

ADVENTURES IN FANFICTION

# The Squib Chronicles



Volume Three  
By Ozma

A RED HEN PUBLICATION



AN ADVENTURES IN FANFICTION EDITION

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characters © J.K. Rowling.

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Hogwarts, and all the characters from the  
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The plot plus any original characters  
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COVER INSET  
BY  
DURAYAN

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# 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!

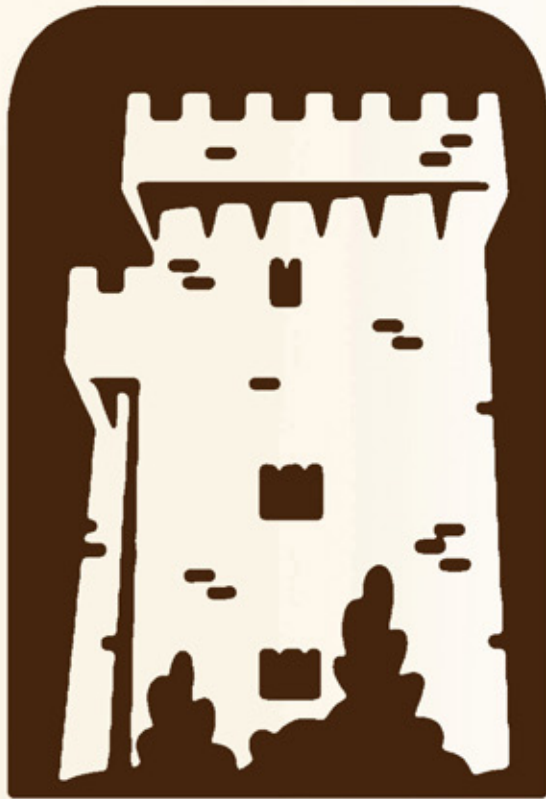
Since Filch is one of my favorite characters, I was disappointed that his appearances in fan-written stories were so rare. It was even more unusual to see him treated sympathetically. I began to think about Filch, his place in the wizarding world and

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.)

# To Save a Squib



## CHAPTER 1

*Calculated Risks*

**I** STAGGERED AWAY from the collapsed ruins of Malfoy's tower to the grove of birch trees. Tumbling down the small hill, I landed, gasping, in the cold water of the stream.

The shaggy black animal who plunged in to help me was as huge as a bear. He was the largest one-headed dog I'd ever seen. But he was more than a simple dog. The wand I clutched tightly in my shaking hands belonged to him. He was a wizard. An Animagus. Beyond that, I had no idea who he was. Severus had simply referred to him as "that idiot Gryffindor."

Severus had given me the wand. The Animagus and I couldn't have escaped without it. My hands had been bound behind my back. Snape had slid the wand between the ropes holding my wrists together. None of the other Death Eaters had seen what their Alchemist had done.

"Take the dog with you, when you go!" Severus had hissed in my ear.

Poor Severus. I had not known how difficult it would

*be to control so much powerful magic. I hadn't meant to make Malfoy's tower fall. I hoped that I hadn't killed the Professor! Beneath the rubble, Malfoy still lived and fought me, but the fate of the other Death Eaters was uncertain. Surely Malfoy had shielded Severus when the tower fell! Blessed Merlin, I hoped so.*

*It was spring and the stream was running fast and high. Weakened by pain, I collapsed face down into the water. Snape's potion had worn off precisely when he'd predicted it would. I'd been able to fight when he'd needed me to fight. And then I had been able to run.*

*The Animagus had been injured far worse than I. His fur was matted with blood. Yet he grabbed my shoulder in his powerful jaws and wrestled my head up and out of the stream. Choking and sputtering, I clung to him as well as the wand, hiding my face in his shaggy side.*

*A battle raged inside me. I held a mighty serpent by the tail while his fangs sought my throat. Lucius Malfoy wanted his magic back. I felt as if he was tearing me up inside. I did not know how much longer I could keep this up. Professor Snape had told me that I had to fight Malfoy for as long as I possibly could.*

*"He needs to be shown that the Squib scrolls are double-edged swords, Filch," Severus had said, grimly. "I am counting on you to teach him a lesson he won't soon forget!"*



Only a week earlier, I had seen the black dog for the first time. He'd been with Harry Potter at Hogwarts, for the garden party.

Cornelius Fudge, Minister of Magic, had wanted to show the wizarding world that everything was "perfectly normal" at Hogwarts. And so the Minister had strongly suggested to the Headmaster that Dumbledore should open up the Castle and have a party for the students and their families.

Albus Dumbledore knew that nothing was perfectly normal in a world where the Dark Lord had risen once more. And he knew that opening up the Castle to the students' families (a mixed group that included both Death Eaters and Muggles) could be potentially quite dangerous.

But he had liked the idea of a party.

"What a splendid idea! We can have it outside!" he told the Minister. "The weather is turning quite nice."

The Headmaster had neatly sidestepped any arguments about refusing to let so many people into the Castle to wander about unsupervised.

Minister Fudge had been expecting another debate about He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. He was so relieved not to have had one that he hadn't objected to a garden party instead.

On the grounds in front of Hogwarts Castle four large pavilions had been erected, one for each of the four Houses. Around each of the pavilions plants and flowers had been artfully arranged, all carefully chosen to represent the four Houses' colors.

I was actually looking forward to the event. Not because I wished to attend. Quite the opposite. I meant to spend as little time as I could at the festivities. But the Castle would be quiet during the party. Better

yet, the bulk of the cleaning up would not fall to me, though I would help a great deal, of course.

For many years I would have been able to get away with lurking in my dungeon office, far from any noisy, crowded celebration. But now I had a young friend who insisted that I do otherwise.

"It's too much excitement for Mrs. Norris!" I told Ginny, stubbornly. "She needs a lot of rest and quiet in her delicate condition!"

Ginny was stubborn too. "Bring Mrs. Norris upstairs and let her have a nap on your bed, Mr. Filch. She won't mind if you go outside, just for a little while. Isn't that right, Mrs. Norris? You know that I won't let anything happen to him."

My traitorous cat had purred acquiescence at Ginny.

"I'll wait for you outside," my little red haired friend had said firmly.

And so, a short while later, I found myself obediently walking out the Castle's front door and down the stone steps to meet her. Ginny would not allow me to hide myself somewhere out of the way. The Castle grounds were full of people, mingling everywhere. She caught me by the hand and pulled me into the throng.

I could have pointed to the Headmaster and each of the Professors with my eyes closed. Each of them, aware of the dangers in such a gathering, were surrounded by a corona of magic as they kept an eye out for potentially difficult situations. All of them were making especially sure to watch over the Muggle relations of the students who came from mixed or Muggle families.

Professor Snape had an especially difficult task.

"You make sure that you keep those cursed Death Eaters away from the Muggles!" Alastor Moody had snarled at his fellow Slytherin. The old Auror had thought that Dumbledore was completely mad to have allowed the Minister to talk him into a party.

Snape had voiced a similar opinion when the Headmaster had told the staff about the upcoming event. But rather than openly agree with Mad-Eye, the Potions Master had just sneered.

"I do not need you to remind me of my responsibilities, Moody," he'd said.

Dressed in somber black robes a bit more elegant than his everyday ones, Severus moved easily among the assorted Slytherin families, both those with ties to the Death Eaters and those who were innocent of such Dark alliances. He knew who deserved his special scrutiny. By the end of the day, I knew that the poor man would have a pounding stress-headache.

Ginny was pulling me towards a knot of mostly Gryffindors. "Don't worry. It'll be fine. You already know my family," she was saying, reassuringly. "My Mum and Dad and Percy are here. You've always liked Percy. You told me so yourself."

"Ginny, they don't want to see me," I protested.

"Hush! You're not as awful as you want everyone to think... not by half. You're just shy."

My look of outraged indignation completely failed to intimidate her.

"See?" she coaxed me. "Hermione's parents are with my

Mum and Dad. And the Creeveys. And Mr. Finnegan is over there with Mrs. Finnegan, and there are the Thomases too. You told me that you've never met any Muggles before. Here's your chance."

Ginny introduced me to everyone that I didn't already know, but the names and faces were all a blur. I felt terribly nervous though Ginny's parents greeted me kindly and Percy did his best to set me at ease with earnest talk concerning his work at the Ministry.

The Muggles were dressed a bit oddly but they were friendly enough. They must have thought it decent of the Headmaster to have a mute Squib as caretaker since I couldn't manage to do more than nod at them.

Mr. Creevey was a surprise. The mousy-haired Muggle milkman who had sired two small wizards was a giant. (Well, not compared to Hagrid, of course. But he towered over almost everyone else.) His dainty wife was the tiny one. I wondered if Colin and Dennis might someday take after their father.

Harry Potter's mysterious Muggle relations were nowhere in evidence. But the boy seemed happy enough. He was with Ron and Hermione. All three of them were alternately playing with the huge, black dog, and stuffing the beast with food. At the time I did not know that anything was unusual about the creature. I just hoped that they weren't going to over-feed it until it got sick.



A grumpy old misanthrope like me is simply not used

to being around so many people at once. Especially so many people that I can't even yell at or threaten with detention. Before long I had a headache every bit as bad as the one that Snape was surely getting.

There were too many witnesses about for me to just call a Door and vanish. So I made my excuses to Ginny and the others and headed back towards the Castle.

On the way, I bumped into Neville. Fortunately, Neville did not take me off and introduce me to his family. (He knows what I think of his great-Uncle Algernon, who once dangled my poor young friend out of an attic window.)

Neville was carrying an untouched plate of food. He'd clearly intended to eat it himself, but he gave it to me instead.

"You're not feeling well," the boy said, studying me. "Maybe you should eat something? You don't want to upset Mrs. Norris. She'll hiss at you if you go back inside looking so pale. Wait here and I'll fetch you something to drink too."

Neville darted away before I could thank him for the food and ask him if he could find me something to drink that was a bit stronger than pumpkin juice.

My young friend collided with a slender dark skinned girl, her ebony hair done in many small beaded braids. Both children tumbled to the ground.

"Oh! I'm sorry... terribly clumsy of me!" Neville said, blushing as he helped her up. "Are you hurt?"

"I'm fine," the girl said, shyly. She looked to be about the same age as Neville. I didn't recognize her.



She wasn't a student at Hogwarts. This puzzled me because she wasn't dressed as a Muggle either.

"Callandra! Oh, my dear! Are you hurt?"

A slim, dark skinned woman in blue robes came hurrying up to the girl. Her manner was anxious and protective. I was puzzled by this too. Callandra did not seem frail or sickly.

I recognized her mother. Hyacinth Murray had been the Ravenclaw Seeker during her school days. She'd married Reuben Moffitt. The Murrays and the Moffitts were both old wizarding families. They'd been primarily sorted into Ravenclaw for many generations. Their son, Daniel, was a Ravenclaw in his second year. Callandra should have been at Hogwarts too. But she wasn't.

Yes, the reason *should* have been obvious. To me, of all people! It must have been the headache. It was several moments before I realized that Callandra was like me. I had never actually met another Squib before.

Hyacinth Moffitt was looking Neville over, clearly making sure that his collision with Callandra had just been an accident. Fortunately for him, Neville is the most harmless-looking person imaginable.

Callandra's mother turned her sharp gaze on me next. Most of those who have been students here find out what I am, eventually. Hyacinth knew that I was like her daughter. Her Seeker's eyes raked me up and down. When our eyes met, hers were full of pain.

*My child is not going to end up anything like you!* Hyacinth Moffitt was clearly thinking. *No gloomy dungeon offices for my baby! No mops, no brooms! No scrubbing*

*acres of stone floors on her hands and knees. She won't be bitter and old before her time... not my Callandra!*

She clutched her daughter to her fiercely, as if she'd just seen the girl's death-omen.

"Mum!" Callandra protested.

"Thank you, Neville, but I'm not hungry," I murmured.

The expression of pain on Hyacinth Moffitt's face was so familiar. I'd seen the same sorrow on my own mother's face many times. Watching me struggle through the world without magic had hurt her deeply.

I handed Neville back his plate and left, before he could speak.



The day after the garden party, I had been carrying a ladder which Professor Sprout had borrowed from me back inside through the entrance hall. I had watched Neville coming down the stairs with his fellow Gryffindors, Parvati Patil and Lavender Brown.

"Your poem doesn't really have to rhyme, does it?" Parvati was saying to Neville, who was looking shy and nervous. "Some of the most romantic poetry doesn't rhyme at all."

"It's hard for us to judge how good your poem is, if you won't even let us see it," Lavender said, gently teasing him.

Parvati's dark eyes sparkled. "It's easy to guess who you've written it for, though. You hardly left her for a moment yesterday, all afternoon!"

Neville blushed like a ripe tomato. Then he caught sight of me. "Mr. Filch!" the boy called, sounding relieved. "Wait! Let me help you with that ladder."

I cringed. Neville is my friend. He's saved my life and I would trust him to do so again.

But allowing him to help me carry a ladder down the dungeon stairs would truly be asking for trouble. Even Neville's friends are forced to acknowledge that he can be remarkably clumsy.

Neville looked at me, a pleading expression on his round, good-natured face.

"Thank you, Neville," I said, trying to be brave. "I could use a hand."

Miraculously, we made it all the way down the dungeon stairs without any mishaps.

After we'd carried the ladder to my main storeroom in the dungeons, I breathed a sigh of relief.

"Mr. Filch? Do you know anything about poetry?" Neville asked me, timidly.

I shook my head. "Not a thing. Writing poems for Callandra, are you?"

The fact that I was a bit embarrassed by the subject myself appeared to bolster Neville's confidence.

"Not 'poems.' Just the one. And it doesn't rhyme or anything," he said. "Callandra is the most amazing girl... I could never write anything for her that would be half as perfect as she is, but I wanted to try anyhow. She sent me an owl. At breakfast this morning. She wrote me a letter! It was more of a note really. But she said that she had a wonderful time. At Hogwarts. With me!"

Fifteen. I'd been there, a very long time ago. Not long enough ago for me to have forgotten what it had felt like, unfortunately.

At fifteen, I'd been ashamed to speak even to the people I already knew. And terrified of meeting new people, always dreading the moment when they'd figure out that I couldn't do any magic. I'd felt worthless. An outcast. Certain that no young witch would ever want anything to do with me.

Young Callandra was certainly far braver than I. What courage it must have taken for her to send an owl to Neville.

"Callandra asked me to tell you something, Mr. Filch," Neville said, hesitantly. "She says that she hopes you won't mind her Mum. Mrs. Moffitt is a nice lady, really. She's just a bit... erm... you know."

I did know. My own parents had also ached for me, worried about me and wanted the best for me. "I understand. Tell your young lady that I said it's quite all right."

"I will." Hearing Callandra referred to as his 'young lady' made Neville smile, shyly.

The boy took a deep breath before he continued. "Callandra knows that you're one too. A Squib, I mean. I told her."

He looked at me, apologetically. "I hope you don't mind. She told me that she's never met another one before. So I told her that *I'm* practically a Squib and she smiled at me and shook her head. She told me that I'm not a Squib at all! She doesn't go to school. Her Mum teaches her at home. She loves to read and she loves to paint, though she doesn't think she's good at it. I'm sure she's better than she thinks she is. She's really clever and she's got such a wonderful memory.

I introduced her to just about everyone in Gryffindor yesterday, and she remembered who was who!"

I could not help smiling. Callandra hadn't needed any magic to enchant Neville. The boy was clearly smitten. I was pleased for them and frightened for them at the same time.

Six days ago, the prospect of Neville's first love had been the scariest thing I could imagine.



Earlier this evening, Severus had come to my office.

"Lucius Malfoy has found another Squib scroll," he'd said, grimly.

Tonight, a fifteen-year-old Squib had been kidnapped on Lucius's orders. Presumably to allow Lucius to access the scroll's magic.

I'd guessed the unfortunate child's name even before Snape had told me. Callandra Moffitt. Feeling sickened, I buried my face in my hands.

"Lucius or one of the others must have noticed the Moffitt girl at that cursed party!" Severus snarled.

I heard guilt beneath the anger in Snape's voice. At the party Severus been preoccupied with looking after Muggles. It had not occurred to him to wonder why Callandra had never attended Hogwarts. Fortunately for Callandra, one of Dumbledore's other hidden agents had noticed the Death Eaters watching her. After informing the Headmaster, this wizard had been instructed to watch over the girl. Severus admitted to me, rather grudgingly, that the other agent had foiled

two kidnapping attempts earlier in the week before being unable to stop the third. Then Death Eaters had captured both Callandra and her protector.

"Lucius does not appear to have the child, at least for the moment. I suspect that the idiot Gryffindor must have Transfigured her into something else to keep her safe. But she is still in terrible danger. If that careless lout should die then we shall have a very difficult time finding the girl! No one else knows where she is, or even what she's been Transfigured into! The fool clearly did not understand that his instructions were to observe without interfering!"

"Of course he had to interfere!" I cried, lifting my head to glare at Snape. "Was he expected to merely 'observe' while those Dark wizards cut poor Callandra to pieces?"

Snape gave me one of his most caustic glares. "He was expected not to make a bad situation even worse!" Severus snapped.

Then, making an effort to calm down, he spoke more quietly. "Filch, Lucius plans to demonstrate the use of that scroll to the Dark Lord tonight, one way or another. He has demanded that I bring you to him, since the girl has been 'misplaced.' Naturally, I have plans of my own. I intend to see the child rescued, and Lucius strongly discouraged from further experiments with those accursed scrolls. I fear that your role will be difficult and painful, but it is necessary. There is no one else who can do this. Will you help me?"

I was terrified at the thought, but Callandra was dear to me. Both for her own sake and for Neville's.

The idea of Malfoy's cronies attacking her with knives and pliers was sickening.

"Yes, Professor," I said, relieved at how steady my voice sounded. "I'll help you."

Snape smiled. When he told me what he wanted me to do, I was aghast.

"What? You expect ME to defeat Lucius Malfoy?!"

"It is not as far-fetched as it sounds. I know something about those scrolls that Lucius doesn't. The link between the Squib and the wizard who activates the scroll can permit the transfer of power to flow either way."

"Y-you mean when you used that scroll on me, I could have stolen *your* magic?"

He nodded. "There's a brief moment at the start of the spell when you could have done exactly that. For that one moment, it doesn't matter which wizard is stronger. It only matters which one is faster. Malfoy understands the principles behind the Squib scrolls but he has not experienced the spell's workings as you and I have done. You will be able to take him unawares."

I stared at him.

"It should be simple enough for you, Filch!" Snape said, exasperated. "Albus keeps me up to date on your progress with Moody. By all accounts you're doing well enough with your training to handle a mission. And I have been informed that you can sense the ebb and flow of magic better than any normal wizard. Simply recognize the right moment and react accordingly."

"Yes, Professor. I'll do my best." I could only hope that my best would be good enough.

"As you know, wandless magic will drain you very quickly," Snape continued. "I can get a wand for you to use. That will help. The idiot Gryffindor has a wand. I doubt he will be in any position to object to your borrowing it."

"How do you know that the poor man is even still alive?" I asked, worried. No matter what Severus thought of this Gryffindor, Callandra owed him her life.

My concern for the Gryffindor wizard appeared to amuse Severus for some reason.

"They need him alive, Filch. Dead, he would not be able to tell them where he's hidden the child. She remains their contingency plan if I should fail to 'capture' you. But even after they have you, they will still have a use for him."

The Potions Master's voice was grim. "The Squib scrolls require a certain amount of blood and pain. Lucius understands now that he must not risk damaging you any more than necessary. Squibs are rare and difficult to come by. Lucius was not pleased that our Gryffindor colleague was able to take the girl from under their very noses. They will make him pay dearly for that."

I shuddered.



Headmaster Dumbledore was not in the Castle. He had gone with Callandra's parents to see the Minister. The Headmaster was doing his best to help them convince the Minister that the poor child had in fact been kidnapped by Death Eaters. Severus gave me a few minutes to tell Minerva McGonagall where we were

going and to ask her to look in on Mrs. Norris for me.

"Are you ready, Filch?" he asked me quietly, when I returned to my office. "Have you everything that you need?"

I gave my pockets a quick pat. "Yes, Professor. I'm ready."

Severus withdrew a small glass bottle from his pocket and handed it to me.

"I apologize for the taste. Drink it all, quickly. It will make what I must do to you bearable. Don't worry. You will be able to do what you must. I've been careful to calculate all the risks in advance."

The potion in the bottle was the most foul thing I have ever tasted. Drinking it quickly was the only way that I could get it all down.

Severus pulled a long, slender knife out of his sleeve.

I stared at it. "P-Professor? What are you...?"

"This is just a portkey, Filch," he said, dryly.

Wrapping his hand around the knife, Snape turned the hilt towards me. Obediently, I placed my hand on the hilt. A moment later, we were gone.



Numb and drugged, I lay on the stone floor of Lucius Malfoy's fifth-best dungeon. Turning my head slowly, I could see a huge, black beast lying in the shadows against the wall. The animal was unmoving, except for the barely perceptible rise and fall of his ribs as he breathed.

Mostly because of his size, I recognized him as the black dog that Potter and his friends had been feeding. A bit slow on the uptake, I realized that this dog

must be Callandra's Gryffindor protector. He was still alive, thank Merlin.

Severus knelt beside me, taking precisely what he needed. One tooth (another molar, from the opposite side of my jaw as the last time.) One nail from my right index finger. A hank of my hair. Finally, he cut a long, bloody strip of skin from my right shoulder. He was careful to catch the blood and collect it in a small crystal vial.

I felt strangely detached. As if these terrible things were happening to some other unfortunate Squib. I could even admire Snape's expertise with the knives and pliers. He had not wasted a single motion nor had he spilled one unnecessary drop of my blood.

After turning me on my back to conceal the wand he'd given me, Snape rose from my side and went to join the others. There were six wizards besides himself, anonymous behind their frightening masks. They were waiting for Snape.

Nearby, a small cauldron floated in mid-air over a low fire. Beside the cauldron, also floating, were a small silver dipper and a tiny porcelain container shaped like an inkwell, with a quill sticking out of it. That side of the room was better lit, both by torches and by the Death Eaters' wands. The area where I lay was mostly full of shadows.

I knew which of the masked figures was Lucius Malfoy, even before the Dark wizard spoke. He was the one holding the scroll.

"Excellent, Severus. Do remember to take proper care with the temperature this time," Lucius Malfoy

drawled. "We cannot afford any more mistakes this evening. *He* will be here very soon."

There was fear hidden within the light mockery in Lucius Malfoy's elegant voice. He was trying to conceal it from everyone. But, with my own emotions numbed, nothing distracted me from perceiving the emotions of those around me.

Malfoy was afraid for his own sake. But I saw that he feared for Severus as well. Even detached as I was, I approved. The Headmaster's subtle work had borne fruit. Dumbledore had reminded Lucius Malfoy that the safety of his son rested in Snape's hands.

"There will be no mistakes, Lucius," Severus murmured coolly. "Not this time."

Snape's last comment was spoken so softly that only I heard him. "I know precisely what I am doing."



Lucius Malfoy held the quill. The Squib scroll floated in mid-air before him. He wrote words of power in blood-red letters. The ink he used had been made in part from my flesh, hair, nails, blood and bone.

Severus was correct. I knew exactly the right moment. It was just after every nerve in my body had begun to tingle. I felt magic, my magic, whispering in my ears, gliding up and down my spine, rushing through my veins along with my blood. Then a part of me that usually remains crippled and silent awakened and began to sing.

The link between us, formed by the scroll, became secure on both sides.

Malfoy was quick, but I was quicker. His magic flowed into me! My small song had seemed to belong to a single instrument. Now it swelled to become an entire orchestra!

Lucius Malfoy felt the spell begin to slip from his control. He pulled, hard. I pulled back, harder. My fingers wrapped around the wand hidden behind my back. I felt the mighty surge of magic singing through the wand's core.

"*Recingo!*" I shouted wildly, drunk with power. The spell freed my hands. Oh! Magic was so much easier with a wand!

It's amazing how many spells one can pick up while mopping floors and cleaning toilets at the finest school of Witchcraft and Wizardry in Europe. Without magic the spells had just been empty words in my mouth. But now I had the power to back them up. The magic, both mine and his, rippled through my hair, sparked from my eyes, danced along my skin. It filled my belly and went straight to my head faster than any drink Hagrid had ever given me. Pain and fear forgotten, I was on my feet, the borrowed wand held out before me.

Across the room I heard the Death Eaters shouting as the other Dark wizards realized that something was terribly wrong. Over the shouting I heard somebody laughing like a madman. (It took a moment for me to recognize the wild laughter as my own.)

"*Pendeo!*" I cried, aiming the wand at the two biggest Death Eaters. They were masked, but I knew that they had to be Crabbe and Goyle, senior. The two huge men were yanked up to float helplessly in midair.

"*Ferio! Pulso!*" I bellowed. Both burly wizards were suddenly reeling under a hail of powerful blows, jerking about like tormented stringless puppets.

Malfoy recovered from his shock. He tried to attack me. "*Cesso!*" he roared.

I recognized this spell as a slightly different version of *Finite Incantem*. Unfortunately for Malfoy, I was drawing so much of his power that he couldn't make the spell work.

"GET HIM!" Malfoy snarled at Severus and the three remaining Death Eaters.

"*Expelliarmus!!*" I shouted, offering a silent apology to Severus as I aimed for him first.

That particular disarming spell seems to be a great favorite with the students at Hogwarts. (Rumor has it that Severus himself is the one who taught it to most of the school, at the first and only meeting of a dueling club started by Professor Lockhart a few years back.)

Poor Severus hit the stone wall with a sickening thud. He crumpled to the floor and lay still, joining Crabbe and Goyle, who also unconscious and out of the fight.

I felt a blast of power aimed at me, a concerted effort from the other three wizards.

"*Clipeus!*" I cried. It's a Shielding Charm, one that Professor Flitwick teaches his sixth years.

The Charm had turned out to be even more useful than I expected! It "shielded" me by deflecting the attack over to the source of my power... Malfoy himself! Lucius roared with pain as the three-fold assault knocked him to the floor.

"FOOLS!" he bellowed.

"*Stupefy!*" I hissed three times rapidly, while the other three wizards were busy stopping their misdirected attack. All three of them went down.

The score was Six to Nil, in my favor! Now, it was just Malfoy and me. We faced each other, both breathing hard. Inexperienced as I am, I had not been pacing myself. I was tired.

Lucius Malfoy smiled, then. And he began to fight me in earnest. He had been taking my measure and planning while I faced the others. Unlike them, he could attack me from within. He spoke no spells. His attack came through the link between us. I felt my heart begin to race. It was suddenly hard for me to breathe. Blood began to flow from my wounded shoulder, my hand and my mouth. I tried to scream and found myself choking on my own blood.

"How aptly named you are," Malfoy said, coldly. "A pathetic 'filch.' Did you think that you could duel me and win?"

There was an agonizing pain running up my left arm. My head struck something hard. It was the stone floor. I had collapsed, still coughing blood. My vision was greying out when the terrible pressure inside me finally eased.

"That's enough, for now. You've learned your lesson. And I do need you alive," Malfoy said, almost lazily. He knelt beside me, reaching for the wand that I still clutched in my right hand.

"Now, how did you get this?" Malfoy murmured, curiously.

My fingers tightened convulsively around the Gryffindor's wand as Malfoy reached for it. He thought I was beaten but the link between us remained open. Desperately, I pulled at his magic again. I shouted the most powerful spell I had ever heard any wizard use.

Albus Dumbledore had cried out this thunderclap word, in a language I did not know. He'd disarmed both Severus Snape and Lucius Malfoy with it, stopping their attacks against each other as if they had been nothing more than a pair of squabbling first year students.

Malfoy was a powerful mage. Was his magic sufficient enough to work that spell?

Apparently, the answer was 'yes.' Just barely, though. I thought that the spell's power would shatter me from within. The thunderclap word reverberated through the already half-ruined tower. Magic flowed out in a mighty wave, shaking the stones until they began to fall on us like a deadly rain from above.

And then, the tower fell.

The next thing I knew, I was lying on the ground near a huge pile of rubble. The black dog was nudging me and whimpering. There was no sign of Lucius Malfoy. I'd felt the pull of his magic as the Animagus and I had fled, but Malfoy hadn't been trying to stop us. Had he been attempting to shield himself and the other Death Eaters from the debris? I hoped so. And, for Severus's sake, I hoped that Malfoy had succeeded.

For a moment or two I could only lie there, trembling. Severus had brought me to the tower in the early part of the evening. From the look of the sky, it was now shortly before sunrise. It had been a very long night.

And it was not over yet. We still had to find Calandra and get ourselves out of here.

We made it as far as the stream.



Shivering, my hands trembling, I slid the wand into the dog's open jaws. Badly hurt as he was, the Gryffindor Animagus was clearly a powerful wizard. He might still have the strength to Apparate if he was willing to abandon me.

The Animagus did not abandon me. He was strong enough to pull me over to the bank. The dog-wizard stayed at my side, preventing me from slipping back into the stream. His wand was now clutched in his teeth. I was in too much agony to wonder why the Animagus seemed reluctant to resume his human form.

*Carefully calculated risks, my....!* I thought, as a new wave of pain made me scream.

Then abruptly, my pain gave way to a terrible, aching emptiness.

Malfoy must have done what Severus had hoped he'd do. He had destroyed the scroll.

"Mission accomplished..." I whispered to my companion. I was barely conscious.

The dog was no longer beside me.

"*Mobilicorpus...*" a hoarse voice said.



The injured Animagus used the spell to support my weight, but he put one arm gently under my shoulders and the other under my knees, carrying me as he staggered up the bank of the stream.

He was limping. And his breathing was ragged, as if something in him had broken. I did not know how he had the strength to stay on his feet, let alone look after me. I tried to get a good look at him but I was so weak that I couldn't focus. I got only a vague impression of a thin badly bruised face and long, tangled black hair. His battered face was unrecognizable.

"Callandra?" I whispered, anxiously. "S-Severus?"

"Callandra will be fine. I'll fetch her. There's nothing I can do for Snape at the moment," the Animagus said, gruffly. Something about the angry way he spoke the Potions Master's name teased at my memory.

His feelings about Snape aside, the Gryffindor was gentle when he put me down. The roar of power inside me was gone. Empty of magic, I could only feel the magic of others once more.

The Gryffindor's power crackled around me as he said, "Accio Callandra!" A few moments later he was holding a small, ordinary stone in his hand.

"It was simple, really," he murmured. "I hid her in plain sight. One more stone among the many stones that had already fallen from the crumbling walls. She was safe, impossible for them to hurt. Even when the tower fell, she was unharmed."

The Animagus sighed. "I'll have to leave her like this for just a little longer while I Apparate. And I'll

have to Transfigure you as well."

Something in his tone nagged at me. He was a clever boy, this one. Tricky. I felt that I should know him. His name seemed to be hovering just out of reach.

There was a sudden movement behind us and a blast of incredibly strong power. A wave of Darkness, icy and foul. Someone else had just Apparated into the clearing. I heard a high, cold voice. And my thoughts scattered in terror.

"Well. What have we here? It seems that my Death Eaters have been somewhat...careless with their toys."

There could be no mistake about this newcomer's identity. It was He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. The Dark Lord.

## CHAPTER 2

# Double-Edged Swords

When I heard the high, cold voice of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, I was terrified. My first coherent thought was filled with regret and anger. Mrs. Norris's kittens... I wasn't going to live to see them born. It wasn't fair!

The Dark Lord moved towards the battered Gryffindor Animagus and me. The red light of the rising sun outlined his unnaturally tall, thin body. I could not help staring at him in horrified fascination. The blood-red slit-pupiled eyes glowing in the skull-white face, the flat nose with slits for nostrils, the pale, long-fingered hands... he did not look human, he was a creature of Darkness, wearing a human-like shape.

As terrible as the sight of him was, the feel of the Dark magic that surrounded him was worse. His presence was an assault against every sense I possessed. I would have been moaning with fear, but I could not make a sound.

The Gryffindor Animagus, injured though he was, moved protectively between me and the Dark Lord. He was too badly hurt to last long against this evil creature. His left arm was wrapped around his side. He coughed painfully, right hand over his mouth. I saw his hand come away with bright red blood on his fingers.

The Animagus held what appeared to be a small grey stone hidden in his left hand. Too frightened to speak, I willed him silently to go! To take Callandra and leave me!

The Animagus remained where he was, between the Evil One and me. It seemed that he was determined to save both Squibs. He took a stumbling step towards the Dark Lord, his feet rustling through the leaves in this small clearing. The sounds muffled the soft noise as he let the stone that was Callandra fall from his hand.

I saw the stone resting, half-hidden, among the leaves. Small, grey, unremarkable... nothing worth the Dark Lord's notice. Even if Voldemort killed us, as it was likely he was going to do, Callandra would be safe. Safe, but a stone!

*Gryffindor idiot!* I thought. I was not worth the child's life. The Animagus should have been content with saving her. He was reckless and foolish... Severus had been right.

Poor Severus. I could not help wondering if his "carefully calculated risks" had included the possible arrival of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. I couldn't ask him. I did not know if he was alive.

The Evil One's red eyes locked on the Animagus. He smiled a terrible smile.

"Well met, Sirius Black."



"S-Sirius... B-Black...?" I tried to say it out loud. My mouth moved, but no words came out. This could not be true! The Animagus could not be Sirius Black!

Sirius Black was a loyal follower of the Dark Lord! He'd betrayed James and Lily Potter. He'd murdered Peter Pettigrew along with a street full of innocent, unsuspecting Muggles! He was a fugitive from Azkaban! A mad, dangerous Dark Wizard! Everyone knew these things!

He'd been a wicked child too. Primarily responsible for the dark streak of malice that was evident in the worst of the Marauders' mischief. I'd known he was a bad one, ever since he was eleven years old!

But... he'd saved Callandra Moffitt.

Severus, who had to have known who the Animagus was (though he'd been wise enough not to tell me) had called Black an agent of Dumbledore's! Snape and Black had despised each other ever since their first year at Hogwarts. I had watched their mutual hatred grow deeper over time. But now they'd been working together to save the girl.

The Headmaster himself had ordered Black to watch over Callandra. I had seen Black at Hogwarts, playing with Potter and his friends, accepting food from the boy's own hands! Surely, Black had been there with Dumbledore's full knowledge and approval.

And, now nearly unconscious on his feet, Sirius Black was bravely (and foolishly) about to lose his life trying to protect me from the Dark Lord.

As much as I'd always disliked the boy, as much as I'd hated the man, it was obvious to me that Sirius Black was not a loyal follower of the Evil One.

Hatred for He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named was evident in every line of Black's body. He was trembling with pain and rage, not awe. He certainly did not fall to his knees to kiss the hem of the Dark One's robes.

Instead, Black tried to spit at the monster. Blood stained his mouth.

"Well met, indeed," Black rasped. His hoarse, pain-filled voice was barely recognizable as the same one that had belonged to the wily child, always so pleased with his own cleverness.

"Were you expecting to find your loyal followers here, waiting for their Master?" Black growled. Jerking his head in the direction of the pile of rubble that was the fallen tower, he gave a harsh, barking laugh that left more blood flecks staining his mouth.

"Take a good look! Nothing's there. Just ruins. And bodies in the ruins."

The Dark Lord looked past us, through the trees to where the tower should have been. Shock and anger flared in the blood-red snake's eyes.

Black began to laugh. An agonized laugh, that quickly became a helpless coughing fit.

"What have you DONE?" the Evil One hissed, glaring at the Animagus.

"Me? Not a thing," Sirius Black snarled, when he could talk again. His pale eyes were snapping fire, the only things that looked alive in his bruised and battered face. "I'm just glad to see you getting some of your own back! Go on. Search through the rubble. Maybe you'll find some of them still living."

The Evil One hissed like a boiling cauldron. His wand was suddenly in his hand. The Dark Lord spoke angrily and the words sounded like nothing in any human language. It was like the whisper of a brutally cold winter wind through dead, dry leaves.

The dreadful spell picked Black up like a rag doll. The Animagus landed hard on the ground beside me. Black cried out in agony. I winced. The sound of breaking bones had been sickening and unmistakable.

Black lay crumpled on his side. He was still conscious, his eyes full of agony.

"You idiot!!" I cried, finding my voice at last. "Why didn't you leave me when you had the chance?"

He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named stalked towards us.

My battle with Lucius Malfoy had left me too weak to stand. Still, I dragged myself forwards, trying to get between the monster and Sirius Black.

"D-didn't want you to know who I-I was..." the Animagus whispered to me, almost wryly. "You *never* believed me whenever I t-ried to tell you that I hadn't done s-something wrong. Knew you'd never believe I was innocent."

"I never believed anything you ever told me, because you were always guilty, before!" I snapped.

There was no time for me to say anything else. The

Evil One had reached us.

The Dark Lord ignored me, speaking only to the Animagus.

"I have a use for you, Black. Both you and Dumbledore's pet Squib shall have the honor of serving me," He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named hissed. "I will let you live.

"But a small lesson is still in order."

The Dark magic that surrounded the Evil One surged.

It was warning enough.

"*Crucio!*" the Dark Lord hissed, raising his wand and aiming it at Black.

My fingers closed around the mirror in my pocket.



*"Are you ready, Filch?" Severus had asked me, before he'd brought me to this place. "Do you have everything you need?"*

*"Yes," I'd said.*

*I had not needed Rita Skeeter's little mirror to fight the Death Eaters. But I had brought it with me, just in case. And it was the only weapon available to me now. I'd wanted to ask Moody if he thought that the little mirror was capable of reflecting back very powerful spells, or even Unforgivable Curses. But I'd been too afraid of what might happen. My teacher shares Severus Snape's tendency towards what Slytherins refer to as Calculated Risks.*

*(Slytherins refer to similar behavior in Gryffindors as Reckless Stupidity. Both Slytherins and Gryffindors will insist that there's a world of difference between the two. I can't see it, myself.)*

*Knowing Moody, he would have experimented by casting an Unforgivable Curse at me while I held the mirror, just to see what*

*would happen. The results would have been painful for one or both of us. I did not want to suffer harm myself and I did not want to hurt Moody. So I had not asked, and the mirror was all but untested.*



The Dark Lord's Cruciatius Curse struck Rita Skeeter's Mirror, instead of Sirius Black.

It reflected, striking He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named with nearly twice its original force.

The Evil One's scream was a terrible thing to hear. A cold, high piercing wail that seemed to go on forever. The Curse did not strike me or Black. But the mirror shattered. The Dark Lord had put so much power into his Curse that every bone in my right hand shattered along with the mirror. The spell's shock wave ran down my right arm to my shoulder, pulverizing the bones. My screams were swallowed up in his.

The pain was indescribable. I lost consciousness. Agony followed me down into darkness, along with the Dark Lord's screams.

### CHAPTER 3

## Rescue

I was drifting in and out of consciousness, lost in a fog of pain. The Dark Lord had been screaming somewhere nearby. Now his cries had fallen silent. But the

terrible sound had not been replaced by the noises common in a small wood in spring. The creatures that dwelled here were still wary, and I knew why. My eyes were shut but I knew that the Dark One was not gone.

He must have been able to recover from the terrible effects of his own double-strength Curse. I could feel his foul magic being used somewhere not too far off. And I could hear sounds coming from the direction of the ruined tower; heavy stones slowly moving and falling against each other.

The noise filled me with fear for myself and my companions, Sirius Black and Callandra Moffitt. Both of them were worse off than I was. Callandra was trapped in the shape of a small, grey stone. And Black was almost certainly dying.

Poor Severus Snape. His plan had worked well enough to free Callandra from the Death Eaters, but he could not help any of us now. The Potions Master could not even help himself. He was buried under the ruins of Lucius Malfoy's fallen tower. I did not know if he was alive or dead.



*Events were occurring elsewhere in the wizarding world; things that I did not know about until later.*

*In the Gryffindor common room back at Hogwarts Castle, a fifteen-year-old boy had been sleeping restlessly in a chair by the fireplace. Plagued by a persistent pain which radiated from the lightning shaped scar on his forehead, Harry Potter had spent a terrible night.*

*Unwilling to disturb the slumber of those who shared his room, (especially Neville, who was distraught with worry over the fate of his missing girlfriend, Callandra) Harry had not gone up to bed at all.*

*Hermione Granger and Ron Weasley had stayed down in the common room to keep him company. When he'd finally fallen asleep they'd taken turns keeping watch over him.*

*It was Hermione's turn to sleep. She was curled up in her chair, a book clutched in her hand, her finger still carefully holding her place.*

*Gangling legs stretched out in front of him, Ron Weasley was troubled as he watched the nightmares scurry over Harry's pale face.*

*Helpless inactivity was not in Ron's nature. Nor was it much to his liking. His hands clenched with sympathy and alarm as Harry cried out in anguish.*

*"Sirius! No...!"*



*In the wee hours of the morning the three children hurried through the Castle corridors, unchallenged by anyone. Harry had told Ron and Hermione that they did not have to worry about meeting me. He knew that catching students and assigning detentions were currently the very last concerns on my mind.*

*"Pepper Imps!" Harry told the Gargoyle. It came to life and jumped aside.*

*Harry, Ron and Hermione rushed up the moving spiral staircase. The Headmaster was still out. But as always he had left the Castle in very capable hands.*

Minerva had been offered the use of the couch in Dumbledore's office, if she needed to rest. The children found her awake. She'd been waiting for some word of Callandra, Sirius, Severus and me. Though the source of the news was unexpected, Minerva knew what to do with the information the children brought her.



Past caring, neither Black nor I heard our rescuer approaching on silent cat feet.

A firm, cool hand stroked the side of my face and a soft voice called my name. With difficulty, I opened my eyes. For a brief moment, preoccupied with the pain, I did not recognize the lovely grey-eyed woman who was kneeling between Sirius Black and me. Then I knew her.

Minerva! She must not linger in this dangerous place for a moment longer than necessary.

"The D-Dark Lord... h-he's still near... his magic... I can feel it," I managed to whimper. "C-Callandra Moffitt. Sirius Black. You have t-to get them away from here, quickly..."

"I know, Argus. And you, too."

Sirius Black was lying so still. His eyes were closed. I hoped that he was only unconscious.

"Black's... alive?"

"Yes," Minerva assured me. Her other hand was resting gently on Black's throat, under his bruised jaw. The Animagus still clung stubbornly to life. To judge by the anxious expression on Minerva's face, she feared for him.

"Callandra... Black T-Transfigured her. She's a stone... a small, grey one. Over there, under the leaves." My good arm trembling, I managed to indicate the right direction.

"Thank you for the description. It will make it much easier for me to know her when I find her," Minerva said.

I was not sure how a true wizard or witch went about sensing an object that is really a Transfigured person, but I had faith in Minerva's ability to do so. Transfiguration is Minerva's specialty. She had to be familiar with every aspect and application in her area of expertise.

Sure enough, it was not long before she was back at my side, clutching a small familiar grey stone.

"Now, for the pair of you," Minerva murmured. "This is going to be extremely unpleasant. But it's necessary."

Crouching between Sirius and me, Professor McGonagall turned us both into stones. First Sirius, then me. "Extremely unpleasant" was an understatement. Transfiguring badly injured animate objects into inanimate objects for easy transport via Apparition is a tricky and complex piece of magic. The last time it had been necessary for Minerva to do this to me I'd been unconscious during the entire process.

This time I was awake when she started. Mercifully the pain in my hand and arm made me faint within moments.



With three small stones clutched in her arms as carefully as if they'd been fresh-laid eggs, Minerva Apparated as close to the Castle as she could, into the village of Hogsmeade. Then she dashed into the Three Broom-

sticks to ask Rosmerta for the use of her fireplace. Rosmerta, another one of the Headmaster's hidden allies, called to Poppy Pomfrey through the fire.

Both Poppy and Minerva spoke a password as Minerva used Floo Powder (borrowed from Rosmerta) to take her to the fireplace in the hospital wing.



Minerva Transfigured Callandra back to her rightful shape first. Physically unhurt, but confused and badly frightened, the girl was comforted by Poppy and Minerva. Then she was given a sleeping draught and tucked into a bed in the hospital wing.

Transfiguring inanimate objects back into badly injured animate objects is equally dangerous and complicated. Fortunately, Albus Dumbledore had returned to the Castle after yet another sleepless night. He was just in time to assist Minerva with the delicate spells involved.

As soon as the Headmaster saw Callandra asleep in the front ward, he wrote a quick note to the Moffitts, telling them that Callandra was safe at Hogwarts Castle. Then he summoned a house-elf, handed the note to her and asked her to send an owl at once.

The Headmaster had spent the evening with Hyacinth and Reuben Moffitt, supporting them while they tried to convince the Minister of Magic to listen to their evidence that the Death Eaters had kidnapped their daughter.

The Minister had been very sympathetic to the plight of the distraught parents. But on the subject of the Dark Lord and his followers he'd remained just as stubborn as ever.

"Now, now. Jumping to desperate conclusions will not help find your daughter. We shall discover the real culprits, whoever they are!" he'd promised. "And we shall return the child to you! Do not give up hope."

Numb with grief and worry, the Moffitts had only just arrived at their home when Dumbledore's owl had reached them.



Callandra Moffitt and her parents had a tearful reunion in the front ward of the hospital wing. In order to give them their privacy, the rest of us were placed in the back ward.

Sirius Black's bed was across from mine. The heavily bandaged Animagus was in his dog form once more, to preserve his anonymity. It seemed that not many people were aware of his secret.

The huge beast lay sprawled across his bed with his shaggy head resting on Harry Potter's knees. The boy, pale with lack of sleep, had dark shadows under his green eyes. Harry was sitting cross-legged on the bed, one hand resting protectively on the sleeping dog's bandaged back. Hermione and Ron had both pulled chairs over beside the bed. Poppy had known that neither of them would leave Harry or the dog just yet so she had not even bothered asking them to go.

"Do you know who that *is*?" I asked Harry, Ron and Hermione.

"Yeah," Harry answered drowsily, yawning. "He's my godfather."

Clearly there was a long story here, but I was in no condition to hear it. Poppy had given me a dose of something incredibly nasty called Skele-Gro.

"Broken bones I can mend in a second, but yours have been completely pulverized," she told me, shaking her head in dismay. "Don't worry, Argus. Your hand and arm should be good as new, even if the next few hours are going to be rather rough. A pain-killing potion would interfere with the Skele-Gro's effectiveness." Poppy added sympathetically.

My right hand and arm were now filled with fiery pains. I was curled around my injured arm, trying not to moan too often or too loudly. At least the pain in my arm was thoroughly distracting me from the miserable discomfort in my jaw from my missing tooth and the throbbing wound in my shoulder where Severus had removed a strip of skin.

Professor McGonagall had been glad to hand the responsibility for the Castle back over to the Headmaster. She'd remained with her young Gryffindors, past and present, drawing strength from the knowledge that they were safe.

At the moment, Minerva was sitting beside me. This was a comfort, even though I knew that I was a complete mess. She had seen me looking even worse, after all.

I was able to doze for a bit. When I woke, I discovered that my good hand was clasped gently in Minerva's. Mrs. Norris had found me as well. My cat was curled up beside me, fast asleep. Mrs. Norris was looking far rounder than usual, heavily pregnant as she was.

The pain in my right arm and hand had eased a great deal. I blushed as I slid my left hand from Professor McGonagall's. Minerva is the strongest woman I know, but tonight's waiting and worrying had understandably taken a toll on her. Sometimes it helps to have another creature nearby, just to hold on to.

I wasn't sure which one of us had reached for the other's hand first, but I hoped she hadn't thought me too forward or disrespectful. The Professor smiled down at me when she saw that I was awake, which reassured me on that score.

It was morning. Bright sunlight was streaming through the windows of the hospital ward. Ron and Hermione must have been persuaded to go back to Gryffindor tower to rest in their own beds. But Harry had not wanted to leave Sirius. The boy was curled up, fast asleep in a chair beside his godfather's bed.

It was then, while the ward was quiet and Harry and Sirius were sleeping, that Minerva finally told me about the most dangerous aspect of her rescue mission.

The Dark Lord had been in her sight the entire time, standing by the ruins of Malfoy's tower. Leaving Black and me lying wounded, He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named had been carefully sorting through the rubble, stone by stone, seeking his six loyal Death Eaters (and his seventh very disloyal one.)

Professor McGonagall had seen the Evil One's unnaturally tall thin body standing in the ruins, still as a statue. His right arm was outstretched, glowing wand clutched in his long, spider-like hand. The air all around him had



been filled with levitating stones. He had been painstakingly uncovering the tower's lower chamber where Malfoy, Severus and the others had been trapped.

Fortunately, the Dark Lord's back had been towards Minerva and he had been fully intent on his own task. Minerva had been swift and stealthy. The Evil One had not known of her presence in the wood.

"Do you think He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named is actually *concerned* about them?" I asked her, hesitantly. "His followers?"

Minerva's lovely face grew angry. "They're tools to him, Argus, nothing more. He does not like to see them broken or damaged, at least not by any hand other than his own," she said, grimly.

"No, I did not see him find anyone," she added in a very soft voice, in answer to the question that I'd been afraid to ask.

Both of us were desperately worried about poor Severus, whose fate remained a mystery.

#### CHAPTER 4

## This Hospital Wing Isn't Big Enough

An entire day had passed with no word from Severus, and without any news of the missing Potions Master. It was now growing dark outside. I was half out of my mind with worry and pain.

Uncomfortable and anxious as I was, a glance at the small table beside my bed in the hospital wing comforted me. There were actually cards and gifts there from children. This was something that had never happened to me before.

Ginny Weasley had made a lovely card for me. She's also given me a small basket of toys for Mrs. Norris's kittens. Next to the basket of kitten-toys was a ledger, a gift from Hermione Granger. There was a note tucked inside, suggesting that the ledger would be very useful for recording the weights of each kitten at birth and for charting their growth over the first few weeks. (The idea quite delighted me. I had not considered doing such a thing until Hermione had thought of it.)

Colin Creevey had presented me with the remainder of his current bag of Bertie Botts Every Flavor Beans. He'd reminded me that both he and his brother Dennis would really, really like to have kittens of their own.

"...of course, Dennis and I are going to have to have them fixed the Muggle way when they get to be a bit bigger. It's my Mum and Dad's rule. Do you suppose that Professor Flitwick could teach me and Dennis to work the No-Kittens Charm that you used to have on Mrs. Norris? Perhaps if we asked him to start teaching us now, we could be able to work the Charm by the time our kittens are old enough to need it..."

I have grown rather fond of Colin but his ability to go for long periods of time without needing to breathe could probably confound a kelpie. Mercifully, Ron Weasley had distracted Colin with a remark

about Quidditch practice. And then Colin had begun chattering happily away to Ron.

Neville had sat with me for a while, shyly clasping Callandra Moffitt's hand in his. Then Neville had bravely asked Callandra's parents if he could "show her around a bit, just inside the Castle. She'll be quite safe, really."

Reuben Moffitt had seen the hopeful look on his daughter's face. He'd agreed, though Hyacinth Moffitt had bitten her lip and looked anxious.

"It will do Callie good to spend a bit of time with children her own age, especially now..." Mr. Moffitt had told his wife soothingly, his arm around Hyacinth's tense shoulders. "And the boy is right. The Castle is quite safe."

Neville and Callandra had made a card for me, together. Neville had written a brief message and Callandra had painted a picture on it using an enchanted brush.

A Squib can make excellent use of magical tools. I've done so many times. Callandra does have a gift for art, despite her telling Neville, shyly, that she "wasn't really very good." She'd painted a portrait of a sleeping Mrs. Norris which looked very much like my sweet cat did at the moment; round and pregnant. The tiny cat-portrait on the card was now purring at me from my bedside table.

Poor Callandra was clearly badly shaken from her ordeal. She remembered very little of what had happened to her; confused recollections of masked and hooded men dragging her into a stone tower and a huge black dog

who had fought them off, trying to protect her.

Naturally Callandra recognized the dog who'd rescued her when she set eyes on him again.

She did not know that he was really a wizard. Sirius Black: unregistered Animagus, convicted-but-innocent murderer, former Marauding troublemaker and godfather of Harry Potter.

Sirius had been awake on and off during the day, although he'd been very groggy with pain-killing potions. His shaggy black fur was a patchwork of healing wounds and bandages. The Animagus had managed to thump his tail weakly in acknowledgment when Callandra stroked him gently and thanked him for the rescue.

Reuben and Hyacinth Moffitt clearly did not know that Sirius was an Animagus. They showered their thanks on both Harry and Sirius, assuming as they had on the day of the Hogwarts garden party, that Sirius was nothing more than Harry's pet dog. For the time being, they were too relieved at their daughter's safe return to wonder how any dog, even a wizard's familiar, could have saved Callandra from Death Eaters.

Harry, who had remained by Sirius's bedside for most of the day, had blushed and thanked the Moffitts on his godfather's behalf, agreeing that "Snuffles" was certainly a dog unlike any other.

And so, the day itself had not been too bad. There had been enough people and noise to distract me from the passing hours. Though my worry over Severus had increased steadily.

"Has there been any word yet?" I asked Minerva, when she came in to the ward to check on everyone. The expression on her face had already given me the answer, but I could not help asking anyhow. She'd shaken her head at me, her mouth a thin line of worry.



Poppy had just gone downstairs for a late dinner. Before she'd left, she'd checked the Skele-Gro's progress on my shattered right arm and right hand.

"Hmm. It's working well enough, but it's taking longer than usual. The effects have yet to truly reach your hand. That should happen some time soon, I'm afraid. I'm sorry, Argus. The pain may get a good deal worse again, before it gets better."

"I'll be all right," I told Poppy, gruffly. She'd had a long day and she needed her dinner.

With Poppy gone, the hospital wing was left in the small, capable hands of Winky, the house-elf. The industrious little creature went to work with a will. She straightened Sirius's blankets and fluffed his pillows, assuring Harry that the Animagus was resting quite comfortably. Then, after she'd done the same for me, Winky proceeded to feed Mrs. Norris.

The elf enjoyed fussing gently for a while over my pregnant cat, before departing the hospital wing for duties elsewhere.

Moaning, I curled up into a miserable ball and used my good arm to pull the blankets over my head. There was still no news about Severus. And the Skele-

Gro had finally started working on my poor hand.



The terrible discomfort of my mending bones had me tossing and turning so much that Mrs. Norris gave up trying to sleep next to me. Looking quite put out, she curled up in the chair next to my bed instead. My occasional groans must have been audible from Potter's side of the room.

"Mr. Filch? It'll be all right," the boy said, awkwardly. He was clearly not comfortable watching another person suffer.

"Skele-Gro doesn't hurt forever. It only feels that way," Harry assured me.

"Shouldn't you be back in Gryffindor Tower?" I wanted to growl but a whimper was the best I could manage.

"I'm going to stay here with Sirius unless Madam Pomfrey comes back and tosses me out," the boy said. He wasn't being defiant, merely stating a fact.

"Er... can I do anything to help you?" he asked.

"Yes..." I gasped. "If you could somehow dispose of every last drop of this infernal 'Skele-Gro' before Madam Pomfrey can ever use it on me again I'd consider it a great favor."

Oh, Sweet Circe. Had I really said that to the son of James Potter, not to mention the godson of Sirius Black? I must be delirious.

"You didn't hear that, Potter..." I told him.

"Hear what?" the boy replied.

My eyes were shut, but I could hear the grin in

his voice. The next time he spoke, Harry Potter was standing right beside my bed.

"Mr. Filch? I haven't thanked you yet. You stopped that curse from hitting Sirius. I-I saw what happened. It's because of my scar. Sometimes I can see what Voldemort..."

"Circe's Pigs! Don't ever say that fiend's *name*, boy!" I cried. My eyes flew open as I trembled. I was so frightened that I didn't realize what he was telling me. "If you say his name he'll c-come and..."

"He'll come for me eventually anyway. Whether I say his name or not," Potter told me, calmly. The expression in his eyes made him look older than his poor father ever had.

Abruptly, I remembered exactly who I was talking to. Facing the Dark Lord had been the most terrifying experience of my life. But Harry Potter had faced and defeated the Evil One before he could walk or talk. And he'd done it again, and again since.

I was shuddering. The boy rested a gentle hand on my shoulder.

"You hurt him, Mr. Filch," Harry said, fiercely. "You did." There was a hard look in his green eyes. "You'd think he'd learn. He ought to be more careful about the curses he throws at 'helpless' people. Those curses have a way of getting thrown right back in his face, don't they? It's too bad that your mirror broke."

Looking at him in wonder, I murmured, "It's true. You really did see what happened, didn't you?"

The boy nodded.

"Potter?" I asked anxiously, "did you see anything

that happened after your godfather and I faced the Dark Lord? Professor Snape was there. He'd helped us. But then he was trapped in a tower that collapsed..."

Harry shook his head. "I'm sorry, Mr. Filch. I didn't see anything except for what happened to you and Sirius. The Headmaster thinks that I... that my scar lets me see Vol- er... You-Know-Who whenever he's near me, or feeling especially murderous."

Potter took a deep breath. "If he's not feeling murderous, well, that's a good sign, isn't it? I guess he'd be feeling pretty murderous if he knew that Professor Snape had been helping you."

I felt too wretched to wonder how the boy knew so much about the dangerous double life that poor Severus was leading.

Unable to offer any other comfort, Potter stayed beside me for a while, talking to distract me from the pain. He told me how he knew that Sirius Black was an innocent man. It was an incredible story, certainly enough to make me forget about my aching hand.

When Poppy returned to check on us, Potter asked her if he could spend the night.

Poppy sighed and agreed.

"Has anyone heard from Severus?" I asked her as she turned to go.

Poppy shook her head sadly.



I was able to doze for a while. A slight rustling sound woke me.

Severus???

Sitting bolt upright, I expected to see Professor Snape. But it was Sirius Black. In his human form, which looked every bit as battered as his canine one. Very wobbly on his feet, Sirius was standing beside his bed, wand clutched in one bandaged hand. Harry had fallen asleep in his chair again, and Sirius was carefully levitating the boy onto the bed. Then he gently pulled a blanket over Harry.

"Heard any news of that oily git yet?" Sirius Black asked me gruffly, when he noticed that I was awake.

I shook my head.

Wincing, Black slid himself gingerly into Harry's chair. We waited.



"Well, isn't this a cozy little scene," a weary but caustic voice sneered.

Black and I, half dozing, both jerked upright. The sudden movement made both of us gasp with pain. Severus Snape probably would have found this amusing. But he did not appear to have the strength. The Potions Master was terribly pale. He looked as if he was about to fall down. He was limping, moving slowly as if every bone in his body hurt.

I tensed, trying to identify the spell I could sense around him. No foul after-taste of the Cruciatius, which was a relief. The spell wasn't Dark magic, but it was a tantalizingly familiar spell.

"Professor," I cried. "Where have you *been*?"

Snape glared at me. "The answer should be obvious, Filch! I've been lying under an extremely large pile of very heavy stones! It seems that some fool of a Squib dropped a tower on me! Were you trying to kill us all?"

Stricken, I shook my head. Black came to my defense.

"Leave him alone, Snape. He did fine. Are you saying that you didn't have the possibility of the tower's destruction added into your precise little calculations?" the Animagus asked, sarcastically.

"No!" Snape hissed at him. "I did NOT. I expected the tower to remain standing! I expected you, Filch and the girl to be long gone by the time the Dark Lord actually arrived!"

I bit my lip. "Professor, I'm sor..."

Snape ignored me, glaring at Black. "It was hard enough for me to plan around the actions of one reckless idiot, let alone two! You flea-bitten excuse for a wizard! What were you *thinking* when you Transfigured that child?"

Black's pale eyes locked angrily with Snape's dark ones.

"I was thinking," the Animagus growled, "that Voldemort would probably show up sooner than the lot of you seemed to expect! And I was thinking that Callandra was better off hidden while I still had the strength to do it! Anything was better than leaving the girl trapped and helpless in Voldemort's hands!"

"For Merlin's sake, don't keep saying his name!" I moaned.

Both wizards ignored me.

"You reckless, stupid... Gryffindor!" Severus snarled

at Black. "If you had died, the child could have been lost forever!"

"If you had been watching your slimy Slytherin friends at the party the way you were supposed to, she would never have been endangered in the first place!" Black growled back.

"It was a miscalculation!" Snape hissed, absolutely livid. "You know all about miscalculations, don't you, Black? Not seeing the true danger until it's too already too late and innocent lives are shattered?"

"Will the pair of you SHUT UP?" I snapped. "You're worse now than when you were children! I ought to clap the pair of you in chains, whether Dumbledore allows me to or not!"

The Animagus was making a very visible effort to calm down. He averted his eyes from Snape and lowered himself gingerly onto the edge of Harry's bed. "He's right, Snape. We're going to wake up Harry."

Snape was silent, breathing hard. He was furious and clearly in pain.

"Professor?" I asked, "you're hurt, aren't you? How bad is it?"

"I'm fine," he snarled.

I glared at him, knowing that he was lying.

"What of the girl?" Snape asked, turning away from me. He addressed Black in clipped tones. "Callandra is safe?"

He was avoiding Black's eyes, the same way that the Animagus was carefully not looking at the Potions Master.

"Yes," Black said quietly. His battered face relaxed. "Callandra is safe and with her family. She's a brave girl and

I think she'll be fine. The Moffitts are all still here in the Castle. The Headmaster invited them to stay the night."

"Good," Snape said.

Both young wizards appeared relieved to have found at least one thing that they could completely agree on. The tense atmosphere in the room eased a bit.

"So," Black said, after a few moments, "Voldemort must have been in quite a foul temper when he finally finished digging the lot of you out of the rubble. Did he admit that he'd just been knocked on his arse by a Squib?"

Severus's dark eyes widened in shock. "That was *Filch*?" he asked, looking at Black, incredulously. "The Dark Lord appeared to be blaming you."

The Animagus snorted. "He would."

Snape pierced me with his obsidian stare. "Filch, how did you...?"

"I had a mirror that reflects spells back, only twice as strong." I explained. "It was really nothing more than a trinket, but it was an especially well constructed one. I confiscated it from a student, years ago. The Dark Lord's Curse broke it. Along with my arm, and my hand..." I added, ruefully.

Snape shook his head. He sighed.

"Yes, Black, you might say that the Dark Lord was in something of a foul temper," Severus said.

In a quiet, almost toneless voice, Snape told both of us what had happened after the Dark Lord had retrieved his followers.



Severus's survival had come at a frightening price. It seemed that he and the other five Death Eaters who had been trapped now owed a wizard's Debt to Lucius Malfoy. Twice over.

Even while he was fighting me for control of his magic, Malfoy was using a powerful shielding Charm to protect himself and his companions. None of them had suffered any injuries worse than bruises when the tower fell, Severus said.

Though they had spent a considerable length of time lying badly battered and unconscious underneath the rubble. This had been unpleasant, but it was not as dangerous as facing their Lord's rage.

It was then that Malfoy had saved the others a second time. He had knelt before the Dark Lord and accepted full responsibility for what had happened.

He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named had been furious enough at the loss of a second Squib scroll. The discovery that his wounded prisoners had vanished from the wood had not improved his temper.

"Lucius was still screaming when the rest of us were strong enough to Apparate away," Snape said in a toneless voice. His dark eyes were haunted.

The Animagus exchanged a glance with me. Neither one of us could muster much sympathy for Lucius Malfoy. I was hoping that the Evil One had finished Malfoy off completely. That slippery, powerful Dark wizard must not demand repayment of the Debt that poor Severus now owed him.

"Is Malfoy dead?" I asked.

"I doubt that the Dark Lord would be merciful enough to permit Lucius to die," Snape answered.

He looked at me, warningly. "Malfoy makes a dangerous enemy. Unlike the Dark Lord, he understands and completely accepts your role in last night's events. Beware of him, Argus. If he should ever have you at his mercy again, he will make you beg for death. Whether he finds another Squib scroll or not. Do you understand me? You must stay away from Lucius Malfoy."

"Yes, Professor," I said. My voice shook. "I will."

"Naturally, Lucius and the others will not expect you to remember any of what happened last night," Snape continued. He smiled at me, without humor. "So consider yourself duly Obliviated."

"Yes, Professor," I said once more.

Some of the tension left Snape's body.

"I must go and make my report to the Headmaster," he said.

"Professor, wait!" I said. "You're using a glamour. I recognize it. It's a spell that lets others look at you and see what they expect to see."

Snape glared.

"How can you tell?" Black asked me.

I shook my head. "It's hard to explain. The glamour has a sort of... smell to it. It's like the one that my Dad liked to use. When we had company and he didn't want to change into his best robes."

The Animagus resumed his dog-shape and sniffed at the Potions Master. Snape looked outraged.

Black resumed his human form, more wobbly on

two legs than he'd been on four.

"I don't smell anything," he said. "Worse than usual..." he added, unable to resist. "You do smell a bit bloody though, Snape. Is that what you're covering up? How badly are you hurt?"

Severus scowled at both of us. "I've already told you. It's nothing worse than a few bruises and scrapes. It looks far worse than it is."

The worried look on my face made Snape snarl with frustration. He took out his wand and removed the glamour.

I gasped in sympathy. Even Black winced. I'd never seen anyone so badly bruised in my life. Not even me, after Lucius Malfoy had thrown me down the front steps of the Castle and bounced me off Hagrid for good measure.

"Surely Lucius Malfoy could have protected you a bit better than that!" I blurted out.

Snape sighed. "I'll do all of us a favor. I will *not* pass along your message the next time I see Lucius."

"Poppy ought to have a look at you! You should be in the hospital wing!" I said.

Sirius Black and Severus Snape exchanged a look. Both of them shuddered at the thought of being confined here together.

"Albus won't be able to sense this spell. Neither will Poppy. They're not Squibs," Snape said, confidently as he restored the glamour. He followed this statement up with a stern glare in my direction, warning me not to give away his secret. He already knew that

Black wouldn't give him away.

Both wizards knew that the hospital wing was simply not big enough for the two of them.

#### EPILOGUE

## Another Miscalculation

"Madam Pomfrey, this is quite unnecessary. I am perfectly all ri... OW!"

"Goodness, Severus! Just look at you!!"

The sound of voices shattered the silence of the hospital wing, waking me up.

It seemed that Professor Snape was arguing with Madam Pomfrey. And he appeared to be losing. The medi-witch and the Potions Master were concealed behind a curtain, surrounding one of the beds. But their voices were clearly audible.

Also awakened by the noise, Sirius Black, in his dog form once more, blinked bleary eyed at me from his bed across the room.

"It's not as bad as it looks..." Severus was protesting. "I'll be the judge of that," Poppy retorted.

This was followed by a yelp of pain from Professor Snape.

"Honestly, you haven't changed since you were eleven!" Poppy said, in exasperation. "This wouldn't hurt at all if you would just stop squirming..."

His hair looking even more untidy than usual,



Harry Potter sat up in his bed. Fumbling with his glasses he looked first at his godfather, then at me and lastly, over at the curtain.

We all heard a sigh from Poppy.

"Well, nothing appears to be broken," the nurse said. "But you're obviously very sore. You need something for the pain."

"I have plenty of potions in my own stores in the dungeons," Snape hissed. "If you'd just let me go down to my own bed... ow! OW!! Stop that, woman!"

"You're behaving like a child, Severus! You heard what Albus said. He wants me to look you over and do whatever I can for these terrible bruises. You are aware of the properties of arnica; you mixed this liniment for me yourself! It will help. Hold still!"



When Poppy emerged from behind the curtain, she was red in the face and muttering angrily to herself. When she caught sight of Potter, Black and me, she glared at us.

"I've given Professor Snape a sleeping draught. Do not disturb him!"

The nurse directed an especially stern glare at the large black dog, her arms folded forbiddingly across her chest. Sirius returned the look, his expression soulful and innocent.

Poppy was not fooled. "You should also be resting," she scolded the badly wounded Animagus. "Perhaps you would like a sleeping draught as well? I have plenty..."

I could not help grinning. Poppy knew that the only way to keep Severus Snape and Sirius Black in

the same hospital ward safely for any length of time was to have one or both of them drugged.

Poppy glowered at Black sternly for another moment. Then, she turned to Harry, her voice and manner growing more gentle.

"You should still have time to get changed and washed up before breakfast, young man. And then, off to your classes. Don't worry, you may see your godfather later. If he continues to behave himself, then he may have visitors. If not..." her voice trailed off, leaving the implied threat.

The huge dog whimpered and put his head down on his bandaged paws. Not being allowed to see Harry was a punishment far worse than a sleeping draught.

From behind the curtain Snape spoke, sounding both drowsy and horrified. "Potter is awake out there?"

"Yes, but he's just leaving, Professor," I called.

The boy grinned at the closed curtain, but wisely, he kept silent. Waving first at Sirius and then at me, he adjusted his glasses and left the hospital wing.

Madam Pomfrey watched us for a few more moments. Black continued to look innocent. With my good arm I reached out towards the chair beside my bed to stroke Mrs. Norris. My cat purred at me, sleepily.

"I'll be within earshot," Poppy warned Snape and Black as she headed for her office.

As soon as she was gone Black shifted back to his human form. "Snape! Are you still awake? How did the Headmaster see through your glamour?"

I would have scolded him for bothering the Profes-

sor. But I wanted to know the answer too. Dumbledore had told me that he could not sense magic.

"The Headmaster didn't know. He wouldn't have known. It was Fawkes who gave me away..." Snape grumbled, yawning.

The sleeping draught was clearly taking effect. His voice grew soft and faint.

"I hadn't considered the Phoenix! The creature kept singing at me ...wanted to weep on me... just ignored me when I shook my head at him and told him to let me be. Blasted bird..."

Severus's voice trailed off completely. He had gone to sleep in mid-sentence.

"Rest well, Professor," I murmured, unable to suppress a grin.

The End

# A Squib's Proper Place



## CHAPTER 1

## Two Squibs at Hogwarts

"ARE YOU REALLY going to just let him go hobbling out of here?" Sirius Black asked, his voice incredulous.

Severus Snape answered the Animagus before Madam Pomfrey had a chance to speak.

"Yes, Black, she is. Do you know why? Because unlike you, I *can* walk."

"I didn't say that you were walking, Snape. I said *hobbling*," the Animagus replied in a sour tone.

"If you prefer," Snape replied, smug despite the bruises which covered most of his body. "At least I'm ambulatory. Which is more than can be said for you!"

Poppy had been able to mend Black's many broken bones but the Animagus would need more time to heal from his internal injuries.

"That's quite enough of out the pair of you!" Poppy Pomfrey scolded the two young wizards. The medi-witch looked in need of a strong headache potion.

Separately Sirius and Severus were difficult patients. Together, they were completely impossible.

"You should have time for a nice, warm bath before teaching that class," Poppy told the Potions Master, sternly. "Make it a good, long soak, mind you!"

Then Poppy sighed. "I really hope that you won't overdo things, Professor. You need your rest."

Severus was on light duties today, only permitted to teach one of his Potions classes. Professor Grubbly-Plank had flatly refused to take the fifth year Gryffindors and Slytherins.

The Potions Master looked insulted by the very idea that teaching one class would be overdoing things. Even if that class did include Neville Longbottom among its members.

(Fond of Neville as I am, I know that teaching him the subtle science and exact art of potion-making is not a task for the faint-hearted.)

After giving Poppy a somewhat stiff and painful nod, the Potions Master raised his wand and restored the glamour which concealed his injuries. The poor man walked as if he was twice the Headmaster's age, but he was obviously glad to be leaving the hospital wing.

The Animagus watched him leave with poorly concealed envy on his own battered face.

If Black had been free to walk around the Castle in his human form, he would have volunteered to teach the Potions class, just to have something to do.

He'd always been a restless boy, unable to handle any sort of confinement very well. It amazed me that he'd been

able to last twelve years in Azkaban, Animagus or not.



The Animagus and the Potions Master had been wounded rescuing a fifteen-year-old girl, a Squib named Callandra Moffitt from the Dark Lord and his followers. The Dark Lord had injured me too, shattering my right hand and right arm with the force of a Curse that hadn't even touched me. My bones had been mended. But my arm and hand remained so painful that they were useless.

I had not forgotten Professor Trelawney's prediction. "The thing that you fear will happen before the start of summer," she'd told me. For nearly two months I'd been worried that she'd foreseen something dreadful happening to Mrs. Norris's unborn kittens. Had Professor Trelawney been foretelling my injury instead? Had she Seen that I would never heal properly? What use would a one-armed, one-handed caretaker be to this Castle?

Aware of my concerns, Poppy had reassured me that I would eventually regain the full use of my hand and arm. My reaction to the Skele-Gro was just a little bit slower than most. Rationally I knew that I could trust her. Poppy always tells her patients the truth even when the truth is unpleasant. But in my heart, I remained troubled.



Callandra and her parents, Reuben and Hyacinth Moffitt, were still visiting the Castle. Thanks to Black,

Snape and myself, the girl had been returned to her family, frightened but unhurt. My satisfaction with this outcome was even stronger than my fear for myself. Callandra's younger brother, Daniel, a Ravenclaw in his second year, was now with them too. I'd heard that all the Moffitts were currently in a meeting with the Headmaster.

Not many people knew the real story behind Callandra's rescue. For the safety of everyone involved not many people *could* know the whole story. The official version released into the Castle's grapevine was that Callandra had been saved from her kidnappers by the big black dog.

Sirius was supposedly a stray that had been hanging about Hogsmeade. He'd been adopted by Hagrid, though he was obviously very fond of Harry Potter as well.

According to the Hogwarts grapevine Severus and I had both been injured in separate mishaps that had nothing to do with Callandra's kidnapping and rescue. Snape had 'hurt his back a bit' while moving supplies in his office. And I'd broken my arm and hand falling off a ladder.



When Sirius heard Poppy say that I would also be allowed to leave the hospital wing he regarded me plaintively.

"Argus, you're not allowed to do even very light cleaning!" Poppy told me, looking stern. "Read a book. Go for a walk outside. Or just spend time sitting quietly with Mrs. Norris. Anything, as long as it's relaxing!"

I was frankly horrified at the notion of relaxing. I'm not very good at it. Keeping busy is what I prefer to do; it's in my nature.

"As for you," Poppy told Black, her tone both stern and sympathetic, "Transfigure yourself into 'Snuffles.' It's not safe to be seen any other way."

With a sigh, the bedridden Animagus obeyed.



Poor Severus did not have an easy lesson with his fifth year Gryffindors and Slytherins. Severus had limped into the classroom to find the children doing one of the things they did best – fighting.

"You're going to have the fifth year Gryffindors for a detention this evening!" Severus told me angrily, via my office fireplace.

"All of them? What did they do?" I asked.

"Longbottom and Weasley made a vicious and unprovoked attack against Vincent and Gregory!" Professor Snape snarled. "And the others were stubborn about defending them! I took fifty points from Gryffindor. And I trust you to make their detention as unpleasant as possible!"



Dusting is quite unpleasant, I thought. No child really enjoys doing anything so tedious. Not even Potter, who is quite good at it. Obeying Poppy's orders, I did not help the Gryffindors. That evening, my useless right arm in a sling, I restricted myself to super-

vising their work on the fifth floor corridor.

Mrs. Norris was curled up on the floor, safely out of range of all the flying dust. She was due to have her kittens any day now. My cat was beginning to look like a small, grey stuffed pillow. She was clearly very anxious for the whole pregnancy business to be over.

While they worked, the children explained the reason for their fight with the Slytherins.

"Pansy Parkinson started it, the stupid little cow!" Ron Weasley said, angrily. The gangly redhead was making me regret my decision to allow the children to use magic to help them clean. The boy was so furious that his floating dust-cloths were creating a dust storm.

"Pansy is awful!" Lavender Brown agreed indignantly. "Saying such rude things about poor Callandra."

Neville Longbottom's round, usually gentle face was full of anger and pain. "Callandra is not 'unsuitable,' or 'useless,' or any of the other things that Pansy said she was!" the boy growled. It was a tone of voice I'd never heard from Neville before.

"Of course she's not," Parvati Patil told Neville, also indignant. She gave Hermione a proud look. "Callandra is worth ten of Pansy, just as Hermione said."

Hermione sighed and looked over at Ron, who was now sneezing and covered with dust. "It might have ended there if you'd just ignored Pansy, Ron."

"How could I ignore her when she'd just called you a Mudblood?" Ron demanded, between sneezes.

"You should have ignored Crabbe and Goyle then. I think they might have been coming over to restrain

Pansy. You and Neville didn't have to tackle them." Hermione said.

"It was great though," Dean Thomas said, grinning. "You were both brilliant!"

"Neville," I said, worried, "you and Ron really *did* attack Crabbe and Goyle?"

"Knocked them right down." Dean's grin widened.

I studied Neville and Ron anxiously, but neither boy had a mark on him. It was surprising. Ron had always been tall and wiry and Neville had grown a great deal over the course of the year, but neither Gryffindor was a match yet for Crabbe and Goyle in either size or brute strength.

The young Gryffindor knights must have made up for the size difference with sheer ferocity in defense of their young ladies' honor. Both of them were too gentlemanly to strike Pansy. But her hulking protectors would have been considered fair game.

"The only thing better would have been if Malfoy had been knocked down too," Dean went on. "What was wrong with Draco, anyhow? Off by himself, like that... not even noticing that his girlfriend had just landed herself in the middle of a fight? Much as I can't stand Malfoy, that's not like him."

"Draco's just had bad news from home," Harry Potter said, quietly. "His father's ill."

Unlike all the others, Potter was actually doing a good job with his dusting. At the moment he was using a cleaning spell to remove the dust from Ron's hair, face and clothes rather than the suits of armor

and the paintings, but it was a start.

"His father must be terribly ill if Draco's too distracted to pay any attention to Pansy," Parvati said. "Maybe that's why she was in such a snit. Neville, surely you don't you believe a word she told you. You're certainly not a disgrace to your family, and you know that your gran would never really disown you!"

"Disown you?" I asked, looking at Neville wide eyed.

"B-because of Callandra," Neville said, angrily.

"My mum married a Muggle and her family didn't disown her," Seamus Finnegan pointed out.

"But, Seamus, your mum never told your dad she was a witch," Dean commented.

"I'm not talking about my dad's side, just my mum's," Seamus said. "Anyway, both sides of the family get along all right now."

"Neville, your gran didn't disown you when she thought you were a Squib, did she?" Hermione's voice was gentle and reasonable. "Why would she object to Callandra?"

I was relieved to see that Hermione's words were able to penetrate Neville's worry and anger.

"Just don't let your great uncle Algie dangle Callandra out of any attic windows," Ron said.

Neville looked ferocious again. "He'd better not try it."

If Neville's great uncle had any sense, he would not tangle with a fifteen-year-old in love.

I was wondering more about the eventual meeting between Neville's formidable grandmother and Callandra's fierce mother, Hyacinth. I almost missed what Neville said next.

"I hope that the Headmaster really is going to let Callandra stay at the Castle," the boy murmured wistfully. "Everyone says that Professor Dumbledore's been talking to her parents about it all day, trying to make arrangements."

"Callandra is being invited to stay?" I asked, softly. I was surprised and pleased. "For how long?"

"Well, for years of course," Seamus told me. "You can use the help, surely. Especially now. With your arm and all."

"The h-help?" My words came out in a whisper.

"You haven't heard anything about this, Mr. Filch?" Lavender said in surprise. "Everyone's been saying that Callandra is going to be your apprentice!"

"What??" I gasped. "No!" I knew that Callandra's mother, Hyacinth, would never allow such a thing. She wanted better things for her daughter, and I did not blame her. No wonder the Moffitt family had been with the Headmaster all day. Hyacinth Moffitt was probably fighting the idea tooth and nail!

The fifth year Gryffindors all stared at me, surprised by my reaction. Even Neville looked upset with me.

"But you seemed to be rather fond of Callandra, Mr. Filch..." Lavender said softly, after a few moments.

"I am. She's a good child," I said, struggling for the right words. Most of the Gryffindors were regarding me indignantly. I felt surrounded and besieged. I gave Mrs. Norris a desperate look but she just glared. The expression in her golden eyes said plainly, *Don't bother me, I'm pregnant. You're on your own!*

"A young girl spending her days scrubbing floors

and toilets," I said, miserably. "Cleaning old gum off the stair railings, enduring Peeves' endless taunts..." I shook my head in dismay. Worse than anything else was the thought of shy, pretty Callandra shut away from the sun in a gloomy dungeon office.

"But, Mr. Filch," Dean Thomas pointed out, "you do those things."

"It's all right for me. I'm an old man. She's just a child!"

"What about our detentions then?" Ron wanted to know. "The bedpans? The trophy polishing? The floor-scrubbing? Watching us clean doesn't seem to upset you!"

"Do you have to clean like a Muggle every single day, boy?" I asked, getting angry now. "A little hard work never hurt anyone, and the prospect of doing a bit of menial labor for punishment should be enough to deter you brats from doing things you know you shouldn't be doing anyhow!"

My voice was shaking. "It would be different for Callandra. It wouldn't be a punishment for just a few hours, but her job! Years of back-breaking chores, morning, noon and night."

I looked over at Neville. My young friend's face was both angry and troubled.

"That can't be what you want for her!" I said.

"But what if she won't be allowed to stay in the Castle any other way?" Parvati asked me, before Neville had a chance to answer.

"It's not as if she could be admitted here as a student," Seamus said. "Her name was never on the List. No letter. No wand. No magic."

I was silent. They had a point.

"But Squibs *do* have magic," Hermione Granger said.

"It's true," she went on, as everyone turned to look at her. "They're not the same as Muggles. I've been doing some reading..." she added, unnecessarily.

"They're not proper wizards either..." Ron said, looking at me apologetically. "Sorry, Mr. Filch," the boy muttered.

I shrugged. He wasn't saying anything I hadn't been hearing all my life. And at least he did have the courage to say it to my face.

"Squibs are very sensitive to magic," Hermione said. "More so than regular witches and wizards. And they're immune or invisible to certain spells. Quite a number of spells, really. The spell that creates the List for Hogwarts is one of that type. That's why Squibs' names don't appear."

Her voice got softer. "Squibs are safest when they're hidden. Dark Wizards have always wanted to cut them to bits and make use of their magical immunity. Why do you think the Death Eaters took Callandra?"

I shuddered. I wasn't the only one, either.

"You've been doing research in the Restricted Section..." I said, glaring at her.

"Professor McGonagall gave me permission," Hermione replied. "As it happens, there's more information on Squibs there than there is in any other section."

"That must be why you were kidnapped, Mr. Filch. Back in December!" Parvati said. Her voice was gentle and sympathetic.

The details of my kidnapping were supposed to be a secret, but naturally these children would make the



obvious connections. Minerva's young lions were too clever to do otherwise. My kidnappers were supposed to have used a memory-charm on me, and the reasons for my attack were presumed to be a mystery even to me. But the whole school knew that Professor Snape had brought me back to Hogwarts, a half-dead bloody mess.

Dwelling on those memories could still make me feel ill. Angry and impatient with myself, I knelt to stroke Mrs. Norris, who had finally waddled over to rub against my ankles. Lowering myself to the floor, I cradled her in my lap.

Neville's voice was gentle too. At least my young friend didn't sound angry with me any more. "If a Squib's best protection is to remain hidden, then neither you or Callandra have that protection any longer," he said quietly. "Callandra needs to be here, surrounded by witches and wizards. She'd be safer here than anywhere. I'm sure you can see that."

"I do want Callandra to stay," I muttered. "I just don't want to see her have to break her back, blister her hands and rub her knees raw in the process. It's not fair."

The young lions were all looking at each other, grinning now.

"You've always said that you'd like nothing better than to see the lot of us hung up by our ankles in the dungeons," Ron said, dryly.

"That's *different!* Callandra is a good child!" I retorted, glaring at him. Then I sighed. I had a sinking feeling that my cover was blown as far as these particular Gryffindors were concerned.

Potter, who had been very quiet till now, spoke up. "Everyone's been saying that Callandra's going to be your apprentice, but it's really just a rumor," the boy pointed out. "And rumors can lie. What if Professor Dumbledore really has other plans for her? What if she's going to be invited to stay here as a student?"

Everyone was looking at him now. Including me.

"Maybe the story about Callandra being your apprentice started because no one could imagine any other place for a Squib at Hogwarts," Harry went on. "But the Headmaster likes to give everyone a chance, doesn't he? Dumbledore has been talking to her family all day! It wouldn't take that long just to make arrangements to take her on as your assistant."

*You don't know her mother!* I thought. But I felt hopeful. Could the boy be right?

"Pringle, the one who was caretaker before you. Was he a Squib too?" Harry asked me.

I shook my head. "Hardly. Old Pringle was a proper wizard who'd failed at his studies. He wasn't too pleased by the idea of training a Squib to do his job, either. Thought it was a dreadful insult."

"You may have been the first Squib here, then," Harry said. "Just like Professor Lupin was the first werewolf-student. If a werewolf can come to school, why not a Squib?"

"At least Professor Lupin has a wand, and can do proper magic! What will Callandra do about Transfiguration? Or Charms?" Parvati asked.

"If Squibs are very sensitive to magic, then Cal-

landra might be able to manage Divination," Lavender murmured, naming her favorite subject.

"Or Arithmancy." Hermione said, naming hers.

"Or Care of Magical Creatures. Or Study of Ancient Runes," Dean said, thoughtfully.

"Or Potions." Neville shuddered. "Or Herbology," he added, brightening a bit. "I could always help her with any spells that she needs to do, if her magic isn't strong enough."

It was the first time I'd ever heard Neville speak of his magic with any confidence. I could not help smiling.

I wondered how Callandra would fare in Defense Against the Dark Arts. She could not protect herself the way the rest of the children could, but there were other ways. Could Mad Eye Moody tutor her as he tutored me? And how would another Squib react to a journey through a Door, I wondered, with a sudden flash of curiosity. Not that I'd want to take such a risk with Callandra, unless it was to save her from Death Eaters...

"She can certainly fall asleep in History of Magic as easily as the rest of us do," Seamus said, grinning.

Quite deeply moved by the young Gryffindors' willingness to accept Callandra as one of them, I fought to control my emotions. It soothed me to stroke Mrs. Norris, who responded with another contented purr.

Thinking about my own early days in the Castle was something that I very seldom did. I'd had to work hard to show fierce-tempered old Pringle that I could do whatever he asked of me, even if I was 'nothing but a Squib.' I'd had to prove myself just to be allowed to mop the Castle floors and scrub the toilets.

If Potter was right, then Callandra would be an experiment, the first Squib witch that Hogwarts had ever trained. Callandra was fortunate that she had friends willing to accept her. She would need them. And every shred of courage and strength she possessed.



The Gryffindors finished cleaning the corridor, eventually. After I dismissed them, I summoned red-and-gold. With Mrs. Norris cradled in my left arm, I stepped through the tapestry into the hospital wing. My right arm and hand were aching, despite the fact that I hadn't been using them for anything.

Poppy gave me a pain-killing potion. Then she gently palpated Mrs. Norris.

"Six kittens at least," Poppy told me. "Quite a litter! And they should arrive very soon now. Keep a close watch on her, Argus." She stroked my cat, who had permitted the examination with quiet dignity.

Mrs. Norris's resigned manner was much the same as 'Snuffles.' The injured Animagus was permitting himself to be petted and crooned over by a group of Hufflepuff first-year girls who had come for some Pepperup potion and remained to fuss over the "poor sweet doggy".

Black looked like he missed Harry, who always came to visit with his godfather in the evenings. Detention had made the boy late. I knew that Potter would be down from Gryffindor tower as soon as he cleaned himself up a bit. But I couldn't say so in front of the other children. I hoped that Harry would not

mention the fact that Severus had given him detention. The Animagus might bite the Potions Master the next time they met.

Poppy gave me a small vial of pain-killing potion. "This is for Severus. I know that he has plenty of his own. But I'd wager a stack of galleons that he's not looking after himself properly," she said. "I want you to go and check on him for me," she added softly.



Stepping into the corridor again, I used my Doors in a way that I rarely do. "Take me to Professor Snape, please," I asked green-and-silver. A heartbeat later I found myself in the dungeon corridor outside Severus's classroom.

Professor Flitwick had placed his Unreachable Charms around Severus's office and classroom. Severus and I were both grateful for that. The Unreachable Charm was a lot less painful than the sort of violent curses that the Potions Master preferred to protect himself with. I was sure that I still had some scars left from the porcupine quills.

The classroom door was slightly open. I could hear voices within. The one speaking sounded very young and uncertain. So unlike the usual superior drawl that I didn't recognize Draco Malfoy's voice at first. Moving softly towards the open door, I peered inside to see Severus and the boy.

"...he didn't want me to know that he was ill," Draco was saying, plaintively. "But Mother wrote me anyhow. She knew I'd miss his letters. Mother won't

say what's wrong with him. I've been owling her all day and she won't tell me what's happened to him! Don't I have a right to know? He's my father."

"Your mother is wise, Draco," Severus said wearily. "Let her be."

"You *do* know what happened to Father!" Draco said, triumphantly. I saw him lean forward to clutch at Snape's arm. "Professor, please. You can tell me what happened. I won't tell Mother that I know!"

The worried boy's grip must have been painful. Either that, or Snape deliberately allowed the glamour that hid his terrible bruises to falter for a moment.

Draco's gasp of mingled shock and pity was audible from where I stood.

"Your father is very strong, Draco. Nothing was done to him that he could not endure and survive," the Potions Master said. He allowed the pain to show clearly in his voice, though his wounds were concealed once again.

Afraid for Lucius, Draco had come to Severus for reassurance. He hadn't found it. But perhaps he'd gotten the information he was seeking after all. The boy's back was to me, so I could not see his face. But he was trembling. Though he was badly shaken, Draco's first response was still to reach out to his mentor. Offering the support he hadn't been given.

Severus retreated, withdrawing into himself. "You have studying to do, Mr. Malfoy," he said, harshly.

Draco's hand fell back to his side. Even before the boy stepped back from his Professor, I was retreating

into green-and-silver again, so I would not be seen.

The Door took me to my own room. I lingered long enough to put Mrs. Norris down gently on the bed. Then, still holding the potion and the liniment that Poppy had given me for Severus, I went back through the tapestry. The classroom door was still open. But Severus was alone now.

He was sitting at his desk, his face buried in his hands.

"Professor?" I asked softly. "May I come in?"

He looked up, dark eyes raking over me. The glamour was down and the sight of his battered face made me wince.

"I thought I saw your shadow in the corridor a few moments ago. Don't deny it!" he snarled.

"I'm not denying it," I said. "I didn't mind if you saw me, as long as the boy didn't."

His real anger wasn't aimed at me, I knew.

"Poppy sent you some things..." I continued.

He waved impatiently at a corner of his desk. Then he buried his face in his hands again. "Draco," he said, harshly, "won't be a boy for much longer. He's going to have to choose his path."

Anguish and shame mingled in his voice. "I meant to frighten him, Filch. I wanted him to see the handiwork of the Dark Master that he's being groomed to serve. No one else can make the decision for him. Not Lucius. Not me. The Dark Lord wants his followers to know they had a choice and that they gave themselves to him freely."

Involuntarily, he rubbed at his left forearm. The Dark Mark hidden beneath his sleeve was a wound

more painful than any of his bruises. Unlike them it would never fade away.

"I haven't done enough for Draco. I've taught him all the wrong things." Snape's voice was quiet, but I could hear his pain. "I'm going to lose him forever. He's going to Fall."

"You weren't lost," I said softly. "Not forever."

He shook his head, tears in his voice even if they weren't on his face. "I wouldn't wish my life, my choices, on anyone. I wanted Draco's path to be easier than mine."

He sighed, bitterly. "You couldn't possibly understand."

I thought of Callandra and my own fears for her. I did understand. Better than he knew.

## CHAPTER 2

# New Arrivals

The large chestnut wardrobe in my bedroom usually contains only my brown coat, my shirts and breeches (also brown) and the bottle green tailcoat that I wear on special occasions. There's plenty of room at the bottom of the wardrobe for a cardboard nesting box, with a mother cat and a litter of four kittens. And a fifth kitten, who would be joining us momentarily.

A few weeks earlier Hermione Granger had helped me cut the box so that the sides were high enough to keep curious kittens inside, but low enough to permit their mother to come and go as she pleased. The box

was lined with many soft absorbent cloths. Birth is a messy business.

Poppy and Hermione had both seemed to know that tonight would be the night that Mrs. Norris would have her kittens. Poppy had reminded me to keep a close watch on my cat when I'd visited the hospital wing earlier this evening. And Hermione, who'd been keeping track of the days, had said in very serious tones, "it's day sixty-three, Mr. Filch!" just before I'd dismissed the Gryffindors from tonight's detention.

Mrs. Norris had approved of both the nesting box and its location. Tonight, she had chosen to sleep in the box instead of on the bed. Taking my pillow and a blanket, I had lain down on the floor beside the wardrobe so I could wait with her.

Her labor had begun in the middle of the night. The sky outside my window was beginning to lighten as kitten number five joined her brothers and sisters. Number six, who arrived about fifteen minutes after number five, seemed determined to enter the world the tail first. (Numbers two and three had also been breech births.) Fortunately this one emerged without too much additional difficulty.

Around twenty minutes later, a seventh kitten emerged. Poor Mrs. Norris had not yet settled down to nurse her babies. Finally, after another ten minutes had passed and number eight was born, she relaxed.

Upon arrival, each kitten had been duly weighed and measured. The resulting information was entered into the ledger that Hermione had given me. My writ-

ing was awkward and messy because of my aching right arm and hand, but still readable.

Mrs. Norris blinked her golden eyes at me, looking quite relieved. *That part's over!* she was clearly thinking. Proudly, I stroked and praised her. She was my brave one, my beautiful one, such a wonderful mother!

While I was removing the soiled cloths and towels from the nesting box and replacing them with fresh, clean ones, I praised the kittens too. Newborn kittens resemble blind, deaf, floppy rats, but Mrs. Norris might have clawed my nose off if I had not said kind things about her darlings.

I'd remembered the fear and sorrow connected with Mrs. Norris's previous litter of kittens. But I'd forgotten the joy, and how the sight of them could squeeze my heart. They were so small! Three tiny queens, all various shades of grey, and five tiny toms. Two of the toms were ginger-colored like Crookshanks, their father. One tom was grey, one was a patch-work of ginger and black and the last one was completely black.

While Mrs. Norris washed and nursed her brood, I made a note of each kitten's gender and coloring in the ledger. My handwriting grew progressively messier but I wanted to write everything down for Hermione. I thought that it would be at least two weeks before I could allow anyone else to view the kittens, even briefly. Mrs. Norris had been very firm on that point the last time she'd had kittens. This time would probably be no different.

An exception would be Poppy, who would come in

a few days to Charm the kittens against the illnesses that they would otherwise be vulnerable to.

Hermione had been disappointed about the expected two week wait, but she'd seemed to understand. I was determined to keep careful notes until she was allowed to see the kittens for herself.

The other children who'd asked for kittens would have to be patient too. I'd explained to each of them that it was Mrs. Norris that they needed to convince, not me. The best I could do was try to put in a good word for them.

Everyone knew that Ginny Weasley would be getting one of the kittens. Mrs. Norris and I were very fond of Ginny. Colin Creevey had wanted two kittens, one for himself and one for his brother, Dennis. Mrs. Norris had seemed receptive to both boys. I was glad, though the thought of Mrs. Norris's kittens being 'fixed' the Muggle way did upset me.

(I hoped that Colin and Dennis could convince their parents that Charms were an effective method for preventing unplanned kittens. Strange as it may seem, Muggles seem to put more faith in their own methods, even when their children are wizards.)

Lilith and Gehenna Morgan, two small sisters from Slytherin, had also asked for a pair of kittens. Mrs. Norris had seemed inclined to grant their request. Hannah Abbott was the last among those that Mrs. Norris had clearly chosen to receive a kitten. That meant six kittens were spoken for and two still needed homes.

Other children had asked for kittens, so I wasn't worried about the last two being unwanted.

The sun was completely up now and I was exhausted. Curling up on the floor again, I was lulled into a peaceful doze by the sound of contented maternal purring coming from the nesting box.

Suddenly, small strong hands were shaking my shoulders. Blearily, I opened my eyes to find myself face to face with a house-elf.

"Mr. Filch is not at breakfast!" Dobby said. "And Hermione Granger is wanting to know, is kittens born yet?" The elf grinned broadly.

"See for yourself," I yawned. "Please tell Hermione that she's a gran now, eight times over."



Mrs. Norris was well supplied with food and water. What she and the kittens needed most now was peace and quiet. Delivering kittens and writing everything down had taken their toll on my right hand and arm. I'd ignored the pain for as long as I could, but now I decided to go and see Poppy.

Either Dobby or Hermione (probably both) had spread the news. The corridors were full of children on their way to classes. I was congratulated many times on my way to the hospital wing.

After adding her congratulations and listening to a detailed account of each delivery, Poppy checked my arm and hand. She reassured me that my injuries were mending nicely. Then she gave me a slightly stronger than usual pain-killing potion.

Sirius Black also appeared to be on the mend. The

Animagus was now able to limp restlessly around the hospital wing in his human form, which he was currently wearing since Poppy and I were the only ones in the ward with him.

The Animagus had listened to me while I'd described the kittens' arrival. He'd smiled and congratulated me though he was clearly preoccupied about something.

"It's Snape," Black growled, when I asked him what was wrong. "You know what he did. He gave every single Gryffindor fifth year detention last night! The greasy GIT."

"He's not a git," I said, automatically. "He was sore and cranky. It made him bad tempered."

The Animagus snorted.

"Even more bad tempered than usual," I amended.

"You always did take his side." Black folded his arms across his chest.

"Perhaps I'm defending Severus because he never once put dungbombs in my desk. Or used sticking-curses on my broom cupboard doorknobs. Or hexed my mops. Or turned my wash-water into Mrs. Skower's flavored custard and set the pail up to fall on me. Or blew up my office toilet with fireworks," I replied, somewhat testily.

Black's grin was rueful. The expression made his gaunt face look younger, a bit more like the incorrigible brat that I remembered.

"Please accept my sincere, if somewhat belated apologies," he said, earnestly. "Blowing up the toilet was really an accident. We were trying to flush away the evidence."

I sighed. "Did Potter tell you about the detention?"

"Yes, I got that much out of him. But Harry wasn't the one who told me it was Snape's detention."

"He's wise beyond his years, that boy," I murmured. "How did you find out if Harry wouldn't say?"

Poppy answered. "He overheard that bit of gossip from Callandra Moffit. She was in here with her parents this morning."

"Is Callandra all right?" I asked, anxiously.

Poppy nodded. "I only needed to examine her and ask the Moffitts for some information about any of her past health problems."

I sighed. Squibs usually have more health problems and more complicated medical records than most proper witches and wizards do.

"I needed the information for her school records," Poppy said.

"Her s-school records?" I asked. "She's going to be a student at Hogwarts then?"

Poppy smiled. "Albus finished making arrangements with her parents yesterday. Today Callandra is going to be tested by each Professor to see which subjects she'll be able to manage best, and to which degree."

Merlin's Beard, Potter had been right!! I knew that I was grinning like a fool, but I hardly cared.

Madam Pomfrey turned to the Animagus. "As for you, whatever you're planning to do to Severus, don't!" she said, sternly. "I was thinking of allowing you to take a bit of a walk today, but if I can't trust you to behave yourself..."

Black gave her an innocent, decidedly puppy-eyed

look. "Please let me out of here, I'll behave, I swear!"

"I'll take him for a walk and make sure of it," I promised Poppy. "We'll go outside. He won't be anywhere near Severus."

I thought that Black would object to me walking with him but the Animagus did not seem to mind. He must have been terribly bored.

Black was studying me, gravely. "Filch. I never thanked you for what you did. Blocking Vol..."

Both Poppy and I looked at him in alarm.

The young wizard sighed. "... the Dark Lord's Curse. Before it could hit me."

I felt embarrassed. "Well, you'd already saved me. Stopped me from drowning. And I didn't thank you for it either."

"That was after you'd got both of us away from the Death Eaters and out of the falling tower," the Animagus said.

"You stood between me and the Dark Lord!" I pointed out, gruffly. "I'm grateful, of course, though it was foolish of you. If you'd had any *sense* you would have taken Callandra and left me."

Black's face looked haunted, his pale eyes full of shadows. "You would have been worse than dead, Filch. I couldn't do that."

Harry had told me a great deal about Sirius Black. The Animagus was innocent of betraying James and Lily, but he still blamed himself for their deaths at the Dark Lord's hands.

The expression on the young wizard's thin battered face distressed me. Of course I didn't miss the mischievous Marauding brat he'd been, but I didn't want

to see the poor lad looking like he was in the company of Dementors either.

"It's all right," I muttered. "It's not a Quidditch match, is it? No one's keeping score."

Black studied me, as if he hadn't heard. "Thank you for trusting me, Mr. Filch, even after you knew who I was," he said, very quietly. Then he took his dog form and we left the hospital wing together.



"Neville really thinks that he's a Squib!" Callandra's voice was astonished.

The child's next test was to be in Care of Magical Creatures. Hagrid was still teaching a class at the moment.

So Callandra waited, sitting with Black and me in the grass near Hagrid's hut. Her ebony hair was in a different pattern than it had been on the day I'd met her. She had many small braids wound carefully together in a twist at the nape of her neck. Both her new hairstyle and her grave expression made the girl look older than her fifteen years.

"Maybe you can convince him otherwise," I said. "Merlin knows, I've tried."

"Neville would believe us if he could only *feel* how much magic he has in him," Callandra said, wistfully. "I never knew that feeling magic is just, you know... a Squib thing. I thought everyone could do it."

"So did I," I told her.

"Neville's great-Uncle actually pushed him off the end of Blackpool pier!" Callandra exclaimed indignantly.



"Nearly drowned him! Can you imagine? Neville's so brave about things like that. Mum wouldn't stand for that sort of thing at our house. She always sent anyone who wanted to 'cure' me packing. I'm glad that my family didn't treat me like Neville's family treated him. Even though he says that they really did mean well."

Her voice got softer. "I'm sure if his Mum and Dad could be with Neville, they would *never* have let anyone hurt him."

Her fiercely protective tone made me smile.

Callandra stroked the Animagus, who blinked at her sleepily. The slow walk that we'd taken around the Castle grounds had really tired the huge dog out.

"I can't believe that I'm really going to be allowed to come here," Callandra said. "I keep expecting that I'll wake up and find out that it's been a dream. A very pleasant dream, after a nightmare," she added, with a shiver.

I watched her deliberately push all thoughts of the Death Eaters away. "Mum and Dad say that I'll be safe here," she murmured, half to herself. "The Headmaster says so too. I thought I'd be afraid of him, but he's so friendly. He told me that the things I can do are really rare gifts."

She bit her lip. "I'm not scared of Professor Dumbledore, but I'd be lying if I said that I wasn't afraid at all. I've always thought I had no magic. What if the Headmaster was just being kind to me, Mr. Filch?"

She took a deep breath. "The Potions Master tested me today. He's every bit as frightening as Neville said he was! I think I did all right. At least I did everything that he told me to do, in the proper order, with all the right measure-

ments. I think the potion came out the way it was supposed to. But he didn't say anything when I'd finished."

"If he didn't say anything, then you must have done well," I said. "Professor Snape certainly would have let you hear about your mistakes."

I wondered if Callandra would ever learn how Severus had risked his life to save her. I wished that I could tell her.

"Professor Snape is a frightening man, but he does smell rather nice," Callandra said, thoughtfully. "Like strawberries with a bit of orange or lemon peel added."

My eyes widened. The glamour! She'd described the scent of it, exactly. She did not seem to know what she was sensing though, and I couldn't tell her about that either. I sighed.

"Mr. Filch?" Callandra said, a bit hesitantly. "I need to ask you something. It's about the Castle. It looks normal to me now, but the first time I came through the gates with Mum and Dad for the party, I saw two images, one on top of the other. One was the Castle as it really is..."

"And the other image?" I murmured. "Was it the Castle in ruins, child? The way that Muggles are supposed to see Hogwarts?"

She nodded vigorously. "Yes! Oh, Mr. Filch, I was afraid to tell anyone! The first time you ever came here, did you see the Castle like that, too?"

"Yes," I said, quietly, remembering my own first look at the Castle so many years ago. I'd been sick with fright, thinking that it must mean that I was practically a Muggle.

"I've never told anyone what I saw. I was too afraid," I con-

fessed. "I didn't know then what I know now. Sometimes we Squibs can see spells that proper wizards can't see."

"Or feel them!" she said. "Sometimes spells tickle me. Or make me feel cold, or warm..."

I nodded, gravely. "Does magic ever make you sneeze? Itch?" I asked.

Callandra nodded, brown eyes wide and serious. Then both of us grinned. How wonderful it felt not to be alone.

"I'm sure that there will be people here who will question your right to be a student," I said, gruffly. "Try to remember what the Headmaster told you. You do have magic gifts, Callandra. Not the same gifts as the other students. But your magic is real, nonetheless."

Caught up in our conversation, neither Callandra nor I had heard Hagrid approaching 'til his huge shadow fell across us.

"I'm ready for yeh now," the half-giant said, cheerfully. His huge hand was outstretched to help the girl to her feet. "Don't be afraid. Yeh'll do alrig'."

Callandra might have been afraid. But she stood up, straight and proud, her hand in his.

"I'm ready," she said.

### CHAPTER 3

## Testing

"I hope that Hagrid hasn't got a Manticore or some other monster for Callandra's test," I muttered. To my

chagrin I discovered that I'd been nervously petting the huge black dog who rested in the grass beside me. Even worse, I'd just been about to scratch him behind the ears.

Fortunately, Sirius Black did not seem to have noticed. The Animagus was dozing.

But a moment later my frightened shout startled him onto his feet.

Callandra Moffitt, soon to be the first Squib ever admitted to Hogwarts (assuming that she survived the Professors' tests) had just soared into the air above Hagrid's hut! She was riding on the back of a pinkish roan hippogriff!

"Callandra!" My voice was a terrified squeak. What was Hagrid thinking?! What was the Headmaster thinking, allowing that oaf to test her, unsupervised?! I jumped to my feet, prepared to rush over to Hagrid's hut and do... something.

The huge dog promptly grabbed my shirt-tail in his teeth. Sirius Black was recuperating from severe injuries. Even so, the beast was very strong. He pulled me over backwards.

For the briefest of moments the Animagus resumed his human form. "Calm down, Filch! She's happy! Look!" Black hissed in my ear. A heartbeat later, he was a dog again.

It was true, I realized. Callandra's face was filled with joy. Unlike most other children born into the wizarding world, she'd never been able to fly a broom on her own.

Callandra was now gracefully riding the hippogriff in a descending spiral over Hagrid's hut.

"Good work!!" I could hear Hagrid's shout from

behind the hut as Callandra and the hippogriff made a (hopefully) safe landing. The paddock was hidden from Black's view and mine. We could hear other, younger voices cheering. I realized that we'd never seen the students in Hagrid's Care of Magical Creatures class leaving to go back to the Castle.

That *oaf!* Had he actually made Callandra take the test in front of so many witnesses?

My heart was still pounding with fright when Hagrid led a crowd of children around the front of his hut, towards the dog and me. Hagrid's class was made up of second year Ravenclaws and Slytherins. All the children from both houses seemed to be jumping around, talking and being generally boisterous.

Callandra was in their midst, grinning as if she'd just had the most wonderful experience of her young life. She was walking with a slim dark-skinned Ravenclaw boy. Her younger brother, Daniel. The boy's face was as delighted as his sister's, and full of pride in her accomplishment.

"Mr. Filch!! Did you see?" Callandra called over to me, her arm across her brother's shoulders. "I rode a hippogriff! Wasn't he lovely? It was so much fun!! Mum's taken me up on her broom a few times but that was different!!"

Hadn't the poor girl sense enough to realize the terrible danger she'd been in? Apparently not! I glowered at Hagrid. There were children all around me now, patting Sirius and chattering like a flock of magpies. A small Slytherin girl was tugging at my sleeve. "Mr.

Filch? When can Henna and I see our kittens?"

"In two weeks, Lilith," I said, gruffly.

"How many female kittens are there?" Lilith Morgan went on, excitedly. "Henna is sure that she wants a female, but I'd take a male if there aren't enough females." The girl sounded as eager and enthusiastic as young Creevey.

My head was beginning to throb. Rubbing my temples, I wondered if there was a special term that one could use for a group of noisy children. There was 'brats' of course, but these children weren't actually misbehaving, they were only being loud.

Black was surrounded by children too, petting his back and stroking his head. To my relief, the Gryffindor Animagus showed no signs of snapping at the young Slytherins who were near him. He was even allowing young Malcolm Baddock to scratch him gently behind the ears.

"Alrigh' the lot o'yeh! Time to get ter Transfiguration Class!" Hagrid bellowed. The sound made me clutch my head and moan. "Professor McGonagall..."

"Was wondering what was keeping my students, Hagrid." Minerva was suddenly there, a lovely island of calm in a sea of chaos.

"They was jus' watching with me," Hagrid said, beaming. "Callie's passed her Care o' Magical Creatures test."

"Excellent," Minerva smiled. She held out a hand to Callandra. In her other hand she carried a sack which seemed weighted down with an assortment of bulges.

"It's time for your Transfiguration test," she told Callandra briskly.

The children all became quiet, as if Minerva had used a silencing spell on them. I was as surprised as the children were. I was going to say something in protest, but Daniel Moffitt spoke up before I could find my voice.

"Professor McGonagall? You know that Callie's a Squib..." he said, a protective arm around his sister's waist. "She can't..."

Minerva's smile became gentler. "Callandra will not be asked to Transfigure anything, Mr. Moffitt. Her talents in the area of Transfiguration are somewhat ...different."

Biting her lip nervously, Callandra was looking at me for reassurance. I desperately wanted to give her some, but I was as puzzled as she was.

Minerva was looking around at the young Ravenclaws and Slytherins. "You may sit down on the grass, if you like. Please make sure to give Miss Moffitt some room," she began.

"It's all right, Daniel..." she added, as Callandra's brother seemed reluctant to leave the girl's side.

Shortly, Callandra and Minerva was the only ones standing. Hagrid, Black and I were seated with children all around us. I was clutching at Black's fur, nervously.

Reaching into the sack, Minerva pulled out a small rubber ball and a ceramic flower pot. She handed both to Callandra.

"Both of these are actually the same. I have Transfigured one of them," Professor McGonagall said. "Can you tell me which item is not in its true form?"

Poor Black yelped as I inadvertently clutched too

hard at his fur. This was worse than the hippogriff! What was Minerva thinking?

No, Minerva was always fair. I knew that. I trusted her. Minerva would never ask Callandra to accomplish an impossible feat. But as far as I knew, the ability to tell if something was Transfigured or not was a power reserved for only those witches or wizards most skilled at Transfiguration.

The young Ravenclaws and Slytherins knew this too. None of them could have done what Minerva was asking of Callandra. I doubted that I could have done it. Then again, I'd never tried...

Callandra stood, brow furrowed. She breathed deeply, turning the ball and the flowerpot over in her slender hands.

"Professor?" she said quietly, after what seemed like a very long while, "I think they're both really flower pots."

"Excellent!" Minerva said, as if she'd expected no less. But the other children, Hagrid and I all sighed with relief. I saw Daniel Moffitt's shoulders sag with released tension. Stewart Ackerly, who was sitting beside Daniel, clapped him on the shoulder.

Minerva handed Callandra a small pennywhistle and an empty ink bottle.

"They're really pennywhistles," Callandra said, after a few moments of thoughtful examination. She sounded a bit more confident now.

When her test had ended, Callandra had been able to tell the UnTransfigured items from their Transfigured counterparts, nine times out of ten! The young Slytherins

and Ravenclaws applauded her when she was done.

I realized that both Hagrid and Minerva were using their tests for Callandra to serve a dual purpose. They were exploring the girl's abilities and showing them off to other children too. Their risks had paid off, but what an awful chance they'd both taken! I'd been so afraid for Callandra that now I thought I might be sick.

When Minerva dismissed the children for lunch, they departed in a noisy, laughing group. Daniel was proudly holding his sister's hand. Minerva, Hagrid, Black and I were left behind.

"Argus, are you all right? You're as pale as Nearly Headless Nick," Minerva said.

"No, I'm not all right," I muttered, aware that I was surrounded by Gryffindors. Most of Godric's chosen seem to thrive on risks. If they don't take foolish chances at least once a day then they think the entire day's been wasted.

"I've just been frightened out of my wits!" I blurted out. "Did either of you think about what could have happened if poor Callandra had failed? In front of all those other children? Including her own brother?"

"She might have been hurt by that hippogriff!" I said, glowering at Hagrid. "Or," I looked at Minerva, "what if she couldn't do what you asked of her? They might have turned on her! Taunted her, or worse! Not her brother, but the others. Particularly some of the Slytherins!"

I didn't realize that I was shaking until Minerva put her hands on my shoulders.

"I've had the benefit of Hermione Granger's considerable research," Minerva explained. "When two

similar inanimate objects are placed side by side and one of them is Transfigured, a Squib can nearly always tell which item is in its true form and which item isn't. It's been documented."

"I didn't know that," I confessed. "Lately all Hermione and I have talked about are the kittens..."

"Callandra did very well, Argus," Minerva said, gently. Her grey eyes seemed to fill my whole world. "I had confidence that she would."

"I'm sorry, Minerva." I should not have doubted her.

"As fer the hippogriff," Hagrid reassured me, "he's a good 'un. Very used ter people, he is. Callie's a polite girl. Knows how ter follow directions. Curtsied ter him like a proper lady. Very respectful. Never doubted her fer a moment!"

Quite pleased with how the testing had gone, the big man was now sitting cross-legged on the ground. One large hand rested gently on the Animagus's back.

"It did her a world a'good ter succeed in front a' so many witnesses," Hagrid continued. "Yeh saw her face, Filch."

I had to admit that he was right. Callandra was far braver than I'd ever be.

Fang had followed Hagrid over from the hut, to see what his master was up to. The boarhound was nose to nose with the Animagus, both huge dogs sniffing at each other in a friendly fashion. After a moment, Fang flopped down next to Black, with a gusty sigh.

"I-I really should go and check on Mrs. Norris. It's been ages," I whispered, summoning red-and-gold. I was still a bit shaky, though the danger of my being sick was receding.

"Argus, wait. I'd like a word," Minerva said. Gently but firmly she took hold of my left arm before I could step through my Door.

"You may meet me outside my room, if you'd like, Professor," I said. I had wanted to be alone, but I couldn't just walk away from Minerva when she wished to speak to me. "Perhaps Mrs. Norris won't object if you come in. For just a little while. She's fond of you." I knew that Minerva of all people would know how to behave around a new mother and kittens.

"Very well, Argus," Minerva said. "I shall see you shortly."

Glancing at Black and Hagrid, I saw that Hagrid was grinning for some reason that I could not fathom. And Black was grinning as well, the way a dog grins; dangling tongue and eyes dancing.

Wondering what in Merlin's name the two of them were smirking about, I spoke to Hagrid.

"You'll see that he gets back to Poppy in the hospital wing, won't you?" I asked, nodding towards the Animagus. "Snuffles is not allowed to exert himself too much. And keep him out of mischief!"

I stepped through red-and-gold.



As expected, Mrs. Norris had not offered any objections to a brief visit from Minerva. A short while later Professor McGonagall and I were admiring the eight newborn kittens as they nursed. I'd meant to refill Mrs. Norris's food and water, but one of the house-elves had been there first. So I contented myself with

simply watching my cat and her brood. Minerva did not mind sitting on the floor next to me. She enjoyed looking at the kittens as much as I did.

Minerva praised the kittens' healthy appetites, a compliment that clearly won her a great number of points with Mrs. Norris. I thought it clever of Minerva to immediately commend the kittens on the one thing that the voracious little fluffballs could do really well. But Minerva found additional laudable traits and proceeded to admire them with sincerity too. She observed how the kittens jostled for position with energy and boldness, it was clear that they were healthy and strong, they were sure to be clever and patient hunters...!

"*This* one clearly knows an exemplary litter of kittens when she sees them!" Mrs. Norris was obviously thinking, as she gave me a satisfied look.

"You seem much better now, Argus," Minerva said. "I apologize. Hagrid and I were not expecting you to be there to see Callandra's tests. We did not wish to frighten you."

"No, it's my fault," I protested, embarrassed. "I shouldn't have been so foolish. You and Hagrid both want her to succeed, you wouldn't have set her up for failure and humiliation."

Minerva was smiling at me, her hands both behind her back. I felt a whisper of magic as she performed a wandless conjuring spell. When she brought her hands out in front of her, she was holding a small china shepherdess and a silver teaspoon.

"Which one is Transfigured?" Professor McGonagall asked me.

Nervously, I took the two small items from her, turning them over in my hands as Callandra had done. There seemed to be nothing out of the ordinary about the shepherdess. But, did the teaspoon seem a bit... slippery when I compared the feel of it to the china figure?

"The spoon," I said, putting them carefully on the floor beside me.

Minerva slid her wand out of her sleeve and Transfigured the spoon back into its real form.

A small china shepherd now stood beside the shepherdess. They were a perfectly matched pair.

"Got it in one!" she told me smiling. "See? It's quite easy for you, just as it was for Callandra."

I blushed.

"No witch or wizard who hasn't studied Transfiguration for many years could do the same!" Minerva continued. "Of course, picking out one Transfigured item from many dissimilar, unTransfigured items is quite a bit harder than that. And being able to detect a Transfigured animate object is far more difficult still. But my test was an adequate start. I'm sure that Callandra can learn those things in time."

Her grey eyes were shining. "I was concerned that there would be nothing that I would be able to teach her," Minerva confessed, quietly. "And I did so wish to work with her. I'm sure that we're both going to learn a great deal."

Minerva's pleasure delighted me.

"Albus and the Moffitts have decided that Callandra's studies must be highly individualized to best

suit her needs," she said. "Wherever possible, she will take classes with the other children her age. But she may be taking some classes with the seventh years! Her parents both work with Ancient Runes, and Callandra's knowledge in that area is quite advanced..."

Her voice trailed off. She was studying me. "Are you sure that you're quite all right, Argus?"

"I'm fine," I said, though my voice was a bit husky. "I was just thinking. The way that the other children were all solidly behind her... no one taunted her. They really wanted her to do well. I wasn't expecting that. I feared for her."

"I'm sure that Callandra will have to face taunts and teasing, Argus. All children do. But the second years of both Ravenclaw and Slytherin are a particularly fine group of children. Callandra's brother is well-liked among them. And Severus assured me that none of his second year Slytherins are from families with ties to the Death Eaters. Hagrid and I made quite sure that we could let those children witness two of Callandra's tests without undue cause for worry."

I sighed. "The Slytherins with ties to the Death Eaters are going to find out about Callandra's presence at Hogwarts soon enough. But this school is the safest place in the wizarding world. They won't be able to get to her here. At least not easily."

Minerva's expression had turned both sad and pensive. I knew that she was thinking of Cedric Diggory, as I was. We both knew that no place in the wizarding world was completely safe these days. Not even Hogwarts.

"I've been safe here, for the most part," I said. Taking Minerva's hand in mine seemed like the most natural thing in the world. I wanted to comfort her.

"I usually tell myself that my parents brought me here and convinced Headmaster Dippet and Apollyon Pringle to take me on simply because they wanted to make sure that I had a secure position," I murmured. "And it was one of their reasons. But not their only one.

"They never told me," I continued, even more softly. "But they must have known, somehow. About Dark magic and Squibs. Mum was always reading. She and Dad must have brought me to Hogwarts to keep me safe from Grindelwald."

Even after he'd been gone for so many years, saying his name still frightened me a bit.

"I never figured that out 'til I started thinking about it, only a few months back. It worked, didn't it? If Grindelwald was looking for Squibs he never found me. Nor did any of his followers."

Minerva squeezed my hand, gently. "Finding you was quite a task for a number of years, Argus. You hid yourself away so well. From the students, from nearly everyone. You worked hard, but you were rarely seen."

"Like a proper house-elf," I said, a little bitterly. Thinking about my early days at the Castle was not something that I enjoyed doing. *Hard work and pain are the best teachers.* It's something I often tell the students here. Hard work I learned about from my parents, particularly my dad. Apollyon Pringle had taught me about pain.

Though, to be fair to the fierce old man, he'd saved most of his true ire for the students. He'd never once

put me in chains. And Pringle hadn't even beaten me very often once I'd proved to him that I could do things the way that he wanted them done.

"Work hard, boy. Keep your head low. Know your proper place. And we'll get along fine." Well, no one was ever going to tell Callandra those things. Her place at Hogwarts would never be the same as mine.

Minerva was pulling me to my feet.

"We've nearly missed lunch, and you already missed breakfast this morning," she said. "We'd better hurry."

As we stood up, her hand slipped from mine. But her smile continued to warm me.

I felt a rush of contentment that was quite separate from the joy I already felt for Callandra.

Sirius Black and any mischief that he might be planning for poor Severus were the furthest thoughts from my mind.

#### CHAPTER 4

## Bad Dog

A very pleasant time spent with Minerva, concluding with lunch together at the staff table in the Great Hall, had driven Sirius Black completely from my mind. It was not until Minerva had left to teach her next class that I remembered the Animagus and my responsibility to him. Black, who had plenty of healing left to do, tired easily. Could Hagrid be trusted to make sure that Black



did not overexert himself? Hagrid, whose idea of "mild exercise" would be to wrestle with a troll?

Poppy had ordered me to spend the day relaxing. But she would be angry with me if I had allowed Black to suffer a setback. I decided that I'd relax much more efficiently once I knew that Sirius Black was back in the hospital wing where he belonged. I set off in search of my errant charge.

Hagrid, Fang and 'Snuffles' were not in Hagrid's hut, nor were they on the grounds nearby. Hagrid's garden was coming along nicely, but the big man and the two dogs were not there either. And the paddock behind Hagrid's cabin was empty except for the pinkish-roan hippogriff.

Standing next to the paddock, with no one else in sight, I summoned red-and-gold.

"Take me to Hagrid, please," I asked my Door. I stepped through, only to emerge back in the same spot I'd entered. This meant that Hagrid wasn't anywhere on the Castle grounds. Where had he gone? Had he taken the dogs as far as Hogsmeade? Or had he taken them for a romp in the Forbidden Forest? Knowing Hagrid, that wouldn't come under the heading of "too much exertion" either.

Sighing, I sent red-and-gold away with my thanks. Then I stood, thinking, next to the paddock. The hippogriff stared at me with fierce orange eyes as I approached the fence.

How had Callandra found the courage to ride this monster, I wondered. That sharp beak and those talons

could have ripped her to pieces easily! Even with a fence between the creature and me, I was afraid. At least Hagrid did have the beast chained to a pole. The pole had been driven into the ground. I hoped that Hagrid had driven it in deep enough.

I really wanted to know where Hagrid was. And there was no other creature around for me to ask.

Politeness, Hagrid had said. Manners. Those were the things that allowed one to speak to a hippogriff and keep one's skin intact. Staying safely on my own side of the fence, I bowed low.

"Please," I said, as soon as I straightened up. "I'm looking for Hagrid. If you know where he's gone, could you just give me a nod in right direction?"

The hippogriff stared at me with a haughty expression.

"I've got to find him and the dogs..." I said, my voice trailing off, nervously. The hippogriff was approaching the fence. To my horror, I realized that the chain was long enough to permit the monster to reach its giant eagle-head over it! Completely ignorant in the ways of hippogriffs, I still realized that the beast did not seem pleased with me. What had I done wrong?

Frightened, I slid to the ground, meaning to stay out of the creature's reach. What had I done to offend the beast? Kneeling, I fell forward and pressed my forehead downwards against the grass.

I stayed that way for a while before I dared to look up, very cautiously. This time when I met the creature's fierce orange eyes, he bent his scaly knees and bowed!

"Oh!" I said, very softly, as the glossy head rose

again and those eyes met mine. "Can you tell me where Hagrid is? Please?"

Leaning on the fence for support, I pulled myself up. My eyes never left those fiery orange orbs.

"What are yeh waiting fer? Give him a pat!" Hagrid said in a loud, cheerful voice. The half-giant was directly behind me.

I yelped and jumped what felt like a mile into the air. Then, finding the hippogriff uncomfortably close to me, I backpedaled, tripped over my own feet and sat down, hard.

The hippogriff tossed his head in alarm and pulled at the chain with frightening strength.

"Don't let him hurt me!" I cried, cowering behind Hagrid.

"He won't. Yer the one who's frightened him, yeh jumpy git."

Taking the fence smoothly, Hagrid soothed the beast. "Easy, Beaky. It's alrig' boy. There's a good boy. Filch. Come here. He won't hurt yeh."

When I proved reluctant to move, Hagrid sighed. He leaped back over the fence, grabbed me and pulled me after him through the gate.

"He likes yeh. He bowed, didn't he?" The big man's voice was exasperated. "He jus' got a bit offended when yeh spoke ter him out o' turn. Yeh should a' waited fer him ter bow, Filch. But then yeh made up fer that mistake with some real groveling! The two o'yeh were gettin on all righ'. Now give him a pat."

Not giving me a chance to balk, Hagrid took my hand in his huge one, moving it up to the hippogriff's

beak. With those fierce orange eyes locked with mine, I gave the creature's beak a very cautious pat.

"Beau'iful, isn't he?" Hagrid said, beaming. He clapped me on the shoulder and I staggered. My arm went around the hippogriff's neck for support. To my surprise, the creature didn't instantly start tearing me to pieces. *Maybe he does like me*, I thought, in wonder.

The beast smelled delicately of strawberries with a faint hint of orange or lemon.

"Hagrid?" I asked, feeling a bit confused, "why does your hippogriff have a glamour on him?"

"Erm... long story..." the big man said, evasively.

"Tell me... no, wait," I said. I looked past Hagrid and saw that Fang was resting alone in the shade next to the cabin.

"What have you done with Snuffles?!" I cried.

"Well, firs' we had a bit o' lunch. Then he fell asleep fer a while. After that we talked. Had some catching up t'do."

Hagrid's voice softened. "Poor man. I only jus' found out that he's innocent. A few days before the party, it was. Dumbledore and Harry told me together. Took both of 'em ter convince me, too. Anyhow, after we'd talked and had a pint or two, Snuffles said he'd best be getting back ter the Castle, so I took him there. That was a while ago. After that, Fang and I went fer a walk in the Forest. We've only just gotten back."

Black was safely back in the Castle. I relaxed. Then I realized that I was still holding onto the hippogriff's neck.

Hagrid grinned at me. "Yeh've gotten bolder, Filch. Never thought I'd see yeh try ter talk ter a hippogriff!"

Having Callie here is good fer yeh, as well as being good fer her. Would yeh like ter ride him, then?"

The thought made me shudder. I backed away from the hippogriff. Just to be on the safe side, I bowed to him again.

Hagrid was chuckling softly. I realized that he'd been teasing me.

"So, did yeh have a nice visit with Minerva?" he asked cheerfully.

I nodded.

He grinned.

Annoyed, I glared at him. "What did Poppy say when you brought Snuffles back to her?" I asked.

"He didn't want me ter take him all the way upstairs," Hagrid told me. "Said it'd be fine if I jus' brought him ter the entrance hall. He seemed ter be feeling a bit stronger so that's what I did."

"Are you telling me that you've left him alone for all this time?" I gasped. I had a sinking feeling that Black, who was 'feeling a bit stronger' had gone down to the dungeons. "I *told* you to keep him out of mischief!"

"Filch, yeh old git! Snuffles is barely more than an invalid!"

We were talking about the only prisoner ever to escape from Azkaban! One quarter of the infamous Marauders!

"Do you think a little thing like that would stop him?" I yelled.

Afraid for Severus, I did what I should have done in the first place if only I'd had enough sense. I summoned green-and-silver. Never mind trying to find Black. I'd

deal with him later! Better see what I could do for his victim. Though it was probably already too late.

"Please take me to Professor Snape!" I said. Glowering at Hagrid, I stepped into the Door.



Of course I was too late.

Green-and-silver brought me into the hallway outside Snape's classroom. I ran into the room to find it mercifully empty of students. The door to Severus's office was open. His office was a shambles.

Severus was kneeling in the middle of the mess, sorting through his belongings. To my great relief, he did not appear to have been hurt. But the shelves behind his desk looked as if they'd been rattled by some sort of powerful explosion. His jars and flasks were lying all over the floor. None of them were broken and few had actually spilled. Severus is a firm believer in Unbreakable, Unspillable Charms.

What was that sound I heard? Pleasant, cheerful humming? Was that... Severus?

"Professor?" I asked, hesitantly. "Are you all right? What happened?"

"Isn't it obvious, Filch?" Snape asked me, mildly. "That Gryffindor idiot happened."

He resumed his jaunty humming as he worked at setting his office back to rights.

"P-Professor?" I asked wide-eyed, as I went to help him. "Why are you humming?"

Snape must not have realized what he was doing.

He clenched his jaws tightly shut.

"Filch," he said through gritted teeth, still in that same mild voice. "We've all been learning a great deal about what Squibs can do. Can you tell me exactly what sort of spell was used in here?"

Staring at him with concern, I took a deep breath and 'felt' for the traces of strong magic that still lingered in the air around us.

"Er... it feels like a Cheering Charm, Professor. But I've never felt such a powerful one before."

"Excellent. Aren't you a clever Squib. Yes, that Gryffindor lout has apparently managed to create one of the most terrible and potent Cheering Charms I've ever heard tell of. The effects may last for DAYS!!!" Severus spoke in that same mild voice, though he'd nearly managed a trace of a snarl on the last bit. As if to make up for the near-snarl, he went back to humming contentedly.

"But it *will* wear off," I said, trying to comfort him. "Eventually. At least you haven't been harmed."

Snape was smiling, but his dark eyes were full of despair.

"Not harmed, Filch? Why, I ought to be raging right now," he told me, gently. "I want to be raging. Instead my mind is full of happy images of frolicking baby unicorns and pretty rainbows."

I shuddered in sympathy.

"Dreadful, isn't it?" Severus said, still smiling. "I would rather be imagining an extremely large and very shaggy black pelt hung up on my wall. Or perhaps he'd make a better throw rug. Just the thing for

in front of my fire."

"It could be worse," I offered weakly.

Severus wanted to glare at me. I could tell how hard the poor man was trying. But he couldn't quite manage it.

I sighed, feeling dreadfully sorry for him. Then I reached down to pick up one of his jars and something sharp jabbed my hand.

"Ow!" I yelped. There was a porcupine quill stuck in my thumb! I noticed that there were a number of those quills scattered on the floor among the bottles and jars. I yanked the long, sharp thing out of my thumb and winced.

"I thought you weren't using this Curse any more!" I said, around a mouthful of sore thumb.

"Am I to leave my personal belongings unprotected?" Severus asked, gently. "I only removed my Curse of the Quills because I regretted harming you. Once Flitwick had perfected his Unreachable Charm I knew that you no longer had a reason to come into my office without permission. So I put the Curse back.

"That flea-bitten fool got what he deserved," he continued, mildly. "But I am unable to enjoy a proper gloat. Instead, I am glad simply because the sun is shining and the birds are singing." Snape's dark eyes were full of desperation.

"It's enough to drive me mad..." Severus murmured.

"I-I'd better go and check on Snuffles," I said, nervously.

"Yes, Filch. Why don't you do that? And please, give that lout a message. Tell that *...Gryffindor* that a few quills puncturing his miserable hide are only just the begin-

ning of my revenge," Snape said. His voice may have been gentle, but the look in his eyes was definitely not.

And then Severus started humming again.



"Take me to Sirius Black," I told green-and-silver. As sorry as I felt for poor happy Severus, I could not help feeling sorry for the Animagus too. I knew how dreadfully those quills hurt.

I was relieved when I stepped through the tapestry into the back ward of the hospital wing. At least Black had been able to make it here to have his wounds tended properly.

Poppy pounced the moment she saw me.

"Argus! What were you *thinking!*" she said, furiously. "I spent half an hour digging quills out of his poor nose!!"

Black, in his dog form, lay sprawled on his bed. His pale eyes were mournful. There was a very large poultice resting on his swollen muzzle.

"You said that you'd keep him out of trouble. How could you let him run off and stick his nose into some dangerous creature's den?" Poppy demanded.

"I-I'm sorry," I said, even as I admired her instinctive grasp of the situation.

"It wasn't all my fault!" I protested. "It's true that I should have kept a better eye on him, but he should have known enough to stay away from ...certain places."

Poppy snorted angrily as she collected her ointments.

"You may visit with him for a little while," she said sternly. "Let me have a look at your arm and hand before

you go," she added as a parting shot, as she left the room.

As soon as we were alone the Animagus shifted back to his human form.

A bit woozy with pain-killing potion, Sirius sat up. He was holding the poultice gingerly against his puffy nose. His jaw had also taken a lot of quill-damage. It was red, swollen and looked very painful.

"Thank you, Filch," the Animagus said in a muffled voice. "For not telling her how this happened."

"I was thinking of Potter, not you. It's not fair to punish the boy because his godfather is an idiot. Poppy wouldn't let you have visitors if she knew what you'd done to Severus!"

"Well, you did say that Snape had given all the fifth year Gryffindors detention because he was sore and cranky. So I decided that he really needed a bit of cheering up."

Black smiled. Then he winced in pain and rubbed his jaw. "How is my favorite greasy git, anyhow?"

"How do you think he is? Helplessly cheerful. And he really wants your hide for a throw rug."

"Worth it..." Black's voice was even more muffled as he tried to hold the poultice so it covered both his sore nose and wounded jaw. "It's better to have him angry at me than with Harry and the other kids. Let Snape pick on someone his own size for a change."

I sighed. I'd been worried about what Sirius was going to do to Severus, and now I was equally worried about what Severus might do to Sirius! Merlin's Beard. Not a prank war! Both of them were old enough to

know better and had far more important concerns. I had to stop this somehow, before it got any worse.



I did not have to tell Sirius Black that he had far more important things to worry about than a prank war with Severus Snape. One look at the anxious face of his godson made that point very well.

It was only a matter of time before Harry found out about Snuffles' painful encounter with the porcupine quills. The huge black dog's limping progress through the Castle corridors had not gone unnoticed.

Concerned students had seen the wounded dog attempting to make his way up the main staircase. The Animagus had attracted a group of worried onlookers. Among them were Fred and George Weasley. The twins had used a levitation Charm to bring the injured animal to Poppy as quickly as possible.

Some members of the Weasley family knew that Snuffles was really Sirius Black. The twins did not seem to be among those who were in on the secret. However, everyone was aware that Harry Potter was especially fond of the big black 'stray.' Once they'd completed their mission of mercy, Fred and George had gone to find Harry.

Groggily, Sirius had resumed his dog form before the pain-killing potion could put him to sleep. He was barely awake when Harry came into the ward to see him, accompanied by the twins and Ginny as well as Ron and Hermione.

The sight of the huge black dog's bandaged, swollen muzzle clearly upset the boy. The Animagus had already been badly hurt and this additional injury had complicated and delayed his recovery.

"Snuffles," Harry said, concerned. "What have you been up to? You should have been more careful. Those quills could have hit your eyes!"

Harry didn't say any more, just stroked the dog's back gently. His thin face was shadowed and anxious. Harry had already come very close to losing Sirius. He'd witnessed the Dark Lord's brutal attack against the Animagus in a nightmarish vision less than a week earlier. After Minerva had rescued Black, Potter had barely left his godfather's side until Poppy had said that Sirius was out of danger. No one who knew Potter's mysterious Muggle relations appeared to think very much of them. It was obvious how much the boy cared for Sirius and needed him.

The battered Animagus rested his head against his godson's knee as he fell asleep. He whimpered softly, an apology without words. Harry knew and understood that the wounds Black had sustained during his rescue of Callandra had been for a good cause. But Black's snout-full of quills had been the result of a foolish prank!

"That's right," I thought, annoyed with Black. "You have responsibilities! You should be thinking of the boy, not behaving like a child and giving him another reason to worry about you!"

Harry had not told Black that it was Snape who had given the Gryffindors detention. The Boy Who Had

More Sense Than A Pair Of Grown Wizards I Could Name hadn't wanted to stir up trouble. When Harry eventually found out what had happened, I hoped that he would give Sirius a proper telling off.

Poppy reassured Harry and the other children that Snuffles would heal from this newest injury too, as long as he was carefully watched and not allowed to do anything else that was foolish. (That last comment was a dig at both Sirius and me.) Poppy would not let Hermione or Ginny question me about the kittens, though the girls were clearly eager to do so.

"You may speak to Mr. Filch later. I'm going to have a look at his hand now," the medi-witch said, as she firmly shooed all the children out of the hospital wing.



After Poppy had checked my arm and hand and sentenced me to another day of rest despite my protests, I was allowed to leave. I summoned green-and-silver and went to look in on Mrs. Norris and her family.

The eight kittens were nestled against their mother, sleeping with the same single-minded intensity that they used when they nursed. Mrs. Norris blinked sleepily at me when I stroked her head. I missed having her at my side. She would belong to her kittens for the next few weeks. Still, she listened to me patiently when I told her about Black and Snape.

"Some things never change," I told her, sighing. "The two of them are worse than children! I've got to nip this in the bud somehow. Potter might be able to keep Black in line..."

(The irony in those words wasn't apparent until I'd already said them. The task of keeping Black in line had been passed to a new Potter. Somehow, I didn't think that was what Harry's parents had had in mind.)

"What can I do about Severus?" I muttered.

My cat nuzzled one of her small grey daughters tenderly, reminding me that she had her own brood to take care of now. The children of Hogwarts, past and present, were mine to deal with.

"Well, my sweet," I said, "I've already befriended a hippogriff today. What's one more impossible job on my list?"

Thinking matters over, I refilled her food and water. Then I stepped through green-and-silver again. Emerging into the dungeon corridor outside Severus's classroom, I went to speak to the Potions Master.



Snape had managed to get through his last class, somehow. He was resisting the effects of the Cheering Charm to the point where he was no longer humming merrily. But he was moving about his office with a happy efficiency that could only be described as "bustling."

"Ah, Filch!" he said, beaming. "How is that reprehensible flea-feast doing? Please tell me that he's in agony."

"He is," I said solemnly. I described Black's wounded face.

A wicked glitter appeared in Severus's eyes that had nothing to do with the effects of the Cheering Charm.

"Good," he purred, silkily. "That's some consolation, at least. Those quill wounds of yours were quite painful, weren't they? You limped around for a while.

Couldn't sit down for a week?"

I nodded, ruefully.

"Then Black should be in utter misery for at least that long. Serves him right."

"I'd say that you're the winner in this round, Professor. The Cheering Charm isn't going to last for a week," I pointed out.

"Even if it wore off this very second, it has already lasted for an eternity, Filch," Snape said, the smile on his face at odds with the misery in his eyes. "Do you know what I was doing during my class with the Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw first years? I was *whistling!*"

I sighed. "Charms can be removed, you know. Or counteracted. I'd imagine that Professor Flitwick would be more than up to the task."

Severus shook his head, smiling gently. "No. I'd rather handle this myself. Perhaps, a potion..."

His eyes glittered wickedly again. "Ah, yes! I can see several possibilities. Why, I could be my usual self again by dinner! Wouldn't that be one in the eye for Black?"

He laughed, merrily, then clapped his hands over his mouth in horror. Then, rubbing his hands together, he grinned. The grin had, perhaps, a touch more wickedness in it than Charm-induced cheer. "The face-full of quills I gave Black and my own potion to counteract his Cheering Charm will do for a start on my revenge, I suppose."

"It will also do for a finish!" I pointed out. "Why don't you just let it go?"

"Let it go?" Snape's voice was mild, but his eyes

flashed. "Who are *you* to tell me..."

"Just a Squib, Professor," I said. "With a great many empty file drawers in my office."

It took him a moment to realize what I meant. Then his dark eyes narrowed.

"Filch," Severus said, smiling gently. "You couldn't possibly understand..."

"Many years of hoarding grudges, indignities and slights and insults?" I said, in a voice as gentle and mild as his. "I beg to differ. I understand those things very well indeed."

"There is no comparison," Snape said softly, still with a slight smile on his face.

"None at all," I agreed. "I'm an old man with no proper magic who mops floors. You are a powerful wizard, a Master of your Art. Letting things go should be much easier for you."

His eyes, desperately angry despite his smile, were locked on mine. "You don't know all the things that Black and those friends of his have done to me. This is only the latest in a long line of..."

"You forgave me when I nearly killed you," I said. "Did they ever do anything as bad as that?"

Snape began to laugh, helplessly. It was not a cheerful sound, despite the powerful Charm. "Filch," he gasped, wretchedly, "you don't *know* what you are asking of me."

Severus wrapped his arms around himself, trembling, his face a mask of forced joy and very real anguish. He was too distracted to maintain his glamour. The tormented expression was even more fright-



ening on his bruised face. When his terrible, sobbing laughter subsided, the Potions Master buried his face in his hands. "Leave me alone, Filch..." he whispered.

I couldn't. At least not yet. Instead I put my hand on his shoulder.

"Professor," I said. "You are one of the most honorable men that I have ever known. And you do whatever must be done, even when it is difficult and very painful. You and Black can work together when the reasons are good enough. You are both servants of the Light. The Headmaster needs both of you. And your children need you."

I sighed. "Do you really wish to waste your precious time and energy on childish revenge? You can let this go. I know you can."



Not sure if I'd succeeded or not, I left him pondering ingredients for an anti-Cheering potion. I didn't use a Door when I left the dungeons. The walk through the Castle would do me good. Poppy had ordered me to spend today relaxing. But, except for the time I'd spent with Minerva, I hadn't been following her orders very well.

I was walking slowly up the main staircase when I was ambushed by Ginny and Hermione.

"Eight kittens, Mr. Filch!!" Hermione said, quite excited.

"Three queens, five toms," I said, smiling at her, glad to see the girls and to think of happier things. "Two of the toms look just like Crookshanks. Mother and kittens are doing fine. I've been looking in on them on and off, all day."

"Were you able to write everything down? With

your hand, and all?" Hermione asked me anxiously.

I nodded. "My writing's a bit messy. If you like, you may copy it over neater." The small ledger that Hermione had given me was in my pocket. I handed it to her and watched her read the entries.

"It must have hurt, writing this down," she said, sympathetically. "I will copy it over, and you can tell me some more details!"

The two girls and I went outside and sat on the front steps of the Castle. Hermione dug a quill out of her bag and prepared to write. The births of Mrs. Norris's kittens were relived, for a very interested audience. Ginny, who everyone knew was Mrs. Norris's favorite and would be allowed to pick a kitten first, was wondering if it would be more fun to have a queen or a tom.

"It would be nice to have a little grey Miss Norris," she said, thoughtfully. "But there are only three. Lil and Henna Morgan both really wanted queens. Did anyone else say that they'd definitely prefer a queen?"

Trust Ginny to be considering other people's wishes, even when she had first choice.

"No one else has asked for a queen. Hannah wanted a tom. Dennis and Colin didn't care which they got, as long as they're two of the same. The third queen is yours, Ginny."

She grinned. "How does 'Nimue Norris' sound? Or perhaps something Classical? Andromache Norris? Ariadne Norris? Hmm. Gerda Norris? Skadi Norris?"

"Those last two are Norse, aren't they?" Hermione murmured, nibbling thoughtfully on her quill.

"Norse is all right, too." Ginny said. "Freyja Norris?"

Idunn Norris? Sigyn Norris?"

"Why not Egyptian?" Hermione suggested. "Bastet Norris? Isis Norris?"

"Bastet..." Ginny murmured. "I'll think about that one."

I rested for a while, listening to them discuss names. Leaning back against the step above me I flexed my right hand cautiously. It still hurt. But, maybe if I rested enough before dinner, Poppy would relent and let me go back to work tomorrow. This "relaxing" business could get very strenuous.

It was nearly dinnertime when Colin and Dennis came rushing out of the Castle.

"We heard from Lil Morgan that Mrs. Norris had five little toms!!!" Dennis said happily.

"Colin and I will have toms then!! I'm going to call mine Paladin!"

"Mine's going to be Pellinore," Colin said. He gave me a beseeching look. "Must we really wait two weeks before we can see them?"

I nodded. "You can't play with them. They can't do anything except sleep and eat."

Though visibly dampened by this news, Dennis and Colin still looked like they had something else on their minds. Both small Creeveys seemed to be fairly bursting.

"What is it?" Hermione asked them.

"Haven't you heard yet?" Colin said, hopping around in excitement. "Callie has finished with her tests. She's going to be Sorted before dinner!"

## CHAPTER 5

# The Sorting

When I walked into the Great Hall between Ginny and Hermione, I was shaking. Dennis and Colin Creevey had rushed ahead of us to find their seats, but the girls matched my slower pace. They were aware of my anxiety.

"Will the Hat be able to find a House for Callandra?" I asked them. "What if Squibs are invisible or immune to the Hat's magic?"

Hermione shook her head. "The Hat doesn't have that type of spell on it," she said, sounding sure of herself.

"Did you read that somewhere?" I asked her.

"No," Hermione said. "But it stands to reason, doesn't it? The Hat's purpose isn't to find the students. That's a different spell entirely. The Hat's task is to Sort them once they're already here!"

Ginny patted my hand. "Don't worry, Mr. Filch," she said. "You know that the Headmaster wouldn't let Callie put the Hat on unless he was sure that it would be able to find the right House for her."

Hermione had appealed to my sense of logic and Ginny to my faith in Dumbledore. I tried to feel reassured, but my heart was pounding dreadfully. Squibs don't get Sorted. Everyone knew that. Squibs aren't *proper* wizards.

*Know your place, boy. Keep your head low.*

The girls were both looking at me with concern. I sup-

pose that I must have been pale. But I told them I was fine, and they left me to find places at the Gryffindor table.

Longing for the comfort of Mrs. Norris's familiar weight on my shoulder or in my arms, I walked slowly towards the Staff Table. Severus Snape's place was empty. I wondered how he was coming along with his anti-Cheering Potion. The other Professors were all present and accounted for.

Smiling, Minerva rose from her chair and came towards me. "It will be all right, Argus," she said. "Callandra doesn't look worried. See?"

She was right. Callandra Moffitt, who stood beside the Headmaster in front of the Staff table, looked excited and happy.

The child was now clad in a black Hogwarts robe, her many long, beaded braids streaming down onto her shoulders. I was sure that the poor girl must be nervous. She was just hiding it extremely well. At the moment, she was exchanging an affectionate glance with Neville Longbottom, who was watching her proudly from the Gryffindor table.

Then I saw her look over at her brother, Daniel, at the Ravenclaw table. Callandra may not have looked nervous but poor Daniel looked like I felt. He was probably anxious enough for both of them. Callandra grinned at Daniel, to reassure him.

The Headmaster gestured for silence and the sounds of conversation in the Hall grew still.

"Today," he said, simply, "Hogwarts is pleased to welcome a new student. Callandra Moffitt." Dumbledore

gave Callandra a kind smile which she returned, shyly.

Hagrid rose from his place. The Sorting Hat was in one of his huge hands and a four-legged stool was clutched in the other. The big man gave first the stool, then the Hat to Dumbledore.

The candlelight glittered on Dumbledore's silvery hair and beard as he placed the stool on the floor in front of him. Then he put the Hat on the stool.

Murmurs filled the Hall like the whispering of the wind through tree branches. I doubted that there was anyone present -student, Professor or ghost- who did not know that Callandra was a Squib. I knew that I wasn't the only one who was wondering just what the Hat was going to do.

The rip near the Hat's brim opened and the whispers died away.

The Hat sang

*"Rare among the wizard-born, seldom revealed,  
From both Light and Dark, ever well concealed,  
But the Sorting Hat can see what is deep within.  
I know the magic flows through your bones and skin.  
So, no need to feel an ounce of dread,  
When you place me upon your head.  
Inside your heart, true magic calls.  
Your House is here, within these walls.  
Patient, Ambitious, Brave or Wise,  
Your proper place, I shall recognize."*

The murmurs were louder now. I heard some exclamations of surprise too.

I found myself blinded by tears. My relief for Callandra's

sake was accompanied by a painful aching in my heart.

Hermione and Ginny had been right. The Hat had a song for Callandra. She would have a House just like any other student. Would the Hat have sung for me so many years ago? I would never know. Tears of joy and sorrow mingled on my face.

Minerva, Merlin bless her, seemed to understand my tangle of emotions. Her hand found mine and held on gently. Thus fortified, I shook my tears away. I wanted to watch Callandra being Sorted.

She was now seated on the stool. Dumbledore placed the Hat on her head. With the benefit of hindsight, I could see that the Hat's choice was clear and simple. Many people, including me, had already found reason to notice Callandra's bravery.

The Hat shouted:

"GRYFFINDOR!!!"

The Gryffindor table's wild cheering and clapping exploded jubilantly into the silence. Neville Longbottom jumped to his feet and held out his hand to Callandra, his round face glowing with delight. With her head held high, Callandra went to him, and to their housemates. She moved gracefully, straight and proud.

I wanted this for Callandra with all my heart. She had a place at Hogwarts, a place in the wizarding world that was far better than my own.

Smiling, I clapped my callused, work-roughened hands for her until they ached.



"Professor, you missed dinner. And the Sorting! Callandra's a Gryffindor!" I said.

Severus did not seem surprised.

"Yes, I expected as much," the Potions Master murmured, matter-of-factly. A faint smile still lingered on his face, but he seemed more adept at fighting the effects of Black's Cheering Charm now.

Professor Snape leaned over his cauldron. He added a careful pinch of something black, sharp-smelling and crumbly to the bubbling mixture.

"You mean that it was obvious to you all along?" I asked him.

"Yes, Filch. The matter of young Callandra's House was quite plain. It is also very clear to me where the Hat would have put you, if Dippet had been as open-minded as Dumbledore."

I stared at him, wide eyed. "W-where do you think the Hat would have put me, Professor?"

"Why, Hufflepuff, Filch!" Severus said. "Did you think that I was going to say 'Slytherin?'" He laughed then stopped abruptly.

Taking a deep breath, he leaned forward again and inhaled the acrid vapors rising from the dark, frothy mixture in the cauldron. His expression, when he looked over at me a few moments later, was nearly as dour as usual.

"Hufflepuff?" I said softly, with delight.

"Of course. It's plain as the nose on your face. You're hard working, loyal, patient. Rather slow on the uptake..."

"My father was a Hufflepuff. He would have been so proud of me." My voice was wistful.

Severus sighed. Slytherins sometimes get that way whenever "Hufflepuff" and "proud" are used in the same sentence.

"Well, Professor," I said, "your Depressing Potion does seem to be working."

"Appearances can be deceiving, Filch. Believe me, I am continuing to fight the Charm's effects. My mind is still filled with persistent mindless good cheer! The potion needs to boil for a little longer." He added another pinch of the crumbly black stuff and leaned over to breathe the vapors. "You can help. Talk to me. Give me some unpleasant news."

I thought for a moment. "Snuffles has a fever," I said.

"That's NOT unpleasant news!" Severus growled.

Then he sighed again. "Unless you are telling me that his fever is bad enough to be life-threatening? It wouldn't do for the mangy beast to expire before I have a chance to get my proper revenge."

"No, he'll recover," I said, sharply. "But Potter left dinner soon after the Sorting to go upstairs to help Poppy with him. Most of the poor man's innards were being held together with healing spells even before he got hit with those quills. He's in considerable discomfort."

"Don't glare at me like that, Filch!" Snape snarled. "I *heard* what you said to me, earlier. I cannot forgive him but I do not intend to take my revenge on that creature any time soon. For your sake, I will simply add this latest indignity to his considerable account."

"Someday," Severus continued, "there will be a proper reckoning between the two of us. I can wait.

For years, if I must. Hufflepuff wizards are not the only ones who know how to be patient!"

"Thank you, Professor," I said.

He glared at me while he continued to breathe the vapors over the cauldron.

"You were right," Severus said, quietly. "I do have more pressing concerns than pranks and revenge. Did you happen to observe Draco at dinner this evening?"

I nodded. Anxious over how Draco and his closest friends might react to Callandra's Sorting, I had spent a while watching the fifth year Slytherins. The boy had been even paler than usual, subdued and quiet. He'd spent much of dinner sitting with his head in his hands. Even the fact that a Squib had just been Sorted into Gryffindor had not seemed to penetrate Draco's distracted mood.

"His father's condition is ...unchanged?" I asked.

Severus nodded. "The Cruciatus is a powerful tool, Filch. The Dark Lord can wield it as no one else can. He knows how to take the Curse just far enough. He could have made Lucius's pain last for far longer than he did without allowing his victim to escape into madness."

He shuddered. Severus had been the Evil One's victim more than once. The terrible memories were plain in his haunted eyes.

"Professor?" I said, hesitantly. "Do you think that Lucius Malfoy might die? I-I know what you owe him. Twice over. He's a dangerous man. Perhaps it would be better if..."

Snape frowned. "I know precisely what I owe him, Filch. That's my concern. Not yours."

"Please," I said, plaintively, "don't try to tell me that

you've taken everything into account and the risks have been carefully calculated. I've already seen enough of your 'calculated risks' to last me a lifetime."

"Filch," Severus said, very softly. "I cannot be certain what Lucius will demand of me. But I do have my suspicions. I may not be asked to do anything for him that I would not do of my own free will."

I shook my head at him in disbelief.

"There are two lives that mean even more to Lucius than his own," Severus said, quietly. "He may demand that I protect them in his place, if he should ever be unable to do so."

"Protect them?" I murmured. "Or give your life to save them?"

Severus stepped back from the cauldron. He did not answer me.

"Professor?" I asked.

Severus took a deep breath. "My thanks, Filch," he said in an entirely different tone. "Our little talk certainly has kept me from feeling ridiculously happy. But the potion is ready now. I believe that I have kept you from your rest long enough."

He saw the concern in my face, and acknowledged it with a wry look. But all he said to me was "Good night".

## CHAPTER 6

# There's No Place Like Home

Severus was kneeling on the floor in the corridor outside my office, trying to detach a five-week-old black kitten from the trailing end of his robe. "Ow! Azoth, you needle-clawed pestilence!! Filch, why does this accursed little creature insist on following me everywhere? Ouch! Stop that! My hand is NOT a cat-toy...!"

"He likes you, Professor," I called to Snape patiently from the chair behind my desk. "You named him. He's yours. He doesn't want to belong to anyone else."

Snape distracted the kitten by rubbing gently under the creature's tiny jaw. The black kitten's contented purr was loud enough to belong to a much larger cat.

"The absurd little beast needed a name, didn't he?" Snape said, testily. "And I needed something to shout at him. He's a four-footed harbinger of chaos and destruction!"

"Stop purring at me," he added sternly, glaring at the kitten.

"Bring him in here, Professor," I said. "He must be hungry. The others have all eaten."

Professor Snape stared into my office. His expression was one of consternation. There was barely any room to walk. Children and animals seemed to be everywhere. Ginny, Hannah, Colin, Dennis, Lilith and Gehenna, all of whom spent as much time with

their kittens as they could, were crowded into the room, either sitting on the floor or lounging against my file cabinets. Daniel Moffitt, who had been chosen by one of the ginger toms, was there as well.

Hermione was sitting in my office's other chair. The ledger that she'd given me was open on her lap. Though they would continue to nurse for several more weeks, the kittens had now been started on solid food. The Castle's elves had brought all sorts of different tidbits and morsels for them to try. Hermione, who took her position as the kittens' 'gran' very seriously, had written careful notes on how much each kitten had eaten and what sort of foods each one seemed to like best.

Both Mrs. Norris and Crookshanks were sitting at Hermione's feet. The pair of them were curled up together, purring softly.

Hermione had succeeded in winning my cat's friendship. (The matter had been firmly clinched the first time that Crookshanks had been allowed to see his offspring. The large ginger tom had acquired a decided swagger in his step as he'd inspected his brood. "Look at you... acting as if you did all the work," Hermione had sighed at him with affectionate exasperation. Mrs. Norris had immediately rubbed up against Hermione's ankles.)

Harry and Ron, who had accompanied Hermione, were also present, sitting on the floor in the corner nearest my desk. Snuffles, almost fully healed now from the terrible internal injuries he'd suffered at the Dark Lord's hands, was between the two boys. Having eaten

their fill, seven of the kittens had been unable to resist the lure of such a large warm, furry body. The Animagus had kittens stuck all over him like burrs.

Ginny's smoky-grey Bastet, Lilith's dusty-grey Juno and Gehenna's misty-grey Beatrice were snuggled up together on the dog's back. Colin's black-and-ginger Pellinore, (who would never need Muggle-fixing because he was sterile, as I'd learned) rested between the dog's front paws.

Dennis's stormy-grey Paladin, (who would have an unpleasant encounter with a Muggle vet someday unless the Creeveys could convince their parents that anti-kitten charms were as effective as Muggle methods of feline birth control) seemed determined to win a wrestling match with Black's tail.

Hannah Abbott's ginger-colored Briar was draped over the Animagus's head, batting at Black's ears. The other ginger tom, Daniel's Semyon, was nestled against Sirius's ribs.

Frowning with disapproval, Severus picked his way carefully into the room, trying not to step on anyone or anything. When he caught sight of Sirius, he froze.

"Mr. Creevey," he addressed Colin in his silkiest voice. "Do you have your camera with you?"

"Yes, Professor."

Snape nodded towards the Animagus-and-kittens tableau. "I believe that is a sight that really ought to be preserved for posterity."

"Oh, you're right, sir!!" Lilith said, delighted. "What a CUTE picture!"

"'Cute' is not exactly the word I had in mind, Miss Morgan," Snape said, dryly.

"Adorable?" Gehenna suggested.

"Sweet?" Hannah volunteered.

"Precious?" Ginny asked, tongue in cheek. (She did not know who the dog really was, but she knew that Severus didn't seem fond of him.)

"Blackmail!" Ron said, under his breath.

"Or Revenge," Harry murmured back, quietly.

Sirius sighed and rested his head (Briar and all) on Harry's knee.

"That's perfect!!" Colin cried, camera in hand. "And I can fit you in too, Harry!"

As nearly everyone started asking Colin for copies, Snape peeled the black kitten off the front of his robe. "There. Go and eat your dinner, Azoth, you little bile-black demon," he murmured almost affectionately, setting the black kitten on the floor.

Hermione opened the ledger to the page that she'd labeled "Azoth Norris" and got her quill ready as the black kitten trotted to the food bowls to inspect the house-elves' offerings.

"What does 'Azoth' mean, anyhow?" Ron asked, mischievously.

Severus ignored the question, but grave little Gehenna looked aghast that a fifth year wouldn't know such a thing, even if he was only a Gryffindor.

"'Azoth' is an Arabic word for Mercury. It's regarded by Alchemists as the first principle of metals," Gehenna told Ron, very earnestly.

"It's in our Potions book, Ron..." Hermione sighed, making a note as the black kitten turned his tiny nose up at a morsel of fried haddock.

"Ron's teasing," Harry assured both Hermione and Gehenna. "He knew that."

"Mr. Weasley only managed to acquire that knowledge after he'd already gotten the answer wrong on a test," Severus said, sneering.

"Filch," he continued, extending the sneer and directing it at me. "Don't you have anything better to do than host a party in your office?"

"I am doing paperwork, Professor," I told him.

"In the midst of all this bedlam?" Severus looked incredulous. Then he regarded the Morgan sisters, sternly. "Lilith. Gehenna. Come. You are keeping Mr. Filch from his duties," the Professor said.

Reluctant but obedient, the Morgan sisters waved to everyone and carefully picked their way out of my office in Severus's wake.

Just before leaving, Severus glowered around the room as if to say that certain students from Hufflepuff, Gryffindor and Ravenclaw could all take a lesson from properly well-behaved Slytherins.



It was approaching dinnertime. Hannah and the Creevey brothers had asked Mrs. Norris if they could bring Briar, Paladin and Pellinore up to the Great Hall with them. Mrs. Norris had blinked her golden eyes at them regally, which the children took as an



affirmative answer.

Hannah, Dennis and Colin had all taken their kittens happily as they'd left for dinner.

Daniel and Ginny immediately asked if they could do the same with Semyon and Bastet.

"Don't worry," Hermione assured Mrs. Norris. "I'll make sure that they're all brought back to you."

"She will, too," Ron said, dryly.

The rest of my guests were clearly preparing to go up to the Great Hall as well. Kittens were being carefully removed from Snuffles' fur so the dog could rise. Hermione was packing up her ledger and quill.

Ron was holding onto Juno and Beatrice, trying to stop them from climbing up his robe. Ginny, with Bastet cradled in one arm, came over to help her brother. Harry was cuddling Azoth. (To judge by the concerned expression on Potter's face, I could tell that the boy thought poor Azoth wasn't going to get enough cuddling.)

Despite what Severus had thought, I hadn't really minded all the company. Though I was looking forward to some peace and quiet. Then, I heard a familiar voice in the hallway.

"Excellent work, Callie! Excellent!"

Alastor Mad-Eye Moody was standing in the corridor, beaming. His electric blue eye swept over my office and everyone in it, lingering longest on Snuffles.

No one had told me if Moody knew the truth about Sirius Black, but I assumed he did. Moody seemed to know a great deal about what went on at Hogwarts, though he was retired and no longer on the staff. On

either side of the old Auror stood Neville Longbottom and Callandra Moffitt.

"What did Callie do, sir?" Daniel asked.

"She did some searching for me, laddie! I took her outside on the front steps and asked her to find Longbottom and you. And she's done it. It's been a long time since I had a chance to work with a Squib who could do that particular trick." Moody's gravelly voice was pleased.

Hermione looked up, fascinated. "Squibs can locate individual witches or wizards? Even in a place as crowded with magic as Hogwarts?" she asked.

"Some Squibs can," Moody said.

"I can't," I murmured, a bit wistfully.

Callandra looked at me with concern. She seemed to be worried that she'd hurt my feelings. "But I can't manage it with everyone, Mr. Filch. Just my Mum and Dad and Danny. And now, Neville too." As Callandra spoke, she reached for Neville's hand.

"Just the people who mean 'home' to you, lass," Moody said. "Finding your brother and your young man will do nicely for a start. That's the part that seems to come to Squibs naturally. But you can eventually work your way up to being able to find anyone, once you've gotten the 'feel' of their particular magic."

"This isn't in any of my books," Hermione said, intrigued.

"Maybe you'll have to write your own book on Squib magic then," Ron told her. He was teasing, but Hermione's eyes brightened at the thought.

Callandra was still looking at me sadly.

"Have you *ever* been able to find people in a crowd like that, Mr. Filch?" she asked me.

"Many years ago," I said. "When I was young I could always find my parents, no matter where they were."

Callandra smiled. "You can do it, then."

"No, I've long since lost the knack," I told her. "And Mum and Dad were the only ones I could ever find. Their magic had surrounded me every day of my life, until they brought me here."

I could still remember my first night in the Castle; awakening in an unfamiliar bed, reaching out in fear and loneliness for the familiar traces that had always been there before. But Mum and Dad had been too far away. Strange magic, strange wizards and witches were everywhere around me, their magic seething, swirling, whispering. Even though I had been older than the oldest of the Hogwarts students, I'd wept like a homesick child.

My expression must have revealed my melancholy thoughts. Still cradling Bastet, Ginny put her hand on my shoulder.

"Interesting," Moody was saying. "See, Callie? It's a talent you can lose if you don't keep right on using it. You've got to practice constantly. Branch out too and work at finding other people."

Both his bright blue eye and his normal eye were locked onto Hermione. "I believe that Miss Granger has been one of your roommates these past few weeks," he said, speculatively. "Why don't we have her go elsewhere in the Castle and..."

"Moody," I reminded him. "The children *were* getting ready to go and have their dinner."

"Another time, then," Moody said, undaunted.

Harry and Ron had put Beatrice, Juno and Azoth down beside Mrs. Norris and Crookshanks. The three kittens nestled between their parents.

The Animagus had moved casually over to Moody, who was idly scratching the dog's ears.

"He'll be along in a while," Moody told Harry.

After the children had all gone, the old Auror closed my office door.

Sirius Black shifted to his human form and stretched. "I feel like a pincushion," he said, ruefully.

"I'm sure that Colin will give Harry a copy of that picture," I told him.

Sirius sighed.

"So..." Moody said, rubbing his hands together. "How are you feeling, Argus?"

It had been a few weeks since my last "active" lesson with the retired Auror. While waiting for me to recover from my mission, Moody's work with me had been fairly gentle. He had been testing me to see which spells I already knew how to sense and identify and he'd been teaching me to identify some new ones as well.

Now that Poppy had given me a clean bill of health, Moody looked eager to start chasing me all over the Castle again.

"Fine," I said. To be honest, I was missing the more active lessons too.

He grunted in approval, and turned to Black. "You've

still got some mending to do, I hear.”

The Animagus nodded, sighing again.

“Once you’re fit there’s an experiment I’d like to try with the pair of you. In the meantime, Filch, call one of your Doors for me. I want to show Black what they are.”

I focused. A moment later red-and-gold appeared on my office wall. The Animagus’s eyes widened.

“That’s a Door?” Black asked, looking from one of us to the other.

“Yep,” Moody said. “There’s four of ‘em. Got some very interesting properties, they do. Filch here can use ‘em to get anywhere in the Castle, instantly. Squibs are immune to their protective spells.”

“What sort of experiment did you have in mind?” I asked the old Auror, warily.

“Animagi have been known to possess a degree of increased resistance to certain types of protective...”

Immediately, I sent red-and-gold away. “NO!” I snapped. “I’ve told you, Moody! No more passengers! Ever!”

“Passengers?” Black asked, intrigued.

“We’ll never know unless you experiment!” Moody argued with me.

“I guess we’ll never know then!” I growled. “Your idle curiosity isn’t a good enough reason for me to risk this young idiot’s life yet again!”

“Well, how about my own idle curiosity, then?” Black asked, sounding like a typical Gryffindor who had not been getting his quota of foolish risks lately.

“Filch took Severus through a Door. Nearly killed him,” Moody explained to Black. “He took me through one too.

I was flat on my back, sick, for nearly two days afterwards. But Ginny and Neville recovered much more quickly. They were fine within a few minutes.”

“It was longer than that. More like ten minutes!” I said, angrily. “The longest ten minutes of my life!”

“And you think that my dog form would protect me?” Black asked, looking thoughtful.

“There’s only one way for us to find out,” Moody told him.

“We are NOT having this conversation.” I said, loudly enough to wake Mrs. Norris and Crookshanks who were still cuddled up with the three kittens.

Moody shrugged. “All right. Young Black isn’t up to it yet, anyhow. He’s not the only Animagus in the Castle, is he? I was also thinking of asking Minerva if she’d like to give it a go.”

“No!” I cried, horrified. “Take such a risk with her? Never!”

Black was grinning. “I guess you’ll be waiting for me, then.”

I glared at Moody. “You *promised* you wouldn’t ask me to take anyone through the Doors.”

“He’s not asking you, Filch. I am,” Black said.

Moody smiled, smugly.

I turned my back on both of them.

“Don’t worry. I’ll work on him,” I heard Moody muttering to Black.

I snorted to hide my apprehension. Gryffindors and Slytherins cause enough trouble when they are at each other’s throats. They can create even bigger messes when they work as a team.

"All right, Filch," Moody said. "That particular subject is closed, for now. For tonight I want you to try a different experiment."

"What?" I asked, warily, as I turned back to face him.

Moody held out his hands, placatingly. "This experiment won't hurt anyone. I only want you to try to do what Callie was doing earlier. Find someone in the Castle for me. Someone who means 'home' to you."

"Weren't you listening?" I asked, irritably. "I haven't been able to do that for years."

"Wouldn't you like to see if you can regain the ability?" Moody asked. "Try. Take me to Albus. His magic must be easy to feel. You've known him for years, haven't you?"

"Or Minerva. You ought to be able to find her easily enough," Black said.

They both looked at me expectantly. I sighed. Looking for the place where you belong and the people who mean home to you is a natural enough thing for any creature. Each of Mrs. Norris's kittens had searched the Castle, looking for a companion and a home. They'd been certain of the rightness of their choices, too. As sure as Callandra had been as she had led Moody to her brother and Neville.

I closed my eyes and tried reaching out with the part of my mind that can feel magic. Within moments I felt a sudden change in the air. A tingle of power, not my own, ran down my spine.

*Oh, no!* How could I have forgotten the last time that I had called out, searching? Something inhu-

man, ancient and incredibly powerful was stirring in response to my 'call.' It turned the merest fragment of Its attention towards me and answered. My heart raced. I felt filled with light. Power flowed through me, spilling out into Black and Moody.

"What in Merlin's Name is he *doing*?" Moody shouted.

"I don't know!" Black shouted back. "But it doesn't look healthy for him!"

"Sorry, Filch," I heard Black say, a moment later. Then he Stunned me.



"Argus?" It was the Headmaster's voice. "Wake up."

"Hurts..." I moaned. "Moody LIED."

Not much time seemed to have passed. I was still in my office, lying on the floor.

Dumbledore helped me sit up. He, Black and Moody were watching me with concern. Mrs. Norris had left Azoth, Beatrice and Juno curled up against Crookshanks. She was beside me, nuzzling me as if I were one of the kittens.

"You felt that?" I asked Dumbledore.

"I did, indeed. All the way upstairs in my office."

"I'm sorry, Headmaster. I didn't mean to do that. It was an accident! Do you think It's angry with me?"

"Is *what* angry with you?" Moody asked, leaning forward, intrigued.

"The Castle," I whispered, not taking my anxious eyes off Dumbledore's face.

"No, Argus," the Headmaster said, gently. "I very much

doubt that the Castle is angry with Its Caretaker."

I saw Moody and Black exchange a look. Moody looked like a child on Christmas morning. His reaction to any sort of new information reminded me very much of Hermione's.

"So, do the pair of you chat with the Castle often?" the old Auror asked, with great interest.

I pulled Mrs. Norris onto my lap, stroking her as I slowly grew calmer.

"I'd hardly call it 'chatting,' Alastor," Dumbledore said, gravely. "It happens perhaps twice a decade, in my case.

"The Castle's attention focused on any one person for longer than a few moments would probably prove fatal," the Headmaster continued. "Though Argus seems well suited for it, even more so than I am. His conversations happen more frequently than mine do."

"I don't understand," I said.

Dumbledore's voice was low and soothing. "Alastor told me what he asked you to do. You were searching for the magic that you associate with home. Every other witch and wizard here has been Sorted into a House, Argus. Including me. Only you are not Gryffindor, not Slytherin, not Hufflepuff, and not Ravenclaw. The entire Castle is your House."

I stared at him for a moment, then the truth in his words sunk in. My place here is considered lowly. But it is an important place and a unique one, in spite of that.

Moody was looking at me speculatively.

"Well, tonight I am the one who gets to say that the lesson is over," I told him gruffly.

Black grinned at the imperious tone in my voice. And Moody, grinning as well, didn't argue with me.

"As you wish, Master Caretaker," he said, giving me a slight bow.

I smiled.

The End

# Squib Puppet



## CHAPTER 1

## Obliviated

**T**HE FORBIDDEN FOREST is a dreadful place. I rarely enter its borders, even during the day. It was sheer madness for me to go there in the middle of the night.

Following Draco Malfoy into the Forest on my own was worse than foolish. I should have awakened Severus before I left the Castle or fetched Hagrid before entering the Forest. But Draco had already slipped out of the Castle like a wraith. And the boy was moving at a run, swiftly going beyond the Castle's boundaries. I was afraid to hesitate even for a moment, for fear of losing him.

Over the past weeks I had seen Severus's fears for his favorite student steadily increase. Barely sleeping or eating, Draco was paler than ever. He had gotten thinner, his grey eyes held a perpetually haunted expression and had bruised-looking hollows underneath them.

As a first year, young Malfoy had shown a sensible amount of dread for the Forest and the perils within.

But now he moved eagerly through the dark trees as if he feared nothing.

Clutching my lantern, I hurried along the narrow earth track that wound through the trees. The boy's glowing wand guided me towards him. At least he had slowed a bit, enough for me to catch up with him.

"Draco!" I shouted. "Stop, boy! Where do you think you're going?"

"Mr. Filch?!" Draco's voice was startled. He was so distracted that he had not known that he was being followed. "What are you doing here?"

"My job!" I snarled, fear making my voice even harsher than usual. "You're supposed to be in the Castle, in your dormitory, in your bed!"

"You shouldn't have followed me! You must leave here at once," Draco ordered me imperiously. "You have no idea how much danger you're in!"

"Me?! What about you, you young fool?" I snapped.

"I'll be fine," the boy said, haughtily. "It's you who..."

Not giving him a chance to finish, I reached out and grabbed his arm. "You're coming back with me, straight-away! We'll see what Professor Snape and the Headmaster have to say about..."

Around us, the Forest had grown very still. Abruptly I realized that the boy and I were not alone.

"*Pendeo*," a drawling voice hissed from behind me. I found myself lifted into the air by a powerful spell.

"Draco, you have brought me an unexpected gift! How delightful. Good evening, Squib. Have you no insolent words for me?" Lucius Malfoy asked. His

voice was as elegant as ever, though there was a ragged quality marring its smoothness.

His power swirled around me, spinning me roughly around to face him.

The resemblance between father and son had never been more pronounced. Like Draco, Lucius looked as if he'd been ill. He was thin and paler than usual. His grey eyes were haunted by the memory of recent pain. The rage perceptible beneath his calm manner struck me like a physical blow.

*Malfoy makes a dangerous enemy. If he should ever have you at his mercy again, he will make you beg for death.* I had not forgotten Snape's warning. Helpless at Malfoy's dubious mercy was the very last place on earth that I wanted to be. I knew that I was not supposed to remember most of the things I'd done to enrage this Dark Wizard recently. I didn't expect that to save me. It didn't.

But Draco bought me a brief respite.

"Please, Father! Leave him alone. Speak to me," the boy pleaded. "It's been weeks! I was so glad to get your message this morning! I've thought of nothing else all day. You still have not said what happened to you. Mother has told me nothing. Neither has Professor Snape!"

"Both Professor Snape and your Mother have been obeying my wishes. What happened to me is none of your concern."

"I've been worried..." Draco's voice faltered now.

"Foolishness. I'm fine, as you can see. Ah, Draco, you are too old for such nonsense."

This last was said as the boy embraced his father.



Lucius held Draco close to him, his protests fading into silence. Malfoy senior made no comment on Draco's obvious pallor. But a flash of pain crossed his face. He held his son tightly for a moment, even after the boy had released him.

"There. Let your mind be at ease now, boy," Lucius said, quietly. "I am all right. What happened is over and done."

His silver-grey eyes studied me. "But not forgotten, oh no. At least, not by me."

"Father?" Draco said, confused. "I don't understand what Mr. Filch could possibly have to do with anything. He's only a Squib."

Lucius smiled, bitterly. "Ah. You'd be surprised how much of a nuisance 'only' a Squib can be. Particularly that one."

I felt a wave of satisfaction. I did not dare allow it to show on my face. Instead I did my best to look frightened, which wasn't too difficult.

"Have you anything to say for yourself?" Lucius Malfoy asked me.

"No," I whispered. "Sir."

"Good. You seem to have acquired better manners since the last time we met. Or since the last time that *you* can recall meeting me, at any rate," Lucius drawled. "At least you're a Squib who understands his proper place in the order of things. Unlike another I could name. The Moffitts aren't really to blame. That old fool, Albus Dumbledore, has put some very strange notions into their heads."

Unable to help myself, I dropped the facade of meekness and glared openly at Lucius Malfoy. I knew that

he'd meant to provoke me, but it didn't matter. I was fond of the Moffitt family! And, though I am not anywhere near as threatening as Hagrid, I still did not intend to float calmly while a Death Eater insulted the Headmaster in my presence! I was doomed anyhow. There seemed no point in hiding my defiance. Maybe if I angered him enough he would kill me quickly.

Draco was giving me a look of pure exasperation. "Father," the boy said, placatingly, "Don't..."

"*Petrificus Totalus!*" Lucius Malfoy snarled at me. The body bind itself was not painful. But the thud when he let me fall to the ground jarred every bone in my paralyzed body. A cry of pain forced itself out through my clenched jaws. Lucius prodded my side with his boot. Then he turned me over onto my back.

"Father, if you hurt him, there will be questions," Draco cautioned Lucius. The boy's face was a calm mask. He sounded completely indifferent to my fate. But he'd moved between Lucius and me, blocking the path of any curses that the older wizard might want to throw in my direction.

"Don't concern yourself, Draco. I'm not going to injure him. At least not in any obvious way. The satisfaction would be all too fleeting. And it would be a foolish waste of an unexpected opportunity. No, I can think of a much better use for Dumbledore's highly trusted pet Squib.

"*Imperio!*" Lucius hissed in my ear, his wand inches from my face.

A wonderful feeling filled me, as if a lifetime of cares had all been wiped away. I struggled hard, both

against this vague unnatural happiness and even harder against the faithless act of betrayal that Lucius Malfoy was telling me to commit for him.

"Stubborn wretch, aren't you..." Lucius murmured. "Well. We'll do this the hard way, then."

Harshly, he said, "*Crucio!*"



I tried to resist him. I tried. But the combination of two Unforgivable Curses was more than I could fight. Through tears of pain, I saw the pale glimmer of Draco's frightened face as the boy crouched, shuddering, beside me.

"I've left no marks on the old man. There will be no unpleasant questions asked about what occurred tonight," Lucius reassured his son, quietly.

"Yes, Father."

"Still, for your own sake, I think that it is best if you do not remember what you have seen and heard. It is necessary for your own protection. You are blameless. None of this shall touch you."

Lucius's voice softened. "I am sorry, Draco. Forgive me. Remember only that we saw each other, we talked, and you found me well."

Lucius Malfoy's voice was gentle, but the spell he cast on Draco was strong.

"*Obliviate.*"

Lucius Malfoy turned to me. "Your turn, now," he said. "You will obey me, though you will forget who has given you your task. In a week's time you will return to the Forest, bearing the thing that I've asked you to fetch for

me. You will speak of this to no one. Is this understood?"

"Yes," I said, dully.

He paused. "There is one thing more. My son is not to be punished for leaving the Castle. You will not give him detention. Bring him back inside and consider the matter ended. You will remember this!"

"Yes," I murmured.

His wand glowed as it filled my field of vision. "*Obliviate,*" Lucius Malfoy said.




I woke up, gasping, from a nightmare that had left me shaken. Terrible dreams had plagued me for the past three nights. The details of the nightmares always faded within moments after I woke. The only thing that I could remember was someone speaking to me in a smooth, compelling voice.

My sudden movement had disturbed the nine cats who were sharing my bed. Rudely awakened, they stared at me reproachfully. Their golden eyes were bright in the moonlight that shone through my window.

Mrs. Norris purred. The soothing sound helped to calm my racing heart. Her eight kittens, nearly ready now to leave their mother, surrounded me inquisitively.

"No, Paladin, I don't want to play. Bastet, stop! That tickles! Ouch! Azoth, get away from my feet!"

It's hard to remain afraid when one is surrounded by playful kittens. The indistinct images from my nightmare had already slipped from my mind.



Early the next morning, I was polishing a suit of armor near the portrait of the Fat Lady. A soft gasp behind me made me turn round.

"Mr. Filch? Are you all right?" Callandra Moffitt stood there, her brown eyes worried.

Puzzled, I frowned at her. "Of course I am."

"Are you sure?" the girl asked.

"Yes," I said, gruffly.

I'm very fond of Callandra but lack of sleep was making me particularly bad tempered. Her question exasperated me. Didn't the child think I'd know if I was all right or not?

Neville Longbottom, who stood beside Callandra, looked from one of us to the other.

"He does seem a bit pale," Neville said to Callandra. "Do you see something more than that?"

My exasperation increased. I am also very fond of Neville, but the two of them were speaking about me as if I was something from their Care of Magical Creatures class!

Callandra nodded, frowning. "There's something around him. Something that ...hurts. It's hard to explain."

The girl shivered. "Neville, can't you feel it?"


Neville shook his head. "It must be a Squib-thing," the boy said.

"It is *not* a Squib-thing," I snapped, glowering. "If it was, then I would be able to feel it too, wouldn't I?"

The two of them exchanged a meaningful glance, the sort of look that seems to contain an entire con-

versation, but they said nothing aloud.


"Hurry along, now. You'll be late for breakfast. I have work to do and you're keeping me from it!" I said, testily.



A bit later, Ginny Weasley also asked me if I was all right. "I'm perfectly fine!" I growled. Then I bit my tongue. I can yell at almost anyone without regretting it, but snarling at Ginny always makes me feel dreadful.

"Merlin's Beard, child. I'm sorry. I'm just tired. Have you ever tried to sleep with nine cats using you for a Quidditch pitch?"

She laughed, which made me feel a bit better. Then she continued on to breakfast and I continued polishing.



That night I awakened, shuddering, from another bad dream. I managed to hold fast to some memories before they could slip from my mind. There had been tall trees around me and a powerful Dark wizard who had held me, helpless. The smooth, compelling voice had been his.

There had been a boy there, too. He had stood between me and the Dark one. A boy I considered one of the worst brats in the school. I had a vague recollection of pale eyes in a thin, haggard face. No, perhaps the boy had grey eyes?

I sighed. The rest of the dream's details had faded.

At least I'd managed not to disturb the kittens this time. The little furballs were piled up in a sleep-heap after a long day spent creating havoc. Mrs. Norris slept beside

her offspring. As much as she would miss them, I knew that she was looking forward to seeing them settled, each one with the witch or wizard of their choice. I ran my hand gently along her back until I drifted back to sleep.



I woke again before morning, unable to remember if I'd been dreaming or not. To my terror, I discovered that I was not in my bed, or even in my room! Red-and-gold was at my back. I had just stepped through the tapestry into the corridor in front of the stone gargoyle. The especially ugly one that guards the entrance to Dumbledore's office.

Professor Flitwick had placed his Unreachable Charms in and around the Headmaster's rooms. Had the Door been trying to bring me to Dumbledore?

What was I doing here, in my nightshirt? I did not remember summoning red-and-gold. Was I looking for the Headmaster? Why?

Sleepwalking was something that I had never done before. The thought that I had apparently just gone sleepwalking through my Door made me tremble.

What was wrong with me?

Sending red-and-gold away, I stumbled away from the stone gargoyle and wandered the Castle corridors aimlessly.

I found myself roaming through the echoing Great Hall. The enchanted starry night sky looked down on empty chairs and empty tables. After I'd circled the staff table several times, my restless journey took me out into the entrance hall.

Worn out but too afraid to sleep, I headed down into the dungeons. The smooth voice haunted me. At the base of the staircase there's a small shadowy area between the edge of the stairs and the wall. Creeping in there, I curled up in the darkness.

Rocking back and forth in misery, I didn't realize that anyone else was near until a quiet voice asked, "Mr. Filch? What's wrong? Are you hurt?" Startled, I looked up to see the softly flickering light from the torches on the stair-well reflecting off a pair of round glasses.

Harry Potter stood on the stairs, looking down at me. Where had he come from? I had seen no one. I frowned up at him and shook my head.

"I'm fine," I whispered, shivering. "Go away, go to bed."

The boy's worried look deepened.

"Aren't you going to yell at me and give me detention?" Potter asked. Then he frowned, ruefully, looking as if he wanted to kick himself.

*"You will not give him detention," the smooth voice had ordered.*

"No. The matter is ended," I murmured.

Relief flickered across the boy's face, only to be replaced by concern. "Ginny, Neville and Callandra are worried about you, Mr. Filch. They think that you're ill."

"I'm just tired..." I murmured.

"You should be asleep, then," Potter said. "In your room," he added, with a touch of wry irony. He came down the stairs and reached towards me, giving me a hand up. Too distracted to scold him for his impu-

dence, I simply allowed him to help me stand.

"Potter!" a voice snarled. It was a smooth voice, though the tone was furious. Trembling, I shrank back into the shadows.

"What do you think you're doing? Out of bed at this hour?"

"Professor Snape!" Potter said. The boy remained between me and the approaching (Dark?) wizard.

No... Severus wasn't a Dark wizard. I had him confused with someone else.

Snape was now beside Potter, looming over the boy.

"What have you done to Filch?" the Potions Master demanded, as he caught sight of me.

"Nothing!" Potter protested. "I was just..."

"He didn't do anything, Professor," I said, struggling to sound normal. "I was just telling him to go to bed."

"And giving him detention, I trust?" Severus sneered.

"That matter has already been dealt with," I said noncommittally, to the boy's relief.

"Off with you, then, Potter," Severus said, coldly. "Ten points from Gryffindor," he added as a parting shot. He glowered at Harry until the boy had gone up the dungeon stairs, out of sight.

Then he turned back to me, his pale face angry. "It's bad enough that Potter has the habit of wandering around after hours! If he's played some miserable prank on you, I hope that you're not going to allow him to simply get away with it!"

"He was only helping me up," I said.

"What were you doing on the floor in the first place?" Severus snarled.

"Nothing, Professor... I-I..."

I couldn't tell him that truth; that I'd been trying to hide from the voice in my head. Instead I blurted out the first reasonable explanation that came to mind. "I must have missed a step. I fell."

The look of concern on his face made me uncomfortable. I plowed onwards, sticking to the complete truth now. "I'm very tired. I've been having nightmares. I thought perhaps a walk would help."

Severus's face had darkened at the mention of nightmares. I suspected that he was no stranger to such things himself.

"Professor, can you make me a Dreamless Sleep Potion? Something a little stronger than the stuff that you brew for Poppy?" The desperation in my voice made him sigh.

"I have a potion already made that's a little stronger," Severus said. "I can give you a single dose. No more than that. It may become addicting."

"Thank you," I murmured.

"Come," Severus said. "You can bring the potion back to your room."



Summoning green-and-silver, I went directly from Snape's rooms to my own.

Mrs. Norris and her kittens were still curled up together on the bed. I envied them their peaceful slumber.

Taking a glass tumbler from a shelf, I carefully poured the potion that Severus had given me into it.

Then I put the tumbler down on my bedside table. I rinsed out the empty glass vial in my small bathroom, drying it thoroughly with a washcloth.

Then I reached into my pocket. Feeling like a puppet with strings inexorably pulled by an unseen, unrelenting master, I took out my handkerchief. Slowly unfolding it, I regarded what was inside.

Moonlight shone on a few very long, very bright silvery strands of hair. They were Dumbledore's. I'd found them caught on his chair in the Great Hall. Unable to stop myself, moving like a man in a dream, I had picked them up and taken them with me.

The glass potion vial was a perfect place for the strands of silvery hair. I replaced the stopper, went to my wardrobe and slipped the vial into my coat pocket.

Then, numbly, I drank the potion.

I lay down along the edge of the bed where I would not disturb any of the cats. As Severus had promised, my sleep was without dreams. I lay unmoving until long after dawn.

Even the kittens did not wake me.

## CHAPTER 2

# A Confrontation and A Cloister

"Tonight, you will bring the item to the Forbidden Forest, at midnight," the smooth voice in my head was saying. "You will come alone."

I had no strength to fight. I had to obey.

As I had done for the past three days, I moved mechanically through my cleaning chores, my manner grim and surly. I stayed away from other people as much as I could and barely took notice of anyone except to snarl at them.

At least until the argument. It was impossible for me not to notice that.

After their shared Potions class, their last class before dinner, Pansy Parkinson, Neville Longbottom and Callandra Moffitt had a confrontation directly in front of the broom cupboard where I was trying to put away my supplies. The door was nearly closed, and none of the children knew that I was there.

Their argument penetrated even the haze of my distress. I listened helplessly, unable to summon the strength of will to go out there and stop the dispute.

"Unbelievable... that we're expected to actually study with the likes of you!" I heard Pansy Parkinson say venomously to Callandra Moffitt. "Gryffindor will accept *anyone* these days. What's next? Muggles? At least Slytherin has standards!

"On the other hand, I take back all the things that I said about your family disowning you because of your little Squib-girl," Pansy continued, almost sweetly, clearly addressing Neville now.

"Your family will probably be pleased that you've found her! It was actually clever of you, finding someone who would be impressed by even *your* pitiful attempts at magic!"

"Neville's magic is NOT pitiful!" Callandra said, heatedly. "Only when compared with yours!" Pansy retorted.

"Compared with anyone's!" Callandra shot back.  
"You're an expert, I suppose?" Pansy said, disdainfully.  
"Squibs can feel how strong someone's magic is. It's one of the things we do!" Callandra told her.  
"Callie's good at any number of other things, besides," Neville put in.

"Name one other thing your little Squib can manage that a proper wizard couldn't do much better!" Pansy said, furiously.

"Well, she can ride a hippogriff," Neville pointed out, mildly. "Unlike some 'proper' wizards I could mention, she knows enough to be polite first.

"Hullo, Malfoy," Neville added, a heartbeat later. "We were just talking about you."

Though frustrated by my inability to intervene, I was pleased that Neville and Callandra were doing well in the verbal wizard's duel. But hearing the name "Malfoy" sent a tremor of fear through me. Terrified, I began rocking back and forth, hidden behind my supply boxes.

Then I heard a shrill mewing outside in the corridor, where the children were.

"Mrs. Norris?" Neville asked. "Is something wrong?"

My cat was nudging the cupboard door until the opening was wide enough to admit her. She came inside and began nuzzling against me anxiously. Holding her close, I reluctantly raised my eyes to the doorway. All four children were watching me with varying degrees of concern and consternation.

"Oh, lovely! He must have heard everything!" I heard Pansy mutter grimly. "We're going to get detention!"

Neville and Callandra came into the cupboard, moving aside the boxes. Their faces were worried. I suppose that I must not have looked well.

"Come, Mr. Filch. Up you get," Neville said, very gently. "We're taking you up to the hospital wing. Madam Pomfrey will find out what's wrong with you. She'll soon put you right again."

I shook my head, clutching Mrs. Norris against me. My grip must have been uncomfortably tight but my poor cat didn't protest. Poppy couldn't help me. No one could help me. I wasn't allowed to speak to anyone about what was wrong. The voice had told me so.

Between them, Neville and Callandra got me to my feet. Reluctantly, I let go of Mrs. Norris though she stayed right at my side as I stood. Callandra and Neville wouldn't listen to my protests that I was only tired.

"No, it's more than that," Callandra said. "You've been hurt. I don't know why you can't feel it."

"The old man was a fool not to insist on having that girl as his apprentice," Draco was saying to Pansy. "Anyone can see the job's become too much for the poor wretch."

My rush of fury at Draco was interrupted by a sudden, painfully vivid flash of memory. I saw the pale boy surrounded by tall trees, moving bravely to stand between an angry Dark wizard and me. I shivered.

Supporting me, Neville glared at Draco. "Mr. Filch will be all right soon, and the job isn't too much for him! You've got a very short memory, haven't you, Malfoy? Either that or you're ungrateful. Mr. Filch can always do whatever needs to be done. Have you

forgotten how he pulled those vines off your arm?"

Malfoy locked eyes with Neville. "I know what I owe the old man. I haven't ...forgotten."

Draco's voice trailed off. He was glaring at Callandra, who had started looking back and forth from Malfoy to me as soon as the boy and I were standing close enough together.

"What is it, Squib-girl?" Draco sneered.

Ignoring his tone Callandra said hesitantly, "Malfoy...? A-Are you all right?"

"Oh, please!" Draco snapped. "Are you going to tell me that I've been `hurt' too?"

I had another terrible flash of memory. Draco, white with fear, crouching beside me shuddering, while I wept helpless tears of pain.

Callandra frowned. "No. At least not like poor Mr. Filch has been. But there's still something... wrong."

Pansy eyed Callandra, looking both troubled and mistrustful. "Ignore her, Draco. She's only trying to upset you!" the blonde girl said. But her hand, which rested on Draco's shoulder, tightened in fear and concern.

I felt afraid too as I looked at Callandra.

Draco snorted. "Your highly touted Squib-senses must not be working right, you silly girl. I'm fine. No one has done anything to hurt me!" His self-assured manner made Callandra falter. But Draco's grey eyes were shadowed.

*Callandra's dangerous*, I thought, and the anger behind the thought did not seem to belong to me. *More dangerous than she knows*. Suddenly I was filled with fear. I knew that I had to get as far away from Callandra as I could.

Could the voice in my head force me to harm her?

Black-and-yellow appeared on the corridor wall near me, in answer to my unspoken wish. But I did not use my Door. Neville knew my secret. Callandra, Draco and Pansy didn't.

"Let me go! Please. I-I need to lie down," I whispered, stepping back, away from the children. "There's no need to bother Madam Pomfrey now. If I don't feel a little better by tomorrow morning, I will go to the hospital wing. I promise," I added, looking at Neville and Callandra's worried faces.

Ignoring their protests, grateful that Neville and Callandra were good children, too polite to try to take me anywhere against my will, I moved off down the corridor as quickly as I could. Mrs. Norris followed me. As soon as I found a deserted stretch of corridor, I summoned black-and-yellow and escaped to my rooms.



Six weeks ago, in a much happier time, Minerva had been my guest. The two of us had admired Mrs. Norris's newborn kittens and talked. I remembered the touch of Minerva's hand, strong and warm in mine.

How I wished that Minerva was beside me now. I wanted to go to her and pour out my fears. Even if that meant she'd discover that I was a coward. And even worse, a traitor. I knew that I was about to do something terrible. I was not alone in my mind, somehow... I felt helpless to stop myself.

*You will speak of this to no one.* The smooth whispering



voice had filled my head until I could hear nothing else.

Alone, except for Mrs. Norris and the eight kittens, I stared at the stoppered glass vial clutched tightly in my hand. It contained several long silvery strands of the Headmaster's hair. I longed to throw the vial away or destroy what was in it. Instead, I slipped it carefully back into my pocket. More desolate and alone than I'd felt for many years, I broke down and wept.

Black-and-yellow, which had not left my room since I had used it to enter, suddenly shifted position to the wall nearest me as if to attract my attention.

Weeping, I got up and stumbled through the tapestry without any clear destination in mind. The kittens followed me, scampering around my feet like overactive dust-balls. Their mother, clearly worried about me, padded softly at my heels.

All of us emerged into a chamber that I had not seen for decades.

I stared around me in wonder. In truth, I had forgotten that this place existed. Long ago, this sanctuary had been very familiar to me. The passing years seemed to have left no changes inside this peaceful haven. Gentle sunlight still filtered down from somewhere far above onto the waters of a small splashing fountain.

Either the room was really open to the sky, or it was enchanted to appear that way. The air smelled faintly of freshly blooming flowers. This hidden workroom was an ideal place to rest, but this was not a cloister that had been made by someone who could bear to sit idle.

An empty loom still stood in the center of the room.

Nearby was a familiar spinning wheel. Examples of a talented weaver's crafting were in evidence along the walls. Beautiful tapestries were everywhere. Each one was a familiar old friend. All the scenes showed various wizarding folk and magical creatures going about the day-to-day business of their lives. The one nearest me showed a pair of courting dragons and then the mated pair and their nest, full of eggs.

Rugs, woven in colorful patterns, decorated the floor. The overall effect was pleasant, busy and cozy. The place had a long-deserted feel to it. Yet there was no dust anywhere. Delighted by their new surroundings, with unfamiliar sights and smells to investigate, the kittens scampered everywhere.

Semyon and Briar chased each other across the floor and then began playfully wrestling together. Bastet leaped lightly up onto the fountain's edge to see if there were fish swimming in the water. Beatrice, Paladin and Pellinore sniffed curiously all around the loom, while Juno batted inquisitively at the spinning wheel. Azoth, slinking through the shadows like a miniature panther, found his way to an empty basket near the distaff. He curled up inside, purring contentedly, claiming it for his own.

Mrs. Norris kept a motherly watch on her kittens. But she followed me to the fountain's edge. Still weeping silently, I sat on the cool stone and rested my head in my hands. My cat jumped up beside me, looking at me with worried golden eyes.

"I'll be safe here at least for a little while, my sweet," I told

her, wiping at my eyes. "I have always been safe here."

It was true. Maybe within this chamber I could find the strength to ignore the compelling voice for a time.



As Apollyon Pringle's young, scared apprentice, I had first found this room many years ago. I'd been sure that my life could not ever get any worse. I had just spilled an entire bottle of undiluted Bundimun secretion while attempting to mix some cleaning solution.

When he discovered what I'd done, Pringle would be furious with me. He already had little use for a clumsy Squib. Now I had wasted his valuable cleaning supplies! He'd beat me for sure. Maybe with the cat o' nine tails he was always threatening me with instead of just his belt.

I'd fled. The nondescript tapestry I'd stumbled through hardly registered. All I'd seen was the cool fountain, with water I could use to get the sticky mess off my hands.



This place had been my refuge many other times. Always when I felt that I'd had taken more than I could bear. Hogwarts Castle could have easily swallowed the entire village where I'd been born. Learning how to find my way around, let alone how to keep this place clean, had taken me years.

The fountain chamber had always been a safe place for me to stop and think and catch my breath until I felt able to get back to my work again, and face whatever I was hiding from.

But gradually over the years, I had lost this room. Or perhaps I had just stopped needing to find it.

Well, I needed this sanctuary now, more than ever. I was grateful to have been brought here again after so many years. I finally knew whose secret place this was.

"Sweet Lady," I whispered, softly. "Greatest of the Hogwarts Four. Though I suppose you would have likely dismissed *that* notion. Glory does tend to get in the way of simply getting things done."

I sighed. "I was never one of your chosen, though I suppose I might have been. Severus said so and I trust his instincts. I've always felt at home here. Thank you for being so kind to me."

Miserably, I took the vial out of my pocket and studied it.

I would stay here as long as I could. Hopefully, I would figure out what to do before midnight came.



The Owlery is a large, circular stone room located at the top of the Castle's West Tower. None of the windows have glass in them, which makes the place very drafty. The hundreds of perches which rise all the way up to the ceiling were nearly empty. Most of their occupants had taken wing, to hunt. (I've always been grateful that this place isn't one of the rooms that I am expected to keep spotlessly clean. Replacing the straw in here at regular intervals is a big enough job.)

The windows are set rather high in the walls. They take a bit of climbing to reach. Pulling myself up, I settled onto a broad stone sill, mercifully free of regurgitated

mice. Far below me in the darkness, the Castle grounds led down to the dark, shadowy mass of the Forest.

*Come to the Forest at midnight*, the smooth, insistent voice in my head whispered endlessly. I knew that I would not be able to resist the compelling power of its command for very much longer. It was only a few minutes past eleven thirty at night.

I reached into my pocket. My fingers closed around the glass vial. Then I jerked my hand back as if the vial had burned me. Desperately, I tried to think of other things. The voice in my head mustn't know what I meant to do. I had thought of a way to avoid obeying the voice.

Looking around me at the Owlery, I shuddered. Years ago, one of the kittens from Mrs. Norris's first litter had probably died here. Either the foolish little beast had been mistaken for prey by an owl, or he had simply managed to fall out of one of the windows.

Not finding her lost kitten inside the Castle, poor Mrs. Norris had slipped outside to search. Her heart-broken crying over the small crushed body she had found on the grass far beneath the tall West Tower still haunted me. Hagrid had helped me bury the tiny corpse, visibly irritated by my lack of tears. I'd been irritated with him, too. The kitten had been dead and my tears would have changed nothing. Falling to pieces never changes the unpleasant facts of life. I could not let myself fall to pieces now, either.

On my way here from Helga Hufflepuff's hidden work-room I had managed to slip away from Mrs. Norris and the kittens. As always when we roamed the Castle

together, the inquisitive little creatures had soon darted off to investigate various curiosities that had caught their fancy. Dancing dust motes, dropped quills, brightly polished suits of armor, loose threads on carpet runners.

Thankfully, at least none of them seemed to be as reckless as their long-dead brother. Though Mrs. Norris would still have a bit of a job to round them all up.

I found comfort in the thought that this batch of kittens would probably be quite safe. Most of the beings inside Hogwarts seemed to be kindly disposed towards them. Even Peeves.



I had Ron Weasley to thank for Peeves.

The very first time that Peeves had set eyes on the helpless little waddling fluffballs, the poltergeist had chortled with wicked glee. "Ooooh! What have we here?"

Images of Mrs. Norris's vulnerable babies trapped in dark, hidden places as a "joke", or struggling with heavy things "mischievously" tied to their tiny tails had frightened me. Grabbing the nearest threatening item (a mop handle that I'd just finished repairing,) I had advanced on the poltergeist. "Stay away from them, you...!"

Peeves had not been the only one interested in the kittens. Hermione had been there, as well as all the children who had definitely been promised a kitten. Some of their friends had come too.

While most of the children had grabbed for the kittens, anxiously protecting them from Peeves, Ron, who had come with Hermione, had considered the

problem from an entirely different angle.

"Wait, Mr. Filch!" Ron had said. "You know that the kittens wouldn't have been born if it wasn't for Peeves."

"So?" I'd snarled, swinging my mop-handle at the laughing poltergeist.

"Well," the boy had said, "doesn't that make Peeves sort of like their godfather?"

Highly annoyed, I'd growled, "It most certainly does not!"

And then I'd seen the look on Peeves' usually wicked little face. The wretched creature was stunned and delighted. Moved, even. As if he'd just been given the keys to the Castle and had been invited to sit at the Staff table beside Dumbledore at the Welcoming Feast.

"I'm sure that Peeves wouldn't play any pranks on his own godkittens," Ron said, matter of factly.

"Godfather!!" Peeves had crowed, clearly delighted both by the boy's suggestion and by my look of anger. He'd thrown out his chest proudly and turned somersaults in mid-air. "I'm the kitties' godfather and there's nothing that Mean Old Filch can do about it!"

Unseen by the happily dazed poltergeist, Ron had grinned at me and given Hermione a wink.

I'd been skeptical at the time. But Weasley's clever move had worked. The poltergeist had never teased the kittens or harmed them in any way. In fact, the more outraged I acted over the notion of the kittens having a poltergeist for a godfather the more Peeves seemed to dote on them.



Thinking about Peeves and his unlikely but cleverly arranged protectiveness towards the kittens helped to ease some of the turmoil in my battered mind.

Slowly I stood up, balancing on the sill.

Then from behind me on the floor of the Owlery I heard a plaintive mew. Followed by a soft, anxious voice.

"Mr. Filch! What are you doing? Please come down from there! Please!"

It was Ginny Weasley.

My heart sank. I began to tremble. Oh, Sweet Merlin, no! This was difficult enough already. Turning my head I saw my small red-haired friend standing with my cat at her side.

"Go away, Ginny, child. It's very late. You should be asleep," I whispered, my hand tightening on the vial in my pocket.

"No. I'm not leaving. You're going to have to come down from there and give me detention," Ginny said.

"I-I can't." I said, miserably. "Please. Just go."

"You don't really want to do this," Ginny said, walking slowly closer with Mrs. Norris still pacing her. "I can see that."

Shaking my head without speaking, I shivered. I couldn't explain, couldn't tell Ginny that I wasn't alone in my own mind. The voice would give me no peace unless I did what it said. Not while I lived.

"Don't take out your wand, child," I whispered. "If you try to use magic to stop me, I'll know before you start. And I won't give you the chance."

Ginny stopped walking. In the moonlight I saw that

her eyes were full of tears.

"Thank you, Ginny. Now, please pick up Mrs. Norris. I really don't want her to jump up here with me. She could fall."

"If I do that, will you come down? Please? If you die, Mrs. Norris will miss you so much. I will too."

"Ginny..."

Mrs. Norris allowed Ginny to pick her up and cradle her. My cat was crying, too, the same heart-rending sound she'd made over her dead kitten. My heart ached and I was horribly afraid, but I wasn't going to cry. I'd cried enough already. Tears would not change what needed to be done.

There was another rustle of movement in the dark Owlery. Behind Ginny and Mrs. Norris I could hear other people.

Suddenly, three more children were hurrying out of the shadows. And moving towards me even faster than the children was a huge black dog. Quickly, I turned away from the concern and fear I saw in the children's faces and in the dog's pale eyes. Resisting the voice for as long as I had done had taken all my strength. I couldn't let anyone stop me.

"I'm sorry," I whispered.

*Forgive me*, I could hear the smooth voice in my head murmur. I knew that these words had not been meant for me. But the sorrow and regret in the voice tore at me, unexpectedly.

With my eyes tightly shut and the potion vial clutched in my right hand, I stepped off the sill into the emptiness beyond.



Just as I started to fall a pair of powerful jaws clamped tightly around my left arm. The huge black dog had made a truly prodigious leap. I don't know if the Gryffindor Animagus thought that he could possibly hold me there. If so, he was sadly mistaken.

The two of us plummeted downwards together towards the ground far below.



I could hear the four children screaming in grief and fear. Their voices cried out the dog's name and mine.

No...! I needed to die, but not poor Black. I already owed the Animagus my life, several times over. I could not take him with me! It was wrong. Suddenly, red-and-gold was directly beneath us.

A heartbeat later, the huge dog, his jaws still clamped tight around my left forearm, tumbled with me, down into the Door.

### CHAPTER 3

## Falling

Traveling through a Door had never been painful for me before. But when Sirius Black and I hurtled downwards into red-and-gold, the usual resistance that I met with whenever a passenger traveled with

me hit both of us like a slap from a giant hand.

Having the Animagus dog's large teeth clamped onto my left forearm was painful as well. It was a pain I welcomed, it meant that the Animagus was still with me. I still do not know how Black managed to keep his hold on me but I was grateful. A passenger lost within the confines of a Door would suffer a terrible fate.

The resistance within the Door absorbed a great deal of the momentum from our fall. Painful though this was, it saved our lives.

The Door released us about six feet above the grass near the bottom of the West Tower. Black emerged from the tapestry pale and unconscious. He reverted to his human form the instant we fell from red-and-gold. My left arm, freed as he Transfigured, was a bloody mess.

The thin dark-haired wizard had blood on his mouth, hopefully mine. A journey through one of my Doors tends to have dreadful effects on adult passengers. Severus Snape had emerged vomiting blood. He had stopped breathing too. Immediate help from Poppy had saved his life, but Snape had been bedridden for many days afterwards.

Alastor Moody had theorized that this was due to the Dark Mark that Severus still bore as a former Death Eater. Moody had suffered lesser effects after his own journey through a Door, but he'd still emerged terribly sick. He'd spent most of the next two days in bed.

Moody had guessed that an Animagus would have more resistance to the Doors' protective magic. Black did seem less affected than Moody had been. Though

he was unconscious, he wasn't vomiting. Black was lucky to be out cold before we struck the ground. He did not have to feel our painful landing.



Unconsciousness was a blessing. It did not last long.  
*Come to the Forest! NOW!*

The smooth voice cut into me like a whip but I couldn't obey. I hurt too much to move. Even opening my eyes would have been too much effort. Mrs. Norris was very close to me, making a low crooning noise. I heard anxious young voices speaking all around us.

"Sirius!!" Harry Potter sounded hoarse and anguished.

"He's all right, Harry! See, he's breathing," Hermione Granger assured him, clearly badly shaken herself.

Ron Weasley sounded as if he felt sick. "Filch is breathing too. His arm's a mess! Do you suppose that Snuffles chewed it up?"

*COME TO THE FOREST! NOW!*

I moaned.

A gentle hand touched my face.

"Poor Mr. Filch," Ginny Weasley said, her voice shaking. Then my little friend gasped. She must have finally looked over at the Animagus.

"Er... Ginny?" Ron said. "There's something important that we haven't told you about Snuffles."

"I-I'd already guessed that he wasn't just an ordinary dog! But I thought he was some sort of bodyguard..." Ginny faltered. "Harry, you called him 'Sirius.' Is he really who I think he is?"

"Yes, but it's all right, Ginny, he's innocent. He never hurt my parents. He was my Dad's best friend!" Harry said, earnestly. "He's my godfather."

"Mum knows all about him," Ron told his sister, reassuringly.

"Please, Sirius... wake up!" Harry sounded very young and frightened.

There was an answering groan from the Animagus, much to my relief. Poor, brave Gryffindor. I hadn't wanted to kill him, even though being alive was something of a problem for me at the moment. The voice in my head was beginning to overpower my pain.

*"THE FOREST!!! NOW!!!"*

Crying out in misery, I opened my eyes. Red-and-gold was back, hovering before me in mid air! I could reach it, if I crawled...

Ron and Hermione were both staring at the floating tapestry, their eyes wide. Harry was still leaning over his injured godfather and Ginny and Mrs. Norris were still beside me.

"No, Mr. Filch!" Ginny cried, trying to stop me from sitting up. "Lie still! You're hurt."

Mrs. Norris helped Ginny by jumping on top of me. I was still too weak to push them off.

"So, that's a Door," Hermione murmured. "We didn't really get a proper look at it from the Owlery..."

Ginny sighed, still holding me while I shivered. "The Doors are supposed to be a secret. Shall I bother asking how you know about them?"

"Er..." Ron said, uncomfortably.

"Um..." Hermione murmured.

"Don't worry. If anyone asks, we didn't hear about them from you or Neville," Ron said, brightly.

"How do you know that Neville knows?" Ginny asked, holding onto me tighter. I'd begun to struggle.

"Never mind that now," she said, a moment later. "Help me hold him. He's trying to get up!"

My left arm was torn and bloody from the Animagus's teeth, but it was usable. I was trying to twist away from Ginny. I'd managed to fling Mrs. Norris off me completely. But now Ron and Hermione were holding onto me as well and then Harry came over to help too. I could not fight my way clear of all of them.

It must have been after midnight. The voice in the Forest was pulling me harder than ever. I felt like a puppet dragged helplessly by its strings. It was then that I realized that my right hand was clutching at nothing and my pocket was empty! I could not obey.

A small part of me rejoiced. But my heart still turned to ice. The hoarse wail that tore from me startled the children.

"No, Mr. Filch, it's all right," Ginny tried to soothe me as I stopped struggling, put my head in my hands and sobbed.

"He can't help it, Ginny," Harry said quietly. "Someone's controlling him with the Imperius Curse. You were right. Callandra and Neville were right. Something's been wrong with Filch all week. Callandra sensed it but she wasn't sure what it was. She's probably never felt an Unforgivable Curse on anyone before."

Harry shuddered. He looked older than his years as he often did. "I've seen what the Imperius can do. Though Filch isn't nearly as bad off as Mr. Crouch was. Without you, Callandra and Neville, I may not have noticed. Even so, we were almost too late. If you and Mrs. Norris hadn't gone looking for Filch tonight, he would be dead."

"He jumped because he was fighting the Curse," Ginny said, her hands tightening on my shoulders. "What did they tell you to do, Mr. Filch?" she asked me, softly.

Still sobbing, I shook my head.

"He probably can't say anything," Ron told her.

Almost at the same moment, Hermione murmured, "Mrs. Norris? What do you have there?" Then Hermione gasped. "I can guess what he was ordered to do," the girl said, quietly.

Harry, Ron, Ginny and I all looked at her. Hermione was stroking Mrs. Norris with one hand. In the other hand, she clutched the glass potion vial, miraculously unbroken. Moonlight shone on the long, silvery hairs within. Only one person at Hogwarts has hair like that.

"You give that to me!" I growled, suddenly in a rage that did not feel like my own, even while my tears continued to fall. "NOW!" I was helpless. Nothing but a puppet. I had to bring the vial and its contents to the Forest. No one must be allowed to stop me. Black was still out cold. Only four children stood between me and the Door.

Weeping bitterly, I grabbed Ginny, who was closest. I held her in front of me like a shield. Any spells cast at me would strike her first. Harry, Ron and Hermione stared at me, horrified and furious. But Ginny was calm

and unresisting.

"It's not your fault, Mr. Filch," she said. The compassion in her voice tore at me.

"Give me the vial. Give it to me, and I'll let her go," I snarled at the other children.

All three of the older children had their wands out. I could feel their magic building. They might only be half-grown but they were mighty, especially together.

"NO!" I growled. "Don't make me hurt Ginny!" It was half a plea and half a threat.

The three broke off their spell and stepped back from each other. Their faces were carefully blank. But then I felt the warning surge of another spell from behind me. There was only one wizard that spell could be coming from.

Black. His unconsciousness had been a ruse, at least for the past few moments. The wily Animagus had gotten behind me. Sirius Black was still clearly shaken by our trip through the Door, but so was I. Spinning to face him as Ginny pulled herself from my grasp, I barely dodged his powerful Stunning spell.

I did not manage to dodge the powerful blow from his fist.



Dazed, I lay on the ground. My right eye had funny lights in it and my left one wasn't focusing particularly well. Even the painful ringing in my head could not drown out that terrible smooth voice. It was driving me back onto my feet. I lunged at Hermione, who still held the vial.



I could feel magic building as Hermione and Ron and Harry all prepared defensive spells. Their spells would undoubtedly have knocked me down again at the very least, but Mrs. Norris was suddenly under my feet. I fell over her, sprawling on the grass, but was on my feet in seconds. Then Sirius Black grabbed me.

"Stay down this time and let us help you!" the Animagus growled, pulling back his fist once more.

"No!!" Ginny cried, catching Black's arm. "He's going to keep trying to get that vial no matter what we do. I don't want him to be hurt. There must be a better way."

"There is," Ron said. "Hang on to him for just a moment longer, Sirius. I've got an idea."

Black was far younger than me, and stronger too. I struggled desperately with the Animagus while the children put their heads together.

Even preoccupied as I was, I caught snatches of what the children were saying. But their words didn't make much sense to me.

"...Remember Millicent's cat...?"

"Ron, you're brilliant!"

"...Just need to transfigure..."

"Hermione's the best one to do that."

"I'd better get the..."

"No, Ginny, best let me do it. I'll need you to save me, after!"

Black had me pinned to the ground, so I couldn't see what was happening. But I heard Mrs. Norris let out a highly indignant yowl and then Ron yelled in

pain. "OW! Grab Mrs. Norris, Ginny! Quick, explain things to her before she claws me to bloody ribbons! Harry, here, give these to Hermione..."

A whisper of magic danced right on the edge of my senses.

"...looks perfect!"

"But he'll be able to tell... remember Callandra's tests?"

"Give me that vial. Inside the glass he won't..."

"It's all right, Sirius. You can let go of Filch now," Harry said.

"Are you sure?" the Animagus asked, dubiously.

"Yes," Ron assured him, dabbing gingerly at a long scratch across his face. "We are."

Harry, Ron and Hermione leaned close to Sirius, whispering, as Ginny knelt in front of me holding the vial. The moonlight shone on the long, silvery hairs within it. "Here," she said, putting it in my hand. "You have what you wanted. Please do be careful, Mr. Filch."

That quickly, the urge to fight left me. Aching all over, I stood up and moved like a sleepwalker towards red-and-gold. All that mattered to me now was obeying the voice.

"Someone very Dark must have put the Curse on him. What if they have no further use for him after they get what they want?" Ginny cried, worried.

Sirius Black sounded as grim as the giant dog he resembled in his other form. "He'll have proven himself to be a useful tool, Ginny. They'll be wanting other things from him, I'm sure. Don't worry. He's not going to be facing any Dark wizards all alone tonight."

I did not stay to hear any more. I stumbled through red-and-gold and was gone.



A heartbeat later I stood, shivering, at the very boundaries of the Castle's protective spells. My Door could bring me no further. Ahead of me lay the Forbidden Forest. It was after midnight. I was late. The voice's continuous pulling had left me feeling dazed and weak. But driven relentlessly, I set off through the ancient trees, soon leaving the path.

Walking was difficult. I supposed that I had taken quite a beating. My legs were unsteady, my back ached and my right eye was slowly swelling shut. Tree roots made me stumble and fall. Each time that I picked myself up, I checked to make sure that the vial I carried in my pocket remained unbroken.

A clicking noise echoed through the dark trees around me. I thought vaguely that I had been hearing it for a while, but I did not know if it meant danger or not. The source of the noise was between me and my destination, so I kept moving.

Suddenly a long, hairy vine grabbed me around the middle, flipping me head-down. I struggled ineffectually against the impediment that was keeping me from obeying the voice.

A cloud must have moved away from the moon, far above. A brighter shaft of moonlight shone down through a gap in the canopy of trees. I saw what was holding me. It wasn't a vine at all. It was a hairy leg,

attached to a spider the size of a carthorse!

I didn't have enough strength to scream. Whimpering softly, I curled my right hand protectively around the glass vial in my pocket. Then I heard the smooth voice.

*"Avada Kedavra!"*

There was a horrifying flash of green. I waited to die. But it was the huge spider who fell, dead instantly. Striking the ground headfirst, I lay still with the spider's leg on top of me.

Strong hands dragged me free from the beast's leg. When the hands released me, I collapsed in a heap on the ground.

*"Lumos!"* the voice hissed.

The glow of a wand revealed the owner of the voice. A tall wizard in a hood, a mask and a long black traveling cloak stood over me. Painfully, I sat up. Then I reached into my pocket and withdrew the glass vial. My hand shook as I held it out for him to take.

"Ah," the wizard said. "Excellent. But you," the voice lowered, threateningly, "are late."

"I-I'm sorry," I whispered.

The tall hooded wizard studied me in the glow of the wand. "Hmm. The Curse seems to have taken quite a toll on you," he mused. "It's your own fault, Squib. You shouldn't have fought so hard. But you've been foolish enough to match wills with your betters time and time again. I suppose you've truly learned your lesson now."

"My fault," I murmured, curling up on the ground.

He sighed. "It was not my intent to break you. At least not yet. You could be a valuable pawn. Pity, to

use you only once. Perhaps I can..."

A crossbow bolt sliced through the air towards us, just as he leaned over me.

The Dark wizard acted swiftly. Hissing "*Mororari!*" he slashed his wand through the air. The bolt froze in flight, barely inches from his heart. The wizard remained calm and icy, though his breathing had quickened. Another wave of his wand and the bolt deflected. It ended up stuck, quivering, in a nearby tree.

"That," Hagrid growled, "was jus' a warning. So's this. Yeh'd better leave him be."

The huge man, another bolt already aimed, was flanked by two enormous, growling dogs.

At the half-giant's feet crouched a small grey cat. Her fur bristled wildly and her golden eyes glowed like lamps.

"My brave girl," I thought, weakly.

Mrs. Norris had never come into the Forest before. But Black and Hagrid had clearly told her to find me. Then they'd taken Fang and followed her. My sweet cat can always find me.

The Dark wizard laughed, mockingly.

"The Forest is your stronghold, Half-Monster," he said, coolly. "It would be madness to confront you here. I already have what I need. The Squib is yours, what's left of him!"

He Apparated.

Hagrid strode forward. He paused for a moment to rest his hand sadly on the still body of the giant spider. Then he knelt and picked me up.

"It's alright, Filch," the big man said, gruffly. "He's gone. I'll bring yeh back ter the Castle. They'll look after yeh, yeh poor old git."

Unable to answer, I hid my face against his coat to block out the sight of the Forest around us. I could not stop trembling. The half-giant carried me easily, as if I weighed no more than Mrs. Norris. He set off for the path with Black, Fang and Mrs. Norris at his side.



The hospital wing is a place that I had become uncomfortably familiar with, ever since I'd been kidnapped by Death Eaters back in December. Though I felt so weak that I was barely conscious, I had some idea of what was happening around me. The Headmaster and Poppy Pomfrey were both working on me. Their magic was powerful, either soothing or painful by turns as they probed my injuries, physical and magical.

Deeper than any other pain was the certainty that I had done something very terrible, even if the details were a bit blurry in my battered mind. I wanted to confess but speaking was too much of an effort. The only thing I could do was moan softly when their probing hurt too much.

"He's suffering from the aftereffects of the Imperius, most definitely," Dumbledore said.

"Used in tandem with the Cruciatius," Poppy sounded appalled. "I haven't seen anything like this before. Whoever's done this to him has created a new variation on the Unforgivables," she said, furiously. "And there seems

to have been a Memory Charm used on him as well..."

Poppy terminated the Diagnostic spell. "He'll have a rough time of it," she said, her voice soft and weary. "But given enough time and rest, he should recover. He's a fighter, our Argus."

I heard the Headmaster's sigh as he tucked the blankets around me. His hand felt firm and cool as he touched my forehead. "You have awakened Severus?" he asked her.

"Just after I called you," Poppy said. "I've already cleaned the wound on his arm. Severus started a batch of that potion he came up with for treating animal bites and he'll start some bandages soaking. He'll bring them to me as quickly as he can."

The Headmaster's voice was tired too. "I'll go and tell the children that Argus will be all right," he said. "And I'll send them off to bed. I seem to recall a number of cats out there. It might be best to let them come in. I do not think that Mrs. Norris and her family will be willing to leave our patient. Will you be keeping Snuffles here as well?"

"No, I think he'll be happier back in Gryffindor Tower with Harry. I'll give the poor creature a potion for pain. It will help him sleep. The children should conjure some pillows for him, he'll be needing a soft bed for a while. He's as badly bruised as Argus is. The pair of them must have taken a dreadful fall."

Their voices faded as they left my side. Soon after that I drifted off to sleep under a blanket of purring cats.



My peaceful rest did not last long. Trapped in a nightmare, I stumbled through the Forest, holding a lantern. I was looking for a student who was headed somewhere he shouldn't be. I caught glimpses of him as he hurried along the path ahead of me. A pale boy, elusive as a will o' the wisp.

Draco Malfoy.

The boy was in danger. Someone he loved and trusted was going to do him harm. Tear away a piece of his mind and lock it away from him, 'for his own protection'. A split in the path ahead of us had made the boy hesitate. He clearly did not know which way he should go. I cried out to him over and over, desperately. But the boy had vanished. I didn't see which path he'd chosen.



"It's all right, old man. I'm here." The boy's soft drawl no longer brought another, far more frightening voice to mind. I would not mistake any other voice for THAT one. Never again.

Draco had tried to warn me away. When I hadn't listened, he'd done his best to shield me. I remembered that much. What had happened after that? I could remember only pain. And the boy's frightened face...

Slowly the Forest and the path faded. I was aware of my surroundings again, though I lacked the strength to open my good eye. My left arm felt hot and raw and painful. All the fretful tossing and turning I'd done must have

annoyed the cats. I appeared to have the bed to myself.

"Professor, why was the old man asking for me? I don't understand."

"I do not understand either, Draco. But Madam Pomfrey asked me to bring you, and your presence does appear to quiet him."

"Is Mr. Filch going to die?"

"Madam Pomfrey expects that he'll live. She would not have left the bandaging of his arm to me otherwise, no matter how weary she felt. Here, boy, take the end of the roll and start unwrapping. Keep handing the bandages to me."

"His arm is a mess. That black beast of Potter's ought to be put down. Vicious dog!"

"The creature reportedly saved Filch's life." Snape's last statement was made in an extremely neutral tone.

"Professor, I heard what's *supposed* to have happened," the boy said. His tone suggested that the 'official version' of events could never be trusted. "The old Squib has been ill all week. I know that much is true. Supposedly, he went sleepwalking last night and fell down the stairs. And the dog grabbed him to stop him from breaking his neck. But, how did he get all those scrapes and scratches? It looks to me as if he was wandering about outside. And what about that black eye? I think someone struck him."

"I do not know what really happened, Draco. A bandage, if you please? Thank you," Snape murmured. With surprising gentleness he began wrapping bandages around my aching arm.

"If someone did hit him, it's likely that he deserved it. The Squib can be both foolish and insolent..." Draco sounded troubled. "The old man doesn't seem to understand that he should keep his mouth shut and his head down! Around c-certain people..."

"He's not a bad servant, really," the boy continued. "He's very loyal to you, Professor. Anyone can see that. You know how to manage him properly."

"Something appears to be bothering you, Draco," Snape observed.

"No, sir, I'm fine! I-It's just that girl. And her Squib-tricks. She told me that someone had... that I'd been... it's nonsense of course..."

"Tell me, Draco."

"Well, sir, she says that my memory's been Modified. It's absurd. I'm not some inconvenient Muggle!"

The boy sighed, his voice anxious. "She said that she's been studying how different spells feel, and that she's certain of it. Well, obviously she's lying. It's a Gryffindor trick, that's all."

His voice got softer. "B-but Pansy is worried about me. You know how Pansy worries."

"At least the poor old man is a useful Squib," Draco went on, before the professor could say anything. "I haven't forgotten how he dealt with those vines. He's quite brave... in his way. If he wasn't so ill, I am sure he could tell me that the miserable girl is wrong. Even though she is his pet. With two Squibs we should be able to tell if one of them is lying or mistaken!"

Concern filled Snape's voice. "Draco, do you have

reason to suspect that Callandra Moffitt might be correct about what has happened to you?"

"No, Professor! Of course not! No one would dare to do such a thing to me! My f-father would...! H-he'd... He would be furious."

"And how is your father?"

"Quite recovered. He sends his regards."

"Send him mine as well, when you write to him next."

Severus had been bandaging my arm steadily, all the while that Draco had been talking. The potion that the bandages had been soaked in were beginning to soothe the throbbing pain.

I sighed softly.



Shortly afterwards, I managed to wake myself up all the way. Draco had gone, but Severus was sitting in the chair beside my bed. Once more I lay under a purring mound of cats. Mrs. Norris and her kittens were curled up on top of me. All except for Azoth, who was stretched out on Severus's knee.

"How kind of you to rejoin us," Snape said, when I managed to open my good eye.

"Professor...?" I murmured faintly, "I've done something ...terrible."

"No, Filch," he said, very stern. "Terrible things have been done to you."

Bewildered, I gave him an uncomprehending look.

He sighed. "Albus has told me what he and Poppy discovered. But neither of them mentioned anything about

Draco. Tell me, what does Draco have to do with this?"

I remembered the boy in the Forest. How he'd tried to stand between me and harm. When I tried to describe the flash of memory, my throat closed up. Helplessly, I started to shiver. "I-I..."

"Are you unable to remember? Or unable to speak? Or both?"

I shook my head, miserably. My shuddering grew uncontrollable.

Snape hissed an oath. Then, picking up Azoth and setting him on my bed beside his brothers and sisters, the Potions Master took a goblet from my bedside table.

He supported and steadied me while he helped me drink from it. The potion was horribly bitter. But it worked. Slowly my tremors eased. I slumped against Snape's arm, exhausted.

"Argus. You unmitigated ass..." Snape said, bleakly. "Didn't I *tell* you to stay away from Lucius Malfoy? I may not be able to do what Draco refers to as 'Squib-tricks,' but I do know Lucius well enough recognize his handiwork. He's responsible for your condition. I am certain of that."

He sighed. "Albus and Poppy spoke of a merging of Curses and Lucius has always been ...creative. Unlike young Draco, I do have faith in Callandra Moffitt's talents. But why would Lucius work a Memory Charm on his own son?"

"Rest now. This is my concern. Not yours." Again, with surprising gentleness, he settled me back onto my pillow. His face was troubled.

## CHAPTER 4

# Visitors

My memories of the first four days after Hagrid carried me out of the Forest were confused and disjointed. I spent those days mostly under the influence of an assortment of sleeping draughts and pain-killing potions.

The Dreamless Sleep Potion was too potent to be taken in anything except small doses. Whenever that Potion wore off I was trapped in dark dreams. Sometimes I seemed to be falling from the West Tower towards red-and-gold below. Sirius Black tumbled beside me. When the Animagus fell with me into the Door, the brave dog's teeth slipped from my aching arm. He was lost inside the Door, forever.

Sometimes I was running through the Forbidden Forest. Draco Malfoy ran swift-footed ahead of me, eager to find his fate whether it was doom or salvation. Sometimes a giant spider clicked menacingly as it chased me towards a Dark wizard, hooded and masked. Evil magic roiled around him. Sometimes I faced him holding Ginny Weasley in front of me as a shield. I tried and failed to wake up before his Dark spell could strike her. Sometimes I stalked the Headmaster through the Castle, driven by a smooth relentless voice. Powerless to speak and warn him of my treachery, I reached out for his flowing beard. The

look of betrayal in his eyes went through me like a bolt from a crossbow. Poppy or Winky were always there to calm me when I woke up, terrified, too weak to scream. They fetched a milder potion to tide me over until I could tolerate Dreamless Sleep again.

Mrs. Norris and the kittens were allowed to come and go as they pleased. Mostly they seemed pleased to linger on my bed. Or nearby, if I was too restless. (Later, when I was feeling stronger, Poppy told me that she could always tell how comfortably I was resting by checking on the cats. If they were at ease, curled up around me, then she knew that I was doing well.)

Whenever Mrs. Norris, the kittens and I were all resting quietly, Poppy allowed other visitors to sit with me for a short time. For the most part I was too ill to speak, but their presence comforted me. Lovely Minerva, with worry in her grey eyes. Alastor Moody, looking far less lovely, but equally worried. Hagrid, who'd been busy knitting something large and hideous that I really hoped wasn't meant for me. Severus, who watched me with a haunted expression. And poor Sirius Black, who looked almost as sore as I felt. In his dog form, the Animagus limped towards my bed and settled himself gingerly on the floor. When Azoth, Paladin and Semyon began swatting at his tail, he whimpered plaintively. Mrs. Norris hissed at the rambunctious kittens and they left the poor dog in peace.

Several times I woke to see the Headmaster in the chair beside me. The sight of his long, silvery hair and beard filled me with shame. I tried to apologize

to him while he tried to reassure me that there was nothing to forgive. He did not appear to understand the terrible thing that I had done. The expression in his eyes was grave and kind.



A few of my visitors came at night. They were students, a fact which distressed me. I was touched by their concern, but I also wondered why there wasn't anyone in the Castle who was making sure that the children stayed in their beds!

Harry Potter, Hermione Granger and Ron Weasley came together. The boys were awkward and nervous. They played with the kittens while Hermione murmured comforting things to me, patted my hand and straightened my blankets a bit.

"Sneaking around at night isn't as much fun, somehow. Not when he's too ill to try and catch us, or even yell," Ron said.

Fun! Wandering around the Castle at night led to all sorts of horrible things. I would have given them all detention if only I had enough strength to speak. Then I remembered that I had done something terrible and had no right to punish anyone.

At least Mrs. Norris did make an effort to remind them that they were out of bounds. But when she mewed at them scoldingly, Hermione simply picked up my cat and cuddled her. Rather to my dismay, Mrs. Norris did not mind this at all.



Draco Malfoy also visited me one night. Moving like a wraith, the pale boy settled himself into the chair by my bed. "Mr. Filch? Can you speak to me?"

I couldn't, though I tried.

"I shouldn't have bothered you. You can't help me. Not in the wretched state you're in. I could have the world's most powerful Memory Charm on me and you wouldn't be able to say a word. Never mind. Rest. I'll wait until you're stronger."



Ginny Weasley visited me in the daytime, like a good child. I tried to apologize to her while my small friend tried to comfort me. The memory of what I had nearly done to her distressed me terribly.

Neville Longbottom and Callandra Moffitt came to see me in the daytime also.

"You were right, child," Poppy told Callandra, the first time that they came. "The poor man was ill. He'd been Cursed. It was two of the Unforgivables mixed up together, the Cruciatius and the Imperius."

"He *promised* us that he would come to you if he didn't start to feel better!" Neville said. The poor lad sounded so angry with himself. My heart broke for him.

"We should have brought him to you, no matter what he promised," Callandra added, unhappily. "He could have died. Without Snuffles, he would have been killed."



Poor Callandra! None of this was her fault.

"You spoke to Harry about your worries, and about what you sensed," Poppy told the children quietly. "Without the pair of you, and Ginny, Harry and Snuffles might not have been there to help Mr. Filch. He's going to be all right. He's getting a little stronger every day."



Five days after Hagrid brought me out of the Forest I woke up, still weak, but mostly clear-headed. I felt as if I'd managed to find my way back home after a very long and highly unpleasant journey.

As it happened, Ginny Weasley came to see me before breakfast. My small friend flung her arms around me. "You're looking so much better this morning, Mr. Filch! How do you feel?"

"Ashamed," I told her.

"Don't be," Ginny said earnestly. "I remember how it feels when something you can't control is making you do things that you'd never want to do!"

Hearing Ginny talk about the Chamber --an ordeal that the brave child seldom discussed-- undid me completely. I wept. Ginny hugged me again and started crying too. We woke Mrs. Norris and the eight kittens who were resting all over my bed. The cats started nudging both of us worriedly. Small grey Bastet climbed anxiously into the girl's lap.

Poppy came in and found us in tears, surrounded by curious cats. She was able to calm Ginny but I couldn't stop crying. I felt as if a dam inside me had broken.

"I've done terrible things..." I gasped. "I couldn't save Draco. I nearly got Snuffles killed. I could have harmed Ginny. And I've betrayed the Headmaster!"

"Oh! Poor Mr. Filch!" Ginny sounded stricken. "You don't know..." The child looked at Poppy. "He doesn't know!" she said.

None of us realized that Mrs. Norris had left until my cat came padding back into the ward, followed by Professor McGonagall.

"Argus, you haven't betrayed anyone," Minerva said in her most no-nonsense tones when she saw the pitiful state I was in. Her strong, slender hand reached out for mine. "You did not carry any of Albus's hair into the Forest. The children substituted a few strands of Mrs. Norris's fur and Transfigured them to look like Albus's hair."

"W-What...?" I murmured, looking anxiously into her lovely grey eyes. "The Dark wizard hasn't got anything of the Headmaster's? Truly?"

Minerva nodded. I wasn't a particularly pleasant sight at the moment (even less so than usual) but her eyes never left my battered face. "Truly," she said.

"No thanks to me," I said, mortified. I knew that I'd been weak and disloyal even though I hadn't meant to be. But thankfully the Castle and the Headmaster had other defenders besides me. True harm had been averted.

Minerva put her hand gently under my chin. "Listen to me, Argus Filch. You fought that Curse, doubly strong as it was, as hard and as bravely as anyone could have done."

Minerva had already told me that she thought I was

strong. Did she really see me as brave too? I longed to be the person that she saw when she looked at me. For her, I could try to be strong and brave. The very least I could do was try to stop whining.

I managed to smile at her. Her answering smile warmed my heart.



After Ginny and Minerva had gone, I feel asleep again. Severus was my next visitor. When he arrived he was clearly furious with someone. I only hoped that it wasn't with me. "Minerva told me that Filch has finally decided to wake up. I want to speak to him," the Professor snarled.

Poppy smiled, wryly, seeing that he'd wakened me. "Go ahead, Severus. He's somewhere under all those cats."

"Are you all right, Professor?" I asked him, yawning.

He looked annoyed. "I'm the one who is supposed to ask you if you're all right, Filch."

His sharp black eyes raked me up and down. Apparently he was reassured by what he saw. As soon as he'd settled into the chair by my bed, Azoth leaped into his lap.

"Memory Charms," Snape said, without preamble. "What do you know about them?"

"Not very much," I said. "Though I've been told that someone has put one on me."

Snape's expression grew angrier. "Yes, Argus. I know. I realize that you may not be able to answer my questions. If you cannot speak, try either nodding or shaking your head."

The Potions Master looked over at Poppy, who had gone to fetch a large potion vial.

"He seems to respond best to this one," she said.

Severus nodded his thanks. Poppy held the potion in one hand and waited beside me.

"We can make some educated guesses about what happened to you," Snape said. "You went into the Forest last week. You encountered Lucius Malfoy. He managed to cast two of the Unforgivable Curses on you simultaneously. Then he ordered you to bring him a few strands of the Headmaster's hair. Do you remember any of this at all?"

"Only p-pieces..." I whispered, starting to shiver.

Severus leaned forward. "Was Draco Malfoy present?"

My throat closed up when I tried to speak. Shuddering harder, I was able to nod. I could clearly remember the boy's pale, frightened face.

"Draco saw everything that Lucius did to you?"

Yes, he must have done. I forced myself to nod again.

"Professor," Poppy said, warningly.

"N-no. It's all right," I whispered.

Severus sighed, looking weary. "Lucius used a Memory Charm on Draco, then?"

I nodded, shuddering uncontrollably. I could still hear the pain in the smooth voice when it had asked for the boy's forgiveness.

"That's enough," Poppy said. "He's confirmed all your guesses."

Snape shook his head. "I still don't know *why!*" he hissed. "Somehow, I doubt it was because Lucius felt

ashamed of what he was doing!"

"H-He wanted... protect...D-Draco..." I choked out. Each word was a horrendous effort.

Glowing at Snape, Poppy gave me a few sips of the bitter potion in the vial. Slowly my trembling eased.

"Protect Draco from what? Guilt by association?" Snape demanded, ignoring Poppy's glare.

I nodded as Poppy helped me lean back against my pillow.

"What a mess!" Severus snarled angrily. "For four days Lucius ignored my owls! Today, finally, he has sent me a reply. It seems that this matter is 'none of my concern!' I am interfering in 'a family matter!' 'My son is perfectly fine!' He does not have to watch the boy grow steadily paler day by day! Draco will not admit to me that anything is wrong. But it is plain that he is struggling against something that is making him ill."

"Mu-much stronger Charm..." I gasped. "On the boy. Than on me."

Severus nodded, looking at Poppy, bleakly. "Can you help Draco?"

She frowned. "Memory Charms are tricky to remove. If the one placed on the boy is strong enough to be illegal, then attempting to take it off could cause permanent damage. Probably not even Lucius Malfoy himself could take the Charm off safely."

Severus's hands were clenched into fists. "What can we do? What do you recommend?"

"First, Severus, you should tell the poor child that we know the truth. He won't like it, but he may accept

it more easily, from you. Then we have to treat his symptoms and build his strength up. Drag him in here, if necessary."

Snape nodded grimly. "Prognosis?"

Poppy sighed. "I can't be sure until I've examined him."

"Professor?" I whispered, shuddering as I fought to get each word out. "Draco... h-he... tr-tried... protect... m-me..."

"From Lucius?" Snape asked, softly.

I nodded.

Severus pressed my shoulder gently. "Thank you for telling me, Argus. Poppy, I'm going to fetch the boy now."



Draco Malfoy, even paler than usual, sat on the bed next to mine.

"All right," the boy said, wearily, as he looked from Poppy to Professor Snape to me. "Perhaps someone *has* Modified my memory!" The admission was a painful one for the proud boy to make publicly. If not for Snape, Draco would have continued to suffer in silence for as long as he could. The boy's trust in Severus carried more weight even than his belief in the evidence presented by my "Squib-Tricks."

Poppy Pomfrey was seated in the chair between Draco's bed and mine. She had cast a Diagnostic Spell on the boy. I could feel the gentle flow of magic from the medi-witch to her patient. Professor Snape stood near Draco, looming over the boy like a concerned shadow. I was sitting up in bed, propped against the

pillows. Mrs. Norris was curled up on my lap and the kittens were cavorting about on the blankets.

"But I don't know who did it," Draco continued, sounding both frightened and defiant. "How could I know, when whoever it was made me forget?"

Severus frowned. "Tell us everything that you can remember about the night you went into the Forest."

Draco also frowned, looking troubled. For a moment he seemed about to protest. But then he obeyed Professor Snape.

"I'd received an owl from my father that morning," he began. "At breakfast. He'd been ill," the boy paused to explain to Poppy. "For weeks. I'd been worried. Father wrote that he wanted me to meet him in the Forest. At midnight," Draco said, watching our faces.

Poppy's expression remained calm and non-judgmental. I said nothing, my eyes downcast as I held Mrs. Norris. And Professor Snape appeared no more stern than usual.

"Continue," Severus prompted Draco.

"I-I went out to meet him. We talked for a little while. He was fine." A smile flickered briefly across Draco's thin face.

"There were just the two of you?" Severus asked, quietly.

Draco nodded. Then he frowned again. I felt his eyes lingering on me. "No, sir..." he whispered. "Filch... Mr. Filch... he'd followed me. He wanted me to go back to the Castle with him."

"What was Mr. Filch doing while you were speak-

ing to your father?" Severus asked.

Draco shook his head. "I-I think that h-he must have caught me after Father and I had already said our good-byes." His voice softened still further. "I don't recall him being there while my father and I were talking."

Troubled, the boy asked, "Why don't you ask Mr. Filch, sir? Can't he tell you?"

"His memory of the evening in question has also been Modified, Draco," Severus replied, tonelessly.

"Oh. I see," Draco murmured, biting his lip. He looked as if a heavy burden had settled on his thin shoulders.

The boy continued, hesitantly. "Professor? Do you think that there's a connection between what happened in the F-Forest that night and Mr. Filch's ...illness?"

"Yes," Severus said, as his dark fathomless eyes locked with Draco's shadowed grey ones. "I have suspicions. But no proof. Mr. Filch is unable to speak about what happened to him."

Draco gave me a look of mingled pity and distress. "I see," he murmured once more. His hands were clenched nervously. "Sir...?" the boy said, looking entreatingly at Severus. "Please, believe me. I have told you everything that I can."

After a few moments he stared down at his clenched hands. "May I go back down to breakfast?"

Severus shook his head. "Both Madam Pomfrey and I feel it would be best for you to rest here today."

"The Memory Charm has been affecting you, Draco,"

Poppy said. I felt her gently terminate the Diagnostic spell. "You've been feeling very tired. Not eating well. Not sleeping well." These were statements, not questions.

Draco did not bother to deny anything that Poppy had said. The evidence was all too plain to anyone who took a good, hard look at him. Trying not to sound afraid, the boy looked at me again. "What will happen to me?" he asked her. "Am I going to become very ill?"

"No, child," Poppy said, gently, her hand on his shoulder. "There are spells and potions that will help you rest and recover your strength. We can start you on them at once."

Her comforting words were meant as much for Severus as they were for Draco. Some of the strain started to leave Snape's body. But the Potions Master grew tense again at Draco's next question. "Will I start to remember things?"

"I can't be sure," Poppy told him. "Perhaps, perhaps not. If you do, it will help you a great deal to be able to talk to someone."

"You may always come and speak to me about it," Severus said.

"Yes, sir." Draco's voice was barely audible.

"You will need to take things a bit easy for a while," Poppy told him.

"What about Quidditch?" Draco asked, anxiously.

"We'll see," Severus said. "It depends on how well you manage to follow Madam Pomfrey's instructions."

Sighing, Draco obediently drank a mild sleeping potion as he followed Poppy and Severus to the front ward.



Poppy had just changed my pain-killing potion. The new one was milder and did not work as well. All the while that Severus and Poppy had been speaking with Draco, my discomfort had been steadily increasing. Poppy returned from settling Draco into bed to find me in utter misery.

"It can't be helped," Poppy told me, sympathetically. "The stronger potions can be addicting, if taken for too long. Where does it hurt? Your back?"

"Yes..." I gasped. Most of my other assorted injuries were healing well but my back ached constantly. I let go of Mrs. Norris, who seemed relieved, as I'd been clutching her tightly. Poppy used a gentle levitation spell to turn me onto my stomach. Using heating charms and warm compresses on my back, she gave me a sleeping potion for good measure. I felt the cats settling all around me as I dozed off.



Some time later, half-awakened by another back-ache, I heard Winky's small, squeaky voice. "Argus Filch is resting! Draco Malfoy should be resting too. Sir should not be disturbing Argus Filch." I felt the elf adjusting a fresh compress across my back.

"I'm not going to bother the old man." Draco sounded weary, torn and miserable.

My lingering pain and their quiet voices fought the effects of the sleeping potion I'd been given. Caught

halfway between slumber and wakefulness, I listened to the boy and the elf.

"Draco Malfoy is having bad dreams? Sir is wanting Madam Poppy?" Winky asked.

"N-No. I'm perfectly fine."

"If sir is forgiving Winky for saying so, sir is looking very troubled."

"It's none of your..." the boy snapped, then he broke off with a sigh. "I mean ...it is not your concern," he said coolly, if a bit more politely. "It's a matter between wizards. Not any business for a house-elf."

"Winky is understanding, sir. Winky is not meaning to be bad."

"You're not bad, Winky. You're a very good house-elf. Not like some others I could mention," Draco said. "Winky?" he continued, after a few moments' silence. "Good house-elves keep secrets, don't they?"

"Oh, yes, sir! Good house-elves is keeping master's silences and secrets, for forever and always."

"You only keep secrets for your master? Only for Dumbledore?" Draco asked, plaintively.

"Yes, sir," Winky said, very softly.

"Oh. I see. Because you have no choice, I suppose."

"Tis part of being a house-elf, Draco Malfoy."

The boy sighed, desolate.

"Sir is keeping a secret also?" Winky asked the boy, timidly.

"What do you mean by that? I'm a wizard, not a house-elf!" Draco snapped.

"Secrets is kept by wizards and house-elves for

many reasons, sir. Even house-elves is knowing of secrets kept for love. Those secrets can be very heavy ones indeed." The elf's voice was filled with sorrow.

I heard the soft sound of Draco weeping.

"Oh! Poor sir mustn't cry! Winky is getting Madam Poppy."

"NO!" the boy choked out. It sounded more like a desperate plea than an order. "Don't go! Don't get anyone. Just stay here with me." For a time I heard only the boy's forlorn crying and the house-elf's comforting murmurs.

"Professor Snape has said that I can always speak to him," Draco murmured when he was a little calmer. "Usually I can. I've always been able to talk to him. B-but not about this. You see, the Professor and my father are angry at each other. I want both of them to be proud of me. And I don't want to get in the middle of a quarrel between them. I really don't remember very much about that night. But I can guess at least a small part of the reason why they're angry. My father can be very... harsh sometimes. And it makes him furious when servants don't know their place. The old man likes to be insolent to my father. Though he's loyal to the Professor. And the Professor cares about the old man. There's no shame in that. True loyalty ought to be rewarded."

The boy's voice trembled. "The old man might be insolent, but I really can see the Professor's point. If anyone ever hurt Crabbe or Goyle so badly, I'd be furious too. Even if Vincent and Gregory had been stupid and probably deserved what they'd got. N-Not that

Crabbe and Goyle are Squibs or servants, or anything like that," the boy continued, hastily, "but they're... well... I do have to look after them. They've got far more muscles than brains, those two. At least they do have the sense to let me do the thinking. They may not always understand my reasons, but they trust me. I've never really thought about it. How hard it must be to trust like that. To have faith that something you can't understand must have happened for a good reason."

I heard the elf's tiny sobs.

"You ridiculous creature, don't you cry too!" Draco sniffled. "If Madam Pomfrey comes back now, she'll think that I've been pulling your ears."

I felt a little annoyed, myself. If I understood Draco correctly, he thought I was nearly as thick as Crabbe and Goyle! What nerve! But my pity for Draco was stronger than my pique. I knew just as Winky did that Draco's heartfelt desire to make both Professor Snape and Lucius Malfoy proud of him was totally impossible.

I'd been trying to fight off the effects of the sleeping potion. Draco's startled "OOF!" made my eyes snap open in surprise. I saw the boy and the house-elf both sitting on the empty bed next to mine. Winky had flung her tiny arms around Draco's neck. She was bawling her eyes out.

"I didn't hurt her!" Draco told me. He was patting the elf's back awkwardly, looking as if he didn't know what else to do.

"Poor boy!" Winky cried, looking simultaneously fierce and broken hearted. Then the elf disappeared with a sound like a whip-crack.

"Don't ask me what *that* was about!" Draco said, defensively. "I have no idea what I said to upset her that much." He brushed at the lingering traces of his own tears. "House-elves can be very strange, sometimes."

## CHAPTER 5

# Just Desserts

As the days passed I slowly grew stronger. The kittens continued to spend a great deal of time either lying on my bed or scampering about in the hospital ward. When Poppy allowed me to have more visitors, I was often surrounded by children as well as by rambunctious kittens.

Generally I would say that Poppy Pomfrey has far more patience than I have. But I could tell that her forbearance was nearing its limits.

"You can't keep the children out," I protested, when she grumbled. "The Creeveys and the Morgans and Hannah, Daniel and Ginny have all been so patient. It wouldn't be fair to keep them away from their kittens."

I didn't have to add that the children had also been deprived of their kittens' company during the whole week that I'd spent confused and ill under Malfoy's Double-Curse. My guilt and sorrow must have been obvious. Poppy relented. But when the kittens were completely weaned Poppy was even more relieved about it than I was.

Still confined to my bed, I comforted Mrs. Norris. My cat seemed to have mixed feelings about her little ones going off on their own. "There, there, my sweet. You've done a splendid job with them and they'll be fine."

Hermione, teary eyed and full of last minute instructions, formally gave Bastet to Ginny, Juno to Lilith, Beatrice to Gehenna, Pellinore to Colin, Paladin to Dennis, Briar to Hannah and Semyon to Daniel.

Several weeks earlier Minerva had translated some tidbits of feline parental advice, as given by Crookshanks and Mrs. Norris to their kittens, on the subject of selecting a companion.

"Crookshanks advises that young humans are quite affectionate, extremely playful and very easy to train properly. Especially if the kittens have the good sense to choose themselves a clever one," Minerva had told me, gravely.

"Oh?" I'd murmured. "And what does Mrs. Norris have to say about this?"

"She agrees with Crookshanks, though she points out that young humans can also be quite messy. Not to mention overly curious, which often leads them to wander about in places where they ought not to be," Minerva had said.

I had been pleased with my cat's good sense.

"Mrs. Norris goes on to say that a fully grown companion can be much more attentive, patient and gentle..."

I'd smiled.

"And is usually well worth the occasional extra effort required," Minerva had concluded dryly.

"Extra effort, eh?" I'd muttered, gruffly. "Hmmp!"

Seven of the kittens had taken the "children are easy to train" option. But Azoth had chosen to follow the "adults are worth the extra effort" route. On the day in question, his wizard had thus far remained conspicuous by his absence.

"Professor Snape hasn't forgotten, I'm sure!" Lilith Morgan assured Hermione and me.

"An owl came to him this morning at breakfast," Gehenna added. "It seemed to be about something very important. He left the Castle immediately after his last class. There's a note on his office door."

Azoth was washing his small whiskers, attempting to look unconcerned. But his eyes were wide and his tail was fluffed out in anxiety.

Looking at the kitten and listening to the Morgan sisters I felt a surge of foreboding too. An urgent message? Something important enough to make Severus rush away from the Castle? What could it be?

*Not the Dark Lord, I thought. The Evil One has far worse ways of summoning people. Surely, He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named wouldn't do something so ordinary as send an owl...*

Lucius Malfoy then? What did he want with Severus? The pale-haired Dark wizard would have been gratified by my reaction to the merest thought of him. I shuddered.



"Did this message seem to upset the Professor?" I asked, trying not to sound as bothered as I felt. Hermione and Ginny were as interested in the answer as I was.

Lilith and Gehenna looked at each other.

"He wan't upset, exactly," Lilith said after a moment. She was busily rubbing Juno's ears while the kitten purred up a storm.

"He seemed to be more exasperated," Gehenna said, between giggles as Beatrice climbed up her robe to wrap herself around the girl's small shoulder.

"Exasperated?" I wondered, baffled.

Hermione and Ginny exchanged a glance and grinned.



Poppy had been looking forward to a more peaceful hospital ward once the kittens were no longer full-time residents. Now that her goal was within her grasp she could afford to be generous. She didn't object when the kittens and their young owners chose to linger for a while. But when Harry and Ron came into the ward, levitating a dripping wet, whimpering Snuffles between them, poor Poppy finally reached the end of her patience.

Firmly, the medi-witch sent all the children and the kittens (except for Azoth, who looked smug at being allowed to stay) out of the hospital wing. Though she was sympathetic to Harry's concern for Sirius, she sent him and Ron away with the other children as well.

"I'm going to keep Snuffles here, for tonight. You

may come back to see him later if he behaves," she said, giving the Animagus a dark look.

Alone except for Poppy, me, Mrs. Norris and Azoth, Black Transfigured back to his human shape. His shabby robe was sopping wet. The Animagus was rubbing his back, looking pained.

"Overdoing things a bit, were you?" Poppy growled as she hurried over to him. "You're worse than a puppy! Don't know the meaning of the words 'take things easy!' What happened?"

Black looked embarrassed. "Some of the children were throwing sticks into the lake, so I started fetching them out. Just for exercise..."

Poppy frowned at him.

"I have to keep myself fit, don't I? Wouldn't want to start putting on weight," Black continued, wryly.

This earned him an even bigger frown from the medi-witch. In spite of all the food that Snuffles received at the Castle, the Animagus remained too thin.

"Well," Black continued, sheepishly, "one thing led to another. Soon, I started catching the sticks as the children were throwing them in. Only, on the last catch I think I may have... er... twisted my back a bit."

I winced as my sore back gave a sympathetic twinge. Poor playful idiot. He really wasn't healed enough for such antics.

Poppy helped the Animagus out of his wet robe. Rapidly she conjured him a dry robe and two large, fluffy towels. Black wrapped one towel around his waist and Poppy began rubbing his hair dry with the other.

As soon as the Animagus had pulled on the dry robe, Poppy waved her wand again. "A hot bath is just what you need," she said. A huge metal washtub appeared on the floor in front of the beds with a loud BANG.

"What? In that?" Sirius protested, sounding as if he'd regressed down to age eleven. "Remember when Snape got hurt? You didn't make *him*..."

"Severus is neither a wanted man nor an Animagus," Poppy said sternly. "Now, how else would I be expected to give a dog a bath?"



Poppy summoned six large buckets. Soon there was a chain of buckets floating back and forth from the small bathroom at the end of the ward, each one full of steaming water to pour into the washtub. The metal tub filled up, slowly.

"I'm going to fetch some healing potions to mix in your bathwater," Poppy said to Black. "Do not go anywhere!"

With a meek nod, the Animagus settled himself gingerly onto an empty bed. Keeping his human form for the time being, Black watched the floating hot water buckets as if hypnotized.

"I hope that they'll stop bringing water when the tub is full," he said. "Years ago, Lily took us to see this Muggle film. There was a sorcerer and a mouse..."

I had no idea what Black was talking about. Poor little Azoth had my attention at the moment. The small black cat had leaped down from my bed and padded over to the nearest wall.

Scratching at the wall, he mewed plaintively. He'd been doing that from time to time, ever since I'd been well enough to take proper notice of him. I didn't understand what he wanted.

Both Mrs. Norris and Minerva had witnessed his behavior. They clearly knew what Azoth was after. Mrs. Norris had responded to Azoth's wall-scratching with a scolding hiss and Minerva had frowned at the kitten.

"He's hardly well enough yet..." Minerva had told Azoth.

"Never mind what he wants, Argus, you're supposed to be resting," Professor McGonagall had said to me when I'd questioned her. My curiosity was definitely piqued. But I'd never had much luck at winning arguments with either Mrs. Norris or Minerva. I certainly wasn't about to take on the pair of them, together.

Azoth wasn't giving up. He'd found a new and possibly sympathetic ear. He mewed plaintively at Black.

"Do you understand what he wants?" I asked the Animagus.

"He wants you to go and fetch his basket for him," Sirius said.

"His... oh!" I said. "Poor little lad... is that all you wanted? Your Mum and your Auntie Minerva mean well, but I'm sure that I can manage that much." With a guilty glance after Poppy, I sat up. Very carefully I slid myself out of bed. I felt as if someone had used a very strong jelly-legs curse on me. The floor seemed like it was a mile away.

I'd already summoned black-and-yellow. The Door had appeared on the wall in front of Azoth, only two steps away.

"Where do you think you're going?" Black asked me. His tone was a blend of amusement and concern.

"To fetch his basket of course," I said, gruffly. "Poppy told *you* not to go anywhere. She didn't say a word to me!"

"Only because she never imagined that *you'd* wander off," Black pointed out reasonably.

"That's completely beside the point. I'll be right back," I replied. Then I half fell, half staggered through black-and-yellow.



Helga Hufflepuff's sunlit workroom never seems to change. Always clean and inviting, with its loom and spinning wheel, lovely tapestries on the walls, a small cheerfully splashing marble fountain in the middle of the room and colorful rugs on the floor. The rugs were soft and thick as well as colorful. I was truly glad of that. Landing in a heap on a hard stone floor would have been painful otherwise.

Azoth and Mrs. Norris had accompanied me through the Door. Mother and son nudged me in concern. Mrs. Norris hissed indignantly, first at Azoth, and then at me. I was sure that poor Black was going to get an earful from Mrs. Norris for translating the kitten's request when we returned to the hospital ward. And Poppy, if she returned before I did, wasn't going to be very pleased with me either.

But poor Azoth... all his brothers and sisters had gone and still no Severus! The kitten had to be worried about his wizard. Merlin's Beard, I certainly was.

Fetching the basket was such a small thing and it would comfort the kitten.

Azoth trotted over to the basket which was by the distaff. Rubbing up against it, he purred contentedly.

"It is quite a nice basket, really..." I told Mrs. Norris. "Large, plain and sturdy. And there's plenty of room for him to grow into it. Severus doesn't have to *know* that it's Helga Hufflepuff's old wool-basket. I won't tell if you won't."

Now all I had to do was reach the thing. The few tottering steps I'd already managed had left me weak and dizzy. It occurred to me that Minerva and Mrs. Norris had been right. I wasn't really up to this.

I had to crawl. Finally, basket in hand, I paused to catch my breath. It had been nearly a week and a half now since Hagrid had brought me out of the Forest. My strength was returning so slowly.

*The thing you fear will happen, before the start of summer*, Professor Trelawney had predicted. Harry, Ron and Hermione had tried to ease my fears. But I could not dismiss the Divination Professor's words as easily as the children seemed to be able to do. What if I never regained my strength? What if I could never resume my duties? I was already afraid for Severus, and now I was scared for myself too. Sitting on the floor, I buried my face in my hands.

As if in response to my fear and helplessness, there was a change in the air. A tingle of magic ran down my spine. Something inhuman, ancient and incredibly powerful was stirring. My first inclination was to shrink away in shame. The Headmaster had said that

the Castle would not be angry with Its Caretaker, but I'd been weak and disloyal. And now I was probably useless into the bargain.

No. Minerva had told me that I was brave. She was being overly generous, of course. But she'd also said, truthfully, that I'd done my best and fought as hard as I could. Let the Castle decide if I was worthy or not. I knew that I would be Caretaker as long as the Castle would have me. Giving in to the magic, I let it wash over me.

Four times in recent months I had endured these experiences. Each time the power had blazed through me, leaving me wrung out, battered and exhausted. This time was different. Only the smallest fragment of the power touched me. It was gentle, like a soft breeze against my face.

When it faded, I felt a little stronger. Just enough to be able to return to black-and-yellow. Carrying the basket and accompanied by Azoth and Mrs. Norris, I stumbled back into the hospital ward. Sirius Black was there to take my arm before I could fall.

"I was about to come in after you," the Animagus told me wryly. He took the basket's handle in one hand and helped me wobble to my bed with the other.

"I do hope you're joking," I said. "Even if you're not, it would be impossible for you to go in on your own, thank Merlin. Mind your back! You wouldn't want to twist it again."

"Falling from the West Tower was unpleasant. But the Door? I wouldn't mind giving *that* another go," Black said with every sign of sincerity. "It wasn't that bad."

"Gryffindors!" I thought, glowering. I wanted to scold him, but Mrs. Norris was already taking care of that. Though Azoth was purring and rubbing against Black's ankles, which balanced things out.

When Poppy returned with the potions she'd gone to fetch she found me settled back in my bed, looking weary. Mrs. Norris was curled up beside me, still looking indignant. Black had shifted to his dog form. Like a good dog, he was waiting patiently by the now-filled tub. Azoth was in his basket, which Black had placed on the floor by my bed. Poppy noticed the basket and raised an eyebrow, but said nothing.



I dozed off, concerned about Severus, though my dreams were untroubled. It was Severus's voice that woke me.

"You... LOUT! Stop that!!!" Snape roared.

"Bad Snuffles!" Poppy scolded.

I opened my eyes to see one very wet dog and two very wet people. The newly bathed dog-Animagus had emerged from the washtub and had apparently attempted to shake himself dry. Poppy hadn't minded much as she was already thoroughly soaked. Severus was both dripping and livid.

That was the first thing that I noticed about him. The second thing was the scent of strawberries with a hint of lemon that surrounded him. "Professor...?"

He sighed, still glaring at Black. "Yes, Filch, I am using a glamour. I could hardly walk through the Castle, looking like this." He took out his wand and

removed the glamour spell.

With a start, I realized that the 'scent' of the glamour had been masking other magical traces. Without the glamour, poor Severus had the redolence of a wizard who had just been in a magical battle. Traces of power, both his own and that of another strong mage, lingered about him. And the poor man was covered with awful scratches! He looked if he'd been mauled by an army of cats. Knowing through sad experience how uncomfortable he must feel, I winced in sympathy.

Poppy said a word that I didn't think she knew and started gathering her bottles of healing potions and salves. Dragging Severus over to a bed, she began cleaning his wounds. Snape submitted to this treatment with stoic forbearance.

Black, taking his human shape and slipping into a dry robe, grinned at the wet, bloody Potions Master.

"So, who looks worse? You or the other fellow?" the Animagus wanted to know.

"What?" Snape snarled.

"Does Lucius have a tail?" The Animagus seemed to be having a difficult time keeping a straight face.

Snape glowered. "Yes, he does. How did you...? Ah, never mind. You needn't tell me. I can guess. I might have known it was you."

Black smiled mysteriously, without correcting Severus. I knew that Black had not been the primary architect of whatever mischief had befallen Lucius Malfoy. That honor belonged to Ron Weasley. The boy had been aided and abetted by Hermione, Harry and Ginny, as well as

Black. But the Animagus wished to protect the children. It would be safer for the younger Gryffindors if Severus assumed that Black was to blame.

I agreed with Black. Lucius Malfoy could never force Severus to reveal the true culprits to him if the Potions Master never knew who they were. On the other hand, Lucius Malfoy had resources other than his connections in the Death Eaters. He was a wizard of wealth and power while Sirius Black was a wanted fugitive. I hoped that Malfoy would never question Severus as to who was responsible for his condition, for both Severus's sake and Black's.

The Potions Master gave the Animagus a very caustic glare. "You were expecting something like this!"

"Lucius appears to have been a bit... distraught," Black said cheerfully, not really answering the question.

"To put it mildly," Snape said in a sour voice. "When I told him that the effects would simply have to wear off in their own good time, he didn't take the news very well. In fact, he became quite irate..."

Poppy interrupted, muttering something unintelligible and angry as she began cleaning a group of five diagonal slashes across the Potions Master's face.

"It's his own fault, really," Snape continued, trying not to flinch. He was still glowering at Black, but now the traces of a rather wicked little smile were beginning to linger around his mouth.

"I could have told the arrogant fool that the hair he'd used in his Polyjuice potion was not what he thought it was!"

"Do you mean that there's a way to tell?" Black asked.

"Yes, of course there is!" Snape said, smugly. "There is a very subtle difference in the normal hissing and frothing reaction. Quite plain to the educated eye. In fact, judging from the rather interesting after-effects, I'd have to say that the hair he used was a cat hair, Transfigured to appear human."

"The Transfiguration spell mucked the potion up even more?" Black asked, grinning.

Snape nodded.

"Lucius had a tail and claws, obviously," Black muttered, watching Poppy cleaning a nasty looking gash on Snape's jaw. "What else? Fur all over his face?"

"Not only his face. Everywhere." Snape's wicked little smile was back.

"Cat's eyes?" Black wanted to know.

"Yes... not to mention cat's teeth. And cat's ears."

"Hmm. Sounds terrible."

"Dreadful," Snape agreed.

"How long do you think that the effects will last? Two weeks? Three?" Black wanted to know.

"Perhaps a month." Snape's wicked smile had gotten bigger. "That's what I told poor Narcissa when she asked. She was quite beside herself. Though she seemed to be managing capably enough. She was able to distract Lucius so I could escape."

"What did she do, offer him a bowl of cream? Or tempt him with a catnip mouse?" Black had begun to laugh, helplessly.

"Something along those lines, I think." Snape was trying very hard to keep a straight face but he seemed

to be losing the battle.

Both young wizards were suddenly laughing together like a pair of children.

Poppy and I stared, first at Black and Snape, and then at each other in astonishment. No one in the Castle would believe this if we were to speak of it!

Black finally stopped laughing when his back started hurting him. "S-Serves old Lucius right, really..." he gasped.

"Yes..." Snape caught his breath. The word was almost a hiss. "It most certainly does."

His dark eyes were suddenly full of pain. I could tell that he was thinking of Draco.

"Snape? Minerva knows. About the Transfigured hair. She was a bit curious as to what the effects might be. She'd appreciate hearing about them from you," Black said. He grinned, wryly. "Perhaps the two of you ought to collaborate on a paper...!" Heedless of his aching back, the incorrigible Animagus was laughing again.

In spite of himself, Snape smiled. "Perhaps one day we shall. However, I have more immediate concerns at the moment." Thanking Poppy for patching him up, the Potions Master came over to my bed.

"Argus," he said, gravely. "I mean it this time. Avoid Lucius in the future. Do not allow yourself to be anywhere near him. He does not know how you managed to trick him, but he's still blaming you."

I sighed. "Yes, Professor."

Snape gave me a caustic glower. The expression

looked even more fearsome than usual on his battered face. "That's what you said last time!" he told me, irritably. Then Severus crouched down to stroke Azoth, who stirred sleepily in his basket. The black kitten purred.

"He was worried about you. Thought you weren't coming," I said.

"Foolish creature. I always keep my appointments," Severus said, rubbing fondly under the kitten's chin. Restoring the glamour that hid his scratches, the Potions Master picked up kitten and basket together.

Black was grinning again.

Severus regarded him, coolly. "Come, Azoth. I'd best take you home. It wouldn't do for you to be hanging about here. You could pick up bad habits. Or fleas."



"Well, that's it then. Down to just you and me," I said. Mrs. Norris was curled up on my stomach, looking wistful.

"It's not like you won't be seeing them again," I comforted her. "There's still a few weeks yet before the end of the term. And they'll be back next year, won't they? Now, all I have to do is ask Professor Flitwick to put a new anti-estrus Charm on you."

She blinked her golden eyes at me, in a rather non-committal sort of way.

"As soon as possible!" I said.

## Epilogue

It was a sunny, warm Hogsmeade weekend. The Castle grounds were nearly empty. Almost every student above second year had gone to the village. Clusters of first and second years roamed the grounds, but none of them were near me.

I'd chosen a secluded bit of the lake's shoreline to walk to. Shaded by trees and hidden by bushes, this spot was chilly in spite of the warm sunlight glittering like gold across the water. The chill didn't bother me. Nor did the slight breeze. Walking from the Castle to the lake had left me tired and sweaty. The wind felt pleasantly cool. I would rest here for a while until I felt strong enough to walk back to the Castle. Summoning a Door was always another option, but I needed the exercise. I wanted to rebuild my strength.

My reflection in the water was blurred by the wind. I didn't mind. No one had ever called me handsome, but I'd always been sturdy. Now two very serious encounters with Lucius Malfoy in the past six months had taken a toll on me. Whenever I could bring myself to glance in a mirror, I saw a frail old man. The image frightened me.

Poppy had released me from the hospital wing on the condition that I was not allowed to do anything more strenuous than paperwork. Bored, I had flung myself into my backlog of forms with a vengeance.

After my own work was reasonably caught up, I had started on the kitchen inventory records for the house-elves. In addition to taking inventory of all their supplies, each elf had made notes regarding equipment that needed to be mended or replaced over the summer holiday, which was fast approaching. Those items needed to be entered on forms as well. Doing the house-elves' paperwork seemed only fair, as the elves were currently handling my cleaning chores as well as their own.

House-elves are mysterious creatures. I don't know how to tell an old elf from a young one. But Browly had to be among the oldest elves in the Castle. When Apollyon Pringle had first taken me on as his apprentice, Browly was among the elves who had fed me my meals in the kitchen. She was one of the elves who had tried to comfort me whenever I'd disappointed the old man or made him angry.

Slowly the passing years had changed me from a cranky young man to a cranky old man. But Browly looked and acted exactly the same.

"You is not any getting stronger sitting at a desk, Argus Filch!" the old elf scolded me when she came to pick up the completed forms. "Enough writing. 'Tis exercise you is needing. Outside. In sunshine!"

Hermione Granger thinks that house elves are downtrodden and ought to be liberated from their lives of toil and slavery. Hermione is Muggle-born. I doubt that she's ever been bullied by a house-elf. Albus Dumbledore is the only one that the Castle's elves call "Master." Everyone else is pretty much at

their mercy. When house-elves decide that they know what is best for you, then you don't have a chance.

Obeying Browly, I'd gone for a walk. The elf had been right, it did feel good to work up a bit of a sweat. However, I did not feel up to walking back to the Castle just yet so I decided to take a nap.



I was awakened by a soft rustling in the grass near the lakeshore. Two cats padded swiftly towards me. One was thin and grey, the other was a sleek tabby. A heartbeat later, Minerva McGonagall shifted to her human shape.

"I was looking for you, Argus," Minerva said. She leaned over to stroke Mrs. Norris. "Thank you for helping me find him."

My cat purred and jumped into my lap as Minerva sat on the ground beside us. The day had grown chillier while I'd been sleeping. Sliding my coat off my shoulders, I put it around Minerva. Later, it occurred to me that she could have simply used a heating Charm. But she seemed content with my coat. She tucked part of the coat around me too. Her body was pleasantly warm beside mine. For a time we simply stayed beside each other, quietly.

"I promised Alastor Moody that I would discuss something with you," Professor McGonagall said, after a while.

I frowned, knowing what Moody must be after. "He wants me to take you through a Door, doesn't he? Tell him that I won't. Better yet, I'll tell him myself. I'm



going to use some language you won't want to repeat. He won't be content until I've incapacitated everyone in the Castle. I nearly killed Snuffles!"

"No, it was falling from the West Tower that nearly killed both of you," Minerva pointed out.

"Snuffles told me that going through the Door itself wasn't so bad," she continued. "He recovered from the after-effects quickly. And he suffered no nausea. He was only knocked unconscious and forced back into his human form."

"Only?!" I growled, upset by the idea of such a thing happening to her.

Minerva shook her head at me. "Animagi learn to endure similar unpleasant things while perfecting our Transfiguration," she explained. "You may not know this, Argus, but Moody has asked everyone that you've taken through a Door to write a brief account of their experiences for him. Snuffles, Neville and Ginny have all completed their own accounts. Moody has written one too, to make the file more complete. Poor Severus is still working on his. Having read about the others' experiences, I'm most curious about the Doors. As well as eager to add my own impressions.

"And not a word from you about curiosity and cats!" she added, acerbically, as I opened my mouth. Mrs. Norris reinforced that sentiment by giving me a baleful stare.

"If anything happened to you I'd never forgive myself!" I told her.

"Do not worry about me, Argus," Minerva said. "I'm not worried. I trust you to bring me safely through to the other side."

She had such faith in me! I was not completely displeased to hear her say so.

"I will promise to keep my claws in," Minerva added, gravely.

I gave her a wry smile.

Minerva pressed her advantage. "I'm sure that you can see the sense in choosing a traveling companion who is small enough to carry. I won't have to bite your arm to avoid getting lost." Her hand rested gently on my left arm. The wound was healed now and Poppy had said that the scars would fade.

I sighed. "Professor, you are a true Gryffindor. You know that, don't you?"

"Why thank you, Argus," she said, sweetly.

Her eyes twinkled. She knew perfectly well that I hadn't meant it as a compliment. But she sensed defeat and acquiescence in my manner.

Alastor Moody, I thought wryly, was a true Slytherin. He'd sent Professor McGonagall to discuss this with me, knowing that I would have been able to refuse anyone else. It's very difficult for me to say 'No' to Minerva.

"Of course, I will tell Moody that we'll have to wait until you're feeling up to it," Professor McGonagall said, reasonably. She's always gracious in victory. "It shouldn't be too long of a wait. You look so much better than you did..." she said, studying me.

A little embarrassed by her scrutiny, I turned my attention to petting Mrs. Norris. Perhaps it was my imagination, or maybe it was wishful thinking, but Minerva was not looking at me as if she saw a frail

old man. I thought I saw affection in her eyes. And perhaps something more.

"It's getting late. I suppose that we ought to head back." I said, gruffly.

Climbing gracefully to her feet, my coat still around her, Minerva reached down to help me up.

I told myself not to be a fool. Professor McGonagall was a lovely woman, a powerful witch. I was fortunate that she considered me a friend. Wanting any more would be ridiculous. I might as well wish for the moon. She was the Deputy Headmistress, for Merlin's sake...

Her hand remained in mine, even though I was standing.

Hands clasped, Minerva and I walked towards the Castle. When I glanced over my shoulder to make sure that Mrs. Norris was following, I discovered that my cat was observing us.

She looked rather smug.

The End  
of  
Volume Three

# Colophon

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