tell him of all the little things that had been going missing.

Sev, for one, knew that they weren't missing any longer. In fact, as of five minutes after all of them but Simon LeStrange had headed down to Hogsmeade, they had been neatly stored in a compartment under Darren's bed.



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Sev had no invisibility cloak to be a fly on the wall in Malachite's office, but he didn't need one. It was doubtful anybody in the entire building had missed Malachite's towering fury as it echoed off the walls. Stand in a nearby corridor, and you could hear phrases like "— disgrace to the school!" and "never in all my years as a teacher —" flying through the air as he raised his voice in anger.

Professor Malachite, Sev happened to know, was extremely defensive of the Slytherin reputation. Knowing the way they were always cast as the 'evil' side in any given confrontation, he was fighting a losing battle to reestablish them in the eyes of the other houses. As soon as Darren had been caught, nobody had thought 'a Hogwarts student just got caught stealing'. Everyone had thought 'a Slytherin just got caught stealing'.

Malachite was, naturally, more than furious. He took Darren 'crimes' extremely personally, as Sev had expected him to. He was not prepared to listen to the sixth-year's increasingly angry protestations of innocence. And it certainly didn't help Darren's case when the other boys in his dorm took the opportunity to do an



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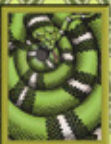
unofficial 'raid' and found the missing items stashed under his bed.

Getting expelled from Hogwarts was near to unheard of, and Sev didn't think petty theft of sweets and small change would do it. However, he also knew it didn't have to.

Mr. and Mrs. Kaye arrived the following morning (neither of them had been prepared to travel by Floo powder). They obviously knew little about magic, but they didn't need to have 'petty theft' spelt out to them. They were both as furious as Malachite, protesting their son's innocence.

Sev soon discovered that apparently being a Muggle was no guarantee of avoiding Slytherin arrogance. They refused to admit even the slightest possibility that their son had done anything wrong (admittedly he hadn't, but Sev was fairly sure it wasn't beyond him to have). After several hours of indiscriminate shouting, they stormed out with a sulky Darren in tow.

"I'll have nothing more to do with your damned magic!" Mr. Kaye shouted over his shoulder on the way out. "I said it before, I'll say it again — it's damned unnatural. I won't have you pinning this on my boy, just because you're all so corrupt it wouldn't occur to you that my son could be innocent. Come on, Darren!"



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And that was the ignoble end to Darren Kaye's time at Hogwarts.

In the buzzing Slytherin common room that same night, Malfoy met Sev's eyes across the room and gave him a surreptitious thumbs up. "One down," he mouthed.



Targets two and three were a fifth year called Liana Whittaker, and a second year, Rick Allison.

Sev picked Rick as victim two, because that broke up any pattern of 'working his way down' through the school.

Working on Rick, he had two assets by the name of Graham Goyle and Alex Nott, both in his year group. Through the friendship between Colin and Graham, the two boys were in fairly tight with Malfoy; even so, Sev went to ask Malfoy for permission to involve them.

Obviously, his judgement of their loyalties was as good as Malfoy's, probably better. However, asking Malfoy reinforced the impression that he was working for him, and that was important. Though Malfoy was smart enough to capitalize on others' strengths, he would come down like the plague on anyone who looked like threatening his position.



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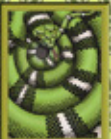
For the moment, his role as leader was fully secure because he was the only one with any contact with his mysterious master. But Sev knew that if he started to get wary of any of his underlings, their chances of making it to that inner circle were zero.

And Snape very much needed to be in that inner circle.

“Nott and Goyle?” Malfoy rubbed his forehead thoughtfully as he leaned back against the headboard. Year Three Dorm B had become a very strange mix of boys’ bedroom and tactical planning centre. When Malfoy and his followers gathered in a corner to talk, you could never tell if they would be discussing the overthrow of the current wizarding system or Quidditch scores and Charms homework.

Sev allowed him a few minutes to contemplate the idea. The less you pushed something with Malfoy, the more convinced he would become that it had been his own idea. Malfoy was very much in favour of his own ideas.

“Yes,” decided Malfoy slowly, “yes, we can use them. Put them on this. See if they can make it work. If they can...” He leaned across to rummage through his top drawer. “If they can, then give them these.”



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He reached over, and Snape took the contents of his cupped hand. It was another pair of the skull-and-serpent rings.

As Sev pocketed them with a nod and strode off to find Goyle, the sense of subtle triumph he felt was nothing to do with having his plan accepted. Malfoy had given him the rings, and more importantly the decision of whether or not to bestow them.

He was now, in all important senses, Malfoy’s second-in-command.



His plan to deal with Rick Allison was less subtle than the previous plot. That had nothing to do with running out of ideas, and everything to do with not leaving patterns. Trying too hard to not leave traces left a trace all its own; sometimes, the best way to allay suspicions was to be obvious.

Malfoy had been uncertain, when Sev had first explained the plan; however, he had been quick to gather the double-edged reasoning behind it. “I like the way your mind works,” he had finally said, with a razor smile.

Sometimes, the best way to hide a plot to get rid of mudbloods was to daub “Mudbloods go home!” in big letters over everything. Nobody



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would expect such blatantly thick-headed prejudice to be part of a larger deviousness.

Nott and Goyle's job was to make Rick's life a living hell. More importantly, they were to anonymously make it a living hell. If they were ever caught, they would deny everything, and certainly admit no ties to Snape or Malfoy.

However, Slytherin was the natural home of secrecy. When this sort of thing went on, nobody saw anything. Rick never reported what was being done to him — possibly because he was too petrified to dare tell anybody.

In some ways, this secret bullying was even worse than what Malfoy had done to Josh Matthews. At least Josh had known who was out to get him. Sev had carefully schooled Nott and Goyle to make no outward change in their attitude to him. Rick had been at Hogwarts for over a year, and this sudden attack from all sides was completely without warning, explanation, or clues.

Rick would open his books, and find vitriolic anti-mudblood passages scrawled all over them. Things of his would be broken or vandalized, and Sev ordered that there should always be a note claiming responsibility. All of them were signed in the same way — "Society for Purity". All of them told him to get his



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mudblood self the hell out of their school. All of them warned that he'd been cursed, and if he ever tried to breathe a word, he would instantly fall down stone dead.

Sev was fairly sure that at the beginning, Rick didn't believe a word of it. However, he had a good enough reading of Rick to know that he would try to deal with it himself first. By the time things got bad enough for him to think he needed help, he would have started to at least half-believe the story of the sudden-death curse.

So far as Sev knew, there was no real Society for Purity, but that was part of the beauty of it. Rick had absolutely no way of telling who might be in it, or how many there might be. And Sev made sure the Society took credit for everything.

Not just the things they'd done. He and the others kept up a near twenty-four hour observation on Rick's life, and anything that went wrong they took the credit for. When he got flu in February, they sent him a note to say they'd put something in his food. When his little sister back home broke her arm, they told him how they'd put a curse on her, and that it would get worse if he didn't leave.

When Nott and Goyle ran out of valuables to break or destroy, they got more inventive. Rather



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than removing things from Rick's stuff, they started to add things. Rather unpleasant things.

Sev's talent for potions came into play here. He never made anything particularly dangerous or deadly, but they were all things that looked extremely scary. Innocuous objects like quills or textbooks would be dusted with solutions that made his skin turn purple or his hands swell up. Rick quickly became terrified to touch or even eat anything that had been unattended for half a second.

In addition to the potions, there were what Nott referred to happily as 'presents'. At first these were things that were harmless but shocking to encounter — foul-smelling solutions shoved in his sock drawer, something slimy under the pillow, squishy grapes enchanted to look like eyeballs.

Then came the dead animals. These started small, with mice and small birds, and got progressively bigger. All of the animal corpses, in varying states of decay, were provided by Simon LeStrange. Not even Avery or Malfoy ever dared to ask him where he got them from.

On Snape's orders, Rick was abruptly left alone for almost two weeks with not the slightest explanation. Then, three days before the

Easter holiday, Rick's bed was visited by the most unpleasant corpse yet; a dead cat, dug up from where it had been buried several months ago. It had been Rick's pet in his first year at Hogwarts, and had been in his family since he was two.

That Friday, Rick had packed up not just a holiday bag but everything he owned. Sev didn't expect him to be back.

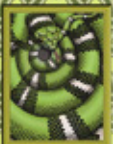



Rick was not the only one to be leaving the school over Easter. Lucius Malfoy also packed his bags, and when Avery asked if he was going home, he smiled tigerishly and said "In a sense."

Sev used Malfoy's absence to put into play plan three, of which he might be a little less approving. Malfoy might want his scheming to go undetected, but he still liked to flavour it with a little cruelty. Sev's plans to get rid of Liana Whittaker were entirely too... nice.

Sev happened to know that Liana was a model student. Not only that, but she was studying languages, with the intention of working in one of the Ministry's international branches.

Sev also happened to know, having read a great deal, that on and off through the years, there had been an old tradition of transfers






between wizarding schools. The European three, Hogwarts, Durmstrang and Beaubaxtons, had chosen one or two of their best and brightest students to make the trade once they had finished their O.W.Ls and were going on to take their N.E.W.Ts.

That tradition had never been actually brought to an official stop, but it had trailed off due to the increasing insularity of Durmstrang. The Dark Arts oriented wizarding school had largely closed itself off from the other two after the last Triwizard Tournament eighty years ago. Hogwarts and Beaubaxtons, however, were still on semi-friendly terms.

With that in mind, at the start of the Easter break, Sev sat down and did something he had never done before in his eight terms at Hogwarts thus far; he wrote to his uncle.

His mother's brother, the man who had raised him, had always been too busy to pay him much attention. This was due to the fairly high-level position he held in the Ministry of Magic — a position that had to do with international co-ordination. He had links to figures in a number of European organizations, including the headmistress of Beaubaxtons.

The letter he wrote to his uncle would



have caused snorts of disbelief if anybody at Hogwarts had intercepted it; none of them would have recognized it as penned by Severus Snape. To the teachers and the Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws, he was a frighteningly quiet enigma; to the Slytherins, an icy, dark-magic using genius; to the Gryffindors, a vitriol-spitting master-hexer. All of those impressions were to a certain extent manufactured. But even Lily, who knew him better than perhaps anyone, would have laughed out loud if someone had told her this letter was written by him.

He wrote a nice, chatty, friendly letter to his uncle about his 'friend' Liana Whittaker and how he'd really like to surprise her. It was a sweet, light-hearted and selfless attempt for a caring student to do something for another.

Sev supposed it said something about his relationship with his uncle that the man didn't for one second find anything odd about it. The letter the Ministry owl brought back was much like the conversations his uncle had with him; vaguely approving in a politely distracted way.

Sev refrained from snorting out loud at his uncle's words about how he "knew you would make friends at Hogwarts; you're such a charming young man," but his lips did quirk up at the

corners. He wondered if perhaps he should show that sentence to Lily next time she made one of her tiresome attempts to trap him and talk to him — she would probably choke so disbelievingly on it he could make a quick getaway.

However, perhaps aware how little his nephew asked for, his uncle made good on his promise to investigate, and, fortunately, to keep the gesture anonymous. He contacted the Beaubaxtons headmistress, and a few days later Sev overheard Dumbledore and Malachite discussing it at the dinner table. Malachite was plainly delighted; he had been in a foul mood ever since the Darren Kaye debacle, and this was a way to give his house some much-needed good press. All the teaching staff seemed to agree Liana was perfect transfer material, and they were all utterly stumped as to who could have recommended her.

Being Severus Snape, he wasn't even slightly tempted to give them any knowing smiles.

The details would take time to work out, but the transfer wouldn't be until next year anyway. Everyone seemed to agree it was a great idea to establish inter-school ties again, especially in these dark times, and when Liana came back from her Easter holidays it was to find a neatly



written letter propped up on her pillowcase.

Sev didn't need to have it confirmed by his uncle — he could hear the shrieking from way over in his own dorm. Liana proceeded to lead several of her friends in an impromptu conga line through the Slytherin common room and then out into the school; witnessed with amusement by the teachers who had all been lurking to see her reaction.

Malfoy and his skull-and-serpent gang were just about the only ones who didn't join in the good-natured applause.


"Your doing, I presume?" said Malfoy sharply when they had retired to their dorms. Sev had been expecting to do some fast talking to justify his actions, but to his surprise Malfoy seemed... amused?

"You're not angry," he observed. For anybody else, it might have been a question, but Sev always knew what he was reading.

"It's inconsequential." Malfoy waved away the whole issue airily. "So she gets away now; it won't matter in the long run. We'll get them all eventually. For now... let them run." He smiled darkly. "It makes the eventual hunt much more fun."

Sev knew something must have happened over the holidays to make him so cheerful. He





quickly scanned him, looking for any visible sign of what it might have been, and noticed one important difference immediately.

“You’re not wearing your ring,” he observed. He had made a point of never taking his off, and the others usually wore theirs, but Malfoy had always made a big thing of displaying his prominently. It was, Sev knew, his way of thumbing his nose at Dumbledore and the rest of the school; showing off to everybody his sign of allegiance and revelling in the fact that they had no clue.

Malfoy smiled delightedly. “I don’t need to. Crabbe, close the door.” Crabbe did as ordered, and the four boys clustered around Malfoy.

With a smile, Malfoy took hold of the left sleeve of his robes and slowly, dramatically, pushed it back. He held his hand flat against his bare elbow for a few moments, then pulled it away with a flourish.

Beneath it, emblazoned on his skin, was a vivid red image. It looked a little like a tattoo, although Sev suspected it was nothing so simple as an injection of ink. The symbol he knew very well; he had seen it once before, blazing against the sky. A skull with a snake for a tongue; the mark of the Death Eaters.

He had seen it before; the others had not.

Though the skull had hovered over the Forbidden Forest for over an hour on the night he had found the corpse of Auriga Cephus, it had been late in the night and few had seen it. The men from the Ministry Dumbledore had summoned had quickly taken away the skeleton and the magical note that had been left with it.

“Cool... What is it?” asked Avery eagerly.

Malfoy smiled, and produced the old serpent ring from a pocket. He tossed it in the air and caught it casually. “This; this, you can take on and off.” He showed it to them all. Then he prodded his arm. “This, you can’t. It’s a mark of his favour, and this one can’t be taken away. This is no temporary test measure — this is the real thing.”

Sev had long suspected that Malfoy’s master was a Death Eater; now he knew it for sure. He knew, however, that probing Malfoy would not yield any more information about who this mysterious ‘he’ was.

The others obviously didn’t. “Who is ‘he?’” asked Avery. “Did you go to see him? Will you take us?”

Malfoy smiled enigmatically, enjoying his knowledge. “All in good time,” he said, in a sensible tone calculated to madden. The smirk faded into something more serious. “As for the rest of you; yes, very soon, I think. He’s wary of new people, but thanks

to Severus we're well on our way to proving ourselves." He gave Sev an approving nod.

"The mudbloods are all out, or on their way. We've purified our own backyard — now it's time to tell the rest of the world we're coming." He smiled widely. "What we need now is... a really big gesture."



Sev soon discovered that the mark on his arm was not the only new thing Malfoy had acquired over the holidays. Later that week, in Care of Magical Creatures, they were out by the Forbidden Forest trying to train Caretynes in their groups.

The Caretynes were like white lions with golden manes and spotted coats, except for their long horns and tusks — and their tendency to shoot flames from their mouths or either ear without the slightest warning. The class was predictably chaotic, Pete Pettigrew setting the brim of his hat on fire and his friends unsure whether to laugh or glare at the Slytherins for doing so.

Malfoy waited until Professor Cuero was occupied trying to put Peter's hat out, then pulled Sev aside. "Quickly! While nobody's



looking." The two boys slipped deeper into the Forbidden Forest.

"I wanted to show you something," he said with a smirk, as soon as they were well clear of their classmates.

"What is it?" asked Sev, careful to sound eager enough. Though he was always keen to learn, he doubted any enchantment Malfoy had to show him would bring him much pleasure.

"I didn't want to show the others how to do this just yet," Malfoy confided. "They're soldiers. Workers. They're never gonna see the big picture, but you..." He shot Sev a pointed glance. "You could get in good with these people. You've got brains, and you could be nearly as powerful as me."

Sev schooled his expression even more carefully than he usually did. Malfoy would have to be completely blinded by his own arrogance to not realise that Snape might very well do better than that.

"He didn't just give me the Dark Mark," Malfoy revealed, rubbing his arm almost absently. "He showed me how to make it." He smiled cruelly. "It's about time we gave all these Muggle-lovers a bit of a scare, don't you think?"

He waved his wand with a flourish that Sev



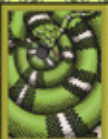
was willing to be wasn't part of the spell, and intoned in a deep voice "Morsmordre!"

Green light exploded from the wand and flared up into the air. For a second, Sev saw an almost shocked expression cross Malfoy's face, as if he hadn't really realised this kind of magic could come from him. Sev saw the green stars of the Death Eater symbol already beginning to swirl into shape.

"Hellfire!" Malfoy gasped, and Sev wondered if he'd even known exactly how hugely and vividly the Mark would display. It was already rising into the sky, swelling rapidly; it would be visible for miles.

For a moment Malfoy stared up at his own handiwork with awe, then his grey eyes met Snape's and panic flared in them. "Run!" he advised, scurrying quickly back towards the safety of their class group. How very Lucius Malfoy, Sev noted. Utterly devoted to his hate group's agenda — provided there was no chance of his getting caught.

Nobody saw them arrive; everybody's attention was completely focused on the growing Dark Mark. There was an oddly intent look on Professor Cuero's face, and the angular lines of his body seemed full of tension.



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They all stood there watching for a long moment. There was an uneasy murmur rumbling through the class, and little Peter Pettigrew looked just about ready to faint. Jade Creevy and Helen Beck clutched at each other, and James slipped a comforting arm round Lily. To Snape's sharp eyes she didn't look scared, only anxious and locked in deep thought, but she didn't move to shove him off, either.

Finally Cuero turned to look back at the students. His eyes met Malfoy's, and there was something in them... He knows exactly who did it, Sev observed. But he said nothing to reveal as much.

"All of you, back to your rooms," he ordered. "Potter, go and get the headmaster." James nodded quickly and sped away. The others were slower to disperse, still gaping at the bloated skull hanging obscenely above them.

Malfoy seemed to have recovered from his panic as soon as it was clear no one would point the finger at him. He pulled Sev aside when they got to their dorm and said eagerly "Cuero — did you see? He's one of ours!"

"He knows you did it," Sev nodded, although that was still a distance away from him being a Death Eater in his mind. But of course, somebody like Malfoy would easily assume that



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somebody else would believe in their agenda.

“Exactly! And he didn’t say anything. You saw his face; he recognized the Mark. Nick!” He snagged Avery as he came through the door. “Cuero; did he do anything weird?”

“When the... skull thing appeared?”

“Yeah — were you watching?”

Avery’s forehead creased into a frown. “He, uh...” He thought for a moment. “Oh! Yes, he did! He kinda... hugged himself or grabbed his arm or something.”

A liquid smile spread across Malfoy’s features. “See?” he said triumphantly. He pushed back the sleeve of his robe, revealing the skull tattoo — looking darker and stronger than before, closer to the colour of blood. “He has the Mark, same as I do! He’s one of ours.”

“Perhaps,” said Sev more coolly. He would have to observe Cuero far more carefully before he would jump to any such conclusion — it wasn’t in his nature to assume.

“That was you, wasn’t it?” said Colin Crabbe eagerly, as he burst into their dorm. Malfoy just grinned, cat-like.

“The Gryffindor’s’ll try to tell them it was us,” Avery warned him. Malfoy shrugged.

“So? Their word against ours.”



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“Or it will be. Give me your wand,” Sev ordered.

“Huh?” Malfoy frowned.

“Your wand, quickly! They’ll be here any minute.”

The blond boy looked uncertain, but his sudden fear that he hadn’t thought of everything spurred him to take orders when he wouldn’t normally stand for it. He quickly pulled his wand out and pressed it into Snape’s hands.

The wand felt unfamiliar in his grip, the wrong length and the wrong texture, but it was still a wand. Sev made a few practise sweeps, and then cast a few spells in quick succession. “*Lumos! Nox! Orchideus! Relashio! Avis!*”

The wand lit up, went out again, produced a bunch of flowers, sparked, and sent a small flock of birds twittering out of the nearest windows. His fellow Slytherins were staring at him as if they couldn’t be sure whether to think he was insane or give him a round of applause.

“What the hell was that?” asked Malfoy, not taking the wand back as Severus held it out to him.

“The wand tests; they do them when they’re checking wands for competitions and the like.” Sev poked the wand to him again, and he took it gingerly.

“But why —?”

There was a commotion in the common



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room outside, and he heard Professor Fractalis call for the third years. “No time! Cast a spell! Anything; just the *lumos*, whatever. Quickly!” he snapped, as Malfoy dithered.

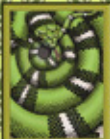
“*L-lumos!*” In his confusion, Malfoy barely stuttered the word correctly, and the light it produced was a feeble flicker. He cancelled it with a snap of his wrist, and looked at Snape questioningly. Sev gave him a quick nod, and led the way through into the common room.

Professor Fractalis’ usual timid expression had been replaced with one that was equal parts nervous and stern. “Boys, there has been a very serious infraction on school grounds. I’m going to have to ask you for your wands.”

Malfoy looked to Sev in silent alarm, but he gave an almost imperceptible nod. With what looked like a slight gulp, he held his wand out to the deputy headmaster.

Fractalis went over to the first of the boys, Jack Brisingamen, and took his wand. He waved it and snapped the words “*Prior Incanto!*”

After a second, a fuzzy image appeared at the tip of the wand; it showed a small human figure summoning something to his hand — the ‘*accio*’ charm. Fractalis left it hanging in the air and repeated his spell; another, similar



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image appeared. He studied this one, too, and then said swiftly “*Deletrius!*” and the images collapsed in on themselves. He handed Jack back his wand and moved onto the next.

His search turned up quite a few little tricks whose academic uses were somewhat doubtful, but he barely even seemed to notice. By the time he got to Malfoy, the blond-haired boy was looking positively sick with nerves.

“*Prior Incanto!*” The feeble flicker of Malfoy’s light spell recreated itself. Fractalis ignored it and repeated the enchantment. A silvery mist sprang up... and dissolved into nothingness. He frowned, and tried again, with the same result.

The deputy headmaster gave Malfoy a sharp look. “Have you used this wand at all today?” he asked.

Nervous or not, Malfoy was a quick study. “Uh — only to do the light spell,” he lied automatically. Fractalis just looked at him for a moment, then silently handed the wand back. He tested the remainder, then nodded, and walked to the door.

“Hmm; good. I told Professor Dumbledore that it couldn’t have been any of our students, and I’m glad to see I was right. Okay, all of you stay in Slytherin quarters until it’s time



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for your next lesson, please — the rest of this period is cancelled.”

When he'd gone, Malfoy staggered back into the dorm room and flattened himself against the wall, breathing heavily. As Snape stepped inside, he stared at him and asked “What the hell was that? Why didn't it —?”

“The mixed signatures confused it,” he explained with a matter-of-fact shrug. “So many spells, cast so quickly... swapping the wand from person to person like that... Prior Incanto was only ever really designed to go back one stage, and it just couldn't follow the trail back to the last spell. It acted as if there wasn't one — as if the wand hadn't been used in a while.”

“And you knew it was going to do that?” Malfoy demanded, eyebrows raised.

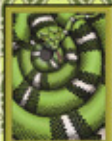
Snape shrugged again. “It seemed... logical.”

“Logical?” Malfoy spluttered as if he was choking, but it gradually turned into laughter. He clapped Sev on the shoulder delightedly. “You're really something, Severus, do you know that? You're really something.”

“So I've been told,” he replied, perfectly dryly.



Malfoy might have seen enough to be con-



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vinced of Professor Cuero's loyalties, but Sev was less easily swayed. Sneaking about and spying was less easily done now that he had given his invisibility cloak away, but he'd always had a talent for it. He could move very surely and silently, and most importantly he never panicked.

If the others had ever woken and noticed him gone, they probably assumed that he was about some small schoolboy mischief like their own — or, correctly enough, that he had insomnia. Snape's lack of sleep never troubled him — indeed, he relished the extra hours of thinking time it gave him. He normally slept only five or six hours a night, and losing a few of those little troubled him.

The caretaker, Mr. Pringle, was always on patrol, but Sev was a flitting shadow. He roamed the halls almost every night, and if any of the ghosts were aware of his passage they had long since grown used to it.

Reading voraciously and patrolling as he did, Sev knew a great many of Hogwarts' secrets. He knew where all the house dormitories and common rooms were, and both the staff's private offices and their quarters.

He had a hunch Cuero might be a night-owl like himself, and in any case, nobody was likely



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to be sleeping soundly tonight. Sure enough, the red-headed teacher was sitting in his office, quill scratching away with a fairly furious intensity.

Sev found that in itself very interesting. Care of Magical Creatures was hardly a classroom-based lesson; it couldn't possibly be anything work-related he was scribbling down.

He waited silently for a quarter of an hour as Cuero wrote. He wasn't terribly surprised that the teacher completely failed to mutter key phrases to himself or conveniently contact someone and explain himself to them. Maybe that was how the likes of James Potter expected their adventures to turn out, but Sev knew that if you wanted to find things out, it took hours of painstaking observation. Even people who were up to something usually spent a great deal of time doing absolutely nothing interesting.

Tonight, though, was something of a special night, and when Cuero had finished whatever he was writing to his satisfaction, he got up from his desk and left the office. Sev faded silently into the background, and then padded after him through the corridors.

He quickly surmised that they were going to the Owlery, and after figuring which route Cuero was taking, split off from him and

found a different one. He arrived up in the tower before the professor, and concealed himself in a corner. The owls barely stirred at his presence; he was in the habit of visiting Hogwarts animal residents from time to time, getting them used to the sight and scent of him. Severus Snape always planned ahead.

He had quickly learned that almost any hiding place could work provided you stayed still. Ninety-nine percent of people, especially in a neutral setting like Hogwarts, would simply never expect anybody to be spying on them. There might be nosy students lurking about, but everybody knew kids couldn't keep silent and still, didn't they?

'Silence' and 'stillness' could easily have been Sev's middle names. After all, they fit in rather neatly with the general naming scheme.

He noted with interest the way Cuero studied the massed owls, instead of just giving the message to the first to approach him. He looked to Sev's eyes as if he was not searching for a favorite, but going through a mental checklist — as if he was being wary not to use the same owls too often. Interesting.

Finally, Cuero picked out an owl, and gave it the message. It was sealed in a small envelope, and

Sev's sharp eyes noted that there was no address on the front. Instead, Cuero simply gave the owl a name; "Gorvic Shimmersby." The owl silently launched itself into the dark, and Sev quietly filed the name away in his memory for the future.

Cuero watched the owl fly away, then slipped his hands in the pockets of his robes and started back down the stairs. Sev made no attempt to follow; the stairs in this tower were far too creaky to chance following somebody.

There was no light up here, so it was safe to stand by the window and observe — even had he not stayed still, his movement could easily have been mistaken for that of one of the owls.

In the bright light of the full moon, he saw Cuero leave the tower, and stalk rapidly back towards his quarters. Sev was about to consider returning to his own dorm when something caught his eye.

At first he thought the tiny movement in the grass below was nothing more than a mouse. But none of the owls beside him paid any attention, and after a second he saw it again. The springy grass was flattening and bouncing back momentarily, as if under some sort of pressure... As if, in fact, somebody was walking on it under an invisibility cloak.

Lily? Or somebody else? Sev had acquired

the cloak from the murderous Potions teacher, Fennel, at the end of the First Year; they were not exactly common toys. But there were other ways to make yourself invisible, if you were a powerful enough wizard...

He tracked the motions carefully, focusing intently for fear of losing them against the gentle actions of the wind. Finally, the invisible footsteps came to a halt beneath the large, flailing tree Professor Parilia had nicknamed the Whomping Willow. The tree was a fairly new addition to the Hogwarts grounds, planted the summer before he had started there; it had taken some months for the more adventurous students to learn that 'stay well clear of the branches' was not exactly optional advice.

As Snape watched, there was the liquid shimmer of the cloak being dropped. From beneath it emerged not one, but two figures. James Potter and Sirius Black.

In the time it would have taken for most people to gasp in surprise, Sev's brain was zipping through the logical connections. Clearly, this was Lily's cloak; the odds of James having one of his own were very small, and he hadn't when Sev had seen him wandering the halls in earlier years.

Lily was fond of James; however, she well knew

that Sev had given her the cloak for her own protection, and she wasn't frivolous by any means. If she had lent the cloak to James and Sirius, then this was more than mischief they were about.

Sev watched as Black picked up a stick and prodded at something on the tree trunk. Abruptly, the flailing limbs froze in position. A secret trick to paralyzing the plant? Dumbledore had to have known about it when he asked for it to be planted. As the two boys descended into some kind of secret passage, Sev's mind was looping back to the end of his first year.

James Potter had rushed to Lily's rescue when she was Stunned by the rogue teacher Fennel. Professor Malachite had demanded, on one of his usual 'different standards for Gryffindors and Slytherins' riffs, to know why he'd been out so late at night. *I was going to check on somebody*, he had said. And Dumbledore had waved Malachite silent with the words *I know what this is about*.

Sev remembered that night. He had spotted an invisibility cloak then, and perhaps for the same reasons — under direct moonlight, you could sometimes see the tiniest shimmer of motion that wouldn't otherwise be visible.

Under direct moonlight...

Three years' worth of tiny clues abruptly

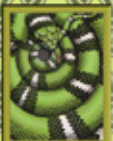
clicked into place, and Snape started to smile. Suddenly, it all made sense...



Sev made his way rapidly downstairs to the bottom of the tower. Once he was there, he found a dark corner and stood watching the foot of the Whomping Willow with a certain amount of curiosity. If what he'd just suspected was actually true, then the passage under that tree was not the safest place to be right now...

In about thirty seconds' time, the two boys came barrelling out as if their robes were on fire. Sirius yanked the cloak out after them before the passageway could close on it, and they both collapsed together; out of breath, but laughing. They'd probably come a hairs-breadth away from their deaths, but neither of them seemed to care. Sev didn't suppose either of them really believed that they weren't actually invincible.

Not even James and Sirius, though, were quite crazy enough to be visiting and then running from a werewolf just for the fun of it — especially when it was one of their closest friends in human form. They had to be trying to do something, trying to test something... Sev realised they must



be trying to find some charm or enchantment that would allow them to visit their friend in wolf form without being attacked.

Clearly, they hadn't found it yet. If they'd known since the first year, they'd probably been doing this every month; searching and searching for something to try, then ducking down the tunnel and risking death to find out if it worked.

This, Sev was fairly sure, was because neither of them were creatures of logic.

Much of the next morning he spent researching methods of suppressing and controlling lycanthropy. Not, of course, that he would endanger his position by passing such information to James and Sirius — but it was knowledge that had suddenly gone from trivia to something relevant; and Sev always liked to have the relevant data at his fingertips.

The books all spoke of how it couldn't be done, but Sev knew how to read between the lines. He duly noted comments about how werewolves were less enraged by the company of animals than men, and various discussions of spells that seemed effective in warding them off.

There were also rumours of a Wolfsbane potion that would quiet a werewolf and render it harmless during the full moon — but if the recipe had

ever existed, it had been lost in the mists of time.

Sev had no way to recover that recipe — but he had a true flair for potions and a brain that could recall every tiny clue that had been fed into it. He strongly suspected that a few successive attempts would allow him to make a usable Wolfsbane... but there would be no safe chance to test it, so he merely squirreled the idea away in his head in case he should need it in later years.

However, whilst he was browsing the potions section of Professor Malachite's private library, he found an interesting little recipe in the back of Dark Elixirs... Trustasium.

A variant on the powerful Veritaseum truth potion, Trustasium had the interesting little quirk of making a its drinker feel extremely trusting... spilling their innermost secrets not because they were compelled to, but because they believed themselves safe in doing so.

An even nastier little side-effect was that the victim, if not put under too much pressure, would not recall the questioning session at all. Though their original feelings for the person concerned would return, the time for which they had been under the influence would be forever cloaked in trust for them — the victim

would be literally unable to contemplate the idea that they could have been used in any way.

No wonder this potion was found in a book of the Dark Arts. It was a deeply nasty and violating little mixture... and Sev could think of a good use to put it to.

Guilt was not a completely alien concept to Severus Snape, but his logical brain would not allow him to apply it to himself in any situation where it wasn't justified. There was nobility, and there was pragmatism; and nobility was for the James Potters of this world, not the Severus Snapes.

The delicate nature of the relationship he was building with Lucius Malfoy made it far too dangerous to use the potion on him. Besides, Sev was sure Malfoy didn't know half as much as he thought he did; his partnership of sorts with the other boy was not a short-term venture. He would have to follow Malfoy all the way up the Death Eater ladder to learn the innermost secrets.

However, such a potion would be ideal for quickly questioning one suspicious individual; Professor Cuero. Two or three drops, a similar number of questions, and it would be done.

Perhaps, in a way, Sev's cold and calculating nature made such a venture a less bad thing



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for him to attempt than for another. Another, no matter how 'noble', might be tempted to pry too deeply into someone else's personal secrets, but Sev would ask the relevant questions and inquire no further.

The biggest difficulty was going to be slipping Cuero the potion without his knowledge. Hogwarts students were not renowned for thoughtfully bringing their teachers food and drink, least of all a cold, distant boy like Severus Snape.

It would be easy enough to slip the potion in with some misdirection at dinner — but that was the last thing he wanted. This had to be done in complete privacy, if it was to be done at all.

When Sev had still owned the invisibility cloak, he had used it to explore every corner of Hogwarts — not just the innermost sanctums. That was what made him different from the run of the mill ambitious Slytherins; all of them would think to study Dumbledore and Malachite, but very few would bother to track the movements of the caretaker and groundskeeper.

Sev happened to know that Hagrid, the half-giant groundskeeper, was extremely fond of animals; apparently, the fiercer, the better. He also loved to make sweets, albeit rather badly.

That, in Sev's mind, added up to Professor Cuero



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having stacks of Hagrid-made goodies thrust upon him as the groundskeeper took any excuse to drop in on him and check out the latest dangerous beasts. Cuero, if he had any sense, would approach them with caution, but often Hagrid's penchant for huge volumes of sugar encouraged people to risk broken teeth and try their luck.

Sev was an accomplished opener of locks, both magical and non. He had spent a great deal of time last year studying the mechanics and practicalities of getting through doors and windows undetected. An invisibility cloak was only as good as the wearer's ability to pass unnoticed.

He tailed Cuero several more nights; never catching him up to anything suspicious, but closely following his routine. When he had a good idea of exactly when was safe, he silently let himself into the Professor's hut.

Unlike most of the Hogwarts staff, Cuero lived in a hut in the grounds like Hagrid. He claimed to prefer to be close to the animals, although most people agreed it was more that he didn't like to be near other people.

The first time Sev broke in, he did nothing and touched nothing. He carefully studied the positions of everything, checked out all potential hiding places, and tested all the exits. Then



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he waited patiently.

Three days later, his observations were rewarded. Hagrid dropped in on the Professor, who bore his presence with a kind of long-suffering resignation. When he departed, he left behind an enormous plate of various sweets. Cuero regarded it with a distinctly wary expression, and then hurried out of the hut to do his usual rounds of the magical animals.

Sev found that telling. If Cuero hadn't intended to eat the sweets at some stage, he would have either taken them out to surreptitiously feed to the animals, or — if he worried about what that might do to their health — simply disposed of them. The fact that he had left them behind strongly hinted that his sweet tooth outweighed his sense of self-preservation.

Armed with the tiny vial of Trustasium he had secretly made up, Sev quietly slipped in and added a few drops to the tray of sweets. Like the Veritaseum it was derived from, Trustasium was colourless, odourless, and tasteless. Once Cuero had taken a few drops of the potion in, the effect would be instant and last for nearly an hour.

Sev secreted himself in a dark space behind a wardrobe, and cast a little spell that had



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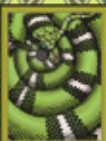
come in useful during his first year. It wasn't as foolproof as an invisibility cloak, but it made him... shadowy. Professor Cuero wouldn't see him unless he came and peered into that corner with the express purpose of checking for someone hiding there.

He knew how long it usually took Cuero to make his rounds, but remained unflustered when he was late back. A less experienced spy might either worry that he was missing something or panic about being discovered, and try to leave. Sev knew that doing that was just about the best guarantee of getting caught you could give yourself.

He waited patiently, and surely enough, a few minutes later Cuero returned. He sat down and picked up a book, but didn't even look at the tray of sweets. Sev was untroubled, prepared to wait as long as it took.

It took nearly half an hour. Cuero kept glancing over at the tray, grimacing, and looking away again. Sev suspected he had a raging sweet tooth, but had met Hagrid's attempts at cooking before.

Finally, greed won out. The teacher moved over to the tray of sweets, stared down at them for a moment, and reached for something misshapen and oozing honey. He pulled a face at it, and then gingerly popped it into



his mouth. Apparently having got lucky and not broken any teeth, he returned to his books. Sev waited a few moments, and then emerged from his hiding place.

Professor Cuero looked up at the sound, but he neither jumped nor looked angry. "Oh, hello there, Severus," he said pleasantly. "Were you waiting for me?" The harsh lines to his face and grating edge to his voice had both smoothed out, and he suddenly seemed much younger.

Sev casually made his way over to the seat opposite him, and sat down. With Cuero under the effects of Trustasium, he could have snapped off his questions interrogation-style and the teacher wouldn't think it odd — but blatantly relying on the infallibility of his magic had never been Sev's style. An irony, perhaps, because the nature that made him so cautious also made his magic more reliable than anybody else's.

"Professor," he said, similarly pleasantly. Any Gryffindor who dropped in to see the two of them 'chatting' so nicely would probably drop dead of shock. "I was hoping you could answer a few questions for me?"

"Of course, of course," agreed Cuero airily. It took a moment for Sev to realise who his brand-new open manner reminded him of;



Professor Dumbledore. It was that same unblinking faith that those around him could be trusted — in Sev’s opinion, the one flaw in the headmaster’s powers of observation. He had every bit of the intelligence and observation skills Severus owned — but they weren’t tempered with that cynical ‘assume nothing’ attitude that made a perfect spy.

He kept his tone as light as if he had called in to check the details of a homework assignment. “I was wondering if you could tell me about the skull symbol we saw in the sky last week?”

“Ah, yes. The Dark Mark.” Cuero frowned. “Nasty business. Symbol of the Death Eaters, you know.”

From those short sentences, Sev had already derived much of what he needed to know. Cuero was aware of the Death Eaters, didn’t belong to them, and didn’t agree with their mindset. Which made the attitude he displayed in classes... interesting.

“You know a lot about the Death Eaters?” he asked with a tone of innocent curiosity.

“Ah, yes, I’m an expert, you know. I was with the team that investigated their actions in the Harrowgate case.”

‘With the team’ — that meant he was part of the Ministry of Magic; probably an Auror.



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Which meant Malfoy’s casual assumptions of his loyalties were deeply misguided.

“So you’re here on a covert mission then?”

“Oh, yes. Very hush-hush.” Cuero tapped the side of his nose. “I can rely on you, I know, but there are a lot of students here...”

“Malfoy and his friends?”

“Hmm, yes. Thirteen years old, and already well on their way to being corrupt. Get them young, and you’ll have them for life. Oh, he’s a cunning one, this Voldemort.”

“Voldemort?” It was a name Sev had never heard before — the ‘mort’ on the end, meaning death, made him sure that it wasn’t any traditional wizarding name, and it certainly wasn’t anything from the Muggle world. “Who’s he?”

Cuero pulled a face. “Well, nobody knows, do they? A couple of the Death Eaters we’ve observed have mentioned him, and we think he’s their leader, but other than the fact that he’s in Europe somewhere, we know nothing. Hard, very hard, to get decent spies in their camp. A problem *they* apparently don’t have,” he added, a trifle bitterly.

“There are spies here?”

“Just the one, we think, but it’s anyone’s guess who. Those morons in the Ministry are



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convinced it's young Hagrid — but the man's a gentle giant, and hardly a schemer. Obviously it isn't Dumbledore... but anyone else is fair game. You saw yourself how they slipped Fennel in, and he was hardly subtle, was he? This other one's a far more slippery character."

"You think this is the person who killed Professor Cephus?"

Cuero scowled. "Sure of it. But they're clever — far too clever to reveal themselves too easily."

"So you're trying to convince them you're one of theirs?"

"Yes." He grinned slightly. "Picking on the Gryffindors was a Slytherin tradition back when I was at school; that never changes. Paint yourself as a true Slytherin, and they're half the way to believing you're evil."

Sev nodded, getting up. He had all the answers he needed, and hanging around for more was asking for trouble.

"What they don't seem to realise," Cuero reflected half to himself, "is that while half of us might grow up to be dark wizards, the other half grow up to be the best damn Aurors in the business. I mean, look at you. You're one of ours, aren't you?"

Sev paused on the way to the door, and permitted

himself to smile wryly at it. Despite the fact that he had forced Cuero to believe that through magical trickery, it was really nothing shy of the truth.

"Yes; I'm one of yours."

He slipped out of the door, and left Cuero to recover his senses and lose his memory.



In the days Sev had spent learning Cuero's secret, Malfoy had not been idle. He had repeatedly mentioned the need for a 'big gesture', but remained tight-lipped about what it exactly it was to entail.

Sev had observed him sending and receiving several letters via his family owl, Meraugis. None of the letters had an address on them and Malfoy never named names, but the owl seemed to know where it was going. Sev wondered if his parents were similarly mixed up with the Death Eaters; Malfoy seldom mentioned his mother and father, except to point out how rich and powerful and important they were.

Finally, the owl returned bearing a parcel that seemed to be the answer he had been waiting for. He gathered the other boys in his dorm, waving the package triumphantly.

"I have it," he announced, with a dark smile.



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“Have what?” demanded Avery. “You’ve been so close-mouthed with this, Lucius, it’s like trying to pry sweets from a Hufflepuff.” The boys laughed nastily. It was a Hogwarts myth that all Hufflepuffs were fat and unathletic.

Malfoy was still smiling. “I have... the perfect gesture,” he said, overdramatically.

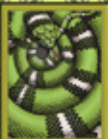
“Tell us,” begged Colin eagerly.

“I can do better than that... I’ll show you. I intend to use this on the whole school — but I do believe a little demonstration is in order before we start.” He rubbed his hands together. “First we’ll have to find ourselves a mudblood...” He reflected for a moment, then smirked to himself. “Potter’s little girlfriend should do nicely.”

“No,” interjected Sev. His voice was quiet, but forceful.

Malfoy frowned. “Why not?” Sev was satisfied to hear from his tone that he automatically assumed that Snape’s objection would be logical, not ethical — not that any wizard of Malfoy’s views would be able to comprehend the idea of ethical problems with harming mudbloods.

“If this is the prelude to a big gesture, it’ll be noted and followed up on. You can’t use Potter’s girlfriend *because* she’s Potter’s girlfriend. It brings the focus too close to us.”



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Malfoy stuck his lip out petulantly, for a moment showing the spoiled rich boy denied a treat. The moment of childishness was quickly overtaken by cruel intelligence, and he shrugged with fake-indifference. “Who, then? A random target? Well then, pick a house, pick a year.”

“Ravenclaw,” said Avery.

“Fifth year,” said Crabbe.

They looked to Snape, who contemplate for a moment. “Jerrod Daniels, or Erica Swift.”

Malfoy gave him a sharp look. “You have the details of every student here in your head?”

Sev simply shrugged. Of course he did. If he heard it, he remembered it. It was hard for him to comprehend that other peoples’ brains didn’t work like that.

“Swift it is,” said Malfoy with a shrug. Sev suspected he’d chosen to go after the girl out of spite over Snape denying him Lily. Malfoy had come to hate her quite violently in the course of their shared classes; not only was she a mudblood, a girl, and very fond of James Potter, but she consistently beat him in exams. Malfoy bore even Sev’s superior brain-power with very poor grace — he certainly wouldn’t tolerate it from somebody he considered pretty much sub-human.

Like many of the students from Muggle



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families, Erica Swift was perhaps a little more conscientious with her studies. Lucius's much-reviled 'mudbloods' were seldom any different from their classmates in their ability to cast spells — but they tended to worry much more about how they were doing. Sev happened to know that Erica and her friends would always be in the library at certain times, and that they always sat at the same table.

Malfoy's package turned out to contain numerous packets of a reddish-brown powder, almost the colour of dried blood. "What does that do?" Avery wanted to know.

"You'll see," smirked Malfoy, liberally sprinkling it over the seats around the table Snape had shown him.

Colin Crabbe's eyes went wide. "Lucius! What if somebody else sits there?" he gasped.

Malfoy grinned, with a glint in his cold grey eyes. "Ah, but that's the beauty of it. Unless they're mudbloods, it won't do anything." The others all exclaimed in delight, but Sev's brain was racing. Some kind of property they had discovered that allowed a curse to only work on mudbloods? That was trouble, serious trouble. He suspected from Malfoy's attitude that this gesture of his would be nasty, but not particu-



larly lethal. However, once the curse existed, a sufficiently competent wizard could adapt it.

Sev thought that whoever had supplied the powder to Malfoy had made a tactical error. His 'big gesture' might send the school into a panic, but it would also alert Dumbledore and whoever he might report to; the Ministry would doubtless begin working on a counter to the 'mudblood-only' properties. It was short-sighted.

Of course, the whole Death Eater campaign was being run in a way Sev would never have chosen to. Should he plan for whatever reason to wipe out a group of people, he would do it as randomly and surreptitiously as he had handled Malfoy's schemes at Hogwarts. It was in his nature to act silently, from the shadows; apparently the same did not hold true for this Voldemort character.

Everything in the Death Eaters' agenda so far spoke of a reign of terror. The skull marks, the messages left at the scenes of crimes... the killings were not just killings, but attempts to stir up fear, mistrust, and panic. Sev strongly suspected that Voldemort was not just planning a series of terrorist attacks, but an actual campaign to set himself up as the new ruler of the wizard world. He wanted it to be so that the mere mention of names or glimpse of symbols



sent wizards everywhere scurrying for cover.

And without a strong and centralized opposition, he would probably succeed. Sev, with his keen sense for people-watching, knew that the vast majority of people were nervous and afraid of change. For every wise Dumbledore or reckless James Potter, there were a hundred cowering Peter Pettigrews.

Sev did wonder to himself why he had ended up working for the opposing team. He was, after all, hardly the type to get high and mighty about right and wrong and nobility.

The best explanation he could give was that the Death Eaters' attitudes... offended his sense of logic. It was... a stupid way to do things. Inefficient. He was hardly enamoured of the Ministry's slightly wishy-washy desire to please everybody, but at least they weren't trying to skew perceptions or alter the order of things. How were you supposed to do anything if people were judged on basic labels instead of abilities? Under Malfoy's system, you worked with the premise that Crabbe was superior to Lily, and whichever angle you looked at that from, it was still insane.

For whatever reason he might have manoeuvred himself into this position, he was here now;

and logic told him to stay. Cuero *et al* might work to get on the inside, but none of them would ever have the chance at it that he had.

So whilst the boys hung on eagerly for Erica Swift to walk into their little trap, Sev waited with them. He didn't have to pull any over-the-top expression of glee; his companions knew that his face was seldom anything but impassive. They just assumed he was feeling the same underneath.

That, Sev had discovered quickly, was the key to infiltrating any group like the Death Eaters. They automatically assumed that you would think they same as them.

In fact, as they waited, Malfoy managed to prove exactly that. "I've got a plan," he confided. "For how to get it out to the rest of the school. There's no way we can do it; we're just students. But Professor Cuero —"

"I don't trust him," Sev replied automatically. Naturally, he couldn't explain why Malfoy shouldn't go to Cuero. Though technically he was on the side of the Auror spy, now was not the time to go after Malfoy. He was still too unimportant.

"Sev, you don't trust anybody," Malfoy chided with a sharp look. "I've been watching Cuero; I think he's sympathetic to the cause."

"And if you're wrong?" he asked pointedly.

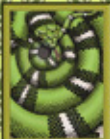
Malfoy's eyes narrowed. "I'm not a fool, Sev. I'll contact him anonymously. And we'll just see what he does about it."

Dumb. Cuero was an Auror, he had strong magic at his fingertips. Nothing Malfoy could do to stay anonymous would be unbreakable. But he couldn't reveal that knowledge without awkward questions about why he'd sat on it until now. So he said "I'm going to check him out; see what I can find out about him."

Malfoy shrugged. "Yes, you can do that." With those words, he could be satisfied that he'd changed a challenge to his authority into him giving permission to an underling. "Now stop fussing; the show's starting."

Erica and her friends came along to their usual table and sat down. They glanced across at the pack of Slytherin boys, but paid little attention to them; older students hardly ever noticed the younger, and Sev at least was a familiar sight in the school library.

At first nothing seemed to happen. Colin and Avery shifted uncomfortably in their seats; neither of them had much patience. Simon stared blankly in the general direction of the Ravenclaw table, but it was difficult to tell if he was watching or just lost inside his own head.



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Sev and Malfoy were the first to notice when it started; Malfoy knew what he was looking for, and Sev was quick to pick up even tiny changes. Even Erica herself was probably unaware of it. Her hand holding the quill was beginning to shake — just judder slightly, as if she was chilled. The minor shudder rapidly spread, until her entire body was quaking.

"Erica! Are you — ?" One of the boys beside her, Jed Aloysius, made a grab for her as she suddenly slid from her chair.

She hit the floor, convulsing violently now. There was a chorus of alarmed cries from her table-mates, and the rest of the students in the library came running. They crowded around to see what was going on — and who would notice if the five Slytherin boys alongside them were perhaps looking a little less surprised and much less distressed?

"She's having a fit!"

"Is she epileptic?"

"Did she just eat something?"

Nobody seemed to have a clue what to do. "Somebody get Madame Florence!" ordered Jed, kneeling beside her and pushing his bookbag under her head. "Erica! Come on girl, are you okay?" She didn't seem to be hearing him; her



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eyes were rolled back in her head so you could see the whites, and her skin had gone deathly pale.

Nobody moved to do Jed's bidding, and Malfoy gave Avery a shove. "You go!" he ordered, and Sev gave him a subtle nod of acknowledgement as Avery looked surprised but sped off. Jed and his friends, should they remember the Slytherin third years having been there, would also recall that one of them had a been the first to run for help. Malfoy might not be in Snape's class of genius, but he knew all about covering his tracks. He was just about able to get away with murder — a phrase, Sev suspected, which would soon, the way Malfoy was going, be less than metaphorical.

Though Sev was no expert, he didn't think that was the case here. The sustained fit looked pretty scary, but Erica didn't seem to be having trouble breathing and the convulsions weren't getting worse. He nudged Malfoy. "How long?"

Malfoy obviously knew what he was asking. "About an hour." He risked a quick smirk, feeling secure in the assumption that everyone was watching Erica. "Good, isn't it?" he murmured quietly. Malfoy was sharp, but he was also arrogant; that would likely be his downfall.

Perhaps sooner, rather than later. As Madame Florence shoed away the crowd and quickly

levitated Erica to take her to the infirmary, he pulled his gang aside and told them "I've sent a anonymous note to Cuero, asking him to meet us in the Forbidden Forest at midnight. As a teacher, he has access to the Great Hall; he can get all the tables dusted with this stuff on the sly." He tapped the parcel containing the rest of the blood-red powder, and smirked. "Can you imagine the scene? We all sit down to dinner, same as usual. Then, all at once... every last damn mudblood in the room — just like Erica. I can see the panic now. We'll raise the Dark Mark over the school, and send them all a message — the day of the mudbloods is over."

"I still say you shouldn't trust Cuero," Sev warned him. Malfoy quirked an eyebrow.

"And when you can give me a reason for that, I'll listen." It suited his view of the universe to assume that he was being bold and confident whilst others were jumping at shadows.

Sev merely nodded lightly, and fixed him with a strong gaze. "Then I'll find one."

Of course, he didn't truly need to find a reason why Malfoy shouldn't trust Cuero; he had one already. The question was, what to do

about giving it to him. He couldn't allow this group of novice Death Eaters to be caught out over what was, to be honest, little more than a very vicious and mean-spirited prank.

Cuero was a spy, but few people thought like Sev did. Despite the fact that none of the mudblood students would be permanently damaged by Malfoy's curse, if he knew about it he would feel compelled to stop it. And that would destroy any chance Sev had of following Malfoy to the centre of this web of conspiracy.

There were two ways he could handle this. He could spill Cuero's secret to Malfoy — or he could take the disguised Auror into his confidence.

Going to Cuero was technically the 'right' way — but he didn't like it. Cuero was a variable he had no control over. Lily and Josh Matthews already knew the truth about his association with Malfoy — and that was two people too many. An Auror was, ironically, a much worse person to entrust such a secret to; the chances of him being captured and tortured or simply fed Veritaseum were far higher.

Severus Snape lived by pragmatism and logic. There were two ways to resolve this; regardless of which choice might be 'right' or 'wrong', one greatly increased the chance that



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his mission would fail, and the other if anything decreased it.

He went to Malfoy.

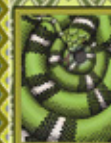


"A spy?" Malfoy looked startled for a moment, then thoughtful. "Yes. Yes, that would make sense. That would make a lot of sense..." He turned a sharp look on Severus. "How did you find out?"

"I have my methods," he said inscrutably. He'd rather not let Malfoy know that he could brew a potion like Trustasium — the Slytherin leader could think of entirely too many nasty ways to use it.

For a instant Malfoy looked angry — and then the expression cleared, so quickly that anybody else but Severus Snape would probably have missed it. "Yes, I do believe you do," he said with a jovial smile. He might dislike being kept out of the loop, but he was smart enough to know that Sev was invaluable to him. He had very nearly blundered directly into a tailor-made trap, and without Snape to point it out to him, he would have done so.

"What do you intend to do about Cuero?" he asked neutrally. It was too much to expect that Malfoy would be smart and leave well enough alone. His pride had been hurt the moment Cuero



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fooled him, and that he would never put up with.

Malfoy smiled enigmatically, enjoying having secrets of his own to keep. "Oh, don't worry about him. I'll make sure... certain interested parties find out about his loyalties." He frowned for a moment. "I suppose this means my... demonstration will have to wait for a better time; but ah, I doubt my associates will be displeased." He smiled darkly, and clapped Sev on the shoulder. "You've done me a service here today, Severus. And don't worry, it will be rewarded.

He had further cemented his own cover, at the expense of destroying another's. Logic told him that he was in the better position anyway, and that it was the intelligent thing to do.

Sev knew that he was right, but he was beginning to wonder if, when the time came, anybody else would be willing to believe that.



That night, Sev played on a hunch, and after the others dropped off he didn't get up as usual, but pretended to fall asleep. Sure enough, after a few moments the 'sleeping' Lucius Malfoy stirred in his bed and got out of it. Sev stayed facing the wall, with his eyes shut, until he heard him leave the room.



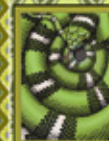
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Slipping silently out of bed, he padded after Malfoy down the corridors. His spell to make him unnoticeable would only work if he was keeping still, and he had no invisibility cloak. Getting caught now would ruin everything; he stayed a long way back.

When Malfoy left via a side door and went out into the grounds, Sev didn't follow but instead retired to a window from which he could watch. He was almost amused to see the 'safe' location in which he had chosen to have a secret meeting; beneath the flailing branches of the Whomping Willow. Had it been a full moon night, he and his companion wouldn't have had nearly as much privacy as they expected.

Both Malfoy and whoever he was meeting with wore hoods pulled down over their faces. Malfoy's was not as good a disguise as he probably thought; Sev would have known him by his height and the arrogant swagger with which he walked. His companion was far more subtle, walking over to meet him with a calculated casualness which meant he probably wouldn't have been looked at twice, even hiding beneath the hood as he was. Malfoy's body language, on the other hand, practically screamed 'up to no good!'



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Sev was too far away to catch the conversation, but he could read the flow of it in Malfoy's expansive gestures as he talked. The other figure didn't seem to speak or move at all, just listened to him explain. He obviously wasn't aware of Sev watching, but he was prepared to take no chances nonetheless.

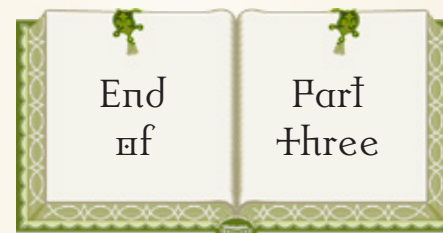
Even Sev's powers of observation could not quite identify the figure from so little data, but he quickly narrowed down his pool of suspects. This had to be the hidden Death Eater Cuero had been sent here to discover. That meant one of the staff, an observation Sev felt confident in. A seventh year might have been tall enough, but they moved completely differently from all but the most athletic of adults.

From the general height and shape of the figure compared to Malfoy, Sev could think of four teachers it might be; Professors Vitae, Fractalis, Malachite or Ephemeria. He resolved to sift through every memory he had of their actions for possible clues — but not right now. Malfoy was coming back, and he had to move quickly to get back in bed and be 'asleep' before he returned.

Professor Cuero failed to make it to Care of Magical Creatures that Thursday afternoon.


Nor was he there the following week, or for the remaining five weeks of the summer term. Sev had a very strong suspicion that the Ministry of Magic would be receiving no further secret reports from him.

Cuero was dead. Sev was still in with Malfoy. And if he wasn't to find himself having made a wrong choice, he was going to have to make damn sure his mission yielded results.





BAND OF FEUR



HE HOGWARTS EXPRESS WAS practically empty. Severus Snape was actually able to get a carriage to himself, a situation that suited him down to the ground.

A loner by design, and exceptionally intelligent, Sev had slotted naturally into House Slytherin. There he'd been in the perfect position to realise exactly how dangerous some of his fellow students truly were, and to infiltrate Lucius Malfoy's little hate group as he led them deeper and deeper into darkness.

Outwitting the plots of the organization that called themselves the Death Eaters had been an intellectual exercise, but it had taken on a decidedly sinister turn of late. Several people had been killed, even inside Hogwarts itself; the latest as good as by Sev's own hand. He had been forced to reveal one of his teachers as a Ministry of Magic spy to protect Malfoy; for if Malfoy was busted too soon, Sev would lose any chance he had of reaching the heart of the conspiracy.



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It wasn't any kind of ego or pride that told him that he was the only person who could do so; simply the icy cold logic that was very much the core of his personality. Of everybody at Hogwarts, staff and students alike, the only one he considered to be in his intellectual league was Albus Dumbledore. And the headmaster had, in Sev's eyes, one fatal flaw; he believed in trusting people.

Also, everybody who knew anything was well aware that Dumbledore would have nothing to do with a group like the Death Eaters. Nobody was half as sure about Severus Snape.

Very few people ever got a glimpse beneath the impassive exterior — and those that did saw a similarly impassive interior. Sev Snape was not completely immune to emotion or humanity, but he was a creature of logic down to the bone. Nothing he did was uncalculated.

Perhaps the closest thing to a friend he'd had was Lily, one of the only two people who had ever found out that Snape was anything other than the dark-hearted follower of Malfoy he appeared. But Lily was a Gryffindor, a mudblood, and very close to Malfoy's arch-enemy, James Potter. Someone else might try to find a way to continue their association without being caught, but Sev was able to view the idea dispassionately and see



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the stupidity of it. The kindest thing he could do for Lily was to openly detest her.

So he had no friends or confidantes, and wasn't unduly troubled by that fact. He wouldn't have traded a fraction of a percent of his intelligence for popularity; nor would he even for the chance to wipe out the Death Eaters. He was not naive enough to believe that prejudice and stupidity could actually be permanently stamped out; his work against them was a work of logic and pragmatism, not of noble intentions.

Logic dictated that if the Death Eaters had their way, the current order would be replaced with something far more inefficient and unbalanced. There was no way you could pursue a solitary life of gathering knowledge under such a system — and little hope of finding anyone to learn from when people were judged more on their pedigree than their abilities. And somebody as bright as he would sooner or later be a target; those who wanted power would never accept that others could be disinterested in it.

So, clearly, the Death Eaters had to be stopped from gaining power. This was a problem; Severus Snape's brain was geared to finding the most efficient solution to problems. Stopping them would involve having the best

possible pool of information about their activities; which meant the best possible spy.

Which meant, naturally, himself.

He had as much of Malfoy's trust as anybody; but that was not a lot. He was no less cynical than Sev himself, just less thorough. Sev could not afford to deviate a tiny fraction from his role for as long as it took — and that meant making strategic sacrifices.

Sev was not a chess player, but mainly because he knew he would never find a good enough opponent to match him. On the chess board, everybody knew you couldn't win without sacrificing pieces with lesser abilities for those in more useful positions. But when it came to reality, people didn't want to believe that the exact same rules applied. The James Potters of this world believed that you could dash in heroically and save the world without ever getting a dent in your nobility.

That was why the James Potters of this world did the heroic dashing-in at the end, and the Severus Snapes laid all the meticulous groundwork.

Others, however, were built neither for subterfuge nor for heroism. The vast majority of human beings, magical or otherwise, were timid and creatures of habit. When dark things

started stirring, they either turned the other cheek or ran to ground.

It wasn't just the train that seemed near-empty; the Hogwarts Great Hall was a ghost of its usual bustling splendour. One teacher had been killed, another disappeared, a third had turned out to have murderous intentions; Hogwarts was no longer sacred ground, and people were scared to send their children there.

Even Sev's own year-group had suffered some losses this time around. The other three houses were all at least one student smaller than the same time last year, and Slytherin itself had lost Rebecca Whistley and Jack Brisingamen. The two remaining boys who weren't amongst Malfoy's followers, Stuart and Robert, sat close together in a kind of apprehensive solidarity.

Even the staff had given up pretending all was normal. As Professor Dumbledore stood to make his tradition Post-Sorting Speech — much earlier than usual, given the shortened, subdued ceremony — his face was sad and grave.

"Welcome, students new and old. I am glad to see you here, and saddened by the faces that are absent this year."

His steely-blue eyes seemed to fix on every student simultaneously. "This is a dark time

for the wizarding community, but as ever our strength is in solidarity. Hogwarts has been the core of our country's magical strength in times past, and so it will remain."


He nodded to the staff beside him. Sev noted that there was one fewer chair than there had been last year; clearly, no one had been willing to replace the departed Cuero.

"Our staff have been working tirelessly to secure the safety of the grounds. I will not lie to you; no defences are truly foolproof. But I firmly believe that Hogwarts still remains one of the best protected magical locations on this planet."

Sev didn't doubt that such a claim was true. However, the fact that nobody could storm the castle meant little when the enemy were already well inside the gates and plotting treachery.

"I appreciate that many of you may be worried for your own safety, and for the safety of your families. And rightly so, for we are all wizards here; though you are young, none of you are too young to want to use your powers to protect yourself and others."

For the first time, he cracked a hint of a smile. "However, I am also aware that when young wizards seek to use their powers in such ways, there can be... complications." His gaze flick-



ered over one or two well-known living disaster areas. "Therefore, as of this year, Hogwarts will be establishing a duelling club."

A murmur of interest rippled through the tables. Most of the students probably had little more than disquieting guesses at exactly what was going on in the outside world, but all of them were interested in magical duelling. Beside him, Avery nudged Malfoy.

"Is it me," he muttered with a smirk, "or did Dumbledore just give as a free pass to totally trash Potter and his little gang?"

Perhaps Dumbledore was sharp enough to know exactly what certain of his students were thinking; perhaps there was some truth in the rumour that he heard everything. He levelled a stern look at the older students over his glasses. "Note the inclusion of the word 'club' in that statement. There will be meeting times arranged in the evenings and lunch hours for the different year groups, and members of staff will always be there to supervise. The prohibition against student duelling is still in effect at all other times. Now, more than ever, the last thing we need is childish student pranks. If the staff come upon cursing in progress, they may well Stun first and ask questions later. You have been warned."

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No doubt there would be some screaming objections from parents if it ever came down to that. And no doubt the Governors or the Ministry of Magic would come along and attempt to give Dumbledore a slapped wrist for it. They were all idiots; unwilling to believe that 'children' could ever be any danger. Sev knew that this kind of darkly seductive organization was perhaps twice as dangerous amongst adolescents as it would be anywhere else. Teenagers were looking for something to believe in; Malfoy had found the Death Eaters, and the others had found Malfoy.

Malfoy had slowly but surely drawn them in over the last few years, and by this point they would probably follow him everywhere. One of the hallmarks of house Slytherin was a thirst for power, and the Death Eaters provided a deadly way to slake it. Though they were only just reaching their middle year at the school, already Malfoy and his followers strode around as if they owned it. And Sev strode with them, impassive mask in place. Everybody would draw the conclusions he desired from that, because nobody else was smart enough to look deeper.

Malfoy, certainly, was by now well satisfied with the loyalties of his followers. He had a certain degree of support amongst the younger and

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even the older students in their house, but his four roommates were the core of his power structure. At midnight that first night, he rose from his bed and went about shaking them awake.

“I’m not asleep,” said Sev quietly, opening his eyes as the blond boy approached his bed. Malfoy rolled his eyes, and smiled.

“Do you ever sleep?”

“I sleep as much as I need to,” responded Snape shortly. He was an insomniac, but the lack of sleep never troubled him; in truth, he needed it. Two or three hours of quiet darkness to line his thoughts up was what kept his brain running like the well-oiled machine it was. In prior years he had roamed the halls of Hogwarts, observing, but that would be more difficult now. He had given his invisibility cloak to Lily, and the security precautions this year would be that much stronger.

Apparently such thoughts didn’t trouble Malfoy. When Colin looked nervous, he smiled knowingly, and said “No one will see us. We have friends in all sorts of places.”

Malfoy, of course, knew who the Death Eater on staff was; but he would never share that information with Sev if the situation didn’t demand it. He was well aware that his clos-

est confidante was brighter than he was, and he guarded what advantages he had jealously. Though Sev could line up suspects with the information he had, his need for precision prevented him from narrowing it down to one without sufficient evidence.


The little train of Slytherins made their way out of the dorms with a surprising lack of disturbance. They were all accustomed to moving about light-footed; even bulky Colin Crabbe had learned to move gracefully in his sideline as a petty thief.

Malfoy led them down out of the castle and towards the Forbidden Forest. There was nobody to mark their passage, not even old Pringle, the caretaker. He was getting far too old to chase after errant students in any case; no doubt he would soon draft a replacement.

“Where are we going, Lucius?” demanded Avery in a slightly whiny tone of voice. That sounded very much like Nick Avery; only too happy to cleanse the world of mudbloods, provided the holy mission didn’t cut into his sleep patterns.

Malfoy, of course, was airing his enigmatic smile. “You’ll see. We’re meeting a friend.”

Sev took that in. He doubted very much the friend would be the staff Death Eater; he got the impression that whoever it was, they had



no intention of being as trusting of Malfoy's followers as the boy himself. It was conceivable that someone could have smuggled themselves into the depths of the forest, but given the reinforced defences it seemed an unnecessary risk.

There were powerful shields against Apparating on the Hogwarts grounds that the Death Eaters would be crazy to try and break. They had been there for several centuries, and built upon by every successive headmaster. Dumbledore would know in a heartbeat if anyone was trying to breach them. Nobody could get in that way.

It was doubtful anybody had come in; therefore, Lucius must be taking them out. Though the Apparating shield went both ways, and the boys were too young to be trained for it in any case, there were other ways to transport people magically.

With this chain of logic winding its way through his head, Sev was not near as surprised as the others when Lucius came to an abrupt halt by a seemingly innocent rock in the middle of a clearing.

"Why are we here?" asked Colin, frowning. Malfoy nodded down at the rock.

"It's a rock," observed Avery shortly. Malfoy rolled his eyes.

"Indeed it is. It's a blue rock with black veins, exactly as I was told to look out for. But it's not

just a rock. What is it, Sev?"

Whether Malfoy was trying to outfox him or expecting him to know, Sev didn't disappoint. "It's a Portkey."

He grinned. "Exactly."

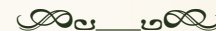
"A what?" frowned Colin.

"A Portkey, Crabbe, what are you, a Muggle? It's a magical transporter."

"Where are we going?" frowned Avery.

Malfoy smiled again. "You'll see, soon enough. Everybody, take hold of the rock. We'll travel together."

Sev stepped forwards alongside the others, and they grasped the enchanted rock together. There was an odd sensation in the pit of his stomach, like simultaneously moving and standing still, and suddenly they were... somewhere else.



They were inside some kind of stone-built castle; too large, Sev saw immediately, to be somebody's private home, and it wasn't any part of Hogwarts he knew.

There was a limit to the number of places this huge that could be magically concealed, and he was pretty damn sure Malfoy wouldn't have transported them into the middle of anything owned by the Ministry of Magic. That

left another one of the magical schools.

A young man came hurrying down the corridor towards them. He was perhaps ten years older than them, perhaps a little less; too old to still be a student. He had closely cropped dark hair, and a goatee with a curl.

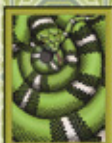
“Ah. Malfoy and party,” he said briskly. His voice was rich and dripping with a kind of bored arrogance.

Malfoy matched him, sneer for sneer. “That’s right. Take us to your master.” As if, Sev observed with cynical amusement, it wasn’t his master too.

The young man guided them rapidly through the echoing corridors. It was extremely cold here, reflected in their guide’s fur-lined cloak.

Durmstrang, Sev concluded. This must be Durmstrang. The young man leading them had no discernible accent, but there was a harsher edge to his voice than you would expect from a native French-speaker. Besides, this castle was altogether too starkly furnished to be the ornate Beaubaxtons. It had to be Durmstrang.

Sev wondered if the Death Eaters simply assumed that the Hogwarts boys wouldn’t put such basic clues together, or they were just too arrogant to care. Probably the latter. Durmstrang was a notorious home of dark wiz-



ards, the whole school an equivalent of Slytherin house at Hogwarts. Besides, it mattered little if they knew they were in Durmstrang, because nobody actually knew where Durmstrang *was*.

They followed the young man to a narrow room that was clearly the base of a tower. Inside stood a blond-haired older man with steely eyes. He glanced at the boys in a vaguely bored way, and turned to Malfoy.

“These are the ones?”


Malfoy nodded briskly. “Yes, Professor Dolohov.” It amused Sev slightly that even in the midst of such dark plotting, a teacher would insist on being addressed by his title. But that, he assumed, was Dolohov’s way of lording it over Malfoy; emphasizing his seniority. In any organization like the Death Eaters, there would be constant backstabbing and jockeying for position.

“His Lordship will see them one at a time.” He nodded to the young man who had brought them in. “Igor, take the first boy.”

Igor took a suddenly nervous-looking Nick Avery by the elbow and guided him towards the steps up into the tower. They heard the two pairs of footsteps echoing up into the dark, and then nothing.

About five minutes later, Igor returned alone. He said nothing, but came for Simon Lestrangle





and took him up the stairs too. Colin Crabbe, standing between Sev and Malfoy and regarding the ceiling anxiously, began to look a little green.

Crabbe was next, and Sev was left alone with Malfoy and Dolohov. The two Death Eaters, professor and boy, pointedly ignored each other. Sev waited in impassive silence for Igor to return for him.

The young man herded him quickly up several flights of stairs, then hung back at the final doorway. "Inside," he said, with a brusque nod. Sev moved to the black wooden door and pushed it open. It was heavier than it would have appeared, but despite his relatively skinny frame Sev had a wiry strength to him.

The room inside was darkened; no doubt to intimidate, and to give the occupant a view of him whilst his eyes were still adjusting. On the other boys — except perhaps for Simon — it had probably worked, but Sev's brain quickly tagged it for the psychological warfare it was.

Drama; the Death Eater leader had a sense of drama. That was good. That was a weakness. Those with a sense of drama wanted to let the world know what they were doing, whilst those like Sev got the job done quietly in the shadows, when nobody was looking.

He waited in the doorway until his eyesight adjusted, and then stepped inside.

A tall, slim figure flowed out of the shadows towards him. It was a dark-haired man; past forty, perhaps, but with a handsome, unlined face. His eyes were as black as Snape's own, and every bit as piercing. He didn't even have to speak, just smile slightly, for Sev to feel the charisma flowing from him; stronger even than that of Lucius Malfoy. This was a man who people would follow. This was a cult leader.

He regarded Sev in impassive silence, who reflected the same attitude right back. The other boys might eventually snap, but not him. However, after a long moment he chanced a respectful nod. He wanted to project strength, not defiance.

The older man gave a nod right back, and smiled softly. "Severus Snape," he said, in a tone that was not a question. He had a pleasant, cultured voice, and spoke as softly as Sev himself. This was a man who didn't need to shout to be obeyed.

"Lord Voldemort," Sev replied. He had little doubt that this was he, although the only person he had yet heard that name from was the Auror Cuero. Perhaps the other man might be surprised that he knew it, but Sev knew he wouldn't abruptly demand to know where he

had got it from. That would be to admit to not having full control of the situation.

Indeed, he did not. Voldermort threw back his head and laughed, and in that instant he seemed perhaps twenty years younger. But when he looked back at Sev, there was something cold and serpentine in his eyes. "You're a smart one. Very sly."

"I'm a Slytherin," he said simply.

"Aren't we all?" Abruptly, all traces of the smile were gone, and Voldermort was regarding him with fiery intensity. "You're a listener, I think. A cold one, a silent one. You're cleverer than Malfoy. Why do you follow?"

"Why would I lead?" Sev knew he had to step carefully; very, very carefully. In his fourteen years of life so far, he had met precisely one person who he believed to share his intellectual level; the Hogwarts headmaster, Albus Dumbledore.

As of tonight, he had met two.

This interview with Voldermort was very much like facing the Sorting Hat; except here, the risks were greater than being relegated to house Hufflepuff. Voldermort seemed able to read the depths of his personality from his eyes; but not all of it.

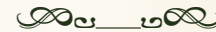
Nobody had ever read all of it.

"You don't lust for glory. I doubt you care much for the fate of the world, one way or the

other. So why are you here? What do you want from us? What can we, the Death Eaters, give you, that you think you cannot give yourself?"

To risk a lie now would be to risk everything. He had to give a truth, and there was only one truth it could possibly be.

"Knowledge."




Voldermort regarded him silently for a long moment. Then he started to laugh. "Yes. Oh, yes. I see Malfoy has found us a real prize in you. Give me your arm."

Remembering Malfoy's Death Eaters symbol, Snape quickly pulled back his robe to bare his left arm.

Instead of producing a wand or some more archaic means of applying a tattoo, Voldermort simply grasped Sev's arm in a powerful two-fingered grip, and spoke the word "*Morsmordrios*."

There was a flash of blinding pain, and Sev allowed the wince of agony to cross his features; he could have controlled it had he desired, but to what end? He doubted Voldermort would be either fooled or impressed. Shows of strength were better saved for the important things.

He automatically gripped his arm as Voldermort released it, but then the pain faded to a tingle. As



he moved his fingers away, he saw the shape of the Dark Mark blossoming there. Unlike Malfoy's when he'd seen it, it was not red but pure black.

Voldemort looked at his handiwork and gave a brief, satisfied nod. He looked Sev in the eye, and said "The Dark Mark is my favour, and my power. When I am near, it will burn black. When I wish you summoned to my side, it is through this mark that I will show it. Obey me, and you will share my rise to greatness. Disobey, and you shall earn my disfavour —" he cracked a warmthless smile — "a considerably more painful thing."

Sev knew Voldemort wouldn't be sold if he made some overenthusiastic declaration, so he just nodded, and said "As you will it."

"As I will it," Voldemort agreed, without a trace of irony. He swept his cloak around him, and ordered "Go to the base of the tower, where the others wait." With that, he Disappeared.

More drama, thought Sev. Now might have seemed the perfect opportunity to snoop around the upper chamber for evidence of Voldemort's plans, but he wasn't nearly stupid enough to assume he wasn't being watched. He turned and quickly descended the stairs to join the others.

The other boys were all there, the three newly-minted Death Eaters proudly display-

ing their Dark Marks, and Malfoy looking distinctly relieved. Sev had passed his interview, and no doubt the others had undergone similar questioning before they were branded. It would have been as much a test of Malfoy's judgement as it was of their suitability.

The fact that they had passed had not relieved Dolohov of his contempt. He regarded them all with a thinly veiled sneer.

"So. Now you are Death Eaters. Do not think that your youth somehow excuses you, or allows you to make foolish mistakes. We will tolerate no mistakes."

He swept back his left sleeve abruptly, revealing his own Dark Mark. "The mark identifies you as a true Death Eater; show it to another, and he will know you for what you are." His face darkened. "Show it to one who is not a Death Eater, and we will be most displeased." He folded his arms.

"You are the Dark Lord's eyes and ears. None will suspect you, provided you do not act foolishly. Malfoy will be your leader; you will receive your orders through him. Carry them out correctly, and you will be rewarded. If you are ever caught or suspected, you will admit nothing, reveal nothing, and explain nothing. Betray us, and we will hunt you unto the ends of the earth and destroy you."

From the expression on his face, it was clear that Dolohov would much prefer that outcome than to actually have to spend one more minute in their presence.

“Contact will be kept at a minimum. Malfoy knows where to find your local contact; you will liase through him.”

Sev could almost respect their stringent security measures. The Ministry of Magic might refuse to believe that children could be used as spies, but the Death Eaters were not so naive. It was paranoia but not unjustified; after all, they did indeed have a youthful spy amongst their new recruits. However, Severus was far smarter than even the most paranoid would give him credit for.

Dolohov’s contempt was, in its way, a shield. The young recruits were beneath him; he would pay them as little attention as possible. His fellows, should Sev ever have a chance to meet them, were likely to be the same.

No, his biggest challenge would be Voldemort himself; and below him, Malfoy. His de facto leadership of the boys had now become an official reality, and it remained to be seen how that would affect his attitude to Sev, his biggest rival.




The novice Death Eaters eagerly awaited the announcement of their first mission, but for a while all was quiet. Their only orders were to keep their eyes open for ‘anything of importance’; a brief which Sev had been adhering to long before he was ever ordered to.

From what he could gather, the ‘anything important’ the Death Eaters wanted at Hogwarts was information about the school’s revamped defences.

Since troubling events in the outside world had started to impinge on school grounds, Dumbledore had been making every effort to keep them as secure as possible. Professors Vitae and Fractalis, the Charms and Arithmancy teachers, had been helping to shore up the wards around the school, although the bulk of the work fell, naturally, on the Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher, Professor Malachite.

However, new defences weren’t the only demand on the staff’s precious time; they were still one man down following the disappearance of Cuero; and then there was the duelling club.

Malfoy, naturally, had been keen to sign them all up for the fourth-year group. It tickled his sensibilities to think that ‘The Enemy’ were taking the time to improve duelling skills that would one day be used against them.



The classes were, of course, packed. Duelling magic was apt to be far more fun than anything learned in lessons, and the students were keen to play around with it. The teachers assigned varied from week to week, but generally it fell to either Professor Vitae or Professor Malachite.

The fact that the two teachers most involved were the respective heads of enemy houses Gryffindor and Slytherin hardly helped to preserve a friendly, non-competitive atmosphere.

Sev was willing to bet that the fourth-year group was the one most likely to explode into all-out magical warfare. In all the years, there were inter-house tensions, but in his own, each side had a charismatic leader; James Potter and Lucius Malfoy.

If you liked Potter, you had to hate Malfoy and his gang. If you liked Malfoy, you had to hate Potter and his gang. If you were trying to be neutral, you were best advised to hit the ground and stay there until the sparks stopped flying.


Even in the early lessons, learning harmless basics like the Disarmament Charm, it was only a matter of minutes before war was joined. The sides were evenly matched; Malfoy had his cadre of Death Eaters, Potter had Sirius, Lily, Remus and Peter. Pete Pettigrew, a small,

and extremely nervous boy, had a quite incredible talent for Transfiguration — much to the dismay of whichever Slytherin he turned it against — and Sirius Black was an explosion waiting to happen. Lily and Remus were less inclined to fight, but they weren't prepared to stand by once the hexes started flying.

Sev himself stayed largely on the sidelines, but he was a legitimate target to the Gryffindors, and when he got hit, he hit back — usually with devastating results. With his photographic memory and penchant for reading, he was a walking library of hexes, and he could always find one that wasn't too dangerous, but looked truly spectacular.

Of course, when this kind of trouble broke out it was down to the teachers to call an end to it — but when you had Vitae and Malachite together, there was no guarantee that would happen.

Professor Vitae let her Gryffindors get away with murder, and Malachite was not unaware of that. A bias tended to exist against House Slytherin — a pose which was a much a cause of its wizards going bad as a defence against it. Professor Malachite was unceasingly angry about the unfairness of it all; “The serpent,” he often liked to say, “has been maligned for too long in this school.”



That was true enough, but there was little chance of it changing with somebody like Lucius Malfoy acting as a figurehead for house Slytherin. Relations between Vitae and Malachite were hence extremely strained, and they both relished any opportunity to set their houses head-to-head.

“Okay, if somebody would like to come up to the front and show us how it’s done?” suggested Professor Vitae after another outbreak of fighting had been quelled. “How about... James and... Lucius. Come on boys.” Sev cynically noted the way she paused before the second name, as if anyone would believe that hadn’t been her intention all along.

Malfoy grinned darkly in triumph. “Oh, this is gonna be fun,” he muttered to his compatriots. “I’m gonna blow the Muggle-loving slime off the face of the planet.”

What Professor Vitae probably failed to take into account when arranging the match was that although her boy would stop short of actual homicide, Malfoy might very well not.

Malfoy was clever, but his thirst for vengeance could make him reckless. James Potter had showed him up too many times, beating him in the classroom and the Quidditch field. He might well take a chance and try to do him a serious injury.



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Though nobody would ever prove it hadn’t been an accident, not everyone would be fooled. People would start watching Malfoy, and sooner or later all five of them would be caught. Sev had to intercede, without actually saying out loud “Don’t try to hurt him”. Malfoy was apt to react against that kind of advice by insisting he knew better.

He thought quickly. “Lucius. I have a spell for you.”

Malfoy’s grin widened. “Really? Do tell.”

Sev whispered the word in his ear, and smiled thinly at him. “Trust me, that’ll give Potter the shock of his life. And I think Professor Malachite will definitely... appreciate it.”

Malfoy flashed him another wicked grin in return, probably not understanding what he meant but willing to trust him. He had come to rely on Snape’s advice, which was all to the good. The more useful Sev made himself in the minor things, the less his loyalty would ever be questioned.

The room fell silent as the two boys faced off against each other. Malfoy gave his trademark mocking smile, and Potter returned it. Potter was perhaps less arrogant than Malfoy, but he had no lack of confidence in himself, and he believed in his own invincibility.

Professor Vitae raised her wand, then paused



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and turned to Malfoy. "Mr. Malfoy; play nice, if you please." Malfoy just gave her an innocent look, but Malachite scowled at the insinuation. Vitae gave him a smile that looked a lot like the ones the two duellists had exchanged.

"When I give the signal —" she ordered sternly. But she barely had time to wave her wand before conflicting shouts cracked through the air.

"*Serpensortia!*" cried Malfoy. The whole room gasped as a huge black serpent boiled out of the end of his wand and lunged towards Potter.

James was shocked into jumping backwards, but he was so quick off the mark that his spell was already flying towards Malfoy. "*Petrificus Totalus!*" Malfoy thudded heavily to the ground, completely paralyzed.

Unfortunately for James, that meant that the serpent was no longer under what little control Malfoy might have wielded. The assembled audience scattered as the long snake rippled towards Potter at lightning speed, and then pulled back, in preparation to strike.

Professor Vitae seemed frozen by surprise, making no move to rescue her prize student from harm's way. James himself couldn't reach for his wand — a sudden movement would certainly bring the snake down upon him.



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Abruptly, a hissing sound snapped through the air. The serpent drew away as if startled, and then snaked across the floor to coil around the Professor Malachite's feet. Ignoring the amazed stares, he calmly lifted the creature from the floor and allowed it wrap itself around his shoulder.

"Snakes," he said mildly, "are nothing to be frightened of — if you know how to handle them properly." He produced his wand from the folds of his cloak, and used it to free Malfoy from the full-body bind. He absently patted the snake on the head, and it blinked up at him blissfully. "I think," he said to Professor Vitae "We'll have to call this one a draw. Now, all of you get to your afternoon lessons, while I send this little fellow back where he came from."

Malfoy got to his feet and scrambled over to Sev's side, shooting Potter a dark look. "Did you see?" he asked Sev excitedly. "He's a Parselmouth!"

"No wonder he's always going on about being nasty to serpents," observed Avery.



It wasn't until just prior to Christmas that the young Death Eaters' mission-statement changed. The first the boys all knew of it was



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when Malfoy gathered them together in their dorm one evening.

"What is it, Lucius?" asked Avery eagerly. The duelling club had brought hostilities with James Potter and his followers to boiling point, and the boys were itching for some action.

"We have," said Malfoy triumphantly, "a chance to prove our value."

"A mission?" asked Colin. Malfoy smiled.

"A mission," he confirmed. The boys all leaned in excitedly.

"Tell us, Lucius," Colin urged.

"I've just received word from the Death Eaters. Two Aurors are meeting tomorrow night in Hogsmeade, and we're to spy on them. They feel that if we are caught, then people will just assume we're Hogwarts kids fooling around." Malfoy's grey eyes grew steely. "But we won't be caught." Severus suspected that anybody who proved him a liar would not have a very good time of it.

"Hogsmeade?" Colin frowned uneasily. "How are we supposed to get down there at night?"

"Oh, there are ways," Malfoy said airily. "Passages. Some the teachers know about; some they don't. I bet Sev could tell us one or two."

"Half a dozen," Snape confirmed. More than

that, even; the combination of midnight prowling and reading old books had taught him more about Hogwarts' secrets than was known to anyone bar perhaps Dumbledore. But he wouldn't share *all* of his knowledge with Malfoy.

"How are we supposed to spy on them?" Colin asked, looking worried. "Did they say?"


Malfoy shot him a scathing look. "We're supposed to use our initiative, Crabbe. I'm aware that you don't have any, but the rest of us will try to make up for it."

"Are we all going?" asked Avery. Malfoy nodded.

"I may need any one of you. You all have your uses." Avery and Crabbe both brightened under the praise, although it was delivered more as if Malfoy thought of them as tools than co-conspirators.

Truly enough, the group had worked together long enough to slip easily into their established roles. Lucius was leader, charismatic and decisive; Crabbe had his thieving skills, and when occasion demanded it brute strength. Avery was devious and the most adept at charming people, and Simon was... well, pretty damn scary, actually.

Sev, with his skills for reading people, knew that the quiet, detached boy was probably even more dangerous than either his friends or



enemies realised. Simon Lestrangle, with his dead eyes and disturbing mannerisms, was a serial killer waiting to happen. Like many such psychopathic individuals, he had a streak of cold-edged cunning that drove him to seek out company where his leanings would go unnoticed for longest. He would be a Death Eater, probably a much-applauded one, but it would never be belief in their holy mission that drove him to commit atrocities.

However, the operation they plotted now was not assault, deception or murder, but an altogether sneakier mandate. In situations like this, there was only one advisor Malfoy turned to.

“Severus. What do you suggest?”

“You know the place?” Malfoy gave him the address, and Sev nodded thoughtfully. Where other students might use their Hogsmeade weekends to load up on sweets and magical gadgets, Sev had used a number of his to study the village as methodically as he had done the school. The only fully-magical community in England, Hogsmeade had a few little surprises that could trip up the unwary.

A lot of Ministry folks had made their homes in Hogsmeade. Particularly in such dark times, those in the more dangerous departments pre-

ferred to keep the kind of protective charms that would cause a lot of trouble if a Muggle accidentally set them off. With Hogwarts students frequently running amok and restrictions on use of magic considerably slackened, Hogsmeade could be a extremely chaotic place to live. Once you got out of the school grounds themselves, it was relatively easy to go undetected.

“I have some ideas,” Sev agreed. It was late, but he stood up to leave. “I’ll go and get some books; there are a few charms I want to take a look at.”

It was too late to head down to the library, but that wasn’t where he was going anyway. As far back as the first year, Professor Malachite had recognized Sev’s superior brain-power, and permitted him access to the bookshelves in the Dark Arts office. This would seem most likely a sneaky way of advancing a promising Slytherin above students from other houses, but Sev was wary of taking any such favour at face value.

Nonetheless, even if there were unseen strings attached it was more than worthwhile. Sev hadn’t been lying to Voldemort when he said that the one thing he wanted was knowledge. He would read up on any subject given the chance, but the Dark Arts tomes were especially enticing, for many of them were rare

editions that contained spells and information you might not find anywhere else.

He had no worries of being disturbed by Malachite. He had learned early on in his unauthorized wanderings that the Dark Arts teacher was a creature of strong habit. Sev had heard Professor Vitae being snippy about the fact that he had somehow procured a luxury bathtub for his personal quarters, and it appeared that he preferred to wind down of an evening with a long relaxing soak. Once he had settled in for the night, so the staff joke went, it would take more than the end of the world to shift him.

Night patrols of the corridors had been intensified this year, but the teachers' offices weren't a target area. Sev had a free pass that worked as well in the night as it did during the day, but anybody else would be a fool to try to get in; all of the offices were magically alarmed and protected. The night patrols were geared more towards keeping students from mischief than protecting the school; despite everything, the staff remained firmly convinced that they were all safe here.

When it came to sneaking about on his own terms, Sev had one particular charm that had served him well. It wasn't precisely invisibility, but rather a spell to make him go unnoticed by a

casual observer, provided he was standing still. That would no doubt be extremely useful in spy work, but he wasn't sure he wanted to share it just yet. The pseudo-invisibility was useless if somebody knew to scan their surroundings in search of someone under it, and he didn't yet want to hand Malfoy that advantage.

However, there were plenty of other little enchantments in Malachite's books that could come in handy. When Dark wizards weren't actively killing people, they were generally trying to sneak about.

For Sev himself, said sneaking had always been second nature, and when his reading was interrupted by voices in the corridor outside, he immediately dimmed the light and sat in darkness. He had always had sharp hearing; his uncle had joked when he was younger that it was nature's way of compensating for his almost unnatural silence.

He placed the voices fairly quickly; and why not, when he heard each of them lecturing several times a week? Professors Ephemeria and Fractalis.

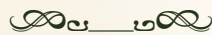
"— about this, Janeida," Fractalis was saying nervously. "What if someone — well, what if I'm caught? I wouldn't um, I wouldn't have a clue what to say."

“Oh, relax, Trigo,” the Potions teacher assured him. “All you have to do is tell them you’re out checking the wards on the grounds. After all, you’re the one that put them there in the first place.”

“In the middle of the night?”

She laughed lightly. “Why not? They all know you’re nervous enough. Besides...” Sev could picture the wryly amused smirk she used to gently mock people in Potions class — “who’d ever believe it of you?”

Fractalis laughed then, a deep, rich, almost musical sound that was a world away from his usual dryly nervous chuckle. “Indeed. Not even me, and that’s the truth.” Still laughing, the two of them passed further down the corridor and out of earshot.



“So how many of these places are there?” asked Avery, as the three of them snuck through the darkened passage. Malfoy had elected to only bring Sev and Avery along; Colin knew all about sneaking, but he wasn’t the best at thinking quickly, and Simon LeStrange could become extremely dangerous if allowed to get bored.

“A fair number,” Sev admitted. He suspected that even he didn’t know the full extent of Hogwarts’ hidden passages, although he probably knew a great



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deal more than most. The shifting architecture of the castle hardly helped; there were passages that might only be there on the day of the new moon, or on Wednesdays, or once every five-hundred and forty-seven years. If the cycle was idiosyncratic enough, there was no way to guess it.


Some passages, though, were more permanent in nature. The desire to sneak down to Hogsmeade had been present ever since Hogwarts students had been restricted in the times they could go there. The teachers, who had mostly been students here themselves when they were younger, knew about a lot of them, but not all.

One of the undetected ones led into the back of Honeydukes, but that was hardly practical for a midnight spying mission. If you were caught in a sweet shop in the middle of the night, it would be fairly difficult to get anyone to believe you were breaking *out*. Others Sev knew or suspected were being monitored. Sneaking out one time on a Saturday might go unremarked, but the same offence late on a school night would not be taken so lightly.

And so, they used this passage. This, Sev was sure, was the least known of all of the Hogsmeade entrances — except perhaps for one of which he himself had only vague suspi-



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cions. Putting together James and his friends sneaking under the Whomping Willow and the 'spirits' that haunted the Shrieking Shack at the full moon, he had a fairly good idea of where that little passageway went.

However, Severus was pretty certain James and his pack didn't know about this one. How could they? The statue that hid the passage would only step aside for the tongue-teaser of a password "Slytherins sneak superbly". Even had the Gryffindors known it, their pride would prevent them from speaking the words.

The Auror's house looked like any other in the street it stood in. However, its defences were both more subtle and more powerful. Sev stopped the three of them a short way away. "Repeat after me," he whispered. "I, Severus Snape, honestly declare that it is my purpose at this house tonight to eavesdrop on the conversation within."

The other two boys looked at him strangely, but echoed the same declaration. As they passed through the gates, the Dishonectors mounted on the gateposts quivered, then lay still. Malfoy registered what was happening, and gave Snape a brief nod and a smirk. An artefact to detect dishonest visitors wouldn't tag one who *admitted* they were there to spy.

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They wouldn't be able to get inside the building, but that didn't matter. Sev had been down to Dervish and Banges earlier in the year for a handy device for hard-of-hearing wizards. Designed to magically read lips, it had one distinct advantage over the old-fashioned method; it worked just as well whether the person in question was facing you or not. All they needed was a clear line of sight into the house.

They got it from a large tree in the house's back garden. Sev cast a quick charm that would cause anybody who looked up into the branches to become immediately distracted. It was a handy trick that he'd developed from a hex Malfoy had used to get Potter in trouble in Potions. He'd adapted it from making a specific person unable to concentrate to making a specific place impossible to concentrate on. It had been simple enough to combine the original hex with the same spell that made a location unplottable.


Malfoy was the first to spot a seeming flaw in the plan. "They're having a secret meeting, Severus. Unless they're even more moronic than you'd expect, they'll draw the curtains."

Sev nodded. "I can fix that. But not until he's inside."

They had been told that the Auror's contact

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would be arriving at midnight, and he arrived three minutes later. He made a thorough sweep of the grounds as he approached, but somehow whenever his eyes or his wand pointed up at the tree, they seemed to slide off again. Avery gave Sev a surreptitious thumbs up.

The Auror met his visitor at the back door, and the magic lip reader dutifully reported the whispered passwords. Avery scribbled them down on a scroll, but Sev needed no such memory aid. Everything he needed to recall would stay in his memory for as long as he wanted it to. So would everything he *didn't* need, but he had learned to live with that.

As soon as the curtains were pulled, Sev dropped lightly down from the tree and sped light-footed to the rear window. He drew his wand and flicked it at the curtains with the whisper "*Monoculous!*" Immediately, the cloth of the curtains turned as transparent as the window they covered, and they could see inside.

"I hope for all our sakes' that's one-way," Malfoy said dryly. Avery had other things on his mind.

"Would that work on the wall of the girls' bathroom?" he asked hopefully.



The magical lip reader reported every word the two men spoke in low whispers. It was a little disconcerting, in some ways; it felt as if the Aurors were not in a room thirty feet away, but standing right behind them.

"Aradin," said the house's owner with a small smile. "I should have known they'd send you."

"Naturally," shrugged the Auror Aradin modestly. "Moody busy?"

"He's still in Albania, Gorvic. He won't be coming back for a cakewalk." The name rang an instant bell in Sev's brain, although he had last heard it a year ago. Gorvic Shimmersby had been the Ministry contact of Professor Cuero, the undercover Auror who had posed as a teacher at Hogwarts.

"This is hardly a cakewalk, my friend," said Gorvic tightly. It was hard to see his face from this distance, but his body language was angry.

"Hush, friend. I know you're still angry about Euphrates."

"It was a monumental cock-up!" Shimmersby snapped. "Euphrates Cuero was a top agent. The Death Eaters should never have been able to find him."

"Well, they did. And they still have a man inside. Which is why Dumbledore's so insistent that we do this. Three batteries of tests," he explained,

becoming more business-like. “January, March, and late June. He wants his staff to see everything we can bring, and learn how to adapt to it.”

“This is a new one on me,” Shimmersby reflected wryly. “I’ve never had to attack an institution before.”

“I know what you mean,” Aradin agreed. “Breaking into Hogwarts; who’d have thought it?”

“If we don’t, they will,” Gorvic said darkly. “So what do we know about the defences?”

“They’re pretty elaborate,” his fellow Auror admitted. “That Fractalis is an absolute genius for wards; never seen an Arithmancer like it. Dumbledore’s taken a personal hand in some of it, I think, and Vitae and Malachite have been setting up the rest of the charms.”

“Together?” asked Shimmersby, with a raised eyebrow. They shared a brief chuckle.

“Quite,” agreed Aradin. “No, they’ve always hated each other, those two. Even back at school. Malachite was quite the favorite of old Dippet’s, you know — even though he was a Slytherin.”

“Yes, I remember how sore Ellida used to get over that. After all, she was well on course to top of the school until he transferred over in the fourth year.”

“Yes, I remember that. Where did he come in from again?”

“I don’t think he ever said. Word was he was a ‘Strang boy — that would explain why he got put in Slytherin.”

“Yes.” Aradin chuckled suddenly. “Remember the end of year ceremony for that year? First time in Hogwarts history the head boy and head girl had to be restrained from killing each other.”


They chuckled over that memory, and then got down to business. Avery scribbled down all the defences and possible counter-spells they talked over, whilst Sev pondered the situation thoughtfully. The Death Eaters must have known what was going to be discussed at this meeting, and they could only have sent the boys here for one reason.

The Death Eaters were going to stage a raid on Hogwarts.



Severus spent a long time pondering why the Death Eaters might choose to tip their hand by making a move against Hogwarts. It made little sense from a military point of view; the staff were indeed all at the top end of their respective fields, but there were others in the Ministry who were their equals, and better trained for battle.

The only target worth taking down was Dumble-



dore himself, and Voldemort would have to be a bigger fool than Sev knew him to be to try and attack him here at Hogwarts. Even should the Death Eaters manage to get him isolated and defenceless, their chances of overcoming him were miniscule; to launch an offensive against him in the magical building whose secrets he'd been learning for half a century was literal suicide.

If Voldemort had any brains — and Sev was certain he did — then he would stage the raid when Dumbledore was away from the school. The Death Eaters couldn't help to hold the building, and it wasn't a smart way to go after specific enemies.

That meant that the point of the raid was not practical gain at all, but rather psychological. They had already put the terror into the hearts of many students and parents by demonstrating that they could cause chaos by stealth; prove that they could succeed in a full-frontal assault, and all hell would break loose.

If fears for student safety caused a mass exodus from Hogwarts, the effects would be far-reaching and catastrophic. There were only three wizarding academies still operating in Europe, and Durmstrang was already in the hands of the Death Eaters. Beaubaxtons was

the newest of the three schools, and if Hogwarts could be penetrated then it didn't have a prayer.

Shatter the wizarding academies, and the Death Eaters already had their greatest wish; the prevention of Muggle-born wizards from ever realising their powers. Without the schools to screen for potential wizards, the 'mudbloods' would never even discover what they were.

Sev doubted that even the most successful raid would accomplish all that. Even so, it would be a huge exercise in intimidation, and that was an end in itself. If Sev's meeting with the Death Eater leader had shown him one thing, it was that Voldemort knew all about the value of causing fear. In some ways, it was like Sev's own strategy in convincing the school he followed Malfoy; blurring the line between what he had been seen to do and what people believed him capable of.

Let the Death Eaters take the advantage this early in the game, and the war might be as good as won. On the other hand, preventing the raid was a bad idea. To do so would be as good as telling Voldemort to his face that one of his information-gatherers was a spy.

No, it would be far better to let it go ahead — and be successfully repulsed. Voldemort

would have no reason to suspect his plans had been anticipated, and faith in Hogwarts would be if anything renewed.

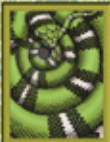
So the question became how to achieve that. The obvious solution would be to give a warning — but the only safe person to send it to was Dumbledore, and there was no way to do that anonymously. He preferred to keep that particular avenue for a much more desperate last resort.

Dumbledore was both discreet and fully trustworthy, but when a secret became shared between two people it didn't matter who they were. The only fully secure way to keep a secret was to share it with nobody.

Sev had already broken that rule twice, but Josh was well removed from the thick of things, and he could avoid Lily as long as he needed to. It wouldn't be near so simple to duck the Hogwarts headmaster if he wanted to talk.

He would handle this, as was his fashion, alone in the dark.

Right at the moment, that description was quite literal; he had suggested that the three of them split up and stagger their returns to Hogwarts, with him coming in last. Ostensibly this was to reduce the risk of being noticed, but in truth he had just wanted the solitude. Tight-



ened security had made it difficult to take the late-night strolls he was inclined towards, and he was glad of the opportunity.

However, back at Hogwarts it was much easier to tell whether or not you were the only one creeping about in the middle of the night. There would be much more advance warning if you were about to, for instance, turn a corner and run straight into James Potter.

“Snape!”

James reared back in surprise. Though Sev hadn't expected to see him, he wouldn't quite say he was 'surprised'. It wasn't the shock of shocks to find out James Potter didn't always stay tucked up in bed like a good little boy.

“Potter,” he said calmly. “Where are all your little friends? They wouldn't let you go out in the dark by yourself, would they?”

With rather impeccable timing, Sirius, Pete and Remus suddenly emerged from a side street and pulled up short at the sight of him. Snape offered James a thin and mocking smile.

“What the hell are you doing out here, Snape?” he demanded hotly. Sev had learned quickly that borrowing from Malfoy's smug superiority was an excellent way to rub James up the wrong way.

“The little snake — he's spying on us!” It



didn't take anything so complex to set off Sirius Black. 'Loitering whilst being in house Slytherin' was generally enough of an offence.

"Yes, Black, I live for the vicarious thrill of your lives," he said dryly. "I don't know what I'd do with myself if I didn't have the excitement of following you four around."

Sirius looked just about ready to explode. James was affecting to be unimpressed, whilst behind him Peter spoiled the effect by jittering nervously up and down. Remus, hanging back as he usually did during conflicts, looked suspiciously like he was trying not to smirk.

"Oh come on, man, you followed us," said James, rolling his eyes. "What the hell else would you be doing out here?"

Sev decided to chance his arm with a cutting remark.

"Maybe I'm trying to find out what haunts the Shrieking Shack." He locked eyes pointedly with Lupin as he said it. The mousy-haired boy did a credible job of keeping an impassive face, but Sev could read it anyway.

"You're out of your league here, Snape," James said warningly, stepping forwards to invade his personal space. As an intimidation tactic, it didn't work awfully well, because he was actu-

ally about half an inch the shorter of the two, and Sev was much better at holding someone's gaze without blinking. "You should toddle off home back to bed before you get hurt."

"By you?" Snape made his point succinctly with a snort of amusement.

"By all of us," said Black darkly, stepping in to join his friend. Sirius was taller, quite a way so, but Snape simply gave him an obnoxious smile and then ignored him.

"You should keep your pet here under better control, Potter," he said to James. "Big dumb animals that play with snakes usually live to regret it."

"You should keep your mouth under control, Snape," suggested Sirius, pushing him backwards.

"I quite agree," he said, stepping back calmly and making a show of wiping the front of his robes. "After all, I wouldn't want to end up with a case of that spitting thing you're doing there."

That was enough to snap him, and he lunged forwards — magic forgotten in favour of a good old-fashioned brawl — but James pulled him back. "Leave it, Sirry," he said, although it came out more a command than a suggestion. "Much as I'd like to see him wake up the hospital wing tomorrow morning, he's not worth the hassle we'd get for being out at night. Right

now, it's just his word against ours."

"Yes, Potter, I really would turn myself in just to get you four idiots in trouble." Sev shook his head in over-acted disbelief. "You seem to be harbouring the delusion that you actually matter somewhat to me; I'd suggest you lose it." He smiled ironically. "It may shock you to hear this, but the fact that you get dizzy if you think too fast isn't proof that the universe revolves around you."

Slytherin tradition of getting the last line satisfied, he turned on his heel and walked away.



It was only thanks to his light-footed nature that Sev became aware of the very quiet scuffling behind him as he made his way back to the secret passage. Someone was following him, and with far too little ruckus for it to be one of the Gryffindor boys he'd just left behind.

He didn't look over his shoulder, or try to catch them out by stopping suddenly; such methods were far more likely to alert the follower than give much chance of catching them. Besides, if it was who he suspected it was, looking back would do him little good.

Instead, he waited until he had ducked into the Hogsmeade end of the secret passage. He

closed the door behind him, and rather than going onwards simply leaned against the wall in the shadows and waited.

Sure enough, a respectable lead-time later, the secret door opened... and then closed. It appeared to do so by itself, but Snape wasn't fooled.

"You may as well show yourself," he suggested to the empty air. "I know you're there."

"Of course you do." With a rustle of cloth, Lily emerged from under the invisibility cloak. She cracked a sarcastic smile. "You are the great Severus Snape, and you know everything."

"Indeed I do," he nodded, "although the workings of your brain are a mystery for greater minds than mine, should they exist."

"Oh, surely not," she mocked gently, and Sev shrugged.

"Any particular reason you're here, or do you do this for fun?"

She waved the bunched-up cloak at him. "You can't give somebody a gift, and not expect them to use it."

"Do you often follow your boyfriend and his friends when they sneak out in the middle of the night?"

"Firstly, he's not my boyfriend. And secondly, only when they develop testosterone problems

and get this idea that only boys can sneak out at night.”

“So you follow them and see what they’re up to?” He raised a fine eyebrow. “I imagine that’s a thrilling occupation.”

“It just got more interesting,” she countered. “Care to explain what you’re doing out here? Unlike James and Sirry, I *know* you’ve got better things to do with your time than follow them around to cause trouble.”

“Apart from anything else, that implies that Sirius Black and James Potter require outside intervention to be in trouble.”

“Nice dodge. Try again, with answers to the question,” she suggested pointedly.

“Unlike your little friends, I’m out here on business,” he told her.

“Malfoy’s business?” she guessed. He inclined his head in a slight nod.

“His... amongst others.”

“So you’re on the in, then?” Lily said. “These... Death Eaters... have taken you in?” Obviously, she’d heard the rumours that were flying about.

“I think you’ll find that *I’ve* taken *them* in,” he corrected.

“Modest, aren’t we?” she observed. That didn’t merit a reply. “No, but I’ve been think-

ing,” she continued a moment later.

“Oh, dear God,” interjected Snape.

“— Quiet. I’ve been thinking. All these things that have happened on school grounds... they’ve got somebody, haven’t they? Somebody on the inside. There are Death Eaters at Hogwarts.”

“More of them than you think.” Sev stepped forwards, and pulled back his sleeve to show her the Dark Mark. She gave an involuntary gasp, and looked up at him with worry in her dark green eyes.

“Sev...” she said haltingly. “Are you... are you totally sure you know what you’re doing?”

He shrugged, lightly. “I always do,” he reminded her. “More to the point, I’m the only one that does, aside from you and Joshua Matthews. He’s not here, and you’re not stupid. None of us three is going to be giving me away.”

Lily looked like she wanted to argue, but she bit her lower lip and said nothing. After a moment of silence, she said “Who is it, then? The Death Eater. The main one, the senior guy. Not Malfoy and his gang of rent-a-thugs.”

“I don’t know.”

She blinked. “That’s a first.”

“I have my suspicions,” he elaborated.

“You always have your suspicions. Nobody’s safe from you; I’ll bet even Dumbledore’s in the frame.”

“No, I ruled him out a few days ago.”

She laughed, and then said suddenly “I’ve missed you. You’re twisted in all the right ways.”

“And you’re twisted in several wrong ones.”

“Takes all sorts to make a world, you know.” She hefted the invisibility cloak, as they neared the Hogwarts end of the tunnel. “I should be getting back.”

“Yes, you should,” he agreed shortly. She laughed again.

“What, no chivalrous offer to walk me back to my dorm?”

“Yes, because sneaking around by the Gryffindor girls’ dorm is *exactly* where I want to get caught by Pringle.”

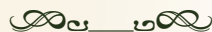
“I don’t know,” said Lily, smiling; “might be a good idea to get some rumours started. Add to your aura of mystique.”

“It’d put your boyfriend’s nose out of joint.”

“He’s not my boyfriend.”

“So you frequently protest.”

They went their separate ways.



Malfoy was waiting up for him in the boys’ dorm; Avery had long-since dozed off.

“You’re late,” he observed, with calculated neutrality.



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A lie was never so good as a half-truth. “I ran into some... complications in Hogsmeade.”

“Complications?”

“Potter and his little gang.”

“Potter?” Malfoy looked furious. “That little Muggle-lover pops up entirely too much for my liking. We can’t have him interfering with our operations, Severus. That could ruin everything.”

“There’s not a lot you can do about him, Lucius,” Sev pointed out. “The whole school knows you’re enemies. If anything happens...”

“If anything happens, it’ll have to be possible to blame it fairly and squarely on somebody else,” Malfoy completed. Sev nodded slightly, wondering what he was plotting.

“Who exactly did you have in mind?”

Malfoy smirked. “Oh, there’s a little... event... going down in the near future. Some friends of ours are gonna be coming over, and I don’t know, I think we might just be able to persuade them to give us a bit of a hand.”

He smiled tigerishly, and lay back in his bed.




As one of the very few to risk staying at Hogwarts over winter in these troubling times, Sev was in a fine position to take advantage of



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the teachers' somewhat looser lips. The testing of the school's defences that was to take place had not been generally announced, but the staff seemed quite willing to discuss it in front of the small scattering of students who shared their table over Christmas.

"Impregnable!" insisted Professor Vitae loudly. "No one gets past my defences, of that I assure you." Malachite pulled off the fairly clever trick of radiating scepticism without so much as pulling a face.

"No fortress is impregnable, my dear Ellida," Professor Dumbledore corrected gently. "But ours, I feel, is closer than most. These tests will only serve to point out to us where any weaknesses may lie."

"Not in *my* sector," insisted Professor Vitae, scowling at Malachite.

Malachite smirked down at his plate. "Well, we wouldn't presume to argue with your supreme authority on that, would we?"

"I feel that our greatest strength lies, as ever, in pulling together," said Dumbledore, with a sly smile.

"We're doomed," said Professor Ephemeria, and a nervous titter ran through the table.

The whole staff seemed a trifle uneasy at the idea of strangers coming onto school grounds

and poking holes in their defences. There had always been tensions between school and Ministry. The teachers liked to set themselves up as experts in their respective fields, and there was a certain amount of friction with Ministry of Magic people who believed their own work to be far more important.

Certainly, Dumbledore's dream of everybody working together against their common enemy was far from the reality. Even in the paranoia that was sweeping the wizard world, people found it easier to indulge in old, petty rivalries than face up to the fact that there was a real enemy out there.

The first test was scheduled for early January, before the rest of the student body returned. Sev considered sending an owl to Malfoy to say as much, but he was certain the Death Eater on staff had already alerted those who needed to know. With Aurors studying the school, it was a senseless risk to send unnecessary messages.

As the scheduled day approached, Sev had been contemplating various ways to observe as much as possible, but he turned out not to need them. A knock on the door of his empty dorm on the morning revealed Professor Malachite.

"Professor," he nodded. "You were looking for

me?" There was no other reason for the head of house to be wandering the dorms. There were only three Slytherins still in residence.

"Ah, Severus. No doubt you're aware what's going on later today?" Snape nodded. "I thought perhaps you'd appreciate a chance to see for yourself."

Regardless of Malachite's motives in offering it to him, it was an opportunity not to be missed. "Yes, Professor, I'd be interested to see that."

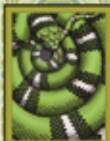
"I rather thought you might," he smiled triumphantly. "Come to my office about two o'clock; the tests are due to start shortly afterwards."

That afternoon, Sev reported at Malachite's office as ordered. The teacher had pushed back the furniture to lay out a large black sheet, upon which were glowing coloured symbols laid over a plan view of the grounds. "I don't suppose you've seen one of these before?" said Malachite.

"I assume it's a Spellograph," replied Snape. He hadn't seen one before, of course, since they were highly specialized Ministry tools, although he had read of them.

"Yes. Handy little thing. Plots every spell currently taking effect on Hogwarts grounds."

"But not in the castle itself," Sev observed, although he knew the reason why. Malachite laughed.



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"A Spellograph, on this place? Why not daub the sheet with multicoloured paint and have done with it?" The level of background magic inside Hogwarts was far too huge for such a device to pick out any single spell. It would be just as useless in the grounds, if not for the rigidly employed controls in place; staff, students, and outsiders were all prohibited from using any kind of active magic during the hours of the test.

"I take it these are the wards already in place?" Sev asked, indicating the unmoving coloured symbols already drawn.

"Yes. They're coloured in accordance with who drew them up; green are mine, naturally, and the blue are Trigo's and the red Ellida's." Either he had forgotten he was talking to a student, or he had abandoned the usual rules of formality for the day. "The gold were drawn up by Dumbledore himself, and that thick silver line is the Hogwarts anti-Apparating shield."

The little spell-symbols differed not just in colour, but in style, too. Malachite's green symbols had an organic, coiled-up look, much like the serpents he was so fond of. Vitae's formed delicate laceworks, and Fractalis's wards were incredibly complex geometric patterns. Dumbledore's own designs looked painfully simplis-



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tic against the rest, and yet they glowed more brightly than anything else on the page.

“Ah, here we are,” spoke up Malachite, as two small dots appeared on the schematic. “The Aurors have arrived.”

“Some kind of locator charm?” Sev surmised. The teacher nodded.

“Smart boy. This map shows any kind of spell, so a simple magical pulse allows us to follow their position.”

“Who’s doing the test?” he asked. He suspected it was the two Aurors they’d been observing before Christmas, but best to have it confirmed.

“Gorvic Shimmersby and Aradin Mulsworth. From the Ministry of Magic.”

“Naturally.”

The two of them lapsed into silence to watch the dots cautiously approach the school’s defences. Malachite reached out to tap each of the circles with his wand tip, and muttered “Text labels.” Immediately each circle grew a little silver label which read ‘Pulse emitter’. That was another very handy feature of Spellograph maps — they could isolate and identify any registered spell and explain which had been used.

“What if they use non-standard spells?” Snape asked.

Malachite smiled, as if pleased that he was asking


intelligent questions. “The Spellograph is designed to check first whether it’s a variation of one of the spells in its list. If not, then it gives it a label like ‘unknown hex one’ or ‘unknown charm two.’”

“So it can distinguish between the same unknown spell used twice, and two different unknown spells?”

“Exactly.” Malachite nodded approvingly. “I see you have a head for this kind of work.” The circles on the map started moving again, and they both leaned in to pay closer attention.

Professor Malachite seemed happy to have someone to discuss his insights with. He crowed with delight when one of Professor Vitae’s wards went down, and groaned in dismay when the same happened to one of his own. He was constantly asking Sev for his opinion; whether the Aurors’ approach would work, what they were doing wrong, where the flaws in the defences were. Sev, for his part, shared as much of his insights as he thought he ought to; avoiding discussion of any topics he really didn’t want Malachite to know he knew about.

He could see from the things they tried that the Aurors were well-trained in this kind of work, but they didn’t have an attack mentality. They were more inclined to delicately step around



things than blast through them; they would rather undo a knot than cut through it. That meant that Hogwarts was learning better ways to repulse a sneak attack, but not an all-out one.

However, in the current situation that seemed sensible. The Death Eaters simply didn't have enough people to storm Hogwarts; or at least, not without dealing with the Ministry first. So a sneak attack it would be.

By the end of the allotted time session, the Aurors had neutralized a number of the wards, but not all of them. They'd managed to set off two of the more complex magical alarms, both belonging to Fractalis.

"Impossible to defuse, those things," Malachite observed. "The man's a genius in his field, but Arithmancy has its limits. You might not be able to go through his wards, but you can still go around."

"The Aurors were trying to defeat all the defences," Sev agreed. "A real attacker would only be trying to get in."

"Exactly." Malachite snapped his fingers. "The very best net of defences can't beat dumb luck. If they can breach the outer ward, they might avoid tripping any of the other alarms purely by chance."



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Or by design. Everything the staff and the Aurors had thought up had failed to take into account one important factor — the presence of traitors on the inside. The student Death Eaters might not have the wherewithal to shut down any of the defences, but the one on the staff could — and, having watched on a Spellograph, they now knew exactly where to find the ones they couldn't remove.

It all came down, once again, to Dumbledore's fatal character flaw — trust. He wanted his staff to pull together, but in giving them all the information to do so, he shared it with the one who was pulling the other way.

At least one, corrected the quiet little voice at the back of Sev's brain that kept him ahead of the game. Just because he knew there to be one Death Eater amongst the staff didn't mean there was only one.

His list of suspects wasn't growing any shorter. Of the four he'd originally tagged to top the list, only Professor Ephemeria wasn't involved in maintaining the school's defences — and she appeared to have formed some kind of connection with Professor Fractalis. If she was the spy, he could be wittingly or unwittingly assisting her.

Malachite's motives were as hard to divine as ever. He was, as ever, sharing more informa-



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tion than he ought to, but it was still hard to guess whether he expected Sev to use it for the school, or against it.

Malachite was not a stupid man. It was possible he knew nothing of Malfoy's group, and had simply judged Sev not to be Death Eater material. It was equally possible he knew Sev was with the Death Eaters, and expected him to be working for them. And it was just about conceivable that he had twigged both Sev's purported loyalties, and his real ones.

Either way, he was grooming Snape for something, and until he knew what it was, Severus was going to have to tread very carefully.

But then, he always did.



When Malfoy returned for the new term, Sev briefed him on everything he'd learned; it would be worse than stupid to hold things back when there was somebody else reporting their own version. Malfoy might believe the assignments they were given to be vital to the cause, but to Sev they smacked of back-up work — retrieving information the Death Eaters already had, and in the process showing their abilities and loyalties.

“So the next dummy-raid's in the holidays as

well?” Malfoy asked, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. Sev nodded.

“Right at the start of the Easter break. The final one'll be in term-time, thought; towards the end of June.”

“Exam time?” Malfoy guessed.

“Yes. They want a time when the grounds will be as empty as possible, to minimize the background magic.”

“You've got the exact dates? I'd like to pass them on. I think this June test presents... possibilities.”

Sev clicked to Malfoy's meaning immediately. After all, it was a piece of deviousness almost worthy of himself. On the test dates, the staff would be fully expecting people to be attacking their defences. So what if that dummy raid was replaced with a real one...?

It made sense. More to the point, it was what he would do. And he strongly suspected that Voldemort had a knack for deviousness that ran nearly as deep as his own.

There were no more missions set for the fledgling Death Eaters; only the ever-present orders to 'watch the staff carefully'. Doing so was less than easy, however. Tensions between Malfoy and Potter's group had once again flared up, thanks in no small part to the duel-

ling club, and Snape's encounter with them in Hogsmeade. It was almost impossible to go anywhere without running into a Gryffindor ambush, or at least being spied on.

Malfoy was a tower of spitting fury. "Potter! He's everywhere! Something has to be done about him."

"So you said," Sev pointed out impassively. "But we can't touch him. Especially not with his gang of friends following him everywhere."

"No, but I've been thinking. It happens that our... associates would like to stir things up a little. How much more stirred can you get than something happening to our star pupil?" Malfoy spat the words bitterly; Potter was beating him in a number of classes, and Sev gathered his parents weren't pleased. They could stomach him losing out to a Slytherin like Snape, but not to Gryffindors like James and Lily.

"It seems to me he's always throwing himself around, trying to be heroic," Sev offered, since Malfoy seemed to be waiting for a response. "I wouldn't be surprised if he gets himself killed one day."

Malfoy smiled darkly.

"Exactly," he agreed. "And his little girlfriend, too."




The rest of the year rolled on excruciatingly slowly. Though for some the end-of-year exams came speeding up entirely too fast, it seemed to Sev like they would never arrive.

The whole school had been gripped by a fierce tension, although probably only a handful could have put their finger on why. Relations between Gryffindor and Slytherin were at their most explosive. Not only were Potter and Malfoy at war, but the feud between the heads of house was growing.

Professor Vitae seemed incredibly infuriated by Malachite's insistence on personally checking and backing up her sections of the defences. When the two of them co-hosted the duelling club, it was more a war zone than a learning opportunity, and it was a constant miracle no one was seriously injured.

In Arithmancy classes, the already scatty Professor Fractalis was completely distracted. On a dare, one of the Ravenclaw boys transfigured his hat into a lacy pink bonnet, and he was wearing it for half an hour before he even noticed.

The students were no less jittery; nobody knew when the next inter-house war would break out, and they were all still waiting for the hammer to fall. The fact that nothing deadly bad had happened



this year had failed to reassure them; the Death Eaters' atmosphere of fear had already settled over them, and they were jumping at shadows.

The tension in the Death Eater camp was of a different kind. Though Malfoy was remaining close-mouthed about exactly what would happen on the day of the Aurors' test in June, he had let the group know they would be playing a part in it.

"Those two Aurors are going to be setting out for Hogwarts on the day of the test. It's our job to make sure they don't arrive."

Colin gulped. "Our job?" he said nervously.

"Partly our job," Malfoy corrected. "Our orders are simple enough, and I mean to see nothing goes wrong," he said pointedly.

"What do we do?" asked Simon impassively.

"On the morning of the day of the tests, four of us will go running down to the house of the Auror Shimmersby. We're to tell him Dumbledore needs to see him about the test, and then stun him the first chance we get."

Avery looked worried. "Stun an Auror? Lucius..."

"That's why I said four of us. That should be more than sufficient to take him down. Our associate, Dolohov will be on hand to wipe his memory as soon as we knock him out, but it has to be students who come to get him or he'll be

on his guard. Once we've got him, it'll be easy enough to get the other guy, and then the plan can be put into motion."

"Who's staying behind?" asked Severus.

Malfoy gave him a nod. "You are. You're supposed to be the genius here — I expect you to hold things up this end. Make sure nobody knows we're gone, and keep an eye out for anything that looks like going wrong. If you see a reason to call things off, raise the Dark Mark over the school. You saw me do that the last time, right?"

"I did," he agreed, and Malfoy nodded in acknowledgement.

"I'm trusting you not to jump at shadows, and only call it off if it's really shot to hell. Clear?"

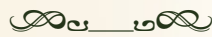
"Naturally." Malfoy was handing him the means to cancel the raid, but it would be crazy to use it. Without knowing the identity of the Death Eater on staff, there was no way he could concoct a foolproof excuse — and Sev never used excuses that weren't foolproof.

"Good," said Malfoy. He turned back to the others. "Now, you three — we're going to spend the next month stunning people until we can do it in our sleep." He grinned. "I can think of a few Gryffindors we can practise on..." They traipsed off.

So, Sev was to be left holding the fort. On the

one hand, he had to protect Malfoy and co. and make sure nothing went wrong with the raid. On the other, he had to help the staff repulse the attackers, and/or attempt to prevent James and Lily from being murdered. He had to push the Death Eater agenda whilst seeming an innocent student, push his own agenda whilst seeming a loyal Death Eater, and hide both his secret agendas and the full extent of his intelligence from both sides — without complete knowledge of who was on which.

It was definitely going to be an interesting day.



Sev was roused before dawn by the sound of Malfoy rolling out of bed. “Ha! I woke you!” the blond-haired boy proclaimed delightedly. “So you *do* sleep.”

“Occasionally,” Sev allowed. “Don’t tell the others. They might start thinking I’m a human being.”

“Small chance of that,” he smirked in reply.

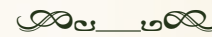
Malfoy might be bright and bouncy with the prospect of the day ahead, but the rest of their dorm were less than thrilled to be woken so early.

“Why do we have to get up now?” grumbled Avery. “We’re not even doing anything ’til noon.”

“D’you want to be caught sneaking out?”

demanded Malfoy fiercely. “You can sleep in the tunnels for all I care, but we have to be out of here before anyone else is awake to see us. We are *not* getting caught over this.” This was Malfoy’s big chance, his first real command situation. Sev didn’t think it was purely logic that had compelled him to leave his biggest rival in the rearguard position. Malfoy didn’t want him to be anywhere that he could grab a slice of the credit for this operation.


The other boys departed, still bickering nervously amongst themselves, and Sev settled down with a book to await their usual breakfast time.



Sev seldom ate breakfast, but this morning he went down to see the house-elves and got several rounds of toast. He also picked up the kind of full English breakfast Colin always ate, and Malfoy’s favorite cereal. It took a hover charm to get it all to follow him through the corridors.

Professor Ephemeria, striding through the corridors with a harried expression, stopped him with a frown. “Where are you going with that little lot, Severus? You know you’re not supposed to eat in the dorms.”

“It’s a revision session, Professor,” he lied automatically.



The Potions professor looked stern. “Leaving it a little late, aren’t you?” The fourth year exams had already started; they had only a few days to go before they were finished. Fortunately for Malfoy’s little plan, it was Divination today, a class that none of the five of them took.

“It’s not me who has to revise,” Sev pointed out with a shrug. Professor Ephemeria looked sceptical. Teachers didn’t like to admit that there were students who could get their good grades without studying; it rather poked holes in their ‘if you don’t work, you’ll never get anywhere’ spiel.

Sev didn’t mind getting caught; in fact, he’d rather counted on it when he’d set the food to hovering. Although Professor Ephemeria hadn’t so much as glimpsed Malfoy or the others, if anybody asked her she would now remember that they’d been huddled in their dorm, revising over breakfast.

This pretense set up, he headed for his usual early-morning haunt; the library. There was almost no one there in the summer months, at least not when it was too late to cram for exams, and it was an unmissable chance to browse the shelves in private.

Nothing would be happening for several hours, and the most he was likely to do by hanging about was call attention to himself.

However, about half an hour before the tests were due to start, just as he was contemplating getting into some better position to observe, there was a complication.

Lily.

She casually breezed into the empty library and sat down across from him; exactly as if they were back in the First Year and he was still tutoring her for Potions on the quiet. Then it hadn’t mattered so much if anyone might come upon her chattering away to Snape; she was new, she wasn’t wizardborn, the whole Gryffindor vs. Slytherin thing might not have sunk in for her yet. Certainly it would take more than a cursory glance to get the impression Snape was even paying attention to her.

Now, though, things were different. Battle lines had long since been drawn, and Lily and Sev were not just on opposite sides but right in the thick of them.

James Potter — who, despite countless denials on both sides was very definitely something approaching a boyfriend — would have a hard time wrapping his head round the idea of Lily making friends with a Slytherin. His head would probably explode if someone added the name ‘Snape’; thanks to his own anti-publicity

campaign, Sev was regarded as every bit as maliciously dangerous as Malfoy — and smarter.

For Sev, the consequences of fraternizing with the enemy were a little bit more severe than a little domestic strife. If talking to a Gryffindor was a hanging offense, being seen in company of a ‘mudblood’ was a thousand times worse. Being seen with Lily could destroy everything he’d built with the Death Eaters.

Of course, Lily wasn’t stupid enough to not know that. “What do you want?” he asked without preamble.

“Answers.”

“Don’t we all?”

“I thought you had all of them?”

“Yes, but my parents never taught me to share.”

It was strange how easily they clicked into the old patterns of conversation. He and Lily just seemed to have the exact same vein of quick, dry wit, sparking off each other without thinking about it. Malfoy and Nick Avery were both far from mentally slow, but the suspicious atmosphere of their house somehow precluded quickfire banter; amongst Slytherins, words were carefully considered and weighed for the best effect. Witty banter was about give and take, but house Slytherin was about coming out on top.

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“What’s happening?” she demanded.

“Many, many things,” he said, shovelling his books into his bag. “Anything in particular you had in mind?”

“You weren’t at breakfast,” she observed. “None of you.”

He quirked an eyebrow. “You’re watching Slytherin eating habits?”

“I’m watching Slytherins,” she corrected. “Looking for patterns, and things that don’t fit them; I learned that from you.”

“If you’d looked a little closer, you’d have seen me going down to the kitchens to get breakfast for the five of us. What does that tell you?”

“That you went down to the kitchens, and the other four haven’t been seen yet.”

He couldn’t help nodding in acknowledgement. “Exactly. Now, if the Hogwarts staff weren’t so easily fooled, we’d have less of a problem.”

“So there is something going on!” she announced triumphantly. He gave her a wry look.

“Lesson two in being like me; squealing like that is not a good way to preserve your aura of knowing everything. Do you have your cloak?” She nodded and pulled it out of the bag. “Put it on. We’re walking.”

“Won’t people notice you talking to your-

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self?” came Lily’s muffled voice from the empty air beside him.

“They generally try to avoid getting that close,” he said dryly.

“This is about those tests that are on today, isn’t it?” Lily realised. She spoke quietly, but even so it was as well the corridors were quiet. Snape headed towards the outside of the building, where he knew the ‘Aurors’ would soon be making their arrival. “Is something going to go wrong with them?”

“No, in fact they’re going to go very well. The inspectors are going to make such a good job of probing the defences they’ll be inside before you know what’s happening.”

“Before they realise that they’re actually Death Eaters,” Lily breathed. He didn’t need to nod to confirm it. Abruptly, he was pulled backwards as an invisible arm yanked him back into an alcove. A moment later, Lily reappeared, tugging off the cloak to stare at him. “They’re going to bust into the school? They’re going to break in and you know about it?”

He nodded briefly. “I’m their rearguard.” Sev smiled ironically. “I’m to see if anything’s going wrong.”

“You can call it off?” she asked, frowning.

“Not without a good excuse. A true excuse. We’re all Slytherins,” he reminded her. “None of us trust each other.”

“So, what? You’re just going to let them attack?” Her voice was rising in disbelief, so it was just as well the corridors were empty.

Lessons were cancelled for exams, and those students who didn’t have Divination today were either outside soaking in the sun or back in their dorms.

“The teachers will be defending, as soon as they realise what’s happening,” he pointed out calmly. “This is about fear, not tactics; there’ll only be two of them, so they can’t hope to do too much damage. Mostly they’ll be causing chaos, but they’re likely to have been told to gun for any Muggle-borns. You should stay out of sight,” he added as an afterthought. “Keep your cloak on.”

“And do what? Twiddle my thumbs?” Lily was furious. “What about the other kids from Muggle families? They didn’t happen to stop you in the corridor, so they don’t get an advance warning? Sev, they could get killed!” Actually, it was more James Potter than the mudbloods who needed to watch out, but getting into that was not really the way to calm Lily down.

“Don’t you remember Audley Fletcher?” he reminded her. “I’ll be on hand; both sides against the middle. It’s what I do.”

“You mean you’ll save people’s lives if it doesn’t look like causing trouble?” She suddenly threw the bundled up cloak at him.

“I’ve got a better idea. You wear this. I’m not hiding; I’m gonna be out there waiting for them, and if they start blasting, well, I’ll blast right back.”

She was spoiling for an argument, but if she thought Snape was going to be like James and get stupidly overprotective, she was wrong. He simply nodded, and took the cloak. “Good idea,” he agreed mildly. “This’ll make things simpler.”

Lily stared at him for half a second, and then snorted laughter. “God, what the hell are you? I don’t know if you’re a snake or a robot, but you’re sure as hell cold-blooded.” She shook her head. “And I like you, God help me. I don’t know if that makes me even more disturbed than you are.”

“Anything’s possible.” He pulled the cloak on as they started walking again. They reached the outside doors, and he spotted James and his friends across the grass. “Look, there are your little Gryffindor friends. I’m sure they’ll be happy to join the fight with you.” That killed

two birds with one stone; the Gryffindors would provide unquestioning backup to Lily, and Lily would give James some warning that an attack was coming.


“And you?” she asked out of the corner of her mouth.

“I’ll be on patrol.” He turned away, probably leaving her wondering whether he was still walking with her or not.

The invisibility cloak certainly did make things easier. They might watch him as Severus Snape, but as an invisible presence he could easily go undetected in the chaos that would ensue. And it would be chaos — half of the school were out here sitting on the grass.

The Aurors had agreed beforehand where they would be starting, to make sure the staff didn’t miss anything. The Death Eaters wouldn’t dare to deviate from that; they couldn’t afford to reveal themselves until they were inside the defences.

Some tactical eavesdropping and knowledge of the first two tests had told Sev what to expect from the staff. There would be three teachers waiting to watch firsthand; he could see them from where he stood, Malachite, Parlia and Vitae. They were a long distance away



from the actual point where the 'Aurors' would be busting in, however, watching through Omniculars so as not to disturb anything.

Those of the staff who weren't involved with the exams would be watching on Spellographs. It was likely they wouldn't even realise when things began to go wrong; not until they started puzzling over the curses the Aurors were throwing about.

Dumbledore himself wasn't even at Hogwarts; as always in the summer, he was tied up in paperwork with the other wizarding academies. It was a grand old tradition for wizarding schools to stab each other in the back and accuse each other of making things easy on their pupils, and standards had to be agreed across the board. Given Durmstrang's involvement with Voldemort, it was likely their headmaster knew what was going on and had deliberately scheduled this meeting to keep Dumbledore out of the way.

He kept an eye on the three observing teachers, and saw when Professor Vitae made an abrupt hand gesture. Following her gaze, he spotted the two cloaked figures making their way towards the school.

Vitae must have used the Sonorus spell, because suddenly her voice echoed across the field. "Students, the defence inspection is beginning!"

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You can watch, but please keep well away from the Aurors and make no attempt to interfere with their enchantments. Thank you." Sev knew this was one of Dumbledore's ideas; some of the teachers had objected to the students being present for this test, but the headmaster believed they should have the opportunity to see how well protected their school really was.

Of course, that was rather the Death Eaters' intention too...

He watched calmly as the two Aurors cautiously approached, scanning for wards. All eyes were on them, at least until their painstaking work became too boring to follow. He glanced over at Lily to make sure she wasn't about to explode into action, and was glad to see she was under control. The Death Eaters wouldn't make their move until the defences were breached, and attacking before they revealed would be a deadly mistake.

He cast his perfect memory back and pulled the original shape of the defences into mind. There were two rings of outer defences that had to be defused before the Death Eaters could get in; they would be able to do so, but it was picky work and take a long time. The point first ring was to stun or otherwise immobilize the

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Band of Fear

unwary — the nastiness of the effects depending on which professor had been responsible for the particular ward you stepped on. The second was a kind of anti-curse shield, through which most spells couldn't be thrown.

Beyond those two rings, he knew, it was all magical alarms — and he doubted very much whether the Death Eaters would mind setting them off. They wanted panic when they opened fire. It was the Immobilizers they had to get rid of, not the noisemakers.

The crowd soon lost interest in watching two cloaked figures carefully scanning every inch of the ground, detecting wards and then probing their nature very cautiously. Sev was intrigued by how practised they seemed at the work; clearly, somebody somewhere in the Death Eaters had Auror training.

He drifted over towards the group of Gryffindors. They were fairly close to the demonstration, and once Lily raised the alarm he could rely on the cover of their blazing spells to work his own.

"God, this is boring," groaned Sirius, lying flat out on his back and looking at the sky. "Can we go, yet Lil?"

"I want to watch this," she insisted, not looking at him.

"It's interesting," agreed Remus mildly. "In fact, I wonder if I can get a little closer. I'm sure that's a variation of those probe charms Malachite told us about."

"Come on," agreed Lily, dragging him forward eagerly. James followed, as did the invisible Snape, but Sirius held Peter back.

"Leave 'em to it, mate," he advised, bored. "Got your Exploding Snap cards? This is like watching paint dry."

Sev saw the tension suddenly grow in the shoulders of the nearest Death Eater. Was the curse-shield down yet? The second it was, they would probably start firing.

He had to stop walking abruptly to avoid slamming into the back of Remus, who had suddenly frozen. "What is it?" demanded Lily.

Lupin was staring fixedly at the nearer of the two 'Aurors'. "There's something... His robes, I smell... I smell blood!" Sev could smell nothing — but he knew there was a very good reason Remus Lupin's nose was considerably more sensitive than his.

It all seemed to happen at once. Perhaps the Death Eater was panicked by Lupin's words — perhaps he had simply finished what he was doing breaking through the wards. Either way,

he reached quickly for his wand, his companion a beat behind him.

Right then, Lily did something nobody would have expected of her.

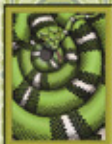
She screamed. Loudly. Piercingly. A scream to wake the dead, not to mention cut through the air and alert just about every student or teacher within four miles.

Go, Lily, thought Sev quietly to himself. The echo of the scream seemed to hang in the air long after the sound had ceased. The momentary stillness seemed to stretch on to infinity, and then...

"Death Eaters!" yelled James, levelling his own wand. Lupin made a sound suspiciously like a growl in his throat, and let fly with an *Expelliarmus* charm. The spell wasn't strong enough to deprive the Death Eater of his wand, but he fumbled to keep hold of it and lost whatever spell he was planning to launch.

Battle was joined. The two Death Eaters were trying valiantly to get their curses off, but they were facing attacks from all sides.

Ironically, the explosively out-of-control duelling club had done far more to prepare the Gryffindors for combat than any properly handled lessons. These were student wizards who fought pitched magical battles two or three times a week.



Sev, in his invisibly cloak, stood calmly by, occasionally sending in a quick spell to nudge a wand off-course when the Hogwarts defenders looked too slow.

The massed students had barely reacted, still too surprised, but he saw the three observing teachers hop down from their vantage point and come running. *Ephemeria* and *Fractalis* were coming too, charging towards them from the direction of the Forbidden Forest.

The Death Eaters' element of surprise had been well and truly busted. They had probably counted on being able to saunter in, pick their targets, and be blasting away before anybody had time to react.

Instead, there were hexes and curses flying so thickly no one had time to aim at anything. Pete Pettigrew was one of the first to go down, zapped with something which turned his legs to jelly. He and Sirius had come running, the dark haired boy startling the Death Eaters by leaping in and actually physically fighting them.

He saw James Potter grab Lily and shield her from a curse, crying out in pain as he went down under the force of *Cruciatus*.

However, before the Death Eater had time to press home his advantage, Snape stepped in



and zapped the wand out of his hand.

The man groped for it quickly, looking around wildly to try and guess who'd shot the spell at him.

Suddenly Professors Vitae and Malachite were there, having left the short-legged Parilia behind in the dust. Vitae was trying to pull out her wand, but she seemed to have got it caught on something in the inside of her robes. "Do something, Carnus!" she snapped.

Professor Malachite had his wand in his hand and at the ready — and yet he seemed frozen, unable or unwilling to use it. "Attack!" Vitae urged him, but he just stood there helplessly.

Suddenly another voice rang out, loud enough to cut through all the chaos like a knife. It took a moment to place it, it sounded so different from Professor Fractalis's usual nervous stutter.

The long sequence of spell-words he used was completely unfamiliar to Snape; so much so that he was sure it had to be an original enchantment. Suddenly all around them, symbols appeared on the ground in blazing blue-white light. It was so powerful, everybody had to shield their eyes against it.

Apparently, Professor Fractalis's amazing geometric designs were a bit more powerful than he had let on.

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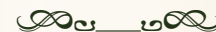
Band of FEAR

Even Snape's unblinking stare wasn't enough to fight that blazing light, and he had to shut his eyes against it. When he could look again, the cloaked shapes of the Death Eaters were fleeing up the path. James and Sirius looked as if they were ready to go hareing after them, but Professor Vitae held them back.

"Let them go, boys. You did a brave thing here, but you don't have the power to face them on their own ground." She scowled at Professor Malachite, who was looking decidedly embarrassed at the way he'd frozen up. Fractalis had gone bright red for a different reason, as Professor Ephemeria hugged him enthusiastically.

"Trigo, that was amazing!" she cried, and he went even redder.

It was all over bar the treatment of injuries and the alternate praising and scolding of the Gryffindors. Satisfied that the Death Eaters had been repulsed for the moment, Snape slipped silently away.



Lily caught up with him in a corridor on his way back to the quiet of the dorms. He turned to face her with a shrug, handing her the cloak before she asked for it. "Nobody died," he pointed out.

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"Somebody will, one day," she said heavily. "This is a knife-edge, Severus, not even you can walk along it forever. Some day, sooner or later, people are gonna get killed for this little scheme you're running. And then what?"

He looked at her for a long, unblinking moment, and then he said softly "Some must be sacrificed, if all are to be saved."

And after that, there was nothing more to say.



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Band ef Fœur

FIFTH COLUMNIST



SEVERUS SNAPE PAUSED IN HIS reading and looked up as the owl flew in his window. Unusually, the elderly creature headed directly for him instead of flapping off to look for his uncle. Deftly catching the letter it dropped towards him, he saw that it was embossed with the Hogwarts school crest. However, he had already received his equipment list for the new school year...

Sev tore open the envelope, and pulled out the letter. The Slytherin serpent on the shield at the top winked at him.

HOGWARTS SCHOOL OF WITCHCRAFT
AND WIZARDRY
HEADMASTER: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE
(ORDER OF MERLIN, FIRST CLASS, GRAND SORC., CHF.
WARLOCK, SUPREME MUGWUMP, INTERNATIONAL
CONFED. OF WIZARDS)

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Fifth Columnist

Dear Mr Snape,

We are pleased to inform you that you have been selected to act as a Prefect for your house in the upcoming year. Please report to the headmaster's office immediately upon arrival on the first day of term.

Please be reminded that term begins on 1 September, and reading and equipment lists for the new term should have been received prior to this letter. As a Prefect, it is requested that you set a good example by obtaining the correct equipment and proper uniform for the year ahead.

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Fifth Columnist

Congratulations on your new appointment, and good luck in the upcoming term.

Yours sincerely,
Trigo Fractalis
Deputy Headmaster

Sev regarded the letter thoughtfully for a few moments, then neatly folded it and tucked it inside his robes.

This was going to complicate matters.



On the train platform, he heard Lucius Malfoy before he saw him, spitting vitriol.

"Never heard anything like it," he spluttered to Colin Crabbe. "My father's never been so furious —" He spotted Sev, and waved him over. "Severus! Have you heard about this? There's been some kind of mistake with the Prefect appointments!"

"Clearly." Severus produced the official letter he'd been carrying around since he received it. "They gave it to me."

"What?" Malfoy snatched it out of his hands

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Fifth Columnist

in disbelief. He read it once, folded it and then opened it again, as if expecting the name at the top to suddenly change. "This makes no sense!"

"I agree," said Sev dryly. Whilst he was unquestionably leading the pack in academic terms, Prefects were also chosen for their social and personal skills — qualities he had been quite deliberately doing the opposite of cultivating.

Lucius Malfoy, with his powerful charisma, Quidditch skills and not unimpressive test scores, would have been the obvious choice. The fact that he hadn't been awarded the position suggested that somebody somewhere had grave doubts about how he might use the authority he was given.

Sev himself happened to know the truth of that; he was one of the select few that Malfoy had inducted into the Death Eaters, the elitist secret society devoted to the 'purity' of wizardry. Whilst the others might be taken in by Malfoy's grandiose claims of a new order, Sev himself was dispassionately observing, seeking a way to gain access to the inner circle of the Death Eaters and learn their secrets.

Thus far, Malfoy had been able to completely hide his more dangerous side from even his deadliest enemies — James Potter and his Gryffindor

friends might hate the Slytherins, but Sev doubted they realised how much deeper the feeling on the other side truly ran. However, the fact Malfoy hadn't been selected spoke volumes.

There were two Prefects chosen from each house, one male, one female. Generally they were picked by a consensus, but if there was a disagreement then the heads of house would vote. In the event of a tie, Dumbledore could break it. Sev knew the headmaster was probably sharper than his co-workers when it came to reading people; had he been given the casting vote, he might well have vetoed Malfoy.

Anyway, whether it had been unanimous or an extremely tight thing, Sev had been voted in and Malfoy out. And whilst that made things awkward for the former, that was nothing on how furious it made the latter.

"I don't believe it! It's been rigged, somehow. Those damn Muggle-lovers have been whispering in Dumbledore's ear —"

Unfortunately for Malfoy, Sirius Black happened to walk by and catch him in the middle of his rant. The curly-haired Gryffindor stopped in mid-step to give a delighted cackle.

"Hah! They passed you over for Prefect, Malfoy? Oh, you just made my year. That's the funniest thing

I've ever heard." He giggled almost childishly.

"You know where to shove it, Black," Malfoy told him icily. "Somehow I don't see you wearing a Prefect badge."

"No, but James and Lily are gonna," he said with an airy shrug. Sirius Black was hardly the type to care about badges of rank in any case. Power meant responsibility, something he was pretty close to allergic to.

Malfoy's normally pale face was growing close to purple. "A mudblood and a Muggle-lover? Well, if that's the best house Gryffindor can do, no wonder they wouldn't put me up against them. Wouldn't want to put you to shame, now would we?"

Sirius was always ready to start a fist-fight, but Remus Lupin was there to restrain him. "Let's tone it down a little, Sirius," he suggested mildly. "Let's try not to get expelled before term starts, okay?" He turned a sharp grin on Malfoy. "After all, we'd miss all the fun of watching Malfoy suffer."

He dragged his friend away, leaving Malfoy to grind his teeth impotently.

"It's a disgrace," he said darkly. "A blot on the name of wizardry. Those two, Prefects? Suddenly I'm glad I didn't get in." He nodded at Sev. "I feel sorry for you Severus... having to work with the

likes of them. See if you can't accidentally curse them a few times, huh, do us all a favour." He scowled after the departing Remus and Sirius.



Sev hopped off the train at the Hogwarts platform and slipped away silently through the crowd. He was the first to arrive outside Dumbledore's office, and stood patiently waiting with his back against the wall.

James and Lily came dashing down the corridor moments later, giggling wildly together over something or other. James came to an abrupt stop when he saw Sev, and regarded him warily. "Snape," he said neutrally.

"Potter," returned Sev with a nod. They stood looking at each coolly for a moment, until Lily elbowed James out of the way.


"Behave. Both of you," she admonished. "We're supposed to be Prefects here."

"Pretty poor excuse for a Prefect," James muttered, backing off.

"You'd prefer Malfoy?" Lily muttered back. James shrugged and rolled his eyes.

"Oh, why do I care what the snakes do?"

Their fellow Prefects took a little longer to arrive. The Ravenclaw two were Penny Perks



and Sol Ackerley. Penny greeted Lily warmly, but Sol reserved a nod for Sev as well as the other two. Of all the houses, Ravenclaw was the one with closest ties to Slytherin; the only other house that prized careful calculation over going with your gut feeling. Certainly, if Sev hadn't had the inherent deviousness that marked him pure Slytherin, his brains would have made him a natural for the ravens.

The two Hufflepuffs came dashing up shortly after, both out of breath. "I told you you'd make us late," objected a plump red-haired boy that Sev recognized as Derek Dobbs.

"I wanted to get my owl settled in," shrugged back his partner, Alena Vermisio. Alena was from a very rich, long established wizarding family, and was well renowned for throwing exclusive parties in the holidays. No doubt she would be bribing the younger kids into behaving with the merest hint of an invitation.

His fellow Slytherin was the last to appear; Sev wasn't particularly surprised to see that it was Narcissa. Narcissa Salenica was both bright and beautiful, but extremely cold with it, and so snooty she wouldn't give the time of day to anybody who couldn't explain what their great-great-grandfather had done for the wizarding

world. Malfoy had staked his claim to her pretty early on, and even if any of the other boys had been brave enough to challenge him, trying to cosy up to Narcissa was about as effective as doing the same to an ice sculpture.

She arched her brows at the sight of Lily, and said in a faintly long-suffering voice "I wouldn't have expected to see *you* here."

Lily, ever ladylike, simply stuck her tongue out. "You should meet my sister Petunia," she observed. "You'd love her — you're both a pair of stuck up —"

"Ladies! Gentlemen!" Professor Dumbledore flapped into view, pulling off his usual trick of studiously not hearing what was being said by his pupils. He moved to the entrance of his office and said the password "Fizzing whizzbees." Lily and Alena giggled, but Narcissa just looked vaguely disdainful.

"Come in, come in." Dumbledore gestured expansively. They all crowded in, most of them curiously. Sev had been inside the office before, but most students went their whole time at Hogwarts without ever getting to see it.

Dumbledore's office was eclectic as his personality, stuffed with fascinating artefacts of all descriptions. James, never one to let well enough alone, immediately started surreptitiously poking

and prodding things. Lily elbowed him in the ribs and hissed at him to behave himself.

Snape, although he didn't let it show on his face, was quietly amused. James looked faintly embarrassed, but did as he was ordered. He and Lily were getting more like an old married couple with every passing year.

"Now; to business," said Dumbledore. "Congratulations, all of you; I have no doubt that you will all do excellently in your new positions. If you'd like to take your badges?" He produced a small box from out of nowhere, in which lay eight coloured Prefect badges. He offered it around, and when it came to Sev he picked out one of the green ones and pinned it to his robes.

When they all had them pinned on, the headmaster beamed at them proudly. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I have to take my place at the feast. No doubt you'd all like to go and join your friends? Your first duty will be to guide the first years to their dorms at the end of the feast. Professor Fractalis will talk to you about your other Prefect duties sometime next week. Congratulations, all."

He dashed off in a hurry, as if until that moment he'd completely forgotten the speech he made at the same time every year. The Hogwarts headmaster had quite perfected

the art of looking vaguely confused about life in general; Sev, however, suspected it was far more of an act than most people ever realised.

As the newly-made Prefects trickled out of the office, James suddenly grabbed Lily's hand. "Did you cut yourself, Lil?" he asked, alarmed.

"Huh?" She rubbed her fingers together and inspected them. "No. I think the colour's rubbing off this badge." She ran her fingertips over the Gryffindor badge, and they came away streaked with red.

"Hey, mine too!" observed James.

"Ours are okay," Derek told him.

"It's probably a sign," Narcissa told him snootily. "You don't deserve to be Prefects, and even the badges know it."

"More like it's a sign of how those idiot Slytherins enchanted all the badges last year," Lily told him. "Remember how Professor Vitae spent ages trying to get the enchantment undone?" An enterprising group of Slytherins had put a spell on the Gryffindor Prefects so that their badges spelt out an entirely different word beginning with P. Professor Vitae had not been pleased.

"Yeah — and Malachite undid it in like three seconds," James observed. "Interesting, huh?" He gave the Slytherins a suspicious glance.

"Yes, Potter, our head of house has nothing

better to do with his time than writing rude words on students' badges," Snape said dryly.

They returned to the feast, and Sev slipped into his customary place beside Malfoy. However, the look the blond boy turned on him was noticeably cooler than usual. "Ah, I see the Prefect has seen fit to grace us with his presence," he observed. It was couched as a gentle jibe, but Sev could feel the steel behind it all the same.

Malfoy had always had some serious control issues; he knew Sev was brighter than he was, and it grated. His position within the Death Eaters gave him the edge, but it was an advantage he jealously guarded. He might be scornful about the school and all of the teachers and pupils in it, but that didn't mean he didn't expect to be showered with honours for his brilliance. He had naturally expected to be a Prefect, and losing the position was a kick in the teeth. Losing it to the second-in-command who constantly threatened his position...

This was not good news for Snape's staying on the right side of Malfoy. This year, the fine line he tiptoed along was going to be narrower than ever...




"Hem. Ahem." Despite the relatively small crowd of eight students he was addressing, Professor Fractalis was clearing his throat as nervously as ever. Public speaking always made him tongue-tied, although give him a class of students and an Arithmancy text, and he could talk forever. He was a quiet, very shy man, and quite spectacularly unsuited to his duties as Deputy Headmaster. Promoting a man like Fractalis had Dumbledore's fingerprints all over it; the headmaster had something of a subtle need to 'fix' people.

Sev, not exactly renowned for his gregarious nature, didn't quite see why Fractalis should be forced into having social skills if he didn't want them. He was probably much happier curled up on his own with a book, something Sev could definitely sympathize with.

Never mind James Potter or Malfoy's jealousy, Sev was most irked over being a Prefect for the way it cut into his private time. He was the kind of person who needed a lot of space to himself, and being on constant call to help out students he really wasn't keen to talk to was something less than a thrill. On the other hand, it gave him a little leeway to return to his old habit of late night strolls, something he'd been sorely missing.

Most of the Prefects looked fairly keen



— for now, at least — although Sev was his usual impassive self. Narcissa was attempting to look unimpressed, and wasn't quite managing it; the Slytherin thirst for glory was too strong, although Sev suspected Malfoy had made some fairly scathing remarks. Never mind that she was supposedly his girlfriend, she had something he didn't and so he had to belittle it.

James and Lily made a much more convincing example of domestic bliss, although neither looked quite their usual bouncy selves today. Lily looked a little pale, her eyes a tiny bit too bright as if she was a touch feverish. It would be very like Lily to soldier on without admitting to being sick, especially when it came to something important like Prefect duties.

Fractalis coughed again, and shuffled papers. "Ahem. Thank you all for, uh, for coming. As I'm sure Professor Dumbledore has told you, we're uh, we're very confident that you'll all do very well as Prefects." He brushed his hair back from his face.

"As you know, this is a, a fairly trying time for wizardry. In these times, it is imperative that students obey the school rules."

"You mean it wasn't before?" said James quietly. Lily smiled at him, although it was a weak reflection of her usual full-throated chuckle.

She was sitting with her head against his shoulder, and he was absently playing with a coil of her hair. Sev had no doubt that if he made a snarky remark at some later date, she would claim illness as an excuse. Though Lily was well aware of his people-reading skills, she seemed bound and determined to prove that she could defy them if she chose. He did wonder exactly who she thought she was fooling, though. Everybody knew James and Lily were crazy for each other.

Lily had befriended Sev in the first year, largely against his will. She had helped him in thwarting a murder plot, understanding — if not liking — his justifications for joining Malfoy's organization to work from within. Lily was far from stupid, but she was fiery and quick to righteous indignation; she knew or suspected the depths his chosen course of action might drive him to, and she didn't like it one bit.

She seemed to have appointed herself the job of substitute conscience, something which would be more hindrance than help on his long-term spying mission. Especially when she was a mudblood, and hence a deadly enemy of the group he was posing as a part of.

Sev had managed to avoid her for some time, but had been forced to let her in on a few things when a

Death Eater raid had threatened the school in the previous year. Now it was going to be even more difficult for him to keep out of Lily's way.

They listened as Fractalis outlined their duties, amidst much stammering. This year, not surprisingly, the emphasis was security above all else.

"Now, I know it's not, um, the nicest thing in the world to feel like you're reporting on your friends —"

"That's alright for Snape," spoke up James. "He doesn't have any." Lily smirked, and Sev just smiled thinly. Smile in the right way, and you could convey a world of contempt without saying a word. Not that he actually cared what James thought, of course, especially since he'd deliberately engineered it so he thought that way, but continuing the 'feud' with the Gryffindors was second nature by now.

Fractalis took a leaf out of his headmaster's book and forged on regardless. "As I say, it may seem a little... harsh, but it's absolutely essential. Remember, the rules are there for a reason." His voice grew stronger now; as an Arithmancer, Fractalis was a firm believer in logic and rules. "This is not about punishment, it's about safety. If students aren't where they're supposed to be, we can't protect them properly."

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They all knew he was talking about the Death Eater raid from the previous year. Then, the enemy had strolled in bold as brass and started attacking; next time, their approach might be far more devious. If students couldn't be accounted for, nobody would know if they were missing or not.

Lily was the first to voice the shared thoughts aloud. "Did they catch them, Professor?"

"What?" he asked vaguely, train of thought derailed.

"The ones who attacked us last year. Did they catch them?"

"Death Eaters," hissed James, and there was a half-seen shudder that rippled through the room. Snape's classmates were older now, coming up for sixteen, and beginning to pay far more attention to the world outside Hogwarts' walls. They had all heard the dark rumours of people disappearing and the Dark Mark being raised above empty houses.

Fractalis spluttered incoherently for a moment, the mention of Death Eaters seemingly disturbing his nerves. "I — I — the, uh, the Ministry of Magic would handle that side of things, I, I wouldn't really know about that." Sev was certain that translated as 'no'. How could they have? No one had really seen the two attackers' faces, and Sev didn't think anybody but him and Lily even

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knew about the Dark Mark tattoos every Death Eater had hidden away on their arms.

The deputy head quickly changed the subject. “And, now, as I say, although being a Prefect is a, a great responsibility, it also carries with it certain privileges.” Alena’s eyes practically lit up, and she nudged Penny excitedly.

“In addition to your own house common rooms, there is a Prefects’ common room that you can all share, and the Prefects have their own bathrooms.”

“Bathrooms?” That caught Narcissa’s attention.

Alena nudged Penny again. “They’ve got, like, a bath as big as a pool in there. My sister told me!”

“Oh, I could kill for a good long soak,” groaned Lily wearily. James looked a little dazed to be loaded up with that particular mental image.

Fractalis lead them down to the Prefects’ Common Room, and showed them the password to get in; “Mahogany”.

The Prefects’ room was smaller than the House Slytherin Common Room, obviously, but it was in considerably better repair, looking more like a teacher’s office than a student room. There were glass-fronted bookshelves stacked with advanced texts, although looking at the

titles Sev saw he had already read most of them.

There were eight comfortable chairs arranged in a ring, so the Prefects could all sit together — although Sev found it hard to imagine that happening this year, somehow. “Nice digs,” said James appreciatively, looking around.

Professor Vitae was waiting outside when they emerged. “Girls, if you’d like to come with me? I’ll show you how to get into your bathroom whilst Professor Fractalis takes the boys.” James, Sol and Derek all made disappointed faces.

“Okay.” Lily yawned as she moved to join the teacher, rubbing her eyes. Looking at her hands, she seemed to remember something, and moved to unpin her badge. “Professor, can you do something about these — ”

Professor Vitae stalled her with a hand. “Are they still staining people’s hands?” she frowned. She turned to Professor Fractalis. “Trigo, are you sure Carnus didn’t have something to do with this?”

Fractalis looked deeply uncomfortable to be asked such a question in front of students. “I, I — ” he stammered. “I don’t see why. It seems such a, such a childish little prank.”

Vitae rolled her eyes. “And God forbid the great Carnus Malachite ever do anything child-

ish. You're quite right, he's a paragon of maturity." Narcissa scowled and Sev followed her lead, whilst James grinned. Vitae fingered Lily's badge thoughtfully. "Still, bleeding badges... it seems like his kind of symbolism."

Lily started to unpin it again. "Do you want to take this? I can —"

"No, no, keep that, dear." She frowned. "Whoever is behind this, they want House Gryffindor to look bad. If our Prefects take their badges off, then they win." She nodded at James and Lily. "You two keep hold of those for the moment, and I'll speak to Professor Dumbledore about getting you some more."

James placed a hand over the badge on his own chest. "Nobody's having my badge off me while I'm alive," he proclaimed melodramatically.

"Who'd want it?" Sev said, too quietly for Vitae to hear. James scowled at him, but wasn't ready to pick a fight in front of his head of house.

Professor Vitae sighed and shook her head. "Right. Come on, girls. Bathrooms." They marched off.



Over the next few weeks, Sev slotted comfortably enough into his new Prefect duties. Students were encouraged to ask the Prefects

for advice and help, but very few of them tried that on with him, even out of the Slytherins. However, out of all the Prefects, he had the most success at commanding authority; where the others might argue back and forth over minor offences, Sev could put down rebellion with a single arched eyebrow.

The role fitted him well enough, although he quickly became bored with the level of stupidity on display. Sneaking out in the middle of the night or breaking into classroom with a purpose was all very well, but why do it just because you were bored? It irritated him that people could be that mindless, and he perpetuated his nasty reputation by snapping at anybody he caught; especially, for the benefit of Malfoy, any of the Gryffindors.

Professor Malachite was certainly pleased with the way Sev handled his authority, and held him up as a model of a successful Prefect. Predictably, Malfoy didn't like that at all.

Malfoy was jealous of Sev's new position, but he was caught by both his need to pretend he didn't care and the fact that he was smart enough to know he needed Sev. Voldemort had shown a certain amount of interest in his second in command, and Malfoy was both threatened

and puffed up about that. It reflected well on him for his second to be valued; provided he stayed a second.

Malfoy's irritation spilled over into his school life; petty and vindictive at the best of times, now he was positively lethal. Since he couldn't pick on Snape without causing himself problems, he chose the nearest available targets; coincidentally, embodying several of his pet hates mixed together.

"Hey, Potter," he called out to James as they came out of Potions. "Still dragging your mudblood whore around after you? I wouldn't get too close; you might catch something. Oh, wait — you already did." The assembled Slytherins cackled triumphantly.

Lily appeared to have some variant on the Muggle flu; she'd been to Madame Florence more than once, but despite an endless supply of Pepperup Potions (and the smoking ears that came with them), she had only seemed to worsen over the past few weeks. Pale and looking very drained, she could have been forgiven for retreating to her dorm and sleeping it off; but, being Lily, she refused to give in.

Malfoy was right; whatever Lily had, James was showing the first signs of going down with

it. His eyes were red, and unlike Lily he'd managed to pick up an incredibly irritating dry cough. Considering nobody else seemed to have got ill, there had been many raised eyebrows and smart comments about 'swapping spit'.

James balled his hands up into fists, presumably ready to defend Lily's honour, when Pete Pettigrew's voice was raised in alarm from inside the classroom. "James! Quick, it's Lily!"

James looked panicked and rushed back in. Everybody else followed, the Slytherins hanging back in the doorway so they could see what was going on without looking like they cared.

Lily was collapsed on the floor, Sirius supporting her head with a worried expression on his face. "Come on, Lil, talk to me," he pleaded. James leapt straight over the desks between them and skidded to her side.

"What the hell happened?"

"I don't know man, she just collapsed!" said Sirius. "Professor! Can't you —"

Professor Ephemeria was hurriedly searching through her shelves of potions. "Hang on, hang on, hang on — ah!" She pulled down a jar of some red substance Sev didn't recognize and flipped the lid off. "She needs to breathe this." She tried to hold it under the fallen girl's

nose, but James practically wrenched it out of her hands to do it himself.

“Come on, Lily, please, Lily.” A moment later, she coughed, and weakly tried to sit up. James wrapped his arms around her to support her, and Malfoy made a disgusted noise.

“Ugh. I’m gonna puke.”

Lily, being Lily, was already struggling to get up. “I’m fine! I was just dizzy for a minute, I didn’t eat breakfast, I’m okay now.” She elbowed James. “James! Get off of me!”

“You’re not fine,” he objected, but he helped her stand up — without relinquishing his hold on her middle. “Lean on me. You should be in the hospital wing.”

“I’ve been! It’s nothing, it’s just flu.”

“Lily, you should probably get yourself checked out again just in case,” interjected Professor Ephemeria gently. “James, Sirius, you take her down. And Lily — don’t come back to your lessons after.” They all knew what Lily was like.

“I’m okay,” insisted Lily, pushing off James and Sirius to walk unassisted. Malfoy was blocking her way out of the door, however, and she scowled down at him. “What are you looking at, Malfoy?” She pushed past him, and he made a big show of scrubbing at his robes as

if he’d been touched by something disgusting. James scowled at him, but he was too busy chasing after Lily to do anything.

Sirius paused to point a finger at Malfoy. “One word, Malfoy, I’m warning you.”


“Ooh, I’m scared,” said Malfoy, pretending to knock his knees together in fear. But he stood back to let Sirius and Peter pass unmoled; only, Sev was sure, because Professor Ephemeria was watching them.

“What was all that about?” frowned Colin, as they headed in the direction of their next lesson.

“Maybe she’s pregnant,” suggested Avery nastily. Malfoy mock-shuddered.

“Bloody hell! Mini Potters? Don’t scare me like that!” With another round of raucous laughter, they continued on their way.

Sev, though, was mulling over events thoughtfully. He knew, maybe better even than James, that Lily was no weakling girl, and he didn’t give much credit to Avery’s gossip-mongering suggestion. If Lily had fainted, there had to be something pretty seriously wrong. And considering she was the most high-profile of the very few mudblood students to remain at Hogwarts... well, “coincidence” was not a word Sev Snape put too much stock in.



Under much protest, Lily was confined to her dorm for the following week. James spent as much time as humanly possible plotting ways to sneak in and see her, and the rest of it wandering around coughing and looking miserable.

The next weekend, Sev was sitting in the Prefects' Common Room reading when the two of them came in. James was fussing over his girlfriend like a mother hen.

"I still say you shouldn't be up," he objected.

"Did I not tell you I was better?" Lily growled at him. She looked it, too, although not totally. She was still pale, but less like one of the walking dead. The bed rest had obviously agreed with her.

"Okay." James pulled a face. "We can stay here a little while if you really want, but then I wanna take you off to bed."

That seemed like a good cue to announce his presence. Sev allowed himself to snort and said "I think we already knew that, Potter."

James whipped around, face flaming, but Lily giggled. "Lily," he whined, dismayed by this traitorous response.

"Sorry," she said, still giggling. "But you totally asked for that."

James scowled at Sev, bright red with embarrassment. "Keep your mouth shut, Snape," he advised.

"I think you'd be better off taking your own advice," he said pointedly.

Behind him, Lily was shaking. For a moment, Sev thought she was still laughing, but then he realised something was wrong. "Potter, you might want to stop glaring at me and pay some attention to your girlfriend," he advised.

James frowned, but turned and ran to Lily's side when he saw the way she was shaking. "Lily! God, Lily, what's wrong?" She was shuddering more and more violently now, as if she was having a convulsion.

He grabbed for her, but she shook out of his grasp and collapsed to the floor, convulsing wildly now. Sev's mind abruptly flew back a few years to when he'd last seen a similar fit. Suddenly, he knew exactly what was making Lily ill, and how it had been administered.

James, though, didn't have the slightest clue, and was looking extremely terrified. "Lily!" He gripped her by the shoulders, completely unsure of what to do. He looked up and his eyes met Sev's.

"Help me!" he said desperately. If he even remembered that Snape was his deadly enemy, the importance of that was lost in his fear and

confusion. "Please, I, I don't know what to do!"

Sev made a split-second decision, which might or might not have involved a careful weight up of the pros and cons of acting. He hopped out of his chair and knelt down beside the spasming Lily, helping the other boy support her.

"Hold her up; we don't want her to swallow her tongue or anything," he ordered. "And give her some room to breathe!" He pulled open her outer cloak, not entirely coincidentally yanking off the Prefect badge that held it in place.

"What's happening to her?" demanded James fearfully.

"It's some kind of seizure. It should pass in a minute, she'll be okay as long as she can breathe properly." It wasn't medical knowledge that made him so sure of that, but James didn't need to know how he knew it.

Despite the fact that he and Snape had long been enemies, it didn't seem to occur to James to doubt his word. The ability to keep a completely calm voice in times of crisis could work wonders.

Sure enough, Lily's convulsions began to subside, and abruptly she sucked in a shuddering breath. "Lily!" The world of relief in James's voice was clearly audible.

"James." She blinked blearily, and frowned up at

the other boy. "Severus?" Either she was genuinely surprised to have him come to her rescue, or she'd retained the presence of mind to act that way.

"Um..." James wasn't sure what to say, suddenly remembering himself but not being unreasonable enough to abruptly snap at Sev after the way he'd helped. Sev solved part of his problem by quickly letting go of Lily and standing up.

He made a big show of opening the hand which held the Prefect badge, and grimacing at the red stains all across his hand. "What's wrong with these stupid things?" he demanded loudly.

Fortunately, James wasn't particularly slow. His eyes suddenly widened behind his glasses, and he wrenched his own badge off. "The badges! They're poisoned!"

Sev allowed the badge to drop from his fingers, but his cover required him to scowl and say "Who'd care enough to poison you?"

James hesitated, natural instinct to pin it on the Slytherins somewhat muted by current events. Luckily, Lily was on the ball. "Death Eaters," she said loudly. "Should've known they wouldn't go for a mudblood Prefect." She coughed, still looking dangerously pale.

"Lily!" James sounded shocked.

"It's only a word, James. It can't hurt me," she

reminded him sharply.

“Unlike this stuff,” he said, looking down at the two badges where they lay on the floor. He turned his gaze back to Lily, and looked deeply concerned. “You took it off; you’ll be okay now, right?” He seemed to have completely forgotten that he himself had been exposed in his worry over Lily.

Sev figured it fit his persona to be scathing about James’s short-sightedness. “It’s poison, Potter, you’ve already got it in your system. All that means now is that you won’t get a stronger dose.”

James’s hands balled into automatic fists, and then he paused. “Yeah? Well then, you fix it.”

Sev frowned at him. “You what, Potter?”

“You fix it! You’re the Potions genius — make me an antidote!”

James had managed to provide him with a rather neat way out of this, but he had to protest anyway. “Why the hell should I?”

James nodded to Sev’s red-stained hand. “Because, in case you’ve forgotten, you got poisoned too.”

Actually, Sev was just a hairsbreadth away from certain that he was in no danger, but James didn’t know that. He compressed his lips into a tight line, and said sharply “Then we’d better do something about it, hadn’t we?”



Sev would have been amused at the symmetry if it hadn’t been a bad time to let his inner smirk show. Here he was again in the exact same Potions lab he’d first tutored Lily four years ago. Here he was, helping his supposed deadly enemies. Forced into it or not, that wasn’t likely to wash well with Malfoy — so it was just as well he’d cottoned onto something that would excuse his actions.

The second Lily had gone into convulsions, he had thought of Erica Swift; an older student who had fallen afoul of a nasty little concoction of Malfoy’s. It was a kind of poison that only affected muddbloods — and it came in the form of a blood-red powder. The second he had remembered that, it had all made sense.

Or nearly all. This little trap had been devised purely for Lily; he was guessing they’d poisoned both badges simply because there was no way of telling which would be hers. The plan must have been to trickle the poison into her system slowly enough that the progression looked like a natural illness. Insofar as it had gone, it had worked.

But... James had become ill. Only over this last week or so, and not very severely... but he had definitely become ill.

James Potter might be the antithesis of your average Death Eater in nearly all respects, but there was one way in which they were perfectly matched. The Potter family were pure-blood all the way; uncounted generations of wizards and witches stretching back through the ages. Malfoy's perfectly self-contained little poison had mutated.

Whether James had become ill through the persistent trickle of poison into his system or through close contact with Lily was open to debate, but either way it spelt serious trouble. If the Death Eaters had drawn up schemes to unleash their weapon on the world, they could forget it. If it could mutate once, it could do it again, and all of a sudden the purebloods might find themselves in as much danger as their enemy.

With all that in mind; well, naturally he had to follow James's orders and develop an antidote.

Any other student, indeed any qualified wizard who hadn't made a specific study of Potions, might be totally stumped. But Sev had read every available text on the subject, he'd had experience developing potions without using a set recipe, and he had somewhere deep down an instinctive grasp of the subject. With part-memory, part-instinct, he easily pulled

ingredients together and mixed them however it felt right. The first attempt didn't satisfy him, nor the second, but when he poured a drop of his third potion on his stained hand, the redness turned clear with an audible hiss.

He turned to the impatiently pacing James. "It's done."

James eyed the blue liquid suspiciously. "That's your antidote? It sounded like acid!"

Sev proffered his now stain-free hand. "Does this look burned to you?"

"Yeah, but that's hardly the same as drinking it." James hadn't been at all happy when Sev had brusquely informed him that if he wanted to get rid of a poison inside him, he was going to have to drink the antidote.

Sev sat back with his most indifferent shrug. "Trust me. Don't. See if I care."

James looked at the potion with distaste. Then, with a concerned expression, he looked across at Lily. She'd made an effort at seeming her usual self on the walk over to the Potions lab, but Sev's experiments had taken time, and that had sapped her strength. She was leaning on the work top, a tiny distance away from falling into a deep sleep.

James stared at her for a long moment. Then

he turned to Snape, and ordered "Give me some of that. I'll drink it first."

"Whatever." Sev poured some out into a beaker and handed it to him. "Knock yourself out."

James regarded the blue antidote with some trepidation. Then he grimaced, and downed it in one gulp. Immediately, he cried out in disgust. "Ugh! God, what's in that?"

Sev shrugged again. "You want sugar, go to Honeydukes. I'm not here to make your life easier." Truth to tell, it would have been simplicity itself to tweak a few things and make the potion more palatable, but that had hardly seemed the sensible thing to do.

James looked ready to murder him, but instead he forced himself to take a deep breath. Then he paused, looking almost comically surprised, and took another. "Hey, I'm not coughing! I think I'm cured."

"Oh, happy day," said Snape, completely expressionlessly. James scowled at him, but he couldn't hold it for long in the face of his relief. He dashed over to the cooling cauldron and scooped out another dose.

"Lil. Come on Lily, drink this for me." She groaned at having to raise her head, but he slipped and arm around her shoulders and

managed to get her to drink it. She smacked her lips, and grimaced.

"Ack, that's foul."

"Oh yeah." But James was grinning at her. "How'd you feel?"

"Better," she said, sounding as surprised as he had. The change flowing through her could almost be followed by eye. Her milk-white skin began to redden up to a more natural colour, and the brightness in her eyes returned. "Actually, I feel great."

James made a cry of delight, and impulsively kissed her on the cheek. Lily blushed and pushed him off. "Stop that." She looked up at Snape and ordered "Quiet, you," at one glance at his expression.

James, however, refused to be downhearted. He hugged Lily against him, and said "God, you scared the hell out of me! I'm so glad, I could, I could — I could almost hug Snape!"

"And I could drop-kick you through those double doors over there," Sev told him warningly.

"I said almost," he said, grinning. He hesitated, and then got up and went over to their unlikely saviour. "I know you can't stand me and hell, I don't like you very much either, but... thank you." He held out a hand for Sev to shake.

Sev just looked at him until he dropped it. "Potter, you'd be ill-advised to take this as evi-

dence I give half a knut whether you live or die.”

James scowled at him, then shrugged and grinned. “Whatever, man.” He turned around, and walked out. Lily trailed after him, pausing only to silently mouth ‘liar’ at Snape. He gave her his best Malfoy sneer in reply.

When they were gone, Sev quickly poured the rest of his antidote into a couple of potion bottles and stopped them up. He would have to give a sample to Malfoy to pass on to his contacts, and it seemed like a good idea to keep some for himself. Then he set to clearing up the Potions lab.

It wouldn’t matter if Professor Ephemeria caught him in there alone; he was often up to extra-curricular experiments. The danger had been if he’d been seen working for his supposed deadliest enemies.

He had to trust that Lily would convince James not to tell anyone of his involvement. That should hold true for their fellow students — James would hardly like to admit to being indebted to Snape — but no doubt the two Gryffindors would report the poisoning attempt in full to someone on the staff. Which made it almost certain it would get back to the Death Eaters.


He knew he could talk himself out of trouble, especially with the knowledge that the hex had

jumped to a pureblood wizard, but it would hardly endear him any further to Malfoy.

Malfoy would take blind dislike over logic any day — after all, that was practically a required qualification for becoming a Death Eater. Despite the fact that Sev’s actions had been the only ones possible to keep his ‘loyalties’ a secret and prevent a mass epidemic overtaking mudblood and pureblood alike, Malfoy would focus on him having become ‘some kind of Muggle-lover’.

What little trust Sev had won himself was rapidly going down the pan. Malfoy already blamed him irrationally for the failure of last year’s Death Eater raid, as if by staying as a rearguard himself he might have ensured better success. Actually, that was probably true, but only because Sev had secretly masterminded the resistance. He was a pro at playing both sides against the middle, and whilst this new twist made things far more complicated, he could wriggle his way around it.

It wasn’t Malfoy he was worried about, nor even the staff Death Eater. It was doubtless the latter who had masterminded this little scam, since Malfoy couldn’t have got access to the badges, or laid a suitable enchantment to keep the poison flowing. That unknown staff member



would doubtless be extremely annoyed, and might keep a closer eye on Sev — but he always behaved as if he was being watched in any case.

No, this little escapade had earned him something far more dangerous than Malfoy's spite or the Death Eater's scrutiny... James Potter's reluctant gratitude. If he wanted the world to keep believing the personality he projected, he was going to have to do something about that... and fast.



Over the next few weeks, Sev waited patiently for a confrontation with Malfoy; it never came. Did the other boy know about what had happened in the Prefects' Common Room? He remained as arrogantly aloof as ever, giving no hint as to whether his Death Eater contacts had told him or not. Sev was intrigued by this development, but neither raised nor lowered his guard in response; his guard was always up.

James Potter had said nothing — not that Sev gave him a chance to. If he ever felt the need to throw a distraction in their path, it only took a few choice words to set off Sirius. A couple of times he caught James frowning thoughtfully at him, but he always returned

the gaze with a cold look or a sneer.

About two weeks after the incident with the poison, Professor Malachite pulled him aside after Defence Against the Dark Arts. "Severus," he said with a nod. "I heard about your quick thinking a few weeks ago; you may well have saved some lives."

Sev returned his sharp gaze levelly. "I did what was necessary," he answered. There was no guaranteeing where anybody's loyalties lay; the trick was to walk the neutral line at all times.

Malachite nodded, stroking his goatee beard. "Nonetheless; very quick thinking. And you haven't been bragging about it, either."

Sev shrugged. "They're not exactly my friends." "Which makes it all the more commendable." The teacher leaned back against his desk, and regarded his student thoughtfully. "Tell me, Severus; have you given any further thought as to what you'll do when you leave school?"

"That's two years away yet," he pointed out.

Malachite smiled slightly. "Let it never be said that Severus Snape doesn't think ahead. Surely you have some idea?"

"I'm keeping my options open." Sev's ideal career would involve being locked in a room on his own and paid to read books. Failing the practicality of that, he wouldn't be adverse to going into aca-

demia; even into teaching, provided somebody could guarantee all of his students would be intelligent. He had found it a surprisingly enjoyable test of his brainpower to tutor Lily, but he couldn't imagine getting much of a kick from hammering basics into the likes of Colin Crabbe.

However, his choice of career was something that would rely very heavily on where his connections with the Death Eaters took him next. Severus had never been the type to try and make plans without knowing all the variables.

Malachite nodded thoughtfully, as if pleased with this response. "Good, good. Always a wise move." He straightened up. "Well, now. You think on it for a while, and if you come to me in your final year, it maybe that I can... open some options for you."

Sev, as he always did, simply nodded and filed the cryptic statement away for future reference.



Christmas rolled on, with little of note disturbing the more mundane aspects of school life. It was both amusing and worrying, Sev reflected, how quickly people just returned to their normal routines in the face of something like the raid at the end of last year. That was

how a group like the Death Eaters could come to power in the first place; people preferred to bury their heads and pretend the problem didn't exist than tackle it.

Having only his uncle for family and no particular homing instinct, Sev always stayed at the school in the holidays. It suited him far better than the rest of the year; school was always better when it was close to empty.

At Christmas, he usually received a stack of books from his uncle, and was more than satisfied with that. Mostly his only relative vastly underestimated his academic level, but Sev wasn't troubled by that. There was no such thing as a useless book.

This particular Christmas, however, his uncle's faithful old barn owl was not his only avian visitor. Whilst he was curled up with a nicely complex Arithmancy text, a sleek, unfamiliar eagle owl zoomed in through the window and away again, leaving a small slip of paper to flutter to the ground. He picked it up, and saw that there were only four words written on it.

Midnight. Portkey. As before.



Sneaking out on Christmas night was no particular hardship. Teacher patrols were all but nonexistent over the holidays, and right now the vast majority of the staff were no doubt either in drunken slumbers or attempting to head that way.

It was no trouble for him to recollect the route to the Portkey clearing Malfoy had led them to the year before. In fact, Sev had been back in between, and seen that the black-veined rock that was used as a transporter had vanished. In the middle of the Forbidden Forest or not, it had stood out enough that some unlucky student might pick it up.

Clearly, the Death Eater on staff had been back to replace it in time for his midnight jaunt. Sev spent much of the walk contemplating ways to monitor who came back to collect it afterwards, but decided there were none that were sufficiently risk-free.

As he walked, he became aware of curious depressions in the ground. All through the forest there were ruts as if somebody had rolled something with a very wide wheel, or else dragged something heavy. He puzzled over them, but couldn't bring to mind any activity on Hogwarts grounds that could have caused them. Still, there was no telling what lurked

within the bounds of the Forbidden Forest...

The teachers all liked to frighten students with tales of the horrible things that could happen if they strayed into the forest, but Sev always had his wits about him. He had a light tread, and he knew how to keep his eyes open; nothing would take him by surprise.

Nothing did, and he made it to the Portkey clearing without seeing anything more menacing than a hedgehog. He knelt down, and pressed two fingers to the surface of the Portkey.

The world fuzzed out and faded in, and he found himself back once more in what he was fairly convinced was Durmstrang School of Wizardry. This time, however, he had materialized not in a nondescript corridor somewhere, but at the base of Voldemort's tower itself.

He looked up into the steely-grey eyes of Professor Dolohov. "Professor," he said with a nod.

"Mr. Snape." Dolohov's voice contained neither warmth nor dislike, only indifference. "He wishes to see you. You know the way."

Snape did. As he mounted the steps, he could feel a small circle of growing heat on his left arm, as if he was resting it against a boiling cauldron. He pushed back the sleeve, and saw that the Dark Mark tattooed there was turning

from red back to black.

The upper chambers were dark, but his eyes adjusted quickly enough. “Lord Voldemort,” he said, stepping inside.

The handsome Death Eater leader, seated in the far corner, looked him up and down, and nodded. “Ah, Snape. You came.”

“I was summoned.”

Voldemort nodded, and leaned forward lazily, resting his chin on one hand. “I’ve heard some interesting rumours.”

“About the poison and the Gryffindor Prefects,” acknowledged Sev. Voldemort was sharp, very much so, and lying or playing with distraction tactics could be deadly.

“Indeed. Would you care to explain your actions?”

The casually interrogative tone was laced with hidden danger. Sev simply looked him in the eye, and gave his explanation in neatly clipped sentences. “There was a miscalculation. I saw that the poison was adapted from the powder Malfoy used; it was only supposed to affect mudbloods. However, I saw that it had jumped to Potter — and Potter is as pureblood as they come, however... misguided his attitudes. An antidote had to be developed, and I thought it best that I make it myself than allow another to study the poison.”

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“And why cure the victims?”

“They’re two lives, and not important ones. Too insignificant to risk the cause for.”

Voldemort leaned back into the shadows, his expression betraying nothing. Sev kept his own as flat, prepared to hold it as long as necessary. After a moment, the Death Eater leader smiled thinly.

“And that, Snape,” he said quietly, “is where you and Malfoy differ. He’s quick to fire; you’re as cool as ice. Tell me, which is better?”

That was a trick question if ever he’d heard one. “Both. Neither,” he shrugged. “Different tools for different jobs.”

“Interesting.” Voldemort still smiled. “Malfoy would have me get rid of you if he could,” he pointed out. Sev nodded and shrugged again. “But you would have me keep hold of him? Why?”

“Everybody has their uses.”

“Indeed. Indeed, they do.” Voldemort stood up. Sev had already obtained much of what would be his full adult height, but the Death Eater leader was far taller. “And I think I will have many uses for you, Severus Snape.” He looked Snape up and down. “Provided you still have use for us.” His dark eyes fixed on the Prefect badge that held his cloak together. “I see they trust you. *Appreciate* you. Perhaps you are

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beginning to think that you would be better off in their order than our one.”

It was not quite a question, but Sev answered it anyway. “It seems that way now. It won’t take long for them to show their true colours.”

“Perhaps. Perhaps not. We shall see.” He nodded briskly. “You may go.”



His second verbal dance with Voldemort had been as intricate as the first, but Sev was more concerned with what hadn’t been said than what had.

Voldemort clearly hadn’t believed that his helping of James and Lily had been some sign of rebellion — if he had, Sev would never have left Durmstrang alive. However, the Death Eater leader was clearly concerned that Sev wasn’t in deep enough yet; he might still be lured away by the other side.

Sev had to allay those suspicions — preferably without actually throwing himself in too much deeper. It would take some serious nastiness to make it so he had no choice but to be Voldemort’s; far better, then, to give himself his own ‘reason’ for choosing that side. He had to pick his ground very carefully; fortunately, a little revelation he’d had in the third

year provided him with something of a clue as to how to go about it.

It was going to take a long-term approach; measured in months, because of the situation involved. And to achieve his aim, he was going to have to do something that didn’t come at all naturally — be totally unobtrusive.

It began with the full moon of February. He made a point of watching the base of the Whomping Willow, knowing what he would see but waiting for it anyway.

Sure enough, as dusk began to fall, he saw the procession of James, Sirius, Peter and Remus making their way to the deadly tree. Sirius poked with a stick at something he couldn’t see, and the flailing limbs abruptly froze. The four of them ducked under the tree.

Sev waited, but it was a while after moonrise before three of the boys emerged. Interesting; very interesting. In the third year, they’d been looking for a way to stay down there. Obviously, they’d found it.

For anybody who didn’t know whatever secret they’d found, however, down there below the Whomping Willow would be a very dangerous place. Sev was counting on it.

The following day, he cornered Pete Pettigrew.

The small Gryffindor had gained in confidence a great deal since he first started at Hogwarts, but he was still apt to cave under pressure.

"I saw you last night," he hissed. "Out in the grounds. Where were you going? What were you doing?"

Pete stuttered nervously, and Sirius rushed to his rescue. "Back off, Snape," he warned.

"I know you're up to something," he said darkly. "And I warn you, I *will* find out what."

"Oh, put a sock in it," groaned Sirius, dragging his friend away. "Come on, Pete." But Sev spotted Remus hanging back, and looking very concerned.

Phase one of Operation Hatred was well underway.



Sev had twigged pretty early that what he needed was a cast iron reason for hating 'the good guys'. And, better yet, he had to do it in such a way that it seemed like their idea.

The four Gryffindor friends were all wild boys, but they had their differences; James was noble, Remus was smart, Peter was nervous and Sirius was impulsive. If he leaned on Peter, the other boy would spill the whole truth and ruin everything. If he went to James, he might well warn Sev out of doing something too dangerous.



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That left Sirius Black — an explosion waiting to happen. Sev just had to get all that explosive potential pointing in the right direction.

The chances of anyone realising he knew the truth if he followed them again next full moon were miniscule — but Sev was nothing if not cautious. He 'failed to notice' the March excursion, biding his time until after Easter.

The intervening months, however, he didn't put to waste. He used every opportunity to be 'caught' watching the Gryffindors with a pensive expression. He shadowed them around Hogsmeade on their weekend trips, and asked leading questions of the Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws — for of course, there was no way a Slytherin would be caught dead talking to Gryffindors directly.

All in all, there could be no doubt in the minds of the four boys that Severus Snape suspected they were up to something. However, they all — except perhaps Peter — shared that Gryffindor trait of belief in their own invincibility. They were Gryffindors — they could outsmart any stupid Slytherin any day of the week.

Sev knew all about that attitude — he was counting on it. Sirius, in particular, would be in love with the idea of pulling a double-cross on sneaky Snape.



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So, when the full moon next rose over Hogwarts, Sev was there, watching from the shadows. And the following day, he cornered Sirius after Quidditch practise. He had known Sirius would be alone; he and James were both on the team, but James had been spending more and more time with Lily lately.

"I saw you last night," he said dangerously. "Down by the tree. Don't think you can hide it from me, I saw you go into the passage. Where were you going?"

"Shove it, Snape," Sirius insisted, pulling away from him.

"I could report you, you know." It was exactly the kind of petty, childish ploy that Sirius would think him more than capable of.

Sirius gave him a scathing look. "Your word against ours."

Sev shrugged, showing off his Slytherin badge. "I'm a Prefect."

"So's James. And he's a Gryffindor."

"Get some new prejudices, Black, this one's wearing pretty thin."

"Yeah? Well you're not exactly doing a lot to disprove it." He turned away to go.

"What's under the tree, Black?" Sev called after him. "What are you all hiding down there?"

Sirius simply shot him a less-than-friendly hand gesture, without looking back. But Sev was well satisfied. The seeds had been sown.

By this time next month, he would be ready to put his plan in action.



The month rolled past. Their year group at Hogwarts had settled into a quieter routine than previous years; O.W.L.s were on their way, and even the Slytherin and Gryffindor gangs were sucked into exam prep.

Sev, of course, had little need for any kind of studying. He bided his time, waiting for the perfect moment to strike.

It came. On the day of the full moon, he cornered Sirius again in the early morning.

"I've figured it out," he said with a tone of malicious triumph. "The passage, under the tree — it only opens on a full moon, doesn't it? It's your secret route into Hogsmeade."

Sirius scowled at him. "I don't know what you're talking about." But Sev could detect the faintest gleam of triumph in his eye; a little light that said *I know something you don't know*.

Under the circumstances, Sev found that idea more than a little ironic.

The groundwork for his little trap had all been meticulously set. Now all that remained was to extend the bait... and see if Sirius snapped it up.

Sev leaned forward threateningly. "I know about your little passage, Black. Lie to my face all you like; it won't make a knut's worth of difference if I report you, and you know it." He gave a nasty grin that was modelled on one of Malfoy's finest. "Tell me how to get in, Black. Tell me how the passage works, and maybe I won't bother bringing a premature end to your worthless school career." He smiled thinly. "I somehow doubt you'll be here for much longer in any case."

That, of course, was a long way from being true. Sirius might be wild to the point of dangerousness, but he was also quick-witted and a surprising natural at passing exams.

Also, apparently, he wasn't too bad at acting, for he managed to pull off a picture of sullen resentment quite well. Of course, that was close to his natural state half the time. Sev blamed it on excess testosterone.

"There's a knot," he said gruffly. "On the trunk. You poke it with a stick."

"Thank you," said Snape, obnoxiously.

Sirius scowled darkly. "You try and stick me with this, Snape, they'll be pulling bits of you

out of the lake for the next decade."

"Stop it, you're scaring me," said Sev completely flatly as he walked away. Sirius' shoulders tensed, but he didn't turn back. No doubt because he was hiding a smile of triumph at a trap well sprung.

Sev, on the other hand, was far too practised at this to let any such sign show on the surface.



The year was on the first edge of summer, and it was late before it began to get dark. Sev lurked silently in the grounds, a safe distance from the Whomping Willow. He had cast an enchantment that made him unnoticeable to anyone who wasn't specifically looking, but he doubted it was needed. The Gryffindor boys were entirely too self-centred, anyway.

James had an invisibility cloak — or rather, Lily did, though Sev doubted she would ever refuse to loan it to him — but they weren't using it when they finally appeared. They were all sixteen or nearly there by now; Pete Pettigrew might be small, but Sirius was built like an athlete and the other two were tall. There was no way all four of them could fit under that cloak, Sev knew without a doubt; after all, it had once been in his possession.

As it happened, though, the boys were making no attempt at being sneaky. They were bombing it across the grass as if there were a swarm of dragons on their tail, Remus in the lead.

"Idiot!" he heard Sirius snap, his voice carrying clearly through the still dusk air.

"I said I'm sorry." That was James.

"Back there necking with your girlfriend, man, the moon's nearly up!"

"I was *not*," he objected.

"Do I care?" Remus's voice was strained almost beyond all recognition. "Open it, open it, open it, bloody hell —"

"There!" A little figure that had to be Peter ducked in under the flailing branches and they abruptly came to a halt. Remus dived right over him and into the secret passage. The others tumbled in after him; laughing, Sev was sure, at their narrow escape.

They were used to playing with fire, although never on the grand scale of peril that he was accustomed to. Whatever trouble they got into, they wriggled their way out of it; they'd never truly had their fingers burned.

Tonight, he intended to give them a little taste of what that was like.

The boys clearly had some way of dealing with

Remus when he was under the influence of the moon. Sev was curious, as he always was about anything he didn't know, but he wasn't about to compromise his plan by busting in while the other three were still down there. It would bring a much better confrontation, but for that very reason it would be too suspicious. He was the cruel, devious boy who spied on them and threw curses; they would expect him to sneak, not confront.

Well, he would sneak. He would wait for them to emerge from under the tree, and then go down himself. And then he would 'narrowly escape' what lay beneath — and scream blue murder about it.

It wasn't long before three boyish figures emerged where four had gone in. The Gryffindors might feel the need to show their solidarity with Remus, but they couldn't stay down there all night; they had to sleep sometime.

Sev watched them go, and immediately left his hiding place and headed for the Whomping Willow. He had a hunch Sirius might stick around to watch for him; best to make his move before the other boy got bored and wandered off. It would definitely be handy to have someone to shout at when he emerged...

The limbs of the Whomping Willow resumed

their usual flailing. Sev had spent some time watching them, a few years back; so far as he could tell, there was no pattern to the motion at all. If you didn't know the tree's secret, there was no way you could get past them.

Sev spotted the knot Sirius had described almost instantly. It was low down on the trunk, close to the ground — well below eye-level. Smart. Sev suspected Dumbledore's hand in this; it had been the headmaster who had wanted the Whomping Willow planted in the first place. He was fairly sure it had been with the sole intent of providing a safe place for Lupin to stay during the full moon.

Sev drew his wand, and reversed it in his hand to reach out and poke the knot — only an idiot poked things with the business end of a wand. The tree immediately froze.

The hole the boys had disappeared into, he could see from this close, was masquerading as a simple gap between the roots. It was narrow and low, and if anybody had seen it at all they would have thought it an animal burrow. But who would be stupid enough to come so close to the highly dangerous tree?

Sev got down on his belly and squirmed through the hole. It was an easy enough fit for him,

although the broad-shouldered Sirius probably had trouble. He slide down a slope inside to end up on his knees in a very low tunnel.

"Lumos." He lit the wand with a low whisper, and looked about. There was little to see; the tunnel stretched out in front of him, a good foot too low for him to walk upright. From the general direction, it was clearly headed for Hogsmeade.

Another piece of the puzzle suddenly slotted into place. The Shrieking Shack. Lately, a legend had sprung up about some howling beast that haunted an abandoned shack in Hogsmeade. Sev was willing to bet that the howling was only heard on nights when the moon was full...

It was quicker to scuttle on his hands and knees than try to move at a stoop. And he would need to be quick; he had a number of tactics in mind for facing the creature he would meet at the other end, but he wasn't sure how well they were going work. Any books he could find were notoriously stingy with information on the subject; generally speaking, their defences were of the "kill it before it kills you" variety.

It would be considerably safer to lurk in the tunnels and then come out pretending to have encountered Lupin, but everything in Snape's calculating nature rebelled against it. He

doubted very much Sirius Black was sitting up there timing his journey to make sure he took long enough, but Sev felt obliged to do this properly anyway. He hadn't got as far as he had by being half-hearted with his deceptions.

Besides which, he wasn't sure whether or not Lupin would remember the events of a full moon night. All the books said no; but whilst Sev worshipped books, he trusted them little more than he did people. The key to surviving was to take nothing on face value.

The tunnel went on for a long time; he was mentally gauging it against the length of his own secret passage into Hogsmeade. Soon, surely...? The tunnel suddenly began to slope upwards.

Warily, now, Sev drew his wand and slowed to a creep.

There was a change in the air of the tunnel; the stir of a minor breeze. He was right at the end of the passageway. He moved towards the gap, caught the slightest glint of light in a dark, beady eye surrounded by coarse fur, and then...

Everything exploded into motion. The werewolf ahead of him let out a sound that was more like a scream than a howl, and scabbled madly at the tunnel entrance as if trying to remember how to pass through it. At the same time, some-

body grabbed him by the back of the collar and yanked him backwards.

"Snape! Run!"

It was James Potter.

The two boys scrambled back through the tunnel at high speed. Sev could hear and feel hot, heavy breath directly behind him, but the werewolf seemed to be so huge it was having trouble squeezing itself along the tunnel. James had him by the shoulder, half-pushing, half-dragging him along.

The tunnel was barely wide enough for the two of them to run abreast, especially stooped as they were. He still had his wand in his hand, but if he stopped to cast a spell the beast would be upon them.

There was no time to say anything, and neither he nor James were particularly inclined to stop and chat. They pounded through the tunnel, hardly able to breath in the clouds of dust kicked up by their feet, and once Sev heard James curse loudly as he cracked his head on the ceiling.

The end of the tunnel seemed to come upon them unexpectedly, and James threw himself at it, squirming up through the opening like some kind of burrowing animal. Sev wondered how many times he and the others had done

this mad dash when their attempts at calming the werewolf had failed or backfired.

Then James's hands were thrust back through the hole, and he yanked Sev up out of it. His back scraped all along the bottom of the tree roots, and as James pulled him away from the tree one of the flailing branches cracked against his shoulder.

They both collapsed on the grass. James was breathing raggedly, and it took a moment for him to push himself up onto his hands and turn to look at Snape. "Bloody hell, man, are you okay?"

This, right here, was the defining moment. The natural, human instinct would be to check his injuries, mutter some quick meaningless phrase like "Yeah, I think so." It was the automatic response to going through such a blur of chaotic action.

With barely a hesitation, Sev thrust aside all such instincts and drew himself up, fire in his eyes. "You set me up!" he spat.

"I—I—what?" Confusion turned to indignation. "I saved you, man! You could have been killed!"

"Whose fault was that?" he demanded at the top of his voice. "You think this was *funny*?"

"I came in after you!" James was shouting, too, now, having forgotten that it was night and neither of them had permission to be out.

"Oh, so that makes it okay? *Never mind* that

I could have been torn limb from limb by that *creature* in there —"

"Hey —!"

"He's a monster, man! Your friend is a monster!" Sev wasn't nearly as stupidly ignorant as to believe all the rubbish that was spouted about werewolves. He knew Remus Lupin well enough, saw that in spite of — probably because of — his deep, dark secret, Remus was an extremely gentle-natured, pacifistic boy. However, a little bit of irrational prejudice was a handy thing to throw into the mix right now. The last thing he needed was James calming down enough to keep this civilized.

Predictably, James exploded. He'd risked his life rescuing Snape from the jaws of death — he wasn't about to take this kind of abuse in return. "Sort. Your. Head. Out. Man. It's your own damn fault! If you hadn't been poking your nose in —"

"My fault? You let that, that *monster* on school grounds and it's my fault when it tries to kill me?"

"If you hadn't been following us around, spying on us —"

"Oh, yeah? Was I down there by accident? Your friend Black told me how to get down there. Was that me poking my nose in? No, that's premeditated murder, that is!"

“Oh, are you dead, are you? No, you’re not!” He and James were face to face now, the Gryffindor boy’s face red with fury. “Why not? Because I went down and saved you!”

“Oh, yeah, you’re a *real* hero — ”

“Hey! Hey! What the in the seven fires of hell is going on here?” At last, their rapidly-escalating shouting match had done what Snape had intended it to — got them some attention. As luck would have it, it was Professor Malachite.

He came looming out of the darkness from the direction of the Forbidden Forest, with thunder in his face. “Potter!” he snapped angrily when he saw James. He came to a dead halt when he realised who the other shouter was. “Severus? What in Merlin’s name is going on here?”

“He tried to kill me!” Sev snapped, careful to sound merely furious, not hysterical — Malachite knew him too well to accept that.

“I saved his life!” James shouted right back. Malachite stood there for a long moment, looking from one boy to the other. Finally he snapped his fingers in a moment of decision.

“Both of you, come with me. We’re going to the headmaster.”



The three of them made their way down to Dumbledore’s office in absolute silence. Anyone who had seen the two fuming teenagers would never have been able to tell that the anger of one was considerably less genuine than that of the other.

Malachite kept giving them both suspicious looks, especially Snape, but had the sense not to try and break the silence. He led them down to the headmaster’s office, and spoke the password, “Pumpkin Fizz”, with as much gravity as he was able to give it. Neither of his young charges was particularly inclined to snigger at the incongruity.

Despite the lateness of the hour, Dumbledore was sitting at his desk, and he didn’t seem particularly surprised to see them. He looked up at Professor Malachite. “Ah, Carnus. Trouble?”

“I caught these two out in the grounds by the Whomping Willow, making a racket. Prefects, no less.” He sniffed disapprovingly, a gesture Sev suspected owed a lot to his thwarted attempts to raise the profile of house Slytherin. His favoured Prefect misbehaving after hours would hardly help his case.

Sev made his voice the iciest he could make it. “I was just doing my job; checking up on students out of bed after hours. Why don’t you ask Potter what he was doing out?”



That shook James out of his self-imposed brooding. He gaped at Sev in disbelief. “What —? I saved your life, you arrogant little — ”

“Potter!” snapped Professor Malachite.

“If it hadn’t been for you and your little *jokes*, my life would never have been in danger,” Sev said pointedly.

“Yeah? Well, if you hadn’t been — ”

“Gentlemen,” said Professor Dumbledore calmly. James subsided, and the headmaster nodded to the Slytherin head of house. “Carnus? If you’d like to give us a minute?”

By the look on his face, Professor Malachite didn’t like that idea much at all, but he nodded brusquely and left the office. As he left, however, his glare was directed at James, and Sev knew he had already made up his mind who was the guilty party. It never took much to convince Professor Malachite the Slytherins were being blamed unfairly.

Handling Malachite had never been the issue, however. It was from Dumbledore that he would have to take his cue on how to handle this.

The Hogwarts headmaster straightened his desk for a few moments, humming to himself and seemingly having forgotten that he had an audience. Then, abruptly, he looked up at

the two of them with a sharp blue gaze. “The Whomping Willow, James?” he asked lightly.

James shifted uncomfortably from foot to foot. “He went down in the passage,” he admitted. It was clear that those who knew Lupin’s secret had been supposed to keep it that way.

Dumbledore steeped his hands thoughtfully. “And how did he know how to get in?” he asked, in that same calmly inquisitive tone. James’s fidgeting grew more pronounced.

“Sirius told him,” he admitted to the floor.

“A rather dangerous little prank, don’t you think?”

“Yes, headmaster,” James said to his feet. Sev decided this was round about his cue.

“I’d hardly call it a prank,” he said sharply. “That seems a little... mild for something which nearly killed me. By all rights, they should both be expelled.” He didn’t for one moment expect that to happen, but nonetheless he should probably call for it.

Dumbledore turned his attention to Snape. His eyes were coolly blue and unreadable. “How did you find out about the tunnel under the tree, Severus?”

“I saw them going down there.”

“They’ would be Remus and Ms. Pomfrey, I presume?” That gave him pause, though an observer wouldn’t have noticed it.

Poppy Pomfrey was the young assistant to Madame Florence in the hospital wing, slated to take over when the old matron retired next year. Clearly she was the one supposed to be in charge of leading Lupin down to the Whomping Willow. Perhaps she did so, sometimes, but other nights it was no doubt easier to hand off the duty to Lupin's ever-so-helpful young friends.

Odd that Dumbledore wouldn't know that more often than not the Gryffindor boys were down there of a full moon. Unlikely, even; he might not know what they were doing down there, but he was far too observant not to notice that they went. It was almost as if he was trying to play down James and Sirius's involvement.

Interesting... A taste of pro-Gryffindor bias, or was he playing games as complicated as any of Sev's own?

Dumbledore's deceptively open face gave no readable clue. Sev gave a sullen shrug and shifted the conversation. "I saw Remus go down," he agreed. "And I saw what he turned into."

"I am aware of Remus Lupin's... condition," Dumbledore informed him. Sev hadn't for a moment supposed he hadn't been. "I know about the arrangement with the Whomping Willow, and I have every confidence in its safety."

James was nodding self-importantly, but Sev quickly shot him down. "With respect, headmaster," he said pointedly, "I would hardly call any venture safe that has one of these reckless idiots at the centre of it."

"Hey!" James, predictably, was more offended by the insult to his friends than to himself. "Remus isn't reckless —"

"Oh, nearly killing your schoolmates makes you the model of self-restraint, does it?"

"It was after moonrise! He didn't know anything about it and you know it!"

"Ah, I see. So you and Sirius cooked up this little plot without telling him that he was going to commit murder?"

James's mouth worked silently for a moment; he was caught in a self-made web of honour and loyalty — a far stickier web than any of deception. He knew that Sev had a point about the position that Sirius had put the innocent Lupin in. However, the only other argument he could make was to tell the truth — that he hadn't been involved — and drop Sirius in it.

"We didn't — It was just —"

"It wasn't *just* anything," Snape told him. "It was nearly murder. Your little last-minute change of heart doesn't change anything."

"Everything changes something," said the headmaster quietly. He looked at James. "James, what you did tonight was very brave... and also very ill-advised. I am pleased that you acted as promptly as you did — and very disappointed that the situation should have come to that. Do I make myself clear?"

James was back on studying the floor. "Yes, headmaster."

"So I should think. You may go."

Sev did his best to look disbelieving. "What? I —"

"I'll talk to you and Sirius in the morning," the headmaster continued. "I'd like Remus to be there as well." James flushed scarlet; that had cut like nothing else. Sev suspected Remus might not be best pleased about the position Sirius had put him in...

"Carnus!" From the speed at which the Slytherin head appeared when Dumbledore called, and the thundery look on his face, he had almost certainly been listening at the door. Dumbledore didn't seem to mind, and had probably expected it. "If you could escort Mr. Potter back to his dorm, please?"

"You're not deducting any points?" he asked tightly.

"No, and I will not be. From either house," he elaborated firmly. "This has been an unfortu-

nate incident, but it could only get more unfortunate if Remus's secret is exposed before the school." He nodded at Snape. "Severus, if you'd like to stay behind for a moment."

They waited as the other two departed, and then Dumbledore turned that powerful gaze on the young Slytherin. "An interesting stunt," he observed neutrally, after a long pause.

"On whose part?" he asked carefully. He dialled down the spitting fury, sure that Dumbledore could see through it.

"You certainly won't have endeared yourself to Remus and Sirius," Dumbledore said lightly, not quite answering the question.

Sev smiled thinly. "Not one of my major goals in life."

"So I've noticed." He rested his bearded chin on his folded hands. "Indeed, those are some interesting goals you have."

"Everybody has a job to do."

"Hmm, yes. You seem to have assigned yours to yourself."

"Somebody had to do it," he countered.

"Why you?"

"Who better?"

"Indeed." Dumbledore leaned back in his chair. "There are people," he said heavily, "who would be

horrified at the idea of a young man of your age setting himself the task you have. They would argue that nobody of your age has the wherewithal to accomplish it — and nor should they.”

“People do love their illusions.” He shrugged. “That’s what makes them who they are. And what makes me what they’re not.”

“Not all illusions are bad,” Dumbledore informed him. “After all, what is childhood but a happy time when the world is whatever you choose to make it?”

“I really wouldn’t know,” said Sev.

“No,” said the headmaster quietly. “Perhaps you wouldn’t.” He rubbed his beard slowly. “By all rights, I should forbid you to do this.”

“But you won’t,” said Snape pointedly.

Dumbledore sighed heavily. “Some illusions are only that. And fools walk away from golden opportunities.”

“And you’re not a fool.”

“On the contrary.” The headmaster’s mood brightened as he pushed himself up from his desk. “I consider myself the biggest fool in the place; and that, I assure you, is no hollow victory. You’ll find — indeed, no doubt you know already — that most people are fools, Mr. Snape.”

“I’m not,” he pointed out neutrally.

“Indeed you’re not,” Dumbledore agreed. “A great pity. Still, you’re young yet, and perhaps you will learn to be a deal less wise in your old age.”

“Most people do,” Sev said dryly.

“Indeed!” The headmaster laughed heartily, and opened the door for him. “Come to me again, after the exams are over. I’d like to speak with you again before you leave for the summer.”



The story of Snape and James’s midnight exploits was a closely guarded secret — which meant, of course, that it was all over the school in record time. Nobody knew the true story, but everybody was well aware that there had been some kind of huge bust-up after hours.

Malfoy was the only one Sev gave any detail to, although he didn’t offer much. “They tried to kill me,” he said tightly. “The teachers can call it a prank all they like, but I know better.”

Malfoy nodded knowingly, and gave just a little flash of a smirk. “Soon enough,” he assured him. “They’ve been lucky so far, but soon enough their luck will run out. They’ll get what’s coming to them.”

“We all will,” Sev agreed.

With the O.W.L.s suddenly upon them, there was little time for any kind of socializing. James

Potter scowled at him in passing a few times, and Sirius Black's looks were particularly venomous — partly, Sev was sure, because he was feeling at least a little ashamed of himself, and was willing to die before he admitted it.

The exams themselves gave him as little trouble as he would have expected. What was remembering an incantation against the intricacies of the stories within stories he was weaving?

The library was full of panicking students as the exams approached, but they emptied out as late revision became too late, and the summer weather beckoned. The place was all but deserted on the last week of term when Remus Lupin approached him.

Sev regarded him with his flattest expression — he'd expected this to come sooner or later. "Yes."

Remus hesitated, almost shyly, but he was a Gryffindor, with the courage that came with it. "I'm sorry," he said simply. "For what nearly happened. I wanted to say I'm sorry."

Of course, the only sensible reply was that it couldn't in any way have been his fault — but that wasn't the game he was playing. "Your apology means nothing to me. You want to do something about it, I suggest you find yourself some better friends."

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"Sirius is... Sirius," Remus shrugged helplessly. "Well, that was certainly... profound," he said sarcastically. "The boy tried to kill me, and at your expense. Anyone who tries to kill will kill again. Maybe you should be a little more... selective about who you hang around with."

"It was an accident," said Remus, a little too stubbornly. He changed the subject. "And... thank you. For not telling anyone."

"What do I care?" he shrugged. "You want to keep your little secret, go ahead. You don't really think you can hide forever, do you?"

Lupin's eyes were troubled for a moment, but he quickly shook it off. "I'll survive," he said, shrugging back.

"Perhaps. Perhaps not. Either way, it's nothing to me." He turned back to his books, and after a moment's hesitation Remus moved away.



He returned to Dumbledore's office on the last day of term. The headmaster was sitting waiting for him. "Ah, Severus. You came."

"Of course I did." He sat down opposite the headmaster.

"Yes. I'm sure there are some who would disagree, but I think that in truth you are... very reliable."

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"That depends who's relying on me," Sev shrugged. "Indeed." Dumbledore laughed, and then abruptly turned serious. "There will come a day, you know, when nobody trusts a word you say."

"That's not today?" he asked wryly.

"What is your knowledge worth, if nobody will listen?" asked the headmaster rhetorically. He looked over the top of his glasses at Snape. "Come to me. When the day comes that you find that nobody trusts you, come to me. Because I think I know you, better than anyone else here could claim to. And I'll know whether or not to trust you."

Sev raised a single eyebrow. "With all due respect, headmaster... if you know me that well, then you should know that I don't need to turn to anybody."

"People change," Dumbledore shrugged.

"Not me."

"Perhaps not. Who knows what the future will hold?"

"People who look forward?"

The headmaster laughed. "Oh yes, indeed." He nodded. "That's why I called you here today. I need you to look forward for me, and find me a foolproof solution."

"You know you have a Death Eater on your staff," Sev surmised. Dumbledore nodded.

"I know. But they don't know I know. Or per-

haps they do know, but I don't know that they know. Perhaps."

"Perhaps a lot of things," Sev agreed. "Do you know who it is?"

"I have my suspicions." He peered over his glasses. "And so do you. There's no fool like an old fool, and I'd rather hear you work it out yourself than tell you and be wrong."

Sev shrugged. "I wouldn't have believed it anyway. I have to see things for myself."

Dumbledore nodded. "Perhaps you're right, and I trust too much... and perhaps you trust too little. Between us, mayhaps, we may end up pointed in the right direction."

"Is that what you're doing? Pointing me in the right direction?"

"I doubt very much that anybody points Severus Snape anywhere he doesn't plan to go. No, I am just a teacher; I guide, but never lead. And," he added with a smile, "sometimes I give homework. And this is yours; bring me a way to catch the spy on my staff. Do you think you can do that?"

Severus quirked an eyebrow. "Have I ever failed a homework assignment yet?"

Dumbledore gave him a slight nod of acknowledgement. He turned, and left the office to go and catch the train.

SIXTH SENSE

PLATFORM NINE AND THREE-quarters grew suddenly quiet as Severus Snape stepped onto the platform. Eyes flicked from him to the four Gryffindor boys clustered at the other end.

Ignoring the weight of the students' collective gaze, Sev slid through the crowd and joined a different group. A moment later, the hum of conversation warily resumed.

"Severus," said Malfoy coolly, sharp grey eyes betraying no hint of whether Sev's presence filled him with distaste or left him unmoved.

"Lucius." Sev didn't bother to acknowledge the other boys' presence, but as always, he missed little.

In the upper end of their teenage years now, they weren't quite boys any longer. Colin Crabbe, never quite small and dainty, had achieved the rough size and proportions of a young gorilla. Nick Avery's too-pretty features had firmed into the face of a young god, neatly masking the darkness beneath. And Simon Lestrangle... Simon

had grown older, but his puffy features and deep green eyes still looked disturbingly childish. Childish not in the sense of sweet and innocent, but rather in the lack of comprehension of adult concepts like right and wrong or morality.

Beside them were two younger, but no less familiar faces; Graham Goyle and Alex Nott. In the year below, Nott and Goyle practically worshipped Malfoy, and had been drawn deeper into his confidence as time went on.

Sev, by contrast, had teetered dangerously on the edge of being pushed out. Malfoy's jealousy of his intelligence, coupled with resentment from when Sev had been made a Prefect and he was passed over, had resulted in a definite growing apart.

In a perfect world, growing apart from Lucius Malfoy would hardly be a tragedy, but Sev happened to have very good reasons for needing to be in with him. Malfoy was his only link to the Death Eaters, a highly dangerous organization who had at least one agent on the Hogwarts staff. Sev, recognizing that nobody else would have such an opportunity — or the skill to pull it off — had appointed himself counterspy, and worked from the very start to get as deeply rooted in the Death

Eater organization as his skills would allow.

It had taken a very risky venture indeed at the end of last year to make the Death Eaters believe he would do anything for them. By putting his own life in danger and making it all the Gryffindors' fault, he had made a very convincing case for his 'hatred' of the current order and all it represented.

Dumbledore, never slowest on the uptake, had got in on the act, deliberately being light on punishment to make Snape's resentment all the more justified. In return, he had set Sev the task of designing him a foolproof trap to find the traitor on the staff.

Sev had spent much of his holidays in contemplation, and as he and the other Slytherins rode the train to Hogwarts, he turned the ideas over in his head once again.

Whether Snape was hugely more intelligent than those around was perhaps a matter of opinion, but certainly where he differed from others was his ability to polish ideas to perfection. He had a great skill for reading people, and coupled with relentless logic it allowed him to play those surrounding him perfectly. Sev might act quickly, but never impulsively. Nothing he ever did was completely uncalculated.

The shift between impassiveness and howling

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anger he managed to portray might seem implausible, but people wanted to believe it. It made them feel more comfortable to believe that his passions could rule him, like anybody else.

Sev had passions, in his own quiet way. But he kept them on the inside.

Anybody watching him on the train would have seen simply a young man, quieter than his rowdy companions, staring out of the window and seeming in a world of his own. They wouldn't have known that he was plotting deception, and never missing a word of the conversation around him as he did it.

The platform on the Hogwarts end was rowdier than in previous years. The Death Eaters had been laying low, and there had been no disasters other than Snape's brush with death — dismissed by most of the school as a school-boy prank, just as he'd intended. When nothing went wrong for a while, people started to believe that the badness must have gone away.

People were stupid.

Sev tuned out the sorting song and the usual celebrations, but he paid more attention to Dumbledore's welcoming speech.

"As you all no doubt know," he was saying, "times have been somewhat... troubled, of late. However, even in these dark days, there

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is always room for hope and celebration. With that in mind, I have decided that this year we will hold a summer festival.”

There were whoops and cheers from everybody but the professionally unimpressed Slytherins.

“What kind of a festival?” called James Potter over the general noise. Dumbledore smiled at him.

“Well, that would be up to you. We’ll be asking for ideas from the students for the kind of celebration you’d want... within reason,” he added, with a pointed look at the rowdy Gryffindor table. He smiled again, and clapped his hands. “We’ll discuss this again later in the year, but for now, it’s time for me to stop talking, so... eat, drink, and be merry!”

“For tomorrow, you die,” Sev completed quietly. Beside him, Malfoy snickered.



Sev knew a summons from Dumbledore was coming, but the headmaster was too subtle to haul him in immediately. It was several weeks before Professor Malachite snagged him at the end of class and said “Ah, Severus. Professor Dumbledore asked if you’d go and see him at the end of today, if you can find the time.”

Malfoy glowered suspiciously, and Avery said

“Hey, Sev, what did you do this time?”

Sev made a point of rolling his eyes in a long-suffering manner. “No doubt I’m being blamed for something house Gryffindor did, yet again.”

Beside him, Malachite’s mouth compressed into a tight line. The Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher was fiercely proud of his ties to house Slytherin, and furious with the way his students were always tarred with the same brush. Considering the current crop of Slytherin bad apples, he was very much fighting a losing battle.

Sev made his way down to the concealed entrance to Dumbledore’s office — it opened before he needed to announce his presence. He stepped inside, and made his way to where Dumbledore was waiting at his desk.

“Headmaster,” he said with a nod.

“Severus.” The headmaster smiled faintly. “Settling in well?”

It was hard to tell if he was being ironic or serious. Sev shrugged. “Well enough.”

Dumbledore leaned towards him. “Have you given any thought to what we discussed last summer?”

“Of course,” he said.

“And do you have a plan?”

“I do.”

Instead of pressing him for details, Dumbledore

said simply "What do you need?"

"Something they want," he replied.

"What?"

He shrugged slightly. "It really doesn't matter. They just have to want it."

Dumbledore smiled faintly. "I'm sure I'll be able to find something. We can't have a trap without bait, now can we?" He frowned slightly. "Bait that they won't get hold of, or bait that they will?"

"Better always to assume the worst, isn't it?" Sev pointed out.

The headmaster looked at him over his glasses. "Better for your plans, perhaps. Not so good for the way you think." Sev couldn't have given him any answer that would have satisfied, nor was he inclined to, so there was a brief silence. Dumbledore shuffled papers on his desk. "I'll speak to you again when I have something for you."

Sev nodded, and got up to leave. On his way, he hesitated, and then turned back. "Oh, and by the way. You're calling together the sixth years who are ex-Prefects to help organize the festival."

Dumbledore looked up at him for a moment, and then nodded. Sev left.



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Malfoy cornered him when he got back to the dorms. "What was that about?" he demanded.

"Parties," Sev said, with just the right note of disdain.

Malfoy looked as skeptical as the idea of Sev Snape being involved in a party deserved. "You? Dumbledore wanted to talk to *you* about parties?"

Sev looked mildly irritated. "This stupid summer festival. He wants last year's Prefects to help organize it."

Malfoy snorted darkly. "Yet again, I give thanks they passed me over," he said, rolling his eyes. Sev knew for a fact that wasn't true. As unimpressed as he acted, Malfoy had desperately wanted the Prefect honours for himself. It didn't matter to him that the position belonged to an order he detested — it represented power over others, and Lucius Malfoy considered power his birthright.

"Something else you might be interested in," Sev told him.

"Interested? In this ridiculous festival idea of theirs?" Malfoy said scathingly.

"Not the festival." He leaned in closer, though there was nobody else in the dorms to hear. "Dumbledore was talking about something.. a package, from the Ministry of Magic. I don't know



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what it is, but it sounds like something important.”

Malfoy nodded wisely. “Really? Interesting, Severus. Very interesting.” He stood up. “I think perhaps I’ll... despatch that little titbit through certain channels.” He smiled mockingly at Snape, and left.

Malfoy enjoyed holding his superior knowledge over him — as if to say ‘you may be smart, but I know who the Death Eater is, and you don’t’. Sev was untroubled. Soon enough, that would be changing.



‘Soon’, perhaps, was not the same for Severus Snape as it might be for another boy his age. Whilst his classmates all thought in terms of the here and now, it never bothered Snape to look to the long term; after all, that was how he’d got into the spying game in the first place.

The unfortunate side effect of his cover-up about ex-Prefects helping with the festival was that they had to well, actually do it. Fortunately the houses were mostly arranging their own events of the festivities, so that meant minimal contact with his new ‘deadly enemy’ James Potter.

The festival was to be held at the end of the summer term, and involve the entire school.

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Dumbledore wanted nobody to be left out, leading to complaints that he was asking for trouble — which, of course, he was. The more chaotic the festival, the better the opportunity for the Death Eater to make a move.

With their new, more advanced lessons as they moved up from O.W.L. to N.E.W.T. level, the sixth years were heavily involved in various projects for unveiling in the summer. Sev, naturally, had drawn O.W.L. results as close to perfect as he chose to get away with — deliberately falling just a handful of points behind Potter to let the ‘resentment’ simmer a little more.

In the upper years, things were more flexible. Although the sixth form at Hogwarts was still more a school than a college, the students had a little more freedom, and were given more time off to study, although that was seldom what that time was used for.

The next part of Snape and Dumbledore’s plan was called into play when the headmaster called a meeting of staff and festival organizers. They all filed in to the meeting room in various states of enthusiasm. Sev kept a look of resigned boredom throughout the quibbling over various tasks and events, not a great stretch of his acting abilities.

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“And now, on a more serious note,” Dumbledore added as the Prefects were dismissed, “I have a few other tasks that need taking care of. Potter, Snape, if you’d like to wait behind for a moment?”

They both lingered, shooting wary glances at each other. Lily stayed behind as well, waiting for James.

“Come here, boys,” said Dumbledore fondly. He addressed both them and the gathered staff. “As you are no doubt aware, Messrs. Potter and Snape hold the distinction of some of the best test scores this school has seen in recent years.”

Professors Vitae and Malachite both grinned triumphantly, happy to take credit for achievements that were more likely due to the students in question than the guidance they had received.

Dumbledore smiled at the two boys.

“It happens that I’ve been working with the Ministry of Magic over the summer. With the worries about safety that we’ve seen in recent year, they’ve been testing a number of new devices. However, as any good inventor knows, no device has been truly tried under adverse conditions until an agile young mind has been given the chance to take it apart and see how it works.” There were a few acknowledging smirks from the teachers.

“James, I’d like you to take a look at a new device called a Pocket Sneakoscope. It’s based

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on the kind of dishonesty detectors that the Ministry use, but in a small, portable form and available for the general public. They’ve tested it in their laboratories of course, but it needs some genuinely sneaky intentions to work properly... assuming, of course, you think you can find any students who might be trying to get away with something...”

James grinned, and then shot a pointed look at Snape. “I’m sure I can find one or two, Professor.” Malachite scowled darkly at him.

“And what about me, Professor?” Snape spoke up.

“Ah, yes, Severus.” For somebody who seemed so twinkly-eyed and honest, Dumbledore certainly did a masterful impression of having quite absent-mindedly forgotten the main purpose of this charade. “You, young Mr. Snape, are going to be road-testing a prototype of an extremely powerful device called a Foe-Glass.”

“What’s that?” asked James with a frown, obviously trying to decide whether or not to be jealous.

“The Foe-Glass, once it’s fully operational, will be an invaluable aid to Aurors in the fight against evil. It allows the user to see the face of their enemies; the more sharply defined the focus, the more immediate the danger. It needs a great deal of fine-tuning yet, but

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once it has been perfected, finding the Death Eaters amongst our own will suddenly become a far, far easier task.”

The murmur of interest that rippled through the staff was such that there was no way to tell which of them was exclaiming for a reason that had little to do with pleasure.

“That sounds... more interesting than mine,” said James, not quite able to bury an edge of petulance.

“No doubt House Slytherin find it easier to test a device for finding enemies than most,” spoke up Professor Vitae silkily. Beside her, Professor Malachite sneered.

Dumbledore clapped his hands together, pretending not to notice what was going on beside him. “I have the devices in my office, at present. They’ll be moved to some place where they can be studied as soon as the arrangements for security are quite finished.”

Sev didn’t need to ask when that would be; after all, it was he himself who would be developing the security system. A system that he would be oh-so-helpfully instructing the Death Eaters in how to breach...

Sev had already sketched out in his mind pre-

cisely what he required for his plan; however, implementing it to his exacting standard took longer. In his best subject, Potions, instinct and a lot of general knowledge could nearly always bring him to the desired result, but the Arithmancy and Charms work needed for this was a far more complex procedure. A Potion could be ‘almost right’ — the wards for a piece of Arithmancy had to be perfectly accurate, or nothing would happen at all.

He borrowed from the Muggle idea of codes. The vast majority of wizards didn’t have a logical bone in their body. Set a series of mystical challenges, and they might be overcome. Set a brain teaser, and you could pretty much guarantee that they’d still be sitting there stumped when the sun burned out.

With his ability to think himself out of the most convoluted of situations, Sev would have had no trouble devising a spell that nobody could break through. The trick, however, was in devising one that could be broken through in exactly the way he desired.

Indeed, the Christmas holidays had rolled up before he’d finished tinkering enough to so much as glance at the Foe-Glass. It was just as well, then, that he’d taken the time to famil-

iarize himself with everything the Ministry had written about it, because when Malfoy returned from holidaying with his parents, he wanted to know everything.

"I spoke with Lord Voldemort," he said in a low voice, sitting down across from Snape in the Slytherin common room. Sev was amused by the way he endeavoured to make it sound as if the conversation had been on an entirely equal footing.

Lord Voldemort was the head of the Death Eaters. His name had begun to penetrate the public consciousness, although all but the most mighty wizards feared to whisper it — as if he might be some demonic figure summoned by the utterance.

Sev was in a position to suspect that this idea had been carefully cultivated. Voldemort was clever, dangerously so, and perhaps as adept at manipulating people as Snape himself. On the few occasions that Sev had been in his presence, he had been forced to play his deceptions with more skill than ever, skirting as close as possible to honesty to duck the risk of betraying himself.

The Ministry had no idea where this shadowy figure was hiding himself, although Sev was convinced his hideout was in fact the magical academy Durmstrang. That knowledge would have availed the Ministry little even had he

chosen to share it — since nobody actually knew where Durmstrang was.

On the occasions Sev had been summoned before Voldemort, he had been transported there by portkey. He had no way to make contact with the Death Eaters, only be contacted, but Malfoy had his own channels of communication. A fact that he was never slow to lord over Snape.

"I reported your work with the Foe-Glass to our leaders." Actually, Sev was more than sure it had been the Death Eater on staff who had first done that, especially since he had made certain all the main suspects were in the room when it was announced. "It seems that they're... intrigued."

"I thought they might be." Sev smiled thinly. Dumbledore's choice of bait had been clever indeed. The Death Eater movement had grown strong through fear and intimidation; the risk of showing their faces too early was no doubt a troubling one.

"So what have you found out about it?" demanded Malfoy.

"As little as possible." Sev smiled at him. "After all, it would hardly be... sporting... to deprive the Ministry of the fun of working it out for themselves."

Malfoy smirked, but then turned serious. "We need to get at the glass, Severus. Our people need

to know how it works to learn how to defeat it.”

‘Our’ people? Sev wondered just when Malfoy was likely to get a rude awakening to the fact that he was nothing more than the Death Eaters’ errand boy. His charisma might allow him to rule the day in House Slytherin, but it would cut no ice with Lord Voldemort.

“I realise that. However, our masters would be less than happy if we tipped our hand in getting it.” The Death Eaters had wasted no time in letting their young recruits know that mistakes would not be tolerated. Malfoy had to listen to him, because if any of his underlings screwed up, it would fall on his head as well as theirs.

“So what do you suggest?” he asked sharply. He always had Sev ‘suggest’ things, rather than actually tell him what to do. Just because Snape was demonstrably smarter than he was no reason for him to admit it.

“The festival,” he said simply. Malfoy wasn’t on his mental level, but he was no blunt knife either, and ideas always went down better if he was given the opportunity to flesh them out himself.

“Yes,” he said slowly. “Yes, I could see that... Dumbledore will be distracted, all the school will be outside, everything will be in chaos...” Sev was amused at the way he sketched out the

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reasoning, as if obviously Snape must have just thrown out the idea without considering any of the reasons why it was a good one.

“Yes,” said Malfoy again. “The festival it is. Now all that remains is for you to bring us a suitable plan.”

“I’m sure I’ll be able manage that,” said Sev dryly.

It was amazing how much more smoothly plotting went when you were running both sides of the battle simultaneously.



It was late February before his perfectionist instincts would allow him to cease work on his security system and actually take a look at the Foe-Glass.

Dumbledore had chosen the device with care; worthless bait would tip off the enemy, but by the same token it could be deadly to let anything too valuable slip into their hands.

The Foe-Glass was indeed at the cutting edge of the Ministry’s detector technology; however, the one they had furnished Dumbledore with was several generations behind the ones they were really working on, and had a few flaws that were already being ironed out in the later versions.

The Pocket Sneakoscope, by contrast, was a mere distraction. It might make an interesting gadget, but it certainly wouldn’t catch any Death

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Eaters. As James and his friends had quickly discovered, the slightest little dubious thought would set it off. And in a school as large as Hogwarts, there were a lot of dubious thoughts.

Sev's thoughts, however, were fully focused on reeling in the suspects. His shields around the Foe-Glass were at last as complete as they were ever going to be. He had the headmaster individually call in the four teachers on his list, Malachite, Vitae, Fractalis and Ephemeria, and tell them each that he was giving them the access code 'in case of an emergency'.

Of course, all the access codes were genuine. That was the whole point. The Death Eater would probably test the code they were given, sneaking in but not actually touching anything. However, there wasn't an absolute guarantee that an honest teacher might not be tempted to do the same — and Severus Snape always wanted an absolute guarantee. So, instead of watching and waiting for somebody to sneak in, he remained deliberately oblivious. They would find out the identity of the Death Eater when they made a real attempt to steal it; all things in good time.

Meanwhile, school life plodded on. The young cadre of Death Eaters were temporarily free

of spying duties, and turned their attention to other pursuits. Colin Crabbe again turned to the possibility of a career in petty theft, and Simon Lestrange continued to severely disconcert anybody who met him with his detached gaze and equally detached personality. Even the teachers were beginning to notice it, although they never said anything. Presumably it was bad teaching practise to admit that you thought one of your pupils was quite possibly a psychopath in the making.

Nick Avery had a great many things on his mind, all of them female. Malfoy, by contrast, had 'laid claim' to Narcissa Salenica. Sev thought it a rather dubious honour, considering the fact that Malfoy thought of her as 'his girl' in the same way that he referred to 'his books' and 'his clothes'. Despite all the evidence that it was a thoroughly unsavoury relationship, the other Slytherin girls were screamingly jealous.

People were stupid.

Goyle and Nott had appointed themselves Malfoy's new bodyguards. Despite the fact that they were younger, they were both built like brick walls, and nobody was going to argue with them. They were the terror of the school's younger students, selecting victims almost randomly and

playing around with spells that were just a little too nasty to be dismissed as youthful pranks.

As summer approached, the Quidditch teams battled it out in the pattern that was almost set in stone by now; Slytherin and Gryffindor put down all in their path to get together for a final, brutal head-to-head battle that always just narrowly went to Gryffindor. By now James Potter and Malfoy were both captains, and there was never a Gryffindor vs. Slytherin match without at least one nasty injury.

Malfoy continued to declare Quidditch “completely unimportant”, a phrase he liked to use for anything he lost at, and complain about the anti-Slytherin bias. Even if it wasn’t part of his cover, Sev would have had to have agreed it existed; however, it was also not unjustified.

Professor Malachite, the head of house Slytherin, was endlessly frustrated by the way his house was always put down — more often than not, by the actions of its own students. He couldn’t understand how Dumbledore had refused to punish James and Sirius for nearly killing Snape the previous year.

Malachite was taking points off Gryffindors left right and centre, at the slightest provocation. His arch enemy, Gryffindor’s head Ellida Vitae,

countered that by doing exactly the same to house Slytherin. She never got Malfoy, however; he was always far too good at playing the innocent.

For all their mutual hatred, Malachite and Vitae were never far apart; Snape suspected they followed each other around hoping for a chance to catch the other in the act of favouring their own house. The perpetually nervous Professor Fractalis would turn a pale and dash away whenever he saw the arguing duo headed his way. Unusually, instead of locking himself away with his books, he was spending an awful lot of time with the Potions professor, Janeida Ephemera.

Snape took this all in, waiting and watching. Then, one weekend at the beginning of summer, the Dark Mark emblazoned on his arm suddenly grew black and burned with pain. He wasn’t particularly surprised; he’d been expecting it since Christmas.

There was no message sent to him, but by now he knew what to do. He rose out of bed in the middle of the night, and padded out into the Forbidden Forest.

Last time he’d been out in the forest on one of these trips, he’d noticed a set of curious marks on the ground. Tonight, he noticed them again, and freshly made; a series of ruts in the ground, as if made by

a very wide wheel — except there was no way any wheeled contraption could navigate through the twisting pathways of the Forbidden Forest.

Sev's logical mind had an overwhelming compulsion to make connections and build patterns. He'd seen these marks before when he'd been going out to find the Death Eaters' concealed Portkey; what was the link?

However, that was a puzzle for a later time, for the meeting that was coming up would need his full concentration — a rare condition indeed. There were very few things Sev couldn't do with most of his mind a million miles away — verbally fencing with Voldemort was one of them.

The Ministry of Magic liked to reassure people that the Death Eaters were vicious but basically arrogant and stupid. That might hold true for the vast majority of their members, but in some cases it didn't; Voldemort, like Malfoy, was arrogant and very intelligent.

Where Malfoy's intelligence equated to a kind of charismatic cunning, however, Voldemort thought in a very similar way to Severus Snape. That, in Sev's mind, made him more dangerous than the rest of his followers put together.

Sooner or later, he knew, the conflict with the Death Eaters would hinge on getting close to

Voldemort. Resentful bigots with a taste for glory were not rare, but get them alone, and they were generally spineless. It was only when they were brought together that they became powerful — and it was Voldemort who brought them together.

No doubt James Potter, had he been in Snape's situation — something which his very noble nature made impossible — would have conceived some wild plan to heroically take on Voldemort himself. Sev knew he was light-years ahead of his fellow students, but he was still seventeen years old. If Voldemort had a brain as quick as his own, and no compunction about gathering knowledge from the nastiest places imaginable, who knew how powerful he might be?

James was a Quidditch Seeker at heart; charge in, zip ahead of everybody else to save the day, and let the whole world know you were doing it. Sev, though he never played the game for lack of an opponent, thought like a chess player. You couldn't win a game of chess by charging the king with your most valuable piece.

And he knew himself to be one of their side's most valuable pieces. Nobody else could infiltrate the Death Eaters so fully, because nobody else had the presence of mind to be so deceptive from the very start. Not many people had

the ability to start spinning a web of lies and secrecy at the age of eleven.

If he tried to make a move against Voldemort, he would not only fail, but remove himself from the game, costing their side dearly. 'Blaze of glory' might have a nice heroic ring to it, but it was no way to win.

And Severus Snape always played to win. He stepped up to the Portkey in the dark, and took hold of it.

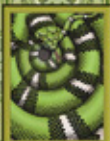


The interior of the Dark Lord's tower was almost familiar to him by now. Voldemort always kept it dimmed, but as a tactic to disconcert him it was fairly ineffective. A habitual insomniac, Sev was no stranger to wandering the corridors of Hogwarts in darkness.

"Lord Voldemort," he said, with a respectful nod.

"Ah, Snape. We thought perhaps you weren't coming." The Death Eater leader was sitting in a chair in the corner, legs propped casually up on a small table.

"I followed the same procedure as before," Sev said, but not over-defensively. Voldemort wasn't attacking him, only studying his reactions — much as he would be doing, if the situ-



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ation had been reversed.

It was strange, but in front of the one person he most needed to fool, he could allow the most of his true personality to shine through. At the school he guarded his intelligence, put on the emotions that he knew would be expected of him. With Voldemort, he could let all that drop and show the cool calculation underneath.

"And what if I had required your presence immediately?" asked the Death Eater leader, in the same deceptively light and airy tone.

Sev looked pointedly at where the Dark Mark was no doubt still burning black under his sleeve. "If you had required my presence immediately, I've no doubt I would have known about it."

Voldemort laughed, not a cackle or a crazy giggle, but a low, earthy sound of amusement.

"Indeed! Now," he leaned forward, resting his chin on his fist, "tell me of this Foe-Glass."

"It's a Ministry device; I assume you've heard what it's designed to do?"

"Yes." Voldemort smiled slightly. "But what does it *actually* do?" It was the same question Sev himself would have asked.

"Oh, it does its job... to a certain extent. It's hard for me to study it fully, without a better class of enemy."



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“You think you don’t have enemies?”

“I think they don’t know they’re my enemies,” Sev countered. The older man nodded in acknowledgement, but immediately challenged him again.

“You’ve had months to study the device; are these all the conclusions you’ve drawn?”

“The device is not all I’ve been studying.”

Voldemort smiled again. Sev was passing the tests he was setting up. “Tell me.”

“The shield around it is an exceptionally well-designed system.” He could say that with full certainty, having developed it himself. “It can’t be bypassed or removed by force, but that doesn’t mean it can’t be overcome.”

“How?”

“The shield-spell has an element that means that even if you use the correct code, it registers who passed through it —”

“So if it the device goes missing, they’ll know who took it.” Voldemort nodded. “This can be circumvented?”

“I’ve figured out how to shut that element down for a short time,” he agreed. To be precise, he’d invented the system in such a way that it was possible to do that. “However, you’d still need the code to get in.”

“We have the code.”

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It was just as well Snape didn’t have Malfoy’s uncontrollable need to smirk when his plan worked perfectly.

This had been the most dangerous edge of the bluff; if Voldemort had asked him to give over his own code, subtly different from the ones Dumbledore had handed out to his staff, all would have been lost. However, Sev had staked everything on his ability to read personalities — and been right. Voldemort responded to Sev’s intelligence by making himself seem to be one step ahead all the time — he wanted to make it clear that everything Snape was reporting, he already knew.

The first phase had gone perfectly — but this was no time to relax.

“You tell us that the best time to make a move would be this ‘summer festival’; why?”

“The list of reasons Malfoy gave you, cloaked as his own reasoning.”

Voldemort laughed. “Quite! And was it his own?”

“Why yes, of course. Once I had told him the conclusion, he was quick to figure out how to realise it.”

Voldemort laughed again, but his face abruptly hardened. “Why are you here, Snape?”

This time, Sev knew, the answer wasn’t ‘because you summoned me.’ “I go wherever advantages

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me most," he said carefully.

"Of course. And what happens when our little organization ceases to be... the most advantageous place for you to be?"

It was a very fine line indeed between truth, lies, and saying the wrong thing. Sev chose to brazen it out with a flicker of Slytherin arrogance. "Perhaps it's best that you see that doesn't happen."

"Perhaps it is," said the Death Eater leader, with an unreadable smile. "I notice you don't leap to assure me your loyalty is without question," he added lazily.

"Nobody's loyalty without question."

Voldemort nodded slowly, then broke into soft chuckle. "I like you, Snape. You think like me."

"I know."

"Very well." He stood up, suddenly. "We will bow to your superior judgement." There was just enough of an edge of humour in his voice to hint that he didn't quite mean it but he wasn't mocking Sev either. "My Death Eater will retrieve the glass on the day you suggested. And you, I trust, will make sure this can happen."

"I will." That was no lie. He fully intended to let the Death Eater agent get away with it — he just planned to find out who they were while they were doing it.

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Voldemort nodded and abruptly dismissed him. "You may go."

Sev went.



Malfoy was lying awake when Sev returned to their dorm. "You've been out," he observed neutrally.

"I was summoned." Sev slid back his sleeve to display the Dark Mark, slowly beginning to fade from black to its original red.

"Summoned for what?" Malfoy demanded. Being the only one in the know might be one of his greatest pleasures, but he didn't much like being on the other side of it.

"They wanted to interrogate me about the Foe-Glass."

"They've had our reports." By which Malfoy meant his reports. He was obviously not happy with the idea of Sev's word being taken over his own. Sev trod carefully.

"Our lord likes to hear these things for himself."

"And?"

"He liked your idea of staging the raid at the festival. He commanded me to weaken the magical shields for him." Deliberately cosying up to Malfoy would be far too obvious, but a few carefully chosen words could emphasize

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Snape's 'subordinate' position. If Malfoy chose to take it that way — which, of course, he did.

"And what are we to do?" asked Malfoy sharply.

"He didn't entrust me with your orders." Again, he subtly pointed out Malfoy's more trusted position. "But I should imagine a few little... distractions couldn't hurt."

Malfoy grinned slowly. The thought of magical nastiness always put him in a better mood. "Hmm, yes. I suppose I could... try to think of some suitable targets."

"Somebody heavily involved in the festivities, perhaps?" suggested Sev with a raised eyebrow. Malfoy smiled back. They were both well aware that James Potter had managed to wriggle his way into being involved with just about every event on the programme.

"Yes..." said Malfoy slowly. "We'll just have to see what we can do to improve the entertainments. After all," he smirked, "we can't let it be said that house Slytherin didn't get into the spirit of things."




As the summer term rolled on, the entire school was overtaken by a buzz of excitement over the upcoming festival. There was to be a

mini-Quidditch tournament, three matches in quick succession, and a host of unofficial betting circles had sprung up. The duelling club was to put on an exhibition — theoretically, it would be set up involve no actual injuries, but that wasn't likely to last very long. There were bets on that too, including on whether Potter and Malfoy would get the chance to go head to head, or if the teachers would be smart enough to put a stop to that before it happened.

Professor Alomanicia would be reading fortunes, and Hagrid was beside himself over the weird and wonderful creatures that were going to be on display. The seventh year Muggle Studies class were putting on a Muggle play, albeit with a few magical twists.

Rumours abounded that Professors Malchite and Vitae would be taking part in the duelling themselves, sparking a rash of inter-house scuffles over who would be the winner. Neither of them would confirm or deny the rumour, leading to even more speculation.

The hum of excitement infected all the lessons. Sev suspected that even as Dumbledore had set this festival up for a purpose, he had also wanted it to be exactly what it seemed — a way brighten up the year for students and



staff alike. The mutterings of dark events far and near had all but died out in favour of more enjoyable speculation.

The end of year exams came and went; half the students failed because they were unable to concentrate, but the teachers didn't even seem to mind. They had been afforded even more of a glimpse of the troubled times than their students, and were just as eager for the chance to escape for a day.

Dumbledore summoned the eight ex-Pre-fects to him a few days before the big event.

"First of all, may I congratulate you all on your hard work in making this day the great success it is sure to be. This project stands as a tribute to how much we can achieve when we all pull together."

Sev was less impressed by the flowery praise than he was by Dumbledore's ability to talk of cooperation with a straight face. In all the meetings they had attended, this one no exception, the Gryffindor and Slytherin delegations had glared each other into oblivion.

Lily, of course, knew that Sev's hostility was only an act — but she could act too, and her dislike of Narcissa certainly wasn't feigned. Narcissa Salenica treated all her inferiors — which, in her mind, worked out to everybody — with the kind of icy disdain reserved for some-

thing you'd stepped in. That definitely rubbed Lily up the wrong way; it seemed to grate with her even more than Malfoy's outright cruelty. Sev had heard her say that Narcissa reminded her entirely too much of her big sister.

Narcissa and Malfoy were certainly a match made in a special kind of hell. Sev felt a vague sense of pity for their potential offspring — any child those two produced didn't have much of a chance of turning out with anything that passed for a normal personality.

Not that he himself could ever be accused of that, but at least he wasn't actively homicidal. His logic might make him unemotional in many regards, but it stripped away the bad as much as it did the good. Sev wasn't entirely immune to human emotion, he just knew better than to be guided by it — something a hothead like James Potter could never understand.

Lily was as bad. She had been the first to know the true extent of his mission, and understood the stakes involved — but she seemed unable to accept his logical weighing up of pros and cons as a way to reach decisions. Hers was a value system of doing 'the right thing' even when 'the right thing' would kill you and everyone you wanted to help, and something a little morally questionable

would save you all with minimal cost.

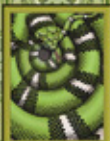
Sev, naturally, found it rather hard to see the logic in that.

Lily was smart enough not to interfere in what he did, but she seemed to have appointed herself his part-time external conscience. And, irritatingly, she was perceptive enough to guess when there was something in the air.

Now, for instance, she kept shooting him suspicious glances across the room. He kept his face as impassive as came naturally, but she knew that proved nothing. As Dumbledore talked, she mouthed ‘what?’ at him. He gave her a look that he knew she would be able to translate as ‘I can’t believe you’re stupid enough to try and communicate with me in a room full of people.’

She responded by sticking her tongue out. He fixed a lazily indifferent look into place, and turned back to Dumbledore. No doubt Lily would be sticking to him like glue on the night of the festival. Well, he could always distract her with Malfoy’s torment of James if he really needed to get rid of her.

Professor Dumbledore was wrapping up his big motivational speech. “And finally, I need a volunteer —” James’s hand was already up. Dumbledore smiled fondly at him. “Somebody who’s a little



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less overinvolved, I think,” he added kindly.

James looked good-naturedly disappointed. It had become almost a running joke that the festival was going to be pretty much the James Potter show, as he scurried from Quidditch to duelling to the play to a few dozen other activities. The Slytherins, of course, had sniffed and called this yet more proof of the way the whole system was prejudiced in favour of Gryffindors. At exactly the same time as they stated loudly how pathetic it all was and none of them would want to be involved.

Dumbledore’s eyes swept around the semi-circle of sixth years and fell — purely by ‘chance’, of course — on Snape. “Ah, Severus. You’re not too busy on the day of the festival, are you?”

“No, Professor.” James snickered into his hands. “Who’d want him?” he said in a stage whisper.

Dumbledore was an expert at not noticing such things. “If you don’t mind, Severus, I’d like you to act as a liaison between the members of staff; make sure everything keeps running smoothly.”

“Yes, Professor,” he nodded. The headmaster had rather neatly handed him a licence to lurk around the staff without engendering suspicion.

However, before he was home free, Lily had a card to play. She pulled a vaguely disappointed face. “I could have done that,” she said to James,



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in a stage whisper of her own. Dumbledore proved mysteriously able to hear this one when he hadn't picked the other.

"Then so you shall. You don't mind a little company, do you, Severus?"

The assembled sixth years choked in disbelief, and James Potter made a sound of disgust. "Aw, Lily, now look what you've done!"

Lily just shrugged. "Ah, don't worry about it." She leaned closer to James. "He gives me any trouble, I'll just push him in the lake."

"Don't do that, you'll poison the monsters." James glared across at Snape. Sev sneered right back. Now he was going to have the fun of executing his flawless plan with snide commentary from Lily every step of the way. Strangely enough, the prospect wasn't all that distressing.



"Pick your feet up, greaseball, what've you been doing, drinking Torpor-Tonic?"

"Careful acting so friendly there, you'll blow our cover," said Sev sardonically. Lily laughed and elbowed him in the ribs.

"Can you move it, please? I don't want to miss the Quidditch."

"You don't want to miss your boyfriend showing off."

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She gave him a look.

"I notice the sudden disappearance of the 'he's not my boyfriend' defence," he added.

"Watch it, you."

"The only thing to watch around here is your laughable insistence on bolting the barn door after the horse is not just gone but launching full page advertisements in the Daily Prophet to tell everyone where it's been."

"Okay, that's either a mixed metaphor you got there or a very talented horse."

"It can't be both?"

Lily arched her eyebrows at him. "Tell me, have you ever considered a brief spell in St. Mungos?"

"Frequently, but how would I get them to take you away?"

They both fell silent and deliberately glared at each other as a third year boy scurried past on his way to festivities. As soon as he was gone, Lily started to giggle. Snape affected a look of mild disdain.

"You're really not cut out for a life of espionage, you know that?"

"Why would I be?" she shrugged. "I'm seventeen!"

"So am I," he shrugged back.

"No you're not, you're forty-five. You're a forty-five-year-old who's made himself some potion to

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look like a kid and infiltrated the school.”

“Yes, because if I’d invented the Elixir of Youth I’d much rather be spending quality time with Malfoy and his friends than marketing it and raking in the millions.”

“Well, why are you spending quality time with Malfoy?” Sev shot her an exasperated look.

“You know why.”

“No,” she corrected, “I know what you’re doing, and how you’re trying to do it. I still don’t really understand why.”

“Preserving the future of wizardry isn’t enough?”

This time it was Lily who gave him the look. “For me, maybe; not for you.”

“I’m the most suitable person for the job.”

“And that’s, like, the whole reason you chose to do it?”

“It’s only logical.”

She pulled a face. “You are sooo Spock.”

“I’m what?”

“It’s a Muggle thing. And I’m not telling you what it means.”

“I don’t care.”

“You don’t care about anything.”

“And yet you never take the hint.”

“Well, shut up, ’cause you’re stuck with me.” She stopped walking. “What’ve we got to do now, again?”

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“We have to check in with Professor Alomancia.” Sev rolled his eyes. “Can’t you remember the simplest little thing?” He was arguing largely for the sake of it, but it was actually an honest question. He found it genuinely difficult to understand why other people’s minds and memories didn’t work the way his own did.

“I have a great memory! I’m just not... freakishly freakish like you.”

“Thank you.” They skirted the big crowd at the Quidditch pitch to go down to the tent where the Divination professor was setting up.

“Ah! Lily, Severus.” She beamed at the pair of them. Unlike most of the staff they’d already seen that morning, she didn’t look surprised that they hadn’t yet torn each other’s throats out. In common with most future-gazing wizards and witches, Professor Alomancia was largely oblivious to what was going on in the world of the present.

“Everything set up, Professor?” asked Lily brightly. They had adopted an unofficial attack plan of Lily being chirpy and friendly, and Sev looking equal parts disgusted and bored — poses neither one of them found particularly taxing.

“Oh, yes indeed, yes indeed.” She looked up at the sky, although Sev couldn’t see that there was much to be read from it when it was blue

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and cloudless. "It surely is a most auspicious day for the revelation of secrets." Sev supposed that could be taken as a sign for his mission, but didn't take it particularly to heart; Professor Alomancia might indeed have a genuine talent, but it was more than buried in a sea of meaningless blather.

"Severus!" She turned to him. "Would you like to know your destiny?"

"I rather think not," he said dryly. There was nothing she could tell him that couldn't be read more clearly by his own perceptiveness.

The teacher shrugged, unoffended, and turned to Lily. "Lily? How about you? Would you care to know what the tides of time have in store for you?"

"Um..." Lily glanced towards the Quidditch team. "I think the match is about to start —"

"And you wouldn't want to miss a second of your boyfriend in flight, now would you?" jabbed Snape.

"Ah, yes. Young James," said the teacher, with a faint smile. "The astral tides strongly favour the two of you, you know," she said in confidential tones.

Lily looked as if she couldn't decide whether to scowl or be faintly pleased. She settled for staring down Sev's smirk and quickly extend-

ing a hand to the professor. "Go ahead, do a reading. I'm not in any hurry."

"Excellent." Apparently clueless as to the undercurrents behind the simple exchange, the Divination teacher took Lily's hand and examined it closely. "Ah yes, strong lines, strong lines. I see much health, love and happiness in your future, and —"

Abruptly she cut off speaking and her whole body went slack. Sev stopped rolling his eyes and watched her more closely. He'd seen her do this once before; the prelude to giving a true-spoken prophecy. The bits and pieces of lore she tagged together at other times might be close to worthless, but the words she spoke in this near trance-state would come true.

Sev focused his attention on her intently — but not so intently that he didn't have time to process the thought that her last true prophecy had also been delivered to Lily.

Professor Alomancia began to speak, in a cold, sharp voice that wasn't her own. "*The hidden snake shall fight the lion. The wolf will carry the fawn. Dog shall be rat and rat shall be snake, and death given freely is the greatest gift. The mighty will fall, the weak will rise, and the dark is brought down by a child.*"

She snapped out of it abruptly, and gave Lily a vaguely bemused smile. "Are you quite okay there, dear? The reading's finished."

Lily shook her head and pulled away. "Oh yeah, I'm sorry, I guess I zoned out for a minute. Thinking about the future, I guess. Thanks, Professor." She turned to Sev. "Come on, Snape. We've got work to do."

"Did you hear that?" she asked, as soon as they were out of earshot.

"No, I've mysteriously gone selectively deaf."

"Oh, give it a rest, would you?" Lily frowned, biting her lower lip. "That's the second time she's done that to me! What d'you think it means?"

"Anything. Nothing." Sev shrugged. "It's prophecy. It's all very enlightening... after the fact."

"No — let me think a minute." Lily perched on the low wall beside them, Quidditch match abruptly forgotten. "The hidden snake will fight the lion... d'you think that's about you and James, last year?"

Sev shrugged again. "I wouldn't have called it much of a fight, but who can tell with prophecy?"

"The wolf will carry the fawn... That's gotta be Remus, natch, but what's a fawn got to do with anything?" Sev had never in as many words stated to Lily that he knew Lupin's secret, but she just assumed he did anyway. Lily knew full

well he seldom missed such things.

"Then there was a load of crap about dogs and rats that I didn't get at all... and death as a gift — which I guess means somebody dying for their cause." She looked at him. "No offense, but that doesn't really sound like you."

"It doesn't," agreed Sev neutrally. Heroic sacrifices really weren't his *raison d'être*.

"...and the dark brought down by a child — that could be you, though."

"As you've already pointed out, I'm really not much of a child, either."

Lily nodded, and hugged her knees, looking frustrated. "Dammit, I hate this! Why tell me anything at all, if it's not gonna make the slightest bit of sense?"

"It's prophecy," he reminded her dryly. "That's what it's for."

Lily refused to be beaten. "She gave me another one, in the... second year? I never got that, either. I can't even remember it now."

"Choose wisely and well, for your doom will come too quickly. Love will not save you, but that which is most precious will survive. Beware; you think you see him, but the colours he wears are not his, and the face you know now is not the true one. He will betray you." Sev

reeled it all off in a flat monotone.

“Oh, and where were you when I was taking my History of Magic O.W.L.?” she demanded.

“Sitting in the back, desperately looking for any question where I could believably drop a few marks.”

“Yeah, well. Anyway... I don’t know what that one was all about, either. I thought it was about you, first off. But now I don’t think so.”

“You don’t think I’m likely to betray you?” he asked, eyebrows raised.

“I think if you were going to betray me, you’d totally tell me you were doing it and really not care what I thought.”

“Pretty much,” Sev agreed amiably.

Lily frowned for a long moment, and then just shook her head and giggled. “So, according to Professor out-of-her-tree Alomancia, I’m either gonna have health, love and happiness, or death, pain and betrayal in my future. Place your bets now, please.”

“Married to James Potter, you’d probably get both.”

Lily pulled a disbelieving face and punched him in the shoulder, hard. “*Married?*”

“Oh, as if you’re not going to,” he taunted her.

“You could marry him tomorrow, if your parents said you could.”

“Oh, like they would!”

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Sev smirked triumphantly. “Oh, but you would if they’d let you?”

She pummelled him again, and he put up his arms to fend her off. Just then, Professor Vitae came charging up. “What’s going on here?” she demanded.

Sev quickly twisted amusement into sullen contempt. “She hit me.”

“He started it!”

The Charms Professor glared at them, or rather glared at Snape and pretended it encompassed Lily too. “Stop it, both of you. Don’t you have places to be?”

“Yes, Professor,” agreed Lily quickly.

“Whatever,” said Snape, looking disinterested.

Professor Vitae shook her head and marched off in the direction of the Hogwarts building — and then abruptly turned, and shouted back “And ten points off Slytherin!”

“Okay, that was completely your fault,” Sev told Lily when she’d gone.

“Hey, it’s your stupid cover story.” She looked up to where a few small shapes were already zooming about the skyline. “Hey, come on! The Quidditch’s already started!”

“I can barely contain my excitement,” said Snape dryly, trailing along behind her.

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Sev slipped away from Lily to sit with his fellow Slytherins for the Quidditch. They all commiserated with him over the indignity of having to drag a mudblood around after him.

"She's an annoyance — nothing more," he shrugged boredly. "Like the buzzing of a fly."

"Flies only buzz until you pull their wings off," observed Simon mildly. The others laughed, although perhaps a little uneasily. Even junior Death Eaters weren't totally sure how to take somebody like Simon LeStrange.

Malfoy was of course Quidditch captain and team Seeker, and Avery was a Chaser. Colin and his younger friend Graham Goyle were both Beaters, smacking the Bludgers with such enthusiasm that Sev suspected they were picturing them to be their opponents heads.

The line-up of the Gryffindor team had changed since James Potter was first made their Seeker. Once it had been a weak team with him their only big gun; now he'd built it up into powerhouse. In a fairly played match, no other house could stand against them. Of course, Gryffindor vs. Slytherin was rarely a fairly played match.

The staff had been sensible enough to start the mini tournament with Hufflepuff vs. Gryffindor, and then Ravenclaw vs. Slytherin. It stopped

the final from being a foregone conclusion, although the other two houses got hammered in the playoffs. Then came the main event.

"Wish me luck," said Malfoy dryly as he got up to take his place after the brief break. The others all laughed. 'Luck' was the last thing the Slytherin team were going to be relying on.

It started off small... and got nasty very quickly. A few deliberately aimed Bludgers became pushing, shoving and grabbing, physical fouls became magical ones, curses started flying... There was a whistle blowing every couple of seconds, or so it seemed, but nobody was paying the slightest bit of notice.

Actual possession of the balls took second place to smashing your opponents into little pieces. The Slytherins had come packing ammunition, but the Gryffindors were expecting trouble and had a few spells of their own up their sleeves.

Play had to be stopped three times for the young nurse Poppy Pomfrey to run on and shift people back into their original shapes. Half-way through, after a particularly lucky goal, Gryffindor Chaser Michael Bell got rammed by Crabbe and Goyle and had to be taken off. He was replaced by the substitute... Lily.

The point when there was a girl and mudblood

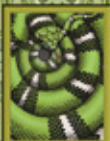
on the pitch was when it got *really* nasty. It was impossible to keep track of all the fouls without Omnioculars, because there were always three or four going on at the same time.

Lily, however, sailed through it beautifully — largely because James left off the aerial acrobatics to appoint himself personal bodyguard. Nobody had the chance to get near her, and she even sunk a couple of Quaffles. Malfoy was not going to be a happy camper.

The pattern was abruptly shattered as James peeled away and started spiralling upwards. Malfoy twigged immediately and zoomed after him, but he just didn't have the acceleration to catch up. Potter had the Golden Snitch, and Gryffindor the match.

As the cheers of the other three houses drowned out Slytherin's groans, Sev got to his feet. High above, Malfoy gave him a subtle nod. A moment later, the whole crowd was crying out in shock and — depending on house allegiance — either glee or dismay at the storm of coordinated curses surging towards James Potter.

Nobody was watching Snape as he slipped away back towards the school.



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Sev padded through the corridors of Hogwarts. There was no need for concealment magics — the entire castle was deserted. Everybody was outside, whether they were part of the festivities or merely watching them.

Sev had spent enough time sequestered up in this little tower room that even had he not had half the memory he did, it would have been permanently ingrained. He twisted the arm of the statue, slipped through the gap it stepped aside from, and ascended the stairs.

He smiled when he came to the door at the top. He and Dumbledore had played the most brazen bluff imaginable. He had spent months up here with the Foe-Glass, designing a magical lock for this door that would perfectly suit his needs. And until he'd completed his work, there had been no lock on the door. The Death Eater could have sauntered in at any time and taken the Foe-Glass, without anything to stop them or mark their passage.


But Sev had known they wouldn't. The hidden Death Eater had proved to be incredibly cautious; so cautious that they would never presume to test the glass's defences until they knew exactly what those defences were.

It had taken much of his ingenuity to work out a



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suitable interface for the lock. It hadn't bothered him to fiddle around with the raw Arithmancy of it, applying a little power here and a little there to get the right balance. But none of the staff, except perhaps for Fractalis, would be able to remember a code built of such equations. Other people's memories, he was aware, seemed to require something more tangible to latch onto.

So, largely for his own amusement, he had made the lock into a kind of little solar system. A collection of little stars and moons and planets hung in space, and their relative positions made up the code. It would be easy to replicate a given arrangement, but literally impossible to try and cycle through all the different combinations to find one that worked. Had he been the kind to share his ability to make puns with anyone, he would probably have named it the 'Universal Lock'.

In addition to simply permitting or refusing entry, the lock had another handy little hidden trick. Sev, never leaving anything to chance, drew his wand to test its operation one more time.

"Recyclius!"

Immediately, the little stars and planets began to 'orbit', moving around in the loops he had restricted them to. After a moment,



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they all stopped moving. With a click, the door popped open.

Satisfied, Snape peered briefly inside, and shut the door again. He pointed his wand at the 'sun' in the centre of the arrangement, and said *"Randomius!"* The planets slid around their orbits and came to random stops. He leaned his weight against the door to test it, and then turned and descended the stairs.

So far as the Death Eaters were concerned, what he had just done up here was switch off a spell to identify the people who passed through the lock. In fact he hadn't, because he'd already designed it so that that spell was there if anyone checked for it, but never activated.

There was no way to detect identity that was completely foolproof. These days, most Ministry-approved security systems had devised ways of seeing through Polyjuice Potion, but there were plenty more devious methods available to a talented trickster — and the Death Eater agent would certainly be that. Cautious or not, it took an incredible amount of skill to leave no clues that either Snape or Dumbledore could pick up.

Lily was waiting for him when he emerged from the buildings. "Where have you been?" she asked, eyebrows raised in curiosity.



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“Bathroom break?” he said guilelessly. She snorted.

“Yeah, right.” The two of them wandered away towards the edges of the Forbidden Forest, where they would be out of view.

“What’s happening, Sev?” Lily asked him, playfulness dropped as reached the shelter of the trees.

“Aside from the festival?”

“Aside from that, yes.”

Snape shrugged, and looked at her. “What do you think’s happening?” he asked.

She didn’t disappoint him. “You’re setting a trap to catch the spy.”

“Find the spy,” he corrected. She shrugged and frowned.

“Same difference, surely?”

He shook his head. “I want to know who the spy is, not blow their cover.”

“Why?” Then she answered her own question. “Because they’ll send another. And you’re better off with a spy you know about than one you don’t.”

“Do I need to be here at all?” he asked sardonically. She rolled her eyes at him.

“Okay. So you’ll find out the identity of the spy. And what are you planning to do with it once you’ve got it?”

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“Remember it?” he suggested.

She glared. “Is that what I meant?”

“I’m a creature of logic. You can’t expect me to guess what’s going on inside your head.”

“You’re a creature, alright. I meant, who are you going to tell?” She folded her arms. “Cause that was the point, wasn’t it? I mean, at some stage in this whole ‘I’m a master spy for the side of light’ game, you’re actually gonna tell the side of light you’re spying for them, right?”

Sev smiled internally. As it happened, he was well ahead of her right here. “And who would you suggest I go to?” he asked neutrally.

“Dumbledore,” she said, without hesitation.

“The logical choice,” he agreed.

“Exactly!” she seized on that. “Logic! That thing that you’re so fond of. So if that’s the logical thing to do, why don’t you do it?”

“Because I’ve already done it,” he said. And then smirked at the way her jaw dropped.

Lily got her facial expressions under control, after a moment. “You’ve already been to Dumbledore?”

“We spoke last year.” And actually, Dumbledore had come to him, but that didn’t really matter. Sev had been planning on pulling him into the loop sooner or later — probably, he had to admit to himself, much later. He knew that his mission

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would be useless if he never reported to everybody, but he'd wanted to delay as long as possible having to bring somebody else in. While he worked alone, he was completely untouchable. Introduce a contact, no matter how trustworthy, and everything became a whole lot less certain.

"And he... knows about your little plan?"

"Actually, it's our little plan," Snape corrected.

Lily blinked at him for a moment, then pulled away. "Wow," she said, apparently to the nearest tree or possibly to the world in general. She looked back at him. "Dumbledore knows what you're doing? He... what did he say?"

"That he wants me to keep doing it."

Her eyebrows shot up. "Really?"

Sev half shrugged. "Basically. I seem to remember there was something in there about trust, foolishness, and people needing illusions, but I tuned that bit out."

"Of course you did," Lily agreed wryly. "Why listen to the bit that's telling you how to be a human being?"

He shrugged again. "I seem to do just fine without it."

"Yes, but fine by whose standards?"

"By mine. Who else matters?"

"See, this right here is at the heart of the 'human being' thing. You need to work on that."

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"I don't think I do," he said lightly. In the brief lull in the conversation he was suddenly aware of the sound of soft footfalls on the forest floor.

"Someone's coming," said Lily.

"Ten out of ten for observation. Not to mention obvious remarks," Sev told her quietly. There was no point trying to run off—they waited warily for the approaching figure to emerge from the trees.

It was Professor Malachite. He came to an abrupt stop when he saw the two of them, looking confused.

"What's going on here? Severus?"

It was Lily who answered him. "Snape's being an idiot, that's what's going on," she glowered.

"Me? It was you and your stupid boyfriend who—"

The instant fake argument had the desired effect. "Okay, that's enough, both of you." He frowned at them. "Why aren't you at the festival with the others?"

"We're supposed to be running messages for the teachers," Lily told him.

"Or we would be, if somebody knew where they were going," Snape said sharply.

"Hey, it was you who said Professor Parilia was—"

"No, if you recall it was actually you that—"

"Okay, okay!" Malachite shouted them down again. He looked up at the sky with a long-suffering sigh. "What idiot decided to team you

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two up on this, hmm?"

"Professor Dumbledore," they answered in chorus.

Malachite laughed, and shook his head. "Oh, Albus. Ever optimistic, I see." He frowned. "Well, no wonder I haven't been getting any messages. Have you seen any of the other staff around here?"

"Not since Mrs. Potter here decided we should take a scenic detour," growled Snape.

"Mrs. Potter?" Lily yelped. The thump she gave him in the arm certainly wasn't faked.

"Oh, why can't the two of you just shut up and get married? Although I suppose that leads to the possibility you might reproduce, which is certainly something we want to avoid at all costs —"

She thumped him again, and Malachite looked like he honestly couldn't decide whether to be angry or amused. "Lily, I know this is a special day, but do you think you could see clear to keeping your fists to yourself?"

"Well, can you make him keep his words to himself?"

"It's self defence!" he objected. "If I don't talk, you might never shut up! And then, sooner or later I'd have to kill myself..."

"Okay, I have to say I'm not really seeing the downside here..."

"Will the two of you please just—?" Malachite sud-

denly froze, and for a moment it looked as if he was about to spout prophecy like Professor Alomancia.

"Professor?" asked Snape, after a second.

Malachite blinked his sharp grey eyes and focused back on Snape. "Huh? Oh, yes." He reconfigured his face into a stern frown. "Both of you, stop bickering and attend to your duties. Severus, you should know better; don't let her goad you into retaliating. Now, if you'll both excuse me, I have some things to attend to." He marched off rapidly in the direction of the school.

"Okay, is it just me or was he doing the whole possessed thing just then?"

"I don't know about possessed," Sev said dryly, "but yes, something suddenly caught his attention."

"Let's find out what." They followed the route the professor had taken. It wasn't difficult; he was moving at quite a lick.

"I like how he managed to get in the one anti-Gryffindor line even while he was being dragged away by the vitally important thing that grabbed him," Lily observed as they trotted after him.

"You should be kinder to him; he's an oppressed minority."

"Really?"

"Yeah. A Slytherin who doesn't like not being liked."

Lily suddenly stopped dead, feigning complete and utter shock. "Ye gods! A Slytherin with... actual human feelings?"

"Stop the presses," Sev agreed dryly. He looked at her. "Do you mind? We're actually in the middle of something here."

"Oh, can you stop it with the logic for just a couple of seconds? You're really no fun to have adventures with."

"Well, that's something I'll certainly have to work on," he said sarcastically. Then it was his turn to stop abruptly as he noticed the flattened grass ahead of them.

"What?"

"Look at the ground."

Lily looked. "It's a dent." He rolled his eyes at her.

"It's a rut."

"Well, you say potato. There's a rut in the ground. So what?"

"I've seen marks like this before, out in the Forbidden Forest. But never this fresh before."

"So Hagrid's been rolling barrels of Butterbeer about. There is such a thing as overthinking, you know?"

"You can never think too much," he refuted.

"On the other hand, it's easy to talk too much. Do you think you could possibly be quiet?"

No doubt Lily would have argued, had she not acknowledged the wisdom of hiding their presence from Malachite. They broke from the cover of trees just in time to see the door ahead of them fall closed.

"He's gone back in the school," Lily observed.

Snake rolled his eyes at her. "Are they paying you to be the narrator?"

"They're not paying me for any of this, actually."

"You're free to leave. In fact, please do."

She gave him a look. "Oh no. You're not getting rid of me that easily. Besides —" she reached inside her robe and yanked out the wadded up invisibility cloak. "You need me."


"You always carry that around with you?" he asked her.

"Only when I think you're up to something."

"All the time, then?"

"Yeah, pretty much." She shook out the cloak and stretched it over both their heads. "Let's go see what he's up to."

Sev would never have chanced trying to observe the theft under normal circumstances, but the invisibility cloak changed matters. As did the presence of Lily. It was probably easier to go along with what she wanted to do than get caught short because the two of them were



standing around arguing it over. And if they were by some chance spotted, it wouldn't be too hard to make it appear that Lily had suspected something and he had followed her to make sure she didn't witness anything.

It wasn't the world's easiest thing to move surreptitiously when there were two of them under the cloak. There was enough room for them, barely, but if they didn't coordinate their movements to some degree they were liable to lose their cover without warning. At least Lily was light-footed.

With the restrictions imposed by the cloak, it took longer than it should have done get to the tower and begin to ascend the stairs. Lily was obviously itching to charge on ahead, but Sev's more cautious pace ruled the day. The last thing they needed was for one of them to trip or mis-step and make a noise.

They were about halfway up as a sudden almighty crash sounded above. Lily jumped, causing the cloak to spill to the ground. Sev quickly snatched it up and looked at her. "Let me take this."

She looked like she was going to object, but there wasn't time for that. "Remember that spell I used in the first year? The one that made Fennel not see me when I was standing in the shadows?"

"Vaguely." She made a half-correct stab at the

pronunciation, and he corrected her.

"Use that. Go down to the bottom of the stairs, and wait to see if anyone comes down. Go!" he ordered, when she still hesitated.

She looked annoyed, but pulled away and started to hop lightly back down the steps. Sev threw the cloak back over himself, and continued to ascend at a faster pace.

Even as he scurried up the stairs, his mind was working overtime, trying to analyze the source of the resounding crash that they'd heard. It had sounded like somebody crashing into a piece of furniture, hard. The sound of somebody trying to break down the door? But if so, it couldn't be the Death Eater. Or any of the other teachers, because they all had the code.

He couldn't even be fully sure it was Malachite who was up there. They'd followed him out of the woods, but they hadn't seen for certain it was him who'd entered the building. And even if it had been, he might have been going somewhere else...

Too many variables. There were too many variables, and he didn't like that at all. He slowed to a complete halt ten steps from the top, and listened intently for a moment. He heard another sound, a smaller thump, like something striking stone, and a strange kind of

hissing. What was going on up there?



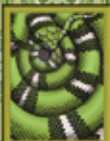
Sev silently trod the last two steps, and with one last check that the cloak was covering him, peered around the doorway. What he saw, even he could probably have been forgiven for failing to predict.

The hooded figure directly across from him sparked immediate recognition; it was undoubtedly the same person he'd seen with Malfoy three years ago. That had been his only sure sighting of the hidden Death Eater, and he'd been sure to burn it into his memory. However, in an unpredictable turn of events, this sighting wasn't the most interesting thing in the room.

That honour would almost certainly have to go to the enormous snake with which the Death Eater was tussling.

The snake was as thick around as a human torso, perhaps thicker, and at least twelve feet long. It was the shimmering blue white of solid ice, with a pattern of interlocking shield-shaped scales.

Well, Sev reflected, at least the origin of those mysterious ruts in the grass was explained. Such a creature might be able to move silently, but it certainly couldn't do it without leaving its mark.



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Under ordinary conditions the enormous snake should have had no trouble coiling around and crushing its opponent, but the Death Eater was backed into a corner and it was too big to squeeze in and get at the hooded figure.

The snake, in a display of non-reptilian intelligence, seemed to realise that, and pulled back to hiss. Its fangs were as long as any of Sev's fingers, and they dripped venom.

For a moment, snake and Death Eater regarded each other. Or so it seemed, although Sev could see nothing of the face shadowed beneath the dark hood. Then, as one, both struck.

The snake's jaws snapped, but it was the Death Eater's hidden dagger that found its mark. The creature suddenly let out an incredible screech and reared backwards. The hooded figure deftly ducked away from it and sprinted out of the tower room, hammering down the stairs so quickly that it was pure luck the invisible Snape wasn't crashed into.

Sev saw the hilt of a dagger protruding from the snake's underbelly. It thrashed, trying to bite at the handle but unable to get a grip to tug it free.

Sev hesitated for a long moment. He had a hunch about this creature... but if he was wrong, and it was just a wild animal, approach-



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ing it could well be his last move.

Still, sometimes you had to just follow your instincts. Sometimes, all logic could tell you was that if you waited around to be one hundred percent sure, it would be too late to do anything.

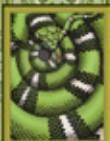
In a decisive moment, Sev tugged off the invisibility cloak and stepped into the room. "Stop," he said, as commandingly as he was able.

The snake abruptly stopped thrashing. It slowly turned its head to regard him with grey, cold, unblinking eyes.

Had it been an animal, he could have said something like "Stay," but he didn't think it was just that, and so he said nothing. Instead, he very slowly stepped towards the huge creature. It reared up to give him more room to get at the knife-handle.

Sev gave it a brief nod of acknowledgement, and grabbed the knife in both hands to yank it free. It took nearly all the effort his muscles could provide, and the snake let out another hissing shriek. Sev didn't panic or run back, understanding that it was only pain that made it screech.

The blade of the knife was dripping with a thick, dark substance that hissed against the metal. He placed it down on the floor in the corner, careful not to touch the blade.



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Then he looked back up at the snake, which was watching him. "I know what you are," he said to it, looking it in the eye.

There was a sudden clatter of footsteps, and he looked around to see Lily come hareing up the stairs. She skidded to an abrupt halt as she saw him and the snake. "Holy —"

She bit off whatever swear-word she might have been contemplating as Professor Dumbledore emerged from the stairwell behind her. Despite the fact that the headmaster was considerably more than seventeen years old himself, he didn't seem remotely out of breath.

"Professor," said Sev, with a nod.

"Severus," said Dumbledore, just as calmly. Lily gaped at the pair of them, and the headmaster's eyes twinkled mischievously. Sev decided it fell to him to address the fourth member of their little gathering.

"You may as well change back now, you know," he told the serpent.

Lily let out a little gasp of surprise as the blue-white snake abruptly melted into the form of a human man. He grunted and dropped to his knees, clutching at his side with a grimace of pain.

"Professor!" exclaimed Lily.

Malachite looked up at Snape. "Clever boy,"



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he wheezed with difficulty.

"Naturally." Sev assisted Dumbledore as they both helped Malachite to his feet. The headmaster patted his shoulder with some concern.

"Carnus, are you hurt?" he asked worriedly.

The Defence Against the Dark Arts professor pulled aside his robes and lifted the undershirt to look at his wound. It made a jagged line against his deathly pale skin, but it had already stopped bleeding.

"It's almost healed," he said, dropping the shirt back down and dismissing it. "It takes more than a knife wound to kill one of my kind."

Lily had recovered a little, although her jaw was still dropped. "You're a Naga!" she realised.

"I'm that, yes," Malachite agreed, with a small smile. "Full marks on identification of magical creatures, there."

Sev nodded slowly, a lot of things abruptly clicking into place. He had known Malachite to be a Parselmouth, capable of talking in the snake tongue, but that was an ability that had long been intertwined with the more ancient bloodlines of house Slytherin. He had read of the Naga, but certainly hadn't had any reason to expect that he might meet one.

Ironically enough, it had been in the private

library Malachite had granted him access to that he'd found the few details of the Naga people that were available. An ancient race of India, they were part-human, part-snake, and some of them had the ability to shift between the two forms. As soon as he had seen that over-large serpent fighting the Death Eater and acting with intelligence, the idea had clicked into place. The moment it had, Malachite had been the only possible suspect.

"Who stabbed you?" asked Lily warily, perhaps wondering if it had been Snape, and if so, whose side she ought to be on.

"Our very own hidden Death Eater, I should imagine," said Dumbledore quietly.

"Yes." Malachite looked frustrated. "I thought there might be an attempt to steal the glass whilst everyone was distracted, so I slipped away and put a ward on the tower door to alert me if anyone went up. I caught them in the act, but I was too late. They got the glass, and I didn't even see the person's face."

Dumbledore nodded, but didn't look too worried. "Calm yourself, Carnus, all is not lost. We were already resigned to losing that particular Foe-Glass, and it will avail our enemy little."

Malachite frowned in puzzlement for a

moment, then realisation dawned. "It was bait?" he demanded.

Sev nodded. "I hope you realise you nearly ruined my plan," he admonished dryly.

"Your plan?" Malachite looked at him, and then laughed quietly. "Of course, I should have known you'd be up to your eyebrows in this." He turned back to Dumbledore. "Albus, you surely could have explained —" He broke off, and looked resigned. "You suspected me?" he surmised.

"I suspected everybody," said Snape dryly.

"He's like that," nodded Lily.

Malachite looked back at her. "And how did you come to be mixed up in this, young lady?"

"Wrong place, wrong time," she said, with a quick shrug. Malachite raised an eyebrow.

"By design, no doubt." He looked at Sev and Dumbledore. "So this was all a trap of yours? Well, I fear the mouse has sprung it, and escaped with the cheese." He nodded his head towards the open door.

"Not quite," Sev said enigmatically, and he moved to examine his magical lock. As he had suspected, the Death Eater had taken the time to scramble the positions after they'd opened it; well, he had his built in features to deal with that. He drew his wand. "*Recyclius!*"

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"It's no good fiddling with that, Severus," Malachite told him, shaking his head. "They'll have used concealment magics to hide their identity, that's a given."

"I'm not looking for that," Sev said, not looking up from the little planets as they rotated through their 'orbits'.

Malachite frowned, and he and the others came closer to watch. "Then what are you doing?"

"Looking at the last code that was put in."

"But what good will that do you? You already know how to get in. And anyway," he gestured at the magical lock as all the pieces came to a stop, "that's not even the code!"

Sev looked up at him, and smiled thinly. "It's not the code I gave you," he corrected.

Malachite looked confused, and then surprised, and Lily began to grin. Dumbledore let out a hearty chuckle. "Our Severus is quite the schemer, Carnus. You should know that by now."

"I should, shouldn't I?" agreed Malachite wryly. "Very well, Severus — you've proved yourself a master tactician. If you gave everybody a different code, then whose code was used?"

They all leaned closer, as Sev once again stared closely at the arrangement of the pieces. He had recognized the pattern as soon as it had

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first clicked into place, but it was in his nature to check, and check, and check again.

“Professor Vitae,” he said abruptly, straightening up.

Lily stared at him, mouth agape. Dumbledore let out a melancholy sigh, looking up at the ceiling, and Malachite began to slowly nod.

“Ah, Ellida,” said Dumbledore, sadly shaking his head. “I had hoped I was wrong about her.”

“What? No, that can’t be — ” Lily looked from him to Snape in disbelief. “But she’s a — ”

“Gryffindor?” Malachite laughed, a sound without much humour. “Ah yes. Who would suspect the mighty Gryffindors, when we, the Slytherins, the snakes, are here to embody all that is wrong with the universe?” There was a bitter twist in his accent on ‘snakes,’ and now they all knew why.

“No, but she, I mean — ” Lily shook her head. “She’s a Death Eater...?”

“I know it seems hard to believe,” said Dumbledore. “I’ve had my suspicions for some years now, but I had been praying I was wrong. She was always such a bright child...”

“Not to mention a vicious, spiteful one,” said Malachite darkly. “Oh, she hid it well, but I always knew there was a dark side to Ellida Vitae.” He shook his head slowly. “Still, even so... I’m not sure I

would have believed this of her.” He laughing shakily. “I must admit, I had my eye on poor Trigo.”

“Professor Fractalis?” Lily said disbelievingly. The Arithmancy professor was well-known for his timidity.

“I know, I know,” he admitted. “But he’s been acting so strangely lately — ”

Lily giggled.

Malachite frowned. “What?”

She looked at him, and then across at Snape, and then she started to laugh. “Honestly, you people — you’re supposed to be the smart ones here! Of course he’s acting strangely. He’s got a girlfriend!”

“Janeida?” Malachite seemed totally taken aback. “Surely not?”

“Yeah!” said Lily pointedly. “It’s obvious.”

“Not quite so obvious as certain people who insist on shouting about how certain other people are not their boyfriend,” interjected Sev acidly.

“Oh, give it a rest, greaseball,” Lily said, rolling her eyes. “Anybody would think you wanted him for yourself, the way you go on about it all the time.”

“I think I can find it within myself to resist his manly charms,” said Sev dryly.

Malachite was listening to the two of them

bicker with a slightly lost look on his face. "You two... know each other?" he asked carefully.

"Oh yeah. We're old friends," said Lily breezily.

"Let's not exaggerate," said Snape.

"We solve mysteries together," Lily elaborated, sticking her tongue out at him.

"I solve. She follows me around and makes smart remarks."

"At least they're smart," she shrugged.

"Smarter than the average Gryffindor," he said, shrugging back. "That's not difficult."

Lily shook her head again. "Professor Vitae? Really? She was always so nice..."

"She seemed nice," Sev corrected. "But she also tried to poison you, if you recall."

"That was her?" said Lily, rubbing her head as if she was getting a headache.

"Well, she was the one who had hold of the Gryffindor badges before they were given to you. And she told you to keep it on after you'd noticed there was something wrong with it."

"No doubt she managed to slide the blame on that one over to me," observed Malachite dryly.

"Well, yeah. But that's because you're a Slytherin," Lily objected.

Malachite laughed shortly. "Not quite. Mostly, it's because I'm me." He sighed. "You see, Ellida

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was once a typical Gryffindor, much like yourself. We were both in the tops of our houses, and fighting it out for pole position within our year.

"Ellida always used to push herself too far to try and be the best. One year, there was a terrible accident, and she nearly died when a potion went horribly wrong. I was able to save her life because in my snake form, I was safe from the poisonous fumes."

"But if you saved her life, then —"

"Alas," Dumbledore took up the story, "poor Ellida would never accept that she'd made a mistake with the potion. She continued to insist that there had been sabotage, that Carnus had been coming in to kill her, not to save her. She blamed all of her teachers, too, for refusing to believe her version of events." He shook his head. "We worried for her, but when she returned to the school the following year, all seemed well again, and we thought she had got over the trauma of the incident. It appears we were wrong."

"Clearly, she never gave up looking for revenge," Malachite nodded. "The Death Eaters must have seemed the perfect way for her to achieve it. It's easy to join someone else's campaign of hatred when that's all you can feel yourself. Her new friends have no doubt promised her the chance to

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take her revenge on me and all her other enemies, in return for her aid." Oddly, he didn't sound all that threatened by the prospect.

"So what do we do now?" asked Lily, exhaling heavily.

"Nothing," said Sev. They all looked at him. "I engineered this theft for them. If we move against her now, I'll be the biggest suspect. We can't do anything yet."

Dumbledore looked grave. "Much as it pains me to continue to harbour an enemy within these walls, I fear the deception is necessary. Severus is our closest link to the inner circles of the Death Eaters, and we need to protect him if we are to have a chance."

"But what about Professor Vitae?" Lily wanted to know. "We can't just – we can't just let her get away with it!"

"We won't," said Sev quietly. "But it's all about the timing. It only takes one misstep for us to lose it all."

There was a long silence, and the Dumbledore clapped his hands. "And now," he announced, "we must return to the festival. Secrets may keep, but impatient students won't, and soon we will be missed."

The four of them descended from the tower,

and went their separate ways.



Professor Malachite cornered Sev one last time before the Hogwarts Express came to take them all home. "This is a dangerous game you're playing, Severus," he warned.

"I'm not playing," Sev reminded him.

"No, you're not," the teacher agreed. "And neither are they. Lily's right, you know. We're asking for trouble keeping a spy this close to us."

"But now we know she's a spy," Sev pointed out. "And that puts us ahead of the game."

"Maybe." Malachite frowned reflectively. "But I can feel things coming to a head. You and your Death Eater companions will be graduating next year, and somehow I doubt you'll be going out quietly..."


"I'll handle it," said Sev. "I always do."

"I hope you know what you're doing," said Malachite quietly. "I just hope you know what you're doing."

Then the last call for the train came again, and Severus headed for the platform to leave Hogwarts for the second to last time. He left Professor Malachite behind on the platform, looking troubled.



THE SEVEN-HEADED SERPENT



SEVERUS SNAPE STEPPED OUT onto platform nine and three quarters for the seventh and final time. Perhaps his heart ought to have been heavy — or even light — at the thought, but he had other things occupying his mind. A great number of things were coming to a head in the world of wizardry right now, and his school career was just about the least important of them.

At seventeen, Sev was now a man grown, imposingly tall if more skinny than slim, and could have been handsome if he'd cared. He did not — appearances, like many of the other things his classmates considered so important, were largely meaningless to him.

Indeed, all of Snape's own most valuable skills were the kind that didn't show on the surface; his surface showed very little at all, except when he wanted it to. He went through life with an icy, impassive exterior, occasionally exploding into a raging temper that very few realised

was as calculated as his barbed remarks.

Orphaned and largely self-raised, with the aid of his uncle's extensive magical library, Severus had developed a truly exceptional logical mind — not to mention the ability to remain detached from the people around him. He'd been watching and listening very carefully from the very beginning of his time at Hogwarts, and it hadn't taken long at all to realise that something very rotten was building in the wizard world.

Though nobody could accuse him of selfless nobility, Sev was nothing if not pragmatic, and logic dictated that the rise of the Death Eaters would do him no favours. Whilst he prized knowledge above all else, they were more interested in their meaningless concept of 'purity' — a system which offended his innate sense of logic. He wasn't impressed by the idea of a world where stupidity could be ranked over genius simply by 'virtue' of family connections, and he knew for a fact that a man of his intelligence would be a target for everybody when it came to that kind of backstabbing environment. Oh, he trusted his ability to outwit them at every turn, but he knew it would be even simpler to eradicate such enemies entirely.

The Death Eaters needed to be stopped from

reaching power, and he wasn't about to trust the forces of 'good' to achieve that without aid. Even Dumbledore, one of the few wizards he believed to have an intelligence comparable to his own, was too often blinded by emotion and compassion. Heroics had their place he supposed, but they were no substitute for careful calculation and planning.

The Death Eater leader, Lord Voldemort, was certainly just as mentally adept as the Hogwarts headmaster — and considerably less hampered by any semblance of moral code. All the heroics in the world wouldn't defeat Voldemort's cunning — that was a job that would require somebody on the inside; somebody extremely quick, adaptable, perceptive, and capable of thinking a few dozen steps ahead of the enemy.

Naturally, Sev considered himself the only possible candidate for the job.

Right from the beginning, he'd made his way into the inner circle of Lucius Malfoy, the obvious ringleader. Though Malfoy didn't like Sev overmuch — he was far too aware of his superior intelligence for that — he trusted him, as much as one Slytherin trusted another.

Malfoy was waiting for him as he stalked through the crowd on the platform. Most of

them stepped back out of his way; his carefully built reputation for fury and curses was close to legendary. He was tarred with the same brush as his fellow secret Death Eaters, and his icy exterior added a dark mystery all his own.

Though Lucius Malfoy had no doubt reached his full adult height, he would never be as tall as Snape or indeed most of his male classmates. Together with his white-blond hair and slim build, he looked almost fragile, delicate — until you noticed the steel in his cold grey eyes.

"Severus." He acknowledged Snape with a barely perceptible nod. "You kept us waiting." Of course, they had never actually made any arrangement to meet on the platform — Malfoy had just assumed that it was his classmates' priority to be where he was.

"This is hardly any place I would care to loiter," he said with a sneer. In truth, a crowded platform was an ideal place for indulging one of his greatest talents, people-watching, although after six years there was little about his fellow students he didn't already know. However, as a Death Eater he was supposed to be deeply disgusted at the idea of fraternizing with lesser mortals. In fact, Sev was quite happy giving most of the students that designation, but not

for the same reasons Malfoy did.

“Quite.” Malfoy pulled a highly snooty expression and swept around in a circle pointedly. “Then let’s get out of the rabble.” They boarded a train.

There were seven of them together in the carriage; over the years they had formed into a tightly knit group. Although by now all of house Slytherin bowed to Malfoy to some degree, these five — and, so he believed, Snape — were his most loyal followers.

Malfoy was the leader, and Sev the mastermind. Nick Avery was slick and charming, and could have rivalled Malfoy for leadership if he hadn’t been too lazy. Colin Crabbe was dim-witted but a surprisingly talented thief, and Simon Lestrangle was quietly psychopathic. The other two boys, Alex Nott and Graham Goyle, were both a year younger, and served as the muscle of the operation. They terrorized ‘mudbloods’ and ‘Muggle-lovers’ wherever they were found, or even suspected of being found. The young Death Eaters never let the facts get in the way of a good prejudice.

Although it would be a big mistake to assume — as most adults probably would — that their youth somehow rendered them harmless, Malfoy’s band of followers were not Voldemort’s most deadly card



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in the Hogwarts deck. That honour belonged to Ellida Vitae, a Death Eater spy who Snape had spent most of the past six years trying to uncover.

As the head of house for Gryffindor, no less — home of the noble and brave — Vitae would probably be considered above suspicion by all but the most untrusting. The only ones who now knew her secret were Malfoy, Snape, Dumbledore, and the Slytherin head of house Professor Malachite.

And, of course, Lily. The least likely of Sev’s allies in his undercover war, she had twigged early on that there was more to him than met the eye, and whilst she didn’t exactly approve of some of his methods, she had to accept that his spying was probably their best hope against the Death Eaters. She might not lead nearly as elaborate a double life as he, but her Gryffindor boyfriend Potter and his friends would be very surprised if they knew that she and Snape were actually pretty close associates.

Malfoy, of course, would be totally horrified. Lily fulfilled every qualification necessary to be his most hated enemy — she was a mudblood, a Gryffindor and James Potter’s girlfriend, not to mention committing the cardinal sin of being simultaneously female and better in her classes than Malfoy.



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However, right now Malfoy was dreaming of bigger things than the perpetual thorns in his side from house Gryffindor. He waited until the train pulled out, as if fearful of spies, and then leaned forward eagerly.

“Our leader wants to see us all this Christmas. I need you all to tell your parents that you’ll be staying with me, or at least that you’ll be staying on at Hogwarts.”

“Why all the fuss?” frowned Nick Avery. “Why can’t we go out at night like we usually do?”

“We’re not using the Portkey this time,” Malfoy explained curtly. Over the last few years, they had often been woken in the middle of the night to troop out to the Forbidden Forest and be magically transported.

“Why not?” frowned Colin. Sev realised the answer first, probably because he was the only one who’d taken the time to work out where they actually were when they visited their hidden leader.

“He’s in the country,” he surmised. All their previous visits had been to the European school of wizardry, Durmstrang, although no one had admitted as much out loud. Now, it appeared, Voldemort was coming to England to set his plans in motion.

Malfoy grinned wickedly. “The hour is upon us,” he smirked. “Soon...” He didn’t need to finish.

The boys’ answering grins were a mixture of

triumph and nervousness. All of a sudden, their playing at being spies and rebels was a whole lot closer to becoming a reality...



Sev’s meeting with his other group of secret allies was a much more surreptitious affair. The young Death Eaters were secure in their arrogance, and protected by the fact that everyone expected Slytherins to be clustered together in corners, plotting. Secret meetings with people who were supposed to be his arch-enemies were a little hard to arrange.

It was three weeks in to the term before Professor Malachite happened to ‘casually’ snare him after class. “Severus; I’ve been thinking about entering you for an extra N.E.W.T. in Dark Enchantments at the end of the year. I’d like you to come and see the headmaster with me about it, if you don’t mind.”

As if she’d been coached to do so — and perhaps she had, for she was under considerably less scrutiny than he — Lily piped up “Dark Enchantments? I’ve been reading up on that over the summer. Oh, sir, can’t I take the exam too?”

It was hard to tell whether Malachite’s scowl was real or feigned. Though his enmity towards

Professor Vitae had turned out to be well-justified, he hadn't quite got over his dislike of her house in general. And perhaps he had good reason to; house Slytherin were routinely maligned and mistrusted, a legacy of suspicion that Malfoy and his disciples certainly weren't doing anything to retract. Malachite tended to be fiercely proud of any show of talent or good behaviour by his students, and was endless frustrated when house Gryffindor horned in on it for their slice of the glory.

"Very well, Lily," he said coolly, "you may come and speak with the headmaster as well. However, I should warn you that the extra course on top of your Defence Against the Dark Arts studies will be very demanding."

"I'm sure I'll survive," said Lily, and smiled sweetly. In her own way, she could be just as wickedly smug as Lucius Malfoy himself.

As she and Snape trooped through the corridors together, they shot each other sneers and dirty looks. As soon as they were through into the corridor outside the headmaster's office, Lily's dissolved into giggles.

Malachite gave her a disapproving look. "This is hardly a laughing matter, Lily."

"Sorry," she said, not very apologetically. "It's just your face, Sev. You look like you've

swallowed a frog."

"It's my 'what did I do in a past life to have to put up with these people?' look."

"Well, it's very effective," she assured him.

"What makes you think it's put on?"

"I should think you have more trying things to put up with than us," observed Professor Dumbledore, seeming to appear out of nowhere. "What of your other group of allies?"

"They're up to something," Sev said bluntly. "Voldemort is in the country, and he wants to see us all at Christmas."

"In the country?" Malachite stroked his goatee beard gravely. "Sounds like he's getting pretty close to making his move openly."

"Indeed it does." Dumbledore looked troubled. "And if so, I fear the viper in our midst may well be preparing to strike."

"Yes, well, she's not the only snake in the Hogwarts grass," Malachite said pointedly. The Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher had a secret of his own; he was a Naga, a shapeshifter capable of taking on the form of a huge white snake. Dumbledore had known about it since his school days, just as he had kept the secret of Remus Lupin's lycanthropy.

"Enough with the snakey metaphors?" Lily sug-

gested. "If anybody can listen in on us here, we've lost already, so why don't we all just speak plainly? You're talking about Professor Vitae, right?"

Dumbledore smiled fondly at her. "Indeed we are Lily, and you're quite right. The time for mincing words is long past."

"In that case," said Malachite fiercely, "let me say again what I've been telling you all summer. We need to get rid of her."

"Maybe so, maybe so." Dumbledore looked sad. "I fear you're right; the time for bringing her back from the dark path's she's strayed to is long past, and if Voldemort plans to move openly there's little need to worry about a replacement spy. So the question becomes can we move against her without throwing suspicion onto young Severus?"

"Of course we can," insisted Malachite boldly. "By throwing it all on to me."

"Now, Carnus —" Dumbledore seemed less than thrilled with the idea, but the Slytherin house leader was firm.

"Please, Albus, she knows full well that it was I she tussled with in the tower last year. There are a limit to the giant white snakes one encounters in a lifetime," he said dryly. "I didn't see her face then, but she knows I've always been suspicious of her."

"It makes sense." Sev spoke softly, but every-



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one fell silent when he did. "If you confront her, you can have her convict herself."

"Oh, c'mon!" objected Lily. "She's kept her defences up this long, you really think she's that stupid?"

"No, but she's that arrogant. Think of Malfoy. The things he says could get him in trouble a thousand times over, but why does he do it?"

"To prove he can," answered Lily instantly. "It's not enough to be nasty, he has to be nasty and prove that he can get away with it." She turned that over in her head for a moment. "So you're saying she'll taunt him with the truth, if she believes no one else will ever get to hear it?"

"Exactly."

"But I think we'd better arrange that someone is there to hear it," interjected Dumbledore soberly. Malachite frowned at him.

"I appreciate your help, Albus, but I assure you, I can take care of Ellida Vitae myself."

Dumbledore looked troubled. "I thought you would say so. I'm afraid I must insist. Ellida has been waiting to revenge herself upon you for a long time — your nature may protect you from many kinds of attacks, but you must remember that she knows what you are. Your victory is not much of one if it gets you killed."

Malachite looked petulant, but finally he



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gave a single sharp nod. "Very well. I'll confront her, and you can tag along. I trust you'll find a way to make yourself... unobtrusive."

"I'm sure I'll think of something," smiled the headmaster enigmatically.

"But not yet," Sev cautioned. "The time isn't right."

Malachite snorted. "Is it ever?"

"Wait until after Christmas," he elaborated. "Vitae is Voldemort's conduit to Malfoy's Death Eaters, and his means of sending them their orders. No doubt he'll find a way to reestablish contact soon enough, but let's not hand it to him on a plate."

The others nodded their agreement, and Lily asked "So what does he want with you at Christmas?"

Sev gave a slight shrug. "To talk about the future, no doubt. Time is growing short, and sooner or later he's going to take us out of the schoolyard and into the combat zone."

The others exchanged worried glances. Sev's face was, as always, unreadable.



The autumn term passed largely without incident. Malfoy had some kind of minor spat with Narcissa, and went around cursing first years with a perpetual scowl; Potter and his friends become



heroes of house Gryffindor by turning the Slytherin Quidditch robes pink; a big fight exploded in Potions that ended with both Potter and Malfoy's friends in a week's worth of detention.

There were skirmishes between the houses, but no outright battles, and Sev suspected Malfoy was laying low — probably at Voldemort's orders. So far as the Death Eater leader was concerned, his followers at Hogwarts were very much a hidden asset, and for now, at least, he wanted to keep them that way.

Sev had no trouble getting permission to attend the Christmas meeting; he always stayed at the school for the holidays in any case, and the uncle who acted as his nominal guardian was content to let him come and go as he pleased.

The seven of them spent the first week of the holiday at the Malfoy family mansion. It was very much as Sev had imagined it, a cold, inhospitable place staffed by petrified house elves. They saw very little of Mr. Malfoy, an imposing and icy-voiced man who was obviously the role-model for Lucius's best evil scowls. There was no sign of his mother at all.

The one thing that Sev did find in the Malfoys' favour was that they had a rather extensive library of books of dark magic. Those volumes



that he hadn't found in Professor Malachite's collection were generally a highly unpleasant read, but he consumed them avidly all the same. In Sev's world, no knowledge was bad knowledge.

On the sixth day, Sev was woken even earlier than usual by a blazing pain in his arm. He wasn't surprised when he pulled back his sleeve to find the Dark Mark tattooed there burning black.

He quickly dressed and found the other boys milling about in the hallway. Nick Avery was the last to emerge from the room he was sharing with Colin, rubbing his eyes.

"Oh, c'mon," he groaned. "He's even in this country now, it would kill him to keep office hours?"

"We go when we're summoned," Malfoy reminded him sharply. "Come on." He led the way to the main room, where a fire was still burning. "We'll travel by Floo Powder — I can Apparate, but I don't suppose any of you can."

Sev suspected he could if occasion demanded it, but although he had learnt the skill he had yet to find reason to test it. Unlike Malfoy, he didn't feel compelled to show off his magics just for the sake of it. Why show everybody when you could hide your skills and keep everyone off-balance?

He didn't recognize the name of the mansion Malfoy gave them to teleport to; he filed

it away on the off-chance that it belonged to a family who had gone over to the Death Eaters. That was a possibility, but it was just as likely that the true owners had been killed off to make room for the Death Eater leader.

Two of his followers had made the trip from Durmstrang with him, the snooty professor Dolohov and his young lackey Igor. They greeted the young Brits with an air of disinterested contempt, and ushered them into Voldemort's presence.

Sev was probably the least nervous of the seven of them, for all that he had most to worry about. Aside from Malfoy, he had seen the most of Voldemort in person, and he thought he had a fair enough handle on how his mind worked. The Death Eater leader was certainly deadly, but there was logic behind his actions, not random cruelty. He was building a reign of terror, but he was doing it on purpose, and with a specific aim in mind.

That aim, of course, being to establish himself as absolute ruler of the wizarding community. It seemed to be a common enough goal, although Sev couldn't for the life of him figure out why. Nearly all the people he interacted with were shallow and uninteresting — why would he want to take on responsibility for a whole country full of similar types?

Voldemort smiled at them all. Sev had no doubt that James Potter and the like would fully expect him to be as icy and grim as, well, Snape himself, but in fact the opposite was true. Voldemort was a very handsome man in his middle years, with an easy, light manner and a ready smile... but Sev knew to look at the eyes, and Voldemort's eyes were very sharp indeed. He might seem friendly, even playful, but he was a very, very dangerous man, and highly intelligent with it.

"Ah, gentlemen." Voldemort lounged casually back in his chair as he regarded them all. "So we meet again."

Actually, it was the first time all seven of them had confronted him together. Nott and Goyle were more recent recruits, and presumably had been taken to see him by Malfoy on some other occasion. Voldemort liked to assess each of his new recruits personally; partly, perhaps, to encourage their awe and fear of him, but also Sev suspected because, like Snape himself, he had a great talent for judging people at first glimpse.

"Lord Voldemort." Malfoy bowed his head in a way that was probably best termed 'arrogantly respectful'. Malfoy held on tight to his position of author-

ity, but he wasn't stupid enough to try to challenge someone as high above him as Voldemort.

Voldemort gave a nod in return. "Lucius." Then he nodded to Snape. "Severus." Sev held in a slight smile of acknowledgement. Clever, very clever — accenting Malfoy's superiority, yet at the same time pointing out that Snape had his own amount of power, too. It took a careful balance of appeasement and prodding to keep Malfoy in place, but Voldemort played him effortlessly.

"Gentlemen, the time of my ascension grows near," he told them with the edge of a triumphant smirk. "Soon, very soon... and I will need faithful followers in position when that time comes."

"What do you want of us?" asked Malfoy eagerly.

Voldemort drew his wand, and Colin, Nick and the younger boys shrank back fearfully. The Death Eater leader smirked, but merely gave a flick of his wand and muttered a simple transportation spell. A pile of seven scrolls appeared on the table beside him, and he gestured for the boys to take them.

Sev took one and unrolled it, scanning the message at his usual rapid speed. It was presented as an official letter, not unlike the ones that were sent out from Hogwarts. As he unfurled it, the letters swirled to personalize it to him.

THE SERPENT ACADEMY OF SLYTHERIN EXCELLENCE

Dear Mr Snape

You have been selected from a number of young hopefuls to take part in the Serpent Academy pilot program this summer. The Serpent program is a further education opportunity for talented older students of House Slytherin.

The program starts immediately after the school term ends and I hope that we will see you there.

Yours sincerely
L.V. DeMorto
Head of Program

Sev smirked slightly at the blatant anagram of the signature. Anybody with the slightest knowledge of the Death Eaters could decipher it — and yet what could they do? It was the kind of casual arrogance that was a hallmark of Death Eaters and Slytherins both. Voldemort wanted his enemies to see what he was doing; see it, but be unable to stop it and unable to prove it.

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“So we’re a nest of serpents, are we?” grinned Nick Avery. Voldemort held up a hand to correct him.

“No, you are one serpent. A team, thinking and acting and moving as one, for the sake of the cause.”

“A seven-headed serpent,” Snape suggested, whilst Malfoy scowled. No doubt he wasn’t too thrilled about being lumped in with everybody else as part of a team.

“Quite, quite.” Voldemort chuckled, an earthy, deceptively friendly sound. “And many heads are better than one, are they not?” Abruptly, his expression clamped down and cut off the good humour. “You may go. Malfoy, Snape, a moment.”

They both lingered as the others trooped out dutifully. “And some heads are better than others,” he said, for the benefit of them alone. “Malfoy, watch your men carefully. I trust you to weed out the weak and the valueless.”

Malfoy gave a coolly triumphant smile. Voldemort turned to Sev. “Severus, you do the same.” Before Malfoy could look annoyed, he elaborated “They all know, whatever we say of teamwork, that Malfoy is their leader. They may be more likely to relax their guard around you. Watch everybody around you very carefully.”

Sev nodded respectfully, and caught the almost imperceptible accent Voldemort gave to ‘every-

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body'. Malfoy didn't realise it, but his second-in-command had just been detailed to keep as close an eye on him as on those below him.

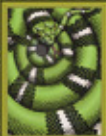
As Sev followed the others out, he reflected that it was almost a pity that he would never let Voldemort know his true loyalties. The Death Eater leader had just the right sort of brain to appreciate the irony.



Malfoy offered the boys the run of his parents' mansion for the remainder of the holidays; Sev was the only one not to take him up on it. He would learn far more at Hogwarts than around a group of boys he'd already observed for six years and besides, the reason he gave Malfoy was a true one — he much preferred the solitude.

Few students stayed at Hogwarts outside of term time, especially during a holiday that was so based around family. With the threat of the hidden Death Eaters growing in everybody's consciousness, the wizarding community preferred to keep their loved ones where they could see them. There were far too many tales these days of people disappearing and whole households blasted out of existence.

It was easy enough, then, for him to find time



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to seek out Dumbledore and Malachite.

The Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher was obviously itching to act. "We need to move now," he urged.

"We need to move later," Sev corrected pointedly. "The winter holidays aren't over yet, and Voldemort can still recall his troops to give them new orders."

"Will it be any different when the new term arrives?" Malachite wanted to know.

Sev nodded. "He's brought us to him by Portkey all the other times, and it has to be Vitae who sets it up for him. Without that, he'll have a great deal of trouble getting us out of the school all together."

"Unless he comes down to the village."

"He won't do that," spoke up Dumbledore, quietly but firmly. Sev nodded.

"He's too smart for that. There's a lot of power concentrated in this school that could harm him at this stage in the game, and I don't think Malfoy or Vitae is important enough for him to risk that."

Malachite looked to the headmaster. "So I make my move against her just before term begins. Do you have your man?"

"Flitwick?" The headmaster nodded, and broke his first smile of the grim planning ses-



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sion. "I haven't told him the details, but he knows we'll be needing him on site — and not just as a teacher. He's a powerful Charms man, and a championship duellist to boot."

"What about Gryffindor?" To his credit, Malachite at least tried to contain his automatic sneer of distaste. "They'll need a new head of house, and you can't hand that to a new man."

Dumbledore nodded, as if he'd thought this through already. "I was thinking of Minerva, actually."

"McGonagall?" Malachite actually started to smile. "Yes, she's been here... why, it must be six, seven years now? She's young, but she takes her Transfiguration classes with a fist of iron. A fine choice, I think. She's just what those rowdy Gryffindors need to keep them all in line."

"So glad you approve," said Dumbledore, with a slight twinkle that made it difficult to tell if he was being wry or serious. The headmaster turned to Snape.

"Severus, you think these plans will be enough to throw Voldemort off track for a moment?"

Sev nodded slightly. "But only a moment. If you bring your substitute right in he'll have no chance to try and lever in another spy. But it won't take him long to start thinking of revenge."

"All to the good," shrugged Malachite. "The

angrier he is, the more careless he'll be."

Sev shook his head. "Not Voldemort. You may make him angry, but he'll be clever about his vengeance all the same. He wants people to be afraid of him, and for that he needs to seem to strike everywhere at once."

"Well, if he strikes at us he'll be in for a surprise," scoffed Malachite. "He can't think to hurt Professor Dumbledore, and I myself have more than a few little surprises up my Slytherin sleeves."

Sev simply nodded, reserving his judgement. Malachite might be right, but he himself preferred to trust cold facts over self-confidence.



Sev liked the holiday season well enough, but mostly because it marked long days of being left to his own devices. He had no objection to goodwill towards all men, provided he wasn't expected to either take part in it or receive it. Who would take noisy, overcrowded parties over curling up alone in the dorms with a good book?

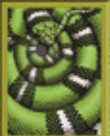
The other boys might return from their homes boasting of the extravagant gifts their parents gave them, but all Severus was used to receiving were books from his uncle — and he certainly wasn't disappointed with that.

His mother's brother was a well-meaning man, but he wouldn't have had much clue how to raise any child, let alone one as coolly self-possessed as his young nephew. His attitude to Severus was mostly one of affection, confusion, and slight relief that he seemed to be capable of raising himself without too much intervention. His uncle might not be too clear on a lot of things about him, but he'd realised pretty quickly that his nephew liked books. The more books the better.

Though, even now he was close to graduation, his uncle still underestimated the level of his education, Sev was always happy enough with his gifts. Even if they were basic books, they were still books, and they were somehow better for the fact that they were his to keep and never had to be returned to someone else's library.

So if Sev was a long way from the type to go crazy with Christmas excitement, he was mildly pleased when the day arrived, and made his way promptly enough to see what the owls would bring him.

As he had two years ago, he found himself with an unexpected delivery on Christmas morning, and this time it wasn't another summons from Voldemort. He frowned as a sleek white school owl delivered a soft package — unlike most of the



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young wizards, he didn't have any crazy relatives with an urge to send him unsolicited clothes.

He tore open the package with a certain amount of caution, and smiled at the familiar silvery fabric revealed. A note fluttered out, and as he picked it up he recognized the handwriting.

You gave it to me, and I don't see why I should give it back. But I know you're up to something, so think of this as a temporary loan until I come back to beat you up and make you tell me.

It was signed simply with an L. Snape shook out the invisibility cloak and held it up thoughtfully. Yes, this was one Christmas present that would definitely come in more handy than his uncle's textbooks...



With the aid of the invisibility cloak, Sev was able to go to witness Malachite's confrontation with Vitae first-hand. A much better proposition than hearing about it after the fact, for even if his allies shared everything with him,



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they wouldn't necessarily look for or notice the same things he did. Dumbledore was wise, but guided by compassion that was too often misplaced. And Malachite was entirely too confident of his superiority over his enemy.

Better, then, that he see for himself. However, Sev didn't see any particular need to inform his allies that he would be accompanying them to observe.

Malachite met Vitae out by the Forbidden Forest. It was the day before the students would be returning, the latest they had dared to leave it.

Vitae strode out to meet her enemy with a cold smile. "So. Carnus. You wanted to speak with me." There was a twist of disgust to her expression when she met him that she could never quite hide, and now she thought they were alone, she wasn't trying.

"I did." Malachite, by contrast, was a block of ice.

She sneered. "I hope you're not plotting some treachery. I know what you are."

Malachite laughed at that; a rich, earthy sound, ringing with genuine amusement. "Treachery, I? I think you forget yourself." He smirked. "Of course, if I were you I would certainly want to."

She looked resolutely unimpressed. "If there's a point to this exercise, I suggest you make it."

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"Very well." He straightened abruptly to his full height, and suddenly the look of the jovial schoolteacher gave way to the inherent nobility of the Naga people he came from. "You say you know what I am, but I recognize you for what you are, Ellida Vitae; a liar, a murderess and a traitor."

Vitae laughed, then, a mocking snort. "You're delusional."

"You're a Death Eater."

He spoke quietly, almost casually. To her credit, she didn't even flinch or look surprised. "You're more than deluded if you think anyone will listen to your jealous accusations," she told him.

"Jealous?" He smiled. "Of what?" He looked her up and down scornfully. "I don't see an awful lot to be jealous of. You're second rate, Vitae. A second rate loser who could never accept I was better than you were. No wonder you went running to your precious Lord Voldemort. Of course you'd embrace a value system that prizes meaningless distinctions over merit."

"You know nothing, Malachite," she spat. "You never did."

"Of course you'd hate those you call mudbloods," he continued relentlessly. "The blood of generations of wizards runs in your veins — I suppose it only makes it that much

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more embarrassing that you're a failure."

"My blood runs hot, not cold like yours," Vitae snarled. "And you have a strange definition of failure, snake."

"Failures are people who lose, my dear Ellida," he told her lightly. "And that, I think you'll find, is definitely you." He laughed again. "Ironic, isn't it? I mean, look at us. You, the brave, noble Gryffindor, the toast of the school. Me, the arrogant Slytherin; sly, secretive, not even human. And which of us went to the bad?" He chuckled.

"Arrogant you certainly are," she said, straightening up. "You truly think you can say these things and expect to be believed? Or do you still have some woefully ineffectual trick up your sleeve?"

"Not up my sleeve, but up yours," Malachite informed her. He smirked. "I know more about your little group than you think. I know that when you sold your loyalties to Voldemort, he branded you with his mark to make sure you never sold them back again."

Vitae made a single sharp movement, and suddenly her wand was in her hand. "And you think that I'll just sit idly by and let you do as you wish?"

"You can't threaten me, Ellida," he remarked calmly. "Or do you forget the name of my speciality?" He shook his sleeve, and suddenly he

was holding his own wand.

Vitae smirked triumphantly. "Some arts are too dark for you to have any defence against them." She raised her wand, ready to cast a spell... and, suddenly, a hand came out of nowhere to grasp her outstretched arm.

"I don't think that will be necessary, Ellida," said Professor Dumbledore quietly. "Do you?"

Even Snape, who had been watching from a distance under the cloak, had not seen him approach.

Vitae yanked her arm away from him and scowled. "Headmaster, you surely don't believe this... *creature's* wild accusations?"

"It's a peculiarity of mine," said the headmaster calmly. "I try to make a habit of believing those who tell the truth."

She snarled at the pair of them, obviously realising the time for smooth talking was well past. "You're fools, both of you. You're no match for the magic Lord Voldemort has taught me."

Dumbledore sighed, and shook his head sadly. "Ah, Ellida. If you truly believe what he's taught you is worth anything, then I fear you never understood magic at all."

Vitae pointed her wand at him. "Your feeble magic is nothing but party tricks, old man! Where's the *power*?" She sneered at him. "Here

you stand, and you don't even have your wand!"

"Perhaps I don't need one." So calmly did he speak, and such was the strength of Dumbledore's reputation in the wizarding community, that Vitae trembled on the edge of casting a spell, not quite daring to go through with it. The Hogwarts headmaster continued to smile at her faintly until her wand-tip lowered towards the ground.

"You've gone a long way down some dark paths, Ellida," he said soberly. "But there is still a way back, should you choose to take it. Turn aside from your dark masters, and I believe I will be able to help you."

Malachite gave a disbelieving snort. Under the cloak, Sev rolled his eyes. Dumbledore had to know full well that his offer would be rejected, but he made it anyway.

Vitae looked at him incredulously, and then spat on the ground. "Did I call you an old man? You're not even that, you're a snivelling child, too weak to fight back against those who seek to destroy you." She smirked evilly. "And that is why we are sure to triumph."

She gestured with her wand and snapped out a word of command, and suddenly her broomstick was in her hand. Malachite lunged towards her, but

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before he could move, she was in the air and away.

The Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher pointed his wand and started to mutter, but Dumbledore stayed his arm. "Let her go."

"She'll run straight back to Voldemort," Malachite warned him, as Vitae disappeared out of view over the trees. No doubt she would Apparate away as soon as she was safely out of the Hogwarts shield.

"She'll tell them nothing they couldn't find out for themselves." He looked up at the stars. "And I fear her masters' displeasure will not go well for her." He showed neither triumph nor grim satisfaction at the prospect, only weary sorrow.

"Perhaps." Malachite looked grave. "But I hope you were right, Albus. Your compassion does you credit, but it's also your biggest weakness."

The headmaster regarded him with a slight smile. "Compassion is a strength, never a weakness, Carnus," he corrected gently.

"Even if it kills you?"

"Especially then, my friend. Especially then."

The two men stood together a moment longer, then turned and began making their way back to the building. Unseen and unnoticed, Snape watched them go.

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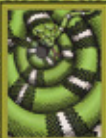
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Sev re-wrapped the invisibility cloak and had one of the school owls deliver it to Lily's dorm where it would await her arrival. No doubt there would be more subterfuge to come, but he doubted his visibility would play into it one way or the other, and he wanted no ties linking him to Lily or the cloak's other user, James.

Lily tried to catch his eye several times during the first days of term, no doubt with questions to ask him, but the first time they ended up in a room together was in a lesson — funnily enough, Charms. The school liked to rotate which groups were put together in the different lessons, no doubt to encourage inter-house friendships — a pretty unlikely goal in the case of Gryffindor-Slytherin, but that didn't stop the powers that be from trying.

For the past couple of months, mixed Charms lessons had meant the usual warfare — especially under Professor Vitae's lax eye. She had been happy to let the battles go on unchecked, and no doubt only Snape and Malfoy realised that it wasn't in fact for the benefit of the Gryffindors.

On this occasion, however, it presented Snape with a handy opportunity to compare and contrast reactions to Professor Vitae's disappearance. Dumbledore had chosen not to announce



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her abrupt departure in a special assembly, perhaps to give Malfoy as little warning as possible of the loss of his ally.

The first rumblings of surprise didn't start until several minutes into the lesson, when it was realised that the usually scrupulously prompt Vitae was nowhere to be seen.

"Maybe the old cow's done us all a favour and dropped dead," grinned Nick Avery. The rumblings on the Gryffindor were not so vicious, but no less optimistic in tone — the absence of even the most beloved teacher was something to be cheered. The more disruption, the less work that had to be done.

James and Sirius began loudly expounding on that mythical school 'rule' that said you could leave if the teachers were ten minutes late, trying to incite the rest of the class to join them in doing a runner. Seated beside them, Lily shot Snape a suspicious look across the room. He returned her gaze with a studiously blank expression.

The buzz of conversation turned to groans as the door creaked open, but everybody craned around in surprise when they saw it wasn't Vitae who came through it.

The smallest wizard any of them had ever seen, in just about the biggest, floppiest hat, shuffled



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through the door with a swaying pile of books. He made his way precariously over to the desk, and instead of opening any of them, dumped them on the chair and climbed up to sit on them.

Everybody gaped at him. He smiled in return, and tipped his hat. "Good morning, class. I'm Professor Flitwick, and I'll be taking you for Charms for the rest of this year."

The buzz of conversation resumed, twice as speculative as before. James Potter's hand was the first to shoot up.

"But, professor, what happened to Professor Vitae?"

Flitwick pushed back his hat as it threatened to slip down over his face. "Professor Vitae has had to leave Hogwarts suddenly for personal reasons."

The Slytherins burst into noisy cheers, whilst the Gryffindors looked almost comically surprised. Sev glanced at Malfoy, but he was simply staring at Flitwick, his face set in stone and his cold gaze unwavering.

"Is she sick?" shouted Sirius over the general hubub.

"Did she get a better job?" asked Helen Beck at the same time.

"I bet something's happened to her," murmured somebody else quietly.

Flitwick clapped his hands for silence, nearly

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dislodging himself from his high perch in the process. "As I said, Professor Vitae has had to leave for personal reasons. I don't know any more than that, so please don't ask me. Now —"

"But who'll be head of House Gryffindor?" interrupted James, frowning.

"Nobody! Nobody wants you!" shouted Nick, and the Slytherins broke up laughing again, all except Sev and Malfoy.

Flitwick gave them a stern look, but didn't say anything. "Professor McGonagall will be taking over that side of Professor Vitae's duties," he told James.


"McGonagall?" Sirius let out a huge groan and sank down under his desk.

The rest of the Gryffindors winced in sympathy, and the Slytherins smirked. Unlike Vitae or Malachite, their Transfiguration teacher played no favorites — at all. No matter how winningly you smiled or how well-behaved you were ninety-nine percent of the time, if you broke the rules in front of McGonagall, you paid.

Flitwick regarded them all sternly. "Right now, settle down, that's enough of that. You're an advanced-level class, and I expect you all to know something. If you'd like to take out your copies of 'The Standard Book of Spells'..."

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In class, Malfoy kept up his impassive mask, but when they got back to the dorms, his followers were taken aback by the depth of his unleashed fury.

“I don’t understand, Lucius—” Colin began.

Malfoy paced up and down the room in tightly-controlled rage. “Of course you don’t, Crabbe, you’re a moron. But I’ve no doubt the rest of you are surprised as well, because none of you are smart enough to see what’s six inches in front of your space. You all knew we had an ally on the teaching staff.”

The matching expressions of disbelief were really quite funny. “But— I mean, she—” Nick tried to begin.

“She was very well disguised,” Malfoy said sharply. “They didn’t just stumble across her by accident, somebody was looking for spies, somebody ferreted her out.”

“Professor Dumbledore?” asked Colin tentatively. Malfoy snarled at him.

“Dumbledore? He’s half senile, and much too in love with his own image to believe anyone could act against him. No, this is the work of a traitor... worse, a traitor within our very own house.”



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“Who?” The other boys leaned in eagerly.

Sev wondered in an almost detached way if Malfoy would cite his own name. He didn’t believe the other boy had any reason to suspect him, but he was no slouch when it came to sniffing out ways to take down potential rivals...

But no, Malfoy had other game in his sights. “Malachite,” he said, disgust dripping from his voice. “He’s had it in for her from the start, and he’s always holding us back, talking about the ‘image’ of House Slytherin. As if we should care what shortsighted mudbloods and Muggle-lovers think of us!”

“What do we do now, Lucius?” asked Colin, a little nervously. It was hard to say if he was afraid of the prospect of them being found out too, or simply of Malfoy himself.

Malfoy’s rage became a cold, hard grin. “Oh... I’m sure we’ll think of something.”



Malfoy presumably got into contact with Voldemort by owl, but Sev wasn’t involved in any of that. He did get to see their supposed leader stomping about the place with a fierce scowl, and concluded that he’d been told to wait and not make any moves just yet. Malfoy was impa-



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tient for swift retribution, but Voldemort had more cunning. Partly the wait might be to prevent people from tying the events together, but also it was to give Malachite a chance to sweat.

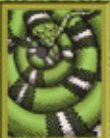
Except he wasn't sweating. He wasn't stupid enough to believe there would be no retribution for breaking Voldemort's plans — he was just fully confident he could deal with it.

"Most likely he'll send them after you," Sev warned him. "Us, even." If there was to be a revenge attack on Malachite, there was no way he could bow out of it without casting suspicions on his loyalties.

"Then I'll turn your attack aside," he said simply. "Severus, I would remind you that despite everything, not one of your little group is over the age of eighteen, and whatever their intent may be, there is a limit to the amount of magical expertise you can amass in that little time."

Sev would have begged to differ, but they weren't really talking about him, just his less knowledge-obsessed fellows. "Perhaps — but they've been getting their education from more sources than just Hogwarts, and the Death Eaters have no interest in placing age limits on their research."

"Learning isn't the same as doing," Malachite pointed out. "And incomplete learning is even



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less. Voldemort may teach tricks, but even if they can repeat them, they don't fully understand them, and they're no match for someone who's spent as long studying the lore as I have." He shrugged. "At the end of the day, they're still boys."

"Well, Avery's a sadist and LeStrange is mad, but you're right — they're probably no danger to you. Malfoy is a different matter. The Death Eaters have been training him for I don't know how long, maybe all of his life. I've seen him use the Cruciatus curse, and that was when he was twelve."

Malachite nodded soberly. "Then perhaps a wise man should be concerned — but you should remember, I'm not a man."

Sev returned his gaze levelly. "The legends might have said the Naga were semi-divine, but I know you're not immortal."

"Maybe not — but I think you'll find we're pretty hard to kill." He chuckled good-humoredly. Sev frowned.

"I haven't forgotten that, but neither will Voldemort. Malfoy will know by now that you're a Naga."

"What good will that do him?" Malachite wanted to know. "Come now, you've doubtless read every footnote there is to read on our people. And what more do you know about us? Precious little. We're a secretive breed, and



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we're rare in this part of the world."

"I know a few things," said Snape. "I know you can't harm a human unless they attack you first."

Malachite smirked. "Somehow I don't see Malfoy restraining himself long enough to bother with that little restriction."

"Nonetheless, that gives him control of the situation. You may not get a chance to take it back."

Malachite stood up with an air of finality. "Severus, I can take everything Malfoy throws at me, and walk away long after he'd think me dead. But I thank you for your concern. It's nice to know you care."

Sev kept his face expressionless. "We wouldn't want to sacrifice our operatives unnecessarily. It's inefficient."

Malachite laughed. "You know," he said, clapping Snape on the shoulder, "I really don't know anymore if that cold front you put on is false or true."

Sev shrugged and got up to leave. "Maybe I don't either," he suggested with a thin smile.



It took Lily nearly a month to successfully corner him, but she caught up with him eventually. "Snape. Talk to me."

He shrugged. "Been missing my scintillating

conversation?"

"Not to mention your delightful company." She backed him into a deserted classroom. "Okay, spill."

"You want me to tell you everything I know?" He raised a single eyebrow. "That could take a while."

"I have all the time in the world." She hopped up to perch on the edge of a desk, and glared at him. "Okay. What's going on?"

"Well, there's a suspicion two of the teaching staff have got engaged, Derek Dobbs turned his brother into a gerbil, Hagrid's trying to adopt a sea monster, and I hear Gryffindor are tipped for the Quidditch trophy this year."

"Quite. What about Professor Vitae?"

"She's gone."

Lily snorted. "Thanks for that. Where?" She regarded him sharply. "Is she dead?"

It was Snape's turn to roll his eyes. "It would probably be better if she was, but no. Malachite and Dumbledore confronted her, and then they let her go."

Lily nodded slowly. "Good. Well, not good, but... we shouldn't have to become like them. In the end, that's just another form of losing."

"Yes, well. Losing is also a form of losing, and if we're not permitted to be ruthless or pragmatic, all we have to rely on is our intelligence.

And, unfortunately, not all of us are me.”

“Oh, come on,” Lily insisted. “You can’t say Dumbledore and Malachite aren’t smart!”

“They’ll do, but Dumbledore’s far too trusting. Malachite’s got more of a clue, but he’s also well convinced that we have justice on our side, so we must be indestructible. He’s arrogant.”

“And you’re not?”

“I’m not arrogant, I’m just well-informed on the subject of my own brilliance.”

“Good God,” she groaned, shaking her head. “Typical Slytherins, the pair of you.”

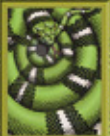
“Smile when you say that.”

“Talking of typical Slytherins,” Lily said sharply, “what about Malfoy? He knew Vitae was the spy, right? He must be spitting!”

“He is.” Sev turned more serious. “He knows Malachite was behind it, as well, and he’ll be out for revenge. But Malachite doesn’t think he’s old enough or experienced to be a danger.”

“Well, that’s just stupid.” Lily, seeing the side of Malfoy and his followers that the teachers never saw, was well aware of what he was capable of.

“And now we’re back at the point I made quite some time ago. These conversations would go much easier if you just accepted that when I tell you something, I know what I’m talking about.”



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“Whatever,” she waved him aside. “Well, what’s Malfoy going to do? Can’t you stop him?”

“No, in fact I’m going to have to join him.” She gave him a dark look, but sighed and turned her eyes away, knowing he was right. “I can’t afford to let him think for a moment that my loyalties are wavering.”

“True... but you’ve fought from the inside before. If you could just find a way to —”

“I could, but Malachite won’t budge. He wants to have the confrontation, because he’s so confident they won’t be able to hurt him. And if it comes down to a face to face duel, and I can’t use the cloak because I’ve got to be seen to be there, then there’s absolutely nothing I can do about it. The ball’s completely out of my court.” He smiled humourlessly. “And you know how much I love that.”

Lily pulled her knees up against her chest and hugged them reflectively. “Well,” she said finally, chewing anxiously on her lower lip, “maybe he does know what he’s doing. He is a Naga, after all. You saw the way he recovered when he got stabbed last year.”

“Perhaps,” Sev acknowledged with a nod. “Certainly we’re going to have to assume so.”

Perhaps Lily was right, after all. But Sev was



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accustomed to living only by his own expert judgment, and he didn't like the idea of trusting to Malachite's overconfident self-image much at all.



It was hard to say if the young cadre of Death Eaters were looking towards the inevitable revenge on Malachite with eagerness or terror. Around their head of house Malfoy was his usual insincerely charming self, but in private he ranted and raged and muttered about how soon they would be wiping the smirk off his face. Sev hadn't been aware of Malachite smirking particularly much, but he didn't think it was very wise to point it out.

The Slytherins were scared of Malfoy in this dark mood; everybody was, apart from James Potter and his suicidally confrontational band of Gryffindors. In one spectacularly nasty magical brawl outside the Charms classroom, Malfoy cursed Pete Pettigrew so nastily that he spent the remainder of the spring term in the hospital wing.

The Gryffindors took their revenge in various ways, but mostly it was directed at the rest of the group, not Malfoy. Sev wondered if Lily was behind that somehow: she had to know that crossing him right now was a long way from a good idea.



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Sev suspected that his fellow Death Eaters were glad of the distraction. Spying was one thing, as was launching attacks on their long-term schoolyard enemies. A possibly fatal, definitely highly nasty assault on a teacher — and one who had been mostly pretty good to them, to boot — was in an altogether different league.

"But what if we get caught?" Sev overheard Avery whisper to Colin, when Malfoy was out of the dorm.

"Lucius won't let that happen," Crabbe insisted, but his usual slavish devotion was tinged with a hint of uncertainty.

"Yeah, but... he's a teacher," said Nick, sounding quite close to panic.

"He'll bleed and die just like anybody else," said Simon, and everybody listening shuddered. It wasn't so much the words as the pleasantly conversational way in which he spoke them.

"Lucius is right," spoke up Goyle. The two younger boys had taken up sitting in the seventh year dorm with their fellows since the winter when Voldemort had proclaimed their little group something akin to a military unit. "They won't catch us. They can't stop us."

"Yeah, but Dumbledore..." Avery shuddered. "He always knows when people have done stuff. We'll be caught for sure." Sev supposed it said a lot



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about Nick Avery that this was a far bigger concern in his mind than any kind of moral qualms.

"It's kiddie stories," snapped Alex Nott. "He doesn't really know everything. He's just an old fool who's got everybody believing in him." As the junior members of the troop, the two sixth years usually felt obliged to talk it up as if they were tougher and more dangerous than anyone else there.

"Yeah... Yeah," agreed Avery more firmly. "We're cool. We're untouchable. We're the serpent, right? They can't touch us." It sounded more like he was convincing himself than proselytizing, but the others all nodded in agreement. Whatever private doubts they had, they were too invested in their own pride, and in too deep to back out now. When Malfoy came calling for them to do his bidding, they would be there.



When Easter came rolling around that year, Malfoy didn't invite the others to come back home with him. In fact, he left the school with hardly a word to any of them. If he was getting any final orders from Voldemort, he obviously wasn't prepared to share them with anyone.

There was only a tiny scattering of students remaining in the school for the holidays, and



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amongst the seventh years Sev was the only one not madly cramming for exams. When they came along, he would pass them, and pass them as excellently as he desired; he always did. But when it came to his exit from Hogwarts, the grades he got in his N.E.W.T.s were going to be just about the least important thing imaginable in determining his future.

In the relative privacy of the holidays, he was able to seek out Dumbledore and try to talk to him about Malachite.

"He won't listen to me," he warned the headmaster. "He's convinced he can deal with Malfoy on his own."

"I agree that Professor Malachite's self-confidence can be a little... excessive," Dumbledore admitted, peering at him over half-moon spectacles, "but it is not unjustified. I assure you, he's as well-schooled in magical defences as anybody in the wizarding world. That's how he came to the post he occupies, after all. In these dark days, did you supposed I'd trust the defence of Hogwarts to anybody but the most qualified?"

Sev refrained from pointing out that for all the qualifications of its defenders, Hogwarts had been infiltrated by Death Eaters, had staff members killed and students assaulted, and



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had only narrowly turned aside a raid that could have had horrific consequences.

"I'm not casting doubts on his abilities," he said instead, "only his attitude. He's not taking Malfoy seriously."

"Severus, I assure you," said the headmaster, "Carnus may seem to take things lightly, but he is as prepared for what may come as anyone could ever be. I know, perhaps better than anyone, what a terrible thing it is to ask others to take risks for the sake of your goals — but it is something, alas, that we all must do from time to time. There are dark things coming, but if we work together and trust each other, we'll be ready to meet them."

The headmaster spoke with absolute conviction, but Sev was less than satisfied with his answer. Even at seventeen, he had seen more than enough of the world to know that self-righteousness and a noble cause was not an automatic guarantee that you would win.

Still, what could he do? The warnings had been given; repeating them would do nothing. Ironically, he began to appreciate more something Dumbledore had said to him a few years ago — that for all his brilliance, his knowledge was only worth something if people were will-



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ing listen to him.

Unfortunately, he had a suspicion that their wake-up call would not be a long time coming.. And by then, it would probably be entirely too late.



The holidays seemed to end as quickly as they had approached, and the rest of the students came grumbling back to their studies. Or most of them did, anyway.

Of Lucius Malfoy, there was no sign.



Their absent leader returned in the middle of a Defence Against the Dark Arts class. The whole room fell silent as Malfoy came strolling in as if he'd never been away at all.

"Ah, Mr. Malfoy," said Malachite sharply. "Decided to grace us with your presence?"

"I've only just got back to school, professor," he pointed out, dropping bonelessly into his usual chair at the back.

"So I notice. I assume you have a good reason why?"

"I was called away for personal reasons," Malfoy smirked. A few people snickered, recognizing the joke on the lack of explanation for Professor Vitae's disappearance — only the



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Death Eaters knew it for the challenge it was.

And Malachite. "Very well," he said, smiling thinly. "No doubt you'll be happy to catch up the missed work on your own time. I know you're always eager to learn."

"I am. I've been learning a lot." He smiled wolfishly. "You'd be surprised."

Those who weren't listening for it probably didn't even catch the barb.



"Lucius, where've you been?" demanded Nick, as soon as they were out of class. Malfoy shrugged casually.

"Just like I said; I've been learning."

"Learning what?" frowned Colin, always slow to catch on.

"Some very useful tricks." Malfoy flexed his wand meaningfully. It was obvious what those 'tricks' were going to be used for.

"When?" said Simon eagerly.

"Not yet." But there was a gleam in his eye as he spoke, where before he'd been grinding his teeth. Voldemort might have cautioned him to wait, but he'd definitely given him the go-ahead.

They were supposed to be on their way to Herbology, but Malfoy had other ideas. "Come



with me." He led them back to the Slytherin dorms where they could talk in private.

"We're going to do it?" asked Nick immediately, sounding uncertain whether to be thrilled or nervous.

Malfoy nodded with a triumphant smile. "Soon, very soon. When the exams start."

"The exams?" frowned Colin.

"It makes sense," agreed Sev dispassionately. "There are no lessons, everybody's in unusual places, the staff are all charging about and everyone's distracted —"

"It's perfect," agreed Malfoy.

"What... uh, what are we gonna do, exactly?" asked Colin tentatively.

Malfoy's grin widened, and Sev remembered Joshua Matthews. A Slytherin boy with the misfortune to have a younger brother put in Gryffindor, he'd been forced out of the school by Malfoy and his cronies. To preserve his precious position when he was still trying to be accepted into the Death Eaters, Sev had been forced to stand by and do nothing whilst Malfoy tortured him with the Cruciatus curse.

Now, he was going to be put in exactly the same position — but this time, Malachite's 'crime' was far worse than one of family con-



nections, and the chances of him scraping through with nothing more than a few days in the hospital wing were not exactly enormous.

"You, Crabbe, are going to follow my lead. You all are. I'm the leader here." The last was aimed pointedly at Sev; he met it with a calculatedly neutral gaze. "I'll be taking care of Malachite — you're just along for the ride."

"Then why do we need to be there at all?" wondered Avery. He shrank under Malfoy's glare.

"Why, Nicholas, is there a problem?"

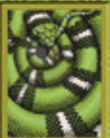
"No!" he said quickly, with a defensive shrug. "I was only, you know, asking."

"It's a show of strength," Malfoy said. "More than that, it's teamwork. After all, we're the serpent, are we not? Anybody suddenly not want to be in the team?"

Of course, there were no takers. Slow wits or warped minds, none of them were stupid enough to believe that there was any way to back out now.

"But Lucius," said Colin hesitantly, "I mean, we'll be... they'll know it's us. He'll recognize us."

"We'll be wearing these." Malfoy tugged a suitcase out from under his bed and drew the zip back a little to reveal the thick cloth inside, a heavy black robe like the one Vitae had worn to pre-



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serve her anonymity. "And besides," he grinned. "The only one who's gonna see us is Malachite. And by the time we're done with him, he won't be in any position to tell anybody anything."



The robe was heavier than the invisibility cloak, and it carried an anonymity of a different sort. Malachite would know who was confronting him, he wasn't stupid — but he wouldn't know which one of them was Snape. Under the thick robes they all looked as bulky as Colin Crabbe, and it was hard to discern anything of the wearer's movements. No wonder it had been so difficult to put a name to the Death Eater from a few distant glimpses.

Malachite knew the attack was coming, and he knew it would be soon — but he didn't know it was tonight. Sev hadn't had it confirmed until mere hours ago, thought he'd suspected it was coming soon from Malfoy's itchy, eager exterior. There had been no chance to send a final warning, and he hadn't tried — Malfoy would be watching like a hawk for the slightest hint of doubts or wavering. Malachite would just have to be as prepared as he claimed to be.

They walked through the darkened corri-



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dors in silence; not for fear of being caught, but because something about their new robes and their deadly mission demanded it. They weren't schoolboys now — they were Death Eaters. They were the seven-headed serpent.

Malfoy led the way unerringly, out of the school and towards the Forbidden Forest. Sev thought of the snake tracks he had often stumbled over out there, and knew that Vitae must have known of Malachite's late-night excursions. After all, she had been into the forest herself, to set up the Portkey and to hide the body of the murdered astronomy teacher, Auriga Cephus. And she had known since her school days what Malachite was.

Perhaps in his snake form he had excellent hearing, or perhaps he had just had the foresight to set up wards around the forest to alert him. He should have known that the time was close, for Dumbledore had been forced away to his usual exam-time meetings with the other schools. Either way, when they passed into the trees he was standing quietly waiting for them.

If any of the boys around him started in alarm or surprise, they did it silently, and the robes hid any such sign of movement.

"Malachite," said Malfoy darkly. His voice



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was sharp and icy cold, a tone that those around him knew well but the teachers had never heard. Nonetheless, Malachite knew full well who he was.

"Malfoy." He was calm, hands in the pockets of his robes, a slight smile creasing his face above the trim white goatee beard. Snape saw it, then, in a flash of insight that had eluded him through the sheer lack of logic. This was what Malachite had wanted all along. He hadn't ignored Sev's warnings because he was short-sighted, or vain, or refusing to believe in the danger. He'd come out here because he *wanted* this confrontation. He wanted to stand out here in front of the enemy and face them down.

Malachite still smiled as his eyes flickered from figure to figure. He didn't know which was which, but he knew the names, and he recited them with a level voice that was more accusing than any impassioned yell. "Snape. Avery. Crabbe. Lestrangle. Goyle. Nott."

One of the figures flinched, but it wasn't Malfoy and it was impossible to tell the other hooded figures apart. None of them spoke, and none of them made any move to turn and run. It was too late for that.

"Well, you've got me," said Malachite, with



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an insolent shrug. “Now what are you going to do with me.”

To all appearances, Malfoy remained unflustered. “You’re a traitor to your house and to your people,” he said harshly.

“My people?” The Defence Against the Dark Arts master laughed. “What do you know about my people?” His eyes narrowed. “As for my house — you’re bigger traitors to house Slytherin than I could ever be, all of you. Doing your bit to drive us further into shadow, destroying the reputations of those of us who work for our place in this world, who try to do good even though nobody expects or believes it of us. Following the dark path.”

“The right path,” insisted Malfoy forcefully.

“The easy path,” Malachite corrected with a sneer. “Why do you follow your precious Lord Voldemort? What do think he can give you? Riches, glory? You’re a fool if you think those things are worth anything, and twice a fool if you believe he’ll share them with you if he gets them.”

“Maybe I think he’s right,” suggested Malfoy pointedly.

“Maybe you think he’s your stepping stone to power,” the teacher corrected.

“And what if I do? Power is power, wherever

you get it. He’s taught me things you narrow-minded do-gooders could never dream of.”

Malachite just laughed, the earthy chuckle out of place amongst the shadows of the forest at night. “Ah, dear. I always knew you were too ambitious for your own good, Malfoy, but I never had you down as stupid. You think he gives you power? Power’s something you build for yourself, it’s not something you can give and take. You’re nothing but a tool in your master’s hand.”

“Maybe so.” Malfoy’s dark robe shifted as he shrugged. “But even a tool gains a sharper edge with use. He’s honing me to be the perfect weapon, and one day I’ll be my own master. For now, I do what he asks because it makes me better.” He chuckled himself, and the sound chilled the air. “And if I get to enjoy what I do? Well, that’s a bonus.”

He drew his wand with a flourish. Malachite scoffed. He clicked his fingers, and his own wand appeared. “Your master should learn to take better care of his tools. Try and cut something that’s too hard, and they’re apt to get... blunted.”

The two circled each other warily. Sev’s hand was on his wand, but he knew he couldn’t use it. His own well-learned but seldom tested powers would do little to help a wizard of Malachite’s

level, not to mention the niggling little detail that doing so would destroy absolutely everything they'd been working towards.

Malfoy snapped out a curse with whip crack speed and zero warning, but Sev didn't even hear what it was because Malachite countered it in the same instant. There was a blare of orange-red light that quickly fizzled out, and the combatants went back to circling.

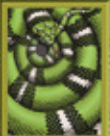
"Interesting choice," Malachite observed, as if they were still in class. "Not the most efficient, though. This isn't an exhibition duel, Malfoy, you should be trying for damage, not flash."

"No I shouldn't. *Stupefy!*"

Malachite countered the stun charm with barely a blink. "Amateur, Malfoy. Fight me, or don't; your tricks won't work." But he didn't make his own attack, and Sev realised that he couldn't; technically, Malfoy hadn't harmed him. Bound by the magical constraints of the Naga, Malachite couldn't fight until his opponent tried to hurt him. A stun charm, however malevolent the intent, was technically harmless.

"Fair enough," Malfoy shrugged. "*Imperio!*" Sev felt the air crackle with the force of a forbidden curse unleashed.

Malachite's face contorted for a moment,



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and for a fraction of a second Sev thought he glimpsed a flash of icy white scales. Then his muscles untensed and he smirked. "Nice try, boy, but you don't think I've been trained in these things?" Sev knew that the Imperius curse could be fought off with sufficient strength of mind, and certainly Malachite had proved himself more than sufficiently stubborn.

"And now it's my turn." But instead of turning his wand on Malfoy, he pointed it at a nearby tree. "*Incendio!*" The frozen watchers all stumbled back as it burst abruptly into flames. Malachite gave a small smile. "And now we can see." He flicked his wand towards Malfoy, and the hood of his cloak snapped back to reveal his pale features. "There, that's better, isn't it?"

Malfoy sneered. "Idiot. If you had any sense, that would be me burning there. *Locomotor Mortis!*"

Malachite's legs locked together as he fell forwards, but he was laughing as he fell. A moment later he rose up again, and Sev heard a sharp intake of breath from one of the boys as they saw that the lower half of his body was now a thick snake's tail.

"Not everyone needs two legs, Malfoy. *Expelliarmus!*" He flicked his arm, and Malfoy's wand flew out of his hand.

"*Accio!*" He snapped his fingers and it flew



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straight back.

“Very impressive,” said Malachite, with a flick of his eyebrows. Without warning, he suddenly lashed his serpent tail around, knocking Malfoy off his feet. “But not quite good enough. *Encavio!*” A mass of tree roots suddenly surged up out of the ground to entrap Malfoy in a living cage.

Malfoy slammed his palm hard against the unmoving roots that held him, and then scabbled for his wand. “*Reducto!*” The cage blasted open.

“*Syrtissio!*”

Suddenly Malfoy was scrambling to grab one of those same thick roots as the ground melted away into quicksand beneath him. “*Glaciaro!*” he gasped out.

Malachite yelped as his body was suddenly hit by a coat of frost. He shifted back into his fully human form and stumbled awkwardly — his snake body couldn’t take the cold.

“*Spinasosia!*” Malfoy rapidly followed up, jumping away from the quicksand. A web of thorns rose up from the ground and wrapped itself around Malachite.

“*Secario!*” He cut the thorn bush down with an impatient flick of the wrist. He looked angry now, his cool burned away. “*Orbis Ignium!*” The flames from the burning tree suddenly swept



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around Malfoy to form a circle of fire.

“*Extinguero!*” The flames faded into a charred circle, but Malfoy winced, the strain of the magic he was pumping out beginning to show. He half staggered, grabbing a tree to steady himself.

For a moment both combatants stood still, breathing heavily.

“Ah,” began Malachite with a smirk. “Not so—”

“*Fissio!*” His planned taunt became a hasty leap backwards as the ground beneath his feet split into a chasm.

Malachite frowned, and then pointed his wand at the ground. “*Obducio!*” The gap began to heal over. He turned back towards Malfoy, but his young opponent was ready for him.

“*Crucio!*” His yell split the air with twice the force of any spell he’d yet uttered. Malachite buckled in agony and fell to his knees. Malfoy stepped towards him, wand still raised as he held the spell in place.

Malachite’s form writhed, and Sev saw the snake begin to take shape. But Malfoy summoned his fellow Death Eaters with an imperious wave of the hand. “To me!” he ordered.

They came running, and all trained their wands on the fallen professor. “*Crucio!*”

“*Crucio!*”

“*Crucio!*”



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Alone, probably none of them would have had the strength to cast the forbidden curse. But their weak spells meshed together, joining with Malfoy's into a force beyond any of their individual abilities.

Sev raised his wand in the same motion, but he never uttered the word of power. It didn't matter. His own contribution wasn't needed.

Malachite screeched, a cry of pain that passed out of the audible and into silence. He contorted in silent agony, shifting from human to snake and back again and finding no relief. And then, finally, he was still.

After a moment, Malfoy lowered his wand, and the others followed his lead. They all stared at the still form of their fallen teacher. His grey eyes were open, but staring at nothing, and he wasn't breathing.

"He's dead," said Nick Avery, pulling back his hood in something like wonder. They all gathered around to look down at him.

Sev looked for a moment at Malachite's body, and into his unseeing eyes. And then he thought *Snakes don't need to blink...* The Naga were a water race, they could go for hours without breathing..

His hood, still down over his face, hid the smirk that suddenly passed across his features.



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The gutsiest of double bluffs...

Malfoy forced his way between his colleagues to stare at his vanquished foe. His breath was still coming heavily, shockingly loud in the darkness.

"You did it, Lucius," said Avery, trepidation giving way to amazement and something like glee. "You killed him, he's really dead!"

And Sev began to believe that Malachite was really going to get away with it.

But then Malfoy shook his head. "No," he said quietly. "No, he's not." He raised his wand arm, trembling on the edge of collapse, and closed his eyes. "*Avada Kedavra*," he let out in breath that was barely more than a whisper. A flash of green light shot out from his wand and coruscated over the fallen man.

Malfoy opened his eyes, and from somewhere found the energy to give his usual triumphant smirk. "He is now."



"I'm going back," Sev said abruptly, as the others hustled through the forest.

"What for?" demanded Avery, wide-eyed with disbelief and terror.

"To make sure he's dead!" Well, that was nothing but the truth. "And to raise the Dark Mark.



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If you're making a statement, you need everyone to see it."

Avery looked uncertain. "Lucius—"

"Is half a second away from being dead on his feet. Get him back to the dorms before he collapses and you have to carry him," Sev ordered. "I'm going back." He left before anybody could question his assumption of command.

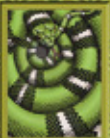
Sev barrelled through the trees and skidded back to the side of the fallen Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher. A moment later, Malachite's eyes flickered open. "You came back," he said, with difficulty. "I thought you would."

"You're not dead." Even Snape could probably be forgiven for stating the obvious, considering all that had transpired.

"I will be." Malachite closed his eyes for a moment, even that small movement seeming to pain him. "I'm just dying in two planes of existence at once, and that's gonna take some time."

"I heard the Naga are supposed to be semi-divine," Sev said. He didn't try to help his teacher up or make him comfortable. There didn't seem to be a whole lot he could do.

"More or less." Malachite smiled awkwardly. "I'm tending towards the less end of the spectrum, under the circumstances. There are —"



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he winced, " — there are very, very few things in this world that can kill one of us. Unfortunately, I do believe that was one of them."

"I'm told that times like these are bad for saying I told you so."

Malachite spat out a fragment of a chuckle. "I see your people skills are as good as ever."

"Malfoy was more dangerous than you thought."

"Yes... more dangerous than any of us thought."

He closed his eyes for long enough for Snape to wonder if he was going. "Good fight, though," he said, with a sudden bright smile. "I had fun."

"Well, that's good to know," said Sev sardonically.

Malachite just looked at him. "I assume they sent you back to make sure I was dead?"

"I sent myself, actually, but pretty much. Malfoy's half dead from the duel."

"I'll bet he is. Pity he's not all dead. Ha! Should've written that on his student report before I came out here. Missed opportunity." He focused on Sev with some difficulty. "Severus...? You're still here? I thought you were... wait..." He gritted his teeth and somehow managed to pull himself back together. His lips were beginning to turn blue, and Sev chose to assume he was too numb by now to be feeling much pain at all.

Sev found this gradual fading away even more



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chilling than the thought of a violent and painful death. The thought of his mind, the only thing about him that meant anything, gradually bleeding away... He hid his wince behind the usual quiet mask.

"Malfoy," said Malachite, finding his way back to the thread of the conversation. "You were right. I thought he'd... spent it all when he called... for help, but he was holding that... in reserve..."

"Voldemort's been grooming him," Sev reminded him softly.

"Even so, I didn't... I should have..." His eyes were losing their focus again, and suddenly he gripped Snape by the arm. "Defence... Against... the Dark Arts. Need someone..."

Sev shook his head slowly. "You won't get anybody volunteering for that job," he pointed out quietly. "Not after..." He couldn't figure out how to finish that sentence, and should he read something into that, or should he read something into the fact that even here, even now, he wasn't reacting but analyzing his own reactions?

"I know," Malachite grated. "After... They'll forget, they'll think it's safe... Somebody who knows..."

"Me?" Sev realised, genuinely surprised.

"You."

"I can't be a spy and a defender."

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"Then... do one at a time. But... one day, choose... Draw a line and... just..."

"I will," said Sev quietly. "When this is over, I'll come back and protect Hogwarts for you. Someone's got to, and hell, everyone else around here is too stupid."

Malachite found his last reserve of strength and struggled to look him in the eye. "How do I... know... you're not... lying to... lying to... comfort a d-dying man?"

"Because I'm me," he said simply.

"Yes. Yes, you are."

Malachite started to laugh, and somewhere in the laughter he closed his eyes and didn't open them again.



Sev sat back on his heels for a long moment. He kept waiting for the paralyzing grief or guilt or whatever he was supposed to feel to come crashing down, and it just didn't. His brain continued ticking. He felt angry and he felt melancholy and he felt frustrated that he hadn't stopped this and... that was it. He just felt it. It didn't take him over, didn't crush him up, didn't motivate him to jump up and curse the gods or fate or whatever else. It was just there. There

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were his emotions and his logic, and his logic wasn't going anywhere.

After a moment, he stood up. Then he raised the Dark Mark and left the scene before anyone could find him there.

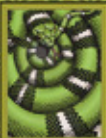
Because he was himself, and that was all he knew how to be.



There was a funeral; Sev didn't go. Lily did, and he saw her coming back afterwards, sniffing back tears with James Potter's arm around her. James himself was dry-eyed, but firm-jawed and solemn; Malachite had been no friend to him, but he hadn't been an enemy either, and James Potter's hatred of the Death Eaters burned with a white hot flame.

Sev avoided Lily, then and in the days that followed. He wasn't sure they would have had anything to say to each other. Malachite's death had been unavoidable, perhaps even necessary — but he couldn't say as much to Lily, and he couldn't pretend that he knew how to be emotionally devastated. His brain worked the way that it did; it wasn't something he could switch on and off.

His brain was telling him that now was the very worst time to betray any inkling of doubt or



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weakness. The young Death Eaters had crossed the line, but the actions that had brought them there had been solely Malfoy's. If anybody was going to cut and run, now would be the time, and he had to be above suspicion.

So he stayed away from Lily and he stayed away from Dumbledore, and for the few remaining weeks of school he stuck close to Malfoy and acted as he would be expected to.

Malfoy himself, once he had recovered from the exhaustion of a full-on magical battle, had regained his smirk and swagger, only magnified. The gap between his public and his private persona had grown huge, as he flipped between sorrowful student and triumphant enemy general.

The ripples of shock that had been sent through the school were earth-shattering. The disappearances, the attack on Josh Matthews, even the discovery of Professor Cephus's body were nothing on the effects of a well-known and well-respected teacher being killed on campus, in the middle of the night. The sparkling death's head Sev had cast had remained hanging over the forest until halfway through the following day when Dumbledore had been located and urged to come home.

The N.E.W.T.s and O.W.L.s had gone on,



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although all the other end-of-year exams had been cancelled. Most of the student body, including some of those who were supposed to be taking those qualifications, had fled the school. Come the following year, Sev very much doubted the vast majority of them would be back.

The final graduation ceremony, usually an uproarious celebration before governors, students and their extended families, was performed to a sadly depleted stock of seventh-years and their petrified-looking parents. Nonetheless, Dumbledore gamely stood up to give the traditional speech.

His blue eyes were dark with gravity as he fixed every individual in the hall with his gaze, as if trying to transfer his passion and belief to them. He spoke of trial and tragedy, of the shock of the death of Malachite and how he believed they could overcome the darkness if they worked together. His speech that year was probably the first one ever given that dared to address the Death Eaters full on, and even voice that name that sent a shudder of terror through the hall; Lord Voldemort.

Sev sat in the back with the rest of the seventh year Death Eaters, several rows of empty chairs between them and the others. Such was



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the power of Dumbledore's voice that none of them even tried to mock him, they just watched with a kind of steely resignation. They all knew it was too late to change the decision they'd made, whatever the consequences.

Dumbledore spoke on and on, filling his audience with fire and determination. But the five of them weren't part of that audience, not even Snape. It wasn't his place to stand tall and defy the darkness, but rather to infiltrate it and turn it against itself. He was as much a soldier of the light as anybody in the room, more so — but most likely none of them would never know it.

Lily and James stood to either side of Dumbledore on the stage; head boy and head girl, standing by their headmaster. Lily caught his eye only once during the proceedings, and her face was as studiously blank as his own had ever been. He couldn't tell if she blamed him for what had happened to Malachite or not, and maybe it was better that he didn't know.

Finally, beside him, Malfoy pushed to his feet. "Enough of this sugary tripe," he hissed darkly. "We're done with this place. It's time to go." Nick, Colin and Simon got up to follow him.

Up on the stage, Dumbledore was still speaking. "...and I wish good luck, good health, and good



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faith, to all who have walked the corridors of this school... wherever their lives may take them.”

His gaze swept across the room, and locked for a fraction of a second with Snape’s. Sev nodded very, very slightly in reply.

Then he stood up, and followed Malfoy out of the room.



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AUTHOR'S NOTES

SO WHO IS SEVERUS SNAPE?

Well, the Sev of my stories came, I guess, from a number of influences. There’s a type of character that I adore above all others; the kind of dryly ironic, Machiavellian schemer who is never caught short by what’s going on around him. There’s a great deal of the Patrician from the Discworld in Snape. He takes a lot from Francis Urquhart of *House of Cards*, and Sir Humphrey from *Yes, Minister*. (We’ll give the non-Brits in the audience a moment to scratch their heads and go ‘Huh?’). He’s also the charmingly evil Bester from *Babylon 5*, and that old *X-Files* favorite, the Cigarette-Smoking-Man.

Mostly, though, more than anybody else, Snape is me.

I’m just a tad more emotional than the Sev of my stories, and I can’t say I’ve ever infiltrated a terrorist organization — but yes, young Sev and I have a great deal in common. He gets from me, among other things, my nightly insomnia and insatiable desire to read, my dislike of unin-

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vited physical contact, and my desperate need for solitude. He has my logical brain, my photographic memory, and my academic grades.

Where we differ, if anywhere, is that I'm a total softie at heart. I like the warm fuzzy feeling of making people smile. I'm a sucker for stories of great deeds and heroics. I have, on occasion, been known to snifle quietly at movies or novels or even at fanfics. Sev would be most unimpressed.

But yeah, basically we have a lot in common. So that's why, for those of you who've commented on it, I've managed to take this unlikely, almost unrealistically cool and collected character, and invest him with a spark of humanity. I can write this character of Severus Snape because in a lot of ways, I think a great deal like him. In fact, I'd say he's the closest thing I've ever written to a Mary Sue.

Are you scared yet? Bwahahahahah!

Ahem. 'Scuse me.

Okay, this is me, signing off. Maybe for good, maybe not. Who knows? Perhaps I'll be back...

~ Nomad

2/5/2002



CALIPHAN

The layout and formatting of this document was created in Adobe InDesign. The Serpent illustration used throughout is a commercial clip from Dynamic Graphics. Page decorations were constructed utilizing commercial clip art from the incomparable Marwan Aridi and a collection of Asian tiled fills from ArtMedia Inc., modified in Adobe Photoshop, Cover was created in Adobe Photoshop.

Fonts used: the Priois Serif family, by Johnathan Barnbrook from Emigré foundary for body text and most titling. Drop Cap initial of Chapter 1 utilizes Mr Barnbrook's earlier font, Mason. Script fonts used are P22 foundary's Micaelangelo, Dearest and Dearest Swash, scripts from various other sources are Texas Hero, an adaptation of Miss Brooks and a demo font, Allegheiri, from David Nalle of Fontcraft. Typographic decorations are from Linotype's Decoration Pi.

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