

ADVENTURES IN FANFICTION

The Squib Chronicles



Volume Four
BY OZMA

A RED HEN PUBLICATION



AN ADVENTURES IN FANFICTION EDITION
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Hogwarts, and all the characters from the
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belong to Ozma.

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.)

Squib Caretaker



CHAPTER ONE

Sojourns with Squibs

(Apologies to Gilderoy Lockhart)

THE MOMENT I emerged from red-and-gold into the quiet Charms corridor the sleek tabby cat in my arms became a lovely woman.

It was after midnight. The term was all but over, the Leaving Feast only two days away. In a portrait on the wall across from us, a shepherdess dozed on a hillside surrounded by her slumbering sheep. No one else was nearby. The Castle was as silent as the Castle ever gets. Mrs. Norris was patrolling the corridors on her own tonight. If any students had been up to mischief, I would find out about it tomorrow.

I was still supposed to be on light duties but Poppy Pomfrey had given me permission to resume my lessons with Alastor Moody. The medi-witch had made the old Auror promise that he'd be careful with me.

Recently the lessons had demanded more of Professor McGonagall than they did of me, anyhow. Mad-Eye wanted to learn more about the Doors' effect on Animagi.

Moody had given me a simple assignment. I was to "learn to relax" while bringing passengers through a Door. Easier said than done, but I was trying.

Minerva's task was more challenging. She and Moody were both trying to find out if an Animagus could slowly build up resistance to the Door's protective spells after repeated exposures. Over the past few days Minerva and I had become old hands at going through Godric's Door together.

Never one for taking unnecessary chances, Poppy had insisted that Minerva should practice Transfiguring in my arms many times before we went through the tapestry. The first time, when Minerva had emerged human and unconscious, I had known how to catch her without doing either of us an injury.

Now, I supported Minerva as she put her arms around my neck. Very wobbly but standing on her own two feet, she rested her head against my shoulder while she caught her breath.

"Professor?" I asked her anxiously, "are you all right?"

"Perfectly all right, Argus," she assured me.

"You did it!" I said, proudly. "You came out standing!"

"More or less," Minerva said. Her tone was wry. After several minutes, her breathing returned to normal. "Are you ready for another try?" she asked me.

Nodding, I held out my arms. Even as I did, she was simultaneously Transfiguring and leaping into them. With her cradled against my chest, I stepped backwards into red-and-gold once more.

The place inside the Doors is a realm that I only

see when I travel with passengers. Godric's Door is all red and gold within. Moving inside the tapestry has grown easier with practice, or perhaps I am merely getting used to slogging my way through. Carrying Minerva through this red and gold place was like wading through waist deep water.

We emerged into the Great Hall in back of the staff table. The house-elves who were busy dusting and sweeping under the silvery moon visible on the enchanted ceiling above, glanced over at us. Several smiled, but none of them paused in their work.

From the Great Hall we went to the trophy room. Nearly Headless Nick and the Grey Lady stood there, deep in conversation. Both ghosts nodded gravely when they saw us.

After that we went to the Astronomy tower. Each time that Minerva emerged from the tapestry she was human and wobbly, but she was also triumphantly awake and aware. Each time I held her while she caught her breath. I was proud of her progress but she seemed unsatisfied.

"Professor, what are you trying to do?" I asked her.

"Remain a cat," she gasped. "If it's at all possible. But I can't seem to manage it!" Removing her wand from her sleeve, she gave us some light. Her grey eyes behind the square spectacles were filled with concern. "Argus, are *you* all right? I'm sorry, it can't be easy dragging me through time after time."

Her solicitude for me made my heart dance. Minerva and I have known each other for so many years. I couldn't say exactly when I first noticed how

lovely she is, or how clever. Or the way that she always manages to be fair, even under circumstances which are driving me into fits of rage.

But it's the warm heart underneath her stern exterior that touches me most deeply. Few of the children in the Castle are perceptive enough to realize how much their Deputy Headmistress cares for them. Though her Gryffindors are aware of the pride that she takes in them and strive to be worthy of her regard.

I long to do the same. Minerva has always had my deepest respect and admiration. Admitting, even to myself, that she has my love as well had seemed very foolish before now. She's a star quite beyond my reach. Recently though, I'd begun daring to hope otherwise...

Sternly, I forced my thoughts back to the matter at hand. She had asked me a question. Here I was, gaping at her like a mooncalf.

"I'm fine," I said. "You're the least trouble of any passenger I've had yet. Animagi take less effort than children do, at least when the Animagus in question isn't plummeting to his death."

"Speaking of the Pup," Minerva said dryly, "he's not going to give you any peace once he discovers that it's possible to fight the effects of the protective spells with practice."

"It's going to be difficult taking him over and over again, a creature his size," I grumbled. "I don't fancy pulling him along on a leash. Perhaps I can find a saddle somewhere and ride him."

Minerva laughed.

"It's all very well for you to be amused," I said, testily, sit-

ting on the Observatory floor. "Moody and the Pup don't see you as Hogwarts' own version of the Knight Bus!"

Still chuckling softly, Minerva sat beside me to rest. I frowned at her, though it was only for effect. I really liked to hear her laugh.

"Perhaps," she suggested, "you should offer us toothbrushes and hot chocolate. Or little paper sacks, in case of sickness." She paused, thoughtfully. "The Knight Bus could do with those as well."

I shook my head. "No paper sacks, thank you very much. You and the Pup don't need them. I'm not planning to take any passengers who do."



Alastor Moody had said that he'd be tracking us this evening. He'd been mysterious about his methods. The absence of the red grapefruit-sized *Secutus* spells that he usually chased me with was puzzling.

Minerva and I were in front of a mirror on the fourth floor when we heard the *clunk* of Moody's claw-footed wooden leg approaching. When Mad-Eye came into view he was accompanied by Callandra Moffitt.

That answered my question. Callandra had been diligently practicing her Searching during the weeks that I'd spent recuperating from Lucius Malfoy's double Curse. She was now able to find many of her fellow Gryffindors, including her Head of House. I knew that it wasn't me she'd been able to follow. Giving off no magical traces, I was quite invisible to Callandra's Searching.

Obviously the child was up and around at this hour

with both Mad-Eye's and Minerva's permission. Nevertheless, I frowned.

"She should be asleep!" I grumbled.

"Only two more days until she goes home," Moody said unrepentantly. "I mean to make the most of 'em."

"What a time I had following you, Professor!" Callandra was saying to Minerva. "You've been all over the Castle. And there were times when you just disappeared!"

The girl turned to me, wide-eyed. "Professor Moody told me how you managed that, Mr. Filch."

"H-He did?" I wheezed. I knew that the old Auror considered the students of Hogwarts to be an untapped resource. I agreed with him, to a point, but I didn't like the idea of him simply telling the child. What would the Headmaster say?

Moody gave me his knife-slash of a grin. "Albus said that I had his approval to add Miss Moffitt to the List," he told me, making me wonder if he could read minds. "The lass can keep a secret. Potter, Granger, Ron and Ginny Weasley already know. So does Longbottom."

"Neville too?" Callandra was delighted.

"Show her, Filch," Moody said gruffly. "Call your Doors."

"It's all right, Argus," Minerva encouraged me, briskly.

I sighed. If Minerva approved as well, any protests that I made would be futile. *Well, at least Callandra's not finding out about my Doors in the middle of some life-and-death crisis, like all the other children did,* I thought.

In answer to my summons, the other three tapestries appeared on the corridor wall beside red-and-gold.

"Professor Dumbledore wanted you to have a look at 'em, lass," Moody said. "Tell us what you can."

Tentatively Callandra ran her hands along each Door. She was silent for many minutes. Minerva, Moody and I watched her with interest. I was reminded of the way that the Headmaster and Severus Snape had examined the Doors the day after I'd learned how to summon them.

The ways of Squibs like Callandra and me are a mystery to most wizards. We're learning that not all of our talents are alike. Older and more experienced, I am able to identify many different types of spells more easily than Callandra can do. (Having spent so much of my life at this school hasn't hurt, either.) But the child's ability to distinguish one wizard's magic from another's can let her sense things that I cannot.

After a while Callandra spoke hesitantly. "I know you believe that each of these Doors was made by a different founder," she said. "And each one was definitely warded and used by a different person. But, under those traces, I think that they were originally the work of a single hand." As she spoke, Callandra's slim brown hands rested on black-and yellow. "Hers."

Minerva and Moody looked surprised but I smiled. I thought of a workroom hidden somewhere in the Castle, a place that I'd only been able to reach through Helga's Door. A Weaver's room, filled with sunlight and the scent of flowers, though the loom was now empty and the spinning wheel now stood idle.

"She made her own Door and gave the other three theirs as gifts," Minerva speculated.

"An interesting bit of information for Albus." Moody's gruff voice was pleased.

I saw that Callandra's examination of the tapestries had tired her. The child was yawning.

"All right, lesson's over!" I said, firmly. "Off to bed with you now!"

"You could bring me back to Gryffindor tower straight away," Callandra suggested shyly. "The Door's protective spells won't hurt people like us."

I glowered at her. Callandra might be a Squib like me but she's also every inch a Gryffindor. Show any of Godric's chosen something potentially unpleasant and dangerous and they can't wait to try it.

The child looked hopeful, Minerva looked encouraging and Moody looked smug. He'd promised that he'd never ask me to take passengers again, or trick me into doing it either. He never had to. He was adept at getting others to do their own asking.

"Argus," Minerva said patiently, "we'll never learn what effect Godric's Door will have on her unless you try. Don't worry. According to all our theories Callandra should be fine."

"Theoretically," Moody mused, "you ought to be able to take her through any of them. Not only Godric's Door."

"No!" I snapped. "She's a Gryffindor! I'm taking her through red-and-gold!"

I hadn't yet tried taking anyone through the 'wrong house' Door. The thought of doing such a thing gave me a feeling of disquiet. Not as strong as the foreboding I felt at the thought of what would happen if I lost my grip on a passenger inside a Door, but I didn't want to take any chances.

I realized what I'd said and bit my tongue.



A short while later, after bidding Minerva and Moody good-night, Callandra and I emerged from red-and-gold directly in front of the portrait of the Fat Lady.

Our journey had been instantaneous. Just as Moody had predicted, Callandra was no more affected than I was. My relief left me weak at the knees. Guesses and theories are all very well but after what happened with Severus I can't help but fear for the safety of anyone who is coming through with me for the first time.

"That was fun!" Callandra said enthusiastically. "It's a wonder that you walk anywhere."

"Walking's good exercise," I said gruffly. "The Doors do me a favor by coming when I call. It wouldn't be right to take advantage of them." Thanking red-and-gold, I sent the Door away.

Callandra smiled at me. "Good night, Mr. Filch," she said.

Bidding her good-night, I headed off down the corridor.



The night had been a busy one, and it wasn't over yet. I hadn't reached my room when I heard an urgent mew from down around my ankles. Mrs. Norris, clearly agitated about something, had found me. There were matters demanding my attention that wouldn't keep until morning.

Summoning a Door at random, (it was blue-and-bronze who came) my cat and I emerged into the

corridor beside the stone gargoyle that guards the entrance to the Headmaster's chamber.

Standing next to the gargoyle was Harry Potter.

CHAPTER TWO

The Potter Effect

The students at Hogwarts Castle often mutter resentfully that I can move through the corridors as swiftly and stealthily as any of the ghosts can do. Overhearing these comments makes me feel quite smug. Nearly all the children lack the slightest idea of how I am able to accomplish this.

Now, staring down at Harry Potter, I felt a twinge of sympathy for the poor bewildered brats. For years Potter has been roaming the corridors at night, seemingly at will. I know this is true, although I rarely see him during his nocturnal wanderings. How does he manage this?

I haven't the slightest idea!

Potter was standing beside the stone gargoyle, saying the password in a frantic voice.

"It's 'ice mice', isn't it?" he asked when he saw me. "Dumbledore hasn't changed it, has he? He usually lets me know, in case..."

"*Professor Dumbledore*," I corrected him automatically. Fear made my voice harsh. There was a time, even a few months earlier, when I would have pounced gleefully, yelling threats and assigning Potter detention before sending

him back to his dormitory with a flea in his ear.

These days, sadder and wiser, I did none of those things. It was obvious that Potter didn't want the Headmaster for some frivolous reason. The boy's green eyes were huge and haunted, his face was pale and frightened. And he was rubbing his forehead as if his scar was hurting him.

I knew what that meant although I really, truly wished I didn't. My heart turned to ice and dropped into my boots. Most of my evening had been spent in Minerva's delightful company but even the pleasant feelings that lingered weren't enough to stop the shudder that ran down my spine.

"You have the correct password," I said, croakily, my throat dry as dust. "Perhaps the door isn't opening because the Headmaster isn't in his rooms. He's somewhere in the Castle or on the grounds..." I added hastily as Potter looked stricken. "He didn't say anything about leaving tonight."

"You can bring me to him," Potter said, urgently. "Please!"

He couldn't mean what I thought he meant, could he...?

"Much faster than I can find him on my own," the boy continued.

Yes, he could. I swallowed hard.

"Please!" Potter repeated.

Mrs. Norris, who had been looking from one of us to the other, backed up this request with a plaintive mew. She's warmed up to Potter considerably during this past year. (Since Potter was the one who figured

out that I'd been Cursed weeks ago, helping to save my life and prevent the damage I'd nearly been forced to cause, she's become downright fond of him.)

I shook my head silently.

"Voldemort," Potter said very deliberately, "has just murdered a man. I saw it happen. The Headmaster has to know."

Chilled and horrified, I forced myself to speak. My voice trembled. "No. I-I'm sorry, boy. You see things as they happen, not before they happen. This poor man is already dead, beyond your help and the Headmaster's. There's nothing that can be done for him now. Nothing to be gained by making yourself sick."

Potter was quite agitated, impatient with both himself and with me. "The man who died was being kept a prisoner, and he wasn't the only one locked up! The room was dark and it was hard to see, but I think there were at least two other people chained up with him!

"The others still have a chance," Harry continued, desperately. "Maybe the Headmaster can find them while they're still alive, before Voldemort..."

I shuddered again, not just at the sound of the unspeakable name. I knew what it meant to be held prisoner, chained helpless in the dark. It was a feeling that I'd never forget.

Potter looked even worse than I felt. I didn't want to think about the terrible things he'd already seen in his short life, or the toll that these nightmare visions take on him.

"All right," I whispered harshly, summoning red-and-gold. "This won't be pleasant for you. I'm sorry."

"Don't worry. I'll manage." The boy's voice was wry.

Minerva's right, I thought. *I should keep little paper sacks handy.* Putting my arm across the boy's shoulders, I held on to him tightly. "Take us to the Headmaster, please. Wherever he is," I said as we stepped into Godric's Door together.



Alastor Moody has come up with some general rules and predictions concerning the Doors, based on our experiences with their protective spells.

1. A Squib hasn't got enough magic to use a wand or cast a spell. The Doors' protective wards don't recognize Squibs as a threat. Going through a Door will not affect a Squib at all. (Moody calls this "the Filch Effect.")

2. Animagi who go through a Door in animal form will emerge human and unconscious. (Moody refers to this as "the Black Effect.")

3. Wizard children who are brought through a Door will be sick for a short time. ("The Longbottom-Weasley Effect")

4. Adult Wizards will be sick for a longer time. ("The Moody Effect.")

5. Anyone bearing a Dark Mark would be wise to put their affairs in order first. ("The Snape Effect.")

Severus, who has not heard Moody's thoughts on the Doors and who would utterly fail to be amused if he did, has often complained that Potter is an arrogant brat who thinks that rules apply to everyone except him.

Well, I doubt that arrogance is the answer, (Potter

isn't arrogant, no matter what Severus chooses to believe) but I have no explanation for what happened when I brought the boy through Godric's Door. Or rather, for what *didn't* happen.

We encountered some resistance, but it was hardly worth mentioning. Taking the boy through the red and gold place was like wading through water that was perhaps only ankle deep.

Potter did gasp audibly while we were inside the Door. When we emerged he was breathing hard and clutching his forehead with both hands. His face was dreadfully pale, even worse than before, but he did not get sick. Not even a little bit. When I asked him if he was all right, he nodded at me, distractedly.

"Number Six: 'The Potter Effect,'" I thought. "Another item for my imaginary file drawer labeled 'How in Merlin's Name Does He Do That?'"

I wondered what Moody would make of this when I told him. The old Auror enjoyed puzzles.

Red-and-gold had brought us out to the lake shore. There are several small wooden docks located at various points around the lake. This one was on the side closest to the Castle, built off of a rock that slanted down to the water's edge.

At the end of the dock a figure was sitting, long silver hair and beard pale in the starlight. His slippers were on the dock beside him and his robes were pulled to his knees so he could paddle his feet in the water.

Thanking me, the boy stepped onto the dock, moving quickly towards the Headmaster.



Not wanting to stay, yet unwilling to leave, I listened to Harry's account of the horror he'd seen. Mrs. Norris had come through the tapestry with Harry and me. I held her tightly, taking what comfort I could.

Somewhere the Dark Lord was keeping prisoners. Potter thought he had seen three chained figures. He'd watched one of them die, slain by the Dark Lord, with the Killing Curse.

Strangely, though the Evil One had been furious, his anger had not seemed to be directed at the man he'd killed.

"He said 'this one is useless to me now!'" Potter said, voice shaking. "The man he killed had been screaming. He screamed right until the moment he died..."

The boy was sitting, cross-legged, on the dock beside the Headmaster. Dumbledore had asked him to sit, for fear that Harry's pacing would land all of us in the water.

"It was as if Voldemort was putting the poor man out of his misery... he seemed to think that he was being merciful!" Potter cried, sounding angry, frightened and heartsick.

"Did you recognize any of the people that you saw, aside from Voldemort?" Dumbledore asked. "Or did you notice any clues that might lead us to where these two survivors are being kept?"

Miserably, Harry shook his head. "I thought, maybe, you could use some sort of spell to help me remember

more, something useful! Or..." the boy's voice shook, growing husky with fear, "maybe you could get some potion from Snape to make me remember things."

Dumbledore's voice was gentle. "We won't need to resort to drastic measures, Harry. Sit here with me quietly and try to think about what you saw. You may yet remember something that will help those people."

I spoke without meaning to. "It's all happening again... deaths, disappearances..."

"Yes," Dumbledore said, heavily. "There have been disappearances, and those who have gone missing are being sought. We are doing what we can." The words were heavy with grief. Even in the dim light the Headmaster's face looked weary. He didn't say if this was the first such vision that the boy had recently, and I couldn't bear to ask.

Together, Albus Dumbledore and Harry Potter were the best hope that the wizarding world had of surviving the Evil One's second rising. Seeing them as a frightened boy and a grieving old man scared me. I knew that I was being unfair and selfish, but I couldn't help it.

"Argus," Dumbledore said quietly, meeting my stricken eyes, "Harry will be all right here with me. Thank you for bringing him to me so quickly."

It was a clear dismissal. I was relieved more than anything else. Still cradling Mrs. Norris, I turned and stepped back into red-and-gold, which had waited.

Godric's Door brought me to my room. The tapestry's odd behavior after we reached our destination made Mrs. Norris and me stare. The tapestry flitted from wall

to wall, as if it was dancing with happiness.

"Enjoyed your busy night, did you?" I asked it as I sat on my bed and began pulling off my boots.

In answer the Door flitted off the wall and reappeared in mid-air. It brushed against me affectionately, the way that Mrs. Norris will sometimes do when I surprise her with some catnip, before it reappeared on the wall.

"Silly thing," I murmured, tired and distressed. "What's got into you?"

CHAPTER THREE

Good-byes and Hellos

"All righ' there, Filch?" Hagrid boomed at me from the front door of his hut.

He was propping the door open, allowing a cool breeze to flow inside. Though the breeze was pleasant, it was also scattering the papers that I'd spread across his table. At the end of every term Hagrid invariably sends his paperwork off to the school's board of governors late and full of smudges and misspelled words. Since I was still supposed to be on light duties, I'd offered to have a go at his forms.

"Close the door!" I growled at the gamekeeper.

Sighing, Hagrid obligingly swung the door shut. This created a strong gust of wind. The papers — notes that he had made throughout the term about things

around the grounds that needed fixing, as well as receipts for items already repaired or replaced – all fluttered to the floor.

I considered banging my head on the table in frustration. Instead I yelled a few rude words at the closed door. It was likely that Hagrid did not hear me. I knew that he was headed down to the station to see the students onto the train.

Another year was over. The Leaving Feast had come and gone. The Quidditch Cup had been awarded to Gryffindor. The House Cup had been awarded to Hufflepuff, accompanied by loud applause from all four tables. (The Gryffindors and Slytherins had been so glad that the other House hadn't won the Cup.)

Even inside Hagrid's hut I could feel the Castle's immense inhuman presence reacting to the students' exodus. It seemed to be stretching and sighing. Irreverently, I was reminded of the way that I feel at the end of long day when I can finally pull off my boots, put my feet up and relax for a bit.

I'd gotten some sense of this before, at the end of other terms. I'd always dismissed it as a foolish fancy. Now I knew differently. The Castle really does have an awareness of its own.

When looked at from the Castle's point of view, the students would be back soon enough. It seemed to know the children as a group, not as individuals. The places left vacant by the departing seventh years would be filled by the new first years just as it had been for a thousand Septembers past.

I wished that I could be as sure that things would continue just as they had always done. He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named had returned. Creatures of the Dark seemed to be gaining strength throughout the wizarding world. People were disappearing and dying. Everything felt fragile and uncertain.

Adding to my anxiety was the knowledge that within a few more days the Headmaster and the professors would be leaving the Castle too. No one would be left except for me, the house-elves, the ghosts and Peeves. Even Hagrid was leaving, as he had done the summer before. The gamekeeper could not reveal the details of his mission but it was evident that Madame Maxime, the Headmistress of Beauxbatons, was also involved. Hagrid had been wandering about for the past few days, grinning and singing tunelessly in French.

I'd missed him last summer though I never would have admitted it out loud. This year I'd be missing and worrying about everyone. Especially poor Severus, who walked a particularly shadowed path.

Severus was due to leave in a few days. I knew better than to ask him about his plans. The Headmaster had told me that the Potions Master was expected to return periodically over the summer.

Professor McGonagall's plans for the summer were equally mysterious. I would miss Minerva most of all. It almost scared me to realize how just how I much was going to miss her.

Grumbling, I knelt and gathered the bedraggled papers off the floor. Keeping myself as busy as pos-

sible was the only thing that would help. Trying to find some order in the chaos of Hagrid's forms was certainly a daunting enough task.

When I'd asked Hagrid for his records, the big man had found some papers in his sock drawer, located another stack in a box under his bed and found a few more stuck on a large nail driven into the wall over the fireplace. Then he'd produced some crumpled papers from his trouser pockets (those appeared to have gone through the laundry a time or two) and still more papers were removed from the pockets of his moleskin overcoat. A few papers in the latter group appeared to have been gnawed. Possibly by a small animal, also lodging in Hagrid's pockets.

"Someone's getting a filing cabinet for Christmas," I muttered.



The Hogwarts Express had left the station long before I finished Hagrid's forms. I'd already said my good-byes to the students I had grown to care for during the year, last night at the Leaving Feast. The ache that still lingered in my heart today was unexpected.

Ginny had put Bastet in my lap before patting Mrs. Norris and giving me a hug that had made my ribs creak. "Have a good summer, Mr. Filch," she'd said. "I'll write to you and Mrs. Norris and I'll send pictures of Bastet so you can see how she's growing."

Colin, Dennis, Daniel, Hannah, Lilith and Gehenna had at various times during the feast also come over

to me and Mrs. Norris with their kittens. The small cats were thriving, starting to look a bit more like proper cats now and less like silly little balls of fluff.

Neville and Callandra had both promised to send me postcards from wherever they went on holiday. They had made me promise them that I would look after myself properly.

I must have looked melancholy then, because Ron had cheerfully reminded me that Fred and George wouldn't be returning in September. In answer, I had shown him my pocket-calendar for the year with each day numbered and crossed off. The date of the twins' last Leaving Feast had been circled in gold ink.

When I mentioned that I had six other such calendars (counting down every single day of every single term until the twins finally left Hogwarts for the unsuspecting world beyond), Ron had snickered.

"Have you ever done a seven-year countdown for anyone besides Fred and George?" he'd wanted to know.

"Oh, yes indeed," I'd said dryly, as Snuffles dangled his tongue in dog-laughter.

Hermione had given me a short reading list. "Just a few books that you might find interesting, if you have some time," she'd said.

I was concerned about Harry. He'd grinned at me when Ron and I had been talking about Fred and George, but he was still pale and troubled. I knew without having to ask that he and the Headmaster had been unable to find the two people he'd seen in his nightmare.

He clearly wasn't looking forward to spending the

summer with his Muggle relatives. Hermione and Ron were trying hard to cheer him up, as was Sirius Black. The huge dog had energetically played tug-o-war with bits of food, causing a lot of laughter at the Gryffindor table.

At least they'd gotten him to smile and relax a bit.

Over at the Slytherin table, Draco Malfoy had been quiet and withdrawn. His father's recent mishap with tainted Polyjuice potion was a likely cause, though Draco was unaware of the details. All the boy knew was that his father was "ill" again. Feeling sympathy for Lucius Malfoy was quite beyond me, but I felt badly for Draco.

Crabbe and Goyle had seemed at a loss as to what to do for him. The pair of them had looked gratefully at Pansy, who was at least able to coax a smile or two from their friend. Draco had said nothing to me. But when he'd seen me studying him, he had given me a very solemn nod.



I chose not to use a Door to go directly from Hagrid's cabin to the Owlery with the completed forms, now sealed in a large envelope. The exercise would do me good. However, I did wait to catch my breath before I summoned black-and-yellow, stepping through the Owlery wall into the hospital wing.

Poppy had told me not to overdo things. She'd wanted to have a look at me before she left, which she was planning to do today as soon as possible. (Hopefully she'd tell me that I could stop taking things easy.)

The medi-witch was surrounded by a pile of bags

and bundles. The pile kept getting smaller as various house-elves kept noisily appearing, picking up parcels and noisily disappearing, taking Poppy's things down to her carriage.

In the midst of the confusion, Poppy was leaning over Sirius Black. The Animagus, in his human form, was sitting up on one of the beds while Poppy checked him over with a strong Diagnostic spell.

"You're still too thin," Poppy scolded, waving her wand. A small packet detached itself from the pile of packages just before one of the elves could disappear with it. "Here. Some more of the herbs I've been giving you. Goldenseal and Astragalus. The doses are written down. Remember to eat enough, and try to eat sensibly! No more rats!"

I shuddered.

Black took the herbs and pocketed them, nodding absently. His thoughts were clearly speeding along the track towards London, with his godson.

"Maybe, as Snuffles, you can look in on him while he's at home," I said, trying to be comforting.

"Those people haven't ever given Harry a home," Black said. "But someday he will have a proper home. With me." The young wizard's voice was both wistful and angry. And his sadness was palpable. Not knowing what to say, I didn't reply.

Poppy patted his shoulder. "You'd better learn to look after yourself then. Or you'll never be able to keep up with that boy."

Sirius smiled as if Harry's ability to attract the more

innocent forms of trouble (quite unintentionally, as I was coming to realize) was a *good* thing.

After she'd given Black some more instructions, Poppy allowed him to get up. Then she beckoned to me. Her Diagnostic spell washed over me like a sunbeam.

"You still need to take things easy," she told me. "Let the elves help you as much as possible. Don't you glower at me, Argus Filch. It's for their good as well as yours. They miss having a Castle full of people to look after."

Poppy Pomfrey is a good friend. We've known each other for years. Widowed, with grandchildren that she looks forward to taking on holiday for the summer, I hoped that she and her family would have a pleasant time safely beyond the reach of anything Dark.

I was about to acquiesce to her orders when she gave me a smile that was fond and a touch mischievous.

"Take good care of yourself, or Minerva will be quite cross with you."

I would have loved to come up with some suitably sharp retort but I was too busy blushing. It wasn't really being teased by Poppy that I minded so much. It was the fact that Sirius Black was standing there, grinning.



A short while later, once we were both released by the medi-witch (who went back to her packing) Black asked me for a quiet word. The Animagus spends most of his time in dog form. This was the first chance he'd really had to speak to me in two days.

"Harry said that you took him through Godric's

Door. He told me that he didn't get sick." The young wizard's tone made it an anxious question.

"That's true. He was fine, at least when we went through the Door. That vision upset him badly, though," I said.

Black frowned. "It's still upsetting him. Those people he saw are very well hidden. No one's found them yet. Dumbledore hasn't given up. And Harry's still trying to remember more."

Again, I was at a loss for something to say. It was clear that Sirius hated not being able to protect his godson from the terrible visions. He ached to give Harry a home and he couldn't. He wanted to fight the boy's battles alongside him but he was a wanted man who was forced to hide instead. The pain inside Black was obvious.

I thought of Severus and the way that he ached and feared for Draco. The two boys' situations couldn't be more different, but Severus's and Sirius's emotions were startlingly similar. (Not that I'd ever be brave or foolish enough to say such a thing aloud where either young wizard could hear me.)

"I'm sorry, what were you saying?" I asked. Black had been talking to me, but lost in thought, I hadn't heard him.

"How about a shortcut? Take me out to the hippogriff paddock by Hagrid's cabin," the Animagus said, giving me a fainter version of his old devil-may-care grin. "Or," he continued, impudently, "are you afraid that I might give Professor McGonagall some real competition and come out wide awake, on all four feet?"

I glowered at him, mostly because he seemed to

expect it. I'd already decided to take him through the Door. At the very least it might take his mind off poor Harry for a little while.

"You could just grab me by an ear," Black suggested. "I'd rather not bite you again. You tasted terrible."

"Holding your ear isn't good enough," I said, frowning. "Maybe we can improvise a leash with some bandages."

Poppy was kind enough to stop packing long enough to help us fashion a harness, which she strengthened with Charms. Then Sirius Transfigured and we tied it around him.

With that taken care of, Poppy wished both of us a good summer and took her leave. The house-elves had finished with her bundles.

I summoned red-and-gold.

The tapestry responded slowly, taking several minutes to arrive. That was odd. The Door had been unusually exuberant for the past two days, but now it almost appeared to be moping. Its colors were looking particularly muddy and faded.

"Poor thing," I thought, giving it a pat when it finally appeared. "It must be missing the children like the elves and Peeves always do." (The wretched Poltergeist always misses the students so much during the summer that he goes off and sulks by himself for most of July and makes up for it by tormenting me mercilessly all the way through August.)

Taking a deep breath and a good, strong grip on the Animagus's bandage-leash, I stepped into the tapestry with Sirius. It was like moving through waist

deep water, through muddy swirls of red and gold. I caught hold of the dog's shaggy fur with my other hand for good measure.

When we emerged in front of the hippogriff's paddock, Sirius promptly returned to his human form and lost consciousness. I lowered him to the ground carefully so he wouldn't hit his head.

The hippogriff had been at ease, mismatched legs folded under him and wings neatly folded along his back. He was snacking on something small, reddish-brown and furry. It was hard to tell exactly what it was under all the blood. I tried not to shudder.

Black's condition appeared to distress the hippogriff. Beaky rose. Stamping his taloned forefeet anxiously, he pulled at his tether.

"It's all right, Beaky..." I murmured nervously. "He'll be on his feet in a moment." I stared at the beast. Normally a pinkish-roan color, the hippogriff seemed to have turned grey! Then I noticed that the strawberries-and-lemon scent of the glamour was absent.

"Black!" I choked out. "Beaky's really a grey hippogriff! Just like the one that mauled Draco Malfoy!"

"He's not 'just like' that one. He IS that one..." Black said woozily, untangling himself from the harness. "Whole thing wasn't Beaky's fault, really. Hagrid did tell the kids to be polite, didn't he? Don't worry, Filch, he's gentle as a lamb... aren't you, Buckbeak?"

The Animagus tottered to his feet and climbed unsteadily into the paddock with the hippogriff, patting his beak affectionately.

"The glamour was wearing off," he explained. "Time for me to renew it. Filch, what's got into that tapestry of yours? I hope it wasn't something I did."

Red-and-gold, apparently too forlorn to hold itself up straight, was now drooping sadly over the paddock fence.

"I'm sure it wasn't you," I assured Black, patting the Door. "It's been acting very strange lately. Why don't you go into the Castle and have a nice rest," I told the Door.

Still drooping, it vanished.

I was about to say something else to Black but the words died in my throat. Forgetting my anxiety over Buckbeak, I scrambled over the fence trying to get as close to the Animagus and the hippogriff as possible, for protection.

A very huge dog had just ambled around the front of Hagrid's hut. A dog with three heads!!!

"Erm... that wouldn't happen to be Fluffy, would it?" Black asked me, wide-eyed.

I nodded mutely.

"Big, isn't he?" the Animagus said, in a remarkably calm voice. He was trying to hold onto Buckbeak. The hippogriff seemed determined to charge at the Cerberus. And Fluffy was headed straight for the paddock!



Buckbeak was greatly agitated; screeching, he reared up onto his equine back legs and strained violently at his tether. Black changed his mind about holding onto the hippogriff. Instead he used his wand to blast the tether so that Beaky could escape.

"Oh, that's just fine!" I thought snidely as Beaky

soared over our heads. "Save the bloody hippogriff!"

The young wizard's attempt to protect Buckbeak was futile. The winged monster seemed unwilling to abandon the Animagus. Instead of flying away, Beaky dove at the advancing Cerberus!

Sirius is a powerful wizard. Though, after spending so much time as a dog, he's evidently more accustomed to fighting with his teeth than he is to fighting with a wand. He Transfigured.

"Wait!" I shouted, summoning red-and-gold back again. I meant to grab the Animagus and pull him through the Door to safety. Perhaps Buckbeak would fly away if Sirius was no longer in danger. But it was already too late. The hippogriff had just been knocked down and was lying stunned on the ground at the huge dog's feet. Sirius made a mighty leap, clearing the paddock fence. The Animagus ran at the Cerberus, growling, preventing Fluffy from injuring Beaky.

"No!" I yelled, helplessly. "You idiot!! You'll be torn to pieces!!"

Fluffy is the only dog I've ever seen who makes Snuffles look small. The Animagus didn't have to face the Cerberus alone. Buckbeak staggered upright, still groggy, but screeching and flashing its talons.

With my attention focused on the monsters, I didn't see Hagrid until the big man was right in the middle of the melee. The half-giant's roaring voice boomed over all the screeching, snarling and growling.

"YEH TRY'N CATCH BEAKY, AN' I'LL HOLD ON TER FLUFFY!" Hagrid shouted at the Animagus.

Buckbeak had managed to get airborne again. Fluffy leaped into the air after the hippogriff, all three sets of jaws snapping. Catching the Cerberus in mid-leap, Hagrid grabbed the creature's massive body. He used his considerable strength and Fluffy's own momentum to flip the dog onto its back.

Even as the mighty crash shook the ground, Black resumed his human form. Dodging slashing talons to keep Beaky away from the downed Cerberus, he jumped and caught the creature around its glossy feathered neck.

"Easy Beaky, easy," the Animagus crooned soothingly, though his voice was hoarse from the snarling and growling he'd done.

"Easy now, Fluffy, there's a good lad..." Hagrid's voice had softened to a much gentler rumble.

The half-giant continued to keep the Cerberus pinned to the ground while the Animagus caught the broken end of the tether and coaxed Beaky back towards the paddock. Scrambling to open the gate, I helped to hold Beaky still while Black used a spell to repair the tether. Once that was done, he restrained the hippogriff once more.

All of them, men and monsters, were bleeding. Ignoring their own wounds, Black and Hagrid checked the beasts over carefully. They didn't seem too disturbed by anything they found. I hoped that meant their hurts were fairly superficial. A good thing too, since Poppy had just left and I wouldn't have known what to do if any of them were seriously damaged! Weak with relief, I sagged against the paddock fence.

"Thank you for coming back," I said to red-and-gold. The tapestry had become a little less droopy. Responding to my call had perked it up a bit.

"Sorry. It was jus' bad timing," Hagrid was saying to Black. "I didn't know that the two of yeh would be here with Beaky. I was planning ter introduce 'em nice and quiet-like. But Beaky was trying ter protect yeh..."

He sighed. "After we let 'em settle down fer a while, will yeh help me try 'em again?"

Black nodded, proving once again that Gryffindors have no sense of self-preservation.

"Hagrid?" I said quietly, not wanting to yell or do anything that might set the monsters off once more, "what is that ...dog doing back here?"

Hagrid beamed at me. "Why, Fluffy's here ter help yeh, a'course!"

"H-Help me?" I wheezed.

"Sure. Did yeh think Dumbledore an' I'd leave yeh ter guard the Castle an' grounds all alone? Things being what they are?"

My jaw dropped open in shock. I'd already promised to look after Fang for Hagrid. I wasn't pleased about it really, but Mrs. Norris and I could manage Fang. Did Hagrid actually intend to leave me to cope with FLUFFY as well???

For a moment or two I just stared, hoping that he was joking. The oaf continued to beam as if he'd just given me the most wonderful surprise ever. Biting back an incoherent howl of astonishment, disbelief and fury, I turned away from the barking mad Gryffindors and

their monsters and stormed through red-and-gold.

"Maybe this wasn't the best moment to give him the good news," I heard Black say to Hagrid wryly, as I disappeared through the Door.



"Headmaster, you can't be serious!!!" I wailed. "You're letting that thing... that beast... roam the grounds all summer? Without Hagrid, who's going to stop it from tearing my legs off? And who will stop it from tearing up the Quidditch pitch and all the bushes and flowers and whole stands of trees? What's to stop it from getting loose and wreaking havoc in Hogsmeade? Unless you mean for me to allow it to roam inside the Castle, which would be unthinkable!!" I paused to gasp for breath and another horrible thought struck me.

"Medusa's Dugs! There'll be vast, reeking mountains of dung everywhere! I'll be the only one here to clean up after it! Ohh, it's not fair... the last straw... I won't stand for it... I won't...!"

Dumbledore said nothing, since he wouldn't have been able to get a word in edgewise unless he used magic to shut me up. Instead he let me go on until I'd ranted myself into exhaustion. Eventually he handed me a cup filled with something that I assumed was water. I gulped it down and choked. It was Ogdens Old Firewhiskey.

I did the only sensible thing that I could do under the circumstances. I held out the cup for a refill.



The second cup went down a lot more smoothly. I collapsed into a chair, listening as the Headmaster spoke to me in the same sort of soothing voice that Hagrid and Black had been using to calm Beaky and Fluffy.

"Hagrid told you the truth, Argus. Fluffy is here for your aid and protection," Dumbledore said. "Hagrid has a week left before he is scheduled to leave. He will be able to make the Cerberus understand what is expected of him. Rest assured, Fluffy will not harm you. As for the trees, plants, flowerbeds and bushes, Professor Sprout is placing strong protective charms around them. Madam Hooch is taking similar measures to preserve the Quidditch pitch. And I have placed charms around the boundaries of the Castle grounds to prevent the Cerberus from straying into Hogsmeade.

"You've been understandably anxious about being here alone," the Headmaster said gently. "You have never had to bear the responsibility for such a length of time. Hagrid has always been here with you in the summer."

"Last year..." I started to protest.

"Last year," he reminded me, "I remained at the Castle for an unusual amount of time. When I could not be here, Minerva came. Filius was here when neither of us were available. This year, the situation has changed."

"Worsened..." I said, miserably.

"Yes, for the most part," he said, sounding tired. "Minerva, Filius, all of us... we have much work to do elsewhere, beyond the Castle."

My first thought was for Minerva. I was overcome by a wave of fear for her. It was foolish I knew, as she'd

always been able to take care of herself quite well, plus any number of other people besides. I didn't care if my fears were foolish. Nothing must ever happen to her.

"Argus, not every situation has changed for the worse," the Headmaster told me. "There is a good reason why I feel that you do not need any of us to stay."

I knew what he was going to do before he did it. Wandless, he reached out with his magic, touching a vast, slumbering inhuman presence. His touch was so deft that the Castle did not wake. He knew as well as I did that attracting the Castle's attention is almost always very painful, not ever a thing to be done lightly.

"There have been caretakers here and Caretakers, if you know what I mean. And headmasters and Headmasters," Dumbledore said. His connection to the Castle was palpable. I could feel its link with him resonating through my own bond. And, as he spoke, I could feel the potential for a third bonding that still waited to be completed.

"Groundskeepers and groundskeepers," Dumbledore continued, smiling at my suddenly wide-eyed expression. "Yes, it shouldn't be too much longer before Hagrid gets himself Noticed by the Castle. Though it's a bit more complicated for him. His connection with the Forest, and with the Wild creatures that dwell there, is very strong. It may muffle the Castle's 'voice' a bit."

The Headmaster's mention of the Wild magic in the Forest made me shiver.

'It's not like the magic that we have in the Castle,' Apolylon Pringle had told me long ago. *'There's no order to*

it, no allegiance to either Light or Dark. It simply Is what it Is, without a rhyme or a reason.'

Unlike most people, Hagrid had never feared the Forest. He loved it as he loved the Castle.

"Sir," I said, "can't we just TELL him?"

Dumbledore shook his head. "There are some things that one must discover on one's own, Argus. Speaking of which, let's go see how they're managing at Hagrid's cabin."



The Headmaster and I found things under control at Hagrid's hut. Hagrid and Black had patched the monsters up, washed their assorted bites and gashes clean of blood and bandaged their worst wounds. Buckbeak, minus a few feathers, but not looking too much the worse for wear, was in his paddock around the back of Hagrid's cabin.

The Animagus had restored the glamour and Beaky was a pinkish-roan hippogriff once more. Hagrid had comforted Buckbeak with another pile of what looked like either dead stoats or weasels, it was difficult to tell.

Now Dumbledore was seated on Hagrid's front steps with Black (in dog form) resting at his feet. The Headmaster was gently cleaning a bloody wound on Black's left ear. Fang lay sprawled, sleeping beside the Animagus. With bright interested eyes, Black and the Headmaster watched as Hagrid introduced me to the Castle's new guard dog.

"All righ', Fluffy?" the big man asked gently, patting

the Cerberus with a bandaged hand. "See, Filch here needs yeh ter look after him. An' yeh'll be helping him ter keep the Castle safe."

Hagrid's abilities with monsters have always impressed me. Much as I dislike admitting this, the oaf does have the makings of a really fine Care of Magical Creatures teacher. And some day Hagrid will finally realize that most people are honestly terrified of creatures like Fluffy. Then I shall be forced to start treating him with the same deference and respect that I reserve for the other professors at this school.

That day has not yet arrived. Hagrid was patient with his Cerberus but he was exasperated with me.

"Yeh don't have ter be so scared, Filch," the big man sighed. "Yeh've got nothing ter fear. Fluffy's met yeh before and he knows that yeh're not a thief. Relax."

He might just as well have asked me to kiss a Dementor! I trembled while Fluffy sniffed me with all three noses. But I received moral support from an unexpected source as Mrs. Norris joined our gathering. Meowing loudly, she leaped into my arms and climbed onto my shoulder. My cat and the Cerberus are old friends.

Immediately Mrs. Norris and I were engulfed by a wave of foul breath as Fluffy's middle head licked both of us with a massive tongue.

"Eurgh!" I choked, gagging as I wiped rivulets of hot drool out of my eyes. Mrs. Norris leaped to the ground and began giving herself a dainty bath.

"See? He likes Mrs. Norris, an' yer with her. That makes yeh all righ' too," Hagrid said, beaming. He

handed me an enormous sack filled with huge doggy-treats. "Here. Give him a few a' these."

Trying not to cringe, I did as he instructed. Tossing the treats into Fluffy's mouths wasn't so bad. I could do that from a distance.

Glancing around as I dodged some flying drool, I noticed (to my alarm) that the Animagus appeared to have sprouted a pair of eyes in the middle of his back.

Then I realized that Azoth, Severus Snape's small black cat, must have followed his mother out of the Castle. The tiny cat had draped himself across Snuffles. He was blending in so well that only his eyes were visible. Azoth looked as amused as everyone else did.

"Yeh've made a good start, Filch," Hagrid told me kindly as he took the sack from me.

Grateful to be released, I picked up Mrs. Norris. My cat regarded me with some disapproval, as I was covered with drool.

"Professor Dumbledore," Hagrid said, happily, "Fluffy an' I have got summat ter show yeh! He's been workin' hard. Watch!" Pulling a wooden flute from one of his pockets and raising it to his lips, the big man began to play a soft, soothing tune.

The head on the right became a bit droopy-eyed and started to yawn. The center head quickly gave it a nudge to wake it up. When the center head yawned and drooped, one of the others gave it a nudge. The head on the right didn't even yawn. The dog listened to the whole song and then, wide awake, he barked for an encore. Both Hagrid and Dumbledore were as

pleased as if the Cerberus had gotten up and danced.

"Excellent! Well done!" Dumbledore beamed and conjured up some more doggy treats for the Cerberus.

"That'll be a shock fer anyone who thinks they know an easy way ter get past him," Hagrid said, with satisfaction.



Both Dumbledore and Hagrid wanted me to learn to be more relaxed around Fluffy. Obediently, I agreed to take the Cerberus for a stroll around the Castle grounds. The dog was a massive shadowy presence looming over me as I wandered aimlessly towards the lake. I was actually starting to get used to the situation. Perhaps even starting to feel a bit calmer with the monster at my back, when the sound of barking shattered the late afternoon stillness.

It wasn't Fluffy who was making all the noise, it was Snuffles. The Animagus was racing uphill towards the Castle, barking a frantic warning. When I saw who he was trying to warn away from Fluffy I felt anything but calm. Severus Snape was coming down the hill towards us.

"Yeh've nothing ter fear," Hagrid had reassured me. "Yeh've met Fluffy before. He knows yeh're not a thief."

The poor Potions Master could be offered no such reassurances.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Cerberus and the Potions Master

Severus has often said that he isn't one for 'foolish wand waving.' His technique might be more accurately described as 'brutally efficient.' The Potions Master knew that it would have been useless for him to attempt to completely paralyze a creature as large as Fluffy. Instead he cast three localized *Petrificus* spells in very rapid succession. Both of Fluffy's front legs and the dog's left head went stiff and numb.

Doubtless, Severus would have tried to paralyze the other two heads next. Unfortunately for him, Fluffy is faster than any creature his size has a right to be. The monster had already reached Professor Snape by the time that the first three spells took effect.

The dead weight of the numbed left head pulled Fluffy off balance. Unable to catch himself on his paralyzed front legs, the huge dog collapsed, nearly falling on top of Severus who was unable to get out of the way in time.

Needless to say, Fluffy's right and center heads were not very happy with Professor Snape.

Sirius Black, who had Transfigured to his human form, grabbed the snarling middle head, wrapping

his arms around its slobbering jaws before it could use Snape for a chew toy.

"NO, FLUFFY, NO! Easy, boy!" the Animagus shouted, trying to calm the furious monster.

Without meaning to, I was making his task more difficult. I was clinging to the growling right head and yelling, "STOP THAT! BAD DOG! BAD DOG!"

"Quiet, Filch! He's *not* a bad dog," the Animagus said, through gritted teeth as both of us were dragged about by the struggling heads. "He's just doing his job, isn't he? Leave him to me! You get Snape away from him quickly, before he's crushed!"

Black was right. Fluffy was panicked by his inability to move parts of his body. The Cerberus was thrashing about, desperately moving whatever still worked. I let go of the right head and dodged around Black, to grab the dazed Potions Master under the arms. If Snape been anyone else, I would have taken him through a Door. As bad as the effects would be for most adult wizards, it was better than being torn to pieces by an angry Cerberus. But that escape route was denied to Severus. All I could do was try to drag him to a safe distance.

Poor Snape gasped in pain when I moved him, wrapping his left arm around his ribs. His wand was still in his right hand. And he still had the wand pointed at Fluffy.

Any injury that does not completely incapacitate the Potions Master will only make him angry. Snape cast a strong leg-locker curse on Fluffy's back legs.

The right and center heads howled even more deafeningly than before.

"You GIT!" Black bellowed at Snape through the terrified howls. "Why...?"

"So you can get away! You IDIOT!" Snape snarled, clutching at his ribs.

"Then who's to stop him from going after you?" Black yelled back.

Fluffy appeared to be regaining the use of his front legs now. He was dragging himself relentlessly towards Snape, pulling the Animagus with him. Black couldn't hold the creature for long. And Severus was unable to run. Well, I couldn't take *him* through a Door but I'd never had any trouble bringing animals with me. Of course, I had only ever tried this with Mrs. Norris and her kittens. A creature Fluffy's size would be a good deal trickier.

"I really hope you're up to this," I muttered, summoning red-and-gold.



The Door was big enough, but only just. I wouldn't have been able to manage if Black hadn't helped to hold the beast while I brought the Door to him. It was not an easy task. Both of us were left covered with drool and a number of bruises. And only Black's quickness saved us from being bitten.

"I'd rather break up another fight between Fluffy and *Beaky!*" the Animagus commented, as Fluffy and I vanished into Godric's Door.

Sirius did not come with us, so my journey with the Cerberus was instantaneous. We tumbled through the tapestry to land on the ground in front of Hagrid's hut.

Thanking red-and-gold, I tried to comfort the Cerberus. Removed from Snape's presence, the monster's rage left him quickly enough, though his fear and confusion remained. Fluffy had now regained complete movement in his front legs and his left head. But he would need a countercurse to free his locked-up hind legs.

"I'm terribly sorry, Fluffy!" I said, standing up so I could pat each whimpering head. "I shouldn't have told you that you were a bad dog. But I couldn't let you hurt Professor Snape, could I? At least not any more than you've already hurt him."

All three heads looked at me, reproachfully.

"Yes, I know that you're not unscathed yourself. Poor creature. I can't undo that curse for you. Maybe Hagrid can."

Our arrival hadn't been a quiet one. Hagrid was already rushing out of his hut, followed by Fang. The big man soothed the whimpering Cerberus while I described what had happened.

"The Headmaster sent a message 'round ter all the Professors who haven't left yet, ter let 'em know about Fluffy. Guess Professor Snape hasn't read his yet," Hagrid said, frowning as he tried to work a countercurse with the broken wand inside his umbrella. "It's no good. This curse is too strong. Professor Snape is going ter have ter come here and undo this himself!"



Hagrid, Black and I all held onto the Cerberus tightly while Snape undid his curse. Fluffy quivered with anger. He growled menacingly at the Potions Master with all three heads. Severus had refused to feed Fluffy dog-biscuits. He would not get close enough for the beast to sniff at him.

"There would be no point," the Potions Master told us, stiffly.

"You're right," Black told Snape. "Fluffy *isn't* going to trust you. You've done your best to make sure of that, haven't you?"

"He's jus' got ter get used ter yeh! So he won't rip yehr legs off next time!" Hagrid said gruffly. "It'll be all righ' Professor. I won't let him attack yeh."

Snape sighed; then he winced. He'd insisted that he didn't need to let anyone have a look at his ribs. He'd said that nothing felt broken. "No!" he said. Then his glare changed to a look of horror. "Azoth! You brainless hairball! *Get away from that beast!*"

Azoth had been lurking unseen in the shadows beside Hagrid's front steps. Fearless as his mother, the little cat stalked impudently up to the Cerberus and rubbed up against the monster's right foreleg.

"That creature spits out morsels bigger than you are!" Snape hissed furiously, glowering at his cat. "What are you waiting for?" the Potions Master demanded, skewering the Animagus, the half-giant and me with an extension of the same glower. "One of you, grab him! Quickly!"

I moved to obey.

"Don't, Filch," Hagrid said, stopping me. "Azoth's alright. See?" Fluffy's three heads had lowered to sniff at the little cat. Azoth accepted the attention regally. Even the lick from the left head's massive tongue, which left him dripping. "Look, Professor. He's acting as a character reference fer yeh. Now, if yeh'd just come over..."

"No!" Snape repeated. He didn't take his eyes off Azoth and the three huge heads. "My association with the foolish cat might just as easily turn the Cerberus against Azoth. I would prefer that the little demon remain safe during his wanderings around the grounds."

More quietly, the Potions Master said, "I dislike having to point out what should be obvious, even to the three of you. Having that Cerberus get too used to me would not be in our best interests. Lying to the Dark Lord is never wise. Since I prefer not to do so any more than necessary, I would rather be able to say honestly that I cannot pass the monster with impunity."

This was a point that I'd never considered. But Black and Hagrid seemed to have expected this comment from Severus. They exchanged a wry glance. After a moment, Hagrid said almost gently, "It's in yer best interest, isn't it, Professor? And Filch's too, since he's the one who's going ter have ter call Fluffy off whenever yeh drop by during the summer."

That was another point that I hadn't considered. I gave Snape a pleading look. Snape glared at me.

"Yeh still won't be safe from Fluffy on yehr own, so yeh really won't be lyin'," Hagrid said.

Snape winced as his ribs gave him another twinge.

"All right," he said grimly. "If Filch will pick up Azoth first, I'll come over there."

I did as he asked, cradling the little black cat against my chest.

"It might be easier if yeh'd try to relax a bit, Professor," Hagrid said, gruffly.

Severus did not reply. Tense as a bowstring, he walked over to Hagrid. The Cerberus regarded him with six ferocious eyes. The triple-chorus of rumbling growls made my bones rattle. The Potions Master looked small, standing between the half-giant and the Cerberus. But Snape held his head high and glared back at the monster.

"The Professor belongs at the Castle," the Keeper of the Keys said simply and firmly. "If yeh see him with Filch or with me, yeh let him be."

Such was Fluffy's trust in Hagrid that the monster stopped growling, though he continued to regard the Potions Master in an unfriendly fashion. The half-giant didn't even attempt to convince the Cerberus that Snape was harmless. He preferred to be honest with his monsters.

"Best we can hope for," Hagrid said, with a shrug. "He'll be chained up near my house most a' the time, at least until everyone's gone fer the summer an' Filch is alone. But it's a long chain, Professor. Yeh'd best not get too close unless one of us is with yeh."

Snape nodded, never taking his eyes off the Cerberus.

Hagrid spoke gently to Fluffy for a while longer, praising the dog and petting all three heads. Then the

half-giant rubbed the creature's back affectionately. Slowly the tension began to leave the Cerberus's huge body. After a moment or two, Fluffy lay down with a thud that rattled Hagrid's windows and made something breakable go crashing down inside the cabin.

Unconcerned, Hagrid sat cross-legged on the ground beside the beast. Fluffy had rolled over to allow the giant to rub his belly.

Obviously I prefer cats to dogs. But when Hagrid found the spot that would make one of the monster's hind legs kick uncontrollably, I thought that Fluffy's behavior was rather endearing.

"Yes, I know," I murmured, rubbing Azoth's ears affectionately. "Dogs have *no* dignity whatsoever." The tiny black cat regarded the Cerberus with amusement.

Black, who was sitting on Hagrid's front steps, gave me look of mock indignation.

"When you're blessed with canine charm, dignity is irrelevant," the Animagus said.

The Potions Master snorted. Then he pressed a hand to his side.

"I'm quite all right," Snape said irritably, when we looked at him in concern. "Whether you realize it nor not, the three of you also look as though you've been through a small war."

"Two small wars, actually," Black corrected him. "First there was Fluffy and Beaky. Then there was Fluffy and you."

Snape glowered at him. "I'm not fussing at any of *you* like a broody hen, am I?"

"We're not the ones who are finding it painful to breathe," I pointed out. "Poppy's already left. I'll fetch the Headmaster. Don't you even think of trying to hide this behind a glamour!" I added, sternly.

Snape glared at me.



"I expected that this summer would hold many dangers for all of us," Dumbledore said, very dryly. "But I didn't expect our troubles to begin before sunset, on the same day that the children left."

Ignoring Snape's protests, the Headmaster had levitated the younger wizard into Hagrid's cabin and put him down on the bed. Then he'd helped Snape remove his outer robe and shirt so he could apply a cooling Charm to his bruised ribs. Azoth had curled up, purring, next to Severus. The Potions Master rested a hand on the small cat's back.

Hagrid and Black were outside, securing Fluffy on a long and very strong chain. I had come in to sweep up the broken pieces of all the cups that had fallen off their shelves when Fluffy had shaken the hut.

"Professor Snape is all right, isn't he?" I asked, dumping the shattered crockery into Hagrid's dustbin. The Headmaster's Diagnostic Spell wasn't as smooth or accomplished as Poppy's, but I could feel the power in it.

"Yes, Argus. He has no broken bones and he's not bleeding inside. He is going to be sore for a while, though."

Dumbledore frowned at Severus. "I sent messages to warn the Professors about Fluffy. Perhaps next time

instead of writing '*URGENT – To Be Opened Immediately!*' on yours, I'll send you a Howler."

Black, who had just entered the cabin, choked back a laugh.

The Headmaster sighed. "It's not like you to ignore an urgent message," he said to Snape before the Potions Master could glare at the Animagus.

"It wasn't intentional. I was preoccupied with other matters," Snape murmured, apologetically.

I wondered what had engrossed Severus to the point where he would forget to open something that was obviously important. Dumbledore looked like he was wondering the same thing. But he let the subject go. The bright blue eyes behind the half-moon spectacles focused on me. "Argus, you had no difficulties in bringing Fluffy through Godric's Door?"

"Well, it was a tight squeeze," I said.

"Not as tight as it ought to have been," Black commented, settling into one of Hagrid's chairs. "The Door grew to accommodate the Cerberus."

"It did?" I asked in surprise.

The Animagus nodded. "I watched it happen. You didn't mean to do that?"

"I wouldn't have known how!"

"How intriguing," the Headmaster murmured. "You must write up a report for Alastor."

"How can I explain something that I didn't do on purpose?" I asked.

"Good luck," Severus told me, snidely. "Once Moody finds out about this new wrinkle, he'll hound you

without mercy. Perhaps I'll owl him and let him know. Perhaps then, he'll stop pestering *me*."

"Merlin's Beard, Snape! Haven't you finished writing your report for him yet?" Black asked, incredulously. "How long does it take to write 'I got sick'?"

Snape glared. "If that old madman would be content with such a terse account, I would have been finished a long time ago!"

"It's too bad that Filch doesn't have some Door forms made up. Then all you'd have to do is fill one out," the Animagus said, dryly.

I looked at Black in delight. "A form! Why didn't I think of that? If Moody is going to keep badgering people into experimenting then having a form all ready could save me no end of trouble!"

Now they were all looking at me.

"I'll need to ask for their Names, House, Which Door, Approximate Duration of Journey," I murmured.

"Are you (check one) First through Seventh Year? Professor? Animagus? Other?" Dumbledore suggested, cheerfully. "And then you might add a few lines for an explanation if they've checked 'Other'."

"Animagi would need to fill out an additional section, of course," Black added, grinning. "Noting how many times they'd already been through the same Door and if they were able to remain conscious or not.

"And," he continued brightly, "there could be a section dealing with subject of nausea! 'On a scale of one to twenty (twenty being the worst) how sick did you get?' And then some more lines for additional comments..."

"Oh, yes!" I said. "And then I could have a section for my own comments and notes!"

Snape looked from Dumbledore to Black, with a sour expression. "The pair of you have wasted perfectly good sarcasm on someone too thickheaded to appreciate it."

"They weren't being sarcastic, they were merely teasing," I said, with dignity. "There's a difference. And it's still an excellent idea."



The few of us who still remained in the Castle had dinner together at a single table in the center of the Great Hall. Sirius, in dog form, rested under Hagrid's chair. He had his own dish of food, which he barely touched. Nearly everyone felt sorry for him and tried to tempt him with table-scraps. Poor Black was as forlorn as red-and-gold had been earlier today. He was missing Harry. Severus, whose ribs obviously ached, did not eat very much either. He left the table early.

After dinner, Minerva and I wandered the corridors together. We weren't sure if I was seeing her to her room or if she was seeing me to mine. It did not matter since neither of us was in a hurry to get anywhere.

"Albus mentioned that you'd had an interesting day," she said. Then she added curiously,

"Argus, how did you know that Fluffy would be able to go through the Door without suffering any harm? I'm not referring to the matter of his size, or to the way that you were somehow able to make the Door grow for him. He's not an ordinary dog. His kind is old and Wild."

"Fluffy is a simple beast who belongs to Hagrid," I said. "I could think of no reason why Godric's Door would see him as a threat. He's an innocent creature, untainted by the Dark."

My voice grew softer. "I didn't want to say that in front of Severus. That Mark shames him so. I'm grateful to the Headmaster for not pressing the issue. I'm sure that he guessed anyhow. He was the one who spoke about Wild magic to me this afternoon."

"Most people would automatically consider the Wild creatures of this world already lost to the Light," Minerva said, quietly. "Not Albus, of course. Not me. And certainly not Hagrid," she said, with an affectionate smile. "But I fear that we are in the minority."

"It was old Pringle who taught me about Wild magic," I said, shyly. "It frightened him. He took me to the Forest's edge and made me swear to him that I would never go in there. Said he'd have the skin off my back if I ever did. The threats weren't necessary. I could feel what he was talking about. It filled me with dread. But even then I knew that it wasn't Dark."

Minerva smiled at me, gently. "Poor Pringle, filling you up with his fears. Argus, you're so much braver than you realize."

I wanted to protest that the old caretaker had meant no harm, he'd simply been looking after me, and I really wasn't brave at all (though it was most kind of her to think so), but then her left arm was around my back and her right hand was touching my face. And then, quite suddenly, she kissed me.

—

What a magical thing a kiss can be. It can make time stand still and the whole world vanish. Nothing existed except for her. Soft lips against mine, luminous grey eyes I wanted to drown in forever. Minerva smelled wonderful, warm and sweet and clean. When my brain finally started functioning again, I hoped that she was enjoying this as much as I was.

The kiss didn't last forever, though I wished it could. We had to breathe eventually.

When we broke apart, I became aware that there was a cat mewling shrilly on the floor by our feet. It wasn't Mrs. Norris. She would never have interrupted Minerva and me at such a moment. It was Azoth. The tiny black cat was making the same frantic mew that his mother uses to warn me of impending disaster, brewing mischief and incipient mayhem.

"Go away!" I growled, glaring at him. "It's summer! The brats have all gone! Get someone else! We're busy."

"Argus, hush," Minerva said, fondly. She gave me another swift kiss before focusing her attention on the small, yowling tomcat.

I love Azoth with all my heart, as I do his brothers and sisters. Mrs. Norris's kittens had been born into my hands. I'd seen each one taking their first breath. However, I could cheerfully have given the little wretch a kick.

"It's Severus," Minerva said. "Azoth isn't sure what's wrong, but he's afraid. Severus is in his classroom, alone. He's shut Azoth out. And there's a terrible cold-

ness inside the room with him."

I sighed, my annoyance with the scared kitten fading. Severus had certainly been preoccupied with something today. What was he up to?

"We'd better go and see," I said. At least I didn't have to leave Minerva to take the long way down to the dungeons. My friend, my comrade, (my love) assumed her sleek feline form and leaped into my arms as I summoned red-and-gold.

Together with Azoth, the two of us stepped into Godric's Door and went to see what had happened to Severus.

CHAPTER FIVE

Gold Spell

Minerva reverted to her human form as soon as we emerged from Godric's Door. She remained conscious and standing, though she did lean on me for a moment or two.

Red-and-gold could not bring us directly into Severus Snape's classroom. At Snape's request, Professor Flitwick had used powerful Charms to block entry via my Doors.

The dungeons of Hogwarts Castle are always cool and damp. But the icy air that emanated from behind the Potions classroom door went far beyond that. When we came out of the tapestry, Minerva, Azoth and I felt as though we had just stepped into a harsh night in the dead of winter.

Our breath misted in the air. Minerva's cheeks and

nose grew rosy with cold. I could almost feel icicles forming on the end of my own nose. The walls, ceiling and floor of the dungeon corridor were coated with ice. Poor Azoth was yowling again. Moving carefully on the slippery, frozen floor, I picked up the little cat.

Minerva's glasses had frosted over. Tugging them off, she murmured a heating Charm, dried the glasses on her sleeve and put them on again.

"Am I correct in assuming that Severus has enough protective wards on his door to repel several Aurors, an assortment of hit-wizards and perhaps a Mountain Troll or two?" she asked me.

I used my senses to 'feel' the wards and nodded, shivering.

"Keep back, Argus. In case I set something off."

Keep back?! Not likely. I could still shield her with my body, if necessary. Of course there was no reason to endanger poor Azoth into the bargain. Turning away, I went to set the little cat down beside red-and-gold (which now had a coating of frost forming on it) and came back to stand stubbornly at Minerva's side.

Minerva gave me a look of exasperation. "All right, then. But I don't want to hear another word from you about how rash and reckless we Gryffindors are."

With that, Minerva banged on Snape's door. "Severus! Can you hear me? Say something! Even if it's only 'Go away!'"

"Professor Snape!" I shouted, banging on the door as well. The coldness of the wood under my fist made me gasp. "Please, answer us!"

There was no reply. At least the mere act of knocking didn't trigger any defensive reactions from Snape's wards.

"Argus, can you tell me exactly which spells Severus has used?" Minerva asked.

I closed my eyes, focusing. Moody has taught me how to put names to many types of protective wards. "There's a massive *Insidiarum* Curse. It's an ambush, maybe with those porcupine quills he's so fond of using. A nasty *Excutio* spell, strong enough to shake off a fair number of magical attacks. And a *Duro* Charm to strengthen the door against more mundane forms of assault, such as a battering ram..."

"Severus would think of that too," she muttered.

"He has some hexes as well. A *Stupere*, which would knock us silly after the rest of this lot have finished with us, plus a *Torpeo* which would have nearly the same effect, just for good measure..."

Minerva sighed.

"What if I didn't attack the door at all? What if I Transfigured the wood into something else, without trying to get through it?" she said, thoughtfully.

"You'd still set something off," I said.

"Perhaps not. I'm going to use a very small spell. We have to take the chance. We can't stand here and do nothing."

Shivering with cold, Minerva raised her wand. I tensed, ready to leap in front of her if she set off any Curses.

"*Liquidum*," she whispered.

It certainly was a tiny spell, barely a whisper of magic, but controlled with pinpoint precision. A fine mist began to form on the wooden door. Abruptly, the

door turned into water. Because of the dreadful cold, the water quickly turned to ice.

I felt the *Insidiarum* Curse, the most sensitive of Snape's wards, a heartbeat before it reacted. Wrapping my arms around Minerva I tackled her to the frozen floor.

The Curse didn't shoot porcupine quills, it shot icicles. Most of them passed over us, shattering glassily against the far wall. Azoth yowled in fear as the broken pieces rained down around him but he escaped injury. A few of them slashed across my back, but I was too numb with cold to feel the pain.

We stayed huddled on the floor until the Curse was spent. Then, cautiously, we stood.

The ice-door was transparent. We could now see what was going on inside the Potions classroom. Of course the ice wasn't as clear as glass, many fine cracks and pockets of trapped air distorted the view.

Severus was plainly visible, standing in the center of the room. All of the student tables and chairs had been moved back to the walls. The only object near the Professor was a small white cauldron. The cauldron was resting on a metal stand, placed on the floor over a very strange looking fire. The 'flames' appeared to be made of ice-shards.

Azoth had communicated to Minerva that Severus was all alone. Perhaps he had been, but he wasn't now. At the Potions Master's side floated a tall, grim ghost with wide staring eyes and silver bloodstains on his clothes.

We watched as Severus dipped a ladle that appeared to be made of ice into the white cauldron. Lifting the

ladle, he poured something clear and sparkling into the frigid air before him.

The deadly cold intensified as the clear substance floated in mid-air, then thickened and became a crystalline globe with silver at the core.

The globe began to spin in mid-air, flattening and stretching as it did so.

Snape kept his eyes on what was now a floating, full-length mirror. But the Bloody Baron's gaze fixed on Minerva and me.

As a series of cracks appeared in the silvery mirror, the Slytherin ghost moved swiftly, floating through Snape's warded door.

There is much variation in the abilities of wizards. The same is true of ghosts. Like Albus Dumbledore, the Bloody Baron seldom finds it necessary to demonstrate the full range of his strength and power. But now, the Baron shattered the icy barrier to Snape's classroom as he passed through it. "Shield him, Madam! Our experiment goes awry!" he intoned at Minerva.

Minerva was already moving swiftly across the frozen floor towards Snape. She had shielding spells in place to deflect the flying hexes and curses.

"Keep down!" she urged me. "Look after Azoth! I don't think I can shield you, me and Severus!"

The kitten was still crouching by the wall, trembling. I crawled to him and cradled the little tom in my arms.

There was a surge of even more unbearable cold and then a loud sound, like the splintering of something huge, made of glass. Likely it was Snape's float-

ing mirror, though it sounded as if the frozen air itself had shattered. I couldn't see for certain since my eyes were tightly shut.

When things quieted down, I let go of Azoth and stood up slowly. Warmth was slowly returning to the dungeon corridor like spring after winter. Water dripped from the ceiling and ran down the walls. Puddles were everywhere.

The immediate vicinity looked like the aftermath of one of Fred and George Weasley's infamous parties. The air was hazy with smoke from Snape's protective spells. The sharp scent of violent magic lingered in the air, making me wheeze.

Afraid of what I was going to find, I splashed my way into the wrecked Potions classroom. Azoth padded after me. Minerva and Severus were lying very still on the dungeon floor. The Baron floated beside them.

Minerva's shielding spells had held. She must have given the lion's share of the protection to Severus. Flying ice-shards had left her with many small cuts on her face and arms, while Severus was unmarked.

Minerva's glasses were broken. Taking them off, she sat up, gingerly. Seeing her cut and bloodied distressed me, though I was relieved that she didn't appear to have any other injuries. The professor looked me over as well, to make sure that I was unhurt.

Then she and I knelt beside poor Severus. The Potions Master was blue and shivering violently with cold, despite the rising temperature. Azoth nosed his wizard anxiously and yowled.

"I shall take my leave. He must be kept warm," the Baron said in his sepulchral voice. He vanished before either of us could ask him what he and Severus had been up to.



The staff bathroom down in the dungeons has a copper tub with taps all around it, big enough to swim in. It's set on a rectangular platform. There are enough torches set in the wall to keep the place from looking too gloomy.

Air that was warm and steamy felt like paradise after the cold. Still shivering, Severus settled deeper into the warm bath that we'd drawn for him. The bruises on his ribs were now spectacular shades of black and purple.

Minerva and I were seated on the stone platform, where we could keep an eye on Severus while he soaked in the tub. Azoth was in Minerva's lap. I was gently washing the cuts on Minerva's face and arms with a damp washcloth. Her glasses, repaired, were resting beside her.

Poor Minerva! She had now joined Black, Snape, Hagrid and me in the ranks of those who looked as if they had been through a small war. Her hair had come loose, and flowed down her back. With her hair down and her wounds, she looked rather like a child who had been playing in thorns and brambles.

"Please pardon my disrespect, Professor Snape," I said, testily. "What exactly were you doing?"

"I regret very deeply that my actions placed the two of you in danger," the Potions Master said in a soft voice that shook with cold and exhaustion. "It matters

little what I was trying to do. The experiment failed."

"Severus," Minerva's voice was gentler than mine had been. "What were you trying to do?" There was a hint of steel beneath her mild tone. She didn't intend to let him put her off.

"You saw the mirror," Severus said, wearily. "If I had been successful then it would have been a portal, a gateway. Alchemists can make Doors too."

"It's a perilous business!" I growled.

"Yes, Filch, I am aware of that," Severus said, too dispirited even to sneer. "Why do you suppose I waited until the students had gone for the summer to make an attempt? There are potions that require cold as a catalyst, instead of heat. I've been trying to get this right all day," he said, with a sigh. "This evening the Baron was kind enough to assist me. My *Fimbul Charm* was strong enough, but maintaining a constant temperature was too difficult even with his aid. The mirror remained unstable.

"I do apologize for the mess," he added, without sarcasm.

"Forget the mess!" I snapped. "You could have been killed!"

The only answer I received from him was a sneeze, which clearly hurt his bruised ribs.

"Poor Severus. You've had a bit too much cold today, I think," Minerva said, dryly.

"No, I haven't," Snape snarled. He promptly sneezed again.

"Poppy always leaves some Pepperup potion ready to use up in the hospital wing. Just in case," I said, ignoring the scowl on his face. "I'll be right back."

Lonely Spirits and Fireside Chats

On the first full day after the students had left Hogwarts for the summer, I contemplated the long list of jobs I had to do. The plumbing was foremost. I would shut off the water supply to the areas of the Castle that would be unused for the next two months. Over the next few weeks I'd fix all of the slow drains, leaky taps and blocked pipes.

Today the house-elves were cleaning out the dormitories. Then they'd be occupied with the laundry. It was anyone's guess as to who would be able to make it down to the dungeons first, to see about the damage caused by Severus's failed experiment. The elves had promised to clean the wreckage in the Potions classroom as soon as they could. And I'd promised to get the Professor a new door for his classroom as quickly as possible.

This morning, the house-elves who weren't working on either the dormitories or the washing had put a buffet-style breakfast out in the Great Hall for the few staff members who still remained at the Castle. It was a serve-yourself affair with all of us wandering in and out at different times. But Minerva and I had arranged to have breakfast together. She'd been quite well and in excellent spirits, despite the small cuts on her face and arms.

Usually the thought of a day spent cleaning out

blocked drains and repairing leaky toilets would not have put me in a good mood. But I was humming under my breath and walking with a spring in my step when I entered the girls' bathroom that Moaning Myrtle calls home.

Consulting my list (one leaky tap, two slow drains), I got out my tools.

"Oh, it's all very well for SOME people to be cheerful!" a glum voice said from behind me. "But you don't have to come bursting in here, bang your things down and start SINGING!"

Moaning Myrtle usually concludes such statements by bursting into tears. This time was no exception. The sight of ghost-brat bawling her eyes out is quite commonplace. I usually react with either boredom or annoyance. Not today. Minerva McGonagall had honored me with a kiss last night and had shared breakfast with me this morning. The world seemed a very sweet place indeed.

"My apologies, child," I said, far less gruffly than usual. I stopped humming. "I didn't mean to bother you. I'll just do my work quietly and be on my way."

The girl ghost wailed even louder.

I sighed. Comforting people has never really been my forte. And it would take a Cheering Charm as strong as an Unforgivable Curse to make a dent in Moaning Myrtle's gloom.

(Though I do know a wizard who can work a Cheering Charm that powerful. What would Sirius Black say if I asked him to cast one of his Unforgivably

Cheerful Curses on Myrtle? I imagined the Animagus looking at me with wide, mischievous eyes. 'Filch! Are you saying that Moaning Myrtle is ...unhappy? Next, you'll be telling me that Peeves is annoying, you're grouchy and Snape is sarcastic!' Would Cheering Charms even work on ghosts? I wasn't sure. But Black would probably know.)

I watched as Myrtle, still sobbing piteously, drifted away from me through the door of the last stall. I couldn't see her any longer but her voice echoed off the walls.

"Peeves told me all about you, last night," she choked. "You and McGonagall! *Snogging!*"

I heard her dive into the tank with a splash.

"Students snog," I said, indignantly. "We kissed."

My pleasant mood was beginning to fray around the edges. I opened the stall door and yelled at the toilet. "Not that it's any of your business! Or Peeves' business either!"

Sniffling, Myrtle rose back out of the tank. Her eyes, behind the pearly glasses, were tear-filled and tragic. "No boy ever kissed me," she said, wretchedly. "Not one. I've always told myself that no boy ever would have kissed me. Not even if I had lived to be a hundred. But YOU were kissed. YOU! It's not fair. If I wasn't already dead then I'd... I'd KILL myself."

I nearly snarled something heartless at her. Myrtle is a damp grey drizzle on any bit of warmth and cheer she happens to encounter. Then I bit my tongue. Was I any better? Hadn't I drizzled on enough good cheer in my time, dampened plenty of bright spirits? Been so choked

by my own misery and bitterness that anyone else's happiness had seemed like a personal affront to me?

I knew that I was ill-favored, surly, unpleasant. All that, and no magic, too. Yet, Minerva wanted me. And I'd been too delighted by the miracle to wonder how long it would last.

"Professor McGonagall will come to her senses soon enough, I expect," I growled, trying to hide the painful doubt in my heart with anger. "She'll realize that she's kissed an ugly old Squib. Perhaps she only did it out of pity in the first place."

Myrtle glared at me. "Oooh! You are so THICK!" she sniffled, rising out of the tank completely to hover at my eye-level. "She fancies you. She's been fond of you for ages. There's no accounting for taste, is there? I noticed months ago. You were in here, bawling, and she came in to comfort you."

"You're a fine one to talk about bawling!" I snapped, automatically.

"She's been fond of me for ages?" I asked in a smaller, more tentative voice. "Do you really think so?"

"Wasn't that kiss enough of a clue, even for you?" the ghost-brat said, annoyed. Myrtle wanted me to pity her, not myself.

"McGonagall always was one of the pretty ones," the ghost continued, glumly. "Olive Hornby was quite jealous of her. Boys looked at McGonagall. Not that she ever seemed to notice. Always going about with a serious expression and her nose in a book." Her lower lip quivered. "If you had seen me when I was alive, you wouldn't

remember me. But surely, you remember McGonagall. She was a student when you first came."

"I'm afraid that I didn't notice the students much in those days, child. I was too busy trying to learn my way around." I spoke without rancor. Myrtle's words had soothed some of the whispers of doubt and fear in my heart. But what she said next chilled me to the bone.

"HE noticed her," the ghost said, darkly. "Handsome Tom. Followed her with his eyes often enough when he thought no one could see. I was beneath his notice, naturally. I don't suppose that HE looked twice at me, not even after his Basilisk left me lying here, cold and d-dead. Not that I'd have *wanted* any part of HIM," she said with a shudder as she became a bit more transparent. "Handsome is as handsome does, my Mum used to say. At any rate, HE's not so handsome any more by all accounts..."

"Myrtle?" I whispered. "Are you saying that He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named took a particular interest in Minerva?"

The ghost-brat might enjoy the misfortunes of others, but she hadn't meant to distress me quite so much.

"It was a long time ago," Myrtle said in the most comforting voice she could manage. "She certainly never cared for HIM at all. Not one to have her head turned by charm and a handsome face, McGonagall isn't. Aren't you proof enough of that? And HE has a great deal of other things on his mind these days, of course.

"Harry's more than HE ever bargained for," the ghost-girl continued with satisfaction, even as she

blushed silver at the thought of Potter. Then Myrtle's usual glum tone turned wistful. "Harry doesn't know how handsome he is," she confided. "He hasn't even noticed Ginny yet, and she's *alive!*"

"Oh, Myrtle, please do be quiet," I mumbled, turning away from the stall and her silly prattle.

My fingers were clumsy when I tried to work. Tools, pipes and fittings seemed to be continuously slipping from my hands. I had already been dreadfully worried about Minerva being harmed by the Dark Lord simply because she was a powerful servant of the Light. The knowledge that the Evil One might have a personal grudge against her, a girl who had once spurned him, left me numb with fear for my lovely Professor.

When the ghost brat spoke to me again, calling my name right next to my ear, I yelled in fright. I dropped a heavy wrench directly onto my right foot.

"Some people are LUCKY they're dead!" I snarled painfully, hopping about on one foot so I could clutch at the other. "Because if certain people weren't already dead, then I'd have to kill 'em!"

Gingerly I wiggled my toes to see if they still worked. "Oooh! Ow...ow...ow!" Then I yelled again in shock. Myrtle was holding her icy, transparent hand over my throbbing foot.

"What a complete prat you are," she scolded. "I made a lot less noise when I died!"

"Well, you've more than made up for it since!" I growled. Her small hand was as good as a cooling charm. But I was too annoyed with her to admit it.

"You had something that you wanted to say to me, Myrtle?" I asked her, gruffly. "Before you made me smash my foot?"

"O-only that you're not really so b-bad. Not much to look at of course, but McGonagall doesn't seem to mind."

A realization overwhelmed me, then. Dead, Myrtle was one of the brats forever. But had she lived, she'd be a woman now. Only a few years younger than Minerva and me. Perhaps in time, she would have learned how to be happy, found herself a friend or two. Eventually she might have loved someone and been loved in return. She certainly wouldn't be here, haunting the gloomiest bathroom in the whole Castle, the first known victim of the Dark Lord. Poor child. No wonder she envied me that sweet kiss.

Such thoughts were too painful for me to attempt to put into words easily. By the time I found my voice, she was already gone, vanished back into her u-bend.

"You're not so bad either, Myrtle," I said, hobbling over to the empty stall.

There was no reply. Not even the tiniest sob.

I finished fixing the taps and drains in silence.



I'd made a good start on my plumbing work, but it was getting late now. And I had promised to see about Professor Snape's new door. Summoning green-and-silver into the Prefect's bathroom where I'd just finished working, I emerged into the dungeon corridor outside the Potions classroom.

"You're limping, Filch," Professor Snape observed

hoarsely, the moment he saw me.

Stating the obvious isn't the Professor's usual style. But I recognized the statement as a gambit meant to distract me. The Professor's eyes were glassy, the end of his nose was sore and red. It was obvious that he hadn't taken the Pepperup potion that I'd fetched from Poppy's stores for him yesterday.

"This is NOT a cold," he informed me when I glared at him, refusing to be distracted. "I did try to explain matters to you last night. Shall we try again? Listen carefully. Cold potions can have an unfortunate ...backlash when they go wrong. The Pepperup is not going to help."

Snape concluded his speech with a sneeze that left him clutching at his ribs.

"Well then, Professor, brew yourself something that will help. And try to rest. You can leave what's left of the mess to Gilly, Primrose and me." Gilly and Primrose were two of the Castle's elves. They had been helping Snape to restore order in his damaged classroom. Anything salvageable was back in its proper place. The things that were beyond saving, mostly broken desks and chairs, were in a heap by the empty doorway.

"I'll be able to get started on a new door before night-fall," I said, moving swiftly into the classroom. Taking an armload of broken desk pieces I dropped them into the huge wheelbarrow I'd borrowed from Hagrid.

The elves and I made several trips out to the hill where we burn rubbish. I took the wheelbarrow through green-and-silver and the elves traveled in their own swift way.



Snape met us on the hill when we were finished. "Incendio!" Severus said, and the pile of wood was burning.

We dismissed the elves with our thanks. The Professor stayed to watch the fire. His hands were wrapped around a large steaming goblet. I noted with concern that Severus still seemed to be feeling cold. He stood closer to the fire than most people would care to do on a warm summer evening.

"More backlash?" I asked, frowning. "Professor, have you told the Headmaster about this experiment of yours, with Cold Potions and the Alchemist's Door?"

"The Headmaster is a busy man. I see no need to bother him with accounts of my unsuccessful experiments," the Potions Master said, acidly.

I would take that as a 'no.'

"Professor, I realize that I know very little about Potions..." I began.

"Really, Filch. Do tell."

No one should be able to fit so much sarcasm into four simple words.

"I've never heard of Cold Potions before," I said, plunging on doggedly.

"I'm not surprised. They are very difficult to work with. Not the sort of thing that even a master should attempt without years of study and practice. I certainly do not teach them to my students. Imagine the mess that would result."

"I'd rather not, thank you." I said.

Snape took another sip from the goblet. "The Alchemist's Door is among the most dangerous and rarely attempted of all Cold Potion spells. The precise measurements of the ingredients and the exact procedure have been lost for nearly a thousand years." He looked at me with hooded eyes.

"Lost? Then how were you able to...?"

He smiled. "That is my secret, Filch. But I will say that I am in your debt. Yours and Azoth's."

"Professor, I don't understand!"

"Good," he murmured, silkily.

I sighed. "Perhaps I should go and see about putting up your new classroom door," I said, puzzling over what he'd just told me. *How* had the little black tom and I helped him find the instructions for a potion that had been lost for a thousand years?

The Potions Master seemed to take a certain pleasure in my confusion. A faint smile lingered around his mouth as he clutched the steaming goblet and studied the bonfire before us.

"There's no hurry, Filch," he said, hoarsely. "My office is still guarded by its own door and by an assortment of protective curses. There's nothing sensitive in my classroom at the moment."

The sky above us was rosy with the setting sun. The day had been warm, but now a cool breeze fanned the bonfire's flames. Shivering a bit, Severus took a sip from the goblet and moved closer to the fire.

"All right. As long as you're not in a rush, I'll get

to it first thing in the morning," I said. It had been a long day and I was tired. And my right foot hurt. Sitting down, I unlaced my boot so I could tug it off. The heavy boot had prevented any serious injury, but my instep was bruised.

"Moody sent an owl. He wished to speak to me this evening," Severus said, still watching the fire. Taking a handkerchief from his pocket, he blew his nose. "I sent a reply, telling him to meet me here," he continued in a muffled voice.

"Would you like me to stay with you?" I asked, gingerly wiggling my toes. I realized that I sounded like a father asking a small child if he wanted some company at his bedside to keep away ogres and nightmares.

"What I meant was, may I stay?" I amended quickly. "I have some things that I want to speak to Moody about too. That is, if you don't mind."

"No, Filch. I don't mind," the professor said. Then he sneezed.



The bonfire was blazing merrily when Hagrid and Sirius Black accompanied Mad-Eye Moody down the hillside towards us. Their reason for escorting the old Auror was obvious. Fluffy, freed from his chain for his evening exercise, was lumbering along behind them, right at Hagrid's heels.

When the Cerberus saw the Potions Master, the right and center heads immediately began growling. And the left head barked angrily.

"Stop that, Fluffy!" I said, very firmly. "It's all right. Hagrid's here and so am I."

The Cerberus obeyed! I was so delighted that I didn't mind when the beast came close enough for all three heads to drool on me. But then the center head licked my face. (Eurgh!)

The monster settled on the ground right behind me, with a massive thud. Hagrid beamed at both of us, patted Fluffy's heads and gave me a clap on the back that would have knocked me down if I wasn't already sitting.

The half giant noticed my bruised foot. He sat beside me and pulled a bottle out of his pocket. Then he held it out cheerfully. "Here, Filch. Good fer what ails yeh."

I shook my head politely.

Sirius, who had sat down on Hagrid's other side, accepted the bottle when it was offered to him. The Animagus leaned back against Fluffy.

The two Gryffindors passed the bottle back and forth, while the two Slytherins stood and glared at each other.

"Snape," Moody growled, finally. "I was coming here to pick up that report I asked you for, months ago. I know you haven't done it. I'm granting you an extension. Black's just told me that Filch is working on a form. You're going to fill one out and owl it to me, as soon as they're ready."

The Potions Master nodded, coolly. Then he glared at Sirius Black who was mouthing, "You OWE me, Snape!" at him.

"Filch. I'm glad you're here," Moody said, turning his mismatched gaze on me. "Albus tells me that

you've taken Potter through Godric's Door. And he didn't get sick."

The old Auror settled himself on the ground next to me. "When you get those Door forms finished, you owl one to Potter too. Along with instructions to send it to me once he completes it."

I nodded.

"What? Potter had no reaction? None?" Snape, who was the only one still standing, stared down at me incredulously.

"That's right," I said. "Though it did seem to hurt his scar a bit."

"Harry didn't tell me about that," Black murmured.

"Prob'ly didn't want ter upset yeh," Hagrid said comfortingly, handing him the bottle.

"It passed quickly enough," I reassured the Animagus.

"Do you or the Headmaster have any theories to explain WHY Potter did not react in the usual manner?" Snape asked Moody, sharply.

"Yep. A few guesses," Moody said. After a moment of silence it became clear that Mad-Eye wasn't going to elaborate further.

"Potter!" the Potions Master snarled the boy's name as if it was an epithet. "Everyone else his age becomes desperately sick, but he doesn't so much as gag! How typical. Even enchanted objects fall at his feet in celebrity-worshipping adoration." Snape's voice trailed off into a barely audible rasp.

"Cranky git, aren't you?" Black observed. The Animagus had looked very fierce when Snape had started speaking.

Then his anger had turned to amusement. Poor Severus sounded too ill and fretful to be provoking.

"Our understanding of the rules governing the Doors' use is far from complete," I said, to reassure the disgruntled Potions Master. "Surely Potter's reaction will prove to be within the proper guidelines, once we know what they are."

Snape paid no attention to me. He was glaring at Black. The Animagus merely smiled as he handed Hagrid the bottle. He wasn't in the mood to argue and he wasn't about to be goaded by a man who could barely even speak.

Looking amused, both by Snape and Black and by my abiding faith in Rules, Hagrid passed me the bottle again. I accepted it and took a sip before I realized what I was doing. Moody had distracted me with a look of approval. I appreciated my teacher's regard but I wasn't sure what I'd done to earn it.

When the old Auror spoke it was to Severus, not me.

"Nasty cold you've got, Snape. You need some Pepperup," Moody said.

"Minerva and I tried to get him take some," I said. "He told me it's not a cold. He said it's..."

I stopped. Professor Snape was skewering me with a deadly glare. Clearly he didn't want anyone else to know about the Alchemist's Door.

Hagrid took the bottle from me and offered it to Snape. "Pour a wee drop in yer goblet, Professor?"

"No. Thank you," Snape said.

Hagrid shrugged and gave the bottle to Sirius.

"Come on. Join the party, Snape," Moody said, gruffly. The old Auror had taken out his hip flask.

"I'll be leaving in the morning," Black said coaxingly, passing the bottle back to Hagrid. "Surely that gives you something to celebrate."

Snape's glower at Black was interrupted by a sneeze, followed by the inevitable wince and clutch at his ribs.

Turning to me to hide his look of amusement, mingled with perhaps a touch of sympathy, the Animagus said, "I've spent today working with Mrs. Norris."

"What?" I asked, confused. "Why?"

"She was recommended to me by Crookshanks," he said. "He thinks quite highly of her. In more ways than one. There's a matter that he and I both attend to while we're here. Crookshanks is gone for the summer with Hermione, and I'm leaving too. Someone needs to keep a particular eye on the rats around here."

I wasn't sure what to make of this. In recent months Black had earned my trust time and again. Still, the image of him as a youthful trickster was indelibly etched in my mind. What was he playing at?

Black's voice grew softer and more intense. No humor showed in his voice or expression. "Wormtail could use a glamour to hide that silver paw of his," the young wizard explained. "Beaky and I have been teaching Mrs. Norris the scent of a Transfigured Animagus, and the scent of a glamour."

"Pettigrew?" I exclaimed. As grateful as I was to Black for having the foresight to guard against a threat that I hadn't considered, I was worried for Mrs. Norris.

"She mustn't attempt to catch him on her own," I said. "It would be much too dangerous. I'll tell her to come to me at once if she picks up that sort of scent on any rat." My voice hardened. "I'm sure that a trip through red-and-gold wouldn't be much to Master Wormtail's liking. Hmm. I wonder which will prove to be stronger, the Black Effect or the Snape Effect?"

The two young wizards exchanged a puzzled look. They were clever. I supposed that it wouldn't take either of them long to figure out what I meant.

Moody was regarding me with approval once more. "My galleons would be on the Snape Effect. Try to capture Pettigrew alive if you should encounter him."

"Yes, please do!" the Animagus growled, his hands curling into fists. Hagrid handed him the bottle and he took a long drink.

"Try to seal him up in a bottle, like a captive Djinn," Moody told me. "Pettigrew might know where Voldemort is keeping the people he's taken."

"I have been unable to discover their whereabouts," Snape said hoarsely, dabbing at his nose. Bitterness and shame at his failure were plain in his face.

"Usually Lucius would have been able to learn more. He might have inadvertently revealed something to me. But Lucius is still not himself, and both of us remain in disgrace."

"How is he? Still clawing up the furniture and shedding fur on the carpets?" Black asked, making a visible effort to turn his thoughts away from Pettigrew.

Snape nodded. The Potions Master had finally

taken a seat on the ground, closest to the fire.

"Doesn't leave Lucius time for much else, I expect," Moody said, giving the Potions Master a pointed look.

Draco, I thought, realizing that Moody was attempting to cheer Severus up. Lucius was bound to have other things on his mind now than Draco's initiation into the Dark Lord's service. Hopefully, the tainted Polyjuice had bought the boy some time.

Snape's expression remained unreadable. Moody changed the subject. "I'll need to see a preliminary version of your Door form, Filch. I may want to add a question or two," the old Auror said.

"I'll send you what I've got as soon as possible," I said.

"Good. One more thing. I've been told that you took Fluffy through Godric's Door." The old Auror's beady eye was filled with curiosity. "I want to see a demonstration."



My tongue-in-cheek remark to Minerva about putting a saddle on Snuffles and riding him through red-and-gold turned out not to be so much of a jest after all. Though I didn't have the luxury of a saddle when I rode Fluffy. Hagrid simply picked me up and put me down on the Cerberus's back, just behind the massive shoulders. The half-giant hadn't even given me a moment to put my right boot back on!

I clung to the center neck, not at all happy about this turn of events. Fluffy did not seem very sure if he liked this sort of thing either. Still, the huge beast stood quietly enough while Hagrid spoke to him gently.

"Good boy. Easy now. This won't hurt yeh, an' it'll only take a minute."

I summoned Godric's Door. Once again, I missed seeing the tapestry enlarge to admit the Cerberus because it happened just as Fluffy stepped through. Though I did hear Black say "See?" There were exclamations of surprise from Moody and Snape, and a delighted shout from Hagrid. A heartbeat later the Cerberus and I were standing in front of Hagrid's hut.

Fang was asleep on the front steps. Mrs. Norris was curled beside him. A casual observer might have thought her relaxed, but her ears were wide and alert and her tail was fluffed in anxiety.

"I hear that you've had an interesting day, my sweet," I said, clambering awkwardly down from Fluffy's back. "So have I."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Sad Farewells and Dangerous Curiosity

"You want me to do *what*?" Sirius Black gave me an incredulous look.

"Cast one of those really powerful Cheering Charms on Moaning Myrtle. Like the one that you put on Professor Snape," I said.

It was very early morning. The sun had not yet risen.

No lights shone in the windows of Hagrid's hut nearby. I'd been anxious to catch Black before he left the Castle. When I'd come stumbling out of red-and-gold still wearing my nightshirt with Mrs. Norris padding alongside me, Black had been looking quite grave. But the young wizard had smiled when he saw us.

The sleepy-eyed Animagus had a small bundle on his back which probably contained everything he owned in the world. He was preparing to fly away on Buckbeak.

After exchanging polite bows with the hippogriff, I'd made my request.

"You want me to play a *prank* on Myrtle?" the Animagus asked, astonished. "No, of course you don't," he amended when I blinked at him in confusion. "What was I thinking?"

"Well? Would your Cheering Charm work on a ghost?" I asked him.

"I'm not sure. Even if it works, it may not be the best way to go about cheering up Myrtle. I wasn't expecting that Charm to be as potent as it turned out to be. Snape didn't care for the effects very much, did he? Maybe it would do Myrtle more harm than good."

A lesser amount of Moaning from Myrtle would mean a more pleasant summer for me, but Black did have a point.

"Well, perhaps if you... erm... toned it down a bit?" I said.

"Why don't you try to cheer her up instead?" the Animagus suggested.

"Me?"

"There are ways to do it without casting spells," Black said. "That bathroom of hers could certainly do with a fresh coat of paint. Ask her to help you pick a new color."

I didn't bother asking how he knew so much about the interior of a girls' bathroom. Black had always made a habit of being places where he shouldn't. Instead, I considered his suggestion. "This IS Moaning Myrtle we're discussing. She'll choose something drab and dingy!"

"Don't offer her any drab colors to choose from. She might want some new mirrors in there too. And more torches to make the place brighter and new sinks..." Black was grinning broadly now, no doubt amused by the thought of me thumbing through endless catalogues of bathroom fittings, offering suggestions for Myrtle's approval.

"You're awfully generous with the school's repair budget, not to mention my time," I grumbled. "New paint will have to suffice. And she may not want a change."

"Even if she doesn't, she might just be glad that you asked."

Knowing Myrtle, that was unlikely. Still, I supposed that I could try.

The Animagus watched my face, guessing at my thoughts. "She may surprise you."

"Anything's possible," I admitted. "You actually turned down a chance to cause some trouble and spare yourself the blame because it would have been my fault for suggesting it. The world's full of surprises."

"Indeed it is," Black said, grinning at me.

"I'm obliged for the ideas," I told him. "I won't keep you any longer."

The young wizard knelt to stroke Mrs. Norris. Not entirely to my surprise, my cat permitted his touch. Snuffles was considered a kindly uncle to her kittens, after all. And he was a good friend to Crookshanks.

Then Black stood and stretched. He released Beaky from his tether and swung himself onto the hippogriff's back.

"Look after yourself, lad," I said, quietly. "You know the boy needs you. Don't be too much of a... a Gryffindor."

Black's pale eyes glittered with mischief. "And here I thought that you *liked* Gryffindors, Filch."

"Not impudent, troublesome young ones like you."

Black laughed, but then his expression grew sober. "Take care of yourself. And the Castle." He sighed. "And tell that greasy git to look after himself a bit better than he's been doing. He's his own worst enemy. Inconsiderate of him... makes me feel redundant."

"I'll tell him," I said.



After watching Black and Beaky fly into the sunrise, Mrs. Norris and I wandered around the front of Hagrid's cabin.

Fluffy, who was on his chain, was lying on his side near the steps. The three heads were resting on each other, eyes closed. As soon as the Cerberus caught our scent, the heads lifted and all six eyes opened. Fluffy's massive tail thumped happily.

I hadn't had the foresight to bring dog-treats, but

Fluffy seemed glad enough for the company. He really was a friendly creature to those he knew and liked, despite his fearsome appearance.

"I hope that the Pup will come back in one piece," I said, giving each massive head a rub behind the ears. "And I hope that the Castle will still be here, safe, when he does."

The grass was damp with dew. I sat anyhow, leaning against Fluffy as I'd seen Black do the night before. Mrs. Norris climbed into my lap and began to purr. The warmth of the Cerberus's huge body and my cat's small one comforted me a bit. We watched the sun finish rising.



Not long afterwards, I was dressed and ready to start attending to my work. This morning, the plumbing would have to wait. Mrs. Norris and I were in one of the dungeon workshops, making a new door for the Potions classroom.

The workshop is one of my favorite places in the Castle. It's large and roomy, with a floor that I keep carefully clean of sawdust. Places for the tools on the shelves and in the drawers are all neatly labeled. Some labels are written in Apollyon Pringle's spidery hand and some in my own. Many more notes and labels were written long ago, by people I can't identify. It's likely that every caretaker in the history of Hogwarts has had a chance to label something down here. I may not know their names or faces but over

the years their handwriting has become nearly as familiar to me as my own.

I'd finished the door's measurements yesterday and made certain that everything I needed was here. Plenty of wood rested in stacks against a wall. Hinges, knobs, fittings...

"Argus? Here you are working, and the sun's barely risen. I went to your room and you weren't there. I asked the elves where to find you." It was Minerva. She was dressed for traveling in a long green cloak.

"Y-you're leaving?" I said, my throat suddenly dry. "I thought you were staying for another day at least, maybe two...?"

Minerva shook her head. "We won't be out of touch," my lovely professor said, quite firmly.

"Of course not," I said, proud of how steady my voice was.

"Albus will have told you that you can summon any one of us back here if we are urgently needed," she said.

I nodded. The Headmaster had given me a stack of postcards, each one bearing a picture of a ruined castle.

I'd recognized it as a view of Hogwarts as a Muggle would perceive it, or a Squib who is seeing the place for the first time. Few proper witches and wizards were probably familiar with the sight.

"Having a lovely time. Wish you were here," I said dryly, quoting the code-phrase that the Headmaster had told me to write on the postcards if I owed anyone to come to the Castle at once in an emergency.

Minerva smiled. My heart cracked in two.

I didn't want her to go away. Or, I longed to go with

her. Foolishness. My duties bound me to the Castle. Her duties lay elsewhere, at least for the summer. Neither of us were the sort to neglect our responsibilities.

"I'll be wishing that you were here with me, every single day," I said, gruffly.

Minerva's grey eyes grew luminous with unshed tears. I felt like an absolute pig for distressing her.

"Professor," I said, in an attempt to be professional again, "I'm terribly sorry..."

"Argus, you sweet, foolish man," she said severely, dabbing at her eyes. "If you apologize to me I shall Transfigure you into a mouse and pounce on you. You have nothing to be sorry for. Unless you intend to wait for an emergency to owl me, because I intend to write to you as often as I possibly can." Her tone made me smile. My fierce one, my lioness.

What would she say to me if I told her 'not to be such a Gryffindor?' I decided that I wasn't brave enough to find out.

"Please, Minerva, promise me that you'll be careful," I said instead. "Take no foolish chances. And always watch your back."

"The chances that I choose to take are rarely foolish ones," she said, briskly. "But I will certainly take care. And you must promise me that you'll do the same."

I gave her my word.

We looked at each other for a moment and then she was in my arms. I kissed the top of her head, she kissed the tip of my nose. Our lips met and time stood still for a long, tender moment.

Minerva's kisses are headier than Ogden's Old Firewhiskey and even sweeter than a refreshing drink of water on a hot summer's day. I could drink her kisses like wine.

Quite intoxicated, I almost told her that her hair was like black silk, her skin was like velvet and the faint dusting of freckles on her nose were dearer to me than every golden galleon locked away at Gringotts. Perhaps fortunately, I was too shy to say such things. I opted for another kiss instead.

Mrs. Norris, who was observing from a quiet corner of the workshop, flicked an ear at us in amusement.



Perched on a stool, Minerva lingered to watch me work on Professor Snape's door. Her carriage would not be arriving for a little while yet, she said.

A combination of hard work and proper organization can take you far, boy, even without magic, Apollyon Pringle used to tell me. Failed wizard though he was, most of the safety spells that he'd put on the saws and drills to protect me remained strong, even after so many years. *Pain may be the best teacher, but I won't get much work out of a one-handed, fingerless apprentice!* the old man had said, gruffly.

There was a time when being observed would have made me nervous. Being watched can make me feel self-conscious about the way that I must fetch tools by hand instead of simply using a wand to summon what I need. I sand, plane and level everything step by step because I am unable to enchant the tools to continue

working while I move on to something else. Over the years there have been professors who have been fascinated by the way that I can work without magic. Perhaps I ought to have been flattered by their interest, but I dislike feeling like an amusing curiosity.

Minerva's interest did warm and flatter me. She did not look as though she was watching a quaint performance. Instead she observed me carefully, taking note when a remark would have proved too distracting. And her conversation held no element of 'Look At That – Aren't You Clever!'

Instead, she gave me some interesting information about Severus.

"I was able to speak with Irma before she left, yesterday evening," she said. "We located a single book on Cold Potion spells in the library's Restricted Section. It did mention 'backlash.' However," Minerva's lips thinned in annoyance, "the book did not describe any backlash effects which resemble a head-cold. Knowing Severus as I do, I suspect that he simply didn't want to take his medicine."

"So, he's just being difficult," I muttered. "How unusual."

Minerva chuckled, dryly.

"After I get his door installed, I'll fetch him another dose of Pepperup. Then I'll stand over him until he drinks it," I said. "If he's going to behave like a brat, then he's going to be treated like one."



Minerva and I didn't use red-and-gold to go out to her carriage. The walk would have been over much too quickly.

Dumbledore and Hagrid were waiting by the Castle gate to see Minerva off. She embraced both of them tightly, then she gave me a quite unselfconscious kiss before climbing into the waiting carriage.

The Headmaster looked away politely, but his smile was pleased. The half-giant grinned broadly. Avoiding both their eyes, I felt myself blushing like a ripe tomato.



Embarrassed and already missing Minerva desperately, I retreated to the quiet coolness of the Potions classroom. Keeping busy is my steadfast answer to heartache.

Poppy had instructed the house-elves to help me as much as possible with the heavy work. Four of the elves placed themselves at my disposal, and the door was up in record time. After thanking the elves and making a brief stop in the hospital wing to fetch another dose of Pepperup from Poppy's stores, I stepped through green-and-silver. A heartbeat later, I emerged in the dungeons, outside Professor Snape's rooms.

He'd placed protective spells on this door too, but none that 'felt' nasty. It was safe to knock. "Professor!!" I shouted, as I banged loudly on the door.

After a few minutes the door swung open. I stepped into a dim sitting room.

Professor Snape, looking paler than usual except for his red, sore nose, stood in another doorway that

led into his bedroom. He was wearing his long, grey nightshirt, clutching a handkerchief in one hand and his wand in the other. His long black hair, usually combed back, was a tangled mare's nest.

"Merlin's TEETH, Filch!" the Potions Master rasped hoarsely. "What do you want?"

"To tell you that your classroom has a new door."

He glared, blew his nose, and glared some more. "You didn't have to disturb me just for that!"

"I didn't, Professor. I also wanted to tell you that Professor McGonagall and Madam Pince have looked up Cold Potions in the library. Your story about backlash was a load of codswallop, meaning no disrespect, Professor."

I held up the goblet with the Pepperup in it and glared back. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself, a Master of Potions, suffering needlessly," I scolded him. "Is it really more dignified to go about sneezing than to be seen with smoke pouring out of your ears? You were probably worried about Black catching sight of you! Well, you needn't concern yourself about that. He's gone. And he wanted me to tell you to stop being your own worst enemy. So, drink this!"

Snape continued to glower at me.

"Don't make me fetch the Headmaster to pinch your nose and force your mouth open while I pour this potion down your throat! You know he'd do it!" I growled.

Snape's sneer became lethal. I was worried that I'd gone too far. Maybe he was going to cast a spell on me to teach me better manners.

But the Potions Master didn't point his wand at me.

Instead, he stumbled forward, grabbed the goblet out of my hands, turned on his heel and went into the bedroom with it. When I heard the slam of another door, I wandered into the bedroom after him. The Professor's sitting room had been neat and orderly, but his bedroom was a disaster. The bed was a tangled mass of sheets and blankets. Parchments, scrolls and books were piled onto his chair, his chest of drawers and every other available surface.

The poor man was ill, and I was hardly an invited guest, I told myself, sternly.

In a corner near the bed, surrounded by an island of clear floor space, was Azoth's large, sturdy basket. The little black tom stood up and stretched luxuriantly before he emerged. Weaving his way towards me around the piled books and parchments, he rubbed against my ankles in greeting.

"Hullo, little lad," I said, absently. I was staring at the basket. The old wool basket that Azoth had found in Helga Hufflepuff's Workroom... as far as I knew, Helga Hufflepuff's secret cloister had remained empty for nearly a thousand years.

True, the Lady of Hufflepuff wasn't known for being an Alchemist. But, she'd created the other Doors, hadn't she?

After a cautious glance at the closed bathroom door, I moved slowly towards Azoth's basket. Inside, I saw a black pillow (real velvet from the look of it, not velveteen) and the rubber mouse that was Azoth's favorite of the toys that Ginny Weasley had got for Mrs. Norris's kittens.

Cautiously, I rested a hand on the velvet pillow. The

basket had seemed harmless and innocent enough when I'd picked it up in Helga's Room, but Severus had possessed it for a number of weeks now.

Sensing nothing, I slid my hand under the pillow. My hand seemed to be going down much deeper than it ought to be going.

The subtle protective spell wasn't triggered until I'd submerged my right arm inside the basket, nearly shoulder deep. By the time I felt the warning surge of magic, it was too late for me to pull my arm out again.

I felt my hand being gripped tightly by some powerful force. And then, a sudden burst of pain...

CHAPTER EIGHT

Secret Chambers

Professor Severus Snape had smoke coming out of his ears. Both literally and figuratively.

"You're a firm believer in punishment, Filch," he snarled. "And this serves you right! You had no business rummaging about inside Azoth's basket! You're fortunate that I used a relatively innocuous protective spell!"

"It's called the *Ferula* Curse," he continued, coolly. "Azoth is quite safe from its effects. Only a prying human can trigger the spell."

Glaring at the Professor, I held my throbbing right hand under the cold water tap in his bathroom sink. My hand felt as if it had been beaten across the

knuckles with a heavy wooden stick.

Snape was right. The *Ferula* Curse wasn't that bad as far as curses went. Compared to the curses that he usually favored it was downright benign. The hurt was a relatively small thing compared to my mortification.

The Professor had caught me snooping. He'd emerged from the bathroom, having finally taken the Pepperup, to discover me struggling to extricate my trapped arm from Azoth's basket and trying not to yelp out loud as bursts of pain exploded across my knuckles.

At least Snape had removed the curse so I could get my hand free of the basket. He seemed to feel that my obvious embarrassment had evened the score between us, at least temporarily. Otherwise he might have decided that some additional revenge was necessary. Pepperup potion cures a cold instantly, but the aftereffects can hardly be called 'dignified'.

Severus had spent all of yesterday denying that he had a cold because he didn't want anyone to see him with smoking ears. Today, I had quite frankly bullied him into drinking a dose of the stuff. Under ordinary circumstances he would have been sure to make me pay dearly for my nerve.

The cold water was making my hand numb. I turned off the tap and gingerly flexed my fingers.

"It was you who gave me the hint about the Alchemist's Door in the first place," I pointed out, sullenly. "You said that Azoth and I had helped you to find the instructions. The basket is the only obvious connection. Did you think that I wouldn't figure it out?"

"If you hadn't come barging in here and gone nosing about in my room would you have seen Azoth's basket and made the connection?" the Potions Master demanded.

An honest answer would have been "probably not," but I was too ashamed and annoyed to give him an honest answer. And Minerva's leaving had torn my heart in two. I felt desolate and reckless.

"This is a fine thank you for my help, isn't it!" I growled. "You admitted that you wouldn't even have this basket if it wasn't for me!"

"Yes," he said, his voice soft and dangerous. "I've been meaning to ask you about that, Filch. Tell me. Where in the Castle did you find this extremely fascinating relic?" The Pepperup had done its work well. Snape's voice was as silky as ever, with no trace of hoarseness remaining.

His dark eyes locked on mine.

Suddenly, the smoky halo around Snape's head seemed neither humorous nor undignified. Instead, he looked diabolical. Like a bird or a mouse trapped by the gaze of a hunting snake, I was frozen, unable to look away or even move.

He was demanding that I speak about something I'd never discussed with anyone, not even the Headmaster. Helga's Workroom was one of the Castle's Secrets. Somehow, I'd always known that. Even before I knew whose haven I'd been welcomed into.

"Where do you suppose I found it?" I heard myself say, angrily. I didn't want him to know that he was frightening me. "Don't you have theories?"

Snape's voice was pure black velvet. "Indeed I do. Can you take me there, Filch? Can you show me where you found this basket of Azoth's?"

I folded my arms defensively across my chest. "That would be quite impossible, Professor."

I thought he'd be furious. Instead, Snape showed his teeth in a grim smile. Then he released me from his gaze. I wanted to slump against the wall, but I decided not to give him the satisfaction. Instead I drew myself up and glared at him.

Again Severus surprised me with a smile. But this one was approving, quite different from the harsh expression he'd worn only moments earlier.

"Well done, Filch. You are one of hers, indeed," he observed, not unkindly. "Whether you were actually Sorted or not."

My anger began to fade in the face of his praise and his evident regard for me. Doubtless the professor would accuse me of being easily manipulated. There are times when he does not seem to understand what he's done to earn the esteem that I have for him.

"How did you know that the basket belonged to Her?" I asked, giving the Lady of Hufflepuff her proper due.

"I have discovered that they worked on the Alchemist's Door together. He asked her to keep the details of their accomplishment hidden in the safest place that she could think of."

"He?" I asked, confused.

"Salazar Slytherin," Severus said, a bit impatiently. "Among his numerous other gifts and achievements,

he was a noted Alchemist. And Helga Hufflepuff could Weave many things."

Professor Snape sat on the edge of his bed. Azoth, sensing a lessening of tension in the room, immediately leaped into his wizard's lap.

"Helga Hufflepuff and Salazar Slytherin?" I murmured.

"Apparently, they corresponded for a while even after the rift between Slytherin and the others." The Professor rubbed under Azoth's chin. The tiny cat lifted his head and purred.

"Clever little demon," Severus said fondly, looking down at his pet. "Most cats are content to bring their companions dead mice and birds as tokens of affection. And Mrs. Norris likes to bring you news of misbehaving students."

The Professor paused to rub the cat's belly while the little tom began happily wrestling with his wizard's hand. "Azoth brings me the long-lost secrets of Salazar Slytherin. Even though they'd been carefully hidden away where no one would have ever thought to look for them. Inside Helga Hufflepuff's old wool-basket, along with a packet of letters from Slytherin himself."

"I-I thought it was just a basket," I said. "There were no spells around it... none that I could sense, anyhow."

"A Weaver's spells are extremely subtle, Filch. I thought it was an ordinary basket for days. Until I happened to reach inside. I couldn't feel the bottom. And then I found the letters. As I said, I am in your debt. Yours and Azoth's."

I sighed. "Repay your debt to us by being more cau-

tious with your experiments, Professor. Neither Azoth nor I wish to see you harmed."

Severus responded with one of his usual caustic glares.

"Has it occurred to you that Slytherin wanted the Alchemist's Door kept secret for a very good reason?" I continued, undaunted.

"Of course," Snape said impatiently. "I'm sure that he had a number of very good reasons. A Slytherin's motives are always complex. And we have more secrets than anyone," he added with a hint of pride in his voice.

"Just be careful! Don't take foolish risks!" I said, with a hint of exasperation in mine. "Don't be..."

"My own worst enemy?" Severus hissed, his anger serving to increase the puffs of smoke that were still curling from his ears. "The nerve...! The infernal cheek of that flea-bitten, mangy Gryffindor lout..."

"If you freeze yourself to death or end up with ice-shards buried in your heart, you'll only be proving him right," I pointed out. "Professor, please don't attempt to create the Alchemist's Door again! At least not until you understand what you did wrong the first time!"

The Potions Master scowled. "You needn't concern yourself, Filch. Azoth and I shall be leaving the Castle tomorrow morning. And this experiment is one that I would not attempt to do anywhere but here."

"Alchemists have waited nearly a thousand years for a Door... surely you can wait a little longer," I said, to console him.

With a quiet sigh, Snape nudged Azoth off his lap and stood up to make his bed. When I noticed that his

ribs were hurting him, I moved to help. Azoth, who had started to make himself comfortable among the tangled blankets, gave both of us a baleful stare and stalked back to his basket.



That evening, after I'd stopped working for the day, I was sitting in my office. Notes for my Door forms were spread out all over my desk, but I was having difficulty concentrating on them. Professor Snape has often told me that I'm slow on the uptake, and I suppose that he must be right. I hadn't thought of Helga's welcoming haven as being in any way akin to Slytherin's legendary, fearsome Chamber of Secrets.

Did *all* the Founders have Secret places of their own? Professor Snape's manner had seemed to suggest that he thought it was possible. At least he'd seemed to suspect the existence of the Lady's Chamber...

Well, Salazar's Chamber was a Secret no longer. And, the Lady's Workroom was well-known to me. But what of Rowena Ravenclaw? And Godric Gryffindor? If I should ask their Doors to take me to their hidden chambers what would happen?

Troubled, I stroked Mrs. Norris who was curled up on my lap. "I know the Rules, my sweet," I murmured. "A Caretaker should never presume. The Castle will reveal Its secrets to me or not, as It pleases."

Then I sighed. "Oh, well. I suppose it wouldn't hurt to ask, would it? The Doors can always refuse me if I'm out of bounds."

Biting my lip nervously, I summoned blue-and-bronze. With Mrs. Norris cradled in my arms for moral support, I approached the tapestry.

"If it is permitted...?" I asked Rowena's Door, my destination an unspoken thought in my mind.

Then we stepped through the tapestry.



Mrs. Norris and I emerged into an unfamiliar Library. It was a vast, airy chamber, at least three stories high. Long narrow stained-glass windows rose all the way from floor to ceiling, bathing the place in color and light.

The sun had long since set, but I was accustomed to the way that the Founders seemed to be able to make time stand still in their Secret Chambers. Bookshelves filled every available section of the wall, accessible from balconies, movable stairs and tall rolling ladders. At the other end of the immense room was an arched doorway. At intervals in front of the bookshelves, were comfortable-looking couches and chairs.

Rowena Ravenclaw had protected her books well against age and dust. Their leather bindings remained clean and bright. But grime lay thick on the floor. At first I mistook the pale dust for a deep, very plain carpet.

"Well. This place could certainly do with a good sweeping," I muttered.

Mrs. Norris leaped lightly down from my arms, leaving her own tiny paw-prints on the dusty floor. I

followed her through the first chamber, through the arched doorway and into a second chamber as vast and light and filled with bright books as the other. It was there that I received a bit of a shock.

Small footprints had disturbed the dust in here. Human, too big and not the right shape for a house-elf... perhaps the size of a first or second year's foot. They started abruptly in the middle of the floor directly in front of one of the bookshelves, leading across the room to a shelf on the opposite wall and then back again, to vanish in the same spot they'd started.

Wandering over to see where the small footprints led, I noticed several empty spaces on the shelves there. The titles of the books that remained were all in a language that I couldn't read.

Obviously there were other paths that led to the Secret Library of Ravenclaw. I looked around a bit. Gruffly, I called out "who's there?" a time or two. No-one answered.

In a small alcove beneath a stained glass window was a couch, curved to fit the shape of the wall. Just over the couch hung a tapestry filled with Eagles in various roles, bringers of both storm and fertility. They were Dwellers on the Tree of Life, breeders of whirlwinds, mighty Thunderbirds. The Eagle tapestry was clearly Helga's work, a gift for Rowena.



After some time spent wandering around among the books (and making note of the small footprints that had disturbed the dust in other places,) Mrs.

Norris and I returned to my office.

The first thing I did was add "Clean Library floor!" to my list of 'Jobs To Do.'

Then, taking a deep breath, I summoned red-and-gold. After a moment Mrs. Norris paused in her bath and padded over to stand beside me. "If it is permitted...?" I asked Godric's Door. Again, my destination remained unspoken, hidden in my thoughts.

Mrs. Norris went with me as I stepped through the tapestry.



It was a small cheerful room. From the looks of things, one of the oldest places in the Castle. As Mrs. Norris and I entered, my eyes were drawn to the fireplace. A row of bright red and gold tiles over the mantel spelled out "Godric's Keep."

A lively tapestry hung on another wall. It depicted a pride of lions; a large golden-maned male watching protectively over small cubs as they tumbled about in play, a group of lionesses teaching the young to hunt, the whole family of great Cats dozing peacefully together in the sun. Another of Helga's gifts.

A large, battered wooden desk stood against another wall near a sunny window. Someone had carved a small but complex geometrical pattern onto the desk's surface with a little knife. Books and scrolls were stacked haphazardly all over the desk, except for a mostly cleared space in the center.

Against the wall opposite the desk, a weathered

wooden door was creaking in a faint breeze. Slowly I pushed it open. The hinges squeaked noisily. Wishing I'd brought along some oil, I stepped through.

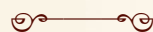
Godric's Keep was on a ground-level floor. It opened directly onto a wide grassy yard that I'd never seen before. The yard was surrounded on all four sides by high stone castle walls.

I stared. A Secret Room with a Yard? I could not help but notice that the grass needed cutting.

The sky above was blue and bright with white, soft looking clouds overhead. Whispers of powerful magic still lingered faintly in the air. Dueling magic, battle-magic.

Only butterflies lived here now. There was a gentle breeze, whispering through the grass. But I could almost hear the clash of long-ago weapons, almost feel the hot, dry wind of spells. There were faint echoes of the eager young voices of long-ago students and the deeper, encouraging shouts of an older wizard, their teacher.

Eyes wide with wonder, I stood still in the practice-yard for an uncounted length of time, lost in the old magic while Mrs. Norris stalked through the grass and chased butterflies.



Silvery hair and beard bright in the starlight, Dumbledore sat at the edge of his favorite dock, padding his feet in the lake.

"Headmaster...!" I gasped, emerging from red-and-gold to stumble down the dock towards him. Mrs. Norris padded after me, a good deal more calmly.

"Hello, Argus," Dumbledore said. "It's a lovely evening, isn't it?"

"Very nice," I said, dazed with the power of the Castle's Secret places. Their magic still clung to me, along with the Library dust and bits of chaff and grass seeds from the yard by the Keep. There were golden butterflies fluttering around my head. I had never spoken of the Secrets to anyone. Now, I thought that I might be crushed by the weight of my silence.

"Headmaster..." I repeated, helplessly.

If Minerva was here, then she would put her arms around me. She would say something warm and sharp and clever. She would be able to put my feet back on the ground again where they ought to be. I missed her so much.

"Severus seems to be feeling better," Dumbledore remarked, quite gently. He tugged me down to sit on the dock beside him, much as he had done with Potter when the poor boy was frightened and distraught.

"Yes, though his ribs are still bothering him," I said. "At least he took some Pepperup and got over that cold he insisted he never had in the first place," I added with a nervous wave of my hand.

Dumbledore noticed my bruised knuckles. He looked at me with concern.

"Oh. That's nothing, just Azoth's basket," I said, vaguely. Unlacing my boots and putting them on the dock beside me, I rolled my breeches up and dangled my feet in the lake as the Headmaster was doing. The cold water felt good against my sore instep. Mrs.

Norris stood beside me, peering cautiously over the edge of the dock, looking for fish. It was hard for me to stop yawning and I couldn't seem to hold my body up straight. After a while, when I grew calmer, I began to realize that I was very tired.

"If you don't get yourself to bed soon, then Mrs. Norris and I will have to fish you out of the lake," Dumbledore said, wryly.

"I suppose I'll need an earlier start than ever," I murmured. "All that grass to cut and that dusty floor, not to mention all the plumbing I haven't got around to yet."

I yawned. "And Snuffles thinks Myrtle's bathroom could do with some new paint and soon enough Hagrid will leave and there'll be Fluffy for me to clean up after..."

"Argus," the Headmaster said, quiet and amused. "Relax. You don't have to do everything all at once. There's plenty of time. The summer is only just beginning."

EPILOGUE

"All the Dark Places"

Today, Moaning Myrtle was haunting me instead of her bathroom. While fixing a broken stall door in her drab domain this morning, I had just happened to bring up the subject of redecorating. Sirius Black had been right. Myrtle had been surprisingly enthusiastic about the idea.

For the next few hours, everywhere I went Myrtle followed. Down to the kitchens, where I'd replaced a

broken pipe for the house-elves. Up to the boys' bathroom on the sixth floor right hand corridor, where I had cleaned out a blocked drain. And now we were all the way up in the Astronomy Tower's tiny bathroom, where I'd just discovered that the leaky old toilet in there needed to be replaced with an entirely new one.

"Purple walls and stalls?!" I said, frowning in response to a suggestion that the ghost-brat had just made. My temper was hardly at its best. "You can't be serious! Isn't your place depressing enough already?"

Myrtle's lip quivered. "Purple happens to be my favorite color!" Pearly tears began forming at the corners of her eyes. "I should have known that you didn't mean it, when you told me that I could choose whatever colors I liked!" she said, sulkily. "What an amusing joke! Let's Tease Myrtle, Raise Her Hopes With False Promises and Then Snatch It All Away!" Then the ghost-brat began to wail.



"Surely, Madam Pomfrey has headache remedies already prepared!" Professor Snape said, impatiently. I couldn't blame him for being irked with me. The Potions Master had been all packed and ready to go when I'd come to him with my request.

"Of course she does. It's just that... well, you're still here," I said, plaintively, rubbing my aching temples. "I'd rather not start depleting Poppy's supplies so soon. My summer's going to be one continuous headache! Will it take you very long to brew something up?"

Severus sighed. To my relief, I saw that he'd decided to help me. With Azoth draped across his shoulders, the Professor strode through the dungeons to open up his Potions Classroom. I followed.

The room was much emptier than usual, thanks to his failed experiment with the Alchemist's Door. (Ordering new desks for the Potions classroom was on my list of 'Jobs to Do'.)

While the Potions Master gathered his ingredients, I sat on one of the few remaining desks and held Azoth on my lap. The little tom's soft purring soothed me. It was pleasant just to sit and watch Severus work. Soon he had a student-sized cauldron heating slowly over a small fire.

"I really appreciate this," I murmured. "It's very kind of you."

Severus looked disgruntled, as he almost always does whenever anyone accuses him of being kind. "It's no bother," he said, brusquely. "But I shall have to leave the washing up for you to do. Why do you foresee a constant need for headache remedies?"

I told him about my redecorating project in Moaning Myrtle's bathroom.

"And whose idea was this incredibly masochistic endeavor? Yours or Myrtle's?"

"Neither of us, Professor. It was Sirius Black's suggestion."

Severus gave me an incredulous stare.

"He meant no harm!" I said, defensively. "He was trying to help me."

Snape's level of skepticism rose by several degrees. "How?"

"Um... I thought that Myrtle's mood could do with some brightening. So, I asked Black if he would cast

one of those... erm... Cheering Charms on her..."

If looks could dismember, I would have been lying on the floor in pieces.

"Well, Black didn't think that it was a very good idea, either!" I said. "That's why he suggested redecorating instead."

"Hmm. Imagine that. The lout can actually learn from his mistakes," Severus said, dryly.

"It's not his fault that Myrtle has the most appalling taste," I grumbled. "Myrtle's favorite color happens to be this dreadfully dark shade of purple! It will make that place even gloomier than it was before, and I didn't think such a thing was possible!"

"Sirius Black is a harbinger of trouble, even when he means well. You deserve to have a summer filled with headaches for being foolish enough to take his advice."

"Don't look at me like that," Snape said, when I was crestfallen. "I'm not going to refuse to give you the potion. It would be a waste of good ingredients."

Wryly, Severus continued. "Will you take some advice from me, now?"

I gave him a glum nod.

"You've already started this foolishness, it would be in your best interests to see it through. Let the ghost-child have her way if it will please her. That was your original intention, was it not?"

"But I still have to clean in that bathroom," I mumbled. "The purple will make the wretched place so dark that I won't be able to see my hand in front of my face! I'll fall over my cleaning bucket and break my neck."

Snape smiled, wryly. "An old Egyptian blessing

comes to mind. 'May the gods stand between you and harm in all the dark places where you must walk!'

"Very funny," I said, glowering.



When the headache potion was finished, Severus ladled it into a goblet for me. "Best to drink it quickly and then lie down for a while. Drowsiness is one of the side-effects."

I nodded.

"Very well then. I shall see you in a week, perhaps two or even three," Severus said.

After thanking him, I said earnestly, "the Door Forms should be ready by the time you return."

He sighed. "My classroom door will be locked. Slip one under the door for me."

"I will." Awkwardly I added, "please, be very careful this summer. Look after yourself."

"I am a careful man, Filch," Severus said, coolly. "And I always look after myself."

With a stern expression that dared me to contradict him, Snape reached out and took Azoth from me. The little cat settled onto his wizard's shoulders once more.

By the new Potions classroom door, Snape paused. Looking back over his shoulder he spoke, quietly. "You be careful as well, Argus. Black might be a lout, but his advice about the Rats was sound."

I nodded again as I followed him from the room. This summer, every good-bye filled me with fear. I hoped that Severus would be all right, and that he would return to us safely.

"Professor?" I said as we stepped into the corridor, and he stopped to lock the door.

"May the gods stand between you and harm." My voice was much graver than his had been.

"In all the Dark Places..." Snape finished for me, softly. "Thank you, Filch."

Then, trailing his long, black cloak after him, the Potions Master headed swiftly down the corridor and out of sight. Snape did not care for lengthy good-byes.



Rowena's Library was quiet and private. The beauty of the sun shining through the stained glass windows was balm for my worried soul. The curved couch beneath the Eagle tapestry was a good place for a nap. I'd made a quick trip here earlier to drop off some cleaning supplies; Magical Mess Remover, a few brooms, several dust mops, wet mops and some cleaning buckets filled with water.

Giving the floors in both huge rooms a proper, thorough cleaning would probably take me hours. But during the summer my time is my own. I could rest now and work all night if I chose. I drank the headache potion and lay down on the couch.

Then, surrounded by peaceful silence and warm colors, I slept for a while in the light.

The End

Squib Summer

by Ozma and Jelsemium

Harry Potter and all recognizable characters are owned by J. K. Rowling and are used without permission or intent to make a profit.

The less recognizable characters: The Grey Stalker, the Harpy, The Caoimhe Bean-Sidhe (Cavvy Banshee), Gormghlaith Mac Gabhann (Gor-em-lee Mac Gavin) and the Bookwurm were created by Jill Weber (Jelsemium) and are used as shameless self promotions *ala* Gilderoy Lockhart.



PROLOGUE ONE

The Predators' Party

THE SPHINX sipped daintily on her *Crème de Menthe* as she surveyed the occupants of the human pub known as the *Leaky Cauldron*. Long ago, gatherings like this had provided her with amusement and sustenance. Then humans had started getting fussy about being eaten if they lost a riddle contest. So now all she got here were drinks and the occasional floor show when some *Muggle-born's* parents realized what she was. She smiled to herself and stroked the breast of her kestrel. Tom the Bartender wasn't happy about letting her come in, even with assurances that she wasn't here for food. However, even Tom wasn't likely to argue with her patron.



The Harpy settled herself into a corner and tried to

be inconspicuous. She knew that the Sphinx wasn't hungry; knew that because she knew the Sphinx's patron did not permit such things. However, the Sphinx was still part feline and the Harpy was part avian and the two species would never mingle comfortably. Maybe it was time to go. She would have left except that she was hungry and the Leaky Cauldron had the best shepherd's pie in England... even if they weren't made with real shepherds.



Nagini was hungry. Her master would not let her feed properly. "The time has not yet come, my pet," he hissed. "We'll show those fools not to take us lightly. Until then, I need you to lay low. Even eating Muggles might draw too much attention to us, and I am not ready for a direct confrontation. Nor can I afford to let you have any of my death eaters." He'd smiled after that. "Although, if certain of them don't get in line... well, some have more than one child. Losing one or two of the extras might bring them in line."

She had to be satisfied with that for the moment, so she was forced to make do with something else. Her errand for her master permitted her to go to Nocturne Alley, which was close enough for her to slip over to the Leaky Cauldron. She couldn't eat any of the patrons, but she could sneak into the cellar to capture a few rats and steal a bottle or two of wine.



Caoimhe was on the prowl. Gliding invisibly down Diagon Alley in search of Gormghlaith Mac Gabhann, last of the Colla Mac Gabhann clan. The woman didn't know that she was all alone in the world.

However, she would as soon as the Bean-Sidhe fulfilled her duties. The mortal cow was being difficult, however. The Bean-Sidhe had no idea what the woman did for a living, but it apparently involved apparating hither and yon like a bloody will-o-the-wisp. The Bean-Sidhe gnashed her teeth as she sensed her target apparating out of Diagon Alley and apparently out of England all together.

Mortals! They had no appreciation for a hard working fairy woman's tight schedule. The Bean-Sidhe sighed and gave up for now. She'd tell the cow about her family soon enough. Right now, she needed a drink. She decided to head over to the Leaky Cauldron for a good stiff shot of whiskey. Bartenders were the only mortals she could bear to deal with, anyway.



Tom the Bartender sighed as he polished the spotless bar top with an equally spotless towel. The bar was going to lose money today, the longer certain patrons stayed on, the more they would lose. Very few wizards cared to spend time drinking and rendering themselves helpless in the presence of predators; particularly predators of the anthropophagus variety.

"Tom! Another Crème de Menthe, if you please." "Or even if you don't please," ran the subtext. The speaker,

a leonine female sitting boldly in the middle of the bar like Sphinxes commonly mingled with mortals, smiled. "Don't look so grim, Tom. The times, they change whether we wish them to or not."

"Yes, ma'am," Tom replied in Basic Bartender Neutral Tones.

"Maybe I could cheer you up a bit. Would you care to hear a riddle? I've got a new one off the Bookwurm not a fortnight ago."

"No, thank you, ma'am," Tom said in long suffering tones.

The Sphinx chortled in her drink and pulled some parchment out from the pouch around her neck. She knew her Patron WOULD enjoy this riddle. So, she might as well make use of her new kestrel to send it to him.

Tom shot a glance to the back corner. 'At least the Harpy was making an attempt to be inconspicuous,' he thought. 'Of course, the Harpy didn't have the backing of such a powerful wizard, either.' He was glad when the Harpy's order came up, though. Quiet and relatively clean as the bird woman was today, she still made him nervous.

"Here is your shepherd's pie, ma'am," he said politely. "Will you be having anything else?"

"Yes, my good man," the Harpy rasped. Her eyes glittered as if with a private joke. "I'll have some blood pudding to follow and another Guinness Stout, please."

"Yes, ma'am," Tom said with a slight nod as he moved to fill her order. He looked around to see if there was anybody else in need of service. He sighed when a

green skinned woman swept through the wall.

"Tom! A whiskey and soda to wet my whistle. Be quick, I need something to calm meself down after a rough day. Honestly, working with mortals is enough to make me scream!" said the Bean-Sidhe.

'Oh, goody,' Tom thought. 'What else could go wrong?'

It was the wrong thing to even think. However, Tom wasn't the one who was going to pay for tempting fate like that.

PROLOGUE TWO

The Boy Who Would Rather Be Anywhere Else

"I don't want him to go," whined Dudley. "He always spoils everything." Actually, the grossly overweight teen was afraid that his cousin would make fun of him when he tried on clothes. He knew he'd make fun of Harry, if his Mum would ever be stupid enough to waste money on new clothes for his abnormal cousin.

"Now, Dinky Duddy-ums," his mother cooed. "You know we have to get you a nice suit for this wedding. Daddy's new boss is getting married and you want to look nice, don't you?" She patted his shoulder anxiously.

Harry Potter, sitting just out of her peripheral vision, smirked at Dudley. Harry didn't consider himself to be much to look at, especially with the scar, but at least

he didn't need to get a custom fitted circus tent.

Dudley scowled. He wished his mother would stop speaking to him as if he were three years old. He wished that Potter would drop dead or something. And he really didn't want to go to some swanky shop where the hired help, and Potter, would smirk at him while he tried on clothes.

Petunia couldn't see Harry, but she could see Dudley's expression easily enough. Without turning around, she said, "Wipe that smirk off your face, Potter. You're coming with us, but don't expect to lollygag around in the shop. I'll not have decent people exposed to you."

Harry sighed. "Yes, Aunt Petunia," he said with as much meekness as he could muster. It apparently wasn't enough, because Petunia boxed his ears as she passed.

Dudley smirked as he 'accidentally' knocked into Harry and bounced him off the wall.

"The taxi's here. Come along then, and no funny stuff! You'll get no lunch if you don't behave yourself."

Harry sighed. He hadn't had any breakfast, since Aunt Petunia wouldn't let him eat until his chores were done. Then she'd insisted that he change into his least disreputable set of clothing. Now he knew why.

Uncle Vernon had been bitterly complaining about the cost of taxis, but taking Dudley on the tube or a bus was just asking for trouble.

Harry managed to squeeze himself into the back seat with Dudley while his aunt sat up front with the driver. "Behave yourself or you'll walk home," Petunia snapped.

Harry sighed again. It was going to be a bad day. If

he'd had a real idea of how bad, he probably would have thrown himself out of the taxi right then. It would have saved him some time and the end results would have been much the same.



Outside the Leaky Cauldron, in Muggle London, a grey clad female stalked the streets. She was close to starvation, but she did not enter the Leaky Cauldron, nor did she approach the Muggle food sellers. They would do her no good, for she did not eat solid food. She licked her lips and ran her tongue along the special tooth that ran along her upper palate. The venom sac was almost painfully full, it had been so long since she'd had a chance to use it.

She dared not go into the Leaky Cauldron in search of prey. There was food in there, but all the magic was locked up inside wizarding folk who could defend themselves. Today there were even other Predators, and the Grey Stalker did not care to tangle with such. Like many predators, she preferred to target the young. Children's magic was especially easy for her to feed on, and they didn't have the control to fend her off. Magic children with non-magical parents were the most vulnerable, which is why she haunted the streets just outside of the entrance to Diagon Alley, waiting for the unwary and the unlucky...



CHAPTER ONE

The Boy Who Was Followed

The Music Store, 'Musically Inclined,' was created by Jill Weber (Jelsemium). The Tattered Cover Bookstore is actually in Denver, Colorado. All recognizable characters were created by J. K. Rowling

The less recognizable humans aren't based on anyone in particular. The less recognizable creatures are loosely based on folklore and mythology

The spell's presence was powerful and subtle. It was unlike anything I'd felt before; a deep musical note that seemed to resonate through the smoke-filled tap-room of the Leaky Cauldron.

I looked up, startled, to discover that no one else seemed to have sensed it. The murmurs of conversation all around me did not cease. Even Mrs. Norris, curled up asleep on my lap, did not stir.

Feeling like a fool, I gazed into the depths of my drink. I'd ordered a gillywater. Being around all the Muggle-repelling spells in London was enough to make me feel a bit ill, without getting drunk into the bargain.

"Enjoy London," the Headmaster had said, yesterday evening when he'd put me on the Knight Bus. "I may be gone before you return, but Hagrid will still be at the Castle for the next three days. After that, it's not

likely that you will have another chance to get away for a while."

"I don't need to get away," I'd grumbled.

That was a lie, and Dumbledore knew it. The Professors had all left Hogwarts for the summer, headed for points unknown. I knew nothing about what tasks lay in store for them, and I knew better than to ask. I was especially worried about Minerva. Very recently the lovely Professor had become more than a dear friend to me.

Unable to do anything to help her or anyone else, I had gone grimly about my summer chores, as best as I could.

How could I be anything but grim at the prospect of cleaning up after a beast the size of Fluffy? And then, there was my redecorating project in Moaning Myrtle's bathroom. But I didn't want to think about that...

"A change of scene will do you good," Dumbledore had said, firmly. Then he'd given me a few days off to take care of some long-neglected business in Diagon Alley.

The Headmaster is usually right about most things. But, at the moment, the scenery in the Leaky Cauldron was a bit too "changed" for my comfort. There was most definitely a Sphinx curled, regally lion-like, in front of the bar. She was surveying the room through long, almond shaped eyes, while she sipped at a drink.

And my nose told me of the Harpy, even before I spied the gleam of brassy wings in a shadowy corner. At least she wasn't flying about, putting people off their breakfasts. Quite the opposite, really; she'd put some effort into making herself tidy, enough so that the harpy-stench wasn't too offensive to the other

beings in the taproom. Nevertheless, everyone was giving that corner a wide berth.

And surely, that fey creature who'd just drifted into the taproom, surrounded by a haze of faint light, was a Banshee! What in Merlin's name was the Leaky Cauldron coming to?

But, when the unknown spell began to ring inside the very hollows of my bones, I forgot about the Sphinx, the Harpy and the Banshee. Moving slowly, almost against my will, I stood, picking up Mrs. Norris. My cat made a small, indignant sound when I interrupted her nap. With her cradled in my arms, I moved towards the door leading into Muggle-London.

Odd, that this potent spell was coming from the Muggle-side, not from Diagon Alley. If I'd had any sense, I wouldn't have gone to investigate. Perhaps I've been spending too much time around Gryffindors lately, it's my only excuse. Of course Minerva would have gone to investigate. She's brave. She wouldn't sit, staring into her gillywater, waiting for the feeling to go away.

I stepped out of the Leaky Cauldron and the spell's power made me stagger. A woman seemed to be one of its focal points. A thin, blonde woman. The spell swirled around her without truly touching her. Near the woman was a very fat blond boy. He provided another focal point for the spell. The corona of ancient magic around the pair of them was so strong that I couldn't tell if they were wizarding folk or Muggles.

Their party had a third member. He trailed behind the other two, dressed in clothing that I could tell was

shabby despite my unfamiliarity with Muggle fashion.

It took me a moment to recognize him.



This was worse than Harry imagined. Not only were they in London, they'd halted just outside the Leaky Cauldron. Harry could almost smell the butterbeer from where he stood outside the music shop. Truthfully, it wasn't even a cool drink he was longing for, although he was feeling parched. It was the congenial atmosphere. He knew that, at the very least, Tom the bartender would be at hand.

Harry was almost to the point where he'd take the Potions dungeons, Snape and all, to listening to his cousin whine any more. Dudley had stopped in front of the record shop and had started badgering Petunia for a new CD, and a new CD player to go with it. Dudley had broken his third or fourth CD player just two days ago when he'd had a tantrum about going to this wedding of Vernon's boss.

Petunia was on the verge of giving in when she noticed Harry staring longingly in the direction of the Leaky Cauldron. She glanced in that direction, then scowled because she saw nothing there. Normally, she'd assume that her freak of a nephew was just staring into space, but there was something in his expression that told her that he was seeing something dear to him. Something she couldn't see. Which meant that it was part of the freak world. "Come along, now," she snarled, hauling at both boys' arms.

Dudley shot Harry a dirty look. "You always spoil everything," he whined. "I was that close to a new CD Player!" He held up his pudgy thumb and forefinger.

Harry snorted. "Well, if you didn't go around destroying your things, you wouldn't need to replace them so often," he said.

Petunia gave him a dirty look, but refrained from hitting him in public. Dragging two recalcitrant teen-aged boys through the muggy heat of a busy London morning would be enough to try the patience of a saint, or a Hufflepuff. Petunia Dursley was neither. Things got worse as Petunia began to notice the odd looks that Potter was getting from passers-by. Typically, she blamed Potter for his shabby appearance, although she knew full well that he was wearing the best clothing that he'd been given.

When one of the onlookers actually made a comment, Petunia snapped. "I can't do a thing with this brat. You're welcome to take him, see if you can do a better job of making him behave."



That caught her attention. Abandoned children fell into the Grey Stalker's purview. Though she had to admit, if only to herself, that her definition of 'abandoned' children probably wouldn't match that of their parents. She defined any argument between such a parent and such a child as 'abandonment.' It gave her a far wider choice of prey, for it was the rare child indeed who never argued with his or her parents. However,

this offer, coming voluntarily from the boy's guardian, most definitely put this tasty morsel within her reach.



When I saw *The Boy Who Lived*, all the pieces fell into place. I'd heard the Headmaster speak of an ancient magic that would protect Harry when he was in the care of his family. The woman and the boy... they must be Potter's Muggle relations. The ones that no one at Hogwarts seemed to think very highly of! Was the family so poor that they had to dress Potter like a beggar? But the aunt and the cousin had been dressed well enough, in their strange Muggle way. It was a puzzle...

By the time I'd collected my wits, Potter, the woman and the boy were out of my sight, hidden among the crowd of people on the street. They were getting further away, but I could still feel the power that bound the three of them. It would be easy enough for me to follow, if I chose.

Mrs. Norris jumped lightly down from my arms. Taking a few steps in the direction that Potter and his family had gone, she looked back at me and gave a loud mew.

"Is it necessary go after him, my sweet?" I asked her. "He's with his family after all. It's none of our concern, really. Between his own magic and that protective spell around all of them, nothing harmful should be able to touch him."

Mrs. Norris flicked an ear at me in an impatient way and headed down the street, a small grey panther slinking through a forest of legs.

"Very well..." I sighed. Mrs. Norris' opinions on such matters are not to be dismissed lightly. I followed her,

pushing my way past staring Muggles. Some were snickering. Others wore expressions of concern and pity.

I glared. It wasn't as if I was doing anything unusual. I was merely speaking to my cat, not juggling purple balls of flame! Didn't Muggles ever talk to their cats?

Potter and his relations were getting further away. Mrs. Norris moves much faster than I do. Keeping her in sight wasn't easy. London was so hot, so many people, so many noisy, wretched cars...

I'd just followed Mrs. Norris across a busy thoroughfare (both of us escaped being struck by moving vehicles, in my case by inches) when I was assaulted by a sudden wave of foul magic.

At first the stench of Darkness was indistinguishable from the reek of a large metal container full of rubbish, standing in a shadowy alley between grubby brick buildings. By the time I realized the danger, it was already too late to defend myself.

Small hands, callused and strong, had seized my right arm in a grip as unbreakable as an iron manacle. I was swung forward, striking my head against the corner of one of the brick buildings.

The next thing I knew, I was flat on my back in the alley. Choking on the combined stink of garbage and Dark magic, I became aware that someone or something was gripping my shoulders and sniffing at me.

"Easy prey, this one, no need to waste my dart here. And there's some magic in him..." a sibilant, female voice hissed. The creature was breathing in my face. Her breath was even worse than Fluffy's.

"But, how to get at it?" The voice was filled with frustration. "He's a tough, old nut. Too hard to crack his shell! And the meal would be a meager one, hardly worth the time and effort. The boy will be sweeter meat. A succulent feast..." Now, I could hear the foul thing licking her lips.

Could there be any doubt which boy she was referring to? Potter has a highly-developed gift for attracting trouble in every possible form. Merlin's Beard... couldn't he even walk down a street? Professor Snape swears up and down that Potter does this sort of thing on purpose. I have come to believe that the boy doesn't mean to attract danger, he can't help it, any more than poor Neville can help the fact that he's clumsy.

"You can't have the boy..." I gasped, struggling to open my eyes. When I succeeded, my dubious reward was the sight of what appeared to be a small, swarthy, dark haired woman. She was dressed in shabby grey robes.

I didn't think that she was a Death Eater, or one of the Dark Lord's minions. The Darkness that surrounded her was different, far more ancient and terribly hungry.

She gave me an evil smile that seemed to contain far too many teeth. "Who's going to stop me then? You, Broken Wizard? Whatever small magic you have is locked away from you."

With a cackling laugh, she let my head drop to the pavement. The pain was like an explosion of Filibuster Fireworks in my skull.



Clothes shopping is boring at the best of times, not that Harry was really familiar with it. His experience with buying clothes had been limited to walking into Madam Malkin's, getting his robes hemmed and then going off to get ice cream. Buying dress robes (please, no Yule Ball next year!) might have been different, but Mrs. Weasley had done that chore for him.

Buying clothes for Dudley went beyond boring. Harry found himself wishing to be back in History of Magic. At least there he could put his head down and go to sleep. Here he had to stay awake and guard Aunt Petunia's purse and all the purchases. There was exactly one package in there for him, his new underwear. He'd asked for some in front of too many witnesses for Aunt Petunia to say 'no'. He'd pay for it later, he knew, but he wasn't about to pass up a chance for some decent fitting under things.

Dudley wasn't helping matters any. His constant whining was finally getting on even his doting mother's nerves. "That was the last fitting, Duddy-kins," she cooed. "Now we can have a nice tea before going home."

"I want a hamburger," whined Dudley.

Harry actually sympathized. He had never been to any of Aunt Petunia's teas, of course, but having cleaned up after them, he'd noticed that the food seemed to consist of undersized sandwiches and little-bitty cakes too small to even taste. He'd rather have a hamburger, too. Not that he was going to get either tea or burger, he sighed to himself.

He was startled out of his reverie when Aunt Petunia

scooped the packages out of his arms. "We're going inside for a final fitting. There's a good restaurant in there that serves tea. Stay here and I'll bring you the leftovers."

Leftovers? From a meal of Dudley's? Harry sighed, but Petunia just glared at him. "If you're not here when we come out, you'll have to make your own way home. I'm not putting myself out over a brat like you."

Harry sighed again as Petunia and Dudley disappeared into the shop's cool interior. He considered slipping back to the Leaky Cauldron, he didn't have any money on him, or even his Gringott's key, but he bet that Tom would give him credit. He got up and looked around, then gave up. All the different errands had him so turned around that he had no idea which way the Leaky Cauldron was from here. He slumped onto a bench and tried to remember the name of the stores that flanked the wizarding tavern.

"Are you all right, dear?"

Harry looked up to see a small, swarthy dark haired woman dressed in a shapeless grey pantsuit.

"You seemed a bit lost," the woman continued. There was something strange about her mouth. It reminded him somehow of some wild Japanese movie he'd caught Dudley watching once, where the actors words didn't synchronize with the lip movements.

A lifetime of being told not to talk to strangers combined with recent events to make him feel a trifle wary, if not outright paranoid. So Harry answered cautiously. "Erm, no, ma'am, I was just trying to remember the name of a record shop that we just

passed. It was right next to a bookstore, too," Harry thought that was safe enough. All the lessons in manners he'd gotten from his Aunt actually agreed with his first year DADA classes... keep a civil tongue in your head when spoken to.

"Do you mean the ones that flank the Leaky Cauldron?"

Harry's eyes went wide. Then her dark eyes flickered to his forehead and he realized she knew who he was. "Yes, ma'am," he replied, shifting his weight uneasily.

"The music store is called Musically Inclined. It's as Muggle as they come. The bookstore is called The Tattered Cover. You can find a great many Muggle works there, and a great many more Wizarding books in there. The proprietors were there long before Diagon Alley was closed to Muggles."

"Thank you, ma'am," Harry said politely. He gave her his best 'I have no idea what McGonagall is talking about, so I hope she doesn't call on me' look."

"Would you like directions, Mr. Potter?" the woman sounded happy. For some reason, Harry didn't share her emotion. What he wanted was for his aunt and cousin to come out of the store so they could head for home. Even more, he wanted Dumbledore or Hagrid to show up. Even Snape would have been welcome at this point.

"No thank you," Harry said. "I was just wondering."

"Not thinking of how good some of Tom's shepherd's pie would taste right now?"

Now that she mentioned it, Harry's thoughts drifted that way. His stomach growled. "Thank you, but I have to wait until my Aunt Petunia gets back."

"Such an obedient child," she said that like it was an advantage to her. "Where is your family?"

"Having tea," Harry said, growing more uneasy by the moment.

"And you didn't want any," the woman said firmly. "I don't blame you. Little cucumber sandwiches never did much for me." She paused and her mouth twisted up into a little smile. One that showed no teeth. Harry was having doubts about which species she belonged to.

"I have a suggestion, young Potter," The woman turned and pointed to a fish and chips shop with a walkup window. "The owner of that shop is a kindly woman with a great many grandchildren. She loathes to see children go hungry. If you offer to lend a hand tidying up the place, she would be happy to give you a bite to eat."

"Thank you, Ma'am," Harry said.

"You are quite welcome, Mr. Potter," the woman(?) inclined her head and walked away.

Harry watched after her until she disappeared into the crowd. He looked over at the fish and chips shop wistfully. He had no idea how long Aunt Petunia and Dudley would be, and he hadn't eaten since yesterday evening. And all he'd had then was diet food.

He decided that it couldn't hurt to ask.

It took a while to get to the front of the line, apparently they were a popular eating place. When he got to the front of the line, he spoke to a sweet faced woman that didn't look old enough to be anybody's grandmother. But when he told her that he was waiting for

his relatives, but had forgotten his lunch money, she suggested the same solution as the grey woman had.

"We're awfully busy, sweetie. If I can get you to clear off the tables, then I don't have to send one of my cooks out there to clean up. That will help me out tremendously. When you finish, come around to the back door and I'll give you a bite."

When Harry finished the clean up, he looked around. The line at the front of the counter had thinned out considerably. The sweet faced woman smiled at him and pointed to an alley that presumably lead to the back door. Harry nodded. He looked back towards Beau Brummels. Still no sign of his aunt or Dudley. He estimated that he'd only been working for half an hour or so. He could get his food and bring it back to where Aunt Petunia had left him. The set up seemed almost too good, but he couldn't see any flaw in the plan. So he went around to the back.



The fish and chips woman, who was as kindly as she looked, wondered why the boy never came for his food. Probably ran into the relatives he'd been waiting for, she decided. She never thought to search the alley. After all, there had been no unusual noises from there.

CHAPTER TWO

The Squib and the Pursesleys

All recognizable characters copyrighted
by J.K. Rowling.

The less recognizable creatures are based
on folklore and might be under your bed.

This was even better than she'd hoped when she'd started her hunt today. The Boy Who Lived! The Boy Who'd Defeated that Hissy Faced Upstart! He had some sweet magic indeed! Better yet, she could give the remains to the so-called dark lord and maybe he'd feel obligated to repay her.

But first, she'd have to get her prize home safely. She needed to wait until the inconvenient relatives left. Then a simple leash charm should be enough to get the boy to follow. She walked back behind the dust bin and looked at the crumpled figure. Such a child, for all his power and reputation, she gloated. So easy to deceive. So easy to overpower. She ran her tongue across her depleted venom sac. It reacted to magic. The more the boy tried to use, the more strongly the venom would affect him. It would also speed the decomposition of the body, once the boy was dead. Likely no human would ever discover what had befallen him.

The grey woman watched the relatives leave, without more than a cursory look around. Looked like the woman wasn't even going to regret her hasty words. She

kicked at some scrawny cat that had come nosing around, no doubt after fish. Then she started weaving the leash charm around the boy to ensure his cooperation.



"Yes, I hear you. Not so loud, my sweet..." I moaned, dragging my eyes open again.

Time had passed. I wasn't sure how much. Mrs. Norris and I were alone in the dim, malodorous alley. For all the notice that the passerby's on the busy street nearby took of us, we might have been invisible.

Sitting up slowly, I clutched at my head. My right temple was sticky with blood and a tender lump had started to swell.

Mrs. Norris rubbed her small head against my side.

"Potter is safe with his blood relations. Nothing should be able to get through that spell..." I said.

Mrs. Norris yowled; a long heartsick wail. She waited while I stood, using the nearest brick wall to steady myself.

When we started off again, I had to move slowly. My head throbbed as I felt for the traces of either the powerful spell surrounding Potter's aunt and cousin, or the Dark stench of the hungry creature that had been pursuing Potter.

Mrs. Norris moved slowly too, though it was clear that she wanted to run. I wished that I could run. What if we were already too late?

"He's defeated the Dark Lord any number of times. He's escaped from Death Eaters, slain a Basilisk and

knocked out a Mountain Troll..." I said to Mrs. Norris, trying to quell the fear rising inside me.

Now the Muggles on the street were regarding me with mingled pity and trepidation. I received a few looks of disgust as well. I supposed that their feelings were understandable. The stench of the alley clung to me and there was blood drying on my head. I moved unsteadily, as if I'd been drinking something much stronger than gillywater this morning.

At least the Muggles were stepping out of my way now.

I could find no trace of the Dark creature. And, when I first sensed the spell around Potter's family again, I almost didn't recognize it. The spell was diminished now, a fading echo of what I'd sensed before.

Confused, I allowed the thin blonde woman, her arms now full of packages, to pass me by. She'd given me a very wide berth and a look of profound disgust. The fat blond boy was lumbering behind her, his expression sulky.

I looked past him down the street, anxious for the sight of a thin, shabby figure with wild hair, round glasses and drab, ill-fitting clothes. But there was no sign of Harry Potter. Without Potter's presence to act as a catalyst the spell had gone dormant. And the young wizard was now vulnerable, without the protection of his blood relatives!

Frightened and angry, I reached out and grabbed the blond boy's meaty arm.

"Where is he?" I hissed.

"W-Who?" the boy asked fearfully, struggling to loosen my grip on his arm. He didn't succeed. Maybe

I wasn't as strong as that Dark, hungry creature, but I am stronger than I look.

"YOUR COUSIN!" I shouted.

I didn't yell Potter's name out loud, not sure who or what else might be listening. "He's supposed to be with you! You're supposed to be looking after him!"

Nearby, a voice shrieked, "Dudley!"

Potter's aunt had dropped her packages. She was swinging her handbag at my head. I dodged and she struck my shoulder instead.

What did she have in there... a small bludger? My arm went numb, forcing me to release her great lump of a son.

Then Potter's aunt screamed shrilly. Mrs. Norris had just sunk her teeth and claws into the woman's leg.

"Mum!" the boy bellowed, grabbing for my cat. He was much too slow. All he received was a nasty set of scratches across one pudgy hand.

I managed to pick up Mrs. Norris, cradling her against my chest protectively as I tried to think what to do.

Obviously Potter's relatives had managed to lose him somehow! They must be even more worried about him than I was. No wonder they were so bad-tempered. Well, fighting among ourselves wouldn't help matters. I tried not to glare at them.

Potter's aunt was glowering enough for everyone. The venom and malice in her eyes when she looked at me and Mrs. Norris would have even impressed Professor Snape.

"Stay back, Dudley!" she hissed, stepping protectively in front of her huge son.

The resemblance between this grim woman and little Lily Evans wasn't particularly strong. Still, there was something in the way that she stood and in the fierce, determined way that she held her head that reminded me of the pretty red-headed girl I had seen at Hogwarts years ago.

I thought of Lily, shielding Harry with the very last of her strength. My expression would have softened, but for what Harry's aunt said next.

"You're one of THEM, aren't you? Those FREAKS?"

I flinched as if she'd taken another swipe at me with her handbag. Of course, Lily's sister must have seen the magic of true wizards. She'd been entrusted with the care of The Boy Who Lived, hadn't she? I didn't know how she knew that I was nothing but a Squib, but I couldn't blame her for thinking that I would be of no use to her in the search for the missing Potter. However, I didn't intend to tolerate rudeness. She was worried about her nephew, but that was no excuse.

"I may have no proper magic of own, Madam. But few witches or wizards would be so ill-mannered as to call me a freak."

"Did you just have the effrontery to call me *ill-mannered*?" Potter's aunt demanded, incredulously. The temperature around us seemed to have dropped several degrees.

Professor Snape is the only other person I know who can do that. It's not magic, it's a matter of personality. Having survived Snape's glares and sarcasm for years, I wasn't so easily cowed.

"Would you prefer to be called 'unrefined?' Or 'discourteous?' Those terms would do as well," I retorted.

"How dare you! You filthy, smelly ...TRAMP!"

"Mum..." the boy, Dudley, said, eyeing me. "He said that he has no proper magic. Maybe he can't hurt us."

I didn't like the way this lumpish youth was looking at me. "Magic or not, the witch and wizard brats at the Castle all live in fear of me," I snarled. "And I don't need to be able to cast spells to deal with you, you great, soft pudding!"

I looked as fierce as I possibly could. It was quite effective. Dudley shrank back, beside his mother.

The aunt wasn't so easy to intimidate. She could take on a Basilisk, with a glare like that. (My money would still be on the Basilisk, but the giant snake would certainly know that it had been in a fight.)

"I will forgive you your bad manners, Madam, if you will forgive me mine," I said, curtly. "I am Argus Filch, Caretaker at Hogwarts. I know that you must be the sister of Lily Evans Potter..."

"I am Petunia Dursley," she said. Her tone was even frostier than mine. I gave her a brief nod, struggling to be more polite. "I can assure you that my goal is the same as yours. We must find the boy quickly. Where and when did you last see your nephew?"

Her face twisted angrily. "The ungrateful brat refused to wait for us in the spot where I told him, quite plainly, to wait! He knew what the consequences would be if he chose to wander off. I informed him that he would have to make his own way home as a

punishment if he got himself lost!"

"I'm a great believer in consequences myself," I said. "Ordinarily. But your nephew may have gone missing for reasons beyond his control. There's something after him. Something terrible!"

Her face twisted even more, her lips drawing back from her teeth in a snarl. Even Dudley stepped back.

"Something terrible from *your* world of freaks and monsters, no doubt!" Petunia Evans Dursley hissed.

"Wasn't it bad enough to have him dumped on our doorstep without so much as a by-your-leave? He's been turning our lives upside down ever since! Years of shame and embarrassment, and strange mishaps, terrifying accidents, and the boy never showing us a bit of gratitude for the food we give him or the clothes on his back..."

I thought of Potter's thin body, and the ill-fitting, shabby clothes.

"Am I expected to comb all of London for him now, to save him from the sort of trouble that ordinary, decent people should never have to face?" she snarled.

"What can I — a mere Muggle — as YOUR sort call us, possibly do to save him!?"

More appalled than I'd ever been in my life, I struggled to find my voice. "You're his aunt, his own flesh and blood..." I said. "All you have to do is be there! There's a spell..."

"Do NOT," she spat, "speak to me of SPELLS! Dudley and I have already gotten in the way of enough dreadful and humiliating spells to last us a lifetime! You're from that... that PLACE he goes to. You help him!"

Turning on her heel, she marched back to where she'd dropped her packages.

A number of people were staring. This did not improve her mood.

"What happened to your magic, then? Did you lose it?" It was Dudley. The boy was looking at me curiously.

"I was born this way!" I growled, still staring in disbelief at the abhorrent creature he had for a mother.

"Do you mean that you're ...normal?"

"No! Of course I'm not normal, boy! Didn't I just say so?"

"Because you're one of THEM and you can't do magic?"

"Yes," I said, making an effort to soften my tone a bit. The poor great lump was obviously simple-minded. "Your Aunt Lily was born into a Muggle family, wasn't she? Sometimes, though not very often, a wizard and a witch will have a child who is like me."

Squibs aren't exactly like Muggles, but I wasn't about to attempt to explain the difference.

"And they're afraid of you? Those kids at Potter's school? Why? What do you do to them?"

I gave him another glare.

He flinched.

"The Headmaster does not allow me to chain them in the dungeons," I said gruffly. "I make them scrub, sweep, polish and dust."

"We're not supposed to lock Potter in the cupboard under the stairs any more," Dudley said. "But Mum's always made him clean a lot of things. Ever since he was little."

Suddenly, I felt quite ill.

"Come along, Duddy-dear! We have to find a taxi! Let

that nasty old tramp worry about your ungrateful cousin!"

Petunia Dursley, packages in hand, was trying to sound as if she wasn't still furious. I could hear the rage under her sugary-sweet tone.

"Potter's probably okay," Dudley muttered. "He's stronger than he looks. Faster too."

"Diddy-Darling! Come along now!"

Dudley spoke to me, under his breath.

"Potter was supposed to wait for us in front of Beau Brummels. It's down that way." The boy pointed.

"Thank you," I said numbly, holding Mrs. Norris as if I could draw strength from her.

Dudley was already lumbering away after his mother.

CHAPTER THREE

The Grey Woman's Lair

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The less recognizable ones
might be under your bed.

Have you looked under there, lately?

Harry came to without any idea of how he'd come to be asleep in the first place. He gradually realized that he was walking. 'Wonderful, I'm sleep walking now?'

The more aware of his surroundings he became, the more alarmed he became. He wasn't anywhere he was supposed to be. And he was being towed along by

somebody he strongly suspected wasn't human.

"Come, my sweet," crooned the Grey Woman. "It's getting late and I'm hungry."

Harry didn't want to go with her. He was hungry, too, but he had a feeling he wasn't going to be a guest at this meal. He tried to turn away, but something other than the grip on his wrist was pulling him along after the Grey Woman. It wasn't exactly the Imperius curse, but the idea was obviously the same.

"Oh, no, you don't," he thought, and he began fighting in earnest.



As impossible as it was for me to fathom, Potter's family had simply abandoned him to his fate.

No, that wasn't quite true. "You're from that PLACE he goes to..." the Aunt had told me, furiously. "YOU help him!"

Of course I would. Someone had to! Dazed, I stumbled down the crowded street in the direction that Potter's cousin had indicated.

Mrs. Norris struggled frantically to get down from my arms. My cat's yowling urged me to hurry! The boy was in terrible danger! When I released her she leaped to the pavement and took off at a run.

Ignoring my headache, I hurried after her as quickly as I could. The Muggles were giving me an even wider berth than before. Dirty, wild-eyed and disreputable as I looked, I couldn't blame them.

As I ran, I tried to open up the part of my mind that can sense magic. I pushed myself harder than I'd

done in a long time. There are many wizarding places hidden within the city, but I was searching for something older, darker and wilder.

Nothing...!

Nothing...!

Nothing...!

Wait...!

In city streets filled with Muggles, the spell stuck out like a sore thumb. Some sort of powerful binding spell, though it was unlike any magic I'd sensed before. I didn't know what sort of creature had taken Potter, but she wasn't human.

Focused only on this spell I stumbled along, hardly taking notice of my surroundings. Dodging people, cars and lorries, ducking around dustbins, I kept pace with Mrs. Norris. I didn't realize how far we'd walked until I realized that we were getting near the river...

In yet another miserable alley, I collapsed next to a building that seemed to be abandoned and empty. I was dizzy, aching and exhausted, and there was a terrible stitch in my side.

Mrs. Norris, tireless as ever, yowled at me. She had stopped outside a small, dark ground level window that appeared to lead into a basement. A few pieces of glass were still attached to the window frame. When I rose unsteadily, Mrs. Norris mewed at me and promptly leaped into the darkness.

Wrapping my coat around my hand and arm, I knocked the glass shards away, so I could follow her. The window was a tight fit, and I couldn't see how much

of a drop it was.

After a second that felt like an eternity, I landed, crouched, on a stone floor about six feet below the window. The stench of old, hungry magic was everywhere in here. It had soaked into the walls, the floor, the air. The light that was able to penetrate this chamber was grey and sickly.

Weaving our way through a jumble of broken crates, battered and discarded bits of furniture, scraps of rags, old clothes and mouldering newspapers (Wizarding and Muggle,) Mrs. Norris and I followed our senses. Broken glass crunched under my feet, along with what appeared to be pieces of bone.

There were voices in the gloom. One that was recognizable as Potter's, raised in defiance. And another voice that was simultaneously hungry and affectionate, a disturbing combination.

"Fight me all you like, my child!" the creature crooned. "A strong, brave spirit gives a meal such a lovely flavor!"

"I'm NOT your child! I'm not anything of yours! Especially not your dinner!" Potter snapped.

"That's where you're wrong. Breaker of Dark Wizards you might be, but I am the Greyling, Devourer of Abandoned Children and you're mine now. You're unwanted, abandoned by your guardian. You're my rightful prey. But, go on, struggle if you don't believe me! It won't do you any good. In accordance with the ancient laws, my hold on you is unbreakable."

I called out, answering the creature before Potter could speak.

"The boy is NOT abandoned!" I gasped, stumbling around a pile of mouldy cardboard boxes.

In the sickly light of another small, broken-glassed window, Potter and the Grey Woman stood facing each other. The boy's thin body was tense. The Grey Woman had no visible hold on Potter. But the foul spell that held him captive felt overpoweringly strong to me at such close range.

The creature didn't react to what I'd said. But, I could feel the ripple that passed over her binding spell. It was like a wind across the surface of a lake.

"You again! Broken Wizard, I should have snapped your neck when I had the chance," the Grey Woman grumbled. "You're with him?" she hissed, then, glaring at Mrs. Norris.

My cat gave her an unblinking, golden stare.

"Mr. Filch...?" Potter's eyes were wide with shock. "What are you doing here?"

"Hullo, Potter. Nice to see you too," I said, grumpily. "Your Aunt Petunia sent me to help you."

The boy's green eyes got even wider. "S-She DID?"

Poor Potter. He seemed even more surprised about that than he'd been at the sight of me. Having met his Aunt, I could understand why.

I nodded at Harry, and then turned to glare at the Devourer. "You know who this Boy is! Can you truly believe that HE'S unwanted and abandoned?"

"He's as good as cast off, if you're the best champion that his guardian could send..." the creature said, giving me a toothy smile.

I was unfamiliar with the ancient laws that she'd spoken of, but her mention of them was reassuring. Laws could be made to work for Potter and me too. She'd called me the Aunt's champion...

"Petunia Evans Dursley, sister of this boy's mother, sent me to help him," I repeated.

The binding spell rippled as I spoke, then it started to fray. Potter had never ceased struggling to be free, and his efforts began to pay off. The Binding on him began to feel increasingly stretched and thin.

"Keep away from her, Mr. Filch," Potter shouted. "She's stronger than she looks!"

I'd already discovered that for myself, thank you very much. I had a bloody lump on my head to prove it. But someone had to try to keep her from recapturing him once he got himself free.

As Potter finally snapped the binding spell, I tackled the Grey Woman." RUN, BOY!" I bellowed, trying to knock her down.

Mrs. Norris came to my aid with a flash of claws. My sweet one is a fierce fighter; the creature's face and arms were considerably bloodied before she managed to fling my cat away from her.

Then the Grey Woman's hands closed around my throat like bands of iron. She began to squeeze.

"Boy..." I heard her croon over the roar of blood in my ears and the desperate pounding of my heart. "Brave Harry Potter. Will you abandon your deliverer to his fate?"

Ineffectually, I clawed at the Grey Woman's hands. I heard Mrs. Norris yowling. She was probably clawing

at the creature's legs, but the Grey Woman's hold on me remained strong.

"Come to me, Harry Potter. Now. Or I will break the old man's neck." The Grey Woman's hands never left my throat, never stopped squeezing.

"*You can't have him... he's run away, he's safe,*" I thought as my vision dissolved into grey fog. I crumpled to my knees, then collapsed to the floor.

Then, I heard Potter's voice. "Let him go!" the boy shouted.

"*Gryffindors!*" I thought in despair, as the blackness took me.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Predators' Court

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The less recognizable ones
might be under your bed.

And I'm not talking about those dust
bunnies, either.

I ached all over. And I was lying on a stone floor, chained in the dark!

My throat was bruised and sore. I couldn't scream. It took me a moment to realize that only my right wrist was manacled. My left hand was free. Rubbing at my throat, I took painful breaths that sounded like sobs.

Harry Potter was calling my name. "Mr. Filch? Can you hear me? Open your eyes! Please!"

"Stupid... Gryffindor..." I rasped, weakly. "Why didn't you run...? You were supposed to run!"

"She was going to kill you," the boy pointed out.

"She'll kill both of us now," I choked, dragging my eyes open. "Listen, boy, when someone is trying to save your life, it's considered good manners to allow yourself to be saved! You're just as bad as your godfather!"

If I'd expected the boy to be insulted then I was to be sadly disappointed. Potter looked honored by the comparison. His expression was visible in the grey, sickly light that shone down all around us.

We were no longer in the basement room of the abandoned building near the river. We'd been moved to a huge, dim chamber. I had a sense of being somewhere underground. Water dripped and flowed from somewhere far above.

Potter was sitting cross-legged on the stone floor beside me. There were no chains on him, no binding spells. He appeared unharmed. Mrs. Norris was beside him, her grey fur fluffed out in alarm. It took me a few moments to understand why.

Outside the circle of grey light that surrounded Potter and me there was an expanse of darkness. The darkness was filled with glowing eyes. Dreadful things were moving beyond the light. Things that whispered and hissed, while they slithered and flopped nastily against the stone floor.

"The Grey Woman told them not to harm me," Potter

explained in a calm voice, when he saw me notice the eyes. "I don't think her orders were necessary. They don't seem to want to come near me. But, the Grey Woman said that they could do whatever they liked with you and Mrs. Norris. And, if I wasn't here, they'd probably eat you."

"W-What are they?" I whispered, sitting up slowly. The chain clanked as I drew my knees up to my chest and wrapped my arms around them.

I don't know," Potter said.

"Where's the Grey Woman gotten herself off to?" I asked, trying to stop shuddering.

Potter shook his head. "I don't know that either. You were able to help break her hold on me. She was furious. She dragged you down here and chained you to the floor. Then she said something about going to a Council of Predators for justice, according to the ancient laws. Have you ever heard of a Council of Predators?"

I shook my head.

"Maybe Hermione would know, or Ron," Potter said, wryly. "But I'm just as glad that Ron and Hermione are somewhere safer than here." He paused and looked around. "Mr. Filch," the boy asked, hesitantly, after a few moments. "How did you break the Grey Woman's hold on me? D-Did my Aunt really send you to help me?"

"More or less..." I said.

"I'm sorry for the all the rude things that Aunt Petunia probably said to you," Potter said, ashamed. "I'm sure that she yelled at you and called you a freak."

"I've been called worse," I said, shrugging. "Did you tell her that I'm a Squib? How did she know...?"

Potter looked startled. "She didn't call you a freak because you're a Squib! She thinks *all* witches and wizards are freaks. My Mum and Dad, Hagrid, Ron and his whole family. And me. Especially me... I'm really sorry."

The more I learned about the boy's Muggle relations, the more horrified I became. "Listen, Potter, stop apologizing! If your own flesh and blood won't accept you for what you are, it's not your fault!" My voice cracked.

"I should be sorry, boy. You're the only one besides me and the house-elves who knows to dust all the way to the edges of things. You always move the furniture when you sweep the floor. You polish the backs of the trophies without being told. And I never thought about it. I never wondered why."

"It's okay, Mr. Filch..."

"No! It's not! My family ought to have considered me a shame and an embarrassment, but they never did. They wanted me to have a place in the world, so they taught me to work hard. I assumed it was the same with you. That's what I thought, Potter, I didn't know... I swear it!"

"Mr. Filch..." Potter said, helplessly. "It's all right. I didn't expect you to know... I didn't want anybody to know. Snape and his Slytherins have enough ammunition to use against me as it is." He stopped, gasping a little as if short of breath. Then he continued in a bitter, self-recriminating tone. "Besides, I probably deserve being treated like a freak. I'm nothing but trouble."

Before I could protest, Potter continued. "Right now, we have more important things to worry about, don't we?"

He had a point about that.

Mrs. Norris was keeping her unblinking gaze on the glowing eyes that surrounded us. And Potter was rummaging around in the pockets of his extremely baggy trousers. Producing a hairpin, he stared doubtfully at my manacled wrist.

"I don't think this is going to work..." he murmured, avoiding my gaze, embarrassed by the things that both of us had said. He put the hairpin back in his pocket. "It's not strong enough to work on this lock. If I had my wand with me. I'd have you free in a moment."

"No wand? You picked a fine time to start following the rules," I grumbled. Potter grimaced. "Aunt Petunia dragged me out of the house before I even had a chance to think about grabbing it."

"What about your little thief in the night trick?" I asked. "That would be helpful now."

Potter looked at me blankly, then he caught on. "Oh, sorry, I don't have my Invisibility Cloak with me, either."

"What? Y-You really DO have an invisibility cloak?" I cried.

The boy nodded. "Professor Snape knows all about it. Hasn't he ever mentioned it to you?"

"Yes, a time or two..." I answered, which was something of an understatement. Severus had been insistent on the subject for years. "I thought he must be mistaken! The Professor can be a bit... well... you know. At least, where you're concerned. Poor man! I owe him an apology!"

Actually, an apology was only half of what I owed Severus where the matter of Potter's Invisibility Cloak

was concerned. I'd also made him a promise. I hoped I'd be alive to keep it.

"Why apologize to him?" Potter asked, puzzled. "It's not as if Snape ever says he's sorry to anyone. He certainly ought to have apologized to Neville, at least. Remember when Snape took points away from Gryffindor, on that day when Neville warned him that the Slytherins were in danger?"

"Professor Snape?" I corrected Potter, automatically, "was wrong about Neville, but he was right about your cloak. I should have believed him."

Poor Severus! To have been right all these years, and not to have been believed! That sort of thing hurt him more deeply than he would permit anyone to see. I felt absolutely wretched. What a fool I was! It was a wonder that the Professor put up with me.

"Apologizing to him might make me feel better," I told Potter, gruffly.

The boy was silent, frowning. Then his stomach rumbled. "Sorry," he murmured, embarrassed.

"It's all right," I said. I was hungry too. Looking around us, at all the eyes glowing in the dark, I decided that I didn't want to think about food.

"You should have run when you had the chance," I said, unhappily. "The Grey Woman had no hold on you. Those things out there won't come near you. You would have been safe."

"When someone is trying to save your life, it's considered good manners to allow yourself to be saved," Potter said, dryly.

He was using my own words against me! What cheek!

I glared at him. "Trying to keep you brats out of trouble is what I do. It's my job!"

Potter sounded very tired. "It's not your job to die because of me. I couldn't leave you and Mrs. Norris down here, alone with those things. When Voldemort kills people I see it happen, and there's nothing I can do." His voice cracked and he fell silent.

When Potter spoke the Dark Lord's name, sibilant whispers of fear and horror came from the sea of eyes glowing in the darkness. The slithering, flapping noises grew frenzied. I was afraid that the creatures would fall on us, but the horrible things came no nearer. I drew closer to the boy and my cat, and the three of us huddled together.

"They don't seem to like it when I say 'Voldemort...'" Potter murmured.

"Well, I don't like it either..." I murmured back. "Potter! Wait! What are you doing?!"

The boy had risen to his feet. "Voldemort!" he said.

The sea of unseen nasty things whispered, flapped and hissed. There were soft sobs, wails and the gnashing of teeth. The Grey Woman's nasty, misshapen guards made sounds of terror that froze the blood in my veins. From the darkness, understandable whispers were heard.

"Mustn't Speak The Name!"

"Dark One Will Come!"

"If I promise not to speak The Name again, may I ask a promise in return?" Potter asked.

The whispering, flapping and hissing gradually died away, to be replaced by silence. Finally, a single voice hissed, "Ask."

"The old man. And his cat. I don't want them to be hurt in any way. Promise. By the ancient laws the Grey Woman mentioned."

"No! Our payment!"

"Broken Wizard is our meat!"

"Greyling promised us!"

"Voldemort!" Potter shouted.

There was silence.

"Voldemort, come!" Potter shouted again.

This time he was greeted by hisses, snarls and a shower of debris. I shielded Mrs. Norris as best I could. Potter wasn't quite quick enough to dodge one missile and I heard him grunt as it smacked against his face. It wasn't enough to shut him up, of course, stubborn brat that he is. He had to shout the Dark Lord's name three more times, and duck three more showers of trash, before he extracted a grudging promise from the whisperers. By then, I was trembling violently.

Potter sat down again, beside Mrs. Norris and me.

"There. Now, maybe all we have to worry about now is the Grey Woman," he said. He looked around at the debris that now surrounded us with a thoughtful expression on his face.



Harry didn't really expect it to be that easy. The back of his neck ached as if a bludger had struck him

and there was a burning sensation spreading from the point of impact down his arms. He forced the discomfort from his mind as he searched through the objects that had been thrown at him in hopes that there was something that could be used as a weapon. Unfortunately, the largest piece of trash turned out to be a screwdriver, and a very small screwdriver at that.

Wait, maybe he could use this to pick the manacle lock?

Before he had a chance to try it, the Grey Woman returned. With her were four other not quite human females... a banshee, a harpy, a sphinx and a naga.

"Sssssoooo, Devourer," the Naga hissed. "These are the ones who are denying you your rightful prey?"

Harry's stomach gave a lurch as he recognized the voice as Voldemort's pet snake, Nagini.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Trial of Harry Potter

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The less recognizable ones
might be under your bed.

I'd be careful next time I
vacuumed if I were you.

"You see, my colleagues, how I have been denied my rightful prey?" the Grey Woman exclaimed dramatically. "The child's guardian clearly said that anyone who

wished could take the child. This broken wizard claims that the family sent him as their champion. I claim that, as an abandoned child, Harry Potter is my rightful prey. This... thing... would deny me. He would break our ancient law and deny all of us our livelihood."

"If it's a challenge to the law, then it's a test they need to be taking," the Banshee hissed like speaking in less than an ear splitting scream was difficult.

The gaunt faced woman swooped around the hall, black hair trailing behind her. Her body seemed solid enough around the shoulders, but from the waist down it faded until her legs were indistinguishable from her hair. She emitted a faint, greenish glow that illuminated the crowd below her.

Harry's stomach did a slow tuck and roll as he caught glimpses of the things that surrounded them. He swallowed and reminded himself that hysterics would only get them killed, or worse.

"Yesssss..." Nagini agreed. The last time Harry had seen Voldemort's companion, she had been a huge snake. Now her head and upper body were human, but her voice was unmistakable whether she spoke English or Parseltongue. "We'll set them tests, then." The snake woman folded human arms across her human torso as her serpentine lower half swayed sinuously. She looked around with a smirk. "So, Devourer, who should set the first test?"

The Grey Woman frowned. "The woman of the sidhe made the suggestion. It is her right to go first."

The Banshee grimaced. "Very well, the man came

to set the boy free. The first test should be easy. The boy must set the man free."

Harry had been thinking about trying to pick the lock with the rusty old screwdriver in his hand. Now was his chance. He took a deep breath. "If you will allow me, sir," he said politely, as if merely opening a door that Filch could have opened for himself. He sat on the floor and pulled the manacle onto his lap. He focused his attention on the task at hand, desperately trying to block out the whispering of the audience and the obscene comments by the Harpy, much of which he only vaguely comprehended anyway.

The lock was stubborn. Each time Harry thought he'd had it open, it somehow managed to relock itself. Harry scowled as he realized it would take more than a pick to open this. He needed some magic. "*Finite Incantatem*," he snarled under his breath as he worked.

The lock clicked and the manacle fell to the ground, freed both from Filch's arm and from the ring that had held it to the floor. Harry's stomach gave a sudden lurch and he felt so nauseated that if he'd had any food in his stomach, it would surely have come up. He was also glad he'd been sitting down. He took a deep breath and looked up at the Banshee. "Done," he managed. He wasn't sure how, but this was no time to look gift blessings in the mouth.

"So it is," the Banshee agreed. She settled down in a corner, illuminating for a moment the creatures that had been sitting there. Not for very long, though. The things moved away quickly, apparently not able to tolerate even

the faint light that emanated from the fairy woman.

"Not so fast," snarled the Grey Woman. She turned to the shadows. "Rebind the man... and do something about that dreadful beast!" she added in a shriek as Mrs. Norris darted over and took a swipe at her already bleeding ankles.

The Grey Woman kicked at Mrs. Norris, which any student of Hogwarts would have told her was a bad idea. Mrs. Norris dodged handily, causing the Grey Woman to over balance and almost fall to the ground. The Devourer of Children staggered for a few steps, then glared as she realized that nobody from the crowd was coming forward to bind anybody.

"What's the matter with you!?" she howled.

There were a lot of mutterings from the crowd about not interfering with the judges and how they were there as witnesses rather than participants. Apparently, none of the monsters wanted to admit they'd been coerced by a child into staying away from the caretaker and his cat. Harry was just as happy they weren't inclined to mention this fact.



"My turn now..." the Harpy said, flaring her wings. She strode forward into the light that surrounded Potter, Mrs. Norris and me.

"And your turn as well, Broken Wizard," she said. "Your task is to answer three of my questions, truthfully."

"Ask," I said, gruffly, trying not to show how frightened I was. It was all too easy to imagine her sharp

talons tearing us to pieces and her brassy wings splattered red with our blood.

"You caught my eye in the Leaky Cauldron this morning," the Harpy said, almost coyly. "I think you knew that the boy was in danger. Tell me, what did you sense?"

The Grey Woman and the other Judges all looked at me. I broke into a cold sweat, my heart beating like an ensnared rabbit's. Did these creatures know about the perceptive abilities of Squibs? If they did, then I didn't dare lie. But I didn't dare describe the powerful spell that protected Potter, either.

"I felt the stirrings of an ancient magic," I said, trying to weave a plausible description out of strands of half-truths. "Wild magic. Very strong."

Looking at the Grey Woman, I shuddered. *Please, Merlin, let her think that I was describing her, as she'd stalked Potter. Please, let her be that arrogant.*..The Grey Woman grinned toothily, as I gave her what she considered to be her proper due. The Naga eyed me, speculatively.

"Yesss, Squibsss have always had their usess..." the snake-woman remarked. "Either whole, or in piecesss." Her eyes glittered.

The Harpy was already asking her next question. "The Devourer's binding spell... were you able to feel it weakening, before you freed the boy?"

At the moment, all I could feel was myself being backed into a corner. It was a simple 'yes' or 'no' question, with no room to maneuver. And I didn't dare lie.

"Yes," I said, very softly.

The intent expression on the Naga's face, when she

looked at me, made my skin crawl.

"The boy was able to free you, without the use of a wand," the Harpy said, as I turned away from the Naga. "All of us saw it. Use your senses now and tell me, Broken Wizard. Does the boy have enough strength remaining to duplicate that impressive feat?"

I looked at Potter. The poor boy's exhaustion was palpable. Announcing this fact did not seem like a very wise idea. I hesitated.

"A silent reply, yet so eloquent!" the Harpy said. "Thank you."

I frowned at her. "But, Madam, I haven't answered you yet! I don't know what to say! In all honesty, predicting what this boy does or doesn't have the strength to do is always a risky business... Potter NEVER does quite what anyone expects of him."

The Harpy glared at me, but she couldn't deny that I'd spoken the truth.

"No more questions," the Sphinx reminded the glowering Harpy. "He has successfully completed the second task."



The Grey Woman snarled at the judges. "Which one of you is ready to set the third task?" she demanded.

The phrase caused Harry to feel sick. It reminded him horribly of the Third Task of the Tri-Wizard Tournament and Cedric Diggory's death. For the first time he appreciated what other people felt when he said Voldemort's name aloud.

His thoughts were diverted when he noticed some

emotion flickering across the Sphinx's face. Something that looked very much like... sorrow?

Could he be reading her emotions correctly? If so, then what could have upset her? She didn't have an evil memory of the Third Task, did she? Nagini glared at the Sphinx. The Sphinx, her face now apparently under strict control, merely smiled enigmatically. "By all means, my reptilian sister, take your turn."

Nagini chuckled and slithered closer. "How about an old classic?" she said. "I'll give you three chances to guess my name," she smirked. "One guess for each of you." She reached out as if to touch Harry's face.

Mrs. Norris took exception. She spat and swiped at the snake woman. Nagini recoiled, then grinned. "Wrong," she said. She looked at Harry. "Your turn, boy."

Harry hesitated. He didn't want to reveal that he knew the name of Voldemort's servant, but he couldn't think of anyway around it. To not answer would be death. "Nagini," he said at last.

Nagini let out a hiss to rival the Hogwarts Express. "Foul child! You cheat!"

"And yet he fulfilled your challenge," the Sphinx said, striding forward.

Now that the Maze from the Tri-Wizard Tournament had been brought to Harry's mind, he thought that the Sphinx sounded familiar. He could be fooling himself, he realized, but he thought that this was the same Sphinx. He wasn't sure if that was a good thing or not, however. He hoped that whatever she had in mind would be to their advantage.

"In order to make sure this court gives the correct judgment, Devourer, I need to know what it was that the boy's guardian said that gave him into your power." The Sphinx bared her teeth at Harry. "Boy, what did she say?"

Harry blinked rapidly, trying to remember what his Aunt Petunia had said. "She said that anybody was welcome to take me, if they thought they could make me mind my manners."

The Grey Woman smirked. "She said, and I quote: 'I can't do a thing with this brat. You're welcome to take him, see if you can do a better job of making him behave.'"

The Sphinx smiled. "And have you been able to make the boy behave?" she asked the Grey Woman.



I couldn't help the wry laugh that escaped me.

"Her?!" I snorted, looking at the Grey Woman. "Of course she hasn't! Better people have tried. And failed, miserably, I might add."

The Sphinx turned her almond eyes on me then, her expression both grave and amused.

"Have you accomplished this feat?" she asked me.

It was Potter who answered the Sphinx.

"Yes, he has. It's part of his job, isn't it? He always makes me wipe my feet when I come in to the Castle, covered with mud. He walks the corridors most of the night to make sure that all of us stay in our beds. And just now, he told me off for speaking disrespectfully about one of my Professors."

The expression on the Sphinx's face was stern as

she turned to the Grey Devourer.

"All four tasks have been successfully accomplished," the Sphinx said. "And, furthermore, this Wizard has met the challenge put forth by the boy's guardian. Greyling, my judgment is that your claim on the boy is non-existent."

"I agree," the Harpy said, almost sweetly.

"As do I," the Banshee rasped.

"It is time now to consider *other* claims on both the boy and the Squib," hissed Nagini.

The Grey Woman wasn't about to give up her prey. "You may take the Broken Wizard for all I care. And his wretched cat, too! But the boy is MINE!"

"NO!" Nagini shrieked. "You had your chance, now it's my turn. I claim these humans for my master, Voldemort!"

CHAPTER SIX

Disorder in the Court

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The less recognizable ones
might be under your bed.

I hope you're not leaving dirty dishes
under there. It only encourages them.

The Grey Woman wrestled with Nagini, both physically and verbally, while the audience of foul, flapping horrors shrieked and moaned. The Harpy preened her wings, looking amused, while the Banshee drifted

nearby, looking disdainful.

"He can have the boy after I'm finished with him!" the Grey Woman was wailing.

"The boy's magic is mine! I will devour his essence and your upstart dark lord can have what remains!"

The insult to her Master made the snake-woman hiss in outrage.

"Mr. Filch..." Potter murmured. "Now would be a very good time to run."

I agreed. "Which way? I was unconscious when she brought us down here."

"Follow me," the boy whispered. He bolted into the darkness with Mrs. Norris at his side. I ran after them still holding the chain that Potter had freed me from. It was heavy but it was the only weapon I had.

"They're escaping!! Grab the boy or face Voldemort's wrath!" Nagini shrieked at the Grey Woman's misshapen guards.

The flapping horrors were more afraid of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named than they were of breaking their word to Potter. They swarmed after us out of the darkness, from all sides. I whirled the heavy chain around, smashing it against any creature that came too close.

Over their squeals of pain and their hisses of rage, I could hear Nagini and the Grey Woman, still fighting.

Flailing the chain about, I stumbled after Potter and my cat.



Harry tripped over something and barked his shin...

unless the obstacle had bitten him. Filch hauled him to his feet and pushed him in front. They came to an arched doorway.

Mrs. Norris raced through the arch. Harry followed. Filch brought up the rear. Behind Filch, they all heard the Grey Woman's guards hissing and flapping in pursuit.

The tunnel was dark and slanted upwards. Pulling Filch along, Harry ran uphill. He nearly fell over Mrs. Norris, who'd waited for them at the foot of a flight of stone steps.

"There's a trapdoor at the top!" Harry gasped. "It's the way out... leads into that building she brought me to!"

"Go, Gryffindor!" Filch shouted at him.

Harry staggered up the stairs. (It wasn't until much, much later that he realized Filch had been insulting him. He didn't have time right then to think about it.)

At the foot of the steps, he heard Filch taking on all comers, using the chain in order to buy him time. Harry slammed hard against the trap door. It refused to budge! He hadn't seen the Grey Woman lock it... had she sealed it with a spell?

Desperate, knowing that he needed to use magic, wand or no, Harry cried out "ALOHAMORA!"

As before, his stomach gave a terrible lurch. He felt even more ill than before, dizzy and lightheaded. Harry knew that collapsing was a luxury that he couldn't afford. His push against the trapdoor was a feeble thing, but this time, it moved upwards!

Harry could hear Mrs. Norris screeching. He imag-

ined her wreaking havoc among Filch's attackers.

"Mr. Filch! Come on!" Harry gasped, shoving the trap door open.

Below him, on the stairs, he heard the Caretaker gasp, "...right behind you..."

Accompanied by a mass of creatures that scratched, clawed and bit, Harry pulled himself through the opening. He emerged into the basement room crowded with broken crates, battered and discarded furniture, scraps of rags, bits of old bone and mouldering newspapers.

Using fists and elbows, Harry somehow managed to reach the wall. Claws caught at his hand-me-downs and shredded them. For once, Harry was grateful for Dudley's size. If any of those claws had sunk into his skin... He pushed that thought aside and began to feel frantically for the light switch. The building was in shabby condition, but there was still something stored here. Harry prayed that the electricity was still on and that whoever had designed this building had put the switch right... there!

Harry flicked the toggle and suddenly the room was flooded with light. The tangle of fighters that had been Mr. Filch, Mrs. Norris and the audience of monsters quickly sorted itself into Mr. Filch and Mrs. Norris as the monsters fled back through the trap door, down into the darkness.

Then, seemingly unaffected by the stampede of light-fearing small horrors who were all rushing in the opposite direction, the Banshee and the Sphinx emerged from the trapdoor.

The Banshee faded from view almost immediately, apparently not able to take strong light any more than the flapping horrors could. The Sphinx shrugged, then vanished from sight as well.

'If there's a God, then she's gone for help,' Harry thought. He felt very weak and his vision was greying out. He struggled to stay on his feet. Nagini and the Grey Woman were still unaccounted for. It would be too optimistic to hope that the pair of them had finished each other off.



"Are you... all right... Mr. Filch?"

Poor Potter. He was swaying on his feet.

"I'll do," I told him, gruffly. "But you look like the eighth day of a week-long detention!"

It wasn't an exaggeration. The boy was deathly pale and covered with bites and scratches. He'd managed to keep his glasses somehow, but his already shabby clothes were now extremely dirty and badly torn.

I'd dragged a box over to the broken basement window, given Potter a boost up, handed Mrs. Norris up to him, and then pulled myself up. Mrs. Norris, Potter and I were back in the dirty Muggle alley, near the river. The daylight was beginning to fade. Our imprisonment had lasted for many hours.

"We're not safe yet," I said. "Hurry, boy. I've got to get you away from here... and back home somehow."

Potter really did not look well. The boy was shivering and sweaty. His baggy clothes were damp with

perspiration and blood and his green eyes were glassy. Mrs. Norris was crooning at him in concern.

"What is it, my sweet?" I asked her absently, too worried about Potter to think about anything else.

"Your cat has senses that you lack, Broken Wizard. She is trying to tell you that the Grey Devourer's bite is poisonous," remarked a voice behind us.

Supporting Potter, I turned to see the Harpy perched on a very large dustbin nearby.

Mrs. Norris hissed at her.

"Truly, I have no wish to see Harry Potter fall into the Evil One's hands!" the Harpy answered my cat. "Wizards and other creatures of the Light are not the only beings who take an interest in this boy."

"It would be wise to bring him to a Healer," the bird-woman continued, turning to me and speaking matter-of-factly. "And quickly, too. The Grey Devourer and the Naga are coming. I fully intend to be somewhere else when they arrive. I suggest that the three of you do the same."

"You... call... Kn-Knight Bus... Mr. Filch..." Potter murmured.

"You'll have to do it, Potter," I apologized, bitterly. "I can't! No wand means no wand-hand. I needed the Headmaster to summon the Bus for me when I left Hogwarts, yesterday. I have a reservation for them to pick me up when my errands are finished."

"But I don't know if I can without a wand!" The poor boy looked as if he could barely keep himself upright. His body was shaking. But, no sooner had he raised a trem-

bling hand then the Knight Bus appeared with a BANG.

"It worked," Potter said with equal amounts of relief and disbelief. I couldn't blame him. After the kind of day we'd been having, any kind of good luck seemed more like a trap than a change of fortune.

Then the Sphinx stepped out of the bus.

I sighed, it was a trap. I pulled Potter to a halt.

The Sphinx snorted at our hesitation. "Get in, if you want to live," she said, gesturing to the door and moving out of our way. Potter pulled me forward.

"You okay?" Stan said nervously from the bus. He jerked his thumb over to the Sphinx. "She said we 'ad to come get yer. But I wasn't sure if it was a rescue..."

Or a free meal, I added to myself.

"It's okay, Stan," Potter croaked out. "She's a Gryffindor." Was that supposed to be reassuring?

"Well, if you say she's all right, Neville," Stan replied.

Neville? I looked at the Sphinx and was vaguely comforted to see her looking as baffled as I felt. It's hard to look bloodthirsty and bewildered at the same time.

"Take us to Saint Mungo's, quickly! It's an emergency!" I gasped, stumbling up the steps, half carrying Potter. Mrs. Norris followed.

The Sphinx nodded and moved away from the Knight Bus, much to everybody's relief. Behind us, I heard the sound of mighty wings, as the Harpy took flight.



Stan Shunpike, the young, pimply conductor of the Knight Bus was still the earnest and conscientious

Hufflepuff that I remembered. He hovered protectively over Harry, and then helped Mrs. Norris and me get the ill boy into Saint Mungo's as swiftly as possible.

(Shunpike's help was greatly appreciated, though I never did understand why he insisted on referring to Potter as "Neville.")

Potter was promptly whisked away by a motherly-looking medi-witch. Mrs. Norris and I took guard positions on a chair just outside the examining room where Potter had been taken. I wasn't about to let him out of my sight. A young witch handed me a stack of forms, large enough to impress even me.

"Send an owl to Albus Dumbledore!" I said, giving the forms a quick glance. "He'll be able to answer the questions that I can't. He'll be able to contact the boy's family as well!"

"I'm here, Argus," Dumbledore's calm voice had never been more welcome. He took the forms from my hand. "I've already sent for the Dursleys. In the meantime, I'll take full responsibility."

"Thank you, sir" I said, gratefully. "How did you know what was going on?"

"Hypatia owed me," Dumbledore said, as he began filling out forms. The look on my face must have prompted him to continue. "Well, technically, she sent a falcon, but there's no need to split hairs. She said she was going to commandeer the Knight Bus, but that I would probably be needed to handle the aftermath."

"Hypatia?" I asked him, confused. "Who's...?"

"You can't possibly have missed her," the Headmas-

ter said, wryly. "She's quite unmistakable. Head of a woman, body of a lion..."

"The SPHINX?" I squeaked. "Sir...? You're on a first-name basis with THE SPHINX?"

He nodded absently, gazing down at a question on the form. "Why, yes, Hypatia's been calling me 'Albus' for ages now. She and I share a fondness for tenpin bowling and chamber music. And she knows some truly delightful riddles..."

"You answer her riddles? But, sir, you mustn't! Wouldn't she EAT you if...?"

"Goodness, no. It would ruin a most rewarding friendship."

I shuddered. "Headmaster," I said, "You're just as bad as Hagrid!"

"Thank you, Argus." Dumbledore looked up and smiled at me in weary amusement before returning to Potter's forms.



Harry was just aware enough of his surroundings to be uncomfortable, but didn't have strength enough to pull himself into full wakefulness. At one point he thought he heard the Dursleys. Uncle Vernon sputtering about being dragged such an ungodly distance at such an ungodly hour, and Aunt Petunia sputtering about the disgraceful way they were being treated. The only one who seemed to react at all to Harry being stretched out like a slab of undercooked bacon was his cousin.

"Is Potter going to die?" Harry heard Dudley ask, fearfully.

"I should be so lucky," snapped his aunt.

Someone responded to her in acidic tones, but Harry was losing what little focus he had and didn't recognize the speaker. As soon as he stopped fighting for consciousness, the nightmare began.

He felt himself being dragged along, like a dog on a leash and he knew that whatever was waiting for him was going to be bad... very bad. He struggled, but somehow his muscles weren't working. In front of him, he could see the Grey Woman being pulled along between Nagini and Wormtail. Nagini was grinning with anticipation. The corridor ended at a rust streaked iron door. Harry, and obviously the Grey Woman, knew who was waiting on the other side.

"So, Grissionn-cràdh," Voldemort hissed. "You promised that which you could not deliver. Now Potter is out of my reach once more. If you had come to me directly, I would have had him. Dumbledore shall not leave such a leak in his defenses remain unplugged. And now he will be twice as wary about letting the brat out of his sight."

"I am sorry, My Lord!" whimpered the Grey Woman. "I hungered so... I needed his magic to sustain me!"

The slitted nostrils flared slightly. "You will not have that worry any longer," he said coldly. "I have a new spell that I've been working on..."

He raised his wand and the Grey Woman tried desperately to back away. Harry also pulled back. He was certain that he did NOT want to see this. When the screaming began, it was all he could do to not scream along. He had

a terrible feeling that if he made a sound that Voldemort would hear him... Voldemort would have him...

CHAPTER SEVEN

Rights, Wrongs and a Promise Kept

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The less recognizable ones
might be under your bed.

Use a flashlight next time you
look, they're having a hard
time reading the story.

The Headmaster and I watched helplessly as Harry Potter struggled in the grip of a nightmare. He thrashed and twisted on the hospital bed as if trying to escape. Dumbledore moved to his side and tried to still him.

"Easy, Harry, lie still. It's over. You're safe now," Dumbledore's litany was falling on deaf ears.

Potter arched his back and pushed desperately away from Dumbledore's grasp, all the while maintaining an eerie silence.

The reason for the silence soon became apparent. Potter had his lower lip between his teeth and was biting down so hard that the blood flowed freely.

"Harry, wake up! *Ennervate!*"

The last finally worked. Potter took a shuddering gasp and opened his eyes. Dumbledore laid his hand on Potter's shoulder, but the boy jerked away and curled into a ball.

"msorrysorrysorryIllbequiet," mumbled Potter.

"Harry, it's me," the Headmaster said quietly. "You're in St. Mungo's Hospital. You're safe. Relax. It's over." But he did not offer to touch the boy until Potter rolled over on his back and actually focused on him.

"Professor?" he managed weakly. "Was I screaming then? Did I wake everybody up?" He seemed more worried about having disturbed people than his lacerated lip.

"No, Harry," Dumbledore said calmly. "In fact, you seem to have injured yourself in your attempts to not scream." Slowly, as if treating a wounded animal, Dumbledore lifted his handkerchief to Potter's face and dabbed at the blood.

"Argus, if you would be so kind as to summon the nurse?"

Quickly, I moved to obey.

The nurse bustled in, and exclaimed over the boy's bleeding lip. She gave us a reproachful look as she whipped out her medi-wand and pulled a bottle of cleansing potion from somewhere.

"Here, child, let me have a look. Goodness, what happened?" she added with another dark look at the Headmaster and me.

"Bad dream," Potter whispered.

"I can't blame you, you've had a nasty day." After cleaning the boy up and shooting one last suspicious

look at us the nurse bustled out again.

I snorted.

"Hufflepuffs can get very protective of their charges," Dumbledore said, mildly.

"Harry," he added, "do you feel up to telling us more about the creature that attacked you? Anything that would help us find her?"

"She's dead," Potter said flatly. He swallowed and touched his lower lip as if just realizing he'd been injured. "Voldemort... was mad because I..." he swallowed again.

Dumbledore was silent for several minutes. "I see. Well, then, there is no reason to disturb your rest any longer."

Potter continued as if the Headmaster hadn't spoken. "He was unraveling her... she didn't look so human once her skin was removed, the bones were all wrong..." His eyes were wide and had started losing their focus.

"Harry, would you like a potion for dreamless sleep?" Dumbledore asked. He rested his hand lightly on Potter's shoulder.

Potter didn't seem to hear him. "She was screaming so loud... I thought if I screamed that Voldemort would hear me, but maybe he wouldn't have over her... Even when she began to fall apart, she kept screaming... Then... then he thanked her. Voldemort thanked the Grey Woman. Said he'd been wanting to try that spell. Said he modified an old curse especially..." Potter drew his legs up and rested his forehead against his knees. "Especially for... For... mmm..." His voice trailed off and his breathing grew raspy.

I hurried out to fetch the nurse back again.

Shortly afterwards, the medi-wizard on duty realized that I hadn't been looked at yet. He hustled me off to have my wounds attended to. His was a face that I recalled from his days at Hogwarts. Yet another Hufflepuff. After checking me over, he frowned a bit and insisted that I stay overnight 'just in case.' Since he had no objection to Mrs. Norris remaining with me, I submitted quietly.

Cleaned, bandaged and clad in a dark blue hospital robe, I was sitting up in bed with Mrs. Norris purring on my knee when the Headmaster found us. His weary face and his grave expression alarmed me.

"Sir? Is Potter...?"

"He's asleep, Argus. A sleep without dreams."

"I suppose you'll be taking him back to the Castle, then?" I said, gruffly. "When he's recovered a bit, I mean. Plenty of empty rooms there. Or he can stay in Hagrid's cabin. Hagrid wouldn't mind at all. You know he wouldn't..."

"Argus."

Trying to ignore the answer I could hear behind the sadness in Dumbledore's voice I plowed on, doggedly. "Well, all right, then. If he can't come to the Castle, he's got friends who're always glad to take him in. Ron Weasley's family..."

"Argus," Dumbledore said in a tone so sorrowful and firm that I couldn't ignore it.

"But, Headmaster, you can't really mean to send him back to those... those...!"

The look in Dumbledore's eyes was adamant. "He is Protected when he is with them. Knowing your talents as I do, I am quite sure that it's not necessary for me to explain further."

Of course he knew all about the spell that surrounded Potter when the boy was with his blood-kin. I supposed that he was probably the one who'd cast the spell in the first place.

"Protected, yes," I cried plaintively, "from every possible horror, except for THEM!"

"Sometimes, one's choices are only between what is 'bad' and what is 'worse,'" the Headmaster said, heavily. "Arrangements are being made. If all goes well, then Harry will be able to visit with the Weasleys later in the summer."

Dumbledore put his hand on my shoulder. "Harry is safe now, Argus. He will recover. You and Mrs. Norris were there for him when you were needed."

"Well, he saved me, as much as the other way around," I said. "He's a good boy, really. At heart, I mean. Don't tell him I said so. On second thought, Headmaster, do tell him. He needs to be told such things. Merlin knows, he probably never hears anything good about himself from those..." my voice trailed off. I sighed.

"It's not FAIR..." I said, miserably, unashamed of the tears in my eyes. How I wished that Minerva was here. Perhaps she could have helped me to think of a way to change his mind. Mentally, I began composing a letter to her.

The Headmaster handed me a handkerchief. I wiped my eyes and blew my nose.

"Where are the Muggles now?" I asked Dumbledore.

"They've headed for home. I offered to call the Knight bus for them when I first contacted them, but they preferred to use their own transportation. They will not be eager to make the trip again, and I confess, I'm not inclined to force the issue. There are too many ways to intercept Muggle transportation. When Harry is well, I shall bring him back to them, myself. Don't fear too much for Harry, Argus. I hear that their neighborhood is home to all sorts of interesting strays."

"Cats?" I murmured, hopefully.

"Yes. And dogs as well."

Presumably, he meant a specific tabby cat and a particular large black dog. Black and Minerva might not be Harry Potter's blood kin. But, his godfather and his Head of House were his family too.

Reassured on that score, I leaned forward to stroke Mrs. Norris. All the tension hadn't left me. It was very likely that this next subject was going to make for another uncomfortable chat, but I had a promise to keep.

"Headmaster...?" I murmured, "There's something else. Potter and I... we talked. And the boy said... he told me that he... ."

Taking a deep breath, I blurted out, "Sir, did you know that he has an..." my voice softened to a whisper, "Invisibility Cloak?"

The Headmaster smiled at me. His eyes were sad, grave and fond all at once. "Why yes, Argus."

"You KNEW?" I gasped.

He nodded.

Shocked, I faltered, "Headmaster... sir... I was sure that you didn't know! No matter what poor Severus thought...! I told him that you wouldn't... you couldn't possibly... Oh, sir, he's only a boy!" My voice cracked. "Look at all the trouble he gets into without even really meaning to...! Sir, why haven't you taken that dangerous thing away from him...?"

"Argus," the Headmaster's voice was solemn, "the cloak is another form of protection. I do have reasons for leaving it in his hands. It would be wisest for me not to speak of a number of those reasons. However, I may mention a few..."

"These are things you know already," he said, when I looked at him wide-eyed. "A powerful Stone was not used for a Dark purpose. An innocent little girl was not killed by an evil memory. A dear friend, unjustly punished for opening the Chamber of Secrets, has had his name cleared at last. A young man, wrongly accused and imprisoned for murder, kept body and soul together..." He looked at me over his half-moon spectacles. "Another dear friend, caught in a web of dark magic, was prevented from falling to his doom."



Yes, thanks to Potter's intrepid nocturnal wanderings, the Stone had been kept out of the Dark Lord's hands, sweet Ginny was safe and well, Hagrid was finally exonerated of all blame for the death of Moaning Myrtle, brave Sirius had kept his soul, and, yes, I was neither dead nor Lucius Malfoy's puppet.

Still, I was troubled.

"Sir, we're supposed to keep him *safe!*" I cried, plaintively. "Allowing him to keep that cloak is worse than irresponsible! No student should have such a thing! It's just plain WRONG. How can we protect him if we can't even see him?"

Dumbledore reached over and stroked Mrs. Norris, who purred softly under his hands. "Visible or not, the boy isn't without resources. He's a brave child, and a clever one. And he has many friends who will come to him at need."

"But it's not FAIR," I cried. "Not to Potter. Not t-to anyone!"

"No," the Headmaster agreed with me, gently. "It is not fair." He sighed. "And you may tell Severus that I admitted as much to you. You will probably see him again before I do..."

"It may be that I have made an ill choice, Argus. If it should turn out that I have chosen wrongly I promise you that will say so to Severus myself. If I am able."

When Dumbledore spoke those words a chill went through me.

"Sir...?" I whispered. It was a frightened plea for reassurance. In that moment he looked and sounded so old that I felt like a child beside him.

Dumbledore managed a smile.

"The Sphinx has just told me a most amusing riddle..." he murmured, closing the subject. "Would you like to hear it?"

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Squib and The Boy Who Lived

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might be under your bed.

Maybe you should charge rent.

Harry stirred uneasily, pushing against the stifling warmth that kept him pinned. He had to keep quiet or they would hear. He must not attract their attention. He had to get out, he had to... had to... be quiet... or Voldemort would hear him. Voldemort was going to...

Harry bit down to keep from screaming.

...Bit down on something waxy. Instinctively, Harry tried to spit it out, but it wouldn't budge. The effort woke him up and he tried to spit again, but only managed a slight gargling noise. He tried to roll onto his side, to reach up and feel for the source of the waxy taste in his mouth, but his arms were pinned to his side and he couldn't move.

"Easy, Potter," a familiar voice grumped. "No need to get in a tizzy." Somebody pulled the waxy gag out of his mouth, leaving trails of drool all down Harry's chin.

Harry blinked up and, after a few seconds, identified the speaker. "Mr. Filch!"

Panicked, Harry managed to push himself free

of the entangling blankets. He shoved himself back until he fetched up against the headboard. "I didn't fall asleep during detention, did I? No? I did, didn't I? What's the penalty for that?" He drew his knees up and buried his head in his arms. "Oh, it just figures, I'll go down in "Hogwarts: A History" as the only person to get detention during detention!"

"Potter!" Filch said, gruffly. "Relax, boy. You're at St. Mungo's. Not at Hogwarts. And you haven't got detention. I've got the summer off too, don't I? Besides, you haven't done anything wrong."

Cautiously, Harry peeked up at the caretaker. Filch was battered and exhausted. Even Mrs. Norris, who was curled up fast asleep on the old man's knee, looked more tired than Harry had ever seen her.

"You look terrible," Harry blurted out, wiping at his chin.

Filch snorted. "You're not a very likely candidate for the cover of WITCH-WEEKLY yourself at the moment."

"No... I meant that you and Mrs. Norris almost died... I'm sorry."

"If you don't stop apologizing, Potter, I'm going to stick this thing back in your mouth," Filch growled. "The Nurse put it there so you wouldn't bite your lip again, but it also kept you from spouting nonsense. You've done absolutely nothing that you should feel sorry for!"



I really hadn't meant to snap at Potter. My talk with the Headmaster had left me frightened and uneasy and the look on Potter's pale face when he'd awak-

ened and recognized me had filled me with shame. Of course the boy was afraid of me. Didn't I *want* to have that effect on the students? Hadn't I bragged about it to Potter's cousin?

I was in fine company, too. It seemed that those Dursleys had done a pretty fair job of scaring Potter themselves. Locking him up in a cupboard when they weren't forcing him to slave away like the most wretched of house-elves. He'd rather chew his lip to bloody ribbons than anger them. And I was no better than they were. No wonder he looked at me like that.

I stroked Mrs. Norris. She purred sleepily, which soothed me a bit.

"Speaking of detentions, I can't have you clean the Castle any more..." I muttered. "It's not a punishment for you, is it? Just business as usual. I suppose that aunt of yours is every bit as exacting a taskmaster as I am."

"Oh, no, she's even worse," Potter said. Then he looked chagrined, as if he wasn't sure if he'd insulted me or not. "Sometimes you tell me when I've done a good job," Potter offered. "Aunt Petunia never does."

That wasn't much of a consolation.

"Oh, Merlin, everything I say is coming out wrong," groaned Potter. He scrunched back into the bed. "I mean, I should be thanking you for risking your life to save mine, but everything's coming out RUDE!" He caught his lower lip with his teeth.

I glared at him. Thankfully, he caught on before I had to wave the wax gag under his nose.

There was a long silence while he got himself

propped up in the bed. Finally, he said "Mr. Filch? Could we, erm, start this conversation over? I mean, I wasn't properly awake the first time and I was still sort of stuck in the last nightmare and I wasn't being very, what I... oh, Merlin." He stuck his hand out.

"Thank you for coming to my rescue, Mr. Filch," he said formally. "I wish there was some way that I could repay you."

"You don't have to repay me, Potter, I was just doing my job."

"Almost getting killed for a student isn't part of your job," Potter protested.

"No," I said with exaggerated huffiness. "Almost getting killed BY a student is more the norm." I gave him the evil eye. (Like a Squib could actually make that trick work.)

Potter looked startled, then he managed a faint smile. "I hope you realize it's not deliberate," he looked down at his hands and made an effort to straighten his blankets. "Some of us don't mean to be bad, it just... comes out that way."

"You're not bad, Potter," I said. "Trust me, I've seen much worse than you." I gave him a sideways look. "A little discipline is all you need." I tried for a joke. "As I was saying, since cleaning doesn't bother you, I'll have to come up with something else; something really special just for you."

Potter looked at me wide-eyed, then his lips twitched. "Oh, NO, Mr. Filch," he said with the same look of wounded innocence that his father used to

try on me. (Harry was much more convincing than James had ever been.) "You don't need to go to all that extra effort on MY behalf. The usual, run-of-the-mill detention will be FINE!"

He looked at his hands again and his smile grew shy. "That's something else I'm grateful for, by the way. That you've never treated me differently than you treat the other students."

"Where it matters most, you're NOT any different from the other students," I told him. "All of you brats are messy and thoughtless and inconsiderate, and most of you have a tendency to test rules to their limits..."

My voice trailed off in a sigh. With an effort I silenced the litany of grouchy complaints. They were safe, familiar, and they were making the boy smile, but Potter deserved more honesty from me.

"Potter, the things about you that are different... you didn't ask for them. It's plain that you'd be perfectly happy if you were The Boy That Nobody Ever Heard Of, and you could have your own Mum and Dad alive and well and waiting for you to come home to them on Holidays..."

The boy blinked a few times rapidly, but kept looking at me.

"...where, undoubtedly, they'd scold you for all the mischief you'd gotten yourself into during the term," I continued, gruffly. "Though James couldn't have been too cross with you, seeing how he got into plenty of trouble himself. And Lily never seemed like the type to stay angry for long either so they wouldn't have

been too hard on you."

Potter looked wistful. "Thank you for not saying anything too bad about my Dad. I don't suppose that you must have liked him very much."

I snorted. "How would you feel about someone who'd blown up your toilet? Though your godfather told me, recently, that the exploding toilet was an accident. They were trying to get rid of some fireworks..."

Potter was trying not to grin and failing miserably. I didn't mind the grin, but I tried not to show it.



Filch was trying to cheer him up. Actually, he was succeeding, more from the fact that he was trying than from anything he said. "I guess I owe you a toilet, if nothing else," Harry said gravely. He was rewarded with a sardonic look from Filch and a catly smirk from a sleepy Mrs. Norris.

Harry fiddled with the blankets a little. "Mr. Filch? Would you do me a favor?"

Filch eyed him warily. "It depends on the favor, Potter."

"Would you NOT tell Sn... Professor Snape that you know about the Invisibility Cloak?"

Filch shook his head. "Listen, Potter, if Ron Weasley or Hermione Granger had been right about something for years, and you kept telling them that they were wrong, only to find out that YOU were the one who was wrong... would YOU deprive them of the chance to gloat?"

"But Ron and Hermione don't even LIKE to gloat!" Harry

paused and reconsidered this. "Well, maybe Ron does a little, but Hermione is above that sort of thing, really."

"Don't be cheeky, you know what I mean. It wouldn't be fair."

Harry snorted. "FAIR? Since when is Snape FAIR?"

"That's Professor Snape to you, boy."

"And why should I show any respect for a bullying git..."

Filch looked annoyed. "He's not..."

"He is! He's worse than the Dursleys! He's as bad as Vol..." Harry choked to a stop because Filch had lunged forward and shoved the wax gag back into his mouth.

"Enough! Sn... Professor Snape is an honorable man," Filch snapped.

Harry tried to glare, but suddenly his vision blurred and his eyes were burning. Oh, Merlin, please don't let him burst into tears now. Something about his expression must have given Filch pause. The caretaker averted his eyes and moved away, allowing Harry to pull the wax gag out again and swipe at his eyes.

Filch sighed. "I'm sorry, Potter. I know that Professor Snape isn't exactly fair when it comes to Gryffindors in general and you in particular. But he's not a bad man, really he isn't. He's saved my life, and yours as well. Please don't classify him with You Know Who."

"Why not?"

"Because I'm asking you not to ... and because you SAID you wanted to repay me for saving your life," Filch said.

Harry's eyes went wide. "Oh. I..." he slumped down. He buried his head in his arms and tried to organize his thoughts for a long time. Filch obvi-

ously liked Snape, and Harry had always known that Dumbledore liked and trusted Snape. He couldn't get past everything that Snape had done to him, or had said about his father, though. He knew that Snape had only saved him to repay his debt to Harry's Dad. But he didn't want to part on bad terms with Filch, not after what they'd been through.

Finally he gained control of his jumbled thoughts long enough to say: "I'm sorry I lost my temper. I'll try not to hate him. I promise I'll never compare him to... to the Dark Lord again."

Filch sighed and sat back on the other bed. "Thank you, Potter."

Harry finally realized that Filch was a patient, too. "I hope you're not badly hurt, sir," he said, a trifle lamely.

Filch was apparently ready to accept an olive branch, no matter how lame. "No, they just wanted to keep me for observation," he said.

There was a long silence as they both calmed down. After a while, Filch broke it. "So, you were on the stairs that night," he said. "And yes, I do realize I owe you something for that."

"Owe me for what?" Harry asked. Some of his attention was diverted and he dabbed at his lower lip. It was itching as it healed. He wondered why the Nurse hadn't healed it completely like Madam Pomfrey would have. *Maybe she wasn't as powerful?*

"For keeping that urn from falling on my head the night that I knocked Moody down the stairs," Filch elaborated.

Harry shook his head. "Oh, I hadn't thought about that," he said. "You're welcome, by the way."

"Then what did you think I meant?"

"I thought you meant that night during the Tri-Wizard Tournament when Barty Crouch, Jr., disguised as Professor Moody, broke into Snape's office."

Filch's mouth flickered. "I'd already figured out you were there, then. Professor Snape said as much, but I didn't believe him." He looked curiously at Harry. "Where exactly were you?"

Harry made a wry face. "I forgot about the trick step on that staircase," he admitted ruefully.

"Got stuck, did you?" Filch seemed as if he were trying not to crow. "I'm surprised that Professor Snape didn't catch you."

"He almost did," Harry said, rolling his eyes. "If he had taken one more step, I think I would have died of a heart attack... or maybe sheer embarrassment."

"It would have served you right," Filch said, still amused.

Harry pulled a face at him, but didn't answer verbally. This time, the silence was a comfortable one, and it lasted until Harry broke it timidly. "Mr. Filch? Do you have to tell Professor Snape right away?"

"Eh? What do you mean?"

"I mean, do you have to tell him that you know about the Invisibility Cloak as soon as you see him? Can you wait until later in the term, when he's in a particularly foul mood and off on one of his usual rants about me... then you can just casually throw in that you know

about the cloak? It might be amusing..." Of course, it could get Filch turned into a toad, Harry realized.

Filch sighed. Apparently he realized it, too.

Harry shot him a sideways look. "I'll let you borrow it," he wheedled.



I was aware that his offer was an attempt at bribery. Nevertheless, Potter was actually willing to loan me something as rare and valuable as his Invisibility Cloak! Where had he learned such generosity of spirit? Certainly not from those Muggles...

I could not help mulling over the possibilities. Why, I could catch Peeves at all sorts of mischief, to say nothing of what I could catch the students at...!

My grin changed to a frown. What was I thinking? How could I possibly expect Potter to choose restraint over temptation if I couldn't manage to set him a decent example?

"Nice try, Potter," I said, gruffly, "but I can't be bribed. If the Headmaster didn't feel so strongly that you need to keep that cloak with you, I'd insist that you put it in a Gringotts' vault as soon as possible! Besides, Professor Snape trusts me. I've never lied to him and I don't intend to start now!"

"You wouldn't be lying to him, Mr. Filch!" Potter said. "Withholding information is different. After the Professor finishes gloating, he'll want to know why you won't confiscate my cloak! Will you tell him that Professor Dumbledore wants me to have it? It's not

safe to make Professor Snape angry."

"He already suspected that the Headmaster wanted you to have the cloak. When I confirm it, I think he'll be more bitter and hurt than angry. He'll find the Headmaster's reasons much harder to accept than I do. He's always felt that your father and his friends got special treatment..."

"Yes, he's mentioned that," Potter said, wryly. "I'd have an easier time not hating him if he could manage to stop hating my father. Look, isn't that a good reason not to tell him? He's your friend. You don't want to upset him, do you?"

Of course I didn't. It was the one argument that might possibly convince me. Potter was as shrewd as any Slytherin...

For a few moments, I remained silent, thinking. Mrs. Norris purred softly on my knee.

"It can't be helped," I said, finally. "The Professor deserves to know that he was right, and that's that. Of course it'd make it easier for everyone concerned if you'd simply try to stay in your bed at night, come September. Because rest assured, Potter, cloak or no cloak, if I catch you out of bed in places where you ought not to be, I still intend to do my duty and insist that you should be punished. The rules exist to protect you as much as any other student."

Potter had a sober expression on his face. "I understand, Mr. Filch. You have to do your job. I just hope you understand MY position. I'd love to not be involved, but the Dark Lord has other ideas. I was in bed when

my parents were killed. I was in bed when Sirius Black broke into Gryffindor Tower. I slept in the same room as Voldemort's right hand rat for almost three years. And, no disrespect intended, but there weren't any teachers around when Quirrel went after the Philosopher's Stone. Can you imagine what would have happened to me if I had stayed in bed and let Voldemort be reborn when Wormtail was living in the same dorm as I was? What could have happened to Ron and the others?

There was a long pause, then the boy sighed. "All I can truthfully promise is that I'll try. But sometimes things happen, things I hadn't planned on. Like the Tri-wizard tournament, or the Grey Woman. And the less people who get involved, the less people there are around me to get hurt. Or ...worse. Believe me, I want to keep the Castle and everyone in it safe, just as much as you do."

"That's not your responsibility, Potter!" I protested.

Harry's green eyes looked haunted; old and weary. I'd seen that look before, not so long ago, on another troubled young face. Who...?

Oh. It had been Severus. So determined to protect the Stone. All alone if necessary...

I decided to keep that thought to myself. Potter was unlikely to appreciate the comparison.

Potter studied my face for a few moments, then he must have decided that we were being too serious, for a spark of mischief gleamed in his eyes as he added. "If that's not enough, then I'll promise that you will never SEE me break curfew!"

"Very amusing, boy," I growled. Potter knew that the

growl was mostly for effect, because he smiled.

"I don't work alone, you know," I reminded him, stroking Mrs. Norris. My cat purred sleepily.

"You ought to be resting," I continued, quietly. "If you're worried about nightmares, maybe the nurse could give you something. Would you like me to fetch her?"

Potter shook his head. "I don't want any more sleeping potions. There's something better that you can do on your own." He looked wistful. "Tell me some things about my Dad and Sirius and Professor Lupin. You don't have to pretend that you liked them or anything. Or tell me about my Mum. Ginny said that you took that sketchbook away from Mum because she drew a sketch of you. I looked at the drawing. It wasn't as bad as all that..."

"Hmmp..." I muttered, gruffly, wondering where to start.

EPILOGUE ONE

The Boy Who Still Had Homework

All recognizable characters copyrighted

by J.K. Rowling.

All less recognizable characters

should be in bed by now.

Harry kept telling himself that he wasn't bitter. He knew it was dangerous for him to go to the Weasleys'. He knew that Dumbledore had important work to get to, he couldn't expect the Headmaster to baby-sit him for the rest of the summer. Maybe if he told himself that often enough, the acid churning in his stomach would stop

reminding him he had, once again, been dumped at the Dursleys' doorstep like a bag of dirty laundry.

"So, even your freak friends don't want you, do they?" had been Aunt Petunia's greeting.

"They wouldn't dream of depriving you of the pleasure of my company," Harry had said with as much dignity as he could muster before sending himself to his room.

He tried to comfort himself with the thought that at least he'd got to see the Weasleys and the Grangers. He'd been in the hospital more than a week. The day after he and Filch had arrived, he'd developed a fever and had been put into a separate room. The fever hadn't lasted long, but it had added to his recuperation time, and the hospital staff was probably bewildered at his gratitude for that.

The Weasleys had come the most often, of course. They had an easier trip than the Grangers. Mrs. Weasley and Ron had been there every day, and the others had visited almost as often. Until Filch left the hospital, the Weasleys had brought treats for both himself and Filch at every visit. Mrs. Weasley had knitted a red scarf with gold lions for Harry and a purple scarf with grey cats for Mr. Filch.

Ron kept bringing Quidditch magazines for both the patients. ("Look, Hermione, reading material!" Ron had smirked at Hermione when the Grangers had arrived. Hermione had just rolled her eyes.)

Ginny had come several times, too. Which must have prompted the strange dream Harry had had about her at the beginning of the week, when he was

still inclined to drowse off during the Weasleys' visits. He had dreamed that Ginny had stolen a kiss. Harry fingered the no-spill inkwell that Ginny had made out of clay and wondered. Surely she wouldn't have done something like that in a room full of her family, not to mention Filch! Shy little Ginny? It must have been a dream, mustn't it?

The Grangers had managed come four times. On their first visit, they had brought him some puzzle books. On their second, they'd brought a book about owls. Prof. McGonagall had come by while he was asleep and had left him a set of muggle clothing. Harry figured that his gratitude must have been pathetic, because on their third and fourth visits, the Grangers had brought him clothing: a pair of jeans and a blue t-shirt with an owl printed on it, to be exact.

Hagrid had visited after Filch had gone home, bringing a hand carved puzzle box. Filch owed him some bed socks from Gladraggs in Hogwarts (perhaps to remind him to STAY IN BED) and a wax mouth guard like the nurse had used earlier. Apparently, Filch had become fond of the things. Harry didn't really want to know what Filch had in mind for them. Fred and George were probably lucky Filch hadn't stumbled across them while they were still at Hogwarts.

He'd even received a mysterious package which turned out (after it had been thoroughly examined by first Bill Weasley, then Albus Dumbledore) to be a book of riddles. The unsigned card merely said: "Riddling is a useful skill. Good luck, Boy."

Harry sighed and thumbed through the book of riddles, then he picked up his Defense Against Dark Arts essay. He'd never be able to look at 'Dark Creatures' the same way ever again; not after the way the Sphinx had obviously come to their aid. The Beansidhe and the Harpy had also helped them, though not as openly as the Sphinx had.

Slowly he shredded the foot and a half that he had completed on his essay. There was no way he could continue along his original line of thought.

He picked up his quill. *"The second most important thing in Defense Against the Dark Arts is knowing who your enemies are. The first is knowing who your friends are. It's too easy to classify people and other beings as 'Us' and 'Them'.*

"However, the line between 'Us' and 'Them' can shift abruptly. So-called dark creatures can show themselves to be sympathetic, even heroic, while some humans can prove to have less humanity in them than a sphinx, or a banshee, or a harpy..." Harry paused, then added. "...Or a werewolf, or a giant."

There was a knock at the door. Harry looked around, startled. "Who's there?"

"It's Dudley."

"What do you want?" Harry asked crossly.

"I've brought you some tea," was Dudley's surprisingly meek answer.

Harry opened the door. Dudley stood in the hall with a tray of tea and scones.

"It didn't look like you'd eaten much breakfast,"

Dudley said, almost shyly.

Harry stared at him. "What's got into you?" he demanded.

Dudley scuffed his foot on the floor. "Look, I know I've never been nice to you before but, well, I never... ." Dudley hesitated. "I thought you were going to die!"

"I didn't think you cared," Harry said, bewildered.

"I didn't think I cared, either," admitted Dudley. "But I didn't... I mean..." he held up the tray. "Tea?" he finished.

"Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia would have a fit if they knew you were feeding me." Harry said warily.

"I know," Dudley said. A look of... defiance?... flashed across his pudgy face. "I don't care. I'm tired of them treating me like a three year old."

There was a long pause. Then Harry moved back and let Dudley come in. Yes, the line between 'Us' and 'Them' can shift unexpectedly.

EPILOGUE TWO

'Dear Minerva...'

Seated behind my desk, chewing thoughtfully on the end of my quill, I contemplated the letter I was writing to Minerva McGonagall.

My lovely professor had briefly interrupted her previous mission to visit St. Mungo's. She had gone to look in on Potter while he'd slept, and had then spent a while sitting with me.

I had poured out my heart to her on the subject of the boy. The heavy burdens that he was expected to carry, the miserable situation at his aunt's house, and my own guilty feelings over the way I'd treated him in the past.

Minerva had no answers to offer, but her presence had been a great comfort.

"Thank you for being so patient with my railing!" I wrote. *"I know that you don't like to see him with those Muggles any more than I do."*

Your kind reassurances to me are much appreciated. Yes, I know that I am not the worst of the evils that the boy has faced in his short life. But I do have many bitter regrets. Things I wish that I had not said to him, chores I wish I had not given him to do. Most of the brats come to us so dreadfully spoiled. I consider it my duty to show them that the

sun does not rise and set according to their whims. I wish that I'd known he was different. I should have guessed. There were things that he said, clues that I was too blind to see. I must try to make it up to him, somehow.

Rest assured that my idea of making amends will not be to treat the boy indulgently--

I'm very glad to hear that the boy is now under your watchful eye and the Pup's too. Even if the poor child doesn't know that the two of you are so near. Please try not to let the Pup talk you into doing anything reckless! You know that you will have to be prudent enough for everyone if there is any sort of trouble."

Sighing, I crossed out 'if,' and wrote 'when' instead.

"From either those Muggles the boy lives with, or anyone even worse.

I really did not expect A-D- to change his mind on the subject of the boy's summer lodgings, but I thank you for trying anyway.

Minerva, please, do not worry about me. I promise that the misadventure caused me no lasting harm. Hagrid has delayed his leaving for over a week now, first because he was worried about the boy, and then because he wished to allow me time to recuperate. But owls bearing perfumed missives signed "D-M" have been arriving for him in ever increasing numbers. I do not expect him to wait for much longer.

Do you remember the card that came to me at St. Mungo's from someone named 'Celaeno'? It turns out that Celaeno is the Harpy. Hagrid knows her. The owl was rather amused to learn that she'd sent me a card. I've written her a polite thank you note in return. Staying on a Harpy's good side would be the most prudent thing to do. Not that a Harpy actually has a good side, but you know what I mean.

Things at the Castle have been, for the most part, uneventful since I wrote to you last. Peeves hasn't been too much of a nuisance, since the time he got too close and I was able to shove one of those wax gags in his mouth. What useful things they are!

I am sorely tempted to ask you to give the Pup a good swift kick for me. I never should have let him talk me into redecorating Myrtle's bathroom! The brat still clings adamantly to the idea of purple stalls, but I think that she may be willing to consider a rather pleasant shade of pale green for the walls.

Please, dear Minerva, look after yourself, the boy and the Pup. And write to me again, as soon as you can.

Mrs. Norris sends her regards as well.

All my love,

Argus.

EPILOGUE THREE

The Predators' Wake

The Sphinx was at the Leaky Cauldron once again. It seemed only fitting. She found one of her fellow 'judges' sitting at the bar clutching a flagon of something in her claw.

"Back again?" the Harpy asked dryly.

"I decided I needed a drink," Hypatia answered in dignified tones.

"Agreed," sighed a dim figure that floated in from the ceiling. "Tom, a whiskey and soda, please."

"I'll take a whiskey milk punch, please," said Hypatia.

"Whiskey Beer Sour for me," Celaeno, the Harpy grunted, gulping down the remains of her beer. "Might as well make it an all whiskey party."

"Maybe I'll be different and have a Banshee, the Caoimhe Bean-Sidhe said.

"Cute, girl," snorted Hypatia.

"Is there some special occasion?" Tom asked cautiously. Normally, he would not nose into the affairs of predatory types, but the three seemed to be in a chatty mood, and something was definitely up.

"Aye," the Bean-side said. "'Tis a wake, Tom. The Grey Devourer will devour no more children."

"She's definitely dead then?" asked Celaeno.

"Oh, aye, she's really most sincerely dead," avowed

the Caoimhe Bean-Sidhe. "I felt her doom on her heels when she came in here over a week ago, asking for judges. I feared the death I felt was that of her prey. I didn't realize she'd set herself against HIM, the breaker of dark wizards."

"The Greyling was a fool all right," Hypatia agreed. "I knew when I saw The Boy that he'd take the day."

"But he didn't kill her," asserted the Harpy. "It was the Dark Lord's minions who brought her before the nameless upstart. The Dark Wizard is the one who put her out of our misery. I am yay close to thinking I should feel a scrap of gratitude toward him."

"The grey stalker met her doom only because the breaker of dark wizards won free," said the Caoimhe Bean-Sidhe. "That child will not be easy meat. Not when he can rally protectors around him like the broken wizard and his cat."

Tom frowned, he hadn't gone to Hogwarts, but it didn't take an Arithmancy professor to calculate how many children could be called 'Breaker of Dark Wizards.' This had to be about Harry Potter.

"And us," added Hypatia dryly. "He even draws the likes of us to his side." The other two predators nodded. "Tom, join us in a toast, will you?" asked Hypatia.

Tom poured himself whiskey, neat, he surely needed a stiff drink now, and listened for the toast.

"The Boy Who Lived!" said Hypatia, raising her glass.

The others echoed her words.

The End

of

Harry's Fifth Year

Author's Note – J: In case anybody's interested in the aforementioned drinks

Banshee – 1 oz. White Crème de Cacao 1 oz. Crème de Banana 1 oz. Cream Combine all the ingredients in a shaker filled with ice, shake and strain into a cocktail glass.

Whiskey Beer Sour – 1 can(s) Frozen Lemonade (from Concentrate) – 1 can(s) Beer – 12 oz Whiskey
Directions/Comments: In a pitcher mix beer, whiskey, and lemonade. Pour 1/3 of the mix with 4 cups ice in blender. (Add or remove ice as desired.) Blend and pour. Makes about 10 drinks. You can use a lot more than 12 oz whiskey and the lemonade will kill the taste.

Whiskey Milk Punch Ingredients:* 2 oz Blended whiskey * 1 tsp Powdered sugar * 8 oz Milk * Nutmeg
Mixing instructions:Shake all ingredients (except nutmeg) with ice and strain into a Collins glass. Sprinkle nutmeg on top and serve.

Whiskey, Neat – Just dump it into the glass! ;-)

Colophon

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