

A DIFFERENCE IN THE FAMILY

THE SNAPE CHRONICLES



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Based on the characters of

J. K. ROWLING

and her books:

*Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*

Year One at Hogwarts

*Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*

Year Two at Hogwarts

*Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*

Year Three at Hogwarts

*Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*

Year Four at Hogwarts

*Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*

Year Five at Hogwarts

*Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*

Year Six at Hogwarts

*Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*

Year Seven at Hogwarts

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## C H A P T E R     O N E

### PROLOGUE

THURSDAY, APRIL 9, 1959 (THE DAY AFTER THE NEW MOON)

"Well, look who's here!" Ted Heseltine looked over from the game of darts as the door to the local opened. "If 't ain't the bridegroom! Wha' cha doin' here, Toby? Run outta petrol?" General laughter greeted this comment.

"Shut yer gob, Ted, and watch yer language. Got the missus here."

There was general movement as the men gathered in the local—in that sweet hour between leaving work and going home for supper—realized that the smaller figure behind Toby was the very new Mrs. Snape. They swept nut shells off the table, dabbed up a bit of spilt ale, and dusted off a chair, for everyone knew that Toby 'd up and married a girl from a country cottage, used to gentler ways than the ones found among the workers in a shabby east Lancashire mill town.

"Beggin' your pardon, Missus," Ted said, offering the now clean seat to the thin, sallow, long-faced woman that Toby'd taken to wife. She was no beauty, but then neither were any of them, and men in their walk of life didn't marry for beauty, but for companionship, a home, and children.

"Thanks," said Mrs. Snape quietly, and condescended to join them, making her instantly popular with the men.

"Lads!" Toby cried. "Drinks all 'round! This 'ere's m' new wife. Eileen, these are m' mates at the mill, the lads what I spend m' days with." The pints came, and they toasted Toby's wife.

"So Toby, wha' cha doin' back from Blackpool early?" asked Thurstan Garnett. "Y' got another day comin'. Thought you might like to stretch it out... Beggin' your pardon, Missus."

"We come back early," proclaimed Tobias Snape with some drama, "because we been informed we've a house. A dome-ee-sile. End o' Spinner's End, it is, and we're settin' up housekeeping. M' grandad's hired a couple o' men

to bring some things from 'is house and m' dad's, and me and 'Leen decided t' take the three days and move in proper. So I ain't back yet, not official. You'll see me at the mill come Monday."

Eileen Snape said nothing as the men exchanged gossip and chatted about the latest news of the job — "fired Fred just like that, and 'im with four kids t' feed" — but she watched their faces as they talked, and her restless eyes took in every detail of the pub. Toby had two more pints and was getting boisterously chummy.

Then it was time to go home — the other men to their wives and to supper — and the little group broke up. Toby and Eileen walked together, hand in hand, through the maze of brick Victorian worker's cottages, soot blackened, the few visible curtains dingy from the grime-filled air. Toby's hobnailed shoes rang loud on the ancient cracked cobblestones as they approached the last little house at the very outskirts of the town, on a street under the shadow of the mill chimney that dominated the whole skyline. The last little house on Spinner's End.

It was dark inside, dark and empty, and their footsteps echoed slightly in the empty rooms. Eileen went directly to the kitchen, where she'd already started preparing supper with one skillet on a coal grate because the gas and electricity hadn't been turned on yet.

Tobias stomped around the little house. The ground floor had a sitting/dining room and the kitchen. The upper floor had a large bedroom and a smaller room that Toby planned to divide into a tiny second bedroom and a storage space. There was also a narrow room with a toilet and a sink wedged onto the upper floor sometime in the last fifty years, but no proper bathroom. It was all right. They weren't any la-di-da Londoners. Hot water and soap in a basin was all you really needed. They'd make do.

They camped for supper, eating Eileen's simple meal on two cracked plates while sitting on the floor in the front room. "Could ya ever witch us up a coupla drinks and some posh dessert?" Toby joked, but Eileen frowned.

"You know it doesn't work with food," she said.

"Aye," said Toby. "Seems there's lots it don't work with."

In addition to the skillet and the plates, and two stools in the kitchen, there was one other thing in the house — an old lumpy mattress in the sitting room. The next day they would get some small pieces of furniture, but for tonight this was the bed.

"Come on, 'Leen," Toby coaxed and, even though it was early and the



sun barely set, Eileen smiled and joined her very new husband. They were, after all, still on their honeymoon.

*[Many miles away, more than an ocean away, on exactly the same day at almost exactly the same time, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration announced the names of the seven men, the Mercury Seven, who would be the first western pilots to become astronauts in their country's space program. One of them, John Herschel Glenn, Jr., would be the first American in outer space. Neither Tobias Snape nor his new bride, the former Eileen Prince, were ever aware that this had happened, but the coincidence is an interesting one.]*

By the time Eileen woke the next morning, Toby'd left, but he was still with her as she moved around the house. She put on her dressing gown and found a note on a sheet from a tiny pad of paper — 'Ye'r the greatest.' Another note was in the tin of tea — 'I'm the luckiest man alive.'

Eileen smiled her tight, quiet smile. She wasn't one for talking and had never had many friends, certainly never a beau to go out walking with. Toby made her feel special, important, and he was always telling her sweet things. He did like to go out with his mates of a Friday night, and had a fondness for gin, and sometimes the fondness gave him a ready fist, but these were common traits among working-class men in both small town and big city, and Eileen thought nothing of it.

A knock on the door made her jump. It wasn't Toby — Toby'd walk right in. Eileen didn't want to greet strangers on her doorstep still in her night clothes, so she walked quietly to the front door and, instead of opening it, said, "Who's there?"

"Your mother, 'Leen. Who else are you expecting at seven-thirty on a Friday morning?"

The door opened, and Eileen nodded to her mother and slipped quickly back inside, conscious she was wearing a dressing gown on a public road. "Come in, Mum, and have a cuppa. We got no furniture yet, but at least we got a house. How'd you get here? How'd you know?"

"Believe it or not, that old muggle scoundrel Wensley dropped by yesterday to tell me he'd found a place, and Sam and Emily Dyson are visiting their daughter in Colne, so they gave me a ride." Mrs. Prince stood in the sitting room looking around at the dingy walls. "It's rather old, isn't it? And small."

"I'll be doing a load of cleaning, that's for sure, and 't ain't big, but it'll be better when the furniture comes, enough for two at any rate."

"Two?" Mrs. Prince's gaze lingered a moment on Eileen's face. "Are you sure?"

Eileen blushed. It didn't suit her and made her face look blotchy. "Mum, please. We are married. And you can't never be sure."

"We can," Mrs. Prince replied. "show me the kitchen now, and we'll have that cuppa." She waited until they were sitting and sipping the hot tea before continuing. "There's going to be trouble, 'Leen. It's not just the money, though children are expensive. That man of yours won't stand being second, and babies have a way of grabbing all the attention."

"Toby'll be fine, Mum. He'll be proud t' have fathered a child."

"He'll be jealous. It's bad enough, both of you Moon in Aries, but to get married when it's swinging through Aquarius and now having it in Aries again for this . . . I never did see a couple so willing to have a fight, with both of you wanting to control everything and him wanting no rivals. You might at least have waited 'til you were settled in."

"We'll be fine, Mum. And you know Toby sets no store by all that . . ."

The front door opened, and Eileen jumped up to greet her husband. Mrs. Prince followed more slowly and paused in the kitchen doorway when she saw there were two men in the sitting room. The older of the two, cap already in hand, gave her a nod that was almost a bow.

"Good morning, Constantina. Come to have a peek at the new digs?"

"Good morning, Wensley. I suppose it was good of you to be looking out for them like this."

"Proud to do it, proud to do it. Well, 'Leen, you're looking fit. Got a bit of a glow. Has my grandson been doing his duty? Am I going to be a great-grandfather before I die?"

Toby started to stammer something about waiting until everything was settled with the house and they were sure about the jobs continuing at the mill, then noticed that both Eileen and Mrs. Prince were very quiet. Wensley Snape had already noticed.

"You got news for us, Constantina?" Wensley asked. "Your people got ways of knowing?"

His mouth still open from an unfinished sentence, Toby turned to his wife of less than a week. "Is it true, 'Leen? D' people like you . . . D' ye know?"

Eileen nodded. Toby let out a whoop, and began dancing her around the empty sitting room. "A dad!" he bellowed. "A dad! And it'll be a boy, I know it. You've made me the happiest man . . ."

Then the laborers arrived with furniture gleaned from the houses of several different relatives — sofa and chairs, lamps, table, bed, and all the important things — not many, but enough — to start a home with. As Toby and Eileen busied themselves with telling the workmen where to put these used but serviceable treasures, old Wensley Snape watched Eileen with a keen, almost hungry expression. Constantina Prince was one of the best-known witch healers and potion brewers of the Pendle countryside, and more than anyone else, Wensley had supported Toby in his courtship of her daughter. It was something he'd wanted most of his life.

There are dreams that are never fulfilled, and others that come true. Wensley Snape was lucky in that, of all those near to him, his was the dream that was about to come true. If all went well, in nine months' time, he would have a wizard in the family.

## C H A P T E R     T W O

### THE PERFECT BABY

**SATURDAY, JANUARY 9, 1960**

**(HALFWAY BETWEEN FIRST QUARTER AND FULL MOON)**

Exactly nine months later, at one forty-six in the afternoon on Saturday, the ninth of January, 1960, Eileen Snape gave birth to a tiny baby boy in that small mill town about fifteen minutes drive from Colne in the Pendle district of Lancashire. There was no doctor present, and no licensed midwife either, the birth being assisted by the new baby's two grandmothers. If the child had been born in a hospital, he would have been taken from the room and placed in a crib in an infant ward, swaddled and removed from real human contact except for the short time each day when he would be allowed to be held by his mother. At home, however, he was washed and placed immediately in Eileen's arms, so that the first thing he ever really noticed in his life, blurred and unfocused though they were, were his mother's eyes.

His father Toby was so overcome by the proxy pain he felt for his wife's travail, that he spent the whole morning in the local pub, together with his own father, Edward Snape, and only returned home, boisterous and joyful, after he was assured he was the father of a reasonably healthy son. Wensley spent the entire time in the sitting room or bringing water and towels to the women. He couldn't go into the upper room itself, for that was women's domain.

"Look a' that!" Toby chirped when he saw his son for the first time. "I told ye no son o' mine 'd be born bald! Chip off the ol' block, 'e is. Chip off the ol' block. Thought all babies 'ad blue eyes, though," for the newest member of the family had wisps of dusky hair already, and his eyes were so dark as to look black.

"You can't ever tell a baby's eye color when he's born," admonished Nora Snape, Toby's mother. "Give him a couple of months and they'll change. Ned, don't breathe the smell of whiskey in the boy's face."

"Maybe," said Constantina, looking at the child thoughtfully and still talking about his eyes. "We'll have to wait and see."

Wensley reached out a tentative little finger and touched it to the baby's palm. The tiny fist clutched it with surprising firmness. Constantina sniffed at the expression on the older man's face. "All newborns hold on tightly," she said. "That grip 'll weaken soon."

"You think so?" said Wensley wistfully. "I was kind of hoping he might be a strong 'un."

"He may still be, but not because of the way he's hanging on right now. Everybody out, now. You've all seen him, and 'Leen needs some rest." The three men went downstairs to plan the boy's future and toast him, his mum, and everyone else they could think of, while upstairs the older women began to prepare mother and baby for the first feeding. There was some tension between them, since Constantina's ideas of what was necessary did not coincide with Nora's. In general, the witch's will prevailed.

The boy was not immediately named. Eileen, true to her education, wanted him to be Septimius Severus, but Tobias wasn't going to have any Septimius in his family, by God, and insisted the baby be named for his grandfathers, either Edward Richard, with Tobias's father first, or Richard Edward, giving pride of place to Eileen's. The eventual compromise was Richard Severus, Toby allowing the Richard since Richard Prince had died some years before, and Toby had never gotten along well with his own father anyway. Not unless they were in a pub.

With the logic inherent in all families who spend an inordinate time choosing names, the little boy was never called any variant of Richard, everybody for some reason settling on the nickname Russ. The neighbors, in fact, labored all his life under the misconception that his name was Russell.

Russ Snape was, from the day of his birth, a changeling child. His father put it down to superior intelligence.

"Ain't he the smart one, though, 'Leen. He knows when I come home from work I need it nice and quiet. He don't never bother, does he? Quiet as a parson. Look at him pushing his head up to look around. Won't nobody never put nothing over on him."

Eileen watched the development of her son with tigerish pride as he

stretched and kicked and explored his little world and, when put on his stomach, pushed himself up to watch her. She didn't tell Toby that the child never cried. It made things easier if Toby felt that was a baby gift just for him. She also didn't tell Toby that the sharp, quick, black eyes lit up and sparkled more for her than for his father. There was no reason reminding her husband that children always have a closer relationship with their mothers.

Eileen's own mother had other things to say when Eileen and her son came visiting.

"What do you mean, he doesn't cry? All babies cry sometimes. When they're hungry, or tired, or they need their nappies changed. He must cry sometimes."

"No, Mum. He doesn't cry. He never has. He has other ways to tell me he needs something." She leaned over the infant. "Russ knows how to tell me things. See? Now he wants me to pick him up and hold him." She lifted the child from Constantina's sofa into her arms. "You want to walk around the room and look at things, don' cha, Russ?"

Constantina, however, had a new worried look on her face. "Eileen, are you reading that baby?" She stood behind her daughter and peered into the great black eyes in the tiny face. "He's closed to me. Not that I could ever read anyone anyway, but I didn't think you could either. No wonder he doesn't cry, if he can just look at you and you know what he wants."

Toby, meanwhile, rapidly became less enchanted, more ambivalent about the child.

"Didn't know as a baby'd cost so much money," he told Eileen. "Bottles and nappies. And can't you just leave 'm a bit to come sit by me? He don't need all your attention. A woman's got to take care of her man."

#### FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 4, 1960 (ONE DAY BEFORE THE FULL MOON)

There was a little group of women that got together of an afternoon while their husbands worked in the mill. Kate Hanson was widowed by a fire in the cotton shed six years earlier and had no children, but the insurance settlement had allowed her to keep her house, and her skill at needlework — plus taking in boarders — kept her independent. Her younger sister was Polly Heseltine, whose third child, a daughter named Peggy, was two months older than Russ. Other women in the group — they were five altogether — also had small children of preschool age. When they got together, in whosoever house, the children played while the mothers gossiped over a cuppa in the kitchen.

"Peggy 'ad a new word this week," Polly told the group jammed into the Snape's tiny kitchen, clearly proud of her little girl. "Just a year old now, and she says 'water,' and 'bye-bye,' and just Tuesday she said 'pram' as clear as can be." (What Peggy had said was 'pam,' but her meaning had been clear.)

"They're such fun t' watch at this age," chimed in Sarah Catlow. "My Bobby's askin' for biscuits and milk. He said 'mama' when he was eight months, y' know. How's Russy doing, 'Leen? He'd be getting close."

Eileen poured more tea for Polly. "He ain't started talking yet. Still too young. He'll be walking soon on his own, though." She glanced through the kitchen doorway to where little Russ teetered on his newfound legs, clinging to the sofa. He got around rather quickly now, moving from piece of furniture to piece of furniture, and she had to keep a constant eye on him.

Sarah smiled at the tiny boy, so much frailer than her own sturdy children. "You'll get something soon, 'Leen. His babbling' ll be words 'fore y' know it."

"He doesn't babble either," said Eileen. "He's a quiet one."

"My cousin Jane's girl never babbled," said Edith Phillips, whose son Neil was now using one of Russ's blocks to pound Russ's toes. "They kept a pacifier in 'er mouth t' keep her quiet, and she never said a word 'til she was near three years old, then started talking like a bleeding solicitor. You never can tell."

"Neil," said Eileen from her chair in the kitchen, "don't hit Russ. Neil..."

Neil suddenly let out a howl of pain and rage and sat down plop in the middle of the sitting room. He continued to scream as his mother ran in from the kitchen to pick him up and cuddle him. "What did y' do, love?" Edith crooned to him. "Did you hit your fingers with the old block? That's what naughty little boys get when they hit other people with blocks, y' know. They hit their own fingers." To the other women's expressions of solicitude she replied matter-of-factly, "I don't think he's hurt. Just one of those things, y' know."

Little Russ swayed insecurely where he clung to the sofa, his black eyes intent on the squalling Neil. He hadn't reacted either to the attack with the block or to Neil's tantrum. Eileen kept an eye on him for the rest of the afternoon, but nothing else happened.

The next night was Bonfire Night. Toby loved Bonfire Night because it was his birthday, and he'd grown up with the idea that the fires and the fireworks were for him. He was thirty now, three years older than Eileen, but that put no damper on his enjoyment of the evening.

In fact, Toby spent a good part of the afternoon looking for serviceable pieces of combustible junk to put into the front area, then as dusk gathered he waited in the darkened sitting room, peering through the closed curtains. A group of teenagers came prowling with the first stars, spied the junk, and lifted it carefully and quietly over the low area wall. Toby let them get a ways down the street before he came out yelling at them for thieves. The boys jeered and threw a couple of small stones, and Toby chased them to the town center. It was all in good fun.

Then Toby returned home to collect Eileen and baby Russ, and together they went to watch the bonfire and the burning of the Guy. Eileen made the traditional black treacle cake called parkin, and Toby brought potatoes wrapped in foil to cook in the fire. They 'oh'ed and 'ah'ed at the fireworks while little Russ watched everything with wide, intent eyes, then went home to feast on potatoes and parkin.

"You got a present for me, 'Leen?" Toby grinned across the lamplit sitting room as the clock ticked past nine.

"I gave you your present," said Eileen. It was a warm winter sweater she'd knitted.

"I 'ad a different present in mind," Toby leered, "seeing as it's m' birthday and all," but Eileen wasn't watching him.

"Shh. Look, Toby. Look at Russ."

Toby looked. Little Russ had clambered to his feet with the help of the sofa. Now, oblivious to the attention he was getting, he released his grip and, holding nothing, staggered toward the front door.

"... two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight..." Eileen stopped counting as Russ lost his balance and sat suddenly on the sitting room floor. He made no sound. "There y' go, Toby! There's your present!" Eileen cried as Toby hugged first her and then the little boy who had him beaming with pride. "Your son's walking!"

#### **SATURDAY, DECEMBER 24, 1960 (TEN HOURS BEFORE THE FIRST QUARTER)**

For some reason passing human understanding, Toby decided to have the whole family over for his, Eileen's, and Russ's first Christmas as a family. Everyone would stay the night, and wake up together for Christmas breakfast and the opening of presents. Since the house was small, they had to split up Toby's parents, for Nora and Constantina had to share the second, smaller bedroom while Wensley and Edward bunked in the sitting room. Ordinarily



Toby and Eileen might have given up their bedroom to his parents, but they had Russ's crib there and felt that with all the noise and disruption, the baby should at least be able to sleep in a place that was familiar.

All had arrived by four o'clock Christmas Eve, Wensley, Nora, and Edward in the latter's car with a Christmas tree tied to the top. Nora guarded boxes of fragile ornaments that had been in the family for ages and had graced every one of Toby's Christmases. "Thought it was best for you to have these," she told her son, "now that you're the one with the child."

The men stayed in the sitting room putting up the tree while the women busied themselves in the kitchen preparing supper. Nora watched Constantina and Eileen with barely concealed curiosity. When Constantina raised her eyebrows, Nora admitted. "I was just thinking to see some . . . you know . . . I never saw you do any."

"What are you expecting," said Constantina a bit huffily, "an ice sculpture?"

"Plum pudding?" replied Nora.

"That's in the oven already," Eileen said. "I got it this afternoon."

"Oh," Nora sighed sadly. "Just like everyone else."

"That," Constantina said, "is a typical muggle attitude. We can't make anything permanent out of thin air. Magic fades, it dissolves. Magical food doesn't nourish. Magical money turns to dross. Magic is for temporary things, like this . . ." She set a knife to peeling a potato and a whisk to beating eggs for the eggnog. "Silly muggle idea, using magic to make food."

"Mum!" Eileen hissed. She looked nervous.

"We're inside a witch's house doing simple household tasks," Constantina replied. "Nobody cares. I swear, that school of yours . . ."

Nora was abashed, though also pleased by the display. "Wensley was always so sure," she said, "but he never could give me a concrete example. Do you think Russy . . ."

"We don't know," said Constantina. "It's too early to tell."

"Maybe not," Eileen whispered, and the two older women bent closer. "Beginning of November, I was hosting a little group — we all have young children — and one of the boys was hitting Russ with a block, not hard, but hitting and . . . well all of a sudden he acted like something hit him and pushed him back, but Russ didn't move. I don't know if that was anything, but I've been wondering ever since."

Nora went over to Russ, who was playing in the corner with a toy telephone made of cardboard, holding it to his ear but not imitating talking into

it. "Are you gra-gra's little wizard, Russy?" she cooed. "Did you do magic on that naughty boy?" She reached out an arm that had bruises on the wrist. Nora always had bruises on her wrists or arms. It was normal. Russ stared back at her with intent, guarded eyes.

"Leen," Constantina said suddenly, "you go talk to him. Ask the same question."

Unsure but willing, Eileen took Nora's place. "Russ," she said, "did you do magic on that naughty boy?" and she held the memory of that day in her mind.

Something behind the dark eyes opened then, like doors opening into a lighted hall, sparkling with comprehension and a trace of mischief. Eileen stepped back, puzzlement now on her face.

"He doesn't understand the question," she said, "but he thought 't was funny when Neil fell down."

"That's not just hunger and wet nappies, 'Leen. That's true reading." Constantina pulled a chair away from the table and sat down in it. "All these years," she said, shaking her head. "All these years you had the gift of reading and I never knew. Your own mother, and I never knew. It's because I didn't have the gift. No one in my family had it. There were some in your dad's family, though not him. I suppose that's why I never looked for it in you. My daughter is a reader."

"Does that mean she can read minds?" Nora asked.

"In a way," Constantina said after considering a few seconds whether or not to answer. "She can look in your eyes and know what you're thinking at that moment. Some have it stronger than others."

Nora turned to her daughter-in-law. "What am I thinking now?" she demanded.

Eileen looked. She kept looking. "I don't know," she said at last. "Maybe about a car."

"Close enough," Nora said. "I was thinking about going in the car to get the Christmas tree. There was a car in there. But why," this was addressed to Constantina, "can't she read me better?"

"Maybe it's the baby," Constantina admitted. "Maybe it's just between the mother and her child."

"What's between the mother and her child?" asked a new voice. Wensley Snape was standing in the kitchen doorway.

"'Leen has the gift of reading Russ." Constantina explained. "That's how she always knows what he needs, and probably why he never has to cry to

get it. He just lets her see it. It seems now she can read much more than that, though."

"Would he let me see it, too?" Wensley asked. He was an old man, eighty or more, and though he wanted to crouch down at the child's level, he couldn't. Instead he brought a chair and sat next to the boy, leaning forward so that they could make eye contact. "Nothing," he said. "I can't read anything in that little brain."

"That's because you're a muggle, and muggles can't read anyway," Constantina stated flatly, but she'd seen something else. She seen the baby's dark eyes lose the light, as if the door behind them had closed. It opened, apparently, only for Eileen.

"What're y' all doin' in th' kitchen?" Toby asked, now sticking his head in the doorway, his father right behind. Father and son had both been hitting the Christmas cheer rather heavily, and both had reached the 'jolly' stage.

"We're experimenting with 'Leen's ability to read your son's mind," said Wensley. "It seems to improve communication. Imagine just thinking what you want without having to say anything."

"Wait a mo'," said Toby. "Is 'at why he's slow? 'Cause 'Leen's doin' something to his mind?"

The three women and Wensley were taken aback. "Your son," said Constantina firmly, "is not slow."

"Ted Heseltine says Polly says Edith Philips says 'e might be slow 'cause 'e ain't talkin' yet."

"That's rubbish. No baby his age is talking yet."

Toby was beginning to get steamed, and made an effort to enunciate clearly. "You know wha' I mean. I mean he ain't talkin' baby talk. I ain't heard a wa-wa or a goo-goo out o' him in his entire life. He's nigh a year old. How come he ain't prattling? There's some beginning to think he's slow."

"He's not prattling, as you call it," Constantina retorted, "because he's smart enough to know he doesn't have to. Why learn to talk when all you have to do is think about what you want and you get it?"

"Well then she's got t' stop doin' it. She's got t' make him 'ave t' talk so 's the neighbors don't get the idea he's slow. Once they start thinkin' y're slow, they've got y' pegged for the rest o' yer life."

"Now Toby, don't be so harsh!" Eileen cried.

"The lad may have a point," said Wensley.

"You'd better be awfully sure of yourselves before you go messing in my grandson's head..."

"Nobody's gonna call my son slow!"

As the exchange heated toward argument level, no one noticed that the child in the corner was watching and listening intently, the place behind his eyes sealed shut, guarded and wary. He didn't understand the words, or what the argument was about, but he knew that the people in the room were angry, and it had something to do with him.

Nora made them stop before it went too far. "For crying out loud, it's Christmas Eve! Toby, you take the chicken, Ned the potatoes, Dad Snape the peas. It's time for supper!"

"But we got to..."

"Toby! Not one more word. Tomorrow. We'll discuss it tomorrow when we're calmer." She thrust the platter with the roast chicken into his hands, turned him around, and pushed him into the sitting room where they'd set up card tables for their Christmas Eve feast. Wensley'd brought a bottle of wine for Toby to open. The plum pudding and eggnog were for later.

There was even a little plate with his special favorites for Russ, who could not yet eat everything they were eating. Eileen held out a hand to him and, since the adults were no longer arguing, he solemnly got to his feet, grasped her outstretched finger in a small fist, and let her lead him into the sitting room. That was when he saw the Christmas tree.

As the rest busied themselves setting the tables, Russ, his eyes wide and wonder-filled, crossed the room on his short little legs and reached out a hand to take one of the pretty, sparkling ornaments. "No, Russ. Don't touch," Eileen called to him, and he put the hand down. She turned back to the table, confident that he would obey.

He did obey. She said he must not touch. Russ again held out his right hand to within two inches of the ornament. Slowly, gently, the gaudy ball of blue and gold moved, arcing lazily outward on its hook as if drawn by a magnet, until it reached the waiting fingers. He had not touched the ornament, the ornament had touched him.

The only one in the room to notice was Wensley, who held his breath as he watched the little pointed face with the glittering dark eyes and soft black hair concentrate on the fulfillment of its desire. *Slow, Toby? I don't think so. There's a brain inside that head, whether he talks or not, and whatever else they may think, no one's ever going to think he's slow.*

The next morning, after a fine breakfast, the seven gathered around the Christmas tree to open presents. These were mostly small practical things — a warm pair of gloves, a new cap — because they were poor working-class

people who had to take care of each penny, shilling, and half crown. (Not farthings, of course. Eileen was going through every pocket and drawer in the house to find all the farthings, which she would spend in her shopping during the coming week, for with the new year they would become worthless.)

The only one in the house who got frivolous presents in addition to the more practical clothing was Russ. He opened his own gifts, with a little help from Eileen, and was soon playing on the carpet with a toy car that his grandfather had given him. He was the subject of midmorning discussion.

"Much as I hate to admit it, 'Leen," said Constantina as she helped pour the tea, "Toby may be right. If the boy isn't making any attempt to communicate with other people because he can communicate so well with you, then maybe he needs a little push."

"But Mum, he's so young. He won't understand it's for his own good. There's never a day in his life when he ain't connected with me. Can I just take that away?"

"There, dear, it isn't really so bad as that," Nora soothed. "It's not like you don't talk t' him every day, too. Just keep talking t' him. He won't lose that. Talk t' him and cuddle him..."

"Not too much," Toby butted in. "No son of mine's gonna be a molly-coddle."

"Be quiet, Toby," said Wensley. "The child's not a year old yet. This is women's business."

"And remember, 'Leen," her mother added, "we only know that you can read Russ. We don't know if Russ can read you. He listens when you talk and doesn't need eye contact to follow your instructions. You're not removing yourself from him, only the crutch."

"Yes, but he's so little..."

"Sometimes," Wensley said, "you have to be cruel to be kind."

They started that afternoon, after the older Snapes had left. Constantina insisted on staying a few days to help Eileen get through the worst of it, and for once Toby let her have her way because in this she was supporting him.

The battle started at three o'clock when Russ toddled into the kitchen and pulled at his mother's apron. She looked down, smiling but avoiding his eyes, and said, "Wha' cha want, dear?"

"Keep it simple," Constantina warned. "Any way he can show you that doesn't involve reading."

Russ continued to tug at the apron, clearly puzzled that he couldn't make

his needs understood. Eileen decided to give him a choice. She patted his nappies. "D' ya need changing?" A quick check showed he didn't. She brought two little bottles, one of water and one of juice. "Are you thirsty, Russ? Show mum what you want."

None of it worked. Eileen was bending down closer, trying to prompt, when Russ suddenly grabbed her hair and pulled. Hard.

"Ow! Hey! Lay off, now you..." Eileen cried.

"What's he doing?" Toby was at the kitchen door watching.

"He's trying to pull my head around so I'll look at him."

Toby grinned in spite of himself. "Knows what he wants and not afraid t' try t' get it, eh?" He turned to Constantina. "He ain't really slow, is he?"

"Toby Snape, your son took his first steps when most babies are still crawling. I think he's going to fight for what he wants right now because he doesn't want to give up the easy life. My grandson isn't slow."

"That's all right then," said Toby, and went back into the sitting room.

Meanwhile, Eileen picked Russ up, but he kept reaching for her hair and eyes. For the first time, she and her son had a true difference of opinion, and for the first time it really struck her how odd it was to have a baby who made no noise except for grunts and coos without meaning. Right now, the most natural thing would be for him to be squalling, but he wasn't.

After a while Russ buried his face against Eileen's arm and lay in her lap, rigid and resentful, while Eileen rocked him, calling him a good boy and asking him to show her what he wanted because if he could do that, she would get it for him. Just show her what it was.

The battle went on for days. Russ clung to Eileen's skirts, reaching up to her, or let himself be carried around the house while he pulled at her hair and nose, and stuck his fingers in her eyes. Other times he lay on his stomach on the sitting room carpet, unmoving and unresponsive, a pathetic, lost little figure who couldn't understand what was happening to his once secure world.

#### **MONDAY, JANUARY 9, 1961 (NINE HOURS BEFORE THE LAST QUARTER)**

They didn't celebrate Russ's first birthday. It was too soon after Christmas for any extra expense, Russ did not understand birthdays in any case, and the boy was still being withdrawn and resentful.

"Is 'e bein' sullen?" Toby demanded when he arrived home from the mill by way of the local. He was later than usual, and gin was clearly the reason

why. "A boy's s'posed to be a comfort n' support for 'is dad. Ain't s'posed to be sullen."

"Don't be hard on him, Toby. He doesn't understand."

"Some 'un should make 'im understand. Where's m' supper?"

Supper was a source of tension, too. "Why don't 'e eat? A man works 'ard for th' food on 's table and th' sullen witch brat don't eat."

"He hasn't eaten anything all day. I don't know if it's 'cause he's upset or he's sick."

"You don't go t' no bleeding doctor! Bloody National Health can't put a doctor in a man's town, 'e pays taxes and still 'as t' pay a bleeding doctor!"

"What if he's sick?"

"Ain't that wha' cher mum does? Wha' good's a witch, she can't physic 'er own kin?"

After supper, Toby pulled a partial bottle of gin from a cupboard, a bottle left over from Christmas, and after he'd poured a drink or two the problem became worse, but clearer. "That bleedin' horse's behind Evans come down from 'is la-di-da office t'day t' tell us we ain't com-pe-ti-tive. We got to ee-co-no-mize, or the mill's closin'. Askin' us t' do same work in shorter hours. 'T ain't right. A man works 'is whole life 'til he gets where 'e can afford a home 'n a wife 'n family, 'n they ups and takes it away from 'im." He poured another glass and downed it in a gulp.

Eileen froze. "You ain't redundant, are you, Toby?" She was trying to think of a way to take the bottle from him.

"What's th' difference? Less hours, less pay. Bleeding managers ain't takin' less pay, I'll wager!"

"We can still make do, Toby. I can clean and sew..."

"Man's s'posed t' provide for 'is wife! 'E can't do that, 'e ain't a man!" Another drink.

"You're a man, Toby, and a good one. 'T ain't your fault the mill's on hard times."

"Wha's a man t' do, 'Leen? Got a wife 'n kid t' take care of..." Toby looked across the room to where Russ was sitting on the floor, toys abandoned, quiet and resentful. "Com'ere son," Toby called to him. "Come t' yer dad."

Russ didn't move. Worse, he turned his head away. "It's all right," Eileen said quickly. "I can put him to bed in the small room. It'll be just you and me."

"No, I want m' son. Get over here, boy, 'n comfort yer dad." When Russ

still didn't move, Toby rose, Eileen trying to restrain him, and stomped over to the boy. He bent down to take Russ's hand, saying, "Y' come to yer dad now," but Russ pulled the hand away and shrank from his father.

"Y' ungrateful little brat!" Toby roared. "I'll teach you what for!" He seized Russ and lifted him, holding him tightly while the toddler wriggled and squirmed and pushed with tiny fists.

"Toby! He's just a baby!" Eileen screamed, trying to break his grip and pull the child away. "Leave him be! Give him to me!"

"Shut yer gob, woman! E's gonna sit with 'is father like a proper son, and not a sullen witch's brat!" Toby yelled back. "'Ere I thought you was a wife, 'n you been teachin' 'im 'gainst me all this time!"

Russ was kicking now, twisting and squirming as his parents shouted at each other, his face reddening and his fists flailing. Suddenly he, too, was screaming — howling and wailing with infant rage and fear. The sound was so shocking to Toby that he staggered back against the little table next to the sofa, tipping over his glass, and released the child to Eileen.

"Wha's 'at?" Toby stammered.

"It's your son," Eileen replied. "He's crying."

"Thought 'e didn't cry."

"He does now." She looked deeply into the dark eyes, saw the need, and carried Russ up to his crib where she crooned to him and settled him down with his teddy bear and his favorite soft cloth, then went back down to comfort the stricken Toby, who had to face the cold outside world alone.

Toby was staring at the floor by the cupboard where the shattered gin bottle lay. "Didn't know I knocked into it," he said by way of an apology as she cleaned up the mess.

After that, Russ had no trouble making his needs known. The next morning he clambered into Eileen's lap and patted her mouth with his hand, opening and closing his own mouth in a pantomime of speech. She started speaking baby-talk to him, and he watched her lips intently, mimicking their movements. Two days later he said, "Mama," and Toby was in transports of joy.

"You're going to regret wanting him to start talking," Eileen told Toby the following week, and it was true they could no longer get the boy to be quiet. He babbled and prattled and talked nonsense on his cardboard telephone the way he saw people talk on the public phone in the market, and on the day he mastered the sound 'g,' he went around the house crowing, 'Ga-ga-ga-ga,' all day long. He said 'da-da' and 'wa-da' and 'tey' (which meant



teddy), and ‘pu’ when his nappies needed changing. Toby had to agree that he was not slow.

The neighborhood was changing. Most of the men at the mill had their hours cut, and it was hard to make do on less than eight pounds a week. Ted and Polly Heseltine had enough saved that they were able to move to Manchester where he could find work. Most of the other wives started walking long, dusty miles to other villages and towns looking for chores to supplement income.

Toby took up an old refrain. “Why can’t ya magic us up something, ‘Leen? What good’s it being married to a witch if she can’t help with a coupla pounds here and there? Y’ give me the expense of a baby and then don’t help out. ’T ain’t fair to a man.”

With Polly gone, Kate Hanson suddenly became available to watch Russ while Eileen went seeking day employ, and luckily she asked only a meal in return. They decided it would be better if Kate came to the Snape house so that Russ would still be in familiar surroundings. The first day she had to leave him, Eileen was edgy.

“You know Mrs. Hanson,” she told Russ as she crouched down at his level and straightened his smock. “You be a good boy and don’t give her any trouble. I’ll be back for supper.”

“Don’t you fret, Eileen,” Kate said. “I may not have had any of my own, but I’ve taken care of all three of Polly’s. We’ll get along fine.”

How fine, Eileen found out late that afternoon when she returned. Mrs. Hanson was sitting by herself in the front room knitting.

“Where’s Russ?” Eileen asked.

“He’s been hiding,” Kate said calmly. “Practically the moment you left, he crawled into one of the lower kitchen cabinets and hasn’t been out all day. He’s punishing you for leaving him. It’s normal, believe me. It took Georgy a week before he’d come out of the upstairs wardrobe, and I’m his aunt.”

“I got to let him know I’m home.”

“I’m sure he knows. He’d have heard the door open. Now, Eileen, he’s not going t’ come rushing into your arms. He’s going t’ punish you. He’ll retreat, and push you away, and scream like a banshee, but that’s because he’s been saving up all day just t’ let you know how unhappy he is. Let him get it all out, and stay calm.”

Mrs. Hanson was right. Eileen couldn’t let the boy stay in the cabinet with Toby due home in an hour, so she pulled him out, and he let out a wail that must have been heard clear down the street. He screamed, and kicked,

and fought his way off her lap, and tried to get back into the cabinet, and it was all she could do to stay patient, for she was tired, too, so Kate came into the kitchen, and Russ went to her instead of his mother, and Eileen was finally able to fix supper.

Russ continued to punish Eileen after Toby came home. He did this by pushing away from her and snuggling up to his father on the sofa. "What's this?" Toby asked, clearly pleased. "You two 'ad a tiff or something?"

"He's sore at me for leaving him today," Eileen said. "We're not talking."

"Smart boy," Toby chuckled. "Women 're fickle. Y' got t' stick with your mates."

It was only a matter of time, of course, before Kate and Russ reached a *modus vivendi*, and he began to accept her arrival as normal, and to run to greet his mother when she got home. Kate did express some concerns, though.

"Did you ever notice how distant he is from everyone," she said one day. "Like he's outside watching, but never wants to get close?"

"No, I can't say as I have," Eileen replied. "Did something happen today?"

"No, not really. Maybe it's just because Polly's children were different, more outgoing. Never the same for two minutes. They'd be giggling, and then crying, and then so rapt in something they'd never hear you call, and then fighting, and then loving. Russ, except when he's hiding in cupboards, well he's always so . . . detached."

"He's always been a quiet child," said Eileen, putting on her apron and starting to prepare supper.

Several months later, Kate greeted Eileen at the door with an apologetic air. "I don't know how it happened, 'Leen, but Russ got out the back door and out onto the moor before I noticed the door was open. I was sure that door was latched."

Since Russ was now sitting on the kitchen floor playing with his toy car, Eileen calmly removed her coat. "I see you caught him."

"When it comes t' it," Kate laughed, "I'm faster than he is."

After Kate had left, Eileen sat herself down next to Russ. "You went out by yourself today."

"I went for walk," Russ replied, not looking at her.

"How'd you open the door?"

Russ thought for a moment. "Didn't. Door just opened."

"Why'd it do that?"

The little boy grinned. "I said please."

Eileen sighed, thankful that childish magic set off no alarms. "Russ, you must never go out of the house alone. Always stay with Mrs. Hanson. If the door opens again, run and tell her. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Mum." And as always, having been given a direct order, Russ obeyed.

Things went on like this for another couple of years, and then in 1964 the mill finally closed. Men like Derrick Philips and Harry Evans got work in Colne and managed to stay in the town while they commuted. Others, like the Catlows and Garnetts, moved to Manchester and Birmingham. Toby got a job in the mine in the next town and came home drunk more often. Things, which had been bad, gradually got worse.

## C H A P T E R     T H R E E

### SCHOOL DAYS

Nineteen-sixty-four was also the year Russ's family began talking about school.

"He'll be going to Hogwarts." Nana was saying. "Eileen was the first of the family to go, but her son should be admitted as well. He's shown he's magical. They can't refuse him." Eileen was Russ's mum, and Nana was her mum, and Nana almost always got her way because she was the most powerful witch around. Russ had not yet come to grips with the fact that Nana and Mum were the only witches around. He thought being the most powerful was pretty good.

"Right," said Dad, who almost never agreed with Nana. "Can y' see me telling m' mates that my son goes to some school called Hogwarts? Y' know what they'll all say."

"You would impress me more, Tobias, if you were worried more about your son's education and less about what your 'mates' would say."

"I don't see 's it makes much difference right now anyway," continued Dad. "He can't start that la-di-da school 'til he's eleven. We're talking about right next year, when he's five."

"He should," Nana said, "be home-schooled."

"She's right, Toby," said Wenny. "The boy needs to be prepared for Hogwarts. A primary school isn't going to give him that." Wenny was Dad's dad's dad. Dad didn't have a dad because he was dead — killed in a mine cave-in. Russ knew a mine was where his dad worked, a cave-in was a bad thing, killed meant making someone dead, and dead was when you had to go away and you could never come back even though you wanted to. Mum's dad was dead before Russ was born. He had no memory of either of his grandfathers.

Mum spoke next, and she agreed with Dad. This made Russ happy because when Mum agreed with Dad, Dad was usually in a good mood about

it. "No, Wensley," she said, "Toby's right. Who's going to home-school him? I can't. I have to look for jobs. We ain't got the money to pay for it. Are either of you going to pay for it? If you aren't I don't see as you've got any say in the matter."

They were always talking about money. Russ didn't understand a lot about money. He had a collection of five coins: a farthing that used to be able to buy things but couldn't anymore, a ha'penny, a penny, a tuppence, and a thruppence. The other coins were too important for him to have, they needed to be spent. He figured home-schooling must cost a lot of sixpences if none of the adults had the money for it.

The school talk ended. Wenny bent down where Russ was drawing with a piece of charcoal on a scrap of butcher's paper. "You want to come spend the afternoon with me, Severus? I think your mum and dad want to be alone." Wenny was leaning on a cane. He used a cane to walk with, which Russ thought was neat since Wenny's canes always had interesting figures on them. This cane had a dragon's head. It came from a place called Wales.

Russ nodded and got at once to his feet. Whenever he visited Wenny because his parents wanted to be alone, his Dad was always in a good mood when he got back. He also loved going to Wenny's house because it had so many interesting things. He scampered to get his jacket and cap, then ran out the door with a quick "Bye, Mum. Bye, Dad."

Walking down the street with Wenny was fun, too. Men Russ didn't know would tip their caps and say things like, 'Afternoon, Cap'n.' Sometimes they noticed Russ. 'Is this the young 'un?' they'd ask, and Wenny would say, 'Aye, m' great-grandson. Greet the gentleman, Severus.' Then Russ would hold out his hand and say solemnly, 'How do you do?' and the men would tip their caps to him, too.

Wenny lived a short ways outside the town, in an old, old cottage with an overgrown, rambling garden. Nana's garden was neat and orderly, and she told him the names of everything and what it was good for, but Wenny's garden was wild and full of things with no names. Russ could pick and examine anything he wanted, as long as he didn't put it into his mouth. He loved both gardens, but Wenny's garden was more fun to play in.

Even more fun was the inside of Wenny's house. It was full of things that nobody else had. There were real human heads so small they'd fit in your hand, and dolls that if you stuck pins in them they could make people sick. There were pig knuckle bones and painted cards that told the future, and blowguns with poison darts that Russ couldn't touch because they could

still kill you if you pricked yourself. There were statues with eight arms, and snake skins, and a dinosaur claw. There was the dried-out eye of a creature that lived on the highest mountain in the world, a vial of dirt from a vampire's grave, and the tooth of a man-eating shark. There were drawers and chests full of these things, and Russ loved them all.

The best were the books because they all had pictures. Russ couldn't read yet, but he knew which pictures were the vampires, and which the zombies. He could recognize werewolves and ghouls, harpies and gorgons, banshees and dragons, gremlins and basilisks, the Cyclops and the minotaur, centaurs and satyrs. He could lie for hours on his stomach poring over one of the musty old volumes that smelled of salt and mildew.

Russ was, in fact, not yet five years old, yet he already knew more about herbs and potions, dark arts and magical creatures, than any other student who at the age of eleven had crossed the lake to Hogwarts on his way to being sorted.

#### WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 1, 1965 (DAY BEFORE THE FIRST QUARTER)

Russ stood in front of his mother and father on the first day of school dressed in his brand new school uniform. It was too big for him. This was partly because there were no premade uniforms his size, but partly also because his parents expected him to grow into it.

The uniform was short gray pants and white shirt, a dark blue tie and blazer, a gray cap and socks, and black shoes. All these garments hung loosely on Russ, giving him a scarecrowish appearance. He didn't realize this. His mum and dad were proud.

"There he is," said Dad, almost teary. "M' son's going off to school."

"Now," Mum asked, "What are you supposed to remember? What's your name?"

"Richard Severus Snape."

"Where do you live?"

"End of Spinner's End, down by the mill."

"Parents?"

"Tobias and Eileen Snape."

"Dad's work?"

"Collier."

"Your numbers."

"One, two, three . . ." he rattled them off all the way to a hundred.

"Alphabet."

"A, B, C..." that one was easy.

"All right, Russ, let's go."

Dad went off to the mine while Mum took Russ's hand and went with him to the school building at the center of the town, a half mile away. Just as they got to the bridge over the river, Mum bent down to adjust Russ's tie.

"And what's the most important to remember?" she asked quietly.

"Don't make nothing happen," Russ replied. It was a rule he'd learned to follow so long ago he couldn't remember. Never make things happen where people could see.

They crossed the bridge and went up the hill toward the school. Other students were going, too, some of them with their mums. Russ was excited and a little bit scared.

Mum left Russ in a big room with desks and tables and chairs. The teacher, a tired young woman with curly blonde hair who introduced herself as Miss Donnelly, showed him where to sit, and soon the room was full with nervous five-year-olds. Russ hunched down in his seat because he didn't want them to look at him. Most of them had uniforms that fit.

The teacher began to call names and to ask the children questions. Some of the questions were easy, like 'What do you call the big light in the sky?' or 'Count from eleven to twenty.' Some were harder, like 'Tell me the names of three animals with four legs.' Russ knew lots of names of plants, but his acquaintance with nonmagical animals was almost nonexistent. Then the teacher called the name of a student who didn't answer.

"Richard?"

The children looked around. Russ looked around. Richard wasn't there.

"Richard?" the teacher said again, then she stood up and walked over to Russ. "Richard Snape? That's you, right?" The class giggled.

Russ looked down at his hands, mortified. "Y's 'm," he muttered, hating himself for not remembering his full name.

"Good, Richard. Now tell me, what country do you live in?"

Russ thought. His parents hadn't given him the answer to this one. "Pendle," he said after a moment. The class giggled again.

"It's England, Richard," the teacher said. "Do you know what the capital of England is? Capital means a large, important city."

Russ thought hard about cities, trying to remember a name. One came. "Blackpool," he answered. More giggles.

"Don't worry, Richard," the teacher said. "We'll have time to learn about London."

It was a terrible day. Russ was confronted time after time with things he did not know. He didn't blame or resent the teacher, he blamed himself. He blamed himself for being too stupid to know these things that everybody else knew. There was something wrong with him. Nana and Wenny were right. He should have been kept at home because he was not good enough to go to school.

When Mum came to pick him up, Russ was silent and miserable.

Russ remained silent after they got home and Eileen got him a glass of water and a piece of bread for tea. "How did it go today?" she asked him finally, sitting beside him at the kitchen table with her own cuppa.

"Okay," Russ answered glumly. He didn't know the name yet for the feeling of shame inside him, but it was new and unpleasant. He didn't want his mother to know about it. She'd been so sure he would do well.

"It doesn't sound so good," said Eileen. "Let's have a look-see." She leaned forward to bring her eyes closer to his.

Russ panicked. For the first time in his life, he did not want to show his mum what he was remembering, what he was thinking. He wanted her to be proud of him, and if she saw, she wouldn't be. Suddenly, not by his own effort, but by a kind of reflex, like pulling your hand away from something hot, he was remembering a half hour in the late morning when he was drawing a picture. That had been nice.

"Oh, drawing," Eileen said. "What did you draw?"

"Nana's garden with the flowers," Russ replied. He'd wanted to draw Wenny's shrunken heads and voodoo dolls, but he didn't know how. The teacher 'd liked the flowers.

"Show me something else."

Russ found that if he left out the bad parts, there were things he could let his mum see. The teacher reading a story, for example, and the song she wanted them to learn. Children running around the play yard. He pushed his own failure down into a place where she would never look for it and . . . he didn't really understand, but it was like the kitchen door out to the area yard that if you didn't latch it, the wind could blow it open. Russ latched it.

By the time his dad got home, Russ had the story ready. He told all about the drawing, and the music, and the class learning ABC together, and Toby was satisfied.



"Mum, what's a country? Is it like Nana's house?" Russ asked later while Eileen did the washing up.

"What? No, Russ. That's a different word. When we say Nana lives in the country, we mean the countryside. Out of town where there's no other house but Nana's, and all's moor and open land. A country is a big place with lots of villages, towns, farms, and cities inside it."

"Is England a country?"

"That's right. We live inside England. Remember last month when we went to Blackpool with Gra? All the time we were driving, and in Blackpool, we were still in England. We could drive for hours, and we'd still be in England."

The next day in school, the teacher didn't ask about England or London, even though Russ now had the right answers to give her.

As the days and weeks passed, school became at least predictable, even though it continued to be a torment. Russ soon discovered that almost anything he did made the other children giggle, and he hated being called on for any thing. Even if he knew the answer, he couldn't get it to come out of his mouth properly, and he would say things like 'L... London,' or 'I don't... know.' That was really funny for the others.

Play time was good because the other children ran off to play games, and he could find a quiet place to sit and think. Wild flowers poked their way up through the cracks and around the edges of the play yard, and Russ found old friends — pimpernel, heart's ease, and toadflax.

Books were another good thing, and Russ learned to form the letters into words, and to add and subtract, and more about England and Lancashire. He learned to look at a globe and find his own country, and how the sun made day and night while the globe turned, and about temperature, and that plants make their own food.

On the bad side, he learned that he was poor, and that the part of the town he lived in wasn't a nice place for the other children to go. Most of the families with small children had left his neighborhood when the mill closed, so there weren't too many others from his area, and everyone could tell where he came from just by looking at him.

And he knew that the one thing he must never, never talk about to anybody was about witches, wizards, magic, or Hogwarts. They were all muggles, and they wouldn't understand.

After the first week, Eileen stopped taking Russ to school or bringing him home. He knew the way, and she needed to work or they wouldn't

have enough money for food on the table. Russ understood that money was important, so this didn't bother him. Besides, this was when Russ started exploring.

The most important thing about exploring was not to stay on the same side of the river as the school. If you stayed there, people stared at you and warned you off because they could tell you were from the other side. On the school side there were flowers in the yards, and the mothers didn't have to work, so they had time to keep their curtains clean from the dirty air. On the mill side, it was different.

The river had a stone bridge wide enough for a car to cross on it. The river went past the old, closed mill, and the water smelled bad. Russ wasn't supposed to go in it, or drink from it, or even touch it. People threw things there like it was a long, wet rubbish bin.

There were places along the bank, though — mostly on the school side — where scraggly trees grew. It was nice to sit under a tree on a quiet afternoon as long as no one saw you. There were a few children at school who lived on the mill side of the river, all older than Russ. Russ didn't like them to see him because they laughed at his badly-fitting clothes, and they all knew his dad spent too much time at the local. Besides, Russ had learned that you didn't want people talking and looking at you too much because if they looked in your eyes, they could steal your thoughts. Russ's mum could, and Russ now assumed other people could, too. It was okay if it was your mum.

At first it was easy to get lost on the mill side because all the streets were the same. All the houses were grayish brown brick covered with black soot. All the cobblestones were cracked and broken. All the streets and sidewalks were narrow, with gutters running down the center, and there were no trees or flowers anywhere. When Russ started noticing which houses had boarded up windows, it got easier to remember which street he was on.

Soon Russ knew all the important places. There was a shop where his mum bought tea and sugar, and a bakery for bread, and the butcher's shop. They were all small and didn't sell many things. Russ knew from walking through the school side that the shops there were bigger and had more things for sale. This didn't bother Russ because he knew they were different, and he didn't question that this was the natural order. It might have been otherwise if he'd suffered real want, but for all his dad's complaint about putting food on the table, Russ had never been truly hungry. He was small, and didn't eat much. There were even rare occasions when his dad would bring home fish and chips wrapped in newspaper on an Friday evening. Life had its pleasures.

Russ also knew where the pub was. He had to be careful his dad never saw him there because Russ wasn't supposed to be mucking around in the street after school, so if his dad stepped out of the pub, Russ had to run home like the dickens to get there before his dad did. His mum would look up from cooking, tired after a day charring or laundering, and say as he raced into the house, "He's on his way, is he? Good thing supper's nigh ready."

After a month of exploring, Russ discovered the old mill. He had a vague memory that a long time before, maybe a year ago, his dad 'd worked at a place called the mill. That was before the mill closed and everyone had to work at another place called the mine. The mill was all boarded up and surrounded by a fence, but Russ found a place in the fence where it was broken and he could squeeze through. He started prowling around every day after school trying to find a way into the building. He didn't find it because something else happened.

Suddenly, in the third week in October, all the mothers were shepherding the children more closely than usual. Children who'd walked to school on their own now came with a parent. Women talked to Russ's mum in the evening, and she walked him to school as well. The teachers patrolled the play yard at play time, and when Russ wanted to go off in a corner by himself, he was told to stay close to the others. Gossip among the second and third year students was frightening.

"They did bad things to her, and then they killed her and buried her on the moor," was the general story, and some of the boys demonstrated how you could be strangled. On Thursday the body of a boy was found on the moor, too, and Eileen lectured Russ about not talking to or taking rides from strangers. The deaths were in Manchester, not in Pendle, but one never knew. The world was a dangerous place.

One aspect of having to stay closer to the other children during play time was that several of the older ones had little battery-run radios, and Russ could overhear some of the songs and listen to the students talk about the singers. He never did it in school, but at home he started singing some of the words. Those he knew, at any rate.

He wasn't a good singer, so the first time Russ did "Help! I need somebody! Help! Not just anybody!" Eileen came running thinking he really wanted assistance. "Hey! You've got to hide your love away!" was another favorite. Over and over again.

Russ wanted his hair longer, too. "No son o' mine is going t' have hair like a girl!" Toby insisted, but eventually he had to give in because so many

of the young people had been growing their hair long for more than a year now, and he wanted his son to be 'normal.'

Shortly after Christmas, in spite of frantic hand waving and stop signals from Toby, Eileen asked if Russ wanted to invite some friends over for a birthday party. "Nah," Russ answered, "bunch o' stuffed shirts," a remark that made Toby tousle his hair and say, "That's m' boy!"

In fact, no one was much concerned that Russ didn't make friends at school. He was the son of a poor miner who had to travel to another town for work, and he came from the side of town where boarded up windows and lifeless streets were signs of the decay that had set in after the closing of the mill. It would have been more surprising if the boy had shown signs of wanting to form friendships outside his social class.

The summer of 1966, Russ went to spend several weeks with Nana. He was six and a half now, and his fingers were much more controllable than they'd been when he was five, so Nana set him to weeding and pinching off flowers in her herb garden. At first he tried witching them out of the ground, but Nana told him not to use magic around her potions herbs, so he stopped. Then he also had to pick off caterpillars and aphids, and anything else that liked to eat leaves or suck juices. The pollinators he was supposed to leave alone. Nana didn't believe in using nasty sprays.

"Don't be afraid of that bee, child!" Nana would call to him across the garden. "It won't sting you unless you force it to. A sting 'll just hurt you for fifteen minutes, but it'll kill the bee. Move slowly and give it time to clear out."

That was the time of Russ's first encounter with stinging nettles, too. At first he thought it was a bee, until Nana checked, found no sting, then saw the plant he'd touched. "We can have nettle soup tonight," she said, and laughed at Russ's expression. "Don't worry. Nettle soup is good and healthy, and cooking takes away the sting. In fact, if you grab it instead of just brushing against it, it hurts but not as much. Sometimes if you want something, you have to be willing to let it hurt you for a bit. It depends on how bad it hurts, and how much you want it. You'd better wear gloves, though, if you're going to be pulling nettles." The nettle soup was delicious.

Nana had an tawny owl named Nelson. Nelson was older than Russ by a year, and Nana warned Russ that if he wasn't careful Nelson would live longer than Russ would. Russ thought this was funny until Nana explained that a tawny owl residing with a wizard family could easily live to be twenty or

thirty years old. "I know of wizards dead before thirty because they weren't careful with their spells."

It was Nana who now started teaching Russ about magic in earnest. Russ's mum couldn't do it because first his dad was uncomfortable about magic, and second because they lived in a place where there were too many muggles. You weren't supposed to do magic where muggles could see, unless like Gra they were members of the family, and so Mum just never used it. She told Russ she'd never been that good at it anyway.

Nana was good at it. She got out her husband's old wand and showed Russ how to hold it. "Mum says I'm not supposed to use wand magic," Russ told her. "I'm too young."

"Your mother picked up some strange ideas in that school of hers," Nana retorted. "And the Ministry's a bunch of officious busybodies. You're in my house, and nobody can tell if it's you or me doing it. A wizard should start his magic young. How else is he going to be good at it? Now you hold this like I showed you, and you're going to learn how to fix something that's broken. It only puts pieces together, so if you don't have all the pieces, it won't be properly fixed, but if you use it the moment you break something, then it's fine. Just move the wand downward 'til it points at the thing and say the name of the thing you want fixed and *Reparo!*"

That was Russ's first introduction to magical language because you couldn't just speak English. If you wanted to fix a bottle (he practiced on a bottle that he could break and repair over and over again), you had to say *Ampullam reparo!* because magic for bottle was *ampulla*. And you had to know that you couldn't use it on living things because they didn't 'fix' the same way.

"You're better at this than your mother was," Nana said thoughtfully after he managed to fix the bottle several times in a row. "I'm not surprised. I never knew a Rossendale or a Prince who wasn't good at magic until your mother came along. Maybe it just skipped a generation."

"What's a Rossendale?" Russ asked.

"I am. My name was Constantina Rossendale before I married Richard Prince, and then I became a Prince by marriage."

"Am I a Rossendale, too?" It was an interesting concept.

"You certainly are. A Rossendale and a Prince, just like your mother." Nana fingered the wand. "This works pretty well for you. Maybe when you're older, you can have it."

THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 1, 1966 (ONE DAY AFTER THE FULL MOON)

Life became more tense that fall. The most important factor was Russ's dad. Toby suddenly hated Americans. It wasn't really about the war in that country south of China that Russ had trouble finding on the globe, even though his dad was always saying how the Americans shouldn't be there. No, the real problem was coal. Russ had the idea that if it weren't for the coal, his dad wouldn't care about the war.

The Americans were selling their coal cheaper than the English were selling their coal. That meant everybody wanted to buy American coal instead of English coal. If nobody bought English coal, then Dad would lose his job. If the English sold their coal cheaper, then the mines wouldn't have as much money, and Dad would still lose his job. To make matters worse, somebody in London was talking about joining Europe. If England did that, then the Germans would sell their coal in England, and Dad would lose his job.

Toby Snape was getting drunk more often now, and it wasn't the jolly kind of drunk. He was coming home roaring with rage against the world, furious and frightened, and striking out at fate. The first time he hit Eileen was the night after the first day of school. He staggered late into the house calling for Russ. "Where's m' boy! The whol' worl's 'gainst a man, but 'e's go' 'is son t' comfort 'im. Bleedin' 'ope f'r th' future! Russ! Come sit wit' yer dad!"

Eileen tried to stop him from going up the stairs, where Russ had already gone to bed in his room. "Get yer 'ands off me, woman!" Toby yelled, and punched her in the shoulder, sending her back against the wall. He advanced up the stairs bellowing "Russ! Get out 'ere!"

Russ had been startled awake, and came out of the room, his father's drunkenness by now a matter of common occurrence. One look at Toby's wrathful face, however, and he shrieked in terror and darted back in, grabbing the door and trying to shut it. This only infuriated Toby more, and he lunged for the door, thrusting it open and seizing the boy by the upper arm. "Shut me out, will ya, ya witch's brat! Where's th' magic when a man needs it? Laughing at me, both o' ya, but y 'd never lift a finger t' do a bit t' help! You don't run from me!"

He'd loosened and removed the belt from his waist and now brought the strap down on Russ. The boy didn't wear pajamas — they couldn't afford unnecessary things — and was dressed in underpants and undershirt. The strap caught the flesh at the back of his thighs, and he screamed, more in fear than

in pain for Toby was too drunk to do a proper job of it. The strap went up and came down again as Russ shrieked bloody murder, and then Eileen was behind them yelling "*Expelliarmus!*" and the belt flew out of Toby's hand. Toby's grip relaxed in the surprise of finding himself beltless, and Russ was out of the room and down the stairs as fast as he could run.

The wand disappeared, and Eileen was soothing the astounded Toby. "Nothing happened, Toby. Y're dreamin' or something. It's all right, come to bed. Y're tired." Russ didn't hear any more. He ran through the kitchen and crouched in the area yard, shivering in the cold.

Twenty minutes later, Eileen came looking for Russ. "It's okay, dear, you can come inside. He's asleep." Russ padded into the kitchen, his face wet with tears. "Let's look at you," his mum said, examining the still red skin on the backs of his legs. "Does it sting?"

Russ shook his head, but she put cold compresses on the marks anyway and then held him until he stopped whimpering and relaxed in her arms. "It's a cold world for a working man, Russ," Eileen tried to explain. "You work hard for every little thing and then the world takes it away. Sometimes a man just explodes from all the pressure."

Beginning to remember, Russ asked, "Did you use magic on him?"

Eileen stiffened. "No. I did not use magic on him. I used magic on the belt and made it go away. I did not use magic on your father." She sat him up in her lap to lock eyes. "Russ, a witch must never, never use magic on a muggle. It isn't fair. It isn't right. We have all the weapons muggles have. We have words, and fists, and everything else. There's no reason why we can't fight them fairly. Magic in the nonmagical world isn't fair."

"But you used magic upstairs."

"On the belt, not on the person. And only because I didn't want to punch him in the nose."

Russ giggled. Eileen put him to bed then, down in the sitting room on the sofa. She lay down in the boy's bed upstairs while Toby sprawled in their bed in the large bedroom. By the time Toby woke up the next morning, Russ was already in school.

School was no better. They had drawing just before lunch, and Russ took the last full packet of crayons. "Hey," said Neil Philips behind him. "I wanted those."

"Well, I . . . got them . . . first." said Russ, and took the crayons to his desk.

At lunch time, Russ found a bench off to one side where he sat to eat the

sandwich his mum made for him. Three older boys, about nine years old, came up to him, Neil right behind.

"Hey, funny-looking," the first boy said, "I want to talk to you."

Russ got up and tried to leave, but they blocked his path.

"I said I wanted to talk to you. Is it true you didn't know your own name 'til you were six?" The boys all laughed. "I'm Brian. Neil's my brother. I want you to stay out of his way."

Russ didn't answer. He tried to move sideways, but there wasn't enough space to get away.

"Do you understand me, funny-looking?" Brian looked around at the others. "Not too bright, is he? What's your name?"

"R . . . Richard," Russ said quietly.

"Well, Ra-Ra-Richard, people like you are supposed to wait and let people like us go first. That's why we live in nice houses and you live in pig sties. Got it?"

"Y . . . es," Russ answered. There was nothing else he could do. They were bigger, and there were more of them. Probably no one even saw he was in the middle of them since he was so much shorter.

"Good," said Brian. He reached out and fingered Russ's blazer lapel. "And tell your parents to get you some clothes that fit. You're an eyesore." The boys left, laughing.

Russ sat back down to finish his sandwich. He was seething. *Wait, he thought, just wait 'til I'm old enough to do magic. I'll show you. I'm better than you are, and you'll have to wait for me.* A new thought came. *Muggles. That's all you are — muggles. Just muggles. I'm a wizard! And I don't have to care what you think because when I'm eleven, I'm going to a different school that wouldn't even look at people like you. And I'll learn to do great magic, and I'll be just like everybody else, and we'll all laugh at you. Who needs muggle friends? When I'm eleven, I'll have wizard friends.*

The thought carried Russ through the rest of the day and gave him an inner dignity that he could see, even if no one else could. He paid no attention to Neil making faces at him behind the teacher's back. He did his exercises and turned in his papers, and when school was over he walked calmly out of the building. He was once again allowed to go home by himself, and now he noticed even more how the houses changed, got older, more uncared for as he crossed the stone bridge over the river. And when he saw his mother wave from the front area yard, she really was dressed more shabbily than the other mothers. It didn't matter. She was a witch, and that made her better.



His dad was shamed-faced and apologetic. Toby didn't remember what he'd done the night before, but he'd been sick enough to know that he was likely out of control. Eileen told him he'd tried to beat his son, and got a couple of good licks in before she could stop him, so Toby was all over trying to make it up to Russ in any way he could.

After dinner, Toby said, "They teach you figuring in that school, right?"

"Yeah," Russ answered.

"What's eight and seven?"

"Fifteen."

"What's six and nine?"

"Fifteen."

"You want me to show you that game your great-granddad and I play all the time?"

"Isn't he a bit young?" Eileen asked.

"That'll just give him more time to get good at it. How about it, son?"

"Okay," Russ said, and watched carefully as his father showed him how to deal the cards, count the hands, and peg. It was a complicated game, and Russ couldn't learn it all in one night. Toby didn't go to the local all weekend, but stayed sober and taught his boy cribbage. By Bonfire Night, Russ was good enough that from time to time he could even skunk his father. They didn't go to the bonfire that night because there was nothing in the way of junk to put in the yard for the lads to scavenge. Even junk was worth too much. Without that, there was no point. Toby stayed home with his family and played cribbage with his son.

Wenny died on Christmas Eve. He was in a shop buying a gift for Gra when he had a massive stroke and was dead in minutes. The funeral was well-attended by older men with a nautical air who'd shipped out on one of Wensley Snape's voyages when they were young, for he really had been a sea captain. Two men even came from as far away as Liverpool.

It turned out, though, that Wenny had lived somewhat above his pension, and that when all was settled, there wasn't much to leave to his daughter-in-law, grandson and great-grandson. Toby got a bit of money, much of which he spent celebrating the fact that he'd gotten it. Russ got a few boxes.

When they opened the boxes, they found the voodoo dolls and the poison dart blowers, and all the other wonderful, dark things that Russ loved so much. Another box had the books with the fascinating pictures, books that Russ still couldn't read because they had words in a language he wasn't learning in school. There were some books in English, though, and Russ was

particularly charmed by one on different things witches could do to curse someone. He sat up several nights going over the hexes and the jinxes, wishing he was at Nana's with his grandfather's wand so he could try them.

It wasn't until after Russ's seventh birthday that the full impact of Wenny's death hit. Russ's effective routine human contact had narrowed by a third. He saw Nana and Gra only rarely, but Wenny had lived in the same town, and while Russ hadn't visited every week, he'd generally seen Wenny two or three times a month at least. Now, that was impossible, and the only people Russ talked to outside of school were his parents in the evenings, if his father was sober.

Wensley's death affected Toby, too, in subtle ways. Of the three, Toby had the largest circle of acquaintance, for he had his mates at the mine, and the lads at the local pub. Some of the men were in both circles, for several of them made the same trip each day from home to mine and back, stopping to unwind over a couple of pints at the pub on the way home. But Wensley had been something more. He was Toby's port in a storm. Toby had always known that if worst came to worst and he had to strike out into parts unknown looking for work, Eileen and Russ could stay the while with old Wensley. Now that security was gone, and Toby had no one to look to for help but himself.

Even more subtle, and something Russ was far too young to understand, was that with Wensley gone Toby and Eileen had far less chance to be alone together. Toby's temper became shorter and shorter, and he tended more and more to take it out on Russ, who was now a serious, if subliminal, rival for Eileen's attention. Toby was far more apt now to lash out with palm or fist or belt when drunk, and Russ was far more apt to be the target. Russ was beginning to sport bruises on his wrists, arms, back, and legs, and it was a good thing his sleeves were long.

Then there was the whole battle over baths.

The house was an old one, and while a toilet had been put in, a bathroom had not. Toby did most of his ablutions at the mine, where there was a big washroom for the men to clean off the dust and grime at the end of the day after they came up out of the 'hole.'

Eileen washed at the sink, and had the daily privacy of an empty house when she got home to take care of her needs. Russ washed his face, hands, and neck daily, but a couple of times a week he stood naked in a washtub on the kitchen floor, water halfway to his knees, while his mum soaped him

down and poured water over his head to rinse him. At the age of seven, this ritual became deeply humiliating to him, repugnant, shameful.

"Mum, please," he begged as she unbuttoned his shirt and began to undo his pants. "Let me do it myself. I'm not a baby!" He didn't know how to tell her that he couldn't bear the thought of undressing in front of her, even though he'd been doing it all his life.

"You're not old enough yet to do it proper. You'd give a lick and a promise and be off."

"Please, Mum, don't. I can do it," She whisked off the clothes despite his efforts to impede her, and he tried to cover himself with his hands. Eileen shook her head and tsked with her tongue, but she did the washing as quickly as possible so he could wrap the towel around him and be decent again. This sudden newfound modesty puzzled her; she could understand neither its origins nor the suddenness of her son's intense embarrassment.

#### **TUESDAY, APRIL 4, 1967 (THREE DAYS AFTER THE LAST QUARTER)**

On the first Tuesday in April, when Russ arrived home from school, his dressing gowned mum met him at the door with a bag that had his play clothes and a change of underwear. "Go over to Mrs. Hanson's, Russ. You're going to spend the night there. She's expecting you. She'll explain." Russ could see past her that his dad was already home, something very unusual as it was at least four hours earlier than normal. Russ didn't argue. He took the bag and left.

Mrs. Hanson was, indeed, expecting him. "We're going t' have so much fun, Russy," she gushed. "It's been so long since I could take care of you. My, you're quite the little man now. Come on in and have some milk and a scone."

"What's wrong with mum and dad?" Russ demanded as soon as he was inside. "She said you knew."

"La, child, there's nothing wrong and everything right. Did you know that on this day eight years ago your mum and dad got married? So it's like a birthday for them. Except on your birthday you want your friends over for a party, but on the anniversary of your wedding, you want t' be alone."

Russ let pass the whole reference to birthday parties. "You mean they're not angry with me? Or with each other?"

"Heaven's no, boy. They're happy as clams, and the more we leave them alone, the happier they'll be. Your dad even went t' the foreman this morning

and begged the afternoon off without pay so 's he could be alone with his missus, and Eileen thought t' make it the whole night. She come running over here so excited, and I'll guess Toby's pleased as punch. He was hoping for just the afternoon."

Russ still didn't understand, except that he already knew being alone was good. Mrs. Hanson at least was a vaguely remembered familiarity from his babyhood, so he decided to make the best of it. "Where can I put these?" he asked, showing her the bag.

Mrs. Hanson was, as she described it, a double-pensioned widow. Her first husband was a sergeant who married just before D-Day and died fighting in France. Her second husband was killed in a mill fire less than a year after they were married. She lived in her late parents' house and got both pensions. The house was quite nice.

To begin with, it had more rooms than Russ's house had — though two of them had paying boarders living in them — and Russ found himself in an honest-to-goodness spare bedroom on the ground floor. Second, it had a real bathroom with a claw-footed tub. Third, it had a television. Supper was early, and Russ kept very quiet because the two boarders were eating at the same table. He kept his eyes down on his plate because he was afraid they would want to look inside him. The door behind his eyes was latched. After supper, thankfully, the two men went to their rooms.

That evening, Russ did two new things. First, he took a bath in a real bathtub in a real bathroom where he shut the door and was all by himself behind a curtain. Second, he watched the first two television shows of his life, both from America. Mrs. Hanson turned on the television five minutes ahead of time because it had to warm up first, and then the shows came on. The first show was about a married couple. The wife was a little crazy, and she had a job in a factory where she was supposed to put chocolates into boxes, except the belt kept going faster and faster, so she was eating the chocolates to keep up. Russ laughed at that one.

The second show was harder to understand because of the strange accents, but in a way it was better because it was about poor people who suddenly got rich. They left their poor house and moved into a big mansion, but they still acted the same, not stuck up. They were smarter than the rich people, too. It was something nice to dream about — getting rich suddenly.

The next morning Russ left for school from Mrs. Hanson's house, and when he got home, his mum had made a cake. Dad got home at a good time after only two pints at the local, and he and Russ played cribbage. Everybody

was happy. Russ thought about the television a lot, and went around the house occasionally singing, "Oil, that is. Black gold. Texas tea." He thought that was funny, too.

After that Russ started spending occasional Saturday nights at Mrs. Hanson's whenever his parents got a bit of money saved up. Saturday night was a good night because after his bath he could watch television shows like 'Dixon of Dock Green,' and Russ finally saw what London looked like. He also watched the Avengers, and thought Mrs. Peel was a great fighter. His favorite, though, was Doctor Who and the TARDIS time travel ship. He wanted to travel in time, too, but Mrs. Hanson explained that it wasn't possible.

The last weekend in June, when summer break was starting, Russ went to spend two nights with Mrs. Hanson. The first was the normal Saturday night, but Sunday night was really special. On Sunday night, Russ was going to watch 'history in the making,' for it was the first time in the whole world when there would be a live television broadcast from every country to every country at the same time, and Russ was going to watch it. So were the two boarders.

"It's because of those satellites they have up in space," Mrs. Hanson explained. She didn't understand them completely, but one of the boarders knew that they floated up there in space so far away that you couldn't see them, and they could now beam radio and television shows to each other and then back down to earth so that everybody could watch the same show at once, and Russ got to watch the very first one.

All Sunday afternoon, while he played in Mrs. Hanson's little area yard, Russ kept looking up at the sky, hoping he could see the satellites, and wondering how they could stay up there and not fall down.

That night, with everybody helping him understand what he was looking at, Russ watched the rest of the world. There was a shopping district in north Africa and the traffic speeding by in Paris. They got to see the house where the Presidents of the United States and Russia were meeting, and there were a bunch of people talking that Russ didn't understand. Then he watched a real cowboy in Canada.

It was tomorrow in Japan and Australia, nearly five o'clock in the morning, and men were working on the Tokyo subway, and the trams were taking people to work in Melbourne.

Then they showed the great outdoor disc of the telescope, and Russ was entranced. He couldn't believe that he was not only watching tomorrow

morning, but that he was also looking at something that could see millions of miles away. Satellites and telescopes, and he was in love.

The last thing on the broadcast was the Beatles. Russ had heard their songs, but not seen them. Their names appeared on the screen, so Russ knew which was Paul, and which was Ringo. They were recording a new song with a lot of people and an orchestra. Russ especially noticed that John's nose looked just like his dad's nose, and when it was all over went to bed humming "All you need is love..."

The next day, Russ didn't describe the whole show to his parents because there was a lot he didn't understand, especially when the serious men were talking about serious things — that had been boring — but he managed to give them an idea of Paris streets, and the beach in Canada, and he even tried to draw what the great Australian telescope looked like. Toby wasn't sure all this exposure to the outside world was good for a working class boy; it made you discontented with life. Eileen was better pleased.

That summer, while Toby was at work and Russ wasn't in school, Eileen started to talk to Russ about Hogwarts.

"It's a great castle on a hill, with a big lake — there's a squid in the lake, so nobody swims there — and the students can fly on broomsticks and play a game called Quidditch. Everybody lives in four different parts of the castle called houses. You'll probably be in the same one I was in — Hufflepuff. You'll like it there. There's all different kinds of people there, and they all work together."

"Did you play Quidditch, Mum?"

"La, no, child. I was never good on a broomstick. I was captain of the gobstones team, though."

Then, in August, Eileen and Russ went to visit Nana for three days, and everything changed.

Eileen and Russ worked together in Nana's garden, weeding, picking off bugs, and pinching back some of the flowers to prevent plants from going to seed. Eileen was talking about Hogwarts.

"The head of Hufflepuff house is Professor Mullein. He's the Herbology teacher, too, so you should get on well with him. He even knows about Nana by reputation, though she never went to Hogwarts. Hufflepuff house is in the lower levels, and you enter through a wall near the kitchens. That's where the house elves work. I never saw or heard of house elves before I went to Hogwarts..."

"Leen," Nana called from the edge of the garden. "Can I talk to you for a

moment.” The two women stood near the kitchen door, but Russ could still hear them in the quiet summer air.

“You’d best not get the boy too excited about Hufflepuff,” Nana said in a warning tone of voice. “He might not be sorted there.”

“Of course he will,” Eileen said. “Children ’re always sorted into the same house as their parents. Since I was in Hufflepuff . . .”

“I went to see Tabitha Pollard yesterday. She did a chart for 1971.”

“I checked that already, Mum,” Eileen said. “Mercury’s in his fourth house and it’s in Virgo from July twenty-seventh to October first. He’ll be fine.”

“No, ’Leen. Mercury is retrograde beginning August thirteenth. It goes back into Leo on August thirtieth, and doesn’t reenter Virgo until September eleventh. It will be in Leo on the day he’s sorted.”

There was silence, and Russ could tell from the quality of the silence that his mum was trying to cope with sudden, bitter disappointment. “They can’t put him into Slytherin,” she said. “A little half-blood boy like him . . . They’d eat him alive.”

“Don’t tell him that. There must be other half-bloods in Slytherin. I don’t think we have that many pureblood families left. If he’s at least prepared to accept Slytherin, he may be fine there. Just don’t get his heart too set on Hufflepuff, and make sure he’s ready for Slytherin.”

From that day, things changed. Eileen began talking to Russ about the other three houses at least as much as about Hufflepuff, and about Slytherin most of all. She said that in Slytherin everybody was ambitious and eager to get ahead in life. Slytherin students stuck together more than the other houses, and if Slytherins were your friends, they’d watch your back and stick up for you. The Head of Slytherin house was Professor Slughorn, who taught potions, so Russ should do well there since he would go to Hogwarts already knowing so much about potions.

It was also from that day that Eileen began to teach Russ how to defend himself. They brought grandfather Prince’s wand back home with them, and she and Russ would go out onto the moors to practice, out where the magic they did wouldn’t register with the place Russ’s mum called ‘The Ministry.’ She began to show him how to read other people.

“Look in their eyes,” she told him. “You’ll see the attack in their eyes before they move, before they say anything.” She also told him he had to close his mind to the person he was fighting. “Don’t let them read you,” she said, “or they’ll know what you’re going to do.”

That part turned out to be easy. Russ 'd always known how to close his mind. It was what he did to everyone but his mother, and sometimes he even hid things from her. Nobody knew it, of course, because they didn't know how to read him. Now, on her orders, he closed his mother out completely when they practiced dueling.

"Great!" she told him. "You catch on fast. Let's work on reflexes."

That fall, Russ started getting into fights at school. The first time, the school couldn't call his mum because she didn't have a telephone. Instead, they gave him a note to take home to her.

"What happened to you?" Eileen exclaimed when Russ walked in with a bruised jaw and a cut on the side of his mouth.

"Neil Philips wanted to fight with me," Russ replied, and handed her the note.

The note said that Russ had started the fight, that he'd attacked the Philips boy without provocation, and that naturally the Philips boy had been forced to defend himself. The note asked Eileen to come to school the next day with Russ to discuss the matter.

The meeting was highly unsatisfactory. Mrs. Philips was there and not only said that boys like Russ shouldn't be allowed in school, she insinuated that Russ's mum was a slovenly housewife, which as she used to come over when Russ and Neil were babies, she knew to be untrue, so Eileen called her a liar and the mother of a bully. Russ insisted that Neil had been about to attack him, Neil denied it, and several of Neil's friends came forward to testify that Neil was the victim. Since Russ had no friends to testify for him, the case was decided then and there. Russ was to stay home for three days. Neil was triumphant.

When Toby learned what had happened, he took off his belt and gave Russ six sharp licks with it for starting a fight and giving the family a bad name. Then he began teaching Russ how to box.

"Nella Tarleton," Toby told Russ gravely. "Y' got to think like him. Featherweight champion of Britain, and th' whole world. I saw him once, his last fight as it turned out, in Manchester when I was fourteen. M' dad borrowed and begged for th' tickets so I could see a master just once. Nel was thirty-nine, and Al Philips was twenty-five. Nel, he'd lead with his left, get several jabs in, and be back out of range 'fore Philips knew what hit him. So quick he was, no one ever could lay a glove on him. Didn't have a mark on him from a gross of fights except from th' ropes. He could sure use th' ropes! A right scientist he was. Always thinking, always planning. After he retired, come t'



find he only had one good lung! Imagine going th' distance in all them fights with only one lung. M' own dad used t' tell me the only way they could get Al Foreman t' fight him was t' limit th' fight t' twelve rounds, 'cause if Nella beat Foreman in fifteen, he'd be lightweight and featherweight champion at th' same time!"

Russ was learning how to punch — jabs and hooks — but he wasn't very good at it. What he was good at was dodging and feinting. If you could dodge and feint enough, then land one or two good jabs, you had a chance of winning. It was fun sparring with his dad, and it gave him more confidence about facing larger boys in the play yard.

"Now you remember," his dad cautioned, "don't never start a fight, but if they mess with you, you give 'em what for!"

It was to his mum that Russ expressed most of his animosity. "They're always pushing me around and calling me names. I could see in Neil's eyes that Geoff was behind me and he was going t' push me so Geoff could grab me. But I got him first! And I'm ready. He comes for me again and I'm going t' tie his legs together. I'm going t' glue his tongue t' the roof of his mouth."

Eileen looked at her son with concern. "How are you going t' do that?" she asked.

"*Locomotor Mortis!*" Russ told her. "And there's a tongue-tying curse . . ."

Eileen seized his wrist in a painful grip. "Where did you learn those curses?" she demanded. "Where! I told you, you don't ever use magic against a muggle! I catch you using magic against a muggle, and I'll skin you alive! Where did you learn those? You tell me now!"

"There's a book that Wenny had. It's in the book." Russ was scared now. His mother seldom got this angry.

"I'm going to lock those up. Imagine you learning things like that! You promise me you'll never use magic on a muggle."

"Promise," Russ said, but his heart was with the curses that could prove to people like Neil and Geoff that he was stronger than they were. He concentrated on the boxing.

Russ was now exploring farther and farther afield. Instead of sticking to the mill side of the river where everything was familiar, he started going out onto the moors. He circumnavigated the town and found there were other ways to get to different areas besides walking openly down the street. He discovered where Neil Philips lived, but he didn't do anything about it because Neil was just a dirty old muggle and not worth the effort.

Sometimes, when his mum was busy putting his dad to bed after a bad

night at the local, Russ would go out onto the moors for the half hour she needed instead of staying in the kitchen or area yard. If the night was clear, you could see for a billion miles. He started to read books about stars in the little school library and was captivated by the pictures taken by the Russians the year before he was born of the 'other' side of the moon. Both the Americans and the Russians were trying to get there, and Russ tried to find out as much as he could about their space programs. Given who he was and where he was living, that wasn't much. Russ longed for a telescope, and treasured with something close to hunger the thought that at Hogwarts he'd be able to study astronomy.

Over the next couple of years things continued on a downward spiral. Britain devalued the pound, which helped coal, but also made things harder in other ways. Petrol became more expensive, and Mum could no longer afford anything that wasn't made or grown in England, and not much of that. Toby worked just as hard for less reward, and drank even more. His belt became more active because Russ was getting into more fights, though now he made sure he never threw the first punch. Mrs. Hanson's house was a refuge, and Russ looked forward to those rare Saturdays he was able to spend with her, but it didn't quite make up for everything else.

To make matters worse, Russ was finally growing. At nearly nine, he finally looked like he was six or seven. If he tried hard to act grown up, people believed he was eight. That was the good part. The bad part was that his clothes went overnight from being too big to being too small. It wasn't that he was fatter, it was that he was taller. He was now more than three and a half feet tall, still the smallest in his class by far, and nearly the smallest in the whole school, but bigger than his worn old uniform. His knees stuck out, his ankles stuck out, his wrists and neck stuck out. His play clothes were better, but even his jeans and jacket were rapidly getting too small.

By this time, Russ actively hated the other children at school and had long realized that he was strange because nobody would be his friend. The others were always talking about things he couldn't share, like 'best friends,' and birthday parties, and even little things like passing notes when the teacher was writing on the blackboard. Things Russ wasn't permitted to join in on. He resented their friendships and hated the air of superiority they used whenever they couldn't avoid contact with him, and he told himself again and again that it didn't matter. He wasn't like them. He was a wizard, and they were just muggles. And one day he'd show them all.

On his ninth birthday, Russ's mum gave him a special present. She let

him have the books she'd used at Hogwarts. There were books on the History of Magic, and on Charms, books on Transfiguration and Arithmancy and Muggle Studies. But the books that Russ loved most were the books on Potions, Defense Against the Dark Arts, and most especially, Astronomy. Russ remembered that although half of him was a Snape, the other half of him was a Prince — a half-blood wizard. On the back of each volume he carefully inscribed in his tight, cramped handwriting: *This Book is the Property of the Half-Blood Prince.*

Russ also had a passion now, the first true passion in his life, and the passion was named Apollo. The satellites and telescopes of his seventh year of life, the stars of his eighth, were making way for a love of Saturn rockets and the capsules they carried into space. One good thing about school was that he now understood why the satellites didn't fall down, and what an orbit was, and he knew not only that the Americans were going to the moon, but when. Russ scavenged used newspapers out of rubbish bins looking for articles on the American space program. He treasured in his heart the possibility that he himself might go to the moon one day.

And then, in May of Russ's fourth year in school, a miracle happened. It was such a miraculous miracle that at first Russ didn't believe it, even though he'd seen it happen. The miracle happened at school.

Russ was doing his maths work when a small click caught his attention, and he looked up to see that three rows ahead of him a girl had dropped her pen on the floor. She bent down to retrieve the pen, and the miracle occurred. Her hand still inches away from it, the pen suddenly leapt upwards and into her grasp. Russ couldn't believe his eyes. A muggle had just performed a wandless summoning spell. A red-haired muggle girl of no account whose name, as Russ knew, was Lily Evans.

## C H A P T E R     F O U R

### A F R I E N D

The shock of Russ's discovery was so powerful that his reaction was physical. His heart was beating hard, not fast but hard, so that he could feel it. He had trouble breathing. He felt lightheaded and his hands began to tremble. It was all he could do to concentrate on the maths work and write something, even if it was wrong.

At lunch Russ watched Lily in the play yard. He watched stealthily, his face turned away, his eyes darting restlessly, so that no one could accuse him of watching. Lily Evans was one of the muggles he hated, hated because she had a best friend and birthday parties, because everyone talked to her and she passed notes in class. At lunch she was part of a group of four girls that always ate together and played little games that Russ didn't know the rules to.

The walk home seemed endless, and Russ was so impatient that as soon as he got to the part of the town where the gardens got lost and boards appeared over the windows, he ran.

"Hold on, young man!" Eileen exclaimed as Russ came careening through the door and burst into the kitchen. "Is there a fire?"

"Mum," Russ said breathlessly, "how many kinds of wizards are there?"

Eileen frowned. "As many different kinds as there are people. All wizards are different from all other wizards."

"No, I mean like how I'm half and half, muggle and wizard."

"Oh, that," said Eileen, and she didn't seem any happier. "Well first, there are purebloods. They have a wizard father and a witch mother. Some purebloods like to think they're one hundred percent magic, but I don't think anyone really is. Generally if all four grandparents are magic, then the grandchild is pureblood. They don't really look back further than that. Then there are part-bloods. That would be both magical parents, but maybe one of them

is a half-blood. True half-bloods like you have one magical parent and one muggle parent, so magic on only one side of the family. And then there are muggle-borns.”

“What are muggle-borns?” Russ tried to conceal the urgency he felt about the answer to this question.

“For some reason, occasionally a magical child is born to a nonmagical family. Everybody is a muggle, and ‘bang’ there’s a wizard in the mix. We don’t know why that happens. The opposite can happen, too. Sometimes a nonmagical child is born into a magical family. They’re called squibs.”

“So you could have someone you thought was a muggle, and it turns out she’s a witch?” Russ asked to confirm what he hoped was true.

“Why are you asking about this?” said Eileen, turning to catch her son’s eyes.

“Nothing,” Russ answered, meeting her gaze calmly, all thought of the girl and the pen latched away where she couldn’t see it. “I was just thinking about it this afternoon.”

“Have a piece of bread and a glass of water then, and do your homework.”

Russ’s desk in his small upstairs bedroom was really an equipment crate turned on its side so he could stick his feet in the crate while he wrote. Now he sat at this makeshift desk while his mother baked downstairs, kicking his feet against the wood and pretending to do schoolwork. He had a lot of thinking to do.

All his life he’d known that he was the only magical child around, and that he must never talk about it or show it to anyone. This made him different, isolated and friendless, the only child in town doomed to have no friends until he was eleven and could leave. But that was more than two years away, and Russ didn’t want to wait two years. He wanted a friend now. Even if she was a girl.

Russ held his feelings down, pushed them into the latched part of his brain where they couldn’t bother him because he had to think carefully about this. What if he was wrong? What if there’d been no magic, just a trick of the light? After all, Lily Evans had been in the same class as him for four years, and he’d never caught a glimpse of magic before. Nor had anyone else, or they’d have talked about it. There was no reason to get excited over something that might not be true.

But he so desperately wanted it to be true. Up until that morning he’d been fine, he accepted his fate and set all his hopes on Hogwarts. Now, sud-

denly, the desire for a friend, for someone to share things with, welled up in him like a hunger, twisting his stomach and making him sick with longing.

He had to be sure. He couldn't afford to act on information that might not be true. Instead of doing his homework, Russ was forming a plan — a plan for watching Lily to see if she ever did any other magic. If she did, if she truly was a muggle-born witch, then Russ could find a way to talk to her, to explain to her, maybe to show her some more magic as proof — and then they could be friends.

He went to bed that night planning how the future was going to be.

Russ became a spy. He was secret agent Drake, he was John Steed and Emma Peel. He found ways to move within earshot of Lily Evans and her friends while making it look perfectly casual. He started having to kneel down and tie his shoes a lot. He began dropping pens. He started walking around with his nose ostensibly in a book, and pausing when he got to 'interesting' bits.

He found out that Lily had an older sister named Petunia who was about to take her Eleven Plus examination. He found out that Lily had a sweet temper and a gentle way about her. He found out that Lily was born in January, just like he was, except he was Capricorn and she was Aquarius.

He asked his mother about this, and she told him, along with the other signs that Russ asked about to mask his real interest, that Capricorn and Aquarius did not go well together. Capricorn was organized and Aquarius was not. Capricorn would be jealous of free-spirited Aquarius. Better be friends than look for a life together.

That suited Russ fine. He wasn't looking for a life together anyway, just a friend.

Russ discovered that Lily and Petunia lived on the eastern side of the little town, far from the area where his house was, a place of nice gardens and newer automobiles. He couldn't follow them there because he would be noticed and most likely chased away. He had to, as his mum put it in her training sessions, get his bearings and learn the lay of the land.

It was June, and the school term was nearing its close. The summer days were long. This was good news for Russ, since it meant he didn't have to be coming and going in the streets at the same time as everyone else. He could go early and wait, and then come home later. He wanted to see Lily away from school anyway. His spying was becoming frustrating. He had still not seen her perform any more magic.

The last week of school, Russ left home early every day. On Monday

he waited behind a gate at the last house where he saw Lily disappear every afternoon, and from this vantage point he was able to see the direction she came from. The next morning he hid further on, and discovered more of her route. By Thursday he'd located the house. He had to wait until all the other children had gone by before he could follow them to the school building, so all that week he was late to class, but he didn't mind.

On the evening after the last day of school, Russ lay in bed planning. He had it all worked out. He would wait until he saw more magic, then he would show himself and reveal to Lily that she was a witch. She would be excited at the news and want to know more, and he would be able to teach her and tell her all about Hogwarts. Hogwarts! Maybe Lily could go there, too.

The next morning, Russ was out of the house before seven o'clock. He hid amongst some rubbish bins a ways down the street from Lily's house and waited. He would do a lot of waiting over the next few days, but the hunger inside him was ravenous now. He no longer even considered the possibility that Lily was not a witch. The bitter disappointment that would entail would, by this point, have destroyed him.

Lily and Petunia frequented a playground near their house. Sometimes there were other children there, and sometimes there were not. Russ began going to the playground instead of nearer to their house so that no one would see him in the street. There were bushes and hedges he could hide behind and under, and no one ever noticed him.

A week and a half into the break, Lily and Petunia were alone, Petunia revolving lazily on a carousel, and Lily in a swing. Lily kept going higher and higher, and Petunia stopped to watch. "You're going too high, Lily. It can be dangerous," cautioned the older sister.

"No, it's fun," Lily crowed. "It's like flying through the air. I bet if I try hard enough, I can really fly!"

"Lily!" Petunia cried. "Don't you dare!"

Lily dared. She reached the top of her arc and launched herself into space. Instead of falling, as Petunia clearly feared, she hovered for a moment, then glided lightly to the ground. "See," she said to Petunia, "I can fly."

It was Russ's moment. It was what he had been waiting for, planning for since May. He tried to get to his feet to go to the two girls, but his courage failed him. Instead, he remained, hidden and miserable behind his bushes.

Petunia started for home. "I'm going to tell Mummy you've been doing wicked things again," she called behind her. "You're going to be in so much trouble!"

Lily ran after her. "I wasn't doing anything bad. Look, I'm not hurt. There's nothing wrong with it. Tuney, come back."

Russ dragged himself home, crushed and defeated by his own timidity. His opportunity had been there, within his grasp, and he had failed to seize it. He might never have another chance.

Back at home he found that another opportunity had slipped like water through his fingers.

"You won't be going over to Mrs. Hanson's this weekend or next," his mum told him as she fixed supper. "She's taking two weeks to visit her sister in Manchester."

Russ nearly spilled his glass of water. "She can't!" he cried. "Not now! The Americans are going to the moon next week. How can I watch it if she's in Manchester?"

The following week the whole world watched the Apollo 11 moon landing except Russ. The whole world got to hear, "That's one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind" except Russ. The bitterness of his disappointment was capped by the news that Mrs. Hanson would be staying in Manchester with her sister for several months, and the boarders were taking care of her house. No moon landing, no further television, no baths . . . The pleasures in Russ's life were narrowing to nothing.

#### FRIDAY, JULY 25, 1969 (FOUR DAYS BEFORE THE FULL MOON)

"He can't wear that jacket any more," Eileen told Toby the day after the Apollo 11 splashdown that Russ didn't see on television. He was already withdrawn and miserable about missing 'history in the making,' and at first didn't register that his mum was talking about him. "It's gotten far too short for him and there's holes in the elbows. He needs new shirts, too."

"A boy needs t' take better care of his togs, and not go wasting a man's hard-earned money," Toby complained. "You was just telling me yesterday as he needed a school uniform, too. You know we ain't got the money."

"He can't go 'round naked."

"He don't have to dress like the Marquess o' Queensbury neither. Can't help the uniform, but ain't we got togs in the house he can wear?"

Russ woke up then to the fact that they were discussing his clothes. The uniform was good news. It'd be big so he could grow into it over the next two years, but that would be better than what he was wearing now. The part about his play clothes was less important.



Mum went upstairs and started hauling things out of the makeshift store-room. There weren't many of them — they generally used things until they were worn so bad they weren't good for anything but rags — but there were some. Some of them had belonged to Wenny. Most of them were still far too big.

"What about this?" Mum held up a strange kind of blouse or smock with a high collar and wide sleeves. The collar and sleeves had embroidery on them. Toby and Russ protested at the same time:

"No son of mine's gonna dress like a girl!"

"I can't wear that, Mum, they'd laugh at me!"

"Don't be silly," said Mum. "Wensley wouldn't have any woman's clothes. He musta picked it up in one of those countries he sailed to. Maybe China or Russia. And we ain't got anything else. It's this, or buy, or go without. What if I take the embroidery off for you, Russ? It wouldn't look so girly then."

There were a couple of the strange smocks, one white and one blue, so Russ had one to wear and one to wash. They couldn't do anything about the pants, so he had to keep wearing his too-short jeans, but Mum did find him a jacket — sort of.

It was an old sailor's jacket, a navy-blue pea coat in worn, shabby wool. It was meant to go part way down a grown man's thigh, but on Russ it reached below his knees. The shoulders were too wide, and the sleeves far too long. Mum rolled up the cuffs to make it fit better. "I might be able to sew that," she said.

"Don't go cutting it," Toby insisted. "If he grows more, he'll need the sleeves long. That's a nice coat, that is. It'll do."

At least it was obviously a man's coat, Russ reasoned, and it would hide the funny smock.

Russ continued for the rest of July into August observing the children at the playground near Lily Evans's house. More than four weeks after his first failed attempt, Lily and Petunia were once again alone, both today on the swings. The other children had gone home.

Lily was again swinging as high as she could, and Russ held his breath, knowing she was planning to fly again.

"Lily, don't do it!" Petunia cried, but Lily just laughed and launched herself into the air, just as she had the first time, landing lightly and easily after her flight, not far from the bush where Russ was hiding.

"Mummy told you not to!" Petunia yelled at her. "Mummy said you

weren't allowed, Lily!" She stopped swinging and was now trying to assert older-sister authority.

Lily was laughing at her. "But I'm fine," she said, as if that was the only problem with flying. She picked up a flower from the ground. "Tuney, look at this. Watch what I can do." In her hands the dead flower began to open and close its petals like some cartoon space creature. This didn't calm Petunia in the least.

"Stop it!" she screamed.

Lily threw the flower down, and there was a hint of resentment in her voice as she said, "It's not hurting you."

"It's not right," Petunia said. Then, unable to completely hide her fascination, she added, "How do you do it?"

There it was. The moment Russ had waited for, planned for, anticipated for nearly three months. If he didn't have the courage to act now, he would never have it. He steeled himself and forced himself to rise, stepping out from behind his bush and addressing Petunia's question.

"It's obvious, isn't it?" he said, and regretted it immediately because Petunia acted as if he was some kind of wild dog and ran toward the swings. Lily didn't run, but her expression was probably the same one she wore when she took medicine. Russ could feel the color mount in his face and wished he were anywhere else. *Idiot! Fool! This was never a good idea.*

After a moment Lily asked, "What's obvious?"

Russ's heart was pounding again — she wanted to talk. He didn't want Petunia to hear, so his voice, when it came out, was nearly a whisper. "I know . . . what you are."

"What do you mean?"

"You're . . . you're a witch."

"That's not a very nice thing to say to somebody!"

She huffed away, just as snooty as the rest of them. Russ hurried after her, Wenny's coat hot and heavy as it hung past his wrists in the sunny August afternoon, but Russ wasn't thinking about how he looked. "No!" he insisted, and they let him get near enough to the swings to listen to what he had to say. "You . . . are. You are a . . . witch. I've been . . . watching you for a . . . while. But there's nothing . . . wrong with that. My mum's . . . one, and I'm a . . . wizard."

Lily said nothing, but Petunia howled with laughter. "Wizard! I know who you are. You're that Snape boy!" and the way she said 'Snape' made it sound evil, obscene. She turned to Lily. "They live down Spinner's End by

the river.” Then she wheeled on Russ, who was suddenly aware how much taller she was than he. “Why have you been spying on us?”

Russ looked down, away from her accusing eyes. “Haven’t been . . . spying. Wouldn’t . . . spy on you anyway. You’re a . . . muggle.” That was when he realized how he must look — Wenny’s pea coat loose around his shoulders and swinging past his knees, the silly foreign smock, his outgrown jeans, his hair damp and sweaty on his forehead. Like a clown.

“Lily, come on, we’re leaving,” Petunia announced, and it was some small revenge to note how shrill and ugly her voice sounded. The two girls stalked out, leaving Russ standing alone and defeated in the playground.

He slunk out away from the houses and onto the moor to go home along the periphery of the town. He didn’t want anyone to see him. He wanted to crawl into the earth and never have anyone see him ever again.

Russ was trying to figure out what had gone wrong. Lily knew she could do unusual things. She should have been pleased to learn she was magical. She should have wanted to know more.

It was Petunia’s fault. Petunia had acted as if he was dangerous, Petunia’d made fun of his poverty and his family with her sneers and smirks. She was probably laughing about him even now with Lily. Petunia had called his honest desire for a friend ‘spying,’ and made it seem criminal. Now she’d probably tell all the other students at school, and they’d all laugh at him even more. Neil would have a great time with that. Instead of better, life had gotten worse, and Russ wished he was dead.

That evening he picked at his food at supper, then went straight to bed, to lie on his side facing the wall. He didn’t want to see anyone or talk to anyone or go anywhere . . . He just wanted to lie there forever.

And the worst thing was that all he had to look forward to were two long, cold, barren, empty years. Years of enforced loneliness and silence, and he didn’t think he could bear it.

“You sick?” his dad asked from the doorway.

“No, just tired. ’S hot outside. Made m’ head hurt.”

“That’s all right then. Don’t you go gettin’ sick. Can’t afford no doctor.”

His dad left. Russ thought bitterly that there was no doctor who could help him anyway. The hunger that had nothing to do with food twisted his insides, and there wasn’t any medicine for it. What he needed was someone to talk to, someone to listen, someone who’d talk to him that he could listen to . . .

The pain inside him was so great that Russ thought he’d burst from it,

and then a strange thing happened. The painful things started to go away. Not the pain, but the things that caused the pain. One by one, the loneliness, the bitterness, the humiliation and shame all retreated from him, as if his mind suddenly said, 'I don't want you any more.' They went — he had no other way to explain it — down into the cellar of his mind and found a door Russ didn't even know was there, and they latched the door behind them.

Russ just lay in bed and let it happen, and when all the bad things were latched down, he felt curiously calm and detached from everything, like it was all just a television show, but nothing to really get upset about. He didn't feel anything — and that was a lot better than feeling pain.

The sense of calm and detachment didn't go away. The next morning Russ got up and ate breakfast — tea and toast was all — then went out exploring while his dad went to the mine and his mum went off looking for day jobs. He went out onto the moor. He had no desire to go over to the playground to watch for the two sisters. It was as if that was another person, that boy who'd been so disappointed the day before.

Instead Russ wandered for miles. The moor area wasn't large, and gave way from time to time to farms, pastures, and sparse woodland with here a tiny village and there another decaying mill town. Colne and Barrowford had many mills, mostly closed. A few other towns had mines or quarries, though Russ usually gave them a wide berth. By now he was old enough and had explored enough to have his bearings and know the lay of the land. He knew the bulk of Pendle Hill was to the west, and Yorkshire but a stone's throw to the east and north.

As he wandered Russ got to thinking that he probably ought to be of use to somebody in his life, and began to figure how he might be useful. He was too young for a real job, and the shopkeepers on the mill side couldn't afford to hire a boy. The shopkeepers on the school side would never even look at him except maybe to keep an eye out that he didn't steal anything. Odd how people expected your clothes to show how honest you were.

Around midmorning Russ found an outcrop of rock and just sat, not really thinking of anything in particular, when he noticed that as long as he kept still, there was a lot of movement around him. There were mostly birds, but some other animals as well, such as a very surprised fox that rose from the ground where it had been resting and slunk off, and a coney, its nose wiggling to pick up odors in the breeze and . . . a grouse.

*What day is it?* was the first thing in Russ's mind, for he did know about the 'glorious twelfth,' the day the men went out to drive the grouse in the

open moors, the beginning of hunting season. He thought about it all the way home.

A glass of water, a slice of bread, and Russ sat in the kitchen watching his mother as if she was a total stranger and he was a scientist observing her behavior. It was a curious feeling. He knew all about her, remembered everything he should remember, but there was no emotion attached. It made things more interesting because he found he noticed more detail, like the way she held her fingers around the handle of the knife she was chopping with, or the limp, straggling locks of hair that strayed on the collar of her dress.

When his dad came home, Russ waited patiently until he was settled, then went into the sitting room.

"Dad, d' you know how t' throw."

"Throw what, son?"

"Rocks."

Toby regarded his son carefully. "Wha' cha want t' be throwin' rocks for?"

"Huntin' season starts Tuesday. Saw a grouse out on the moor."

Toby chuckled. "Leen! This boy thinks he can put down a grouse with a rock. Ain't that a kick?"

"Y' always did want him t' be ambitious, Toby," Mum called from the kitchen.

They started that day, in the lingering August evening, Toby showing Russ how to select stones and how to throw them, not overhand or underhand, but sharp and quick from the side. Russ found his new sense of cool apartness helped. He noticed every detail of his father's stance and movement, and copied each one with care and accuracy. Before they went in to bed, he was hitting fence posts more times than not, and Toby was beaming with pride.

Eileen took him out training on the weekend, and was impressed. "You been practicing, ain't cha?" she said. "Couldn't get past your eyes not once the whole time. Come 'ere. Let's have a look-see."

She peered into his eyes, and Russ gave her the moors and his satisfied tiredness after the hard work, and the fact that he was hungry for supper... but the other things, the fears, the failures, stayed latched away and she never even looked for them.

"Good," Eileen said at last. "You're learning right fast. We'll start with some real spells tomorrow."

On Sunday, Russ learned Expelliarmus and Protego. There was some trick to the way you held and pointed the wand for each one, so it took

some concentration, but now he had three wand spells that he could actually do, because he remembered how to do *Reparo*. It was a shame he could only do them on the moors, and not in the town because of the muggles. Russ was always thinking of the neighbors as muggles now.

Just before school started, Russ brought down his one and only grouse. It was the first thing larger than a spider that he'd ever killed. He studied it for a while, clinically, dispassionately, then put it in the bag he now carried everywhere and took it home for his mum to cook. That was, after all, why he'd learned to throw.

**MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 1, 1969 (TWO DAYS BEFORE THE LAST QUARTER)**

By September first, Russ was willing to acknowledge that the first day of his fifth year at school was likely to be different from previous first days. It wasn't just that he was older. It wasn't just that for the first time he was wearing a new uniform that was neither clownishly big nor embarrassingly worn and small. No, it was more that there had been two important changes. The first was his expectation that Petunia Evans had spread through the entire school his claim to being a wizard, which the other students would find ridiculous and would tease him for. The second was his mastery of two fighting spells that gave him more self-confidence, combined with a continued total separation from any emotional connection to the school at all.

It wasn't until he was crossing the bridge over the river that Russ remembered something — something that altered his whole perception of the coming day, and that he could have kicked himself for not remembering earlier. Petunia Evans was no longer going to his school! She'd taken her Eleven Plus exams the previous spring and, depending on how well she'd done, was even now on her way to a grammar school or a technical school in Colne or, if she'd done poorly, to a secondary modern. She wouldn't even be at his school to tell stories about him.

That left Lily, of course, but Russ hoped she would be less interested in ridiculing him about the witch idea, and more interested in talking about it.

At first that didn't seem likely. Lily started and stared at him when she saw him in the play yard before school, but she didn't approach. On the good side, nobody teased or laughed at him. Neil tried to get at him by holding his nose and talking about 'river stench,' but Brian was gone to secondary school, too, and Neil had no backup. Russ ignored him.

The breakthrough came at lunch time.

"Is this taken?" Lily asked Russ, indicating the far end of the bench where he was sitting.

"Nah," Russ replied. "Go ahead." They ate their sandwiches in silence for several minutes. When they started talking, they allowed long pauses between sentences so that no one else would notice.

"What you said in the playground, about me, was it true?" Lily asked.

"Sure. You know most people don't do stuff like that." Russ was calm and cool. The hunger was latched down.

"Do you do 'stuff like that'?"

"Fly off swings? Nah. Don't got no swings on th' other side o' th' river. I do other things."

"What kind of things?"

"You got something broken you want fixed? I can fix it. Don't have to touch it."

"Now you're fooling me!"

"Okay, if that's what 'cha wanta believe."

There was an extended silence, then Lily said. "Can you prove it? Fix something now."

"It's not allowed in front of muggles."

"What you really mean is you can't."

Russ paused, but the latched down feelings didn't hinder his evaluation of the situation. "No. I mean I'm not allowed. If you want, I can show you. Just not here and now."

"When and where then?"

"Can you go after school t' the trees just north of the bridge? Wait for me there? Then I can show you."

"I'm not supposed to go near the river."

"Well, if you can't, you can't."

"Okay, I'll try."

"Give me a few minutes. I'll have to get m' wand."

The whole rest of the afternoon was tinged by a magic spell. If all went well, Russ was going to meet Lily by the trees just north of the bridge on the school side shortly after school. There he would show her what being a wizard meant. And yet, there was still that curious detachment, as if this was happening to another person.

Right after school, Russ ran home. He took the stairs to his bedroom two at a time and extracted his grandfather's wand from under his pillow. Tucking it carefully into his sleeve to preserve it from unworthy eyes, he ran back to

the bridge and, hopefully, to Lily, the greater part of him still detached and cool.

It took a moment to see where Lily was, but she'd gotten there before he did. From the way she was crouched down by the tree, it was clear she didn't want to be seen any more than he did. Russ coughed before joining her on the grass, not wanting to startle her suddenly.

"This is my wand," he said, holding it up for her to see. "It was my grandfather's, but he's dead, so my grandmother gave it to me."

"Fix something, then." Lily was prepared to be skeptical.

Taking a small bottle from his huge pocket — a bottle he'd rescued from the rubbish and kept to practice on — Russ handed it to her and said, "Break this."

Lily examined it carefully. It looked like a normal, unbroken bottle. "How?" she asked.

"Hit it on something. Hit it on the tree."

It took several hits before Lily used enough force to break the glass. It would have been more dramatic if the bottle was shattered, but Russ was willing to take what he could get. "Now you check it and be sure you think it's really broken."

"You sound like one of those trick magicians on television."

It registered that Lily's family had a television, but Russ didn't dwell on the thought. "I just don't want you to think this isn't real," he said, and for good measure turned out his pockets and then took off the pea coat, patting the full sleeves of the smock to prove there was no second bottle hidden there. Then he brought his wand down to point at the bottle and said, "*Ampullam Reparo.*"

The glass sprang together and the bottle was fixed. Lily didn't want to touch it. Instead, she stared at it and examined it from a short distance as it lay on the grass. "That was pretty good," she said. "How did you do it?"

"The same way you make flowers open and close. Magic. That's why I said you were a witch. It wasn't anything bad, just a name for a girl who's magical."

"Are your parents magical, too?"

"Just my mum. My dad's a muggle — an ordinary person."

"So why are you poor? If you can do all this, why not make yourself rich?"

Russ thought about this. It was something he asked himself sometimes, even though he knew the answer. "Magic doesn't create stuff," he said. "If



I make money or food, it isn't like real money or food. It doesn't last. If I have real stuff to work with, I can break it, or fix it, or make it move — once I learn how — but I can't make things that aren't there."

Lily nodded. Apparently it made sense. She looked straight at Russ. "What else can you do," she asked. "Could you fix my watch?"

Her eyes were green. Russ had never noticed that before. Green, and though round in the middle, they were pointy at the sides... A breeze inside his head was blowing the unlatched doors open, and the things that were supposed to stay down there were floating back up, and Russ was suddenly confused... He turned his head quickly away, letting the doors close again.

"I don't know," Russ answered. "I don't know the magic word for watch yet." He saw a figure move by the houses on the other side of the bridge. Panic rose — it was his mum! "Get down!" he whispered to Lily. "We shouldn't be seen together."

"Russ!" his mum was calling, and she sounded angry. "Richard Severus Snape, you come out right now!"

Russ stood up and ran for the bridge, hoping Lily kept her head down. "I'm here, Mum!" he cried out to her.

"Who're you with?" Eileen demanded. "Did you take something from the house you're not supposed to have?"

"No, Mum, I..." but she grabbed his pea coat and found the wand in the pocket.

"You did! Do you know I just got an owl from the Ministry? You used this where muggles could see! Muggles! You march home right now, young man, because this time I'm going to give you what for!"

Eileen took Russ's wrist and pulled him away from the bridge. A quick glance behind told him that Lily'd either left or was hiding. Russ knew he was in serious trouble, but with all his doors once again latched, it didn't really bother him. It was like Nana said. Sometimes you had to take a little pain to get something you really wanted. It just depended how much pain and how much you wanted it.

That afternoon, for the first time, Eileen whupped her son and whupped him good. And she was a lot better at it than Toby was.

TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 2, 1969 (ONE DAY BEFORE THE LAST QUARTER)

The next day, Lily's behavior toward Russ remained unchanged. She sat in her seat in class and never looked at him. She stayed with her friends during play time and lunch. She giggled with the others when Russ was called on to recite and stammered his answer. And she also managed to drop a tiny scrap of paper near him that contained the one, indecipherable word 'tree.'

Russ didn't wait by the tree, he waited in the shelter of the underside of the bridge. When Lily came and sat down under the tree they'd sat under the day before, Russ came out from his hiding place and joined her.

"Were you in trouble yesterday?" Lily asked.

"Yeah. I'm not . . . supposed to do wand magic 'cause I'm . . . too young, and doing it . . . with a wand where muggles can see is . . . worse. The Ministry sent an . . . owl."

"An owl? The Ministry?"

"We use owls as . . . messengers. There's this Ministry of . . . Magic that has laws and . . . rules, and they get after you if you . . . break them. I broke a . . . rule, and 'cause I'm nine it's my . . . parents who get in trouble . . . for it. Mum was pretty . . . angry."

"Did she spank you?"

"She used a . . . hairbrush. Dad uses a . . . belt."

"That's terrible!"

"Not . . . really. There's worse they could . . . do."

Lily didn't reply to that. Instead she changed the subject. "She called you by a different name. Is that why you didn't know your name in our first year?"

"I didn't . . . think people . . . remembered that."

"Neil joked about it for the longest time. It was like he had something personal against you."

"My mum says we used to . . . play together when we were . . . babies. That's before the mill . . . closed."

"Neil's from the other side of the bridge?" Lily giggled. "Maybe that's why. He doesn't want people to know."

"Are you going to . . . tell?"

"Why cause trouble? So what's your real name? The one you use?"

"Severus. My parents . . . call me Russ."

"Severus . . ." Lily repeated, rolling the name in her mouth in a way that made it sound important. "What do wizards do when they grow up?"

"Don't know. When I'm . . . eleven I'm going to the wizard . . . school. It's called . . . Hogwarts. That's where I'll learn the important . . . magic. Mum says in sixth year they . . . start talking about careers. By then I'll . . . know what I'm good at."

"That'd be fun, going to a magic school."

"But you're . . . magic, too. That means you could . . . go. Heck, they probably already . . . know about you from the time you . . . did your first magic trick."

"You think so?" Lily sounded pleased at the idea of going to a magical school. "I don't think my parents would let me, though."

"Just wait 'til they . . . find out. They've gotta be . . . pleased." Russ thought about Petunia. "Don't know about your . . . sister, though."

"Tuney? She'll be fine. She just doesn't like me doing things Mummy and Daddy said not to. She's bossy. She likes to boss me around."

"Good job she's going to a . . . different school then."

"True. If she was still here — I wouldn't be here." Lily looked over at Russ. "Could you tell me all about what it's like to be a witch?"

"Sure. Right now?"

Lily looked down at her watch. "It's late," she said. "I have to go or they'll get worried and Tuney'll get suspicious. We'd better not meet every day either." She got up and brushed herself off. "See you tomorrow, Severus," she said, and was gone.

Russ went home practically floating on top of the world.

Right after finishing his homework that evening, Russ went up to his room and took his Hogwarts textbooks out from under his bed. That was also where he'd put Wenny's books on dark creatures and hexes, and he brought them out as well. There was a new importance to these things because not only did he have to be ready for Hogwarts, Lily had to be ready as well. They had only two years, and there was no time to waste.

All of his mum's books had been bought second hand. Some, like *The Standard Book of Spells (Grade 1)* had the name of the previous owner written on one of the front pages, and Russ wondered who people like Atticus Fringillida and Cassius Varve were. Mostly, though, he was interested in the subject matter.

For the next several days, Russ pored over *A History of Magic and Astronomical Charts for Beginners*, over *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them* and *The Dark Forces: A guide to Self-Protection*. On Friday Lily slipped him a note — 'tomorrow, 2.'

Russ took this to mean two o'clock, and arrived at the bridge at one forty-five.

"I don't think this is a good place," was almost the first thing Lily said when she showed up at two-ten. "At least not on the weekend. Too many people pass by here."

Russ agreed, and suggested a place just outside the town, on the river above the old mill, where there was a sheltered thicket of trees and brush that was more shielded from passing view. They split up immediately, Russ following the west bank of the river upstream, and Lily following the east. Where the thicket was, Russ waded across because the river here was shallower.

"You didn't tell them about me, did you?" Lily asked when they were settled.

"No. My mum wouldn't want me . . . meeting someone she wasn't . . . sure about . . . magic, you know." Russ answered. "She doesn't . . . want another owl from the . . . Ministry."

"I can't tell my family about you either. My daddy was a supervisor at the mill. He doesn't trust the laborers on the other side of the bridge. They didn't get along."

"Who's your . . . father?"

"Harry Evans. I guess yours is Tobias Snape."

"Your dad . . . talks about my dad? Mine doesn't talk . . . about yours."

"No, it's just that Tuney asked if Daddy knew the families of any of the students at school. I guess she was really asking about you, but she didn't make it too obvious. She named a whole bunch of people, and Daddy told us." Lily paused, clearly embarrassed. Then she took a deep breath. "Is it true your dad's all the time in the boozier?"

"Your dad said . . . that?"

"Yeah. Tuney loved it. She gave me this see-I-told-you look that made me so angry. Is it true?"

Russ wanted to change the subject, but somehow asking 'Do you want to learn the history of magic' would've sounded hollow at this point. "Yeah," he said. "Him and Mum are always . . . arguing. On bad . . . days, that's when he . . . hits me."

"Phew, that's all right then," said Lily. "Tuney bet you'd lie about it and said if you did it'd prove I couldn't trust you. Now I can tell her how silly she is."

"D' rather you didn't . . . talk to her 'bout . . . me. She doesn't like me."

"It's all right. She's okay once you know her."

"She thinks I'm . . . rubbish 'cause I'm on the wrong side . . . of the river."

Lily's silence confirmed the truth of this statement. She changed the subject and asked about Hogwarts, and Russ began to tell her all about the courses they'd be taking — Herbology, and Transfiguration . . . It seemed like only a short time before Lily had to leave. They agreed to meet in the same place the following Saturday. During the week it would be as if they didn't know each other.

On arriving home, Russ thought to try Petunia's trick on his dad. He asked about the different families of his classmates.

"What 'cha wanta know that for?" his dad asked.

"Got to know who's decent and who ain't," Russ replied. "Don't wanta mix with no stuffed shirts or college puddings."

"That's m' boy," Dad said, and that was how Russ found out that 'that rat, Harry Evans' was one of his dad's least favorite people. There was no doubt now that his friendship with Lily had to be kept secret.

A secret friendship wasn't as good as a best friendship, but it was so many steps higher than anything Russ'd had before that he wasn't going to quibble. He didn't see Lily every Saturday (though he was at the tree every Saturday), but the chances he had to talk to her quickly became the most important thing in his life.

#### **SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 15, 1969 (THE DAY BEFORE THE FIRST QUARTER)**

Russ paced impatiently by their tree. He was fairly sure two o'clock had come and gone, but he didn't want to pass up this particular meeting and was willing to wait until dark if necessary. He glanced at the sun in the southwest. Two-thirty maybe? Two-forty-five? Then he saw her, and sat down so that no chance observer would see two young figures by the river.

"Hi," Lily said as she sat down next to him. She was bundled up more warmly than he, with scarf and hat as well as her winter coat.

"Did you see it?" Russ asked, ignoring the formalities.

"No, but it was on the news. It got hit by lightning."

"What! They're not . . . It didn't . . ." he couldn't even say the words.

"No, they're all right. Just after takeoff a bolt of lightning hit, and I think it damaged something because they were taking about how the information was garbled or something, but everything else seems to be okay."

Russ sighed deeply. He knew Lily wasn't as interested in this as he was, and it was kind of her to relay reports. Certainly better than the Apollo 11 landing when he had to scrounge newspapers for any kind of information. He was still going to scrounge newspapers, but there was more a sense of immediacy with Lily watching her television.

"What about the lunar landing?" he asked. "That's . . . Wednesday morning about seven. Are you going to be able to . . . watch that?"

"I'll try," Lily promised, and the conversation switched to school and Lily's most recent tiff with Petunia. Russ wished he had a brother or sister to have a tiff with. It seemed to make life more interesting.

Wednesday morning, Russ was at school early. Lily gave him a surreptitious 'thumbs up' when she came in, then left a note wedged between her books for him to retrieve on the way to recess. The note said, 'TV not working. Nobody can see it.'

It was a grim sort of satisfaction to learn that the well-off with their televisions were in exactly the same position as he was without. His poverty — he knew the word now and accepted the reality it represented — was not a disadvantage at this moment. Nobody was watching the Apollo 12 moon walk.

There was one more important moment, maybe the most important of all, and Russ and Lily had to arrange that the following Saturday.

"It'll be about nine o'clock at night. Will you be able to . . . watch?"

"I think so. I don't know if they'll show it, though. I can have a radio on, too. They'd announce something. How do I let you know?"

Russ had that already planned. "I'll sneak out and go around and be . . . waiting out in the dark. Do you have a flashlight?"

"You mean shine it out the window? Like a signal?"

"Yeah. One flash if something went . . . wrong, two if they're okay."

"Okay. Are you going to have trouble getting out?"

"I don't think so. I've been practicing."

Monday evening, Russ said goodnight to his parents and started up to his room at eight o'clock.

"You got more homework tonight?" his dad asked. "That school ain't turnin' you into no pudding, is it?"

"Nah, Dad. Just showing 'em I ain't no dummy. I'm going to bed right when I finish, though. See ya in the morning."

From there it was easy to arrange his bed to look like he was in it, then to sneak into the small store room at the back and out the narrow window.

He had a length of rope there that he could tie and lower to help him down and back up. No one would notice it hanging there in the dark.

Russ also had a flashlight, since he couldn't be sure how long it would take him to get to where he could see Lily's house and the window to her bedroom. If she didn't see his answering gleam of light, she was supposed to repeat the message in fifteen minutes. By the stars, it was around nine o'clock when he took up his position on the cold moors.

He didn't have long to wait. About ten minutes later, there was a flash of light, followed by a second flash. He let his own light shine for a few seconds, then carefully picked his way back home across the moors and let himself in through the window. His parents were none the wiser.

As he got into bed, Russ considered that life was pretty good. Apollo 12 was back with a safe splashdown, and he had a friend who could tell him about it. Life didn't get much better than that.

## C H A P T E R     F I V E

### WAITING FOR HOGWARTS

**TUESDAY, DECEMBER 2, 1969 (THE LAST QUARTER)**

At the beginning of December, Toby's hours at the mine were cut. He came home that night roaring drunk.

"Ge' yer 'ands off me woman!" he bellowed at Eileen as she tried to get him upstairs to bed. "Where's m' son? Russ! Ge' out here n' keep yer father company. Where's m' boy!"

Russ was outside in the cold area yard where a steady rain had already drenched him to the skin. The door was ajar, and he could hear everything.

"Come to bed, Toby. You're tired. You got to get some sleep . . ."

"Wha's a man to sleep for if he don't got a job t' go to in th' morning? Russ! Ge' out here!"

The silence mirrored Russ's own shock. His dad didn't have a job? There was nothing worse that could happen. He waited, scarcely breathing.

"Toby," Eileen whispered, "you're not redundant? Not now with winter coming on?"

"Good as . . . Take a man's hours away, take 'is pay. Where's m' boy?" There was another silence, then . . . "Whyn't y' witch 'em? 'Ere I'm saddled wi' a witch 'n a witch's brat, 'n she can't witch me up a decent job 'r decent pay. What good are ya, woman! Take a man's money 'n give 'im nothing!"

"Toby, come upstairs. It'll be better in the morning. It'll . . ."

"Ge' yer 'ands off me!" There was the sound of a fist hitting flesh, and a thump as someone fell against the wall.

Russ was through the kitchen and into the sitting room at once. Eileen was on the floor, but already starting to rise. Toby swayed near the foot of the stairs. "Mum!" Russ screamed and made to cross over to his mother, but Toby grabbed his arm.



"You b'n keepin' away from me, y' ungrateful brat! You 'n yer useless mam! I'll give you what for!"

His belt came down, buckle end this time, and Russ kicked and shrieked as it struck, his arm held in a viselike grip. Eileen moved in, and Toby swung at her; the buckle caught her ear and drew blood. Russ kicked and connected with a knee cap, making his dad turn and strike him backhand across the mouth. Eileen grabbed Toby's left arm, and the grip on Russ eased. He wriggled out of his dad's grasp, Toby lunged for him, stumbled on the threadbare carpet, and fell. He struggled for a moment to rise, but he was too drunk, and then he was asleep.

Eileen looked down at her husband sprawled on the floor. "Bloody mine," she hissed. "Bet the managers aren't going hungry. Here, Russ, help me get him on the sofa." Together they hauled Toby over and dragged him onto the sofa, then Eileen took Russ into the kitchen to check his mouth, back and legs. "He gave you a couple of good ones, then, didn't he?" she said as she dabbed at the spots where the buckle 'd broken the skin a little. "Stopped bleeding, though."

"Mum, your left ear's bleeding." Russ helped his mum wash off her ear and neck where there was a small trickle. A bruise was just starting on her jaw.

"I've half a mind to send you to Nana," Eileen said, "even if it means missing school. We're in for a rough stretch."

"Why don't we both go to Nana?" Russ asked. "She'd make him stay away."

Eileen shook her head. "Who'd take care of him?" she said quietly, glancing toward the sitting room. "Your dad ain't one that can live alone. He wouldn't last a week." She reached out a hand and touched a welt on Russ's shoulder. "He's not a bad man, Russ, just one that muddles through the best he can, but sometimes he can't even do that. It ain't easy working in a mine, the dark, the dust, the hard work, and then they take even that away. And he lies in bed of a night fretting and worrying and sick just thinking about the future. At least with a bit of gin in him he can sleep..."

"Can't you just use your wand? It'd be..."

"You don't. Use. Magic. Against. Muggles. Not ever. And if we go around breaking the rules about magic in a muggle community, they can keep you out of..." Eileen looked at Russ, then grasped his face between her hands, her own face fierce and determined. "You listen to me," she said. "You don't ever get in the middle of that ever again. I can handle your dad, but you got

to stay out of it. We got a year and a half to make through, and then you're going to Hogwarts. You'll be safe in Hogwarts. And I'm not doing anything to give them a reason to keep you out. We can do magic out on the moors where no one can see us or identify us, but not in town. Promise?"

"Yes, Mum."

The following day, Russ went to school as tightly locked down as he had ever been in his life. His dark eyes were cold and empty, and no spark of feeling bubbled up through the latched doors. His teacher asked him how he came by the cut and bruise on the side of his mouth, and he looked her straight in the eyes, knowing she would never be able to read him, and answered, "Accident," in a cool, collected voice. The fact that her knowing smirk implied that she suspected a drunken, working-class father bothered him not at all. He cared nothing for her or for any of the other students. Today he didn't even care for Lily. That, too, was locked away.

That night, Russ sat up with his mum waiting for his dad to get home. When they heard his hobnailed working shoes staggering along the cobblestones, Eileen ordered Russ out of the house, not to come back until Toby was in bed. Still locked down, still cold and detached, Russ obeyed. He obeyed night after night for two weeks.

He couldn't bear to stay in the area yard in the back listening to the same scene played over and over again. When his dad came home, Russ went out onto the moors. He no longer got undressed for bed, but wore his clothes at all times, so that outside at night, with the collar of the pea coat turned up to protect his ears, he could still be warm in the winter cold. Sometimes it rained. Sometimes there was a light dusting of snow. Once the sky was clear and glittering with a million stars.

Term ended, and school let out for the Christmas break; Lily's family went to Hampshire for three weeks. Then, two days before Christmas, there was a cave-in in an old section of the mine they'd decided to reopen and try to work again. Toby came home that night crazed with grief and anger. Russ heard the lamp smash just as he was closing the kitchen door, and stayed, afraid now to leave his mother alone, trying to decipher from the sounds what was happening in the next room.

"Toby, no! Put that down, we can't afford more if you..." The sound of a plate breaking against the wall. "Ge' off me, woman! Bloody murd'rin' swine e'ry one o' 'em!" A chair thrown across the room. Russ cowered by the door, trembling as his mum's pleas, his dad's roars, the crash of objects to the floor told of violence spiraling out of control.

Russ couldn't stand it any more. He eased the door open. His parents were yelling at each other, Eileen trying to restrain the furious Toby, whose back was turned to Russ. Russ took a deep breath and slipped past his dad up the stairs.

Toby saw the movement. "Get back here, you brat!" he yelled, and made a grab that missed. He started up the stairs after the boy.

"Toby!" Eileen shrieked. "Russ, get out of here! Toby!"

Russ rushed into his room and out again, wand now in hand. In the face of his father's ferocious charge and his mother's cries to stop, he pointed the wand and said, loudly and clearly, "*Stupefy!*" Red light spurted from the wand, Eileen screamed, and Toby crumpled there on the stairs and fell backwards, crashing down the steps to the floor and lying motionless.

"You've killed him!" Eileen screamed, dropping to her husband's side. "My wand! Get my wand now!"

Russ, horrified at what had happened, raced for the kitchen drawer where Eileen kept the wand and brought it to her, then crouched miserably in a corner as she began the low healing chants to repair the damage he had caused. Even as she worked, there was a bump and flutter against the window. Not wanting his mum interrupted, Russ rose and crossed to the window to open it and take the heavy official envelope from the owl. All around him the world was crumbling, and it was his fault. And still Eileen chanted, and still Russ waited.

When Toby was finally sleeping safely, Eileen rose and walked over to Russ, her face pale and furious. She held out her hand, and Russ gave her the letter. She opened it, glanced at the contents then, white with rage, handed it to Russ.

It was short and to the point. Two spells, one an attack spell and one a healing spell, had been performed with two different wands in a home with only one adult witch in an area where they might have been seen by muggles. They were reminded that wizards under the age of eleven were not allowed to use wands, and that continued violation of the Magical Secrecy Act and the Restriction on Underage Magic might result in the confiscation of the wands and the revocation of the privilege of attending Hogwarts School.

"Why didn't you leave like I told you?" Eileen said coldly. "A mate of his was killed today. He needed to blow off steam. He didn't touch me, just furniture. You used magic against a muggle. You dropped him on a staircase and near killed him. You brought the Ministry down on us and now they're

talking about Hogwarts. Nothing is going to keep you out of Hogwarts. Especially not your own stupidity.”

She seized his wrist and dragged him after her out onto the dark moor. There she stripped off the coat, pulled up the smock and with a murmured “*Flagello*,” wielded her wand like a whip. When she was done, she wrapped her son in the coat and carried him back into the house.

Russ spent the next three days in bed while his mum tended the lash marks on his back. They stung like fury, but Eileen couldn’t risk using magic with two counts already against them at the Ministry, so Russ had no recourse but to endure. It was then, with the constant prodding of pain, that he began to exploit, without even willing himself to do so, the inner recesses of his own mind.

The first thing he realized was that a total emotional lockdown made the pain easier to endure. The pain didn’t go away, and it didn’t lessen, but he didn’t care about it as much. He could accept the pain as simply there, and was able to concentrate on other things in spite of it. Then he realized that, separated from any emotional reaction to what had happened, he was able to understand both the necessity for and the justice of what his mum had done. Russ had broken the rules.

One of the rules was that you never broke the rules of people who controlled what you wanted or needed. You had to figure out first what you needed, then what you wanted, and then you had to learn who, if anyone, controlled it. Their rules were the important rules. Russ had to get into Hogwarts. The Ministry controlled that. The Ministry’s rules couldn’t be broken, not by him and not by his mum. The Ministry controlled nothing that Nana needed or wanted. Their rules didn’t affect her.

Another rule was that there were different levels for the concept of unfair. A lightweight fighting a featherweight was basically unfair because of the weight difference, but as Nel Tarleton proved, the odds could be evened out by applying other physical talents that reduced the advantage. Magic, on the other hand, was an irreducible advantage. A nonmagical person had no chance against a magical person, and there was no nonmagical talent that could even the odds. To use magic against a muggle was more intrinsically unfair than to use magic against a weaker wizard. The weaker wizard could compensate. The muggle couldn’t.

Still another rule was that you never interfered with someone who’d decided that the goal was worth the pain. His mum had decided that protecting him and giving his dad a way to ‘blow off steam’ was worth the pain of an

occasional black eye or bruised jaw. He'd tried to take that decision away from her, and thereby negated the freedom she needed to control her own life.

Russ was, in fact, beginning to learn that pain and disappointment are two of the most profound teachers in a person's life. If you never have to learn to deal with pain and disappointment, then you don't have the tools or the defenses to survive. Russ was a survivor. He would learn from his disappointment, and he would learn from his pain, and locking himself down was a way to do both.

In this fashion, Christmas came and went with no one in the Snape household even noticing. There was, in any case, no money for a tree, presents, or special foods. Just having enough food was a gift.

With the new year, Russ returned to school, his being locked down now the most natural of states for him. The first Friday of the new term was his tenth birthday, an event notable for its lack of celebration. The following day he went to the tree by the river to see Lily privately for the first time in a month.

**SATURDAY, JANUARY 10, 1970**

**(HALFWAY BETWEEN THE NEW MOON AND THE FIRST QUARTER)**

"What happened?" was the first thing Lily said when she arrived at the tree Saturday afternoon, all bundled up against the cold. There wasn't any snow, but the shallow places on the river had a thin crusting of ice.

"Nothing, why?" Russ replied.

"Severus Snape, you're lying to me. You've changed, gotten all . . . distant and turned off."

"I'm always distant and turned . . . off. There's no one at school for me to . . . turn on for. Except you, of course."

"How's your mum?"

"Okay, I guess."

"And your dad?"

Russ didn't answer. Instead he looked across to his side of the river, the side with no trees. "I suppose he's okay, too," he said after a moment.

"Do they fight?"

"They argue a lot." It wasn't really a lie, because he hadn't said no about the fighting, and they did argue.

"Don't take it to heart," said Lily and reached into her pocket. "I brought you something." It was a little square of gingerbread with icing on it. Lily also fished out a tiny, partially burnt candle. "I can't light it because I can't use matches, but you can pretend to blow it out. I know it's late." She stuck the candle into the icing and handed the gingerbread to Russ. "Happy birthday," she said.

Russ stared down at the little square that he knew would be sharp and sweet at the same time because he'd had gingerbread at his grandmother Gra's house, and occasional other sweets at home when times were good. He thought of them as something special, to be treasured, and wondered if Lily felt the same way. "Thanks," he said, and looked into her eyes.

This time he was expecting it, and it didn't frighten him as much. As he looked into the green eyes, the locks began to unlock and the latches to unlatch. The part of his brain that had been detached and clinical for so many weeks analyzed the phenomenon and wondered if this always happened between friends or if it was something about Lily in particular, and then he realized that the surfacing feelings were too many to cope with at once, and he glanced away. The latches clicked back into place.

He had, however, learned something else. It wasn't as clear and definite as seeing an attack spell in his mum's eyes when they practiced out on the moor — more of a vague, partly defined impression — but he knew, with certainty, that Lily would never willingly hurt him. "How did you . . . know?"

Lily giggled. "I'm not telling," she said. "My secret."

"I know yours is at the end of . . . January. What day is it?"

"Not telling that either. How do you know?"

"Miss Wade last year had a list of months and . . . birthdays, and our names in order, but I couldn't see the . . . dates. How can I say 'Happy Birthday' to you if I don't . . . know?" Russ looked at her again, and the fresh breeze of her gaze blew through the unlatched doors. He realized he could control this by looking up and down, maintaining a balance.

"You just wait 'til you know it's past, then you say 'Sorry I'm late, but happy birthday.' Just like I did. There. That's my secret." Lily was laughing now.

"You mean you really didn't know . . . yesterday was my birthday?" Russ wasn't laughing exactly, but his smile had a liberating feeling.

"Wow. I got really close, didn't I?"

The ground was too cold to sit on, so they stood next to the tree and shared the gingerbread. Lily told Russ all about Hampshire and her visit to

the Isle of Wight and Portsmouth, and the two days she'd been in London. Russ couldn't tell her about his Christmas break, so he just said, "I was sick for a few days," and "Nothing much. The usual. Kind of boring, really."

Then Lily told Russ some silly jokes her cousin in Hampshire told her. Things like 'What does a five hundred pound mouse say?—Here kitty, kitty,' and 'Why aren't you ever hungry on the beach?—Because of the sand which is there.' Then she had to explain to him about 'sand which is' and 'sandwiches' because Russ wasn't too good at jokes, but he got the last one all by himself. 'Where does a five hundred pound gorilla sleep?—Anywhere he wants to.' By then both of them had reached a point where they'd giggle at anything.

After that, Lily had to go home. They said, 'see you in school' knowing they couldn't talk there, and they arranged to meet the following week, knowing it might not be possible, and then Russ went home, and as he crossed the river and made his way past the derelict mill, the doors began to close and latch again, and the locks made everything secure. He didn't make it happen, it just happened.

The feeling of openness and lightness of being was gone, and would not return until Russ was able to look again into the green eyes, but he didn't really mind. What he felt—or rather, didn't feel—at that moment was quite normal to him. He was under no illusions about life. Most of it was muddling through, or dealing with hardship, or surviving storms. Every now and then, if you were lucky, there were some happy moments. Russ was lucky. Sometime in the next few weeks, maybe as soon as the very next Saturday, he'd have another happy moment. It was something to look forward to.

Winter melted into spring, and Toby got his hours back at the mine where a new shaft held some promise of steady work. Life at home calmed down, and once again father and son played cribbage of an evening after Russ was done with his homework. Eileen found a place in a town seven miles away that gave her needlework, piecework that she could bring home and embroider and return when she was done for decent pay, the little label 'hand embroidered' being something the company used to charge more from the tourists who bought the table linen they manufactured. Sometimes Eileen would take the things to Nana's house and embroider with magic. It went faster that way, and brought in more shillings.

As April opened with its new leaves and first shoots that would be flowers by May, and the world began to look fresh and green again, Russ once more turned his eyes to the heavens. April eleventh was the day he was waiting

for. April eleventh would bring the reenactment of another important part of his life. The Americans were planning their third lunar expedition, and this time Russ and Lily were conspiring to see if they could find a way for him to finally watch it on television.

Russ hadn't seen the first moon walk, and no one had seen the second, but he had high hopes for the astronauts and lunar excursion module of Apollo 13.

The Saturday before, on the fourth of April, Russ went over the terminology with Lily: launch, splashdown, lunar orbit, liftoff, command module, reentry, and all the other useful facts she'd need to follow what was happening. Launch was from Cape Kennedy just after eight o'clock at night, and Russ planned to be out on the moors waiting for Lily's signal that all had gone well, that the rocket hadn't blown up. "Although," Russ assured her, "the Saturn rocket's never failed. It has a perfect record."

"I think it's great you like this space business so much."

"You're interested in it, too."

"Not as much as you," Lily said, "but when you talk about it, you forget to stammer."

"That sounds like you think I... stammer on purpose."

"You know I don't mean that!"

"Okay," said Russ, the stammering immediately forgotten again, "liftoff is on the eleventh. The lunar excursion starts the sixteenth and goes into the seventeenth, reentry and splashdown are on the twentieth. Now we have to find out when the BBC is broadcasting because they won't do it for the whole thirty-three hours they're on the moon."

The launch went as planned the evening of the eleventh, and Lily's flash-light beam told Russ that all was well. All continued well for the next two days, but Tuesday morning the rumors began to fly.

"There was this big explosion, and the whole spaceship was torn apart!"

"I heard the ship's like a big coffin and they're going to stay up there forever."

"A meteor hit it and all the air escaped into space!"

"It's going to fall into the sun!"

"Don't be an idiot! It isn't anywhere near the sun!"

That afternoon, the teachers dedicated themselves to rumor control and science lessons. Russ's teacher was loaded with details. She referred constantly



to a piece of paper as she drew a diagram of the different parts of the 'space-ship,' the modules Russ already knew as the Odyssey and the Aquarius, and explained.

"There's been an explosion, but they don't know what caused it since they can't go back there to look. They've lost a lot of electrical power on board, and now they have to save the batteries to get back to earth. So they turned everything off in this big part of the ship, and moved into the little part where they use less electricity. When they get back close to earth, they'll turn everything on again."

That was all right, but then over the next two days the teacher was talking about carbon dioxide and temperature, and something called 'trajectory.' It was very clear that these brave men, these astronauts, could die at any time.

It was a living nightmare, and Russ found his heart and soul linked with the flight crew of Apollo 13. They were young. Only Lovell was older than Russ's dad, and Haise was younger than his mum. That was old in one sense, but still far too young to die. They had children Russ's age. Luckily the whole rest of the world was caught up in the drama, too, and for once Russ didn't have to scavenge for information. It was all around him.

As he learned of all the different ways to die, Russ died with the astronauts. First was losing the air, being suffocated in carbon dioxide, struggling just to breathe. Then there was cold, as your fingers lost their feeling and you kept on trying to work instruments with hands too numb to manipulate the controls. Then there was the fear of ricocheting off the atmosphere, to careen into empty space and slowly die of cold, thirst, and hunger. And all the while knowing that no one, no one could ever come help you. That in the end, you were alone.

Russ longed for the chance to go into space, to heroically save the astronauts of Apollo 13, and knew that he was as helpless, as impotent as everyone else. There was nothing he could do.

The Odyssey and Aquarius went around the moon, and then they sped back towards earth, and suddenly reentry wasn't April twentieth, it was April seventeenth. Right around seven o'clock in the evening. Russ left an emergency note in one of Lily's books, and they met by the tree Wednesday afternoon after school.

"It's tomorrow. It's tomorrow around seven o'clock. I have to know if they get back all right. The heat shield, you know. It might've been damaged."

Lily frowned. "Dad's got an interview with a company in Birmingham. I don't know if it's tomorrow or Friday. If he goes tomorrow, Mum'll go with

him. Don't know about Tuney. Maybe you could sneak in. They may not be showing it, though."

"How could anybody not be showing the splashdown? How could people not care?"

"Okay. Be outside hiding in the garden at six thirty. If Mum and Dad are gone, I'll try to keep Tuney upstairs. She's not so interested in this 'space' stuff. She'll stay there if she's got school work to do. I'll see you tomorrow night."

It wasn't easy getting to Lily's house on the seventeenth. It was right around supper time, and if Russ was seen in that part of town in his poor clothes he'd be taken for a prowler or a thief. He started early and made his way cautiously from street to street in order to be hiding under a bush in Lily's yard ten minutes ahead of schedule.

At six thirty, Lily opened the kitchen door, and Russ slipped into the house.

"Shh," Lily said. "Mum and Dad are in Birmingham, but Tuney's listening to records upstairs." And indeed, Russ could hear "Gimme Shelter" from the upper part of the house as Lily led him into their sitting room where the television was already on and tuned to BBC1.

The Evans house was an intimidating place to be. Larger and filled with newer and more expensive things than Mrs. Hanson's home, it made Russ feel very dirty and uncouth. He was afraid to touch anything for fear of leaving finger marks, and when Lily invited him to sit down, he shook his head. He pretended that he preferred standing. In reality, he didn't want to touch the sofa.

"They're not broadcasting it," Russ said, for the normal Friday night show was on.

"They'll switch over soon," Lily replied. "They've already alerted us that as soon as the capsule is close enough, they'll pick up the transmission of the splashdown."

Sure enough, at about a quarter to seven, they started getting a picture from a big American ship in the Pacific Ocean. The BBC announcer was explaining that the spacecraft was about to begin its descent, and that there would be a radio blackout due to ionization of the hull. Normal blackout was about three minutes; this one would be longer because of the shallow angle of entry.

Blackout began, and Russ and Lily waited. Three minutes seemed an eternity, and while they were waiting the announcer explained that there was

the possibility that the spacecraft would just burn up in the atmosphere because a heat shield may have been damaged, or the parachutes might not open and the capsule would be destroyed in its freefall crash into the ocean. It was terrible to listen to.

Three minutes was up, and nothing happened. The announcer explained again about the shallow angle. Thirty more seconds . . . still probably okay . . . thirty more . . . they were obviously worried now, and Russ began to shut down . . . another thirty seconds . . . and suddenly there was a crackle on the radio, and the astronauts were talking to Houston, and they were safely through the blackout . . . And Lily let out a whoop, and hugged Russ right there in front of the television.

"What are you doing down there?" Petunia called. "Why are you making so much noise?"

"It's just the television Tuney," Lily called back. "I'm watching that moon thing, and everybody's happy because it looks like they're going to make it home."

"Oh, that thing. Don't yell like that, please. I'm listening to something."

Lily put her finger to her lips, and she and Russ turned back to the television because it wasn't over yet. The spacecraft was still falling, and Russ wouldn't be satisfied until it was in the water and the astronauts climbing out.

It took nine minutes for the rest of the long plunge to earth. Russ and Lily heard that the parachutes had opened long before they could see the capsule, and then it came into view and hit the water, and they knew the worst was over. They couldn't see any more after that, because the ship was too far away from the capsule. A helicopter was on its way to them, and then the BBC interrupted its coverage to return to normal programming. It would be a while before the ship reached the astronauts, but they would keep their viewers informed.

That was it. Russ knew he couldn't stay until the recovery of the capsule. He had to leave Lily's house and go home. Lily had other ideas.

"Would you like a glass of milk and some gingerbread before you go?" she asked. "I ought to have asked you earlier, but we were too interested in the splashdown."

Russ was going to say no, then remembered how good Mrs. Hanson's milk tasted. "I don't want to be any trouble for you," he said.

"No trouble. We can eat in the kitchen."

"Who are you talking to?" Petunia shouted from upstairs.

"It's the television," Lily shouted back. She and Russ scurried into the kitchen, where Russ felt more comfortable about sitting on the chairs, and Lily got him some milk and a little plate of gingerbread. "That was scary," she said as she settled into her chair. "I thought for a few minutes they weren't going to make it. It seemed like such a long time."

"In a way, it probably wasn't as hard for the astronauts," Russ replied. "They knew they were still alive. It's us who didn't know what was happening that felt it was long."

"I don't think I could ever do what they did," Lily said. "I mean asking for a job where I knew I might die like that, all alone up in space with no one to help me."

"There are worse ways to die," said Russ. "At least they were able to keep working on it, keep trying to solve their problem, right up until the last possible moment. Even if they did die, they'd have been thinking of something else when it happened. It'd be a lot worse to be in some kind of accident, like a mine cave-in, where you're trapped for hours or days in the dark, and there's nothing you can do to keep your mind off dying. Or do you remember our first year in school when they found those bodies in Manchester?"

"Yes, I remember that."

"My dad says if that'd been a year or two earlier, they'd have been hanged. Imagine walking out to die and you have to stand there while everyone's watching you, and nobody's going to help you because they all want you dead. That'd be worse, too."

"Do you think about dying a lot? It's like when you talk about the astronauts. You're not stammering."

Russ shook his head. "Not a lot, but sometimes. My dad works in a mine, and there was a cave-in last December and one of his mates died. It messed him up for a while, and when I thought about it I could see..." Russ paused because of the look on Lily's face.

"Your dad works in a mine?" she said.

Russ looked down at his hands, at the dirt under the fingernails and around the cuticles, and thought of his dad's hands, grimy and calloused from working with the tools and the slate. He'd bet anything Lily's dad didn't work half as hard. "Yeah," was all he said.

"But if your mum's a witch, can't she do something?"

"Nah. I... told you. We can't make... anything that doesn't already... exist. And we can't do... magic where... muggles can see."

"What would they do to you if you did?" Lily picked up a piece of gingerbread and nibbled the edge, her head cocked to one side.

"They could keep me out of . . . Hogwarts, and there's other . . . things they could do."

"Like what?"

Petunia unwittingly came to the rescue. "Lily, you're talking to somebody down there. You're not supposed to have people in the house when Mum and Dad are away." They could hear her footsteps on the stairs.

Russ was up immediately and out the back door. He didn't run, though. He needed to be cautious getting back out to the moors, and besides, he wanted to hear what Lily and Petunia would say.

Petunia's voice got louder with the kitchen door no longer muffling it. "Who was here with you?"

"No one," Lily answered. "I was playing a game."

"How come there's two glasses of milk?"

"I poured one, then forgot I had it. Then I poured another. Don't worry, I'll finish both of them."

"I don't believe you!"

"I don't care if you believe me or not. You're not my mother."

"It's that boy, isn't it? You had that strange Snape boy over didn't you?"

Lily laughed. "That's silly. How would he get here? Everybody'd chase him off. I'm going to tell Mum and Dad you're imagining stuff. Besides, you're just trying to scare me so you can bring your boyfriend over."

Twelve-year-old Petunia was incensed. "I don't have any stupid boyfriend!"

"Sue Hodges said her sister Mary said you were sweet on Brian Philips."

"That stupid git? I'd rather be sweet on a ferret!"

"Tuney lo-oves Brian . . . Tuney lo-oves Brian . . ."

Satisfied that Lily had the situation well under control, Russ ducked away from the bushes around the house and made his way stealthily to the moors and thence back home. It was still early enough that his parents hadn't been the slightest bit concerned as to his whereabouts.

"Mum," Russ asked later that evening, "what do they do to wizards who break the rules?"

"They have a prison, Mr. Nosey Parker, just for rule-breakers. It's called Azkaban."

"Is that a bad place?" Russ asked.

"Oh, very bad. It's guarded by dementors who'll steal all your happy thoughts and leave you miserable for the rest of your life." Eileen was putting away the dishes and cleaning up the kitchen, ready for the next morning.

"What do they look like?"

"Like nasty corpses in rotten grave cloths and when they kiss you, they suck out your soul." Eileen made a sudden lunge at Russ, who squealed in mock terror and dove out of her grasp.

"If I did something bad, would they send me to Azkaban?" Russ continued from a more defensive position.

"Why? What did you do?" Eileen regarded her son shrewdly.

"Nothing."

"Then they won't send you there."

"But if I did something bad?"

"They don't send children to Azkaban. If you did something really bad, they'd send me to Azkaban, and you and your father'd have to muddle through. Come to think of it, I could use a holiday. What're you planning?"

"Mum!"

"I mean it. I'd get there, and when they tried to suck out my soul I'd tell them all about my demon of a son who'd drive a saint to perdition and get them all feeling so sorry for me..."

"Mum!"

Eileen stopped, and she seemed to see something in Russ's face because she crouched down to talk to him. "Don't you ever forget," she said, "you're a good boy. There's nothing you could do that'd make anyone want to put you into Azkaban. You're a good boy."

"I've done wand magic."

"They don't put you into Azkaban for that."

The next time Russ saw Lily was in May under the tree by the river. That was when he told her about the owl from the Ministry and the warning message, though he didn't go into detail about why he'd cast a spell, or what his dad'd been like, or how his mum'd reacted. Just that he'd done magic and gotten a warning. And he told her about Azkaban and the dementors.

"They sound really scary," Lily said.

"They're supposed to be scary. It wouldn't do any good to have a prison people weren't scared of."

"I guess not."

"Magic's serious business," Russ said solemnly. "It's not a game. You've got to follow the rules."

Of course, there are more serious things in the world than just magic.

**MONDAY, JUNE 1, 1970 (THREE DAYS BEFORE THE NEW MOON)**

School was winding down toward the summer break. On the first of June, Toby came home early from the pub, more sober than usual. Even more surprising, he brought a copy of the *Manchester Guardian*. It was a rare thing for him to buy a newspaper, but one glance at the front page told Russ and Eileen why.

"Forty thousand people," Toby told them, awe mixed with sorrow in his voice. "Forty thousand. That's a whole town buried under the earth. Makes a mine cave-in look like nothing. A miner—he knows what might happen every time he goes down a shaft, but them? Who'd think the earth could move so 's t' make a whole mountain come down on ya? Where's Peru, boy?"

Russ hesitated a moment, then blurted out, "South America." Geography was something Miss Wade had stressed.

"Smart kid. They do well by ya in that school. They speak English there?"

"No, Spanish."

"Don't matter none. People's people. Ain't nothing worse 'n being buried before y're dead."

The *Guardian* was left to Russ, who pored over every word in every paragraph. The next day he uncharacteristically slipped a note into Lily's hand. *Ask about the Peru earthquake* it said. Lily obliged, and the class got a nice lesson about plate tectonics and fault lines.

On June 18, general elections were held and Labor was voted out. Toby hadn't been completely happy with a Labor Government that tried to limit workers' rights, but he was less than happy with a Conservative government that didn't bother about those rights at all. Workers in far off places like Wales were talking of strikes, and late nights at the pub became common again. Russ mastered sleeping with one ear tuned to the cobblestones, ready to slip out of the house at a moment's notice.

Ten days later, the school year ended. Lily went with her family to the Lake District and Scotland, and wasn't due back until August. For the first time in his life, Russ found himself with nothing new to do and no one to do it with. He was frustrated and bored, and old enough for the boredom and frustration to find expression in mischievous and potentially destructive activities. He prowled through his house, his neighborhood, and the town

looking for an outlet for his nervous energy. He found the outlet in his great-grandfather's books.

The study of spells, charms, hexes, jinxes, and curses was no longer a matter of childish curiosity. That summer it became serious business. Russ 'borrowed' his mother's wand, went far out on the moors where the rules didn't apply, and practiced gestures and incantations and a new language. Wensley's ships had put into Piraeus often enough for him to invest in a tiny Greek dictionary and phrase book, and once Russ figured out the strange letters, it was a treasure trove of words, though he was aware that it wasn't the 'magic language' that Nana used. He had to experiment with pronunciation, but he was patient and determined.

The first spell Russ invented was one that made a pebble jump a few inches into the air. He'd been concentrating on it all afternoon, and was so surprised when it happened that he jumped backward himself and fell down. He practiced saying "*Pido!*" to a number of small things and returned home with a sense of great accomplishment. This was no vague, childish play, but a deliberate, focused spell. He assumed all wizards invented such things. He had yet to learn what a rare talent it was.

Later in the month, having more or less mastered the Pido spell and remembering the events of early June, Russ checked his Greek dictionary for the word for earthquake. It was *Seismos*. He tried making a spell with the word, but with little success. Not daunted, he continued trying.

#### SATURDAY, AUGUST 8, 1970 (TWO DAYS BEFORE THE FIRST QUARTER)

Lily returned in August, and it was sunny and hot the second Saturday, when Russ and Lily were able to meet under their tree. The bright sun made the river sparkle, and you could almost forget how dirty it was. Russ even removed the ever present pea coat, now comfortable enough with Lily that he was confident she wouldn't laugh at his clothes. There was, however, a new barrier between them.

Russ found himself unable to look Lily in the eyes. It wasn't that he was afraid she could read him — he knew by now she couldn't — but that the feeling of being so open when he now had so much to conceal made him nervous. What if he couldn't close down again before he went home to his mum? What if his mum found out he was using her wand and doing illegal magic, even if it was in a place where the rules were different? Russ couldn't risk it. He



spent a lot of the conversation looking at the river. They were talking about Hogwarts.

“... then after you get the school letter, you can get a wand.”

“I thought you already had a wand.”

“Mum took it away from me. Besides, it wasn’t really mine. It was my grandfather’s.” Russ thought about the feel of the wand in his fingers. His mother’s borrowed wand didn’t feel the same, and he knew he could do better magic with his grandfather’s old one. That wand really was his—he could tell. He didn’t say this to Lily, though. “They’ll start teaching us real magic at Hogwarts. Then the rules get stricter, like I told you, and the Ministry can punish you if you do magic outside school—you get letters.”

Lily looked disbelieving. “But I have done magic outside school!” she insisted.

“We’re all right. We haven’t technically got wands yet. They let you off when you’re a kid and you can’t help it.” Russ wasn’t as sure what happened when you were a kid and knew enough magic so that you could help it, but not going to Hogwarts was involved. “But once you’re eleven,” he continued, “and they start training you, then you’ve got to go careful.”

A random stick became a play wand in Lily’s hand. “It is real, isn’t?” The note of disbelief was softer now. This was something she wanted to be real. “It’s not a joke? Petunia says you’re lying to me. Petunia says there isn’t a Hogwarts. It is real, isn’t it?”

“It’s real for us. Not for her. But we’ll get the letter, you and me.”

“Really?”

“Definitely.”

“And will it really come by owl?”

“Normally. But you’re muggle-born, so someone from the school will have to come and explain to your parents.”

“Does it make a difference, being muggle-born?”

Russ found himself remembering the whispered conversations between his mum and Nana, the ones he wasn’t supposed to have heard—*A little half-blood boy like him... They’d eat him alive*—and he knew not everything was perfect at Hogwarts. He looked at Lily then, her burnished red hair, the eager expression he knew so well, and couldn’t bear the thought that his only friend might be afraid to go to Hogwarts, might refuse to go to Hogwarts. “No,” he said. “It doesn’t make any difference.”

Their eyes met, the doors blew open and, as Lily rolled onto her back to

stare up at the leaves, Russ watched inside his head where the selfish truth about himself was bubbling up through the open doors.

*I'm afraid of Hogwarts. The stars say I'm to be sorted into Slytherin where they eat half-blood boys like me alive, and Mum's so worried she's teaching me how to fight. I don't know if I'll ever have a friend there. I've never met any other wizards, and the only witches I know are Mum, Nana, and Lily. What if they don't like me? But if Lily's there, I'll have a friend, and it'll be all right. She has to go. She has to be there. I need her to be there...* Then the doors slowly closed again for the green eyes were looking elsewhere.

"How are things at your house?" Lily asked, and Russ lied his little lie, downplaying the strife because he was ashamed of his dad, picking and pulling at the grass around him to keep from looking back at Lily's eyes, not wanting to see more of the truth.

"But it won't be that long and I'll be gone," he finished, hoping his mother was right, and it would be better at Hogwarts.

For some reason Lily wanted to talk more than usual, maybe because they hadn't seen each other in six weeks, and she changed the subject to Azkaban and the dementors. It was better than talking about his family, so Russ would have liked the conversation to continue, but at that moment he heard a rustle of leaves and grass much louder than any lizard or mouse could make, and Lily was scrambling to her feet crying, "Tuney!"

Their secret meeting place was no longer a secret.

Russ was on his feet at once, angry that Petunia would consider acceptable for her an action she'd condemned in him only a year earlier. "Who's spying now? What d' you want?" he demanded.

Instead of responding to the challenge, Petunia attacked on a personal level. She leveled a finger at Russ. "What is that you're wearing, anyway? Your mum's blouse?"

It was a low blow and, as fury blazed in him, Russ heard the snap of a breaking tree branch, Lily's warning cry, and then Petunia was pushed backwards when the falling branch struck her shoulder. She turned and ran from them, sobbing.

Lily's call of "Tuney!" had no effect. She spun to confront Russ, anger mounting in her as well. "Did you make that happen?"

He hadn't. He couldn't have. He hadn't noticed the branch until it fell. "No," Russ answered, and was distressed that Lily'd even asked the question.

Lily was already starting after Petunia. "You did! You did! You hurt her!" she flung at him, as she moved away.

"No — no I didn't!" but the protest was useless. Lily glared at him and was gone, leaving Russ staring forlornly at the branch on the ground where Petunia had been standing.

*Did I do that? I didn't think about doing it. It just happened...* Yet Russ understood that somehow he had done it, had used the branch as a weapon against Petunia because Petunia was attacking something that lay at the core of his being, something that he couldn't give up. Now, because of it, he was losing Lily's friendship anyway, because of something bad that he'd done.

*I lost control. I did childish, wandless magic because I lost control. Why did I lose control? I lost control because I wasn't shut down tightly enough. When you don't shut down, you lose control, and then people don't want to be around you. Like Lily doesn't want to be around me now. If I don't shut down tight enough, I'll lose control, and then Lily won't be my friend any more.*

Quietly, consciously, deliberately, Russ examined the latches and locks of his mind. They were dangerously loose and open. He closed them. And having closed them, he resolved to monitor them closely to ensure they remained closed. He couldn't afford more mistakes like the one he'd just made.

Russ walked home firm in his new resolve. The following weekend he went to the thicket of trees by the river, but Lily didn't come. He didn't see her again until school started in September—their last year of school before Hogwarts. By then, Russ had been practicing being shut down so well that he no longer had to think about it all the time. He'd also spent more time working on magic and, in his loneliness and isolation, had created spells that would make flowers droop and wilt, little patches of ground dry up and become hard, and small insects like ants grow confused and lose their way.

The first Saturday in September was the fifth, and Lily came to the river. Russ watched the path behind her, but saw no sign of Petunia. "Don't worry," Lily said. "She won't be coming any more. You were very mean to her."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to do it. I didn't even know it was me doing it."

"Well, you shouldn't do it any more. I couldn't be friends with someone I thought was mean."

"I won't do it any more. I've been practicing not getting angry."

"That's good. Because you did hurt Petunia, you know. She had a bruise on her shoulder."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to do it. It won't happen again."

"That's all right, then," said Lily, and they sat under the tree and talked.

Russ was very careful not to look into her eyes so that he wouldn't lose control. It was good to have everything in his world back to normal.

Things were better with Toby as well. With full time work, and the extra Eileen brought in, he managed to save a little money, and on October 17, instead of staying home to rest after a hard week at the mine, Toby left for the morning and returned in the early afternoon at the wheel of a battered old black car that chugged and backfired as he drove it along the cobblestones to the house. Since theirs was the last home in Spinner's End, Toby parked the car beside the house.

There was a dog-eared, torn manual with missing pages, some tools, and a kit for patching the inner tubes of the tires. Together, with Eileen watching, Toby and Russ pored over the manual. Toby had considerable experience with the trucks and other machines at the mine, and soon father and son had the hood up and were tinkering with the engine, trying to improve the car's performance. They succeeded well enough that that evening they went for a short drive, and Russ got to feel the wind whipping at his hair through the open windows and the thrill of speeding along at thirty miles per hour.

Fall dissolved into winter, and then into a new year, and soon it was Russ's eleventh birthday.

#### **SATURDAY, JANUARY 9, 1971 (TWO DAYS BEFORE THE FULL MOON)**

For his eleventh birthday, Russ had an actual party. Both his grandmothers came, and he had not only cake, but three presents. The table in the sitting room was covered in a lace cloth supplied by Gra, and flowers from Nana's garden added color and a festival feeling.

The reason for the party was, of course, that if all went well, this was the last time he'd be home on his birthday for the next seven years. Toby wasn't entirely comfortable with the idea of his son attending a wizards' school, but the women dealt with it by reminding him of the major advantages — more time alone with Eileen, one less mouth to feed, and a son who, at the age of seventeen, would be able to keep the car properly tuned with a wave of his wand.

Gra, a lover of all kinds of puzzles, gave Russ a book of logic problems and a book of Sherlock Holmes stories. Nana's witching fees were mostly in kind, but she'd saved coin and bought him his first little cauldron and starting potions kit from a wizarding shop in Liverpool that carried school supplies.

Russ's mum and dad gave him a wonderful gift — trousers, shirt, shoes and a sweater that were only a little bit large, and actually came close to reasonably fitting. He tried them on to show how they looked and was quite the proper, respectable, working class boy. Then he changed back into his normal clothes so that the new ones wouldn't get dirty. They were for his trip to London at the end of August.

"Have you heard there's a new headmaster?" Nana asked after Russ blew out his candles, the cake was sliced, and Mum'd handed out the cups of tea.

"No. You mean old Dippet finally retired? It's about time. When I was there, the deputy headmaster already did most of the work anyway. We thought Dippet spent most of his time asleep." Eileen smiled to herself at the memory.

"Who was the deputy headmaster?"

"One of the Transfiguration teachers — Dumbledore." Eileen handed a slice of cake to Gra, who knew nothing of Hogwarts and wisely kept silent.

"He's the one who's just been made headmaster. Is he any good?" Nana asked.

"He's a shrewd one, that's for certain. Who'd take over as head of Gryffindor if Dumbledore's the headmaster?"

"Did you know a professor named Minerva McGonagall?"

Eileen shook her head. "She must have come after I left in June of fifty-two. I don't recall anyone named McGonagall."

"She's the new deputy as well, so Gryffindor remains firmly in charge. You said they always got the plums, didn't you?"

"It seems like my whole time there, the Head Boy and Head Girl were from Gryffindor house." Eileen turned to Russ, who was playing cribbage with his dad. "The discipline and order in the houses is maintained by the prefects of each house. You have to obey them." She turned back to the other women. "They all, regardless of their houses, are supervised by the Head Boy and Girl, who report to the deputy headmaster. So being Head Boy is a pretty powerful job. They always gave it to someone from Gryffindor because that was Dippet's old house and Dumbledore's, too."

"Sounds like Gryffindor has a lock on the power," said Nana, pouring herself another cup of tea.

"It didn't bother us too much, but the students in Slytherin were ambitious, and they resented being shut out." Eileen smiled across the table at her son. "Slytherin students are clever, and they all think Gryffindor students are strong, but brainless."

"My boy's clever," said Toby, not really paying much attention to the conversation. "He'll go with the clever ones. Y' don't need brawn to get along in the world, you need brains."

Late in the afternoon, they all got into Toby's car, Russ sandwiched in the back between his two grandmothers. First they took Nana to her neat little cottage in the country, then they drove to Gra's village where Toby helped his mother into the house, Gra having a little trouble walking. Then Toby gave Russ a treat by driving around for a while. Since they were on summer time all year, the sun didn't set until a quarter past five, so they got home just as it was getting dark.

It'd been a really nice birthday.

The next day was Sunday, and Russ wandered up to the little thicket of trees where he sometimes met Lily. There he found a piece of paper wedged between two branches. He unfolded it and read: *I came at 2:00 and you weren't here. It was cold but I waited for an hour. What happened? I thought you'd always come Sat. afternoon. Where were you?*

The idea of Lily waiting in the cold for him was terrible. Russ wasn't sure what to do. He'd have to find some way to apologize because he didn't want to lose Lily's friendship due to his own thoughtlessness.

The end of January brought both Lily's birthday on the last Saturday of the month, and the launch of Apollo 14 the following evening. Russ didn't have any money for a present, so he walked the eight miles to Nana's cottage after school on the twenty-ninth and returned long after dark with a little bottle of potion that could revive any drooping flower, plus the instructions for making more. It was fairly simple, and the beauty of potions was that they required no wand magic, so he could brew them without fear of the Ministry.

Apollo 14 returned safely from its mission and splashed down late in the evening of the second Tuesday in February. Lily's parents, amused by her interest in the American space program, let her stay up long enough to get the news that the capsule and astronauts were safe. She beamed her flashlight out towards the moors, so that Russ could sneak back home to his warm bed and a peaceful night.

The very next day, every bank in Britain closed at three-thirty, not to reopen until the following Monday. The era of tuppences and sixpences was over. England had gone decimal, and suddenly everyone was talking about 'pee,' so what used to cost half a crown was now twelve and a half 'pee.' It

didn't affect Russ much since he never had any money, but everyone else was confused for a while.

Then in April, Russ became interested in the Russians. The Americans were going to the moon, but the Russians had a space station orbiting the earth, the Salyut 1. The first crew sent up to enter the station had to return to earth because the docking mechanism wouldn't work, but the second crew made it and spent almost all of June working on experiments in space. Russ and Lily sat for their eleven-plus exams, but Russ's thoughts were more with the cosmonauts than on the test. The test didn't mean anything anyway. He wasn't going to one of those schools.

June 30 brought the first tragedy. The three-man crew of the Soyuz 11 died during their return to earth. A faulty valve allowed their air to escape, and the cosmonauts were asphyxiated within minutes. Russ had nightmares for a week, waking up struggling for breath as if something heavy was sitting on his chest.

And then, in the last week of July, the Hogwarts letters came.

Russ got his letter by owl, a majestic brown bird, and treasured the stiff parchment message with its green ink that told him what to bring. Eileen immediately pulled out her old robes and books, and began altering the first to fit Russ and sorting through the second for the ones he would need. The books were old, secondhand even when Eileen had them, but she and Russ agreed he could make notes in the margins of any material that was new since they were published.

Nana sent Nelson with a letter asking if she could pick up anything at the shop in Liverpool, and soon, with his birthday cauldron and his grandfather's wand, Russ had everything he needed. On Saturday the thirty-first, he met Lily under their trees on the river.

"It's so exciting!" Lily squealed, hugging Russ when she saw him. "It was just like you said, everything the way you said it. This woman came to the door, the deputy headmistress, and talked for the longest time with Mum and Dad, and did magic for them right there in the house! You should have seen Petunia's face. She's been teasing me about this for the longest time, and now she has to eat her words because it's all true!"

"What did your mum and dad say?"

"I think they were really shocked, but also relieved. I mean, they've been worried about me and the things I can do, and I think they were happy to find out I wasn't crazy. Petunia's gone all sour. I think she's jealous."

"Let her be jealous. It serves her right for being nasty."

"Don't be mean. Anyway, we're going to London next week because there's this secret place just for witches where we can buy all the things I need for school. Are you going there?"

"Don't have to. I've had all my school things for ages." Russ didn't think it was necessary to tell Lily that they'd been his mother's things.

"Have you ever been to London?"

Russ shook his head. The whole business about going to London to take the Hogwarts train was causing problems in his family. There was no train from Colne that would get them to King's Cross station in time to catch the express, so he and his mother would have to go the day before, but there was no money for lodgings. His mum and dad had been arguing about it since the letter came.

There was something else important to ask Lily. "Are you going to be back from London by next Saturday?"

"Sure. I even have the house to myself all evening. Mum and Dad are taking Petunia out to dinner and a movie in Colne. Sort of to give her some attention since I'm getting so much. Why?"

"There's another splashdown..."

"Again?"

"Apollo 15. Coming back from the moon. Please Lily. What if they die like the Russians? I have to know."

The landing was scheduled for just before ten o'clock in the evening on August seventh. Lily suggested that Russ come for supper so that she could play hostess, but he didn't want his parents to wonder where he was. She settled for dessert and tea. He agreed to arrive around nine, and would leave well before her parents and Petunia got back.

Russ's arrival went according to plan, and he got to Lily's house just as the sun was setting, not having been seen by anyone. In honor of the occasion, he was wearing the new clothes he would take with him to Hogwarts. He felt very proper and dressed up. She let him into the kitchen where she had cake and tea ready, and for fifteen minutes they ate and talked about Hogwarts.

"Would you like to see my house?" Lily asked suddenly. "You hardly got to see anything the last time you were here."

"Sure," Russ replied, having not only the vague impression that refusing would be impolite, but also curiosity about the place where Lily lived. He wasn't as intimidated as he'd been the first time, since this time he had an idea what to expect.

The downstairs had a dining room as well as a living room. The upstairs



had a bath and three bedrooms. Russ was immensely impressed that Lily didn't have to share her bedroom with Petunia, though Lily admitted that if they had overnight guests, she did.

Lily's room was robin's egg blue and white. "I wanted paisley," she told Russ proudly, "but Mum wouldn't hear of it." Petunia preferred yellow. It surprised Russ that Petunia's room was more frilly than Lily's. If he'd had to guess, he would have thought the other way around. Each girl had a bed, a desk and chair, a small bookcase and...

"What's that?" Russ asked, pointing to Petunia's desk where a yellow envelope with green writing lay.

"I don't know," said Lily.

"It's a letter from Hogwarts."

"Really? Petunia didn't mention it."

"That's not possible," Russ said, walking to the desk and staring at the envelope. "Muggles don't get Hogwarts letters."

"Maybe it isn't really from Hogwarts," Lily said, and picked the envelope up. It was the same parchment and the same green ink. "I wonder what it says. You don't think Petunia's been accepted to Hogwarts, too, do you?"

"Has she ever shown any magic ability?"

"I never saw any."

"Then she can't go."

Curiosity got the better of Lily, and she opened the envelope. After looking at the letter for a moment, she handed it to Russ. It was from Headmaster Dumbledore, gently explaining that unfortunately only persons with magical talent could attend Hogwarts. He understood Petunia's desire to learn magic with her sister, but it was not possible.

"She wrote to the school," Russ said in surprise. "How could she do that? I always thought muggles couldn't write to them, like there's someone in the postal service that stops the letters."

"Maybe it happened during the postal strike. That lasted forever."

Russ shook his head. "That ended in March. She must've writ to him after you got your letter last week."

"Poor Petunia," Lily sighed. "I guess she is jealous after all. She was on about you and me being freaks, but that could have been after she got the answer to her letter."

"Well let her be jealous. I don't care. I don't want her at Hogwarts. She's never been nice to me."

"Don't be mean, Severus."

"Mean is as mean does. I'm glad she won't be going."

At that moment, they both remembered the Apollo 15 capsule hurtling toward earth, and ran to warm up the television. Because of the recent Russian tragedy, the BBC picked up the image just before a quarter to the hour. Russ saw what was wrong at the same time the announcer did.

"There's only two parachutes open! What happened to the third one?"

All thought of Petunia's letter vanished as, heart in his throat, Russ watched the Endeavour plunge to earth. As it turned out, the third parachute was there just as a precaution, and the capsule was perfectly capable of landing in the ocean with two. Less than a minute after being terrified half out of his mind for the astronauts, Russ was hugging Lily madly in the knowledge that they were safe. Then he slipped out of her house and made his way home.

On August 30, both Nana and Gra came to stay the night in order to see Russ off at the train station in Colne. He was taking a footlocker with his books and a few extra things like changes of underwear, and Gra brought an old, somewhat battered Gladstone bag that had belonged to Wensley Snape in the days when he went to sea. The bag was for carrying Russ's robes and hat so he could change on the train.

It was a Monday night. Toby'd taken the following morning off to drive all of them, Eileen and Russ to the station at Colne, and then Nana and Gra to their homes. He'd be by himself one night, but there was a train Eileen could catch from Euston Station after leaving Russ on the platform at King's Cross that would get her home the evening of the second day, September first. Russ had the feeling his dad was looking forward to that night.

Lily had already left. She, her parents, and Petunia had spent the weekend in London. Russ wouldn't see her until they got to King's Cross Station, and he wouldn't be able to talk to her until the train was on its way to Scotland. After that, though, they no longer had to worry about their parents or Petunia.

That evening, Russ had a thorough wash at the sink upstairs. It was years now since he'd stood in the wash tub in the kitchen, but he still hated the whole process. Nonetheless, tonight he wanted to be especially clean for the trip to London in his new clothes. The worst part was his hair, which he couldn't wash upstairs so as not to get hairs in the drain. No, washing his hair had to be done outside in the area yard, stripped to the waist, while his mother poured water over his head in full view of the neighbors. It was

humiliating, but Russ endured it. It was the last time for ten months. For Hogwarts, he'd endure anything.

"What say y' give us a game, eh boy?" Toby said after dinner, and they pulled out the cribbage board and the cards.

"You might let the child visit with us," said Nana primly. "We're the ones who don't see him every day."

"That's why you won't miss him so much as I will," Toby retorted. "Sides, he can talk while he plays. He ain't no dummy, my son."

Despite the barbs, the evening was good humored and pleasant, and Russ even got the feeling his father and his grandmother enjoyed a bit of sparring. The grandmothers were sharing his room, and Russ spent the night on the old sofa downstairs.

They were up early the next morning to a hearty breakfast and the double checking of all Russ's things. The women fussed over how neat he looked in his new togs, while Toby went out for the twentieth time to run a cloth over the car to be sure it looked nice. The footlocker was loaded into the trunk of the car, then, at last, they were off to Colne.

"Now you remember," Toby said at the train station for the fifth time since he parked the car, "you don't let no one put nothing over. They try, and you give 'em what for."

"Sure, Dad."

They stood in an embarrassed little group on the platform until the train pulled up, and then there were hugs from the grandmothers while Toby watched. Last of them all, he faced his son and solemnly shook hands. "You remember who you are, Russ. Them college puddings can't never put nothing over on a lanky. You don't never forget that."

Eileen and Russ boarded the train and found seats in the nearly empty second class car. Russ had been on trains three times before in his life, once to Blackpool and twice to Manchester, and he knew the whole routine. They had sandwiches for the trip, which would be a long one since the train made every stop on the route. Longer from Lancashire to London than from London to northern Scotland, since the Hogwarts train was an express, Eileen explained.

The train was moving, and they were waving goodbye, and the adventure was truly started.

Eileen spent the trip reviewing with Russ all the things he needed to remember, about guarding his thoughts, about dueling and defending himself, about keeping his things secure, and about hiding from the authorities the

fact that he'd been practicing magic, real magic, for some time, in defiance of the law. Keeping secrets wasn't a problem for Russ. He'd been keeping secrets for years.

From Euston station, they went to King's Cross where they checked almost everything they were carrying. Eileen had a special hotel in mind, one she'd stayed in as a student, and they shouldn't have luggage when they showed up there. "There," she said as they left the station. "Across the road." She was pointing to a church, a white church with a classic Georgian portico. "We should be in time for evensong. Then we have to be careful, but if we are it'll be a peaceful night."

Together mother and son crossed Euston Road and entered St. Pancras church.

## C H A P T E R     S I X

### A N E W   W O R L D

WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 1, 1971 (FOUR DAYS BEFORE THE FULL MOON)

“Russ, wake up. Wake up, child. Shh!”

Russ roused himself on the hard wood of the church pew where he’d spent the night, his mother’s urgency vibrating in him. “What’s happening, Mum?” he whispered.

“Sexton. It must be around six o’clock. Quick. He mustn’t see us.”

The two slipped off the pew as the lights came on and, making use of the columns and aisles, managed to stay out of sight of the sexton of St. Pancras Church. It was, in fact, six thirty-six on the morning of September 1, 1971, and neither mother nor son was supposed to be in the church at all.

“This way,” Eileen hissed, and Russ followed her into a lavatory near the parish hall. There, not turning on any lights for fear of discovery, they made quick ablutions. Then they snuck back into the nave of the church to wait until, as people straggled in for morning prayer, they could slip out into the crisp morning air of London.

Eileen and Russ sat on the steps of the church portico. “You have to show me now,” the mother said. “How do we get to the train station?”

Russ stood to get his bearings. At eleven and a half, he was still so thin-boned and small that few would guess him older than seven. His most prominent features were long, lank black hair, stunningly dark eyes, and a nose already predominating in his small, sharp face. No director, casting for a stage or film production of Dickens’s *Oliver Twist* could have passed him up for the part of the Artful Dodger. He had that air of being too old in a body that was too young.

“Euston Road to the right,” Russ said. “Then right again and the subway under the car park.” He pointed to the northeast. “That way,” he said.

"Good boy. Mum's proud of you. They won't lose you, not in the biggest city in the world. Not anywhere."

Together the two turned right and walked to Euston Road, then right again to the underground passageway that took them across the busy street to the area in front of King's Cross Station. Eileen fumbled in her sweater and shawl, and pulled out a little cardboard ticket.

"Give us a moment, Russ," she said. "I got something I have to do."

By this time it was after eight o'clock, and the ticket booths were all open. Eileen left her son by a news vendor and went to a window to argue with a clerk, coming back a few minutes later with a fist full of coins.

"What'd you do, Mum?" Russ asked, eyeing his mother's hand. "Dad didn't give you any money."

"Now you got no reason to tell your Dad about this. He's going to meet me at the station in Colne and no questions. I just won't start from London." She let Russ see the tip of a wooden stick, about ten inches long that protruded from her sleeve.

"You brought the wand? I won't peach. Where're you jumping to?"

"I'll pick up the train in Wolverhampton, and no one the wiser. It'll give us more time together. But now, Master Snape, I'm going to treat you to breakfast. Real English breakfast in a real station restaurant. You never had kippered herring before, did you?"

They got a little table in the station breakfast room, and with the money she got from trading in her train ticket, Eileen treated Russ to bacon, eggs, toast, kippers, and even a cup of coffee. He ate with a healthy appetite, a good sign since he so often suffered from a nervous stomach.

As they ate, mother and son practiced a strange sort of catechism.

"In your classes..."

"I don't know anything. Everything they show me is new."

"They teach you a new spell..."

"I do it wrong the first time, so they don't suspect."

"With the boys in your dormitory..."

"I take the last place, I don't make trouble, I don't make enemies."

"And you never, ever, ever..."

"Let them steal my thoughts."

"Russ, I am going to miss you. Nana'll send you an owl every month. Anything happens, and you tell her."

"Yes, Mum."

After breakfast they wandered through the station, watching the people and reading the covers of the magazines in the kiosks. Eileen bought Russ a snack to eat on the train — “Healthier than the stuff they sell off the sweets trolley, and you don’t need sickles to buy it.” A little after ten o’clock, she murmured, “There’s the first of them.”

Russ looked in the direction she nodded. Two families were crossing the station heading for the platforms. They wore peculiar combinations of clothing and colors that made them look like mummers or circus performers. His mother had told him how hard it was for most wizards to blend in with normal people, but he hadn’t really seen it before this day.

“We’d better get your things.” Eileen took another ticket from her sweater pocket and went with a trolley to ‘Left Luggage.’ There she picked up the old Gladstone bag and the small footlocker. It had taken a while to convince Toby to give her the money to leave the things, but she’d talked about how hard it would be to run with them if they were caught, and he’d given in.

“This way, Russ, to platform nine.” The platform was a perfectly normal train platform, but the show was delightful. Any number of oddly dressed people with luggage trolleys approached the decorative bricked arch between platforms nine and ten, looked around stealthily as if planning a robbery, then scooted through the brick wall. Both Eileen and Russ had a lovely half hour watching them, though Russ was also keeping an eye open for Lily and her family.

“All right,” Eileen said finally, “your turn.” Sedately the perfectly normal looking pair, she in working class dress, sweater, and shawl, Russ in trousers, shirt, and a sweater, walked to and through the place in the arch. No one noticed them.

On the other side it was another world, almost like stepping a hundred and twenty-five years into the past. A bright red steam locomotive puffed beside the platform, and people in colorful capes and cloaks, no longer out of place, lingered to say last goodbyes to the children they were sending off to school.

Further along, Russ finally spotted Lily. She must have arrived while his mum was getting the luggage. All four of them stood about halfway down the platform, Mr. and Mrs. Evans clearly enjoying watching all the color and display of the wizarding world. Lily and Petunia seemed to be arguing quietly a few yards away. Russ couldn’t make any signal to Lily since no one but Petunia was even aware they knew each other. Suddenly shy, Russ

huddled by his mother. This was an unknown world his mother was sending him into, and she was sending him alone for the first time in his life. Even Lily's presence couldn't prevent the disturbing sense of insecurity.

"Don't turn scaredy-cat on me now, Russ," Eileen said. "This is my world, the world your dad can't enter. You got to get used to it, too." The platform was emptying as eleven o'clock ticked closer. "Think what your dad would say if you turned tail now. Just remember, as the train gets near Hogsmeade you have to put on the robes. And let the station people take care of your things. Now, get on up."

Russ lugged the bag to the train, almost the last of the students to board. He turned to wave to his mum, but the station attendants had already closed the door. He could see her through the window, but he wasn't sure she could see him. The train lurched, then began to chug from the station. Russ picked up his bag again and made his way along the corridor toward the rear of the train, looking for the second-class cars.

There were no second-class cars. It took a while for Russ to realize this as he passed through car after car of first-class compartments. And every compartment was occupied. There was no place that he could enter without intruding on groups of friends and schoolmates, laughing and talking together, most of them older and all of them bigger than he was.

It took him over half an hour to traverse the entire train. At last he came to the end of the last passenger car and found himself face to face with the baggage compartment. Nowhere in all that long train had there been a place to sit by himself. Nowhere a place where he didn't have to slide open a door and meet the hostile stares of total strangers, eyes all fixed on him.

At that point, two things occurred to Russ. The first was that here, alone by the baggage car, he had a chance to change into his Hogwarts robes in private, and he did so. The second was that Lily must be in one of those first class compartments he'd passed, and he might, if he went back looking through all the compartment windows, find her and be able to sit with her. More slowly now, he retraced his steps, stopping to check every face in the compartments he passed.

Lily was sitting by the far window near the middle of the train, the seat opposite her empty. She was staring at the passing landscape, and Russ had the odd feeling that she'd been crying. Paying no attention to the others in the compartment, Russ opened the door and crossed over, sitting facing her.

Lily barely glanced at him. "I don't want to talk to you."

"Why not?"



"Tuney h...ates me. Because we saw that letter from Dumbledore." It sounded like Lily was going to start crying again.

"So what?" Russ said. He was thoroughly confused. Lily had shown him the house, Lily had opened the letter, Lily had handed it to him. He could see that Lily might be upset with Petunia, or even with herself, but not why she was angry with him.

The comment got Russ a glare, however. Lily clearly blamed him for something, so he must have done something. "So she's my sister!" Lily snapped.

"She's only a..." Russ stopped. There was a mystery here that he didn't understand. It had something to do with being brothers and sisters. Neil and Brian Philips were always fighting, yet Brian bullied people Neil didn't like. Russ didn't know Petunia very well, but every time he'd seen her, she was bossing Lily around or arguing with her. Lily was nevertheless always on Petunia's side. In any case, where they were going, he'd never have to worry about muggles again. A sudden loud laugh from one of the boys sharing the compartment reminded him, too, that he shouldn't go around mentioning that Lily was muggle-born. Not until he got his bearings and knew the lay of the land.

Deciding Lily just needed cheering up, Russ said happily, "But we're going! This is it! We're off to Hogwarts!" Lily wiped her eyes and gave him a little smile. His stab at taking her mind off Petunia was working. Now Russ was concentrating on the future, on a time approaching with the speed of the train they were riding, a time when he'd always have someone to talk to without having to hide his friendship from everyone. He returned Lily's smile. "You'd better be in Slytherin," he told her, knowing that to be his destiny as well.

Their conversation was interrupted by a sneering voice. "Slytherin?" said one of the boys, curling his lip and looking arrogantly down his nose at Russ. He turned to his companion. "Who wants to be in Slytherin? I think I'd leave, wouldn't you?"

The other boy appeared equally arrogant, stretched out across two seats as if he owned the whole compartment by right of birth. His demeanor was identical to that of Brian Philips. "My whole family have been in Slytherin," he said.

Russ tried to ignore them, but he was suddenly seized with a sense of horror that he might have to live in the same place as this boy, and for the

first time he thought about the implications of everything his mother had told him of dormitories.

The two boys ignored him as well. "Blimey, and I thought you seemed all right!" the first boy said.

"Maybe I'll break the tradition," the other replied with a big smile. "Where are you heading, if you've got the choice?"

The first boy posed, like a man with a sword. "'Gryffindor, where dwell the brave at heart!' Like my dad." Russ sniffed, and the boy rounded on him. "Got a problem with that?"

There was menace in the boy's attitude, and Russ began to shut down. "No," he replied. "If you'd rather be brawny than brainy..."

The slouching boy joined in. "Where're you hoping to go, seeing as you're neither?" he said, provoking the other boy to laughter.

Lily stood up, her face set and angry. "Come on, Severus," she said with forced calm, "let's find another compartment."

Both boys mocked Lily, and the Gryffindor boy stuck out his foot to trip Russ as he passed. "See ya, Snivellus!" the sloucher called as Lily slammed the compartment door shut.

"What unpleasant people!" Lily exclaimed as the two of them moved through the train. "I thought you said Hogwarts would be a nice place."

"All except... Gryffindor," Russ said. "My mum told me that... Gryffindor students always looked... down on Hufflepuffs."

Lily paused and looked at Russ carefully. "They really bothered you, didn't they? You're stammering again." She waited, but Russ didn't reply. "Okay, Severus, what's a Hufflepuff?" she continued.

"There're four... houses. Slytherin, Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw, and... Gryffindor. They put this hat on your... head, and it tells everyone which... house you go into. That's where you live."

"So why are you going to Slytherin if your mum went to Hufflepuff?"

"My grandmother did this star chart for me, and it... said I'd go to Slytherin."

"Well," Lily said, "at least it's better than Gryffindor."

"Do you want to find another compartment?" Russ felt that if Lily was with him, he wouldn't be as shy about entering one of them.

"No. Is there any place else we can sit?"

Russ led Lily back to the space between the last passenger compartment and the baggage car, where they settled themselves onto the floor of the train. Leaning back against a panel, feet drawn up and arms around their knees,

they managed to relax in the quiet and complete privacy of the little out-of-the-way nook. There they chatted, ate their food, and watched the passing scenery — and generally enjoyed the rest of the trip to Hogwarts.

It was getting dark when Russ and Lily were startled by a voice over a loudspeaker telling the students that they'd be arriving in five minutes and to leave their luggage on the train. Quickly Lily ran back to the compartment to get her robes and returned a few minutes later looking upset, though she refused to tell Russ what happened when she reencountered the two unpleasant boys. Russ stood guard with his back to Lily while she changed into robes. The train was slowing down.

Students were in the corridor, straining for a glimpse of the school, a glimpse that was denied them as the train braked to a crawl and then stopped in a tiny rural station with only one platform. Most of them seemed to know where they were going, and Russ and Lily let them go first, hanging back unobserved so that they could observe the others. They left their bags in a compartment that was now empty except for the luggage.

When they stepped from the train, students milled around them, a wall of black that they couldn't see around or through, but to their right a booming voice was calling, "First years! This way, first years! Get together over here 'n follow me!"

Russ and Lily glanced at each other, then followed the voice, and soon most of the students were behind them as they tagged after the other first years and the great voice.

It was dark, the sun having set and the moon not yet risen. The line of students had entered a forest, for Russ could both hear and smell the pine trees, and noted the occasional skitter of some tiny creature disturbed by the passage of a horde of children. The path began to slant downward, and the footing was uncertain, forcing Russ to concentrate to keep up with the others and at the same time keep from falling. One good thing was that being in the rear and now slightly above the others, he could see that the one leading them had a lantern, and the small light bobbing far down the hill helped him get his bearings. He walked in front of Lily, and she held his hand to steady herself on the path.

Then there was a turn and the path opened onto the beach around a large lake, but Russ didn't notice the lake much. Still a ways up the hill, he could see over the heads of those in front, and what he saw made him stop, mouth open in wonder.

It was a great castle set high on a cliff on the other side of the lake, and

every window blazed with light in the darkness around it. Russ had never seen anything so beautiful in all his short life. Beside him, Lily whispered, "Oh, how marvelous. You were right; this is wonderful."

He would have stayed there watching that castle all night long, but the voice was once again booming, "Into the boats now, four t' a boat. Everybody into a boat. We don't want t' be late."

Russ then saw the owner of the voice, a giant of a man with a great beard and massive frame. Russ didn't come to much past his knee. Beyond the monstrous figure were the boats, all of them occupied as the train compartments had been occupied. Russ's eyes flickered from the huge man to the forbidding boats, to the last students clambering into them, and didn't know what to do.

The monster knew what to do. "Come on, lass. Come on lad. Don't be shy. Here's a spot for ya." He guided Lily to a boat with three girls already in it, then swept Russ up in a great arm and placed him surprisingly gently into the last empty place in the last boat. The other students never noticed; his companions didn't even turn to look at him. They were all staring at the castle, and Russ was relieved that things so far were going relatively well.

The boats glided across the water, propelled by magic, into a cave under the castle's cliff. Inside was a grotto where the boats docked to allow the students to disembark. Once again Russ and Lily brought up the rear, climbing in the dark up a narrow rock passage to the top of the cliff. At the entrance to the castle, they were met by a tall, dark-haired witch who peered at them over wire glasses.

"The first years, Professor McGonagall," the monster said, and the group of students entered Hogwarts Castle.

They were ushered into a sort of antechamber where Professor McGonagall explained to them about the houses they were to be sorted into. Russ paid polite attention, but there was nothing new in what she said. It was basically exactly what he'd told Lily on the train.

Then it was time, and the first years filed out of the antechamber into the Great Hall, open to the night sky and aflame with torches, pulsing with the laughter and chatter of nearly two hundred fifty students, laughter and chatter that was stilled as the first years entered. Russ wasn't tall enough to see much, but he could feel the stares, and it unnerved him to be in the center of the circle of eyes.

In front of the teacher's table, the first years were arranged with the short ones in front and the tall ones in back so, though he wasn't happy being in

front, Russ was finally able to see. There on the dais was Professor McGonagall holding a battered old wizard's hat. Beside her was a stool. "When I announce your name, come forward and sit on the stool," she said, and then called, "Adams, Clarissa."

The role call went slowly, for sometimes the hat had to think before pronouncing 'Gryffindor!' or 'Ravenclaw!', but it gave Russ time to observe the other students. He particularly listened for the boys being sorted into Slytherin house, for they would most likely be his dormitory mates.

The nasty, slouching boy from the train responded to the name 'Black, Sirius,' and Russ held his breath. The Hat cried out "Gryffindor!" and Russ was able to breathe again.

'Edison, Mitchell' was the first Slytherin boy sorted, then it was the turn of 'Evans, Lily,' and Russ again held his breath. To his horror and intense disappointment, the Hat didn't hesitate at all before calling "Gryffindor!" Russ moaned slightly, and kept his eyes on Lily as she joined the Gryffindor table. She looked back at him with a wan smile then, forced to sit close to 'Black, Sirius,' she firmly turned her back on him.

Now, suddenly, Russ felt that he could even put up with 'Black, Sirius' if he could just be sorted into Gryffindor house. But of course, that was not in the stars. The names of the Gryffindor boys became as important to him as the names of the Slytherin boys. One Gryffindor girl had also been sorted before Lily, but Russ didn't remember her name. He'd have to find out, though, because she was one of Lily's dormitory mates. Then came: 'Jones, Calpurnia' — Gryffindor; 'Lupin, Remus' — Gryffindor; 'Macdonald, Mary' — Gryffindor; 'Mulciber, Aloysius' — Slytherin; 'Pettigrew, Peter' — Gryffindor; the sneering one from the train, 'Potter, James' — Gryffindor; 'Rosier, Evan' — Slytherin . . .

And then — "Snape, Severus."

Russ stepped forward, climbing awkwardly onto the sorting stool, and felt the Hat slide onto his head.

*Danger!* Tentacles were thrusting into his mind — horrid, probing things sucking at the thoughts he kept locked away! Instantly Russ shut down, the doors in his brain slamming and bolting, shielding his thoughts from the probe. Adrenaline poured into his system to battle the threat, and Russ instinctively groped for the wand he usually kept in his sleeve, the wand that at this moment was still in his Gladstone bag. But the probing tentacles had already stopped, baffled by the barriers.

The Sorting Hat spoke. "Is there no student here? I cannot sort someone

who does not exist. Where is the student?" It paused. "Yes, here he is. Here is the wall he builds against me. But where is the student behind the wall? Does he hold his secrets so close? A boy who hides his true self so completely can only be . . . SLYTHERIN!"

Utterly mortified, Russ slipped off the stool. Not only was he not with Lily, the Hat had told everyone there was no student there to sort. Then he noticed that the Slytherin table was clapping politely and that the expressions of the students around him hadn't changed. *They didn't hear*, he thought. *The hat spoke to me, but not to them.* It was small, but it was a comfort.

Quietly Russ made his way to the section of the Slytherin table where the first years sat, close to the teachers. There he joined the three boys who'd already been sorted. A tall, blond, older student wearing a badge came over to congratulate him. A few minutes later, 'Wilkes, Aaron' was sorted into Slytherin, too, and they were five. 'Vance, Sally' and 'Wintergreen, Paladin' were in Gryffindor.

Aaron Wilkes sat next to Severus, and the other three Slytherin boys sat opposite. "What's your name again?" a big boy with dark hair asked him.

"Severus," Russ replied, barely looking up. "Severus . . . Snape."

"I'm Aloysius Mulciber. You play Quidditch?"

Russ shook his head. His mother had mentioned Quidditch to him, but he'd never been on a broom. "I'm not . . . good at things like . . . that," was all he said.

"I play Quidditch at home," said Aaron. "I'm Aaron Wilkes. That's my cousin Evan Rosier, and you are . . .?" He was speaking to a tall, sturdy blond boy.

"Mitchell Edison. I play Quidditch, too. I'm a pretty good chaser."

"Great!" Aloysius said. "I'm better as a beater. If either of you is a good seeker or a keeper, we've got the start of a team!"

At that point announcements were made by the Headmaster about what was not permitted, and the welcoming feast began. Suddenly the table was loaded with all kinds of things to eat, many of which Russ had never seen before. His four classmates dug in with fervor. Russ examined the fare carefully. He was nervous, and therefore not hungry. He took a piece of chicken and a chunk of bread. Around him, as if on cue, silvery ghosts began to flit.

This wasn't at all daunting, since Eileen had told Russ all about the ghosts. There were around twenty of them, and four were the patrons of the four houses. Slytherin's ghost was the Bloody Baron, a stern, taciturn

spirit adorned with goutts of spectral blood. After introducing themselves, the phantoms were considerate and allowed the students to eat undisturbed.

Russ had been placed so his back was to the rest of the hall and the Gryffindor table on the far side of the room. He wanted to glance back and see how Lily was dealing with the ghosts, but he didn't dare.

Aloysius, Mitchell, Aaron, and Evan talked of nothing but Quidditch for the entire feast. They discussed the national teams, described games they watched, and bragged of their own abilities. Russ couldn't even follow the conversation since he didn't know how the game was played. At that moment, he didn't care. He wished the feast were over so that they could go to bed. Maybe on the way out he could speak to Lily.

Dessert came, and Russ tried a pastry, but it was so much sweeter than anything he was used to that he knew if he ate it he'd be sick. It seemed like an eternity before the prefects were told to escort the first years to their houses.

The seventy students of Slytherin house left the Great Hall first. Russ was finally able to look over at Lily, and she raised a hand and gave a tiny wave. He did the same and then with the others trooped across the entrance hall to the stairs leading to the dungeon level. In fact, they went down several levels until Russ thought they must be around the same depth as the boat grotto. They stopped in front of a blank wall.

*"Dens Serpentis,"* one of the prefects said, and the wall slid open to reveal another flight of stairs leading down into a large common room with green lamps and sea-green walls. Russ didn't ask, but he had the feeling they were under the lake. The new students were shown the lavatories and then taken to their dormitories, which split off a long corridor, boys on the right and girls on the left.

A few minutes later, they were called back into the common room. The tall, blond prefect who'd greeted Russ after his sorting rose to address all the Slytherin students.

"This is going to be brief because we're all tired and want to go to bed," he said with a smooth voice that held the hint of a drawl. "You all know me. For the benefit of the first years, my name is Lucius Malfoy, and I'm the senior male prefect of the house. Sarah Urquhart is the senior female prefect. Sixth year prefects are Brutus Gamp and Victoria Vaisey, and fifth year are Rabastan Lestrangle and Beatrice Bole. Prefects are in charge of discipline in the house, and you obey a prefect the way you obey a teacher."

Malfoy glanced around at the students. "You first years should know that

we have a new headmaster, Albus Dumbledore. He used to teach Transfiguration, and he was the deputy headmaster, but he's been the one really in charge for years, ever since the last headmaster, Dippet, started getting too old to do the job. Dumbledore favors Gryffindor, always has. He was subtle about it while Dippet was still nominally in charge, but now he's showing his true colors.

"The most powerful students in the school are the head boy and girl. They're in charge of schoolwide discipline and supervise all the prefects. They also represent the students to the faculty when there are problems. Normally the job is divided between a boy and a girl of different houses. Dumbledore has appointed a Gryffindor both as head boy and as head girl, shutting out all three of the other houses. The new Head Boy is Fabian Prewett, and the new Head Girl is Cindy McLaggen."

A murmur of discontent swept through the Slytherin students at this news. It appeared that neither of the two was popular.

Malfoy held up a hand for quiet. "I want to caution you all. They'll be looking for ways to deduct points from Slytherin house and to put Slytherin students on detention. And from what we saw of Dumbledore last year, he'll back them all the way. Everybody has to be on his guard. We can't give them excuses for striking at us. That's all. You all need to get to sleep." With that the students left the common room, most of them talking excitedly. The first years were quieter, not understanding exactly what the speech had been about.

Back in the dormitory, the five new boys found their things laid out on chairs next to their beds. Each bed also had a night stand by the head and a storage chest at the foot. Russ's bed was near the door. Aaron went to his bed on the far side of the room from the door and looked it over. Then he went to Russ.

"I prefer the bed near the door. What say we switch?"

*Don't make trouble. Don't make enemies.* "All right," Russ said. "Which one do . . . I take?"

"The one on the far side of the room. Opposite the fireplace."

Russ moved his things. It wasn't hard to do as he had so few of them. Then he sat on the bed and examined his new school uniform. It was a straight, black, belted medieval gown with green and silver embroidery on collar and cuffs, the Slytherin colors. The cap was a green and silver biretta. Russ took off his black academic robe and laid it over the chair, too, then did the same



with the cloak from his bag. His mum hadn't needed to alter it for him, and it still bore the black and yellow badger shield from her own school days.

"What's that? Hufflepuff?" Evan snorted.

"My mother was . . . in Hufflepuff." He'd have to remove the Hufflepuff badge.

"That explains it," Mitchell said. "I didn't think I'd heard of anyone named Snape in Slytherin. But you're Slytherin now."

"Yes," said Russ quietly. He noticed that the bed had curtains, and he pulled them so that he could undress in privacy, which caused some amusement among the other boys. Then all five of them went to bed.

Russ had never before slept in a room with other people or in a room with no windows, where you couldn't look out and see the moon and the stars. When the lights were out, it was pitch black. In addition, Aloysius snored. It was a while before Russ was able to fall asleep. Instead, he stared blindly up into the darkness at the invisible canopy of his bed, wondering what Lily was doing. He had so little in common with his four dorm mates that he couldn't imagine being friends with them. It was a good thing he already had a friend. That way he wouldn't have to worry about what the others thought of him. All he had to do was stay out of trouble.

#### THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 2, 1971

Russ woke early the next morning, his whole life with his father making him sensitive to any change in the night. Aware at once of his surroundings, he was surprised to note that the room had grown perceptibly less dark. Even without windows, it seemed that the light of dawn was allowed to filter into Slytherin house through the water of the lake. The light had a soft greenish tint to it.

Glancing over at his clothes, Russ saw that they'd changed. He sat up, feet dangling off the side of the bed away from the others, and examined his robes. They were the same, except bands of embroidered green and silver had been added to his academic robe, down the front and banding the wide sleeves, and the Hufflepuff badge had been replaced by the Slytherin snake. Russ had no idea how this had happened except by a magic spell. He was worried that performing magic in the room hadn't wakened him. It meant he wasn't safe.

There was an envelope on the night stand. Opening it, Russ found the Hufflepuff badge. It made him feel better to think he still had his mother's

insignia, and he slipped the envelope with its contents into the drawer of the stand. Then he stood up.

Everyone else was sleeping soundly. It was the perfect time to be up and about. Gathering his new robes, Russ padded barefoot out of the dormitory to the lavatory where, completely by himself, he washed and got dressed. There was a mirror there, but he didn't look at it until after he was done.

There in the mirror was a tiny, slender wizard, the green and silver biretta holding his long black hair neatly in place around his small, pale features, the black belted gown and flowing robe giving him an almost priest-like appearance. For the first time in his life, Russ was pleased with the way he looked. The robes suited him.

He went back to his dormitory and took some care putting his things into the storage chest. There wasn't much. Just the clothes he'd worn the day before, another pair of trousers and another shirt, some underwear, toothbrush and comb, his books, and the cloak.

Then he sat on the bed with his History of Magic book and waited for the others to wake up.

That didn't happen until the wake-up bells rang at six-thirty. Russ's four roommates staggered out of bed and to the boys' lavatory, then returned and transformed the whole business of dressing into a pillow fight initiated by Aaron and Evan. After that they trooped off, Russ with them, to the Great Hall for breakfast. On the way out, they were informed that the password had been changed to *Toujours pur* by Sarah Urquhart.

Once in the Great Hall, Russ stayed with the other first year boys at the Slytherin table since he wasn't sure whether anything else he did might be a mistake. The talk was about broomsticks, a subject Russ knew nothing about, and so he was quiet, munching on a piece of toast and drinking water. The others poured themselves a drink that looked a bit like orange juice, but when Russ tried it, it tasted strange, so he didn't take any more.

While he half listened to the chatter of the other boys, Russ looked around the Hall. It was very different from the night before in that the students didn't seem to feel as if they had to sit in a particular place. Some came in groups, others individually, a couple were reading books, and clearly many of them were still in their dormitories getting dressed and ready for the day.

Lily was at the Gryffindor table, and Russ raised his hand just below shoulder height when he caught her eye. She wagged her hand in return, then went back to eating breakfast with the little group of girls that were her

dorm mates. Russ was happy that she seemed so happy, but wished he was with her instead of where he was.

A little later a short, fat professor with thinning hair came by, greeting many of the Slytherin students by name and handing out schedules. The older students had just their regular classes for the semester, while the first years had orientation in the morning and started their first classes in the afternoon.

Back in Slytherin house, Russ went to his storage chest for his toothbrush, at which point he found Aaron right behind him.

"So, Hufflepuff, what house was your father in?"

Russ didn't look at him, not wanting eye contact. Instead he carefully closed and latched the chest. "He didn't . . . go to Hogwarts," was all he said.

"You talk funny. Where're you from?"

"Lancashire."

"Northern boy. So where did your father go to school?"

"Just an . . . ordinary school."

The momentary silence was full of danger. Then Aaron sneered, "You mean a muggle school? Hey, Evan, I think we've got ourselves a half-breed in Slytherin house."

Russ bristled. "I'm a . . . half-blood, not a dog."

"Half-bloods are dogs. What's that word, Evan?"

"Mongrel."

"Yeah, one of those."

"Come on," said Mitchell from the other side of the room, "lay off, why don't you. He didn't do anything to you."

Aaron whipped around. "Are you a half-breed, too? Or just a muggle-lover?" he turned back to Russ, "Like his mom."

A prefect stuck his head in the doorway. "Into the common room, first years. Head of house is here."

The argument dropped as the five boys filed from the room, Aaron pushing his way first. Russ, of course, was the last one out and stayed to the rear of the assembled house where he couldn't see and had trouble hearing.

The fat professor with thinning hair was Professor Slughorn, potions teacher and head of Slytherin house. He gave what was clearly the same speech he gave every year about doing their best and making Slytherin proud. Then he sent all but the first years off to their classes.

"Let's see, who do we have this year?" Slughorn muttered as he sorted through his papers. "Ah, yes. Wilhelmina Alderton?"

"Here, sir," said a plump blonde.

"Such a sweet girl. Your father works for the *Daily Prophet*, doesn't he? Mitchell Edison?"

"Here, sir," said Mitchell.

"Your uncle was one of my students many years ago. He's the Seeker for the Chudley Cannons now, I believe. Your mother was a lovely girl, truly beautiful. I remember her well. Doris Gamp? So nice to see the old families continuing in Slytherin. Claudia Higgs? Your mother went in the Department of Law Enforcement, no? Sonya MacFusty? Are you one of the Hebridean MacFustys? Excellent family. Aloysius Mulciber? I seem to recall your grandfather made a fortune in South American mines. Evan Rosier? I hear your father is making quite a stir in the world these days. Severus Snape? Yes. Maladicta Trimble? Isn't your uncle the one who wrote our Dark Arts text? I thought I recognized the name. And Aaron Wilkes, another family expanding its influence, you must be proud. Now students, if you will follow those two prefects, they'll give you a tour of the school. I'll be talking to each of you personally this evening after dinner."

With that, Professor Slughorn left.

The fifth year prefects started out by showing the first years how not to get lost in the dungeons. It was like a three-dimensional labyrinth. The most sensible thing to do was learn the way in and the way out and never deviate from it. Russ was beginning to find the sheer size of Hogwarts frightening.

Back in the upper levels of the dungeons, the prefects showed them the Potions room and the door to Slughorn's office. Then they went into the entrance hall. "You know where the Great Hall is. Down that way are a bunch of classrooms we seldom use except as study areas. On the other side of the staircase is the passage to the kitchens and Hufflepuff house (Aaron nudged Evan at this information), and down that way are lavatories and more staircases to the upper floors."

It turned out that Hogwarts had seven floors above the ground area and a large number of towers. Each floor was laid out differently, and the corridors didn't seem to intersect at right angles. Some of the staircases went in different directions on odd days of the week. By the time orientation was over, Russ was sure of only two things: the nurse was on the first floor, and the library was on the fourth. Beyond that, he was more lost than when he'd started.

By this time the morning classes had ended, and the school was going to lunch. Russ stood in the back of the Great Hall and observed the freewheeling way students came and went, just as they did at breakfast. Lily wasn't there.

*It would be easier, he thought, if I just took a sandwich and ate in the dormitory. That way I wouldn't have to sit with the others.*

There were a variety of sandwiches, and Russ took one that looked like chicken. He went down the dungeon steps and puzzled his way slowly through the twists, turns, and staircases that led to Slytherin house. On the second try he pronounced *Toujours pur* correctly and entered, going straight to the dormitory.

Aaron and Evan had his chest open and were looking through his things.

"That's . . . mine," said Russ from the doorway.

"Hufflepuffs have to pay a fine if they want to stay in Slytherin," said Aaron, and Russ realized they were looking for money.

"It's mine," Russ repeated.

"Leave it, Aaron," said Evan. "I bet he doesn't have anything to pay a fine with. Look at this junk. Muggle boy doesn't have anything anyone would want anyway. Let's go to lunch."

"Sure," said Aaron, letting the chest lid fall with a bang. "I'm hungry. And don't you get any ideas about looking at my things or I'll wipe the floor with that big muggle nose of yours."

Russ waited until they were gone, then opened the chest and checked his things. Everything was there, though it had been tossed about untidily. He found his wand and began to murmur a guarding spell. The cousins would have a much harder time opening that chest in the future.

Having done that, Russ sat on his bed eating his sandwich and studying for his first class that afternoon, Herbology, which was followed by History of Magic. Well before one o'clock, when the Herbology class started, Russ put an additional locking charm on the chest and left the dormitory to try to find the Herbology lecture room.

The Herbology lecture classroom was on the second floor, where its windows had a view of the greenhouse complex. Russ was the first Slytherin student into the room, though there were already several Ravenclaw students ahead of him. He took a seat at a desk towards the back.

By one o'clock, all the students were there and the Herbology professor came in. The other Slytherin students had said nothing to Russ, though Mitchell had nodded.

"Well, well," he said. "Fresh new faces. I am Professor Mullein. First, I have to call your names from the register, and then we can get started." Which he proceeded to do without commentary, to Russ's great relief.

"Good. Administrative business over. Now, let's see what you already

know. Who can tell me three important things that all plants need?" No one raised their hand. Mullein prompted them gently, "Now think, what do you have to give to plants?"

Russ was trying to obey his mother's instructions, but it was hard. *I know I'm suppose to let them think I have no experience, but Mum was really only worried about magic. This isn't magic, it's gardening. Timidly he raised his hand.*

"Yes, you young man in the back. Remind me of your name, please."

"Severus Snape, sir."

"And what three things would you guess, Master Snape?"

"Soil, water, and sunlight."

"Excellent! Thank you. And a point to Slytherin for your answer." Mullein paused. "Your face is familiar. Are you by chance Eileen Prince's son?"

"Yes, sir."

"A good Herbology student, too, your mother. That would make you Constantina Prince's grandson. A classic witch of the old tradition. Does wonders with herbs and potions. Now, as Master Snape has told us, plants need soil, water, and sunshine. Why is that? Because unlike us poor humans or members of the animal world, plants can make their own food. And they do it with air, water, and sunshine."

The first class was basically a lesson, minus chemical equations, on what muggles would call photosynthesis. It was meant to impress on the young, as yet unschooled minds, the importance of learning exactly how much water and sunlight, and what kind of soil, each plant needed. Russ already knew that each plant had its own requirements, but he'd never learned the technical reasons why before. He enjoyed the lesson thoroughly and jotted notes in his Herbology textbook.

It turned out that most of their lessons were with the Ravenclaw students. Their other class Thursday afternoons was History of Magic, and all twenty students walked together from the second to the first floor where Professor Binns's class was.

Professor Binns was a ghost. Like Professor Mullein, he had a register of the students in the class and read it out to responses of 'Here, sir' from all, but that would be the last time that year that he got their names right. This was apparently because he'd not been able to learn any new information since the day he died. He continued forward, perennially locked in 1922.

Binns started right away with lectures — it was the only teaching style he knew. And he started from the beginning with 30,000 year old Cro Magnon

amulets and grave goods. Russ was glad then that he'd spent so much time reading the text in August.

Here again, Russ's quill was busy scratching small cramped notes in the margins of his books and on scraps of parchment that he tucked between the pages. Professor Binns supplemented the book with lots of tidbits of history and sociology that the book didn't contain, but Russ only knew that because he'd read ahead. He didn't notice that the other boys kept glancing at him as if a diligent student was outside their frame of reference.

Mitchell walked beside Russ as the Slytherin students returned to their house to rest before dinner. "He knows your grandmother," he said after several minutes. "Mullein, I mean."

"He seems to . . . know of her. I never heard . . . her mention him."

"Didn't she go to school here?"

"My mother was . . . the first Hogwarts student in . . . the family."

"Oh. You took a lot of notes that last class."

"He said things I . . . wanted to remember."

"Yeah."

They entered the dormitory together. Aaron was standing by Russ's bed trying to open the chest. Every time he yanked on the lid, the chest jumped forward and tried to crush his toes. So far Aaron had escaped, but he was so determined to force the chest that crushed toes seemed inevitable. "What did you do to this thing?" he yelled at Russ as soon as he noticed Russ's presence.

Russ thought of his mother and her warnings about not making enemies, but that was something that had started when Nana had shown her the astrology charts. There were older lessons, and some enemies come ready-made. *Never let them see you're afraid. It's like blood to wolves.* His wand, kept in a special loop up the right sleeve of his robe, was ready if he needed it. The few open places in his brain were shutting down.

"I locked it," Russ replied to Aaron's question.

"You're going to open it." Aaron advanced on Russ, his hands balled into fists.

Mitchell stepped to one side, as if hoping the fight would be interesting.

"It's more fun watching you try," said Russ quietly.

Aaron paused, his eyes narrowing in reassessment, then he reached into the pocket of his robe. Russ didn't move a muscle, but his right hand now also held a wand, concealed by the loose folds of his own robe.

Turning slowly, Aaron pointed his wand at the chest and said, "*Alohomora!*" Replacing the wand, he grinned at Russ. "Now we'll see," he said.

He went back to the chest and pulled at the lid. It wouldn't open, but the chest attacked him again.

"If I'd known you were still just on *Standard Book of Spells, Grade One*," said Russ, "I wouldn't have wasted the effort."

Aaron pulled out his wand again, but it was clear he didn't know any other opening spells. He faced Russ, angry and frustrated, only to find that Russ's wand was pointing at him. He glared at both Russ and Mitchell, then stomped past them out of the room muttering, "Stupid half-breed," as he passed.

"That was pretty cool," Mitchell said. He looked down at Russ's right hand, but the wand had disappeared. "How'd you do that?"

Russ looked Mitchell in the eyes, his own as black as jet, impenetrable. "Do what?" he said, and went over to his bed where he sat facing the wall, trying to wind down and reopen some of the doors in his mind, a much more difficult task than closing them.

Mitchell shrugged and threw himself on his bed. "If I fall asleep, wake me for dinner," he said.

"Sure," Russ answered.

Dinner was more formal than breakfast and lunch, the whole school assembling in the Great Hall and filling the tables. Mitchell, who seemed to be perpetually hungry, left the dormitory before Russ. None of the others had come in, and Russ assumed that Aaron and Evan were together, probably with Aloysius.

Walking into the Great Hall at exactly dinner time, Russ noted that Aaron was next to Evan, but that Mitchell and Aloysius were together at a different part of the table. There was no room at the end of the table near the door, but there were several spaces along the sides. Russ walked to a section where there was an empty bench, ready to move if someone said it was taken. No one said anything, and he relaxed and looked at the food.

Over at the Gryffindor table, Lily smiled at him. She looked tired, and he reasoned that she, too, had had a busy day. Neither made any attempt to communicate. It was as if their friendship was as much a secret here as it had been in Lancashire.

That evening, back in the dormitory, Russ sat in bed and studied. He felt like he needed to find another place for that, but there were just too many new things to get used to. At home there were just him and his parents, and Lily on the odd Saturdays when she could get away. Russ was used to wide,



empty, rolling moors, and the quiet back streets of a small town in a mine and mill district. And to hours and hours of being alone.

Now he was almost never alone. The school was all heavy stone pressing around him and a maze of corridors where you couldn't see the sky to get your bearings. Slytherin house didn't even have windows. The common room was crowded and noisy. The classrooms were regimented rows of desks. Russ began to doze.

Suddenly, the other boys were racing into the dormitory room, opening chests and pulling out books. Russ was wide awake immediately. He'd forgotten it was Thursday night and they had Astronomy. Together the five boys and five girls raced up out of the dungeons, running into ten Hufflepuff students on the main staircase who were going in the same direction. At least with the whole group of them together, it would be hard to get lost.

The Astronomy lecture room was on the seventh floor, and the children were all out of breath by the time they got there. Professor Sinistra, a rather calm lady with gray hair, was already waiting. "Good," she said, "you didn't forget. They sometimes do for the first lesson." She called the names on the register, then told them that this first class would be short since they'd had no preparatory lectures on what they were supposed to be looking at. This evening, they would just familiarize themselves with the location of the tower and the compass points.

Russ followed the rest up the long spiral stair of the Astronomy Tower and onto its broad, flat roof. The air was cool and clean, and it was dark enough, for though the moon was nearing full, it took a couple of hours to rise above the surrounding mountains. Looking up, Russ drew in a deep, satisfied breath, for arched above him from horizon to horizon was the vast canopy of the night sky, glittering with millions of stars.

The next morning, Friday, Russ had Defense Against the Dark Arts and Transfiguration with Ravenclaw. Dark Arts was the only class where the Slytherin students didn't share the classroom with another house. Professor Wildacre was new and just getting used to the curriculum, so after calling the names on the register she set the students to memorizing the definition of Dark Arts and the five classes of dark spells (Unforgivable Curses, Curses against the Mind, Curses against the Body, Hexes, and Jinxes). It was quite dull and pointless, especially since Russ was perfectly aware that any spell could be considered a dark one if it was used in the wrong way.

Professor McGonagall in Transfiguration was more interesting, especially since school rumor had it that she was secretly an animagus. It was fun to sit

there quietly and wonder what sort of animal she might transfigure herself into, while she was demonstrating how to turn a mouse into mustache wax. *I wonder what happens to your mustache after the mouse is transformed back into itself. Do you have mouse guts all over your face?* Transfiguration was the only subject that was new to Russ. His mother hadn't been good at it, and had never taught him. It was the only place so far where Russ felt like he was really learning something.

In the afternoon they had Charms with Ravenclaw and the first Astronomy lecture period. Russ's delight at finding someone else in the school as small as he was didn't last long, for Aaron and Evan started a whispered speculation as to whether there wasn't more than one part-goblin in the school. Being thought related to Professor Flitwick was definitely a minus. It was in this class that Russ really had to work hard at pretending he didn't know anything. Spells were just too easy for him.

Astronomy was like Herbology — it didn't deal with magic. Here was a place where Russ's muggle knowledge could shine. His familiarity with the Apollo program and understanding of satellites and orbits stood him in good stead. The night sky was a friend, and terms like 'retrograde movement' were old, familiar vocabulary.

When Russ returned to Slytherin house after dinner in the Great Hall, there was a subtle change in its mood. People noticed him, watched him, and the feeling wasn't friendly. No one said anything, but Russ was sure Aaron had mentioned he was a half-blood. He slipped as quickly as possible through the common room and into his dormitory, not going out again until most of the rest had gone to bed, when the lavatory area was empty and he could wash and brush his teeth in peace.

The following day was Saturday. Russ got to the Great Hall early, and then dawdled over his breakfast. Lily came in fifteen minutes after he did, and though they exchanged glances, neither spoke nor even signaled each other. Russ was nervous about letting the other Slytherin students know he had a Gryffindor friend, and it appeared Lily felt the same. Lily ate quickly, then said something to the girl sitting next to her, rose, and walked out of the Great Hall. A moment later, Russ followed her.

Lily was standing next to the great oak doors leading outside. As soon as she saw Russ, she slipped out the doors. Russ crossed the entrance hall and started down the passage to Slytherin house, then seemed to change his mind, turned, and went outside, too. It was like being back in Lancashire, sneaking

through the streets and around the moors so that neither his family nor hers would ever see them together.

Russ saw Lily near the cliff overlooking the lake. This was his first time outside the Castle, but it was clearly not Lily's. She led him along the cliff, down a little path opposite the stands of a stadium, and along the lake shore to the trees. There the two sat under a tree, shielded from the sight of the Castle. It was as if nothing had changed.

"Are you all right?" Lily asked, looking worried.

"Yeah, fine. Why?" It wasn't a lie. Right at that moment Russ was fine.

"Everybody in Gryffindor says that Slytherins hate muggle-borns and half-bloods. That's why I didn't try to talk to you. I didn't want to get you into trouble." She paused. "They also say the students in Slytherin are wicked and practice dark magic."

"Funny. The students in Slytherin say Gryffindors are bullies and care only about power. Anyway, they already know I'm a half-blood. Some are mean about it. I don't know about the others yet. How are your classes?"

"Pretty good. We had Astronomy last night, and I kept thinking about the moon missions. Do you know that almost none of them even know people have been to the moon? I thought that was sort of dumb. But I really liked my Charms class. The professor said I'm a natural."

Russ smiled a little. "The Herbology teacher knows about my grandmother. He called her a classic witch. I think that helped a little with some of the others in the dormitory. Like making up for being half muggle."

"Do you have any friends yet?" Lily asked.

"Sure," Russ replied. "You."

They chatted for a while, and Lily asked Russ about some of the words the ghost Professor Binns had used, then they went separately back into the Castle to study and do homework. They promised to meet every Saturday and Sunday morning after breakfast. Then on Monday, they would see each other in the one class they had together — Potions.

Potions Monday morning with Gryffindor was a joke. Russ 'd helped his Nana brew medicines from time to time since he was five, and already knew a tisane from a decoction, and how to extract an essence, but Mum said not to let them know, not to make them notice, not to be a target, so he had to pretend. Professor Slughorn wandered around the room watching the students, clearly only paying attention to his favorites. Russ was too much Nana's grandson to botch a potion, so he made it the best he could — knowing Slughorn would never see it — then, when it was perfect, added a

little more crushed snake fang and a few nettles, reducing the potion's quality to mediocre. Lily noticed and made a face at him, but he ignored her.

It turned out that the two of them couldn't make contact in Potions class either, for the Slytherin students were watching him, and the Gryffindor students were watching her. Not that any Slytherins suspected the friendship. They just watched him because he was a half-blood. In Lily's case it was different. The two bullying boys from the train already knew Russ and Lily were friends. They were constantly glancing over, as if to be sure she was toeing the line.

That afternoon, after Herbology, the first year Slytherins had the rest of the day off. Russ left the Castle by himself, seeking a place to be alone. He found it at the bottom of the cliff, out of sight of any window, and reachable by a narrow path. There he sat with his schoolbooks to study. Weekday afternoons were not a time to be with Lily. That was for weekend mornings when half the school was sleeping in.

Dumbledore was meeting with the teachers at exactly the same time, getting a first impression of the newest students.

"And you, Minerva? What of your charges? How is our youngest member of the Black tribe taking his exile from Slytherin?"

"That boy is mischief personified. He'll be terrorizing the whole school before he's in third year. Do you know he's already found a way to get onto the roof of Gryffindor tower?"

"Do tell? I was hoping that would take him at least two weeks. And the thin one? Lupin?"

"Shy and withdrawn. The others have been teasing him a bit, but I think it'll calm down, so I'm not saying anything. Just keeping an eye on it. Pity that he's been sick the last few days and missed this morning's classes. It makes it just that little bit harder on him."

"I was sorry to hear that, but it was not unexpected. His health is fragile. He does need to see Madam Deering on a regular basis," Dumbledore nodded to the school nurse, "but it should not interfere seriously with his studies. Are there any other areas of concern?" McGonagall shook her head, and Dumbledore turned to Slughorn. "And what of Slytherin house, Horace? Any problems surfacing there? They are not bothering the little one, the Snape boy, are they? He is a half-blood, you know."

Slughorn shook his head. "Everything smooth in Slytherin, just as usual."

McGonagall coughed slightly. "I'd keep an eye on that one if I were you."

He's a loner, not shy but withdrawn. I got the feeling he was assessing everyone as a potential opponent."

Dumbledore pondered this for a long time after the others left. It was not the first time that a thin, dark-haired, pale-faced half-blood had been sorted into Slytherin house. That other one had been cold, withdrawn, and calculating, too. It bore watching. It definitely bore watching. It was fortunate that the other Slytherin boys were not teasing the child. Ostracism could be devastating to a young psyche. Dumbledore made a mental note to check frequently with Slughorn about it.

Russ returned to Slytherin house just before dinner, planning to leave his books in the dormitory. Just as he reached the door to his room, he heard a bit of conversation — Aloysius's voice.

"... just that Dad told me to get to know you because he and your dad... Well, you know... It'd be a good thing if students like us..."

Russ opened the door then, not trying to conceal his presence. He didn't want to be accused of listening at doors. Aloysius stopped talking immediately, and Evan, for that was the one he was talking to, got up from Aloysius's bed where he'd been sitting and moved across the room to his own.

Paying absolutely no attention to either one, Russ traversed the room to his corner, deposited his books, straightened his robes and his biretta, and walked out again, not having said a word to either boy. As he closed the door behind him, the conversation was renewed.

"Do you think he heard us?" Evan asked nervously.

"Nah." Aloysius's voice was scornful. "Don't worry about it. A little half-muggle like that doesn't have a clue what's going on in the real world."

*It depends*, Russ thought, *what you consider the real world to be...* but he made a note to talk to Lily about it on the weekend.

#### FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 10, 1971 (THE DAY BEFORE THE LAST QUARTER MOON)

The rest of the week passed without much change. Each class was three times a week except Defense Against the Dark Arts (twice) and Potions (once). The schedule was complex, but first years had only two hours in the morning daily and two in the afternoon Tuesday and Wednesday. Thursday evening was the Astronomy practical session, and it appeared Friday's second afternoon hour would be for Flying Lessons. Monday after Herbology, the rest of the afternoon was free.

Russ was now spending a large part of his free time studying by the lake. He even took his lunch down there to be alone. It wasn't too bad. He was used to being either around adults or alone, and he didn't suffer much from it. It was a more pleasant place than home because here no one hit him. On the weekends he could be with Lily. The rest was minor.

Until the second Friday evening, that is. Russ went straight to dinner where he sat and ate alone as was his wont, trying not to watch Lily chatting with the other girls in her dormitory. Then he went back to his dormitory and to the lavatory to wash his hands and brush his teeth.

Aaron and Evan were there, as were a couple of third years. "Do you smell something?" one of them said.

"Smells like a mongrel to me. Muggles always smell."

Russ turned to leave the lavatory, but the third year blocked his way. "We've never seen you take a bath, half-breed, and we think you smell."

There was no point in explaining that he washed every morning before they were awake, since that wasn't what this was about. "I'll try to do better," Russ said, wishing he could see where the boys behind him were standing.

"Not good enough. I have a better idea. Why don't we give you a bath right now? We've got hot water. We've got soap. We've got the scrub brushes. Wash that muggle smell right off you, so your dorm mates can sleep tonight."

The panicky realization of what they intended was shutting Russ down completely. He stepped to one side and let his wand slide into his hand, but Aaron was ready for this. From behind, he forced Russ's wand hand down, and slipped his other arm around Russ's neck. Evan was running hot water into one of the tubs. The second third year produced soap and brushes while the one who'd blocked his way starting unbuttoning Russ's collar.

"A nice bath," he said. "To get rid of the mongrel smell."

Russ kicked out and connected with a shin, then began to struggle fiercely. His tormentor swore, seizing the smaller boy by the hair and twisting a hand in the collar. "You little mudblood spawn! I'm going to enjoy this." With Aaron's help, he dragged the kicking Russ over to the steaming tub.

Danger had by now focused everything into sharp clarity, and Russ began to broadcast silent commands, spells inspired over the last two years by words from his great-grandfather Wenny's Greek dictionary — *Phouskala! Spuraki! Aimateré muté!*

With cries of alarm, both Aaron and the third year released him as blisters, boils, and pustules erupted on their skins. Evan grabbed a towel and clamped it to his face to stem the sudden stream of blood from his nose. Russ, free of

their grasp, lunged for the door, pausing there to issue a wordless *Accio!* to his wand, which sprang into his hand. Without a backward glance, he raced for the dormitory room where he would have a wall at his back and the more neutral witness of Mitchell in case he was pursued.

He was not pursued. About five minutes later, another third year stuck his head in the door. "They'll leave you alone if you reverse the spells," he said quickly and nervously, then left.

Mitchell, who'd been watching ever since Russ came bolting into the room, asked, "What spells?" but a look at Russ's jet black eyes told him the question was futile.

After a moment, Russ released a deep breath and, wand still in hand, walked out of the dormitory to the common room and from there to the lavatory. Those students still in the common room watched him warily. At the lavatory door, Russ paused.

"I don't want you to touch me," he said.

"We won't," the third year replied. "Just undo the spell." His nose was dripping blood, and his face and hands were pocked with eruptions.

Russ pointed his wand and thought *Therapeia!* four times. He didn't really need the wand at these close quarters, but it would look better to the others. Then he returned to the dormitory to calm himself and reopen doors.

Nobody bothered him for the rest of the evening. Nobody even spoke to him. Before retiring for the night, Russ walked slowly around his bed, silently casting guard spells. Though it was best to be cautious, he wasn't really worried because he didn't think they'd have the nerve to attack him. They'd gotten a taste of what he could do.

More important, they hadn't seen the scars on his back.

The next morning, Russ went straight to the Great Hall, picked up some food and made something resembling a sandwich, and went straight out to the lake and the trees past the Quidditch stadium. Lily arrived half an hour later.

"How was your week?" was her first question.

"Fine. How was yours?"

"It was great. I'm learning so much, and the other girls in the dorm are really nice. Morwen's helping me with Herbology, and I'm helping her with Astronomy. Mary has this funny tortoiseshell cat named Spooks, and Calpuria knows all kinds of jokes. Are you having fun with your dorm mates?"

"Yeah, except they all like Quidditch, and I don't know much about it. And Aaron and Evan are cousins, and Aloysius's dad's in business with Evan's

dad, so they already know each other. It's harder when they're already a group and you're the only new one. Besides, you know . . . me. I never had a lot of . . . friends anyway."

Lily looked at Russ shrewdly. "You're stammering," she said. "Are you sure everything's all right?"

"Yeah." Russ didn't want to upset Lily with his problems. He'd already realized that it was a good thing she hadn't been sorted into Slytherin. It would have been much worse for her than for him. Now he just wanted their time together to be pleasant so that she'd enjoy talking with him. Otherwise she might prefer the company of the cat, or the girl who told jokes. "What did you think of the Potions class?"

"I wanted to ask you about that! What did you do to your potion? It looked great, then all of a sudden it got cloudy."

"I told you. Mum doesn't want anyone to know they've already taught me stuff. I'm supposed to lie low for the first year or so, so we don't get in trouble with the Ministry."

"I forgot about that. Do you understand the Potions homework?"

"Sure." They spent the next hour talking about the different ways of extracting oils and essences from plants. Then they split up, Lily going to the library, and Russ staying by the lake near the boat grotto, right at the foot of the cliff.

That evening after dinner, as Russ crossed the common room to the corridor leading to the dormitories, he heard his name.

"Snape? Could I have a word with you?" It was the fifth year prefect named Rabastan.

Russ walked over to him and sat in the chair the older boy indicated. He didn't say anything.

"I hear there was a little trouble last night. Students aren't supposed to be fighting or hexing each other, you know," Rabastan said.

This was a different kind of fight. Russ shut his doors and looked Rabastan in the eyes, closed down and innocent. "They wanted to fool around. I didn't want to play. They had trouble understanding that, so I had to make it clear."

Rabastan's eyebrows shot up in surprise. "So I heard. Really clear. Where'd you learn to do that?"

"Do what?"

"Make things clear."

"No place. Some things just happen."



Now Rabastan was trying to control a frown. "Just make sure it doesn't 'just happen' again."

"Yes, sir." Russ got up and went into the dormitory where Mitchell greeted him and the others ignored him. He performed his new ritual of guard spells, got into bed, and fell quickly asleep.

On Sunday, Russ started for the trees to meet Lily, but realized Aaron was watching him. He skirted the Castle, ducked into a cloistered courtyard, doubled back through the entrance hall, then slipped outside and down the passageway leading to the boat grotto. From there it was easy to tell if he'd gotten rid of his shadow, or if he was still being followed. No one came after him, and he continued downward and out along the lake shore, hidden from the view of the castle by the rocks of the cliff.

Lily had a bunch of jokes for him, courtesy of Calpurnia, and they spent an hour laughing at them. Then the interlude was over, and Russ went back to his now normal life of solitude and study, eager for the next weekend when he could again be with a friend.

It was the end of the week before Aaron and Evan were brave enough to try again. During that week, Russ noticed that others in Slytherin were watching him even more than before, but with a difference. Now there was a touch of wariness. Russ was content. *Oderint dum metuant*. [*Let them hate, so long as they fear.*]

Russ was consciously building a wall around himself. At every meal he took some food and went elsewhere. In every class he buried his nose in his books, refusing even to notice the names of his classmates. During free time he went to the lake or hunted for corners of the Castle where no one else went. His initial timidity at Hogwarts' great size was diminishing, and he even began exploring the dungeons. He only returned to Slytherin house for curfew and to sleep.

Classes were hard, for he still tried to obey his mother's instructions about staying unnoticed. Flitwick, McGonagall, and Wildacre, he knew, saw him in the ranks of the mediocre. Binns and Slughorn didn't see him at all. Only Mullein and Sinistra seemed to realize that he was better than he allowed others to see, though both respected his clear desire for privacy.

On the third Friday, the seventeenth, Flying Lessons started with Mr. Overhill. It was not something that Russ was looking forward to. The students lined up with their brooms, simple school brooms, to their right side, hand outstretched, and called "Up!" A few of the brooms responded. Others quivered or jerked. Russ's broom didn't move. "Up!" he repeated.

"Up!" Aaron and Evan were snickering. None of the others, including the Ravensclaws with whom they were taking the lessons, seemed to notice since they were having troubles of their own.

Two Ravenclaw boys got their brooms up into their hands at the first try, as did both Aaron and Evan. No one else did as well, though others were slowly getting the idea. Russ's broom remained adamantly on the ground. Since Overhill was not about to delay the lesson for a few students, he sent those who were having no success to one side to try to get control of their brooms. The three were Russ, the Slytherin girl named Maladicta Trimble, and a Ravenclaw girl. None of them could get their brooms to move. They didn't talk to each other.

The fiasco with the broom seemed to embolden Aaron, who took it as evidence that Russ was not as powerful as previously thought. He laughed about the episode as they went in to dinner. "I swear, I was beginning to think it was the janitor's broom, that's how quiet it was, but when I tried it, it came right to hand. Guess some people aren't cut out to ride brooms. Something to do with blood."

Russ took some bread and an apple and went out into the early evening to watch the sun go down and try to forget his failure.

The other first years were in the common room when Russ reached Slytherin house just before curfew. Aaron and Evan followed him into the dormitory, Aloysius and Mitchell not far behind. Evan was doing a crude imitation of the way Russ edged sideways along the common room wall so that he had the wall to his back and was facing the others.

"You walk like a spider!" Evan sneered.

"Don't you . . . like spiders?" Russ asked innocently.

"Disgusting things," said Evan. "Almost as bad as muggles."

Russ didn't answer. Instead he went over to his bed and sat down. There was something different about the night stand. The drawer had been opened and not completely shut again. Russ reached over and opened the drawer. The Hufflepuff badge was gone. When he turned around, Aaron was holding it.

"That belongs . . . to me," Russ said coldly. "Give . . . it back."

"We don't want lousy Hufflepuff garbage in Slytherin any more than we want lousy half-bloods." Aaron took out his wand and pointed it at the badge.

"It's mine." Russ repeated. "Give it to me."

With a few waves of his wand, Aaron cut the badge to shreds and set it on fire. Russ said nothing, but returned to his bed. There he changed into his night clothes, then looked over to the laughing Aaron and Evan. *Folia*

*arachnon!* he thought in Evan's direction, and towards Aaron *Pseires!* The lights had barely gone out when Aaron began to shriek.

The prefects got Slughorn, who got Professor Dumbledore and Madam Deering. "I have to get him upstairs," Deering said. "We need to check the whole dormitory and disinfest the bed. His head will take more than a few minutes, though. How he could have such a bad case of lice and not realize it before is beyond me." Beside her Aaron kept running his hands through his hair and blubbering.

Dumbledore looked around. Amidst the turmoil, Eileen Prince's son sat quietly on his bed looking shyly at the floor. Calm, innocent, well-behaved. "Is there anything you wish to tell me about this?" Dumbledore asked gently.

The boy shook his head, not looking up. Just so another shy exterior had masked a wizard of formidable power. Just so another half-blood boy had denied knowledge of incidents that had gradually grown to terrify his house mates.

Dumbledore helped escort the Wilkes boy up to the hospital wing. He did not wish to leap to unfair or unjustified conclusions, but he was deeply disturbed.

From the moment Aaron returned from the hospital wing, his head lice now gone, Russ's house mates in Slytherin ceased to tease him. Instead they ignored him altogether. If this was meant to be some sort of punishment for being both a half-blood and a student who could conjure a headful of lice, it didn't work. Russ didn't feel punished. He preferred to be left alone.

The only one still suffering was Evan. Starting the night of the lice, Evan discovered that he'd acquired a nest of spiders over his bed, and occasionally one would drop onto his face or into his mouth while he was sleeping, or even weave cobwebs attached to his ears or nose. His efforts to get rid of the nest weren't successful, but it seemed silly to complain to Slughorn about an occasional spider. He didn't talk to Russ about it, as that might seem like surrender.

Mitchell acted as if he might like to talk to Russ, but the other students made it clear that if he did, he would be ostracized, too. In any case, Russ never acted as if he wanted anyone to talk to him, and so it was easy to let him be by himself, and to give him a wide berth in the common room when he passed through, just to avoid unpleasantness.

Russ made it easier on the others by staying out of Slytherin house as much as possible. When he could, he used the regular lavatories on the different floors, and he found other sources of clean water in the springs that

bubbled up here and there in the cliffs around the lake. He spent his spare time in the library or at the lakeside, and wrote lengthy and meticulous assignments for his different classes. Weekend mornings of course, were different.

The one failure was Flying. Russ could not control a broom. The single time he managed to mount one, it bucked and threw him off while the others laughed. It wasn't really important. There wasn't an OWL in broomsticks.

It was in Potions that Russ scared the other students. He worked alone, and by this time it wasn't just Lily who noticed him, it was all the Slytherin students as well, for Russ would make a perfect potion in record time then, while they all watched, would do something to lower its quality. When he caught another Slytherin student watching, Russ would just smile.

"Why did you do that?" Mitchell whispered to Russ after watching him intentionally get a lower grade on a potion to reduce hives. During Potions class was almost the only time they talked now. The others were usually struggling with their own potions and paid no attention.

"I don't... like Slughorn," Russ replied.

"But you get poor marks in Potions."

"Who cares? I know I can... do it. No one... else needs to know."

"But you need good marks to get a good job."

"Not from him. I checked. He doesn't... give the OWL or the NEWT, and only the... OWL and the NEWT matter."

"So what he teaches you is..."

"Baby stuff. I could pass either... test right now."

"Wicked."

Russ heard a sound and turned to find Evan watching him. Evan immediately turned away, but Russ remarked, ostensibly to Mitchell, "There are other... potions, too. Ones that can turn your... brains to jelly so they run... out your ears..." Evan moved to a table farther off.

"Where do you go during dinner?"

Russ stared at Mitchell calmly, as if he were a laboratory specimen. "My... business," he said. "Not yours."

"All right. Have it your own way."

What Professor Slughorn didn't notice, Professor Flitwick did. The talents of a student with no background in spell casting, and the talents of a student concealing a background in spell casting are quite different.

"He isn't failing at his first attempts because he can't do it," Flitwick told Dumbledore. "He's doing a different spell technique that doesn't match the spell he's supposed to do. Then, after several 'unsuccessful' attempts, he

switches techniques and does the spell perfectly. The other students think he's struggling to learn the material, but he's really just playing a game. The Slytherin boys seem to understand that now because they don't tease him about it anymore. They stay clear of him."

"Have you seen any evidence of his performing unusual spells, things you never saw before?"

"Would causing another student's levitation feather to tear to pieces count? I couldn't figure out how it happened, but if he did it, it was nonverbal and without direct wand action."

"Whose feather was mutilated?"

"A Slytherin boy. Aaron Wilkes."

"Did Master Wilkes think that Master Snape had done it?"

"Oh, no. He just thought he'd done the spell wrong. I didn't tell him it wasn't possible in that situation. I was trying to work out how it could have happened."

Dumbledore drummed his fingers thoughtfully on his desk after Flitwick left. *Hexes, advanced spells — it makes one wonder if perhaps certain things are escaping Professor Slughorn's attention in Potions. But how to verify it?*

Until well into the small hours, Dumbledore paced his office, puzzling over patterns and coincidences and the peculiar workings of fate. Two boys, so similar — and he did not wish the second to go the way of the first.

Both were from old wizard families that were nonetheless outside the mainstream of wizard life. Dumbledore was just beginning to research the background of his former student, Tom Riddle, and the picture of an ancient and traditional, but provincial and poverty-stricken family was one part of the pattern. True that the Snape boy did not appear to be related to any of the founders, but the witches of the Pendle region had their own traditions.

Then both had the air of changeling children. Riddle, of course, had been abandoned and orphaned, left to be raised unaware of the fact that he was a wizard. Dumbledore knew of no similar problem in young Snape's family, and yet there was that strong sense that there was something other about him that Dumbledore could not quite place.

And why would the Sorting Hat place the child of a Hufflepuff girl into Slytherin house? And a half-blood to boot? It was another disturbing part to the pattern.

Dumbledore had also to add recent events. There had been no head lice when Wilkes entered Hogwarts three weeks earlier, of that Dumbledore was certain. And yet the lice had appeared without wand or warning, suddenly

there. Something was happening in the first year dormitory of Slytherin house that Slughorn was blithely unaware of. Was Wilkes the offender, and Snape retaliating? Or was Snape the manipulator as Riddle had been, already gathering followers and intimidating those who would not follow? Neither boy had accused the other of anything — itself a bit of a mystery — and yet Dumbledore knew it was between the two of them.

Now Flitwick revealed that the Snape boy was deliberately concealing a talent for spells — for curses, hexes, and jinxes, no doubt — of an astounding magnitude in one so young and so outside the normal wizard milieu. Patterns were forming into dark, frightening shapes.

The Headmaster got little rest that night, for the problem was potentially a great one. They had not watched over Tom Riddle enough from the beginning, and the wizarding world was beginning to reap the consequences. It could not afford a second Lord Voldemort.

“The Snape boy? Little Severus? Why he’s a darling child! I wish all my students were like him.” Professor Sinistra adjusted the cap over the end of a telescope, checking for cracks and loose fitting. “He wants to come up to the tower and observe the twilight sky, particularly as the moon wanes to new and waxes again. He says it has something to do with Saturn and Apollo and America, which I don’t completely understand, but I’m not about to stand in the way of such enthusiasm. And he really is looking at the sky, mind you. I’ve peeked up here to check.”

“So he already knows a lot of astronomy?” It was something Dumbledore had not expected.

“Sir, that child knows a thing or two that I don’t. He’s that good. He has a few strange ideas — he thinks we should know what the other side of the moon looks like — but anything that gets a boy to want to look through a telescope is a good thing in my opinion.”

“Snape? About the same as any other student. Not at ease with Transfiguration. I don’t think he’s ever done it before. He does have skill with a wand. I’d expect him to shine more at Charms. It’s the metamorphosis he has trouble with, as if he wants things to be . . .”

“Yes?” Dumbledore prompted as McGonagall hesitated.

“Well, Albus, predictable. Dependable. He has that attitude, you know the one. He wants to know where he stands, and feels uncomfortable when things around him keep shifting. I don’t have to tell you what a common problem that is in Transfiguration.”

Wildacre thought deeply about the question. “If I were to go by his daily

performance in class, I'd say mediocre. He won't answer questions, he doesn't grasp the material, he's abnormally shy . . . no, shy isn't the word. Reticent."

Dumbledore waited a moment, then spoke. "That is his performance in class. What else is there?"

"His written assignments. Well considered, well researched. If I didn't know he was a first year, I'd think he was preparing for OWLs. I'm not complaining, but the written performance and the spoken performance don't match."

"He's his grandmother's grandson." Mullein seemed to think no other evaluation was needed.

Dumbledore raised his eyebrows. "I do not know that I have ever heard of his grandmother."

"She's a local potions brewer in eastern Lancashire. I travel a lot in the summer, looking for new potions or different recipes for old ones. Mrs. Prince is a witch and healer of the classic tradition. Those in the trade know her. Severus takes after his grandmother."

"I wouldn'ta thought ya'd be so worried about one little boy," said Hagrid as he fixed Dumbledore a cup of tea.

"It is not the boy himself that I am worried about, at least not on a cosmic level. It is his potential that concerns me. There is circumstantial evidence to indicate that he knows more about certain aspects of magic than our seventh years."

"Why would ya think that was bad? Sounds good t' me." Hagrid set the cup and saucer down and watched while Dumbledore added sugar. "A boy ought t' live up t' his potential."

"Oh, Hagrid. You know what trouble a boy with too much potential can cause. You have had first hand experience. And now the wizarding world is having too much . . ."

Hagrid began fizzing in laughter, which caused Dumbledore to stop stirring his tea and look up in irritation. "I was not aware that I had said anything funny," he said grumpily.

The last laugh was more of a bark. "You're comparing that wee thing to We-Ain't-Supposed-t'-Say-His-Name? I weren't here yet when he was sorted into Hogwarts, but that Snape boy ain't no Tom Riddle."

"What makes you say that? You haven't seen much of him at all."

"I seen enough. Train crew says he didn't hardly try t' find a seat — just plunked hisself at the back of the train in a corridor the whole trip, with a muggle-born girl. He weren't about t' climb into a boat with the others — I

had t' put him in one. He don't take meals in the Hall, an' he spends time by hisself at the lake—I seen him there. Now Tom, he'd be out there making contacts an' building power—what d' ya call it—influence. That Snape boy—he don't know nothing about building power. He just wants t' be left alone.”

It was reassuring, but Dumbledore wanted more certainty. “He has used some rather strong spells against his dormitory mates.”

“An' who told ya that? An' did they say why? No offense t' Professor Slughorn, mind you, but what goes on in Slytherin house can be mighty unpleasant.”

“How would you know that?”

“I got ears. I got eyes. I know when a boy's being bullied. Ya don't want t' step in right off, 'cause most of the time the boys fix it themselves, but ya can see if it's there. That boy were being bullied, and then it stopped. But he's spending more time from Slytherin than before. That tells me he took care of hisself, but he ain't trying t' build anything on it. You catch my meaning?”

Dumbledore relaxed somewhat, for what Hagrid observed on a gut emotional level was usually the truth, the gut emotional level being where most young people lived. “You have been watching him, then?”

“I got me a personal interest, being the biggest one at Hogwarts, in watching out f'r the littlest. Mind, if he grows, or if someone littler shows up . . . Ya ever ask why he got put in Slytherin?”

“The Hat will not say, except that it has something to do with guarding secrets. That did not make me feel more comfortable about the situation.”

“What secrets would a boy like that have t' hide?”

“Exactly. I do not know.”

And then there was Horace Slughorn.

“Well, Albus, let me see . . . I don't really have a firm grasp of his character yet. The boy isn't personable, you know. His mother? I don't think I recall his mother. Not Slytherin, of course.”

“No. Hufflepuff, actually.”

“There you go! I knew she wasn't Slytherin.”

“Have you spoken to the boy?”

“Naturally. Start of term interview and everything. Sullen child. Kept his head down the whole time. Answered in monosyllables. I'm not surprised he's doing poorly in some of his classes. Potions work—not top quality at all. I generally get better material sorted onto Slytherin.”



"I am sorry to hear that. Professors Mullein and Sinistra are impressed with him. Flitwick and Wildacre think he shows promise."

"Really?" Slughorn thought for a moment. "He does have a grasp of some, uh, techniques. And if he works hard his skills, hem, could improve. It isn't a lost cause, you know."

"Have there been any other incidents in the dormitories?"

"No, no. None at all. We run a tight ship in Slytherin. Firm hand at the helm."

"Well, I am sure you are watching out for all your students. Thank you, Horace."

## C H A P T E R   S E V E N

### S E T T L I N G   I N

"I think," Lily said with a contented sigh, "that broomsticks are the most wonderful thing in the world, don't you?"

Russ made a face, wrinkling his nose in distaste, but didn't respond.

Lily rolled onto her stomach on the soft autumn leaves. "It's just so wonderful to be able to go up into the air like a bird and look down on everything, and feel the breeze in your hair . . . Pretty soon I'll be able to steer the broom better and maybe go faster. Don't you just adore it?"

This time Lily noticed Russ's silence. She reached out and smacked him on the nose with the seed head of the blade of dry grass she was holding. "Aren't you enjoying flying on a broom, Severus?"

"I suppose," Russ replied with some dignity, "that I might enjoy it if I ever got around to doing it. As it is, I have other things to occupy my time."

"You take flying lessons, too! It's just like riding a bicycle. Almost."

The great thing about talking to Lily was not having to pretend. "I never had a bicycle," Russ said, "I never rode one."

"Do you mean," Lily giggled, "that you never got your broom up in air?"

"Up?" said Russ. "Are you saying they're supposed to go up? If I'd known that . . . Silly teachers never tell you anything."

Lily was laughing now, and tossed a handful of leaves in Russ's hair. "I bet I could get you to fly on a broomstick," she boasted.

It turned out that Lily, in fact, had a plan. They agreed to meet again after supper, and she went running back to the Castle. Russ waited a few minutes, then strolled to his usual place at the foot of the cliff. He'd only been there half an hour when it started to rain. With a sigh, Russ got up and went into the Castle. He spent the rest of the day studying in the library.

It continued raining all afternoon. Unable to take food from the table to eat outside, Russ stayed in the Great Hall, which also gave him the opportunity to see what Lily wanted him to do, since she couldn't go to their usual

meeting place either. A few moments after she left the hall, he rose and left, too.

Lily was at the end of the classroom corridor opposite the Hall. As soon as Russ appeared, she slipped down another corridor to the right, one that led to the fountain courtyard. Russ followed her out. There were a few students there, but it was easy to stand off to one side of the large courtyard and talk, basically unobserved.

"Tomorrow morning," Lily said, "go down to the Quidditch stadium. They keep the school brooms stabled there. Nobody 'll be there that early, and we can practice with the brooms for a while. I'm going to get you airborne!"

Russ returned to Slytherin for the night feeling more light hearted than usual. He was accosted in the passage to the dormitory by Aloysius. "What were you doing talking to a Gryffindor?" Aloysius said.

"Potions . . . homework," Russ replied.

"Why doesn't she ask her own house mates?"

"Gryffindors are . . . stupid at potions."

"She's a mudblood, isn't she?"

Russ had never heard the word before, but it didn't sound complimentary. "I don't know," seemed the most neutral reply. "I didn't . . . ask."

"Blood calls to blood, I guess. You might try to rise out of the ooze, you know. Part of you is supposed to be a wizard."

Russ didn't answer. Instead, he went inside the dorm and to his bed to get ready for the night. What Aloysius said didn't really bother him. On the day wizards walked on the moon, he'd start giving them credit for being almost equal to muggles. Not before.

The next morning after breakfast, Russ snuck down to the Quidditch stadium. Lily 'd already opened the broom lockers where the ordinary brooms were kept and selected a couple she knew to be docile and easy to manage. Neither of them responded to Russ's command of "Up!"

Lily stepped in and ordered a broom to rise. With the broom already in the air, Russ mounted and, on Lily's instructions, kicked into the air. For a moment, Russ had the heady feeling of hovering a few feet from the ground, the best he'd ever managed. Then the broom began to buck and tossed him onto the grass.

"That's an unusual dismounting technique," Lily said, laughing heartily. Russ smiled as she coaxed him back onto the broom. They were there for an hour, but with Lily's help Russ was finally able to get a broom up on

command, and to mount and hover. He had a fine sense of accomplishment that day.

**THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 30, 1970 (FOUR DAYS BEFORE THE FULL MOON)**

On the morning of the last day of September, Russ received his first owl message. The tawny owl was already up in the rafters waiting when he walked in to get his breakfast, and it swooped down and deposited a blue envelope in front of him before he started picking up food. Then it returned immediately to the rafters to wait for a reply.

A glance down the table showed Russ that his dormitory mates had seen the exchange and were curious. There was even the vague sense that getting an owl had brought him up a notch in their estimation. It made him more a wizard and less a muggle.

By this time Russ had gotten used to pumpkin juice, so he took a glass, put a couple of slices of bacon between two pieces of toast, and went back to the dormitory to read his letter.

*Dear Russ,*

*How are you doing in school? We all miss you and think about you. Your mum wants to know which house you were sorted into, and whether you're doing what you're supposed to in classes. Your dad had a spate of trouble getting used to you not being around, but he's back to normal now. He says you better not come home a 'college pudding' whatever that means.*

*This grandmother has finished drying her winter herbs and harvesting the last of the annuals. The pumpkins you planted at the start of the season are huge and could bring you a bit of pocket money, maybe even a sickle or two from the local 'community.' I'll let you know. The other one says you have to keep the second half of April free for sixteen. Destination Descartes. Crew Young, Mattingly, and Duke. Muggle talk, I suppose.*

*Don't think you have to answer right away. Your mum says Nelson can wait in the owlery a day or two while you write. We're all looking forward to getting your letter. And Mrs. Hanson is back and sends her love.*

*Nana*

Russ returned to the Great Hall and called Nelson. Once again he noted that the others were watching. He told Nelson to join the rest in the owlery while he thought about his answer, then watched as the owl flew away.

All during the day, Russ used his spare time to compose an answer to Nana. There were things that weren't so good, but he didn't want anyone to worry, especially his mother.

*Dear Nana,*

*Thank you for your letter. I got it at breakfast this morning. The news about the pumpkins is great. My Herbology class is my best, and Professor Mullein says he knows you. Do you know him? Tell mum she was right about that Potions teacher. He don't know half. I've been doing everything she told me.*

*I got into Slytherin like she thought I would. It's down in the spooky old dungeons and there aren't any windows. I don't stay there much. Tell dad a couple of the boys tried to mess with me, but I gave them what-for, and they don't mess with me any more. I won't be no pudding.*

*Classes keep me busy, but I get outside, too. There's mountains here, and a forest, and a lake. The castle is really big. I was scared at first but just for a day or two. Now I started exploring and I've got my bearings. I'm going to know it better than anybody.*

*Tell Gra I copy. I got a telescope in Astronomy class and everything is 'go' for April.*

*I miss you all, but don't worry. Things are fine here. Tell Mrs. Hanson I miss her, too.*

*Russ*

Later that afternoon, Russ climbed up to the owlery and found Nelson. He gave the owl a treat he'd saved from lunch, and sent it back home to Nana with his letter.

The next morning in Transfiguration, the Ravenclaw students had some interesting news. The headmaster himself had come into their first morning class, which was Astronomy lecture with Gryffindor, to see how they all were doing and make sure they were settling in well. He watched them make star charts for the polar region, and they showed him how they set up their telescopes. He even talked with a couple of students personally.

"It was scary at first," said Patience Ferguson. "He's so tall and it's like he sees everything. But he was nice, too. I thought he really wanted to be sure we were getting on all right. He says he's going to visit all the first year classes this month."

"Is he coming here?" Mitchell asked.

"I don't think so. Not today, anyway. I think he went to Dark Arts with Hufflepuff."

Russ thought about this information for a couple of minutes, but it didn't worry him. He turned his full attention to trying to transform a pin into a paper clip.

The first of Russ's classes to be visited by Dumbledore was Flying, that same Friday afternoon. Flying lessons only lasted for a month, after which it was assumed that first year students who wanted to continue on broomsticks could practice by themselves with the school brooms. Students who didn't want to continue didn't have to.

Professor Dumbledore arrived halfway through the lesson, but from some of the things he said to the students, Russ got the feeling he'd been watching from a window. He talked first to the Ravenclaws who were really good on their brooms, and to the Slytherins who were pretty good. He encouraged them to try out for Quidditch in their second year because the school could always use good players. He'd noticed some of their moves, and thought they were team quality.

Russ was now with the small group of students who could rise and descend on their brooms, but little else. There was one more lesson, but after that he was quitting brooms entirely. Even Lily's encouragement would never make him really like the experience. Mercifully, the headmaster paid no attention to the less than brilliant. It would have been mortifying to be singled out for notice because of ineptitude.

Dumbledore was enlightened so far by what he'd learned in the different classes. Young Black of Gryffindor, for example, was a definite mischief maker, and would need an eye kept on him. Three of his dorm mates — Lupin, Pettigrew, and Wintergreen — were overawed by him and perhaps a little frightened. The fourth, Potter, seemed to have already become a Black follower. There was a moment when Dumbledore worried that this boy, too, might be another Tom Riddle, but Black's skills were more physical than magical, and he was too open to be a plotter as Riddle had been.

Another good thing was that in Slytherin there had been no indication of

teasing or bullying when the children went out with their brooms for the flying lesson. The more proficient students had gathered for their next instructions while the less adept had started a review, but there was no exchange of words or gestures, no offensive or defensive body language, to express any kind of ill feeling. An excellent sign.

It was beginning to look as if Hagrid was right, and whatever problem there was had been dealt with by the boys themselves.

The next observation was Monday morning Potions with Gryffindor and Slytherin together. Dumbledore intentionally delayed his arrival until twenty minutes into the class, then was able to stand in the doorway for another ten minutes unnoticed by anyone while he watched the activity.

Slughorn was on the Gryffindor side of the room showing a group of girls how to shred the suckers from octopus tentacles. Other students were scraping soot from lamp chimneys or squeezing juice from marshberries. It looked like a writing potion, Duplicating Ink, that could be written on one page of parchment then, when the page was divided, reproduce the exact text on each part in slightly reduced size.

From his great height, Dumbledore looked down across the room onto the surfaces of the cauldrons. Most of the students were still in the preparation stage, but one cauldron shimmered with iridescent purple, a perfect Duplicating Ink. The pale pointed face of its maker regarded the creation with some pride.

Then, as Dumbledore watched, Master Snape took a vial of octopus ink from his robes and added exactly six drops. A quick stir, and the mixture had changed to dull black. It was now a perfectly serviceable ink, but not the Duplicating Ink it was meant to be.

Slughorn looked up. "Headmaster! I didn't see you. Welcome to my class. Come in, look at what the students are doing."

"With pleasure, Professor Slughorn. I see the students are quite industrious. Some have already reached the brewing stage, and one has even finished."

"Ah, yes. Sometimes I wish he wouldn't go so fast. He gets careless. Now look at this. Not what he's supposed to be making at all."

"It looks like there's a bit too much octopus ink," Dumbledore said. He watched carefully, but the Snape boy had dropped his gaze modestly at their approach — or maybe it was because he knew he'd been caught.

"Octopus ink? I don't think so. Suckers, yes, but there's no ink in this one." Slughorn looked around the table. "No, no ink."

"A mistake then," said Dumbledore, smiling slightly. He glanced around

at the Slytherin boys with the distinct feeling that they also knew more about the altered potion than Slughorn did, but didn't want to say anything. The feeling of foreboding returned.

"Perhaps, since he has plenty of time, Master Snape would like to try making his potion again. I remember having a bit of trouble with it myself when I was younger."

Under Dumbledore's gaze, Master Snape remade his potion, and Dumbledore was well aware that all of the Slytherin students were paying surreptitious attention. Once again the perfect, shining purple filled the cauldron, where no octopus ink tainted its purity.

"Wonderful!" cried Slughorn. "It's good to see you can make a potion. Now you have to try to do it when no one's watching."

Black eyes flickered up to Dumbledore's face and down again, though they did not meet the headmaster's own.

As soon as the lesson was over, Lily rushed out of the Potions class ahead of everyone, but then realized she'd left her quill and notebook behind and darted back in. In her haste, she bumped into Russ, murmured an apology, and was gone. Russ found himself holding a tiny piece of paper that said *Trees. Dinner.*

The afternoon seemed to drag, but finally it was dinner time. Russ grabbed some bread and fruit from the Slytherin table and went quickly to the meeting place. Lily was already there and wasted no time.

"He saw you!" she exclaimed even before he was safely under the shielding shade. "He knows what you did to the potion. How could you be so careless?"

"I... didn't see him. If I'd... seen him, I wouldn't have... done it."

"Do you think he'll report you? Do you think he'll tell the Ministry and have you expelled?"

"I... don't know."

"He can't do that," Lily insisted. "You're my best friend here. You're the one who prepared me for Hogwarts so that now I'm getting good marks in all my classes, so now I even understand what they're talking about and don't have to ask stupid questions. You made me fit in. They can't expel you! I'll go to Professor Dumbledore myself..."

"No." Russ's flat negative stopped Lily cold. "We can't do that. My dad... can't know you're my friend. Your dad can't know I'm your... friend. Slytherin and Gryffindor can't know either. I'll do my... best with Professor Dumbledore, but you have to stay out of it."



Lily agreed, and they returned to their separate dormitories. Russ's dorm mates eyed him speculatively as he prepared for the night, but said nothing.

There were in all sixteen classes to observe: two each for Astronomy, Charms, Flying, Herbology, Potions, and Transfiguration, and four for Defense Against the Dark Arts. Dumbledore did not visit Binns's classes since there would have been little point. What he saw confirmed two major worries—both Sirius Black and Severus Snape were of concern, but for very different reasons.

Black was self-confident, arrogant, sure of the validity of his own opinions and willing to enforce them. He had the air of a bully, though he did not yet seem to have bullied anyone, and he lacked any sense of the immorality of practical jokes. He enjoyed laughing at, rather than with, others. On the plus side, he seemed to enjoy laughing at himself as well, as long as the experience was not too embarrassing. Black harvested followers the way other students gathered in grades and awards. The more students looked up to him, the better he felt.

Snape, on the other hand, was quiet and self-effacing. He seemed not to care for the opinion of others, scorned notice or approval, and avoided social contact. And yet this boy was possessed not only of an understanding of witchcraft that many adults would envy, he had that strange, indefinable quality of being remote, alien, that none of the others had.

So different, so opposite, so great a potential problem each in his own right, so separately unlike that other problem, Tom Riddle—Dumbledore did not want to create a greater problem by distressing either boy, and yet he wanted a better grasp of what he held in his hands. He arranged appointments with all the first years, sandwiching Black and Snape into the middle of the general crowd.

The interview with Black was all fire and passion. This was a rebel, not merely discarding the views of his pureblood family, but renouncing them with the fervor of a religious convert decrying his old faith as heresy. Dumbledore came away from it with a firm understanding of why the Hat had placed young Sirius in Gryffindor, and more at ease with the boy's place in the future of the wizarding world.

Now Snape stood in Dumbledore's office, mute, ill at ease, waiting for questions to respond to, volunteering nothing. There was something in his self-conscious stance, the awkward placement of his hands at his sides, the slightly hunched shoulders and the defensive downward tilt of his head as he

watched a spot on the floor four feet ahead of him that suddenly reminded Dumbledore of Eileen. He was his mother's son.

"How are your classes, Master Snape? Are you having any problems?"

"No, sir. They're . . . fine, sir."

"And Slytherin house? Are you settling in well?"

"Yes, sir."

"I notice you do not eat much in the Great Hall. Is there a problem there?"

"No, sir." The silence stretched out, compelling the boy to continue. "Too . . . many people," he added, then stopped.

"Do you mean that you feel uncomfortable because the Hall is too crowded?"

"Yes, sir."

It was, Dumbledore thought, like pulling teeth. This was not liking speaking to Tom Riddle. Tom would not have stood so shyly, or answered so shortly, or stuttered. *I wonder now if the problem is that he has never had friends his own age. Or any friends at all, for that matter. If that is the case, then Hogwarts must be an intimidating place. And trying to force the issue might only make it worse.*

"Thank you, Master Snape. I hope your time at Hogwarts is pleasant and profitable. If you ever have anything you wish to talk with me about, do not hesitate."

"Yes, sir. Thank . . . you, sir," and the boy was gone.

Russ scuttled quickly down the spiral staircase, relieved that the ordeal was over. He found Dumbledore terribly frightening — so tall, with his long beard and long hands, and the piercing blue eyes that could probably steal every thought in Russ's head if he wanted to. Russ wanted desperately not to be noticed by the headmaster, and was unnerved by the knowledge that Dumbledore was aware that he did not eat in the Great Hall.

The seventh floor was the natural abode of Gryffindor and Ravenclaw. A Slytherin student ought not to be there alone, and so Russ scurried for the nearest staircase. It took him to the fifth floor and a long corridor leading to the stairs downward. Here, blessedly, there was no one, and Russ continued on to the library where he hid at a table in a corner, behind a large book.

There he stayed until dinner time, when another momentous decision loomed. Should he avoid the Great Hall altogether and miss supper, or go and take food away with him, or go and eat in the Hall? It was a question of which action would cause the headmaster to notice him the least. With a sigh, Russ left the library and headed for the Great Hall.

He saw Mitchell in the entrance hall, and walked in behind him. For lack of a better plan, he stayed near Mitchell, picked up a small plate and start putting bits of food on it.

"Where do you go with that?" Mitchell said next to him.

Russ had started at the voice, but quickly recovered. "Out," he replied.

"Why don't we just sit here. I want to ask you something."

At the teachers' table, Dumbledore watched. It was a good time to have someone to talk to. "Right," Russ said.

They didn't sit at the very end, for that had been taken over by a rough group of fifth years, but space not too far up the table was usually relatively clear. The two boys sat next to each other on a bench, and Mitchell heaped his plate. The were a study in contrasts, the big sandy-haired athlete and his small, dark companion.

"Why don't you eat more? You'd grow some if you did." Mitchell bit into a forkful of Yorkshire pudding.

"No. I'm naturally . . . small."

"Why? Are your mom and your dad small?"

Russ thought about this for a moment. Neither his mum nor his dad was small, but he'd grown up being told his size was natural. Now he wondered, too. "No, just me," he answered.

"Well I'm just naturally big. My uncle has me down for a beater or a keeper if Chudley'll take me. I'd rather be a chaser, but I don't have the build." He paused. "You don't know anything about Quidditch, do you?"

"It's a . . . game." Russ shrugged.

"Do you have to always talk like that?"

"Like . . . what?"

"Like th . . . th . . . this."

Russ stopped eating his dinner and was silent.

Mitchell pretended to ignore him for a moment, then relented. "Look, I'm sorry. It's just I was sure it was an act."

"Why?"

"Cause you didn't talk like that when you were facing Aaron down. You talked really good then."

"That was . . . different. Aaron is . . . dangerous."

Mitchell chewed a bit more, then turned suddenly and made a hideous face at Russ. "There," he said, "now I'm dangerous, too, and you can talk straight."

"It doesn't . . . work like that," Russ said, but he was almost smiling.

"So, you're Sev?" Mitchell asked later in the dormitory.

"Severus," Russ said firmly. He wanted no undue familiarity from people potentially set on him as spies, however nice they might seem.

"Doesn't matter," Mitchell said. "They say only the first years go by given names. Everybody else uses last names. So by next year we'll be Edison and Snape anyway. I kind of like it. Sounds more grown up."

That suited Russ fine. He didn't want anyone using his own name but his family. Outsiders could use Severus, but Snape was even better. Less personal. Less of an intrusion into his own world.

Aloysius Mulciber came in then. Mitchell went out into the common room, and Russ went to his bed where he pulled a library book from his footlocker.

"Studying your hexes?" Aloysius asked from his own bed where he was laying out robes for the next day.

"Don't need to . . . study that," Russ replied after a moment's hesitation.

"Why? Your mum already teach you all of that?"

Russ thought of the spells his mother had taught him — Expelliarmus, Stupefy, Protego . . . — and of the trouble they could get into if the Ministry discovered she'd taught adult spells to a child. "No," he said.

"Where'd you learn them?"

"Didn't."

"Somebody had to teach you those spells. Didn't Mullein say something about a grandmother?"

"No."

"I'm sure he did. But my dad says healers and potions brewers aren't usually good at curses. Who else do you know?"

"Nobody."

"Suit yourself." Aloysius devoted his attention to his robes and the way they were folded over the chair. Then, "You caught old Dumbledore's attention the other day, didn't you? That wasn't a good idea."

"Why?"

"Dumbledore's looking for reasons to slap Slytherin down. Ask any of the older students. You were cheating. He saw that. Now we're in trouble."

Getting others into trouble was definitely the wrong way to be noticed. "I . . . didn't do . . . anything wrong."

"I'll admit," said Aloysius, "most people would cheat to get higher marks. Cheating to get lower marks is strange. He was watching you at dinner. You'd better be careful."

"I... will."

Aloysius left Russ alone then. No one bothered him for the rest of the evening, though Evan and Aaron kept glancing at him when they came in to go to bed. Russ lay awake that night wondering how things had conspired to make him so unpleasantly noticed when he'd tried so hard to do what his mum wanted.

After that, Russ began to notice things himself, mostly in the common room. The fifth year prefect, Rabastan, had a younger brother named Rodolphus. They seemed to be good friends with the third year student who'd threatened Russ in the lavatory. His name was Kenneth Avery. The three of them were always talking to Aloysius, Evan, and Aaron. They also got into long, earnest conversations with other students, but only when the other prefects weren't around. If Lucius Malfoy walked into the common room, they would leave whoever they were talking to and start doing something like homework.

That was when Russ also started to notice the phrase, 'You know...' It was used to refer to shared information that the Lestranges, Avery, Aloysius, Evan, and Aaron understood but didn't want to say. It was used in sentences like, 'My dad has to go this weekend to... you know,' or 'We got instructions from... you know.' They used it a lot, and with the exception of Malfoy, they didn't seem to care who heard them.

It was all very mysterious. Russ stayed out of the dorm room and the common room as much as possible. He didn't want to be noticed by anyone any more.

In the middle of October, the weather suddenly became quite cold, so that Lily and Russ couldn't meet out by the trees on the weekend of the sixteenth and seventeenth, nor on the following weekend. It was only a minor problem for Lily, who spent the time with the girls in her dorm or studying, but for Russ it was a depressing reminder of how important his weekly talks with Lily were. He hated the fact that the hills of Hogwarts were colder than the moors of Pendle.

Back in Lancashire, Russ had his parents to talk to. In fact, their company was more important than Lily's, and little routine things like cribbage with his dad or helping his mum in the kitchen were that crumb of daily human contact he needed. Meetings with Lily had been extra. Now meetings with Lily were all he had since he couldn't talk to his dorm mates. He started spending more time in the dorm, sitting on his bed studying, and once even

squeezed into an isolated corner of the common room where he could at least listen to the voices of the others and not feel so alone.

It was in those two weeks that Russ learned that the Lestranges, Avery, Aloysius, and Evan were trying to get some of the others to join something. One of the people they were always talking to was Aaron, who seemed to be wavering. At first they were also interested in a dark-haired girl in third year, but stopped talking to her near the end of October. Rumor had it that her older sister 'd married a muggle, and she was no longer acceptable. Russ sympathized with her.

On the last Saturday in October, the day before Halloween, at midmorning, the school suddenly emptied. Russ was surprised at how quiet the Great Hall was at lunch that day. "What's . . . happening?" he asked Mitchell, who had quickly become his source of information for the more social aspects of Hogwarts.

"They're going into Hogsmeade, the village outside the gate."

"What's in . . . Hogsmeade?"

"Lots of things. Shops and places to eat. There's a candy store and a joke shop . . . It's supposed to be great!"

"Oh," said Russ quietly. It all sounded like it cost money, which meant there was nothing for him to do there. "Are you . . . going?"

"Can't," replied Mitchell, his mouth full of chicken sandwich. "Have to be third year or older. None of the firsts or seconds can go."

"Oh," said Russ again, but now he felt better. No one would question why he didn't join them because no one would think it strange that he didn't go. Lily caught his eye from the Gryffindor table and opened her hands as if she was reading a book. After lunch, Russ hurried up to the library to meet her.

"There's absolutely no one here!" Lily whispered fiercely after Russ found her in the corner dedicated to Herbology. "The Castle's practically deserted. Wouldn't this be a great time to find a new place to meet when it's cold or rainy?"

"But if we meet inside, we'll be caught."

"Silly, this castle is huge! They don't use even half the rooms. There must be rooms all over that no one ever goes into. Now's our time to find one. We can start on the seventh floor and work our way down."

"No," Russ said immediately. "No Slytherin should ever get caught alone on the seventh floor. It's dangerous. And with a Gryffindor girl, it'd be worse. Gryffindors are mean."

"No we're not! It's Gryffindors who have to be careful about being caught alone in the dungeons. That's what everyone says."

"I've never heard anyone in Slytherin talk about going after Gryffindors, but several of the older students 've been pushed around by Gryffindors. They say Gryffindors prefer fighting to magic."

"There is a lot of pushing and shoving and horseplay in the common room and dorms," Lily admitted, "but it's all in good fun." She studied him for a minute. "Maybe we should stay off the seventh floor. But we'll stay away from the dungeons, too."

They decided to start on the third floor, then left the library separately to meet again in an alcove near the Charms classroom. There were several empty classrooms nearby, but the Charms corridor would have a fair amount of students in it on Saturday and Sunday mornings, so they discarded that idea.

The next possibility was the trophy room but that, with all its glass cabinets, was too exposed. Russ and Lily also checked the armor gallery without finding a convenient place to meet unobserved. They explored more corridors and found a passageway behind a tapestry that led them to yet another corridor. Russ, with his 'bearings' and sense of direction, reckoned it wasn't far from the Charms classroom where they'd started.

"Let's try this way," Lily suggested, and led the way to the end, where they found a door that didn't look like a classroom door. The door opened into another corridor, one clearly long disused.

"What's that?" Lily asked, pointing to the flagstone paved floor, her voice puzzled.

"A trapdoor," Russ replied, equally puzzled. *What would a trapdoor be doing here?*

Being children, Russ and Lily naturally tried opening the trapdoor. What they found was a shaft that dropped out of sight into darkness. Russ looked around for a stone or a pebble that he could toss down the shaft, but castles that are not falling into ruins do not have stray stones or pebbles lying around on the floor. So Russ extracted his wand from his sleeve.

"What are you doing?" Lily cried as Russ held the wand out at arm's length.

"Experimenting," Russ replied, and dropped the wand. The two listened for the sound of the wand hitting the bottom, but heard nothing. Russ sighed. "*Accio Wand!*" he commanded, and the wand returned to his hand.

Lily plumped her fists onto her hips. "How did you do that?" she demanded.

"Summoning charm," said Russ.

"That's a fourth year spell!"

"So?"

"So what are you doing, doing fourth year spells?"

"Now you know why my mum's worried about the Ministry."

There was no denying this irrefutable logic, so instead Lily insisted that Russ teach her the spell. They found an empty, abandoned classroom in the trapdoor corridor and spent the next couple of hours working on charms. Russ knew more of them, but Lily caught on faster. He taught her the Accio, the Reparo, and the Expelliarmus. The rest could wait for another day. They agreed that in inclement weather, they would meet in this little out-of-the-way room rather than outside under the trees.

About mid afternoon, Russ and Lily left their new meeting place to return to the library so it would look as if each had spent the day there doing homework. As they reached the Charms room and were about to start up the staircase, they saw Aaron on the landing above them. That was nothing strange except . . .

Suddenly two masked students jumped out and grabbed Aaron from behind. Aaron started to cry out, but was stopped by a silencing spell. "Think he'll do?" one of the students asked the other.

"Better if he was rounder, but he'll do. Any Slytherin would do."

As Russ and Lily stood rooted, concealed by the angle of the passageway, the two pulled Aaron to the top of the staircase, said the spell *Propulso scalae!*, and pushed him forward. Aaron hit the third step and bounced upwards, then came down again, bouncing each time as his body descended the flight of stairs. Russ, terrified, looked around and saw only a suit of armor. Pushing Lily back further out of sight and swinging his wand, he struck it, and the reverberating sound made the two attackers run from the stairs as fast as they could go.

The coast clear, Russ stepped forward, wand out, and cried, "*Arresto momentum!*" Aaron's downward trajectory stopped, and Russ managed to get him seated on the step so that he wouldn't fall any more.

Lily joined him, her face pale with the horror of what she'd just seen. "That was . . ." she started, but Russ stopped her.

"I know. Look, you have to get . . . out of here. If anyone knows we were . . . together . . ."



"He'll know." Lily nodded at Aaron.

"I think he's... dazed. Get out now. I'll take... care of this."

Russ waited until he was sure Lily had enough time to get to the library. Then he raced to the hospital wing for help.

"Did you see who they were?" Dumbledore asked, but Aaron shook his head, still too dazed to think properly. They were in the hospital wing with Dumbledore and all the heads of houses later that afternoon. "And you?" Dumbledore said to Russ.

Russ shook his head.

"Are you sure you couldn't see who they were?" the headmaster prodded. "You watched the whole incident."

Russ thought for a moment. "Light... behind them," he said, nervous and more tongue-tied than usual. "They... had... masks." He paused and thought. "Gryffindors," he finished.

"How do you know?" asked Professor McGonagall.

"Borders on... robes. Red and... gold. They wanted a... Slytherin."

"At least we are fortunate," said Dumbledore, "that almost all of the Gryffindor boys were in Hogsmeade. There are only about ten to check and see where they were when this happened."

"I'll get on it right away," said McGonagall, and left the room.

"Are you all right?" Dumbledore asked Russ gently.

"They... didn't get... me."

"No, but you were on your way up there when it happened. If Master Wilkes had not been there, they might have gotten you. Had you thought about that?"

Russ nodded. He'd thought of little else since the attack occurred. The thought of what might have happened to himself was intensely frightening. The headmaster seemed to realize it. The thought of what might have happened to Lily was worse, but that had to be concealed.

"Professor Slughorn," Dumbledore said. "Would you see that this young man gets safely back to Slytherin house? He has had a rather unpleasant day."

Russ followed Slughorn back to the dormitories where he became the center of attention for those back from Hogsmeade. Everyone wanted details on what had happened to Aaron, and suddenly Russ felt himself part of the house, one of the group, for it was Gryffindor that was now the common enemy.

Aaron himself was back in the common room in time to go up to the Great Hall for supper.

Slytherin house went to supper en masse, to show their distrust in the honor of Gryffindor. Third and fourth years stood as bodyguards next to first and second years while the older students acted as perimeter guards. Russ's 'protector' was Avery, the student who'd attacked him in the lavatory. It didn't make him feel safer.

Rabastan Lestrangle came and stood beside him, whispering in Russ's ear, "Which ones attacked Wilkes?"

"I don't... know. I didn't... see them," Russ replied. "They wore masks."

"You heard them, didn't you? If they were first years, you'd know the voices."

Russ couldn't explain to this older house mate that he knew who the Gryffindor attackers were, but couldn't say anything because he didn't want the possibility of involving a Gryffindor girl. He knew it was Black and Potter from the train, and Lily knew it was Black and Potter from the train, but if Russ identified them, then Black and Potter might start watching him, and he wouldn't be able to see Lily anymore.

"I was... too far... away. I couldn't... hear," Russ told the prefect.

Lestrangle went away, muttering 'dumb half-breed' under his breath.

Because of the situation, Russ was forced to stay and eat supper with his house instead of going off by himself. This gave him the chance to watch as Lily pointedly refused to sit near either Black or Potter and turned away from both of them in distaste. Russ loved watching it, though he fervently hoped the two boys wouldn't deduce anything from Lily's behavior.

Back in the dormitory at the end of the supper, there was a semblance of patching things up with Aaron. "They told me you were the one that chased them off," Aaron said.

"I made... noise, and they... ran."

"How come you didn't fight them?"

"I can't... fight."

"You fought us in the lavatory. A whole bunch of us. How come you didn't make their noses bleed?"

Russ looked at the ground and shrugged. Aaron shrugged too. "Well, thanks anyway. At least you got them to stop." Then Aaron went to his own bed and put out his light.

**SUNDAY, OCTOBER 31, 1971—HALLOWEEN (TWO DAYS BEFORE THE FULL MOON)**

Sunday was Halloween, and the Great Hall that morning was already festooned with black and orange, with pumpkins, and with silhouette figures of black cats, witches, crescent moons, and broomsticks.

Halloween was an alien holiday to Russ. They'd never celebrated it in his town, and it held no memories for him. For him the great autumn celebration was Bonfire Night when they paraded the Guy and roasted potatoes. This particular Halloween was like being in prison, for the combined students of Slytherin continued to express internal solidarity and external distrust by banding together, and he was not allowed to be alone all day, especially since he'd been the one who'd interrupted the foul deeds of Gryffindor and could therefore be presumed to be a target of retaliation.

The table that evening was loaded with sweets, which Russ didn't want to eat because he knew they'd upset his stomach. He was forced to accept them, however, since for the moment a hefty percentage of Slytherin students were still congratulating him on foiling a Gryffindor plot, and presented offerings of cake, candy, and caramel covered apples.

The being congratulated was nice. The eating sweets all evening had him in the lavatory later throwing up, but this time there was no teasing. Everyone was really quite sympathetic about it.

The next day Nelson came with the monthly message from Nana. Russ took the blue envelope outside to open and read it.

*Russ*

*I didn't send yesterday because your mum says Halloween is a big thing at your school. Did you enjoy it?*

*Your mum is concerned about what you said about Slytherin. She says if they give you grief about your dad, you just forget what she said about being nice. They don't deserve it. She hopes you didn't forget how to take care of yourself.*

*Your dad says he's 'pleased as punch' that you gave them what-for. That's what he'd expect from his boy, and he's proud of you. He says you just remember that Nel Tarleton was a featherweight, too, and one lung to boot. He won two titles on pluck and skill, and your dad says you've got the pluck and the skill. You just keep giving them what-for.*

*This grandmother is the same as always, but misses her assistant brewer. The other one thought your brain might do with a little exercise and sends you a gift.*

*Nana*

Russ took his letter to the lakeside at lunch time to think about it, and by supper he had a reply for Nelson to take back.

*Dear Nana,*

*Thank you for the letter. Halloween was not so good because some Gryffindors thought they could push us around, but we faced them down. Tell Mum I already remembered what she told me about taking care of myself, and I'm doing it. Things are getting better. And I remember what Dad told me about Nella, so I'm sticking all fifteen rounds.*

*I made a little mistake about Potions. The headmaster came into class and caught me hiding a good one. I think maybe he knows. But the professor's so thick, I don't think he'll ever catch on, so I'm probably all right.*

*Thank Gra for the puzzle book. I like the logic ones best. I miss you, too. I'd like to be somewhere I didn't have to botch potions.*

*Russ*

**SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 6, 1971**

Slytherin house never did find out who the boys were that attacked Aaron. They were told that the two were identified and punished, but Dumbledore and the heads of houses wanted no retaliatory feud started over the incident and refused to give Aaron or his house mates the names. Since neither Aaron nor Russ could name the attackers, the matter was forced to stop there. Slytherin was not satisfied.

The Saturday after Halloween was the first Quidditch match of the season, and by tradition it was between Slytherin and Gryffindor. Under the circumstances, things were tense, and it was probably a good thing that at

breakfast and lunch the two houses were separated by Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw.

Russ met Lily right after breakfast in their meeting room on the third floor, but all she could talk about was Quidditch. For the first time in all their years of friendship, Lily confessed to Russ that she was a devoted fan of the Red Devils of Manchester, and that one of the things she missed most at Hogwarts was football. One of the things that reconciled her to being sorted into Gryffindor, apparently, was that the red and gold of Gryffindor matched the red and yellow of the crest of Manchester United.

When the whole school marched down to the Quidditch pitch for the game, Lily firmly surrounded by other Gryffindor students and clearly enjoying herself, Russ did not go. Instead he slipped into the corridor where the unused classrooms were, snuck into one, and waited until the Castle was empty. Then he scurried out the front doors and down the narrow path on the face of the cliff to the lake side.

It was cold, but otherwise pleasant, the cliff itself shielding Russ from the cheering that rose in the house stands as the game started. Russ had no intention of being in the middle of a crowd of yelling, pushing students, and was quite content alone. He was trying to work out a new spell that would throw things at an attacker from another direction than his own, to make them think he had help. He thought it might come in handy if he was ever attacked as Aaron had been. The two Gryffindor students hadn't been as brave when they thought someone besides Aaron was approaching.

Russ decided to start with stones. He was pretty good at throwing stones, his father having taught him to bag birds and coneys out on the moors. He searched the narrow beach for a good one, the right shape and weight, then looked around for a target.

The beach didn't offer too many good targets, but nearby there was the forest. That might be a place to experiment. Picking up more stones as he went, Russ studied the trees on the forest's edge. Several were about the girth of a human being, and would give him an accurate size to work with.

The first thing he had to do was work out the mass involved. Hefting the stone, he concentrated and cast a levitation spell. Since he was close enough to the stone to focus easily, he didn't bother using his wand. Satisfied with the force he'd need to lift it, he tried the stone to examine the force required to toss it and the trajectory it would follow. With practiced ease, he shot the stone at one of the lower branches of a nearby tree.

"Here! What're ya doing there? Ya hadn't ought t' be throwing stones at birds, ya know!"

Russ wheeled, startled at the gruff voice that had come out of nowhere, and found himself face to face with the monster who'd lifted him into the boat on his first night. Except, of course, he knew the monster's name was Hagrid and that he was the keeper of the grounds.

"I... wasn't," he stammered.

"Wasn't? Sure looked like ya was to me. Wha' cha chucking rocks for if not at birds?"

"Just... throwing one. No... bird."

"That's better. Why ain't ya watching the Quidditch game with yer mates?"

"Don't... want to."

"That don't sound right. All boys want t' watch Quidditch. Didn't yer mum an' dad ever take ya t' a Quidditch game?"

Russ shook his head, this question at least not needing a vocal reply. He let the rest of his carefully gathered stones drop to the ground.

"Oho!" said Hagrid. "More 'n one. You was going huntin' in the forest, then? That's two things. Huntin' birds and goin' into the forest. You oughtn't t' be doing either."

"I... wasn't... hunting."

"Ya look kinda cold. Whyn't ya come with me an' I'll fix ya somewhat warm."

There was no choice. Russ reluctantly followed Hagrid to his hut for a cup of hot tea.

"I don't know where ya got yer ideas from, but that boy ain't nothing like Tom was, with all his smooth talk an' easy answers. Don't know if it's the stutterin' or somethin' else, but he won't hardly open his mouth at all, and he's nervous an' shy t' boot."

"What did you talk about?" Dumbledore asked.

"I talked about Hogwarts an' how was he doing in classes. He didn't hardly say a thing. Drank a little tea. Didn't eat nothing. It ain't natural f'r a boy his age not t' be hungry. No wonder he's knee-high t' a goblin. Was Eileen that solitary?"

"I do not recall what she was like at that age. It is very possible, as she never did have a large number of friends. Perhaps I should ask Professor Mullein about her. If we have more information about the mother, it may

give us insight into the son. Thank you, Hagrid, for bringing this information.”

“Just like t’ be helpful.”

The next day Lily could talk about nothing but Quidditch. All during their morning meeting it was snitch this, and quaffle that, and Chasers, and Seekers . . . It didn’t help that Gryffindor had won. Probably the worst thing was having Lily so enthusiastic about her house’s victory. If Slytherin had won, Russ would never have exulted over Lily the way she did over him.

It wasn’t until Lily was nearly talked out that Russ realized that Lily wasn’t exulting over him. She was exulting Gryffindor over Slytherin, and for some reason she didn’t connect Russ with Slytherin in this at all. For her, he was like some neutral outsider that she was recounting the exciting moments of the game to. Gryffindor had beaten Slytherin, but that had nothing to do with Lily’s friend Russ.

Russ didn’t know whether to be pleased or depressed by Lily’s attitude. In a way, it was good because she could share with him her excitement over things like Quidditch without worrying about whether or not he agreed with her. Russ rather liked that because it made him more of a friend. On the other hand, it meant that Lily didn’t think about the rest of his life, about what it was like to live in Slytherin house, at all. For her, he didn’t exist except in their weekly meetings.

That made Russ think about himself and his attitude. Did he think about Lily at all except in terms of their weekly meetings? He realized that he knew almost nothing about her daily life. He started watching her dorm mates, wondering what it was like living with them, thinking about Lily as a whole person and not just his friend.

Russ’s encounter with Hagrid didn’t stop him from working on new spells. By the end of term in December, his Rixno spells were working well, and he could throw stones, sticks, dirt, water and, with the first fall of snow, snowballs. The only problem was that this was primarily an outdoor spell since he had trouble picking up anything heavy with it, though indoors books were a possibility.

End of term brought a profound change to Hogwarts, since everybody went home for the holidays. Everybody but Russ, that is. Even Lily left, going back to Lancashire to be with her parents and Petunia. They were going to meet her in London and stay there for a few days, then go back to Pendle for Christmas and the New Year.

Everybody but Russ . . . Well, that was not exactly true. Two fifth year

Slytherin girls stayed to study for their OWLs, and there were in all seven other students from Gryffindor, Ravenclaw, and Hufflepuff. Then there were Headmaster Dumbledore, Professors Slughorn, Flitwick, McGonagall, and Mullein, Madam Pince and Madam Deering, Hagrid, and Filch.

On the twenty-second, two days after everyone else had left, Slughorn summoned Russ to his office just before dinner time.

"What's the matter with you, boy?" the Professor asked after Russ shut the door and came to stand in front of his desk. "Are you sick or something?"

It was Russ's second time in the office, the first being for his very short beginning of term interview, and he was decidedly uncomfortable. "No . . . sir," he replied.

Slughorn stared at him for a moment. "You just remember to be respectful, Master Snape. Now if you're not sick, why aren't you eating?"

"I . . . am . . . eating . . . sir."

This brought another stare, though a more sympathetic one. "Do you always talk like that?"

"Yes . . . sir."

"Humph. You should speak up more in class. Give it some exercise. That'd take care of it. Now, what and where are you eating, because you're not doing it in the Great Hall, and the headmaster has taken notice. It's rude to avoid us all, especially when we're such a small group."

"Yes . . . sir."

Slughorn didn't notice that Russ hadn't answered the question. "It's time to go up for supper now, and you're coming with me. You'll sit at the table like a well-behaved young man, you'll eat what's put before you, and you'll speak when spoken to. I won't have the headmaster regard Slytherin house in an unfavorable light. Do you understand?"

"Yes . . . sir."

Russ meekly followed Slughorn out of the dungeons into the Great Hall. Most of the others were already there, so they were all looking at him, and he blushed with embarrassment.

"He's fine, Albus," Slughorn announced, clapping Russ on the shoulder. "Just wanted to do a little extra studying. I told him all work and no play . . . So he's happy to join us. Sit here next to me, Master Snape. Fill your plate."

Placed securely at Slughorn's left, Russ had no choice but to obey, and he tentatively took morsels from the less exotic dishes and put them on his plate. Slughorn grunted, then reached across and loaded the plate with more food. "A growing boy needs a good appetite," he said.



Suddenly, Russ understood that Slughorn was like his father. He, Russ, was doing something wrong and, as he always did with his father, he was making Slughorn angry. Now he had to try to do the right thing, or he would make Slughorn angrier and force Slughorn to punish him. He quickly picked up a fork and took a bite of sweet potato pudding.

It was thick with cream and butter, and cloyingly sweet. Russ knew it was going to make him sick, but he had to force himself to eat it to show Slughorn he was being good. He took another bite. Slughorn was in conversation with Mullein now, and had ceased watching, but he would notice if the plate remained full. Reluctantly, Russ took a third bite.

Someone was watching him. Glancing around out of the corners of his eyes, Russ realized that it was Dumbledore. When he looked back at his plate, the sweet potato pudding was gone. Instead there was a manageable amount of plainer food, something that Russ could deal with.

Russ stared at the plate, eyes round with surprise, then shot another sideways glance at Dumbledore. Was it his imagination, or did the headmaster wink at him? Russ didn't dare look again to be sure.

Another mysterious thing about the dinner was that Russ never had to talk. The three times a teacher asked him a question, somehow Dumbledore entered the conversation and turned it away. No one even seemed to notice that Russ had not responded. Beginning to relax, Russ found that he was able to finish his food to the point of satisfying Slughorn. At the earliest possible moment, he excused himself and escaped back to the Slytherin dormitories.

Night in Slytherin house was so far very pleasant with all the boys gone. In fact, Russ had taken advantage of the opportunity to search the house thoroughly on the very first day of the break. Thoroughly was, of course, a relative term. He hadn't touched the beds or belongings of his dorm mates, nor had he entered any of the other dormitories. That wouldn't have been right. That there may or may not have been protective spells was irrelevant. What he had checked were the corridors, the boys' lavatory, and the common room.

He found that he could not identify the springy, translucent material that allowed light to filter through the lake water to the house beneath. He found that there had once, many years earlier, been a fierce fight outside the girls' dormitory farthest from the common room. The jambs and lintel were scarred by burning spells that had come from inside the dorm. He found that the scrolling of the rock surface around the great fireplace was really the marks left by generations of students scratching their initials into the stone,

which had been painted over and now appeared part of the decoration, but could still be read as initials up close.

Bathing in the empty lavatory was delicious and decadent, and Russ hoped that every Christmas and Easter break for all of his seven years would be as devoid of other students as this one was. There was no bathroom in his own home, and there was never enough hot water in the sink by the toilet—aside from the fact that hot water cost money—but here at Hogwarts during the break Russ could stretch out his legs and submerge himself, and let the warmth sink into his very bones, with no fear that anyone would ever see his back. The peace it brought him made him want to cry.

This night, for a contented hour, Russ forgot all about Slughorn, Dumbledore, sweet potato pudding, or his home, and luxuriated in the warm water. Then he toweled himself dry, put on his pajamas and bathrobe, and padded barefoot back to the dorm. There he read another of the books he was constantly checking out of the library—this one on vampires—and finally went to sleep.

The next morning Russ was up early, and was almost out the door of Slytherin house into the dungeons before he remembered that Slughorn would be watching him at breakfast. The thought put a brake on his movements, but there was no avoiding the fact that he had to eat breakfast in the Great Hall, so he continued reluctantly on his way.

Only a few of the teachers and two of the students were there ahead of him. Russ considered for a moment and decided he would get into the least trouble if he sat exactly where Slughorn had placed him the evening before. Professor Mullein took his usual seat and wished him ‘good morning.’ The table was beginning to fill.

Then a form settled in the seat next to him, and Russ realized with a shock that it was Dumbledore. The headmaster immediately struck up an earnest conversation with Professor Flitwick concerning the effect prestidigitation had on performing spells, about which Russ understood nothing. Slughorn arrived, and Dumbledore beamed up at him beatifically.

“Horace, I seem to have appropriated your place. Do you mind switching seats for the meal? It has been a while since Filius and I could chat.” Slughorn moved to the head chair. Food appeared on the table.

“Have you ever tried kippered herring?” a voice spoke near Russ’s ear, and he realized it was Dumbledore’s. He nodded in response, not sure what to do or say.

"The kipper over there looks quite nice," continued Dumbledore. "That is, if you feel like kipper this morning." Then he continued his conversation with Flitwick.

Kipper was what Russ had eaten in the railway restaurant, during his last breakfast with his mother before he boarded the Hogwarts express. He took some, together with bacon, toast, and eggs. It was a lot for him, but it reminded him suddenly of his mum and that morning at King's Cross.

A few minutes later, Dumbledore said, "How is it?"

"It's very . . . good, sir," Russ managed.

"Excellent!" said Dumbledore, as if Russ had just recited a prize-winning speech. "Maybe I'll have some, too." He helped himself to kipper and turned once more to Flitwick.

During the rest of the meal, Dumbledore requested that Russ pass the butter, a feat accomplished without talking, asked two questions that could be responded to with a nod or a shake of the head and once, just once, said, "What do you find most pleasant about Christmas break, Master Snape?"

"Less people," Russ replied, and Dumbledore nodded in concurrence.

"I, too, prefer fewer people around. It offers a measure of peace and quiet," he said.

When breakfast was over, the Snape boy said, "Excuse me . . . please," and scurried out of the Great Hall. Dumbledore watched him go with a mixture of concern and tenderness. *Not Riddle. Most blessedly not Riddle at all.*

Then, later, from the windows of his office, Dumbledore watched as the tiny dark figure appeared from the direction of the main doors and approached the cliff face. Unerringly it found the steep, narrow, downward path and disappeared from view. Vowing to finish the rest of his business later, Dumbledore hurried down the staircases and onto the cliff edge in time to see the boy head right, along the lake shore to a stand of trees beyond the outermost bounds of the Quidditch pitch. Above him and slightly behind, Dumbledore followed.

As Dumbledore stalked his small quarry, he began to speculate, and the first point of speculation was as to Master Snape's direction, for he was definitely heading toward trees but toward a smaller stand of trees farther away than the forbidden forest. Was he overzealous in obeying school rules, or was he trying to avoid Hagrid? Dumbledore tended to think the second more likely than the first, but reserved judgment.

Another major question — why go as far as the trees at all during a time

when the school was nearly empty — was soon answered. The trees were targets. The boy looked around, but Dumbledore made sure that he himself was not visible to the viewer below. Then Master Snape attacked a tree notable for its resemblance in size to a teenage boy.

The attack was with snow, which fortunately had no adverse effect on the tree whatsoever. The snow, in fact, was of minor concern to Dumbledore. What attracted his attention was that the attack was silent, and there was no evidence of a wand. Dumbledore watched, fascinated, as apparently random flurries of snow swirled against the target, gradually coalescing into more compact clouds. Young Snape then used his wand, still in silence, and the clouds of snow instantly formed into tight snowballs, striking the tree with unerring accuracy.

There followed demonstrations of rock throwing, where a much more closely targeted pattern could be observed, and of tossing up amounts of leaves and other small debris. This last supported Dumbledore in his suspicions that the exercise was one intended for defense rather than offense, since the dirt and leaf blind would be more useful in distracting an enemy while trying to escape than as a weapon of attack.

It was clearly a demonstration of variations on one basic spell, the astounding parts being the nonverbal casting of the spell and the novelty. The boy had invented it. No, to be more precise, the boy was in the process of inventing it. Dumbledore had just watched a session where a crude new spell was being refined. It was impressive. It was more than impressive. Most older wizards never attempted to create spells, yet this child was clearly no novice.

It was, however, nothing compared to what came next. Suddenly the wand was gone — Where does he keep it? Dumbledore thought — and the boy stood quite still. Nothing happened. Nothing until a small shower of pebbles skittered down the cliff face. Dumbledore was intrigued. Master Snape's wand appeared again, and again he concentrated. This time small, loose rocks near Dumbledore were dislodged as well and rolled a short distance. Along the adjacent cliff the rustle of pebbles and the soft thud of clumps of snow were clearly audible.

*Did the cliff vibrate? Did that child just cause a small earthquake?* Dumbledore continued watching, but the boy was now finished. He turned and walked back along the lakeshore, Dumbledore once again following, until Master Snape got to the narrow path up the cliff face. Then Dumbledore waited until the boy was inside the Castle before he, too, entered and went up to his office. He had a lot to think about.

Russ was extremely pleased with his practice session. His throwing spells were improving measurably, and he considered them nearly complete. He was a bit disappointed that the focus needed for snowballs and rocks required a wand, but that was not uncommon with targeted spells. The Seismos spell at the end was just the icing on the cake.

Until the previous year, Russ had never even thought about earthquakes. Then, that Monday evening at the beginning of June 1970, his father'd come home with a newspaper, and there it was on the front page — the earthquake that sent a landslide to bury a town in South America, killing forty thousand people. He got to read all about it for several days, too, for a disaster in a foreign land was one of the few reasons his dad was willing to spend money on newspapers at all, since he got most of his local and national news at the pub.

For weeks Russ immersed himself in fault lines, plate tectonics, and seismic research. He didn't begin to understand it all, but the concept was so alluring that he began trying his own miniature imitations, mostly by setting up vibrations radiating from a circle around his feet. It wasn't a real earthquake, but it had a similar feel for a very short distance. Today he'd gotten almost exactly the result he wanted. The only problem was that he absolutely needed a wand to focus that much energy. Russ didn't like having to depend on the wand for so many things. It was a point of vulnerability.

That evening Russ walked behind Slughorn into the Great Hall and sat next to him to obediently eat his dinner. Quiet and shy, he kept his eyes on his plate, answered briefly when spoken to, and pleased Slughorn by his polite and respectful demeanor.

"How are your studies coming, boy?" Slughorn asked him during a lull in the adult conversation.

"Fine . . . sir," Russ replied.

"His work in Transfiguration is showing improvement," added Professor McGonagall kindly. "If he continues to apply himself, he may become quite a competent spell caster."

"More than competent, I'd say," chimed in Flitwick. "His wand work in my class is very good."

"Excellent!" cried Slughorn. "Excellent! And if you work a little harder at your potions, well . . . We may make a wizard of you yet!"

"Thank . . . you, sir," said Russ demurely.

Dumbledore followed the exchange in silence, wondering with some

amusement how the others would react if they saw what he had seen that day.

## C H A P T E R     E I G H T

### MORE PROBLEMS

Nana's letter at the end of December contained bad news. The miners union wasn't able to negotiate pay raises, and if talks stopped, there would be a nationwide strike. Russ's dad had never gone out on strike, but Russ knew that if you did, you had no money until the strike was over. He didn't know how his parents would make it if there was no money coming from his dad's work, and he prayed there wouldn't be a strike.

Then the break was over, and the students returned to the school. Once again Lily smiled and managed a hidden wave from the Gryffindor table. Once again Russ took food from the table in the Great Hall at mealtime and slipped away somewhere else to eat it. He'd gotten careless during the break, however, and on Tuesday he left his notebooks and quills in the dormitory during breakfast. As soon as he'd eaten, he rushed down into the dungeons to Slytherin house to retrieve them. As he entered, he heard soft voices in the common room, one of which was Aaron's.

"I said lousy muggles. I think that was why."

"Lousy gets you lice," said Rabastan Lestrangle. "That makes some sense. So you think it was the insult?" When Aaron paused, the voice grew harsher. "This time the truth, Wilkes. No hedging."

"I destroyed something. That did it."

Russ set his books on a side table with a thud, and the voices stopped. He didn't want any fifth years thinking he was spying on them. He hurried down the passage to his dorm, then back out again with notebooks and quills wondering if he would be facing a fight in the common room. But the common room was quiet when he passed through on his way out. Lestrangle was sitting in front of the fire while Aaron was finishing an assignment.

That evening, a select group of boys began to notice Russ in a way that was different from before. When, just before curfew, he got down to the wall

that was the entrance to Slytherin house, two sixth years pushed him aside saying, "Out of the way, half-breed. Purebloods go first." In the common room as he passed by, a seventh year sneered, "We need one dormitory with a cage, just for the mongrels."

Russ pretended to ignore them and went straight through into his own dormitory. Aaron and Evan looked away, Aloysius looked smug, and Mitchell looked embarrassed. Russ said nothing, but went directly to his own bed and pulled the curtains. Something had changed subtly over the Christmas break. Russ had no idea why.

On Saturday, Russ went up to breakfast only to find that outside was a swirling snowstorm. That was a disappointment, since he'd hoped to spend the afternoon practicing his spells under the trees. Now he had to find someplace to be that wasn't already occupied by other students. This would be harder than usual since everyone else was equally castle-bound due to the snow. It was a problem he pushed aside to deal with later, however, since the most important thing that morning was that he would see Lily again.

Russ got to the third floor corridor and their special room first. Lily came in ten minutes later.

"Oh, Severus," she exclaimed as soon as the door was closed, "I had the best Christmas ever!"

"I'm glad," said Russ. "What did you do?"

"We went . . . you'll never guess! We went to Mallorca!"

"Where's that?"

"It's an island near Spain. It was so nice. The weather was pleasant, and it was sunny most of the time, and the water was so blue. We didn't get to see all the flowers—that'll start in a month—but it was so nice to get away from foggy old Britain. Petunia met this Spanish boy, and mum and dad had fits, but she had a good time."

"How come your parents took you there?"

"Dad's got a new job with a company in Manchester. He drives there every day, and it pays better, so now he thought maybe we could see something of the world. I really like seeing the rest of the world. Maybe soon we can go to France, or Switzerland."

Russ didn't like this idea very much, but he didn't say so. Instead he told Lily how he'd shared the table with the professors, and Dumbledore'd talked to him. Lily was impressed, and that made Russ feel important. They didn't stay together for very long because the next day, Sunday, was Russ's twelfth



birthday, and Lily hinted that she had something special planned. They said goodbye, and Russ went looking for a place to practice his spells.

All the extra classrooms on the ground floor were occupied by small study groups. The library was full. Regular classrooms had tutoring sessions, and the Great Hall had clusters of students scattered around it. Russ stood for a few minutes by a window on the second floor looking down at what would have been the ice covered lake if he could have seen that far through the snow. Then he decided to try the dungeons.

The dungeons were a labyrinth of corridors and rooms on several levels going down to Slytherin house and the lake bottom. Russ had explored the corridors, but he hadn't been into all the rooms. Now he decided to look for one, maybe far from the general stairs. It was a terrible thing not to be able to be alone on the day before your birthday.

The problem with the dungeon rooms at these levels was that they were all windowless. At least the Potions room in the first dungeon had little slits of windows up near the ceiling. Below, everything that branched off the stairway was dark.

No one was on the stairs to see him, so Russ lit a Lumos spell and moved cautiously along a passage to his right, further under the hill. A locked door, another locked door, and then a storeroom full of casks and barrels. The fourth door was also unlocked, and inside Russ found crates, bulging burlap sacks, and a table and chair. There were ledger books on the table.

Russ didn't examine the ledgers, since they weren't his. He did move them aside to create space for his own books, and sat down to study. It was immediately apparent that either the chair was too short, or the table too tall, but it was definitely the wrong height for Russ. He stood away from the table and cast a spell to lengthen the legs of the chair, then settled in to study and work on his new spells. The absolute solitude of the storeroom was a blessing.

It was a solitude fated not to last. After only ten minutes, Russ heard a footstep in the passage outside the room, and a moment later the door opened. It was a Slytherin student, a third year girl with dark hair and heavy lidded eyes. Russ had noticed her before, since she was always with a group of the older students, cousins of some kind, lounging in the common room. Most of the others called her Black, but her close relatives called her Bella. She was the one whose sister had recently married a muggle.

"Oh," she said in surprise. "I didn't think anyone would be here."

"I'm . . . sorry," said Russ, now nervous. "I'll . . . go." He stood and began to gather his books.

"No, that's all right," she replied. "You were here first." There was a pause as they stood unmoving, Russ by the table and Bella blocking the doorway. "You're one of the first years, aren't you," Bella said finally.

"Yes," was all Russ could manage.

Another pause, then "I'm Bella Black. What's your name?"

"Seve . . . rus Snape."

She laughed. "You don't look like a Severus. Someone named Severus should be stern and cold. Untouchable. You don't look untouchable. You seem kind of nice. Look, Saturday isn't for studying. Would you like to come to the common room and talk?"

The answer to the question was a most decided 'no.' Russ did not want to go to the common room to talk to anybody, especially not this pureblood he suspected of following him into the storeroom. But she was blocking his exit, and he had few options. "All . . . right," he said. She turned and led the way back to the stairs.

The Slytherin common room was fairly crowded — not surprising considering the weather — but the far corner, shielded from the view of the entrance by the fireplace, was mysteriously empty. Bella went straight to that corner, Russ trailing her obediently. She settled in a comfortable chair, and patted the end of the sofa next to her where Russ sat and waited.

"So, how do you like Hogwarts?" Bella smiled cheerfully.

"It's . . . all . . . right."

"How are your classes? Are you learning a lot in your Charms class?"

"Yes."

"What, for example?"

That required a real answer, and Russ paused. "Levi . . . tation," he said finally.

"Oh, excellent. I love levitation. Show me some. Levitate, let me see . . . levitate that." Bella pointed to a small bowl of candies.

Bewildered now, Russ let his wand slip into his hand. Levitation was an early first-year spell. Even the most inept wizard could do it by the end of the autumn term. He looked at the bowl, then at Bella. Her gaze was fixed on his wand. Russ decided she would be less suspicious if he could do the spell than if he couldn't, so he pointed his wand at the candy dish, swished and flicked in the prescribed manner, and said, "*Wingardium Leviosa!*" The little dish rose slowly into the air.

“Bravo!” Bella cried, and clapped her hands. Then she pointed to a lamp. “Do that one!” At Bella’s command, Russ levitated a lamp, a chair, a small table, and a picture on the wall. Then another third year student came over, one Russ recognized as Rabastan Lestrangle’s brother Rodolphus.

“Putting your mongrel through his paces?” he asked Bella casually, as Russ let his wand hand fall to his side and stared at the floor.

“You have the manners of a giant, Dolph,” Bella responded. “He’s no mongrel, just a puppy dog, and he’s nice enough to entertain me on dull day. Which is more than you’ve done. Now go away and leave us alone until you can act like a decent person around others.”

“Sure, Bella,” Rodolphus laughed. “If you’re simple enough to be entertained by a half-breed jester, that’s your business.” He leaned forward and picked up the candy dish, searching carefully for just the right sweet. “Just let me know when you’re ready for something a bit more upscale.” Still laughing, he headed in the direction of the wall entrance to Slytherin house.

The entrance was about six steps up from the common room floor. As Rodolphus started up the steps, he suddenly caught his foot on one and fell forward, throwing his hands in front of him to break his fall. The dish clattered to the floor, candy skittering across the stones.

Every other student in the common room looked around at the noise, and Bella was on her feet at once, heading to the entrance to help him. No one was paying any attention to Russ, who moved quickly around the edge of the common room into the corridor and to his own dormitory.

“I thought you were going to let me work on it,” Bella said icily when the little group of three met fifteen minutes later in one of the study hall classrooms. “I was doing fine. He was beginning to show off.”

“Baby tricks!” Rodolphus scoffed. “You’re not going to find out anything that way. You’re still on probation, you know. We have an assignment. If you can’t produce results . . .”

“We’ll get nothing if he hates us!” Bella retorted.

“No? The only reason we knew anything before today was because he hated Wilkes enough to lash out!”

“And it’s still all we know,” interjected Rodolphus’s older brother Rabastan, who’d been listening to the exchange in silence. “We’re no wiser than before.” He stopped because the other two were looking at him in a fashion that could only be called gloating. “All right, then. What did you learn?”

Rodolphus chuckled. “I didn’t stumble. I was thrown. Something lifted

me about two inches into the air so that my foot would catch the step. Don't look at me like that, I know when I've been levitated. Ask Bella."

"He's right, Rabs. Snape kept his head down the whole time, but he was watching out of the corner of his eye. I was watching him. I know he did something, but it was nonverbal. A first year who can do nonverbal spells."

"Well we know that," said Rabastan. "Wilkes already told us he could do nonverbal. Though I wish I'd seen you fall flat on your face." He grinned at his younger brother.

"There's more," said Bella quietly. "He's a dueler." The two boys stared at her. "I mean it," she continued. "He hides his wand somewhere in his robes so he can get it into his hand unseen, in a second. I asked him to levitate that dish, and he had a wand in his hand. But he didn't use it to trip you. He didn't need it."

Rodolphus let out a slow, quiet whistle. "Father will want to know. We're going to have to test this. When do you think we can do it?"

"Not right away," Rabastan replied. "We can't be caught attacking a younger student or we could be expelled. It'll have to be at the right place and the right time. Besides, we're supposed to go slow. We've got a couple of years, and we're not supposed to scare him off."

"I thought you said we were supposed to push him around," said Bella.

"Father said to do what we could to test him, make sure he really has talent, and then hold him. If getting angry is what makes him fight back, then get him angry, but make sure it stays in house. They want him to look for help inside Slytherin, not outside."

"I guess that's your job, Bella," said Rodolphus.

"Yes," said Bella. "That's my job."

"And don't forget," Rabastan added, facing her directly, "you're not in yet. With a sister disgracing herself and a cousin in Gryffindor, you still have to prove that muggle loving doesn't run in the family."

"Don't worry about me," Bella smiled back at him. "As far as I'm concerned, blood traitors don't exist. He'll find he has no one more loyal than me. All I ask is a chance to prove it."

"See that you do," said Rabastan.

**SUNDAY, JANUARY 9, 1972 (THE DAY AFTER THE LAST QUARTER)**

The next morning, Russ was up early and out of Slytherin house before anyone else was awake. He took his History of Magic book and went up to the third floor corridor to wait for Lily. He wasn't hungry, and didn't want to go into the Great Hall in any case.

"Happy Birthday!" Lily greeted Russ two hours later, and hugged him. "I got up early today just to surprise you, but you beat me up here. I guess that means you didn't eat anything." She was carrying a small basket.

Russ shook his head, then smiled as Lily began to unload the basket. It was full of wonderful things, hard boiled eggs, bread rolls, and sausages, a little flask of tea, another of pumpkin juice, and a sweet roll with a tiny candle on it. This time Lily used a spell to light the candle.

They spent most of the morning together just chatting. Lily did most of the talking, Russ only speaking to encourage her or if he could think of something pleasant to say. He didn't want to spoil Lily's fun by telling her depressing news, and he didn't want her to know how scary the day before had been. He was turning into a very good listener. By the time Russ and Lily were finished celebrating the fact that he was twelve, it was nearly lunch time.

The next day Russ got an owl from Nana. The note contained a brief, belated wish for a happy birthday, and bad news. The day before, while Russ had been celebrating with Lily, British miners had gone out on a nationwide strike. Toby was out of work.

To make matters worse, after that life for Russ in Slytherin house became more and more miserable. It seemed as if everyone was conspiring to make him feel bad. It started with Aaron and Evan.

"Why are you always hiding behind those bed curtains?" Aaron accused him that same evening. "Is there something wrong with you? Do you have some terrible skin disease or something?"

"It's the muggle blood," Evan sneered. "Muggles aren't like normal people. They have tails. Long mongrel tails that wag when they're happy."

"Maybe he's just neat and prissy like a girl."

"Maybe he is a girl."

"How about that, Miss Prissy? Is that why you won't take a bath or change clothes without hiding behind a curtain? Are you a girl? Miss Snape! That's what you are! Miss Prissy Snape." Aaron laughed about his own joke for the next fifteen minutes, until the lights went out and they went to sleep.

In Slytherin house, other students either ignored Russ completely, which was what he preferred, or they acted like they smelled something funny when he was around. Or they went out of their way to avoid touching him, as if he carried a loathsome disease. It was harder to keep clean because the little streams of water he had been using to wash with were frozen in the winter cold, so Russ started to get up around four-thirty every morning to be sure he could wash in peace. He wanted to be sure there wasn't any real smell for them to tease him about.

The only nice person in the whole house was Bella Black. She said 'good morning' and asked about his classes, and when she was talking to him, the others left him alone. They never had any long conversations, nor did they talk every day. It was just that when she was in the common room as he passed through, he felt a bit safer.

There was something that Bella had said to him that Russ was thinking about seriously. It was his name. Someone named Severus should be stern and cold. Untouchable. Russ wanted to be cold and unmoved by the taunts. He wanted to be untouchable, to be able to listen to the insults with calm superiority. *If I was Severus instead of Russ, I could do it.* He began to think of himself as this other person, this Severus.

"Severus?" Mitchell was following him out of the Great Hall. Severus turned and waited for him. "Could I ask you a favor?"

Severus regarded him with calculating dark eyes. Mitchell never teased him or insulted him. Mitchell was all right. "Sure," he replied. "What do you want?"

"I need help with some of my classes. I'm not really good at some of the things we have to learn. I mean, Charms and Transfiguration are all right, but Astronomy and Potions—I really need help with Astronomy and Potions. And you're so good at it..."

"Me? I'm barely getting passing marks in Potions."

Mitchell grinned. "You're weird. You're trying to get low marks. Just because old Slughorn can't see beyond the end of his nose doesn't mean the rest of us are blind. You could be top of the class if you wanted to, and do it without hardly trying."

In a way it was nice that someone recognized his abilities. Severus thought for a moment. "All right," he said at last. "I'll work with you on your assignments." The two boys began meeting in one of the unused classrooms on the sixth floor to do their homework and to practice potion-making techniques.

January flowed into February with relative normalcy. Lily's birthday was

also on a Sunday, and this time Severus supplied the food and a piece of cake. He wrote frequently to Nana with messages for his parents since the strike was dragging out for weeks, and on February 9, the Prime Minister declared a state of emergency in Britain. Severus was worried sick about his mum and dad, but no one in Hogwarts even noticed that anything unusually was happening. It was like living on two different planets.

The next morning, however, Severus got his first inkling that something was wrong in the wizarding world as well. This came from an overheard conversation between two first year girls, Wilhelmina Alderton, whose father wrote for the *Daily Prophet*, and Sonya MacFusty of the Hebridean dragon-breeding MacFusties.

"It's going to be in the paper today," Wilhelmina was whispering to Sonya. "Father wanted me to know first so no one would surprise me."

Severus paused to rearrange the contents of his book bag.

"Where was it?" Sonya breathed excitedly.

"Right in the yard in front of his house. Not a mark on him. Flat on his back and staring at the sky."

"Wicked. What's Paladin going to do?"

"I don't know. I don't even know if they've told him yet. The *Prophet* always gets the news before the family does."

"His own father. Wicked."

Severus continued up the stairs and into the Great Hall. Paladin. *That must be the Gryffindor first year — what's his name? Wintergreen? That's it — Paladin Wintergreen.* In the Great Hall the Gryffindor table was full, but ominously silent, many of the students glaring at the Slytherin table as if the students there were responsible for whatever had happened. Severus decided to stay for breakfast and find out.

While it was true that Slytherin and Gryffindor never talked to each other except in insult or challenge, Gryffindor did talk to Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff, and they talked to Slytherin, so the news was not long in coming. Paladin's father, Pellinor Wintergreen, had been found at midnight, stark dead in his own front garden, cause of death unknown. Paladin was with Dumbledore and would probably be leaving Hogwarts soon, perhaps permanently.

Gryffindor might be stern and withdrawn, but Ravenclaw, Hufflepuff, and Slytherin were discussing the news freely. That is, except for a few students at the Slytherin table who were uncharacteristically silent. Silent but with knowing eyes, Rabastan and Rodolphus Lestrange chief among them. Bella Black was also ominously quiet. Severus suspected this was because they

already knew what had happened and had no reason to discuss it. Maybe a reason not to.

A quick glance around the table was revealing. Of the other first years, Aaron and Evan were equally quiet, as were Doris Gamp and Claudia Higgs. *So whatever source of information the Lestranges have, the four of them have, too.* Severus wondered what it was.

Later it became known that Paladin had left Hogwarts for good. He was, rumor had it, an only child, and his mother didn't want him far from her now that she'd lost her husband. That meant that the first year boys' dormitory in Gryffindor had only four students in it.

"Hey, it's my little puppy!" Bella said, looking up from her Transfiguration text at Severus, who had just come into the common room. She was sitting right in front of the entrance, as if waiting for him. "I've been hoping to talk to you. Here, sit next to me." She slid aside to make room on the sofa, and Severus gingerly sat down. "Tell me all the news," Bella went on, and though it made Severus nervous, it was also flattering to have her pay attention to him in such a kind way.

"There's... nothing new," Severus said quietly, looking down at his hands rather than at her.

"That isn't true. I've noticed you looking glum."

"It's just... what happened. So... fast."

"You mean about the Gryffindor boy? That's nothing for you to worry about. Besides, you've been worried about something for longer than that. Anything wrong in your family?"

"No," said Severus quickly. "No, they're... fine." For some reason he did not want Bella thinking about his family.

"I'm sure they are. And I'm sure they'll stay fine. Well, I'm glad nothing serious is troubling you." It was clearly a dismissal, so Severus got up and went into his dormitory room.

The next afternoon, Severus noticed Bella and the Lestrangle brothers talking earnestly with Mitchell in a corner of the entrance hall. Severus continued on to his classes without stopping, wondering what the three of them would have to do with Mitchell.

Suddenly, in the last third of February, things began to look better. Nana send an extra letter on the twenty-second with a message from Gra that the Russians had sent an unmanned probe called Luna to the moon to pick up rocks. Nana supplemented it with word that the picketing (whatever that was) was called off because a settlement seemed near. The end of month letter



came three days early, on Saturday the twenty-sixth. Russ ran up to the third floor to share it with Lily.

"That old miners' strike?" said Lily, wrinkling her nose. "My dad says it's blackmail. He says Mr. Heath says the miners are driving the country to economic ruin with their unreasonable demands. They've asked for a forty percent pay increase."

"Settled for less than twenty-five percent," countered Severus, who'd never heard Prime Minister Edward Heath's name mentioned before without the word 'bloody' in front of it. "And deserved it, too, all the years they've been bottom of the pay scale, and them doing the dangerous work."

"That's right," Lily struck back. "Your dad's one of those dirty pit men, isn't he?"

"And your dad's one of them lazy managers sipping tea in a posh office all day collecting money from the hard work of others!"

"Socialist agitator!"

"Capitalist bloodsucker!"

The two stomped away from their meeting place in high dudgeon, and refused to speak to each other for a good four hours. Then, across the intervening tables at lunch, Lily made a sign to meet again.

"I'm glad your dad's getting a pay raise," she said, and there was a note of contrition in her voice. "I guess I forgot all the things you didn't have all those years. Maybe now you can get a television."

"And miss watching the moon missions with you? Never." And so they made up and agreed to be friends again.

Things went well until the middle of March. Throughout that time, Severus and Mitchell studied together and worked together on assignments, but they weren't what is normally considered 'friends.' That was more because of what they didn't talk about. They never mentioned their families or their lives before Hogwarts. They never talked about other students. They never discussed their successes, disappointments, or plans. Theirs was a professional relationship, and they talked about their courses and their studies, and nothing else.

Severus found this perfectly normal, since he had never before shared any part of his life with another person his own age except Lily. For him, just having a study partner was a novel and enriching experience. There were occasions when it seemed that Mitchell might want to carry a conversation into more personal topics, but he always caught himself and backtracked before he could be accused of prying. Occasionally Severus saw Mitchell talking to

Bella or the Lestrangle brothers, but this didn't alarm him. They talked to everyone now.

Then, in March, Mitchell asked the first question. "What part of Britain are you from, anyway?" was the exact phrasing.

"Northern England," Severus replied.

"I'm from Hampshire myself. Never been north 'til I came here. What part?"

This was strange because Severus remembered having been asked this before. It was odd that Mitchell was asking again. "Lancashire," he replied, wondering if Mitchell just didn't recall.

"Merseyside?" Mitchell asked hopefully, and Severus realized the other boy knew something about muggle music.

"No," Severus answered. "Out in the . . . country."

What followed was even stranger, for Mitchell again asked where, and it seemed to Severus that Mitchell was pressuring him to give the name of his home town. This was something that Severus suddenly didn't want to do. London or Birmingham — that would have been all right, a city large enough to lose the entire school in. But a little Pendle town — that was too close, too vulnerable.

"Just . . . country," Severus told Mitchell after a moment of interrogation. "I don't . . . think it has a . . . name."

"Okay," Mitchell responded, and he seemed pleased.

Several days later the investigation resumed. "You know," Mitchell said, "I've been wondering since September what you did to give Aaron lice."

*I already told you what I did. Don't you remember? Or did you try what I told you and find out it wasn't right?* "I didn't do . . . anything."

"Come on. You said you just thought the word lice, but that can't be it. At least it didn't work for me. Maybe you were lying and you didn't really give him the lice, but he didn't have lice when we got here. Where else would he get it?"

"I don't . . . know. Where do people . . . usually get lice?"

"Nowhere overnight. One minute, no lice. The next minute, lice. I didn't do it. I didn't know who did back then, but I thought it was you. Then you said it was you. Since then I've gotten to know all four of you in the dorm, and the others couldn't have done it. They're not good enough. The only one good enough to do it was you. So I want to know — What did you do to give him lice? And don't tell me you just thought the word 'lice' because I know it isn't true."

Severus thought for a minute. "Who do . . . you want to give . . . lice to?" he asked.

"Nobody, silly! I just want to know how to do it."

"I don't think . . . I should tell you. You . . . might use it to attack . . . one of my friends."

Mitchell laughed. "Me? Attack anyone? Besides, you don't have any friends but me."

Severus paused to think of an answer, then said, "How do . . . you know?"

Mitchell looked embarrassed. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to make you feel bad. I just never saw you talking to anyone else."

Behind Mitchell, Severus saw Aaron enter the dormitory room. The air was suddenly charged with danger, and Severus immediately began to shut down. He couldn't ignore Mitchell, however. "Just because I don't talk to people in your presence doesn't mean I don't have friends," he said, not noticing Mitchell's sudden amazed stare.

It turned out that Aaron was looking for Mitchell. "She wants to see you," was all that he said, and Mitchell raced out of the dormitory to the common room, only to return twenty minutes later looking depressed and nervous. He lay down on his bed and didn't talk for the rest of the evening. Severus had no doubt who 'she' was, and watched Mitchell with a growing feeling of sympathy. It was now obvious that Mitchell was assigned to procure information about Severus. Sympathy did not, however, lead to any sense of obligation or desire to cooperate.

Life, which only a couple of weeks earlier had begun to improve, was becoming difficult again.

#### **SUNDAY, MARCH 19, 1972 (THREE DAYS BEFORE THE FIRST QUARTER)**

The third Sunday in March, Severus and Lily met as usual for a couple of hours after breakfast. Their chat was routine, except that they agreed that the weather had improved enough that, although it was still cold, they could resume meeting under the trees on the west side of the lake. Lily left first, and Severus followed several minutes afterwards.

He ran right into Aloysius, Evan, and Aaron. "Funny," said Aloysius as Aaron moved behind Severus and Evan watched his wand hand, "funny how we just saw a Gryffindor girl come out of the exact same corridor as you."

"I don't know what you're talking about," said Severus, his eyes dark and cold.

“That Gryffindor named Evans. She was with you. That corridor has a dead end. The only reason you two ’d be there so long is if you were together. Slytherins don’t go with Gryffindor girls. Maybe we have to do something to make sure you remember that.” Aloysius was enjoying threatening Severus. It showed.

“Maybe,” Aloysius continued, “you should forget her. Wouldn’t want anything to happen to her, now would we?”

Severus shook his head, and they let him go.

The next day was Monday, Potions day. This Monday the first years were making Forgetfulness Potions, which would be on their exams. Severus glanced around at the rest of the students as he set up his cauldron. The four Gryffindor boys (now that Wintergreen was gone) and the five Gryffindor girls didn’t interest him at all, not even Lily. They weren’t the cause of his problems or his pain. It was Slytherin that merited his attention. Even there, it wasn’t the girls, just the boys. *Still, if you got in the way, then you got in the way.*

Forgetfulness Potions. Severus smiled to himself. Considering what he’d just been told to do, forgetfulness was an apt and just revenge.

It would be easier if Severus had access to potions ingredients outside of class. Then he could brew things in secret, away from prying eyes. Since he didn’t, he had to use this Potions class to make what he wanted, and he had to do it while at the same time making the assigned potion and under the full scrutiny of his house mates.

This time, Severus made no attempt to sabotage his own work. Instead he produced a perfect batch of Forgetfulness Potion in record time, bottled the required amount, and proceeded to divide what was left into beakers, making precisely five batches. With blatant audacity, he crossed the classroom to the supply cupboard, carrying several little vials on a small tray, and selected and measured ingredients from the cupboard into the vials. He was below Slughorn’s radar, and he knew it. Slughorn didn’t notice him at all.

Back at his table Severus carefully added various combinations of ingredients to each of the five beakers, then bottled and labeled each with care. When he was done, he cleaned his station and looked up. All of the Slytherin students were watching him, as was Lily.

Throughout the day, Severus was constantly aware that he was being spied on. Doris Gamp and Claudia Higgs were one team, and Aaron and Evan another. Aloysius would come by from time to time to talk to one or the other of them, and seemed to be directing the operation. Severus had no

chance to get to Lily and tell her what had happened in the third floor corridor. After supper, Severus returned to his dormitory well before curfew to find that the others had been trying to open his footlocker. Trying, but not succeeding, though the reddened, rash-covered hands of Aaron and Evan left no doubt as to their persistence. Aloysius had been watching from his bed. Severus was pleased they were taking an interest in his potions.

Severus then spent a couple of days in the library compiling a list in his small, cramped handwriting. He consulted his notebook frequently, and kept changing the list, apparently oblivious to the students watching him. When finished, the list said:

*Blue — enhance Ch, Tr,*  
*Green — enhance He, Po.*  
*Yellow — enhance Ast, Hist, DA.*  
*Purple — forget*  
*Red — anti. to pur.*

March was coming to an end, and the end of term tests loomed. Students all over Hogwarts were studying madly, hoping to go into the Easter break with the term successfully completed. On Saturday the twenty-fifth, Severus went early to breakfast and waited until Lily came, ate, and left the Hall. He hadn't told her about the threat of the previous weekend, partly because he'd been so closely watched, and partly because they'd already agreed to abandon the third floor and meet outside. After waiting a few minutes, he rose and left the Hall, too.

Aloysius and the third year named Avery were standing at the head of the stairs leading down into the dungeons. When he saw Severus, Aloysius smiled. Realizing immediately what was happening, Severus raced for the oak doors and burst through them into the pleasant spring morning. Lily stood on the lawn in front of the castle, her way to the cliff blocked by the Lestrange brothers, her retreat cut off by Aaron and Evan.

Rabastan's voice wasn't loud, but it was clear. "We're not going to hurt you. We're not going to touch you. We're not interested in you at all. We're just telling you what your own house mates would tell you if they knew. Go to them now, in fact, and ask them to help you meet a Slytherin boy. See what they do. They'll probably thank us." He looked over at the doors and saw Severus standing on the steps. "You can go now," Rabastan told Lily.

Lily turned and ran past Severus into the castle. She was beginning to cry.

Rabastan walked up to Severus and put an arm around his shoulders, steering the smaller boy down the steps and across the lawn toward the cliff. "It's for your own good," he explained gently. "Do you have any idea what the Gryffindor boys would do if they caught you meeting a Gryffindor girl? We're just trying to keep you out of trouble. Your own house is all the friends and family you need at Hogwarts. You should stick to your house."

"I... thought you... didn't like... mongrels."

Rabastan stiffened and looked down, turning Severus so they faced each other. "Don't get cheeky with me. I'm a prefect, and I..."

"What's going on here?" came a commanding voice from the castle entrance. It was the seventh year prefect Malfoy. Rabastan released Severus's shoulders as Malfoy approached them. The others backed away.

"I spotted a couple of your toadies standing sentry duty in the entrance hall," Malfoy continued, his dislike of Rabastan unmistakable, "and then a Gryffindor comes running in, in tears. What do I find outside but every piece of riffraff Slytherin has to offer."

"You'd better watch your step, Malfoy," replied Rabastan. "The world is changing. You don't want to end up obsolete."

"Obsolete? I don't think so. The wizarding world knows the difference between gold and dross. Why are you detaining this first year? What rules has he broken?"

"He's... Nothing."

"Good," said Malfoy. "Then he can go back inside and study. End of term's on us and we want all of Slytherin to get good marks. You," this was addressed to Severus, "get up to the library and work on your assignments."

"Yes, sir," Severus answered, and scurried past the others into the castle and up the stairs, thankful to be saved from Rabastan, but perfectly well aware that the confrontation outside hadn't been about him. It was between Malfoy and Rabastan, and Severus was merely an excuse.

Severus was also aware that the reprieve was only temporary. Malfoy might be able to order Rabastan around while he was outside Slytherin house, but every one of Severus's dorm mates followed Rabastan, and there was no way Severus could escape retaliation unless he obeyed Rabastan and stopped seeing Lily.

It was time to show them that he, Severus, was not entirely helpless. His plan was going forward.

After breakfast on Monday of the last week before the break, Severus

opened his footlocker and removed the five little bottles with their colored liquid. Measuring out about a teaspoonful of the green potion into a tiny glass cup, he drank it, then put the vials into his robes. What he managed to conceal was that the bottle he drank from, containing only colored sugar water, went back into the footlocker.

That morning in Herbology, Severus excelled in his test. His answers were long and detailed, and he wrote at least two feet of parchment longer than anyone else in the class. Aaron and Evan watched him carefully, but he affected not to notice. After the class was over, Severus left the castle for a few minutes to get fresh air before his next class. He was reviewing his list, which he held in his left hand.

A sudden breeze blew the paper from Severus's hand. As he spun to seize it before it blew away completely, his wrist was imprisoned in Aaron's fist. About ten feet away, Evan bent to pick up the piece of paper.

"What's this?" Evan sneered. "Are you using memory enhancing potions to cheat on your exams? Bet this would get you detention in a heartbeat."

"Give that . . . back," Severus whispered hoarsely. "It's . . . mine, and you have no . . . right to . . . look at it."

"I think we do," Aaron said. "If one Slytherin cheats, it tarnishes the honor of all. We're just going to have to be sure you don't cheat anymore." He looked at the steps going back into the castle where Rodolphus Lestrangle was watching the little scene.

At a jerk of Aaron's head, Rodolphus came over. "Got a problem?" he asked.

"This Slytherin seems to be using memory potions to cheat on tests," said Aaron. "I think he's carrying them with him. See this paper? He drank something green this morning and then flew through the Herbology test. Isn't that what it says? 'Green — enhance Herbology and Potions.' That's what it means, right?"

"Give it . . . back!" Severus hissed. "It's . . . mine!"

"It's . . . mine," Rodolphus mimicked, laughing. "Not anymore, half-breed. Let's see what's in those robes." Aaron and Evan held Severus's arms while Rodolphus frisked him, removing the five vials of potion. "Now you can just finish the rest of your tests without any help from these." Rodolphus tucked the little bottles into his own robes, and strode back into the castle with Aaron and Evan in tow, leaving Severus fuming on the lawn.

Nothing happened during Charms class, but the afternoon was Defense Against the Dark Arts. Aaron and Evan swaggered into the class as if they

were masters of the world. Each had a little bit of yellow potion in a dosing cup that they covertly swallowed just before the tests were distributed to the class.

Severus was enjoying the situation tremendously, hoping that in other classes at other levels the same scenario was being repeated by other students. It was a treat to receive his paper, glance sideways at his tormentors, and watch the look of blank incomprehension spread over Aaron's face, mirrored by Evan's two desks away. The colored potions were, in fact, subject specific, so both boys were keenly aware of what they were unable to remember.

After an hour's careful writing, Severus turned in a length of parchment that was good enough to merit a relatively high mark without being in any danger of earning an excellent one, thus preserving his own reputation for being good, but not that good. The parchments handed in by Aaron and Evan were blank.

"Hey! Half-breed!"

Severus turned to face Rabastan Lestrangle in the fifth floor corridor, the tip of his wand tickling his palm where it lay hidden in his sleeve, ready if he needed it. He was shutting down already. "What do you want?" he asked.

"I want to know what you gave my brother."

"I didn't give your brother anything."

"I've told you before, little first years shouldn't be disrespectful to fifth years. It gets them in trouble."

Bella's voice reached them from down the corridor. "Is my puppy giving you trouble, Rabs?" She approached quickly. "I'm sure he doesn't mean anything by it, do you?"

"He gave a potion to Dolph that made him fail his test in Charms."

"I didn't give..."

"No," Bella laughed, "Dolph took it. He and cousin Aaron. They took it and used it, and it backfired on them. It serves them right, the bullies."

"He set it up. He tricked them."

"No, Rabs, he dangled bait in front of them, and they were dumb little fish and they took it. You've got to teach Dolph not to be so trusting. The world is a dangerous place. He can make it up at end of year exams." Bella smiled up at the older boy, who glared for a moment, then shrugged and left them.

"Thank you," Severus said after Rabastan disappeared.

"It's nothing. I like you. I think you need a friend or two in this place."



Like that Mitchell boy. He's nice, too. It's good of you to help him with his homework, and you should let him help you."

"What can he . . . help me with?"

"I don't know. Things. Got to go. Transfiguration calls." Bella hurried down the stairs, leaving Severus in thought.

"Can I talk to you?" Mitchell asked on Friday as Severus was leaving the Great Hall, his meager lunch in hand. "Not in the Hall. Someplace quiet?"

"First floor . . . lavatory?"

"Good. Meet you there."

The first floor boys' lavatory was empty. Severus ate his sandwich as he waited for Mitchell, wondering what the other boy wanted. Mitchell arrived about seven minutes later and immediately checked the stalls.

"There's no . . . one here," Severus said.

"Good. Look, I'm going home tomorrow for Easter break, but there's something you need to know. Don't trust that Bella. She's dangerous."

"I don't . . . trust her. I don't . . . like her."

"No, not like that, I mean really dangerous. You've got something she wants. I don't know what it is, but she wants it. She and those friends of hers. I'm supposed to talk to you about her, get you to like her, to trust her, to do what she says. She said if I didn't she'd make me so miserable I wouldn't want to stay at Hogwarts."

"I didn't . . . know. I thought you were . . . I wasn't sure. I'm sorry."

"That's all right. Listen. She also wanted information. Like what you can do—the locking spells, and the stuff you can do without saying anything, and how you're faking Potions to make it look like you're no good—she thinks that's all really interesting. I'm supposed to be spying on you."

"Why are you . . . telling me?"

"I don't want to do it anymore. I don't like her controlling me. After the break it's only a couple of months until the year's over. I think I can take it for a couple of months. I've been teased before. I've got to go. Aloysius is waiting for me in the Hall."

Mitchell left, and the two boys, by unspoken mutual consent, didn't talk to each other for the rest of the day. The next morning the train left for London carrying all the students who were going home for Easter, Lily among them. She and Severus hadn't spoken all week. Once again Severus was left in a nearly deserted school.

The Easter break was, quite frankly, boring. More students remained at

Hogwarts than had during the Christmas break, but this was primarily because they were studying for exams and were thus mostly fifth and seventh years. Rabastan Lestrange was not one of them.

Severus was once again alone in his dormitory, and was once again able to use the boys lavatory inside Slytherin house with some freedom since the older students tended to study late and sleep in during the break. He still avoided the common room because it tended to be a congregating point for the others. Mealtimes were rather pleasant as there were enough students so that the teachers remained segregated at the high table, but few enough so that the students spread through the Hall in small groups or studying individually. Severus was able to remain in the Hall to eat without feeling nervous about the presence of others. He did a lot of thinking.

Mitchell had said that he could take being teased and bullied for a couple of months until the summer. Severus wasn't sure if he himself was that strong. *I could take the bullying before, but that was because I knew I had Lily to talk to on the weekends. Can I take not having anyone to talk to for a couple of months? Can I hold out and stay free from whatever Bella's planning? It's only a couple of months, and then we'll go home for the summer. Then Lily and I can talk together any time we want, and we won't have to worry about what Slytherin and Gryffindor think. We'll be back home in Lancashire, and we'll have the whole summer to talk.*

It was a good thought, and Severus resolved to be strong. The promise of the summer would sustain him.

Then the break was over, and the students returned to Hogwarts for the final term of the year. Aaron and Evan arrived on the train on Saturday evening. Lily came on the train, too, and exchanged glances with Severus at supper, but neither tried any further contact. On Sunday, Mitchell apparated in with his father, who left immediately after seeing his son was safely inside the gate. It was the first weekend of the last term, and Severus already missed talking to Lily. He spent the second half of Sunday afternoon in the library.

Shortly before supper, Severus went downstairs to the Great Hall, but was told by a Hufflepuff prefect that he needed to go to the Slytherin common room where Professors Dumbledore, McGonagall, and Slughorn were addressing the entire house. Severus didn't know if this was normal at the beginning of the final term, but he rather thought not. He went down into the dungeons wondering if he would be the last to arrive since he saw no one else on the stairs. The common room was quiet when he entered, most

of the students looking shocked or sad, and several of the sixth and seventh year girls crying.

Mitchell came over to Severus. "It's Malfoy," he said softly. "He's not coming back to Hogwarts."

It took a moment for the information to sink in. "What happened to Malfoy?" Severus asked after a moment.

"His mother — she was killed in a bombing in Northern Ireland during the break."

"Wizards don't plant bombs." Severus was shutting down, his few memories about Malfoy locking themselves away in the vaults of his mind.

"Wizards didn't set the bombs. It was a muggle attack."

"How? Why?"

"She was visiting a cousin in County Armagh. The cousin lived outside Crossmaglen. Professor Dumbledore says there's been lots of trouble among the muggles, and on Friday one group of them set off two dozen bombs all over Northern Ireland. The cousin was so nervous about the violence, she even had a Disillusionment Charm on the house to make it look like a derelict building. Professor Dumbledore says it was just a coincidence that the bomb was put where it would kill Malfoy's mother."

Severus remembered Malfoy putting Rabastan in his place just before the break started, and felt his mouth twitch a little, almost like a smile — one of those bitter half-smiles that wasn't really a smile at all. "They work fast," was all he said, knowing that Mitchell wouldn't understand.

The students went to their rooms, and Headmaster Dumbledore, with Professor McGonagall as Deputy Headmistress, spent some time talking to the girls and boys in small groups in their dormitories about the loss of their friend and senior prefect. When Dumbledore got to the first years, Aaron and Evan did most of the talking — about how nice Malfoy was, and how he was always helping them and giving them advice. Severus, who knew Malfoy had scarcely paid any attention to them at all, except for the day he rescued Severus from Rabastan, sat quietly on his bed, looking occasionally at the walls, but mostly at the floor.

"And what of you, Master Snape?" Dumbledore asked gently before leaving. "Will you miss Master Malfoy?"

"He was . . . nice," Severus said without looking up, and left it at that.

Bella was first. She came to the dormitory and asked to speak to him. "How're you doing, puppy dog?" she said when Severus went to the door. "I know Malfoy was like an older brother to you."

Severus knew that Rabastan had told her all about the scene outside the castle. He shrugged. "No more than anyone else," he said, jet-black eyes fixed on her face. "You must miss him, though. After all, you knew him a lot longer than I did."

She stared at him. "Why are you talking like that?" she asked.

"Like what?" Severus responded, then turned and went back to his bed. The next day he began haunting the library looking for spells. What he really wanted to do was talk to Lily. She might be able to help him sort things out and see them clearly. Lacking that, he acted on instinct. He had no illusions about the role of coincidence. Malfoy had helped him and thereby made himself a target for Rabastan LeStrange. That meant that he, Severus, was already involved, and the only one left who could orchestrate Malfoy's revenge.

It took awhile to construct the first spell, which involved localized aging. A week later, as Severus slid by the common room on his way to breakfast, he looked at Bella and thought *Phalakros*, then exited through the wall, not knowing if his spell would work since he had no opportunity to test it.

Bella realized what was happening halfway through breakfast when she absent-mindedly ran her hands through her hair. Clumps of strands parted from her head and came away with her fingers. She stared at them in horror, then ran her hand through her hair again. More hair was detached from her scalp. She began to shriek, her initial incoherence gradually resolving itself into the words, "Bald! I'm going bald!" By the time her friends managed to steer her out of the Great Hall, she was in hysterics.

Rodolphus got a silent Schizo spell as he crossed the entrance hall. Instantly, the seams of his robes split, and his clothing began dropping from his body in tatters. In less than a minute he was nearly naked, clutching the shreds of his garments around him as he raced for his dormitory.

Rabastan, being older, required more planning. In the end, Severus decided to wait for the OWLs, and started a series of memory-slowng spells at the beginning of May. Rabastan began suddenly to spend more time in study halls and with paid tutors.

In mid May, Severus paused in a fourth floor corridor at the sound of a familiar voice. It was Rabastan, and he was talking to Rodolphus.

"... says there's no proof he can do anything, and I'm beginning to agree. We've never heard a spell or seen the wand since Bella tested him in January."

"What about at the beginning when we tried to give him a bath? That was him, for certain. And the way he can lock up his stuff."

"So he knows a couple of locking spells. That doesn't mean anything.

And they say muggle-borns first know they're magical because they can do things when they're angry or scared that they don't intend and don't understand. Could be the same with half-bloods. He was scared. Something happened. Anyway, except for that, we have nothing but a couple of parlor tricks. They say it's a waste of time."

"I don't know, Rabastan..."

"Look, if he's so good, why isn't he getting better grades? Why isn't he threatening us, or defying us about that girl in Gryffindor, or making a power play? Why's he always sneaking around the edges of rooms like he's scared of everybody, and why's he always alone? If I had the kind of talent you think he has, you know what I'd be doing with it! He's a waste of time. We're to drop him."

"What about making my clothes fall off?"

"Geez, Dolph, that could've been anyone! It could've been one of the girls checking you out!" Rabastan was laughing now. "We've got better things to do with our time than test babies. Come on! I'll race you downstairs!"

The two rushed past while Severus flattened himself into a statue niche where they wouldn't see him. It was good news. They were going to leave him alone for a while. It was the best news he'd had all year.

The rest of the term was quiet. It was so quiet that Severus had time to notice that Lily got quite a few owls around exams time. Severus himself passed his exams with good enough grades to be somewhere in the middle of his class — acceptable but not noticeable. The end of term feast was noisy and lasted well into the night, but that only meant that most of the students would sleep on the train back into London. Severus had no intention of sleeping on the train. The train was his opportunity to speak to Lily.

This time Severus wasn't the last one on board, and he managed to find an empty compartment where he was soon joined by two other first years, one Hufflepuff and one Ravenclaw, whose names he still didn't know. It didn't matter, because both dozed the entire trip. About an hour after the train started, Severus left the compartment to look for Lily. He went first to the rear to check by the baggage car.

Lily was already there. "I knew you'd come," she said. "I've missed talking to you ever so much."

"Me, too," said Severus.

Lily told him all about her Easter trip to Kent, and the new wiring in May that allowed Petunia to have her very own princess phone. "Which I'm going

to use when Petunia isn't in," she added decidedly. Then Severus told her about Malfoy and his mother's death, something Lily found very depressing.

"It'll be great this summer, though," Severus said. "We'll be able to meet by the river any day we want and just talk. It'll be a lot nicer back home than it was at Hogwarts."

Lily didn't look at him. Instead she looked out the train window. "I'm not going back to Lancashire," she said finally. "Dad's company in Manchester's transferred him to their office in Reigate. They've already moved. They'll meet me in London and we'll go right to Surrey."

There wasn't much else to say. A few minutes later, both went back to their compartments. Severus was already shut down, and remained shut down as he watched Lily greet her family in London. Petunia was there looking smug.

King's Cross was crowded. It took Severus several minutes before he located his mum. She was standing quietly to one side, just waiting. There were no hugs, because there never were. "You all right?" she asked, looking him over.

"Yeah. I'm a survivor."

Eileen nodded brusquely. "And never forget it. Our train leaves tomorrow and your dad's meeting us at Colne. You got your bearings?"

Severus and his mum left King's Cross station, and she watched patiently as he took in the confusion of cars and buses, and the evening bustle of people on their way home from work. Then Severus pointed to the right. "It's over there," he said firmly. "We can use the underground entrance to cross Euston Road."

Eileen smiled. "Good boy," was all she said, but Severus knew she was proud. She let him lead the way down Euston Road to Euston Station where they checked his things, then across to St. Pancras church, where Evensong was under way. They sat during the service like members of the parish, then managed to conceal themselves while the church was locked up. When they were alone, Severus and his mother huddled in a pew in the nave by the light of a tiny Lumos spell.

"Here's your supper, then," she said, pulling sandwiches and apples from her pack. "Now, tell me about Hogwarts."

Severus told her. First about classes, and how he'd kept his marks at a respectable but unremarkable level, except in Herbology because Professor Mullein knew about Nana. She nodded, but was unhappy about Potions.

"It isn't the professors you worry about, Russ, it's the students. Now

you've got Slughorn thinking you're mediocre, which is good, but the other Slytherin students know you're faking it. I should've guessed you had too much pride to just botch a potion, but you shouldn't have let them see what you can do. Well, I suppose the damage is done. Next year you can go for better marks in Potions. Be sure you make them think you have to work hard at it. Just don't go showing off in Charms or Dark Arts."

"Yes, Mum," Russ replied.

Early the next morning, the two slipped out of the church and across Euston Road to Euston Station where they got something simple to eat and boarded the train for Lancashire. This train had second-class cars, and Russ settled comfortably into the familiar seat where he didn't feel out of place. He and his mother pointed out things they noticed along the way, chatted more about Hogwarts, ate their sandwiches, and napped a little. The train stopped frequently, and it was early evening before they pulled into Colne.

Toby wasn't there. After half an hour, Eileen settled Russ in the station waiting room with his bag and his books and went out checking pubs. She found him in the second one she entered, not yet too much the worse for wear, and hauled him out while he informed his companions of the hour, "Gotta go see m' boy. Just got back from a la-di-da school, he is. Gotta take the la-di-da shine off 'im. Where is 'e, Leen? Too high an' mighty to come down an' be with 'is father?"

Russ stood as his parents came into the waiting room, judging rapidly how much his dad had drunk and just how touchy he might be. *Not too bad*, he thought. It could have been worse. He waited for his dad to speak first.

"Go on, Toby. Say something to your son." Eileen had already made the same assessments and felt on relatively secure ground.

"Hey there, Russ," Toby grinned. "You didn't grow none. Still knee-high to a midget. That school polish you up all nice and pretty?"

"Don't nobody polish me. If they try, I give 'em what for."

"Let's see how much they taught ya." Toby bent down and stuck out his left hand, palm forward. "Let's see how ya go all fifteen."

Russ looked at the hand and imagined Aaron Wilkes's face. Then he balled his right into a fist and punched out straight into his father's palm. Toby looked surprised, then impressed. "Y' picked up a bit on that right jab," he said, rubbing the reddening palm.

"Told you. Don't nobody polish me."

Nodding appreciatively, Toby turned to Eileen. "There's a fish 'n chip

place just down the street. Wha' say we get supper here an' then drive home? It 'd give the boy a chance t' tell me about his battles."

Supper was good, and Russ tucked into his fish and chips with relish. He had to tell his dad three times about the fight in the lavatory where he'd bloodied another boy's nose. He just didn't mention that he'd done it with a spell, and Toby was happy that his boy was a fighter. Eileen was happy that Toby stuck to beer, and just a pint of that.

By the time they finished, it was nearly ten o'clock, and the sun was setting. It would be fully dark long before they got home, and the moon, full and bright, would light the way. Luckily, Toby was perfectly capable of driving the car, and they loaded Russ and his things into the back and set off, arriving about twenty minutes later at the little brick house at the end of the shabby row on the edge of the old mill town where they lived.

On the way, they'd passed through the better part of town, and Russ had noted that Lily's house was dark, the shutters closed, waiting for a new family to move into it.

Things in the Snape family were going so well that Eileen had taken a chance and had Toby stop by the local so that she could run in and get a couple of bottles of beer. With luck, she could keep him home until after last call. Toby'd started to insist that he go in instead, but she told him to stay in the car and talk to his son. "I was with him on the train all day. Now it's your turn."

"You know," said Russ from the back seat, playing his mother's game, "I haven't had the chance to skunk anyone for near ten months."

"You betting you could skunk me?"

"I'm not betting I can't."

"We'll just see when we get home."

Eileen got the beer, and as soon as they were inside their home, Toby pulled out the cribbage board. While Toby and Russ were occupied with the cards, Eileen put her son's things away and turned down the beds. Then she fixed tea in their tiny kitchen and brought Russ a cup. Father and son were neck and neck down the last pegging row, and Toby counted first, pegging out and winning.

"Ya got to give me another chance, dad," Russ insisted, and the two of them played until it was too late for Toby to go to the pub.

In their room, getting ready for bed, Toby mentioned to Eileen, "It's good to have the boy at home again."

It was a good summer, even with Lily not there. With the strike over and



settled, Toby had work the entire time at decent pay, which meant he spent less time at the pub except on Friday and Saturday nights. In addition, there were special occasions, the first coming at the middle of July, less than three weeks after Russ arrived home.

"I saw Mrs. Hanson at the market this morning," Eileen told Russ on July fourteenth, a Friday. "She thought you might like t' visit her this evening. Maybe stay over 'til Sunday."

"What for?" Russ asked, not looking up from the second-year Transfiguration book he was studying.

"She said maybe you missed Dr. Who, and maybe you'd like t' go t' Manchester with her tomorrow."

That sparked Russ's interest, for he'd only left his own town a couple of times in his life before going to Hogwarts. "Sure," was all he said, but he was ready to leave well ahead of time. He also had the feeling that maybe this was one of the times his mum and dad wanted to be alone.

Mrs. Hanson had hot chocolate and cookies for him, then Russ soaked in her marvelous tub where he could close the door against the whole world, and at last watched television all Friday evening seated on the floor with his knees pulled up to his chin, for Mrs. Hanson let him, and in her house it was even possible to laugh. The next morning they set out early with one of her borders who drove them to Colne. The trip to Manchester was a long one because for some reason they had to go all the way to Blackburn to change trains, but Russ enjoyed the journey nevertheless.

Mrs. Hanson had a bigger surprise in Manchester. "Didn't you used to enjoy listening to the Beatles?" she asked when they left Victoria Station. "One of their movies is showing here. It's a sort of revival. The one called Help!" And so Russ saw his very first motion picture.

He was fascinated by the recording studios, alpine skiing, Caribbean beaches—and Ringo's vain attempts to fend off villainous ruffians by striking at them with the edge of his hands.

"What's he doing, then? That's not fighting!" Russ scoffed. Certainly not Nel Tarleton's style of fighting.

"I think it's called karate, dear, but he's not very good at it, is he?"

There was no one else to ask about karate until Russ visited his muggle grandmother, Gra.

"Sure I've heard of it. From Asia, I think. I know Toby doesn't think much of it, but your great-grandfather Wensley did. The ships used t' pull into Hong Kong and other parts, and I know he saw some. Your dad and

your grandfather always said it was just circus tricks, but Wensley thought they could give a boxer a run for his money.”

“Do you have any books about it?”

“Love you, no, dear. What would I be doing with books like that?”

It waited until Toby took them to Blackpool in August. Toby and Eileen wanted to spend time together, so Russ was free to roam the town for two days. He went to book stores and read as much as he could before the shopkeepers realized he wasn’t buying and told him to leave.

Russ wasn’t impressed by the idea of breaking bricks with your hands. It was the idea that falling was an art, and that an opponent’s momentum could be used against him that captivated Russ. When they returned home, he began to spend time out on the moors, practicing falling and rolling the way he’d seen in the pictures. It went well with wand work, and soon he could dive and come up with his wand ready and pointed at his target in one swift motion.

It was much easier than flying on a broomstick.

On the last Monday of the summer, less than a week before school was to start, Russ was out on the moors working on his dueling, incorporating everything he’d been practicing. He came up from a dive and roll to hear his mother’s voice behind him. “That’s an interesting technique. Where did you learn it.”

“From Ringo Starr,” Russ replied, turning to look at her. She had her arms crossed over her chest.

“Lovely. Now tell the truth,” she said.

“No, it’s true. He was doing this karate act in that movie, so I checked on it. Falling and getting out of the way so that you can attack is important.”

“Keeping your mind closed and reading theirs is important, too.”

“Of course, but I can do both at the same time.”

“Show us, then.” Eileen opened her arms to reveal that she was carrying her wand. It meant a real training session. Though the spells they used were harmless, they were actual spells. Out here, unidentifiable and away from muggle homes, they could not get into trouble.

Russ was already shutting down completely. It was the first thing his mother would check. She had this idea that he would be careless and didn’t seem to believe him when he told her that in moments of real danger it happened automatically. Eileen never shut down. She’d told Russ it was because she was imitating his opponents. He sometimes wondered if that was really true.

Eileen started with an Expelliarmus that Russ blocked easily. She then sent out a steady stream of stinging hexes, confusion jinxes, and body-bind curses that Russ parried, blocked and avoided, sometimes using his new techniques, at first awkwardly, then with growing confidence. Within about five minutes, she stopped coddling him and began to fight seriously and in earnest. After twenty minutes of strenuous dueling, with both of them tiring, Russ dove to his left, stayed on the ground when Eileen was expecting him to stand, and disarmed her with a numbing hex to the wrist. It was the first time he'd beaten her in a no-quarter fight.

"Impressive," was all Eileen said, but it was the highest praise she'd ever given him, and Russ was quietly proud. "We'd best get home before your dad's shift is over. Don't want him knowing we've been wand waving now, do we? Just let me check first that you remember all your lessons. Don't want to send you back t' that school with your guard down."

From the time he was a baby, his mother had checked frequently to be sure he never gave himself away, so the moments of intense eye and mind contact with her were as normal to Russ as the air he breathed. Eileen was looking for fear, for doubt and wavering, and she saw none and was content. What she saw was what a potential foe would expect to see — the moor, herself, anticipation of future dueling success, an interest in what was for supper — the things a twelve-year-old should be thinking about. A twelve-year-old whose calm self-control and analytical mind were things Eileen prided herself on.

There were other things that Eileen didn't see — didn't see and didn't miss because she'd never seen them and didn't think to look for them — the moments he shared with others that infringed on her possession of him, like his talks with his grandmothers and his brief laughter at Mrs. Hanson's, and especially his friendship with Lily — the bitterness, shame, and anger at the poverty and blood status that she'd warned him all his life would make him a target, and that his brief stay at Hogwarts had now confirmed — the fierce drive for sheer survival that she'd drilled into him, that inspired his defenses with a preternatural cunning and a talent for manipulation. She didn't look for these things because she didn't know they existed. He hadn't shown them to her and never would. More things closed down automatically than even he knew, and he gave himself away to no one. Not to her. Not even to himself.

In the last days of summer, Russ concentrated on his mother's old second-year books, glad now that he had permission to show more of what he could really do in his upcoming classes. In the early afternoons, he and his mother

went out on the moors to duel, and in the evenings he played cribbage with his father. He was rather looking forward to his second year at school, since he had evidence that the Lestrangle brothers and Bella would leave him alone, and he was reasonably sure he could control Wilkes and Rosier. And maybe he would find a way to be able to talk to Lily again.

On the morning of Thursday, August 31, 1972, Toby Snape drove his wife and son to Colne and saw them onto the train to London where they would once again arrive at Euston Station, spend the night at St. Pancras, and where the following day Russ would depart from King's Cross Station on the Hogwarts Express for another year, one that promised to be much less eventful than the first one had been.

## C H A P T E R   N I N E

### P O R T E N T S

**FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 1, 1972 (THE DAY AFTER THE LAST QUARTER)**

The first year Severus attended Hogwarts, Eileen Snape had stayed with him all morning and said goodbye just as the Hogwarts Express was about to pull out of Kings Cross station. This second year, she got him to Kings Cross early with his things, then hurried back to Euston Station to return to Colne on a morning train. Severus didn't mind. They didn't have very much to talk about, having already said everything several times. Farewells in train stations have a tendency to be awkward.

Severus wandered around the station for a while, pushing his trolley with his school books and clothes, and then around ten o'clock he quietly slipped through the barrier to Platform 9 3/4 where he found a bench about half way down the platform. There he sat watching as the platform slowly filled with people. He didn't even try to see Lily, since she wouldn't be able to come over and speak to him. He'd find her on the train.

At about a quarter to eleven, Severus got his things to the train crew, except the Gladstone bag he carried his robes in, and boarded the train at about the center, moving toward the rear as he looked for an empty compartment. Passing one where the curtains were drawn, he overheard a familiar voice.

"... doing it all wrong. Dad says He said we should take time to check before we start talking to them." It sounded like Rabastan LeStrange.

"Who's he?" The voice was Aaron's.

"You know who — Him." This was Kenneth Avery. "They think if we move before we're sure of what we've got, we'll scare them away. They say we scared lots away last year, and we're not to repeat the mistake with this year's new students."

"What about the ones from last year?" said Evan's voice.

"Go slow," said Lestrangle. "Business as usual. Not too nice, and not too nasty. Just normal."

There was the sound of someone coming into the car behind him, so Severus quickly moved on, wondering about the conversation he'd just eavesdropped on. *Was I one of the ones they scared away last year? I'd better be careful.*

Severus found an empty compartment almost at the end of the train where he quickly changed into robes. Just before the Express started moving, three older Hufflepuff students pushed open the door. It looked like they were going to leave again as soon as they saw what house he was in, but then seemed to decide that one small Slytherin by himself probably wasn't dangerous, and came into the compartment.

"Mind if we sit here?" one of them said. He wore a prefect's badge and looked to be sixth or seventh year.

"Suit yourself," Severus replied. After a moment he added, "My mum was in Hufflepuff."

"So how come you're in Slytherin?"

"Retrograde Mercury."

The Hufflepuff students nodded sagely. "Tough luck," another of them said.

"Thanks," Severus replied.

The first Hufflepuff held out his hand. "Macmillan," he said.

"Snape," Severus responded and shook hands. The other two introduced themselves as Roper and Hopkins.

"Don't know as I've ever seen the name Snape in the Hufflepuff archives," said Macmillan.

"Her name was Prince."

"That'd be it. Did she play Gobstones? Team captain?"

"Yeah," Severus said.

"Rotten luck about Mercury."

After that, Severus stared out at the passing scenery, not trying to join in the conversation, a move that seemed to earn him more respect. An hour later there was movement in the corridor, and then the door slid open and Lily entered. She nodded to the Hufflepuff boys and walked past them to sit opposite Severus. "How was your summer?" she asked.

"Pretty good. We went to Blackpool. Yours?"

"Southern Italy and Malta."

Next to them the three boys from Hufflepuff carefully ignored the conversation, but the sight of a Slytherin boy talking to a Gryffindor girl clearly had them silently cursing the whims of Mercury in retrograde.

Lily only stayed an hour because she was afraid the other girls would get too curious about where she was, but that hour was just like old times. Amidst talk of Capri and Pompeii, of Manchester and the Beatles, Severus and Lily also managed to decide that he would help her with her Potions work, and that they would make no effort to see each other Saturday or Sunday mornings. Instead, Severus would immediately establish his old routine of not eating supper at the Slytherin table, and from time to time Lily would join him somewhere in the castle or outside.

After Lily had gone, Severus resumed watching out the window while the Hufflepuff students alternately talked or dozed. It was actually a rather comfortable train ride.

Hogsmeade station brought something new. Everyone except the first years, it seemed, went from the station to the castle by carriage — a carriage that moved by magic, since Severus could see nothing that pulled it. This time he wasn't able to avoid his house mates, and he found himself in a carriage with Aaron, Evan, and Mitchell. They nodded in greeting, but none of them said much as the carriage took them along the darkened road, through the gates, and up the hill to the castle.

It was amusing to watch the sorting from the Slytherin table, then boring to sit there for the whole welcoming feast. Severus didn't join any of the conversation, and nobody talked to him. It didn't surprise him. Nobody'd ever wanted to talk to him except Lily, and he'd always avoided the Great Hall at meal times and thus never gotten to know them anyway. He listened to some of the chatter, but wizards weren't any more interesting than muggles, so he thought about other things.

One of the things he thought about was how dumb wizards could be. Like pens. It hadn't taken long for Severus to become completely disenchanted with quills and bottles of ink. It gave you more to carry around, the quill needed constant sharpening, and the ink stained the most careful fingers and needed to be continually blotted. A handful of ball-point pens would be much more convenient, but it took muggle brains to come up with an idea like that. Just like it took muggle brains to come up with television and lunar excursion modules. Severus was proud that he wasn't a pureblood wizard. All his brains were on the muggle side.

Then he started thinking about the others around him and what he might

do if he wanted to. Like the distracting way Doris Gamp's hair kept flopping into her eyes. Severus was sure he could come up with a hair trimming spell to cure Doris's problem. Or Aaron's irritating habit of cracking his knuckles all the time. Maybe a spell to make the knuckle bones all soft and gushy so they wouldn't make that horrible sound. Severus wondered what the Greek for knuckles was.

When the feast was over, the students went to their dormitories. Everything was as it had been at the end of the first year. Severus went straight to his bed and pulled the curtains shut. He waited for Aaron to call him 'Miss Prissy,' but no one said anything about it.

Mitchell stretched and yawned. "This is going to be the best start of term ever," he commented.

"How do you figure that?" Evan asked.

"Tomorrow's Saturday. We have a whole weekend before we start classes. I'm going to sleep the whole time."

Severus hadn't thought of that. He immediately put a little awakening spell on his bed so he could get up early and into the lavatory before anyone else was awake.

Aloysius came in from the common room and dumped a handful of chocoballs on a side table. "I got extras on the train," he said. "Help yourself."

Despite the fact that they'd just finished a feast, the boys pounced hungrily on the candy. Aloysius looked over to the far side of the room where Severus was getting out his pajamas. "You too, if you want, Sev," he said, and turned to open his own footlocker.

That presented a little problem. Severus had only a second to decide what to do because if he waited too long it would look suspicious. He walked over and took one chocoball from the little pile. "Thanks," he said, and bit into it. It tasted good.

Aloysius shrugged and didn't say anything. That was fine with Severus. He liked his world predictable. Business as usual.

They were all tired, so there wasn't a lot of conversation. Severus got into his curtained bed and changed into his pajamas, then crawled under the covers. He'd already put a locking spell on his footlocker and a guard spell on the bed. It didn't pay to be careless, even if Aloysius was handing out candy. Soon all five boys were sound asleep.

The next day, Severus spent the whole time outside of Slytherin house



checking out all the old places he used to go. His spot by the lake was probably the best, since it was shielded from the view of the castle by the cliff itself, and you could hear if anyone started down the steep little path. Besides, there were four ways to escape — either direction along the lake shore, up the cliff, and into the boat grotto. Nobody was ever going to trap him or Lily in a corridor again.

Severus spent Sunday in the library, and then on Monday classes started.

Severus noticed several important things that first week of classes. The first was that he was followed when he left the Great Hall, having taken some food with him for supper. He'd anticipated that from the conversation he'd overheard on the train, and he made no attempt to lose his 'tail.' Instead he led the follower all over the castle, finally stopping each night in a different and remote spot where he curled up in a corner to eat his supper and study one of his textbooks. Meanwhile he knew, because it was part of their plan, that Lily was sometimes staying in the hall and sometimes slipping out, and when she slipped out it was to do as he did — find a spot to study alone. Once they had everybody believing that was all they did, they could start meeting from time to time.

The second thing was that people were being nice to him. It wasn't really a 'nice' nice; it was more a 'not so mean as usual.' Still, it was something. Aaron absentmindedly stood aside to let Severus pass when they almost ran into each other at the dormitory door. Aloysius asked about a point on a homework assignment. Evan told a joke and looked to see if Severus was laughing along with everyone else. Mitchell was emboldened to say things like, "Good morning," and "See you in Charms."

Bella Black seemed to have risen in the world. Even though she was a fourth year student, and Rabastan Lestrange was a sixth year prefect, Rabastan seemed to be listening to and taking orders from Bella. This was totally mystifying to Severus, especially since he had no idea what they meant when they said, 'You know . . .' to each other, something they now did with great frequency.

On September twelfth, Severus and Lily met by the lake for the first time since the term started. The rest of the school was in the Great Hall eating supper.

"Why did you give your note to Madley?" was practically the first thing Severus said when Lily arrived. "Couldn't you have thought of something else?"

"Thurstan is nice," Lily replied primly. "At first he didn't want to pass

notes to Slytherins, but I told him to talk to the fifth years — one of those boys on the train was a Hufflepuff prefect, you know — and I guess they told him you were all right. When did he give it to you?”

“In Herbology. It was kind of funny, him dropping that mandrake. And then I realized he was using it to give me something. It was a pretty good idea, I guess.”

“Of course it was. I always have good ideas. How’s the opening of term been for you?”

“Decent, actually. Nobody’s been mean yet. I keep waiting for it to change.”

“Maybe they finally figured you were a decent person.”

Severus snorted in disdain. “Their idea of decent isn’t the same as yours.”

“Do you know about gift horses?” Lily asked. “Stop looking in their mouths.”

The whole rest of September was like that. The students in Slytherin were reasonably civil to Severus, but they still occasionally spied on him. Lily met him from time to time, and was wondrously supportive in most things, but pooh-poohed his suspicions. Severus trusted nothing and no one — except Lily.

By the beginning of October, the honeymoon was over. Aaron began once again to refer to ‘Miss Prissy,’ and even told Severus he wasn’t to return to Slytherin house before supper or after supper until curfew. “We need time to air the room out,” was the stated reason. Severus began spending more time in the library and in the deserted classrooms, of which, it turned out, there were many. Lily was a peripheral issue.

After the beginning of October, another phase began. Slytherin students again began actively spying. Whenever Severus cast a spell in Charms, another Slytherin was there to register how he did it. Whenever a potion was brewed, another Slytherin was there to record how it was done.

Severus was beginning to get very irritated with Slytherin house, and very protective of his relationship with Lily.

#### THURSDAY, OCTOBER 19, 1972 (3 DAYS BEFORE THE FULL MOON)

The Slytherin dormitories were not far from the Potions classroom. A group of Slytherins headed there to relax for a couple of hours before supper, and Severus fell in behind them as they went deeper below ground to the bare damp wall that concealed the entrance to their common room under

the lake. Skirting the green-lit common room and its gathering of students, Severus slipped through an opening and down the short passage that led to his dormitory.

Two of his roommates, Wilkes and Rosier, were already there, but they stopped talking to watch Severus when he walked in. "Aren't you here a little early, Miss Prissy?" sneered Wilkes. "Thought we told you never until after supper."

Severus ignored them and crossed to his bed in the far corner. His potions book went into his footlocker, and he took out his black cloak with the Slytherin badge of a coiled serpent. He rather liked the Hogwarts robes, the straight, black, belted medieval gown with its green and silver embroidery on collar and cuffs, the black academic robe bordered in front and on its wide sleeves with the same Slytherin colors, the green and silver biretta, and the black cloak. They made him look less scrawny.

He didn't worry about the safety of his belongings. The others had tried to rifle through them the year before, as evidenced by their raw, blistered hands, but none of them had been able to break through the curse he kept on his possessions. They'd tried to tease him more the first year, too. Then a family of spiders had taken up residence right over Rosier's bed, dropping from time to time into his mouth as he slept, while Wilkes had come down with the worst case of head lice Hogwarts had seen in thirty years. After that things were more peaceful.

Swirling the cloak around his shoulders, Severus closed the footlocker with a snap of his fingers and left the dormitory and common room, unconcerned about the others or what they were doing. Wilkes and Rosier followed his small departing figure with wary eyes, then resumed their conversation.

The first stop for Severus was down the hill, into the copse behind the North Tower. The spring of a tiny stream hid there, and he went to it from time to time to wash up. It wasn't satisfactory, but he didn't care as his own appearance was of no daily concern to him. The place he avoided above all was the boys' communal lavatory with its frightening horseplay. A few of the older boys had once tried to humiliate him by forcing him to strip there, but it's hard to focus on tormenting a smaller boy when your eyelids and lips are swelling and your nose bleeding from multiple hexes, and they desisted from their sport. All in all, he considered it a success since none of the other boys had ever glimpsed his scars. Being called 'Miss Prissy' by Wilkes was insignificant by comparison.

*A few years in Hogwarts will teach you to defend yourself. Never let them see*

*you're afraid. Never let them see you're weak. Don't be fooled into fighting them on their ground. Make them fight on yours.* His mother's words. Words to live by, and he'd lived by them. *Oderint dum metuant*, she'd taught him, and he found part of him enjoyed making them fear.

Once into the copse he made sure there was no one to spy on him, then slipped out of cloak and robe and loosened the cuffs and belt of the gown. A quick, modest wash was enough, and he was ready to return to the Castle. It was still an hour before supper.

October was well advanced, and the Great Hall of the Castle was resplendent with harvest decorations. Even before supper was served, the Hall was crowded with hungry students. Severus slipped over to the very end of the Slytherin table nearest the doors, hoping that no one would notice his presence. Normally he'd grab a few bites to eat and sneak outside to consume them. This time, for no particular reason he glanced over at Lily.

She was near the end of the Gryffindor table with a few friends. It was amazing how comfortable she seemed with them, talking and giggling. He watched them without watching, eyes averted and head down. Once, once only, she looked back at the Slytherin table, and for a fleeting half second their eyes met. *Did she wink? Or not? Does she want to meet by the lake?* He snatched a few tidbits of food from the now groaning tables, rose and left the Hall.

"Is everything all right?"

Severus jumped at Lily's sudden appearance. She'd followed him down to the lake where the moon, three days from the full, was beginning her climb into the crisp autumn sky. "Wilkes was being mean again," he answered. For some reason he felt better out here in the cold and the dark.

Lily looked down at the scraps of meat and vegetable he'd stuck inside a small bread roll. "No wonder you're so small. You don't eat anything. I never noticed that before." She sat down on a smooth boulder and untied the ends of a large dinner napkin she carried. It fell open, full of meat, bread, and sweets. "I already finished most of my supper, but I thought we could share some dessert."

Severus settled on the grass beside her. The food was delicious, and they ate in silence, Lily nibbling slowly and pressing most of it on Severus. He hadn't realized how tasty the tarts and sweetmeats would be. He hoped too many sweets wouldn't make him sick. "How come you wanted to meet tonight?"

"I just thought you looked a little down. I was afraid they were picking

on you. Why didn't you tell me at the beginning of last year that things were rough in Slytherin? I could have helped."

"I didn't want to upset you. Besides, what could you have done?"

"I don't know. Maybe let you talk about it. That helps sometimes."

"I don't want to talk about it. I want to forget it. Talking to you helps me forget."

"Okay, but when I'm upset, talking helps." Lily looked up at the moon. "This is a beautiful place to watch the sky. When did you start coming here?"

"Last year. It's hidden from the castle. That's why I chose it. It gets cold, though."

They talked for a while, and Severus felt better when they returned to the castle. He kept to the edge of the common room as he made his way to the dormitory for the night. A group of older students was talking and laughing by the fire on the other side of the room. One glanced up. It was Rabastan Lestrangle.

"The place stinks of mongrel," he commented loudly. "Hey, Rosier. You ever have to fumigate your dormitory?" Rosier laughed with the others, but his laughter was strained and uncomfortable. He'd never been as free with his insults as Wilkes. Thinking of spiders, no doubt.

Severus didn't respond to the mockery, but continued calmly to the dormitory, passing Wilkes and Edison on his way to his own bed. His cloak and robe went right onto the chair next to the bed. Then he took out a plain flannel nightshirt and pulled it over his head before unfastening the belt of his gown and removing it, too. He tucked his wand into the sleeve of his nightshirt.

After checking his bed automatically for hexes, Severus climbed in and nestled in the bedclothes. His mother had given him permission to show more of what he could do, and he had to think of just the right response to Lestrangle's comment. So far this year, Lestrangle had paid no attention to him, so this was part of the general switch from nice to mean. *There's no such thing as idle jesting. They'll be testing you, probing you for weaknesses. Never let them find one.* He smiled suddenly to himself, then rolled onto his side and went to sleep.

The next morning Severus was up and dressed first, sitting quietly on his bed reading his potions book. His very presence put a damper on the conversation of the others, and they quickly got ready for the day and hurried out of the dormitory. When Severus was sure that most of Slytherin house was awake and beginning to gather in the common room before breakfast, he

stood, put his potions book into the footlocker, adjusted the wand he kept in his sleeve, donned his robe and biretta, and left the dormitory. Though he looked wrapped in his own thoughts, his black eyes were darting back and forth behind lowered eyelids, assessing the position of everyone in the room.

Just as he entered the common room, Severus glanced up. The Lestrangle brothers were once again by the fireplace with Bella Black, talking and laughing loudly. He fixed his glance and the hidden wand on Rabastan's back for two seconds, then walked around the edge of the room and out the door into the main Castle. He knew that Rosier had seen him, and that Rosier's eyes followed him.

About ten minutes later, as the Slytherins were moving out toward the Great Hall, Bella Black wrinkled her nose and said, "I don't want to get too personal or anything, but someone should visit the lavatories more often."

There was a general chuckle, then the others began sniffing the air as well. "Well, it isn't me," laughed Rodolphus Lestrangle, then turned to his older brother. "I do believe you're the one who needs a bath."

The others began to edge away from Rabastan, laughing. The faint but unmistakable pungent odor was now permeating the air around him. In the Great Hall, the rest of Slytherin house left a comfortable space of open air between themselves and the smell. Rabastan spent all his free time in the lavatory, scrubbing his skin, but it was three days before the aroma of wet dog was gone.

Severus didn't stay to watch Rabastan's discomfort. He never gloated over the effects of curses because the only thing that mattered was the long-term result. This one was eminently successful, for Rosier didn't tease him again for the rest of the year.

#### **MONDAY, NOVEMBER 20, 1972 (THE FULL MOON)**

That was the last time for nearly a month that Severus and Lily were able to meet together and talk. Things were happening in Slytherin house that Severus didn't quite understand, and he was part of it. It was as if certain people were trying to push him into losing his temper, and it extended out into the corridors and classrooms of the school. Wilkes stole his quill in History of Magic, and Severus had to use a silent Accio spell to get it back. Gamp insulted his long, lank hair, so he made her own get tangled in horrid knots when she tried to comb it. When Rodolphus Lestrangle called him a

skinny little runt in the middle of the common room, Rodolphus began to gain weight so that a week later he was twenty pounds heavier.

*If they want to push, I can push back*, was becoming Severus's main tactic and general attitude.

He kept trying to find a way to talk to Lily. It wasn't easy since he was once again being followed. A month after their October meeting, Lily and Severus did manage to sneak off to the lake again, primarily because Severus ducked behind two of the Hufflepuff boys who'd been on the train, and they concealed him from Mulciber. This time Severus took away more food from the Hall, and together he and Lily had a very respectable feast. The moon was full, and soon Lily was skipping stones across the cold, flat surface of the water.

"How do you do that?" Severus asked. Her last stone had skipped three times before it sank to the bottom.

"Petunia's boyfriend showed me. You just hold it like this between your thumb and forefinger and throw it sidearm . . . Like this. Didn't your dad ever teach you to throw when you were little?" Lily regretted the words almost instantly, for Severus's suddenly embarrassed look spoke volumes about how little his dad had taught him of such things. "Do you know how to throw at all?" she finished a bit lamely.

"Oh, yeah. I can snag birds pretty good," he replied. He picked up a stone, pointed to a pine tree a short distance from the water's edge, and with a quick, overhead snap, brought one of its pinecones to the ground.

Relieved that she didn't have to teach him everything, Lily set about her instruction on the fine points of stone skipping. Severus picked it up rather quickly, and soon they were side by side, skipping stones across the lake water.

"What do you miss most?" Lily asked after a while.

She didn't have to explain. He knew what she meant. "Fish and chips on Friday nights," he said.

Lily laughed. "That's a good one. We haven't had fish and chips one night at Hogwarts. I miss — listening to the latest songs with all your friends huddled over a transistor radio, and singing along with the song."

Severus didn't respond directly to this, as Lily was his only friend, and he'd never had a transistor to listen to in any case. He thought about his next answer, though. "Bonfire night," he said. "Dad always goes out and finds some old piece of junk furniture to leave in the yard for them to pick up for the bonfire. Then when they come into the yard to get it, he goes out and

yells at them for being hooligans. Then they yell back, and we follow them to the old quarry for the bonfire. We all throw things at the ‘Guy’ and roast potatoes. It’s exciting.”

“Yeah,” said Lily. “Bonfire night is pretty good, too. I miss the airplanes. Our new house is near Gatwick, and you can always hear the planes overhead. I like to imagine that I’m in one, flying all over the world.”

“Have you ever been in an airplane?”

“Not yet, but I will.”

“Me either, but I will, too.”

Severus dreamed that night of airplanes flying to Timbuktu, Zanzibar and Mandalay. Thinking about it the next morning, he realized they were the most exotic names he knew. Next to his dream, Hogwarts seemed dull and pedestrian.

The following Thursday, Severus came into the dormitory just before curfew to find the other four boys kneeling in the center of the floor in a circle. Wilkes, Edison, and Mulciber seemed fascinated by something in their midst while Rosier, though interested, kept a bit of a distance.

Severus started to go around them to his bed, but at just that moment Mulciber sat back on his heels, and the two bumped into each other. “Sorry,” they both said at once, and Severus continued to his bed.

“Hey, Snape,” Mulciber said suddenly. “You know how to control spiders, don’t you?”

Severus thought for a moment. “Some . . . times,” he said.

“See what you can do with this one.”

Severus approached cautiously and looked into the circle. There was a big, fat, black spider there that for the moment wasn’t moving. Severus suspected a Petrificus spell, and guessed that this was why Rosier didn’t seem quite as happy as the others. “What am I . . . supposed to do?” he asked.

“Anything you want. All we’ve been able to do is make it run around and then stop. Except I think the running around is something it’s doing on its own. So that means the only thing we can make it do is stop.”

“Why?” said Severus.

“Just for fun. Just to practice spells. You’re not a spider lover, are you?”

“Can you . . . make it go . . . backwards?” Severus asked.

“How would you do that?” responded Wilkes.

Severus let his wand slip into his hand, concentrating enough on the spider that he didn’t see the surprised look on Edison’s face or the admiring one on Mulciber’s. Thinking for a moment, Severus pointed the wand at the



spider and said, "Libera corpus!" then "Retroverso!" The spider, which had started to scurry away upon being released, began instead to step carefully backwards.

"Good one!" crowed Wilkes. "I'll have to remember it. Wonder if it works on people."

"I don't . . . know," said Severus. "I never . . . tried it before."

Mulciber looked at Severus closely. "You did that on the first try?"

Severus shrugged. "It isn't a . . . hard spell. You just . . . say it. There are . . . others that are . . . harder."

Mulciber said nothing at first. He just contemplated the spider. "Make it do something else," he demanded after a moment.

"Like what?"

"I don't care. Anything."

Pointing the wand at the spider again, Severus opened his mouth, then changed his mind. "Don't know . . . anything else." The wand was back in his sleeve. He turned and walked over to his bed.

"Hey!" Wilkes shouted across the room. "You can't just walk away when . . ." then suddenly stopped.

Severus looked up, and for a moment it looked like Mulciber was trying to communicate something silently to Wilkes that involved glaring and shaking the head. Then Mulciber stood up. "I'm tired of playing with spiders anyway. Let's go see if anything's happening in the common room."

They all left except Edison, who climbed into his bed and opened a book for his Dark Arts class. "Do you really know more spells?" he asked after a few minutes.

"Couple," Severus replied.

"Wilkes 'd be happy if you'd teach him to use them."

"Against who?" said Severus.

"I see your point," Edison replied, and went back to studying.

On a whim, Severus walked out of the dorm and down the passageway until he got to a spot where he could see most of the common room. Mulciber and Rosier were in a corner talking to Bella Black and Rabastan Lestrangle. Severus pondered this as he returned to the dorm and prepared for sleep. It was all very mysterious.

## FRIDAY DECEMBER 1, 1972 (4 DAYS BEFORE THE NEW MOON)

It had rained the night of November thirtieth just as the temperature fell below freezing, and Hogwarts woke to a world shimmering in ice diamonds. Everything outside was slick with glare ice, and Severus found himself forced to eat breakfast in the Great Hall. Around him groups of students were planning forays between classes to slide down the hill or go skating if the shallow areas of the lake were solid enough. Severus had not yet thought of what he would do in his enforced imprisonment, knowing only that he would stay far from Slytherin house.

Someone called, "Mail's here!" and the buzz in the room grew more excited. Owls came swooping in from all sides, dropping letters and packages into the hands of lucky recipients. Severus was not usually in the hall for mail call since he was no longer getting monthly letters, and watched with some curiosity, noting how different students reacted as they got, or did not get, their mail.

Suddenly he spied a shabby, brown owl that looked like Nelson. *Not possible. She has nothing to send me.* But the owl saw him and swooped down, missing his head by inches and depositing a square blue envelope in front of his plate. Then it was gone, well aware that there would be no response.

Severus didn't want to touch the envelope. *It can only be bad news.* Still, bad news had to be faced eventually, and after a minute he reached for his letter. Inside was a scrap of paper and another, smaller envelope. The scrap of paper said only, 'The other one thinks you want this.' He looked at the second envelope with new interest, for it represented an unusual event. Why would his muggle grandmother ask his witch grandmother to transmit a message by owl? Carefully he opened the envelope. The only thing inside was a newspaper clipping from the *Guardian*. He read it twice, tucked it into his Charms textbook, and signaled Lily.

Lily met him on the seventh floor and together they crept up the spiral staircase to the top of the Astronomy Tower, a particularly appropriate place that afternoon. They had to be careful not to slip on the ice, but as everyone else was out playing and skating, they were guaranteed not to be disturbed.

"They're going on the seventh, at five-thirty in the morning. I'll be watching."

"You won't be able to see them."

"I know that. It's just . . . I want to be part of it."

"Well I'm not getting up at five in the morning for this. You're watching on your own."

"But you'll watch the landing, won't you? It'll be in the evening. It'll be easy."

"I don't know..."

"You have to watch. One of them's named Ronald Evans. He could be related to you or something."

This information cast a whole new light on the matter, and she agreed to join him for the landing.

### MONDAY DECEMBER 11, 1972 (2 DAYS BEFORE THE 1ST QUARTER)

Once again Lily and Severus met by the lake, but this time it was a kind of pilgrimage. Lily brought the food, and Severus brought a telescope that he'd sneaked out of the astronomy classroom. With only minor mishaps, they managed to set the telescope up on the lake shore and train it at the moon, now moving into its first quarter. There was a sense of history for, as far as they knew, this would be the last time in their lifetimes that this event would happen.

"You're sure they're not going to do this again next year."

"Certain. They're not going to spend the money. This is the last mission."

"If I find out you're wrong, I'll thump you so hard..."

Severus straightened from tightening the support screws. "And what if I'm wrong? This is still just the sixth time that anyone's walked on the moon. It's historic. You can tell your grandchildren you were watching. Just like the first time on television. And Apollo 13."

"All right. Where are we looking?"

"The east side of the *Mare Serenitatis*. Here, in the upper right side. This dark patch right here." Severus lit the map with a Lumos spell, and they both studied it for a while. Then they went back to adjusting the telescope. By the time they had to return to their respective dormitories, they were both convinced that they'd seen light glinting off the lunar landing module in the Sea of Serenity.

Lily went home to Surrey for the Christmas break, but Severus stayed at Hogwarts, content to be alone for once in his dormitory. The one major disappointment of the break was that the Lestrange brothers were also staying.

**BOXING DAY, TUESDAY, DECEMBER 26, 1972 (1 DAY BEFORE LAST QUARTER)**

"Hey, Half-Breed!" The voice was midway between a command and a sneer. "Turn around when you're spoken to, Mongrel."

There was no escape. Severus was on the path leading to the lake, dark trees many yards ahead of him, a dusting of white snow all around, and just out of sight of the windows of the castle. No teacher would come to his defense, and no ally would watch his back. Slowly, deliberately, he turned to face Rabastan Lestrangle, with Rodolphus right behind. No one else, just the two. Severus said nothing, but his black eyes flicked from side to side, assessing the terrain. The two above him with a downhill slope at his back was not good.

"We need wood for the fire in the common room, and you're going to collect it and carry it on your back like a good little donkey, and then you're going to scrub all the floors in Slytherin house, and maybe entertain us all with a little dancing and singing. How does that sound, Half-Breed?" Rabastan stopped about twenty feet away, a malicious grin on his face. Behind him Rodolphus was chuckling.

"I don't think so," said Severus.

"I think the little second year needs a lesson in respect, don't you, Dolf? A dip in the lake, a roll in the snow. We'll leave your robes on the entrance steps and you can get dressed again there. After you bring up the wood."

Severus didn't answer. He was shutting down and closing off all the parts of his mind that might be seen during eye contact. His mother's presence was palpable. *Keep your mind closed, child. Don't give them weapons to use against you. Don't watch my hand, watch my thoughts. You'll see the wand in my brain before you see it in my hand.* Poised and ready, he fingered his own wand where it lay hidden in his sleeve. Then his black eyes met Rabastan's brown ones and he saw the Petrificus spell forming behind Rabastan's eyes.

*Petra!* He thought the spell rather than say it, and a rock dislodged itself from the hill behind the Lestrangle brothers and slammed into the back of Rabastan's shoulder. The brothers wheeled, searching the hillside for hidden enemies. "What was that?" yelled Rodolphus.

"I have friends," Severus said quietly.

A furious Rabastan turned on him. "We'll see about that." His wand was out and he screamed, "*Petrificus Totalus!*" at the same time that Rodolphus attacked with an *Expelliarmus*, but Severus had already cried out, "*Protego!*" while his brain was sending a stream of *Petra* and *Chioni* spells.

As rocks and snowballs pelted the brothers, Severus turned and ran fifty feet to his right and a little way up the hill, still not far enough to be seen from the windows. Spinning around with another *Protego* already spurting from his wand, he barely managed to avoid two *Pugnatio* spells, but the combined impact of the double hit against his own shield knocked him down.

Severus started to scramble to his feet, saw another *Petrificus* coming, and dove to the left. He was truly frightened now. Rabastan was sixth year, and Rodolphus was fourth. Either one he could take alone, but the two together were stronger than he was. They could keep him here, pinned on the hillside, until his strength waned, and then he would be theirs. And the fight would have made them angrier. Fear inspired desperation, and desperation focused every ounce of his slender being into one last-ditch effort to escape. Rolling onto his back, he pointed his wand at the rocks beneath the Lestrangle brothers' feet and, concentrating all his energy into the one spell, hissed "*Se-e-ismo-o-os*" in a long serpentine sigh.

The earth of the hillside heaved and rocked, chunks breaking off and striking at Rabastan's and Rodolphus's ankles. The brothers lost balance and fell, sliding several feet down the hill in a miniature avalanche. Like a flash, Severus was up and running for the castle. By the time the brothers were able to stand, he was over the rise of the hill and out of their range.

Rabastan laid his hand on his brother's shoulder. Far from being angry, both brothers looked immensely pleased. "Never saw that one before, and I bet no one else has either," Rabastan said calmly, "Mulciber was right. The little half-breed's a fighter. Back him into a corner and he's worth half a dozen of the others. Potions and spells . . . I think the Dark Lord will be very interested in him."

"I'll tell Bella she was right," said Rodolphus. "She can begin recruiting him as soon as the new term starts."

#### SATURDAY, JANUARY 6, 1973 (2 DAYS AFTER THE NEW MOON)

The Saturday after New Year's Day, everyone arrived back on the train — Edison, Mulciber, Wilkes and Rosier, Bella Black, and especially Lily. In fact, if Severus hadn't been so eager to catch a glimpse of Lily, he might have noticed the Lestrangle brothers talking to Bella in the common room, and Bella alternately nodding and shaking her head.

## C H A P T E R     T E N

### N E T S

TUESDAY, JANUARY 9, 1973 (3 DAYS BEFORE THE 1ST QUARTER)

She came from behind him as Severus left the Great Hall with his meager supper to go outside and eat. “Hi,” she said softly near his left ear. “I remember you. You’re Snake, aren’t you?”

Severus recognized the voice before he turned to almost look at her. Bella Black, the fourth year student who didn’t tease him so much about being part muggle, but asked him to perform like a trained dog. He was amused at her mistake, and didn’t correct it. She wouldn’t pay attention anyway.

Bella took his silence for assent. “They say,” she whispered conspiratorially, “that you’re a genius with potions work.”

Severus shrugged. Danger bells were ringing in his mind.

“I’m looking for someone who can help me with my potions. I’m so far behind now I don’t know how to catch up, and I’ve got my OWLs next year. I can make it worth your while.”

Severus wasn’t sure what she meant by that, so he didn’t say anything.

“Look, do you want to help me with my potions, or not? It’s a little weird talking to someone who doesn’t talk back.”

“I thought you were the one who wanted me to help you with your potions.”

Bella’s face tightened in restrained anger. “You little . . . How dare you talk to me like that, second year. I’ve offered to let you help me with my class work. I could make you more comfortable in the common room than you’ve ever been in your life. You don’t get snotty with me.” Behind her, Rabastan Lestrangle was hovering in the doorway of the Great Hall.

“I’ll let you know if I ever want to get comfortable in the common room.”

Her eyes narrowed. *She’s going to slap me.* Severus braced himself for the blow that didn’t come. Bella was visibly seething, but seemed to be trying

to control herself. *She despises me, but she's forcing herself to stay. Never trust anyone who tries too hard to be nice. They just want something for themselves. They'll use you and throw you away.*

"I still need help getting ready for my OWLs. The offer stays open. You help me with my potions, and I'll take care of you. Life gets better when you have friends."

"It depends on who the friends are."

Bella's mouth dropped open. She spun on her heel and stomped back into the Great Hall, nodding curtly at Rabastan, who stood aside to let her pass. Then he advanced to tower over Severus.

"You really like to live dangerously. I know all about you. You're good with spiders and dog smells, but I can skewer you to the wall and wrap your guts around one of the pillars. I never hurt people that Bella likes, but if Bella doesn't like you, you're fair game. You and I have a grudge. I'm going to make you pay, so you need all the help you can get." And Rabastan followed Bella back into the Great Hall.

Severus watched them go, wondering why, all of a sudden, people like Bella Black and Rabastan Lestrangle were taking an interest in him. The back of his neck prickled and a shiver ran down his spine. Alert at once, he glanced around. Above him, looking down from the railing of one of the staircases, was Hogwarts's headmaster, Albus Dumbledore. *Did he see what just happened? Did he hear anything?*

Feeling suddenly vulnerable, Severus backed away from the Great Hall, turned, and left the Castle through the main entrance. Tonight, of all nights, there was at least someplace else he could be.

Dumbledore slowly descended the staircase, pondering what he had just seen. The Blacks and the Lestranges were from influential pureblood families that were rumored to be joining the ranks of the former Tom Riddle, who now called himself 'Lord Voldemort.' But the boy, he was no more than Eileen Prince's son, and half muggle into the bargain. The Princes were pureblood, but hardly in the same league as the Blacks. Why ever would Bella Black and Rabastan Lestrangle be interested in such a . . . Dumbledore did not really think of any of his students as nonentities, but he knew that Bella and Rabastan would. So why were they after Eileen's little boy?

Severus did not go directly to the lake, but rather took a longer, more roundabout route so he could check whether or not he was being followed. All seemed well, so he picked his way carefully down the slope to the water's

edge. Lily wasn't there. *She won't have remembered. A lot has happened since last year.*

Ice rimmed the lake, solid and laced with the marks of skates nearer the shore, thinning to a bare crust over the deeper water in the middle. Something lived down there, just as things lived in the forest, and in the walls of the castle. Mice, rats, spiders, beetles, whole worlds teemed just out of sight and hearing. He thought of things he wanted, but couldn't have. A telescope to look at the moon, a microscope to look at the water, an airplane to visit strange places — anywhere but Hogwarts . . .

Severus heard the faint slithering of someone coming down the hillside and fingered his wand. Quietly he turned to face the intruder, and it was Lily.

"I'm sorry I'm late," she said.

"Not . . . a problem. I was looking . . . at the moon."

She eyed him suspiciously. "What happened?"

"Nothing . . . happened."

"Yes it did. You're nervous. You only ever talk like that when you're nervous."

He frowned slightly, puzzled.

"Hullo. You're stammering. What happened?"

"A couple of . . . Slytherins tried . . . to start a fight. I got . . . away though. I don't what they wanted. They never noticed me much before." He hadn't told her about the fight with the Lestranges during the break.

"Well, it's gone now, so you must be feeling better. Do you still stammer when you talk to people, like you did in the other school? Besides me, of course."

"No. When I'm really scared, everything gets very clear, and it's like I can see all the details. Then I can say anything."

"Good. That's when you need it. Here, I brought you this." She handed him a small covered dish. "It's why I'm late. A friend in Hufflepuff bribed a house-elf for it."

Severus opened the cover. Inside was a tiny cake, just the right size for two people. Its green and silver icing had red and gold letters on it spelling 'Happy 13th B-day.' "Thanks," he said. "It's perfect."

Later, when it was time to return to the dormitories, Severus remembered Rabastan. After December's fight he'd expected trouble with the brothers, but had gotten none. He had no illusions about his luck repeating itself. Sure enough, there in the almost deserted common room were the Lestranges, Rosier, and Avery. Bella Black was not present.



Severus was halfway to the passage leading to his dormitory when Rabastan uncoiled himself from a chair and, pointing his wand at a spot two feet ahead of Severus, sent a stinging hex into the stonework. Rodolphus and Avery blocked his exit through the wall and back into the corridor.

"Thought we'd be asleep by now? Little second years shouldn't be up so late. It's not good for their health."

Severus fingered his hidden wand. His brain was feverishly calculating distances to the center of the common room and to the exit in the wall. Rosier moved suddenly, and Severus's attention flickered to the left. In the instant's distraction, Avery pinned his right arm while Rodolphus extracted the wand. Severus's back was against the cold stone wall, but otherwise he was surrounded. The ease with which they'd cornered him was humiliating.

"Does a baby want his little wand back?" Rabastan stood directly in front of him now. He pulled Severus's wrist from Avery's grasp and twisted, forcing Severus onto his knees. As he heard the sound of Rabastan's belt unbuckling and being drawn from its loops, Severus began to struggle. He was already too familiar with the feel of a belt buckle across his back.

"What's going on here! What do you think you're doing? Let him up! Let him up now!" Bella stood framed in the passageway to the girls' dormitories, her wand pointed at Rabastan. "You disgusting bully! Pick on someone your own size."

Rabastan laughed, and the others drew back. "No harm meant, Bella. Just wanted to scare him a little. We weren't going to do anything."

"You're not now, for sure. Drop his wand. Get out of here, the lot of you. If I find out tomorrow that you've touched him, I'll go after you myself."

They melted back into their dormitories while Bella picked up Severus's wand and knelt beside him on the floor. "Don't worry," she said soothingly. "They won't hurt you. I won't let them."

Severus stood, shaking uncontrollably, and accepted his wand back from her. "Thank you," he said.

Bella smiled. "I told you. I take care of my friends."

#### UP UNTIL THURSDAY JANUARY 18, 1973 (THE FULL MOON)

The next morning Bella was waiting for Severus as he left his dormitory. The Lestranges and Avery watched from their fireplace stations like a pack of wolves watching a deer. Bella was all gentle consideration, though, and

steered him through the common room with a protective arm around his shoulders. All the while she talked about potions.

“... and then it went all chalky, and for the life of me I don’t know what I did wrong.”

He knew, and couldn’t resist. “You... beat it instead of... stirring it. Never whip... air into a potion like... that.”

“There. You see. I knew I was right getting you to help me with this.”

It was flattering, even though he had no illusions about the night before. Bella guided him into the Great Hall and sat him beside her for breakfast. She heaped his plate with eggs and sausages, toast with jam and marmalade, a choice of three kinds of tea. He barely uttered the syllable “kip-” and she was reaching for kippers, kidneys, fried tomatoes and mushrooms, bacon... And all the while she plied him with expert questions: How many ortolan eggs to the pound? How do you strain hairs from fresh-pulled badger claws? Which phase of the moon is best for gathering nightshade blossoms? Several members of Slytherin house wished him ‘Good morning,’ students who would have sneered down their noses at him just yesterday.

Lily came in for breakfast, and the shock on her face cut Severus like a knife. He wanted to explain to her what happened, but it was impossible. To make matters worse, she never once looked back at the Slytherin table, leaving with her Gryffindor friends as soon as she had eaten.

Classes were strange, too. Slytherins nodded greetings to him, and no less than three came over during morning breaks to tell him how pleased they were that he was a member of their house. No one whispered ‘Half-Breed,’ no one pulled aside to avoid touching him, no one tried to hit him with wadded up pieces of parchment. Life was pleasant. Life was good.

And all day his mother’s voice resonated in the center of his mind. *They’re using you. They don’t want you, they want your abilities. The instant you aren’t useful, they’ll sell you. They’ll chew you up and spit you out. No one wants just you.*

The next day was double potions, but Severus couldn’t talk to Lily during class. Too many Slytherins were watching him. Too many were asking his advice about their potions and copying his movements around the cauldron. To have tried to talk to Lily would have directed their attention towards her, and that was the last thing Severus wanted to do. She had to stay clear of the circus.

And still all that day, as the day before, wherever he went there was Bella Black. And if not her, there was Avery, or Rodolphus Lestrange. It was as if

all these former enemies had become his best friends, and the experience was making Severus feel dizzy. Dizzy, and trapped, and exhilaratingly important. For the first time, he began to wonder if his mother had been wrong.

In Severus's own dormitory, things became more relaxed as well. Mitchell Edison spoke to him freely, and the two worked on their History of Magic homework together. Wilkes got sweets from home and passed them around, including Severus as if it were something they'd been doing routinely since the previous year. During the Friday night pillow fight, Rosier noticed that Severus was nervous and tentative, and toned down his roughness. And he didn't tease Severus about it either.

It was, in fact, the first time in Severus's life that he'd related, in a positive way, to a group of boys his own age. He remained wary and ready to shut down at any moment, yet at the same time he was beginning to look forward to evenings in the dorm.

Several times Bella asked him about Potions, so Severus stayed in the common room to go over her work with her. He completely forgot his mother's warnings about making it look as if he was laboring for good marks. The work Bella was doing was still basic, and he was still Nana's grandson. He didn't notice that he was getting a reputation.

During this time, Severus wasn't able to meet with Lily, but somehow, with all the attention he was getting in Slytherin house, it didn't seem quite as important as it used to.

Monday added a new wrinkle to the situation. Severus was making his way along the fourth floor to the library, for once free of attendant Slytherin toadies. It was just after noon, and most of the school was at lunch in the Great Hall. Without warning, a tall, stocky, dark-haired boy about Severus's age stepped from a niche and confronted him in the corridor. It was the boy named Sirius Black. The one from the train in first year.

"If it isn't cousin Bella's little stooge," he said, the pitch and cadence of his voice exactly like that of Rabastan Lestrage. "Aren't you afraid to be wandering about without your guards, Slytherin?"

Severus backed away a few steps. Black was a Gryffindor, but Severus had never before had problems with any of the other houses. "I'm not bothering you," he said.

"Anyone Bella fancies bothers me," the other boy responded. "But I'm still trying to figure out why Dolf doesn't wring your scrawny neck. Then I thought, maybe she doesn't fancy you. Maybe someone a little darker fancies you."

Severus didn't understand what he was talking about, but with every sentence the boy advanced on him, and he retreated an equal distance. Black's plan became clear a moment later when Severus backed into someone else, someone who seized his arms and pinned them behind his back. Severus jerked forward and twisted to the side, but his new antagonist held him too tightly for him to escape.

"Now," said Black, "we're going to clarify a couple of things. First, you meddle in dark arts. We've checked. You use curses all the time. That's going to stop. People who study the dark arts don't last around us. Second, you're not helping Bella. Not now, not ever. Whatever she threatened you with is nothing compared with what we can do. Third, you stay away from the Lestranges, from Avery, from those second years Mulciber, Rosier, and Wilkes. They're mixed up in things that're going to get you killed. Did I leave anything out?" The last was addressed to his companion.

"It sounded good to me." It was the other boy from the train, Potter. He released Severus by pushing him against the wall. "Remember, we're watching you."

The two sauntered away down the corridor, not even glancing back at Severus, who quickly dodged into the boys' bathroom and leaned against the cool tile. He felt sick. After a minute, he turned on the tap in one of the sinks and splashed cold water on his face. *Why? Why me? Why now? No one ever cared before.* The answer, of course, was obvious. They didn't care about him. They cared about his contact with Bella Black and the Lestranges.

His choices were narrowing. Stay with Bella and be the target of Gryffindors, or defy Bella and be the target of Rabastan and Rodolphus. Life was neither pleasant nor good.

A week had gone by and little more seemed to change. Little that is except that Bella began hinting about people and goals larger than Hogwarts and its classes. She was never direct or specific about her allusions, and Severus was not sure what it had to do with him. The other Slytherins seemed to understand, though.

It was Thursday again, and double Potions in the afternoon. Severus was once again the center of a group of Slytherins while Lily remained surrounded by Gryffindors. There was no contact between the two at all.

At the end of class, as he was nearing the door to the dungeon classroom, Lily suddenly hurried past him. She misjudged the space, knocked into his left arm, and sent her and his books crashing to the floor. "Stupid Slytherin," she hissed as she gathered up her books. She picked up one, realized it was

his, and sent it sliding under a table. Then, with a toss of her long red hair, she stormed out of the room.

“Dumb Gryffindor,” said one of Severus’s house mates, and the group of Slytherins laughed.

Severus picked up his books and returned to his dormitory. There he sat on his bed and opened the book that had gone under the table. In it was a note: ‘Moon, tonight.’

It wasn’t easy slipping away from the Great Hall. Gone were the days when he could grab a bite and leave unnoticed. Now he made an excuse about checking something in the library and escaped before dessert was served. He saw no one in the entrance hall, so he went to and out the great doors and down the steps into the moonlight. The back of his neck was prickling, but it had been doing that all week.

Having watched Eileen Prince’s son leave the Great Hall and dart into the night, Dumbledore decided to take a stroll around the grounds. A small set of snowy footprints leading from the entrance steps toward the lake determined his choice of direction, his curiosity increasing when they met another set of footprints descending the hill from the north side of the castle.

From the edge of the copse, Dumbledore watched the two children, red hair and black hair nearly touching as they conferred earnestly in the glow of the full winter moon. He knew the girl, Lily Evans, a sweet muggle-born witch who was slowly becoming one of the most stabilizing forces of the second years. She had a good heart and an honest vision. Professor McGonagall had nothing but praise for her. It was unfortunate that Professor Slughorn didn’t have as thorough a knowledge of the students in Slytherin, for the boy, beyond his shyness, was more of an enigma.

Dumbledore coughed loudly and made ostentatious noise as he moved away from the trees. The two by the lake separated suddenly and faced him, clearly discomfited by his presence. “Good evening, Miss Evans. Good evening Master Snape,” Dumbledore said cheerfully. “A pleasant night to be enjoying the stars. And the moon.” The two students shifted uncomfortably under his gaze.

“It is most fortunate that I have encountered you here, as I have been hoping to exchange a few words with you Master Snape, if I may. I hope you will excuse us, Miss Evans.” Lily nodded and said a quick ‘Good night,’ then scurried off in the direction of the castle. Dumbledore settled himself on the same boulder Lily had sat on the first evening she and Severus met in this spot. He motioned to Severus to approach him.

The boy sidled in Dumbledore's direction, but his reluctance was obvious. He kept his gaze fixed on the ground and seemed to shrink inside his robe.

"You know," said Dumbledore gently, "I am generally accustomed to having the people I am speaking to look at me."

His words seemed only to intensify the boy's nervousness. The black eyes darted around the lakeside like a bird trying to escape a cage, looking everywhere, anywhere except at Dumbledore. Dumbledore reached forward and cupped the boy's chin in his palm, thumb and forefinger forcing the young face up and around. No doubt whose son he was, for he had Eileen Prince's long, pale features and lank hair. *It must be his father's nose, though.* For just an instant, the boy's eyes met the Headmaster's then flicked away again, but Dumbledore's expression became suddenly worried.

"I see your mother has been teaching you. She had a difficult time at Hogwarts, and I'm sure she means well trying to protect you from similar problems, but this isn't the way for someone as young as you. Not everyone is going to hurt you."

The boy flinched, and Dumbledore made a mental note to talk to Professor Slughorn about the teasing and bullying that went on inside Slytherin house. "I will be honest with you, Severus." The boy looked up then, and quickly back down, at hearing his name. "I was planning to talk to you about being wary of the friends you associate with, but I think maybe I did not perfectly understand the situation. I should like you to participate in a little experiment with someone else on the grounds. A little secret just between the three of us." Dumbledore rose.

A firm hand on Severus's shoulder steered the boy away from the lake, and a few minutes' walk brought them to Hagrid's hut. Dumbledore knocked politely. The gamekeeper opened the door quickly and was greeting the Headmaster when he saw the student a pace behind.

"Bless me, it's Severus, Eileen's boy," he said.

"Yes, Hagrid. May we come in? The night is still young, and I need to talk to you about something."

An hour later, Severus was dismissed back to Slytherin house, but Dumbledore remained to confer longer with Hagrid. Hagrid was at first insufferably pleased with himself.

"Didn't I tell ya he weren't no Tom Riddle? That child ain't no more looking for power and influence than I am. Maybe less."

"I must confess, Hagrid, that you have proven the better judge of the situation. I fear, however, that I had some time ago reached the same conclusion.

It was not the boy's own ambition that I was attempting to curb tonight, but the ambition of others and his utility to them as a pawn. That has now been overtaken by another concern."

"Y're worried about him? In his own right, I mean?"

"Very worried. So worried that I should like to appoint someone to look after him. He is undersized, his health seems fragile, he is nervous and frightened, and he needs to be drawn out of himself. Made more comfortable with the world around him. I should like the person looking after him to be you."

That gave Hagrid pause. "D' ya think I'm the right one for this job, Professor? I mean, I'm more used t' dealing with the animals."

"You care for magical creatures, Hagrid. What more magical creature can you find on this earth than a young wizard? And this one needs a very large amount of care. Not books or classroom work, but real care. He has not had an easy life. I would never have guessed, trying to read him, that he was only thirteen."

"Trying t' read him, eh? Well that's yer business, though I'd like t' know somewhat about it. I can tell ya a few things just by looking up close, though. He's not just undersized, he's seriously undernourished. Needs t' be put on better feed. Then ya usually see that kind of skittishness in a beast that's been mishandled. Beaten maybe. What d' ya know about that muggle Snape that Eileen married? I don't think Eileen 'd beat her son, but maybe his dad."

"I think you are right. I worry now that Eileen may have suffered as well. She was never an open person, never talked about herself. I fear she has passed that trait on to the boy, and made it worse. She has been teaching him occlumency."

"No! Ya don't say so! He's a child! Ya don't lock a child up inside hisself like that and expect him t' turn into any kind of normal human being. What can she be thinking of?"

"I think she means to protect him. But there is some protection worse than any danger. Do you remember what Professor McGonagall said about the boy after the sorting last year?"

"Like reaching fer a bird to find yerself holding a dagger. Thought she was being fanciful."

"No. I fear now she was being quite accurate. I am sorry that I did not follow up on it. We might have been able to intervene earlier."

"What can I do 'bout this occlumency part o' the problem, Professor? I can feed him and tend his hurts, but I don't know how t' deal with occlumency."

"We must get him to express honest emotions, Hagrid. Get him to break through that shell and really feel something, and feel it strongly. Any emotion will do, as long as it is honest. The easiest is anger. Get him to express his anger at what has been and is being done to him."

"Well I don't know. Should I tell him what I'm doing, and why? Or just let him get angry at me?"

"I do not like being devious, but an occlumens's whole intent is to hide thoughts and feelings. If the boy knows what we are doing, he may counter it. I fear we shall have to work on his feelings without telling him our purpose."

The wheel of fortune turned, and suddenly things were back to normal. Or almost normal. The next day it was made clear that the Headmaster had taken an interest in Severus. Not only did Dumbledore bid the boy 'good morning' in the Great Hall as he passed to the staff table for breakfast, but Slughorn actually spoke to him the same evening in the common room and inquired about his health and that of his family. Bella and the Lestranges backed away, not wanting attention from Dumbledore, and Severus once again found himself more isolated in Slytherin house.

On the up side of things, no one teased him anymore. At least not in Slytherin. On the down side, he still couldn't talk to Lily in Potions class because he was no longer anonymous in his corner, the other Slytherins turning to him from time to time for advice on their own class work, and Slughorn keeping his eyes more open. Severus and Lily still met by the lake as often as she could escape from her friends without causing comment. Maybe once a week.

Another small problem was the unwanted notice of Gryffindor house. The two Gryffindors who'd accosted Severus near the library continued to let him know that they were watching him, making cutthroat gestures across the Great Hall, or 'accidentally' jostling him in the corridors. He contemplated hexing them, but decided it wasn't worth the risk, especially since their attentions were sporadic now that Bella seemed to have forgotten him.

Of course, there were his visits to Hagrid.

The first session was purely medical. In a way it was demeaning, for Hagrid treated him almost like one of the animals he tended. On the other hand it was fascinating, for Severus had never been to a doctor before and the attention was a novelty. And no one would ever know about it except for himself, Hagrid, and presumably Dumbledore.

"Open yer mouth now. There. Yer adult teeth are coming in crooked 'cause yer jaw is too small. Don't know if we can fix that. Ya may have to live



with it. Gums are not good, not good at all. More fruit, I think. D' ya like lemons? That may help a lot.

"T is a pity about the bones in yer legs. Just a tad rickety it strikes me. Arms too, but they don't bear the weight. We can keep it from getting any worse, though. Milk 'll do it. That and lots o' greens.

"Ya've got to grow, lad. Y're way too small for yer age, an' I don't think it's in the blood. I think it's in the rearing. Meat's what ya need. Lots o' good, red meat."

A prescription was sent to the house-elves for a change in diet. Aside from a general direction to eat more, Severus was to be given a special glass of milk with each meal, and his intake of meat, fruit, and green vegetables was to be monitored. It was a blessing that the others were paying less attention to him now for, overall, it was a little . . . embarrassing.

And then there was the matter of the irresistible force and the immovable object.

"Now, lad, if ya'll just lower the top half o' yer gown so 's I can look at yer spine and back muscles . . ."

Severus froze, doors slamming and sealing. "No," he said quietly. "I don't think that will be necessary. My back is fine."

"Well I think I need to be the judge of that. What with the rickets and all, I need t' check fer curvature and alignment. Just part of the examination."

Severus turned to gather up his cloak and robe, and in doing so moved three feet closer to the door. "My back has never bothered me. There's no reason for you to be concerned."

"Well it ain't concern so much as doing my job. Part of it is checking yer back."

"I have class now. It will have to wait until another time. I'm sure Professor Dumbledore will arrange it for us." And he was gone back to the safety of the castle and his house.

"And I'm as sure as I'm standing here that the reason was he has something on his back he don't want me t' see." Hagrid accepted a glass of firewater from Dumbledore and downed it with enthusiasm. "It ain't that he don't want me touching it. He don't want me seeing it."

"Scars, perhaps? You did say the skittishness of a creature that has been mishandled. The scars of a beating, maybe? Or of many beatings? And from his father, or his mother, or both? At least he is not being beaten here. We have some time to sort this out."

"Just so 's you know, he ain't said one word 'gainst either dad or mum."

Dumbledore sighed. "They seldom do," he said.

The spring advanced, life went on, and the owls came again, his grandmother's among them. This time there was no extra scrap of paper inside the blue envelope, just the message.

"May 14. It's going up May 14." Severus told Lily that evening. "I have to watch."

"You. Won't. Be. Able. To. See. It! I told you last time, and I was right. What can you see here of a launch in Florida?"

"It isn't the seeing. It's the . . ."

"Being part of it. All right. I'll watch with you. At least it's in the evening this time instead of the morning."

#### **TUESDAY, MAY 15, 1973 (2 DAYS BEFORE THE FULL MOON)**

The day after the launch, Severus got the second owl.

Lily found him standing on the edge of the lake, his face tilted to the moon, now almost full. "What happened?" she asked.

"Do you know that the Saturn V rocket has never failed on a mission? Never."

"So something happened. What happened? There wasn't anyone on that rocket. It wasn't manned. No one could have died."

"The sun shield is gone. The solar panels are damaged. It hasn't got any power."

"Are they scrubbing the mission? Are they just going to leave it there?"

"No. They're still going up. It's just been delayed."

"Then why are you so upset? No one's died, the mission is still 'go.'"

"Don't you see? So many things can go wrong. Don't you remember the Russians put up a space station a couple of years ago? They called it Salyut. Everything was fine until the cosmonauts came back. Then something happened to the reentry vehicle, and they . . . died. Out there in space. The Skylab crew could die, too."

"Oh. I'm sorry. I didn't think about that."

"No, no. It isn't sad. The cosmonauts saw things no one else has seen. They were living their dream. They died doing something the world will remember forever. How can you find a better way to die? There are so many worse ways to go."

They lay on their backs on the grass at the verge of the lake, looking at the moon. "Would you like to go like that, like the Russian crew?" Lily asked.

"Doing something I wanted to do? Oh, yes! It's the perfect way to die."

Talk of death made Lily uncomfortable, for she could see no 'perfect' way to die. "If that's the perfect way to go, what would be the worst way to die?"

For Severus, that answer was easy. "Like Professor Binns. Stuck in Hogwarts until you die, and even then not being able to leave. Never going anywhere. Never doing anything. Never exploring anything new. Can you think of anything worse than ending up a teacher at Hogwarts for the rest of your life?"

Skylab was a success. An owl arrived nearly every day with news of repairs and space walks. Severus and Lily now had a whole new vocabulary that included 'solar sails' and 'extravehicular activity.' One disappointment was that they wouldn't be able to keep vigil together for the astronauts' return, for that was scheduled for the very day that they were to leave Hogwarts and return to London.

Then came final exams, and the whole school hunkered down with books, notes, wand practice, and late night potions. And finally it was over. Another year at Hogwarts. Just a week left to clear out cupboards, pack clothes, exchange addresses, be given the marks on the exams, and get ready for the train back to King's Cross Station from Hogsmeade.

Two days before they were to leave, Professor Dumbledore stopped Severus in the entrance hall on his way from dinner. He held a legal-looking envelope in his hand. "If I may, Master Snape, this letter arrived for you from Hogsmeade this afternoon. I trust it is not bad news, but if it is you must feel free to come to me for any assistance."

Severus said, "Thank you," but instead of either looking at the letter or continuing to Slytherin house, he walked slowly up to the first floor and sat on a staircase near the hospital wing. It was certain that no one would bother him there. He examined the letter; he had already recognized his mother's hand in the address. Then, with a shrug, he slipped his thumb under the flap and opened it.

Inside was a second-class ticket for the Saturday morning train from Euston station in London to Colne, Lancashire. A hurriedly scribbled note said 'We'll meet you at Colne.'

FRIDAY, JUNE 22 TO SATURDAY, JUNE 23, 1973

(THE LAST QUARTER OF THE MOON)

The change in plans meant a change in packing. Severus sought out Professor Slughorn for permission to leave his books and other school paraphernalia locked in Hogwarts for the summer. He took with him only his battered Gladstone bag, which was more than sufficient to hold his robes after changing on the train. That, and a few other clothes and small personal items.

The morning of departure was a flurry of activity for most students, but Severus waited quietly in his dormitory until everyone had gone to breakfast. His bag was only half full, since his muggle clothes were on under his robes. Hearing the bustle die down, he glanced once around the room, stood, and walked out, holding the bag close to his left side.

Arriving at the Great Hall, he settled at the end near the doors, separate from the others, and slipped the bag under the table, its latch unfastened. From time to time as he ate breakfast, he would sneak a roll, meat, fruit, into the bag. He didn't want to take too much, but it had to last for two days.

The ride to Hogsmeade was different from his first year. Severus 'd said goodbye to Lily the evening before. It 'd been short and simple—have a good summer, and we'll see each other in September. On the train he made his way to the last car and, finding no empty compartment, preferred to sit in the aisle by the door at the end, even though he knew Lily wouldn't join him. Nearing London, he took off his robes. Underneath he wore a pair of gray trousers and a cotton shirt. Shoving the robes into the bag, he replaced his cloak with a gray sweater, a little worn at the elbows.

The train pulled into London and spilled students onto the platform, jostling, laughing, hugging, waving goodbye, greeting their families . . . Once more Severus waited until most had left, then he followed the remaining students through the barrier and into King's Cross station. From that moment he was indistinguishable from any other muggle child of a respectable working class background.

One unexpected surprise was that Lily was still there. She was talking with her parents and a skinny blonde girl who Severus realized was a fifteen-year-old Petunia. They seemed upset, and Lily seemed to be resisting them, glancing back from time to time at the entrance to the Hogwarts platform. When she saw Severus, she smiled, pointed at a newsstand to her left, and abruptly ended her argument with her parents by turning and walking toward the exit, leaving them puzzled in her wake. Severus approached the

newsstand. The article in the evening paper was small, but on the front page. The astronauts' splashdown had been without mishap.

One of the things that Severus hated about London (and this was, after all, his fourth time in the metropolis) was the traffic. Outside the great tan brick bulk of King's Cross and its red brick neighbor St. Pancras was a bedlam of cars that careened through a huge open transit area in apparent total chaos. Severus turned right out of the main entrance and joined the evening rush to the underground station. He had no intention of boarding a tube train since he had no money, but the underground was also a convenient subway passage to the other side of Euston Road.

The walk to St. Pancras Church was not long. Evensong was in progress, and Severus had no trouble finding an empty pew. Most of the pews were empty. The tricky part was avoiding being seen as the church was closing down for the night. Still, no one really expected a thirteen-year-old boy to be spending the night in the church, and so what they didn't expect to see, they didn't see. It was, in fact, easier alone than it had been with his mother the year before.

The next morning when the church opened for morning prayer, he simply crossed Euston Road to Euston train station. The worst thing at this point was thirst, but handfuls of water from the tap in the men's room were enough to keep him going. He wandered around the station for a couple of hours, watching the people and reading the fronts of the newspapers until it was time to board his train. He did that at the earliest possible opportunity, and was able to get a seat by a window. He was pleased at how smoothly things were going.

The journey to Colne lasted eight hours. Basically it was boring as he had nothing to do. Severus thought about Apollo 17 and Skylab, about Bella and Rabastan, about Dumbledore and Hagrid, and about possible reasons why his mother hadn't been able to meet him in London. Mostly he thought about Lily and decided two things. The first was that he could pretend he was talking to her, and then he wouldn't feel so lonely. The second was that he still couldn't tell his parents about her, even though now she lived so far to the south. It didn't do for management and labor to fraternize.

It was early evening when the train pulled into the station at Colne, and Severus was the only person left in his car. He stood quietly on the platform for a few seconds, then saw his mum. She waved, and he lifted a hand in response. Together they went onto the street where his dad waited by the

car. It was the old black car, held together in places with rope, but he knew every broken spring in it. He'd even helped keep it running.

"Did ya give 'em what for?" his dad asked.

"Whupped 'em every time."

"That's my boy."

The long northern evening stretched out before them as they left Colne, and the stark silhouette of Pendle Hill loomed to their left, backlit by the sun, whose red glow suffused the omnipresent smoke and haze with a crimson and vermilion worthy of Dante. It was less than a quarter hour's drive to the small mill town where the Snape family lived. No one talked during the ride. Severus was home.

The brick house at the end of the row was dim inside, but they lit no lamps. Summer was no time to be wasting money, and the sun would be enough light for a couple of hours yet.

"What'll ya be wanting for supper yer first night home, boy? No expense spared. Anything that fancy school can give you, we can better yer first night home."

"Fish and chips. And chocolate taffy," Severus replied.

His dad roared with laughter. "Did I tell you, 'Leen? No fancy school's going t' spoil him. Did I call it? Did I?"

"You called it, Toby." Eileen smiled at her husband and her son, and got the bag out of the icebox. "Your dad picked it up before we drove to Colne." Plates, cups, and forks were laid out, with the fish and chips, salt and vinegar, tea for Eileen and Severus, and a bottle of small ale for Tobias. They set to the meal hungrily, not talking for several minutes.

"Anything else ya missed, boy?"

"Double skunking m' dad. Can't do that at Hogwarts. None of them puddings knows nothing."

Tobias Snape laughed again and went to the sideboard. From it he pulled a battered deck of greasy cards and an ancient cribbage board. Great-grandfather Snape had been a seaman, and cribbage was a family tradition.

Father and son played three full games, Severus winning one and Tobias the other two. It had by then grown so dark in the small house that they could hardly see the pips on the cards. "You're tired boy, best go to bed. Tomorrow's Sunday. We'll have a good old time."

There were two bedrooms upstairs. The back one had long before been divided in two to form a tiny sleeping area and a storage space. Undressed

and in bed, Severus listened to his parents downstairs. Funny that in all these years it had never occurred to them that he could hear them.

"The boy's growed, Eileen. Wrists sticking a mile out his sleeves. He's growed, and he'll need new togs."

"He won't need them yet, Toby. We've got all summer to figure it out. We can piece it out, a bit here, a bit there. We can sell the old things. He can use my old books next year; we won't have to get any of them new."

"We got to keep the expense down. We can't afford them things. Look, I know I promised to be good, but I got to think this out. I got to go out and think on it."

Severus heard the door close and knew his father was off to the local boozer. It was his fault. He'd taken food from Lily, from Bella, from Hagrid. It was all that extra food. That was why he'd grown, and that was why his father had gone out to get drunk. *I can't do anything right. Everything I touch turns out wrong. Now I've ruined it for Mum, and I've only just got home.*

He did not go to sleep that night.

Severus's bed stood next to the window where he could look out at the night. So many nights watching, estimating the time by the moon and stars. Now it was 'last call.' Now the final patrons left and the doors were locked. Still his father didn't come home, which meant he was with his mates and a bottle.

Not until after two o'clock did Severus hear the uneven steps on the cobbles and the rattle of the doorknob. Eileen heard it, too, and crept quietly down the stairs. Before she reached the bottom, the door slammed open.

"Where's m' boy? Where's m' son? Come back from that big fancy school! He should be 'ere t' talk t' his dad! Russ! Get down here an' keep yer dad company!"

"Shh, Toby. Come to bed. He's tired, he's asleep. You can talk in the morning."

"Get out th' way, woman! That's m' boy. Needs t' be learnin' a man's business..."

"Please, Toby. Not so loud. You'll wake him. Wake the neighbors."

"A man's job! Not some jumped-up college pudding, fancy..."

"It's late. Better in the morning..."

"My son! Not some witch's brat!"

"Toby!"

Severus heard the sound of the blow and his mother hitting the wall. He was up and halfway down the stairs in a second. Eileen was standing against

the wall, her left arm up to protect her face, while Tobias advanced on her, fist raised.

"Russ!" Eileen yelled. "Get back upstairs! Stay out of this!"

"You!" Tobias roared. "Come back from yer fancy school, think you're better 'n everyone! Takin' a man's wage out his pocket fer fancy clothes! Get down 'ere! I'll show ya what for!"

Tobias charged up the stairs, but Eileen lunged for his arm. "Toby!" she screamed, "Russ!" Tobias turned, unsteady, her weight dragging on him, and struck her backhanded across the mouth, sending her into the wall again. Severus turned and ran for his room, to his bed where his wand was hidden under the pillow. From the top of the stairs he pointed it at his father's distorted face and hissed, "*Stupefy!*" A bolt of red light struck Tobias, and he fell forward to lie unconscious on the steps.

Eileen and Severus stared at each other over Tobias's limp form. Both were breathing hard. "What," Eileen forced out, "do you think you're doing? Give me that thing. Now!"

Dumbly Severus handed her the wand. It'd all been so fast that he still wasn't sure what had happened. His father lay sprawled on the stairs, beginning to snore. But he had done that. He had taken his wand and used it against his father. He was no better than Rabastan or the Gryffindor bullies. His mother's anger was righteous and justified. A deep sense of shame began to fill him.

"You'll get this back when you go to London in September," Eileen said. "Now see if you can help me get him into bed. If you're lucky, he won't remember anything tomorrow."

They had managed to pull Tobias up onto the upper landing when they heard a flurry of wings against the sitting room window. "Oh, no," whispered Eileen, and she hurried down the stairs to admit the owl. The letter was brief to the point of rudeness. An underage wizard had used a stupefying spell and was now in danger of being expelled from school. Both he and his parents were warned that any repetition of this behavior would result in disciplinary action.

"That's done it," said Eileen to the house in general. "Now the Ministry of Magic is watching us." She waved the letter in her fist as she came back up the stairs. "You know what your dad 'll do if he finds out the Ministry's got its eye on him! You had to go for the wand!"

"I'm sorry, Mum, I didn't think..."

"Obviously not!"



"It's just that I got so used to having to be ready, and sometimes you don't have time to think . . ."

Eileen patted her son on the shoulder. "So you didn't whup 'em every time, eh? That's all right, Russ. I forgive you the fib. It made your dad happy. Let's get him to bed now. Won't any more owls be bothering us tonight. But you and me have to work on this fighting thing. You have to decide in a second whether to react or not react, and you can't afford to get it wrong. We start Monday after your dad goes to work."

The next morning Tobias was sick with a fierce hangover. He knew from the bruise on Eileen's face that he'd done something the night before, but he had no memory of what it was. Both Eileen and Severus acted as if nothing had happened, and soon Tobias accepted that they were probably right.

The summer quickly settled into a routine. Tobias left early each morning for work while Eileen and Severus practiced until noon honing his reaction skills. Then, depending on what she could take in, Eileen sewed, washed, or charred in neighboring villages, while Severus explored the surrounding moor country, collecting seeds and roots for his potions. Friday evenings Tobias spent with his mates, and was the worse for wear Saturday mornings, but aside from that he kept his promise to Eileen about being good. Except, of course, for the last day in July when they got word of the eighteen killed in a cage accident at Markham No 2 Colliery in Derbyshire the day before. Every mining man in the district was angry and drinking that night and Eileen, forewarned by a neighbor with a radio, sent Severus out with a pillow and a blanket to sleep in the area behind the kitchen before Tobias got home.

And of course, Eileen looked for clothes. Fortunately the cloak and biretta could still be worn. The robe was loose enough, but getting too short, so Eileen invested some of her hard-earned coin in black cloth to add a strip about the bottom. Some of the same cloth provided plackets and gores in the gown, as well as a band around the waist to add length. Her seamstress work was so expert that it was hard to tell that the robes had been reworked.

The other clothes for a growing boy — shirts, trousers, sweaters, underwear — were harder to come by. There were charity shops and church poorbins, and some things Eileen got as castoffs from the families she worked for. In the end it was all good, sturdy, serviceable working-class cotton, gray and dingy from too many washings in mineral-hard boiling water and cheap soap, but solid and durable. And Tobias didn't have to lay out his own wages, so familial peace was maintained on that score.

One day Eileen and Severus went to visit Nana, his witch grandmother. It was an all-day expedition, for they had to hike over the hills and moors to another town. Nana had a modest cottage on the edge of town with an extensive garden. Bees hummed, butterflies fluttered languidly, and you could practically hear the earthworms plowing up the soil. The brown owl Nelson lived in a little hutch by the rear door and kept the pigeons away from the insect life.

Nana, many generations back, had the blood of Katherine Hewitt in her, and was renowned in the district for her potions. She had three cauldrons bubbling in her kitchen the day her daughter and grandson came to visit, and hauled Severus inside at once to try his newly learned and supposedly improved skills. Love potions sold best, and sleeping potions were easiest to make, but the healing potions were Nana's greatest gift. Bone-knit and headache remedies, salves to stop bleeding and poultices to draw stings, syrups for coughs and catarrhs, Nana supplied the whole region. She and Severus roamed the garden, snipping buds, plucking hips, scraping twigs, stripping grass heads. He could learn more in one day from his grandmother than Slughorn had taught the whole last term.

The 'other one,' Gra, had been married to grandfather Snape and, though she never said so, Severus had the impression that she was pleased to be a widow. Gra loved puzzles. She had a jigsaw puzzle, a different one each visit, in progress on the dining room table, and so they could never eat there. Gra kept Britain's most extensive collection of murder mysteries on her bookshelves, and an equally impressive collection of real-life murder case clippings stored in a small filing cabinet. When Severus was six, she had him working on the fox, goose, cabbage puzzle and, as he grew, the logic problems became more complex.

Visiting Gra was always amusing, for she knew a little of everything that was happening. She kept newspapers for months and extracted the ones with the most interesting stories to hold for her grandson. Everything about the Apollo missions was in her house, as well as the Skylab program, but most recently she had begun collecting articles on something called deoxyribonucleic acid. Severus was entranced, and carried an armload of newspapers and magazines home with him. Suddenly, his passion was biochemistry.

The letter came from Hogwarts, and Eileen began preparing Severus for his third year.

The first thing they did was break open the boxes in the half storeroom. Every book on Severus's list was there, though in a edition at least twenty

years old. They pulled them out and dusted them, then experimented with ways to cover them so as to hide their age. Eileen thought of white wrappers, but Severus suggested newspaper and magazine clippings arranged in themes. That way, if anyone challenged him on the covers, he could challenge them back on their knowledge of the world.

One of the things they pulled out was Eileen's old 'Advanced Potions' book. "You can't take that with you, it's a sixth year book," she chided him.

"But Mum, I was using this when I was nine," Severus responded, turning the book over to look at the signature he'd written on the back cover four years earlier. That was the year that Nana 'd told him he was still half a Prince on his mum's side, a wizard, as well as a Snape on his dad's. He'd been so proud of his Prince blood that he'd inscribed the name on the book's cover. Today, at the advanced age of thirteen, the inscription seemed childish.

Still, he tucked the potions book, with all the notes and inscriptions he'd started making, into the box of books he was taking with him to Hogwarts. He had no doubt that something in it would prove useful in the coming year.

Tobias started talking about going to Blackpool once as a special excursion, but both Eileen and Severus regarded this as a potential disaster, especially since the wage settlement from the strike the previous year was being eroded by price increases, and money was an issue. In the end, they talked him down to a Sunday picnic on Pendle Hill. That afternoon, Severus stood at the top of Pendle Hill and looked down on all of east Lancashire. He thought of Katherine Hewitt and the others that had been hanged with her, of his seaman great-grandfather, and of all the Snapes and Princes in his life. He had a past that had nothing to do with Hogwarts. It was no backwater of ignorance and grinding poverty, but a rich heritage of individual strength and initiative. He could stand up to any Black or LeStrange in the world.

His mother didn't go with him to London at the end of August. He was thirteen, and a man who could take care of himself. Though he carried more than just a Gladstone bag, it was still his job to transport everything from Euston Station to King's Cross, and to get himself on board the Hogwarts train. His parents drove him to Colne for the Friday morning train to London. He took with him his lunch, supper, and breakfast, plus enough money for a locker at King's Cross to store his extra baggage. The night at St. Pancras was like spending an evening at a favorite and preferred hotel. On Saturday, September 1, he crossed through the portal to Platform 9 3/4 and was on his way back to Hogwarts.

That weekend, Tobias Snape was drunk two nights in a row and gave Eileen a black eye.

## C H A P T E R     F I F T E N

### B A T T L E S

**SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 1, 1973 (3 DAYS BEFORE THE FIRST QUARTER)**

Students in various stages of semi-muggle dress wended their way through King's Cross Station trying not to be too noticeable. It was actually amusing watching how hard they and their parents worked at being invisible. Severus got his trolley and retrieved his meager packages from the locker, then made his way to Platform 9. He stood there as if waiting on the platform until there was a lull in the Hogwarts traffic, then calmly slipped through to Platform 9 3/4. As he pushed the trolley to the baggage area, he overheard snippets of conversation.

"... have to pass as many OWLs as possible or that new broomstick I want..."

"... and then we spent another two weeks on the Riviera..."

"... I heard the whole house just burned down, with them..."

"... fairly reeks of mudbloods and mongrels this year..."

"... tons of extra galleons because I'm so looking forward to Hogsmeade..."

Leaving his baggage with the handlers and carrying only the Gladstone bag with his robes, Severus headed for the rear of the train where he hoped to meet and talk with Lily. He was surprised to hear his own name called from behind him.

"Snape! Wait. Hold on a moment."

Severus turned and waited as Bella Black hurried up. She smiled winningly at him as if they had been lifelong bosom friends. "I'm so glad I caught you here. Some of us Slytherins are getting together in the first cars, and you should join us. It's like a back-to-school House party. Come on. It'll be fun."

"I'm always... dull at... parties," Severus replied. "Not my favorite... thing."

"You'll be fine. We have too many clowns as it is. We can use quieter ones to tone things down." She hooked her arm in his and steered him back along the platform to the front of the train where a crowd of familiar faces was milling around prior to boarding.

"Look who I found!" Bella called, and others came up to greet him and shake hands. Severus felt very out-of-place in his working-class clothes among all the children of rich old families, but everyone seemed truly pleased to see him. Then they boarded, and Severus found himself in a kind of club car with little tables. He was sitting with Evan Rosier, who started talking about his summer like an old friend. Tea, coffee, and various juices were brought to the tables along with an assortment of sweets. Severus was amazed at the variety.

At the other end of the room, out of earshot, Bella was in conversation with Rabastan. "I've done my part. He's here. Are you sure He's interested?"

"Are you joking? A second year who can conjure up an earthquake? Father was practically salivating when I told him. He told . . . you know, and he's interested. He's just a kid now, but with the proper training he could be a powerful spell caster. We're supposed to take it easy, be sure he stays with us, not scare him away. We've got five years before he'll be ready, but . . . you know who is willing to wait."

"What if Stumbledore is still hanging around him?"

"We back off. I told you. We have time. We can afford to do this slowly. We just be sure he develops in the right direction."

After an hour of listening to Rosier and to Wilkes, who had joined them, Severus left the club car. He needed someplace quiet where he could think. Bella tried to stop him and lure him back, but Rabastan restrained her, mouthing the word 'slowly' as he did so.

Severus met Lily near the other end of the train as she was making her way back from the baggage car. "What happened," she whispered, so that no one in the compartments could hear. "I was waiting for you."

"I was kidnapped," Severus replied, smiling slightly as their eyes met. He could feel the doors sliding gently open in his mind, and relaxed with a sense of homecoming that he didn't feel even in his parents' house. At her look of surprise, he added, "Bella Black wanted me to come into one of the front cars for a bit. They're having a Slytherin reunion." The two moved back to the area in front of the baggage car where they could talk freely.

"I thought they teased you all the time. Isn't that what you said last year?"

"Yeah, but Bella's in fifth year now, and she has her OWLs at the end

of the year. I think she's already worrying about them and wants to be sure I'll tutor her in Potions. I'm not going to complain. Whenever she shows an interest in me, everyone else leaves me alone. It's almost pleasant."

Lily look puzzled. "That's not how her cousin talks about her in our common room. But he hates everything about his family and Slytherin, so maybe he's not exactly objective."

They chatted for a while, then Lily returned to her mates.

The sorting that evening was a revelation. Severus suddenly realized that he was no longer the smallest student at Hogwarts. Almost all of the new first years were shorter than he was. Nothing else about the sorting was remotely important. He didn't pay attention to a single name.

Lily sat, as usual, at the foot of the Gryffindor table. She and Severus exchanged 'thumbs up' and smiled at each other. Further contact could wait until a safe and opportune moment. The feast was sumptuous, and this time Severus stayed to eat his fill. After all, the shock of his growth was now history, and his mum had figured out how to handle it. And the students around him seemed prepared to tolerate his presence.

At the moment when the sweets were served, there was a sudden interruption in the festivities. An explosion stopped the talking, and a huge smoky banner began to form in the middle of the hall. The banner carried a representation of a human hand balled in a fist with one finger extended and the legend, "Slytherin Sucks, Gryffindor Rules" emblazoned across it.

The entire Gryffindor table was stricken by sudden giggles. The Slytherin table expressed requisite rage. Severus thought it was mildly amusing. Only a few seconds passed before Headmaster Dumbledore rose and dispersed the banner, with a gentle admonition about courtesy and school unity. No one could identify who had perpetrated the dastardly act.

The feast being over, the four houses repaired to their respective dormitories.

The tenor of the term was set the next day as Slytherin house left its underlake dormitories for a relaxed Sunday breakfast. The first out slipped and slid on a slime of seaweed that coated the floors. Rotting fish hung from the stone walls, and the stench of aged shellfish permeated the air. The members of Slytherin house gagged and retched, and swore vengeance on Gryffindor, for all were convinced that Gryffindor it must be.

War had been declared. Slytherin was in a state of siege.

Rabastan sat as head of the war council. "We can't let them get away with this. The honor of Slytherin is at stake. We stand now against our enemies, or

we go down to glorious ruin in a blaze of vengeance!” (Rabastan was always in his element where drama was concerned. A pity that Hogwarts had no drama department.)

“Yes, but what’re we going to do that’ll half make up for what they did to us?” Avery had more of a talent for cutting to the quick of things.

“We could move the seaweed and stuff to their tower.” Wilkes was roundly cuffed for his total lack of imagination.

“Let’s make badges that say ‘Gryffindor is garbage.’”

“We can wrap toilet paper around their tower.”

Severus spoke up then in a quiet but confident voice. Curses always made him feel secure. “The fish and seaweed was because we’re under the lake. They’re up in the air. We have to do something with birds.”

“But they’re lions. That’s not birds,” Wilkes sneered.

Severus waved a hand in disgust. “And we’re snakes, not fish. They didn’t care. Why should we?”

“Go on, Cursemaster,” cried Rabastan. “How can we destroy them?”

“Bird dung, feathers, and eggs. Tar and feathers. Rotten eggs. Not when they come out by the Fat Lady where they’re expecting it, but dropping on them from the ceiling later as they come down to supper. Hitting them from the air outside during broom practice. And I would suggest . . .” they all paused to listen, “the ones who hit us were the boys. Target only the boys. Let their own girls laugh at them. Let them be shamed by their own house. Divide them against each other and make them weaker against us!”

They cheered him then, and formed into groups to learn the Koutsoulia, Phtero, and Augo spells. Severus was mostly glad that Lily would not be a target, although the thought of a real fight against an open enemy was more exhilarating than he would have imagined.

By supper time it was understood that no quarter would be given by either side.

“It wasn’t very nice,” Lily said as they huddled in a niche along the north wall watching it rain. They’d brought lunch from the Great Hall and found a sheltered place. No one else was out in the cold and wet, and they didn’t fear being disturbed.

“What they did to us wasn’t very nice.” Severus pulled a little vial of slime from his robes. “Smell that.” Lily backed away in disgust from the stench. “That was all over the corridor. People were slipping and falling in it. It was almost impossible to get out of the robes.” He’d been lucky. By the time he was leaving the common room, the corridor problem had been



discovered. How he would have paid for new robes, he didn't know. "And we could've done worse. Someone suggested tar with the feathers, but we kept it to eggs. That washes." He didn't think she needed to know that the tar had been his idea.

"But a lot of the boys that were hit with that stuff had nothing to do with the first prank."

"And none of us had done anything at all to Gryffindor. We were all innocent."

Lily frowned. It was true. "It'd be better, though, if the only ones attacked were the ones who started it."

"Do you know who started it?"

"There's a group that loves practical jokes, but I'm not sure it was them." And that was all she would say, so Severus let the matter drop.

"How is Arithmancy?" Lily asked after a few minutes.

"It's all right. I wish it was something harder, though."

"Harder? You must be the only student at Hogwarts who wants the classes to get harder."

"Yes, but the classes we have here aren't going to help me. I need physics, and chemistry, and algebra, and calculus..."

"Why?"

"I'm going to be a scientist." The look on Lily's face said she thought it was a stupid idea. Severus wasn't sure he could explain it to her. He loved the pictures of laboratories in the magazines he'd gotten from Gra. They were so clean and orderly. And when you worked out a math equation, you didn't have to worry about nuances, or how someone felt. The answer was there in front of you on the paper. Severus's favorite voice in the world was the voice of the man counting down the rocket launches: "Six... five... we have ignition... three..." Total and perfect calm while doing something truly interesting and important. That was what it was like in a laboratory.

Severus showed Lily the double helixes he'd been doodling in his notebook. He tried explaining about them, but Lily seemed mostly impressed with how pretty they were. Severus realized she was bored. Something had changed between them, and he wasn't sure what it was. When they parted, both were thinking of other friends and things to do, not of the next time they would meet.

"Hey, Cursemaster!"

Severus paused on the steps outside the entrance to the Castle. He was on

his way to Professor Kettleburn's class on magical creatures. Rabastan joined him and walked with him down the hill.

"I wanted to ask you about your hex work." Severus didn't reply. "I mean, you know, you're really good at little baby stuff, but did you ever try anything bigger?"

"Baby stuff?"

"Yeah. You know. Spiders and snowballs. I mean, Wilkes told me about the lice, and that was truly brilliant, but all you do is throw things and do hexes with small animals and insects."

"I seem to recall an earthshaking moment."

"Now that's what I mean. Something big. Something, well, dangerous. Ever invent a spell for something like that? Besides the earthquake."

"Not really. I never needed one."

"Well you should think about it. This thing with Gryffindor is getting bigger, and some of them are nasty and mean. I don't think they've realized yet that you're the source of the new hexes, but if they do, you're a target. You should have some good defense ready."

Rabastan returned to the castle while Severus continued on to his class. He didn't pay much attention to the magical creatures (in this case glumbumbles) because he had other things on his mind.

Back in his dormitory before supper, Severus dug into his footlocker and took out the Advanced Potions book. His mother had used it during her sixth year, and had taken notes in it on various potions. Nana, too, had added an occasional note when she saw place for improvement. But most of the copious annotations on many of the pages were in Severus's own cramped, spidery, almost illegible handwriting. His mother had given him the book when he was nine, and he'd spent the next years trying out the potions.

There were many that he couldn't do because he couldn't get all the ingredients, but where he could, he did. Things like gnat wings and dried lizard eyes were easy, as were most of the herbs. He'd nearly gotten the skin clawed off his right arm trying to get badger nose-hair, and shavings from the wooden leg of a one-eyed seaman had turned out to be more trouble than it was worth, yet overall the experience had been invaluable.

Here and there among the potions, though, he had experimented with charms. This book was the intellectual godparent of all the little hexes he'd used at Hogwarts. Many of them were accidents. Next to a potion requiring louse legs was the hex he'd stumbled on that later produced Wilkes's fine crop.

Severus began to turn the pages, studying each note carefully. Rabastan was right. They were all simple hexes involving bugs and rocks.

But what if Rabastan was right about having to protect himself? He forced himself to remember the fight with the Lestranges on the hill, and how it had felt to realize that they were going to take him. The two Gryffindors — well, they had been two as well. Face to face was one thing. What if he was face to one and the other coming behind his back?

The first step was to decide what kind of spell might be useful, then try to make it. Severus went to the Great Hall for supper, grabbed a few things to take with him, and returned to Slytherin to work. It was just like first and second year all over again, but with a bigger enemy.

The short pudgy boy with the watery eyes and colorless hair glanced around the Great Hall. The two he was looking for were right in the center of the Gryffindor table, holding court as usual. Jokes, judging from the laughter around them. Moving sideways between the benches, the boy edged nearer until he caught the eye of the slender, dark-haired boy with glasses. He touched the side of his nose, and the boy nodded and whispered something to his companion. The taller, stockier boy looked over, gave a ‘thumbs up’ sign, and continued his conversation.

After supper, they met in a corner of the Gryffindor common room. “. . . and then Rabastan ran out and down the steps. He was calling somebody. ‘Cursemaster’ was what he said.”

The two others exchanged a significant look. “Cursemaster. Now that sounds like exactly what we’re looking for, don’t you think, James?” said Sirius Black.

James Potter, the boy with the glasses was grinning. “Got to be. Peter, did you get close enough to hear what they were saying?”

“Whoa. First things first,” said Sirius. “Who was this spell caster so powerful that Rabastan lord-love-you Lestrangle, for crying out loud, calls him ‘Cursemaster’?”

Peter chuckled. “You won’t believe. He’s the same year we are. The little pasty-faced one with the long black hair. The one that’s so good in Potions.”

James pursed his lips and made an I’m-trying-to-remember face. “Sirius, didn’t we warn him last year about being your cousin Bella’s lapdog?”

Sirius barked a loud laugh. “Sounds like the lesson didn’t take. Sounds like he’s moved up to Rabastan. Sounds like we’re going to have to get our pretty little hands dirty.”

James turned back to Peter. “Did you get close enough?”

Peter had to admit he didn't, but he'd remember one piece of information. "Snape," he said. "His name's Severus Snape."

"That's his name all right," said Sirius. "Snivellus Snake. There's a proper Slytherin name for you. Maybe we can rechristen him. Shiverus Shake sounds better, don't you think." Sirius jabbed an elbow into James's ribs and grinned.

This time it was four to one, Sirius, James, and Peter being joined by a thin boy with light brown hair named Remus. The whole school was in the Great Hall for supper the next day, and Severus had grabbed his handful of food to return to his dormitory when Sirius stepped out from behind a staircase right in front of him. James and Remus moved in from the sides to hold his arms, and James clamped a hand over his mouth. Together they hustled him into the chamber where first years generally waited before the sorting, then Remus and Peter stood guard outside.

"Cute," said James as he extracted Severus's wand from its loop in his right sleeve. "I'll have to remember that one. Must save a lot of time." He tossed the wand into the far corner. "Now, Cursemaster, you will sit, and we will talk." They pushed Severus into a chair and used rope spells to bind his wrists and ankles to the arms and legs.

Severus was thinking feverishly. He couldn't plead ignorance, since they'd overheard Rabastan. "I'm sorry..."he started, but Sirius didn't let him finish.

"Apology? We don't want an apology. You got bird poop and eggs in my hair. We want payback."

"Rules first," said James. "We told you this last year, but you didn't want to listen. Now we have to slap you around a bit. You don't help Bella, or Rabastan, or Rodolphus. You don't attack Gryffindor students. You don't dabble in dark arts."

Sirius pulled out a tiny vial. "This is for you. Who knows what it'll do. You're a slimy Slytherin slug, and you're going to drink it." He pulled Severus's head back while James pinched his nose, forcing him to open his mouth to breathe. They tipped the contents of the vial down his throat.

Untying the ropes, they pulled him along the underground corridor to the entrance to Slytherin house. Severus's stomach was swelling, and he realized with horror that things were moving inside him. Depositing Severus on the floor in front of Slytherin, and setting a body-bind curse on him, they left, laughing. The things in his stomach were crawling into his throat, and Severus began to retch, vomiting up a huge slimy slug. Slug after slug spewed out of him as he lay helpless and mortified until Bella and Rodolphus found

him twenty minutes later. They released the binding curse and helped him expel the slugs, assuring him that they would never again leave him to face enemies alone.

Severus was not cowed, however. A cold, murderous fury had settled in him, and he set his whole heart on vengeance.

Bella went back to the waiting chamber to get his wand, and then Severus sat up all that night in bed, analyzing what had happened to him. He was singled out. Why? Because Rabastan had called him ‘Cursemaster’ for all to hear. What was the worst part of what they did? That was easy. It was being forced to swallow the liquid in the vial. He could still hear Black’s voice, ‘Who knows what it’ll do.’ As it was, it was an uncomfortable and unpleasant prank, but the liquid could have been anything. Fear. Vulnerability. That was the worst part. Public humiliation and physical discomfort were important, too, but the sense of helplessness would stay with him the longest.

*So. I make them feel helpless, too. Uncomfortable and publicly humiliated would also be nice, but fear is the most important.* All night he thought, but no plan would come, and finally Severus understood that his fear had nothing to do with magic. Brute physical force could not be met with hexes and jinxes. *I have friends now. I can use them.* But that wasn’t the answer either.

*Never trust others for your safety. Just when you need them most, they desert you. If you can’t take care of yourself by yourself, then you’ve been beaten.* In the end Severus settled for public humiliation, leaving the intimidation for a later time.

The next day both Sirius and James were hit by tripping jinxes and stinging hexes. Neither did them any damage, and they laughed and slapped each other on the back. “Is that Slytherin’s best? Come on back, Cursemaster, we’ll even give you the first two jinxes free.” The retaliatory attack had been so pathetic that neither boy even considered a response. They assumed they had won.

Two days later, Nelson brought a small package. In it were homemade candies from Nana. Severus opened it at the table in the Great Hall, extracted one particularly tasty-looking one, and ate it with obvious relish. Then he tucked the box under his arm and returned to Slytherin house.

That afternoon Black and Potter found him in the fountain courtyard with his box from home. “Little Slytherins should share with their friends.”

Severus sprang up, closing the box and taking out his wand. “They’re mine. Leave me alone.” He tried to leave, but they split to take him from both

sides. Gryffindor was victorious while Slytherin fled ignominiously from the field of battle.

The box of sweets was small, but delicious, and Sirius and James finished them together in their room. Just before climbing into bed, James leaned forward, his hand on the bedpost. "Somehow I didn't think he'd be so easy to push around. I'm a little disappointed."

Sirius laughed. "You just like a fight. Go to sleep."

Severus, meanwhile, was not in bed. He was creeping past the Hufflepuff dormitories to the kitchens in the lower levels of the castle. A touch of his wand, a whispered, "Alohomora," and the doors opened. He had no trouble finding the great vat of pumpkin juice and emptying the contents of a small flask into it. The liquid was colorless, odorless, and harmless. Unless one had eaten certain candies the day before.

Morning dawned without incident, and all was well with Gryffindor. James stretched luxuriously in bed, then decided he was hungry. Together he and Sirius went to the Great Hall and sat down for breakfast.

A few minutes later, the giggling started. Sirius glanced around to see half his table staring at him. He turned to James and choked on his toast. James's hair was mottled with green and silver. From the shocked look in James's eyes, Sirius knew his hair must be blazoned with the Slytherin colors, too. In the minute that followed, the stares and giggling spread to Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff. The Slytherin students were less restrained. En masse, they stood and cheered. Sirius clambered onto the bench and glared at the Slytherins. Severus wasn't there. "Coward!" he yelled. "Where's the slimy little coward?"

He raged out of the door, James behind him, and teachers beginning to spill from the front table to head off the fight. There in the middle of the entrance hall stood Severus, wand in hand, calmly waiting. "Nice hair," he said.

Black stopped several feet from Severus, his own wand now in his hand. Behind him, Potter was trying to talk him out of his rage. Students were spilling out of the Great Hall, and they could hear Dumbledore, Hagrid, and the teachers telling people to step aside and let them through. The two antagonists were glaring into each other's eyes now, but only Dumbledore would have been able to warn Black of what that portended, and he was still battling his way through the crowd.

"You did this!"

"I presume you're talking about the hair. When am I supposed to have done it? I only just left Slytherin house and I haven't been in..."

*"Petrificus!"*

*"Stupefy!"*

*"Accio wands!"*

The air between the two combatants vibrated and expanded with the impact of their spells on Dumbledore's shield, and then both wands flew across the entrance hall into his hand. The Headmaster was furious. "You will both of you remain standing where you are. You will not move, and you will say nothing. The rest of you will either return to breakfast in the Great Hall, or you will go immediately to your dormitories to prepare for classes. Any student left in this hall after one minute, except for these two . . . ah three, will be serving detention this evening."

The hall cleared. Dumbledore turned to the teachers, who were herding the students as quickly as possible up the stairs and out of the way. "Minerva, Horace, I am afraid I shall have to ask you to accompany me upstairs for this conference. And do you think you might find the prefects of your houses and bring them along, too."

"So, I am to understand that Gryffindor house and Slytherin house have been hexing each other all week, and no prefect has seen fit to inform the heads of their houses or to take any steps to stop the fighting."

The prefects hung their heads in shame, and both McGonagall and Slughorn vowed to watch their charges like hawks watch rabbits, and then the only ones left in Dumbledore's office were Dumbledore, Hagrid, James, Sirius, and Severus. Sirius was speaking first.

"Look at our hair. Look at what he did to us. He's making fun of us in front of the whole school. Will it even come out?"

Dumbledore looked to Severus for an answer, and met the quiet black eyes. The boy was totally shut down, tight as a Gringotts vault. *O Eileen, is there no child in there at all?* "Have you a response to this accusation?"

"I don't know when their hair turned green. I wasn't in the Great Hall. I didn't see it. Why would I want to turn their hair green anyway?" Severus turned his inscrutable gaze on Sirius.

James gripped Sirius's arm, seeing the pit opening in front of them. "He's right. There's no reason to think it's him instead of some other Slytherin."

"But he gave us something that made this happen!"

"You're mistaken," said Severus. "I've never given you anything in my life."

Sirius saw the trap then and shut his mouth. All three boys were silent.

Dumbledore sighed. The trio was dismissed, but both Sirius and Severus were given detention for having raised their wands against each other.

Outside the office the three boys were forced to go as far as the staircases together. Potter placed himself between Black and Severus in an attempt to avoid physical violence so close to Dumbledore's office. "We know it was you," Black growled.

"And I'd love to be a fly on the wall while you explain to Professor Dumbledore why you think so."

"It isn't over."

"I didn't think it was." As the two Gryffindors started up the staircase, Severus added. "You might try shaving your heads."

Only the realization that Hagrid was watching from the end of the hall prevented bloodshed there and then.

\* \* \*

"Did you?"

"Will you hate me if I say yes?"

"You did! Why?"

Severus buried his face in the arms he'd wrapped around his knees. He really didn't want Lily to know about his own humiliation, but if he didn't tell her she'd think he'd instigated his attack for no reason. "They jumped me," he said.

"Go on."

The story came out slowly, about being dragged into the waiting chamber and losing his wand, being forced to drink the liquid, then lying paralyzed for twenty minutes vomiting up slugs...

"Ugh! That is so disgusting! What horrible, vicious bullies! And all you did was turn their hair green? They got off lucky." Then she began to feed him information.

"The tall one, Sirius Black, he's Bella Black's cousin, but I think you know that. They're arrogant purebloods, but he pretends not to be. The one with glasses is James Potter. He's our new Quidditch Chaser. Quidditch? Oh, you. You know it's a game. I think his family's really rich or something. The pale one with the brown hair is Remus Lupin. He's kind of nice, but shy. He gets sick a lot. And the fat one with the little eyes is Peter Pettigrew. They've been hanging around together since first year, at least Sirius and James have."



He came away from their talk knowing more about the Four Horsemen than he did about what Lily was doing in her life. She didn't really want to talk about herself. Severus didn't push it, though, since he knew what it was like having people prying into your business when you didn't want them to.

Then Hagrid started seeing him again.

"Open wide, now. I think that one's a baby tooth doesn't want t' come out. Ya let me pull it and there'll be more room for the others. What'd them two do that made ya so angry anyway?"

"Nobody made me angry. I don't get angry. Go ahead and pull it if you think it'll help." It was a baby tooth with hardly any root. The extraction was almost painless.

"Ya got to do exercises for the muscles in the legs. Rickets always affects the muscles. Y're not going t' have much strength if ya don't exercise. Must've been something bad if not one of the three of ye was going to tell Dumbledore."

"Maybe there was nothing to tell. And I've been drinking the milk and eating what you told me. And there's no place to exercise."

"Yer mum should've given ya more proper food when ya was growing up. Then ya wouldn't..."

"You leave my mother out of this!"

"So I'm talking 'bout that little upset with Black and Potter, and I got nothing. Not a rise out o' him. But when I start mentioning his mum... Well, let's just say he was a mite 'irritated.'"

"His mother, do you say? Hagrid, that is very enlightening information. We need a breakthrough with that boy. If it is his mother that brings up the powerful emotions, so be it. I would have wished for something less... fundamental, but one cannot have everything."

"So. Do I start working on him?"

"Hagrid, you already have."

The war went underground. First, Professor Mullein spent a fruitless two days trying to discover why the Venus Flytraps in his Herbology class had developed a sudden fondness for Severus's nose, then Black went around with his left hand hidden up his sleeve for nearly a week until he could figure out how to get rid of a wart that bore an uncanny resemblance to Professor McGonagall's hat. After picking up a quill in Charms class, Severus found he was leaving sticky fingerprints on everything, ruining all his homework and gluing the pages of his books together. But all agreed that the piece de

resistance was the hex on Black's voice one evening that gave him an extra ultrasonic squeak perfectly pitched for summoning bats.

Rabastan was beside himself with frustration. Severus was simply no longer interested in developing grander curses. He considered it entirely Rabastan's fault that Sirius and James had attacked him, and he flatly refused to work on hexes that would raise the combat level to the point of appearing on the teachers' radar screen. The Lestranges and their group backed down again and bided their time. At least the conflict with Gryffindor might push Severus a little further in the 'right' direction.

Sirius had checked a book of advanced spells out of the library. It was open on his bed to the page with the Incendio charm. James glanced at the page, looked again, then gazed thoughtfully at Sirius.

"You can't use that one. It might hurt him."

"I want to hurt him."

"No, I mean really hurt him." James closed the book and carried it over to his own bed. "Fun's fun, but you've lost track of why we're doing this." He waited until he knew Sirius was listening. "We want to scare him away from the Black-Lestrangle gang, not push him into it. At least that was what we tried last year."

"And it's gotten bigger since then. Now he's one of their lieutenants. No holds barred, I say."

"I think you're wrong. Rabastan doesn't go around looking like he's sucking lemons when he's getting his way. And the curses are still kid stuff. We know he can do more, we know Rabastan wants more, but he isn't doing it. There seems to be discord in Slytherin house."

"You want me to just let him get away with the bat thing?"

"You take things too personally. There's a third year kid in Slytherin who's known more hexes than anyone in school since day one, and every son and daughter of every What's-his-name follower in Britain is being nice to him. They're pulling him in to the dark side. We want to make them fail. Your personal grudge is getting in the way."

"Right. Like warts and bats are going to conquer the world."

"Warts and bats in third year. If you keep pushing him, what's he going to hit you with in seventh year? We have to start looking ahead. I'll wager Rabastan is. Lay off."

And Sirius laid off.

"I can't check for damage t' the hip an' leg joints if I don't look at yer spine."

"There is Nothing. Wrong. With my. Spine."

"Like there's nothing wrong with yer teeth or yer bones or yer muscles. Yer parents ain't been doing right by your feeding..."

"My parents care for me the best they can."

"Best ain't so good then, judging by the result."

"This is over. I am going to class." A goal rendered difficult by Hagrid's bulk blocking the door.

Hagrid's pause reflected his puzzlement. It had been going well, the boy's ire had been rising, and suddenly he was cold as ice. Hagrid was no legilimens, but even he could sense the mind shutting down and closing off. He stepped aside and let Severus go to class.

\* \* \*

"And it was over. Like talking t' a wall."

"You switched the topic, Hagrid. You were on his parents, then you switched to him. It seems that when you criticize him, he can close you out. You have to press his vulnerabilities. Next time you examine him, let me know. I shall join you part way through. We have got to crack that shell."

#### THURSDAY, OCTOBER 25, 1973 (THE NEW MOON)

The chosen ambassador was Remus Lupin. He spoke to Severus briefly in Potions, and they arranged to meet in the fountain courtyard. Severus was fifteen minutes late. "I had to check for traps," he explained.

"You don't trust me."

"Should I? I seem to recall that you jumped me."

Remus shrugged. "I'm not proud of that. The point is that it's history. They don't... We don't want it to get any bigger."

"I think the term is escalate," interjected Severus, but Remus didn't appear to understand the reference.

"They're willing to forget the whole thing if you will. They'll stop it right now, and let you have the last jinx, just to show good faith." Severus radiated skepticism, and Remus bristled. "It's fair. We're not backing down from you, we don't have to. There's four of us. You've seen what we can do. Now we're trying to be nice because we think it's going too far."

“Four?” responded Severus. “I’d have said three and a half. Or even two and two halves. But how can you be equal partners when you miss one week in four?”

Remus’s face flushed. “You think you’re smarter than everyone, but you’re not. You want this to go on? Then you should get ready to be beaten. You want to stop it now, accept our offer.”

“I’ll think about it.”

“Don’t think too long.”

“Thanks for the warning.”

Depressed by his lack of success, Remus left the courtyard and wended his way down the hill. Partway down he became aware of the smell of a small fire. The fire was properly banked and made with dry wood, so it’s likely no one else would have noticed it, but Remus’s olfactory senses were rather acute.

He crept nearer to discover that the builder of the fire was a girl he knew, a fellow Gryffindor named Evans. “Oh,” he said. “Sorry to bother you.”

“You’re not a bother . . . Remus, isn’t it? It’s just that I can’t get this potion to come out right.”

“I can’t help you there. The best person I know in potions is . . .”

“Yeah. I know. In Slytherin. And if I can’t get this to work, I’m going to ask him.”

“Do you know him?”

“Not really. Hey, do you feel all right? I know it isn’t the full moon, but you look pale.”

Remus could feel his face getting paler. “What do you mean, full moon?”

“Nothing, except . . . This friend of mine is really interested in the moon, and I started noticing the phases, and then I noticed you tend to get sick when the moon is full. Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. It’s just . . . It’s Thursday and we have Potions, and I think I should get back to the castle. It was nice talking to you.”

“You, too.” Lily watched him leave. He seemed so lonely sometimes that she wanted to hug him and tell him that people cared. There was something about the hapless loners that brought out the caregiver in her. She knew Remus had James and Sirius, but she also knew he needed more. *Why do I always go for the runt puppies in the litter?* She went back to her potion, wondering if Severus would help her if she asked.

**HALLOWEEN, WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 31, 1973****(3 DAYS BEFORE THE FIRST QUARTER)**

Nelson was not a particularly big owl, and on Halloween morning he came flapping in slow and heavy, winded by the load he carried. Severus watched the tawny owl with some trepidation, for owl mishaps were always a source of general mirth. Nonetheless, Nelson made it to him without falling into any of the food.

Severus held the owl for a return message, then opened the larger package. It was an algebra book. It was second hand, but it had the answers to the problems in an appendix in the back, and one of the previous owners had worked problems in the margins. It was, thus, a treasure. A smaller package held a book of logic problems and an envelope contained news clippings. Severus hoped that Gra and Nana were getting on well together because he did not want this bounty to stop. He scribbled a hurried 'Thank you' to both grandmothers on scraps of paper and sent them off with Nelson.

Back in his dormitory he poured over the clippings. Someone in Czechoslovakia had discovered a comet that was heading toward earth even as he read. It was the "comet of the century." Skylab III was going up in November to photograph it. Suddenly space was his passion again, and he longed to see the lump of dirt and ice that was going to blaze its way across the heavens and flirt with the sun. He had to tell Lily, but he wouldn't see her again until the Halloween feast that night.

Severus pulled out the old/new algebra book, the book that contained information beyond the ken of Hogwarts, opened to the first page, and began reading.

"Well she clear never kept the right amount of milk at home. Look at the curve of that leg bone. It won't never be straight, and Eileen had somewhat t' do with that."

"I don't see why you keep bringing my mother into this."

"She had the care and feeding of ya, didn't she? If y're gonna take care of a child, ya got to learn what they need an' don't need. And I ain't talking about pencils in their school boxes."

"You are supposed to give me medical attention, not criticize my mother at every opportunity."

"And that medical attention is needed because of what Eileen wasn't able to..."

"STOP talking about my mother!"

Dumbledore entered the hut without knocking, catching the flash of Severus's temper as he did. Close. *Very close. Very near to the surface.*

"Are you discussing Eileen Prince's parenting skills, Hagrid? Surely that is not necessary. Eileen, of course, had no real preparation to be a mother, but I am sure she..."

"You're doing the same thing! My mother did all she could for me, and she's worth ten of the two of you put together."

"Severus, your mother is teaching you dueling skills to compensate for her own lack of those skills while she was here at Hogwarts."

This was a new angle, and Severus wasn't sure how to deal with it. His fury was barely under control as it was. "You're wrong. She wants me to take care of myself. We learn from mistakes."

Dumbledore frowned. *Too clinical. We need raw anger here.* "She has left you vulnerable to the very problems she says she is shielding you from. She will sacrifice your protection on the altar of her own ego."

"My mother's... not... like that. She won't... ever... hurt me. She wants me... to be strong."

"There is the possibility she wants to live her life through you like some kind of maternal vampire."

Severus exploded in a blinding crimson rage and sprayed Hagrid with wasp stings. "You don't know!" he screamed. "You don't know her! She loves me!" Cinders burst from the logs in the fireplace, and clay cups leapt from the shelves to shatter on the floor. He spun on the window shutters, and they crashed open, splinters of wood spraying onto the garden outside.

Hagrid was moving, trying to block the spells that lashed at Dumbledore now, boils and blisters, carbuncles, warts, and pustules... and screaming, all the while screaming, "You don't know! You have no right! You don't know her!"

Hagrid finally succeeded in pinning Severus's arms. He held the kicking, twisting boy above the ground while Dumbledore extracted his wand.

"Well," said Dumbledore calmly. "I think that was a success."

Dumbledore seated himself in one of the chairs, carefully laying Severus's wand on the table. Hagrid held the boy until his struggling weakened, then lowered his own bulk to the floor in front of the hearth. Severus was trembling uncontrollably now, his breath coming in gasps. Then, quite suddenly, he began to cry, huge sobs wracking his body. Instinctively, Hagrid began to rock gently back and forth, murmuring soothing nonsense, his hold slowly loosening until Severus lay limp in his arms, crying more softly now.

Dumbledore knelt beside them. "I fear there is one more thing to do, but it is better to do it now than try to force it later." Gently he unbuttoned the top of Severus's gown and drew both gown and robe away from the thin shoulders to examine the lash marks. They were several years old, but the faint color around the edges could still be seen. No muggle belt or whip had caused those marks. Eileen had beaten her son.

Dumbledore replaced gown and robe, and rebuttoned the gown. "I am sorry, Severus," he said, "I shall not do that again." He put a hand on the boy's shoulder, but Severus turned from him and buried his face in Hagrid's coat. "I am leaving now, Hagrid. I think things will go more easily without my presence." Dumbledore rose carefully, brushed the dust from his robes, and went to the door. He paused to look at Hagrid, cradling Severus like a mother with a child. Magical creatures, both of them. Dumbledore closed the door quietly behind him.

"I know you think she's awful, but really, it only happened once. And it was my fault."

"Once? All that happened one time? Here, give this t' Herbert." Herbert was the youngest of the Thestrals and Hagrid's favorite. Giving him his feed-bag was a little difficult since Severus couldn't see him. Luckily Herbert did most of the work, nudging the boy to show him where to fasten the straps.

"I used magic on m' dad. He fell down the stairs, and Mum had t' use healing spells t' save him. The Ministry was furious because they knew it was two wands and only one adult wizard. They threatened t' keep me out of Hogwarts. Mum was... angry."

"I'll say she was. You got a bit of her temper, too. More 'n a bit seems like. She never beat you again?"

"She stopped using magic. She put up her wand and only takes it out when we go to the moor to practice dueling. She says she can't trust herself."

"How old were you?"

"Nine."

The sessions with Dumbledore were becoming interesting.

Dumbledore at first tried to convince Severus that he didn't need to use occlumency at all, but soon gave that up as hopeless. There seemed to be more to it than just Eileen's teaching, almost as if the shutting of his mind was an instinct. There were ways around it, though.

"You do not have to shut yourself off to keep people out. In fact, it is safer if you do not. I can tell if you shut me out. It gives you away. Try controlling

the thoughts so that the ones you do not want people to see stay down, and the ones you want them to see come up.”

It took practice, a lot of hard practice, but Severus was a good pupil, and with Dumbledore’s help it gradually became easier to do.

**THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 15, 1973 (2 DAYS BEFORE THE LAST QUARTER)**

As he was leaving Potions class, Severus saw Lily ahead of him. He didn’t call to her, but watched to see if she was going down toward the lake. She was, and he headed in the other direction to meet her there by a roundabout way. He hadn’t had a chance to talk with her for a while, and it was lucky that she was going where they could be alone.

She was there ahead of him, but as he approached quietly he heard another voice, a boy’s voice. He stopped. *Who else knows about our meetings?*

Lily was sitting on her rock listening. Pacing back and forth on the beach in front of her was the thin, brown-haired boy who’d helped corner him in September. Remus Lupin. Lily had told him Remus’s name, but she’d never mentioned she knew him as other than a fellow Gryffindor. Severus sensed an uncomfortable, tight feeling in the center of his chest that made it hard for him to breathe. He backed away, careful to make no noise, and returned to the castle.

*Why him? What does she see in him? Can he tell her about things like comets and space launchings? He’s just some pale washed-out nobody who’s sick all the time.* Severus stopped pacing. Remus had been sick for three days about a week before . . .

Severus hadn’t been paying much attention to the phases of the moon, as the position of the moon wasn’t important to a Skylab launch, but hadn’t it been full just a week earlier? *Is Remus always sick when the moon is full?* It was something to check.

“Ya seem preoccupied, lad. Somewhat bothering ya?” It was Severus’s weekly checkup with Hagrid, and it usually lasted about ten minutes now, most of the major things having been covered.

“Why do you feel bad when your friend has another friend?”

Hagrid paused in the middle of checking the reflex in Severus’s left elbow. The question was a milestone in his treatment, dealing as it did with actual emotion. And after only two weeks. “Uh, I would say that it was jealousy.” He tapped the joint again. “Ya got someone t’ be jealous of?”



"I don't know. I have a friend, but . . . my friend is talking to someone else, and now I don't have anyone to talk to."

"If ya was friends with the other person, then there'd be three of ye."

"I don't think that would work."

"Ya got a problem with this other person?"

"Sort of."

He left a message the next morning at her desk in her Ancient Runes class. All it said was 'Kohoutek. Today. Rock,' but she knew who it came from.

"Who's Kohoutek?"

"He's from Czechoslovakia. He discovered a comet. It's heading for the sun right now, and we should be able to see it pretty soon."

"I've never seen a comet."

"It's supposed to be pretty spectacular. It's supposed to be the comet of the century. They're sending up the Skylab III team today to take pictures. You want to try to see it with me?"

"Okay. Do we need a telescope?"

"I don't know. It'll be brighter after perihelion."

"And that is . . . ?"

"After it goes around the sun. It'll be around for a while, so we just look for clear nights."

There were no clear nights for more than a week, but during the same time Lily found three occasions to talk by the lake with Remus Lupin.

Probably the most unnerving thing was the sudden tendency Lily had developed to giggle and worry about her hair. She was three weeks younger than Severus, almost fourteen, and Severus found himself paying more attention to other girls of their age to see if they behaved in the same silly way. To his great disgust, they did.

As November faded into December and the hills around Hogwarts turned white again, another female fulfilled her promise to become important in Severus's life.

"Snape, wait a bit, I need to talk to you." Bella Black was waving from the corner by the fire in the common room. Severus crossed the room and stood quietly in front of her, waiting. "Remember about my Potions OWL? You were going to tutor me for the exams."

"You were serious about that?"

"Of course I was! I don't joke about exams. We really need to get together

so you can find out how much work I need. What about this evening after dinner here in the common room?”

Severus thought quickly. Slytherin house had no windows, but he knew the sky was gray and overcast. No Kohoutek tonight. “All right,” he replied. “This evening after dinner.”

It turned out that Bella, while a highly proficient spell caster, was a remedial potions maker in almost every way. Severus asked her about ingredients, measurements, heating, stirring, cooling, about moon phases and sidereal time, and Bella did not have a clue. And this was third year stuff. He insisted that she loan him her Fifth Year Potions book so that he could study it overnight. She obeyed without demur.

This was the biggest challenge that Severus had yet faced at Hogwarts, and for the first time his ego was on the line. He was the best Potions student in his year, in the years behind him, and for two years ahead of him. He might be the best Potions student in the whole school, but that was information beyond his ken for Slughorn noticed only three things: 1) Was your family old and famous? 2) Was your family rich and influential? and 3) Was your face pretty? Having none of these things, Severus was unnoticed by Slughorn, without Dumbledore’s prodding.

But in the student world, the notice of teachers was of little import. It was the notice of other students that mattered. Who cared what Slughorn thought, or McGonagall, or even Dumbledore, if the other students acknowledged your position? Bringing Bella up to getting her OWL in Potions would mean status. It would mean reputation. It would mean respect.

The next night started Bella’s tutoring, and Severus took her to the Potions classroom for the lesson. A whispered ‘Alohomora’ and they were in. The expression on Bella’s face was priceless, for it had apparently never occurred to her that he would commit trespass, and he could see that she was reevaluating his worth then and there.

They began with the basics, first year stuff, but basics that really were fundamental to the rest of the curriculum. And he made her tell him what was important about what she was doing. From time to time he got frustrated because it was so clear to him and she was so obtuse, but they avoided blows.

Then, after a week of lessons, Severus told Bella he could not tutor her that evening. He never said so, but the sky was crystal clear and now, two weeks before perihelion, the sky just after sunset was perfect for viewing the comet. He had already left a note for Lily, and they were going to the Astronomy Tower during dinner to try to see it.

Bella didn't have to be told anything. She sensed a rival, and she moved instinctively. First and foremost, you cannot act without information. Bella cornered Avery, and the two recruited a first year named Regulus, some kind of cousin of Bella's. Their orders were simple and clear.

Find out where Snape is going, and who he's with.

**WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 12, 1973 (2 DAYS AFTER THE FULL MOON)**

Severus went up to the Astronomy Tower first. There was a light dusting of snow, but since no one else would be out on such a frosty evening, he was not worried about footprints. A few minutes later, Lily joined him. Together they watched as the sun sank below the line of hills.

"As soon as twilight deepens, we should be able to see something, as soon as the sunlight isn't overwhelming everything else," Severus explained.

The sun's disk disappeared, and the orange glow of sunset slowly faded. Their eyes became accustomed to the dark and — there it was. Far fainter than Severus had hoped it would be, Comet Kohoutek was still the brightest star in the sky. What's more, it had a tail. Not a long spectacular tail streaming across the heavens, but a short modest one. A tail, nonetheless.

The two watched the comet until the light of the rising moon dimmed the stars. It was time to go down to supper. Both knew this was probably the last time they'd talk in 1973 because Lily was going home for the Christmas break in less than a week. They would meet again in January.

"It'll be better then," Severus promised. "It'll be closer to earth, and the sun will be pulling the tail out across the sky. Lots of comets are so bright they can be seen in the daytime."

Lily went down first, and Severus followed a few minutes later. He was cold, but happy, and he planned to go down to the lake to watch the moon. He really didn't feel like meeting Bella for Potions after having shared Kohoutek with Lily.

Avery flopped onto one of the sofas, near enough to Bella so that they could talk without being overheard. Bella raised her eyebrow and waited. Avery had the air of a man with news.

"The half-breed has a mudblood girlfriend." The shock on Bella's face gave Avery so much pleasure that he wished he'd planned an even more dramatic announcement.

"That's impossible," she stated flatly. "I'd have known."

"Clearly you don't know everything. He went up to the Astronomy Tower by himself, so Regulus and I waited."

Bella's expression changed to one of greater interest. "That's a cold place for lovers to meet."

"A few minutes later that mudblood Gryffindor comes along and goes up onto the Tower, too, so I left Regulus as a lookout and climbed up myself. Had to go slowly because I thought they might have stopped on the stairs, but they were right out on the Tower watching the sun set."

"Cute. Where did they go after the sun went down?"

"They didn't. They stayed there watching the stars. It looked like they were looking at one in particular. Then I had to move fast because she came down by herself and went to dinner. Then he came down and went to dinner."

"Where are they now?"

"She's in Gryffindor house, and he's down by the lake watching the moon."

Bella dismissed Avery and sat gazing into the fire, pondering the unexpected strangeness of this information. She'd been unaware that Severus had continued his friendship with the Gryffindor girl after being warned in first year. Her initial reaction was to eliminate this mudblood as a factor, but she already had warning of how Severus reacted to force. Which was why Bella was handling this case and not Rabastan. No, a lighter touch was needed. A gentle, friendly touch.

Standing and moving to a desk, Bella pulled out quill and parchment. It took her a while to compose her letter, since it had to be just the right tone, but at last she was satisfied. She looked around. It was late, and everyone had gone to bed. Bella folded the letter carefully, sealed it, and went to her own dormitory. The next day she sent an owl.

By Thursday, there was an answer, the right answer. Bella gave the owl a tidbit from her breakfast plate and looked around for Severus. Alone in a corner, as usual. Bella went over and slid onto the bench beside him.

"You don't go home for the holidays, do you Snape? Rodolphus says you always spend Christmas here."

Severus nodded. "It's okay. It's quieter without all the students."

"But not a lot of fun. Look, I really need to work for this OWL. Why waste a fortnight? Why don't you come spend the break with my family? It'd be mostly to tutor me, but we'd have a lot of fun, too. You could meet some people who could help you later after you leave Hogwarts."

Severus wasn't sure, but Bella painted a lovely picture of light and laughter, and being part of a family. The next morning in the common room he told her that he'd decided to accept her invitation and spend Christmas with the Blacks.

## C H A P T E R     T W E L V E

### HIGHS AND LOWS

**SUNDAY, DECEMBER 23, 1973 (ONE DAY BEFORE THE NEW MOON)**

Severus regretted his decision almost at once. The world of Bellatrix Black and the world of Severus Snape were so far apart that it was hard to believe they even shared a common humanity. The London town house of the Blacks was a wealth of paneled walls, gilt molding, crystal chandeliers, and a marble staircase designed to make Severus feel small and poor in his Hogwarts robes, the only robes he owned.

Mr. and Mrs. Black were icily polite, and the house-elves (a pair of them) practically sneered. Bella took Severus to a room in the upper part of the house that he recognized at once as servant's quarters, but he didn't mind. He was far more comfortable there than he would have been in a grander room. He had a bed, a table, a chair, a wardrobe for his things, and his dormer window looked out over west end London. He realized that this was the first view he had of London that didn't include Euston Road.

The next couple of days were not so bad because Bella's parents ate out at the homes of friends, so he and Bella could share a simple supper after lessons. Bella wasn't always around either, but she showed him the library on the first floor and he was quite content to sit there and read, or watch upper class London go by the window.

Two days before Christmas, things changed. The Blacks were giving a dinner party to welcome Bella's sister home from France, and some of their well-to-do acquaintances would be there. Bella was given the task of telling 'that little tutor boy' that the gathering was not for people of his 'sort,' and that he would have to have supper in his room.

This seemed only fair to Severus, who spent the whole day in his little dormer room while the house-elves made things ready, the sister arrived, the

decorations were put up, and the food prepared. Guests would come at seven, and the evening would be a formal one.

Shortly after six, Severus thought that there was a book in the library that he would like to read during his exile. He could use the servants' stairs and come out close by the door. If he was careful, he could get his book and be back in his room before he was seen. It was well before the arrival of the guests, so it shouldn't bother anyone.

His plan working well, he got the book, and then Severus hurried out of the library into the first floor hall where, to his great horror, he very nearly collided with a member of the family. He froze, his heart thumping, then looked up in the gathering silence, his mouth open in shock.

The Snow Queen herself stood before him, regally tall, gowned in iridescent blue and silver, her golden hair woven into a crown with one thick tress falling onto her shoulder. Ice-blue eyes smiled down in a face whose skin was the finest porcelain and whose mouth the delicate petals of a rose. Severus stood, rapt and dumbfounded, for he had never before seen anyone so beautiful.

"Well, hullo there. You must be Bella's friend from Hogwarts. Severus, isn't it?" and her smile was laughter and her voice the singing of birds. "I hope you're enjoying your stay at our home. I'm Narcissa."

It took a moment for Severus to recover and find his voice. "I'm . . . sorry. I . . . didn't mean . . . to . . ."

"That's all right. There's no damage done. I'm afraid I can't stay and chat right now as they're expecting me in the parlor, but since you're staying for the holidays, I'm sure we'll get to know each other." Then she smiled again and glided past him in a rustle of satin and the faint hint of jasmine perfume.

Severus watched her go, then started for the servant's stairs. By the time he reached the bottom step he was running, taking them two at a time up to the top floor. The book was thrown forgotten on the bed as he rushed to the window. His room faced the front of the house, and he hoped he could watch the guests arrive.

At precisely seven o'clock the chauffeured cars began to disgorge guests. Men in white tie and tails, women in tiaras and evening gowns. It was a fairytale world of color, richness, and beauty, of silk and lace, emeralds and sapphires, top hats and ebony walking sticks. Severus leaned as far out his dormer window as he dared, trying to catch all the details. Families were arriving together, older parents with sons or daughters the age of Narcissa. It looked as if Bella would be the youngest one there.

After the last guest was inside, Severus left the window. He had to see more. He put on his robe over his gown and took the biretta as well. If he were caught, he would at least be in his school uniform, and therefore respectable. Slowly and quietly he crept down the servants' stairs and along the hallway to the railing where he could look down on both the grand foyer that rose three stories to where he was, and on the doors to the dining room at the top of the marble staircase.

When the guests left the parlor to ascend the stairs for dinner, Severus peered through the rails to catch a glimpse of the Snow Queen. She went to dinner on the arm of a slender young man who matched her in height, but whose blond hair was so fair as to be almost white, a young man whom Severus recognized as the seventh year prefect when he himself was only in first year, Lucius Malfoy. They smiled and talked like old friends. The guests entered the dining room, and the doors were closed.

Severus couldn't move from his vantage point. He was certain that if he left for a moment he would miss something. After two hours, the doors opened again and remained open. The long table had vanished and music was playing—the dining room had become a ballroom. Glittering couples whirled past the open doors to the sound of enchanting music. It was a feast for eyes and ears, and Severus fed on it until the guests began to leave at two in the morning. Mrs. Black stood at the head of the staircase to bid her guests good evening. Narcissa and her partner moved to one side, away from the others, in intimate and mutually pleasant conversation.

The last guest to go was an older man whose bearing and coloring proclaimed him the father of Lucius. The man was talking to Mr. Black, and the argument had become heated, though Severus could only hear part of it.

“... what your brother would say, Black, to abandon the traditions of your family like this... toadying to an upstart of no background...”

“... has the best interests of the old stock in mind... we have to do something to keep our position... even at Hogwarts less than half are now pure...”

“... bring the product of miscegenation into your own house...”

“... only a tool that the Dark Lord may find useful...”

“Dark Lord! Have you sunk so low? How can you think that I would allow my family to be so polluted...” The man turned toward the younger couple. “Lucius! Attend me at once! We're leaving this place.”

The blond young man stepped forward, dismay on his face. He turned to say goodbye to Narcissa, but his father's anger preempted him. “Lucius! At



once! We no longer associate with such people.” Torn between love and duty, Lucius threw one despairing glance back at Narcissa, then hurried after his father down the staircase and out the door. Narcissa followed him, one hand outstretched as if to seize him and draw him back to her, but she was stopped at the head of the stairs by her mother. The front door slammed. Narcissa hid her face against her mother’s shoulder and began to weep.

Severus silently crept back up the stairs to his room. The tragedy of the situation overwhelmed him. She was so beautiful, so noble. She loved him, and he loved her, but the quarrels of their parents had torn them apart. It was heartbreaking. Severus hated both Narcissa’s parents and Lucius’s father. They had no right to stand in the way of true love! He only wished that there was something he could do to help, for his own young heart was firming in resolve.

If Narcissa Black wanted Lucius Malfoy, then Narcissa was going to have him.

“If we could get him over to Uncle’s house to see all their things, it might make him more interested in the Dark Arts. He loves puzzles and mysteries and things like that.” Bella was sitting on Narcissa’s bed while Narcissa went through her clothes and jewelry deciding what to wear that evening.

“You know Auntie will never allow it. You know what she’ll say.”

Bella mugged. “Filthy blood traitors bringing a half-breed into my house . . .” Both sisters laughed.

“Besides,” continued Narcissa, “it would hurt him to meet someone like Auntie. He really is rather sweet, and so eager to please.”

“Sweet?” Bella almost doubled over with laughter. “The one who dreamed up the bird-dung curse? The kid who had Sirius beating bats out of his hair? You have a twisted sense of ‘sweet.’”

“Bats! You must be joking!”

So Bella had to tell Narcissa all about the September war between Gryffindor and Slytherin. Then she had to tell about Rabastan and the earthquake. At that point Narcissa became very quiet.

“So the Dark Lord really is interested in him.” She seemed suddenly sad.

“Why do you think he’s here? You don’t think I’d invite someone like him to our house just to be nice. Even if I do need the help with Potions.”

“Oh, Bella. You can be so mean sometimes.” Narcissa brightened suddenly. “I know what we can do. Let’s invite Regulus for Boxing Day. He can bring some things from Uncle’s house and we can all have fun just playing with them.”

"And what good's that going to do?"

"Well first of all, it could be fun. Then for your scheming, it could help him see that the Dark Arts aren't so bad, nothing to be afraid of."

Bella looked at her older sister with renewed respect. "I think you may have a good idea."

### **BOXING DAY, WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 26, 1973**

**(TWO DAYS AFTER THE NEW MOON)**

The Hand of Glory was the hit of the evening. First of all, it was spooky and gruesome. Then they took turns seeing how it gave light to the holder and darkness to the beholders. Then Narcissa thought of the game.

She made everyone study the drawing room for five minutes. Then she took the Hand of Glory, and darkness descended on the others. A minute later it was light again. "All right," Narcissa asked, "what's changed?"

The other three glanced around the room, uncertain what they were looking for. Bella got it first, of course. "The candlesticks were at opposite sides of the mantle. Now they're in the middle." And it was Bella's turn.

Paintings reversed themselves, facing chairs turned their backs, lampshades switched, and the chandelier lost a third of its crystal baubles. The little group dissolved into laughter at every phase of the game, and yet Severus could detect an aura of melancholy that touched Narcissa from time to time, especially when Bella slipped and mentioned Lucius's name. Severus adored Narcissa's courage, the crystal sadness that she covered with consideration for others, the golden sorrow that tinged every action with romance. By the end of the evening he knew that he would lay down his life for her. For the love that she and Lucius shared.

Christmastide dissolved into the New Year, and it was time to return to Hogwarts. Severus carried back with him three defining concepts. First, that the life of the rich, while a source of pleasant fantasy, was as far above his day-to-day existence as the moon above the earth. Second, that the Dark Arts were nothing to fear, but merely an extension of the commonplace, something that he had already been playing with in his hexes and jinxes, and something that could be a source of amusement as well as power. Third, that there was no one in the world as kind, gentle, considerate, or worthy as Narcissa Black.

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 9, 1974 (1 DAY AFTER THE FULL MOON)

Kohoutek was a disaster. The Skylab photos from December were great, but then the comet just seemed to fizzle out. Severus and Lily spent several evenings on the Astronomy Tower without a spectacular sighting in the bunch. Lily was great about it, saying that she had fun just watching the sky, but Severus knew that he'd failed to keep her interest.

Bella, on the other hand, was all attention. Not only was he teaching her potions, he was also fielding answers to other questions. Questions about cursing items and hexing people, and how to jinx the weather. Severus was spending more and more time in the library studying as much as he could about the Dark Arts, and his Defense Against the Dark Arts class was quickly becoming his favorite.

More to the point, he was making a little cash. Bella's cousin Regulus started paying him for tutoring in Potions and Dark Arts. It wasn't much, but this time Severus might be able to buy something on the Express back to London. Though frankly he would have preferred muggle money.

Severus was doubly blessed on his fourteenth birthday, for Bella received an owl with a message for him. All it said was, 'Best wishes for a Happy Birthday, Narcissa,' but that was all it had to say. Then that evening Lily met him by the lake in the ice and snow with another little cake for two. He thought as they ate it together that he'd never realized before how pretty she was.

"Ya seem to be doing well this term. Taller. Even putting on a little weight. Somewhat's agreeing with ya."

"I'm eating what you told me to. And drinking the milk. And classes are easy." Severus paused for a moment. "Hagrid?"

"Ask away, lad."

"Are girls really different from boys?"

Hagrid's face puckered in fruitless self-restraint, and then he burst into laughter. Severus blushed fiercely as he realized what he'd said. "I don't mean that. I mean..." then he started laughing, too. It was a small, weak laugh, lacking experience and practice, but it was a laugh.

"What did ya mean, lad?"

"I mean do they think differently from boys. Do they like different things and look at the world differently?"

"The man that could answer that question would make hisself a fortune."

'T is my opinion they're a whole different breed. Ya got a girl you're interested in?"

"Don't know yet. Maybe."

Not everything was pleasant in Severus's garden, though. It manifested itself in the fountain courtyard.

"Hey, you! Snivellus! Turn around when you're spoken to, Snake!"

Severus turned, taking a couple of steps to his left as he did so to put a wall at his back. Sirius Black approached him in a tightly controlled rage, Potter and Pettigrew behind him.

"You're going to stay away from my brother, Snivellus. You start poisoning his mind and I'll crack your skull open."

"Brother? I didn't know Dr. Frankenstein was still in business." *Wasted effort. He hasn't got a clue.*

"I'll doctor you right into a hospital bed. You stay away from Regulus."

"Regulus is your brother? Mendel was right. Niceness is recessive."

Sirius advanced, and Severus pointed the wand that he still carried in his sleeve. "*Toichos*," he said calmly, and Sirius was blocked by an invisible wall that surrounded the spell caster. Severus backed away from the trio, as they pressed forward just beyond the limit of his wall.

"You okay, Snape?" Rabastan, Rodolphus behind, was standing in the cloistered walk that surrounded the garden.

"Fine, thanks. These gentlemen were just going."

Both sides backed away from the field, leaving the battle a draw.

"I'm warning you," was Sirius's parting shot.

## FRIDAY, JUNE 28 TO SATURDAY, JUNE 29, 1974

(THREE DAYS PAST THE FIRST QUARTER MOON)

Spring progressed with little change, and summer began to bloom around Hogwarts. Soon it was exams time again. Again Dumbledore called Severus to his office and gave him an envelope with a train ticket. Again students packed their belongings and said goodbye for the summer.

This time the train ride into King's Cross was much more enjoyable for Severus. He stayed with the other Slytherin students and bought some of the refreshments with his hard-earned coin. It was something of a farewell party for Rabastan, who'd finished his seventh year, sat for his NEWTs, and was now free of Hogwarts for good. Rodolphus was passing around a jug that Severus sniffed at and passed on, but by the time they got into King's Cross it

was clear that some of the younger students were tipsy. In general, Slytherin house had a great time.

Exiting from King's Cross, Severus was aware of a change in London. It was hard to put a name to the feeling, but the area was different. There were a lot of bicycles in the traffic. Somewhat fewer cars, and a lot more bicycles. He crossed Euston Road to St. Pancras for the night, wandered Euston Station the next morning, and boarded the train for Colne without problem. The trip to Lancashire was uneventful, and he arrived in Colne in the early evening.

Severus's parents were not there to meet him.

Severus sat on a bench in front of the train station for nearly two hours before he finally admitted to himself that his mum and dad were not coming. Four times the station master offered to phone his home, but they didn't have a telephone so Severus thanked him politely, but declined.

Finally he made up his mind that he'd have to walk. It was nearly ten miles to the village where he lived. The long northern twilight would make most of the trek bearable, and the waxing moon would give some light after the sun was gone. Still, it was more than a three-hour walk under the best of conditions.

At first Severus considered cutting across the moors, but quickly abandoned the idea. The gathering dusk wasn't the best time to be going over uneven land; he would probably make better time on the road. And if his parents were coming, he would have to be on the road to meet them. He hefted his Gladstone bag. Luckily it wasn't heavy.

The sun set, and the moon was near setting, too, before he reached his own town, tired, cold, and hungry. It was past 'last call' at the boozers, and probably close to closing time. In all the hours he'd trudged along the road, though, he'd not seen a single car. It was as if all of eastern Lancashire was deserted, and he was getting nervous.

The sound of his shoes on the cobbles brought Eileen to the door well before Severus reached their gate. Her frightened expression turned to one of relief. "Russ! Thank God you're alright. I was that worried," but she wouldn't let him into the house. "You go over to Mrs. Hanson's in Mule Lane. She's expecting you. Don't come back here 'til tomorrow morning."

"But Mum," Severus began, and Eileen turned on him in fury.

"You get to Mrs. Hanson's and you get now! You're not spending the night in this house. I don't have time to argue with you. You obey! Now get!"

And Severus got. Mrs. Hanson was a plump widow whose husband had worked in the mill. She was still up in her sitting room with the light on, waiting for him. She had a cold supper and a bed made up in the spare room, and she clucked over him as he ate, warming himself by her grate.

"It's those Arabs," she explained. "There was a war in the east and those Jews won. So those Arabs cut off our petrol. Isn't nobody can drive a car now, and the factories have it hard paying the extra for the power to keep them running. Prices are up everywhere. It's got near impossible to make ends meet. Your dad was on strike in February. They won, the miners, but everyone else is worse off, and your father's been drinking worse than ever. Your mum says he was getting to work late most every day. The mine says your dad's redundant, and he got laid off two days ago. Been drunk ever since. You go home tonight, boy, and he's like to kill you."

Severus lay awake all that night in the once familiar bed in the once familiar house, wondering what was happening at his own home. Laid off. No money. Like when he was nine. He didn't have to imagine what his dad would be like. He knew. And he was scared.

The sun was well risen the next morning before Mrs. Hanson would let Severus leave her house. She fed him, too, not knowing what the boy might find at home. "Now you remember," she said as he walked to the gate, "you have any trouble over there, you just come here 'til it cools off."

Severus's own house at the end of the street was quiet. The whole street was quiet, and Severus noticed that two more houses had boarded-up windows. As she had the night before, Eileen heard his footsteps before he reached the house and came out to meet him. She had a cut over the left cheekbone, and a bruise had formed around it.

"Shhh," she hissed, "he's asleep. Do you need breakfast?"

"Mrs. Hanson gave me some. Supper, too."

"Good. Now, first things first. Wand."

"But Mum, I may need it. You never know what..."

"Exactly. You'll go for it. You listen, Russ, and you listen good. Nothing—nothing—is going to keep you from going back to Hogwarts in September. Give me the wand."

Reluctantly he pulled the wand from his sleeve and handed it to her. Only then did she let him enter her house. Together they went back into the kitchen. Toby was snoring upstairs. Eileen opened the door into the area and picked up a glass jar full of a reddish-brown liquid, then took two cups from the cupboard.

"What's that?"

"Tea. Brewed it in the sun. It's lukewarm, and there's no milk or sugar, but at least we still have some tea. Enjoy it while it lasts."

"But what about . . ." Severus glanced at the stove.

"Gas costs money. I have a job for you. Now drink your tea."

Dressed in his oldest, shabbiest clothes and carrying a large bag, Severus made his way to the local coal yard. It was Sunday, and the yard was shut down and quiet. He nimbly scaled the wall and began looking around for lumps of coal. Eileen's orders were clear. He was not to go into any trucks or open any bins. He could only pick up what had fallen loose and stray around the yard. That turned out to be quite a lot, and after a couple of hours he'd filled his bag. If they were careful, it would last a long time, for Eileen only intended to use the coal for cooking on the grate, a few lumps at a time.

Severus deposited his bag in the area yard and checked with his mother to find that Toby was still asleep. He then set out for the open moors, occasionally stooping to pick up a rock of exactly the right size and shape. He found a little outcropping and sat waiting, for patience was now his most important quality. After twenty minutes he saw a tentative movement of gray in the scrub. Easing himself up into position, he paused, then fired one of his rocks straight and true at the rabbit. He didn't move to collect the animal until he'd managed to kill another. A brace of rabbits would make a fine supper.

The kitchen was empty when Severus got home, but he could hear that his dad was being sick. He kicked off his muddy shoes in the area yard and went upstairs. Toby was in bed with a massive hangover, while Eileen held a bucket for him. The stairs squeaked, and both looked over at Severus.

"You!" Toby roared. "Where've you been? Come home from that fancy school to steal a man's food off his table, and not even here to help when he wakes up! Skulking around! Get over here! I'm going to beat the skin . . ." He turned suddenly and vomited into the bucket again.

Severus waited quietly. When the spasms passed, and Toby was able to talk again, Severus moved his hand from behind his back and held the rabbits in front of him.

"I'll give you what for, skulking around like . . ." Then Toby saw the rabbits. "How'd you get them?"

"Accident. They got in the way where I was pitching stones."

Toby grinned. "That's my boy. Ain't every boy can bring down a coney with a rock, is it Leen? Maybe you ain't more trouble 'n you're worth." Then he was sick into the bucket again.

Over her husband's bent head, Eileen and her son's eyes met. She smiled a tight, closed smile and nodded. He winked and went downstairs to leave the rabbits on the kitchen table.

A new routine settled into the Snape family.

Severus was now the primary food provider. On most days he managed to get a rabbit, or at least a couple of birds. It was closed season on moor hens, but pigeons were like rabbits, always fair game. Then, a few miles from home, he discovered a new source of food.

It was a small farm cottage with an extensive kitchen garden, and the woman was trying to repair a hinge on her gate. She was an older woman, in her sixties, and seemed to live alone. The garden was beginning to get overgrown with weeds.

"Could you use some help, ma'am," called Severus, standing in the road watching. "I could use the work."

"I've got the work, and I could use the help, but I can't pay you, so you'd be wasting your time." The woman looked tired and more than a little frustrated.

"I'd be willing to work for some potatoes, and maybe one of the new cabbages."

"Done," she said.

The first thing he did was hold the gate so she could finish the hinge, then she set him to picking things that were ripe and needed canning, while she stewed vegetables in the kitchen and sterilized jars. Severus had no trouble knowing what to do, reckoning that finally all that Herbology he'd studied was proving useful. Then, in the afternoon after a bite to eat, she had him start on the hoeing and weeding. There was more than enough work for the day, so he promised to return on the morrow. The woman sent him home with potatoes, carrots, onions, and a cabbage.

Severus spent a lot of that summer tramping around the district looking for work he could do in exchange for food.

Eileen was traveling farther to find jobs to do as well. Many of her old employers were also short of money, and she couldn't find the work near home that she used to do. She frequently brought tasks home with her to work on as long as she had any light. Most of her money went for things like bread that she couldn't make at home, or for petrol for the car. In addition, she always managed to put a few coins into a jar for the money to buy Severus's train ticket to London for the start of the next semester.

Toby was usually up before dawn, driving to nearby towns looking for



day labor. If all went well, he would be home in the evening, ready to go to bed so he could get up and look for work the next day. If all didn't go well, he would come home late, drunk and frequently violent. Severus was helping his mother get his father to bed now, and was getting his own set of bruises as well.

One night at the end of July, Eileen wasn't there when Toby came home roaring drunk. Severus heard the unsteady steps on the walk and froze in the kitchen, listening. The door banged open, and his father yelled, "Eileen! Eileen! Get out here an' get me t' bed." Not knowing what else to do, Severus went into the hall to assist Toby.

"What're you doin' here? Where's your mum?" Toby muttered. "She oughta be here to tend me when I come home. Where's she got off to?"

"She's got a job. She'll be back soon. Just get up to bed, Dad..." Severus tried to support his father to the stairs, but Toby had focused on one word.

"Job? She's not s'posed t' have a job. She's s'posed t' be here. Her place is here!"

"Come on, Dad, just get up the stairs."

"Where's your mother!" Toby rounded on his son with a fist to the jaw that sent Severus sprawling into the wall to then drop dazed to the floor. Staring madly around the room, Toby spied the umbrella stand with its one broolly. Seizing the heavy umbrella, he swung it like a club, the curved handle smashing into Severus's side as the boy tried vainly to ward off the blow with his hands. "I'm th' breadwinner in this house! I'm th' man in this house! No witch's brat's gonna make a fool of me!"

Another blow struck Severus in the leg, then he threw his arms around his head as the umbrella came down on his skull and everything became blurred. Suddenly Eileen was in the room screaming, "Toby! Stop, Toby! You'll kill him!" She flung her arms around the enraged man, but he pushed her back onto the stairs and advanced again on the boy whose presence in his house shamed him so.

Eileen flew up the stairs into the store room and from the upper landing aimed her wand at Toby, screeching "*Stupefy!*" with all her strength. Toby buckled and fell to the floor, the umbrella clattering beside him, and lay still.

Without a glance at her husband, Eileen rushed to Severus. He was unconscious, and the hair on the crown of his head was sticky with blood. Cradling her son in her arms and crying uncontrollably, Eileen apparated.

Severus woke up at Nana's house. His grandmother was sitting in a wing-backed chair on the other side of the room. When he tried to move, he real-

ized he had a splitting headache and that every bone in his body seemed to be protesting. "What happened?" he asked.

"You had a concussion. You've been lying unconscious in my guest bedroom for six hours, and I've had to sit here watching you to make sure you didn't die on us."

"I mean . . ." Severus felt the bandages around his head, then realized others wrapped his chest and his left leg. "I mean what happened?"

"Oh, that. Your lout of a father came home drunk and nearly beat you to death. Your mother, finally using the common sense I've always hoped she was born with, hit him with a stupefying spell and brought you here to me. I've bandaged you and medicined you, and here you are. Awake and asking questions."

"Where's Mum?"

"The idiot girl has gone back to what she is content to call her 'husband.' I offered to dispose of him, but she flew into one of her tempers and left in a huff. I assume you don't intend to do the same."

"But he could . . ."

"Not if she stays at arm's distance. Which is what you should've done. Actually getting close enough so he could hit you. You ought to be ashamed of yourself."

Severus spent two weeks with his grandmother Prince. Then they shuffled the deck and he spent two weeks with his grandmother Snape. He got an owl from his mother almost every day telling him she was all right and asking about his health. He got nothing from his father.

Eileen came to visit him at grandmother Snape's about a week before the end of August. She brought with her the old robes that she had worn during her time at Hogwarts. "You're as tall as me now," she explained. "I can't buy you new robes, but maybe I can rework my old ones." She undid all the seams and reversed the fabric so that the faded side was now in, and the unfaded side out. She had to make some adjustments for the style changes since the beginning of the '50s, but it was minor, wizarding robes not have altered as much as muggle styles.

Severus returned to spend one last night with his parents before the trip back to London. His father was sober as a judge. There was a new reticence about Toby, who hardly dared look his son in the face. The awkwardness finally dissolved with the appearance of the cribbage board, and Severus won all three games. Severus was pretty sure that his father had miscounted his hands, but it was Toby's way of trying to make up.

The next morning they drove to Colne. There Severus bid his mum and dad goodbye and boarded the train for London. All went according to plan — Euston Station, St. Pancras Church, King's Cross. At eleven o'clock on the morning of Sunday, September 1, 1974, the Hogwarts Express carried him back to school, lit as the day closed by a moon at the peak of its fullness.

Severus never saw his parents again.

## C H A P T E R     T H I R T E E N

### I N D E P E N D E N C E

**TUESDAY, OCTOBER 15, 1974 (THE NEW MOON)**

It is highly probable that the Hogwarts academic year of 1974–1975 started out the same as usual. It is highly probable that Gryffindor and Slytherin engaged in mortal combat on and off the Quidditch pitch, and that the familiar names of Black, Potter, Lestrangle, Snape, Lupin, Rosier, and Pettigrew were heralded as champions of their respective houses. It is highly probable that curse met curse, hex met hex, jinx met jinx, and practical jokes reached a height of cleverness and cruelty never before experienced by the student body at Hogwarts. Highly probable, but not provable, for in all the years to come, Severus was never able to remember those first six weeks, not after the events of the fifteenth of October.

Kettleburn's Care of Magical Creatures classes ended that Tuesday at mid-morning, and the students started to filter back to the castle. Severus had an appointment to see Hagrid, but it was on a routine matter and he hoped to be mostly free until luncheon. When he entered the hut, however, he could tell that Hagrid was upset about something, Hagrid never having been able to hide his emotions in all the time that Severus had known him.

"I hope ya got some free time, 'cause Dumbledore's got somewhat t' say t' ya. I'm supposed t' take ya up there now."

Severus was puzzled, but followed Hagrid into the castle without protest. They climbed the stairs to the entrance to the Headmaster's Tower in silence punctuated only by Hagrid's snuffles. A muttered password, a ride up the moving spiral stair, and they were in Dumbledore's domain. Severus was a little surprised to see Professor Slughorn there as well, but assumed his presence would be explained.

"Ah!" said Dumbledore on seeing him. "Master Snape. Please, would you sit down?"

Severus sat in the proffered chair, aware that no one but Dumbledore seemed to want to look at him. Dumbledore sat in a similar chair facing him. "I am most grieved at having to impart this information to you, but we have received very bad news that concerns you. I am sorry but . . . your parents have died."

Severus sat quietly looking at Dumbledore for several seconds, wondering why the Headmaster was telling him this. Certainly a student's parents were dead, but he didn't know this student, and there was nothing he could do, so why would Dumbledore inform him? He glanced at Hagrid for assistance, but Hagrid was beginning to cry, and was therefore of no use. He looked back at Dumbledore with a slight smile and started to form his question — and then it hit him. Mum was dead. Dad was dead. He could feel the blood draining from his face, and for a moment he feared he was going to faint. Hagrid stepped behind him and placed a hand on his shoulder. Severus was beginning to tremble. Dumbledore leaned forward, laying a hand on his wrist. His breathing was difficult. His heart was pounding. He looked at Dumbledore with frightened eyes.

"What happened?" he whispered.

"There was, as I understand, an accident with their automobile. They were both killed."

"That's impossible. Dad only used the car to find jobs. Mum never rode with him. There's no reason they would be together."

"And yet, tragically, it seems they were. I am to take you back to your home. Hagrid will accompany us. We shall be met there by your grandmothers."

They apparated to the edge of town near the Snape house, then walked the rest of the way. Severus was suddenly horribly embarrassed that Dumbledore should be seeing where his parents had lived, the poverty and the squalor. He wished that Dumbledore had not come. Then Gra saw them and came trotting out, small and dumpy. Nana was thin and pinched looking, and the house was a working-class hole.

They walked through the door and into the sitting room. It seemed strangely empty, even though everything he remembered was still there. Severus excused himself to go with Gra to brew some tea, but in the narrow hall at the foot of the stairs he stopped, rooted to the spot. There in the threadbare rug was a stain that hadn't been there before. A reddish-brown stain, roughly circular, about a foot in diameter.

Hearing the silence, Dumbledore rose and joined them, Hagrid and

Nana behind him. Severus and Gra were staring at the floor, so Dumbledore looked, too. "Dear, dear," he said calmly. "Master Snape, would you come back into the parlor with me? Mrs. Snape, do you think you might go to one of the neighbors? I think we need to find out what happened here."

Mrs. Hanson came, as did several of the men who still lived on the street. They stood nervously before Dumbledore, caps in hand. Ted Murphy did most of the talking.

"He come home late in the afternoon all liquored up. He 'd of been longer at the pub, but he run out of money. Near 's we can tell, she got him into bed, but he was up again a couple of hours later and they was going at it. Seems he hit her at the top of the stairs and she fell all the way and cut her head open.

"Next I know he's banging on my door begging for a can of petrol for the car 'cause he's got t' get her t' the doctor next town. I helped him put her in the front seat, and she was breathing kind of ragged. Toby, he was beside hisself. Kept calling to her, asking her not t' leave him, calling hisself the worst kind of villain, he was that overcome. I never seen him so scared.

"He seemed all right to be on the road. It ain't like there's any cars on the roads now, but he hit a turn too fast and took the car into a ditch. Don't know as he ever hit the brake. They both died right there. Terrible thing."

And it was a terrible thing, but it was done, and life had to go on. The neighbors went home. Mrs. Hanson offered to look after Severus, but Gra said he was coming to stay with her for a few days. Nana concurred and was the first to leave, apparating from the upstairs landing. Dumbledore took charge of locking up the house, putting charms on all the doors and windows to keep the meager possessions safe.

Normally one did not apparate with muggles, but Gra was a special case. Dumbledore escorted her home, then returned for Severus, sending Hagrid back to Hogwarts. Once Severus was settled into a little room next to Gra's kitchen, Dumbledore also left, letting grandmother and grandson share their grief in privacy.

Hours later Gra had gone to sleep and Severus sat in his strange new room on a strange bed with a candle to keep him company, thinking of what had happened. A fat fly buzzed in one corner, and he pointed his wand at it and shot it down. He believed the men's story. It was so like his father to strike out first and regret later. Then when Eileen fell, Toby would be distraught. In all his life Severus had never known his parents to spend a day apart. His

dad couldn't live without his mum. Another fly buzzed, and he shot that one down, too.

So Toby would have run, panic-stricken, to the neighbors for help getting Eileen to a doctor, blaming himself for everything. Begging his unconscious wife not to leave him. More terrified of living without her than of dying himself.

That was why Severus knew, more than anyone, what had happened on that road that night. There had been no accident. No drunken, laid-off coal miner had taken a curve too fast on the way to the hospital and wound up in a ditch. No, his dad never had a chance to get to a doctor; his mum had died in the car on the way, and his dad knew it. Unable to face even a minute with the stark knowledge of his guilt and loss, Toby had pointed the car at that ditch, stepped on the accelerator, and joined Eileen.

All that night Severus sat alone in the dark bedroom, pointing his wand at the ceiling, shooting down flies . . .

#### **HALLOWEEN, THURSDAY, OCTOBER 31, 1974 (THE FULL MOON)**

Severus returned to Hogwarts on Halloween. He apparated into Hogsmeade early in the evening with Nana, and together they walked up the hill to the castle. Severus was thinner and paler than before, dressed in school gown, robe, biretta, and cloak, but Nana looked like a dowager empress.

Head and shoulders above Severus in height and slender as a greyhound, Nana moved with the natural dignity of one born to the throne. Her gown was as straight and plain in its cut as Severus's except for the fullness of the bishop sleeves, but it was of royal blue moire silk, with collar, cuffs, belt, and hem embroidered in silver, pearls, and tiny beads of lapis lazuli. The satin robe was the same shade of blue, with shortened, wide draping sleeves that revealed the gown underneath, but cut straight in an oriental fashion that did not billow as she walked. A matching tricorne hat swathed in a sapphire ostrich plume sat jauntily on her head, a large brooch of crystal and sapphire holding the feather in place. Blue satin slippers adorned her feet, and over all she had a midnight blue velvet cape. Nana wore no other jewelry, but in her left hand she carried an ebony walking stick nearly as tall as she was, banded in silver and topped by a raven, its wings spread in challenge, carved in jet with garnet eyes.

All had been made for Nana's own great-great-grandmother Rossendale to wear to the coronation of George III, and it lay in a small trunk in her attic

until needed to put on a show at Hogwarts, but having only been worn once before, it had the look and feel of something new. “Stand up straight,” Nana whispered to Severus as they stepped into the empty entrance hall, “and hold your head up. We may not be rich, but we come from families as old as any here.”

The Halloween feast was well under way, and many of the staff and students were dressed in formal robes for the occasion. The heavy doors swung silently open, and Nana advanced a few steps into the Great Hall, Severus at her right side, her arm around his shoulders. There they waited, unmoving, as Dumbledore rose from the high table and came to greet them while quiet spread through the hall.

“Constantina, it is an honor to welcome you here,” exclaimed Dumbledore as he bent to kiss her outstretched hand. “My pleasure for the evening is now complete.”

“It is good to see you, too, Albus,” replied Nana. “It has been far too long.” Which, since they had only met two weeks earlier, was a slight exaggeration, but a show is a show.

A house-elf appeared to take the cloak that Nana let fall from her shoulders to the floor. Dumbledore turned to Severus. “Welcome back to Hogwarts, Master Snape. We have missed you. I am sure that you would like to join your comrades in Slytherin, but I am going to be selfish enough to ask your grandmother to grace my own table.”

Severus nodded and went to the Slytherin table, where Bella pushed Rodolphus out of the way to make room for him. “How does your grandmother know Dumbledore?” whispered Bella.

“I’m not sure. She didn’t attend Hogwarts.” This led to rampant speculation that Severus’s grandmother had been educated in France, a rumor he never bothered to contradict.

When the feast was over, Severus kissed Nana goodbye and went to his dormitory, where he was treated with a new respect as befitted the romantic nature of his sudden departure and dramatic return. Dumbledore accompanied Nana down the hill to a point where she could apparate back to her home in Lancashire. The quiet night was a perfect place to talk.

“We don’t know what to do. You saw him — he isn’t eating. He barely speaks. He lies in bed half the day sleeping or just staring at the wall. He used to be a fighter. Now he’s given up. I couldn’t let him slink back into school like a whipped dog, thus this little charade. Thank you so much for playing along.”



"It will be a nine-day wonder at the very least. Everything he does or doesn't do will be attributed to romantic moodiness. I am concerned about his depression, though. It is not healthy in one so young. Has he shown no interest at all in any outside things?"

Nana shook her head. "It's as if he's built a wall around himself. No one gets in, and he won't come out."

After Nana disappeared, Dumbledore walked slowly back up the hill pondering what he might do.

**WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 6 TO FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 8, 1974**  
**(THE LAST QUARTER)**

Severus stopped going to see Hagrid, so Hagrid was forced to go to Severus. This was not as easy as it sounded, for Hagrid never entered the four houses, and Severus had stopped attending most of his classes. About a week after Severus's return, Hagrid managed to catch him outside his Dark Arts class. Hagrid seized his elbow and marched him down to the hut. Severus made no attempt to resist.

Hagrid was appalled at Severus's condition. Thin and haggard already, the boy was beginning to get slovenly. His hair was unwashed, and his robes wrinkled from sleeping in them. He submitted with a frightening passivity to Hagrid's checkup, not saying a word all the while.

"Ya've got to start taking better care of yerself," said Hagrid. Severus shrugged. "I'm serious. Y're way too thin, and ya look a mess. Ya keep on like this and ya'll end up in hospital."

Bella accosted Severus when he returned to the Slytherin common room. "Hey, Snape. You really have to join us. Rosier's birthday is coming up and we're planning a party." Severus stared at her blankly, then walked without a word into his dormitory. Bella's voice followed him. "You've got to snap out of this. I know you feel bad, but this is going too far."

Severus lay on his side on his bed, staring at the wall. He wanted to sleep. When he was asleep, he didn't feel anything. Nothing else mattered. He closed his eyes.

Lily managed to contact him two days later. 'Lake' the note said, and for the first time Severus felt like he might want to talk to someone. Lily was his friend, his only real friend. Lily would understand.

They stood by the lake in the deepening afternoon, skipping rocks across the water. Severus told Lily some of what had happened, how his mother had

fallen on the stairs, and how his father had tried to get her to the doctor, and how the car had gone off the road. He didn't tell her the other part, why it happened. He'd never talked much about his parents to Lily before, and there were things he didn't want her to know.

"That's terrible. No wonder you feel so bad. It's good you still have your grandmother to live with."

Severus had forgotten that Lily would have seen Nana on Halloween. He didn't really want Lily to try to make him feel better. He wanted her to understand his sorrow. "It isn't the same thing. She's nice, both of them are nice, but it isn't the same as Mum and Dad."

"Still, you do have family to go to. Not everyone has that."

"I'll never be able to play cribbage with Dad again, never practice dueling with Mum..."

"You'll have other things. There's still the space program, and your science. You have a lot of things to keep you interested."

"Why don't you care how I feel?"

"I do care. I'm trying to make you feel better."

"No, you're trying to make me feel the way you think I should. I'm the one who just lost his parents!"

"And you need to start getting over it. Look at you! You look awful! And you smell!"

"I offend you. I'm sorry if losing my parents offends you. I thought you were my friend."

"I am your friend. And sometimes friends have to tell the truth!"

Severus felt a terrible emptiness in the center of his being, as if part of him no longer existed. He fought to get that part back. "Friends aren't supposed to act like this. If you were my friend, you'd be nice to me, you'd understand, you'd treat me better," he yelled at her.

She yelled back. "Well maybe that's why you don't have so many friends!"

Then it happened. His right hand was up across his chest and he struck Lily with the back of it on the right side of her jaw. She staggered back, a look of outraged fury on her face. He stared dumbly at her and at his own hand as the horror of it slowly dawned on him. "I'm sorry," he whispered. "Lily, I'm sorry..."

"You hit me! How dare you! You hit me!"

"I didn't mean... I didn't want... Please, Lily, I'm sorry. ... I won't ever..." but she backed away from him as if he were some kind of beast, then turned and ran back up the hill to the castle.

Behind her, Severus sank onto the narrow stretch of sand and buried his face in his hands.

Severus knew now the full import of what had happened. He was in every way his father's son. Tobias Snape had carried a demon inside him, a demon that made him lash out at and finally destroy the thing he loved most in the world. That demon lived in Severus, too. He carried it in his blood like a disease. He had one real friend in the world and he'd struck her, struck as his dad had so often struck his mum, for facing him with honesty and truth. And in the moment that his hand hit her jaw, he'd felt a visceral sense of power and completeness that thrilled through his very being. The demon thrived on it. Severus had never felt so ashamed of himself in his life.

The demon had an image. An image that brooded in the pure cleanliness of the laboratory and mocked his dreams — the image of a double helix. The double helix resided in every cell of his body, half from Toby and half from Eileen. Toby's half was the demon that lived in his blood, his bones, his skin. There was no escape. He was genetically doomed to destroy what he loved.

Hours passed as he struggled with the demon, and slowly the solution came to him. As long as he never loved anything, he could not destroy it. Anger could be controlled. Frustration, envy, pride, could all be controlled. Only love woke the sleeping demon and beckoned it from its hiding place. Deep inside, the doors that Hagrid and Dumbledore had worked so hard to open began to close again.

Around suppertime it began to rain, but Severus didn't appear in the Great Hall. Lily looked for him, hoping for the opportunity to snub him, and was disappointed that he didn't come. After twenty minutes, Dumbledore signaled to Hagrid, for they were trying to ensure that the boy at least ate regularly, and Hagrid went out of the hall.

A little later Hagrid returned, shaking his head. Dumbledore rose and passed through the hall next to the Gryffindor table. "Miss Evans," he said when he reached her place on the bench, "I am sorry to interrupt your meal, but may I have a word with you?"

They went into the entrance hall where they could speak undisturbed. "We are trying to find Master Snape. I know that at one time the two of you were friends, and I was hoping you might know where he was."

"No, sir," she replied, yet Dumbledore could feel the uncertainty in her manner, and noticed quite suddenly that there was the tiniest hint of something — swelling? — along her jaw.

"We are very worried about him. You may have noticed a change since

his parents died, and we are concerned that he is all right. He is not at supper, and he is not in Slytherin house.”

Lily wrestled for a moment with her own demons, but they were weak and puny in comparison with her heart. “We were down by the lake,” she said. “We had an argument and . . . he hit me.”

Dumbledore and Hagrid exchanged a glance, then Hagrid said, “I’m on it,” and left at once. Dumbledore stayed with Lily.

“I hope you are not hurt. I am most grieved to hear that he struck you, both for your sake and for his. Has he told you what happened to his parents?”

“His mother fell on the stairs, and when his father was taking her to the hospital, they had an accident with the car.”

“Ah, yes.” Dumbledore concealed his disappointment. The girl could be of so much help if she understood more, but he could not violate the boy’s confidence by telling her more than Severus wanted her to know. They were, after all, the boy’s parents. “Would you do me a favor? Would you stay here until Hagrid brings Master Snape back? It may do much good.”

Hagrid found Severus lying by the lake, soaked and chilled to the bone. The boy protested as he was lifted, but Hagrid could tell that he was already becoming feverish and wasted no time. He lumbered up the hill, through the entrance hall, and up to the first floor hospital wing, Dumbledore and Lily now in his wake, to deposit Severus into the care of the new, young nurse, Miss Pomfrey.

Quickly they stripped the wet robes and wrapped him in warm woolen blankets. Dumbledore heard a small gasp behind him and turned, already knowing that Lily had seen the scars. Carefully he steered her away from the patients’ area. “There is much that I wish I could tell you, Miss Evans, but it is, alas, not my story to tell. Do you think you might hold yourself ready in case he decides to tell you himself?”

Lily nodded, and set herself to wait.

It turned out that Severus was in no danger, just wet and cold, and what fever he had was quickly brought under control. Dumbledore decided, however, that it would be better to keep him in the hospital wing for a few days, where he, Hagrid, and Miss Pomfrey could monitor him better, especially his food intake. Hagrid stood off to one side while Dumbledore talked to the boy.

“Now how did you happen to be sitting in the rain by the lake?”

“I was talking to a friend.”

"Your friend was no longer there."

"She left."

"She must have realized it was getting near supper time, or that the weather was turning chill."

"No. I did . . . something bad."

Dumbledore waited patiently. Admitting a wrong was a step toward healing. Concealing it was a whole other problem.

"I . . . lost my temper. I hit her. In the face."

"With your fist?"

"No. Like that." Severus made a quick gesture with the back of his hand. He was deeply embarrassed that he had to answer these questions, but it was his own fault.

"And why did you decide to hit her?"

"I didn't decide to. I just did it. She made me angry."

"Really."

Severus thought about this for a while, remembering the times his mum had been the target and his dad the attacker. "No, not really. She was trying to help. I was angry. She wasn't doing what I wanted her to do, but that wasn't her fault. I won't ever do it again."

Dumbledore was relieved. No excuses, no attempts to justify his actions. Maybe the situation was not as serious as he'd feared. "Let us hope not, Master Snape," he said, rising to leave. "You get some rest now."

The conversation with Lily was slightly different.

"I am so sorry . . ."

"You should be. I don't let people hit me."

"I said I was sorry. You're supposed to . . ."

"Like I was supposed to be nice to you and treat you better? Because that's what friends are supposed to do?"

"Well, yeah, because . . ." Severus stopped. That was where the demon had appeared. That was where he'd lost control. "Well, no. I mean, you shouldn't have to do things just because I think it's what's supposed to happen. Anyway, it won't happen again."

"It better not."

"It won't. Pax?"

"Pax."

What it boiled down to, Severus decided as he lay awake in the hospital wing, was that there were things that you could have in life, and things that you couldn't. There were things that people like the Blacks took for granted

because they were rich that Severus would never dream of wanting. It was just not part of his life. He could watch it, and enjoy it, but having it would make him grotesque, like a fish trying to live on land.

So it was in the world of emotions. There were some people who were born to love. There were others, like Toby, like himself, who had forfeited this right by the circumstances of their birth. The double helix never lied. If you tried to resist the dictates of its destiny, you'd destroy what you most wanted to preserve.

The sooner you realized that and learned to live with it, the better.

There is nothing less romantic in the world than lying in a hospital bed staring at a privacy screen. The soft, enticing melancholy of his dormitory cocoon was impossible in the white world of crisp linen and bedpans. Lily didn't come again, but that was understood, for the hospital wing was too open and exposed to casual observation. Severus couldn't leave until Dumbledore allowed it. After one day Severus was bored.

Bella sent books, two of them. One was *Creatures of the Inner Darkness*, which was infinitely better than the grindylows and red caps of his Defense Against the Dark Arts class. Here he found the seven ways to become a vampire, learned that there were weretigers as well as werewolves, discovered incubi and succubi, changelings, harpies, doppelgangers, zombies, ghouls, and lamiae. Around him teemed a vast ocean of nocturnal life, invisible to those who walked in the mundane light of midday.

The other book was *Wands from a Lightning-Blasted Oak*, about all sorts of enchanted items. Severus's old friend, the Hand of Glory, was in it, along with candles made from human tallow, weather changers, cursed rings, and several different kinds of blood writing.

Severus devoured both books within two days. It was as if a part of himself that had always been empty were becoming whole. He understood it now. He, too, was a dark creature, born for the midnight hours under the full moon. He carried that darkness within, a gift and a curse from Toby. Maybe he would never be able to share the world of light and love, but there was another world that he was welcomed into.

Among the enchanted items in *Wands from a Lightning-Blasted Oak* was an assassin's knife that could be sent anywhere to attack an enemy. Severus studied the description for several minutes before the idea hit him. Why do you need the knife? Can't you do that with just a spell?

The next morning Dumbledore freed him from prison, and Severus raced to his dormitory to pull out Eileen's old sixth-year potions book.

Severus's dorm mates noticed the change, or at least they noticed some change. "Hey, Snape," Mulciber said as Severus entered the room and headed straight for his footlocker, "Snape, you got a minute?"

Although he didn't really want to talk to Mulciber, Severus went over to the bed where he was lying on his stomach reading a book. "Yeah?" he answered.

"You okay?"

Severus regarded Mulciber calmly. Although he'd never tried to be friendly the way Edison sometimes did, he'd also never teased the way Wilkes did. After the death of Toby and Eileen, Severus had a vague recollection that Mulciber 'd even made sure the others left him alone. "Sure," he replied.

Mulciber turned on his side, head leaning on one hand. "Do you know how to give Ian Scorsone a pimple? A big one, right on the side of his nose?"

Scorsone was a fifth year Slytherin prefect. "Why do you want to do that?" Severus asked, contemplating the possibilities.

"I want Alderton to go to Hogsmeade with me, but she's soft on Scorsone. I figure one big pimple..."

Severus smirked. Wilhelmina Alderton had acquired a reputation for going with anyone who would buy her a butterbeer. If something like a pimple could interfere with her affections... "Papula," said Severus. "Point right at his nose and say, Papula."

"Thanks, mate. I owe you one."

Severus went outside to attend to his own business. Making spells for lice and spiders was easy. The knife spell took until the Christmas break to work out. Severus tried different words in different languages. He tried twirling, tapping, and slashing with his wand. He moderated his voice from loud to whispered, even a nonverbal command.

The first time his *Sectumsempra* spell worked was against a sapling at the edge of the Forbidden Forest. There, in the ice and snow and gathering darkness, he watched in horror as the slender tree was slashed to pieces in a matter of seconds. *What if I had tried that on a person?* Severus felt sick.

There was no time to work on it, though. Christmas break was coming and Bella once again invited him to the Black house for the holidays. He wasn't sure why, since she'd passed her OWL in potions, but he decided to accept anyway. He wanted to see London again. Maybe he wanted to see Narcissa again.

Severus examined his feelings for Narcissa very carefully and felt he was

safe. He didn't love her. She was beauty, grace, and tender sorrow, but she was not and never would be for him. She couldn't wake his demon any more than the marble, gilt, satin, or velvet could tempt him to leave Nana and Gra.

Christmas break came, and Severus left with Bella. He took with him the two books that had been Bella's hospital gifts, and he took his mother's potions book. He was planning on working over the holidays.

The Black residence hadn't changed. There was the same grandeur, the same frosty politeness, the same upstairs room, and the same almost total privacy. There were far worse ways to live. There was also Narcissa, and two days after Severus arrived she began to make her plans clear.

"How much do you know of London, Severus?" They were in the conservatory where she'd asked him to join her for tea.

"Almost nothing. I have to go through King's Cross Station and Euston Station every year, but that's about it."

"Well then I have to show you London. What kinds of things are you interested in?"

Severus wanted to say 'science,' but he was aware of Narcissa's limitations. So he said 'history' instead.

"Great!" replied Narcissa, and told her family at dinner that she was taking Severus the next day to see the Tower of London.

The Tower presented a challenge, for they couldn't simply apparate into it. Every part of it was so crowded that apparation would unavoidably attract the attention of muggles. Mrs. Black kept a small amount of muggle money with her household accounts in case of emergencies, and Narcissa was able to ask for some of it to take the underground. Her justification was that binding the affections of one whose talent was of interest to the Dark Lord could only benefit the family. Her parents assented and admired her self-sacrifice.

Severus had to navigate the Tube. The underground was new to him too, but he at least comprehended the route charts. Tower Hill was on both the District and the Circle lines, so a change at South Kensington was all that was necessary. The two of them actually stood in line to enter through the Middle and Byward Towers, and then Severus's illusions were trampled into the dust of convenience. Right at the rise where the Coldharbour gate had once been, he and Narcissa 'accidentally' ran into Lucius.

Narcissa made the introductions, and Lucius remembered meeting before, but nothing could soften the sneer of superiority he wore at any encounter with a muggle or a half-blood.



“Right,” Severus announced with a fierce decision. “I’ll wait for you by Traitors’ Gate.”

“No. No. Lucius, you have to talk to him. Severus, you have to stay.”

There, at the beginning, only Narcissa held them together, for Lucius and Severus would have squared off against each other like alpha gorillas in a hillside pack, posing and spitting in rage. There was a part of Lucius that assumed that every male, regardless of age, wanted and needed Narcissa, and it took until noon before he realized that Severus was not actually a rival.

“This is the first time we’ve been able to meet and just talk since last Christmas,” Narcissa admitted sadly. “We run in the same crowd, we go to the same parties, but we can’t talk because there’s always someone to overhear. Father won’t allow me to go out alone because, well . . .”

“He doesn’t trust her. Or me. He’s sure we’d do exactly what we’re doing now. Meeting against his wishes.”

“Why don’t you use a spell so you can talk at the parties?” Severus asked.

“Silencing spells are more noticeable than conversation,” Lucius replied. “They’d arouse suspicions at once.”

“What if it doesn’t create silence? Just a background hum for the listener, like the surrounding conversation?”

“I’ve never heard of a spell like that.”

By the end of the week, Severus presented Narcissa and Lucius with the Muffliato spell as a Christmas gift.

“He creates new spells.” Lucius was talking to an older man, the father of Severus’s room mate Evan Rosier.

“Evan said he was clever with hexes and jinxes.”

Lucius shook his head at the blindness and lack of imagination he was confronted with daily. “Have you ever created a spell?”

“I’ve never been the clever type.”

“Idiot! Do you know anyone who’s created their own spells? Have you a clue how rare that is? Do you know how much I’d pay if someone could teach me to do that? It’s a gift.” Lucius paused. “And he’s never learned anything from the Dark Lord. It’s all natural talent. I wonder if he can do things the Dark Lord . . .” Lucius didn’t finish the sentence. He didn’t trust Rosier that much.

## C H A P T E R   F O U R T H

### GROWING PAINS

THURSDAY, JANUARY 9, 1975 (ONE DAY BEFORE THE NEW MOON)

On his fifteenth birthday, Severus received the worst possible present. He woke up with a slight sense of pressure and pain at the right corner of his mouth. He touched it, and there was a bump there. A glance in the mirror confirmed it. He had a pimple.

"Lestrage knows a spell to clear that up," said Wilkes. He'd begun having similar problems around Halloween.

"I need to think about that. Maybe I don't want to get rid of it."

"Maybe you did it on purpose. Maybe you just fancy Wilhelmina," said Mulciber, coming up from behind them to check out the image of Severus's pimple in the mirror. "I heard she has a thing about pimples."

Wilkes laughed. "Maybe she just has good taste. Come on, Snape, go see Lestrage."

"I'm serious. I may keep it."

"You want something like that on your face? You're weird."

It wasn't just the pimple. Severus had noticed that his hair was oilier, and it was getting harder to keep clean. He still wouldn't join the other boys in the communal lavatories, but he was now reaching a point of major decision. Should he do anything to improve his appearance, or should he just let the changes happen?

Severus was aware that he would never be good-looking. He had his mother's thin face, pale skin, and stringy hair. He was clearly now developing his father's hooked nose and bony chin. His sharp black eyes were small and close together, and his teeth were crooked. In the black Hogwarts gown and robe he was a spectral study in light and dark. In the moonlight he could pass for a vampire. Severus rather liked that thought. He found vampires fascinating.

*Why do the others care about their appearance, anyway? Isn't it girls? Aren't they all just interested in getting girls to notice them?* But Severus carried a demon inside him, and there was no point in wasting time caring about something you couldn't have. He would keep the pimple, and the oily hair. He would waste neither time nor energy on his outward self. Only the inner world, the mind, was important. That was where he would invest his energy.

Lily couldn't make it to the lake that evening, but she left him a note wishing him a happy birthday. Severus went by himself to skip stones and sit on Lily's rock for a while. He was still working on his *Sectumsempra* spell, and spent nearly an hour and a half trying to refine the slashing effect. It was supposed to be like a surgeon's scalpel, not a butcher knife.

By this time Severus was casting the spell non-verbally. He'd decided that he couldn't risk anyone overhearing the words, especially with something as dangerous as his new cutting spell. In the hands of the wrong person, it could kill with a terrifying ease.

He was working on another non-verbal spell, too, but one that could only work non-verbally. After a long period of reflection, Severus had worked out the basics of a self-protective spell to use if he were ever ambushed again. It was a spell to lift his attacker off the floor and hold him suspended upside down. He reasoned that the shock of suddenly being head down would make anyone let go of him and give him a chance to escape. The spell particularly had to be non-verbal in case he found himself again with a hand clamped over his mouth. The next step was working out the words.

No breeze stirred the crystal air of that dark winter night. Severus was utterly alone on the icy verge of the lake when he heard a faint . . . sound. He glanced around, saw nothing, and became more nervous. There was something there, in the trees, he was sure.

Slowly, carefully, Severus began to inch his way toward the hill and the castle. As he shifted his position, he saw the eyes. Green eyes in the woods. Wand at the ready, he continued to back away. The eyes followed him until he reached the bottom of the hill, then they were gone. Severus hurried to the castle, breathing hard, for what he'd seen in the starlight frightened him, its unknown quality most of all.

The four students in the shelter of the trees were equally startled. "Who was that?" muttered Sirius listening to the muffled sound of retreating steps in the snow.

James lit his tiny green *Lumos* spell again and looked at the map the

boys had been working on. The name 'Severus Snape' was moving up the hill towards the castle. "I wonder what he was doing out here all alone in the dark?"

Sessions with Hagrid were back to normal.

"Yer weight's up. That's good. Didn't like seeing ya so skinny. Did ya want t' do anything 'bout that acne? No? Suit yourself. Mind, though. Y're getting t' be of an age where ya got t' take better care of yerself. I know ya don't want nobody seeing yer back, but ya got to find a better way t' wash up."

"I'm perfectly fine the way I am."

"Ah, but ya ain't fine for the people around ya. Face facts, lad. Teenage boys smell. Ya don't want t' make it worse 'n it has t' be." Hagrid got a sudden sly look around the eyes. "I mean, ya don't want t' be attracting more attention than what ya deserve."

"You think so?"

"I do so."

Severus thought about this while Hagrid went through the familiar checklist of his inspection. "And if I needed someplace different to wash up, where would I go?"

"Well, I got a pretty big washtub here. Ya could pop in from time t' time. Ya don't got t' be no prima donna, but a wee bit of a cleanup from time t' time 'll keep ya in the background, if ya get my meaning."

Severus got his meaning.

Lily brought news clippings from home. "They've actually been working on this for a couple of years! I mean, who knew? The Russians and the Americans planning a joint program? Astronauts and cosmonauts together? The future of the space program is just getting bigger and bigger. You're sure to get into space!"

The Apollo-Soyuz launch wasn't scheduled until July, but Severus and Lily were studying the configuration of the docking capsules in February.

There were even a couple of sessions with Dumbledore.

"Now, I want you to think about your parents' deaths. I know it is hard. Please try not to close anything down. Good, but that is very graphic."

"I saw the blood. What do you want?"

"You saw the blood, but you did not see her fall. What you are showing me is your own reconstruction. Reconstructions are dangerous because they never represent the truth, only a personal interpretation."

"I thought legilimency saw the truth."

"It sees what you think the truth is. If you think that someone is a murderer, then the legilimens sees the murder. If you think the accused has been 'framed,' then the legilimens sees the 'frame up.' You control what the legilimens sees."

"Then I can lie."

"No. The legilimens sees the truth. Your truth. It is just that sometimes you can chose which part of the truth you wish the legilimens to see. It lies in the selection of memories, not the falsification of them."

\* \* \*

"So what was he doing there? Pitch black night. Cold to freeze your . . . rear end off. And he's completely silent. Did you hear him? Did you?"

Sirius had to admit that he hadn't, as did Peter and Remus. "What if he's doing non-verbal spells," Remus suggested.

"Hello. Earth to Remus. He's fourth year, just like us. They won't us teach non-verbal until sixth year."

"Right. Like that ever stopped you. The man who's trying to become an animagus. Do they teach that at Hogwarts?"

"You think he's inventing non-verbal spells?"

"I'd stake my life on it."

"Then I think we're at war again."

The new war began in the stage of intelligence gathering and spying. For a few weeks, almost everywhere Severus went one of the four Gryffindors was nearby. The least obtrusive was Peter Pettigrew, and so he generally followed Severus into the library where Severus was spending more and more time studying every book that had a reference to the Dark Arts. Peter noted down for the record the titles of everything Severus read, and soon became curious about them himself. After a while he spent his time watching Severus by reading many of the same books.

Sirius took most of the outside watch, but was soon frustrated, for Severus had an uncanny ability to lose the person tailing him. If it weren't for his knowledge that no one could apparate inside Hogwarts, Sirius would have suspected Severus of doing just that.

"Maybe you're following him too closely," James said. "You're letting him see you're there."

"If I don't follow him close I'll lose him. Besides, I want him to know I'm there. I want him to worry."

"You have the subtlety of a bull elephant. What're we going to learn if he knows we're there? We're not just after him, remember. We're trying to stop them from recruiting any more."

"I'm after Bella's puppy dog. Regulus told me he was getting friendly with the Malfoys last Christmas."

"Regulus is delusional. The Malfoys get chummy with a half-blood upstart? Never."

Remus lounged against the pillows on his bed in the dormitory. "Would it interest you to know that he's tutoring half of Slytherin house?"

"Really?"

"Potions and Charms. Seems everyone's gotten real interested in their exams."

James thought for a minute. "Sirius, you take over the inside watch. I'm going to see if I can follow him outside."

Avery accosted Severus in the common room. "I need to get this work done tonight."

"You should have planned ahead. I'm busy tonight."

"I'm paying you to do this. You work for me. I need it tonight."

Severus's eyebrows shot up in mock surprise. "I work for you? For what you pay, I'm making a charity donation. You may not have noticed, but you're at the bottom of my 'to do' list."

"You think you're so smart, but you're not so smart."

"I know. I have the 50p a pound brains and you have the 100 pound per ounce brains. That's why I'm tutoring you and not the other way around."

"So you're saying I have more expensive brains?"

"Of course. Supply and demand. Do you know how many purebloods you have to kill to get an ounce of brains?"

This was not the most diplomatic thing to say in the middle of the Slytherin common room, so it was a good thing that Severus had somewhere else to be that evening.

Severus was meeting Lily that evening because he was tutoring her, too. The difference was that he was teaching her his own spells. The first was the Muffliato spell that he'd made for Narcissa and Lucius. If they could use that in classes, they could talk without being overheard. It would be best if she knew how to cast the spell non-verbally, but that was harder to teach.

As he left the castle after supper, Severus kept a watch to the rear. For the last few weeks he'd been followed from the moment he went down the steps at the castle entrance. In response he'd devised a mental fog spell that

cut off pursuit, but he preferred to use it only when necessary, not wanting to confuse the innocent by accident. Today it seemed that no one was behind him.

On the first floor, near the history classroom, James Potter was watching from one of the narrow windows. From the direction that Severus was going, James suspected he was going to the lake again. And right now, just before supper, was a time when he would be less likely to be disturbed. James left his vantage point and headed downstairs and out the entrance, then made his way stealthily toward the lake shore.

What James found there was the last thing he expected. Severus was with a girl. A girl whose robes were embroidered in Gryffindor red and gold. She was sitting on a rock, and Severus was on the grass at her feet. Severus stood and pointed at a dead branch nearby. Slowly it rose from the ground, though Severus had said nothing. James crept closer.

Then the girl stood, and James recognized her instantly. She was a fourth year, like him, and muggle-born. Her name was Lily Evans. She gazed fixedly at the branch, but nothing happened. Now snippets of conversation reached James.

“You have to focus the non-verbal part of your brain.”

“I don’t know where the non-verbal part of my brain is.”

“I don’t know where yours is either, but mine seems to be on the right side just above my ear.”

“You’re joking! Nobody can feel the part of their brain they’re thinking with.”

“I swear, it’s over here on the right. Just focus on the branch, okay?”

James crept away again, not wanting to risk being seen.

The four friends met in the Great Hall and took seats separated from the rest of their house, shooing away anyone who tried to join them.

“He’s meeting the Evans girl. He’s teaching her dark magic.”

Remus interrupted. “That’s impossible. Lily’s not interested in dark magic. She’s one of the nicest people in our year.”

“And you would know that because...?” James was beginning to feel that there were too many revelations for one evening.

“We talk. We’ve been talking since last year. She knows I have a ‘problem,’ and she wants to help.”

Sirius sneered. “Does she know what the problem is?”

“No. But it wouldn’t matter. She’s just nice. She likes to help people.”

"If she likes both Moony and the Cursemaster, maybe she really is into the Dark Arts." Sirius seemed to think the whole situation amusing.

"Oh, shut up," replied James. "She probably doesn't know what she's getting into, how dangerous it could be. I should talk to her. Remus, could you get the two of us together for a private chat?"

"Of course I know you. Everyone knows you. You're a Quidditch chaser."

James preened a little, but got down to business quickly. "We need to talk to you about the company you keep." Then he explained how he knew about her and Severus.

"You've been spying on me?"

"No. Not on you. I was spying on him."

"So that makes you what? A better kind of spy?"

"Look, I'm sorry about the spying. But there's this whole group in Slytherin that's into the Dark Arts, and their families are associated with this dark wizard who's been recruiting followers for the last four years. Your 'friend' is one of the leaders of this group. He's dangerous."

"Severus? Dangerous? Now you're not even a good spy. And if you think you're going to dictate to me who my friends are, you . . . better think again. And you!" She wheeled on Remus. "I'm ashamed of you!"

"You know," said James menacingly, "this means we're going to have to watch you, too."

"Well maybe I'm just going to have to study this dark magic to get rid of you."

"Well maybe you are."

The war entered its sniping phase.

Leaving 'History of Magic' class, Severus was hit with a fur-growing spell that duplicated the coloration of a tortoiseshell cat. The worst part about it was that it itched, and took Miss Pomfrey two and a half hours to remove. Severus in turn placed a jinx on a third floor mirror where James liked to check the precisely tousled condition of his hair. Waiting to be sure he hit the right target, Severus then sealed the hex, leaving James with hideously crossed eyes.

A Rictusempra in Herbology sent Severus reeling backwards into a freshly transplanted stand of carnivorous plants which nibbled at his ears, nose, and fingers while he rolled on the floor giggling uncontrollably, and Wilkes and Rosier frantically helped Professor Mullein pry the fly-traps off him. Severus's retaliatory Arpague spell caused Sirius's hand to spasm at the



very moment he was helping adjust Ariadne Musgrave's cloak, causing him to grab her in a way that led to a slapped face and the end of their budding relationship.

James and Sirius's next jinx backfired when Severus saw them coming and sidestepped the curse, which continued down the hall and struck the innocent Bertram Aubrey, inflating his head to twice normal size, for which both spell casters got detention. Severus decided not to respond to that one, except for the comment, "I thought you didn't use dark magic," as they were led past him to their punishment.

Things were quiet for a few days, but only because James and Sirius were trying to perfect their use of a babbling curse. This one was cast as Severus entered his Astronomy class, causing him to spew out the name of every constellation, star cluster, red giant, nebula, galaxy, and white dwarf on their charts, all 365,729 of them, until an exasperated Professor Sinistra hustled him out of the room and down into Slughorn's first year Potions class with the icy remark, "This, I think, is yours."

Stern times require stern measures. After letting things cool down for two days, Severus hit James and Sirius with matching Eros spells, carefully calibrated to go through a romantic phase, a courtship phase, a jealous phase, and a tender phase before reaching the full-blown love spell. Interestingly enough, it took twelve hours for any of their friends to notice a difference in their behavior, by which time the spells had become nearly impossible to remove.

Lily never told Severus that James had threatened her. Instead, she reacted by seeking out his company even more. They went for walks around the lake, and picnicked on weekends, and reminisced about muggle life. Severus finally confided to Lily the truth about his parents, and she in turn talked about her insecurity at Hogwarts, being muggle born. And they prepared for the Apollo-Soyuz launch.

They wouldn't be able to watch together on the day of the launch because it was scheduled for July, but they promised each other to keep separate vigils. Meanwhile they memorized every facet of the mission and even began learning a little Russian in honor of the historic cooperation. When they met they wished each other 'Dobree dyen' and called each other 'moy droog.' They said 'spasibo' instead of 'thank you.' Severus found out that in Russian his name looked like CEBEPYC, and he began writing that in his notebook.

It pleased both of them that none of the other students knew what was

happening in the outside world, for it tinged their muggle heritage with romance and gave them a secret no one else could share.

And then it was final exams and the end of the term. Severus wondered if Dumbledore would call him to his office to give him a ticket, but he wasn't sure where any train ticket could take him. His whole summer was an unknown quantity. Then he got Dumbledore's summons and learned that he would have to leave almost everything at Hogwarts until he returned in September. Nana was apparating directly into Hogsmeade for him, but she wouldn't be able to carry much luggage out. Severus packed all his belongings in boxes for Slughorn to store over the summer.

The last test, the last packing, the last goodbye, and on Friday, June 27, 1975, Severus walked down the hill from the castle carrying his Gladstone bag. Nana was waiting for him, and they apparated together back to Lancashire.

It was a summer of real potions. As long as Severus was going to be living at Nana's expense for all of July, she was going to get work out of him. It started in the garden with foxglove, monkshood, and belladonna, comfrey, feverfew, and betony, and the symbiosis of bird, bee, and worm.

"You've left that too long, Russ. It should've been gathered last night."

"I'm hopeless at this. Why are living things so difficult to work with?"

"A talent for potions doesn't always go with a talent for herbs. A great potions master needs a great herbologist."

Potions. That was another matter. That was where Severus earned his keep. Infusions and decoctions, poultices, syrups, and lozenges, Nana's supply of medicines was kept stocked all during the summer. It was needed, too, for people in the surrounding villages seemed to be sick constantly. Some of them paid in kind, but others had coin, and for the first time Severus began to save a little of his own money.

#### TUESDAY, JULY 15, 1975 (THE FIRST QUARTER MOON)

Nana and Severus were in the garden the morning that Apollo-Soyuz was scheduled to go. The Russian rocket was set to launch twenty minutes after noon. Severus was trying to hurry with his work among the herbs so that he would be free to join Lily (in spirit at least) at the promised time. Suddenly his and Nana's heads swung to the sound of a car screeching to a halt by her gate. A woman sprang from the passenger seat.

"Mrs. Prince! Mrs. Prince! My Bill! He's had a fall. You've got to come..."

"Russ! The bag by the door! Run!"

Severus ran for the house to get the emergency bag that Nana kept filled with medicines by the front door while Nana hurried down the garden to the waiting car. Severus joined them and the car sped away. Severus closed his eyes. He hadn't been in a car since two summers before, and all he could think of was his father driving into that ditch...

They reached the house in less than ten minutes. A little group of neighbors was gathered around the fallen Bill, who from the look of things had been repairing shingles on the roof. He lay now on his left side, his body at a strange angle. Someone had thrown a blanket over him. The people all moved respectfully aside at Nana's approach.

"Have you moved him at all?"

"Don't dare, ma'am. Looks like his back's messed up. We move him, who knows what we'll do."

"Probably for the best." Nana eased herself down next to Bill and felt the clamminess of his skin and the weakness of the pulse in throat and wrist. Her expression became grave. "He may be bleeding inside. Bleeding badly. He's dying. I don't have medicines for this." The woman choked on a sob, and Nana turned to speak to her. Behind her, holding the emergency bag, stood Severus. "Russ. Come over here. Now."

Severus knelt beside Nana. She spoke quickly and softly. "You have the gift of reading. Eileen told me. Read him. Find where the bleeding is."

"I don't... I can't..."

"Don't tell me you can't when a life is at stake. You try."

Severus looked into Bill's face; he was sixteen, maybe seventeen years old. *Eye contact. I need eye contact.* Carefully Severus lifted Bill's eyelids so he could stare into the blank blue eyes. Nothing. A swirling fog. The rapid beat of heart and shallow breath. Then... Severus doubled up in pain. Nana gripped his shoulders as he clutched the upper left side of his abdomen. "Here. It's here."

"Ruptured spleen. Get him away." The men pulled Severus back as Nana drew out her wand and took Bill's hand. She began a low, ancient spell like a chant, like a song, and the air around her grew chill. Time receded while Nana crooned to the injury, her body gently rocking back and forth. Then it was over. She beckoned to Severus again.

"Check his head for injuries, and find if there's a place in his back where

the nerves are damaged.” Again Severus looked into the blue eyes, and again Nana rocked and sang until finally she was able to tell the men to carry Bill into the house. He was breathing easily and color had returned to his skin.

Nana was too exhausted to stand. One of the men lifted her and carried her into the sitting room where they laid her on the sofa and brought her tea and biscuits. No one spoke of payment, knowing that for months to come Nana’s wood would be chopped, her garden hoed, her screens patched, and that she wouldn’t want for eggs or bread.

“How could you do that?” Severus asked after they got back home. “We aren’t supposed to do magic in front of muggles.”

“Muggles? What an ugly word. They’re people. And for time out of mind there have been witches here in Pendle. What are we supposed to do? Just disappear because some newfangled Ministry decides to write a law?”

“Nana, will you teach me to be a healer, too?”

#### **MONDAY, JULY 21, 1975 (THE FULL MOON)**

Less than a week later, Severus finally got up the courage to visit his home. Nana packed up a lunch for him, as he’d be gone all day, and he set off across the moor country. He wasn’t interested in having anyone see him, so he walked around the town to the side where the house was. More of the windows in the street were boarded up as neighbors left looking for work in larger towns. The coal mine in the neighboring town appeared to still be operating.

The yard was overgrown with weeds. Severus stood outside the house for a quarter of an hour before steeling himself to go inside. There everything was as it had been left, a cup whose tea evaporated long ago still on the kitchen table, the bed upstairs unmade, the stain at the foot of the staircase . . .

Severus began to straighten up, suddenly wanting it to look as if his mother were still keeping house. He washed dishes, dusted, swept the floor, made the bed . . . then shut himself into the back storeroom to go through boxes of things that he might need for Hogwarts. One small box contained photographs of his parents’ wedding. He closed it immediately and shoved it into a corner. Another held baby clothes and toys he vaguely remembered from his childhood, and he stared at the ceiling for a while until he was certain he wasn’t going to cry.

Then, under the suitcases and the boxes of chipped dishes and worn linens, he found the books. Six boxes of books. At the top of one box was a

seaman's navigation manual, more than a hundred years old. Severus dragged all six boxes downstairs into the sitting room and unloaded them onto the sofa and chairs.

One group of them were school books bearing the names Tobias Snape, Edward Snape, and Leonora Smith. Books to teach arithmetic, English history, reading, penmanship, and French. It occurred to Severus that Leonora must be Gra, but he never knew she spoke or understood any French.

His mother's old schoolbooks were here, too, and he carefully separated them from the others, for he would need them at Hogwarts.

Another group were the professional books of a nineteenth century seaman, and Severus was particularly fascinated by the communication handbooks: the colored flags, semaphores, and Morse code.

One box contained just magazines, primarily a complete set of the Strand from 1890 to 1893. *Why keep these?* Then he flipped through them and saw the Sherlock Holmes stories. One of Gra's parents had held onto an old friend.

Agatha Christie was a favorite, too, and Daphne du Maurier, and a host of lesser-known writers of the thirties and forties. Probably all Gra's.

The last box was different. The books inside had been carefully wrapped first in linen and then in oilcloth. The oilcloth was old, cracked, and very brittle. Severus unwrapped only two of the books. They were eighteenth century grimoires, the first on astrological correspondences, and the second on talismans. He wrapped them back in their linen and oilcloth and carried that box back upstairs, burying it under suitcases and old bedding. Dumbledore's spell should keep the house safe, but it was still not a good idea to leave things lying around.

Severus repacked the rest of the books, but left them downstairs in the boxes. He had an idea that he should bring in bookcases so that the books could be seen and read instead of hidden away. It was something to consider for the future. Taking with him those books he knew he would need for fifth year, Severus locked the house up and set off back to Nana's.

Halfway there, the irony of it hit him. During that whole last year when money got tight and his father was laid off, the solution had been in the storeroom all along. Those books would have fetched a great deal of money. Even the Strand magazines were probably worth something. His father had been sitting on a pile of cash, and had not known it.

"Mum had a box of old witchcraft books, really old books. Whose were they?" Severus asked Nana later that evening after supper.

"Old books? I don't remember any. What kind of books?"

"Astrology. Talismans. Stuff like that."

"That sounds more like your grandfather's family than mine. A couple of them were deeply interested in the hidden mysteries. I wonder how Eileen might have gotten their books."

There were thus no answers. Just more questions. Still it was something to have the beginnings of one's own private library.

At the beginning of August, Severus went to stay with Gra for three and a half weeks. By this time he had a supply of chants to practice, together with an old book on anatomy so that he could learn about things like spleens and kidneys.

At Gra's there was time to study and relax. She, too, had a garden, but it was for flowers and butterflies. Severus told her about his visit to his old home.

"Some of your schoolbooks are there. I didn't know you studied French."

Gra laughed. "Je m'appelle Leonora. Comment-allez vous? That's about all I remember. Was there anything else?" She was cutting up a stewing hen for supper.

"Seaman's stuff, navigation and all. Old Sherlock Holmes magazines. Lots of murder mysteries."

"That sounds like the books I gave Toby for you to read when you grew up. Except for your great-grandfather's seaman books. Those were for Toby."

"Some of grandfather Prince's books were there, too. Old books on magic and talismans."

Gra paused to face Severus instead of the chicken. "Child, I never knew the Princes to keep books. Those were your great-grandfather Snape's collection."

A tightness, an excitement, began to develop in the pit of Severus's stomach. "I remember his books on dark creatures and strange cultures. But why would he have such advanced books on magic?"

"From his travels. Did Wensley or Toby never tell you anything about the family?"

Severus shook his head. "I knew he was a sea captain, and that's where he got the shrunken heads and voodoo dolls. That was all."

Gra went back to cooking as she talked. "Constantina and I are from old Lancashire families, but the Princes and the Snapes came from Yorkshire, the Princes from Kippax just outside Leeds. I think they picked the wrong side in a civil war about five hundred years ago and had to remove to someplace

safer. The wizard community here was a good place to hide. They got a bit of land and settled in.

“Snape’s a village in the North Riding. I think that side worked their way south through Ripon, then came through here with the building of the Leeds and Liverpool Canal. Wensley Snape, your great-grandfather, shipped out of Liverpool.

“He went all over, and he learned things. Didn’t have much schooling, but he knew more than any man I’ve met. And he got interested in all that magic stuff from his travels. I know you’ve got the voodoo dolls from the Caribbean, and the shrunken heads from New Guinea, and I’ll bet you’ve got the poison darts from the Amazon . . . That man had the scariest collection of things — used to give me nightmares every time I visited him. He managed to pick up books, too. Things in black leather bindings with pictures of witches on brooms that you saw when you were small, but also older things. Scarier things. That must be what you found.

“He was thrilled when he found out that Toby’d been seeing the daughter of Constantina Rossendale, she that married Richard Prince. Ned and I, that’s your grandfather who died when you were young, we weren’t that happy about it, but old Wensley wanted witch blood in the family. He kind of pushed Toby along, though Toby didn’t need much pushing. And Eileen, she was willing, too.

“So Toby must’ve got those books along with the ones you inherited when Wensley Snape died.” Gra put the stew pot on the stove, and her story was done.

Severus went back home the next day to search the house. He started in the storeroom, opening and rummaging through every case, box, and piece of furniture there. Then he went through his old room.

One box was in the bottom of the wardrobe in his parents’ bedroom, another in a cabinet in the kitchen. The shrunken heads and dart blowers were there, just as he recalled them. There were the little statues of multi-armed gods and goddesses, and strange wand-like sticks with Chinese characters. It was a wealth of small artifacts from every continent, all of it very dark. Some of them were old, well-remembered friends. Others he’d never seen before.

This time Severus unwrapped all the books in the box upstairs. He was acquainted with only a few. Most of the rest were printed books from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, more than half of them in French. He could guess what they were about from the illustrations, but he couldn’t read them.

Two of the books were smaller, older, handwritten on parchment that was still soft and supple, the ink as fresh as the day it was made. They appeared to be spell books, but like the others they were unreadable because they were in Latin. Something else to study.

Severus carefully packed everything back into its boxes and left it where it had lain for nearly fifteen years. He did pick one shrunken head, one voodoo doll, and the cribbage board to take with him to Hogwarts as a reminder of great-grandfather Wensley Snape.

He also took Gra's French schoolbook. At some point he wanted to be able to read the books that he'd inherited when Wenny died.



## C H A P T E R     F I F T H

### THE LAST PEACE

**SUNDAY, AUGUST 31, 1975 (2 DAYS AFTER THE LAST QUARTER)**

Severus returned to Nana's house for the last few days of summer, packing and showing her how well he'd studied his lessons. On the last day of August he was taken to the train station at Colne by the parents of Bill, the young man who'd fallen from the roof. Nana and Gra teamed together to buy his ticket. Severus would have preferred to apparate to Hogwarts with Nana, but everyone else agreed the Express was the best way to arrive.

Truth be told, Severus didn't want to spend the night at St. Pancras. The last time he'd been there was before his parents died and that, coupled with his physical growth, made the idea of hiding in church pews, well . . . distasteful. On his arrival at Euston Station, he carried his things to King's Cross and left them to call for the next day. Then he checked a directory for youth hostels. There were several within walking distance.

Not being able to take economics at Hogwarts, Severus was unfamiliar with the term 'opportunity cost,' but that day made him aware of the concept. Even the modest charge for a bed at a hostel would seriously deplete the small amount of money he'd managed to save over the summer and limit his choices for the future. Poverty in the countryside of eastern Lancashire was a gentle nudge. Here in London it was a sledge hammer. Severus spent the night at St. Pancras.

The Express to Hogwarts was a different story. Here he could use the knuts and sickles he'd made tutoring other students the year before. In the Slytherin club car where Bella Black greeted him warmly, he was able to contribute to the refreshments. It was nice to be back with his classmates.

Bella was preening for everyone. She was now a seventh year, and whatever else happened, this would be her last trip on the Express to Hogwarts. She and Rodolphus Lestrange were not officially engaged, but they were so

clearly an item that it was occasionally embarrassing. Those in Severus's class were already talking about their OWLs, and clearly many of them were already nervous. Severus found several classmates being conspicuously nice to him.

There was another topic of conversation, one discussed in muted tones at corner tables. For the first time in a couple of years, Severus again heard rumors of attacks on wizards and their families by a dark lord and his servants, a rising figure of power whose very name the students were afraid to say. He thought of all the whispered 'you know' in his dormitory in previous years and made mental connections. It appeared that no Slytherin families had been directly harmed, but he got the impression the same could not be said about students in Ravenclaw, Hufflepuff, or especially Gryffindor. It was on this train ride north that Severus first heard the phrase 'death eater,' without understanding what it meant.

#### THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 4, 1975 (THE DAY BEFORE THE NEW MOON)

Severus and Lily exchanged glances in Potions class with the understanding that they would meet at the lake, but it was not to be. On his way to his Care of Magical Creatures class outside, Severus passed by a group of Gryffindors.

"Hey, Snivellus!"

Severus affected not to hear.

"Snivellus!" Sirius Black was suddenly in front of Severus, blocking his path. "You should stop and listen respectfully when your betters address you."

"If any did, I would." Severus knew the other three were moving behind him, but he doubted they would do anything here, in full view of the castle windows.

Sirius's eyes narrowed dangerously. "If I had a beak like yours I wouldn't show myself in public. It's so big it'd give my neck a permanent twist."

"That's only because your brain isn't big enough to balance the weight."

Sirius's fists came up, but James moved between the two to block the punch. "Did you hear how the Slytherin insulted a Gryffindor?" he said. "I think you should take five points from Slytherin, Remus."

Severus turned to look at Remus and saw the Prefect's badge. "So you and who else together make a whole prefect?" he asked. Remus blushed.

James thrust his face within inches of Severus's. "You're making it hard to give you friendly advice, Cursemaster, but I'll try. Stay away from Gryffindors. You think we're scared because a few of your coward friends ambushed people over the summer, but if you try to bring it into Hogwarts, I'll take you down myself."

Before Severus could think of a reply, Professor McGonagall was in their midst, and all five of them found themselves unceremoniously herded into Dumbledore's office.

"This is not," said Dumbledore, looking over his glasses at the five boys, "the first time that three of you have been brought here for disturbing the peace at Hogwarts. I understand that it is even further from the first time that you have all behaved in an unruly and potential dangerous manner towards one another, though on many of those occasions you were not apprehended. What have you to say for yourselves?"

"We were just talking," said James. "Having a discussion."

"And what might that discussion have been about? Master Snape?"

Severus looked Dumbledore straight in the eyes. "We were talking about the summer, and how we wanted this year to be a good one."

Sirius and James glanced at Severus, then at each other. Remus and Peter stared at the floor. Dumbledore's expression became even more grave.

"I know that you are all aware of incidents over the summer that have raised tensions in both the wizarding and muggle worlds. It is of vital importance that these incidents not spill over into Hogwarts. All of the staff have been advised to regard any incident of practical joking, hexing, or hazing as grounds for detention or more severe punishment. Do I make myself clear?"

All five boys nodded.

"Good. Now I should like to ask you to set an example of restraint. Although none of you is on detention, I should like you to voluntarily restrict yourselves to your own dormitories this evening as a sign of desiring peace between your houses. Is that agreeable to you?"

"Yes, sir," said James immediately, and one by one the other four consented as well.

James stopped Lily as she was leaving the Gryffindor common room to go to supper. "Your friend won't be meeting you tonight."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"The funny looking one with the big nose and the greasy hair. He won't be meeting you tonight."

Lily turned and confronted him. Part of her was worried, but most of

her was furious. "You nasty, arrogant, supercilious, obnoxious, arrogant pig! Why can't you just treat people normally?"

"Because I'm nasty, supercilious, and arrogant. But he still can't meet you. Dumbledore's restricted us to our dormitories. Him too."

Lily didn't know what to say. She knew James was telling the truth, so it was nice of him to warn her. At the same time he was so unpleasant about it that she wanted to shake him. "Thank you," was what she finally did say, and went to supper.

Dumbledore's evening walk managed to take him past Hagrid's hut. There he knocked and was welcomed in for tea.

"Hagrid, we have a problem. It is the Snape boy."

"I'm sorry t' hear that. I thought he were doing better."

"As did I, but there has been an unforeseen change. He and the Gryffindor four were brought up to my office today because Professor McGonagall thought they might come to blows."

"Well that's happened before, hasn't it? Did come t' blows once or twice as I recall. Creative blows, too."

"Ah, but this time I asked him what happened and he told me they were just talking about summer vacation."

"Well a boy's not s'posed t' peach on his mates, even if they are enemies."

"That was not the problem. The problem was that I could not see it. They were confronting each other outside, but when he came into my office, he concealed it. And I could not see it. If Professor McGonagall had not told me the whole incident, I would not have known he was hiding something. I saw what he wanted me to see."

"Ain't that what you been training him t' do?"

"You are right, Hagrid. It is my fault. I just did not realize he would be so good at it."

## **TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 9, 1975 (3 DAYS BEFORE THE FIRST QUARTER)**

Severus and Lily got together again as the moon waxed. Severus had to admit that he'd missed the Soyuz launch, but then he explained why. Lily was fascinated with Nana's healing powers, and wanted to learn some of them, too. She also seemed interested in Severus's family history, though she most emphatically did not want to touch the shrunken head.

Their new projects were Viking and Venera. The recent international cooperation had led to an indirect and potentially far more profitable development. The Americans were going to investigate Mars, while the Russians checked out Venus. Both programs consisted of two spacecraft working together, and Viking 1 had launched on August twentieth. Viking 2 was going up at 18:39 on Tuesday. They had completely missed the Venera launchings the previous June, but the two spacecraft would arrive at Venus in October. Viking would take nearly a year to reach Mars.

Severus planned to borrow a telescope from the Astronomy classroom so they could see Mars, and the two had a date for Tuesday.

Remus put the final touches of ink on the parchment and sat back. "There. Finished. Who'd have thought the school was so big. And with hidden passages."

James admired his handiwork. They'd been working on sections of the map for more than a year, but now it was complete in the sense that it was comprehensive. There were still details to be added. "A masterpiece. We need to commemorate the occasion by using it tonight. Where shall we go?"

"Hogsmeade," replied Sirius at once. He was idly spinning web traps between the posts of his bed.

"You bore more easily than any other human being I know. Let's take the map with us, get some supper, and go marauding."

Shortly before seven o'clock, the four friends left the Great Hall. Slipping into the waiting room, they took out the seemingly blank map, and James ceremoniously pronounced, "I solemnly swear that I am up to no good." All of Hogwarts and its grounds resolved itself before them, with little moving dots, each labeled with a name.

They studied the map for a while, arguing over where to go. Remus glanced at a corner, then quietly folded that section under, but not quietly enough to escape Sirius's notice.

"Anything interesting over there?" Sirius asked.

"No," replied Remus, but Sirius unfolded the map anyway.

"Hey, Prongs. Look at this. Evans and Snivellus are down by the lake together. That girl has a peculiar taste when it comes to boyfriends. Thought you told her to stay away from him."

James looked at the two dots. "I think we should pay a visit to the lake."

All the way down the hill, Remus tried to talk the others back into the castle. "They're not hurting anyone," he insisted.

"He's probably teaching her dark magic and recruiting her into the Death Eaters. Whatever they're doing, we're going to stop it."

"Either that or kissing," laughed Sirius, "and we'll stop that, too. Can you imagine any girl wanting to kiss him?" For some reason, James didn't laugh at the joke.

What they saw was neither Dark Arts nor romance, but something so totally unexpected that none of the four made a sound. A telescope on a tall tripod was set by the lakeshore, and Lily was peering into it. Severus stood to her right and a little forward. "Can you see the moons?" he was saying.

"One of them. It's pretty bright. Could it be reflecting sunlight that far out?"

"Probably. Even the tiniest light makes a difference in all that darkness."

"I think I see the other one now. It's a lot fainter."

For some reason that he couldn't explain, James was more disturbed by this scene than he would have been by any black magic or making out. He rose slowly from the bushes and stepped onto the narrow beach.

"Well, well," he said quietly as Lily and Severus turned at the sound, "two lovebirds stargazing. What'll we have to do about that?"

Severus could feel himself shutting down in preparation for battle. A part of his mind registered how automatic the reaction was, the rest of his mind was assessing the situation. It was like that winter day three years earlier against Rabastan and Rodolphus, except that today it was four to one, and he had Lily to take care of.

Lily didn't seem to think she needed taking care of. "What're you doing here bothering people?" she snapped. "I never met anybody who stuck his nose into other people's business as much as you."

Sirius stood now and joined James, Remus and Peter a pace behind in the darkness. "You have a peculiar taste in boyfriends," Sirius said.

"Boyfriend!" Lily paused, a sly look coming over her face. "And what if he is? What's it to you?" She moved closer to Severus.

"Don't get in the line of fire," Severus said quietly. "I need a clear shot."

"You can't fight all of them. It's four to one."

"Two and two halves to one. Maybe only a half and a quarter."

Sirius, wand in hand, was edging away from James, moving more to Severus's left side. "You've got a smart mouth, Snivellus. Did you hear that, Remus? Peter? Snivellus thinks you're not good enough to fight him."

"Remus!" Lily called. "You're not part of this. You're better than this."

Remus shuffled uncomfortably. "You don't know what he's mixed up in, Lily. He's dangerous. He's training people in the Dark Arts."

"That doesn't give you the right to gang up on someone four to one."

"Lily, move out of the way." Severus was icily calm.

"You can't fight all of them!"

"They're not giving me a choice."

Remus stepped past James, turning to face him, his back to Severus and Lily. "She's right," he said. "This is wrong. I'm not with you in this. You keep it up and it's three to three."

"I don't need your help," said Severus.

"I'm not helping you, Slytherin. I'm a prefect. This is my job." Remus turned back to James. "I'll turn you in, I swear. And I'll get ten points each off Gryffindor, including myself. Now back off."

James and Sirius both lowered their wands and backed away.

Remus spoke without looking back. "Get the telescope and go back to the castle, Lily. We'll follow."

Severus didn't argue. There was a fine line between courage and stupidity, and he was not about to cross it tonight. He stayed slightly behind Remus as Lily folded up the tripod, then let her go first up the hill. He followed, and Remus brought up the rear. The other three remained by the lake.

When they reached the castle, Lily threw her arms around Remus and hugged him. "I knew you were better than them," she said. Then she turned to Severus. "You could say something, you know."

Severus thought for a moment. "Thank you for changing your mind about beating me up," he said coldly.

"My pleasure," replied Remus, but there was no love lost there either.

Remus had to face an infuriated James and Sirius when he returned to the dormitory later that evening. He'd spent a lot of time thinking of what to say.

"You traitor! You back-stabber! Switching sides in the middle of a fight! We had him!"

"Calm down, Sirius. There'll be other times. We know where he is all the time now. We have the map. Next time she won't be there."

James was thoughtful. "So you think we should've waited 'til Evans wasn't there?"

"She won't let you push her around. The more you try to put her off him, the more she'll back him up."

"This requires a rethinking of strategy."

"Let us know when you've come up with something," said Sirius.

After that, it seemed as if Severus and Lily could never be alone. They tried meeting at the lake at different times of the day, but one of the four, usually James or Sirius, always managed to meet either Severus or Lily on the way and break up the rendezvous. Then they switched in succession to the edge of the Forbidden Forest, down the path near the gates that led to Hogsmeade, various rooms inside the castle... It was always as if the four Gryffindors knew exactly where they were at any moment of the day. The only vigils they could keep for the Venera landings on Venus were behind Muffliato spells in classes they happened to share.

The last weekend in October was the first excursion into Hogsmeade for the year. Lily suggested they try meeting there, so Severus went to Professor Slughorn for permission.

"You never wanted to before," was Slughorn's first reaction.

I never had any money before. "My father wouldn't sign the paper. But my grandmother will if I send her a copy."

He sent the permission form with a school owl and got the signed paper back the next morning. Lily'd been to Hogsmeade in previous years and explained how to get to the edge of town.

Every student at Hogwarts who visited Hogsmeade had to see the Shrieking Shack, which was fast gaining the reputation of being the most haunted house in Britain. Having seen it, however, they seldom returned. The house shrieked every few weeks rather than daily, and then only at night. As a result, it was rather boring compared to Hogsmeade's other attractions. After the first hour of the first weekend visit, the area tended to be deserted.

Neither Severus nor Lily was followed to the Shack, and they spent a very pleasant afternoon on the edge of the nearby woods. Lily was still having trouble with nonverbal spells.

"Accio wand. Just think 'Accio wand' and concentrate on the wand. Upper right side of the brain." The wand twitched, but otherwise refused to budge.

"I'm useless. Is there anything else I could try?"

"Let's go back to the Levicorpus spell. That has to be nonverbal. Maybe that'll be easier"

After a few minutes without success, Lily said, "Why don't you use it on me. Maybe if I know what the spell feels like, I can cast it better."

"I couldn't do that."

"Why not?"



Severus blushed. "You're wearing robes. The spell flips you over."

Lily laughed. "Not every boy would see that as a reason not to use the spell."

"I'm not every boy."

"That's true."

Lily went into town for some twine to tie her robes around her ankles while Severus chose a properly soft and mossy spot, the release spell tending not to let one down easily. Then, amid much giggling, Lily was suspended head down. It was a breakthrough moment, as Lily's thoughts coalesced on what she was trying to achieve. For a while they hung each other upside down, then turned to equally useful nonverbal spells. By the time they had to return to Hogwarts, Lily'd advanced considerably in her nonverbal skills.

"We lost them! How could we lose them?"

"Aren't you taking this a little harder than you have to?" Sirius didn't always appreciate James's dramatic streak, since it conflicted with his own.

"The fate of a Gryffindor girl hangs in the balance."

"Right. Like you cared for this girl before you found out she liked the Slytherin you love to hate."

"We're talking about a Dark Arts expert who's been tight with Bella and the Lestranges since second year. We're talking about a Death Eater in training. And she doesn't see it. She doesn't know how bad he is."

"The more you try to talk her out of it, the more she's going to fight you. You've got your work cut out for you, Prongs."

James could not find fault with Sirius's evaluation.

#### **MONDAY, NOVEMBER 17, 1975 (THE DAY BEFORE THE FULL MOON)**

"You've never watched a Quidditch game? Where have you been for four and a half years?"

"Don't act so surprised. You've known me for ten years and we've hardly mentioned Quidditch once."

"Well you can't go to Hogwarts and not see at least one game. Come with me tomorrow."

"Who's playing? It'd be awkward if it was Slytherin and Gryffindor."

"It's Gryffindor and Ravenclaw. We're favored."

"I am not sitting in the Gryffindor stands."

"Then we'll both sneak into Hufflepuff. It'll be fun."

Severus agreed to go, and Lily borrowed the cloaks and the yellow and black scarves from a couple of her friends. They met near the fountain courtyard and changed, pulling the hoods over their heads as if for protection from the cold. Disguised as Hufflepuffs they set out to watch Severus's first Quidditch match. The Hufflepuffs who admitted them to the stands were the same boys who'd shared a train compartment with them three years earlier.

To his immense surprise, Severus enjoyed the game. This was partly because he was cheering for the Bludgers, a highly entertaining part of the action, especially when attacking Chasers. It took him half the game to understand the physical action, but he comprehended the scoring part at once.

"If either team had really good Seekers, this would be a boring game, wouldn't it?"

"What? What are you talking about?"

"It would be over too soon. No suspense. But as long as the two teams are within a hundred fifty points of each other, it's anyone's game. Bad Seekers, longer game, more action. Good one!" Severus's yell was for a Bludger that nearly knocked the Gryffindor Seeker off his broom.

Severus had no visions of himself playing Quidditch. Broom riding was the one course he'd failed dismally at Hogwarts. Brooms instinctively knew that he couldn't handle them and enjoyed trying to throw him. If he'd ever gotten more than six feet off the ground he'd have been killed, despite Lily's help.

Gryffindor won the Quidditch game, and for Lily's sake Severus hid his disgust at the abysmal Ravenclaw performance. Then he focused on the postgame activity and had a revelation.

Girls from all the houses were flocking to fawn over the Quidditch players. Even the losing players were surrounded by adoring fans attracted to them like flies to rancid meat. Severus's eyes swept the scene and located one of the Gryffindor Chasers, James Potter. *If they push any more, they'll squish him. Trampled to death by girls. Pleasant thought.* Severus saw the broomstick, too. New, expensive, the best one there. James Potter was as rich as the Blacks.

*A spoiled, arrogant rich kid who can have anything he wants and is popular to boot. Why does he care about me?*

"Look at him. Oozing money. No wonder he thinks he can boss everyone else around. People like that think they can buy anything." Severus and Lily were by the lake. For some reason they had not been stopped nor, apparently, followed.

"You don't know that he's like that. He can be quite nice."

"Both of them. Potter and Black. Rich and arrogant. Anyone not in their social class is scum."

"Haven't you met any nice rich people?"

"Plenty if you have something they want. Otherwise, no. Well, maybe one."

"You still don't know them. Not well enough to judge."

"No? They've been pushing me around since second year. I think I've had a chance to see their dark side."

"You have a dark side, too, you know."

Severus wheeled in his pacing, anger seething, making it hard to breathe. She was belittling his opinions, trying to prove him wrong. She wasn't supposed to do that. She was supposed to support . . .

Severus stopped. He knew from the expression on Lily's face that his own was cold and hard. Cold and dangerous. The demon was awake again and had almost taken control. Almost.

He closed his eyes and forced himself to breathe deeply. Forced himself to shut down, close off, seal the demon away where it couldn't hurt anybody.

"You're right," he said. "I do."

Hagrid took his time with the examination, but at the end was forced to admit that Severus was in reasonably good health and condition. "Eating good, seem t' get enough exercise. Been sleeping well? That's good. Any problems?"

"Problems? No. None to speak of. Why?"

"There's been a few times in the past. With other students. You know, problems."

"I've no idea what you're talking about."

"You got one of the worst cases of excessive pride I seen in all my years at Hogwarts."

"Pride? I'm not proud."

"Not proud? Goes up to hospital looking like Puss-in-Boots and says his wand slipped. Outnumbered and 'bout t' get his tailed whupped and tells Dumbledore bold as brass that they was discussing summer vacation. Won't ask for help nohow, and says he ain't proud."

"You've been talking about me behind my back."

"Hullo. This is a school. Happens t' be part of the job, taking care of students. Now, are you having problems?"

"Nothing I can't handle."

“Ya see. Proud.”

Everyone in fifth year was in the incipient stages of nervous breakdown because of their OWL exams in the spring. Severus found himself inundated just before Christmas with requests for tutoring. Enough Slytherin students approached him with the news that they were staying at Hogwarts over Christmas and begging for help with potions and charms that he floated the idea of having actual classes during the break. The response was overwhelming.

As the term wound down and the break neared, Severus tried to organize what he was going to do. He'd already tutored most of the students individually at one time or another, so he knew their relative strengths and weaknesses, easy to work with one on one, but harder to coordinate in a group. He was concerned to do it right, though, since he was going to get a considerable amount of money from the combined tutoring fees.

*Is this what the teachers in our classes have to do all the time? I hope they get paid a lot.*

“Hi, Snape. How's the term been going?”

It'd been a while since Bella had talked to Severus, and he was surprised to have her sit next to him in the common room on the last day before Christmas break.

“Fine, I guess. Nothing to complain about.”

“Any trouble with those thugs in Gryffindor?”

*Do I have a black eye or something? Why is everyone asking me about problems with the Potter gang?* “Nothing serious. Actually milder than some years. Why?”

“I'm sure you've heard that there've been problems ‘outside’ with wizards being attacked . . .”

Severus nodded.

“What the Ministry isn't telling people is that we're in danger. And it's coming from the muggles. There's a witch hunt brewing, and some of our own are fueling it because they want more power.”

“I heard it was the other way around, that it was more of a muggle hunt.”

“That's what they want you to think. But muggles have always hated us and tried to get rid of us. Wasn't anyone in your family killed by muggles?”

Katherine Hewitt and the other Lancashire witches. Right in Pendle near where Nana lives. “Yes, a few. But that was a long time ago. Three hundred years.”

“It's going to happen again. I don't want to scare you, but we have to be

prepared. There's a new leader who's not afraid to speak up about the danger. He's looking for support so we can protect ourselves."

"It seems pretty improbable to me."

"Well, just think about it."

Christmas break passed quickly, probably because there was so much to do. Severus had classes for about half a dozen students at a time, trying to keep those with similar strengths and weaknesses together. One of the bonuses about being 'the teacher,' was that sometimes the other students forgot that he was there as they worked on a potion. Severus got to overhear some interesting gossip.

He wasn't particularly fascinated by what Serendipida Corman was doing with Hengist Camberwell, but the knowledge that she was doing it with at least four other students added spice to an otherwise dull afternoon. Or the 'true' source of the Paternoster's wealth, that was good for a smile or two. His ears did perk up a bit more at hearing the name 'Black,' though. Which is how he was reminded that Bella and Narcissa had a sister. A sister who'd disgraced herself by marrying a muggle. *Would you call her a 'Black black sheep?' Maybe if Bella ever slips about my background, I can ask about Andromeda.*

Severus heard other things, too, ugly comments about mudbloods and mongrels. He should have been better prepared for the levels of blood snobbery he encountered, but somehow it still surprised him. One conversation in particular left him seething in silent impotence.

"... didn't need him so much for OWLs, I'd teach him to remember his place."

"You're oversensitive. He's nothing more than a servant. Didn't your parents ever hire a tutor?"

"Yeah. It's not like he was trying to push his way into social things, except on the train. That would be stepping over the line."

"Well I suppose if you look at it like that..."

What it boiled down to was money. You had to have money, or you were easy prey to every whim of fate, every twist and turn of economics. Severus swallowed the pride Hagrid said he had too much of and continued with his classes. He taught the rich kids, they paid him, but he no longer felt he had to be polite to them. Instead he began to vent his frustration with comments about their ineptitude and incompetence. It made him feel a little better.

Sirius Black spent Christmas at the Potters' home. It was in every way

more pleasant than Christmas at home would've been, even with James rambling on and on about the girls in Gryffindor and what did Sirius think, anyway.

Christmas Day was especially fun.

"What in the world is this?" James asked, holding up a heavy, shimmering, multi-hued piece of cloth that looked like a cloak.

"A family heirloom you've grown into," replied Mrs. Potter. "Put it on, dear. I think you'll look nice in it."

James wrinkled his nose at Sirius. He thought the cloak hideously ugly, but was not about to say so in his mother's hearing.

"Go on." Sirius was trying to contain his laughter. "Put it on. You'll look nice in it."

James put it on, and Sirius's laughter melted into awe. "It does make you look better! You've never looked so good in your life. It's an invisibility cloak."

The two boys took turns wearing James's cloak, and planning a wide series of escapades for their return to Hogwarts.

"You seem different," Lily said when she and Severus met after the Christmas break was over. "Did something happen?"

"No. I've just spent the last two weeks researching the inverse relationship between money and brains."

Lily laughed. "Rich kids are stupid, aren't they?"

"More than most. Maybe there's something about money that contaminates the gene pool. Wait . . . If you can put chlorine into a swimming pool to disinfect it from germs, is there anything you can put into the gene pool to disinfect it from money?"

"Or could you say that someone comes from the shallow end of the gene pool?"

"Good one! I like that."

For a while they referred to the dumbest rich students as 'shallow-enders.'

"Hey, Evans!"

Lily turned, her face blank, as James hurried over to her. "Going to Transfiguration?" he asked.

"You know where I'm going."

They walked together, since they were headed for the same class. "I've been wanting to talk to you . . ."

"If it's about who I can and can't talk to, I don't want to hear it."

"I'm sorry about that. No, that's not true. I'm not sorry because he's not the kind of person you want for a friend, but I'm sorry I tried to pressure you."

"You don't know what kind of person he is."

"Look, Evans, we're living in really dangerous times. People are being attacked. Some of them are being killed. Not just wizards and witches, but muggles, too. One of the families that's deepest into this 'Dark Lord' business is Sirius's family. They disown anyone who even associates with muggles, and they're part of the group that's heading the attacks. That's how I know so much. Do you think I'd care about some oddball Slytherin if he wasn't tight with the Blacks since second year? Do you know anyone at Hogwarts who knows more about the Dark Arts than he does? He walked into this school knowing more than anyone. His family has to be as dark as they come."

"That shows how much you know. He's a half-blood."

James stopped in his tracks, then hurried to catch up to her. "Really? That surprises me. He's been to Bella's house for Christmas break. Twice. I never thought they'd allow a half-blood under the roof for anything. That makes it worse."

"How?"

"Don't you see? If a family like the Blacks will tolerate a half-blood, even encourage him, then he must be..."

"What?"

"Special. Valuable. More powerful than I thought."

Lily looked worried.

"Why do you associate with them?"

Severus paused, a rock that he'd been about to skip across the water still in his hand. "With who?"

"People like Bella Black. Like Evan Rosier. Like Aloysius Mulciber. Those people."

"I don't associate with them. They condescend to associate with me. I take their money. Besides, have you ever tried not associating with your dorm mates? It's kind of hard to do."

"You visit them during the breaks."

"So?"

"The Blacks don't like muggles and half-bloods. Why are you different?"

"You've been talking about me behind my back. Who with? Stuck-up Potter?"

"This is serious. People are getting hurt."

"Yes, witches and wizards."

"Muggles, too. And why didn't you answer my question?"

"What question?"

"Why are you different?"

"I'll answer your question if you'll answer mine."

"Okay. Potter wanted to talk to me. I told him he didn't know anything about you."

"I hope he still doesn't. Now your question. I'm useful. I was tutoring Bella in Potions so she could pass her OWLs. They put me in a servant's room on the top floor, and I got to eat all my meals by myself. Happy?"

"Yes, very. I'm so glad you're not one of them."

#### FRIDAY, JANUARY 9, 1976 (THE FIRST QUARTER)

Severus was heading to a special Astronomy workshop just after lunch. He prided himself on his ability in astronomy and was thus in a state of perpetual frustration because of the course emphasis on the Zodiac and on astrology. There was nonetheless a certain amount of geometry involved, so it was not a total loss.

On a second floor staircase he happened to glance down and froze. Lily was leaving the Great Hall, James Potter was entering it, and the two paused to talk. Severus had a fairly good view of Lily's face, though not of James's, and was at first pleased to see that she wore a scornful expression. Pleasure turned to concern, however, as he began to note her mannerisms.

There was the little toss of her head, and the way she tucked a lock of hair behind her ear, the defiant way she tilted her chin, and the sidelong glance. Right hand on hip, a stamp with the left foot, then Lily walked proudly to the entrance doors while James, laughing, entered the Great Hall.

Severus sat back on the steps, stunned. Lily's face, and presumably her voice, radiated scorn, but every other part of her was flirting. Flirting with James Potter. Unconsciously, subconsciously flirting outrageously. *Control yourself, idiot. Since when are you able to read girls' body language? Maybe she was restraining herself from attacking him and tearing his eyes out.* But of course that was wishful thinking.

Lily was attracted to Stuck-up Potter.

James was bored. Sirius had started an all-out campaign to regain the affections of Ariadne Musgrave, for which the presence of his good friend



Potter was a hindrance. Remus was madly working on an Ancient Runes assignment, while Peter had disappeared. There was an unconfirmed suspicion that Pettigrew was taking advantage of his newfound small size to infiltrate the girls' dormitory, but there was as yet no proof. *That's what you get when you have a rat for a friend.*

Getting out the Marauder's Map, James idly tapped it and said, "I solemnly swear that I am up to no good," but the effort was halfhearted. What good was it going out alone? He flipped through the different folds. Lily Evans was leaving Gryffindor Tower.

James looked quickly through the rest of the map. Sure enough, Severus Snape had just exited Slytherin house. As James watched, Lily headed for the lake, while Snivellus went down the path toward the gate to Hogsmeade. Then Lily turned left, while Snivellus turned right, and now both were going in the direction of the Forbidden Forest. At night. In the snow.

*This evening isn't going to be so boring after all.* James hid his invisibility cloak under his school cloak and slipped out into the dark after his prey.

"Happy sixteenth birthday," Lily said as she gave Severus the traditional little cake. "I can't believe that next year we'll be of age. Are you looking forward to apparating?"

"Yes and no. Horribly uncomfortable experience, but much better than the train from Euston Station."

"When have you ever apparated?"

"With my grandmother, after my parents died. It wasn't the best of times."

"I am just dying to be able to do it. Think of the freedom!"

"Were you interested in learning other spells? Apparation isn't the only one with great advantages."

Lily giggled. "During vacation I tried some of the ones you taught me. I failed dismally. I don't know what I did wrong."

"Lucky it was wrong. The Ministry of Magic would've been on you for underage magic. In a muggle household, too. What do you think you did wrong?"

"I don't know. I tried the Leevicorpus . . ."

"There's your problem right there. It may be nonverbal, but you still have to think the right sound. The first syllable's a shorter sound, more like 'ay.' Levicorpus. Try it like that."

Lily tried it on a rock, and it worked. Then they went over the Libercorpus spell as well, just to be sure it worked, too. By then it had gotten very cold, and they were both ready to return to the castle.

In the dark, they didn't notice the other set of footprints that came from the lake shore. The set of footprints that just ended there in the middle of the snow. Under his invisibility cloak, James Potter was thinking of a plan.

## C H A P T E R   S I X T E E N

### CONFLICTING EVIDENCE

The next day, three Slytherins were hung upside down in the fourth floor boys lavatory, their robes and gowns falling around their waists, and Rosier, on finding them, ran to pull Severus out of the library.

*It can't be. It can't be my spell. Only Lily and I know my spell.* Severus closed his eyes in foreboding, then instructed Rosier and the other boys who'd since gathered to be ready to catch the first victim as he fell. He took a deep breath and thought *Liberacorpus*, and the suspension spell was released, dropping the boy to the floor. The other two quickly followed.

"Whoa! Cursemaster!" whooped Rosier. "How'd you know that?"

"First year stuff," muttered Severus as he stomped out of the lavatory. He needed to think.

It turned out he didn't have much time. Slytherin students were being attacked and hung up in every corner of the school where teachers were unlikely to go. So far it was just the boys, but the chance that it would soon extend to the girls could not be ignored. A war council was called in the common room.

Bella and Rodolphus led the meeting. It centered on Severus.

"How did you know what the spell was?" Bella demanded.

"I didn't. I'd just . . . come across something similar before and thought I'd try the release spell to see if it worked. Turned out I was right."

"Lucky for us. Is this a spell we can all learn? It'd be best if we could turn the tables on them, so to speak. Make the field level." Rodolphus was clearly eager to get his revenge, even though he was not one of the victims.

"It'll be hard for most of you. It's a nonverbal spell. Knowing it doesn't mean you can cast it."

"So you teach us."

It was decided. The sixth and seventh year students already knew nonverbal skills, and Severus taught them the *Levicorpus* and *Liberacorpus* spells

that evening. He began showing the lower level students how to do nonverbal spells the next day. While not everyone was good at it, enough were so that soon Gryffindors were hanging up in the most unlikely places.

Levicorpus was the fad spell of the year.

"How did they learn it if you didn't tell them?" Severus was trembling, he was so upset. "I certainly never told them. They're my enemies!"

"So you automatically assume it must be me. Wonderful. You don't trust me." Lily pursed her lips in anger.

"Who else is there? Do you think I went around showing my spells to the whole school? Do you think I have a whole crew of 'friends' to choose from?"

"I'm surprised you have any friends at all!"

Severus went white. It was as if the breath had been slammed from his lungs. When he spoke it was in a cold, controlled voice. "You really don't understand, do you? You're the only one I ever taught those spells to. The only one. I guess I don't have any friends at all. But I know who your friends are."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"You don't exactly hide it. Every time you talk to him you're batting your eyelashes. It's quite an exhibition."

"What are you talking about?"

"Stuck-up Potter. You fancy him. You want him to notice you. Is that why you taught him my spell?"

"I never taught him your spell. But maybe I should have. He seems nice. Not like some people."

"It's hard to be nice when you've been betrayed."

"Maybe I'll try Potter. It'll be a pleasant change."

"Along with all the other girls. Learn what it's like to be part of a harem."

"At least he never hit me!"

In icy silence and deadly calm, Severus turned and walked away.

Without Lily to talk to, there were now three areas of life left for Severus to concentrate on, his classes and preparation for OWLs, his tutoring and the growth of his small savings into a rather respectable sum, and the Dark Arts, which he continued to study passionately.

One of Severus's new spells was Phusalida. It created a protective bubble shield around him to help ward off his own Levicorpus. What good was it that the Hogwarts robes disguised his poverty if he was vulnerable to a very revealing attack? For days he'd kept to areas frequented by the school staff,

since it was only in hidden spots that the students dared use the suspension spell.

Fortunately, knowing exactly how Levicorpus worked, Severus was able to make his Phusalida spell curse-specific. It kept him from being suspended upside down, but was otherwise undetectable. The problem with curses, though, was that it was possible to invent new ones. Who knew what spell masters were out there creating hexes and jinxes just as he did in Hogwarts? The Dark Arts were a constantly shifting, dangerous morass requiring eternal vigilance and adaptability.

That was why he loved them so.

#### THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 12, 1976 (THREE DAYS BEFORE THE FULL MOON)

Although busy, Severus was also increasingly lonely. Then, just before Valentine's Day, that began to change.

He was heading downstairs from the library to Potions in the dungeons when the sound of running feet behind him made Severus spin to face a potential attack. It was Wilkes and Mulciber, and they were running in what appeared to be panic, except they were laughing. They would have turned to race down the stairs, but Mulciber saw Severus.

"Snap!" Mulciber hissed, pausing there at the head of the stairs. "Come with us! Quick!" Wilkes was pulling at his robes, trying to get him to move.

"Why?" Severus asked, suspicious.

"Never mind. Just do..." A sound behind him alerted Mulciber to the presence of his pursuers, and he glanced around, then appeared to make a quick decision. Leaving the safe escape route of the stairs, he ran and seized Severus's robes. "Run, quick. You don't want them to see you."

"But..."

"You're in Slytherin robes. They won't care that it wasn't you." Even as he spoke, Mulciber pushed Severus down the corridor and into an empty classroom, Wilkes right behind them. "We have to hide," Mulciber gasped, breathing hard. "If they catch us in here..."

"In the corner, quick," said Severus, and as the three boys huddled by the windows, Severus twirled his wand and said, "*Contego!*" Although nothing seemed to have changed, the other boys trusted him and remained crouched down. They could hear voices in the corridor.

"They didn't take the stairs or we'd 've seen them. They must be here somewhere. You look in there. I'll check this one." It was Sirius Black's voice.

"Right you are, Padfoot. Yell if you need me."

The door to the classroom burst open, and Black entered. At least Severus assumed from the voice that it was Black. He wouldn't have known otherwise, since Black's face was covered by a long, thick beard the same color as his name. Hair was sprouting out of his ears and nostrils, and his eyebrows were about six inches long. Severus clamped his hands over his own mouth to keep from laughing out loud.

Black scanned the classroom, saw nothing, and continued down the corridor opening doors and searching. After a couple of minutes, the three could tell from the sounds that Potter and Black had moved on.

Mulciber stood, and held out a hand to help Severus to his feet. "Contego," he said. "I'll have to remember that. Thanks." He laid a hand on Severus's shoulder. "We'd better get down to Potions. We're almost late."

Wilkes laughed. "I'm looking forward to seeing how Black can stir his cauldron with all that hair in the way."

"You could have been there already," Severus pointed out. "You didn't have to stop for me."

"And let them catch you!" exclaimed Mulciber. "Not on your life. No Gryffindor messes with a Slytherin while another Slytherin stands by and watches."

"I thought it was different with 'half-breeds' and 'mudbloods.'"

Mulciber tilted his head, cocky and arrogant. "You may be a half-breed, but you're a Slytherin half-breed, and that makes you one of us. Come on, let's get to Potions."

The three entered the Potions classroom together. Potter and Black weren't there yet, but Lily was, and she watched them with worried eyes.

#### **SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 14, 1976 (1 DAY BEFORE THE FULL MOON)**

At breakfast on Saturday morning everyone was talking about Hogsmeade. They tended to talk about Hogsmeade at least once per term, and Severus normally paid no attention. This time Mulciber asked him a direct question, though, so he had little choice.

"What's your favorite place in Hogsmeade?" was the question.

"I don't have one," Severus replied. "I don't generally go into Hogsmeade."

"You mean you've never been there?"

"Once in third year. I didn't think it was that interesting." He didn't think Mulciber needed to know about the last time with Lily.

Mulciber grinned. "I bet you'd find it more interesting now."

Severus shrugged and shook his head. "On Valentine's Day? I doubt it. Are you going with Wilhelmina?" It was a measure of the degree that hiding from Sirius Black and James Potter had altered their relationship that Severus was suddenly able to talk to Mulciber this way.

"No, that's over. I'm taking Doris to Madam Puddifoot's. You should come along."

"You never heard about the number three and its comparison to a crowd?"

That made Mulciber laugh. "One of the things I like about you, Half-Breed, is that you have a way of saying things that's different from everyone else." There was something about the way he said 'half-breed' that made it sound more like a friendly nickname than like the insult it had been before. Severus had heard his dad and his dad's friends call each other names like that, and all it meant was that they were mates. It didn't bother him.

"So," Mulciber continued, "are you going to Hogsmeade?"

"What would I do there that's remotely interesting?"

"Maybe the Shack will shriek."

"What shack?" There was nothing wrong with pretending to be dumb if you were intentionally hiding knowledge.

"You never heard of the Shrieking Shack? They started talking about it when we were in first year. There's this old tumble-down house just outside Hogsmeade, and it got haunted by some ghoul or something about four years ago. Lots of nights you can hear it scream and wail, or so they say. I hope to hear it at least once before I leave Hogwarts."

That sounded more interesting, for previously unremarked time sequences began to click together. "When does it shriek?" Severus asked, feigning only mild interest.

"At night. That's what makes February such a great time to go. The sun sets around five o'clock, so we can still be in Hogsmeade after dark. We have a chance to hear it."

That was even more intriguing. Severus declined to spend the entire afternoon in Hogsmeade, but he promised Mulciber he'd try to make it to the village around sunset to see if he could hear the shrieking in the Shack.

That afternoon, as the sun sank below the ridge of hills that rimmed Hogwarts and the moon, at the beginning of its fullness, edged over the same

ridge, Severus made his way down the hill to the main gate with its flanking boars. No students were climbing the hill in the other direction, and Severus expected this was because they were all doing the same as he was — taking advantage of the early sunset to listen for the shrieking.

Indeed, finding the shack was simply a matter of following the students. Everyone, it seemed, was moving toward a little hill just outside of the village, and there was already a substantial number of students there. Severus saw Mulciber and Doris Gamp, and moved toward them. Mulciber looked over and waved. With so many students around, it was impossible to get close even to the fence that kept people away from the Shack itself.

Sudden stillness descended as a low, penetrating moan cut through the icy air. Severus felt the hair on the back of his neck stand up, and the crowd of students swayed and sighed in anticipation. Then the Shack began to shriek.

Severus had never heard — no one had ever heard — anything like it. It rose from a low murmur to a shrill scream. It throbbed with a wild ululation, then broke into barking yells and spectral howls. It screech and roared, moaned and sobbed, and cackled with demonic laughter. After only a few moments, most of the students had their hands over their ears to block the worst of the wailing, and when the professors came to herd everyone back to the castle for the night, no one resisted.

Severus went back with the rest, pondering the demonic noises as he watched the brilliant orb of the moon mount the western sky.

The little group into which Severus was now admitted expanded to once again include Bella Black, who brought with her Rodolphus LeStrange, Kenneth Avery, and the third year student Regulus Black whom Severus had met at the Hand of Glory party, and whom he now knew was Sirius Black's brother. He didn't hold that against Regulus, who all in all was a decent chap.

Within his own dormitory, Severus would never wholly trust either Wilkes or Rosier, but Edison and Mulciber, who'd never been quite as mean to him, were fast becoming the closest thing to male friends that Severus had ever had in his life. For the first time he was admitted to a level of confidence and banter previously unknown.

"Yo!" cried Mulciber on their way to lunch one Monday in early March. "Muggle ship off the starboard bow! Now that one could make me change my opinion of mudbloods."

The 'muggle ship' in question was Patience Ferguson of Ravenclaw, whose budding womanhood evoked the image of a figurehead from an old sailing ship, and who generally tended to leave young men in her wake with



their hearts pounding and their tongues hanging out. Severus was able to watch her with a newfound aesthetic appreciation and with the opportunity to nudge another young man in the ribs in expression of that appreciation, even though he knew he would never be able to do anything about it. Not if he wanted to be free of the Demon.

Mulciber also turned out to be funny, in a crazy sort of way. He was taking Muggle Studies on the principle of 'Know Thine Enemy,' and now frequently asked Severus to explain some arcane point. On having electricity and the electric light explained, he began hitting Severus with a series of jokes.

"How many purebloods does it take to change a light bulb?— None. It never occurred to them that the possibility existed."

"How many half-breeds does it take to change a light bulb?— Two. One to change the bulb and the other to keep the purebloods from getting in the way."

"How many mudbloods does it take to change a light bulb?— One if he's by himself, but if another joins him they need to canvass the neighborhood, hold a meeting, and vote."

"How can you tell the difference between a pureblood, a half-breed, and a mudblood?— Test them when they're eleven. The one who can't tie his shoes is the pureblood. The one who can't make change for a galleon is the mudblood. The one who dies laughing at the other two incompetents is the half-breed. Bury the half-breed. Never try that test again."

Severus rather liked Mulciber's jokes because they never made half-bloods seem dumber than purebloods or mudbloods. He completely forgot that he used to resent being called a half-breed, at least not when the word came from Mulciber. From Wilkes, it was a different matter.

When Wilkes used certain words, the very tone of his voice made them insults. When Mulciber used them, they were humorous and friendly. Severus wasn't sure exactly how it worked, but he knew that to Mulciber words were words, but to Wilkes they were weapons. Severus was careful how he used the same words, since he wasn't sure he could say them the way Mulciber did.

"Hey, Macdonald!" Mulciber called across the lawn one morning in mid March as the Slytherin fifth year students went out to the greenhouses while the Gryffindors returned to the castle from their earlier class. "Is it true mud-blood girls...?" and made reference in scientific terms to certain points of

anatomy. Macdonald blushed furiously and ran over to her dorm mates, already in tears.

The group of Slytherin boys for whom Mulciber had been showing off included all four of his dorm mates as well as Avery and Regulus Black. Severus found the comment amusing, and was disappointed that Macdonald hadn't come back at Mulciber with something equally scathing.

"Isn't that your girlfriend, Sev?" said Rosier, pointing to the cluster of Gryffindor girls with Lily in the midst of them.

"What do you mean?" Severus was on guard at once, unsure of where this was leading.

"You know. The one you were meeting in the third floor corridor in first year. The one you kept on meeting..."

"Yeah," chimed in Black. "On the Astronomy Tower, too!"

"You knew about that?" Severus said, wondering why, if it was true, no one had said anything.

"Sure," said Avery. "It wasn't hard, not when we really wanted to find out. But Bella said to leave you alone. She figured you'd eventually find out for yourself that the girl was bad news. I mean, why does she have to have her claws in you when she's got a whole stable of Gryffindors?"

Severus watched calmly, his mind closed and sealed, as Lily turned to regard his whole group with searing scorn. He thought of her meetings with Lupin, and her flirting with Potter, and wondered if Avery was right. After all, the times he'd seen her were scattered and short. He had no idea what she did the rest of the time, though apparently the rest of Slytherin house knew. And she had given the Gryffindor boys his spell...

Yet even at that moment, Severus would have given anything to be able to go back to the way it had been before, to have at least one person he could trust completely, one person he could open up to. Part of him wanted to believe that Lily was honest and true, even though every piece of evidence he had said that Avery was right.

Lily accosted Severus in the fountain courtyard two days later, seized his arm, and marched him into the empty corridor on the other side of the cloistered walkway.

"What were you doing being so mean to Mary?" she demanded.

"I didn't say anything to Macdonald," replied Severus. "If you want to get upset with someone, get upset with Mulciber. Better yet, get upset with Less-than-Serious Black. He said just about the same thing to Alderton. I don't see you getting all righteous about that."

"I don't care about Sirius Black or about what he says and does. I do care about what you say and do. All of Gryffindor knows we've been seeing each other for years and..."

"Aha! Worried about your reputation, are you?"

"You know perfectly well this isn't about my reputation!"

"And why would I know that? You've been sneaking around hiding our friendship for years, and now you tell..."

"Me? Me hiding our friendship? I seem to recall it was you who were afraid of your 'friends' from Slytherin finding out..."

"They've known all along and never bothered me after first year. The ones who've harassed me are from Gryffindor. Now I find out it's because of you!"

"Because of me? I'll have you know..." Lily stopped, and Severus knew, knew as if he could see the image floating to the top of her brain, that she was remembering times when Potter warned her away from their friendship. She switched tactics. "Severus, you know they use dark magic."

Severus laughed out loud at this, actually enjoying the startled look on Lily's face. "You're going to have to do better than that if you want to pass your Dark Arts OWL," he chided her. "There are objects that are dark, but only three spells are classified as always dark. All the others depend on the intent of the spell caster. Even the simplest of spells. If I'm helping you clean the owlery, Scourgify's a cleaning spell. If I use it in anger to harm another person, it's dark magic. Even a... someone like you should know that."

"Of course I know that! But your 'friends,' people like Avery and that Bella Black, they're not trying to help people with their magic. It's dark."

"Do you think Stuck-Up Potter was trying to help Bertram Aubrey when he enlarged his head? Every hex and jinx and curse he uses to force people to do what he wants or just to show off, that's all dark magic because his intentions are selfish and mean. Just like that spell you stole."

"What are you talking about?"

"I made that for self protection. I intended to use it only if I was attacked. That's light magic. Then old Stuck-Up gets his hands on it, and uses it to attack and embarrass people. That's dark magic." Severus glanced around as if searching for Potter. "Do I see you talking to him about it? No. Clean up Gryffindor first. If we weren't attacked, we wouldn't have to defend ourselves."

"What happened the day before yesterday wasn't self defense."

"What happened the day before yesterday wasn't magic. It was a boy

teasing a girl, and there wasn't any magic involved. Tell Macdonald she needs thicker skin. If she'd dinged him back, we'd all be laughing at him now."

"It was mean. You shouldn't hang around with him."

"I should hang around with spell thieves, I suppose. Those seem to be my only choices."

"I didn't give your spell to Potter!"

"No? Maybe you gave it to Lupin, and he gave it to Potter. One big happy family over there in Gryffindor, aren't you?"

Lily stamped her feet, quivering in frustrated rage. "You're making it awfully hard to like you!"

"Believe me, when I want you to like me, you'll know!"

The silence deepened, then Lily turned and, stiff-backed and struggling for dignity, walked away into the castle. Severus watched her go, feeling oddly empty and incomplete. Then he left the corridor and went down to Slytherin house.

One rite of passage for the fifth years was the mandatory meetings with Professor Slughorn in April, about preparing for the future and a career. Since nothing in his social position had changed, Severus expected his own interview to be a short one.

"Well, Snape, you seem to have good marks in all your classes. Doesn't look like you'll have too much trouble with the OWLs. Have you thought yet about what you want to do with yourself after leaving Hogwarts?"

"I'm torn between becoming a numismatist or a spelunker."

"Uh, yes. Well, um, you certainly have the grades for either one, but I, uh, am not certain that those would be the best career paths for someone in your, uh, position."

"Do you think my Herbology grades are too low for spelunking? I have excellent marks in Astronomy and Potions, though, so I was also considering Paleoanthropology."

"Well, you do seem to have given this considerable thought. I think we can leave it at that until you have to choose your sixth year classes."

"Thank you, Professor."

"Get along to class, now."

"Don't you ever go to Hogsmeade, Snape?" Bella was waiting for Rodolphus for the first excursion of the spring into town. "There's so much to do."

"Occasionally, but it's only fun if you're with someone or have money."

"You could be with us, and you have money."

Severus glanced up at Bella, caught the tail-end of a warning look on her face, and turned to the newly-arrived Rodolphus. There was no question what his expression had been at the prospect of Severus being the third member of their party. Severus didn't mind. He almost sympathized with poor Rodolphus, for this had nothing to do with money or status and everything to do with wanting to be alone with Bella.

"Not enough," he said. "Money's been tight since my father died, and when I go back this summer, I'll have to take care of the property. It needs some improvements." Not exactly a lie, but phrased so that Bella could exercise her imagination as to just what his 'property' was.

"Suit yourself. Just remember that we'd love to have you."

They left, along with most of Slytherin house except the first and second years. Severus stayed in his dormitory with his mother's old Advanced Potions book. By now nearly every page was full of his small spidery handwriting, not only hexes and jinxes, but attack and defense spells, and notes on just about every potion in the book. He was going to go into his sixth year potions class knowing more than old Slughorn ever would in his entire life.

Hagrid spied Lily sitting on the low stone wall of the planted area in the fountain courtyard. "Morning, Lily. I hope everything's well with you."

"Good morning, Hagrid. I'm fine, thank you."

"I been looking for Severus. Ya wouldn't 've happened t' see him, would ya?"

Lily's face darkened. "Mr. Snape does not entrust me with his schedule."

"Just thought I'd ask. You have a good day, now."

"Thank you, Hagrid."

On his way back to his hut, Hagrid thought he saw a familiar thin figure near the edge of the forest. Severus appeared not to notice as Hagrid lumbered over. "There ya are. Y're due for a checkup, ya know."

"Don't you think I'm a bit old for that now?"

"That may be, but that's for Professor Dumbledore t' say."

"Maybe I should talk to Professor Dumbledore."

"Maybe ya should. Meanwhile, I got my orders. Come along now."

Severus drew himself up to his full height, which was still somewhat short of Hagrid's chest. "I'm not your servant. You don't command me like one."

Hagrid was suddenly reminded of Professor McGonagall's old image of a dagger. A razor-sharp obsidian blade. "Suit yourself," he said casually, but his expression was worried as he returned to his hut.

First Lily, now Severus. Something had happened there, and Hagrid wished he knew what it was. What was most disturbing was the locked-down hardness, the frosty isolation he sensed in the boy, as if all his and Dumbledore's hard work had been in vain.

"Hi, Evans. What's the sad face?"

Lily looked up at James. Of all people, he was the one she probably least wanted to see that morning. "Nothing," she answered. "Classes. OWLs."

"You can't be worried about your OWLs. You're a top student in almost every class. Bet you breeze through and ace every one."

Lily shrugged.

"Look, Evans. I've been meaning to talk to you . . . No, not about that; don't get huffy 'til you hear me out. I'm not as good at Potions as you are, and I was wondering if you could help me out on a couple of things I'm having trouble with. It's not a lot, but I'd really like to get an Outstanding in the subject. I know you will."

"I don't know. I've never tutored anyone."

"I'd really appreciate it."

"Let me think about it."

James insisted that he couldn't be tutored in the common room of Gryffindor house since he had a reputation to protect. He chose instead out-of-the-way places like behind the Quidditch field or in the Great Hall in the empty period between breakfast and lunch. He was very careful not to push things, keeping his meetings with Lily strictly to the business of tutoring. When she got really interested in the Potions work, some of the chill left her manner.

Sirius had finally realized that James's interest in Lily involved more than a concern with the Dark Arts. He acted as sentry for his friend, keeping others away from wherever they were working. He was most particularly concerned that Severus not see James and Lily together.

Spring progressed, and the OWL exams got nearer.

They were well into May before Lily made the next move. As she had so many times before, she slipped a note into one of Severus's books saying 'Forest. Lunch. Please.' She got there as quickly as she could after class and waited, concealed behind bushes at the edge of the trees.

It was half an hour before Severus arrived. Looking around and seeing no one, he was about to leave when he heard a "Psst . . ." from near by. Lily rose and beckoned him closer.

"I really want to talk to you," she said when he approached.

“So talk.”

“Okay, first I’m really sorry about what I said, about you hitting me. That wasn’t fair. It didn’t have anything to do with what we were arguing about and it’s way in the past. And I shouldn’t have blamed you for what someone else did. I just wanted to tell you I was sorry and ask you to forgive me.”

“That’s first. What’s second?” Severus regretted the words immediately, for it looked as if Lily might start crying. He looked at the ground, then at the lake in the distance. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said that. I guess we both say stupid things when we’re angry. Of course I forgive you. Will you forgive me?”

“Sure. Water under the bridge.”

They stood awkwardly for a couple of minutes, neither knowing what to do next. Lily got her nerve first. “I worry about you. The others in Slytherin — do they ever talk to you about Death Eaters?”

“Why?”

“Haven’t you seen in *The Daily Prophet* how people are being attacked, sometimes killed because of this dark wizard, this Lord . . . you know.”

“I know we’re in danger, but a lot of the attacks are from mud . . . muggles against our people, and the Ministry’s doing nothing about it. Someone has to protect us.”

“O Severus!” Lily sounded distraught. “You’re even talking like them. Don’t you know that’s what they want you to think so they can get you to join them? Don’t you know that all your friends in Slytherin work for him? Sirius says their fathers are all Death Eaters — Lestranger, Avery, Mulciber, Rosier . . . You haven’t joined them, have you?”

“Nobody’s asked me to join anything, so if your beloved Sirius is telling you they have, then he’s lying to you.”

Lily sighed. “I’m glad about that. I’d feel better if you didn’t hang around with them. I wish we hadn’t quarreled. About that spell . . .” Severus just watched her, neither helping nor stopping her.

“I really don’t know how anyone found out about the spell,” Lily continued. “I’ve been thinking and thinking. I know it wasn’t you, because it was Gryffindor using it. You say you didn’t tell anyone else. I know I didn’t tell anyone else. But it did start with Gryffindor. I’ve been wondering if maybe I talk in my sleep or something. It’s the only thing I can think of. If I did, it wasn’t intentional. You believe me, don’t you?”

"Yeah. I believe you," said Severus. "It's over now, anyway. It's out. Everyone knows. Water under the bridge. Pax?"

"Pax. Do you think we can get together again? Viking is getting near Mars."

"Hard to say. I'm awfully busy right now with tutoring and everything. I don't know how much free time I'll have before OWLs. Maybe afterwards."

"Okay. Maybe afterwards."

A shout interrupted them. "Hey, Evans! What're you doing out here?" They both looked in the direction of the castle to see James coming towards them, Sirius not far behind. "I thought we had an appointment for after lunch today. I've been waiting for you."

Severus glanced at Lily. "Tutoring," she mouthed and started for the castle before James could reach them.

"Hey, Snape!" James called as he stopped and waited for Lily. "Enjoy your afternoon. I will."

As the trio walked back up the hill to the castle, Severus began practicing Sectumsempra on the bushes.

"What do you see in him? He's weird, he's funny-looking, he's moody, he's up to his eyeballs in the Dark Arts . . . Why do you care?"

"I don't think that's your business. Your business is learning Potions."

"Look, Evans, I know you know that I don't do this just for the Potions OWL. I'm sure it's occurred to you that there's more than that between us."

"That's it. This lesson is over."

"No, come on. I'd really like to do things with you. Go to Hogsmeade, have lunch together. I've been dying for a month to ask you on a date."

"I wouldn't date you if you were the last man on earth." Lily slammed her books shut and headed for the dormitories.

"Would you date him if he was the last man on earth," said James to no one in particular. "Would he date you if he knew . . ." He was smiling.

Severus stopped as Sirius stepped out of the doorway from the boy's lavatory. The fourth floor corridor was empty of students, since most were enjoying a beautiful June afternoon, maybe the last before their tests.

"Someone wants to talk to you, Snivellus."

Severus turned to see Peter and Remus blocking his exit in the other direction. *How do they always manage to get the drop on me?* "What do you want?"

"Not them. Me," said James to his right, from a statuary niche. "I just wanted to give you a little information."



"So." Severus inched to the left so that his back was to the wall.

"That spell of yours that lifts people up? I taught that to everyone. Just wanted you to know."

"No you didn't."

"Sure I did. You want to know where I got it? Evans told me."

Severus felt his insides go hollow. "That's a lie."

"Think so? She had some trouble with it. She was pronouncing it wrong. Leevicorpus she was saying. Once she corrected that, it was easy. That's all I wanted to say."

The four left, James and Sirius laughing together. Severus stood alone in the fourth floor corridor feeling as if his world had ended.

#### WEEK OF JUNE 6—JUNE 12, 1976 (MOON WAXING TO FULL)

There was no time left for friendship or enmity, for trust or betrayal, or even for the end of the world. There was nothing for it but for Severus to shut down and turn off everything inside himself but exams. It was a drill he knew well. For the second week of June, there was nothing in his life but OWLs. Theory in the morning, and practical application in the afternoon.

Charms on Monday went well, but that was only natural. Half the tricks he knew with a wand, and every trick he knew without one, Severus owed to his mother. Eileen had enticed him with baby games when he was little, schooled him in elementary magic as a boy, forced him to focus by teaching him to duel at age nine, and given him the discipline and power that no one his age could match. Severus had learned very little at Hogwarts except some incantations.

Tuesday's Transfiguration tests were harder. Toby Snape had spent almost all his adult life trying to transmute the lead of his mundane existence into the gold of the perfect family. That early on he had learned to use the Philosopher's Stone of alcohol was perhaps not entirely Toby's fault. Severus, as a result, had inherited a certain inability to change what was into what he wanted it to be.

On Wednesday, Severus dedicated his Herbology test to Nana. Dealing as it did with the idiosyncrasies of living things, Herbology was not Severus's best subject, but he had the necessary knowledge and skills, and knew Nana would never stop trying to make a healer of him — still the most intriguing, to Severus, of all the possible wizarding professions.

During all this time, Severus kept his head down, his eyes averted, every distraction locked out, and he never once saw or consciously thought of Lily.

Thursday morning's test in Defense Against the Dark Arts took place in the Great Hall. All the tables usually in place for the daily meals were removed and replaced with individual desks. June sunlight streamed in through the high windows, tinting everything in chestnut, copper, and gold. Severus wasn't allowed to keep his wand near his hand for the test, so he tucked it into the folds of his robe. He contemplated hanging great-grandfather Wensley Snape's shrunken head around his neck as a talisman, but decided it would shock too many people. Besides, for this one he didn't need luck.

Severus found his place and carefully picked up and examined his ink bottle, quill, and roll of parchment. He knew that everything had been enchanted with anti-cheating spells, but whether or not they had been hexed with anti-success spells was another matter. Everything seemed in order. Professor Flitwick, the Charms teacher, was helping proctor the test. The question papers soared out over the students' heads, then settled simultaneously on their desks, and the test began.

From the moment Severus glanced over the questions, he knew his biggest problem was going to be time. *How am I going to write down everything I know about these subjects in just a few hours? Just have to write fast and leave some of the fun things out, I guess.* He picked up his quill and began writing in his small, spidery script. He kept his head close to the paper so he could read the words easily.

Severus had barely finished when Professor Flitwick called, "Quills down, please! That means you, too, Stebbins! Please remain seated while I collect your parchment! *Accio!*" Severus's parchment rolled itself up and joined the others sailing towards the tiny professor. There was a moment of mirth as the rolls knocked him off his feet, and a couple of students in the front had to help him up again. Then Flitwick announced, "Very well, everybody, you're free to go!"

Severus picked up the questions paper, but instead of putting it into his book bag, he started scanning it again. The whisper of a thought had appeared in his head as he wrote his answers, and he was trying to retrieve it. Somewhere in the middle, between questions 10 and 15.

Students spilled out into the sunshine from the Great Hall. Most of Slytherin house vanished quickly, either back into their dormitories or to other parts of the castle. Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff tended to side with Gryffindor

in any confrontation, and the Slytherin students had grown wary of being outnumbered.

Severus didn't notice. It never occurred to him that anything would happen here on the front lawn anyway, in full view of the castle and all the teachers. He didn't want to walk and read at the same time, so he made his way down the grassy hill to a spot not far from the lake where he could settle in the shade of some bushes. There he continued his study of the questions, trying to remember what had set off those warning bells in his head.

Finally giving it up as a lost cause for the moment, Severus rose and folded the paper, tucking it into his bag. As he started down the lawn, a voice behind him said loudly, "All right, Snivellus?"

Severus wheeled to meet the threat, but his wand was not at his hand, and in the seconds it took him to pull it from his robes, James yelled "*Expelliarmus!*" and Severus's wand flew a dozen feet behind him. Severus dove for the wand, but an *Impedimenta* from Sirius threw him to the ground and knocked the breath out of him. *Two to one. Here in front of half the school it has to be an ambush and two to one.*

Severus felt as if heavy weights were holding him to the ground. As he fought to get air into his lungs, focus, and rise at the same time, he heard the other two approach. He was frantically trying to think of any wandless spell he knew that was of any use in a duel.

"How'd the exam go, Snively?"

"I was watching him, his nose was touching the parchment. There'll be great grease marks all over it, they won't be able to read a word."

Around him, Severus could hear the giggling and laughter. Gryffindor, Ravenclaw, Hufflepuff—probably not a Slytherin anywhere around. He managed to fight the spell enough to turn his head and look James in the face. "You . . . wait," he gasped. "You . . . wait . . ."

"Wait for what?" came Sirius's cool voice from the side. "What're you going to do, Snively, wipe your nose on us?"

"Stu . . . pefy . . . Petri . . . ficus To . . . talus." The words wouldn't come out right with the magical bands constricting his chest. "You cow . . . ardly bas . . . tard. You can . . . go to . . . hell."

James was as cool as ice. "Wash out your mouth. *Scourgify!*"

It was a spell meant for scrubbing floors and dirty dishes, not for use against another human being. Severus suddenly felt as if stiff-bristled brushes were scouring the inside of his mouth, and his throat and nasal passages began to clog with soap. He was coughing, gagging, choking, suffocating . . . Above

him as he struggled in panic, he heard a voice screaming as if from a great distance, "Leave him ALONE..."

Lily advanced on the scene in a raging fury. "Leave him ALONE!"

"All right, Evans?" Incredibly, in the middle of everything, James was flirting, in a low, pleasant, come-hither voice.

It had no effect on Lily. "Leave him alone. What's he done to you?"

James pondered the question. "Well... it's more the fact that he exists, if you know what I mean..."

"You think you're funny, but you're just an arrogant, bullying toerag, Potter. Leave him alone."

"I will if you go out with me, Evans. Go on... Go out with me, and I'll never lay a wand on old Snively again."

"I wouldn't go out with you if it was a choice between you and the giant squid," said Lily.

"Bad luck, Prongs," Sirius laughed.

The Impedimenta curse was wearing off, and Severus could finally move. Nauseous from the soap and groggy from lack of air, he began to vomit, filling his nose with suds and bile, but at least his throat was clear and he could breathe again. Realizing through his mental fog that James and Sirius had been distracted, Severus began to crawl toward his wand, still spitting out soap as he desperately inched his way forward. His fingers touched it, and he spun his arm around to point at James with a nonverbal Sectumsempra that gashed James's cheek and spattered blood on his robes.

The enraged James whirled and hit Severus with a Levicorpus, and Severus felt his legs pulled up into the air, his robes dangling about him. He heard laughter in the crowd of students and the voice he finally recognized as Lily's say, almost laughing, laughing at him... "Let him down."

"Certainly."

Severus fell in a heap, and struggled to his feet, wand ready, only to be hit from the other side by Sirius with a Locomotor Mortis that knocked him to the ground as stiff as a board. It was a hopeless battle, for whichever one he faced, the other would take him from behind. Fear and frustration knotted his stomach as he waited helplessly for what they would do to him next. Through the haze of his panic he could hear Lily's voice talking to James. Lily, who had betrayed him, sold him, given him into the hands of his enemies to be shamed, humiliated, and tortured. The demon was loose, raging inside him, and he hated her with every fiber of his being.

Then he was free again, and James was smiling at him. The condescending rich boy deigning to notice the poor trash at his feet. "There you go," James smirked as Severus struggled to stand, "you're lucky Evans was here, Snivellus..."

The demon lashed out in fury as he screamed at both of them, "I don't need help from filthy little mudbloods like her!"

Lily froze in shock. "Fine. I won't bother in the future. And I'd wash your pants if I were you, Snivellus."

James was clearly gloating as he threatened Severus from one side while Sirius covered him from the other. "Apologize to Evans!"

Lily spat like an angry cat. "I don't want you to make him apologize. You're as bad as he is..."

"What! I'd NEVER call you a..."

Severus only heard part of what followed for he was fighting to keep himself shut down and closed. He trembled with the effort to control himself, to lock down the rage, remembering this had happened once before, with Hagrid by to restrain him...

"You make me SICK!" Lily shouted at James, turning briskly on her heel and walking away.

"Evans! Hey, Evans! What is it with her?"

"Reading between the lines, I'd say she thinks you're a bit conceited, mate," said Sirius.

"Right," said James, looking around for a way to vent his own frustration. "Right..." and Severus was upside down again, held aloft by his own spell. "Who wants to see me take off Snivelly's pants?"

"Touch him again, Potter, and I turn your tongue into corkboard!"

James spun to face an infuriated Bella Black, who stood just above him on the grassy hillside, her wand pointed directly in his face and backed by a score of students from Slytherin house. "Oh look," he drawled. "The Wicked Witch of the West wants her little dog back." Casually he let Severus fall back to the ground. "I'd be happy to take you on, Bellatrix. Just you and me. Man to man."

The crowd of students was backing away from the line of fire, and some of the Gryffindors were edging around to support James and Sirius. A few students hurried up toward the castle, looking for teachers. The show had turned from amusing to dangerous.

"Funny how you want it one on one now that you're the one outnumbered, isn't it? Funny how that little fairness thing didn't concern you when

you had the upper hand. You really are a bully, Potter, aren't you?" Bella advanced down the slope, wand still pointed at James. More students from Slytherin house were coming down to support her.

"*Accio wands!*" Pushing her way through the crowd, Professors Flitwick and Slughorn behind her, Professor McGonagall advanced to the center of the ring of students. Wands flew from the hands of the confronting groups to fall in a great flock at her feet. She ignored them and addressed the crowd. "Every student involved in this display of hostility and violence is on detention. Any student who lifts a wand against another will be suspended from this school without delay. How dare you fight here! You and you," she pointed at James and Sirius, "go to my office immediately. You members of Slytherin house, you will go to Professor Slughorn's office. The rest of you will hold yourselves available as witnesses..."

She never finished. Severus, having dropped exhausted to the grass, had staggered to his feet. The pressure that had been building inside him all term now exploded. Wandless once more, he launched himself at James, knocking him down with the force of the impact, and both boys were on the grass, rolling, punching, gouging, and kicking.

The rest of the students howled with glee and rushed to surround the combatants. More students poured from the castle and the surrounding grounds, the unerring radar of teenagers telling them a fight was in progress. The three professors struggled against the pressure of the crowd, but were unable to get close enough to immobilize either James or Severus. Though exercise gave James an advantage in muscle, the two were of roughly similar build, and Severus's single-minded fury evened the odds. Every blow of fist or knee that connected on either side was greeted with whoops and cheers from the eager watchers. When Sirius tried to intervene on James's behalf, he was jumped and held by half a dozen students from three houses.

From his hut nearby, Hagrid saw the crowd and knew what was happening. He ran grunting over to the lake to toss students from his path and force his way to the center of the milling, pushing throng. He grabbed both boys by the collars of their gowns and held them at arm's length. Both twisted and struggled, trying to continue the attack, so he shook them hard as the three professors finally made it to the center. Hagrid turned to speak to Professor McGonagall, and his hold loosened. Severus was on James like a wildcat. "Prefects!" McGonagall shouted.

Remus was a Gryffindor prefect and helped hold James back, together with a prefect from Hufflepuff. Severus was in the hands of Slytherin and

Ravenclaw. They glared and challenged each other across the ring of students until McGonagall could get both of them hustled back up the steps into the castle. They were taken first to the hospital wing to be treated for bloody noses and numerous cuts and bruises, and then to Dumbledore's office to answer for causing mayhem on school grounds.

Saying that Dumbledore was angry would be like saying the Sears Tower in Chicago was tall — true as far as it went, but conveying no concept of the order of magnitude involved. James and Severus were isolated at opposite ends of the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom, each under separate guard, while Dumbledore interviewed students from all the houses. Then the two were brought into his presence, James first and Severus after him to avoid the possibility of a clash on the spiral staircase.

"Master Potter, Master Snape, you will both please sit down." Dumbledore indicated chairs at opposite ends of a substantial table. Hagrid took a seat near the center. "I have been speaking with students who witnessed the altercation between you two, and it would seem that in the matter of the fist fight you, Master Snape, physically attacked Master Potter. You will both refrain from comment, Master Snape. It appears, however, that you were provoked into this attack by a series of curses inflicted upon you by Master Potter and Master Black, who will be spoken to later. Master Potter, would you explain why you cursed Master Snape?"

"I greeted him after exams. He drew a wand on me. I had to protect myself."

"Master Snape?"

"He already had his wand out. He hit me before I could turn around."

"With an Expelliarmus. Then Master Black used an Impedimenta."

"That's right."

"Let us say for the moment that you were trying to protect yourself, Master Potter. Master Snape had just been immobilized by an Impedimenta. What was the justification for you to use a Scourgify on a fellow student?"

"He insulted us."

"So you used on a helpless opponent a spell generally reserved for cleaning the bottoms of owl cages?"

"Yes, sir."

"I see. Master Snape, you deliberately attacked another student and initiated a fist fight. You will receive two days' detention. Hagrid, would you take Master Snape to your abode, run a physical examination, and discuss with him the seriousness of his offense. Master Potter, you endangered the

health and life of another student with your careless and malicious use of a dangerous spell. You will remain here while we discuss the gravity of your offense and the punishment it will entail. You are in serious danger of being expelled from this school. If you would, Hagrid.”

Hagrid motioned to Severus, and the two left Dumbledore’s office.

“So, ya went for James Potter and ya gave as good as ya got.”

“I think so.”

“That’s going t’ be a nasty black eye. Ya want me t’ get rid of it.”

“I don’t know. I’ve never had a black eye before. It could be a badge of honor. I wish I’d broken his nose. He has a nose that deserves to be broken.”

“I’ll reserve judgment on that. Y’re not supposed t’ be fighting, after all.”

“Do you think he’ll be kicked out?”

“Doubt it. But he’ll be cleaning a lot of classrooms.”

“Good.”

That night began the first of the three days of the full moon, yet Severus still could not recall what had set off the warning bells in his head during his Dark Arts examination. The OWL exams continued all the next week. On Friday of the second week, Viking 1 reached Mars, but Severus was not in good enough spirits to notice. Then came the last week and preparations for the end of year and summer holidays.

During all that time, Severus and Lily did not speak even once to each other.

It was, Severus figured, the last time he would return home with a next-day train ticket and an overnight at St. Pancras church. He would turn seventeen before the end of sixth year, and then he could apparate. Once more. Once more at the beginning of sixth year, and he would be done with this drill for ever. This year, however, he decided to vary the routine.

Severus had never been to Diagon Alley, but he knew where it was and how to get there. The Underground took him to Charing Cross Road and the dingy little pub called the Leaky Cauldron. A passage through a wall, and he was in the crowded London marketplace of the wizarding world.

There was only one place he wanted to go — Flourish and Blotts. Severus spent a pleasant couple of hours going through dozens of books, finally picking out five that he thought he could afford. Four he deposited in King’s Cross Station with the rest of his things, taking *Witch Trials of the Seventeenth Century* with him to read that night and on the train.

Nana met Severus at Colne, and they slipped into an alley near the train station where she could apparate unseen to her cottage. Over tea he explained



to her why he still had the traces of a black eye. "Good for you," was Nana's reaction. "You stick up for yourself."

A week later, Severus was back at his parents' house with a basket full of food that Nana prepared for him. He was planning to stay for several days, and maybe get some work done. After unpacking, he started to clean. The electricity and gas were off, but the water was still running, rusty at first from sitting so long in the pipes. Severus found a small supply of candles and decided that with coal and candles he didn't need electricity. He didn't really need candles if he rose and slept with the sun.

It was nearly two years since Eileen and Toby died, and now Severus was prepared to face the stain on the carpet at the foot of the stairs. He scrubbed it for half an hour, and it became fainter, but he couldn't get all of the blood out. As twilight sent long shadows through the house, he had a late supper and climbed the stairs to his little bedroom. It and everything else in the house seemed much smaller than he remembered.

*Go back to bed, Toby. You've had too much. You're still drunk. Sleep it off before you go out again.—Leave me be, woman! A man's got the right to go where he will and no woman standing in the way!—I won't let you! You're in no condition to be on the street.—Get out of my way!*

There was a scream and the sound of something heavy falling on the stairs. Severus was awake at once, ready to help his mother. He burst onto the landing and . . . there was nothing there. *A dream. I was dreaming.* He went back to bed and lay awake for the rest of the night, but the sounds didn't recur.

The second day, Severus began clearing out the storage room and sorting everything into two groups. The things he thought he would use he moved downstairs. The things he knew he wouldn't need he shifted into his parents' bedroom. He was thinking of converting the storage room into a workshop or laboratory. He couldn't use the front bedroom for anything, but it didn't bother him to store things there.

That night he had the same dream of his mother falling down the stairs. This time, after the shock of waking suddenly, he lay in bed and listened. The house was silent. Severus got up and went out onto the landing, but there was nothing there. *A dream. Only a dream.*

The third day Severus was in the sitting room sorting books. He was trying to think of a way to make bookcases around the sides of the room. If he continued to make money tutoring, he could afford to buy a large number of books and wanted someplace to keep them.

There was a pop that he recognized as the sound of someone apparating into the kitchen. Puzzled, Severus started towards the back of the house to see who it might be, only to meet Nana coming out of the kitchen clearly looking for him.

"There you are child. I'm glad you look presentable. We need to leave right away."

"What's happened, Nana?"

"It's your grandmother. She's had a stroke."

Together Severus and Nana apparated to Gra's house.

It was over before they got there. The stroke was a massive one, and Gra lived for less than an hour after it happened. Severus and Nana went first to the hospital in Colne, then to Gra's house where they stayed while Severus took care of the administrative details of funeral, taxes, and inheritance. Gra's neighbors knew him from previous visits and came to offer their condolences together with gifts of food. Everyone was very kind, though they seemed wary of Nana.

The funeral was in the little vicarage church. There was a plot in the cemetery there where Severus's grandfather already lay, and Gra was placed beside him. Toby and Eileen were there, too. Nana took one of Edward Snape's three suits and altered it for Severus so that he looked quite distinguished as Gra's chief mourner. Severus was amazed at the number of people who were there to pay their last respects.

Nana hosted a reception at Gra's house afterwards, and people came up to Severus all afternoon with stories about his grandmother: how she had worked as a mechanic during 'the War,' and brought trays of sandwiches to the men demonstrating during a strike at the mill, and delivered the Anderson baby when the midwife was sick with influenza. It saddened Severus to think how little he'd known about her.

For the next few weeks Severus and Nana went through the whole house. There were three basic categories — keep, sell, and give to charity. Most things went up for sale. Severus kept the books and those things that reminded him most of his grandmother, and anything that looked as if it might have belonged to Wensley.

Then the house was locked and put up for sale. Severus went back to Nana's for a few days, and finally returned to his work at his parents' home.

That night Severus dreamt again of Eileen falling down the stairs. The next morning he moved everything left upstairs that he would need into the

lower part of the house. He looked through his father's meager tools and selected a heavy mallet and a crowbar.

The first swing of the mallet smashed into the stair railing and sent slivers of wood flying across the room. Carefully, methodically, Severus demolished the entire railing. Then, starting at the top, he used the crowbar to pry up every tread and riser, and finally took out the stringers with a combination of both tools.

With a pair of heavy shears, he cut away the section of carpet at the foot of the now destroyed staircase and burned it in the area yard.

After that, Severus slept without dreaming.

The debris from the staircase turned out to be very useful, for with it Severus began making the first of his bookcases. It took him six days because he had to keep undoing things that weren't fitting together right, but in the end he had a place for most of the books that had been in the upstairs store-room. He decided that he could go through Gra's books the next summer, when the pain of her death had worn off a little.

It was then that Severus began to wander again. He spent whole days out on the moors rediscovering old haunts and the flat areas where he and his mum had dueled. He climbed the fence around the dilapidated old mill and prowled the huge workrooms with their dusty, silent machines. On the afternoon that he realized he hadn't opened his mouth to say a single word for three days, he decided to go around to Mrs. Hanson's house, only to find she was visiting her sister in Manchester. From Mrs. Hanson's, he went straight across the bridge, past the school, and to the playground where he'd first told Lily she was a witch. He sat there all afternoon and evening, until the late summer sunset tinged the northwestern sky with red. Then he went back to the empty house in the empty town where not one person knew who he was or cared. The next day he returned to Nana.

Severus spent the rest of August with Nana, working in her garden and brewing medicines. It was strange realizing that Nana was now the only member of his family left, and then it hit him that he'd been the only one left of her family for nearly two years. He started wheedling stories out of her, stories about her own parents and grandparents, and anything she knew about the Prince side of the family, too. He bought a notebook and jotted down every detail, worried that if Nana died suddenly all that information would be lost. Sudden death was a constant in life, always lurking in potential ambush.

The other thing Nana did for Severus was help him get his bearings again. After all, it was Nana who thought that 'muggle' was an ugly word, and

reminded him that they were all of them people. Out there in the calm countryside of eastern Lancashire, it was easier to see the bonds that held the community together, the shared hardships that made neighbors so important. School and house rivalry seemed distant, and the whispers of ‘you know . . .’ more distant still. Severus decided that ‘muggle’ indeed was an ugly word, and ‘mudblood’ therefore uglier still. He resolved to try to talk to Lily again.

It was the end of August, and time to return to Hogwarts.

## C H A P T E R   S E V E N T E E N

### MISUNDERSTANDINGS

**WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 1, 1976 (THE FIRST QUARTER)**

This time on the Express, Severus arrived and boarded early, not wanting to see or be seen by anyone. Bella and Rodolphus, of course, were not there, having finished seventh year and left the school for good. Severus doubted anyone else would come looking for him. He settled at the rear of the train and watched the scenery.

Once at Hogwarts, it was impossible to avoid the others. Severus was a little worried about meeting his house mates again after the intense embarrassment of his humiliation at the hands of James and Sirius, but it turned out that what people remembered was the fight, and he was greeted almost as a returning hero. All during the Sorting and the welcoming feast, Severus tried to stay out of conversations with the others. He wondered if Lily would even notice.

The next day was Thursday and their first Potions class of the year. This time Severus left a note in Lily's book — 'Lake. After supper. Please.' He was so nervous that he couldn't eat anything and left early to wait down by the water. He waited for two hours, but Lily didn't come.

Severus tried again on Friday with a note in Herbology. Once again, Lily ignored him. He wanted to talk to her on the weekend, but she spent most of her time in the Gryffindor common room, and when she went out into the school, she was always surrounded by friends. Meanwhile, Severus was talking to his dorm mates in monosyllables, if at all, and generally alienating everyone around him.

Sunday night, in defiance of both curfew and the bullies of Gryffindor, Severus went up to the seventh floor and sat in the corridor right in front of the picture of the Fat Lady. It was so late in the evening that the move was

almost counterproductive, but fortunately Lily's dorm mates Dearborn and Macdonald were equally late.

"What are you doing here, Slytherin?" Dearborn sneered at him.

"Could you tell Evans I'm out here? I need to talk to her."

"Why don't I tell someone else you're out here and let them slap you around like they did last June?" Dearborn spat at him. "Snivellus," she added for good measure.

"You go right ahead and do that," said Severus. "Maybe it'll lure her out to watch the fun. Two beating up on one. That is Gryffindor's idea of 'fun,' right?" To Macdonald he added, "Tell her I'll stay out here all night if necessary."

The two girls whispered the password to the Fat Lady and stalked past him into Gryffindor house, but apparently something got through because Lily appeared a few minutes later in pajamas and dressing gown.

Severus scrambled to his feet. "Lily, please. I need to talk to you. I wanted to tell you I'm sorry..."

"I'm not interested."

"I'm sorry!"

Lily folded her arms across her chest as if barricading herself from him. "Save your breath. I only came out because Mary told me you were threatening to sleep here."

"I was. I would have done." Severus was talking fast, realizing that Lily didn't intend to stay. "I never meant to call you mudblood, it just..."

She refused to let him explain. "Slipped out? It's too late. I've made excuses for you for years. None of my friends can understand why I even talk to you. You and your precious little Death Eater friends..." Severus opened his mouth, but she cut him off. "You see, you don't even deny it! You don't even deny that's what you're all aiming to be! You can't wait to join You-Know-Who, can you?"

Severus opened his mouth again, but was too shocked to reply. She'd already made up her mind, and wasn't going to listen.

She lashed out again. "I can't pretend anymore. You've chosen your way, I've chosen mine."

It was irrevocable dismissal. "No..." Severus stammered, "listen, I didn't mean..."

"... to call me mudblood? But you call everyone of my birth mudblood, Severus. Why should I be any different?" And then she was gone back through the portrait into Gryffindor house.

Severus, standing there staring at the portrait entrance, felt white-hot rage rising in him. She hadn't let him complete one sentence, one explanation. Instead of finding out what he really wanted to say, she'd interrupted him again and again and supplied her own stupid, prejudiced answers. And, typical Gryffindor that she was, she was probably dumb enough to think that what she'd invented herself was what he'd really come up here to tell her. Why he'd ever thought that such a vicious, vain, cruel, irrational, prejudiced person was nice was beyond him.

A new kind of battle took place on Monday. Severus hadn't planned it, but he and Rosier were standing in the entrance hall when Lily and her friends came to breakfast. On a sudden impulse, Severus raised his voice. "You know how you get into Gryffindor, Rosier? The Sorting Hat tests your intelligence. If your IQ is lower than your age, you're in Gryffindor."

Rosier snorted, then realized what was happening and went for extra points. "I thought you had a friend in Gryffindor."

"That's only because my parents wouldn't let me have a pet. If I'd had a goldfish or a turtle, I wouldn't have needed a Gryffindor. Turtles are much better companions, you know."

Lily and her friends marched by as if they hadn't heard, and Severus didn't press the point there. Later that morning in Herbology, however, he noticed that Alderton was at a table next to Lily. He walked over and ostentatiously moved Alderton's belongings to the side of her table farthest from Lily. "You need to be careful, Mina," he said. "Things can get stolen if you don't watch out." He didn't look at Lily then, but a glance later showed him her face was flushed, and she was cutting roots with a savage determination.

The third opportunity came outside Charms class. This time Severus was with Mulciber. "Al," he said in that slightly louder than necessary voice, "how can you tell a Gryffindor girl from a cobra?"

Mulciber laughed. "I don't know, Sev. How do you tell?"

"Easy. Get them to bite each other. The one that dies first is the cobra."

Going in to supper, Severus found himself face to face with Macdonald. "She wants to see you," was the message. "She says you know where."

Severus almost didn't go, but in the end curiosity got the better of him. Lily was already there, sitting on her rock, staring out across the water.

"I'm here." Severus said flatly.

Lily didn't turn around. "I want to know why you're being so mean."

"I thought I was remarkably restrained."

"You've been saying nasty things all day."

"You were pretty nasty to me last night."

"You just came to make excuses."

"How do you know, since you never let me get a word in edgewise?"

"I had a reason. I was angry. I'm still angry. Last year you called me a . . . you know."

"Considering what I could've called you, I still think I was remarkably restrained."

"I was trying to help you!"

"Why? Guilty conscience?"

"What are you talking about?" Lily was looking at him now.

"I thought maybe since you were teaching him all my spells you might feel guilty when he started using them on me."

"I told you. I keep telling you. I never taught him your spell."

"That's not what Potter says."

Lily blanched and paused. When she spoke again, her voice was nearly a whisper. "What did he say?"

"How you tried to teach him Levicorpus, but you were mispronouncing it, so you had to check with me about what you were doing wrong. He even told me how you were saying it."

"That's not true."

"Then how did he know?"

Lily had no answer to that, but she was determined to find one.

\* \* \*

"Hey, Evans!"

Lily kept walking, and James hurried to catch up to her. "I was wondering if you'd like to go into Hogsmeade with me on the first weekend. I know it's weeks away, but I wanted to be the first to ask."

"I don't date liars."

James frowned. "I'm not a liar."

"No? Did you or did you not tell a friend of mine that I was passing you his spells?"

"Snivellus? You're worried about old Snivelly?"

"You did, didn't you? See. Liar."

"You know, I don't have to put up with this. There are other girls who'd be happy to date me."

"Good. Then you can stop bothering me."



"Well good riddance then," snapped Sirius that evening in their dormitory. "Ask somebody else. She doesn't deserve you."

"I don't want to ask anybody else. All I wanted to do was break them up, and now she hates me. What does she see in him, anyway?"

"Can you imagine her kissing him? His long hair getting in the way."

James threw a shoe at Sirius's head. "You're positively vile, you know!"

"I know how to capture her affections. Take a telescope. I hear you can do really kinky things with a telescope."

James stomped out of the dormitory, through the common room and past the Fat Lady, fuming and calling Sirius every name he could think of under his breath. He wished he could start over with Lily with a clean slate, but he'd bungled that relationship royally. Sirius was probably right, he should give up on Lily and date other girls. The problem was, he didn't want to date other girls. He wanted to date Lily.

On the last Saturday in September, the Marauder's Map in hand, James went looking for Severus.

It took a while for James to find Severus in a spot where there were no other students. The little dot labeled 'Severus Snape' stayed on the fourth floor in the library for nearly three hours while James waited in one of the corridors. Luckily most of the students were outside enjoying the fall weather, so when Severus finally left the library, the fourth floor was almost deserted.

"Hey, Snape!" James called as he hurried forward.

Instantly, Severus had his wand in his hand and his back to the wall, glancing quickly up and down the corridor for Sirius, Remus, and Peter. It was a reaction that would have amused James a month earlier, but now only made him angrier with himself for being such a miscalculating fool.

"I need to talk to you."

"Where's your backup?"

"I don't need backup. I can handle you myself."

"You think so? You never have before."

James held his hands up in front of him, palms open. "No wand. No backup. I just want to talk."

"In an empty fourth-floor corridor with no witnesses."

"You're not making this easy!"

"Right. I'm supposed to make your life easy."

James took a deep breath. "I just wanted to tell you that I lied to you. About Evans."

Severus eyed him narrowly. "Did Lily put you up to this?"

"She doesn't know anything about it. But she won't talk to me." James stopped. It was more than he wanted to say, certainly to Severus.

"Sounds like evidence of common sense to me."

"Look, I overheard you talking to her about your spells, and I pretended that she told me herself. I wanted to break you up."

"Now you are lying. You couldn't have overheard that. If you'd gotten close enough to hear, I'd have seen you. Lily put you up to this. Maybe you can tell me why."

"No. She doesn't know."

"Okay. You stick to that story." Severus inched away from the wall and backed down the corridor, his wand still out and ready to fight if James made a move.

James just wanted to bang his head against the wall.

It was shortly after his encounter with James that Severus remembered what had attracted his attention during the OWL exam the previous June. It was Question 10: 'Give five signs that identify the werewolf.' He'd been thinking about the full moon, and that had led to Remus's mysterious illnesses that lasted for about three days every month. Always around the time of the full moon.

Of course, the idea of Remus Lupin being a werewolf was ridiculous. If there'd been a werewolf at Hogwarts for the past five years, everyone would've known it. There'd have been attacks and deaths, and Lupin would have been discovered. No, the answer was something else, but it was connected with the moon. Severus decided that he was going to find out what it was.

In addition, Severus thought he might keep a closer eye on James and Lily. It bothered him that Lily would get James to confess to a lie when the confession was so obviously false. It was even more unnerving that James would actually pretend to apologize to him. There had to be something behind it, and knowing James, it boded no good for Severus Snape. He wished that Lily was not involved.

#### THURSDAY, OCTOBER 7, 1976 (THE FULL MOON)

Remus wasn't in Potions, but then Severus hadn't expected him to be. All that afternoon he tried to keep at least one of the other three in sight, figuring that at some point they'd want to be with their sick friend.

"There he is again," snarled Sirius, looking over the Marauder's Map. "Right up there by the first floor windows. Just standing there looking out."

James shifted his position so that he was facing both Sirius and the castle. Sure enough, Severus was at one of the windows watching them. Then he was gone.

"Now he's coming down the stairs. He'll be at the entrance in a few seconds." Sirius tucked the map inside his robes. It wouldn't do to have other people get curious.

"We've got to distract him," said James, "send him off someplace else. We have to shake him before we can join Remus."

"I think we should take him with us. Then he'd never bother us again."

"Stop talking like an idiot." Then James brightened. "I have an idea. Give me the map. When you see him follow me, get to the willow."

The little dot labeled 'Lily Evans' was in the fountain courtyard. James set off down the lawn toward the lake, planning to double back and join her there. If all went well, he could kill two birds with one stone. Sure enough, after a minute the dot labeled 'Severus Snape' began to follow him while Sirius and Peter continued in the other direction toward the willow.

Lily was sitting on a bench studying her Advanced Potions book. James took a deep breath and walked over to her. "Hey there, Evans. Can I join you?"

The look on her face was pure disgust. "I'm studying," she said.

James sat on the wall next to the bench instead of on the bench itself. Out of the corner of his eye he caught a glimpse of black and green moving in the cloistered walk and knew Severus was there. "I just wanted you to know I tried," he said, a touch louder than he normally would.

"Tried what?"

"Patching things up with old Snivellus..."

"You are a toad! Why do you call him that? He has a name."

"You called him that."

"I was angry."

"Okay. Okay. Snape. I tried patching things up with Snape. It didn't work."

"What did you do? Lie to him and insult him again?"

"No! I tried telling him the truth... that I'd overheard you. He didn't believe me. He didn't think I could get that close."

"Come to think of it, I don't believe you either. We were out by the forest and there wasn't anyone around. How did you hear us?"

James thought fast. "It's a spell that enhances your hearing. It's like having an ear trumpet or a microphone."

"I don't believe you."

"So don't believe me. But I tried. You can ask him yourself."

"He won't talk to me and it's your fault. And I hate you. Go away."

James got up and left. Once on the lawn he took out the map. Severus wasn't following him anymore, he was headed for the lake. Lily was still sitting in the courtyard. James grinned. His plan had worked better than he'd hoped. With a much lighter heart he headed for the willow to join his friends.

Severus spent a long time by the lake, skipping stones across the water and pondering what he'd heard. It made no sense. He tried to reason out scenarios.

First he focused on the assumption that both James and Lily were telling the truth. That would mean that James overheard them talking, and Lily was unaware of it. This was the most comfortable explanation, but it had one major flaw. There was no such spell as the one James described. Not that people hadn't tried to make one. If such a spell existed, no secrets would be safe from anyone, for the distance that James claimed to be able to eavesdrop was at least two hundred yards. It would be the most coveted, sought after, and therefore most well-known spell in the wizarding world.

Then there was the possibility that both James and Lily were lying, and that Lily had given James the spells. It was simple, easy to understand given that Severus knew Lily was attracted to James, and personally very unpleasant. What it meant, though, was that the scene he'd just witnessed had been concocted by both for the purpose of misleading him. Severus didn't like this scenario at all, not least because he was sure that Lily was not that good an actress.

If James were lying and Lily truthful, there was still the problem of how he'd overheard a distant conversation, and the proposition that James was truthful and Lily lying just didn't make sense. There was always Lily's explanation — that she'd talked in her sleep — but then why would James have to make up a story about nonexistent spells?

No matter which way he looked at it, Severus could see nothing but a puzzle wrapped in contradictions.

The puzzle, and classes, kept Severus busy through the second night of the full moon, and then there was nothing to do but wait another month. He had a lot now to keep him busy. Seventh years were approaching him

about tutoring for their NEWTs and fifth years about their OWLs. He had so many requests from timorous first and second years that he actually set up a little workshop where they could review and practice the material they covered each week. Slytherin house was doing very well in Potions.

Severus was doing very well in money, the only problem being that it was all galleons, sickles, and knuts. Then he hit on the idea of charging only two-thirds the fee if he were paid in muggle money. Half-blood students were overjoyed, and purebloods so desperate that a black market in pounds and pence soon darkened the seedy teenage underbelly of Hogwarts. Or at least of Slytherin house.

Then Gra's house was sold, and Nana sent an owl to inform Severus that he now had an actual bank account with Barclay's of London. He had to go with her to sign a sheaf of papers, but the wonder of possessing a number and a passbook was something that enveloped him in a fluffy cloud of contentment for days.

#### SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 6, 1976 (THE FULL MOON)

The next full moon fell on a weekend. By great good or ill fortune, it was also a weekend when the school was allowed to visit Hogsmeade. This time Severus decided to go. This time he had money. Though most of the students talked about Honeydukes and the taverns and coffee shops, Severus knew that Hogsmeade also boasted a book store.

The sun was heading toward an early setting that afternoon, but not before the full moon rose in the deepening late afternoon sky. Severus was immersed in books, from which pleasant occupation he was summoned by screams and yells. "The Shack! The Shack is shrieking!"

Severus raced out with the others. To be a witness to the phenomenon of the most haunted spot in Britain not just once, but twice, was an opportunity not to be missed. Pressed together with the other students at a respectful distance, Severus listened again to the cries and moans of the Shack, punctuated with howls and ululations impossible to describe. The crowd cheered and shivered at the spectral sounds, and went back to Hogwarts thoroughly pleased with the day's activities.

A little later, Severus stood on the lawn in front of the castle watching the bright orb of the moon rise in the sky. The moon was full, Lupin was sick, and the Shack was shrieking. *I never thought about it before because I never*

*went into Hogsmeade before except that one time. Does the Shack only shriek when the moon is full? And what would it have to do with Remus Lupin?*

The December full moon coincided with end of term exams, and Christmas break was full of workshops and Potions classes. The January full moon was wrapped up in beginning of term papers and assignments. Severus's daily schedule had never been so full, and he was beginning to wonder if the money was worth it. He barely had time to even think of his problems with Lily. They probably wouldn't have had time to speak even if they'd been on speaking terms.

Then January was over and the term settled in, and Severus had a chance to breathe. It was the beginning of February, Imbolc in the ancient way on the first, Candlemas in the Son's way on the second, and by great coincidence the first night of the full moon on the third. Severus thought again of the mysterious illness of Remus Lupin and decided to investigate once more.

James, meanwhile, had continued his relentless pursuit of Lily. He greeted her, consulted her, mugged in front of her and made her giggle, embarrassed himself for her pleasure and allowed her to insult him at her whim. In short, he would have been the perfect boyfriend if she had liked him even a little. As it was, he endured perpetual frustration for a shining goal held always beyond his reach.

Christmas break brought Sirius to the haven of the Potter household, but Sirius was no help because he never looked beyond the throng of Quidditch groupies. James longed for the days when Lily could trample his heart underfoot, and was eager for the new term to begin.

#### THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 3, 1977 (THE DAY BEFORE THE FULL MOON)

Sirius stared at the Marauder's Map in disgust. "Snivellus is following us again. Why can't he keep his greasy nose out of our business?"

"Leave him alone." James was watching the spiral staircase leading from the Gryffindor common room to the girls' dormitories where Lily had just disappeared. It was after supper, and they were waiting until the room cleared to sneak out. "Besides, how can he be following us when we're in here?"

"He's outside waiting near the entrance steps. I think he wants to find Remus. I think he wants to get Remus expelled."

"You're paranoid. He doesn't know anything about Remus."

"No? How come he only follows us once a month? Answer that, Mr. Know-It-All. I'm going out to have a talk with him."

James was on his feet in an instant. "You're not going to mess with him."

"Why? Because he's your girlfriend's pet? What's she going to do, beat you up?"

"I'm serious. You're not going to hurt him."

"I'm Sirius, too. And I promise I won't lay a hand on him."

Sirius returned twenty minutes later looking like the cat that had swallowed the cream. "That's it," he said. "Trouble over."

James glanced over at him. "How'd you get rid of him?"

"Told him what he wanted to know."

"Which was..." The room had grown suddenly cold.

"I told him how to find Remus, but he thinks he's after you, too." Sirius laughed. "I said I was sick of you hanging around Lily, and that you and Remus had a secret place outside Hogwarts. I told him about the willow and the knot. I said it'd be a good thing if he caught you two together because then you'd both be expelled for going off grounds. Then you wouldn't be able to bother Lily."

"And he believed you?"

"No. Of course not. He told me what an idiot I was. I was that close to strangling him. But I think his curiosity is going to get the better of him and we'll be rid of a nuisance."

James felt his heart stop. "You sent him into that tunnel without telling him what he'd be meeting?"

"So? Serves him right for being such a nosey Parker."

"No. Curiosity doesn't deserve death. You're going to stop it."

"Hell if I am. If I could have a front row seat, I'd be in it."

There was no time to lose, and James was on his feet and out the door before Sirius finished the sentence.

As soon as Sirius went back into the Castle, Severus started down the hill toward the willow. He'd wondered about that tree. The older students remembered when it was brought in, already substantial, and planted. That was the year before Severus entered Hogwarts. Why anyone would want a whomping willow around a school was a mystery. Yet somehow Sirius Black had the key to that mystery, and it involved Remus and James. Unless, of course, there was no button, and Sirius was watching from the hill, waiting for Severus to get whumped.

*Timing. It's all timing. If I can dart in and back out again before it has a chance to hit me...* Severus took a deep breath and ran for a great root that arched out like the entrance to a cave before plunging into the earth. The

willow reared back in anger, but Severus already found and pushed the knot, and the tree froze. *Amazing. Sirius Black was telling the truth.*

Under the root was a low, rough tunnel leading in the direction of Hogsmeade. Behind Severus the full moon lit the school grounds with bright silver light, but the tunnel was pitch black. Severus drew his wand. "*Lumos*," he said, and entered the tunnel.

James ran out across the lawn to where he could look down on the whomping willow. It stood immobile. *Let me be on time. Please let me be on time.* He raced down the hill and ducked into the tunnel. *I can't even transform. I have to talk to him, and I may have to use magic. I have to face Remus as a human.*

James lit his own Lumos spell and hurried as quickly as he could along the low, uneven tunnel, reasoning that he could gain on Severus since he knew his way already. And yet there was no black-robed student in front of him, no twin light spell. James dreaded what he might find at the end of that tunnel and felt sick.

Then the tunnel rose, and James pulled himself up into a lower room of the Shrieking Shack. The door to the hallway was ajar. Beyond it he heard quiet footsteps, and a board creaked. Then there was the horrible sound of ripping, splintering wood, and a crash that made the whole house shake.

James burst through the door to find Severus frozen at the foot of the stairs, his face blank with shock, staring up into the yellow eyes of a huge, raging werewolf. The beast leaped.

James screamed, "MOVE!" and threw himself forward, tackling Severus and pulling him down away from the wolf's claws. Twisting himself around, he shoved his wand forward and yelled, "*Impedimenta!*" The wolf staggered back, dazed, and James jumped to his feet, pulling on Severus's arm. "Get up! Get up! We have to get out of here!"

Severus scrambled up, but the wolf was between the two boys and the hallway door. The Impedimenta was already wearing off. Severus pointed his own wand, a determined look on his face, and James, realizing what he was about to do, grabbed his arm. "Don't kill him! It's Remus!" The wolf charged, and the boys dove for the floor.

The door was in front of James now. He wheeled and sent another spell at the wolf, giving Severus time to get clear, but the second spell had less effect than the first one. After reeling for a moment, the wolf faced them, teeth bared and snarling, and started down the hallway.

"On three! One, two, thr . . ." Twin Impedimenta spells hit the werewolf,



and James and Severus bolted through the door and slammed it shut. "Down into the tunnel! Quick! It can't follow us. It's too big."

"What about you?" Severus gasped. The wolf was clawing at the door, which couldn't hold long.

"I'll be right behind you. Move!"

Severus slipped down the hole with James on top of him as the werewolf broke through the door and thrust its snout into the tunnel after them. They ran, bent over, stumbling and tripping on the uneven floor, until they were certain there was no wolf behind them, then lit their wands and continued, bathed in the dim green light, to the base of the willow.

There, under the willow, they sat panting and gasping for breath. Severus was trembling uncontrollably, and James realized that he was shaking, too. They looked at each other, then Severus said in a tight, fierce voice, "He tried to kill me."

"He can't help it when he's changed. He doesn't know what he's doing."

"Not him. Black. Black tried to kill me. I'm going to get him. I swear I'm going to get him."

"Can't we please stop the fighting?"

"I wasn't the one who started it."

"Fine. But we don't have to fight tonight. Let's get out of here."

James led the way out of the willow and pushed the knot to let them through. The two walked back up the hill in silence. As they split up, Severus to go down into Slytherin house and James up into Gryffindor, Severus turned. "By the way," he said, "thank you. For saving my life."

"Don't mention it."

Neither boy slept well that night.

After the full moon passed, Sirius greeted Remus like a conquering hero. "You had old Snivellus messing his pants. I'd've loved to see it. Gad, what a show."

Remus shook his head. "I don't understand what you're talking about."

"Sit down," James told him. "This isn't going to be easy to listen to. And you, Padfoot, keep your mouth shut. Snape was following us. He figured out something was wrong, but not what. Sirius thought it would be 'funny' to tell him how to get past the whomping willow and into the tunnel. Told him you and I were visiting Hogsmeade without permission."

"But he didn't do it. You didn't really let him do it."

"When I got there, you and he were facing off at opposite ends of the

staircase. If I'd gotten there ten seconds later, you'd have killed him. He had a chance to kill you, too, but when I asked him not to, he didn't."

Remus blanched and looked nauseous. "I've never killed anyone. All these years I've been so lucky, and I've never killed anyone. And then you!" He rounded on Sirius with an anger they'd never seen him display before. "You send someone walking right in where you know I'll have to kill him..."

"So what? It was just old Snivelly."

"Shut up!" James and Remus yelled at him in unison.

Severus sat at the far end of the Slytherin table during supper and kept his eyes on the Gryffindor four. He hadn't yet mentioned his encounter with Remus to anyone else, though he'd been weighing the pros and cons. Finished eating, he rose and left for Slytherin house. The four rose as well and followed him out.

Severus knew they were there. Halfway across the entrance hall, he turned to face them. "Isn't this a little public?" he said. "But I forgot. You like public places."

James planted himself directly in Sirius's path. "This has nothing to do with us," he said. "We're staying here. This is just about you and Remus."

Remus separated himself from the others. "I need to talk to you. Can we go outside?"

They went out onto the lawn where the moon was climbing in the east. Remus watched it wistfully, then said, "I want to apologize to you."

"What for?"

"For what happened."

"Which time?"

Remus was puzzled. "How many times did you go to the Shack?"

"Ah, that one. That's the one you don't have to apologize for. That wasn't your fault."

"I could have killed you."

"No. The werewolf could have killed me. I did get an Outstanding in Dark Arts, you know."

"So what other one are you talking about?"

"Ones. Plural. The first one was having my arms held while they took my wand away from me, dragged me into an empty room, and forced slug juice down my throat."

"I wasn't in the room."

"You helped carry me to Slytherin house afterward and left me there paralyzed. The last one was watching a Gryffindor prefect sit quietly on the

grass while I was drowning in soapsuds. There were others in between, but those two stand out.”

“You’re not making this easy.”

“Why does everyone expect me to make things easy for them when they’ve made things so hard for me? Frankly, if I had to choose between apologizing and vomiting slugs, I’d much rather apologize.”

“You hit us, too.”

“Never four to one. Not even two to one.”

Remus didn’t know what to say. He was suddenly very tired. “Look,” he said, “I’m sorry. I’m sorry for all of it. You’re right. I’m weak and I went along with it. I’d give anything to be able to go back and undo it, but I can’t. I know we can’t ever be friends, but could we at least be not enemies?”

“Are you speaking just for yourself?”

“Just for myself.”

“Okay. Not enemies.”

On an impulse, Remus stretched out his hand. “Pax?” he asked.

Severus hesitated, his cold eyes glittering in the moonlight. Then he took Remus’s hand very briefly. “Pax,” he replied.

“Let’s walk,” James said as Remus rejoined them and the four started up the stairs to Gryffindor house. “Just us.” He called to Sirius, who was up on the second flight already. “Remus and I are going out. We’ll meet you later in the common room.”

The two went back out onto the lawn under the moon. “How did it go?”

Remus thought for a moment. “Better than I deserve. He’s awfully bitter. Not that I blame him. But he agreed not to be enemies.”

“So we’re neutral now?”

“Not you. Just me. I don’t think it’ll be so easy for you.”

“No, guess not. But he did agree to end hostilities with you? That’s encouraging.”

“Good luck.”

“I’ll need it.”

James was sitting in the common room, the Marauder’s Map secreted in the book he pretended to read and an unusually light book bag on the floor next to him. When the ‘Severus Snape’ dot started moving through the Slytherin common room, he was up and running down from Gryffindor Tower, the bag in hand.

They met in the entrance hall. “I need to talk to you,” James said between

breaths. "How about in here?" He gestured to the room where the first years waited for sorting.

"I don't like that room," Severus said.

James nodded. "I don't blame you." Then, on an impulse, he reached inside his robes and took out his wand. Holding it by the tip, he offered it to Severus. "Token of good faith?" he said.

Severus took the wand. "You first?"

They entered the room, James first and Severus after. James turned, determined to see this through. "I'm putting all my cards on the table," he said.

"I don't play cards," Severus responded.

"You know, you're not . . ."

"Making this easy. Yes, I know."

James took a deep breath. "I like Evans. I think she could like me, but she seems to think I'm a stuck-up prick."

Severus raised his eyebrows.

"Okay! I am a stuck-up prick! But she's angry that you won't talk to her and she thinks it's my fault. And it is my fault. So I'm going to come clean." James reached into his book bag and pulled out the length of shimmering, iridescent fabric. "I got this for Christmas last year." He threw it over his shoulders, and most of his body instantly disappeared.

Severus didn't gasp, but his mouth stayed open for a good five seconds. "You have an Invisibility Cloak."

"Not really. It's just this old rag that coincidentally makes you disappear."

Severus's cough concealed a snort of laughter. The laughter was a reflex of relief. He sat down in one of the chairs. "So you wore this . . . thing, and followed us?"

"Right out to the edge of the Forbidden Forest. She talked about not being able to do the spell. You told her what she was doing wrong. I spread it through the whole school the next day."

Severus stood and walked over to James. Slowly, carefully, he reached out and touched the fabric of the cloak. "Do you know how rare these are?"

"Not really. My parents gave it to me. Family heirloom or something. Look, do you think you could patch things up with Lily? I know you don't like the idea of us being together, but it's only leveling the playing field. If she still doesn't like me, I'm cooked."

"I'll talk to Lily," Severus said.

The note, 'Lake — after supper,' appeared in Lily's book this time.

Lily was early, Severus on time. “What did you want?” Lily asked, cutting right to the important part.

“I had a talk with Potter today.”

“Oh. What did he have to say?”

“It turns out he owns an Invisibility Cloak. He got it for Christmas a year ago.”

“Do they exist?”

“This one does. He showed it to me. He thinks every rich kid has one. In his dictionary, rare and expensive are synonyms.”

There was an awkward silence, Lily not wanting to ask and Severus not wanting to volunteer. Severus buckled first. “He wore it that evening when he overheard us talking.”

“So I didn’t tell him.”

“I guess not.” There was another awkward silence while Severus weighed the relative discomfort of spitting up slugs. “I... eh... was wrong. I... should have trusted you. I’m sorry.”

“That’s okay. An invisibility cloak. Wow. Who would have guessed?”

“So, how are your classes going?”

“Same as usual. Potions is getting hard. It’s so easy to brew them, but analyzing them is a lot harder. I still don’t understand Golpalott.”

“Well, if you need any help...”

They didn’t stay. It was cold, and it was late. Both had early classes, and there really wasn’t much else to talk about.

The next day James approached Lily and timidly tried to clown for her amusement. She smiled at him, and he grinned back.

Potions was a bigger nightmare for Lily than she admitted. She’d always been good, and working with Severus had made her top in her class, but brewing and analyzing were totally different concepts, not to mention the academic theories, and Lily was floundering.

During the last class of February, Slughorn gave them the hardest assignment yet, which was the practical application of Golpalott’s Third Law. Each student was given a different blended poison and required, during the course of one double period, to analyze it and come up with the antidote that would simultaneously counteract each of the poison’s separate components. Severus wasn’t concerned. The work was rigorous and challenging, but eminently doable. He set out calmly and methodically to uncover the secrets of his poison.

Lily was having trouble. She botched her first test and had to start over

again. Then she mismeasured a vital catalytic agent and ended up with skewed results. Time was running out, and Lily was nowhere near finished.

Severus, who'd been immersed in his own work, didn't notice her panic until the class was nearly done, and Lily hadn't wanted to ask him. Their relationship was still too tenuous. He completed his assignment and looked over at her, frustrated and frazzled. Their eyes met, Severus realized what was happening and inclined his head toward his potions book, then bent and scribbled a few words.

When Slughorn wasn't looking, Lily crept over to Severus's table on the pretext of picking up more ingredients. Glancing at the page in the book, she saw written right across a list of antidotes the words *Just shove a bezoar down their throats*. Almost laughing with relief, she slipped across the room to a storage cupboard and returned a moment later with something clutched tightly in her hand. When Slughorn came to check her results and look at her antidote, she held the bezoar in front of him.

Slughorn roared with laughter. "Not exactly the solution I was expecting, Evans, but I do have to give you points for creativity."

Across the room, Lily and Severus winked at each other. For that brief moment, they were a team again.

In March it was announced that apparating lessons would begin within the week. All students who had already turned seventeen, or who would turn seventeen before the first of April, were allowed to sign up. Both Lily and Severus put their names in the first day.

Hagrid looked up from the raked and hoed plot that by autumn would become a pumpkin patch. "Hullo. Haven't seen you in a while. Y're looking reasonably fit. What're ya now, seventeen?"

"Reasonably fit," said Severus. "I suppose that's better than 'at death's door,' though there is that touch of something lacking. And yes, I have managed to survive until age seventeen. How've you been doing, Hagrid?"

"'Bout the same as always. There ain't a lot of variety in the job from year t' year. New students, new faces, same problems."

"Same old same old, I suppose. Well, Dumbledore said I should now have a checkup once a year. I think this is it, if you're not too busy."

"Won't be in about fifteen minutes. Have a seat, lad. I hear y're learning t' apparate." Hagrid bent to his seeding.

"Oh, yes. Wonderful thing, apparation. No more train tickets and overnights in London. And I can now do magic at home without ministerial interference."

"You got somewhat you want t' do at home?"

"Little things. Improvement projects. Muggle awareness protection. Do you know that last summer I made bookcases? With a hammer and nails? I am not a carpenter."

Hagrid chuckled. "It ain't in all of us t' be handy, lad."

They went into the hut, and Hagrid checked height, weight, teeth, reflexes . . . Severus endured it all with patience.

"One of your jobs is managing the forest, isn't it?" Severus said as Hagrid peered into his right ear.

"Yep. And it's a full-time job on its own, it is. That's a big piece of property."

"So you've got to notice if things go wrong, like strange animals move into the area."

"Sure enough. Upset the balance, they do."

"Then if some big predator animal moved in, like a wolf, you'd be the first to have to deal with it."

"I would. Though we ain't had that problem since the winter of '54."

"No wolves at all?"

Hagrid paused. His face scrunched up in thought. "Can't say as there's been any at all. Can't say as I've seen any."

"Of course not. There wouldn't be any wolves around Hogwarts."

Later that afternoon, long after Severus had gone, Hagrid went to Dumbledore. "He's asking about wolves on the grounds."

"Dear, dear, we must see about that," was Dumbledore's response.

Dumbledore regarded the earnest student with some affection. "So you see, the whole situation has been under control for some years."

"And you can guarantee that there's never been a time when he's left that shack. Never even a close call?"

"Is there some reason, Master Snape, that you feel that you are better qualified than I to evaluate this situation? If so, I would appreciate hearing it, for I would not wish to make an error in so delicate a matter."

"No, sir."

"And do you have any concrete evidence that other students are in any way endangered?"

"No, sir."

"Ah. Then I shall have to request that you keep your suspicions to yourself. As long as you are unable or unwilling to back them up with factual

evidence, then I must insist on maintaining the status quo. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir.”

Sirius Black stopped Severus on the third floor the next day, as Severus was going down from the library. “You peached to Dumbledore, didn’t you?”

“Why, Black. Whatever are you talking about?”

“He had us up there for half an hour. I’m on detention. You’re a little sneak squealer, and I won’t forget it.”

“You know, Black, you keep jumping to conclusions, and one day you’re going to jump right off a cliff.”

“I won’t forget. I’ve got my eye on you.”

“Oh, I’m scared, I’m scared. Look how I’m trembling.”

Black stomped off, and Severus waited until his next Potions class to speak to Lily. The conversation was whispered, but that didn’t disguise Lily’s irritation.

“I think it’s mean of you to talk about Remus that way. Think what would happen if that rumor started in the school. He wouldn’t have any friends at all. And you’re wrong. He just gets sick a lot.”

“Sick only when the moon is full, and I bet you wouldn’t find him in the hospital wing. And he wouldn’t lose any friends because his friends already know. I don’t want to start rumors, Lily, but I don’t want you hurt either. You’ve got to be careful.”

“He’s been here nearly six full years. Nothing’s happened, not even the rumor of anything happening. Sev, I think you’re wrong.”

Their eyes met for the first time in more than a year, and Severus felt the barriers melt and the doors swing open in his brain. For a second, just a second, he let it happen. Then he turned his gaze away. “Why can’t we be friends again,” he said quietly, “like we were before?”

Lily was suddenly engrossed in the potion she was brewing. “I don’t know,” she said. “Could we both forget what’s happened? You’ve changed.” She must have noticed the suddenly stiffening of his back and shoulders because she added, “We’ve both changed. We’re not children anymore. We’re not the same people we were then. You have other . . . friends, and so do I.”

“They’re not my friends. They tolerate me. I use them. I’ve only ever had one . . .” Now it was Severus who found the potion in his cauldron fascinating. After a minute, he whispered, “Couldn’t we try? We were best friends once.”

“I don’t know. Let me think about it.”

On Mulciber’s seventeenth birthday, Avery snuck a bottle of firewhisky



into the sixth year dormitory. Now all five of them, Severus, Wilkes, Rosier, Edison, and Mulciber, were seventeen, but the firewhisky was still not allowed in the dormitory, and they were joined by the underage Regulus Black, so the whole party was technically illegal.

“Here’s to the Birthday Boy!” Avery said as he thrust a glass of firewhisky into Severus’s hand.

Severus looked down at the glistening amber liquid and thought of his father. He himself had never before tasted anything alcoholic, and he wondered if this would do to him what gin had done to his dad. He started to hand it back. “I don’t know . . .” he said.

“Oh, come on. One small drink isn’t going to hurt you. You have to toast the birthday boy. It’s customary.”

Severus kept the drink. The only one who was firm in sticking to pumpkin juice was Edison, who was now generally considered the prude of the dorm anyway.

Avery raised his glass. “Gentlemen, I give you Aloysius Mulciber!”

The other five, Edison with his pumpkin juice, raised their glasses and responded, “Aloysius Mulciber!” and downed their drinks. Severus had the impression even as he drained his glass, that Regulus had done this before, then he was suddenly and totally preoccupied with the burning sensation in his throat and stomach. He began to cough uncontrollably.

“There’s always a first time,” Wilkes laughed as he pounded Severus on the back. “Here, have another. It’ll stop the coughing.”

Wilkes was right. It did stop the coughing. In fact, the little party became quite merry after that, and Severus found himself giggling at just about everything Mulciber said because he realized that Mulciber was a very funny person. The boys started a little hexing game, trying to leave marks on each others’ faces.

“I know!” cried Avery. “Let’s go out into the castle and see what we can find!”

Edison declined, and he managed to convince Severus to stay as well and get Regulus to bed. If Regulus had been caught outside Slytherin house clearly tipsy, they all would have been in serious trouble.

Regulus was asleep and tucked into bed (in that order) well before curfew and the return of the other four boys. Severus was still in a state where he was highly amused at everything, but Edison was gradually pulling him back down to earth. Then Avery and the others came bursting into the common room with the air and noise of escaping a hue and cry, becoming more sedate

once they were safely inside Slytherin, and finally sauntering into the dorm laughing.

“Did you see the look on her face?” Avery crowed. “I thought I’d die! Where’d you ever come up with that spell, Al?”

“A little thing I picked up at Zonkos’s, though I doubt the originator intended it to be that . . . revealing,” said Mulciber.

Wilkes was giggling like a maniac. “I thought she’d have a fit when she realized it was under her robes, but the unbuttoning charm . . . If only it’d gotten one more button. What a treat!”

“What are you talking about?” Edison asked.

“Girls!” Wilkes and Rosier yelled together, and Rosier continued. “We went up to the fifth floor and caught some Gryffindors and Ravenclaws going up to the towers, mostly half-breeds and mudbloods, including Ferguson.” He made a motion over his chest to indicate how well-endowed Ferguson was. “Al has these disrobing spells . . .” He chuckled.

“I swear,” howled Wilkes, “it was all the way down to here before she realized her robe was being unbuttoned. And lifting that Gryffindor’s robes from behind ’til you could see . . . Whew!”

“And the tickling curse! You’d think she had a bee in her robes the way she was jumping around!”

“I didn’t want her to jump around,” laughed Mulciber. “I wanted her to take the robes off. Kind of like a birthday present to me.”

“We could have, too,” Rosier explained, “because Ken had them boxed in on the landing. He’s got this herding spell, and where they were, no one could hear them. Another ten, fifteen minutes and — paradise!”

“What Gryffindor girls?” Severus asked giggling, his attention finally shifting from the general laughter to four comments earlier.

“The plump one,” Avery said. “What’s her name? Macdonald. She and Ferguson were the oldest there. The others were younger. They’d have put on a great show.”

“Why didn’t they?” Edison asked, quiet and calm. Of the group he was the only one who hadn’t laughed.

“Oh, that,” said Mulciber. “A group of Ravenclaw boys came by and saw what we were doing. We had to run. It was great fun, though.”

The four continued to relive the incident to their own great amusement, and to Severus’s as well, imitating, in a clownish way, the motions of the girls as they struggled to keep their clothing in place despite the disrobing spells.

Then, suddenly, Severus was asleep, and didn't wake until the next morning, not really certain how he'd gotten into his own bed.

It wasn't until three days later that Severus noticed there was anything wrong. Lily had spent most of their afternoon Charms class working with Potter and Lupin, but Severus was hoping to talk to her alone during the afternoon break. He followed her discretely downstairs, and when she broke off from the others to head toward one of the courtyards, he called softly, "Lily, wait a moment." To his surprise, she tilted her nose up and stalked on as if she hadn't heard him.

"Lily! Lily, wait," Severus called again, with as little response. He caught up to her at the entrance to the cloistered walk. "Lily, is something wrong?"

She glared at him. "I don't want to talk to you," she stated firmly. "I hate the lot of you."

"Hate me? What did I do?"

"You're just like them."

"Like who?"

"Birds of a feather," Lily said flatly, and stomped past him into the courtyard.

Severus ran after her, his temper beginning to rise. "What are you talking about? You know, Lily, it might help if you explained to me what I did that made you angry. I'm not a mind reader, you know. Lily! I thought we were supposed to be friends? Best friends?"

Lily spun to face him, walking sideways, almost backwards, across the courtyard. "We are, Sev, but I don't like some of the people you're hanging around with! I'm sorry, but I detest Avery and Mulciber! Mulciber! What do you see in him, Sev, he's creepy! Do you know what he tried to do to Mary Macdonald the other day?" She backed into a pillar and stopped there, scanning his face.

The memory was there — fuzzy, but there. "That was nothing," Severus said. "It was a laugh, that's all . . ." It had certainly seemed amusing while he was listening to it.

"It was Dark Magic, and if you think that's funny . . ."

Severus began to seethe, the demon rising in him. It was the same prejudice, the same double standard that Lily had been throwing at him ever since the Sorting Hat put her in Gryffindor. The double standard that Dumbledore and McGonagall encouraged. What his dorm mates had done hadn't actually hurt the girls, not like putting Bertram Aubrey in hospital or trying to suffocate Severus in soapsuds, or sending him to face a werewolf and

almost certain death. But when Gryffindor did something, it was a boyish prank, and when Slytherin did something, usually something less serious, all of a sudden it was Dark Magic.

"What about the stuff Potter and his mates get up to?" he spat at her, jumping over the logic and going straight to the heart of the matter.

"What's Potter got to do with anything?" said Lily.

*Everything. The different ruler you use when you measure Potter has everything to do with it.* The words didn't come out right, though, and Severus found himself beginning to stammer again as he listed the reasons she already knew. "They . . . sneak out at night. There's . . . something weird about that Lupin . . ." *Like he's on page three-ninety-four of our third year Dark Arts text . . .* "Where does he keep going?" *Think, Lily, think.*

"He's ill," said Lily, as if she were reciting a memorized passage. "They say he's ill . . ."

*They! Potter and Black most likely!* "Every month at the full moon?" *Remember what I told you!*

Lily was suddenly as cold as ice, distant, a stranger. "I know your theory. Why are you so obsessed with them anyway? Why do you care what they're doing at night?"

*Because you let them get away with murder. Because Dumbledore and McGonagall let them get away with murder. Because if you're rich and attractive and in the right clique, the whole world lets you get away with murder.* "I'm just trying to . . . show you they're not as . . . wonderful as everyone seems to . . . think they are."

"They don't use Dark Magic, though," Lily retorted, and before his response could explode on her, she let her voice drop to almost a whisper. "And you're being really ungrateful. I heard what happened the other night. You went sneaking down that tunnel by the Whomping Willow, and James Potter saved you from whatever's down there . . ."

Severus recoiled in livid shock. Dumbledore had forbidden him to speak of the incident, but he'd apparently placed no such restrictions on Potter, Black, or Lupin. "Saved?" he spluttered. "Saved? You think he was playing the hero? He was saving his neck and his friends' too!" He couldn't comprehend how she could be so unfair. "You're not going to . . ." he stammered. "I won't let you . . ."

Lily's fury blazed now. "Let me!" she screamed at him. "Let me!"

They glared at each other, and Severus felt the sluice gates rise as everything in him seemed to open and pour out. There had never been any doubt

who in their relationship controlled whom, and he had never really questioned that it should be so. "I didn't mean..." He was stammering again. "I just don't want to... see you made a fool of..." He paused. *Cards on the table. That's what Potter said.* "He fancies you, James Potter fancies you! And he's not... everyone thinks... big Quidditch hero..."

A look of surprise and then of comprehension illuminated Lily's face. She seized her advantage and held onto it. "I know James Potter's an arrogant toerag. I don't need you to tell me that. But Mulciber's and Avery's idea of humor is just evil. Evil, Sev. I don't understand how you can be friends with them."

Severus relaxed into the sense of ease and peace that Lily's eyes always gave him. He had missed it for so long. Lily was there, talking to him, letting him look in her eyes, and what was more, she'd not yet succumbed to Potter. The world still held hope.

Lily moved away from the pillar, Severus beside her. "Will you stop seeing them, Sev? Can you do that?"

"It isn't that easy, Lil. We live together. We sleep in the same dorm. Well, not Avery, of course. Could you just stop talking to your dorm mates?"

"My dorm mates are nice."

"So are mine, sort of. Most of the time now, at least. Lil, that day was Mulciber's birthday, and Avery brought firewhisky into the dorm. They were all a little tipsy..."

"It isn't just that one time. They're always doing things like that. Promise me you'll try to stay a little distant from them? Please?"

Severus promised. The odd thing was that he was so preoccupied with tutoring for the upcoming OWLs and NEWTs that his dorm mates didn't even notice that he was coming in right at lights out and leaving early. Nobody questioned him, and nobody minded.

## C H A P T E R   F I G H T E E N

### BAIT, HOOK, AND CATCH

And so the sixth year at Hogwarts ended. Severus asked for and received permission to apparate home several times during the last week in order to clear out the things he'd left stored in Slytherin house over the years, and he took advantage of the trips to pay brief visits to Nana. Apparation was a wonderful thing, and he'd turned out to be quite good at it.

Now that he was allowed to perform magic outside of Hogwarts, Severus set about seriously remodeling his home. He lined the walls of the sitting room with bookcases, making it smaller and darker and more like a private study. Then he built a new staircase that ended behind one of the bookcases, a sort of secret passage. Upstairs in the now empty storage area he installed tables, cabinets, and a sink, turning it into a proper laboratory for both potions and chemistry.

With all finally prepared, Severus apparated to London. It was a heady thing to have money. He wasn't sure where to go, so he went to the Tower of London, where he was sure there was a tourist information desk. There he found that Charing Cross Road was the best place for books. He wandered in and out of rare book shops until he discovered his favorite building in the whole country, for it contained floor after floor after floor of books. Severus restricted himself to geometry, physics, astronomy, and chemistry, then apparated home, assuring himself there'd be many more visits.

Another day he went to Diagon Alley to buy books at Flourish and Blotts. While there Severus noticed a display of broomsticks, and paused to think. It'd been a while since his disastrous classes, and he was older and more self-assured. Maybe . . . After all, it might be wise to keep a broom at home. Just in case. He lied to the shop keeper about a younger brother and bought a lightweight beginner's broom to practice with on the moors outside town.

The broom turned out to be easier than Severus expected. He went out onto the moor in the evening when he was certain not to be seen, and tried to recall everything he'd ever been told about handling a broom. Whether it was his own greater maturity or the fact that the broom hadn't already been used by hundreds of other students, Severus found that he could rise and land without losing control and that he could navigate short distances without the ride becoming too bumpy. Not great, but serviceable, and so he was content.

Then there was Voyager. Not as glamorous as Apollo or Skylab, nor as immediate in its results as Viking and Venera, Voyager nonetheless was a scientist's dream. Severus practiced his geometry and physics calculating the trajectory that would take the twin probes to Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus and Neptune. The thought of seeing photographs of something more than two and a half billion miles away was intoxicating.

Severus was upstairs working in his laboratory one sunny day in the second half of July when a beautiful tawny owl flew up and beat her wings against the window. *Who would send me an owl?* He opened the window to let her in, and tipped her a few knuts. He had the impression she would have preferred a live mouse, but he kept no live animals in the house, certainly not mice.

The letter was from Narcissa. Her whole future happiness was at stake. She was desperate. She was at her wits' end. She had no one to turn to except him. If he wouldn't help her, she would have no other recourse but to die.

*Rich kid drama. No one falls for this stuff except people who really want to and people who watch too many movies. And people who have too few good memories.* The return owl assented to a meeting and gave instructions on how to find the house. The next afternoon, Severus heard the pop of Narcissa apparating into his kitchen.

Narcissa was clearly not prepared for Severus's house. She was uncomfortable with its smallness, its shabbiness, its uncared for look. He persuaded her to sit down on the tiny, worn sofa in the sitting room and prepared tea for her in a chipped cup. She sipped at it graciously.

"I can't stand it. I can't stand being without him. My parents are opposed. His parents are opposed. I'm at my wits' end. I need a spell; I need a potion. I need something that will turn them around and allow us to marry. You're the only spell maker I know. Can't you do something for us?"

"I might be able to do something in the spell way, though I'm not sure what, but I have no idea if there's a potion that will do what you want it to.

My grandmother would know. She's made potions for the district all her life. If there's something that can help you, she'll know what it is."

"Oh . . . You have a grandmother?" was Narcissa's reply.

Nana's cottage was classic, small but perfect in its simple, neat way, and Narcissa loved the garden. She and Nana were polite to each other, and yet there was a distance of blood and heritage that both were intensely aware of that created a certain frostiness between them. It made Severus wonder if Narcissa had ever before been in the position of feeling inferior.

"I do not," Nana said as they inspected the black hellebore and aconite, "brew potions to deceive."

"Oh, no, Mrs. Prince. Not deceive. Just incline to our point of view."

"It would help if I knew why your points of view differ."

"Our fathers have different ideas on a . . . political issue. It has nothing to do with Lucius or myself, and everything to do with keeping the families apart. I hate politics so. I just want us to be happy."

Later they took tea on the lawn. Nana was using an elegant tea service that Severus had never seen before, and he suspected she kept it packed away, bringing it out for special occasions.

"There is a potion for the healing of psychic wounds that may help you. It dispels bitterness and resentment, and speeds recovery from spiritual injuries. It is a complex potion that will take about six weeks to make and is somewhat expensive. I could not guarantee that it will accomplish what you wish, but it may make your persuasion more successful."

"Oh, money is no problem. We're just so happy to have any help at all. You're too kind."

Narcissa arranged to return in August.

It was a terrible summer. Even in the backwater of eastern Lancashire, they learned of accidents and attacks all through the wizarding world. It was as if the whole country was under some kind of evil spell.

Homes were destroyed by lightning, or by the explosion of gas mains. Families drowned in freak boating accidents, or were buried in mudslides of huge coal slag mountains. Closer to home, mobs of muggles in villages of Yorkshire and Cumberland attacked wizards and witches, driving them from their houses or, in one instance, killing them. The Ministry of Magic was frantic, trying to contain both the disasters themselves and the spread of news. Muggles were being attacked as well, and here the cover-up was more difficult.

Severus increased the protective spells around his house, extending them



to neighboring buildings. Most of the narrow street was now empty of inhabitants, and he was quite pleased to keep it that way. The only thing needed was to ensure that the local council ceased to notice that the end of the road existed. It was at the very edge of the village, and drew neither electricity nor gas, and so the spells, while complex, did not involve a large area. He urged Nana to guard her cottage as well, but she didn't see the need.

Voyager 2 launched on August 20. Severus thought it fascinating that the second probe would leave Earth before the first one, but the logic was unassailable. Voyager 1 would be on a faster trajectory, and would arrive first at Jupiter, assuming all the physics had been done properly. Severus had no doubts. He set himself to wait patiently for a year and a half until he could start seeing the pictures.

Narcissa, too, came in August. She went directly to Nana this time, and Severus wouldn't have known of her visit if he hadn't been visiting Nana at the same time. They had a pleasant luncheon on the lawn, the weather being beautiful that day, and Narcissa left with a precious vial of potion for the healing of psychic wounds.

The summer ended far too soon, and it was time to return to Hogwarts. Seventh year, last year. Severus was looking forward to being out of Hogwarts for good. Except for Lily, he had no happy memories of the place. He knew it would be busy, with classes and tutoring, and preparing for his NEWT exams, but he was much more interested in chemistry and calculus, and was already trying to figure out how one could be employed in a laboratory without having a university degree.

On September 1, for the first time, Severus apparated directly to King's Cross Station to take, for the last time, the Express to Hogwarts.

Severus made his way to the Slytherin club car and sat toward one corner. Rosier joined him after a moment. "Feels funny being the top class, doesn't it?"

"A bit," Severus answered. "How was your summer?"

"Terrible. Haven't you heard of all the attacks? No one's safe."

"We got some of the news. But it's pretty safe where we live."

"Really? I thought a couple of the worst incidents were near you."

Severus wondered how Rosier had any idea where he lived. "North of us," he said. "Quite a bit north of us. But I did fortify the house better. You can't take chances."

"The Ministry twiddles its thumbs and does nothing while our people

are dying,” Rosier continued in a low, tense voice. “We need leadership that really leads. Someone who’ll help us fight back.”

“Does someone like that exist?”

Rosier bent closer. “Not only exists, but is already doing something about the problem. You’ve heard of him. We’ve spoken of him before. You know . . . His followers don’t speak his name. They call him the Dark Lord.”

“I remember. I’ve only heard a little about him.”

“They don’t spread it around much. Only the most trustworthy. The Ministry is against him, of course.”

Rosier talked about the Dark Lord for a good part of the trip.

Severus looked for Lily at the Sorting. He found her, too, sitting next to James Potter. He almost got away without being seen, but wasn’t quite fast enough.

“Severus! It’s good to see you. How was your summer?”

The odd thing was that for all those years they’d never spoken in front of other students, preferring to keep their friendship a secret, and now that the friendship was diminished Lily felt comfortable bringing it into the open.

“It was all right. A little dull. How was yours?” He nodded to James. “Potter.”

“Snape,” James replied with the same almost formal nod.

“It was all right. A little dull.” She laughed. “See you in Potions, probably.”

“Yeah, Potions.” And that was the extent of the conversation. Severus sat with Rosier at the Slytherin table, thinking of his promise to Lily of the year before. There wasn’t a lot to talk about.

Before the first month was over three students, one from Gryffindor and two from Ravenclaw, were called to Dumbledore’s office because of attacks on their families. Endorpha Reedbinder’s uncle was actually killed by crazed wizards in a rampage outside the Ministry of Magic itself. The whole school was on edge, and the seventh years in Slytherin house formed a special group to discuss the situation.

“We have to generate support for this Dark Lord who’s actually doing something to halt these attacks,” Wilkes insisted at one of the first meetings.

“But we don’t really know who’s behind it.” This was from Mordechai Benedict, and several others agree with him.

“Muggles are behind it!” Wilkes insisted. “Muggles and muggle-borns. Do

we have to wait until there's not an old pureblood family left before we recognize the danger? Even the half-bloods come from old families, and they're in danger, too."

Severus agreed that some action should be taken, though he stood with the group that felt caution was needed in assigning blame.

Then, as the October moon waned into nothing, Dumbledore called Severus into his office.

**TUESDAY, OCTOBER 11, 1977 (ONE DAY BEFORE THE NEW MOON)**

"Master Snape, you will not apparate!"

"She's my grandmother!"

"And she has died. And we will go to her as quickly as possible. But you will travel with me. You will not apparate alone. You will go with me by Portkey."

"You're trying to control what happens!"

"I am not ashamed to admit it. You will not apparate into the middle of a volatile situation without backup or without someone who can control you. We do not yet know the full extent of what has happened."

"No, an angry mob just burned my grandmother to death in her own home, but I guess that's not explicit enough for you!"

"You are going nowhere until you have better control of yourself." Dumbledore nodded to Hagrid, who stood guard by the door.

"Lad, ya got t' be calmer. Ya go running off halfcocked and y're just going t' make the thing worse. The first thing we got t' do is find out just what did happen. Then ya can decide the next step."

"They will pay. I swear, they will pay."

"That is not for you to decide."

"You don't understand, do you Headmaster! I don't have any family left! She was the last living relative I had!"

"And you will not dishonor her memory by randomly attacking the innocent."

"You are not going to stop me! You are not . . . going to . . . stop . . ." And then Severus was sobbing like a child, with Hagrid's arm around his shoulders as he was pulled down onto one of the chairs in Dumbledore's office. "Oh, Nana . . . Nana . . ."

The Portkey took them first to the hospital to talk to an earnest young physician. "You're the grandson, right. I know she lost her daughter in a car

accident. A sorry business, sorry business. Matter for the police, of course. I can assure you she suffered little pain. She was asleep. They found her body, well what was left . . . I'm sorry. They found her body still in the bed . . . well as near as . . . I'm sorry. She appears to have been still asleep in bed when she died, which means she never realized what was happening . . .”

“How am I supposed to believe that?” Severus confronted Dumbledore outside. “A mob surrounds her house and sets fire to it and she doesn’t even wake up? That’s not my grandmother. That’s not Nana.”

The police had little more to add except that eleven people were in custody, all of them having admitted to setting the fire. Severus wanted their names, but that was against policy until he’d consulted a solicitor. Dumbledore steered him carefully towards the door.

Then, finally, they visited the house. Nothing was left except a charred shell. The plants that stood next the house were gone, though the rest of the garden was intact. More to the point, the whole village was silent. No one, not one person, dared approach Severus or the tall wizard with the long beard and pointed hat. If there was an image of an avenging angel, it was Dumbledore.

The funeral was yet another problem. The local pastor was not sure that Nana deserved to be buried in consecrated ground. There not being other ground in which she could be legally buried, Severus was understandably upset. Dumbledore undertook to mediate between the inflexible church and the distraught boy, and ended up making enemies on both sides. It turned out there was a small, freethinking columbarium in Clitheroe, and Nana’s urn was placed there, she already having been ‘cremated.’

A week after having left, Dumbledore and Severus returned to Hogwarts. Dumbledore was conscious of a situation that had not been handled well. Severus went directly to Rosier to ask what he could do to assist the Dark Lord.

Severus had more or less called a truce with Remus Lupin and with James Potter, but that truce did not extend to Sirius Black. Nor did it extend to Peter Pettigrew, but since Peter was such a nonentity, no one cared. The basic bottom line was that in addition to everything else, Severus and Sirius were still at war.

Once again Severus found himself busy with requests from fifth year students for assistance in preparation for their OWLs. Now he was paying more attention to each student’s potential usefulness in the coming muggle war, passing on names and information to Rosier in addition to simple tutoring.

To one student in particular, however, Severus gave special attention, promising to help him not only pass his OWLs, but learn how to create spells and invent potions. That student was Regulus Black.

It was the end of October and the weekend of the first trip into Hogsmeade. Most of the students at breakfast were eagerly discussing their day's plans as Severus rose and walked over to his new protégé.

"Are you ready? The earlier we get started, the more you can work on."

The younger student, whose thick black hair and moody good looks unmistakably proclaimed his house and lineage, grinned and said, "Sure. Right now?"

"Why not?"

They walked past the Slytherin table and out the doors into the entrance hall. As expected, they were followed.

"Hey, Snivellus! Where are you going with my brother?"

"Your brother? Oh, of course, Black. Silly of me not to have noticed."

"You keep your greasy fingers and your dark magic away from Regulus or I'll pulverize you with my bare hands."

"The Headmaster will certain want to hear how a Gryffindor student is threatening Slytherin students. Especially considering the situation in the world at large. We don't want fighting in school."

"There'll be fighting if you keep corrupting my brother."

"Leave me alone, Sirius," interjected Regulus. "You don't even live at home any more. You don't have any authority over me."

"Here. What's going on here?" Hagrid stood in the doorway to the Great Hall. Now he advanced to plant himself between Sirius and Severus.

"This Gryffindor student was threatening and attempting to intimidate us when we were just looking for a quiet place to review Regulus's Charms and Potions work. We'd like him to be ordered not to follow us." By now James, Lily, Remus, and Peter also appeared. Severus glanced at them and a note of bitterness entered his voice that gave his words added sarcasm. "Maybe our Head Boy and Head Girl could exercise a little of their authority for the protection of the students at large, and keep this 'person' from accosting us in the halls."

"We'll take care of this, Hagrid," said James quickly. "Come on, Padfoot. Let's go back to the common room and talk about this."

Reluctantly, Sirius allowed himself to be pulled away, while Severus and Regulus continued outside to work on spells.

"It's a trap, Prongs! You've been to our house in London. You've seen

all that stuff we have. Regulus has always been interested in the dark side of magic. But it was just a kid's interest. Now Snivellus..." Sirius saw Lily's glare and met her eyes in defiance. "...Snivellus is trying to pull him down into this Death Eater business and make him a servant of their Dark Lord, too. And he doesn't even care about Regulus. He's doing it to get back at me!"

"Why, Padfoot," James said smoothly, "whatever would Snape want to get back at you for? It isn't like you ever did anything to him."

"But this isn't me! It's Regulus! He can come after me with any curse he's got and I'll take him on man to man. But if he hurts Regulus, I'll kill him!"

James watched Sirius, a worried frown between his eyebrows. "Man to man," he said. "I'm not sure. Sometimes I wonder, if we ever had taken him on one to one, who would've won."

"I can tell you that," said Lily quietly. "He would've won. He's that good. He never used all his spells on you. I can also tell you that he never wanted to fight. Everything he did was in response to something you started. So now, please, leave him alone. He's already had enough trouble for the whole year, and it isn't November yet."

James slid over on the sofa so he was closer to Lily. "I've already promised. No fighting. We can still talk to him, and to Regulus, but I've sworn off curses for good."

"I haven't," Sirius snarled. "If he doesn't leave my brother alone, he's going down."

The interviews with Dumbledore lasted most of the afternoon.

"Master Black, you stated within the hearing of Hagrid that you would pulverize another student with your bare hands. Do you not consider this a threat?"

"The slimy git..."

"You will not use such language in my presence."

"He's teaching my brother the Dark Arts. He's recruiting for this Dark Lord, this evil sorcerer. I'm not letting Regulus get caught in it."

"Would it not be more to the point to inform the teachers or me of this? Do you think we are incapable of handling this situation?"

"Professor, you don't know how sneaky he is. He was close to my cousin Bella for years. She's gone off and joined these Death Eaters, and they've got their sights set on Regulus. I'm not going to let it happen."

The next interview was easier, though no more successful. "You have been friends for many years. Do you not think, Master Potter, that you could

“speak rationally with Master Black and convince him not to take matters into his own hands. If the conflict on the outside comes into Hogwarts, we shall have trouble indeed.”

“I’ve been trying, but when Sirius cares passionately about something it’s hard to derail him. He’s really worried about his brother, and it’s against his nature to sit back passively and watch things happen.”

The third held more promise. “You used to be quite close friends, Miss Evans. No, do not look shocked. We have known about it for years, and it has been an excellent association for both you and him. Now I understand that you have formed other emotional attachments, quite natural too, but it has removed a means of reaching Master Snape.”

“I’m sorry, Professor. I don’t think I ever had that much influence on Severus. We’d talk, and he’d listen, but generally he did what he wanted. If I’d had any effect on him, there wouldn’t have been so much hexing and cursing.”

“Ah, Miss Evans. I fear you seriously underestimate your own role in the past six years. Could I persuade you to talk to him and find out how seriously attached he is to this Dark Arts group?”

“I’ll try. I don’t think he’ll tell me much, though.”

And then the final one. “The accusation is a serious one, Master Snape, that you would teach Dark Arts to another student and actively recruit him into a group bent on guerilla warfare within our world.”

“I don’t know what they’re talking about, Professor. I tutor the others in Slytherin for their OWLs, their NEWTs, and their regular exams. I’ve been doing it for years. No one’s ever accused me of promoting the Dark Arts before. To tell the truth, I think he’s upset because he doesn’t want someone like me to be a friend of his brother’s. They are an old pureblood family, and I am a half-blood. It’s just that he can’t admit that kind of prejudice to you, so he has to find some other reason. The Dark Arts business is just ridiculous.”

At the end of the day, Dumbledore called on Hagrid.

“He frightens me, Hagrid. He truly frightens me. Of all of them, he was the one I had no feeling for. If I did not already know he was lying to me, I would not know he was lying to me. How can one so young be so accomplished at this kind of deception?”

“Seems you asked that question before, sir, and seems I gave you the same answer. Ain’t that what you been teaching him to do?”

“Ah, yes. I do recall. And I also recall saying that I had not anticipated that he would be so good at it. Tangled webs, Hagrid. Tangled webs.”

A December owl brought an invitation from Bella to spend Christmas in London. Severus's acceptance went out by return owl. Even if he was in a servant's room on the fifth floor, or ate all his meals alone, he would still be living in London near Charing Cross Road. There were many worse ways to spend the holidays.

He was in for the biggest surprise of his life. When Severus arrived at the Black mansion, he was greeted warmly by Bella's parents, and his meager belongings were taken to one of the guest bedrooms. It was so grand, he hardly dared touch anything. Even the house-elves were polite.

That evening he was asked down to before-dinner drinks, and Mr. Black insisted that he have a glass of sherry. Severus's initial awkwardness at having to come to dinner in his school robes was quickly dispelled by the kindness of the family, and his reticence at drinking alcohol was pooh-poohed as well. Mr. Black commented on the boredom of the school wardrobe and recommended a tailor. Mrs. Black assured him that sherry 'doesn't really count.' By dinnertime Severus felt a relaxed sensation around his mouth and shoulders, and talking had become much easier. Which was good, because Mr. Black asked so many questions. Severus actually had answers for him.

"My mother's family? Landed gentry until 1485, when they chose the wrong side at Bosworth. That's how we ended up in Lancashire. There are some things magic can't fix. But they controlled the Pendle district for generations. Even now we're well-known, that is until the recent . . . unpleasantness . . .

"Making new spells isn't glamorous work. It takes painstaking research and hours of experimentation. You have to envision the spell, develop an incantation, adjust for variance in voice and delivery . . .

"I don't think I would call Dumbledore the greatest Headmaster Hogwarts has ever had. He's made some serious errors since I've been there, and his record regarding improvement of the curriculum is certainly eclipsed by that of Phineas Nigellus."

Severus went to bed that night thoroughly convinced that the Blacks were the most civilized, intelligent, and respectable family in Britain.

The Black evaluation took place between Bella and her parents after the rest of the household was asleep.

"He's more intelligent than I thought he would be," said Mr. Black. "You ask him for an opinion, and he actually has one, one that he can back up with evidence. And he thinks fast on his feet. Do you think he was telling the truth about the spells he created?"



“Rodolphus said he and Rabastan got caught in an earthquake spell when Snape was second year. I’d say anyone who could make an earthquake when he was twelve could do everything he talked about tonight.” Bella was clearly proud of her own protégé, and wanted her parents to know it.

“I really think,” interjected Mrs. Black, “that you should take him to be fit for some new clothes. He would be quite presentable if he had something decent to wear. I mean, he already knows something of how to behave, better than some of our acquaintances, and it’s a shame that people would be judging him on his clothes.”

Mr. Black did, in fact, take Severus around to his tailor to arrange for formal robes as well as formal and semiformal muggle dress suits. Severus was proud (and immensely relieved) that he had enough money to pay for the clothes himself, though he mentally calculated how much extra tutoring he would have to do to recoup the amount he was spending. It was more than made up for by a gala night at the ballet, to which he was permitted to escort Narcissa. That he helped arrange a tête-à-tête between her and Lucius was just icing on the cake.

At the ballet, at the theater, at dinners with the Blacks and their friends, Severus found that he was meeting more and more wizards who supported the Dark Lord and his agenda for wizarding Britain. He was moving in a rarified atmosphere, and the effects were heady.

The general consensus about Severus, never divulged to him, was that he was a remarkably talented young man, and something of a social climber. So unfortunate about his father’s family, though. The reports back to the Dark Lord were universally favorable.

Severus and Lucius also got together several times over the Christmas holidays. Some of it was about Narcissa, but a lot of it was about spells. Lucius had focus and discipline, but he lacked any background in the sciences.

“I don’t understand why we can’t just make an eavesdropping spell.”

“Sound waves. Sound is disturbances in the air that move in wave-motions. As they radiate outward from the source of the disturbance, they dissipate and weaken. You have to have a way to collect and funnel . . . Do you understand this?”

“No. But you do. That’s all we need, isn’t it?”

“I thought you wanted to learn how to do this.”

“You handle the theory. Show me the practice.”

After several tries with material that didn’t work, wool being particularly bad, Severus hit on a spider web-like filament that could radiate out in a cone

shape to channel sound waves to a point in space just in front of the caster. Since it was a delicate mesh, it was nearly invisible, and would collapse into a tiny ball in an instant. The incantation took awhile to devise as well, but ultimately Autiarachnon did the trick.

It had taken three days. Lucius went away from the experience with a valuable spell, a deep respect for the art of spell construction, and the wish that he'd been trained to do this when he was younger.

One day shortly after Christmas, Severus managed to escape the Black home and go to South Kensington, to Imperial College. Since it was the Christmas break, most of the buildings were closed. He did manage to get some information about submitting an application which, on the whole, was extremely depressing. He'd attended no accredited grammar school, had taken no math or science courses, had not passed his O-Levels and would not sit for A-Levels, and was in every sense not qualified for admission.

*Field work. I could volunteer for field work and get experience. I could get a job in a chemist's shop and prove how good I am at preparing medications.* Severus sat for a few hours in the Natural History Museum trying to figure out a way around the massive obstacle to his dreams. *How can you be a scientist if you don't go to university, and how can you go to university if you've never been to a real school?* The doors to the future were closing, and he hated Hogwarts.

Severus returned to school with the knowledge that in six months he would leave Hogwarts for good, and he had nowhere to go. He could never work for the Ministry of Magic, a thought so distasteful that it made him ill just contemplating it. He could get a job in a shop, or deal in potions like Nana. Maybe, since he'd actually taught himself some real math, he could work in a bank . . . But he didn't want to work in the muggle world. Muggles were the problem, not the solution.

Regulus had no such concerns. He came from a rich family and assumed there would always be money. "You could buy a yacht and sail around the world."

"I hate water and can't swim."

"You could betray rich widows in Alpine ski resorts."

"Ditto mountains. Ditto skiing."

Their conversation solved no problems, but at least it lightened the mood.

"I," Regulus announced, "shall join the ranks of the Dark Lord and fight for the freedom of our people. Can there be any nobler occupation than the

struggle against oppression? To avenge the injuries inflicted upon us by cruel tyrants?"

Severus fought to close out the image of Nana's burned cottage. *Anger destroys concentration. Vengeance is a dish best served cold. They will pay for killing Nana. They will pay for trying to kill me. They will pay for cheating me of my dreams. They will pay...*

"Are you all right?"

Severus looked up at the castle that loomed above them. "Yes, I'm fine," he said. "I need to think about something. I'll catch you at supper." He stood and walked toward the lake, not caring that Regulus looked bewildered and offended.

Sitting on the narrow strip of sand by the lake, Severus tried to sort out the mass of contradictions that was himself and his life. *Muggle or wizard? Scientist or potions master? I'm going to be on my own in six months, and I don't even know who or what I am.*

There were three main questions. *What do I want? What do I need? What can I have?*

*I want payback. From the people who killed Nana. From the people who tormented and tried to kill me. From the mine that fired my father, and the pub owners who kept selling alcohol to an already drunk man. From the people who start wars and the people who embargo oil. From a school that won't tell me what I need to learn until I'm too old to fix it. From... No. Anger destroys concentration. Vengeance is a dish...*

*I want a clean laboratory and a white lab coat. I want banks of computers at Mission Control in Houston. I want the world of microscopes and telescopes. I want voodoo dolls and the Hand of Glory.*

*I need safety. Physical safety and economic safety. Protection and a way to make a living.*

The muggle world provided neither. From airplane crashes to rampaging mobs, it was a world of sudden, violent death. A world where the food on your table depended on a war a thousand miles away. Where they didn't care what you knew, only whether you had the right piece of paper. The wizarding world was no better, full of prejudice and equal violence, where four boys could torment one, and no one cared.

Then he remembered. The one who had stepped forward to save him. The one who had protected him with something more effective than impotent moral indignation. The one who'd charged out of the castle, a small

army at her back and wand ready, shouting, "Touch him again, Potter, and I'll..."

Bella.

With Bella he had a place, a place where he was known and accepted, with Rabastan, Rodolphus, and Avery, where Mulciber, Wilkes and Rosier would be, and Regulus Black, too, and eventually Lucius and Narcissa. What did it matter if they didn't really like him? At least they respected his work. And colleagues were always more dependable than friends. Colleagues and a job — it took care of what he needed.

*And of what I want. They'll help me get the paycheck. Against the people who killed Nana and the people who hurt me.*

That left only 'What can I have?' That was when he took the clean laboratory and the white lab coat, the slide rules and the Bunsen burners, the banks of computers and the voice, his favorite voice in the whole world, and packed them away in tightly sealed boxes in the storage room of his mind, toys that he was now too old to play with.

Severus rose from the little sandy area, more settled and focused than when he'd sat down, and went to look for Regulus in the Great Hall.

#### MONDAY, JANUARY 9, 1978 (THE NEW MOON)

Severus's eighteenth birthday was cold and clear. He spent the second half of the morning in the library looking up protection spells for buildings and for items left in the open. It was tedious work, and he wasn't sure who was going to get the information when it was done, but Rosier had asked him for it the evening before, and he was trying to finish as quickly as possible.

As he finished his list and gathered his books to go, Severus noticed that Peter Pettigrew was also in the library two tables over. Pettigrew hadn't been sent to watch him since fifth year. A quick glance told him that there were no other Slytherins in the room, not a good sign. He moved three rows closer to the windows, scanned a bookshelf over his head, and picked out a particular volume.

Pettigrew looked up as the book slid in front of him. "What do you want?" he asked.

"Did you know there were seven seduction spells in the Appendix of this book? One especially involves chocolate. Livilla Fairhall likes chocolate, doesn't she? A lot. Of course, if I take it out, then bring it back when you're

not here, you'll never know which book it is. They all look so much alike and there are, what, two hundred thousand of them?"

"What do you want?" Pettigrew repeated, but there was a totally different note to his voice.

"Who made you guard dog this time?"

"Sirius."

"Where's he going to jump me?"

"Staircase behind the tapestry."

"What spell?"

"Petrificus. He has a speech he wants to give you, but he was also talking about tying you to the railing and shaving your head."

"Such tender affection. What does he do to you?"

"Huh?"

"You hate him almost as much as I do. What does he do, insult and belittle you or practice his spells on you?"

Pettigrew didn't answer, his reddening face doing that for him.

"Ah," continued Severus, "he lets you know your place, like the good little dog you are. Here, take it. Good luck with Livilla. Now don't move, this is for your own good." He cast quick binding and silencing charms, then whispered, "Tell him I snuck up behind you. That's why you couldn't warn him."

Pettigrew nodded.

Severus edged towards the tapestry, wand in hand, hoping to surprise Sirius. It didn't work. Somehow Sirius knew he was there, for the tapestry was suddenly pushed aside. Severus got his spell in first, though, and a petrified Sirius fell backwards onto the stair landing.

"My, my. What do we have here? Frozen Gryffindor on a Stick?" Severus stepped over Sirius's body and sat on the step next to him, letting the tapestry fall into place and conceal them. "Such a convenient opportunity for us to have a chat, don't you think? What shall we talk about? I could hang you upside down right here. There's a girls' bathroom two floors down. They'd love to come up and check you out." Then he noticed the wad of parchment sticking out of Sirius's pocket.

"What else do we have? An unfinished homework assignment? A love letter?" He pulled it out, ignoring Sirius's furious glare, and glanced over it. He paused and looked at it more carefully. "My goodness! No wonder you always knew where I was. Here I am right here on the stair, and here you are next to me. And here's that wimp Pettigrew in the library. I didn't have

to tie him up after all. You didn't need him to warn you." Severus looked at the front. "Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot, and Prongs. You're Padfoot. I heard Potter call you that. Moony must be Lupin. We all know why. I can't imagine Potter being called Wormtail, so that must be Pettigrew."

Severus stood and smirked down at Sirius. "I know just what I'm going to do. I'm going to give you your map back. Then I'm going to bring you company much more fascinating than I could ever be." He stepped over the supine Sirius again and slipped under the tapestry.

Five minutes later, Filch appeared. Filch's grin was positively evil. Ten minutes after that, and the map was in a cabinet in Filch's office, and Messrs. Moony et cetera were all on detention.

After that day, Severus began to get clandestine visits from Pettigrew, to whom he fed a slow but steady stream of small hexes and jinxes in exchange for information that Severus passed on to Rosier.

A few days later, Severus happened to see Lily and James talking together near the Quidditch field. He'd noticed since the beginning of the year how much closer the two were becoming, but this time they were talking earnestly rather than lovingly. For a moment, just a moment, Severus considered using his new Autiarachnon spell, then shook his head. Lily's conversations were private and none of his business. He turned and walked back towards the castle.

Lily found Severus in the fountain courtyard. "Can I talk to you for a few minutes?"

"Here? In public? That's a first, isn't it?"

"You're right. I think it is. I wonder if there's some special meaning to that, like we've matured and don't have to play games any more."

"Could be. The games were fun, though. There's something about clandestine meetings that adds spice to life."

They were silent. It was a comfortable silence. Friends don't always have to talk.

"James asked me to talk to you."

*Thank goodness she isn't lying about it. I couldn't take that.* "What does he want you to say that he can't say himself? I can't get his map back. I'm not breaking into Filch's office for anything."

"That was quite a coup. You'd have loved listening in to Sirius's ranting after you caught him behind that tapestry. Did you know you had the heart and soul of a bloodsucking vampire?"

"Well I am impressed. I must've really gotten to him to have advanced so far beyond the bloodsucking leech stage."

Lily giggled. "I miss talking to you."

"You have other things to think about."

"Seriously, though, we're worried about you. James says you're more involved with this junior Dark Lord group, and you're helping them with spells and information."

"Potter has big ears."

"It's like quicksand, Severus. You think it's just an innocent pool of water, and by the time you figure out how deadly it is, you've been sucked in so far you can't get out. This is so much bigger and more sinister than hexes and jinxes. It's dangerous. People are being killed."

"I know."

"Oh, I'm sorry. That's right, your grandmother. But you're in danger, too."

"No. I'm in danger when I'm by myself. That's when I get hit. All those years I never had anyone covering my back. You have no idea how much safer I feel now. And I have somewhere to go after Hogwarts. They're not evil, Lily. It's the world around us that's evil." He regarded her quizzically. "Why so solicitous now? As I recall, two years ago the same prospect made you ready to toss me in the dustbin. Now you..."

"Two years ago the world seemed simpler. Good and evil were clear opposites, black and white. It isn't that simple, though, and I realized how easy it is to set a snare. What about being a scientist?"

"A child's pipe dream. That was never really an option. Not for someone like us. I don't think about it anymore."

"That's sad. It was a good pipe dream."

"How are your dreams doing?" Severus asked, and watched how prettily she colored.

"Good. It's all so... I'm very happy."

"You tell him that if I ever hear you're not happy, I'll turn his tongue into corkboard."

"I will. And you'll think about what I said? And keep your heart open?"

"I will."

Rosier slipped onto the bench next to Severus during lunch in the Great Hall. It was more private there amid all the babble than in the relative quiet of the common room.

"Bella wants to see you."

"I'm flattered. I thought Bella was above Hogwarts now."

"Not where you're concerned. She has maternal feelings for you. You're her own private project."

Severus was not certain if he wanted to be Bella's pet project, but he nonetheless smiled his restrained, sardonic smile and let Rosier know he was pleased. "Where are we supposed to meet?"

"Hogsmeade. Next weekend."

"I'll be there."

**SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 5, 1978 (TWO DAYS BEFORE THE NEW MOON)**

They met at the Hog's Head Inn, where Severus paid for their drinks.

"I see things are improving for you," Bella commented.

"In some respects."

Bella raised her glass, "Here's to more improvement in more respects."

"I can drink to that."

"You're becoming known in high places. And in a good way. The Dark Lord himself has heard that you're resourceful and a team player. So many are looking only for their own aggrandizement, but you're not one of them. Have you thought of what you'll do after you've sat for your NEWTs and you're finished with Hogwarts?"

"Not really. Not that there are a lot of positions available for someone like me."

"I can think of one."

"I'm all ears."

"Join us. Become one of the Death Eaters. It's a waste for you to sit on the sidelines when you have it in you to play such an important part. Our people have already been attacked in the north — I don't have to remind you of that, you've already lost so much — and the witch-hunting fever is moving into the west and the midlands. We need people to defend our communities, to strike back at our assailants. You could be part of that."

"What would joining entail?"

"You have to be sponsored. That's easy. Several of us could sponsor you. There's an initiation, too. It's an interview with the Dark Lord, and you get a tattoo that shows you're one of us."

"Interview?"

"The Dark Lord is probably the most accomplished legilimens the wizarding world has ever seen. The interview takes place in the presence of a



select group of followers, but it's silent, just you and the Dark Lord. It's minor. A demonstration of loyalty."

"I'll think about it."

"Let me know."

The next move was not long in coming, and it was Sirius's.

"They say you can help me with my OWL in Potions."

Severus looked up from his book. The library was practically empty since lunch had just been served in the Great Hall. The fifth year student in front of him was from Ravenclaw house.

"I usually only tutor inside Slytherin. Who told you to look for me?"

It was clearly an embarrassing question. After a pause the Ravenclaw admitted, "No one. I heard them talking in class and they said you were good."

"What are you weak in?"

"Blended potions."

"They can be tricky. Let me think about it and I'll get back to you. What's your name."

"Sigfried . . . Sigfried Thurifer. But you shouldn't contact me at our house. Maybe we could meet somewhere . . ."

"Don't want to be seen with a Slytherin? All right. Where?"

"By the Quidditch stands tomorrow at lunch?"

"Okay. But if I don't show up it means I decided not to tutor you."

Severus sought out Mulciber for advice.

"I don't want to, I've already got too much to do, but I thought you should know."

Mulciber frowned in thought. "You know, Snape, we don't have anyone in the other houses who can gather information for us. This Thurifer could be our toe in the Ravenclaw door, so to speak. Why don't you take him on and find out how useful he is?"

"All right, if you think it could help."

Regulus was in the common room, too. "Isn't the Quidditch field an odd place to meet a pupil?" he asked.

"Away from prying Ravenclaw eyes was the sense I got of it."

The next day at lunch, Thurifer was waiting by the Quidditch stands. As Severus approached, the other boy motioned him forward and moved behind the stands where he was shielded from the castle windows. Severus shrugged and followed, and suddenly found a hood pulled over his head, a cord binding its cloth into his mouth, and his arms pinned behind his back. He tried to

throw himself forward and to the right, but was restrained by several pairs of hands. *Not again.*

Behind him, Sirius's voice said, "Here's your money. Now get out. We don't need you anymore."

Severus started to kick, and one of his captors laughed. "We're going to have to tie his feet, too. He might hurt himself." It was a voice Severus didn't recognize.

Sirius laughed as well. "We certainly wouldn't want him to hurt himself. That's my job."

They put binding spells around Severus's arms and legs and carried him under the scaffolding of the bleachers, hidden by colorful cloth panels, where they dumped him unceremoniously on the dirt. Sirius knelt next to him.

"It isn't you personally, Snivellus," he said, in a friendly tone. "Well, yes it is personal because personally I consider you sneaky, slimy, and unwholesome. But things would never have to go this far if you'd just listen when I tell you not to mess around with my brother. Because if I ever find that Regulus has joined up with that Death Eater crowd, I'll kill you. Before I do that, I'll break your kneecaps, rip off your fingernails, and gouge your eyes out of their sockets, but the bottom line is that I'll kill you. Do we understand each other?"

Severus didn't move, so Sirius took the cord that gagged him and pulled, tightening it painfully and jerking Severus's head back. "Do we understand each other?" he repeated. Severus managed a nod, and the pressure was released.

"Now these friends of mine have been looking forward all week to beating the crap out of you, and I have no intention of disappointing them." They pulled Severus to his feet and held him upright. Sirius gave his cheek a gentle pat, then drove a fist into the pit of his stomach. Severus would have doubled over in pain if not for the hands that held him upright.

Then he heard Regulus's voice say, "Hit him again. Go on. Give me an excuse to break your nose against that post. Hit him again."

Regulus helped Severus back to the Slytherin common room, while Sirius returned to Gryffindor.

"What the hell were you thinking of! Hexes are one thing, and sometimes they got out of hand, but beating someone up! Are you insane?" James could not recall ever being so furious with Sirius in all the time they'd known each other. To make things worse, Lily was crying and not talking to either of them.

"He deserves it! I'm not going to stand by and watch him destroy Regulus's life!"

"And you think your own family doesn't have a lot to do with it! Did it ever occur to you that Regulus might be pulling Snape into this? Maybe you're beating up the wrong person!"

"Snivellus has been tight with Bella ever since second year!"

"And Regulus has been tight with Bella ever since he was born! You're cousins, you idiot!"

They both stood, breathing hard, staring each other down.

Lily spoke then, and her voice was very quiet. "He said he needed the protection. That he never had anyone covering his back before, and being with them made him feel safer. I think you just proved he was right. They were covering his back today. What would you've done to him if Regulus hadn't shown up with his friends? I hear that first punch was pretty hard."

"I was angry."

James shook his head. "That's not good enough. You get out of control when you're angry. I know you. You could've killed him. As it is, he'll probably never listen to us again. I mean, how does it look? Lily goes to talk to him about being careful of this Death Eater business and then you jump him? He must think we're the biggest hypocrites in the world. We may never be able to repair the damage you did today."

"If you scared him as badly as you claim," Lily added, "we won't have the chance. He'll never go anywhere alone again."

Severus was lying on one of the sofas in the Slytherin common room while the others did their best to make him comfortable. "How did you know?"

"I told you I thought the Quidditch field was a strange place to meet. I followed you. When I saw Thurifer leave by himself, I went for Mulciber. Luckily they were all together. I wish we'd gotten there sooner."

"Soon enough. That was scary, though. He's your brother. Does he often get that violent?"

"Yeah. Sometimes it's like he's going to explode. He never hides it, and he never tries to control it. On the good side, he never tries to hide his affections either. He can be really nice."

"A side of Sirius Black I have never been privileged to see. And won't if I can help it. I'm taking a bodyguard if I leave the castle again. Maybe even inside it. There're some fourth and fifth years who'd be happy to trade time for tutoring."

"We need to teach Ravenclaw a lesson."

"Agreed. But let me decide what to do. I don't want anyone out of control like your brother. The punishment has to fit the crime."

They waited a week, then four Slytherins jumped Sigfried Thurifer in the quiet fourth floor corridor as he was leaving the library. Hustling him down the stairs behind the tapestry, they suspended him upside down with a Levicorpus spell inside the girl's bathroom. Then they shook him a little to make his money fall out of his pockets onto the floor. Regulus scooped it up with a grin.

"For the Slytherin Defense League. Thanks for the contribution," he sneered.

Back in the common room they chuckled over the scene. "We didn't hurt him, Snape, I swear, but he looks so stupid hanging there by the cubicles. I hope the girls wait awhile before getting someone to take him down."

"I almost wish I'd seen it," Severus said, "but discretion is more important than personal satisfaction."

"I wish you could teach my brother that."

The spring advanced with little disturbance. Either Severus was too well guarded or James managed to restrain Sirius, but there were no more incidents. Hagrid sent word that he'd have to see Severus one more time. Severus replied that he did not see the need, and was in any case too busy. Hagrid responded that it was purely administrative, a simple matter of closing the books. In late May, Severus appeared at the hut for his appointment. Dumbledore was already there.

"Headmaster, I'm honored," Severus said. "Does two for one mean I'm getting the discount rate?"

Dumbledore chuckled. "We thought you might be pleased. It saves you time this way. You do not have to keep two appointments."

Hagrid followed his usual routine. "Jaw getting bigger. Means the back teeth have lined up better."

"Can they do that?"

"Oh, teeth move around, lad." He checked Severus's ears and eyes, shoulders and spine, then pushed up his sleeves to check the wrists and elbow joints. Severus didn't resist, but his eyes narrowed as he glanced from Hagrid to Dumbledore. "Rickets all gone?" was all he said.

"Looks to be in excellent health, if a tad under weight," Hagrid said as he finished. "I'd say the medical aspect was a success."

"I am pleased to hear it. Sit down, Master Snape. I am sure we both know the drill by now."

Severus met Dumbledore's eyes calmly as he was asked about the last year. "No problems, sir. I assure you," was his answer to Dumbledore's questions.

"Well, that is it, then. I wish you good luck on your NEWTs, Master Snape, and a profitable and happy life after Hogwarts."

"Thank you, Professor. It's kind of you."

As Severus was following Dumbledore out, Hagrid put a hand on his shoulder. "You ever need somewhat, lad, you just come by here."

"Thank you, Hagrid. I will."

There is nothing that will help one better understand a subject than teaching it to others. Severus aced his NEWTs and then it was time to say goodbye. After clearing out all his belongings and apparating home with them, Severus spent hours in the library copying down titles of books he hoped to be able to buy one day.

James and Lily came together. Or rather, Lily came accompanied by James.

"Tell me again, when is this Jupiter fly-by?"

"Not for nearly two years, so don't hold your breath."

"You take care of yourself."

"You, too." On a whim, Severus turned to James. "And you . . ."

"I know. Corkboard."

The departing seventh years partied on the Express all the way back to London. There was, Severus found, the most intoxicating sense of liberation from time that he'd ever felt. Hogwarts was over and done, never to be returned to. The future had not yet begun. For those few hours the class of 1978 was totally free. It was a good thing the Express sold no alcohol, or half of them would have been drunk by the time they reached King's Cross Station, there was such a strong sense that rules no longer applied.

The farewells on the platform were short as students apparated to their homes. Severus went right to his own kitchen in his own house, registered the amount of accumulated soot from the colliery, and settled down to brew himself a cup of tea over a newly lit coal grate. He was looking forward to a few weeks of solitude.

He got two and a half. Then on July 18, Bella's owl came with the message: 'Meet me in London tomorrow. Wonderful news. He'll see you on the 20th. Initiation at sunset. Bring dress robes.'

## C H A P T E R     N I N E T E E N

### THE DEATH EATER

WEDNESDAY, JULY 19, 1978 (THE DAY BEFORE THE FULL MOON)

Severus apparated directly into the Black residence, per Bella's instructions. She met him in the grand entry and escorted him to his room. It was not only not a servant's room, it was more sumptuous than the last one he'd been in. "The guest of honor gets the best room," Bella said, smiling.

That evening there was an 'informal' dinner with only twenty guests. Rabastan and Roldophus were there, along with Avery, Mulciber, Rosier, Wilkes, and Lucius sitting happily next to Narcissa. All but Lucius were joining Bella in sponsoring Severus, and Severus expressed his surprise that Rosier and Wilkes had already become Death Eaters while still students at Hogwarts.

"Like you can't get away with murder in that school," was Wilkes's comment on the observation, which won him a laugh and a general cheer.

They coached Severus on what would happen, how he would apparate with Bella, blindfolded, into the dark room at headquarters, kneel and be interviewed, and then receive the first, novice Dark Mark. "Did it hurt?" he asked as he studied Rosier's tattoo, a small green skull with a snake issuing from its mouth.

"I asked the same question," said Wilkes, "everybody does. Yeah, it hurt. It burned. But then it goes away."

"You have to remember to let the Dark Lord see your whole mind," added Bella. "That part feels funny. It doesn't hurt, it just feels funny."

Severus went to bed just a little tipsy because Mrs. Black kept giving him more sherry.

THURSDAY, JULY 20, 1978 (THE FULL MOON)

They assembled in the grand entry at noon the next day, dressed in formal robes, Severus looking very young and slender in his straight, modestly cut green and black, and his tall, peaked wizard's hat. Bella stood in front of him, a delicate gold cord in her hands.

"Cross your wrists in front of you." Severus obeyed, and Bella used the cord to bind his hands loosely together. "It's very easy to get out of, but try not to even if you're scared. It tests how calm you are, how much you trust the Dark Lord, and how willing you are to obey him. Understand?"

Severus nodded, and Bella took the wizard's hat off his head. She showed him the black hood he would wear. "You can't know where we're going, and you're not allowed to see anything until you look the Dark Lord in the eyes. We'll guide you and tell you what you have to do and when to do it. You just trust us. Now from this point on, you don't talk. You don't question. You just do what we say, and you don't say anything. Okay?"

Severus nodded again, and Bella slipped the hood over his head, then replaced his hat. Then she stood next to him and slipped her arm through his. "Everybody ready?" There was the sudden, tight pressure of apparation, and they were standing in a different room, one that was cold and muted, as if the walls absorbed all sound.

"Just walk with me," Bella whispered, steering Severus down an inclined floor. His shoulder brushed something, a doorway, then they were in a room that sounded larger. "Kneel," came Bella's quiet command. Severus knelt, and the hood was removed from his head.

The room was dark and shadowed. One thin, weak beam of light illuminated the spot between Severus and a standing figure robed in black. In a moment bordering on panic, Severus searched his own mind, checking if everything was open, unlocked, on display — this man would know. Then the figure in front of him lowered its own hood, and Severus was staring into the eyes of the Dark Lord. Severus heard and felt nothing, but he knew that questions were being asked.

His own answers were memories rushing to the surface of his mind: Toby drunk — Toby hitting Eileen — Toby lying on the stairs and his own wand in his hand — nights in a vacant church — Nana — the burned cottage — the doctor, police, pastor who wouldn't help — Dumbledore restraining his anger and his vengeance...

Dumbledore saying 'maternal vampire' — Hagrid holding him off the

ground as he attacked the headmaster — Slughorn's scorn — the camaraderie of the Slytherin common room — Bella — Rabastan — Mulciber — tutoring — Regulus — Christmas with the Blacks . . .

Sirius — slugs — James saying *Scourgify* — a fist hitting the pit of his stomach — Regulus yelling, *Give me a reason* — Bella yelling, *Touch him again, Potter . . .*

Severus had no idea how long the session lasted, only that the rush of images and feelings was swamping him, drowning him, like water released from a floodgate.

*What do you bring me?* a voice asked in his head as the memories rushed to a close. *All I have and all I am are yours.* Severus's own mind responded.

And then it was over.

Above him a voice was speaking, a voice unlike any he'd ever heard, full of spectral power, resonating with authority. "This one has come to us like an innocent child to his father, open and trusting and obedient. Freely has he shown us the deepest recesses of his soul, and he has held nothing back. Greet him now as one of our family. Come forward, Death Eaters, and embrace your new brother, Severus Snape."

The group of Death Eaters helped Severus rise and untied his wrists. Bella threw her arms around him and hugged him. The others were shaking his hand and patting him on the back. The Dark Lord himself was aloof from this display of welcome, his hood once again shielding his face in shadow. Severus realized that he had no clear picture in his mind of what the Dark Lord looked like, and immediately accepted that maybe he was not supposed to know.

The final step was the tattoo, the brand. The Dark Lord stood now next to a brazier that flamed a ghastly green light. Metal rods tipped with tiny stars lay in the fire. Once again Severus knelt before his new Lord, and this time Rabastan and Mulciber knelt with him to support him. They strapped his left arm to a small table to keep it steady as one by one the Dark Lord seared the tiny stars into his skin to form the small, unbroken outline of skull and serpent. The pain was intense, but bearable. The Dark Lord then traced the lines of the mark with a long fingernail, and it seemed to glow.

"It is done," the spectral voice intoned. "united into one body until death. Take him now and celebrate his coming into our family. Teach him what he must know. And when the time comes for his work to begin, I will send for him." And the Dark Lord was gone.



“When you stand up,” Bella said as they unstrapped Severus’s arm, “lean on me. You’ll be dizzy and feel a little sick. It’s normal.”

The group, now relaxed and beginning to chat, went out the door and up to the first chamber. Holding the wobbly Severus steady, they apparated back to the Black residence.

It was mid afternoon, but the house was full of people. Many of them were people Severus had met either at the Black’s house, at the ballet, or seen arriving in their limousines years ago. As the group apparated in, the guests began to applaud, and a band struck up ‘For he’s a jolly good fellow.’ Cygnus Black was the first to shake Severus’s hand, and then he was surrounded by well-wishers.

“Party time!” called Rodolphus. “Somebody get me a drink!” and the celebration was under way.

“Does everyone get welcomed like this?” Severus asked Bella as soon as he could escape the press.

“I don’t know. We don’t know everyone. The Dark Lord has several groups of Death Eaters, and we’re kept separate so that we can’t be forced to betray each other by spells or Veritaserum. We all know each other here because we’ve sponsored each other. Some of these people aren’t Death Eaters, just people who support us and the work we’re doing.”

The party lasted all night. There was music and conversation, and a twelve-course dinner followed by dancing in the ballroom, and cards and billiards in the other rooms. The former Hogwarts students (with Regulus, of course, who was also there) ended up in one of the smaller drawing rooms, one with its own bar, where Avery showed them how to mix exotic drinks like Black Russians and Harvey Wallbangers. That was when Severus found out that Avery could almost juggle six table knives at once, and Rodolphus knew how to dance the can-can.

As dawn began to tinge the sky, the party broke up. The guests departed, the family retired to their rooms, and Severus, feeling very contented, went to his own room and slipped, deliciously tired, into bed.

That was when it hit him, and Severus sat bolt upright in bed, wide awake.

He hadn’t shown Lily to the Dark Lord. In all that stream of memories, all that river of feelings, emotions, and recollections, there hadn’t been one image of Lily. *Impossible. I must be mistaken. Maybe I just didn’t notice everything.*

Yet every image that had been pulled from his mind was as sharp and

clear as if he'd lived it yesterday. Hundreds of images, large events and small. Severus began to review them, looking not for what was there, but for what wasn't there.

Nothing about Lily. Nothing about Gra or Wensley Snape. Nothing about Apollo, or Skylab, or Voyager. Nothing about Hagrid's examinations or Dumbledore's advice on occlumency. Nothing about an encounter with a werewolf. Nothing about Narcissa.

Severus was frightened. He'd gone to the initiation honest and open, as honest and open as he could, and his own mind had filtered his thoughts without any action from his will. *I'll go to him. I'll confess to him and show him everything. Maybe he won't be angry with me.*

But there was a saner part of him that rose in self-defense. *What will he do to me if I tell him that I can hide things from him? That when he looks at me he can never be sure of seeing my thoughts? Can he even afford to have that known? He'll punish me.*

And the quietest, gentlest part replied. *That's right. Besides, I don't think I want him to know about Lily.*

Nobody in the Black household woke up the next day until well after noon. A quick, simple luncheon, a renewal of congratulations, and by mid afternoon Severus apparated back to Lancashire. The entire London trip would've seemed like a dream were it not for the sting of the novice grade Dark Mark on his left arm.

Severus finished the interior work on the house. The shrunken sitting room lined with bookcases was like a little cave, a real den, his own personal reading room. The stairs going up were behind a set of shelves. He kept the little bedroom as his own, needing no more space, and the back storage area was now a potions workshop. It did have a white lab coat, but Severus never put it on.

Bella's owl came in the middle of August, and Severus apparated immediately to London. They left the Black house for a short walk.

"I'm going to show you a piece of paper. It has an address on it. Once you see the address, you'll know it, but you won't ever be able to write or say it because of a secrecy spell. It's the entrance to our headquarters here in London. Understand?"

Severus nodded, and she handed him the paper. Almost as soon as he glanced at it, it shriveled up and disappeared. "Why did you have to do that? Why not just take me there?"

"Silly, I can't take you there until you know the address. That's the same

as saying or writing. The only one who can tell a new person where it is, is the one who wrote that note. Now, when we go there you'll get your first assignments. You won't see the Dark Lord. Only the higher-ups see him. But you might hear him. Or you might not."

"Are you one of the higher-ups?"

Bella looked smug. "He appreciates my enthusiasm for the work."

The outside of the house looked perfectly normal, but inside was the entrance to a labyrinth of underground passages. Bella knew her way. Severus quickly became lost. They reached a small room with a little pedestal in the center. On the pedestal was a parchment.

"Pick it up," said Bella. "You're the only one who can. That's your job."

It was actually several jobs, mostly in London. Severus was supposed to stay in Diagon Alley all of the last half of August, meeting Hogwarts students he knew from tutoring and talking to likely prospects about joining the Death Eaters. He was also to shop for books and artifacts in Diagon and Knockturn Alleys, and anywhere else in Britain for that matter, looking especially for long-forgotten ways to hide things, keep them secret, and protect them from discovery or theft.

Along with the parchment were two small bags, both holding a considerable amount of money, both wizard and muggle.

"Be sure you keep a record of all your expenses," advised Bella. "If you meet other students, and you buy the refreshments, that's okay, that's a legitimate expense. Don't use it just for yourself. though. He's touchy about that."

The assignment turned out to be quite pleasant. Severus got to meet and talk to students now in sixth and seventh year that he'd tutored the year before. He met new students as well, and was introduced to them as a fountain of knowledge about spells and charms. He even made appointments to get together with some students over the Christmas break for tutoring, accepting only those who'd be working to pass their NEWTs.

Browsing through the shops was enjoyable, too. For the first time he didn't have to worry about how much something cost, though he was careful not to buy anything unless he was sure it would be useful.

After September 1, Severus began to go outside London, searching not only through wizard shops, but also in muggle stores, antique shops, estate sales, and the like. Here his muggle background proved very useful since he was able to pass as a muggle anywhere he went, where a pureblood would have been spotted immediately.

By Christmas, the Dark Lord's catalog of spell books had grown immensely, as had the number of dark objects available to his workers. Severus had also managed to add to his own collection, though he was careful how he did so. He always paid for his own things with his own money, and he never took for himself anything that would be useful to the Dark Lord unless it was a duplicate of one the Dark Lord already had.

In all this time, Severus came into contact with none of the other Death Eaters except Bella, although he did hear of more and more attacks against witches and wizards all over Britain. The sense of being on the sidelines while others fought the real battles was galling to him. He had to keep telling himself that what he was doing was necessary, and helped the war effort as much as the true fighters did.

During Christmas he tutored Hogwarts students and found that he could get information from them that he passed on to Bella.

In January, as he turned nineteen, Severus got the message that his job was changing, and he went to headquarters in London for his new instructions.

An older wizard met Severus at the entrance to headquarters and escorted him to the assignments room. A new parchment lay on the pedestal.

*You will work at headquarters and devise spells for our people. There are three to start with.*

- 1) A spell that will enable us to overhear conversations at a distance.*
- 2) A spell that will enable us to walk unheard through dry leaves.*
- 3) A spell that will keep dogs from noticing us.*

*If you encounter any difficulties with these spells, you will notify us immediately. The attendant will show you to a work area.*

The older wizard took him to an upper room with a window that looked out over roofs. There was a table and a chair, parchment, quills, and ink. "Tell me if you need anything," the old wizard said.

"Tea?" asked Severus, and it was brought immediately.

The first spell was no difficulty at all. Severus already had the Autiarachnon. It was mildly interesting to note that Lucius hadn't told anyone about it. The other two would be harder.

He could think of three ways to move through leaves, one of which was a levitation spell. That, of course, already existed, but was generally not used

because it required so much power to sustain for any length of time. The next was to change the consistency of the leaves as you walked to make them soggy. Workable, but it would leave a trail. The third was to muffle the crackling of the leaves with a silencing spell. One that silenced only the leaves.

Severus went to the door and opened it. "I need to go out," he said.

"Why?" asked the wizard.

"Research on a new spell."

"I'll check."

Severus supposed they did have to be cautious around headquarters, but it felt odd not being able to come and go freely. He waited patiently inside the room.

"It's okay. You can go out. Report back before you go home this evening."

There was no snow in London, so Severus went to Hyde Park looking for dry leaves. *How do you find the sound frequency of rustling leaves? There should be something like a sound meter that registers frequencies. Or maybe I could just use trial and error.*

The afternoon passed quickly. Severus made some progress with the leaf spell, but it would take a few days of refining. He went back to headquarters and was admitted by the same wizard.

"You have an interview. Follow me."

Severus was nervous, not knowing what the Dark Lord wanted to talk to him about. He followed the wizard to the same room as his initiation. The room was dark, lit only by the narrow beam of light. Severus stood in the center for a moment, then knelt as he'd done before.

"Do you have our spells?"

Warning bells were ringing in Severus's head. He was suddenly frightened. This was not the time to try to hide anything.

"I have a listening spell. I made it months ago. I can give you that right away. The leaf spell will take a few days because I have to experiment with the sound waves. I don't think the dog spell will be possible."

"Not possible? Explain."

"Animals have certain instincts that make them immune to magic that disguises. If the dog is right in front of you, it'll know you're there. I think I can make something to alter scent and movement so that a dog at a distance won't notice you, but it won't work if it gets close."

"You have spoken truthfully. Write the listening spell before you leave. Bring the others as they are completed. Do not take too long."

"Yes, my Lord."

The Dark Lord was gone, but parchment and quill lay on a small table by the door. Severus quickly wrote down the Autiarachnon spell and left.

He had the leaf spell two days later, and the dog spell within the week.

The whole spring was spent working on spells and potions. Much of it involved the books and artifacts Severus had bought himself, and his labor seemed to be concentrated on hiding and disguising things.

Hiding and disguising was something of an obsession at headquarters. Severus almost never saw other wizards. Everyone who came or worked in the building was kept in his or her own cubicle except for the teams that went out on raids. Sometimes Severus saw people he knew, and they would exchange greetings, but they never talked for long.

At the beginning of April, Severus was asked to provide a potion that would protect someone from contracting dragon pox. He thought this a strange request, but had a vague recollection of the development of small-pox vaccine, and started researching reptilian viruses. It turned out that no one exposed to moke pox had ever contracted dragon pox. With the proper caveats, Severus suggested inoculation against moke pox.

Severus by now had become very familiar with the area around his own workroom, coming and going without an escort. He normally didn't pay any attention to what was happening in the other rooms, that being none of his business, but there is something special about hearing your own name. In a crowded room amid numerous conversations, you'll notice if someone speaks your name. In an empty corridor one afternoon in late April, Severus heard the word "Snape" and stopped to look around.

"We can't use him." Severus wasn't sure, but the voice behind the door sounded like Rosier.

"All he does is hang around headquarters all day. He never goes out on a raid. We need people."

"His work here is useful. Where would you be if we didn't have that dog spell yesterday? Don't say he doesn't do anything."

"But we need more people this time."

"Look. I'm only saying this once. He never, never comes on this kind of mission. You even tell him about it and I report you to the Dark Lord."

Severus left quickly. He wasn't sure what they were talking about, but if knowing it would anger the Dark Lord, he didn't want to know.

A few days later, the wizarding world was rocked with the news that Abraxas Malfoy had contracted, and quickly died of dragon pox.

Dangerous times make people more aware of the transience of our short

lives. That spring and summer saw many young couples, who would normally have waited, rush into unions while there was still a chance for some happiness. It seemed as if there were two or three weddings every week. After an interval of only a month to mourn his father, Lucius Malfoy finally married Narcissa Black. Severus attended the ceremony, and was happy for their happiness.

In June, two weeks after the fact, Severus also heard that James Potter and Lily Evans had wed.

As the spring ended and summer progressed, it became clear that a new force had entered the battle to control the wizarding world. More and more, the Dark Lord's teams were running into opposition from an organized group of wizards and witches who seemed to be particularly well informed and well prepared to thwart their operations. More and more the signs pointed to the source and inspiration for this organization. It radiated out of Hogwarts and bore the stamp of Albus Dumbledore.

By August, the Dark Lord was in a continual foul temper about Dumbledore's new Order. That was when Regulus Black, not yet eighteen, was initiated into the Death Eaters. It was highly unusual for one so young, and rumors abounded of the Dark Lord's expectation of information through Regulus and his brother Sirius of Dumbledore and his plans. Severus, by now a full-fledged Death Eater, was one of many who sponsored Regulus, but he avoided the rumor mill. He'd already learned that it was best if one kept one's own council.

The new school year started, as it always did, on the first of September. In late October, Severus received a message to report to the assignments room for new orders. This time there was no parchment. Instead he was ordered to report to the Dark Lord himself for an interview. Severus went immediately, nervous but excited.

"You have taught your fellow students."

"Yes, my Lord. I began tutoring in Slytherin house in my second year."

"And every year from that time."

"Yes, my Lord."

"You organized them into classes."

"When there were too many to teach one on one, yes, I did."

"I wish you to become a teacher."

Severus opened his mouth to protest, then closed it in silence. He didn't want to teach, but it was not for him to say. "Who must I teach, Lord?"

"You will travel to Hogsmeade for an interview with Albus Dumbledore."

You will convince Dumbledore to take you on as a member of the staff. Once you have established yourself in Dumbledore's confidence, you will transmit to me any information you can garner about the movements and whereabouts of Dumbledore and of this organization of his."

"The school year has already started. What if Dumbledore will not hire me?"

"You will have failed me."

"Yes, Lord."

That night Severus apparated home to Lancashire, and the following morning he went to Hogsmeade.

### WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 31, 1979 (4 DAYS BEFORE THE FULL MOON)

Severus went first to the Three Broomsticks, there to sit at a table near a small leaded window and watch the passersby. He'd almost never visited Hogsmeade as a student, so none of the inhabitants recognized him, and as it was not a Hogsmeade weekend, there were no students who might recall their tutor. Severus was trying to decide how to proceed with the Dark Lord's instructions.

It would be so much easier if he'd even once expressed an interest in teaching during his years at Hogwarts. Then he could go to Dumbledore and say, 'Do you remember...' and they could at least have a normal conversation about it. Now he had to invent some excuse, some reason, for suddenly seeking a job.

*Maybe I can tell him how bad things are in Lancashire, and how I desperately need the money because I haven't been able to find anything... Dumbledore knows about my tutoring, doesn't he? I could point out that I have some experience... I don't even know if they have an opening... I'm going to look like such a fool... It's too late in the year; he won't hire me and I'll fail on my first really big assignment.*

Around noon a frumpy looking woman entered the common room to inquire about lodgings, a strange lady with thick glasses and an absent manner. She seemed put off at the price, insisting that she had to have a place because she was expected. She had an appointment. She would have a position. The proprietress suggested the Hog's Head as a cheaper establishment, and the frumpy lady left.

*So maybe Hogwarts is hiring. That's a good sign. And if she has an appointment, it might mean that Dumbledore will be here today. Better and better.*



In the middle of the afternoon it began to rain, and the weather became autumnly cold. Severus ordered supper and was beginning to eat when he spied Dumbledore walking down the street, turning, and then heading in the direction of the Hog's Head.

Severus quickly paid his tab and left the Three Broomsticks. At the head of the lane he was just in time to see Dumbledore enter the Hog's Head Inn. Severus didn't dare run, not wanting to attract attention, but he did walk very fast to the inn. There, through a dirty windowpane, he saw Dumbledore talking with the barman. Then the Headmaster left the bar and went up the stairs toward the rooms.

Severus slipped in. *Should I wait for him in the bar? I could at least ask him for an appointment when he comes down.* Then he wondered what job the frumpy lady was applying for, and thought how much easier it would make his own task to know. The bartender was paying no attention, and Severus slipped soundlessly up the stairs after Dumbledore.

It wasn't hard to find them, for voices were coming from only one room. Severus crept closer, the narrow gap between door and jamb making listening all the easier.

"... I am certain that my pedigree could not but impress you, for I am the great-great..."

"Yes, Madam Trelawney, but you must understand that we have not actually decided to continue the teaching of Divination..."

"Oh, but you must teach Divination! The foreseeing of the future is so important a part of the education of every accomplished witch. And wizard, too, of course. I don't see... don't see... don't..." Her voice became low and harsh, an unearthly voice that could never have issued from a mortal mouth:

***THE ONE WITH THE POWER TO VANQUISH THE DARK LORD APPROACHES...***

***BORN TO THOSE WHO HAVE THRICE DEFIED HIM, BORN AS THE SEVENTH MONTH DIES...***

"Here! What are you doing here? Listening at keyholes?"

Severus turned to see the bartender standing behind him. "No," he said quickly, not fully able to disguise his surprise and embarrassment. "I was looking for someone who came up here. I have an appointment. I mean I want an appointment..."

"You don't get an appointment by following people into private rooms. You wait downstairs 'til he comes down himself, 'stead of snooping."

"I wasn't snooping. I was..."

"You were eavesdropping. I don't hold with people spying on the guests."

"No, not spying. I just wanted to see him."

"See me?" The door opened, and Dumbledore stood before them, his head cocked quizzically to one side. "Did you wish to see me, Mr. Snape?"

"You know this bird, Albus?"

"Oh, yes. Former student. What did you wish to see me about, Mr. Snape."

Severus shifted nervously. "I wanted to talk to about the possibility of a job. Things aren't going too well, and I could use . . ."

"Oh, but I have no jobs, Mr. Snape. There was one, but I have just hired the person to fill it."

And there was nothing for it but for Severus to return to London and admit to the Dark Lord that he had failed.

"How much do you think he heard?" Dumbledore asked the bartender, who happened to be his brother Aberforth.

"Ha! Now why didn't you ask him that yourself, you great legilimens, you? What's the use of having all that natural ability you always bragged about if you can't use it when you need it?"

"I never bragged! And besides, I can't read this one. He's a natural. A born occlumens."

"I thought you said they didn't exist."

"This one does. I can't explain him otherwise. The Sorting Hat put him into Slytherin. Can you guess why? Because it couldn't read him either. It decided anyone that secretive had to go to Slytherin. I wonder though if things mightn't have been different if he'd been in Ravenclaw. I always saw him as a Ravenclaw. Now, how much did he hear?"

"Not a lot. He wasn't there very long. And I stopped him about a minute and a half, near two minutes before you came out."

"That's good. So even if he heard something, he couldn't have heard everything."

"I still think you should've hauled him up to the castle and put thumb-screws to him."

"I like to take the long view, Aberforth. We may yet need him, and it's easier if he still has reason to trust us."

The interview with the Dark Lord did not start well.

"You have returned early. You do not come with favorable news."

"No, Lord. I've failed."

"You do not come with excuses. Your punishment will be abated because of this."

Pain hit Severus with the force of a sledgehammer, and he fell to the floor writhing and screaming in agony. Pain struck at head, gut, and back, and then it was gone. He lay on the floor of the interview chamber gasping for breath.

"Now you will tell us what mistakes you made."

"I followed him too closely. I eavesdropped on a conversation with another applicant. A seer. She went into a trance . . ."

"You heard a prophecy. Who was this seer?"

Severus shifted his body so that he was on his knees again. "She claimed to be the great-great-granddaughter of Cassandra Trelawney. It seemed that Dumbledore wasn't interested in her until she went into a trance and started prophesying."

"This was not a hoax."

"I don't think so. Her voice changed, harsh and low. I don't think she could have faked it."

"What did she say?"

"The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches . . . Born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies . . . Then I was interrupted and I didn't hear the end."

"Did Dumbledore question you?"

"A little. The bartender confirmed that he interrupted what I could have heard. I don't think he realizes I heard any of the prophecy."

"This is interesting. By great fortune you have redeemed your error and brought us a gift of some use. For this reason we will not punish you further. You will return to your duties."

"Yes, Lord. Thank you, Lord."

Severus went back to his workroom deeply grateful to the Dark Lord for his understanding and mercy. *I failed him. I deserve so much worse, but he saw my intentions; he accepted what I was able to give. He is so much better to me than I deserve.*

Severus continued his work with a renewed sense of dedication and purpose.

Autumn advanced, and Severus continued his work with spells and potions. The Dark Lord forbade him to mention the prophecy to anyone else, though that was scarcely a problem since Severus saw and spoke to so few people in the course of a day, and then only briefly. Life was so different

from Hogwarts, when it seemed he never had enough time. Now the focus of his whole life was the assignments he received from the Dark Lord.

Midway through November a well-known witch, Marlene McKinnon and all her family were killed. Initial shock quickly transformed into enthusiasm as word filtered through the ranks that McKinnon was a member of the shadow organization that surrounded Dumbledore, and the enemy were no longer immune. The Death Eaters had a new source of information, and things were going to turn around. Optimism spread through headquarters. People spoke of the future with confidence.

Severus was called before the Dark Lord at the beginning of December. "Bring your wand," was the only instruction the messenger gave.

Instead of the usual interview room, Severus was conducted to a larger hall. Rabastan Lestrange stood at the entrance, more worried than Severus had ever seen him. "I'm sorry," he said as he shook Severus's hand. "I didn't foresee this. Just remember, you whipped two of us when you were twelve."

It was not a comforting thing to hear, but Severus had no time to ponder it as he was ushered into what was clearly a small arena a little like a bull ring, with stands around it for a small group of observers. Unbidden, his brain began to lock down, to close off, and his senses sharpened in the presence of danger. Across the arena was a large, lumpy, brutal-looking wizard that Severus knew as Amycus Carrow.

The voice of the Dark Lord spoke softly in the silence. "You are being tested. The winner will be high in my favor. The loser, if he survives, will not. There are no rules."

Shock and surprise paralyzed Severus for a second, but Carrow grasped the meaning of the last sentence immediately, hurling an *Stupefy* at Severus, who dove to one side in a defensive roll as he managed to conjure up a non-verbal *Protego*. Carrow's defensive strategy was to attack, and he unleashed a steady stream of striking and cutting spells, shouting wildly as Severus retreated backwards in silence around the circumference of the arena, barely managing to parry each blow as it came, with no time to consider how to counterattack, struggling to remain focused. Reading Carrow turned out to be nearly useless, since the spells varied little and never paused. It was his first duel against an adult wizard with battle experience, one who was trying to kill him. He remembered his father and Nel Tarleton.

The trick was not to waste time on spells for defense, but rather to use his physical ability to avoid the spells and his wand to attack. It didn't matter if Carrow got off three spells to each of his as long as the three spells missed

and his struck home. His biggest handicap was that he had no intention of seriously hurting Carrow, much less killing him.

He spun counterclockwise to avoid another cutting spell and Carrow, not expecting the move, faltered. Severus hit him with a finely tuned Sectumsempra that nicked Carrow's right ear and drew blood. Carrow, bellowing in rage, responded with a blasting spell that Severus escaped by once again diving and rolling. From the ground, he hit Carrow with an Expelliarmus that sent the older wizard's wand against the stands. As Carrow grabbed for his wand, Severus sprang to his feet and scurried behind Carrow's back to the left, using the extra second of time to transmit a Doppelganger to Carrow's right. Carrow lashed out at the ghostly image, then wheeled around, his wand spitting fire as Severus again dove in the opposite direction, sending a leg-binding curse under the other wizard's spell. Carrow lost his balance, fell over like a log, and the fight was finished.

Brushing dust off his clothes as he rose from the floor, Severus glanced around at the spectators. During the whole duel, the only voice had been Carrow's. No one else had said a word, and all Severus's spells had been nonverbal.

"It is as I have been told," he heard the Dark Lord say, and he turned to face his master, breathing quickly and trying to control his trembling. "Your dueling skills are not balanced. You excel at defense; you are weak in attack. Yet you have bound your opponent and would therefore have a prisoner to bring to me. You have a new assignment. You will teach your brothers and sisters to protect themselves in battle, to use these defensive skills of yours to make them better fighters. You will start at once."

The observing wizards came into the arena to congratulate Severus on his success, none more relieved than Rabastan, who couldn't stop grinning as he said over and over again, "I knew you could do it."

The good part was that after months of seclusion amounting almost to isolation, Severus was once again among people, people he could talk to as well as teach. The bad part was that such a large percentage of the Death Eaters were so abysmal at casting nonverbal spells that he had trouble understanding how they ever made it through Hogwarts. Another problem was the almost total lack of understanding about defense.

"Why can't I just go for his head?"

"Because I'm sure even someone with a pea brain like yours has noticed you can't win a fight if you're immobilized on the ground."

"I can just do it faster."

"Not 'til you can do it silently. The first syllable you utter, he knows which spell you're using."

Rabastan came for lessons, and was one of Severus's best pupils. Bella came, as well, though with less sense of its value. Many of Severus's pupils were much older than he was, and the incongruity of a nineteen-year-old teacher with a forty-year-old pupil was a source of mild amusement.

Lucius Malfoy came, too. Freed from parental restraint and in possession of his inheritance, Lucius had quickly become a Death Eater. He and Severus talked a little of old times, and Lucius confided with some pride that Narcissa was with child. Severus was more patient with Lucius than with many of the others, and more careful to teach him the finer points of self-defense, for Narcissa's sake.

As Christmas approached, a raiding party of Death Eaters ambushed and killed Benjy Fenwick, leaving nothing behind but small pieces, a fact which did not please the Dark Lord, who had hoped to 'talk' with Benjy.

Winter deepened and the Dark Lord led his forces to unerring victory. The new source of information was the best they'd ever had, and raiding parties came back to headquarters both successful and without casualties. With the New Year, one group cornered Edgar Bones and his family, leaving almost no one alive. It was a mark of the Dark Lord's power that such an accomplished wizard could be attacked and defeated with impunity.

The only bad news, in fact, was the sudden, unexplained disappearance of Regulus Black. He'd taken a bit of a holiday to spend Christmas with his recently widowed mother and had not returned. Rumor abounded that he'd been kidnapped and possibly killed by Dumbledore's organization, but despite the Dark Lord's sources of information, no answer to the mystery was found.

Feeling that it was now fighting a losing battle, the Ministry of Magic took the extraordinary step of authorizing its aurors to use Unforgivable Curses against the Death Eaters. This was a great moral victory, since the Ministry could no longer claim to be representing the side of decency.

In May, the Death Eaters scored another triumph with the ambush and disappearance of Caradoc Dearborn, whose body was never found. The brethren who'd gone on that raid never told exactly what happened, though they seemed to think it exceptionally funny whenever anyone asked.

On the fifth of June, 1980, Narcissa Malfoy gave birth to a boy child, a son for Lucius. Severus was invited to the naming ceremony, and was delighted

at Narcissa's radiance. Lucius, his patrician reserve for once set aside, was practically bursting with pride.

Narcissa allowed Severus to hold baby Draco during a quiet moment away from the crowd of relatives and well-wishers. It was a precarious moment, for Severus had never held a baby before, but Narcissa assured him, laughing, that he was doing a great job. Severus was entranced by the scrunched up baby nose and the pouting little mouth, and utterly amazed at the tiny perfection of infant fingernails. Most of all, it was good to see Narcissa so happy.

Holding Draco made Severus remember the prophecy. 'A child approaches...' But not this child, and for that Severus was glad. He'd heard that Lily was also pregnant, and he'd checked carefully with all his sources of information. The most reliable rumor said she would have her child before the middle of August, so that was good, too.

June brought a return of students from Hogwarts. One of them was Barty Crouch, who was initiated into the Dark Lord's forces. Crouch was a great coup for his sponsors, as his father was an official in the Ministry of Magic, and Crouch Junior was another good source of information.

The beginning of July almost brought a setback, for a raiding team intending to attack a single family was instead engaged by a party of Dumbledore's followers. There was a fight this time, from which both Avery and Lucius returned wounded. The Dark Lord was satisfied, however, since the team gave better than it got, and both his enemies Gideon and Fabian Prewett were dead.

Starting in the middle of July, the Dark Lord set up a team of researchers to go through *The Daily Prophet* and all other wizarding news media looking for, of all things, birth announcements. Severus knew why, and the Dark Lord, of course, knew why, even though the team itself was not told the purpose of this information. For a while it seemed as if there would be a total dearth of babies in July, then on the last day of the month they found the article they'd been looking for. The day before, July 30, 1980, Alice Longbottom gave birth to a baby boy. She and her husband Frank would name him Neville.

The news gave Severus an odd feeling. The abstract danger to the Dark Lord that he'd known about for so many months now had a name: Neville Longbottom. For a brief moment he wondered if this child, too, had perfect fingernails, then forced the thought from his mind. Frank and Alice were

both aurors, enemies, and in a very important way it was fitting that their child should be the one that the Dark Lord would seek. It was fate.

So it came as a complete surprise to walk into headquarters on August first and find that the research team was agog with news. The announcements page of *The Daily Prophet* had a small picture of a beaming James Potter, and the news that his wife Lily had given birth to a boy, Harry James Potter, the previous day — July 31st.

*August. She was supposed to have the baby in August. He won't attack them anyway; the baby isn't a pureblood. Not as dangerous as the Longbottom child. They're aurors. It makes more sense.* Severus smiled at the Death Eater who told him of the birth. "Is that what you were looking for, then?"

"Don't know. Any child born the second half of July. We're to keep on looking for another week or so in case there's a belated announcement. But we have two good ones. He'll be pleased."

The week passed in suspended animation, but there were no further births. The research team was disbanded and its members reassigned. Severus began to get more chatty with the Death Eaters he was training in defensive spells.

"... You must be getting some difficult assignments. This is your third lesson on repelling Cruciatus curses. Which aurors are they sending you up against, anyway?"

"Usual Ministry thugs. I'm just not good at it ..."

"... I'm getting a lot of repeat work from people going to the northern counties. I hope you're not always being sent against that Dumble crowd."

"It was more a 'muggle control' thing, if you take my meaning ..."

"... Sometimes I envy you. Here I have to stay at headquarters all the time and never get to strike a blow for the cause. You must go up against some powerful adversaries."

"Not always. They've got a lot of us chasing the Potters for some reason. I understand it's a personal vendetta. Not that I'm complaining. I don't want you to think I'm complaining ..."

So there it was. Several of the teams were specially delegated to hunt down the Potters. Not the Longbottoms, the Potters. Severus felt sick.

As week followed week, waiting for the news that one of the teams had succeeded, Severus racked his brain for the glimmer of an idea of something he could do to avert catastrophe. There was nothing he could do about the baby or about James — the attempt alone could mean his own death — but he might be able to help Lily. He requested an interview with the Dark Lord.



“So, Potions Master, you petition us for this woman? This mudblood?” The shadow of the Dark Lord’s form loomed outside the circle of light where Severus knelt.

“Please, Lord. I saw her . . . her picture, and now I can’t get her out of my mind. We were in the same year . . . I recall her from my Potions class. She’s talented. She could be turned to your service . . . in brewing potions . . . I’ve served you loyally, Lord, and now I . . . I need her . . . I . . .”

The Dark Lord’s laughter cut across Severus’s words. “The body burns when one is twenty, but it can burn for more than one woman. Take heart, Potions Master, we shall consider your need, but it will not be this woman. This woman is our enemy. Find another to suit your ‘needs’ and we shall listen to your request. But not this one.”

Severus left the Dark Lord’s presence defeated and despairing.

Faustino Pembertine was one of the Death Eaters that Severus tutored from time to time. At the end of August, all those who’d worked with the unfortunate Pembertine were called into the interview chamber, for he’d been apprehended trying to defect to the Ministry of Magic.

“Did you think we would not know?” the spectral voice asked.

“Lord, I didn’t betray you! I would never betray you! But my family, the Ministry, I had to look out for my family.”

“We do not see the distinction. Betrayal is betrayal.”

Pembertine gasped and began to claw at his left arm. “No, Lord!” he screamed. “I won’t leave you! I’ll serve you!” He ripped the sleeve from his arm and tore with his fingernails at the flesh beneath. The mark there was glowing a ghastly, putrid green. As Pembertine struggled, boils began to erupt on his skin, burst and spew green slime. He twisted and contorted on the floor of the chamber, clutching his stomach in wild torment, vomiting blood and maggots. And then he was dead.

“We have been merciful,” intoned the spectral voice. “His punishment was quick. Those whose betrayal is on a greater level shall have greater punishment. Their torment will last for days. Take care that none of you join him.”

Severus returned home that evening in a state bordering on panic and spent hours staring at the tattoo, the mark on his left arm.

Then a team of Death Eaters captured Dorcas Meadows, who was brought alive before the Dark Lord. Everyone at headquarters was summoned for the interrogation. It did, indeed, last for days. In the end it was

a shell of a woman who stood before the Dark Lord, but she did not break. And she died there in the interview room, a lesson and a warning to all.

Severus couldn't sleep or eat or even think straight.

*What can I do? I'm not strong enough. I can't fight the Dark Lord. I can't face the pain. It wouldn't help anyway. Who? Who? Who can I go to? There's no one. I have no one...*

*I have Hagrid. Hagrid can get me to Dumbledore. But I can't get to Hagrid. If I go near Hogwarts I'm dead. If I enter Hogwarts he'll know and I'm dead. There's no way. No way...*

*There is a way. The Shrieking Shack. It's a way into Hogwarts. He'll still kill me. But I can speak to Hagrid first.*



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