

“You’ve never been on the receiving end of one of her Bat-Bogey Hexes, have you?”

“Shhh!” said Fred, half-rising from the bed. “Listen!”

They fell silent. Footsteps were coming up the stairs again.

“Mum,” said George, and without further ado there was a loud crack and Harry felt the weight vanish from the end of his bed. A few seconds later and they heard the floorboard creak outside their door; Mrs. Weasley was plainly listening to see whether they were talking or not.

Hedwig and Pigwidgeon hooted dolefully. The floorboard creaked again and they heard her heading upstairs to check on Fred and George.

“She doesn’t trust us at all, you know,” said Ron regretfully.

Harry was sure he would not be able to fall asleep; the evening had been so packed with things to think about that he fully expected to lie awake for hours mulling it all over. He wanted to continue talking to Ron, but Mrs. Weasley was now creaking back downstairs again, and once she had gone he distinctly heard others making their way upstairs . . . In fact, many-legged creatures were cantering softly up and down outside the bedroom door, and Hagrid, the Care of Magical Creatures teacher, was saying, “*Beauties, aren’ they, eh, Harry? We’ll be studyin’ weapons this term . . .*” And Harry saw that the creatures had cannons for heads and were wheeling to face him. . . . He ducked. . . .

The next thing he knew, he was curled in a warm ball under his bedclothes, and George’s loud voice was filling the room.

“Mum says get up, your breakfast is in the kitchen and then she needs you in the drawing room, there are loads more doxies than she thought and she’s found a nest of dead puffskeins under the sofa.”

Half an hour later, Harry and Ron, who had dressed and breakfasted quickly, entered the drawing room, a long, high-ceilinged room on the first floor with olive-green walls covered in dirty tapestries. The carpet exhaled little clouds of dust every time someone put their foot on it and the long, moss-green velvet curtains were buzzing as though swarming with invisible

bees. It was around these that Mrs. Weasley, Hermione, Ginny, Fred, and George were grouped, all looking rather peculiar, as they had tied cloths over their noses and mouths. Each of them was also holding a large bottle of black liquid with a nozzle at the end.

“Cover your faces and take a spray,” Mrs. Weasley said to Harry and Ron the moment she saw them, pointing to two more bottles of black liquid standing on a spindle-legged table. “It’s Doxycide. I’ve never seen an infestation this bad — *what* that house-elf’s been doing for the last ten years —”

Hermione’s face was half concealed by a tea towel but Harry distinctly saw her throw a reproachful look at Mrs. Weasley at these words.

“Kreacher’s really old, he probably couldn’t manage —”

“You’d be surprised what Kreacher can manage when he wants to, Hermione,” said Sirius, who had just entered the room carrying a bloodstained bag of what appeared to be dead rats. “I’ve just been feeding Buckbeak,” he added, in reply to Harry’s inquiring look. “I keep him upstairs in my mother’s bedroom. Anyway . . . this writing desk . . .”

He dropped the bag of rats onto an armchair, then bent over to examine the locked cabinet which, Harry now noticed for the first time, was shaking slightly.

“Well, Molly, I’m pretty sure this is a boggart,” said Sirius, peering through the keyhole, “but perhaps we ought to let Mad-Eye have a shifty at it before we let it out — knowing my mother it could be something much worse.”

“Right you are, Sirius,” said Mrs. Weasley.

They were both speaking in carefully light, polite voices that told Harry quite plainly that neither had forgotten their disagreement of the night before.

A loud, clanging bell sounded from downstairs, followed at once by the cacophony of screams and wails that had been triggered the previous night by Tonks knocking over the umbrella stand.

“I keep telling them not to ring the doorbell!” said Sirius exasperatedly, hurrying back out of the room. They heard him thundering down the stairs as

Mrs. Black's screeches echoed up through the house once more: "*Stains of dishonor, filthy half-breeds, blood traitors, children of filth . . .*"

"Close the door, please, Harry," said Mrs. Weasley.

Harry took as much time as he dared to close the drawing room door; he wanted to listen to what was going on downstairs. Sirius had obviously managed to shut the curtains over his mother's portrait because she had stopped screaming. He heard Sirius walking down the hall, then the clattering of the chain on the front door, and then a deep voice he recognized as Kingsley Shacklebolt's saying, "Hestia's just relieved me, so she's got Moody's cloak now, thought I'd leave a report for Dumbledore . . ."

Feeling Mrs. Weasley's eyes on the back of his head, Harry regretfully closed the drawing room door and rejoined the doxy party.

Mrs. Weasley was bending over to check the page on doxies in *Gilderoy Lockhart's Guide to Household Pests*, which was lying open on the sofa.

"Right, you lot, you need to be careful, because doxies bite and their teeth are poisonous. I've got a bottle of antidote here, but I'd rather nobody needed it."

She straightened up, positioned herself squarely in front of the curtains, and beckoned them all forward.

"When I say the word, start spraying immediately," she said. "They'll come flying out at us, I expect, but it says on the sprays one good squirt will paralyze them. When they're immobilized, just throw them in this bucket."

She stepped carefully out of their line of fire and raised her own spray. "All right — *squirt!*"

Harry had been spraying only a few seconds when a fully grown doxy came soaring out of a fold in the material, shiny beetlelike wings whirring, tiny needle-sharp teeth bared, its fairylike body covered with thick black hair and its four tiny fists clenched with fury. Harry caught it full in the face with a blast of Doxycide; it froze in midair and fell, with a surprisingly loud *thunk*, onto the worn carpet below. Harry picked it up and threw it in the bucket.

"Fred, what are you doing?" said Mrs. Weasley sharply. "Spray that at once

and throw it away!”

Harry looked around. Fred was holding a struggling doxy between his forefinger and thumb.

“Right-o,” Fred said brightly, spraying the doxy quickly in the face so that it fainted, but the moment Mrs. Weasley’s back was turned he pocketed it with a wink.

“We want to experiment with doxy venom for our Skiving Snackboxes,” George told Harry under his breath.

Deftly spraying two doxies at once as they soared straight for his nose, Harry moved closer to George and muttered out of the corner of his mouth, “What are Skiving Snackboxes?”

“Range of sweets to make you ill,” George whispered, keeping a wary eye on Mrs. Weasley’s back. “Not seriously ill, mind, just ill enough to get you out of a class when you feel like it. Fred and I have been developing them this summer. They’re double-ended, color-coded chews. If you eat the orange half of the Puking Pastilles, you throw up. Moment you’ve been rushed out of the lesson for the hospital wing, you swallow the purple half —”

“— which restores you to full fitness, enabling you to pursue the leisure activity of your own choice during an hour that would otherwise have been devoted to unprofitable boredom.’ That’s what we’re putting in the adverts, anyway,” whispered Fred, who had edged over out of Mrs. Weasley’s line of vision and was now sweeping a few stray doxies from the floor and adding them to his pocket. “But they still need a bit of work. At the moment our testers are having a bit of trouble stopping puking long enough to swallow the purple end.”

“Testers?”

“Us,” said Fred. “We take it in turns. George did the Fainting Fancies — we both tried the Nosebleed Nougat —”

“Mum thought we’d been dueling,” said George.

“Joke shop still on, then?” Harry muttered, pretending to be adjusting the nozzle on his spray.

“Well, we haven’t had a chance to get premises yet,” said Fred, dropping his voice even lower as Mrs. Weasley mopped her brow with her scarf before returning to the attack, “so we’re running it as a mail-order service at the moment. We put advertisements in the *Daily Prophet* last week.”

“All thanks to you, mate,” said George. “But don’t worry . . . Mum hasn’t got a clue. She won’t read the *Daily Prophet* anymore, ’cause of it telling lies about you and Dumbledore.”

Harry grinned. He had forced the Weasley twins to take the thousand-Galleon prize money he had won in the Triwizard Tournament to help them realize their ambition to open a joke shop, but he was still glad to know that his part in furthering their plans was unknown to Mrs. Weasley, who did not think that running a joke shop was a suitable career for two of her sons.

The de-doxying of the curtains took most of the morning. It was past midday when Mrs. Weasley finally removed her protective scarf, sank into a sagging armchair, and sprang up again with a cry of disgust, having sat on the bag of dead rats. The curtains were no longer buzzing; they hung limp and damp from the intensive spraying; unconscious doxies lay crammed in the bucket at the foot of them beside a bowl of their black eggs, at which Crookshanks was now sniffing and Fred and George were shooting covetous looks.

“I think we’ll tackle *those* after lunch.”

Mrs. Weasley pointed at the dusty glass-fronted cabinets standing on either side of the mantelpiece. They were crammed with an odd assortment of objects: a selection of rusty daggers, claws, a coiled snakeskin, a number of tarnished silver boxes inscribed with languages Harry could not understand and, least pleasant of all, an ornate crystal bottle with a large opal set into the stopper, full of what Harry was quite sure was blood.

The clanging doorbell rang again. Everyone looked at Mrs. Weasley.

“Stay here,” she said firmly, snatching up the bag of rats as Mrs. Black’s screeches started up again from down below. “I’ll bring up some sandwiches.”

She left the room, closing the door carefully behind her. At once, everyone dashed over to the window to look down onto the doorstep. They could see the top of an unkempt gingery head and a stack of precariously balanced cauldrons.

“Mundungus!” said Hermione. “What’s he brought all those cauldrons for?”

“Probably looking for a safe place to keep them,” said Harry. “Isn’t that what he was doing the night he was supposed to be tailing me? Picking up dodgy cauldrons?”

“Yeah, you’re right!” said Fred, as the front door opened; Mundungus heaved his cauldrons through it and disappeared from view. “Blimey, Mum won’t like that . . .”

He and George crossed to the door and stood beside it, listening intently. Mrs. Black’s screaming had stopped again.

“Mundungus is talking to Sirius and Kingsley,” Fred muttered, frowning with concentration. “Can’t hear properly . . . d’you reckon we can risk the Extendable Ears?”

“Might be worth it,” said George. “I could sneak upstairs and get a pair —”

But at that precise moment there was an explosion of sound from downstairs that rendered Extendable Ears quite unnecessary. All of them could hear exactly what Mrs. Weasley was shouting at the top of her voice.

“WE ARE NOT RUNNING A HIDEOUT FOR STOLEN GOODS!”

“I love hearing Mum shouting at someone else,” said Fred, with a satisfied smile on his face as he opened the door an inch or so to allow Mrs. Weasley’s voice to permeate the room better. “It makes such a nice change.”

“— COMPLETELY IRRESPONSIBLE, AS IF WE HAVEN’T GOT ENOUGH TO WORRY ABOUT WITHOUT YOU DRAGGING STOLEN CAULDRONS INTO THE HOUSE —”

“The idiots are letting her get into her stride,” said George, shaking his head. “You’ve got to head her off early, otherwise she builds up a head of

steam and goes on for hours. And she's been dying to have a go at Mundungus ever since he sneaked off when he was supposed to be following you, Harry — and there goes Sirius's mum again —”

Mrs. Weasley's voice was lost amid fresh shrieks and screams from the portraits in the hall. George made to shut the door to drown the noise, but before he could do so, a house-elf edged into the room.

Except for the filthy rag tied like a loincloth around its middle, it was completely naked. It looked very old. Its skin seemed to be several times too big for it and though it was bald like all house-elves, there was a quantity of white hair growing out of its large, batlike ears. Its eyes were a bloodshot and watery gray, and its fleshy nose was large and rather snoutlike.

The elf took absolutely no notice of Harry and the rest. Acting as though it could not see them, it shuffled hunchbacked, slowly and doggedly, toward the far end of the room, muttering under its breath all the while in a hoarse, deep voice like a bullfrog's, “. . . Smells like a drain and a criminal to boot, but she's no better, nasty old blood traitor with her brats messing up my Mistress's house, oh my poor Mistress, if she knew, if she knew the scum they've let in her house, what would she say to old Kreacher, oh the shame of it, Mudbloods and werewolves and traitors and thieves, poor old Kreacher, what can he do . . .”

“Hello, Kreacher,” said Fred very loudly, closing the door with a snap.

The house-elf froze in his tracks, stopped muttering, and then gave a very pronounced and very unconvincing start of surprise.

“Kreacher did not see Young Master,” he said, turning around and bowing to Fred. Still facing the carpet, he added, perfectly audibly, “Nasty little brat of a blood traitor it is.”

“Sorry?” said George. “Didn't catch that last bit.”

“Kreacher said nothing,” said the elf, with a second bow to George, adding in a clear undertone, “and there's its twin, unnatural little beasts they are.”

Harry didn't know whether to laugh or not. The elf straightened up, eyeing them all very malevolently, and apparently convinced that they could not hear

him as he continued to mutter.

“ . . . and there’s the Mudblood, standing there bold as brass, oh if my Mistress knew, oh how she’d cry, and there’s a new boy, Kreacher doesn’t know his name, what is he doing here, Kreacher doesn’t know . . . ”

“This is Harry, Kreacher,” said Hermione tentatively. “Harry Potter.”

Kreacher’s pale eyes widened and he muttered faster and more furiously than ever.

“The Mudblood is talking to Kreacher as though she is my friend, if Kreacher’s Mistress saw him in such company, oh what would she say —”

“Don’t call her a Mudblood!” said Ron and Ginny together, very angrily.

“It doesn’t matter,” Hermione whispered, “he’s not in his right mind, he doesn’t know what he’s —”

“Don’t kid yourself, Hermione, he knows *exactly* what he’s saying,” said Fred, eyeing Kreacher with great dislike.

Kreacher was still muttering, his eyes on Harry.

“Is it true? Is it Harry Potter? Kreacher can see the scar, it must be true, that’s that boy who stopped the Dark Lord, Kreacher wonders how he did it —”

“Don’t we all, Kreacher?” said Fred.

“What do you want anyway?” George asked.

Kreacher’s huge eyes darted onto George.

“Kreacher is cleaning,” he said evasively.

“A likely story,” said a voice behind Harry.

Sirius had come back; he was glowering at the elf from the doorway. The noise in the hall had abated; perhaps Mrs. Weasley and Mundungus had moved their argument down into the kitchen. At the sight of Sirius, Kreacher flung himself into a ridiculously low bow that flattened his snoutlike nose on the floor.

“Stand up straight,” said Sirius impatiently. “Now, what are you up to?”

“Kreacher is cleaning,” the elf repeated. “Kreacher lives to serve the noble house of Black —”

“— and it’s getting blacker every day, it’s filthy,” said Sirius.

“Master always liked his little joke,” said Kreacher, bowing again, and continuing in an undertone, “Master was a nasty ungrateful swine who broke his mother’s heart —”

“My mother didn’t have a heart, Kreacher,” Sirius snapped. “She kept herself alive out of pure spite.”

Kreacher bowed again and said, “Whatever Master says,” then muttered furiously, “Master is not fit to wipe slime from his mother’s boots, oh my poor Mistress, what would she say if she saw Kreacher serving him, how she hated him, what a disappointment he was —”

“I asked you what you were up to,” said Sirius coldly. “Every time you show up pretending to be cleaning, you sneak something off to your room so we can’t throw it out.”

“Kreacher would never move anything from its proper place in Master’s house,” said the elf, then muttered very fast, “Mistress would never forgive Kreacher if the tapestry was thrown out, seven centuries it’s been in the family, Kreacher must save it, Kreacher will not let Master and the blood traitors and the brats destroy it —”

“I thought it might be that,” said Sirius, casting a disdainful look at the opposite wall. “She’ll have put another Permanent Sticking Charm on the back of it, I don’t doubt, but if I can get rid of it I certainly will. Now go away, Kreacher.”

It seemed that Kreacher did not dare disobey a direct order; nevertheless, the look he gave Sirius as he shuffled out past him was redolent of deepest loathing and he muttered all the way out of the room.

“— comes back from Azkaban ordering Kreacher around, oh my poor Mistress, what would she say if she saw the house now, scum living in it, her treasures thrown out, she swore he was no son of hers and he’s back, they say

he's a murderer too —"

"Keep muttering and I will be a murderer!" said Sirius irritably, and he slammed the door shut on the elf.

"Sirius, he's not right in the head," said Hermione pleadingly, "I don't think he realizes we can hear him."

"He's been alone too long," said Sirius, "taking mad orders from my mother's portrait and talking to himself, but he was always a foul little —"

"If you just set him free," said Hermione hopefully, "maybe —"

"We can't set him free, he knows too much about the Order," said Sirius curtly. "And anyway, the shock would kill him. You suggest to him that he leaves this house, see how he takes it."

Sirius walked across the room, where the tapestry Kreacher had been trying to protect hung the length of the wall. Harry and the others followed.

The tapestry looked immensely old; it was faded and looked as though doxies had gnawed it in places; nevertheless, the golden thread with which it was embroidered still glinted brightly enough to show them a sprawling family tree dating back (as far as Harry could tell) to the Middle Ages. Large words at the very top of the tapestry read:

THE NOBLE AND MOST ANCIENT HOUSE OF BLACK

"TOUJOURS PUR"

"You're not on here!" said Harry, after scanning the bottom of the tree.

"I used to be there," said Sirius, pointing at a small, round, charred hole in the tapestry, rather like a cigarette burn. "My sweet old mother blasted me off after I ran away from home — Kreacher's quite fond of muttering the story under his breath."

"You ran away from home?"

"When I was about sixteen," said Sirius. "I'd had enough."

"Where did you go?" asked Harry, staring at him.

"Your dad's place," said Sirius. "Your grandparents were really good about

it; they sort of adopted me as a second son. Yeah, I camped out at your dad's during the school holidays, and then when I was seventeen I got a place of my own, my Uncle Alphard had left me a decent bit of gold — he's been wiped off here too, that's probably why — anyway, after that I looked after myself. I was always welcome at Mr. and Mrs. Potter's for Sunday lunch, though."

"But . . . why did you . . . ?"

"Leave?" Sirius smiled bitterly and ran a hand through his long, unkempt hair. "Because I hated the whole lot of them: my parents, with their pure-blood mania, convinced that to be a Black made you practically royal . . . my idiot brother, soft enough to believe them . . . that's him."

Sirius jabbed a finger at the very bottom of the tree, at the name REGULUS BLACK. A date of death (some fifteen years previously) followed the date of birth.

"He was younger than me," said Sirius, "and a much better son, as I was constantly reminded."

"But he died," said Harry.

"Yeah," said Sirius. "Stupid idiot . . . he joined the Death Eaters."

"You're kidding!"

"Come on, Harry, haven't you seen enough of this house to tell what kind of wizards my family were?" said Sirius testily.

"Were — were your parents Death Eaters as well?"

"No, no, but believe me, they thought Voldemort had the right idea, they were all for the purification of the Wizarding race, getting rid of Muggle-borns and having purebloods in charge. They weren't alone either, there were quite a few people, before Voldemort showed his true colors, who thought he had the right idea about things. . . . They got cold feet when they saw what he was prepared to do to get power, though. But I bet my parents thought Regulus was a right little hero for joining up at first."

"Was he killed by an Auror?" Harry asked tentatively.

"Oh no," said Sirius. "No, he was murdered by Voldemort. Or on