

ADVENTURES IN FANFICTION

The Squib Chronicles



Volume One

By Ozma

A RED HEN PUBLICATION



AN ADVENTURES IN FANFICTION EDITION

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The Squib Chronicles

Volume One

By OZMA

COVER INSET
BY
DURAYAN

Table of Contents

FOREWORD	iii
INTRODUCING THE SQUIB	1
The Squib and the Cerberus	3
The Squib and the Potions Master	15
The Squib and the Werewolf	27
The Squib Without a Clue	39
THE SQUIB AND THE DEATH EATERS	49
All Cats are Grey in the Dark	51
The Scroll	71
Abyss	89
SQUIB DOORS	101
Vigil	103
Detention	117
Tapestries	138
Squib's Magic	158
COLOPHON	187

Foreword

BY OZMA

The Squib stories were written in the interval between the release of the first "Harry Potter" film and the publication of HARRY POTTER AND THE ORDER OF THE PHOENIX.

My kids are Harry Potter fans who were eager for more stories about the Potterverse. While they were waiting for J.K. Rowling's next book, we discovered the existence of Harry Potter fan fiction on the internet. Eventually, after enjoying quite a lot of these stories, I felt inspired enough to try writing my own stories set in Harry's world.

Argus Filch, the caretaker of Hogwarts, is one of my favorite characters. He's a man without magic in a world where it's normal to be a wizard. A bitter old grouch who's touchingly devoted to his cat. He does his best to keep the castle clean and in good working order, and no pesky poltergeist or bratty student had better stand in his way!

Since Filch is one of my favorite characters, I was disappointed that his appearances in fan-written stories were so rare. It was even more unusual to see him treated sympathetically. I began to think about Filch, his place in the wizarding world and

his relationships with the people around him. These ideas grew into stories and eventually became an epic which JOdel had now made, most wonderfully, into a series of books.

The results are yours to enjoy...

(My thanks to JOdel, Jelsemium – my co-writer for "SQUIB SUMMER," and Durayan, the artist who did the lovely cover portrait of Filch and Mrs. Norris. And also J. K. Rowling who gave Filch life, and David Bradley who portrayed Filch so brilliantly in the films.)

Introducing the Squib



The Squib and the Cerberus

(This story takes place right before Harry's first year.)

MRS. NORRIS was nowhere in sight when Hagrid unlocked the door to the Forbidden Corridor. I would have sworn to it. I was standing right behind Hagrid, watching for her, just in case. No one had told me if the Stone was in place yet, but I knew most of the dangerous traps and enchantments that would be protecting it were already there. Including one truly monstrous guard dog. The Forbidden Corridor was no place for a cat.

Suddenly, as Hagrid paused to adjust his burdens (his keys, a large shovel, a sack of meaty, bloody bones, two water jugs, and a second sack filled with an assortment of extremely large doggy toys,) my cat was there. She raced towards us, a small feline Seeker who'd seen the Snitch.

In a moment she was past me, leaping lightly over my feet. I dropped the food bags, the water jug and dog bowls I was carrying for Hagrid, to make a fran-

tic grab for her. I missed. She bounded past Hagrid, evading his futile clutch as well. The door to the Forbidden Corridor was barely open at all, just a crack, but it was more than enough to admit a thin, grey cat, too curious for her own good!

That locked door had intrigued her for weeks. She was often there, pawing at it, clawing at it, determined to get in. Mrs. Norris was accustomed to going almost everywhere she wanted to go inside the castle corridors. No corridor was "Forbidden" as far as she was concerned. I'd given her stern warnings and a very serious lecture concerning cats and the dangers of curiosity. Apparently, she'd thought I must have meant *other* cats.

"Mrs. Norris!" Hagrid's exasperated yell was followed by a second, even more exasperated yell as I raced after my cat, shoving past him, sending his supplies crashing to the floor where they bounced and rolled in all directions.

"*Filch!*" Hagrid paused to sneeze; cats have that effect on him. Then he bellowed "STOP! It's NOT SAFE!"

'Not Safe.' Hagrid has a decided gift for understatement. Poor Mrs. Norris had no idea what was on the other side of the locked door. At the moment I didn't care if Hagrid's beast had an important task to do. I had no intention of letting that monster kill my cat!

Heart pounding, I stumbled into the Forbidden Corridor. What I found was not what I expected.

I've been Caretaker at Hogwarts Castle for more years than I want to remember. I know the secret passageways of the school better than anyone. At least anyone

living. But the Castle can still catch me off guard.

Suddenly there was the smell of the sea all around me, the crying of gulls overhead. I heard waves breaking on rocks. I was standing on a beach. No one had said anything about this sort of spell! I felt confused, until I saw the Cerberus. Massive as a dragon, three huge, drooling heads, each with its own impressive set of sharp teeth. Six angry eyes fixed on me hungrily. A triple set of rumbling growls made my bones rattle. Hagrid's monster was something I'd expected to see, but I was still terrified. Desperately, I looked for Mrs. Norris.

My cat stood, feet firmly planted in the sand, directly in front of me, fur bristling. Looking like a fierce little dust mop, she met the growls with a warning hiss. Incredibly, she padded forward. She wouldn't even make a mouthful for one of those huge heads!

"Oh, no you don't!" I gasped, lunging for her. Just as the creature lunged for me.



"...Filch? Say somethin'!" Hagrid's voice was very loud and very close.

"...Ow..."

I dragged my eyes open. The light made my head ache and I felt terribly dizzy. After a brief glimpse of Hagrid's huge, hairy, worried face, I closed my eyes again. At least in the dark nothing was spinning.

"Talk ter me! Anything feel broken?"

Everything did, actually, but that wasn't what concerned me most.

"Where's Mrs. Norris...?"

There was a rustling movement and I felt a familiar weight curled on my stomach. I cupped my hands around her bony body and listened to her purr. She, at least, appeared to be whole and undamaged. My relief made my aches unimportant. At least nothing had happened to her.

"It's all your fault, Missy," I scolded her. "If you were a student, I'd give you detention! Every single day, for the entire term!"

"It's not her fault." Hagrid contradicted me. "Yeh were in far worse danger from Fluffy than she was."

"FLUFFY?" I yelped.

"Perfectly good name. Chose it meself," Hagrid said, with dignity.

"That creature just hit me harder than the Hogwarts Express!" I wheezed. "There's nothing remotely 'fluffy' about it!"

Hagrid had the gall to laugh. Then he said, more seriously, "Sorry I couldn't get ter yeh before Fluffy did. He's that quick. 'Least yeh wasn't bitten. Took a bad fall, though. He flung yeh clear across the room. An' yeh got a nasty knock on yer head when yeh hit the floor. Better get yeh ter the hospital wing."

"No one's there. Poppy's gone out to Diagon Alley to get some things she needs before the term starts. And she's meeting friends for lunch. She said she'd be gone a while. I'm supposed to be mopping the hospital wing now." I tried opening my eyes again, but the brightness still hurt too much.

Hagrid sighed. "The next time I tell yeh ter stop, Filch, yeh'd best do it."

"Believe me, I've learned my lesson. And, the next time I see you carrying too many things at once, dropping rubbish all over the stairs, I'll just keep walking!"

Hagrid sounded amused. "Didn't say I wasn't glad ter have yer help."

I ignored him and kept grumbling. "I've more than enough work of my own to do, with the term starting in less than a week! Classrooms still need to be opened and aired, and that cursed girls' bathroom on the first floor is flooded again. Now I'll never be caught up in time! Rest assured, you will be getting no more help from me...!"

Hagrid sighed again. "Yeh should'a just stayed behind me. Mrs. Norris would'a been fine. She an' Fluffy were only gettin' ter know each other. Can't blame yer cat fer wantin' ter meet a new, interestin' creature, can yeh?"

I snorted. Mrs. Norris poked me with a reproachful claw.

"Where's that beast gotten to, anyhow?" I asked nervously.

"Fluffy's nearby. Don't worry, it's safe now. He knows yer with me. Lie here an' rest fer a bit. When yeh feel up ter walkin' I'll help yeh ter the hospital wing, an' we can wait fer Poppy."

I felt Hagrid's big hand moving carefully under my aching head, sliding an empty sack there as a cushion. Thankfully, it did not smell like one of the same ones he

used to clean up after his monster, several times a day.

Still woozy, I did as he said. Mrs. Norris kneaded her claws gently against my stomach and continued to purr. The sound soothed me, as did the waves breaking in the background. I wondered why Hagrid had bothered to put the sack under my head. The warm sand felt soft enough.

Waves? Sand?

My eyes flew open. Ignoring the pain and an awful bout of nausea, I sat up. Mrs. Norris, who landed in my lap, gave me an indignant glower. I stared all around me. At the beach, at the sea, which sparkled against a clear, blue sky. At the entrance to what appeared to be a cave, a black hole leading into a cliffside.

I watched Fluffy emerge from the cave and trot towards Hagrid, who was busy gathering up all the things we'd both dropped. He'd gone back through the door, which sat incongruously in the middle of the sand. Hagrid moved towards his creature, his arms filled with the water jugs, the bag of bones, and the assortment of bowls. Fluffy's tail wagged as he barked joyously in greeting.

Both the huge man and the huge dog left deep tracks in the soft sand.

Making no comment about being unexpectedly at a seashore, Hagrid continued fetching the creature's things. As he carried in the sack of pet toys, a wave broke across his feet, soaking his boots. He made no reaction to this at all.

"Er... Hagrid?"

"Yes?"

"The Professors..." I said, "the ones who have done the enchantments... the traps, the charms... d-do you know if any of them have cast any sort of ...glamour on this room, some sort of illusion to help protect the Stone?"

He frowned and shook his head. "No. None of 'em mentioned anything like that."

I took a deep breath. "When you look around, at this corridor, what do you see?"

"Jus' the corridor. Like it always was. Except fer Fluffy, an' his things. Trapdoor's new, a'course."

Trapdoor? Oh. There it was. A few of Fluffy's body-lengths away from the door, with sand all around it.

"Hagrid...? Does anything *else* in here look a bit ...er...different to you?"

"No. Why?"

If this seashore wasn't one of the professors' protective spells then what was it? Hagrid couldn't even see it! Perhaps there was something wrong with me. Not something caused by my fall, or the blow to my head. I'd seen the beach the moment I entered the Forbidden Corridor! My hold on Mrs. Norris tightened. She butted her head against my chin, comfortingly. One of the gulls flying overhead let out a loud cry. I jumped.

"Filch? What is it? What do yeh see?"

Ignoring Hagrid, I pushed Mrs. Norris gently off my lap and ran my fingers through sand that felt warm and real. Still too dizzy to stand up, I crawled forward to the water's edge and let a wave splash me. It was cold, and felt as real to me as the sand did. I

shivered, soaked to the skin.

Staring out to sea, towards the horizon I could see several triangular fins breaking the water's surface. Sharks? No, I thought, as one leaped from the water. Dolphins. In spite of the warm sun, I trembled harder.

Fluffy moved from Hagrid's side to the water's edge, beside me. All three heads barked in chorus, the same joyful sound he used to greet Hagrid. He bounded up and down the beach, clearly greeting the dolphins.

What? He saw them too?

Hagrid looked at his Cerberus and back to me, in confusion. Then he blinked. Comprehension appeared to dawn. "Ah. That must be it. But I don' understand. Yeh shouldn't be able ter..." He shook his head again. "Filch, don't worry. Whatever yer seein' now, yer not losin' yer mind. It IS a spell, but not one cast by the teachers. An' its got nothin' t'do with the Stone."

"I-I don't understand."

"That spell's meant just fer Fluffy! Dumbledore put together a small charm. A very small one. Ter make Fluffy feel at home. It'd be so hard fer him otherwise, shut in here on his own. I don't know how often Fang and I will be able ter come up here an' have a good, long visit, specially after the students come an' the term starts."

For a moment I wanted to grin. The idea of Hagrid fretting because his monster would feel lonely and bored guarding the Forbidden Corridor was ...ludicrous.

And then Hagrid continued. "No one should be able ter see it. It's such a little charm. Dumbledore said that no wizard or witch would even know it was there."

I felt a choking wave of bitterness, and a pain that had nothing to do with any physical injury.

It shouldn't hurt so much, still, after all these years, should it? I am getting old, even as we reckon time in the Wizarding world. I have had plenty of time to get used to being what I am.

Squib.

Non-magical misfit, born to a family of wizards. No acceptance letter from Hogwarts, or even one from any lesser school of Magic. Fit only to scrub floors and clean toilets. Some witches and wizards, fearing that a child of theirs might be a Squib, will do things to shock and frighten the non-magical child, trying to awaken the power in them.

I suppressed a very bitter laugh. Getting tossed about by a Cerberus was certainly more exotic than any attempted Squib-cure I'd ever heard tell of. Still hadn't done the trick, though, had it? Here I was, just as unmagical as ever. Vulnerable to a charm that no true witch or wizard would even notice... a charm meant to amuse a dog. How humiliating!

"Er... sorry, Filch." Hagrid said, looking uncomfortable.

"Forget it." I growled. Hagrid might be an oaf, but I knew he wasn't deliberately cruel. He'd probably just forgotten. I've never talked about being a Squib, but everyone on the staff surely knew. Just as I knew Hagrid is a failed wizard, expelled during his third year, his wand broken as a punishment. I don't know what he did. Whatever his crime was, they couldn't take his magic away because of what he'd done.

Magic is part of him, in his blood and his bones, in his huge body and his wild, black hair. He'll always have the magic in him, no matter what.

Mrs. Norris jumped in my lap. I stoked her fur, and she purred like a small, furry thunderstorm.

Hagrid cleared his throat, a little nervously. "Er... Filch? C-could yeh... er... I mean... would yeh do me a favor? Would yeh mind tellin' me exactly what yeh see when yer in here?"

"What?"

"I never did ask Dumbledore what sorta charm he made fer Fluffy," he explained, a bit sheepishly. "An' I'm curious."

I gave him a hard look, to see if he'd asked me this out of pity. But he almost looked envious because I could see the charm and he couldn't. Imagine being envious of a Squib.

"Must be something lovely..." he prompted me. "Fluffy seems ter really like it in here."

I nodded, sighed, and told him about the sun, the sand, the cave and the dolphins. The Headmaster does exquisite work, even when he thinks that no creature, except Hagrid's three-headed dog, is ever going to view the result. How would it feel to be able to do magic like that?

In front of us Fluffy rolled contentedly in the golden sand. Each head chomped gleefully on its own toy. The head in the middle had a red ball that squeaked incessantly, an incredibly annoying sound.

Mrs. Norris flicked an ear at Fluffy with amused disdain. I wondered if she could see the Headmaster's

charmed beach or the real corridor? Perhaps she was even aware of both, simultaneously. I could only guess, for she can keep secrets, even from me. Cats do love to be mysterious.

Hagrid grinned, watching me pet her. "Just got ter clean up after him an' we're done in here." He took the empty, folded sack I had been lying on, picked up the large shovel and headed up the beach. Or up the corridor, depending on your point of view.

"Sack's clean. Hadn't used it yet, had I?" he said cheerfully, over his shoulder, in answer to my glare.

In a few minutes he returned and dropped the dung-filled sack near the door. "I'll get that later. Let's see if Poppy's back yet. Can yeh walk?"

With his help, I climbed unsteadily to my feet, trying not to groan. I hurt all over, especially my head, but the dizziness wasn't as bad as it had been. Leaning on him, I should be able to make it to the hospital wing.

Even with Poppy's best efforts, I knew I'd be feeling the aftereffects of this mishap for the next day or two. I'm not as resilient as I used to be. It did not matter, as long as I would be fully healed by the start of the term. Hellions like the Weasley twins would ride over me roughshod if I weren't strong enough to deal with them properly.

Before we left, Hagrid patted each of Fluffy's three heads, murmured endearments and promised to come back as quickly as he could. Mrs. Norris padded silently across the sand, weaving in and out between Fluffy's huge front paws. Three enormous black noses lowered to sniff at her, each in turn. I watched a little

anxiously, but she remained calm and unafraid.

"Yer welcome ter visit Fluffy again with me, any time yeh like," Hagrid addressed this comment to Mrs. Norris. "Seein' how the two of yeh know each other now." His black eyes glittered mischievously. "Unless Mr. Filch wants ter try'n stop yeh?"

"No..." I said, ruefully, "pain is an excellent teacher. Particularly when it's mine. I won't try to prevent her from coming in here again, if she wants to. As long as you are in here too. Just take care not to lock her in when you leave."

"Yeh've got my word on it."

Hagrid moved me towards the door, patient with my slow, hobbling walk. Mrs. Norris passed us, trotting almost jauntily through the door ahead of us. Her tail was in the air, and she had the look of a cat who had more than adequately proven her point. No corridor should be Forbidden to her. She was a cat who could look after herself.

"Strut all you like now, Mrs. Norris," I said, gruffly. "And someday, if you should meet a creature who turns out to be more than you can manage... promise me that you *will* at least have the sense to be a bit more cautious, eh?"

She jumped into my arms, purring, as Hagrid paused to lock the door.

The End

The Squib and the Potions Master

(This story takes place during Harry's first year.)

QUIDDITCH SEASON inevitably means that a lot of extra dirt and mud will be tracked in all over the castle floors. But a blood trail? That's a bit more unusual. (Unless it's directly after a team practice or a match. In which case the blood will most often lead directly up to the hospital wing.)

This blood trail, currently defacing a corridor that I'd spent most of the morning scrubbing clean, wasn't leading me towards the hospital wing. Mrs. Norris and I followed the path of small, red droplets, and the occasional larger splotch, away from Poppy's domain. At least the blood was fresh enough to come up fairly easily, even from stone. As I mopped, I wondered irritably who was bleeding, and why they didn't have sense enough to go have themselves looked after properly! As if I had nothing better to do than follow a bloody mess from one end of the Castle to the other!

It was evening, after the hour when most students

had withdrawn to their common rooms. But it wasn't late enough for everyone to be in bed. When I tracked this mess to its source I intended to drag the hapless student straight to the Headmaster. Obviously someone had been up to some sort of mischief, and didn't want anyone to know they'd been hurt. The unfortunate miscreant was unaware that they were leaking blood. It was a clue even less subtle than Peeves. I grinned with satisfaction. There was no possible means of escape!

Large red blotches stained several of the big, porous flagstones where two corridors met. This was going to take a bit more elbow grease. Grumbling, I shoved my mop into the pail of Magical Mess Remover and reached for my scrub brush.

"Stay on the trail!" I told Mrs. Norris. "Whoever it is, don't let them get away!"

I didn't have to tell her twice. She was off in a flash of grey.

After giving the flagstones a quick, but vigorous, scrubbing I followed. There are few things in life more satisfying than hunting mischief-making students down, but blood is very difficult to get off stone, once it sets. Knowing that Mrs. Norris could be trusted to uphold her end of things, I cleaned up the messes as I found them, as swiftly as I possibly could.

As I turned a corner, I saw Mrs. Norris waiting for me, about halfway down the corridor. Perhaps I didn't clean up the last few drips as well as I might have, in my haste to reach her and see who we'd caught. Aha! Our bleeding quarry had finally been run to ground in ... the staffroom?

Oh, my, I thought gleefully. Defiling the castle corridors *and* trespassing!

Mrs. Norris let out a shrill mew.

"What?" I said, looking down at her. The look in her golden eyes advised me to proceed with caution.

This was not like her. I didn't know what to make of it.

"I'm going in there," I said. This was one victory that was not going to be snatched away from me! "We can't let ourselves be intimidated by a mere student, can we?"

She repeated her warning, perhaps a little more emphatically.

"You can stay out here, if you like," I told her.

Feeling a bit annoyed, I opened the staffroom door and went in alone.

"All right, you...!" I began angrily, only to have the words die in my throat.

I'd been greeted with a stare so caustic that I wished I could bottle it. I could peel centuries worth of grime off the castle's stones with that much corrosive power. Unfortunately, the only wizard at Hogwarts who might be capable of bottling that look for me was the one who was glowering. And he didn't appear to be in the mood to do anyone a favor.

"Professor Snape...?" I said. "You're hurt!"

"You have an amazing grasp of the obvious, Filch..." he snarled.

He was sitting, one of his legs propped on another chair in front of him. A glance at his leg told me where all the blood had come from. That glance was enough to make my gorge rise, and I've always

prided myself on having a strong stomach. From the knee down that leg was mangled meat.

"What happened...?" I asked in a strangled voice.

Did I say that the first look he gave me was caustic? Well, the second look could have dissolved the castle stones, if given half a chance! To escape his glare I looked down. There was a pile of used, bloody bandages resting on the floor. Some of them were bloody enough to stain the floor under them.

"Look at this mess you're making!" I exclaimed.

I was expecting a sneer that would put the first two to shame. Instead he looked down at the soiled bandages, his expression turning pensive.

"You found blood in the corridor..." he said, softly.

It was a statement, not a question. But I couldn't help answering.

"Yes, I did. In several corridors!"

"You've cleaned it all up, I suppose?"

"Of course!"

"Then you have attended to your duties adequately, Filch. Thank you. And good evening!"

His tone was dismissive, and colder than a frost giant's beard.

I started to say something angry, then I stopped. A bit belatedly, it occurred to me that he'd been hurt badly. His face was even paler than usual and he was clearly in pain.

"Professor, you really should have that leg seen to. Come. I'll help you to the hospital wing."

"No."

Exasperated, I said, "All right then. I'll go get Poppy and bring her here."

"No. You will not."

"Why not? Poppy doesn't bite..." I crossed the room, kneeling down and forcing myself to look more closely at his wounded leg. I gave a soft whistle. "...but something else certainly does!"

And that 'something' had the biggest teeth I'd seen since...

Since I'd met Hagrid's three headed monster in the Forbidden Corridor. Guarding the Stone.

"...Oh, my," I breathed. I did not have to say anything else. He saw what I knew, quite plainly in my face.

His eyes went so cold that they seemed to freeze two holes right through me. I could feel the temperature in the room dropping. The air itself seemed to thicken and solidify around us.

"Y-you went in there." My voice sounded thin and nervous, even to me. I could feel my pulse pounding in my throat. "No one is supposed to go in there."

"I had my reasons."

My eyes locked on his. "And they were?"

"My own." He smiled. It was not a pleasant expression.

I looked away first, my throat dry as dust. Snape was using no magic on me, it was all personality and force of will. I stared at his injured leg, watching the red blood glisten.

He continued to study me. "You seem oddly familiar with that creature's ...handiwork, for want of a better term, Filch. How did you know?"

"Just a lucky guess. There's nothing in the castle as big

as that Cerberus. What else could have done this to you?"

The sight of his wound was making me feel ill, but I could not bring myself to look at his face again. I thought of snakes, trapping prey with their eyes. He'd been attacked attempting to get to the Stone! Of course he would want his injury kept a secret.

I was shaking. And I hated myself for it.

"We can't let ourselves be intimidated by a mere student, can we?" I'd said to Mrs. Norris. And I remembered Snape as a student. Remembered him well. He'd been a skinny first year, when I'd met him, small for his age. I could still recall his somber little face, not yet grown into his proud nose, and the set of his thin shoulders, as he was usually hunched over either a cauldron or a book.

Contrary to what the children at Hogwarts think, I do not hate all the students. Only most of them. There are some I actually don't mind too much. It's true that I never forget the ones who were the most trouble. It is also true that I never forget the ones who treat me decently. And Severus Snape had always treated me decently, as both man and boy. Or at least he treated me no differently and no worse than he treated most people. There were always Slytherins who acted as if I was some sort of uppity house elf that they were not allowed to kick down the stairs. Severus had never been one of those. Never.

Young Severus had also never been one to accept help, even when he needed it badly. He'd been determined that no one should ever see him weak or vulnerable. Offers of aid would be met with sneers and

threats. That child had long since grown into a man, but some things, apparently, had not changed.

I looked at him, willing my heart to stop racing. He'd gone quiet. Both of his hands were clenched tightly in his lap. Even his lips were white. I could not let him just sit there, bleeding.

"With all due respect, Professor, you are getting blood on that chair cushion, and all over the carpet. If you won't accept help from Poppy, then you'd better accept it from me. You need something to clean this mess with, and I'm not talking about the chair or the rug. And you need fresh bandages. You wait here, and I'll fetch what we need from the hospital wing."

Snape glared at me. Suddenly his wand was in his hand. He raised it in my direction, slowly, as if he were waiting to see if I would flinch or bolt. I did neither. I wanted him to see that I trusted him. Me, with no wand to defend myself, and no proper magic of my own.

My point was not lost on him. He gave me no verbal acknowledgment, but the tense set of his shoulders eased a little.

"Accio bandages..." he said, moving the wand.

My skin tingled and the fine hairs on the back of my neck rose. Something blew past me, a wind that felt somehow both hot and cold. Snape's spell. A second flick of his wand opened the staffroom door to admit the roll of bandages he'd summoned.

"This is all I need," he told me. "These bandages were stored in my office. They've been soaked in a healing potion, specifically made to treat the Cerberus's bite."

Snape must have been trying to reach the cache of bandages down in his office and had only managed to make it as far as the staffroom, I realized. The bandages hovered in the air in front of me. I took them, unwrapping until a section of bandage came free from the roll, so I could hand it to him.

"The healing potion also contains a pain killer," he said. "It may make your fingers a bit numb, but it will do you no harm."

"When did this happen?" I asked, nodding towards his leg.

"Halloween Night. When the troll got in." Snape flinched as he gently wound the treated cloth around his ankle.

"You've been limping around on that mess for all this time?" I exclaimed, shocked.

"Such bites are typically slow to heal. Poppy herself could not make it mend any faster."

"Professor, why did you go into the Forbidden Corridor?" I unwrapped a second bandage from the roll and handed it to him.

He said nothing. Just when I thought he wasn't going to answer me at all, he sighed.

"You know that the Stone was moved here from Gringotts because someone was trying to steal it, correct?"

I nodded.

"I thought it possible that someone had let the troll into Hogwarts to serve as a diversion, while a second attempt to steal the Stone was made. I wished to make certain that the Stone was still safe."

"You should have gone to the Headmaster," I told him, handing over another bandage.

"There was no time. And Dumbledore's first concern was the safety of the students."

"All right," I conceded the point. "That explains what you did on Halloween. Why are you still being secretive?"

Snape gave me a taste of the tone he usually reserves for particularly slow students.

"Has the thief been caught yet, Filch?"

"Er... no."

"Is the Stone still in danger, then?"

"Well, yes, I suppose so."

"Very good. That's two out of two. Shall we try for three out of three? Do I want the thief to know that I am watching for him?"

Snape's tone was so abrasive that he could have lent it to the house elves in the kitchen to scour their dirtiest pots. And there would still have been enough left over, for me to use on the dungeon floor.

"I can see why you wouldn't want to give yourself away," I said. "But there's no reason for you to handle this completely on your own. You can go to the Headmaster."

He paused, while wrapping the latest bandage around his leg, to glare at me. "I will not bother Dumbledore with accusations and suspicions that may well be unfounded. This is far more serious than a bit of student misbehavior!" He gave me a sneer that should have been classified by the Ministry as "Dangerous/Requires Specialist Knowledge/Skilled Wizard May Handle."

"You think you know who the thief might be?" I asked.

The expression on Snape's face changed, becoming almost ...haunted.

That look sent a chill down my spine.

"I am not going to tell you anything more, Filch," he said, very softly. "Only know that I will do whatever I must to keep the Stone from falling into the wrong hands." He reached out for another bandage.

I'd forgotten to keep unwrapping them for him. Hastily, I fumbled with the roll. Snape accepted the new bandage and added it to the collection already covering his wound. There was still quite a bit of mangled flesh left to cover. My fingers were tingling a little, but not really numb. The healing potion had made my hands slippery and I wiped them on my breeches. At least the potion appeared to be working. Snape no longer looked as if he were in quite so much pain. And his color wasn't too bad. Not for him, anyway.

"Your leg's feeling a bit better? Good. You were very lucky, you know. Fluffy's much faster than any creature that size has a right to be. You could easily have lost your leg. Or worse."

"Fluffy?" Snape raised an eyebrow. "Is that what Hagrid named that thing?" He eyed me, speculatively. "One might suspect that you'd tangled with the monster yourself."

"Tangled? Hardly. Mrs. Norris got in there once when Hagrid unlocked the door to feed the beast. I went in after her, very stupidly, I might add. If Hagrid hadn't been right there to call his monster off, then Hogwarts would have been advertising for a new caretaker this

term." I shuddered. No one who had seen teeth like Fluffy's at very close range would ever forget the sight.

Snape's eyes glittered with satisfaction. "I knew you weren't just guessing, Filch." He sounded quite smug. I supposed he had sufficient reason. He'd managed to escape the Cerberus alive, with all his limbs still attached (if not quite intact), without needing a rescue from Hagrid.

"And you will also know how seriously I mean this advice, Professor," I said. "If, in the course of protecting the Stone, you should find yourself going into the Forbidden Corridor again, I hope you will have some sort of plan?"

Snape's voice turned glacial. "Of course I will have a plan. I had one the first time!"

"Yes, and it worked out so very well, didn't it," I muttered. "You rushed in there and stuck your leg down one of Fluffy's throats. Not exactly up to the usual Slytherin standard, was it?"

He all but yanked another bandage out of my hands. "Leave this to me, Filch. Do I tell you how to mop floors? I wanted to make certain that the Stone was still well guarded, and it is!"

I simply looked at him. Snape was powerful wizard and a cunning one, but I feared for him. He was determined to go about this alone, against a thief dangerous enough to put that haunted look on his face. He couldn't afford to be overconfident. A dig at his house pride had seemed the best way of making my point. But I wasn't sure he'd gotten the message.

I think, perhaps, he did see my concern. Not knowing what to make of it, he looked away.

"Blasted thing," he grumbled. "How are you supposed to keep your eyes on all three heads at once?"

Very softly, I said "I hope you will stay out of the Forbidden Corridor until you can answer that question, Professor. Reckless courage is supposed to be strictly a *Gryffindor* trait, isn't it?"

The look on his face was indescribable. If he'd chosen to point his wand at me at that moment I know I would have fled. (Either that, or I would have ended up floating, pickled, in a big jar in his office, labeled "Insubordinate Wretch of a Caretaker.")

But he had no chance to do anything to me. At that moment, we both became aware that someone was listening to us. The door was partially open, and a wide-eyed student was in the doorway.

"POTTER!" Snape roared, moving his robe over his partially bandaged leg.

I turned to look at The Boy Who'd Just Distracted Snape. Poor Potter. He had just gotten the full force of Snape's fury. And he would never know how grateful to him I was.

The End

The Squib and the Werewolf

(This story takes place during Prisoner of Azkaban.)

THE BASILISK filled my office, from floor to ceiling. I didn't actually see the Basilisk, just its monstrous shadow, cast in the golden rectangle of light on the corridor floor just outside my office. The oil lamp on the ceiling swung madly as the massive serpent's head struck it. I was still outside in the corridor. The sight froze me in my tracks as thoroughly as the creature's stare would have done.

Mrs. Norris was standing directly in front of my open office door. As the huge shadow coiled and twisted in the swinging light, my poor cat yowled in terror. Her grey fur stood out wildly. She turned, her claws scrambling madly on the flagged stone floor. Hissing, she bolted towards me, dashing between my feet, down the corridor and out of sight.

Relieved that she'd escaped both death and Petrification, I tiptoed closer to my office, meaning to shut the door before the monster could slither out

into the corridor. Don't ask me why I thought that a mere wooden door could prevent the King of Serpents from going anywhere that it wanted to go. I suppose I wasn't thinking very clearly.

I was just about to squeeze my eyes shut and make a grab for my door handle, when I saw the terrifying shadow simply disappear. Trembling with fear, I peeked into my office. The room was empty, though the lantern on the ceiling was still swinging.

One of my file cabinet drawers was slightly open.

My heart pounding as if it would burst, I realized the truth. What Mrs. Norris and I had just seen wasn't a Basilisk at all.

It was a boggart.

Quickly, I hurried into my office and slammed the file drawer shut.



Poor Mrs. Norris! She'd undoubtedly crept off to some secret hiding place to recover from her fright. A boggart will take on the shape of any creature's worst fear. Mrs. Norris is as brave as a lioness. It would take nothing less than a Basilisk to reduce her to such a state.

Any properly trained wizard worth his wand would be able to make short work of a boggart. Unfortunately, I am not a trained wizard. I'm just a Squib.

Snarling and muttering to myself, I stalked through the corridors as the student brats swept themselves out of my way like so much dust. I knew that there was really only one thing that I could do in this situation.

One of the Professors had let it be known that he was looking for a boggart. I'd been avoiding him as much as possible, ever since the start of the September term. There was too much history between us. Too many pranks and too many detentions. But I had to make certain that this wretched boggart would not trouble my sweet cat again!

I had no choice but to seek him out.

Hogwarts' latest Defense Against the Dark Arts Professor.
Remus Lupin.



Every magical brat in this Castle is sure that I despise him or her. That is not true. For most of the students, my feelings go no deeper than dislike. They are annoyances. Ephemeral muddy tracks across the stone of my clean floors.

And then, there are the students that go beyond "annoyances." These brats are in a category all their own.

In one of my numerous file drawers I have made a list on a piece of midnight black parchment. In silver ink, I have written out the names of the students who have done far, far more than merely "annoy" me.

The third name from the top of that list is Remus Lupin.

Sirius Black is the first, James Potter is the second. Peter Pettigrew is fourth, right after Lupin.

The accursed Marauders.

Mischief Incarnate.

The bane of my existence for seven seemingly endless years.

(No students, before or since, have approached their level of misconduct, until Fred and George Weasley.)

I had punished the four Marauders many times.

But I could never really win. Their spirits remained unbroken.

I reflected, without triumph, that life had done far worse to three of them than I ever could have done.



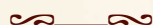
I had never learned to care much for James Potter, even after he was grown. But the manner of his death had still appalled me.

Betrayed by Sirius Black, James Potter had stood against the Dark Lord, trying to protect his pretty Lily and their baby, Harry, a boy who could be his father reborn, except for Lily's green eyes and that scar.

And little Pettigrew. His death had shaken and sickened me. He'd been blown to bits. Hopelessly out-matched against his former friend, Sirius Black.

Remus Lupin was the only one that remained alive or free.

The Last of the Marauders.



Professor Lupin followed me down to my office. He'd fared far better than his friends had done. At least he lived. Still, every time I set eyes on the man, I could not help thinking that the years had not been kind to him either. He always looked tired and shabby.

Seeing him like this pleased me far less than I'd

expected. Just as with Potter and Pettigrew, it was not the sort of victory that I could take any pleasure in. Even I'm not *that* vindictive.

Lupin seemed unconcerned about the threadbare image he presented. He had a cheerful grin on his face, as he usually did.

As soon as I'd gone to him and told him about the boggart in my file cabinet, his ears had pricked up with interest.

"I've been combing the Castle for days, looking for one," he said, grabbing a large packing case from underneath his desk. "Thank you, Mr. Filch! Let's go!"

No matter what Remus Lupin had been once, he was now a Professor. I made an effort to keep my tone respectful when I spoke to him.

"But, Professor, what do you want a boggart for?" I asked, as we made our way down to the dungeons.

"It's for an independent study project with one of my students," Lupin said.

What sort of independent study could he do with a boggart, I wondered. He couldn't possibly be planning some sort of childish prank, could he?

Looking over my shoulder, I gave Lupin a disapproving frown. Then I sighed. It didn't matter. I just wanted the wretched thing out of my file cabinet.

"Now, the most important thing to remember, when tackling a boggart, is that laughter is your best weapon," Professor Lupin told me, earnestly.

I stopped in my tracks and stared at him.

"You sound as if you're expecting me to help you capture this thing!" I said.

"It will be easier with two of us," Lupin replied, mildly. "It's always best to have company when tackling a boggart. If there are two of us, we'll confuse it. The boggart won't know which of us to attack."

"Yes, it will," I said grumpily. "It will go for the one that has no magic!"

Lupin held up his wand, to reassure me. "Don't worry, only one of needs to actually say the spell. I'm not going to allow the creature to harm you."

I have never been able to do a single spell on my own. But I can feel the strength in the magic used by the witches and wizards around me. Remus Lupin may not have looked like much. Appearances can deceive. I knew that, underneath his threadbare exterior, there was a great deal of power.

Still, it would have been much easier for me to trust Professor Lupin if all of my most vivid memories of him did not involve some prank or other.

"*Riddikulus!* That's the name of the spell," Lupin continued. "I'll say it when we face the boggart. You'll do fine. Try to think of something that you are afraid of, and then think of a way to make that fear seem amusing."

He had to be joking! He was asking me for one impossible thing after another! I *never* think about the things that I'm afraid of! Why should I hand the boggart a weapon like that? For that matter, why should I hand the last of the Marauders a weapon like that?

No, I was certainly not going to focus on my fears! Instead, I would try my best not to think of anything at all.

When we reached my office I took him straight to

the file cabinet. We stood side by side. Keeping my mind a careful blank, I opened the drawer.

Nothing happened.

"Perhaps the boggart has gotten away?" I said, reaching into the drawer before Professor Lupin could stop me.

No. The boggart had not gotten away.

Suddenly there was a mirror in front of me. I was staring at my own reflection.

I saw a Squib.

Such a useless creature! What could I possibly do with my life except hard, menial labor?

Break my back like a Muggle. Slave away like a house-elf.

Mop. Scrub. Dust. Clean. Fetch and Carry.

And what if I couldn't work...!?

The image in the mirror was changing. Now, my body was wracked with illness, crippled by age.

Useless Squib. What will become of you now?

You'll starve. Beg. Die all alone.

My reflection reached out a palsied, skeletal hand and seized me by the throat. It was shockingly strong.

"No..." I whimpered, trembling with fright.

My strangled cry was drowned out by Lupin's growl.

He reached out and grabbed the mirror away from me, pushing me back, to safety.

There was a loud, cracking sound.

In his hands, the mirror changed. He was holding a round, silvery white orb in one hand. Suddenly, his

wand was in the other hand.

"*Riddikulus*," he said.

Rubbing my bruised throat, I stared.

"P-Professor...?" I wheezed, incredulously, almost at the same moment as he spoke his spell. "You're afraid of a ...cheese?"

Immediately the silvery-white orb was surrounded by nibbling mice!

Lupin dropped it on the floor and the mice worried it all around.

He was looking at me anxiously. "Mr. Filch? Are you all right?"

To my surprise, he seemed more troubled about me than he was concerned about the boggart.

"You're afraid of *cheese*!" I gasped, still rubbing my throat while I snorted with laughter.

Professor Lupin grinned at me, shaking his head.

"Well, that's not quite the way that I expected things to go," he said. "But, being able to laugh at my fear instead of your own is close enough, I suppose. It certainly did the job."

He was right.

I should have trusted him. My laughter certainly appeared to be more than the boggart could handle.

The wry expression on Lupin's face made me almost helpless with mirth. Part of it was my relief at not being strangled. Or too sick or crippled or ancient to do my work.

And, I had to admit that the the idea of a powerful wizard like him being afraid of a simple food prod-

uct... it was just too much!

I thought, surely, that my laughing would anger Lupin. Though, in all the years I had known him, I had never seen him truly angry.

He didn't get angry now, either. Quite the contrary. My laughter appeared to delight him. I realized that he'd probably never seen me laugh before.

"Oh, I fear all types of cheese, Mr. Filch..." he said, very gravely. "Roquefort. Swiss. Cheddar. Brie. Edam..."

"S-stop..." I moaned, clutching my sides. Tears were streaming from my eyes.

"Baby Gouda..." he murmured.

I doubled over, guffawing.

Lupin picked up the orb, with the nibbling mice still attached, and dropped it into the packing case. Then he sealed it, trapping the boggart neatly inside.

"I think I've gotten all the mice," he reassured me. "Though, if I have missed any, Mrs. Norris is bound to take care of them for you."

His expression grew concerned again. "Are you sure that you're quite all right?"

"Fine..." I said, trying to get a grip on myself and recover from the laughing fit.

It occurred to me that he'd seen my worst fear, just as I'd seen his. That helped me finally get myself under control.

I stared at the floor in embarrassment.

Lupin clapped me on the shoulder. "That was excellent! You did very well indeed."

"No," I protested, gruffly. "I froze. I didn't do what you said."

I was trying to keep my mind empty, but i-it knew..."

He nodded sadly. "Boggarts always know. But," he continued, gently, "you recovered quickly. I had faith that you would. You've never proven to be anything less than a worthy adversary."

I blinked, surprised at the unexpected, evidently sincere, praise from him.

Made uncomfortable by just how much his words had pleased me, I decided to go on the offensive.

"You don't want this creature for some sort of prank, do you, Professor Lupin?" I asked. "Tell me the truth! Are you going to put it in Professor Snape's desk? Because, if you are, then you'd better think again."

"And," I continued, "don't give me that innocent expression, either! It's exactly the sort of thing that you would do!"

Lupin grinned at me, mischief dancing in his eyes. "You mean it's the sort of thing that I would have done... once upon a time. But, such conduct is highly unbecoming to a Hogwarts Professor. No, Mr. Filch. Severus is quite safe from me, now. You have my word. I'm a changed man."

His voice grew softer. "People do change, you know," he said.

I knew what he was thinking, because I was thinking the same thing.

The picture in the Daily Prophet. Matted hair, empty terrifying eyes staring out of a thin face that was all but unrecognizable.

People can change, all right.

Sirius Black. Everyone had seemed so surprised twelve years ago, but I'd always considered him the worst of the lot.

Twelve years after betraying and murdering his friends, he'd done what no one else had ever done before; he'd escaped from Azkaban.

I'd seen his picture. A rail-thin specter, now. Horribly changed, no longer remotely resembling the handsome, careless boy he'd been.

Black had kept the Castle in a constant state of fear, since the start of the September term.

The Dementors would get him eventually. They had to. Justice demanded it. They'd never been known to fail.

Lupin's thin face was full of sorrow. For James and Lily Potter. For Peter Pettigrew. Maybe, even for the Sirius Black he'd thought he'd known.

I sighed. I felt terribly sorry for Remus Lupin, though I would have faced a boggart alone before I'd ever let him know it.

It was an awkward feeling, even more uncomfortable than my reaction to his praise had been.

A soft sound in the doorway made me look up.

"Ah, there you are, my sweet!" I said, to Mrs. Norris. "We've taken care of the boggart. It won't bother you again."

She was still trembling a bit, and her little heart was beating faster than usual. I picked her up, cradling her, crooning softly.

She was my dear one, my brave one, my Queen of all cats...

In my concern over Mrs. Norris, I'd quite forgotten

that Professor Lupin was there, for a moment. I looked up to see him regarding me with a smile. It wasn't an unkind smile. Quite the opposite really.

I glared at him anyway.

"Well, you have your boggart, Professor, "I said, gruffly. "Don't let me keep you."

"Professor..." I added, as he turned to go. "You were always worthy adversaries too. You and the others."

He looked pleased by that, I thought.

He was evidently going to be a lot more comfortable with this mutual respect business than I was.

"Stay out of trouble..." I growled after him. "I know where there's a lot of cheese..."

Grinning, he picked up his packing case and headed into the corridor.

The End

The Squib Without a Clue

(This story takes place during Goblet of Fire.)

Dedicated to Mr. Roberts III at Sugarquill (who asked for Filch's view of this particular scene) and RADKA at FF.Net (whose mention that Snape had talked about Harry's Invisibility Cloak in front of Filch inspired the idea)

"DUMBLEDORE happens to trust me," Professor Snape said, through clenched teeth. "I refuse to believe that he gave you orders to search my office!"

"Course Dumbledore trusts you," Professor Moody growled back. "He's a trusting man, isn't he? Believes in second chances. But me — I say there are spots that don't come off, Snape. Spots that never come off, d'you know what I mean?"

Oh, Peeves had really outdone himself this time... the poltergeist had stolen a Triwizard clue from one of the schools' champions. And his mischief had managed to set two of the professors against each other!

Now the Defense Against The Dark Arts Professor and the Potions Master were snarling and growling at each other like a pair of Hagrid's monsters. And Mrs. Norris and I had the misfortune of being here on this narrow staircase with them. Caught between two furious wizards is no safe place for a Squib and a cat.

Still clutching the heavy golden egg I'd found on the stairs, I tried to make myself as unobtrusive as possible. Wisely, Mrs. Norris stayed behind me.

Snape and Moody were years beyond the uncontrolled, unfocused magical incidents that all normal wizard-children are prone to during times of intense emotion. Tight control was second nature to them by now. But they were both extremely powerful. The surge and flow of their restrained magic seemed to press all around me in this confined space. It was heavy, like the pressure in the air before a storm. My head throbbed.

Merlin help me, if the pair of them should decide to start dueling here! They were certainly angry enough.

Professor Snape had been furious even before Professor Moody had joined us. Severus had just discovered that someone had broken into his office. Few people would have dared to anger him further when he was already in such a foul temper. Mad-Eye Moody was one of those few. In fact, the retired Auror seemed to be getting a dark sort of amusement from baiting the much younger wizard.

"Get back to bed, Snape." The old Auror's laugh was harsh and full of menace.

"You don't have the authority to send me anywhere!" The Potions Master hissed. Snape's voice was soft and dangerous.

I longed to take my cat, my clue and my leave. But I didn't want to draw their attention towards me or Mrs. Norris.

Making an effort to ignore the pounding in my

head, I tried to think only of Peeves. After a half-century of enduring his taunts, his pranks and his mischief, how satisfying it would be to finally be rid of him once and for all!

Yes, once the Headmaster saw this egg, he would have no choice. The wretched poltergeist would have to be exorcised. Stealing from the students was going too far...

"You've dropped something, by the way..." Moody was growling at Snape. The old Auror was pointing.

Automatically, my eyes went towards a piece of parchment lying on one of the steps. I frowned. Did that parchment seem a bit familiar? No, it couldn't be... The one I was thinking of had been safely hidden away in one of the drawers in my office for a good many years.

Snape was reaching towards the parchment, looking more furious than ever. I felt a sudden surge of power from the old Auror.

"My mistake..." the scarred wizard said, calmly, as he Summoned the parchment. "It's mine. Must have dropped it earlier."

If Moody was deliberately trying to push Snape right over the edge, he was succeeding. Now Snape's eyes were snapping fire as he looked from me to Moody.

"Potter!" the Potions Master hissed, more to himself than to either of us. "That egg is Potter's egg. That piece of parchment belongs to Potter. I have seen it before, I recognize it! Potter is here! Potter in his Invisibility Cloak!"

Oh, Merlin! Moody had done it now. Poor Severus! He's really quite irrational on the subject of Harry

Potter. He can't help it, I suppose. He and James Potter had spent years getting each other into trouble, and Harry is the very image of his father. Harry seemed to turn the clock backward for Severus. The Potions Master became an angry boy once more, pointing an accusing finger and shouting, "It's all Potter's fault!"

As for Potter having an Invisibility Cloak, Severus had been insistent on the subject ever since the boy's first year. But I'd gone to the top of the Astronomy Tower on that night three years earlier, when Potter, Granger, Longbottom and Malfoy had all been caught roaming the corridors. I'd found absolutely nothing there.

Invisibility Cloaks are extremely rare and valuable. Too much so for me to believe that any underage wizard would have one in his possession. I hadn't even bothered to include them on my List of Objects Forbidden Inside the Castle.

I certainly do agree with Snape that Harry Potter is a troublemaker. Wandering about the corridors at night in his first year, flying a car to school in his second, sneaking out to the grounds at night to fight Dementors in his third!

But not even Fred and George Weasley at their worst could have managed to do half of what Snape accused Potter of doing. (For example, why would the boy help Sirius Black, the Dark wizard who'd betrayed Potter's own parents to their deaths, escape justice? It made no sense to me at all.)

Now, with hands outstretched, Severus was moving slowly up the stairs, looking for all the world as if he

was expecting to find Potter lurking there, unseen.

Even through my awful headache I felt embarrassed for him, behaving in such an illogical way in front of Moody.

"There's nothing there, Snape!" Moody barked. "But I'll be happy to tell the Headmaster how quickly your mind jumped to Harry Potter!"

"Meaning what?" Severus asked him, glowering. His hands were still outstretched.

"Meaning that Dumbledore's very interested to know who's got it in for that boy. And so am I, Snape. Very interested."

Severus lowered his hands. "I merely thought that if Potter was wandering around after hours again... it's an unfortunate habit of his... he should be stopped. For — for his own safety."

Good, I thought, in relief. He was returning to his senses. Very good. I couldn't have said it better myself.

Moody did not seem convinced. "Ah, I see. Got Potter's best interests at heart, have you?"

The two professors locked eyes once more. Again, their magic surged and roiled. Pain throbbed dully behind my eyes. I tried to gather up my courage. It was terribly unfair of Moody to suspect Severus of any wrong-doing. Someone ought to tell the old Auror about how Severus had spent an entire year shielding Potter from an agent of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named...!

I tried to speak but I felt too intimidated and the words wouldn't come.

The silence stretched unbearably. Then my sweet

cat shattered it with a loud meow.

"I think I will go back to bed," Severus said, curtly. He was still glaring at Moody.

"Best idea you've had all night," Moody answered. Then, his mismatched eyes both locked onto me.

"Now, Filch, if you'll just give me that egg – "

"No!" I cried, clutching my prize tightly. Not the egg... I needed it. Oh, why hadn't I run from them when they'd been ignoring me? "Professor Moody, this is evidence of Peeves' treachery!"

"It's the property of the champion he stole it from," Moody told me, gruff and very stern. "Hand it over, now."

Desperate, I looked to Professor Snape for help. I had explained matters to him before the old Auror had found us. Surely he understood how important this egg was to me! But the Potions Master swept past me, going down the stairs without saying a word.

It's my own fault, I thought, bitterly. I'd been too cowardly to defend Severus against Moody's accusations, and here was my reward. The Potions Master didn't want to speak up for me.

The expression in Moody's dark, beady eye was hard. His electric-blue eye was rolling about crazily. The effect would have been frightening, even without the feel of his power which was still making my head throb.

My shoulders sagged. Even for a chance at finally winning my long battle with Peeves, I did not dare to stand up to Mad-Eye Moody on my own. Obediently, I gave the egg to him. Then, making a soft noise to tell Mrs. Norris to follow, I stumbled away from the

scarred Auror, down the stairs.

"Never mind, my sweet," I muttered. "We'll see Dumbledore in the morning... tell him what Peeves was up to..." Even so, I knew my case was hopeless without the Triwizard clue to show as evidence.

Rubbing my temples, I made my way into the nearest empty classroom. I sat despondently at one of the desks, my head in my hands. Mrs. Norris jumped up on my lap, purring softly.

The sound of a door slamming startled me. Professor Snape had just come into the room, shutting the door behind him.



"Listen to me, Filch. Peeves had absolutely nothing to do with that egg! It was POTTER!"

"With all due respect, Professor, you always think it's Potter."

"With no respect whatsoever, Filch, you always think it's Peeves!"

"Professor, after all the years I've spent with that poltergeist as a thorn in my side I think I should know Peeves' handiwork by now."

"Yes, you should, but you don't. You are completely misinterpreting the significance of the clue on the stairs!"

"No, I'm not. As I've told you before, Professor, I've never seen any sign of this Invisibility Cloak of Potter's."

"Of course not, you fool! That's the whole point, isn't it? We won't see him, but that cat of yours will surely pick up his scent! If you and Mrs. Norris will help me

find Potter, I'll convince you that the cloak exists!"

Ordinarily I would have gleefully jumped at the chance to go student-hunting. But the headache, fading now, had left me wrung out and exhausted. And my disappointment over the loss of the Triwizard clue had taken a toll as well.

"I see no point in searching the Castle for Potter when he is probably asleep in his bed," I said, trying not to sound too curt.

Snape regarded me with narrowed eyes.

"You're sulking because Mad-Eye took that egg from you," he snarled.

I didn't have the energy to deny the accusation. Especially since I was guilty as charged. "Wouldn't it make more sense for you to try convincing the Headmaster instead of me?" I asked him, wearily.

Snape scowled. "The Headmaster knows about the cloak. He has known about it ever since it belonged to James Potter."

"Now I know that you're mistaken," I said, vehemently. "Dumbledore would confiscate the cloak if it existed and he knew about it! Whether Invisibility Cloaks are on my List or not, no student should have such a thing! It's quite inconceivable that the Headmaster would condone it. He's the Headmaster! Why, i-it just wouldn't be right!"

Snape looked at me for a very long moment. His expression was furious and frustrated.

I waited for him to argue further. But, to my surprise he managed a wry, bitter smile instead. "Thank you, Filch."

"You're welcome," I said, confused. "What exactly are you thanking me for?"

He sighed. "Despite your unparalleled talent for cluelessness, perhaps you'll understand fully one day. And when you do, I hope that you will tell the Headmaster exactly what you've just told me. Give me your word on it."

"Of course, Professor. B-But..."

"It's late, Filch. I'm going to bed. Good night."

After he left, I sighed and looked down at Mrs. Norris.

"Do you understand what just happened here, my sweet? I certainly don't."

My cat looked up at me, enigmatic as a sphinx. Unable to explain even if she wanted to, she simply purred.

The End

Author's Note:

I'm assuming that Dumbldore took Harry's Invisibility Cloak out of the Astronomy Tower back in Harry's first year before Filch ever got a chance to see it. The idea of Filch spending years wondering how Harry gets around the Castle without being seen tickles me.

The Squib and the Death Eaters

(This story takes place in Harry's fifth year.)



CHAPTER 1

All Cats are Grey in the Dark

I WAS CHAINED up in a shabby excuse for a dungeon. No more character to the place than a hole in the ground. Oh, sure, it was dark and gloomy enough. And terribly cold. I could see mist in the air from every ragged breath I took. Then again, it was the middle of the night in early December. The darkness and the bitter cold could be taken as a given. So, no extra points there.

This dungeon was nearly a ruin, falling down from neglect. Even from the lower chamber I could see the snowy night sky through matching gaps in the floor and roof of the chamber above. The walls were broken and crumbling in many places. Hagrid might have been able to knock some of them down with a couple of good kicks. Too bad Hagrid wasn't here. I was on my own.

The wall behind me wasn't one of the crumbling ones. And the chains that bound my hands and feet

to the wall were also strong, no matter how hard I pulled against them. But they were rather rusty and could have done with some oil and polish. If there's one thing old Apollyon Pringle, my predecessor as Hogwarts' caretaker, drilled into me it was the importance of maintaining one's tools.

All in all, this dungeon was hardly worthy of the name. It was a furtive sort of place. Not much chance of lingering on in this filthy pit for years, sleeping on dirty straw and taming rats with dry bread crusts. Magic is something I can feel on my skin, though I have never once felt it inside me. Dark magic had soaked into the walls down here; ugly spells that chilled me more than the cold and crawled over me like hundreds of small bugs. Death in this hole would be brutal and swift. What was left of me would likely be transfigured and hidden elsewhere, quickly, in a shallow grave. Possibly before another night fell.

I knew that I would probably never see my sweet Mrs. Norris or Hogwarts Castle again.

When I tried to recall how I'd been brought to this place my memories grew jumbled and confused. I knew that I'd been safe at Hogwarts earlier in the evening. I felt certain that Mrs. Norris was still there, safe. It was one of the few comforting thoughts I could grasp.

There wasn't much else that I could be sure of. I clearly remembered being anxious about something very important I had to do. And the next thing I knew I was locked in a desperate struggle with the two trollish wizards who'd clapped these rusty chains on me.

Crabbe and Goyle, Senior. I remembered them from their student days. They'd barely changed, except for the fact that they were perhaps even bigger and stupider now. I'd known it was futile to try and fight them. But I couldn't just let them just have things their own way. When my efforts to defend myself physically ended in failure I resorted to squirming around like an eel to avoid the chains, and peppering Crabbe and Goyle with curses. Compared to a true wizard's curses, my own are feeble things. Just words, no magic behind them. Though I do try my best to compensate for my lack of magic with creativity.

After a royal struggle, Goyle's silencing curse had hit me with the force of a backhanded slap, robbing me of my voice. And then Crabbe had cursed the chains onto me so firmly that the rusty things seemed almost as if they had been bonded with my wrists and ankles. It was uncertain whether either effect had been completely intentional. Crabbe and Goyle themselves had seemed a bit taken aback at how effective their curses were. I could understand their surprise since, as wizards go, they're barely competent.

Oh, dear. I guess I'd made the poor ickle wizards angry! Such big brutes, both of them. You wouldn't think that chaining up an old Squib like me could have given them so much trouble. Like the dungeon around us, they were pathetic.

Heavy feet lumbered through the chamber above. My vision was blurred and my left eye was swollen shut but I could still see the flickers of torchlight

through the holes in the ceiling. Oh, lovely. My tormentors had returned for another go-round.

The two of them moved carefully down the treacherous, crumbling stairs and set the torches that they carried into brackets on the wall. Crabbe was also carrying a large, heavy bag, which he set down with a thud. Then they stood there eyeing me with baleful expressions.

Crabbe's nose was mashed and bloodied. I'd broken his nose by smashing him in the face with my head. Hadn't done my head any good, but the sight of that nose cheered me up a bit. "We must take our joys wherever we can find 'em," old Pringle used to say.

I was also delighted to note that Goyle was still walking a bit hunched over. I'd been able to get one really good kick in before Crabbe had gotten the chains on my feet. Heh. Maybe there would be no more little Goyles to darken the corridors of Hogwarts. I knew that my successor as caretaker, whoever he might be, would appreciate that.

"Got anything to say for yourself, Squib?" Goyle jeered.

"What's the matter?" Crabbe added. "Your cat got your tongue?"

This witticism made both of them roar with laughter.

They did not seem to mind that I'd been rendered silent. Didn't they want me to talk? Wasn't that usually the whole point of the exercise? I had been very determined not to tell them anything they wanted to know, and they'd made sure that I couldn't, even if I wanted to! Could these two really be that incompetent?

I knew who had probably set these brutes on me,

even if I didn't yet know why. Lucius Malfoy. Crabbe and Goyle might be fools, but Malfoy certainly wasn't. Why didn't they seem more worried about what he would say when he discovered I had no voice?

"Soon," Goyle gloated, "We'll have your tongue, Squib! And maybe your eyes, too..."

"Merlin's Beard!" I thought, my heart beginning to pound.

"Er, wait a minute..." Crabbe said.

"Yes, please do!" I thought. "Wait as long as you like."

"We can't take them things from him, Goyle. Not tongues and eyes."

"Well, not 'tongues' anyway, since he's only got just one of 'em," Goyle conceded. "But why not just one eye? He's got two of those, don't he?"

"We're supposed to start only with the bits that can grow back again," Crabbe said. He was kneeling down, rummaging in the big bag. The torchlight glittered on a lot of sharp things inside.

Crabbe reached into the bag, smiling, to pull out the tools he wanted to use. He walked closer. I pressed back against the cold stones.

"I remember what you used to say, back when we was at school, Mr. Filch. Pain is the best teacher." His voice was much more nasal than usual, thanks to his broken nose.

"You probably still say that to the students, don't you? Well, Mr. Filch, you're really going to learn a lot tonight..."

I'd learned something already. It's quite possible to scream without making a sound.

In the wizarding world, parents who fear that their child might be a Squib will often do things to frighten the child, to shock the magic in them awake. I've heard tell, sometimes, of "Squibs" being cured. It's my humble opinion that those children were never really squibs at all. Perhaps they were just late bloomers. True Squibs are actually quite rare.

I've got a wizard's lifespan, even if I can't do magic. And in my life I've had all sorts of shocks, pains and emotional upsets. I've been tossed around by a Cerberus. I've endured nearly seven years of Fred and George Weasley. Peeves torments me on a daily basis. I've seen my sweet cat hung up, stiff as a board by her tail, looking dead and stuffed. There have been times when I've thought "this is it, I'm about to be either a dead Squib or a live wizard!" But, if there is any magic inside me at all, it has just gone right on sleeping.

Crabbe was right, for probably the first time in his life. It was an educational evening indeed. I was able to add several items to my imaginary file drawer of "Torments I Can Endure While My Magic Sleeps."

The nails were ripped from my fingers. And then from my toes. Hanks of hair were torn from my head.

Kept upright only by those rusty chains I listened, barely conscious, while Crabbe and Goyle discussed other options.

Goyle was still holding my chin. "Teeth are something that'll grow back, right?"

"Er," Crabbe said, "I think that's just kids' teeth. Maybe one tooth would be all right. Get us a nice big one. If it turns out useless, we can always keep it. For a souvenir, like."

How men like these two can manage to be born wizards and scrape through the finest school of Witchcraft and Wizardry in Europe is completely beyond me. Not only that, they managed to find witches willing to marry them. And then they successfully reproduced, creating nearly exact younger copies of themselves! Magical younger copies, naturally. Their junior versions were currently fifth year students at Hogwarts. They're all wizards, and I'm a squib! Does anyone really wonder why I'm so bitter?

Goyle reached into my mouth and grabbed one of my back teeth, a big molar, with something that felt like pliers. He pulled. I struggled and coughed and spat blood all over my tormentors. And still, no magic rose inside me.

A short while later they decided that strips of my skin would also count as "something that would grow back."

Soon after that I passed out and did my best to stay that way.



Voices. I could hear voices through a haze of agony. One of them was very familiar. A deep voice I heard every day. It sounded furious.

"What have you fools done? He's nearly dead from misuse!"

That was Professor Snape! What was he doing here, in this terrible place? Had he come to get me out of here, to take me back to Hogwarts? For a moment, I dared to hope so.

A second voice. Slow, drawling, elegant. Lucius Malfoy.

"He's still breathing, Severus. My scroll specifies the use of a living Squib, not necessarily a healthy one. And he's certainly more manageable this way. He gave Crabbe and Goyle quite a bit of trouble, earlier."

"Am I correct in assuming that you haven't managed to decipher all that much of 'your' scroll, Lucius? He may have been damaged beyond all usefulness now."

Snape's voice was even colder than this pit of a dungeon, icy enough to freeze whatever blood still remained inside me. He sounded utterly indifferent to my fate, and all too comfortable with the sort of company he was keeping.

The shock of this would have made me gasp out loud, if I'd had a voice. Trust is not something that comes to me easily. But Severus Snape was one of the few people I trusted. My mind rebelled against what I was hearing. This could not be happening.

"We did what we were supposed to do." This was Goyle. "We only took bits off him that'll grow back."

"If he dies, then none of his 'bits' will grow back," Snape snarled. "Do the two of you understand that? I am making an effort to use words with only one syllable!"

"We can get another Squib if this one snuffs it, Professor." This was Crabbe, sounding sullen.

"Or maybe a Muggle," added Goyle. "Since Squibs are kind of thin on the ground. Why can't we just use a Muggle?"

Snape made a hissing sound of pure disgust.

Malfoy addressed his underlings. "Muggles are plentiful, yes. Unfortunately, according to the scroll, only a Squib will do."

I heard another disgusted hiss from Professor Snape. "Lucius! What am I expected to do with these dirty, badly mangled bits of nail and hair and skin? These two incompetent trolls are clumsier than anyone in my first year potions class! If you truly want these experiments to bear fruit, then the ingredients for the potion must be carefully extracted, under the proper conditions! And I will need to know much more than you have already told me about the process."

There was a pause.

"You are becoming very tiresome in your insistence on seeing my scroll, Severus." Malfoy said languidly.

"Unless you allow me to see it for myself I will be stumbling ineffectually around in the dark, a blind man led by another blind man! Do you wish me to get results suitable enough for you to bring before Lord Voldemort?" Snape asked him.

Merlin's Beard! I could not be hearing this.

Despair swept over me like a Dementor's fog. Tears of helpless rage slipped from beneath my swollen lids. I'd trusted Snape. Worse yet, the Headmaster still trusted him. The pain of his betrayal was every bit as excruciating as the physical torture I'd already endured.

And, still my magic slept.

"Lucius," Snape was saying, "I will not wait around in this forsaken place for the rest of the night. If you will not agree to let me have the scroll then I will take no further part in this matter."

Malfoy didn't appear to like the sound of that. "You know as well as I do that no one else could possibly be

trusted with such delicate and difficult work! Much of the scroll is indecipherable! Parts of it are in code, and other parts are missing! You are the only one who could possibly make sense out of the few pieces of the puzzle that are ours to work with!"

Snape's voice took on the silky tones I knew well. "Then why not make me your full partner in this enterprise? And if our experiments with the scroll fail, there will be the two of us to share the blame, as equals. Surely, you can see how this will be an advantage to you."

"Share the credit, share the blame?" Malfoy sounded reluctant, but also like he was thinking things over.

I could barely think at all.

Snape's hand was on my face, turning it towards the torchlight. I was able to get my right eye slitted open a little, just enough to look at him. I wished I had the strength to spit.

"He's nearly unusable, Lucius." He might have been talking about a broken broom. "I do not understand why you insist on keeping him in this place when you have a perfectly serviceable dungeon in the Manor."

"This is one ...project that I have no intention of bringing home with me," Lucius Malfoy said, haughtily.

So... Malfoy wouldn't even have a Squib like me over for a bit of torture in his best dungeon. I'd be willing to wager that this wasn't even his second-best dungeon. Isn't it comforting to know that some old wizarding families really keep to their standards?

"How long do you intend to leave him down here?" Snape asked, sounding as if the answer hardly mattered.

"Not long. It would be too great a risk," Lucius Malfoy said. "Albus Dumbledore is no Ludo Bagman. He's not one to let members of his staff go missing for months and do nothing to find them. Dumbledore will make certain that his Squib is found, dead or alive. Nothing connected to the Squib's disappearance must lead him back to the Manor."

"True..." Snape murmured. "And Dumbledore will move quickly. You really do not have much time."

There was another pause.

"All right, Severus," Malfoy said, sighing. "We shall be partners. Come, I shall take you to fetch the scroll."

In a different tone he addressed Crabbe and Goyle. "You two, stay here and guard the Squib. We shall return shortly."

I could hear footsteps receding, and the sound of Malfoy and Snape climbing the stairs.

I was alone with Crabbe and Goyle again, but apparently I was no longer in any condition to be an interesting plaything.

Once Malfoy was out of earshot, Goyle started grumbling.

"No reason we have to stay down here with him, is there? He's not going anywhere. It's a bit warmer upstairs. We can have a fire."

They left the lower chamber as well, taking the last torch and leaving me in darkness. It hardly mattered.



"Pain is an excellent teacher." It's something I've often said to the students at Hogwarts, the bad ones and the

unlucky ones who find themselves handed over to me for a detention. I make them scrub bedpans in the hospital wing, or polish regiments of awards and trophies. Without magic. Until their nails crack and their skin blisters and their fingers bleed. They wash windows and scrub floors and scour walls with caustic potions and cleansers that leave their hands chapped, red and sore. And all the hard work makes their backs ache and their poor little knees throb for days afterwards. The brats hate the sight of me. I couldn't care less.

I clean everything at the Castle without magic. Every day. It's my job. Don't have much of a choice, do I? The students act as though it's torture. They don't know what real torture feels like. Even if the Headmaster would let me put the brats in chains, the chains would be clean and polished. I wouldn't leave the little brats locked up all alone in the dark, either.

All right, maybe my office back at Hogwarts is rather dark and depressing. It's a dungeon! I can hardly paint the place yellow and plant pretty flowers, can I? But it's a clean dungeon. Not too cold, and it's dry. Not open to the sky, with the snow falling in. It's not like this place.

Cold. I'm so cold. Can't feel my hands or my feet any more. Maybe that's a good thing, considering what's been done to them. I can't feel much of anything any more.

The Headmaster will look for me. Even Malfoy said so. That's some comfort, even though I know not even Dumbledore will be able to find me before I die.

I hope I die soon. They need me alive. They said so.

I want to die, just to spite them. Lucius Malfoy. Professor Severus Snape. I trusted the Professor, stupid old fool that I am.

Maybe I can hang on long enough to tell the Headmaster what Snape really is.

A Death Eater...

There's some noise from the chamber above me. My captors, Crabbe and Goyle, Senior, went up there because it's warmer than down here. They had a fire, but they still complained about the cold. It seemed like they didn't really want to be here either. Well, sorry, gentlemen, it's been a rough night all around. You will be getting no sympathy from me.

More noise from above. The voices had gotten louder.

"What's that? I saw something moving!" That was Crabbe.

"I didn't see anything." That was Goyle.

"Over there! Something small!" Crabbe said. "Looked like a cat..."

Goyle laughed. "Maybe it's the old Squib's mangy cat come to rescue him!"

"Not funny. Something else is here with us."

"I don't.... wait, what's that...?"

Suddenly, there was a lot of noise from above. Crashes, thuds, shouts. A flash of light that I saw though my slitted right eye. The unexpected commotion made my heart beat rapidly and the silence after all the noise finally died down was eerie.

I heard the sound of soft little feet padding down the uneven stone stairs. It was a familiar sound. Goyle was

right, I thought, incredulously. It is a cat. I could tell, even though I could barely see, that this cat was not my beloved Mrs. Norris. But it was another lovely lady I knew.

She stood at the foot of the stairs where the cat had stood only a moment before. Tall, black-haired Minerva McGonagall.

"Lumos!"

The tip of her wand glowed in the darkness.

"Mr. Filch...?" she said, looking at me, her voice full of pity and horror.

I supposed that I must look like something no self-respecting cat would want to drag in.

"Let's get you out of here..." she said, fiercely.

The chains remained stubbornly attached to my wrists and ankles when she tried a spell to remove them. Practical as ever, she simply blasted the other ends of the rusty chains right out of the wall.

With my only support removed, I fell forward, the chains still attached to me. She caught me and gently lowered me to the floor. She sat beside me, rested my head against her knee, and aimed her wand at the wall.

"Destruo!" she said. The power of her spell blew past me like a warm wind. Parts of the wall, specifically the places where the chains had been attached, crumbled. It looked as if the chains had been wrenched out of the weakened wall by simple, brute force.

"There's very little time," McGonagall said. "I've taken care of those two upstairs, but Malfoy could be back at any moment. You will need strength enough to run."

I gave her the most polite look of disbelief I could

manage, under the circumstances.

"Don't worry, you won't need to run far. This will help you. Just a sip, now," she coaxed me softly. "Severus told me that a sip would be enough."

"Severus?!!" My cry was silent, my voice was gone. Weakly, I twisted away from the small vial she had pressed to my mouth. Snape was a traitor. I would not drink anything he had prepared! Had that snake set a trap for her too? My lips moved silently, begging her to run, before it was too late!

"Mr. Filch! ...Argus. Please. There's more going on here right now than I can possibly explain. There's no time. Drink the potion!"

I writhed, nearly wrenching the vial out of her hand.

"Oh, dear. I'm sorry about this, Argus." She pinched my nose, grabbed my chin and forced my mouth open. When she saw the mess left by Crabbe and Goyle's quest for a souvenir Squib-tooth she said a word that I didn't think she knew. But she didn't let go of me.

I've always appreciated Professor McGonagall's firm, no-nonsense approach to things. Though I can't say I enjoyed having her use that approach on me very much. In spite of my desperate struggles a few drops of the potion got down my throat. I coughed and sputtered, twisted out of her lap and curled into a ball on the freezing stone floor.

"I can imagine what you must think of him at the moment," McGonagall said softly, her hand resting on my back. "But try to listen. He is walking a dangerous path, doing his best to get all of us out of this

alive. He can be trusted, believe me."

"Maybe Snape wants both of us dead!" I thought miserably. I lay, huddled, waiting for the potion to kill me.

Instead I felt my pain recede. It wasn't gone, it had just become ...unimportant. A thing that could be ignored and dealt with later. Very much to my surprise, I found that I could sit up. In a few moments I felt strong enough to stand. Dazed, disbelieving, I tottered to my feet. I was even able to support the extra weight of the rusty chains that were still attached to my wrists and ankles.

"The effects will not last long. A few minutes only. Severus told me that giving you any more would be too dangerous," McGonagall warned me softly. "When it wears off, you may feel even weaker than you did before. We must hurry!"

She helped me up the stairs. Snape's potion was making me feel very strange. Things seemed to be happening in a dream. I noticed how she moved carefully up the stairs, mindful not to step in any of the snow that had drifted in through the broken roof. It dawned on me that she was being very deliberate about not leaving any human footprints. Though she had left footprints in the snow when she'd come down to the lower chamber as a cat. And she didn't seem too worried about the bloody footprints that my bare, mangled feet were leaving on stone and snow alike.

"They must not know the truth of how you managed to escape," she whispered in my ear. "In order to keep all of us safe, you must appear to have had no help from any witch or wizard at Hogwarts."

We'd reached the upper chamber. Crabbe lay sprawled against one wall and Goyle lay crumpled in front of the fireplace.

Both of them had been knocked senseless. Size and strength aren't everything. McGonagall had more power in her little finger than either of those two had in their over-large, brutish bodies.

"Can you stand on your own now?" She asked me. "Do you think you can run?"

I nodded.

"You must follow me across the small clearing, to the grove of birch trees. There's a stream over there. Run to it as quickly as you can. I do not know much longer Severus will be able to delay Mr. Malfoy's return. There are protective spells around this place to prevent anyone from Apparating and Disapparating. But I can take both of us to safety when we reach the stream. Do you understand?"

I'd never heard of anyone being able to Apparate with a passenger. But, though I still wasn't sure if I trusted Snape, I trusted McGonagall completely. I nodded at her.

"Good," she said, approvingly. She looked at me as if I was a comrade in arms, and not just a useless Squib who'd gotten himself caught by Death Eaters and needed to be rescued. In spite of everything I felt a wave of pride when she looked at me like that. As if I was one of her Gryffindors. I did not want to disappoint her.

McGonagall's eyes twinkled. "They mustn't know the truth," she whispered, "but we can leave them an explanation of sorts..."

Suddenly, a tabby cat was standing there. Giving me a look that said "Follow!" she bounded away from the small ruined tower in which I'd been imprisoned.

Maybe it was Snape's potion making me giddy. But the idea that Malfoy would return to find me gone, my chains ripped from the wall and my bare, bloody footprints running away, led by the prints of a running cat, made me want to laugh. I didn't envy Crabbe and Goyle when they had to explain that their captive had been rescued by his cat!

I thought that we were safe. I should have known better.

We heard the voices before we reached the grove of birch trees near the stream that marked the Apparition point. Malfoy and Snape. Through the swirling snow they stared at us. Malfoy's face was a study in disbelief. Snape, standing slightly behind Malfoy, wore an expression of dismay.

Perhaps there were things going on here that I didn't understand. But I knew that I wouldn't let them take me again. And there was no way that I would ever let them take Professor McGonagall.

Malfoy's wand was suddenly in his hand, but I was on him before he could do anything. The chains lent me weight and momentum. We crashed together to the frozen ground. I smashed one manacled wrist against his forehead, with all the strength I could manage.

It wasn't enough. He was down, but not out. I'd been warned that the potion's invigorating effect would be a brief one. But, the agony sweeping over me as my wounds made themselves felt once more, was still a

terrible shock. Malfoy's fist slammed against my jaw, on the same side as my missing tooth. This new pain, added to all the others, left me so dazed and weak I could barely move. Everything around me seemed to be happening very slowly. Nearby I could see Snape trying to grab McGonagall. It seemed, for a moment, as if the man and the cat exchanged a glance; an apology given and an apology accepted.

And then the cat yowled like a mad thing, and clawed viciously at his face. Cursing fit to make a goblin blush, Snape flung McGonagall away from him. He put a hand to his face, feeling the bleeding gashes that raked across his cheek, narrowly missing his eye.

"Having some trouble there, Severus?" Malfoy's drawling voice sounded amused. He got up, leaving me lying very still in the snow at his feet.

"I'm not the one who can't even lock up one old squib properly!" Snape snarled, one hand pressed against his wounded face. "And if the old man's miserable cat could find her way here, can Dumbledore himself be far behind? You've ruined everything! Wait... what are you doing?"

Malfoy's wand was pointing at my head. "That should be obvious. I am disposing of the evidence, Severus. Finding another Squib for us to experiment on will be difficult, but not impossible. At least the next one will have a much safer master than Albus Dumbledore. *Avad...*"

I was grateful that at least McGonagall had gotten away. She would be able to tell the Headmaster what had happened. I gave myself up for dead.

"Wait, Malfoy!" Snape strode over furiously, slapping the other man's wand hand down. "The scroll will be useless without him! I refuse to wait until we can locate another Squib. I have a better idea. Leave him to me."

His tone became as smooth as black silk. "I already have the scroll. I can perform a memory charm on the old man. I can bring him back to Dumbledore myself. After he heals I can experiment on him at my leisure."

Malfoy sounded incredulous. "You would conduct those types of experiments? Right under Dumbledore's overly long and crooked nose?"

"Why not?" Snape's eyes glittered. "Do you really want to lose this Squib and have to start all over again with nothing?"

"You never cease to amaze me," Malfoy said, sourly. "If I agree to your plan, then I do have nothing. You have your knowledge of potions, the old man and the scroll. Everything! If your experiments are successful then our Lord will be very pleased with you. And I am out of the picture entirely!"

His eyes raked over Snape. "All right, Severus. Well played. You've won. But, beware, for the prize is dangerous. If you fail in this task, you fail alone. I will not stand between you and Lord Voldemort's displeasure."

"That is exactly what I expected to hear from you, Lucius. But I'm not going to fail."

They stared at each other for a moment or two longer. Finally, Snape said, "Go. I must take him back to Hogwarts while there's still some life left in him. I will keep you informed of my progress."

"Best of luck, Severus," Malfoy said. He gave Snape a mocking bow and Apparated.

I didn't hurt so much any more. I could barely see Snape standing over me. My hearing seemed to be deserting me as well, because I heard him sigh and it seemed to be coming from a long way off.

"Filch..." Snape said, faintly, "you troublesome old ...git." I was dimly aware of something warm being wrapped around me. His cloak.

"Minerva, take him, quickly. I'll follow you."

It was the last thing I heard.

CHAPTER 2

The Scroll

The gum-dissolving potion in the vial stung the tender skin under my clean, new fingernails. Ignoring the discomfort, I added the contents of the vial to my bucket.

Some miserable creature (either student or poltergeist) had left wads of gum stuck all over the undersides of nearly every banister on the main staircase! The gum might have been stuck there for the entire time I'd spent bedridden in the hospital wing.

The contents of the vial didn't react to the cleaning potion as they ought to have done. Instead of the usual Mrs. Skower's Magical Mess Remover (Extra Strength) frothing and foaming, the contents of my bucket appeared to be forming one huge soap bubble.

This bubble rose, drifting up and out of my bucket, a rather attractive variety of colors floating across its surface. It continued to grow alarmingly.

Cautiously, I stepped back.

The bubble expanded until it reached the size of one of Hagrid's huge pumpkins. Then it began to quiver. Just as I flung my arms up to protect my face, it exploded. There was a huge, wet SPLAT! A stench, not unlike rotting eggs, filled my office. I held my nose and tried not to choke.

Mrs. Norris, who'd been standing directly behind me, had managed to stay completely dry. Her golden eyes looked me up and down, taking in my sodden condition. She flicked an ear at me and began to wash one of her paws in a meaningful and deliberate way.

"I'll take a bath later!" I said, testily. "There's too much work to be done right now. And don't look at me like that. This mischief was clearly set up while I was stuck in bed. You should have been keeping a better watch on things down here!"

Mrs. Norris gave me another long stare before resuming her wash. She had stayed up in the hospital wing with me. Poppy hadn't had the heart to chase her away. When my condition had improved enough for me to start noticing things again, I'd been dismayed.

"If you're spending all your time here then who's watching my office?" I'd asked my cat.

Poppy had been quick to defend Mrs. Norris.

"Don't be an ungrateful beast, Filch. The poor little creature was in such a dreadful state when you were missing.

And then, when Professor Snape and Professor McGonagall brought you back half dead, she was beside herself!"

It wasn't that I had lacked gratitude. I'd just been concerned over what sort of pranks might be cooked up during my absence. My office had been vulnerable without someone I could trust to guard it. I'd tried to convince Mrs. Norris to reconsider her priorities, but she'd continued to watch over me as if she was afraid to let me out of her sight again.

Speaking of pranks, this was clearly a Welcome-Back-So-Glad-You're-Feeling-Fit-Again "gift" from somebody. As I stood there, dripping, I decided that my galleons were on either Fred and George Weasley, or...

"Oi! Filch! Fiiiiiiilch! Did you like your surprise? Is your office all nicey-nice and clean now?"

Peeves.

From the sound of things, the poltergeist had been waiting somewhere not too far away from my office, listening for the sound of the SPLAT. Now he was coming in closer, to have a nice gloat.

Less than an hour out of the hospital wing and my life was already getting back to what I would consider "normal."

I looked over at my desk, hoping that nothing there had been ruined by the exploding bubble. There was only one piece of parchment on the desk and it looked unscathed. I breathed a sigh of relief.

That parchment had been a gift from Professor Flitwick. He'd charmed the parchment to instantly record the name of any student who had been put down

for detention. I would have hated to see it ruined.

The Detention Parchment currently held three names. Three students who had been disrespectful in Charms class. I read the names and my heart turned to ice. Suddenly I felt anything but "normal."

I began to tremble uncontrollably. Memories I really couldn't keep banished for long overwhelmed me.

Professor Snape had told Lucius Malfoy that he was going to use a Memory Charm on me. But that had been a lie to placate the other man, and to maintain the Professor's dangerous role as a spy among the Death Eaters. I remembered everything all too clearly; a bitterly cold night, three weeks ago, in the dungeon of a ruined tower. I remembered the faces, the voices, and the sharp knives and the pain.

Especially the pain.

The blood drained out of my face as I clutched the edge of my desk to keep from falling. I'd broken out in a cold sweat. My heart was beating too hard and I couldn't breathe properly. I would not let myself be sick. I would not let myself be sick. I would not let...

Peeves chose that moment to come floating through my open office door. His already wide mouth was even wider than usual, with a self-satisfied smile. Held captive by the dreadful memories, I stared at the poltergeist almost without recognition.

My battle with Peeves has been a very long one. Between myself and the poltergeist there has never been any quarter asked and no quarter has ever been given.

I suppose that I must have really looked like death

warmed over. Even so, Peeves' reaction to the state he found me in was unexpected. His sharp little face twisted with anger and fear, an expression I'd never earned from him before.

"Stupid old Filch!" he wailed as I clung to my desk and struggled to breathe. He hurled himself like a bludger around my office and, in his wake, some of the drawers in my file cabinets burst open and papers scattered everywhere.

"Go ahead and croak!" Peeves shrieked. "I won't even care! Wretched, smelly Filch!"

Mrs. Norris, fur puffed out all around her like a dusty halo, hissed at him. Then she leaped off the desk, straight at the poltergeist.

Peeves retreated back into the corridor.

"It wasn't me..." he cried at her. "I didn't do it! It was the boys who messed with old Filch's things! The twins, they did it!"

Highly agitated, he flew away down the corridor. I could hear things falling and crashing as he flew past.

"Well..." I said weakly to Mrs. Norris. "What's got into him?"

I realized that I'd somehow ended up sitting on the floor with papers fluttering down all around me.

"What a mess..." I whispered, resting my head on my knees.

Mrs. Norris pushed her little head anxiously against my hand.

"Don't fuss at me, my sweet... I'm fine."

After some time, when I was able to move again, I

started mechanically gathering papers. Keeping busy, that was the ticket. I wanted to feel angry at Peeves because of the mess, but I just felt dazed and wobbly.

"Argus! What's happened in here?"

The sudden sound of someone else in the room made me jump with fright.

"Headmaster!" I gasped. "You startled me..."

Dumbledore's blue eyes looked at me with concern from behind his spectacles. "So I see. Forgive me. I went to see you in the hospital wing. Poppy told me that she'd released you. On the condition that you would restrict yourself to light duties, only." He frowned.

"I-I'm just tidying up my office a bit..." I said, faintly. "It was Peeves. He..."

"Yes, I saw Peeves when he passed me in the corridor," Dumbledore murmured. "He looked as if he'd had a bit of a scare himself. He was unusually quiet while you were recovering, you know."

He sighed. "Argus, I can see that you are still not well. You shouldn't be up and around yet. I am bringing you back to the hospital wing."

"My work..." I protested.

"Will keep until you are strong enough to do it."

"Poppy said that I could get up."

"She has been reconsidering that decision. I had the distinct impression that you bullied and badgered her mercilessly to let you up out of bed this morning." He was still stern, but there was a touch of humor in his voice. "And then, when that had no effect, you resorted to shameless begging until she took pity on you."

Poppy had told on me! Embarrassed, I stared intently at the pile of papers in my hand. It was true that I didn't feel particularly strong or well yet. But staying in bed had grown unbearable. I needed to stay busy, to keep the memories away.

"Madam Pomfrey is aware that you were unable to make it from the hospital wing all the way down here to your office without needing to rest quite a number of times," Dumbledore continued.

How did she know...? It must have been the portraits! Poppy had probably alerted all of them to watch me for signs of lingering infirmity. I'd felt eyes all over me as I'd walked through the corridors. Wretched things. After I'd always taken such good care of them too!

"I promised to fetch you for her and bring you back upstairs. I do hope you're going to come along quietly?" Dumbledore's tone was deceptively mild.

"I can't leave this mess..." I said.

Dumbledore picked his way carefully through all the papers scattered on the floor to look at my desk blotter. He read the three names on the Detention Parchment. I looked up to find him studying me with concern.

I realized that I was still shaking.

"Very well... we shall clean up first." His crooked nose wrinkled. "But the atmosphere in here is a bit ...pungent. Not particularly good for your health." Wandless, he made a tiny gesture with his right hand.

"Floreo," he said.

The wave of power that accompanied even the smallest use of his magic washed over me. Suddenly

my office smelled as sweet as a rose garden.

I was about to thank him when he got down on his knees and began to help me gather up papers.

"Headmaster," I said, scandalized, "get up off the floor! You must have more important things to do..."

"I am doing something important. I am preventing my caretaker from overworking himself until he collapses. And then I am going to make sure that he goes back to bed where he belongs."

"Will you put a Protective Charm on my office door to keep pranksters out?" I asked him, grumpily. "A suitably nasty one?"

"One that I consider appropriate, yes."

I sighed. It would have to do.

"Hmmm." Dumbledore said, examining the papers he'd collected. "Did you have these organized alphabetically, or by year?"

"By year, and then alphabetically."

"All right. I'll take care of this lot. You sit and rest."

I stared at Dumbledore in shock, but Mrs. Norris was regarding him with approval. She jumped into my lap and began to purr. Automatically, I began to pet her.

"You could use a spell..." I said. "This will take you too long without one."

"No, it will not, provided that you keep resting until I've finished." He was using his "Headmaster" voice on me.

Obediently I sat still.

"Rather a lot of pages marked 'Weasley,' aren't there..." Dumbledore murmured.

"There's rather a lot of Weasleys. Mostly it's Fred

and George. They have their own drawer. Other Weasleys can be filed with the rest of the school, under 'W,' according to year. You won't find any 'Weasley' papers marked 'Percy,' though. I never had the heart to punish him. Not only did he have a proper respect for rules, he has to live with the twins. Even I could never think of a punishment worse than that."

Dumbledore's bushy eyebrows rose. "That's rather harsh, Argus."

"Percy agreed with you, surprisingly enough," I admitted. "I gave him my opinion on the matter, once. He was terribly affronted. 'They're my brothers!' he said. He doesn't deserve the twins and they certainly don't deserve him."

I was aware that I was practically babbling. But if the Headmaster insisted that I should sit still, then I felt I had to keep talking. Stillness was unbearable.

Dumbledore smiled, as if he didn't mind my chatter. Then, as he picked up a new sheet of paper, his face changed. His eyes filled with sorrow.

I saw the student's name on the paper he held, and flinched.

Cedric Diggory.

"He was punished just the one time," I said, miserably. "It was during his first Quidditch season on the Hufflepuff team. It had been raining. They all came in from practice dripping mud everywhere. I said all the things that I usually say. That I'd had enough, and I was tired and already had far too much work to do, and they had no respect..."

I winced. "You know how I get."

There was no tactful way to respond to that, and the Headmaster politely kept silent.

"And Cedric... he looked at me, stricken! Even before I gave them all detention."

I sighed. "Headmaster, he actually looked sorry for what they'd done. No one ever takes what I say to heart, but he did. For several years I hardly thought about that incident at all... but now I can close my eyes and see that look on his face."

"He made certain that the Hufflepuff team never left me a mess again," I continued softly. "For all the rest of his life."

"I have never regretted anything I've said to a student before." My voice cracked. "I've never regretted punishing one either. But now I wish that I could tell him that it was only a bit of mud. No harm done."

We were both silent for a while after that. Dumbledore's expression was bittersweet, as if he was glad for another memory of Cedric.

"Please," I asked him, "you won't tell anyone I said that, will you?"

"When necessary, I can keep secrets like a house elf, Argus," Dumbledore said quietly.

"Thank you," I murmured.

I'd started to tremble again.

Cedric Diggory had been killed by Death Eaters, on the orders of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. Not because he'd done anything to harm or anger them. The Death Eaters hadn't cared about who Cedric was.

Cedric had been nothing to them. He'd simply been in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Mrs. Norris mewed at me.

I realized that instead of petting her, I was rubbing at the ugly welts on my wrists; souvenirs of a pair of rusty, cursed chains. The Death Eaters hadn't killed me like they'd killed that poor boy, but they hadn't spared my life out of kindness, either.

The papers scattered on the floor had all been sorted into neat stacks. Dumbledore stood up to put each stack in the correct file drawer. After he'd done that, he crossed to my desk and picked the Detention Parchment up.

I watched him study the names on it.

Draco Malfoy

Vincent Crabbe

Gregory Goyle

Three boys who were all so very like their fathers.

"Headmaster," I whispered, "I know we've never seen eye to eye on the subject of punishment. But these three Death Eaters' spawn surely deserve to be locked in chains and hung up by their ankles."

"Not for the evil things that their fathers have done, Argus." Dumbledore's voice was very gentle. "You will not be handling their detention, at any rate. Severus has asked to deal with them himself. And I have agreed."

"He'll be too easy on them!" The cry wrenched itself out of me before I could stop it.

Dumbledore's voice was sad. "Severus only favors the Slytherin students in front of the other houses. In private,

among his own, he can be quite ...harsh. The Slytherins expect that from him. They do not respect weakness."

If possible, my tremors became even worse. I knew how "harsh" Snape could be.

"Many of the students in Slytherin house require careful handling. Severus is the one who can do that best. They are still children, undecided between the Dark and the Light. Many of them face tests and trials unknown among the members of the other houses. Severus knows that difficult path all too well."

"Is that what you were coming to tell me, Headmaster?" I asked bitterly. "That these three ...children would not be mine to punish?"

Mrs. Norris lay still under my nervous hands. I could feel her gentle breath and her small heart beating. Slowly, I was able to get my trembling under control.

"No, Argus. As I said, I'd expected to find you still in the hospital wing. I was actually coming to see you there for quite a different reason."

He took a deep breath. "I promised Severus that I would discuss something with you once you were feeling a little better. It is a difficult matter..." he warned me, "involving your recent ordeal."

The blue eyes behind the half-moon glasses studied me intently. I felt as though he could see right through me.

"It's all right, Headmaster..." I whispered. "I'm listening."

"Lucius Malfoy had a scroll in his possession. Severus has it now. It is a very nasty piece of Dark Magic, of a type that Severus has not seen before. Most of the scroll is indecipherable. A potion can be

used to make it readable. The potion must contain..."

"Squib bits." I said, before he could continue. "Hair... nails...skin." I shivered again. "I heard them discussing it, that night."

Dumbledore looked grim. "I told Severus that the scroll should be destroyed. But he feels that we should try to read it first. Severus is concerned that the scroll may not be only one of its kind. We have been able to translate just enough of it to learn that the danger it represents could be very great. Perhaps this scroll, or another like it, might reveal a way to break through many of the protective spells around Hogwarts Castle."

I looked at him, my eyes full of fear.

"I had to admit that Severus had a valid point." Dumbledore said. His voice had grown very gentle again. "Argus, I do not like to ask you this after what you have been through. But a single strand of your hair and a small sliver from one of your fingernails is all that would be required."

I flinched. "Will he...? Is Professor Snape going to...?"

"Severus has agreed that it would be best if you were to cut your own hair and nails for him."

"Gracious of him," I muttered.

Once Severus Snape had been one of the few people I truly trusted. Now, even though I knew he'd risked his life to save mine, I could hardly bear to be in the same room with him. It wasn't something I was terribly proud of, but it was true all the same.

I snorted with disgust. Snips and slivers had been all that the Death Eaters had really needed from me.

All that blood and pain for nothing... except, possibly for their amusement. I felt ill.

"I told him that he would have to agree to abide by your decision. If you refused, then your word would be final," Dumbledore continued.

There was a long pause. "He's agreed to destroy the thing after you and he have read it?" I whispered. I could still remember Lucius Malfoy's mocking voice. "If you fail," he'd said to Professor Snape, "then I will not stand between you and Lord Voldemort's displeasure."

"If he destroys that scroll, they'll kill him," I said. "Did he tell you that?"

Dumbledore suddenly looked closer to his age than I'd ever seen him look.

"Severus intends to make the scroll's destruction look like an accident. The activating spells are quite tricky, even for someone with his talent and skill. I have asked for his assessment of the risks involved. He is certain that he will be punished. But he does not think he will be killed."

I felt even more ill.

Snape was doomed to suffer whether I helped him or not. Helping him seemed the only decent thing to do. As long as he wasn't going to come near me with anything sharp. He was really asking for very little.

"Tell him I agree." My voice was so faint I could barely even hear myself. "Does he need those things now? I have a small pair of scissors and a pair of nail clippers in my desk drawer. Would you get them for me, please?"

Dumbledore did as I asked. I managed to keep my

hands steady. It took me only a moment to cut off a piece of new fingernail and a strand of my hair.

I handed them over carefully, watching as he sealed them inside a small glass vial he conjured up.

"Thank you, Argus," he said, very gravely.



Taking Mrs. Norris (who wouldn't have let me leave her, anyhow) I went back to the hospital wing without making a fuss.

By the time that Poppy finally considered me fit enough to leave for good, the school was mostly empty of students because of the Christmas holiday. At last I could finally get some real cleaning done! The fact that there wouldn't be a lot of annoying brats underfoot made things even better.

It was a relief to finally be back in my own rooms, sleeping in my own bed. Most of the students would probably be shocked to learn that Mrs. Norris and I do not actually live in my little dungeon office. We do not sleep among the file cabinets and we do not spend all of our waking hours plotting to make the students' lives miserable.

(All right, we do spend some time plotting against the students; everyone needs a bit of fun. I can't spend all my time cleaning, can I?)

The rooms that Mrs. Norris and I call home are small, but quite pleasant. They're located on a lower floor of the castle. We have a window with a view of the lake. Mrs. Norris isn't really the sort of cat who

likes to sun herself in front of windows, but she gives in to the temptation every now and then.

In the middle of my first night back in my own bed, I woke up abruptly.

Every nerve in my body was tingling. Something, somewhere, was calling me. But it was inside me too. I could feel that something whispering in my ears, gliding up and down my spine, rushing through my veins along with my blood.

I knew I should be able to recognize what I was feeling. It was familiar. Almost like...

Magic!

All my life, I have been able to feel everyone else's magic. Spells have danced across my skin, blown through my hair, and made my nose itch. Though I can feel magic, smell magic, and practically taste it, I have never been able to do a single spell on my own.

But this magic had its roots somewhere deep inside me. A part of me that had been crippled and silent all my life was suddenly awake, and singing! This magic was all mine!

And yet, someone else was using it.

I knew exactly who that someone was. Black eyes in a pale face, framed by hair darker than midnight! I could almost see him, down there in his dungeon, bent over a scroll. (Unlike me, he actually does live down in the dungeons.)

Severus Snape!

I knew he'd told Dumbledore that he was trying to read the scroll only to understand its dangers. But I also

remembered him telling Malfoy that he would wait until I was healed, so he could "experiment" with me.

I was furious. What was he playing at? I would not let him steal my magic!

Hardly aware of what I was doing, I got out of bed.

Clad only in my long, grey nightshirt, not even bothering with my slippers, I went out of the rooms that Mrs. Norris and I share. I stalked barefoot through the cold, dark castle corridors.

I had no lamp, but I needed none. Below me, in the dungeons of Hogwarts, my magic waited! It drew me like a moth to a flame.

Mrs. Norris was padding softly after me. I heard a small, worried mew.

"It's MINE, my sweet. He doesn't need it!" I hissed.

I had hardly seen Snape since the night he and Professor McGonagall had rescued me from the Death Eaters. I'd been avoiding him. He'd been avoiding me too. I hadn't known if he was doing it out of respect for my feelings, or for some reasons of his own. Now I knew.

Moving through the Castle as effortlessly as a ghost, and just as unaffected by the cold, I was soon down in the dungeons, standing in front of the door to Snape's rooms.

A strong protective ward on his door stopped me in my tracks.

No! It wasn't fair! He couldn't keep me out here! He couldn't keep me away from what was rightfully mine! My hands curled into fists.

Proper wizards have wands. I've never had one. They just don't respond to me. But powerful wizards

like the Headmaster can do wandless magic. I've seen (and felt) Dumbledore do spells without a wand any number of times.

For the first time in my life I could feel power crackling through my body. I thought I could focus it like the Headmaster did. I tried to remember the spell that Professor McGonagall had used to break the dungeon wall the night she had helped Snape free me from the Death Eaters.

"Destruo!" I shouted.

I felt the power flowing outward, through me.

Snape's wards were very strong. They might have held, but for the fact that I could feel my magic, the part of it that was in there with him, attacking his door from the other side.

He had not guarded against an attack from within.

The results were quite satisfying. Snape's door blew open with a mighty crash.

Unfortunately, it smashed right off its hinges, falling towards me and Mrs. Norris. I stayed in front of her, frantically reviewing all the spells I'd ever heard.

"Pulveris!" I cried, and the pieces of the door crumbled into a cloud of dust.

It made a horrid mess. I didn't care.

Snape had been sitting, hunched over a thickly scrolled up piece of parchment. Near him, a small cauldron was simmering. He stared at me. His black eyes were fathomless.

"Filch...?" he said, sounding shocked.

"Good evening, Professor!" I hissed. "Or should I call you thief? Magic Stealer? Give me what's MINE!"

CHAPTER 3

Abyss

I was expecting Professor Snape to be furious. Or defensive. I was expecting him to attack me. But he did nothing that I expected him to do.

I was standing before him, with real magic in me for the very first time in my life. Wandless, I'd just shattered his protective wards, blasted the door of his dungeon to pieces and then reduced those pieces to dust!

But those spells had taken a toll on me. My head ached, my legs were shaky and I could hardly focus my eyes, let alone my magic. (It occurred to me that there is a reason why most wizards do not perform wandless magic. It will drain them from within, much more quickly than any outside threat.)

Mrs. Norris stayed beside me as I made my way into Snape's classroom. My cat was looking at me as if she wished she could drag me out of there by the scruff of my neck, like an errant kitten. She clearly didn't think that I was behaving wisely. But she remained with me anyhow, while I faced Snape.

The professor was sitting at one of the student desks. Beside him was a student-sized cauldron, heating slowly over a very small fire. On the desk in front of him were a small silver dipper and a tiny porcelain container, shaped like an inkwell, with a quill stick-

ing out of it. The scroll that had formerly belonged to Lucius Malfoy was in his hands.

Severus Snape simply looked at me as Mrs. Norris and I came closer. And something in his pale face made me think of Cedric Diggory.

Poor Cedric had only ever gotten one detention from me. Years ago he and his team-mates had muddled up a corridor during Quidditch season. Struggling with my usual once-a-year bout of flu, I'd been in an even worse temper than usual. Cedric had listened to my wheezing, hoarse voice and stared at my red, dripping nose. Even before I'd stopped complaining and started handing out punishments, Cedric had looked stricken. As if he'd unwittingly done something unforgivable, and was only just realizing it.

Snape was looking at me with almost exactly the same sorrowful expression.

Why was he looking at me like that? I had been angry. No, I'd been furious, but now I was baffled. It wasn't as if I'd expected him to be afraid of me... that would have been ridiculous. He was one of the most powerful wizards at Hogwarts. Even with the new-found power in me I was still no match for him magically, and both of us knew it.

"This is something I truly had not anticipated..." Snape said, softly. Then he sighed. "I should have listened to Albus. I should have destroyed this cursed thing."

"You used that scroll to wake up my magic, didn't you?" I asked him, growing more confused by the moment.

"Yes, Filch, I suppose I have done so. It was unintentional."

He was clearly angry, but it was with himself, and not with me.

"I have used a very Dark spell," he continued, bitterly, "to activate this scroll. A word of power must be written across the top of the parchment. The ink must be made from a potion that contains, among other things, a Squib's blood, hair, nails, skin and bone. Apparently, I have finally discovered all the ingredients and used them in their proper proportions."

I gulped, queasily, remembering how Malfoy had given Snape the collection of "bits" that Crabbe and Goyle had removed from me. Some of those pieces must have been usable after all. Snape never would have dared to ask Dumbledore if he could have one of my bones.

My tongue went automatically to the empty space where one of my molars had been. My mouth was still a bit sore.

"What did you do? Go and steal my tooth from Crabbe and Goyle somehow?"

Snape closed his eyes. "I didn't steal it," he said, tonelessly. "I challenged them to a game of chance, and won it from them."

"Did you get my blood from them too?" I asked him. "I suppose there was enough of it left on the floor and walls of that place. I know you wouldn't have dared to ask Poppy for any."

His dark eyes opened and met mine. "Dried blood would not have been usable," he lectured me, sounding like the Potions master he was. "Fresh blood was obtained from my cloak. The one I had wrapped around you that night, when I carried you to the

Apparition point for Minerva. She transfigured you into a stone so that she could Apparate with you safely. She handed my cloak back to me, the lining all streaked with your blood."

"All right, so you've used Dark magic," I told him. "I can't say I mind the results too much."

"It was not the result that I intended! I was simply trying to read the scroll!" The self-hatred in Snape's voice made me flinch. I'd never heard him sound like that before.

It was true that I'd spent the past month fearing, doubting and avoiding Snape. But for many years before that I'd trusted him. He sounded so tortured. I wanted to console him. "Professor, it's all right! What you've done hasn't harmed me. I've been hoping for this all my life! Until now I was never sure if I had any magic in me at all!"

"Of course you have magic, Filch," Snape said, sounding as if I was being unbearably thick. "You were sired by a wizard, and carried under a witch's heart. Squibs have some magic within them, even if it is locked up in a place they can never reach. You're a fool and you don't understand what I've done to you!"

His dark eyes looked haunted and miserable. "I've left you balanced on the edge of an abyss," he said.

"You're right, I don't understand," I replied.

"You will. Come here." He used the same tone that he uses when he teaches a class. I obeyed him quickly. It's not magic, it's just his personality.

"Closer, Filch. I want you to see this scroll that has awakened your magic."

As he spoke, he was unrolling the thing. When I saw what was on it I gasped. The portion of the scroll that I saw seemed, at first glance, to be covered in blood.

Then I realized that the ink was the same color as fresh blood. The words were written in a crabbed old-fashioned hand, in a language that I couldn't read. But the pictures spoke plainly for themselves. They horrified me.

Images of severed body parts... fingers, eyes, a tongue. A diagram showing a man with the skin being flayed from his back. Swallowing hard against a wave of nausea, I stepped back.

"Squibs differ from other wizards in several interesting ways," Snape said. "It's true that they cannot create and sustain spells, at least not under normal circumstances, but a Squib is not magically ...inert."

He fixed me with eyes like two deep black holes.

"There are ways that the magic trapped inside a Squib can be tapped and used by a more powerful wizard. The Squib's store of unused potential can be added to that of the other wizard, increasing his powers. This particular scroll contains spells that might enable a Dark wizard to Apparate within the walls of Hogwarts, even inside the Headmaster's own chamber. If he wears a charmed cloak, made from the skin of a Squib."

I sat down on the student table next to the one he was using. My legs were no longer able to support me. Mrs. Norris leaped up lightly beside me and I took her onto my lap.

"This thing must be destroyed." Snape rolled the scroll back up again, hiding the dreadful diagrams and pictures from view.

"Wait..." I heard myself say. "Professor... must you? You don't have to use those dark spells! Just keep the scroll, and let me keep my magic! Please!"

I sounded mad and desperate. Because I could feel that whatever it was he had done to awaken my magic was starting to wear off. The song inside me was growing still and silent once more. I knew that I would feel more empty than ever when it was gone.

"Please," I repeated, begging him, clutching at his sleeve. "You don't have to read the spells, you don't have to use them, ever. Just write one more word of power on the page... just one!"

"No, Filch. Keeping this scroll was never one of my choices. Dumbledore wants the thing destroyed. As for the Dark Lord... he wants the scroll brought to him, its secrets revealed, along with a Squib he can use to access its spells. The Death Eater who brings him what he wants is sure to be rewarded."

I stared at Snape, my eyes wide with horror.

"This scroll is a very ancient piece of Dark magic," he said. "One that even the Dark Lord had not seen before. Malfoy had the scroll in his collection, but he was unable to unlock more than a tiny fraction of its secrets. I was able to figure out a way to activate it and read the spells, but I didn't fully understand the true Darkness in this thing until I saw its effect on you."

His voice grew softer, sorrowful and deadly cold at the same time. "Did you like being able to work spells, Filch? Did you like it well enough to crawl before Lord Voldemort? Would you kiss the hem of his robes just

to have another little taste?"

"Stop..." I whispered. "Professor, please..."

"As near as I can understand, a stronger spell would be needed to activate the scroll each time. And the cost would be higher in blood and pain. Are you willing to give yourself to him, one finger, one eye, one tooth at a time? Make no mistake, Filch, he would have some use for every last bit of you. Or you could always pay him with the suffering of others. Would you be willing to betray any trust to be able to use your magic again? He would take the lion's share of your untapped power for himself, of course. But he might feel generous enough to throw you scraps every now and then. Scraps like the magic that you used to force your way in here."

I was weeping. Dry, wracking sobs choked me. Mrs. Norris pushed her small head against my chin. She stayed still, even though my tears were falling on her.

"Would you beg him for those scraps of magic, the way you begged me?" Snape's voice cut into me like a knife and scraped me raw.

"You don't understand..." I managed to gasp out.

"Of course not." His tone was harsh enough to strip the skin from my back, like that poor Squib in the scroll drawing. "How could I possibly understand? I know absolutely nothing about the seductive temptation of power!" Sarcasm dripped from his words like acid.

It was a while before I could speak. "I only meant..." I whispered hoarsely, "that you don't understand what it feels like to be powerless..."

"Don't I?" Snape snarled bitterly. He sounded very

near tears himself. "Do I have the power to change the past, and undo the terrible mistakes I've made? Can I rescue the innocents I've failed to save, the innocents left broken at my own hands?"

He was looking at me. I realized, to my shock, that he was adding me to the number of innocents he felt he carried on his conscience.

His harsh anger was turned inward again, against himself. "I do not even have the power to keep the children of my own house, my Slytherins, safe from the Dark! Not when some of them have whole families already too far gone along Voldemort's twisted path!"

The only sounds in the room were my wretched sobs. Snape fell silent. He would not allow himself the release of tears. But I'd seen deeper into him than I ever had before. Every Slytherin child who fell to the Dark was another piece wrenched from a heart he didn't want anyone to know he had.

"So, Filch." His voice had grown silky, but underneath the smoothness I could still hear the painful rasp of his unshed tears. "The Headmaster did say that I must defer to you, in matters concerning the scroll. Tell me. Which of my two masters shall I serve now? Shall I destroy this ugly thing as Dumbledore wants me to do? Or shall I please my Dark master by bringing him the prize he seeks?"

He looked at me coolly, dark eyes fathomless.

"Destroy the scroll, Professor," I whispered.

An abyss, he'd called it. I had been able to step back from the edge. I thought of Severus walking his lonely

shadow path between the Dark and the Light. He'd fallen into the abyss once, and pulled himself back out again. He had returned to walk along its edge, a guide to help others find their way back. He'd let me choose my own path. I wondered how anyone could be that strong.

We had scored a small victory against the Dark, but I felt too shaken to rejoice.

I held Mrs. Norris tightly and tried to stop crying into her fur. She was beginning to look like a soggy dust mop.

She gave me an annoyed look, but rubbed her head against my chin. I sniffled and wiped my eyes and nose on the sleeve of my nightshirt.

With an annoyed expression rivaling that of Mrs. Norris, Snape reached into one of his pockets. He handed me a clean handkerchief and glowered at me until I'd used it.

"How are you going to destroy that scroll?" I asked him.

"There are a number of mistakes that I could have made while performing the activating spell. I might have used the wrong balance of ingredients in the potion for the ink. I might have heated my cauldron a bit too much, or not enough. The ink must be kept precisely at the temperature of human blood, so a few degrees either way would have been disastrous."

Snape paused. "I think, perhaps, my fire was a bit too hot." He drew his wand out of his sleeve and pointed it at the small fire under the cauldron. The flame grew, almost imperceptibly.

He let the potion heat up for a few moments before he reached into the cauldron with the small silver dipper. He poured the blood red mixture into the

small porcelain inkwell and dipped the quill inside. The he reached for the scroll.

"You may feel this, Argus," he warned, sounding sorrowful again. He touched the quill to the scroll and began to write in blood red letters. The letters hissed as they formed on the page, turning it a mottled black. The blackness spread across the parchment, like some sort of fungus. The scroll began to crumble in places, slowly falling completely to pieces.

Snape was right, I did feel the effects of the scroll's destruction. The little bit of magic that still remained from his earlier spell went silent and dead. The emptiness hurt me deep inside, and I couldn't help crying out.

"It's over," he said quietly.

Both of us looked at the pile of black dust on the student desk.

"What will He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named do to you, Professor?" I whispered. "You told the Headmaster that you didn't think you'd be killed. Are you sure about that?"

"I'm sure that whatever Voldemort does to punish me for my failure won't be pleasant, but I will probably survive." Snape's tone was dismissive. He didn't like it when other people fussed over him. I'd learned that years ago.

"I'm almost more worried about what Lucius Malfoy is going to say to me," Snape said, ruefully. "He's going to gloat unbearably. The Potions Master, making such a first-year mistake..."

He turned away from the concerned look on my face.

"The next thing we must do is get rid of this lot. Keeping it around might well present a danger to

you," Snape said. He nodded down at the cauldron.

"I will just melt the whole thing down into a puddle of unrecognizable slag. Where's Longbottom when I need him?"

I stroked Mrs. Norris, watching as Snape proceeded to melt the cauldron. He used a spell to contain the fumes when they got too bad.

"Professor...?" I asked him, hesitantly. "If I'd chosen differently, if I had said that you should take me to He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, along with the scroll, would you have done that?"

"I would have truly been surprised if you'd made that choice, Argus." His voice was quiet as he watched the cauldron melt.

His faith in me was the highest praise I had ever been given. I was deeply moved.

"Ah, well. They're a messy lot, Death Eaters," I said. "Blood all over their walls... rusty chains and holes in the roofs of their dungeons. I'd much rather choose to stay here and make the brats' lives miserable. At least there's a hope of getting a few of them to wipe their feet sometimes."

Snape smiled, but spoke with an echo of his earlier sadness. "I regret forcing you into a position where you had to make such a choice."

"I don't regret it," I told him.

I wanted Snape to see that what he'd done hadn't broken me. Instead, he had shown me that I could be strong. Powerful enough to refuse the thing that I wanted most in all the world, when the price was too high.

I waved a hand towards the empty doorway, taking

in the wrenched hinges and the huge piles of dust out in the corridor.

"I've had a chance to do real magic, Professor! And perhaps some day, my magic might decide to wake up on its own. I can wait, I'm used to waiting. At least now I know my magic is really there."

A little more softly, I added, "I am sorry about your door, though. I'll have it fixed as soon as possible. Do you want me to take care of the mess for you?" I nodded towards the melted cauldron on the table and out towards the piles of dust in the hall.

"It will keep till morning."

I grinned. "Professor, it is morning. And I've spent almost a month resting. It's time I got back to work."

"You're right, the castle is in desperate need of some cleaning..." Snape said dryly. "But shouldn't you at least get dressed first?"

I remembered that I was still barefoot and in my nightshirt.

Mrs. Norris gave me an amused look and began washing her paws.

"There's still a few hours yet before breakfast," Snape said. "Go back to bed, Filch. I'll see you in the Great Hall."

I was glad to see a faint smile on Snape's face. A real one this time, untouched by guilt or shadows.

The End

Squib Doors



CHAPTER 1

Vigil

WIELDING my scrub brush with a vengeance, I attacked the dirty flagstones on the floor of the castle's entry hall as if each stone was a deadly enemy.

Hogwarts' entrance hall is huge. I knew that trying to give the floor an extremely thorough cleaning during the school term was an exercise in futility. By tomorrow evening, the students would have it covered with muddy footprints all over again. This task was usually one of my projects during Christmas holidays, when the Castle is nearly empty. But I had been an invalid for most of December and part of January. As a consequence, my regular cleaning schedule was lost beyond all hope of recovery. Keeping the floor really clean for just one night was the best I could manage. It wasn't good enough, but it would have to do.

As a Squib surrounded by witches and wizards, I can admit (if only to myself) that I am a petty tyrant when it comes to the few things I can actually control. Keeping

the Castle clean, keeping the students sufficiently cowed, these things can make me almost content with my lot in life. But now, matters inside Hogwarts felt as if they were slipping out from under me. Even though I had recovered, I moved more slowly than I had done before and I tired more easily. My work took me longer to accomplish.

Frustrating as this was, it was only half the problem. I'd been accustomed to keeping an eye on mischief-making students with the help of my cat, Mrs. Norris. But Mrs. Norris was still being overly protective. She refused to leave my side in order to patrol the corridors on her own. She was near me now, sitting on a section of freshly scrubbed flagstone, like a small, dusty sentinel. I knew that students were probably breaking rules all over the castle, and there wasn't a thing I could do about it!

And Peeves was still treating me as if I was something breakable. Usually, this would not be worthy of comment. The poltergeist most often deals with breakable things by simply breaking them. Peeves was actually treating me as if I were something that he wanted to keep in one piece! It was most unsettling.

But tonight my smaller troubles had been dwarfed by a much bigger fear.

Earlier this evening, Professor Severus Snape had been summoned by the Dark Lord.

I'd seen the summons. It had happened right in front of me. We'd been in a corridor, surrounded by a mob of yelling Slytherins and Gryffindors. There had been an altercation; three young Slytherins against two young

Gryffindors. Curses had been thrown. The commotion had attracted more students of both houses, and their professors. Professors Snape and McGonagall were trying to sort out what had happened.

I'd been shouting about detentions. The two Gryffindors had already been assigned detention with me, but I had been determined to get my hands on the Slytherins as well. I really wanted those three!

Suddenly, Professor Snape's face had gone paler than usual. I hadn't understood the significance of his slight wince, and the involuntary clutch at his left forearm as if something there had hurt him. I might have missed the whole thing, if it hadn't been for Professor McGonagall and Harry Potter. Both of them had reacted. Potter's green eyes had widened and he'd taken a sharp breath. Minerva had reached out to Snape, as if to support him.

Still clutching at his arm, Severus had stepped back. He'd drawn himself up to glare coldly at both of them, and then at me.

"You may do what you like with Mr. Longbottom and Miss Weasley, Filch!" he'd snarled. "But Mr. Malfoy, Mr. Crabbe and Mr. Goyle belong to my house! I shall attend to their punishment!" Not waiting for my reply, dismissing me from his attention as if I didn't exist, he'd addressed Professor McGonagall.

"I leave matters in your capable hands," he'd said, silkily. He'd stalked off down the corridor, black robes swirling around him, drawing his triumphant, satisfied Slytherins in his wake.

I still hadn't understood. Under the loud sounds of Gryffindor outrage rising all around us, Minerva had leaned closer to me.

"Argus, leave young Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle to Severus. It is for your own good, and for his as well." It was the look of concern on her face, concern for Snape, that had finally made me see. I had framed a silent question at her. She'd nodded, grimly.

Resting a gentle hand on Potter's shoulder, she'd turned away from me then, to soothe her angry young lions.

Feeling suddenly weak, I'd leaned against the wall. I owed Severus Snape my life. In early December, he and Professor McGonagall had rescued me from Lucius Malfoy's fourth or fifth-best dungeon, after a terrible night spent under the not so tender mercies of Crabbe and Goyle, senior.

Professor McGonagall had masqueraded as my cat, Mrs. Norris, to free me. Professor Snape's continuing masquerade, as a loyal Death Eater, was far more dangerous. In order to keep me safe he'd had to "fail" a mission for the Dark Lord. I hoped that saving my life would not cost him his own.



Mrs. Norris, who hears better than I do, looked towards the marble staircase. I glanced up from my scrubbing. Minerva McGonagall was coming down the stairs. In her arms she carried a neat stack of parchments. I guessed that these were student essays she needed to read.

"Has Severus gone yet?" I asked her, hoarsely. "And does the Headmaster know?"

"Yes, to both questions."

"*Merlin help him!*" I thought. I could only hope that Snape returned to us in one piece. I could wait up for him. It wasn't much, but it was all I could do.

Mrs. Norris and Professor McGonagall exchanged a polite feline greeting, meeting each other's eyes for a moment, and then looking away.

"Severus may not return for many hours," Professor McGonagall told me. "He may not even return tonight."

"*He may never return at all!*" I thought, wretchedly. I didn't have to say that out loud. My expression must have been eloquent enough.

Minerva didn't try to deny that possibility. Her mouth compressed into a thin, worried line. She sat ramrod straight on a lower step of the main staircase with the essays beside her.

"Professor, you don't have to wait down here with me," I said. She didn't look very comfortable sitting on the step like that.

"I will stay for a while," she said. "You and I do have things to discuss, Argus. There is the matter of Neville and Ginny, and their detention. They have told me what happened. How much of the incident did you see?"

"None of it!" I confessed angrily. "I only came later, after I heard all the noise." I couldn't help glowering at Mrs. Norris. "I should have been one of the very first on the scene!" I grumbled. No creature living could spot trouble about to happen like my cat managed to do. If

only she'd been there just as the trouble was starting instead of wasting her time shadowing me!

Mrs. Norris returned my glare with a soft hiss and an indignant flick of her right ear. She twisted away from me to lick daintily at her left shoulder.

Professor McGonagall smiled. "She intends to keep a close watch on you until she feels that it is no longer necessary to do so. And she feels that if you want a companion to give you blind, unquestioning obedience, then perhaps you should consider getting yourself a dog."

"I was able to take her general meaning, thank you very much, Professor. A literal translation was not required."

Turning to Mrs. Norris, I muttered, "I can look after myself perfectly well, Missy. It wasn't me who once got myself Petrified by a Basilisk, now was it?"

Mrs. Norris gave me a long, cool look before shifting her attention to her right shoulder.

"She did have the wit to look at the Basilisk's reflection in a puddle before the sight of the actual creature could kill her," Minerva pointed out. "And I remember how you refused to let her out of your sight for months after Poppy gave her the Mandrake juice."

"That was different!" I said. "After all the terrible events of that year, it's no wonder that I felt protective..." I broke off in dismay. The year of the Chamber had been a terrible one, but that disaster had only been the first of many. Things had grown worse since. No wonder Mrs. Norris was concerned.

I sighed, and admitted defeat.

Gracious in victory, neither Minerva nor Mrs.

Norris pursued the subject any further.

"Well, at any rate, I didn't see what happened," I continued after a few moments. "What did the children tell you?"

"Neville said very little, but I gathered that he was having some trouble with Malfoy and his friends. The other boys had got hold of Trevor somehow and were refusing to return him. Then Ginny stepped in to help Neville and matters escalated from there. Neville confessed to using a body-bind on Goyle. And Ginny confessed to cursing all three of the Slytherins with boils. In some particularly uncomfortable spots!"

"Well, good for her!" I said, before I could stop myself.

"Minerva, I do not feel that Mr. Longbottom deserves a detention at all. It was only one curse and he used it in self defense! As for Ginny Weasley, her actions are perfectly understandable, really..."

Minerva was staring at me incredulously. "Who are you and what have you done with Argus Filch?" She was smiling, but her eyes held an expression of concern.

I saw her worry deepen as I continued. "If anyone deserves to be severely punished it's those three Death Eater Spawn!" My knuckles whitened on the scrub brush as I dipped it into my bucket. Drips of Magical Mess Remover flew as I gestured with it. Mrs. Norris hissed at me in annoyance and Professor McGonagall turned to shield her essays.

"Hanging them up by their ankles would be too good for those three!" I snarled. "I'd like to..."

"To what, Argus?" Minerva's voice managed to be both very gentle and extremely stern. "Leave them

chained up someplace dark and bitterly cold? Cut bits and pieces off them?"

"I..." my throat had closed up. "I...can't help it, Professor! I know I'm not supposed to remember anything about what happened. And I don't want anyone to know that Severus worked no memory charms on me. But every time I see those three...!"

"They're children, Argus. They are not the ones who hurt you."

"I know that," I said, bitterly. "I've already had this conversation with the Headmaster, twice now. I know that, no matter how badly I wish it were otherwise, I shall not be permitted to punish young Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle at any time in the foreseeable future. It seems that the Headmaster is worried about what I might do to them."

"Albus is concerned about you, just as he is about the boys."

"I know that," I muttered.

Minerva stood up and came over to me, careful not to step on any wet parts of the floor. She knelt beside me, resting a hand on my shoulder. "I shall never forget what you looked like when I found you that night," she said softly. "You were so torn and bloody. I was afraid that Severus and I were already too late. But you're strong, Argus. Stronger than even you know."

The grey eyes behind her glasses were calm, steady.

I looked into her eyes, wishing that I could be the person that she saw. I didn't feel strong at all.

"It's not fair, Minerva."

It was a soft cry, torn from my heart. I knew that she would understand. Minerva and I both agreed that the world could be cruel and unfair sometimes. Minerva tries to compensate by being as fair as she possibly can. I just become angrier and more bitter as the years go by.

"No one can make them pay for the terrible harm that they do!" I said. "They nearly killed me. For all we know, they're killing poor Severus at this very moment!"

"They will pay. Someday." She spoke firmly as if she believed it with all her heart. "As they should. But the fathers should pay, not the sons."

"The boys are still young and they have not yet chosen their path," she continued. "It is not easy, but I know that Severus tries to show them, very subtly, that there are other paths besides the ones that lead to He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. I know that, if he could, Severus would cut himself to pieces if he thought it would save the children of his house from the Dark."

I nodded. I'd seen that in Snape too.

"It's hopeless," I told her. "Maybe he has a chance with some of the other Slytherins. But no one could save those three brats from the Dark. They're black-hearted little Death Eaters already!"

"Severus is determined to try. And he will find a way, if anyone can." Minerva said.

"If he lives..." I pointed out, bitterly.

McGonagall's eyes became sad. "Severus was certain that he would survive the Dark Lord's displeasure. He told Albus that it was a calculated risk."

I snorted angrily. "Oh, yes, he told me that as well."

So I told him that there were times when the difference between a Slytherin's 'calculated risk' and a Gryffindor's 'reckless courage' was too fine a distinction for a mere Squib to grasp!"

This earned a faint smile from her. "Oh, my. What did he say to that?"

With the best sneer I could manage, I attempted to imitate Professor Snape's caustic tones.

"A Slytherin's careful planning is nothing at all like a Gryffindor's reckless stupidity! That should be obvious to anyone, even the merest Squib!" I grinned. "Then he called me an ass, and stalked away down the corridor in a huff like a great, black manta!"

"Hmm. He said 'Reckless stupidity,' did he?" Minerva raised an eyebrow.

"Er... you aren't going to mention that to him, are you?" I said.

"Of course not, Argus. I wouldn't dream of it," she said, sweetly.

"If you do say anything, please remember that you never heard about that conversation from me. If you like, you can blame it on Peeves, and say he overheard us. I hope you do get your chance..."

Minerva smiled sadly and reached out to stroke Mrs. Norris. She is one of a very small number of people in the Castle, besides me, who can get away with doing that.

"We still haven't discussed the matter of the detention, Argus," she reminded me. "What about Neville and Ginny?"

"You haven't taken away any points from them,

have you?" I asked her. "I'm sure that Severus was going to take points away from Gryffindor, but he never had the chance."

"Neither of us had a chance to take any points from either house. There was so much noise and confusion. And then we were both distracted."

"At least there's that," I murmured. "So, you really want me to punish your young lions? You're not afraid of what I might do to them?"

"Rules exist for a reason." Minerva said quietly. "Hogwarts exists to train responsible witches and wizards. Curses should not be used lightly, no matter what the provocation. Neville and Ginny are good children. They know that one need not sink to a foe's level in order to defeat them. They know that all unpleasant actions have consequences. And they are both capable of understanding the sort of hard lessons that you can teach better than anyone. And, no, I am not afraid of what you might do to them."

Her grey eyes studied me closely. I felt again that she was seeing me as someone stronger than I really was. And again, I wished to be the person that she saw.

"I am not giving you leave to clap them in chains, of course. I've always thought that sort of thing showed a lack of imagination anyhow," Professor McGonagall added.

"I will try my best to think of a detention that is both suitable and imaginative, Professor," I murmured. This would be my first detention since I'd been out of the hospital wing. I was surprised to find that I was actually quite nervous.

"I will, of course, discuss my plans with you, before we schedule a time for the detention to take place," I added.

"Thank you, Argus."

Around us, the Castle was going quiet. It was after the time when the students should be in their dormitories. The good students undoubtedly were exactly where they should be. The bad ones...

I sighed and gave Mrs. Norris a very pointed look.

She ignored me and arched her back under McGonagall's gentle hand. My cat purred, perfectly content to remain exactly where she was. The bad students were going to run about, unchecked for another night.

Sighing again, I went back to scrubbing the floor.

Professor McGonagall went back to the stairs and her stack of essays. Conjuring a light, she began to read. Mrs. Norris padded after Minerva, curled up on the step beside her, and kept her golden eyes on me.



Hours later, Minerva had long since finished reading her stack of essays. She sat on the step, with Mrs. Norris in her lap, both of them watching me. I had nearly finished the floor.

The Castle's huge front door swung open with a creak. A tall, thin figure in black stumbled painfully inside.

Minerva and Mrs. Norris got to Professor Snape first. Professor McGonagall didn't seem to be half as stiff as I felt, I thought ruefully, as I stumbled after her.

Snape's face and hands, the only parts of him visible under his cloak, were horribly pale. His eyes looked

like deep, black tunnels. He was trembling. Echoes of the Dark Magic that had been used against him surrounded the Professor like a second cloak.

I did not need to be told that I was feeling, smelling, almost tasting the malevolent magical aftereffects of the Cruciatus Curse. Severus was so weak he could barely stand.

When we reached out to steady him, he flinched. It hurt him to be touched, though we tried to be gentle. Snape hated to be fussed over. He hated for others to see him when he was vulnerable. But seeing him this way hurt both Minerva and me, so I decided that we were all a little bit even.

When he spoke, his voice was a sandpaper raspy ghost of its usual silky self. "Well. It seems that I have calculated the odds of my survival correctly, after all."

Professor McGonagall carefully maneuvered his right arm over her shoulder. Just as cautiously, I did the same with his left arm, taking particular care not to touch his forearm. I knew very little about such matters. But I supposed that the Dark Mark might still be very sore.

"Yes, Severus. So you have," Minerva said, gently.

She and I helped him towards the staircase. Mrs. Norris helped us all by staying out from under our feet.

"I need to see Albus..." Snape whispered. "Let me go. I've made it this far... I can make it on my own."

This was such a blatant lie that Professor McGonagall and I ignored it by unspoken mutual consent. Behind his back, we also silently settled the matter of where we were

taking him. Straight to the hospital wing, whether he liked it or not. Neither of us thought that the Headmaster would object to debriefing his spy there.

"The two of you shouldn't have waited.... foolish of you." Snape murmured.

We started carefully up the stairs.

"It didn't seem like such a long wait..." I lied. I saw Minerva hiding a wry smile.

"Professor McGonagall and I had time to discuss the students' detentions," I added.

"Oh?" Severus murmured, though he was concentrating mainly on keeping himself upright.

"She's convinced me that you are right to insist on handling the punishment of your Slytherins however you see fit. I will restrict myself to the matter of disciplining the Gryffindors."

"Very good, Filch. I am delighted to know that you've finally seen the light of reason."

In spite of his condition, Snape actually managed to achieve a respectable level of sarcasm. But it was several moments before he could speak again.

When he did, he sounded very cold. "Believe me. I will teach young Mr. Malfoy, Mr. Crabbe and Mr. Goyle a lesson they will not soon forget. They will not get off lightly."

Minerva flinched. She has a kinder heart than I do. I was pleased to hear this. But, looking at Severus Snape's face, hearing his voice, I think that both Minerva and I were equally glad that we would not know the details.

"I do believe you, Professor," I said.

CHAPTER 2

Detention

Detentions are supposed to make the students nervous. Not me. I live for detentions. Ask anyone at Hogwarts. They'll tell you about the horrid old Squib caretaker who exists simply to make the students' lives a misery. It could not be nerves that were making me shake inside as I stared at the pair of young Gryffindors who'd been sent to me for a detention. It had to be anticipation. Surely, that was it.

I regarded the serious, round face of the fifth year boy and the equally serious face of the red-haired, freckled fourth year girl and tried not to tremble visibly. It was nerves. I admitted it to myself. I felt awkward, almost frightened.

Nearly two months had gone by since I'd last had students for a detention. In that time I'd been kidnapped and tortured by Death Eaters and rescued by Professors Snape and McGonagall.

My recovery had been slow. Some things were still not back to normal. My interactions with the students, for example.

Nothing truly major had changed. The students still despised me. I didn't mind since, in most cases, the feeling is mutual. The students still avoided me. I didn't mind that either. I could never get my work

finished if I had the brats always underfoot. (Look at Hagrid; children hanging about his hut at all hours. It's a wonder he can get anything done!)

But, since I'd been injured, I had noticed a different quality in the way the students avoided me. Some eyes were averted out of pity. Others seemed afraid of me, not because I am a grumpy and vindictive old man, but because the sight of me reminded them of the Dark things currently moving through the Wizarding world, despite all the Ministry's words of reassurance to the contrary. Terrifying things that could strike without warning, leaving broken bodies in their wake.

I had spent nearly a month in the hospital wing. Poppy had put curtains around my bed so that the students wouldn't gawk. It had been for their benefit as well as mine. I hadn't needed a mirror to let me know what a dreadful mess I was. Frightening children was usually something that I did not mind doing, but I hadn't wanted to do it that way.

My bed had been at the back of the ward, where the noise from the rest of the hospital wing was less likely to disturb me. But I'd had nightmares, sometimes during the day as well. It was inevitable that some of the students had heard my cries. It was also inevitable that some of them had caught glimpses of me as Poppy had tended my wounds.

The details of what had happened to me had been left unclear. I was not supposed to remember anything about the attack, or my attackers. But, as always, the Castle was awash with rumors. And some of the

rumors came close to the truth. Many of the students seemed to know that I'd been left broken and nearly dead by the Dark.

The two children now facing me had each suffered their own terrible encounters with the Dark.

Neville Longbottom's parents had been attacked and tortured by Death Eaters when he was only an infant. His Auror father and his gentle mother had been driven insane by repeated applications of the Cruciatus Curse.

Ginny Weasley had found a diary during her first year at the Castle. A fifty-year-old evil relic, belonging to the boy who would one day become the Dark Lord. She'd been entrapped, used against her will and nearly killed.

Neville and Ginny were both eyeing me with haunted expressions. Fellow survivors, they seemed to know that I would spend the rest of my life struggling against the aftereffects of what had been done to me. The evidence of their own, private battles seemed vivid in their young faces.

Or perhaps they were just two children who would simply rather be anywhere else. They could merely be nervous about the work they would be asked to do for me. I was being a foolish old man. My voice still wouldn't work when I tried to speak to them.

Mrs. Norris came to my rescue. Leaping lightly down from my desk, she padded over to Ginny Weasley. Then, to my shock and amazement, she rubbed against the girl's ankles and purred.

"Mrs. Norris?" I exclaimed, finally managing to talk,

even if the words came out in an indignant squeak.

"Hello, Mrs. Norris," Ginny said, at the same moment. She stroked my cat once, very lightly. Wisely, she didn't make a second attempt. Mrs. Norris isn't one to permit undue familiarity, least of all from students.

Neville and I looked at Ginny with astonishment.

"How often has she let you do that?" I demanded. To my knowledge, my cat had never permitted herself to be touched by a student before.

In the past there have been students who have attempted to get on my good side by making up to Mrs. Norris. She can see through that type even faster than I can. Those foolhardy students had been lucky to escape with any of their skin left intact.

"That was the first time she's ever let me pet her," Ginny admitted. "But she's purred at me before."

She blushed, making her face nearly as red as her hair. "I've talked to her sometimes. When she's in the hall by herself. After what happened during my first year ...the Basilisk.... well, I just wanted to apologize to her. And since then she's never seemed to mind if I speak to her. As long as she isn't too busy."

"The only thing she's been busy at lately is getting underfoot!" I grumbled, giving my cat a dirty look.

I continued, gruffly. "And, as for what happened with the Chamber... Merlin's Beard, child! Everyone knows that none of it was your fault! Even Mrs. Norris and I know that."

I hoped that Ginny Weasley really knew, deep down, that it wasn't her fault. I hoped that people who

loved her told her every time she needed to hear the words. I wanted to reassure her further, but I knew that my aptitude for kindness is about the same as my aptitude for magic.

But Ginny surprised me with a smile. A genuine one. I could see the tension beginning to leave her.

Neville had remained quiet, observing Ginny and me, but he also seemed less tense.

Well, good for them. Silly children. I was still as tense as a bowstring. My "conversations" with students usually consisted of me scolding and complaining, with very little participation needed from the brats involved. This was a new and uncomfortable experience for me.

"Let's get on with it, shall we? Can't hang about all night. We've got work to do..." Stiffly, I got up from my desk. I gave Ginny a tray bearing several large bottles of cleaning solution, and handed Neville a sack filled with rags. Picking up my toolbox, I lit a lantern and led the way out of my office.

As I stepped into the corridor I nearly fell over my own feet in order to avoid treading on a toad.

"Trevor!" Neville darted past me, nearly knocking me over as I was still off balance. "I thought I'd left you back on my bed!"

The boy blushed as he looked up at me guiltily. "Sorry, Mr. Filch..." he said, putting Trevor in his pocket.

Usually I would have spent the next several minutes yelling about careless children who couldn't keep track of their pets. But I simply didn't have the energy. It takes a great deal out of me to shout at Neville.

I know, because I've it done so many times. Not as often as Professor Snape has done, but close. Without meaning to be, Neville is one of the most infuriating students at Hogwarts.

Neville is clumsy and unlucky (which was why I'd given all the breakable bottles to Ginny to carry) but he is also earnest and brave and unfailingly good natured. Not to mention self-effacing. I've even heard him say that he's "almost a Squib". I am glad that he doesn't know I've overheard him. The foolish boy might want to fall through the floor with embarrassment. Knowing him as I do, it's safe to say that he might actually, literally, fall through the floor. And then who would have to mend the hole? Me, that's who.

You can't be "almost" a Squib. You either are, or you aren't. Believe me, I know. It really makes me want to give him a good, hard shake!

Neville Longbottom is most definitely a wizard. An almost unbelievably inept one sometimes, but a wizard. I could have told him that his magic was as strong as anyone's (and certainly much stronger than mine!) but I knew the boy would never believe me. That's what infuriates me about him more than anything else.

Holding the lantern, I led the way through the labyrinth of dungeon corridors. Our destination was several long passages away, but the walk took even longer than it should have because Trevor managed to get away from Neville twice.

The second time Mrs. Norris caught the toad before Neville managed to, and I had to snatch him away

from her. This put my cat in a miserable temper.

"You can't eat that creature!" I scolded Mrs. Norris, while Neville and Ginny checked Trevor over to make sure that he was uninjured. "Not even the boy knows where it's been!"

By the time we reached the gloomy dead-end passage with the small storeroom I'd been heading for, I was in a foul temper myself. In other words, I felt perfectly normal. What a relief.

"Hardly one of the show-places of the Castle, is it?" I growled, when I saw the nervous looks on their faces. "Well, I come down here fairly often and nothing's ever harmed me. The only thing we'll find down here is some hard work." I glared at them.

"Has Professor McGonagall told you anything about the job we'll be doing?" I added harshly.

Both children shook their heads.

"It's going to be painstaking and tedious!" I warned them, warming to my subject. "It'll strain your eyes and get your hands dirty!" I unlocked the door to a small, dingy storeroom with a dirt floor, crowded with crates and boxes and unidentifiable bits of lumber. An earthy, musty smell rose around us.

Neville and Ginny watched wide-eyed, as I set the lamp on the floor beside my tools and began wrestling a large, heavy crate out into the passage.

"You'll probably get your fair share of splinters too, I should imagine..." I continued, wiping sweat from my face. "Not to mention smashing your fingers when we start hammering..."

"Mr. Filch?" Ginny interrupted me. "Professor McGonagall said that we were to help you. Please, why don't you let us get everything out? Tell us what we need. We can use a levitation charm."

"I am perfectly capable of moving a few crates and boxes!" I growled at her. I knew that she'd be all right with the levitation charm, but I was worried that poor Longbottom would drop something large and heavy on top of me. Accidentally, but that wouldn't make it any less painful. I'd spent enough time in the hospital wing lately, thank you very much.

To my surprise, both children came forward to help me as I started moving the next crate. Denied the use of their magic, they readily put their backs into the job instead. With the three of us lifting, it wasn't that heavy. Before long there were three crates out in the passage, and I was prying them open.

Besides a plentiful amount of cobwebs, dust and spiders, these crates contained empty paintings. Not blank canvases, just paintings vacated by their inhabitants. The frames were broken, the canvases were dingy, a few of them were torn, and the colors muted with grime.

"Where have the people in them gone?" Neville asked, sneezing. Trevor had hopped out of his pocket again, but the toad was staying nearby, apparently stalking the many scuttling spiders.

"They're all over the Castle. Staying in other paintings, mostly, with friends..." I said. I paused to give Mrs. Norris an angry look. She appeared to be weighing the odds of

making another successful go at catching Trevor.

"Don't even think it!" I said to her. "If you do, we'll never get any work done!"

Wide-eyed, Neville retrieved the toad. Trevor had a mouthful of spiders, and went willingly back into the boy's pocket.

"I was supposed to clean these up ages ago," I said. "But, with one thing and another..." my voice trailed off in embarrassment.

"Oh! This one's lovely!" Ginny was examining a painting of a meadow filled with wildflowers. "Who lives in it?"

"Er... a maiden and a unicorn, I believe. The unicorn has been staying in a forest in one of the paintings near the prefects' bath entrance. The wretched creature gives me dark looks whenever I walk by. I don't know where the maiden has gone."

"I'll start with this one," Ginny said.

Neville selected a painting of a table with a banquet spread out on it, surrounded by empty chairs.

"You must be getting plenty of dark looks from this lot," he said, sympathetically. "They ought to be terribly hungry by now."

Before long I had them both set up with rags, bottles of cleaning solution and careful instructions. "Only a dab of the potion is needed to clean off the dust and restore the brightness of the colors. Too much might damage the paint. And, for best results, try to move in the same direction as the brushstrokes!"

Ginny and Neville nodded and went to work willingly enough.

When I saw that they'd got the hang of it, I turned my attention to fixing loose frames and mending rips in canvas.

I was squinting over my work, when I noticed a tingle of magic whispering against my skin. The light seemed to have improved. I looked up to see my lantern levitating beside me. Globes of glowing light were also illuminating the area near Neville and Ginny.

"Miss Weasley! You are not supposed to use magic during a detention!" I growled.

"I'm not using magic to do the work," she said earnestly. "Just to make things a bit easier for all of us. You were straining your eyes. You needed more light, but we need the light too. This seemed the best solution."

I had to admit, the child had a point.

"I like having the extra light..." Neville admitted shyly. "Brightens the place up a bit."

He had a point too.

Both of them were wise enough not to press me any further. At least not with words. But there were looks of entreaty on their grubby faces. They were working hard, diligent and uncomplaining enough to impress even Helga Hufflepuff. These were good children, as Minerva had told me.

I did not know that those globes of light and the levitation charm on my lantern were the first spells used in this little dead-end passage, in front of the small storeroom with the dirt floor, in a dragon's age. I had absolutely no idea what I was setting in motion. I was thinking "What harm will it do?"

Merlin help me, I was trying to be kind.

"All right, keep the lights. And keep the lantern up for me too, if it's not a strain for you," I muttered.

I consider everything that happened afterwards to be all my fault.



Professor Snape has often said that Neville Longbottom is too dangerous to be allowed to use a cauldron. Professor Snape should consider himself lucky that he's never been near Neville when the boy is using a hammer.

(Though Severus certainly would have known better than to offer to hold nails in place for Neville while the boy hammered...)

"OW!!" I shrieked, clutching my right hand.

Mrs. Norris, who had been in a snit ever since I'd refused to let her eat Neville's toad, gave me a smug look that told me I deserved what I'd gotten.

"Oh! Mr. Filch! I'm sorry!" Poor Neville looked crushed. Not half as crushed as my poor fingers.

A good and patient old man would have reassured the boy with some kind words. But Neville was stuck with me, which is Neville's usual sort of luck. So the words that he heard weren't kind at all, as well as being not suitable for children's ears.

"I didn't mean to hurt you!" the boy said, miserably. "Here... let me..."

His wand was out, and moving before I could say anything coherent. He took my injured hand in his. There was a tiny flash of light. I waited for my hand

to turn into a flipper or a toadstool, but instead something cool and soothing seemed to wrap itself around my throbbing fingers.

It was a perfect little cooling charm, very neatly done. Not bad, for a boy who considers himself "almost a Squib."

"There," Neville said. "Does that feel better?" He looked at me, anxiously.

"No magic! You're supposed to be having a detention!!!" I snarled, yanking my hand back to cradle it against my body.

"I'm really sorry, Mr. Filch!" he repeated. "I should have been more careful!" Neville's face was white. He was looking at me as if he'd done something far worse than accidentally whack my fingers with a hammer. He continued to sustain the cooling charm around my hand.

Ginny Weasley had just tapped in a final finishing nail. She set the newly repaired frame against a stack of other finished ones and came over to us. "How bad is it? May I see?" she asked me, gently.

I glowered at their decidedly grubby, concerned faces and repressed a weary sigh. Brats I can handle any day of the week. The rude ones, the defiant ones, the sly ones. Children who look down their magical little noses at me, who treat me as if I am nothing more than the dirt under their feet. Anything those little wretches can give me, I can take and give right back again!

But what, in sweet Circe's name, am I to do with the other sort? The good ones...

"Oh! Mr. Filch... I'm sorry! We didn't realize we were tracking in all this mud..."

"You should have used those sharp eyes of yours then, eh, Diggory? That's what Seekers are supposed to do, isn't it? Of all the inconsiderate..."

"I'm really sorry, Mr. Filch..."

So am I, Cedric. So am I.

"Neville," I said quietly. "It was an accident. You meant no harm."

I held out my damaged hand to show Ginny, gingerly flexing my fingers. My right index finger was bruised blue and blood had welled up under the nail, but the boy's cooling charm had eased the pain. "Don't fret," I said gruffly. "I've had worse."

Neville winced. "I know."

It was the first time that any student had said anything on the subject to me. I didn't know what to say in reply.

"I was in the hospital wing back in December," Neville went on. "Forgot to step over a trick stair and sprained my knee..."

"Oh," I said.

"You look much better now," Neville told me.

"You really do..." Ginny said, earnestly. "I caught a cold," she explained. "Just before Christmas. I went to the hospital wing so Madam Pomfrey could give me some Pepperup potion."

I looked at them, seeing only kindness and sympathy in their young, dirty faces. I still didn't know what to say. For a while there was only silence.

"You don't have to keep on doing that, if it's too much bother." I nodded to Neville, indicating the cooling Charm he was still keeping around my fingers.

"It's all right, Mr. Filch."

Neville kept the cooling Charm going while Ginny finished fixing the last of the broken frames. He continued to hold it while he and Ginny packed up my tools, the cleaning potion, and their dirty rags. He finally stopped when I told him to, so I could pack the refurbished paintings back up in their crates to bring back to my office.

With Neville's charm added to the lights that Ginny had already conjured and the levitating spell she'd used on my lantern, this little dead-end corridor now seemed awash with magic.

The earthy, musty smell from the storeroom with the dirt floor seemed to have grown stronger. More pungent. And there seemed to be another odor underneath. Almost like something had died. I wasn't the only one who'd noticed. Ginny's freckled nose was wrinkled. Neville held his nose pinched shut as he watched me packing up the crates. Mrs. Norris paced around all of us, looking uneasy, ears and whiskers twitching.

"Ugh!" Neville said. "What's that?"

"The smell's coming from the storeroom," Ginny said, also pinching her nose. "But why didn't we notice it before? That doesn't make sense..." Waving her wand, she motioned one of her floating lights over to the open door leading to the smelly storeroom.

Mrs. Norris was suddenly between Ginny and the storeroom door. The girl had to stop to avoid stepping on her. But Ginny's floating light, unhindered by Mrs. Norris, continued on its way into the dark, little room.

The globe of light flickered and began to fade. Just

before it went out, it seemed as if something long and sinuous had moved in the dark.

Mrs. Norris hissed loudly, and lashed her tail.

"D-did you mean for it to go out?" Neville asked Ginny, nervously.

Ginny shook her head. "I think that something in there just ate my light!"

I had come over to stand between the children.

The passage seemed much gloomier than before, with only the glow of my oil lantern and Ginny's remaining floating light to illuminate the place.

"You said that there was nothing down here!" Neville reminded me.

"I've never seen or smelled anything remotely like that down here before!" I said.

"We could do with a bit more light," Neville murmured. He waved his wand, murmuring "*Lumos*." The tip of his wand glowed brightly, lighting up the area just inside the storeroom. The children, Mrs. Norris and I all saw the dirt floor rippling as if something large, with many tendrils were moving, just under the surface.

Suddenly, what looked like a long, thin vine shot up from the storeroom floor. Clods of hard-packed dirt flew. The stench of decay became even stronger. The vine moved horribly fast, snaking out towards Neville.

"GET BACK!" I shouted, darting forward to slam the storeroom door closed.

The door was made of heavy wood. We heard the vine-thing strike it with a thud. The door held. But we could hear a rustling, pattering sound from within

the room. As if the vine were snaking out along the inside of the door, probing for weak spots.

"What is that thing?" Neville gasped. "Is it a Bundimun? Aren't they supposed to smell terrible?"

"Bundimuns infest hovels that are never cleaned! They feed on filth!" I snarled, highly affronted. "Moldering messes! Dung!! Slime!!! Perhaps I may have let the Castle go, a bit, during these past two months, but a Bundimun?! I never...! Of all the rude, impudent....!"

Poor Neville was cowering under my verbal assault, but Ginny spoke up.

"I've never heard of a Bundimun that shot vines out of the floor," she said. "Aren't they supposed to look like a sort of fungus? With eyes?"

"I wouldn't know!" I replied, drawing myself up, angrily. "I have never seen a Bundimun in my entire life!"

There was a loud, shrill mew from Mrs. Norris. Her golden eyes held an impatient look. She stalked down the passage, and then turned to look back at us.

"She's right, Mr. Filch," Ginny said. "We shouldn't hang about here. Whatever that thing is, we should go and tell someone about it."

"Yes..." I growled, still glaring at Neville. "The Headmaster should know." Under my anger I felt an undeniable twinge of fear. It couldn't actually be a Bundimun, could it? Surely I hadn't let the Castle go that much...? What would Dumbledore say to me?

My heart beating hard, I went to retrieve my toolbox, the lantern, the rag bag, and the bottles of cleaning solution. The Headmaster would have to be

informed about this, as soon as possible. But I couldn't tell him right away because...

Ginny and Neville were standing by the three crates of paintings.

"Mr. Filch?" Neville asked me, timidly, "You aren't planning on having us carry these crates all the way back to your office, are you?"

It must have taken a lot of courage for him to speak to me after the way I'd just been yelling at him. Poor Neville. None of this was his fault.

"No, they're too heavy," I said, without looking at him. "The two of you can use your levitation charm. It will be much faster."

Yes, I was the one who told them to use the levitation charm. I hardly even gave the matter a thought. I was trying to recall something else, something important. I couldn't tell Dumbledore about this right away because...

Behind me I heard two young voices saying "*Wingardium Leviosa!*" Warm tendrils of magic brushed against my back.

The thing behind the storeroom door pushed against the wood. It creaked alarmingly. Then, without warning, the door gave. It didn't splinter, it crumbled. As if something had eaten away at it from within.

Long, thin vines, sickly green in hue, snaked out of the storeroom, where they were rooted in the dirt floor, bringing with them a stench of decay. Ignoring me, the vines coiled out towards the children.

Ginny and Neville didn't run. It wouldn't have done them any good. The vines had them cornered against the

dead end wall. Both young Gryffindors had the presence of mind to lower their crates carefully, even Neville. Then Neville and Ginny attacked. I heard them shouting cleaning charms, scouring charms, the sorts of things one is supposed to use against a Bundimun infestation.

Unfortunately, the vines seemed undeterred. Perhaps this thing was simply too big.

I didn't wait to see what the children would try next. These were young Gryffindors after all, and they were likely to do almost anything as long as it was foolhardy and dangerous. Dropping everything except the bottles of cleaning solution, I ran forward.

Giving the bottles a shake I began spraying the cleaning solution on the vines. Wherever the liquid touched them the vines turned black and withered. The ugly things twisted about like angry snakes. But they didn't show any real interest in me until I got between them and the children.

Then there were vines all over me, foul, stinking things. My ribs felt like they were being crushed. I gasped in pain. A tendril wrapped itself around my throat and I couldn't breathe at all.

"*Accio Mr. Filch!*" I heard Ginny shout. Her spell wrapped around me, even stronger than the vines, wrenching me free. I felt myself flying towards her. As Ginny's spell released me, she tried to stop me from falling and both of us ended up in a heap on the passage floor.

Then I heard Neville. He sounded nothing at all like a frightened boy. It was a young wizard's voice that shouted "*INCENDIO!*" The terrible wave of heat that

accompanied Neville's spell made me cower protectively over Ginny. I could only hope that Mrs. Norris had run off somewhere safe.

The vines burned. And burned. And burned.

Now the passage was filled with smoke as well as a terrible stench. Since the air was slightly better near the floor, the three of us stayed there, choking, until the vines were destroyed.

"I'm glad that once seems to have done the trick," Neville said faintly, after a while. "Because I don't think I can do that again."

"Once was fine, Neville," Ginny told him, sincerely. "Once was perfect!"

"Neville, if you're 'almost a Squib' then I'm a house-elf!" I wheezed. The praise was heartfelt. The boy had more than earned it.

Even through the smoke, I could see Neville blush, thanks to the glow of Ginny's remaining floating light. Shyly, he pulled Trevor out of his pocket to make sure that the toad was unhurt.

"Thank you, Ginny," I said. "You saved my life."

Very much to my surprise, the girl hugged me. Gently, because she'd seen what the vines had done to my ribs. I was going to be very sore tomorrow.

"Are you all right, Mr. Filch?"

"I've been worse. You're not hurt, are you? Either of you?"

Neville shook his head.

"I've been worse too," Ginny said. She managed to smile.

Mrs. Norris padded softly out of the smoke. She

wound her way around all three of us, making impatient little mews.

"I thought that you would have had the sense to run, my sweet..." I murmured.

"I think it must not have been a Bundimun after all," Neville said, thoughtfully. "You don't need a spell like '*Incendio*' for Bundimuns..."

Ginny stood up, waving her wand. "*Zephyr!*" she said. A small wind sprang up and the air began to clear a bit. Turning, she inspected the three crates with the paintings. They had escaped being damaged by either the vines or Neville's spell. Ginny, Neville and I were relieved about that.

Mrs. Norris was still agitated. She was nudging at all three of us with her head, hissing and glaring. She was behaving as if the danger had not yet passed. I knew enough to respect her judgment.

"She thinks that we shouldn't linger here, and she's probably right. Come along," I said. Neville's powerful spell had taken a great deal out of him. I took his arm to help him up.

"We should go and tell Professor Dumbledore about what's happened," Neville said.

"We won't be able to talk to the Headmaster tonight. He had a meeting with the Minister... I've only just remembered," I said.

"I'm glad that I didn't know he was gone before," Neville murmured wryly.

Ginny nodded. "Things never seem quite so bad if I know he's in the Castle somewhere," she said.

It was an opinion shared by the majority of the

various beings inside Hogwarts Castle. Things were never as bad as they could be, as long as the Headmaster was somewhere about.

"I'll speak to Professor Dumbledore in the morning. It's late. Your detention is over. The two of you should be getting off to bed," I said gruffly.

Once more the children levitated the crates. My tools and my lantern were still lying where I'd left them, near the storeroom, so I went to get my things. The lantern had gone out, and I relit it. When I saw what the light revealed I caught my breath in horror.

The vines that Neville had destroyed had been only runners! The root of the thing was still intact somewhere under the ground. New vines, thin and sickly green, had spread across the dirt floor.

Worse, they appeared to be gaining some purchase on the stone walls of the storeroom! As before, the vines didn't react to me at all. But, as the children approached, I could see the hideous things quiver.

Why did those foul things only go after the children and not bother with me, unless I got in the way? There was only one obvious reason, wasn't there?

"Neville! Ginny! Put the crates down! Ginny, put out your last light! DON'T USE YOUR MAGIC!! That thing isn't dead and IT EATS MAGIC!!!"

They were good children, they listened. Unfortunately it was already too late. As I watched, a thin green runner wound its way through the storeroom doorway. It twisted up along the stones of the passageway wall. It seemed to be finding places in the

stone to grip as it moved.

My bottles of cleaning solution were empty. Neville didn't have enough strength for another *Incendio*. And the Headmaster wasn't here to pull anyone's chestnuts out of the fire.

"Leave the crates, children! Just hurry!" I moved forward, holding up my lantern, so they could see into the storeroom, and observe what was growing in there. I stood between them and the door as they went past.

"RUN!!!" I hissed.

The three of us ran, leaving everything but my ordinary, non-magical lantern. Mrs. Norris led the way out down the dead end passage. When we reached what should have been the main corridor, we stopped and stared in shock.

The passage only went a little way and simply ended at a blank stone wall. There were no doors, no openings, no possible way out. We were trapped.

I know the twists and turns of Hogwarts Castle better than almost anyone living. And I had never, in all my years as caretaker, seen anything like this before.

"This is very bad, isn't it, Mr. Filch?" Ginny said, in a small voice.

CHAPTER 3

Tapestries

"Yes, Ginny. This is very bad," I said.

"I suppose you must have seen something like this

before, Mr. Filch?" Neville asked me hopefully. "You've lived at the Castle for such a long time..."

I shook my head grimly. Things inside Hogwarts do tend to move about, but I had never seen an entire passageway seal itself off from the rest of the Castle. Well, there's a first time for everything.

Finding one's way around Hogwarts isn't easy. I'd be the first to admit that. And I know the Castle very well indeed. From the lowest reaches of the dungeons, up to the highest towers. It had taken me many years to learn the Castle so well. For a moment, it seemed as if all those years had never happened. I felt as uncertain as I had during my days as an apprentice caretaker. As if at any moment, old Apollyon Pringle would find me and give me a terrible clout for getting myself lost again.

The fact that we shared this trap with a foul smelling, magic-eating vine-creature that was even now inching its tenacious, many-runnered way along the stone walls and floor of the passageway behind us did not improve matters one bit.

"Why do you think the passageway sealed itself off like this?" Ginny asked me. "Do you think someone ...outside the Castle... maybe You-Know-Who...?"

I shook my head. "I don't think so, Ginny. The Castle has more magical defenses than even the Headmaster knows. This might be one of them. That ...thing back there has somehow managed to get a foothold in the storeroom. Who knows how long it's been there, growing in the dirt? I'm the only one who usually comes down here and I can't do magic. The mon-

ster never reacted to me. It's never left the storeroom before. Perhaps when it did, the Castle defended itself by sealing off the passage."

"Then the Castle isn't trying to trap us in here, just the monster," Ginny said.

"Unfortunately," Neville pointed out wryly, "we're still trapped along with it."

The children and I turned to face back in the direction we'd come from. Mrs. Norris wound her way around all our feet, hissing, while I lifted my lantern to examine the walls and floor near us. So far we had managed to outrun the vines.

But their terrible stench filled the gloom all around us and we had nowhere else to go.

"It would have been better if I'd simply chained both of you up in my office," I said, bitterly. "Maybe Professor McGonagall is right about it showing a lack of imagination. But, when all's said and done, you can't go wrong by sticking to the basics!"

Ginny gave me a wry smile. "I'm glad that you didn't chain us up. I liked restoring those paintings much better. Do you think the vines will bother them?"

"Is *that* what you're worrying about?" I demanded incredulously.

"We did do a lot of work on those paintings," Neville said. "And they turned out rather well..."

"The paintings were in that storeroom for a long while! And that vine-thing didn't just get there yesterday," I said. "I'd imagine that the paintings will be all right. It would be much more sensible to worry about ourselves!"

I saw the looks on their pale faces and felt ashamed. Of course they were worried. But these children were two of Minerva's young lions, and they were trying hard to be brave.

In spite of the horrible smell I took deep breaths, struggling to stay calm. Breathing deeply hurt my bruised ribs, but at least the pain gave me something to focus on besides my fear. Squibs don't get Sorted so I've never worn the Hat. If I had, I never would have ended up in Gryffindor. I'm not a bit brave.

But the vine-beast ate magic and probably magical people as well. I was the only non-magical thing standing between that monster and Neville and Ginny and Mrs Norris. (That monstrous thing wasn't going to get my cat, either!) I couldn't be as brave as they were, but I couldn't help any of us by panicking.

The children were standing together, talking in quiet voices. Then Ginny looked at me.

"Mr. Filch, we think that you should stand behind us," she said, deep in thought.

Suddenly my fear was unimportant. Anger and bitterness, my two constant and trustworthy companions, did an excellent job of banishing all other emotions.

"What did you say, Miss Weasley?" I demanded, my voice a harsh growl. "Are you implying that I'm useless, just because I'm a Squib?"

Ginny blinked, as if she hadn't expected my reaction. But then her eyes flashed. "Of course you're not useless!! But you've already been hurt, protecting us!! Please, just do it!"

"Er... Ginny...?" said Neville.

My voice rose, furiously. "If you think I'm going to hide behind two children, think again!! That evil thing doesn't even want me! It wants the two of you, because you're magic!!! And I'm the fool who didn't stop you brats from using your magic down here! Do you really expect me to cower in a corner while that thing kills you!?"

"Mr. Filch!! Ginny!!" Neville shouted. He's not usually the type who shouts, but it was necessary in order to make himself heard. At the same moment, Mrs. Norris dug her claws into my leg and let out a yowl.

Ginny and I stopped yelling as we noticed what Neville and Mrs. Norris had already seen. The stinking vines had caught up with us. The first thin, sickly green creepers were winding their way along the floor and the walls in front of us.

"Ginny's right, Mr. Filch. You should stay behind us," Neville said earnestly. "Not because we think you're useless. Not at all. You're right, those vines don't want you. And we don't want them to circle around in back of us."

Ginny nodded, firmly. "If we stand in front, they'll stay focused on us. If you stand in back, maybe they won't close us in! And, you have to stand back there anyhow, so you don't get hurt when Neville and I use *'Incendio'* together."

I opened my mouth, and then shut it again. So, the Gryffindors were thinking on their feet, and they had a plan. As plans went, it wasn't too shabby. Professor Snape often makes disparaging comments about the strategic abilities of Gryffindors. But Ginny's and Nev-

ille's plan wasn't nearly as reckless as others I've seen.

For example, there was a certain Slytherin Professor who wanted to make sure that a certain Stone was still well guarded. Oh, perhaps nearly getting his leg bitten off by the Cerberus hadn't been part of his plan, but still...

I didn't have the nerve to bring up that subject with Severus any more. But I had once overheard Professor Snape sounding off to Minerva and the Headmaster about the thick-headed, "rules don't apply to me so I can go off on my own any time I please, risk my neck and damn the consequences" tendencies of certain young Gryffindors.

Hands folded, Dumbledore had been waiting quietly and patiently for Severus to run out of steam. But Minerva had picked up her handkerchief and coughed into it, delicately. Her coughs had sounded remarkably like "Fluffy! Fluffy!"

The Headmaster had lost his battle not to grin. (So had I, but thankfully Severus wasn't looking in my direction.)

I hoped that we would all get out of this somehow, so I could tell Minerva how her young lions had done her proud. Obediently I stepped back to let the children confront the encroaching vines. Mrs. Norris stayed by my feet.

Reaching into his pocket, Neville turned to me. "Hold Trevor, please, Mr. Filch? I'm worried that he might get away from me."

Ugh. I don't much care for toads. But I accepted the cool, moist creature anyhow, cupping the hand that wasn't holding the lantern carefully around him. Nev-

ille didn't need any additional worries. Mrs. Norris gave me a hopeful, peckish look and I glowered at her.

Neville and Ginny had their wands outstretched. With one voice they cried out "INCENDIO!!!"

The resulting blast of mingled heat and magic was so strong that I reeled, even though I stood behind the children.

The vines burned brightly, filling the corridor with smoke, adding to the strong stench of decay. Not one vine touched the children. Not one vine got behind them.

I have always been able to feel the force and power behind the spells used near me. Whether he believed it or not, Neville was as powerful a young wizard as his old and noble family could have wished for. Still tired from his previous spell, he managed to put a respectable amount of power into this one. Ginny's magic was incandescent, fierce and mighty. It seemed too much for such a small girl to carry inside her.

They were strong, yes. But not fully grown and not fully trained. Destroying the horrible thing they faced would have taken the combined efforts of many adult wizards and witches.

The two children could manage to make the vines retreat. But the heart and brain of this thing lay somewhere under the dirt floor of that storeroom. Someday, Neville and Ginny would have had enough power to burn the vine-runners to ash, and force their spells underground to destroy the creature itself. But, I knew that they could not do such a thing now. The vines would be back.

Ginny and Neville surely knew that too. This victory was only temporary. The children had bought us some time, but we didn't know how much.

In the smoky, foul gloom that the light from my lantern barely managed to penetrate, the three of us and Mrs. Norris huddled together on the stone floor of the passageway. The children were exhausted. It was almost certainly past their bedtime.

Neville wearily accepted Trevor back again and slipped the toad into his pocket. Ginny leaned against my shoulder. Mrs. Norris curled up in my lap.

"I wish Professor Dumbledore was here..." Ginny said softly. "Or Professor McGonagall."

"I'd even be glad to see Professor Snape..." Neville said, wryly.

We were going to die. Minerva had trusted me to teach the children a hard lesson, and I had certainly outdone myself this time.

A few weeks earlier, Professor Snape had destroyed a scroll, a piece of Dark Magic, that could have awakened my own power. The cost would have been high; I would have had to sell myself to the Dark Lord, piece by piece. Severus had trusted me enough to know that I would refuse. And I had.

But if the Dark Lord were to come before me right now I knew that I would have given him anything he wanted from me, if he would only give me the power to save Ginny and Neville and Mrs. Norris.

"I hate being a useless Squib..." I said, bitterly. "I'm so sorry!"

"Mr. Filch!" Ginny sounded like I'd broken her heart. "None of this is your fault..."

"Yes, it is," I growled, "but, don't worry, I'm not going to keep going on and on about it. I'm sorry, and I just wanted the two of you to know. Why don't you try to rest for a bit? I'll wake you when the vines come back."

Neither child thought they would be able to fall asleep, but Neville was soon snoring, his head against my shoulder. Ginny was curled up against my side, which made my ribs ache. I didn't have the heart to move her.

Mrs. Norris and I stayed awake, staring at my oil lantern. The light was getting dim.

"Well," I said to my cat, ruefully, "Who would ever have thought it'd end like this? I always thought that caring about a couple of students would be the very last thing I'd ever do. Guess I was right."



When the vines attacked us for the third time, one of them wrapped itself around Neville's arm. The boy's agonized scream tore a hole through my heart. Earlier, the vines had given me bruises and what felt like the beginnings of a rash on my throat, chest and back. But I'd gotten off lightly compared to what the vine's touch had done to Neville's arm.

He'd been burned, as if by dragonfire. Face white, body quivering with shock and pain, Neville had trembled in my arms while Ginny had shouted terrible things at the vines, words that she'd probably learned from those wretched twin brothers of hers.

I'd ripped the vile things off Neville with my bare hands. Those vines would have to pull me to pieces before I would let them touch either of the children again!

Screaming out Neville's name, Ginny renewed her own fiery assault on the vines.

I had learned to judge each member of Ginny's family on his or her own merits. (I'd had a double-dose of that lesson after Fred and George had followed Percy to Hogwarts!) Plentiful amounts of courage, red hair and freckles were the only givens when dealing with Weasleys. Little Ginny shared the good qualities her elder brothers had, but she possessed a deep, inner strength that was all her own.

Alone, with Neville in too much agony to help her, she'd driven the vines back. She was already quivering with fatigue from the earlier battles, and all three of us knew that this respite would be our last. We no longer had the strength to fight for our lives.

Now my lantern had gone out. There was no more oil. Ginny had conjured a small, floating light to help her see while she kept a cooling Charm on Neville's burned arm. It didn't matter any more if Ginny used her magic. The monster knew right where to find us.

During the latest onslaught, some of the vines had gotten behind us when I'd been ripping their cousins off poor Neville. The wall behind us was now burned black from Ginny's last *Incendio* spell. I leaned against the filthy wall and cradled Neville while Ginny worked on him. Neville slowly stopped trembling.

Mrs. Norris stood by Ginny's side, faintly singed

around the edges and smelling of smoke. Her golden eyes stared intently down the passageway. She'd appointed herself our lookout.

The boy looked at me, a faint smile on his pale face. "Thank you, Mr. Filch. You and Ginny both saved me. I guess I owe you a wizard's debt now."

"You and Ginny have both saved each other tonight, Neville. All your debts are repaid. And you've both already saved me too. Though I'm not sure if a Squib can be owed a wizard's debt, or if a Squib can repay one either... I've never asked anyone."

Neville looked at me curiously. Perhaps talking helped to keep his mind off the pain. "Have you ever met another Squib, Mr. Filch?"

"I don't know. It's generally not the sort of thing that people just announce about themselves."

"I thought I was a Squib. My family did too. For ages." There was a familiar world of sorrow in his words.

"No one wanted to talk about it with you, did they?" I said, softly. "And you felt afraid..."

Neville nodded.

"Ashamed, guilty..." I continued, receiving another nod.

"You must have been so relieved when you discovered you were a wizard after all," I said, for once sounding more wistful than bitter.

"What... what did your family do?" Neville asked me. "Once they were sure?"

I knew how hard it had been for him to ask that question. Not many grown wizards and witches have had the courage to ask me that.

He deserved an honest answer. "My mother cried," I said. "All the time, when she thought I couldn't hear her. She blamed herself. Perhaps she hadn't said the proper protective Charms before I was born. Perhaps she'd used some dangerous spells while carrying me, or maybe it was the boggart who'd frightened her when she was six months along. Whenever one of her friends began to talk about how well their children were doing with their magical studies, her face would just go still."

These memories still hurt. I had never talked about this, with anyone.

"The year that the other children my age were starting their first term at Hogwarts I spent being dragged off to one Healer after another. Of course, none of them could tell Mum what she wanted to hear."

"What about your father?" Neville asked me.

"The poor man could hardly bear to look at me," I confessed. "His friends kept telling him stories about people they knew who had managed to 'cure' a Squib. I overheard a few of those tales myself. There was one about a boy who'd been tied hand and foot, placed in a sack and tossed in a river. 'He's about to start his fifth year at Durmstrang, now!' the boy's uncle told my father. I heard about Squibs being locked in dark cupboards, hung up by their thumbs, smothered with pillows and dropped from brooms. And one old wizard who worked with my father even swore that he could 'beat the magic right into me, with a stick!'"

Ginny was looking at me, horrified.

Neville was nodding again, with a rueful smile. "Great

Uncle Algie wouldn't have done any of the really awful things. But he did almost drown me once, by accident. What did your father do?"

"Nothing. He was a very gentle man. Not much like me at all," I said, wryly. "Those stories made him go pale. But I could tell he was blaming himself for not wanting to do something, anything, as long as there was a chance it would make me be a normal wizard, like everyone else."

"They must have told you it wasn't your fault." Ginny said, her voice soft.

"They did. I still blamed myself for hurting them, disappointing them."

"It wasn't your fault!" Ginny said, vehemently.

"It can be hard to know when something's not your fault..." I pointed out. "You know that, Ginny."

"They still loved you, didn't they?" Neville asked, looking wistful.

"Yes, they did. Very much."

I looked at Neville and realized, for the first time in my life, how lucky I'd been. In spite of the pain of those years, at least my parents had been there to tell me that I was loved. This realization was bittersweet, since my poor parents are long dead. But it was a gift, and it was totally unexpected. I smiled at Neville and brushed the hair back from his sweaty face,

"My mum has a second cousin who's a Squib," Ginny murmured.

"Really? What does he do with himself?" I asked, genuinely curious.

Ginny looked embarrassed. "We don't talk about him much. Not because he's a Squib," she hastened to assure me. "The family was terribly hurt and angry when he ran away to live with Muggles. He's an accountant, now. I think, maybe, he works at a bank like a sort of goblin."

I sighed. "I thought of doing that, long ago. Not working at a bank... running off to live with Muggles. But I was too afraid. It would have meant leaving everyone and everything I ever knew. It would have meant admitting to myself that I would never be able to use magic like a normal person. Your mother's cousin sounds as brave as all rest of your family."

"I never thought about it that way..." Ginny said.

Then she said, "I don't feel brave! I'm frightened. I don't want to just sit here and wait for the vines to come back! Neville, when you feel up to it, would you like to go back to that storeroom with me? We may not be able to beat that thing, but at least it will know it's been in a fight!"

"I think it knows that already..." I said, looking at them proudly.

Both children smiled.

"I'd like to come too, if you don't mind," I said. "Touching those things isn't nearly as hard on me as it would be on either of you. Being a Squib has worked to my advantage, for once. It's a pity there aren't more of us here. Squibs, I mean. With enough of us to grab hold of that monster perhaps we could even dig it out of the ground and hold it down for you witches and wizards to finish off properly..."

"I'm ready now, Ginny..." Neville said. "Let's go." This

was clearly a lie. The boy was still so pale. Without Ginny's cooling charm he would have been in awful pain. He would barely be able to stand up, yet.

"I can't stand waiting either..." Neville confessed. "I just want to... to get it over with."

Ginny and I exchanged a look.

"It's all right. We can wait a little bit longer, Neville," she said softly. Mrs. Norris rubbed against Ginny and the girl picked her up and cuddled her. Then my cat leaped lightly down from Ginny's arms to resume her duties as lookout.

I had never felt so useless in my life. Why did these brave, good children have to be trapped here with me? Oh, I've been fond of students before, here and there. There have always been some that don't seem as bratty as the rest. Generally it takes me a few years to figure out which children I mind the least. Sometimes I don't even know that I am fond of a particular child until that child leaves the school at the end of their seventh year.

Or leaves forever, in another way. (I'm sorry, Cedric.)

Sometimes, years after I've figured out that a child wasn't so bad, the child comes back to teach at the Castle, as Severus Snape had done. I've never known quite how to treat the children I'm fond of. I'm not Hagrid, who has brats underfoot at all hours, feeding them tea and those horrid rock cakes he makes. I've always thought that the kindest thing I could do was simply leave them alone.

I wished I'd chosen a different detention for Ginny and Neville.

This latest plan of theirs was pure reckless Gryffindor courage. A final, doomed charge into certain death. It was a waste. It was so unfair...! I could not think of a better plan, though.

The Castle wall was cold against my back. I leaned against it and sighed. This wall shouldn't even be here. Behind it, in other parts of the dungeon, maybe someone was trying to reach us? The thought had occurred to me before, but I hadn't said anything about it to the children, not wanting to give them false hope. If someone on the other side of the wall could reach us, they would have done so by now.

Such a dirty wall... blackened by smoke and the ashy residue from the vines. Absurdly, I felt a desire to give it a good scrubbing.

At my back, I felt a tingle of awareness. Something I've felt before, only a few times in all my years as caretaker. I don't know what it is. It's definitely magic, but nothing human, nothing alive in the normal sense.

Sometimes I have wondered if it is the Castle itself. The sensation is very strange and frightening, and I usually shrink from it, like a terrified first year. I've never had the courage to ask the Headmaster about it, and he's the only one who might understand. (If he doesn't know what I'm talking about, then I'm afraid he'll think I've lost my mind.)

Now, weary beyond belief, I closed my eyes and just let the feeling wash over me.

"Please..." I thought. "Please...!" Our need was too great for any further words.

"Mr. Filch...?" I heard Ginny say.

"I think he's asleep." That was Neville. His voice was still tight with pain, but it sounded like he'd stood up.

"He wanted to come with us," Neville added.

"There's no reason for him to die too," Ginny said.

Please...

"He'll be angry if we don't wake him. He won't think of it as a kindness, Ginny. You know that."

Please...!

"Mr. Filch?" Ginny was shaking me. But I couldn't move. The magical something at my back had grown stronger. Behind me, the wall was changing. My heart was hammering, I was covered with sweat. I felt like I had run a mile.

This surge of magic had not come from inside me. It didn't belong to me. But I'd cried out to something with all my strength, and that something had answered.

"Where did that tapestry come from?" Neville gasped.

My eyes were still shut, but I didn't need to look to know what was behind me. A nondescript tapestry. The colors so dull, it was hard to see if the tapestry had scenes on it or just patterns. The boring sort of thing that most people's eyes just usually sort of slide over, without really seeing.

Like many of the very old, rare and magical things inside the Castle, this tapestry was not what it appeared to be.

I know the doors of the Castle. When their hinges creak, when their knobs get dingy, when the students have covered them with fingerprints and even worse muck, who comes to put them to rights again? The doors that insist

on being tickled, the doors that like to be asked politely, these doors open for me without wasting my time with any nonsense. They know I have work to do.

(And if I do sometimes oblige them with a tickle or a kind word, when no one else is looking, then the doors are wise enough to keep my secrets.)

Not all the doors at Hogwarts have knobs and hinges.

Inside Hogwarts Castle there are four similar tapestries. Each one so dull and faded that the few people who notice them probably wonder why no one has thrown the ugly things out. I think of these tapestries as the wandering doors.

The doors seem to travel randomly around the Castle. Sometimes I don't see any of them for months. That strange surge of magic had never been connected with them before. And this was the first time that one of the doors had ever come to me when I'd called.

"Ginny! Neville!" My voice sounded very weak. I opened my eyes, to see their white, frightened faces.

"Everything's going to be all right," I said. "We're going to get out of here! We can walk through this tapestry."

I reached in back of me to show them. My arm disappeared. I held my other hand out towards the children. My hand was shaking. "It's too dark for me to see which one this is. There's four of them. They move around but each one always lets me out in a particular place, whenever I use them. We'll come out near the library, or the trophy room, or near my office, or up in the Owlery."

"Anywhere is better than here!" Neville said, sincerely.

Mrs. Norris started to hiss, her fur standing on end.

The vines were coming back.

"Hurry," I hissed.

Ginny was closest to me. I grabbed her hand and stepped through the tapestry, pulling her along. Or I tried to. I was able to go forward, into the trophy room. But Ginny's hand had slipped from mine somehow! I returned through the tapestry to find her sitting on the floor, rubbing her head.

"It won't let me in..." she said, dazed.

"Impossible!" I cried. "I go through them all the time. If I can do it, surely you can too."

I helped Ginny up and reached out to grab Neville's unburned arm.

"Come on!" I told Mrs. Norris.

My cat and I emerged safely into the trophy room. But no Ginny! No Neville! Snarling the foulest oaths I could think of, I went back through again for the children. Both of them were sitting on the floor, looking stunned.

"Ginny's right, Mr. Filch," Neville said, tears in his voice. "We both really tried. We ran at it, like we do at Platform Nine and Three Quarters! It won't let us in!"

The looks on their faces broke my heart. I'd offered them hope and then snatched it away! Turning, I pounded my fists against the tapestry and screamed in rage and frustration.

"It's all right, Mr. Filch..." Ginny said, very softly. "You can go through and get help for us."

She and Neville had risen to their feet, wands drawn.

"*INCENDIO!*" Ginny cried, her voice cracking.

All of us heard the vines slithering closer. Their

stench was overpowering.

"*INCENDIO!*" Still in pain, poor Neville sounded like he was at the end of his strength.

"Go on, Mr. Filch..." Neville told me. "You'd better hurry... we won't last long."

"Damn right you won't!" I growled at him. "I'm not leaving you! If this cursed thing won't let me bring you through, what makes you think I'll be able to bring anyone back to help you? I don't understand what's wrong!!!"

"Maybe," Ginny paused to blast a vine, "that tapestry has an anti-wizard spell. Like an anti-Muggle spell. Except in reverse..."

"What would be the point of a bloody stupid spell like that?" I wailed.

The children were too busy to reply.

I felt Mrs. Norris brush against my feet. Unwilling to leave my side for months now, she'd followed me back into danger, through the tapestry.

"What's wrong with you??" I cried. "I don't care if you do have nine lives!! Someone here has to do the sensible thing! I suppose it's come down to you. Go for help!"

With the Headmaster away for the evening, for a meeting with the Minister, Professor McGonagall was in charge of the Castle. And Mrs. Norris would have no trouble making Minerva understand her. Not giving my cat a chance to argue, I picked her up and pushed her, none too gently, back out into the trophy room.

"If all goes well, the three of us will be right behind you!" I called after her. My fingers hurt too much to cross, so I hoped it wasn't a fib.

An anti-wizard spell, Ginny had said. Like an anti-Muggle spell in reverse. Clever girl. She'd given me an idea. I wasn't sure if what I was about to try would work. But, if Ginny's theory was right, I'd been through something like this before. As a "passenger."

I knew I could never manage to do this twice. Being the passenger had been bad enough. I refused to choose a child to leave behind. All three of us would make it through, or none of us would.

Stepping up behind the children I wrapped one arm around Ginny's waist, and the other around Neville's. Ginny was a small girl, but Neville had grown a good deal over the last year. I dragged them both backwards, and they struggled.

"Don't fight me!" I shouted. "I've got a plan. If it doesn't work, I'm sorry. Even if it does work, I'm sorry! I'm afraid that this is going to feel really dreadful, but there's no help for it! Please, try to trust me!"

Moving as slowly as I dared, my arms locked tightly around the children, I pulled all three of us into the tapestry together.

CHAPTER 4

Squib's Magic

Muggle-repelling spells can be dreadful things. The strongest ones can crawl over my skin like a thousand small, biting ants, sting like salt in an open

wound, or make me feel like I'm being turned inside out. When I'm in the vicinity of a powerful anti-Muggle spell, the fact that they do not actually repel me seems like a very small comfort.

The anti-Muggle spell that takes the prize for the most uncomfortable of all is the one that protects Platform Nine and Three-Quarters at Kings Cross station. That's the one that wrenches me inside out. I'm grateful that it's been a while since I've felt any compelling reason to go to Kings Cross.

Squibs like me are a rarity in the Wizarding world. To my knowledge, no one has ever written a handy manual for Squibs on 'How To Get Yourself Past a Strong Muggle-Repelling Spell Without Getting Violently Sick All Over Your Shoes Immediately Afterwards.' Perhaps, if I ever figure out a way to accomplish this feat, I'll write a such manual myself. I might make a few galleons. And, unlike those charlatans responsible for the Kwikspell Course, I will be providing a legitimate service.

The title of Chapter One would definitely be: 'Ignore What They're Telling You!' For example, everyone says that you should enter the platform at Kings Cross at a run. This works if you are a proper witch or wizard. But, if you're a Squib, you will probably just crack your fool head open.

Hard work and pain are the best teachers, I always say. After plenty of both, I have learned a great deal about the ways that Squibs can react to different sorts of Muggle-repelling spells. My advice would be to

observe what the proper witches and wizards are doing, and then try to do exactly the opposite.

To use Kings Cross as an example again; the only way to get onto the platform, if you're a Squib, is to take it v-e-r-y s-l-o-w-l-y. And, even then, you will not be able to do it on your own. A proper witch or wizard, hopefully one that you can trust, must help you, staying right at your side.

The actual spell will probably make you feel as though you are being slowly taken apart and then put back together with your pieces scrambled. And it's best to have a paper sack handy. It's bad manners to thank the witch or wizard who has helped you by vomiting up every morsel you've eaten that day all over him or her.

I did just that to Hagrid once. Though he'd deserved it. The oaf thought that getting me blind drunk first would actually help. I was foolish enough to give it a try. I thought it wouldn't do any harm and might just do me some good.

How wrong I was. I couldn't keep any solid food down for days. Mrs. Norris was so annoyed with Hagrid. She followed him around for a week, just to make him sneeze.

The point, that your companion must be someone you can trust not to talk you into doing something stupid, can not be emphasized enough.

Yes, all the various types of anti-Muggle spells are old, familiar thorns in my side. There are many that I've become accustomed to, after repeated exposure, and am no longer bothered by.

Wizard-repelling spells, however, are quite new to me.

My right arm was locked tightly around Neville Longbottom, my left one around Ginny Weasley. At a snail's pace, I crept along with the children through one of the four ancient wandering doors of Hogwarts Castle.

The wandering doors are tapestries; faded, worn, ugly things that no one ever usually looks at twice. I've often used them as convenient shortcuts when I have a busier than usual schedule of jobs to do, or when I'm hot on the trail of a rule-breaking student. I have sometimes wondered if anyone else at the Castle ever uses the tapestries. Even the professors seemed to always take the long way around. Until Ginny and Neville had failed in their attempts to use the tapestry, I hadn't known there was such a thing as a wizard-repelling spell.

Until very recently, I was not sure if I had any magic in me at all. Less than a month ago, Professor Snape had shown me that I did, in a place I couldn't reach. Apparently, this wizard-repelling spell couldn't reach my magic either, for the spell didn't affect me in the slightest.

Poor Ginny and poor Neville, however, were a different matter. Taking the children through the tapestry felt like dragging them through chest-deep sludgy water. Both children were trembling hard. I could hear Neville moaning. I clutched them even tighter and slogged onwards, hoping that was not a vine I felt brushing across the top of my head.

When my right foot finally emerged onto the floor of the trophy room, I gathered my remaining strength and slowly pushed the children through ahead of me.

If the vines had actually managed to follow us through the tapestry I would have to block them somehow. Those foul things must not get through to harm the children and infest the Castle!

I could hear the poor children gasping and retching as I reached up to grab the long, thin creeper that had been trying to get past me. But, as I let go of the children, the resistance slowing me down vanished and suddenly, both the vine and I were in the trophy room. And, emerging from the tapestry, there were more of the foul-smelling sickly green things down at my feet!

In Mighty Merlin's Name... what had I done?!

"STUDENTS OUT OF BED!! STUDENTS OUT OF BED!!" screeched a familiar voice. "Students spewing their guts up all over the trophy room floor! I'm going to get Filch!! OI! FIL..."

Peeves had been floating up near the ceiling of the trophy room. From the look of things he'd been making stalactites on the ceiling with toilet paper that had been soaked in water.

His sharp little eyes bulged when he saw me there, wrestling with the vines. I could feel the evil green things quivering. It wanted to snack on young witches and wizards, but apparently, a poltergeist was even more delicious.

"FLY, Peeves!!!" I shrieked, trying to grab the vine that was coiling up towards him. The vine whipped around, dragging me off my feet and up into the air with it.

"Go get help, you wretched...!"

Instead, the foolish poltergeist came closer to see what I was doing! The vine's tip snapped forward and

touched one of Peeves' dangling feet.

He screamed.

My heart stood still. I had never heard him make a sound like that before. Arms wrapped tightly around the vine, I twisted it away from the poltergeist, cracking it like whip.

Peeves was clutching his foot and whimpering. He'd never done that before either.

The two vines that had come out through the tapestry near my feet were snaking towards Ginny and Neville, who were still being mercilessly sick on the floor.

Oh, Blessed Ambrosius! What had I *done*??

There was the sudden pattering of small, light feet. Mrs. Norris, who always comes through for me, ran into the trophy room, followed by another cat, a sleek tabby with square markings around her eyes.

An instant later, Minerva McGonagall, black hair coming undone and flowing like a waterfall down her back, pointed her wand at the vines.

"DOWN!" she ordered me.

I let go of the vine I was holding and fell to the floor, landing with a painful thump.

"INCENDIO!" Minerva roared like a lioness, seeing her cubs in danger.

Her spell scorched along the floor, incinerating the vines menacing the children. The spell that destroyed the vine attacking Peeves was cast only a heartbeat later. Ashes and smoke and the stench of decay filled the trophy room. The vine-creature was no longer facing a Squib and a half-grown witch and wizard! I could

almost feel the monster deep in the dungeon wailing in agony as Professor McGonagall's power found its way down to the creature's heart! She'd wounded it!

"Neville, Ginny, Argus! What are you doing up here in the trophy room?!" Minerva gasped. "We've been down in the dungeons for the past few hours trying to get through that wall! None of the ghosts could get through... not even the Baron...! Ever since Severus said that something was terribly wrong down there..." She broke off, staring at the children.

"Oh, Neville, your poor arm! Ginny, are you all right?"

"I'm fine, Professor," Ginny said, though her small, dirty face was white as ashes.

"It's not that bad, Professor," Neville said, still huddled around his burned arm.

"I'm sorry, Minerva," I said, miserably. "I never meant for their detention to be this imaginative..."

"HELLLP!!" Peeves had found his voice again. "CASTLE UNDER ATTACK!!!"

Eyes snapping viciously, the poltergeist flew down at me, rubbing his wounded foot.

"HE did it!!! Old Filch! Dragged all that mess in here. Stinking filth! Puking students! Vines that HURT! Befouling the Castle! All his fault!"

I buried my face in my hands. The wretched poltergeist was absolutely right.

The monster had been hidden in a dungeon storeroom; dormant for who knows how long, in a place only I ever visited. I'd been the one who'd chosen to give Ginny and Neville the detention that had brought us to that store-

room in the first place. I'd been the one who'd allowed them to cast the spells that had awakened the thing.

The creature had nearly killed Neville and Ginny. I would never forgive myself for that.

I'd been responsible for dragging the creature along with us to the trophy room. What if Minerva hadn't come in time to fight it? The vines might have gotten a foothold there, causing more harm and destruction. My fault.

From the sound of things, Severus had been aware of the situation, almost from the beginning. He'd alerted the others. Minerva had said that they'd been trying to reach us for hours. Hours of worry! All my fault.

"When the Headmaster comes back he should punish Filch!! Ought to put him in chains and BEAT HIM!!" the poltergeist cried.

I could not picture Dumbledore doing such a thing. But if he did, I'd deserve it.

"Peeves, that's enough!" Minerva said, sharply.

A draft of icy air announced the arrival of one of the ghosts.

"Professor, the new wall in the dungeon has vanished!" Nearly Headless Nick reported crisply, as he rose through the trophy room floor. "The other Professors are engaging the creature!!"

"Thank you, Sir Nicholas," Minerva said. "Tell the others I'll be back down, directly."

Not even fully emerged from the floor, Nearly Headless Nick began to sink out of sight again. A Gryffindor from his barely-attached head, down to his toes, he was obviously eager to return to the battle.

"Be careful, Nick!!" Ginny shouted after him. "Those vines can hurt ghosts!"

And if any of the professors, or the ghosts were injured... that would be my fault too.

"Argus," Minerva said, gently pulling my hands away from my face. "How did you and children get up here? We thought that you were trapped!"

"We used the door..." I said, faintly.

"What door?"

I looked past her, at the wall where the tapestry had been. It was gone, probably off to some remote part of the castle to recover from its ordeal. I didn't think I'd be seeing that particular tapestry for a while. Maybe not for years, after this. I couldn't blame it for wanting nothing to do with me.

"Never mind, you can tell me later." Minerva looked at all three of us, sternly. "Get yourselves to the hospital wing! Can you walk? If not, I'll conjure stretchers."

"We can walk," Neville said. "Don't worry about us. Go and help the other teachers!"

"You'll find that vine monster under the dirt floor of a storeroom down the fourth dead end passage, headed away from Mr. Filch's office..." Ginny said.

"You'd better show her, my sweet..." I whispered to Mrs. Norris.

My cat glowered at me.

"Don't worry, Mrs. Norris," Ginny said. "Neville and I will look after him, I promise."

Fixing the girl with a golden stare that said plainly, "See that you do!" my cat turned and ran out of the trophy room.

Minerva was back in her Animagus form and running at my cat's side, before we could even blink.

"Nasty Old Filch is going to be in so much TROUBLE!!!" Peeves said gleefully.

Both young Gryffindors glared at him.

"You know, there are a plenty of vines where those came from..." Neville said, in a pleasant, conversational tone.

"And we could easily go and fetch some more if you'd like..." Ginny said, sweetly.

Peeves fled, vanishing through the ceiling.

"Come on, Mr. Filch, up you get..." Neville reached out with his good arm to help me up.

"Ginny, Neville, I'm so very sorry about all this..."

"You have nothing to be sorry about!" Ginny said fiercely. "You were very brave, and you saved our lives. I don't care if you're a Squib. I owe you a wizard's debt!"

"So do I," Neville said, equally firm.

"B-but..."

"Hush," Ginny soothed me. "Now, come on. We promised Mrs. Norris and Professor McGonagall that we'd go to the hospital wing. You don't want to get them angry, do you?"

I was certain that they were already very angry at me. And Headmaster Dumbledore was going to be even angrier! But none of this would be Ginny's or Neville's headache. Just mine.

Leaning on each other, the three of us headed into the corridor.

"Show me, Argus. If you please."

The Headmaster's voice was kind, but he looked and sounded unusually tired. No wonder. He'd been up all night, as he's been too often lately. First, he'd had a long and fruitless meeting with the Minister of Magic. The Minister still stubbornly refused to believe that the Dark Lord had returned, despite all the evidence Dumbledore could present to the contrary.

(Minerva had said, angrily, that the Minister's head was permanently stuck in the ground, like an ostrich. Hagrid had growled, under his breath, that the Minister's head was permanently stuck somewhere quite different. Privately, I agreed with Hagrid. Usually I would have said that one must show proper respect for the position, if not for the wizard who holds it, but the Minister's stubborn blindness continued to defy all belief.)

Then Albus Dumbledore had returned to Hogwarts Castle, his school and safe haven for young witches and wizards, to find that the Castle had been invaded from within.

After a furious battle, the professors, aided by the ghosts, had destroyed the monstrous vine creature.

But the battle, the creature's death throes, and the subsequent, still continuing, exhumation of the vanquished monster and its endless creepers, roots, vines and tendrils, had left much of the dungeons in a shambles. Several professors had been burned by the vines' touch, though thankfully, none very seriously.

Albus Dumbledore had not been to bed yet. It didn't

look as if he would have a chance to take a rest any time soon.

The Trophy Room of the Castle was a shambles too, though not nearly as bad as the dungeons were. At least someone had cleaned up the floor, where poor Ginny and Neville had been sick. But the place still stank of decay, the air was hazy with smoke and there were ashes everywhere.

"B-but, Headmaster..." I stammered in response to his request, "I don't know if I can do it again."

Dumbledore looked at me, disappointment in his eyes. I flinched and stared at the floor.

I blamed myself for what had happened at the Castle last night. I did not know if I could do what Dumbledore wanted me to do. I didn't know if I really wanted to succeed. Part of what I'd been able to do had terrified me.

But I put my bandaged hands against the filthy trophy room wall. I had to try. I owed him that much.

Please... I thought, quivering inside. *Is Anything there?*
Silence.

The Headmaster hadn't blamed me for any of it. He hadn't shouted at me or sacked me. He hadn't punished me any way.

I kept trying.

Severus Snape stood a little apart from Dumbledore and me, in the shadows. The exhaustion evident in his pale, strained face and in every line of his thin, black clad body, made me cringe in sympathy.

Professor Snape can be quite ...territorial about the dungeons. He doesn't simply teach classes there, his

rooms and his office are down there as well. I'd heard that his rooms had escaped serious damage. But his classroom and office had been nearly destroyed. (I felt dreadfully guilty, because my own office had barely been touched.)

The dungeons of Hogwarts held something even more precious to Severus. Thankfully, the long, creeping vines of the creature had not even come close to the underground dormitories of Slytherin House.

Severus had taken no chances with his Slytherins. The first one of the professors to notice something amiss, he'd alerted the others, even as he'd been busy evacuating the children of his house up to the safety of the Great Hall to sleep for the night.

I'd overheard other professors saying that Severus had fought the creature like a demon-crazed warlock. The battle had cost him dearly. Severus was still trying to recover from the Cruciatus Curse.

The long, strife-filled night he'd just had was affecting him, visibly, even more than Dumbledore. His face was nearly as white as one of the ghosts. His eyes were hollow and had bruised-looking shadows under them.

The Headmaster had asked Snape to fetch me from the hospital wing. Severus had swept into the ward, trailing his black robes and his customary aura of menace. The expression on his pale face when he looked at me had been so cold that Ginny and Neville had feared for me. Even ill and tired, Severus could be terrifying.

"Headmaster Dumbledore wishes to see him. In the Trophy Room. Now." Snape had said to Poppy, not

even acknowledging me or the children.

I felt so guilty and wretched that I stood up immediately to follow him.

"Oooh... Filch is in *trouble*!" Peeves had said in a soft sing-song voice. The poltergeist had been in the hospital wing, soaking his damaged foot in a pail of water. He'd been the only one of the ghosts to suffer an injury.

His wound was the only one that I'd stopped feeling badly about.

Mrs. Norris had been asleep on Ginny's lap. But, as soon as Snape entered, she'd been awake and alert. She sprang to the floor and followed us from the room. She stood at my feet now, offering me moral support.

Her support was very badly needed. I slumped, resting my forehead and forearms against the trophy room wall.

"I'm sorry, Headmaster. I can't do it. Forgive me. I'm so tired..."

My last comment had been in a barely audible whisper. I knew that I had no right to complain about my exhaustion in front of either Dumbledore or Snape. Terrible as my night had been, each of theirs had been far worse. But I simply could not match their endurance! Poppy had healed my ribs, treated my bruises and put salve on the rash I'd gotten from touching the vines, but I still ached from head to foot.

I told myself to stop whining. I looked at Dumbledore. "I'm sorry, Headmaster," I repeated. "Let me fetch my things and make a start at cleaning up in here. It's the least I can..."

There was a sudden change in the air. A tingle of magic ran down my spine. Something inhuman, ancient and incredibly powerful, was stirring.

That Something had taken notice of me. Far more notice of me than It ever had before.

"Headmaster...!?" I tried to say. But the word came out as a cry of pain and fear.

Dumbledore who was behind me, reached out to hold me up. Without his support I would have crumpled to the floor. My heart was racing. I was covered with sweat.

I was helpless in the grip of Something vast, and far more terrifying than the vine-creature. It could crush me, shatter me to pieces, if It were ever to favor me with more than this small fraction of Its Awareness.

"No..." I wailed. "Headmaster... help me! Make It stop...!"

Dumbledore moved, wrapping his left arm around me. He moved his right arm under mine, wand in hand.

"No more..." I cried. "Please... It hurts...!"

"It will be all right, Argus..." he said, quietly. "Do not be afraid. You know the Castle better than anyone. Better even than I do. Every nook and cranny... every twist and turn, every secret path... your place is here. It's time you touched the Castle's heart."

His voice was soothing. I felt his power protecting me, shielding me. I could breathe again.

"Is there something you wish to say?" The Headmaster murmured. "While you have Its attention?"

"Yes..." I whispered. My left hand still touched the wall. I knew my thoughts would be heard. Still trembling and frightened, my heart beating like a rabbit's

in a snare, I nevertheless meant every silent word.

Thank you. For keeping everyone within Your Walls safe last night. Thank you for the life of Ginny Weasley. For the life of Neville Longbottom. For the life of Mrs. Norris. For my life...

Without words, the Castle answered me.

I felt suddenly filled with light. Too much light for me to hold, it spilled out all around me, into Dumbledore and Snape. I did not know what they were feeling. But for me, it was a highly uncomfortable blend of pain and joy.

I wept.

Behind me, I heard Severus gasp. He sounded like child, full of awe and wonder, younger than Neville and Ginny. Much more of this and my heart would burst! My hand slipped from the wall.

Gently, Dumbledore moved my hand back. "One thing more..." he reminded me.

Wordlessly, I framed a request. And the wall in front of me changed.

Four tapestries appeared, all in a row. I had never seen them together before. Side by side, it was easier to see the differences in their faint colors, so faded with age that they were barely even there.

The tapestry that had saved Ginny, Neville, Mrs. Norris and me last night, the one that always brought me to the Trophy Room, was patterned in traces of red and gold.

The second one, always obliging enough to let me out near my office in the dungeons, bore equally faint traces of green and silver.

Next was the faded blue and bronze one that would take me near the Library.

Last was the tattered black and yellow one that always took me up to the Owlery.

Then the Castle's Awareness was suddenly gone, as if someone had blown out a candle.

The four tapestries remained.

"Thank you, Argus," Dumbledore said, smiling. He looked as tired as before, but the blue eyes behind the half-moon glasses were shining. "Excellent! Well done."

I was shuddering helplessly, my legs too weak to hold me. The Headmaster helped me slide to the floor at his feet. I felt broken and battered, like something that had been washed up on a beach after a terrible storm. Mrs. Norris came to me and I clutched her tightly, a drowning man grabbing a rope.

"Please, Headmaster..." I begged, softly, tears still trickling down my face, "never, ever ask me to do that again."

"Don't worry, Argus. I won't." Dumbledore assured me. "Too much of that would not be healthy. Whenever the Castle decides to notice me I find it quite unsettling. I'm glad that it only usually happens once a decade or so."

We both saw a shudder pass through Severus. It seemed that he agreed with us.

"Filch...?"

It was Peeves.

The poltergeist sounded uncharacteristically hesitant. He'd just flown in through the wall. He looked

down at me, huddled and weeping on the floor, Mrs. Norris fussing over me like a mother cat, and the Headmaster and Professor Snape looming over me.

Since last night, the poltergeist, furious at being hurt, and blaming me for his injury, had been saying to everyone in the Castle that the Headmaster ought to have me beaten. Maybe he'd even come down to the trophy room to plead his case before the Headmaster again and insist that I should be punished.

To my dismay, I realized that my cries had probably been audible from the corridor. Wretched Peeves had obviously overheard, and had jumped to the wrong conclusion.

Not even Peeves had really expected Dumbledore to do as he'd asked. But, there was Snape standing over me, looking malevolent, and the Headmaster beside him, looking grave. Peeves' eyes grew rounder than I'd ever seen them get.

"As you can see, Peeves, Filch has answered in full for his role in last night's events," Snape said, sneering up at the poltergeist. "And I am still not in a particularly good mood. Would you like a taste of what he's just suffered?"

Shocked and disbelieving, I could only sit there, with my mouth open... My disbelief increased when Peeves' sharp little face acquired a guilty look.

"You all right, then, Old Filch?" Peeves asked me, nervously.

"He will be fine," Dumbledore said quietly, before I could produce any coherent sounds. "All things considered, I feel that Mr. Filch's actions last evening were really quite

brave. Now that the small question of his culpability has been dealt with to my satisfaction, I believe that we can consider the subject permanently closed."

Peeves looked from Dumbledore to Snape, then down at me. He gulped. Without another word, he turned around and flew back out through the wall.

Humiliated, I sputtered, "Headmaster! Professor! Why in Merlin's Name did the two of you do that?"

Dumbledore's tired blue eyes twinkled. "But, Argus, everything that Severus and I said to Peeves was true."

"B-but you said...! You told him that that the question of my guilt was settled. And that the subject was closed! Permanently."

"Yes, it is. I don't want to hear another word about it." Dumbledore said.

"Does that mean that neither of you blame me for any of this?" I asked, hesitantly.

Severus and the Headmaster exchanged a glance.

"He's thicker than a troll, Albus!" Snape complained.

Dumbledore chuckled, while Snape scowled at me.

"Filch," Severus said, "Listen carefully, for I am only going to say this once. We do not blame you. That vine-creature was clearly meant to grow, secretly, under the Castle until it became too large and powerful for us to fight. If you, Mr. Longbottom and Miss Weasley had not awakened it prematurely, that is likely to have happened."

"Because of the three of you, that thing did not have a chance to grow too close to the Slytherin dormitories, which I suspect, would have been its first target."

Snape looked at me, and there was no mistaking the gratitude in his weary eyes.

"As for our little prank on the poltergeist..." he continued, "do you think that we wanted to listen to that wretched creature milking his injury for all it's worth until next Christmas? We do not wish you to feel responsible for things that are not your fault. On the other hand, a little misplaced guilt will do Peeves a world of good."

Snape's dark eyes met the Headmaster's again for a moment. Even though both men were exhausted, tense and under pressures I couldn't begin to understand, they grinned at each other.

Snape's smile was a brief showing of his teeth, like the flash of a knife. Dumbledore grinned back like a small boy.

"Peeves teases everyone else in the Castle, Argus," the Headmaster said, mildly. "Do you think he deserves to have all the fun

"With all due respect, Headmaster, I think it's unfair of the two of you to tease the poltergeist at my expense! I think that the pair of you are plainly over-tired and as giddy as house elves under the influence of too much cooking sherry. You should both get yourselves to your beds as soon as possible. Sirs."

"Soon, Argus," Dumbledore promised. "First we would like to learn a bit about these Doors of yours."

Dumbledore and Snape examined the tapestries for a while. I sat on the floor and caught my breath. Mrs. Norris sat in my lap and purred. Slowly, I calmed down.

I realized that the Headmaster had called my name. Both of them were looking at me, gravely.

"The evidence appears to suggest that each of these tapestries were created by one of the four Founders." Dumbledore told me. "Over the centuries many wizards and witches have bemoaned the fact that the Castle's defenses do not allow them to Apparate and Disapparate inside the Castle, or anywhere on its grounds. It seems that the Founders were no different. Each of the Hogwarts Four had a wandering door of their own."

He sat on the dirty floor beside me, while Snape continued to examine the tapestries thoughtfully.

"But, why would the Founders have put anti-wizard spells on their Doors?" I asked. "It doesn't make sense!"

"Each of the tapestries was keyed only to the witch or wizard who created it," Severus said. "And the spells you are referring to were simply meant to prevent them from being used by any other witch or wizard."

"Oh," I said, trying not to sound as bitter as I felt. I could use the Founders' Doors only because I wasn't a proper wizard. "I see."

"No, you do not," Dumbledore said, earnestly. He sighed. "Argus. Listen to me. You know that Squibs are quite unusual. They... you... are not the same as Muggles. But, you are not like other wizards either."

"I'm not a wizard at all," I said, automatically.

Snape hissed in frustration. "I've had more than enough of your endless self pity, Filch! Just be silent and listen! In the mixture of Wizard and Muggle, magic and mundane, Squibs are rare trace elements. You cannot

create spells, but you can affect them. And magic often reacts to you in ways that are unpredictable."

I heard the words, but they didn't make sense. "Professor, are you telling me that I *am* a wizard?"

Snape snarled under his breath, muttered "...thicker than a TROLL!" and turned his back on me, furiously.

Dumbledore was more patient. "Argus, you are as much a wizard as I am."

I shook my head in disbelief.

"If you weren't a wizard then you would be incapable of using the Doors at all," the Headmaster said. "You have just enough magic to use them. If you had any more they would be as closed to you as they are to every other witch and wizard in this Castle. When the Founders made the Doors and warded them against other wizards and witches, they did not take Squibs into account when they were casting their spells. Many spells simply do not take Squibs into account."

"Magic has strict rules," Snape said, over his shoulder. "But, apparently, Squibs are living loopholes."

This was really going to take a while to sink in.

Dumbledore continued, gently. "The magical tools created by powerful witches and wizards can acquire a life of their own, as we all know. The Tapestries have been ...lonely. I believe that they are quite pleased that someone is finding them useful again."

"You may not be aware of this, but you have already achieved some small degree of control over them," he continued. "With more training I believe you may be able to learn how to summon them at will and

use them to take you anywhere inside the Castle. Or maybe even outside, within its boundaries."

Cuddling Mrs. Norris, I hobbled to my feet, to stare at the Founders' Doors.

Dumbledore smiled. "They are yours now, Argus. They've all been keyed to you for some time. No one else in the Castle can use them."

He sounded pleased for me. And as young and eager as a first year with a brand new wand.

Squib Doors, then...?

Mine?

Professor Snape sounded considerably less enthusiastic.

"He's in terrible danger, Albus." Snape said, stiffly. "And the Castle may be in danger from him. Surely you realize that. The fewer people who know about this, the safer we will all be. If the Death Eaters were to discover what he can do... if they should get their hands on him again, the results could be devastating."

I shuddered. He didn't have to spell anything out. I would not be able to fight a Dark Wizard's Imperius Curse, a curse that might turn me into an assassin. A killer that could not be stopped by the Castle's protective spells against Apparating and Disapparating.

Would I now be able to bypass any portrait? Any password? Any ward within the Castle? The implications staggered me.

Severus sounded angry with himself. "I am sorry, Albus. I should have been able to predict this! If a Dark spell could allow its caster to Apparate within the Castle, using a borrowed Squib-skin, I should have surmised

that a Squib, who comes by his skin honestly, might be capable of accomplishing the same type of feat."

Dumbledore smiled, wryly. "Severus. I am only going to say this once, so listen carefully. You could not have predicted this. To the best of my knowledge, the study of Squib-magic is a lost art."

"Nearly everyone in the modern wizarding world would consider 'Squib magic' a contradiction in terms," Severus agreed. He frowned, obviously thinking once more of the ancient Dark scroll that had once belonged to Lucius Malfoy. He'd often worried that the scroll wasn't the only one of its kind.

"Perhaps, for his own safety, Filch shouldn't explore the possibilities offered by those tapestries any further..." Severus said.

I would have taken offense. But I heard real regret in Snape's voice. He knew exactly what that would have cost me, and he would have grieved at the necessity.

"Knowledge and training are his best protection, Severus. He can train in secret. No one will know about the Doors, beyond those who know already. The danger makes it even more important that he should be trained." Dumbledore said

"What about the children? Miss Weasley and Mr. Longbottom?" Severus asked.

"After I sent you to fetch Argus, Minerva went to see the children. She undoubtedly has already told them that the Tapestries must remain a secret, for the sake of Argus's safety."

The Headmaster turned to me and smiled. "She knew,

even before she'd spoken with them, that the children would be quite willing to keep the secret for your sake, Argus. It seems that they have become fond of you."

"Ginny and Neville are good children," I said, embarrassed. "Perfectly well behaved."

I glowered at Snape, daring him to say something derogatory about Neville. But he said nothing. He looked as if he were trying not to smile. Then he yawned and swayed on his feet.

Both Professor and Headmaster looked ready to fall asleep right where they were.

"Severus, I believe that you and I should turn in, at least for an hour or two. Your rooms are still mostly intact, aren't they? Yes? Good. Argus, I don't suppose you'd care to offer us the use of one of your shortcuts?" Dumbledore sounded curious and wistful.

Then he shook his head, regretfully. "No. Considering how ill it made the children, I suppose it's best if we just take the long way. And, Argus, please get some sleep yourself before you start cleaning."

"Yes, Headmaster," I said, obediently.

After the Headmaster and Professor Snape left the Trophy Room, Mrs. Norris and I remained, staring at the Doors.

"Well, my sweet, let's choose a shortcut, shall we?" I said.

Still not sure about how much control I could exert over the exit point, I chose the Ravenclaw tapestry, because my rooms are closer to the Library than they are to the Dungeons or the Owlery.

"My bedroom, please...?" I said, as I stepped through it.

I expected to end up just outside the Library, as I

always did when I used this Door.

But it was my own room that I emerged into.

"Oh, my," I said to Mrs. Norris, who came through the Door behind me. "I think we can get used to this, with very little difficulty indeed...!"

My cat purred, rubbed up against my ankles, and leaped lightly up onto the bed.

"Thank you..." I said to the Squib Door. "Er... you don't have to hang about here, if you have other places you'd rather be...?"

The tapestry stayed put.

"Suit yourself then." I said, and collapsed onto the bed next to my cat, too tired to bother with getting undressed.



I remain who I have always been; the nasty old Squib caretaker of Hogwarts Castle, surrounded by witches and wizards.

All my life I have felt helpless, powerless and useless. Fit only to clean floors, and walls and toilets. I am a petty tyrant about the few things I can actually control. I detest children and I live to make the students' lives here miserable.

The world outside Hogwarts frightens me terribly, and the world inside Hogwarts has been slipping out from under me lately.

But, I wonder. Can any of these things ...change?

Can a Castle made of stone and the dreams of wizards and witches have a heart?

Ginny and Neville care what happens to me. That's all right. I care very deeply about what happens to them, too. Mrs. Norris has learned to let me out of her sight again. Professor Snape and the Headmaster played a successful prank on Peeves. (All right, it was at my expense, but you can't have everything.) Albus Dumbledore himself told me that I'm a wizard. The Squib Doors are mine to use.

Anything is possible.

The End
of
Volume One

Colophon

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